

# Culture Jams and Meme Warfare: Kalle Lasn, Adbusters, and media activism

## Tactics in Global Activism for the 21<sup>st</sup> century

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Three members of a Center for Communication and Civic Engagement (CCCE) working group on communication and global activism traveled to Vancouver Canada on April 19, 2002 to interview Kalle Lasn, editor of Adbusters magazine, co-founder of the Media Foundation, and author of *Culture Jam: How to Reverse America's Suicidal Consumer Binge – and why we must* (New York: Quill, 2000). The interview team included: Wendi Pickerel, a University of Washington undergraduate who received a Mary Gates Fellowship to recognize and support her work at CCCE; Helena Jorgensen, a visiting Danish graduate student in the Department of Communication, and Lance Bennett, director of CCCE.

We were all excited to meet Lasn, currently one of the leading figures in the culture jamming movement, because of our interest in how to communicate activist messages. Culture jamming is the act of reorganizing media, via acts like billboard or a magazine advertisement alteration, in a way that gives new meaning to the images – a meaning that carries a political message or social commentary on the product, brand, or corporation doing the advertising. Carrie McLaren, editor of Stayfree Magazine, credits the band Negativland with culture jamming's inception on their 1984 *Jamcon* release (SST Records) and quotes the band as explaining that

as awareness of how the media environment we occupy affects and directs our inner life, some resist....The skillfully reworked billboard...directs the public viewer to a consideration of the original corporate strategy.

McLaren goes on to write that culture jamming as a term was

adopted and used by other media activists in their line of work. *Open Magazine Pamphlet Series* spotlighted culture jamming in its July 1993 issue. Tracing it back to Negativland, writer Mark Dery surveyed the varied forms it has taken in media activism: hoaxing, audio agitprop, billboard banditry, guerilla semiotics, zines, etc.

Jams are often aimed at exposing questionable political assumptions behind commercial culture, aiming to capture our attention so that, for a moment, we can consider the branded environment we live in. Culture jams refigure logos, fashion statements, and

product images to challenge images of “what’s cool,” along with assumptions about the personal freedoms of consumption. Culture jams can help create a sense of transparency about a product’s production impact by presenting images that quickly communicate the realities hidden behind the slick corporate logos. The logic of culture jamming is to convert easily identifiable images into larger questions about corporate responsibility, the “true” environmental and human costs of consumption, or the private corporate uses of the “public” airwaves.

The basic unit of communication in culture jamming is the meme: the core unit of cultural transmission. Memes are condensed images that stimulate visual, verbal, musical, or behavioral associations that people can easily imitate and transmit to others (see Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, second edition 1989). For example, culture jammers play on familiar commercial memes such as the Nike swoosh to engage people of different political persuasions in thinking about the implications of their fashion statements. One Adbuster’s play on this core Nike meme invites us to consider how we identify with Tiger Woods when his smile is morphed into a Swoosh. In another example, a jammer named Jonah Peretti strained the purity of the Nike image by creating an email exchange with a custom Nike web site that refused his request to put the word “sweatshop” on his custom Nikes. This e-mail circulated in viral fashion to a huge population world-wide. And it made its way quickly into mass media news and culture content, carrying with it questions about the limits of consumer freedom and the discomforts of making a fashion statement with expensive shoes made by child sweatshop labor.

For Lasn, the best culture jam is one that introduces a meta-meme, a two-level message that punctures a specific commercial image, but does so in a way that challenges some larger aspect of the political culture of corporate domination. One metameme, noted above, is “true cost” which conveys the larger environmental and human costs of products beyond their sales price to the consumer. Another is “Media Carta” which calls for a serious charter to make the public airwaves truly public, and not just a corporate domain. Another is the call to rewrite the corporate “genetic code” so that corporations have less license to become social and environmental predators, and more responsibility to contribute to the well being of society. For example, a TV “subvertisement” produced by Adbusters begins with a series of tobacco executives lying to congressional hearings (the specific product jam) and ends with the question of whether such corporations should be allowed to exist (the meta-meme). Yet because of the lack of true public media rights (the “Media Carta” meta-meme), Adbusters has had little success in getting broadcasters to sell air time for these subvertisements on grounds that they contaminate the purity of media environments designed exclusively for communicating commercial messages.

We arrived early at the bustling offices of Adbusters magazine, located in a residential neighborhood in Vancouver, Canada. It took a few minutes to adjust to a scene that was vibrating with so much energy. We were quickly caught up in the flow of mailing the current issue, producing material for the next one, and processing subscriptions. Several rooms off the main floor were busy with meetings and computer activities.

Kalle Lasn soon emerged from a meeting and cheerily ushered us ahead to a free room on the top floor. We realized that starting our prepared interview would only interrupt the free-flowing conversation that had begun before we took our chairs. By the time the tape recorder was turned on, we were in the midst of an animated conversation about how to communicate with citizen-consumers who often avoid political problems and topics in favor of building an isolated reality around consumer comforts. We began talking about the limits of using ideological or analytical messages to reach those who have become politically isolated by their immersion in consumer culture.....

