taking stock

a polemic against stock photography and the commodification of visual language

a print compliment to the interactive polemic
Stock photography, particularly those on-line or on CD-ROM based formats, can be found using keyword searches via metatagging (a.k.a. indexing, cataloguing). You type in the word and they provide the image. Never before has the relationship between the literal and the visual been so clear. You own your words, your idea, but once the input is run through their indexing engine, you’ll find that almost any image will fit your idea. You’ll also find that that image has been used several time before for someone else’s idea. EyeWire’s latest marketing slogan says, “We supply the image, what you do with it is up to you.” As if we had so much control. Even if we were to look beyond the strict licensing agreements for the image, what would we do if we were to supply the concept, but the image just wasn't right? Metatagging claims to be the answer yet being no more accurate than a typical web-based search engine, it lists an image for almost every associated metaphor that has ever been related to that image. This in-itself becomes the problem. New metaphors/allegorical imagery become stifled by the image-for-purchase model. Stock photography assumes it has the answer and insists it can provide the right image for your idea-- at a price.

“Like it or not, (Bill) Gate’s digits and his digitizations will play an increasingly prominent role in the way art - and especially photography - is presented and viewed. For some, the continued concentration of content in a few hands is a cause for concern.” — Wired Magazine
“Stock agencies are also busy cataloguing new clichés for today’s social order and tomorrow’s dictionary of received ideas.”

“It is very naive to look for ethnology in the Savages or in some Third World-- it is here, everywhere, in the metropolises, in the White community, in a world completely cataloged and analyzed, then artificially resurrected under the auspices of the real, in a world of simulation, of the hallucination of truth, of the blackmail of the real, of the murder of every symbolic form and of its hysterical...”- Jean Baudrillard

“Our entire linear and cumulative culture collapses if we cannot stockpile the past in plain view.” – Jean Baudrillard

“Drop-kick those corporate cliches. Get the lowdown on new office life - from one-person startups to established firms - where laptops, cell phones, and pagers are standard accessories. Breathe new life into business metaphors with clever color treatments and angles”

— Eyewire
Stock photography is a danger. As designers, as thinkers, and as consumers, we must consider stock photography as the antithesis of the creative, of the free, and of the new. Stock photography represents itself as a reflection of our culture and becomes/reifies as a visual language when we choose to use stock imagery by a default process to visually express ideas. We begin to see/communicate/think exclusively with a generic visual vocabulary for rent. This is not coincidental. It is a marketing at its best. Stock imagery is deceit. Stock imagery is hiring factory workers, establishing a company store, and selling marked up products to the employees who in turn work extra hours to purchase extra products. Stock imagery is a vicious circle.

A great idea occurs to you. You might ask, “How would I communicate this to others?” Images come to mind, and you begin to question the source this imagery--of the graduate with the diploma, the handshake, the lightbulb, the executive at the mahogany desk. You begin to question why it becomes difficult to imagine an original image you haven't seen plastered on a thousand ad campaigns. We begin see the idea as a lightbulb, the transaction as a handshake and click and point interactivity on the web as a surfer riding the crest of an information wave. Community becomes by default an image of a campy picnic multi-racial gathering. You have an radical approach but cannot shake the temptation to consider using an image from an extreme sport, say, snowboarding. You are an internet service provider and as much as you hate to use the “roadkill on the information highway” allegory, you second guess your audience and use the cliché to reach the broadest possible market. It eats you. You realize the imagery is as sensual as a nilla wafer but your clients/audience do not.

This is the default visual language of business and and when it comes down to the bottom line, you begin mouthing the motions, flipping through stock catalogues, CD-ROMS, and web-based lightboxes. This is how we become duped into visualizing that has been visualized. Your ideas are sold and your audiences are bought...through someone else's imagery. The stock photography corporations encourage you to be creative, and claim finding the perfect killer image has never before been easier. They are right. It has never been so easy. It is a vicious circle. We must kill stock photography.

“As visual landmarks melt and reform before our eyes, we sense somehow the world itself dissolves beneath us” — Bruce Mau
Stock photography is currency. Ideas have value. The ability to control ideas has a greater value. Software becomes efficient only with intelligently designed interfaces. Ideas become actions only when a vehicle exists for effective communication. Bill Gates has spent millions on his vehicle, the stock photography giant, Corbis. Wholly owned by Gates himself, Corbis currently owns distribution rights to Da Vinci’s Codex Leicester notebook (purchased in 1994 for $30.8 million) and the Betteman Archive, Behind the Microsoft Outlook email, the Microsoft Internet Explorer browsing, and the Excel spreadsheet forecasts, the critical moment comes down to selling your idea to the brass, the client, or the future partner. It is at this moment we default to battered allegory and stale visual metaphor. We insert ‘loaded’ generic images into our documents to speak the “common language”. Microsoft provides its Office suite with a clip-art gallery to help you say what you might not really want to say. Bill Gates purchases the Betteman Archives, not for aesthetic appreciation, but capital appreciation fueled by a powerful control of the idea/visual language. He knows that we want only what we can see. He owns what we see.

