SOUP OF THE DAY

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The most devastating experience for me as a magazine writer is seeing my work in print. I can't figure out why anyone would want to read what I wrote. The text is only texture, a decorative element. The type is too small, the lines too long, the title too obscure, and the layout too complicated. I get nauseous just staring at it—loss of creative control feels a lot like a hangover.

Authors are no longer authority figures. Art directors and type designers, kept for many years in a subordinate position, have taken over and claimed authorship of the page. The electronic revolution has given them the advantage. Their victory leaves the rest of us to sift through the visual wreckage—tangled headlines, blurred letters, floating pull quotes, and distressed imagery—unable to figure out what an article is all about. Somewhere in the swelling sea of digitized information, the author's original intention has capsized. This illegible medium is the new message—adrift in a bottle.

In a recent issue of *Interact*, a journal published by the Chicago-based American Center for Design (ACD), two writers were allowed to express their objections to the layout of their article, which had been set in a series of copy blocks shaped like footprints. "We were not offered the opportunity to work collaboratively with the designers," wrote Lauralee Alben and Jim Faris. "This is ironic, given the subject of our article [interdisciplinary dance], which discusses various models of collaboration and the degree to which they foster or hinder effective design." The editor's note, written in response, had an unpleasant tone:" ACD considers design a form of authorship, and does not generally ask its designers to rework their proposed solutions based on subjective criteria,just as it does not ask authors to rewrite their contributions to reflect a different point of view should someone disagree." Conflicts between icon makers and wordsmiths are as acerbic as those between estranged husbands and wives.

I used to be an art director and can attest that I was often asked to rework my design solutions based on the subjective criteria of editors, publishers, circulation experts, communication consultants, marketing executives, advertisers, and even, sometimes, writers. But those were the old days when the pen was mightier than the mouse.

Just when I thought computers would further erode my ability to function as a designer, I became a writer. I should have known better—whenever I switch lanes at the checkout counter, I always pick the wrong one and get stuck behind someone who is returning a defective product and filling out triplicate forms for a full refund. Although I, too, feel like asking for a refund when I see my articles in print, I also find myself cheering for my old team. Let designers have the ball for a while. Reading is, after all, a spectator sport.

Printed words have lost their authority because they are no longer printed, but rather "published." Not long ago, their weighty presence was a by-product of the heavy printing equipment necessary to produce them. The massive engraving plates, sturdy oak drawers packed with steel punches, and vats full of melting lead were indeed impressive. In contrast, digitized documents stored on wafer-thin disks don't seem real. Flickering on screens—bit-mapped at 72 dots per inch—and translated into software language for various output devices, these words are now elusive entities. Without their metal shells, they are vulnerable, unprotected. Fontographer, a software program by Altsys, creators of the popular

illustration software Aldus FreeHand, allows designers to modify traditional iron-age typefaces, pushing letters to the limit of their readability. Easily layered, meshed, and woven together into a seamless electronic fabric, these rasterized words are eventually transcribed onto paper—almost as an afterthought.

The page is now a living surface. Fluidity is the order of the day. Your typical type foundry is a converted space—an office, loft, or bedroom—with a couple of Macs in the corner. Fontographer users are a volatile group, more artists than technicians. Twenty-six years old on the average, they are usually middle-class college graduates-from Eastern Michigan, Cranbrook,Art Center, CalArts, Yale—who've read Claude Levi-Strauss, Roland Uarthes, and Jacques Derrida. Few live in Manhattan; they prefer the off-campus, informal atmosphere of a smaller town. The new typographical movement is a regional phenomenon with its local heroes: Dutch graphic designer Rudy VanderLans, founder of *Emigre* magazine, lives in Sacramento; Rick Valicenti, principal of Thirst, and Carlos Segura, who masterminded the prolific foundry T-26, are both in Chicago; Scott Makela has moved his Words+ Pictures design office to Minneapolis; David Carson used to art direct *Ray Gun* from Santa Monica.

The traditionally macho field of typography is accommodating women who are gaining access to the keyboard. One of the first type designers to publish her own fonts under the *Emigre* label was Zuzana Licko, VanderLans' wife and partner. Her bold, vigorous, and popular font designs (Modula, Matrix, Journal, Citizen) changed forever the face—and the gender—of graphic expression.

