LOOKING CLOSER
CRITICAL WRITINGS ON GRAPHIC DESIGN

EDITED BY
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INTRODUCTION BY
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When it comes to aesthetic theory, designers today perceive themselves as originators, not followers, and most are loath to admit that they are influenced by much of anything other than their own inner creative resources.

To suggest that there is a link between new directions in design and ideas or developments taking place in contemporary society ought not to give offense to this ideal of creative individualism. Believing it does is a relatively new phenomenon and one that many respected figures in the history of graphic design would probably find puzzling. For the seeds of many a historic movement in graphic design are found in contemporaneous literature, painting, philosophy, politics, and technology.

In a January/February 1960 *Print* article, “The Bauhaus and Modern Typography: The ‘Masters’ Liberate the Typographic Image,” Sibyl Moholy-Nagy discusses the relationship of the designer to culture and technology. She points out that one of the most significant reasons for the success of the Bauhaus was its artists’ abilities to make creative use of the inventions of the time. Under the aegis of a fundamental group philosophy, Bauhaus designers were able to capitalize on new, and seemingly alien, construction procedures and materials, exploiting them for their production and esthetic advantages. They did not resist change, but embraced it and engaged in meaningful discourse about it.

Today, the technological changes taking place in typography have been brought about by the personal computer. Relatively inexpensive and easy-to-use desktop publishing equipment and software have given those designers choosing to take advantage of them direct control over typographic arrangements which were previously dependent upon expensive typesetting techniques or laborious handwork.

The ability of the computer to allow variations at low cost gives the designer the freedom to experiment until the page seems “right,” whereas previously, tried-and-true formulas were necessary in order to predict the outcome more certainly, and avoid undue expense at the typesetter. Today’s seemingly boundless freedom precludes the need for many typographic conventions and even brings into question the need for that most sacrosanct of mid-twentieth-century graphic design devices—the grid.

Grids are but one means of organizing visual material—a means to an end, not an end in themselves. Ostensibly, the best grids are based on a general evaluation of content and reflect the particular character and presentational requirements of that content. Besides
being useful to designers from the Middle Ages to the present as visual organizers, they are useful to those designers who, because of the expense involved, are unable to visualize or mock-up accurately more than a small amount of the total material that will be controlled by the grid. Based on this sampling, the designer using the subsequent grid, with its inherent regimentation, can predict the visual outcome of the entire body of the material. At the same time, however, general assumptions about all or portions of that material are made that may not be specifically responsive to the content, nor in its best interpretive interests.

The computer permits the designer to view all the material that needs to be organized at one time. It does this by allowing the designer to place into the machine, and then maneuver and accurately view, the actual copy and images before even the most rudimentary of design decisions are made. This versatility includes the particulars of the page itself, the style, size, character, and position of type; as well as the size, shape, position, and other features of all kinds of imagery. Just as important, the designer is able to experiment freely with the relationship of these elements one to another-left to right, top to bottom, and even front to back. These capabilities allow the designer to organize empirically, that is, from within the actual environment of the material thus permitting the development of a more responsive grid, or the exploration of other means of visually organizing materials, or quite possibly eliminating the need for any kind of restrictive structure. The grid may be dead, and if so, the computer will have been the culprit.

But while the computer provides the technical ability to accomplish a seemingly new look in typographic design, it is certainly not the only inducement to aesthetic innovation.

The evolutionary temperament of general culture is capable of producing an atmosphere that stimulates a variety of creative disciplines to respond simultaneously, sometimes similarly, sometimes dissimilarly. And designers often find concepts and images generated by disciplines remote from design seductive and worthy of appropriation. Sibyl Moholy-Nagy writes that two of the most dynamic revolutions in twentieth-century typography, Futurism and the Bauhaus, were fueled by the excitement of ideas generated by such seemingly unrelated developments as the automobile, Einstein’s theory of Relativity, and Freud’s theories of the self. According to Moholy-Nagy, the inventive quality in all of these ideas had to do with motion, and so typography, “in it’s age old function of filtering the great artistic movements down to a residue of simple communication, then took upon itself this restlessly evolutionary trend...”

Within the last few years, typography and design in general have been influenced, either directly or indirectly, knowingly or unknowingly, by the concept of “deconstruction.” Most designers moving in deconstructionist directions vehemently deny any knowledge of deconstruction, much less admit to being influenced by this encroaching concept from critical thought and philosophy. But design does fall under its influence, if for no other reason than because designers live in the culture that gave birth to deconstruction. We live in a deconstructed world, a world agitated by more and more complexity, where the attention span diminishes hourly (turning us into a society of information grazers), and values appear to change weekly. It is inevitable that heretofore clear and supposedly resolved notions about what design does and the way it does it will begin to blur and ultimately reshape themselves.

