

CHAPTER THREE

ALT.EVERYTHING

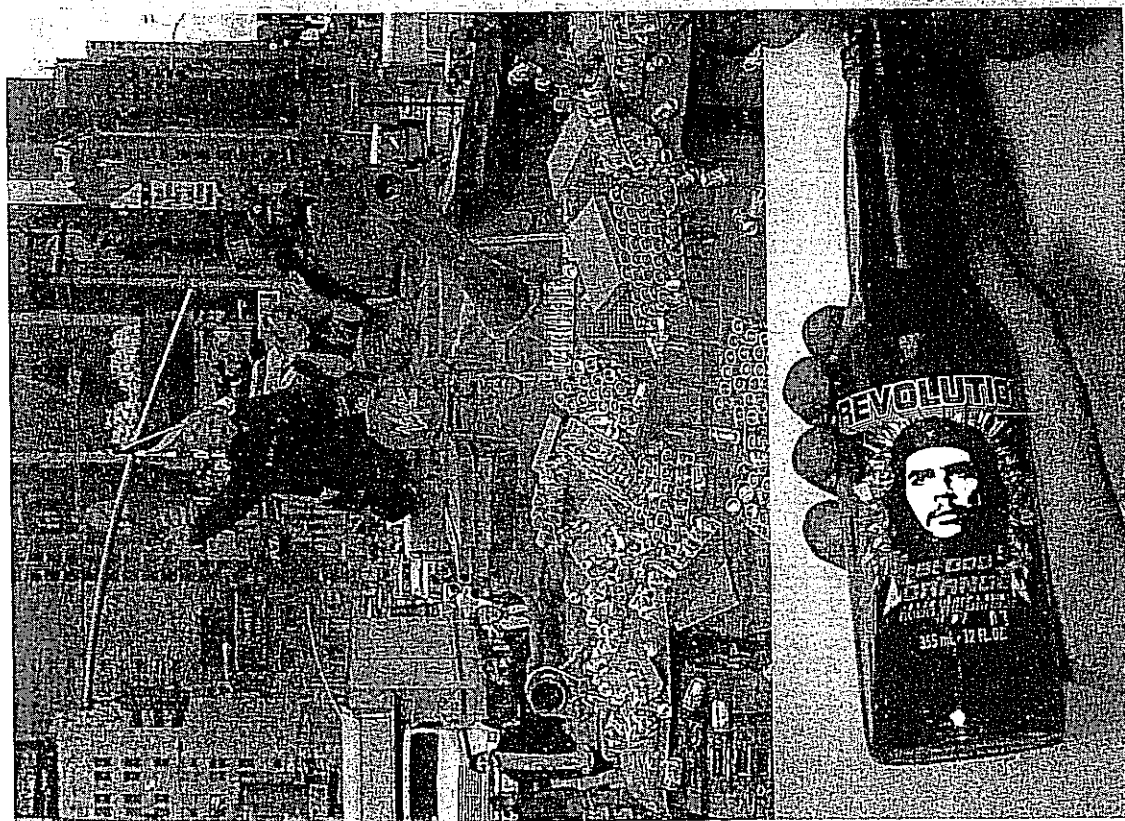
The Youth Market and the Marketing of Cool

It's terrible to say, very often the most exciting outfits are from the poorest people.

— Designer Christian Lacroix in *Vogue*, April 1994

In our final year of high school, my best friend, Lan Ying, and I passed the time with morbid discussions about the meaninglessness of life when everything had already been done. The world stretched out before us not as a slate of possibility, but as a maze of well-worn grooves like the ridges burrowed by insects in hardwood. Step off the straight and narrow career-and-materialism groove and you just end up on another one—the groove for people who step off the main groove. And that groove was worn indeed (some of the grooving done by our own parents). Want to go traveling? Be a modern-day Kerouac? Hop on the Let's Go Europe groove. How about a rebel? An avant-garde artist? Go buy your alterna-groove at the secondhand bookstore, dusty and moth-eaten and done to death. Everywhere we imagined ourselves standing turned into a cliché beneath our feet—the stuff of Jeep ad copy and sketch comedy. To us it seemed as though the archetypes were all hackneyed by the time our turn came to graduate, including that of the black-clad deflated intellectual, which we were trying on at that very moment. Crowded by the ideas and styles of the past, we felt there was no open space anywhere.

Of course it's a classic symptom of teenage narcissism to believe that the end of history coincides exactly with your arrival on earth. Almost every angst-ridden, Camus-reading seventeen-year-old girl finds her own groove



Top: Virgin's Richard Branson, the rock-and-roll CEO. Bottom: Revolution Soda Co.'s consumable Chic.

eventually. Still, there is a part of my high-school globo-claustrophobia that has never left me, and in some ways only seems to intensify as time creeps along. What haunts me is not exactly the absence of literal space so much as a deep craving for metaphorical space: 'release, escape, some kind of open-ended freedom.

All my parents wanted was the open road and a VW camper. That was enough escape for them. The ocean, the night sky, some acoustic guitar... what more could you ask? Well, actually, you could ask to go soaring off the side of a mountain on a snowboard, feeling as if, for one moment, you are riding the clouds instead of the snow. You could scour Southeast Asia, like the world-weary twenty-somethings in Alex Garland's novel *The Beach*, looking for the one corner of the globe uncharted by the Lonely Planet to start your own private utopia. You could, for that matter, join a New Age cult and dream of alien abduction. From the occult to raves to riots to extreme sports, it seems that the eternal urge for escape has never enjoyed such niche marketing.

In the absence of space travel and confined by the laws of gravity, however, most of us take our open space where we can get it, sneaking it like cigarettes, outside hulking enclosures. The streets may be lined with billboards and franchise signs, but kids still make do, throwing up a couple of nets and passing the puck or soccer ball between the cars. There is release, too, at England's free music festivals, and in conversions of untended private property into collective space: abandoned factories turned into squats by street kids or ramped entrances to office towers transformed into skateboarding courses on Sunday afternoons.

