the culture.
a historical examination of the communication arts.

Bill Bernbach’s Advertising Revolution

Pop Art and the Consumer Culture

The Psychedelic Influence
Culture Magazine is a publication dedicated to an examination of the history of communication arts. This month’s issue is specifically focused on the 1960s time period. The 1960s is often regarded as one of the most interesting and influential of any decades. It was a time of revolution, whether it was in music, art, fashion, or politics, this nation was changing drastically. The most recognized aspect of the sixties generation is often the counterculture movement and the different spheres it existed within. The counterculture emerged as an opposition to the post-war economic boom that created a society based on consumerism and materialism. As a result a creative revolution began in the advertising industry, not only seen on the streets of Madison Avenue but integrated into the counterculture movement itself. Many people look back at advertising of the 1960s and see psychedelic imagery and a new type of language directed at the new hip consumer. However, what many people assume (and what this issue will attempt to disprove), is that advertising during the sixties was every bit as part of the counterculture movement as the music and art revolutions were. The leader of this creative revolution was a man by the name Bill Bernbach and fueled by the Pop Art scene and Psychedelic poster design. Bill Bernbach brought a new philosophy and way of thinking to the advertising world that at its time was considered anti-establishment, he challenged the corporations directly with his new style of copywriting and simplistic design and put the power back into the consumer’s hands. This issue will look focus primarily on how Bernbach revolutionized the advertising industry in the 1960s, and show how it was connected to the Pop Art and Psychedelic movements.
The sixties were a turbulent time. A time of finding meaning through new forms of expression; often when discussing the sixties people reference music, hippies, pop art, and fashion. However, one aspect that is almost never included in this discussion of the counterculture is the topic of 1960s advertising which in fact experienced its own Revolution similar to the other revolutionary movements in art, music, fashion, and many more. Also, advertising wasn't only seen in the corporate agencies on Madison Avenue, it was widely expressed through popular counterculture mediums, such as, Andy Warhol's Pop Art and album cover design, to the psychedelic poster designs from artists like Peter Max and Milton Glaser. The sixties represented a time when people were skeptical about advertising and were challenging the consumer driven society of the post-war 1950s era. Many people viewed ad men and agencies as alleys to the large corporations that the counter culture was striving to change and in some aspects this is true. However, sixties advertising experienced its own creative revolution fueled by the mind of Bill Bernbach. This new way of thinking sympathized with the consumer and offered a new way to think about advertising and the consumer, and just as The Beatles or Dillon inspired change through music, Bill Bernbach inspired change throughout the advertising and art community, and in its own way contributed to the counterculture movement. Bernbach was not reacting to the movement but was participating in it.

Before Bernbach emerged on the scene as a creative revolutionary it is important to consider what advertising had been doing before he came along and why this creative revolution developed through Bernbach.

The roots of revolution can be traced back to post-war America in the 1950s, when the country was experiencing tremendous economic success following two decades of war and depression. People were finally able to experience luxuries in their lives and could focus more on enjoying life rather than struggling to make ends meet. Mass production and mass consumption took hold of society during this decade and gave rise to the “quest for upward mobility,” as Hazel Warlaumont calls it. A new optimism had infected the American culture which created a culture that was comfortable where it stood and was overwhelmingly controlled by large corporations such as, Ford, Rockefeller, and Carnegie. The advertisements of this era reflected this somewhat overoptimistic and uniform lifestyle that had emerged. Ads often fetured a man-
in his business suit with a big smile on his face, or depicted the stereotypical image of Suzy homemaker which reflected the optimism of the corporations and the consumer (Warlaumont 24-25). During this time period advertising played a large role in the success and promotion of big business. “Advertising’s job was to create and maintain consumer demand for the plethora of new products being introduced in postwar America. Advertisements urged America to “listen to us,” to “move up” to avoid being an “unfortunate,” and to “show off to your neighbors,” in hopes of cementing a tight connection between status and consumption (Warlaumont 26).” Advertising during the fifties was in fact the voice of the corporations and were telling the consumer what they should think and how they should live their lives.

