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First things first – or *Our* things first?

On a parochial manifesto of sated professionals

The Manifesto of graphic designers, art directors and visual communicators, called *First things first 2000,* organised by the British design writer Rick Poynor, makes for a strange reading. It is possibly best approached as an expression of problems experienced by a profession which does not suffer from unemployment, which enjoys considerable social prestige, whose services are among the best paid – and whose members, having long ago solved their survival problems, are visited with existential ones. The text gives the impression of a private grievance of a group of sated, prosperous, and politically correct professionals.

Admittedly, the signatories do advance a legitimate request: they demand that their talents also be employed other than for marketing and commercial purposes. No problem with that. However, in order to back up this wish, they intimate that their work in commercial contexts is largely devoid of meaning, since the Western commerce-based society keeps producing "*things that are inessential at best*" (i.e. useless), and that "*the profession's time and energy is used up manufacturing demand*" for all these inessential-at-best products. This principal accusation is hardly new; it has been with us for quite many generations. Is there anything in it?

Typically, the signatories' own criterion for distinguishing things essential, important and necessary from things inessential, redundant and useless, fails to lend any support to their conjecture, that the Western commercial society is bent on producing inessential things. In fact, it suggests the very opposite.

Just as all critics of "inessential things" before them, the signatories take the criterion of inessentiality to be what they themselves have no use for.

They have no use for things such as dog biscuits, designer coffee, butt toners or hair gels. On the other hand, by essential things the signatories understand what all critics before them always understood as essential, i.e. things highly important in their own eyes. Unsurprisingly, their examples of such all-important things are books, magazines, exhibitions, educational tools, television programs, films, charitable causes, and cultural interventions and social marketing campaigns (whatever that means).

Their first-things-first philosophy of design is pretty similar to an old, frighteningly well-meaning essay published in 1946 by Karel Honzík, a Czech functionalist architect, and called *Necessismus aneb myšlenka rozumné spotřeby* [*Necessism: a vision of reasonable consumption*], where the idea of planning for production of only essential things, to be determined by "consumption experts", was promoted.

The key problem of such first-things-first philosophies lies in the fact that not only graphic designers, but pretty much every social group, whether defined by profession, culture, age, religion, or otherwise, has its own notion of *first things*. These *first things* necessarily belong to the specific world of the particular group, while members of other groups view them either indifferently or in a downright hostile manner. There are hundreds upon hundreds of such groups – and inside those groups each of their members has probably somewhat different opinion as to what those *first things* are. The signatories of the *First things first 2000 Manifesto* appear to believe that the difference between an efficient hair gel on one hand and a refined book layout on the other resides in the inessentiality of the former, in contrast to the essentiality, or *firstness*, of the latter. However, the fact that most of us design-people would agree that the value of good book design is higher than that of good hair gel has no bearing whatsoever on the question of importance, usefulness,

relevance, essentiality or *firstness* of either of them. In extreme circumstances, when one's life is at stake, both of them are equally irrelevant. But under normal, peaceful circumstances (and commercial societies are by their nature peaceful societies), both books *and* hair gels, educational tools *and* butt toners, exhibitions *and* dog biscuits, contribute in their different ways to improve the quality of a user's life.

If *first things* of each social group are widely different, then the denigrated commercial framework may be viewed as a unique solution to the problem of conflicting priorities. The commerce-based type of society pooh-poohed as basically dysfunctional by the signatories, offers in fact not only one group, but each group that manages to be heard in the marketplace, to pursue its own *first things* – despite the fact that these groups would never ever come to a mutual agreement about what to consider the *first things*. Typically, there is not one word in the *First things first 2000 Manifesto* about the amazing accomplishments of the Western commercial societies. And, of course, not a word about those societies of the 20th century, whose only raison d'être was to erect an alternative to the commercial, capitalist societies, then as now accused of producing unnecessary things. Here I am not referring to the relatively successful attempts of individuals to form voluntary egalitarian societies, such as the kibbutz movement, but to the communist regimes of not-so-distant history, in which a single group monopolized the right to define the essential. Those alternative societies were no minor experiments: at their apogee the regimes held around one third of the mankind involuntarily locked within their barbed wire borders – and some of them still do. This is not to say that all critique of the present commercial societies is to be silenced by always pointing to the fiasco of the anti-commercial, communist alternatives. I do think, however, that rejecting the Western commercial framework (which is the message of the Manifesto) while completely ignoring both the attain-

ments of Western capitalist societies based on political and economic freedoms, and the outcome of the alternative communist societies that programmatically abolished these freedoms, is ludicrously inadequate. It is an intellectual equivalent of sighs of the sated.

There is no doubt that the high quality and sophistication of graphic design in the Western culture is a function of a commerce-based society. Besides, historically speaking, only the societies based on economic and political freedom have made possible a growing standard of living to the majority of its members. Luxuries, earlier available only to the rich and powerful, became increasingly accessible to common people only in the Western societies. It is a fact that commercial societies have permitted a growing number of its members to define their own preferences, i.e. to decide for themselves what their *first things* are. Not surprisingly, the Western system of economic growth has brought greatest profits to those innovators who improved the standard of living of many less rich, rather than of a few fabulously wealthy. We may assume that the global capitalism, in spite of the upheavals of its "creative destruction", will keep improving the living standards of all those who live outside the wealthy Western world.

True, a free-market society does not make, and will never make, for an ideal society. The signatories of the *First things first 2000 Manifesto* are not alone in finding many features of the consumer society personally regrettable, and I for one would join them in the complaints. But their first-things-first philosophy is short-sighted at best. The problem is that if every group will try to tailor the world to the *first things* of its own, while rejecting, as the signatories apparently do, the framework which permits more than one group to advance their own *first things*, we would be cutting off the very branch we all are sitting on. It is imperative to have not just one, but two objectives: to go ahead and further *our own first*

things, and, at the same time, to care to preserve and defend the political and economic framework which permits other people to pursue *their own first things*. The existence of this framework is both the primary source, and the only guarantee, of our prosperity. This is our ultimate *first thing*. Here lies the curious professional parochialism of the *First things first 2000 Manifesto*: its signatories apparently fail to understand that their declaration of "first things first" only means: "*our* things first".

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