INSIDE OUT: GRAPHIC DESIGN’S PLACE IN BEAUTY, DISTORTION
AND UGLY TRUTHS

A Thesis

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When the fields of advertising and design are too closely linked, as they have grown to become, design skills are not only squandered, they can be put to use in a destructive way—creating visual messages that are streamlined and stereotyped. One can contribute to existing critiques of the advertising-design relationship by examining marketing practices for beauty products. The cosmetics industry is notorious for portraying unrealistic paradigms of feminine beauty through elevated promises in copy lingo and heavily manipulated imagery. The ugly reality to this advertising fantasy is that many beauty products contain concerning levels of skin irritants and toxins. By contrasting the unattainable images of femininity presented in make-up ads with the ugly reality that cosmetics contain toxins, this thesis and the accompanying Fierce Cosmetics Campaign question the out-of-control nature of consumer culture in the United States and graphic design's role in contributing to, as well as subverting, the advertising industry.
This is dedicated to my mother and father. Your support and generosity have made any and all of my life’s accomplishments possible.
# CONTENTS

Figures .............................................................................................................................................. iv

Preface ................................................................................................................................................ v

Acknowledgments .............................................................................................................................. vi

Chapter 1: Introduction ...................................................................................................................... 1

Chapter 2: Advertising and the Hard Sell ........................................................................................... 5

Chapter 3: Selling to Women: Beauty as a Commodity ...................................................................... 9

Chapter 4: Ah Perfection: Graphic Design’s Contribution to the Advertising Fantasy ...................... 15

Chapter 5: Not Gonna Take It: Graphic Designers Subverting the Advertising Fantasy .................. 22

Chapter 6: The Cosmetics Industry and the Advertising Fantasy: A Superficial Thrill and a Toxic Relationship .......................................................................................................................... 31

Chapter 7: Spoof Advertising: Subverting Below the Surface ............................................................. 36

Chapter 8: Guerrilla Campaign: Subverting at the Source ................................................................. 43

Chapter 9: Conclusion ......................................................................................................................... 45

Appendix A: First Things First Manifesto .......................................................................................... 48

Appendix B: First Things First Manifesto 2000 ................................................................................. 51

References ............................................................................................................................................. 54
FIGURES

Figure 1: Britney Spears Photos (A) for Candie’s at Kohl’s Ad (B).......................... 13-14
Figure 2: Gibson Girls at the Beach............................................................................. 17
Figure 3: Pinup Imagery ............................................................................................. 18
Figure 4: Gil Elvgren Coca-Cola Ad........................................................................... 19
Figure 5: Barbara Kruger, Your Body is a Battleground.............................................. 23
Figure 6: The Stella Artois billboard: She’s a Thing of Beauty (A) and
She is a Thing (B)........................................................................................................... 25
Figure 7: Adbusters, Absolute Impotence Ad ................................................................. 27
Figure 8: Adam Winnick, Separation of Corporation and State.................................. 28
Figure 9: Controversial Retouched Lancôme Ad (A) and Unaltered
Photograph of Julia Roberts (B) .................................................................................... 30
Figure 10: Maybellithal Mascara Poster Before and after silk screening.................... 38
Figure 11: NO’Real Foundation Poster ........................................................................ 39
Figure 12: Chemical Girl Lipstick Poster ...................................................................... 41
Figure 13: Process Photos of Silk Screening with Mascara (A),
Foundation (B) and Lipstick (C).................................................................................... 41-42
Figure 14: Guerrilla Video Footage ............................................................................. 44
PREFACE

“Good designers (and writers and artists) make trouble.”

-Tibor Kalman, Graphic Designer (1949-1999)
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am deeply grateful to every person who has had the slightest input in my thesis project. This work would not be the same if were not for the guidance of my thesis committee: Maria Tomasula, Jean Dibble and Robert Sedlack. I am particularly thankful for Robert Sedlack’s tireless mentorship during this academic year. I am thankful to my esteemed art and design faculty as well as my talented graduate student peers for the ideas and comments offered during Graduate Design Seminars and Final Reviews. Thank you to my graduate design studio mates who not only offered great insight into my work, but also put up with months of mess in our shared workspace. I would like to offer a special note of appreciation to my close friends and family for all of the love, support and direct contributions in shaping this thesis work. Finally, I would like to thank my colleagues within the Notre Dame community for the many acts of kindness ranging from help carrying large materials around Riley Hall to generously offering talents to aid my project’s progression.
The fields of graphic design and advertising are inextricably linked. The advertising industry has come to rely heavily on graphic designers, despite the fact that the design profession can impact areas outside of advertising—the territory described in Victor and Sylvia Margolin’s essay, *A “Social Model” for Design*, that includes healthcare, safety, wayfinding, education, and emotional development. In advertising, however, graphic designers are the creative visual thinkers who understand, construct and perfect the “big idea” at the heart of all brand communication. Advertising can be a safe-haven of job creation for the graphic designer; however, the relationship between the two fields often pulls the design profession away from its greater potential to service public good. The ability graphic designers have to act as mediators between different groups simultaneously is a significant power that can be directed toward social benefit or toward public


manipulation through advertising. In the ad industry, more often than not, the skill of designer empathy turns towards the pursuit of consumer persuasion.

In 1964, a group of 22 designers and artists signed the First Things First manifesto, in which they laid out their frustration with the heightened consumer culture in Britain and its impact on the design profession. They state, “By far the greatest time and effort of those working in the advertising industry are wasted on these trivial purposes, which contribute little or nothing to our national prosperity.” The sense here is that graphic design’s true potential to positively impact lives is being frittered away in the advertising world. The main critique in the 1964 First Things First manifesto is that advertising tends to peddle needless products in an effort to enrich the client. The authors assert that different approach, turning attention to public need, is in order. When social benefit becomes the central focus of a graphic designer and advertising goals take a back seat, the field of design can accomplish remarkable results.

