

This is an interview that took place on the 26th of October 2007 between the hours of 11:30 and 13:30. The interview involved Ken Garland and myself: James Allen. It was conducted at Ken Garland's personal studio in Camden, London.

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Ken Garland: Do you want to test it?

James Allen: Yes. It's recording now, so...

KG: Right, well we are having a little test to make sure that I am coming over in adequate form.

JA: That's great.

(I test to see if the Dictaphone is working)

KG: So what would you like to hear about then?

JA: I am really interested in learning more about the First Things First manifesto.

KG: Ah, okay, well I don't know what accounts you may have heard of it already? I don't want to repeat something you know, so do you know the situation in which it emerged?

JA: Yes, vaguely.

KG: Would you rather I...

JA: I know it happened at the ICA...

KG: I see, so you'd rather have it from the horse's mouth?

JA: Yes please if that's okay with you?

(Ken laughs)

KG: Okay. Well, it happened in December of 1963. The older members of the graphic design community, and the design community generally had become

alarmed that people of our generation, we were in our late twenties, had already established ourselves but had no desire to join their organization which was called, then, *The Society of Industrial Artists*, later called *The Society of Industrial Artists and Designers* and now called *The Chartered Society of Designers*. They couldn't see why we didn't want to belong to what was after all our organization, so they asked us would we please come to a meeting to talk about why we didn't want to join the SIA.

The title of the meeting was 'Why not join the SIA?' and the leading likes of the SIA, included a guy who I was already friendly with, he was a good friend. F. H. K Henry-an, called Hénry by his friends. It was Hénry who was the moving spirit in this, he was always looking for and interested in young talent, and he was quite alarmed that the young talent seemed to be able to get along perfectly well thank you without the SIA. So this meeting was held in the, well what was then the ICA building in Mayfair, which is where it was before it moved down to Carlton House Terrace, where it is now. It was very well attended because Hénry and his chums had done a good job, and they had phoned everybody and said "Look, do come, we want you", so it was an invitation that we could hardly refuse.

There were my contemporaries: Alan Fletcher, Colin Fords, Derek Birdsall, and Phillip Thompson. These were people who were students with me at the Central School of Arts and Crafts, which was a very good course out of which we all sprang; we were quite a lively generation. So we were there and some of the older guys came up and made their schpiel and it was quite, err... err... impressive in a way and yet because I had no intention of joining I was sitting at the back ready to go if I felt I'd had enough. I felt, and sort of thought that I had heard this all before, it was quite nicely delivered but there was nothing new to me and I thought, what do I really care about? Well what I really wanted was that the SIA should have been a trade union, I thought they were spending an awful long time talking about raising standards, these mysterious things called standards, there were standards of achievement and so on, funny enough it was standards with which, by which as far as my generation was concerned by the time you had attained the standards you weren't interested in them anymore (Ken laughs) you have other things to do. We felt a bit like Marks who said memorably on one occasion "I wouldn't dream of belonging to an occasion which would want me as a member", you know, so if you want me as a member then thank you I don't want to be one anymore, that's all I wanted to know. I suppose there was some sort of satisfaction in the fact that they were pleading for our membership, but I did think I had something else to concern me, and that was that we were becoming merely the lackey of the establishment and system, we were merely their run

arounds, we were putting the icing on the cake. We were just following orders; *I was just following orders!* You know the famous phrase.

I felt that we had other missions, but a little ill defined at that time, 1963, little ill defined, but I thought I'd jot down a few things which seemed to me to have more importance than what we were talking about. So I jotted this down, now I want you to understand that that First Things First thing was very much off the top of my head, it hadn't been brooded on, there had been no deep thinking into the reaches of the night, just the way I felt at the time. As I was jotting it down it was really to keep my mind occupied during what had become literally quite a tedious meeting. Once I had written it down I thought I wanted to show this.

