

Direct

An interview with Akiem Helmling

I met Akiem Helmling in Underware's office inside De Illussie building in Den Haag for an interview on July 2006. And, this is what we talked about →

Regular teaching, workshops, type design, graphic design, typeradio: what is the principle that connects them?

If you ask me why we do all these different things, it's because it is all connected to our interest in type, type design & typography. We try to approach things in a broad sense. You can be very interested in type and type design without actually designing type. You can also teach or you can talk about type. So, we try to think in a different way try to connect type to a broad context. So for example, if you make a radio station about type and typography, you have probably a much bigger audience than if you release a type specimen that shows a type from A to Z. On one hand, everyone is surrounded by type. It's very present in everyone's life. You can't live a single day without being confronted with type. But, on the other hand it is a very isolated subject/field. People don't know so much about it. Isn't that's very strange?

We had a talk with someone who is organizing a poetry/musical festival in the Hague. The festival was trying to cross borders in current society; to connect poetry with performance, performance with music, music with language etc. We approached them because we thought that typeradio would be an interesting

addition to a festival like that. Especially when such a festival is held in the Hague. They asked us why do we think that this is important and why this would make sense. We wrote a little essay about this, trying to convince the organizers. So we stated how we thought it was very strange that most famous writers for whom it would be very important to know something about type, know nothing about type. I would be curious to see what comes out if you ask for example the best selling authors or the highest appreciated writers, in what type their last book was set. I would be very curious to see if they know. I think they wouldn't. And that's very strange. It's the same as if a construction company didn't know anything about steel or whatever material they build stuff with. Type is the material that writers use to tell their stories. If you design a book, a novel or a poetry book, quite often there is no direct contact with the writers. And if it's a famous writer, there's even no chance at all to get in contact with him. Type is very isolated area. Even though everybody has to deal with it.

Type design: Theory, instinct or mimesis?

I think 90% of it is a craftsmanship. It's about defining a basic idea and applying this idea in a consistent way through the whole typeface. It also deals a lot with arrangements in society. At some point the alphabet was defined. People agreed on how forms should look like in order to be readable.

But there is still lot of things that you cannot define; for example “the personality” of a type. I think that as soon as you try to build a type completely on theory, try to calculate your every move, there is a big chance that at the same moment the same type is done by someone else, somewhere else. So if this is not a problem for you, this approach is perfect. But, if you would like to

make an original typeface, it is necessary that you make very personal decisions. Decisions for which you can justify with good reasons. And that's always a problem: how to bring in your personality, without disturbing the concept. Type design should be based on a very clearly defined idea. You can for example have a basic idea to make a very very thin type and this will bring up problems. Or you can make a very thin type with a very high contrast. Another problem. Or you can say I want to make a thick type that it's still very elegant, which is probably very difficult. So for me this part of type design is the most interesting one: defining a vision, an aim, a purpose, very clearly in the beginning. Then it is very easy to judge if you did a good design or not. If you don't define this aim, this purpose, it would be very hard to judge the final result.

There are also some things that you cannot explain. It's the same as with music. You can not explain why some songs are hits and some are not. If we knew this there would be no rock-stars. Type design is very defined by media, trends and propaganda. The typefaces we are using are probably not the best typefaces for a certain purpose but we use them because other designers use them or because they are profiled by the media (or the foundries) as very good typefaces. And this I think is very strange because, on the one hand there is globalization, where for example we all wear the same sneakers, but on the other, we still use very different typefaces in Holland or in Germany. Even though we are so close to each other. I believe that this has to do with every country having its own design heroes who in the end define the typefaces we are using.

For Underware designing type starts with a very clear idea and visualizing this idea in a very personal way. Of course we always need the theory to base our construction on but I don't know if I would use the word mimesis for type design.

How do you confront a possible misuse of your fonts? How do you confront font piracy regarding your fonts in particular?

We approach this in not such a strict way than probably other font foundries do. Sometimes it happens that font foundries are too strict. For example, once I heard a story of a foundry calling up a publishing house and saying “One of your designers made a book and the font he's using is published by us and he didn't pay for this font” and based on this the designer got into a conflict with the publishing house. But later on it came out that the designer had actually bought the font but under a different name (laughing). So I would really feel guilty if I did something like this.

But it's always very difficult and very hard to trace. For example you see something made with a type of yours and sometimes you get curious of course and check the (client) database if they have bought a license. Sometimes you can't find the name. But you don't know whether he bought the font by a different distributor eg. from MyFonts or Fontshop. We don't know. So you should be very careful when you approach people and ask them “Hey, what is that?” Sometimes it happens that I ask in a very kind way eg. “I just saw that this big project has been released and (...) I know that you never contacted me about the fonts, so did you actually purchased a license or not?” Quite often they say “Yes, I bought it by a different distributor” or “under a different name.” And I always say “Oh, I am very sorry for this” and I have to give them a little present (laughing). That's very difficult.

But if we discover that other people put our fonts for downloading somewhere, of course we approach them saying that they have to remove them immediately otherwise they will get in trouble. Once we had this funny story where a russian guy put Bello somewhere for downloading and we approached him and told him that this font is not for free and it's under copyright and that he

has to remove them immediately. After this he approached us very aggressively saying “This is not right. This font is for free. There is not a copyright mentioned anywhere.” We told him that we don't feel like starting a discussion about that and that he just has to accept it and he really freaked out saying what assholes we are, who do we think we are and so on... Of course this only happened once.

Do you plan on adding Greek or other foreign languages scripts (e.g. Arabic or Cyrillic) to any one of your existing or upcoming typefaces?

