

# Type-Only Design Solutions

by Laurel Saville

“Type well used is invisible *as* type, just as the perfect talking voice is the unnoticed vehicle for the transmission of words, ideas.”

—Beatrice Warde

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Sometimes when you're in a noisy room, speaking softly is the best way to get noticed. The same can be said for a world crowded with images screaming for attention—many graphic designers find that a type-only solution is a whispered way to get big results.

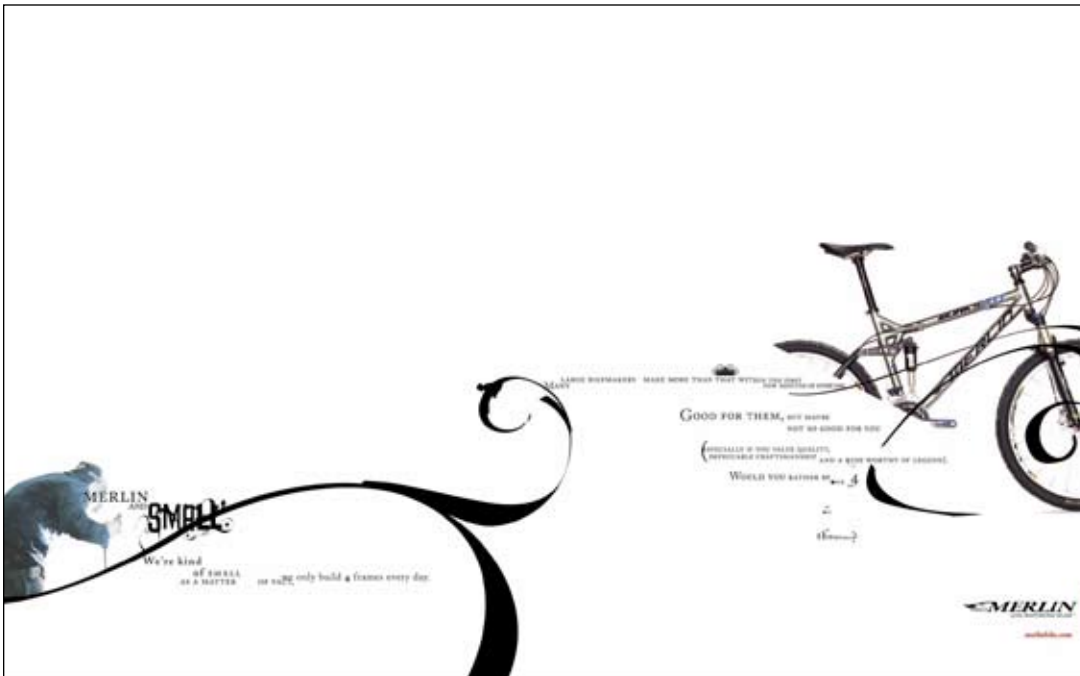
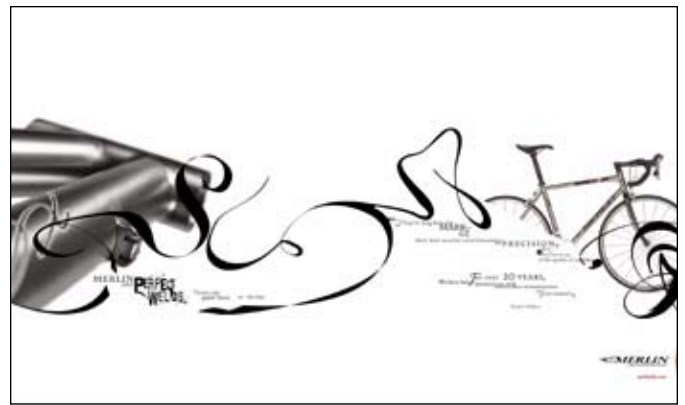
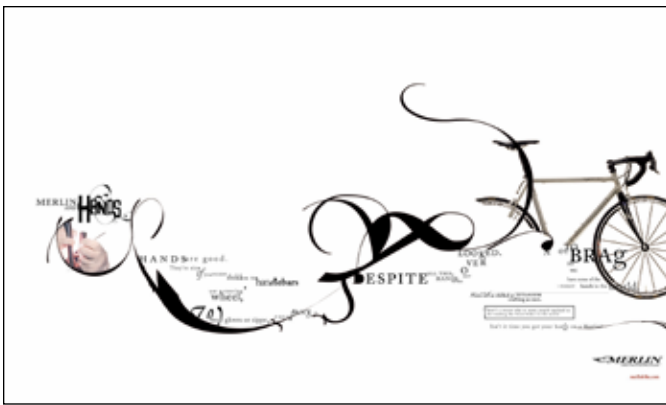
## TYPE TANDEM

