



Say every piece of graphic design exhibited the same high level of professional luster and technical finesse. Say every graphic designer were exactly as good as every other graphic designer. This would be utopia, right? *This would be heaven. Or would it be hell?*

Well, the world is full of good designers. The computer has made it possible for every single one of us to attain perfection. Given a reasonable deadline and a big enough budget, we can make anything, anything at all, beautiful.

We're good.

But if we're all good, there's hardly any point to it, is there? To be good is to be average. Being good becomes a problem.

The solution is that we have to learn how to be bad.



Not bad like this:

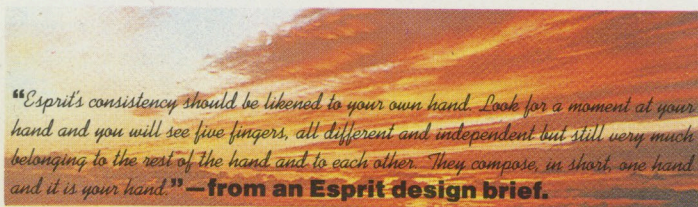


Or this:

That's not it at all.

Maybe what those designers did was in some way bad, but their clients thought they were good.

We need to be bad as in disobedient. Bad as in insubordinate. Bad as in taking the design brief the client hands us and rewriting it.



The client says, "I want a brochure that will make my product sell better." We match the slick copy to some glossy product shots and put together a brochure that will secure us a place in the Regional Design Annual.

But maybe the client doesn't need a brochure. Maybe he needs a new product. Maybe he really needs an advertising campaign. Or a decent copywriter. Or a career change. Maybe we should tell him.

We're talking bad.

To be good—or rather, bad—designers shouldn't placate clients. We should make them squirm. We should make them itchy. We should make them understand that graphic design (like architecture and product design) has an effect on its audience and their surroundings.

Bad means subverting what we've come to accept as the design process. Instead of taking what the client says about his business, about his needs, about why he's hiring a designer, we can refuse to listen. If we approach clients with our own agenda, we may be able to do more than change a typeface or an annual-report

concept. We might be able to have an impact on how companies do business. We might be able to make them better, or smarter, or more socially responsible.



Designers need to function as OUTSIDERS. We need to be wise to the concerns of the marketers, the researchers, the people who believe that every visual nuance can somehow be quantified. But we need to solve the problem independently.

Marketing is the science of manufacturing desire. It's a way of making business more efficient and profitable by creating a marketplace where most people want the same stuff.

For instance, it would be easier and more profitable for General Motors if everyone would just buy the same model car. It would be easier and more profitable for R.J. Reynolds if everybody would just smoke the same brand of cigarette. But people have learned to express their individuality through the products they buy. So products have to appear to express different attitudes. In order to grow and increase their market shares, companies are required to diversify their product lines.



"And as more and more competitive products become more and more alike, a good package can become a packaged good's

best if not only point of difference."—ad in the Wall Street Journal for The Michael Peters/Duffy Design Groups.

If the only difference between two products is the design of the package, then design has become an extremely important part of business, and of our culture.

Designers are needed to make one product appear to be distinct from another. Designers make cars look a little different from model to model and year to year. Designers come up with new graphics for old cigarettes. Designers are hired to give the appearance of a world (or a supermarket aisle) brimming with options by

graphically dramatizing the differences between, say, Coke and Pepsi, Diet Coke and Diet Pepsi, Caffeine Free Coke and Caffeine Free Pepsi, and so on.

Designers are good at this.

But design shouldn't be an accessory to the marketing process. It should be the opposite. Design should be a

way of making things truly different, distinctive, individualistic, and interesting. Design should be about the creation of real choices.

But designers, like everyone else, have been suckered by the allure of marketing. We've become part of that process. We've become insiders.

We are a cog in a machine when we might be more effective as a wrench in the works.

Jenny Holzer, Selection from The Survival Series, Times Square, New York, 1985-86.



Reproduced courtesy Barbara Gladstone Gallery.

We have begun to dress like our clients and talk like our clients and even worse, think like our clients.



"The new Mister Donut has an immediately recognizable identity. It projects cleanliness and professionalism."—capabilities brochure, Selame Design.

Mister Donut

We say we're practicing "strategic communication design" or that we are a "strategic imaging firm." We

offer our clients "proprietary quantitative research systems."

There's a lot of strategic communicating and imaging going on at design firms, a lot of quantitative research. And none of it sounds much like design. Not the part of design that has to do with art. Not the part of design that has to do with ideas. Maybe not even the part that has to do with style. It sounds like business. Safe and boring.

We're all professionals now, right?

And we need to be. What choice is there in a world where the term "big business" has become an understatement? Companies operate on a scale, geographically and economically, that would have been unthinkable not long ago.

"As tastes become global, products are bound to follow. Tomorrow, we believe, the food business will see more and more brands go global...Today, Philadelphia Cream Cheese is a multinational product that we plan to make global." —Hamish Maxwell, chairman and chief executive, Philip Morris Companies.

Forget the utopian vision of one world. What we have is one marketplace. The Global Village is really the GLOBAL MALL.

As corporations keep growing and extending their reach, the distance between a creative person, say, a designer, and the person who actually makes decisions becomes almost insurmountable. The designer and the decision-maker are separated layers of yes-men and no-men.

Especially no-men.

There are level upon level of marketing experts and researchers and people who move numbers around on computer screens. All of them focus their attention on a design, making sure it has mass appeal, making sure it has a look that says majority not minority, a look that says white not black.

Is it nice? Is it safe? Will it hurt anyone's feelings? And if it is nice, safe, and inoffensive, will it cut through the clutter? You know, the clutter of all the other nice, safe, inoffensive designs.