Deconstruction, which began as an avenue of literary criticism, involves the
Evolutionarily, deconstruction (also referred to as post-structuralism) grew out of but later disputed-an earlier movement called structuralism, which, led by the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, sought to establish language study as a science in and of itself. Deconstructionist ideas were first introduced in the U.S. by the French philosopher and critic Jacques Derrida, who, in 1966, was invited to speak at Johns Hopkins University. Beginning in the late sixties, Derrida's writings, including *Of Grammatology, Writing and Difference,* and *Dissemination,* became available in English and are now widely read, albeit with some difficulty.

As the word itself suggests, “deconstruction” refers to the breaking down of something (an idea, a precept, a word, a value) in order to “decode” its parts in such a way that these act as “informers” on the thing, or on any assumptions or convictions we have regarding it. Its intention, revolutionary insofar as critical thinking is concerned, is to activate the discussion of ideas by demonstrating how their interpretation is influenced less by their actual meaning than by the amount of play in the fabric that holds them together.

For example, think about deconstructing the word “whole.” We think of a whole as one complete thing, but in actuality we never understand any one thing except in terms of its parts, and at the same time our understanding of the details is conditional, or informed by an idea of how they are a part of and make up a totality. In concept therefore, “wholeness” is inherently incomplete. Its meaning depends on the multi-leveled, mental play of the parts that hold it together. This kind of deconstructive thinking has moved philosophy away from meaning-centered discourse and into a sort of flirtatious game-playing around meaning, or with multi-meaning.

One deconstructs something for a variety of reasons, which may be political, artistic, philosophical, or otherwise expressive. Political/cultural positions such as feminism and Marxism work deconstructively when they uncover aspects of our society which, while appearing to be universally humanistic, actually suppress the needs of one social group while serving those of another.

While several branches of art and design, most notably the practice of architecture, have been heavily influenced by deconstructionist ideas, typographic design is probably the most logical extension of deconstruction because of its basis in words and text. Deconstructionist writings are linked with the visual world, in that their authors often utilize graphic nuances in order to illustrate difficult concepts or subtle contradictions in meanings. Derrida, in the essay “*Différence,”* demonstrates in print the concept of something being present and absent at the same time, by cleverly inserting a “rogue” vowel to replace one of the correct characters in the French word *différence.* The new word reads *différence,* in which the “a” is a misspelling-in French, this change is visible (present) but inaudible (absent). Thus the distance between two seemingly contradictory concepts, presence and absence, is remarkably abbreviated, collapsed into one typographic solution.

Similarly, deconstructionist Jacques Lacan, a French psychoanalyst and structuralist, uses an illustration of two side-by-side, identical lavatory doors, over one of which is the sign “ladies” and over the other, the sign “gentlemen. With this simple picture, he attempts to show the impossibility of there being only one point of reference or “meaning” for any one word or concept. The difference again is graphic: The lavatory doors look the same, but the designation over them—and each viewer’s reference point to either sign—is different.
The deconstructionist view asks that a reader comprehend and account for complex differences in signification, at one level meaning one thing and at another level meaning its possible opposite-to point out that “meaning” is an elusive business. For designers, using different layers to create a sort of comparative visual vocabulary in order to present the evolution of a particular idea has become a fairly common, and sometimes arbitrary, practice. But when the deconstructionist approach is applied to design, each layer, through the use of language and image, is an intentional performer in a deliberately playful game wherein the viewer can discover and experience the hidden complexities of this approach is effective when the purpose of the game is to extend or enhance the message being conveyed, it can be a communications paradox when merely used for stylistic purposes.

The intricacy of this kind of work virtually requires the designer to participate in the writing process, if not actually be the writer, something more and more designers seem willing, able, even anxious to do.

Some graphic designers may be inclined to think of a process like deconstruction that is so deeply involved in theory as absurd and remote. But the very essence of contemporary typography-driven design lies in the process of determining the characteristics and arrangement of type relative to the interpretation or presentation of the text or words in order to enhance communication or expression. With this in mind, it is easy to realize the susceptibility of typographic design to this kind of deconstructionist visual discourse. The Modernist movement advocated simplicity, and so it is understandable that many of today’s designers view the visual complexity found in much deconstructionist design as extraneous and alien. Far from being the mere application of style, however, deconstructionist design potentially clarifies or extends certain aspects of communication that the uniform treatment of elements inherent in Modernism has a tendency to obscure. Some signposts of deconstructionist design are: empirical page design and juxtaposition of elements based on context rather than traditional presuppositions (for example, the entire character of a particular page being determined by the subject of that page alone); typographic coding and modulation arising from content and language rather than convention (for example, articulating the content/context of significant words in the text by visual or literary punning); and/or meaningful layering and contrast to create discourse rather than adornment (for example, superimposing selected portions of text directly over the appropriate area of a related photograph, in order to comment on or emphasize aspects of their association).

