



ANARCHY AND ADBUSTERS: BRANDING THE OCCUPY WALL STREET MOVEMENT

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This paper investigates the political role of 'Adbusters,' a Canadian non-profit, anti-consumerism, pro-environment, magazine and the practice of designed anarchy. The Adbusters website describes itself as follows: "We are a global network of culture jammers and creatives working to change the way information flows, the way corporations wield power, and the way meaning is produced in our society." The paradox of selling anti-consumerism dependent on consumer culture, a practice defined as 'culture-jamming,' presents a particular design challenge. This paper suggests that Adbusters' visual branding of the Occupy Wall Street campaign enacts post-colonial tactics of resistance that include reversal of perspective, repetition of the dominant narrative and mockery by imitation. A brief survey of anarchy and visual propaganda, a review of the operation and reception of Adbusters, as well as an analysis of available posters from Adbuster as diverse narratives of shared resistance together frame a claim of post-consumer consumerism.

Introduction

An article titled "Branding the Occupy movement" by William Yardley, published in the New York Times, November 27th, 2011, opened with the following statement: "Kalle Lasn, the longtime editor of the anticonsumerist magazine Adbusters, did not invent the anger that has been feeding the Occupy Wall Street demonstrations across the United States. But he did brand it." This statement reminded me, of Paul Jodard, writing that Loewy did not invent industrial design by quoting Nietzsche, "Need is not the reason for something to come into existence, it is an effect of what has already come to be."ⁱ It seems odd to pair Kalle Lasn, the brander of the Occupy Wall Street movement and Raymond Loewy, an industrial designer of 1930s corporate America. While their answers may be divergent, they share the same American search for social equity. Indeed, Loewy and Lasn expose the power of visual messaging in adopting or countering a dominant narrative. And, in narrative and counter narrative, they need each other.

Grounded in the relationship between empowering form and content, this paper explores attempts to visually represent the ambiguous relationship between consumerism, citizenship and anarchy. This paper focuses on the visual representations of the Occupy Wall Street movement that operate much like post-colonial resistance interrupting a dominant cultural, political and economic narrative.

Occupywallstreet.org defines the movement as follows: "Occupy Wall Street is a people-powered movement that began on September 17, 2011 in Liberty Square in Manhattan's Financial District, and has spread to over 100 cities in the United States and actions in over 1,500 cities globally. #ows is fighting back against the corrosive power of major banks and multinational corporations over the democratic process, and the role of Wall Street in creating an economic collapse that has caused the greatest recession in generations. The movement is inspired by popular uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia, and aims to fight back against the richest 1% of people that are writing the rules of an unfair global economy that is foreclosing on our future."ⁱⁱ The website also contains principles of solidarity,ⁱⁱⁱ as well as a statement of autonomy. The persistence and ubiquity of the movement garners much attention as a demonstration against a sense of shared systematic inequality under capitalism rather than a particular isolated event.

The Critical Role of Anarchy

Post-colonial theories of resistance that interrupt a dominant discourse seem particularly suited to decipher the visual messages of the Occupy Wall Street Movement that subvert a system of capitalism through the visual means of capitalism. Past grassroots self-rule movements across colonial countries against imperialism share much with the struggle to expose systematic inequalities of capitalism today. In branding the movement, Adbusters consolidates the presence of distinct, diverse and often distant and displaced voices of critique. The attempt to visually systematize unsystematic currents of resistance aims to project strength in unity, not uniformity. The strength of colonial self-rule movements, independence movements or the civil rights movement resides in the diverse narratives of shared disempowering experiences. The design challenge associated with giving shape to spontaneity would suggest that the visual representation of the Occupy Wall Street movement should show shared references without the same narrative. Anarchic movements expose smothered voices of dissent in a scream. And, *branded* anarchic movements, such as the Occupy Wall Street movement, direct such screams into voices of resistance, in unison but not in harmony. In this way, the work of Gandhi can be viewed as branding, but not inventing the self-rule movement in India.^{iv} Founded on a suspicion about a similarity between anti-imperialism and anti-capitalism movements I suggest that designed anarchic movements, such as the Occupy Wall Street Movement, employ post-colonial tactics of reversal, repetition and replication. Furthermore, the unity of these movements depends on resisting formal crystallization into a single narrative (visual and verbal) ideology.