To deal with the corporate army of qualifiers and quantifiers, the hedgers and the bean-counters, design firms employ their own armies, account executives who speak the language of "strategic communications." We

hire people with marketing sense to sell our work.

There's a traditional balance in design firms. The art partner and the business partner. One partner can design and the other partner can hustle. It's a good balance as long as it remains a balance. But what happens now is that the business side, the marketing side, takes over.

In the good old days—10, 15, 20 years ago—this emphasis on financial goals over artistic goals was known as "selling out." To accuse people of selling out was to hurt their feelings, to denounce them as traitors to their art. But at some point in the last decade or so, selling out became the honorable thing to do, the only thing to do.

We sell out small, by doing jobs for clients we abhor. We sell out big, by allowing multinational design conglomerates to buy away our independence.

Accuse people of selling out today and they are likely to be flattered. They are likely to boast about their billings or their capital gains.

Sometime in the last decade or so, big business became fashionable. Growth became socially acceptable. Small is no longer beautiful. Small is small.

And bigger is now better.

But it's risky to be big.

A wrong move—a flawed product, a misguided ad campaign, a failed graphic—represents tens of millions of dollars down the drain.

The way to minimize financial risks in design is to minimize the esthetic risks.

So big business creates big products. Big fills the world with golden arches, Michael Jackson music, Madonna videos, and Coca-Cola. Big multiplies. Big spreads. Big metastasizes. Big makes everything everywhere look the same.

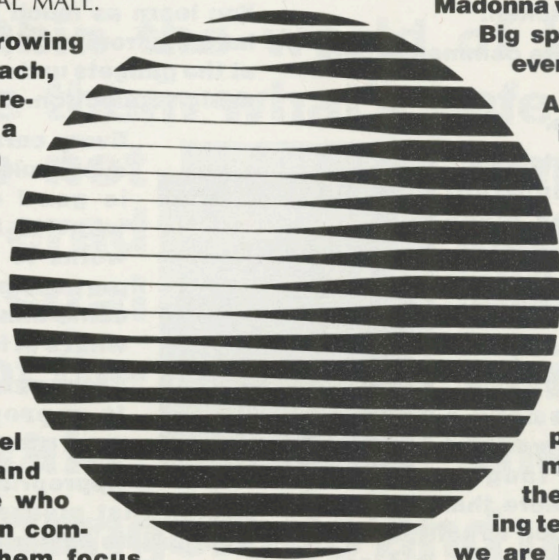
Advertising tells us that our self-images are represented and formed by the products we buy, products which are identical to other products but for the packaging. Consequently, design is now an extremely important factor in how we perceive ourselves and our fellow human beings.

The package becomes more important than the product. And the package is loaded with meaning, meaning ascribed by the marketer. To the extent that we believe what marketing tells us, to the extent that we buy what we are being sold, the package becomes part of the culture and the social fabric.

All of us consume marketing. All of us consume design.

Design is playing a more prominent role in everyday life, but the designer isn't. The designer as authoritative individual has been shrinking in direct proportion to the growth of the designer as player in the marketing process.

When we consume marketing, when we buy the package rather than the product, and the style rather than the substance, our world becomes a different place. When information becomes the premier commodity, things get strange. Things—assuming we still have things—get confusing.



Coke & Pepsi
Ford & Elite
HBO & Showtime
Hertz & Avis
Hunt's & Heinz
L.L. Bean & Eddie Bauer
Lee & Levi's
McDonald's & Burger King
Nike & Reebok
Sable & Taurus
Spartan & Futura
Time & Newsweek
Goodyear & Goodrich

If graphic designers didn't exist how would we know the difference between...

with layouts that look like the layouts in everybody else's portfolios, portfolios that look like the portfolios of professionals.

Inappropriate design is design that ignores professional standards. It's design that prods people into unlearning the rules and opening their eyes.

But design magazines usually wind up reinforcing our ideas about what's appropriate.

What do we see in a design magazine and what do we see?

What we come to think of as good design.

And we come away with reinforced beliefs about what and who is good. And this is bad.

Designers have to forget how to be "professionals." We have to stop being the lap dogs of big business.

We have to be bad.

We have to forget what we learned in design school about appropriateness. We have to dump all those awkward phrases taught at overpriced seminars on "Getting Your Message Across to the Client." We have to learn to listen to our gut instincts instead of the corporate rhetoric. We have to be brave and we have to be bad. If we're bad, we can be the esthetic conscience of the business world. We can break the cycle of blandness. We

can jam up the assembly line that spits out one dull, lookalike piece of crap after another. We can say, "Why not do something with artistic integrity or ideological courage?" We can say, "Why not do something that forces us to rewrite the definition of 'good design'?" Most of all, bad is about recapturing the idea that a designer is the representative—almost like a missionary—of art, within the world of business. We're not here to give them what's safe and expedient.



We're not here to eradicate the visual face of the design world. We're here to make



here to help clarify everything of interest from the earth. We're here to help them think about

design that's dangerous and unpredictable.

We're here to inject art into commerce.

We're here to be bad.

We see this:



And this:



And this:



From "The Design of the Day" by Tihor Kalman and Karrie Jacobs, published in PRINT magazine. The text is a collection of sentences that were too embarrassing to typeset and reinstating words that Kalman lacked the confidence to pronounce in front of a large audience. recently dubbed "design's bad boy" by Esquire magazine) and Jacobs (who—to the best of her knowledge—has never been dubbed anything by Esquire) revised the text somewhat for PRINT, removing sentences that were too embarrassing to typeset and reinstating words that Kalman lacked the confidence to pronounce in front of a large audience.