



Type at the edge of the universe

Words **Hamish Thompson** Interviews **Catherine Griffiths**

Some want ads are just made to go unanswered. Sometimes you get lucky, or you get mad, and make it happen anyway. Case in point: a typographic designer working ‘at the edge of the map’ in New Zealand has made a major conference happen in her own backyard – Catherine Griffiths says she was just really hungry to stir up more awareness and debate about the medium within her own community. This is no set menu talkfest, franchised from bigger centres. Instead, TypeSHED11 is a ‘boutique event’, featuring Pacific and Northern Hemisphere-based designers in lectures and workshops on the Wellington waterfront.

It’s already raising dust in the local industry. Imagine, slogging through a discussion-starved design life in a ‘frontier town’ and suddenly you hear some of your colleagues have arranged for a visit from: Experimental Jetset, Christian Schwartz, Walter Bohatsch, Leonardo Sonnoli and David Bennewith. It’s not that there aren’t people in this island nation who take typography seriously: In a recent *Sunday Star Times* article, Wellington-based typeface designer Kris Sowersby is quoted: ‘He admits that when he’s reading he can go “for pages and pages” before he realizes that he hasn’t been reading the words. “I’ve been looking at the font and thinking about the font, and who did it, where it comes from.” Sowersby has won plaudits from the Type Directors Club and is currently working on an assignment (with Christian Schwartz) to complete Eric Spiekermann’s Meta Serif.

But typographically aware people in New Zealand are definitely ploughing an uphill slope, caught up in a design culture with all the usual commercial imperatives and little else. A small population makes for a small economy, and a decided limit to what a designer trying to feed the family (or the cat) can afford to take on outside their bread and butter work. And the discussion here can be suffocatingly shallow. The local design profession has to navigate the competing demands, having to reassess, balance whether its first allegiance is to the client or the aesthetic. The lack of dedicated serious publications doesn’t help: in a country with one of the highest purchase rates of periodicals per head in the world, many niche publications still just can’t survive in a total population of 4 million.

In addition, most design schools in the country do not offer specialist courses in typography (the one exception being Massey University). And if a graduate does find themselves drawn to type, they’ve little chance to find a specialist position here, even a fulltime job as a generalist – many end up working in bigger centres, in Australia and beyond, for their early adventurous years, or even their whole career. Such restrictions make TypeSHED11 loom large in the New Zealand design calendar: a big milestone on what can be quite a lonely path for the dedicated type-users and makers at this end of the world.

Ever been to a big act in a small town, where touring shows are rare? There’s a certain receptiveness in the air that can make it a night in a million, even for the performers. That’s the chance on the Wellington waterfront in February 2009. pđ

01\ Experimental Jetset, a Dutch graphic design unit, will be a guest at TypeSHED11. On the facing page is a shot of EJ Studio with a banner Experimental Jetset designed ten years ago for *Black Metal Machine*, an installation created for *SuperNova*, a group exhibition that took place in 1998 at Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam.

TypeSHED11.
Wellington, New Zealand
February 11–15, 2009
typeshed11.co.nz



David Bennewith

Q. As a type designer and/or user of type, what does typography mean to you?

It means an arrangement of devices and circumstances with which to construct messages. These devices, circumstances and messages are also in flux - related to contemporaneous events.

Q. What is the earliest typographic experience that you can recall?

Making headline lettering for school projects aided by Noelene Morris' *The Lettering Book*. But my most poignant experience happened while studying photography at art school in 1995. I had started classes for learning how to use computer graphics applications, rejecting Photoshop in the outset, I began to use Freehand to design silhouettes for producing photograms - I was really amazed when I discovered that you could convert typed letters into outlines and manipulate them. It was the first time I realised that letters (and their meaning) were truly malleable – and even in this digital space – in quite a physical way. A kind of shift happened in my thinking that I think has really influenced my practice today.

Q. Who or what has influenced your thinking in terms of typography and type design?

Too many things to mention. But five that come to mind are: the work of Samoan-born New Zealand type designer Joseph Churchward; the work of London-based artist/designer and writer Paul Elliman; Roland Barthe's essays *The Spirit of the Letter* and Erté, or *a la lettre* in his book *The Responsibility of Forms*; The Werkplaats Typografie – a masters course in graphic and typographic design in Arnhem, The Netherlands and *Up My Street* – Kate McCann's entry to the 'Doodle for Google' competition, 2008.

