Life today: it's by design

Books show how advertising and style saturate society

Life Style
By Bruce Mau
Edited by Kyo Maclear
with Bart Testa
Phaidon, 625 pp, \$95

Brand.new
Edited by Jane Pavitt
Princeton University Press
224 pp, \$76.50

PETER O'BRIEN Special to The Gazette

hese two books about how advertising and design saturate and at times distort our perceptions of the world approach their topic from vastly different places.

Bruce Mau's Life Style is a monster of a book that comes in eight different cover designs. It is part self-conscious treatise, part ironic manifesto, and part documentation of the international work that his Toronto design and corporate-identity studio has produced over the past 15 years for various companies and cultural organizations. It is full of such epigrams as: "Celebrity is short-form personality - a way of stuffing complexity into a package that need never be opened," and, "Most of the new economy revolves around the manipulation of attention." It is also witty, complex and based on perpetual experimentation.

Brand.new, published to accompany an exhibition at London's Victoria and Albert Museum, is more like a corporate annual report on branding and how such consumer behemoths as Microsoft, Coca-Cola and Nike shape our view of the world and influence our collective lust for shopping.

An architect friend of mine, after looking through Life Style, lamented: "We all work for Bruce Mau." It is true that Mau seems everywhere these days. The New York Times recently called him "one of the most creative minds at work in design today," and his clients have included architects Frank Gehry and Rem Koolhaas, the Guggenheim Museum, Swatch, Sony Classical and Montreal's Canadian Centre for Architecture. Not so bad, as we Canadians might say, considering Mau just recently turned 40 and never ventured farther than Sudbury until he was 17.

What is so spectacular about Mau and his studio is that he refuses to stand still or take the easy route. His identity program for the Netherlands Architecture Institute, for example, literally stretches and skews the very idea of a corporate logo. By projecting the "NAi" logotype onto 100 different surfaces, the result is 100 different logos, which in turn were combined with 1,000 colours taken from a 1973 painting by Gerhard Richter. The stationery, programs, invitations and business cards that the institute has developed remain endlessly transformative, thanks to Mau's willingness to embrace what he calls logo "promiscuity."

His signature book design, colourdrenched pages with scrims of interlocking image and text, is mimicked by many lesser book designers the world

Mau is far more than merely a designer to watch. His intelligence, desire to see things new, and eclectic energy are all shaping the world of design and contemporary

culture. In this designer world, where our lifestyle, for better or ill, seems to overtake our life, that is a significant achievement.

Brand.new is a more orthodox collection of voices, including those of historians, sociologists and designers, on such issues as branding, packaging and consumer behaviour. Brands, the book states, are "part of 20th-century mythology," with some having become so generic that they no longer are protected by trademark, including yo-yo, thermos and escalator.

Much of the book follows the tactics and intrigues of such corporations as Heinz, BMW and Woolworth's as they lurch toward domination of some portion of the market and attempt to instill in the general citizenry associations with quality, reliability and loyalty. There are explorations of branding, including how a product such as Coke sustains its market share: "If Coca-Cola were to lose all its production-related assets in a disaster, the company would survive. By contrast, if all consumers were to have a sudden lapse of memory and forget everything related to Coca-Cola, the company would go

out of business."

The book really starts to warm up in its final chapter, The Point of Purchase, by Victoria and Albert curator Garreth Williams. "To misquote Karl Marx," says Williams, "perhaps we should view commodities, not religion, as the opium of the people, as they distract us from questioning the social and economic status quo."

Critics of advertising, or "subvertisers," are given particular attention, especially the work of Adbusters, which started in Vancouver. Their elaborate spoofs have included a recasting of Calvin Klein's Obsession ad with a muscular model looking nowhere but down his own shorts.

Whether we like it or not, international corporate advertisers shape the way we look at and think about the

world. Imagine, if you can, family, food, sex, nature, even religion, without the images that Ford, Nike, Mi-

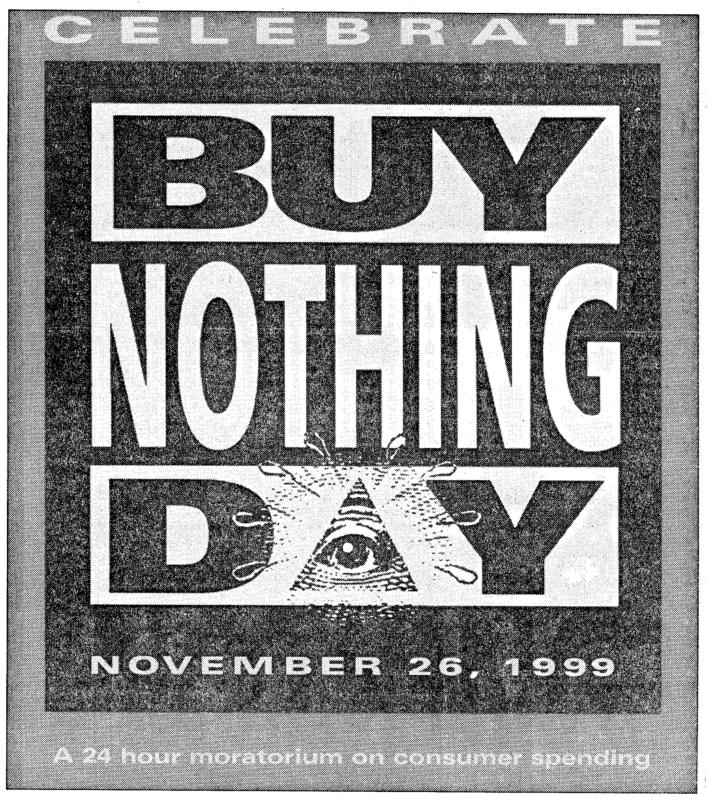
"Perhaps we should view commodities, not religion, as the opium of the people."

> crosoft, McDonald's and Coca-Cola bombard us with every day and on every street corner.

> There are times I fear that we are so far into the corporate rabbit hole that we will never get back to some unmediated, unmarketed view of the world. Perhaps corporatization is just another in a long list of nightmares from which we are trying to awake. Or perhaps resistance to something so allpervasive, so adaptive, so self-reflexive, is just futile.

Whatever this is that is shaping our lives, I do think we had better be aware of it and be able to critique it, even as in envelopes us in soothing music, warm colours and manufactured memories. Both these books can help you stay aware of this elaborate game of corporate cat and consumer mouse, of its historical roots and where it may be heading in the future. The Mau book, especially, gets you thinking and keeps you thinking.

* Peter O'Brien lives in Toronto. He is on the board of C: The Visual Arts Foundation and is currently editing a collection of recent writing on Canadian art.



Adbusters celebrates anti-consumerism in a poster reproduced in Brand.new.

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