Design Is Not Enough
Tony Credland, Sandy Kaltenborn, Brian Holmes

Introduction by Oliver Vodeb
This text was originally written during the Declarations conference at Concordia University in 2001 in Montreal, Canada.
It was at that time when we were preparing the first Memefest, which happened in 2002. Based in Ljubljana, Slovenia, we felt truly inspired to read these lines and learn more about the Declarations event. It showed us that there is a really impressive and organised scene of designers, educators and students, which actively and in such an amazing and articulate way question the dominant design discourse. And we couldn't agree more with the ideas we read. Not long after we signed Design is not Enough, we became friends and collaborators, a relationship that last until today. The text is not easy to find online these days, but we feel it is a beautiful and really important text and it should be read widely. So here it is published in its entirety!

What happens to graphic design when it leaves the professional discourse behind, to do political work with activist groups and social movements? That's the question we wanted to explore with the students and community members at Concordia University.

The answers have been different for us, and they'll be different for everyone involved. But we know that the experience of political engagement takes design practice away from the forms in which it usually appears in society today: as advertising, art, information or propaganda.

Advertising first. It's one of the most powerful forces in our societies, and it's actually a form of politics itself, with a clear agenda: the promotion of consumer capitalism. But it's a politics without conflict, without debate, addressed to spectators with no way of talking back. It reduces the citizen to a consumer. As a professional, client-led, mass-produced process, advertising is Enemy Number 1 for politically engaged designers, not least because it occupies all the biggest and flashiest spaces: TV commercials, billboards, neon signs, lightboxes, endless magazine pages...

Two residual opponents to advertising are art and information (newspapers, journalism). You could say they're Enemies Number 2 and 3 – but they're already much easier to work with and transform. Art in our societies stands for the individual, for subjectivity: it's the opposite of organized party politics and propaganda. Which is fine for us, because we don't believe in political parties as they're organized today, and we don't want to produce propaganda. But what passes for art in the multimedia economy of contemporary design is something that constantly borders on visual entertainment, the endless production of new attractions, novelty for novelty's sake. The thing is to find a social twist in artistic creativity, to set artistic processes at work in a group or a social movement, to turn originals into multiples, or multipliers.

As soon as you get into groups, issues and social movements, information becomes the key. You've got to get the information out, and that's where you run into journalism. But at the same time, that's where you realize the newspaper can really be an adversary. The newspaper represents truth in our societies. But the truth lies. The news media lie by omission, by distortion, by change of emphasis, or they just outright lie, putting words in your mouth that were never there. And like advertising, or even like art in a lot of cases, the news media address spectators, in a situation where they can't talk back.

That's the opposite situation from the one we want to produce, and it shows the basic reason why design practice alone is not enough for political involvement. What we want to create are situations where you talk to people who talk back. Situations where the ears are as important as the eyes, where the written word and the image get left behind in the conversation. And so we have a central idea for the whole workshop, which is: RESPONSE-ABILITY.

What we're talking about are social situations where people with a particular skill, a particular passion or professional ability – whether it's photography, art, writing, graphic design, music or poetry – can fit into a movement of collaborative expression in such a way that they add something without dominating, and without distorting the process. This kind of movement takes you beyond any "designer identity" – when it really works it can spread in all directions, open up new spaces in institutions, even make it possible to change your relations at work, with clients, in university situations and so on. It's a way to get outside the straightjacket of being a wage-earner and a citizen-consumer. But for people with the specific skills of graphic designers, it involves a real responsibility. Because designers have an important role to play in social movements, which is the role of making the goals of group activity visible, precisely in a way that encourages the continuation of the process.

Design in an activist group or a social movement is always going to be a matter of tactics, which means working from a position of weakness, where you don't have the keys to all the doors and you can't make strategic plans with an overarching view. It means improvising, finding the unexpected materials and expressions that can help release a power of collaboration going far beyond the objects you can imagine and make. Design in these situations is a success when the designer disappears and the users take over. That's how designs tactics can have a social impact, without all the resources and strategies of governments or big corporations.

So, what's at the bottom of all this? Why do some crazy people spend all their free time doing something they'll never get paid for and where they even tend to disappear, not as individuals but as stars and signatures?

The thing is that it can change your life. It can teach you what responsibility means, get you out of your cocoon and into situations of social cooperation and confrontation. That's what we mean by politically engaged graphic design, or that's the beginning of the story anyway.

Maybe we all got an idea of how quick and how far that story can go, over the four short days when the group and the facilitators seemed to share something more than just the products we created together.

Many thanks to Lydia Sharman, the students and all the others who made this experience possible.

Tony Credland, Sandy Kaltenborn, Brian Holmes
For the "Design is Not Enough" workshop at Concordia University

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Note: This workshop ran alongside two others run by WD+RU and Ian Nobel/Russ Bestley from LCP. The keynote speakers were: Jan van Toorn, Patricia Zimmermann, Liz McQuiston, Naomi Klein and The Critical Art Ensemble. The Declarations Conference fashioned itself as a follow up to the Design Beyond Design symposium held at the Jan Van Eyck Akademie in Maastricht, Holland in 1997.

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Notes: DESIGN IS NOT ENOUGH

Atelier Facilitators:
  Tony Credland – Cactus Network (UK)
  Brian Holmes - Ne Pas Plier (FR)
  Sandy K. – Bildwechsel (GER)
Coordinator: Lydia Sharman
Support: Audrey Samson / Kevin Lo

Cactus Network, Bildwechsel and Ne Pas Plier are activist groups creating and distributing, socially engaged images, and getting them out on the 'street' to unfold their meanings in public confrontations with the idea that art is political not only in its frame but also in its distribution. From its inception Cactus Network experimented in the use of image and politics, dissemination and networks, involving around 1,000 people over a period of 12 years. The role of politics in visual communication continues to be the central theme. The network branched into various projects namely: 'Cactus Magazine', 'Feeding Squirrels to the nuts' and 'Debate'.
Ne pas plier (Do Not Bend) brings social workers, visual artists, intellectuals and concerned people into collaborations that address urgent situations, without forgetting about the longer term. Specific capacities of conception, organization and production develop the association into a meeting point, a place where ideas and emotions and visions can condense into visual signs, return to stimulate more ideas, visions and emotions. It is an association for the production and above all the distribution of political images.
From Bildwechel (image shift) and the Metro Gap workspace in Berlin the graphic designer Sandy K. works to sensitise political activists on the importance of visual communications and production in political struggle. Metro Gap brings together designers, architects and urban planners for political actions primarily against the privatisation of public spaces.
The atelier will bring the experience of these groups to participants involved in giving expression to local issues, while connecting them to similar issues in a much wider global context, to integrate the local with the global, the short term with the long term. The atelier will consider questions such as: How to create new forms of expression, exchange, debate and form? How to

maintain them over time, and how, where and at what scale to take and institute new spheres of popular sovereignty? How to link those spheres together in the society? How to take concrete steps in this direction, in the present time with all its gaps and contradictions, on a necessarily small scale to offer a different model of visual communication that conveys not just a message, but also processes of cooperative organization and continuing self-education?