

Low and High

Design in Everyday Life

In 1990 the Museum of Modern Art organized the exhibition *High and Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture*, which showed how modern artists incorporated elements of low culture into their work. The curators presented newspapers, advertising, comic books, and graffiti as raw material for the hermetic experiments of the avant-garde. In each instance, the “low” was transformed into a higher form, its crude energy diverted to fuel new aesthetic value.

Graphic designers engaged in their own transformations of low into high during the 1980s. Many appropriations of the so-called “vernacular” worked from the top down, viewing ordinary commercial artifacts as external sources to be studied with detached admiration. Yet the question of low and high can also be viewed from the bottom up—from the worm’s eye view of everyday life rather than the bird’s eye view of the critic. While the bird looks down at the world from above, the worm looks up at the world from below. This essay argues that in order to renew their critical view of contemporary life, designers could find a place to speak from *within* culture, and not position themselves outside and above it.

The line must also be drawn across them, through them: linking the two sides of the divide while separating them, cancelling the opposition while marking it.

The opposition between low and high art parallels oppositions found in language, where the pair low/high describes a spatial relation—as do under/over, down/up, fall/rise, and bottom/top. These spatial conditions can be mapped onto a series of value judgments loaded with cultural connotations: lower class/upper class, downstairs/upstairs, elevate/denigrate, and hell/heaven, to name just a few. Again and again, the English language classifies features of social and spiritual life in terms of proximity to the earth.

The conflict between low and high is not a matter of content but of structure.



Low and high is a pattern, a conceptual shell, whose value shifts from situation to situation. What is high in one setting is low in another. In the space of a few years, a style can cycle from current chic to dated convention to camp nostalgia to neo-conservative revival. The term “vernacular,” like the high/low pair, is relative: it positions a standard language against a lesser dialect, a dominant culture against a secondary subculture. The vernacular is the Other, and any discourse has its Other.

The recent attraction to vernacular styles represents a search for spontaneous, unpretentious voices—voices that belong to the idealized aura of a romanticized past (the roaring 20s, the flamboyant 50s) or to the noble savagery of a visual underclass (folksy signage, campy clip art). Nostalgia, a key ingredient in raising the market value of a vernacular style, is not a return to history but a repackaging of history. It treats the past not as the roots of the present, but as a

distanced Other. Appropriations of contemporary vernaculars often project a barrier between a sophisticated "us" and a naïve, spontaneous "them"—the ordinary commercial artifact is an innocent object that fails to comprehend its own genius. Such nostalgic borrowings relegate the vernacular to a space removed from the aesthetic world of the designer.

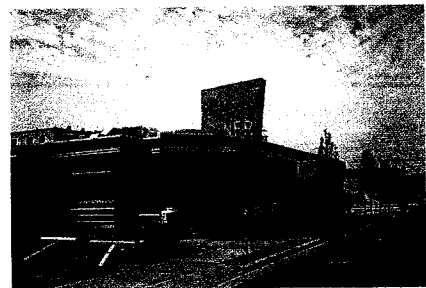
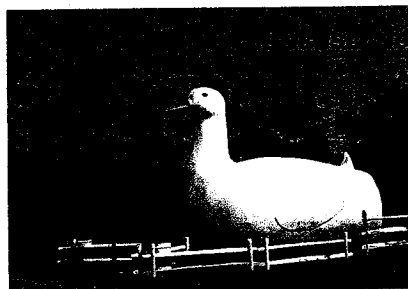
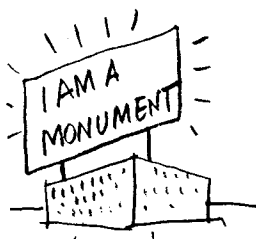
Setting a distance between design and everyday life was one of the founding acts of modernism, which posed a divide between the consumer culture and a critical avant-garde. Thus William Morris's designed objects stood against the machine ethic of the day: he opposed naturalism with abstraction, artifice with honesty, and the illusion of depth with the honesty of surface. Morris created a conscience for design, and also a consciousness—a sense of opposition between a reform-minded minority and a commercial majority governed by the appetites of the marketplace.