Q. Does content and meaning have a part to play in the work you do?

These two things serve as a reflection on each other and there are always unmotivated consequences between these two things in relation to work.

Q. Is your work shaped by content and meaning, or do you exert an influence over content and therefore its meaning, by what you do?

Designers always exert influence over content no matter how objective their approach is – I think, in terms of messages and objects, our profession is one of the worst for it. I don't know if it is possible to separate these things clearly in terms of 'influencing'. But maybe it is tied up in an attitude or a position in relation to them.

Q. For some, typography is a means of expression - is this the case for you? If so, how do you achieve this, in terms of expressing your own ideas?

For me firstly typography is a means of reference then, by doing/practicing, I guess what you might call expression follows – but hopefully more an ulterior one. The typography is expressed primarily from the content.

Q. In your view, how vital is typography/type design's role, socially, politically, and/or culturally?

Not really vital, but maybe of consequence. The way typography relates to our society via language is interesting, from a Bond & Bond catalogue to a cereal packet to a street sign to a corporate identity etc... things we read both consciously and unconsciously – the messages we receive from letters and words and the way they are [re-]presented. I enjoy typography that on some level can also serve as a reflection on itself.

01 \ Joseph Churchward, *Suggestions*. An A0 four-colour silkscreen poster, 2007. David Bennewith lives and works in Amsterdam. He is an MA graduate in Typographic and Graphic Design from the Werkplaats Typografie, Arnhem, and is currently a researcher in design at the Jan van Eyck Academy, Maastricht.

03 \ *Ten Years of Posters* (2006), installation view of solo exhibition by Experimental Jetset at Kemistry Gallery, London. Experimental Jetset is comprised of Marieke Stolk, Danny van den Dungen and Erwin Brinkers.

04 \ *20/20 Vision* (2004), installation view of sign system for Stedelijk Museum CS (SMCS).

Experimental Jetset >

Q. What was your earliest typographic experience that you can recall?

It’s hard to come up with one specific memory, but in general, we think we have been exposed to typography from quite an early age. For example, Marieke’s father was a printer. He was one of the main founders of Provo, an Amsterdam-based anarchist movement that existed between 1965 and 1967; his printing practice was rooted in activism. Danny’s father was a stonecutter (he still is), working mostly on the lettering on tombstones. In fact, he has been a stonecutter since the age of 16, working mostly with chisel and hammer. We’re not saying that our parents forced typography upon us, far from that. But in retrospect, we came to realize it’s not farfetched to assume there might have been some influence at play.

Q. Who or what has influenced your thinking in terms of typography and/or type design?

Punk. We were too young to be involved in the original punk explosion (we were pre-teens in 1977), but as young teenagers, in the mid-eighties, all three of us were very interested in the post-punk subcultures of that time: psychobilly, new wave, two tone, American hardcore, garage punk. We were specifically intrigued by the graphic language of those subcultures, as it manifested itself in record sleeves, badges, t-shirts, fanzines, mixtapes.

Q. For some, typography is a means of expression - is this the case for you?

We think typography is always a means of expression, even if the typographer is not aware of it, or simply doesn’t want to see it. As a designer, you are being handed raw material: it can be a text, a theme, a word, a question, sometimes almost nothing at all. It is then your responsibility to transform this material into actual physical objects: books, posters, invitations, letterheads, installations. During this process, the designer has to make an awful lot of creative decisions; and through these creative decisions, the designer is expressing concepts, values, theories, his/her cultural heritage, political ideas, preferences, dislikes. This happens even when the designer is not aware of it, or tries to suppress it. (You can see this very clearly in the posters made by those designers who saw themselves as pure functionalists in the 60s, and whose self-chosen goal it was to neutrally transmit information in the most objective way. Looking at these posters, you can really see the hopes, ideals and political ideas of a whole generation, clearly expressed in the typography. The fact that these posters were announcing exhibitions, or advertising medicines, is almost invisible now; what shines through is the incredible creativity of the designers).

Q. In 20 years time, how would you want to feel about the work you have done, as an artist/type designer/typographer, in terms of your practice? What is the footprint you’d like to have left behind?

