



TYPOGRAPHY DAY 2015: Fineness and Craftsmanship
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Typography: craft & chaos

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Abstract

Illuminated Latin manuscript-spreads exhibit outstanding craftsmanship, both in their page disposition and the craft of letters. Their page proportions and the underlying grids are now familiar to book design enthusiasts, thanks to the work of Van de Graaf, Villard Honnecourt, Jan Tschichold and others.

Born out of industrialization, Modernism -- though it advocated rejection of decoration from design - held closely to the craft of typographic grids. Grids became the hallmark of Swiss Design, while Constructivists and Futurists made innovative use of grids.

The birth of Post-modern design, midwived by the Apple computer and the theory of de-co struction, resulted in the spread of a chaotic brand of typography & design. It became fashion- able for graphic design schools in the West to jump on to the Postmodernism bandwagon. The plight of graphic design and typography in these circumstances prompted respected designers such as Massimo Vignelli, Paul Rand and Steven Heller, to dismiss these manifestations as mindless experimentation. Despite the rather savage attack by Post-modernists, grid-based design and typography endured and are here to stay in the professional graphic design practice, both in print and on-screen. Craft & Chaos

is an attempt to examine the works of influential designers from the craft-based design and the cult heroes of Post-modern design, in order to present their respective relevance to today's graphic design practice as well as students.

Key words: Modernism, Postmodernism, typographic grid, creative experimentation, new wave typography.

Picture this!

A frail old man of over 75 walks in the dead of night struggling to carry a heavy wooden box ... he goes over an otherwise busy bridge.... Makes sure nobody's around.... Empties the content of the box to the river below... goes back only to return with the next lot!

What this has got to do with fineness in typography, you may ask. The man in question was Thomas Cobden-Sanderson, one of the two partners of the Dove Press, printer of fine books. And what he emptied to the river, through his frequent trips over a year, was the exclusive Dove Press metal types that Cobden was so attached to in meticulously composing the pages of extraordinarily beautiful books. He was in the process of losing his business to his partner, Emery Walker. Cobden couldn't stand the thought of the type being used for anything other than fine books, that too by another pair of hands not as devoted as his! Undoubtedly, this is an extreme case of devotion to work! Between 1916 and 1917, Cobden dropped over a ton of metal types into Thames River from the Hammersmith Bridge, making over 170 trips. There was no trace of the type after that, but a few copies of the books he printed survived (a copy today may fetch as much as \$30,000!).



Fig 1: Paradise Lost from Dove Press

A century later, another devoted type designer spends over three years tracing and re-tracing the Dove Press type over 120 times in an attempt to digitally recreate the lost treasure... Robert Green at last succeeds – “It is eccentric” he says. “I am not really sure why I started. In the end it took over my life.”



Fig 2: Original Dove Press types recovered from Thames and Dove Press digitised type

THE DOVES TYPE®

C An updated digital facsimile of the Doves Press type is now available, after Robert Green's recovery of a portion of original metal from the River Thames last year.

(In November 2014, Green managed to recover part of the original metal from Thames and a new version was released in Jan 2015!)

This inscription at the base of the Trajan column is from AD 1st century. Craftsman then meticulously worked out the geometry to create such beautiful forms of letters. 2000 years later, among others, David Goines spent ‘an unreasonable’ amount of time researching and painstakingly reconstructing the Trajan letters using only compass and ruler. A constructed Roman Alphabet was compiled and published in 1982.



Fig 3: Trajan column inscription and David Goines’ geometric reconstruction

Here’s a clear crystal goblet filled with fine vintage...

An analogy Beatrice Warde made for finely crafted ‘transparent typography’ in her essay *The Crystal Goblet*.

I quote:



