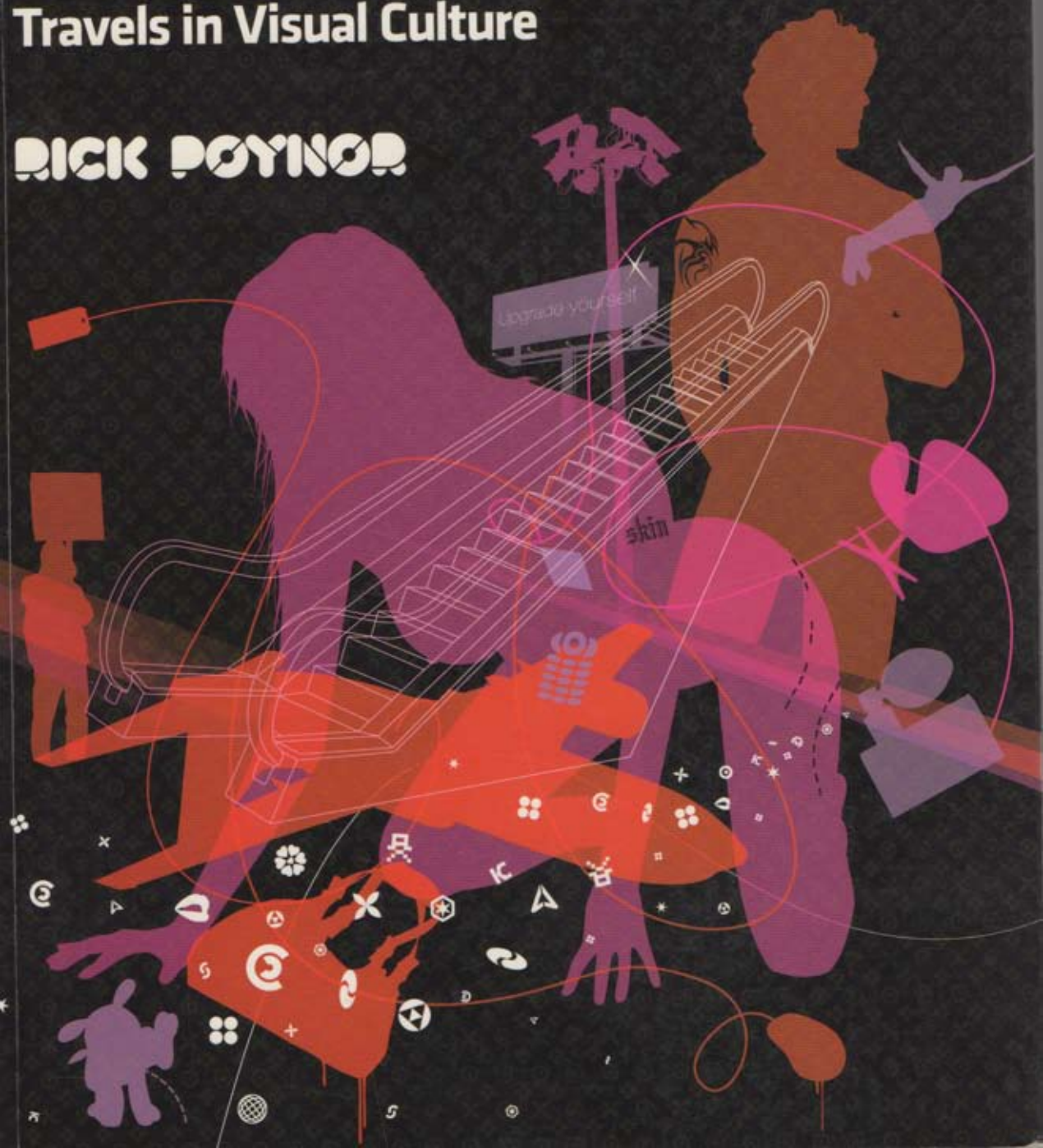


DESIGNING DORINOTOPIA

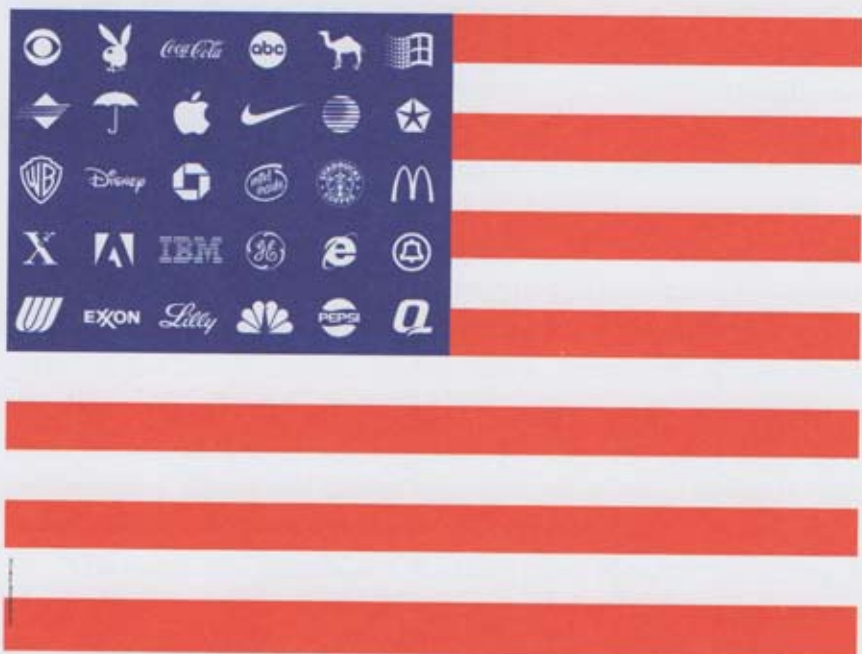
Travels in Visual Culture

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THE CITIZEN DESIGNED

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Corporate American Flag,
protest graphic for
Adbusters, 2003.
Design: Shi-Zhe Yung

By the end of the 1990s, anyone who felt that corporate power was getting out of hand had good reason to be hopeful. After a long period of complacency, public discussion was starting to happen in the US and other liberal democracies, spurred by expressions of disaffection seen at a series of protests, beginning with the World Trade Organization negotiations in Seattle in 1999, and fuelled by the appearance of books such as Naomi Klein's *No Logo* and Thomas Frank's *One Market Under God*. Some designers, too, were showing signs of unrest. By the late 1990s, *Adbusters* had become a must-read publication for many, and the magazine's launch of the *First Things First 2000* manifesto gave additional focus to this renewed questioning of design's position in the scheme of things.

The plans made by the American Institute of Graphic Arts (AIGA) for its national design conference, 'Voice' in late September 2001 seemed set to give further impetus to design's questioning mood. In retrospect, the decision to cancel the event, following 11 September, was unquestionably correct, but it is emblematic of the way that, since that terrible moment, the discussion of formerly pressing issues such as globalization has been pushed aside. Considered as news events, concerns about sweatshop exploitation and advertising in schools paled in comparison with thousands of dead, anthrax scares, the defence of the free world and the bombing of Afghanistan. Anyone speaking out against corporate domination ran the risk of being branded a terrorist sympathizer, but in the aftermath of 9/11, as we came to terms with the shock and remembered the victims, few people were listening anyway. Enron was portrayed as the wrongdoing of a few bad apples rather than as a disturbing sign of precisely the kind of systemic corruption and failure that the anti-globalization protesters had been talking about. Before long the issue that overrode all others was Iraq.

