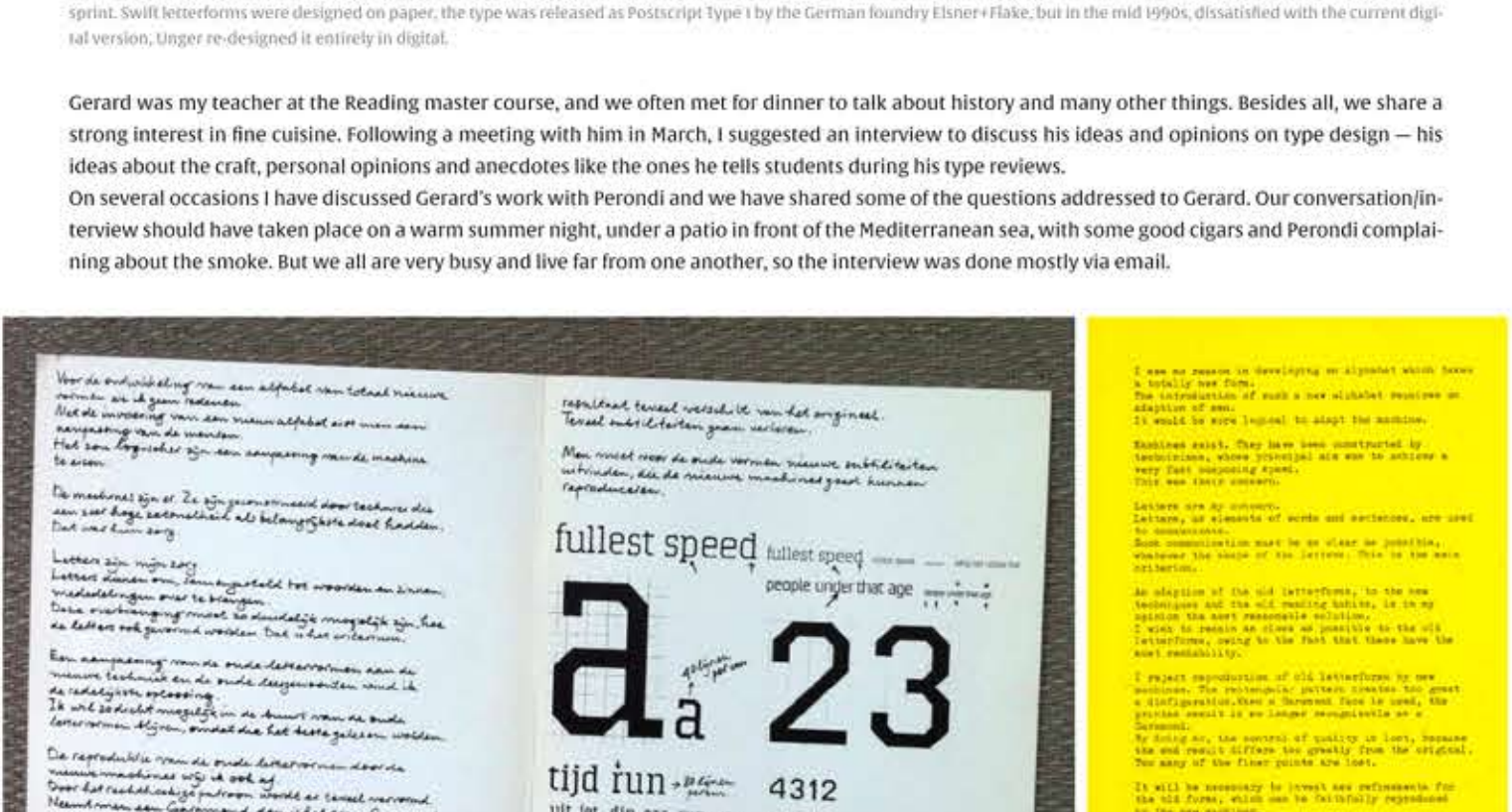


An inter-character space of Swift semibold (mid 1990s)

