

Tibor Kalman on Social Responsibility

Tibor Kalman was born in Budapest and raised in suburban New York. He was educated at New York University and on the streets of New York City. In 1968, he started working for the company that became Barnes & Noble. In 1979, he founded M&Co. He was art director at *Artforum*, creative director of *Interview*, and the founding editor in chief of *Colors*, for which he edited the first thirteen issues. In 1993, he suspended M&Co. and moved with his family to Rome. In 1995, he left *Colors* and reanimated M&Co. to work primarily on noncommercial projects.

For over a decade, first as the principal of M&Co. and then as editor of *Colors*, you've been on a mission to change the way people in the design field address the world. How did this missionary zeal take hold?

M&Co. started in 1979 as just another design firm. For me it was about leaving the big company I was working for, Barnes & Noble, and starting out on my own doing the only thing I knew how to do. Our first project was signage for E. J. Korvette's department stores, a chain of discount stores in New York. During the first five years of M&Co. we did a tremendous amount of garbage. By the mid-1980s we were moving to a kind of Robin Hood idea where we would do ugly work for corporations and interesting work for rock bands and cultural institutions. In 1986, we began showing our music work to corporate clients because in the mid-eighties (and suddenly!) corporate clients started becoming younger and hipper.

What made you change your focus?

Because I could see that the other way wasn't going to be enough to keep me interested in design. The mission began when I started thinking, "Does what designers do make the world look nicer or more interesting or better?"

What did you decide?

I was dissatisfied with the notion of having something look "good" or "nice." That's when I became interested in the vernacular.

How do you differentiate what you call "garbage" from vernacular?

Vernacular is the result of a lot of time, very bad tools, and no money. In New York it might be a bodega sign in Spanish Harlem or the graphics on the side of an ice delivery truck. A tremendous amount of care is taken with the work, and there's real concern about beauty and stuff like that. However, because there is no skill, it comes out kind of clunky—but beautiful, in my opinion. Garbage is bad, stupid, but professional graphics: junk mail, the Korvette's signs and Citibank brochures we designed.

Were aesthetics your only bête noire?

No. I like beautiful things, so this was not just about aesthetics. The thing that started to bother me, after we got good at producing garbage, was the extent to which we were being asked to lie and the extent to which we were asked to put pretty faces on nasty corporate behavior.

Like what?

We did annual reports for the Limited for a couple of years. Each time we were asked to do a very pretty annual report that made the company, which was having its share of problems, look like everything was hunky-dory.

So you were spin doctors.

Isn't that what most of design is about—using design to make something seem different from what it truly is? So that's the point at which I began to worry about what we designers, who are very skillful and have powerful tools at our disposal, are doing in the world, what role we are playing—making the filthy oil company look “clean,” making the car brochure higher quality than the car, making the spaghetti sauce look like it's been put up by Grandma, making the junky condo look “hip.” Is that all okay or just the level to which design (and many other professions) have sunk? That was the point at which the AIGA conference in San Antonio, “Dangerous Ideas,” happened. Milton Glaser and I were cochairs, and we decided to raise ethical and moral issues (I'm sure it was not the first time) at a national conference of designers.

Before that, at the second AIGA conference in 1988, you mounted an offensive against Esprit, the winner of that year's AIGA corporate award. Was that the fulmination of your frustration with, say, the Limited or other companies you were dealing with?

What shocked me was that the AIGA could reward a company like Esprit just for having a semicool public relations face, just for the fact that they had hired hip designers. It didn't seem to me to be the role of design in the world. I wanted to make sure that people saw the other side of the coin and the contradiction in their positions.

You mounted an anonymous leaflet campaign calling into question Esprit's poor labor practices. It was a strong indictment, but you didn't acknowledge that you were behind it. In fact, you even denied your involvement.

Yeah, I wasn't ready to come out. I wasn't sure enough of my legs and theory.

So when did your legs get stronger?

Well, a few years later I was working for Benetton, which was the same thing as Esprit (ironically, Oliviero Toscani was creative czar for both); although my project for Benetton, the magazine called *Colors*, was totally independent editorially, I acknowledge that you can't be a designer and have nothing to do with corporations. It's almost impossible. In rare cases it's not even bad.

Do you feel like you were able to succeed at making those contradictions public?

No. I was terrible at it. I could make people laugh at it, but I couldn't solve the contradictions, and I couldn't address it in a way that would convert people. I think that the long-term series of criticisms that I made of the community have been useful. But I don't think that anything has been resolved.

A milestone of your mission to make design free from hypocrisy was the so-called Kalman/Duffy debate, where you were fairly critical of Duffy's public position about what design does for business. In retrospect, do you feel that was a useful forum for making designers conscious of their actions?

