

# **RANDOM THOUGHTS ON TYPE DESIGN**

by George Triantafyllakos

→ Who am I designing for? I constantly think about that whenever I start working on a new typeface. Does anyone care or am I simply producing digital garbage with little to no value whatsoever? Does my work have any impact on the microworld of Greek graphic/type design and Greek typography? Who will use it in the end and how? Can I have any kind of control over its final use? Eventually, should I care about all that at all?

→ Not a day has passed the past 10+1 years not to question myself, the work I do and the reasons I am doing it. Is it vanity? Is it genuine curiosity? Is it passion? Is it altruism? Does it make any difference (good or bad) if one prevails over the rest? I guess these doubts are essential and it's what can keep one going. You could say that they are the most important driving force behind any kind of creative endeavour (apart from fear of death, professional or other recognition, or the need to make a living out of it). But in order for them to work this way, they have to be constructive; they have to force you to work harder, learn as much as you can and evolve as a practitioner and as a human being. If they just overwhelm you and bury you beneath a huge mass of insecurity and self pity, then they are as good as professional suicide.

→ OK, type design is without a doubt a first-world problem. We can all agree to that. Nonetheless, is it important? Of course it is (at least, for some of us). Does your life depend on it? Of course it doesn't (unless you drive your car and you see a sign writing END OF ROAD, and the space between END and OF has been erroneously forgotten or is deliberately too small, and you read ENDOF ROAD, and you think ENDOF is some kind of important historical figure whose name was righteously given on this road, and you keep going and you fall off a cliff with your car. It can happen...). Can you stop doing anything that your life doesn't depend on just because it doesn't? Of course not. Does type design have to be acknowledged as something more important than it is now considered to be? I am not sure about that, but I think I lean towards thinking no, it doesn't. Does this change the way one should approach type design (as a serious practice and not some kind of free-time hobby)? Definitely not. Is there a point to any of this? Probably not.

→ A lot of people (including the ubiquitous judgemental voices inside my head) have asked me why do I give away the typefaces I design for free. Why don't I sell them? Isn't this practice somehow a way to debase and underestimate the value of your work? I see the point behind such remarks. However I see them as a bit hypocritical. I mean, ok; when the little guy does it he is killing the market or reeks of insecurity and unprofessionalism, but when Google does it, it's a game changer in web typography or something. It's revolutionary, right? I mean, ok, I know it is not the same thing, and there is more behind the decision of Google to distribute hundreds of medium to high quality typefaces freely online (mostly political and technological decisions) but why can't a small designer from Greece do it, without having to explain that (a) at some point in your life, you didn't want everything you do to revolve around money, or that (b) yes, you did feel insecure about the quality of your work, so you were afraid to ask people to pay for it but, at the same time, you were curious to see if and how people will use it, and that (c) there was always a little bit of ambition in you and getting your work exposed like that was a way to gradually promote your work, get feedback and get to know people, and become part of a network of people and a whole discourse on what is typography, and that this involvement was extremely helpful and crucial for your evolution as a type designer. What the hell money has to do will all these, anyway?

→ I always had a difficulty designing trendy typefaces. Maybe because I am always a step back from trends and it always takes a big effort for me to try and understand why or how a new type design trend is relevant to me, the way I design and the way I understand typography. I think I am getting better at it by the day. At least the understanding part, not really the designing part. But hopefully, I am getting there as well.

→ The case of typeface use in Greece was always as follows: one or two typefaces used literally everywhere and by everyone for a somewhat limited period of time. This pattern (at least during the years I have been involved with graphic and type design) started with Meta® and Din® during the late 90s, moved on to Fedra (mostly Serif, but

also Sans) the early 00s, then Gotham and Neutraface during the late 00s and early 10s, only to end up with a handful of neo-geometric, again Gotham- or Futura-like typefaces, the past years. Fortunately there is a tendency for graphic designers to work with a larger variety of custom typefaces the past 2 years, but this still only applies to a few designers and creative studios. I know that it takes time for a designer to understand and really “own” a typeface. However, I do think that Greek designers are a bit more conservative when it comes to typography than they should, and I always thought of great designers as truly skillful people that have the ability to make even the most (seemingly) useless typeface blossom (and that’s why in the polyphony vs. cacophony debate, I prefer the former). And it’s just a matter of will to be this kind of a designer; a trend-setter instead of a trend-follower, one who rests inside her safe zone doing just the few things she knows how to do well. I believe that a good metaphor for this is thinking of designers as movie directors and typefaces as actors: using the same actor over and over again in your films leads to a point where everyone starts noticing the actor more than the role he is playing at. The suspension of disbelief starts to dissolve and all you are left with is the same old actor once again, in another one of the roles that made him famous, using the same gimmicks and the same face expressions, and everything ends up being boring and utterly uninspired. That’s bad, right?