**Bennett:** Elaborate political messages may be great for those who are blessed with ideological understandings. But the question of how to communicate with those who have isolated themselves from conventional politics had been a challenge for me until I read your movement's publication. It has really made me rethink political communication.

**Lasn:** One of the things that I really liked about the Battle in Seattle was it wasn't their usual left wing kind of thing. People were there for all kinds of reasons -- all very personal, intimate reasons and somehow, it felt like the beginning of a new politics.

**Bennett:** Yes, though it is puzzling to me because I keep waiting for some convergence, some neo-ideology that goes beyond Marxism to somehow engage with global economics today but I am not seeing it. I wonder if this diversity is the movement.

**Lasn:** What are you not seeing?

**Bennett:** For example, when everybody shows up for a protest, the media frame the protestors as violent and describe their ideology as anti-global. My sense is that most of these protestors aren't anti-global but instead want a democratic globalization process. Apparently, at Pôrto Alegre this year (World Social Forum 2/2002), there was a lot of discussion about whether the movement *should* develop a set of core messages, and the sense was, "No, we should promote inclusiveness and diversity." This is difficult for the media to engage with.

**Lasn:** I must admit I am skeptical about that kind of thinking. I think we need to tackle some of these issues, define what they are, and then promote them with the same kind of vigor that the corporations use to promote their issues.

**Pickerel:** So, you're skeptical of leaving that really loose diverse message going on? You see it as more important to have a unified message?

**Lasn:** I see a need for both but I don't like it when one excludes the other. I understand why we have this looseness, the diversity, and a nobody-is-the-leader attitude. Still, when I see protest after protest leading up to Genoa and how those coalition's messages aren't coming through, it forces me to ask if it isn't simply how the media is framing us but that we *ourselves* don't know what the issues are.

**Pickerel:** We're missing the metamemes, as you mention in your book?

**Lasn:** Yes, we haven't been able to say, "Here are the six metamemes and they are the big issues and without achieving Media Carta, we will never be able to address them and take the actions necessary to resolve them." That sort of thinking is missing right now from the movement and it's hurting us.

**Jorgensen:** Is it your opinion that by only being symbolic protest the protestors don't have any "weight" behind their actions?

**Lasn:** Yes, because at the moment, quite apart from the media just wanting to show the broken windows and violence, we *actually* don't have anything to say! Of course, in a sense we do, but there are not enough people wrestling with the big ideas behind our movement and explaining them to the public.

**Pickerel:** You mentioned corporations and the vigor they invest to promote their messages. I imagine a corporation has solidarity because of what it is but the movement, what some call the global social justice movement and others the anti-globalization movement, doesn't have this same solidarity right now. This puts the movement at a disadvantage right away. The diversity and inclusiveness it does have are important but there is a level of solidarity that needs to be established to bring the movement to something that is going to be more constructive about creating a change. I worry that if that solidarity isn't established in some way or another, this fragmentation and unwillingness to commit to the bigger ideas, such as the metamemes you have discussed in your book, will continue to obscure the issues and allow the media to present the movement in the form that they choose.

**Lasn:** One good strong issue that everyone can agree on creates solidarity. I think it is very hard to maintain a solidarity that is based on everybody having sniffed tear gas. If someone asks you, "What is the big issue of our time? What do you really believe in?" then you should have a clear answer. If you don't, then what does your protesting ultimately add up to?

**Jorgensen:** So you actually want a more prominent discussion, something that unites these battles in Seattle or Goteborg (Sweden) into something more cohesive?

**Bennett:** How about a focus on the big meme such as democratic globalization? Democracy is still a well traveling concept and globalization is already everywhere, so connect the two of them up, and put a spin on them. Almost everyone can buy into that, but what is puzzling about this movement is the sense of not wanting to!

**Lasn:** I think many activists haven't thought things through. Things haven't gelled into clearly defined issues.

**Pickerel:** Maybe that is the hard work that is coming next, that people haven't been prepared to take on?

**Lasn:** I think so. For example, I heard one person talk very eloquently on CBC radio about what the big issues were at the Pôrto Alegre meeting in Brazil. She said media democracy was a big issue there and people talked a lot about the six big media corporations that control over half of all the information flows around the planet and how important it was for activists to fight for access to the airwaves and "get a voice." She was talking about Media Carta and I thought, "This is great!" But that turned out to be only one of a dozen ideas floating around Pôrto Alegre and since the meeting ended, everything has fizzled into an amorphous mess again. Ultimately, no big ideas emerged.

**Pickerel:** It will be interesting over the course of the year to see what kind of networking takes place as a result of the World Social Forum (WSF). In many of the articles I read on Pôrto Alegre, there was a new, strong sense of networking starting there. Maybe that is the first baby step in creating more solidarity among people?

