Let's build something together. Real is better. Kindness ricochets. Never follow. Let the rewards fly. Expect everything. Savor the good life. Moving forward. It's all about the beer. It's the network. I'm loving it. This is how it should feel. This is it. For the kid in you. Always worth it Expect more. Pay less. Obey your thirst. Reach out and touch someone. It's everywhere you want to be. Have it your way. The antidote for civilization. Capitalist tool. Say it with flowers. Finger licking good. Stop searching. Start travelling. Reach for greatness. Is it in you? The power of dreams. Turn on the future. You'll feel better with us. Defy obstacles. A fresh perspective. You're in good hands. The ultimate driving machine. How money becomes wealth. The heart of communication. So advanced it's simple. Live at the speed of light. The miracles of

comMODIFIED

remixing advertising rhetoric

work. The choice of professionals. Think. Feel. Drive. An American revolution. Human energy. Safety through innovation. Essential to the experience. Designed for the extraordinary. The possibilities are infinite. Made to move. The art of time. Exhilarate your senses. Where your worlds connect. Do something good

by Alexis Lloyd

comMODIFIED
remixing advertising rhetoric

by Alexis Lloyd

A thesis submitted to the faculty of Parsons The New School for Design,
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Special thanks
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abstract

comMODIFIED is a series of new media art works that remix advertising media as a method of critiquing, questioning, and satirizing marketing rhetoric.

The ever-present language of advertising locates its persuasive power in its ability to exploit intangible desires and cultural values. We are taught to pursue purity through our soap, authenticity through our clothing, and community through our internet provider. Thus we find ourselves in an endless cycle of consumerism, attempting to buy happiness through material goods.

comMODIFIED addresses this dissonance between the ideas used to sell products and the actual function of the products themselves through a series of new media art works. By deconstructing, remixing, and altering advertising language to create fake ads and products, this suite of pieces intends to foster a more critical perspective on advertising and to reveal the essential meaninglessness of the rhetoric that has become our cultural lingua franca. The exaggerated language of these remixed messages calls into question the construction of meaning in advertising and makes the cognitive dissonance between message and product more explicit. In looking more critically at the ideas and messages that are being sold to us, we can gain greater agency in our relationship with corporate rhetoric and our own consumer practices.

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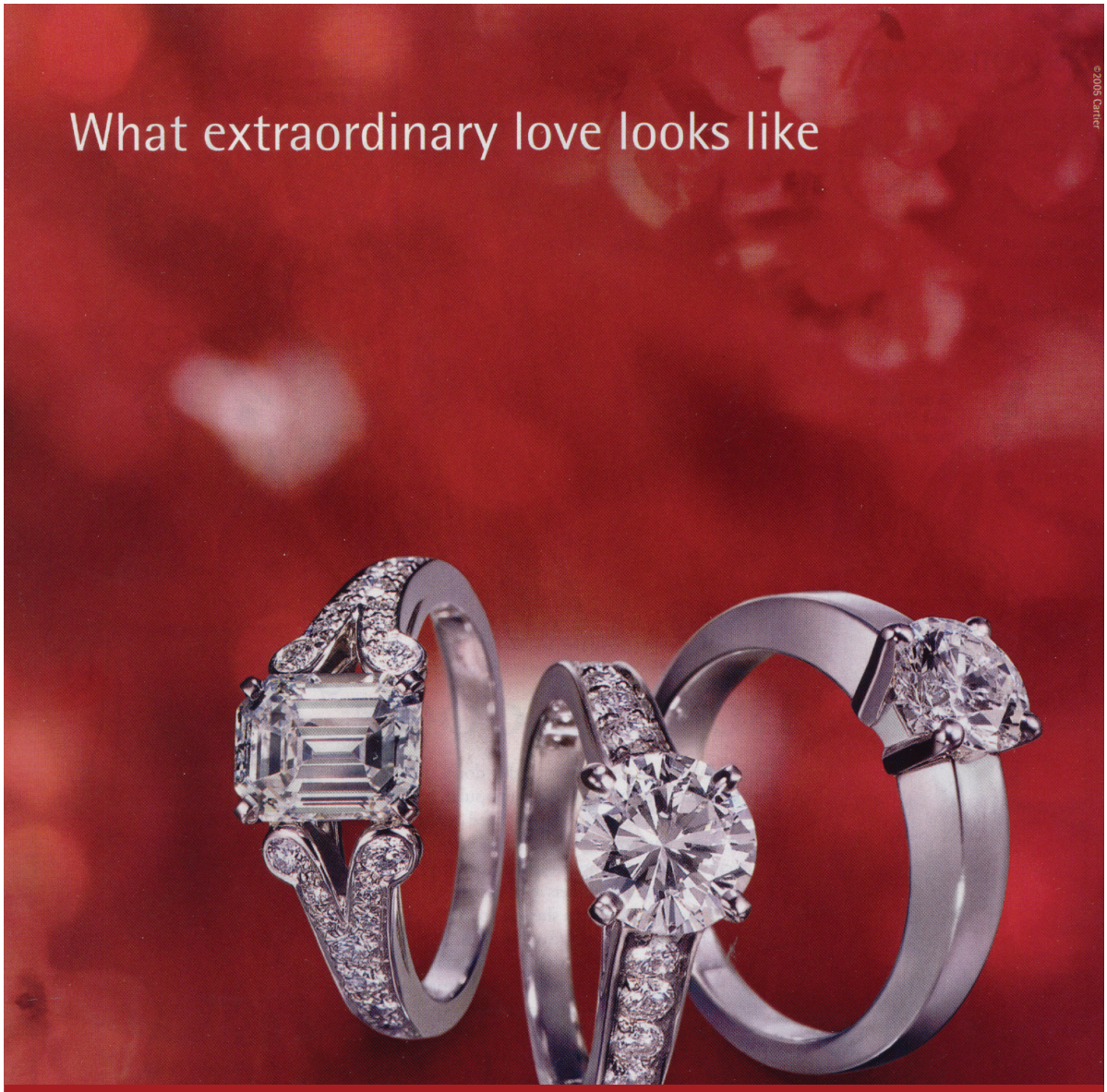


"Advertising suffuses all corners of our waking lives; it so permeates our consciousness that even our dreams are often indistinguishable from a rapid succession of TV commercials."

- Billboard Liberation Front

INTRODUCTION

1

Volkswagen advertisement

"Savor the good life", Cuisinart tells us.

"Live richly", says Citibank.

"Dare to be happy", exhorts Volkswagen.

These are just a handful of the vast multitude of advertising messages that the average American sees each day. These ubiquitous messages persuade us, alter our buying habits, and to an extent, shape our understanding of the world around us. Yet the ideas espoused by advertisements often have little or no relationship to the products they are selling. Rather, they persuade us by exploiting intangible desires and encouraging us to turn to the marketplace for spiritual comfort. Naomi Klein, in her seminal book No Logo, observes that "with this wave of brand mania has come a new breed of businessman, one who will proudly inform you that Brand X is not a product but a way of life, an attitude, a set of values, a look, an idea." (Klein 7) The language used by advertisers is deeply meaningful in that it reflects our desires and cultural values, yet becomes corrupted and meaningless when used to sell material products. That is, a concept like "community", which is about real connections with others in our lives, is diluted when we also understand "community" to be a quality embodied by a cell phone or an insurance company. The false conflation of happiness and purchasing power is a myth intentionally perpetuated at the expense (literally) of consumers.

Growing up and living in New York City for three decades, my interest in corporate power grew out of observing the way the changing business landscape has altered the nature of the city. Until relatively recently, New York's stores and restaurants were dominated by small business owners, with few national chains to be seen. Over the past 10-15 years, there has been a massive surge of corporate presence in the city, a huge influx of Target, Old Navy, Crate and Barrel, Whole Foods, IKEA, Bank of America, and more. In the process, the city seems to have become blander, more generic. Each time I shop at one of these stores, I could be in any town in America, whereas when I shop at a locally owned store, it has a unique character that is tied to the city. Furthermore, local business owners have a vested interest in the well-being of the community that large national chains do not. The chain stores feel vast and impersonal to me, as if I'm conducting a transaction with a faceless machine rather than an actual person. Even the way store employees speak to customers is scripted and generic. Seeing one historic local business after another being razed to make way for more uniform, plastic stores has opened my eyes to the ways in which the growing power of multinational corporations is negatively affecting both the economy and culture of American towns and cities.