Over a year ago, we read an essay that really impressed us: *Socialism and Print* by Régis Debray, published in issue 46 of *New Left Review*. In this essay, Debray describes the versatile subculture of printers from which modernity grew, and he calls this eco-system the ‘graphosphere’. Debray seems pessimistic about the future of this ‘graphosphere’, and describes its fall after the rise of postmodernism (which Debray calls the ‘videosphere’). Although we think ‘graphosphere’ is an extremely ugly word, we hope that a little bit of the spirit of the ‘graphosphere’ will stay alive in our work. If that can be our footprint, we would be glad.



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WHEN
I'VE
NOTH-
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TO SAY
I WRITE
IT IN
BOLD.

Leonardo Sonnoli >

Q. As a type designer and/or user of type, what does typography mean to you?

Typography is an extraordinarily simple/complex tool that can help to add (stronger-different-positive-negative...) meaning to the written language.

Q. What is the earliest typographic experience that you can recall?

As child, the stamp with my name composed in a sort of Classical Script font and an old Remington typewriting machine. I loved to use both. As student, the type design course, the letter drawings by ink with ugly curves. As professional, the compositions with Letraset.

Q. Who or what has influenced your thinking in terms of typography and/or type design?

Of course many, many authors. But, in the beginning, the deepest influence has been the early 20th century avantgardes. The Russian constructivism with Rodcenko and Lissitzky, the Dutch De Stijl with Van Doesburg and Piet Zwart. The typo-photographic experiment of Moholy-Nagy at the Bauhaus. But the importance to investigate the past of design in the present time has been the major lesson I got from my mentor Pierpaolo Vetta, a brilliant Italian designer.

Q. What compels you to make the work you do?

No idea. Probably my culture and my many influences.

Q. Does content and meaning have a part to play in the work you do?

Yes, of course. The meaning and the form are one. Even if the form should add or change meanings. But in this case written language is less ambiguous than pictures, which is the reason why I like typography.

Q. Is your work shaped by content and meaning, or do you exert an influence over content and therefore its meaning, by what you do?

My visual work is always shaped by content and my interpretation. A designer is not just a translator but an interpreter. Therefore we designers are betraying the original meaning. Just look at different solutions for the same content designed by different authors.

Q. In your view, how vital is typography/type design's role, socially, politically, and/or culturally?

A bad law written in a good type is still a bad law. Goebbels, the Culture Minister of the Third Reich, first imposed Blackletter as the official type of the Reich. But later, as it was difficult to read it (especially in invaded countries in the late period), he declared that an expert team had discovered that Blackletter was designed originally by the Jewish. So he declared Antiqua the new official type. I think that typefaces should be an important part of the cultural identity of a country, but often people don't care about it.

Q. In 20 years time, how would you want to feel about the work you have done, as an artist/type designer/typographer, in terms of your practice?

What is the footprint you'd like to have left behind?

Should be enough to leave a footprint and not on the beach... I'd like to leave a footprint consistent with Vignelli's statement: "I like design to be semantically correct, syntactically consistent, and pragmatically understandable. I like it to be visually powerful, intellectually elegant, and above all timeless".

05 \ For *Kakejiku*, an exhibition at the Ginza Graphic Gallery in Tokyo, 2006. Sonnoli says: "When I've nothing to say I write it in bold," is an escape from a typographical composition that represents only itself; it is the desire to remain silent whilst using a screaming heavy alphabet. A letter takes on the meaning of the word it composes and the content it relays. Typography without content is not even an exercise in style; it is simply an 'unaesthetic' exercise."

06 \ *Conversazione su Gianfranco Grignani*, 2001. Offset - two blacks plus varnish - 98 x 68 x two-side poster-tribute to Gianfranco Grignani, one of the most influential post-war Italian graphic designers. Designed with Pierpaolo Vetta.

07 \ *Diritti e doveri* (Rights and duties), May 1997. A poster for the national conference on the rights and duties of people in metropolitan areas. Offset two colors and UV varnish on matte coated paper.



08\Giorgio designed by Christian Schwartz for *T, The New York Times Style Magazine*, 2006. Schwartz is principal of Schwartzco, a New York-based type design and consultation firm.

09\StagDots designed by Schwartz for *Las Vegas Weekly*, 2006 and 2008. Benjamin Purvis was art director.

10\ESB Titting and Sans, designed by Paul Barnes and Christian Schwartz for The Empire State Building, 2007.

11\Guardian Egyptian, designed by Paul Barnes and Christian Schwartz for *The Guardian*, 2005.