**Bennett:** As I see it, networks are part of the reason why the ideas aren't coming together. Networks are wonderful for being able to span the globe and keep people in touch without costing too much. They are strong in this way. Still, while these networks tolerate diversity, which is a good thing if that is your goal, they subvert consensus -- especially the kind of networks that are being created in this global movement. They are incredibly loose networks and they form and reform in almost an amoebic sense. For example, a network that comes to Genoa has some of the same players from an earlier protest and many new ones, and the network that comes to Prague shares some of the same players but they may take different roles in shaping the actions because new ideas accompany them.

**Lasn:** Yes, one of the reasons I think the battle in Seattle was so successful is because there was a clearly defined goal: to shut the meeting down and stop those inside from passing the world trade rules. After that it was replay, replay, replay! Everyone was focused on one goal: "Let's create trouble and stop this meeting!" Then, if we had said, "The next protest in New York will be about Media Democracy and the protest in Melbourne will be about True Cost and the protest in Genoa will be about killing the corporate "I," then, instead of all this endless talk about networking, we would actually be getting somewhere by now.

**Bennett:** That *would* really have been something -- a meme for every protest!

**Lasn:** Yes, a metameme for every protest!

**Bennett:** Hey, that is a good slogan; maybe we should promote that?

**Lasn:** Yes, maybe that's a meta-metameme!

We all laughed at the meta-metameme idea, and the conversation turned to more specific questions we had been exploring in our CCCE working group and hoped to ask Kalle. But he beat us to the questioning. The May/June 2002 issue of *Adbusters* had recently come out, and he was curious about the impression it had made on us.

**Pickerel:** We have a few specific questions we would like to ask you. We all enjoy *Adbusters* and have read it for quite sometime.

**Lasn:** Great! Can I ask you a question? What do you think of the theme like-direction we have taken with the last few issues?

**Pickerel:** My friends and I liked the last issue a lot but there were parts of it, that although were very much in the context of the magazine, still left some of my friends asking, "Where is this coming from?" Still, there were parts where we really focused in on.

**Jorgensen:** I have met two kinds of people reading *Adbusters*. Those who don't always have to have the message served to them and others who would prefer to have the message brought forward more clearly. I think it is a mix – sometimes it is clear and sometimes its more intimate; as if the message lies between imagery and text or within the context of the whole series of the magazine. I really enjoy the play between the imagery and text.

**Lasn:** That's what has me most excited right now: finding new ways of juxtaposing image and text to create a new comic book kind of flow from cover to cover.

**Pickerel:** That approach, juxtaposing text and images in new ways, is something I am particularly interested in -- how activists could better draw on merging images and text together, how campaigns could better utilize and embrace the media to draw people into an issue when we, as you have mentioned in other interviews (*The Sun*: July 2001, #307), are in a "media trance", receiving more advertising messages than we have room for in our heads. People just don't have the time or space in their minds today for so many messages. I keep wondering how you can pull the consumer into an idea and quickly, stop their thinking briefly, so they can look at an issue in a different way if at least for only a moment...

**Jorgensen:** I think it's interesting today in a society that is very much built up by media and visual images how you try to deconstruct image by imagery. I think it is quite interesting to see how the Dadaists, the Surrealists, and the Situationists reacted to the manipulation of imagery – and how this is continued via Adbusters in our present context. I really enjoy it!

**Bennett:** I was looking through one issue downstairs in your offices and I thought the picture of Tiger Wood's smile in the shape of a Nike swoosh is brilliant. It says so much, so clearly...

**Lasn:** I just gave a talk recently and showed a few slides, and you know, that slide -- everybody burst out laughing.

**Bennett:** It gets into Tiger Wood's personality. We all think that we know him because of his style on the golf course and his character... but to turn his smile into the corporate logo...

**Lasn:** It's like branding -- after that I have never seen his smile in quite the same!

**Pickerel:** In the current global activists' scene, we would like to know where you place yourself? Would you consider your organization the calling card of change, the rabble-rousers, a term you yourself have used before? And going forward in activism, where do you place yourselves?

**Lasn:** Twelve years ago when we first started, we just wanted to launch a new strain of activism because we were tired of the old left; we figured that "culture" was going to be the great new battleground. At that stage we were just fishing, looking to see whether we could float some new ideas, but then after the Battle of Seattle everything heaved. Suddenly we saw culture jamming as one of the hubs of the new activism. Nobody quite knows how politically left this new activism will be or to what extent the left will be able to co-opt the movement. No one has quite figured out this movement yet.

**Pickerel:** I agree and feel that we are at the preliminary stage where those hubs are forming. I see this particular hub (culture jammers and Adbusters) as very important because it is getting the messages out to people.

**Bennett:** Can I follow up on the media question? I think media democracy is a very important meme and one that should be shareable across a lot of different groups. I am constantly impressed, and depressed, with activists who buy the Chomsky-ian idea of the rigid wall the media places against politically progressive messages. I see hundreds of examples of culture jamming that have made it into the New York Times, CNN, USA

Today, The Times of London, and The Today Show. Jonah Peretti's Nike sweatshop<sup>1</sup> escapade got him in the most prominent media all over the world. So, I see an opening in the mass media to culture jamming if done in a way that creates drama about a major corporation, drama that the stock holders might be interested in, that fashion consumers might be interested in, and so on. And yet, to take it to the next level of media and democracy and generate the next level of memes that we would at least like to see in print, and on TV, seems to me to be an experiment a lot of activists aren't willing to engage in because they firmly believe that the media does not open the doors to their messages. Yet, the media have opened the doors to the messages at so many specific issue levels that we have documented.

