

Direct Action

Culture Jamming

"If any of you work in advertising or marketing, kill yourself. No, seriously. Kill yourself."

– Bill Hicks, US comedian

Early evening. A crowd of commuters stands on the platform of a San Francisco train station, avoiding eye contact and glancing occasionally at the overhead monitors. Suddenly, a gust of wind indicates an imminent arrival. The crowd looks up to the monitors in unison, checking the train's destination. The stream of adverts switches to the characteristic lettering of a destination message – only it reads, "Capitalism Stops at Nothing." The message blinks twice before giving way to the train's destination. And for a few seconds, hundreds of people scratch their heads and wonder the same thing: "What

the hell just happened?"

What just happened was a perfect example of culture jamming. Sometimes known as media hacking, information warfare, or poetic terrorism, it's an assault on advertising and consumer culture involving the deliberate disruption, distortion, or subversion of mainstream media messages to expose their hidden meanings.

Culture jamming ranges from the simple alteration of billboards – with spray paint or pasted up text using similar fonts, the redesign of logos, the printing of spoof newspapers, such as the *The Financial Crimes*, to more complex forms involving hacking websites, or developing intricate press pranks. Although the techniques and media vary, there is one key characteristic: the subversion should feel and look like the real thing. Attention to detail is

key and the more closely the jam can mimic the media it is trying to distort, the more successful the action will be.

Here are a few examples of culture jamming to inspire the semiotic guerrillas in all of us:

GI Jane

The voice boxes of hundreds of GI Joes and Barbie dolls are switched, and the dolls placed back into shops. Unsuspecting consumers buy the altered dolls and suddenly have a sparkling Barbie huskily intoning, "Dead men tell no lies", while a combat-ready Joe squeals, "Want to go shopping?" A leaflet hidden in the box tells them to ring their local media, and is signed the Barbie Liberation Front. The media love the story; Mattel, who manufactures the dolls, is outraged.

Rename the streets

As the war on Iraq intensifies, brand new street signs appear

in Buenos Aires. The street once called "United States" has been renamed with plaques that look identical to the official municipal ones. The street is now called "People of Iraq".

Billionaires for inequality

"Because inequality is not growing fast enough," reads the byline of "Billionaires for Bush and Gore", a bipartisan coalition of super-rich donors to political parties. Dressed in tuxedos and evening gowns, they have been seen pressing wads of fake money into the cops' pockets and thanking them for repressing dissent, chanting slogans – "We don't care who you vote for, we already bought them both" – during political party conventions, and holding a press conference after the Enron scandal where they admonished the company, saying: "Shame on you Enron for getting caught! You need more creative accountants and better PR!"

Consumer choice

Nike's Express Yourself website gives the customer the chance to have the message of their choice embroidered on a new pair of shoes. Someone logs on and requests shoes embroidered with the word *sweatshop*. Nike refuses the order and the resulting email debate between Nike and the culture jammer is forwarded to millions around the world.

Resources:

- » UK artists and subverters: www.uhc-collective.org.uk
- » Culture Jammer's Encyclopedia: theory, techniques and links everything you need in one place: www.syntac.net/hoax/index.php
- » Old masters of the genre: www.billboardliberation.com
- » *Adbusters* magazine: the journal of the mental environment. www.adbusters.org
- » *Activist Cookbook*, Andrew Boyd, United for a Fair Economy, Boston, 1997.

UHC collective



A billboard advertisement for Diesel, transformed. Manchester, UK