

# Art from Turmoil

By Nick Shinn

Graphic Exchange

Sept./Oct. 2002

# Stock promotions blitz metaculture

By Nick Shinn

# Art from

Stock photography is a business that stands on its head every few years, but one thing is constant: a direct-mail barrage of fresh images aimed at art directors, graphic designers, and editors.

With the spread of high-speed Internet, web sites have become the hub of the selection process (replacing catalog browsing for many users) and downloading the preferred method of delivery (replacing CDs for royalty free images, and transparencies for rights managed).

That, and sheer marketing intensity, is changing the appearance of stock promotions. It's no longer enough to send out a generic, 9" x 12" utilitarian tome. That's old news, recipients have tons of that stuff, and *ABC Company Vol.x* won't even make it out of the plastic bag.

Now the goal is to drive traffic to one's web site, and the best catalogs, if that still serves as a description, are oddly sized, con-

**At top: Corbis does Pantone. Dysfunction follows form – stickies get caught as fan closes, edge digs into user's hand. One side shows small shots, but not in the usual groupings and sequence; the other has 'creative treatments', i.e. faux usage – not stock at all.**



**Warning: some assembly required, and beware of sharp metal edges. Tony Stone's notorious metal book (1999) is well organized and indexed, with great photos. The pages are slow to turn on 3" binder rings, but this is nonetheless one objet that really does showcase the product.**



**'By designers, for designers.' FontShop International has entered the stock photo fray with *f-stop*, collections from 13 designers, including Rian Hughes and April Grieman. This cute little brick of a 480-page catalog is the work of Stefan Sagmeister.**

ceptually figured, lavishly produced artworks in their own right, with superb production values—quality materials and binding, die cuts, and special colored inks, preferably hot orange.

"The stock catalog, a tool that was used for research, has become a funky book that you look through for ideas and inspiration," says Gerard Blink, who has developed business for Image Bank, Tony Stone, and First Light.

In the graphic industry's business to business media—the metaculture of those who design consumer culture—the virtuoso pieces have traditionally come from a different kind of stock promoter, paper companies.

The creative flowering of stock photo promotion signals the

**Everybody smiles in Comstock land, but not in this edgy postcard promo. Their catalogs also feature CD product in a literal fashion, with content and marketing uses spelled out persuasively.**



# turnmoil



Above and right: Getty's *buz* (2002) fuses product and promotion in a flawlessly edited gallery of understated, minimal images, with tight, off centre cropping, arranged in consistently varied block-aligned patterns, with no bleeds. Love that fluorescent orange.

Top right: Superstock's *Pulse* (2002), designed by Rumblefish, follows the standard stock demographic sequence, but develops a rich graphic language as the pages turn, each spread a distinct artwork.



key role stock has come to play in digital culture.

Two streams of development have merged over the past ten years, both driven by digitization. On the one hand, the new royalty free (RF) companies, exemplified by PhotoDisc, and on the other hand the traditional, rights managed (RM) stock businesses.

The RF arc was driven by price and convenience. When CD players were hooked up to PCs around 1990, a number of innovative companies took the opportunity to niche market RF images on CDs. But it was not until 1993 that things took off, when PhotoDisc and Digital Stock (now Corbis) took on the mainstream with a range of high quality photo volumes that were not just incredibly inexpensive but were extremely useful in a professional context. Key ingredients in PhotoDisc's early success were drum scanning, an on-disc image browser (LightBox) with search engine, a sampler disc with low-res comps of all their images, and slick packaging and tastily designed catalogs, all introduced around 1994. And the quantity and quality of shots grew and changed at a digital pace.

Digital downloading of individual images from RF websites became widespread around 1997, another economic spur to growth, as if one were needed.

The availability of RF images as inexpensive scans fostered the use of more sophisticated imagery by innovators in areas that were accustomed to plain and simple. "Royalty free helped us to sell our ideas," says Damien Denobrega, art director at Directory Advertising Consultants, specialists in Yellow Pages. He used RF images as a lever, backed by research, to establish the worth of



Photonica raises the bar with mystery and emotion. Its images are often 'concepts'— not in an obvious, heavy handed manner, but open to interpretation. This business book reads like a dreamy photo essay, full of selective focus, nutty color, and lomotic crops.



In these nine pages that begin the September issue of distributor Veer's *Visual Elements* Catalog, stock photos frame a narrative love poem,



fashioned from barely augmented keyword listings, giving a form to the metaculture that has the reflexive quality of modern art. Word.

photography to clients.

While PhotoDisc was the digital leader, Tony Stone Images was stretching the boundary of traditional RM photography. Stone was the first to abolish research fees, around 1994. Blink, Director of Canadian Operations for Stone in the mid-'90s, recalls their confident philosophy: "If the client called for Couples, we didn't send them dozens, we sent *The Shot*." Suddenly, stock didn't look so stock, its surface had brightened...

The catalogs, pardon me, resource books, got thicker and more frequent. Digitization improved filing, searching, and catalog production, although only a small percentage of items were scanned (this was one reason they were slow onto the web). Traditional stock had higher quality photography and huge selections, professionally searched. It would not begin to offer scanned images to its clients until late in the decade—but in the last three

years the changeover from shipping transparencies to downloading scans has been almost complete.

