

Privatized Resistance: *AdBusters* and the Culture of Neoliberalism

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In their October 2003 issue, Vancouver-based *AdBusters Magazine*, internationally renowned for fourteen years of trenchant anti-consumerist agitation, announced plans to create and sell the Black Spot, a Portuguese-made canvas sneaker with a two-fold agenda: to “kick [Nike CEO] Phil Knight’s ass,” and to “do no less than reinvent capitalism.”² Skeptical followers of the magazine, especially of the boisterous writings of its founder and editor Kalle Lasn (now also “CEO of the Blackspot Anticorporation”), would not be especially surprised at these hyperbolic pronouncements and would be left to wonder about similar past prophecies such as “culture-jamming will become to our era what civil rights was to the ‘60s, what feminism was to the ‘70s, what environmental activism was to the ‘80s.” (Lasn 2000, xi). Despite disappointing those holding their breath for the fulfillment of these pretensions, *AdBusters* has captured the imagination of a great many activists, educators, and other culture workers, at least in the global North. *AdBusters* is known not only for their glossy bimonthly publication and website but also for increasingly popular and globalized decentralized campaigns including “Buy Nothing Day” and “TV Turn-off Week” as well as their iconic “brand” of cultural resistance, “culture jamming”: the remixing of advertisements in an attempt to unmask (rather than ornament) corporate evils. Indeed, culture jamming and *AdBusters* appear in many cultural studies textbooks and course syllabi and as a common tactical referent in the strategies of contemporary social movements who share their anti-corporate sentiment. Lauded for its pedagogical promise and seemingly radical politics, *AdBusters* has been heralded as a form of Situationism appropriate to neoliberal times.

So it was to the great surprise of many, and the smug satisfaction of a few, that *AdBusters* appeared to so totally “sell-out” into the sneaker business. Lasn stated in one interview that:

The idea of pushing your way into the capitalist game and tussling with people like Phil Knight and taking some of the market share, I would argue, this is one of the strategies that angry people, like me, have of changing the world for the better [. . .] Rather than always snapping at the heels of the people who are playing the game, let’s get into the game. I think that it’s possible to produce a logo like the Blackspot that stands for something real. If we can do that without selling out ourselves, then we’re doing the right thing. (quoted in Raines-Goldie 2004)

It hardly seems worth analyzing the Black Spot campaign as it seems such an impoverished example of social critique that is neither especially socially minded nor particularly critical. But I would contend that this campaign, far from being discontinuous with *AdBusters’* prior and broader politics, represents only the latest crystallization of what I will call *AdBusters’* politics of [gestural] resistance, symptomatic of a broader tendency in many ostensibly resistant social texts. And this politics, which seems to be becoming remarkably fashionable in a variety of circles,³ must be critiqued as not only inadequate for confronting the contemporary global political and cultural hegemony of neoliberalism, but in many ways rehearsing key tenets of neoliberalism so as to make *AdBusters* a highly problematic political text, one made even more worrisome in that it smugly wears the mantle of radical resistance. Writers such as Bill Zuk and Robert Dalton (2003) and Joseph Rumbo (2000) suggest that despite *AdBusters’* sometimes problematic politics, it represents a form of critical public pedagogy and organic public intellectual intervention against the hegemonic discourses of consumer society. But I am less optimistic than they about the potential results. In this article I outline how *AdBusters’* public pedagogy is not simply inadequate to confront the cultural hegemony of neoliberalism, but in some ways complicit with it. First, I address the absence of sustained scholarly critique of *AdBusters* followed by a discussion of the public pedagogy of neoliberalism and *AdBuster’s* intervention participation within it. I follow by differentiating *AdBusters* from the 1960s Western-European Situationist political/art movement to whom they are often linked and suggest, rather, that it is more fruitful to compare *AdBuster’s* cultural politics with post-war American Gestural Abstraction. After a more specific

discussion of *AdBusters'* problematic cultural politics within a global neoliberalist paradigm, I conclude with some discussion of how *AdBusters'* insufficient public pedagogy marks an invitation to think critically about the practices and performances of public intellectuals in the struggle for a more just future.

AdBusters has, surprisingly, received little peer-reviewed academic criticism. My suspicion is that this is largely due to the ambivalence it inspires in two major tendencies of cultural criticism: the neo-Gramscian and the audience-oriented.⁴ From the neo-Gramscian approach, the magazine is an interesting example of counter-hegemonic and organic-intellectual intervention. It brings the work of many media and cultural critics to broader publics and provides readers not only with the conceptual tools to challenge dominant representations, but visual tools with which the pervasive culture of hypervisual consumer capitalism can be "directly" confronted. However, *AdBusters'* many myopias, notably its near total disregard for class (both as a "historic" and sociological category), its persistently simplistic, libertarian, and tacitly sexist approach to gender,⁵ its near complete indifference towards race, and its confusing (yet aggressive) ambivalence between revolutionary and reformist politics, all conspire to make the magazine an infuriatingly difficult text to approach.

For the more audience-oriented pole of the cultural studies, *AdBusters* seems to be evidence that consumers are not just mindless automatons reproducing and relaying corporate culture, but rather agents who create and enact resistance in a variety of novel ways and spaces that do not easily reduce to "classic" forms of revolutionary, civil-society, or identitarian struggle. Yet the anti-consumerist everyone-is-totally-programmed-by-the-culture-of-the-spectacle rhetoric of *AdBusters* is largely incompatible with the perspective and politics of audience-oriented cultural-studies such that *AdBusters* is once again an uncomfortable text to parse.

Combined with these two aporias, many on the left are likely reluctant to criticize (supposed) allies for fear of weakening the camp in what seems an increasingly desperate battle to broaden politics and civic engagement beyond electoral brand-loyalties and spectacles of mass "opinion" (and their contemporary authoritarian outcomes). Others are likely critical of *AdBusters*, but see it as hardly worth the effort given its marginality to both popular culture and serious cultural critique. I believe, however, that it behooves the Left to question its camp—indeed, this is the queer

strength of the left, and all our hope rests in the expansion of this reflexivity to all aspects of life and politics such that a deep, rich, and radical democracy and solidarity might flourish in all spheres of living, as opposed to the ubiquitous "Wrestlemania" of religious, ideological, and economic fundamentalisms. *AdBusters* is an important site of study because, in the era of the cultural revolution of neoliberalism, we need to start paying greater attention to those popular texts that offer a vision of resistance for their moments of complicity and their shortfalls. As *AdBusters* and culture jamming begin to appear more frequently on secondary and post-secondary curricula, as well as within popular political and cultural discourses, we ought to sound some caution at the premature valorization of this form of cultural politics and public pedagogy. Indeed, the increased appearance of *AdBusters* on mainstream newsstands should be an indication both of its increased resonance as well as an invitation to read into its popularity the undercurrents and mediations of popular desires for social change (and their cooptation) that critical pedagogues and cultural workers ignore at their peril.

