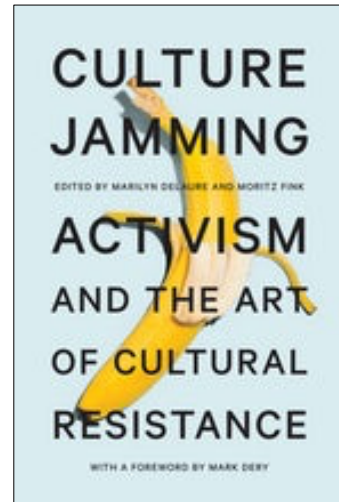


Marilyn DeLaure and Moritz Fink (Eds.), **Culture Jamming: Activism and the Art of Cultural Resistance**, New York: New York University Press, 2017, 455 pp., \$30.00 (paperback); \$89.00 (hardcover).

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Last fall, international artists converged upon major cities across the UK to take over billboards in the spirit of highlighting the global threat of anthropocentric climate change. A so-called “Brandalism” network hijacked over 100 commercial billboards and bus stops—overlaying existing brand messaging and advertisements with artistically rendered countermessages paying homage to climate change mitigation. Their goal—to shame automobile manufacturers and marketers for creating a culture of unsustainable car ownership and carbon emissions—was aligned perfectly with the medium under attack. Roadway billboards, of course, epitomize a culture of driving, consumption, and sprawl. In total, over 45 rogue works of art were produced by a guerrilla collective of street artists, designers, and satirists. The campaign was striking for its ambition in taking aim at global automakers like Volkswagen, Ford, and BMW. It was also remarkable for turning a form of corporate persuasion—in this case, outdoor advertising—against itself to achieve a higher social goal.



It is but one example of how activists successfully subvert consumer culture through an array of tactics that turn heads in live time and foster real-world political impact. From street art to parodies, and media hoaxes to outlandish stunts, these deployments interrupt a mediated world that serves global capitalism. And they are the focus of the insightful and wide-ranging collection devoted to this genre of activism that is **Culture Jamming: Activism and the Art of Cultural Resistance**, edited by Marilyn DeLaure and Moritz Funk.

The book features a collection of essays, interviews, and creative works that in myriad ways reflect the loosely defined structure of this powerful yet underestimated communication form. The term “culture jam,” coined in the 1980s, describes the media tactics that appropriate the language of capitalism and consumer culture. In their bid to subvert or oppose institutions, activists “jam” the traditional tools of commercialism, including advertisements but also logos, slogans, and mainstream cultural productions. Broader societal shifts during the last several decades, including migration to cities, the privatization of urban space, and the mass uptake of digital communication forms, have provided further growth to this unique genre of advocacy and mediated action. Culture jamming’s parodies, hoaxes, and subverted slogans have now been joined by inner-city street art and social media–driven flash mobs.

A strength of this collection, thanks to the breadth of its contributors and their respective engagements with the topic through different conceptual lenses, is an ability to consider culture jamming as a more robust framework for understanding or amplifying social advocacies and political movements in the future. Contributor Christine Harold, for example, situates culture jamming as an inventive form of media activism. A strategy of rhetorical sabotage not only mitigates the intended effects of marketing, but it also

offers lessons anew about consumer culture. And yet, Harold points out deftly that “subversive rhetoric” and “shocking imagery” are already layered into mass marketing campaigns (p. 64). As an example, she points to contemporary product advertisements that rely on a message of ostensible revolution even as they bolster product sales or shareholder returns.

To this end, the book strives to understand whether or not culture jamming has been successful in undermining dominant societal institutions. The answer, here, is murky, and raises a second question: In light of its inevitable co-optation, did the culture jamming moment die before it even got started? Michael Serazio ponders this question in his exploration of the guerrilla marketing tactics at advertising agency Crispin Porter + Bogusky. The agency is one of many that have embraced so-called guerilla marketing tactics—those that subvert public places and physical spaces—in the name of consumer brands and institutional campaigns. Both guerrilla marketing and culture jamming, according to Serazio, exist within a sphere of commercial media saturation and mainstream marketing messages that are overwhelmingly “inauthentic, trite, and dissatisfying” (p. 238). Culture jamming is therefore locked in a struggle over meaning-making with corporate brands that have leveraged these same tactics to shift human psychology and behavior in the service of designer running shoes and fast food restaurants. This subversive persuasion, therefore, faces a significant existential crisis thanks to its co-optation by Madison Avenue. It means that culture jamming as a strategy needs to evolve alongside the desire of corporations and governments to co-opt the approach.

