

OBEY THE GIANT

LIFE IN
THE IMAGE
WORLD

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August-London
Birkhäuser - Publishers for Architecture
Basel-Boston-Berlin

VC
798.4
P69
2001

First published in 2001 by

August Media Ltd
116-120 Golden Lane
London EC2Y 0TL, UK

Birkhäuser – Publishers for
Architecture, P.O. Box 133
CH-4010 Basel, Switzerland
Member of the
BertelsmannSpringer
Publishing Group

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CIP catalogue records for this
book are available from the British
Library, London, and the Library
of Congress, Washington D. C.

Deutsche Bibliothek Cataloging-
in-Publication Data
Obey the Giant : life in the image
world / Rick Poynor. – Basel ;
Boston ; Berlin : Birkhäuser, 2001
ISBN 3-7643-6565-X

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Art Direction: Stephen Coates
Design: Anne Odling-Smee
Project editor: Alex Stetter
Editorial assistant: Ruth Ward
Publishing director: Nick Barley

Picture research: Heather Vickers
Copy editor: Lise Connellan

Printed on acid-free paper
produced of chlorine-free pulp
TCF ∞

Typography: Quadraat Light,
Checkout

Production co-ordinated by:
Uwe Kraus GmbH
Printed in Italy

ISBN 3-7643-6565-X

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

<http://www.augustmedia.co.uk>
<http://www.birkhauser.ch>

For Tim P.

August - London
Birkhäuser - Publishers for Architecture
Basel - Boston - Berlin

'LIFE MUST BE SEEN, BEFORE IT CAN BE KNOWN.'

Samuel Johnson

Introduction

Any ambiguity in this book's title is completely intentional. It can be taken ironically – 'obey' the giant – or it can be taken straight. You might be inclined to accept the imperative as an accurate picture of reality: the 'giant' requires us to surrender to its every command and whim. Or you might scoff at the very idea. No one is coercing us to do anything and we are manifestly free, as no people before us, to do whatever we like. American artist/designer Shepard Fairey's long-running 'Obey Giant' poster campaign – from which the phrase is taken – captures the spectrum of possibilities. To some viewers, coming across the giant's leaden visage in the street, like an ordinary piece of fly-poster advertising, the message seems threatening. To others, this mysterious, ubiquitous, endlessly reiterated graphic instruction is a seductively absurd image-game. It's possible, too, to feel that other people are doing the 'obeying' – without even realising it – while we go our own way.

That there is, however, a 'giant' out there few could seriously deny. Even the most determined and Panglossian free-market optimist must be assailed at times by the suspicion that mighty forces, many of them corporate, are making decisions over which we, as individuals, seem to have little if any control. Our triumphant age of plenty is riddled with darker feelings of doubt, cynicism, distrust, boredom and a strange kind of emptiness. As one newspaper headline summarised it: 'We have reached utopia and it sucks' ¹ On British television, as an experiment, a wealthy family of four try to live for three weeks without their hundreds of designer possessions, carted off by the programme-makers. It doesn't go well. 'I just feel totally insignificant and worthless,' confesses the de-branded husband, who is later found to be securing a surreptitious product high by wearing his gold Rolex to business meetings. ² Any novelist who made up this story to satirise consumerism gone haywire would be accused of exaggeration. Meanwhile, the disaffection and sense of powerlessness apparently felt by many people is a source of mounting public concern. Demonstrations in Seattle, Prague, London, Gothenburg and Genoa confront governments and media with worrying signs of disturbance in the depths of the social body. If there is still a tendency to stigmatise

all acts of protest as the work of an irresponsible carnival of anarchists, falling voter turnouts in national elections are beginning to oblige even the most complacent politicians to face the fact that growing numbers of citizens feel their democratic votes count for nothing.