But as privatization slithers into every crevice of public life, even these intervals of freedom and back alleys of unsponsored space are slipping away. The indie skateboarders and snowboarders all have Vans sneaker contracts. The indie skateboarders and snowboarders all have Vans sneaker contracts. Road hockey is fodder for beer commercials, inner-city redevelopment projects are sponsored by Wells Fargo, and the free festivals have all been banned, replaced with the annual Tribal Gathering, "an electronic music festival that bills itself as a 'strike back against the establishment and clubland's evil empire of mediocrity, commercialism, and the creeping corporate capitalism of our cosmic counter-culture'" and where the organizers regu-

larly confiscate bottled water that has not been purchased on the premises, despite the fact that the number-one cause of death at raves is dehydration.

I remember the moment when it hit me that my frustrated craving for space wasn't simply a result of the inevitable march of history, but of the fact that commercial co-optation was proceeding at a speed that would have been unimaginable to previous generations. I was watching the television coverage of the controversy surrounding Woodstock '94, the twenty-fifth anniversary festival of the original Woodstock event. The baby-boomer pun-dits and aging rock stars postured about how the \$2 cans of Woodstock Memorial Pepsi, festival key chains and on-site cash machines betrayed the anticommercial spirit of the original event and, incredibly, whined that the \$3 commemorative condoms marked the end of "free love" (as if AIDS had been cooked up as a malicious affront to their nostalgia).

What struck me most was that the debate revolved entirely around the sanctity of the past, with no recognition of present-tense cultural challenges. Despite the fact that the anniversary festival was primarily marketed to teenagers and college students and showcased then-up-and-coming bands like Green Day, not a single commentator explored what this youth-culture "commodification" might mean to the young people who would actually be attending the event. Never mind about the offense to hippies decades after the fact; how does it feel to have your culture "sold out" now, as you are living it? The only mention that a new generation of young people even existed came when the organizers, confronted with charges from ex-hippies that they had engineered Greedstock or Woodshlock, explained that if the event wasn't shrink-wrapped and synergized, the kids today would mutiny. Woodstock promoter John Roberts explained that today's youth are "used to sponsorship. If a kid went to a concert and there wasn't merchandise to buy, he'd probably go out of his mind."²

Roberts isn't the only one who holds this view. *Advertising Age* reporter Jeff Jensen goes so far as to make the claim that for today's young people, "Selling out is not only accepted, it's considered hip."³ To object would be, well, unhip. There is no need to further romanticize the original Woodstock. Among (many) other things, it was also a big-label-backed rock festival, designed to turn a profit. Still, the myth of Woodstock as a sovereign youth-

culture state was part of a vast project of generational self-definition — a concept that would have been wholly foreign to those in attendance at Woodstock '94, for whom generational identity had largely been a packaged good and for whom the search for self had always been shaped by marketing hype, whether or not they believed it or defined themselves against it. This is a side effect of brand expansion that is far more difficult to track and quantify than the branding of culture and city spaces. This loss of space happens inside the individual; it is a colonization not of physical space but of mental space.

In a climate of youth-marketing feeding frenzy, all culture begins to be created with the frenzy in mind. Much of youth culture becomes suspended in what sociologists Robert Goldman and Stephen Papson call "arrested development," noting that "we have, after all, no idea of what punk or grunge or hip hop as social and cultural movements might look like if they were not mined for their gold..."⁴ This "mining" has not gone unnoticed or unopposed. Both the anticorporate cultural journal *The Baffler* and the now-defunct *Might* magazine brilliantly lampooned the desperation and striving of the youth-culture industry in the mid-nineties. Dozens, if not hundreds, of zines and Web sites have been launched and have played no small part in setting the mood for the kind of brand-based attacks that I chronicle in Part IV of this book. For the most part, however, branding's insatiable cultural thirst just creates more marketing. Marketing that thinks it is culture.

To understand how youth culture became such a sought-after market in the early nineties, it helps to go back briefly to the recession era "brand crisis" that took root immediately preceding this frenzy — a crisis that, with so many consumers failing to live up to corporate expectations, created a clear and pressing need for a new class of shoppers to step in and take over.

During the two decades before the brand crisis, the major cultural industries were still drinking deeply from the river of baby-boomer buying power, and the youth demographic found itself on the periphery, upstaged by the awesome power of classic rock and reunion tours. Of course actual young consumers remained a concern for the industries that narrowly market to teens, but youth culture itself was regarded as a rather shallow and tepid well of inspiration by the entertainment and advertising industries. Sure,

there were plenty of young people who considered their culture "alternative" or "underground" in the seventies and eighties. Every urban center maintained its bohemian pockets, where the faithful wrapped themselves in black, listened to the Grateful Dead or punk (or the more digestible New Wave), and shopped at secondhand clothing stores and in dark record stores. If they lived outside urban centers, tapes and accessories of the cool lifestyle could be ordered from the backs of magazines like *Maximum Rock 'n' Roll*, or swapped through networks of friends or purchased at concerts.

While this is a gross caricature of the youth subcultures that rose and fell during these decades, the relevant distinction is that these scenes were only half-heartedly sought after as markets. In part this was because seventies punk was at its peak at the same time as the infinitely more mass-marketable disco and heavy metal, and the gold mine of high-

end preppy style. And while rap music was topping the charts by the mid-to late eighties, arriving complete with a fully articulated style and code, white America was not about to declare the arrival of a new youth culture. That day would have to wait a few years until the styles and sounds of urban black youth were fully co-opted by white suburbia.

So there was no mass-marketing machine behind these subcultures: there was no Internet, no traveling alternative-culture shopping malls like Lolla-palooza or Lilith Fair, and there certainly weren't slick catalogs like Delia and Airshop, which now deliver body glitter, plastic pants and big-city attitude like pizzas to kids stuck in the suburbs. The industries that drove Western consumerism were still catering to the citizens of Woodstock Nation, now morphed into consumption-crazed yuppies. Most of their kids, too, could be counted on as yuppies-in-training, so keeping track of the trends and tastes favored by style-setting youth wasn't worth the effort.

