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I like the Vernacular...maybe
A discussion of the vernacular in contemporary graphic design.

by Anne O'Hara
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Introduction

aims:

I wish to study use by graphic designers of vernacular visual languages in contemporary work, looking at a broad and varying range of examples of graphic design which makes use of a vernacular language. Firstly, however, I shall explore the meaning of the term and endeavour to define it in terms of graphic design. I will also examine its origins in graphic design, identifying its antecedents and their influence on the work of contemporary designers.

I wish to explore not only the different types of vernacular languages, but also the attitudes of designers towards the vernacular they are using, their reasons for appropriating a certain image, style or typeface - nostalgia, irony, street credibility, etc. Many designers, by rejecting a slick professional image, are challenging ideas of good design, broadening the field of source material from which to work.

I also want to present differing opinions and attitudes regarding the vernacular, presenting, in a sense, a debate which will examine whether or not use of the vernacular is valid as good and original design. Some see it as an indication that graphic

design is in crisis. It appears to some that designers, out of sheer lack of creativity, must resort to working from sources deemed by many as being outside the parameters of "good" design, outside the realm of stark, high-minded design as it is taught. I want to question such criticism and identify positive aspects of designers' work which uses the vernacular.

methodology:

It was necessary to categorise the different vernacular languages used, therefore I divided my research and written analysis into separate chapters.

My research required the gathering of information from various sources; magazine articles, essays, and by looking at examples of certain designers work, as well as design in everyday life such as posters, packaging, club flyers, etc. The subject has not been extensively written about - there are articles, chapters in books, brief mentionings but I found through my research that no one had had tackled the subject to any lengthy extent. There appears to be no definitive body of work on the subject. I felt that it was necessary to piece together what has been written about the subject , and then try to present examples, offer definitions and compile an overview of this broad ranging topic. My thesis will encompass the opinions and examples given in design periodicals and publications, an analysis of the term itself, an exploration of its roots in graphic design, and finally a weighing up of positive and negative aspects and views on the subject.

chapter one: Defining the Vernacular

(its meaning within design, and identifying its antecedents).

Every discourse has its "other". The vernacular can be seen as the "other" when discussing conventional modern graphic design as it is taught. In his essay "I like the Vernacular......NOT" Jeffery Keedy points out: "When you are having trouble defining something, it is often easier to describe what it is NOT, and the vernacular is what we (professional designers) are NOT." (Keedy, 1993, p.7)

The term vernacular relates to that which is native, local, ordinary, simple. It is most often used to describe speech, vernacular being the commonly spoken language or dialect of a particular people or place. It denotes that which is "not of learned formation." (Collins Dict.) On looking up the term in a thesaurus, interesting words were given which prove to be key terms in understanding the vernacular within the context of graphic design: regional, popular, informal, colloquial, conversational, vulgar, familiar. These perhaps are the qualities which attract the designer to the vernacular (representing all that design should not be). Vernacular is a term which is often used in architecture. It concerns ordinary buildings, often purely functional in design rather

than of high aesthetic value - cottages, barns, factories, gas towers etc. rather than cathedrals, government buildings, etc. The term " vernacular"in relation to graphic design describes such ephemera as bus tickets, food packaging, road signs, invitations, etc. It concerns everyday, throwaway, functional paraphernalia (including that of the past). However, these items possess a particular aesthetic quality. They are part of a certain visual language, a language of the ordinary. In comparison to the visual language of painting, for example, they can be seen as part of a lower visual language, both for their low value and for their impermanence as merely functional pieces.

With these definitions in mind, it can be understood that the use of the vernacular in graphic design would entail a highly tutored designer incorporated low visual forms/languages into high design. However, the term "vernacular" within graphic design has come to signify any of the varying visual languages. People have become more aware of and in contact with various cultures and subcultures, and there is a merging of ideas and influences. There is an overlapping of cultures in all areas of life - from the food people eat and the clothes they wear to their spiritual beliefs . The world has become more of a cultural 'melting pot'. "The languages of corporate cultures, mass cultures, subcultures and design cultures have become increasingly fluid, with members of each world poaching upon the territory of others."(Lupton, 1993,p.113)

At first I was simply concerned with looking at how highly tutored graphic designers were incorporated the "vernacular" into their work - appropriating something from a 'lower' source, utilising an "other". However, it is not as simple as this - isn't graphic

design *itself* merely the production of the vernacular? Graphic designers (although ideally they would be recognised as artists) are not painters or sculptors creating valuable precious works, which will last for years. Graphic design is concerned with messages - pieces that have their function and then are obsolete. They are to be read, but they have a shelf-life, so to speak. So when a designer makes use of the vernacular, he is more often than not borrowing/appropriating from his own field and discipline.

In her article on the use of the vernacular by graphic designers, Ellen Lupton states how the term "vernacular" is relative: "It places a standard language against a lesser dialect, a dominant culture against a sub culture."(Lupton, 1992, p.73)
So the term can be used in a broader sense, to describe any cross cultural borrowing (e.g. street subcultures borrowing from the commercial mainstream, western design influenced by the east.) Designers take influence from such sources as cinema, religion, foreign cultures, etc. For the most part though, they quote movie *posters*, religious *illustration*, record *sleeves*; graphic designers quoting existing graphics. What is interesting is that deep down, although it seems that designers are combining many cultures and influences, they are still very much working from within the (broad) field of graphics. Within graphic design the term vernacular has come to mean much more than simply the low visuals of functional design. Primarily though, the vernacular can be seen as two categories: the imagery and lettering of the untutored hand, the untrained eye, and the functional graphics by designers themselves. In the following chapters I will examine the various subcategories within this topic, and not only look at the source from which the designer takes influence, but also the reason for and the attitude
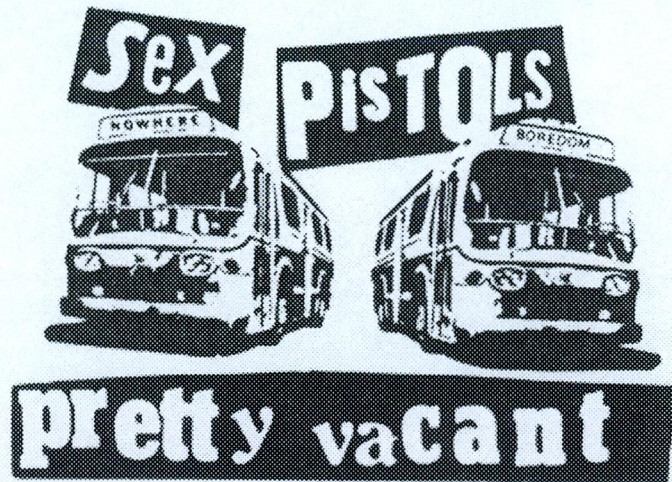
towards this appropriation - irony, nostalgia, street credibility etc.

Some look with disdain on the vernacular. Many designers live by the Modernist belief that a distance must exist between design and everyday life. It is important to look at Modernism, as its ideals and aspirations (which were seen as rules in design) are now being challenged by designers who use the vernacular and reject modernism's "high minded reformism."(Lupton,1996,p.113) Ellen Lupton describes the Modernist ideal of the designer as critic:

> "a figure who stands aside from the mainstream and presents
> alternative visions....someone who aspires to go beyond what
> people already want and to teach them to want something
> better."(Lupton,1992,p.74)

The ideal was that the designer was an authoritative voice who reformed the masses (and did not borrow from or copy the masses.) This view was attacked by the Pop movement who embraced mass production, glorified mass culture and its imagery, just as designers are doing presently. With Pop Art it became widely accepted in the art world to use imagery directly from popular culture. It broke down classic modernist notions of what was appropriate subject matter and style (Andy Warhol's Campbell's soup cans, Lichstenstein's comic strips). The vernacular in graphic design has its roots in the Pop movement and it is interesting to see designers who are currently breaking down conventional notions of "good" or successful graphic design by their use of alternative visual languages. Lupton points out that those involved with the Push Pin Studio, an American group of designers, "treated modernism itself as a kind of vernacular, one dialect among many rather than a standard grammar"
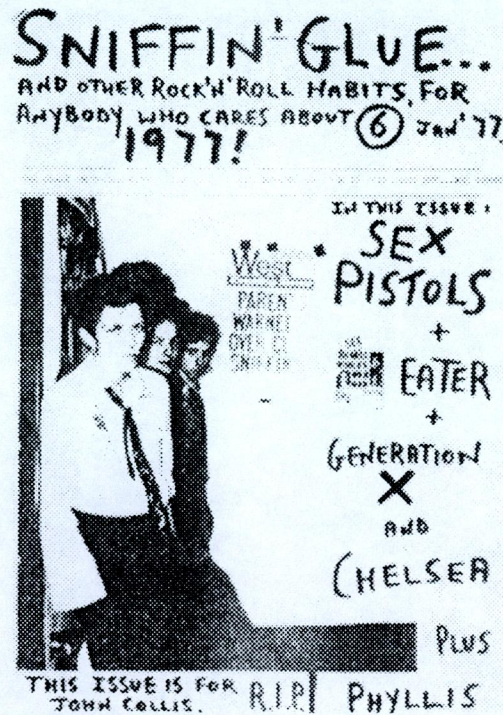
fig. 1

(Lupton,1997,p.74), as it once was considered to be.

