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Defending the Domestic Environment from Advertising: the Commercial Rhetoric Art Project

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As a discipline, advertising – and for that matter, graphic design – often measures its effectiveness against the abstractions of markets, audiences and users. Impressions, responses and actions are used to determine whether a message arrives at its target, or to use a figure of speech, ‘hits home.’ However, if the term hits home is interpreted literally, what is the impact of advertising designs on a single home, and what can be learned from an engaged case study of commercial rhetoric within the domestic environment?

In the Fall of 2005 I was granted a semester-length sabbatical leave from the University of Minnesota to pursue this research, using my own home as ground zero (another apt metaphor). Beyond collecting, cataloging and analyzing these artifacts in a quantitative sense – as might be typical in scientific or historical research – my methodology involved a qualitative engagement. Applying the theory of design authorship, (McCarthy, 1996, McCarthy and Almeida, 2002) whereby form and content meet symbiotically in self-initiated works, my increased agency has led to designs that pose questions about the persuasive rhetoric of advertising. Through a process of selection, dissection and interrogation, a body of work titled *Commercial Rhetoric Art Project* was created.

The Commercial Rhetoric Art Project recontextualizes the visual material aimed at domestic markets into a social, political and economic statement. By dismantling and re-arranging the commercial messages meant to seduce us as consumers, the project causes viewers to question the rhetoric that attempts to colonize our homes. Strategies of collage, juxtaposition, satire and parody serve to invert the dominant tide of advertising propaganda entering our private spaces.

A series of collages created from direct mail, assemblages of food and product packaging, reconfigured branded apparel, digitally remixed television commercials, web sites and email ‘spam’ – Commercial Rhetoric Art Project uses any uninvited advertising as its fodder. Some of the artifacts created are purely aesthetic, some critique consumer culture, and others hint at an alternative functionality.



Precedents for using collage to make contrarian statements abound, with John Heartfield's photomontages critiquing Nazi Germany in the 1930s serving as prime examples. (Ades, 1986) Richard Hamilton's 1956 Pop Art collage *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?* directly addresses domesticity and consumption. (Ades, 1986) Ashley Bickerton's provocatively titled *Tormented Self-Portrait (Susie at Arles) No. 2* is a compilation of corporate logos: Nike, Marlboro, Fruit of the Loom, TV Guide and others, that seem to implicate the self as conflicted consumer. (www.desmoinesartcenter.org) Contemporary designer and educator Matt Soar's logo parodies overtly critique corporate hegemony – perhaps best known is his remix of the FedEx logo into *FedUp*. (www.mattsoar.org) These influences were the backdrop to the Commercial Rhetoric Art Project.

Our homes are generally recognized as private places – spaces of informality, intimacy, and perhaps sanctity. We expect to feel safe and secure and treasured, and to provide that guarantee to our families, partners and possessions. We believe that we decide who enters our homes, and who gains access to our thoughts, feelings, decisions and choices. Unfortunately, the barbarians are at the doorstep. Commercial messages invade and colonize our homes on a daily basis, attempting to persuade us to consume, consume, and consume some more. This infestation has been so gradual – rather, we've been complicit with the enemy – that we only feel bothered or slightly overwhelmed, but not outraged.

There has been a growing anti-consumerist movement, as evident in the impact of the 1999 World Trade Organization protests in Seattle, an interest in 'true cost economics,' (www.redefiningprogress.org) and books like Naomi Klein's *No Logo* and Kalle Lasn's *Culture Jam*. A "magazine concerned about the erosion of our physical and cultural environments by commercial forces," (adbusters.org) the success of Adbusters (sponsors of 'Buy Nothing Day') is well known in graphic design circles. More obscure is *The Baffler*, a journal that "draws on a long American tradition of dissent, especially the critique of business culture...." (Frank and Weiland, 1997, p. 15) Most activists, however, confront the roles of advertising in the public, not the private, domain.

One design academician whose creative inquiry bridges domesticity and publicity is Mississippi State University professor Kate Bingaman. Her *Obsessive Consumption* web site states that it serves to: "showcase her love/hate relationship with money, shopping, branding, credit cards, celebrity, advertising and marketing. The work is inspired by the ever ubiquitous, generic, delicate, sometimes stomachache inducing credit card statement, craft as activism, and general consumerism. She created *Obsessive Consumption* in 2002 when she decided that she was going to not only document all of her purchases, but to also create a brand out of the process to package and promote." (www.obsessiveconsumption.com)

Although Bingaman is both "repulsed and grossly fascinated by the branding of consumer culture," (www.obsessiveconsumption.com) her research agenda ultimately takes a critical stance.

In addition to the aforementioned print and electronic advertisements, corporate sponsorships and commercial content posing as cultural content (for example, product placements in films and songs) have wormed their



way into our homes like a nasty virus. Even the term ‘viral marketing,’ which relies on strategies of subversion and word of mouth to spread (en.wikipedia.org) – like a conversation between family members or neighbors – illustrates the efforts of advertisers to transgress the final barriers between products and services and their potential markets.

