

**ANAR  
CHIST  
BRAND  
MODEL  
LING**

**2023**

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**Anarchist  
brand modelling:  
  
a manifesto for  
participative  
community  
branding**



**— f o r e**  
**w o r d**

**There's something disturbing about branding. It doesn't have to do with traditional critical thoughts, though.**

**It's not about economic decline, global insecurity, the structure of needs or values. It's not about data, cognition, habits, neurons or salient signals. It's even not about manipulation, ideology and propaganda in the first place.**

**Still, ever since branding has been preoccupied with the power to 'sell to the masses', it fosters its self-esteem in managing the meanings of social life.**

**The problem has to do with what we generally understand as human autonomy, dignity and imagination. It's about social life as meaningful existence and about society appreciating each and every one of its member.**

**It's about brands being the result, not the origin of meaning.**

**We shouldn't feel hopeless about our ability to impact the world. Because we don't 'buy into' culture. We imagine, adapt, use, and construct anew.**

**In other words: 'they need to be led' cannot remain the prevailing (even if unspoken) way of thinking about consumers, voters and civil actors.**

**This hidden curriculum must be taken seriously, demasked and replaced with participative and straightforward process of community branding.**

**anarchist**

**participatory**

**community-driven**

**socially-legitimate**

**self-organized**

**well-grounded**

**bottom-up**

**direct**

**These words are close to each other and we use them as synonymous. Hopefully 'anarchist' isn't that scary anymore.**

**We got it from David Graeber, actually, and we really suggest his work. He was a great thinker!**

**Now, we're applying some of his thoughts to branding. The purpose? There's no way to fully control and own the world of meaning, and its goal is different anyway. We better understand and share it.**

**Anarchists say  
'no Gods, no masters'.**

**We agree (with a little  
reservation on religiosity).**

**Then, some basic principles:**

# 1

**'They' are NOT stupid.  
'They' don't need  
to be led. It's us  
who don't understand  
why people do stuff.  
People can, do and  
should handle their  
own lives.**

# 2

**You're one of 'them'.  
Always. You're part  
of the community you  
work with and you can  
only talk success once  
the whole community is  
succeeding.**

# 3

**No one will ever own it. It's either everybody or nobody. It's collective and shared. If it's not, it doesn't exist.**

**Forget copyrights, authorship and originality crap. Leave that to the lawyers.**

**Forget creative genius. It's playful imagination ... and everyone imagines.**

# 4

**Don't do it unless you can and want to give a shit, just like you expect them to.**

**Sounds similar to #3, yes. It's a consequence of honestly enjoying the work and not being a selfish ass.**

# 5

**Approach facts, data, values, theories and arguments like they're the artefacts and rites of a religion.\***

\* They are, actually. But let's leave this for some discussion about sociology of knowledge or philosophy of science.

**1**

**i n t r o**

**It's been more than 20 years since Albert Muñiz and Thomas O'Guinn shared their thoughts on brand communities. 20+ years for us to see brand communities are not passive recipients of advertising messages.**

**Yet, words are still told and actions are still pretended. We keep working like communication budgets divided the world into brand owners and consumers. There's not much participation besides a few focus groups, questionnaires and coping with social media hate.**

**20+YEARS**

**It's been more than a century since Émile Durkheim shared his powerful thoughts on symbolic meaning. More than a hundred years for us to think about the difference between a piece of cloth and a flag to die for.**

**Yet, we talk market segments as if people thought about and used cars or financial services in practical ways. There's not much understanding why people do what they do – or, more importantly, what they mean by doing it.**

**Seems like we need 'Google Hermeneutics' more than Google Analytics.**

**100+YEARS**

# INFORMATION

We call it a 'transactional trap': the belief people exchange information as if social life and sharing meaning could be reduced to a linear math equation.