Punk and its savage graphic language can also be seen as an antecedent of the vernacular in graphic design. Again, it is seen as a rebellion against Modernist aesthetics: "an aggressive rejection of rational typography, testing the limits imposed by Modernist formation".(Heller,1993,p.54) The whole attitude and concept behind Punk was the notion of Do-It-Yourself music, an anarchic rejection of the mainstream, the idea of "participation and interaction" (McDermott,1987, p.24). This idea was carried through to Punk graphics as well as the music, "where new sounds and new forms made it an actual advantage to be inexperienced and skill-less."(McDermott, 1987,p.25) Such qualities are among those which attract designers to the vernacular - the naive/vulgar aesthetic quality of the untutored, 'skill-less.' However, an important factor to note is that the notorious Punk graphics such as those by art director Jamie Reid for the Sex Pistols (fig. 1) were contrived to *appear* unskilled and rough. It is an interesting point to consider when looking at current designers' work which utilise unskilled styles, untutored or 'bad' typography etc. - behind this is the voice or hand of the educated highly trained designer.

Punk graphics were primarily to be seen on record sleeves and in cheap Punk fanzines (e.g. Mark Perry's "Sniffin' Glue."fig 2)Such fanzines can be seen as the predecessors of many current magazines (i-D and the Face, for example) who aim to present a voice from the street, manifestos of style and attitude. Punk fanzines utilised a savage raw vernacular language using bad typing, headings scrawled in thick felt pen, cut up

fig. 2

lettering similar to ransom notes, torn paper, found images, angled photographs -

techniques which were soon adopted by more upmarket and mainstream magazines.

The Punk movement had a major influence on such respected graphic designers as Art

Chantry. Chantry points out:

> "It is worth noting that today's more influential young designers were
> students of the Punk era and as their influence on the design
> scene prevails, the driving force which shaped punk, while heavily
> watered down, will increasingly make their mark."(Chantry, 1989, p.27)

* * * * *

It is impossible to discuss the use of the vernacular in graphic design in a general

fashion; it has become such a wide subject and a term whose meaning is many-fold and

varying. Therefore in the following chapters I have endeavoured to categorise the

various ways that designers use the vernacular, looking in detail at specific examples of

their work.

chapter two: A View from the Street

"Appropriations like these are made not from above mass culture but from within it. A view from the street rather than from the laboratory." (Lupton, 1992, p.77)

Many visual languages are born out of street culture and commercial art which have inevitably become part of the vernacular, and which are fed upon by the hungry graphic designer. Never have designers had such an appetite for so many influences, been open to such varying imagery.

In her article "High and Low (a strange case of us and them),"2 Ellen Lupton addresses the subject of designers and their attitude towards the vernacular from which they quote. There is often a sense of hierarchy, with the sophisticated designer selecting, from a common visual language, something to be incorporated into his high design.

> "Many contemporary uses of so-called 'vernacular' styles assume a distance between the civilised designer and the raw material to be transformed, other work acknowledges the position of the designer as someone who is both inside and outside of culture: the designer as spectator of his or her own world rather than a connoisseur of a nostal gic past, an exotic "other," or a visual underclass." (Lupton, 1997, p.92)

So the designer is not always positioned above and beyond mass culture and

subcultures. More than ever, the designer is influenced by the culture in which he finds himself. It is not surprising that his work should reflect the variety of cross cultural visual sensations to which he is exposed. Rather than present a visual world completely removed from street culture and popular life, many contemporary designers have come to revel in the nitty-gritty, to appreciate throwaway mass culture that surrounds them, in all its "vulgar glory and kitsch tastelessness," (Livingstone, 1993, p.39) 3 to see beauty or interest in ugly visual forms.

In their book Type Play4 Steven Heller and Gail Anderson use the phrase "street smart" in reference to designers who adopt the vernacular:

> "In the 1980s the term vernacular, referring to a common language, was adopted by graphic designers who, in rejecting the slick profes sionalism of commercial Modernism borrowed, reappropriated and celebrated the 'dirty' design typical of the anonymous commercial artist. Such approaches were dubbed non-design by Modernist profes sionals, but with the advent of the post-modern professional such art lessness has become a virtue, and the basis for new, purposefully naif design. In addition to commercial street art, there is also a subcultural street art that is at odds with it. Graffiti is the principal street expres sion... the ultimate vernacular." (Heller/Anderson, 1997, p.53)

Graphic designers take on the vernacular of the street as an element in their work for various reasons and with varying approaches. The graphics of the Punk era, which I looked at in chapter 2, rose from the taste for the improvised, unconventional, anarchic. The influence is taken from the street: the people, their music, clothing and attitudes. Their rebelliousness and anti-establishment views are reflected in Punk graphics' raw, aggressive and seemingly unskilled visuals. The designer presents the

audience with a mood and attitude familiar to that of their own subculture. However, streetwise design is usually merely contrived to appear to have been created within the subculture of its target audience.

fig. 3

A good example of design presenting a voice from the street is Terry Jones magazine i-D , which began life as a cheaply produced fanzine. "Jones wanted i-D to be structured as an outlet for a lot of different viewpoints from the street." (McDermott, 1987, p.25) This was a magazine which would give a voice to street culture, containing the music, fashion and lifestyle of youth subcultures. It was a manifesto, so to speak, of style and culture. However, it was not simply the content that was important; the presentation and design elements were crucial to i-D.
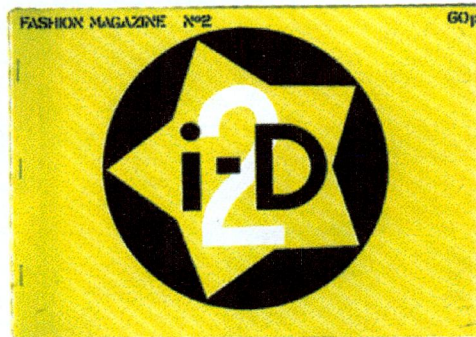
> "Jones felt that the way to reflect the creativity he admired in street
> style was through visual effects rather than text. In order to achieve the
> immediacy that he wanted he numbered issues, used typewriter face
> print and tickertape headlines...simple design techniques such as block
> colouring and texture. The carefully contrived appeal was of hand-
> made spontaneous design." (McDermott, 1987, p.27)

This hand-made, rough presentation had a certain aesthetic appeal, fresh and lively, in tune with the lifestyle, clothing and music of youth subcultures (punk and later, skateboarding, for example).

Jones states: "All graphic solutions are influenced by the mass of ephemera in
life and society. Images are constantly thrown around the brain day and
night and the imagination must be fed with stimulation from music, film,
architecture and discussion." (Jones, 1997, p.126)

Jones allows his designs to be greatly influenced by what surrounds him in everyday life. Like the Punk graphics of Jamie Reid and others, i-D used various visual devices
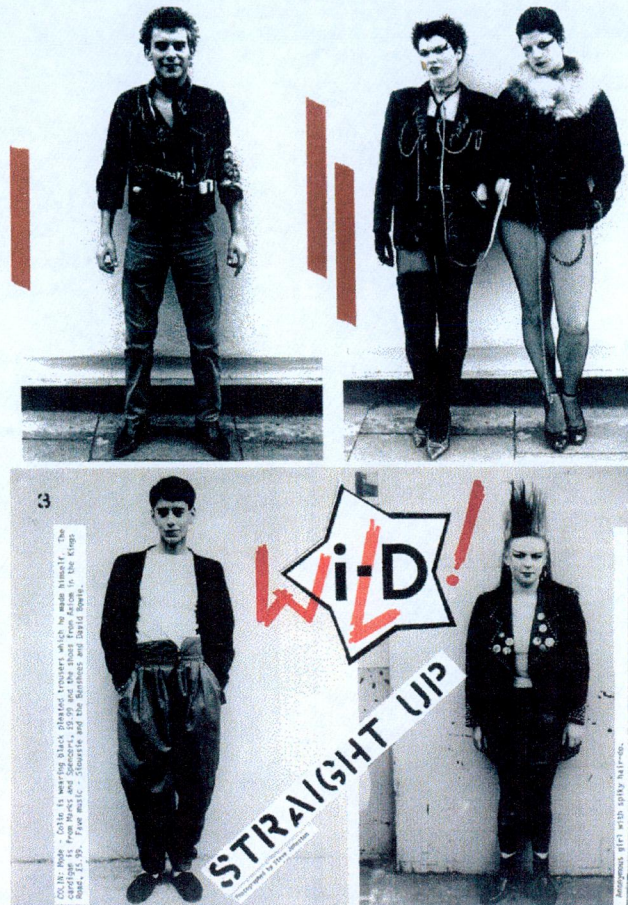
fig. 4

which added to its air of the unconventional, raw, hand-made. i-D saw the use of brash, adventurous visual effects - handwritten headings, blown up typewriter text, letraset and cut out ephemera. The decorative possibilities of mechanical devices were exploited, for example the inclusion of colour bars and registration marks. i-D subverted the idea of traditional glossy fashion photography by using grainy shots from video and polaroids. It displayed a taste for the vernacular language of the accidental and the unskilled. Many of the above devices were copied by anyone wanting to show their street credibility. More mainstream magazines began to take on the raw energetic style, which had begun with Jones "capitalising on the chance element of technical error." (McDermott, 1987, p.27) Such experimental, labour intensive methods had been necessary in the early days of i-D, but these cheap techniques were essential to the look of the magazine, regardless of the budget or the technological limitations. i-D was originally produced in the days before computer graphics. Jones used silkscreen printing techniques producing block colouring. Artwork was cut by hand and the earlier issues were A4 sheets stapled together (fig.3). Jones used the combined vernacular languages of the accidental, the seemingly untutored and the visual language of street style and youth culture.

