A MANIFESTO WITH TEN FOOTNOTES

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FIRST THINGS FIRST MANIFESTO 2000[1]

1. In 1963, British designer Ken Garland wrote a 324-word manifesto titled "First Things First." It condemned the still-nascent graphic design profession for its obsession with the production of inconsequential commercial work, and suggested instead an emphasis on more worthy projects of benefit to humanity. It was signed by twenty-two designers and other visual artists, acquired some notoriety, and then dropped from view.

In fall 1998, Chris Dixon and Kalle Lasn reprinted the thirty-five-year-old document in their admirable and provocative self-described "journal of the mental environment," *Adbusters*. They had an opportunity to show it to Tibor Kalman, who was seriously ill with the cancer which would kill him within a year. "You know, we should do this again," Kalman said.

Adbusters, with help from journalist Rick Poynor, rewrote the statement, updating the references and sharpening the argument but otherwise leaving the spirit intact, and it was circulated by Lasn, Dixon and *Emigre*'s Rudy VanderLans to an international group of designers, many of whom signed it.

And who wouldn't? Published in the Autumn 1999 "Graphic Agitation" issue of *Adbusters*, bearing Kalman's now-ghostly imprimatur, the revamped manifesto was preceded by a historical overview of thoughtfully captioned political posters and other cause-related graphics. These in turn were contrasted with examples of contemporary commercial work, including packaging for the Gillette Mach 3 razor, Kellogg's Smart Start cereal and Winston cigarettes. Each of these examples was presented without comment, no doubt with the assumption that its surpassing vileness spoke for itself. Given all this, could someone seriously be *against* "more useful, lasting and democratic forms of communication" and in *favor* of the "reductive and immeasurably harmful code of public discourse" represented by Healthy Start cereal?

Good question. As for me, I wasn't asked to sign it.

We, the undersigned, are graphic designers, art directors and visual communicators.[2]

2. Most of the thirty-three signatories are names that will be unfamiliar to the average rank-and-file American graphic designer. Many of them built their reputations by doing "cultural work" on the fringes of commercial graphic design practice as critics, curators and academics. As designers, their clients generally have been institutions like

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museums and publishers rather than manufacturers of nasty things like triple-edged razors, cigarettes and cereal. So it's likely your mom's probably never seen anything ever designed by these people, unless your mom is a tenured professor of culturalstudies at a state university somewhere.

In short, with some exceptions (including a glaring one, the prolific and populist Milton Glaser, who sticks out here like a sore thumb) the First Things First 2000 thirty-three have specialized in extraordinarily beautiful things for the cultural elite. They've resisted manipulating the proles who trudge the aisles of your local 7-Eleven for the simple reason that they haven't been invited to. A cynic, then, might dismiss the impact of the manifesto as no more than that of witnessing a group of eunuchs take a vow of chastity.

Techniques and apparatus of advertising.[3]

3. The phrases in the opening sentence have a tone of urgency that suits the ambitions of a millennial manifesto. But they have been lifted almost verbatim from the thirty-five-year-old original. In effect, the invidious influence of advertising has been haunting the graphic design profession since before most of the signatories were born.

It's hard to say exactly what's meant by this particular phrase. The most obvious interpretation is that graphic designers do work that informs, and that advertising agencies do work that persuades. In the First Things First universe the former is good and the latter is bad. But some of the most effective work on behalf of social causes has appropriated nothing more and nothing less than these same "techniques and apparatus": think of Gran Fury's work in the fight against HIV, or the Guerrilla Girls' agitation for gender equality in the fine arts.

Graphic designers, in truth, view the advertising world with a measure of envy. Whereas the effect of design is secretly feared to be cosmetic, vague and unmeasurable, the impact of advertising on a client's bottom line has a ruthless clarity to it. At the same time, ad agencies have treated designers as stylists for hire, ready to put the latest gloss on the sales pitch. Revolutions often begin with the politicizing of the most oppressed. And in the ecosystem of the design disciplines, graphic designers have long dwelled at the bottom of the pond.

Dog biscuits, designer coffee, diamonds, detergents, hair gel, cigarettes, credit cards, sneakers, butt toners, light beer and heavy-duty recreational vehicles.[4]

4. This litany of gruesome products has one thing in common: they are all things with which normal people are likely to be familiar. Yet haven't such common products comprised the subject matter of graphic designers throughout history? What is our design canon but a record of how messages about humble things like shoes, fountain pens, rubber flooring, booze and cigars have been transformed by designers like Bernhard,

Lissitzky, Zwart, Cassandre and Rand? What makes dog-biscuit packaging an unworthy object of our attention, as opposed to, say, a museum catalog or some other cultural project? Don't dachshund owners deserve the same measure of beauty, wit or intelligence in their lives?

