

Typography Day 2014
Typography and Culture

Sensory Experiences in Typography

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Abstract:

Typography does not exist in a vacuum. We are constantly surrounded by textures, contours, smells, sights, sounds, all simultaneously. For a design to break through the din, it must engage the senses.

Sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch are all connected. You cannot eat a potato chip without touching it with your hands and your lips, tongue and teeth. You will also smell the oil as you taste the salt and hear the crunch. While some examples may be less multi-modal, your body is always experiencing the world through each of the five senses.

Key words: *Typography, Graphic Design, Process, Senses, Touch, Smell, Sound, Taste, Sight, Visual Communication, and Experimental Typography.*

1. Introduction

In the words of Kenya Hara, “Since infancy, we have had a tremendous number of sensory experiences which have built up interrelations. Our experiences and memories of licking, touching, smelling the world, through which we have attached meaning to it, have given us the background for our senses.”¹

The five senses are strongly linked to memories. The scent of chalk can evoke memories of grade school just as well as the sound of chalk rasping against a chalkboard. As designers, we often neglect many of the senses. But typography is a sensational experience. We should consider how users interact with designed objects and typographic forms - and how these experiences relate to *all* of the senses. Not only is design felt more deeply when it involves the use of multiple senses, but it also opens doorways to new creative territories.

Typography is not meant to just be seen. It is meant to be heard, smelled, tasted, and touched. Type being a visual representation of language makes it inseparable from sound and verbal communication. Typographic designers also feel type - they create and modify form as well as interact with both designs and installations. On rarer occasion, type can be smelled and tasted. We eat type without thinking about it. For instance, when we eat a candy bar. Does “Hershey’s” taste like chocolate? Can a brand have a flavor? Does the taste change based on the culture in which it is experienced?

Even the origins of typography are tactile: letterforms being carved into stone and pressed onto paper. (Figure 1) While the digital age might make us appear to be somewhat removed from the physical relationships, we still have haptic relationships - they’ve just evolved to smartphones and touchscreens. The user experience of design is a very personal one. Typography is an expression of language - and a primary way in which people connect to one another.

Type itself is very intimate. Text perhaps even more. I make the distinction of type as “form” and text as the “selected words.” As Paula Scher puts it: “Words have meaning. Type has spirit. The combination is spectacular.” Because of this deep tie to emotion and communication, typography is, by definition, expressive. Sometimes type needs to remain quiet, neutral - have the words spread a message and design be a crystal goblet. Other times, type needs to communicate a greater meaning. It can scream at you from the page, or whisper in your ear. And other times you need to find ways beyond visual representation to reach your audience. Advancements in interactive printing and digital technologies are giving designers more tools by the day.

2. Body

2.1 Sight

Simply viewing this paper, you are using sight. This is perhaps the most obvious connection to typography and graphic design, but I would like to take a moment and explore the other senses as they relate. Particularly because no sense can truly exist in isolation from the rest - and because experience is heightened when multiple senses are fully engaged.

When it comes to typography, sight and sound are incredibly closely linked. Type is the visualization of language. In the words of Robert Bringhurst, “Writing is the solid form of language, the precipitate. Speech comes out of our mouths, our hands, our eyes in something like a liquid form and then evaporates at once. It appears to me that this is

part of a natural cycle: one of the ways the weather forms on the ocean of meaning. What else are the words we drop like pebbles in that ocean if not condensing droplets of evaporated speech, recycled bits of the ocean of meaning itself? Yet language can also solidify - into iridescent, sharp, symmetrical crystals, or into structures more like hailstones or shale beds or mud. In solid as in liquid form, the intersecting meanings may reinforce each other or rub each other out.”²

2.2 Sound

Humans have found many ways of visually documenting sound. While this is primarily done through the use of letterforms, much other visualization is also common. For instance the musical score, perhaps the most literal visualization of sound - as it takes into consideration the loudness, length, and tone of a sound. Additionally, the universality of music is quite beautiful.

Yet, words and songs will never be heard the same way twice, because there is never absolute silence in the background of a performance. In an interview, composer and artist John cage once said, “Wherever we are, whatever we’re doing, there are always sounds to hear.” Even in recorded music, listeners' radios will be located in thousands of different places so that, unlike the first performance, the sounds heard by the audience will be made by many, many different sources.³

Many designers have also focused on the visualization of language. For instance, Warren Lehrer, in pieces like “French Fries”⁴ where each character of the book is given an individual typeface - and the layout of the book is based on dialogue and sound. When the characters are in a space where there is much background noise and hearing would be difficult, typographic design and legibility is compromised to reflect the chaos.

Another example of sound being incorporated into a visual design is Cassie Hester’s installation piece, Dig Deep (Figure 2). You can actually hear the piece, because the sequins will move in the wind.