My frustration with corporate power has specifically focused on advertising rhetoric out of a personal and long-standing love for language. Growing up, my family arguments were about grammatical rules and etymology, I rose in the ranks of the New York City-wide spelling bee as a child, and now, as an adult, I do the New York Times crossword puzzles obsessively. I find the intricacies and nuances of language endlessly interesting. Using language well is an art form, and it can be extraordinarily powerful as both a tool and a weapon. Hence, I believe that the omnipresent rhetoric of advertising strongly influences what we do and how we think, and I am deeply disturbed by the ways in which it uses the power of words to foster an endless cycle of consumption.

The intent of my thesis work is to create a means by which I (and others) can understand how this construction of meaning occurs. If advertising is now selling meaning rather than product, what are the meanings that are being sold, and how do they reflect or shape our cultural values? Is there a way to prevent this language from influencing our behavior? How can we regain some form of control in our relationship with the rhetoric of advertising?

comMODIFIED explores these ideas through a series of four new media art pieces that remix and satirize language and imagery from advertising media, examining the semiotics of marketing from a variety of perspectives. This suite of works includes:

The Ad Generator, a generative artwork that dynamically creates fake ads by remixing actual corporate slogans and juxtaposing them with related images from Flickr (a popular online photo sharing service).

Slogan Stickers, in which stickers bearing slogans created by The Ad Generator are placed on top of ads and billboards in public spaces.

Prime Time, a video collage of media from television commercials that creates a composite vision of the images and messages we consume daily.

Mixed Messages, a guerrilla shop-dropping intervention in which products with altered labels are placed on shelves in stores and supermarkets.

These projects are jarring and provocative in that they present a viewer with exaggerated, yet deceptively familiar constructs. They encourage viewers to think critically about advertising language, not through didacticism or heavy-handedness, but through subtle recontextualization and satire. This lighter touch creates moments that are humorous, yet encourage deeper questioning. The remixed words and phrases lose their inevitability, and allow viewers to look more closely at how advertisers convey ideas. In developing these approaches to remixing media, *comMODIFIED* attempts to answer specific process-oriented questions, such as: How does the juxtaposition of text and image create or change meaning? Can remixing media through algorithmic or generative composition reveal patterns of meaning? Can these approaches succeed in inviting the viewer into the process of interpretation?

comMODIFIED shows the ways in which advertising language conveys a set of values that we absorb through our daily contact with this rhetoric, and the projects encourage viewers to actively participate in the process of critique and interpretation. Although we have little choice about whether or not to be exposed to advertising, developing a critical perspective on the ads we see "allows us to filter the implicit meanings and images that swarm and flow through us every day, immunizing us against becoming passive victims of a situation." (Beasley and Danesi 31)

"Part artistic terrorists, part vernacular critics, culture jammers introduce noise into the signal as it passes from transmitter to receiver, encouraging idiosyncratic, unintended interpretations."

- Mark Dery

CONTEXT AND PRECEDENTS

2

Kay Rosen plays with language. Near the ceiling, in enormous letters, is the word "ROOF", with a gap between the first two letters. At the bottom of the same wall stands the word "FLOOR", an anagram of "ROOF" with the extra "L" sitting below the gap in the word above. The piece is entitled "Leak".

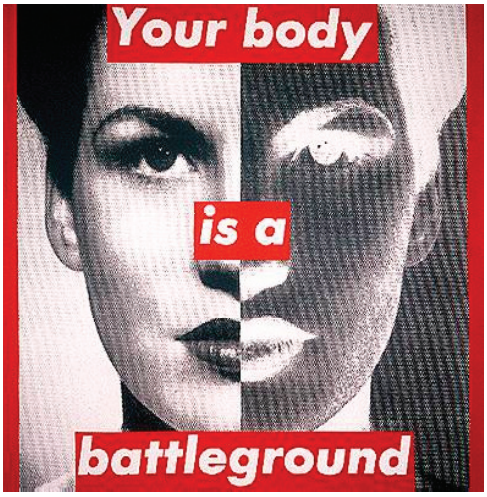
In San Francisco, The Billboard Liberation Front scales the city's billboards at night to make "improvements," such as altering an Apple billboard featuring the Dalai Lama to read "Think Disillusioned," replacing Apple's famous "Think Different" slogan.

These are just two examples of the rich history of artistic practice and political activism that informs my thesis. Since the early twentieth century, artists and activists have been developing techniques that can be used to deconstruct, subvert, and remix meaning in compelling and provocative ways, whether for political or poetic purposes. Specifically, artistic techniques drawn from twentieth century modern art movements combined with newer approaches like information design and culture jamming form a rich toolset that supports the critique of corporate power through an examination of language and meaning.

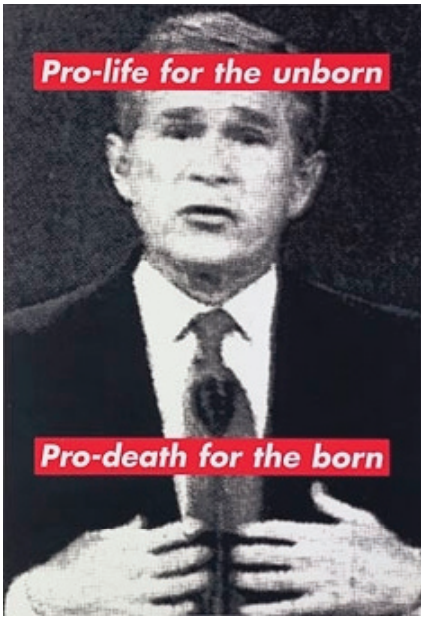
dada and neo-dada: avant-garde art techniques

> "The strongest Dada impulses informing younger American and European artists of the 1950s were Duchamp's notion of the 'readymade'...and Schwitters's collage technique...More globally, the Neo-Dada artists' use of chance as a compositional method, their interest in performance and other ephemeral manifestation, and their challenges to the conventional exhibition, distribution, and commodification of art, reflect profound shifts effected by Dada in attitudes about making art." (Hapgood and Rittner, 64)

The early and middle twentieth century spawned a multitude of related and overlapping schools of thought in modern art, such as Dada, Surrealism, Situationism, and Fluxus. While these movements each had their own idiosyncratic approaches, they collectively popularized a number of techniques that I am applying in my thesis process, including collage or détournement, the use of text in visual art, and chance as a means of composition.



Barbara Kruger, *Your Body is a Battleground*



Barbara Kruger, *Untitled*

Collage is particularly relevant to my thesis in that the juxtaposition of decontextualized elements is inherently related to meaning and how meaning is understood. This juxtaposition is an effective way of exposing the mechanics of how messages are constructed. Although collage was pioneered in artistic practice by Picasso and Braque near the turn of the century, the Situationists were the first to explicitly discuss this technique as a tool for political and social commentary. They stated that "the literary and artistic heritage of humanity should be used for partisan propaganda purposes" and proposed the technique of détournement, whereby existing visual elements are placed in new contexts in order to create new meaning: "Any elements, no matter where they are taken from, can be used to make new combinations…when two objects are brought together, no matter how far apart their original contexts may be, a relationship is always formed." (Debord and Wolman). Thus the artist is no longer responsible for the craft of color, line, and shadow, but becomes an author and manipulator of meaning itself.

