

# Ethics in Design

Megan Prusynski  
EZcheZpoof@hotmail.com  
March 27, 2003

## Abstract

In this paper, I will discuss the importance of ethics in the field of design. A designer's job is constantly changing, and our role is becoming more and more important in society. Design is an evolving industry with many issues surrounding it. I will investigate the ethics movement in design, its history, message, and effects. I will discuss one of the most prominent documents in the ethics movement, the First Things First Manifesto, in detail. Designers must become conscious of the effects their work have and take responsibility for it. I will outline a few ways to move towards an ethical design process and urge designers to do so.

## Key Words

design ethics, social responsibility, advertising, corporations, communication, consumers, globalization, branding, sustainability, First Things First manifesto, Adbusters, culture jamming, Situationalism, Green design,.....

## Introduction

The design industry is constantly evolving, changing along with culture, trends, technology, and the economy. A designer has an ever expanding job description, one that is becoming more and more tied to the corporate business world and advertising. Designers are communicators and serve many important functions to society. But often, especially today, designers are ignoring their roles in society and the responsibility that comes with them. "Within a consumer-oriented society, the job of the designer is, increasingly, to make products and

services more appealing,” (Wood 2000). Design today is moving from art to business, focusing more on advertising and corporate clients and less on ethics and social responsibility.

Design is an ever-increasing part of every person’s life. It can be seen in the form of billboards, corporate logos, packaging, television, web sites, and advertisements of various media. It is part of consumer society and affects the lives of countless people every day. “Designers are to our information age what engineers were to the age of steam, what scientists were to the age of reason. They set the mood of the mental environment.... They create the envy and desire that fuels the economy and the cynicism that underlies our postmodern condition,” (Lasn 2000). We are more important, and possibly more dangerous, than we thought. The messages that designers create are reaching to far corners of the globe. They affect how people perceive a product or company, how they think about issues, how they live, and what they buy. With such an important role, designers have an immense responsibility to society. Shouldn’t designers take responsibility for their work and its effects?

### **The Role of Designers**

One role of designers is that of communicators or mediators between their clients and the public. By portraying a message to an audience, they connect a company to its consumers. Designers are responsible for the way a company or product is perceived, and because they are connected to their clients, everything a company does or stands for reflects on the designer. Designers have other roles as well. They provide and organize information so that the public can digest it. They help people navigate, whether on the street or the internet. They design anything from business cards to billboards, cars to video games, logos to newspapers.

With these important roles come responsibilities that cannot be ignored. A designer must keep in mind that a message can be perceived in different ways by different people. An ethical designer examines the effects of their work before

it reaches the public, and also examines the intentions of their client. If these things are not considered, a message could be misleading, dishonest, or offensive. “Whatever value or ill-effect designers’ works have is magnified through repetition and mass distribution to every corner of people’s lives... designers are accountable, personally, to the extent that they are an accessory to the [activities] of their employer,” (Heller 56). A designer, therefore, must not only consider the message they communicate, but the actions and intentions of their clients as well.

### **Issues Surrounding Design Today**

Corporate America is an increasingly powerful force in the world. Corporations control at least half the world’s wealth. They provide jobs, sell products and services, and through designers, send messages to the public. “They lobby legislators and bankroll elections. They manage our broadcast airwaves, set our industrial, economic, and cultural agendas, and grow as big and powerful as they damn well please,” (Lasn 69). Corporations have a more powerful role in society than many people realize. Since the 1886 Supreme Court decision in *Santa Clara County vs. Southern Pacific Railroad*, corporations have been considered natural persons, entitled to the same rights that individuals are. Only they have far more resources than individuals and therefore have more impact on our world. Because most designers have corporate clients, they play a role in the power and impact corporations have on the world. “The vast majority of design projects... address corporate needs, a massive over-emphasis on the commercial sector of society, which consumes most of graphic designers’ time, skills and creativity,” (Poyner 1999). A designer’s clients play a large role in how they are perceived and what kind of work they do. In a time when corporate corruption and scandal are common, designers must be careful who they choose to represent.

