IDENTITY IS THE CRISIS CAN'T Y O U SEE?

The fourth issue of Counter-Signals aims to invoke and assemble writing and image materials that query the aesthetic claims and political-economic stakes of identity, in design and in cultural production more generally.

"Visual identity" names the highest order project within the discipline of graphic design, historically constituted in post-war capitalist Europe and the US. It enlisted the concepts, forms, and techniques of design modernism towards the consolidation of globalizing language technology corporations like Olivetti and IBM. The project of "corporate identity," as it became known, reflected and advanced the dematerializing production trajectories of industrial capitalism, organized by concepts of "scientific" and then cybernetic management. Graphic design was used to formally unify corporate information products and their publicity, through totalizing identity systems and the powers of the logo. In this advanced capitalist superstructural project, the corporate identity standards manual produced not only signs and products, but subjectivities as well: the white-skinned, white-collared, grey-flanneled heterosexual male professional class. The production of these subjectivities was understood, within the dystopian collectivity of the corporation, to compose a distinct and homogeneous "corporate culture," and thus to extend a process by which corporations came to aesthetically appear as sovereign entities on an equal footing with nation states.

Beginning with Bruce Mau's identity for the Netherlands Architecture Institute in 1989 (and coinciding with the collapse of the Soviet sphere and the total globalization of capital), the concept of advanced visual identity as a design project has been radically altered, decentering its aesthetics while displacing its field of application. As its forms have become self-consciously dynamic, mutable, fluid, and heterogeneous, its content has shifted from the multinational corporation to the contemporary multicultural art institution. This "postmodern" shift in aesthetics and in domains of representation accompanied another shift in design practice and discourse, one which attempted to reverse the international modernist vector of corporations becoming state-like through the mediation of their visual identity. In the late 80s and 90s, under the aegis of "nation branding," an array of architectural projects and discourses in a number of countries (with the Netherlands in the vanguard) sought to aesthetically formalize and differentiate nation-states and their institutions within a competitive market, and thus make them like corporations. This moment came hard on the heels of a period marked by various and often hard-fought struggles to define postmodernism and its implications for design, as well as in larger cultural and political contexts. Attempt were made, by both progressive and conservative actors, to define and reify "culture" as a vital force, exactly as, in the increasingly "postindustrial" west, many of the hard realities of material production were being displaced across distant seas and had receded from view. Within the struggles of these "culture wars," it became possible, and necessary, to think in terms of an "identity politics" that ascribes political agency to cultural difference, while also critiquing the static rigidity, and hubristic claims of rationality by modernist institutions. Ironically, the calls to depoliticize architecture and design and to reject modernist "social engineering" that marked many figurations of postmodernism, ran parallel to a new coupling of cultural politics and "cultural production" that would further blur the already fraught distinction between design and politics.

This turn towards "culture" and mutability has continued and amplified in the contemporary moment, in the aftermath of postermodernism. Recent identities for the Whitney Museum of Art (Experimental Jetset), the Stedelijk Museum (Mevis and van Deursen), and Documenta 14 (multiple), among many others in the institutional art world, have become the explicit medium for aesthetic demonstrations of multiplicity and difference, rather than the logical deductions of a structure or system. In these projects, it is possible to see an almost-utopian desire for design to embrace and represent — or even to produce — the kind of fluid and open identities that characterize postmodern cultural life. At the same time, the late-capitalist global corporation has seemingly dissolved its claim to visual identity altogether, while its erstwhile form-workers and art directors have been demoted to freelance influence hustlers and bland neoliberal ideologues. The once-monolithic identify edifice of corporate giants like IBM and Olivetti has diffused into vapor, noise, and pulp, and the corporations, or whatever they are at this point, have put aside the iconic clarity of self-presentation in favor of holding up a mirror—a grotesque distorting fun house mirror—to their audience/consumers.

This profound shift in both the form and content of advanced visual identity work mirrors the one that Paul Preciado has articulated, from industrial commodity production to what he has termed the pharmacopornographic production of subjectivities. "Industrial work," he writes, "has turned into biopolitical labor; and what is being produced is gender, sexual desire, and subjectivity as multi-media commodities."[1] Capital has always deployed divisions of gender, as well as race and cultural representations of class, to reproduce itself. If, however, the old regime of modernist corporate identity produced white heteronormative subjects largely through disciplinary managerial means, then in the contemporary social factory of late capitalism, we are now explicitly summoned to produce and reproduce ourselves

as gendered, sexed, and racialized subjectivities, through dispositifs of drugs and images, relentlessly customized by the hidden algorithms of online platforms controlling our spectacular circulation. In these newer and softer regimes of control (coincidental with the shift in focus, in the field of design, to relational forms marked by "interaction" and "user experience"), the emancipatory promise of openness and flexibility is conjoined to a forcing-down and inward of design—as an agency of power and control—deeper into the private self, in ways that leave increasingly fewer blank spaces for negativity, excess, and resistance.

This transformation raises a host of pressing questions about the status of many of the old revolutionary projects of modernism. If industrial production has been supplanted by a new regime of semiotic and biopolitical self-production, how might we conceptualize a collective resistance to this late capitalist multi-media regime of identity? What new images can we produce to short-circuit this political and aesthetic economy of control? What new procedures of interpellation might we self-organize for the reproduction, not of individualized gendered bodies and mental attentions for capital, but of emancipated subjects for new autonomous and collective pleasures? Is it possible to seize control of the contemporary mean of subjective reproduction? Can we occupy these new factories? Can we break the chain that representationally fastens a signifier to a signified and thereby interrupt or shut down the semiotic apparatus that produces abstractions of sex and gender? Alternatively, are there paths of flight which can be identified to lead us out into a new ground, a new space? Can we, like the groovy hippies of old, building space-age geodesic domes on their back-to-the-land farm communes, be free to construct our own identities from fragments of the old and new? Or can we, dialectically, like the punks of the Xerox machine, cut ourselves into pieces and reassemble the shapes in new orders, new dreams, new pleasures, and new alliances?

There is no need to fear or hope, but only to look for new weapons.[2]

[1] Beatriz Preciado. *Pornotopia: An Essay on Playboy's Architecture and Biopolitics*. Zone. 2014. pp 10–11.
[2] Gilles Deleuze. *Postscript on the Societies of Control*. October, Vol. 59. (Winter, 1992), p 4.

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