Typographic Dialogues: Local-Global

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Leaving the reasonable

Barnabas Wetton, Associate Professor, Head of International Innovation, Design School Kolding, Denmark — bsw@dskd.dk
Rikke Hansen, External Associate Professor University of Southern Denmark/Design School Højer, Denmark — rh@wheelsandwaves.dk

Abstract:

Typography gives concrete voice to the spoken word. It is tasked with giving tone and accent to our communication and — fascinatingly — within large bodies of text is equally tasked with disappearing so that the trained reader can hear the words without being consciously aware of the medium that transported them. This is a clear and vibrant axis. Leaving the reasonable presents another typographical axis — one that explores dimensionality, readability and at its very edge the power of the physical to engage bodily emotions and conditions.

Key words: Typography, experimental, semiotics, narration.

1. Introduction

Typographic design is a field that divides into small interest groups including traditionalists, revivalists, rationalists, constructivists, de-constructivists, modernists, post-modernists and techno freaks, among others, with each group pursuing typographic design in different ways, resulting is an enormously diverse, constantly changing typographic landscape (Kunz 2003, 8)

It is a given that typography is a central, integrated aspect of the graphic profession that constitutes a set of combinatorial visual elements, representations of sound as well as being a carrier of meaning — for these reasons typographical expression is one of the most beguiling and all-pervasive aspects of our daily life.

By re-framing how to approach typography from the starting point of touch and story we will present investigations on how we interact and create different interpretations of type design. More prosaically the project takes materiality and narrative as its starting point by re-examining through local craft traditions of old Scandinavian stitching manuals as well as experimenting with how embroidery and weaving traditions can be made relevant to the present day.

Our work runs parallel with a fundamental change in the West that is seeing a move away from the use of handwriting in general and with screens becoming the default position for most written communication. We will explore how we interact with and interpret typography when it is no longer restricted to print or screen. It gathers examples of typographical and narrative experimentation fused with textiles e.g. knitting, weaving and embroidery. It explores the position of typography in materiality and dimensionality that can be approached through the power of touch as well as sight.

Neither of the authors of this paper are font designers per se but they are passionate about exploring typography, words and images. We are curious and passionate of the unforeseen journey our collaboration one as an artist and the other as graphic designer can nurture the ongoing experiments we are working on.

Our driving force is about embodiment rather than disembodiment. It is about the weight, structure and depth. It is about making stories come alive as words.

2. The truth about letters

According to Bringhurst letters have a life and dignity of their own. Letterforms that honour and elucidate what humans see and say deserve to be honoured in their turn. Well-chosen words deserve well-chosen letters; these in their turn deserve to be set with affection, intelligence, knowledge and skill. Typography is a link, and it ought, as a matter of honour, courtesy and pure delight, to be as strong as the others in the chain (Bringhurst 2004, 18).

Typographic design is both a process and product — a creative combination of communication practice and aesthetic theory (Kunz 2002, 49). Our intention is to extend these point of views with our experiments and let them, in a more or less controlled way, direct us to what the result reproduces in form and expression.

3. Types of experimentation with letters

Our work with glyphs, letters and words can be seen as a continuum through which their meaning can be paired with a number of overlapping and connected principles. It would be wrong to say that letters are solely purposed to create and carry a representation of verbal language but nonetheless this thinking is central to how we approach our work. Our first project — PLANCK LENGTH — started with a chance encounter with a member of the British security services and the story he told. It was a story of code sufficient Russian code being hidden in a single pixel to take a whole atomic reactor down. This was our starting point rather than an identified, specific communicative need based on and through glyphs. PLANCK LENGTH takes its' name from the smallest measurable unit beyond which all classical physics breaks down and the world of quantum uncertainty unfolds. It marks the portal between our own utilitarian understanding of the world and all of that which lies beyond. In all its simplicity it is a way of describing how we are trying to bring typography to the limits of its form and to the edge of narratives. Making experiments with making typographies that take us to the edges of the defining characteristics of our age.

Our identified continuum runs through scale, narrative, materiality, textiles, bodily engagement and the poetic.

Edward Hirsch writes "Language is an impure medium. Speech is public property and words are the soiled products, not of nature, but of society, which circulates and uses them for a thousand different ends". We take this as a starting point for our work. We see its impurity as its force. Our work is akin to a visual alchemy that attempts to engage the potential of experimental continuums as a way of engaging with what it means to be human — to paraphrase Hirsch — the impure and the soiled. Underlying this intention is our wish to re-engage with physicality. For its own sake. Because so much of what it means to be human resides in the spaces between.

Embodied, and in our bodies.