As the fifties progress the idea of mass conformity and corporate control became an issue with many American’s, particularly the youth culture. The youth culture grew up under the control of the baby boomers and had lived most of their lives under their influence of materialism. As this youth culture became older they started to rebel and question the conformity that had been imposed on them from the day they were born. The idea of “upward mobility” took a back seat and individual achievement and education took the reigns (Warlaumont 30). Out of this thinking the Beat Generation emerged, antiestablishment writers such as Alan Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac began writing on the dangers of a corporate run society and the advertising that fueled it. Ginsberg is quoted as saying, the beat generation “led artists and intellectuals to get out from under the American flag.” People were now challenging conventional literary styles of the past (Warlaumont 36). As Ginsberg was doing this with poetry, Bill Bernbach was doing the same with advertising. There is no doubt that advertising was the alley of corporate establishment during the early 1950s, however, Bernbach merged onto the scene and began developing a new style of advertising focused on the consumers wants rather than the corporations wants. His unique approach and attitude towards corporations could be comparable to those of Ginsberg and others of the Beat Generation.

As I discussed earlier there is a common viewpoint by many, that advertising and it’s so called “creative revolution” of the sixties was a direct response to the consumer when in fact the revolution was comparable to any other revolution, in the fact that it began as a challenge to traditional ways of thinking and conformity. As Thomas Frank pointed out in his book, The Conquest of Cool, Bernbach was challenging this establishment years before the counterculture emerged. “In 1947, he(Bernbach) wrote a letter to the owners of the Grey agency, where he was employed, which spelled out his opposition to the features of business organization that the mass society theorists would soon identify and attack. “I’m worried that we’re going to fall into the trap of bigness,” he wrote, “that we’re going to worship techniques instead of substance…” (Frank 56). So, long before Ginsberg and the Beats emerged as influences on the counterculture, Bernbach was critiquing the idea of “bigness,” and the corporate control of society.

In the book, When Advertising Tried Harder, author Larry Dobrow asks the question: How do you start a revolution? He answers, first, you introduce a philosophy that runs counter to established viewpoints and accepted practices. This generates a sense of excitement and poses an element of risk-all of which attracts young and adventuresome followers to the cause. At the same time, you present a visionary’s view of the way things should and could be. This wins even more new converts. Finally and with far more difficulty, you lead by setting a successful example (Dobrow 20). Dobrow uses this passage as an introduction to explaining how he believes Bernbach changed the advertising industry; it directly shows that Bernbach was in fact a revolutionary and not a follower.

After leaving Grey agency Bernbach founded his own agency known as Doyle Dane Bernbach(DDB) in 1949 and began his first move towards revolution. DDB’s philosophy was largely comparable to that of the counterculture in that it defied a tradition set of rules. Other agencies followed a strict formula for creating ads that were based on a scientific method of studying the consumer and interpreting research, a method that reflected the early fifties. Bernbach was convinced that advertising was an art form and that art could not be created by
Mercury advertisement that represented the traditional deceptive car ads of the fifties.

The new style of ad inspired by Bernbach's new philosophy of simplisity and honesty.
using scientific methods. Bernbach is quoted saying, “For creative people rules can be prisons, the real giants have always been poets, men who jumped from facts into the realm of imagination and ideas (Frank 56-57).”

With Bernbach’s new creative philosophy came a total change of the agency structure and psychology, “where creative inspiration could be translated more directly into finished advertising (Frank 57).” Before, an agency was comprised of writers, artists, and executives who all worked separately. When an artist was done with the visuals he would send it over to the writer who would write the copy, neither of the two would have any contact with one another and therefore ads often had copy that poorly correlated with the image. Bernbach changed this and did away with any type of hierarchy that existed within the agency; he in a sense fused the creative minds together. Communication lines were shortened and a new creativity was allowed to flourish. Phyllis Robinson, a copywriter for DDB said, “we just felt very free, as if we had broken our shackles, had gotten out of jail, and were free to work the way we wanted to work (Frank 57).”