In 2000, 33 renowned visual thinkers revived the First Things First manifesto in order to discuss the still-prevalent issues surrounding this design-advertising relationship. “Commercial work has always paid the bills, but many graphic designers have now let it become, in large measure, what graphic designers do. This, in turn, is how the world perceives design. The profession’s time and energy is used up in manufacturing demand for things that are inessential at best.” This updated


manifesto goes on to voice concern about the ways in which consumer-driven work fundamentally changes public identity. The critique is that design skills are not only squandered in the field of advertising, but also put to use in a destructive way as messages are increasingly distilled to their lowest common denominator.\(^5\)

Now, almost fifty years after the original *First Things First* manifesto was written by graphic designer Ken Garland, the criticisms in both documents are, sadly, still applicable. This thesis proposes a sceptical view of the advertising industry—the establishment of unachievable paradigms and its manipulation of consumer identity, particularly in relation to the female image. Furthermore, this paper will discuss graphic design’s role in contributing to advertising persuasion tactics. It will explore the work being done by dissident designers in order to combat the negative impact advertising has on public perception. Using the cosmetics industry as a case study, I will contrast the unattainable images of femininity presented in make-up ads with the ugly reality that many beauty products currently on the market contain concerning levels of skin irritants and toxins. Finally, I will discuss my own creative work: how it fits into the dialogue surrounding the relationship between graphic design and advertising while also providing a subversive campaign to highlight issues within the cosmetics industry.

This thesis is a commentary on the out-of-control nature of ad-focused consumer culture and explores the graphic designer’s role in contributing to, as well as potentially subverting, the industry with which it has become so closely tied.

Graphic design is at its best when it becomes removed from the advertising industry and turns its focus to public aid and empowerment.
CHAPTER 2:
ADVERTISING AND THE HARD SELL

Those working in the ad profession are bound by client relationships. No matter if the client is a foot spray brand or a casino, the advertiser’s primary ethical litmus test is “am I benefiting my client?” In the end, the only way to aid a client with advertising is to help sell his or her product. The modern textbook definition of the word “advertising” is rooted in sales and public persuasion. Though persuasion may seem innocent, when ad messaging only considers client needs, it bears a striking resemblance to manipulation. As advertising tactics illustrate, the line between suggestion and pandering begins to blur.

From the beginning of the twentieth century, it was clear, industry-wide, that the success of an advertisement is measured in its ability to sell product. This has more to do with shaping the consumer thought process than with delivering product attributes to the public. In a 1913 book mapping out the importance of closely uniting the fields of advertising and psychology, applied psychologist Walter Dill Scott draws an analogy between a teacher and an ad copywriter: “For, however diverse their occupation may at first sight appear, the advertising writer and the

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teacher have one great object in common—to influence the human mind.”

This is a worthwhile analogy to explore: if influence is the sole objective of advertising, then it is no far stretch to imagine the ways in which advertisements teach consumers a collective viewpoint. Much like students in a classroom, consumers learn how to act, how to think, how to view themselves, and what to expect from others through the influential pull of marketing images. Therein lies the power of the advertisement—an educational tool for consumer behaviors and expectations.

The fact that advertisements subtly shift public thinking is not entirely shocking. What is disturbing about ad persuasion is the reality that advertisements tend to be indifferent to real consumer needs. Legendary ad-man David Ogilvy explains in his book, *Ogilvy on Advertising*, how he persuades people to buy from his clients, saying, “Consumers still buy products whose advertising promises them value for money, beauty, nutrition, relief from suffering, social status and so on. All over the world.”

This sentiment gets to the heart of the issue with advertising manipulation tactics: by appealing to insecurities, doubt and discontentment, ads create consumer need where there once was none.

These emotional manipulation tactics in advertising become increasingly dangerous when taking into consideration the number of messages presented to

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8 Ogilvy, David, *Ogilvy on Advertising*, 7

consumers daily. Most consumers are aware of the numerous ads they see on any given day and are therefore unaware of the ways that they are being manipulated. Between Internet advertisements, billboards, magazines, television and radio, an average person in the U.S. will see around one million advertising messages every year.\textsuperscript{10} We live in a world highly flooded with advertisements; we live in a world saturated with messages intended to manipulate public vulnerability and fears.

Such messages often manifest themselves in a covert fashion—as snapshots of the good life—playing to a sense that the grass is always greener in someone else’s yard. In her book, \textit{Are They Selling Her Lips?}, clinical psychiatrist Carol Moog discusses how simple it can be for advertisements to impact our lives and influence our identities by exploiting consumer self-doubt, “Everywhere we look, identities are in crisis, in transition, or in limbo. And when any of us go searching for a new sense of identity, we’re likely to go searching for a new product as well…. Marching together through a reality of goods and luxuries, people and products get inextricably entwined.”\textsuperscript{11} Because of this connection between consumer and consumable, advertising is poised to not only influence what an individual thinks about a particular product, the industry can warp public perception on identity and what is valued in a very broad sense.\textsuperscript{12}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{11} Carol Moog, \textit{Are They Selling Her Lips?} (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc, 1990), 113.
\textsuperscript{12} Jean Kilbourne, “Advertising and Disconnection,” 174.
\end{flushleft}
CHAPTER 3
SELLING TO WOMEN: BEAUTY AS A COMMODITY

One major problem surrounding the power of advertising to define public identity appears in the industry’s imagery and themes. Ads rely on watered-down visuals and messaging in order to resonate with the largest number of people, achieving the biggest bang-for-client-buck. In his book, *Reading Ads Socially*, Sociologist Robert Goldman discusses advertising power and how narrow caricatures of real life can warp consumer perception. He comments:

Cultural hegemony refers to those socially constructed ways of seeing the world around us that predominate in a given time and place. In the latter twentieth-century US the supremacy of commodity relations has exercised a disproportionate influence over the ways we conceive our lives. Every day that we routinely participate in the social grammar of advertisements, we engage in a process of replicating the domain assumptions of commodity hegemony. These domain assumptions are important because they condition and delimit the field of discourse within which our public and private conversations take place.

As we allow advertising to influence our cultural perceptions, we accept a narrow view of reality that is grossly oversimplified. It makes sense that stereotypes are a natural byproduct of the distillation of messages in order to be palatable for the greatest number of consumers. Most important is the issue that consumers are

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internalizing certain advertising stereotypes and creating a cultural consciousness that perpetuates shallow representations.