Throughout the history of graphic design, there have been reinterpretations of the contextual assumptions concerning the typographic page, and it is possible to find isolated examples of fascinating deviations from the norm that rival in typographic intricacy anything being done today. But for the most part, until the revolutionary explosions of the early twentieth century, and much later the work of Wolfgang Weingart in the late sixties and the seventies, changes have been evolutionary rather than revolutionary.

The way was prepared for the introduction of deconstruction to graphic design by the reissuing in 1982 of *Pioneers of Modern Typography*, first published in 1969, and the publication of *The Liberated Page* in 1987, both by Herbert Spencer. These books made it possible for designers to see a substantial collection of the work of those twentieth-century innovators, the Dadaists, Futurists, De Stijl artists, and Constructivists through examples by designers such as Filippo Marinetti, El Lissitzky, Piet Zwart (who often wrote his own
copy), Kurt Schwitters, Herbert Bayer, László Moholy-Nagy, Jan Tschichold, and Theo van Doesburg.

Spencer points out that the visual interpretation of the meaning of words to provide emphasis, and even the portrayal of the sounds of words, was of interest to both Dadaist and Futurist typographers. The Futurist Marinetti proposed a revolution against formulaic design, and began by refuting the uniform integrity of the text block: “My revolution is aimed at the so-called typographical harmony of the page, which is contrary to the flux and reflux, the leaps and bursts of style that run through the page. On the same page, therefore, we will use three or four colors of ink, or even twenty different typefaces if necessary.”

Regardless of whether Marinetti might reconsider the idea of using twenty different faces on a page upon seeing the progeny of the average “desktop publisher,” his work and ideas as well as those of his contemporaries have had a direct impact on work from the studios of Rick Valicenti, Neville Brody, Ross Carron, Katherine McCoy, Nancy Skolos, Gordon Salchow, Rudy VanderLans, Tom Bonauro, Stephen Doyle, Lucille Tenazas, Tibor Kalman, and others. Some of these designers also reflect the influence of the turn-of-the-century French poet Guillaume Apollinaire and the American concrete poets of the sixties, writers who understood the importance of the visual presentation of words and chose to make typography an extension of poetry by taking direct personal control of it. The work and ideas of these designers is in strong contrast to the aloof minimalist typography generally seen in the fifties, sixties, and seventies.

Deconstructionist design continues to collapse traditional typographical harmony even further than Marinetti’s claim. The visual coding accomplished by style, size, weight, and position of each typographic element on a page, from initial caps, text, and headlines to captions, has begun to disintegrate. Evidence of this can be seen in the new work of Joel Katz, Michael Mabry, David Carson and Joe Miller, where what are still obviously initial caps are distorted or appear in unexpected places, or the contrast, in weight, of a portion of the text causes the eye to begin reading in a non-traditional location.

In graphic design as a whole, formulaic structures seem to be blurring in favor of a kind of empirical context for the page that serves to create a new relationship between form and content specific to an individual piece of work. Although pages from different issues of *Emigre* bear a family resemblance to one another, for example, the resemblance does not spring from traditional graphic structure. John Weber’s work exploits these methods not only in traditional print graphics, but also in type animations that take place on a computer screen, or in video, where the relationships between typographic elements constantly change.

At the MIT Visible Language Workshop, designers are experimenting with the very nature of the perception of typographic information. Their work goes so far as to tamper with presumptions about the eye moving from the top to the bottom of a body of information. Here, powerful computers allow the viewer to control interactively the sequence or movement through information, rather than over it. Moving a pressure-sensitive pen up or down, left or right, and in or out, causes text and images on the screen to be moved or selected, indicating to the computer the interests of the viewer. The computer reacts with the new information in the form of new type and visuals on the screen.

Deconstruction brings into question and reshapes the entire typographic vocabulary, the orientation of the page, whether there should be a page, and whether type itself should do more than perform its basic historical function of being readable.
Discussing legibility, both Rudy VanderLans, designer and publisher of Emigre, and Tibor Kalman of M&Co are quick to point out that there are many ways to approach reading and that type and text can have a purpose other than to be read.