That was at a time when Duffy was owned by this big designer/entrepreneur from England named Michael Peters, who was going to turn Duffy's firm into the Gap of corporate design. They were taking full-page ads in the *Wall Street Journal* telling corporations that they could turn shit into gold. I read those ads as, "The way we'll turn shit into gold is that we'll put it in gold packaging, and we'll sell people bottles of the same old shit and just make it look fabulous, valuable, and lustrous," which is what Duffy was always very good at. To be fair, he could make good stuff look better, too. I mean, in a certain way, it's what most other designers and I are also good at. So, at the AIGA conference, there was an unsatisfying debate because I was not able to separate what I did very much from Duffy. And there were two kinds of people in the audience: those who were absolutely convinced of my position, and those who thought that it was outrageous that I, being a member of the community, would call into question the practices of the community. I think Michael Bierut said it best when he said there was no difference in what we did, it was just that I felt bad about it. In hindsight, I guess I was trying to change my role in the system and bring the contradiction to my colleagues' attention.

What was the response?

It was mostly negative. Designers are proud of what they do. No one likes to be called unethical. But to me, most design projects were about stretching the truth or embellishing it or hiding the negative aspects of the product. In this live debate, waves of responses came back saying, Where do I get off criticizing Duffy? (I used him only as an example; I was really challenging my profession, and so this was no surprise). The point was that there was a person out there yelling into the darkness, who was saying that maybe what we do, not what you do, not what Duffy does, but maybe what *we* all do is not quite right. Hadn't anyone said this before? Why was there not such a thing as criticism in our field? I'm sure there was, but everyone in that ugly hotel ballroom in that fake city in Texas seemed to be new to the idea.

Whatever success or failure you might have felt, the AIGA conference marked a moment when the design profession became self-reflective. How did you proceed from there? What changed for you in terms of your attitude?

I began to realize that I couldn't do image building for corporations anymore. And by the late eighties, much, though not all, of M&Co.'s work was shifting away from that. We began to find other ways to be busy and to survive outside the area of making brochures, annual reports, and corporate IDs. We worked on film titles, videos, our own products.

What about your philosophical direction?

I began to think about whether it would be possible to use my skills as a designer to promote good ideas instead of corporate profits. That's when I began to do a lot more lecturing and tried to move the firm from form to content.

In your missionary role, around 1990, you gave a highly publicized satiric presentation to the designers at Landor Associates in San Francisco, the nation's leading identity design company—the belly of the beast,

so to speak. Did you feel that had any kind of curative or cautionary effect, or was it ultimately for their amusement?

What I tried to do was to pick apart and expose the cynicism of corporate identity to the management at Landor. I was kind of a clown, and they probably got swelled egos thinking, Oh, we've really got this wild, revolutionary kind of guy in here, and aren't we so liberal that we allow him to speak to our staff?—probably what Luciano Benetton thought as well.

What I was after was just to throw wrenches into the works and reach some of the younger designers who hadn't quite made up their minds that Landor was going to be the way they would live their lives.

And the result?

I was beginning to formulate ideas about whether it was possible for me to use my skill at getting corporations to do self-critical stuff. That was one of my purposes at Landor, and I think to some extent there were some discussions inside Landor about what that meant. I don't know what the lasting impact of it was.

Why did you decide to close M&Co. after nearly fifteen years?

Very simply, because I became involved with a project that was better than all the stuff I had ever done at M&Co. With *Colors*, I had control over content. I was editor in chief. There was total freedom. There was even a decent budget. I had started working on *Colors* in 1991 and did it for two years and five issues in New York. At the time, there were a dozen to fifteen people working on *Colors* and a dozen to fifteen working on M&Co., and I bounced like a maniac between the two. I had two super-demanding, trying-to-reinvent-the-wheel, full-time jobs! But I was having more fun on *Colors*, and it was a lot more interesting than wristwatches or album covers. I thought it would be a lot more useful to the world than the whole sum of M&Co.'s output from that period.

How did you reconcile Benetton—a clothing firm, similar to Esprit—*Colors*, fun, and usefulness for the world?

You don't become a corporation and you don't make profit in this world without exploiting people. And I knew that Benetton was a corporation, and everybody else I had ever worked for was a corporation, too. There are a couple of institutions that I've worked for, like a museum now, that is not in and of itself scummy, but it gets its money from scum. That's just how it is, and you're either going to go into a shell, go into academia, kill yourself, or figure out a way to swim among the barracuda.

At the time Oliviero Toscani, the creative director of Benetton, was doing very controversial "socially oriented" ads for Benetton that ultimately promoted knit goods. How did you feel about this?

At the time that I got involved, Toscani was doing those sweet unarguable antiracism ads where a black and white child play together or a black hand and a white hand are handcuffed together. Actually, I liked Toscani a lot as a person, and I believed that he was really concerned about those issues, and I believed that he spoke a language that was incredibly easy to understand around the world. That was the beauty of what he did.

So you were comfortable with the relationship?

