

Bakhtin's Carnival and Critical Utopias:
Rethinking Design Processes

I want to talk about how we can shift our conceptions of the possibilities offered by design in addition to exploring how we think about design and design processes.

To do this I want to look outside of the traditional realms of design practice and theory.

Carnival and Critical Utopias

Carnival

Carnival \Car"ni*val\, n.

1. A festival celebrated with merriment and revelry in Catholic countries during the week before Lent, esp. at Rome and Naples, during a few days (three to ten) before Lent, ending with Shrove Tuesday. [1913 Webster]
2. Any merrymaking, feasting, or masquerading, especially when overstepping the bounds of decorum; a time of riotous excess. -Tennyson. [1913 Webster]



The Fight Between Carnival and Lent, Pieter Bruegel, 1559

Welsford describes these occasions:

“But not only were the festivals treated as seasons of lawlessness and buffoonery when all the revellers behaved foolishly, they were also marked by the performance of traditional dances and games, the performers of which were grotesquely disguised and regarded as fools.”

<http://www.thomson-craighead.net/docs/webworkb.html>

The Carnival served numerous purposes within a feudal / monarch system that was highly influenced or controlled by religion, it:

1. Served as an outlet—a sort of pressure relief system—for a society where the masses lived lives that were barely above slavehood and at best were harsh and highly unfulfilling.

Traditionally Carnival was also just before Lent, a time of purification and control that led into Easter. So the Carnival served as a high contrast to this period.

2. The Carnival also facilitated the idea of transgression, where there was a loss of hierarchy—the king became the fool and the fool the king—if only for a day.

This naturally leads us to:

Walt Disney and the Hunchback of Notre Dame.

Crowd:

Come one, come all!

Leave your loops and milking stools

Coop the hens and pen the mules

Come one, come all!

Close the churches and the schools

It's the day for breaking rules

Come and join the feast of ...

Clopin:

Fools!

Once a year we throw a party here in town

Once a year we turn all Paris upside down

Ev'ry man's a king and ev'ry king's a clown

Once again it's Topsy Turvy Day

It's the day the devil in us gets released

It's the day we mock the prig and shock the priest

Ev'rything is topsy turvy at the Feast of Fools!

Crowd:

Topsy turvy!

Clopin:

Ev'rything is upsy daysy!

Crowd:

Topsy turvy!

Clopin:

Ev'ryone is acting crazy

Dross is gold and weeds are a bouquet

That's the way on Topsy Turvy Day

All:

Topsy Turvy!

Clopin and Crowd:

Beat the drums and blow the trumpets

All:

Topsy Turvy!

Clopin and Crowd:

Join the bums and thieves and strumpets

Streaming in from Chartres to Calais

Clopin:

Scurvy knaves are extra scurvy

On the sixth of "Januervy"

Clopin and Crowd:

All because it's Topy Turvy Day!

Clopin:

Come one, come all!

Hurry, hurry, here's your chance

See the myst'ry and romance

Come one, come all

See the finest girl in France

Make an entrance to entrance

Dance la Esmeralda

Dance!

Here it is, the moment you've been waiting for
Here it is, you know exactly what's in store
Now's the time we laugh until our sides get sore
Now's the time we crown the King of Fools!
So make a face that's horrible and frightening
Make a face as gruesome as a gargoye's wing
For the face that's ugliest will be the King of Fools!
Why?

Crowd:
Topsy turvy!

Clopin:
Ugly folk, forget your shyness

Crowd:
Topsy turvy!

Clopin:
You could soon be called Your Highness!

Crowd:
Put your foulest features on display
Be the king of Topsy Turvy Day!

Clopin:
Ev'rybody!

Crowd:
Once a year we throw a party here in town

Clopin:
Hail to the king!

Crowd:
Once a year we turn all Paris upside down

Clopin:
Oh, what a king!

Crowd:
Once a year, the ugliest will wear a crown

Clopin:
Girls, give a kiss

Crowd:
Once a year on Topsy Turvy Day

Clopin:
We've never had a king like this

Clopin and Crowd:
And it's the day we do the things that we deplore
On the other three hundred and sixty-four
Once a year we love to drop in
Where the beer is never stoppin
For the chance to pop some popinjay
And pick a king who'll put the "top" in
Topsy Turvy Day!
Mad and crazy, upsy-daisy, Topsy Turvy Day!

Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin

(November 17, 1895 – March 7, 1975) was a Russian philosopher, literary critic, semiotician and scholar who wrote influential works of literary and rhetorical theory and criticism.

Although much of his work dealt with rhetoric and was looking specifically at writing, his ideas, theories and writing about the Carnival and Carnavalesque serve as a useful framework for us to ask questions about design.

Bakhtin frames the carnivalesque as a transformative and transgressive experience:

“...medieval man in a way led two lives: one official, monolithically serious and somber; beholden to strict hierarchical order, filled with fear, dogmatism devotion and piety; the other, of carnival and the public place, free; full of ambivalent laughter, sacrileges, profanations of all things sacred, disparagement and unseemly behaviour, familiar contact with everybody and everything.” (Bakhtin, 1984: 173)

At the heart of Bakhtin’s writing is an appeal and search for an expression of free will and a resistance to structures of control, and more importantly to explore means and methods to transgress these structures.

