

especially
Mr Smith

Against the grain:

A conversation with Kelvyn Smith

by David Jury

Mr Smith is agitating wood type characters which are standing on one of the composing surfaces in his workshop. The pretence of a normal conversation is creating a nervous energy. I've known Kelvyn for ten years, but he knows that I will be writing this article and so our 'conversation' feels awkward. He hates pretence. But with the help of strong fresh coffee and the rhythmic sound of a printing press in the background, the conversation begins to flow. Smith is a graphic designer who works with letterpress. Much of his work is based upon the use of sans serif, so I begin by asking him, why?

I like all grotesques; they are so odd, really interesting, uncomfortable and quirky. On the other hand, I love the bland, mechanical, quiet nature of Univers. Sans serifs are not just one style of typeface; they vary immensely, a very complex typographic category. The choice of typeface is really important, but the context is the key – the weight, size, colour and texture all support this – but, finally, it is what the words are saying that is essential – the core. The materials can also reinforce the message: chosen well, the stock and binding lends a crucial quality, a nuance to the meaning. Essentially, I can only use what I've got and; in wood type, I mostly choose to have sans serif. My resources are uniquely limited, so I am extremely familiar with the details and characteristics of each and every one of the individual wood type characters.

With wood type, 'character' is a particularly appropriate word because this material often has its edges damaged and surface scratched or worn by heavy usage and occasional abuse. So each individual character is quite distinctive; it could, after all, be a hundred years old. In display wood-founts, it doesn't take long before you know which of, say, three of the same characters that are available, would be the best for a particular project. Of course, these characteristics can be manipulated and adjusted by make-ready: placing thin slivers of paper under a character to lift it slightly, or varying the packing on

the press. Both will provide a darker, more even tone; more 'bite'; more impression into the paper. Again, the amount of ink used gives another range of options. There are many considerations other than the choice of typeface. Fundamentally, it is knowing, understanding what to make it say; it is the infusion – the design – which is the most difficult, but also, the most interesting.

Kelvyn's workshop is situated at the far end of a printing works which is on the first floor of an old, multi-purpose, industrial building in central London. The building has broad, uneven wooden floorboards, rough painted brickwork walls and metal-framed windows providing good light. Space is in short supply but it feels very comfortable here.

An organised environment is crucial to getting the best out of this weighty process. Typography enforces its own order. It requires a considered and systematic approach and, if you are a typographer, your life also becomes systematic. I love typography and so I love order, but letterpress is also full of idiosyncrasies and physical constraints. Sometimes limitations, such as the size of my proofing press, or, perhaps, missing characters, mean that I have to reconsider an initial idea. I analyse the words, read them again and again, rethink my motives and look for other meanings that can be drawn out. There is no doubt that looking at type in a case is helpful. The wood type is stained by the coloured inks of previous jobs. This gives them a sense of not only belonging to me, but also of being unique to me. When I finish a job, I often leave the ink on the wood type. That way it reminds me of where and when it was used before it carries with it another context – it remains part of that previous linguistic purpose – and only gets cleaned when it is ready to take on a new meaning within another series of words. When alternative characters are constructed on the composing surface [the stone], it is much easier, and a more pleasurable experience making decisions. A little like choosing and mixing colours from a palette. Weight, width, size; in the end, any of these characteristics might provide the solution. Obviously, this would not occur using a system with an

infinite number of characters. It might appear a little eccentric, especially with digital technology being so accessible, to use a system with such finite resources, but when someone is able to take everything for granted, they have a tendency to work without question. That is the purpose of desktop publishing systems; they are designed to be super-efficient. They are – but they severely lack character.

The colours on the type are limited to various tones of grey. Do you ever use black?

Not often. I'm fascinated with grey. It's complicated, but I'm really interested in the transitional space in between black and white – not so much either/or, more maybe/possibly.