When images and text from advertising messages are used in collage, a double détournement occurs, since advertising already relies heavily on the juxtaposition of images, text, and symbolic elements to convey the desired message about a product. One contemporary artist who performs this double détournement in her work is Barbara Kruger. Kruger uses collage to reflect on advertising and cultural beliefs by pairing her own texts with imagery from advertisements in her signature black, white, and red color palette. Her work is effective in that the juxtaposition of text and image clearly critiques the messages of advertising and the way they perpetuate problematic social norms. However, her messages can be a bit heavy handed. For example, in one piece, the words "Your body is a battleground" are superimposed on an image of a woman's face. Or in another, a photo of George W. Bush is paired with the words "Pro-Life for the Unborn. Pro-Death for the Born". The didacticism of these messages makes the viewer feel as if (s)he is being told what to think rather than being encouraged to explore an idea. One of the goals of *comMODIFIED* is to create art that invites exploration and leaves room for the viewer to come to his/her own conclusions through active interpretation.

Kay Rosen, *Pendulum* and *Yellowish/Reddish*

A defining element of Kruger's work is her use of text, another practice developed by modern artists that is essential to my thesis. The use of text in visual art exposes the nature of language as a symbolic system and encourages us to question how we understand words to have specific meaning. The incorporation of text can be achieved through the juxtaposition of text with image, such as in Barbara Kruger's work or in Magritte's famous work *The Wind and the Song*, in which a picture of a pipe is shown with the words "Ceci n'est pas une pipe" (this is not a pipe) below it. However, the deconstruction of meaning can also be achieved through the use of text alone, where the text itself is the image. Russell Bowman, a curator and modern art critic, states that:

> "The forms in which words and language fragments are presented in visual formats are as various as the types of art, but they are united by the fact that the words serve to increase the image's potential for meaning. Whether the words underline and reinforce the image, essentially become the image, or contradict the image to achieve a telling ambiguity, the combination of the visual image with the visual sign system we know as language always creates a compelling resonance." (335)

Kay Rosen is a contemporary artist who utilizes text alone to create extraordinarily compelling pieces that reflect on language and meaning. Her works, which range from small canvasses to large-scale public billboards, consist entirely of words combined, separated, disemboweled, and manipulated to expose their inner multitudes of meaning. For example, her piece *Pendulum* consists of the letters P-N-U-U-M-L-D-E shaped in an arc, forcing the viewer's eye to perform the action of a pendulum in order to read the word. Another work has the word "wish" in yellow followed by the word "dish" in red – it is entitled *Yellowish/Reddish*. A third piece is a billboard in Miami Beach that reads either "Miami Go Miami" or "Mi Amigo Miami", depending on how you look at it. Rosen's work is compelling on a level that Kruger's isn't because she doesn't make any explicit statement, but rather encourages the viewer to look at a medium (language) in an exploratory and experimental way. Eileen Myles , in her Art in America profile of Rosen, argues that, "Her paintings accomplish what good art, I think, is intended to do: they change the world around us, not through exhortation, but by a cumulative alteration of the systems of seeing, hearing, and reading." (Myles, 110) This is the kind of experience I intend to evoke in my work; one where viewers are encouraged to engage with advertising language in a new way, but not told what to think about it.

In the majority of my thesis work, the way I attempt to create this type of experience is to partially eliminate my editorial voice through the use of chance composition, or generative art. The use of chance as a method of artistic composition is another technique that grew out of twentieth century modern art movements and originally has its roots in Dada. Marcel Duchamp is credited with pioneering the use of chance in his *3 stoppages etalon*, three pieces in which

Marcel Duchamp, *3 stoppages étalon*

Jean Arp, *Collage with Squares Arranged According to the Laws of Chance*

he held a piece of string over a canvas and then adhered the string to the canvas in whatever pattern it fell. Chance compositions were also used by other Dada artists, including Jean Arp and Max Ernst, as well as mid-century performing artists such as John Cage, Merce Cunningham, and Lamonte Young (Brecht 7-9). These artists used techniques such as cutting up words and randomly arranging them to create generative poetry and composing music using the I Ching. Composition by chance can be used to avoid the didacticism that can result from inserting one's own messages into a piece, and can allow the system to reveal something about itself, often something unexpected. The artist's voice is still present, but it is expressed through the design of rule sets and frameworks for chance occurrences.

Digital technology has brought about a renaissance for chance composition in the form of generative art that utilizes computer algorithms to provide the framework for a piece. For example, *The Postmodernism Generator* is a web-based work that uses a program called the Dada Engine to dynamically generate an academic essay on postmodern theory. The program encodes rules of grammar and structures of academic writing, and then draws from a database of postmodern theoretical language to create such pitch-perfect sentences as "Bataille uses the term 'the precapitalist paradigm of consensus' to denote the absurdity, and some would say the defining characteristic, of modern culture." The believability of the essay combined with the knowledge that it was randomly generated causes the reader to question how much inherent meaning actual postmodern texts have. One is led to think about the way that postmodern theory uses language and what that language actually means. This is the same approach I am taking by algorithmically generating slogans in *The Ad Generator*: the randomness of the generation and the believability (or absurdity) of the slogans is intended to provoke an investigation into the construction of meaning in advertising.

Thus, chance composition, text art, and collage are three techniques developed by avant-garde artists in the twentieth century that are particularly relevant to a contemporary approach to remixing advertising language. These methods are also utilized in and enhanced by newer fields and schools of thought, specifically, information design and anticorporate activism.

information design and data visualization

While my thesis is strongly influenced by techniques developed by avant-garde art movements, newer methods of information design and data visualization are also central to my approach. While the visual result of my work is vastly different from typical projects in these fields, it is born out of the same desire – to allow viewers to understand patterns and systems of meaning. The goal of information designers is to present data that might be overwhelming or meaningless, and visualize it such that users can process it as information containing meaning and structure. Nathan Shedroff states that:

> "An understanding of Information Design starts with the essential view that the vast amount of things that bombard our senses everyday are not pieces of information but merely data…Data is fairly worthless to most of us; it is the product of research or creation (such as writing), but it is not an adequate product for communicating. To have informational value, it must be organized, transformed, and presented in a way that gives it meaning." (Shedroff 268-269)

This approach is particularly useful to my work in that people usually see advertisements one at a time, and the ads themselves use information design to encourage a particular interpretation of the images and text, therefore a critical analysis of language patterns is difficult. *comMODIFIED* uses methods inspired by information design to encourage people to question assumed interpretations and to see patterns in advertising messages that are not usually discernible.

A recent net.art project using data visualization and information design to reveal patterns in meaning is Jonathan Harris's *10 x 10*, described as "an interactive exploration of the words and pictures that define the time" (Harris). *10 x10* consists of a web-based interface that displays a grid of images and a list of words that change every hour. The words are the top 100 keywords from major news sources for that hour, and the images are images from the news that have been tagged with those keywords. The intent is to create an at-a-glance representation of how we represent the important issues in the world at a particular moment.

Jonathan Harris, *10 x 10*

One of the premises of the project is that words shape our conception of reality, and that displaying words we use to describe our reality will reveal something about our beliefs. Furthermore, Harris extracts the individual words from the sentences and news articles they appear in, where their meaning might be outweighed by the larger context. In this way we are forced to examine the nature of the specific words we use to describe our world. Similarly, *The Ad Generator* extracts advertising language from its natural context and randomly recontextualizes it, exposing its meaninglessness and encouraging greater analysis on the part of the viewer. Harris uses another technique similar to one used in *The Ad Generator*, in that he pairs words with images that are "tagged" with those words. This approach forces us to examine not only the meaning of the words themselves, but also how the juxtaposition of text and image creates meaning.

adbusting, culture jamming and subvertising

Finally, my thesis work draws heavily on anticorporate activist traditions of adbusting, culture jamming, and subvertising, three interchangeable terms for the practices of appropriating corporate media and subverting the original messages. Recent growth of anticorporate sentiment has led to a corresponding increase in artists using advertising media to make political statements. These artists have taken the avant-garde techniques of collage, détournement, and text art and used them to create scathing commentaries on corporate power. Naomi Klein, in her writing on anticorporate activism, says that culture jamming "baldly rejects the idea that marketing…must be passively accepted as a one-way information flow". She describes a "good jam" as "an X-ray of the subconscious of a campaign, uncovering not an opposite meaning but the deeper truth hiding beneath the layers of advertising euphemisms" (Klein 281-282).