A regular feature in i-D is the profile of ordinary individuals from the street. Young and urban, they pose in their own clothes, photographed 'in situ' on the street, as they are. We are given details about their clothes. It could not be more real more directly from youth culture. Their clothes could even be said to be vernacular: they are of the people, ordinary people, part of their own culture or street subculture. Fig.4 and 5 we

fig. 5

can see such spreads from i-D . In fig.4 the photos are more like casual snapshots than studio or professional set up photographs. It has been made to look like the photos have been roughly taped down with typewriter text cut out and pasted at right angle to the images. This is a far cry from the sophisticated visual language of the refined glossy fashion magazine. This is very much directed at youth culture, presented as if *from* youth culture itself. It is almost as if the kids in the photographs have put the the magazine together in their own way. Particularly interesting in fig.5, is the inclusion of an extract from a D.H.Lawrence novel, alongside a photograph of a person in a coat with the handwritten names "Siouxsie and the Banshees," "John Lydon," and "D.H.Lawrence." There are quotes from the individual. We are presented with the real voice of youth culture, its ideas and tastes. There is stencilled lettering, lending to the look of the hand done. The i-D logo has been altered to read *"wild"* with the extra letters added in thick felt pen. It calls to mind graffiti done on public signs, where the meaning is changed by the graffiti.

If we look at a more recent issue of i-D fig.6 we see this feature continued, and we are presented again with a set of photographs of young people, giving a profile of street style as it is today. However, it is presented in a cleaner layout, with conventional type. Even though the overall look of the magazine today is more clean-cut and sophisticated (no longer a stapled together handmade production) the mood of the vernacular, the voice of the street and youth culture is ever present. i-D remains a manifesto of style and attitude of street and youth culture, an example of the vernacular of the street incorporated into graphic design.

fig. 6

fig. 7

Another example of Jones' work displaying the influence of mass culture is his design for the article on Courtney Love fig.7 Jones takes the vernacular of the tabloid newspaper, a familiar image, using it as a visual device, conveying a mood of scandal, or of the overpublicised life of the star.

Like Jones, Neville Brody's designs for the Face, another magazine for youth and street culture, take influence from the vernacular. Brody did not see design as being separate from ordinary life: "The urban images which affect our daily experience cross over onto the pages of the Face." (McDermott, 1987, p.27) The Face also utilises the unconventional and has a mood of the raw and abrasive. Brody used images from everyday life, mixed serif and sans serif typefaces, turned headlines upside down, etc. There is always, it seems, an interest in producing magazines which (unlike high fashion 'glossies') portray an image of the present, the street and its changing fashions and attitudes. Designers are constantly influenced by mass culture, popular life and street cultures, and these vernacular elements will remain a part of their designs.

chapter three: Nostalgia

"Like playing with old toys encrusted with comparative innocence, toying with old types designed for comparatively more naive purposes will always have appeal."

Much of the graphic design today that uses the vernacular utilises or takes influence from the past. At different times, waves of nostalgia for for certain eras sweep popular culture, creating revivals in fashion, music and influencing cinema, and literature and interior design. Naturally, graphic design also displays a taste for days past, and an appreciation for the often simpler, sometimes crude design and commercial art of previous decades. Often this is done in a quite tongue-in-cheek manner, with the sophisticated designer highly aware of the dated or simplistic nature of the source material. Often this appropriation of the past is seen as a "condescending act of elitism," (Keedy, 1993, p.8) making obvious the distance in status between the designer and the naive work from which he quotes. People have varying attitudes to different eras - for example some might look upon '70s or '80s imagery / style with distaste or humour and might feel nostalgically drawn to all things from the 1950s.

fig. 8

Nostalgia has a legitimate place in contemporary design (we cannot always ignore our past). Use of art, design or paraphernalia from the past can create a certain mood, suggest a theme or attitude. They can also appeal, as existing imagery will either be recognised or have certain associations. It can unite people in nostalgia for a certain period in time. Unlike completely new and previously unseen styles or imagery, the reader will automatically have certain feelings towards or associations with old styles and pictures. Often the pleasant illustrations of old advertisements receive a warm reaction: they can appear as less cold and more personal than stark modern design. Some might see nostalgia in design as a short cut, a cheat: a designer now has all the graphics and other paraphernalia of the past as stock from which to create instant designs. For example, depending on the imagery, he can instantly create an air of glamour or simplicity. It might seem that with existing imagery at his disposal, the designer does not necessarily need to really design, invent. However, this is not really the case; it is the manner in which the appropriation is made that determines it as being simply a lazy, uninventive plagiarism or a clever use of existing imagery or adaptation of the past in an appropriate context.

Some designers use the vernacular as a source of parody. Many have used images from 1950s commercial art, parodying the values of the American dream and the capitalist ideal, products promising happiness. Such advertisements portrayed smiling housewives with new washing machines or refrigerators, and dashing family men with shiny automobiles, existing blissfully in an apple-pie consumerist suburbia. Now people have seen through this idealism and optimism. They have the ability and education to read
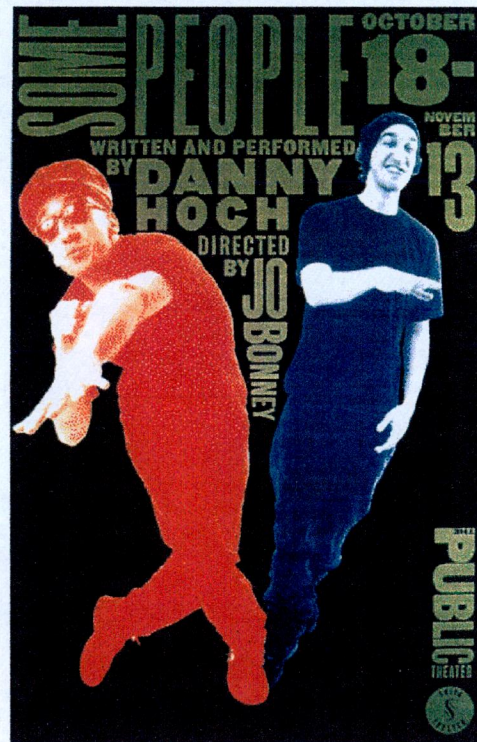
these advertisements for what they are and are more aware of media tactics. Using such imagery in contemporary contexts creates humour and satire.

fig. 9

In their book <u>Type Play</u>, Steven Heller and Gail Anderson describe how advertising agencies play on peoples' sense of nostalgia, and how nostalgia has become "a common marketing tool for business...In graphic design and typography, the past has become a viable and ubiquitous plaything."2 They do acknowledge however, that some designers who use the past, creatively interpret it to contemporary design:

> "Others use the past as a springboard to new discoveries. In the 1960s Push Pin Studios reprised Art Moderne (aka Art Deco) as "The Roxy Style," a hybrid of 1920s/1930s decoration and sixties colour. In the 1980s Paula Scher recalled 1920s Russian constructivism as an eclectic way of reintroducing viable design approaches considered passé or forgotten." (Heller, 1997, p.91)

Paula Scher was part of "Retro" design, where the vernacular of old design was appropriated for new graphics. Designers began to gain an understanding and appreciation of their own history, and as the name suggests, the movement was based on historical revival. Designers involved had an eclectic interest particularly in Modernist European design from the first half of the century. It began with such designers as Paula Scher, Louise Fili and Carin Goldberg. They rediscovered earlier twentieth century graphics, particularly modernist and decorative typefaces. Their work displayed "a flagrant disregard for the rules of proper typography and a fascination with kinky and mannered typefaces of the 1920s and 1930s."3

Their attitude towards the regulations of proper design allowed them to experiment, mixing fonts and using extreme letterspacing. A good example of Scher's work are the

promotional posters and flyers for the New York Public Theater (fig. 8,9). In 1994 it transformed its identity with the help of Scher at Pentagram. Sans serif type runs in various directions, mixing bold type with photographic images, echoing the early use of photography in posters in Russian graphic design. These successful posters portray spontaneity and dynamism, and although creating a mood of times past, seem crisp and modern.

