

Custom Typography: When Type Becomes Art

by Laurel Saville

Four designers discuss how they manipulated, tweaked, sketched, appropriated, and transformed letterforms into compelling and memorable imagery.

“Anyone with a Mac can typeset,” says Doug Bartow, principal of id29 in Troy, N.Y. “But don’t confuse that with typography. To a designer, it’s akin to the conceptual differences between blank space and white space.”

Indeed, when faced with a project that has a miniature budget or nonexistent art, some designers might be tempted to use plenty of white space to fill blank space. But the most inventive designers find these limitations are simply interesting creative challenges—which can often be met making type do double duty as art.

Putting the fly in the bottle

As Bartow points out, “I’m driven to create work that hasn’t already been done. One way to approach that is by creating original typography and letterforms.” A case in point is the artwork Bartow created for eMPAC’s (the Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute) presentation of the philosophical comedy play, *The Fly-Bottle*. “The *e* in eMPAC is for *experimental*,” notes Bartow. “I thought this would be the perfect project to experiment with creating new typography based upon the tenets of the performance. The fly-bottle was an old English pub tradition where they would keep an unwashed bottle under the bar to attract the flies so they wouldn’t bother patrons.”



Performance-based
Insect appendages provided the inspiration, while discipline provided the restraint required for Doug Bartow to create a headline that captures the viewer’s imagination by alluding to complex themes in an experimental philosophical comedy.
www.id29.com



Looking closely at illustrations of insects, Bartow found “there were a lot of parallels between portions of insects and parts of letterforms. This became my entry point into the piece.” Using Stempel Garamond italic and Kuenstler Script as a start, Bartow “took the typefaces apart, sliced up the existing letterforms, married them with other glyphs, and then started adding other elements.”

Bartow tried to use both a fanciful and restrained hand. “I wanted it to be scary, like a fly looks under a microscope,” he notes. “But there’s a lot of nuance, a lot of optical adjustments that have to be made. You have to make formal decisions based upon each letterform and how it relates to the next. This is a different methodology than I would use if I was designing an entire typeface, where reason and order are necessary for consistency. With individual letterforms, more care must be taken with each letter and how it works with the next.” The result of his efforts was a piece of original art that worked not only as a headline, but also evoked the themes of the play it was promoting.

Instructions not included

For a poster project in which there was not only no time and no money, but also no information, Maya Drozd of VisuaLingual in Cambridge, Mass., chose to assemble rather than draw a custom headline. Using only dingbats and clip art she already had on her computer, she designed an inventive poster to announce a lecture by design historian Alston Purvis at Montserrat College of Art.

Because she didn’t know the topic of his lecture in advance, “the overall design covers all bases of design history,” she notes, “and I added the title at the very last minute. It’s just a jumble of elements, the old, the new, the ancient, the high, the low. I figured that if you’re going to bring in all of design history, why can’t you bring blackletter and wood type together?”

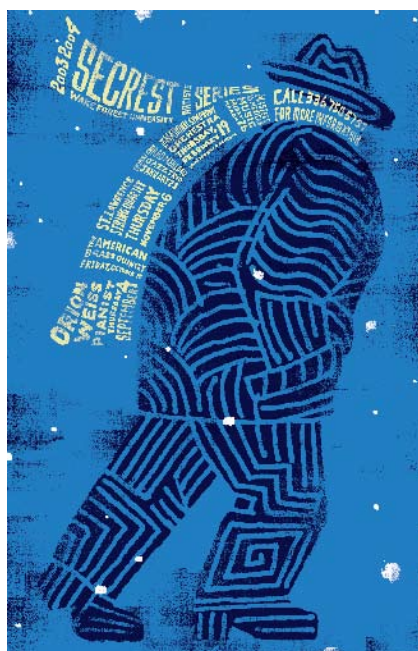
Drozd used this project as an opportunity to work off “personal dares,” plucking and putting together things she wouldn’t normally use. “Another little dare was to use hot rod flames,” she says. “It’s a low culture thing that has nothing to do with me, so I wanted to find a way to use it that *would* be me. I just manipulated all these elements and took them out of their usual context. It was a bringing together of the odd bits I had. And then once I had them laid out, I manipulated them to make them fluid.”

Drozd strung together everything from the symbols for pi and a men’s bathroom in such a way that they spell the speaker’s name. “I wanted it to be type and image, so when it came to the details, they had to be a little bit off, but they needed to read easily. I used the elements almost as I found them, and my work consisted mostly of combining them. It’s OK if the title is a bit of a struggle as long as you can easily read the name in the bio.”

For this narrative, she used a standard typeface, replacing some of the letters with characters from other languages and symbols. “I did it very quietly so you can still read it, but there are things that are not quite right. The goal was just having fun.”