One clear example of where these clichéd advertising images can be cause for concern is in their depiction of women. In her 2000 essay, *Socialization and Imagemaking*, designer Kim McCarten discusses the impact of formulaic ad images on the way women view themselves and also the way women in the field of design represent other women. She reasons, “Women are raised in a predominantly male society, and they create images that reflect this. Since our culture teaches us to consume women visually, women make images from the perspective of being looked at, often reflecting a picture of womanhood that has been defined by men.” She discusses that despite a rise in the number of females working in the design field, the depiction of women in advertising is slow to evolve from an out-of-date, one-dimensional representation. Conventions defining femininity are so strong in mass media that even women working today to generate imagery for public consumption risk perpetuating stereotypical depictions of other women.

The unintentional result of advertising stereotypes is to effectively diminish a positive female self-image and establish unrealistic male expectations for women as fantasy-things. In their book, *Women, Advertising and Representation*, authors Sue Abel, Marjan de Bruin and Anita Nowak discuss the idea that advertising creates overly idealized paradigms for women in which appearance is of highest

importance. “Ads propagate the myth that women are to seek self-esteem, success, and social worth through physical attractiveness, and in turn, women continue to learn that self-empowerment is contingent on self-objectification and the approving gaze of others.”16 The advertising world’s representation of flawless and overly sexualized feminine beauty in everything from kitchen cleaners to website hosting solidifies the idea that the worth of a woman is defined by her looks and her ability to be looked at. The objectification of women in advertising can have significant ramifications for interpersonal relationships and self-esteem.

The stereotyping of women in advertising through a largely masculine lens places enormous importance on attracting male attention and male relationships. “Regardless of the modern cultural wellspring of support and admiration for intellectually accomplished women, advertising reflects and magnifies women’s insecurity about whether their acumen will really result in a man’s approval.”17 By continually representing masculine paradigms, advertisements emphasize a conception of male-female bonding that can often be flat, overly intensified or otherwise unrealistic. This notion of validation through male relationships strips women of their ability to self-validate and therefore diminishes notions of independence and self-worth.


By far the darkest manifestations of self-esteem issues caused by advertisements are apparent in life-threatening and body-altering disorders such as anorexia, bulimia and plastic surgery addiction. Though many factors can contribute to body image compulsions, a sense of striving for perfection and a focus on appearance-based worth are major culprits. In her book, *Appearance and Identity*, art and design theory professor Llewellyn Negrin discusses these severe examples where the diminishing effects of impossible beauty standards in media negatively impact female self-image, causing detrimental results:

Susan Bordo (1993b, 247) quotes the example of the plastic surgery addict, for instance, who returns for operation after operation in perpetual quest of the elusive goal of the ‘perfect’ face and body. Likewise, the anorexic, in submitting her body to extreme regimes of dieting and exercise, does so out of a desperate sense to experience a feeling of control that she otherwise lacks.... While these may be extreme cases, they serve to highlight the fact that women’s preoccupation with their appearance is often symptomatic of their relative disempowerment in other areas of their lives.\(^{18}\)

It is easy to see where advertisements are implicated in creating the imagery that promotes a specific idea of what bodily perfection means. Self-esteem and body image are deeply impacted by the advertising fantasy of flawlessness.

One contemporary ad that presents an image of perfection to the detriment of a realistic representation of beauty and the female form is the 2009 Britney Spears ad for shoe and apparel brand, Candie’s® (Figures 1). The singer allowed the

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un-retouched images from her photo shoot to be released,\textsuperscript{19} with the intention of highlighting the drastic difference between reality and the advertising depiction of the body ideal.

Figure 1: Britney Spears’ body shape is noticeably different before retouching and after (A). Her legs are much thinner in the photo-manipulated image as is her stomach. Photo Credit: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/04/13/britney-spears-reveals-un_n_535981.html. An image of the actual advertisement as it ran displays her highly manipulated photo(B). Photo Credit: http://www.popcrunch.com/britney-spears-candies-ad-poster-revealed-photoshoot-video
CHAPTER 4

AH PERFECTION: GRAPHIC DESIGN’S CONTRIBUTION TO THE ADVERTISING FANTASY

My own experience with idealized imagery in the advertising industry comes from working for three years in an ad agency. Perhaps the greatest misuse of my graphic design skills could be seen in those projects that required photo-manipulation, particularly when requests came from the client directly. The main program used in advertising and photography to gloss over imperfections and present the best possible image to consumers is Adobe Photoshop. This program is a designer’s aid to execute photo-retouching of the variety seen in the above-mentioned Britney Spears ad for Candie’s® (Figures 1). Using Photoshop, I was asked to thicken various heads of hair, brighten eyes, remove pimples, shrink chins and noses—even completely remove one woman’s arm hair. The arm hair task took hours of painstakingly grafting pieces of the forehead over the poor model’s arms, all so that she would look “more” perfect.

When the images saturating our visual space are first run through a program where the click of a button can eliminate blemishes and shrink thighs, it is no wonder that consumers develop warped expectations for self and others. If the visual paradigms of perfection are so far removed from anything resembling real life, then consumers are doomed to a constant battle between reality and perfection.
“Photoshop is the tool of our search for the perfect, the tool of our mythically male side, the side of the mind that wants to stretch the Cosmo girl so that she is just a little bit more, well, perfect.” As design critic Natalia Ilyin points out in her essay “Perfection,” the fantasy world of ad-images works precisely because of its implausibility. No workout could ever achieve the definition of a poster-boy’s biceps and no amount of skin cream could ever give a woman that CoverGirl™ glow. Consumers rationally know this to be true, but it is the emotional manipulation embedded in advertising images that inspires hope and, likewise, inspires purchases.

