

WORD AS WEAPON: THE MANIFESTO AS A CATALYST FOR DESIGN ACTIVISM'

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ABSTRACT

The manifesto is commonly defined as a call-to-arms, a public declaration of principles and intentions and a “powerful purveyor of ideology” (Helfand, 2001). For the Italian Futurists, typographic experimentation allowed language itself to be a tool for attacking, disrupting or subverting convention. For the designer, the manifesto may be used to give more “meaning to our present way of life” (Garland, 1964), to “deliberately manipulate the public view” (Cawes, 2001) or to playfully blast and bless the cultural landscape. My hypothesis is that the manifesto is not only a forum for design debate, a framework for a visual argument, but also a script for action. From the pamphleteers of 17th century England designers have appropriated the most effective means of communicating an urgent message to the masses, forming a sphere of popular public opinion. Whether online or in print the manifesto demands a re-envisioning both message and medium, in this context a ‘Manifesto for Sustainable Design’ project given to first year

graphic design degree students. By embedding notions of sustainability, responsibility and action into their design curriculum the manifesto has enabled individual students to engage in incendiary debate in a non-dogmatic format.

MAIN TEXT

Introduction

This paper presents the (artists’) manifesto as the basis for a model of (graphic) design activism in a studio-based teaching and learning environment. Historically the manifesto has set out to fight injustice and denounce authority, aiming to reduce confusion, consolidate opinion or secure a wide-spread consensus. In this context the manifesto is investigated as a political graphic artefact providing a generic framework for a visual argument: a proactive *script for action*. As designer-writer Ellen Lupton (2008) puts it, “*a well-written manifesto is like a well-designed product. It communicates directly, it is broken into functional parts, and it has elements of poetry and surprise.*” Within the fluctuating field of (graphic)

design this device encourages an integrated mode of understanding theory *in practice*, where *sustainability* is the focus.

The manifesto is introduced in a practice-based scenario, which requires *each* design student to craft their own manifesto by identifying significant issues, which are discussed and supported in peer-group seminars. Their generic or single-issue ideas and opinions are framed within contemporary design debate and are valued as a *process* of enquiry rather than a product. By emphasising the expression of ideas and ideals from an *informed* position, each designer is encouraged to establish their own interpretation of how 'green' and sustainable issues relate the broad territory of graphic design and visual communication.

A legacy of political and artistic manifestoes theoretically underpin and facilitate a critical analysis of this form of communication, expression and impact in social, cultural and creative terms. *Artists'* manifestoes have been described as "outlandish, outrageous and frequently offensive. They combine wit, wisdom and world-shaking demands" (Danchev, 2010). Within a historical and technological context, a range of artists' manifestoes are discovered and discussed for their particular merits: linguistic, poetic, typographic, creative and political. Examples, such as the Futurist and Vorticist manifestoes described here, are explored as

vehicles for the conceptual, ideological and material concerns of artistic practice and principles at that time. The artists' dynamic integration of form and content helps the students explore a more experimental mode of communication than conventional graphic design commonly allows.

The manifesto project is not intended as a traditional problem-solving activity but as a *problem-finding* process, instigating a challenge to the terms with which design is understood as a *service*, as an *activity* or even as an *attitude*. By not requiring collective consensus of opinion, each student engages more freely in embracing a new paradigm of user-centred, silent or social design. The notion of the *citizen designer* is tackled as an alternative mode of design practice in addition to more familiar commercial practice. Without dismissing the traditional job or tools of design, this manifesto-based project aims to:

1. Engage graphic design students in a proactive mode of design debate
2. Research and explore the power of the written word as a visual form of language, to shock, intrigue or elucidate a message
3. Tackle the issues of design and sustainability as an integral part of the design discipline, illuminating how to integrate them into their own practice

4. View form and content as significant conceptual *and* ecological considerations in every design activity
5. Be irreverent towards conventional design formats and mechanisms in order to explore more innovative and unexpected solutions
6. Gain a sense of the local and global territory of design in both its commercial and civic roles, and beyond

Tackling the complex issues of sustainability in graphic design with a large cohort of students (average of 90 per year) is a daunting task, especially as there was no reference for this idea at first year level at that time. So instead of imposing a moral argument at the briefing as an accepted foundation for further research, the students are asked to define for themselves what sustainability means. Introduced about 5 years ago as a trial project, it has been embraced by an increasingly politically aware student population, contributing to a consistent level of social and ecological engagement. The manifesto as a device is valuable to this research project as it requires a level of personal conviction based on real facts rather than opinion or popular myth, using a generic approach to criticising the Status Quo and demanding change.

