



OUT OF HAND

Handwriting has long been a touchstone in the history of graphic design, a point where lettering meets the messy reality of the human body. By David Crowley

1 (facing page). The *Bibelschreiber*, which has been programmed to write out the Bible in lettering based on the early Schwabacher typeface, copies out verses from the Book of Kings (see also 10).
2 (this page). Detail from the 1914 edition of *The Palmer Method of Business Writing*.

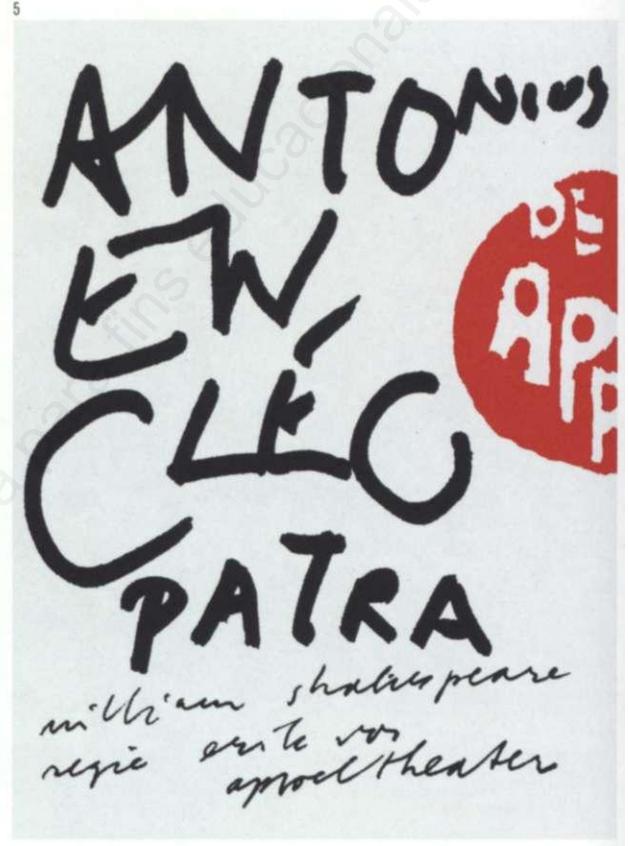
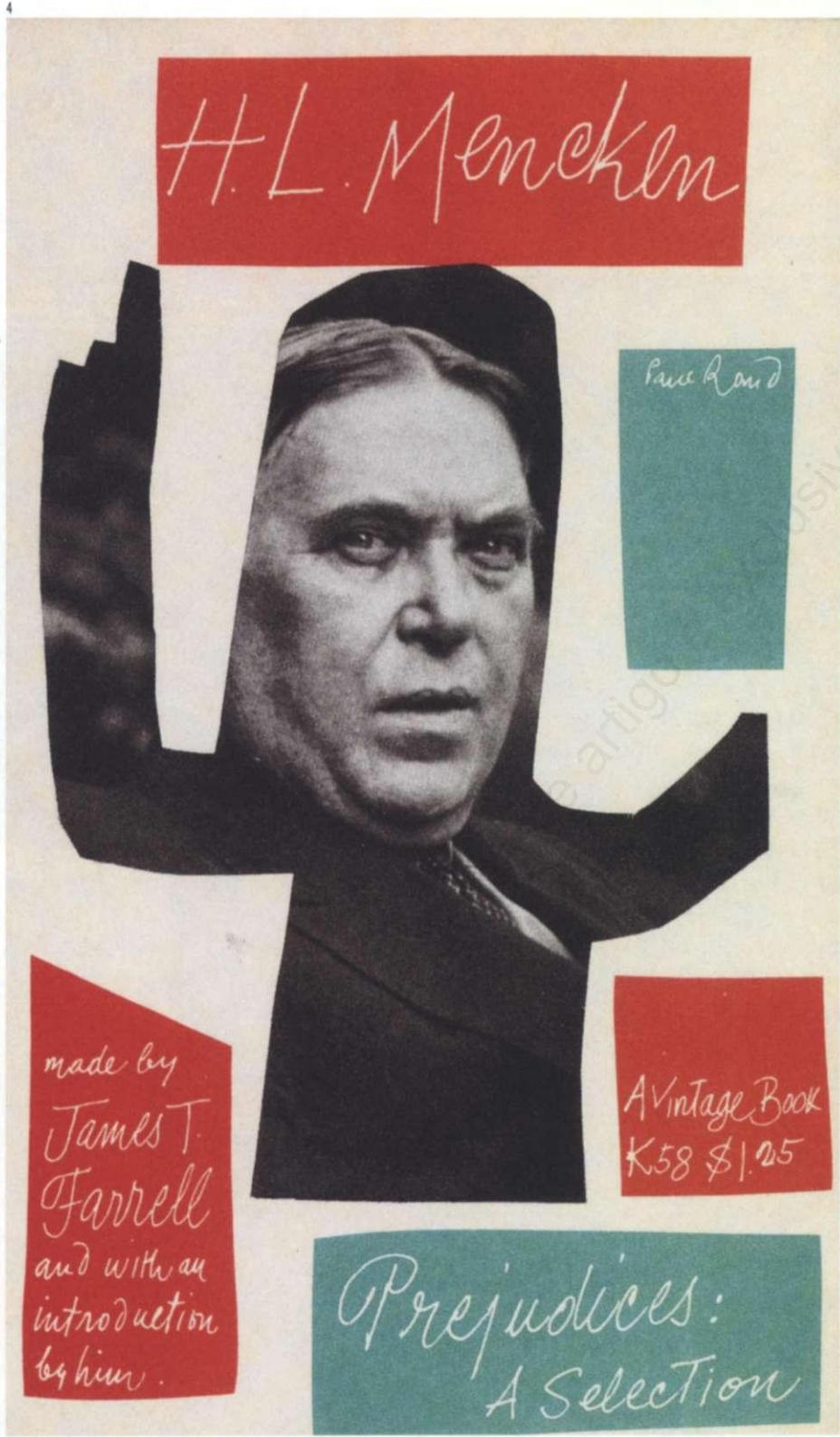