Wired writes, “The more distant future will keep Charles Mauzy (President of Corbis) busy building what he believes “will represent a legacy of incalculable wealth,” ultimately destined to become a “digital Alexandria.” A photographer wishing to submit original photography to the Corbis stockpile must contact Leora Kahn, Director of Content Acquisition. The title alone indicates that Corbis is fully aware the significance of imagery.

Bill Gates is not alone and in fact is hardly the bully in this speculative market. When the Getty family sold their oil assets to Texaco in 1984 for a lump sum of $3 billion. Mark Getty, grandson of J. Paul Getty, saw survival and expansion of the family fortune in stock photography and embarked on an aggressive acquisition campaign resulting in the formation of Getty Communications who currently controls exclusive distribution rights for the imagery of Tony Stone Images, the BBC picture library Hulton Deutsch, collections of Man Ray and Alfred Eisenstaedt, ImageBank, and Photodisc. According to the Getty Images website, “There is a good chance that the next image you buy will have come from us.”
The latest stock trend is intimate with the latest visual design trends. Some savvy clients/consumers have grown indifferent to the staged and clichéd themes of stock photography. They have recognized that stock imagery “is not of my world.” In a move to counteract resistance to this movement, the stock corporations have moved to profit in the vernacular imagery that is currently in style, such as deconstructed typography and street signs – both can now be found in DigitalVision’s latest “Contextures” catalogue. Images taken directly from our environment have been commodified and resold to consultants lacking a visual vocabulary, then in turn recycled through advertisement after advertisement. New stock collections can be found exclusively selling imagery seen outside your window. No longer can consumers say the imagery of stock is not of their world. It is. It has been taken directly from their world, unstaged, unretouched. The stock IS their world. According to the Getty Images web site, “There is a good chance that the next time you see a television commercial, read an annual report, glance at a poster, visit a Web site or choose a greeting card, the image that catches your eye will have been supplied by us.”

And in spite of corporate claims for a kinder, gentler visual environment, it will soon be clear that is anything but. From the vernacular imagery of the neighborhood crackhouse, interstate street signs, third-world poverty, gay couples to subway infographics, it becomes difficult to know what is real and what has been staged. The stock companies are fully aware that any way you “slice the image”, you’re buying it. The corporations are intent on not only selling images but bundled all-purpose language. Another trend has been to enforce the notion of stock photography as “art.” New stock catalogues can be found in hardcover editions. Large photographic layouts seem no different from photographic book collections seen on bookstore shelves except for the fact the stock index numbers and ordering instructions are clearly prominent. Stock illustration has become a market. Everything is becoming stock, and if the recent IPO’s of GettyOne and other corporations is any evidence, stock is becoming stock.

We must act against the commodification of our visual environment. This is a world to see for yourself, and you shouldn’t have to pay to see it and more importantly, you should not
What’s wrong with this picture?

“Stock photography offers a way of studying images as a form of currency that funds advertising, text books, real-estate pamphlets, greeting cards, magazines, book covers, poster, annual reports, and innumerable other forms of visual communication. It cuts through the genres and the class distinctions of graphic design. This kind of photography is not the award-winning sort commissioned by leading art directors, nor is it a heartfelt grassroots expression. It is, instead, of corporate vernacular that fuels a vast amount of graphic design practiced in both amateur and professional settings.

The two major sources for stock photos are out-takes from commissioned shoots (often of a documentary nature) and photographs shot specifically as “stock.” It is difficult to trace the history of the phenomenon because it is both a border activity - a stepchild of more respected forms - and a transient, commercially driven undertaking. Nor is stock photography a stable, continuous, or discrete entity. The strands that contributed to its development include the nineteenth-century stereoscope business, the formation of picture agencies to serve the magazine and advertising industries in the 1920’s, and the formalization of the “stock market” in images during the 1970’s. There is no single point of origin for stock photography, which has grown out of the diverse areas of photographic production and consumption.”

“What is the focus of the new image infrastructure? Attention. It’s all designed for capturing, tracking, quantifying, manipulating, holding, buying, selling and controlling attention.”

-Bruce Mau

Have to depend on a company to think. When we allow a corporation to manufacture our ideas, our images, our language, thinks become less than picture perfect.