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## ***Capital lady of letters***

*Wellington-based designer Catherine Griffiths, the powerhouse behind the upcoming TypeSHED11 event, fairly lives and breathes in letterform.*

Words Anna Dean Photography Bruce Connew and Jason Busch

01 | When the Wellington Writers Walk committee asked Catherine Griffiths to design a series of A4 bronze plaques for she sold them on a more concrete proposal, to international acclaim. Photo by Jason Busch.

02 | At home in the streets of Wellington where typographers will converge this February, Griffiths is photographed by husband and collaborator Bruce Connew.

03 | The owners of this house loved Griffiths' typographic idea of literally wrapping their new house in poetry, which was sandblasted onto glass panels. Photo by Bruce Connew.

04 | Typographically understated, *Stopover* by Bruce Connew tells a story of Indian-Fijian migration.

05 | In her book cover design for *A Short History of Photography*, Griffiths closely knitted names together in Didot.

On contents page: Hand-written brushwork, inspired by the flight of birds, in a calm section of *Muttonbirds – part of a story*.

**Settling in to start** writing this piece on Wellington-based designer Catherine Griffiths, I'm stumped before I've even begun. Not because of the range of projects, achievements and fine design this one-woman typographic powerhouse is responsible for, but rather I'm now cripplingly aware of what my typeface selection may say about me.

In a recent panel discussion Griffiths chaired at the Adam Art Gallery, I learned some typographers consider Arial (my word processing font of choice) to be a lousy digital version of Helvetica, and that's putting it nicely. Griffiths will be reading this draft before I submit it to *ProDesign*. Should I use Times? Garamond? Futura perhaps, to reflect my personality a little better? In the end I stick with Arial for its comforting familiarity. They're a strange breed these typographers and Griffiths is a die-hard fanatic. After spending time in conversation, her enthusiasm and eye for type is infectious. She literally appears to live, breathe and dream in letterform.

There is a self-portrait on her website that captures the woman perfectly. Poised wearing Galliano's newspaper pants and leather jacket, this snapshot is taken hurriedly in the dressing room at John Galliano's store in Paris (as part of her Dressing Room project). The focus is on the fabric, imprinted with newspaper clippings and his signature name typeset in a gothic serif, Blackletter – a telling representation of the designer herself – she the devilishly stylish 42-year-old and a cheeky, covert image creator.

We meet in a Cuba St café and the 'young' (step) grandmother arrives in a flourish of red mini-skirt and knee-length boots. She's in a rush and there's much to talk about as she's at the helm of the most exciting typographic design event ever to be held in New Zealand. Griffiths is the creative director of TypeSHED11, a five-day international typography symposium happening in Wellington on 11-15 February next year. But more on that later.

Right now she's red-cheeked and breathless, telling me about her recent typographic discoveries in the icy wastelands of Alaska. It's hard to keep track of the range of projects Griffiths has mastered; book and exhibition design, corporate communication design, environmental signage, public sculpture, even two short films, but they all come back to a focus on letterform.

Griffiths' love of the shape of letters may be hard for the uninitiated to understand but she clarifies it as a "working relationship with letterform" to evoke and produce a meaning, a mood and a certain feeling. Describing typefaces in terms such as "hard working", "exciting", or "quite exquisite" reveals her deep feeling and appreciation for type in humanistic terms. It's a love affair that started young.

The daughter of a civil engineer and a musical mother, who "sewed all of our clothes", Griffiths recalls having an awareness from an early age of her surroundings, her sense of place and the landscape she exists in. "Perhaps as a consequence, I see time and space mapped out very clearly in my mind in three dimensions (rather like a personalised galaxy of numbers) upon which my whole life and all that goes with it, is pegged out for me to see and make reference to. It's a landscape I am constantly referring to.

"I didn't even know the term 'graphic design' until I was 16 or 17, so I sort of fell into it," she explains. A Visual Communication Design course at Wellington Polytechnic in the mid-1980s, and the arrival of tutor Hamish Thompson "changed everything that was typography" for this student. "Hamish, a graduate of the Basel school, introduced us to the Swiss school of thought and it was his own commitment and passion that rubbed off on some of us."

Upon graduating, Griffiths headed to London for three years before settling back into New Zealand where she has spent almost 20 years working in visual communication design in the corporate world, as well as on personal projects. A Stringer Award winner in 2002, Griffiths has now found herself at a comfortable stage in her career.

"I'm not afraid to follow my instincts and am lucky to be in a position where I can choose to work with people where there is mutual trust and respect – vital ingredients for a successful collaboration," she says. "I'm now quite selective and try to work with decision and vision makers where the ideas stay intact and the energy is fresh. Projects need to have meaning for me and I always plan to come out the other end feeling that what I have done has carried the meaning appropriately. You always need good content to start with and then the design will come intuitively."