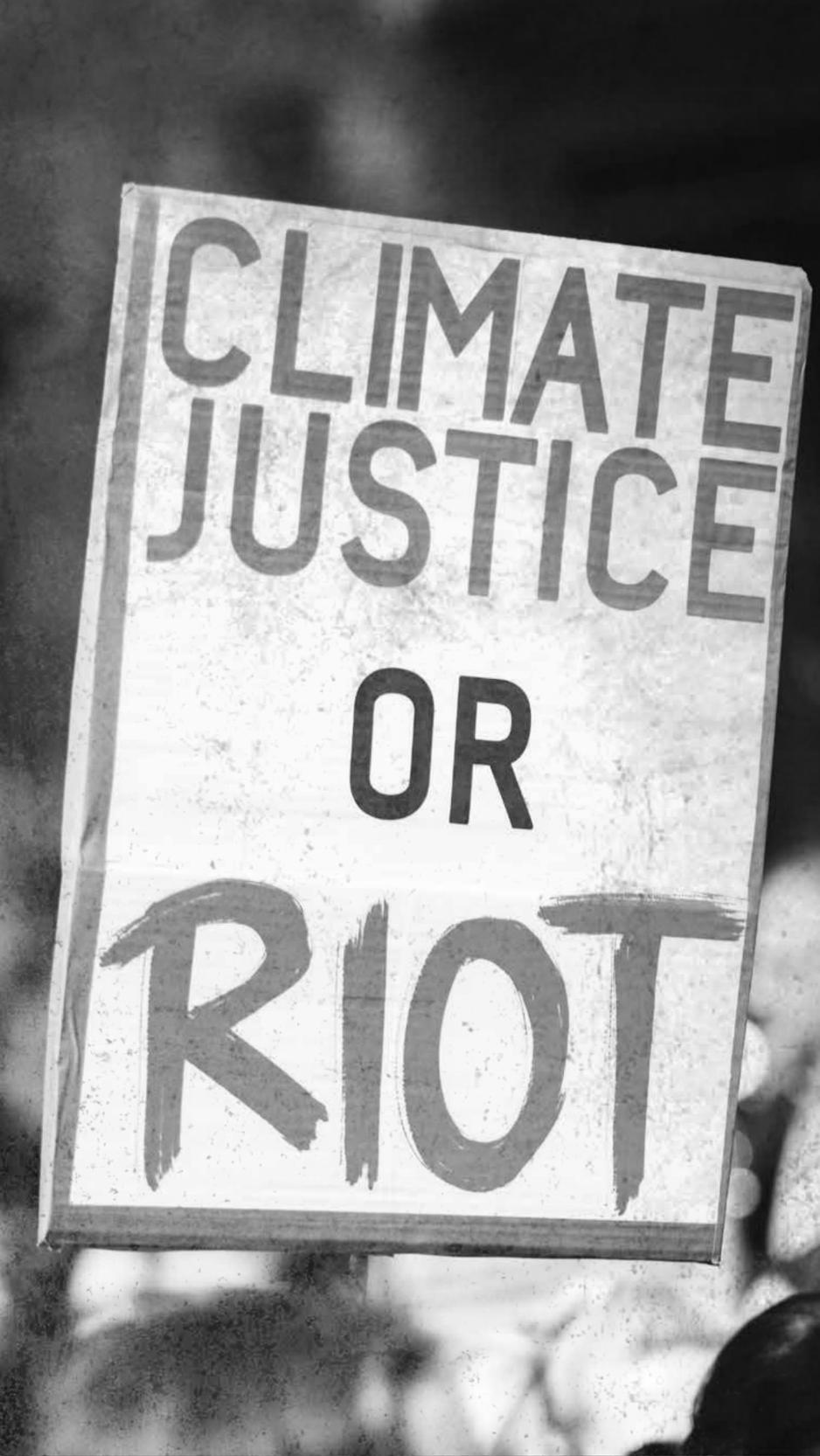
We act as if there's nothing more to message than common sense; as if what we say will be roughly the same as what 'consumers' will understand.