During the dotcom boom, Mark Getty (Getty Images) and Bill Gates (Corbis) bought up most stock agencies of any size, irrespective of provenance. Getty acquired RF innovators PhotoDisc and Artville, along with RM leaders Stone, Image Bank, and FPG. Digital Stock (RF) became part of Corbis, along with Sharpshooters, Stock Market, and Westlight. There are also RF indie players, such as Canada's First Light, Ireland's Stockbyte and U.K.'s Digital Vision.

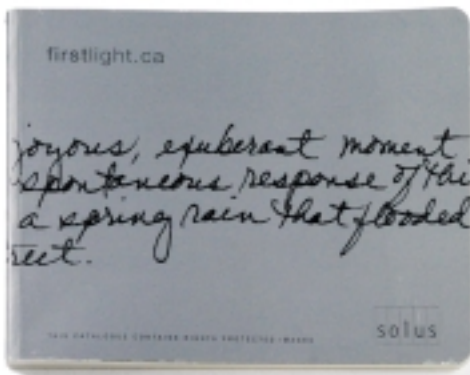
The consolidation of RF and RM in the two major empires all but eliminated cultural differences between digital and pre-digital players, reducing them to optional web site buttons. With reductive functionality, the massive websites erased the visual branding of their product lines (the assimilated companies) that searchers are exposed to, driving out serendipity into the print medium.

Catalogs may contain both indexes and CDs with search engines, but they cannot compete with websites for Search and Find. FirstLight uses RandomEye's Image Grabber, a meta search engine, to troll many web collections at once. Now, the dominant purpose of print promotion emerges as "to inspire and inform, rather than create efficiency through the transaction process," according to Veer's Jacqueline Osland.

Veer uses a smaller catalog (52 pages), mailed monthly, to satisfy the market's hunger for new imagery, and to drive traffic to its



**Yo, download this: huge layered Photoshop files. Topping their abstract series *Datafunk*, Digital Vision has launched *Infinity*, 17 CD titles commissioned from multi-media designers. Pay to play: twice the price of normal RF. Available from Veer. (See samples in background.)**



**Solus catalog (2001), distributed by First Light, takes the form of a scrapbook annotated by many hands. No type, few bleeds, lots of white space and pictures that don't quite line up—these devices create a casual impression that emphasizes the individuality of each image.**



**CO/OP Stock. With Workbook, photographers and illustrators get a larger royalty, and their names in 30 pt type, not 6 pt.**



**Corbis RF series features spot solids and Chalet typeface.**



**Corbis Red: 272-page glimpse of Bill Gates' 25 million images.**

website for the sale. Avoiding faux usage (e.g. fake ads or packaging), the Veer creative team pushes the art of sample showing beyond elegant design into the realm of the conceptual (see above).

Things are different at Comstock, a traditional company that has survived by adding RF licensing, and using its no-nonsense catalogs to hard sell CDs. “Royalty free is the introduction...the copy in our catalog educates new users,” says Carlos Maningas, Managing Director, Canada. His sales are moving towards online (now at 40%) and RF—typical of the industry as a whole.

What have the changes meant for photographers? The penetration of stock agencies has left the high end relatively unscathed, but decimated the mainstream. “Honey, I shrunk the fees,” as illustrator and activist Brad Holland put it. Art directors and graphic designers are, in general, paying less for stock shots, and using stock instead of commissioning original work, and the stock agencies (with the exception of Workbook) are paying less.

Royalty free product is the culprit. “One of our great complaints with the Royalty Free pricing strategy is that it often leaves huge amounts of money on the table that the buyers would have willingly paid, if only they had been asked,” say Jim Pickerell and Cheryl Pickerell DiFrank in *Negotiating Stock Photo Prices* (2001) and this is the intractable paradox at the root of the boom, boosting volume as it sucks money out of the profession; check out [www.pickphoto.com](http://www.pickphoto.com) for more on this aspect.

Getty Images and Corbis dominate the landscape, and these

two empires call the shots. The business model they lean towards would reduce the photographer to a day laborer, with production costs covered, no rights in the work, and no royalty fees. The shot not considered a piece of art, history, or time, merely so many bytes. Against this foreboding possibility, American photographers have organized and held their ground.

Yuri Dojc, based in Toronto, recently signed with Getty Images, and gives the activists their due. “No contract is perfect. Getty and Corbis have enormous power,” he says, but is happy with his deal and the benefits it brings to a successful shooter. In particular, he enjoys the balance of the technology-business configuration that gives him control over the imagery—shooting digital, and finalizing 50 Mb files—while vesting market authority in the photo editor.

The present recipe for stock photo production is fast and focused. Begin with a saleable theme that will boil down to one thumbnail image next to a catch phrase title as a link, then mix in images of sufficient attitude. Serve up a fresh slice of the meta-culture in a tasty promotional catalog.

*Nick Shinn, R.G.D. is an art director and Shinn Design is his practice. He also designs and publishes typefaces through ShinnType. Tel. 416 769-4198, [nick@shinntype.com](mailto:nick@shinntype.com), [www.shinntype.com](http://www.shinntype.com)*