THE CRYSTAL GOBLET: Imagine that you have before you a flagon of wine. You may choose your own favorite vintage for this imaginary demonstration, so that it be a deep shimmering crimson in color. You have two goblets before you. One is of solid gold, wrought in the most exquisite patterns. The other is of crystal-clear glass, thin as a bubble, and as transparent. Pour and drink; and according to your choice of goblet, I shall know whether or not you are a connoisseur of wine. ¶For if you have no feelings about wine one way or the other, you will want the sensation of drinking the stuff out of a vessel that may have cost thousands of pounds; but if you are a member of that vanishing tribe, the amateurs of fine vintages, you will choose the crystal, because everything about it is calculated to reveal rather than to hide the beautiful thing which it was meant to contain. ¶Bear with me in this long-winded and fragrant metaphor; for you will find that almost all the virtues of the perfect wine-glass have a parallel in typography. There is the long, thin stem that obviates fingerprints on the bowl. Why? Because no cloud must come between your eyes and the fiery hearth of the liquid. Are not the margins on book pages similarly meant to obviate the necessity of fingering the type-pages? Again: The glass is colorless or at the most only faintly tinged in the bowl, because the connoisseur judges wine partly by its color and is impatient of anything that alters it. ¶There are a thousand mannerisms in typography that are as impudent and arbitrary as putting port in tumblers of red or green glass! When a goblet has a base that looks too small for security, it does not matter how cleverly it is weighted; you feel nervous lest it should tip over. There are ways of setting lines of type which may work well enough, and yet keep the reader subconsciously worried by the fear of “doubling” lines, reading three words as one, and so forth. ¶Printing demands a humility of mind, for the lack of which many of the fine arts are even now floundering in self-conscious and maudlin experiments. There is nothing simple or dull in achieving the transparent page. Vulgar ostentation is twice as easy as discipline. When you realise that ugly typography never effaces itself, you will be able to capture beauty as the wise men capture happiness by aiming at something else. ¶The “stunt typographer” learns the fickleness of rich men who hate to read. Not for them are long breaths held over serif and kern, they will not appreciate your splitting of hair-spaces. Nobody (save the other craftsmen) will appreciate half your skill. But you may spend endless years of happy experiment in devising that crystalline goblet which is worthy to hold the vintage of the human mind. BEATRICE WARDE, *The Crystal Goblet: Sixteen Essays on Typography* (1955).

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Fig 4: Redesigned Beatrice Warde text by J Menon

Classical typography

All these show the obsession and devotion of craftsmen to what many people may consider as such an insignificant thing – the shape of tiny letters and their disposition on a page! “What is there in a book to DESIGN? You just pick one up and read...” I have encountered this question several times in my career as a book designer. Books, as containers of knowledge, have always had a very special place in society. Scholars and scribes attached divinity and respect to books as well as the act of creating them. No wonder then scribes devoted their whole lives painstakingly writing and illuminating them.

Although the history of typography spans just 5 centuries after the printing of Gutenberg’s Bible, many of its practices and principles goes back to much older times. The design and development of humanist faces are inspired from the Trajan column inscriptions. Construction of book margin is borrowed from the practices of handwritten manuscripts.

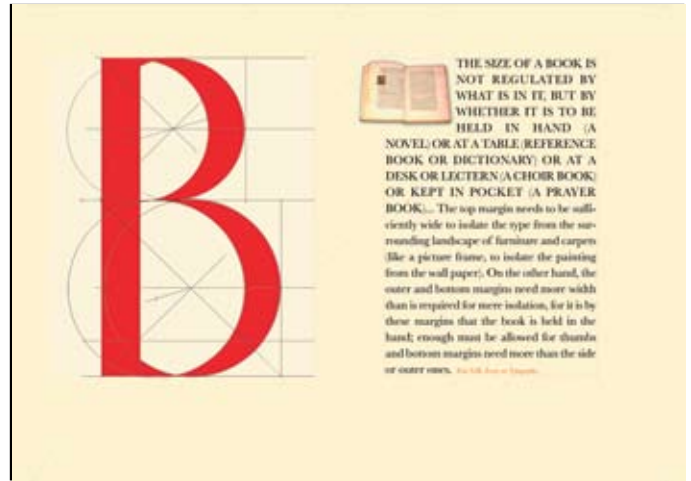


Fig 5: Van de Graff Canon applied to an illuminated manuscript spread and a composition by J Menon

Mechanization of typesetting and printing during the 19th century had an adverse effect on the quality of typography and form of the book. This resulted in the revival of interest in the craft of typography and book design. William Morris’s Kelmscott Press led the Private Press movement in England that spread to other parts of Europe and America. Dove Press and Essex House Press were other prominent players of the movement in England, while typographers Frederic W Goudy and Bruce Rogers revived interest in classical type design and book design in America.



Fig 6: pages from books printed at Kelmscott Press & Dove Press. A page designed by Bruce Rogers

Modernism and sans-serif

Focus of the book design was on the transparent aspects of typography (remember the crystal goblet!). Undoubtedly, a well-designed book is a beautiful piece of art as well. Post-war and industrialization brought in a new sense of aesthetics of 'minimalism,' the overall Modernist philosophy.

