

## FROM LITTLE THINGS BIG THINGS GROW

In 2011 Levi's® launched an ad featuring hopeful youth partying on rooftops and protesting on the streets of Berlin set to the tone of Charles Bukowski's poem *The Laughing Heart*. Titled *Legacy (Go Forth)*, the ad merged footage of violent clashes between *May Day* protestors and police with the words "your life is your life, don't let it be clubbed into dank submission."<sup>1</sup> It wasn't the first time I'd seen cultural resistance commodified by corporations eager to profit from contemporary concerns. Watching it from my apartment in Kreuzberg, Berlin (a place with a history of leftist resistance to government and corporate control) the ad resonated with the hopes and failures of my surrounding context; *Legacy* reflected the increasing reality of gentrification in Berlin, where this generation's political agency has become an aesthetic to market lifestyles through products.

Last year Pepsi's *Live For Now* ad seemed to extend on this aesthetic, replacing specific footage of recent US demonstrations with a generic recreation. Void of the violent and disparate struggles of the Black Lives Matter Movement, the Anti-Trump Campaign and the Women's Marches it referenced, *Live For Now* featured politically neutral demonstrators dancing, cheering and waving peace placards, while "we are the movement, this generation" played in the background.<sup>2</sup> Stepping down from a photo shoot to join the protestors and the police, reality star Kendall Jenner became the voice of 'this generation', united through Pepsi. In appropriating the culturally and politically diverse resistance of the contemporary context and flattening its message into a vague global sentiment, Pepsi's attempts to identify with a unified 'generation' backfired through outrage and retaliation. Fighting back with its own appropriation of Pepsi's problematic message, 'this generation' circulated Internet memes mocking the ad by inserting Pepsi into past and present images of real protests.<sup>3</sup>

The similarly ambiguous relationship between cultural agency and its commodification is particularly relevant in a contemporary Australian context, where increasing cultural and environmental awareness and resistance has been co-opted by many companies as a marketing tool. As such, the adage *From Little Things Big Things Grow* reflects both the agency of grassroots movements to create change as well as the ability of corporations to align themselves with social and environmental movements. Initially written by Paul Kelly and Kev Carmody as a protest anthem referencing the Indigenous Australian struggle for land rights and reconciliation, *From Little Things Big Things Grow* was subsequently used in a politically unrelated ad for Industry Super and a recent IKEA ad, where DIY was aligned with empowering people through modular "democratic design."<sup>4</sup> In a time when the commodification of social and cultural concerns by commercial enterprises is inevitable, the exhibition 'From Little Things Big Things Grow' suggests one possible way that Australians might reclaim their cultural and social agency. Drawing on the processes of mimicry that corporations use to re-package cultural resistance, the exhibition presents sculptural reconstructions and re contextualisations of these products, reflecting on some of the contradictions involved in their marketing.

Carly Fischer, 2017

1 Charles Bukowski, *The Laughing Heart*, (Boston: Black Sparrow Press , 1996)

2 Skip Marley, *Lions* (2017).

3 Angela Watercutter, “Pepsi’s Kendall Jenner Ad Was So Awful It Did The Impossible: It United The Internet”, in *Wired* (2017). <https://www.wired.com/2017/04/pepsi-ad-internet-response/> (Accessed 18/1/2018).

4 *Designed For You*, IKEA catalogue (2017), p5.