In the *Location of Culture*, Bhabha writes, "Resistance is not necessarily an oppositional act of political intention, nor is it the simple negation or exclusion of the 'content' of another culture, as a difference once perceived. It is the effect of an ambivalence produced within the rules of recognition of dominating discourses as they articulate the signs of cultural difference and re-implicate them within the deferential relations of colonial power—hierarchy, normalization, marginalization and so forth."^v Thus, for Bhabha, the context of resistance as ambivalence opens the possibility of intervention onto a dominant discourse. An attempt to intervene in a dominant design history begins with the production of the hybrid object that entails designed undecidability, between local-global, design-craft, tradition-modernity. Contemporary neo-colonial designs disrupt the unity and continuity of a dominant industrial design history by exercising resistance without rejection. The interruption of a binary system of center and margins, according to Bhabha, appears as a doubled and split identity. Consequently, the exercise of differentiation generates dual identities, one dependent on the dominant discourse and one resisting the dominance. Doubled and split, the post-colonial hybrid object is a 'metonymy of presence' according to Bhabha that represents the absence of the margins. This haunting presence of absent margins is exercised through features of reversal, mimicry and replication, among others.^{vi}

The first feature of the hybrid object, according to Bhabha, is the capacity to enact a change in perspective from center towards margins reversed to be a perspective from the margins towards the center. The reversal in perspective is a colonial Copernican turn, in which the perceived center of authoritative discourse is dislocated. In so doing, the hybrid object arrests the attempt to marginalize and differentiate by making the mechanism of differentiation explicit. Discursive denial made transparent reverses the 'effects of disavowal' and reflects denied representation as presence. Bhabha explains, "Hybridity is a problematic of colonial representation and individuation that reverses the effects of colonialist disavowal, so that the other 'denied' knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority—its rules of recognition."^{vii} This infiltration of dominant discourse through a change in perspective reverses and challenges the priority of the center. Accordingly, the first step to decolonizing design history entails the reversal of perspective that expose founding differences constituting the rules of recognition. To this end, post-colonial hybrid objects are proclamations of absence that establish fundamental ambivalence.



The operation of reversal accompanies active mimicry of discriminating practices that disturb the authority of a dominant narrative. In miming the gestures of dominance the hybrid object returns the projection of power weakened by the weight of accusation. The hybrid object evolves through discriminatory difference towards ambivalence permitting a metonymy of presence by retaining and imitating the form of authority. While the first feature of hybridity requires a reversed perspective, the second feature demands retention of form emptied of content.^{viii} The retention of the structure, mimed and imitated, corrodes ambitions of a pure dominant identity. This disturbing imitation of the center at the margins fractures the illusion of unity and generates copies of an original intention. Accordingly, the hybrid object mimics in the double sense of mockery and recognition of a formal structure of authority. Consistent with the hybrid object, the disturbance of dominant discourse as systemic/systematic is precisely the task of decolonizing design history that retains the structure of dominant industrial design history.

In addition to change in perspective and narrative content, Bhabha presents replication as a mode of resistance. As such, the qualitative difference of identity and imitation is further compounded by the quantitative difference of identity and multiplicity. Activities of reversal and mimicry initiate a multiplicity of discourse that threatens a pure identity with copies. The multiplicity of difference, not of diversity, exposes dominating structures that differentiate and impose normative constraints. Deconstructing dominating discourse occurs through redirection, imitation, multiplication whereby discrimination is exposed, resisted, and reconfigured. Of the pretense of recognition, Bhabha writes, "The display of hybridity—its peculiar 'replication'—terrorizes authority with the ruse of recognition, its mimicry, its mockery."^{ix} The terror of fracture and pollution at the center translates as difference and recognition at the margins.

I argue that Occupy Wall Street posters are symptomatic of the split personality evident in hybrid cultural products. In mockingly critiquing pop cultural references, designers rely on the dominant media they aim to subvert. Posters that attempt to compose a separate distinct narrative lack the brash negation of normative conditions. A closer look at the images below, may clarify the need for referential ambiguity in order to retain a stance of critical confrontation.

Post-colonial Interpretations of Occupy Wall Street Posters



Figure 1: The content of the poster references the protagonist Guy Fawkes from the Hollywood movie *V is for Vendetta*. The movie portrayed the narrative of an anarchist with a mission to expose bureaucratic corruption. The color block and treatment of the poster mimics the 'Hope' poster of the Obama 2008 campaign. The reliance and convergence of popular culture icons mirror anarchic and presidential campaigns. In this way the poster extracts moments from the dominant narratives of Hollywood and D.C. in service of the Occupy movement. It allows a shared critical and counter position without sharing an ideological direction.



Figure 2: This poster repeats the subway signage in service of the Occupy movement with the title 'camping.' It emphasizes the location of the resistance. The 'occupation' through camping invokes popular imagination of free access to natural public parks, sleeping under the stars, smores and camp-side collectivity. The reference romanticizes a non-violent community of conscious objectors. In this way the urban, directive, subway signage is repurposed towards directions to an urban camp.