Design’s role in consumer society is a growing one. As the creators of advertisements, brands, and other portrayals of companies, designers are

partially responsible for the commercialization their clients spread. Our society is based on consumerism. Today our consumption reaches alarming rates. Society tells us to spend more and more money on products that are often useless or unnecessary. With constant consumption comes the creation of waste and pollution. The earth simply can't keep up with our greed anymore. Everything from fueling our cars to producing everyday products poisons the earth and threatens our future as a species. Corporations are largely to blame for our over-consumption and its effects. Designers need to be aware of the practices of their clients as well as their role in continuing the cycle of consumerism. They can also be the ones to stop it. "The consumer class needs to be provided with the necessary information for them to begin publicly challenging the notion that consumerism is the only way to live," (Collins). Designers can use their communication skills to bring such issues to light.

Designers play a part in globalization because they are often responsible for branding companies with images that are then spread throughout the world. "While the driving force of globalization is the spread of free-market capitalism, globalization has become notoriously known as the swift spread of American culture... We are the creators, positioners, and stewards of these powerful brands," (McCarron 18). Globalization occurs as corporations, especially American ones, strive to create a global market and increase profits. While not always bad, this can have adverse effects on local cultures that are invaded by foreign companies. Cultures can lose their unique identities, local businesses can't compete, and the local economy suffers. Branding goes hand in hand with globalization and consumerism. Brands are everywhere we look: Nike, Microsoft, Calvin Klein, and Coca-Cola are household names. "Brands provide, through their products, a lopsided and fallacious sense of belonging," (Holland 4). Graphic designers create corporate identity, they attach an image and an emotional response to a company or product. These brands represent who a company is and provides an identity for consumers to adopt. At times, these brands are dishonest and deceiving. "When a brand manipulates a visual image

to give a false or misleading impression, a designer is usually one of the key players. In that sense, that designers are accomplices in the crimes of branding is abundantly clear since it is the designer who makes the image," (Holland 6). The issues of globalization and branding must be understood by designers, who play such a large role in them.

### **The design ethics movement**

Many organizations and leading designers have begun to question the role designers are playing in society, bringing the issue of design ethics to light. Many other designers argue that design is just a job, and ethics doesn't need to be a priority. In one way or another, design ethics has weighed on the conscience of the design industry. Tibor Kalman said in 1997, "I began to worry about what we designers, who are very skillful and have powerful tools at our disposal, are doing in the world--what role we are playing--making the filthy oil company look 'clean,' making the car brochure higher quality than the car.... Is all that okay, or just the level to which design and many other professions have sunk?" (Casey 1). Many designers have chosen to ignore, or at least not see their part in, the issues that surround the industry. Others are bringing the issues to light and truly making a difference, making social and ethical design their life's work.

*Adbusters*, a magazine, web site, and media foundation, is one example of an organization giving a wake up call to the world. The magazine abandons conventional design and turns it into confrontational art. The organization's philosophy is loosely based on the Situationist movement in Paris in the 1960's. The Situationists "began protesting against the escalating commercial takeover of everyday life, and against the artists, illustrators, photographers, art directors, and graphic designers who manufactured this fake gee-wiz reality," (Vienne 2000). *Adbusters* steps a bit further to link consumerism to the environment. One recent issue of *Adbusters* magazine was devoted to "Design Anarchy," questioning the role of design in consumerism and challenging designers to

make a difference. One method for change proposed in the issue was the adoption of true cost design. "True cost simply means that before designers come up with a new product, they consider the ecological and psychological consequences of what they do. In other words, they plan to minimize the damage before they maximize the cool," ("True Cost Design"). Design needs a code of ethics like this one, one in which the impact and importance of design is acknowledged, and the harm it does is reduced. In 2000, Adbusters, along with several other prominent publications, published the *First Things First Manifesto*, a document calling for more ethical design and criticizing design's role in consumerism. The document was originally written in 1964 by Ken Garland, but was updated in its 2000 publication. It spurred much debate and has had a profound effect on how designers perceive themselves.