As Marshall Berman (1983:102) notes, “the manifesto is remarkable for its imaginative power, its expression and grasp of the luminous and dreadful possibilities that pervade modern

life.” Design infiltrates every arena of modern life from the alarm clock’s display to the breakfast cereal packaging, the morning newspaper, TV graphics, weather map, the signs aiding navigation on the journey into work and the ubiquitous digital communications systems. Even in pre-digital era of the late 1950s, before the exponential reach of the world wide web and global communications systems, design was described as “*always related, sometimes in very complex ways, to an entire constellation of influencing situations and attitudes.*” (Nelson, 1957)

The Futurist manifestoes are useful exemplars in this paper because, “*by inventing the idea of art as a branded public enterprise, Marinetti compelled many poets, painters and designers after him to state their principles in compact, incendiary speech*” (Lupton, 2008). *Words-in-Freedom* and *Blast* provide examples of the dynamic possibilities of a visual argument providing designers with comparisons and contradictions beyond traditional discipline boundaries. Bartram (2005:7) points to this influence, by suggesting that “*their numerous manifestoes were wonderfully extreme and their work still reverberates in graphic design today.*” The desire to engage a mass audience through self-promotion and the exploitation of accessible media brings the artists’ manifesto more closely into the designer’s field of vision.

According to Danchev (2011:1) publication of the 1909 Futurist Manifesto in the *Le Figaro* newspaper had both an immediate and long-lasting impact on a community of artists and the general public, by announcing a new vibrant visual language of artistic expression and ideas to a mass audience. These ‘passports to modernism’ caused a sensation in the public arena, using language itself as a tool for attacking, disrupting or subverting conventional socio-cultural conditions through page layout by extending the potential of a previously intractable technology (ibid: xxiii). The Futurists’ enthusiastic embrace of all the ‘characters’ available within print technology introduced a genuinely innovative form of linguistic and typographic expression. This freedom is, generally, not available to designers within the constraints of commercial production (Miller, 1993). For the Futurist poets, words, and their visual representation were considered as an inseparable whole, as Bartram (2005:8) puts it: “the form is a part of the content and the content creates the form.”

The phrase *Give me 26 soldiers of lead and I shall conquer the world*, attributed to Gutenberg and Benjamin Franklin, among others, captures the essence of this solid form of language (Bringhurst) as an agent of power and protest. Like the mythical dragon’s teeth of Prince Cadmus (the bringer of literacy and civilization) this set of movable letters and glyphs has contributed to a fundamental shift in society. In the design manifesto, *words* are carefully crafted to function

in an active and considered role as *weapons*, and also *seeds* of inspiration.

According to McLuhan (1964:86), the invention of movable type in the 1400s (in the west) greatly accelerated and enabled cultural and cognitive changes that had already been taking place since the invention and implementation of the alphabet. Print culture, introduced via the Gutenberg press in the middle of the fifteenth century, brought about a cultural predominance and transference of the visual over the aural/oral considered the most important advance in civilization after the creation of writing. It translated the content of shared discourse into a portable commodity, a democratic package within a uniform and *repeatable* mechanical system. For the Futurists, these words were incitements to action if not violence, in musical production, painting, fashion, food and war.

In England, response to the Futurist war cry was expressed in a far more streamlined, clear and direct visual language, reflecting more closely the advertisements and commercial notices of the day and (arguably) a national characteristic for more understated forms of protest. Led by Wyndham Lewis the dynamic diagonal title and pink cover of *Blast* announced the Vorticists’ “aggressive modernity with a starkness of design quite in contradiction to the complex acrobatics of Marinetti’s pages” (Drucker, 1994:220). Whereas the Futurists intentionally

combined or contrasted diverse fonts as emotive concepts in chaotic visual form, the Vorticists applied a more restrained approach to passionate debate. *Blast* (1914) engaged artists and poets (such as Ezra Pound) in a similarly violent urge for change as the Futurists yet, here, idiosyncratic lists of un/popular figures from the time, commercial products, ideas, places and trades are either damned or praised with tongue firmly in cheek. The role of wit and humour as effective communication tools is explored in the next section: humour is included as a valuable communication device because “*it permeates every aspect of English life and culture*” (Fox: 2004).

Make Tea Not War: wit and the graphic language of protest:

Humour has not been taken as seriously as it deserves (according to Freud), considering the important role it plays in our mental and emotional lives. Although humour may be universal it is still heavily reliant on cultural context and a reciprocal relationship between participators or observers. This is particularly important in terms of the nuances of irony – the dominant ingredient in English humour, according to anthropologist Kate Fox (2004). She observes that, in English conversation, humour is not just important but “*omnipresent and omnipotent*” in everyday conversation.

