



## The Manifesto of January 3, 2000

by Bruce Sterling

The rapidly approaching millennium offers a unique cultural opportunity. After many years of cut-and-paste, appropriation, detournement and neo-retro ahistoricity, postmodernity is about to end. Immediately after the end of the fin de siècle, there will be a sudden and intense demand for genuine novelty.

Any new year offers a chance for sweeping resolutions and brave efforts at self-reform. But the end of a millennium offers a rare and vital opportunity to bury all that is dead within us and issue proclamations of particular scope and ambition.

I suspect that a group that can offer a coherent, thoughtful and novel cultural manifesto on the target date of January 3, 2000 has a profound opportunity to affect the zeitgeist. (On January 1, everyone will be too hung over to read manifestos; on January 2, nobody's computers will work. So naturally the target date must be January 3.) In this preliminary document, I would like to offer a few thoughts on the possible contents of such a manifesto.

The central issue as the new millennium dawns is technocultural. There are of course other, more traditional, better-developed issues for humankind. Cranky fundamentalism festers here and there; the left is out of ideas while the right is delusional; income disparities have become absurdly huge; these things are obvious to all. However, the human race has repeatedly proven that we can prosper cheerfully with ludicrous, corrupt and demeaning forms of religion, politics and commerce. By stark contrast, no civilization can survive the physical destruction of its resource base. It is very clear that the material infrastructure of the twentieth century is not sustainable. This is the issue at hand.

We have a worldwide environmental problem. This is a truism. But the unprecedentedly severe and peculiar weather of the late 1990s makes it clear that this problem is growing acute. Global warming has been a lively part of scientific discussion since at least the 1960s, but global warming is a quotidian reality now. Climate change is shrouding the globe in clouds of burning rain forest and knocking points off the GNP of China. Everyone can offer a weird weather anecdote now; for instance, I spent a week this summer watching the sky turn gray with fumes from the blazing forests of Chiapas. The situation has been visibly worsening, and will get worse yet, possibly very much worse.

Society has simply been unable to summon the political or economic will to deal successfully with this problem by using 20th century methods. That is because CO2 emission is not centrally a political or economic problem. It is a design and engineering problem. It is a cultural problem and a problem of artistic sensibility.

New and radical approaches are in order. These approaches should be originated,

gathered, martialled into an across-the-board cultural program, and publicly declared -- on January 3rd.

Global warming is a profound opportunity for the 21st century culture industry. National governments lack the power and the will to impose dirigiste solutions to the emission of carbon dioxide. Dirigiste solutions would probably not work anyway. It is unlikely that many of us could tolerate living in a carbon-dioxide Ration State. It would mean that almost every conceivable human activity would have to be licensed by energy commissars.

Industry will not reform its energy base. On the contrary, when it comes to CO2 legislation, industry will form pressure groups and throw as much sand as possible into the fragile political wheels. Industry will use obscurantist tactics that will mimic those of American right-wing anti-evolution forces -- we will be told that Global Warming is merely a "theory," even when our homes are on fire. Industry is too stupid to see planetary survival as a profit opportunity. But industry is more than clever enough to sabotage government regulation, especially when globalized industry can play one government off against the next.

The stark fact that our atmosphere is visibly declining is of no apparent economic interest except to insurance firms, who will simply make up their lack by gouging ratepayers and exporting externalized costs onto the general population.

With business hopeless and government stymied, we are basically left with cultural activism. The tools at hand are art, design, engineering, and basic science: human artifice, cultural and technical innovation. Granted, these may not seem particularly likely sources of a serious and successful effort to save the world. This is largely because, during the twentieth century, government and industry swelled to such tremendous high-modernist proportions that these other enterprises exist mostly in shrunken subcultural niches.

However, this doesn't have to be the case. With government crippled and industry brain-dead to any conceivable moral appeal, the future of decentered, autonomous cultural networks looks very bright. There has never been an opportunity to spread new ideas and new techniques with the alacrity that they can spread now. Human energy must turn in some direction. People will run from frustration and toward any apparent source of daylight. As the planet's levees continue to break, people will run much faster and with considerably more conviction.

Our cultural substance-abuse problem with CO2 may have very severe consequences to human happiness, but the immediate physical problem is rather well understood. Clever people, united and motivated, should be able to deal with this. Carbon dioxide is not a time-honored philosophical dilemma or some irreducible flaw in the human condition. Serious fossil-fuel consumption, as a practice on the grand scale, is only about 200 years old. The most severe rise in carbon emission occurred during the past fifty years. We're painfully dependent on this practice, but it's not as if we've married it.

