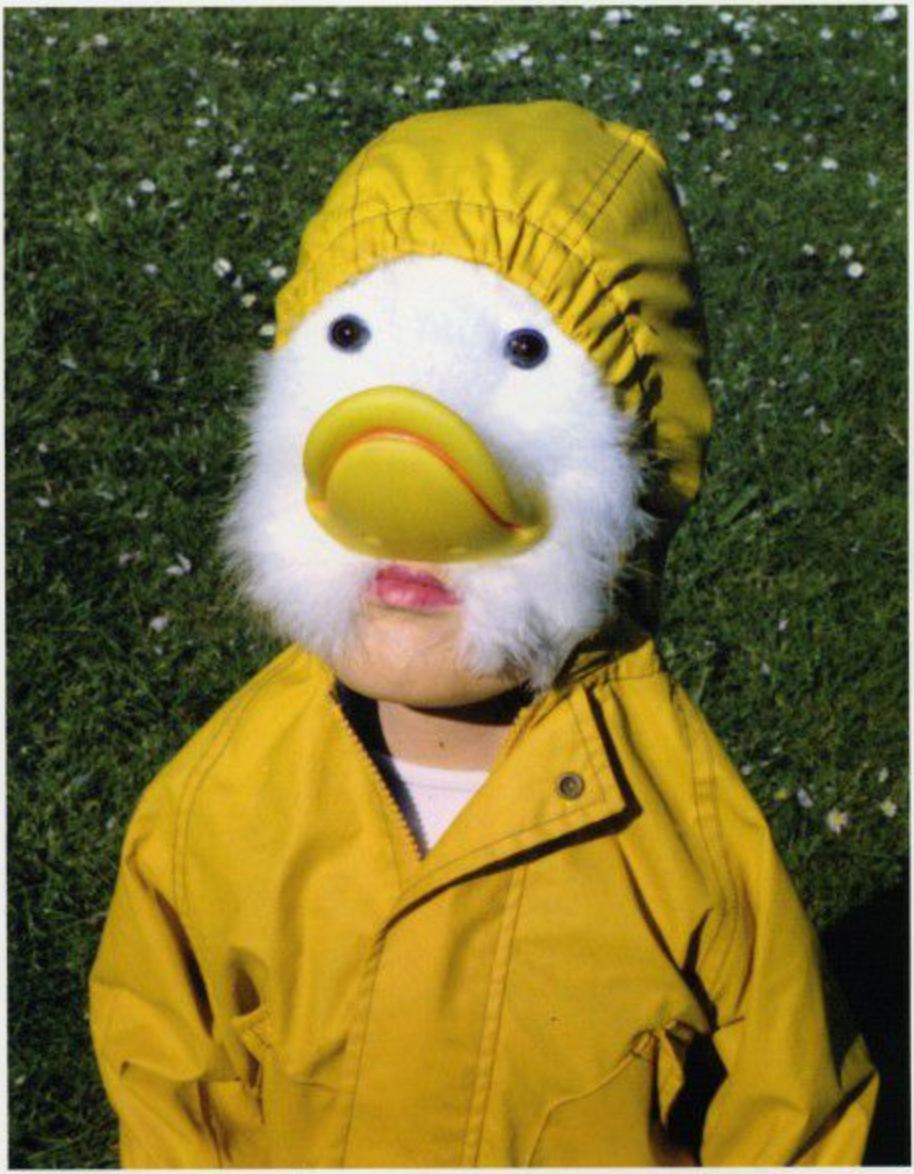
Human Branding



Strutting Johnnie Walker

I Am What I Am (Not)...

Gay culture is an interesting counterpoint to the feminist resistance of the power of the human form as an intentional manipulative communicative device. Where feminists have often resisted with words, certain cohorts of gay men have readily embraced the strength of the human form to construct a brand of sexual cultural identity. Images of outrageous drag queens, muscle-bound leatherboys and well-adjusted homosexual professionals appeared, in photographs and illustrations, almost from the outset of the Gay Rights movement. Appearing initially in underground political publications –the birthplace of many of the now longstanding respectable gay publications- these images eventually made their way into the mainstream.