In ‘A Smile in The Mind’ Stuart and McAlhone (1996) contend that wit is particularly prevalent and integrated into British graphics and advertising because of the implicit resonance of a structured society, shaped by the cultural power of class and subtle nuances of accent. It could be said, “*for many designers, witty puns and visual gags are graphic design at its best*” (Shaughnessy, 2009:141). Visual wit and wordplay have been a feature of many artists and groups in the 20th century: it is the witty observation that makes it such a valuable device in visual communication. As Adrian Shaughnessy (ibid:142) explains, “*the best comedy is based on acute observation of the everyday*” and an “*ability to look at the mundane and unlock an inner truth.*”

An example of the witty appropriation of a serious message to capture a contemporary ‘truth’ is exemplified by the huge popularity of *Keep Calm and Carry On* (figure 1). This pithy poster, now a popular motto for the undermined or oppressed, was originally designed in 1939 by an anonymous English civil servant. Only seeing limited distribution at the time, the simple statement was designed to strengthen morale in the event of the feared (yet anticipated) Nazi invasion of UK shores. The ‘typically’ understated spirit of the response to a potential dreadful eventuality was captured by the simple layout and utilitarian, reliable tone of voice embodied by Eric Gill’s typeface. In Gill Sans, the message embodies a utilitarian, elegant, reliable *tone of voice* that contributes more than just effective

communication. Describing her anglophile tendencies Jessica Helfand (2009) asks, “how can you criticise a country whose national font is Gill Sans?”

Anyone looking at a printed message will be influenced, within a split second of making eye contact, by everything on the page: the arrangement of various elements as well as the individual look of each one. In other words, an overall impression is created in our minds before we even read the first word. (Spiekermann: 2002).

Only rediscovered in 2000, *Keep Calm and Carry On* has become the source of widespread inspiration, such as *Keep Calm and Carry Yarn* and *Now Panic and Freak Out* (all accessible online as posters, t-shirts, mugs, etc.). These unobtrusive graphic statements capture a certain national nostalgia for a pragmatic ability to cope under pressure, translated into the wry despair of our uncertain economic times.

A brief description of the Manifesto for Sustainability project:

Introduced in the first year of a full time BA Graphic Design degree the manifesto project aims to locate sustainable design issues at the forefront of design practice, given at least equal status among the essential design skills. Yet, in contemporary visual communication the very tools of design production and dissemination have

become the cause of some ethical dilemmas. Shaughnessy (2009: 109) observes, that designers seem more sensitive to the ethical issues of their discipline than artists. In his words, “*perhaps it is to do with design’s proximity to many of the key issues that confront us today: consumerism, overconsumption, green issues, economic growth, commercial propaganda and media proliferation?*”

Designers operate in a multi-layered cultural landscape, a matrix of inter-relationships between media, people and place, within which the designer must always be on alert for unpredictable scenarios, new technologies, economic and political shifts. In order to mindfully engage in this world – both locally *and* globally - it is necessary for the future designer to understand his/her role in civic as well as commercial terms. “*The greatest skill designers can bring to the community, and society as a whole, is the power to help life flow... we see the multi-faceted nature inherent in any problem. We borrow from history, philosophy, science, art, technology, and sociology in arriving at solutions.*” (Quraeshi, 2002). How is a student to understand this? This project places the student in the ‘driving seat’, setting their own boundaries, defining the territory for their argument and audience.

It is an important element of the project’s success (short-term and long-term) that the manifesto is understood as a personal response rather than an attempt to construct one

collectively agreed consensus of opinion representing a shared majority view. For the (graphic) design students Ken Garland's First Things First Manifesto (1964, rewritten with Rick Poyner in 2000) stands out as a marker for a more *meaningful* reflection on the discipline and practice of graphic design. First Things First, originally crafted in a spontaneous meeting of minds and later published in mainstream media (The Guardian newspaper), called for a change of priorities: a more lasting and meaningful form of communication.

FTF drew a distinction between design as a communication device, informing the public, and design as persuasion, preoccupied with commercial issues alone: "*we think that there are other things more worth using our skill and experience on*" (Garland, 1964). However, FTF polarised opinion between design as service and design as conscience: criticised as "reductionist" in setting up social responsibility as separate and "in opposition to the commercial sphere of graphic design" (Parrinder, 2000. Eye). Jonathan Barnbrook is one of few designers working in the commercial sphere with a social conscience, taking a subversive position for design with a message. His non-commercial work is constructed and delivered with an intelligent observer-consumer in mind, reconfiguring the language of advertising to reveal an anti-corporate message. The *Friendly Fire* show at the Design Museum (2007) introduces Barnbrook as "working in both commercial and non-commercial spheres,

Barnbrook combines originality, wit, political savvy and bitter irony in equal measures." The familiar visual mechanisms and devices of commercial communication cause a double-take, demonstrating that professional realization of an idea does not need to be sacrificed in the service of a serious message, but may in fact enhance it.

