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THE FIRST THINGS FIRST MANIFESTO AND THE POLITICS OF CULTURE JAMMING: TOWARDS A CULTURAL ECONOMY OF GRAPHIC DESIGN AND ADVERTISING

Abstract

Advertising has long been recognized as an important cultural force by media and cultural studies scholars. Graphic design, despite its comparable ubiquity, has rarely been the subject of this kind of critique. Where these activities *have* been discussed, the emphasis has been overwhelmingly on their textual manifestations (graphics, ads, commercials) and, occasionally, on their reception. In the interest of working towards a fuller account of the overall circulation and reproduction of an increasingly commercial contemporary culture, then, this paper turns to the generative source of these ephemeral artefacts and, in particular, professional graphic design practice. By paying especial attention to the framing of current debates about accountability and social responsibility *within* this profession, this paper seeks to explore the constraining and enabling effects of commercial practice. Advertising and design are readily distinguishable from other economic institutions because of their declared expertise in creating specifically *cultural* forms of communication. Further, these practices rely on the skills of cultural intermediaries: individuals whose job it is to develop these forms to mediate between, or more properly, *articulate*, the realms of production and consumption. Graphic designers, it seems, enjoy much greater latitude for personal expression than ad creatives – or at least enjoy a professional culture, or habitus, that supports debate and dissent through a variety of activities, and recognizes non-commercial design

projects as legitimate forms of expression. While the designers interviewed here may claim that advertising is a creative practice entirely subsumed by commercial constraints, they also recognize that their own professional activities involve only a limited degree of subjective control. Personal and non-commercial projects, often indirectly funded by income from business clients, appear to provide a more reliable means to creative fulfillment.

Keywords

graphic design; advertising; cultural intermediaries; ethics; cultural production; cultural economy

THIS ARTICLE CONCERNS the contemporary culture of graphic design¹ practice in the USA and, to a lesser degree, that of its close relative, advertising. The work presented here is part of a larger project conceived as a response to both the general absence of critical approaches to the study of graphic design and to the dominance of textual approaches to the critical study of advertising (Soar, 2000). It is also part of a project to broaden our limited understanding of a group of workers Pierre Bourdieu (1984) has identified as the ‘cultural intermediaries’.²

Graphic designers and advertising creatives (art directors and copywriters) fit squarely within this last category. Indeed, their working lives depend for their efficacy and ultimate success on a specific attunement to the swirl of values and tastes within culture. More than that, they play an important role in lending traction to the contemporary routines of capital accumulation by articulating these values and tastes to the promotion of ideas and events, services and products. The privileged position the intermediaries hold in the ‘circuit of culture’ (Johnson, 1986/87) has recently been expressed through the notion of an attenuated, or ‘short’, circuit (Soar, 2000). How then to bring a critical cultural analysis to bear on these commercial practices? In essence, I am interested in applying a modified cultural studies perspective to these forms of commercial practice.³ In doing so, I align myself with recent scholarship in ‘cultural economy’ (du Gay, 1996, 1997; du Gay *et al.*, 1997; Nixon, 1997a, b; McRobbie, 1998, 2000) to address the reported investments of the design and advertising intermediaries in the cultural work that they perform. I focus on their values and opinions and highlight the relative sense of empowerment they claim for themselves. At the heart of this analysis is a short, polemical document called the ‘First Things First Manifesto’, which calls, in part, for a ‘reversal of priorities in favor of more useful, lasting and democratic forms of communication – a mindshift away from product marketing’. It continues: ‘Consumerism is running

uncontested; it must be challenged by other perspectives expressed, in part, through the visual languages and resource of design'.

Concurrently, the last decade has seen an escalation in the promotion of 'culture jamming' as a viable form of populist, anti-commercial critique. For many people this is most closely associated with the insistent editorial stance of the Canadian magazine *Adbusters*, perhaps best known for its spoof ads deriding a whole range of ills associated with excessive consumerism and the corporate concentration of media ownership, and the promotion of activities such as Buy Nothing Day and TV TurnOff Week. It was also intimately involved with the re-emergence of First Things First.

These two moments – the manifesto proper and *Adbusters*' framing of both First Things First *and* culture jamming – are investigated here because they are directly addressed at the intermediaries *by* intermediaries. Most significantly, they identify designers in particular as potent agents of positive social change.⁴ Indeed, if it were not for interventions such as these, in which cultural intermediaries themselves have challenged the priorities of the commercial fields in which they work, then these professions and their associated activities might be far less worthy of our critical attention than their textual manifestations (as currently seems to be the case).

The return of the First Things First manifesto

When power and control are foremost, moral purpose is reduced to whatever is popular in the marketplace of ideas and commerce, rather than to what is right. This is the guiding principle of bad marketing and bad advertising, and it is also the guiding principle of bad design.

(Buchanan, 1998: 7)

The First Things First manifesto is a call for social responsibility that was signed by and distributed amongst designers, art directors and writers on design through six key periodicals in 1999. It was originally conceived in 1964 as a provisional response to a new social climate characterized by 'the high-pitched scream of consumer selling'. British designer Ken Garland wrote the first draft during a meeting of the Society of Industrial Artists in London in 1963. The manifesto was then signed by twenty-two individuals, many of them well-known photographers, typographers, designers and teachers. It received exposure in, for example, *Modern Publicity*, *Design* and the *Guardian*. Garland was also interviewed on television (see Poynor, 1999, for a concise history).

Interest in the manifesto was rekindled when it was republished in its original form in the mid-nineties in *Eye: The International Review of Graphic Design*, *Emigre* [sic] and *Adbusters: The Journal of the Mental Environment* (published in England, the USA and Canada, respectively). *Eye* republished it in support of an

article by Andrew Howard called ‘There is such a thing as society’ (Howard, 1994), in which he envisioned a post-Thatcherite future of ‘partnerships and collaborations in which design is not simply a means to sell and persuade’ (Howard, 1994: 77). *Adbusters* republished the original manifesto because its art director, Chris Dixon, and its editor and copublisher, Kalle Lasn, had seen it in *Eye*. Subsequently, several individuals got together to update it, including Lasn, Dixon and Rick Poynor, a distinguished writer on design issues and visual communication (and, until recently, a visiting lecturer at the Royal College of Art in London).

