

Monotonous

An interview with Chester Jenkins

I met Chester Jenkins in DUMBO, Brooklyn (NY) near Village's (vllg.com) office on October 2008. And this is what we talked about →

Q – Do you believe typography could have a social/political role/responsibility? If yes, what would that be?

A – I think it does. Since I have been designing real type, which has only been a few years, I have come to feel that it is very important that typography actually does its job, which is to communicate. There is absolutely nothing wrong with display typefaces, but I guess I'm a real modernist in that I feel the medium may make the message, but when the medium is typography it should be as neutral as possible.

Typefaces add style, of course, otherwise you could just use what you already have. (One of Massimo Vignelli's five typefaces, for example.) Even as we are creating new styles of type, it is paramount that they remain legible and readable as their first job is to communicate. How they look is secondary in my world.

As far as the political responsibility... Even though I may not be politically neutral, I think that typography should be politically neutral. Just because I don't believe in a nation's political system doesn't mean that I should not treat their script or language with as much respect as any other. In that way typography should be neutral, it shouldn't try to add another layer of commentary or content to the message. I made a “political” typeface called Freedumb that left out the letter W as a protest against President George W. Bush, but that was really just a joke.

Q – What do you think type means to "ordinary" people? Are they more aware today of what type and typography is than they used to be? And if so how does this awareness influence type design?

A – I do think that people are more aware of typography. The popular media has taken an interest in type design. A lot of people saw the Helvetica movie, including many people completely outside the world of design, and now when I meet somebody and tell them that I am a type designer he says, "Oh! Like Helvetica!" They are starting to understand what type design is. There have always been typographic ad campaigns, and when there is a lot of strong work like that, people notice it a lot more ... At the moment people are talking about the different graphic approaches of the two Presidential campaigns, which has been more widely discussed than it was in previous elections. Mostly because Senator Obama's design is so handsome and non-traditional. So, yes, I think that there is much more public awareness now than there was even a few years ago. A designer friend told me that his clients are asking him about commissioning custom type, instead of the other way around. The client says, "We have this logo; can we make an alphabet based on it?" Typography has entered the consciousness of the people who used to indirectly commission it.

Q – So, in a way, it made the clients more demanding.

A – Yes, and they actually know what they are demanding. That means more work for us, which is great, because there are more type designers working than ever before. It is something that pushes us forward towards better quality communication for everybody.

Q – What would you say that your philosophy is as an agency? Which is your one most basic principle? What is your biggest ambition as Village for the future?

A – Our philosophy is to curate a high quality, small, and very carefully chosen collection of work from selected type designers.

Q – So do you want to be recognized more as a type design agency or more as a (type) collective?

A – I think that the collective part of it is the most interesting. We have people from all around the world who are members of the group. It's a small group, ten foundries now, and we don't plan to expand over twelve. That has always been our limit. We want to make sure that we are representing people whose work is not widely available. So, for most of the members of the collective, Village is their only distributor. And it's important to us that the work is very high quality, very original, and you can't find it anywhere else.

Personally, my ambition for the foundry and for the group is for our work to reach the maximum number of people possible. So we have extended OpenType support and extended language support. That's what I am trying to do with my work. And hopefully I have been able to bring other members of the group with me by helping support at least Eastern Europe and Turkey, and encouraging them to work in other scripts like Greek, Cyrillic, Hebrew, Arabic, Korean and so on. So, our biggest ambition is to stay where we are in terms of size, but reach as many people as possible, and never taking on work that we don't believe in. We'll never do that just

to have a release which will be popular for a couple of years.

We are in this for the long run and our hope is that Village keeps on going for decades. We started the company 4 years ago with my wife and partner Tracy, who went to the Design School at Yale University, and got her MFA there in 2004. It took us almost a year to put together the company, the collection, the group of people, and the website before we launched. So we've been working for 3 years and it's been improving from month to month. We have some extraordinary young talents, like Kris Sowersby, who is an amazing designer from Wellington, New Zealand, and we are very happy to have a place where we can present his work to the world.

Q – Correct me if I'm wrong but Galaxie is actually one of the few fonts (if not the first) you distribute that contains a foreign script (Cyrillic). Do you see this becoming everyday practice for your future releases?

A – We definitely do. We are going back to our most successful publications and adding language support, at the risk of releasing new versions of everything without putting out new work. Which we are also doing. It's a balance of extending the existing releases and releasing new work.

Q – What was your approach in doing that?

A – For the Cyrillic I corresponded with Maxim Zhukov and he gave me notes, and for the Greek I looked at a lot of types by Panos Haratzopoulos of Cannibal. It's important to get things right. There are so many things that I don't know and I recognise that

some people may give me opinions as opposed to facts. So, I do listen to people's feedback... In my early type designs I made the mistake of making the letters graphically “right” as opposed to making them work as units of the greater whole. Most people make mistakes because they look at the work of other people who made mistakes. I want to talk to as many people as possible about making the type look right for various languages.

Q – How do you confront a possible misuse of your fonts?

A – I feel that when we make our work available for licensing in an open market there is nothing we can do about how it is used. You hope that it will be used by interesting people for interesting work, but if it's used by, for example, a gun manufacturer or some “evil” company, well... It is what it is. I may not be excited about it but I can't stop it... Your types are your children: you raise them, you do the best you can and you put them out in the world when they are mature, but you can't control everything. They can go out and rob a bank or they can win a Nobel prize. Hopefully, it's the latter.

Q – How do you confront font piracy regarding your fonts in particular?

A – Every once in a while, a typeface will show up on a publisher's or distributor's site which bears a too-close resemblance to something we have released. If it's definitely a stolen idea we will write to the publisher or distributor and they are usually very responsive. It doesn't happen that often. Maybe once a year.