**Lasn:** I must admit, I can't quite see it the way you do. I know that there are lots of little breakthroughs and we ourselves are making a lot of these little breakthroughs, but let's face it, that's just nibbling at the boots. It reminds me of the story of how you've got a monkey on your back and this monkey is trying to be very nice to you and it will scratch your back if you ask it to, and it will massage your neck if it feels a little stiff... it will do anything you ask, but it won't get off your back. This is the way I see the media. Even though you can penetrate it and get your message across sometimes, the really big stuff isn't happening. Take the global automakers for example. They spend sixty billion dollars a year, a lot of it on T.V. and they have this sexy thing going on with their cars and a continuous product message saying that the personal automobile is the only way to get around. Up against those sixty million dollars on the other side, where they are telling us that automobiles create climate change and are putting the planet out of whack for hundreds, maybe thousands of years, you have ONE BIG ZERO. So where is the breakthrough? The monkey remains on our back.

**Bennett:** I understand that and it is an interesting way of raising a question we have all talked about. It seems if the goal is to democratize the media, which I agree that we are just nipping at their heels, there do seem to be tactics enabling activists to get political messages through the media that would otherwise not be delivered by the mass media if the activists were presenting them in ideological terms. I wonder if those techniques couldn't be stepped up a level to promote the messages of the global movement? Do you see that as a separable issue from whether we will capture the media in that process?

**Lasn:** All these little breakthroughs are wonderful; yes they are great first steps. It's the jamming stage when you get in there any which way you can and create as much trouble as you can. Let me put it this way -- you are going after the corporation because it cut down some trees or it polluted the river. What you're doing is going after the corporation for the individual harms it inflicts and so, each time, you have this big, big fight. That is one way to go and you can have some limited success with it, but what you are missing by taking this approach is, as I explain in my book, that the genetic code of the corporation itself remains intact. You must attack the corporation on a higher level. You

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<sup>1</sup> See shey.net's web page <http://shey.net/niked.html> to read the original email correspondence (1/2001) and also a timeline of how it was picked up by the media in the following months.

must attack the way the corporation is set up, taking into consideration the way *we the people* have given corporations their corporate charters, their rights and freedoms which are very similar to the rights and freedoms we human beings ourselves have. Unless you attack the corporation on that level, you can do all the individual harm you want but you will never win the game. They will continue to remain in charge, and I feel the same way about the media. We can keep on trying to get someone on some show and put on 30 seconds of blank screen on CNN<sup>2</sup>. That's great and wonderful and a lot of fun and, obviously, worth doing, but the commercial mass media system remains intact. Under this system a citizen does not even have the right to walk into his local T.V. station, plunk down his money, and buy 30-seconds of airtime -- even though we call these airwaves the *public airwaves*! If we want to solve the corporate problem we have to recode the corporation. Likewise, if we want to solve the media problem we have to change the way information flows in our culture and create new information rights — Media Carta! We have to ask, how do we license these broadcasters? Where do we draw the line between their business and our free speech interests? Do we the people have the right to demand that two minutes of every hour be given back to us for our messages? Can we say, “OK you guys can have 58 of every 60 minutes, but we the people want our two... and maybe later three, minutes.” We need that kind of “we the people are in charge” attitude. I think it's important not to get carried away with all the fun of culture jamming. There is a bigger, battle to be won.

**Pickerel:** I think that culture jamming does draw people into that issue. It's almost taking people's hand and pulling them closer to the problem. For example, the *Obsession* jam – that is the easiest example for my friends to understand when I explain the concept of culture jamming and what Adbusters does – they all get it quickly and say “Oh yah, that's great!” It's at that point that they start asking questions, which ultimately leads to a larger conversation. Still, I do wonder -- although half of us might understand, is culture jamming going to be able to show people how big of a monster the media is? I am concerned that the minority, let alone the majority, don't understand the enormous barricades that they are up against if they try to speak their minds and access their own culture – a culture we depend so heavily on the media to give us.

**Lasn:** There are all kinds of jammers; some of them just enjoy a prank in the middle of the night such as liberating a billboard, but the people I deal with on a daily basis all understand that it is close to an insurmountable problem. What we are facing are power structures, some of which have been built up slowly over hundreds of years – like the corporate power structure and the legal structure that sets up the corporations. It is going to be very difficult to recode corporations and get back public control of broadcasting.

**Pickerel:** Do you think that when people or activists think about it, it is *so* hard or *so* scary to consider that they choose to take other tactics? It is almost too frightening or discouraging to put their minds around the problem?

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<sup>2</sup> See Adbuster's web page <http://adbusters.org/campaigns/tvturnoff/> to view the uncommercial they placed on CNN April 18<sup>th</sup> to promote TV Turnoff week.