So the chairman of the meeting was a guy called Stuart, hmmm... I've forgot his surname, anyway, Stuart the senior designer said "Well thank you young people for attending and listening to our case and responding, has anybody got anything else to say?" So I raised my hand at the back of the audience, he said "Ah, Ken", he knew me already, "Please come and tell us what you have", I said I've got something I could read out if that's okay? "Oh, yes, yes, do come along" He was very tall. So I walked forward and as I walked forward I remember going past Alan Fletcher and Alan saying "There is a wolf in sheep's clothing if ever I saw", because I was wearing a sheepskin jacket, in those days I still wore animals, I was wearing a sort of a sheep skin jacket (We both laugh) so I thought that was very fun. So I went forward and I read this out and these senior guys, well their mouths fell open, it was nothing to do with what we were talking about and the audience was at first bemused but as I read it I sort of warmed to the subject and I started to declaim it you know with gestures (Ken laughs), a bit like a speech from the battles fields, so the audience got fired up, they were all people of my age, I finished it with a flourish; thunderous applause. Which surprised me no end, you know I hadn't expected this sort of reception and Stuart whatever said "Well, thank you Ken that's ended the meeting with a resounding declaration which I'm sure we all want to take to heart, thank you very much", that was it.

Afterwards a number of people come up to me and asked if that was sort of a manifesto, because I hadn't declared it as a manifesto, I said I suppose it is really, yes. They said "can we join?" join? Well, well I suppose yes, right, I felt then at that meeting the thing to do was get it written out more formally and get some more people to sign. Well I also thought because the way it was written it was a we, we this, we that and we the other so I wanted to put across the idea that it wasn't me it was we, which was a fond hope that was full-filled by what we said.

So then I thought I was going to invite people to co-sign this otherwise I'll be forever juggling with people saying can I be in, can I be in? So I just thought that I would invite twenty or so people and this is what happened in the end. I wanted to invite people who were considerably older than me and people who were younger than me; the youngest was probably about twenty. They also had a range of skills, not just graphic designers, but photographers as well and people teaching typography and graphic design. The oldest was Edward Wright, Edward Wright was a guy who I had formed a great friendship with, he had taught an evening class in the Central School which was really quite memorable, to which the contributors of the evening class were not just graphic designers but architects and academics and all sorts of them. They came along to play around with type, it was huge fun, anyway I'm diverging a bit, I wanted Edward to be at the top of the list so I reversed the alphabetical order, which is something I do quite often in my teaching as well, when I look at students work I say well, we will look at your work in alphabetical order, which is quite intriguing for people who use to be the last one to be looked at and then they turn out to be the first, you know. So it started with Edward and ended up with whatever.

I got it printed and I printed, oh I don't know, I can't remember, a couple of hundred perhaps, small print run. Then I just distributed this to various magazines, institutions, I stuck it up on the wall of certain art schools I had connections with - The Central School and The London College of Printing and so on and so forth. It reverberated, this was in January, by this time it was January of 1964, it reverberated quite quickly.

One of my friends who was already working for me at something I had founded called Ken Garland & Associates: Bob Chutten. He knew Tony Bennett or he was then known as, Anthony Wedgwood-Ben before his transmodification, so he contacted Wedgwood-Ben and said "I think you might be interested in this manifesto" and he said "*Yes I would*" and he made it the theme of one of his pieces which was working regularly for The Guardian, in those days called The Manchester Guardian. So Anthony Wedgwood-Ben's piece was all about First Things First. This was seen on the day it was published by the villagers of a magazine called *Tonight*, which is very equivalent of what is now *News Night* and they thought oh this is news worthy, so they contacted me and got me in that very night to proclaim the manifesto to a wider audience.

