Adbuster Véronique Vienne Interviews Kalle Lasn

Kalle Lasn's documentaries have been broadcast on PBS, on CBC, and around the world. He is the publisher *of Adjusters* magazine and founder of the Adbusters Media Foundation and Powershift Advertising Agency. He has dedicated himself to launching social marketing campaigns like Buy Nothing Day and TV Turnoff Week.

VV: What do you think about AIGA's new code of ethics? Don't you think it's a step in the right direction in terms of responsibility?

Kalle Lasn: Yes, AIGA has finally come up with a code of ethics to back up its longstanding talk of professional standards. But is this the best AIGA can do? A list of rules about fees and decorum? There's a need for ethical standards, but in this age surely ethics must take a much longer view. I'd like ro suggest a more timely and straightforward code: the code of true-cost design.

"True cost" simply means that before designers begin **work on** a new product, they consider the ecological and psychological consequences of what they do. In other words, they plan to minimize the damage before they maximize the cool.

VV: What would be your guidelines for finding the true cost of a product?

KL: Well, let's say you're designing a leaf blower. The little two-stroke engine you plan for the thing probably has a life of a few thousand hours. Each one of those hours will produce a bit of stress and annoyance and pollution for everyone who is forced to listen to the machine and to breathe its fumes.

So before you start work, you do the math. You decide how much per hour that aggravation and pollution costs society (for the sake of example, say one cent per hour). You multiply that by the 3,000-hour lifespan of this tool. The result is a rough estimate of the ecological and psychological cost of your leaf blower over its lifetime: thirty dollars.

Now you have a decision to make. If the true-cost figure seems unacceptably high, and you do not feel you can make it lower, then you should turn down the job. Or you can try to design a leaf blower that's quieter and cleaner. Or maybe you decide instead to design a better rake, or a leaf composter.

VV: True cost is a theoretical exercise, isn't it? There is no way to know for sure" what is the true cost of a product. So designers should think of true cost as a personal and professional discipline.

KL: I don't think of it as a theoretical exercise. Of course, this whole area is very subjective right now. There are few objective criteria for deciding what the true cost of a product is. But we cannot simply throw up our hands and walk away. Bit by bit, we must learn how to calculate these costs, because if we don't, we are effectively calculating them as zero—which is the worst thing we can do. If the AIGA code of ethics said, "designers do no harm" and asked us to estimate, as rigorously as possible, the true cost of the products we design, then we, and future "L generations of designers, would be nudged into a whole new way of thinking about^ our work. Bit by bit, over the years, I think we would then turn what is now a largely theoretical exercise into something much more precise and scientific.

VV: I think what's intriguing is to try to consider the psychological cost as well% as the ecological cost of a product.

KL: Yes, it's fascinating. You know the mental environment is a new idea and what is becoming clearer is that there are often quite severe psychological costs associated with the design and marketing of products. Right now our culture is suffering an epidemic of mental illness. A recent study by Myra Weissman at Columbia University showed that young people today are three times (300 percent) more likely to suffer from a mood disorder, or an anxiety attack, or a bout of depression compared to people in their fifties and sixties. Half of all North Americans will visit a mental health professional or take some kind of psychoactive drug like Prozac sometime in their life. Many researchers believe that mass-media clutter and the thousands of marketing messages our brains absorb every day, are partially to blame for this epidemic of mental dysfunction.

I think we designers have to question our role in all this. We have to confront both the ecological and the psychological harms we do.

You know there are two kinds of products. First, the kind that sits on the table: it's beautiful, it's got nice form, a cool feel. You pick it up, turn it around in your hands and say, "Wow! what a wonderful product—the client will love it and it will sell well in the marketplace."

Then there is a second kind of product, the one that doesn't sit on a table to be admired, but is in the customer's hands every day—to brush his teeth, shave his beard, drive him to work, or whatever. I think we designers have to pay more attention to that second kind of product—the one that, for years, maybe decades, maybe centuries will delight, ease, charm. It will be shared, cursed, repaired, and will ultimately sit in a landfill long after the designer is food for worms.

If we thought more about the psychological dimensions of products in use, I think we could do all kinds of weird and wonderful things. We could design a hot-water tap to be used less. We could design a lawnmower to be shared by all the residents of a city block.

We could design a "carbonometer" that sits on the dashboard uf a car and tells the driver how much carbon he is pumping out of his tailpipe. The possibilities explode as soon as you break out of the commercial design box.

VV: Can you also take into account the positive benefits of a product? If a beautifully designed object is soothing psychologically, how does this effect your true-cost analysis?

KL: Yes, in time, I think we can leam how to value things like the health benefits, the stress-reduction power, and perhaps even the aesthetic pleasure of the products we design. But first we have to make sure our products do no harm—in other words, that our true-cost analysis yields an acceptable result.

VV: Ale you going to explore that idea in the *Adbusters* magazine some more?

KL: Yes, in fact, ever since we put out our "First Things First Manifesto" and "Design Anarchy" issues we've been getting an incredible amount of feedback about design ethics, responsibility, and related issues—especially from young designers. Every day we get e-mails and phone calls from design students and some of them come to visit us in our Vancouver office. They all want to feel that this profession they are getting into is about more than just satisfying a client and making a ton of money.

As the planet degrades, I think a slower, greener, less-cluttered, and less-commercial aesthetic will emerge. We are going to as many schools and conferences as we can talking about this emerging aesthetic, and about eco-design. bio-mimicry, psycho-design, codes of ethics, and so on.

VV: What is bio-mimicry exactly?

KL: Bio-mimicry is mimicking nature. I think it's one of the key aspects of future product design. It's already popular in architecture and some other professions. In design, bio-mimicry would involve looking at how nature does the same job as the product you are designing.

Somehow, you'd try to incorporate what you can learn from nature into the design of your product.

VV: Actually, I feel that most clients think that the "greening" of their product" is just a good marketing slant. They say, "Yeah, we're responsible," when actually i what they're trying to do is to find a new spin.

KL: Yes, this kind of green-washing is very prevalent. Of course, there are companies out there who are serious about sustainability, who believe in the values we've been talking about, and who consider the ecological cost of their products from cradle to grave. They like ro have the feeling that their products are not harming future generations, not harming the planet in any way. But such companies are few and far between.

By and large, especially for large corporations, green thinking is mostly about negotiating a better relationship with the public. For them, it's all about putting a prominent green symbol on their packaging: our product is green, our packaging is green. It's not a serious attempt to be responsible. That is why we cannot rely on our clients to set ethical standards. That's why it is so important for our profession to come up with its own codes.

VV: In Europe, of course, they are much more advanced in that way of thinking—but are they really leaders in the field? European companies, I think German companies in particular, are environmentally and psychologically conscious.

KL: Yes, many European companies are well ahead of us here in North America. But I wouldn't call them leaders, I would sav they are ahead by a few years. Thev have yet to come up with the big-picture solutions toward a truly sustainable global economy. What I am talking about is the idea of an across-the-board, true-cost marketplace, in which the cost of every product tells the ecological truth. This would mean that the ecological damage caused by a "bad" product—like, for example, the gasoline-powered automobile—is internalized right into the market price of the product. Such broad-based, market-reform thinking is still in its infancy, even in Europe.

VV: Finally, there are those who would question the whole notion of designers evaluating true costs. Any parting words for them?

KL: We designers are in the unique position—design being so new—of still being able to shape our culture as it grows. We can carve out a soul for it beyond its current commercial masturbation. I think true cost is something we can live by, explain to our kids, put into our professional code of ethics. It's something we can hang our profession on.