“...Carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalised and completed.” (Holloway & Kneale, 2000: 1981)

“...the utility of the concept of carnival lies in its capacity to illuminate potentially transgressive elements within popular social and cultural practices.” (Webb, 2005:1).

“...during carnival there is a temporary suspension of all hierarchic distinctions and barriers so that ‘all were considered equal’” (Bakhtin, 1984a:15, 10 taken from Webb, 2005:1);

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Creating a liberation from prevailing truths and established orders

Utopia

Utopia \U*to”pi*a\, n.

1. An imaginary island, represented by Sir Thomas More, in a work called Utopia, as enjoying the greatest perfection in politics, laws, and the like. See {Utopia}, in the Dictionary of Noted Names in Fiction. [1913 Webster]
2. Hence, any place or state of ideal perfection. [1913 Webster]

12 V T O P I A E I N S V L A E T A B V L A .



192 v. October

In 1516 Thomas More wrote a book entitled **Utopia**. The word is neologism from outopia meaning 'no place' and Eutopia meaning 'good place'.

So what is utopian thinking? What is Utopia?

The search for Utopia is about the desire to be somewhere different (literally or figuratively), the desire for a world to exist that is free from the problems and difficulties of this world. Utopia is a 'good place'.

But Utopia also cannot exist, it is literally 'no place'. Even though we search and strive for it we can never reach it, we are never satisfied.

Here we can see a link between design and Utopia. Design can—and has tried to—serve as a means of achieving Utopia, by improving society and the world. So some designers design things to change the world with the idea that design can make the world better.

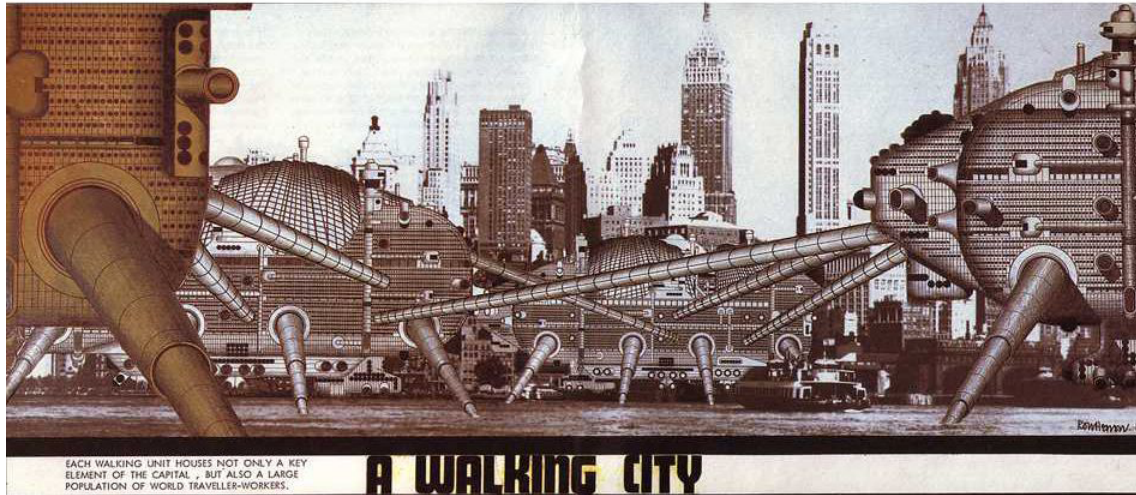
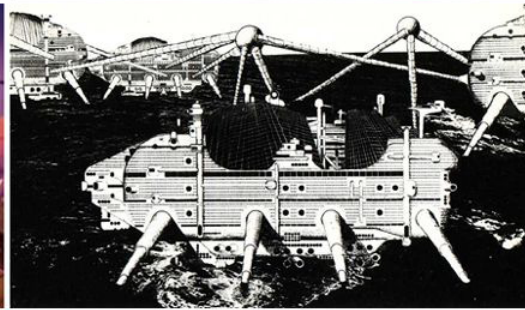
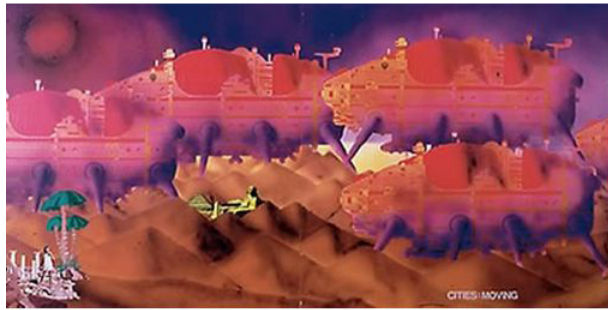
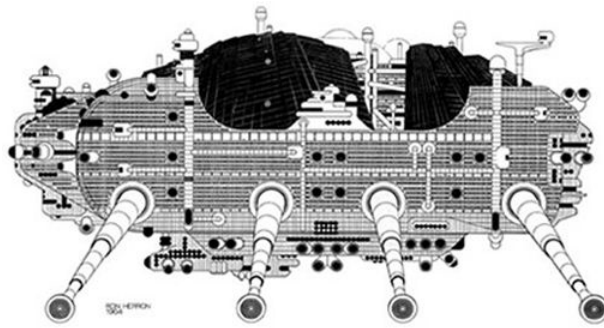
This was the main drive behind modernism, where design—in a very rational and applied form—was used to solve the social problems of the world.