In setting out to critique *AdBusters*, one is instantly met with a host of methodological problems. Primarily, the text is not only polysemious, but also polyvocal, (even schizovocal). Not the work of a single author, not reigned in too tightly by its editors, and dedicated to its own vision of traversing borders between critique, prognosis, prediction, fiction, image, gesture, and symbolism, the magazine's greatest strength might be its role as a staging ground for an experimental public sphere. Much of the magazine's content is provided by its readership, breaking down the tired modernist distinction between audience and author and opening a new space for novel political participation. One of the most interesting sections of the publication is the letters (and the editors' feisty responses⁶) in which a plurality of debates circulate, often on issues deemed "too hot to handle" by even other (ostensibly) left-wing media.⁷ It is unclear to what extent the editors of *AdBusters* censor or select these contributions, although it is likely fair to assume such sanction is minimal, given the magazine's relatively steadfast dedication to basic principles of freedom of speech and their evident libertarian streak. For these reasons, standard visual and textual content analysis would likely provide disappointing results in a search for broader ideological currents. Yet despite its nebulous and anarchic proportions, I believe one can and must tease out some of the

magazine's general political commitments, which at least reflect the better part of that which appears under its masthead—to trace a thread which may or may not be fundamental to holding the magazine together conceptually, but which winds its way throughout, nonetheless. It is this thread, I would argue, that is largely responsible for the magazine's broadening appeal which demands critical analysis.⁸ For these reasons, this critique must hover at an unsatisfactory level, between textual, visual, and theoretical critique that only infrequently and briefly touches down in substance of the magazine or Lasn's writing only to ascend again to a more general level. The solidity of this study, then, is clearly open to critique. But I hope and suspect readers who are familiar with *AdBusters* will find my assertions have resonance, despite their foundations on shifting ground.⁹

In considering the politics of *AdBusters*, it is important to elaborate the context into which its cultural interventions seek to intercede. The global rise of neoliberal ideology in the past twenty years is well documented. Though articulated differently from Canada to China to Indonesia to Kenya, neoliberalism has come to generally signify a constellation of economic and political beliefs and objectives predicated on the faith that the free-market is the best and only means of distributing resources on a planetary scale. Famous among its manifestations are the fiscal austerity, deregulation, and privatization regimes imposed on the governments of indebted peripheral and semi-peripheral nations and voluntarily adopted by governments in the centre. Concurrent with the meteoric rise of multi-national corporations, the prominence of international financial and currency markets, and the intensification of the global and local disparities between rich and poor, neoliberalism has come to represent a powerful global ideological hegemon against which a revolutionary (in implication if not always intent) global alliance of groups has consolidated.

Yet while critiques of neoliberalism as an economic and political paradigm have received a quantity and quality of criticism befitting of their destructive capacity (criticism ignored by most media establishments), there has of yet been little attention paid to neoliberalism¹⁰ as a cultural and pedagogical force. Henry Giroux outlines such a criticism in his 2004 book *The Terror of Neoliberalism* arguing that, concurrent with its horrifying material and political consequences, neoliberalism installs a culture of fear, individualization, hopelessness, and cynicism in the vacuum left by the liquidation of public space and time in an age of triumphant consumerism

and escalating militarism. The task of activists, artists, cultural producers, and public intellectuals, then, cannot be limited to reforming policy or electing slightly more temperate political leaders, but must be based in grassroots and everyday struggles to transform culture and reinvigorate democracy with the radical spirit of commonality, intentionality, passion, and hope fundamentally predicated on the reinvention, restoration, and defense of public spaces, common understandings, and shared ambitions.

I will only touch on a few major aspects of the culture of neoliberalism here. The culture of individualism, predicated on the base economic monad of the rational economic man, has overseen the transformation of the citizen into consumer.¹¹ Giroux elaborates that among neoliberalism's key teachings is that the failure, poverty, and misery of oneself or others is a personal problem unconnected with broader social or political conditions and certainly not warranting any collective action (2004, 50). Stemming from this idea is a new relation to oppression marked by the rise of the language of the "colour-blind" society in which all barriers to minority participation in the labour market, political realm, or educational system are presumed to be ameliorated (Brown et al. 2003, *passim*). Thus the endemic poverty and degradation which disproportionately affects people of colour, women, and other people marginalized by the resilient white, masculine power structures are seen through the neoliberal lens as personal flaws, evidence not of the failure of the free market, but of its success at motivating/punishing the indolent and encouraging/rewarding the industrious. Unable to imagine collective action beyond attendance at spectacles of mass entertainment or electoral circuses, social change becomes largely unimaginable, and hope gives way to the cultivation of either paralyzing cynicism or rabid faith in transcendental extremism.

In the public pedagogy of neoliberalism, learned through exposure to a lifetime of commercial media that glorify wealth, commodities, individualism, violent retributive vigilante justice, and the mythology of equality, Giroux notes that there is no room for *public* imagination (2004, 18–19). As such, state services no longer seem to make sense. Slavoj Žižek argues that rather than being understood, cherished, and expanded as the precarious endowment of past generations of social struggle, what shreds remain of the welfare state are derided as inhibitions to the freedom to choose, dangerous government monopolies, and free services which diminish people's motivation to work hard and thus receive

the promised gifts of the bountiful market (2005, 117–9). Civil liberties, norms of “ethical” warfare, public debate, and participatory democracy become nothing more than quaint anachronisms or utopian fantasy in a culture unable to imagine itself collectively outside a pernicious and vindictive nationalism or even more ruthless fundamentalist identities.

