

---

## Just Do It! Tony Hendra on Designism

**Written by** Steven Heller

**Published on** October 24, 2006.

Filed in *Voice: Journal of Design* in *Off the cuff*.

In September 2006, the Art Directors Club (ADC) held an evening devoted to design for social and political change. For years, designers have debated the advantages and disadvantages of rallying the profession in the service of political and social causes, and the furor continues unabated. This particular evening, organized by Brian Collins who heads Ogilvy's Brand Integration Group, brought designers who have contributed their ideas and talent to a wide range of issues and events to discuss the recurring theme of "what can we do to make a difference." The participants included Milton Glaser, George Lois, Jessica Helfand and James Victore. Radio host and social critic Kurt Andersen was on hand for some sober reflection, and Steven Heller moderated the articulate group.

Collins introduced Tony Hendra, who gave a rousing keynote. Hendra, a satirist, author and editor who has long worked on the conceptual side of design, made a heartfelt plea for active engagement. In this interview, he discusses the importance of the evening in building a consensus while taking a whack at the criticism that designers should stick to design, not politics.

**Steven Heller: Through satire—and particularly as a writer/producer for *Spitting Image* (the British satiric puppet show), *That Was The Week That Was* (the British faux news show that prefigured by decades Jon Stewart's *The Daily Show*), author of *The Messiah of Morris Avenue*, a novel about the real second coming) and an editor of the *National Lampoon*—you've impacted the way people think about their world. You may have even forced people to positively act on their thoughts and beliefs. Do you believe that, by itself, design has potency to alter behavior?**

**Tony Hendra:** I have always had a preference for executing a satirical premise visually if possible, or at least visually and verbally. *National Lampoon* in its golden years was the beginning of that, and in my career anyway, *Spitting Image* was its climactic point.

Both enterprises were first and foremost visual—their satirical message existed in the way they looked. No matter what the premise of an article in the *Lampoon*, no matter who was being caricatured in *Spitting Image*, it was the design of the magazine, the design of the series, that told you instantly—in that instant now known as "the blink"—what we were up to. Even if the satirical content wasn't up to the message of the design, the design still told you that this was an enterprise that challenged political authority, the prevailing wisdom, the easy assumption.

**Heller: You're not a designer and yet you are a guiding force behind Designism, a term coined by Milton Glaser. What can designers do to make the proverbial "difference?" Or is this just one more do-gooder exercise in futility?**

**Hendra:** I have always taken a great deal of interest in design and designers. After talking with graphic designers and those who instruct them, I suspect that many younger designers (probably older ones too) feel that there is a disconnect between what they do for a living and what they believe. I think this is bullshit, and those who teach it are sellouts. If you organize and dynamize space—whether it's on a paper page or a web page (or any other medium)—what you see on it, place on it, and what you believe should be one and the same thing.

Now I'm old enough and greedy enough to know that, in order to make living wage, people sometimes have to suppress some part of that some part of the time. But if you have the ability to render your beliefs and passions visually, you have a powerful weapon in your hands. If you don't use it, you are wasting your life.

**Heller: Well, that's unambiguously definitive. But there is a certain carpet-bagger sensibility here, coming into designers' precincts at the recent Art Director's Club (ADC) Global event and stirring things up. Although the audience (as well as the panelists), all seemed to be in tune with your views, what do you say to those who don't feel the need to be politically active, or those who disagree with your political position?**

**Hendra:** I would hate to think design is a confederacy. I am certainly not a designer, but as an editor and writer of screen, TV, magazines, and books. I have learned the hard way that great images—static or in motion—are what people remember these days, not, alas, great words. I have always championed the designers alongside the writers of what I edit or produce. This is not common among magazine and print editors who tend to regard designers as peons who come in after all the real work has been done and either pretty things up, sell them, or both.

As for being politically active: If you don't feel the need to be politically active in our times, you will be swept away.

As for agreeing with me or not: I answer I don't care. I have my beliefs and want to see them triumph in my lifetime, but there are many goals and many ways to achieve them. As a writer, one of the things I try to do is never to let an opportunity pass to zap it to the establishment—that can be the Democrats as well as the Republicans.