This crafting of unrealistic imagery is nothing new to image making or the fields of advertising and graphic design. Though Photoshop makes image touch-ups easier, faster, more realistic-looking, and more widespread, there is a history of images being pinched, puckered and perfected to the point of impossibility. An early example of mass-consumed idealistic imagery can be seen in the work of Charles Dana Gibson. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Gibson’s drawings established a paradigm of feminine beauty that sparked millions of women to mimic the dress, hair and physical attributes of his famed “Gibson Girls” (Figure 2). With cinched waistlines and exaggerated busts and hips, these representations of women suggest a form that could only be achieved with the discomfort of a corset. The pen


and ink artist is an early example of an image-maker creating implausible, ideal imagery that impacts public perception by playing to and accentuating the desires of the society at his time.  

![Figure 2: This famous image of the Gibson Girls at the beach is one of many drawings that shaped a popular definition of female beauty at the turn of the twentieth century. Photo Credit: http://giam.typepad.com/100_years_of_illustration/2005/02/imitation_is_th.html](http://giam.typepad.com/100_years_of_illustration/2005/02/imitation_is_th.html)

A later example of this beauty ideal can be seen in the work of pinup artist Gil Elvgren. From the 1930s up to the 1970s, his paintings and illustrations of provocatively posed women established a model of the sexually alluring feminine fantasy for male viewing pleasure. Looking at his reference photos as compared to the actual images, the illusionary aspect of his work comes to life (Figure 3).

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Figure 3: An early example of perfecting the female form through mass-consumed images can be seen in pinup illustrations. There is a notable difference between the reference photograph (left) and the final drawing (right). The model’s thighs have been thinned, her waist has been tightened, her neck lengthened and her breasts enlarged. Photo Credit: http://www.amusingplanet.com/2011/04/gil-elvgrens-pin-up-girls-and-their.html
Finding success commercially, with work famously created for Coca-Cola advertisements\(^{24}\) (Figure 4), Gil Elvgren's images established an ideal for the U.S., All-American good life of the mid-twentieth century.

Figure 4: Gil Elvgren’s work for Coca-Cola ads in the 1940s and 1950s helped to solidify a particular female paradigm of beauty in the popular culture of the time. Photo Credit: http://www.adbranch.com/coca-cola-ads-by-gil-elvgren/

Defining what is considered to be "the ideal," as well as being able to craft images that impact public perception, has historically been an enormous power held by image-makers. Today, this power is even greater for graphic designers as our culture is more heavily saturated with messaging and consumable images are easier

and quicker to create. “As designers in the new millennium, we need to be more aware of the beliefs we are bringing to the image-making process. We have the power to significantly shape and alter people’s perceptions.” Notes author Kim McCartney, it is primarily images that communicate subtle emotions and set the expectations for a society’s visual palate.

Oftentimes, those aspects of an advertisement that fall within the graphic designer’s domain can be the most impactful elements to the viewer. A research-based book, *Nonverbal Communication in Advertising* sets the stage to illustrate, through psychological testing, the highly influential emotional effects of images, colors and textures in an ad. “The use of imagery, visual associations, drawings and paintings, models, visual memory devices, product and corporate symbols, and music are pervasive in advertising, and all are forms of nonverbal communication. Studies of nonverbal communication in interpersonal situations suggest that half or more of the variability of response can be attributed to nonverbal factors.” By trade, the graphic designer brings visual appeal to the advertising message and therefore controls one of the greatest tools for manipulating an audience.

The ability to subliminally communicate gives non-copy elements, such as music, imagery and design choices, great power over affecting perception. Designers are conditioned to seek perfection as they craft these non-verbal elements. In her


essay *Perfection*, Natalia Ilyin discusses the designer’s role in shaping consumer perceptions of the ideal—attributing some of the blame to designers and their obsession with perfection. She describes a graphic designer’s job as including “a search for the perfect typestyle, the perfect substrate, the perfect balance of elements, the perfect ‘imperfection’ of a texture or a ragged edge. We are forever searching for the perfect photograph of the perfect women or the perfect man, the perfect shrub or the perfect hand, the perfect SUV atop the perfect pinnacle.” Designers are notorious for meticulous attention to detail. It is hard to deny that graphic designers become easily wrapped up in “finding-the-best (fill in the blank)” to communicate their vision.

As the creators of the images that consumers digest, there is a certain responsibility for graphic designers to depict a more realistic worldview and move away from ideal representations. Ilyin’s essay continues:

> The word ‘consumer’ means ‘eater.’ Dante, in his vision of Hell, describes the Inferno as a place where hunger, in all its forms, overcame all other human needs or tendencies, and was never satiated, never gratified. Our search for the perfect, and graphic design’s juggernautlike need for the new and the perfect, push the American consciousness further into Dante’s Inferno. We create need where there is no need, and we helped create the current malaise, a dissatisfaction with the imperfect, with the average, the normal, and the same.²⁸

This quote, though hyperbolic, is certainly worth some consideration by graphic designers, particularly those working in the field of advertising. Heavily art-

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²⁷ Natalia Ilyin, “Perfection,” in *Sex Appeal*, 32.

²⁸ Natalia Ilyin, “Perfection,” in *Sex Appeal*, 33.
directed and photo-manipulated images impact public standards and expectations by establishing unrealistic ideals. It is difficult for anyone to see a glossy, clean advertisement and not to turn inward, criticizing all the messiness of reality.
CHAPTER 5

NOT GONNA TAKE IT: GRAPHIC DESIGNERS SUBVERTING THE ADVERTISING FANTASY

Graphic design does a great deal to contribute to advertising manipulation tactics through images of perceived perfection. However, there are those in the field who also do a great deal to subvert the advertising industry. In How to be a Graphic Designer Without Losing Your Soul, Adrian Shaughnessy discusses a dialogue in the field of graphic design between those who see design as a mere business tool and those who believe that, “although design undoubtedly has a problem-solving function, it also has a cultural and aesthetic dimension, and its effectiveness is enhanced, and not diminished, by personal expression.” Increasingly, many designers and artists are going rogue—creating guerrilla campaigns and criticizing advertising in an effort to bring balance to the industry and elevate the power of the consumer.