This is always very difficult. There is always some aspect in designing type that is very very personal. There is not one right and one wrong. You can judge this in your own language, but you cannot judge it in a different language. You have to have someone who you totally trust and that's very difficult. There is so much stuff based on personal taste and on personal ideas that you can only decide for yourself. But you cannot do this if you don't know the language. I think a lot of people hesitate to add eg. Cyrillic or other languages because they cannot judge them by themselves. You do something and then the other one tells you “Yes, this is acceptable” and another says “This is not acceptable”. You can only judge it if you talk and read the language.

There are so much stuff that you can't say that this is right or this is wrong. For example in figures you have a lot of freedom when you design them eg. where you want to make them thick or thin, so there will be always a discussions. I think there is not one typeface where there are no discussions. People will always find elements where the design is very strange but creates very individual forms. And these are probably the basic characteristics of the font. But you can only define by yourself if this freedom will fit to the rest of the font or not.

What would be your advice to an emerging type designer?

The most important would be to define a need for the type you are designing. To define clearly why this type should be designed. What does it add to all the existing typefaces. I think there are a lot of typefaces which are very similar to each other and it's hard for me to see any difference. There are still so many things to explore. It is worth to invest some time to search for a subject in type design which is not explored than to hurry up and start too early. Sometimes people are very selfish and they just want to design a type. They really feel the urge to do it without defining what this type should be used for, why they actually make it and what makes this type better than other similar existing ones. You can define a very clear a strong idea behind a typeface. This way you can make it very real and less vague.

So, this would be my advice to upcoming type designers. To invest more time in defining the basic idea behind their typefaces. And also to try to use the freedom and the possibilities they have now and here. There is a different situation now than 20 years ago. You can design much quicker than 50 years ago, when you needed to draw perfect outlines, to digitize them with Ikarus and so on. Comparing it you could say that it's perhaps 50 times faster. So in the same time you can make 50 more variations than someone could do 20 years ago. So be aware of this situation. Use technology and also your personal background and surroundings. Someone in Greece should make a different type from someone in Portugal or someone in Argentina or Norway. So, at first it would make sense to look very carefully at what other people are doing (but) then you should look for a field that is not yet explored and try to understand it. x

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Il y a aussi des choses que vous ne pouvez pas expliquer. C' est la même que pour la musique. Vous ne pouvez pas expliquer pourquoi certaines chansons sont des coups et certains ne sont pas. Si nous savions il n' y aurait pas des rock-stars. Le dessin de type est très définie par les médias, les tendances et la propagande. Les caractères que nous utilisons ne sont probablement pas les meilleures pour un certain travail, mais nous les utilisons parce que d' autres concepteurs utilisent eux ou parce qu' ils sont profilées par les médias (ou les fonderies) comme très bons caractères. Et je pense que ca c' est très étrange parce que, d' une part, il y a la mondialisation, où, par exemple, nous portons tous les mêmes chaussures, mais de l' autre, nous utilisons encore très différente typographie en Hollande ou en Allemagne. Même si nous sommes si près de l' autre. Je crois que c' est parce que chaque pays ayant ses propres héros de dessin qui à la fin définissent les caractères que nous utilisons.

Νομίζω ότι το 90% αφορά δεξιότητα και γνώση. Αναφέρεται σε κάποιες βασικές αποφάσεις και ιδέες και στην εφαρμογή τους με ένα συνεπή τρόπο σε όλη τη γραμματοσειρά. Σε μεγάλο βαθμό έχει να κάνει και με κοινωνικές συμβάσεις που καλώς ή κακώς ακολουθούμε. Κάποια στιγμή ορίστηκε και αποφασίστηκε το αλφάβητο. Οι άνθρωποι αποφάσισαν και συμφώνησαν πάνω σε συγκεκριμένες σχεδιαστικές φόρμες. Αλλά υπάρχουν ακόμα πολλά πράγματα που δεν έχουν και δεν μπορούν να οριστούν επακριβώς· π.χ. «η προσωπικότητα» μιας γραμματοσειράς. Νομίζω ότι αν κάποιος προσπαθήσει να σχεδιάσει μια γραμματοσειρά ακολουθώντας «κατά γράμμα» τη θεωρία και έχοντας προκαθορίσει κάθε του κίνηση, υπάρχει μια μεγάλη πιθανότητα, την ίδια ακριβώς στιγμή η ίδια γραμματοσειρά να σχεδιαστεί και από κάποιον άλλο σχεδιαστή, κάπου αλλού. Αν αυτό δεν αποτελεί πρόβλημα για έναν σχεδιαστή, η προσέγγιση αυτή είναι τέλεια. Αν ωστόσο θέλει να δημιουργήσει κάτι πραγματικά πρωτότυπο, είναι απαραίτητο, και μάλλον αναπόφευκτο, να πάρει κάποιες πολύ προσωπικές αποφάσεις.

La cosa più importante sarebbe quella di definire una necessità per il carattere tipografico che si sta progettando. E definire in modo chiaro il motivo per cui questo carattere tipografico dovrebbe essere progettato. Che cosa aggiunge a tutti i tipi di carattere esistenti. Credo che ci sia un sacco di caratteri tipografici che sono molto simili tra loro ed è difficile per me vedere alcuna differenza. Ci sono ancora tante cose da esplorare. Vale la pena di investire un po' di tempo per la ricerca di un'idea che non è ancora esplorata che fare in fretta e cominciare troppo presto. A volte le persone sono molto egoisti e vogliono solo la progettazione di un carattere tipografico. Hanno davvero sentito la voglia di farlo senza definire per quale motivo questo carattere tipografico deve essere utilizzato, e che cosa è quella che lo fa differenziarsi e lo rende migliore degli altri consimili caratteri tipografici già esistenti.

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LIGATURES/DIGRAPHS

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