

Views from the Edge: An Introduction to Culture Jamming and Street Art

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As awareness of how the media environment we occupy affects and directs our inner life grows, some resist. The skillfully reworked billboard . . . directs the public viewer to a consideration of the original corporate strategy. The studio for the cultural jammer is the world at large.

(Culture jammers) question the taken-for-granted assumption that consuming is natural and good and aim to disrupt the naturalization of consumer culture; they also seek to create systems of production and consumption that are more humane and less dominated by global corporate hypercapitalism.

Source: Culture Jamming, Wikipedia

If there's one issue I feel strongly about it's the deep penetration of corporatism into our lives and cultures. That is, the seemingly irresistible takeover of media, public space and various institutions. I see it as a huge mistake – driven by the currently powerful – for which we will all pay an incalculable price. The takeover has become more pervasive and counter-productive with every passing year and it needs to be resisted. The world we are facing does not need the currently affluent (East and West) to continue being driven to ever-higher and more damaging levels of consumption. It follows that we don't need the advertising industry – at least not in its current form. Nor do we need the psychology of competitive individualism and the cultural desert it creates. One mode of resistance to this relentless personal and social colonisation is culture jamming which, at certain times and places, blends into street art. What both have in common is the questioning of, and opposition to, the continuing dominance of corporatism.

Like many others I deplore the 'uglification' of public space by relentless tagging and the defacing of both public and private property by those who lack any respect for either. Not all culture jamming is useful and not all street art is worth looking at. But when I see huge billboards in city streets with their crass commercial messages thrust in the faces of all passers-by I get a certain pleasure and sense of common justice when I notice that someone has subverted a message in a witty or pointed way. In one example from Melbourne all it took to completely undermine a carefully constructed fashion image was for someone to have altered the eyes on these otherwise perfected models, thereby making them appear ridiculous.

Culture jamming often has a specific purpose and target in mind. Street art, on the other hand, has flourished anarchically over the last few decades and led to a whole series of artistic and cultural innovations. It is not about one thing but about many including identity, social standing, protest, experimentation and fun. The list of motivations is probably endless. The essence of street art, however, is that it does not seek permission. Rather, it asserts the right of its creators and to be seen and heard. In so doing, it often brings a human touch to some otherwise

barren and unsightly places. Indeed, it often makes use of spaces that are depressing or degraded and, by inserting any one of a wide variety of images, comments and signs, somehow transforms or transfigures them into something quite different.

I first encountered street art through a youth worker in Melbourne whom I met in the late 1980s. Through him I learned about some of the graffiti subcultures that were at that time spreading through the city and leaving a range of works of varying quality. For a while I was a member of a 'Graffiti Working Party' convened by the then Mayor of Hawthorn. The focus of that group was single-mindedly on 'preventing offenders from offending.' Through these connections I became more familiar with some of the various artists and groups in the city. Since then I've followed the development of street art there and in many other place I've visited.

Here's the text of an interpretive panel from a street art exhibition held at the University of Queensland Gallery in 2011. It is followed by a personal statement from a local artist.

Ad Busting and Street Art

In the battle to wrestle public space from commercial and government interests, street artists strive to saturate the streets with anti-commercial imagery in as many places and as frequently as possible. It is a combative tactic that often necessitates the appropriation, recycling and reclaiming of material at hand. Commercial billboards and advertising posters have become prime targets for street artists who want to creatively express their objection to the corporate control of public space and the evils of a society based on rampant consumerism. Billboard jamming and adbusting are just some of the many sophisticated intervention techniques that artists have incorporated into their street practice.

My street art is fuelled by a disgust of the flood of designed and formulated commerce whose wasteful indulgence is a form of massively funded, distracting social brainwash. My intention is to reevaluate, illuminate and deflate some non-vital corporate illusions. I want to provide a conceptual jolt, a conscious awakening from within the context of a constantly mediated assault upon our environment. To encourage people to feel they can think for themselves and for the work to offer this pause for thought. To have an active relationship with culture beyond the consumer drip feed; to make and shake and share, not just take.

Marcsta (Brisbane Street Artist)

From: *Space Invaders*, Street Art Exhibition, University of Queensland Gallery, April, 2011.

Wikipedia sources on culture jamming and street art include:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Culture_jamming

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Street_art

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Graffiti>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stencil_graffiti

I'll revise and add to this short introduction over time. Meanwhile please enjoy some of the works posted here.