AdBusters confronts many of these issues in its publication and public-pedagogical tactics: it draws attention to the alienation of human beings from the world as social concerns are privatized and it highlights the ways in which social identity is mediated and constructed to some extent by the consumer-capitalist spectacle. It notes the rise of corporate power and the ideology of neoliberalism in the form of neoclassical economics. It is deeply critical of the overt racism and repression engaged by the United States in the War on Terror. It acknowledges and illustrates the powerful public-pedagogical force of a variety of social forces, but most notably the popular media and its corporate owners. And it questions the path of humanity into the twenty-first century, focusing on the mental and physical environments as key sites of struggle over what sort of vision will guide us.

But *AdBusters* bespeaks several problems in its analysis that must give us pause before we evaluate its place or utility in the struggle against neoliberalism. Numerous critics have charged *AdBusters* with cultivating (and selling) a politics of self-serving distinction which does little to confront the real sources of power in society but rather furnishes its followers with the smug satisfaction of being “outside” or “knowingly critical” of (and thus no longer complicit with) consumer culture. These critiques are no doubt apt, but insufficient. The tendency to fixate on hypocrisy or the realization that a moment of cultural “resistance” is “actually just another aspect of ubiquitous consumer culture,” while sometimes accurate, can all too often boil down to a cynicism and hopelessness as neoliberal culture is reaffirmed in the vacuum left behind when a form of resistance is dismissed out of hand as morally inconsistent or culturally redundant. There is a risk that such epithets serve to reinforce and reflect the search for universal answers to the complex and multifaceted problems posed by systems of power, a search that frequently lead to despair as the answers are much more likely to be evolving, collaborative, and undecidable except in their particular contexts. Criticism which centres on hypocrisy may fall into the same trap to which Imre Szeman (2001) identified

AdBusters as having succumbed: the search of a radical and pure “outside” of the pervasive biopolitical apparatuses of global capitalism—a space which simply no longer exists (if it ever did). Taking up the work of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Szeman notes that our subjectivities and activities are *everywhere* mediated by forms of social power themselves wrapped up with a global capitalism which cannot be “escaped,” only dealt with through various constellations of solidarity on the level of their own immanence (2001, 11–12). Rather than searching in vain for the pure or authentic revolutionary potential of any form of radicalism (and losing hope to cynicism when they prove complicit with the culture in which they circulate), it seems more fruitful to examine the ways in which radical politics can enable just and lasting forms of collective struggle *against* the atomizing and depoliticizing tide of neoliberalism and its attendant militarism, cynicism, and hopelessness. My interest, then, is on the ways in which *AdBusters* might be usefully criticized not for its moral double-standards (of which there are many) but for its ineffectiveness in the face of and even recaptulation of pernicious culture of neoliberalism. It is my hope this can open a critique which prompts provocative questions about cultural politics and the responsibilities of culture workers.

In response to questions by the *Globe and Mail* about the Black Spot sneaker, famed critic of consumer culture Naomi Klein, whose globally successful 1999 book *No Logo* was generally supportive of *AdBusters'* efforts (281, 286–7), was reticent, but offered that “writers and publications who analyze the commercialization and privatization of our lives have a responsibility to work to protect spaces where we aren’t constantly being pitched to” (quoted in Patriquin 2003). Here, Klein opens the door for a discussion that goes beyond the hypocrisy of *AdBusters* to speak of the responsibilities of public intellectuals and the need for a public pedagogy that challenges neoliberal culture on the grounds of the commercialization and privatization of social life. Her assertion invites us to look critically at the politics of *AdBusters* to ascertain how such a disconnection between a critique of consumer culture and the privatization of public spaces of discourse might have come about.

Rumbo (2000) joins the majority of critics who in some way ascribe to *AdBusters* the (mutated) legacy of the Situationist avant-garde political movement. The Situationists’ emerged in the 1950’s in Western Europe claiming that the working class’s oppression and docility was confirmed and compounded by the

development of a "Society of the Spectacle" in which social life was increasingly routinized and organized into banal, contrived, and stayed rituals and spectacles of work, play, and political participation. Evolving out of the impasses which met prior avant-garde art movements like Dadaism and Surrealism, Situationism's objective was to use techniques many would identify as "art" as weapons of class war to provoke thought and action which would lead to a society where the separation between art and life would be erased and the capitalist mode of production (and the society built to sustain it) would be replaced by a radical form of socialism suffused with a deep collective intentionality and radical democracy. Guy Debord, a luminary in the movement and one of the only members who remained with the group from its inception to its demise, writes in his 1968 *Society of the Spectacle*, that, in the (society of the) Spectacle, "capital is accumulated to the point where it becomes an image" which represents a falsified reality echoed and relayed in every aspect of daily life (1994, 24). The spectacle (not a collection of images but rather the totality of relationships between people everywhere mediated by images (12) affirms and normalizes the standard order of life such that workers/consumers remained complicit with and imbricated in iniquitous relations of power, unable even to imagine alternatives let alone the pathways to their actualization. The Situationists famously designed and enacted a wide variety of reflexive critical interventions in the hopes of participating in breaking people out of their daily routines, encouraging political participation, and awakening class struggle.¹² Among these tactics was *Detournement* (often cited as the ancestor of culture jamming): the transformation of artifacts of high and commodity culture into propaganda that revealed the hollow promises of bourgeois culture and demystified the commodity as nothing more than the bittersweet residue of the stolen time of labour.

While *AdBusters'* editor Lasn himself traces his political genealogy to this group (2000, 101–2), it is important to note several key differences between *AdBusters'* orientation and that of the Situationists, differences that, I believe, make them largely incompatible. Here I am not as interested in *AdBusters'* infidelity to the "purer" politics of the Situationists¹³ as in the ways in which *AdBusters'* deviations from the Situationists are indicative of a problematic political orientation that takes on dark dimensions within the cultural matrix of neoliberalism.