Kelvyn has always been interested in finding connections between often-disparate (grey!) areas of specialisation. Aged eighteen, he was a member of the ground staff at the Kent County Cricket Club and had aspirations to be a professional cricketer. He also had a place booked at Leeds University to study landscape architecture. He decided instead to take up a place on a one-year art foundation course at Maidstone College of Art, which, in turn, led to a graphic design degree course at Norwich School of Art in 1987.

I loved drawing, and it was important that I went to 'art school' – not 'uni' or 'poly' but a pure 'art school'.

STAFF EXHIB -ITION

Nicked
Plates

Table
Description of Machines

1. The machine used for the printing of the
plates was a Galleys and a Galleys
and a Galleys and a Galleys
and a Galleys and a Galleys
and a Galleys and a Galleys



Vehicle No. 1
University of Brighton

all of the plates in this series have been 'found' in the
printing workshops and old store cupboards of the colleges
and universities at which I work, and
are made

Nicked
Plates



Vehicle No. 2
University of Brighton



Diagram No. 1
Collector Analysis

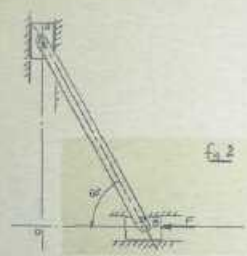
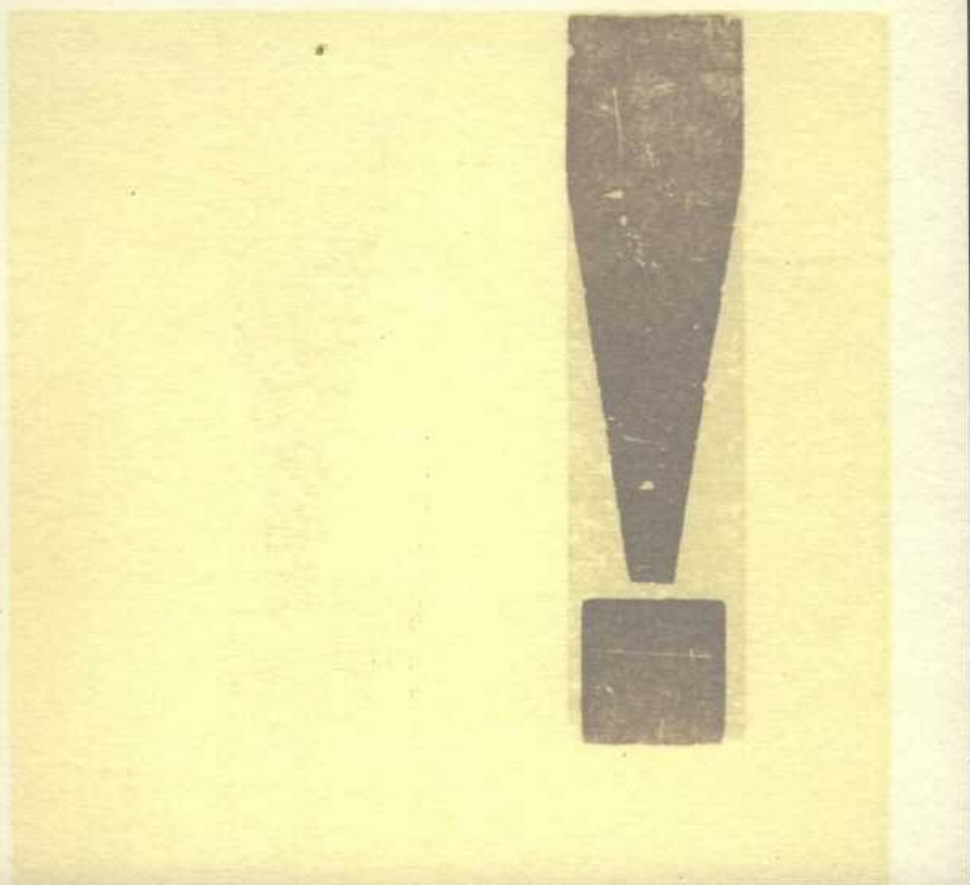


Diagram No. 2
Collector Analysis

Background of previous spread:
New years card, *Grotesque 51*
(metal type), blind embossed in
grey board, 297 x 210 mm.