If today's principled designers truly believe the role of commercial work is simply to "pay the bills," it should be pointed out it was not "always" so. "In the monotony and drudgery of our work-a-day world there is to be found a new beauty and a new aesthetic," declared Alexey Brodovich in 1930, summing up what was for him the essence of the modern condition. Graphic designers in mid-century America were passionately committed to the idea that good design was not simply an esoteric ideal, but could be used as a tool to ennoble the activities of everyday life, including commercial life.

This vision of design making the world a better place by marrying art and commerce is no longer a compelling vision for many designers. Tibor Kalman's quote, "Consumer culture is an oxymoron," is one of those aphorisms so pleasing one accepts it unthinkingly. Yet a centerpiece of his valedictory exhibition Tiborocity was a "shop" stocked with selections from his vast collection of unabashedly commercial detritis: packaging for Chinese gum, Mexican soda pop, Indian cigarettes. Is there a contradiction here? Or is this kind of work okay as long as it's performed anonymously and, if possible, in a third-world country?

Manufacturing demand.[5]

5. Many downtrodden graphic designers will read these damning words with a secret thrill. After countless years of attempting to persuade skeptical clients that "design is good business," or, failing that, that it has any measurable affect on sales whatsoever, here we stand accused of something no less delicious than *manufacturing demand* for otherwise useless products! If but it were so.

The First Things First vision of consumer capitalism is a stark one. Human beings have little or no critical faculties. They embrace the products of Disney, GM, Calvin Klein and Philip Morris not because they like them or because the products have any intrinsic merit, but because their designer puppetmasters have hypnotized them with things like colors and typefaces. Judging by the published response, First Things First has been received most gratefully by underpaid toilers in the boiler rooms of the twenty-first-century communications revolution. In the manifesto they discover that in deciding between circles or lozenges for the design of those goddamned homepage navigation buttons, they are in fact participants in a titanic struggle for the very future of humanity. When it comes to graphic designers, flattery will get you everywhere.

To some extent we are all helping draft a reductive and immeasurably harmful code of public discourse.[6]

6. To another extent, however, human beings have always used the marketplace as a forum for communication and culturization. "As we enter the twenty-first century, the urban condition is defined more and more by tourism, leisure and consumption, the hallmark of an evolved capitalist society wherein economic affluence allows personal freedom to seek pleasure," wrote architects Susan Nigra Snyder and Steven Izenour on the (re)commercialization of Times Square. They concluded, "If your model is the cultural mish-mash of the everyday landscape, then commerce is the very glue—visually, socially and economically—of American civic space." What will happen when the best designers withdraw from that space, as First Things First demands? If they decline to fill it with passion, intelligence and talent, who will fill the vacuum? Who benefits? And what exactly are we supposed to do instead?

Many cultural interventions, social marketing campaigns, books, magazines, exhibitions, educational tools, television programs, films, charitable causes and other information design projects.[7]

7. Finally, here the prescription is delivered, and note the contrast. Gone is the bracing specificity of butt toners and heavy-duty recreational vehicles, replaced by vague "tools," "campaigns" and "causes." The puzzling construction "cultural interventions" will be less baffling to readers of *Adbusters*, who will recognize it as code for the kind of subversive "culture jamming" activities the magazine has long advocated. From other contextual clues we can infer by this point that the books advocated here will deal with subjects other than the Backstreet Boys, that the magazines will feature models less appealing than Laetitia Casta on their covers, and that the television shows will not involve Regis Philbin.

The issue of *Adbusters* that introduced the First Things First Manifesto 2000 included a range of classic examples of design as a tool of protest. Almost all of these were historical antecedents to that glamorous old standby beloved by right-thinking graphic designers everywhere, the dramatic poster for the pro bono cause. Although Lasn and Dixon in that same issue paint a vivid, knowing picture of the awards and fame that accrue to the creator of "a stunning package design for a killer product," any seasoned designer can tell you that it's a hell of a lot easier to win a prize for a pro bono poster than for a butt toner brochure. What designers can't figure out is whether any of our worthy posters really work.