In his designs for the Seattle music industry, Art Chantry often quotes the past, creating albums covers which feature food packaging and old adverts. They have immediate aesthetic appeal for their bright colour and quirky , sometimes dated, look. Part of the appeal is also the use of imagery in an alternative context to that intended or expected. One example is the album cover "Smells Like Smoked Sausages," (fig. 10) on which Chantry uses an image of tinned food, the label of which harks back to packaging of the past, and features an illustration of a smiling all-American boy. The attitude towards the appropriation is pure tongue-in-cheek. Other CD packaging by Chantry (fig.11) feature imagery from small black and white advertisements: gritty and cheap in appearance, these old ads feature such everyday items as cuts of meat and household appliances. They display a taste for a vernacular which although crude and purely functional in its original state, has a quality that seems fitting in a contemporary setting. It can be appreciated for its ordinary or tacky quality. (It brings to mind Warhol's Campbell's soup tins.) In a CD package design for "Destroy All Astromen," (fig. 12) Chantry employs another element of nostalgia - the vernacular that is science fiction illustration. He uses images of robots, similar to those in B-movies or book

fig. 10

fig. 11

covers of the 1950s. The CD cover is reminiscent of a movie poster or book cover of a science fiction adventure.

Nostalgia remains a strong element in many designers' work. In a time when it seems that everything has been done, that nothing new can be created anymore, the past is a trusted source, a starting point for many designers. Some might argue it reflects a lack of direction in the design profession. It may simply be, however, merely a response to peoples' taste for the past or an appreciation on the designers' part of his heritage as an image maker.
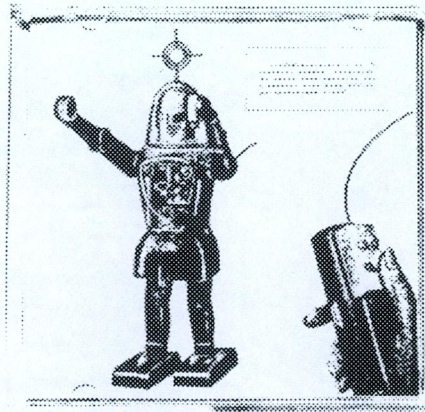
fig. 12

chapter four: The Aesthetic of Mixing

"There is no single culture... but rather a vast web of overlapping mass cultures and subcultures." (Lupton, 1996, p.95)

The taste for mixing images or placing images in alternative contexts than originally intended is an aspect of postmodernism. Elements from existing or familiar sources are transplanted into new contexts (I recently saw a refrigerator, stocked with food as a window display in a fashionable clothing store - in youth culture particularly there is a trend for the use of imagery from the vernacular, from science to the supermarket). In postmodernism, Tony Godfrey points out, "it is the reader's experience that matters, not the writer's "(Godfrey, 1998, p.143). The designer who uses the vernacular references something familiar or pre-existing, towards which the reader will already have attitudes and associations. It relates closely to the world of contemporary music, where existing tracks are remixed, sounds, melodies and tracks are sampled and there is a crossover of different musical genres. It makes sense then that the distinctive graphics that promote raves and clubs (as well as record/CD covers themselves) adopt the aesthetic of mixing also.

Designers manipulate existing images and typefaces, combining material from
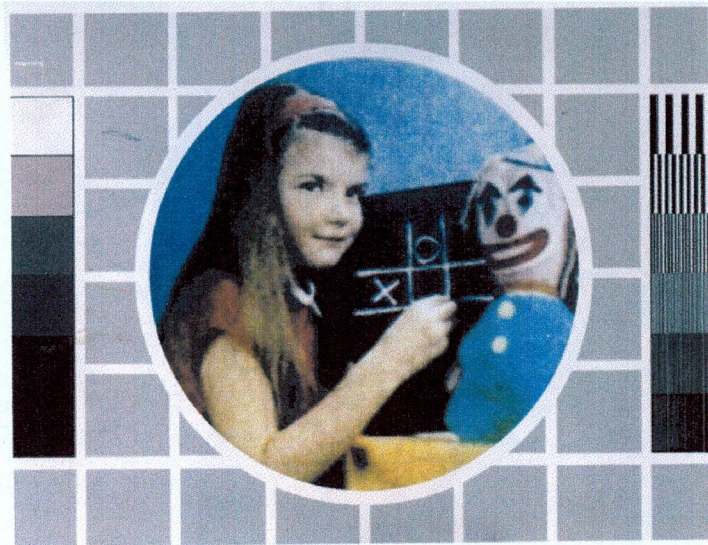
fig. 13
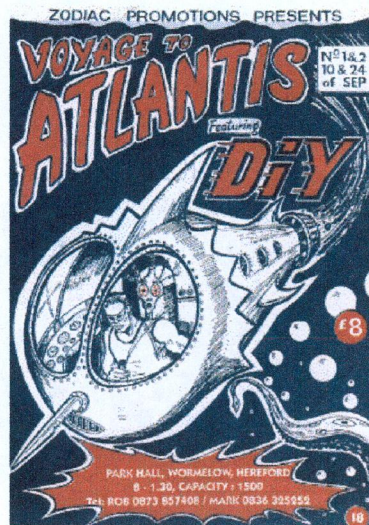
fig. 14

fig. 15

advertisements, television, comic books, commercial packaging and other sources. An example of the familiar used in club flyer design is Richie Aspinall's design for "Heaven" which features the old BBC testcard (fig. 13). Many would receive this flyer with delight as they will have fond associations of childhood television viewing. It has a kitsch charm: it appeals because it is out-of-date and no longer fit for use as a testcard. Club culture borrows imagery, just as it borrows music from various sources. Designers of club flyers quote such sources as science fiction (fig. 14) and television (fig. 15).

The relation between dance music and its graphics is that both borrow from existing source material. The nature of both the music and the visuals is of mixing, combinations, hybrids. Prerecorded music is mixed to create new sounds, and existing visuals reused to create new graphics.

Designers of rave flyers often parody the brand identities of well known consumer goods:

> "A common strategy among urban subcultures is to remake national trademarks into emblems for alternative ideas......By rewriting the hieroglyphic speech of everyday products, these subcultural groups are making a new language of the ordinary that borrows from the dominant corporate monologue." (Lupton, 1992, p.77)

This is evident in such subcultures as rave and skateboarding. Tony Zajkowski converted a series of popular brand names into logos for his band *Lotion*.(fig. 16) In his essay on the cross-cultural borrowing by skateboarding subcultures, Mike Mills

fig. 16
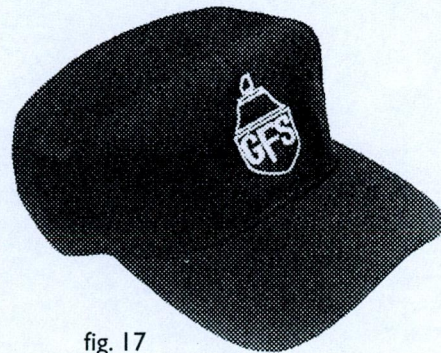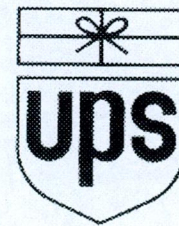
demonstrates how high graphics become the vernacular from which street cultures can take influence from or parody. One example Mills uses is the clothing company *GFS Not From Concentrate* (founded by graffiti artists Gerb, Futura and Stash) whose logo (fig.17) plays on the famous UPS logo designed by Paul Rand in 1961 (fig 18). Mills points out that "the authority of the UPS logo is humourously undermined." It is with this attitude that much of these designs are made - an undermining of established corporate names, the visual language of capital. Like club flyers, in other subcultural graphics, the language of corporate culture is altered, its meaning changed, threatened or parodied.

Another interesting point which Godfrey makes in relation to the postmodern, and can be applied to postmodern design is that "the act of reading becomes not passive, but active." (Godfrey, 1998, p.148) As I mentioned, designers intentionally use imagery with which readers will have associations. Such designs depend on the common experience of the readers.

fig. 17

fig. 18
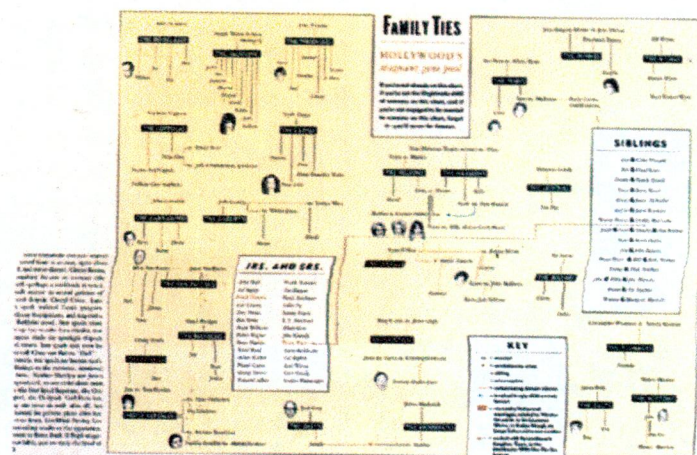
fig. 19

chapter five: Functional and Information Graphics

Often designers use the vernacular for its 'low' undesigned quality. However, there are many other vernacular languages, one being the language of information graphics, often very stylised, clean cut and appropriate to particular contexts. Information graphics can be found in newspapers, scientific charts, diagrams, textbooks. Use of such elements is evident in Spy magazine. In which there is a refreshing use of vernacular formats, layouts and devices, often lending a mock authoritative tone to a piece, imbuing a humourous piece perhaps with more seriousness than it deserves. (fig.19)

Spy used the genre of the magazine itself as an object of parody. Kurt Anderson, the magazine's founding editor, had