Modernist movements like Bauhaus (Germany), De Style (Holland), Futurism (Italy) and Constructivism (Russia) shared a common ideology. Modernism thrived in art & Design schools. It is a formalist, rationalist visual language that can be applied to a variety of contexts driven by the maxim 'form follows function.'



Fig 7: Examples from Lissitzky (Constructivism) & Marinetti (Futurism). Kandinsky poster by Herbert Bayer

Typography and graphic design responded to Modernism with sans-serif and structured page compositions locked to geometric grids. Typography became more visual – 'seeing' took precedence over reading. Swiss design dominated the scene for a considerable time (arguably even today!). Popularly known as International Typographic Style, corporate world embraced the Swiss style wholeheartedly.

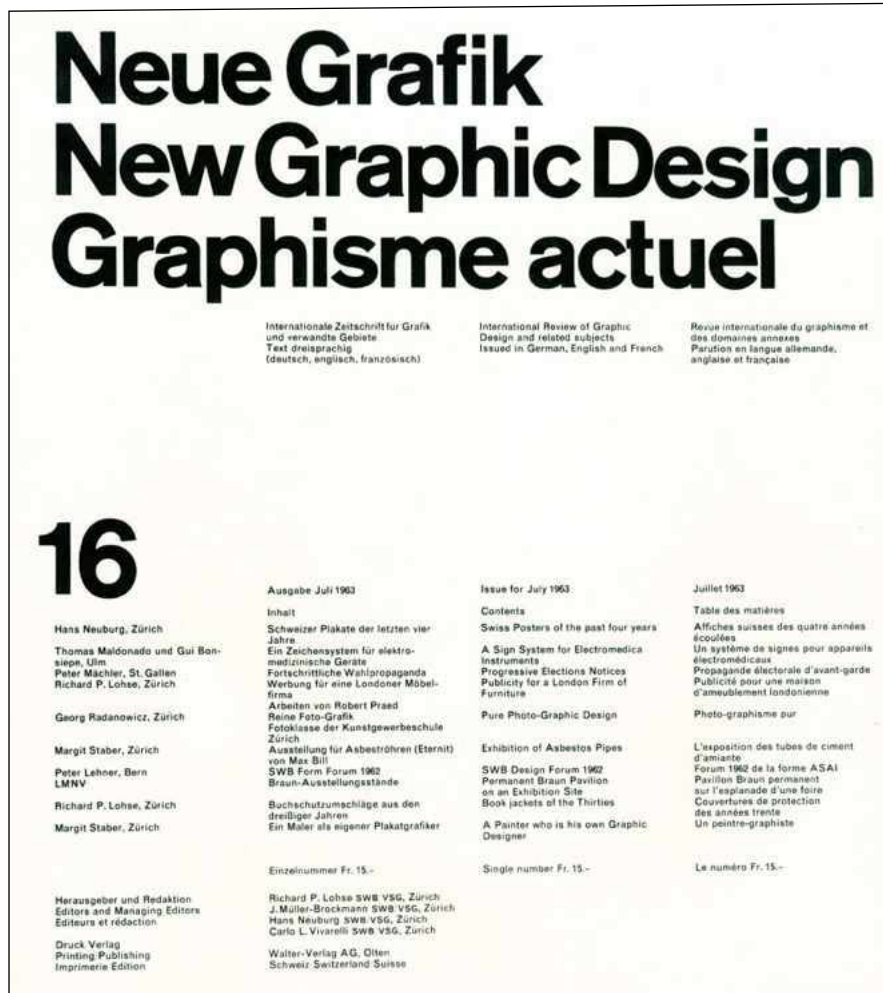


Fig 8: Swiss International Typographic Style

There were notable designers of the late 20th century with a Modernist leaning, putting forth compelling works exploiting the visual aspects of typography.