First and foremost, Situationism was predicated on a strong Marxist understanding of power, resistance, culture, and society. Unlike *AdBusters*, their vision of politics was informed by a notion of, and dedication to, the historic struggle between classes and was motivated by a desire to quicken the revolutionary potential of humanity which, uninhibited by the hegemonic stupefaction of the Society of the Spectacle, they believed to be immanent. As Giorgio Agamben notes, for Debord, the Spectacle is neither simply the supremacy of commercial visual culture nor the increased commodification of everyday life in any simplistic sense, but something far more sinister that permeates all of society (even spaces of “resistance”). The Spectacle is the moment of “the commodity’s last metamorphosis, in which exchange value has completely eclipsed use value and can now achieve the status of absolute and irresponsible sovereign over life in its entirety, after having falsified” what he calls “the entire social production” (2000, 76)—in other words, the totality of spaces where social life is performed and reproduced. By contrast, as Szeman points out, for *AdBusters*, it is the spectacle *itself* that is the problem, not insofar as it dissuades the oppressed from rising-up or colonizes all of life, but more that it eschews the “authenticity” of the individual (2001, 4). There appear to be little deeper politics behind *AdBusters*’ condemnation of what they understand to be the Society of the Spectacle than anger at its capacity to make life “inauthentic.” Whereas for the Situationists “inauthenticity” was part and parcel of workers’ alienation from the means of production, the fruits of their labour, and a society evacuated of democratic relationships, for *AdBusters*, “inauthenticity” is a mark of deviation from a romantic notion of unmediated transcendent human freedom for its own sake. As Sadie Plant points out, the Situationists passionately rejected tropes of essentialism in favour of a concept of democratic participation in *all* aspects of life and the creation of radical experimental public spheres and practices that democratized being itself, rather than drawing on some myth of repressed or subterranean essence (1992, 62). The contrast is marked by Debord’s hope in 1968, *not* for the “success” of situationist tactics of *Detournement* in somehow transcending or shattering the Society of the Spectacle through singular provocative public experiments, but for the flourishing of independent revolutionary workers’ councils: radical collectivities who not only struggled for emancipation from the commodification of life, but to change life and their ways of living commonly and totally.

Second, and related, insofar as *AdBusters* takes the Spectacle for the determinant of social ill, it seems largely myopic to forms of systemic and cultural oppression to which the Situationists were at least a *bit* more attentive. The way consumer culture is shaped by (and shapes) class, race, gender, sexuality, and other modalities and hierarchies of power within Western society is generally ignored or dramatically simplified by *AdBusters*.¹⁴ Their blanket condemnation of consumerism without considering how it is mediated, attenuated, and defined within social structures of power (and people's and social movements' responses to those structures) not only makes *AdBusters* largely unable to comprehend the contemporary perpetuity and permutations of racism or sexism, but also tacitly helps naturalize the neoliberal dogma that the playing field is now "level" for all groups. Indeed, Lasn assumes the authority to declare that "by and large, feminism today has ceased being a broad-based social movement and become just one of the many special interest 'victim' groups vying for a piece of the money and the action" (2000, 118); sentiments worthy of right-wing talk-radio, to be sure.

Third, for the Situationists as well as the Surrealists and Dadaists before them, there was a sense that the public or common was something to be reclaimed or remade. Situationism was born of the struggle for a truer democracy and equality in Western Europe beyond post-war paternalistic corporatism or Soviet Spectacle-socialism. While critical of the quotidian practices of "normal people," the movement aimed to awaken and enlighten the *public* to their own oppression such that a richer, more full life could be led by all through the *collective* rejection of fascism, capitalism, and state socialism from the bottom up. If we prefer, the Situationists seem to have dreamed of a new *common*. For, as Agamben puts it, the Spectacle was, for the Situationists, the "extreme form of the expropriation of the Common" by Capital (2000, 82), the objective of which was to "organize environments and events in order to depotentiate life" (78). The Situationists' objective was to create spaces where people could experience the *collective potentials* of being beyond a consumerism that was always seen as part and parcel of a set of ubiquitous capitalist relations of property, production, and reproduction.

By contrast, *AdBusters* sees the public as its *enemy*. It is precisely the public-ness of the public, the absence of individualist authenticity, which is their problem. For *AdBusters*, there is often no public

solution to the world's problems if it is not preceded by a private act of *freeing the mind*. What is absent here is any notion that this might be a *reflexive* or common project. As Zygmunt Bauman, following Cornelius Castoriadis (a contemporary of Guy Debord and editor of the journal *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, widely considered to be, along with the Situationist International, among the key intellectual projects which informed and inspired the May 1968 uprisings in France), notes, the politics of a democratic emancipation can only take place with the convergence of the inseparable and mutually reinforcing projects of building critical democratic reflexive consciousness on the one hand and the creation of forms of public space and time capable of confronting the ravages of neoliberalism on the other (1999, 137–8). There can be no radical consciousness outside of the collective attempts at bringing about social justice (and vice-versa).

Rather than inheriting the legacy of Situationism, it might be helpful to understand *AdBusters* within the legacy of Gestural Abstraction (also known as Action-Painting or Abstract Impressionism). The latter rose to prominence in New York in the post-war period and was favorably received (or appropriated)¹⁵ by a certain powerful segment of elites as the truest and most unmediated expression of individual passion. It was taken as the rejection of stayed norms and “conservative” European aesthetics, figured as effeminate and inadequate to the task of emblemizing the freedom possible in the modern epoch of Western capitalist technocratic triumph under the banner of The American Century. The Gestural Abstractionists seemingly attempted to efface any and all representation or formalism in their work. Rather than being a rejection or problematization of the way capitalist culture limited, organized, and routinized people's existence (and, symptomatically, their aesthetics), Gestural Abstraction was taken to celebrate the possibilities of personal and artistic freedom provided by the capitalist West under the post-war “peace” between docile labour and tamed capital, guaranteed by a strong welfare state underscored by Keynesian economic policies.¹⁶ Indeed, as Francis Stonor Saunders (1999) has shown, gestural abstraction came to be covertly funded and promoted (along with a variety of other “modernist” cultural projects) by an alliance of iconic American corporations, elites, and the CIA, primarily to “beat” the Soviet Union in the art-world equivalent of the nuclear arms race, where artistic achievements created in both superpowers was showcased around

the world as evidence of their making good on modernity's promises. Gestural Abstraction was also consciously used to displace the rising popularity of the Latin American Socialist muralists like Diego Rivera, Jose Clemente Orozco, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and their colleagues whose works, in contrast, were made to appear, according to the gleeful recollections of one CIA agent, "even more stylized . . . rigid and confined" than they "actually" were (260). Mexican muralism was generally dedicated to acts of public pedagogy in which large murals served (despite their glorification of the masculinized figure of an Eternal Labour) as public monuments to social struggle around which people could read a history and imagine the possibility of collective social struggle. By contrast, Gestural Abstraction was made into the embodiment of the American "national will" and was dubbed "free enterprise painting" by Nelson Rockefeller, one of its greatest patrons (258). Artists such as Jackson Pollock were valorized for their cowboyesque demeanor and their manifestation of what Saunders describes as "the great American myth of the lone voice, the intrepid individual" (255). The CIA's strategy played on modernist tropes of transcendence, creative genius, and the possibility of grounding action in an "authentic" place *outside* society. Indeed, within this context, the public becomes the negative point of reference for, or the immanent Other of, the figure of the artist whose gestures constantly strives to attain the mythic space outside the public and its corrupting mediations.

