McJunk

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For Claire & Callie

McJunk by Nigel Ball

McJunk | Introduction

| Photographs

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McJunk has been an ongoing personal project since 2001. It consists of an ever growing database of photographs of McDonald's litter. Every time I consider drawing this project to a close, McDonald's change the graphics on their packaging, and I'm off again. To date, aspects of McJunk have been exhibited on a gallery floor, included in a collaborative postcard project, and published as a Flickr set. As a continuing visual investigation, I have never had a set outcome in mind when taking these photographs, and it is my intention that this content stays as flexible as possible in its potential application. This book serves as an example of such an approach as well as to contextualise my current thinking behind the continuation of what are otherwise purely observational recordings. It is with this in mind that this short introduction will explain my working methods and attempt to firmly place McJunk within the practice of graphic design, rather than that of art.

I first started recording McJunk using a Polaroid camera, I liked the immediacy of the format and I felt it shared common values with the subject matter. In 2002, I moved from Polaroid to digital. At the time I questioned whether I should be picking up the litter and/or recording the location where I found it with a view to analysing the optimum distance from a restaurant to where packaging is discarded. While this would have made an interesting anthropological study of the habits of McDonald's patrons, I may possibly not have followed through had I been tied to writing down information at the point I took each photo. I decided the capturing of the image should in some way respond to the action of littering and in the process of taking these photographs I have tried to resist composing the shots. I wanted to echo the same lack of consideration that the person dropping the litter demonstrates in their actions. This led me to wonder whether the active participants in fast food littering actually consciously think about the act they are performing. If they do, then I guess it only takes one or

two seconds of thought—the same amount of time I try to apply in taking my photographs. That said, an automatic visual consideration does appear to kick in as I have become aware that I intuitively compose some of the shots I take without realising I am doing so.

There are certain self set 'rules' I adhere to. For example, I will not go out of my way, choosing to take photographs of litter when I happen upon it. If driving, I will occasionally stop the car and get out with camera in hand, but I refuse to change my route or return to something I previously passed. If I see a piece of litter on private land I will not photograph it, because although unlikely, I have no knowledge of whether the owner of the property wants it there or not. Part of the point of this project is that this packaging has been discarded in what I regard to be public places and shared environments. What people get up to in their own front yard is up to them. I have also, from time to time, walked straight past pieces of litter, for I either do not have the time to stop and get my camera out of my bag or I am feeling too self-conscious to bend over and look at the pavement. For the purposes of this book, I have selected images from my vast collection of photographs taken on a range of cameras, with two principles in mind; an eye to the shot's composition on the one hand, and a knee-jerk aesthetic judgement on the other.

Although I did not start this project until 2001, I can trace the origins of McJunk back to Canon Street, London, 1999. I can not help returning to a memory I have of a McDonald's restaurant being dismantled in front of my eyes. It struck me at the time, as I watched a group of Reclaim The Streets protesters, just how disposable everything about McDonald's was, right down to the storefront and signage that it took only minutes for approximately 10 people to deconstruct with their bare hands. As a metaphor, this was a powerful image.

The dismantlement of the physical representation of this icon demonstrated to me the lack of sustainability and permanence that surrounds McDonald's. The store front that anti-capitalists ripped apart in a moment, I later reflected, mirrored food packaging cast aside by patrons; both storefront and litter were to become a temporary urban graffiti in my mind, strewn about town centres, the tag of the golden arches being the most permanent thing about the brand as it lodged in my subconscious.

Although I didn't start McJunk with such thoughts in mind, the more the project has developed in the past nine years, the more I have come to read the photographs I take of McDonald's litter as a visual reminder of the relationship between graphic design and the late 20th and early 21st century western phenomenon of what some call 'disposable culture', or 'throw away society'. I am a passionate believer in the important job graphic design does, and there are a million plus examples of how graphic design enriches, informs, clarifies, excites, and guides us through life's pleasures, difficulties and day to day existence. But I am also all too aware of the ease with which it is possible to find examples of graphic design that are only concerned with ephemera and advancing capitalism's excesses. As a creative discipline, graphic design is often maligned and looked unfavourably upon in comparison to other art forms. Herbert Bayer said in 1967, "the graphic designer is designated with the minimising term 'commercial' and is generally ignored as compared to the prominence accorded by the press to architecture and the fine arts" [1]. This is as true today as it was in 1967, and every time I see a piece of McDonald's litter, I can't help but think that this is for good reason.