It did not work.

Modernism—for all its good intents—failed. The ideas, the ideals, and the ideologies that drove it imagined a world where design and technology could provide one solution for everyone. There are a variety of reasons it failed, but in short this search for Utopia became a fixation that ignored the human(e), the personal, the opportunity to be unique and different.

But what if we think about Utopia in a different way?

What if instead of searching for an ideal or perfect future we searched for possibilities that helped to support the individual, the unique, the things that made us different?



EACH WALKING UNIT HOUSES NOT ONLY A KEY ELEMENT OF THE CAPITAL, BUT ALSO A LARGE POPULATION OF WORLD TRAVELLER-WORKERS.

A WALKING CITY

The Walking City, Ron Herron, 1964

In a reaction to and against modernism, artists and designers in the 60s starting looking at utopia once again, but based around the idea of a utopia of difference.

Designers like Archigram and Constant Nieuwenhuys started working on projects and ideas that referenced a new idea of utopianism (anti-utopianism?). Building on—or ignoring—their modern forefathers, they designed to create a totality of social action, a world that enabled rather than one that imposed, their plans and schemes allowed for what was missing in modernism—difference. “They designed spaces that worked in the in between space of choice and control, they created a metamorphosis of action.” (Ward: 2007)

This new type of utopia is one that celebrates difference, a utopia that acknowledged current issues and attempted to facilitate change. In short they were interested in what we can call **Critical Utopias**.

“Critical Utopias reject domination, hierarchy and ‘identity thinking’ in order to explore emancipatory ways of being as well as the very possibility of utopian longing itself.”
(Gardiner, 1991)

