



A Definition of Now, Metahaven, 2012

*We have all seen how an appropriate and well-timed joke can sometimes influence even grim tyrants... The most violent tyrants put up with their clowns and fools, though these often made them the butt of open insults.*

— Desiderius Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly*, 1509.

*A bottle of pop, a big banana  
We're from southern Louisiana  
That's a lie, that's a fib  
We're from Colorado.*

— From: C.H. Ainsworth, "Jump Rope Verses around the United States," *Western Folklore* 20, 1961, 121. Cited in Susan Stewart, *Nonsense*.

## 01. INTRODUCTION

*May, 2012.*

*I'm sifting through a bunch of old records, and the smell of dusty cardboard and vinyl, softened by the summer heat, fills the decrepit record store. Passing through the same old Michael Boltons and Ultravoxes, I pause at an album by George Clinton, the legendary founder of Funkadelic. The album title is *Some of My Best Jokes Are Friends*. It was released in 1985.*

*A few hours later, I'm browsing the internet looking for evidence of political reform in Europe after the financial crisis. There is almost nothing; it's the same old system obsessively staring at its own growth, or the lack thereof. Except for Iceland. Its constitution was rewritten by "crowdsourcing" – a trendy word for getting direct input from as many people as possible. The country brings its own corrupted bankers to court, where it has some trouble getting them convicted.<sup>[1]</sup> The mayor of Reykjavik, Jón Gnarr Kristinsson, is a comedian; his party, the Best Party, became popular by parodying ruling politicians. In a pleasant combination of dispassionate rationality and raving madness, Iceland – a state with the population of a small city – seems a laboratory for reinventing politics. In Italy, a new kind of populist movement is gaining ground, headed by the comedian Beppe Grillo. His slogan *Váffanculo* ("Fuck off") has hundreds of thousands in its grip; his performances are entertaining political rants that promote self-organization and human values. Grillo is against Italy's*

*participation in the euro currency and, by virtue of that position only, fits into Europe's centrist-totalitarian media discourse as a "dangerous" politician. His weapon is comedy, and what makes it effective is its natural juxtaposition to both the pompous "common sense" of technocratic bailout rule and the perverted, corrupted oligarchy of Berlusconi. Yes, Grillo is a merciless populist; but that's not why he is popular – popular enough to come third in Italy's February 2013 elections.*

*On Twitter, I find an essay by the Deterritorial Support Group (DSG), a think tank band of London-based graphic activists. Goatse As Industrial Sabotage links perverse internet images to political graphic design from the 1970s. DSG's thesis is as strangely plausible as it is, in a political sense, hilarious.*

*A friend reminds me of Ethan Zuckerman's "Cute Cat Theory of Digital Activism". It holds that a digital platform where many people exchange pictures of cute cats is also an excellent place for political activism: if the state were to shut it down, people would protest because they could no longer exchange pictures of cute cats. (More likely, if this did happen, they would find another platform to exchange pictures of cute cats). Zuckerman contends that it is inherently fruitful to embed messages of political activism within widely popular online platforms, so that subversive content can't be easily isolated by authoritarians.*

*A question shapes itself in the early morning hours. Is it possible that graphic design has only one thing left to do, which is posting itself on the internet? And – to go a little bit further – is it possible that jokes have an untapped political power, which was historically always present but never so useful and necessary as now? Could, then, the leftovers of graphic design be turned into jokes? Might – through this re-allegiance – design rediscover actual societal impact?*

*Can jokes scale? Can they supersize? Can we laugh so loudly at those in power that they fall? Can jokes, in fact, bring down governments?*

### *November, 2012.*

We are told this is a time for tough decisions and certainly not a time for jokes. Governments of liberals, centre-right conservatives and social democrats have declared austerity throughout Europe. Their policies are a cocktail of the once-opposed extremes of their respective ideologies: there will be reduced public services (hail neoliberals), and there will, at the same time, be higher taxes (hail social democrats). Injustice is now *fair*.

Austerity is promoted and imposed by a techno-financial superclass of managers. The austerity elite does not live in the countries where its regimes are imposed, and it most certainly does not live in the social circles affected by it. Where its rule is the harshest this superclass goes by the name of the *troika*. Comprising the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the European Central Bank (ECB) and the European Commission (EC), this roaming triumvirate of experts specialises in summary judgments of EU countries.

