

# Artful words

The worlds of art and type recently met in two projects — *Le Cadavre Exquis* and *Give us a Sign* — running concurrently to February's *typeSHED11* symposium in Wellington.

Words Helen Walters

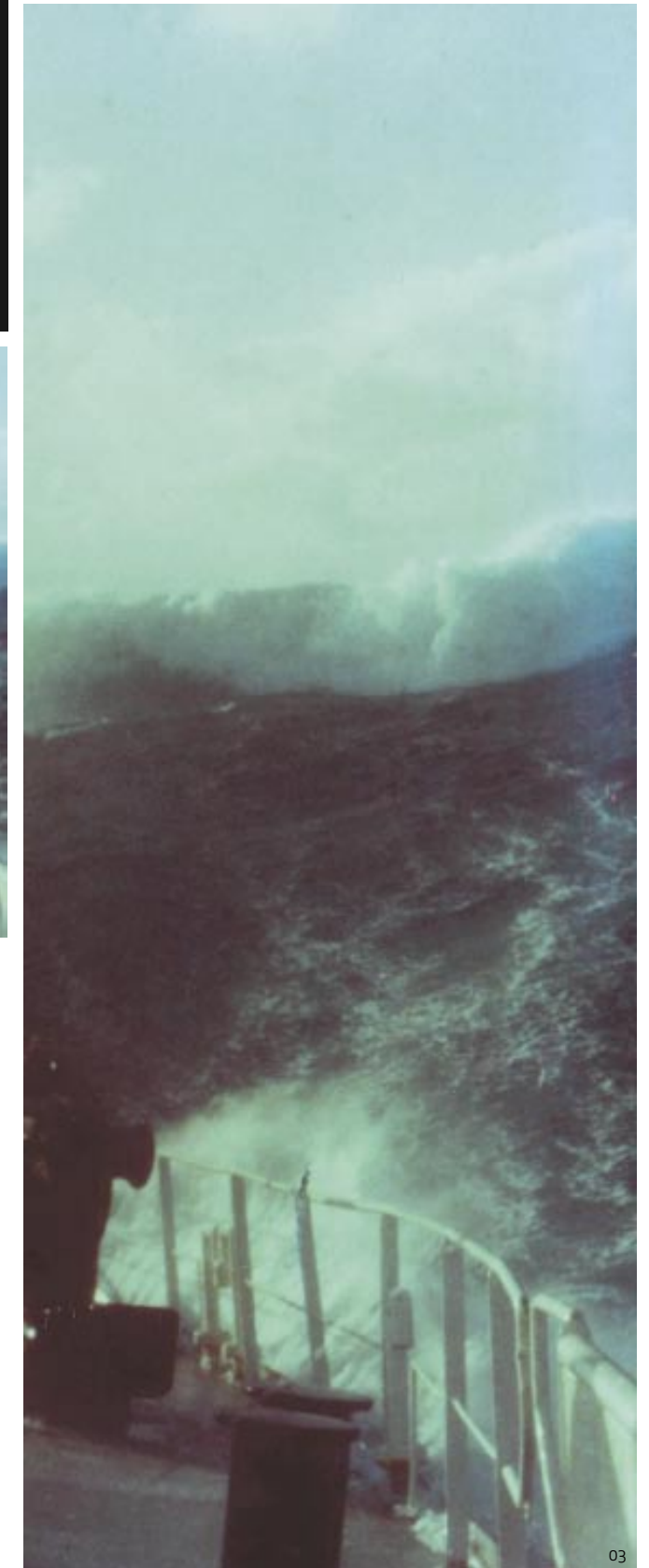
01 \ Works from *Give us a Sign*, Courtenay Place Light Boxes, 17 December 2008 – 14 June 2009. 3 *Daughters*, digital prints on vinyl by Joseph Churchward and David Bennewith. *Georgina* (Churchward, Georgina Light Italic); *Maricia* (Churchward, Maricia Shadow Italic); *Lorina* (Churchward, Lorina Light). 02 \ *Too much too soon too little too late* and *For Reasons of Affection* by Stanley Nives. Digital prints on vinyl. 03 \ *Big Sea*, digital print on vinyl by Jim Speers.

