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Non-existent design: women and the creation of type

When invited to participate in an exhibition about typefaces, called *Frische Schriften/Fresh Type* in the Museum of Design in Zürich in 2004, I was the only female designer out of more than 25 males to exhibit recent digital font designs. This fact went almost entirely unmentioned in the accompanying catalog published on the occasion of the exhibition, with the exception of François Rappo's contribution. His essay *Write It, Damn You, Write It!* (Janser, 2004) very briefly acknowledges the lack of gender diversity among type designers:

> What about the 'softer' culture-oriented fields, the 'gender bent'? How does the 'techno' thematic emphasis [form] fit in with the realization, be it simply empirical, that the designers represented here (but also in graphic design in general) are predominantly and insistently male? (p. 86)

Rappo raises the issue of gender in relation to design and the stereotypical association between technology and masculinity. Being the only female invited among these boy whiz kids, I put the blame first on the country's retrogressive gender equality, and second – stereotyping myself – on women's reluctance to deal with technology. But somehow these explanations for the lack of female representatives didn't completely satisfy me, especially since over time I came across other signs that indicated a global predominance of male type designers. One hint of this is *TypeBase*,[1] an online type site listing type creators and offering detailed information on 31 designers, of whom Emigre co-founder Zuzana Licko is the only woman designer featured. This lack of gender diversity is also evident in publications featuring type designs, which are perhaps unintentionally filled with alphabets created by a majority of male designers. To this day, there are very few women who have made it into the ranks of accomplished and industry-accepted type designers. Out of the 478 font designers represented by the Linotype type foundry only 59 (12.3%) are female.[2] A brief survey of the gender of invited speakers at recent international typographic conferences such as ATypI, TypeCon, and Typo Berlin also discloses strikingly unequal numbers: for example, ATypI (2003, 2004) and TypeCon (2003, 2004) reveal an average of 15 percent female contributors (Figure 1). Out of the total of 65 invited presenters at the Typo Berlin (2004) only 5 were female. The current climate still prevailing at type conferences is one of male 'type gurus'. According to an entry in *Typographica*,[3] an online journal of typography and a popular blog site, the program planning committee for the 2004 ATypI conference –

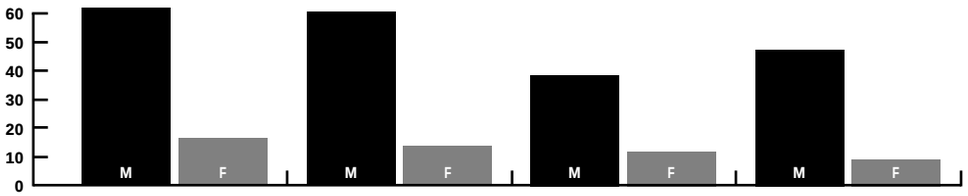


Figure 1: Gender representation at recent typographic conferences.



Figure 2(a): By a process of electrolysis, a copper pattern was made from the wax which was placed onto the punch-cutting machine. As the pattern was carefully traced, tiny cutters replicated its shape onto the end of a steel blank to create a punch. The punch was hardened and could be used to create matrices.

Crossroads of Civilization in Prague – consisted of nine prominent, all-male typographers. Women subconsciously have to conform to the conference culture around them. In 1994 (11 years ago), the Women's Design Research Unit (WD+RU) was established as a response to the male-dominated platform of speakers for the London FUSE '94, the interactive publication and conference for innovative typeface design. The problem of exclusion of female professionals was inadvertently stressed. It became obvious that the profession was not accurately represented in terms of female contributors. Apparently the situation has not evolved much since then.

This article aims to shed light on the reasons behind the scarcity of female type designers and attempts to suggest strategies for remedying the situation. Some of the questions under discussion are: What measures could be taken to improve gender inequality in the field of typography in the 21st century? What would be the value of more women designing type and contributing to typography? What forms of unconscious resistance are there that hold women back from feeling part of type design and typographic culture?

TECHNOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

By the 1980s the personal computer became ubiquitous and profound changes occurred in the field of type design and manufacture. This era marked the end of the dirty, physically strenuous work involved in the production of metal type. Graphic designers gained easy access to designing their own fonts as type design and production moved closer together. These technological advancements led to an increased 'democratization' of type production; they marked the rise of the independent type designer and the exhilaration of intensive typographic inventions. Over the last few years this type euphoria has dulled down as the deconstruction and mismatching of (existing) digital typefaces have been exhausted. Another reason for the calming of the typeface development frenzy might be the difficulties of earning sufficient revenues from type design, which in turn put a damper on revolutionary ambitions. Despite the fact that the creation and production of type became a more woman-friendly working process and therefore opened up opportunities for female designers to practice in this field more than ever before, type design nevertheless remains



Figure 2(b): Translating the designer's idea into working drawings with the use of a set square and french curves.



Figure 2(c): Tracing the working drawing on the table of a pantograph; while tracing the outline of the drawing, the design was cut at a reduced size into a wax-coated glass plate.

predominantly a white, Western, male working field. The creation of letters is an expert profession traditionally dominated by men. By the 19th century, women were employed in the printing industry to polish imperfections from metal type. At the end of the century Linn Boyd Benton and RV Waldo developed the Pantographic punch-cutting machine.[4] This marked the beginning of the development of hot-metal composing machines produced by Linotype and Monotype. The development of the Pantographic punch-cutting technique made it possible, for the first time, to produce punches in different sizes from a single pattern. A typeface offered, for example, by Monotype in a range of sizes involved the preparation of large numbers of character drawings. The drawings from which the patterns for punch-cutting were produced were prepared in the type drawing office. The key priority was to adhere as much as possible to the type designer's original intentions. Judging from a number of photographs demonstrating the working processes at Monotype, c. 1956, reproduced in *Type and Typography* (Baines and Haslam, 2002), these tasks were carried out by less-skilled labor (token women), while the actual design of letter forms remained a male domain (Figure 2).

GENDERED DESIGN

In the 19th century, women began to have access to university or college training in the arts and design. They were typically encouraged to focus on the learning of crafts such as weaving, textile painting, pottery, illustration, stained glass and calligraphy, all occupations oriented towards the decorative. The acquisition of these stereotypical feminine skills followed the tradition of women's involvement with craft. Seen in a masculine and cultural context, these skills remain in the realm of a craft workshop. In contrast, within the same time period, arts education for men traditionally focused on learning professions such as printing and type setting. Male-dominated areas such as metal-smithing or the design of lead type were not about decorating. The developed product was designed for distribution and for combination with some other visual material such as, for example, the merging of type and image. A manufactured item produced in large numbers is more firmly located in the dominant patriarchal order of mass production and industrialization, as explained by

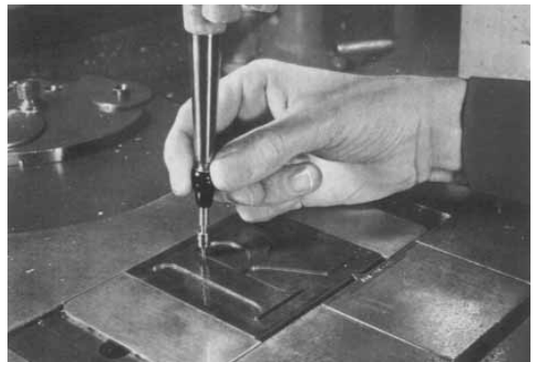


Figure 2(d): Checking for the accuracy of the outline wax pettern.

Whiteley (1993):

> Whereas 'design' has been addressed primarily as a male activity, the spaces occupied by the decorative including the 'craft-making' of pottery, calligraphy, and textiles, have been deemed as feminine. In a patriarchal structure these areas are given an 'inferior status'. (p. 7)

Type design can be perceived as an activity which focuses on the cold, black-and-white anatomy of lines; it lacks the stereotypical female features – images and colors. To this day, drawing type is a mechanical and rational process and requires a very high degree of visual sensitivity. Designing type is time-intensive, and demands patience and diligence. Typographic creations are highly individual undertakings, and characteristic products of their designer. The making of a mark, such as a letter, and creating entire character sets are considered an important form of authorship. The success of a type face is measured by the number of font licenses sold. Dimitri Bruni's statement in *Fresh Type* (Janser, 2004) alludes to a desire to promote designer wares in a competitive system. Within the existing hegemony of male (type) designers, female role models are very scarce: 'When I decide to sell a font I want a lot of people to buy it and use it. I'm interested in seeing attractive applications' (p. 50).