Austerity is *potentially unlimited*. It has *no boundaries*. No austerity elite is willing to say: until here, and no further. The humanitarian crisis of austerity is none of its business.

In unleashing austerity on its constituents, the political superclass has opened up a Pandora's box of disastrous consequences. It has awakened and emboldened powerful enemies. Not just of austerity, but of democracy itself.

Politicians in Europe are more afraid of financial markets than of their own people. Financial markets exercise a form of "direct

democracy” over our lives everyday via the stock exchange, the bond markets, the ratings agencies, the banks, financial service providers and their products. While people may have their say every four to five years in parliamentary elections, they produce – at best – *parodies* of regime change. When financial trader Alessio Rastani, in a BBC interview, famously asserted that “governments don’t run the world, Goldman Sachs does” it left the presenters in a real state of shock. Did it really? The BBC journalists were actually surprised that it is profitable to cripple countries, as Rastani assured them was the case. Indeed, as of July 2012, no less than five key European financial executives are former employees of Goldman Sachs: Peter Sutherland, the Irish Director-General of the World Trade Organization; Italian prime minister Mario Monti; Greek prime minister Lucas Papademos; Petros Christodoulou, who leads Greece’s national debt management agency<sup>[2]</sup>, and Mario Draghi, the Italian President of the ECB. On November 26, 2012, Mark Carney was named head of the Bank of England. He previously worked at Goldman Sachs.<sup>[3]</sup>

In 2009 British author Mark Fisher coined the term “capitalist realism” to describe this paradigm of government. In a (still) notionally democratic system a state of permanent crisis, either looming or actual, is normalized. Capitalism is then established as “the only viable political and economic system” to the extent that “it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it.”<sup>[4]</sup> Fisher’s American counterpart, the anthropologist David Graeber, located the key financial-political problem in the phenomenon of debt. In his book *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*, Graeber observed that “the last thirty years have seen the construction of a vast bureaucratic apparatus for the creation and maintenance of hopelessness, a giant machine designed, first and foremost, to destroy

any sense of possible alternative futures [...]” so that “those who challenge existing power arrangements can never, under any circumstances, be perceived to win.”<sup>[5]</sup> This analysis is right on the money, literally. The political system, practice and governing ideology of capitalist realism functions as a frameset which forces its political opponents to “speak the same language.” By means of such a “discourse” – an interplaying set of words, meanings, symbols and implications (a system, indeed, of “making sense” of the world) – any alternative (by the oppressed) must first be rendered in the language and protocol of the oppressor. There is, at first sight, nothing too funny about the death of social democracy. “Luxury for everyone” is now “financial oligarchy against the masses”. Pretty much everyone except the occasional oligarch’s beautiful daughter is doing worse than their parents did, in terms of job prospects and job security, whereas social development is stifled by an over-regulated and monetised public sphere. In the Netherlands, for example, alongside grave austerity, and despite millions of square meters of vacant office space being available as part of this country’s real estate bubble, squatting has been declared a criminal offense. Countries the West looks up to for their economic growth, such as Brazil, Russia, India and China, invariably show much steeper rich – poor divides than any Western government of the past 20 years would have deemed acceptable. It is a statement of fact that we have entered a world of drastic inequality – its political compass pointed toward much more of it. Graeber’s “99%” vs. “1%” binary became one of the Occupy movement’s dominant motifs – exposing how fundamental social inequality has become to Western governance. Worse, this ideology of resource distribution cannot be expelled from there by the conventional political and media channels.

Designers are, on the whole, to be found on the poorer side of that watershed. We've been told, by the likes of Richard Florida, that our proficiency at brewing lattes and baking cupcakes, our aptness at drinking and eating them clad in angular hipsterwear, while posting pictures of ourselves and all of our food on Tumblr, constitutes a self-propelling socio-economic *Wunderbaum* called "creativity." Richard Florida's wealth cloud of gallery openings, furniture stores and coffee and wine bars is some sort of 72 dpi parody of the 19th century bourgeoisie's transformation of the inner city into a theme park for the *flâneur*. Indeed, the decorative paintings of our erstwhile *salons* have become digital files on laptop screens, in dilapidated, sub-subrented, barely inhabitable apartments. There must, however, be many ways in which the labour of designers can be politicised in the age of capitalist realism.