1. *Nicked plates*, set of twelve,
ten cards in a set. The various
stolen printing plates in this
series have been 'found' in the
printing workshops and old
store-cupboards of colleges
and universities. *Clarendon*
various sizes (metal type). Blind
embossed, silver, varnish and
one other colour for each card.
Pale greeny-grey, gullt-round-
edged cards 'acquired' from old
print shop, 230 x 179 mm.

2. *Franz Kafka* book covers
for *Vintage* series, *Random*
House. Set of nine one-off hand
printed compositions. *Grotesque*
216, *Clarendon* (metal type),
condensed *Grotesque* (wood
type). Printed on 280 gem
Somerset Velvet Grey. Blind
embossed, silver and violet, nine
specials, 380 x 253 mm.



Adam Broomberg

First Floor
15 Westland Place
London N1 7LP

Oliver Chanarin

First Floor
15 Westland Place
London N1 7LP

www.choppedliver.info
oliver@choppedliver.info
+44 (0) 78 8770 2807

3 Typographic marks, limited edition prototype for exhibition. Various wood type. Blind embossed, dark grey and varnish printed on 270 gsm Vellin Arches. 42 x 48 picas.

4 Business cards for prolific photographic duo chopped liver. 9, 10 Univers 55. Green and silver mix on 750 microns grey board. 85 x 55 mm.

5 Christmas card for Wallpaper magazine from an initial design by Andrew Wren, a collaboration with David Mckendrick and Tony Chambers. Blind embossed, silver and fluorescent orange on 300 gsm Somerset Textured, Soft White. Printed from a plate, shown untrimmed 198 x 264 mm trimmed to A5.

It was whilst on the foundation course that he saw his first copy of the journal, *Octavo*, a revelation which propelled him towards taking a graphic route. At Norwich, the discovery of what was then the defunct college letterpress workshop further defined his direction. To the mortification of some at the college, he immersed himself in it.

What I was able to do at Norwich School of Art was not made particularly easy for me, but at least it was possible. I was able to go off and devise my own way of working, and allowed to prove my point. Going against the grain was never intentional, just necessary and, in the end, very natural.

Three years later, uncertain of what to do or where to go, he found himself being advised by both Peter Davenport, Davenport Associates, and Derek Birdsall, Omnific, who suggested he show his work to Alan Kitching. Kitching had only recently left Omnific and was, himself, in a state of transition, setting up what would become Alan Kitching Typography, which later evolved into The Typography Workshop in Clerkenwell.

The first time Kelvyn walked into Kitching's workshop in 1990, he knew immediately that this was where he should be. But it was not easy; he had to work hard to persuade Kitching to take him on. Kitching was in no position to employ anyone, and he later acknowledged that it was only because Kelvyn was so persistent that he eventually found a way to take him under his wing as his first apprentice.

Alan looked me squarely in the eye, grabbed my left arm and firmly stated, 'I can't pay you much, but I can teach you everything I know'. That was enough for me.

Not only did Kitching provide Kelvyn with what amounted to a typographic and printing apprenticeship, he was also, as a tutor at the RCA, a direct link to Smith's influences and contemporaries at that time – Phil Baines, the Why Nots, GTF, Rupert Bassett, Johnny Barnbrook and Jeremy Tankard – and, crucially, an insight into a tutor's perspective of the flourishing talent, both staff and students, emerging from the RCA. Other influences at that time included Russell Mills, Vaughan Oliver and, chiefly, Gert Dunbar (Dunbar Associates) who was, for an all too brief but eventful three years, head of Graphic Design at the RCA. All of them were driving forces. Kelvyn worked with Kitching for just over four years, before setting himself up in an East End industrial building. Several incarnations later, he is now situated just off the City Road.

Merry Christmas*

From Wallpaper*

Kelvyn is very animated when he warms to his subject. He constantly flits about, pulling items out of cases and off galleys, demonstrating tools, and even when bringing up documents on his computer. I have this impression of you being someone who doesn't stay in one place for very long...