Along with changing the structure and management of the agency Bernbach also strived to limit the influence corporations had on the advertisements. He believed good advertising was honest and was from the perspective of the consumer, not the financial concerns of big business (Dobrow 28). There is one specific example when one of DDB’s clients repeatedly criticized the agencies work, telling DDB their work was wrong and that they would have the final say over what the advertising was going to be, Bernbach being the revolutionary he was, kindly told the client that they no longer would be doing business together. This was probably the first time an agency had gotten rid of a client rather than vice versa (Frank 59). Surprisingly, Bernbach’s strategies were extremely successful and led to some of the best and most influential advertising of our time. Ads like the 1959 Volkswagen campaign contested the “glitzy, glamorous imagery” that had been associated with automobile advertising up until that time.

Rather than trying to trick the consumer into buying a car, Bernbach took an honest approach to the advertising. Auto advertising up until that time had distorted images of cars that made them look bigger than they really were and portrayed images of lavish lifestyles suggesting that if you buy this car your life will be better. The Volkswagen ads did the opposite, and presented the consumer with an honest and truthful view of the product. The blatant honesty almost came across as making fun of the car. Ads were no longer coming from the corporations; they were designed with the people in mind. Bernbach’s ads did not respond to the corporation, they were in fact a representation of his own dissatisfaction with the status quo and the large corporations limits on the creativity of advertising artists. As Frank states in his book, “the most powerful feature of the Volkswagen ads-and a feature one can find throughout DDB’s oeuvre-is there awareness of and deep sympathy with the mass society critique,” “his approach to advertising itself took mass society on directly,” “consumerism has given us a civilization of plastic and conformity, of deceit and shoddiness. Bernbach’s style wasn’t so much promotion as it was cultural criticism, “Read as a whole, the best advertising of the sixties constitutes a kind of mass culture critique in its own right, a statement of alienation and disgust (Frank 60 -65).” As these quotes from Thomas Franks Suggest, Bill Bernbach was not just another ad man reacting to the consumer society and the counterculture movement of the 1960s. He was in fact a vital part of the counterculture movement. Many other agencies adopted Bernbach’s strategies because of his success and as a result, the advertising world was changed forever. Bernbach was able to do what so many other movements were trying to do during this time, and that was take control away from “big business” and major corporations.
Do you think the Volkswagen is homely?

The Volkswagen was designed from the inside out.

Every line is a result of function. The stub nose cuts down wind resistance. The body lines hug the interior workings. Nothing protrudes.

One Briton called the Volkswagen “a marvelous economy of design.”

An American owner put it differently, “It’s funny,” he said, “how she grows on you. At first you think she’s the homeliest thing you ever saw. But pretty soon you get to love her shape. And after awhile, no other car looks right.”

The VW defies obsolescence. You can hardly tell the doughty shape of a 1950 model from a ’61. To suggest altering it is heresy to owners. (Would you change the perfect form of an egg?)

But we are continually making changes you cannot see. Example: a new anti-sway bar eliminates sway on curves. Over a hundred such changes since 1950, but never in the basic design.

Is the Volkswagen homely? It depends on how you look at it (and how long).
**Pop Art** is often viewed as one of the defining features of the 1960s façade. It is often perceived as a critique of consumer society in a post-war materialistic era, which is by no means false. However, I will examine its correlation to advertising in the sixties and the similarities to Bill Bernbach’s philosophies. Pop Art was undoubtedly a part of the counterculture movement and a challenge to the materialistic society, but its roots were strikingly similar to the roots of the creative revolution in advertising. I am not looking to make a direct comparison, rather, I suggest that the two were one in the same, and merely existed in different realms of society. This separation is most likely due to the misconceptions that advertising only changed as a response to the counterculture movements, such as Pop Art; when in fact advertising was as much a part of the movement, and in some ways a precursor to many philosophies of artists such as Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein.