One famed artist and graphic designer worth considering in terms of creating work to subvert advertising paradigms is Barbara Kruger. Much of Kruger’s art draws imagery from advertisements and popular culture and utilizes a definite

marketing aesthetic. She removes images from their original messaging and confounds their meaning by adding dark copy of her own. “In focusing on stereotypes, clichés, and categories as manifestations of power and control, her work has consistently positioned itself within the world, actively engaging and confronting the spectator.” An example of this face-off with the viewer can be seen in her work, *Your Body is a Battleground* that appeared, in one manifestation, as a 1990 billboard in Columbus, Ohio (Figure 5). It depicts a black and white image of a frightened female face claustrophobically framed by the billboard parameters. Over Kruger’s iconic red bar, white type proclaims, “Your Body is a Battleground.” This piece makes a strong commentary on the female image as it is used and abused in advertising and mass media.


Some artists and designers take a more activist approach, with the idea that consumers need to be liberated from the stronghold of advertising. Carol Moog, who specializes in the effectiveness of advertising communication, describes the profession as:

A battle of psychological wits. It wants us to do something. It wants us to buy. And its ‘success’ lies in its ability to get us to believe in the fantasy and then take that next step. Its ‘success’ lies in its effect on our decision-making.... The best we can do, given the inevitable economic movements of advertising, is to acknowledge and understand how it’s influencing us, why it’s trying to influence us that way, and then attempt to separate ourselves from the images, and act objectively.32

In an effort to aid consumers in this pursuit of objectivity, groups known as “cultural jammers,” “adbusters” and “subertisers” have been organizing to criticize and overturn advertising power over the consumer thought-space. These groups often utilize guerrilla art tactics, such as spray-painting over an existing billboard, in order to get their dissident message to the public. Examples of jamming over existing ads can be seen in the work of the Billboard Liberation Front (BLF), an organization of cultural jammers who are, as their tagline states, “establishing a new paradigm in street marketing.”

Using existing billboard space, these jammers insert their own message on top of the advertising fantasy, thus disrupting its hold on consumers. One example of this guerrilla tactic can be seen when the BLF covered the ad copy, “She is a Thing of Beauty” in a Stella Artois billboard to reveal the phrase “She is a Thing.” This message speaks to the objectification of women in advertising (Figures 6).

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Figure 6: The Stella Artois billboard before the Billboard Liberation Front's subversion act reads: “She’s a Thing of Beauty” (A). After jammers paint over a portion of the copy, the billboard reads, “She is a Thing” (B). Photo Credit: http://www.billboardliberation.com

http://www.billboardliberation.com
This so-called graffiti over the Stella Artois billboard exemplifies anti-
advertising art and design activism. It is important to not only note the message of
this guerrilla ad, but also, \textit{where} the act took place. In her book, \textit{No Logo}, Naomi
Klein describes the most successful cultural jamming techniques:

The most sophisticated culture jams are not stand-alone ad parodies but
interceptions—counter-messages that hack into a corporation’s own method
of communication to send a message starkly at odds with the one that was
intended. The process forces the company to foot the bill for its own
subversion, either literally, because the company is the one that paid for the
billboard, or figuratively, because anytime people mess with a logo, they are
tapping into the vast resources spent to make that logo meaningful.\textsuperscript{35}

Klein is highlighting the deep impact acts of guerrilla dissidence can have on
advertisements and brands. Because so much time and money go into crafting a
strong brand, any disturbance to the messaging of that brand can be a detrimental
blow to the company’s power and credibility.

One group famous for hitting advertising where it hurts most is the non-
profit organization Adbusters. This organization of cultural jammers is successful in
subverting advertising through the creation of mock ads and guerrilla art. The
convention most commonly used by Adbusters, particularly in their magazine, is to
spoof or otherwise distort contemporary advertisements, lessening the strength of
the brand messaging and weakening any possible “cool factor.”\textsuperscript{36} Perhaps one of the
better-known Adbusters spoof ads that debunks a hip brand image is the “Absolute
Impotence” ad (Figure 7). This takes on the world-famous Absolute Vodka campaign

\textsuperscript{35} Naomi Klein, \textit{No Logo} (New York: Picador, 2000), 281.

and strips the brand of its trendiness by highlighting a more undesirable effect of using the product. Adbusters' parody ads use recognizable consumer imagery with a twist on advertising messaging in order to get attention from the viewer through small moments of upsetting what is expected.

Figure 7: The Adbusters’ *Absolute Impotence* ad plays on existing conventions of Absolute's brand in order to spin public perception of the product towards something “uncool.” Photo Credit: http://www.adbusters.org/content/absolut-impotence

Beyond merely doling out criticisms of the advertising industry, Adbusters also frequently positions itself against US political and economic institutions. Adbusters continually uses elevated, war-like language to combat contemporary
cultural norms. The Adbusters battle is poised between corporation and consumer and the lines are thickly drawn. One spread in *Adbusters Magazine’s Big Ideas of 2012* issue features a slogan by cultural jammer Adam Winnick that calls for “Separation of Corporation and State” in a design loosely referencing political campaign signage (Figure 8). The political spoof gets to the heart of Adbusters major critiques surrounding advertising and, more broadly, the institution of capitalism.

![Figure 8: Jammer Adam Winnick designed the Separation of Corporation and State graphic for Adbusters magazine. Photo Credit: http://adbusters.tumblr.com/post/13930124960/adam-winnick](http://adbusters.tumblr.com/post/13930124960/adam-winnick)

Finally, Adbusters can be seen celebrating failures in the advertising industry. A recent incident in July of 2011, involving the United Kingdom’s

Advertising Standards Authority and the cosmetics company Lancôme is touted as a consumer victory in an *Adbusters Magazine* article, reading, “This global awakening is only the first phase of a much more grand action to see ads not as messengers but as the messages themselves—the cause of worldwide mental dysfunction.” The two-page Lancôme ad featuring actress Julia Roberts was pulled due to the misleading representation of the product’s effect on a user’s skin. Julia Roberts, who is known for her near-flawless skin appears to be airbrushed in the ad, as any hint to wrinkles or even contours in her skin has been removed and smoothed over. The photograph is manipulated using lighting techniques and post-production retouching (Figures 9). This creates a false account of what the product can do and sets unrealistic expectations of what consumers can achieve with their looks.

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38 Unknown, “Cleaning up the toxic areas of the mental environment” *Adbusters* (January/February 2012): 26.

