Fluid Typography: Construction, Metamorphosis and Revelation

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Introduction

This chapter interprets the theme of Writing Design as an invitation to examine the design of writing or type in a temporal context. It addresses new treatments of writing and type in screen-based temporal environments. In particular, it discusses fluid typography, which treats writing as processual, or transformative rather than concrete, material, or static.

The history of typography has demonstrated that type is not arbitrary. It is capable of more than communicating linguistic information. From Guillaume Apollinaire to F.T. Marinetti, David Carson and Neville Brody, practitioners have extensively demonstrated that text can operate as more than a collection of arbitrary signs, it can also communicate pictorially through properties of shape form and colour. With the advent of readily accessible time-based displays, we now experience type that is capable of more than this. It is capable of performance and behaviour [1]. In numerous advertisements, credit sequences and digital artefacts of the past century, practitioners including Saul Bass, Kyle Cooper and Martin Lambie Nairn have demonstrated that, in temporal media, type can move and distort, and be subject to cinematic transitions. Type can interact with its surroundings (as in Robert Brownjohn’s title sequence for From Russia With Love, 1963), and interact with itself (as in R/Greenberg Associates’ title sequence for Altered States, 1980). All of these artefacts are readily located under the banner of ‘kinetic typography’ [2], of ‘motion typography’ [3].

More recently, a new form of temporal typography has emerged that cannot be so readily defined as ‘motion typography’. The terms, ‘kinetic typography’ and ‘motion typography’, though widely used to define the work mentioned above, imply that ‘motion’ is the single defining characteristic of temporal typography. These terms are used widely, to describe anything from ‘the temporary appearance of static text’ [4], to complex typographic performance. In many instances, these terms are misleading. They are misleadingly used either where the type itself is static, merely appearing alongside moving images, or where motion is not the central aim of the typographer. In many contemporary examples, type, though in motion, is capable of more than just a change of location, it is capable of distortion and transformation. Here, the term ‘dynamic typography’ [5] may be more accurate, allowing
for more complex forms of motion and change, but this term is still vague, and does not do justice to some contemporary artefacts.

One such artefact, which evades simple definition, is morphing typography, in which forms metamorphose into letters (as can be seen, for example, in Komninos Zervos’ animation, Beer). In morphing typography, as demonstrated in [fig. 1], it is not the motion of the letters that is significant: it is the transformation of one form into another. The consequence of the exhibited behaviour is not limited to a change of location or a rearrangement of letterforms, but also includes the introduction of new identities, both visually and semiotically. As each letterform evolves, it loses its initial identity, then adopts a new one. The form shown in fig. 1 is a single form, but it presents several different alphabetic identities over time (an ‘a’ and ‘b’). Significantly, despite the introduction of new identities, no new forms are introduced. Each identity emerges from an existing form, and so each single form is potentially many letters. During the process of transformation, intermediate glyphs are created. These are not recognisable as typographic, only as indefinable abstract forms. Such forms can be described as ‘asemic’ [6], having the appearance of writing but without any specific linguistic meaning. The process - the loss of initial identities, and the introduction of new meaning that occurs as a result of the transformation - is far more significant than any ‘motion’, which may occur incidentally.

![Figure 1. A single form, as it may appear in several frames of a moving sequence, morphing from an ‘a’ into a ‘b’. In the intermediate stages, asemic glyphs are created.](image)

For definitions of this kind of typography we must look outside of temporal media. During the 1980s and 1990s, Eduardo Kac produced a number of holographic poems (‘holopoems’) [7], which exhibited the same inconsistency that is displayed in contemporary examples including morphing typography. In holopoetry, letterforms appear to change over time [fig. 2]. As the viewer moves around each piece, it not only appears to be in motion, but also to ‘exhibit… behaviour’. From different locations, viewers can observe different formations of letters. Kac describes his works as containing ‘fluid signs’, or signs that alter over time, ‘therefore escaping the constancy of meaning a printed sign would have’. They are capable of ‘metamorphoses between a word and an abstract shape, or between a word and a scene
or object’ [8]. This is text that does not have a fixed identity or a reliable, constant meaning. It is constantly in flux, presenting multiple identities over time.

Figure 2. Eduardo Kac, SOUVENIR D’ANDROMEDA, 30 X 40 cm, Digital transmission hologram, 1990, Collection Acquaviva-Faustino, Paris. Image courtesy Julia Friedman.