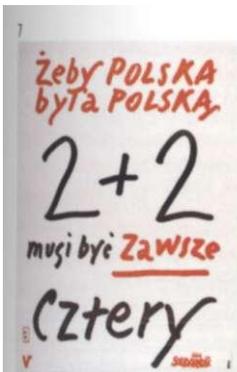
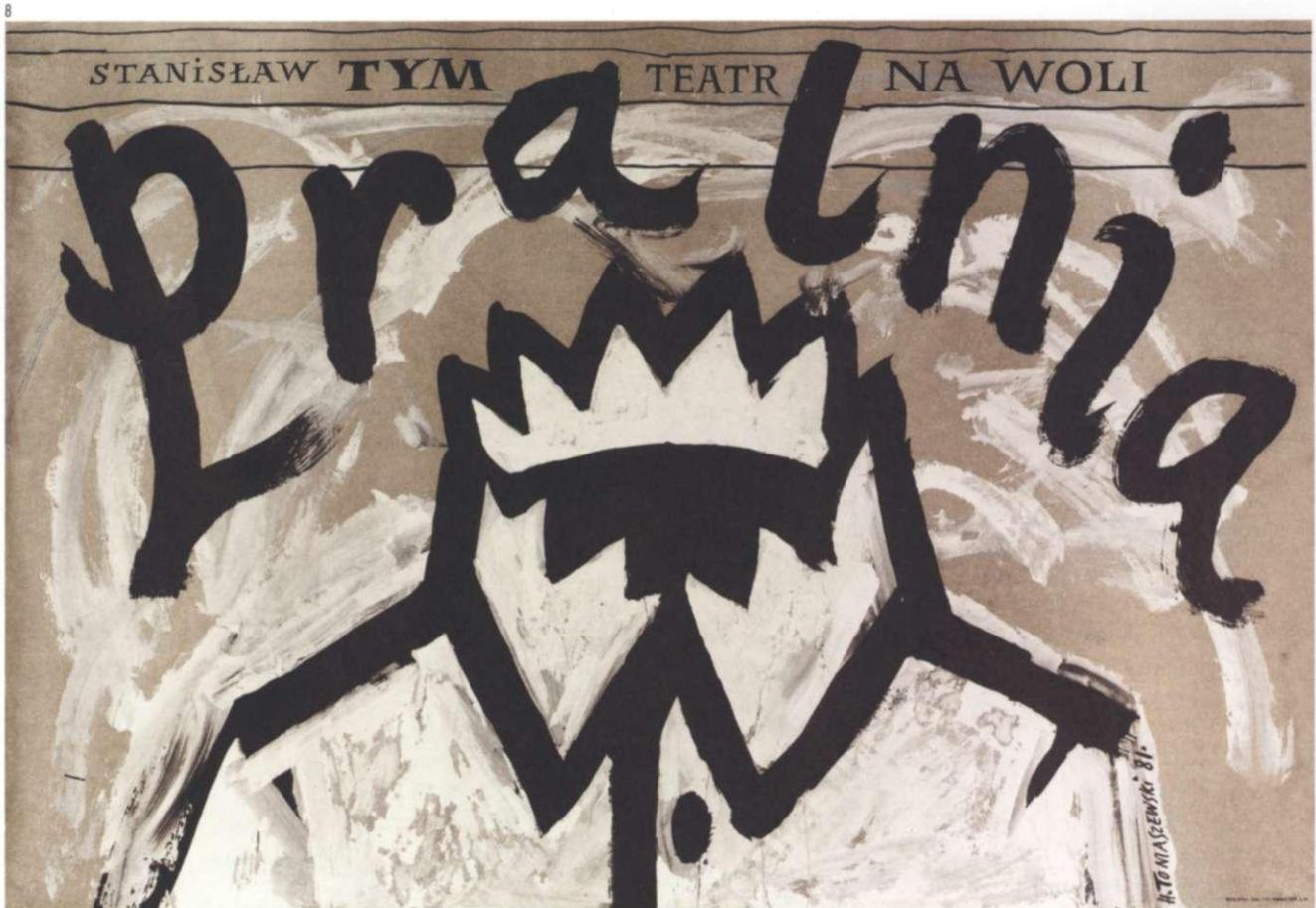
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*A typeface
 is zu
 alphabet
 in a
 straight jacket*



