

The Design Anarchist's Bible

BY LAUREL SAVILLE

KALLE LASN CREATES ANOTHER PUBLICATION SOAPBOX WITH HIS BOOK *DESIGN ANARCHY*, AGAIN CALLING ON DESIGNERS TO CHANGE THE WORLD BY CHANGING THEMSELVES & THE WAY THEY WORK.

Design Anarchy is Kalle Lasn's barbaric yawp over the roofs of the design world. Part personal scrapbook of all things that have infuriated him over the years, part political, psychological and ecological polemic, the book is a manifesto on how the merger of design and commerce is eviscerating the spontaneous, individual, creative, healthy, happy, messy soul of our world and replacing it with nothing more than a consumption-driven pseudo-culture.

The diatribe starts out gently enough, with a recollection of a childhood spent playing in "the gaps between buildings, ruins of buildings, fallow land, abandoned industrial areas, gravel pits and sand mines." However, this "dirty, unused place" of youth is soon ruined by "the city gardeners ... the eliminators of mystery, the killers of the empty spaces." The rest of the book goes on to enumerate the multitude of ways designers have nullified our mental mysteries and killed the empty spaces of our imaginations by cooperating with corporations to fill our minds with messages of manufactured inadequacies and shallow promises about products that will cure our so-called problems.

The book's pages are, appropriate to an anarchist, unnumbered, but Lasn wastes no time in putting forth a solution. Spread eight reveals his demands, in type cut from a newspaper like some kind of B-movie ransom note: "What design needs is 10 years of total turmoil ... fuck-it-all anarchy ... after that maybe it will mean something again ... stand for something again ..."

WHO IS THIS GUY?



First Things First Manifesto

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.

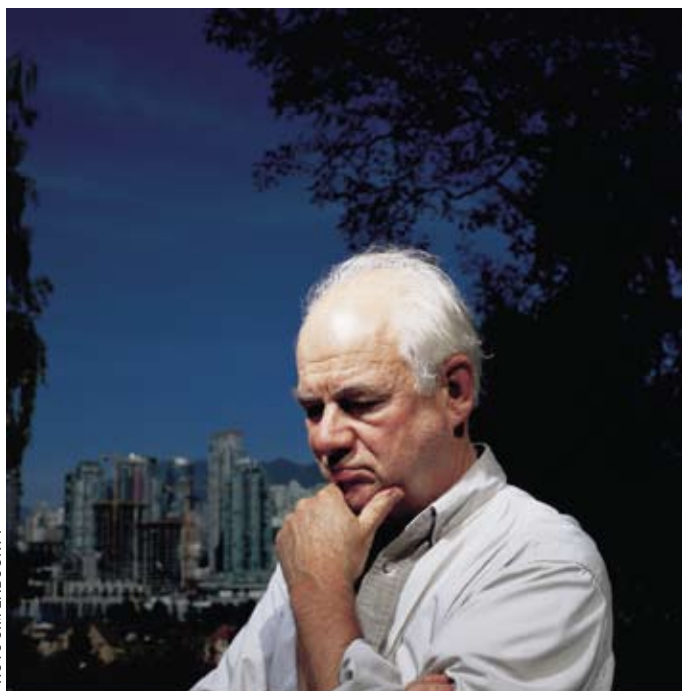
Many of us have grown increasingly uncomfortable with this view of design. Designers who devote their efforts primarily to advertising, marketing and brand development are supporting, and implicitly endorsing, a mental environment so saturated with commercial messages that it is changing the very way 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.

Jonathan Barnbrook
Nick Bell
Andrew Blauvelt
Hans Bocking
Irma Boom
Sheila Levrant de Bretteville
Max Bruinsma
Siân Cook
Linda van Deursen
Chris Dixon
William Drenttel
Gert Dumbar
Simon Esterson
Vince Frost
Ken Garland
Milton Glaser
Jessica Helfand
Steven Heller
Andrew Howard
Tibor Kalman
Jeffery Keedy
Zuzana Licko
Ellen Lupton
Katherine McCoy
Armand Mevis
J. Abbott Miller
Rick Poyner
Lucienne Roberts
Erik Spiekermann
Jan van Toorn
Teal Triggs
Rudy VanderLans
Bob Wilkinson



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and over the next 10, 20,
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we find ourselves in.”*