While most designers might not take sound quite this literally in their works, they still show volume through scale and weight. For instance, 72 point heavy Helvetica is much louder than a quiet 8 point Mrs. Eaves.

Smell, taste, and touch may not connect as directly to typography as do sight and sound, but I believe that when you engage multiple senses, you more deeply connect to viewers.

2.3 Smell

Due to technological advancements, certain appliances can actually produce smells and text simultaneously. For instance, Hammacher Schlemmer's Armoatherapy Clock both displays the time while letting off lavender scents to help the user relax and fall asleep. Another prototype for a clock had a similar idea, where the clock always emitted a smell, and the scent changed throughout the day - so the user could tell just from smell, what time of day it was.⁵

Printers have options such as scented varnishes that designers can use in mass-production - although the use of scratch-and-sniff technology seems to be generally limited to packaging for air fresheners or promotions for children. On my own, I have played with incorporating smell into my designs. For my 'wine and appetizers' wedding reception invitation, (Figure 3) I printed the information onto napkins and then hand-stained each invite with wine. Not only did this allow each invitation to be unique, but the design itself also tapped into the sense of smell.

However, designers are rarely afforded the luxury of having smell be a part of their work, but they can still evoke emotion based on the memory. For instance, when shown type that is rotting, viewers have a visceral reaction (Figure 4) - because of previous experience.

Exhibition designers are fortunate, in that they have the ability to fully control the environment in which their work is experienced. (Figure 5) This enables them to not only set viewing height, size, etc - but it also allows the opportunity to control the smell of the surroundings. While you can *invite* a viewer to touch or taste something, you cannot force it. Whereas a smell cannot be avoided.

2.4 Taste

Food makes for a wonderful medium for typographic design. There is an excellent sense of play, when you take something known (like a sushi roll) and turn it into something new (like a typographic design). Additionally, American language also has many food sayings that designers can play off of: easy as pie, eye candy, and piece of cake.

People also have many memories and associations made to food. If you see (or eat) a certain kind of cookie, it can send you instantly back to a time in your childhood where you were making cookies with your mother. Therefore, the use of food visuals with typographic design can enhance meaning. For instance, if someone says "summer" I get a few random samplings of various summer moments. But, if someone shows me "summer" carved into a piece of watermelon, (Figure 6) I get specific memories - and I can nearly taste a sweet, juicy watermelon.

And what's more fun than playing with your food? Typographically speaking, that is. The physical properties of food are varied and rich. Incredible textures, colors, and forms make for an excellent working medium. Additionally, people are familiar with food. So, when you have a picture of an R covered in a caramelized colorful sugar, (Figure 7) most people can practically *feel* the stickiness. Or if you have type literally made from dough, viewers can remember a *taste*. Another wonderful property for working with food as a medium, is that, if cooked, the form can change over time: sugar can caramelize, dough can turn into pretzels, popcorn kernels can become popped corn.

There is a temporary nature to using food as a medium (it spoils, disintegrates, evaporates, melts, or is eaten). If you see a design made out of sugar, you do not expect it to last forever (as you might if you saw a design carved into stone). This fleeting nature also parallels memory.

2.5 Touch

Technological developments, such as tablets or motion sensors, engage viewers with designs and are often more interactive. But beyond the delivery mechanisms, touch (and associated memories) are important design factors.

At some point in their lives, nearly everyone knows what it is like to be cold or hot, or to burn their hand, or to feel pain. So, if typographic designs incorporate the use of ice and snow the user automatically thinks of the cold (even if the words do not say so). (Figure 8) Or, if type appears to be burned, the user thinks of heat and flames. (Figure 9). And, having all felt pain, when we see damaged skin, we remember those experiences.

Yet, associations to touch do not always have to be so extreme. Type can be rough or soft and many other possibilities. (Figure 10).

The scale of a typographic design changes how we interact with it - and how we touch it. For the most part, type is intimate. You rest a book in your lap, or you hold a phone in your hand. But type can be monumental. A letter can be large enough to be home to a bird or a miniature golf course (Figure 11).

I also believe that, in a way, all of the senses involve touch. We see because of the way light hits our eyes. We smell and taste when particles enter our noses and rest on our tongues. We hear because of the physical vibrations in our ears. In essence, all we experience connects to how we touch the world and how it touches us.

6. Conclusion: Design for all five senses

As Diane Ackerman puts it, “The mind doesn’t really dwell in the brain but travels the whole body on caravans of hormone and enzyme, busily making sense of the compound wonders we catalogue as touch, taste, smell, hearing, vision.”⁶ As designers and typographers, we must consider all of the senses.