Figure 3: This poster is reminiscent of early 20th century Russian Constructivist posters that depict strong diagonals consistent with revolutionary spirit. The hammer and pose show active destruction and construction. The activity is also reminiscent of depression era WPA posters. The stars and stripes are deconstructed to convey a direct confrontation. The text announces the cause, while the colors of red, black, yellow and white compose a bold announcement. The invitation to 'bring your tent', almost sounds like a pre-teen sleep over with a cause.



Figure 4: This poster references the color and layout of the WWII British Posters of 'Keep Calm and Carry On.' Here the messaging that announces a class war is direct. The text is bold and appears as the foreground, while warfront images shadow the background. This 1939 war propaganda poster was never used. It was rediscovered in 2000, in time for much use during the 2009 world economic crisis. The Occupy poster shows the subversion of a traditional, imperial formal poster, repeated and replicated with a transformed narrative.



Figure 5: This poster references the 1989 Tiananmen square protest. Instead of the single figure with shopping bags in front of the tanks, here the designer added a wall of protesters in solidarity. The poster globalizes the movement with shared democratic impulses. It converts an individual act into a graphic image of collective resistance abstracted and universalized, much like the Guy Fawkes reference above.



Figure 6: The ballerina and the bull, under the criteria of subversive iconography is perhaps the most confusing poster announcing the Occupy Wall Street Movement. The suggestion of the delicate ballerina riding the bull of capitalism shows a graceful dying swansong of capitalism. Although poetic, it does not have immediate popular resonance. It does not, like the other posters, subvert a dominant narrative image, nor does it imitate another well-documented populist movement. The narrative requires attentive analysis without immediate visual reference. The title is equally puzzling and poses a question rather than a declaration.

Design and Anarchy

The images above show appropriation of dominant narratives or a replication of narratives of resistance (except the last). The posters themselves have no shared shape, color, size or content. The lack of visual uniformity does not corrode the unity of the movement but rather enhances the non-ideological and strictly critical role. The post-colonial reading of these images shows methods of perspective shifts, repetition, and replication as mimicry used in the promotion and cultural production of the Occupy Wall Street Movement. Whether the same tendencies can be seen in global rumblings of democratic voice remains to be studied. As hybrid objects of resistance, these posters display a dual personality that in referencing a standard bureaucratic and commercial narrative..... subverts it. The tactics of reversal, repetition, and replication permit unity of intent without uniformity of message. This branding of the anarchic has been historically exercised in collective critiques, such as in the post-colonial self-rule movements, in the civil rights movements, in the Arab spring movements, and beyond. Communication design that demands a level of ambiguity in order to maintain a diverse yet shared message of popular resistance against corporate authority requires critical nuance beyond 20th century graphic consistency and clarity. Indeed, in these posters we see stirrings of a new critical capacity of 21st century communication design that exceed intentions of clarity or ambiguity and aspire, clearly, to be ambiguous. For organizations such as Adbusters that aim to 'change the way information flows and meaning is produced,' the visual challenge to protect the flow of expression is conditioned on dynamic design that is deliberately open, referential, diverse and location specific. Moreover, in branding popular movements 21st century designers must remain loyal to the critical urgency of anarchy without ideological reification.

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ⁱ Paul Jodard, *Raymond Loewy* (New York: Harpers Collins, 1992).

ⁱⁱ The term #ows is not an error. It denotes the twitter identification for occupy wall st.

ⁱⁱⁱ On September 17, 2011, people from all across the United States of America and the world came to protest the blatant injustices of our times perpetuated by the economic and political elites. On the 17th we as individuals rose up against political disenfranchisement and social and economic injustice. We spoke out, resisted, and successfully occupied Wall Street. Today, we proudly remain in Liberty Square constituting ourselves as autonomous political beings engaged in non-violent civil disobedience and building solidarity based on mutual respect, acceptance, and love. It is from these reclaimed grounds that we say to all Americans and to the world, Enough! How many crises does it take? We are the 99% and we have moved to reclaim our mortgaged future. Through a direct democratic process, we have come together as individuals and crafted these principles of solidarity, which are points of unity that include but are not limited to:

- Engaging in direct and transparent participatory democracy;
- Exercising personal and collective responsibility;



International Conference on Communication, Media, Technology and Design
ICCMTD
09-11 May 2012
Istanbul - Turkey

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- Recognizing individuals' inherent privilege and the influence it has on all interactions;
 - Empowering one another against all forms of oppression;
 - Redefining how labor is valued;
 - The sanctity of individual privacy;
 - The belief that education is human right; and
 - Endeavoring to practice and support wide application of open source
- iv As Suchitra Sheth, a scholar from India in a recent Design History Society conference with the theme of Design Activism, argued. Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).
- v Ibid.
- vi Ibid.
- vii Ibid.
- viii Ibid.
- ix Ibid.