In 2001, the Graphic Designers of Canada association adopted a code of ethics and professional conduct similar to the *First Things First Manifesto*. "The code establishes a stringent set of guidelines and responsibilities for graphic designers--the clients and to more transcendent concerns, such as the environment, society, and human rights," (Helm 18). The code is a bold movement towards ethics, it points out that designers have a very prominent responsibility in society. It also suggests that designers should refuse to work for clients that engage in unethical practices, including doing environmental harm or disregarding human rights. Designers who fail to uphold the code risk losing their status as Registered Graphic Designers. Codes of ethics such as this have significant impact because they open the eyes of designers and challenge them to adopt a view that design should be used for good and avoid all things unethical.

It is clear that design plays a big role in consumerism, globalization, branding, and the unsustainability of culture. That is why examining ethics is so important. Design has an enormous impact on people's lives; ignoring one's responsibilities as a designer undermines the entire industry. "The designer, as the creator of the graphic image, has an ethical responsibility to understand, with

a higher level of consciousness, the impact the image that is going to be exploited will have. This responsibility is rarely acknowledged,” (Holland 10). It is time designers open their eyes and examine their role in the world. As talented, creative people, designers have the potential to make very poignant statements that can have positive effects on society.

### **The *First Things First Manifesto***

One of the most important documents in design ethics is the *First Things First Manifesto*. It was written in 1964 by designer Ken Garland, while at a meeting of the Society of Industrial Arts. He read it aloud that night, and several people signed the manifesto. “Back in 1964, a small group of British graphic designers lent their names to a quietly radical document. First Things First was a rebuke to their colleagues in the industry for having forgotten their old idealism and having lost sight of the things that really matter,” (Dixon 1999). The manifesto was published and sparked interest and debate, at a time when design was fairly new. “That the First Things First struck a nerve is clear. It arrived at a moment when design was taking off as a confident, professional activity. The rapid growth of the affluent consumer society meant that there were many opportunities for talented visual communicators in advertising, promotion, and packaging,” (Poyner 1999). But the manifesto was soon forgotten, and today the issues it raises are even more pressing. Design has started to become the corporate-driven industry Garland warned against.

In 2000, *Adbusters* magazine brought back the manifesto and updated it to readdress the issues it brought up. The manifesto’s aim is to get designers to rethink their role in the world and their effects on it. “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,” (*Adbusters* 2000). Saying that designers create such a commercial environment is a strong statement to make. The

manifesto urges designers to use their talents to better the world instead of adding to its problems. "There are pursuits more worthy of our problem-solving skills. Unprecedented environmental, social, and cultural crises demand our attention," (*Adbusters* 2000). Reissuing the manifesto in a way redefined design. It urged designers to decide their place in society and not let commercial work overpower the design industry. The statement of the manifesto is a bold one, but it alone cannot wake up an entire industry. "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," (*Adbusters* 2000). This revolutionary statement sparked a debate that is still playing out. The manifesto cannot profess to change the world, but it has had an effect on design.

If nothing else, the *First Things First Manifesto* got designers thinking. It challenged the ties between design and consumerism, a bond that has grown stronger and stronger over the years. The idealism shown in the manifesto is what is needed to open the eyes of the design community and inspire change. Many designers debate about the true aim of the manifesto and if it was even realistic. However, it uses strong language but has a modest aim. "The manifesto's aim is not to hold designers culpable for the world's social and economic problems. On the contrary, it sees designers as having a potential to help cure its ills and make this world a better place," (McCarron 2000). The manifesto was both widely accepted and heavily criticized by designers, but it accomplished its goal to spark debate. Its message is an important one for every designer to think about. "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)," (Poyner 1999). This distinction must be understood, because as designers we have the potential to be either communicators or persuaders, and we must be aware of the message coming from each. Perhaps the most valuable lesson designers can learn from

the *First Things First Manifesto* is that we need to be aware of all the issues surrounding design and know our role in and effects on society.

