

DESIGN AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY,
ARE THEY MUTUALLY INCOMPATIBLE?

A Thesis

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Design Statement

Typography, grids, and computer software are some of the tools of the designer, but knowledge of these things alone do not make you a good designer. Design requires the ability to reach out to different disciplines to solve the visual problem. Being open to inspiration from any source— history, science, even the peeling posters on the lamppost, allows us to act as a mediator in this visual world. My role as a designer is to take these observations and translate them into concrete images.

The formal aspect of design is not an end in itself; the more crucial aspect for me is the success of solving the visual problem. The formal aspects are merely a vehicle for the content and should only enhance but not distract from the content. Design can lend content credibility, legibility, and emotional impact. It is a powerful tool that is often misunderstood and misused. My personal goal is to integrate my skills as a designer with my passion for activism to work with nonprofits, arts and cultural organizations to create socially responsible design.

Abstract

This thesis deals with the question, can (or should) design be socially responsible?

Design is defined as a powerful economic, cultural, and social force within society. With that power comes a responsibility to be aware of the ramifications of design. The economic value of design came about with the shift of the U.S. society from production to consumption. Though design plays a large part in economics it has also historically been used for social and political reasons. Design has been used to win wars, stop public health crises, and to cast presidential elections into doubt. In a negative light, design can also create and reinforce stereotypes and assumptions that can be harmful to the audience. Huge amounts of waste and environmental damage can be caused by design. The fact that corporations utilize design more often than schools, cultural agencies, and other nonprofits creates a monopoly of advertising messages in the public domain. Even more disturbing is the growing disparity of who has access to technology. This thesis does not offer simple answers but looks at several ways that designers could integrate social responsibility into their work.

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Introduction

Graphic design – which fulfills esthetic needs, complies with the laws of form... which speaks in semiotics, sans serifs, and geometrics;...is not good design if it is irrelevant. Visual communications of any kind, whether persuasive or informative, from billboards to birth announcements, should be seen as the embodiment of form and function: the integration of the beautiful and useful.¹

– Paul Rand

Graphic design is a powerful tool for shaping cultural, social, and economic interactions. With that power comes a responsibility for the designer to be aware of the consequences of their efforts. This thesis will explore the ways that design influences society, possible negative impacts of design, and lastly will talk about different ways that designers, myself included, can assume responsibility in their work. By elaborating on my design philosophy, I encourage each designer to create their own personal ethics and values when it comes to their work.

Graphic design is not limited to websites, newspapers, and advertising. It is a means of communication, of problem-solving, that is used in everyday life. Not relegated only to the professional, it is a "universal life-skill, a way of ordering, interpreting, and

¹ Quoted by Nancy Nowacek, "Us versus Them," The Education of an E-Designer, ed. Steven Heller (New York: Allworth Press, 2001), p. 186.

enhancing our artifacts, images, and surroundings....”² Design is inherent in everything we experience whether it has consciously been designed or not. The AIGA defined graphic design in 1913 as “all arts and crafts intended to make ideas visible.”³ Poor design is more obvious to the viewer when it interferes with the comprehension of the idea. Good design lets you concentrate on the message itself.

It has been argued that graphic design is a form of persuasion or even propaganda. First let me clarify the definitions of persuasion and propaganda. Propaganda has generally been defined as “the systematic widespread promotion of a particular doctrine or idea.”⁴ Persuasion can also fit into that definition but generally doesn’t hold the same negative connotations as propaganda. Propaganda is associated with war and repressive governments, while persuasion is associated with advertising and health campaigns. It all depends on your perspective on how it is used. Graphic design can also be seen as a tool, where its use can be moral or not, rather than placing a value judgement on the whole of graphic design itself.

Designers are not just problem solvers; they are fluent in the visual language that permeates the culture. The ability to create meaning on several levels allows designers to address and speak to many complex issues. This allows designers to keep the quality of public debate high and invites the viewer in to the dialogue.⁵ Naomi Klein argues that the

² Rick Poynor, “First Things Next” <http://www.adbusters.org/magazine/36/next/1.html>

³ Ellen Mazur Thomson. *The Origins of Graphic Design in America: 1870 – 1920*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), pg. 4.