Figure 9: This heavily retouched Lancôme ad was a source of controversy in the UK in July of 2011 (A). Photo Credit: http://blog.seattlepi.com/thebigblog/2011/07/28/julia-roberts-make-up-ad-banned. Compare an unaltered photograph of Julia Roberts with obviously retouched Lancôme advertising image (B). The ad image (right) is manipulated to the point that the actress’ skin, which is quite smooth under normal circumstances (left), appears to be painted on. No makeup product could achieve this result. Photo Credit: http://pasmworkshop.com/2011/07/uk-banned-julia-roberts-lancome-ad-for-too-much-photoshop-retouchers-beware/
CHAPTER 6
THE COSMETICS INDUSTRY AND THE ADVERTISING FANTASY:
A SUPERFICIAL THRILL AND A TOXIC RELATIONSHIP

Where better to observe the melding together of advertising manipulation tactics and their effects on defining public perception than the cosmetics industry. As seen in the above-mentioned advertisement, the cosmetics industry is notorious for unrealistic paradigms of beauty. “Fashion and cosmetic ads routinely propagate the ideal woman and promote the ingredients for making her more attractive to both men and herself.” Note Steven Heller in his introduction to Sex Sells, cosmetics ads, in particular, mark the intersection of sexual suggestion, photo-manipulation, exacerbating consumer insecurities, and creating inauthentic needs through false claims. Much of the imagery tends toward an overtly idealized depiction of feminine beauty in the context of vapid sexual allure, establishing beauty ideals that are unattainable by any woman. Through elevated language, Photoshopped images and near-heavenly backdrops, cosmetics ads establish female-worth as a surface feature.

Another area where cosmetics advertisements serve to call attention to key critiques of the advertising industry is in the copy itself. Cosmetics ads claim results that their products can never, in reality, deliver. Fantasy abounds in this world of

persuasion in the beauty industry’s practice of “puffery.” This act, according to Ivan L. Preston's book, *The Great American Blow-Up*, “is the pretentious opinion of salesmen and advertisers, exaggerating their wares, magnifying value, quality, and attractiveness to the limits of plausibility, and beyond.”41 Through puffery, cosmetics companies can legally make false claims about the effectiveness of specific product ingredients.42 An example of this is when a lotion touts that a certain oil component can make skin look younger with no scientific evidence to back up the claim.43 Because of this practice, advertisements in the beauty industry are riddled with elevated promises that can never be realized by the consumer.

Beyond the issue of puffery, a not-so-pretty reality exists in the cosmetics industry that deeply contrasts the shimmery, sexy hopes of beauty ads. Today, many cosmetics currently on the market contain concerning levels of skin irritants and toxins, typically used as preservatives. Furthermore, these products remain highly under-regulated.44 According to a report from the Environmental Working Group, 33% of personal care products contain at least one component chemical that has


been linked to cancer.\textsuperscript{45} The only FDA regulations surrounding the production of safe cosmetics is a “Voluntary Cosmetic Registration Program” where cosmetic companies are encouraged, \textit{but not required}, to list chemical ingredients and are allowed to self-police the safety of their products.\textsuperscript{46} Finally, under “trade secret laws,” many chemicals and additives in cosmetics, particularly those listed as “fragrances,” do not need to appear in ingredient lists at all.\textsuperscript{47}

Siobhan O’Connor and Alexandra Spunt’s book mapping out unsafe cosmetics, \textit{No More Dirty Looks}, details chemicals that can be frequently found in beauty products. Chemicals ranging from things that sound as if they could be found in a chemistry textbook—1,4-dioxane, nanoparticles and phenoxyethanol—to well-known hazardous materials few would want to ingest—lead, mercury, formaldehyde, and coal tar—make appearances in every-day beauty products. The trick, particularly with the better-known bad-boys of the additive world, is in the labeling of ingredients. O’Conner and Spunt discuss the sneaky ways cosmetics companies hide dangerous chemicals from consumers by listing them under pseudonyms. They say, “These contaminants are very bad news, and while you won’t always know from the label if they’re in the bottle, they tend to be associated


\textsuperscript{47} Siobhan O’Conner and Alexandra Spunt, \textit{No More Dirty Looks} (New York: Da Capo Press, 2010), 57.
with certain ingredients that you can and should start avoiding." With the Fair Packaging and Labeling Act of 1973, cosmetics companies were finally legally obligated to list their ingredients. Companies can, however, work around this regulation in many ways. One way is to use alternate names for certain ingredients—for example, consumers can find formaldehyde in their products under names such as “cormalin” and “methyl aldehyde.”

Another way companies can dodge the product-savvy consumer eye is through the convention of listing ingredients in small type. This is a key area of the ethical—or rather unethical—contribution of graphic design to the marketing world. If one were to pick up almost any make-up product in a drugstore, she would find impossibly tiny letters on the back of the packaging listing ingredients. The ingredient list, an important tool for consumers to understand product safety, is typically set in overly bold, condensed or otherwise visually challenging type. Any graphic designer with a basic knowledge of typography can spout off at least ten ways to make a word more legible for the viewer. Why then are designers creating seemingly purposefully illegible ingredient lists? It could be the mere pursuit of aesthetics: considering it more important that the product look beautiful than deliver information. It could also be an effort to mask or diminish certain

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48 Siobhan O’Conner and Alexandra Spunt, No More Dirty Looks (New York: Da Capo Press, 2010), 34.


50 Ibid., 40.
ingredients from the consumer’s sight. Consider too, the previous discussion on puffery where words such as “gentle” and “dermatologist-tested”\textsuperscript{51} have no basis in reality, even when present on the packaging itself. In *No More Dirty Looks*, the importance of observing and understanding a product’s ingredients list is highlighted. O’Conner and Spunt say, “Get it through your pretty heads: for now, the only legitimate information on the bottle or box is the ingredient list, and the order in which they are listed.”\textsuperscript{52} With regard to make-up, much of the advertising and design surrounding these products serve to distort and confuse reality, leaving the consumer in the dark.