3. Alan Fletcher's distinctive handwriting, featured in the Typographic Circle's journal, *Circular*, issue 6, 1996.
 4. US designer Paul Rand used hand-scrawled text and a cropped photograph to create a comic image for the cover of H. L. Mencken's *Prejudices*, Vintage Books / Random House (1958).

5. Poster (1989) by Jan Bons for a Dutch Toneelgroep de Appel production of *Antony and Cleopatra*. In the DVD documentary *Jan Bons* (see Eye 69), the group's director, Erik Vos, praises Bons's 'deliberate carelessness and anger ... the intensity and draftsmanship it takes to create a balance in the chaos.'
 6. Wine labels with hand-lettering by illustrator Paul Davis for Valli Unite Vineyard, 2010. Design and art direction: Stephen Coates.





7 and 8. Posters by Henryk Tomaszewski (1914-2005).
 7. This 1989 poster for Solidarity reads: 'Let Poland be Poland, 2 + 2 must always be four', a reference to the Orwellian public culture in communist Poland. Courtesy of the Poster Museum at Wilanów, Warsaw.
 8. His 1981 poster for Stanisław Tym's play *The Laundry* is printed on uncoated paper. The designer's thick brush-strokes seem to have soaked into its surface.

In 2007, Robotlab, a group of artists based in the German city of Karlsruhe programmed a Kuka robotic arm - the kind that usually toils in a car factory - to write out the Bible. Performing for audiences throughout Europe, the *Bibelschreiber* ('Bible Scribe') turns the act of writing into a public spectacle. Hour by hour, neat blackletter script fills paper rolls in evenly spaced columns with large initial letters in the style of a medieval manuscript. Tooled with a nib, the Bible Scribe produces letters that are neither smooth nor absolutely uniform. Moreover, moving slowly and methodically, the robot arm pauses before starting each letter, as if deliberating before making its mark.