I would suggest that it is useful to read *AdBusters* as inheriting the tradition of Gestural Abstraction (as opposed to Situationism) both philosophically, in the sense of a celebration of the quest of the individual for an outside from society (entirely in line with the discourses of Western masculine imperialism), as well as politically, in regards to its penchant for the romantic act of purportedly unmediated cultural intervention as the most appropriate means of resistance. Even though the visual content of *AdBusters* may have little to do with Gestural Abstraction, I would suggest it shares something with this form of "radical" art for a number of reasons. First, the celebration of the romantic quest of the individual artist or, in this case, culture jammer, is enshrined as the means to emancipation. Second, the public is not seen as the "subjects of History" or the bearers of revolutionary potentials *as a public* but rather a set of individuals who have not yet freed themselves from the velvet shackles of consumer culture. Their *publicness*, their aspiration

towards any form of commonality, is the enemy that inhibits their participation in the radical gesture (always and intractably defined *against* the public).¹⁷ Third, without any sense of a politics which goes beyond personal emancipation from the confines of society, tactics are all too often reduced to haphazard gestural actions which, convinced that they flower from the repressed source of pure human authenticity, need not be critically and reflexively scrutinized for their effectiveness in confronting or participation in broader forms of oppression.

All three of these features, the quest for an outside, the derision of the public as a site for activism and engagement, and the myopia towards systemic inequalities and historical struggles are entirely compatible with a neoliberal cultural politics. As Zygmunt Bauman (1999) details, neoliberalism posits the individual as the solitary locus of human freedom whose perfection is only possible if the tethers to inexpedient others are severed or diminished in the quest to become the perfect economic subject. It is averse to any form of the public or commonality that might exist outside the auspices of the market, the discourse of self-help, or state interests increasingly oriented away from "welfare" and towards "control." Finally, neoliberalism works to erase the possibility of understanding inequality as systemic but rather makes it the fate and responsibility of the individual. Indeed, these three aspects of neoliberal culture are precisely what gives it such cultural force and enables the perpetuation of its horrific economic and social consequences. As such, not only does *AdBusters* fail to confront the culture of neoliberalism, in some disquieting ways it is one of many sites which echo its key tenets and resonates with its regimentation of desires.

A good example of these gestural politics, their limits, and the possibility of moving beyond them stems from another example from the "art world." Barbara Kruger's 1987 *Untitled (We Don't Need Another Hero)* (Figure 1) was not only a provocative artistic statement against the commodification and masculinization of art, but also an incisive public-pedagogical intervention, placed on billboards in Europe and North America.¹⁸

Not only did Kruger's work participate in the critique of the 80s art world for its a(nti)political tendencies and increasingly esoteric vocation, it also begged provocative questions about the roles and responsibilities of artists and cultural producers as public figures. We can read in this work a critique of patriarchal individualism whereby "heroes" are made of asinine little boys with the



Figure 1. Barbara Kruger, *Untitled (We Don't Need Another Hero)*, 1987–. Image courtesy of Artangel UK.

complicity of obsequious girls, rehearsed time and time again in cultural texts ranging from children's story books to the business press to Hollywood action movies to media coverage of war. This narrative is re-envisioned (or, rather, inflated to shameful proportions) by Kruger in such a way as to stimulate a potentially radicalizing incredulity in the spectator. But beyond the romantic notion of "waking" people from the seductive nightmare of the Spectacle through the deployment of a provocative image, this intervention also has much to say about the possibilities for democracy. The idea that a "we" don't need another "hero" invites us to imagine ourselves as a collective and common "*we*," while implying that the potential for social and political change is immanent. Implicit in the work is the notion that *we* have a responsibility to make change and not wait for the divine orders of some messianic leader. Kruger's work *addresses* the public insofar as it not only speaks to us, but also somehow helps us constitute ourselves as a public, in public space and time and creates, even momentarily, an address where we can be located, from which and to which we can correspond.

By sharp contrast, *AdBusters'* "jam" of Kruger's "jam" is not only a refutation of Kruger's intervention, but also a keen example of why hers was necessary in the first place. With the romantic image

of two young male “radicals” in a violent protest situation, *AdBusters* has reclaimed the masculinized individualist hero problematized by Kruger’s socialist-feminist intervention. *AdBusters* seems to not only suggest that we need violent vanguardist leaders to confront global power, but, in a way, that revolution has been made *effeminate* by works like Kruger’s which do not meet consumer culture with the unmediated gestural action to which *AdBusters* aspires.¹⁹ Gone is the deep intentionality and cunning of Kruger’s work, which invited the audience to think of themselves critically and reflexively as participants in their own liberation. The *AdBusters* jam represents the politics of the gesture in which revolutionary acts and culture jamming are prized for their own sake. Here, the gesture is valorized both in the content of the jam, the two masked male youth whose target is unknown (for all we know they could be firebombing a mosque), but also in the jam itself in which the history and politics of Kruger’s prior intervention is chucked out the window in favour of the gestural resistance of the petty little boys (and their regimes) she so ardently and cleverly critiqued.