(Doorbell rings. Tape is stopped. Ken goes out of the room for 15 minutes, whilst I read one of his books)

KG: Well to pick up where I left off, I had this interview with the *Tonight* team, one of whom was very enthusiastic; Ken Allsop, the other one Cliff Richemore frankly he couldn't see what all the fuss was about and a lot of people can't see what all the fuss is about, sometimes I can't even see what all the fuss is about. (Ken laughs) I do worry about this, you get quite sort of boiled up about everything, you know, just get on with it. People like Alan Fletcher who was very opposed to it all said, "I can't see what Ken is banging on about, he's a perfectly good designer, he should just get on with it" (Ken laughs) and there is a point there, I must say I always thought he had a point there. Well there were reverberations from that T.V interview and also from the exposure of the manifesto in various magazines, like *Design Magazine* showed it and the *SLA* journal whatever it's called showed it and then it got showed in some magazines in the US and even in New Zealand of all places. So I began to get correspondence from everywhere sort of thing, you know, Sacramento California, Auckland New Zealand and the Hampstead suburb, you know, everywhere. So I had to do a lot of answering of letters, and by the end of it all I was dieing for it all to quieten down so I could just get on with my work. After all manifestos are manifestos and work is work and I just wanted to get on with my work, and nothing much happened, I mean it wasn't a revolution (Ken laughs) let's put it that way.

The people who co-signed it, we met once, my co-singes, and we argued (Ken laughs) we didn't exactly all get on, but we kept it all together and we had a general agreement, but we had lots to argue about. We didn't meet again, and that was that. So I thought it was kind of the end of it, but of course it isn't, its been going on every ten years or so and no doubt this will continue and I shall never get it off of my neck. (Ken laughs) It's a bit like the albatross, no that's unfair because I do enjoy meeting new people; especially I like meeting a whole new generation of students, to whom it's a new thing. I think, I wonder what I would think if I were twenty years old and this old geezer produced this thing and I though, funny, I can respond to that, you know, an old geezer wrote it but I can still respond to it. So I feel refreshed, so don't think even though I am slagging it off occasionally, I don't really mean it. Now that we've got through that if you've got any questions?

JA: One that has just popped into my head as you were talking about Alan Fletcher. I would like to know why Alan Fletcher didn't sign it and why was he against it?

KG: Well, he wasn't against it and he wasn't antagonistic, he was just dismissive, you know, I can't see what your bothering about sort of thing. I didn't actually

ask Alan to sign it, I don't exactly remember, but he made his feelings known, in the nicest possible way.

JA: Yes (We both laugh). Now *Adbusters* republished your original First Things First manifesto in 1999/2000 as the First Things First Manifesto 2000. Why was it that *Adbusters* rewrote the manifesto instead of yourself?

KG: Err... (Prolonged silence) well my contact, I had contact with the founding editor of *Adbusters* Kalle Lasn but my main link was with Rick Poyner who had taken it upon himself to be the connecting spirit and he said "How would I liked to be involved?" and I said "Well, if you want to take First Things First the original one as a spur for a new one then please do" and he said "Would you co-sign a new manifesto?" I said "Yes I think I would if you showed me the draft of course and all being well, yes, I would co-sign it" So I thought well leave it to them.

I somehow assumed it would be in a completely different form. I would have quite liked it to be a CD-Rom or I don't know, just a straight email message, or something like that. But they came out with a printed version that echoed the original version very closely and a lot of the phrasing was echoed. I was both flattered and a little bit disconcerted because I felt that here we are all these years later we should perhaps have quite different words in quite a different form, but Rick assured me that the message was still valid as it was originally, it only needed updating, so what we required was an update and that is what we got. So I was happy to co-sign it.

JA: It doesn't sound like they pushed it much further forward considering it had been 36 years since the last one. Like you say they printed a version that was very much the same as what you had done originally.

KG: It was a little bit more updated but not that much. It got a terrific response. *Adbusters* ran a website for it for at least a year, maybe two years, and it got thousands of people who actually co-signed the manifesto. I looked it up after a year and I was amazed. Some of the signers were under fake names like Mickey Mouse (We both laugh) however there were some genuine ones as well. So I was impressed. I was impressed; not just because *Adbusters* had taken it upon themselves and other magazines had joined in, that was impressive too but even more so was the response from younger people. Then I began to get, because I then not long after had my own website, people discovered it and began to get my email address and it's been happening ever since; and here you are.