In the autumn of 1999, the newly drafted manifesto (‘First Things First 2000’) appeared in at least six journals, including *Emigre*, *AIGA Journal of Graphic Design*⁵ and *Adbusters* in North America, *Eye* and *Blueprint* in the UK, and, on the European Continent, *Items* (and, much later, *Form*). It carried Ken Garland’s name once more, augmented by those of thirty-two new signatories. In his short article on the history of First Things First, Poynor (1999) stated: ‘The vast majority of design projects – and certainly the most lavishly funded and widely disseminated – address corporate needs, a massive over-emphasis on the commercial sector of society, which consumes most of graphic designers’ time, skills and creativity’ (1999: 56). He thereby made a vital distinction between this singular, commercial role of graphic design and ‘the possibility . . . that design might have broader purposes, potential and meanings’. Katherine McCoy, an American design educator, had earlier expressed the situation thus:

Designers must break out of the obedient, neutral, servant-to-industry mentality, an orientation that was particularly strong in the Reagan/Thatcher 1980s. . . . Design is not a neutral, value-free process. A design has no more integrity than its purpose or subject matter.

(McCoy, 1994: 111)

The manifesto could not fail to make waves when it was republished precisely because it stands in stark contrast to the stock-in-trade of many design magazines. Indeed, part of its critique concerns the intermediaries’ apparent obsession with aesthetics and personalities (i.e. design and designers, art and art directors, illustration and illustrators, photography and photographers) – at least as it is endlessly expressed in the majority of design and advertising publications. Eminent among these are so-called ‘showcase’ or ‘portfolio’ magazines such as *Communication Arts* (also known as *CA*), *Print*, *Graphis* and *ID*,⁶ all of which are high-gloss productions that use sumptuous photography and printing techniques to show off the latest graphic, packaging, furniture, interior and industrial design (and, less often, their creators). As American designer and critic Michael Rock has noted, ‘we have a lot of information about logos and typefaces and the design “heroes” that make them, but little that situates the work in the culture. We need both types of analysis’ (Poynor and Rock, 1995: 58).

The chief exceptions to this generally laudatory editorial pattern are *Eye*, the *AIGA Journal of Graphic Design*,⁷ *Critique*,⁸ and *Emigre*.⁹ While they are all just as meticulously crafted in their appearance, these periodicals generally sustain a more reflective or critical editorial stance than their glitzy counterparts. Instead of merely showcasing, they often advance well-researched visual and textual essays that grapple with the social, cultural, historical and political dimensions of design and advertising.¹⁰

While it has often been said that ‘designers don’t read’, it is clear that some designers at least *write*. Indeed, even a casual familiarity with the design press reveals that there is a core constituency of designer/writers who have produced, collectively, a substantial – if eclectic – body of insightful writing about the dynamics of the profession and its place in culture (see, for example, the articles and essays collected in Bierut *et al.*, 1994, 1997; Heller and Finamore, 1997).¹¹ These writers are often successful and even distinguished practitioners who have turned to writing perhaps as a way to elaborate ideas that cannot be addressed in depth through the act of designing itself.

As the profession grows in size and visibility, the available avenues for publishing articles and essays have also expanded (as have the number of opportunities to discuss, debate, and present research on design matters).¹² One recent estimate, in a new journal called simply [. . .] (i.e. ‘dot-dot-dot’) showed that the number of graphic design and visual culture magazines in the Northern hemisphere has increased exponentially from around 26 in the early 1950s to over 144 in 2000. The USA currently has 44, while the UK and Germany are able to sustain 52 each ([. . .], 2000: 53). It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that the list of signatories of the relaunched manifesto was largely made up of designer/writers already familiar to many members of the profession.

The following section reports on a series of personal interviews¹³ with prominent individuals¹⁴ carried out in late 1999, some of whom put their names to *First Things First 2000*. The most important theme that has so far emerged from this ongoing field research is the issue of personal and political agency, including some remarkably candid observations on the ways in which this is constrained.

The usual suspects

Michael Bierut is a partner at Pentagram, an international design company of considerable standing among design professionals, and, at the time of interviewing, was president of the AIGA. He has also co-edited a number of works that rightly belong in the category of design criticism (Bierut *et al.*, 1994, 1997, 1999; Kalman *et al.*, 1998). Stefan Sagmeister has a small design company in New York and has produced CD covers for artists such as The Rolling Stones and Lou Reed (see Hall and Sagmeister, 2001). He has been featured in various design

magazines for his innovative and occasionally shocking work, and is a popular speaker at art schools and conferences. His favourite personal aphorism is 'style equals fart'. Jessica Helfand runs her own design partnership in Connecticut with William Drenttel, also a designer and past-president of the AIGA. They have only recently moved out of New York City. Helfand has taught at Yale for six years, and has been a writer for *Eye* magazine for four years. She was among the co-editors of *Looking Closer 3: Classic Writings on Graphic Design* (Bierut *et al.*, 1999) and has written two essays on Paul Rand (Helfand, 1998), one among a small group of (male) designers consistently identified as seminal figures in the history of US graphic design. (During his lifetime, Rand also taught students – including Helfand – at Yale.) Milton Glaser is another key figure comparable to Rand; he is exceedingly well-known as a designer, illustrator and educator (see, for example, Glaser, 2000). Glaser¹⁵ has taught for many years at the School of Visual Arts in New York and was a partner in Pushpin Studios, a much-lauded company that challenged many of the prevailing trends in graphic design thinking in the 1970s. He now has his own practice, Milton Glaser Inc. Richard Wilde has been chair of the advertising and design programmes at the School of Visual Arts in New York since the 1970s. He is a senior vice president at the Ryan Drossman Marc USA ad agency and also runs his own design company.

