What is Metahaven?
Sarah Hromack, 2015

In his 1996 essay ‘Designer as Author’, Michael Rock traces the evolution of authorship by hop-scotching through postmodern literary, critical and film theory to land on director François Truffaut’s ‘la politique des auteurs’. This was a strategy that Truffaut used to elevate cinema to a high art by attributing authorship to a film’s director, rather than to the studio.¹ Rock argues that auteurship is an aspirational model for design, one whereby designers might occupy a position of creative agency rather than follow traditional client/provider business models. Just two years later, in 1998, Ellen Lupton wrote ‘The Designer as Producer’, an essay which brightly suggests that the multiskilled, technology-enabled designer might use the collapsing of disciplinary lines in contemporary design practice to work as an author, editor and publisher. Lupton cites Walter Benjamin’s 1934 essay ‘The Author as Producer’, which identified interdisciplinarity as one of the central outcomes of film, radio and other then-novel forms of communication.²

In the years since Rock and Lupton’s essays, public access to the internet became widespread, enabling anyone to dismantle the idea of singular authorship through self-publishing and peer-to-peer file sharing. ‘Web 2.0’ placed all manner of people in direct dialogue with typography, photography and other visual elements traditionally associated with graphic design, suggesting that we might also dabble as citizen designers while blogging, chatting, uploading and posting our way to a new social paradigm. The fallout from Web 2.0 has been nothing short of astounding. The internet that once seemed open and free has been transformed into a dystopia of double meanings and commercial and political dealings. Ingrained psychological dependencies have developed out of brightly blinking ‘user friendly’ experiences, monitored by businesses and government agencies. These dark ‘post 2.0’ conditions – and the economic, social and political superstructures that help create and enforce them – motivate the work of Metahaven, a research-focused design studio founded by Amsterdam-based Vinca Kruk and Daniel van der Velden.

Metahaven are difficult to define – knowingly and obstinately so – not simply as a collective, whose ranks have expanded and changed over the years to include any number of collaborators, but to locate altogether on the spectrum of ‘graphic design’ (or pedagogy, theory, journalism, art or any other number of things). The studio can certainly be understood using the conventional terms that define success in the international design community: institutional
affiliations, awards and exhibitions. Echoing Rock and Lupton’s can-do optimism, they could be considered ‘auteur-producers’: tenacious visionaries who work across multiple platforms to create a broad variety of functional objects, as well as a prolific amount of insistent, manifesto-like critical and self-referential writing.

A sense of the uncanny pervades much of Metahaven’s work, which draws on the heavily mediated visual detritus that defines the corporate and government worlds. Microsoft’s pre-installed font package, drop-shadow effects, garish colours, pirated logos and other dated graphic elements are the marks that make the work feel vaguely familiar yet perfectly pitched. Playing on the form of manuals that guide corporations in the application of graphic and branding identity systems, Uncorporate Identity (2010) is, at 608 pages, the studio’s most formidable publication to date. The book traces the connections between corporate and nationalist aesthetics and those of separate-seeming, yet visually related, subcultures including black metal, diy ‘zines and the military. Chock-a-block with essays and other didactic materials, and authored by a long list of contributors from a variety of disciplines, the book is visually jarring, which suggests its critical potential as a design object. Uncorporate Identity actively frustrates the reading experience while accurately reflecting the cognitive effects of the information glut that corporate brands force on consumers. Paradoxically, however, this also poses the question: who can use a book that intentionally breaks the conventions of readability?