> "mastered information graphics at TIME magazine which in the 1970s
> had pioneered the use of graphs and charts to make serious informa
> tion understandable.....in contrast, Spy developed an intentionally
> arcane look for its off-colour information yielding graphics that ignored
> the conventional wisdom on legibility." (Lupton, 1996, p.130)

Alexander Isley, art director at Spy perfected its distinctive use of tables, diagrams and charts, "creating a rich and witty editorial form widely imitated in other publications."
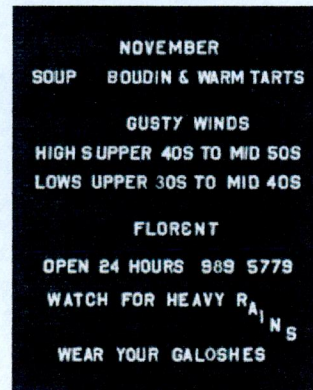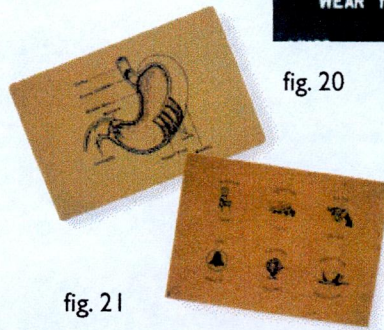
Designers also make use of the vernacular of other functional graphics; often throwaway paraphernalia: tickets, invitations, as well as the pictorial symbols and other printed forms of small ads, phone book ads, instruction manuals, catalogues, road signs, etc. One design studio which very much took influence and inspiration from such vernacular elements is M&Co, who worked in New York between 1979 and 1993, (fig.20-24)

"Under the direction of Tibor Kalman, M&Co. embraced the ready-made aesthetic of dictionaries, instruction manuals and generic highway signs." (Lupton, 1996, p.43) Kalman saw the vernacular as including unpretentious, real objects from daily life, often produced outside of the design profession and were "examples of direct communication that could be appropriated for more sophisticated uses and injected into the context of contemporary design with a sense of irony." (Lupton, 1996, p.43) I think they not only used such elements with irony, but also for their real and distinctively undesigned appearance. M&Co. turned the matter-of-fact, mostly unappreciated vernacular of commercial printing into clever, word-based designs. Lupton describes the appeal of M&Co.'s vernacular designs:

> "M&Co. converted the everyday dialect of quick-print wedding typogra phy and felt-board lobby signage into urban chic." (Lupton, 1996, p.108)

Icons such as phone book symbols and tiny photographs of generic objects become typographic elements, creating a unique and recognisable style at M&Co. It reflects an appreciation of the ordinary, a taste for visuals outside the perimeters of high design. Members of M&Co. went on to found Drenttel Doyle Partners in 1985. Stretching the conventions of design, they introduced elements from printing into their

NOVEMBER
SOUP   BOUDIN & WARM TARTS

GUSTY WINDS
HIGH SUPPER 40S TO MID 50S
LOWS UPPER 30S TO MID 40S

FLORENT

OPEN 24 HOURS 989 5779

WATCH FOR HEAVY RAINS

WEAR YOUR GALOSHES

fig. 20

fig. 21

fig. 22
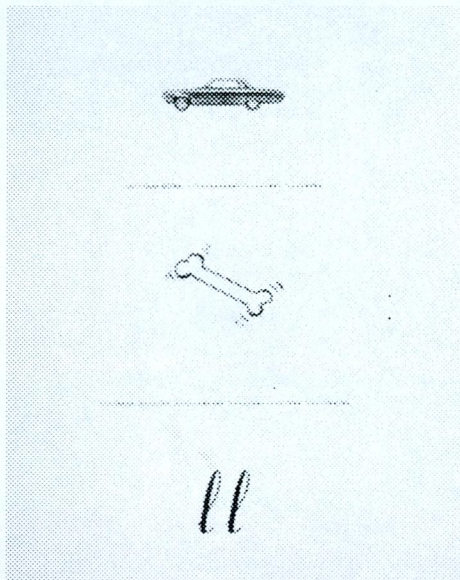
fig. 23
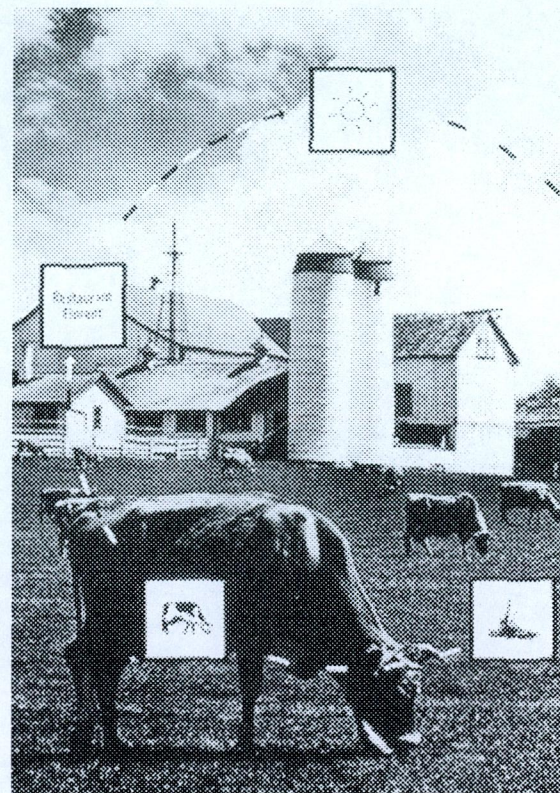
fig. 24
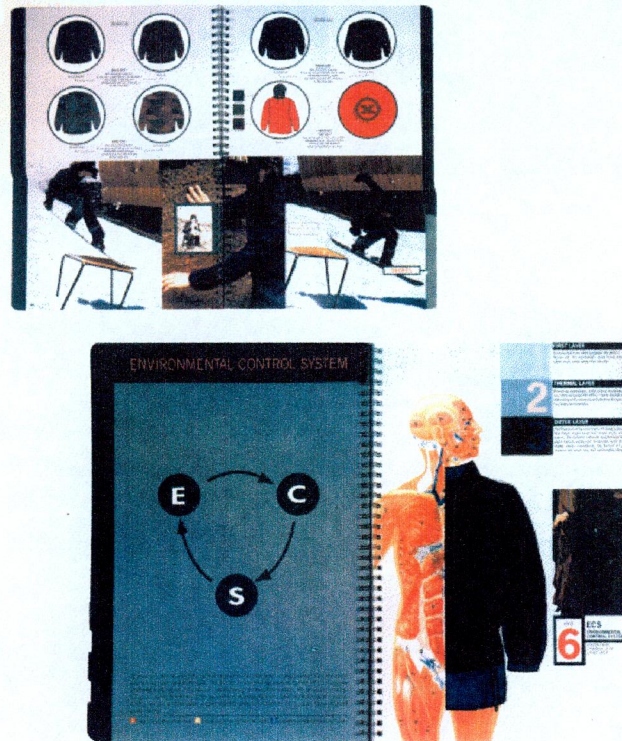
fig. 25

designs. They implemented the use of typographic devices such as initial caps, footnotes, side bars and borders, which became "poster sized elements bursting off the page or minute details packed into the margins." (Lupton, 1996, p.44)

Youth subcultures such as that of skateboarding and snowboarding have distinctive graphic styles of their own. In a mock authoritative fashion, some designers take on elements from scientific diagrams to industrial catalogues in their own catalogue designs for skateboarding and snowboarding fashion and equipment. One example is the catalogue for Burton Snowboards (fig.25) where the designers (David Covell and Keith Brown) have utilised the language of medical diagrams, scientific symbols and industrial manuals. This lends an authoritative, serious tone, perhaps implying the technologically advanced nature of the materials.

