



THE DESIGNER AS BRANDER

*The unveiling of a new brand identity
is an emotional opportunity to energize employees
around a new sense of purpose.*

RODNEY ABBOT

*There is much more to branding than a logo or style.
It is a manifestation of power.*

METAHAVEN



MAKING MARKS

From the Nike swoosh to the Christian cross, abstract symbols play an important role in human society. Elementary shapes such as the circle, square, triangle, the line, the arrow, and the cross have been found in 35,000-year-old cave drawings on different continents.¹ This would suggest that some symbols are universal, although their meaning is definitely not universally shared. Historian Yuval Noah Harari mentions sociological research that suggests groups of up to about 150 individuals can exist without symbolic representation. Once a group becomes larger, stories and myths are necessary to establish a social order. Harari cites religions, politics, professions, nation states, social classes, and corporations as examples of such myths.²

The subject of symbols is expansive, which is why this chapter limits itself to the use of symbols that mark products or services: *brands*. The designer as a brander could be a craftsman, an artist, or a designer, who creates symbols for products as a proof of quality, authenticity, identity, and promotion. People are naturally drawn to symbol making. Workmen in ancient Rome and Egypt left inscriptions of symbols and their initials at construction sites, discovered thousands of years later. Today the unheard and unseen use graffiti tags to leave their mark in public space.

Branding started with the marking of agricultural property. Brandings were a symbol of identification, but today they have become symbols for mass-produced products. With each step the maker of the product became further removed from the brand that it represented, until logotypes for businesses grew into graphic systems for multinational corporations known as corporate identities. Branding since then spread to include all aspects of life, with brands achieving an almost omnipresent and religious status. Nothing can escape 'branding'; cities, nations, water, air, even sand

← Hank Willis Thomas, *Scarred Chest*, 2003.

can be branded. To find out which aspects of branding serve the capitalist system, this chapter retraces the designer as a brander, from its origins to the billion-dollar brands of today.

The Branding of Bodies

The word branding comes from the ancient Norse word *brandr*, meaning 'to burn'. One way of marking property was by burning a symbol into the hide of an animal, using a wooden torch called a brand. The word dates back to the early Middle Ages, but the Egyptians branded their livestock five thousand years ago. Livestock wasn't the only living form of property that was branded. David Graeber describes how in ancient Greece, slaves could be freed for a ransom, and they would be branded with the mark of their own currency.³ Under Roman law, slaves were considered property. Runaway slaves were marked with the letters FGV for *fugitivus* (fugitive), while robbers were branded with FUR, for *fure* (thief) into the forehead, legs, and arms.⁴

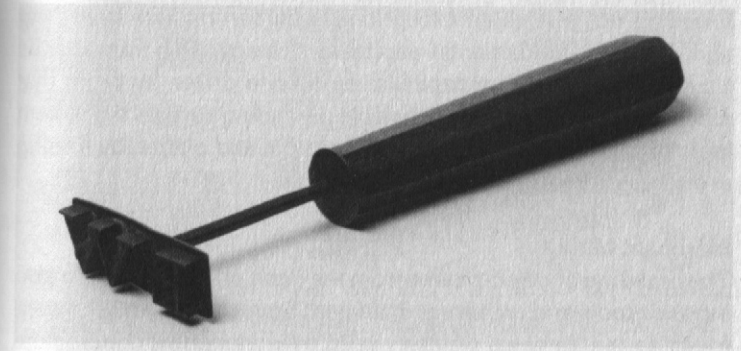
Slavery took on an industrial scale during European colonialism, when labour was needed in the colonized territories. Enslaved peoples were branded with a hot iron on the forehead, breast, or arm. The horrifying act of burning an owner's logo into a person as branding is understood by author and educator Simone Browne as both a technology for marketing and for torture.⁵



John H. Felch and William Riches, branding slaves, c. 1858.

Iron instruments fashioned into rather simple printed type became tools of torture.

SIMONE BROWNE, AUTHOR AND EDUCATOR



Branding iron with the letters 'E' and 'W', Latin America, 1877.

The branding of slaves was part of a designed cultural system of oppression and violence. When slaves from the Dutch West India Company (WIC) arrived on the Caribbean island of Curaçao they were branded before being sold. The WIC was one of the first corporations in the world, and already had 'brand' guidelines: 'as you purchase slaves you must mark them at the upper right arm with the silver marker CCN, which is sent along with you for that purpose', and then the method of branding itself,

note the following when you do the branding: (1) the area of marking must first be rubbed with candle wax or oil; (2) The marker should only be as hot as when applied to paper, the paper gets red.⁶

The graphic systems for branding slaves signified locations, situations, or owners. Browne explains the branding system of the WIC after 1703:

The company began to use alphabetic branding irons in an A-Z sequence, with the exception of the letters U and J so as not to be confused with the letters V and I, and the letter O was not used due to the iron being worn down.⁷

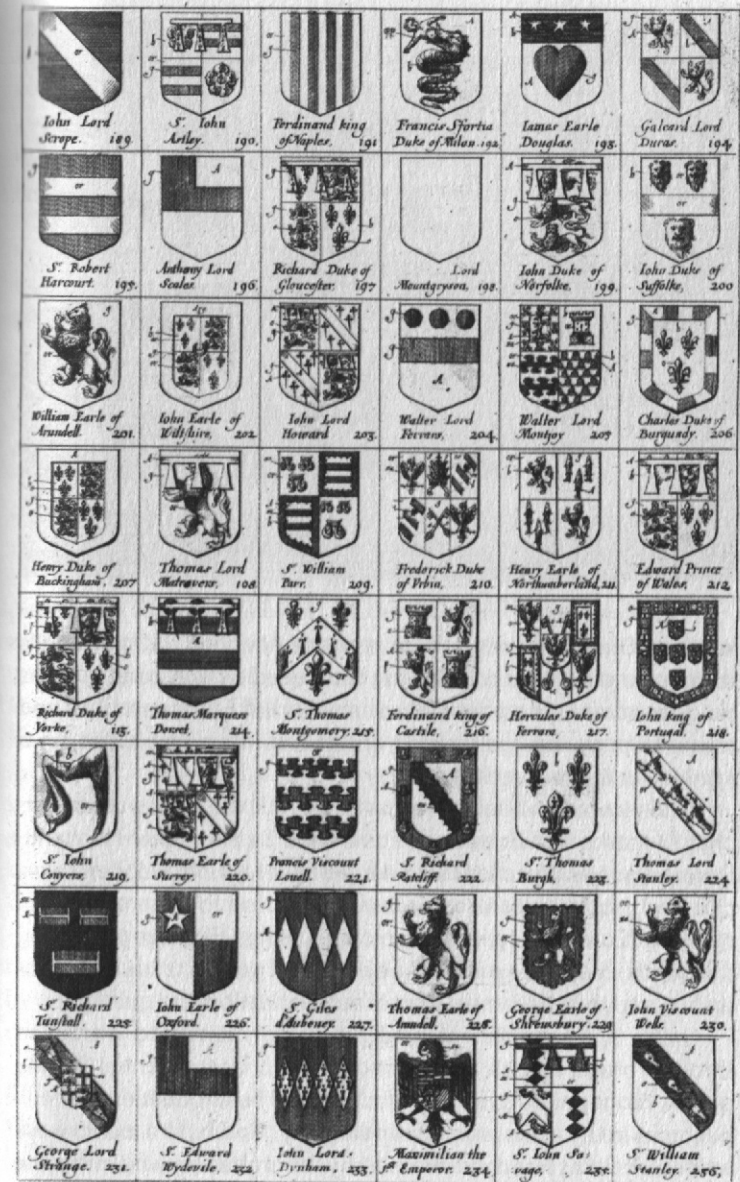
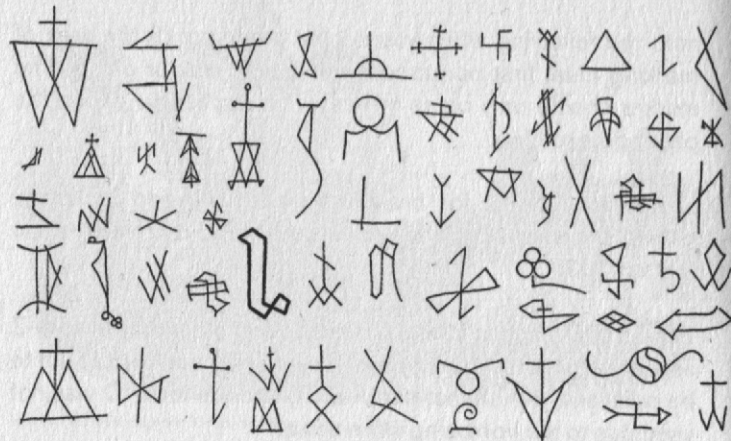
The Barbados Council branded the letter R on the forehead of slaves that set fire to sugarcane fields. In Brazil, runaway slaves were branded with the letter F.

