



“WE ARE ALL WORKERS” is the message that accosts me every day as I wait in the crowds for the bus to work. Sure, Levi’s hoi polloi proclamation is true enough in their recent campaign, well, save for the idle rich and a workless 9.1% of the U.S. But are we really the workers we imagine or romanticize that we are? My daily routine, like many of you, involves floor to ceiling windows, perfectly climate-controlled environs, about ten hours a day in front of a wide-screen monitor, and a spine-friendly standing desk (a recent addition). This hardly hearkens back to a time when work meant sunrise to sunset in the field, factory or (for the unluckiest) mine.

The “Go Forth” campaign, developed for Levi’s by presumably moustached, plaid-clad art directors within its target demographic at advertising juggernaut Wieden + Kennedy, is just one illustration of the Manifest-Destiny-ian wildfire issuing from Brooklyn to the Mission District and beyond onto the frontiers of the Internet in search of the handmade, authentic, imperfect and purportedly “genuine.” One of the campaign’s centerpieces, a minute-long video featuring a misappropriated voice-over of Walt Whitman’s poem, “Pioneers! O Pioneers!” is a marvel of modern advertising. My first listening, hunched over my glowing laptop screen in my darkened living room, elicited goosebumps. Not so much for the choppy, almost angry scenes of twenty-somethings pulling on jeans, mimicking the poses of statues and running aimlessly with torches, but for Whitman’s words from 1865 words that sprung out of a nation on the verge of destroying itself, ringing tinnily out of my equally tinny speakers hundreds of years later.

Nevertheless, Whitman’s poem is unfit for our times: it captures a specific time and place as an idealized look toward the future. A future after the Civil War, of continued Westward Expansion, golden dreams, and an imperial republic’s Great White Fleet. Today his words are echoes from a fabricated analog recording—a time capsule for today’s “pioneers” from the past. Unfortunately Whitman’s words couldn’t be more falsely placed. The charm of Americana is apparent, but today, in a country similarly disfigured by financial crises, faceless wars and an increasing class gap, consumed with consuming technology, what is our collective story? We have come to see authentic and old as synonyms and a pioneer as a fearless and free pair of Levi’s parading its individuality through a meadow.

The Levi’s campaign is the perfect digest for a movement that reaches to the far ends of our consumer gamut, from our digital devices to our diets. Instagram by Willem Van Lancker However, as we eagerly push toward needing to “have an app for that”—lurching forward on the backs of smoothly perfect, shining machines—this small rebellion has been brewing, a quiet subversion of all things slick, modern and “perfect.” While the celebration of technology has and will continue, diversions like handmade wooden book jackets for your iPad, Android “Russian Toy Camera” photo apps, Tumblogs dedicated to gorgeously vestigial apartments and women donning braids befitting Marie Tovesky, New England mills seeing a boom in popularity not enjoyed since the days of Samuel Slater, and even crass celebrations of the Unabomber’s analog ephemera (and the style of its presentation) have flooded into every Galleria and Gap in our great nation. Oh, pioneers!

These items, many created by companies with a true and compelling history of furnishing the needs of real workmen (i.e. Carhartt, Woolrich, Pendleton and even Levi’s) are today being reduced by a contemporary culture that didn’t grow up on film cameras with f-stops, milk in



glass bottles, work boots (for utility, not fashion), or anything handmade (or even homemade) at all. We are a generation that has grown tired of the slickness, sameness and promise of a digital future that couldn't replace the human character of imperfection. These natural, unsophisticated, austere qualities act as a kind of protest—bringing character, personality and spirit, and meaning back to the objects we own, even if they have been imposed by artificial means. What this means for our own self-image, however, is a complicated and challenging question.

This is of course not just the digital future we are rejecting. It is nearly everything promised to us since the 1950's (that we finally realized in the 1980's and '90s). Our supermarkets are full of food of Jetsonian imaginations: liquefied protein gels, flash-frozen "fresh" vegetables, entire meals in a drink—yet again, we clamor to return to a world that was never our own: farmer's markets, organically grown everything (including our clothing), happy free-range chickens and untamed wild salmon.

So now, as more and more of our lives reach symbiosis with a connected "social" web, we find ourselves yearning for an experience we can verify (or justify) as authentic, worn and storied. The more disposable our object culture becomes, the more we will rely on these constructed histories to provide meaning to the objects we own or consume, causing us to feel more interesting and connected to the world we live in. In this romanticized past, designers were craftsmen. A designer had to possess certain skills—not solely using their minds as we celebrate today, but also their hands. They would literally put themselves into their work, lost fingers and all. The final product may have lacked the flawless precision of a unibody Macbook Pro or the algorithmic brilliance of a Google Search but it is something my generation of jar-drinking bohemians can admire as genuine, beautiful and truly human. This quest for storytelling has become a cottage industry in itself—that every brand, product, and good must come packaged with a unique story or else it is valueless. In the past these stories were experienced firsthand—today we read them on placards and labels in stores framed as immersive brand experiences.

So, while we attempt to recapture this Dust Bowl mentality in our own lean times (not that you can really compare the two eras), where the genuine has become artificial and we slowly lose grip on a meaningful definition of who we really are, I can't help but feel pity for the coming generations of hipsters and new bohemians that will have nothing but discarded phones, outdated software and closets full of trail-wear cut out for the Starbucks queue to be nostalgic about.

I'm troubled here not by the pervasive trends of "craftsman" culture. In fact, I quite like the delightful idiosyncrasies of products like Instagram and its ability to transform the lifeless iPhone photo into an artifact with a feeling of style and meaning. Instead, I am concerned that we as a society, and a generation, so concerned with how we live and how we share, will forget our residual impact—the impact of past generations we cherish today. As designers, we deal with these concepts of digital curation, archiving and memory every day. Working on a product as fast-expanding and evolving as Google, I often consider: What will future generations have to hold, or even access, as the echo of our present? What will I be able to point to and say to my posterity "I built that"?



The consensus lately has become that artist-hackers and software engineers are the Edisons and Warhols of the twenty-first century. I've seen evidence of such in my peers and their dabbling in digital art projects, dusting off copies of Photoshop 1.0 and early 3D rendering software to generate explorations of a new variety. And while this evolution is exciting, the rise of the browser-cum-canvas, it is cut off from our being—there is nothing to hold, to touch or interact with on the more fundamentally humble human interfaces. Furthermore there is no artifact, not semblance of a “piece of work” apart from the lo-res JPEG hosted on an artist's server.

So, as we cast aside our version one iPhones and iPads, abandon profiles and apps for more verdant social pastures in a world of HTML 5 and fleeting digital interactions, let's not forget the importance of memory, reflection, and nostalgia in our own histories—not just the ones sold to us as authentic memories of a more romantic past imagined. I think the thrift store shoppers of the future will thank us, the pioneers.