In thinking about the brand of resistance *AdBusters* offers, Henry Giroux’s critique of the film *Fight Club*, yet another of the growing number of mass cultural products that make seductive yet problematic claim to “radical resistance,” is instructive. He writes that:

While *Fight Club* registers a form of resistance to the rampant commodification and alienation of contemporary neoliberal society, it ultimately has little to say about those diverse and related aspects of consumer culture and contemporary capitalism structured in iniquitous power relations, material inequalities, or hierarchical social formations. (2001, 67)

As a result, *AdBusters* resistance becomes coded in the figure of Tyler Durden, the hypermasculinized leader of an essentially fascist terrorist cell. Durden’s attitude, which valorizes the “mayhem”—causing gesture, devoid of a broader strategy or alliances, relegates any other form of social critique or solution to social ills as “an act of bad-faith or the unacceptable whine of victimization.” (68). Notable is the way Lasn’s language echoes these sentiments. In response to Naomi Klein’s brief and cautious statement on the Black Spot cited earlier, Lasn rejoined with typically explosive ejaculations:

Old leftists like Naomi Klein hang on to an old, “pure” activism that hasn’t had any success for 20 or 30 years [. . .] There’s a lot of people now who want to jump over the dead body of the old left. We’ve decided to stop

whining about Nike; why not make \$10 million and use it to run a media literacy campaign instead? I'm really sick of the whiners. (Sanchez 2003)

In another interview he suggests that:

There is a feeling among the 60–70,000 culture jammers that have joined our network on the Internet and who read *AdBusters* that the political left has really lost it recently, that we really just can't get it up any more. The Democratic Party can't get it up any more. The activist left can't get it up any more. ("Hitting the Black Spot" 2004)

Other than begging the question of precisely whom or what Lasn wishes to penetrate after he "gets it up" (i.e. where is the "heart of darkness" of the consumerist empire against which he would wield his phallic revolt), such sentiments reflect the same hyper-masculinized, action-oriented play-resistance Giroux has identified as valorized in *Fight Club*. Giroux notes that, in the film, consumerism is depicted as an emasculating, inauthenticating force that can only be countered through acts of violence and daring. In many ways this is the same aesthetics and politics of gestural resistance advocated by *AdBusters*.²⁰ As Giroux notes, such depictions not only are inadequate to confront the culture of neoliberalism but actually reproduce it by rehearsing the image of the romantic individual as the site of radical human agency, eliminating and deriding forms of public participation as "wimpy" and redeploying expressions of masculinity that thwart the cause of gender-equitable social justice.

Largely absent from *AdBusters'* critique is any appearance of the state except as the object of derision, a view shared by most neoliberal critics. Such a sentiment is not evidence of anarchist distrust of reformism (given *AdBusters'* peculiar faith they can reform corporations and capitalism) but rather a more libertarian inability to imagine any space of public participation beyond volunteerism. This disdain for the state shares with neoliberalism the desire to eliminate government and institutional controls over private matters, but fails to imagine the sorts of public institutions that might replace them. Who will provide schools, hospitals (in Canada), roads, and universities (or indeed the postal service that delivers *AdBusters'* magazines and running shoes to their global audience)? Surely given the history, size, and inadequate democratic institutions of the Nation-State one must be both suspicious and skeptical of claims that it can be the key to lasting social justice, at least in the North, especially in an age when neoliberalized states have so

imbricated themselves in global power apparatuses that even modest reforms have become largely impossible. But one must realize that the state, to the extent it has not been turned vicious and carcereal by the rapacious logic of neoliberalism, provides vital social provisions and life-support to many people, and that it retains the power to protect and engender public spaces (universities, public parks, community centres, etc.) where participatory and democratic practices might be made possible. One hopes and works for a form of deep participatory democracy so rich that eventually the state as an institution becomes redundant, not because it lacks of control over public institutions and laws as the result of neoliberal globalization, but because it lacks the wealth of democracy to justify itself in the face of a proliferation of public spaces and practices capable of maintaining vital institutions and advancing social justice on deeply local and immanently global levels. Until then, blanket condemnation of the state and a refusal to defend and transform those aspects Pierre Bourdieu (1999, 2) has called the “left-hand” of the state (that bittersweet residue of institutions and policies of social welfare bitterly fought for by social movements of the past) is nothing less than a gross dereliction of the duty of critically minded public intellectuals and activists, even as we fight the “right hand” (those carcereal and repressive aspects built and maintained to serve power). It will predominantly hurt those most vulnerable to the vicissitudes of neoliberalism who rely on what is left of state services for some modicum of stability and security, tenuous and coercive as they may well be.

It can be argued that *AdBusters* has in fact made good-faith efforts to confront neoliberalism. Their many campaigns and manifestos often address overt aspects of neoliberalism and suggest alternative models. For instance, the “true-cost economics”²¹ campaign challenges neoclassicism and proposes a realignment of economics such that the “true” cost of commodities (including paying producers a fair wage, the social and ecological costs of their production and transportation) is charged the consumer. Unfortunately, this campaign is wrong-headed in two senses derived of *AdBusters*’ focus on the individual (consumer), its inability to dream the public, and its myopia towards systemic oppression. First, whether the costs are true or not, a market remains a market which effectively means the possibilities for democratic participation in the distribution of goods and services is diminished as sectors of

life are declared “private” and out of the reach of a “public.” Second, true cost economics reifies the notion of commodities as having a universally fixed price, regardless of who buys them. Thus poor families will have to pay as much as the rich for the same inflated commodities. Without a fundamental rethinking of value and a dramatic redistribution of wealth, true-cost economics does little to engender social justice. As the costs of the staples of survival increase, the poor and marginalized suffer more than the wealthy. Once again this example illustrates not only *AdBusters'* ineffective strategy when it comes to confronting neoliberalism, but its dangerous liaison with the ideology that prohibits any substantial vision of democratic politics.

In stark contrast to *AdBusters'* proposals, Bauman argues that a basic social wage (one that extends to all people, not just “workers” in the classical sense) would ensure that people’s needs were met such that they would have the time to participate in deliberative and democratic social organizations. Such a commitment could then make the question of human *wants* (over and above needs) less a matter of atomized *personal* choice and the affirmation of consumerist identity cultivated to assuage alienation and more a question of *public* deliberation (1999, 187–8). While Bauman shares the critique of consumer society with anti-consumer critics like *AdBusters*, his solutions start from the necessity to make public choices rather than participate in privatized acts of resistance.