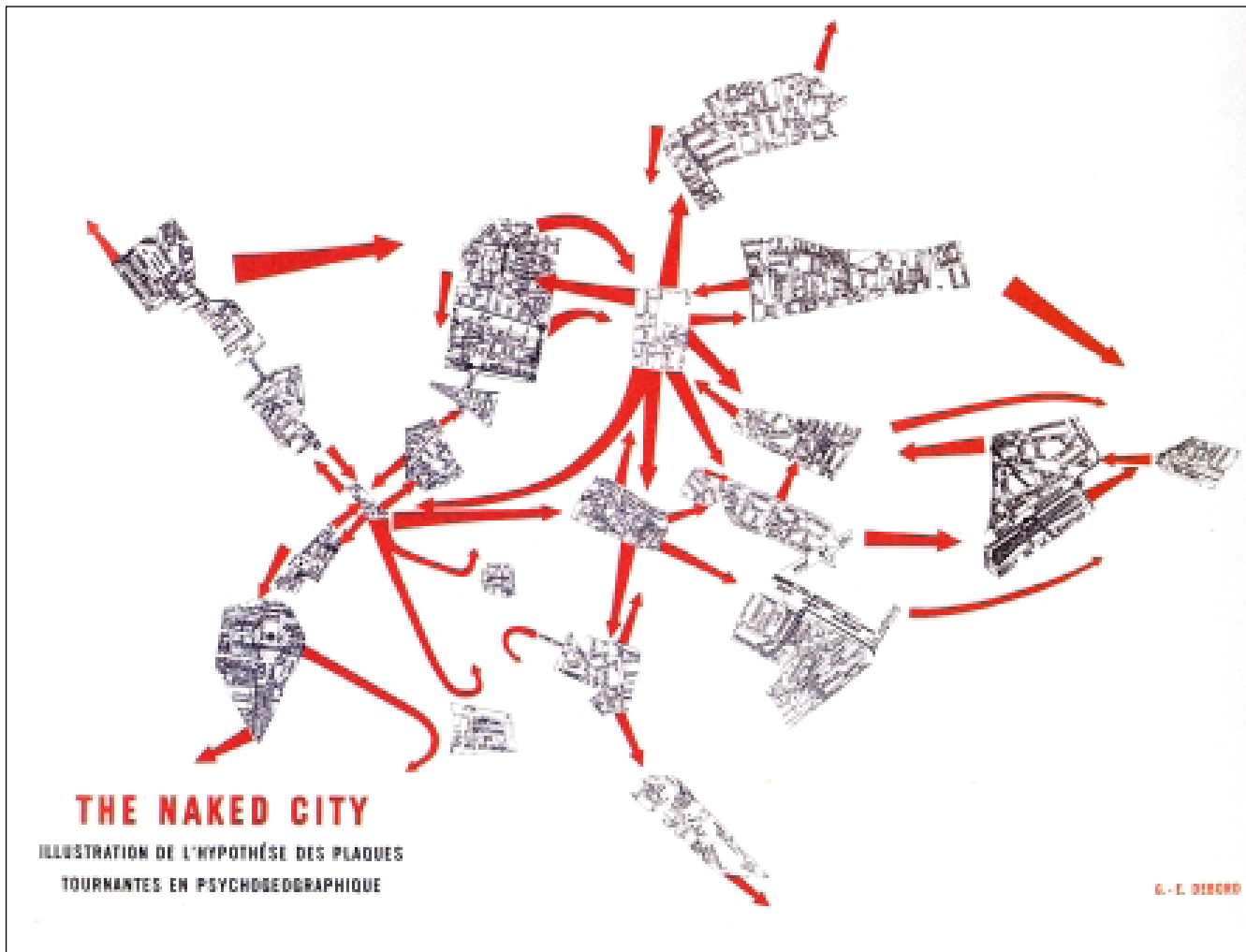
Design Tactics from French Philosophy

Dérive

Dérive is usually translated as a drift, or aimless walk. It is concerned with re-examining urban spaces and places by questioning our accepted routes and transits. By taking alternative routes and following whims and our emotions it is proposed that we free ourselves from our daily routes and routines.

Promoted by the Situationists International (particularly Guy Debord), the dérive helped: to raise the question of the role of urban design; the emotional impact (or lack thereof) of spaces; and how urban design controls peoples actions.

The main premise of the dérive is for people to explore their environment (“psycho geography”) without preconceptions, to better understand their location, and therefore their existence.



Sadler, 1998: 60

Dérive

“to dérive was to notice the way in which certain areas, streets, or buildings resonate with states of mind, inclinations, and desires, and to seek out reasons for movement other than those for which an environment was designed. It was very much a matter of using an environment for one’s own ends, seeking not only the marvellous beloved by surrealism but bringing an inverted perspective to bear on the entirety of the spectacular world.” (Plant, 1992)

Détournement

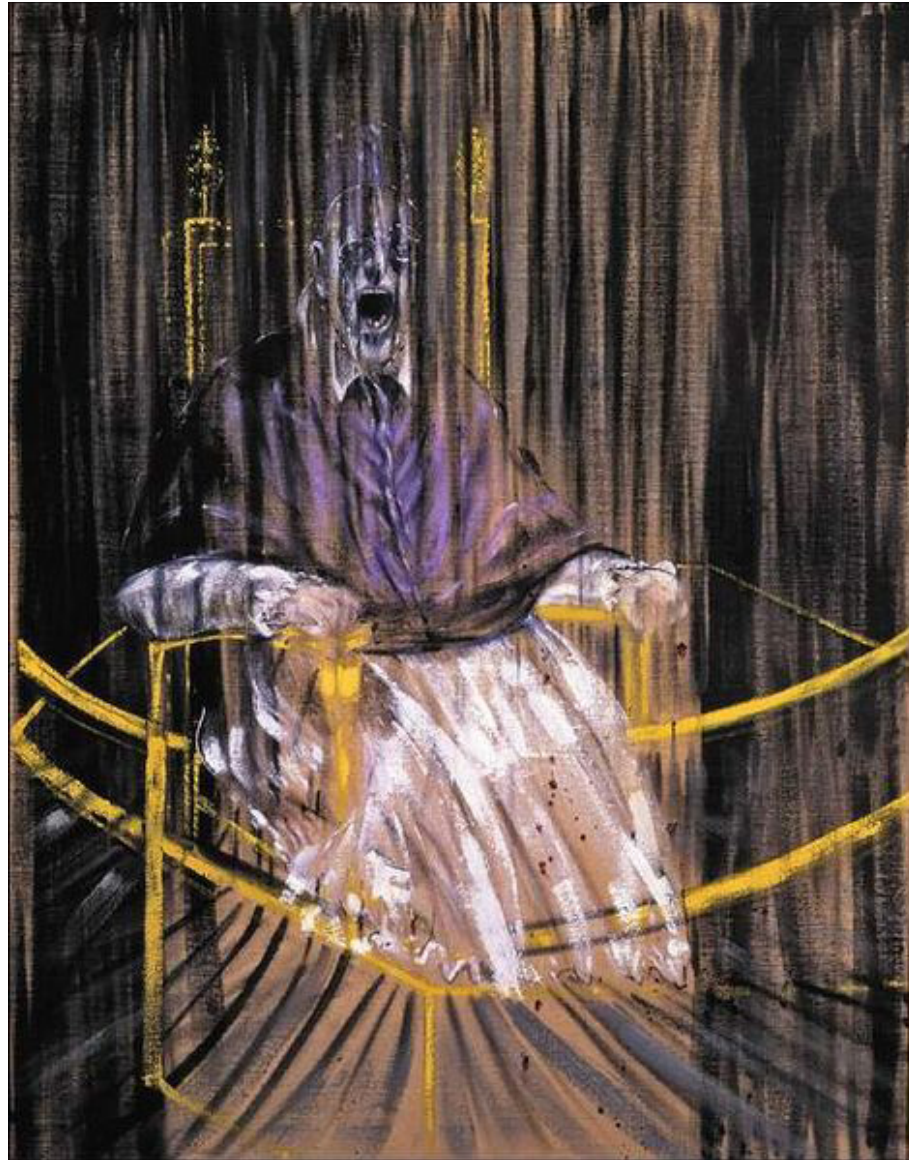
Détournement involves the reuse / bastardization of a popular media to create new works that have a different message, often this message is contrary to the original message. The term détournement comes from the Situationist International, it is sometimes translated as 'turnabout' or 'derailment'.

