



***"It is no longer enough today to lock ourselves in our studios and produce culture. We must engage in our world in as many ways as possible. We need to ground our artistic production in the realities of our lives and those many others around us."***

—Realizing The Impossible: Art Against Authority

If graphic design is understood as the expression and reflection of a particular set of values, systems and interests, then most artistic practice today tends to express the interests of the class that controls and profits from society. It is these interests that dominate the standards of value in design, defines its emphasis, and excludes its more subversive, egalitarian alternatives. As a result, graphic design is the tool that communicates, beautifies and commodifies the interests of those in power. Its communicative strength is overwhelmingly used in an economic/commercial sense—consciously or unconsciously used to exploit; to raise profit margins and material wealth for the benefit of a select clientele. While graphic design sometimes lends its talents outside of the commercial realm in the form of an informative and communicative visual language, and in academic, self-authored, or research-based practices, the primary role of graphic design is that of the visual instrument of the powerful—the seller of sales, the convincer of consumers. Its strengths are employed by the corporate body (or state-sanctioned by capitalist/socialist totalitarian governments) in order to reinforce their position of power. And while design academia can wax poetic about the virtues of graphic design and its specialised visual language (conveniently side-stepping more tangible issues) the design industry practitioner, whether one chooses to acknowledge his/her role or not, must realise that their labour is nothing more than the harbinger of consumerism, used in the service of monolithic capitalism and all of its ails. Without the aid of graphic design, those who sustain the ills of society have no face, no visual identity, no point of reference, and most importantly, no effect.

While recognising in the libertarian tradition that no individual designer, group, institution or government has the right to define the role in which graphic design should play,<sup>1</sup> it is important to encourage alternative design practices in an attempt to counter the exploitative position it has consciously stepped into. Analysis of the capacity inherent in design practices to alleviate current exploitation, and to aid in more alternative modes of social organisation is needed (and has begun in limited pockets of the design world).<sup>2</sup>

Design then, must explore the peripheral space outside of advertising totally devoid of any commercial use—or more specifically, for the movement towards a humane and libertarian society, that is to say, a more autonomous existence based on self-management, mutual aid, solidarity and direct participation and control over one's affairs. As the potential producer, educator and visual face of social change, graphic design could weld its creative future with more pressing concerns than market shares and profit margins.

**"One cannot, in the nature of things, expect a little tree that has turned into a club to put forth leaves"**

— Martin Buber

It is interesting to ponder the power graphic design holds within the current capitalist system. Corporates and their friends in government have all tapped into the powerful and almost unrivalled marketing resource that is graphic design. *Better By Design*,<sup>3</sup> hand-in-hand with business interests, has marched towards a better future for consumerism. And no wonder—what other non-physical coercive technique can instill a company logo in the mind as early as two years old?<sup>4</sup> Unchecked, the increasing role of graphic design as advertising's lackey will continue to have irreversible effect on our mental, visual and physical environment.

In 1964, and again in 2002, the concerns of above were brought forward in the form of the *First Things First Manifesto*, signed by designers, photographers, artists and visual practitioners interested in steering their skills along a more social and worthwhile path. "Unprecedented environmental, social and cultural crises demand our attention... charitable causes and other informational design projects urgently require our expertise and help." Calling for a shift in graphic design's priorities, the signatories of the manifesto recognised the potential for their skills to aid more humanitarian causes. The 2002 manifesto, as a tentative step in reviving Ken Garland's original ideas for today's practitioners, and as a step towards visual 'reform', is greatly noted. However, regardless of how well meaning and sincere the ideas brought forward in these documents were, it is necessary to critique their statements in more radical terms.

