BREAKING BOUNDARIES

She is the best friend that graphic design and typography have in the museum world. Conceiver of such exhibitions as "Safe: Design Takes on Risk," "Humble Masterpieces: Everyday Marvels of Design," and "Design and the Elastic Mind," Paola Antonelli, senior curator in the Architecture and Design department at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, seamlessly integrates 2-D and 3-D design in a standard-setting manner. Over the last year she has further pushed the museum forward into the digital age by acquiring for MoMA's design collection the @ sign and, just recently, 23 digital typefaces. It is this pioneering leap into the digital realm that was the subject of our recent conversation.

PHOTOGRAPH BY Robin Holland

Paola Antonelli, senior curator in the department of Architecture and Design at The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Before we discuss MoMA's acquisition of 23 digital typefaces for its design collection, tell me how type was collected prior to the digital age?
When we acquired Helvetica (bold, 36 point), the only non-digital typeface currently in our collection, we collected the lead blocks within their wood tray, exactly the way the donor, Lars Müller, presented it to us.

For our exhibition to celebrate Helvetica's 50th anniversary in 2008, my colleague Christian Larsen culled from the collection great examples of objects made with Helvetica and bought or procured some others, such as American Apparel's shopping bag.
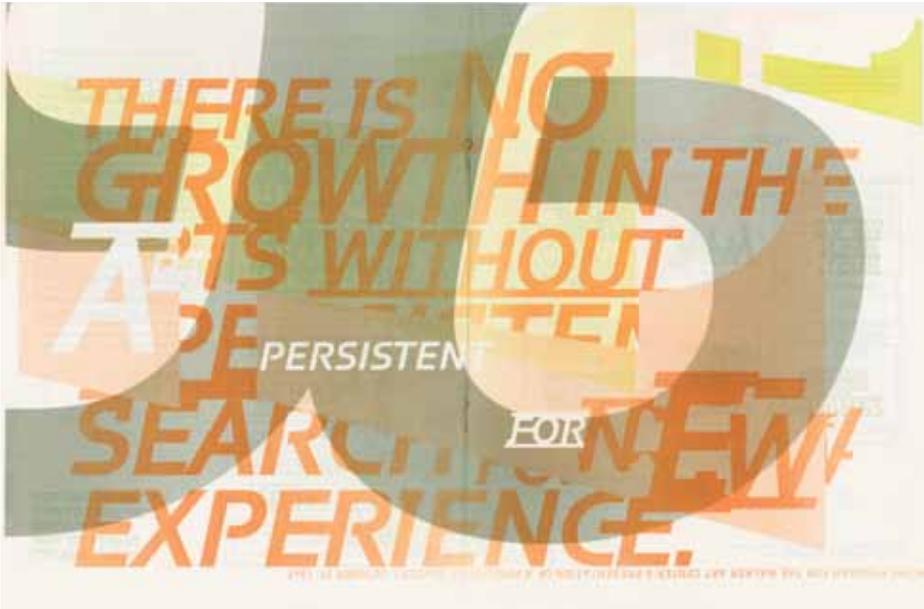
It seems that, at least when it comes to lead or wood types, that's the way; the tradition is to acquire first and foremost the artifact itself—the blocks, a complete series for each font size and style—along with some notable applications. In many cases, especially with wood and lead type, museums and centers also offer workshops for people to try the typefaces out. That is what the Hamilton Wood Type & Printing Museum in Two Rivers, Wisconsin does.

There are several museums of typography. While each has its own collecting style and historical foci they always seem to share a few traits: They always need to show applications (the abstraction of
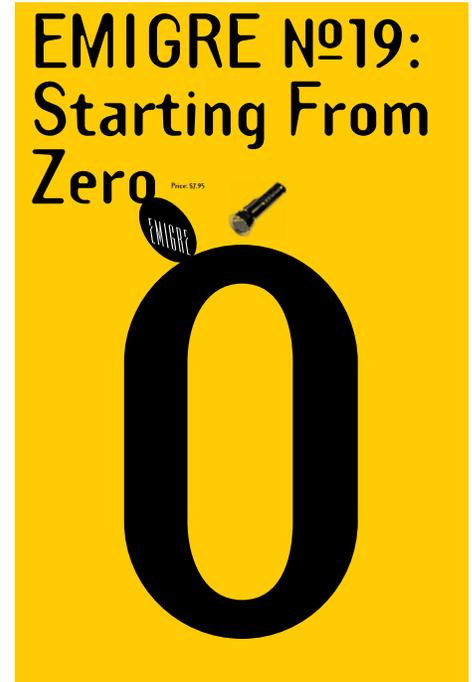
THERE IS NO GROWTH IN THE ARTS WITHOUT A PERSISTENT SEARCH FOR NEW EXPERIENCE.

EMIGRE №19: Starting From Zero *Price: $7.95*

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Left: Matthew Carter's Walker typeface, Walker Art Center identity
Below: Barry Deck's Template Gothic, cover of Emigre No. 19

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> " WE WANTED TO BRING THE COLLECTION UP TO DATE AND MAKE IT INTO A TRUE COMMENTARY ON COMMUNICATION DESIGN.

type as a design entity is not very easy for the public to grasp), and they always connect type to printed paper (even with digital fonts, the reality of an increasingly paperless world is still hard to swallow when thinking in models, i.e. a museum collection).

