

## Comment: The Designer and Language

Alexander Nesbitt

The designer, on the whole, does not understand what language is. He has been “visually educated” in the manner of the usual design school or art school. His very simple approach to communication is to crucify the problem upon the cross of his all-important design. As far as meanings are concerned he rarely, if ever, looks for them.

Most of his problem stems from the society in which he was born and lives; he is caught in this and almost never reaches the awareness of his own being. In an almost straight materialistic sense his art or design is the result of the demands of the marketplace: the necessity to sell huge quantities of photographic material of all kinds, for instance, is just one of these factors. Of course, the society we are concerned with is western society. Mass marketing—the consumer society—actually dictates what comes out of most of the design schools in the end, and forms the basis for the communications which follow modes and patterns from year to year in which there is essentially no meaning beyond the buy and use incentive.

In the more or less unconscious effort to escape the damning reality of such an existence, the designer or artist—or even poet—invents artifices of all kinds to convince himself that he is his own man and really not the slave of a system. In this play existence, in which he fancies himself to be creative and free, he indulges in all sorts of aberrations: typographical, photographical, and communicational; for only in this way can he find an outlet to combat the evils of the system: by perverting the meanings and fouling the possibilities of communication. The artist has been revealing the horrors of the world and society for a long time; the designer follows pretty much the same bent.

All the inhuman aspects of our world setup are reflected by the artist and designer in a variety of ways: they all lead to a foundering of one kind or another, according to the nature of the individual. The

techniques of non-human communication are invoked to produce results that are hailed as new, startling, creative. What meaning all of it has in human terms is considered to be wholly irrelevant. In the overall sense these designers and artists work to please or mystify each other; it is very easy to insist that the great mass of the population is not up to them perceptively nor intellectually. Again, the use of all the machines and devices, whatever their kind, is justified by the necessity to keep our technological system going, and with it our precarious economy.

What has happened in typography and lettering is quite discernible. Lettering, to take up the latter first, has been banished from most of the design schools; no further study of the early letterforms or of their history is considered necessary. The drying-out process that has been going on for some twenty-five years has finally produced design-school directors, deans, etc., who are thoroughly dehumanized and thoroughly subservient to the dictatorship of technology and its handmaidens—if such a designation be allowable for a basically sterile complexity. It is not difficult to imagine what has befallen typography; in its present state it is simply chaotic.

All of this in the end may not be as disastrous as it seems. We are being forced to reconsider the wastefulness and prolixity of the problem. There may, finally, not be enough energy to activate all the gadgets and contraptions that come out of man's fever dream of conquest of nature; one need not mention all the other hazards that now beset the world population. It may seem far-fetched to link the state of lettering and typography to the haunting threats of extinction that rise from the ranks of the biologists, ecologists, agronomists, oceanographers, etc.; but the same sort of threat is presently in the language and, consequently, the written or printed word: here, it is confusion and meaninglessness.

There have always been the skeptics of language, the cynics, and the perverters of truth. They did not always control all the sources of communication available to the masses; now they do, or rather the masses themselves do—the anomaly of life in the twentieth century. However, the pressing problems of meaning and truth for all western culture will not always be befogged by spurious politicians, pseudo-scientists, hack literary men, nor the great venal army of advertising and public relations practitioners. One may say that there are two directions: the lie and the truth; it is very important to humankind that our designers, artists, leaders in all walks of life take the latter direction. Then those slow changes in word meanings, alphabetic and

orthographic changes, and the possible breakthrough in visual communication may come about normally. The present overheated, over-advertised, auto-erotic efforts to change everything overnight may be almost confidently predicted to fail. If there is one thing that schools of design should do, it is to train young people to understand language; for this a new generation of instructors will be needed to say the least.

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## art and typography

typography enters into art.

characters and pieces of newspaper enliven the early works of braque and picasso.

kurt schwitters composes pictures with coloured pieces of printed paper.

but experiment in modern typography had already started at the end of the 19th century.

mallarme, the french poet who succeeded in musicalising language, gave his verses a new visual form, freed his poems from the traditional way of typesetting.

his sentences ran freely over the pages.

gradually typography leaves its rectangular prison, no longer feels the chains of symmetry,

tries to lead the eye over the page and accentuates the direction from the left to the right.

the revolution in art originates a new typography.

contrasts destroy the grey form.

old characters acquire new value.

the white of the character becomes more important than the including form.

the white of the page reigns over the black.

transparency is one of the fundamental principles.

typography becomes a means to bring quick messages to the many.

publicity in daily papers and in weeklies, light publicity in our cities makes extensive use of new discoveries.

the importance of the designer increases every day;  
is he aware of his responsibility?

willem sandberg, amsterdam