That's a mistake: even if the meanings of words were stable (which they aren't), the situations and social contexts of reading them changes anyway.

# TIME

What's even more, we think time in seconds, days, work weeks and ASAPs. We multiply it with salaries and taxes, comparing weeks-on-air and year-to-dates to respective brand performances.

Maybe, we should try to rethink time itself. Remember waiting for votes of 3 remaining states in last US presidential elections? What CNN called 'the longest 3 days in American history' doesn't really equal 72 hours.



**Just a few ...  
now what are they?**

**Unexpected events? Unintended  
consequences? Historical  
coincidences? Social movements  
inside otherwise functional,  
shiny-happy society?**

**No. You cannot sustain such  
arguments anymore.**

**It's the life we live.**

Modern technology, industry, medicine, smart cities? Sure. Many things about modernity cannot be easily questioned.

But we, humans, have never been modern.\* We didn't get rid of religions (neither big nor small ones), because we can't live secular and cold-blooded lives.

We'll always have to protest some shit (even if we can't believe we're still protesting against this shit).

\* Bruno Latour

**What does this all mean for branding?**

**Rather than diving deeper and deeper into social life, we develop new languages and define new spreadsheet cells that excuse mechanized disinterest and/or fear.**

**We seem to draw boundaries and boxes to stay safe from a distance, rather than to better understand.**

**Segmentation, positioning, KPI, big data, neural networks, AI chatbots. So much great stuff!**

**Do our thoughts, decisions and actions really evolve with it, though? What about our ability to imagine and empathize?**

**We turn to technologically advanced ignorance instead of raw, everyday ethnography, careful historical-cultural interpretation and scrupulous search for meaning.**

**But social meaning can only be understood with and through social beings.**

**Let's be honest  
here: all too  
often, marketing  
is a prime example  
of what David  
Graeber would call  
a bullshit job.**





**Well, today we finally see  
there's no u-turn, no 'back to  
business as usual'.**

**So, is there a way for branding  
to become more serious about  
social life? What is it? What  
does it look like?**

**We talk the role brands can no  
longer play – and hope for a new  
one to come.**

**It's all about  
listening and being  
listened-to. About  
appreciation and  
social recognition.**

**About chance to change  
and influence. About  
people not being  
stupid if we don't  
treat them that way.**

**About support for  
community in self-  
organizing and self-  
help.\* About brands  
being HONESTLY engaged  
– not about salient  
signals or catchy  
commercials.**

**In the end, it's about  
reconstructing  
democracy bottom-  
up and top-down  
at the same time:  
about participation  
and legitimate  
representation.**

\* Reconstructing Democracy,  
Charles Taylor et al.

# **Marketing is colonized.**

**Colonized by games that pretend numbers can capture human experience. 'Scientific' marketing normalizes this colonization.**

**We want to  
decolonize  
marketing.**

**We want to return to the  
fundamentals of strategy: to  
understand real people and their  
real problems, and think  
in their terms.**

**Who we are cannot and should not be jailed in the cells of spreadsheets. The truth is not singular and the version of truth proposed by marketing professionals – who haven't spent time in deep, empathetic conversation with the people they mean to reach – can't possibly be a truth worth telling.**

