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Adbusters: Zine That Created The Occupy Movement

Levi Asher · Thursday, November 3rd, 2011

It's a strange and delightful fact that the Occupy movement which began last month on Wall Street was not born on Twitter or Facebook or a blog. Rather, the idea emerged from a dusty print-based medium that almost nobody cares about anymore (or so we thought), a format that dates back to the days of Husker Du and [Pagan Kennedy](#). Occupy Wall Street was born in a zine.

[Adbusters](#) was founded in Vancouver, Canada in 1989 by [Kalle Lasn](#), an Estonian-born filmmaker outraged by the insidious and deceptively “warm” television commercials the timber industry was running in the Pacific Northwest to cover its destruction of vast areas of forest. Adbusters began using humor and parody to highlight and combat corporate and consumerist groupthink, and over the past two decades has staged many events and campaigns: TV commercials that mock other commercials, “open source” sneakers resembling existing sneaker brands, a “Buy Nothing Day” to combat holiday shopping mania, fake tickets to place on the windshields of SUVs. The zine became a staple of bookstore magazine shelves in the 1990s, sharing space with other worthy indie publications like Bitch, Giant Robot, Bust, Maximum Rock ‘N’ Roll, Craphound and Factsheet Five.



Like many other media jammers such as Julian Assange, Kalle Lasn is stronger on vision than on charisma, and likes to keep a low public profile. He occasionally [appears on TV](#), and wrote a book, *Culture Jam: The Uncooling of America*, in 1999. Unlike other media organizations with less political conviction, Adbusters appears to be truly opposed to mainstream success, and has resisted the temptation to dilute its message in search of greater popularity. But the organization's intrinsic hostility to media respectability has sometimes left curious newcomers confused about its program, and has given its opponents an easy opportunity to dismiss the (clearly honest) organization as extremist, Marxist, sympathetic to foreign influences.

This campaign has been sadly effective in tarnishing Adbusters' proud role in coming up with the [original idea](#) to occupy Wall Street (an idea, obviously, that had absolutely tremendous resonance). The Adbusters organization is well equipped to provoke, to satirize and to organize, but it does not seem well equipped to explain itself to the public at large. Predictably, some conservative news outlets are even cherry-picking critiques of Israel's policies from the vast Adbusters archives and attempting to portray the organization as anti-Jewish, though there is no basis for this charge at all.

A look back at Adbusters' intellectual roots points to the obvious influence of the [Situationist International](#) in the 1960s. This European-born movement, which emphasized satire, public provocation and street theatre over conventional political activism, culminated in the [Paris riots](#) of 1968, and fell apart a couple of years later. Another famous political activist inspired by Situationism was Malcolm McLaren, who founded the Sex Pistols with the intent of enraging his fellow Brits ("God Save the Queen", "Anarchy in the U.K.") in the mid-1970s. The Sex Pistols also fell apart soon after their first taste of success, and the inability of Situationist-inspired groups to stay together appears to be a real problem. The Adbusters organization has already shown itself to have far more longevity than its Paris or London predecessors, though Adbusters is currently reaching a greater peak of visibility than it ever has before, and must now be facing some of the hazards of vast, sudden popularity for the first time ever.

As provocative as Adbusters has been, its critique of consumerist conformity and corporate evil can be received not only as a political and activist message but also a personal and psychological one. How vulnerable are we all, really, to the advertisements and subliminal messages that bombard us from every direction? How can we make sure, when we rebel against society, that our rebellions haven't been mapped out in advance? This was the question at the heart of Dana Spiotta's novel [Eat the Document](#), which portrayed a Starbucks-like corporation sneakily invading the minds of earnest young Seattle hipsters, and also of Jonathan Franzen's [Freedom](#), in which a mining company schemed to gain support for a mountaintop removal program by selling it as a program for a bird sanctuary. Novels like Spiotta's and Franzen's help to remind us how deeply the political protests fought by movements like Occupy Wall Street and zines like Adbusters can cut into our private spaces, and how ambivalent the issues surrounding these protests can sometimes be.

The amazing public acclaim for the Occupy Wall Street movement, now known simply as the Occupy movement, is a testament to the creative thinking of a few individuals. If Lasn and his associates had not come up with this idea a few months ago, where would all these protesters be right now? And where would the important message of the protest be? It's a question that can really make your head spin, once you think about it hard enough.

The cover of Adbuster's second issue, from late 1989, is at the top of this page. Several early Adbusters covers (including the first issue — I chose to show the second on the page because I like the artwork better) can be found in [illustrator Cat Simril's archive](#).

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