It's a question of tactics. Civil society does not respond at all well to moralistic scolding. There are small minority groups here and there who are perfectly aware that it is immoral to harm the lives of coming generations by massive consumption now: deep Greens, Amish, people practicing voluntary simplicity, Gandhian ashrams and so forth. These public-spirited voluntarists are not the problem. But they're not the solution either, because most human beings won't volunteer to live like they do. Nor can people be forced to live that way through legal prescription, because those in command of society's

energy resources will immediately game and neutralize any system of legal regulation.

However, contemporary civil society can be led anywhere that looks attractive, glamorous and seductive.

The task at hand is therefore basically an act of social engineering. Society must become Green, and it must be a variety of Green that society will eagerly consume. What is required is not a natural Green, or a spiritual Green, or a primitivist Green, or a blood-and-soil romantic Green.

These flavors of Green have been tried, and have proven to have insufficient appeal. We can regret this failure if we like. If the semi-forgotten Energy Crisis of the 1970s had provoked a wiser and more energetic response, we would not now be facing a weather crisis. But the past's well-meaning attempts were insufficient, and are now part of the legacy of a dying century.

The world needs a new, unnatural, seductive, mediated, glamorous Green. A Viridian Green, if you will.

The best chance for progress is to convince the twenty-first century that the twentieth century's industrial base was crass, gauche, and filthy. This approach will work because it is based in the truth. The twentieth century lived in filth. It was much like the eighteenth century before the advent of germ theory, stricken by septic cankers whose origins were shrouded in superstition and miasma. The truth about our physical existence must be shown to people. It must be demonstrated repeatedly and everywhere.

People with networks, websites and sophisticated sensors should not find this task very difficult.

The current industrial base is outmoded, crass and nasty, but this is not yet entirely obvious. Scolding it and brandishing the stick is just part of the approach. Proving it requires the construction of an alternative twenty-first century industrial base which seems elegant, beautiful and refined. This effort should not be portrayed as appropriate, frugal, and sensible, even if it is. It must be perceived as glamorous and visionary. It will be very good if this new industrial base actually functions, but it will work best if it is spectacularly novel and beautiful. If it is accepted, it can be made to work; if it is not accepted, it will never have a chance to work.

The central target for this social engineering effort must be the people who are responsible for emitting the most CO<sub>2</sub>. The people we must strive to affect are the ultrarich. The rentiers, the virtual class, the captains of industry; and, to a lesser extent, the dwindling middle classes. The poor will continue to suffer. There is clearly no pressing reason for most human beings to live as badly and as squalidly as they do. But the poor do not emit much carbon dioxide, so our efforts on their behalf can only be tangential.

Unlike the modernist art movements of the twentieth century, a Viridian culture-industry movement cannot be concerned with challenging people's aesthetic preconceptions. We do not have the 19th-century luxury of shocking the bourgeoisie. That activity, enjoyable and time-honored though it is, will not get that poison out of our air. We are attempting to survive by causing the wealthy and the bourgeoisie to willingly live in a new way.

We cannot make them do it, but if we focussed our efforts, we would have every prospect of luring them into it.

What is culturally required at the dawn of the new millennium is a genuine avant-garde, in the sense of a cultural elite with an advanced sensibility not yet shared by most people, who are creating a new awareness requiring a new mode of life. The task of this avant-garde is to design a stable and sustainable physical economy in which the wealthy and powerful will prefer to live. Mao suits for the masses are not on the Viridian agenda. Couture is on the agenda. We need a form of Green high fashion so appallingly seductive and glamorous that it can literally save people's lives. We have to gratify people's desires much better than the current system does. We have to reveal to people the many desires they have that the current system is not fulfilling. Rather than marshalling themselves for inhuman effort and grim sacrifice, people have to sink into our twenty-first century with a sigh of profound relief.

Allow me to speak hypothetically now, as if this avant-garde actually existed, although, as we all know, it cannot possibly come into being until January 3, 2000. Let's discuss our tactics. I have a few cogent suggestions to offer.

We can increase our chances of success by rapidly developing and expanding the postmodern culture industry. Genuine "Culture" has "art" and "thought," while the Culture Industry merely peddles images and information.

