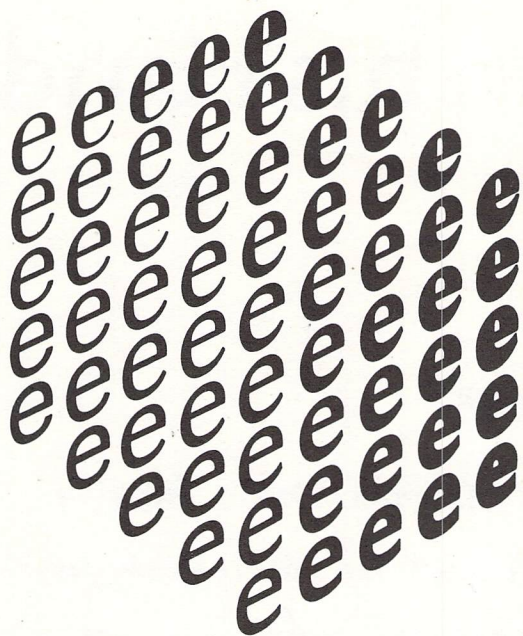




Letter Letter

MAY 4 1986

Typography is slow. The speed of composing machines may be considerable but the remainder of the typographic process is troublesome and tricky. The copy has to be handled by people who do not understand its subject. This requires careful preparation of the manuscript. The copy has to be cast off to fit into the available space, proofs have to be read, corrections have to be executed and the composition has to be made up. Before the copy could arrive at the first stage of the process of typography, Letterletter is delivered to the printer for a facsimile production. The edition is pasted together and it is closed when there is no more space left. This is convenient for the editor, economical for the publisher and wholesome for the reader who is encouraged to extend his mental concept of writing to handwriting. By taking the trouble he will even learn to understand why Nicolette Gray has introduced the expression of 'mental concept'. The reader might fail in his attempts to become familiar with

handwriting but then he would be aware of this failure and this awareness would be very important for everybody who has anything to do with the design and the production of writing.

In Letterletter 4 the facsimile has one more reason. The core of this issue is a contribution by Nicolette Gray, first lady of the A.Typ.1. She illustrated the latitude of the mental concept with some well chosen examples in handwriting, but it is her original manuscript which proves that she is not just propagating an aloof idea, it is a lively and sensitive testimony of a flexible attitude.

Nicolette criticizes Letterletter 3 and also the proposal 'Printing & the hand of man' by Fernand Baudin. Fernand took the opportunity to explain his position. As a matter of fact this battlecry is reproduced in facsimile as well.

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Fernand Baudin his Hand

TO THE EDITOR OF 'LETTER-LETTER'

As a matter of fact I never assumed that the concept "letter" is contained within the activity of handwriting exclusively, in the first place. Secondly, Nicolette is perfectly right in what she says about mental concepts & perception; just as any number of "educators" are right to feel concern about literacy & illiteracy to-day. Yet, my project is entitled PRINTING & THE HAND OF MAN & not: "Printing & Handwriting" or whatever, because my aim is to persuade A.Type I (i.e. the Board of Directors & the General Assembly) "to organize various activities... which might develop a critical knowledge of typography amongst the public" (Statutes, Art. 2). As I stated repeatedly, this we could effectuate by making the public aware of letterforms in their daily environment & of the people as well as the technologies involved since the typewriter, the composing machines & the computer obscured the fact that even to-day letterforms involve the hand as well as the eye & the mind of man.

Any number of agencies, public & private, are fighting illiteracy in their several capacities & contexts. They are potential allies. My proposal is to include them in the public we are addressing & to develop THEIR critical knowledge of typography, in the first place. My proposal is only one among several others. I mean within A.Type I. Admittedly, at the ratio of only one annual discussion, little progress will ever be made with any one of them.

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Nicolette Gray: The mental concept ³

I have read your Letter Letter 3 and the report of the discussion at Hamburg - which I was unfortunately unable to attend. I want to make a comment. Surely the first question which has to be decided when we consider problems of illiteracy, and of the teaching of handwriting, is the question of the meaning of the word 'letter'. Perception is an essential element in the problem, but we have to be clear what it is that we perceive.

Femand's project is entitled 'Printing & the hand of man'. Genit asks 'What is Writing'? Both these approaches assume that the concept 'letter' is contained within the activity of handwriting. I find this an arbitrary and misleading assumption. Ultimately the idea of each letter is a concept in the mind of man. It is by means of this mental concept that we are able to write & design letters and to recognise them when we read.

