Personal Perspective

Typographical designer Jonathan Hoefler once remarked, “Typography is to writing as soundtracks are to movies.” If the music for a motion picture is too loud or too soft, too intense or too calm, or in an inappropriate style, an audience member is distracted from the plot. Typographical choices can guide a viewer toward understanding the literal message of the words and toward perceiving symbolic meaning. But the wrong choices can make words hard to read and distract from their message. How words are presented, then, are just as important as what those words are.

A graphic designer has many variations of type at her disposal. In addition to the obvious choice of the particular typeface style, a single word or a block of copy varies in its size, placement, color of the letters, the background, column width, length, and justification style. If a designer is working in a screened media either for television, motion pictures, or online, other variables can include pacing, the length of time letters are shown on a screen, and direction, the placement of where the words enter and exit a frame. Unless the letters are the main thrust of a presentation, it is a safe bet that most typographic choices made for print and screen media go unnoticed by an untrained viewer.

Artists, however, seldom want their work to have a neutral reaction. They want their choices seen and responded to by a viewer. The typographical artist Tauba Auerbach (Weblink 7.2) uses letterforms in her pieces that often demonstrate how the same word can have different messages depending on the typographic choices employed (Figure 7.8). The Seoul, Korea, artist duo of Marc Voge and Young-Hae Chang of Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries (Weblink 7.3) work primarily with online animated typographical forms set to music that make statements about social customs and practices. In their piece called “The End,” they demonstrate through mostly large, uppercase sans serif letters that breaking up is hard to do in English, Korean, and Galician, a language spoken by about 3 million persons mainly residing in northwestern Spain. Voge and Chang vary the music and pacing depending on the letterforms inherent within each language. Again, the literal message remains the same, but the effect on viewers is quite different. New York artist Yael Kanarek, perhaps more well known for the integrated media piece “World of Awe” first conceived in 1994 (Weblink 7.4), also works with word sculptures made from rubber cutouts. In “Lemon,” the word is displayed in 32 languages in a collage of rubber characters glued together to form a kind of crocheted piece in order to investigate the “territorial properties of language.”

Figure 7.8
“Blah, blah, blah,” 2006, by Tauba Auerbach. The New York–based typographic artist Tauba Auerbach shows in this work how the same word can have different symbolic and emotional meanings depending on the choice of typeface.
In a similar technique, "Untitled (Lace)" weaves together a phrase from "World of Awe," "Yours forever, your sunset/sunrise forever yours, your forever yours" written in English, Hebrew, and Arabic. The piece conveys simplicity within its chaos through its webbed structure (Figure 7.9).

**Historical Perspective**

Although the art of typography officially began with the first edition of Gutenberg’s Bible, typography is linked directly to the history of writing. And even though anatomically modern humans have been on the Earth for about 180,000 years, the practice of placing symbolic messages on a medium of presentation is probably 40,000 years old. Since then it has transitioned from drawing and writing to mechanical and then digital production.

**Drawing**

As evidence of higher intelligence over other animals, early humans began to preserve images of animals by drawing or carving petroglyphs on the walls of caves, on mountains, on desert plateaus, and on the bones of slaughtered animals (Figure 7.10). Paintings and petroglyphs were a realization by early humans that they could make their thoughts permanent by preserving them. Later, drawings of human figures and symbols for the sun and moon abounded, but overwhelmingly the main subjects were the animals that were hunted in the part of the world where the drawings were found. The drawings represent two kinds of visual messages: pictographs and ideographs. Pictographs are pictures that stand for objects, plants, or animals. Ideographs are images that represent abstract ideas. Modern humans can easily understand ancient pictographs, but the ideographs created by early humans remain a mystery (Figure 7.11).

In the Lascaux and Chauvet caves in southern France, for example, early artists mixed charcoal or colors from the soil with animal fat or their own saliva. They spread these paints with their fingers, spit them from their mouth, or used crude reed brushes to produce paintings of animals with remarkable clarity and artistry. These drawings represent the first known attempts to create a written language.

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**Figure 7.9**

"Untitled (Lace)," 2008, straight pins and rubber words in English, Arabic, and Hebrew, by Yael Kanarek. In the typographical artwork, the hypnotic flow of words in rubber merge in organic patterns in which the foreground is as interesting as the negative spaces between the forms and the background shadows.