Robotlab's Bible Scribe combines contemporary technology with much earlier inventions. It uses a variant of the Schwabacher typeface cut in the late fifteenth century to emulate the lettering used in medieval manuscripts. Letters once cast in lead are restored by the Bible Scribe to their origins in the 'hand'. In this regard, Robotlab's writing machine seems to reverse a pattern shaping the history of the written word. In *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World*, David Abram describes the 6000-year-old tradition of writing as a gradual divorce from its 'natural' origins in the human body and its environment. Until the invention of moveable type, writing retained a vestigial connection to the body as traced in the actions of the scribe and the illuminator. The price of the printing revolution launched by Johannes Gutenberg in the west, according to Abrams, has been a declining sense that a material, organic body is behind the writing. iPads and mobile phones would seem to be the latest stages in this long process of disembodiment of writing. The Bible Scribe seems to offer a historical kink in the straight path of progress.

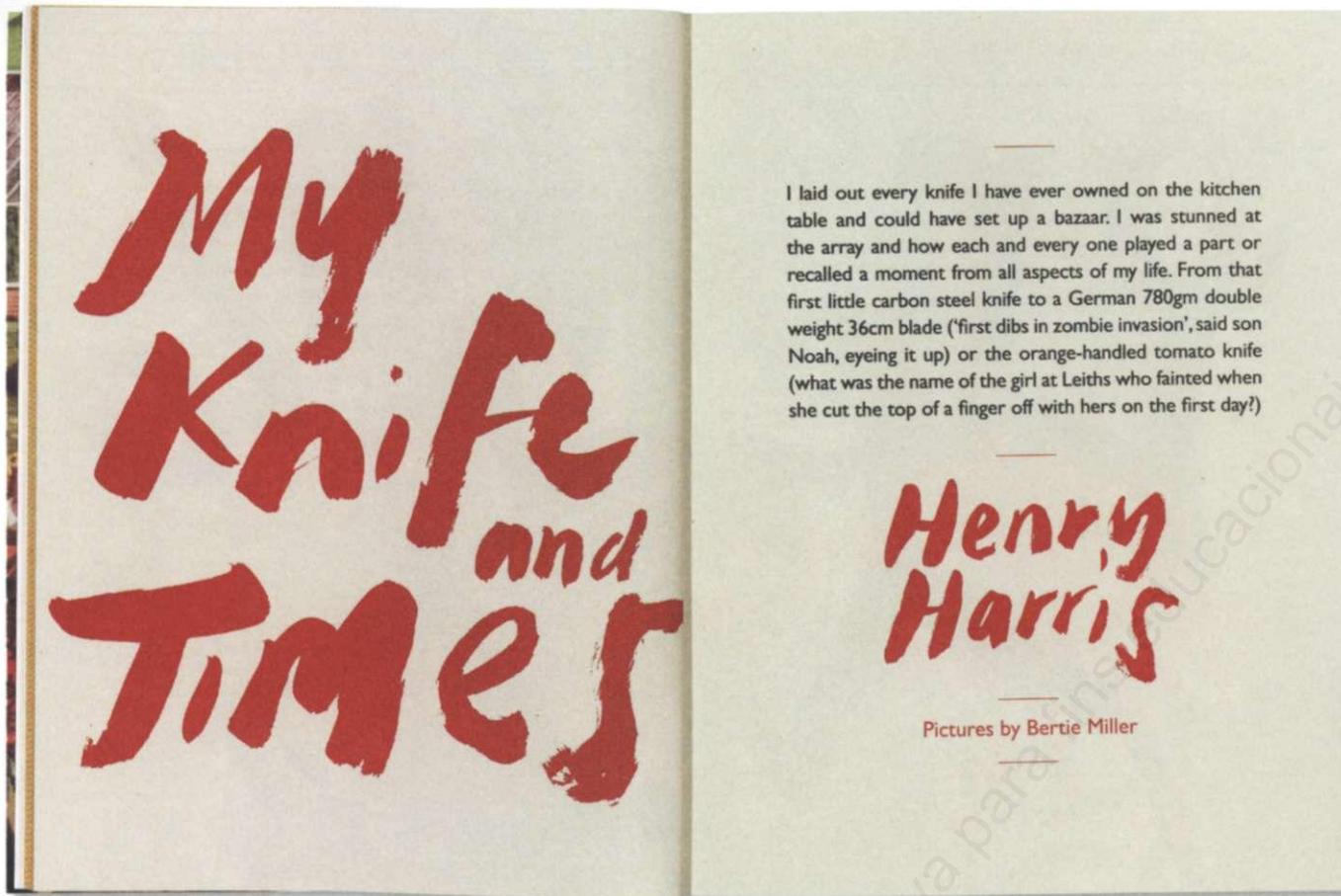
In the beginning was the hand

The readers of *Eye* hardly need to be told that in recent years there has been a ripple of enthusiasm for handwritten letterforms. Their champions usually set the natural and 'personal' qualities of penmanship against the cold precision

of digital lettering. Many designers and illustrators, including current stars Jon Gray, aka gray318, James Victore, Seb Lester and Marian Bantjes, employ the looping strokes of the kind of cursive 'copperplate' scripts that were once taught in the Victorian schoolroom by disciplinarians ready to train wayward hands with a swift swipe of a cane.

There is nothing new in this. Handwriting has long been a touchstone in the history of graphic design. In 1928 Jan Tschichold attacked the taste for self-expression among designers working in German publishing and advertising after the First World War. 'Their common fault,' he wrote, 'was that they always made their own personalities or their "handwriting" an effective factor in their work.' The 'correct' approach - according to Tschichold - was a rational application of the engineered forms of 'the new typography'. In the US a few years later, Paul Rand took a different view, combining his own lively penmanship with classic typefaces on book jackets, magazine covers and advertisements. Fancy, ornamental faces were ruled out: only handwritten letters could deliver both the authenticity and playfulness that he prized in equal measure. In the middle of the twentieth century, handwriting became a code for modern individualism, allied to jazz and classical music in, for instance, Alex Steinweiss's album sleeves for Columbia (see *Reputations, Eye* 76) and to the modern novel in book covers by Alvin Lustig and Paul Rand.