But there is a more directed intent too — we need to return this embodied messy reality to letters too. We need to learn new ways of re-engaging with ourselves as fully engaged, corporal agents.

More prosaically we are working with flags, embroidery, textiles, Swarowski crystals and intuition. Each line of experimentation endeavours to match the primary materiality of the experiment with words or texts. It is rarely worked with outside the range of the words or sentences.
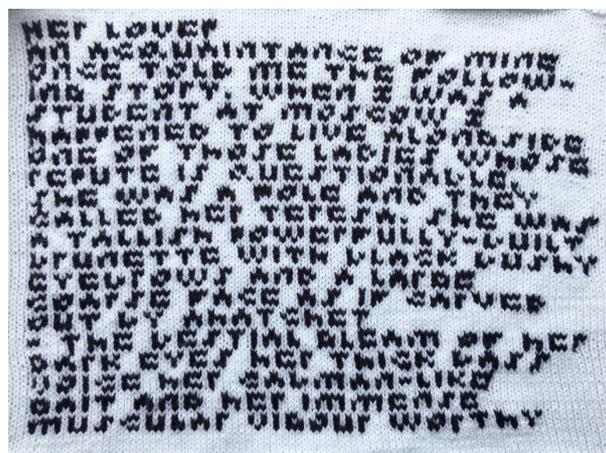
3.1 Controlled experimentation

We worked with existing material platforms and endeavoured to bend them to our will. This included taking political flags and mixing them Swarowski crystals, embroidery and poetry to subvert their original meaning and allow their materiality and perceived specific context to take on a wider and more expansive set of meanings.

Further to this we have engaged a number of women in Southern Jutland to unwittingly experiment with PLANCK LENGTH by knitting texts in a relatively open knit pattern (img.1-3). This then has formed the basis for printed textiles that challenges the perceived tactile and visual quality of wool by printing it on a much more tightly woven textile. The perceived potential materiality is twisted by a very different haptic reality (img.4-6).
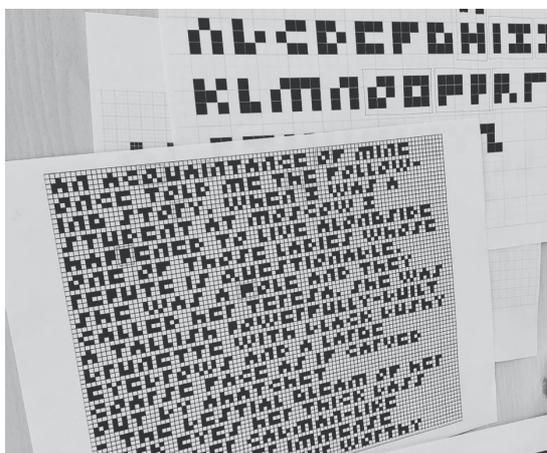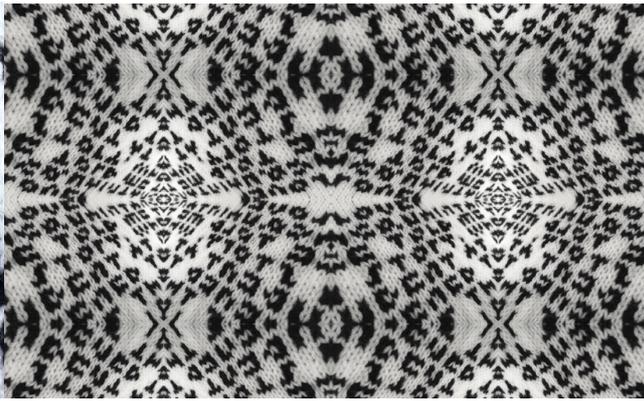

1/ Knit pattern for knitting and weaving. *1/ Hand knitting*

3/ Hand knitting close-up

4/ Hand knitting digitalized patterns

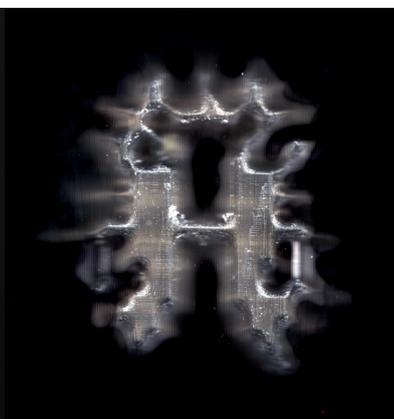*5/ Digital printed pattern on tightly woven fabric*

6/Letter-pattern jacket

Part of this programming has involved taking glyphs formed in the 3D printer and working with them in embroidery in order to inform a secondary stage of our work that in and of itself started with hand stitching (img 7-9).