The inner consistency of Gerard Unger

An interview with the Dutch type designer whose well-defined style has marked recent decades

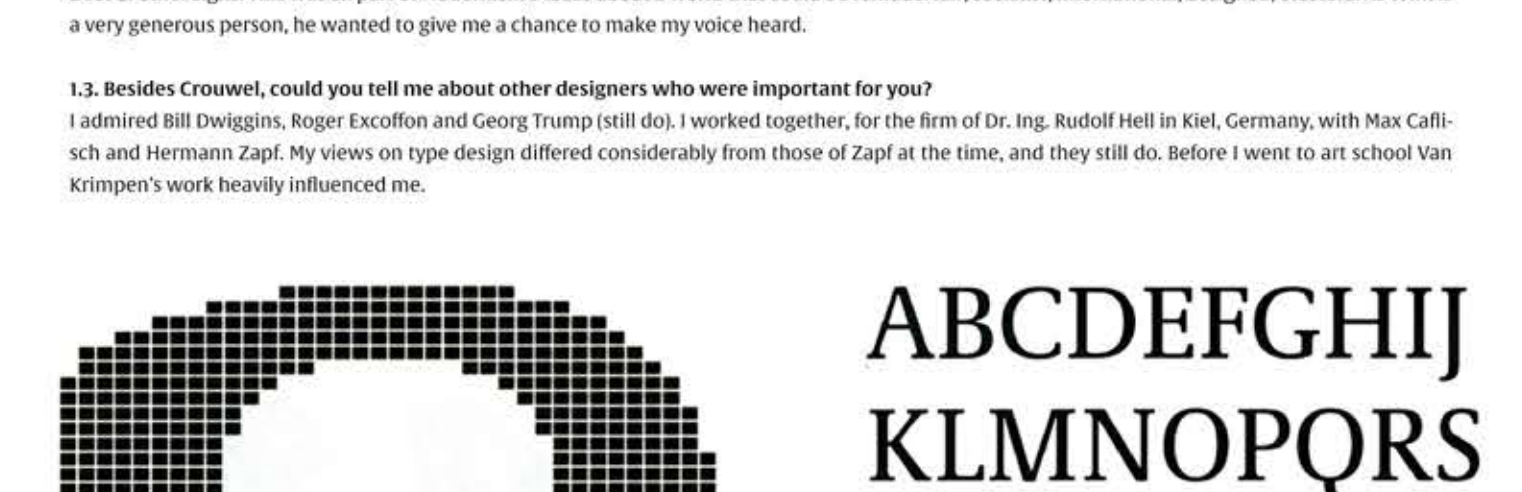
I see Gerard Unger as the most influential type designer of the present age. Not just one of the most influential, but the most influential. His work — his special style of letterforms that you can recognize just from a single shape — has strongly influenced the graphic world in recent decades. Actually it seems to me that over the past fifteen years, since type design became a popular discipline with hundreds of practitioners (compared with the few designers working in the field before digital times) his particular style has been copied in several typefaces, and today it is not easy to recognize an original Unger type from the various imitations. But I might be wrong in considering them as imitations. Luciano Perondi once said that Unger is for type design what Django Reinhardt was for guitar playing. Reinhardt had a peculiar way of playing the guitar and whoever plays in a similar way will be thought of as imitating Django. The same thing is true for Unger and his letterforms: whoever draws counters with such flat curves as Unger has done throughout his career cannot do much more than remind us of him.



Swift (1965, 1995) was Unger's first typeface for newspapers. It was conceived in the early 1960s, when only a few types were suitable for newsprint and most newspapers were using Times or Excelsior (both from the 1930s). Swift is a robust typeface, with a certain sharpness and large squareish serifs. It was designed to withstand fast web-fed presses and coarse newsprint. Swift letterforms were designed on paper; the type was released as Postscript's Type 1 by the German foundry Euler-Fläke, but in the mid 1990s, redesigned with the current digital version. Unger re-designed it entirely in digital.