As the New York Times columnist, Thomas Friedman, puts it, the world these days is hot, flat and crowded. In an age of globalisation, we're all more connected to each other than ever before. Thanks to increasingly sophisticated technology, we can learn about a far-off place, see real time images of how it looks, listen to its sounds and its music, admire its art and design, even make personal contact with locals if we feel like it, all at the click of a button, and all from thousands of miles away.

Now while some fear that such a shrinking of the world is leading inexorably to a bland global homogeneity, a sludge of visual sameness that will envelop the world and rid it of its nuance and subtlety, many cultures remain brilliantly distinct. For visual artists in particular, issues of context and environment regularly play an important if often understated role in their work, and many of the most skilful practitioners have set up internal filters to process the assault of influences. Accepting the connected reality of the world? Yes. Creating something unique? Again, yes.

That's why *typeSHED11* promises to be such a fascinating event, as it brings together a host of visual artists from around the world to share and compare ideas, thoughts and influences in a location that all too few will have visited before. The five-day event examines all things typographic, that too often undersung lynchpin of design. The brainchild of New Zealand graphic designer and typographer, Catherine Griffiths and Simone Wolf, of *Typevents*, the event brings together the likes of Paul Elliman, Donald Beekman and Experimental Jetset for what looks to be a thought-provoking snapshot of contemporary type design, its history and its future.

In honour of the event, Griffiths collaborated with Leonardo Sonnoli, an Italian designer and educator, who will also be presenting at *typeSHED11*, on an ambitious project that required the collaboration and good humor of nine of the world's foremost graphic artists. Based on the "cadavre exquis" game so beloved by the Surrealists, the pair sent out a challenge to designers including Peter



04 | Posters from Le Cadavre Exquis, organised by Catherine Griffiths, Simone Wolfe and Leonardo Sonnoli. Participants included Griffiths, Sonnoli, Alt, Paul Sahre, anothermountainman [Stanley Wong], Peter Bilak, Tony Brook, Henrik Kubel and the fictional Moana Bilsahson.