**Heller: You posted your own "review" of Designism on The Huffington Post and while some of the comments were positive, others rejected the concept as either superficial or knee-jerk. The mantra at the Designism panel was, "Do something!" How do you counter the critics who say, "What you want us to do goes against our grain?"**

**Hendra:** Again, I don't believe anyone—designer, writer, or any creative, thinking, feeling person—can possibly sit out these times. I would rather you were a vibrant, brilliant competitor who disagreed with me on every issue than an escapist art-for-arts-sake opt-out. The comments on The Huffpost tended to be in sympathy with the idea that designers were a formidable force for change and dissent. Some took the position that "design" can be oppres-

sive and toxic as in the unquestionably brilliant designers who made fascism fashionable, or (as a corollary) those who make fashion a form of fascism. I don't totally disagree—it simply affirms how powerful a tool, weapon, and conceptual force design is.

**Heller: Let's talk strategy. Designism covers a lot of ground. It can be confrontational or rational; it can be philosophical or activist. What is the best way, if there is a best way?**

**Hendra:** I hate theory here. Design, like good writing, great acting and performing, is all in the action—the doing—and never in the theory. If we can galvanize designers to challenge authority, prevailing wisdom, and facile assumptions, and galvanize them to do it not with words, but with brilliant, coruscating visuals, my goal will be within reach.

**Heller: Let's be frank, Tony. When we talk about Designism, aren't we really talking about opposition to the Bush policies in Iraq, on torture, abortion, religion and so on? Is there something else you have in mind that is not so party-oriented as this?**

**Hendra:** I don't think so; this can't be party oriented. Without going into the specific politics of the Bush Administration, I think it's incontestable that politics at home and around the globe is becoming more confrontational. The goal of involved and activist designers should be to show opinions, rather than hear yet another carefully coiffed head yakking on about it. And the goal should possibly be to take the position that defusing and reducing the confrontation—itsself a political goal—might be a prime area for designers to colonize. Peace is a very large tent.

**Heller: The ADC Global is an organization devoted to serving the cultural and professional needs of the advertising and graphic design communities. Should it get involved with political action? As some critics have said about ADC and AIGA, doesn't this compromise their status as professional organizations?**

**Hendra:** Why? Did the ADC and AIGA have a hands-off attitude to, say, the Civil Rights Movement or the Movement for Women's Liberation and Reproductive Rights? (I don't know. I'm just asking). Whatever the answer, it must be said that all too often the inertia of professional groups is one of the most insidious forces conspiring against urgently needed political change. On the other hand, an ADC or AIGA that can use its power to change the debates in the prevailing public forum isn't necessarily one that's in conflict with the professional needs of its members. Not at least once it's helped changed the political forum.

**Heller: I'm not sure "Designism" is the best title for this. What about you?**

**Hendra:** No, I don't think it's a good expression of the spirit we're aspiring to. It smacks of exactly the opposite—design for design's sake—design insulated politically and culturally from the nasty reality of what's going on in the real world. Design that talks only to itself, not to the great unwashed and their needs and fears and dreams.

My original provisional slogan was “Design for America” because I liked the ambiguity of the phrase, and also because it evoked Teach for America, the supremely successful teaching program that recruits the cream of the cream of America’s college graduates and inspires them to go teach in our most challenged and threatened schools.

Whatever the name ends up being, that’s what i think is most important: To harness the raw energy of the cream of the design crop and get them to reinvent the visual vocabulary of dissent in that inimitable way only great design can.

---

**About the Author.** Steven Heller, co-chair of MFA “Designer As Author” at School of Visual Arts, is the author of *Merz to Emigre and Beyond: Avant Garde Magazine Design of the Twentieth Century* (Phaidon Press), *The Education of a Comics Artist* co-edited with Michael Dooley (Allworth Press), *The Education of a Graphic Designer, Second Edition* and *The Education of an Art Director* (with Veronique Vienne) (Allworth Press).