Gerard was my teacher at the Reading master course, and we often met for dinner to talk about history and many other things. Besides all, we share a strong interest in fine cuisine. Following a meeting with him in March, I suggested an interview to discuss his ideas and opinions on type design — his ideas about the craft, personal opinions and anecdotes like the ones he tells students during his type reviews.

On several occasions I have discussed Gerard's work with Perondi and we have shared some of the questions addressed to Gerard. Our conversation/interview should have taken place on a warm summer night, under a patio in front of the Mediterranean sea, with some good cigars and Perondi complaining about the smoke. But we all are very busy and live far from one another, so the interview was done mostly via email.



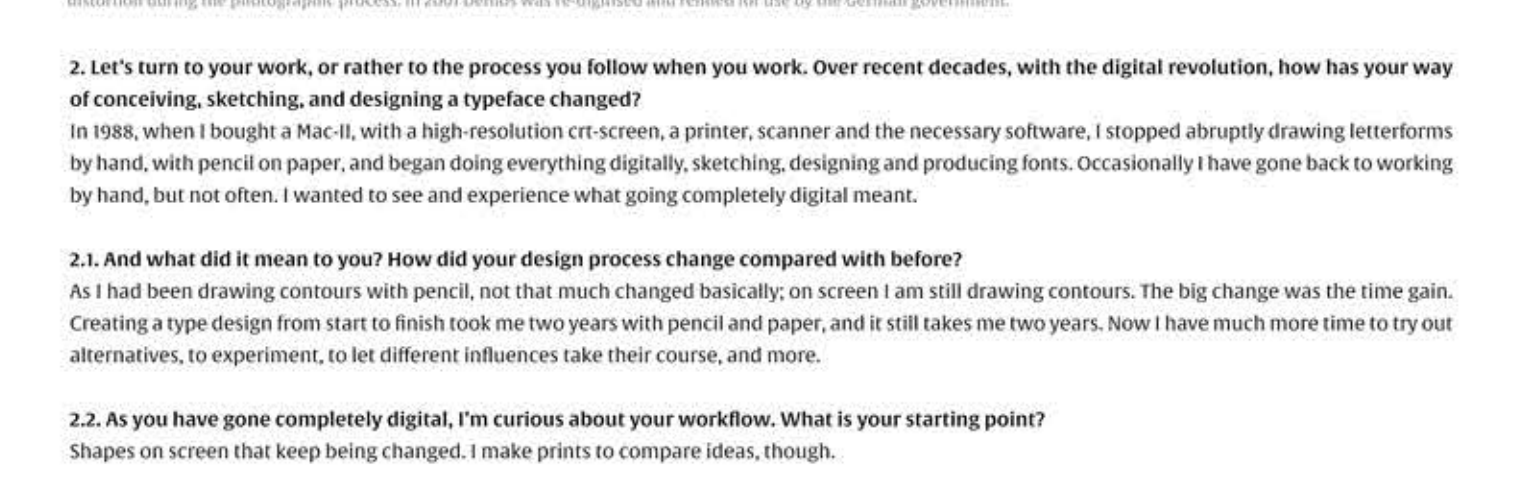
A few months after Wim Crowe's New Alphabet (1967), Unger published his counter-proposal in the same Kwadaahtad series, where he proposed to adapt type design to the new technologies without losing the connection with the traditional letterforms. The proposal was written by hand in Dutch (left) and the English translation typewritten on the back of the folder (right).

1. Let's start from the beginning. What sort of training did you have before you became a type designer?
As I had been trained as a graphic designer at the Rietveld Academy (then still the School for Applied Arts of Amsterdam), with a specialization in type design. My main teacher, Theo Korpershoek (1914-1998) was a painter and graphic artist (etchings, lithographs) and a self-taught typographer and calligrapher. He brought me into contact with many different views within type design and typography. He did not impose one single view on me, although at the time of my education (1963-67) the so-called 'Swiss Typography' was very popular.