It is important to understand this violent part of the history of branding not just as an exceptionally barbarous acts from long ago, but as a fundamental capitalist strategy. The transatlantic slave trade itself was a capitalist enterprise driven by profit that made industrial capitalism possible. Branding reveals the violent logic of capitalism's exploitation of people and planet, by turning everything into a commodity, even people.

Merchant Marks

The branding of objects came from the habit of craftsmen of marking their tools and creations. In ancient Egypt identity marks were found on the personal property used by workmen working on the pyramids. Identity marks could be derived from someone's name or initials, or a symbol related to the family name. A family symbol could even transfer from father to son.⁸

Before literacy became widespread, symbolic markings and colour schemes were necessary to identify friend or foe. Medieval knights who fought with closed visor needed shields with symbols and colours to distinguish one another on the battlefield. Heraldry books were produced with the graphic depictions of shields in order to assess the right amount of ransom money for captured



↑ Arms of Knights of the Garter, an order of knighthood in the British honours system, 1672-1677.
← Marks left by masons in King's College, thirteenth century, London.



The grocer's, from a Dutch school teaching aid. Most items are sold brandless in bulk quantities.

knights. Shields were part of a visual identity, with symbolic imagery and specific colours that were used by aristocrat families for generations. The popularity of shields led European cities and towns to copy the custom and create their own shields as town symbols in the thirteenth century.

While towns and noblemen used shields, the guilds used merchant's marks. These were symbols used by the maker for manufactured goods. Merchant's marks were burned into wooden cases carrying products, or were pressed onto products themselves. In medieval Europe they were even compulsory.⁹ Besides protecting the guilds, they were used to keep track of goods, to identify ownership, and thus became a sign of authentication and quality.

Crafts and specific regional production could be protected through brand names and symbols, which was essential for the guild's monopolies over manufacturing. These qualities can still be found in the use of some brands today. Merchant's marks were written or cut by hand, or stamped by the craftsman who made the product. Branding as a natural outcome of the production process itself would change with the industrial revolution.

Industrial Branding

In the craftsman's workshop, handmade products took great efforts, skills, and time to produce. The merchant's mark was a personal guarantee of quality by the workshop's master. The invention of the steam engine set in motion industrial production in the late eighteenth century, and the market would soon be flooded with identical mass-produced goods. These products were of much lower quality than the handmade products, and their form revealed little about the people who designed and produced them, and under which circumstances.

To compensate for the absent affinity that craftsmen instilled in their products, artists were hired to invent narratives, names, and symbols to replace the craftsmen's signature. These were always partly fictional, as the design of packaging and branding wasn't done on the factory floor where the objects were produced. One of the strategies to instil a familiar feeling onto lifeless industrial products was to invent fictional persons. Design theorists Ellen Lupton and J. Abbott Miller write that early industrial brands 'replaced the local shopkeeper as the interface between consumer and product'.¹⁰ This is why the brands for generic foods were folksy and family-like: Campbell's Soup, Uncle Ben's, Aunt Jemima, and Quaker Oats. A lot of these early advertising ideas can still be found today, as brands create brand personalities as a substitute for human relationships. By using a consistent way of speaking, informal language, and friendly imagery, brands make us associate a product with a person. In her book *No Logo* (1999), Naomi Klein quotes a 1920s ad man working for General Electric, saying that GE is not an electric company but they are 'the initials of a friend'.¹¹

The successful use of fiction to breathe life into products, taught early advertising professionals that they could sell anything by appealing to the customer's subconscious. Branding started to revolve around the creation of pleasant associations.

Filling the Void

The American Marketing Association defines a brand as a 'name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers'.¹² Undoubtedly brands can be symbols of quality and distinction,

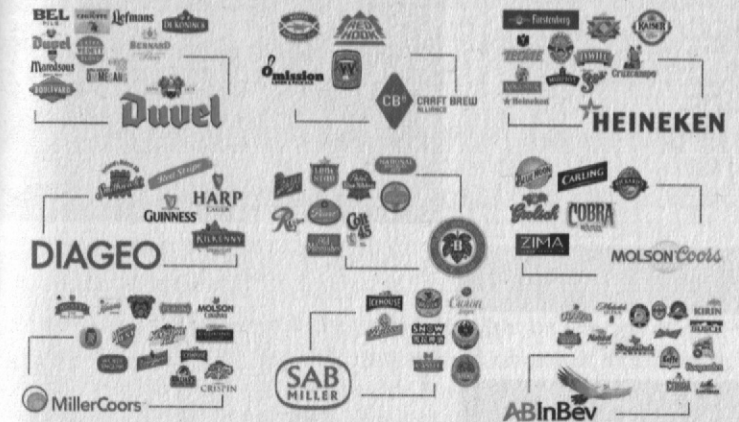
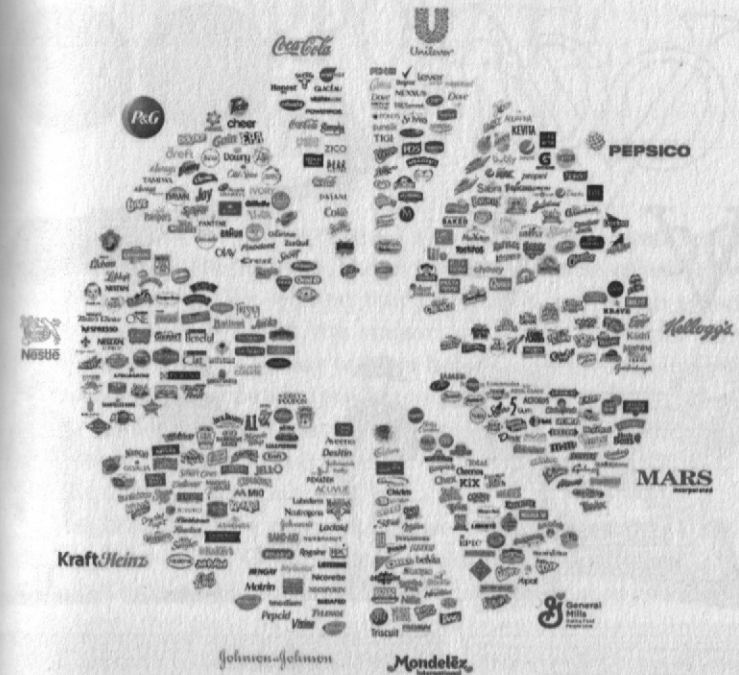
which have a genuine purpose. By creating marks that identify owners and makers of products, brands can even have a practical and cultural value.

