



1+1=3:

Building Social
Capital Through
Communication
Design

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2006 marked the beginning of the “green” phenomenon, sweeping through the nation and permeating the American mainstream. Toyota, Ford, and Honda increased production of hybrid models while large corporations such as Wal-Mart, General Electric and Intel pledged commitments to sustainable business practices. Green issues of *Wired*, *Vanity Fair*, and *Newsweek* hit the magazine racks and Al Gore’s book, *An Inconvenient Truth*, became a *New York Times* bestseller. The same year, Whole Foods emerged as a *Fortune 500* company, the first big business promising to offset all energy use. For decades, the cautionary pleas of environmentalists had fallen upon deaf ears. Yet in a matter of only three years, the green consumerism movement created a nationwide buzz amongst a previously apathetic mainstream audience. The speed of its success provokes serious questions: Can this sustainability movement sustain itself? Can our pocket books alleviate the pressures of our global climate crisis?

A downfall to the green consumerism movement is its exclusion of the lower and middle economic classes. Consumption is an overtly individualistic tactic while a collective and inclusive response is necessary. It is time to replace the green trend with a paradigm shift focused on shared responsibility and community.

In September 2008, as several large United States financial firms failed and merged, our American economy entered into an economic crisis unseen since the Great American Depression. With an unhealthy market economy, we will see green consumerism even more exclusive to the upper-class. American society will be forced to adopt the older environmental strategy, “LESS.” A revisit to our nation’s economic past may reveal that “living with less” for the upper and middle classes could result in particular benefits. Ben Friedman, author of *The Moral Consequences of Economic Growth*, responds to the solidarity which resulted during the Great Depression, “Enough Americans from different walks of life saw one another in distress that they may well have felt, as if they were now, for practical purposes, part of one larger community.”¹

In 1961, urbanist, writer and activist, Jane Jacobs coined the term “social capital” in reference to the value of social networks within a community.² The results of social capital are trust, ownership, reciprocity and the inclination for people do nice things for each other. Wealth can be measured by currency or by the connections and relationships that bind our communities. Can an increase in social capital help relieve our distressed market economy and increase responsibility for our natural environment? In his book *Deep Economy*, Bill McKibben concludes, “Community, it turns out, is the key to physical survival in our environmental predicament and also to human satisfaction.”³

The success of the Obama campaign is a contemporary example of the power of community. An online body of supporters was built through the campaign’s website and grassroots social networking. Subsequently an offline community was organized resulting in the canvassing events and rallies. Obama supporters cross generations, race and economic status. The campaign’s power to mobilize community is largely attributed to its striking, yet unified visual voice. The success of the design identity, created by Sender, LLC of Chicago, was not just the distinguished graphic “O” and use of the contemporary American typeface, Gotham. The greater accomplishment was its clever adaptability, allowing subgroups of supporters (Environmentalists for Obama, Americans with Disabilities for Obama, Arab Americans for Obama, etc) the potential for customizing their unique visual attitude while adhering to the campaign’s overall design standards. In addition to the official campaign, a grassroots wave of work from artists and designers emerged.

1. Bill McKibben, *Deep Economy: The Wealth of Communities and the Durable Future* (New York: Henry Holt Books, 2007), 126.

2. Jacobs, Jane, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 1961), 138

3. McKibben, *Deep Economy*, 2.

The power of communication design to inspire social change was evident in Obama's election. As the nation enters a terrifying time of disrepair, can we harness the energy and momentum seen throughout our communities during the President's campaign? Through our thesis, *1+1=3: Building Social Capital through Communication Design*, we aim to collaborate *with* participants instead of communicating *to* an audience. We've experimented with different design strategies in our work, such as collaboration, participation, memes, design mediation, online and offline community building and gift economies. These six terms are pillars of our design practice and we believe they are critical in building social capital through design. All of our projects utilize some combination of these strategies. No individual can cause or heal an environmental predicament. A sense of responsibility to one's community is only present when one feels ownership for that community.