1.1. Could you tell me about people and situations that had an important impact in the early stages of your career?
My first job was with Wim Crowel (1967), who influenced me, not so much with his systematic approach to design as with his clear thinking and reasoning, and especially with his generosity. During my studies it was Professor Ovlink of the Amsterdam Typefoundry (of the book on Atmosphere Values), who brought me into contact with Mardersteig and organized access for me to, for example, the Bibliotheca Laurenziana in Florence.

1.2. You worked with Crowel in the same year he delivered his famous New Alphabet. But if I remember correctly you were rather critical of that design.
Wim personally asked me to put together a counter-proposal. Wim Crowel thought at the time that the existing alphabet could be easily replaced with a set of other signs. This was all part of Modernism's ideas about a world that could be remade: fair, socialist, international, designed, etcetera. As Wim is a very generous person, he wanted to give me a chance to make my voice heard.

1.3. Besides Crowel, could you tell me about other designers who were important for you?
I admired Bill Dwiggins, Roger Excoffon and Georg Trupp (still do). I worked together, for the firm of Dr. Ing. Rudolf Hell in Kiel, Germany, with Max Gillisch and Hermann Zapf. My views on type design differed considerably from those of Zapf at the time, and they still do. Before I went to art school Van Krimpen's work heavily influenced me.



Demos (1975) is the first typeface Unger designed for the firm of Dr. Ing. Rudolf Hell GmbH in Kiel, a manufacturer of phototypesetting machines. One of the earliest digital typesetters ever designed. It was conceived to hinder the limitations of the new technology. The letters were formed by a cathode ray tube and were built up of fairly coarse pixels — designed to resist distortion during the photographic process. In 2001 Demos was re-digitized and refined for use by the German government.

2. Let's turn to your work, or rather to the process you follow when you work. Over recent decades, with the digital revolution, how has your way of conceiving, sketching, and designing a typeface changed?
In 1988, when I bought a Mac-II, with a high-resolution crt-screen, a printer, scanner and the necessary software, I stopped abruptly drawing letterforms by hand, with pencil on paper, and began doing everything digitally, sketching, designing and producing fonts. Occasionally I have gone back to working by hand, but not often. I wanted to see and experience what going completely digital meant.

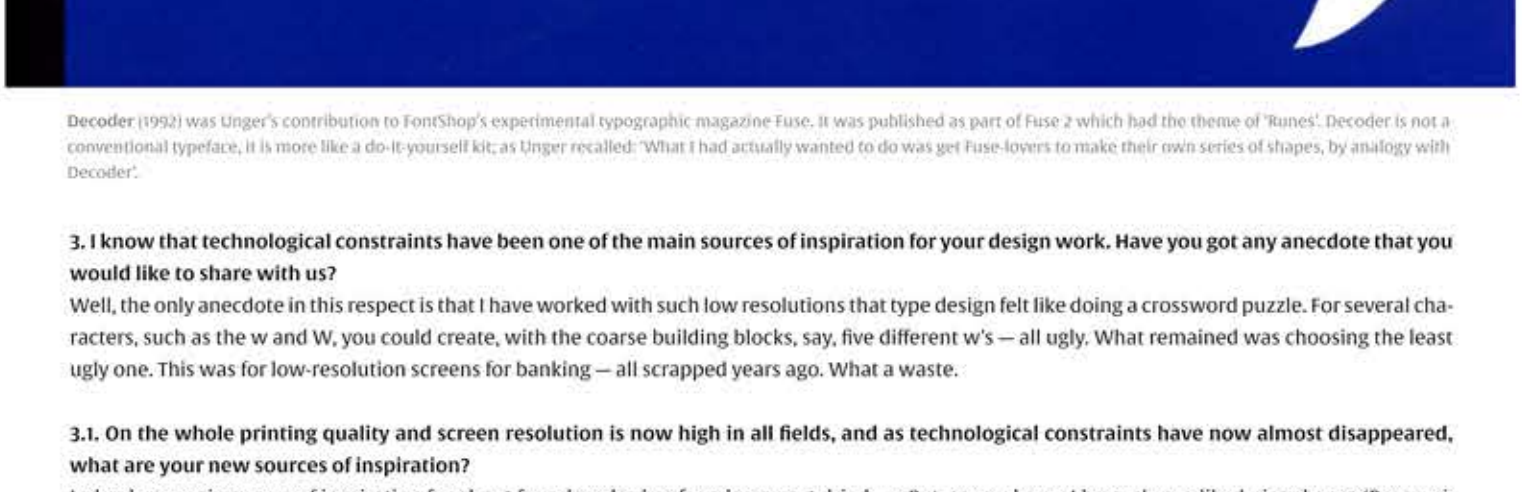
2.1. And what did it mean to you? How did your design process change compared with before?
I have no doubt drawing with pencil, not that much changed basically; on screen I am still finding contours. The big change was the time gain. Creating a type design from start to finish took me two years with pencil and paper, and it still takes me two years. Now I have much more time to try out alternatives, to experiment, to let different influences take their course, and more.

