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World Signs: Symbols without Meaning

"There is no expression without excitement, without turmoil"
*(Dewey, 2005, p. 64).*

Abstract

For decades I experienced the verification of readability as constraints in exploring the potentials of experimental display typography. To solve this rational and emotional problem, I initiated in 2005 a self-directed artistic enquiry.

Over the period of three years I've developed a set of thousands of symbols that on the one hand resemble writing and symbol systems but on the other do not have such functions. In a second phase I extracted a selection thereof and created a font that I named World Signs. To stage the symbols I took photographs, combined them with the former and created a body of work of two-dimensional digital print artworks.

I initiated this project from an applied typography perspective, experimented in the fine arts realm and convey my findings now in a teaching and research context for graphic design students. As a result, in creating display typography I challenge today again the boundaries of its readability. Acknowledging my artistic, professional, academic and emotional gains I now posit the importance of self-initiated creative investigations and encourage my students to consider this when working as a commercial graphic designer.
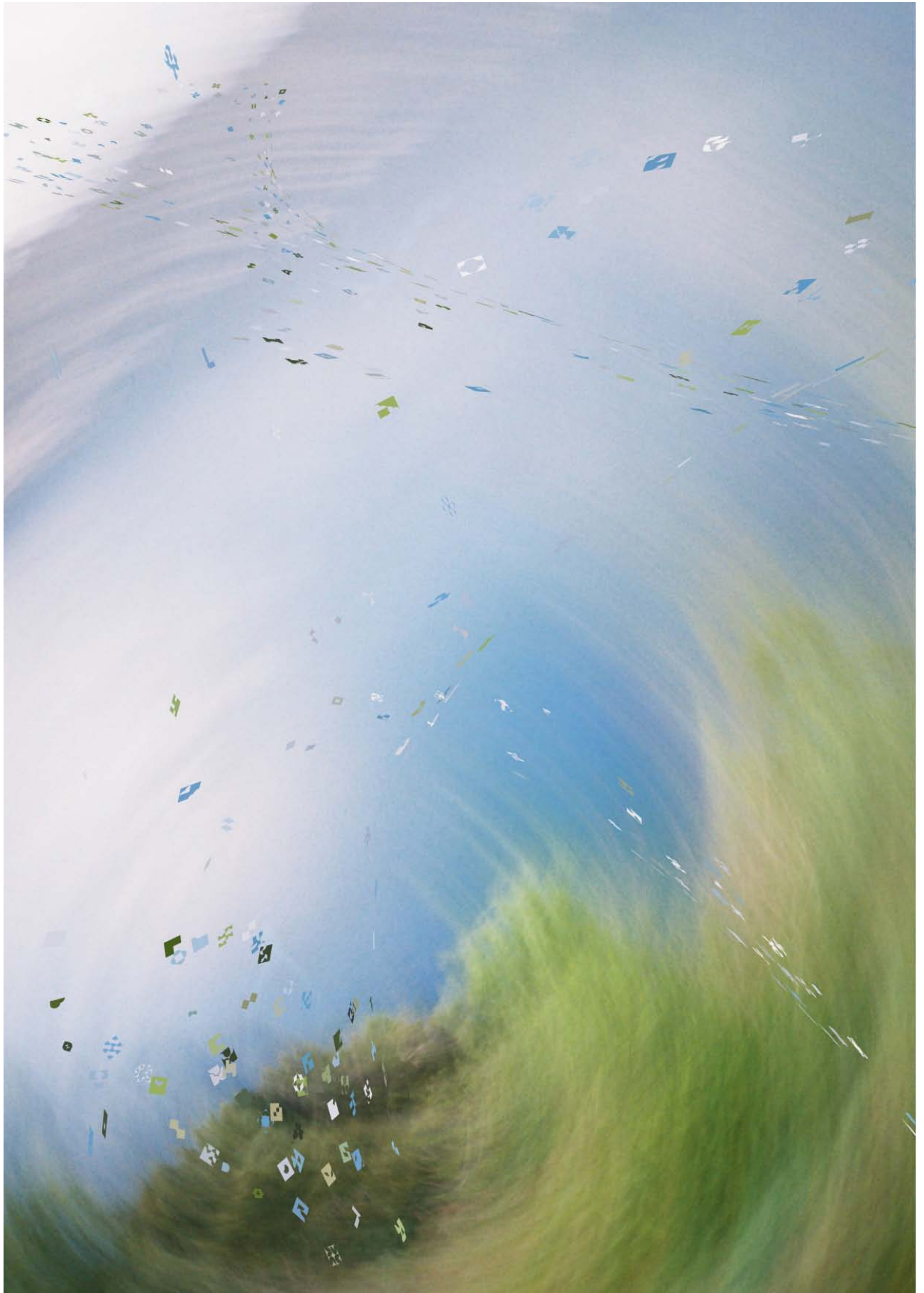
Background and Motivation