The Youth Market Saves the Day

All that changed in the early nineties when the baby boomers dropped their end of the consumer chain and the brands underwent their identity crisis.

At about the time of Marlboro Friday, Wall Street took a closer look at the brands that had flourished through the recession, and noticed something interesting. Among the industries that were holding steady or taking off were beer, soft drinks, fast food and *sneakers* — not to mention chewing gum and Barbie dolls. There was something else: 1992 was the first year since 1975 that the number of teenagers in America increased. Gradually, an idea began to dawn on many in the manufacturing sector and entertainment industries: maybe their sales were slumping not because consumers were "brand-blind," but because these companies had their eyes fixed on the wrong demographic prize. This was not a time for selling Tide and Snuggles to housewives — it was a time for beaming MTV, Nike, Hilfiger, Microsoft, Netscape and *Wired* to global teens and their overgrown imitators. Their parents might have gone bargain basement, but kids, it turned out, were still willing to pay up to fit in. Through this process, peer pressure emerged as a powerful market force, making the keeping-up-with-the-Joneses consumerism of their suburban parents pale by comparison. As clothing retailer Elise Decoteau said of her teen shoppers, "They run in packs. If you sell to one, you sell to everyone in their class and everyone in their school."⁵

There was just one catch. As the success of branding superstars like Nike had shown, it was not going to be sufficient for companies simply to market their same products to a younger demographic; they needed to fashion brand identities that would resonate with this new culture. If they were going to turn their lackluster products into transcendent meaning machines — as the dictates of branding demanded — they would need to remake themselves in the image of nineties cool: its music, styles and politics.

Cool Envy: The Brands Go Back to School

Fueled by the dual promises of branding and the youth market, the corporate sector experienced a burst of creative energy. Cool, alternative, young, hip — whatever you want to call it — was the perfect identity for product-driven companies looking to become transcendent image-based brands. Advertisers, brand managers, music, film and television producers raced back to high school, sucking up to the in-crowd in a frantic effort to isolate and reproduce in TV commercials the precise "attitude" teens and twenty-

some things were driven to consume with their snack foods and pop tunes. And as in high schools everywhere, "Am I cool?" became the deeply dull and all-consuming question of every moment, echoing not only through class and locker rooms, but through the high-powered meetings and conference calls of Corporate High.

The quest for cool is by nature riddled with self-doubt ("Is this cool?" one can hear the legions of teen shoppers nervously quizzing each other. "Do you think this is lame?") Except now the harrowing doubts of adolescence are the billion-dollar questions of our age. The insecurities go round and round the boardroom table, turning ad writers, art directors and CEOs into turbo-powered teenagers, circling in front of their bedroom mirrors trying to look blasé. Do the kids think we're cool? they want to know. Are we trying too hard to be cool, or are we really cool? Do we have attitude? The *right* attitude?

The Wall Street Journal regularly runs serious articles about how the trend toward wide-legged jeans or miniature backpacks is affecting the stock market. IBM, out-cooled in the eighties by Apple, Microsoft and pretty well everybody, has become fixated on trying to impress the cool kids, or, in the company's lingo, the "People in Black." "We used to call them the ponytail brigade, the black turtle-neck brigade," says IBM's David Gee, whose job it is to make Big Blue cool. "Now they're the PIBs — People in Black. We have to be relevant to the PIBs." For Pepe Jeans, the goal, articulated by marketing director Phil Spur, is this: "They [the cool kids] have to look at your jeans, look at your brand image and say 'that's cool...' At the moment we're ensuring that Pepe is seen in the right places and on the right people."⁷

The companies that are left out of the crowd of successfully hip brands — their sneakers too small, their pant-legs too tapered, their edgy ads insufficiently ironic — now skulk on the margins of society: the corporate nerds. "Coolness is still elusive for us," says Bill Benford, president of L.A. Gear athletic wear,⁸ and one half expects him to slash his wrists like some anxious fifteen-year-old unable to face schoolyard exile for another term. No one is safe from this brutal ostracism, as Levi Strauss learned in 1998. The verdict was merciless: Levi's didn't have superstores like Disney, it didn't have cool ads like the Gap, it didn't have hip-hop credibility like Hilfiger and no one wanted to tattoo its logo on their navel, like Nike. In short, it wasn't cool. It

had failed to understand, as its new brand developer Sean Dee diagnosed, that "loose jeans is not a fad, it's a paradigm shift."⁹

Cool, it seems, is the make-or-break quality in 1990s branding. It is the ironic sneer-track of ABC sitcoms and late-night talk shows; it is what sells psychedelic Internet servers, extreme sports gear, ironic watches, mind-blowing fruit juices, kitsch-laden jeans, postmodern sneakers and post-gender colognes. Our "aspirational age," as they say in marketing studies, is about seventeen. This applies equally to the forty-seven-year-old baby boomers scared of losing their cool and the seven-year-olds kick-boxing to the Backstreet Boys.

As the mission of corporate executives becomes to imbue their companies with deep coolness, one can even foresee a time when the mandate of our elected leaders will be "Make the Country Cool." In many ways, that time is already here. Since his election in 1997, England's young prime minister, Tony Blair, has been committed to changing Britain's somewhat dowdy image to "Cool Britannia." After attending a summit with Blair in an art-directed conference room in Canary Wharf, French president Jacques Chirac said, "I'm impressed. It all gives Britain the image of a young, dynamic and modern country." At the G-8 summit in Birmingham, Blair turned the august gathering into a basement rec room get-together, where the leaders watched All Saints music videos and then were led in a round of "All You Need Is Love"; no Nintendo games were reported. Blair is a world leader as nation stylist — but will his attempt to "rebrand Britain" really work, or will he be stuck with the old, outdated Brit brand? If anyone can do it, it's Blair, who took a page from the marketers of Revolution Soda and successfully changed the name of his party from an actual description of its loyalties and policy proclivities (that would be "labour") to the brand-asset descriptor "New Labour." His is not the Labour Party but a labor-scented party.