It was hardly surprising that, for well-meaning attendees and participants at the rescheduled 'Voice 2' in March 2002, 9/11 continued to loom large. For some designers, especially for those who live and work in New York, the destruction provoked a profound need to find a way to use their design skills to contribute. 'Many designers in and out of New York, feeling they had a public responsibility, produced images and words to help us deal with this unprecedented event, Milton Glaser told the conference.¹

These are sentiments with which anyone can identify, but in terms of the broader issues – the issues that preoccupied many concerned people before 9/11 – they don't take us very far. While the hurt must be addressed, addressing it will not in itself bring about deeper

slurry of consciousness-shaping propaganda. What on earth is wrong in producing and taking support from some alternative points of view?

On its own, though, this will never be enough. The fundamental question for design, now and for ever, is how it should relate to the public, and this was a point made persuasively at 'Voice 2' by Samina Quraeshi, Professor in Family and Community at the University of Miami. Design has a central role, she noted, in 'breaking down the physical and psychological barriers to full participation in society' and giving citizens 'the means to express their needs and solve their problems'.² This point was taken up in one of the short texts written in response to the conference. It is the designer's responsibility, says Sheri Koetting of New York, to engage society: 'Society depends on citizen participation, and information design holds the key.'³ At the end of her talk, Quraeshi challenged the audience 'to become architects of change'. The first step for the citizen-designer, she said, is to develop an understanding of the changes under way in the world and of the many cultural values and traditions that give worth to human life. The next step lies in individual action at community level. 'Begin in the home, move to the street, reach out to the neighbourhood, restore the community, re-imagine the world' Quraeshi concluded. 'The architecture of change depends upon an enlightened design community.'⁴

This is easy to say and many of us, seeing ourselves as already enlightened, would probably endorse it as a statement of principle. But to redefine design in terms of Quraeshi's model would require nothing less than a complete reversal of the way in which we think about and employ design most of the time. Once again, there is no way around it: this is a political question. Even to begin to understand changes in the world, you need a conceptual framework in which to view them; merely witnessing or experiencing these changes does not mean you understand them, even if you are able to reflect them in your work. Any interpretation of these changes that you use as the basis for your own actions will be informed by an underlying ideology of some kind whether you recognize it or not.

Once you move out into the street, you are already entering a contested terrain, since the street, as hardly needs restating here, is increasingly treated not as a civic space in which an active community defines its own needs and priorities and expresses itself in its own way, but as a commercial space whose purpose is to sell things to herds of essentially passive consumers. Rampant commercial forces have played a huge part in damaging neighbourhoods (as in the Wal-Mart effect on town centres) and demoralizing our sense of what full engagement in the

change. More worryingly, the emotional bond that comes from shared distress and fear is easily manipulated by political forces with a vested interest in avoiding more searching and potentially troublesome forms of introspection and inquiry. In this climate, even the mildest forms of self-reproach from America's internal critics generated accusations of betrayal and appeasement from those who would like us to believe that the only available course is to unite in the face of a common enemy. Only now is a wider range of responses beginning to be heard.

It has to be said that designers were not, even before 9/11, conspicuous supporters of the anti-capitalist movement. I confess that I hesitated as I wrote 'anti-capitalist' out of concern that using such a phrase – shorthand for a complicated mixture of causes and interests – might seem too politicized, too leftist, too doctrinaire, too off-putting. The problem that dogs all analysis of these issues as they relate to design is that, at root, these are political questions. Any discussion that fails to acknowledge this will never move very far beyond vague, platitudinous statements of a desire to 'improve things'

One of design's great visionaries, Buckminster Fuller, believed that these issues were so important that they bypassed the trivialities of mere politics. Fuller was right about many things, but on this point he was wrong. There may be more than enough resources in the world to go around, as he often pointed out, but human beings do not spontaneously opt for what he saw as the fair and rational course of action and share them out. Politics is the only mechanism by which a more equitable arrangement might be achieved. Yet to state the essentially political nature of the challenge not only risks alienating designers who do not feel themselves to be political creatures, or who see design as somehow existing apart from politics, but actively antagonizes those who do not share these political views. Perhaps at this point we should simply accept this, because the key issue, put starkly, concerns what we as a society most value and how we wish to live. If you do not acknowledge the reality of the struggle for political power, which will proceed regardless, you simply play into the hands of those who have no compunction in exploiting your lack of 'voice'