Bierut was not one of the signatories. He reported that while one of his partners in Pentagram, J. Abbott Miller, had signed the manifesto, another (Paula Scher) found it 'elitist and nonsense'. Glaser agreed to sign the manifesto only after an earlier draft had been modified: it was 'too polemical and not inclusive enough . . . it basically took a stand and . . . did not allow for any elasticity in who was admitted into the game. It sort of said "choose or die". . . . My feeling about it in general is if you don't give anybody anyplace to go, they don't pay any attention to you'.

Bierut made a telling distinction between the framing of the manifesto in *Adbusters* (a 'very absolutist view . . . sort of, sell your soul or bring capitalism to its knees') and his own position: it is 'simply asking for a shift in priorities as opposed to a complete disavowal of commercial work'. Even with these relatively modest aims in mind, Bierut sensed a certain degree of alienation among many readers of the manifesto largely because of the nature of the list of signatories (whom he referred to as the 'usual suspects'). In this context, he agreed that the purposes of the manifesto might have been better served by excluding signatures altogether, or at least employing 'a broader, more provocative list' of adherents. In sum, he suggested that, 'It remains to be seen whether that's an exclusionary, elitist position, taken by people who could afford to take it, as opposed to one that actually was tempting [designers] to cross over'.

Helfand, in contrast to Glaser, suggested that it is 'a call to order: this is not an industry in which you need to purify the practice, but there might be some basic understandings, some general context in which we can define the values we bring to our work'. Unlike Bierut, she also thought that having the manifesto

signed by the ‘usual suspects’ (herself included) was actually one of its strengths: ‘would this thing have gathered strength in numbers if fourteen thousand people [i.e. the entire AIGA membership] had signed it? That would have cancelled itself out as a special thing’. When I raised the possibility that the manifesto was simply preaching to the converted (since, in my view, advertising, not design, was the real target of the manifesto’s scorn), Helfand responded that the kind of posturing in and around the manifesto was ‘endemic to these kinds of tribal organizations. . . . the [AIGA] tribe gets together . . . and talks about design’. Indeed, she maintained that such activities were functional for anyone who had chosen design as a career: ‘Years ago when I was a graphic designer at a newspaper and I was the only trained designer on a staff of five hundred journalists’, it was ‘incredibly therapeutic . . . I loved to go and gather with other designers and know that I was doing things right; there were other people that cared about things’. While the AIGA has clearly proved useful to Helfand as a source of support and camaraderie, she qualified this statement by noting that, ‘The degree that that has any impact on culture at large is not so certain’. She expressed a hope that the manifesto might reach beyond ‘the design ghetto’ rather than ‘support[ing] and advanc[ing] this kind of hierarchy and stratification, which may also have cultural precedent in all sorts of organizations’.

Glaser characterized the signatories as a ‘cadre’ who must continue to promote the ideas in the manifesto and encourage practical responses if it is to be of any consequence – ‘otherwise any polemical statement will more or less go by the boards’. Glaser’s more general view on matters of ethics was that ‘there is an area of ambiguity about what is harmful, what is not, and so on’. Of the manifesto in particular, he said: ‘certainly I agree with the fundamental issue, which is that one should try to do no harm, and to some extent that is the most attractive thing about a proposition of this sort’. Glaser was also pointedly philosophical about the role of designers:

If you begin with the premise that what we work at more often than not involves to some degree a distortion or misrepresentation, it is very difficult to be at any point in this spectrum without having sinned. . . . the question really is how to balance the reality of professional life – and earning a living obviously – and one’s desire not to cause harm.

Sagmeister suggested that one could distinguish between individuals for whom ‘design plays a very crucial role in their life’ and those for whom it is simply a nine-to-five occupation. The former group was typified by the signatories of First Things First and Sagmeister himself: ‘I think it’s great. If I’d been approached I’d definitely have done it, I would have signed it too. . . . Why would you want to be part of this incredible machinery that produces this amount of unbelievable junk?’ Sagmeister’s identification was with the ‘gist’ of the manifesto; in his elaboration of this point, it became clear that the ‘junk’ to which he referred is

actually badly conceived and executed design work – comparable, perhaps, to advertising ‘clutter’. During his well-attended talk at the AIGA conference in Las Vegas in 1999, he attributed this ‘fluff’ to a lack of political or even religious conviction on the part of designers.¹⁶

The Las Vegas event, the AIGA’s eighth biennial conference, was attended by around 3,200 people, including 300 students. Bierut was charged with providing the closing comments for the event and, in light of this experience, he testified to the sheer range of responses to the manifesto that he had encountered within the first few weeks of its reemergence. Further, he noted what he called the ‘inverse relationship’ between the aesthetic theme of the conference (‘America: Cult & Culture’) and the ascetic tone of the manifesto. He also anticipated that the cumulative effect of the recent ‘design boom’ (the result of a strong economy) and the ‘wretched excess’ of Las Vegas itself might give designers pause for reflection. For this reason especially Bierut thought that the manifesto’s appearance (particularly in *Adbusters*) was ‘really interesting, really provocative and perhaps extremely timely’. Bierut praised *Adbusters* in particular for ‘see[ing] design as an active tool in creating social change’. This he compared favourably – at least in principle – to the AIGA membership’s aspirations, which he characterized as a ‘universal’ desire to have ‘normal people’ and the ‘business community’ alike ‘know and care about design; to understand what it is and to know that it’s important’.