In the winter of 2008, we both enrolled in an interdisciplinary class started by student-run initiative, Respond Design. Twelve students, representing several departments, gathered each week to collaboratively author a proposal for RISD to become a carbon-neutral institution. Upon completion, we presented the document to a large faculty audience and the Associate Provost of Academic Affairs. Seeing the result of this cross-pollination of ideas renewed our enthusiasm and confidence in addressing environmental challenges as designers. At this juncture, a commitment to our collaboration became evident.

The seminar ignited further interdisciplinary work with an industrial designer, Jill Peterson. In the spring, we created an identity for Respond Design. We designed a logo as a stencil that any member of the community could customize. We created an interactive, online "hub" as a place for students from all majors to find out about sustainability initiatives on campus. We also developed a guerilla-style campaign to galvanize support. Our work moved beyond the typical posters that clutter the school to include the use of responsible and reusable materials. Rather than limiting our communication tactics to bulletin boards, we explored alternative avenues such as planting messages on desktops of shared computers. We stamped already existing paper products, such as napkins and cups, and inserted bookmarks made of reused paper in the library.

The next collaborative effort was Sustain Me, a collective with two other studio-mates, Mary Banas and Lauren Mackler. The objective of Sustain Me was to cultivate a public interest in our connection to natural ecosystems. We proposed an interactive website to house short animations, images of public installations and music videos. The set of one animation involved an underwater scene made of recycled fabric stuffed with used plastic bags. We also created a series of campaign tote bags made of old t-shirts from a thrift store. The collaborations yielded results that neither one of us could have imagined creating alone.

Our title, *1+1=3*, is based on the idea that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. In his book, *The Evolution of Cooperation*, political sociologist Robert Axelrod describes the findings of a computer tournament in which a game model, "Tit For Tat," proves the success of cooperation over individual gain. He writes "The analysis shows that the two key requisites for cooperation to thrive are that the cooperation be based on reciprocity, and that the shadow of the future is important enough to make this reciprocity stable. Once cooperation based on reciprocity is established in a population, it can protect itself from invasion by uncooperative strategies."⁴ Thus, the 3 comes from this strong place, where the bonding of two cooperative forces is stronger than any uncooperative counter force.

4. Axelrod, David, *The Evolution of Cooperation* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 21-24, 173.

Cooperation exists as its own entity. In her eulogy for artist and collaborator Michael Piazza, Bertha Husband said, "When two artists work together to create

5. Temporary Services,
*Group Work: A Compilation
of Quotes About Collaboration
from a Variety of Sources
and Practices* (New York:
Printed Matter, 2007), 99.

6. Hyde, Lewis. *The Gift:
Imagination and the Erotic Life
of Property* (New York: Random
House, 1983), xxi.

a work, it is as if we have given birth to another character—an entirely different artist—who makes something neither of us could have made independently. There are works by Michael Piazza and there are works by Bertha Husband; and the works of the collaboration are created by the Third hand. For this Third hand to emerge, there has to be a willingness from the two collaborators not to individually force things—a willingness to give up personal solutions and a willingness to wait and see what arrives.”⁵ Science, as a discipline, is marked by the common ownership of knowledge and progress. The interest lies in the greater good. This special form of collaboration seeks truth as the ultimate goal and allows for discoveries of the highest echelon. By shedding individual ownership, greater strides are made. Missions to space or to the sea floor require hundreds of people working together, each with a narrow specialization of knowledge or skill to contribute to the quest of understanding the unknown.

As communication designers, there are cues to be taken from the field of science. Just as monumental achievements are realized by multiple cooperative participants, we aim to borrow similar working methodologies in our design practice. We are collaborators, but just as importantly we are facilitators of group collaboration.

We feel it’s important not only to collaborate with those in our field, but to foster working relationships with other branches of study. The cross-pollination of ideas experienced in Respond Design—working with industrial designers and landscape architects—can be pushed further by opening our practice to include collaboration with scientists, engineers and so on.