Since the industrial revolution we have seen a very different function of brands. Overproduction under capitalism requires more aggressive methods to sell the surplus of products. Branding has become a promotional vehicle that disconnects the conditions of actual production, the workers, and the materials, from how products are sold. 'It has been the very business of the advertising industry to distance products from the factories that make them', writes Naomi Klein.¹³

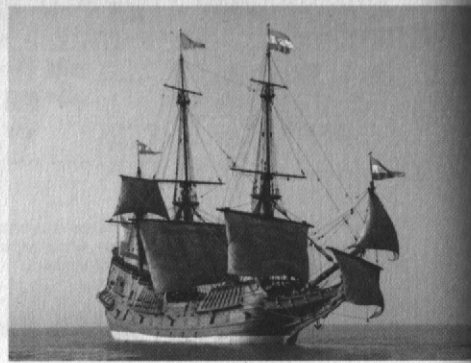
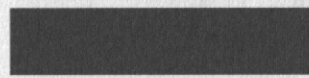
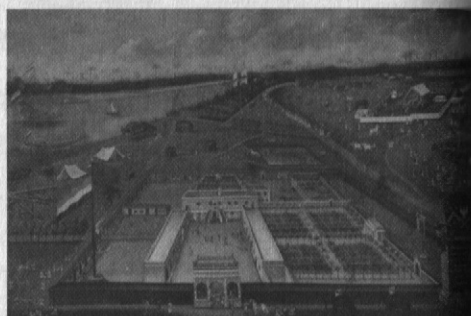
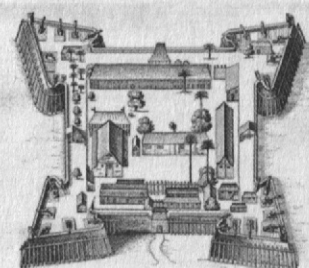
To a large extent, the workers who actually assemble or make the products have no influence on how these are communicated and branded. This is done as far away as possible, to enable designers to develop fictional narratives for the purpose of selling the product independent of its material quality and origin. Copywriter Helen Woodward started her advertising career in 1907 and said: 'if you are advertising any product, never see the factory in which it was made.... Don't watch the people at work ... because, you see, when you know the truth about anything, the real inner truth—it is very hard to write the surface fluff which sells it.'¹⁴

Through the dogma of branding, graphic designers are learning to commodify all forms of information. Just as what goods signify matters more these days than their basic utility, so it goes that first, information must signify ownership and only secondly does it inform.

NICK BELL, DESIGNER



- ↑ The products in supermarkets give the perception of unlimited choice. But a closer look reveals most brands are owned by a eleven companies, who often compete with their own brands.
- ↑ Six largest beer companies in the world and their brands.



CORPORATE IDENTITY

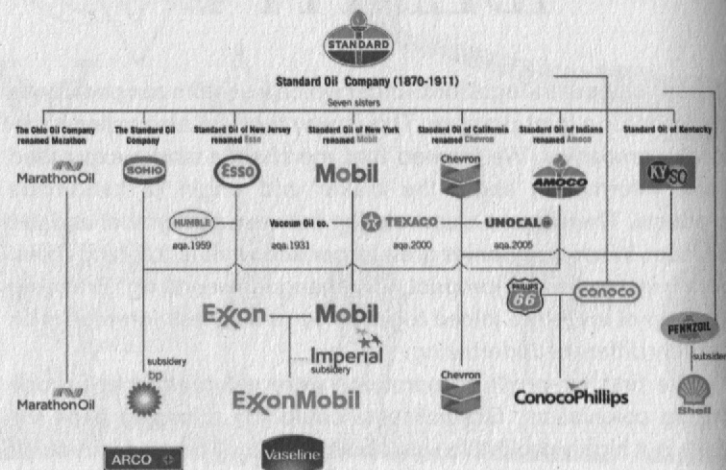
Corporations are a legal form under which investors can pool funds together for a joint purpose. This is why they are also called joint-stock companies. We learned that merchant's marks expressed basic information about the maker and origin of handmade products. There was a clear relation between the symbol and the product. When companies grew larger and wanted to brand themselves instead of the product, this changed everything. Branding a group of investors joined together for a business interest, is an entirely different undertaking.

The first for-profit corporations were established in Europe during colonialism. Governments could not afford to back the risky, but highly profitable sea journeys, so they created joint-stock companies that could attract money from investors. The enormous profits that were made in the slave trade and from colonial extraction and exploitation were the conditions under which the corporate form emerged. Among these first chartered multinational corporations were The Dutch East India Company, the Dutch West India Company, the British East India Company, and the Hudson's Bay Company.

The Dutch East India Company, *Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie* (VOC), was one of the first corporations. It was founded in 1602 as a merger between competing shipping companies and it was decided that incorporating them would increase profits. The VOC had a fleet of 4,700 ships, its own army, fortresses, colonial settlements, and even minted its own coins. To communicate its power across continents, it created what might be the first corporate identity. VOC logos were emblazoned on stock, documents, books, maps, coins, flags, cannons, and even on branding irons used on slaves. The colonial armies of the VOC engaged in torture and terror, and for the indigenous populations the corporate identity

← The first corporate identity and the first multinational, the Dutch East India Company, 1602-1799.

had 'become a sign of murder, torture and dispossession from their lands'.¹⁵ For centuries, European colonial corporations reigned supreme, and the VOC is estimated to have been the most valuable company in history, with an estimated worth of \$7.8 trillion today.¹⁶



Capitalism naturally creates monopolies. John D. Rockefeller's Standard Oil was the biggest corporation before it was broken up because of anti-trust laws in the US in 1911.

Boom and Bust

Lucrative colonial endeavours created an investment hype in seventeenth-century Europe, that ultimately led to several financial crises. People who wanted a piece of the pie were prone to scams. Laws were set in place to strictly limit the setting up of corporations. The British Bubble Act of 1720 forbade the founding of any joint-stock companies, except for those approved by the crown.

With government regulations in place, many charter companies were disbanded and colonial territories became governed by the state. Corporations remained a relatively minor phenomenon until the railroad boom at the end of the 1800s, when laws in several states in the US made it easier to incorporate. Corporations such as Coca-Cola (1887), General Electric (1892), and US Steel (1901), were all established around this time.

Loosened regulations and the lack of a tax code in the US led to the famous 'robber barons' of the 1800s, such as John D.

Out of the desire within organisations and companies to fix or control their message came the principle of corporate identity.