Well, I was Area of Study Leader for *typo/graphic Design* at the LCP (London College of Printing, now London College of Communication) for four years! I have taught typography and design intermittently for over fifteen years. For me, the institution itself does not matter – it is the team you work with, the quality of the students, what you do and the way you do it that are important. But I do like new challenges; I like life to be fluid and flexible, open to new opportunities, a sort of perpetual 'work in progress'. I have had countless offers of jobs but I much prefer working like this [looking around his workshop] where everything is tangible – by which I mean everything is within my control. It can be a struggle sometimes, but the autonomy I have allows me to be really constructive, to take chances, to push myself – it also allows me the freedom to develop personal projects. I have any number of these on the go at any one time. But, like this week [sighing], more often than not, I am really snowed under.

Explain what you mean by 'personal' projects...

Personal projects are something I do for my own creative satisfaction. I have always done them. They are often just simple ideas really... they don't have any great purpose, but what I discover feeds into my clients' work. I can do it because I have always worked for myself. If I see or uncover something intriguing, I can examine it. That's what I meant by 'flexibility' earlier. I am interested in language and linguistics, history and anything to do with time and sequence, so these personal projects are often concerned with the analysis and documentation of processes; physical elements left behind and usually discarded.

Kelvyn shows me a set of prints, relief printed from the damaged surfaces of cutting and creasing formes used to make cartons or boxes.

This illustrates a concern I have with designing digitally: there is no record of process. You rarely get accidents on the Mac. Sometimes, when you import an image that is far bigger than the picture box, the abstract detail is gorgeous, but that's pretty much it. It relates back to 'control', but more than that, it is the quality of the experience, the pleasure of making. Making something is so all-engrossing, you become very attached to the materials, the way they feel and behave when they are changed by interaction with other processes – the activity works on an emotional level.

By contrast, a computer ensures you remain detached from what you are making. I enjoy making stuff, here in my studio, from start to finish, rather than generating a digital 'document' which will, in turn, be converted by someone else into something else. I do have to work with a computer, but I can't do it all day. I tend to use it in conjunction with letterpress printing. Over the years, I have found ways of making it work pretty seamlessly.

On his computer, he shows me spreads from a book he is designing for AVA Publishers.

A lot of my work does get printed lithographically, using scans of letterpress proofs. A huge advantage of being here in this particular space is that I can work closely with Andy, John and Bill – the printers on the same floor. I'm sure I'm a bit of a pain, but this way the print is never out of my sight.

Working in this way makes some people suspicious. It is the old cliché: is it art or is it design? The implied criticism is that an artistic sensibility is intrinsically selfish, and so, inevitably, the reader becomes less important than the typographer. I think that reflects the low opinion in which the general public is held by too many in the visual communications industry, by which I mean, primarily, advertising and marketing, but not exclusively. But to suggest that you design for everyone except yourself is ridiculous.

We, as typographers, must keep our standard high; quality is important. It is this 'working to the lowest common denominator' that is so damaging to our visual culture. I mean, the amount of typos I see in advertising: poor grammar; the ludicrous use of the Microsoft apostrophe and appalling splattering of full points after single display words. I love cinema, as you know, and the greatest films are those made with the conviction and detailed attention of an individual, highly skilled, articulate voice. I think the best graphic communication work has the same individual conviction. I'm not interested in the notion of typography just being a service.

All typographers work with words but Kelvyn does things to words that add significantly to their meaning. His work is authorial, born out of a rebellion against bland, shorthand, consumable language that is strewn with lazy clichés. He estranges and reconfigures the narratives within his work. The results are intriguing, and sometimes disorienting, their strength being the very direct correlation between meaning and form. Estranging the familiar rejuvenates the reader's experience. It is surely relevant that this is generally the result of a 'selfish' process, one in which ideas that hold a personal resonance are pursued. It is a playful, intelligent and idiosyncratic activity. Kelvyn designs his work to speak, in a very distinctive and personal way, rather than to blandly 'communicate'.