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Chic

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Christian Schwartz >

Q. As a type designer what does typography mean to you?

Typography is language made visible.

Q. What is the earliest typographic experience that you can recall?

My father is an animator, and when I was young he worked entirely by hand. From time to time he would have to make titles, or labels on maps, using dry transfer lettering, and he would let me play with the partially-used sheets when he was done. The first typeface I can remember using is 30 point Thompson Quillscript, when I was 4 or 5.

Q. Who or what has influenced your thinking in terms of type design?

I've been very lucky in my career, and had the opportunity to learn and work with some of the best type designers (and art directors) working right now, but I'd have to say that, besides the old masters - Granjon, Figgins, Wilson, Benton, and Frutiger, to name just a few - the biggest influence on my thinking has been my collaborator and business partner Paul Barnes. He's skilled at designing typefaces (although he still refuses to call himself a type designer), he's a great typographer, and has an encyclopedic knowledge of type history.

Q. What compels you to make the work you do?

I got into type design because I love to read newspapers and magazines, so I suppose it's only natural that most of my work is geared towards publication designers[...].as long as there are new things to read, we will need new typefaces.

Q. Is your work shaped by content and meaning, or do you exert an influence over content and therefore its meaning, by what you do?

When all goes well, my work is a visual voice for content, and helps to convey meaning to the reader, but the designer who uses the typeface is responsible for shaping content with it.

Q. For some, typography is a means of expression. Is this the case for you?

If my main concern was self-expression, I would not be a type designer. I make tools for other people to use.

Q. How vital is type design's role, socially, politically, and/or culturally?

I see type design as very similar to fashion - a typeface is an expression of its time and place, and things go in and out of style. I think a typeface is a cultural artifact, no more-or-less important than a song, book, film, or article of clothing. It's interesting to see the way a typeface can become sort of a visual shorthand to signify certain ideas, like Helvetica for neutrality and Didot for elegance. However, I think it's hard to make a convincing sociopolitical statement through a typeface. Even acutely political typefaces generally need some additional explanation to get the idea across, and it's easy to subvert the idea of a typeface with the content written with it.

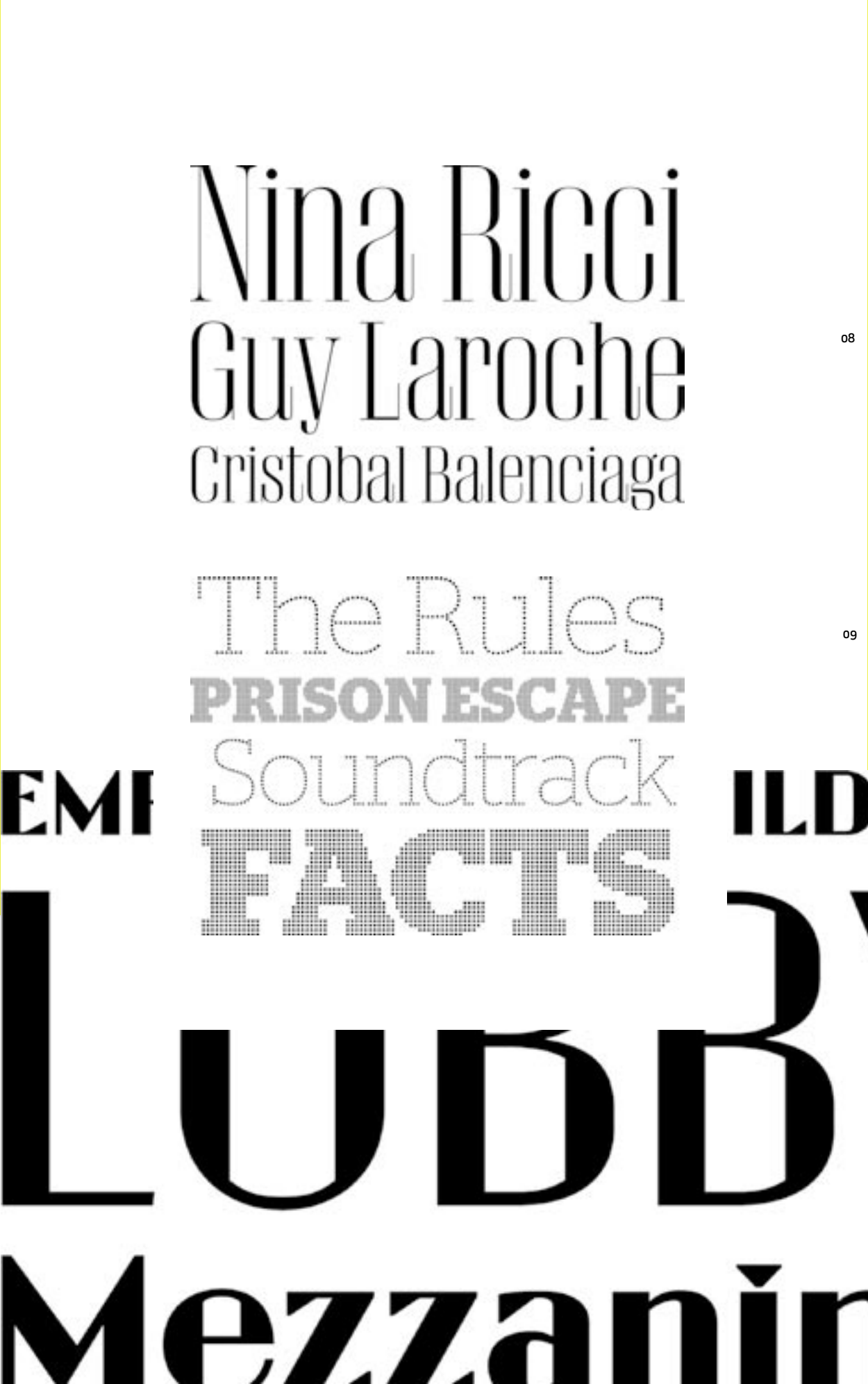
Q. Is any of this important to you? Why, or why not?