Both Helfand and Bierut cited specific instances in their own day-to-day work that served to illustrate the difficulties of ethical practice. Helfand complained bitterly about the excesses of the marketers she works with:

I’m sitting with thirty-five people in a conference room, and with a tremendous budget, and a tremendous amount of work and a tremendous set of expectations, and people aren’t referred to as audiences, they’re referred to as ‘eyeballs’! How reductive and dehumanizing can that be? And yet, that’s what they’re thinking about: leveraging the knowledge they can get from market research to then go out and build their brand and get people to buy stuff. . . . I think designers have to think carefully about the role they play in that mix. I have clients who are asking me to do things, you know I have to think about it very carefully.

Bierut was remarkably candid about his own company’s activities, noting that Pentagram has worked for ‘all the big bad ones’, as identified in what he called *Adbusters*’ ‘litany of must-to-avoid’ companies, including Nike and Disney. He highlighted the ethical dilemmas of ‘dirtying oneself in the muddy ponds of commercial practice’ by repeating an anecdote he had shared with the audience at the AIGA conference about one of his ‘most worthy’ clients. According to Bierut, the Brooklyn Academy of Music has ‘bravely put on interesting avant-garde performances’, ‘championed free expression, and really advanced the cause of

culture . . . as well as reaching out to their community. . . . they've been great citizens of Brooklyn'. He added: 'they're a fantastic client. . . . they're a pleasure to work with, I'm very proud of the work I've done for them, and their biggest sponsor is Philip Morris'. Bierut then asked the pointed question, 'am I advancing the arts in America? Am I helping the underprivileged, arts-starved, and culture-starved Brooklyn community, or am I furnishing the ugly face of the makers of a product that kills thousands and thousands of people?'

Glaser anticipated this kind of conundrum when he noted that:

designers *per se* are usually in a very weak position in regard to what they do; they don't make the determinations, they don't decide what is to be sold, they don't decide on the strategy or the objectives very often. They are, to a large extent, at the end of a long process where these essential decisions have been made by others. . . . Designers have to recognize that their role has become . . . a mediation between clients and an audience, where they act more like telephone lines than they do like initiators.

Glaser suggested that it is through this kind of realization that designers can come to a more grounded epiphany about the potential harm – or good – they can effect through their work practices. Helfand echoed the view that designers' hands are increasingly tied: in reference to her particular interest in ethical issues surrounding design and new media (including the development of websites, CD-ROMs, etc.) she said: 'the rules are being rewritten, but not by designers. . . . we're getting pushed into these roles where we're meant to visualize some fleeting information . . . giving form to content that's not thought through in any meaningful way'.

When asked if he felt some sense of *deja vu*, given his vast experience in the field – Glaser is a septuagenarian – he observed that

at the end of every century in human history – not to mention the millennium itself – there's been this sense that the world is used up, that things have gone wrong, that the wrong people are in power, and that it's time for a fresh vision of reality. . . . it's linked in some way to the Arts and Crafts movement, the Viennese Secession, to Dadaism. All of these desires to clean up the act and to basically produce art or design that is socially responsible. Of course that occurs with great regularity, and that gets subsumed into the needs of the larger culture, to produce things to sell and to buy.

Was this any reason not to react to the manifesto?

No, I don't think it makes it any less important. It actually shows a sense of historical continuity . . . what gets lost when people don't pay attention

to history. But it *has* to be said, because things have reached a point where, if it isn't said, all you can look forward to is an increasing lowering of human standards and sense of human community. This feeling that you could do anything to an audience as long as it sells the goods is oppressive.

Relative sinners: intermediaries on advertising vs. design

While Helfand, for example, saw First Things First as a community-building exercise for a business that did not need to change substantially, others, most notably Glaser, were more candid about the inevitability of 'sinning' at some stage in one's career. Glaser also noted that 'people in the advertising world certainly represent a more visible and more forceful expression of these ideas than what we find in the so-called world of design'. Indeed, advertising was repeatedly targeted, even scape-goated, for the ills identified in the manifesto – much to the frustration of Richard Wilde, for one. At the time I spoke to him, Wilde was only vaguely aware of the manifesto. After I sent him a copy, he remarked that while it looked good at first glance, ultimately he felt it was 'truly naïve' and 'high-handed'. He defended advertising's record by pointing out that, unlike designers, 'American ad agencies contribute 10% of their combined output to social issues, in the form of PSAs – or Public Service Announcements'.

As an indirect response to Glaser's suggestion that designers 'do no harm', Wilde said: 'who's to say what's good and what's not good? From where I sit I could take most any product and find real flaws'. Indeed, Wilde seemed to be the most conversant of my interviewees with regard to specific environmental and political issues beyond the immediate purview of design and advertising practice. Examples he readily cited included products made overseas through the use of exploitative labour practices, the use of carcinogenic chemicals to treat fruit and vegetables, aerosols and the production of leather goods. Ultimately, however, Wilde saw the strength of the manifesto in the fact that it 'opens up the question and gets people thinking and it gets their blood churned a little bit and it opens up debate; and debate on this is probably the single most important thing'.

According to First Things First's signatories, it is advertising's 'techniques and apparatus . . . [that] have persistently been presented to us as the most lucrative, effective and desirable use of our talents'. Andrew Howard has faulted the original manifesto, and Ken Garland in particular, for making unnecessary concessions to advertising. When Garland declared in a 1964 interview that '[we] are not against advertising as a whole' because '[t]he techniques of publicity and selling are vital to Western society' (quoted in Howard, 1994: 75), Howard suggested 'that what Garland is arguing for is the same cake, sliced differently', rather than 'a different cake altogether' (1994: 75). As it turns out, Garland has

acknowledged that he has, over the ensuing years, 'had some qualms about the pragmatic flavour of that part of the manifesto' (Garland, 1994: 3), but maintains that the original concern of First Things First was 'spending priorities rather than social consciousness' (1994: 3).