In many ways the Pop Art sensation that developed in the 1960s began for many similar reasons the creative revolution in advertising began. People, the youth in particular, were beginning to question the post-war materialistic society that they had grown up in (Doris 9). Pop Art essentially began when our country was experiencing an economic boom following World War II and a consumer industry being promoted by the media, and “the pressures of the urban environment, and rampant mechanization and commercialization of society,” was causing many to rethink conventional imagery (Warlaumont 62). As we see when we look back on the 60s many movements emerged to question this idea of materialism a searched for more out of life than just tangible goods. Movements emerged in music, poetry, fashion, and of course the art world. “The somber mood of the immediate postwar period shifted to values of self-determination, independence, and valorization of personal freedom (Warlaumont 62).”
A young artist emerged on the art world by the name of Andy Warhol. Ironically, before Warhol became a Pop Art sensation, he was working in retail advertising in the 1950s. Much of his early art work depicted images from advertisements and many times resembled many similar techniques that advertisements were using (Warlaumont 63).

However, just as Bernbach had become stifled by the overbearing corporations and their deceitful control over the consumer, Warhol too began to critique this false impression created by big business. As Hazel Warlaumont points out in her book, *Advertising in the 60s*, the advertising and art world seem to be very much similar and interconnected, “both seem to have their finger on the pulse of society, and both act as conduits in their similar roles of social communicators.” Warlaumont discusses how in many instances the two even borrowed from concepts and ideas from one another, however, she describes the difference is that art was protesting against the empty values of consumption, while advertising was promoting it (Warlaumont 62)." I have to disagree with the latter part of this statement in the fact that we have direct evidence that Bernbach was in fact challenging big business and questioning the same empty values of consumption that artists like Warhol were questioning. Bernbach wanted to place the power back in the consumer's hands and get rid of the lies and falsehood corporations were telling people in advertisements. You can see direct correlations between Pop Art and Bernbach's work. Warlaumont even reinforces my thinking when she says that “Pop arts most significant contribution was that it found a way to reach its audience by designing commonplace, mass produced objects as art and selling them as a commodity in department stores (Warlaumont 64). She believes that Pop art was responsible for breaking the traditional creative barriers, with its “power to the people” attitude and that advertising followed this format to keep up with the public's attitude, when in fact Bernbach was already breaking these barriers in 1947 when he wrote a letter to the executives at Grey Agency saying, “I'm worried that we're going to fall into the trap of bigness,” and, “that we're going to worship techniques instead of substance…” (Frank 56).

He then came out with the famous Volkswagen and Avis campaigns that the corporations were scared to run but were extremely successful because they spoke honestly and directly to the people, just as Pop Art was designed to do. Just as Bernbach was protesting the stale overcomplicated advertising of the fifties, Pop Art was a reaction to the “abstract expressionism so popular in the 1950s, in a sense it was an art of the people, especially in a consumerist society (Warlaumont 64).” Another commonality between the work of Bernbach and the Pop Art movement was the issue with manipulation of the public. In advertising this was commonly seen in car advertisements when they would elongate the image of the car to make it look larger, and then they would place it in a desirable location or setting. Bernbach moved away from this just as Pop artists did, and showed the consumer exactly what they were buying and why they were buying it. Sara Doris describes Pop Art as the de-glamorization of the commodity, and explains that by de-glamorizing these products and images it allowed society to see past glamour and recognize the way in which they are being manipulated (Doris 10).

Although Doris is directly talking about Pop Art, it is easy to see the similarities between Pop Art and Bernbach's advertising and provides good reasoning behind why Bernbach's advertisements were so successful.

By no means was this a complete history of the Pop Art movement. It was a complex and very compelling movement in the 1960s. Rather I tried to point out the similarities it had with the advertising of Bill Bernbach in order to emphasize the fact that advertising was a part of the counterculture movement rather than a reaction to it. The philosophies and methods were very much the same and in many instances overlapped throughout the media. As Sara Doris points out, Pop Art was the first art movement to articulate itself consistently in the language of the mass media, thus straddling the boundary between art and mass culture. In the same context, I would argue Bernbach was the first to articulate advertising in the language of art as a challenge to “big business,” therefore also straddling the boundary between art and mass culture and providing his own contribution to the revolution of the 1960s.
Psychedelic images are one of the most reproduced and talked about relics of the 1960s counterculture era because of their “trippy aesthetics” that portray the mindset and mood of the culture. Often looked at as hippie artwork, many look past the fact that these posters are in fact advertisements and were developed not only to complement the consciousness of the counterculture but to draw in more consumers by relating to their mindset. It is my intent to point out, as I have tried throughout the rest of this publication, that advertisements were in fact a part of the counterculture movement and were seen not only from ad agencies but from the people themselves. Psychedelic posters are probably the most prolific images associated with hippies and the anti-establishment but they are rarely looked at as advertisements when that is truly what they are. It is my conclusion that Bernbach’s work in the field of advertising combined with the pop art movement, and the psychedelic art changed the advertising world forever. These movements were largely responsible for the country’s change in consciousness and the shift from a corporate controlled society to a consumer controlled society.

