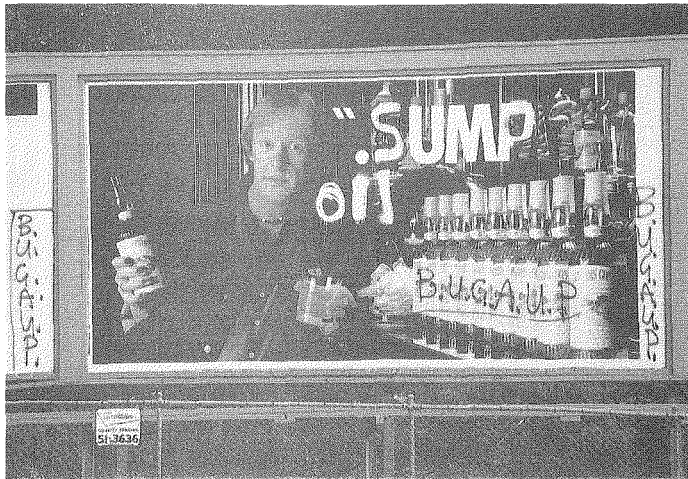


Anti-ad practices

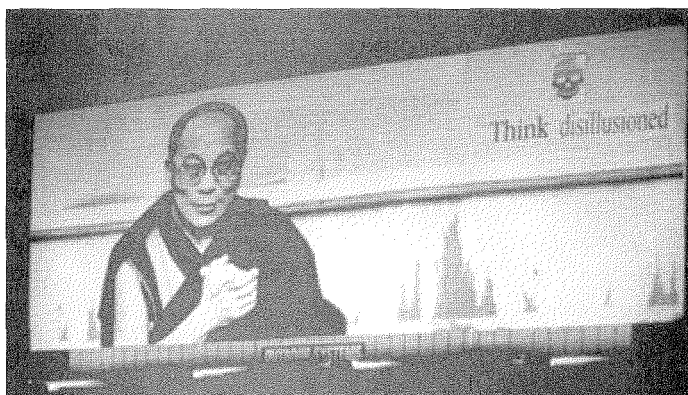
So far, we have discussed what consumers do with ads and products, but advertisements can be themselves directly the subject of resistant cultural practices. The public service ads that we discussed earlier are exemplary in their use of advertising's dramatic text and image juxtapositions to emphatically present, political and public service messages. The form of advertisements themselves has also been the focus of work by artists who are interested in critiquing commodity culture. Artist Hans Haacke has created a whole series of works that use the codes of advertising as forums for political critique. In 1978, he reworked a series of advertisements for Leyland Vehicles, which make Jaguars and Land Rovers, in which he incorporated information about the company's practices in South Africa during Apartheid, and created new slogans for the company, such as "a breed apart" and "nothing can stop us now," in order to comment on its elitism. Haacke has consistently produced works that address the workers who are rendered invisible by the process of commodity fetishism, and the costs to these workers of their labor. In a 1979 image pictured on the next page, Haacke used the famous Breck shampoo campaign of the 1970s that featured the motif of a well-coiffed "Breck girl" to make a political critique of Breck's labor practices. The text refers specifically to the fact that American Cyanamid, Breck's parent company, gave women workers of child-bearing age whose jobs posed reproductive health risks the



BUGA UP billboard



Two billboards by the
Billboard Liberation
Front (BLF)



messages, such as a billboard of two hands grasping a beer can that was labeled "masturbation fantasy #133," For the time period in which they were on display, these billboards were anti-ads and political statements about commodity culture, as well as other issues.

Since the late 1970s, a group in San Francisco, called the Billboard Liberation Front, has also been reworking billboards against their intended messages. The group redesigns billboards so that it is not readily obvious that they have been tampered with. For instance, the early cigarette ad, on the previous page, was changed to state **"I'm real sick. I only smoke FACTS."** The BLF states that the group is not anti-billboard (in fact, several of its members work in the advertising industry); it believes that billboards should be available to all. They state, "to Advertise is to Exist. To Exist is to Advertise. Our ultimate goal is nothing short of a personal and singular Billboard for each citizen."⁶ The BLF continues their work at a time when advertisers are increasingly attempting to coopt styles of anti-corporate messages. For example, the group reworked the Apple Computer "Think Different" slogan which is itself intended to get viewers to stop and attempt to identify the person in the image, by rewriting it as "Think Doomed" and "Think Disillusioned." BLF also reworked a Levi's Jeans billboard to include mass murderer Charles Manson as its spokesperson, and rewrote a Kent cigarette ad to read "Kant—The Choice is Heteronomy." The work by groups such as BUGA UP and BLF has been defined by cultural critics as "culture jamming," a term that refers to the CB radio terms for jamming someone's broadcast and which was coined by the band Negativland.⁷ Writer C. Carr notes that these guerrilla artists are working out of the tradition of the Situationists of the 1960s, which we mentioned in Chapter 5, and its analysis of the role of spectacle in producing a banal experience of "pseudo-life." The interventions of billboard artists, whether shock or humor is their strategy, thus changes the messages of the marketplace, startling viewers into thinking about those messages differently. It is the case, though, that advertisers are also using these self-mocking techniques to get attention, and thus the distinction between ads and anti-ads is increasingly difficult to make.

These processes testify to the complex ways in which processes of hegemony and counter-hegemony function in a continuous dynamic. Cultures are always in flux and are being constantly reinvented; they are always the site of struggles for meaning. In the culture of late capitalism, when the meanings of coolness and hipness are understood to be central to the exchange of commodities, there is a continuous appropriation of the styles of marginal cultures,

which are in turn in a constant state of reinvention. And, in the cultural realms of art, politics, and everyday consumer life, mainstream values are constantly questioned and political struggles are waged. As subversions and resistances at the cultural margins are appropriated into the mainstream, new forms of cultural innovation and refusal are found. Thus, in late capitalism, the boundary between the mainstream and the margins is always in the process of being renegotiated.

Notes

1. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (New York and London: Penguin, 1972), 131.
2. Anne Friedberg, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1993).
3. Michael Schudson, *Advertising, the Uneasy Persuasion: its Dubious impact on American Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).
4. Rosemary Coombe, *The Cultural Life of Intellectual Property* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998).
5. Coombe, *The Cultural Life of Intellectual Property*, 3.
6. Jack Napier and John Thomas, <<http://www.billboardliberation.com/horne.html>>.
7. C. Carr, "Guerrilla Artists Celebrate 20 Years of Culture Jamming: Wheat Pasting against the Machine," *Village Voice* (28 April–4 May 1999) <<http://www.villagevoice.com/columns/9917/carr.shtm1x>>

Further Reading

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