While saying so might seem heretical to some, type can have purposes which are illustrative, atmospheric, interruptive, and expressive in addition to, or beyond, mere legibility—what Sibyl Moholy-Nagy refers to as “the non-communicative function of type.” Designer Paula Scher, who occasionally uses typography executed by hand, maintains, “The legibility of type is dependent upon the goal: If it’s supposed to be legible, it should be. If it’s not supposed to be, it shouldn’t be.” With this observation, she clearly points to the need for the designer to understand the reason for a particular approach rather than merely engaging in meaningless stylistic mimicry.

If the computer has been an important influence on typographic design, it promises to challenge equally the traditional use of photography in design. With the new-found ability to capture images, manipulate, crop, and mask them on a screen, designers are beginning to rediscover the power of the photographic image. Photography is being used less and less to isolate rectangles of “reality,” and is instead becoming more fully integrated in the “reality” of the entire page—a circumstance that quite naturally serves deconstructionist ideas about the discourse and play between language and image achieved through positioning and layering. The visual expression of these ideas can be seen in the work of April Greiman, Lorraine Wild, Chuck Byrne, Katherine McCoy, Rudy VanderLans, Ross Carron, Lucille Tenazas, Edward Fella, and Jeffery Keedy.

Sibyl Moholy-Nagy states that her husband’s special contribution to his era was the integration of photography with typography. He would surely have recognized and appreciated the significance of the introduction of the computer into the two, and the potential for that relationship to be more synergistic. Doubtless, Moholy-Nagy and his contemporaries would have embraced the computer with a passion.

The most extreme deconstructionist reassessments of design precepts tend to distinguish themselves clearly from other forms of reinterpretation, such as those of the early twentieth century. A recent issue of Emigre, titled “Heritage,” is devoted to the state of Swiss design today. In it, Richard Feurer, a founder of the studio Eclat, states the goals of his work in a discussion with other young designers. “To me, it’s neither a question of bringing across a significant message, nor of being ‘understood.’ I don’t expect to be understood in the way that I myself understand my visual message. My task is to generate an effect. You can’t define what exactly, or how, the viewer will take in your visual message. There are an endless number of possible ways of looking at it. The only thing I can do as designer is to animate the person through my message. He himself should act, should analyze, and reproduce the visual message for himself.”

These designers, as do most, grouse at the suggestion that what they are doing involves deconstruction. But the new thinking behind their work stands in strong contrast to Modernist concepts of visual clarity and reduction of complexity and reflects the introduction of deconstructive ideas, directly or indirectly, into graphic design.

While some critics feel that these ideas are a moral transgression of the designer’s commitment to clear visual communication, it can’t be denied that reading and the perception of visual information is a learned skill the practice of which can be altered. Interestingly, many designers who find great fault with the legibility of this kind of typography tend to forget the hue-and-cry that was raised concerning readability when
the use of small-size, unjustified, sans-serif type was introduced in the early 1960s—the model held up today as the ideal of readability! The pages of *Emigre*, and many of its mainstream visual imitators, are not only widely admired, they are even read—suggesting that human perception, or at least young human perception, is more flexible than it seems.

Some designers are more closely tuned than others to the world of ideas outside design, and the educators and writers among them are beginning to disseminate these ideas in the classrooms and various design publications. But these designers, too, respond cautiously when it is suggested that deconstructionist characteristics originating in fields such as literary theory, semiotics, linguistics, and philosophy are apparent in their work.

Hans Allemann, an instructor at University of the Arts in Philadelphia, finds that training in semiotics is a useful “tool” for graphic designers, but warns against the complexity of “signs” brought from the vernacular environment distorting communications on the printed page. Allemann argues that, for the most part, it is still a designer’s responsibility to communicate clearly, regardless of his or her facility with complex language. In discussing the influence of literary theory and criticism on graphic design, Katherine McCoy at Cranbrook is similarly cautious. “Some of these ideas,” she says, “fit the role of art better than design, since designers have an implicit agreement to accept the client’s message as their primary content.”

The ultimate effect on graphic design of *deconstruction* and computers can’t be known. What is apparent is that even though they tend to isolate themselves from its philosophical origins, many designers today are engaged in *deconstructive* design. That they should wish to isolate themselves from the origins of a philosophy so intertwined with the visual is unfortunate, as it seems to be the source for a significant change in graphic design. They should instead follow the example of the early pioneers of twentieth-century design: seek to understand these sources and engage them.

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**Endnotes**

1. Many of the ideas and much of the thinking contained in this article were suggested by the poet and scholar David Orr, who died during the summer of 1989 while preparing research for a book to be titled *The Ecology of Information.*