JA: I do think *Adbusters* helped to get the manifesto out to a younger generation again and like you say; here I am. We recently had a lecture from a design studio called Universal Everything at the LCC. They were talking about all their work then Matt confessed that they had done some work for Marlboro the cigarette company. Feeling guilty... (Kens phone rings. The tape is stopped and Ken answers the phone)

KG: Umm... where were we?

JA: Universal Everything...

KG: Yes, yes.

JA: They decided to give all the money to charity. Do you think that this is a good thing for design studios to undertake every once in a while to help the greater good of charities or do you think that this is still going against...

KG: *No, no.* I don't want to sound like a wet blanket, but anybody who works for people who sell shit is getting his hands very mucky. Cigarettes are *shit*, and the large cigarette companies who sell them are even shittier. I wouldn't touch them with a barge pole. I see nothing wrong in design outfits fully engaging in commerce, I mean I've done it all my working life, most of my clients sell things, services and products, why the hell not? That's what we're about, that's what my work has been and ought to be. But cigarettes are something else, and I think umm... they should lay off the cigarettes.

JA: Do you not think that people should have the same measure of beauty and intelligence in their lives, regardless of it being designed for cigarettes or designed for an art gallery?

KG: Infact the idea of working unwillingly but in order to make money, I'm not so sure you do such good work for people. If you say look we don't like these people they're a bunch of arseholes but they've got lots of money and we'll soak them for a big fee and then spend it on doing good things. I don't think that is the right way to do it; I think you actually damage your own skills by devoting them to something when your heart isn't in it.

JA: That makes complete sense to me. Before you had said that I was in the frame of thought that doing work for lots of money then spending it to do good things was a fair way to go about things, but like you say, if your heart isn't in it

then its really no good.

KG: All the clients I've worked for fortunately I felt very, *almost* all the clients I've worked for I felt very involved in their product or their service and enjoyed publicising it for them. That makes for really satisfying relationships. I hope you do the same.

JA: I do, I hope to do the same. A few years after the First Things First manifesto you said "What I am suggesting... is that we make some attempt to identify, and to identify with, our real clients: the public. They may not be the ones who pay us, nor the ones who give us our diplomas and degrees. But if they are to be the final recipients of our work, they're the ones who matter". Michael Bierut argues, "They deserve at the very least the simple, civic-minded gift of a well-designed dog-biscuit package". I agree with Michael's argument here, surely we are here, as designers, here to make the world a more aesthetically beautiful and more visually functioning place, so what better place to start than with dog-biscuits?

KG: Yes, I thought he had a point. Michael has actually been very supportive in other ways of First Things First, but what Michael was saying was I was being dismissive of people engaging in the apparently modern day commercial objective, which I say they shouldn't do. Well I've actually never said that and I think Michael miss-interpreted my manifesto as being anti-advertising. What I was arguing about was the matter of economics and politics, although I do have ethical views, I was not expressing them in that manifesto. I was talking about the sheer economics and politics of all the money going into aspects of advertising, only aspects of advertising which seemed to soak up huge amounts of money which could have been better applied else where, maybe also in advertising, but also elsewhere. Why should we spend so much time trying to sell identical detergent powders? The reason why we spend so much money is because they are identical, there's no difference between this one, that one and that one, therefore the argument goes we need very intelligent, very subtle and very clever advertising to sell them because they are so similar, *this is nonsense!* This is capitalism at it's most ludicrous. So that's what I was talking about. That was the underlying message.

JA: I read that somebody once told you 'You should always leave when you're ahead'. You left *Design* magazine to start your own consultancy even though you was enjoying the job more than ever.

KG: *Oh yes, yes I was.*

JA: Do you think this was a wise choice and a good piece of advice? Or would you have liked to ride the wave a bit longer before quitting?