One project that aims to do this is the *Wonderbox*, a kit designed to initiate conversations between young designers and scientists. The box includes artifacts from the natural world, a set of cards with prompts for discussion, and a book about biomimicry. It was structured to target specific questions about basic needs, health, commerce, waste and energy, and to encourage creative thinking from various fields of expertise.

In addition, we have actively sought collaborative opportunities with our peers in the scientific community. In April 2009, we were invited to collaborate with three graduate students from the School of Environmental Engineering at Yale, who were working with a group of high school students in New Haven. The task was curate an exhibition about the Pacific Gyre, an “island” of garbage floating in the Pacific Ocean. Gathered by currents from all over the world, this garbage island is nearly the size of Texas. Over the course of six weeks, we met with this high school group to visualize their research in the form of an animation. Through a series of workshops, we collaborated with the students to write the script, narrate and illustrate the piece. We recorded them reading their script and created an accompanying soundtrack to the animation. It was on display at the Yale Peabody Museum from May through June 2009.

Lewis Hyde repurposes Marcel Mauss’ definition of a gift economy as “the obligation to give, the obligation to accept, and the obligation to reciprocate.”⁶ Science can be considered a contributive gift economy because progress relies on the contribution of ideas. Other contemporary contributive gift economy models are Wikipedia and Opsound, a website inviting musicians to share and download various musical compositions. Miranda July’s site, *learningtoloveyoumore.com*, is another example. July gives assignments to viewers such as “make an inspirational banner;” viewers execute the assignment and upload their projects. The result is a touching collection of work by people who may never have connected otherwise.

In his book, *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*, Lewis Hyde argues that the introduction of gift economies to contemporary society is one way to strengthen community. In addition to contributive gift economies, Hyde

mentions circulatory and distributive gift economies. A gift economy based on the principle of circulation can be seen in the anthropological example of the Kula Exchange. The Kula Exchange is a ceremonial exchange system conducted in the Milne Bay Province of Papua New Guinea by the Massim tribe. This ritual is hundreds of years old. The Kula ring spans 18 island communities involving thousands of individuals. Participants travel, at times hundreds of miles, by canoe in order to exchange Kula valuables which consist of shell-disc necklaces and shell armbands.²

This tradition inspired the creation of a contemporary circulatory gift economy, the *Gift Cycle*. The *Gift Cycle* was a cross-country cycling project in which we biked gifts of art from local artists of one community to local artists of the next community en route. Each event united members of a community that may not have met previously. In addition, a nationwide network of approximately 200 artists was created.

A distributive gift economy is a model in which gifts are passed along in a culture of sharing. Hyde tells a story of a couple who had been living with a band of bushmen in South Africa during the 1950's. When they left, they gave each woman a necklace of cowrie shells. When they returned a year later, they were surprised to find hardly one necklace remaining. They existed no longer as whole necklaces but rather found in ones and twos. The beads had spread throughout the region farther than any of the women could have traveled. They had been given away repeatedly. To quote Hyde, "This image of the seashells spreading out in a group like water in a pool takes us from the simple, atomic connections between individuals to the more complicated organization of the communities."⁷

Our project, *Pass it On* borrows the fundamental principles of a distributive gift economy. The project aims to distribute appreciative messages about alternative transportation throughout Providence. Love notes from bicycles are planted in cyclists' tires thanking them for riding instead of driving. The recipients of the letters are asked to go to the website, thankyou-passiton.org, and mark where they found the note on a map of the city. Most importantly the recipients are requested not to keep the note but anonymously regift it to another cyclist. The hope is that passersby will also see the notes, inspiring more biking as an alternative to driving.