I accept that graphic design itself, as a discipline, cannot solely be blamed. Nor can graphic design practitioners. But as a profession we do tend to justify any moral or ethical concerns that are raised regarding our role in encouraging waste and over consumption with statements that either try to justify the status quo, such as claiming graphic design helps the economy to keep people in jobs, or defensively cowering that as wage slaves we have no choice when there is a mortgage to pay and kids to feed. Such excuses are often followed by the deflection that the ultimate responsibility lies with producer and consumer, not with the conduit that is the creative. These arguments go back to graphic design's inception as a titled profession in the 1920s. The poster artist Cassandre stated that advertising posters were "a means of communication between the seller and the public," and that all the designer "is asked to do is to communicate clearly, powerfully and precisely" [2]. And while I don't completely disagree, I still hang my head in shame when I see that combination of Pantone 123, 485, and Helvetica Black, as they visually mug me in the form of graphics on McDonald's packaging that has been cast aside with so little regard. As creatives we proudly declare ourselves 'problem solvers', but I can't help thinking, 'well here is a problem that needs solving'. As a graphic design practitioner and educator, I also can not help but feel somehow culpable for such thoughtless behavior that is littering, damned by the association of my trade.

Maybe I wouldn't be so concerned if I wasn't confronted by McDonald's packaging everyday. Unfortunately though, I see it where ever I go, discarded on the pavement and littering urban communities and countryside alike. Shopping centres, hedgerows, grass verges, footpaths, beaches, public parks—nowhere is exempt and much of it seemingly miles away from the nearest fast food outlet. But don't get me wrong, I dislike all forms of litter and obviously there are other fast food outlets available to pick on. So maybe I've chosen to focus on McDonald's because their graphics have seeped into my

subconscious more than any other. Eric Schlosser claims that the "impact of McDonald's on the way we live today is hard to overstate. The Golden Arches are now more widely recognised than the Christian cross" [3]. Or it may be because there is just more McDonald's litter on our streets than any other food packaging. This has been proven by a recent high street survey conducted by Keep Britain Tidy where "McDonald's material accounted for 29% of litter" found in town centres, more than any other branded or non branded fast food detritus [4].

While the general public can't escape any blame, (I completely agree that it is the consumer's responsibility to dispose of packaging responsibly), I believe McDonald's are culpable by promoting a culture of food on the go, excessive use of packaging, and not taking more of a lead in using graphic design on their products to help reduce these issues of waste disposal. But this leads back to the question of whether it is the role of the graphic designer to challenge client behavior? When making a living out of a known problem, I think ethically, the answer has to be yes. For although McDonald's take away containers have a 'jolly' Ronald McDonald reworking of the classic Keep Britain Tidy bin man icon, you probably won't be surprised to discover that this is not given a prominent position in the visual information hierarchy on a waxed paper cup. In fact, in a recent redesign of McDonald's packaging, the typographic treatment focused more on trying to sell the product from the prospective of championing the quality of the food and caring for the environment, than informing the public of how to dispose of the packaging responsibly. Although the designer was only following the client's brief, I'd be interested to know whether concerns about waste were ever raised by the creatives involved, or whether they remained tight lipped and just thought of the exposure and pay cheque involved in working with such a supersized corporation. As to the

design concept, Creative Review blog raised a fair point when it stated at the time of the redesign that "the issues with McDonald's go much further and deeper than the quality of its beef or the paper used in its wrappers. Unlike packaging on the shelf in a supermarket, by the time a McDonald's box has arrived in someone's hands, they have already bought it. You would have to assume that whoever is holding the box has already set aside their concerns about the food" [5]. As an ironic aside, part of the redesign contained the phrase 'going that extra mile' to reinforce the idea that McDonald's care about food quality and responsible packaging. However, whenever I spot that phrase on a bag decaying in a hedgerow five miles from the nearest restaurant, I wonder whether the copywriter involved in the rebranding was truly aware of how far McDonald's packaging travels?

Despite the above, I do not present this book and introduction as a judgement of others' employment practices and client choices. It is intended as a visual contribution to a wider debate about graphic design. This is a profession that is not only in constant flux, as dictated by technological advances, but is also continually challenging itself. From modernist rule makers through postmodernism's rule breakers and beyond, graphic design is a creative field that can not be accused of conservatism. Nevertheless, regardless of its changing nature, it is still just as rooted in commerce as it has always been. The fact that what the graphics on McDonald's packaging communicates to me may not be the intended message is irrelevant; I fully accept my interpretation of these memes is personal. However, I can not help thinking that litter on our streets may also define in other people's minds, albeit subconsciously, what graphic design and its contribution to society is.

Nigel Ball, 2010

1 Helen Armstrong (2009) Graphic Design Theory
2 Richard Hollis (2001) Graphic Design: A Concise History
3 Eric Schlosser (2001) Fast Food Nation
4 Keep Britain Tidy (2009) Brands Lying In A Gutter Near You
5 CR Blog (2008) McDonald's New Packaging—Lovin' It?

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