From 1990, the year I left the Basel School of Design, until 2005 I was working as a visual communication designer producing mainly commercial work. Most of my clients were conservative, seeking the most possible economical security for return of investment and thus bound themselves to walk on graphical 'safe ways'. In their eyes, taking creative risks was most often feared as a financial threat rather than seen an opportunity to win by differentiating their designs from their competitors'. Thus to sell my designs, it was most effective when I convinced them applying arguments based on the old Bauhaus doctrine of 'form following function'; a creative formula, most of my former clients were familiar with. Right until today, this old modernist thinking, based upon the exchange of rational-logical arguments, still appears to be the dominant discussion convention between designers and business professionals.

Besides general discussions about the quality of design proposals, in my past professional practise this way of thinking also affected the creation and selection of the display type for headlines. Clearly, a typeface that expresses visual uniqueness has to compromise on its readability. Fonts with conventional shapes were there-fore 'easier to sell' to clients than those with experimental shapes because the argument of the better readability was perceived to be more accepted than convincing my clients of the possible impact experimental fonts and custom design typefaces would have. The downside of this beneficial way to talk about graphic design with clients was clearly that I blocked my creative flow of ideas. Through self-censoring I guaranteed my clients and I the approval of readability. What was cut-off were typo-graphical experiments, which appealed emotionally and intuitively but for which I did not have the appropri-ate, or any, language at all to communicate with my clients. Over the years working as a commercial designer this situation became increasingly unsatisfying. I felt that my creative freedom which I was able to nurture and express as a student at the Basel School of Design was a superfluous hindrance in the commercial world. This continuum between creative expression and commercial convention has reached a stage where I felt a need for change.

After a transition and professional re-adjustment period I started, in 2005, an appointment as a lecturer for graphic design/multimedia undergraduate students at the University of Ballarat/Australia. Helmut Stenzel, the course coordinator at the time, encouraged our students to become 'creative independent thinkers'. This was in the era of post-grunge, after David Carson's typographical experiments (Carson, 2000), when we experimented with forms and contents in search for new visual languages. As an educator and researcher I re-activated my enthusiasm for typography that had been sparked when I was a design student. More-over, this new professional and geographical environment inspired me to rekindle my creativity.

Overview

Recalling the advice given by my professors back in Switzerland to nurture one's creative practice in self-defined projects, independently initiated and pro-duced from commercially driven graphic design assignments, I decided to give myself a creative task.

My main goal was to re-gain my creativity by working in a field which I am competent in, that is related to display typography but, by completely abandoning readability, developed within the fine arts realm.

In hindsight, I conclude that the process was always of greater importance to me than the final results. However, I worked on each piece so long until I 'knew' it was finished, meaning, I developed each artwork so long until it has reached a quality level in form and aesthetics that I was content with. The decisions I made were predominantly intuitive of nature.