**That's why we propose to reconsider what this work is about.**

it's all about  
**culture**

it's all about  
**culture**

it's all about  
**culture**

it's all about  
**culture**

2

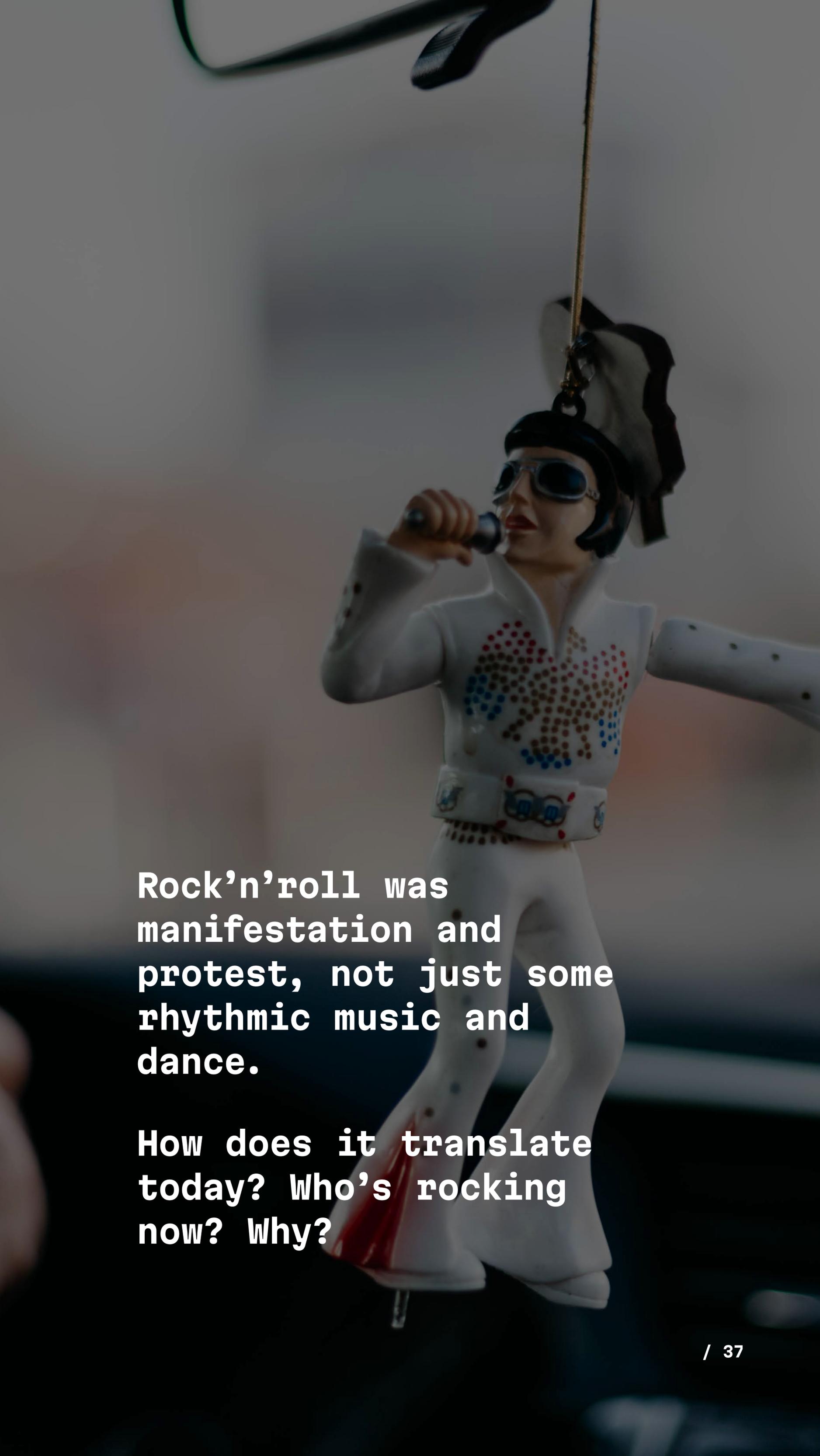
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c ū ī t  
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**what is  
culture?**

**Culture isn't popular literature, movies and music. It's the way we think and feel and experience life with and through all of that.**

**The other way around:  
literature, music,  
film, paintings,  
architecture, fashion  
design, sculptures,  
and video games EQUAL  
to social theories.**

**It's the way we,  
humans, think and  
materialize our  
thoughts to fill the  
world with meaning.**

A white figurine of Elvis Presley in his iconic white jumpsuit with a colorful sequined pattern on the chest and a wide, ornate belt. He is wearing dark sunglasses and holding a microphone to his mouth. The figurine is suspended by a thin gold chain from above. The background is a soft, out-of-focus indoor setting.