⁴ Riverside Webster’s II Dictionary.

⁵ Max Bruinsma. “The Long March.” American Centre for Design: 22nd Annual 100 Show of Excellence, 2001. <http://www.xs4all.nl/~maxb/AC4D.html>

culture has gone from being a dialogue to a monologue with the messages coming down from the corporate towers. She says, “The underlying message is that culture is something that happens to you...It is not something in which you participate, or to which you have the right to respond to.”⁶

Good graphic design, in my opinion, can be a solution where the reader is asked to think, feel, and respond. Communication theories abound, too many to detail here, but communication is no longer seen as a simple linear process with a sender and receiver, more a complex relationship where both sides bring their own interpretations.

Economics and Design



Figure 1

American society is largely a consumer culture. With the advent of industrialization more of the population moved from rural to urban areas and we saw a shift from the home as producer to consumer of goods.⁷ The new urban population was more mobile, dependent on mass-produced goods, and comprised of wage earners rather than self-sufficient.⁸ The mass-production of goods was a result and cause of America shifting to an economy of bartering to

⁶ Naomi Klein. No Logo. (New York: Picador, 1999), p. 178.

⁷ Stuart and Elizabeth Ewen Channels of Desire: Mass Images and the shaping of American Consciousness. (Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 1992), p. 37

⁸ Ewen, p. 35.

monetary exchange. A consumer economy is dependent on the need for the consumer to keep buying, if not at the present rate, then at a higher rate.⁹ There can never be enough desire for a product and ads are a part of the mechanism that creates that desire.

In the last twenty years there has been a profound shift in business practices in the U.S. Many companies are no longer producing products but marketing brands. They have shut down their factories (largely in the U.S.) and outsourced to much cheaper contractors globally.¹⁰ The move to marketing has led to more expensive and intense ad



Figure 2

campaigns. In 1998 alone, the U.S. spent \$ 200.3 billion on all forms of advertising. The rest of the world, combined, only spent \$ 218.4 billion.¹¹ With the downturn of the economy after the events of September 11, 2001, we were even encouraged by our president to support our country by shopping more. Johnathan Rowe made the comparison best between the sacrifice illustrated by ration cards of WWII and the consumption encouraged by the automobile makers offering deals on sport utility vehicles.¹² This highlights the shift in the economy from production to consumption.

The mass production of goods also led to a demand to keep these goods new and innovative, and therefore desirable to the consumer.¹³ This is thanks in part to Earnest Elmo Calkins who, in the late 1920's, wrote about the importance of programmed

⁹ Ewen, p. 37.

¹⁰ Klein, p. 196 – 198.

¹¹ Klein, p. 81.

¹² Johnathan Rowe. "Our World War," *Adbusters* January / February 2002, p. 40.

obsolescence. He felt that all products need a style makeover from time to time to encourage the consumer to buy.¹⁴ This programmed obsolescence does push for more innovation in the product but often the innovation is only superficial. The product may not be any different but may be bigger, with new packaging or just a different logo.¹⁵

Social and Political Design



Figure 3



Figure 4

Propaganda has made the most obvious use of graphic design. Past wartime propaganda (World War II and earlier) is easily identified by its simplification of the message, the gross distortion of the enemy, and the playing up of emotions. Anti-war posters use many of the same techniques. Polish designer, Tadeusz Trepkowski, created a

¹³ Leo Bogart. *Commercial Culture*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 66-67.

¹⁴ Michael Bierut and et al, Ed. *Looking Closer 2: Critical Writings on Graphic Design*. (New York: Allworth Press, 1997), p. 114.