Project Chronology

My first interest was to create a set of symbols that have neither linguistic nor other meaning conventions attached to them. In search of a suitable creative methodology, I revisited Wolfgang Weingart's typographical experiments from the 80s (Weingart, 2000) and recalled the design exercises I did under his guidance. Hereby, I was, and still am, intrigued by the way how he defines a creative playfield by allocating a set of fixed and variable parameters. This framework allows both a controlled and free environ-ment with an enormous potential by elaborating it to its extreme boundaries. Founded on this thinking I then decided to draw a grid from which these symbols should evolve.

For a long time, my relation to the typographical grid is ambivalent. Mainly, I appreciate it as a tool to assist consistency in design and to organise information in a hierarchical manner (Müller-Brockmann, 1996). In addition, I enjoy the fun when its rigidity is visually juxtaposed and value its guidance to create asymmetrical compositions. I have also experienced the flip-side of this coin: The grid can be an enemy when it dic-tates the design. Taking this in consideration, the potential to combine the gird's versatility with the creation of abstract symbols fascinated me.
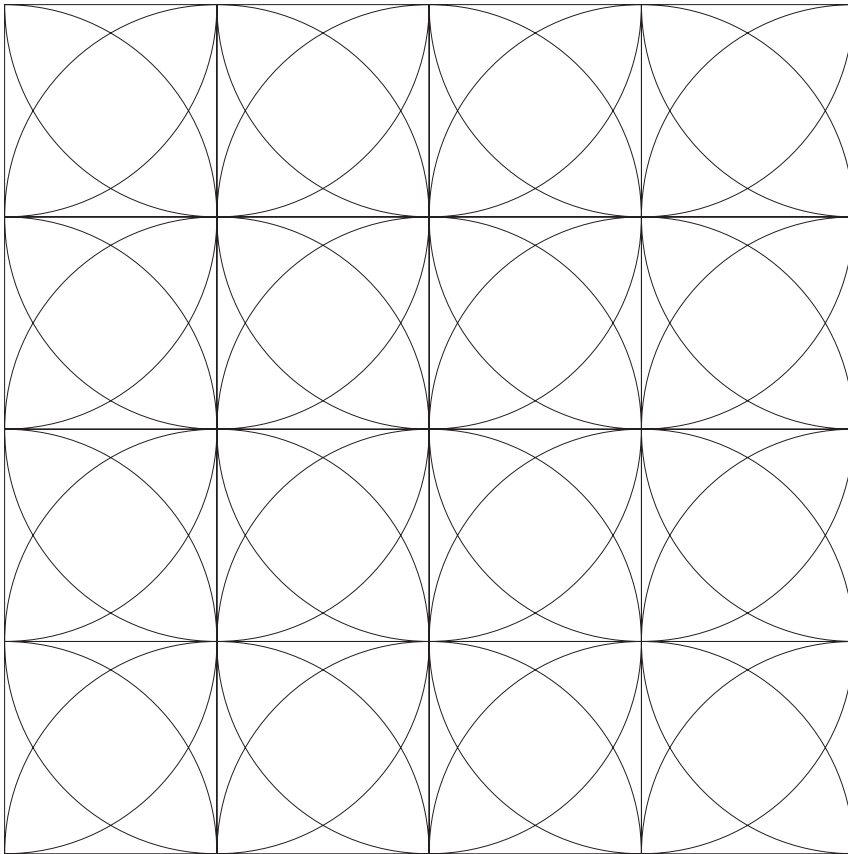
As a peripheral inspiration, I also acknowledge achievements that have entered the archives of design history. Here I would like to point out the pioneering designs of grid-based type designs in Wim Crowel's Vormgevers-Poster in 1968 (Elam, 2001, p. 86) and, earlier, Paul Renner's geometrically crafted Futura. Additionally, my past experience of using font design software with their copy/paste and guideline-alignment options might have influenced my choice to use the grid.