Although adbusting and culture jamming have experienced a resurgence in the past decade with the rise of anticorporate sentiment and the accessibility of technological tools, the tradition has been in existence since the Great Depression, where "Toucher Uppers" modified billboards and photographers like Margaret Bourke-White documented the disjunction between advertising imagery and the rampant poverty of the time (Klein 305). One of

Billboard Liberation Front, *Think Disillusioned*

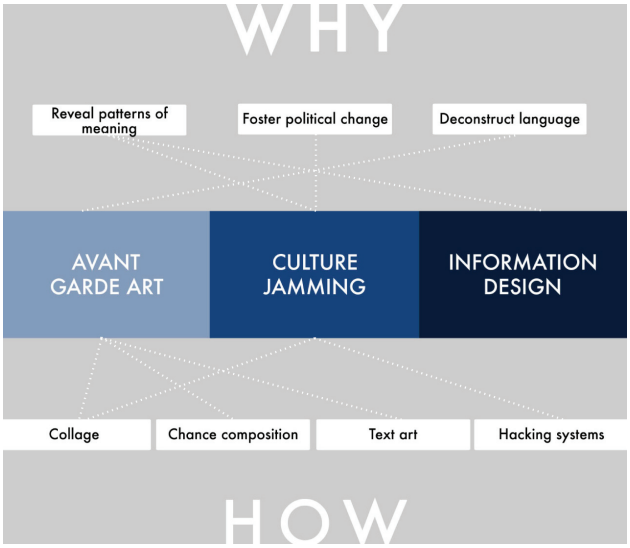
the longest-lived contemporary culture-jamming groups is the Billboard Liberation Front, which was formed in 1977 by Jack Napier and Irving Glikk. The BLF "improves" the messages of billboards in public spaces, such as changing the Camel cigarettes billboard to read "Am I Dead Yet?" or altering the Apple Computer ad featuring the Dalai Lama to read "Think Disillusioned". They argue that since advertising is so ubiquitous and has such a deep effect on us, that we have a right and responsibility to author the messages that shape our views. This argument – that advertising language shapes our psychological reality – is the basis of my thesis. The BLF manifesto puts it eloquently:

> "Through the Ad and the intent of the Advertiser we form our ideas and learn the myths that make us into what we are as a people. That this method of self definition displaced the earlier methods is beyond debate. It is now clear that the Ad holds the most esteemed position in our cosmology." (Napier)

One culture-jamming method that has evolved more recently is "shop dropping". Shop dropping, the opposite of shoplifting, involves placing products in stores as a means of commenting on corporate practices. The purpose is "to take some of the visual space back, that in our days is occupied by commercialism. Shop-droppers claim this commercial space for self expression and artistic use. They insert their altered products in public spaces of commerce and enforce therefore a new way of conception (Koehn)."

One of the earliest and most famous shop-dropping interventions was enacted by the Barbie Liberation Organization during the Christmas shopping season of 1989. The group switched the voice boxes of several hundred Barbie and G.I. Joe dolls and placed them back on store shelves, resulting in the army figures complaining that "math is hard" and Barbies shouting "vengeance is mine!". While this project focused on questioning how consumer products reinforce gender stereotypes, other shop-dropping projects have extended adbusting techniques into the shopping environment or inserted art objects into stores in order to question the corporate domination of the marketplace.

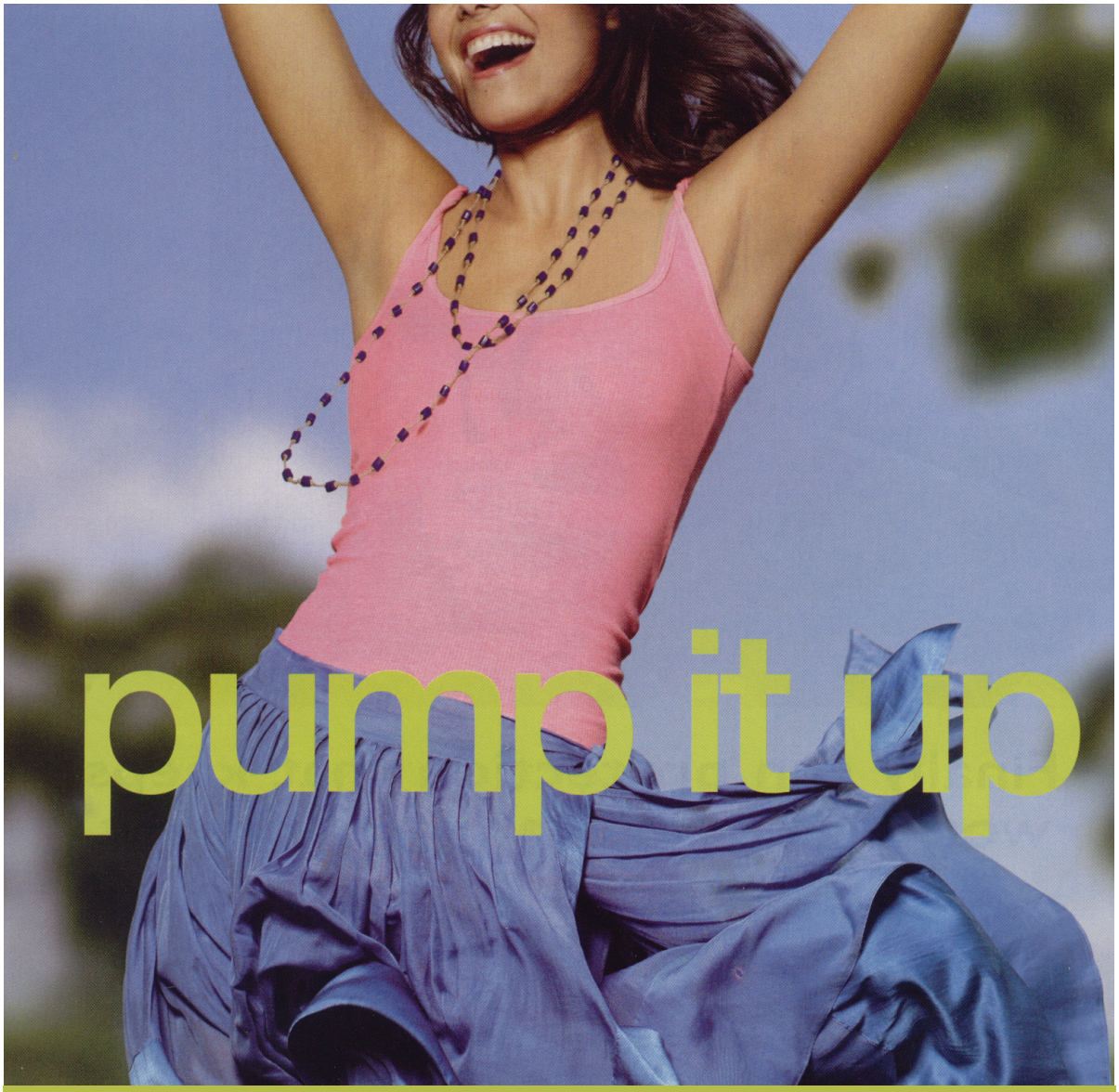
Shop dropping and other culture jamming techniques inform my thesis work in numerous and far-reaching ways. Questioning the assumptions of corporate media and interrupting the consumer experience to critique, satirize, and ask questions are central approaches in all of the projects that comprise *comMODIFIED*. While my work stems from the same premises about corporate power, language, and public responsibility that all culture jammers share, I also depart from adbusting techniques in a significant way. Like Barbara Kruger's work, adbusting projects can often come across as preachy or moralizing. The viewer immediately recognizes what (s)he is being told and there is no room for a deeper or more layered experience. By using the elements



Areas of research

of advertising to reflect on themselves, rather than inserting my own commentary, and by attempting to create subtle interventions, these works ask rather than tell, and invite viewers to engage in the process of interpretation.