KG: Still do.

JA: Really?

KG: Yes, I have very nostalgic memories of working on *Design* magazine partly because I met so many designers of different kinds, users of design and enthusiasts about design, very often people like manufacturers, people in marketing who had a genuine conviction about the importance of design and that was an evangelical period which I think we have kind of lost. The editor of *Design* magazine Michael Ford who I greatly admired, he was a great friend of mine, he's now dead, he had become imbued with the desire to spread the word about ergonomics, also called human factors. He said that one of the things that design generally suffered from was the fact it didn't focus enough on human needs, it focused on say marketing or whatever, other impulses which were not entirely unworthy, but there were these even more worthy ones of designing to meet measurable human needs, that's what I thought was terrific. Well when I left *Design* magazine I left that, in a way, behind, but this somebody who said to me quit whilst I was ahead, he was absolutely right, imagine what it would have been like if I stayed there for another couple of years and became disillusioned with working, because eventually you do, if your in the same job long enough you do become disillusioned, you know, it's the nature of things; but it didn't happen to me.

JA: Do you think that designers of my generation, who are coming out into the design world in more vast numbers than ever before in graphic design history, are we coming out of design schools less equipped and skilled than your generation? It seems that fewer and fewer design schools are teaching the basics and I feel that some institutions, not to name any, are teaching aesthetics instead of feeding knowledge and ideas. Your generation seemed to come out of design schools a lot fewer but a lot better equipped in the essentials, such as kerning and letter spacing etcetera. Do you agree?

KG: I wouldn't say that, partly because I'm teaching (Ken laughs), I'd be stabbing myself in the back, I think that teaching in many many places is as good to me as it ever was. I think there are new challenges and I think that is what you are referring to. We nowadays have got a great variety of outlets for our work, quite a lot more I must tell you than what we had in the early 1960's, far more. Graphic designers have a greater canvas on which they can display their talents but there

is competition, the competition is the 'Do-It-yourself' graphic design, it is possible for an untrained person to pick up various applications and templates and knock out a possible piece of graphic design for himself/herself without having any reference to a graphic designer, that could not have been in the past. Also because there is a fusion of all the skills of pre-print and preparation skills it is possible for one outfit to assume all the typesetting, all the generation skills that are unnecessary to go straight to print, and this will become increasingly so and will increase as we move into the digital future which will mean we will be using these forms for our printing and by-passing the traditional ones completely and therefore graphic designers have a new kind of competition and they've got to accept it, they have no choice and graphic designers have to find a new role for themselves or more to enhance the role that they have got use to, we have to find a greater and more ingenious way of using those skills. I don't know what they'll be because I'm not a prophet, in fact you probably know better than I do, but it is almost unpredictable, you don't know where its going to go.

JA: How do we then begin to equip ourselves for this?

KG: Well, we take on as many interests in information, business and technology as we feel we are able to, you cant encompass them all, there are simply too many for a 3 year course to accomplish all in one go but if you become *very* proficient in doing one sort of thing the chances are that you can translates those or carry over those skills into another area or another or another. Its not a bad thing to concentrate on a certain aspect of graphic design or graphic communication so that you master it and in the mastering of it you then discover how you might go on to master another and that is probably the best way to do it. In my case I was so interested in photography that I wanted to master the use of a photograph, both in typography and layout and also to be able to be a photographer myself which I always have been and to feel great sympathy for an identity with the photographic aspect of graphic design, that was my interest. Other people have other things to concentrate on; thank God there are still people, in spite or your hint, for whom typography is an absorbing skill in itself. Your hint is right in one respect and that is there is fewer than there use to be, the skill and the art of typography is not so well taught nowadays. It's been a continual plea of mine; can we have more typography in our graphic design teaching. What has happened is, I think, that the teachers of graphic design are themselves now less proficient in typography as their predecessors were, and that's a very sad protocol.