I'm interested in how typefaces fit into their cultural context: the development of the British Modern, for example, or how the architecture of the Empire State Building can be reflected in a typeface that, while new, can seamlessly integrate into the visual environment of the building. Finding a social and political role for type design seems like a stretch at best, though. Type design is a craft. Would you ask a tailor or a carpenter the same question?

Q. In 20 years, how would you want to feel about the work you have done?

I'm too young to think about my legacy. Ask me in 20 years.

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12\ Poster: *Love, Art and Agony*. Gabriela Rodríguez (curator) and AGI Alliance Graphique International invited 100 graphic designers from all over the world to design a poster on the topic of homage to Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera. This work by Bohatsch Visual Communication shows a subtle interaction between image and typography, which refers to the dynamic relationship between Frida and Diego.

Walter Bohatsch >

Q. As a type designer and/or user of type, what does typography mean to you?

Typography is inseparable from type usage, while type does not merely represent a documenting medium, but is the knowledge medium *par excellence*. Accordingly, if one views typography as that function which guides, through its conscious implementation, the arrangement, processing and exchange of information, one will concede that it has also changed, and will continue to change our thinking. Assuming that reading continues to be the overriding means of acquiring knowledge, as it has been up to this point in the history of civilization, not only the considerable role of typography in today's societies is secured, but also the responsibility of the person active in its service.

Q. What was your earliest typographic experience that you can recall?

Secretly lettering on the walls of my parents living room – as a four-year old.

Q. Who or what has influenced your thinking in terms of typography and/ or type design?

Wolfgang Weingart, Basel, Switzerland. Fritz Gottschalk, Zurich, Switzerland.

Q. What compels you to make the work you do?

My enthusiasm for visual design as well as my interest in connecting it to the workings of contemporary society.

Q. Does content and meaning have a part to play in the work you do?

In order to develop a suitable design solution, one must understand the content of the problem being posed.

Q. Is your work shaped by content and meaning, or do you exert an influence over content and therefore its meaning, by what you do?

Both yes and no, as the answer to this question depends upon the specific problem at hand.

Q. For some, typography is a means of expression - in your practice, is this the case, and if so, how do you achieve this, in terms of expressing your own ideas?

It is never design for designs sake; instead, we try to get to the core of the task that we have been commissioned for.

Q. In your view, how vital is typography/type design's role, socially, politically, and/or culturally?

One might say that the civilising achievement of typography is its ability to transmit meaningful and interpretable messages. Writing and typography are the essential media for communication and must be judged by there ability to successfully transmit those messages.

