

FTF 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.

Signed

Jonathan Barnbrook , Nick Bell, Andrew Blauvelt , Hans Bockting , Irma Boom , Sheila Levrant de Bretteville , Max Bruinsma , Simeon Cook, Linda van Deursen , Chris Dixon , William Drenttel, Gert Dumbar, Simon Esterson, Vince Frost, Ken Garland, Milton Glaser, Jessica Helfand, Steven Heller, Andrew Howard, Tibor Kalman, Jeffery Keedy, Zuzana Licko, Ellen Lupton, Katherine McCoy, Armand Mevis, J. Abbott Miller, Rick Poynor, Lucienne Roberts, Erik Spiekermann, Jan van Toorn, Teal Triggs, Rudy VanderLans, Bob Wilkinson

FTF Revisited

When Ken Garland published his First Things First manifesto in London thirty-five years ago, he threw down a challenge to graphic designers and other visual communicators that refuses to go away. As the century ends, this brief message, dashed off in the heat of the moment, and signed by twenty-one of his colleagues, is more urgent than ever; the situation it lamented incalculably more extreme.

It is no exaggeration to say that designers are engaged in nothing less than the manufacture of contemporary reality. Today, we live and breathe design. Few of the experiences we value at home, at leisure, in the city or the mall are free of its alchemical touch. We have absorbed design so deeply into ourselves that we no longer recognize the myriad ways in which it prompts, cajoles, disturbs, and excites us. It's completely natural. It's just the way things are.

We imagine that we engage directly with the “content” of the magazine, the TV commercial, the pasta sauce, or perfume, but the content is always mediated by design and it’s design that helps direct how we perceive it and how it makes us feel. The brand-meisters and marketing gurus understand this only too well. The product may be little different in real terms from its rivals. What seduces us is its “image.” This image reaches us first as a visual entity - shape, color, picture, type. But if it’s to work its effect on us it must become an idea: NIKE! This is the tremendous power of design.

The original *First Things First* was written at a time when the British economy was booming. People of all classes were better off than ever before and jobs were easily had. Consumer goods such as TVs, washing machines, fridges, record players and cars, which North Americans were the first to take for granted, were transforming everyday life in the wealthier European nations - and changing consumer expectations for ever. Graphic design, too, had emerged from the austerity of the post-war years, when four-colour printing was a rarity, and designers could only dream of American clients’ lavish production budgets and visual panache. Young designers were vigorous and optimistic. They organized meetings, debates and exhibitions promoting the value of design. Professional associations were started and many leading figures, still active today, began their careers.

Ken Garland studied design at the Central School of Arts and Crafts in London in the early 1950s, and for six years was art editor of *Design* magazine, official mouthpiece of the Council of Industrial Design. In 1962, he set up his own company, Ken Garland & Associates, and the same year began a fruitful association (a “do-it-for-love consultancy,” as he once put it) with the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. He was a committed campaigner against the bomb, and his “Aldermaston to London Easter 62” poster, with its huge, marching CND symbol, is a classic piece of protest graphics from the period. Always outspoken, in person and in print, he was an active member of the socialist Labour Party.

Garland penned his historic statement on 29 November 1963, during a crowded meeting of the Society of Industrial Artists at London’s Institute of Contemporary Arts. At the end he asked the chairman whether he could read it out. “As I warmed to the task I found I wasn’t so much reading it as declaiming it,” he recalled later; “it had become, we all realized simultaneously, that totally unfashionable device, a Manifesto.” There was prolonged applause and many people volunteered their signatures there and then.

Four hundred copies of *First Things First* were published in January 1964. Some of the other signatories were well-established figures. Edward Wright, in his early forties, and the oldest, taught experimental typography at the Central School; Anthony Froshaug was also a Central typographer of great influence. Others were teachers, students, or just starting out as designers. Several were photographers.

The manifesto received immediate backing from an unexpected quarter. One of the signatories passed it to Caroline Wedgwood Benn, wife of the Labour Member of Parliament, Anthony Wedgwood Benn (now Tony Benn). On 24 January, Benn reprinted the manifesto in its entirety in his weekly *Guardian* newspaper column. “The responsibility for the waste of talent which they have denounced is one we must all share,” he wrote. “The evidence for it is all around us in the ugliness with which we have to live. It could so easily be replaced if only we consciously decided as a community to engage some of the skill which now goes into the frills of an affluent society.”

That evening, as a result of the *Guardian* article, Garland was invited on to a BBC TV news program to read out a section of *First Things First* and discuss the manifesto. It was subsequently reprinted in *Design*, the *SIA Journal* (which built an issue round it), the *Royal College of Art* magazine, *Ark*, and the yearbook *Modern Publicity 1964/65*, where it was also translated into French and German. This publicity meant that many people, not just in Britain but abroad, heard about and read *First Things First*. Garland has letters in his files from designers, design teachers and other interested parties as far afield as Australia, the United States and the Netherlands requesting copies, affirming support for the manifesto’s message, or inviting him to come and speak about it.