**Lasn:** Not the jammers I talk with. There is *no* cynicism there, but instead a feeling of momentum building, that our time has come... this is our chance, and that we *can and will* do it. I would say that this is why the jammers I talk to want to move up to that next level. They are not happy anymore with mucking around in the backwaters. Maybe this goes back to what we started talking about today where we now need to say, “Media Carta” or the mental environmental movement “has to be one of the big issues that we are fighting for as a movement.”

**Jorgensen:** Because you can visualize what you have to do, as for instance with the Media Carta, the corporate genetic code, and all that, you still have to have the means as individuals to do this. Because perhaps, *you* can’t conceptualize it so as to carry it to a further level (beyond understanding culture jams). Where do you go in? Is it perhaps a legal issue? That is what I keep thinking is the biggest issue – how do we go from the conceptual level to one level up?

**Lasn:** Well, I think it may be as simple as just raising the level of discourse. For example, in the anti-corporate-rule realm there is now an increasingly solid core of individuals and small groups who are constantly, and only, thinking about how to recode the corporations. In fact, they are having a conference this July where all the big corporate thinkers are coming together to discuss it and this latest T.V. spot we have created which should start airing in about six months, actually asks, “How much harm does a corporation have to do before we question its right to exist?”<sup>3</sup>.

**Jorgensen:** Having read your book and Guy Debord, the French observer of media culture<sup>4</sup>, I have another question I would like to ask. I am interested in the way he discusses imagery. His big problem seems to be that we have been, more or less, caught in this conceptual system – a corporate system of imagery. So, even the counter imagery is actually already accepted by the system. So, how do we get out of the box? Debord says in *The Society of the Spectacle* that, “the spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images”. We have been caught in this imagery and yet, you try to use imagery to break out of this spectacle.

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<sup>3</sup> Visit Adbuster’s web page <http://adbusters.org/campaigns/corporate/> to see the Corporate Crack down uncommercial they hope to air in late 2002.

<sup>4</sup> Lasn describes the Situationists as among “the most profound influences” in his life (*The Sun*: July 2001, #307). The Situationist movement started originally as a French group of eight artists and writers who from 1957 and throughout the 1960s committed themselves to a life of permanent immediacy and creativity. Seeing how consumer capitalism co-opts the authenticity of life by turning the social relations between people into one mediated by images, their main objective became that of reclaiming life from what they coined as “the spectacle of modernity”. Guy Debord was a prominent member of this movement. In 1967, Debord wrote, in *The Society of the Spectacle*, that the spectacle lies at “*the very heart of society’s real unreality. In all its specific manifestations - news or propaganda, advertising or the actual consumption of entertainment - the spectacle epitomized the prevailing model of social life. It is the omnipresent celebration of that choice already made, and the consummate result of that choice*”.

Therefore, how do you use imagery to create this transparency towards objects, towards corporations? How do you break out of that box?

**Lasn:** The same way Debord did it. What he says there is fine, I agree with it. You see he was determined, he believed in that; that you could take the spectacle or some image of a spectacle and you could creatively tip it back on itself in such a way that it became a counter tool. Some of the greatest detournements are symbolic. For example, he had this idea about a book with sandpaper covers that would in time rub out all the other books in the human library. That's crazy but strangely inspiring too that someone can think up such a monumental prank. When I pull off a successful jam, I can feel it and I know it is working! It's actually breaking some people out of their media-consumer trances. It is doing exactly what Guy Debord dreamed of.

**Pickerel:** So by using old imagery, we can still create a paradigm shift even though these images are part of the meme of the system?

**Lasn:** Its meme warfare! And we have to win the war! I believe if we can get a big enough movement going we can win the war.

**Pickerel:** Their images, our images, it doesn't matter?

**Lasn:** Yes, right -- instead of saying, "Oh no, our images are being sucked up by the system — our images are being neutralized by their images." I don't believe in that kind of cynicism! I've seen enough images, jams, and detournements work to not be afraid of that.

**Jorgensen:** You are not afraid of the fact that perhaps at some level people no longer see the culture jam because they have become saturated with images? How can you maintain the critical notion in the imagery when people have seen so much of it?

**Lasn:** We have to evolve. For example that image you talked about (the Obsession jam) -- when I look at it now, I must admit it now looks pretty lame. It was something we came up with six or seven years ago and now I think, "I bet you this ad actually gave Calvin Klein some *cool*." I don't think the advertising agency representing Calvin Klein looked at the ad and felt threatened but instead maybe said, "Hey look, oh great, they are spoofing us, that's wonderful -- all the better for us." I don't believe we actually did them any damage at all with this spoof. We probably even helped them. But I do think it's possible to raise the level of culture jamming to the point where we *do* worry them, we do damage and uncool their brand.

**Pickerel:** When you create a logo campaign or activists have savvy messages, which gets hit in the belly first? The consumer's consciousness or the corporation? Who do you aim for? Do you want to make the images and actions savvy enough that the corporation realizes that the consumer is going to pick up on them very quickly and therefore reacts? Although you have the consumer in mind, to pull them into it, what you're really going for is the corporation's soft spot?