**Rock'n'roll was  
manifestation and  
protest, not just some  
rhythmic music and  
dance.**

**How does it translate  
today? Who's rocking  
now? Why?**

BOSTON

SEOUL 34 mi  
54 km

CONEY ISLAND 7033  
MILES

SAN FRANCISCO 5428 miles

TOKYO 259 mi  
414 km.

BURBANK 5610  
MILES

Death Valley 6776  
miles

TOLEDO 8133

DECATUR 9412  
M.

**M\*A\*S\*H was a powerful social critique, not just some comedy TV series.**

**How does it add to how we understand wars today? How does its meaning reappear?**

# the CATCHER

The Catcher in the Rye wasn't an escapist novel but expression of generational trauma.

Will it reappear?  
How and when? Does it translate into our post-pandemic lifestyle?



**So what does social meaning mean?  
It's what we mean.**

**Meaning can be thin and thick.  
It can evaporate and also  
condensate. It can sediment very  
deeply and also emerge incredibly  
quickly. However, there's no  
meaning without people sharing  
it.**

**That's why we're going to ignore  
the difference between a brand  
and its community. Because the  
former doesn't exist without  
the latter. When we talk about  
'interpretive community' – a  
bunch of people who understand  
something the same or pretty  
much the same way – that's where  
brands actually exist.**

**Believing in experience and knowledge doesn't mean being a knowledgeable or well-educated expert. It means becoming a believer and extending the self into those imagined worlds that make it meaningful to live for.**

**By driving cars, we extend ourselves into speed and/or carrying capacity. By using microscopes, we extend ourselves into cellular worlds. By reading books and listening to music, we extend ourselves into moods with storylines, into heroes and villains.**

**That all lives in our thoughts and daydreams. As soon as we can imagine something, we are able to believe it, too.**

**So there's no imaginary fiction vs. hard, factual reality. There's just different interpretations of the world, that need to find a pluralistic way to live alongside each other.**

**Remember these words?**

**“I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.”**

**Did Martin Luther King personify a powerful social change as some future vision – a ‘dream’ as we usually understand it?**

**No. It started as a series of powerful performances which materialized better life here and now. It’s happening as soon as we can see it, when we can ‘dream’ it the same way!**

**We're convinced people don't make "wrong" decisions. People make the best decisions they are able to make.**

**They can feel aligned with or distant from something, though. And that's about having the possibility to participate and to be recognized as valuable, visible and important members of a community.**

**This is where traditional branding fails. This is where anarchist principles come in.**

**In short ...**

### **The interpretive part.**

**We look for what people mean when doing something, not what they answer to marketers' bullshit questions in the first place. We aim to understand the meaning of everyday things the way people understand them. Much of it cannot even be said. But it can be experienced and lived-through.**

### **The modelling part.**

**We neither plan, nor do we predict. Nobody can truly do that. We're modelling brands as much as we're modelling communities. Brands must be able to adapt as much as communities do.**

### **The normative part.**

**Understanding culture, cultural disruption and social change is a powerful skill that comes with responsibility. We have to think how and when our communities are ready for change.**

# no rules

**We don't follow rules in everyday life, so why should we in meaning research or brand modelling?**

**Does invention come from following rules, or from breaking them?**

**It's methodological anarchism at its best. We look for clues and inspiration everywhere.\***

\* Against Method,  
Paul Feyerabend

**“We don’t cherish  
ruthless economic  
success of brands.  
We cherish their  
initiative and  
participation in  
making our lives  
better.”**

**Abe Lincoln**

(or maybe, just maybe someone else)

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3

— — — —  
r e s e  
a r c h



**YES**

we do research.

**NO**

we don't test  
hypotheses.

**NO**

we don't ask  
predefined questions.

**BECAUSE**

we'll always  
have it wrong.

