

MORE LIGHT!

For a typography that knows what it's doing

The days of manifestos are over. In politics, no one much believes in any sharp polarity of left and right. The difficulties of action are immense. Keeping the boat afloat and away from the rocks seems all we can do. Any manifesto-talk has merely tried to turn this sense of difficulty and confusion into a principle. Rationality has been called authoritarian and rejected in favour of what are termed non-oppressive and non-hierarchical ways of thought and action. In typography, we have had a 'next wave', attempting to 'deconstruct' the text. The reader is challenged.

The result is a set of visual elements, taken apart and digitally interfered with: a scrambled message that each reader will piece together differently. The next or new wave polemic has involved a criticism of modernist typography. This is generally understood to be the Swiss typography of the 1950s and 1960s. It is seen as a failed and inhuman thing, like the high-rise architecture of that time. And as for traditional typography, from the new wave perspective that hardly needs to be considered: it is two or three times passé.

In reply, the critics of deconstructive typography have just said: 'this work is ugly and meaningless'. Yes, but its designers won't disagree: meaninglessness is even their aim. If there are meanings they are there for the designers' own pleasure. The hierarchy here seems clear: designer at the top; public down at the bottom. But then there is still the question of how to work now, in 1993. This article is an attempt to point ways forward.

■ An approach

Traditional? Modern? Post-modern? Forget those worries, and go back a step. Think what it is that you want to do. Think for yourself! Disregard preconceptions, models, influences. Consider what you know and what you have to hand. Then you can plot a course that makes sense for you and for everyone else involved in the enterprise, not least the user or reader.

The scandal of this proposition is that it emphasizes thought, intellect, and rationality. Personal intuition, as well as cultural tradition, can certainly play important parts: but in dialogue with the awkward questions put by reason. Design is so often taken as being about 'expression' — of the designer and the designer's personality. Forget that, and think. Think with extreme attention and passion. Reason that is split off from feeling is a distortion of reason. And reason is an active thing. It connects with the world: reason is critical.

■ Consequences

Thinking: consideration. That can be taken also in the sense of being considerate towards those people for and with whom you are working. This means being prepared to accommodate someone else's desires: those of clients, bosses, colleagues, backers and investors, printers, readers and users. It means an end to the terrible arrogance and egoism of the designer. Thinking: what is really the goal of the process? The material has to be given order, to be allowed to find a form that is appropriate. If there is indeed something of interest there, in the text and images, then the struggle of designing it is half won. Then you will want to make the stuff clear and lucid, and everyone else caught up in the process will certainly want that too. By contrast, obscure and visually overladen effects are good for thin and uninteresting content. Design cannot be better than the material it has to work with. Good design means interesting content.

This is not necessarily to argue for a design of bare bones and minimal effect, in which the content is set free. It depends. Each case has to be considered freshly. And, anyway, form and content can't be separated. But there is here some argument for making things that work in situ. A book is a prime case of this. It can be judged only when you hold it, when you flex the spine, or when you see what happens to it in a damp atmosphere or on an aeroplane flight. Or when you sit with it, tired in the evening, and see whether your attention is held. Is the index easy to use? How do the captions relate to the pictures? And what about the kinetics of the pages, how the information falls, as you leaf through? These and many other considerations will never ever be resolved by thinking of the book as a two—dimensional image.

Thinking: but thinking also about material qualities. This is a call for critical reason in design, but for a reason that is fully embodied in artefacts and which resists reduction to image. It is against the proliferation of reproduction in annuals, anthologies, and magazines. The jump to image, seduced by something one wants to imitate, too often means a leap that passes over meaning and purpose.

■ Out of time

When the work — or the conversation or any other human activity — is going well, then you forget what time it is and whatever else you should be doing. There is some quality in artefacts that is like this process. It is not that the thing is transparent. On the contrary, it presents itself to you in a very immediate and unavoidable way. But it seems inevitable. Its novelty isn't an issue. It isn't expressive, except of its own content.

This may sound like a dream. Except that it is a dream of waking up from a nightmare. It is a dream of ordinariness: of a situation of

quiet conversation, in which matters are discussed and considered critically. It is tempting to take Goethe's celebrated last words — 'mehr Licht!' — 'more light!'— as a statement loaded with significance. One could take it as a motto for enlightened work, but for an approach that is also realistic and modest. Goethe, it seems, was just asking for a second shutter in his room to be opened.

Robin Kinross, 1993