

**HERBERT BAYER HACKED AWAY ALL TRACES OF TYPOGRAPHY’S CALLIGRAPHIC PAST AS HE DREW HIS MODERN ALPHABET UNIVERSAL IN 1925. ARMED WITH A COMPASS, RULER, AND T SQUARE, HE REDUCED LETTERFORM DESIGN TO THE ESSENTIALS.** Capital letters, eliminated; serifs, eliminated. As an instructor at the Bauhaus, he strove to revolutionize typography. His Universal alphabet was but one step in his life-long quest to rethink the alphabet itself, reenvisioning it in new forms appropriate to machine-driven modern society. As exemplified by his work, Bayer urges us to go deep into the “underlying strata” of typography, moving beyond what he disdainfully describes as “trends of taste devoid of inner substance and structure, applied as cultural sugar-coating.” In “On Typography” he highlights advances made in typography in the 1920s and looks to a radical new future, correctly foreseeing the widespread reshaping of typography imposed by new media. Exhibition designer, painter, architect, sculptor, photographer—Bayer managed to be immensely practical and rational, while never losing the ideals he discovered at the beginning of his career.

## ON TYPOGRAPHY

HERBERT BAYER | 1967

typography is a service art, not a fine art, however pure and elemental the discipline may be.

the graphic designer today seems to feel that the typographic means at his disposal have been exhausted. accelerated by the speed of our time, a wish for new excitement is in the air. “new styles” are hopefully expected to appear.

nothing is more constructive than to look the facts in the face. what are they? the fact that nothing new has developed in recent decades? the boredom of the dead end without signs for a renewal? or is it the realization that a forced change in search of a “new style” can only bring superficial gain?

it seems appropriate at this point to recall the essence of statements made by progressive typographers of the 1920s:

previously used largely as a medium for making language visible, typographic material was discovered to have distinctive optical properties of its own, pointing toward specifically typographic expression. typographers envisioned possibilities of deeper visual experiences from a new exploitation of the typographic material itself.

they called for clarity, conciseness, precision; for more articulation, contrast, tension in the color and black-and-white values of the typographic page.

THE BAUHAUS URGED THE CONTEMPORARY ARTIST TO TAKE PART IN  
THE ISSUES OF HIS TIME BY SOLVING THOSE PROBLEMS THAT ONLY  
THE ARTIST CAN, THAT IS GIVING FORM TO OUR ENVIRONMENT, TO THE  
SPACES WE LIVE IN, TO THE GOODS WE USE, TO COMMUNICATION.

HERBERT BAYER  
“typography  
and design at  
the bauhaus”  
1971

typography was for the first time seen not as an isolated discipline and technique, but in context with the ever-widening visual experiences that the picture symbol, photo, film, and television brought.

they recognized that in all human endeavors a technology had adjusted to man’s demands; while no marked change or improvement had taken place in man’s most profound invention, printing-writing, since gutenberg.

the manual skill and approach of the craftsman was seen to be inevitably replaced by mechanical techniques.

once more it became clear that typography is not self-expression within predetermined aesthetics, but that it is conditioned by the message it visualizes.

that typographic aesthetics were not stressed in these statements does not mean a lack of concern with them. but it appears that the searching went beyond surface effects into underlying strata. it is a fallacy to believe that styles can be created as easily and as often as fashions change. more is involved than trends of taste devoid of inner substance and structure, applied as cultural sugar-coating.

moreover, the typographic revolution was not an isolated event but went hand in hand with a new social, political consciousness and, consequently, with the building of new cultural foundations. the artist’s acceptance of the machine as a tool for mass production has had its impression on aesthetic concepts. since then an age of science has come upon us, and the artist has been motivated more than ever to open his mind to the new forces that shape our lives.

new concepts will not grow on mere design variations of long-established forms such as the book. the aesthetic restraint that limits the development of the book must finally be overcome, and new ideas must logically be deduced from the function of typography and its carriers. although i realize how deeply anchored in tradition and how petrified the subject of writing and spelling is, a new typography will be bound to an alphabet that corresponds to the demands of an age of science. it must, unfortunately, be remembered that we live in a time of great ignorance and lack of concern with the alphabet, writing, and typography. with nostalgia we hear of times when literate people had knowledge, respect, and understanding of the subject. common man today has no opinion at all in such matters. it has come to a state where even the typesetter, the original typographer, as well as the printer, has lost this culture. responsibility has been shifted onto the shoulders of the designer almost exclusively.

in the united states the art of typography, book design, visual communication at large, in its many aspects, is being shelved as a minor art. it has no adequate place of recognition in our institutions of culture. the graphic designer is designated with the minimizing term “commercial” and is