2.2. As you have gone completely digital, I'm curious about your workflow. What is your starting point?
Shapes on screen that keep being changed. I make prints to compare ideas, though.

2.3. From which letters do you usually start?
I have no favourite letters to start with. Like with all other designers, I suppose o, n, H and O are in the front row, and I usually work on g as an early character. Often I begin with cannibalizing one of my earlier designs — most digitization points are already in place and I start moving these around till a different design, corresponding with a mental image, begins to emerge. And I do make prints, many, in large and small sizes.

2.4. Which type design software do you employ today?
Good old Fontographer. Together with Matthew Carter we are probably the only ones still using this software.

2.5. But Fontographer does not handle multiple master. I wonder how you structure your typefaces. Do you work on the different masters in different font files?
Yes, that is the way I work, and I cooperate with an ex student, Tom Grace, and Irene Vlachou for Greek. Tom does most of the production work. Although he lives and works in Heidelberg, Germany, we work together and I am not alone in front of my screen.



Decolore (1992) was Unger's contribution to FontShop's experimental typographic magazine Face. It was published as part of Face 2 which had the theme of 'Rimes'. Decolore is not a conventional typeface. It is more like a do-it-yourself kit, as Unger recalled: "What I had actually wanted to do was get Face-lovers to make their own series of shapes, by analogy with Decolore."

3.1. Would that technological constraints have been one of the main sources of inspiration for your design work. Have you got any anecdote that you would like to share with us?
Well, the only anecdote in this respect is that I have worked with such low resolutions that type design felt like doing a crossword puzzle. For several characters, such as the w and W, you could create, with the coarse building blocks, say, five different w's — all ugly. What remained was choosing the least ugly one. This was for low-resolution screens for banking — all scrapped years ago. What a waste.

3.1. On the whole printing quality and screen resolution is now high in all fields, and as technological constraints have now almost disappeared, what are your new sources of inspiration?
Indeed, my main source of inspiration for about four decades has for a large part dried up. But, as you know I have always liked nice shapes (Brancusi, Arp, Calder) and I am interested in history. These sources continue to exert their influence (Leidse Letters, Alverata). But my latest design, Sanserata, is still influenced by a technological constraint, by emitted light from screens. To let readers read Sanserata with ease it is supplied with articulated endings, based on recent legibility research.