NICK BELL, DESIGNER

Rockefeller, whose Standard Oil owned 90-95 percent of all oil refineries in the US and became one the wealthiest men in history. In 1911 monopolies such as Standard Oil and US Steel were forcefully broken up into smaller companies. Big companies were seen as exploitative giants, and widely criticized and ridiculed. During the Great Depression there was even a strong anti-advertising movement in the US.¹⁷

International Business Style

World War II had left Europe in ruins, but the US economy was still intact, and capitalism had come out victoriously. The Bretton Woods Agreement of 1944 established the US dollar as the world currency, and set the scene for an international financial market. Many designers from Germany had fled to the US, and now brought their modernist design aesthetics to corporations. The post-war design school in Ulm, Germany, responded to the horrors of the war by perfecting the modernist international style of graphic design for business applications. The idea was that by using elementary forms and sans-serif type a universal visual language would help bring peace and prosperity to all of humankind.

The growing post-war economies created a new wave of corporations that operated internationally. This required a consistent visual style, which was found in the assumed universal principles of modernist design. In the 1950s the first design studios in the US and Europe started to offer corporate branding to multinationals. Well-known examples are Unimark, Chermayeff & Geismar, and Paul Rand in the US, Total Design in the Netherlands, and Otl Aicher in Germany. These multidisciplinary design studios used modernist design principles to organize visual identity systems for virtually every corporation that mattered. Design studios themselves even adopted aspects of the corporate form, such as setting up offices worldwide, and working in large minimalist designed office spaces

Google
Spotify™
facebook
YAHOO!
airbnb
Pinterest


Original tech company logos, 1998–2014.

Google
Spotify®
FACEBOOK
yahoo!
airbnb
Pinterest
Uber

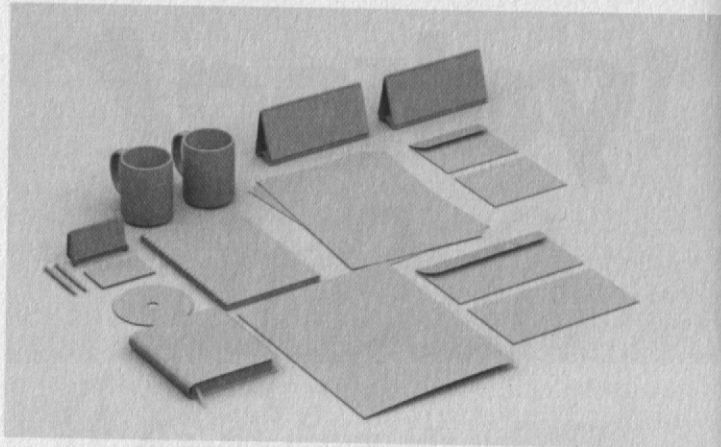
Redesigned logos between 2014–2021.

Good graphic design is not tarnished by the greed or the illegal or other self-imploding acts of clients. We do not feel responsible for the character of those we work for.

IVAN CHERMAYEFF, DESIGNER

while wearing suits, as opposed to the messy artist studios.

The design of these first corporate identities established many of the rules that are considered standard today, such as using grids and measurement systems, consistent colour use, and simple layout rules with simple and recognizable logotypes. Design theorist Philip Meggs writes how Unimark 'rejected individualistic design and believed that design could be a system, a basic structure set up so that other people could implement it effectively.'¹⁸



Identity design template.

Handwork and recognizable personal expression by the designer was considered inefficient and unwelcome for corporate design.¹⁹ The systematic way of working led to the creation of the first identity manuals to ensure the design would be applied consistently across all continents.

Monocultural Branding

The large design studios from the 1950s and 1960s solidified the image of the corporate identity. Modernist design was a serious attempt to create a collective, universal style that was thought to last forever. The belief in the Swiss style of typography was so profound that Unimark studio saw it as their mission to propose the Helvetica typeface for any corporate identity. Total Design was criticized in the Netherlands for designing everything from phonebooks to corporate identities in the same style, flattening any cultural or historic differences and qualities in the name of technological progress and efficiency.

The modernist corporate identity form has claimed a universal design language, which was assumed to be the best form of communication for all countries and in any culture. This claim has been challenged by designers who point out that this is a very limited view of what design is, rooted in a Eurocentric modernist design culture. The corporate identity studios were also notably uncritical of capitalism and its worst excesses. Many designers sincerely believed that merely applying a modernist style was a radical act, while ignoring the actual political struggles of the time.

While designers compared logotypes, activists put the spotlights on corporations, revealing financial malpractice, labour exploitation, tax evasion, and the extraction of resources. In light of such a lack of morality, the professional modernist branding that designers provide has proven to successfully obfuscate corporate wrongdoings.

The partners of Chermayeff & Geismar—who branded oil companies, banks, and pharmaceutical companies—explain their view on corporate identity design as follows in *Printmag*: 'When we create a great logo for an environmental organization, we do not see ourselves as saving the planet. In the same way, we cannot take responsibility for the "evil" actions of corporations we brand'.²⁰

Monopolies and Mergers

Whereas regulations of the post-war period prevented monopolies to be formed, deregulation in the 1980s paved the way for the mega-corporation. The ten largest mergers in US history happened during the presidency of Ronald Reagan (1980–1989).



Waiting line at the Apple Store for the new iPhone, New York City, US. Photo by Rob DiCaterino, 2008.

The number of mergers and acquisitions led to a concentration of power around a handful of multinationals. Cheap overseas manufacturing and deregulation allowed corporations to bend the rules of law, maximizing profits without having to pay taxes or fair wages. Even though capitalism prides itself on being the system with the most choices, without regulation each sector naturally ends up being monopolized by a one or two companies. Some of these corporations have grown so big and powerful that they are no match for nation states. For example, Walmart has deeper pockets than Spain and Australia, and Royal Dutch Shell has more money than Saudi Arabia, Russia, or Mexico.²¹

In times of mergers and mega corporations, branding becomes part of a strategy to distance products from their holding companies. Tax havens and complicated financial constructions allow multinationals to pay little tax or none at all, while companies, brands, and holding companies create a legal maze of confusion. The largest beer company in the world is called Anheuser-Busch InBev SA/NV (shortened to AB InBev), and the merger between Glaxo Wellcome and SmithKline Beecham is called GlaxoSmithKline. This is not far removed from corporations in the science fiction novel *Super Sad True Love Story* by Gary Shteyngart where after decades of corporate mergers, the only remaining companies in



Walmart employee dress code.

the world are LandO'LakesGMFordCredit, AlliedWasteCVSCiti-groupCredit and ColgatePalmoliveYum!BrandsViacomCredit.²²

An Identity for the Mind

In 2010 a US court ruled that corporations are persons by law, and have a right to free speech. Internet and social media platforms gave corporations new platforms to create personalized communication and services. On social media, corporations cultivate designed personalities, with clever jokes and witty replies to angry customers. Corporate identities have expanded to performative fields, extending brand guidelines to instructions for behaviour for 'staff on representative positions': what to wear, how to speak, what music to play in the store, and detailed scripts for how to deal with clients. For an employee being 'on brand' means to communicate all aspects of the brand at all times, whether or not they align with your mood, beliefs, interests, or talents. Brand personalities were created to fill the void of the absent craftsmen. Now those working for the brands have to hide their personality, in favour of adopting the artificial personality of the corporation.

Corporate identities were a response to a scaling of organizations, which required a clear and consistent communication strategy. Graphic systems allowed large groups of people to

PHILIPS

1920

PHILIPS

1968

PHILIPS

2008

PHILIPS

2013

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NICK BELL, DESIGNER

communicate and interact, and in that aspect the organizational part of the corporate identity design is not unlike wayfinding. But the success of the corporate identity has surpassed its functional use, and has become a dictatorship of professionalism that is intended to prevent creative expression from individuals within the corporate form.