Glaser thought that advertising people must be brought to the table although, for him, 'they have the most to lose'. However he also maintained that designers should not feel ethically superior to ad people or 'removed from the fray', since the issues for both camps are the same (never mind that, for designers, this 'is somewhat obscured by our loyalty to beauty, so called'). Bierut emphasized his belief that there is no way to make a clear-cut distinction between 'right' and 'wrong' in the design business and, further, that it is much harder to make ethical decisions in design than it is in advertising – mainly because the motives of the latter are, for him, singularly oriented towards commercial persuasion. In contrast, Helfand thought that 'intrinsically there's nothing wrong with advertising' – although she did feel that 'marketing might be [the enemy]'. Here she included activities such as market research, focus groups and brand-building.

In contrast to design, there seems to be something resolutely furtive or even confessional about the notion of ad people taking the time to criticize the workings of their own profession. While the rhetoric of advertising speaks tirelessly of subversion, resistance and revolution, its near-universal complicity in supporting the most fundamental tenets of capital accumulation perhaps serve to ensure that its practitioners remain – overtly at least – committed believers. A clue to this distinction lies in the paucity of venues for critical debate about advertising for its practitioners. There are isolated exceptions (e.g. Gossage, 1986; Lury, 1994; Helm, 2000) but perhaps because of the education and training that ad people generally receive, the critical insight offered by such rare contributions is most often particularly limited. Further, although the ad business has long supported the creation of public service announcements (PSAs) for various interest groups – drunk driving, anti-drugs, etc. – these rarely, if ever, take the messages or methods of advertising itself to task.

A public debate about First Things First was organized by the AIGA and held in New York in April 2000. Among the invited panelists were Jay Chiat, cofounder of Chiat/Day, one of the most successful and high-profile American ad agencies of recent years. He was unabashed about his own track record – Chiat/Day's emergent reputation was due in no small part to its work for Nike – and seemed indifferent to the palpable sense of urgency both at the debate and conveyed in the manifesto.

Another panelist, Kevin Lyons, was recently declared one of a 'bumper crop of remarkable young talents' in 2000's *ID* Forty Designers Under Thirty feature. He had declared in interview with *ID* that graphic design 'is a true guerilla art form'; if he was not a designer, he would be 'Doing guerilla activity of a different sort'. Further, he claimed that his work is 'informed by culture and politics'.

Lyons' clients include Nike, Stüssy and Urban Outfitters. At the debate, Lyons recounted how he had worked on campaigns conceived to persuade inner city youth to choose to buy Nike shoes. While this had the ring of a confessional, his tone was anything but. Indeed, there seemed to be something altogether absent in the contributions of Chiat and Lyons, a yawning gap between the earnestness of the manifesto and the possibility that their disclosures might somehow implicate them as targets of its criticism.

Discussion: fall-out from First Things First

First Things First has provoked a fair range of responses from 'name' designers and art directors. While sharing a largely unspecified commitment to social responsibility, reactions were varied among these intermediaries as to the perceived severity of the situation as described in the manifesto. Further, they seemed to feel that, at the limit, designers either had their hands tied or were simply innocent of the criticisms levelled at them (or were significantly less culpable than ad folk). More telling, perhaps, was the way in which the 'usual suspects' policed one another's level of involvement: in one or two cases it seemed that the politics of inclusion or exclusion as a signatory might actually outweigh the import of First Things First itself.

Since his interview with me, Bierut has taken a decidedly negative public position on the manifesto. In a recent article (Bierut, 2000) in *ID*, he set about criticizing the signatories of the manifesto partly because – with a few exceptions – they 'have specialized in [designing] extraordinarily beautiful things for the cultural elite, not the denizens of your local 7-Eleven' (Bierut, 2000: 76). Unlike his comments in interview, Bierut's somewhat glib response is characteristic of a tit-for-tat dialogue that has characterized much of the ensuing debate over First Things First. It is generally difficult to gauge whether individual responses have been borne of a genuine commitment to further discussion or have merely been symptomatic of a kind of turf wars played out in the pages of design magazines. To illustrate: two of the three responses to Bierut's article published in the letters page of the next issue of *ID* were from the editors of other design magazines. One was Steven Heller, editor of the *AIGA Journal of Graphic Design*; the other was Rudy VanderLans, editor of *Emigre*. Both were highly critical of Bierut's argument, with VanderLans accusing Bierut of working to 'maintain the status quo'.

On a more positive note, the letters page of the October/November 2000 issue of *Adbusters* carried a brief contribution from David Berman, National Ethics Chair of the Society of Graphic Designers of Canada. He reported that, after 'a passionate discussion' centring on the manifesto at a recent international design conference, 'the delegates unanimously agreed to sign the manifesto'. Furthermore,

Unlike past signatories, this group only agreed to sign on if it were attached to a commitment to meaningful action. Each delegate agreed to perform at least one socially responsible project in their professional work this year, and we are setting up a way for publicly collecting and publicizing these acts as an inspiration for others.

(Berman, 2000)

Berman was also chiefly responsible for the unprecedented development and implementation of a code of ethics for the Ontario chapter of the Society. Designers can now sit an exam to become Registered Graphic Designers (RGD), and Berman has high hopes that the initiative will be taken up by other chapters across Canada. In interview, Berman also said that it has received demonstrable support from the Ontario government, to the extent that it has begun specifying in some of its advertised contract work for the Province that only RGDs need apply.

Responses to First Things First have also been divided along generational lines. The public debate about the manifesto organized by the AIGA was held at the Fashion Institute of Technology, and was attended by many students – some of whom expressed puzzlement and even dismay at the panel's responses during the question and answer period. Discussions with educators at several educational institutions confirmed the degree to which young people have readily identified with the manifesto's criticisms. Elizabeth Resnick is a professor in the graphic design programme at Massachusetts College of Art, or MassArt. She also has a design practice and has long been an active member of the Boston chapter of the AIGA. In interview she was emphatic in noting that the reemergence of First Things First was highly significant for her students, strongly resonating with many of their formative concerns.