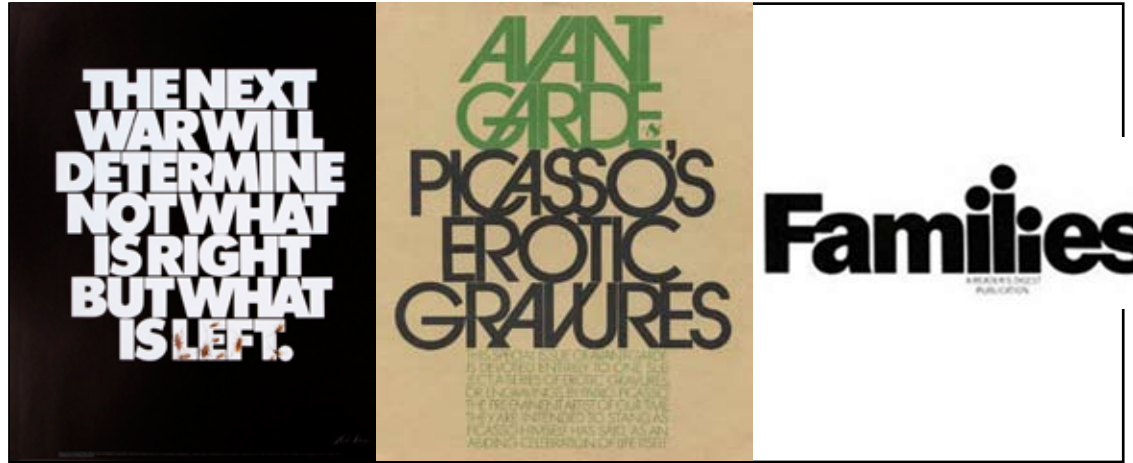


Fig 9: Typographics of Herb Lubalin

Swiss punk or New Wave typography, started in Basel – the centre of Modernism, was anti-canonical in approach and chaotic in nature compared to the grid-locked Swiss style. De-metallisation of typesetting technology through photocomposition set them free from the rigidity of the letterpress. This style was the forerunner of Postmodernism.

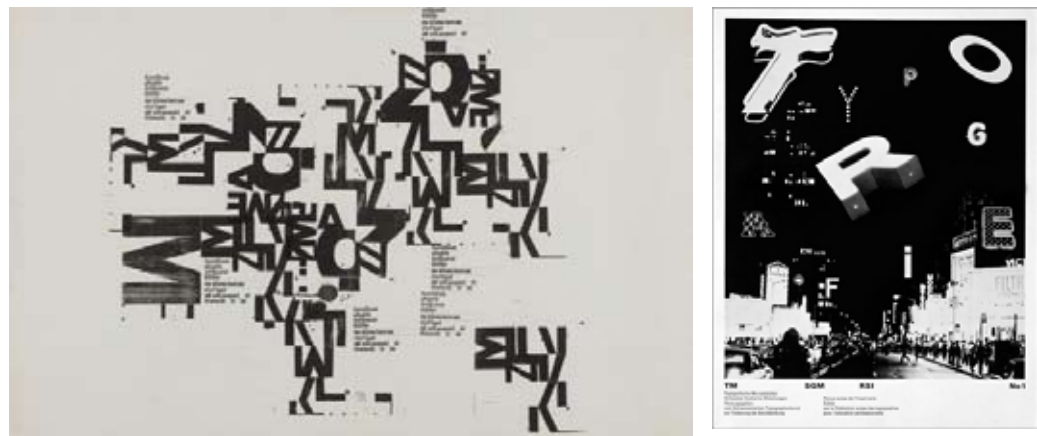


Fig 10: New Wave typography
From Wolfgang Weingart & Dan Friedman

Postmodernism and chaos

The essence of the New Wave in the 60s was a reaction to the 'good design' of high Modernism seeking freedom from the limiting grid. Academically, Postmodernism is known for its theoretical discourse following Deconstruction theory at Cranbrook Academy in the early 90s.



Fig 11: Postmodern experiments – Cranbrook poster & emigre. a spread by Neville Brody

With the introduction of computers in 1984, for the lack of a clear definition or ideology, Postmodernist typography became a collective label for all the chaotic work generated through the computer! The new aesthetic was reduced to impure, chaotic, irregular and crude approaches – a no-holds-barred design style – churned out with the help of computer programs. Hugely popular among young graduates, many designers considered it as an indisciplined self-indulgence without any formal ideals, vocabulary or grammar. The vernacular, sub-culture, pop, nostalgia, parody, punk, deconstruction, rebellion etc represented some of the ideas. The plight of graphic design and typography in these circumstances prompted respected designers like Massimo Vignelli, Paul Rand and Steven Heller to dismiss these manifestations as mindless experimentation and ‘Cult of the ugly.’