### Slices of text

Griffiths' appreciation for the written word led to the Wellington Writers' Walk, which has become a beloved city treasure along the urban waterfront. Created as a conversation with the landscape and something to touch and engage with, stare at and read, the 15 concrete creations – slices of text and poetry from New Zealand writers – is known around the world while the words of the writers live on, outside the pages of a book; a permanent fixture in the hearts and minds of the capital.

Alongside this successful project is a strong sense of collaboration with Griffiths' husband, photographer Bruce Connew. The pair have collaborated on a number of book projects together, including the beautiful *Stopover* (2007)



and the stunning *Muttonbirds – part of a story* (2006), and are heavily involved in each other's work as sounding board, confidant and critic. The self-publishing projects and travel for inspiration have come at a high cost for the pair, however this investment is considered vital to their own professional and artistic development.

Like most graphic designers dedicated to type, Griffiths records and documents her travels carefully. Invitations to speak at conferences in places such as Alaska (Alaska Design Forum, 2008) and Helsinki ATypI, (Association Typographique Internationale Conference, 2005) – as well as a place on last year's typography judging panel at the D&AD Global Awards, London – have enabled her all manner of typographic excavation.

Camera in hand, laptop over shoulder, Griffiths creates the impression of an Indiana-Jones-type-explorer, recording and dissecting letterform and design style the world over. After lecturing in Alaska, she flew to the northernmost tip of the continent and "discovered a typography worth recording".

Landing on ice in Barrow, a small settlement populated by indigenous Eskimos and a bunch of scientists, Griffiths set off in a borrowed truck, armed with a can of 'polar bear spray' and drove as far north as she could. "The landscape was overwhelming. There I was, inside the Arctic Circle, minus 208 Celsius, and not a soul outside. A wide white space, forever and ever. And not a word. I was struck by this absence of voice. Until I saw a mini dumpster."

Here, hand-painted in bold bright colour, Griffiths located the voice of the community, "speaking out and back to themselves" about the social issues and problems in this extraordinary landscape. "As I drove I discovered more bins saying: DON'T DRINK AND DRIVE, STOP SEXUAL ABUSE, HOW MANY PEOPLE HAVE TO SUFFER? and realised the community had found a way to mark their own territory."

### TypeSHED11

After her public stint in Helsinki, Griffiths was featured in New York's acclaimed *Print* magazine in 2006. As her international profile has spread, her connections with teachers, students, designers and artists have multiplied. But it was a chance meeting with Simone Wolf, an Italy-based events management consultant, that has led to the "creative space" of TypeSHED11.

An idea born out of a food and wine-filled conversation, Griffiths and Connew visited Wolf and her partner in Italy's Reggio Emilia in 2007. "We'd just finished printing Bruce's book, *Stopover*, in Verona nearby. I'd been fortunate

enough to meet Simone twice since 2005 at two typography conferences organised by her company Typevents. It was Simone who suggested Typevents come to New Zealand and it was really just a question of why not?"

Wolf, who Griffiths describes as "a stunning mix of Maltese and German sensibility – organisation with personality," says there was an instant meeting of minds between the pair. "Catherine is surely very skilled and has a profound background knowledge of everything she does plus her eye for detail and her strive for perfection are useful and necessary characteristics that make her work outstanding. Besides that though, you can see she is not a European designer or typographer. Her approach is a much more open and laid-back one than we have over here."

This curiosity for the New Zealand approach and the opportunity to visit has created a swell of enthusiasm within the international design community. Wolf believes TypeSHED11 will move the type and design world even closer, giving people the chance to exchange ideas, thoughts and problem-solving techniques from different cultural perspectives.

The TypeSHED11 concept is based around a distinctive New Zealand voice and tone. "It's a world class, boutique event being held in Wellington ... in a shed," Griffiths laughs. "It's great to see local and overseas individuals and groups coming on board, contributing in various ways all in the name of TypeSHED11." Fifteen high profile and influential international guest speakers will be in town for the five-day event which includes presentations and workshops at Shed 11 on the waterfront (not far from Griffith's concrete poetry creations) as well as satellite events around the city.

Guests who have been announced thus far include Dutch group Typeradio (Liza Enebis – aka LoveLiza and Donald Beekman) – a typography radio channel that broadcasts live from conferences. Then there's Melbourne typographer Stephen Banham; Austrian Walter Bohatsch, regarded by the godfather of typography, Wolfgang Weingart, as the most interesting and challenging graphic designer around today; and young hotshots Experimental Jetset, also from the Netherlands (they starred in *Helvetica* the movie)... As Griffiths enthuses: "Imagine these people and our own, thrown together under one roof."

In the meantime, she is taking another call. It's Kyle Cooper's PA from San Francisco confirming he'll be coming. While not widely known, Cooper's been described as the man "almost single-handedly revitalising the main title sequence as an art form. He's the guy who made the opening sequence for the movie *Seven*," she beams across the table at me. Things are getting more than exciting. pd

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