How can graphic designers, for example, deploy their labour against the austerity elites? Depicted as the solemn caretakers of a hatchet job that just must be done, the austerity elites and their capitalist realist hordes get away with it – supposedly to bring economies back into a healthy shape, "paying back" fictional billions of toxic assets and nonexistent resources, by slashing the state while raising taxes. Not only are the cutbacks hammering fragile human ecosystems into poverty at the pleasure of banks and speculators, as is happening in Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain; for some, the job of cutting and slashing the public sector is an activity at the very heart of their political beliefs. What gets presented as a "natural" program to re-establish a "balanced budget" is in fact a vehicle to achieve a particular, and emphatically political, outcome.

The bankruptcy of conventional tactics at maintaining any believable "opposition" against this political state of emergency reveals itself everywhere. Usually, a principled announcement of



resistance against any unfairness (the slashing of benefits, pensions, child care, healthcare, etc.) lands centre-left political parties some electoral gains. When elections are over, compliance begins; a lust for power (er, “responsibility,” sorry) brings about a forced marriage with what nominally counts as that party’s strong political opponent, usually a pro-austerity centre-right party which has itself maintained power by modelling its politics along the lines of the extreme right. Austerity is instituted as expected, and the “explaining” of its technocratic programming language may begin. The rule of austerity, therefore, is closely tied to the older idea of a “Third Way,” where a rational consensus between opposed political agents led to a package deal going beyond any notion of conflict or opposition. [\[6\]](#)

The politics of capitalist realism can only be countered by a strategy which removes itself from its political-discursive frame. Instead of being heard and listened to, people are continuously being told they have no idea of the magnitude of the threat that is underway – which is a manner of silencing them and enforcing a frame of reference.

If your country is not already like Greece, it will require lots of austerity to not become like Greece. If your country is already like Greece, or worse, it will need an even larger austerity package to “improve its economic outlook.” What is needed is a political intervention that removes itself from the frame of this ongoing political and social state of emergency.

So, how might graphic designers contribute? The failure of corrupted political entities to properly represent *anyone* who mandated them to assume governing power is somewhat analogous to the crisis confronted by graphic designers in their eroding role as mediators and representatives of institutions. We might begin to understand the reign of austerity from a different angle if we take into

consideration how graphic design's social role has changed with it. Design, gradually but certainly, has shifted from being a middleman in the social fabric between people and institutions, to functioning as a direct *index* of conditions of life and work in a given place. In other words, design is a direct agent of the socio-political realities lived by its makers. To a large extent, this is due to the fact that many graphic designers are short on, or out of, work. The institutions they were educated and trained to serve have either ceased to exist, or no longer commission them in the ways they once did. Designers used to be everything between enlightened technicians-craftsmen, cynical enablers of the predictable, principled technocrats, or impassioned fighters for a better world. In all these roles, they were also *gatekeepers*. The world as it gets mediated through information from "senders" to "receivers" passed through the designer's hands, and often through a printing press. The designer once operated at the behest of an institution, be it the Postal Service, or a museum, or the subway, which maintained the infrastructure of social democracy. Now that this infrastructure has collapsed, designers are becoming increasingly unpaid, and are also "released" from the frame that gave their activity meaning and purpose within the socio-democratic fabric. This relative loss makes designers both qualified, and ready, to take the next step.

## 02. DISRUPTION

In *Capitalist Realism*, Fisher offers a hopeful note. He predicts that a politics of fear enslaved by capital is vulnerable to even the slightest of ripples across its surface. Precisely because the system is made and maintained by technocratic control freaks, it is easily disrupted. Fisher says, “the long, dark night of the end of history has to be grasped as an enormous opportunity. The very oppressive pervasiveness of capitalist realism means that even glimmers of alternative political and economic possibilities can have a disproportionately great effect. The tiniest event can tear a hole in the grey curtain of reaction which has marked the horizons of possibility under capitalist realism. From a situation in which nothing can happen, suddenly anything is possible again.”<sup>[7]</sup>

This essay is concerned with the disruption Fisher hints at in the closing remarks of *Capitalist Realism*. We will look for glimmers of such alternative realities, drawing on the resources of a graphic design dismissed from its former duties. The joke has the capacity to resist and overturn the frame of reference imposed by any political status quo – including that of capitalist realism. The joke has an untapped power to disrupt – a power far greater than we thought. On the internet, jokes may “scale” quickly and reach hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, millions of people in the course of a few minutes, if they are contagious enough to catch on.