A common assumption among direct mail marketers is that a 5% response rate (an actionable response from mail recipients) is considered a successful campaign. In 2005, “the overall average response rate for direct mail, including mailings to both house and prospect files, was 2.77%.” (Direct Mail Association, 2005, p. 11) Presumably, the remaining 97% goes into the garbage (or preferably, the recycling), at a huge social and environmental cost that is not borne by the sender. The Ohio Environmental Protection Agency reports that “each year, 100 million trees are used to produce junk mail.” (www.epa.state.oh.us)

In our homes – relaxed and familiar, emotionally exposed, intimate, honest – we are the most vulnerable to this onslaught. The advertisement’s depiction of happy, healthy people in new clothing, the perfect bowls of cereal displayed in sunlit breakfast nooks, and the images of power and authority conveyed by large sport utility vehicles contribute to the creation of insatiable desire at the expense of contentment, modesty and equity. Increased debt and diminished levels of savings also enslave the consumer to the myth of freedom through lifestyle purchasing choices.

A visual analysis of the primary artifacts used in Commercial Rhetoric Art Project reveals a predictable format. Products or services are overtly displayed (usually by tightly scripted photographic means), the rhetorical tone is urgent and cajoling (but verbally simple and conceptually cautious), and the graphic vocabulary is often loud and dense (clarity, hierarchy and subtlety are eclipsed by a cacophony of shapes, words, images and colors). The use of market research attempts to target ads to specific demographic groups, and as one would expect, this leads to more segmented – but not necessarily more nuanced – messages. For example, marketers using the VALS™ tool (originally Values and Lifestyles) employ psychological data and personality traits to assess consumer behavior (<http://www.sric-bi.com/VALS/>); this is then used to design targeted advertising. The commercials messages entering my home have probably been tuned to the perceived desires of its occupants.

As a graphic design professor, I endeavor to teach my students how to effectively use visual communications to inform, entertain and persuade viewers. Harnessing the power of verbal and visual languages through text and image, graphic designers give form to the many messages that shape our culture and economy. When we succeed, by creating a symbolically rich and diverse visual culture, the results are an engaged citizenry and a prosperous economy. When we fail, graphic designers contribute to the waste stream; not just wasted resources like plastic, paper and ink, but wasted consumption as consumers go deep into debt for unnecessary goods, and wasted goodwill as the relationship between cultural experiences, civic information and commercial propaganda is blurred.

There’s a popular saying, that ‘fifty percent of advertising dollars is wasted – advertisers just don’t know which fifty percent.’ Those of us who feel violated by the daily inundation of commercial messages know which fifty



percent, and believe that it's much more than that. The domestic environment is our last bastion of privacy and intimacy, and the Commercial Rhetoric Art Project addresses real human concerns by defending these qualities.

The project consists of over 250 discrete works, in a variety of media. The same underlying methodology was used for advertising in different formats: cut it up, rearrange it, send it back. Each medium uses a technology appropriate to itself; for example television commercials consist of short digital videos, food and product packaging consist of items that are product-like (assembled sculptural forms), etc. [Technically, while collages are artworks made by pasting various materials on a single surface, montages combine superimposed photographic imagery, and assemblages combine diverse 3-dimensional elements – all three methods were exploited as needed.]

While many of the individual pieces of original advertising or packaging design might be seen as well designed in the conventional sense, the Commercial Rhetoric Art Project critiques the work on the systemic level. One aspect of the project's message is that graphic designers have contributed to the problem of over-consumption by actually succeeding in their field. Handsome catalogs for clothing retailers, smart boxes, bags and bottles for branded goods, and clever ad campaigns for television – it's as if we're choking on gourmet cuisine! This concern was expressed – again, considering Ken Garland's initial statement from 1964 – in the First Things First 2000 manifesto, wherein graphic designers are admonished for “helping draft a reductive and immeasurably harmful code of public discourse.” (Vanderlans, R. et al., 1999, front cover)

Junk mail – largely direct mail catalogs of clothing and house products, credit card offers, grocery store circulars, etc. – was cut up, rearranged, and glued into collages. (fig. 1) The collages subvert the intended message by introducing humor, satire and parody through the visual strategy of juxtaposition. Both visual and literal, the collages' images and words contribute to making new meaning from everyday sales rhetoric. Ultimately, the collages exist in a series, creating a narrative about consumer culture.