While proposing "a reversal of priorities in favour of more useful, lasting, and democratic forms of communication", the manifesto falls short in recognising any kind of tangible, radical change. The *First Things First Manifesto* of 2002 fails to recognise that the 'uncontested' and 'unchecked' consumerism they wish to re-direct is so engrained in the social relations of capitalism that anything short of the complete transformation of those social relations will never effect true change. Proposing the shifting of priorities within the system rather than the shifting of the system itself—as history has proven in both state socialism and the farce of parliamentary democracy—will do nothing more than file down the rough edges of our chains. The fact that rampant globalisation and corporate hegemony go hand in hand with the current system is the real issue concerned

graphic designs could be questioning. In fact these systems, "far from being a guarantee for the people, on the contrary, creates and safeguards the continued existence of a governmental aristocracy against the people."<sup>5</sup>

With this in mind, the following text proposes to explore the graphic designer's role (if any) in revolutionary, direct action towards the transformation of society, in specifically anarchist terms.

***"It is said that an anarchist society is impossible. Artistic activity is the process of realising the impossible."***

— Max Blechman, *Toward an Anarchist Aesthetic*.

The basic ideas of Anarchism have been misinformed, misinterpreted, and misunderstood throughout its existence. For many people, the anti-authoritarian stance of Anarchism coupled with negative press on the part of those threatened by it, associates it with chaos and disorder. However this is far from the truth.

Anarchist communism (or libertarian communism) is the belief that no one has the right to control or exploit another, and that coercive authority (as opposed to voluntary association) is the mainstay of inequality—socially and economically. Anarchists strive for a social system of human beings living, interacting, and relating in a way that is the most fair, equal, and free of any kind of exploitation. This includes the many forms that oppression takes—economic or political, patriarchal or racial, and more.

"A mistaken, or more often, deliberately inaccurate interpretation alleges that the libertarian concept means the absence of all organisation. This is entirely false: it is not a matter of 'organisation' or 'nonorganisation', but of two different principles of organisation... of course, say the anarchists, society must be organised. However, it must be established freely, socially, and, above all, from below."<sup>6</sup> The idea of non-hierarchical forms of organization are central to anarchism—only through direct action and self-management will we enjoy complete emancipation in our lives and the daily decisions that they entail. These ideas are far from utopian, as those who fear its potential would lead us to believe, and as the millions of men and women throughout history who have subscribed to, and lived out, anarchist ideas. They are no more utopian than the thought that far-removed, parliamentary 'representatives' can intimately and effectively answer our many wants and needs as individuals and communities.

Anarchist communism is not a fixed, self-enclosed social system but rather a definite trend in the historic development of society, which, in contrast with the intellectual guardianship of all clerical and governmental institutions, strives for the free unhindered unfolding of all the individual and social forces in life. For anarchists, freedom is not an abstract philosophical concept, but a vital concrete possibility for every human being

to bring to full development all the powers, capacities, and talents within them, and turn them to social account. The less this natural development of people is influenced by religious or political guardianship, the more efficient and harmonious human personality will become, the more it will become the measure of the intellectual culture of the society in which it has grown.<sup>7</sup>

***"As anarchists, we have seen our politics denigrated by other artists; as artists, we have had our cultural production attacked as frivolous by activists."***

*—Realising the Impossible: Art Against Authority*

It would be wrong to view this text as some kind of blueprint for anarchist design action. This is not a manifesto. Nor is it the justification for graphic design as a specialist, elitist profession to continue in its current form in the 'aid' of social change. As the early anarchist Proudhon wrote to Marx, "Let us not make ourselves the leaders of a new intolerance. Let us not pose as the apostles of a new religion, even if it be the religion of logic, of reason".<sup>8</sup> And while there is a definite place for the graphic designer in an activist role, both in an educational and provocative sense, designers must not make the mistake of becoming some kind of vanguard group of directors. Whereas Marxism is often justified in both political and academic fields in this respect—defending the role of a necessary vanguard party to lead the ignorant masses to liberation—anarchism vehemently refutes and rejects this concept.