Fig 12: Cult of the ugly? Samples from typical graduate students’ work inspired by David Carson

Further kindling the movement was a spurt in publishing activity, bringing out a concoction of ‘type books’ that were fun to look at but bereft of any critical, informative or qualitative analysis. This was the result of the publishing industry seizing the marketing opportunity among the increasing number of graduate design students and the ease of producing books with the new desktop publishing technology. The publishing craze has certainly helped to create a hype among the young graduate students, but has done much damage to the promotion of typography as a fine craft.

Conclusion

Book typography and design occupied pride of place at a time when that was the only form of printed communication. Influence of the various typography movements on book design as such was limited. On the other hand, proliferation of mass production for pulp-fiction and text-books took away the old-world charm from book design and typography.

Evolution of typography from a highly artistic practice to a chaotic stylistic display has a parallel back-end of technological revolution and nature of print communication. The evolution of typesetting technology from movable type, lino/mono casting, photo composition and digital technology brought in a lot of flexibility and freedom in type composition and layout. When Gutenberg printed his first book, books were the only form of printed communication. The nature of its content and life-span necessitated a great deal of respect and devotion to the work. Other ephemeral forms of printed communications, such as bills, newspaper, advertisements, corporate communication, magazine, etc required a different way of treatment in terms of design. Designers responded to changing needs, harnessing the freedom that came with the changing technology.

With computer becoming the work station, experimentation became a child’s play. Experimentation in itself is a necessity for progress driven by an instinct or logic. Experimentation for the sake of it, however, will be empty and cannot stand the test of time. We have examples of typographic experimentation from the Constructivists, Futurists and the New Wave in the past that are either part of an art movement or a reaction to certain design approaches. Post-modern typographic experimentation informed by theoretical discourse has merit and so is the