Anticorporate activism relies heavily on the modern art techniques discussed earlier. These techniques – collage, text art, and chance composition – that were central to Cubism, Dada, and Surrealism in the early twentieth century (and later expanded on by groups such as Fluxus and the Situationists) have laid the foundation for many contemporary artists, especially artists who are exploring meaning and semiotics. Collage is effective in examining how the meaning of images or symbols changes when recontextualized; how the use of text in (or as) visual art allows for an explicit exploration of language as a system of meaning; and how chance composition, or algorithmic art, can be used to remove the artist's explicit "message" and allow systems to reveal their own meaning. These techniques, when paired with the newer fields of information design and culture jamming, create a rich and coherent set of tools and methods that can be used to explore language, meaning, and the construction of meaning. *comMODIFIED* uses these tools in order to reveal underlying patterns in the way language is used in advertising, and to create an exploratory space in which viewers can develop a critical approach to corporate messages and imagery.



"Mix, mix again, remix: copyleft, cut 'n' paste, digital jumble, cross-fade, dub, spin, merge, morph, bootleg, pirate, plagiarize, enrich, sample, break down, reassemble, multiply input source, merge output, decompose, recompose, remix again."

- Bernard Schütze

DESIGN PROCESS

3

Creating a series of pieces rather than a single work has allowed me to explore a wide range of ideas and tactics in my thesis development. Each piece in the series addresses a different advertising medium or form. *The Ad Generator* and its spin-off, the *Slogan Stickers,* address the form of billboards and print ads, while *Prime Time* works with television commercials, and *Mixed Messages* intervenes in product packaging and labeling. The development of multiple works, in addition to providing a variety of perspectives, has also presented a complex set of challenges, including questions about methods of remixing content, satirical versus poetic approaches, the role of intervention, and the influence of technology.

the ad generator: satirical ad creation

The Ad Generator is a generative artwork that creates fake advertisements in order to explore how advertising uses and manipulates language. Words and semantic structures from real corporate slogans are remixed and randomized to generate invented slogans. These slogans are then paired with related images from Flickr to dynamically generate fake ads. By remixing corporate slogans, *The Ad Generator* deconstructs how the language of advertising is both powerful, in that it represents real cultural values and desires, and yet simultaneously meaningless in that these ideas have no relationship to the products being sold. In using the Flickr images, the piece explores the relationship between language and image, and how meaning is constructed by the juxtaposition of the two.

While the development of *The Ad Generator* was fairly straightforward, there were some obstacles in the design and development process. The first iteration of the project worked well in many respects, but the language analysis was far too simplistic. The program simply took an existing slogan and performed a fill-in-the-blank for a single word in that slogan. This process was problematic in that the original slogan was usually recognizable and there wasn't much flexibility or variation in the slogan generation. In addition, while there was rudimentary differentiation between different parts of speech, this process also needed to be much more sophisticated in order to avoid awkward grammatical constructions.

10. Screenshots from *The Ad Generator*

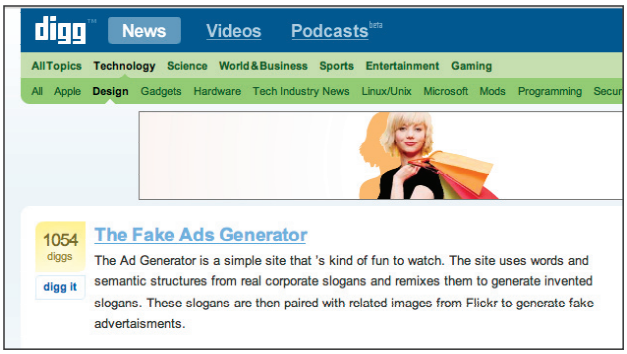
The second and final iteration of *The Ad Generator* improved upon both the language analysis and the design. Now the program uses only the basic semantic skeleton of the real slogans and fills in most or all of the words randomly from a separate database of words. For example, the Nike slogan "Just do it" would have its semantic structure identified as "adverb, transitive verb, pronoun" and the individual words in the slogan would be entered into the words database along with their parts of speech and variations. This approach provides a much greater degree of flexibility and variation in the generated slogans. In addition, the language analysis now differentiates between different parts of speech on a more granular level (e.g., transitive and intransitive verbs) so that the selected words are appropriate to the grammar of the slogan. While the design is improved in the new version, it is still extremely simple. The images are the primary visual feature of the design, and text is displayed below the image on a neutral grey background. I would have liked to be able to make the piece more "designed", but since both the images and text are dynamic rather than predetermined, the design needs to be very minimal in order to avoid clashing with the images or interfering with the readability of the text.

After completing the final iteration of *The Ad Generator*, I conducted user testing in order to ascertain what viewers would understand about the project if they were given no explanation about its purpose or function. Like many generative pieces, providing an explanation of the process will probably deepen a viewer's understanding and appreciation of the work, but it was important to me that the piece be compelling and communicative on its own, without explanation. Most user-testing participants understood that the piece was about advertising, which supports my hypothesis that there is a pattern of semantic structure and vocabulary that is specific to advertising as a whole. Many users also expressed some degree of pleasurable confusion, as described here:

> "Initially, it was confusing, because the words and pictures almost matched each other, but not quite. Some of the phrases in the text wind up being really funny, because they read like real ad campaigns, but are obvious nonsense — sometimes they wind up being particularly ironic or even negative statements."

While confusion is often seen as a negative aspect of user experience, in the context of this project, I think it is actually a marker of success. It is this confusion or cognitive dissonance that provides the impetus for the viewer to examine the language more deeply and critically. Jennifer and Kevin McCoy, in an interview about their net.art work, discuss the use of confusion as an artistic device:

"I am struck by how thoroughly the corporate world has adopted previously "avant-garde" attitudes. Mockery and masking are now basic modes of operation at most media corporations. You have to be a lot more sophisticated now. As a result, our stance is very subtle. In our net art projects we don't announce anything. We try to present the material in an unassuming manner. Playing it straight. But what we present I think then leads to confusion. Confusion is the real weapon against the corporate world." (Bosma)



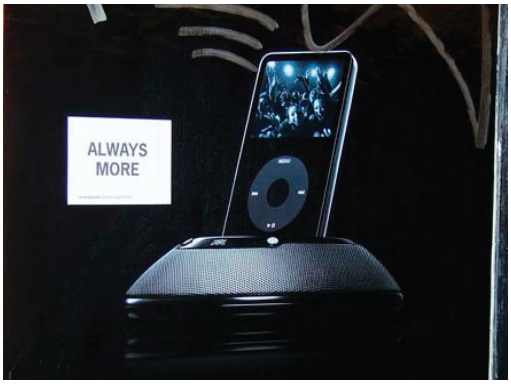
The Ad Generator gained popularity online through word of mouth on sites like Digg.

The results of user testing demonstrated that *The Ad Generator*, in its current form, is successful in creating the desired viewer experience. However, I was frustrated that these messages would only be seen in a gallery environment, and I wanted to expand the reach of the project. This expansion was achieved through a multi-channel approach. First, I created a web-based version of *The Ad Generator* (www.theadgenerator.org), and disseminated information about the project via email and by contacting various blogs. The project has received a great deal of attention and blog press over the past several months, and has seen hundreds of thousands of visitors over the past few months. In addition, many visitors have been taking snapshots of their favorite generated ads and posting them online, thereby creating an online gallery of imagery that is, by its generative nature, fleeting and ephemeral.