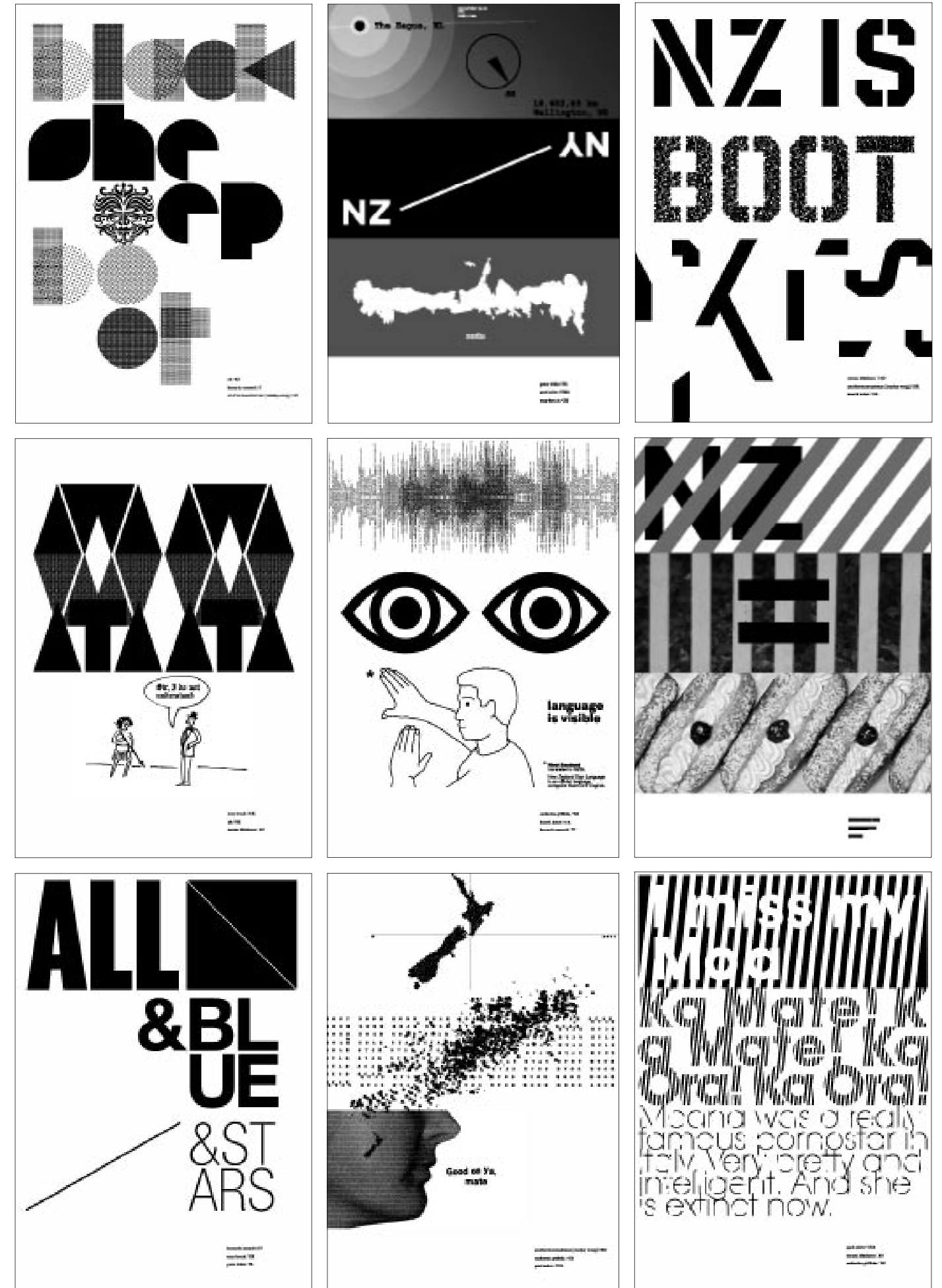
Bilak in the Netherlands and New York-based Paul Sahre. Their challenge: come up with an image that imagined New Zealand through typography.

On returning the image, the designers then received another file, this time with the task of adding to another's work. Same again in round three, which saw the pieces' completion, for a total of nine A0 sized posters featuring the collaborative vision of the nine artists. With a pleasing continuity across and throughout the nine images (all black type on white), these are also startling visions of a country's identity, with themes covering the gamut from whimsy to beauty, with a healthy dose of the absurd included for good measure. "The effort was to create a dialogue among designers and a reflection on the idea of identity of a nation," Sonnoli noted in an email. "In this case it should be an experiment interesting also for the citizens and not only for designers."

It was certainly an interesting experiment for its curators, who had to deal with the crunched availability