Take, for example, the world of bicycle advertising. Flip through any bike magazine, and you'll find one testosterone-fueled ad after another. When faced with this rugged terrain, the designers at id29 in Troy, N.Y., chose a different route for Merlin bicycles. “The ads were to remind people that Merlin makes great bikes that are custom-built in small batches, with every part handled by one team,” says designer Bryan Kahrs.

The ads began with minimal copy describing the bike-building craft. “The copy was all very fluid,” Kahrs explains. “Instead of setting it as a paragraph, I decided to make it like poetry across the page, and just play off certain words that made bold statements.” The result is a series of elegant spreads where type, type-referenced flourishes and arabesques flow across a field of white space, connecting words with the product itself. The ads create an oasis of calm in a sea of visual noise. “They stand out in magazines,” Kahrs says, given that “the pages before and after are usually all red or black with lots of fire effects.”

## NO-FRIZZ FONT

Another industry dominated by imagery—albeit of a predominantly feminine kind—is the world of



**Merlin Bicycles**  
In these ads for Merlin Bicycles, Bryan Kahrs of id29 ([www.id29.com](http://www.id29.com)) in Troy, N.Y., worked with a variety of typefaces. “The body copy is set in Caslon—regular, italic, swash, ornaments, etc.,” he says. “Some of the swash shapes are pieces I broke off from the typeface Escrita. The Small, Perfect Welds and Hands are from the typeface Kraftwerk, although I modified it quite a bit.”

## Parlor

To make these ads stand out in a sea of airbrushed images, Becker Design ([www.beckerdesign.net](http://www.beckerdesign.net)) in Milwaukee used lots of white space along with bright, feminine colors and crisp type-faces to simply remind women of the variety of salon services Parlor offers.

Official Salon of the Milwaukee Bucks Energie! Dance Team

W161 N11629 CHURCH ST. GERMANTOWN, WI 53022  
262.253.6800

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W161 N11629 CHURCH ST. GERMANTOWN, WI 53022

Gift Certificates Available

262.253.6800

AVEDA.

SUNLESS TANNING

hair salons. And to get noticed in this crowded field, Neil Becker of Becker Design in Milwaukee also went the white space and sophisticated type route. Services are simply listed in clean, brightly colored type surrounding the name of the salon, Parlor. “There are a number of other salons in this publication,” Becker says, “And I wanted our ad to look and feel completely different, because I thought this would set us apart. The logo itself is hand-drawn type, so the idea of using type made sense to me. You’re reminding people you’re there, so you have to come up with fresh, artful, colorful ways to say the same things over and over again.”

## TO THE POINT

When Joel Templin of Hatch Design in San Francisco set out to create ads for the information management firm Seagate, he decided to go against the prevailing winds. “A competitive audit showed all the other ads were photographic, and all the noise was at the same level,” Templin explains. “Cover the logo, and the same ad could have been for almost any company. So my writing partner Dann Wilkens and I decided to zig when everyone else was zagging.” By flooding the pages with a single color and representing the core concept of each ad with visually arresting arrangements of letters and numbers that symbolize the data the company manages, “the ads totally stood out.”