—KALLE LASN

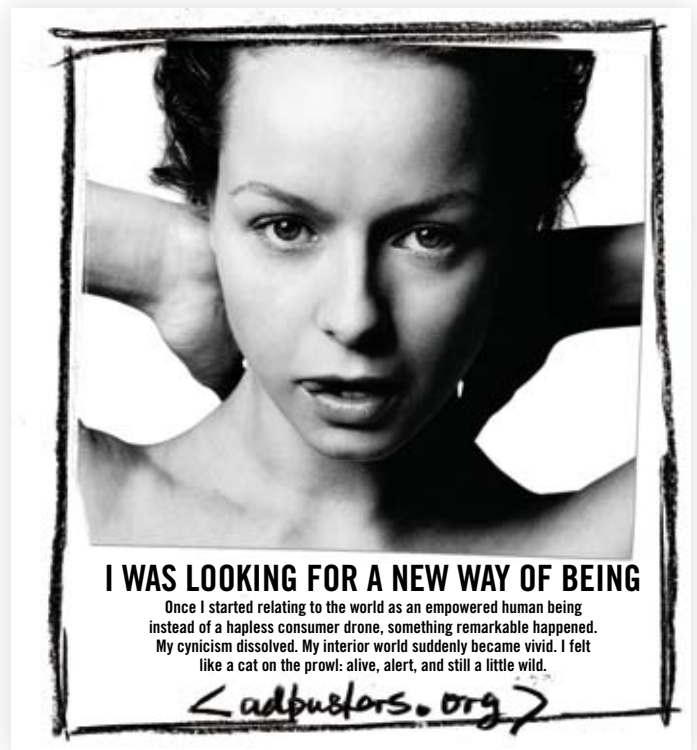
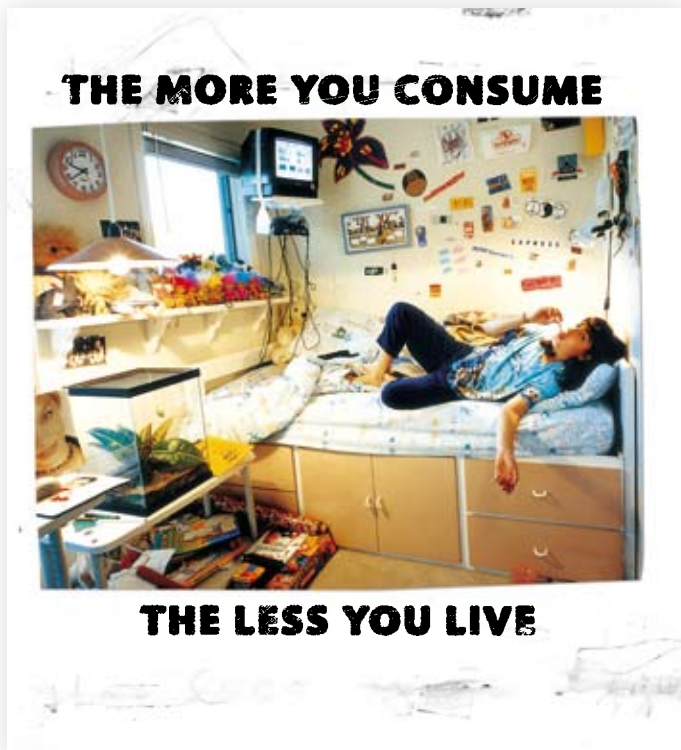
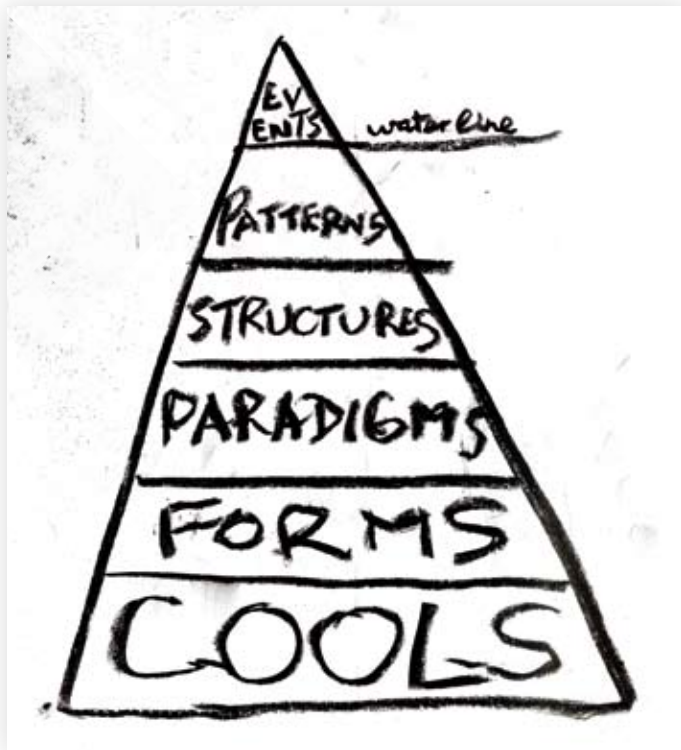
Talking to Lasn is like being peppered with a rapid-fire list of the world's ills. But unlike many radicals, he is just as quick to offer solutions. Everything is delivered in a passionate staccato, leavened with the traces of his Eastern European accent. It makes for a bracing and energizing engagement. Lasn says design's problems and society's problems—“the implications of climate change and psychological and ecological change, depression and mood disorders that are sweeping across us, and the so-called war on terror”—are inextricable from one another. And why is he placing the blame so squarely at the feet of designers? Paradoxically, because he believes so deeply in them.