But, as we all know, the actual form given to any one letter varies very considerably, not only according to the sort of pen used, but also according to the limitations & capacities of other ways of producing letters, whether by casting in metal or generating by computer etc. The mental concept is not precise it is flexible, indeed protean, and yet each letter has identity it has certain characteristics which are indispensable. To take lower case forms, 'g' must have a closed bowl

and a descending tail, but the tail can be straight g, or curved g, and it can start at the top of the bowl (but only on the right) x or from the bottom g. f must consist of a vertical ascender ending in a hook to the right x must have a central cross stroke, f, but the ascender can be prolonged as a f descender, and either, or both can be looped f or flourished f. In order to define the identity of a letter we have to decide the essential characteristics. The technical developments of today make this an urgent priority. (What are the essential characteristics of the letter 'r' or 'r' or why not x?)

We have an example of the effect of mindless thinking in contemporary teaching of handwriting in British schools. Here it has been assumed that xx century sans serif type design provides models of the proper & precise form of each letter. Children are taught both to read and to write these forms: so they make ascenders and descenders which scarcely exceed the x height of their script. Joining strokes are not part of the form learnt, they may or may not be added later as extras. So very often letters are put together with no intervening spacing, cheek by jowl. The result is the transformation of a crisp & functional type design into illegible handwriting.

In order to read we need only to be able to recognise the identity of a letter from its essential characteristics. In order to write, or design letters there must be added to this an understanding of the particular qualities & requirements of the medium used.

Terminology

I went recently to a meeting of teachers organised by the Institute of Education of London University. There I was given an interesting article by an educational psychologist. Here the word 'serif' was used to mean 'joining-stroke'. This single example of divergent usage of a key word demonstrates the need for co-operation.

Basle - 12 September 1986

8.00 - 9.30 Annual meeting of the Committee on Education and Research in Hotel International

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Provisional agenda

1. Election of the chairman.
2. The seventh working seminar.
3. Coordination of national efforts of educational reform.
4. Letterletter.
5. Any other business.
6. The mental concept of writing. A discussion with Nicolette Gray on design and research.

Proposals for the definitive agenda should be addressed to the chairman of the Committee.

To the points

1. candidates have to be proposed by the meeting.
2. There is no new information since the proposal made by Roman Tomaszewski in Kiel.
3. Iceland, Frisia (The Netherlands), France, Hungary (and probably other countries) are

considering a new approach in the teaching of writing (reading and handwriting) in different stages. A correspondence between Frisia and Iceland seems to be stimulating for both parties. Could the Committee provide a central address for such an international correspondence?

4. Letterletter is scientific, polemic and very Dutch. Who wants to prepare an alternative edition?

6. I would like to reserve as much time as possible for this fundamental discussion. The schedule of the Committee meetings allows all designers to participate. The subject of this discussion has been prepared in the proposals by Fernand Baudin and in Letterletter 3 and 4. In this discussion we could take all the profit of the participation of Nicolette Gray.

The dimensions of the mental image and its origin

Nicolette Gray is one of the most original and stimulating personalities I know. She has the rare greatness of allowing other people to develop their own attitude. Introduce her to a group of timid students and you will observe an almost immediate transformation in the party. Everybody will feel encouraged to bring forth his own view without fear. Those who know how students are will understand that this is an extraordinary achievement. Long after Nicolette has left the scene, her exciting spirit will last. Her letter about my 'misleading assumption' is a fine specimen of her frank and honest approach. There are few ideas about the nature of writing offering so many new possibilities as the idea of the mental concept. My only problem is that I can not see any incompatibility of this idea and my theory of writing. I will demonstrate this in an attempt of integration.

A a d A A A A a

These shapes have been collected from my concept of the letter a. Of all shapes only two can be combined with a given shape n.

na na

given the shape g only one possible a is left.

na g

In her examples of the mental concept of g Nicolette Gray considers cursive handwriting and Italian script only. Otherwise she would not exclude a start on the left top. The European cursives of the 'bastarda' family are excluded as well. Of this family the German running hand is still alive and its g is started on the left top.

WOLV

My steps in the selection of a suggest different levels in the mental concept of writing:

1. The concept of construction (the direction and the sequence of strokes).
2. The concept of script (the relationship of shapes in the alphabet).
3. The concept of letter (the collection of shapes representing one letter).

