

The Language of Letters

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Letters of Identity When I was a teenager I loved to draw letters. In my school diaries and notebooks, and on my schoolbags. It was one of my favourite activities.

Basically, I copied the lettering of the record sleeve designs of *Rubber Soul* and *Revolver* by the Beatles, *White Room* by Cream, the Who, and albums by the Dutch group, Cuby and the Blizzards. Lots of drippy-drop, psychedelic lettering. It made it to the cover of the school paper and, later, a few posters.

Unconsciously, and by trial and error, I discovered the essence and power of "custom" lettering: the expression of identity.

It became obvious to me that, by drawing my own letters, I became part of them. Or, they became part of me. It was my drawing, and I made it. It was me. This awareness made me become more interested in lettering and letters. I hadn't yet heard the word *typography* whispering in the distant future.

At art school, graphic design became my main foci's. During my education, I had four professors who taught me various aspects of lettering and typography. In 1970, at the Academy for Art and Industry in Enschede, Abe Kuipers, a well-known Dutch typographer and graphic artist, was the first to stimulate working and designing with lead type for the book press. But first, he made us draw the letterforms and layouts by hand.

As an artist, his paintings, silk-screen prints, and sculptures were an important example of mixing fine art and applied art. Book designer Sien ten Holt, my second teacher, forced me to break with my "psychedelic" approach in the core year at the Gerrit Rietveld Academy in 1971, by teaching the basic letterform construction of the Roman capitals and the essence of letterspacing. The next couple of years, Charles Jongejans, my third teacher and mentor, placed typography in a broader cultural and social context.

His involvement in the earlier developments of the profession of the typographer and graphic designer showed a strong affection and cultural integration of typography in society.

Finally, Gerard Unger introduced me to the more detailed aspects of letterforms and type design (1975-76). He was young and entertaining.

He designed brand names and logos with classical type. I thought that wasn't modern enough. I wasn't sure if I liked his typography class that much, but because I liked him, I did my best. Unger taught me the very basics of typeface design: when and where to pay attention, what to look out for, and where to be modest. His specialty, the curves, had my interest, too, especially the female curves. What other reason can one have to design letters? The hallway of his house had the curves of his wife's calf. Most importantly, I learned to change the look, appearance, and meaning of a message with typography, the manipulation of the good, bad, pretty, ugly, legible, illegible, provocative, and conservative.

After my formal education, when I was art director for *Vinyl* magazine (Amsterdam, 1981-1986), we deliberately changed the headline typeface every month as a matter of style. It was quite experimental and appealing to my generation: a hardcore group of fans of the post-punk and new-wave movements. You could say it was the *Raygun* of the eighties. We would draw our letters, or write them in script, use photocopy machines, very early Linotype digital typesetting, optical modification techniques, and early dot matrix printouts, all as manual artwork and a lot of darkroom repro stuff. *Vinyl's* design expressed the shifting conventions of

typography and graphic design that illustrated the individualization of the lifestyle of the youth in the eighties. While the seventies were very much about collective idealism, the eighties—the precursor to the computer era—were known as the "Me" generation.

With *Language Technology*, the first magazine completely produced with computers (Amsterdam, 1986), I started to digitize typefaces with the earliest versions of font software. Soon, I started to apply the technology to all my work for posters, books, and other graphic designs. No more dark-room days, ever again! A new era was born. *Language Technology*, with its desktop publishing production, shook a rusted graphic industry to its foundation.

The field was cracked wide open, and so was the source code. New freedoms, new forms. By gluing parts of two existing typefaces together, I created the "Fudoni" in 1990. It was the first reassembled, remixed type-face of its genre, instantly devaluing established conventions of the industrially produced letterform.

The secrets of producing type production were gone. The technology was accessible to anyone. For the graphic designer, type design had become another aspect of the broad field of the profession. Type became an illustrative element in graphic design. With custom-created alphabets, the graphic designer could give a strong and recognizable identity to the graphic product. Typography had become lettering again.

Hindsight

To become a professional typographer, you will need to develop an eye and feel for every aspect of typography and applied lettering. You need a basic appreciation in the matter that can originate from various fields of interest, like writing, painting, or drawing: the content and/or the form of communicating messages.

Then, you'll need to get focused on more specific aspects and details. Good teachers will inspire you to explore your own talents and will help direct you in an appropriate direction.