The characteristics of fluidity, as defined by Kac, are now seen elsewhere. The most prominent contemporary example is that of Channel 4’s recent set of brand identities (MPC, 2004-present). Since Martin Lambie Nairn’s first Channel 4 ident in 1982, the Channel 4 logo has been constructed of parts which are capable of moving and relocating themselves, thereby constructing and deconstructing the Channel 4 identity as they converge and then disperse. In the most recent idents (including Tokyo, 2005, and Pylons, 2004), these parts adopt additional identities, so that they may blend seamlessly into the landscape. It is only when they are viewed in certain alignment that they are revealed as part of the ‘4’ configuration. These idents reveal a new relationship between text and image that is not possible on the static page. When we look at static examples that blur the divide between text and image, such as Apollinaire’s Calligrammes (1913-16), we see elements that operate simultaneously as type and image. Although fluid type also operates as both type and
image, its multiple identities are not necessarily simultaneous. It transforms from one to the other. It may, in one instance, be typographic, then it may be architectural or abstract it another. Its identity is constantly in flux. Here, what is significant is not the fact that type and image can exist within the same form, but the process through which the ‘type’ and ‘image’ identities are revealed. It is the process of transformation that is the focus of this research.

The Transformation of Type to Image

Transformative processes are not native to the field of temporal typography. Transformation can be observed in nature, and in human behaviour. The ‘continuous deformations’ found in nature can even result in a complete change in identity: a caterpillar can become a butterfly, or a tadpole can become a frog [9]. This naturally occurring flexibility and tendency towards change can be seen in man’s tendency to transform himself and his surroundings. Man moulds natural materials into artificial tools and objects. In life, and more overtly in performance, man transforms himself. In the shadowpography of the 1890s, performers used a combination of physical distortion and props to transform their shadows so that they resembled the silhouette of other animals or objects [10]. This tradition continues today with the dance troupe, Pilobolus, who transform their bodies through distortion and lighting effects. Metamorphosis also plays a central role in myths and legends, particularly creation myths [11], as well as literature, ranging from Grimm’s fairy tales, to Ovid’s Metamorphoses [12]. In these fictional cases of transformation, change tends to be more readily accepted when it occurs within a single ontological category (living creatures become living creatures, inanimate objects become inanimate objects), or, when change operates across ontological boundaries, subjects commonly retain recognisable characteristics in order to preserve identity or familiarity [13]. In fluid typography however, a paradigm shift occurs.

In many contemporary examples of fluid typography, forms transcend paradigmatic boundaries. Type becomes image, and vice versa. Letterforms adopt the identities of flat pictorial forms, or three-dimensional objects. They may even come to life, adopting the identity of one or many animals (as in BB/Saunders’ channel Five ident, Midges, 2005). Through this transformation, fluid type challenges established definitions of typography. ‘We have been conditioned to view typography as being distinct from images’ [14], yet if it is susceptible to change, its identity as type cannot be taken for granted. Indeed, it may not be reliably defined as either type or image, as it is, at different times, both or neither. Perhaps, therefore, the term typography is inappropriate to describe these artefacts [15], or perhaps current understanding of the term typography needs to be modified in order to allow for the
current cultural shift towards temporality, ‘quick change’ [16] and visual, rather than verbal, communication.

**The Construction of Modular Letterforms**

Numerous contemporary examples of fluid typography involve lettering that is broken apart and rebuilt as an image, or parts of an image that come together to build a letterform. Channel 4 idents, from Martin Lambie Nairn’s 1982 animated brand identity, to MPCs more recent equivalents, construct the figure ‘4’ from an array of converging component parts, in representation of the bringing together of television programmes produced by numerous different production companies [17]. The component parts are abstract polygons, independently communicating no linguistic meaning, but collaborating to communicate the identity of the channel. Although perceived as a single, whole sign, the ‘4’ is not a single, whole from: it is a configuration of separate forms, each with its own distinct abstract or pictorial identity. The process of letter creation through the convergence of parts is therefore reliant on the notion of the letter as a modular composition.

Modular lettering, constructed from ‘primitives’ [18], is not solely a feature of temporal typography. It has long existed in static type, and is most prominently displayed in Modernist typography. There are, for example, distinct similarities between the construction of the Channel 4 logo and Joseph Albers’ *Stencil* (1925), Theo van Doesburg’s typeface for *De Stijl* magazine (1917), and the lettering in Bart van der Leck’s poster for *Delft Salad Dressing* (1919) and *Het Vlas* (1941), all of which feature letters that are constructed from geometric primitives. Central to these modular typefaces is the notion that component parts are interchangeable. A single component part can therefore play multiple different roles, and only a limited number of different primitives are required in the construction of an entire alphabet. A tall rectangle may, for example, serve as the stem of either an ‘h’, ‘l’, or ‘p’. Theo van Doesburg’s cover for the first edition of *De Stijl* magazine (1917), and Bart van der Leck’s poster for *Delft Salad Dressing* (1919), demonstrate a remarkable similarity between the primitives used to construct type, and those used to construct image. Components of letterforms are similar, or in some cases identical, to the components of images and abstract pictorial arrangements. In Van Doesburg’s cover, the same black rectangles are used in the construction of letterforms as are used in the construction of the abstract pictorial arrangement which appears beneath, and in Van der Leck’s poster, a figurative image is reduced to coloured polygons, with similar polygons used to create type. Being interchangeable, these rectangles do not have a fixed typographic identity. If each block may
be exchanged for another, with each rectangle having the potential to serve as both image and type.