Another example of clever and appropriate use of information graphics is the range of designs for Sony, in which they used a language from their own field: the visual language of the instruction manual. Norio Nakamura's designs (a greeting card, flyer, poster and postcard fig. 26) contain linear images, numbers, arrows, and words mimicking diagrams or assemblage instructions. Traditionally functional devices are used here as decorative elements. What is interesting and causes the design to be appealing aesthetically is not only the fact that the designer plays upon this visual language, but also the way a new design has been forged from an original concept. The design is simple and uses functional graphics, yet has understated style and simple graphic elegance. What shines through is an appreciation of the ordinary/functional, and the
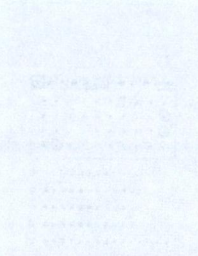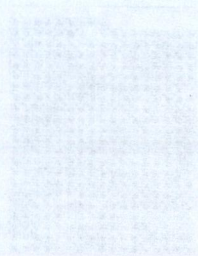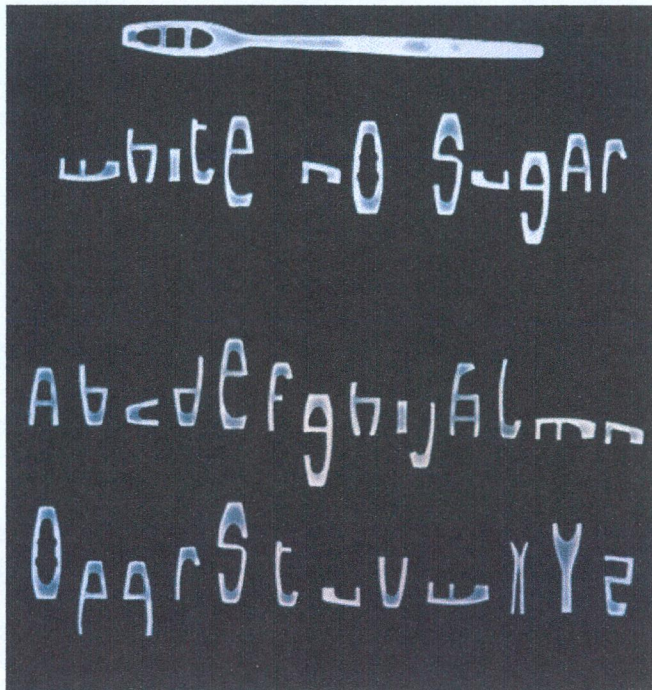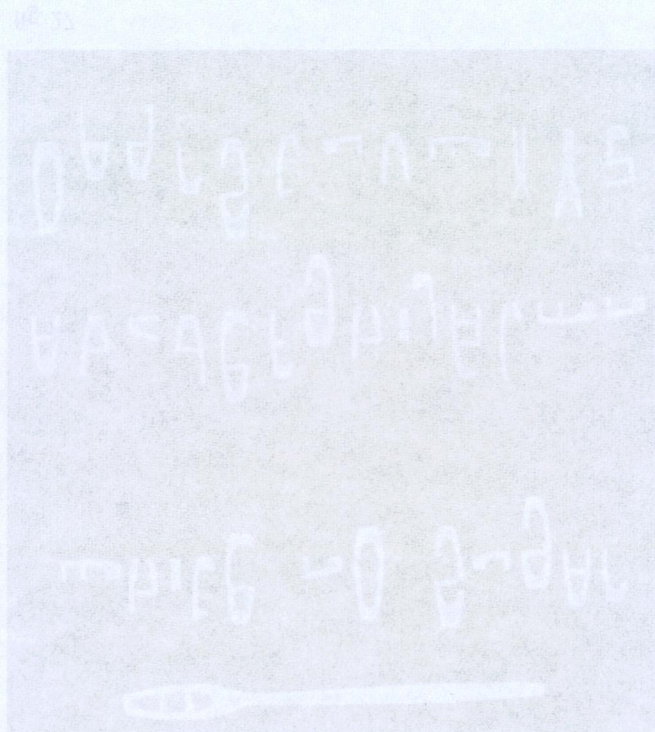
fig. 26

ability to create an original new design from existing material.

One particularly interesting and quirky piece of design created through the appropriation of the functional is Anna-Lisa Schonecker's typeface "White No Sugar" which has been created purely from shapes taken from the purely functional, disposable and undecorative tea stirrer (fig. 27). Schonecker has created an original, beautiful and very contemporary typeface from a mundane functional object. This truly is an example of good use of the vernacular. In comparison to another decorative typeface, this is contemporary, has its roots in popular culture. Its decorative features stem from functional elements of a generic object, demonstrating that clever design can come from such ordinary sources.

In CD designs for the group *Massive Attack* (fig. 28), Michael Nash utilises imagery of the functional. Elements in his designs include pictorial symbols for 'flammable,' knives and forks, combined with background textures of flat and corrugated cardboard, the overall look is that of the functional, durable, that influence has been taken from practical, undecorative, and everyday sources.

The American clothing company "Urban Outfitters" used the format and general look of an old-fashioned almost industrial publication for their annual report (fig. 29). Styled like a textbook, it utilises graphs and layouts both as functional devices and decorative elements.

Another example of the functional aesthetic in new design is a recent flyer for "Strictly

fig. 27

fig. 28

fig. 29

fig. 30

Fish," a Dublin club event (fig. 30). The image used is a stencil with scientific instruments, with the "Strictly Fish" logo disguised as part of the stencil. The recipient of such a flyer reacts with delight at such a familiar functional object, associated with school and science, used to advertise an entertainment event.

What is most interesting is the fact that designers quote the functional, information graphics in their own designs and these designs are inevitably pieces of the vernacular themselves: functional, throwaway, elements of the visual landscape, along with the source material from which they quoted.

The authoritative visuals of information graphics have very particular qualities - from unique scientific symbols to graph paper, from school textbooks to pie-charts. They are the visuals of education and information. They are part of contemporary culture and part of design history. They serve as an inspiration and source of visual and decorative devices for today's designers. Along with functional graphics (signage, tickets, and other printed paraphernalia) these vernacular languages are used constantly in new ways by designers, whose work reflects today's society in which people are bombarded with an unfathomable amount of visual stimuli, through the media and other parts of modern life.
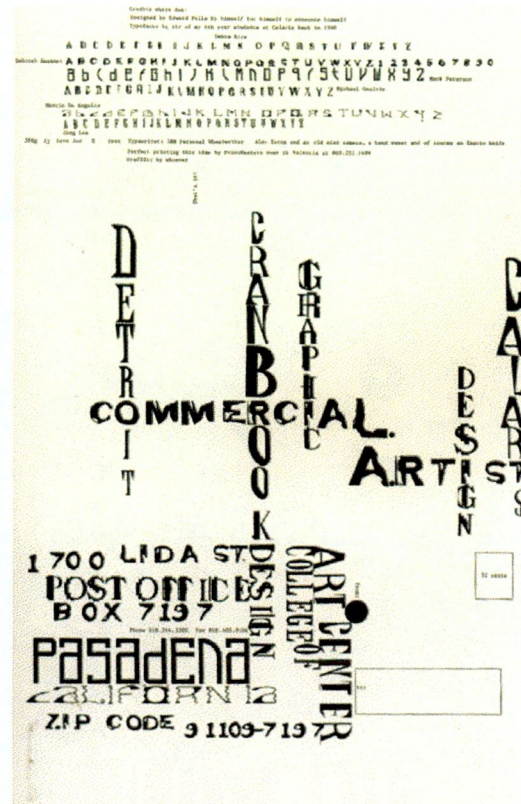
fig. 31

chapter six: Rejecting Slick Professionalism

(a taste for the accidental, unconventional, or pure and simply bad design)

A large number of designers who use some sort of vernacular in their work merely appropriate imagery from various sources. However, there are those who also take a vernacular *approach* to their work, employing a look of the accidental, rough, untutored or merely or merely the pretense of 'bad design.' These designers, although skilled and well aversed in 'high' design and its unwritten rules, have a taste for the unskilled, manually produced, or simply alternative.

One designer who strayed from the conventions of formal design, and thus creating unique artistic graphics, is Edward Fella. Fella designed over sixty posters for the Detroit Focus Gallery between 1987 and 1990. This gave Fella the scope and opportunity to be experimental; he had total freedom in these low budget pieces (fig. 31,32,33). This freedom is evident in his brave use of hand rendered letter forms and his alternative approach to type in general. He introduced in his work

"the vernacular, the impure, the incorrect, and all the other excesses. These excesses, such as nineteenth century fat-faces, comical stock

fig. 32

fig. 33

fig. 34

printers' cuts, ornamental dingbats, hand scrawls and out-of-focus pho
tographs were anathema to the early Modernists, who battled to
expunge such eyesores from public view." (Heller, 1993, p.58)

Fella experimented with damaged and defective forms; from over-photocopied
lettering to broken transfer type. His taste for the unconventional was equalled by his
"technologically out-of-date manual skills," (Lupton, 1996, p.57) which included hand
lettering and cut and paste methods.

Another designer who rejects the slick, clean-cut professional approach is Art Chantry,
who created eye-catching low budget graphics for the Seattle music scene. His work
often uses found commercial artifacts from industrial merchandise catalogues as key
elements in his posters and flyers. (fig. 34)

As well as these borrowed images, Chantry employs techniques which give a look of
the untutored, an apparent disregard for conservative design. A major influence in
Chantry's work is the Punk movement. Chantry states: "Reid's work was so powerful,
while being wonderfully expressive and crude." (Austin, 1991, p.30) This is also true of
Chantry's own work, which like Punk graphics adopted the vernacular of the street, of
rebelliousness, with a raw and abrasive visual style.

Two examples are the posters for "Mudhoney" (fig. 35) and "Gruntruck"(fig. 36) in
which he uses overphotocopied type, which bleeds and is slightly uneven. Both posters
feature imagery that appears to have been appropriated from some other source. They
are like grainy over-enlarged newspaper photographs. This fashionably haphazard and
grainy look gives Chantry's work a very young, contemporary, and unconventional
look, and the pieces almost seem more like the work of an artist rather than that of a

fig. 35

fig. 36

designer.