Fisher’s assumptions about the susceptibility of capitalist realism to disruption have so far proven correct. 2010 and 2011 were years of uprising, with protests, even revolutions, occurring

throughout North Africa, the United States and Europe. The disclosures of WikiLeaks, popular revolutions in the Arab world against western-backed dictators, Occupy Wall Street's civic invasion of the joint arena of finance capital and the state, and Anonymous's defacements of and denial-of-service attacks against the superstructure of corporations and governments, are an expression not just of anger but also of new forms of collectivism and political organization. The struggles took to the streets and swept the internet – meaning, effectively, the re-politicisation of an entire generation of youth raised under capitalist realism. As a result, the London headquarters of the Conservative Party were in 2010's "Winter of Protest" suddenly besieged by "girls dressed like Lady Gaga" and "boys wearing pixie boots and ironic medallions".<sup>[8]</sup>

The mobilisations set off from a grid of mobile internet and online social media, smartphones, and digital cameras. This is a pattern common to all contemporary protests: the tools are means of coordination, sharing and mass communication all at the same time. That is, a group can coordinate amongst itself so it knows its own moves. New information can influence decision-making instantly, unfiltered by any central apparatus. These same tools are not just as a movement's field radio, but also its mass media broadcasting instruments.

Facebook and Twitter replaced hierarchy and bureaucracy; smartphone in hand, coordination now came for free. And along with its tools, the network injected its own indigenous culture into protest. Rather than relying on the classical graphic design strategies developed for political protest, the network has been breeding a native approach to protest in which the anonymity or pseudonymity of the sender provided a break with the institutional mode of communication, from a known "sender" to an unknown "receiver,"

engrained even in graphic design's most idealist models of practice. Anonymity *also* breaks with a culture of online "real name accountability" promoted by both some of the world's major social networking sites, as well as internet regulators.

One of the most pervasive network-native approaches to protest was formed in the unlikely environs of an online message board called 4chan.org. 4chan is an image forum that rose to prominence and visibility in the mid-2000s, when a generation of net-native, bored trolls began to use it as a context to misbehave – originally united by an interest in Japanese-style manga and anime. The default moniker on 4chan to post stuff is *anonymous* – and, indeed, the notion of anonymity was central to the site from the start. The anonymity was inspired by similar Japanese image boards, where such anonymity constitutes a crucial human condition. And from 4chan's default user moniker sprang the notion of a collective called Anonymous, as is still spelled out by the site's FAQ page:

"Anonymous" is the name assigned to a poster who does not enter text in to the [Name] field. Anonymous is not a single person, but rather, represents the collective whole of 4chan. He is a god amongst men. Anonymous invented the moon, assassinated former President David Palmer, and is also harder than the hardest metal known to man: diamond. His power level is rumored to be over nine thousand. He currently resides with his auntie and uncle in a town called Bel-Air (however, he is West Philadelphia born and raised). He does not forgive.<sup>[9]</sup>

Anonymous' activities as a "collective" began with their trolling of the Church of Scientology. In early 2008, a leaked video appeared on the web site Gawker.com consisting of a scary, incoherent motivational speech/performance by Scientology's most prominent

member, Tom Cruise. Scientology had been trying to prevent the release of Cruise's speech at all costs and had had it taken down from YouTube before. The idea to then "raid", to "hack" or "take down" the Scientology website emerged on one of 4chan's discussion boards, and that's what subsequently happened. A notoriously humourless organisation, Scientology seemed to the emergent Anonymous to embody a sense of wrong, secrecy, and at the same time, camp. The protest ranged from denial-of-service attacks and exploiting Scientology's database, to physical demonstrations at Scientology branches in the US. An email sent to Gawker, announcing a protest at the Church of Scientology in Harlem, had the following tagline:

We are Anonymous

We are Legion

We do not forgive

We do not forget

Expect us.<sup>[10]</sup>

Anonymous went from the online world of 4chan to a significant presence in physical space, and this back and forth continued right into the cyber-insurgency's 2011 engagement with Occupy Wall Street. But this transition did not bind or conform the group to the conventional logistics, aesthetics and rules of physical-space political protest. It emphatically developed new rules, strongly inspired by online anonymity. This included a white mask – loosely based on the British revolutionary Guy Fawkes – originally worn by the protagonist of Alan Moore's 1982 comic book *V for Vendetta*. The mask was hugely popularised by a 2006 film adaptation, and become so associated with protest that in February 2013 it was banned in repressive Gulf state Bahrain.