The Change Agents: Cooling the Water Cooler

The journey to our current state of world cool almost ended, however, before it really began. Even though by 1993 there was scarcely a fashion, food, beverage or entertainment company that didn't pine for what the youth market promised, many were at a loss as to how to get it. At the time that cool-envy

hit, many corporations were in the midst of a hiring freeze, recovering from rounds of layoffs, most of which were executed according to the last-hired-first-fired policies of the late-eighties recession. With far fewer young workers on the payroll and no new ones coming up through the ranks, many corporate executives found themselves in the odd position of barely knowing anyone under thirty years old. In this stunted context, youth itself looked oddly exotic — and information about Xers, Generation Y and twenty-somethings was suddenly a most precious commodity.

Fortunately, a backlog of hungry twenty-somethings were already in the job market. Like good capitalists, many of these young workers saw a market niche: being professionally young. In so many words, they assured would-be bosses that if they were hired, hip, young countercultures would be hand-delivered at the rate of one per week; companies would be so cool, they would get respect in the scenes. They promised the youth demographic, the digital revolution, a beeline into convergence.

And as we now know, when they got the job, these conduits of cool saw no need to transform themselves into clone-ish Company Men. Many can be seen now, roaming the hallways of Fortune 500 corporations dressed like club kids, skateboard in tow. They drop references to all-night raves at the office water cooler ("Memo to the boss: why not fill this thing with ginseng-laced herbal iced tea?"). The CEOs of tomorrow aren't employees, they are, to use a term favored at IBM, "change agents." But are they impostors — scheming "suits" hiding underneath hip-hop snowboarding gear? Not at all. Many of these young workers are the real deal; the true and committed product of the scenes they serve up, and utterly devoted to the transformation of their brands. Like Tom Cruise in *Jerry Maguire*, they stay up late into the night penning manifestos, revolutionary tracts about the need to embrace the new, to flout bureaucracy, to get on the Web or be left behind, to redo the ad campaign with a groovier, grittier feel, to change quicker, be hipper.

And what do the change agents' bosses have to say about all this? They say bring it on, of course. Companies looking to fashion brand identities that will mesh seamlessly with the zeitgeist understand, as Marshall McLuhan wrote, "When a thing is current, it creates currency." The change agents stroke their bosses' middle-aged egos simply by showing up — how out of touch

could the boss be with a radical like this on the same intranet system? Just look at Netscape, which no longer employs a personnel manager and instead has Margie Mader, Director of Bringing in the Cool People. When asked by *Fast Company*, "How do you interview for cool?" she replied, "...there are the people who just exude cool: one guy skateboarded here for his interview; another held his interview in a roller-hockey rink."¹⁰ At MTV, a couple of twenty-five-year-old production assistants, both named Melissa, co-wrote a document known as the "Melissa Manifesto," calling on the already insufferably bubbly channel to become even more so. ("We want a cleaner, brighter, more fun MTV," was among their fearless demands.) Upon reading the tract, MTV president Judy McGrath told one of her colleagues, "I feel like blowing everybody out and putting these people in charge."¹¹ Fellow rebel Tom Freston, CEO of MTV, explains that "Judy is inherently an anti-establishment person. Anybody who comes along and says, 'Let's off the pig,' has got her ear."¹²

Cool Hunters: The Legal Stalkers of Youth Culture

While the change agents were getting set to cool the corporate world from the inside out, a new industry of "cool hunters" was promising to cool the companies from the outside in. The major corporate cool consultancies—Sputnik, *The L. Report*, Bureau de Style—were all founded between 1994 and 1996, just in time to present themselves as the brands' personal cool shoppers. The idea was simple: they would search out pockets of cutting-edge lifestyle, capture them on videotape and return to clients like Reebok, Absolut Vodka and Levi's with such bold pronouncements as "Monks are cool."¹³ They would advise their clients to use irony in their ad campaigns, to get surreal, to use "viral communications."

In their book *Street Trends*, Sputnik founders Janine Lopiano-Misdorn and Joanne De Luca concede that almost anyone can interview a bunch of young people and make generalizations, "but how do you know they are the 'right' ones—have you been in their closets? Trilled their daily routines? Hung out with them socially?... Are they the core consumers, or the mainstream followers?"¹⁴ Unlike the market researchers who use focus groups and one-way glass to watch kids as if they were overgrown lab rats, Sputnik is "one of them"—it is in with the in-crowd.

Of course all this has to be taken with a grain of salt. Cool hunters and their corporate clients are locked in a slightly S/M, symbiotic dance: the clients are desperate to believe in a just-beyond-their-reach well of untapped cool, and the hunters, in order to make their advice more valuable, exaggerate the crisis of credibility the brands face. On the off chance of Brand X becoming the next Nike, however, many corporations have been more than willing to pay up. And so, armed with their change agents and their cool hunters, the superbrands became the perennial teenage followers, trailing the scent of cool wherever it led.

In 1974, Norman Mailer described the paint sprayed by urban graffiti artists as artillery fired in a war between the street and the establishment. "You hit your name and maybe something in the whole scheme of the system gives a death rattle. For now your name is over their name....your presence is on their Presence, your alias hangs over their scene."¹⁵ Twenty-five years later, a complete inversion of this relationship has taken place. Gathering tips from the graffiti artists of old, the superbrands have tagged everyone—including the graffiti writers themselves. No space has been left unbranded.