Détournement takes advantage of satire and parody but goes further in speaking in a visual language that is of what it is commenting on, creating a meta-comment.

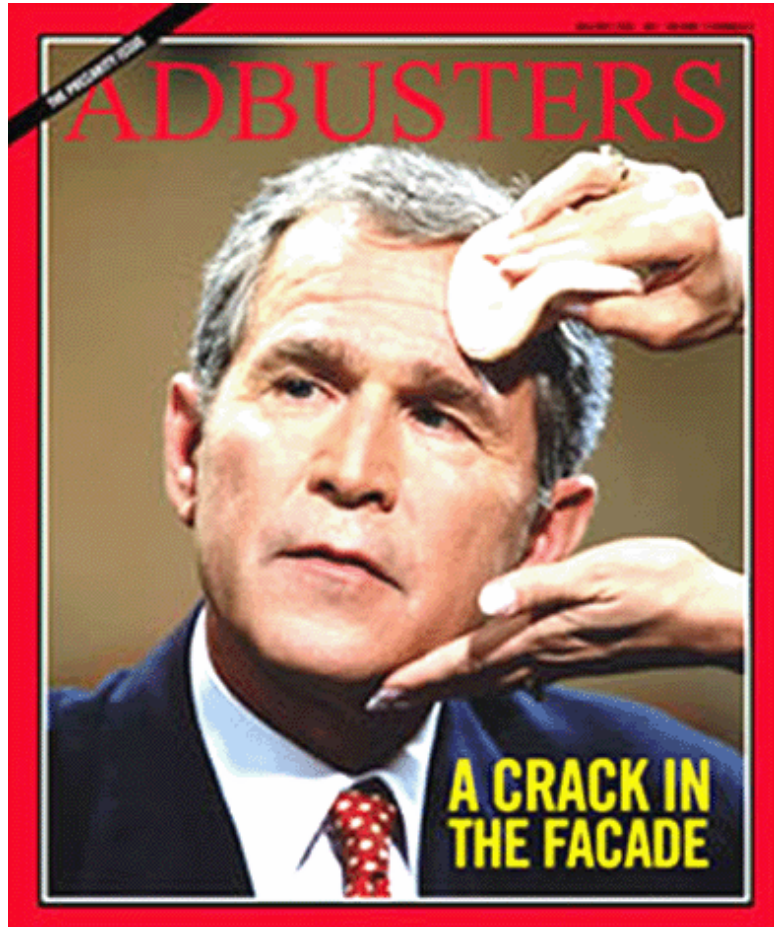
Also linked to culture-jamming and subvertisements.



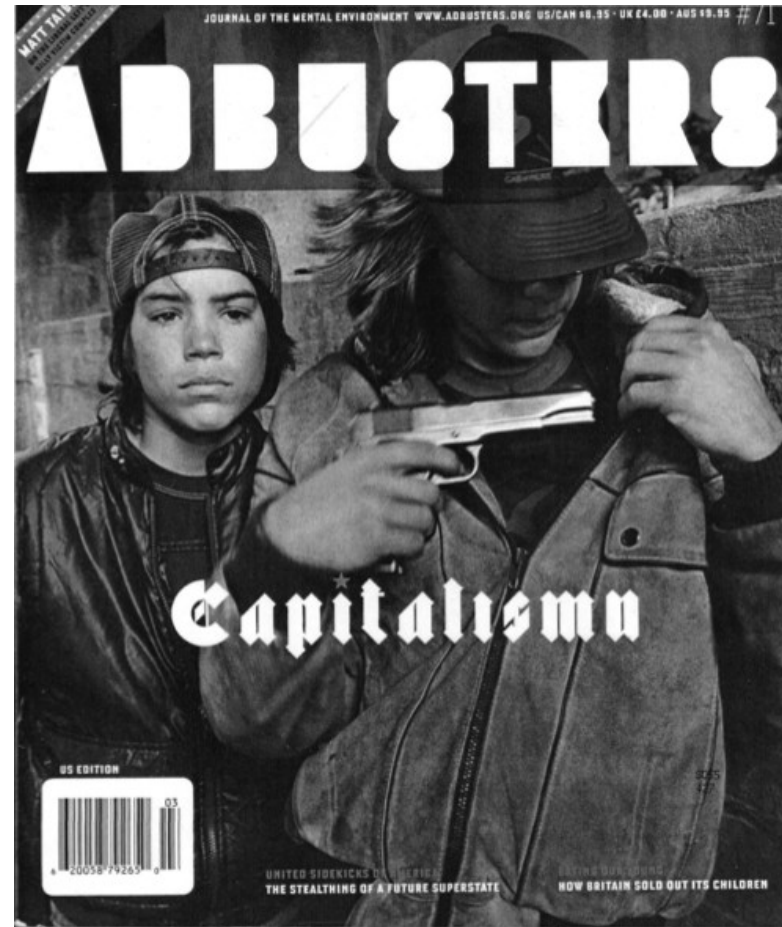
Innocent X by Diego Velázquez



Study after Velázquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X by Francis Bacon