→ The way graphic vs. type designers view typefaces and typography is completely different. Where the former look for trends, originality, ingenuity, and diversity without worrying for any inconsistencies and/or technical or design errors, the latter are obsessed with detail, consistency, historical authenticity and relevance, technical and design integrity. There are type foundries that clearly take sides and produce typefaces that fully satisfy the needs of the one or the other group of practitioners. And there are some (few) type foundries that can satisfy equally both sides. I still can’t decide which side [backpacker.gr](http://backpacker.gr) leans towards more... And if I have to make such a decision...

→ I hate social media. There, I said it. I do believe that they nurture arrogance and compulsive criticism, and force people to take a stance

on everything and choose sides and, eventually, become something that they are not. Having a commercial type foundry though (the past 3 years), I should probably start thinking differently. It's clear that, more than ever before in the history of humanity, we are all connected and one's professional visibility, its very existence in fact, depends on how he perceives himself inside a global network. So, I do make an effort and try to be a more active player in (selected) social media as a way of promoting my work (my involvement with social media ends there of course). I am not sure if this has any considerable effect yet, either to my visibility or to the way I work. I definitely get jealous more (at least more than I used to in the past) seeing all the amazing work done by brilliant young type designers and all the great conferences, workshops, and talks that take place in more active (and mature) type design communities abroad. But what can you do? Better jealous, than completely isolated, right?

→ Which leads me to an inevitable comparison of the Greek type design paradigm with what happens abroad: nothing less than a revolution! The gap between the two scenes(?) is just tremendous. On one hand there is a thoroughly organised discipline with (a) a clear and efficient division of labour, (b) sound theoretical, methodological and research foundation, (c) established and interconnected networks of highly educated and skilled professionals, (d) numerous opportunities for type designers to be part of really important initiatives and projects for the production of type design products with global appeal, and, last but not least, (e) a secure financial framework. On the other hand, you have only few, fragmented efforts with genuine passion and interest, but (a) with non-existent or, at least, rudimentary theoretical, methodological, research foundation, (b) with an introspective attitude and limited scope, (c) with little or no impact and little acceptance, even from the Greek market, (d) efforts that are discontinuous, inconsistent and badly organized, (e) inside an insecure, indifferent and fragile economic environment. Two completely different paradigms that are really difficult to get together, without an unavoidable tension occurring between the two sides: the former (the Greek one) feels inferior, disadvantaged, misunderstood and ends up condemning the other

side, while the latter ends up showing disdain on any work (good or bad) done from the other side. I don't know whether there is anything to gain from accusing one or the other for anything. It's clear that in some extent the Greek side's stance can be explained as just another manifestation of the "Greek" problem (issues concerning our collective understanding of inherent contradictions such as logic vs. emotion, East vs. West, theory vs. practice, feelings of inferiority and injustice, sometimes justifiable and reasonable and sometimes not, etc.). There are however things that can be done by both sides so as to allow a fruitful cooperation between the two.

Those participating in the Greek type design scene should: (a) open their eyes and ears and try to gain as much as possible, instead of being upfront and completely negative and critical towards the other side, (b) try to develop objective, solid and more coherent methodological, research, analytical tools that will allow them to justify their arguments with greater clarity and validity, (c) expel any (sometimes justifiable) inferiority feelings that prevent them from fully developing their skills and evolving as type designers.

On the other hand, those outside of the Greek paradigm should just try to do one simple thing, even if this seems difficult or futile: they should try not to treat the other side with leveling and, at times, utter disdain. They should: (a) initiate a productive dialogue, (b) open up more and allow the other to become a part of the discourse concerning Greek typography and type design, (c) try to be critical but also fair in their evaluation of the effort made by the other side.