Katherine McCoy, during her long tenure as co-Chairman of the Department of Design at the Cranbrook Academy of Art, argued for the inclusion of 'issue-oriented work' (1994: 113) for design students to counter what she has termed the generally 'apolitical' nature of their educations. Indeed, this was very much part of McCoy's signature influence at Cranbrook. Similarly, the arrival of Sheila Levrant de Bretteville, a self-described 'graphic designer and public artist', as director of graduate studies in graphic design at Yale University's School of Art in 1990 also heralded a significant shift in pedagogical emphasis towards specifically *social* issues. Both McCoy and de Bretteville signed the First Things First manifesto. The most telling consequences of the return of the manifesto, then, may ultimately be measured through its impact on design education.

The Lasn–Dixon line: intermediaries as revolutionaries

One of the strongest advocates of the manifesto has been the Media Foundation, through its publication *Adbusters*. The magazine, which has historically fostered a

blend of consumer and environmental activism, carries little or no advertising; in fact, it has become particularly well-known for its spoofs of prominent ad campaigns ('Absolut Impotence'; 'Joe Chemo'). Kalle Lasn, the editor of *Adbusters* (and cofounder of the Media Foundation) has recently elaborated a political agenda – both in the magazine and in book-form (Lasn, 1999b) – which he describes as 'culture jamming'.¹⁷ It is through his elaborations on this strategy, and his utilization of the First Things First manifesto in particular, that Lasn continues to make overtures to both graphic designers and ad creatives:

We are going to be the first activist movement to be launched by print ads and TV spots, by putting up billboards and by this more visual image-oriented thrust. In that sense, graphic artists are the cutting edge of what we are doing. Not only that, but I've found that graphic artists are in some sense the perfect people to launch a revolution because they have an open-mindedness that I don't find in other professions. Their skills can be used to sell soap, sneakers and Coca-Cola, but they can also be used to change the world. More and more visual artists are realizing this.

(Lasn, in Poynor, 2000: 98).

As part of its ongoing, open invitation to readers to join in the cause of culture jamming, the Autumn 1999 issue also carried a call for entries for a 'Creative Resistance Contest': 'If you're a designer, filmmaker, ad agency team or digital artist, you have the skills to affect the issues that concern you. *Adbusters* needs your help to sell ideas, not products. Send us your best social marketing concept – storyboard, video, poster, print-ad, parody, installation or performance art piece. Create. Resist. Contest' (*Adbusters*, Autumn 1999: 63).

In gestures such as this, *Adbusters* may be acting as a bridge between critics and disillusioned ad people, at least according to its editor: 'there is a huge percentage of graphic artists within the advertising industry who are profoundly unhappy with their industry's ethical neutrality. Given the chance they would dearly love to be using their skills for other purposes, and these people finished up being very powerful allies for us' (quoted in Poynor, 1998: 40).

In interview with me, Lasn was full of enthusiasm for his project: with First Things First he hoped to 'launch a vigorous debate about why designers are sitting on the fence, and why they don't recognize the fact that they are actually foot-soldiers for consumer capitalism. . . . Designers are supporting a system that is unsustainable'. For the AIGA conference in Las Vegas, Lasn and Dixon recruited Jonathan Barnbrook, a well-known experimental typographer, to design a 48 ft billboard poster that was displayed outside the conference. Quoting the celebrated designer Tibor Kalman,¹⁸ it read: 'Designers: Stay away from corporations that want you to lie for them'.

For Lasn, then, graphic design affords its practitioners the latitude to explore their dissent openly; so-called political graphics can, at least nominally, be

accommodated as a legitimate form of design expression – as the *Adbusters* feature attests. (Tellingly, it is *Adbusters* alone that specifically refers to First Things First as a ‘Design’ manifesto.) It must also be said that Lasn, a former documentary film maker, and Dixon, the magazine’s art director, are intermediaries in the rare position of being able to lead with their consciences: rather than supplement business-as-usual with prosocial gestures, they have been able to dedicate their entire efforts to the politics of media activism.

In the issue of *Adbusters* that preceded the relaunch of First Things First, Lasn wrote a scathing attack in which he elaborated on his conviction that ‘culture jamming will become to our era what civil rights was to the ‘60s, what feminism was to the ‘70s, what environmental activism was to the ‘80s’ (‘The culture jammers network’, *Adbusters* Autumn 1999: 80). In ‘The New Activism’, he declared that ‘we’re not feminists’, ‘we’re not lefties’, and ‘we’re not academics’ (see also Lasn, 1999b). Among the shortcomings of these dubiously contrived – and apparently mutually exclusive – cohorts, were such crimes as ‘communications professors who tell their students everything that’s wrong with the world – and nothing about how to fix it’.¹⁹

When Edward Herman, co-author with Noam Chomsky of *Manufacturing Consent* (Herman and Chomsky, 1988), wrote in to complain that ‘Lasn’s effort to make culture jamming into a general philosophy and program of activism . . . is intellectually and programmatically pitiful’ (Herman, 1999: 12), this was Lasn’s accompanying reply – which is worth repeating *verbatim*: ‘Once again, a traditional lefty describes as “action” such efforts as “thinking very hard” and writing proposals that others, presumably, are expected to carry forward. But what have you done lately besides talk and write, Mr. Herman? Would the left be in so sorry a state if it had permitted itself more action – even if “based on outrage”?’ (Lasn, 1999a: 12)

Conclusion: towards a cultural economy of graphic design and advertising

In a short essay entitled ‘All the world’s a stage, screen or magazine: when culture is the logic of late capitalism’, Angela McRobbie (1996) argues for the importance of studying ‘the production of culture’ and ‘the sort of people who now work in culture, or who aspire to work in culture’ (1996: 336). Further, McRobbie calls into question several undesirable trends that she detects within cultural studies as it has been practiced. These are tendencies towards ‘overtheorizing’ and a ‘confin[ement] . . . to the world of the text’ – both of which can be understood, at least partially, as the result of ‘fairly damning critiques of . . . empiricism, ethnography and the category of experience’ (1996: 337). As I have tried to show, one way to work *against* the textualism to which I alluded at the

beginning of this paper is to actively engage with McRobbie's 'three E's' (i.e. 'empiricism, ethnography and the category of experience').

