

In Defense of a Kinder and Gentler Type Treatment or, Easy on the CRAP

“Unfortunately, the ease of computer use puts potent graphic capabilities into the hands of people devoid of any esthetic sense about typography and have little or no understanding of the most basic design principles.”

–Philip B. Meggs, *The Obscene Typography Machine*

There is no denying that experimenting with typography and fonts is a joyful experience. Who wouldn't be delighted at the chance to apply a font entitled, *Cocaine Sans* or *Cold Night for Alligators*, to their document—I confess, I did it. However, when it comes to poetry, unless the intent from the onset is to create visual or concrete poetry¹, I would argue in favor of a more subtle type treatment, one that is driven by the rhythm of the lines and words. In a poem, it is the occupation of words to hint, suggest, shriek or shout a visual. Whatever landscape emerges is an incidental occurrence of the author's purposeful attempt to create stops pauses and apply emphasis to words.

While I was sorting through the many fonts I collected for this exercise and deciding which ones I wanted to apply to which words, I became increasingly uncomfortable. I kept looking at the original poem, reading the lines and thinking, *it's already the way it's supposed to be*. So I took a closer look at the original to see if I could find the CRAP principles (contrast, repetition, alignment proximity) at work. Obviously, the line breaks and word groupings aren't random. The poem uses a subtle technique of long dashes to insert pauses in lines and more importantly to give more

Still Swallowing The Cure (with apologies to Anne)

I've come back to the place
of scattered senses. Come
at midnight
during a January ice storm
without suitcase or security,
giving up my purse and jacket
for inspection, clutched in my hand
a book of Sexton's poems.

I sign by the inked-in X,
realize this is no game—even
insanity must stop
a moment
for formalities.

Today mad voices creep
into my room, curl
around my head, fog my mind
like the gray hazy cloud
that fills the dayroom
when they allow us to smoke.

It's always the same production:
paranoid hides in the corner,
clutches her pillow; addict
paces the halls, wrings hands; borderline
smuggles a razor
inside her shoe; and there are
the permanent guests, whose pinched
blurred faces
blend in
with the tasteless wall decorations.

Ten years I've slipped in and out
of this place, where the doctors advertise
new drugs while we paint
ceramic flowers. I might have sailed
overseas, flown
to every exotic city, taken a lover,
had a child—a daughter.

But I've returned, recommitted
and yet the craziness isn't what it used to be.
I've lost the hang of it—the innocence of it.

My roommate in her so apropos insanity
black ensemble, her manic laughter;
even she seems small and colorless—like

emphasis to the phrases that follow them. Visually, the long dashes provide a delicate sophistication and consistent feel throughout the piece.

The principle of proximity is used consistently through this piece, but in a different way than you might think of for a brochure or other type of document. Here, proximity is used to group words together, some in shorter groupings and some in longer. The proximity of the words to one another isn't for the effect of spacing but back to the idea of the author applying pauses and stops to suggest rhythm.

Overall, it's clear that design principles are at work in this piece. They are almost esoteric in nature, but they are present, serving to give subtle shape and supply a pace throughout the poem.

Remix

"We are seeing typography approach this level of obscenity as students, neophytes, and even experienced designers, berserk over the new toy..."

—Philip B. Meggs, *The Obscene Typography Machine*

What I discovered as I got further into applying fonts and a new interpretation of proximity and alignment to this poem, I was choosing fonts and treatments that gave the visual to the reader, instead of suggesting it. Instead of the reader imagining their own twist on what insanity looks like, I showed them what I was talking about with a font that looks like a demented kidnapper. All of the inhabitants of the asylum are revealed in precise manic, scratchy, shaky, creepy fonts. As fun as it was working with the fonts and treatments, in the

my good trip pills
from Dr. Alltogether; the complimentary
bon voyage assortment—pre-packaged
colorless persona. And I keep
swallowing the cure.

I've come back to hang
on the wall like a crooked
picture, to be decommissioned
like an obsolete steamer, locked up
like a multiple offender
who was so hard up
she fell in love with prison.

Still S wal low ing The Cure

(with apologies to **Anne**)

I've come back to the place
of s c a t t e r e d senses. Come
at midnight
during a January ice storm
without suitcase or security,
giving up my purse and jacket
for inspection, clutched in my hand
a book of **Sexton's poems.**

I sign by the inked-in X,
realize this is no game—even
insanity must stop
a moment
for formalities.

Today mad voices
into my room, **curl**

creep

end it feels too gimmicky, as least for this piece that has been completed and published. Would I ever consider starting from scratch, with the intention of creating a visual poem, sure; I think that is the way to do it.

When all the excitement is over and we are left staring at the bottom line, the point to carry home is, there needs to be a purpose to the design choices you make in any piece. Fonts and treatments should not be chosen just because they are mad cool. Rather, for every document, we need to understand what we are trying to accomplish and who the intended audience is. When we understand that, we can apply the principles of design to compliment that purpose instead of distract from it.

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like the

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addict

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BORDERLINE

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I've slipped in and out
of this place, where the doctors advertise
new drugs while we paint

ceramic flowers. I might have sailed

overseas, flown

to every exotic city, taken a **L**over,

had a child—**A DAUGHTER**

But I've returned, recommitted

and yet the **CRAZINESS** isn't what it used to be.

I've lost the hang of it—the innocence of it.

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Citations

¹ Mary Ellen Solt. "Typography in the Visual Poem." *Concrete Poetry: A World View*. 1968.
<<http://www.ubu.com/papers/solt/typo.html>>.