The change of mood is now so widespread that it is easy to forget how recent it is. In the years after the collapse of communism, there was no public appetite to hear about the problems of consumer capitalism and dissenting viewpoints were not part of the mainstream media discussion. One could read a journal like *The Baffler* – published in Chicago – and nod sagely at the acumen of its analysis of business-world double-think, wishing for a time when such ideas would once again be part of the everyday news agenda, but in the mid-1990s that moment had yet to arrive. It didn't occur until December 1999 when images of goons in Darth Vader body armour, protecting corporate property in the streets of Seattle, were seen around the world. Naomi Klein's *No Logo* is only the most visible and media-friendly example of a flourishing new genre of scorching anti-corporate tract that stretches from Charles Derber's *Corporation Nation* (1998) by way of *Baffler* editor Thomas Frank's *One Market Under God* (2000) to Noreena Hertz's *The Silent Takeover* (2001). Interestingly, the group that seemed to grasp some of these ideas quickest – stylish, educated young people – was one that had, not long ago, provoked deep sighs of disappointment from ageing baby-boomers dismayed by the kids' seemingly total surrender to the branded life. 'The point is that there are no ways for you to express yourself that the brands don't own or control or won't own or control in an instant,' writes Nick Compton in the British style magazine *i-D*. 'That there is no space or event or experience that cannot be bought and made part of the brand message.'³ Another youth-culture bible, *Dazed & Confused*, devotes a whole issue to the subject of rebellion: is it possible anymore? For the magazine's twenty-eight-year-old editor, Rachel Newsome, there is no such thing as an underground because corporate culture has infiltrated youth culture and utterly co-opted it.⁴ Her generation has got what it wanted – in the sense of material opportunity – but young people still seek something to believe in, even as they come to terms with the realisation that corporate 'cool hunters' are lurking in the shadows, taking detailed field notes about their every move.

For a discipline that lives by clocking the latest trends, design was not especially quick to catch on. For many of those busily engaged in fabricating the image world, there was probably too much at stake. In the last fifteen years, the design business, too, has burgeoned into some kind of giant. In the 1960s, a successful metropolitan design firm might consist of three or four designers, an assistant or two, a tin of Cow gum and a few drawing boards cross-hatched with cut marks. In 2000, the UK-owned WPP

Group became the world's largest marketing communications giant, as well as the biggest owner of design groups, when it acquired US advertising group Young & Rubicam. Its ever-expanding list of subsidiaries now includes Landor Associates, The Partners, Coley Porter Bell, Enterprise IG, Addison, BDG McColl, and The Brand Union. Any one of these component companies might employ 50 or 100 designers, as well as other personnel. Other growth-hungry conglomerates – some originating inside design; some entering the field from the business consultancy and marketing services sectors – are also gobbling up design firms to strengthen their ability to win and implement huge national and global design projects. In Britain, according to a government audit in 2001, the creative sector is now a significant business worth more than £100 billion a year. Design generates £26.7 billion of this revenue, second only to software and computers (£36.4 billion) and some way ahead of publishing, television and radio, and music.⁵ And this accelerating dependence on design's magical services is a global phenomenon. A recent *Time* magazine cover story enthusiastically proclaims 'The rebirth of design' – 'Function is out. Form is in. From radios to toothbrushes, America is bowled over by style.'⁶

For most of the 1990s, creating an ad campaign for a brand such as Nike – let alone designing the actual footwear – was one of the most desirable jobs to which a thrusting young creative could aspire. Now, suddenly, protesters were throwing rocks at Nike megastores and serious cognitive dissonance was almost bound to result. The response among some design, advertising and marketing people is to try to regroup. A book called *Beautiful Corporations* (2000) readily agrees on its cover that 'Corporations rule the world' and this message is reinforced in its pages by the claim that governments are fundamentally impotent and a spent force. They have 'now probably withered to such an extent that they cannot help' with impending ecological catastrophe.⁷ But that is okay, it seems, because 'beautiful' corporations will gallop to the rescue. According to the business world's more far-sighted theorists, in a successful market economy shopping is a new kind of election. every item bought and carried off home is another vote cast. (Good news for the designer label-addicted TV family: they are clearly outstanding democrats.) In this kind of gung-ho design text aimed at the business reader, great premium is put on the necessity for style. Genuine style, we are told, is idiosyncratic; stylish individuals go their own way; style has to come from within. In the same way, if it is not to seem phoney, style must emanate from deep down in the very 'soul' of the corporation. Preachers of the design gospel never acknowledge the essential contradiction in this language. A soul is not something you can acquire along the way by trying harder: it's a determining essence that is present from conception. Design