Sexually depolarized, identified by area codes rather than style, physically isolated in front of their screens, font artists are marginalized. They see no reason to join the system. With the click of a mouse, they can distort, smudge, blur, or shrivel any letterform and challenge the sanctity of the written word.

The first generation of graphic design students who trained on Fontographer is now entering the work force. These young professionals think that text is something that's meant to be infused with irreverence-not necessarily read. To a large extent, they are right: the projects they design are album covers, posters, catalogues, brochures, greeting cards, and, occasionally, annual reports—graphic showpieces no one ever reads. Most of the time, junior designers don't deal with real readers. The only victims of their personal style are people who receive invitations to gallery openings and can't make out the day, the time, or the location.

"The new, popular medieval typefaces, Coptic-looking glyphs, and Victorian scripts, are symptomatic of a return to individuality," says Jonathan Hoefler, who created elegant faces for such publications as *Esquire, Rolling Stone*, and *Harper's Bazaar*. "This revivalist trend is not retro—it's politically subversive. What you are witnessing here is the crumbling of the paternal authority of the word. Some typesetters, Erik van Blokland and Just van Rossum in particular, have programmed a progressive and randomized decaying of their typeface right into the system." Today, printed matter is viewed as trash, even before it gets to the dump.

Illegibility is a deliberate act of avoidance. Jonathan Barnbrook, an influential British type designer, confessed in an article in *Emigre* that he "finds it difficult" to use his own typefaces (appropriately named Bastard, Exocet, Manson, Prozac, Nixon). "I see them as individual elements rather than part of the larger discourse," he writes. That "larger

discourse" is one writers and editors know all too well. The economic reality of magazine publishing can turn the most substantial editorial content into mere stuffing-into processed food for thought sandwiched between white bread ads. "The tension between authority and its destruction is a constant theme in my work," says Barnbrook in a recent Eye magazine interview.

But is this communication? RudyVanderLans, the art director/editor/publisher of *Emigre*, the now legendary West Coast graphic design publication, takes a philosophical approach: If you can't read something—never mind, it probably wasn't written for you. "People who complain about not being able to read the type are usually not the audience the piece was destined to reach," he says.

But what's most striking about this ambiguous type trend is the fact that it has become a coded language for an entire generation. Illegible typefaces are the graffiti of cyberspace. And in the computer age, things have a way of springing into the mainstream in the blink of an eye. Today, type designers like David Carson, former art director of the music and youth culture magazine *Ray Gun* (probably the most illegible magazine to date), are worshiped by those whose job it is to capture the attention of a visually overloaded public. In the last year, Carson has acquired some pretty big corporate clients, including Nike, Levi Strauss & Co., and Hardee's. "I figured that if I didn't work with them, someone else would-using a bastardized version of my style. I have done the illegible stuff for ten years."

The message-driven Nike T-shirt department is one of the company's fastest growing divisions. Valerie Challis, a Nike senior art director, explains that illegibility is "appropriate to the function" of the product, which is to express irreverence. "Different ideas or messages call for different typefaces," she says matter-of-factly. Wieden Kennedy & Associates, Nike's advertising agency, has teams of copywriters working around the clock to come up with hip, jargon-of-the-moment slogans. Raised on a visual diet of cartoons, TV sitcoms, and videos, their twentysomething target audience has only recently discovered the power of words and they're hungry for more.

In an interesting about-face, Carson is now de-emphasizing the typographical exuberance that won him his fame for the benefit of tone, attitude, color, and shape." I want to redesign the magazine-which is tricky since *Ray Gun* had no format to start with," he says. "I've had enough of weird scripts and fractured letters. One should be able to solve anything with one typeface. There is this new straightforward font I like, with a name l can't spell, something like 'DINEngschrist.' I don't even know where I got it."
Watch out, David. People may not like the new *Ray Gun*. I recently picked up this cryptic message posted on one of the handful of graphic chat lines on America Online: "Sorry, but *Ray Gun* isn't meant to be read. It is a forum for design disguised as a music mag forced upon the unbeknownst musicians who purchase it." (Signed TKween9.)