Gabriella Coleman, an Associate Professor of Media Studies at New York University, notes that Anonymous “has become a political gateway for geeks (and others) to take action. Among other opportunities, Anonymous provides discrete micro-protest possibilities that aren’t otherwise present, in a way that allows individuals to be part of something greater. [...] The decision to engage in political action has to happen somehow, via a concrete path of action, a set of events, or influences; Anonymous is precisely that path for many.”<sup>[11]</sup> Anonymous as a “gateway,” as a focal point or gathering strategy for activities that exceed the individual scope and scale, is a manner of describing its significance as a form of organising-without-organisation.

Anonymous and 4chan have been the *de facto* breeding estates for much of what we today see as network-native forms of protest. Those forms only became apparent quite recently, and they are hardly permanent. We might see Anonymous as an *open-ended ingroup* – consisting of a potentially large number of individuals whose form of (dis)organisation is not based on any actively shared location or identity, other than their use of a computer, use of an internet chat room, and basic understanding of the English language. In this, Anonymous differs sharply from equally relevant, yet less scalable pseudonymous groups like The Invisible Committee. The Invisible Committee is a French anarchist collective which first published its pamphlet, *The Coming Insurrection*, in 2007.<sup>[12]</sup> This publication became “the principle piece of evidence in an anti-terrorism case in France directed against nine individuals who were arrested on November 11, 2008, mostly in the village of Tarnac. They were accused of ‘criminal association for the purposes of terrorist activity’ on the grounds that they were to have participated in the sabotage of

overhead electrical lines on France’s national railways. Although only scant circumstantial evidence has been presented against the nine, the French Interior Minister has publically associated them with the emergent threat of an ‘ultra-left’ movement, taking care to single out this book, described as a ‘manual for terrorism,’ which they are accused of authoring.”[\[13\]](#)

The pamphlet premiered in the US in 2009 at an unscheduled event at a Barnes & Noble branch at Union Square in New York. A security guard tried to eject the crowd, without success; the crowd was then removed by the NYPD, and announced it would move into Union Square park. After it left Barnes & Noble,

instead of proceeding directly to the park, the crowd moved next door to high-brand make-up outlet Sephora, where they were able to use their bodies to keep security away while the book was passed around for anyone to read aloud, others helping themselves to free samples of bronzer and eyeliner. After a few minutes the employees’ pleas for the mob to leave were honored as we took to the streets again, this time walking towards the nearest Starbucks – already on the alert for rowdy interventionist protests due to its long-running suppression of IWW union activity there. Cops arrived almost immediately; one person received a summons for disorderly conduct for reading atop a table. The group, which had dwindled after the appearance of about a dozen police, resigned themselves to reading, talking, and taunting the police from the park as they had previously decided.[\[14\]](#)

Just as Occupy reclaimed the public-corporate space of Zucotti Park as “public” the 2009 readers of *The Coming Insurrection* did so with Barnes & Noble and Starbucks. The Invisible Committee,



Anonymous and Occupy Wall Street share similarities in content, and differences in form. *The Coming Insurrection* offered no easy targets, such as Scientology or PayPal, and no tools to pursue them. But its take on life under capitalist realist hopelessness is similar to that of Occupy and Anonymous. As the Committee wrote:

No need to dwell too long on the three types of workers' sabotage: reducing the speed of work [...]; breaking the machines, or hindering their function; and divulging company secrets. Broadened to the dimension of the whole social factory, the principles of sabotage can be applied to both production and circulation. The technical infrastructure of the metropolis is vulnerable. Its flows amount to more than the transportation of people and commodities. [...] Nowadays sabotaging the social machine with any real effects involves reappropriating and reinventing the ways of interrupting its networks.[\[15\]](#)

Political action in the 21st century has moved beyond the manifesto. To achieve scale, it is deploying new strategies with viral properties and Darwinian survival skills.

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