## FOLLOW THE LEADING

Even gifts can use artful treatments of type to make a singular statement that sets them apart from the usual shelves crowded with kitsch. “The purpose of the Après Peau brand is to create souvenirs from Washington, D.C., that are not just trinkets,” says Megan Semrick of Willoughby Design in Kansas City, Mo. In addition to other products, the design team developed stationery that features quotes from First Ladies, declarations of love between Presidents and First Ladies, and quotes from the Founding Fathers (see example on page 42).

All the items are printed letterpress on high quality card stock. While the team did explore creating image-based pieces, “We settled on just using words because it differentiated us more,” says Semrick. The words make the objects more engaging than, say, a snow globe. “Our target audience is people who read, who care about history, and the quotes give these pieces a layer of meaning beyond what images alone would.”

## TYPE MENU

Of course, there are times when type is not optional. In these cases, the opportunity becomes how to





do more with the type you need. When Richard Boynton of Wink in Minneapolis was designing labels for a Target-owned brand of dietary supplements, his first efforts included many explorations that featured illustrations. “The bulk of these came in the form of a large, looming, illustrative logo and large color fields,” he says. While he did include a type-only solution in his first-round presentation, “it was passed over for the other, flashier, more colorful options because the client thought they would have a stronger shelf presence.”

However, each round of feedback included requests for increasing amounts of descriptive copy, as well as greater focus on FDA-required callouts. “There was a novel’s worth of information on every bottle, and each word is important to someone somewhere.” Eventually, the original type-only solution was rediscovered. This version references old-school apothecary type treatments and employs a clear hierarchy to invite people to read and learn about what’s in the bottle. “The sheer volume of information dictated a typographic solution,” Boynton says. “In fact, it’s the most honest approach available, given the nature of the product and its constraints. The illustrative options, in retrospect, were a forced attempt to create a personality. Eventually, function and subtlety won out.”

## WORD ART

Even in a book or journal, which obviously demand type, there are ways to design the type treatments to enhance the reader’s visual experience and comprehension. Jessica Fleischmann of still room in Los Angeles explains how she added another layer of sensual meaning to the articles in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Protest* (shown on page 45). “It’s a self-described ‘weirdo think tank’ of art/activism/theory/criticism,” she says. “I didn’t want images to overpower the words. I also didn’t want there to be a one-to-one correlation between text and images.”

Her solution was to read the articles closely and set type as a visual commentary on what was said. For the transcript of a performance piece where a pair of artists read while images were projected on a wall, Fleischmann created separate texts that run into and overlap each other, reflecting the real-time experience of the event, where the voices also overlapped.

For another piece that offers advice about public speaking as a form of protest, Fleischmann set the type in layers of speech bubbles to represent instructions and different weights to reflect discussion. “The type design was always a response to each particular piece of writing,” she explains. “In many ways, the design itself is a text. Its intention is to propose alternate readings and ways of looking at a cohesive body of work.”





### Après Peau

For gift items (opposite page) created for the sophisticated D.C. denizen, Willoughby Design ([www.willoughbydesign.com](http://www.willoughbydesign.com)), used Trade Gothic and a custom face designed just for Après Peau. The Declaration of Love cards feature the calligraphy of Jan Powell.

### Origin supplements

Packages for Origin dietary supplements “reflect an organic/holistic approach to health maintenance,” says Richard Boynton of Wink ([www.winkmpls.com](http://www.winkmpls.com)). “The typography ... carries the load by evoking a sense of traditional apothecary, mixed with a hint of modernity.”





## ABOUT FACE

So now that it's clear how successful a type-only design solution can be, the question remains how to achieve this kind of elegance and sophistication on the page. San Francisco-based designer and educator Jennifer Sterling points out the first step is, paradoxically, to consider type as an image. "I think typography has the same responsibility as images and photography," she says, "which is to convey the concept of the subject. There's that old cliché that a picture is worth a thousand words, but type can do the same thing, in the right hands. For example, if you look at Bauhaus or Dadaist expressions, those weren't just type; they were movements."

