writing by Ellen Lupton

WRITING WITH SCALA

Scala by Martin Majoor

I FIRST USED SCALA IN 1991, when Robin Kinross mailed it to me in New York City on a floppy disk. Robin was writing an essay for an exhibition catalogue I was editing, *Graphic Design in the Netherlands: A View of Recent Work*. His essay was about typeface design, and this is what he had to say about Scala, designed by the brilliant young typographer Martin Majoor:

> Scala sums up many characteristics of recent Dutch type design. It is an "old style" face, perhaps, but it follows no established model— it invokes memories of W. A. Dwiggins and Eric Gill. Scala has a definite, sharp character of its own, which escapes the Van Krimpen mold. As usual with the Dutch, *the italic has a strong, insistent rhythm, perhaps to an extreme.* Much love and attention has gone into the "special sorts,"—there is even an x-height ampersand (&)—and the figures are, of course, non-lining.[1]

Presented on the following pages are specimens of texts that I have written over the years, sampled and reconfigured to provide a showing of this amazing typeface. All of these texts were originally written in Scala. As a writer who is also a designer, I often compose my words directly on the page, and I am happiest when writing in Scala. Its crisp geometry and humanist references make Scala at home with both the visual and literary qualities of the written word. Scala's x-height, which may be unfashionably large by today's standards, has always sat well with me, reminding me of my own bottom-heavy figure. Scala's distinctively shaped characters call attention to the physical presence of typography; at the same time, their design allows the letters to recede into the texture of words, enabling the process of reading to move forward with comfort and ease.

FF Scala family, designed by Martin Majoor, beginning in 1991.

1. Robin Kinross, "Non-Lining Figures: On Recent Dutch Type Design," in Ellen Lupton, editor, *Graphic Design in the Netherlands: A View of Recent Work* (The Cooper Union and Princeton Architectural Press,). Published in Scala, 1992.

22/28 pt

Advertising and design serve to amplify Bold
the value of useful things, *transforming* Italic
functional tools into alluring FETISHES Jewel (Pearl)
that promise to satisfy emotional as well as
material needs. A Eureka vacuum cleaner Regular
claims not only to sweep clean the rug,
but to give its user all her heart desires.

14/18 pt

Scholars of religion use the word FETISH to describe objects Jewel (Diamond)
that societies invest with the magical ability to control the forc-
es of nature. *The witch's broom, a* FETISH *appearing in Euro-* Jewel (Crystal)
pean folklore, is a cleaning tool employed for magical purposes;
the witch is a dangerously bad housekeeper, a single woman with
cobwebs in every corner. KARL MARX *borrowed the word* FETISH Caps
to characterize the cult object of capitalism: THE COMMODITY, a
product manufactured primarily to be sold, and only second-
arily to satisfy a human need. The object becomes a FETISH
as its functional role gives way to psychological incentives.

12/17 pt

The commodity FETISH speaks through advertising, packaging, styl- Jewel (Sapphire)
ing, and brand name recognition. *The corporate personality invoked by a*
familiar brand image such as logos for Hoover or Maytag can raise the value
of an appliance, regardless of its functional difference from other brands. Marx
assigned a feminine personality to the commodity FETISH *by describing*
the alluring, extra-functional features of the consumer product as "amorous
glances" that solicit the inner hopes and passions of the buyer. Freud used the
word FETISH to name an object or body part that stands in place of a
forbidden sex object. A foot or a shoe, a hand or a handbag—each can
become the target of desire, invested with emotional significance.

justified

JACQUES DERRIDA's theory of *deconstruction* asks how representation inhabits reality. How does the external image of things get inside their internal essence? How does the surface get under the skin? Western culture since Plato has been governed by such oppositions as *inside/outside* and *mind/body*.

flush left

The intellectual achievements of the West— its science, art, philosophy, literature—have valued one side of these pairs over the other, allying one with truth and one with falsehood. Deconstruction attacks such oppositions by showing how the devalued, negative concept inhabits the valued, positive one.