Even though the creative playfield of the first project phase seemed limited, the amount of variation felt infinitive. After creating thousands of symbols, I named these 'World Signs'. I believe this name is suitable for what I saw in them:

- Universal, geometric shapes that are visually interlinked by the forms originating from the same grid;

- Semblance to corporate logotypes, dingbat fonts, enclosed communication systems and/or abstract, enigmatic codes based on specific conventions;

- Proximity to existing forms of alphabets;

- Showing timelessness and suggesting cross-cultural, international implementation.

It is this ambivalence of the familiar, the known, the resemblance of the applied on the one hand and the quaintness, openness, meaningless inherent in both their individual forms and in the symbol's system on the other that inspired me. This vibrant fluctuation and oscillation of meaning, the specific as in a personal perception and the general as in a universal interpretation, plus the system's inherent vagueness was what I was looking for. This personal intuitive interpretation of the World Signs provided me the ideal basis to explore them further.
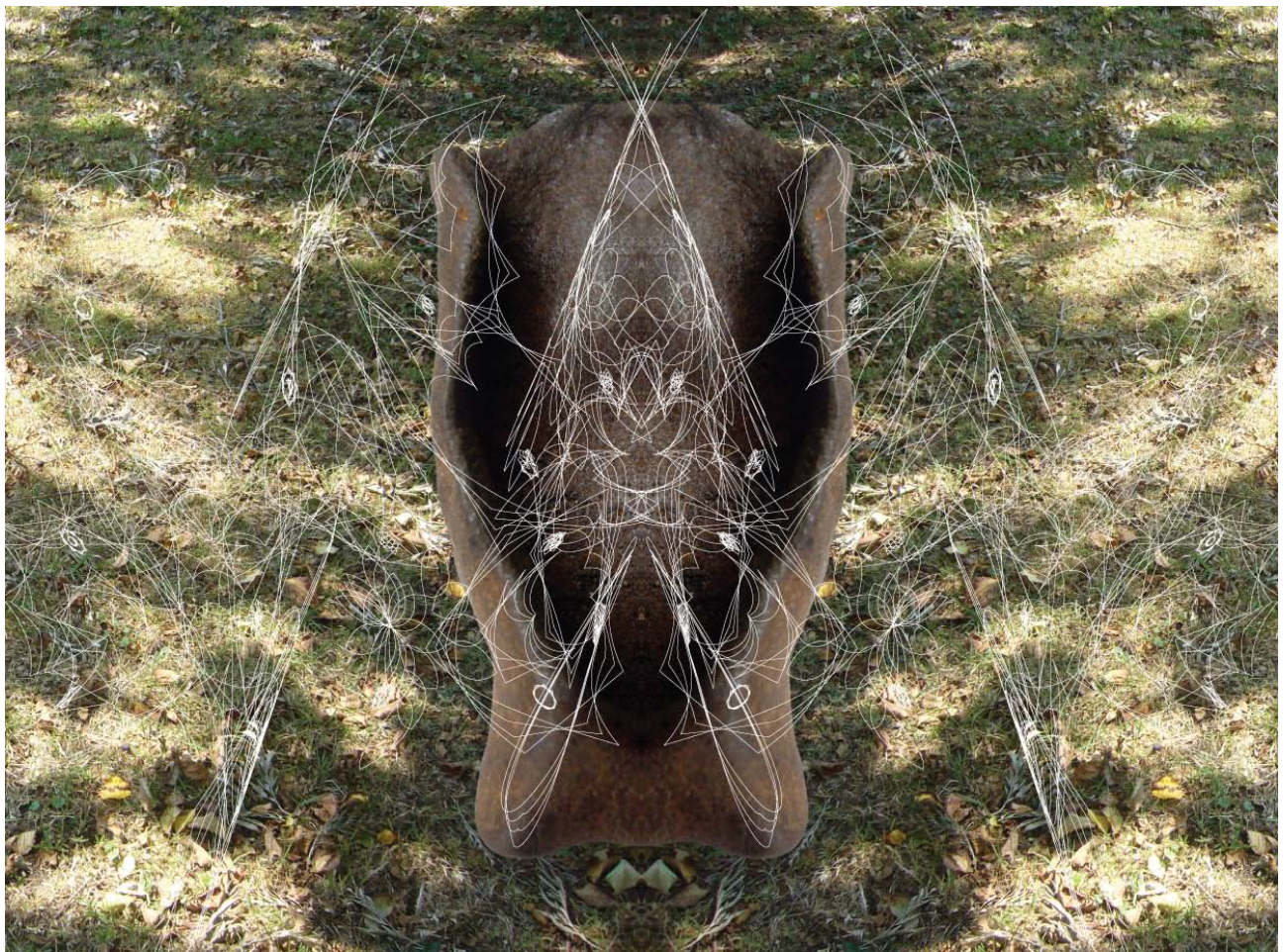
To give the symbols an environment to be staged in I incorporated photography as a second medium into the process. With this intention I started taking a range of photographs with long exposure time, shot on analogue film stock. Because I mainly wanted to achieve moving, dynamic images, the subject matter was of secondary interest to me. The reason I aimed at this visual vivaciousness was both to contrast the static of the geometric shapes and to achieve a photographic environment that is not clearly identifiable, hence abstract as the World Signs are. The integration of the World Signs with the photographs eventually led to a body of two-dimensional digital print artworks.