Adbusters's Cover #62



Adbusters's Cover #71

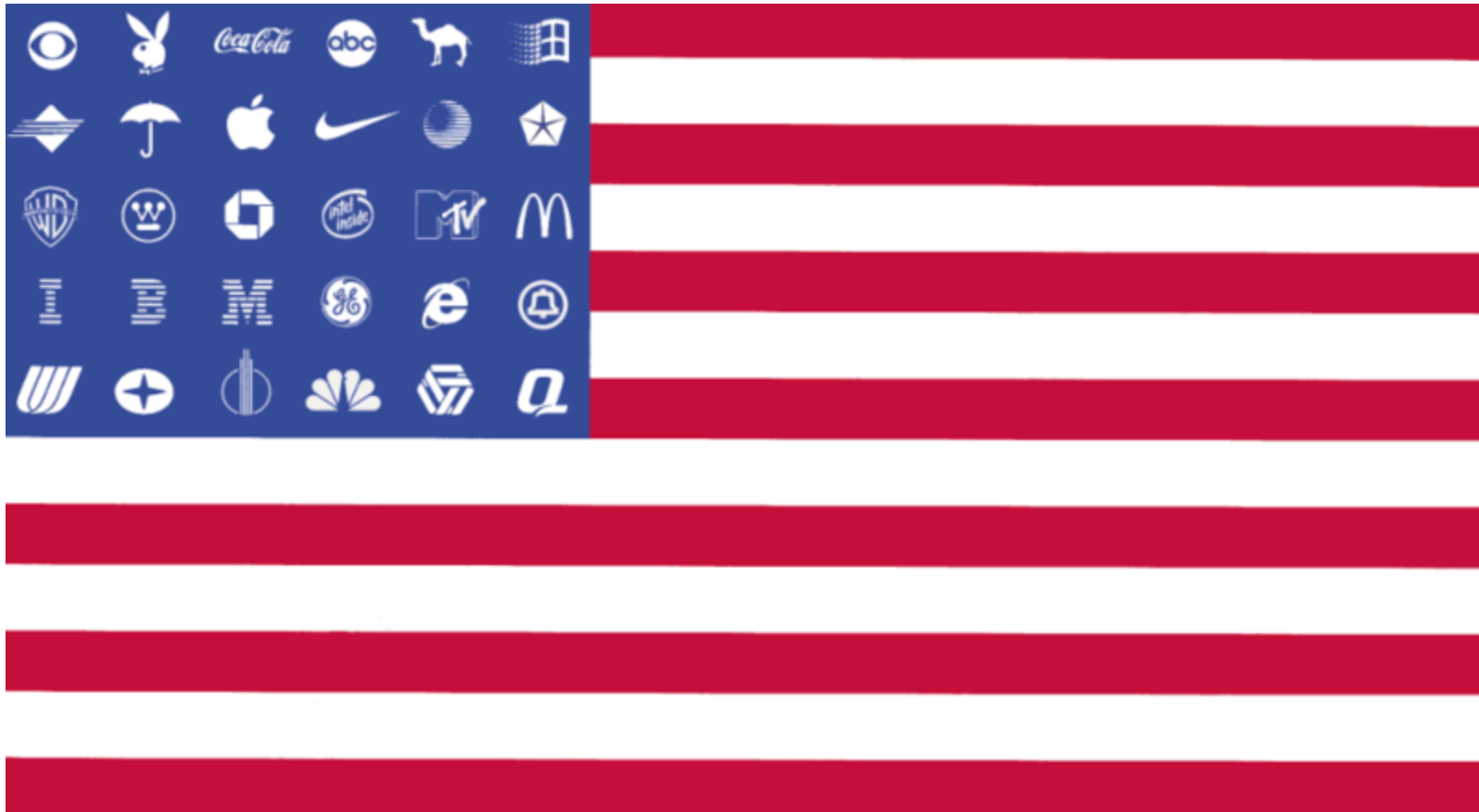
Adbusters (from their website)

Based in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, Adbusters is a not-for-profit, reader-supported, 120,000-circulation magazine concerned about the erosion of our physical and cultural environments by commercial forces.

Adbusters offers incisive philosophical articles as well as activist commentary from around the world addressing issues ranging from genetically modified foods to media concentration. In addition, our annual social marketing campaigns like Buy Nothing Day and TV Turnoff Week have made us an important activist networking group.

Ultimately, though, Adbusters is an ecological magazine, dedicated to *examining the relationship between human beings and their physical and mental environment*. We want a world in which the economy and ecology resonate in balance. *We try to coax people from spectator to participant in this quest*. We want folks to get mad about corporate disinformation, injustices in the global economy, and any industry that pollutes our physical or mental commons.