In the 1960s, one of the trademark features of the celebrated Polish poster was the use of handwriting. This was, in part, a matter of necessity: Polish designers had no access to the typefaces being issued by foundries in the West. At the same time, lettering in the posters and designs by figures such as Henryk Tomaszewski carried an implied critique of communist authority. In a bureaucratic world filled with forms, dockets and regulations, type was an ally of illegitimate power; whereas the spontaneous, uncertain, even shaky, hand-lettering accompanying Tomaszewski's quick-fire drawings seemed to side with the ordinary man. During the 1980s, his calligraphic aesthetic became the house style of



Solidarity, the anti-communist trade union in Poland.

Even in the early days of desktop publishing, type designers quickly identified both the potential and the limitations of perfectly scalable and mathematically accurate digital lettering. Early experiments with digital type design included Just van Rossum and Erik van Blokland's digitised handwriting, JustLeftHand and ErikRightHand (1990), as well as their much reproduced 'randomfont' Beowulf (1990). Promoting their ideas in an occasional magazine with the title *LettError*, they pointed to the innately human quality of imperfection.

These various uses of handwriting are rooted in the belief that the hand can express individuality. This idea is written deeply in our culture. Graphologists, for instance, tell us that true character is betrayed in the angle of a pen stroke or the way a loop is closed.

If handwriting can be interpreted as a trace of the mind, it is also an index of the body. A signature on a document has a legal force that other forms of handwriting do not possess, because it stands in for a person. A line of ink pressed into paper is evidence of the will, and an index of the presence, of an individual. For instance, a forensic document analyst (the better regarded cousin of the graphologist) verifying signatures looks for *sprezzatura*, the visual signs of nonchalance, which perfect forgeries lack. This points to a key difference between the signature and other forms of handwriting. In order to communicate, 'good' handwriting tends to conformity. By contrast, a 'good' signature is distinct and so difficult to reproduce.