After the first year of exploring these artistic parameters I decided to assemble a selection of the symbols into a TrueType font. Being now able to type the World Signs, the font brought me somehow back to language. This manifested itself as I stringed symbols on lines, similar to typing letters in succession.

Project Outcome and Analysis

Whilst progressing through this project intuitively, I worked within thematic realms and produced one-off artworks and groups with variations that included between 3 to 5 pieces of artwork. The parameters I set were all of formal-aesthetic nature. With self-posed analytical questions focusing on the relations between forms, dimensions, movements, colours, contrasts, arrangements, layers, textures, etc., and resulting actions, I guided myself through the project.

The benefit of being totally freed by ignoring the readability of the symbols was an amazing act of liberation to explore my artistic experiments. Within three years I created a large body of artwork and simultaneously expanded my knowledge and understanding of typography. The artwork samples in this documentation show only a glimpse of my production.

Project Expansion

After departing my artistic research in applied typography I immediately found myself in the fine arts world. This is, I argue, because the World Signs are not being able to be practically used. However, through the symbols' inherent proximity to conventional communication systems, such as icons and dingbat fonts, there is always a gateway open for interpretation to the applied design realm. It can be argued that there could be a cross-fertilisation between the applied arts, specifically the expressiveness in display typography, and the fine arts, the exploration of forms that resemble writing and communication systems in my project. As a continuation it could now be interesting to further elaborate on the research by expanding and breaking borders between form and function in display typography.