Hip-Hop Blows Up the Brands

As we have seen, in the eighties you had to be relatively rich to get noticed by marketers. In the nineties, you have only to be cool. As designer Christian Lacroix remarked in *Vogue*, "It's terrible to say, very often the most exciting outfits are from the poorest people."¹⁶

Over the past decade, young black men in American inner cities have been the market most aggressively mined by the brandmasters as a source of borrowed "meaning" and identity. This was the key to the success of Nike and Tommy Hilfiger, both of which were catapulted to brand superstardom in no small part by poor kids who incorporated Nike and Hilfiger into hip-hop style at the very moment when rap was being thrust into the expanding youth-culture limelight by MTV and *Vibe* (the first mass-market hip-hop magazine, founded in 1992). "The hip-hop nation," write Lopiano-Misdorn and De Luca in *Street Trends*, is "the first to embrace a designer or a major label, they make that label 'big concept' fashion. Or, in their words, they 'blow it up.'"¹⁷

Designers like Stussy, Hilfiger, Polo, DKNY and Nike have refused to crack down on the pirating of their logos for T-shirts and baseball hats in the inner cities and several of them have clearly backed away from serious attempts to curb rampant shoplifting. By now the big brands know that profits from logowear do not just flow from the purchase of the garment but also from people seeing your logo on "the right people," as Pepe Jeans' Phil Spur judiciously puts it. The truth is that the "got to be cool" rhetoric of the global brands is, more often than not, an indirect way of saying "got to be black." Just as the history of cool in America is really (as many have argued) a history of African-American culture — from jazz and blues to rock and roll to rap — for many of the superbrands, cool hunting simply means black-culture hunting. Which is why the cool hunters' first stop was the basketball courts of America's poorest neighborhoods.

The latest chapter in mainstream America's gold rush to poverty began in 1986, when rappers Run-DMC breathed new life into Adidas products with their hit single "My Adidas," a homage to their favorite brand. Already, the wildly popular rap trio had hordes of fans copying their signature style of gold medallions, black-and-white Adidas tracksuits and low-cut Adidas sneakers, worn without laces. "We've been wearing them all our lives," Darryl McDaniels (a.k.a. DMC) said of his Adidas shoes at the time.¹⁰ That was fine for a time, but after a while it occurred to Russell Simmons, the president of Run-DMC's label Def Jam Records, that the boys should be getting paid for the promotion they were giving to Adidas. He approached the German shoe company about kicking in some money for the act's 1987 Together Forever tour. Adidas executives were skeptical about being associated with rap music, which at that time was alternately dismissed as a passing fad or vilified as an incitement to riot. To help change their minds, Simmons took a couple of Adidas bigwigs to a Run-DMC show. Christopher Vaughn describes the event in *Black Enterprise*: "At a crucial moment, while the rap group was performing the song ['My Adidas'], one of the members yelled out, 'Okay, everybody in the house, rock your Adidas!' — and three thousand pairs of sneakers shot in the air. The Adidas executives couldn't reach for their checkbooks fast enough."¹¹ By the time of the annual Atlanta sports-shoe Super Show that year, Adidas had unveiled its new line

of Run-DMC shoes: the Super Star and the Ultra Star — "designed to be worn without laces."¹²

Since "My Adidas," nothing in inner-city branding has been left up to chance. Major record labels like BMG now hire "street crews" of urban black youth to talk up hip-hop albums in their communities and to go out on guerrilla-style poster and sticker missions. The L.A.-based Steven Rifkind Company bills itself as a marketing firm "specializing in building word-of-mouth in urban areas and inner cities."¹³ Rifkind is CEO of the rap label Loud Records, and companies like Nike pay him hundreds of thousands of dollars to find out how to make their brands cool with trend-setting black youth.

So focused is Nike on borrowing style, attitude and imagery from black urban youth that the company has its own word for the practice: *bro-ing*. That's when Nike marketers and designers bring their prototypes to inner-city neighborhoods in New York, Philadelphia or Chicago and say, "Hey, bro, check out the shoes," to gauge the reaction to new styles and to build up a buzz. In an interview with journalist Josh Feit, Nike designer Aaron Cooper described his bro-ing conversion in Harlem: "We go to the playground, and we dump the shoes out. It's unbelievable. The kids go nuts. That's when you realize the importance of Nike. Having kids tell you Nike is the number one thing in their life — number two is their girlfriend."¹⁴ Nike has even succeeded in branding the basketball courts where it goes bro-ing through its philanthropic wing, P.L.A.Y. (Participate in the Lives of Youth). P.L.A.Y. sponsors inner-city sports programs in exchange for high swoosh visibility, including giant swooshes at the center of resurfaced urban basketball courts. In tonier parts of the city, that kind of thing would be called an ad and the space would come at a price, but on this side of the tracks, Nike pays nothing, and files the cost under charity.

Tommy Hilfiger: To the Ghetto and Back Again

Tommy Hilfiger, even more than Nike or Adidas, has turned the harnessing of ghetto cool into a mass-marketing science. Hilfiger forged a formula that has since been imitated by Polo; Nautica, Munsingwear (thanks to Puff Daddy's fondness for the penguin logo) and several other clothing companies looking for a short-cut to making it at the suburban mall with inner-city attitude.

Like a depoliticized, hyper-patriotic Benetton, Hilfiger ads are a tangle of Cape Cod multiculturalism: scrubbed black faces lounging with their windswept white brothers and sisters in that great country club in the sky, and always against the backdrop of a billowing American flag. "By respecting one another we can reach all cultures and communities," the company says. "We promote... the concept of living the American dream."²³ But the hard facts of Tommy's interracial financial success have less to do with finding common ground between cultures than with the power and mythology embedded in America's deep racial segregation.

Tommy Hilfiger started off squarely as white-preppy wear in the tradition of Ralph Lauren and Lacoste. But the designer soon realized that his clothes also had a peculiar cachet in the inner cities, where the hip-hop philosophy of "living large" saw poor and working-class kids acquiring status in the ghetto by adopting the gear and accoutrements of prohibitively costly leisure activities, such as skiing, golfing, even boating. Perhaps to better position his brand within this urban fantasy, Hilfiger began to associate his clothes more consciously with these sports, shooting ads at yacht clubs, beaches and other nautical locales. At the same time, the clothes themselves were redesigned to appeal more directly to the hip-hop aesthetic. Cultural theorist Paul Smith describes the shift as "bolder colors, bigger and baggier styles, more hoods and cords, and more prominence for logos and the Hilfiger name."²⁴ He also piled rap artists like Snoop Dogg with free clothes and, walking the tightrope between the yacht and the ghetto, launched a line of Tommy Hilfiger beepers.