Exhibition Note:
The Ad Generator was selected to be shown in an exhibit in Eindhoven, Netherlands curated by the MAD Emergent Art Center. The exhibit, entitled "Touched Design", addresses emotions and feelings in new media, and ran from May 2 – June 30, 2007 at the Artgadgets gallery.

slogan stickers: the ad generator goes public

In addition to creating the web-based version of *The Ad Generator*, I was interested in exploring ways of extending the project into public space. To this end, I created a series of stickers bearing slogans produced by *The Ad Generator* and placed them on top of existing ads and billboards in public spaces in New York City. By disseminating content from *The Ad Generator* in this way, I can intervene in the same spaces where people are actually confronted with advertising. The



Slogan Stickers in action

Slogan Stickers design

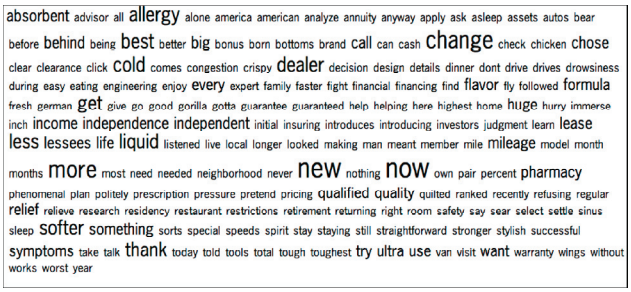
stickers, with their invented and absurd marketing language call into question the "realness" or validity of all language in this space. This is a realm where confusion about the slogans being "almost, but not quite" plausible can be particularly effective. If viewers begin to ask the question, "But what is this really selling?", then perhaps they will extend that questioning stance to actual advertisements as well.

In designing the stickers, I retained the minimalist look and feel that was used in *The Ad Generator*, printing black text on white 5.5" x 4.25" stickers. Ironically, the question of whether to "brand" the stickers in some way became a central issue. I wanted the series of stickers to be perceived as a unified whole, even though they all display different slogans, and I also wanted to communicate some sense of the slogans being mechanically generated. However, I didn't want to create a brand in the traditional sense and I wanted to retain some element of confusion or mystery. The eventual solution involved placing a line of small print at the bottom of each sticker that reads "The Ad Generator: Generated Slogan #0000000". This message conveys the sense of algorithmic or industrial creation, and also gives viewers a potential method for finding the online version of *The Ad Generator* without explicitly making that connection. While the connection between the stickers and the software is obvious because of their functional and aesthetic similarity, the fact that the connection has to be discovered adds to the sense of confusion or mystery for the viewer.

prime time: remixing commercials

The second project I developed applies a similar process of generative remixing to a different form of advertising – television commercials. While similar in methodology to *The Ad Generator*, *Prime Time* is more focused on ideas of collection and abstraction. My hypothesis is that, although each commercial or advertisement we see is selling something specific, they are all addressing some aspect of a shared set of values, needs, and desires. My intention was to create a work that uses language and media from a collection of television commercials in order to reveal this shared set of values. In other words, what does our ideal American life look like? What cultural values are being offered for our consumption? How can I create a piece that gives viewers the sense of stepping back and seeing a bird's-eye view of our desires and ideals?

Early video prototype



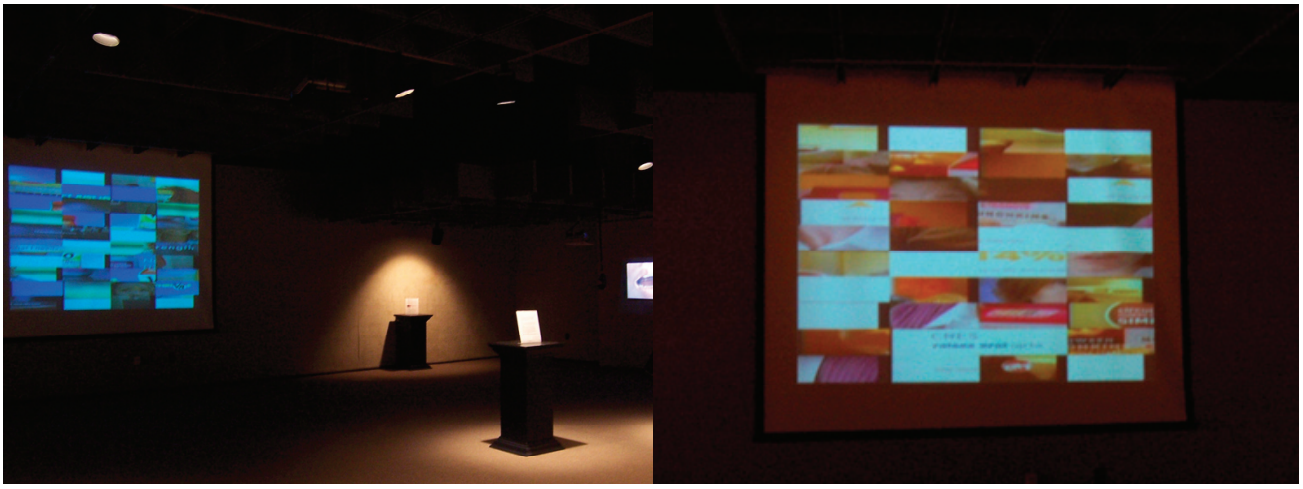
Tag cloud prototype (cataloging words from 9 commercials)

Photomosaic prototype

The process of developing this project was quite challenging and involved numerous iterations. While a project like *The Ad Generator* is largely carried by the concept and functionality of the piece, I discovered that this project required much more craft and attention to visual detail. In my many iterations and experiments, I found that the idea of the piece simply didn't communicate unless the aesthetics and composition were very refined. The initial concept for the piece involved a multi-monitor video work in which each monitor would cycle through single shots from various commercials and overlay randomly selected words from the commercials' scripts on top of the video image. One of the prototypes for this idea was a piece that involved nine screens displaying video clips and words that were grouped according to theme, such as illness, beauty, technology, etc. and a piece that used three screens to display video clips grouped by similarities in the visual language of the shots.

Though these ideas seemed promising, once they were being developed, they revealed a number of problems and challenges. Because of the way commercials are edited, the quick cuts from shot to shot with short sound bites didn't read as anything different from actual commercials. When presented with this kind of video editing, the majority of viewers tended to tune out rather than becoming more attentive or critical. The element of confusion or cognitive dissonance that *The Ad Generator* creates was sorely missing from this piece.

Finding this approach unsuccessful, I next began a series of attempts to extract and translate data (primarily still images and words) from the videos in order to create a more traditional data visualization project. These experiments included the creation of a "word cloud" that visualized all of the words used in the commercials by frequency of use and a set of photo mosaics that constructed images of words used in the commercials with collections of still shots from the videos that utilized those words. While these iterations did begin to express some of the ideas I wanted to communicate, they lacked in emotional resonance. The process of viewing (and creating) became an intellectual exercise in matching words to images that wasn't particularly compelling or satisfying.



Prime Time installed at the Melvin Art Gallery, Lakeland, FL

During the creation of these experiments, I was simultaneously looking at work by a number of video artists, and I realized that I hadn't fully explored the potential of the video medium. I returned to the original videos and began exploring other ways of conveying my central ideas in a more abstract and emotionally engaging way. The final solution for this project is a single-channel video piece that visually slices and rearranges a number of commercial videos simultaneously. Four commercials are selected at random, then cut up and collaged such that fragments of each are playing simultaneously in different areas of the screen. When any one commercial ends, another is selected to take its place. In addition, the four audio soundtracks are playing simultaneously. The result is a barrage of image and sound that evokes the sense of bombardment created by the ubiquity and aggressiveness of advertising. However, while conveying a sense of bombardment, that experience is also mitigated so that it doesn't simply become impenetrable noise. In order to achieve this balance, I used two techniques. First, in addition to the video imagery, snippets of text intermittently appear on the screen. These words and phrases are hand selected, and begin to convey some of the larger desires and cultural values being communicated in the commercials. In addition, the audio is manipulated so that only one of the four audio tracks is at full volume at any given moment, while the others are at a lower volume. As the audio fades in and out between the commercials, the effect is similar to radio stations being tuned in and out – words, phrases, and pieces of music can be discerned, but they take on new meanings as they are decontextualized and remixed.