With this in mind, whilst still in the production process, I presented some of the artwork to a group of faculty members and students at the Arts Academy of the University of Ballarat in 2007. After the presentation, my former student Chang Oh asked me a question that was pivotal to my artistic and academic future. He was interested in knowing "How would the World Signs sound like?" It might be insightful to know that Chang has both a fine arts and graphic design background and because of this combination, I assume, he asked the question. I was not able to give him an answer at the time, but his question stuck in my mind.
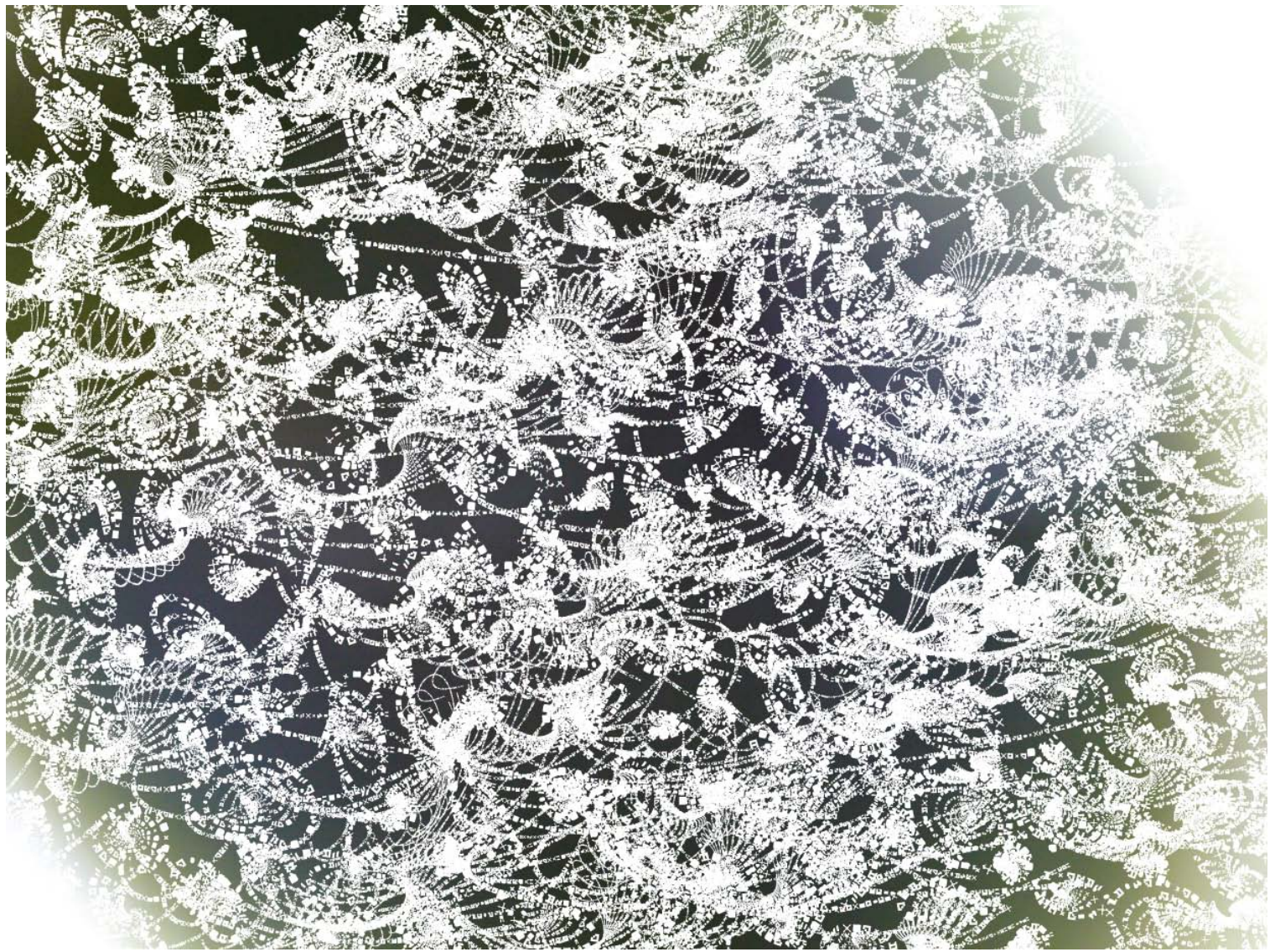
What fascinated me was the link Chang made into another art form that I have not touched yet, music. I read his question as a possible artistic investigation into graphical notations for music and thus saw another research area to open for exploration. What captured my interest was the field of graphical notation ranging from precise instructions with almost no space for interpretation, fragmented compositions defined by aleatoric methods as well as abstract symbols with vague, open-ended meanings for the musician to interpret (von Amelunxen, 2008). Realising the topic's potentials I wondered how the World Signs could expand with and within the canon of graphical notation.