Morris initiated the modernist ideal of the designer as critic, a figure who stands aside from the mainstream and presents alternative visions. The designer-as-critic is not simply an obedient extension of marketing, but aspires to go beyond what people already want, and teach them to want something better. The lofty mission of the designer/critic carries with it an elitist attitude toward the public. The designer is a cultural expert occupying a view from above. Hovering beyond the teeming crowds, the designer hands down master plans for reform.

As modernism became an academic credo in the 1950s and 60s, museums and university design programs became critics of the junk products and street graphics of everyday life. This paternalistic view was attacked by Pop movements in London, New York, and Milan. For American designers, the post-modern rebellion was crystallized in *Learning from Las Vegas* in 1972, which rejected high-minded reformism in favor of embracing the existing landscape of capital. Yet the distanced stance of the critic returns in the voice of Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour, whose edict to "learn from Las Vegas" was directed at the late inheritors of modernism, not at the makers of roadside architecture. *Learning from Las Vegas* viewed its subject as an ethnographic specimen, an innocent sample of popular life to be studied by the knowing specialists of high culture.

Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour celebrated architecture-as-sign in *Learning from Las Vegas*. They used a road-side egg store store shaped like a duck as an icon for modernist architecture: building and meaning are collapsed into a single, monolithic structure. In contrast, the typical diner or "decorated shed" is a box with a sign attached to it. *Learning from Las Vegas* made the Long Island duck—once considered a trashy eyesore—into a cult object which is now protected as a historical landmark.

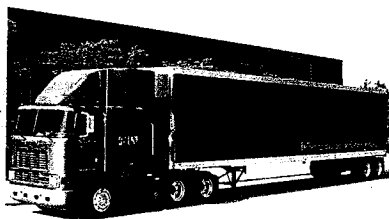
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Parallel to the Pop urbanism of Venturi and Scott Brown was the eclectic style of the Push Pin Studio, which recombined elements of avant-garde art, historic ornament, and popular media in the 1960s and 70s. The Push Pin artists favored America's permissive marketing ethos over the normative theories of European modernism—they treated modernism itself as a kind of vernacular, one dialect among many rather than a standard grammar. Milton Glaser transformed his sources—from comic books to Constructivism—into his own signature style, sifting his borrowed material through the filter of a personal “touch.” Reflecting the logic of “learning” from Las Vegas, Glaser turned low forms into something higher, refashioning them through his distinctive artistic style.

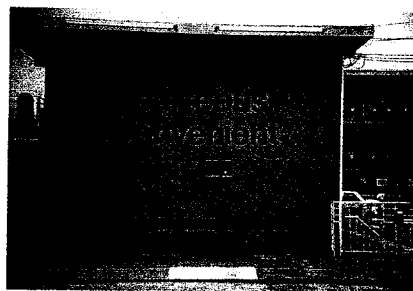
A similar alchemy of the ordinary appears in the post-Push Pin eclecticism of Charles Anderson, who has tapped the archive of outdated commercial ephemera as a source of familiar codes, ready to be updated into old-yet-new styles. Anderson's appropriation of “naïve” typography and illustration from the 1940s and 50s has capitalized on the nostalgia epidemic which gripped middle-class America in the 1980s and has yet to loosen its hold. Anderson has described the commercial art of 30 years ago with phrases like “naïve, simple, in your face, not intellectual, not slick, bone-head.” Beneath his admiration, however, is a sense of distance from the culture he quotes. Anderson's nostalgia marks a divide between “us” in the design-savvy present and “them” in the bone-head past.

The New York design studio M&Co championed the vernacular in the 1980s as a source of clean, honest inspiration—a cold, invigorating shower to cleanse the conscience of style-happy, client-rich designers. Alexander Isley, Marlene McCarty, Emily Oberman and other designers employed at M&Co in the 1980s converted



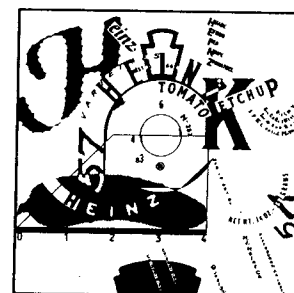
The signage below for a motel in Wildwood, New Jersey was borrowed from Massimo Vignelli's identity for Knoll, designed in the 1970s. The cultural position of a given style along the axis of high and low is not fixed; nor does it move in only one direction. Here, modernism itself serves as a vernacular idiom ripe for quotation—“clean, courteous, convenient.”