It is the responsibility of anyone with an understanding of visual communication to consider the effect their work has on the lives of others, especially the most marginalised, and the most oppressed. Instead, the design practitioner, through the basic act of joining their moral principles with their material production, should, and could, greatly contribute to the transformation of everyday life—towards a more just and humane society. The conscious graphic designer could instill in people's minds a broader sense of possibility, using the communicative powers of artistic imagery to empower, encourage and enrage. It is important to shift societies' many urgent concerns from the fringes and into the public realm, in a direct and unavoidable manner. However, purely negative and angst-ridden critique (while sometimes useful) can only go so far—it is the sense of positive possibilities that need to be associated with the ideas of revolutionary change. The marginality of alternative social relations must be overcome—its ideas rendered public, transparent, and shared.

Mainstream media do a rather convincing job of keeping our private critical thoughts isolated. It is an important task to illustrate that the critical and questioning ideas we may be having individually are, more often than not, shared by others, rather than letting them be diffused and disarmed by those in power through religion, politics, education, and popular media (including, of course, graphic design). Graphic design can publicly and prolifically become the visual manifestation of these shared ideas. "Ideally, art can

inspire hope, encourage critical thinking, capture emotion, and stimulate creativity. It can declare another way to think about and participate in living. Art can document or challenge history, create a framework for social change, and create a vision of a more just world. When art is used in activism it provides an appealing and accessible entry point to social issues and radical politics".<sup>9</sup> Graphic design can act as one catalyst for further involvement in social alternatives, and social struggle.

***“Artists speak out against the war for one week but serve the capitalists all year.”***

—Black Mask #4

However images alone are not enough. It is not just what the work of a designer says or does that perpetuates the dominant social relations of today, but how that work is made. Design is an overwhelmingly individual act. Yet further exploration of collective participation in the design process can set the basis for future non-hierarchical, collective organisation. Ways of working with others when making work could essentially form patterns and guides for the self organization of a more libertarian society. Therefore the act of making work could be as empowering as the visual message itself, pointing the way towards social relations on a more macro level. This exploration has exciting and liberating possibilities: "Anarchism is no patent solution for all human problems, no utopia of a perfect social order, as it has so often been called, since on principle it rejects all absolute schemes and concepts. It does not believe in any absolute truth, or in definite final goals for human development, but in an unlimited perfectibility of social arrangements and human living conditions, which are always straining after higher forms of expression..."<sup>10</sup> Allowing anarchist inspired design to collectively explore and illustrate those 'higher forms of expression' can do nothing but broaden the scope and awareness of more just social relations between people.

## **Endnotes**

1. In relation to the anarchist concept of 'no gods, no masters'—or, that 'the exploitation of man by man and the dominion of man over man are inseparable, and each is the condition of the other'.
2. Design collectives such as Justseeds, The Street Art Workers, Drawing Resistance, the Beehive Collective, Paper Politics, Taring Padi, and the Prison Poster Project are just a few examples. See *Realising the Impossible: Art Against Authority* by Josh Macphee and Erik Reuland (AK Press, 2007).
3. A government initiative aimed at helping New Zealand companies 'increase their exports and profits through the better use of design in their products and services'. Check it out at [www.betterbydesign.org.nz](http://www.betterbydesign.org.nz).
4. See *Fast Food Nation* by Eric Schlosser (Penguin Books, 2002).
5. Michael Bakunin in *Anarchism* by Daniel Guerin (Monthly Review Press, 1970).
6. Voline in *Anarchism* by Daniel Guerin (Monthly Review Press, 1970).
7. Paraphrased from Rudolf Rocker's *Anarcho-Syndicalism: Theory and Practice* (AK Press, 2004).
8. From *Anarchism* by Daniel Guerin (Monthly Review Press, 1970).
9. Colin Matthes, *Realising the Impossible: Art Against Authority* by Josh Macphee and Erik Reuland (AK Press, 2007).
10. Rudolf Rocker, 'Anarcho-Syndicalism: Theory and Practice' (AK Press, 2004).