In 2008, whilst lecturing at the Queensland College of Art, I crafted a proposal for a Master of Fine Art by research with Chang's question as the central research question. The following year, having re-located in Switzerland, I presented this proposal to the admission panel at the Bern University of the Arts and was subsequently accepted to enrol as a student in the program Master of Arts in Contemporary Arts Practice (Fine Arts). Under the mentorship of Daniel Weissberg who supported my research interest with his background in music, Hans-Rudolf Reust with his expertise in art criticism and René Pulfer with his knowledge in time based media practices in fine arts, I was guided to produce three video artworks in which I answered Chang's, and by now my own, research question. Obviously, I could have pursued this question ad infinitum but at this stage I decided to complete the topic 'World Signs' and moved on to explore other interests in fine arts.

By reflecting the outcomes, I can capture the following personal achievements. I have:

- re-vitalised my creativity;

- expanded my knowledge about typography;

- developed a deeper understanding on the meanings and conventions of language;

- negotiated the tension and oscillation between non-readability and readability;

- explored the relation between the functions and shapes of symbols; and

- developed my understanding and the potential of visual expressiveness in display typography.
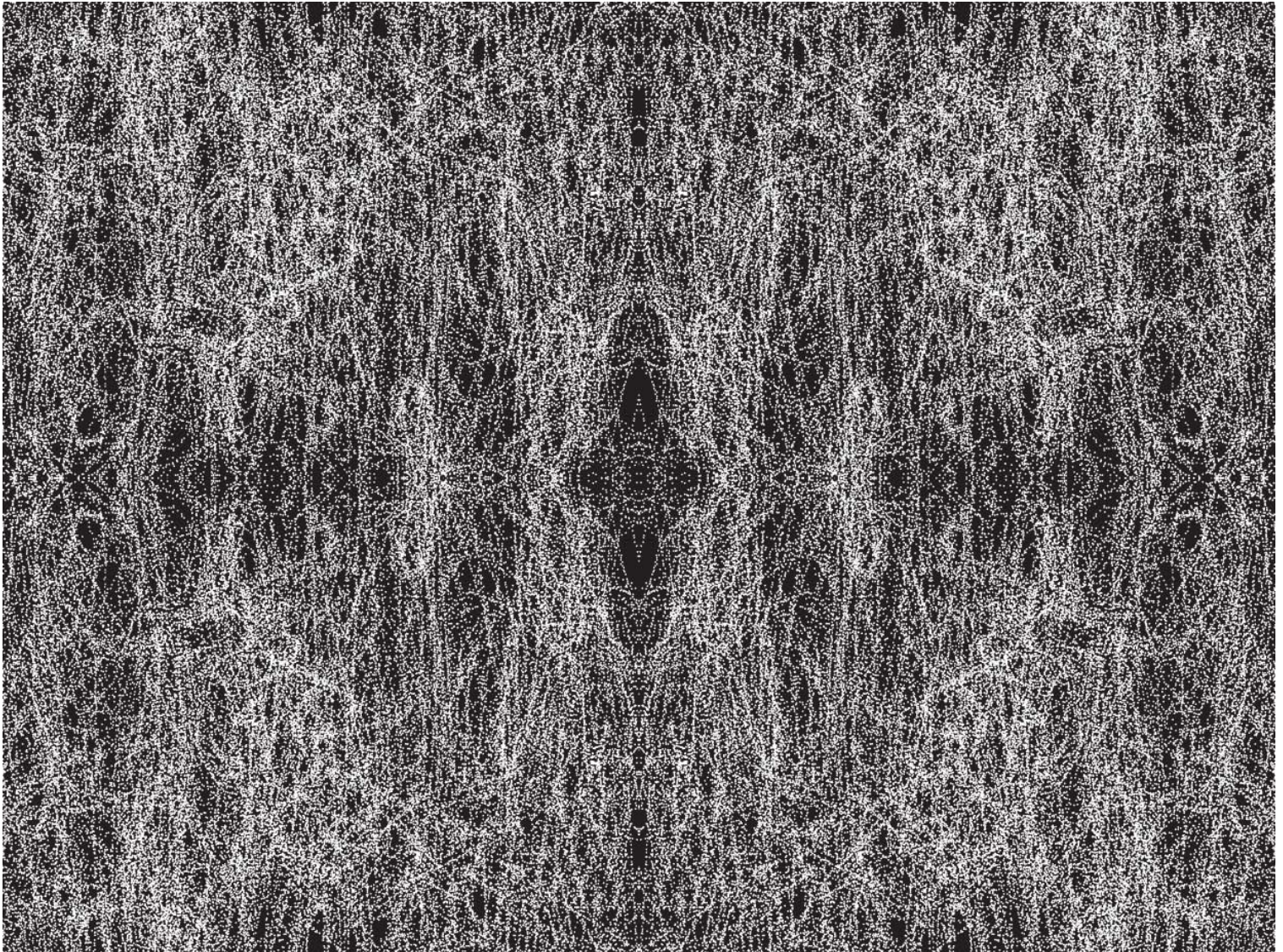
In 2012, I find myself again teaching degree courses in applied design and typography. At this stage of my career, I also convey to my students the knowledge and experience I have gained when I explored my artistic project 'World Signs'. What has changed is that I now increasingly encourage them to create typography with a range of conventional and unconventional mark making tools (Sagmeister, 2012), accompany them to express their own handwriting with traditional and non-traditional writing instruments (Perry, 2007), and guide them to produce hybrid designs with digital mark making, photo manipulation and layout software.