3.2. Undoubtedly research matters. How do you apply research to the process of type design?
For many years I have made designs for newspapers. To do this I had to research printing technology, legibility, and also the social side: who are the readers, what are their educational levels, what is their average age, and other factors. Of such research you cannot point to any clear results in a type design. This all works in the background. And I have always been interested in a much wider field than just typography and its history. There are many other histories, of publishing, education, readers, and there are the present-day aspects of such interests. I have learned heavily on the arts, Modernism and Modern Classicism, total abstraction, Futurists, especially Balla, and other isms and Individuals, such as Ellsworth Kelly.



Capitolium (1998) was commissioned as part of a wayfinding system for the city of Rome to mark the jubilee of the Roman Catholic Church in 2000. Unger's starting point was the work of Giovan Francesco Cresci, an Italian writing master of the sixth century who had design a fovearica alphabet to match the Imperial capitals.



Capitolium News (2006). Some time after completing this typeface Unger decided to design a version of Capitolium for newspapers. He increased the x-height and re-designed all the letterforms to make them more compact, more robust and more suitable for newspapers.

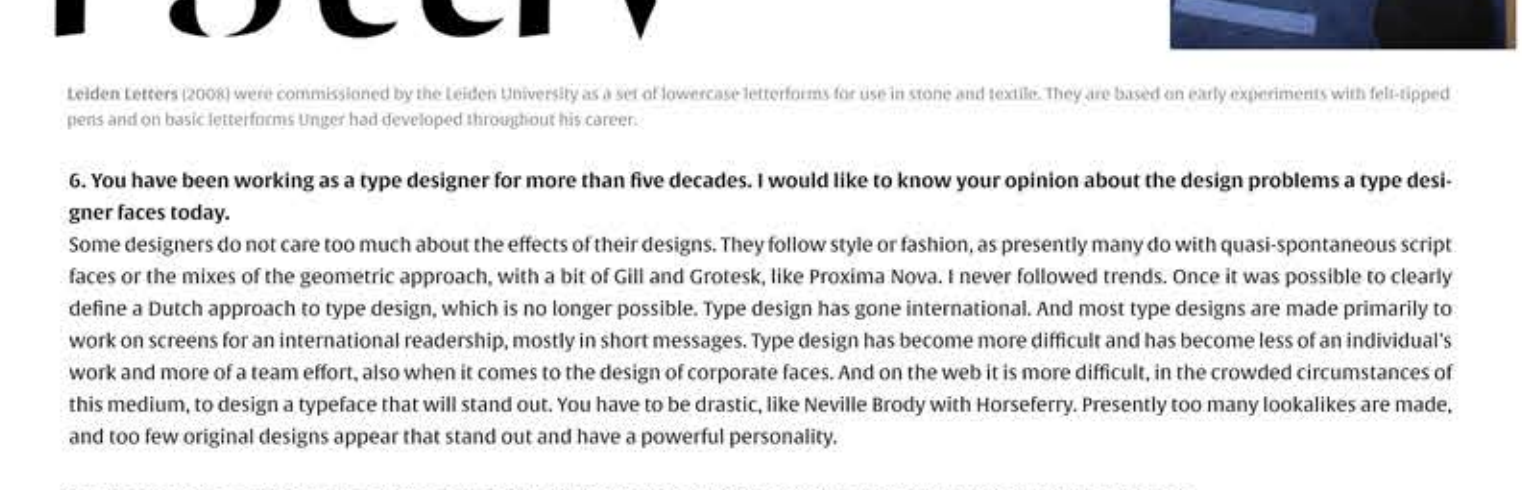
4. You have a strong and well-defined style that has been consistent throughout your career. Why do you only follow that one particular style?
As you know, Matthew Carter is very good at creating revivals. I have tried that but found I cannot do it. When I attempted to, for example, walk in Heischmann's shoes I ended up making my own shapes. That is what I can do — it is irrepresible. I do not do it on purpose. I cannot do anything else.

4.1. How would you define your style? What are the main features that has made it so unique?
I would say it is clear, and outspoken speech, on experimenting with letterforms. With Van Krimpen I am also strongly attached to convention as a widely observed practice, especially to facilitate social interaction. I do not want to sacrifice convention to experimentation, I try to find a delicate balance and then push experimentation a little further.