"Letters are legible," wrote Dutch designer Peter Mertem in 1990 in *Emigre 15*, a landmark issue devoted to typography. "If they are not legible, then they are not letters. illegible letters do not exist. Illegibility does not exist."This statement has since become the *Emigre* credo. By making the controversy black and white—either you can read the type or you can't—Mertens was hoping to cut the Gordian knot. But five years later, font designers are still tangled in the same inextricable debate.

Jeffery Keedy, a type designer also known to his fans as "Mr. Keedy" (at age thirty six

he thinks of himself as "an old man"-the Mr. Rogers of the new typographical age), believes that legibility is an American obsession. "In Europe, people give themselves permission to interpret the text. Here, we hold on to the illusion that what we read is true — that there is no misinformation or lies in the press."

Zuzana Licko offers a conciliatory explanation: "Typefaces are not intrinsically legible," she argues. "Rather, it is the reader's familiarity with the faces that accounts for their legibility. Studies have shown that people read best what they read most. For example, the scientific assumption is that words typeset in lowercase are the most readable—but aren't they also the most ubiquitous? It seems curious that Gothic letters, which we generally find illegible today, were actually preferred during the Middle Ages," she notes. Totally Gothic, a "medieval" typeface she designed in 1990, was considered hard to read when first introduced to the market. Five years later, it is regularly used, in small sizes, by conservative art directors. The extra time people spend deciphering the words seems well worth the gratification they derive from the exercise.

What's read most these days—newspapers, magazines, catalogues, ads, promotional material—would probably be unreadable to an erudite twelfth-century monk. And vice versa: today, the Gothic letters he painstakingly fashioned might be deciphered as slowly as he wrote them. Modern readers are visually literate; most things aren't read, they're read *into*. People can glance at a corporate brochure and instantly deduce if the company had a good or a bad year. They scrutinize an ad to evaluate a product's worth. It's possible that we read different kinds of things with different expectations of comprehension. So how's a designer to know what to do? A monk only had to communicate the eternal glory of God.

Communication is not simply problem solving. The readability of a typeface is often directly proportional to its emotional context. To communicate via fax-modem with my parents in France, I ordered (from a company called Signature Software) a customized typeface that's a digitized version of my handwriting. Named Colette, after my mom, my personal font gets the job done. Although she knows I didn't scribble a note to her, my mother reads my electronic messages with something that resembles pleasure. "The Vs and the Rs are realistic," she says. "Too bad the lines are so regular."

Readability can be off-putting. Just last week I received a "Dear Veronique" letter, beautifully typeset on blue paper, and instantly assumed it was junk mail. I trashed it without even reading it. When I emptied the wastebasket I realized it was written by a close friend of mine.

The type market is flooded with experimental fonts that express the delicious idiosyncrasies of their makers. They quickly become addictive. Mara Kurtz, who teaches typography at New York's Parsons School of Design, collects typefaces the way Imelda Marcos collects shoes. "There is no way I can use them in my work," she says, "but I am hooked. Type today is not about excellence, it's about diversity."

My favorite new faces are those that take my eyes where I didn't know they wanted to go. A decorative engraver's face, Bronzo, designed by Dick Valicenti and Mouhli Mauer and distributed by Thirst, features overemphatic horizontal strokes that lend an irresistible zippiness to the stream of letterforms. You don't decipher words set in Bronzo because they are easy to read, but because they chase each other from line to line. Randomun, an engaging brushstroke font by Todd Munn distributed by T-20, reads like a series of

footprints, leaving on the page a trail of fascinating tracks that lead the reader, step by step, to the end of the sentence. A hard-to-read typeface called Indelible Victorian, designed by Stephen Farrell for T-26, becomes legible when seen in the context of a phrase—its faded letters with their broken and frayed edges forming a fragile yet compelling message. Sorting out the visual context to extract relevant information always was—and still is—a genuinely creative act, one that demands judgment, good sense, and aesthetic discernment. In the last analysis, it is the reader, not the writer or the designer, who is the ultimate arbiter of the implication of a text.