Graphic designers should realize that their work on corporate identities can be used as a straitjacket by managers, to discipline their staff to stay 'on brand'. Designers aren't usually aware of the impact of corporate identities guidelines, as their work is finished when delivering the manual and the print-ready files. For those working within the corporation, especially in the lower echelons, it means a disciplining of behaviour for the sake of a designed image of consistency and efficiency. Why would corporations want to extinguish individual personalities in favour of a single dominating persona? Because the corporations are owned by the stockholders. They decide on the basis of their dividends, not on behalf of the well-being of people or the planet. Until that changes, the corporate identity will fulfil no other purpose than maximizing shareholder profit.

← The Philips word mark has received periodic facelifts since the 1920s to make it appear the same but yet slightly updated, adapted to the fashion of the times.



CONTRA-BRAND

Brands functioned as symbols of quality and authenticity, but today brands add value to generic products. Branded goods are often equated with expensive or high-quality goods. In fact, often simply slapping a known logo on a product can greatly increase its price. The high mark-ups that well-known brands use have lured counterfeiters into the world of branding.

According to the European Union, one of the most threatening phenomena to the safety and economic prosperity of the EU are fake brands. The value of traded counterfeit products is estimated between €600 billion and €1 trillion.²³ Five percent of goods imported into the EU are counterfeit or pirated. In an accountability test by the US government, two out of five brand name products bought online were fake. According to the OECD, 2.5 million jobs were lost worldwide to copyright infringement in 2015.²⁴ Fake Gucci bags, Nike shoes, iPhones, and DVDs mean lost revenue and taxes, and damage to a well-polished brand image.

Companies such as Alibaba, being a piracy super brand of sorts, offer identical-looking versions of branded goods for a fraction of the price. At the same time media companies are cracking down hard on the illegal downloads of books, films, and music. Governments launch campaigns to scare people away from buying fake brands, such as the EU webpage on counterfeiting that writes that fake items are hazardous and can cause safety risks, that 'counterfeit items are often produced in sweatshops or factories using child labour' and 'many of these groups are involved in extortion, prostitution, and terrorism'.²⁵

Made in China

In the war that Europe has unleashed against fake brands, China is often portrayed as the culprit that cares little for copyrights. That narrative forgoes the historic role of manufacturing and branding.

← Collection of derivative Adidas brands.

When industrial production of branded goods was outsourced to China in the 1970s, much manufacturing knowledge was displaced as well. Chinese workers used their knowledge of brand products to produce counterfeit versions after hours, indistinguishable from the original. This created an entire industry called Shanzhai manufacturing. In counterfeit production every product is reverse-engineered, copied, and even improved, for example a iPhone copy that can carry two sim cards. Shanzhai manufacturing and other counterfeiting industries use well-known logos to charge higher prices. This has created an entire ecology of fake and hybrid brands, making use of people's inattentiveness with endless variations on brand names: Naik, Like, Kine, Mike, Nire, Hike, Nibe, Nkie, Niki, and Knie.

Creativity for Those Who Can Afford It

Luxury brands are not only counterfeited because the manufacturing knowledge became available through outsourcing. There is a demand for illegal copies because not everyone can afford the originals. The mark-up of luxury goods can exceed 400 percent, most of which goes to advertising and marketing budgets. In many countries, DVDs of Hollywood movies, Nike shoes, or iPhones, are simply unaffordable. People have to rely on counterfeited or illegal versions to have access to the brands they see advertised everywhere. In Cuba, which suffers from decades of a US trade embargo, movies from Hollywood studios are only available as bootlegs. Cuban artist Jota Izquierdo writes

For the upper classes a connection to the Internet, to fashion, to what we call 'the first world' is easy. But for most of the population, piracy is a necessity; it means access to culture, development, and education, but most of all it's about the economy, a way of living, culture, and a way of consuming modernity.²⁶

The difference between 'fake' and 'real' brands is often a matter of class. That means that the wealthiest of the world population experience the branded, HD, original versions, and the majority have to make do with the low-resolution, fake, pirated and dubbed versions of Western popular culture. The bootleg industry employs

thousands of do-it-yourself designers who create custom artwork for pirated Hollywood movies and brand products. A section within the graphic design discipline that shows there is tremendous creativity in copying and pirating. Cuban designer Ernesto Oroza is one of them: 'I make most of the covers. There are designs, photos that I take from the original pictures. Most of them are in English, so I change them to Spanish. I do it myself or someone working with me does it'.²⁷

Fake Fictions

Fake brands should not be dismissed as criminal acts that leech off the brand value of corporations. Counterfeit brands could be seen as an extension of the fictionalization of brands, which started with the industrial revolution. Now that production and branding no longer share a common reality, the fictionalized brands are easily transformed into formats that are even more disconnected from the product. Fake brands are in that sense a side effect of a global branding culture gone haywire, in the same way that Disney builds a 'world', Coca-Cola organizes festivals, and McDonald's makes reality TV. For corporations it should come as no surprise that moving manufacturing to low-wage countries, incentivizes underpaid workers to take this knowledge and, as good capitalists, invest it in their own business. Counterfeiting brand goods is therefore as capitalist as the outsourcing of production itself.



Big Brother Brazil creates a McDonald's episode of the reality TV show, 2021.

NUMAN TRADING LIMITED
VERDITE INVESTMENTS LTD.
MAJORCA ASSOCIATES, S. A.
NINGO CENTER LTD.
DOLMER PROPERTIES S.A.
STOGAN SERVICES CORP.
IMEXDA LTD.
STANDARD PACIFIC INC.
T.M.D. ENTERPRISES INC.
JUGAR OVERSEAS LTD.
TAWLER INTERNATIONAL INC.
ELLENTON COMPANY S.A.
GRENDDEL PROPERTIES INC.
FANDEL HOLDINGS LIMITED
THRELKA INTERNATIONAL S.A.
WOODSPRING INDUSTRIES
TORRIJOS Y ASOCIADOS LTD.

Some of the 785,000 companies used in tax havens, exposed as part of the Panama Papers.
More at offshoreleaks.icij.org.

STEALTH BRANDING

Brands usually increase the visibility of products and services, but branding can also be a way of hiding them. Logos on clothing used to be small and modestly placed so that they would only be visible to the trained eye. A subtle gesture to flaunt expensive clothes.²⁸ In the 1990s, the popularity of branding led companies to put huge logos on clothing. The logo itself became a symbol for capitalism, and a popular target for activists. *Adbusters* (1989) criticized the hypocrisy and unethical behaviour of brands, often by making variations on logos or ads. Naomi Klein comments how in the wake of her book *No Logo* some brands actually started to use a no logo-branding strategy. Starbucks opened an unbranded coffee shop in Seattle (known as stealth Starbucks) and Absolut Vodka launched an unbranded version of its liquor.²⁹

When it comes to the branding of luxury goods, minimalist branding has been a strategy that caters to the tastes of the rich. Those who have money have the possibility of seeing fewer ads, especially as many free or cheap services have mandatory advertising. The designers from Metahaven write that abstaining from using logos is the way to attract the wealthiest of customers. They give the example of private banks in Geneva, where 'the absence of a name on the front door of a private bank implies confidentiality'.³⁰

The Dirty Corners of Capitalism

The fierce competition that drives capitalism, has forced companies to cut costs wherever they can, in order to maximize profit. This creates scenarios where corporations scourge the edges of what is legal, stretching national borders and laws to their very limits. With the logos of large companies being under scrutiny, contractors with bland names and plain logos can be a way to not be noticed. Like shell companies with non-descriptive names are used to hide corporate profits and private wealth in tax havens.