To illustrate Bauman’s point and *AdBusters'* inadequacy, it is worth looking briefly at the example of children’s addiction to TV, a common theme in *AdBusters* (also see Lasn 2000, 3–4, 12, 189) probably because the corruption of children’s ostensibly more innocent and “authentic” consciousnesses is a poignant emblem of the pervasiveness and perversity of consumer culture. Missing from *AdBusters'* analysis are any of the social and structural conditions that lead to children’s TV watching habits for which “addiction” might be a term used far too loosely. For instance, *AdBusters* does not mention the traumas of working parents who, as economies and societies become insecure in times of the neoliberal diminishment of (minimum) wages, labour rights, and corporate and government downsizing, often have to work longer hours or multiple jobs to make ends meet, leaving tragically little to no time to attend meaningfully to children. Nor is any attention paid to the added responsibilities of looking after the sick and elderly as state services are cut, work mainly done by women (Chow 2003, 454;

Ehrenreich and Hirschchild 2002, *passim*). Further, it is likely that many children's sociality and curiosity is being diminished by schools which, dedicated to the mantra of "preparing students to enter the global economy," are enamoured with "results based" education largely oriented towards ensuring high standardized test scores to impress increasingly apathetic and craven politicians to maintain already meager funding levels (Giroux 2004, 94–95). This last effect is compounded by budget cuts that have led to crumbling buildings, over-worked teachers, and inferior supplies, especially in deprived areas. These circumstances would be more intense for families and children who are poor, racialized, or don't conform to the confines of the mythic suburban nuclear family. And it must be acknowledged that due to patriarchal codes, women remain the primary domestic workers and largely responsible for holding families together in these grim circumstances. In this context, parents' desire to put their child in front of a television screen, and children's desire to escape into the screen take on different dimensions. But, paying scant attention to these problems, *AdBusters's* rhetoric would place the responsibility on the individual *parent* or nebulous corporate evil rather than the system of entrenched inequalities. Once again, culpability and guilt for consumer culture is placed on the shoulders of the individual in a way continuous with a neoliberal public pedagogy that *disappears* public issues into personal responsibilities, which erases systemic inequality in favour of a moralistic indignation. Indeed, this moralistic turn threatens to fuel the perception of an ethical crisis, a sentiment adeptly exploited by fundamentalists and neoconservatives promising a "return" to more righteous times.

Rather than condemning parents or waging what are likely to be only marginally effective campaigns against corporations which advertise to children or for "media literacy," it is important to look to deeper answers which demand public participation. For instance, to confront TV addiction among children we might think about demanding or providing free, high-quality, flexible, and universal childcare such that parents have time to work, enjoy leisure time, attend to children, and participate in their communities and in democratic forums. We might think about reversing the trend of cuts to public schools that lead to deteriorating learning environments, frantic teachers, and shoddy, desperate, and banal pedagogy that diminish children's creativity and desire to learn about the world. We might think of fully funded recreational programs in

restored, safe, supervised public places. We might think about guaranteeing people a social wage and rethinking work so adults can spend time with their children such that the constant stresses of finances suffered by most families is assuaged in favour of developing a society that dreams of future generations with hope rather than fear. We might also think about learning from and making central to our agendas the feminist practice of critically engaging patriarchal social relations that ascribe to women responsibility for acts of social reproduction and maintenance of households, including childcare. We might think of prohibiting advertising to children or creating children's entertainment that reflects the values of democratic commonality and seeks to awaken wonder at the *potential* of life and the future. Should all members of society see children as important and as a collective, public responsibility, we might see a culture in which "television addiction" was a thing of the past, where the investment of *care* appreciated with passing generations, and in which the gift of democracy was returned more richly by generations raised in participatory environments. Probably these sorts of ideas are more likely to appeal to most people than jammed ads and eschatological graphic design. But they require nothing less than that most difficult but necessary thing in the world: the work of building critical communities and deep public cultures. As to what footwear is appropriate to meet these challenges, I do not care to speculate.

In this article I have argued that *AdBusters* is a form of public pedagogy and political intervention which is largely unfit for the task of confronting the rising tide of neoliberalism: perhaps the gravest threat to human peace, security, democracy, social justice, and survival today. I have suggested that *AdBusters* cultivates a gestural politics that is predicated on a mythic romanticized individual, one which diminishes the possibilities of a politics of the public and which is largely myopic towards systemic forms of oppression. As such, *AdBusters* is not only inadequate but even in some ways complicit in the cultural politics of neoliberalism.

Whither *AdBusters*? Only time will tell. The publication and its supporters may find themselves with strange bedfellows in the struggle for a corner of the consumerist-resistance market (along with the Body Shop, American Apparel, etc.). Problematically, what my analysis here might have pointed towards may be a wider problem with culture jamming, neo-situationist strategy, and the politics of the visual. And whereas there is not room here to explore these

issues, that they have been raised ought to negate critics who might argue my article seeks academic mileage out of the internal combustion of a bastion of anti-corporate activism and thought.²² To speculate, I suspect many who would intervene in the culture of neoliberalism or Society of the Spectacle on the left all too often fall prey to a crass simplification of the Gramscian understanding of hegemony which, while it correctly sees all culture shot through with the power of capital, neglects to think about the specific dynamics of each site of cultural production, reception, and response as particular, contingent, and singular.²³ Indeed, it is precisely this uniqueness that has enabled the power of hegemony (a rather unwieldy instrument when vested in the classic institutions of schools, churches, press, and civil society) to remain so dynamic and powerful in an age of largely disorganized capitalism.

With this in mind, I think we might want to shift the question to seriously ask “where are culture jamming tactics becoming useful in an overall struggle for social change” rather than “how can we forge a revolutionary strategy out of culture jamming.” The former question needs to be and is being explored by social movements and dedicated individuals. For my part, I believe two fields in which culture jamming could be useful are (a) as part of the personal and small group cultivation of deep critical solidarity and (b) in secondary-school or early-university pedagogy with the same objectives. In the case of the former, I think that by manipulating and transforming the icons, logos, symbols, and spectacles that are our environment and shape and inform our subjectivities we can go a long way to problematizing for ourselves our internalized complicities with the Society of the Spectacle. Being made to think about what an effective cultural intervention in these spaces means we have to think seriously about the complexity and urgency of the political situations in which we find ourselves and may make us better activists, culture workers, and educators, especially where we do this work in common. Culture jamming is a practice which asks us to take those intimate resources of subjectivization we encounter everyday and denormalize them, make them into tools for experimentation and becoming. In so doing we do not simply “free our minds” from consumer culture but can in fact read the multiple ways in which we are enabled and inhibited by the spectrum of power relations which surround us.

Second, I think the work of culture jamming can be extremely effective as a critical pedagogical practice, as teens and other

learners take control of the icons and brands and symbols which surround them and shape them as social agents. Combined with a social justice oriented curriculum which includes a broader problematization of the media, I suspect students doing various acts of "culture jamming" and taking them public might be a very important experience in that it not only demands acts of imagination beyond those ascribed by mainstream consumer culture, but invites an imagination of *the public* and forms by which learners can address and change it, which seems of the utmost importance if we are to counter the individuating tide of neoliberal public pedagogy.