A love of words—and a need to exert more control over my work—made me switch careers. In the process I became fascinated with the way written language performs. Its power is in its sheer simplicity. An active voice, a vigorous choice of adjectives, and a healthy respect for grammar give sentences their potency. A good writer, I soon learned, is not timorous. *That's what it must feel like to be a guy*, I thought. Real men don't mix metaphors.

Annoyed by a culture that rewards assertive writers and celebrates must-read male authors, women designers are at the forefront of. what Pamela Mead calls "hairiness." An interface communication specialist for InForm in Boston, Mead advocates a fuzzier interpretation of readability standards. "Hairy is a philosophy, not a set rule," she wrote in *Interact.* "It should add a degree of pleasure and surprise, taking advantage of the human tendency to take a chance and explore." She proposes, for example, friendly ATM machines that give users a chance to play with the visual representation of their cash transactions.

Rebeca Mendez, former design director of the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California, wants to use typography to re-script cultural assumptions about the best way to communicate. "If you are too overt about challenging authority, people dismiss you as crazy," she says. "It's more effective to subtly undermine the grid system from within, with imperceptible tricks, such as delicate curves in the baselines, slight corruption of the letterforms, and strategically placed *mistakes*." Pleasing and legible, her irregular text treatment suggests an exquisitely flawed material—a skillfully woven fabric delicate enough for the emperor's new clothes.

Margo Johnson, a graduate from the California Institute of the Arts iii Valencia, applied mathematical variables to existing typefaces and recorded each step of the process as the alphabet fell apart. The results were sixty expressive hybrid fonts that retrace, backward, the story of the evolution of typography, from elegant cursives to primitive ink-spots. "There is a trend in the multimedia field to turn type into pictures," says Johnson." I used to think of myself as a type designer—now I tell people I am an illustrator." While male designers enjoy blurring words, women seem to prefer blurring the boundaries between words and pictures, typographers and illustrators, designers and artists. Rather than re-script narrative expression, women choose to de-script it.

To promote Concrete, her Chicago-based design office,Jilly Simons produced what she calls a "tautological piece," a handsome series of captionless photographs held together by a wide rubber band imprinted with the phrase:"How does it feel to think?" It's definitely a stretch. "Words make it too easy," she explains. "I want to challenge people to think for themselves. I want them to create their own story. I find text with pictures somewhat redundant." Not everyone got it. She adds wistfully that she received more inquiries about the printing on the rubber band than about her company. "The focus of my work is to

use pictures to create a dialogue. I welcome different interpretations. For me, a truly interactive piece is poetry."

Few graphic designers can afford to develop truly sophisticated interactive presentations of their work, like CD-ROMs or multimedia films. "There is never enough money in interesting projects to hire the right people," says New York designer Barry Deck. "So when l want something, I simply design it. I collaborate with myself. It's the only way I can control my work. I script it and design it." While his fonts are used by Nickelodeon, *Details, Mademoiselle*, and QVC, and his bootlegged Template Gothic shows up everywhere from missing pet posters to Fortune 500 annual reports, Deck likes to keep techno-jargon to a minimum. "Yeah I get on America Online, but mostly to check the *New York Times* highlights. It saves paper—I don't like murdering trees."

Nevertheless, the page is the typographer's and the reader's preferred medium. Interface design—strictly for monitors-is still mostly in the hands of engineers who have minimum graphic design training. As a result, even the most popular CD-ROMS are awkward in their visual delivery. Images are lavish, but the text—or "hypertext"—is seldom an integral part of the overall concept. You still read blocks of copy stuffed in compartments and click icons to activate dialogue boxes. The little booklet that comes with the disc is usually the most graphically exciting part of the software package.

"Today, words are objects," says Fred Brady, Adobe's manager of new typographic developments, and a designer who's helped define the type company's aggressive strategy. "A word can be set in an illegible, ephemeral font and still be readable—yes, people can decipher a couple of words in a large size, no matter what they look like. But no one reads text unless it is set in a permanent typeface." With multiple master technology, which allows variations of sizes, weights, widths, and styles, the Adobe font user can now instantly create hundreds of fonts from one typeface. Composition families, as Adobe typefaces are now called, support creativity while preserving legibility.