Through collection and abstraction, *Prime Time* examines the composite set of American values, needs, and desires that are being sold to us every day. The layers of multiple commercials emphasize the sense of bombardment and noise created by the ubiquity of commercial advertising, yet the signals that emerge from this noise form a fragmented narrative that points to the patterns of implicit meaning we absorb from this media.

Exhibition Note:
In February 2007, I was invited to exhibit *Prime Time* at the Melvin Art Gallery at Florida Southern College in Lakeland, Florida. The piece was shown as part of a group video exhibition that also included work by Lisa Erdman, Ligia Carvallo, and Samuel Romero. Images from the exhibit installation are shown above.

mixed messages: a shop-dropping intervention

Having developed *Prime Time* and *The Ad Generator*, I spent some time reflecting on my process in order to determine potential next steps. In retrospect, I felt that the satirical remixing of language in *The Ad Generator* was a more successful tool for conveying my ideas and engaging viewers than the more abstract, video-art approach of *Prime Time*. People seemed to "get it" more readily, and the humor of the fake ads made the piece very approachable. In addition, I found the complexity of the media in television commercials not as well suited for remixing in a way that communicated clearly, whereas the pithy nature of the corporate slogan provided a very clear structure to work within—the slogan messages speak directly to the appropriation of desires and values that I am interested in critiquing. As a result of these realizations, I began looking at other media and forms of advertising that might provide fertile ground for this type of critique. Having already worked with print ads and television commercials, I began to examine the labeling and packaging of products themselves, and found that the marketing rhetoric on product packages is as manipulative, strange, and absurd as corporate slogans, yet with a different nuance and tone.

The initial prototype for the "product project" involved emulating the form of products, but labeling them with the language people use to talk about their desires and dreams, thereby making an explicit statement about how marketers literally "package" our desires and sell them back to us. In keeping with the generative approach to remixing, I intended to gather texts from 43things.com (a social-networking website where users post their desires and goals), and use these texts to label empty product containers.

While this idea was compelling, it seemed , to lack something. First of all, I was concerned that the piece wouldn't communicate well unless the process behind it was explained in detail. It wasn't apparent that the text was being generated from another source, and the form did not strongly evoke modes of advertising. It also seemed more abstract, and didn't provoke the kind of humorous or jarring experience that was achieved with *The Ad Generator*. But most importantly, the fact that this work would only exist in a gallery space was problematic. Bringing *The Ad Generator* into public space (online and outdoors) had been immensely satisfying, and I wanted to create a project that would have an audience outside the art world.

Initial product prototype

Mixed Messages: skin cream with "30% more youth!", cereal that "absorbs wetness!", and "100% whole grain" water.

At the same time as I was exploring these ideas, I was introduced to the idea of shop dropping, a method of culture jamming in which items are placed on store shelves alongside real products. This turned out to be the ideal method with which to hack or critique advertising language on product packages – similar to the *Slogan Stickers*, this method reaches people in the places where they are actually confronted with marketing messages.

The final form of this project is entitled *Mixed Messages*, and consists of a shop-dropping intervention in which product labels are altered or "hacked" and placed back on store shelves. While I initially considered creating entirely fake labels and products, I eventually decided to use the form of the "new and improved" texts on labels (e.g. "30% less fat!", "Now with micro-absorber technology!", etc.) in order to create a more subtle intervention. Altering only part of the label text succeeds in creating the "almost but not quite" moment of cognitive dissonance that allows a project like this to become a subtle, layered commentary rather than simply a punch line.

Despite the desire for subtlety, the first design attempts were actually far too subtle. I chose to design the label additions to blend seamlessly with the package design of particular products. However, since the new labels were indistinguishable from the packaging, there was very little chance that the consumer would actually notice or read the new text. The eventual solution was to use the round, neon stickers that supermarkets often use to mark sale items. These labels clearly call attention to themselves, and the uniform design applied to many products is more in keeping with the generative, minimalist aesthetic of *The Ad Generator* and the *Slogan Stickers*.

For this project, I chose to have more of an editorial hand in the messages than in my previous projects, which were largely generative. The textual content for the label hacks is being created through a combination of approaches. Some of the texts are completely invented, such as "30% more youth!" on wrinkle cream or "Now with appetite suppressants!" on ground beef. For other labels, I am using texts from actual products and applying them to unrelated products, such as "100% whole grain" stickers on bottled water or "Absorbs wetness!" on cereal.

These messages point to the absurdity of actual marketing rhetoric and pose questions about how or why we use these texts to make buying decisions. Are we more likely to buy deodorant with "28% more wetness fighter" or cosmetics with "advanced European technology"? These are texts from actual products, yet when we stop to examine them, they are no less absurd than many of my invented and remixed messages. However, it is this absurd, meaningless language that surrounds us and persuades us. The *Mixed Messages* intervention is intended to reveal, critique, and ask questions about this rhetoric and its influence on our perceptions.

"It's either write, or be written. I can raise a pen or a brush in defense of my own mental environment, or allow myself to be the passive, infinitely impressed palimpsest which is the consumer caught in the maw of a marketing campaign."

D.S. Black

EVALUATION

4

The process of creating art works that are intended to serve as political critique and incite a particular response from viewers has been a challenging and edifying experience. Developing a series of works rather than a single piece was essential for this particular area of exploration, as it allowed me to work with different approaches to the material and different aspects of the content. Each project's process raised its own particular issues and shed new light on recurring questions.

art of the remix

> "Remix culture…upholds the remix as an open challenge to a culture predicated on exclusive ownership, authorship, and controlled distribution. Against these cultural forces, the subterranean remix opposes an ongoing questioning of economic and cultural givens…It equally calls into question the categories, rifts and borders between high and low cultures, pop and elitist art practices, as well as blurring lines between artistic disciplines." (Schütze)

The four projects that comprise my thesis all utilize the technique of remixing or collaging advertising media. The idea of the remix has been the primary methodological thread throughout my work. I have consistently found that deconstructing and juxtaposing elements of language and imagery is a powerful method for questioning how meaning is constructed and communicated. Drawing elements of advertising language and imagery out of their native contexts breaks marketers' carefully constructed narratives and allows those texts to be read more critically. Recombining them in new contexts then creates an altered, often absurd narrative that directly questions the ways in which meaning is constructed and communicated to consumers through advertising, and how much those meanings really "mean" anything.

I had originally intended that the remixing for the various projects be done completely generatively. As a designer and programmer, I was interested in methods for creating rule sets that would generate compelling visual results and would communicate specific ideas effectively. In addition, by remixing existing media and by doing so generatively, I hoped to allow the system to reflect and comment upon itself and to avoid any didacticism or heavy-handedness in the tone of the pieces. Through this process, I intended

to ask questions about the construction of meaning in advertising rather than telling the viewer what to think.

the role of technology

While the generative approach to remix was very effective in achieving the desired goals, I also found that it wasn't appropriate for every situation. In particular, for *Mixed Messages*, I decided to forgo a generative approach. This choice stemmed from the fact that generative remixing inevitably produces more and less successful results. In *The Ad Generator* and *Prime Time*, the viewer sees a number of remixed results, so if a few of those remixes are less than perfectly compelling, the effect is balanced out by the majority. However, in *Mixed Messages*, a viewer/shopper may only see one relabeled product. Therefore, there is more responsibility on the part of the artist to insure that each juxtaposition is as effective as possible. For this reason, I chose to edit and curate the remixing process for that particular project.