The democratization of type production mentioned earlier led to a sudden increase in formally untrained and self-promoted type designers. As of today, there are very few institutions which offer a postgraduate degree in typeface design, and some of them have been in existence for only a few years. The University of Reading in the UK offers such a program and TypeMedia is an official accredited postgraduate course at the Royal Academy in The Hague, Netherlands. Judging from the institution's online information, TypeMedia's faculty is almost exclusively male.[5] However, the 2002-4 student list reveals an equivalent participation of females and males. The same is true of the University of Reading graduating class of 2004. These numbers point to a more balanced gender representation of future contributors in the field, anticipating that these women will be practicing type designers. In the USA, some schools are particularly well positioned to encourage type design. For example, Jeffery Keedy teaches a class in type design in the graphic design graduate program at the California Institute of the Arts, while Matthew Carter has been a senior critic at Yale University School of Art since 1976. Taking account of his students over the past 17 years, Jeffery Keedy judges that there will be as many women as men type designers in the 21st century.[6] However, at the current time, lecturers in type design are predominantly male which may help to perpetuate gender patterns that are slow to change within education and industry.

DRAWING FROM OTHER AREAS

Can technology be blamed for the low number of practicing female type designers? What about the stereotypical myth that women are afraid of technology? In an attempt to discover the reasons behind the absence of women in type design, it may be worth examining the field of computer science, which has had comparable challenges. In *Unlocking the Clubhouse, Women in Computing* (2002), Margolis and Fisher examine the many influences contributing to the gender gap in computing. In their view: 'The information technology revolution is transforming almost every aspect of society, but girls and women are largely out of the loop' (p. ???). They challenge the assumption that computer science is 'just boring for girls and women' by showing the influences that attract women's interest. One of their suggestions is not to slot women into computer science as it is currently taught and conceived: 'Assignments and teaching examples often embed male-dominated interests and activities, such as sports statistics and card and number tricks' (p. 37). 'Rather a cultural and curricular revolution is required to change computer science so that the valuable contributions and perspectives of women are respected within the discipline' (p. 6). The stereotypical computer science student is described as a male nerd, myopically focused on computing. 'Singular and obsessive interest in computing that is common among men is assumed to be the road of success in computing' (p. 71). 'For most women students, the technical aspects of computing are interesting, but the study of computer science is made meaningful by its connections to other fields' (p. 49) [such as medicine, environmental science, famine control]. Technology serves as a tool for contributing to a field of expertise. In Kali Nikitas's opinion:

> Women are becoming more fearless about learning programs or navigating through digital media. But as long as our fathers and brothers, husbands and boyfriends set up our VCR machines and fix the broken appliances, we may never stop feeling like technology is this 'other thing' that belongs to 'the other side'.[7]

This statement stresses the importance of women taking control and mastering technological applications.

Looking at other traditionally predominantly male fields, the National Science Foundation's *Program for Gender Equity* (PGE)[8] in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, has supported more than 250 curricular innovations, professional development efforts, and informal learning opportunities for women and girls. With over $84 million in awards since the fiscal year of 1991, PGE is the largest public or private funder of efforts expressly dedicated to improving outcomes for girls and women in these disciplines. The program's mission is to

> increase awareness of the interests, needs, and capabilities of female students; promote instructional materials and teaching methods for increasing interest, retention, and achievement of girls and women; and increase the availability of student enrichment resources, including mentoring (p. 1).