We cannot simply draw a line between low and high, or between the inside and the outside of culture, or between public and private experiences of mass media.

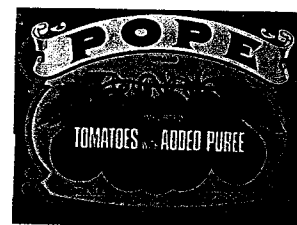
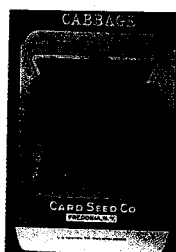


Seed packets, old and new. Adobe's nostalgic package, designed as a promotion for illustration software, shows the capacity of computer-aided design for retro styling. The real seed packets below range from the appealing collectible to the artlessly ordinary.

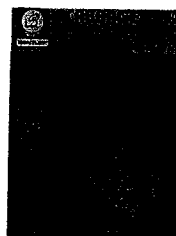
Study of Heinz ketchup label, designed by Robert Nakata, 1984, Cranbrook Academy of Art. The supposedly naïve "vernacular" of the Heinz label was the subject of a formal experiment. The Heinz label is not truly naïve, but is part of a sophisticated corporate identity program.



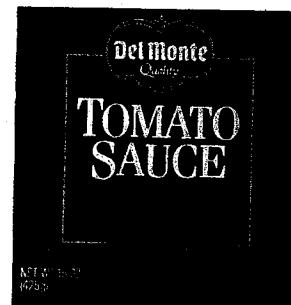
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Label redesign, Oregon canned fruit, 1991. In a wave of nostalgia, this fruit packer eliminated the bluntly industrial elements from its old package—sans serif type, photographic illustration—in favor of a quaint retro style reminiscent of collectible fruit crate labels. Two vernaculars clash—a strangely outmoded modernism is supplanted by a sentimental revival.



Within the semiotic landscape of tomato sauce, there are numerous "vernaculars," from a national brand name like Heinz, whose look is deliberately bland and familiar, to an Italian export product whose image is jubilantly inventive, to the pseudo-ethnic identity of Ragu, which draws upon a stock of standard clichés about Italy, to the deluxe graphics of the Duffy Group's Classico label, which appeals to nostalgia for the traditional craft of home cooking. Each of these labels is "vernacular," in so far as each gives voice to a distinct product world, aimed at a distinct market.



the everyday lingo of quick-print wedding typography, felt-board lobby signage, and phone-book iconography into a new urban chic. M&Co's ironic use of over-the-counter graphics suggested the absence of art, the erasure of ego, and the disappearance of the designer. Yet while creative director Tibor Kalman publicly promoted non-design, he built his career on the mystique of the artist-as-witch-doctor, the impresario of taste who turns lead into gold, low into high.

Working in the same New York milieu, Drenttel Doyle Partners incorporated mundane commercial sources into the studio's distinctive use of mixed fonts, graduated type sizes, and literary conventions. Most of Drenttel Doyle's appropriations transformed their low sources beyond recognition. As Stephen Doyle has explained, he adopted tabloid typography and commercial catalogue layouts for "civilized use"—he was interested in the structural ideas, not the surface appearance, of such crude artifacts as the *World Weekly News*.

The commercial vernacular became part of a distinctly modernist experiment at Cranbrook Academy beginning in the mid-70s. Students were asked to submit an ordinary typographic object—such as a Yellow Pages ad or a ketchup label—to a series of formal operations, from rational grid studies to free-form compositions.

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The exercise was an object lesson in discovering the distance between "us" and "them," between the esoteric laboratory experiments of graduate students and the specimens they skillfully dissected. What these studies appeared to overlook is the fact that the seemingly naïve "commercial vernacular" often belonged to a sophisticated marketing strategy. The Heinz Company, for example, helped invent corporate identity in the late nineteenth century, by pioneering modern packaging, advertising, and image management.