Leathermen by Ari Versluis en Ellie Uyttenbroek

Gay life, the world was shown, has a face; a face largely covered in outrageous make-up or sitting atop a gym-titted torso. By the 1980s the interference loops between the mainstream fashion magazine industry and the gay press organs had become very complex. Trying to work out whether "gay" images had infiltrated the mainstream or whether gay culture had become so visible that it drew from the mainstream became something of a spectator sport for academics and media observers. Was Calvin Klein making his ads look a certain way to appeal to a gay market? Or did they look that way because of the "gay" contributions of the homosexual men working in the creative industries? The debate raged and still rages. The salient issue for this reflection is that logo-istic images of men had evolved which both spoke to large numbers of gay men and with which they, in turn, wanted to identify.

Had there been a visible group of feminists who had embraced the images offered up for mass consumption in response to feminist critique – Charlie's Angels, Wonder Woman, Cagney and Lacey- perhaps the experience of the Women's movement would look more similar to that of the Gay Rights movement. But, on the whole, there was no such cohort and it took a clear and visible divide to appear, a post-feminism to occur, before a generation of women could feel comfortable to claim both a positive impact of the Women's movement and a liking for playful, sexualised images of women.

The Gay Rights experience on the other hand, appears seamless. In reality, the in-fighting and accusations of betrayal are all there, just as in the women's struggle. The old-school, overtly political Gay Rights campaigners – more likely to adopt a pink triangle for their t-shirts- have long been sidelined in how the majority of gay men self-identify. And yet oddly, the mass gay experience of its own culture is that it is a continuous, all-singing, all-dancing party of liberation. It is one long party illustrated by a thousand images of oddly similar-looking men within certain genres; the toothpaste smile jock, the hairy bear, the leatherboy skinhead, the camped up go-go dancer etc.

The fact that these images have been produced for many years by commercial stakeholders in the gay lifestyle is largely ignored by –or of little interest to- the majority of gay men. So strong is the myth that these logos churned out by gay commercial concerns – muscleboys in jockstraps; dizzy disco dollies- are somehow a representation of gay culture that it has, in fact, become true. It is reminiscent of the way that the narrative of the jolly Father Christmas, actually invented by Coca Cola in the 1930s, is now so ensconced in what the majority of Anglo-Americans believe about Christmas. Since so many believe it is actually part of an ancient Christmas celebration ritual, it has, in effect, become "true".

Millions of gay men now recognise their "pride" and "liberation" through logo-istic human forms churned out by the commercial end of the pink economy as if they had an intrinsic link to the original resistance of oppression of the 1970s. This is not presented as evidence that there is no longer dissent and self-criticism within the ranks of gay men. The absence of the pink triangle as a dominant logo does not necessarily mean that there are no longer gay men who view their position from a more traditional political perspective. But it does suggest that the uses of human logos have become prevalent and that they now serve a function of unifying a certain gay experience, whether the men seeing and recognising these logos wholeheartedly or unquestioningly embrace the actual subculture/s that these logos represent.

Similarly, it would be fair to say that the so-called gay culture has so fully embraced an image culture, a self proclamation through logo-istic use of the human form, that it is now in a position to play with its own rules, to now make visual in jokes to its audience about its own history of representation. The same cannot easily be said for feminism.

Of course, there are many women artists who construct complex discourses through figurative representations of women -again Cindy Sherman springs to mind- but in the main, these discussions, and even jokes, tend to occur in the refined arenas such as academia, the world of galleries and museums. It is notably different compared with the visual jokes about image developed in the gay and gay-friendly fashion media, played out on a mass public platform where many of those engaged - the audience- would rather be dancing the night away on ecstasy than finding time for self edification.

This carries no intrinsic judgement of the success of either movement. But it does raise questions about the efficacy of an image culture to convey complex issues of identity that cannot, perhaps, be as easily disseminated into a broader culture through complex written statement and argument.

The ability of logistic human images to disseminate complex ideological and identity information within a mass cultural context is even more evident if one examines the most overtly political uses of the device. Or at least what started out as overtly political use of the mechanism.