¹⁵ Bogart, p. 67.

powerful statement about the carnage of war in his poster “Nie!” (Polish for “no”). Ruins of a devastated building are silhouetted within the image of a falling bomb to create a simple but eloquent statement.¹⁶

A poignant example of lack of thoughtful design can be seen with the presidential elections of 2001. The design of the ballots in Florida led to many voters becoming confused on actually whom they had voted for. A common sense design could have averted several months of legal battles and the uncertainty of who won the election. Since then the AIGA (American Institute of Graphic Arts) has made it a priority to go before the government to lobby for the use of professional designers for the ballot as well as other important documents and communications.



Figure 5

Clear and concise design can illustrate, educate, and motivate. Edward Tufte is one of the most vocal advocates for the use of quality visuals to make a point. One of his many examples is the case where a Dr. Snow in 1854 was trying to stop a cholera epidemic in central London. He created a simple map where he marked the deaths by dots and crosses to mark the location of water pumps. Dr. Snow realized that the majority of the deaths occurred around one such pump. He took action to have it removed and the epidemic ended.¹⁷ The current battle against the HIV/AIDS epidemic has also inspired powerful images to educate and raise

¹⁶ Steven Heller and Karen Pomeroy. Design Literacy: Understanding Graphic Design. (New York: Allworth Press, 1997), p. 11.

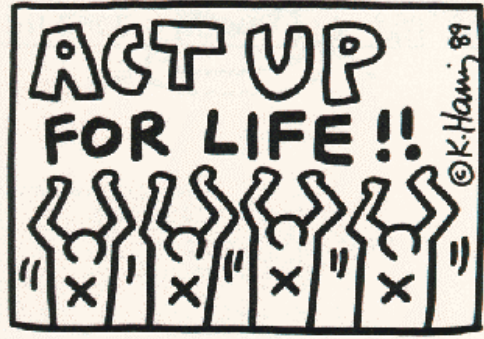


Figure 6

awareness. Act Up, an activist group has used Keith Haring's artwork to signify that this is a matter of life and death. His iconic people do not relate to any particular gender, race, or ethnicity, which helps strengthen the fact that HIV/AIDS does not discriminate.

Culture and Design

Design, in the form of advertising, has created brands that do more than sell products; they sell self-identity. The ad is not just selling the product but a fantasy that comes with using the product. Ads promise not just the deodorant but a happier, sexier, cooler you.¹⁸ When you think about certain labels put on segments of the population, like Yuppie for instance, certain products are associated with them. Starbucks coffee, Gap khakis, and a cellular phone are seen as part of the lifestyle. A person can try on a new identity by simply buying a new product.

Design can also reinforce what is considered "high" and "low" culture. An item's value can be increased or decreased by simply by packaging and it's style. At the same time, a person's standing in society can be increased or decreased by the design they use.

¹⁷ Edward Tufte. The Visual Display of Quantitative Information. (Graphics Press: Connecticut, 1983), 24.

Katie Salen writes about how typography can be a way of “marking” that signals certain assumptions about economic status, race, and other background information.¹⁹ Graffiti is usually associated with street culture and is often borrowed for use in selling to members of that culture. Some might call that clever marketing but when it’s used to sell malt liquor and cigarettes it shows how design can reinforce stereotypes and cultural assumptions in a powerful way.

Negative effects of design

Graphic design can have a detrimental impact on the environment. The obvious impact is that catalogs, ads, packaging, and point of purchase display often end up in the wastebasket and in our landfills. According to the EPA, 41% percent of garbage consists of paper and related paperboard; 80% percent of that paper will not be recycled but will end up in landfills.²⁰ The more subtle effect is the demand that design creates for new products and the disposal of the old. With the difference in products being more superficial than real, this leads to a disposable society, where we would rather throw out products than refurbish and keep them.

¹⁸ Arthur Asa Berger. Ads, Fads, and Consumer Culture. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2000), p. 46.

¹⁹ Katie Salen. “Surrogate Multiplicities: In Search of the Visual Voice–Over” Graphic Design and Reading: Explorations of an Uneasy Relationship. Ed. Gunnar Swanson. (Allworth Press: New York, 2000), p. 79.

