

# WHAT'S NEXT FOR FIRST THINGS FIRST?

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Graphic designers and artists have a long history of interpreting, reacting to, and visually transforming societal norms. Sometimes these reactions are given voice in the form of a manifesto. As William Morris extols in *The Arts and Crafts of Today*, published in 1901, “it is our business, as artists, to show the world that the pleasurable exercise of our energies is the end of life and the cause of happiness.”<sup>[1]</sup>

Morris’ manifesto was just one of the first in a long line of social design manifestos spanning more than 100 years. These manifestos call for change, activism, beauty, and clarity. They articulate the visions that these artists and designers are advocating. Morris’ declarative call to action was echoed by ensuing Futurists, Surrealists, and Riot Grrrls. In 1909, Marinetti’s *Manifesto of Futurism* called for “courage, audacity and revolt.”<sup>[2]</sup> Breton’s nonconformist surrealists declared that, “only the marvelous is beautiful, in 1924.”<sup>[3]</sup> And these pronouncements continued as Kathleen Hanna tried to determine “how what we are doing impacts, reflects, perpetuates, or **DISRUPTS** the status quo” in Riot Grrrl’s 1991 manifesto in *Bikini Kill Zine*.<sup>[4]</sup>



## FIRST THINGS FIRST 1964

In 1964, during a meeting of the Society of Industrial Artists at London’s Institute of Contemporary Arts, Ken Garland, a British designer, art editor, and nuclear disarmament campaigner, made a speech that would become the basis for another important social design manifesto, titled “First Things First.” Garland rallied against consumerist culture and warned



First Things First caused controversy from the start. Some critics saw the manifesto as naïve and idealistic. They argued that graphic design was a job like any other and that the ideals Garland championed were unattainable. However, the signatories and supporters were right to worry. From 1964 on, commercial advertising has only grown to the detriment of design, and tangentially, to consumers, too.

By the late 60's, advertising had become a cultural leech, promoting materialism and deceiving consumers by using emotional impact marketing to sell, sell, sell. The market boomed and then busted, and advertisers started marketing to a younger generation. Heralding emotional design strategies that aped Punk and New Wave, and a digital design revolution that according to design historian Steven Heller, “presumes that more is hipper than less, confusion is better than simplicity, fragmentation is smarter than continuity, and that ugliness is its own reward.”<sup>[7]</sup> Postmodern design overtook the 80's and 90's, allowing form to overshadow function, and left designers with misprinted type and misunderstood messages.

## FIRST THINGS FIRST 2000

In 1999, Kalle Lasn, editor of *Adbusters* magazine, showed the 1964 manifesto to Tibor Kalman, an influential American graphic designer, who encouraged him to update it and print it again. With Garland's blessing, the updated version of “First Things First,” began to emerge. When asked in a 2002 interview why he decided to revive the manifesto, Lasn said, “For a long time, *Adbusters*' art director, Chris Dixon, and I were very dissatisfied with the sorry state of visual communications and design. We felt that most designers lived and worked like prostitutes, selling their services to the highest corporate bidders without a second thought.”<sup>[8]</sup>

This new manifesto, structured similarly to the 1964 version, has a familiar beginning. It intones of designers using their skills and imagination to sell “sneakers, butt toners, and light beer.” However, the message is more aggressive in its outcomes, arguing that, “we are all helping to draft a reductive and immeasurably harmful code of public discourse.”<sup>[9]</sup> Instead, the signees advocate for a more political approach, by putting their skills to use in service of worthy causes: “Unprecedented environmental, social and cultural crisis demand our attention,” they state.<sup>[9]</sup> The manifesto shows that the signees were becoming “increasingly uncomfortable” with the current state of design. In the end, they renewed the manifesto with an expectation that its original call for worthwhile pursuits be taken to heart before more time passed.

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First Things First 2000 was simultaneously published internationally in Adbusters, Émigré, the AIGA Journal, Eye, Blueprint, Items, and Form magazines. This time it was signed by some of the leading names in graphic design and the visual arts community. Along with Garland, there were thirty-two other signatories, including Milton Glaser, Steven Heller, Katherine McCoy, Rick Poyner, and Tibor Kalman.