### **How to become a more ethical designer**

Today it is more important than ever that designers understand how influential their work really is and how they can use it to promote their ideals. Design is communication, its applications are endless, and it has the potential to make the world a better place. What it takes is for each designer to examine his or her own morals and understand the role of design in the world. “The designer must work with harmony and balance in mind, working for the good of the weaker members of our society, and be willing to face the consequences of their design interventions, and accepting their social and moral responsibilities. (Lihou 2000). One way to design ethically is to apply your talents to serve a social or cultural purpose, or fill a need in society. Design can be used to open people’s eyes to important issues, bring people together for a common purpose, or serve public needs. Political posters, promotions for cultural events, identities for non-profit organizations, and educational materials are all possibilities.

Another way to design ethically is make sure that your clients reflect your morals as well. Researching a client’s background is important to keeping personal integrity and to make sure your work won’t be used to represent something you don’t agree with. “Each client we work with is a reflection on our integrity, so we must take precautions before agreeing to take on a new client relationship,” (Holland 9). Designers must step back and take a look at the meaning their work produces, and what it stands for. Choosing clients carefully may not always be an option for smaller firms, but at least designers could opt to work on a mixture of commercial and social or ethical designs. Another thing designers can do is to use their relationships with clients to push clients in more ethical directions. Designers can bring up issues that concern their clients and alert them to the effects a brand or advertisement has on society. They can do work that represents the client honestly and fairly. “What you need to do is go in

there and create a corporate conscience, to make corporations feel like they ought to spend money on things that make their workers' environments nicer, or make the world nicer, or help people outside their corporation." (Casey 1997). Of course designers cannot work miracles, but they can at least make sure their work is honest and beneficial instead of harmful. Often the best tool a designer can use is discretion when accepting projects from clients. Simply saying no can be a profound ethical statement.

Some designers have opted to take a more dramatic, alternative stance. The designers at *Adbusters* make it their goal to use cognitive dissonance in design to shock the system. The magazine's bold statements and provocative design often leaves readers uneasy and inspired to take action. A main focus of *Adbusters* is to break design molds and change minds. Creative minds inspired by *Adbusters* and their own observations of the world partake in "Culture Jamming." In his book, *Culture Jam*, Kalle Lasn describes culture jammers as a varied group of people who have become disgusted with consumer culture and want to provoke change. He states a manifesto for culture jammers:

We will take on the archetypal mind polluters and beat them at their own game. We will uncool their billion-dollar brands with uncommercials on TV, subvertisements in magazines and anti-ads right next to theirs in the urban landscape. We will seize control of the roles and functions that corporations play in our lives and set new agendas in their industries. We will jam the pop-culture marketeers and bring their image factory to a sudden, shuddering halt. On the rubble of the old culture, we will build a new one with a non-commercial heart and soul. (Lasn 128).

Designers have unique talents that can be applied to culture jamming. In ways small or large, culture jamming is slowly creating a revolution.

Designers can also do a great deal to protect the environment in everything they do. Environmentalism merged with design has yielded "green

design,” a new form of environmental consciousness in design and a movement to promote sustainability. “Sustainability is a social priority which can be helped or hindered by design. Green designers attempt to foresee the environmental consequences of their designs and create designs with minimal environmental harm,” (Brodie 1997). There are many ways designers can become more environmentally sound in their practices. In addition to considering the impact their design has, they can promote sustainability in the design process. Designers can choose to recycle paper, minimize the amount of material in designs, print in a way that does not waste paper, avoid treated and bleached materials, use natural and safe inks, use environmental labels, use recycled materials, or design things that are reusable or recyclable.

The most important thing a designer can do to practice ethically is to be conscious of their effects on people, society, culture, and the environment. Designers must take full responsibility for their work and understand the issues that surround their industry. “Taking final responsibility for what we design moves us in a positive, productive direction, one that benefits society and the individual,” (Landa 174). Designing ethically not only contributes to the well-being of society and makes a designer feel good, it can reflect positively on the entire field of design, and define designers as ethical, concerned, and action-oriented people.

## **Conclusion**

The corruption present in our consumerist society is easy to see. By ignoring the importance of their work and the issues that surround it, designers are part of the problem, not the solution. Designers need to understand issues such as corporate corruption, the effects of advertising, the unsustainability of consumerism, design’s effects on the environment, globalization, and branding. Design plays an important role in these and many other issues. Designers must take responsibility for the work they produce.