He yearns for the days when “designers were mightily engaged in the world,” and fears the last generation of designers was schooled primarily in how to use design to make money for themselves and their clients. “The old-school designers have forgotten that we are very powerful people, and we are the creators of this culture,” he says. He believes if designers made it, they can also fix it, and it's up to the newest generation of designers to do exactly this. “I think designers are starting to realize that they're creating the slickness of this culture, the tone, the ambience. The medium is the message, and we designers control the media itself. We have incredible power, and over the next 10, 20, 30 years, we can play a huge part in solving this crisis that we find ourselves in.”

ADBUSTERS & “THE CULTURE OF COMMERCE”

For his part, Lasn has spent the last few decades creating opportunities to control both the medium and the message. A former documentary filmmaker, he became both educated and enraged in the late 1980s when he tried to buy television time to run an ad against the depletion of old-growth forests in the Pacific Northwest; he was shocked to find no one would sell him airtime. This stark lesson in the lack of democracy on the airwaves led him to create *Adbusters* magazine, a process he describes in Chapter 3 of *Design Anarchy*: “We were a bunch of burnt-out activists tired of environmentalism, feminism and all of the other -isms. ... We had this nasty feeling that ‘we the people’ were slowly but surely losing our power to sing our songs and tell the stories and generate our culture from the bottom up.” A “visually driven bunch,” they made the magazine by laying spreads out over picnic benches in an effort to create a single, ad-free, visual and mental narrative of images, polemic, essays and culture jams.

But it took almost a decade—and half a million dollars of debt—for *Adbusters* to truly find its voice and harness the power inherent in design. When Chris Dixon came on board as art director, says Lasn, he “taught us a few tricks” and increased the volume of the message, as well as the circulation, by dramatically improving the look of the publication. Then, he and Lasn visited Tibor Kalman, armed with the original First Things First manifesto, which had appeared in 1964 calling for designers to find something more meaningful to do with their talents than engage solely in “the high-pitched scream of consumer selling.” Working with Ken Garland, the British designer who created the first manifesto, Lasn, Dixon and Kalman reworked and updated it, got 33 signatories and published it as First Things First 2000. (See the text on the facing page.) This new version again lamented the increase-consumption-only approach to design and called for a “reversal of priorities in favour of more useful, lasting and democratic forms of communication ... toward the exploration and production of a new kind of meaning.”



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—KALLE LASN

WHY BLAME DESIGN?

The new manifesto caused quite an uproar, especially, according to Lasn, because of its challenge to redefine the meaning of design itself. It effectively provided the spark that reignited the debate about what responsibilities—if any—designers have in terms of considering the cultural impact of their work.

When asked about Lasn, Steven Heller points out that, after all, design has always been aligned with commerce: "Design is an aesthetic service," he says. "Has it prostituted itself? No. It does its job, sometimes for good, other times not. But design is a commercial enterprise serving other commercial enterprises. That does not mean there is no room for criticism. But realpolitik is such that the mission of most designers is to make a client look good."

A FIGHT FOR DESIGN'S SOUL?

However, it's precisely this concept of "most designers" that Lasn frets about. "We all have to live our lives," he concedes, "and some people care about bucks, and they can live their lives being service providers to clients, and there will always be designers like that. My problem is that 99 percent of designers now are like that. We all have to make bucks, but life is not just about making money; it's about living a fully engaged life. I'd like to see just some small percentage of designers give the profession back its soul."