This version, too, became the subject of controversy. Critics who viewed the manifesto favorably saw it as a political statement urging designers to debate pressing issues and take a stance. Rick Poyner, published an article in Émigré magazine along with the release of the new manifesto, in which he detailed its origins in 1964. As a signer of the 2000 publication, his accompanying article aims to push the lightly worded agenda into a heavier handed decree. He states,

“Even now, at this late hour, in a culture of rampant commodification, with all its blind spots, distortions, pressures, obsessions, and craziness, it’s possible for visual communicators to discover alternative ways of operating in design.”<sup>[10]</sup> Those critics who opposed the manifesto, like the type designer David Quay, refused to sign, and when asked, said that he, “felt that it discriminated against many good designers that do their very best, often under difficult and strict commercial conditions.”<sup>[11]</sup>

Criticism continued when Metahaven, a strategic design studio known for their political and social design critiques, published a series of essays titled, *White Night Before a Manifesto*, in 2008. They critique the actionability and hypocrisy of such a manifesto, stating, “none of the signees publicly refrained from well-paid or commercial work after its release, none set out to make some sort

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of professional or personal sacrifice that would purport realization of the aims stated, and none changed the trade of advertising from without or within. Simply put: nothing changed.”<sup>[12]</sup>

## FIRST THINGS FIRST 2014

On the 50th anniversary of the 1964 publication, designer Cole Peters set out to write a new manifesto that included web worries and vied to be more inclusive of other professions (not just graphic designers, and art directors), and which aimed to capture the spirit of how open and collaborative the web is, allowing anyone to become a signatory of the manifesto.

Rather than listing superficial items that designers create, Cole’s manifesto hazards designers to be aware of a professional climate that, “prizes venture capital, profit, and scale over usefulness and resonance, demands a debilitating work-life imbalance of its workers, and lacks critical diversity in gender, race, and age.” The 2014 manifesto asks designers to use their abilities to benefit areas such as “education, medicine, and humanitarian aid.”<sup>[13]</sup>

First Things First 2014 was launched online and made available for all interested parties to sign. There were no famous names rallying to its cry. It remained open for nearly two years, attracting over 1,600 supporters to its call for a more humanist approach to design and technology.

Most feedback was positive, the biggest opponents being those who suggested that the words of the manifesto may not end up translating into actions; others posited that the manifesto is better at suggesting what not to do, as opposed to informing readers of where to go next.

And that does seem like a general critique of all these manifestos. They feel like gentle suggestions. Like a little poke or pull. Encouraging dialogue but leaving it up to the designers to turn it into action.

## FIRST THINGS FIRST 2020

But change may be coming. Published online on the 50th anniversary of Earth Day, FTF 2020, organized by designers Marc O’Brien and Ben Gaydos, and architect Namita Dharia, took an even more aggressive approach than the 2000 and 2014 versions. These designers are not just “increasingly uncomfortable” with the state of design and its impact on consumerist culture and our planet—they sound downright pissed.

Taking heed of the critiques of the previous proclamations, this manifesto isn't blowing smoke, it's blowing horns, announcing:

**“We, the undersigned, are designers who have been raised in a world in which we put profit over people and the planet in an attempt to grease the wheels of capitalism and keep the machine running. Our time and energy are increasingly used to manufacture demand, to exploit populations, to extract resources, to fill landfills, to pollute the air, to promote colonization, and to propel our planet’s sixth mass extinction.”<sup>[14]</sup>**

They respond with a bulleted checklist of action items that examine the histories, processes, and ethics of design, and that promotes justice, encourages empathy, and integrates these principles into multidisciplinary design education.

FTF 2020 is a living document. Not only can you sign the pronouncement, but you can also add to the discourse on the website. “Our goal was to decentralize the process, to open it up to anyone,” says Gaydos. “It can adapt and change just as we are forced to adapt and change if we want to survive.”<sup>[15]</sup>

This is the fourth version of the manifesto. “First Things First” keeps getting revived with increasing vehemence in the hope that change will magically take place. The many iterations may speak to the futility of such proclamations. However, the newest manifesto has transitioned from declarations to solutions, seeing a systemic change by integrating ethics and empathy into design education.

Before a manifesto becomes a movement, movement has to take place. The phrase “Increasingly uncomfortable,” first used in the 2000 version of “First Things First,” brings to mind the sensation of when your butt has gone numb from sitting too long. Maybe it is time to stand.



## Notes

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