**Ask yourself:**

**who's dealing with everyday life questions in ... well ... everyday life?**

**Then why should we expect academic theory or any form of standardized research to provide everyday life answers?**

**The best theory is out there. The one lived and experienced.\***

**Marketers are part of it, even if they feel superior earning their PhDs in brand semiotics or advanced statistical modelling.**

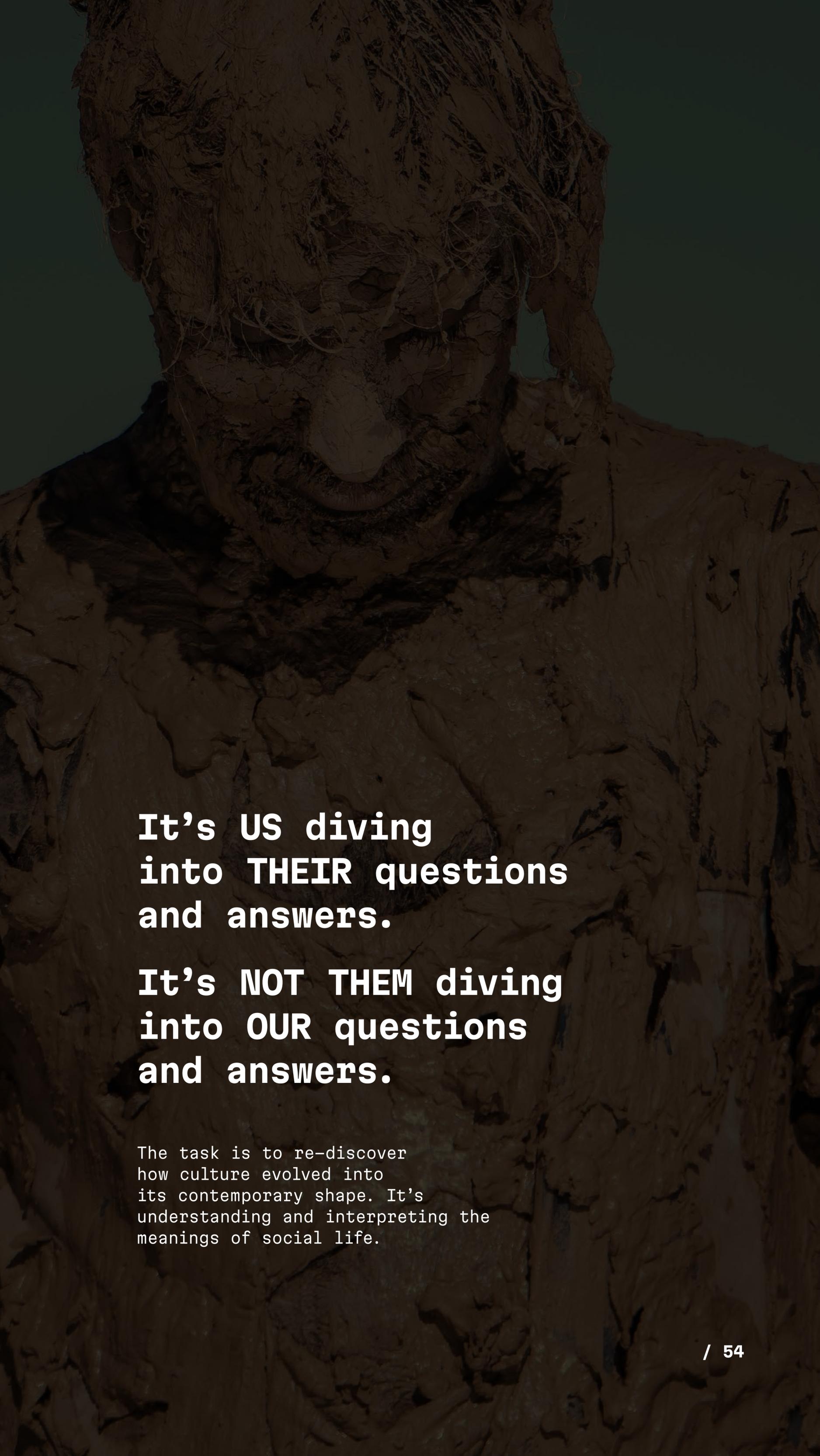
**The best 'data' is out there, too. The people created themselves.**