The viral aspect of promoting cycling defines this project as a meme visualization. Meme, a term coined by writer Richard Dawkins, refers to information which is copied from person to person by imitation. Memetics is based on the fundamental principles of Darwinism. Just as there is an evolution of genes there is an evolution of memes.⁸ Malcolm Gladwell, author of *The Tipping Point*, compares memes to viruses. "Think, for a moment, about the concept of contagiousness. If I say that word to you, you think of colds and the flu or perhaps something very dangerous like HIV or Ebola. We have, in our minds, a very specific, biological notion of what contagiousness means. But if there can be epidemics of crime or epidemics of fashion, there must be all kinds of things just as contagious as viruses."⁹ In his book, he discusses the igniters of memes; who are the people that knock down the first domino? Memes are powerful. How can we create the movement necessary to spread ideas that matter?

There exists a cynical view that the quality of personal relationships have declined within the past 15 years due to the increase in forms of technological communications such as email and text messaging. Perhaps there is some truth in this opinion, but it's hard to ignore the positive potential of Facebook, MySpace and other social networking sites. These sites help instigate memes, and if used for good can yield results such as Obama's election. It is important to recognize how online and offline communities complement and strengthen one another.

7. Hyde, Lewis. *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property* (New York: Random House, 1983), 13-31.

8. Susan Blackmore, *Memes and "Temes."* TED Talks. http://www.ted.com/index.php/talks/susan_blackmore_on_memes_and_temes.html

9. Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* (New York: Bay Back Books, 2000), 15-30.

10. Clay Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations* (New York: Penguin Books, 2008), 48.

11. Gamers Mob, "Big Urban Game," Katie Salen, http://www.gamersmob.com/big_urban_game.html (accessed, October 2008).

12. Medard Gabel, "Introduction to Buckminster Fuller's World Game," Buckminster Fuller Institute, http://bfi.org/our_programs/who_is_buckminster_fuller/design_science/world_game/introduction_to_buckminster_fullers_world_game (accessed, March 11 2009).

13. Jacqueline Ford Morie, Janine Fron, Tracy Fullerton, Celia Pearce, "Sustainable Play: Towards A New Games Movement for the Digital Age," Ludica & University of Southern California Institute for Creative Technologies, <http://egg.lcc.gatech.edu/publications/SustainablePlay-wAuthors.pdf> (accessed March 13, 2009).

In his book *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations*, Clay Shirky explores the balance of these two kinds of communities in the digital age. "Our electronic networks are enabling novel forms of collective action, enabling the creation of collaborative groups that are larger and more distributed than at any other time in history."¹⁰ *Pass It On* uses online and offline tactics to complement one another. The *Gift Cycle* would not have been possible without email, the blog, the website and finally Facebook. Another example of an offline community building project that relied on online social networking is the *Bike Write*.

The *Bike Write* was a critical mass style bike ride with two events in Providence prior to election day. The first group ride followed a typographic bike route spelling *Yes We Can*. The message was in support of both Barack Obama and alternative transportation. The route united three distinct neighborhoods throughout the city. The mayor of Providence, David Cicilline, joined the ride and stated that it was, "One of the most fun days he's had." In our work, it is important that ideas can be passed on and shared. Jill Peterson, RISD MFA Industrial Design 2009, organized the second *Bike Write*, spelling *Hope* through neighborhoods not covered during the first event. The massive group ride was uniting, but the massive group communication was the most powerful aspect that came from the project. It gave voice to a community. This project required the participation of many individuals in order to make a large impact. We define this design tactic as participation. Say it alone or say it together. One is obviously more influential. As communication designers, we utilize this strategy to effectively disseminate positive messages with a lasting impression.