Illustrated nowhere are examples of some things that absolutely *do* work, those otherwise unexplained "information design projects." Too bad: designers actually *can* change the world for the better by making the complicated simple and finding beauty

in truth. But things like the F.D.A. Nutrition Facts label, probably the most useful [illegible] widely reproduced piece of graphic design of the twentieth century, generally rec[illegible] neither awards nor accolades from the likes of *Adbusters* or Rick Poynor: too humb[illegible] too accessible, too unshocking, too *boring*.

We propose a reversal of priorities.[8]

8. Manifestos are simple; life is complicated. One of my favorite personal clients is th[illegible] Brooklyn Academy of Music, a fantastic non-profit organization that courageously sup[illegible] ports forward-looking performers and is a first-class citizen of its decidedly hetero[illegible] neous urban neighborhood. Yet, like many cultural institutions, it is supported b[illegible] philanthropy from many large corporations, including the generous Philip Mor[illegible] Companies. So am I supporting an admirable effort to bring the arts to new audienc[illegible] Am I helping to buff the public image of a corporation that sells things that cause can[illegible] cer? And come to think of it, don't I know a lot of graphic designers who smoke?

A new kind of meaning.[9]

9. "Designers: stay away from corporations that want you to lie for them," exhorte[illegible] Tibor Kalman. But that High Noon moment when we're asked to consciously mis[illegible] represent the truth comes only rarely for most designers. We're seldom asked to *lie*. Instead, every day, we're asked to make something a little more stupid, or a little more ugly, or a little more blithely contemptuous of its audience. Is the failure of contemporary graphic design rooted in the kind of clients we work for, or in our inability to do our jobs as well, as persuasively, as we should?

The greatest designers have always found ways to align the aims of their corporate clients with their own personal interests and, ultimately, with the public good. Think of Charles and Ray Eames, who created a lifetime of extraordinary exhibitions and films that informed, entertained and educated millions of people while advancing the commercial aims of the IBM Corporation. Or Kalman himself, who struggled firsthand with the contradictions—and lies, perhaps?—inherent in the ongoing marketing challenge of portraying a sweater company, Benetton, as an ethically engaged global citizen.

What would happen if instead of "a new kind of meaning," the single most ambiguous phrase in the manifesto, we substituted "meaning," period? For injecting meaning to into *every* part of their work is what Kalman and Eames and designers like them have always done best.

Today, we renew their manifesto in expectation that no more decades will pass before it is taken to heart.[10]

10. Kalle Lasn and Chris Dixon have a dream. "We wait for that inevitable day of reckoning when the stock market crashes, or the world is otherwise destabilized," Lasn declares in the Autumn 1999 issue of *Adbusters*.

> On that day we storm the TV and radio stations and the Internet with our accumulated mindbombs. We take control of the streets, the billboards, the bus stops and the whole urban environment. Out of the despair and anarchy that follows, we crystallize a new vision of the future—a new style and way of being—a sustainable agenda for Planet Earth.

What a disappointment to learn that this revolution is aimed at replacing mass manipulation for commercial ends with mass manipulation for cultural and political ends.

I have a dream as well. I am the president of a national association of graphic designers and a principal in a large firm that works on occasion for the Disneys and Nikes of the world, so you can dismiss me as someone hopelessly invested in the status quo, and no fit person to lead us into the endless promise of the new millennium. Yet I take inspiration from something designer Bill Golden, the creator of the CBS eye, wrote over forty years ago. You can consider it a twenty-one-word-manifesto: "I happen to believe that the visual environment . . . improves each time a designer produces a good design—and in no other way."

Golden's manifesto, unlike First Things First, is easy to understand. Yet, if anything, it's harder to execute. As any working designer can tell you, commercial work is a bitch. If you do it for the awards, it's a hard way to get them. If you do it for the money, you've got to earn every penny twice over. Make no mistake, there is much to be alarmed about in the contemporary world, from the continuing establishment of the corporation as global superstate, to the idiotic claims of marketing mavens seeking to elevate brand loyalty to the status of world religions. Lasn, Dixon, Poynor and the signers of First Thing First are right that graphic design can be a potent tool to battle these trends. But it can be something else, something more. For in the end, the promise of design is about a simple thing: common decency.

About four years after the original First Things First, Ken Garland wrote, "What I am suggesting . . . is that we make some attempt to identify, and to identify with, our real clients: the public. They may not be the ones who pay us, nor the ones who give us our diplomas and degrees. But if they are to be the final recipients of our work, they're the ones who matter." And, I would submit, they deserve at the very least the simple, civic-minded gift of a well-designed dog-biscuit package.

If you think that's so easy, just try.