The design ethics movement has already begun. Documents such as the *First Things First Manifesto* have started the debate. Many organizations and designers have begun examining their roles and making ethical design decisions. By keeping the discussion alive and educating themselves and others, designers can be forces of change, powerful communicators, and good people. If every designer takes ethical issues to heart and strives to uphold their morals, design can become an industry defined by honest, important, and positive communication and social change.

### **Works Cited**

- Brodie, Laura. "Design Ecology: Environmental Issues in Graphic Design." College of the Atlantic. 1997.  
<<http://www.coa.edu/DesignEcology/TextOnly/aText2.html>>.
- Casey, Allan. "Tibor Kalman, an Interview." Adbusters. Autumn 1998.  
<<http://adbusters.org/campaigns/first/toolbox/tiborkalman/1.html>>.
- Collins, Chaley, et al. "How can we change consumerism?" Enough.  
<<http://enough.enviroweb.org/enough08.htm>>.
- Dixon, Chris. "First Things First." Adbusters. Autumn 1999.  
<<http://www.icograda.org/web/articles/features-past-single.shtml?pfl=feature-single.param&op2.rfl=58>>.
- "First Things First Manifesto." Adbusters. 2000.  
<<http://www.adbusters.org/campaigns/first/toolbox/signup/>>.
- Heller, Steven. "Wolfe Bane." Print. Vol. LVI, Issue III. 2002. pp. 55-61.
- Helm, Jelly. "Sustaining Beauty." Print. March/April 2001. pp 18, 167-168.
- Holland, DK. Design Issues. New York: Allworth Press 2001.
- Landa, Robin. "No Exit for Designers." Print. Vol. LVI, Issue II. 2002. pp. 22, 174-175.
- Lasn, Kalle. Culture Jam. New York: Harper Collins 1999.
- Lasn, Kalle. "Design Anarchy." Adbusters. 2000.  
<<http://www.adbusters.org/campaigns/first/toolbox/designanarchy/1.html>>.

- Lihou, Robert. "Reconciling Nature and Technology." 1998.  
<<http://www.biotic.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk/product/thesis/conc.html>>.
- McCarron, Carolyn. "Expanding Our Field of Vision." Communication Arts.  
March/April 2003. Issue 319. pp. 16-23.
- McCarron, Carolyn. "First Things First: A Second Look." Communication Arts.  
May/June 2000.
- Poyner, Rick. "A Brief History." Adbusters. 1999.  
<<http://adbusters.org/campaigns/first/toolbox/history.html>>.
- "True Cost Design." Adbusters. 2000.  
<<http://www.adbusters.org/magazine/37/truecost/>>.
- Vienne, Veronique. "Confessions of a Closet Situationalist." Communication Arts. 2000. <<http://www.icograda.org/web/articles/feature-past-single.shtml?pfl=feature-single.param&op2.rfl=2>>.
- Wood, John. "Towards and Ethics of Flow." International Journal of Computing Anticipatory Systems. August 2000. <[http://futures.gold.ac.uk/CASYS/CASYS\\_2.html](http://futures.gold.ac.uk/CASYS/CASYS_2.html)>.

## References

- Macdonald, Nico. "Can Designers save the world (and should they try?)" New Design. September/October 2001. pp. 28-31.  
<<http://www.spy.co.uk/writing/NewDesign/SuperHumanism/>>.
- Poyner, Rick. "Value-Added Design." Print. March/April 2000.
- "Re/Design." Adbusters. 2000. <<http://www.adbusters.org/magazine/37/>>
- Rich, Tim. "Who Needs Ethics." Print. Vol. 50, Issue 3. May/June 1996.  
Accessed via EbscoHost.
- Sterling, David. "Step One: Put Money Where Mouth Is." Communication Arts.  
July 2000. pp. 200-205.
- "Time to Mind Your Ethics." Design Week. November 2001. Accessed via Lexis Nexis.