Like Fella, Chantry dislikes the use of computers, and is passionate about the printing process, the paper and inks. His work, like Fella's, has a hand-made appeal, there is evidence of the labour involved. Chantry feels that with big budgets and sophisticated computers, designers become lazy, work less hard in the process of creating imagery. He is also anxious about design falling into the wrong hands: "Technology has become so available that anyone thinks they can do graphic design." (Austin, 1991, p.29) Chantry constantly strives to push himself, and his work reflects this, as he manages to break the conventions of clean-cut, safe (and perhaps unengaging) design. In his article "Cult of the Ugly," Steven Heller describes how Chantry's disregard for conventional design, although decidedly alternative, results in successful design:

> "While these 'unsophisticated' graphics may be horrifying to designers who prefer Shaker functionalism to Punk vernacularism, Chantry's clever manipulation of found "art" into accessible, though unconvention al compositions prove that using ostensibly ugly forms can result in good design." (Heller, 1993, p.56)

A prime example of graphic design created from and influenced by the untutored/unskilled is Leslie Carbarga's typeface "BADTYPE" (fig. 37) created through observation of lettering by untrained or "lay letterers." Carbarga attempted to encorporate many of the common mistakes made in such instances as hand painted signs, combined to make the ultimate bad type. This is an ironic feat: a designer, skilled and educated in tasteful typography, creating a font from badly rendered ugly lettering. It could be an expression of appreciation of the quirks and qualities of naive lettering.

BAD LETTERING
I HAVE FOUND, IS USUALLY BEGINS WITH THE PREMISE THAT ALL LETTER WIDTHS, LIKE ALL MEN, ARE CREATED PREDICTABLE. EQUAL. THE LAY LETTERER THEN ADDS THE TYPICAL MISTAKES SERIFS TO THE "I" SO IT WILL FILL UP ITS MADE BY LAY LETTERERS SLOT. THERE IS NO CONSISTENCY TO OFTEN FOLLOW SIMILAR THE RADIUSES OF CURVES IN CURVED LINES. I'VE MARVELLED CHARACTERS, NOT EVEN WITHIN THE OVER THIS FOR YEARS. SUCH SAME CHAR- ACTER. MOST OBSERVATIONS FORMED THE PERPLEXING, IS THAT THE BASIS OF A REALLY LOUSEY LAY LETTERER MIXES THICK+ FONT CALLED THIN STROKES WITH MONO-WEIGHT LETTER FORMS. THEN HE CONFUSES THE ORDER OF THE THICK+THIN **BADTYP.** STROKES OF ROMAN TYPE AS THOUGH HE'D NEVER SEEN A NEWSPAPER IN HIS LIFE OR CAN'T REFER TO ONE.

Set in Carbarga BADTYP

fig. 37

More than likely, however, it is a condescending look at the atrocities and faux pas made when typography falls into the wrong hands, an elitist mockery of those outside the profession.

> "Such observations formed the basis of a really lousey font called BAD TYP."

chapter seven: For and Against

I looked earlier at the work of Paula Scher and her "Retro" designs for the New York Public Theater. Scher, like many designers who quote the vernacular, has come under criticism. Philip Meggs says:

> "The close paraphrasing of resources has been a controversial aspect of some Retro designs, as sceptics question how closely a designer might quote an earlier source." (Meggs, 1983, p. 453)

This is a problem designers face when creating designs using the vernacular. Some simply reuse existing imagery, others adopt influences or images, yet *adapt* and modify them for their own design. Where should the line be drawn where designers can take images or styles from other sources and use (or reuse) them in their own design? When is it simply a sort of plagiarism, or is their such a thing within contemporary culture, where disciplines and cultures are fluid and inter-related? A good example which Meggs uses raises the question of appropriate appropriation is Paula Scher's poster for Swatch.(fig. 38) in which she quotes a famous poster by Herbert Matter from the 1930s (fig. 39). Meggs points out the similarity, as Scher adopts Matter's dynamic poster design and adapts it to her criteria for the Swatch poster. It could be

fig. 38

fig. 39

seen by some that Scher has failed, to some extent, as a designer and has blatantly 'ripped off' (to use the vernacular) Matter's poster, taking elements which make it a successful piece of design, and making it her own. But we can also look at it in another way. Scher recreates a clean, crisp design, cleverly adapting it, using a contemporary photograph. Swatch is a Swiss company, so there is a smart reference to Matter's poster for the Swiss Tourist Office - Scher is not hiding the fact that she has copied Matter, she makes a clever reference to a good poster of the past. It displays an awareness of design history, and an ability to bring a classic design of the past into a contemporary setting.

My original interest in writing about and researching the vernacular was sparked by Jeffery Keedy's fascinating and convincing essay, "I like the Vernacular....NOT," in which he vehemently condemns designers who use the vernacular. He insists that those using the vernacular to produce nostalgia are merely retreating to the past - "there's no fiction like the good old days," (Keedy, 1993, p.6) - in an effort to escape the anxiety of an uncertain future. According to Keedy, the current interest in the vernacular signifies a lack of direction within the design profession. Instead of moving forward, inventing, designers are recreating the past and reusing what already exists. As well as creating nostalgia, use of the vernacular entails use of that which is outside the conventions of 'good' design, so by using it, the designer often points out the crudeness of the source material, in turn highlighting the designer's own sophistication. As Keedy sees it,

> "When the high-culture graphic designer (trained in a design school) borrows clip-art illustration or crude lettering....it can be a condescend

ing act of elitism that deliberately draws attention to the difference in status as if to say 'hey, look at what this so-called illustrator did.....isn't it corny? I could never do anything that silly, I'm too sophisticated. I really wish I could but I'm too clever... in fact, I'm too clever to do any thing at all, that's why I have to use stuff from these poor hacks.' " (Keedy, 1993, p.8)

Keedy tries to convince us that designers, idealistically, should be cutting edge, avant garde, constantly creating the new, heading directly into the future, pushing the world of graphic design forward, and in that direction only:

"Maybe graphic designers should go back to the old business of invent ing the future instead of regurgitating a past that's been digested so many times that it has no taste." (Keedy, 1993, p.11)

Ironically, Keedy is telling us to look to the past in order in order to learn *not* to look back to the past. We can learn from designers of previous decades who were inventive and progressive.

The problem that many people, like Keedy, have with using the vernacular in 'high' design is just that: it is supposed to be high design. The notion of low art, mass culture, street culture being used as elements in high design seems contradictory to many. The design profession has traditionally seen and defined itself as "socially enlightened and self conscious." It sees itself as above the broad field of commercial production and naive folk art. So perhaps, contrary to Keedy's opinion, those designers who incorporate the vernacular into their work *are* the forward-looking ones within the profession. They encourage the broadening of subject matter and source material, and the breaking down of traditional conventions of graphic design. As I described in Chapter 2, there is an overlapping of cultures and influences in all areas of modern life

(fashion, music, cinema, food, etc.) so it is only natural that this merging of ideas become evident in graphic design. Designers do not exist in a vacuum and are naturally and readily influenced by the world around them. Lupton points out however, that often, uses of vernacular create a divide between everyday life and design, rather than bring the two closer. A barrier is created between a sophisticated "us" - the designer, and a naive "them." There is, Lupton continues to explain, a romanticism of the "visual underclass," highly educated and technologically sophisticated designers borrow and are influenced by images such as hand-made signs, which are crude and unselfconscious. Lupton implies that a distance remains between the designer and the piece of popular culture, as the designer remains educated in high design, with a critic's eye. An example of this is the work of Charles Anderson (fig.40) who uses the naive commercial art of the 1940s and 1950s, capitalising on the wave of nostalgia in America. Lupton claims that "beneath his admiration, is a sense of condescending distance from the culture he quotes." (Lupton, 1992, p.74)

I looked earlier at Art Chantry's poster design for The Night Gallery, a music event, in which he used imagery from an industrial merchandising catalogue. In his article "The Cult of the Ugly," Steven Heller argues argues that Chantry's designs are functional within the context. In saying this he is agreeing that the found imagery is appropriate as a style for the music. Andrew Blauvelt mentions Chantry's work and clarifies perhaps what Heller says: that such designs acknowledges "the impossibility of 'original' form through its appropriation of a pre-existing style." (Blauvelt, 1995, p.64) Chantry manipulates appropriated imagery and creates compositions which "prove that using

fig. 40

ostensibly ugly forms can result in good design." (Heller, 1993, p.56) Heller has defined ugliness as a stylistic element in contemporary design: "Designers used to stand for beauty and order. Now beauty is passe and ugliness is smart."(Heller, 1993, p.52) Conventional beauty is no longer considered to be essential to good design. I think Heller has labelled traditional aesthetics of modernist order as ' beauty' and post-modern mixing and multiplicity as disorderly, random ugliness. He explains that he uses the term 'ugliness' as opposed to classical design. The good thing and the progressive thing about such 'ugly' forms as those in Chantry's work is that they question "popular notions of beauty so that alternative aesthetic standards can be explored." (Heller, 1993, p.57)It is debatable whether Chantry's poster is an example of good clever postmodern design, or merely the unimaginative placing of imagery in a different context than originally intended. It is also subjective as to whether such things are "ugly forms." However, ugly or not, I feel that designers should be taught to appreciate the vernacular. It is important to be aware of functional graphics; industrial, decorative, etc. People should also appreciate the work of the untrained eye and the unskilled hand in hand painted lettering, poorly produced visuals etc. This might not necessarily mean incorporating it into one's work. It does have a place within graphics, and seems appropriate to such areas as dance music/rave graphics, as it corresponds to the nature of the music being promoted. As I pointed out in chapter, much of contemporary music (especially dance and rave) consists of mixing and remixing tracks and sampling beats, sounds and melodies. It makes sense then that the graphics to promote such music represents this aesthetic of mixing in a visual sense. Use of the vernacular is also another way of questioning the notion of 'good design,'

and what it should be. It pushes the constraints of conservative graphic design. Perhaps an appreciation of graphics on all levels should be encouraged; an appreciation of hand-painted signs, food package design, clip art, graphs and diagrams. These are a part of graphic design and its history. What is valuable in most of the true vernacular (particularly the hand done) and possibly what makes it so appealing to both designers and the audience, are its human qualities. Evidence of the person comes through in the accidental, the vulgar, the poorly rendered, etc. It is this human quality that is absent in most stark and strict modernist design.