Once Tommy was firmly established as a ghetto thing, the real selling could begin — not just to the comparatively small market of poor inner-city youth but to the much larger market of middle-class white and Asian kids who mimic black style in everything from lingo to sports to music. Company sales reached \$847 million in 1998 — up from a paltry \$53 million in 1991 when Hilfiger was still, as Smith puts it, "Young Republican clothing." Like so much of cool hunting, Hilfiger's marketing journey feeds off the alienation at the heart of America's race relations: selling white youth on their fetishization of black style, and black youth on their fetishization of white wealth.

Indie Inc.

Offering *Fortune* magazine readers advice on how to market to teenage girls, reporter Nina Munk writes that "you have to pretend that they're running things... Pretend you still have to be discovered. Pretend the girls are in charge."²⁵ Being a huge corporation might sell on Wall Street, but as the brands soon learned on their cool hunt, "indie" was the pitch on Cool Street. Many corporations were unfazed by this shift, coming out with faux indie brands like Politix cigarettes from Moonlight Tobacco Company (Philip Morris again), Old Navy's mock army surplus (the Gap) and OK Cola (Coke).

In an attempt to cash in on the indie marketing craze, even Coke itself, the most recognizable brand name on earth, has tried to go underground. Fearing that it was too establishment for brand-conscious teens, the company launched an ad campaign in Wisconsin that declared Coke the "Unofficial State Drink." The campaign included radio spots that were allegedly broadcast from a pirate radio station called EKOC: Coke backward. Not to be outdone, Gap-owned Old Navy actually did launch its own pirate radio station to promote its brand — a micro-band transmitter that could only be picked up in the immediate vicinity of one of its Chicago billboards.²⁶ And in 1999, when Levi's decided it was high time to recoup its lost cool, it also went indie, launching Red Line jeans (no mention of Levi's anywhere) and K-1 Khakis (no mention of Levi's or Dockers).

Ironie Consumption: No Deconstruction Required

But Levi's may have, once again, missed a "paradigm shift." It hasn't taken long for these attempts to seriously pitch the most generic of mass-produced products as punk-rock lifestyle choices to elicit sneers from those elusive, trend-setting cool kids, many of whom had already moved beyond indie by the time the brands caught on. Instead, they were now finding ways to express their disdain for mass culture not by opting out of it but by

They sell 501s and they think it's

funny

Turning rebellion into money

— Chumbawamba,

"That's How Grateful We Are"

abandoning themselves to it entirely — but with a sly ironic twist. They were watching *Melrose Place*, eating surf 'n' turf in revolving restaurants, singing Frank Sinatra in karaoke bars and sipping girly drinks in tikki bars, acts that were rendered hip and daring because, well, *they* were the ones doing them. Not only were they making a subversive statement about a culture they could not physically escape, they were rejecting the doctrinaire puritanism of seventies feminism, the earnestness of the sixties quest for authenticity and the "literal" readings of so many cultural critics. Welcome to ironic consumption. The editors of the zine *Hermenaut* articulated the recipe:

Following the late ethnologist Michel de Certeau, we prefer to concentrate our attention on the independent use of mass culture products, a use which, like the ruses of camouflaged fish and insects, may not "overthrow the system," but which keeps us intact and autonomous within that system, which may be the best for which we can hope.... Going to Disney World to drop acid and goof on Mickey isn't revolutionary; going to Disney World in full knowledge of how ridiculous and evil it all is and still having a great innocent time, in some almost unconscious, even psychotic way, is something else altogether. This is what de Certeau describes as "the art of being in-between," and this is the only path of true freedom in today's culture. Let us, then, be in-between. Let us revel in Baywatch, Joe Camel, *Wired* magazine, and even glossy books about the society of spectacle [touché], but let's never succumb to the glamorous allure of these things.²⁷

In this complicated context, for brands to be truly cool, they need to layer this uncool-equals-cool aesthetic of the ironic viewer onto their pitch: they need to self-mock, talk back to themselves while they are talking, be used and new simultaneously. And after the brands and their cool hunters had tagged all the available fringe culture, it seemed only natural to fill up that narrow little strip of unmarketed brain space occupied by irony with pre-planned knowing smirks, someone else's couch commentary and even a running simulation of the viewer's thought patterns. "The New Trash brands," remarks writer Nick Compton of kitsch lifestyle companies like Diesel, "offer inverted commas big enough to live, love and laugh within."²⁸

Pop Up Videos, the VH1 show that adorns music videos with snarky thought bubbles, may be the endgame of this kind of commercial irony. It grabs the punchline before anyone else can get to it, making social commentary — even idle sneering — if not redundant then barely worth the expense of energy.

Irony's cozy, protected, self-referential niche is a much better fit than attempts to earnestly pass off fruit drinks as underground rock bands or sneakers as gangsta rappers. In fact, for brands in search of cool new identities, irony and camp have become so all-purpose that they even work after the fact. It turns out that the so-bad-it's-good marketing spin can be deployed to resuscitate hopelessly uncool brands and failed cultural products. Six months after the movie *Showgirls* flopped in the theaters, for instance, MGM got wind that the exploitation flick was doing okay on video, and not just as a quasi-respectable porno. It seemed that groups of trendy twenty-somethings were throwing *Showgirls* irony parties, laughing sardonically at the implausibly poor screenplay and shrieking with horror at the aerobic sexual encounters. Not content to pocket the video returns, MGM decided to relaunch the movie in the theaters as the next *Rocky Horror Picture Show*. This time around, the newspaper ads made no pretense that anyone had seriously admired the film. Instead, they quoted from the abysmal reviews, and declared *Showgirls* an "instant camp classic" and "a rich sleazy kitsch-fest." The studio even hired a troupe of drag queens for the New York screenings to holler at the crowd with bullhorns during particularly egregious cinematic moments.

With the tentacles of branding reaching into every crevice of youth culture, leaching brand-image content not only out of street styles like hip-hop but psychological attitudes like ironic detachment, the cool hunt has had to go further afield to find unperfected space and that left only one frontier: the past.