The student responses:

Over the past few years the students' responses have demonstrated intelligent and diverse cognition and interpretations of the key issues in and around sustainable design. Innovative in their realization and engaging in their integrity and conviction. Outcomes are always tested 'live' in the studio in smaller groups, where peer review contributes to the viewpoint taken and consideration between the message and medium.

Identifying *truths* is essential when so much reporting on the issues of sustainability is clouded in misinformation mediated by media outlets that persist in projecting an ambivalent of not outright antagonistic attitude towards ethical activism. But the terms *ethical* and *worthy* are often viewed as *knitted* or *wooly* by students: the cultural equivalent of socks worn with sandals. Often it is the re-envisioning of an existing product or visual mechanism that provides the key for an argument to communicate capturing the zeitgeist and immediacy of the problem.

The immediacy and the ephemeral nature of graphic design, combined with its link to the social, political and economic life of its culture, enable it to more closely express the zeitgeist of an epoch than many other forms of human expression. (Meggs: 1993)

A current tendency towards the pithy statement evident in *Keep Calm and Carry On* is also found in Anthony Burrill's posters, such as *Work Hard and Be Nice to People*, demonstrating a desire to make the complex simple, perhaps. The cover of recent design magazine, *IDn* (2010) dedicated to issues of sustainability makes an equally simple but bold statement: "**FUCKING RECYCLE.**" In its online promotion it makes a call: "Let's go green! 'Buy and use only what you really need and then get rid of it properly when you have finished with it'." It should be remembered that this aggressive and direct statement is situated in the same cultural landscape as *Keep Calm and Carry On*. Student Ben Roebuck's (2010) printed artefact aimed at a similar demographic: "wake the fuck up!" His manifesto, proposed a simple and direct argument that "design should be sustainable by default", with concise and appropriate facts and figures.

Sometimes the materiality of the message is used as the focus of content in an organic whole: even the transformative value of the material itself becomes a part of the solution. For

instance one student (Mickey Yoo) created a manifesto cut into ice that gradually melted. Another redesigned and printed the layout of a traditional foolscap writing pad so that it had much narrower lines thereby encouraging smaller handwriting and, as a consequence, a less (wasteful) use of paper. As she says, "*bored with serious messages of sustainability, I wanted to communicate how a few small changes can help the bigger picture*" (Helen Parry, Feb. 2009)

Research into the practices of industry, revealed for James Titterton the inherent waste of the corporate social responsibility manifesto, which wastes huge amounts of paper and ink in its production and often only pays lip service to the issues it highlights. Often the project has a long-lasting effect on the cohort's personal projects and attitudes to design. In James's (2009) case, he pursued research into the casual waste of A4 office paper, to develop a new form of packaging: "*Recognisable existing packaging for the product is re-invented as a fold-out poster. The content of the poster illustrates how office workers can re-use their daily paper wastage for personal and environmental benefit*".

Eventually responsibility to initiate change lies with the academic staff who instigate this form of investigation. One student, Ben Urbanowicz, took this on board by creating a badge for each member of staff with the simple invitation: "ask me about sustainability".

ecological balance between human beings and their socio-cultural and natural environment.”

(Icograda: 2002)

Summary and Evaluation:

This paper has described a peer-reviewed studio-based method of tackling some of the prescient issues of design and sustainability as a mode of design activism. In this context the personal manifesto challenges the young designers' conventional views of the discipline as a service, but also helps them redefine the role of design in their own terms. This project introduces the idea of the citizen designer, in a more responsible engagement with an uncertain world, where design is used to help shape the actions of individuals and groups by establishing a cultural and intellectual dialogue. As the field of design itself is continually in flux, this yearly project consistently responds to and adapts to prevalent issues of the day: in material, technological, philosophical, economic or aesthetic terms.

Material thinking – the relationship between the medium and the message, and the means by which communication is tangible expressed - is incorporated from the initial stages of conceptual development to final presentation in the studio. The meaning and repercussions of these materials have changed radically in value and use over time: paper, print culture can no longer be understood in the same way as even fifteen years ago. *“The variety and complexity of design issues has expanded. The resulting challenge is the need for a more advanced*

Nevertheless, even 'new' digital technologies leave a trace: therefore assumptions around the availability and appropriate use of technology are questioned as essential tools for contemporary design discourse. In answering what sustainable design means in practice perhaps we can establish some new methodologies or a broader territory of concern affecting the designer as a cultural producer, facilitator, and even entertainer. As the Designers' Accord stated in 2009 “Design is an active process, not a conclusion.”

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ILLUSTRATIONS

FIGURE 01: KEEP CALM AND CARRY ON (1939)
ANONYMOUS DESIGNER



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