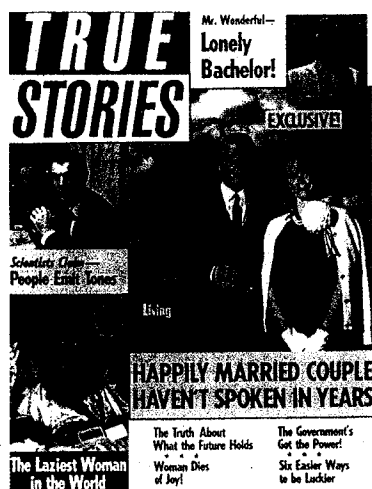
These quotations of the everyday perform acts of transformation—the Pop makeovers of Milton Glaser, the quirky nostalgia of Charles Anderson, the visual slumming of M&Co. In each instance, the low redeems itself by turning into something better, by offering a source of energy to the higher life form which feeds upon it. Various critics—from Walter Benjamin in the 1930s to writers in "cultural studies"—have argued that mass culture changed the very structure of art, both high and low. Because mass media and mass production altered the conduct of public and private life, "low" culture cannot be treated merely as an innocent source of subject matter, imagery, or style. We cannot simply draw a line between the inside and the outside of culture, or between public and private experiences of mass media, or between low and high forms of expression. The line must also be drawn across them, through them: linking the two sides of the divide as well as separating them, cancelling the opposition as well as defining it.¹

1 See Meaghan Morris, "Banality in Cultural Studies," *Discourse* 10, 2 (Spring/Summer 1988): 3-28; and Stuart Hall, "Notes on Deconstructing the 'Popular,'" in Raphael Samuel, ed., *People's History and Socialist Theory* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), 227-239.

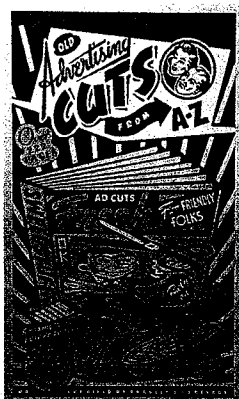


Promotional comb, designed by M&Co, mid-1980s. M&Co became notorious for its surprisingly ordinary gifts.

Film poster, *True Stories*, designed by M&Co, mid-1980s. Tabloid typography is used to promote David Byrne's gothic depiction of Middle America.



Menu board, Restaurant Florent, designed by M&Co, mid-1980s. M&Co used off-the-shelf typography for this hip downtown diner.

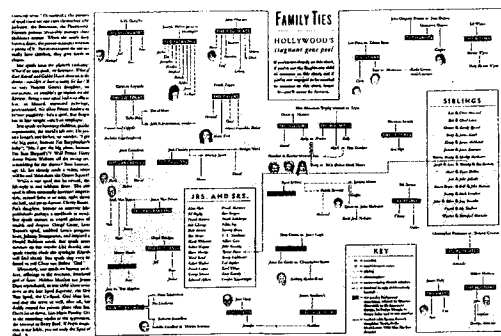


Book cover, *Advertising Cuts from A to Z*, designed by Charles Anderson, 1989. Anderson's book of clip art is a visual dictionary of 1950s nostalgia.

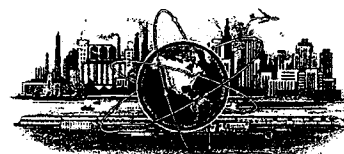
Advertisement, World Financial Center, designed by Drenttel Doyle Partners. The designers based their layout on an industrial catalogue.



Magazine spread, "Family Ties," designed by Alexander Isley. *Spy*, 1988. Isley's absurd yet rigorously archival graphics explored the messy subconscious of the Information Age.



Logo, Drenttel Doyle Partners, mid-1980s. The studio's own graphic identity incorporates vernacular elements, but here—unlike the examples at left—the source is adopted openly, its identity left unobscured. This vernacular source comes not from the visual underclass of clay-coated catalogues and supermarket tabloids, but arrives instead from the genteel world of engraved financial ephemera. The designers have allowed the vernacular to show its face in a situation where the social class involved is high rather than low.