The psychedelic era began very similarly to that of pop art, in that it was a shift away from the mainstream middle-class value system imposed in the 1950s. Fueled by the music scene and psychedelic drugs, a new consciousness emerged throughout the youth culture. With this new consciousness a new communication art form materialized primarily through the medium of concert posters and eventually evolved into one of the most influential advertising techniques in the late sixties. A large deal of credit must be given to Bill Graham and Chet Helms for the emergence of psychedelic promotion. After being inspired by the profitability
of the Trips Festival and the Mime Troupe, they partnered up and took aim at the Fillmore auditorium in San Francisco began promoting concerts. In order to promote their concerts, Graham and Helms hired poster artists to design ads for their concerts and from these posters a new style was born (Miles 99-100). The psychedelic posters often used texts and imagery that was almost unreadable, but the idea behind the posters was freedom of the mind and expression. Although the artistic techniques were different than that of pop artists, and Bernbach, the idea of relating to the people through artistic means was a commonality and also a means of communicating to the culture.

Although psychedelic poster was originally produced by individual artists who usually were not classically trained; it developed into a business and became part of the marketing industry. In 1967 the “big five” of psychedelic design formed the Berkeley-Bonaparte Agency. The big five included: Wes Wilson, Victor Moscoso, Alton Kelly, Stanley Mouse, and Richard Griffin. They formed this agency as a way to market poster art and were strikingly similar to the functioning of an advertising agency, yet were largely embraced by musicians and concert promoters of the counterculture scene. One of the most recognizable posters is a poster promoting a Jimi Hendrix concert that shows the image of a eyeball with wings crawling through a burning hole in the paper (Eskilson 339).

Along with the “big five,” artists such as Milton Glaser and Peter Max were largely influential artists of the psychedelic art scene and artists that had a large impact on 1960s advertising. Glaser was one of the founders of the Push-Pin Studio, which sought to eliminate a rigid aesthetic and explore new styles. Push-Pin was not only devoted to the creation of new art styles but an influence in the advertising as well. Glaser worked on designs for the music industry as well as large corporations and products. One of his most recognizable creations, and another icon of the counterculture movement, is his 1966 poster of Bob Dylan and as Stephen Eskilson points out in his book, Graphic Design A New History, “this drawing, with its exotic pedigree, came to be viewed as an example of a quintessentially American style of graphic design (Eskilson 346). Also influential in the psychedelic advertising revolution was a man named Peter Max. Max is regarded as one of the most famous psychedelic artists of the sixties and his art is often thought of as a symbol of the 1960s. Although Max was largely inspired by the counterculture mindset he was a prominent figure in the advertising as well and was commissioned by numerous companies, such as General Electric (Warlaumont 63).

As discussed, the psychedelic art and poster design of the sixties was a powerful medium for the counterculture movement of the 1960s. It was also a important part of the advertising industry. These images and artists are often considered to be separate from the advertising world because they were not part of a traditional advertising agency but it has been shown that they were were advertising for the same reason agencies were, which is essentially promotion, whether it be a product, idea, or even a state of mind.

Ad agencies are often viewed as the anti-counterculture because they supported the corporations fueling mass-consumerism, but we can see that advertising in fact was a part of the counterculture movement. Figures such as Milton Glaser, Peter Max, and the Berkeley-Bonaparte Agency are viewed as important counterculture artists, but it is important to remember that they are were part of the advertising industry and helped change the industry forever.
Works Cited