Also, you'll need to locate yourself in the professional landscape. Who is doing what, and where? Who are your friends and allies? Who are your competitors? What do you want to achieve with all the energy you will put into your work?

Then, you will have to look for the opportunity to jump on an assignment and use it to accommodate your client's goals, as well as your own. Try to be at the right place at the right time. You might get lucky.

So, don't sit and wait. Start and do. Know that not everything you touch will become a work of art. You will fail, sometimes, but all failures will lead to more successes.

The more you produce, the closer you'll get.

Edit Your Design Decisions

One of my philosophies (which is rather concise) is: "The quality of talent is within its limitations, not with its possibilities." It means that in dealing with the physical limitations of reality, the professional designer often has to be inventive and improvise to solve a problem within a limited time frame. He needs to be practical and efficient. He needs to know what to look for, but, more importantly, when to stop. The design process is one of decisions. Every decision has its own direct consequence, and, ultimately, its long-term consequences and out-comes. Once you know where you want to be in a certain time frame, it is easier to make your decisions. When you visualize the design process in a schedule, scheme, rough setup, or outline, you will be able to take your steps with a strong sense of direction. Outlining is essential in the design process. And, it literally can be anything. To me, it

is drawing or sketching. For somebody else, it might be writing, or a list, or charts. What is important is that these are all manual reflections of thoughts. Mind maps, brainstorming, and doodles. They are, at best, physical interactions with the spirit. The spirit of each individual is influenced by the spirit of mankind. Your own hand, as limited as it is in its skills, interprets your individual style. You become the visual translator of your thoughts, which nobody else will ever be able to replicate. Experience will build up confidence. What once seemed to be awkward and strange becomes special. That's where originality originates.

Language Is Reference

Communication is language, whether it consists of words or visuals. When we communicate, we understand the use and meaning of the words or visuals. Why? Because, we learned them at a certain stage in our lives. If we do not communicate, we don't know anything about the use and meaning of the words or visuals. Why? We do not have any reference material to fall back on.

Meaning is a value given to something previously meaningless and abstract. Meaning is subjective, because it could have been something else, too. Subjectivity is culturally dependent; thus, meaning is culturally dependent. Communication uses cultural references. When references aren't shared completely, they'll create misunderstanding and opposition. Most problems we encounter individually, locally, or globally are based on not sharing cultural, religious, or economical references, unintentionally or deliberately.

The easiest way to communicate is using values that everybody recognizes. These overused values are the clichés of communication. A lot of our language is cliché, whether we like it or not. But, there is nothing wrong with clichés. They are very digestible.

Is the easiest way to communicate also the best way? Is there a hard way to communicate? If you know whom you are talking to (what reference group your audience belongs to, culturally, politically, mentally, spiritually, and economically), you will use a language of reference to communicate. The wider your audience is, the more your reference groups will build up, and the reference material you use will be less specific. You will compromise more to general references, and, probably, clichés.

By using clichés in your own personal style vocabulary, you will be able to translate them according to your own interpretation skills. By appropriating them, you make them your own.

Our book of reference is very much time dependent. Insights, knowledge, experience, and understanding are constantly changing. These changes are the living organisms of our way of thinking about and looking at the world around us. That will never stop. Our references will change and extend. And, so, our language will change and extend. As long as we develop our personalities, and our individual characters, we will see different and new interpretations of the references we live by. This applies to images, drawings, and paintings, lettering and letterforms, typeface design, typography, music, dance, writing, photography, literature, science, business, economics, politics, religion, industry, trade, travel, and everything else that is humanly created.

The Voice of Type

A letter speaks to us, because we know it is a letter. It was given a label, which merged into the letter. Certain letters are created in certain times. They are historical,

they are "old"; sometimes, they are "classic" because of how they were produced. Sometimes they are modern because of the way production has changed. Sometimes they are crap because everybody and anybody can make them. But still, they all are letters. The styles of letter reproduction tell us they want to look different than the others. They say whether they are sophisticated, angry, obnoxious, or gracious. They say: "Use me for your specific purpose."
And you have a purpose! You have a poem, so you'll choose a poem typeface. You're writing for a grocery store, so you'll choose a grocery type-face. You are part of a revolution, so you choose a shouting typeface. If you have something to sell, choose the typeface that sells it the best.
Does the style choice matter? No, as long as it sells your thought, idea, or message within the context that used and shaped it. Communication is selling. And a listening consumer is your reward.

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