What is retro, after all, but history re-consumed with a PepsiCo tie-in, and breath-mint and phone-card brand extensions? As the re-release of *Lost in Space*, the *Star Wars* trilogy, and the launch of *The Phantom Menace* made clear, the mantra of retro entertainment seems to be "Once more with synergy!" as Hollywood travels back in time to cash in on merchandising opportunities beyond the imagination of yesterday's marketers.

Sell or Be Sold

After almost a decade of the branding frenzy, cool hunting has become an internal contradiction: the hunters must rarely youth "microcultures" by claiming that only full-time hunters have the know-how to unearth them — or else why hire cool hunters at all? Sputnik warns its clients that if the cool trend is "visible in your neighborhood or crowding your nearest mall, the learning is over. It's too late.... You need to get down with the streets, to be in the trenches every day."²⁹ And yet this is demonstrably false; so-called street fashions — many of them planted by brandmasters like Nike and Hilfiger from day one — reach the ballooning industry of glossy youth-culture magazines and video stations without a heartbeat's delay. And if there is one thing virtually every young person now knows, it's that street style and youth culture are infinitely marketable commodities.

Besides, even if there was a lost indigenous tribe of cool a few years back, rest assured that it no longer exists. It turns out that the prevailing legalized forms of youth stalking are only the tip of the iceberg: the Sputnik vision for the future of hip marketing is for companies to hire armies of Sputnik spawns — young "street promoters," "Net promoters" and "street distributors" who will hype brands one-on-one on the street, in the clubs and on-line. "Use the magic of peer-to-peer distribution — it worked in the freestyle sport cultures, mainly because the promoters were their friends.... Street promoting will survive as the only true means of personally 'spreading the word.'"³⁰ So all arrows point to more jobs for the ballooning industry of "street snitches," certified representatives of their demographic who will happily become walking infomercials for Nike, Reebok and Levi's.

By fall 1998 it had already started to happen with the Korean car manufacturer Daewoo hiring two thousand college students on two hundred campuses to talk up the cars to their friends. Similarly, Anheuser-Busch keeps troops of U.S. college frat boys and "Bud Girls" on its payroll to promote Budweiser beer at campus parties and bars.³¹ The vision is both horrifying and hilarious: a world of glorified diary trespassers and professional eavesdroppers, part of a spy-vs.-spy corporate-fueled youth culture stalking itself, whose members will videotape one another's haircuts and chat about their corporate keepers' cool new products in their grassroots newsgroups.

Rock-and-Roll CEOs

There is an amusing irony in the fact that so many of our captains of industry pay cool hunters good money to lead them on the path to brand-image nirvana. The true barometers of hip are not the hunters, the postmodern admen, the change agents or even those trendy teenagers they're all madly chasing. They are the CEOs themselves, who are, for the most part, so damn rich that they can afford to stay on top of all the coolest culture trends. Guys like Diesel Jeans founder Renzo Rosso, who, according to *Business Week*, "rides to work on a Ducati Monster motorcycle."³² Or Nike's Phil Knight, who only took off his ever-present wraparound Oakley sunglasses after Oakley CEO Jim Jannard refused to sell him the company. Or famed admen Dan Wieden and David Kennedy who built a basketball court — complete with bleachers — in their corporate headquarters. Or Virgin's Richard Branson, who launched a London bridal store in a wedding dress, rappelled off the roof of his new Vancouver megastore while uncorking a bottle of champagne and then later crash-landed in the Algerian desert in his hot-air balloon — all during the month of December 1996. These CEOs are the new rock stars — and why shouldn't they be? Forever trailing the scent of cool, they are full-time, professional teenagers, but unlike real teenagers, they have nothing to distract them from the hot pursuit of the edge: no homework, puberty, college-entrance exams or curfews for them.

Getting Over It

As we will see later on, the sheer voracity of the corporate cool hunt did much to provoke the rise of brand-based activism: through adusting, computer hacking and spontaneous illegal street parties, young people all over the world are aggressively reclaiming space from the corporate world, "unbranding" it, guerrilla-style. But the effectiveness of the cool hunt also set the stage for anticorporate activism in another way: inadvertently, it exposed the impotence of almost all other forms of political-resistance *except* anticorporate resistance, one cutting-edge marketing trend at a time.

When the youth-culture feeding frenzy began in the early nineties, many of us who were young at the time saw ourselves as victims of a predatory marketing machine that co-opted our identities, our styles and our ideas and

turned them into brand food. Nothing was immune: not punk, not hip-hop, not fetish, not techno — not even, as I'll get to in Chapter 5, campus feminism or multiculturalism. Few of us asked, at least not right away, why it was that these scenes and ideas were proving so packageable, so unthreatening — and so profitable. Many of us had been certain we were doing something subversive and rebellious but... what was it again?

In retrospect, a central problem was the mostly unquestioned assumption that just because a scene or style is different (that is, new and not yet mainstream), it necessarily exists in opposition to the mainstream, rather than simply sitting unthreateningly on its margins. Many of us assumed that "alternative" — music that was hard to listen to, styles that were hard to look at — was also anticommercial, even socialist. In *Hype!*, a documentary about how the discovery of "the Seattle sound" transformed a do-it-yourself hardcore scene into an international youth-culture-content factory, Pearl Jam's Eddie Vedder makes a rather moving speech about the emptiness of the "alternative" breakthrough of which his band was so emblematic:

If all of this influence that this part of the country has and this musical scene has — if it doesn't do anything with it, that would be the tragedy. If it doesn't do anything with it like make some kind of change or make some kind of difference, this group of people who feel this certain way, who think these sorts of things that the underdogs we've all met and lived with think — if they finally get to the forefront and nothing comes out of it, that would be the tragedy.²²

But that tragedy has already happened, and Vedder's inability to spit out what he was actually trying to say had more than a little to do with it. When the world's cameras were turned on Seattle, all we got were a few anti-establishment fuck-yous, a handful of overdoses and Kurt Cobain's suicide. We also got the decade's most spectacular "sellout" — Courtney Love's awe-inspiring sail from junkie punk queen to high-fashion cover girl in a span of two years. It seemed Courtney had been playing dress-up all along. What was revealing was how little it mattered. Did Love betray some karmic debt she owed to smudged eyeliner? To not caring about anything and shooting

up? To being surly to the press? Don't you need to buy in to something earnestly before you can sell it out cynically?