While the history of independent publishing suggests the revolutionary political potential of the small press, the current state of digital distribution leaves much to be desired. Massive corporate entities – Amazon, Apple, Google – exercise the highest levels of algorithmic and
censorial control over the material we find online, and how we discover it. The journalistic non-profit organization Wikileaks first ignited a public outcry in 2010 with the release, on its website, of footage from a 2007 US military strike in Baghdad in which Iraqi journalists were killed (now known as the Collateral Murder video). The same year, Wikileaks released over 75,000 documents relating to the war in Afghanistan. Intrigued by the visual language that came to light through these data dumps, Metahaven performed a volunteer branding exercise of sorts for the group in 2011. The project comprised a series of grey T-shirts printed with the organization’s name, along with a set of scarves whose camouflage-like pattern suggested they could be used for disguise while their silky texture mimicked that of a luxury good. Sold as part of the Dark Store presentation by the New York gallery Artists Space at the 2012 Art Berlin Contemporary fair, the proceeds from sales were passed on to Wikileaks. (When once asked in an interview how surveillance might impact their design process, Metahaven’s response was provocative: ‘Design is basically high-res censorship’).

The true use-value of these objects may be debated by anyone with a passing interest in Marxist politics. Does the world need another T-shirt with a slogan on or faux-luxury scarf? (Answer: No.) Can the T-shirt-as-anti-capitalist-statement possess any real humour or potency when it is a limited-edition good sold at an art fair or gallery? In their eBook Can Jokes Bring Down Governments? Memes, Design and Politics (2013), Metahaven cite US media activist and scholar Ethan Zuckerman’s ‘Cute Cat Theory of Digital Activism’ (2008), which identifies digital platforms as prime locations for political action. Zuckerman argues that citizens would surely protest if the state began to infringe upon their sovereign right to post banal pictures of their pets – and that they would easily find somewhere else to post such images should an online platform such as Facebook dissolve. ‘Is it possible’, Metahaven ask, ‘that graphic design has only one thing left to do, which is to post itself on the internet?’

Suggesting that recursive jokes – memes, cat-based and otherwise – might have untapped political power, they wonder: ‘Could the leftovers of graphic design be turned into jokes? Might – through this re-allegiance – design rediscover actual societal impact?’ However self-aware it may be, Metahaven’s dark-yet-playful sense of humour is most buoyant when freed from physical form and posted across a variety of digital platforms. For instance, in a 2014 music video collaboration for ‘Home’, a piece by San Francisco composer and sound artist Holly Herndon, the studio generated a cheerful-looking ‘data rain’ of patterns fashioned from the logos that symbolize the various National Security Administration programmes. In the video, these images are overlaid onto Herndon’s face like a veil of cartoon camouflage, as if to protect her from the government surveillance infractions her song laments. In the project’s documentation, Metahaven assert their belief in pop music as ‘a force that can change the critical mass of a politically stagnant cultural field’.
Yet, while Herndon may be immensely talented, she can hardly be considered a pop star in the conventional sense. Even with the disseminatory clout of the internet, niche performers like Herndon struggle to achieve broad legibility and audience ‘reach’, just as is the case with limited-edition objects and smaller publishing houses or galleries. For all of their engagement with power structures and other systemic failings, Metahaven can’t allow their work, in practice or in scale, simply to be what it is; they cannot resist telling a visual joke through design and then explaining it again, as if to assure themselves of the punch line. At times, in fact, they could even be perceived as coming close to undermining their own critical potential in a feedback loop of self-description and analysis. They publish their work to Tumblr, for instance: a platform for rampant, often anonymous, image-sharing. They also choose to explain their work through the didactic texts they publish when they could, instead, perform an effective meta-commentary by simply allowing their images to exist without comment.

The recent whistleblowing actions of Private Chelsea Manning, Edward Snowden and others have revealed that an NSA PowerPoint slide template uses the same visual design forms as the mainstream software we use in our everyday lives. Given that, perhaps design’s greater potential for social change lies not in its theoretical implications but in its functional ones: what, for instance, can design do to help people recognize political ideology at work? If Rock’s auteurist invocations helped create the critical conditions in which studios like Metahaven thrive, then it is Lupton’s consistent, if seemingly prosaic, demand for a design ethos that is intelligible to everyone, which suggests a different possibility for design’s continued relevance. The most effective visual joke for Metahaven to tell would be one so banal that it registers everywhere – or nowhere at all.


3. For a list of the studio’s professional accomplishments see: metahaven.net