I know this. I am fully aware of the many troubling drawbacks of this situation, but on mature consideration, I think that the Culture Industry has many profound advantages over the twentieth century's physically poisonous smokestack industries. Also, as digital technologists, thinkers, writers, designers, cultural critics, and so weiter, we Viridians suspect that the rise of the Culture Industry is bound to increase our own immediate power and influence vis-a-vis, say, coal mining executives. This may not be an entirely good thing. However, we believe we will do the world less immediate damage than they are doing.

We therefore loudly demand that the Culture Industry be favored as a suitably twenty-first century industrial enterprise. Luckily the trend is already very much with us here, but we must go further; we believe in Fordism in the Culture Industry. This means, by necessity, leisure. Large amounts of leisure are required to appreciate and consume cultural-industrial products such as movies, software, semi-functional streaming media and so on. Time spent at more traditional forms of work unfairly lures away the consumers of the Culture Industry, and therefore poses a menace to our postindustrial economic underpinnings.

"Work" requires that people's attention be devoted to other, older, less attractive industries. "Leisure" means they are paying attention and money to us.

We therefore demand much more leisure for everyone. Leisure for the unemployed, while copious, is not the kind of "leisure" that increases our profits. We specifically demand intensive leisure for well-educated, well-heeled people. These are the people who are best able to appreciate and consume truly capital-intensive cultural products.

We Viridians suspect that it would require very little effort to make people work much less. Entirely too much effort is being spent working. We very much doubt that there is anything being done in metal-bending industry today that can justify wrecking the atmosphere. We need to burn the planetary candle at one end only (and, in daylight, not at all).

As much time as possible should be spent consuming immaterial products. A global population where the vast majority spend their time sitting still and staring into screens

is a splendid society for our purposes. Their screens should be beautifully designed and their surroundings energy-efficient. The planet will benefit for everyone who clicks a mouse instead of shovelling coal or taking an axe and a plow to a rain forest.

The tourist industry is now the number one industry on the planet. Tourists consume large amounts of pre-packaged culture. We believe tourism to be a profoundly healthy development. We feel we must strongly resist the retrograde and unprofitable urge to make migrants and migration illegal.

Given the unstable condition of the environment, this practice may soon become tantamount to genocide. It is also palpably absurd to live in a society where capital can move faster and more easily than human beings. Capital exists for the sake and convenience of human beings.

We believe that the movement of human beings across national boundaries and under the aegis of foreign governments is basically a design problem. If guest workers, refugees, pleasure travellers and so forth were all electronically tracked via satellite or cell repeaters, the artificial division between jet setters and refugees would soon cease to exist. Foreigners are feared not merely because they are foreign, but because they are unknown, unidentified, and apparently out of local social control.

In the next century, foreigners need be none of these things. Along with their ubiquitous credit cards and passports, they could carry their entire personal histories. They could carry devices establishing proof of their personal bona fides that would be immediately obvious to anyone in any language. A better designed society would accommodate this kind of human solidarity, rather than pandering to the imagined security needs of land-based national regimes.

We believe that it should be a general new design principle to add information to a problem, as opposed to countering it with physical resources (in the case of migrants, steel bars and barbed wire). Electronic tracking seems a promising example. While the threat to privacy and anonymity from electronic parole is obviously severe, there is nothing quite so dreadful and threatening as a septic refugee camp. We consider this a matter of some urgency. We believe it to be very likely that massive evacuations will occur in the next few decades as a matter of course, not merely in the disadvantaged Third World, but possibly in areas such as a new American Dust Bowl. Wise investments in electronic tourist management would be well repaid in stitching the fraying fabric of a weather-disrupted civilization.

For instance, we would expect to see one of the first acts of 21st century disaster management to be sowing an area with air-dropped and satellite-tracked cellphones. We believe that such a tracking and display system could be designed so that it would not be perceived as a threat, but rather as a jet-setter's prestige item, something like a portable personal webpage. We believe such devices should be designed first for the rich. The poor need them worse, but if these devices were developed and given to the poor by socialist fiat, this would be (probably correctly) suspected as being the first step toward police roundup and a death camp.

Replacing natural resources with information is a natural area for twenty-first century design, because it is an arena for human ingenuity that was technically closed to all previous centuries. We see considerable promise in this approach. It can be both cheap and glamorous.