\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 57.
CHAPTER 7
SPOOF ADVERTISING: SUBVERTING BELOW THE SURFACE

The idea that the advertising industry is one of the great cultural manipulators is an age-old criticism. It is nothing new to discuss the role advertising plays in negatively shaping consumer identity and negatively impacting the field of graphic design. In order to uniquely contribute to this dialogue, however, my thesis work combines these concerns under the umbrella of exposing bad practices in the cosmetics industry. Looking to past dissident designers and guerrilla movements that have participated in this conversation, I have employed the use of spoof ads, advertising interception and unique methods of image making to cause consumers to reflect upon their interaction with advertising—the ways it shapes identity and twists reality.

This thesis work is the culmination of three years of exploration around the themes of advertising and identity. Not only am I poking fun at overtly seductive imagery and the problem of puffery in cosmetics ads, I am also informing consumers about the dangers of toxic preservatives and skin irritants. As women consume these make-up products, their skin is fed harmful chemicals, such as formaldehyde, parabens and lead. Over time, these toxins have the potential to create the opposite
effect of the glamorous depictions in beauty ads and can cause premature aging, rashes and even cancer.53

In this work, I focus specifically on three big-name drugstore brands that have some of the largest advertising budgets yet are major offenders of using toxins in their makeup. The main use of toxic chemicals in make-up products is as a preservative, and the big drugstore brands, in an effort to keep cost down and shelf-life up, oftentimes use a great deal of preservatives. In a test of popular lipstick brands performed by the Food and Drug Administration, over half of the lipsticks sampled contained lead. The brands with the most metallic lip-colors were found to be CoverGirl™, Maybelline™ and L’Oreal™.54 Furthermore, the Skin Deep Database, an organization that tests and compiles information on toxins in beauty products, lists these brands as having consistently high levels of toxins. Using humor and parody, I have created a campaign that references a contemporary make-up ad aesthetic commonly seen to market these three brands.

Three posters, along with accompanying product wraps and magazine inserts, boast the most posh ways to contract cancer and acquire skin irritations. The tone is snarky and sarcastically upbeat while the content is cutting. The imagery is sterile and glossy—championing large, sexy product shots and sleek textures. This imagery is then interrupted with printmaking techniques in order to tarnish the


sleek, ideal advertising feel. As can be seen in Figure 10, the first ad in the poster series appears to be selling a popular drugstore brand of mascara, however it is silkscreened over with a filthy texture and eyes that are fading, distressed and removed from their context.

Figure 10: Maybellethal Mascara Poster Before and after silk screening

An important element in this work is the verbal play off of cosmetics ad “lingo.” Through biting words and subtle spins on widely used fashion phrases, the glossy advertising fantasy is further contrasted with the fleeting, gritty reality that these products are unnecessary health hazards. This contrast between tone and
content is intended to jar the viewer into deeper contemplation surrounding the messaging received in everyday life. Figure 11, the second poster of the series depicts a foundation ad. The copy calls out, “Killer Skin,” playing off the popular practice to call something “killer” if it is truly wonderful. The body copy reads:

Looking for that hot new link to breast cancer? Try parabens! These killer preservatives are found all over breast tumor tissue and all up in your foundation! They can also cause skin to prematurely age for that extra-sickly glow! Try all five kinds, found in ingredients under sexy little pseudonyms! Talk about looks to die for! For the ugly truth about beauty products visit FierceCosmeticsCampaign.com.

This copy mimics the overly aspirational tone of cosmetics ads while delivering shocking information about cancer-causing toxins. This is meant to jar the viewer out of complacency.
Another major component of this work is that the prints are created with actual makeup materials. In figure 12, the third poster in the series, the pink lips and rough texture are created by pulling actual lipstick, not ink, through a screen. The poster in figure 10 is created with mascara and the poster in figure 11 with foundation. As a medium, makeup has painterly qualities, yet by working with it I have come to find that each beauty product contains its own unique texture and pungent smell. In removing these substances from their intended and notably alluring packaging, I am getting up close and personal with their “ick” factor. Another benefit I find in working with makeup is that it can be blended easily and it
is impermanent. I have documented the printing process, in order to help viewers understand the learning experience I have undergone while creating this work. Through these images, the gelatinous gunk intended for our faces can be seen in a more realistic and subsequently unappealing light (See process photos Figures 13).

Figure 12: Chemical Girl Lipstick Poster
Figure 13: The process of silk screening with make-up highlights the oily and undesirable attributes of these products. The mascara (A), foundation (B) and lipstick (C) all seemed unnatural and “icky” when removed from their sleek and highly designed containers.
CHAPTER 8

GUERRILLA CAMPAIGN: SUBVERTING AT THE SOURCE

This project exists as a multifaceted campaign that includes a combination of traditional visual communication approaches, such as large-scale posters and a website, while also working with guerrilla tactics, such as product-wrap stickers and magazine inserts. These tactics act as a means of subverting ad messages at the points of consumer interaction. A consumer will pick up a *Glamour Magazine* from a shop rack and find an inserted anti-ad, touting the dangers of cosmetics products mixed among the shoe advertisements and “Hot New Handbag” articles.

Though audience reach can often be small with such tactics, the intention is to get away from advertising motives of manipulation and persuasion and encourage learning and contemplation. With these guerrilla pieces, the motivation is to inform and empower the consumer. It may be ignored, but the hope is that by jolting interested viewers at unexpected moments, the hold that the advertising fantasy has over a consumer will eventually be broken, if only for an instant. I filmed my process of placing the guerrilla pieces in actual drugstores (Figure 14). These videos are available to be viewed on the accompanying campaign website. Viewers are also encouraged to download their own version of my guerrilla campaign and distribute these elements as they see fit. The idea is that as more participants
subvert cosmetics advertisements, an increasing number of consumers become savvy, aware and thoughtful about the products they use.

Figure 14: Above is a still frame from the guerrilla video footage displaying magazine inserts being placed into drugstore fashion magazines.
CHAPTER 9

CONCLUSION

“So how does a graphic designer avoid losing his or her soul? Having misplaced little pieces of mine, I'm not sure if I am the right person to answer this question. What soul I have left I've managed to keep by pausing; by stopping and thinking.”