might well be able to help the fortunate bearer of a decent soul to express its inner light more effectively (though even this sounds manipulative) but no amount of expensive design penance can imbue a corporate entity with a 'soul' that was not there in the first place. If a corporation really needs to be told that customers admire and reward values such as quality, consistency, integrity and honesty, it is already a lost cause. Any attempt to confect the appearance or 'style' of these virtues must necessarily be bogus and the idea of design consultants going around trying to smarten up the corporate soul in this way – in order to 'insinuate your company into the customer's mind' – is enough to confirm a disenchanting consumer's worst fears.⁸

The trendier end of the branded universe has responded with a battery of hip-sounding rethinks and wily new strategems: funky business, viral marketing, stealth advertising, ambient advertising, guerrilla advertising. One new British ad agency underlines the anti-corporate message by actually styling itself Anti-Corp. At the Anti-Corp website, potential clients are advised that the team has assembled a panel of 'early adopters' and opinion-formers, who can supply instant e-mail feedback on their views and attitudes about ideas and brands. If the 'underground' is now officially dead, the news appears not to have reached Anti-Corp. 'We're going to use [the panel] like an early warning system,' says co-founder Dave Hieatt, a former Saatchi & Saatchi copywriter, 'because we've learned that the more "underground" an idea is in the youth market, the more likely it is to work.'⁹ In another guise, Hieatt and his partner Mark Simmons operate the skateboard clothing line Howies, voted ninth 'coolest' brand in Britain in 1999 by *Fashion Weekly*. Howies does a T-shirt emblazoned with the legend 'Big Brand Defector' and a little registration mark in a circle – just the thing for readers of *No Logo* and *The Silent Takeover*, which make similar ironic use of registration and copyright symbols on their covers.

Design and advertising people who dedicate their efforts to this line of work are caught in a double bind from which there is no obvious way out. The difference between big brand communication and 'defector' brand communication is one of scale rather than essence. The mechanisms of 'insinuation' are largely the same. In some recent public statements, the angst is almost palpable: 'Everyone's trying to pass off their product as experience these days. I even passed The Kebab Experience last week. People in marketing need to learn responsibility, or it's all just spin,' warns Ralph Ardill, marketing and strategic director at Imagination, a huge British consultancy, with 160 designers on the payroll.¹⁰ Another design consultant bemoans the fact that: 'Quirky or niche local offers, regardless of their ability to endure, are rapidly becoming things of the past.'¹¹ And what exactly is driving these unfortunate 'niche offers' towards

extinction with such regrettable haste? It's the gigantic, all-consuming global design and marketing initiatives on which so much creative energy is now lavished.

The unfocused sense of awakening detectable in such laments is starting to find expression at a larger institutional level. In May 2001, D&AD, the British organisation representing advertising and design, organised a one-day event, 'SuperHumanism', intended to act as 'an international forum for change in the design and communication industries'. In the conference announcement, Richard Seymour – product designer, TV personality, past president of D&AD and leader of the initiative – noted that philosophy was no longer part of our view of design and spoke of the urgent need to 'put people first'. 'There's a growing sense of alienation that has touched every aspect of our lives,' he explained in *Blueprint*. 'This sense of fear must be reversed to engender trust and empowerment and this can only be achieved through a thorough investigation of how the structures of brands, communications and service-to-user relationships are able to develop in a world beyond digital convergence.'¹²