7/ 3D printed letter

8/ Scanned 3D letter

9/ Scanned letter in embroidery

3.2 Natural experiments

The term "experiment" usually implies a controlled investigation with the dependent factors effectively under control but sometimes this kind of material or action-based discipline is prohibitively difficult or impossible. In this case the researchers resort to natural experiments or quasi-experiments — a kind of empirical interventional study used to estimate the causal impact of an intervention on target population without random assignment. Quasi-experimental research shares similarities with the traditional experimental design or randomized controlled trial, but it specifically lacks the element of random assignment to treatment or control. Instead, quasi-experimental designs typically allow the researcher to control the assignment to the treatment condition, but using some criterion other than random assignment (Dinaro 2008). Natural experiments rely solely on observations of the variables of the system under study, rather than manipulation of just one or a few variables as occurs in controlled experiments. To the degree possible, they attempt to collect data for the system in such a way that contribution from all variables can be determined, and where the effects of variation in certain variables remain approximately constant so that the effects of other variables can be discerned. The degree to which this is possible depends on the observed correlation between explanatory variables in the observed data. When these variables are not well correlated, natural experiments can approach the power of controlled experiments. Usually, however, there is some correlation between these variables, which reduces the reliability of natural experiments relative to what could be concluded if a controlled experiment were performed. Also, because natural experiments usually take place in uncontrolled environments, variables from undetected sources are neither measured nor held constant, and these may produce illusory correlations in variables under study.

As stated earlier we are not font designers per se and that we have identified a communicative continuum runs through typography, narrative, materiality, textiles, bodily engagement and the poetic as a driving force for how we can work. A lack of direct control has also contributed to a form library that can be used to further embed materiality and tactility in our work.

Through natural experimentation we endeavor to set off on an exploration of new (though relatively undefined) possibilities – what Kelly defines as iterative rounds of rapid prototypes, early, rough representations of ideas that are concrete enough for us to react

to, with the purpose of exploring a range of ideas without becoming too invested in only one (Kelly 2013, 23).

This took two forms – firstly using mediums such as agar and crystals to grow letters and giving control of principles to other actors without direct input in the form the experiments would take (img 10-11). Anne Sofie Blundell (assistant to Barnabas Wetton) was tasked with imagining how letters could take form and from the basis of her training as Accessory Designer. Crystalline structure forces an implicit sense of temperature, weight and dimensionality into what is generally seen as static and two-dimensional. The aspect of seeing something as cold was completely unexpected for us and deserves further examination (img 12-13).

10/ Lassercut wood letter

11/ Growing crystals onto the letter

12+13/ Crystals grown onto the letters

3.2 What can we learn from experimentations

*Nurture the kind of "prepared mind" that seizes the moment when an epiphany occurs.
— Kelly & Kelly* — Discovery is not only the result of focused effort — it can also arise as a result of insights that grow directly or indirectly out of mishaps or mistakes that then turn into a breakthrough. Success from failure stories indicate that the experimenters were not only were keen observers per se but that their working practice was typified by also conducting a lot of experiments to begin with (Kelly 2013, 106).

We contend that this is a two-way process — the first direction is internal — by daring to experiment generally results in developing an internalised space that is nourished by the act of discovery — for its own sake. This lies in real contrast to the kind of fast and easy development that comes from design-by-google.

The second direction is external — the danger of "failure" means creating an authentic platform through which the practice of design can meet the fundamental human objective of finding meaning in and through discovery.

4.0 Conclusion

One of the uses of alcohol

To slow down the written word
So the letters can stand
    Alone
        Themselves
           And instead.   Barnabas Wetton

From our perspective the two most functional words here are ALCOHOL and INSTEAD. But why alcohol? Because in this case it stands for changing a line of sight. The practice of changing perspective is central to making leaps of the (visual) or (communicative) imagination. New times need new solutions and new times need new approaches.

The omnipresence of text apps is a case in point in that it severely limits in the form we can give our writings. What they lose in form they make up for in the sheer volume of text we produce, Conversations that once were spoken are now solely written, by choice.

We can change character by use of CAPS or emojis and very little else. Its form is driven by logic and ubiquity. Playfully inhabiting a newer, more uncharted territory of tactility, and substance can point to new ways to see writing and typography outside the frame of the reasonable and the strict.

This is typography beyond the reasonable. This experimental approach can act as an antidote to the self-limiting reality of "design-by-pinterest". By rooting a typographical approach in materiality, narratives and historical insights we can give a direction to how to bridge the past and the future and work across technologies. An insistence on core experimentation also allows us to see how typographical insights can work across other related fields — Bringhurst points the way for this when he states that typography is a field. Seen in this light it becomes a place for cross pollination and new insights to grow.

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