Adbusters corporate flag



New York City billboard

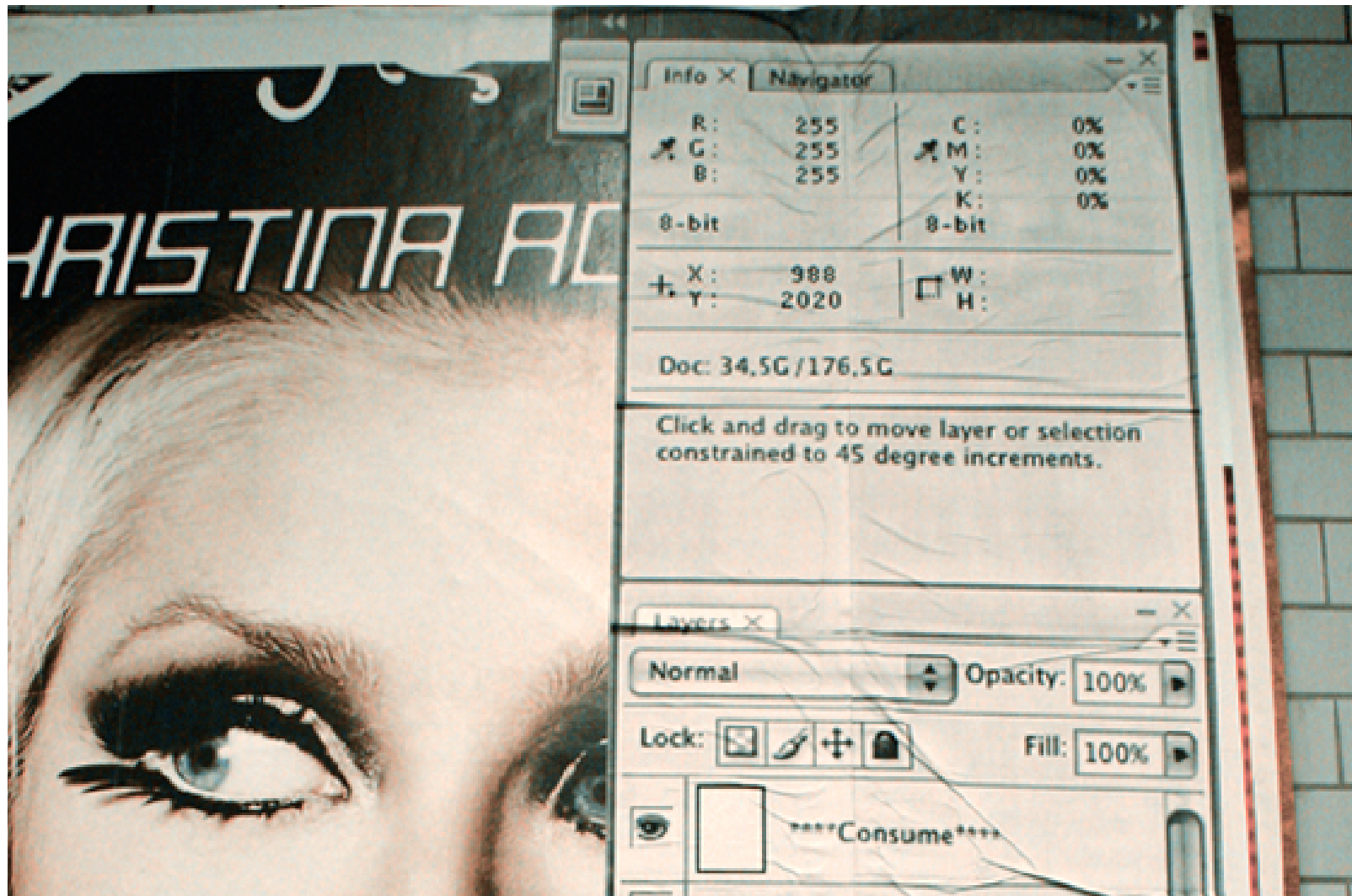


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“The thing I hate most about advertising is that it attracts all the young, bright, creative people, leaving us with only the slow and self-obsessed to become our artists. Modern art is a disaster area. Never in human history has so much been used by so many to say so little.”