That First Things First struck a nerve is clear. It arrived at a moment when design was taking off as a confident, professionalized activity. The rapid growth of the affluent consumer society meant there were many opportunities for talented visual communicators in advertising, promotion and packaging. The advertising business itself had experienced a so-called “creative revolution” in New York, and several influential American exponents of the new ideas-based graphic design were working for London agencies in the early 1960s. A sense of glamour and excitement surrounded this well-paid line of work. From the late 1950s onwards, a few skeptical designers began to ask publicly what this non-stop tide of froth had to do with the wider needs and problems of society. To some, it seemed that the awards with which their colleagues liked to flatter themselves attracted and celebrated only the shallowest and most ephemeral forms of design. For Garland and the other concerned signatories of First Things First, design was in danger of forgetting its responsibility to struggle for a better life for all.

The critical distinction drawn by the manifesto was between design as communication (giving people necessary information) and design as persuasion (trying to get them to buy things). In the signatories’ view, a disproportionate amount of designers’ talents and effort was being expended on advertising trivial items, from fizzy water to slimming diets, while more “useful and lasting” tasks took second place: street signs, books and periodicals, catalogues, instruction manuals, educational aids, and so on. The British designer Jock Kinneir (not a signatory) agreed: “Designers oriented in this direction are concerned less with persuasion and more with information, less with income brackets and more with physiology, less with taste and more with efficiency, less with fashion and more with amenity. They are concerned in helping people to find their way, to understand what is required of them, to grasp new processes and to use instruments and machines more easily.”

Some dismissed the manifesto as naive, but the signatories were absolutely correct in their assessment of the way that design was developing. In the years that followed, similar misgivings were sometimes voiced by other designers, but most preferred to keep their heads down and concentrate on questions of form and craft. Lubricated by design, the juggernaut rolled on. In the gentler, much less invasive commercial climate of the early 1960s, it was still possible to imagine that if a few more designers would only move across to the other side of the vehicle balance would be restored. In its wording, the manifesto did not acknowledge the extent to which this might, in reality, be a political issue, and Garland himself made a point of explaining that the underlying political and economic system was not being called into question. “We do not advocate the abolition of high pressure consumer advertising,” he wrote, “this is not feasible.” But the decision to concentrate one’s efforts as a designer on corporate projects, or advertising, or any other kind of design, is a political choice. “Design is not a neutral value-free process,” argues the American design educator Katherine McCoy, who contends that corporate work of even the most innocuous content is never devoid of political bias. Today, the imbalance identified by First Things First is greater than ever. 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. As McCoy points out, this is a decisive vote for economic considerations over other potential concerns, including society’s social, educational, cultural, spiritual, and political needs. In other words, it’s a political statement in support of the status quo.

Design’s love affair with form to the exclusion of almost everything else lies at the heart of the problem. In the 1990s, advertisers were quick to coopt the supposedly “radical” graphic and typographic footwork of some of design’s most celebrated and ludicrously self-regarding stars, and these designers, seeing an opportunity to reach national and global audiences, were only too happy to take advertising’s dollar. Design styles lab-tested in youth magazines and obscure music videos became the stuff of sneaker, soft drink and bank ads. Advertising and design are closer today than at any point since the 1960s. For many young designers emerging from design schools in the 1990s, they now appear to be one and the same. Obsessed with how cool an ad looks, rather than with what it is really saying, or the meaning of the context in which it says it, these designers seriously seem to believe that formal innovations alone are somehow able to effect progressive change in the nature and content of the message communicated. Exactly how, no one ever manages to explain.

Meanwhile, in the sensation-hungry design press, in the judging of design competitions, in policy statements from design organizations, in the words of design's senior figures and spokespeople (on the few occasions they have a chance to address the public) and even in large sections of design education, we learn about very little these days other than the commercial uses of design. It's rare to hear any strong point of view expressed, by most of these sources, beyond the unremarkable news that design really can help to make your business more competitive. When the possibility is tentatively raised that design might have broader purposes, potential and meanings, designers who have grown up in a commercial climate often find this hard to believe. "We have trained a profession," says McCoy, "that feels political or social concerns are either extraneous to our work or inappropriate."

The new signatories' enthusiastic support for Adbusters' updated First Things First reasserts its continuing validity, and provides a much-needed opportunity to debate these issues before it is too late. What's at stake in contemporary design, the artist and critic Johanna Drucker suggests, isn't so much the look or form of design practice as the life and consciousness of the designer (and everybody else, for that matter). She argues that the process of unlocking and exposing the underlying ideological basis of commercial culture boils down to a simple question that we need to ask, and keep on asking: "In whose interest and to what ends? Who gains by this construction of reality, by this representation of this condition as 'natural'?"

This is the concern of the designer or visual communicator in at least two senses. First, like all of us, as a member of society, as a citizen (a word it would be good to revive), as a punchdrunk viewer on the receiving end of the barrage of commercial images. Second, as someone whose sphere of expertise is that of representation, of two-dimensional appearances, and the construction of reality's shifting visual surface, interface and expression. If thinking individuals have a responsibility to withstand the proliferating technologies of persuasion, then the designer, as a skilled professional manipulator of those technologies, carries a double responsibility. Even now, at this late hour, in a culture of rampant commodification, with all its blindspots, distortions, pressures, obsessions, and craziness, it's possible for visual communicators to discover alternative ways of operating in design.

At root, it's about democracy. The escalating commercial take-over of everyday life makes democratic resistance more vital than ever.