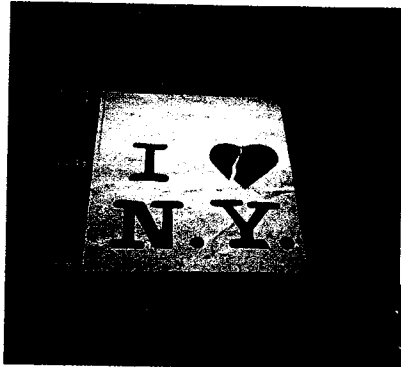


DRENTTEL DOYLE PARTNERS

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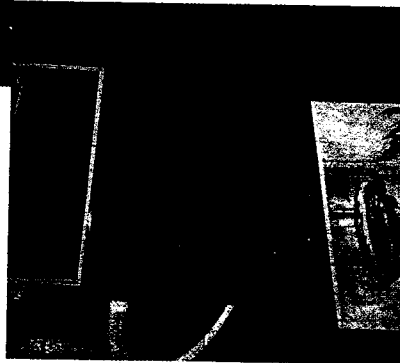


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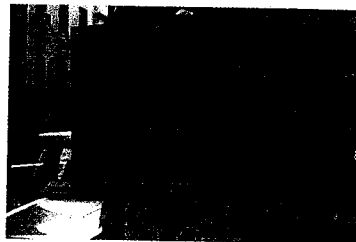


Poster, *Homelessness at Work*, designed by Day Gleeson and Dennis Thomas. Published by Bullet Space, New York, 1991. This series of posters included adaptations of corporate and bureaucratic information styles.

Poster, designed by Tom McGlynn and Emily Carter. Published by Bullet Space, New York, 1991. This symbol for a broken-hearted city is based on Milton Glaser's famous rebus.



Poster, *Enjoy AZT*, designed by Vincent Gagliostro and Avram Finkelstein. Published by Bullet Space, New York, 1991. This appropriation of the Coca-Cola logo compares the makers of AZT to manufacturers of other products-for-profit.



Rave flyer, *Cream of the Crop*, designer unknown, New York, 1995.

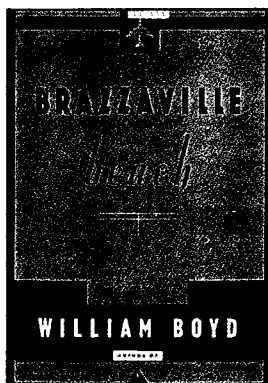


The maker of this sign attempted to imitate the "vernacular" of mass-produced typography.

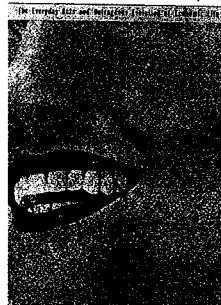


NUMBER 3
HOMOTURE
\$4.00

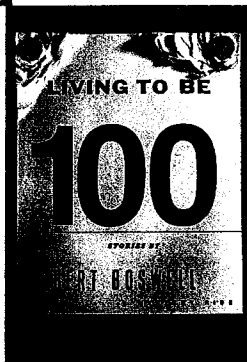
Magazine cover, *Homoture*, 1991/92. The Pepsi generation comes out.



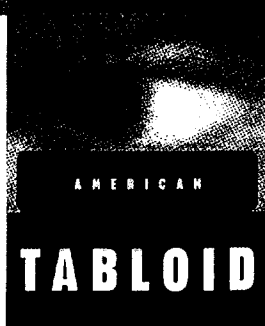
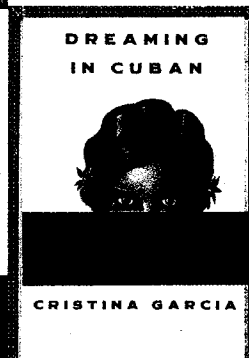
The American Replacement
of Nature: William Irwin Thompson



Book cover, *Low Life*,
designed by Barbara de
Wilde, Alfred A. Knopf, early
1990s. Art director: Carol
Devine Carson. Insistently
horizontal bands have been
used to express the
condition of "lowness."