This issue has become more salient in 2021, in light of global political movements and the COVID-19 pandemic. Driven by institutional and economic pressures, corporations have moved with urgency to embed social, political, and environmental callings into organizational missions and communication outputs. Given this emergent political economy, what does the future hold for culture jamming when Fortune 500 firms increasingly emulate not only activists’ tactics but also deliver commercialized variations of their messages?

One effective path forward for activists seeking to reclaim culture jamming processes might be realized through play and provocation. Harold invokes “pranking rhetoric” to explain popular media forms that are hijacked and reconfigured in the service of social impact (p. 65). This hybrid of innovation, political art, and media moves away from a polarizing discourse that reinforces existing meanings, and provides a refreshed metanarrative, in which issues of culture and commerce are recalibrated to confront a changing world. This understanding of culture jamming emphasizes the clarity of its messaging in the service of activism, and its ability to efficiently fulfill a set of strategic objectives focused on media amplification, public opinion shifts, and policy change.

But, if anything, the global protests of recent years remind us that nothing moves the needle of social change like direct action. Where does this leave culture jamming’s forum for subversion, which emphasizes persuasion in civic life over a public showing of force? A helpful interpretation beyond rhetorical appeals—one that moves from the playful to the unruly—is articulated by contributor Tony Perucci, who situates “ruptural performance” as a means to not merely replacing dominant narratives, but also to derailing meaning-making processes in which such narratives are consumed (p. 281). This metaunderstanding moves culture jamming away from efficient strategic advocacy toward a seemingly unproductive but overtly sensory form of direct action that revels in its attributes of inconvenience, annoyance, and ambiguity.

Of course, for creative artists and tongue-in-cheek activists, culture jamming is less about processes and outcomes than it is about experimentation and the unconventional. For the would-be tactician, the book's third section—"Culture Jammers' Studio"—offers an eclectic collection of approaches, from the gaming of trademark and copyright law to the usage of digital media to disseminate alternative viewpoints. Satire is, of course, a fixture amid this array of pop media manipulations, subversions of corporate communication, and other semantic alterations. Andrew Boyd's chapter "Notes on the Economic Unconscious from a Billionaire for Bush" recalls a "well-packaged schtick" of grassroots activists—one that grew to 100 chapters—adorned in tuxedos and projecting slogans like "Free the Enron 7" and "Corporations are People Too" (p. 402). As Boyd noted, this innovative approach to persuasion provided an indulgence of personal motivations and emotions. As a "get out of jail free card, a moral license to let our id run wild over a number of ideological taboos," it provided the flexibility needed to break through the media clutter about money and economic inequality (p. 403).

This reflexivity is what makes this collection continually relevant in spite of upheavals in our collective global political and economic life. A cynical view might hold that culture jamming is a relic of a more innocent time. The physical and mediated spaces corporations helped create were ready-made for subversive performance. This is increasingly harder to do. With the encroachment of national commercial brands into this arena, there is the distinct possibility that traditional culture jammers will have less room to make a meaningful contribution.

DeLaure and Fink deserve credit, here, for broadly conceptualizing a culture jamming that is mostly resistant to institutional capture and nimble enough to see its way through an astonishingly sophisticated and increasingly cynical media landscape. Corporations have adopted culture jamming in their repertoire of marketing tactics, but that does not mean they have made it obsolete for activists. Serazio addresses the line between the culture jamming work of activists and commercial advertising creatives: "The subvertisement being the means to liberate consumerist thinking; the anti-advertisement being the means to reimagine consumption" (p. 243). Yet, even as cultural disruptions are blended into mainstream communication and persuasion, they still have a significant role to play in our shifting configurations of mediated, technological, and physical space. Concerns over the suppression of free speech and expression by media institutions, technology companies, and government agencies provide a powerful case in point. Here, culture jamming may not serve as merely a persuasive form of mediated activism. By virtue of its playful disguise, it may provide the only practical venue for activists to counterpunch the worrying amalgamation of market forces, commercial appeals, and political attacks against our democratic institutions.