And what types are in the MoMA collection?
Besides the Helvetica bold 36 point, here they are, our 23 new acquisitions: American Type Founders OCR-A (1966), Wim Crouwel New Alphabet (1967), Matthew Carter Bell Centennial (1976-78), Matthew Carter ITC Galliard (1978), Erik Spiekermann FF Meta (1984-1991), Zuzana Licko Oakland (1985), Jeffery Keedy Keedy Sans (1991), Erik van Blokland and Just van Rossum FF Beowolf (1990), Barry Deck Template Gothic (1990), P. Scott Makela Dead History (1990), Jonathan Hoefler HTF Didot (1991), Neville Brody FF Blur (1992), Jonathan Barnbrook Mason (1992), Matthew Carter Mantinia (1993), Tobias Frere-Jones Interstate (1993-95),

Matthew Carter Big Caslon (1994), Albert-Jan Pool FF DIN (1995), Matthew Carter Walker (1995), Matthew Carter Verdana (1996), Jonathan Hoefler and Tobias Frere-Jones Mercury (1996), Matthew Carter Miller (1997), Jonathan Hoefler & Tobias Frere-Jones Retina (1999), Jonathan Hoefler & Tobias Frere-Jones Gotham (2000).

Interesting choices. How did you decide on which typefaces to include in the collection?
Four years ago we held a one-day symposium with experts from all over the world—including you, Steven—to address the future of our graphic design collection, which consisted mostly of posters, albeit great ones. We wanted to bring the collection up to date and make it into a true commentary on communication design. Amongst the lacunae we identified in our historical holdings, and amongst the new categories of objects that we should tackle, were typefaces.

Moreover, as far as contemporary design is concerned, we established that

the jump into the digital realm requires on the museum's part a similar declaration of intent as the one made for objects and architecture: We are committed to embracing new technologies and to devising updated criteria and methods to set the basis for the future of the collection. We decided to begin with digital typefaces because one needs to start somewhere, and the last 30 years are my comfort zone. However, my colleague Juliet Kinchin and I are planning to go back in time and study the whole 20th century. The initial list of 23 typefaces is distilled from the discussions held in the symposium and tempered further by additional conversations with designers and critics. We tried to represent different phases in the history of font design in the past 30 years—and more, there are two 1960s fonts in the list—and to give an overview of an important historical arc to our audience.

Digital typefaces are code. How do you define type as an object that is suitable for the MoMA collection?

FF Blur, Medium	OCR-A
Aa Bb Cc Dd Ee Ff Gg Hh Ii Jj Kk Ll Mm Nn Oo Pp Qq Rr Ss Tt Uu Vv Ww Xx Yy Zz 1234567890	Aa Bb Cc Dd Ee Ff Gg Hh Ii Jj Kk Ll Mm Nn Oo Pp Qq Rr Ss Tt Uu Vv Ww Xx Yy Zz 1234567890

Mercury Display, Roman	New Alphabet
Aa Bb Cc Dd Ee Ff Gg Hh Ii Jj Kk Ll Mm Nn Oo Pp Qq Rr Ss Tt Uu Vv Ww Xx Yy Zz 1234567890	

Clockwise: Neville Brody, FF Blur, Medium; American Type Founders, OCR-A; Hoefler & Frere-Jones, Mercury Display, Roman; and Wim Crouwel, New Alphabet.

We are comfortable with code and have been acquiring it for a while—always in applied form, we have not gotten yet to the point of acquiring code for its own intrinsic design merits, even though I know it could be done... Not yet.

We have acquired digital architectural drawings, chairs that are 3-D–printed from a digital file, interfaces, visualization designs, and much more. Not only in the Architecture and Design department, also in others, especially Media and Performance. There is a conservator at MoMA, Glenn Wharton, who focuses on digital media, and a committee that studies issues such as technology migration, the format of what should be acquired, the legal issues of intellectual property, you name it.

Since drawings are done on screen, do you also collect these ephemeral forms?
Yes. We do collect the digital file, every time it is possible.

Before digital technology, type was on photo strips. Are any of these fonts earmarked for MoMA?
Not yet.

When collecting a typeface, what ancillary materials do you acquire to document it?
We ask the designers for the applications they are the proudest of, or we pick really well-known ones—for instance, Peter Saville's 1988 *Substance* CD cover for Joy Division as a milestone application of Wim Crouwel's 1967 New Alphabet.

I understand that even type collected by MoMA faces licensing issues. Can you discuss how you've addressed them?
Not in detail, but I can tell you that: first, it required a lot of work, both on our side and on the side of the foundries and producers; second, it was in most cases an interesting and successful process; and third, it enabled us to design a template for other acquisitions in the future. A particular mention should go to Kate Carmody, the curatorial assistant with whom I concocted this whole operation,

Paul Galloway, our study center supervisor, who kept all the negotiations going, and our intrepid General Counsel Henry Lanman, who devised a way for us all—curators, foundries, museum, public, and fonts—to live together happily ever after.

What is the future of collecting design in this digital environment?
Challenging and very, very interesting. Every time we will move to acquire something, we will have to think hard of the several different formats and representations of the object we will need to fully document it—say, the object itself, plus the code, some applications, maybe a video, perhaps even the tools to replicate it, etc. And we will need to think hard of how to preserve it for a long time. After all, that is our mission, too.

This is all very abstract, though. The best way to show what we mean is by examples. We have begun with interfaces and visualization, made big headway with @, now fonts, and our next move is not far away. To be continued. ∎