- Banksy



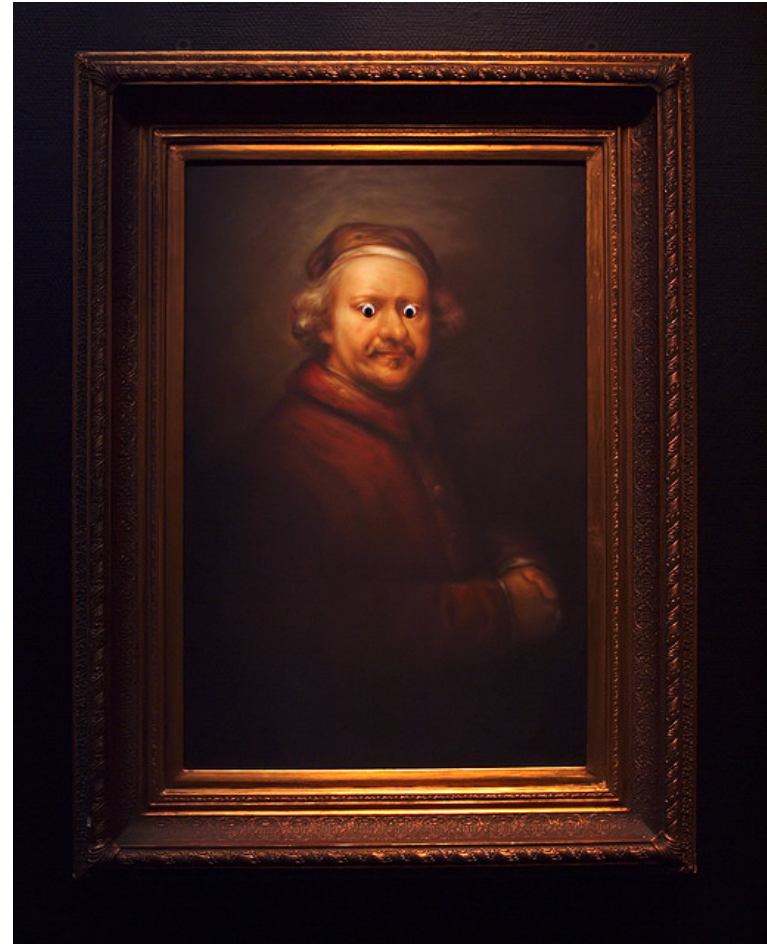
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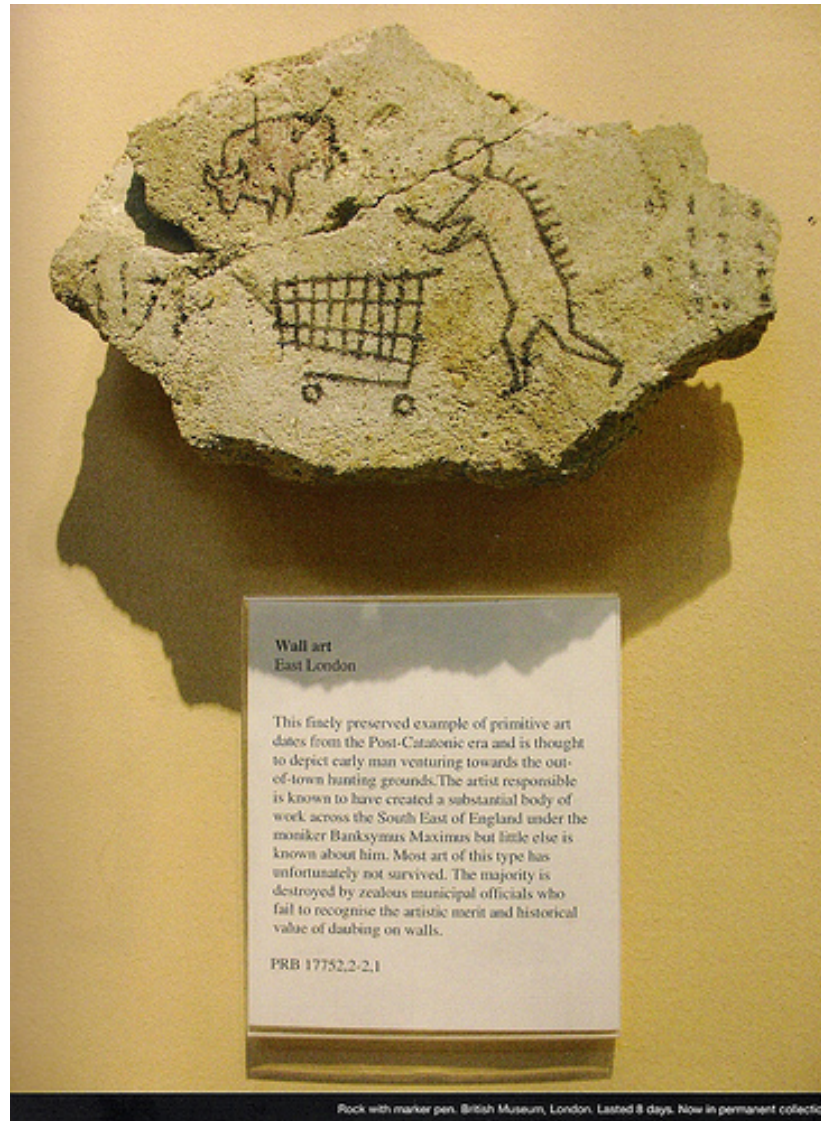
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<http://therumpus.net/2010/03/the-contradiction-of-contradiction-a-conversation-with-banksy/>

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Wall art
East London

This finely preserved example of primitive art dates from the Post-Catacomb era and is thought to depict early man venturing towards the out-of-town hunting grounds. The artist responsible is known to have created a substantial body of work across the South East of England under the moniker Banksyinus Maximus but little else is known about him. Most art of this type has unfortunately not survived. The majority is destroyed by zealous municipal officials who fail to recognise the artistic merit and historical value of daubing on walls.

PRB 17752.2-2.1

Rock with marker pen. British Museum, London. Lasted 8 days. Now in permanent collection

<http://therumpus.net/2010/03/the-contradiction-of-contradiction-a-conversation-with-banksy/>

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