Seattle imploded precisely because no one wanted to answer questions like those, and yet in the case of Cobain, and even Vedder, many in its scene possessed a genuine, if malleable, disdain for the trappings of commercialism. What was "sold out" in Seattle, and in every other subculture that has had the misfortune of being spotlighted by the cool hunters, was some pure idea about doing it yourself, about independent labels versus the big corporations, about not buying in to the capitalist machine. But few in that scene bothered to articulate these ideas out loud, and Seattle — long dead and forgotten as anything but a rather derivative fad — now serves as a cautionary tale about why so little opposition to the theft of cultural space took place in the early to mid-nineties. Trapped in the headlights of irony and carrying too much pop-culture baggage, not one of its antiheroes could commit to a single, solid political position.

A similar challenge is now being faced by all those ironic consumers out there — a cultural suit of armor many of us are loath to critique because it lets us feel smug while watching limitless amounts of bad TV. Unfortunately, it's tough to hold on to that subtle state of De Certeau's "in-betweenness" when the eight-hundred-pound culture industry gorilla wants to sit next to us on the couch and tag along on our ironic trips to the mall. That art of being in-between, of being ironic, or camp, which Susan Sontag so brilliantly illuminated in her 1964 essay "Notes on Camp," is based on an essential cliquiness, a club of people who get the aesthetic puns. "To talk about camp is therefore to betray it,"²⁴ she acknowledges at the beginning of the essay, selecting the format of enumerated notes rather than a narrative so as to tread more lightly on her subject, one that could easily have been trampled with too heavy an approach.

Since the publication of Sontag's piece, camp has been quantified, measured, weighed, focus-grouped and test-marketed. To say it has been betrayed, as Sontag had feared, is an understatement of colossal dimensions. What's left is little more than a vaguely sarcastic way to eat Pizza Pops. Camp cannot exist in an ironic commercial culture in which no one is fully participating and everyone is an outsider inside their clothes, because, as

Sontag writes, "In naive, or pure, Camp, the essential element is seriousness, a seriousness that fails."³⁵

Much of the early camp culture that Sontag describes involved using an act of imagination to make the marginal — even the despised — glamorous and fabulous. Drag queens, for instance, took their forced exile and turned it into a ball, with all the trappings of the Hollywood balls to which they would never be invited. The same can even be said of Andy Warhol. The man who took the world on a camping trip was a refugee from bigoted small-town America; the Factory became his sovereign state. Sontag proposed camp as a defense mechanism against the banality, ugliness and overearnestness of mass culture. "Camp is the modern dandyism. Camp is the answer to the problem: how to be a dandy in the age of mass culture."³⁶ Only now, some thirty-five years later, we are faced with the vastly more difficult question, How to be truly critical in an age of mass camp?

Or perhaps it is not that difficult. Yes, the cool hunters reduce vibrant cultural ideas to the status of archeological artifacts, and drain away whatever meaning they once held for the people who lived with them — but this has always been the case. It's a cinch to co-opt a style; and it has been done many times before, on a much grander scale than the minor takeover of drag and grunge. Bauhaus modernism, for example, had its roots in the imaginings of a socialist utopia free of garish adornment, but it was almost immediately appropriated as the relatively inexpensive architecture of choice for the glass-and-steel skyscrapers of corporate America.

On the other hand, though style-based movements are stripped of their original meanings time and time again, the effect of this culture vulturing on more politically grounded movements is often so ludicrous that the most sensible reaction is just to laugh it off. The spring 1998 Prada collection, for instance, borrowed heavily from the struggle of the labor movement. As "supershopper" Karen von Hahn reported from Milan, "The collection, a sort of Maoist/Soviet-worker chic full of witty period references, was shown in a Prada-blue room in the Prada family palazzo to an exclusive few." She adds, "After the show, the small yet ardent group of devotees tossed back champagne cocktails and canapés while urbane jazz played in the background."³⁷

Mao and Lenin also make an appearance on a Spring 1999 handbag from Red or Dead. Yet despite these clear co-optations of the class struggle, one hardly expects the labor movements of the world to toss in the towel in a huff, give up on their demands for decent working conditions and labor standards worldwide because Mao is suddenly the It Boy in Milan. Neither are union members everywhere accepting wage rollbacks because Pizza Hut aired a commercial in which the boss delivers pizzas to a picket line and all anti-management animosity is abandoned in favor of free food.

The Tibetan people in the West seem similarly nonplussed by their continued popularity with the Beastie Boys, Brad Pitt and designer Anna Sui, who was so moved by their struggle that she made an entire line of banana-print bikini tops and surfer shorts inspired by the Chinese occupation (*Women's Wear Daily* dubbed the Tibet line "techno beach blanket bingo"). More indifference has met Apple computers' appropriation of Gandhi for their "Think Different" campaign, and Che Guevara's reincarnation as the logo for Revolution Soda (slogan: "Join the Revolution"; see image on page 62) and as the mascot of the upscale London cigar lounge, Che. Why? Because not one of the movements being "co-opted" expressed itself primarily through style or attitude. And so style co-optation — and indeed any outside-the-box brainstorming on Madison Avenue — does not have the power to undo them either.

It may seem cold comfort, but now that we know advertising is an extreme sport and CEOs are the new rock stars, it's worth remembering that extreme sports are not political movements and rock, despite its historic claims to the contrary, is not revolution. In fact, to determine whether a movement genuinely challenges the structures of economic and political power, one need only measure how affected it is by the goings-on in the fashion and advertising industries. If, even after being singled out as the latest fad, it continues as if nothing had happened, it's a good bet it is a real movement. If it spawns an industry of speculation about whether movement X has lost its "edge," perhaps its adherents should be looking for a sharper utensil. And as we will soon see, that is exactly what many young activists are in the process of doing.