One of the original First Things First 2000 signatories, Jonathan Barnbrook, is trying to do just this. When he first came across *Adbusters*, he found "it directly spoke to me about all the things I believe and hadn't put into spoken form." He points out that "design always has been the vehicle for change, even when it wasn't thought of as graphic design, from the church being the first publishers, to the constructivists helping the Russian Revolution. The real world isn't just having a client and producing the work." But Barnbrook recognizes that most designers need to get a job and work for bosses and clients who may not be trying to save the world, real or otherwise. He suggests a kind of carbon-neutral approach to design. "If



ABOVE AND ON FACING PAGE: PAGES FROM *DESIGN ANARCHY*, PUBLISHED BY ADBUSTERS MEDIA. A USER'S GUIDE TO CULTURE-JAMMING, ITS IMAGERY EXPRESSES KALLE LASN'S URGENT PLEA FOR DESIGN ACTIVISM.

*I too am not a bit tamed—I too am untranslatable;
I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world.*

—WALT WHITMAN, *LEAVES OF GRASS*

you are forced to work for someone who is not particularly wonderful,” he says, “then do something to offset it. Go help in the community. The thing is to use your skills positively in your own time. It’s easy to do nice, cool-looking work, but this is a medium that has power to communicate. If you go and do something for your local school, that’s more helpful than complaining.”

AN UNDERDOG, A REFORMER, AN ANARCHIST

Design Anarchy is Lasn’s personal effort to combine complaint with help. A massive collection of the “ideas and images that have stayed with me over the years of culture-jamming and putting out *Adbusters* magazine,” he describes the book as “a monumental struggle with everything we’ve been involved with, dished up in a way that will hopefully engage not just designers, but artists, architects and all the visual communicators of the world.” The content includes liberal lifts from *Adbusters*, advertisements and news images, many of which have been written over, printed upon, pasted up and/or put next to other images, words, poems, essays and opinions that shock the senses and subvert the original commercial and political messages.


“You have to understand that, in a sense, it’s a jam,” says Lasn. “It’s basically taking the modernist, Helvetica, slick design aesthetic that exists in every brochure and website and magazine that designers put out, and was an attempt to jam that. It was driven by anger and a desire to fight back against this aesthetic that I think is just wrong. I don’t think of it as designed, and didn’t come up with this new aesthetic, but it was an attempt to make people think.”

Which is the work Lasn seems made to do. Born in Estonia in the middle of World War II, he spent his early childhood living in a displaced-person’s camp before immigrating with his family to Australia. After receiving a degree in pure and applied mathematics and working at a job where he played computer-simulated war games, “I traveled the world, mostly in poor countries, because

that’s what I was drawn to,” he notes. He worked in advertising and marketing in Japan before moving to Canada where, for 15 years, he was an award-winning documentary filmmaker. Then his fateful collision with media monopoly sent his life in a new direction.

In addition to *Adbusters*, Lasn has also launched a slew of anti-consumerist social marketing campaigns such as Buy Nothing Day and TV Turnoff Week, and started the PowerShift Advertising Agency, which works only on cause-related marketing and for non-profit organizations. “I know what it feels like to be discriminated against, to be an underdog and fight your way up from the bottom,” Lasn says. “My life has turned me into a maverick.” It’s a role he relishes, and one the design world seems to need. “I really enjoy my fight with the old-school designers. I love it,” he says. “In dangerous times the world needs mavericks.”

Steven Heller agrees. “It’s always good to have mavericks kicking up dust,” he says. “Particularly when they are more than just talk. Lasn truly believes that the world would be a better place if designers acted responsibly. He’s shown with great consistency that he believes in ideals that are worth following. I admire his tenacity.”

And despite all the serious ills he’s wrestling with, Lasn remains hopeful about the future. “I think that maybe 20 percent of designers are realizing that they are people who want to engage in the world in the most emotional and visceral way, and that the reason they got into design is that they see it as the best way to engage,” he says. “They phone me and e-mail me and tell me how wonderful it feels to fully engage their convictions in the profession they’re getting into, and discovering it can be a way to live a fulfilled life.” Lasn’s positive outlook should not be surprising; after all, to be convinced that change is not only necessary but achievable, any true anarchist must be a devout optimist as well. 

www.adbusters.org