Technology plays an important part in the conception and creation of all of these works. Clearly, the generative aspects of *Prime Time* and *The Ad Generator* are entirely dependent on technology and programming techniques. Yet technology also creates the means for a new wave of culture jamming, of which these projects are representative. The abundance of content that is now accessible online means that corporations have less and less control over the ways people access and use their media. While advertisers want their messages to become embedded in culture and social interaction, they want it to remain intact, without the public dialogue that is usually inherent to cultural memes. Technology is now allowing this public dialogue to occur on a greater scale, as average citizens not only have the access to the media objects, but the publishing tools to manipulate that content and broadcast it in widely accessible ways.

social critique: poetry or satire?

Another issue that arose during thesis development was the question of how to most effectively communicate social critique. Should this critique be satirical and witty? Poetic and contemplative? Subtle? Obvious?

After creating *The Ad Generator*, which takes a distinctly humorous and satirical approach, I aimed for a very different result with *Prime Time*. Since the nature of television commercials is much more complex and layered than that

of print advertising, I wanted to see if, by pulling back and showing a highly complex collage of commercial media, it would be possible to create a poetic, almost transcendent experience of a very mundane medium. By revealing patterns in the barrage of image and sound that we are exposed to on a daily basis, *Prime Time* asks viewers to step back from the narrative of one particular commercial and see the larger structures in this medium as a whole. It also exaggerates the sense of bombardment created by the aggressive tone of television ads in order to reveal the emotional impact that these commercials have on most viewers. Overall, the piece is intended to create a much more poetic, emotional, and moody effect than the other projects that comprise my thesis.

While *Prime Time* does achieve these goals, I discovered that a more pointed, satirical approach is received much better and is more effective at provoking a critical response towards advertising media. However, as previously mentioned, many satirical approaches to culture jamming and adbusting tend to be quite obvious. As a result, the satire is often just a punch line that does not allow for a deeper, layered user experience. A more effective approach, as I have taken here, is to create works that operate in an in-between space, that exaggerate marketing rhetoric to the point of absurdity yet are still almost plausible. These "almost but not quite" advertising texts create the necessary cognitive dissonance to compel viewers to look closer, not only at the piece itself, but at advertising media in general. *comMODIFIED* asks: Why do these completely absurd messages seem almost genuine? Do the actual messages we absorb daily have any more real meaning than this? How is it that we are persuaded by such empty messages? What deeper desires do they exploit? What are we really being sold?

to intervene or not to intervene

Finally, the question of intervention has been central to my thesis process. Though my initial project sketches were almost exclusively confined to the gallery environment, as my process evolved, I found that, in order to create an effective social/media critique, the projects needed to extend themselves beyond the art world and into alternate environments.

The first extension beyond the gallery space was the creation of a web-based version of *The Ad Generator*. This alternate

version was hugely successful, having received a great deal of blog press and hundreds of thousands of visitors. Users' comments and responses on Digg, Tech Crunch, and other blogs have served to stimulate discussion about the issues raised by the project. In this way, the online *Ad Generator* has taken advantage of an existing medium in order to provoke discourse about advertising rhetoric.

While this public presentation and dialogue has been very successful, I decided early on that the most effective intervention would have to occur in the spaces where people are confronted with advertising. This technique is central to both the *Slogan Stickers*, which were placed on existing billboard ads in public spaces, and *Mixed Messages*, which altered messages on products in stores and supermarkets. Subverting actual advertisements is the most effective critique, in that it interrupts the communication of the original ad message. In addition, this type of intervention challenges the notion that public space is only a forum for corporate speech. It proposes that every citizen has the right to take part in a dialogue with the corporate that dominates our mental and physical environments. As Jack Napier says in the Billboard Liberation Front's Manifesto:

> "Until that glorious day for global communications when every man, woman and child can scream at or sing to the world in 100Pt. type from their very own rooftop; until that day we will continue to do all in our power to encourage the masses to use any means possible to commandeer the existing media and to alter it to their own design."

conclusion

The public space should indeed be a place for public dialogue, yet it is bought and sold by corporate media. All others who attempt to speak in this space are labeled vandalizers and criminals. Citizenship has been colonized by consumerhood, and the messages of advertisers become our cultural discourse. The messages are no longer confined to the sidebar of a newspaper or the interstitial spaces of television shows; they are everywhere we look, and impossible to avoid. These purveyors of desire promise us rebellion through sneakers, a sense of community in our cell phones, and peace of mind in our household cleaners. Thus we shop, seeking fulfillment of our intangible desires through the culturally sanctioned and celebrated marketplace. Yet somehow, Clorox never quite makes us feel pure and Oil of Olay doesn't really make us young and beautiful. The pervasive call of advertising has woven false myths and stories around these consumer products, exploiting our desire for authentic experience and subverting it by turning our gaze back to material goods.

By remixing, questioning, and subverting these ubiquitous texts, the series of pieces that comprise *comMODIFIED* take an important step toward unweaving the web of persuasion created by advertising. These works ask the user not to ignore advertising, but to look closer, to really see how these myths are made. The deconstructed and recomposed messages ask viewers to question the meanings and stories that inhabit their mental environments. First, we must ask: What am I really being sold? Then, the inevitable question that follows: Am I buying it?

a selection of slogans used as source material for the ad generator

Let's build something together | Lowe's

Real is better | Nantucket Nectars

Kindness ricochets | Hilton Hotels

Never follow | Audi

Let the rewards fly | Southwest Airlines

Expect everything | Budweiser

Savor the good life | Cuisinart

Moving forward | Toyota

It's all about the beer | Heineken

It's the network | Verizon Wireless

I'm loving it | McDonald's

This is how it should feel | Westin Hotels

This is it | Macy's

For the kid in you | Nestle Crunch

Always worth it | Bud Light

Expect more. Pay less. | Target

Obey your thirst | Sprite

It's everywhere you want to be | Visa

Have it your way | Burger King

The antidote for civilization | Club Med

Capitalist tool | Forbes

Say it with flowers | 1-800 Flowers

Finger licking good | KFC

Got milk? | Milk / Dairy Board

Stop searching. Start travelling. | Southwest Airlines

Reach for greatness | Bass beer

Is it in you? | Gatorade

The power of dreams | Honda

Turn on the future | Aiwa

You'll feel better with us | Aetna

Defy obstacles | Air Canada

A fresh perspective | Acer

You're in good hands | Allstate

The ultimate driving machine | BMW

How money becomes wealth | Barron's

So advanced it's simple | Canon

Live at the speed of light | Citizen

The miracles of science | Dupont

Get more | Eckerd

Making energy make sense | Evantage

Taste the difference | Florida's Natural

Live well | GNC

Anything less would be uncivilized | Gillette

Feel good food | Healthy Choice

Stay smart | Holiday Inn Express

Driving is believing | Hyundai

When you really want to know | MSNBC

Dare to be happy | Volkswagen

Your potential. Our passion. | Microsoft

Escape completely | Princess Cruises

selected product texts used as source material for mixed messages

Zero trans fat

Golden baked goodness

Helps remove cholesterol

100% whole grain

Now even cheesier!

Now with thermogenic power

Kills 99.9% of bacteria

Controls tough odors

Thick, strong, and stretchable

Locks away tough dirt

Easy one-handed preparation

New Dri-Soft cotton-like cover

Natural softness of real cotton

LeakGuard core

New! Extra clean and healthy mouth!

60% healthier hair

28% more wetness fighter

New! Intensely fresh formula!

24 hours of unstoppable freshness

New! Superior protection with Extra Power

With Micro-Neutralizer technology

With Micro-Absorber technology

Richer formula

With active fruit concentrate

ColorSeal technology

Superior damage protection

20% more natural-looking hair color

100% gray coverage

ColorBlend technology

Built-in protection

Totally trauma-proof color

Targeted body firming treatment

With sea kelp extract

Double the nourishing avocado oil

Younger looking skin

Naturally heals

With gentle microbeads

With Boswelox

No water needed

New! Advanced European technology

Double lifting

Oil-free

With natural licochalcone

Amino-peptide formula

Cool refreshing tingle

New tongue cleaner

Clinically proven

Extra whitening

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