In the end, it is worth pointing out that there are a lot of notable people in Greece with a genuine interest and deep love for Greek typography, who make considerable effort trying to understand, document, evolve and keep the whole thing alive – often without any financial support or other benefits. And it is also clear that the ways in which different people approach a practice like type design will always be of different texture, quality, and, eventually, value. All approaches are valuable and all of them together build a discourse that will potentially help our understanding evolve and allow type design develop as an academic and professional field in Greece. All I wish and hope for is that this will happen with greater synergies, understanding, and mutual respect.

# **FEMINIST STS AND TWO COFFEE TABLES**

by Haroula Kerasidou

Let me tell you a story. A story that came about at the beginning of my PhD and then changed and evolved during the *long* time it took me to complete it. This is a story about two computational artefacts, two coffee tables which caught my attention at a time when I was thinking about human and machine relationships more carefully, and when I was trying to conceptualise different ways to think and write about their encounter that might escape certain old, well-performed dichotomies.

In 2007, at the very beginning of my PhD and while I was researching projects and products within this landscape, I came across two computational objects. The first one was Microsoft Surface, a 30 inch computational table that was launched in 2008 [1]. I never touched or interacted with the Microsoft Surface, in the traditional HCI meaning of the word. Instead, I encountered it through carefully staged performances – beautifully designed websites (now withdrawn), well-staged demos, or second-hand accounts of journalists who had made physical contact with it. Accounts like that of Derene, for example, the first journalist to be allowed access to catch a glimpse of the Surface, who writes “Microsoft has quietly been developing the first completely new computing platform since the PC – a project that was given the internal code name Milan” (Derene 2007). In the beginning of the article, Derene describes “My hosts politely threatened legal consequences if I blabbed about the project to anyone not directly involved in it, then escorted me down a dark hallway to a locked corner conference room. Inside that room was Microsoft’s best-kept technology secret in years... a coffee table” (ibid) and the sub-headline of the article proclaims “The software giant has built a new touchscreen computer – a coffee table that will change the world” (ibid). We, his readers, along with him, the messenger, are instructed and directed in our interaction with the object, all playing

[1] Since then, the table has acquired a new life. In 2011, the sales of the Microsoft Surface (now called Microsoft Surface 1.0) were discontinued in anticipation of the release of a new platform that resulted from the partnership between Microsoft and Samsung and combined Samsung’s SUR40 hardware with the Microsoft Surface 2.0 software; a partnership which resulted in the table losing its bulky base that was replaced by four table legs. In 2012, the product was renamed Microsoft PixelSense when Microsoft gave the name Microsoft Surface to their new consumer tablet.



our parts in a rather familiar performance that is meant to present the Microsoft Surface as a stand-alone, perfect machine with no relations, no associations; a “miracle” that sprung out of Microsoft’s secret labs.

And then, there was the Drift Table. A delightful artefact designed and prototyped by the Interaction Research Studio which has travelled in exhibitions and galleries and has made recent appearances as a source of inspiration for AHRC’s REACT Ideas Labs [2]. This is a low cuboid little coffee table with a lens that like a “digital hot-air balloon” allows the user to drift slowly above the British countryside. As the catalogue which accompanies it explains, “[a]dding weight to the table causes it to ‘descend’ zooming in on the landscape below – but it never descends very far, or moves very fast. It just drifts. Make of it what you will, and meanwhile it keeps on drifting” (The Curious Home 2007). And as Gaver, the leading member of the Studio, would say “That’s all it does” (Gaver in press: 3).

Back then at the beginning of my PhD, the Drift Table caught my eye and my attention. For someone whose first reaction to any “cool, exciting, playful” interactive machine was rather sceptical, this table made me look again. I started thinking about the Drift Table more carefully having the Surface as a backdrop, the “other” that helped me make out some of the former’s intricacies. And how different they were! The Drift Table seemed as the antidote to the Surface’s well-staged performance. The latter eager to please presenting itself as something no less than perfect. The former slow, low and relaxed. Of course, this does not mean that the Drift Table was not also capably staged. The work of STS and feminist technoscience has made theoretically and empirically evident that technologies are socio-material assemblages and not stand-alone neutral objects that reside in an isolated “technical” realm until they are transferred to the “social”, i.e. their users. And if they appear as such, as in the case of the Surface, this is because there is a hidden background of resistances, labours and efforts that work to orchestrate and maintain this performance, sometimes successfully, others not.