Advertising creates unrealistic norms that very few can live up to. By seeking our identity in consumer products, the ads set a standard for what is considered desirable. With the ads usually reflecting the upper-middle class, white, heterosexual, beautiful, and thin, those who don't fit this description are left feeling out of the norm.²¹ A study conducted by Mary E. Gomes, an assistant professor of psychology, and psychologist Matthew Albracht, consisted of interviewing forty people from divergent backgrounds about the role advertising plays in their lives. It revealed some of the universal needs advertisement plays upon. Advertisements were seen as not just giving information about a product, but defining social norms.

The participants felt conflicted about wanting to be their "true" selves, and being accepted by the consumer culture. The participants wanted to see their culture, gender, and other personal traits reflected in the ads. Groups that aren't portrayed in ads, or are depicted stereotypically felt a sense of alienation.²² Feminists have long criticized the way women are depicted in the advertising as victims of violence, an unattainable body, or a sex object. Different ethnic groups are excluded from mainstream ads. There is growing concern over a sense of isolation in this culture, which some critics blame on this consumer culture. There is growing debate in a wide range of disciplines about the possible negative effects of advertising.

²⁰ Bierut, p. 185.

²¹ Mary E. Gomes, Stephen Leupold, and Matthew Albracht. "Advertising, Community, and Self." ReVision (Spring 1998), p. 26.

²² Gomes, pg. 2.



Figure 7

Graphic design is not always used in the best interests of the people. The power of design has been used to purposefully deceive and manipulate the public. War propaganda has done more than rally the troops and the homefront, it has blatantly lied about the frontline conditions and created atrocities where there were none. This was the case during WWI with Britain's Ministry of Information, and the public became so distrustful that reports on Nazi concentration camps in WWII were not believed at first.²³ Cigarette advertising is a more contemporary example of deliberate deceit. For years tobacco companies knew the dangers of smoking but withheld this information from the public. At the same time they aggressively targeted kids in their ad campaigns with the likes of Joe Camel, their cartoon pal.²⁴

Who has access to design is another area to examine. Good design is not cheap, so those who can afford design services are whose message reaches the most people. Designer Michael Rock wants his colleagues to be aware of the “nexus of money, power, and communication.”²⁵ Corporations are often the largest consumers of design services. Organizations, such as schools, public health, and the arts, who have vital messages to communicate, have nowhere near the budget of the corporations. The avenues for the display of design are also limited. The majority of TV, newspapers, book publishers, and Internet providers are owned by only 7 corporations. These corporations also have

²³ David Welch. “Powers of Persuasion” *History Today* August 1999, p. 24.

²⁴ Heller. *Design Literacy*, p. 26.

²⁵ Bierut, p. 180.

extensive holdings in other industries like nuclear power, defense, and oil.²⁶ For those trying to buy ad time on TV or in newspapers that might criticize the parent company (or any of its sponsors) that owns that media outlet it can be nearly impossible. The media will often self-censor or buckle under advertiser pressure to avoid a loss of revenue.²⁷

A lack of access to the education and tools to create design is another problem. Here at the University of Idaho we have 1 computer for about every 11 students. In contrast, in the Margaret Trowell School of Industrial and Fine Art at Makerere University in Uganda there is only 1 computer for every 50 students.²⁸ Students who have little or no computer experience just can't compete in the design field.

There is also a danger of a widening digital gap with the advent of the World Wide Web. As a designer I consider myself being inclusive in my design as allowing for slow modem times and old browsers. It's easy to forget that only 7% of the world's population are on-line. Africa has more than 10% of the world's population but less than 1% have access to the World Wide Web. In India, only about 0.2% of the adult population have access. Compare this with the fact that about 60% of the UK will have access by 2003.²⁹ This sets up a hierarchy of power and control by excluding whole segments of the world's population from the design dialogue.

²⁶ Adbusters, http://adbusters.org/campaigns/mediacarta/toolbox/who_owns

²⁷ Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Karlyn Kohrs Campbell. *The Interplay of Influence*. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2001), p.108.

