Levi Strauss & Co. and the American Aesthetic

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Writer Seth Stevenson was the first to note when Levi Strauss & Co. "ditched its old ad agency and signed on with Wieden & Kennedy" following the economic plunge in the autumn of 2008. Their original campaign, titled *Live Unbuttoned*, "featured smiling, attractive people dancing around to jumpy pop music." Stevenson observed that the campaign seemed out of touch with the current political landscape: "watching those ads now, it seems clear they were conceived before the fall 2008 financial plunge." Levi's decision to change firms proved strategic for marketing their product during a time when many were having a hard time filling their gas tanks, yet it was also a perfect demonstration of the political potential kitsch art has when properly crafted. The "Go Forth" ad campaign demonstrates not only a very effective use of kitsch, but also a brilliant definition of the American aesthetic.

Political Scientist Murray Edelman -- whose book *From Art to Politics* argues that art shapes political conceptions and actions -- would instantly recognize the Levi campaign's effective use of kitsch and its political undertones. In the first television commercial from their *Go Forth* ad campaign, Levi's used visuals, music, and the haunting "voice" of great American poet Walt Whitman to escape the zeitgeist other companies noticed evaporating around them, and to assert the company's place in the pages of United States history. The ad agency marketed Levi's not only as a product, but as a cultural icon. These ads did so much more than just sell a brand of jeans, an "American brand that was actually around when Whitman was alive" (Stevenson); they also utilized the American aesthetic, and established the role their company played in the creation of America. It is fitting that Whitman appears in their ads, as the advertisements echo his writings on the American aura. One attempting to breakdown the *Go Forth* campaign will note that while they follow the framework described by Edelman, the picture painted uses the major points of Whitman's classic essay "Democratic Vistas." One might think of this ad campaign like a framed work of art, the frame itself provided by Edelman, and the canvas merely a reapplication of paint provided by Whitman.

Before diving into these ads, one should be familiar with the American aesthetic. Whitman wrote in 1871 of a distinctly American aesthetic yet to be

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