What I Have Learned about Typography. What I Teach.

Denise Gonzales Crisp

As an illustration student in 1980, I observed my design peers as they carefully arranged rigid blocks of text amidst rectangles of flat color or photographic images. Compared with the paint I was learning to manipulate, the materials of design held little appeal.

Before art school, I was a type worker. I had done pasteup, and had mastered an IBM compositor and a photo headliner. After graduation, I took production jobs to help support my fledgling illustration career. I figured out how to spec type, mark up galley proofs, and even input code and text on the non-WYSIWYG screen of a massive typesetter that then issued near-complete layouts. The machines and systems proved mysterious and complex. The output did not.

Hoping to have the intricacies (and attractions) of typography revealed, I studied with a tutor who himself had learned under a master named Müller-Brockmann. On eight-by-eight squares, I did exercises in a methodology that led to precision and rational beauty (I suppose), yet failed to entice.

I didn't connect viscerally with type until 1985, when I sat before the tiny screen of a Macintosh computer. Having control over typographic minutiae and seeing words shift almost instantly on a virtual page was akin to wielding a juicy paintbrush.

I caught my first glimpse of *Emigre* magazine, which assembled pixels into surprising letterforms and playful visual statements. I was introduced to April Greiman's digitally generated experiments. Those bricks of text with which I had built pages on the Varityper promised now, on the Mac, to billow into clouds.

I learned that typography is light, incrementally malleable, and that letters can be liquid stitches.

In 1992, I had access to a letterpress shop, where I meticulously constructed lead words on a composing stick. If the Macintosh led me to infatuation with typography, setting galleys letter by letter awakened affinity. Designing pages constrained to ancient agates and coppers linked my process and product to that of every type composer, printer, and graphic designer before me.

I learned that typography is heavy, as heavy as thick volumes inked on iron letterpresses.

I went on to design nearly every kind of typography: magazines, annual reports, stationary systems, books, signage, pamphlets, and packages. For years, my approach to each was burdened by the fear that I was unwittingly transgressing immutable laws. Though I had been teaching typography since 1991, I somehow had not been able to identify the so-called rules. They loomed vaguely overhead.

Working under a few skilled designers, I discovered that these laws that so eluded me were just the slippery nature of taste. The laws were, in fact, secret passwords and salutations handed down through centuries of apprenticeship. Like choosing the correct fork or knowing when brown doesn't work with black, this taste is acquired only by immersion. It is pointed out by people who know, and who slyly fix the fine line between restraint and tedium by example and signal.

I learned that typography is discrimination, and that such sensitivity to refinement determines one's position in the professional, if not social, pecking order.

In graduate school, I looked to typography to enlarge design—not for self-expression, but for extra (!) other (…) expression. I manipulated the form of my own words, and designed my own writing instead of that of copywriters or journalists. I confess that I got confused, and was not sure when my words should dominate or when the form I gave them should hold sway. I was smitten by both, so I determined that any attempt to separate them would be cruel.

I learned that typography is word love.

Are lightness and heaviness and tastefulness and tenderness the essence of good typography? Yes, and not quite. Typography is the form of words, and words cannot be present without form, and form is never not present. This interdependence predisposes all typographic form to meaning. Typography's myriad functions and attributes can only be placed within this inescapable context: the forms of all words always transmit meaning (and do so in spite of us). All typographic forms tell past, present, regional, technological, or doctrinaire stories. To glibly toss off any line of type is to be cynical about the designer's role in the manufacture of meaning.

In this light, the typography of casino coupons might be as important as the typography of books on Greco-Roman history. Pragmatically, of course, we have to distinguish between what matters less and what matters more. To the lesser concerns, a good typographer responds with the sensitivity of a master craftsman. To the greater ones, she responds with the invention and conviction of a performer crafting a tale.

18