The signature joins other actions of the hand that - according to the philosopher Martin Heidegger - distinguish mankind: 'Through the hand occur both prayer and murder, greeting and thanks, oath and signal, and also the "work" of the hand, the "hand-work", and the tool. The handshake seals the covenant. [...] No animal has a hand, and hand never originates from a paw or a claw or a talon.' Writing about the development of writing machines in the late nineteenth century, Heidegger lamented the way in which writing was

I laid out every knife I have ever owned on the kitchen table and could have set up a bazaar. I was stunned at the array and how each and every one played a part or recalled a moment from all aspects of my life. From that first little carbon steel knife to a German 780gm double weight 36cm blade ('first dibs in zombie invasion', said son Noah, eyeing it up) or the orange-handled tomato knife (what was the name of the girl at Leiths who fainted when she cut the top of a finger off with hers on the first day?)

Henry Harris

Pictures by Bertie Miller



9. Spread from *Fire & Knives*, issue no. 6. Design: Rob Lowe. Most of this food quarterly's display copy is written out in Lowe's distinctive hand.
10. The *Bibelschreiber* performing in an exhibition on automata in the Centre for Art and Media in Karlsruhe in 2007. Robotlab will create a 'bios [Bible]' installation with the *Bibelschreiber* in Westminster Abbey in London, Autumn 2011.

increasingly torn from 'the essential realm of the hand'.

Typewriters bothered Heidegger (who liked to write long-hand). Had he lived in an earlier age perhaps other writing machines might have perplexed him. In 1804 Thomas Jefferson, for instance, acquired a mahogany, brass and green baize 'polygraph', a kind of pantograph that allowed the US president to make an exact copy of his writing. Two pens were fixed into a frame over matching pieces of paper. The movement of the pen in his hand - including its regular journey to refill at the inkwell - was reproduced by a 'slave pen'. In this way, two identical letters could be produced, one for dispatch and the other kept for the president's records. A keen champion of innovation and an industrious letter-writer, Jefferson lauded it as 'the finest invention of the present age.'

Master and servant

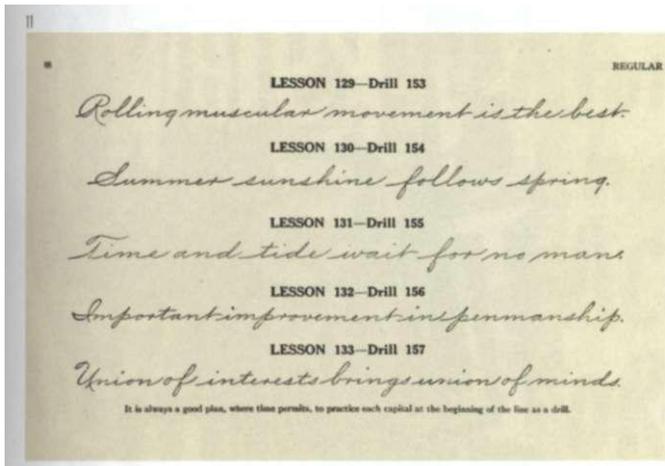
Today, historians and collectors fret over the status of Jefferson's facsimile letters: are they copies or originals? After all, the moment of composition and the moment of reproduction were one. The slave pen was controlled by the same action of the hand as the other pen. These doubts persist for much the same reasons that we distrust the scanned signatures that appear on junk mail and other unsolicited correspondence. They seem to point to the absence of the signatory rather than vouching for his or her presence.

Unusually, Rand and Lustig sometimes lent their own signatures to the vibrant book covers that they created for publishers such as Vintage and New Directions in the 1950s. The coincidence of two 'signatures' - those of the book's author and its designer - had an unsettling effect. In 'handwriting' author Crane Brinton's name on *The Anatomy of Revolution*, Rand made it evident that he was engaged in an act of graphic ventriloquism. Brinton was being lent someone else's graphic character. The same minor deception is, of course, made in most contemporary uses of handwriting by graphic designers and illustrators working to commission today.

There are reasons to see handwriting not as the expression of character but as its suppression. In the United States in the

nineteenth century, for instance, different styles of penmanship vied for the hand of the nation. By the end of the century this prize was won by the Palmer Method of Penmanship. Students were taught - in business colleges and through best-selling manuals - to write flowing cursive script according to a method developed by Austin Norman Palmer while working as a clerk in the Iowa Railroad Land Company in the early 1880s. Eschewing the flourishes and virtuosity encouraged by other systems of handwriting, Palmer set clarity, plainness and speed as priorities.