**Go find it.**

\* search 'phenomenology'

**We're 'small scientists', not prophets. With our brands, we're here to understand, not to teach or even humiliate.**

**We don't bring enlightenment. We offer a helping hand.**



**It's US diving  
into THEIR questions  
and answers.**

**It's NOT THEM diving  
into OUR questions  
and answers.**

The task is to re-discover  
how culture evolved into  
its contemporary shape. It's  
understanding and interpreting the  
meanings of social life.

# 7 how-tos

# 1

## **Observe & collect.**

**It's underestimated. We do it a lot, though, because it's crucial in reassembling meanings.**

**Focus. Look around. What artefacts with symbolic meanings do we use? What do we project into our phones, cars, dresses and hairstyles? What does it mean within our interpretive community? What does it say to the outside world?**

**What's our ritual action? How do we perform it? What makes our events so powerful? What beliefs do we share?**

**When and how did you personally come to believe it? What was so powerful that you suddenly felt like being a part of the community?**

# 2

## **Hear people talking.**

**Listen to voices as they appear  
in their natural environment.**

**It's observation and interviewing  
combined. No focus groups or in-  
depth interviews can replace the  
way people interact with each  
other and express themselves in  
their own environments. Hear them  
talking and read their texts,  
wherever they allow you to.**

**In case you don't understand,  
you have to ask, sure. But  
remember: 1) you only ask  
childish questions because you  
don't understand, 2) you only  
ask to better understand, not to  
bother, and 3) asking questions  
equals intervention – keep in  
mind the goal isn't to convince  
or manipulate. Honest questions  
only.**

# 3

## **It's all text\*, read it.**

**Imagine community life like an ongoing script. Develop your skill to read and understand it. How does the story evolve?**

**There are actors with roles and plots. They get in touch and cross with each other, thickening relations and creating dramas. That's where meaning concentrates into powerful words and images. See it, capture it, find its place in that bricolage\*\* of meaning.**

\* Texts go beyond words: not just on phones, social media, or books, but on screens and through speakers and beyond.

\*\* French word for "DIY", like a sociological collage.

# 4

## **Taste & spit.**

**Yep, as close as it gets. It's an iterative process of trying out experience while also keeping critical distance.**

**We'll never stay clean. There's no objectivity, get used to it.\* But we don't want to be too much into it either – or else we lose the broader perspective. Find balance in between. Take some deep breaths after deep dives. Get distracted to reestablish good connection again.**

\* e.g. Richard Rorty, Paul Feyerabend, Thomas Kuhn

# 5

## **Describe & share.**

**Your eyes are their eyes. Share it, reflect it, understand together what you thought you understood by yourself. Remember, participation!**

**You're an ethnographer and cultural interpreter, you don't earn points for academic achievement. You're innovating community culture so your destination is a better, more fulfilling community life. Communities don't look for prophets bringing enlightenment, they evolve from within. That's where you work!**

# 6

## **Study.**

**We don't need formal institutions to study what we're interested in. But we need to know how and why things evolved into what they are today.**

**The most important thing about culture and meaning is that they're historically rooted and reproductive. (Just compare Knight Rider's KITT to smart cars of today.) Yet, we live in individualist society and believe in almighty, heroic free will and creative genius.**

**So how did the thoughts you're dealing with evolve? Where did they come from, and what came before them? What must have happened that our community is dealing with this or that particular problem today?**

# 7

## **Mix & repeat endlessly.**

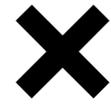
**It's never finished.  
It's performative and keeps going  
rather than being one-and-done.**

**The point is simple. There's no  
brand without its community, just  
like there's no god without her  
believers. It's the former who  
needs the latter – not the other  
way around.\***

**Remember, 'goals' are just  
tools to stay on track. They  
don't prove success or high  
performance, they prove humans  
can imagine and idealize.  
As hard-working members of  
community, we shouldn't be afraid  
to change them.**

\* That's why we talk about  
"interpretive communities" rather  
than target audiences,  
social groups, demography,  
psychography etc.