²⁸ Susan E. Davis. "Design without borders," *HOW Magazine*, April 2002, p. 182.

²⁹ Simon Rogerson. "ICT and Social Justice," *TPM Online*.
http://www.philosophers.co.uk/current/ict_social_justice.html

How designers can take responsibility

It is not a lost cause or a pipe dream to integrate social and personal responsibility into design. Who a designer chooses as a client can be an important first step. Some



Figure 8

designers have eliminated a specific client altogether and chose to work with an issue or cause. Barbara Krueger, who has been called both an artist and a designer, produces work on issues important to her. Her style stems from her earlier jobs at Harper Bazaar and Mademoiselle where she rose to senior designer quickly. All her work shares the use of nondescript

photos that look as if appropriated from an ad, cropped, with the text layered over. The tension between the ambiguous text and photo creates multiple meanings that take on feminist and anti-consumerism undertones.³⁰ Her work is more often seen in art museums but when taken out of that context it's difficult to discern it stylistically from an ad.



Figure 9

In a recent project, I have taken on the issue of the import of the mineral coltan and how it's financing a bloody war. I was disturbed by the lack of media

³⁰ Heller, Design Literacy, p. 22-23.

coverage of the fact that at least 2.5 million people have needlessly died in the Democratic Republic of Congo.³¹ Coltan, a mineral that is used in most electronics including cellular phones, computers, and TVs, is found abundantly in the Congo. Several different factions, many from neighboring nations, are controlling these mineral rich areas, mining them, and making a huge profit. The local population is starving and faces violence from the instability in the region.³² There are several goals of this project; making people care about what is happening, educating them about the connection between consumer products and the war, and to giving them concrete steps to take action if they so choose.

Not having photos to work with in my coltan project, I decided to go with a typographic approach. I chose headlines that were confrontational to engage the viewer and draw them in. The colors and type all work to keep them reading and get the information. I ended the poster with some concrete steps that the viewer could do to help with the situation.

Another approach is to be selective in picking a client by defining some guidelines that the client must meet. This can be a murky area though, as Michael Rock has pointed out; most people will no longer work for cigarette magnate Phillip Morris but does that exclude Kraft, one of it's subsidiaries? What about charities that are supported

³¹ IRC (International Rescue Committee). Mortality in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, May 2001.

³² IPIS (International Peace Information Service). Supporting the War Economy in the DRC: European companies and the coltan trade, January 2002, p. 6.

by Phillip Morris?³³ Max Bruinsma has said, “allegiance and critique are not incompatible.” He doesn’t believe in complete loyalty or opposition but rather using the middle ground to create a discourse. It comes down to the individual designer deciding what is their “mental and moral bottom line and having the courage to adhere to it.”³⁴



Figure 10



Figure 11

One designer who used a corporate setting to critique and raise controversial issues was Tibor Kalman. Kalman was seen as something of a maverick in the design industry since he had no formal training but his impact is still being felt today. Kalman felt that it was necessary to take the commercial with the political, that “There’s no sense in being politically progressive if you’re not commercially viable because you can’t get the word out.”³⁵ Olivero Toscani, the advertising director of Benetton, was the man responsible for the use of highly controversial images of dying AIDS patients and war zones in their ad campaigns. Benetton has argued that it’s using its clout to highlight social issues.

³³ Michael Rock, Ed. Michael Bierut, et al. “Can Design be Socially Responsible?” Looking Closer. (Allworth Press: New York, 1994), 191.

³⁴ Bruinsma, 3.

Controversy aside, Toscani approached Kalman about creating a magazine that could expand the discussion of these issues and serve as context for the ads. Kalman accepted and the magazine *Colors* was born. Kalman had complete editorial control over the magazine and he proceeded to push the envelope. The format varied from issue to issue but was always multi-lingual and largely visual. The issue dealing with racism was met with the largest controversy, mainly for the layout where Kalman alters the race of several famous figures such as the Queen of England, to ask the question is it race or power that segregates people.³⁶ In the two layouts I have shown here you can see the simple and direct use of images that illustrate the sameness of humanity.