flush right

Consider, for example, the Judeo-Christian concept of the body as an external shell for the inner soul, a construction that elevates the mind as the sacred source of thought and spirit, while denigrating the body as mere mechanics. The original work of art carries an authenticity that its copy lacks—the original is endowed with the spirit of its maker, while the copy is mere empty matter.

centered

If *writing* is but a copy of spoken language,
typography
is even further removed from
the primal source of meaning
in the mind of the author.
The alphabet aims to represent
the sounds of speech with a finite set of marks.
DERRIDA used the term
grammatology
to name the study of writing as a
distinctive form of representation.

mixed alignment

A study of *typography* informed by deconstruction
would reveal a range of structures
that dramatize the intrusion of visual form
into verbal content, the invasion of ideas
by graphic marks,

gaps,

and differences.

FF Scala
8/12 pt
Regular, Italic, and Caps

DERRIDA proposed *grammatology* as a field of inquiry for which deconstruction is a crucial mode of research, a manner of questioning that frames the nature of its object. Falling within the domain of grammatology are the material forms and processes of typography. ROBIN KINROSS's *Modern Typography* (1992) charts the progressive rationalization of the forms and uses of letters across several centuries of European history. As KINROSS argues, printing was a prototypically *modern* process that engaged techniques of mass production.

The seeds of modernization were present in GUTENBERG's first proofs; their fruits are born in the self-conscious methodologies and standardized visual forms of printers and typographers, which, beginning in the late seventeenth century, replaced an older notion of printing as a hermetic art of black magic, its methods guarded by a caste of craftsmen. If KINROSS's history of modern typography spans five centuries, so too might a history of deconstruction, running alongside and beneath the evolution of transparent formal structures. DERRIDA's own writing draws on experimental forms of page layout, and countless forms of irrational order appear across the discourses of the printed letter.

FF Scala
9/12 pt
Regular, Italic, and Caps

External/internal, image/reality, representation/ presence, such is the old grid to which is given the task of outlining the domain of a science. And of what science? Of a science that can no longer answer to the classical concept of the episteme because the originality of its field— an originality that it inaugurates—is that the opening of the 'image' within it appears as the condition of 'reality,' a relationship that can no longer be thought within the simple difference and the uncompromising exteriority of 'image' and 'reality,' of 'outside' and 'inside,' of 'appearance' and 'essence.' JACQUES DERRIDA

FF Scala Sans

Bold

MODERN DESIGNERS, WORKING IN 22 pt

THE AMBITIOUS DECADES BETWEEN THE LAST 18 pt

CENTURY'S TWO WORLD WARS, EMPHASIZED 16 pt

AND TRANSFORMED THE TECHNOLOGIES OF MECHANICAL REPRODUCTION. 10 pt

Regular

THEY SOMETIMES BURIED EVIDENCE 20 pt

OF THE HAND IN ORDER TO OBJECTIFY THE MACHINE. 14 pt

Caps

THE MASS MANUFACTURERS 30 pt

OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY HAD PROVEN THAT INDUSTRIAL 14 pt

PRODUCTION COULD REPLICATE THE WORK OF TRADITIONAL ARTISANS. 11 pt

Regular

Avant-garde designers aimed, instead, 24 pt

to express the techniques of production in the form and appearance of the object. 11 pt

Italic

They sought to expose technology and loosen 22 pt

its constraints, viewing the processes of manufacture as devices equipped with 12 pt

Caps

CULTURAL AND AESTHETIC CHARACTER. 22 pt

Bold, Regular, Caps, Italic

Modernism fetishized the very means of manufacture,using the systems of MECHANICAL REPRODUCTION to build a mode of design that openly endorses its technical origins. The *ruler* and *compass*, the *camera* and *half-tone block*, the *letterpress shop* and the *offset press*: these were technologies charged with meaning, their presence heroically narrated in the visual forms they served to produce. 12/15 pt

Bold, Regular, Caps, Italic

Artists and designers tapped the CULTURAL ENERGY OF THE MACHINE, viewing industrial production as a vehicle for utopian social change. Although the visual languages of the avant-garde were suppressed in the Soviet Union, they continued to grow in the West, where *graphic design* emerged as a practice that translates the technologies of communication into compellling visual forms.