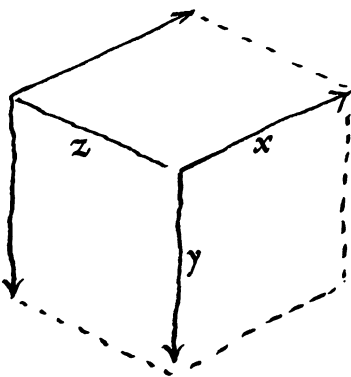
The concept of construction depends on knowledge of the techniques of handwriting. The concepts of script and letter depend on understanding of handwriting which however might be substituted by a more superficial knowledge (a catalogue of facts such as the classification of typefaces instead of a theory of writing).

The small concept (handwriting in some Italian cursive script) of Nicolette's examples could be sufficient in elementary teaching of handwriting. It is the minimal

concept of everyman's skill. It is not sufficient for elementary teaching of reading. The mental concept of the young reader should include all current typefaces. Typographers let alone type designers need more understanding, but the difference between training specialists and teaching children is not essential.

Any teacher would say that children should learn to write a fast current hand, but I do not know a teacher who teaches his children in this sense. The school offers the children an extremely formal model and asks them to copy it as an informal hand. This is one more absurdity of our (the western) system of education. The mental concept lacks a fourth dimension.

4. The concept of articulation (the relationship of speed and articulation in more or less formal handwriting).



The heading of this Letterletter is decorated with the photograph of a cube of letters. The cube represents the mental concept of contrast. Contrast would be the fifth dimension of my mental image but the

cube itself is three-dimensional. This results in 7 dimensions of the mental image of writing.

The z-axis is the range of variations (in fact interpolation) in the nature of contrast. From this starting line the contrast of the letters may be increased in the direction of the x-axis and reduced in the direction of the y-axis. The cube results from interpolating the plane x, z with the plane y, z. This is a complete model of the possible variations in contrast. Any position can be expressed in values of x, y, z. The meaning of the cube is a subject for a future issue of Letterletter.

This logical approach of the mental image of writing clashes with the position which is taken by Nicolette. I did not try to accentuate the part of handwriting; it is just there as the first condition of writing. I can isolate a typeface with reduced contrast (commonly and extremely inadequately called 'sans serif') from the bottom of my cube and use it independently but it is not possible to understand it in this isolation. It is not an independent concept but the result of extreme reduction of contrast. To understand it I have to follow its development in the opposite direction which will bring me back to the z-axis. Any possible shape on the z-axis can be analysed as tracks of counterpoints (Letterletter 1 and 2). To express this in

plain words: the z-axis is the range of handwriting. Along this axis 'the concept "letter" is contained within the activity of handwriting' as Nicolette puts it. Maybe this origin of any writing is an 'arbitrary' fact, but it is the fact in the origin of writing. Its acceptance is imperative and not 'an arbitrary and misleading assumption'.

I do not have sufficient knowledge of the beginning of writing (nobody has) to be able to point at this fact. There is, however, no alternative within the limited scope of my mind. This scope is made tangible in my cubic universe of contrast. There is only one edge conceivable as the origin, the z-axis. Any stupid computer can arrive at any shape within the cube given this axis, but even a smart designer could never derive the cube from another edge.

It might be sufficiently clear now that it is not my concept of writing that is 'contained within the activity of handwriting' but its origin. This should make a difference to Nicolette. My concept of writing is not a concept of letters either, it is rather a mental concept of collections. These collections do not consider the deviations of individual writers and designers (an important reason to say nothing about serifs). The inclusion of personal subtleties would explode the structure of the mental image, but my reason for

neglecting them is much simpler: I am considering a convention (that what all writers have in common) and what can be taught. In this objective there is nothing individual.

Not everything in my theory of writing is as tangible as the cube of contrast, though everything might be precise enough for scientific tests. There is one major problem: The theory is in contradiction with the teaching of Stanley Morison, Jan Tschichold and all other gurus of writing. It is, however, my business to explain the principles of writing and to save its phenomena. It is not my task to save worn out reputations.

During fifteen years Nicolette Gray has been my most faithful opponent. This Letterletter is another demonstration of how much I owe to her criticism, but I still fail to understand her. Even such a simple question (the left back edge of the cube) as the interdependence of Baskerville and Helvetica could never be settled in my discussion with our enigmatic first lady.

Could our fundamental difference be a difference in 'cosmology'? Then we would only be actors in the everlasting play of the discussion between the romantic and the mannerist.