4.2. To me the main feature of your typefaces is a certain tension given by the horizontal curves of the counters that are almost flat. I guess this feature comes from your research on typography. When did you start applying such a feature to your type design?
This was in my designs from the very beginning, even before I went to art school. It is a feature in the type designs of Jan van Krimpen, whose work has influenced me through my father's book case. And you'll find it in Dwiggins' Aetia. So, I did not invent this feature but found a good use for it.

4.3. What is the designer's personality? In what ways and to what extent does the designer's personality (or the designer's personal style) come out in his work?
Many designers can do many different things. I can't. Think of Juliet Shen's 'Finding Morris Fuller Benton' about the man who created News Gothic, Franklin Gothic, Century Schoolbook and other famous faces — a look at Zapf's work is interesting. It is difficult to describe a designer's personality. With Excoffon and Dwiggins it is fairly obvious, with Benton it is complex. A description of my personality I gladly leave to you and Luciano. By the way, a clear personality in design can be seen as an advantage and as a limitation.

4.4. Could you tell me more about this advantage and limitation?
Look at Benton's output — very prolific, but then he acted more as art director. When you have strong personal preferences or a limited personal interest, it is harder to create type designs that differ considerably. A look at Zapf's work is interesting; in his early work for Stempel his variations are very different: Melior, Palatino. In his later work for ITC, with Zapf International as an example his designs are all closer together, more designs on a theme.



Alverata (2011) and Sanserata (2016), his sans companion, are Unger's most recent typefaces and they are inspired by the capitals of Romanesque inscriptions (11th-13th centuries). Both these types have a wide range of weights and styles, such as Alverata Informal and Irregular, with the latter including multiple variants of letters that follow Romanesque models. Unger asserted that it was also "an opportunity for an investigation into how far convention within the Latin script can be stretched without disorienting the readers with unfamiliar details".



Leiden Letters (2008) were commissioned by the Leiden University as a set of lowercase letterforms for use in stone and textile. They are based on early experiments with felt-tipped pens and on basic letterforms Unger had developed throughout his career.

6. You have been working as a type designer for more than five decades. I would like to know your opinion about the design problems a type designer faces today.
Some designers do not care too much about the effects of their designs. They follow style or fashion, as presently many do with quasi-spontaneous script faces or the mixes of the geometric approach, with a bit of Gill and Grotesk, like Proxima Nova. I never followed trends. Once it was possible to clearly define a Dutch approach to type design, which is no longer possible. Type design has gone international. And most type designs are made primarily to work on screens for an international readership, mostly in short messages. Type design has become more difficult and has become less of an individual's work and more of a team effort, also when it comes to the design of corporate faces. And on the web it is more difficult, in the crowded circumstances of this medium, to design a typeface that will stand out. You have to be drastic, like Neville Brody with Horseferry. Presently too many lookalikes are made, and too few original designs appear that stand out and have a powerful personality.

6.1. As you have a long career as a teacher, I wonder what is the first thing you look at when you evaluate a typeface.
That is difficult. As you know I am writing for Gerry [Leonidas] the Theory of Type Design. Evaluation is the last chapter I still have to write.

6.2. How would you define the inner consistency of a typeface?
One of the interesting aspects is the impossibility to design a typeface that is consistent in its inconsistency. You will be able to read about it in my next book.

6.3. How can you achieve the inner consistency of a typeface starting from a single shape (letterform), or from a small group of shapes?
I would say that you need at least variations on a shape, or several consistent shapes with variations. Consistency seems to be the thing to go for when you design type: all details that can be treated in a similar way should be treated in a similar way. But it is more interesting to introduce slight inconsistencies and to apply these consistently. It is even fun to find out how far you can go with applying inconsistencies consistently, to find out where the edge is before you go over it.

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