Energy meters, for instance, should be ubiquitous. They should be present, not in an obscure box outside the home, but enshrined within it. This is not a frugal, money-

saving effort. It should be presented as a luxury. It should be a mark of class distinction. It should be considered a mark of stellar ignorance to be unaware of the source of one's electric power. Solar and wind power should be sold as premiums available to particularly affluent and savvy consumers. It should be considered the stigma of the crass proletariat to foul the air every time one turns on a light switch.

Environmental awareness is currently an annoying burden to the consumer, who must spend his and her time gazing at plastic recycling labels, washing the garbage and so on. Better information environments can make the invisible visible, however, and this can lead to a swift re-evaluation of previously invisible public ills.

If one had, for instance, a pair of computerized designer sunglasses that revealed the unspeakable swirl of airborne combustion products over the typical autobahn, it would be immediately obvious that clean air is a luxury. Infrasound, ultrasound and sound pollution monitors would make silence a luxury. Monitor taps with intelligent water analysis in real-time would make pure water a luxury. Lack of mutagens in one's home would become a luxury.

Freedom from interruption and time to think is a luxury; personal attention is luxury; genuine neighborhood security is also very much to be valued. Social attitudes can and should be changed by the addition of cogent information to situations where invisible costs have long been silently exported into the environment. Make the invisible visible. Don't sell warnings. Sell awareness.

The fact that we are living in an unprecedentedly old society, a society top-heavy with the aged, offers great opportunity. Long-term thinking is a useful and worthwhile effort well suited to the proclivities of old people.

Clearly if our efforts do not work for old people (a large and growing fraction of the G-7 populace) then they will not work at all. Old people tend to be generous, they sometimes have time on their hands. Electronically connected, garrulous oldsters might have a great deal to offer in the way of managing the copious unpaid scutwork of electronic civil society. We like the idea of being a radical art movement that specializes in recruiting the old.

Ignoring long-term consequences is something we all tend to do; but promulgating dangerous falsehoods for short-term economic gain is exceedingly wicked and stupid. If environmental catastrophe strikes because of CO2 emissions, then organizations like the anti-Green Global Climate Coalition will be guilty of negligent genocide. Nobody has ever been guilty of this novel crime before, but if it happens, it will certainly be a crime of very great magnitude. At this moment, the GCC and their political and economic allies are, at best, engaged in a risky gamble with the lives of billions. If the climate spins out of control, the 21st century may become a very evil place indeed.

The consequences should be faced directly. If several million people starve to death because, for instance, repeated El Nino events have disrupted major global harvests for years on end, then there will be a catastrophe. There will be enormous political and military pressures for justice and an accounting.

We surmise that the best solution in this scenario would be something like the Czech lustration and the South African truth commissions. The groundwork for this process should begin now. The alternatives are not promising: a Beirut scenario of endless ulcerous and semi-contained social breakdown; a Yugoslav scenario of climate-based ethnic cleansing and lebensraum; a Red Terror where violent panic-stricken masses seek

bloody vengeance against industrialism. Most likely of all is a White Terror, where angry chaos in the climatically disrupted Third World is ruthlessly put down by remote control by the G7's cybernetic military. It is very likely under this last scenario that the West's gluttonous consumption habits will be studiously overlooked, and the blame laid entirely on the Third World's exploding populations. (The weather's savage vagaries will presumably be blamed on some handy Lysenkoist scapegoat such as Jews or unnatural homosexual activities.)

With the Czech lustration and the South African truth commissions, the late 20th century has given us a mechanism by which societies that have drifted into dysfunctional madness can be put right. We expect no less for future malefactors whose sly defense of an indefensible status quo may lead to the deaths of millions of people, who derived little benefit from their actions and were never given any voice in their decisions. We recommend that dossiers be compiled now, for the sake of future international courts of justice. We think this work should be done quite openly, in a spirit of civic duty. Those who are risking the lives of others should be made aware that this is one particular risk that will be focussed specifically and personally on them.

While it is politically helpful to have a polarized and personalized enemy class, there is nothing particularly new about this political tactic. Revanchist sentiment is all very well, but survival will require a much larger vision. This must become the work of many people in many fields of labor, ignoring traditional boundaries of discipline and ideology to unite in a single practical goal: climate.

A brief sketch may help establish some parameters.