**Lasn:** Sometimes we just go for a catchy image that we know people will get a belly laugh out of and maybe buy our magazine and then suddenly become Jammers two years down the road. Other times, we just do something that we know won't be very successful in the public but is deliberately done to send a chill down the spine of a corporation. I think the best level of all is if you can do both. For example, the T.V. spot we are putting together right now (To view, go to <http://adbusters.org/campaigns/corporate/>) is one spot that for the first time will actually introduce the audience to the idea that we the people have the right to unplug corporations, to actually give corporations a death sentence if they have been bad, really bad like tobacco corporations have been. As soon as we realize this, the corporations are, well.... Consider this -- recently R.J. Reynolds changed their name. Previous to which, three times in a row, we had put a half page ad in Harper's magazine saying, "Why are you buying your food from a tobacco company?" and I think these three half-page ads scared the shit out of them! Because they realized that the people were going to figure it out and maybe they thought, "Our food products are going to be tainted with this tobacco thing and we better distance ourselves from it." This sort of stuff really works I think.

**Pickereel:** I wanted to ask you about an angle on regulation. I was reading a printed conversation you had with a lawyer over bringing suit against the television networks, and I was struck by the fact that the lawyer himself argued that it was unrealistic to sue media companies because they are *private* businesses and therefore, have the right to do what they are doing. But, I thought, that private entity is controlling something considered a *public* good. Isn't there a legal crack in that? A private entity monopolizing a public good? A private corporation that defends it self on the grounds that it is *private* seems to obviously condemn them when they are managing a public space.

**Lasn:** That's a hazy line and it has been for years, and so far there has not been a First Amendment legal action that has succeeded against a T.V. station. Basically, the First Amendment is interpreted in such a way that the T.V. stations can pretty well run the airwaves anyway they like and the FCC is unwilling to enforce the public interest.

**Bennett:** But the FCC is so weakened, that the end political action needs to be to regain some public policy control over the public airwaves.

**Lasn:** For ten years the T.V. networks, ABC, NBC, CBS have always refused every TV spot we have sent them. CNN is the only one who has accepted anything from us but now, we have quite an interesting young woman, Beth Cunningham, a third year law student, who is joining us for an internship. When she comes here, we will take that first step which we have never managed to take in the U.S. before and launch a First Amendment legal action against the Big Three Networks. I think this "right to communicate" is a big issue, maybe the issue of issues.

**Jorgensen:** So perhaps that is the final way to reclaim that democracy?

**Lasn:** Yes and it is actually an attempt to tinker with the genetic code of broadcasters because let's say we won this case and suddenly it was illegal for a broadcaster to refuse to sell airtime to a citizen -- now that would really open up a can of worms! It would completely change the whole television mindscape in a way that nobody can quite imagine. It would become a bit of a slugfest -- the free marketplace of ideas. Suddenly pro-car ads and anti-car subvertisments would be next to each other and someone would come on and say, "Buy a Big Mac," and someone would come on and say, "Don't buy a Big Mac because its mostly fat." It would be a great meme war — and the best ideas would eventually win.

**Jorgensen:** That is interesting. Kalle, you talk a lot about T.V. but people today say very much that the Internet has been what has really generated this network and this globalization process. What about the Internet as a part of enhancing the level of discourse; of consumer awareness?

**Lasn:** Well, the Internet is an up and coming thing and we use it very successfully to launch global campaigns. It is a way of networking and creating solidarity, as we talked about this earlier, but quite frankly, television is still 80% of the power. People don't sit on their computer and surf for four hours every night; they sit in front of their TVs. Television is still the primary battleground. You can have the most brilliant web site in the world and you may still not get anywhere with it. But if you're able to detonate one mind bomb on Larry King Live or CBS News with Dan Rather then that can really shake things up.

**Jorgensen:** Perhaps it is a means to reach the majority. I mean, who are your readers? I know they are a broad diversity but the magazine is still highly intellectual and not always straightforward. If you want to promote this consumer awareness, you also have to get hold of Mr. and Mrs. Smith.

**Lasn:** That is where the real revolution lies. Let's say you were able to float this meme that advertising can cause ill mental health. That is a very powerful meme and if you're able to say that on Dan Rather's show, CNN, or Larry King Live, well, this is the kind of power that launches movements but we haven't gotten there yet. The system still protects itself really well. Still, we have to remember, twenty or thirty years ago, although it was only one brief moment in history, pro-tobacco and anti-tobacco suddenly fought it out in a truly free market place of ideas and guess who won? We can do that same thing.

**Pickerel:** Anti-tobacco didn't even have a lot of resources or money and still they won.

**Lasn:** Yes, I remember their ads. They were really brilliant.

**Jorgensen:** And they extended the crisis to not only those who smoked but also to those who didn't as well. They were really good at finding out how to extend the problem to everywhere and everybody. How can you bring culture jamming to a higher level of discourse?