Two of the forum's three core aims – to master 'out of control' technology and to meet people's real physical and emotional needs – seemed reasonable enough, however complex these goals might be to realise in practice. But the forum's third ambition – 'to restore the population's faith in brands and business' – threw the entire initiative into question. For those who earn their living (or make their fortunes) by providing services to brands and business, the public's loss of faith in their alchemical powers is bound to cause anxiety and no doubt appears a pressing concern. Nevertheless, the aim of a genuine 'super-humanist' committed to putting people first (rather than putting brands or business first) must surely be to start by addressing the underlying social, political and educational causes of that loss of faith. A restoration of faith in brands might – or might not – be the eventual result of this process but, if clear, impartial thinking about these issues is the intention, brand rescue certainly cannot be the project's stated purpose. In other words, you don't 'reverse the sense of alienation' in order to change reality; you work to change reality in order to reverse the sense of alienation. Not for the first time, it seemed that design people visualise these problems in terms of image rather than substance, even though this superficial way of thinking is a root cause of public suspicion. By tracing design's etymological origins, the Czech philosopher Vilém Flusser arrived at a startling definition of the designer as 'a cunning plotter laying his traps'¹³ Design, he proposed with persuasive elegance, has an inherently deceptive dimension. Starting a reappraisal of design practice from this point, rather than with the need to get us all back 'on message' for the business community's benefit, could produce profoundly radical conclusions. Yet critical perspectives that would require a

more fundamental interrogation of design and its relationship with marketing and advertising were not aired at 'SuperHumanism's forum of industry insiders, despite the proposal in its mission statement to unite philosophy and design.

While it might seem from the foregoing remarks that *Obey the Giant's* agenda is entirely polemical and opposed to much visual production, this is far from the whole story. As an ordinary viewer, my attraction to the image world was first prompted by forms of commercial communication that seemed to go far beyond the routine and made a gripping, genuinely life-enhancing contribution to everyday visual culture. I still see plenty of evidence of design-thinkers, form-makers and image-crafters who are striving, sometimes against the odds, to develop strategies both to engage with, and resist, contemporary conditions. Some of them are discussed in this book. In design education, issues of personal engagement, authorship and responsibility are often debated and there is much talk about the need for 'critical making' and the 'reflective practitioner' Yet even now, in a design-conscious age, there is little real interchange between the relatively open and speculative domain of higher education and the more tightly focused, income-watching 'creative' professions. If the would-be reformers of the design establishment really want to promote meaningful change, then they should open their minds, cast their nets wider in the search for fresh thinking and reconsider an obsession with size that is squeezing the spirit out of design. It's hard to talk sensibly with giants – their massive heads tend to get lost in the clouds.

My own path as an observer has been to move from a position outside design, in towards the centre, and then by degrees to pull back to a position further out. There is simply no way to occupy a place near the heart of an 'industry' and maintain a truly critical stance. After a while, you cease to recognise how many of its assumptions and values you now take for granted. Where I stand at the moment, I view design as part of the landscape, not as the main event. Its growth as a business or revenue-generator is not my concern. I am interested in its effects. My motive for writing about visual culture begins and ends with a desire to understand my own experiences: my life – our lives – in the image world. The key difference of emphasis between *Obey the Giant* and other books with a broadly 'anti-corporate' theme is that visual culture itself – rather than iniquitous labour practices, or environmental disaster, or the relationship between business and democracy – is its focus. These essays are written, with a kind of repelled fascination, from the perspective of a street-level participant, an image-consumer, a tuned-in viewer. Above all, what I hope comes across is a sense of the visual sphere as an inexhaustible supplier of provocation, stimulation, enlightenment and many different shades of pleasure. Irritation and even anger with the products of the image world are inevitable.

Ambivalence and not always being certain are part of the fun. It's possible to be deeply immersed in this culture, seduced, excited and energised by aspects of it, yet, simultaneously, to feel alienated from it in fundamental ways. By this I mean that all day long you are exposed to visual messages – delivered as edicts, targets and norms – which may affront every value you cherish, yet, short of total withdrawal, you must find your own way of coping with the incessant demands of this 'mental environment'

Any conclusions I draw about the larger picture are heavily shaped by these everyday personal encounters with posters, billboards, photographs, books, magazines, websites, record covers, tourist attractions, exhibitions and shops. It is because I think that visual culture matters, that it makes a difference, that there are too many occasions when it is confiscated, controlled, doctored, diluted and sold back to us with its meanings changed for completely different purposes, that I want to take issue. I hope that at least some of these observations and reflections will strike your eye the same way.