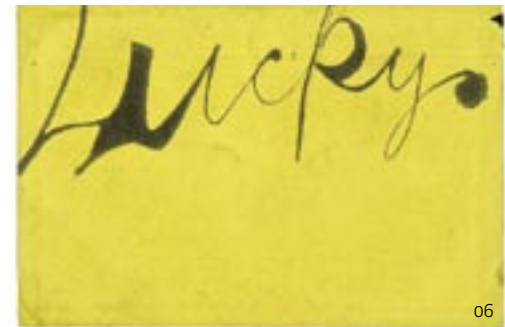
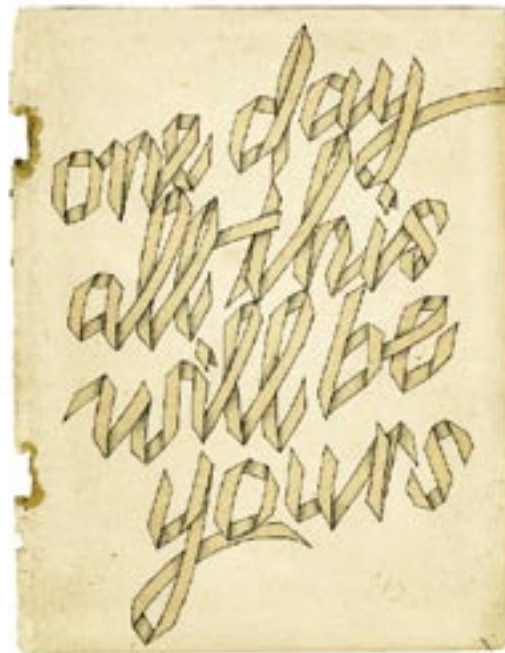
of their nine contributors. To their credit, they pulled it off, with only one last minute hitch: the unexpected disappearance of Vince Frost (turns out, he'd gone on holiday.) Ever resourceful, Griffiths and Sonnoli improvised, staying true to the Surrealist nature of the project by simply inventing the ninth designer. Love the work of Moana Bilsahson? Make the most of it; it's the only time you'll ever see it, what with Bilsahson being an amalgam of work by Peter Bilak, Paul Sahre and Leonardo Sonnoli (see how they did that?). The fiction continues – Moana's from AO, an abbreviation for Aotearoa.

Across town, another exhibit also celebrates both local and international artists. Curated by Heather Galbraith of the City Gallery, the sixteen works in Give Us A Sign are, appropriately enough, displayed in light boxes on Courtenay Place. The works, from the likes of Joseph Churchward and David Bennewith, Sarah Maxey, and Jim Speers play with the context of the environment, a busy commercial district in Wellington. "I was intrigued that the overall tone of





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05 | From Give us a Sign. *I did this instead of going out* by Sarah Maxey. Digital print on vinyl, from original drawing on old endpaper.  
 06 | *One day all this will be yours*, by Sarah Maxey.  
 07 | Digital prints on vinyl by Gavin Hipkins: *Bible Studies (River)*, *Bible Studies (Preacher)*, and *Bible Studies (Sea)*.  
 08 | Kate Newby, *Thursday evening, Saturday evening and Yesterday evening*.

the works ranged from a little bit sad, through wistful to melancholic, right on to downright bleak," says Galbraith of the contributions. The works play with the idea of what a sign can be, and reflect the common themes affecting the lives of their creators — and all. Again, where we live and work may contribute to making us all distinct, but none of us are immune from the pressures of the downturn of the global economy, with its tentacles stretching far into every part of our lives. "Most of us are searching for a way through this turgid time, looking for the little rays of hope that keep us chugging along," says Galbraith. "I wanted to provide a platform whereby the participants could be as optimistic or as pessimistic as they wanted, to be playful, provocative, resigned or angry. But also the willfully naive wording acknowledges the complexity of our current ills and triumphs and that it is an unrealistic expectation to

lay on art, that it will be the thing to offer us complete transcendence."

Sure, transcendence through art seems like a long shot, but as the world settles into a new era, roiled by depression and difficulties, it's also clear that culture and art have a part to play in fashioning the future. And events such as TypeSHED11, bringing together artists to explore, learn and investigate the practice of others as well as an audience of sympathetic onlookers, eager to learn and hone their visual skills in their own right, act as a cultural hub to further the practice of all.

*Editor's note:* Le Cadavre Exquis is an edition of three sets of nine A0-sized posters, digitally printed by Fuji Xerox, comprising: an exhibition set; a set split between the nine; and a third set put to auction. Auction proceeds go towards funding a typography student's studies. [p4](#)