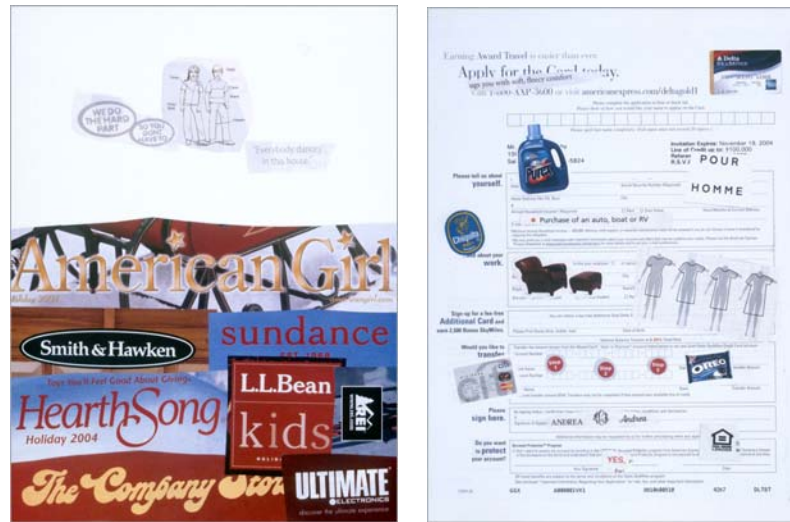


fig. 1 Commercial Rhetoric Art Project collages (four shown). 9 x 12" each. Paper, adhesive. © Steven McCarthy 2005.

Food boxes, cans and product packaging were cut up and forced into new, assembled relationships using only a brass grommet as a fastener. (fig. 2) Some are reminiscent of useful objects: floor coverings, containers, flags, table settings; others fail to function, yet succeed as artistic commentary. Originally, the plastic, metal, glass and paperboard served to functionally contain the food or beverage or pair of shoes, while the role of the label is to distinguish and promote the brand. Conversely, one might wonder if the true role of the container is simply to hold up the brand identity, long after the product is used. The comment attributed to Raymond Loewy, that he wanted his box design for Lucky Strikes cigarettes to be recognizable even when crumpled on the street, seems relevant to the relationship between much packaging and waste.



fig. 2 Commercial Rhetoric Art Project assemblages. 13 x 29" top, 17 x 15" bottom. Paperboard, brass grommet. © Steven McCarthy 2005.

Computer-printed montages of web sites and corporate logos are layered in dense, overlapping compositions, created by passing each sheet through a desktop color printer several times. Computer interface designs, and



the metaphors inherent in windows and linking, are explored formally while covert ownership relations between corporations are suggested conceptually.

Numerous scans of clothing labels, both from the exterior and interior of garments, were printed onto iron-on material and transferred onto white t-shirts. (fig. 3) Once utilized as a mobile canvas for personal expression, the t-shirt today has minimal commodity value as an article of clothing, but instead serves as a walking brand, emblazoned with logos and slogans.



fig. 3 Commercial Rhetoric Art Project apparel (t-shirts). Men's large. Cotton fabric, iron-on transfer print. © Steven McCarthy 2005.

Over 100 television commercials were recorded, edited and remixed into seven short digital videos. (fig. 4) These compilations range from 30 to 90 seconds in length, and employ different visual montages and narrative structures. Recurring themes of sexual desire, family drama, product fetishization, food hedonism and authority figure persuasion are extracted for ridicule. Another Commercial Rhetoric Art Project media commentary is a multi-page web site that is the interface to hearing a number of radio commercials, and for reading found text poetry culled from newspapers and magazines.

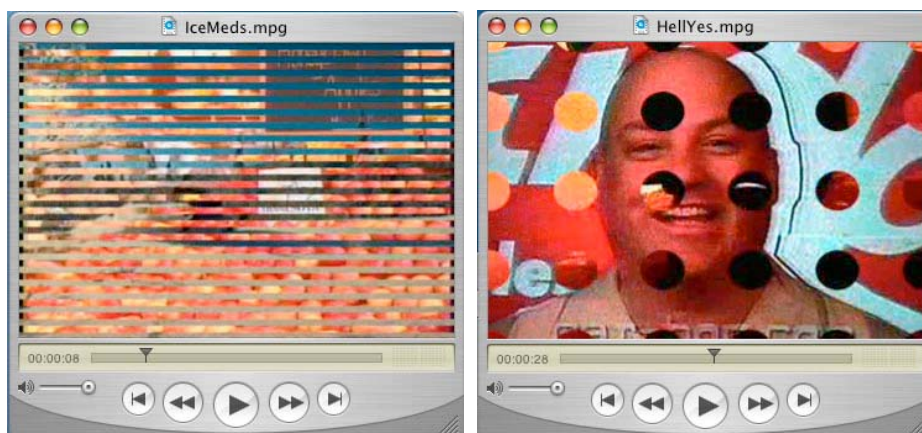


fig. 4 Commercial Rhetoric Art Project digital videos. 00:00:53 top, 00:00:45 bottom. Quicktime MPEG files. © Steven McCarthy 2005.



Commercial Rhetoric Art Project is a multi-form work, consisting of many components that relate to the larger themes of domesticity, advertising and the graphic designer's role in this relationship. Through the lenses of design and art, one can appreciate the aesthetic pleasure and formal qualities of re-arranging the commercial rhetoric of other designers. The project's therapeutic value to the designer-author is beyond debate, even if its impact on the discipline is minimal.

An activist stance, however, requires one to cast the project into a social, political and economic context, and examine graphic design's role in issues of environmental, ethical and moral importance. An analysis of the Commercial Rhetoric Art Project itself as a response to the issue of over-commercialization remains a future endeavor of critics beyond the scope of this paper, and I invite their constructive criticism.

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