The *Bike Write* was a unique experience for both the riders and the onlookers. Designing experiences for a community can help strengthen that community. In 2003, commissioned by the Design Institute, Katie Salen, Nick Fortugno and Frank Lantz, launched a project called the *Big Urban Game*. *BUG* was set in Minneapolis; the game board was the city streets. Teams of movers raced 25-foot-tall inflatable game pieces along the winning routes.¹¹ Prior to *BUG*, there exist other historical examples of large-scale proposed and actualized public community building events. Stewart Brand, founder of *The Whole Earth Catalog*, along with Buckminster Fuller, became interested in the power of games in response to environmental and sociopolitical issues of the 1960's. Fuller proposed the *World Game* in 1961, with the idea to "make the world work for 100% of humanity in the shortest possible time through spontaneous cooperation without ecological damage or disadvantage to anyone." Fuller choose to call his vision a "game" because he wanted it seen as something that was accessible to everyone, not just the elite few in power.¹² In late 1966, responding the Vietnam War, Stewart Brand staged a public event which gathered a hundred or so pacifists into an open field. The group inflated a 6-foot-diameter medicine ball, hand painted to resemble planet earth. Brand's instructions were simple, "There are two kinds of people in the world: those who want to push the Earth over the row of flags at that end of the field, and those who want to push it over the fence at the other end. Go to it."¹³

In May 2008, we organized a group installation in Greenpoint, Brooklyn. The project was in response to the largest known oil spill in American history, the Greenpoint Oil Spill. Though it is bigger than Valdez, it is not well-known. A century's worth of spills, leaks and waste dumped by oil companies in Greenpoint has resulted in an underground lake of carcinogenic sludge more than 55 acres wide and up to 35 feet thick (the equivalent of 55 football fields). In September of 2007, the EPA released a year-long study indicating that up to 17-30 million gallons of oil are sloshing in the soil of Greenpoint. That's three times more than the Exxon Valdez spill.¹⁴ The project was an installation in the Nassau subway station on the G line, parallel to the levels of the oil underground. Written in both Polish and English (Greenpoint is

a primarily Polish neighborhood) questions about the spill were posed to neighborhood inhabitants on silk-screened paper towel rolls. Twelve artists and designers performed the installation. The shared experience of the installation team proved just as important as the viewer's experience. We were communicating collectively and the power of the shared experience brought us closer. Our passion for the subject matter grew and with that came a greater sense of responsibility as community members. An article about the project was written on the blog, *The Gothamist*, bringing the conversation of the spill from the installation team to the subway users to a second-level audience, a larger blogging community.

In visualizing our response to environmental, political and social issues, we have embraced the handmade and the heartfelt. We value evidence of the hand and all its imperfections. We have come to believe that revealing the mark of the maker manifests a greater connection with our audience. As part of our design methodology, the life-cycle of our projects is always considered. How can we use less? Is there potential for reuse? How does durability factor in? Sometimes smart material choices take precedence over form, sometimes form wins.

We extend beyond two-dimensional printed materials, working with alternative forms such as bike rides, sing-a-longs, performances, and public installations. We don't want to just communicate visually. We want to engage multiple senses.

In response to coral being added to the endangered species list in 2007, we made an animation about the environmental benefits of walking instead of driving. One afternoon, together with Mary Banas, Julia Gualtieri and Lauren Mackler, we put on every pair of pink tights we owned. By laying down and kicking our legs together we became a sea anemone. This is an example of our search to find whimsy in the everyday. We are communicating about difficult things so we try to make the conversational space as open as possible. We think about this a lot with our color choices. Hot pink is never scary.

The current trend in addressing environmental issues through communication design is the overuse of the word and color *green*. Other failed strategies play into guilt and fear. By promoting individualistic consumer choices, advertising neglects the societal whole. Sleek design can be intimidating. We believe colorful and lyrical forms can speak with authority. We aim to elevate playful aesthetics to the higher design conversation.

Through the power of collaboration, participation, memes, design mediation, online and offline community building and contemporary gift economies, we aim to strengthen community through our design practice. The green wave in consumerism helped alert the mainstream to our environmental predicament, but a collective rather than individual response is the sustainable imperative. Our market economy yearns for the assistance of supplemental economic strategies; perhaps an increase in social capital may offer a helping hand. We elected Obama with vigorous community strength. It is essential to grab hold of this momentum and continue to communicate what is truly important to us.

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