# **1 condition**



# **Love humanity with all its messiness.**

**If you don't love people, you'll never understand people. No science or even this pdf will give you what your're looking for.**

**Is it idealist? Naive? Does it sound pretentious? Honestly, we don't care, not anymore. We're not new to this business and we know there's a better way to do our job. Join us or hate us, or just take whatever you like.**

**But be aware you can't sustainably create the just organizations and systems you want to see without acting with that same justice in your own life.\***

\* Adrienne Maree Brown,  
Emergent Strategy

— — — — —  
n o t e s

**For many reasons, the classic genre-game where ad agencies compete to win a client isn't sustainable. We believe the 'new game' is about ad agencies and clients competing to convince the public they are of any use.**

**Branding has to prove it's not chit-chat. It's not pointless creation of profit, but creation of meaning for sustainable and fulfilling community life.**

**In our minds, branding means broad social responsibility, not greenwashing and likeable CSR sponsorship covering sweatshop work. It's there anytime we talk about communities.**

**Forget 'target audiences'.  
They never existed (outside of  
PowerPoint decks).**

**Engage with interpretive  
communities. Groups of people  
who understand issues the same  
way. Why do they do it? Why is it  
important? In what is it rooted?**

**Experience life their way so it  
almost becomes your own way.  
Ask them to help and join you.  
The brand isn't a predefined  
tool. It's more a platform  
for community life. A space  
to construct, enjoy and re-  
construct. That's got nothing to  
do with some pre-defined persona  
and archetype. It's more like a  
religious social form - sets of  
beliefs and the practices that go  
with them.**

**Our goal is to facilitate  
communities and support them  
actively in their struggles.  
Those are our struggles, too.**

**We follow much of the ‘strong program’ in cultural sociology – the work of Jeff Alexander, Phil Smith, Isaac Reed, Jason Mast and many others who continue in and further develop the heritage of Durkheimian sociology. We also follow selected ideas from cultural branding by Douglas Holt and Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) as it developed during last 20 years.**

**We don’t purchase much of critical cultural studies and marxist traditions despite we very much respect and appreciate it as our (theoretical) opposition. We celebrate anarchist thoughts, first of all those of Paul Feyerabend and David Graeber. In a different register, that also means our alignment with the work of Thomas Kuhn, Richard Rorty and several culturally-inspired social constructivists.**

**The heart of this manifesto is build up around the interpretive approach of the social sciences and symbolic and cultural anthropology. We try, however, to think more broadly and find inspiration in semiotics, arts, religious studies and humanities.**

We are cultural sociologists and strategists, we live from meaning-making and support community-based organizing, emergent strategy and perpetual curiosity. We connected through our fellow culture buff and anarchist thinker [Vanessa Bittner](#) and Cultural Sociology at Yale and are always eager to talk and exchange ideas and perspectives.

### Andrew

besides cultural sociology and strategy, is also a teacher, plantsman, musician and digital media artist. He finds continual inspiration in the human anthropological capacity for magic and lives on the unceded territory of the Gabrielino-Tongva, Chumash, and Kinz peoples in South Los Angeles, California.

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### Jan

besides cultural sociology and strategy, is also a father promoting neurodiversity, interest-driven and enquiry-based education. He loves philosophy of science, graphic design and photography, and lives in Bratislava, Slovak Republic.

[LinkedIn](#) / [Instagram](#)



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