**Bennett:** I agree with Kalle, I think we can bring them in through memes and communicating jams and mind bombs, and so on. Your question Helena seems to be, how do you get those audience members who get mind bombed to then grasp culture jamming and become culture jammers as opposed to just more savvy viewers?

**Jorgensen:** Currently, many feel that we live in a branded environment. If I reject Nike then I have to find something else, but this will probably be branded too. Everyone can't become anti-consumerist because for many that would be too radical, so how can you provide us with an ethical consumer attitude – because we are consumers after all.

**Lasn:** If you look at some of the great victories of the past like the tobacco victory, where their anti-ads were so potent that it knocked out the other side -- that was the beginning of a turn around on this whole issue. Once you were able to zap those people off T.V., they stopped having the power to create cool. Even though they had billboards and this and that, they lost the advantage. Now, let's say we suddenly decide to concentrate on the global auto-makers, to focus on how cars create global warming and climate change so that we understand that cars are a thousand times bigger detriment to our health than the smoking ever was. We could now do to the automakers what we did twenty years ago to the tobacco people. I think the timing is right for that now.

**Pickerel:** Good example. We would win! Do you think Adbusters and the way that you present the corporations and the brands creates a transparency around these issues – transparency between what these corporations and their ads are doing to our mental environment?

**Lasn:** To me transparency is one of those bogus things. It doesn't get to the heart of the issues. Why are we talking about transparency when really, we should be recoding the corporations? Transparency is just a mild way of saying, "Hey, we'd better look more carefully at what these corporations are doing." To me, it's next to useless quite frankly. It is actually diverting energy from what we really should be doing. I am not saying we shouldn't do it, but if that is all we are doing than we are failing.

**Pickerel:** Let me clarify what I conceive transparency can be. If you can show people the situation, using a concept of transparency, making the connections for them between what these corporations are up to and how it is related to their lives, isn't that the first step to raising the level of discourse and drawing them into the issue? If I can show you what is behind this corporate model and their products, for example, that you're buying your food from a tobacco company, suddenly you have created transparency around that corporation; you created transparency around all those brands and about who was *really* producing those products. I am sure there were a lot of people who suddenly experienced a sense of what I am calling transparency when they read your ads in Harpers about Phillip Morris; they made the connection that Phillip Morris is selling them their food. They saw through the brand, to the web behind it that includes them, and, they then had a better sense of their place in that web which, they were probably unknowing of before that. Those food products became more transparent.

**Lasn:** Yes, I was thinking of transparency in a different context. I took transparency to mean, what if we ask corporations to be socially responsible and to create a system where we see clearly what they are doing. But in the context you are talking about transparency, I am all for it.

**Bennett:** This is where I think the dilemma comes in. For example Jeff Ballinger, who started the Nike campaign back in the eighties as a one-person effort, understood that there were huge contradictions. His logic was wonderful. He wanted to expose Nike's environmental and labor practices because they are the industry leader. By getting Nike to recognize labor unions in their factories, and recognizing that in fact, the factories, the worker conditions, and the environmental standards and so on were Nike's responsibility, Nike would lead the industry to change. It seemed a good political logic and yet, the day that he targeted Nike and not Reebok, which was making shoes in the very same factories with the same underpaid and under-protected workers, environmentally harmful glues and solvents, he realized he had let Reebok off the hook and Reebok capitalized symbolically on Nike's misfortune by then creating its international human rights award without making any changes itself in its factory practices, without recognizing labor unions. So, on one hand, you're finding this dilemma: some culture jamming encourages people to use less or to choose different brands, but then others are saying, such as the Simplicity movement, don't buy at all.

**Lasn:** I think both works. Jeff's approach was brilliant and that is basically the approach we use. In every industry we try to target or identify the worst guy – the one that seems like the juiciest target. For example, in the oil companies, Exxon Mobile is by far the lousiest of the bunch. I think it makes a lot of sense for jammers with limited resources to target the worst, to set an example, and say, "We have the power to make this company change its ways and if it doesn't, then we are going to hurt it, to uncool it, and reduce its market share." Once you demonstrate that you can do that to Exxon Mobile and Nike, then you are saying to the rest, "You too are vulnerable and you better listen up!"

**Jorgensen:** That would require consumer awareness because corporations would only start restructuring if they knew that the consumer would leave them if they didn't do it. It takes a balance or a two-fold focus when jams are being done. One, on the corporations and two, on the consumer as it is the consumers that provide the greatest threat to the corporations. It's perhaps what Wendi was saying, that you really have to create a transparency so one can see the link between what the corporations are selling and what they are doing before the consumer can fall in step.

**Lasn:** I do think the cultural mode has to be right and it does not necessarily depend on what the corporation is doing. For example, right now there are tens of millions of people in North America who are feeling stressed out, having very bad days, feeling depressed... or their wife is depressed and *there really* is this feeling that things are not alright. Then there is all this talk about Prozac, Ritalin, Zolof, Paxil, and all the other

prescriptions to help you feel better. I think this moment is ripe for a mental environmental movement.