In the introduction to his ethnographic study of the production of a documentary series about childhood for American public television, Barry Dornfeld (1998) states:

An ethnographic approach to cultural production offers the possibility of rethinking and bridging the theoretical dichotomy between production and consumption, between producers' intentional meanings and audience members' interpreted meanings, and between production studies and reception studies.

(1998: 12–13)

This sounds like an ambitious project indeed, but one that I believe can be achieved through the modest assertion that we could benefit from applying a cultural studies perspective to selected work cultures – sites that are responsible for generating the media and cultural texts that, in the rush to analysis, have been routinely disarticulated from their generative environments.

Furthermore, while we often treat the commercial media system as inherently counter-democratic, and, through its products and corporate policies, as an overwhelmingly conservative cultural force, we should recognize that this orientation is *institutional*: it will not suffice as a universal characterization of the system *and* all those who work in it. To the extent that we invest emancipatory potential in the subjective experiences of media audiences, so, too, we would do well to note the progressive (and, on occasion, radical) micro-currents at play within media organizations of all sizes. Very recent British field research on fashion designers (McRobbie, 1998, 2000), ad men (Nixon, 1997a, 1997b) and retail workers (du Gay, 1996), and the general development of a cultural economy perspective (du Gay, 1997), threaten to complicate a neat (and misleadingly held) binary opposition between homogenized productive forces on the one hand, and liberatory consumption practices on the other.

Studies such as these compare favourably with recent ethnographies of media practices in the USA, for example Henderson's (1995) research on film school, Lutz and Collins' (1993) investigation of the production and reception of *National Geographic* magazine, and Dornfeld (1998). As Dornfeld argues:

We need to rethink producers as particular types of agents, producing media texts within contexts constrained by both culture, ideology, and economy, but operating within particular social locations and frameworks, not floating above society, as many approaches to the study of media forms seem to imply. This kind of reorientation would allow us to discuss with greater specificity and clarity the relationship between media forms and

practices and the larger public spheres they produce and are situated within.

(1998: 13)

By broadening the focus of critical attention in these ways we can continue to tease out the characteristic contours of the relationship between the subjective claims of designers and ad creatives and the structural constraints within which they generally operate; to explore the ways in which commercial practice enables non-commercial endeavours; and, to identify those subjective and/or structural elements that ultimately result in conservative, regressive or even pernicious 'texts'. Put bluntly, then: if graphics, ads and commercials are often so abundant in ideological cant, why not pay attention to the activities and beliefs of the highly skilled group that creates them – the cultural intermediaries – with the ultimate aim of training and using such talent more responsibly, and steering it toward more progressive ends?²⁰

Finally, it is my contention that cultural economy, as a gesture or an intervention (for it is surely too early to call it a theory) holds the promise of opening up a critical space in which to further develop our understanding of the intermediaries and, by extension, contemporary culture.

Notes

- 1 Definitions of the term 'graphic design' vary considerably. Until very recently it was also entirely absent from most major dictionaries (Wheeler, 1997). The *de facto* reference for graphic design students, critics and historians – Philip B. Meggs' *A History of Graphic Design* (Meggs, 1998) – begins its ambitious survey with the cave paintings of Lascaux. There is relative consensus, however, that the term itself was first used by W. A. Dwiggins in 1922 to describe an emergent set of practices that grew out of 'commercial art' (now more familiar as the practice of advertising).
- 2 The elaboration of Bourdieu's terms of analysis has been disappointingly thin. For exceptions, see Nixon (1997b), du Gay *et al.* (1997), and Stevens (1998). The latter employs Bourdieu's notions of taste, class and habitus to examine the rarefied world of distinguished architects. Aside from its decidedly polemical premises, Stevens' study offers some useful pointers for exploring the idea that individual success in graphic design is not simply premised on exceptional talent, but is also partly the result of accumulated cultural capital (including formative involvement with already-distinguished designers).
- 3 While Marilyn Crafton Smith (1994) has laid out a basic argument for a cultural studies approach to graphic design criticism, my intention here is actually to challenge this received model of cultural studies, or at least the bulk of research and analysis on advertising and design generated in its name.
- 4 This is not to discount certain ongoing debates that are often confined to the

design community and its most immediate academic counterparts. For example: the marginalization of women (e.g. Buckley, 1989; Thomson, 1994) and African-Americans (Margolin, 2000) in graphic design history; the role of an engaged politics of social activism (e.g. Lupton, 1999; McCoy, 1994); and, the possibilities for a radically improved professional milieu of social responsibility (e.g. van Toorn, 1998; ten Duis & Haase, 1999). 1989 also saw the advent of *Dangerous Ideas*, AIGA's third national conference, which ultimately proved to be a factor in emergent debates about social responsibility in graphic design. It featured Stuart Ewen as keynote speaker, but is perhaps best remembered for a heated debate between two well-known designers, sparked by one citing the other's company as an example of dubious business practices (see Brown (1989) and 'Tibor Kalman vs. Joe Duffy', *Print*, March/April 1990, pp. 68–75, 158–63).