Composite content

Reaching into the computer grab bag for clip art, dingbats, and fanciful shapes and images she has collected, Maya Drozd was able to design a compelling poster publicizing a lecture before she even knew the topic or content. www.visualingual.org



Drozdz chose some green paper she'd picked up at an office supply store and had the posters screen printed. "This paper is designed for very dry, clear information, yet what's happening on the page is very baroque and free. It's an interesting contrast," she notes. "The elements are neatly placed, but in a semblance of randomness, so I thought a background of orderliness would be good." This project has helped her prove the point she frequently makes to her students: "You can make anything work; it's just a matter of how you work it."

Sense of involvement

For Hayes Henderson, creative director of HendersonBromsteadArt, the ultimate in opinion expression comes in theft. "These posters get stolen a lot," Henderson says, "and that's the best compliment when you're a designer."

He's referring to the posters his firm has been designing for years for the Secret Concert Series at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, N.C. Supported by mailers, the posters are meant to create excitement and provide nuts-and-bolts information about the concerts. A strong concept and custom typography have become their signature solution.

According to Henderson, "I think a lot of the type treatment evolved from the pressure of making the artwork look good, and then having to strap all this information onto it. Instead of throwing the type up into a corner, it started to evolve into interrelating the image and the typography as a way of getting

all the information, but softening it a little bit, and making the poster a collectable piece of art."

All type for the posters is hand drawn from scratch, without reference to any standard typeface. "We just drew the tree shape and then filled it in with type. Each branch represents one event, and each band of color on the hat poster is also a different event," Henderson notes. "This gives visual cues that this information goes together and that information goes together. It's important to keep information hierarchy rules in mind."

But according to Henderson, it's also OK to stretch some of the rules, especially when it comes to legibility. "There are two different theories: Either you make the type easy to read, or you make it difficult so people have to work to figure it out," he says. "If you make it a little tricky—as long as it's not illegible—they will work at it and draw more info from it, they will go up and involve themselves with it. People will feel a sense of success when they work it out and they won't even realize that they've been an unwitting participant in the experience."

Critter composite

Arjen Noordeman, design director at MASS MoCA, the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, regularly faces the challenge of too much, rather than not enough, art. For him, beginning with type grounds his design process. "When I face the blank sheet syndrome," he says, "I often just start drawing type to clear my head and get into the subject."

Temptation in type

Start with a strong concept, hand draw letterforms without reference to existing typefaces, keep relevant information together, and repeat every year: This is Hayes Henderson's formula for creating posters beautiful enough to get stolen. www.hendersonbromsteadart.com

To create a poster and accompanying book for an exhibit about animals in contemporary art, Noordeman began with “all these freeform animal symbols that you can find on the internet—reptiles, zoo animals, insects. I didn’t want any of that to be apparent, but I thought if I threw it all together, it might work. So you see a wing, or leg, or hair, all these different organic elements, without knowing what animal it is.”

His initial experiment, however, was deemed “a little over the top. So I thought that the next logical step—since the show is about hybridity, the space between animals and humans—would be to merge this idea with another typeface.

“I made a hybrid of my experiment with an Emigre typeface called Filosofia, and that gave me this kind of a little bit Hollywood, horror movie-ish typeface. It became a lot more legible, and still had that critter-like quality,” Noordeman explains.

To achieve the composite, he says, “I quite literally overlaid the letterforms on this beautiful serif typeface and somehow it fit. Even though the letters were drawn without any grid whatsoever, I just pushed and squeezed a little bit.” He also pushed and squeezed the type within the book itself. “I changed the sizes of each letterform on each page. I wanted them to touch each other and grow around each other and create this sense that the type is alive.”

Noordeman recognizes that many designers, when faced with such strong and even disturbing images, might choose to make the type very simple, almost subservient to the art it supports. “By nature,” he says, “I kind of want to take over everything and that’s not always called for, so sometimes I have to pull back a little. With most things I do, there are a lot of people who love it and a lot who hate it. I don’t make much quiet work, but I’m fine with people not liking it as long as they have an opinion about it.”

And after all, participation from the audience is what design is all about. When type is also art, it communicates both information and beauty, thereby enriching the connection between the printed piece and the viewer by simultaneously appealing to head and heart. ☺

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Transforming letters
 Arjen Noordeman uses type studies to ground his design thoughts. One set of fanciful letterforms wandered away from readability, but by merging them with an existing typeface, he created forms that incorporate the theme of the animal in art.
www.noordeman.com

Recommended resources
Thinking With Type, by Ellen Lupton, \$19.95, Princeton Architectural Press, www.papress.com

Stop Stealing Sheep & Find Out How Type Works, by Erik Spiekermann & E.M. Ginger, \$30, Adobe Press, www.adobe.com

The Elements of Typographic Style, by Robert Bringhurst, \$29.95, Hartley & Marks Publishers, www.hartleyandmarks.com