I used to care a great deal about people who stole our typefaces and put them on sharing sites, but it's something that you can fight all day long and never put a stop to it. The people who are downloading typefaces are amateurs for the most part; they are not professional designers. They will use the types to make an image for their website, a flyer for a party and so on. I'd rather it didn't happen but it's pretty harmless. I used to battle a few specific pirates, and you could shut them down one day and they would pop up the next day with the same URL at a different host ISP. They were more persistent than I could ever be, so I had to ask myself: do I want to make type or do I want to stop people from stealing type? I decided it was a better use of my time to make type.

Q - Type design: Theory, instinct or mimesis?

A - I think it's all three. But different people work in different combinations within their different typefaces. Personally, I am not that interested in doing historical typefaces; I don't have a collection of specimen books, and look at the typefaces of Walbaum or Bodoni or Garamond and ask how my version of those historical models would look. (That being said, Kris Sowersby and I are working on a Plantin together. I have always liked Plantin and I wanted to figure out what a Plantin would look nowadays. So there is a Galaxie Plantin coming out.) Usually I am most interested in doing work from scratch. Thinking of an idea and then making it work. And most of that is instinct. But your instinct develops. The more you do it, the more you learn what to do and what not to

do. I have been designing typefaces for 15+ years but only in the last few have I started to make good typefaces. And I certainly wouldn't say that any of my fonts are perfect. Everything you do is a learning process. And I think that most of the people I respect would say the same thing.

The more you try to build a typeface based on theory alone, the worse it looks. You have to have some kind of variation for type to actually work: Futura seems like an almost perfectly geometric typeface but it's not. A lot of moves were made in order to make the typeface work as a typeface, and deviating from the pure geometry to do that. The first thing most of us do as budding type designers is to build a typeface out of circles and squares, and it almost always looks terrible and works even worse. The more you understand how things work, the further away you get from theory and the closer you get to instinct: things will just look "right" to you. I never studied type design so I don't know how it's taught, but I think that a lot of it is trial and error. As Matthew Carter has said, a typeface is not a collection of letters. If you design an alphabet from A to Z, that's not a typeface. A typeface is how all letters interact with each other in text. And unless it interacts well in text, it's not working, and it's not a typeface.

Q - Is type design "good business" in New York?

A - Since we came to New York, it's been a huge change. We had so many more opportunities mostly from New York clients but also from elsewhere. There might be a perception about New York City

designers... I don't know what it is. I used to live in Chicago and I don't think that if I was still in Chicago I would have the same opportunities. We have done a lot of work for Pentagram, (Michael Bierut, Luke Hayman and Abbott Miller,) 2x4, and other agencies in town. In New York you can meet a lot more people. There are so many great type designers working here and there is so much work to go around. Clients know they can come to me for a certain type of work or a certain approach to a project, and they can go to Christian Schwartz for a different approach, or Hoefler & Frere Jones or another approach to a project. So, yes, New York is a good place for type design.

Q – Do you see any type design trends nowadays? Can you in a way foresee the upcoming trends of the near future (e.g. could that be the super families)?

A – Sans serifs are always very popular; our top ten typefaces are mostly sans serif. But there are a couple of serifs in there too. An original and truly contemporary serif design can really take off and become ubiquitous. Mrs Eaves by Zuzana Licko at Emigre is a very good example of that. At Village, Newzald and Odile are popular choices. People are also interested in the super families, as you mention. They want to be able to get a typeface which has a lot of weights, a condensed version, a matching serif, small caps, numeral sets, language support, etc. Because Village is small and we know where our typefaces are being licensed, frequently we will hear from our customers, and we can talk to them and find out what they are interested in and why they look at a specific typeface.

Q – Do you think that a future trend would be towards more generic (universal) letterforms like e.g. Gotham or more culturally diverse and situated forms like e.g. Malaga?

A – Probably both. I think there will be a demand for both. Thanks to rampant self-publishing we see a lot of types that are geographically specific. For example, designers in South America seem to be making type which has a very specific regional flavour, and that's fantastic to see. In Europe, a Dutch type language was developed in the 20th century Gerrit Noordzij, Bram De Does and other designers, and their pupils are teaching now, so the Dutch school has spread very far and wide.

Q – What would be your one most important advice to an emerging type designer?

A – Stay open minded. Talk to a lot of people about your work. Get all the information you can from as many people as you can. A lot of type people are really nice and really generous. When I was first starting out, making really bad types, I was hugely influenced by Gerard Unger, whom I met when I was living in London and Utrecht. My work was very rough, but Gerard was very encouraging. So don't be shy, take advice and don't be afraid to fail. The first work that everyone does is terrible. If you are a sculptor, the first sculptures you make are going to be very rough. Very very few people are like Mozart and will be able to just go right into making perfect work. So, you have to work at it and fail a lot, and learn from those failures. I am happy that I started my career as a type designer at a time when it was more difficult to

publish. You had to publish with one of the few foundries, and that meant that you had an editor, an editorial board, and other quality tests to pass. The first face I published in 1993 through FontShop was a single silly typeface, but it was selected by FontShop, and they had to do some work on it. It was a good thing to learn from. Not every typeface should be published. Not every song should be recorded. Some things are just experiments with limited interest or application. So, to emerging designers I say this: Don't expect instant gratification. In making type, there is a little bit of talent, and a lot of work involved. Drawing a typeface is 5% drawing letters, and the rest is intense technical work. You can't rush through the last 95% of the work. You have to get everything working together.

Many thanks to Christos Tsolerides for his help with the interview questions. All rights reserved. Please do not use any part of the interview without written permission from backpacker.gr

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