Here I conclude with a set of general cultural changes that a Viridian movement would likely promulgate in specific sectors of society. For the sake of brevity, these suggestions come in three parts. (Today) is the situation as it exists now. (What We Want) is the situation as we would like to see it. (The Trend) the way the situation will probably develop if it follows contemporary trends without any intelligent intervention.

## **The Media**

**Today.** Publishing and broadcasting cartels surrounded by a haze of poorly financed subcultural microchannels.

**What We Want.** More bandwidth for civil society, multicultural variety, and better-designed systems of popular many-to-many communication, in multiple languages through multiple channels.

**The Trend.** A spy-heavy, commercial Internet. A Yankee entertainment complex that entirely obliterates many non-Anglophone cultures.

## **The Military**

**Today.** G-7 Hegemony backed by the American military.

**What We Want.** A wider and deeper majority hegemony with a military that can deter adventurism, but specializes in meeting the immediate crises through civil engineering, public health and disaster relief.

**The Trend.** Nuclear and biological proliferation among minor powers.

## Business

**Today.** Currency traders rule banking system by fiat; extreme instability in markets; capital flight but no labor mobility; unsustainable energy base

**What We Want.** Nonmaterial industries; vastly increased leisure; vastly increased labor mobility; sustainable energy and resources

**The Trend.** commodity totalitarianism, crony capitalism, criminalized banking systems, sweatshops

## Industrial Design

**Today.** very rapid model obsolescence, intense effort in packaging; CAD/CAM

**What We Want:** intensely glamorous environmentally sound products; entirely new objects of entirely new materials; replacing material substance with information; a new relationship between the cybernetic and the material

**The Trend:** two design worlds for rich and poor consumers; a varnish on barbarism

## Gender Issues

**Today:** more commercial work required of women; social problems exported into family life as invisible costs

**What We Want:** declining birth rates, declining birth defects, less work for anyone, lavish support for anyone willing to drop out of industry and consume less

**The Trend:** more women in prison; fundamentalist and ethnic-separatist ideologies that target women specifically.

## Entertainment

**Today:** large-scale American special-effects spectacle supported by huge casts and multi-million-dollar tie-in enterprises

**What We Want:** glamour and drama; avant-garde adventurism; a borderless culture industry bent on Green social engineering

**The Trend:** annihilation of serious culture except in a few non-Anglophone societies

## International Justice

**Today:** dysfunctional but gamely persistent War Crimes tribunals

**What We Want:** Environmental Crime tribunals

**The Trend:** justice for sale; intensified drug war

## Employment

**Today:** MacJobs, burn-out track, massive structural unemployment in Europe



**What We Want:** Less work with no stigma; radically expanded leisure; compulsory leisure for workaholics; guaranteed support for people consuming less resources; new forms of survival entirely outside the conventional economy

**The Trend:** increased class division; massive income disparity; surplus flesh and virtual class

## Education

**Today:** failing public-supported schools

**What We Want:** intellectual freedom, instant cheap access to information, better taste, a more advanced aesthetic, autonomous research collectives, lifelong education, and dignity and pleasure for the very large segment of the human population who are and will forever be basically illiterate and innumerate

**The trend:** children are raw blobs of potential revenue-generating machinery; universities exist to supply middle-management

## Public Health

**Today:** general success; worrying chronic trends in AIDS, tuberculosis, antibiotic resistance; massive mortality in nonindustrial world

**What We Want:** unprecedentedly healthy old people; plagues exterminated worldwide; sophisticated treatment of microbes; artificial food

**The Trend:** Massive dieback in Third World, septic poor quarantined from nervous rich in G-7 countries, return of 19th century sepsis, world's fattest and most substance-dependent populations

## Science

**Today:** basic science sacrificed for immediate commercial gain; malaise in academe; bureaucratic overhead in government support

**What We Want:** procedural rigor, intellectual honesty, reproducible results; peer review, block grants, massively increased research funding, massively reduced procedural overhead; genius grants; single-author papers; abandonment of passive construction and the third person plural; "Science" reformed so as to lose its Platonic and crypto-Christian elements as the "pure" pursuit of disembodied male minds; armistice in Science wars

**The Trend:** "Big Science" dwindles into short-term industrial research or military applications; "scientists" as a class forced to share imperilled, marginal condition of English professors and French deconstructionists.

I would like to conclude by suggesting some specific areas for immediate artistic work. I see these as crying public needs that should be met by bravura displays of raw ingenuity.

But there isn't time for that. Not just yet.

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Viridian Home