These measurements have helped to narrow the gender gap:

> The proportion of women among Science and Engineering graduate students grew from 35 percent in 1992 to more than 41 percent in 2001 and 2002. The number of female students has increased every year for the last 20 years, including a gain of more than 6 percent in 2002.[9]

Still looking at the labor force,

> women constitute just 23 percent of the population employed in science and

> engineering and the unemployment rates of women are higher than those of men in each major science and engineering occupation and within most major age groupings.[10]

Although merely based on anecdotal data, the number of women designers has increased over the past decade, according to Richard Gefé, the executive director of the American Institute of Graphic Arts (AIGA). He states that recent surveys indicate that the AIGA membership is made up of about 55 percent women, which AIGA believe is probably lower than the profession as a whole.[11] As in many other professional fields, women still face challenging obstacles preventing them from participating more fully, such as balancing their work life and childcare, or having access to financial resources.

WHAT IS THE FUTURE OF WOMEN DESIGNING TYPE?

Because the practice of type design is a very specialized subexpertise in the applied arts, it might be easy to overlook, dismiss or deny that there is a gender inequality and lack of female participation in the field. However, it is urgent to acknowledge the gender imbalance as it limits competitiveness in a global technological society. The greatest impact of women's absence from the world of type design may be on the success of typography as a discipline and its influence on society. Currently, the field is not in a position to draw on a pool of talent from the entire population. The typographic culture reflects the desires and sensibilities of males, and excludes women and other minorities from forming their identity, based on broader choices. Despite decades of social change, and shifts in the gender balance in many professions, the font user still mostly chooses from a selection of typefaces designed by males. This is at the expense of acknowledging a broader contextual and societal diversity. Having a stronger representation of women in the typographic discipline would help to move away from dichotomous definitions of the relationship between gender and technology, and challenge stereotypical assumptions of feminine work characteristics or visual expectations. I reject the idea that women should receive preferential or differential treatment on the grounds of gender, but welcome long-term strategies of empowerment that could lead to a more balanced gender representation within typographic disciplines. Programs seeking to broaden women's participation in the typographic field could help to remedy the inequality.

I would argue that the profession of type design and typography, in existence for more than 500 years, up to now has avoided leading a discourse on the absence of female participation that should realistically have been initiated at least 10-15 years ago. There is no commitment to establishing strategies that positively strive to include and empower minorities. Adding more women's names to lists of conference speakers may constitute part of the solution, as long as it doesn't serve as a form of tokenism. But the profession also needs to make a sincere attempt to question attitudes towards the unbalanced gender situation, demonstrate a willingness to lead an informed discussion and assume responsibility for improving the situation. Up to now, the problem of unbalanced gender representation might be acknowledged as such by some, but to my knowledge no concrete steps to change the one-sided situation have been taken. Assessing the current typographic culture may help to establish strategies for a shift. Many changes have taken place in the world of type and type design in recent years. Major businesses have undergone dramatic changes; some have disappeared, others are no longer involved with type, or have shrunk into smaller enterprises. The industry lacks diversity initiatives to empower equal opportunities for minorities. Affinity groups could aim to create a culture of inclusion, ultimately leading to a more productive work- and marketplace.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

To balance the gender imbalance in typography, the relatively successful models applied in the education of science, technology and engineering could serve as starting points. One of the tools for supporting women in their active participation within the industry would be to establish a better network among female peers. These communities are critical for establishing the exchange of knowledge, increasing visibility and providing a mutually supportive environment. The field's culture must become more women friendly. Incentives such as internships, mentoring, research and evaluation, tutoring and travel awards, tailored to women in education and industry, could be established to create an environment of inclusion. Typographic organizations and clubs such as ATypI (Association Typographique Internationale) and TDC (Type Directors Club) could work towards opening up power positions and establishing committees with a more equal gender balance. ATypI's 2003/4 board comprises 15 members, only one of which is female. The industry (technology developers, type foundries, type design studios, etc.) should have an interest in providing internships, scholarships, or grants, specifically established to foster and empower female professionals. A program that monitors the number of practicing female (type) designers should be established so that professional development efforts could be tracked over a period of years.