In the 1980s and early 1990s, many experimental graphic designers embraced the idea of the readerly text. Inspired by theoretical ideas such as Roland Barthes's "death of the author," they used layers of text and interlocking grids to create works of design that engaged the reader in the making of meaning. In place of the classical model of typography as a crystal goblet for content, this alternative view assumes that content itself changes with each act of representation. Typography becomes a mode of interpretation, and the designer and reader compete with the author for control of the text.

Bold

Another model surfaced at the end of the 1990s, borrowed not from literary criticism but from human-computer interaction (HCI) studies and the fields of interface and usability design. The dominant subject of our age has become neither reader nor writer but user, a figure conceived as a bundle of needs and impairments—cognitive, physical, emotional. Like a patient or child, the user is a figure to be protected and cared for but also scrutinized, tested, and controlled.

Regular

How texts are used becomes more important than what they mean. Someone clicked here to get there. Someone who bought this also bought that. The interactive environment not only provides users with a degree of control and self-direction but also, more quietly and insidiously, it gathers data about its audiences. Text is a game to be played, as the user responds to signals from the system. We may play the text, but it is also playing us.

Italic

FF Scala Sans
9/11 pt

Graphic designers can use theories of user interaction to revisit some of our basic assumptions about visual communication. Why, for example, are readers on the Web less patient than readers of print? It is a common assumption that digital displays are inherently more difficult to read than ink on paper. Yet HCI studies conducted in the late 1980s proved that crisp black text on a white background can be read just as efficiently from a screen as from a printed page.

The impatience of the digital reader arises from culture, not from the essential character of display technologies. Users of Web sites have different expectations than users of print. They expect to feel "productive," not contemplative. They expect to be in search mode, not processing mode. Users also expect to be disappointed, distracted, and delayed by false leads. The habits of the screen are driving changes in design for print, while also affirming print's role as a place where extended reading still occurs.

Another common assumption is that icons are a more universal mode of communication than text. Icons are central to the GUIs (graphical user interfaces) that routinely connect users with computers. Yet text can often provide a more specific and understandable cue than a picture. Icons don't actually simplify the translation of content into multiple languages, because they require explanation in multiple languages. The endless icons of the digital desktop function more to enforce brand identity than to support usability. In the twentieth century, modern designers hailed pictures as a "universal" language, yet in the age of code, text has become a more common denominator than images.

FF Scala Sans
8.5/11 pt

Perhaps the most persistent impulse of twentieth-century art and design was to physically integrate form and content. The Dada and Futurist poets, for example, used typography to create texts whose content was inextricable from the concrete layout of specific letterforms on a page. In the twenty-first century, form and content are being pulled back apart. Style sheets, for example, compel designers to think globally and systematically instead of focusing on the fixed construction of a particular surface. This way of thinking allows content to be reformatted for different devices or users, and it also prepares for the afterlife of data as electronic storage media begin their own cycles of decay and obsolescence.

In the twentieth century, modern artists and critics asserted that each medium is specific. They defined film, for instance, as a constructive language distinct from theater, and they described painting as a physical medium that refers to its own processes. Today, however, the medium is not always the message. Design has become a "transmedia" enterprise, as authors and producers create worlds of characters, places, situations, and interactions that can appear across a variety of products. A game might live in different versions on a video screen, a desktop computer, and a cell phone.

The beauty and wonder of "white space" is another modernist myth that is under revision in the age of the user. Modern designers discovered that open space on a page can have as much physical presence as printed areas. White space is not always a mental kindness, however. Edward Tufte, a fierce advocate of visual density, argues for maximizing the amount of data conveyed on a single page or screen. In order to help readers make connections and comparisons as well as to find information quickly, a single surface packed with well-organized information is sometimes better than multiple pages with a lot of blank space. In typography as in urban life, density invites intimate exchange among people and ideas.

FF Scala Sans
7.5/11 pt