

THE NEW 'NEW TYPOGRAPHY'

Review of
Typography Now Two: Implosion,
edited by Rick Poynor,
Blueprint,
December, 1996

Rick Poynor's first anthology of 'New Typography', subtitled 'The Next Wave', appeared in 1991. A publishing phenomenon, it has been reprinted no less than seven times, and sold 60,000 copies around the world. Five years later, *Typography Now Two: Implosion* brings us up to date.

Anthologies can never tell us much about the context of the original work; they are about appearance – style. But they are useful in telling us where the profession is at a particular historical moment, or at least what someone thought worth recording. From the images in anthologies, design historians construct much of their limited histories. As editor of *Eye* magazine, Rick Poynor understands this. He anticipates the importance of what he is doing, explicitly claiming a documentary intention, and he has given the historian additional help. Not only has he provided the visual record, but also his short introduction logs, with proper references, much of the debate which this new work has aroused, and brief on-page comments usefully extend the context of the illustrations beyond the bare captions usual in design annuals.

Two factors distinguish these two 'New Typography' books from the ordinary anthology. First, they have a subject – a 'New Typography' that Poynor describes as a 'genre'. It is not concerned with typography in the accepted sense, nor is it to be confused with the old New Typography movement of the 1920s and 1930s; it is graphic design using letterforms produced on the desktop computer.

Work on the screen provides instant gratification. It is very fast. It is direct. The speed of transformations on the screen is exhilarating, and so is the sense of power to make them happen. Until very recently, type was assembled by workers in the printing industry, with or without detailed instructions from a designer. The old typography necessitated tracing type, measuring, designing for a restricted number of modular units, when 'cut and paste' really meant cut and paste. Now, with type and images scanned into the system, there are few constraints on the designer. Digital tools have instantly enabled and empowered.

The second distinguishing feature of this book is that it illustrates its subject not only in conventional reproductions, but in its own design. The book itself is an example of the new 'New Typography'. It is the real thing. We are the readers. We know the context.

On the book's pages, typefaces change and mix frequently, apparently at random. The reading of straightforward continuous prose is interrupted by sudden changes of colour or size or width of column. This is not startlingly anti-functional. We can read the text, but haltingly. The eye is not directed. The book's designer, Jonathan Barnbrook writes: 'There's a reason for the way I do things and if you look I hope you'll get the meaning, though the communication process isn't so direct that you are necessarily going to get it the first time you look at it.' The horizontal rule running through this statement is characteristic of the reader's difficulties.

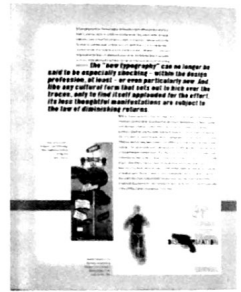


Typography Now Two,
cover designed by
Jonathan Barnbrook
1996

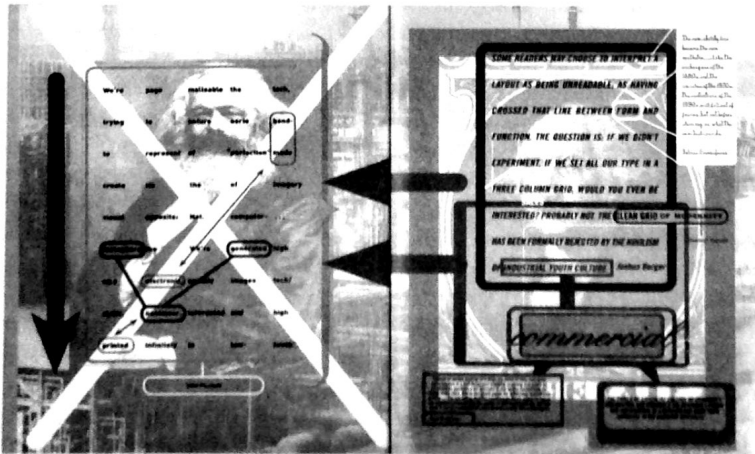
Barnbrook's 'reason' for the way he does things remains unclear. The new 'New Typography' is unconventional in the sense that it abandons conventions, or introduces new mannerisms that have no meaning. Ruling out letters or words is a convention to show the reader that you have changed your mind.

