



without our brain and muscle
not a single wheel will turn

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this is not a manifesto

Ideas towards an alternative design practice

GARAGE COLLECTIVE



“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

Graphic design has predominately been, and still is, the tool which beautifies, communicates and commodifies a set of ideas, ideals or products within various tenets of our social and economic relations. Unfortunately, it is fair to say that this creative tool is overwhelmingly used in an economic / commercial sense — consciously or unconsciously using its talents to exploit — to raise profit margins and material wealth for the benefit of a select clientele. While graphic design lends its talents outside of the commercial realm in the form of an informative and communicative visual language, and in academic or self-authorship, research-based practices — the primary role of graphic design as a profession is that of the visual instrument of the powerful; the seller of sales, the convincer of consumers — employed by the corporate body or state-sanctioned by capitalist / socialist totalitarian governments in order to perfect and reinforce their hegemonic positions. 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 graphic design those who sustain these 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, government or institution has the right to define the role in which graphic design should play,¹ it is important to explore and encourage alternative design practices in an attempt to counter the exploitative position it has consciously stepped into. Analysis of the capacity inherent in design / designers practices

raised in ones practice could essentially form patterns and guides for self organization in a more truly libertarian society. Individualism and autonomy intact, the personal process/es of making work could lead the way in eventual liberation on a more macro level, exploring the ‘unlimited perfectibility’ of both personal design arrangements and social organization. “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...”¹⁰ Allowing design to publicly explore and illustrate those ‘higher forms of expression’ can do nothing but broaden the scope and awareness of the anarchist movement as a whole.



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 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.

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’. Josh Macphee and Erik Reuland (AK Press, 2007).

10 — Rudolf Rocker, ‘Anarcho-Syndicalism: Theory and Practice’ (AK Press, 2004).

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 towards the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ or the liberation of ‘the mob’ — anarchism vehemently refutes and rejects this concept. The everyday individual or anarchist design practitioner, through the basic act of joining their libertarian principals with their material production, should, and could, greatly contribute to the transformation of everyday life towards a more just and humane existence. As educator and mediator, it is the responsibility of anyone with an understanding of visual communication to instill in people’s minds a broader sense of possibility, using the communicative powers of artistic imagery to 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 can only go so far — it is the sense of positive possibilities that needs to be associated with the ideas of Anarchism. The marginality of current grassroots movements must be overcome — the isolation of both activist groups and concerned individual’s thoughts must be rendered public, transparent, and shared.

Mainstream media do a rather convincing job of keeping our private thoughts as seemingly isolated and illogical. It is an important task to illustrate that the critical and questioning ideas we may be having individually are, more often than not, shared as a whole, rather than letting them be diffused and disarmed by hegemonic structures and institutions such as the news, popular media, and the state. 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”.⁹ As the initial point of contact with more in-depth and varied forms of activism, graphic design can act as the essential catalyst for further research, involvement, and more importantly, for direct action.

Further exploration of existing and more experimental modes of production and aesthetics in design and design application can only set the basis for future non-hierarchical, organic organisation. Systems and structures

to alleviate current ideologies, and to aid in more alternative modes of social organisation is needed, and has begun in limited pockets of the design world.² Design then, must explore the peripheral space outside of advertising; totally devoid of any commercial use — or more specifically, for the movement towards a more humane and libertarian society, that is to say, a more autonomous existence based on self-management, mutual aid, solidarity and direct participation in one’s affairs. As the potential producer, educator, organiser and visual face of social change, graphic design could weld its creative future with more important and pressing concerns instead of increasing market shares, profit margins and consumption rates.

“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 realise the power that graphic design holds within the current capitalist system. Corporates, and likewise, governments, have all tapped into the powerful and almost unrivalled marketing resource that is graphic design. Better By Design,³ 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 public and private mind as early as two years old.⁴ Unchecked, the increasing role of graphic design as advertising’s lackey will continue to have irreversible effects 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 viable 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 and radical change. The First Things First Manifesto of 2000 fails to recognise that the ‘uncontested’ and ‘unchecked’ consumerism they wish to re-direct is so engrained in the very system we participate in, that anything short of the complete transformation of social priorities, structures and organization will never effect true social change. Proposing the shifting of priorities within the system rather than the shifting of the system itself — as history has proven in both state / democratic socialism, and the farce of parliamentary democracy — will do nothing more than gain a few insignificant victories while the real battle goes unwaged. The fact that rampant globalisation and totalitarian corporate hegemony go hand in hand with the current system is the real issue concerned graphic designers could be questioning. In fact, “the representative system, far from being a guarantee for the people, on the contrary, creates and safeguards the continued existence of a governmental aristocracy against the people.”⁵

With this in mind, the following text proposes to explore the graphic designers 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 mis-informed, mis-interpreted, and mis-understood throughout its existence. Its humanistic and libertarian ideas were forever tarnished by a minority who committed violent acts around the turn of the 19th century — ‘the propaganda of the deed’ as it was known, included assassinations and terrorism directed towards the state and its leaders. These acts, and the anti-authoritarian stance of Anarchism have tended to, in the majority of peoples minds, associate its theories with chaos and disorder. This is simply not the case.

Anarchism or libertarian socialism, is the concern — whether it be social, political, or historical — of human beings living, interacting, and relating in a way that is the most fair, equal, participatory, and ultimately free of any

kind of exploitation — whether it be economic or political, capitalistic or communistic. “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.”⁶ The idea of non-hierarchical forms of organization are central to libertarian socialism — 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 or fruitless as those who fear its potential would lead us to believe — they are no more utopian than the thought that voting for certain parliamentary ‘representatives’ can intimately and effectively answer our many wants and needs as individuals and communities.

Therefore Anarchism 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 with which nature has endowed him / her, 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.⁷

“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 for the ‘aid’ of social change. As 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”.⁸ And while there is a