In neither case, however, do I think culture jammers should assume the products of their work *itself* will have any substantial effect on the broader public. There will be extremely few who will walk by a jammed ad or billboard (even Kruger's) and reevaluate global capitalism or their life practices. People are probably less stupid and duped and more hopeless and cynical. Being told the enjoyment of their few material pleasures afforded them guarantee their damnation is unlikely to sway many.

One of the telling things about the growing popularity of *AdBusters'* gestural politics is the pervasive sense of crisis common to almost everyone. It is precisely the haunting sense that something very bad is in store for us if present global trends continue that draws people to *AdBusters* which, if nothing else, promises (easy) action. And while a landscape of subverted billboards may indicate the impatience of the democracy to come for its own arrival, it is no substitute for the hard work of collaboratively building the constituency and collective agency we need in order to bring such a democracy about.

NOTES

1. Many thanks to Henry Giroux, Alyson McCready, Susan Searls-Giroux, Scott Stoneman, and Imre Szeman.
2. <http://blackspotsneaker.org>
3. Indeed, so popular it has taken on a life all its own from manifesting in transnational art/design festivals like *Memefest* (www.memefest.org) (see Soar 2000) to appearing on secondary school curriculums to being rapaciously mimicked or appropriated by the "guerilla marketing" of savvy ad agencies (Klein 1999, 297-9).
4. Clearly, this "debate" is predicated on a false dichotomy, one addressed and surpassed by many fine scholars, but one which is still all too often trotted out (undressed, redressed) for the purposes of performative distinction and dialectical derision.

5. Noted even by readers of the magazine, especially in its incrimination of feminized consumer stereotypes and the equation of obesity, especially female obesity, with moral weakness and collusion with consumerist destruction of the natural and psychic environment.
6. In response to a letter of critique by Edward Herman, co-author (with Noam Chomsky) of *Manufacturing Consent*, Lasn responded, "once again, a traditional lefty describes as 'action' such efforts as 'thinking very hard' and writing proposals that others, presumably, are expected to carry forward. But what have you done lately besides talk and write, Mr. Herman?" (Quoted in Soar 2000).
7. Perhaps *AdBusters'* most recent mega-scandal was its identification of the high proportion of Zionists highly placed in the Bush junta reminding many readers of the anti-Semitic conspiracy-theories central to the legitimization of Jewish persecution (and its horrific consequences) throughout modern Western history as well as of the general turn towards conspiracy theories in global general popular culture. Yet it also highlighted, both in the act and the vitriol of the subsequent response, the degree to which such questions are swept under the carpet by the corporate media. Apart from perhaps being a good example of the ambiguity between *AdBusters'* critical public-pedagogical work and its attention-seeking gestural politics, the question of this intervention must wait for another time.
8. There is a temptation, to which I too fall prey, to reduce the *AdBusters'* trajectory to that of Kalle Lasn, its editor and founder, who often casts himself as the embodiment of the publication, especially in his 1998 book *Culture Jam*. Yet *AdBusters* cannot and should not be reduced to Lasn who is an inadequate spokesperson for a phenomenon that, by now, far exceeds him.
9. This article takes as its data *AdBusters'* magazine, campaigns, and website up until the end of 2004. *AdBusters* has adopted new directions and approaches since this time, but they will have to be the subject of future research.
10. I hasten to note that, while this article appears to indict neoliberalism as an active and unified force, it would be remiss not to insist that neoliberalism is a metaphor or shorthand for a discontinuous social movement made up of a wide variety of actors, acts, and discourses, local and global, which do not necessarily share the same objectives or trajectories outside of a general capitalist logic of accumulation.
11. The implications of this insight are amply mapped in Bauman (1999).
12. For an excellent summation of the Situationists and their legacy, see Sadie Plant's *The Most Radical Gesture*.
13. Indeed, there is much to criticize and question about the Situationists' program, especially as it relates to contemporary situations, and my treatment of it here will be rather generous and general.
14. Here I am sympathetic to David Theo Goldberg's theory of the state and state formation outlined in *The Racial State* and Stanley Aronowitz's surgical analysis of the role of social movements, class, and the state in *How Class Works*.
15. The intentions, interventions, and culpability of the artists in this process are open to a debate that exceeds the confines of this article.
16. Indeed, as Malcolm Bull points out, Gestural Abstraction's "cooptation" was instant, immediately being used as backdrops in fashion shoots to advertise a product's novelty and cultural capital within an overarching American progress narrative (Bull 2001, 109-110).

17. Critics more discriminating than I might even suggest it is in inviting a self-loathing angst in the public at its inability to transcend itself that both these cultural forms produce their own lucrative market, at the expense of any notion of collective hope and in collusion with the worst depoliticizing and individuating tendencies of consumer culture.
18. Thanks to Artangel UK for permission to reproduce this piece which they commissioned in 1987. In attempting to secure the companion image from *AdBusters* I was told the permission was not theirs to give, having themselves *purchased* the image from an image databank company and then “jammed” it. As of this printing, it remains unclear if this publication would be able to use the image under “fair-use”, illuminating at the very least the lunacy of the intensifying global intellectual property regime. The image in question is best described as a photo of two young men with their faces covered by bandanas, throwing rocks in the street. The image is bisected by a red horizontal line (clearly echoing Kruger’s idiosyncratic aesthetic) in which white letters read “We don’t need another hero” with the word “don’t” scratched out as if with a permanent marker.
19. I am not so vain as to assume I know the time and place for “direct action” and revolutionary violence. Yet I believe there *simply isn’t time* for its puerile valourization.
20. For an elaboration of the contemporary interlocking of spectacle, militarism, haste, and masculinity, see Stoneman’s article in this issue. Given the situation he outlines as the context for *AdBuster’s* intervention, we must pause once again to evaluate the latter’s effectiveness and participation in a new militarized neo-liberalism.
21. <http://adbusters.org/metasc/eco/truerecoeconomics/>
22. I find this to be the objective of Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter’s *The Rebel Sell* (Toronto: Harper Collins, 2004), a crassly opportunistic and greatly problematic text that begs for substantial future critique.
23. In thinking about this I have found Nick Couldry’s (2006) critique of and hopes for cultural studies particularly instructive.

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