When Kali Nikitas initiated the project *And She Told 2 Friends* in 1996, which included an exhibit and accompanying catalog, she wanted to celebrate the female network within graphic design and acknowledge women's success in the profession. Nikitas's project could serve as an example for a leader or an interdisciplinary group to assume responsibility for countering the problem of under-recognition. Websites acting as a source of information, platform for discussion and virtual exhibition space showcasing talented female type designers could be inexpensive tools for providing opportunities of being seen and heard. Improving the gender situation in education will also be crucial. Schools offering programs in type design should address gender-related differences, and be aware of how pedagogical approaches and teaching styles, curriculum, student services and institutional culture contribute to causing or closing gender gaps that persist in the field. In this regard, institutions with faculty members represented by both genders provide a more inclusive and welcoming environment for female students. Curricula could be reviewed and changed with respect to a culture of inclusion. In the book *Women Designers in the USA – 2000*, (2000), Ellen Lupton describes the influence of women working and teaching in the graphic design profession, and offers a positive perspective of gender involvement.

> During the last quarter of the twentieth century, women played a central role in building the discourse of graphic design. During this period the profession came of age both as a recognized business and as a field of study in university art and design programs, including at the graduate level. Women were no minority among the educators, critics, editors, and curators who defined the theoretical issues of the time. Schools and museums provided accessible platforms from which women could influence the direction of graphic design (p. 376).

If the field of typography and type design wants to be taken seriously as a discipline, it cannot afford to postpone a gender discussion any longer. The typographic field needs to

open up and reform its reputation as a closed and inward-looking domain. Due to profound technological changes, the profession seems to suffer from a continual identity crisis. Yet, a new era could constitute a chance to include other, perhaps long undervalued opinions and build upon a more inclusive foundation developed by men and women. Type design in general is still a rather under-recognized creative art form, and it is up to its practitioners to educate a broader audience about it. Typography and the design of letters in the 21st century will play an increasingly important role: screen-based type – animated, interactive or with added sound effects – and the rapidly changing world of communication and education, demand the close involvement of typographic professionals. To avoid getting left out of the equation, manufacturers of digital devices need to be made aware of the importance of the typographic functioning of visual interfaces. We can only legitimately call ourselves the experts if the personality and culture of the typographic profession can keep up with the rest of the world's changing culture, working climate, and multiple points of views. Women must be part of the type design discipline if the remodeled information-technology world in the 21st century is to fit women as well as men.

NOTES

1 *TypeBase* [http://typebase.com], site accessed 27 December 2004.

2 *Linotype Library* [http://www.linotype.com/fontdesigners.html], site accessed 4 January 2005.

3 *Typographica* [http://typographi.com], posted 20 January 2004.

4 By the second half of the 19th century, enormous social, economic, and aesthetic transformations took place. Due to improved literacy and a consequent increase in the demand for composed matter, technological change was forced on the traditional technique of type production. This increase in the demand for type marked the beginning of the development of mechanical composition systems. What Benton and Waldo patented in 1885 was the application of mechanical production of identical punches for text sizes of type. Pantographically controlled rotary cutters had been used earlier in the century for the production of wood type. In terms of accuracy, the production of punches for text type were much more severe. Benton's invention paved the way for the development of hot-metal composing machines.

5 *TypeMedia* [http://just.letterror.com/ltrwiki/TypeMediaFaculty), site accessed 27 December 2004.

6 Personal email exchange.

7 Personal email exchange.

8 *NSF's Program for Gender Equity in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics: A Brief Retrospective 1993-2001*, Executive Overview, p. 1. National Science Foundation [http://www.nsf.gov/pubs/2002/nsf02107/nsf02107.pdf], site accessed 27 December 2004.

9 *Info Brief*, National Science Foundation, Science Resources Statistics, June 2004 [http://www.nsf.gov/sbe/srs/infbrief/nsf04326/start.htm], site accessed 27 December 2004.

10 *NSF's Program for Gender Equity in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics: A Brief Retrospective 1993-2001*, Executive Overview, p. 1. National Science Foundation [http://www.nsf.gov/pubs/2002/nsf02107/nsf02107.pdf], site accessed 27 December 2004.

11 Personal email exchange with AIGA National Office, New York.

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