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: © Michael Jackson
Or this: © Michael Jackson
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 insubordi-
nate. Bad as in taking the design brief the client hands
us and rewriting it.

"Capital's consistency should be learned in your own hand. Look for a moment at your
hand and you will see five fingers, not different and independent but all very much
dependent upon the one in the hand and to each other. They compose a single, one hand
and it is your hand."

— from an Esprit design brief.

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 adver-
tising 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
corporate identity. 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 some-
how 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 peo-
ple 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 prod-
ucts become more and more alike, a good
package can become a package's
good best if not only point of difference."—ad in the Wall Street

If the only difference between two products is 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 ciga-
rettes. 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, Diet
Caffeine Free Coke and Diet
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, individ-
ualistic, 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.
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, Sesame Design.

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.

Were 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 now.

There are levels upon levels of marketing experts and researchers and people who move numbers around on computer screens. All of them focus on 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 qualified 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. But now when the accusers say 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 small, by doing jobs for clients we abhor. We sell 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 theirkillings or their capital gains.

Sometimes 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 aesthetic 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 market. To the extent that we believe what marketing tells us, to the extent that we buy what we are being sold, the packaging 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.
For example, an investment banker owns a Mercedes because it fulfills his expectations about himself. These expectations have been learned from Mercedes advertisements.

At the same time, inner-city kids are exposed to the fallout of the marketing culture; they are always receiving commercial messages that are actually intended for someone else. People with sweeter demographics, people with money. But they get these messages and they respond to them. They learn from them. Practitioners of street design appropriate images of wealth and power because marketing teaches them that wealth and power are all there is. And the stolen images bring them as close as they’re likely to come to actually having wealth and power.

The banker pays extra to buy the car with the symbol. The car that is a symbol.
The kid doesn’t get a car. The kid just gets a symbol.

Both are buying the same myth. Neither is getting his money’s worth.

When we search for indigenous culture in this country, or in other countries, a funny thing happens. What we’re likely to find is the culture of bigness. Our heritage becomes the heritage of the mall and the highway strip.

Our vernacular is Kentucky Fried Chicken.
Our common experience becomes the common experience of network TV.
Our idea of cultural diversity is cable.

Often, the best design, the most important design, takes place outside the profession, where there is still a true vernacular. A non-corporate, non-designed vernacular.

Vernacular is slang, a language invented rather than taught.

Vernacular design is visual slang. More than that, it’s design that’s so familiar that we don’t really see it. Seeing the vernacular is seeing the invisible. It is looking at something commonplace—a yellow pencil, a metal folding chair—and falling in love.

Vernacular design is so clear and simple that it seems to be from another time. Often it is. Vernacular design happens when a small business hires the local sign painter, print shop, or commercial artist to take care of its design needs. Vernacular design happens when a business takes care of its own design needs. Appreciation of this sort of design shouldn’t be confused with nostalgia because the vernacular isn’t a bygone era or style that can be celebrated or revived.

"The name—Old Town Overshuffles—is presented in such a way as to create confidence, trust, tradition and heritage. We wanted the package to look authentic, even though this is a microwave product, we didn’t want it to have a high tech look."—press release, Gerstman + Mayer.

Rather, it’s a process, a straightforward one that creates work which has an unfiltered, emotional quality. These designs are some person’s, some regular human being’s, ideas of how to communicate—how to say “This is a company that sells shipping supplies,” “This is a store that sells sausages.”

It is the unscientific but clear way to say “This is a beauty salon,” or “This is a bottle of soda.”

The vernacular is design as it design were a regular thing to do, not the sacred mission of an elite professional class. It’s design that hasn’t been ordered and purified by the methods of trained practitioners.

It’s communication without the strategy, the marketing, or the proprietary quantitative research. And that’s what’s good about it.

It’s as important to look at this invisible design as it to look at the design that is documented in magazines and taught in the schools.

You learn as much by looking at the kitchen gadgets hanging from pegs at Woolworth’s as you do by looking at the gadgets under glass in the Museum of Modern Art design collection.

Every curatorial decision, every convention, every rule about what is good design and what is bad design works to narrow your perceptions. You become blind to most of what’s in front of you.

Every rule about what is appropriate ruins what’s possible.

Appropriate design is design that pleases the largest number of people. Appropriate design is normal design. It’s about keeping things more or less the same.

Inappropriate design is a way of confronting taste.

Inappropriate design is a way of making people think about why they like what they like and how they learned to like those things.

It’s a way of making people unlearn what they were taught in design school. Unfortunately, schools teach students to design by imitating what the professionals do rather than developing their own approaches. And the schools turn out legions of graduates who believe that their best bet for success is to have a portfolio filled
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 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 help clients everything interest from the earth. We’re here to make design that’s dangerous and unpredictable.

We’re here to inject art into commerce.

We’re here to be bad.