- 5 The American Institute of Graphic Arts is a professional organization for art directors and designers with a national membership in excess of 14,000. With an administrative centre in New York, it has over 40 chapters throughout the United States.
- 6 *ID* was originally called *Industrial Design*, but has long since expanded its editorial focus to include all manner of two- and three-dimensional designed objects and spaces. Not to be confused with the British style magazine *i-D*.
- 7 Renamed *Trace: AIGA Journal of Design* in 2001. *Trace* ceased publication after three issues as a result of cost-cutting measures taken by the AIGA in the wake of the events of September 11, 2001.
- 8 *Critique* ceased publication in 2000.
- 9 *Emigre* has recently returned to an editorial focus on music.
- 10 A potential caveat with these publications, however, is the marked tendency to rely on the same small pool of writers. Indeed, there is often such a degree of familiarity among the participants that entire conversations seem to take place through articles, qualifications, expansions, and rebuttals, from month to month across a very small number of magazines and journals.
- 11 This is aside from scholarly publications such as the journal *Design Issues* (see also Margolin and Buchanan (1995) and Doordan (1995) for collected essays from this periodical) and the three-part special issue of the journal *Visible Language* edited by Andrew Blauvelt (1994/95). Limitations of space have prevented me from fully exploring these contributions here.
- 12 The AIGA held an event on First Things First shortly after the manifesto reappeared, and, more recently, organized a two-day conference on design history and criticism called *Looking Closer*. The 2001 AIGA national conference, to be held in Washington DC in September, aimed to address design's place in a broader social, political and cultural context. (The conference was ultimately postponed until March 2002 due to the events of September 11, 2001.) Academic interest has also begun to grow: see for example the conferences *Democratic Communications in a Branded World*, Carleton University (Ottawa, May 2001), and *Declarations of [inter]dependence and the im[media]cy of design*, Concordia University (Montreal, October 2001).

- 13 Some of these were originally conducted for an article in the *AIGA Journal of Graphic Design* (Soar, 1999). Permissions were obtained at the time to re-use the material in scholarly endeavors.
- 14 My emphasis on distinguished, or 'name', designers presents specific problems, not least of which is the temptation to use this evidence to generalize to the entire membership of AIGA, and beyond. Stevens (1998) provides a useful critique of the star system in architecture, in which he suggests that the achievement of distinction has a great deal to do with having the right class background, education, and formative professional connections.
- 15 Glaser has, in the past, taken a principled stand against unethical business practices. See, for example, his orchestrated withdrawal from a design competition organized by Chrysler (Glaser, 1997). He had discovered that the car company had instituted a policy of insisting on approving editorial copy in magazines before agreeing to buy advertising in them. Glaser persuaded fellow nominee Steven Heller, and jurors Jessica Helfand and Tibor Kalman, to join in his protest. Kalman, who had won the award the previous year, 'offered to give his \$10,000 award to charity or to use it to fight publicly this nasty form of censorship'.
- 16 Sagmeister noted, approvingly, that the designer of the much-lauded film titles for the movie *Seven* (1995, Dir. David Fincher, New Line Cinema) is a born-again Christian. He felt that the designer's 'very strong view on evil . . . [was] a point of departure. . . . I'm not a religious person but it . . . showed me that he has a strong backbone . . . and that's where it comes from'.
- 17 According to Rick Poynor, the term was 'coined in 1984 by the American experimental music and art collective, Negativland, to describe billboard liberation and other forms of media banditry' (Poynor, 1998: 39). See also Dery (1993) and Lasn (1999b).
- 18 Kalman, who died in 1999, was well-known in the design community for his outspoken views on design and social responsibility.
- 19 The fact that *Adbusters* has also featured articles by Professors Stuart Ewen, Mark Crispin Miller, and Sut Jhally – not to mention *homages* to the trenchant critiques of Barbara Kruger and *Ms.* magazine, seems altogether puzzling.
- 20 While this can be achieved most immediately through more enlightened decisions about which clients to take on and the working relationships so developed, it also has much to do with creative execution, such as the selection of specific images to communicate a particular issue. Lavin (2001), for example, argues that the abortion debate might be lifted out of its current rancorous deadlock – 'the pro-life helpless fetus versus the pro-choice helpless woman' (Lavin, 2001: 145) – through a conscious expansion of the range of images used in the designed communications (e.g. posters and leaflets) produced by both sides.

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Appendix

FIRST THINGS FIRST MANIFESTO 2000

We, the undersigned, are graphic designers, art directors and visual communicators who have been raised in a world in which the techniques and apparatus of advertising have persistently been presented to us as the most lucrative, effective and desirable use of our talents. Many design teachers and mentors promote this belief; the market rewards it; a tide of books and publications reinforces it.

Encouraged in this direction, designers then apply their skill and imagination to sell dog biscuits, designer coffee, diamonds, detergents, hair gel, cigarettes, credit cards, sneakers, butt toners, light beer and heavy-duty recreational vehicles. Commercial work has always paid the bills, but many graphic designers have now let it become, in large measure, *what graphic designers do*. This, in turn, is how the world perceives design. The profession's time and energy is used up manufacturing demand for things that are inessential at best.

Many of us have grown increasingly uncomfortable with this view of design. Designers who devote their efforts primarily to advertising, marketing and brand development are supporting, and implicitly endorsing, a mental environment so saturated with commercial messages that it is changing the very way citizen-consumers speak, think, feel, respond and interact. To some extent we are all helping draft a reductive and immeasurably harmful code of public discourse.

There are pursuits more worthy of our problem-solving skills. Unprecedented environmental, social and cultural crises demand our attention. Many cultural interventions, social marketing campaigns, books, magazines, exhibitions, educational tools, television programs, films, charitable causes and other information design projects urgently require our expertise and help.

We propose a reversal of priorities in favor of more useful, lasting and democratic forms of communication — a mindshift away from product marketing and toward the exploration and production of a new kind of meaning. The scope of debate is shrinking; it must expand. Consumerism is running uncontested; it must be challenged by other perspectives expressed, in part, through the visual languages and resources of design.

In 1964, 22 visual communicators signed the original call for our skills to be put to worthwhile use. With the explosive growth of global commercial culture, their message has only grown more urgent. Today, we renew their manifesto in expectation that no more decades will pass before it is taken to heart.



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