Much of the design which uses the vernacular appeals to me at an immediate level. Often the vernacular has a particular aesthetic quality, a beauty of the ordinary, whether it be decorative or purely functional, from a food label to a 1950s book jacket. Keedy's convincing argument will always conflict with my taste (perhaps Keedy would say my bad taste) for the vernacular, the popular, the exotic, the vulgar. Keedy was hopeful, believing that designers should create new design and look to the future. However, it is part of our culture and time to reference many sources. With revivals occurring in the music and fashion industries, graphic design too displays evidence of such trends.

Again I return to Keedy, as he sums up his essay by posing interesting questions which I have considered while researching the subject. Some see the issue as black and white - that it is simply not territory for graphic designers to tread. Keedy asks:

"Is there a 'correct' way to use the idea of vernacular in graphic design, or is the whole idea of the vernacular overly simplistic and not very useful?
Isn't getting inspiration from your Print, How, I.D., and Emigre maga zines using the vernacular?
Why is it that graphic design history includes cave painting, cuneform alphabets and woodblock engravings but doesn't include sign painting or clip art?"(Keedy, 1993, p.10)

I think that graphic design history *should* acknowledge such things, as they are as legitimate visual languages as any others, and possess individual and unique aesthetic qualities. I agree that getting inspiration from magazines is use of the vernacular to a certain extent. Being influenced by sources both inside and outside one's culture, and incorporating them into one's work is, in a sense use of the vernacular. I think Keedy poses the above questions admitting that the vernacular *has* a place in graphic design, but only as part of its history. As he made clear, he feels it has no place in contemporary design.

In their book GI Neville Brody and Lewis Blackwell include examples of the vernacular, including packaging, photographs, found objects, indicating how broad a term this is. They describe the term as once referring to "that which was generic or untouched by professional hands," and now referring also to "things that are sometimes accidental (for example a dirty stencil or torn packaging)" and things "taken away from their original purpose." (Blackwell/Brody, 1996, p.9)
According to Blackwell and Brody, the vernacular is legitimate and accepted as a vital

element in much of today's design: They admit the changes in approach of designers to that of their predecessors.

> "Now graphic designers pick'n'mix styles off the shelf, while others choose whether to see this as clever post-modern self-knowledge or a desperate lack of ideas and principles." (Blackwell/Brody, 1996, p.8)

They go on to describe how a new aesthetic has emerged:

> "While it may not be founded on state-of-the-art idealism, such work has the assurance of being built on the bed rock of the vernacular. It can claim to be design that refers to life, rather than theories that are not accepted or fully shared by practitioner and reader." (Blackwell/Brody, 1996, p.8)

The vernacular also brings the world of graphic design closer to that of fine art, as it sees the legitimate use of found objects and existing art and design in contemporary work.

It must be noted that use of the vernacular is often seen as lacking the complete originality and problem solving of other design. It seems to be a new form of creativity - working from existing sources while still creating new designs.

Use of the vernacular, however, can be seen as a short cut, instant design. Hiebert points out: "the danger lies not in the use of readymade images per se but in the false sense of creativity they induce." (Hiebert, 1998, p.199) It can be said that some

designers using the vernacular are lacking creativity and must resort to reusing pre-existing material.

But I think positive aspects to using existing imagery and styles must be highlighted. When presented to readers in a new context, elements of the vernacular are rediscovered and given a new life. Hiebert identifies this experience as the "delight and surprise of discovery," (Hiebert, 1998, p. 199) hailing this as one of the benefits to using the vernacular. The recognition the reader has with the material causes the piece to have immediate appeal. "It has special appeal for communication: ease of connection or conductivity." (Hiebert, 1998, p.198)

Use of the vernacular in graphic design occurs today where style and fashion take a higher place, in many cases, than content and problem solving. Graphic design was once a discipline concerned primarily with problem solving, cleverness. Now, in today's fast moving sound-byte culture, immediacy and style are all important. It appears to be more important for a design to be streetwise and fashionable. The notion of something being timeless is no longer valued. Everything, including visual media, is fast moving and ephemeral. The vernacular may be a passing trend in graphic design. But it is more than that. The fact that it is vernacular means it already has links with people or culture. To use the vernacular in one's design is an instant way to create a stylish and contemporary looking piece. It is a sure way of getting recognition by the target audience: using something they already identify with or recognise. The vernacular is now a tool of style. In an article which analyses style in graphic design, Andrew Blauvelt

points out that conservative critics "lambast entire genres for being mere followers of fashion." (Blauvelt, 1995, p.64) But in contemporary culture, perhaps it is helpful, if not necessary to pander to the audiences taste. No longer does the designer reform the masses. Blauvelt labels the use by professionals of anonymously designed vernacular as "stylistic mimicry." The idea that the vernacular is merely a stylistic element is interesting. Blauvelt goes on to say how in usual design discourse, issues of style and taste are "placed outside the brackets of the problem - solution equation." (Blauvelt, 1995, p. 64) Style is concerned with the surface, the appearance. This may suggest a shallowness or meaninglessness. However, the notion that style is meaningless and empty is no longer valid. Design which borrows from other sources is particularly loaded with meaning, as the material has already existed and been read. Blauvelt points out the value of style as a means of communicating a message: "Styles circulate as communicative codes that distinguish cultural groups and social classes." (Blauvelt, 1995, p. 64) It could be said that in good design, fundamental design values and properties exist beneath fashionable and superficial surface elements. These values are concerned with the communication of messages. The vernacular as a source for designers means that designs can communicate with greater impact and immediacy to certain target audiences. However, in some instances, the message and problem-solving aspect may suffer in the name of style. The vernacular is a safe bet for designers - one can rely on existing imagery and styles, guaranteeing to have appeal or impact:

> "'Low design' - the vernacular - tantalises by its accessibility. But the trained designer faces a dilemma here: on one hand, to access and understand the peculiar strength of the vernacular; on the other, to realise how evasive these

qualities can be in problem solving."

Essentially, however, the positive side to use of the vernacular is that it defies conventional and conservative ideas on design and questions notions of beauty, order and 'good' design:

> "The layered images, vernacular hybrids, low resolution reproductions and cacophonous blends of different types and letters at once challenge prevailing aesthetic beliefs and propose alternative paradigms." (Heller, 1993, p.54)

conclusion

I have examined the use of the vernacular in contemporary design, identifying the various categories within this field. Designers quote various sources from the vast visual landscape which surrounds them in contemporary culture, as well as the past, including television, cinema, magazines, advertising, packaging, art, graffiti, literature, etc.

There seems to be primarily two ways of using the vernacular - one is the appropriation of imagery or themes from other sources. The second is the adoption of vernacular styles - aesthetic qualities of the badly printed, poorly rendered type, roughly cut-out pictures, grainy photographs, etc. This taste for the raw and abrasive, as I pointed out, has its roots in Punk graphics.

Earlier I quoted Godfrey's thoughts on the postmodern: designers (as well as other artists) no longer present the completely new (as with modernism) but present the reader with a world they already know: "It is the reader's experience that matters, not the writer's." (Godfrey, 1998, p. 143) We all have more or less common cultural influences and similar cultural experiences and memories - television, cinema,

literature, etc. Contemporary designs which utilise the vernacular depend on our experiences. (Such designs would be wasted on someone from outside contemporary culture: they simply would not 'get it.' This is a large part of using the vernacular; it is all about clever references to our common cultural experience.)

In chapter seven I presented opinions and attitudes towards the vernacular as it is used in contemporary design. It is an ongoing argument within in the design world as to whether it is indicative of discipline of design in crisis or merely a reflection of postmodern culture.

I think that style and fashion have taken a higher place in graphic design than problem solving. The design profession seems to be concerned with fleeting trends, keeping up with streetwise fashions which emerge in all areas of life. Designers create quick solutions by appropriating imagery or styles. It may be a short cut to a solution, a sort of instant design: "Vernacular expression is motivated by directness and convenience; it has a certain efficiency about it." (Hiebert, 1998, p.195)

I have considered the writings on this subject, and examined the positive and negative aspects to contemporary work which uses the vernacular. It often seems that designers today rely heavily on many aspects of the vernacular. There *are* many unoriginal designs. However, I think it should be acknowledged that using the vernacular is part of contemporary and postmodern culture. Any designer whose work strives to break conventions or bring alternative forms and ideas into his field is bringing design forward, and progression is unarguably positive. As Heller suggests,

designers using the vernacular "propose alternative paradigms" and explore

"alternative aesthetic standards" (Heller, 1993, p.54).

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