Lao-China Friendship Street in the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone in Bokeo Province, Laos.

The cheap production of goods is partly a result of another state of exception, the Free Economic Zones, or Special Economic Zones. These are industrial areas with special legal regulations, such as low taxes and anti-union laws. The majority of industrial production in the world takes place in the 5,400 Free Economic Zones.³¹ If companies move production to such a zone, they can receive 'tax holidays' which means they pay no income and property tax for five years. Inside these zones the world's manufacturing of branded goods takes place in indistinct locations.

Naomi Klein writes that the location of production is: 'a "trade secret" to be guarded at all costs'.³² Companies prefer to hire contractors so they can avoid responsibility of paying fair wages or good working conditions. Brands often change contractors or offer new biddings to get better prices or a competitive advantage. These backstreets of capitalist production are often dirty in more than one way, and exposing too much of it could endanger the known brands connected to them.

War Branding

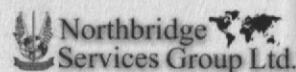
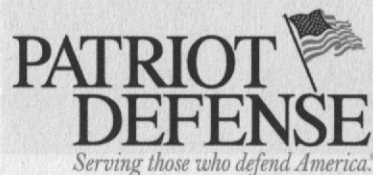
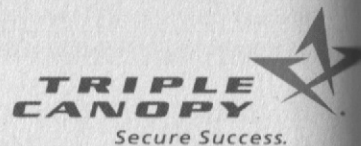
Knights used banners and shields to distinguish themselves on the battlefield. In contemporary warfare, intentionally not branding oneself can be a way of remaining unnoticed. The non-branding of military operations is something of a specialty for the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), who have created shell companies since the 1950s to carry out secret operations. During the Vietnam war, they used aircraft from CIA shell companies with names like Air America, Continental Air Services, Inc., and Civil Air Transport. Using bland corporate names and unmarked civilian aircraft, they carried out anti-terrorism and espionage operations in plain sight. Public scrutiny of covert operations by governments has increased the use of mercenaries or 'independent security contractors' for military operations. These private armies employ indistinct names and branding to avoid unwanted attention.

It's more of a philosophical point about how this war on terror has changed everyday life and insinuated itself into everyday life.

TREVOR PAGLEN, ARTIST AND GEOGRAPHER



Aircraft of the Southern Air Transport, 1996, a front company for the CIA.



As recent as 2018, geographer and artist Trevor Paglen found that the CIA still uses shell companies to transport terrorism suspects. Prisoners were flown to illegal prisons with civilian aircraft, operated by companies such as Premier Executive Transport Services, and Aero Contractors Ltd.⁸³ These amateurishly branded companies were in fact purposefully non-branded to allow torture and violent interrogation to take place on illegal CIA prisons called 'black sites'. Torture and branding are still related, as it turns out.

Unbranding can be effective in creating confusion in a conflict situation, as the invasion of Crimea in 2014 illustrates. Russian special forces invaded and occupied the Ukrainian peninsula Crimea in 2014, wearing unmarked uniforms, stripped of any official identification. This allowed Russia to deny any involvement, claiming they were 'self-defence groups'. The Russian news media put a spin on the story by calling the troops 'polite men' or 'little green men'. Even in a time when the cameras are everywhere, the foreign media were forced to provide proof that these were, in fact, Russian special forces sent by the Russian government.




† Blackwater, the mercenary company founded in 1997 was rebranded after reports of wrongdoings in 2007, first Xe Services (2008), Academi (2011), and then Constellis Holdings (2014).
 ← The branding of privatized warfare: mercenary companies logo.

I ♥ NY

UTRECHT

MADRID

be  Berlin

ONLY LYON 

I amsterdam

SELLING THE CITY

Medieval cities in Europe had visual identifiers such as flags and coats of arms, which were inspired by the coats of arms of noble families. These were not created for the purpose of commerce, but to identify themselves among their rivals. Town guilds were likely to use the town coat of arms in their merchant's marks as a means of identification. The promotion of a town or city as a commodity, also known as place branding, is of a much more recent origin.

Place branding was introduced by marketer Philip Kotler in the early 1990s, but its origins can be traced back to the 1970s. The cities in the Global North had grown because of manufacturing jobs, but now that manufacturing was being moved to low-wage countries they faced high unemployment. Cities such as Amsterdam and New York became unpopular and suffered from crashing real estate prices, loss in tax revenue, and rising crime rates. Cities that were in bad shape saw an opportunity with the growing tourism industry, which led cities to compete for investors and tourism dollars. In an effort to turn the economic tide, large corporations and banks persuaded cities to become centres for white-collar work, high-end entertainment, and tourism.

Branding cities went hand in hand with gentrification, which is the process of the influx of wealthier people in poorer neighbourhoods, leading to the displacement of lower-income residents. The bible of city branding is *The Rise of the Creative Class* by Richard Florida, in which he proposed that cities should focus on attracting creatives.³⁴ In his view, creative people attract businesses, which in turn leads to economic growth. His work was the foundation for policies of gentrification and city branding since the 2000s.

← City brands: I Love NY by Milton Glaser, 1977; Utrecht by Koeweiden Postma, 2010; Madrid, 2008 by Cros & Machin, 2008; Be Berlin, 2008; Only Lyon, 2007; I Amsterdam, by Kessels Kramer, 2004.

To Save the City We Had to Sell It

Perhaps the best-known city brand is 'I Love New York'. The famous logo was designed by Milton Glaser in 1977 for ad agency Wells Rich Greene. At the time, Glaser thought it was a short campaign and it wouldn't do much, and he didn't even receive any payment for his logo. As a native New Yorker, he saw the logo as his contribution to making the city a cleaner and safer place. In an interview from 2003, Glaser recalls the city at the time: 'You were just walking through all this dog shit day after day, in this filthy city, garbage, and so on.'³⁵

By the end of World War II New York was a manufacturing city. In the decades that followed, jobs started disappearing when the garment industry began outsourcing to low-wage countries. Wealthy New Yorkers moved to the suburbs, and the mechanization of the cotton industry brought unemployed workers to the city.³⁶ With the rich leaving the city, tax revenues plummeted, and the city was struggling to make ends meet. New York saw crime figures rising and the subway was notoriously unsafe. At least, that is the narrative of the wealthy upper class, because although the city was struggling financially, it became the birthplace of an abundance of art and music movements. Hip Hop, Punk, Salsa Brava, and No Wave all started around this time, and New York was home to the most vibrant and diverse art and music scenes in the world up to the late 1980s.

Music and art didn't bring in enough taxes, however, and New York City almost went bankrupt in 1975. President Ford refused a federal bailout, which left the city with no other option than to ask the banks for help. The banks did not bend over so easily, and demanded that the city would impose austerity measures, meaning cut spending on public transport, healthcare, free university education, and social housing. The new policies were clearly aimed to stop people of colour from coming to New York. Housing administrator Roger Starr said 'Stop the Puerto Ricans and the rural blacks from living in the city ... reverse the role of the city ... it can no longer be the place of opportunity.'³⁷

At the request of the banks, welfare programmes were cut, wages were frozen, and the free CUNY university introduced tuition fees.³⁸ 47,412 city employees were laid off, among whom

FINAL

DAILY NEWS

Warm and humid
today.
Near 90. Partly
cloudy tomorrow.