Display typography has become for my students and me a magical playground to test visual expressions through simultaneously pushing the boundaries of readability. In my workshops my students attempt exercises where they explore how the choice of the writing medium supports the content and compare their outcomes with 'safe' solutions. Within such uncensored 'client-free' environments most of the experiments' results look more compelling, hence have a greater visual impact. Moreover, I claim, the forms generated also meet the communication aims better. In reflective critique sessions I discuss the outcomes with my students so that they acquire the skills to better explain their design proposals with rational-logical arguments which they can apply later in their professional practise.

I strongly emphasise that tertiary institutions need to support such learning tasks, thus welcoming these enquiries in their curricula. Ideally, I argue, explorative typographical experiments that push and go beyond the boundaries of readability are most advantageous when students design their own learning plans and objectives; open research tasks and free environments for creative investigations simply complement one another. Such a desired learning and teaching methodology stands in harsh contrast to indoctrinated programs with normative assessment criteria. In opposition to

the latter, Noam Chomsky, who advocates the concept of creative enquiry that follows the enlightenment tradition, nicely summarised:

"The highest goal in life is to enquire, to create, to search the riches of the past, try to internalise the parts of them that are significant to you and carry that quest of understanding further in your own way. The purpose of education from that point of view is just to help people determine how to learn on their own" (Chomsky, 2012).

Deriving from my own experiences I posit that such intrinsically motivated enquiries open-up creative flows and thus the students produce higher quality results. Therefore, implementing open learning methodologies within suitable academic support frameworks and sufficient, appropriate resources, students actually produce work with personalised, as opposed to normative meaning. A well-structured analytical, critical-reflective practise could be used as learning evidence for creative development evaluation processes.

By explaining the benefits that I have personally, artistically, professionally and academically gained from my self-directed artistic enquiry I emphasise to my students the importance of such projects and encourage them to cultivate such enquiries on their own when they work as commercial designers. This would serve them in two ways: Firstly, whilst enjoying the process, they continuously nurture their own creativity. If their clients are open minded and convincible of the benefits and/or the risks of 'off-the-norm' design solutions, the graduated students might luckily integrate the findings of their experiments into their commercial assignments. I also argue that such creative endeavours strengthen the skills in verbally 'selling' their experimental work to clients. However, in case my ex-students would work mostly for conservative clients who only want to walk on 'safe' design ways, the graduates would at least have self-initiated, expressive results that showcase that they have not sold-out their creativity.

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