Writing in the Palmer method meant never lifting the pen off the page, except to recharge the nib. Letters and words were not produced in the hand - according to Palmer - but shaped in the forearm and propelled by the shoulder. Denied a pen, the left hand was given the sole role of feeding the paper. Efficient



writing could be produced only by a well trained body with the correct posture and wearing the right clothes. Palmer's students were not learning how to form words but how to manage their bodies.

Palmer's method brought a kind of masculine industry to the business of writing. Like the 'time and motion' studies of factory workers widely promoted before the First World War, his aim was to produce regular and 'efficient' actions. Money would be saved if wasteful strokes of the pen by book-keepers, secretaries and clerks could be eliminated. Writing was not a matter of expression but of utility.

If the Palmer method pointed to any kind of personality, perhaps it was a national one. The Palmer style - which became America's handwriting in the early twentieth century - is readily distinguishable from its contemporaries elsewhere like the rather decorous graphisme and the angular *Sütterlinschrift* taught in French and German schools. It was the product of new world ideals about the discipline and control needed to be a self-made man.

Automatic writing

The Palmer method represents the high point of automation in the history of handwriting. Mastering the technique, the writer came to regard the motor control needed to produce the strokes, bars and loops of the cursive lettering as innate or natural. Thought was hardly needed, or so it seemed. Disciplined penmanship was 'automatic writing', albeit not in the Surrealist sense.

For André Breton, writing in his 1924 'Manifesto of Surrealism', '*l'écriture automatique*' - whether stimulated by drugs, hypnotism or chance - promised to reveal an authentic self usually inhibited by culture and civilisation. 'Write quickly, without any preconceived subject, fast enough so that you will not remember what you're writing and be tempted to reread what you have written,' Breton urged. 'The first sentence will come spontaneously, so compelling is the truth that with every passing second there is a sentence unknown to our consciousness which is only crying out to be heard.'

Automatic writing - like Surrealism - fell out of fashion in western Europe and North America in the middle of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, the method has enjoyed occasional revivals (though stripped of any grand claims to what Breton called 'the truth').

Over the past few years, British artist Fiona Banner has explored the relations of the hand, mind and body in her 'Performance Nudes'. Working within the classical tradition of the life-drawing, Banner does not actually draw her models: she describes them in hand-rendered capital letters. Treating her canvas like a sheet of paper, she starts at the top left and fills its white surface with floods of words. Seemingly lacking formal syntax or eschewing any principles of aesthetic calligraphy, these texts depict the model's body in a series of sharply observed moments. Banner has the eye of a forensic pathologist, pointing, for instance, to 'knees bumpy and worn red' and 'fringe of lashes on parchment lids'. Written in the present tense and in direct prose, these artworks offer an intimate experience of following the artist's eye and mind as a very real and palpable body emerges. Banner's undisciplined handwriting amplifies this effect.

Bodies are always invoked by handwriting, even when prostheses like the *Bibelschreiber* robot arm are employed or when the script has been digitised. This is what makes this 6000-year-old technology so current and, literally, 'near at hand'. What is less certain is whether handwriting on the page or on screen is 'authentically' autographic. Handwriting has become code for the individual, rather than evidence of an individual hand. And even when we can be certain that the writing is 'authentic', perhaps the hand was being steered by the discipline of good penmanship.

11. Exercises from the 1914 edition of *The Palmer Method of Business Writing*. These lessons offered moral as well as practical advice.
12. Fiona Banner producing *Nude 57 minutes* (2005), one of the works in her 'Performance Nude' series.

NOTES

1. Jan Tschichold, *The New Typography*, trans. Ruari McLean (Berkeley, 1995).
2. Martin Heidegger, *Parmenides* (1942-43), trans. André Schuwer and Richard Rojcewicz and cited by Friedrich A. Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (Stanford, 1999).
3. Thomas Jefferson, Letter to James Bowdoin (10 July 1806), available at Library of Congress online.
4. André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor, 1972).

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