Book covers, designed by Chip
Kidd and Barbara de Wilde,
Alfred A. Knopf, early 1990s.
Art director: Carol Devine
Carson. Kidd and de Wilde use
cigarette packages, pieces of old
magazines, and other scraps
of daily life in their book covers.
These covers changed the
familiar language of design for
publishing, precipitating a new
"vernacular" out of old ones.



It is this contradictory break between the low and the high—at once there and not there, dividing and connecting—on which modernism was founded. The vanguard opposition to middle-class society, the search for a place above and beyond the mainstream, the need to transform the ordinary into something new: these are features of the modernist vision. The desire to find a space outside of culture was inspired by the very omnipresence of products and media, a socializing force from which no one is exempt.

Many contemporary uses of so-called “vernacular” styles assume a distance between the civilized designer and the raw material to be transformed, while other work acknowledges the position of the designer as someone who is both inside and outside of culture: the designer is a spectator of his or her own world, rather than the connoisseur of a nostalgic past, an exotic other, or a visual underclass.

A common strategy among urban subcultures is to remake national trademarks into emblems for alternative ideas and institutions. Appropriations like these are made not from *above* mass culture but from *within* it: a view from the street rather than from the laboratory of the specialist or the studio of the artist. Such designs represent vernacular codes as the visible traces of power. By taking back and rewriting the hieroglyphics of the everyday, these designers are making a language of the ordinary that borrows time from the dominant corporate monologue.

Critical refashionings of a vernacular code include the information graphics of *Spy* magazine. *Spy*'s format was initiated by Drenttel Doyle Partners in 1986 and crafted by Alexander Isley into a ruthlessly funny, rigorously archival typographic language. The vernacular model for *Spy*'s charts, maps, and diagrams is the authoritative lingo of newspapers and science textbooks. *Spy*'s infographics parodied the typographic style of Objectivity, Facts, and Information. They appropriate not a visual underclass but the vocabulary of “knowledge” itself.

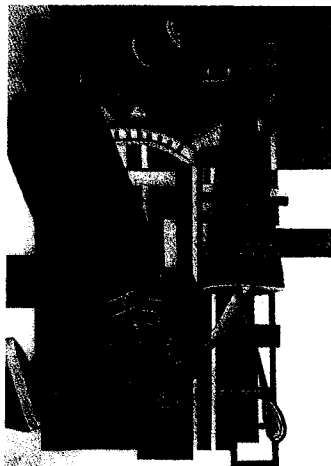


CALL AGAIN

CALL AGAIN

Cigar box, designer unknown. ♀
Chip Kidd used cigar box graphics to express an explicitly consumerist, American vision of “Cuba” in his design for the cover of *Dreaming in Cuban*.

Painting, *The Siphon*, Ferdinand Léger, 1924. Albricht-Knox Gallery, Buffalo, New York. Featured in the exhibition *High and Low*, Museum of Modern Art, 1990.



A transformation from the mundane to the magical was the subject of MoMA's *High and Low* exhibition, which presented commercial art as raw nourishment for the hermetic visions of modern artists. Throughout the exhibition and catalogue, curators Kirk Varnedoe and Adam Gopnik reiterated the transformation from the public to the private, from the external artifact to the internal vision, from the low to the high. Newspapers, advertising, and comic books were treated as modern-day equivalents to the landscapes, bowls of fruit, and naked women which have traditionally offered subject matter

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Advertisement, Campari, from *Le Matin*, September 12, 1924. Featured in the exhibition *High and Low*, Museum of Modern Art, 1990.

to secular artists. Yet mass media and modern art are not worlds apart. The modern museum has itself become a form of entertainment and a vehicle for corporate image—the *High and Low* exhibition was, among other things, a promotion for AT&T, the project's sponsor.

Because designers are taught to focus on visual style over social function, we often overlook the relation of design to institutions of power. The tendency to see styles as working in a free space encourages a romantic view of the "commercial vernacular" as an innocent Other rather than an active player in the politics of daily life. The heroism of the avant-garde lay in its vision of design as a liberating social force. The current crisis of modernism lies in the contradictory desire to occupy a place outside of society while at the same time transforming it. The critical stance of modern design can be relocated as an analysis from *within* culture, rather than a critique from above and beyond.