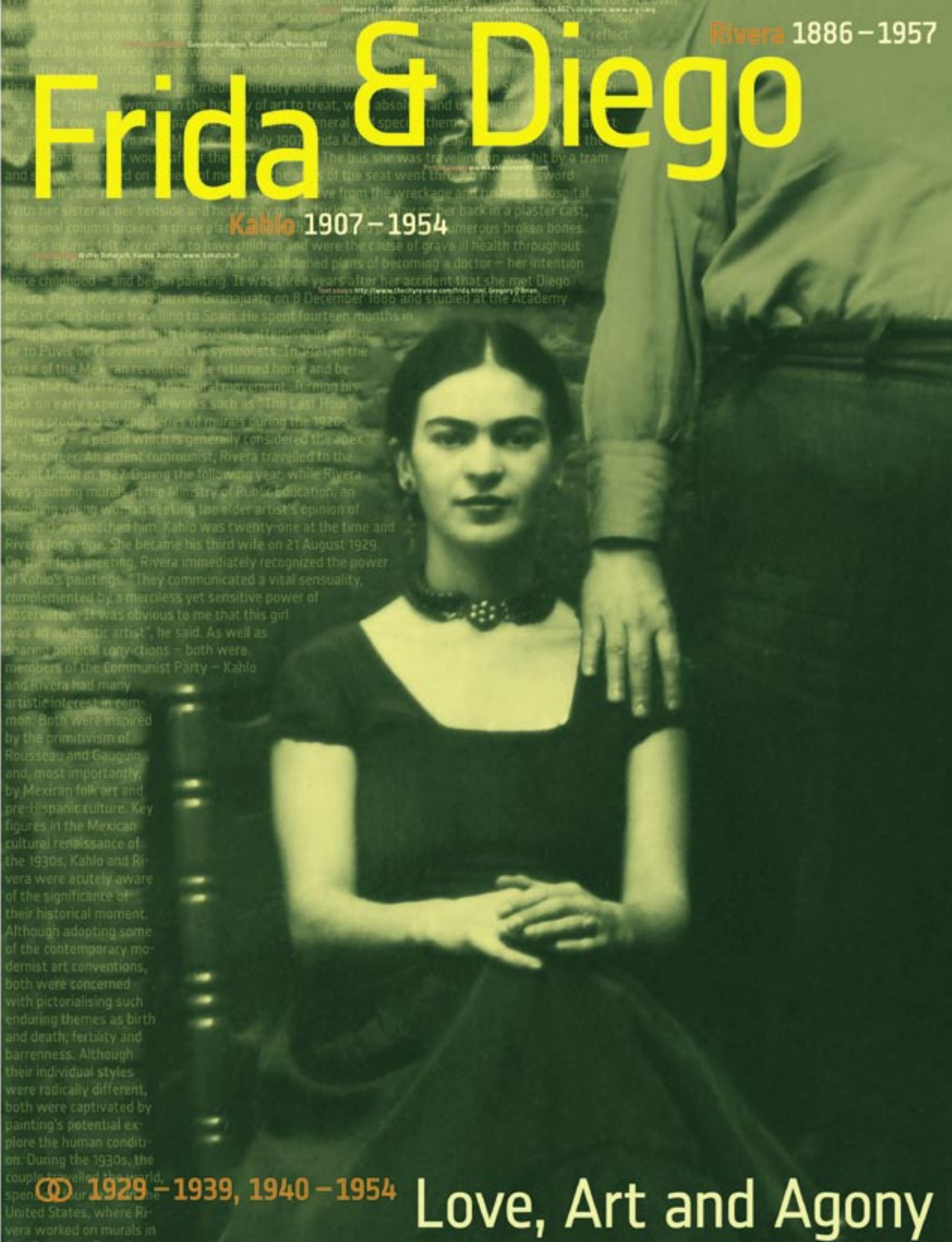
Q. Is any of this important to you? Why, or why not?

The legibility of what ever we read, be it conscious or unconscious requires typographic preparation.

Q. In 20 years time, how would you want to feel about the work you have done, as an artist/type designer/typographer, in terms of your practice? What is the footprint you'd like to have left behind?

My primary interest is to be able to continue to believe in myself and the work that I am producing.

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Rivera 1886 – 1957

Kahlo 1907 – 1954

1929 – 1939, 1940 – 1954

Love, Art and Agony