Minion is a good example. A classic serif, it looks substantial and unambiguous in any size or permutation. You can slant it, squeeze it, stretch it, shrink it, or enlarge it—it never fades or falls to pieces. So how come David Carson doesn't play with it in *Ray Gun*? Maybe it's because Adobe's fonts aren't vulnerable enough: they take abuse and keep going, a sure sign of a corporate mind-set.

Another type resource, the International Type Corporation (ITC) in New York, recently completed a three-year project to replicate, in the digitized realm, the "warm, irregular, and human" feel of the original Italian Bodoni face. "To appeal to designers today, we knew we had to preserve the stylistic idiosyncrasies of the eighteenth-century face," says Ilene Strizver, ITC director of typeface development. "An interpolation between the small and the large sizes gave us what we were looking for—a consistent style and flavor—and the proof that the computer had captured Giambattista Bodoni's attention to details." Less pristine and luminous than Minion, ITC Bodoni is robust, friendly, and easier on the eye.

Clarity is not always synonymous with readability. On America Online, the *New York Times* is exceedingly legible—set in Geneva, a digitized version of Helvetica. But practically speaking, it is unreadable: you have no perspective on the news; the articles are reproduced on the screen in a uniform format—with no columns, photographs, or captions to support the flow of the narrative; you can't glance back and forth at other headlines; you can't savor the irony of journalistic juxtapositions. There is no hierarchy, urgency, or

drama. And dare I say it? I miss the Lancome ads.

To make matters even more confusing, good typography is not always synonymous with good design. With unquestionable graphic dexterity, the Oregon firm of Johnson & Wolverton designs SAY, Amnesty international's award-winning magazine for young people. Trendy with just a touch of funkiness, the magazine is technically readable but practically illegible: it's humanly impossible to concentrate on the subject matter—torture—in such a slick visual environment. "We are not commenting on politics," explains designer Hal Wolverton. "Our goal is to inform and motivate. We made an early decision to avoid gruesome imagery, to focus instead on emotions the reader feels capable of acting upon." Here, reading is not as important as joining. SAY is not a magazine but a highly successful pamphlet-the youth section is the most active division of Amnesty International.

To make sense, text must be more than simply copy. "All the world's a text," says Robert Scholes, author of *Protocols of Reading* (Yale University Press, I9H9). J. Abbott Miller would agree. Ten years ago he founded Design Writing Research, a "form making and textmaking" studio in New York, with his partner and wife, Ellen Lupton. He art directs *Dance Ink*, considered to be one of the most appealing magazines at the newsstand. What makes the quarterly publication so accessible is not its type or its layout—both low-key—but the genuine curiosity with which the designer seems to approach the content. A prolific writer on design criticism and history, Miller describes white space on a page as "absence of narrative." Here, the text—in the structuralist sense of the term—is legible. In *Dance Ink*, the narrative is a choreography between words and images. We don't read what's clear or orderly—we read what's spellbinding.

Case in point: a modest literary magazine, *Cellar Roots*, published once a year by Eastern Michigan University. Designed by graduate students Sharon Marson and Craig Steen, who created a slightly idiosyncratic format and two memorable typefaces, a recent issue was unanimously selected for the prestigious American Center for Design's seventeenth annual 100 Show. Three judges, representing a wide range of typographic styles, picked it without hesitation. "it's an oddity, a real curio," says Stephen Doyle, of New York's Drenttel Doyle Partners. "The classical type is surrounded by_ very peculiar ornamentation," explains graphic designer Laurie Haycock Makela. "It's the balance between L1miliarity and experimentation that holds my attention," adds Rudy VanderLans. If you look closely at *Cellar Roots*, there is nothing much to the design. Classical borders overprinted in yellow fracture the text without ever interrupting it. "We challenged ourselves to be smart while pleasing our conservative audience—artists and poets who were disappointed with how their work was presented in the past," says Steen.

Cellar Roots' writers knew instinctively that, without readers, their thoughts would forever remain illegible. Authorship is a shared experience between writer, type designer, and reader. As French semiologist Roland Barthes once wrote, "Reading is: rewriting the text of the work within the text of our lives."

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