A more common approach is the donation of services, or pro bono work, for nonprofits, educational institutions, and cultural agencies. These groups generally don't have much of a budget but nevertheless have important information to get out. Designers can take several different routes; doing an occasional pro bono piece, setting aside a percentage of their profits to fund the pro bono work, or adopting one agency for a year. Brown & Co. decided to opt for the adoption route mainly because they were taking on too many small jobs with many nonprofits. They felt they could make a much bigger impact by taking on one nonprofit and treating them as a paying client. This has allowed them to really focus on creating the nonprofit's identity and not just designing a brochure here and there.³⁷

³⁵ Tibor Kalman. Tibor Kalman, perverse Optimist. (Princeton Architectural Press: New York, NY, 1998), p. 58.

³⁶ Heller. Design Literacy, 99 – 101.

³⁷ Jenny Sullivan. "Giving Back." HOW, January / February 2002, 73 – 74.

For my part I have done a few projects for nonprofits, mostly as a favor for a friend. I decided to take on a more permanent challenge by volunteering to do the

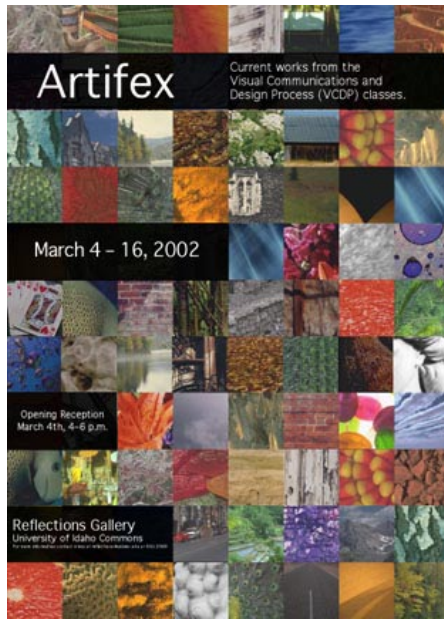


Figure 12

graphics for the Reflections Gallery that is located on campus in the Commons. This required creating a poster and postcards about every two weeks for each show. My main goal with this project was to raise the bar for the quality of graphics, which I hoped, would also increase the prestige of the gallery. When I first started, the previous posters had been doubled from an 11" x 17" by blowing them up on a copier, then laminated and mounted on foam core. The results were less than thrilling;

images couldn't be used because they came out at such poor quality and they were only black and white.

I did some research and negotiating to start printing posters in color and at a much higher quality. I decided to decrease the size to allow for two posters, one to be posted at the show and the other the artist could use as advertisement. I encouraged the clients to meet with me to try to create something that truly captured the theme of the show. In actuality few consulted me on concept; more often than not I was given some images and text and allowed complete creative control. As I leave this year I will hand off this position and hope that the next designer will build upon what I have started.

Designers can also take leadership roles that can change whole neighborhoods. Candice Lopez, a graphic–design professor in San Diego, decided to fight crime and get drug dealers out of the East Village. The drug dealers were using electrical pad transformer boxes, found on most street corners, as a place of business. Lopez proposed painting these boxes into blatant works of art that would draw too much attention to the workings of the drug dealers. With volunteers from the local AIGA chapter, schools, and neighborhood the transformation was a success and the Urban Art Trail was born. This inspired others to create more public art that beautified the neighborhood and cut down on crime. An added bonus was the workshops given by designers with inner–city kids that gave them exposure to the design field.³⁸

Other designers have taken a more global approach, such as the group Design without Borders, which actually consists of husband and wife David Stairs and Sydnee MacKay. Both graphic designers, they relocated to Uganda to create a design program and bring much needed resources to Makerere University. One of their goals is to allow students there the opportunity to gain skills that will actually make them competitive in the larger design field. They also see themselves and their students as a resource for the many businesses and charities that have virtually no access to design services.³⁹

Trying to combat stereotypes and assumptions within design can often be difficult. There are no clear-cut guidelines for a designer to follow; it comes down to being aware of what message you are sending, intentionally or unintentionally. I created a

³⁸ Sullivan, 72 – 73.