Conventions are fundamental to communication. But ambiguity is sought after by many of the digital typographers, who have argued against the restrictions of the accepted rules of traditional and Modernist typography, 'preferring the visual utterance, alternative take and delayed punchline...' This is the nihilistic, punk attitude, clearly demonstrated in the design of bizarre letterforms and a cult of the (consciously?) 'ugly'. Meanwhile, a contrary, 'deconstructionist' position has tried to decode the text and expose its elements of meaning. Between these two attitudes there has been every kind of eccentricity, infantilism and brilliance.

The sections of the book are introduced by double spreads designed by Barnbrook. Their style is that of Italian 'Anti-Design', a spasm of the 1970s, which reappears intermittently as 'Post-Punk'. They are montages of statements – often cogent – by significant proponents of some aspect of the new 'New Typography', overlaid on pale halftone images. The first, for 'commercial' work (shown below), has an overall background photograph of a refinery. It is printed in orange together with, on the left-hand page, a portrait of Karl Marx. On the right-hand page is George Washington, printed in blue. (Are we to 'read' the portraits of historical figures as, perhaps, icons of state intervention and laissez-faire capitalism? There could be several others.) The left-hand page has a white diagonal cross, and a black arrow points down. Two green arrows, spaced like an equals sign, point from Washington to Marx. The text on the left consists of two sentences strung vertically, some of them linked like a very old-fashioned analytical grammar. The five statements on the right-hand page are left to themselves (except for an upward-tending sales graph), but the central quotation from Joshua Berger is particularly relevant, to this spread and to the book as a whole: 'Some readers may choose to interpret a layout as being unreadable; as having crossed that line



Page from *Typography Now Two*, and, left, the double-page spread discussed in the text



between form and function. The question is: if we didn't experiment, if we set all our type in a three-column grid, would you even be interested?' He adds that 'the clean grid of Modernity has been formally rejected by the nihilism of industrial youth culture'.

Given that a lot of readers (and of these designers) do not belong to the youth culture, the attacks of the old guard are understandable but often misguided. The old 'New Typography' of the 1920s had, like contemporary typography, been initiated as part of a wider technological, cultural and social revolution. Designers such as Paul Rand had sought clarity in a legible, but often playful structure. It was the generation that succeeded Rand, notably Massimo Vignelli – another fierce opponent of the new 'New' – who applied a ritualised version of Modernist typography (the old New Typography) as style. This Modernist style is what Poynor believes has 'imploded'.

Like Poynor's pack, the old 'New Typographers' of the 1930s welcomed technical innovation and a new aesthetics of space and asymmetry, and those pioneers were mostly artists. The intense subjectivity of most practitioners of the new 'New' suggests that they too are artists, rather than designers with a specific intention. By tradition, artists are differentiated from designers by the fact that artists work on unique objects embodying their own ideas, whereas designers' tasks are communicating other people's messages, industrially produced or, now, electronically transmitted. The artists of Poynor's 'New' are communicating their own aesthetic messages – an aesthetic they have discovered in interaction with the computer.

These new 'New Typographers' have come to terms with the technology. They have played with it, and been mesmerised by its possibilities. But typographers are entrusted with words, language, to communicate. The typographic pioneers of the earlier machine age were working when books were being burned. Since then, words have not lost their meaning, but they have been devalued. When the distinction is blurred between what is true and what is a lie, what is real and what is 'virtual', who is to say that the 'New Typographers' are not asking the right questions? The 'New Typography' is a symptom of cultural change, a metaphor for a breakdown of social values. It is trying to change the rules at a time when the old rules have been overtaken by technology. The work of some new 'New Typographers' is suggesting answers to the questions they themselves put. Meanwhile, too much of their skill is wasted dancing over the grave of a tradition which refuses to be buried.

This welcome book deserves serious attention. Poynor's treatment of this international phenomenon is not frivolous. But it will be used as a copybook, whereas it should invite a critical reappraisal of where design is heading.