I didn't have very much trouble reconciling with it at that time. I knew deep in my marrow that Benetton was probably not the nicest company in the world, but I thought

that the freedom I was getting in making the magazine was worth the trade-off of having slightly filthy money in it. Remember, most ballet in the United States is funded by Philip Morris. Does that mean the dancers shouldn't dance?

You mean you're not a purist?

I'm not independently wealthy. I can't afford purity. I don't believe it's the way to be effective. I took advantage of the fact that Benetton was ready, willing, and able to fund me, making a big international magazine whose message I could believe in, especially since I played a major role in creating that message. For me, the issue was that Benetton could wear *Colors* like a medal—that they (sometimes) could get good publicity for it was fair—as long as they didn't try to influence the message. I believe I had more freedom than 95 percent of magazine editors. It wasn't a magazine for everyone, but it was a magazine that I believed could reach young people in lots of different places around the world. I felt that the concerns and interests of the audience—young people, whether they were in Manila or Philadelphia—reflected similar frames of reference because of the global village, MTV, Coke and Pepsi, Adidas and Nike, technology and a shrinking planet, and that we could actually address issues that were relevant to both.

You did issues that were extremely powerful. One of the most striking was an issue on racism, which to me is still an exemplary piece of publishing activism from this decade.

I want to mention that we also did issues on sports and travel. Because what I wanted to do was take the serious issues, like racism and AIDS, and treat them with humor and sexiness, and take the issues like sports and travel and treat them more as issues of social relevance and politics.

Where did you, coming back to the United States, want to resume your career?

The one thing I didn't want to do was to begin where I had left off. I didn't want M&Co. to work "commercially" any longer—that is, I didn't want it to sell stuff. What I really wanted to do was to find—or better yet, invent—a magazine to edit. There have been a couple of projects in my life that I would have been happy to continue to work on for the rest of my life. One of them was *Colors*. The other one was the Talking Heads video.

The video, which introduced moving type as a visual element on the screen, was a wonderful piece of form, but how could you do that for the next century?

I think there is a thoroughly exploited but equally unexplored relationship between image and type, especially moving image and type. While we see a tremendous amount of type on television now and on commercials because it's such an effective way of communicating two messages in the space/time of one, I sincerely believe that the extent to which it's being done is still only scratching the surface. What we were doing in the Talking Heads stuff back in 1989 was really ahead of its time. It was a way of creating narrative with design, using words as pictures and, maybe, using pictures as words. That was the relationship in *Colors* too. I'm fascinated with telling stories using images as opposed to words. And a lot of my work right now is about the ways in which images can be arranged as messages.

Since returning to the United States, are you happy or are you disappointed in where design as a community has gone?

I'm disappointed. A couple of things bother me: one is the extent to which technology has evolved. The evolution of technology has been tremendous. I'm not computer-literate at all. And at the risk of being thought an old fogey, I mistrust what computers do to ideas. But given the impact of computers within the design world, the impact of computers on photography, the impact of the Web, I think that there has been a really fundamental sea change, a kind of shift of the critical mass.

For better? For worse?

For both. It's made it much easier for designers to become more responsible about the things that go through their studios. That's an opportunity that right now is wasted.

Wasted in what sense?

It's wasted on obfuscation. It's wasted on a trashy kind of commercialism instead of even cool commercialism. It's wasted on corporate Web sites that are pointless. I think a thing like the Levi's Web site, which everybody talks about as being really cool, is useless because they haven't figured out what it should do. If they could figure out what it could do, it would be revolutionary, but designers are failing to do that. Again, they're failing to consider that content begets form, not vice versa—you can't get around that. If something is useless, it does not mean that it won't sell. Look at the stuff on the shelves at Kmart; watch the home shopping channel.

Has the word "cool" replaced "meaningful"?

Well, I think the word "cool" has replaced the word "content." If you have enough attitude in your work, if it's cool enough, then it doesn't matter that there's no content. The best example of this is David Carson. It's cool, and so it doesn't need to say anything. And I think this is a fundamental misunderstanding of what design is. Because it's just a language. It's just a means of communicating. It's a medium. It's not a message. It doesn't have any message in it unless somebody comes along and puts a message in it. Just because you make something cool doesn't mean that it is something. If nothing is cool, then it's nothing. And that's why this sort of work is disappointing for me.

And yet you feel that given this new technology, designers have more power and therefore should have more responsibility?

Because of the technology, we have the opportunity to become really important. We don't need publishers anymore to do this. Just look at the Web designers, they can single-handedly reach the world—eventually with full-motion video and stereo sound. We can do this for free; we can all do it at home, not only designers, but also everybody else in the world. So, I am excited by it because I am hoping that people are going to be serious enough to not be constantly in search of something that's just cool, but to be in search of ideas that can eventually begin to fill these huge empty vessels of technology.

Are you gearing up to preach to the design community again?

No. Yes. No. I'm just trying to do good work. I'm trying to make it really hard on myself, and I'm trying to make it really hard on my audience, and I'm trying to do work that just leaps forward. That's what I want.