Advertising’s function is to sell product. As an industry, its alliances are towards its clients. This has a problematic effect in shaping consumer perception away from realistic value and character judgments towards overly perfected, unachievable fantasies. Graphic designers contribute to the advertising fantasy when they participate in tactics such as portraying overly idealized views of reality. Through Photoshop image manipulation and an obsession with perfection, graphic designers are in a place of power to negatively impact the self-esteem of the public.

However, graphic designers are also in a unique position to utilize their skills as problem solvers and empathetic thinkers in order to combat the advertising clutter. Through advertising subversion tactics such as guerrilla art, graphic designers and artists can play a significant role in restoring the power of objectivity

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55 Stefan Sagmeister, forward to How to be a Graphic Designer Without Losing Your Soul (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2005), 8.
to consumers. If this skill of designer empathy can be harnessed and utilized, a significant change in consumer understanding and response to advertising messaging can be made. The advertising industry limits the field of graphic design to a one-dimensional profession, much like the stereotypical images many advertisements depict. In order to gain a more robust experience of their field, graphic designers should turn away from advertising aspirations and focus on satisfying the real needs of the public.

By designing for those areas that exist as part of the real human experience, not the advertising fantasy, graphic design can bring about positive change. In their essay, *A “Social Model” of Design*, Victor and Sylvia Margolin describe where design can and should position its emphases. They state, “Many products designed for the market also meet a social need but we argue that the market does not, and probably cannot, take care of all social needs, as some relate to populations who do not constitute a class of consumers in the market sense.”

They go on to describe those broad areas where all people can be benefitted, saying, “Various domains that impact human functioning are the biological, psychological, cultural, social, natural, and physical/spatial.” By incorporating a social focus to their work, graphic designers can serve more than client or consumer, they can inspire and empower humanity. Focusing on paths outside of the advertising arena can prove to be a more


meaningful and rewarding approach to graphic design, elevating the profession to its highest possibilities.
APPENDIX A

FIRST THINGS FIRST MANIFESTO 1964

“We, the undersigned, are graphic designers, photographers and students who have been brought up in a world in which the techniques and apparatus of advertising have persistently been presented to us as the most lucrative, effective and desirable means of using our talents. We have been bombarded with publications devoted to this belief, applauding the work of those who have flogged their skill and imagination to sell such things as: cat food, stomach powders, detergent, hair restorer, striped toothpaste, aftershave lotion, before-shave lotion, slimming diets, fattening diets, deodorants, fizzy water, cigarettes, roll-ons, pull-ons and slip-ons.

By far the greatest effort of those working in the advertising industry are wasted on these trivial purposes, which contribute little or nothing to our national prosperity.

In common with an increasing number of the general public, we have reached a saturation point at which the high pitched scream of consumer selling is no more than sheer noise. We think that there are other things more worth using our skill and experience on. There are signs for streets and buildings, books and periodicals, catalogues, instructional manuals, industrial photography, educational
aids, films, television features, scientific and industrial publications and all the other media through which we promote our trade, our education, our culture and our greater awareness of the world.

We do not advocate the abolition of high pressure consumer advertising: this is not feasible. Nor do we want to take any of the fun out of life. But we are proposing a reversal of priorities in favour of the more useful and more lasting forms of communication. We hope that our society will tire of gimmick merchants, status salesmen and hidden persuaders, and that the prior call on our skills will be for worthwhile purposes. With this in mind we propose to share our experience and opinions, and to make them available to colleagues, students and others who may be interested.”

Signed:

“We, the undersigned, are graphic designers, art directors and visual communicators who have been raised in a world in which the techniques and apparatus of advertising have persistently been presented to us as the most lucrative, effective and desirable use of our talents. Many design teachers and mentors promote this belief; the market rewards it; a tide of books and publications reinforces it.

Encouraged in this direction, designers then apply their skill and imagination to sell dog biscuits, designer coffee, diamonds, detergents, hair gel, cigarettes, credit cards, sneakers, butt toners, light beer and heavy-duty recreational vehicles. Commercial work has always paid the bills, but many graphic designers have now let it become, in large measure, what graphic designers do. This, in turn, is how the world perceives design. The profession’s time and energy is used up manufacturing demand for things that are inessential at best.

Many of us have grown increasingly uncomfortable with this view of design. Designers who devote their efforts primarily to advertising, marketing and brand development are supporting, and implicitly endorsing, a mental environment so saturated with commercial messages that it is changing the very way citizen-
consumers speak, think, feel, respond and interact. To some extent we are all helping draft a reductive and immeasurably harmful code of public discourse.

There are pursuits more worthy of our problem-solving skills. Unprecedented environmental, social and cultural crises demand our attention. Many cultural interventions, social marketing campaigns, books, magazines, exhibitions, educational tools, television programs, films, charitable causes and other information design projects urgently require our expertise and help.

We propose a reversal of priorities in favor of more useful, lasting and democratic forms of communication - a mind shift away from product marketing and toward the exploration and production of a new kind of meaning. The scope of debate is shrinking; it must expand. Consumerism is running uncontested; it must be challenged by other perspectives expressed, in part, through the visual languages and resources of design.

In 1964, 22 visual communicators signed the original call for our skills to be put to worthwhile use. With the explosive growth of global commercial culture, their message has only grown more urgent. Today, we renew their manifesto in expectation that no more decades will pass before it is taken to heart.”

Signed:

Jonathan Barnbrook, Nick Bell, Andrew Blauvelt, Hans Bockting, Irma Boom,
Sheila Levrant de Bretteville, Max Bruinsma, Sian Cook, Linda van Deursen, Chris

Dixon, William Drenttel, Gert Dumbar, Simon Esterson, Vince Frost, Ken Garland,
Milton Glaser, Jessica Helfand, Steven Heller, Andrew Howard, Tibor Kalman, Jeffery Keedy, Zuzana Licko, Ellen Lupton, Katherine McCoy, Armand Mevis, J. Abbott Miller,
Rick Poynor, Lucienne Roberts, Erik Spiekermann, Jan van Toorn, Teal Triggs, Rudy VanderLans, Bob Wilkinson
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