every piece of graphic design exhibited the same igh 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

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.

"Esprits consistency should be likened to your own hand. Look for a moment at you hand and you will see five fingers, all different and independent but still very belonging to the rest of the hand and to each other. They compose, in short, one 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

We're talking bad.

To be good-or rather, baddesigners 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 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 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

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, 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, 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.



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.

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?

Coke & Pepsi

Ford & Elite

Hertz & Avis

Hunt's & Heinz

in & Eddie Bauer

Lee & Levi's

Nike & Reebok

Sable & Taurus

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 yesmen 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 " in g G' 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 selfimages 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 the culture and the social tabric.

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, nondesigned 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 OvenStuffs—is presented in such a way as to create confidence, trust, tradition and beritage. 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 + Meyers.



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, idea 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 if design were a reqular 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 is 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 narrows 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.

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.

any questions.

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 mission ary—of art, within the world of business. We're not here to give them what's safe and expedient.

We're not ents erad of visual face of the to make

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

design that's dangerous and unpredictable. We're here to inject art into commerce.

We're here to be bad.



eckscher

