

## Conceptual Type: Type Led by Ideas

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### EDITORIAL

“Where are the idealistic fonts, the artsy fonts, the non fonts, the political fonts, the funny fonts, the difficult fonts, the fonts that don’t look like fonts, the fonts that are frontiers of new beliefs?”

We would like to focus on the ideas and concepts behind type. Rather than ushering in our examination about type by asking who it was that created it and what it looks like, we want to ring in this new decade by asking why we create type and what it means.

‘In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes art.’ (Sol LeWitt, ‘Paragraph on Conceptual art’, in *Artforum*, 1967.)

We would like to draw on Sol LeWitt’s vision and then we would like to replace ‘art’ with ‘type’, in a search for the idea-type-machines of our time.

We would be most honored if you would join us in our pursuit.”

In the hopes of launching a non-dogmatic effort to discover the idea-type-machines of our time, a conference was held in Copenhagen in 2010, where designers and theorists convened to discuss the current status of type design with a point of departure in what was proposed on the invitation quoted above. The conference attracted more than 500 graphic designers, type designers and theorists from all over Europe and the large turnout and the huge interest in debating type inspired us to make use of the conference and the concept of ‘conceptual type’ as the basis of a combined book and special issue of *Artifact*. We call this combination a signature edition.

The book and special issue both include presentations made at the conference, which have been revised and edited, as well as a number of new articles written especially for this publication. In all

the texts, the concept of ‘conceptual type’ forms the basis of a discussion about the current role of type design, as illustrated by specific cases and examples and with perspectives that are related to historical developments and contemporary trends in a variety of genres and publication formats.

‘Conceptual type’ is not an established term, nor does it have any clear-cut definition. But in this context, it has served as the point of departure for a non-dogmatic, thematic and proposal-oriented discussion about type design and its underlying ideas.

The signature edition thus takes an explorative approach to the concept, showcasing and debating specific historic and contemporary fonts, concepts and cases, all of which address the topic of the publication in various ways.

The aim of the publication is not to arrive at a consensus or an unambiguous definition. The articles represent very different voices emanating from praxis and from research. The contributors have their respective roots in various professional traditions and thus have different ways of presenting their thoughts and ideas. The editors have chosen to maintain these professional and individual differences rather than to strive for a uniform expression, since having a range of professionals offering different perspectives on the publication’s central topic has been considered to be a specific plus. Hopefully, with its open and discursive approach, the publication ought to help spark some debate about the role of type design today and in the future.

The publication consists of six articles with supplementary illustrations and presentations of visual cases. With this structure, the publication can be read either ‘horizontally’, via the visual cases and captions, or ‘vertically’, via the articles’ more in-depth approach to the subject.

## CONTRIBUTIONS

**Steen Ejlers:** Is the success of a conceptual typeface, rather than being an effect of aesthetic or functional qualities, related solely to the preceding idea-development process? Or to put this in a more simple way, "When is typography conceptual?", asks Steen Ejlers and takes us on an explorative historical journey of type design, ending with present day corporate typefaces, which he regards as conceptual in a moderated manner, inasmuch as they deviate from the dictum that a typeface must first and foremost be functional, and instead places their thrust on conveying something beyond the verbal message. Ejlers questions whether the conceptual, in the end, is seated where functionality is no longer of primary concern.

**Rick Poynor:** Rick Poynor takes us back to what might be deemed the heyday of conceptual type experiments. In "Conceptual Hybrids: Type in the 1990s" he takes a closer look at the decade that brought about a new concept-driven approach to typeface design, an era when sampling and surrealism invaded the field. Informed by the theory of deconstruction, these type experiments were seeking to unravel the stability of language and any notion of inherent meaning. Conceptual type neither was nor is an established term, Poynor says, but the letters of the alphabet certainly do carry unlimited potential for conceptual re-workings.

**Paul Barnes:** In "Concepts and Realities. *Marian*" Paul Barnes discusses the implications of tools in type making, and uses historic examples of formulaic type-construction as a basis for calling attention to the tension between the conceptual and the realities of type design and manufacture. Bound by the same basic alphabet, Barnes contends that the central concern in type design is how we deal with the fact that the past is very much present in type design. Comparing the making of typefaces to cover-versions of classic songs, and using his own typeface, *Marian*, as an example, he contends that while the idea for a new interpretation is indeed the most important factor, the most interesting place is where concept and reality converge.

**Peter Bilak:** "Conceptual type is an oxymoron": such is Peter Bilak's opening statement in "Conceptual Type?" As a craft-based discipline, type design cannot be purely conceptual; the success of a typeface is dependent on its execution. "Would you hire a 'conceptual' plumber to fix your sink?", Bilak asks polemically. He talks instead about the underlying ideas or intentions of the author, pointing to how the term 'conceptual' is often used synonymously with

these other terms. Bilak questions whether usage might lie at the heart of the matter and asks: What does it entail for a typeface when author and user have differing intentions? Is a typeface that never gets used but remains instead an aesthetic exercise perhaps to be considered a conceptual typeface?

**Ida Engholm:** In "Conceptual Type – a commentary on the Internet's design development?" Ida Engholm offers a definition of the term, "conceptual", that is generated by way of conceptual design and conceptual art. She then employs this definition as an analytical concept and subjects it to an examination of how conceptual typography was used as a critical design approach during the early days of the Internet. Within this venue, conceptual typography that was based on postmodernist ideologies broke away from a prioritizing of the technical-functional, focusing instead on laying bare the non-transparency of the Internet medium. Even though this type of critical stance is currently diminishing in prevalence, Engholm addresses the continued need for a concern with the relation between writing and its underlying ideas.

**Nanna Bonde:** In "Considering conceptual type" Nanna Bonde examines how the two conjoined terms, *type* and *conceptual*, can be construed in such a way that the concept of *conceptual type* can currently be explored in a meaningful and generative manner. Through the vehicle of conceptual art theory, she posits a distinction between experimental type and conceptual type: positioning the conceptual within the processual, and delimiting the conceptual from the ideational. She suggests that conceptual type might be intrinsically linked to the exploration of the relation between type and language – congruent with the deconstructive type experiments of the 90s.

## VISUAL CASES

**Norm, design collective:** The Swiss duo has persistently been working methodically and conceptually with visual communication and typeface design. They are constantly pushing the boundaries for New Swiss design further by being both referential and almost obsessively compulsive in their attention to concept, grids and details. In the book, they show examples from their own output, focusing especially on their conceptual book, *Norm: The Things*, and on their typeface, *LL Replica*. According to Norm, *all* text is conceptual, because it is based on the alphabet. In the case of the Latin alphabet, for example, there has never been a *tabula rasa*, a re-start from scratch.

**Underware, design collective:** The Dutch/Finnish type design collective has, from its outset, combined humor with a highly skilled and patently original approach to typemaking. For Underware, the process of typemaking, including the initial sketching, the wrong decisions, the failures and even the naming of the fonts, are all as important as the actual finished product.

**Europa, design collective:** Negotiating and appropriating visual culture is the hallmark of this British design collective. They have reinterpreted Johnston's writing exercises, re-introduced the illustrated capital letter and exercised the visual style, New Ugly, before it was rebranded Pretty Ugly.

**Erik Spiekermann, type designer:** Embodying corporate custom fonts, Spiekermann represents the idea that corporate values and ideas can be reflected in a typeface. As a paradox, his typeface, *Meta*, teaches us that even though a typeface has originally been developed for a very specific client, it can eventually transform itself and become the '*Helvetica*' of the 90s.

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