To increase the communicative value of type, one must first understand how type works. Templin points out that in these digital days, many young designers are losing their feel for type itself. "The digital thing makes the whole process too easy," he laments. "When I was in school, we had a letterform class where we had to draw type, so you had to figure out the thicks and thins, and you learned, for example, that when you made a word in all caps you had to make it a quarter of a point smaller so that visually it will look the same size as the rest of the text." Templin not only suggests young designers study the old masters like Paul Rand or Ladislav Sutnar, but he also has designers in his office scan and then hand-trace type to get a feel for how the letterforms are made.

Templin suggests, as do many designers, limiting the number of typefaces you use. "We only use a handful of faces—Helvetica, Trade Gothic, Garamond, Futura—fonts that are very classic," he says. "This gives the work some longevity. We don't do things that are trendy." Boynton agrees: "My advice is to start with classic typography first, because most contemporary fonts date very quickly. If you capture the feeling you're going for with something that is established and timeless, then your design will sustain its integrity for years. Which means your work won't have to be redesigned by someone else down the road."

## WALKING A TYPE ROPE

Of course, rules can always be broken in interesting and effective ways. "I once had a design teacher who said you should never stack type," says Becker. "So my next three projects I did in stacked type." However, even he concedes that using typefaces selectively is a good place to start. The key is creating "the appropriate sense of space and balance," he suggests.

## *Journal of Aesthetics and Protest*

Jessica Fleishmann, of still room ([www.still-room.com](http://www.still-room.com)) in L.A., set type in a way that turns the articles shown on the facing page—from the *Journal of Aesthetics and Protest*—into visual performances on the page. Different voices are expressed by type weight, shade and location.

For Semrick, the end result of this balancing act is of direct benefit to the viewer. "You have to think about pacing," she says. "If it's just a field of type, people won't read it. You have to take the reader through the piece, create a hierarchy of message that leads to understanding. The important consideration is how to turn the type into a user experience." Which, according to Becker, is also one of the key pleasures of working with type: "Type is so beautiful because you, as the designer, working with just typography, can control the viewer's perspective."

When it comes down to it, the successful type-only solution is a result of lots of time-consuming design trial and error. Kahrs explains how he came up with the arrangement of elements for the Merlin bicycle ads: "I started with the Merlin logo on one side and the image on the other side of the page. Then I started distorting the type and filling in with swaths. I set the words conventionally, then spread them apart, and kept breaking it further and further apart to see how interesting I could make it visually without distorting it too much. I was also looking for things to play with, like pulling out a *G* or filling in the *O*s. The ornament set in Caslon is great; I used it a lot. I saved iterations every half hour. I did at least six or seven versions for each ad—a few safe ones, a few middle ground and a few that went too far."

Templin went through a similar process in creating his ads for Seagate. "It took a really long time," he recalls. "I'd outline the type, drag it over, scale it up and down until it proportionally felt right. There was no cheating. I just kept duplicating things, dragging them over, filling things in."

It is this focus on craft that makes working with type so satisfying for designers. Designers love images, but sometimes images can become overpowering or be relied upon to do too much.

The same is true of relying on the masters who came before you. Yes, as Templin suggests, study the great type designers of the past. But don't copy them, Sterling cautions. Respect history, use a restrained hand and then be bold enough to make something of your own.

Giving examples of type treatments that make her cringe, Sterling recalls some classroom experiences. "When you're teaching students and they try to replicate type solutions," she says, "they might take something that was done in the Bauhaus, but then they translate it using seafoam and mauve. Or they're trying to achieve something that was great when David Carson did it, but it's not great when you appropriate what David Carson did." ⑤

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