Yet, the Drift Table was different and, unlike technologies such as the Surface, I thought it was a good example of an artefact

[2] <http://www.react-hub.org.uk/objects-sandbox/ideas-labs/> (last viewed 01/03/15)

that was designed, celebrated and enacted as a sociomaterial assemblage through a number of carefully orchestrated performances that brought together (some of) its different realities (see Law and Singleton 2000); through pictures, descriptions, stories that appear in *The Curious Home* catalogue (2007), a website [3], Gaver's published papers, through the volunteers' stories that appear through selected quotes or through a documentary of the table in the home of one of the volunteers [4], through the Table's appearance in selected and well-regulated exhibition spaces, or, if you are one of the volunteers, through having the Table in your sitting room for a period of time. Each performance could be further analysed as a different trope in terms of material semiotics (see Law 2002). Among all these, the most celebrational performance of the Drift Table is through *The Curious Home* catalogue (2007). The catalogue does not focus solely on the Table but presents the group's work for the Equator project (part of which was the Table). Their work is presented in reverse "from the latest field trials all the way back to the tentative stirrings of ideas at the beginning of the project". The catalogue has no page numbers but dates reminiscent of a diary with all the "baggage" that such an analogy brings along. Gaver, though, uses another interesting metaphor in the catalogue's introduction:

*It's like watching a film of a great wave hitting a beach, but played backwards: the water withdraws smoothly over the sand, begins to fizzle, then throws up spray and suddenly rears into a breaker, which retreats rapidly from the shore, gradually subsides into a swell, and disappears. Our work – the home trials, prototypes, engineering diagrams, sketch designs and concept proposals – are the flotsam carried by the wave, sometimes a coherent mass, sometimes a chaotic tumble of old ideas swirling away while new ones are gathered. In the end (which is where the catalogue begins) a single item is shown sitting peacefully in a changed landscape, like a mysterious piece of jetsam on a beach. What are we to make of such an unruly account? (in *The Curious Home* 2007)*

[3] <http://www.gold.ac.uk/interaction/portfolio/> (last accessed 01/03/15)

[4] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uRK0ypmDDBM> (last accessed 01/03/15)

The Drift Table is presented as part of this dynamic fluid maze that moves and swirls. This maze consists of heterogeneous materials; Gaver refers to a number of these, “home trials, prototypes, engineering diagrams, sketch designs and concept proposals” (Gaver in *The Curious Home* 2007), along with the designers and their shifting roles who had to wrap up the table, carry it safely to the house, set it up properly and negotiate their behaviour with the volunteer so as not to reveal or conceal too much. The volunteers themselves, the ethnographers, the film maker, the Orientation Guide that accompanies the Drift Table. The catalogue is sensitive to this plurality of presences and documents in one way or the other (not only through texts, like the quote above, but also through pictures, stories of technical shortcomings, uneven floors, overlapping exhibitions and polite instructions) their dynamic associations. “The way our ideas developed and wove around one another is manifest in this catalogue. Flip through its pages and proposals appear and reappear, like old friends or recurring dreams – or, perhaps, the anecdotes of a pub bore” (Gaver in *The Curious Home* 2007).

The Drift Table’s performances reflected the Studio’s approach to design which they call “ludic design”; a process that sought to move away from more traditional task-oriented approaches to interaction by promoting “curiosity, exploration and reflection” (Gaver et al 2004: 885) and by allowing “openness and ambiguity” (ibid: 888) to become part of the design process, concepts and products. This was in an effort to “give space” to people “to intermesh their own stories with those hinted at by technologies” (Gaver 2002: 4). As Gaver writes, “ludic design should not be ‘for’ anything, but instead offer a range of possible actions and meanings for people to explore” (Gaver et al 2004: 888). Indeed as he stressed (somewhat misleadingly, as I later realised), their new “ludic” designs “not only embody unconventional assumptions, but do so in a way that demands neither conviction nor rejection” (in press: 3) and so the Drift Table can just drift away on its own holding one’s cups and books just like any other normal table.