**Jorgensen:** That was very much what this last issue of Adbusters was about, yes? (May/June 2002 Mad World/Mad Pride)

**Lasn:** Yes, that's right. It really is a matter of reading the culture and knowing what is cooking and then choosing the right moment to launch the right meme.

**Pickarel:** I agree. I don't believe our culture thinks holistically at all or understands how interconnected we all are, let alone all the processes we trigger each day with our actions, or that are triggered in us, but I do feel that there is a concept of transparency that could create a larger sense of this in people – such as your jam in Harpers did. The consumer could begin to see through the corporations to the regional and global webs the corporations rely on to sell their products, giving the consumer a more holistic comprehension of our system. Using an idea of transparency to explain how these webs have snared us, I think people are going to start making connections about their dissatisfaction, their level of discomfort they can't explain, or their unhappiness. Of course, people will make different connections and understand the system on various levels but I believe it is ripe to happen. McDonald's actions this week confirmed that for me. (A decision to require their meat producers to treat the animals they slaughter more humanely) McDonalds seems to be, like other corporations, trying to head off greater change – making small well-publicized change in order to avoid making larger systemic changes. This seems to me a reaction to the consumer starting to make the connections. But what about the people who are economically affected by McDonald's actions? McDonalds grabs on to an issue like this, absorbs the good media that goes along with it but circumvents any real large issues. In other countries I have seen, as well as our own, how American economic policies and activities negatively affect *people*. There are a number of people being affected by how McDonalds produces its meat and they aren't even being discussed! (note: As of 05/07/02 McDonalds announced that it is going to begin importing a percentage of its beef from abroad in order to keep costs down)

**Bennett:** What I thought was wonderful about the McDonalds example was that PETA the activist group was standing in the kid's play area at McDonald with *unhappy meals* which at least prompted McDonalds to address the issue. They had been in denial about it up to that point until they couldn't stand these activists with the *unhappy meals* standing in front of their kid's play area.

**Jorgensen:** This could be a part of the problem perhaps. Activists such as PETA only attack the first level of the problem and they don't see all the other levels of the problem.

**Bennett:** Here is the dilemma – one of my students just interviewed the Fair Trade Coffee network people and his question is a very painful one that I think addresses your concern, Wendi. He is wondering if it bothers these activists that the more effective symbol or logo for the Fair Trade Coffee campaign are the songbirds that are allegedly not coming back to our Seattle backyards because the shaded coffee plantations are

disappearing, rather than the image of the coffee families who are being driven into misery as they are forced into migrant labor and into the capitol cities where they live in unbelievable distress; all as a result of the loss of small shade coffee farms due to the drop of world coffee prices.

**Pickereel:** Yes, exactly! What about all the people in the middle of these processes? How can we begin to see them behind the corporate media glaze? Still, although I am not impressed with McDonald's actions right now, it does tell me something. It makes me think that people are making connections, articulating them, and these messages are getting through to the corporations. McDonalds have been *so* silent for *so* long and now they are *doing* something, responding to an issue that their critics have voiced. It is encouraging because of all the corporations, McDonalds has been almost untouchable in the media. Someone, somewhere, is getting to them and the base is weakening.

**Lasn:** Yes, that is exactly the way I see it. They got a bloody nose when McSpotlight in the U.K. did a number on them a few years back and now I would guess they see a long term threat to their business world wide.

**Pickereel:** It seems to me there is a corporate nervousness, an uneasiness going on that is causing McDonalds to react the way they did this week and that is exciting to me.

**Lasn:** Yes, for me also. You can sort of smell the blood!

**Bennett:** It might be the right moment to launch the right meme on them.

(Postscript: At this point we wrapped up our conversation with Lasn. We had covered a lot of subject matter in a short time and have reflected on it quite a bit. One of the strongest impressions that emerged for myself was a sense of commitment to a cause, in spite of the obstacles. Right now in our global community many many people and community systems are in critical condition. From every part of the globe you can hear representatives of these communities, NGOs, scientists, and activists calling out to the greater good to make changes. After talking to Lasn, it is clear that to make progress you have to choose your battle wisely, pick your line of attack, take action, and then be relentless in your actions and creativity. In so doing, you will have to bear the ideological criticism of your peers and the scorn of your enemies but as he said, "Its...warfare! And we have to win the war! I believe if we can get a big enough movement going then we can win the war." Whatever front you're on in this battle: media, environmental, social justice, activists such as Kalle Lasn and the staff at Adbusters demonstrate an effective mix of strategy, positive thinking, action, humor, and self-possession which a cultural revolution in our thinking and actions require. I admire Lasn's ability to seem less caught up with the skirmishes within his own

ideological front as he is too busy strategizing a bigger picture and confronting a larger more impossible battle: the political and corporate domination of public resources, media, and markets by a few for greed driven, unheard of levels of financial gain at the expense of the majority – the majority now and the majority for many generations. – Wendi Pickerel, University of Washington, graduating senior, International Studies/Latin American Studies, 2002)