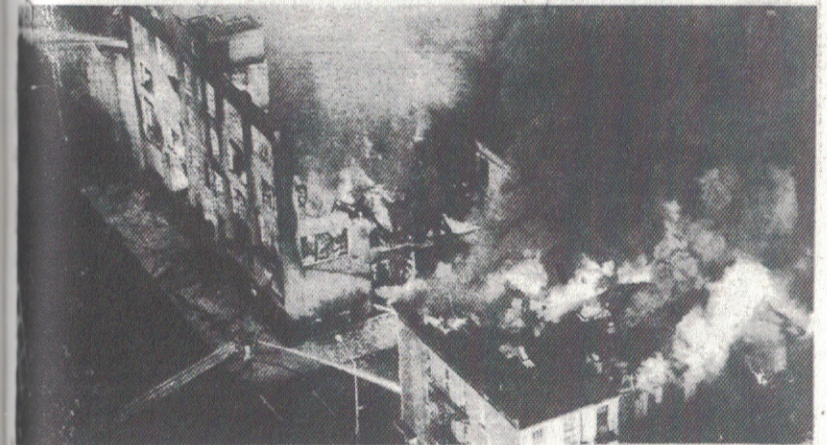
10 B. No. 17

New York, Friday, July 15, 1977

Price: 20 cents

THE LIGHTS GO BACK ON

Subways Roll; Fires & Looting Ease; 3,400 Are Arrested



Looting erupts into vandalism. Buildings at Stone St. and Summers Ave., Brooklyn, burn.

SPECIAL 28-PAGE BLACKOUT SECTION

NY Daily News, 15 July 1977.

two books on political posters; *The Design of Dissent* (2005) and *The Design of Dissent* (2017). Glaser saw his I love New York logo as form of socially engaged design that helped improve the city he loved so dearly. When asked about his logo he said: 'I have to say that when you do something that you really feel is useful—when you have a positive social effect—it makes you feel great.'⁴¹

What this example shows is that even the work of socially engaged designers with good intentions can be used to drive gentrification. Glaser's successful city brand united people and made many New Yorkers proud, but it was also used to obfuscate the punishment of poor New Yorkers in favour of the wealthy.

Rise of the Real Estate Class

The New York City branding shows that successful city branding can have devastating consequences. Amsterdam is the city that I call home since 2003. With its 800,000 inhabitants it is a relatively small but comfortable city with a high standard of living. Tourists have always been drawn to Amsterdam's old centre with its liberal stance on soft drugs and prostitution. In 2004 the city decided they needed to attract a different kind of tourist. Less young scruffy types looking for weed, and more older tourists, families and organized tours with deeper pockets looking for culture and history.

Advertising agency KesselsKramer came up with the 'I Amsterdam' motto and logo to rebrand the city. A massive marketing offensive put 'I Amsterdam' logos on all communication in the city, websites, and campaigns, and placed a 23.5 metre wide 'I Amsterdam' logo in the museum district. By 2017 the number of tourists had doubled to eight million. The campaign brought in a lot of money, but not everyone profited.

Housing has always been scarce in the Netherlands, a country with one of the highest population densities in the world. The city of Amsterdam welcomed online platform Airbnb, which put pressure on the already tight housing market. The city of Amsterdam also actively promoted real estate to foreign investors. The I Amsterdam website boasts about 'Amsterdam's Unique Assets in High Demand' and 'Investors who have been sleeping for some years now, are waking up to the opportunities'.⁴² The twelve

→ I Amsterdam logo on Museumplein in Amsterdam, 2013. Photo by Kevin McGill.





For so long, people thought Airbnb was about renting houses. But really, we're about home. You see, a house is just a space, but a home is where you belong.

BRIAN CHESKY, CEO OF AIRBNB

percent growth on real estate revenue has made investment so lucrative that one in four houses is bought in cash by investors, and many of these apartments are immediately put on the high-end rental market.

After the 2008 crisis, austerity measures had impacted the lower incomes more than average. Despite being one of the richest countries in the world, the number of homeless people in the city doubled in ten years. In 2016, one family was evicted from social housing on average every day, while in the same year 25,721 rooms were offered on Airbnb.⁴³ Home owners are benefiting from exorbitantly growing prices, while renters are faced with skyrocketing rents and stagnant wages. This has led to the 'rise of the real estate class' of families who own real estate and pass it down along family lines. Those who do not own real estate, will sooner or later have to leave the city because of its high rents.

In the 2018 municipal elections housing was one of the main topics. Myself and three other graphic designers created a series of posters to reclaim the city for all its inhabitants. Posted on a website, these could be downloaded for free and put up in front windows to show solidarity among residents in neighbourhoods. One group had downloaded the posters and pasted them all over the city.⁴⁴ Our campaign was not aimed at blaming Nutella stores or Airbnb for the city becoming unaffordable, as they are merely symbols of how the city council has allowed profitability to reign over liveability. City governments—like national governments—are representatives of the city's population, elected to decide what policies are in the best interest of all citizens. We have grown so accustomed to property ownership given priority over the right to housing, that a city like Amsterdam has a growing homeless population, while nine percent of the real estate stands vacant

← Yuri Veerman, poster for the Amsterdam elections, 2018. De text reads 'I don't eat monoculture'.

as investment, and 21,000 apartments are rented out via Airbnb. Amsterdam apartments rented to tourists were the most expensive in Europe in 2019.⁴⁵

If cities are popular places to live, this will ultimately lead to rising real estate prices no matter what policies are in place. The point here is not that a city should close itself to tourism, or only cater to lower-income residents. But when public buildings and social housing are actively being sold off to become hotels or expensive apartments—as the city of Amsterdam has done—and subsequent rising real estate prices make the city unaffordable for everyone but the wealthiest, then the city is literally selling itself.

We Love Brands

This chapter started with the designer as a brander who creates signs of quality, authenticity, and identity for market goods. Part of the popularity of branding comes from the irresistible human urge to leave identity marks as a reminder of someone's existence. The expression of human identity through symbols can be found everywhere, from prehistoric cave paintings to graffiti tags. The love that we have for symbols and what they represent, has unfortunately been transformed into a brand universe, where all aspects of human life can be branded, and then sold as commodities.

Branding is one of graphic design's core functions, and a lot of design work is spent on designing identities, making style guides, and implementing corporate identities. Another part of branding is the brand image, created by graphic designers and advertisers with cool campaigns and attractive graphics to ensure the brand stays 'hip'. What seems like a good idea for the designer, will most likely end up as a memo to workers, dictating the clothing they can wear, or the language they can use, and how to properly use the new logo. In the enthusiasm of putting their mark on the world, the designers' ego can get in the way of understanding the social implications of their branding guidelines.

Most design studios advertise branding services on their websites saying something like 'We love brands'. But while many designers love brands, some feel uneasy about the relentless barrage of consumption messages that branding inevitably leads to. A discomfort that is no less part of the history of branding, at its most



Ruben Pater, poster for the Amsterdam elections, 2018.

Honestly stop it with the logos. Stop making them and putting them on things.