So design badly needs people ready to stand up and speak out. We have a few, but they tend to be lone figures and mavericks, image-makers such as Shawn Wolfe in the US or Jonathan Barnbrook in the UK. While some argue with alarming vehemence that such work achieves nothing apart from letting off steam and publicizing the designer, I believe that it has considerable value. The consumerist status quo pumps out a vast, overwhelming, massively resourced

public realm might mean. Any attempt to restore a community and give it back a sense of itself will need to challenge these colonizing forces with a vigorous alternative vision of urban organization endorsed by political backing at both local and national levels. If the task of re-imagining just one blighted, dysfunctional city seems vast, then how much more imponderable Quraeshi's exhortation to 're-imagine the world'?

Small wonder that so many designers prefer to find solace in the private world of their screens: a realm they can fully control. Nevertheless, daunting as the task of citizen-designer might sound, Quraeshi offers some challenging speculations about design's potential role. Designers, she argues, have a unique skill-set, vital to the contemporary world, and this is their capacity for interdisciplinary thinking, which allows them 'to see the multifaceted nature inherent in any problem' New opportunities to apply a designerly way of problem-solving are emerging in private, public and non-profit sectors. Bruce Mau says similar things about his Institute Without Boundaries educational venture. These are large, rather self-aggrandizing claims, but without such a level of self-belief (backed up by real ability) there is no way in which designers will ever exert fundamental influence. Essential to this, as Quraeshi notes, is a willingness to mix with civic leaders, appointed officials and volunteers, who frequently come from the business community served by design.

On this point, one of the responses prompted by 'Voice 2' was particularly instructive. Bennett Peji, a former president of the AIGA's San Diego chapter, reported how, in less than a decade, the chapter has evolved from a professional organization to a service organization 'whose mission is to utilize design for the public good' Peji puts 20 hours a week into running his business and 20 hours into voluntary work, serving on the board of five non-profit organizations. 'The key to truly affecting any group's design perspective, he says, 'is to effect change by serving on the board, not just being a pro bono vendor.'²⁵ He cites the example of the San Diego Dance Institute, now renamed CityMoves with his prompting, and describes how this kind of organization can be awakened to the power of design as a tool for defining and expressing its activities and goals. In the 1990s, the San Diego chapter rallied a complacent design community, tripled its membership and gave its support to city art programmes at the service of disadvantaged neighbourhoods. From this position of strength, the chapter continues to forge alliances with other creative professionals in the area. The aim, says Peji, is to build a creative community with political influence in

San Diego. 'Design is not the end goal, he notes. 'Design is simply a tool to help us connect to our communities and make a difference.'⁶

That simple statement encapsulates a profound and, perhaps for many, rather alarming challenge to design. If we are honest, so much of the design we produce and acclaim and obsess over seems to exist primarily for itself. The client often comes a not-so-close second and the public, let alone the public good, doesn't really figure in the reckoning at all. In his conference talk, Milton Glaser drew attention to the AIGA's new code of ethics, which offers information about appropriate behaviour towards clients and other designers, 'but not a word about a designer's relationship to the public'⁷

For anyone who believes that this relationship is the heart of the issue, it should be a matter of urgency now to act. Designers are much too insular. If you really wish to be an architect of change, you cannot go it alone. Those who support the idea of reform should do more to connect with like-minded colleagues, both inside and outside design. There is strength in numbers and, more than anything, we need coalitions, pressure groups, proposals and plans. We should think much more strategically about how to press design's case where it counts most – in the places where power resides. We must ensure that design, as an interdisciplinary way of thinking, becomes an integral and equal component of significant public initiatives. There is no other way.