In Jinsop Lee’s TED Talk: Design for all 5 senses, he examines how various experiences relate to each of the senses. For instance, riding a motorcycle is a very engaging activity in that you see many things, feel the bike and road, smell your surroundings, and hear the roar of the bike. As designers, it should be a goal to consider each sense in the products we produce.

We hope that when you create designs or typographic treatments, that you will not just consider the visual - but that you will consider all of the senses as relevant to your design. When a design engages the senses - it appeals to viewers from multiple angles.

Images



Figure 1: Scarab of Ikhnaton and Nefertiti, c. 1370

Meggs, Philip. (1983) A History of Graphic Design. Van Nostrand Reinhold, New York.

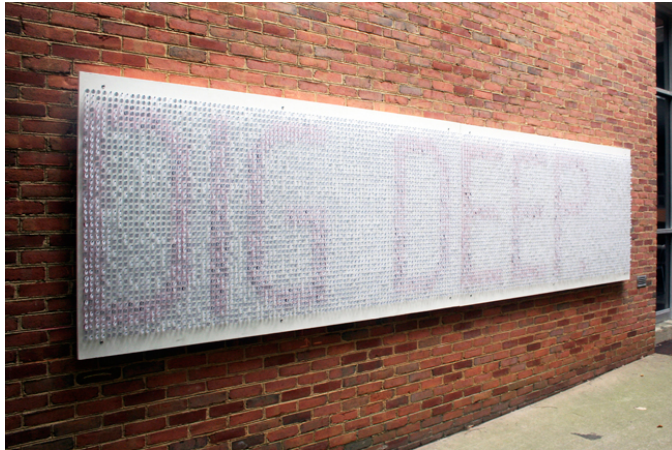


Figure 2: Cassie Hester - Dig Deep Installation



Figure 3: Meaghan Dee - Wedding Reception Invitation



Figure 4: Hara, Kenya. (2004) “Haptic” exhibition. Available at <http://www.ndc.co.jp/hara/works/en/2004/06/haptic.html>



Figure 5: A typographic installation made out of bananas that rotted over time.

Sagmeister, Stefan. (2008) “Deitch projects, banana wall.” Available at

<http://www.sagmeisterwalsh.com/work/project/deitch-projects-banana-wall>



Figure 6: Rambhia, Perin. “365+1 Calendar” Available at <http://www.perinrambhia.com>



Figure 7: The letter R covered in candy.

Dee, Meaghan and Cassie Hester. Typographic experiment.



Figure 8: Dee, Meaghan. Ice experiment.



Figure 9: Hester, Cassie. Branded “W.”

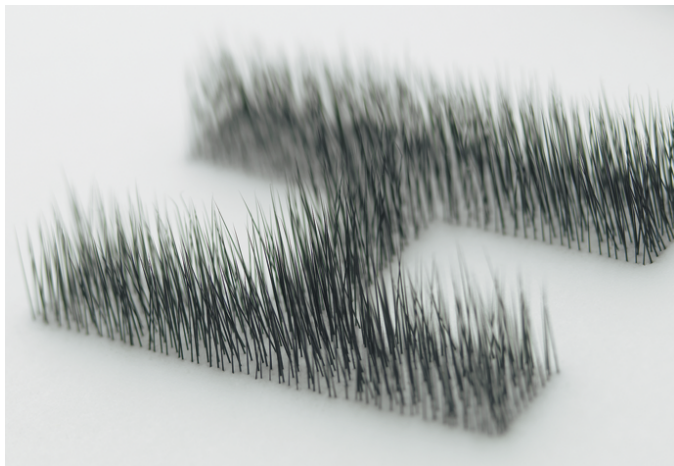


Figure 10: Hara, Kenya. (2004) “Haptic” exhibition. Available at <http://www.ndc.co.jp/hara/works/en/2004/06/haptic.html>



Figure 11: Willis, Ollie. “Golf Type.” Available at <<http://www.olliewillis.co.uk/Golf>>

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¹ Hara, Kenya. (2007) Designing Design. 1st edition. Lars Müller Publishers, Baden, Switzerland. p 2.

² Bringhurst, Robert. (2004) The solid form of language. 1st edition. Gaspereau Press, Printers & Publishers, Nova Scotia, Canada. p9.

³ Worby, Robert. (November 3, 2011) "433 words about John Cage's 4'33" - and the first ever radio realization" Available at <<http://www.bbc.co.uk>>

⁴ Bernstein, Dennis and Warren Lehrer. (1984) French Fries. Visual Studies Workshop Press and EarSay Books.

⁵ Lee, Jinsop. (August 2013) "TED Talk: Design for all 5 senses." Available at <http://www.ted.com/talks/jinsop_lee_design_for_all_5_senses.html>

⁶ Ackerman, Diane. (1991) A Natural History of the Senses. Random House, New York.