³⁹ Davis p. 182.

poster for the show for World AIDS Day 2000, which is a topic fraught with emotion and fear. I drew upon my past years' experience as a sexuality educator to try to pinpoint the most important message I wanted to convey. I saw my fellow designers create powerful posters but they all seemed to be too specific in targeting an audience. It's so easy for people to go into denial because they aren't like "those people who get HIV/AIDS."

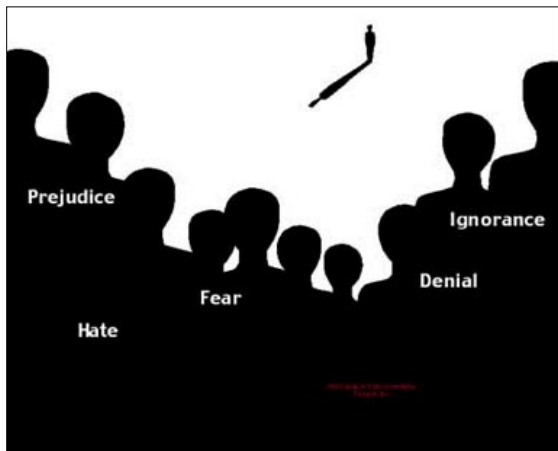


Figure 13

I wanted to speak a broader message; one about the fear and segregating that goes on in this society. I chose nondescript figures so they couldn't be associated with any specific group but seen more as universal. The larger words list some of the reasons why HIV/AIDS has been allowed to spread without a

concerted effort to stop it. The smaller type, in red, simply reads "AIDS doesn't discriminate. People do." By trying to anticipate and counteract the audience's own stereotypes about HIV/AIDS I work to create a more powerful image.

Another crucial part design can play is in the environment. Some ways to help are obvious, like using recycled paper and soy ink. The more subtle way is to look at the project itself and think of environment as another client. Is there a solution that will benefit both? This can mean eliminating wasteful and expensive packaging, or choosing to print a small quantity of an annual report and instead encourage people to access it

online. If the reader wishes they can print out their own version or send away for the nicer printed version, but this allows the reader a choice in viewing. This helps eliminate a lot of wasted paper for those who do not want to keep the report or who are environmentally conscious.

Conclusion

I am only one, but still I am one;

I cannot do everything, but still I can do something;

And because I cannot do everything I will not refuse to do something that I can do.

– Edward E. Hale

My main objective of this thesis is to explore my own beliefs and philosophies regarding the role of design in society. I have always held the view that a career is not just a means of making a living; it can be an expression of how you live. I reject the pessimistic view that we are just cogs in the industrial machine and cannot make a difference. Our actions do have consequences and ignoring them will not alleviate those consequences.

There has been much discussion within the design community over what socially responsible design actually means and how it can be practiced. It is not a new argument,

Ken Garland spoke about it in 1964 with the *First Things First Manifesto* (see Appendix A), and the updated version in 1998 stirred up as much controversy.⁴⁰ There is a lot of frustration from within the community over the fact that there have been many debates but little action. My belief is that you cannot wait for someone else to tell you how to be socially responsible, it is a matter that each designer must decide for himself or herself. Any major change in society starts with one person who takes action and inspires others to do so.

There are no simple answers to this complex question of socially responsible design. Choosing recycled paper stock for a job will not cure the world's pollution problems and showing realistic women in ads will not eliminate anorexia or bulimia. However each action you take is one small step in the right direction which can be built upon towards a larger solution. I urge all of us as designers to make conscious decisions about our work that reflect our individual beliefs and values in order to take that first step in the right direction.

⁴⁰ Adbusters. <http://adbusters.org/campaigns/first/toolbox/1964.html>

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Appendix A: First Things First Manifesto

<http://adbusters.org/campaigns/first/toolbox/signup/>

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.