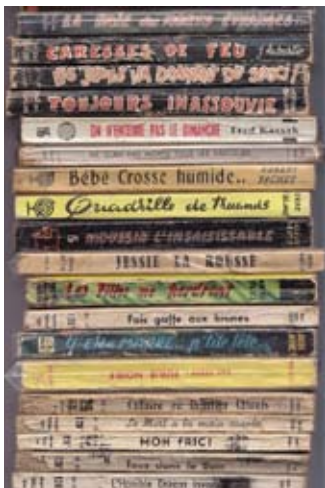


Fig 13: Pulp fiction

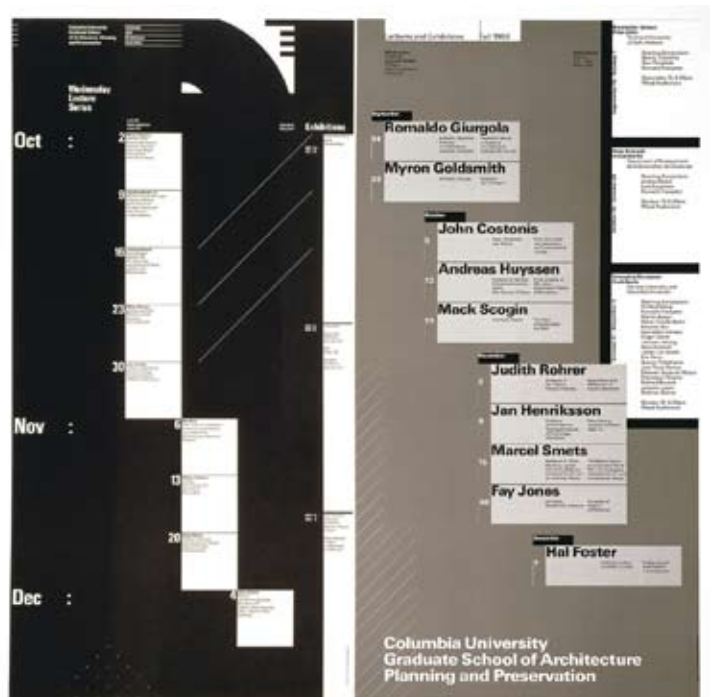
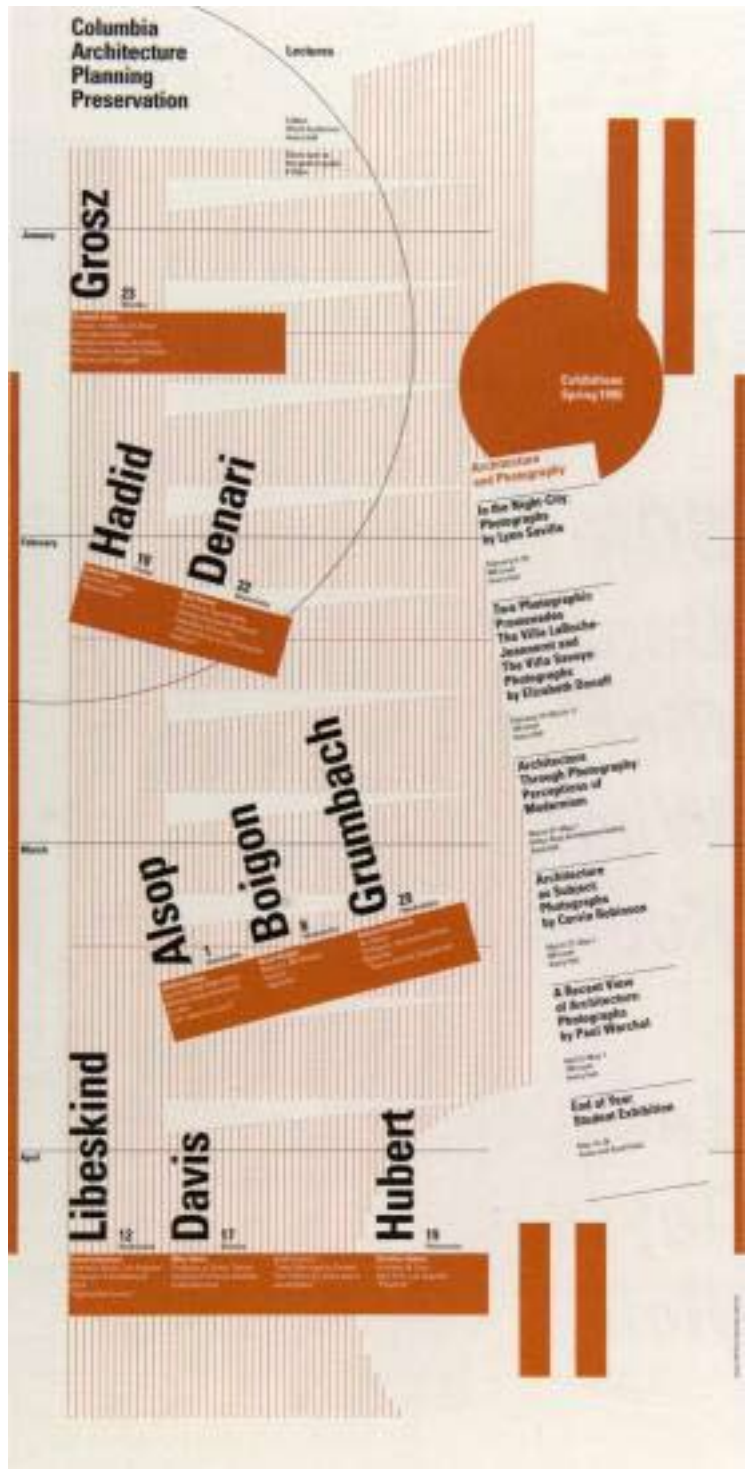


Fig 14: "Creative Experimentation" Work of Willi Kunz combine the spirit of experimentation with innovative use of grids. Uncompromising on functional aspects, Kuntz carved a fresh path for himself in what he calls "creative experimentation."

reaction to Modernism by Weingart and his pupil. “Creative Experimentation” of Willi Kunz is of particular relevance here. The value of experimentation need not also be judged by its success, as failures often are stepping stones.



Fig 15: Legibility is not communication?! Setting a magazine spread in unreadable text, and in digbats (!!!) show complete disregard for the author, the content and the reader. As no purpose is served by this exercise, this is a total waste of scarce resources like paper and efforts of so many people in producing the publication.



The current outburst of Postmodernist experimentation is dubious and lack credible explanation. Postmodernism in typography shouldn't be a description of a style but rather a line of thinking. An idea driven by the time we live in. A time full of complexities, contradictions and opportunities opened up by sweeping changes in technology and an explosion of information. Focus should be to make complex information accessible and interesting through innovative and creative strategies; and not to make simple information complex for the sake of style.

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