This sense of “space” and the slow rhythms of the Table resonated well with me at that time at the beginning of my journey when I was on the look-out for different ways to engage with interactive machines. Ways that did not rush me or shoehorn our

encounter into tight pre-determined boxes but allowed me to be sceptical, uncertain, or even uninterested. I looked back at the Drift Table and its “spacious” design with the measured excitement that other machines were too anxious to allow me and I was delighted to find this space that the Table and I *were given* to negotiate our encounter; a space that back then I, mistakenly (as I will show in the following paragraphs) attributed to the design choices that Gaver and his team had taken, and one that I saw as embodied in the Table’s very design, in its particular materiality. But I was wrong.

### *Looking back ←*

The ethnographer and philosopher Annemarie Mol is careful to draw the distinction between plurality and multiplicity (1999: 75). The former, what both perspectivalism and constructivism advocate, refers to a proliferation of perspectives or interpretations of one single and unchanged object. The latter, a key tenet of performativity, invites us to commit to an ontological multiplicity of objects and realities where subjects and objects are co-constituted through their encounters rather than prior to them. And, such an ontological commitment carries with it an ethical responsibility. It was Sara Ahmed’s work that brought this point home.

In her book *Strange Encounters* (2000), Ahmed writes about the coming together of different entities and formulates a critique of the ways in which different discourses have theorised the relationship between the “I” and the “Other”, the familiar and the strange. Specifically, she examines the figure of “the stranger” that is mobilised within contemporary contexts of globalisation and multiculturalism, and turns a critical eye on discourses that, whether by expelling or welcoming “the stranger”, share common ground in the ways that they figure “the stranger” prior to any encounter. Arguing that both these processes rely on a “fetishisation” of the figure of the stranger in that they both seek to cut it off from the social and material histories of its determination, Ahmed warns us against the ontologising of the stranger, namely the idea that the figure simply is (ibid: 5).

Years after my first encounter with the two coffee tables and enriched with Ahmed’s lessons I return to my old story only to realise

that I made a mistake. Back then I mistook the Drift Table's plurality and the orchestrated visibility of all these actors and actants entangled together as evidence that Gaver and the design Studio have taken on board Suchman's call for a shift in design, a "shift from a treatment of subjects and objects as singular and separately constituted to a focus on the kinds of connections and capacities for action that particular arrangements of persons and things afford" (Suchman 2007: 151). And convinced that such shift in design has real and identifiable effects on the material object itself I saw the Table's exceptionality as somehow intrinsic to its design. I attributed it to its creators thinking that the Studio have achieved this by "*giving space*" (Gaver 2002: 4; my italics) to the other actors involved in the assemblage, or else by "abandon[ing] the presumption that a specific, authoritative interpretation of the systems we build is necessary, possible or desirable" (Sengers and Gaver 2006: 99), and exploring alternatives by designing for ambiguity and multiple interpretations.

Yet as I now return to my old story, I understand that by locating the Table's exceptionality in its design, I made the mistake that Ahmed has warned against. I fetishized the other. I ontologized the machine, in this case the Drift Table, by regarding it as an object that simply is and one that has, in its body and its designed materiality, the feature of enabling spacious and respectful intra-actions [5], because its designers built it this way. While I hailed the Table for its ability to foster a breathing space for negotiation, I actually closed down this space and locked the Table in a static and unchanged materiality and ontology courtesy of its designers' choices; i.e. the Table *is...* (wonderful, boring, whatever), because it was designed this way. And so, while I was trying to articulate a different way to understand human-machine relationships, I mistakenly froze my artefact in an unchanged frame to be preserved in its designed exceptionality. And I did this partly because I followed the Studio's account too closely. Yet I do not want to abandon the Drift Table. Instead, I want to return to it and its stories and try harder to make justice to our encounter.

[5] "Intra-action" is a neologism introduced by Karen Barad which stands in opposition to the concept of "interaction" on the grounds that the latter highlights a dichotomy between the object and subject while her proposed concept of intra-action signifies their a priori inseparability (1998: 96; 2007)

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