WES ADAMS, DESIGNER



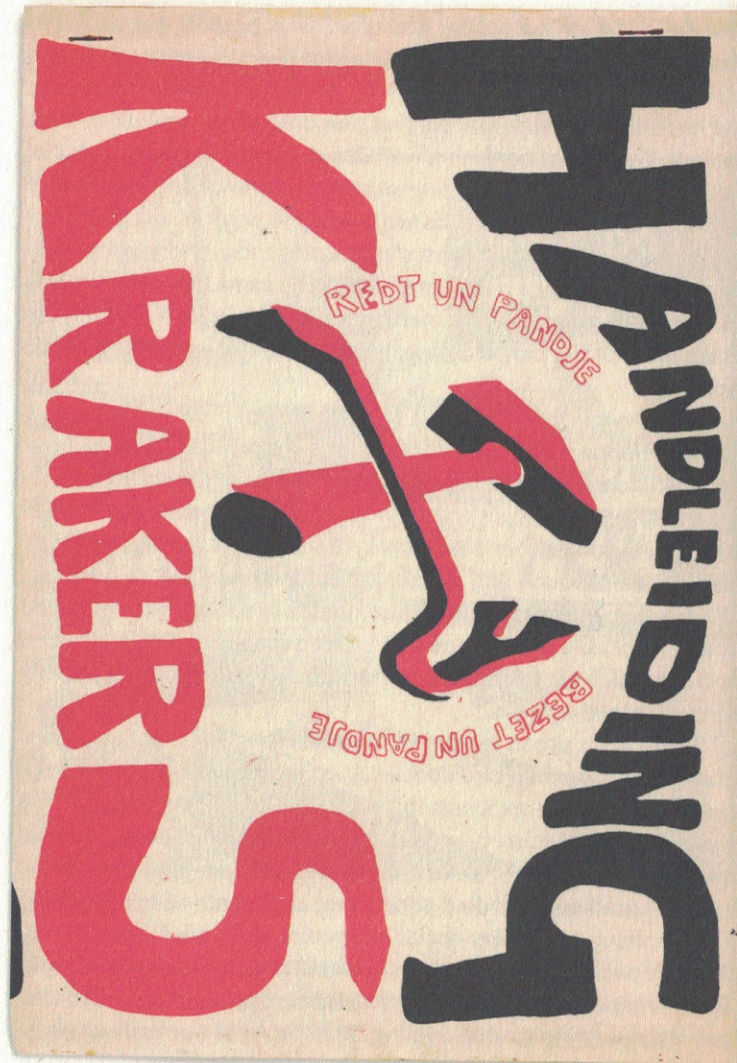
Clay Butler, 1996.

violent. Branding began literally as a weapon of torture, intended to dehumanize people by subjugating them into becoming objects for sale. We are also reminded of the uneasiness of advertisers during the industrial revolution, who did not want to see the horrible circumstances under which products were made, as it would make it impossible to write the copy to sell them. In efforts to brand all aspects of society, city branding has become a powerful tool in the hands of lawmakers for the gentrification of cities and the commodification of housing, which benefits the wealthy.

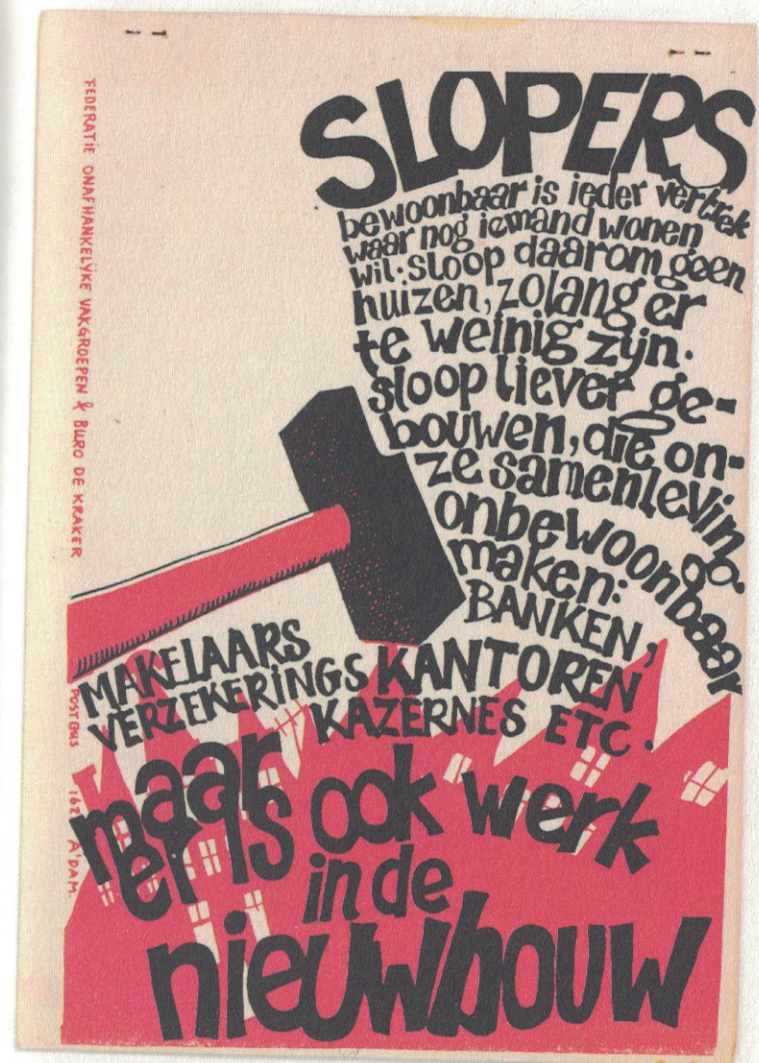
The redesign of corporate identities is a popular topic in the design press. Redesigns kickstart heated discussions on the Brand New website.⁴⁶ Discussing the logo design is perhaps amusing, but has little to do with the role that branding plays in our economic system. We cannot confuse a well-drawn logo with ethical ways of doing business. Designers cannot claim ignorance and externalize all ethics to the client. Brands are one of the ways in which designers fuel the continuous consumption of goods, and even a well-designed brand for a museum still uses the same logic of branding to sell more tickets, more merchandise, to increase visibility, to make more profit, perpetuating the narrative that everything needs branding.

Using symbols to signify a product's origin has its uses, as it has been done historically. Branding to simply mark a product or service is useful, but if we would limit branding to its functional qualities, the majority of brands would disappear instantly. The automatic response from designers is to simply put the logo on every imaginable product, and to see it as often and as big as possible. The process of enclosure of the commons in society, where shared spaces available to everyone that aren't privately owned are seized and sold off, from healthcare, to housing, to nature, often happens through branding.

There is an urban legend that people who live in cities recognize more logos than bird species. It could very well be true, as the average person is exposed to about 5,000 ads every day.⁴⁷ We should stop and think how graphic design has turned our streets into an architecture of billboards, and our media platforms into a banner paradise. Branding shows that capitalism sees everything as a product, and every social encounter as a sales opportunity. Graphic designers can play an important role in refusing that logic. To not treat every design job as a branding opportunity, and to take our responsibility to stop turning all aspects of our daily environment into products.



Squatting manual, May 1969. Published by Woningburo de Kraker, 1966. This cooperative to help and assist squatters emerged from the anarchist protest movement Provo in the 1960s, when housing was scarce in Amsterdam. *Kraker* is Dutch for squatting. The text reads: 'squatters' manual, save a house, squat a house'.



The text reads 'Demolishers: liveable is every quarters where someone wants to leave. Don't demolish houses as long as there are too few. Demolish buildings that make our society uninhabitable: banks, real-estate offices, insurance offices, army barracks. But there is also employment in new construction'.