Van der Leck himself referred to such typographic works as ‘compositions’ [19], describing letterforms that are built, as opposed to moulded, with each letter ‘systematically’ constructed ‘as if it were a building’ [20]. Conceived as a configuration of interchangeable primitives, the letter is capable of being dismantled and reassembled. One letter may be dismantled, and its component parts used to construct another letter or, as in MPCs Channel 4 idents, a pictorial scene. In the work of Van Doesburg, Albers and Van der Leck, this process of constructing or dismantling type is part of the process of creation of a final typographic product. In fluid typography, however, this process becomes the product. The audience is exposed to the process of construction, and therefore to the multiple roles played by each component part. In MPC’s most recent Channel 4 idents (2005-present) component parts, at different times, serve different roles. Each of these idents introduces the viewer to an apparently everyday scene, then, defying the viewer’s initial expectations, extracts objects so that they may serve as component parts of the ‘4’ configuration. These objects initially serve a pictorial purpose, as part of the landscape, playing the role of architectural objects, but as they align to form the ‘4’ configuration, they collaborate in the communication of a typographic identity.

Construction, as opposed to other methods of creation, leaves the component parts as whole forms or objects in their own right: part of a letter but still independent. The forms may still be identified as rectangles, even after they have been stacked to create the shape of a letter. These primitives are more complex than those used in the modular lettering of De Stijl. Their independent identities are meaningful enough that they may communicate a complex pictorial message even when standing alone in an image. In channel Five’s Free ident (BB/Saunders, 2006) [fig. 3], the component parts of the typographic message are balloons. The balloons, drifting in the breeze, converge to form a typographic configuration: the word ‘free’. The word then breaks apart, allowing the balloons to drift away, themselves becoming free. One thing that is notable about this example is that the balloons themselves never change. Each balloon remains a balloon, retaining its original identity, throughout the introduction and dissipation of the typographic identity. There may be a hierarchy established, whereby the balloons become secondary to the more prominent text, but they are always present, and they are always balloons. The lettering therefore becomes a container for two simultaneous messages: one linguistic and one pictorial.
The Channel 4 and Five idents construct lettering in two distinct ways: construction through navigation, and construction through motion of parts. The first of these processes, as with Eduardo Kac’s holopoems, requires viewer navigation to prompt the transformation of one letter or object into another. In Kac’s holopoems, new identities are revealed as the viewer physically moves around each poem. In contemporary examples such as many of MPC’s channel 4 idents, navigation also reveals the new identity, but this navigation is virtual, and tracked by the camera rather than the voluntary movements of the viewer. In Tokyo (2005, Fig. 4), the camera, representing the viewer’s point of view, navigates through an urban scene. This navigation reveals that some apparently architectural objects are in fact part of a ‘4’ configuration. The architectural identity is replaced momentarily by a typographic identity as the 4 is constructed and then deconstructed according to the camera’s viewpoint. This process is wholly reliant on the use of virtual three-dimensional, or ‘environmental’ [21], space.

Figure 3. BB/Saunders, Free, channel Five ident, 2006. Image courtesy Five.

Figure 4. Construction through navigation, in MPC, Tokyo, Channel 4 ident, 2006.
If the component pieces are capable of independent motion, then viewer navigation is no longer required to reveal the typographic identity. This is the case with other Channel 4 idents, Five idents, and with many two-dimensional examples of fluid typography. In MPC’s \textit{Lawn} ident (2004), and in Lambie Nairn’s original Channel 4 idents (1982), the objects which construct the figure ‘4’ move independently. They initially present themselves as abstract shapes or objects, then converge to become part of the larger typographic identity (the ‘4’). Two dimensional equivalents include Harm van den Dorpel’s \textit{Type Engine} (2005), in which coloured rectangles are rearranged to form type.

\textit{Metamorphosis Between Letterforms}

The transformation of one identity into another - image into type or type into image – may involve processes other than construction. As shown in fig. 1, letterforms can metamorphose. Such change is exhibited in examples of fluid typography such as Komninos Zervos’ Flash animation \textit{Beer} (2005). \textit{Beer} demonstrates an extreme process of warping in which letterforms are distorted to the extent that each initial identity is replaced by a new one, in a languid process that resembles the properties of a drunken slur. Letters distort, become malformed, then reform to present new letters.

The notion that a letter may morph into another form is arguably founded upon ideas developed during a study conducted at the French \textit{Académie des Sciences} from 1695, in which letterforms were placed on grids in the creation of a new typeface, \textit{Romain du Roi}. In the creation of the slanted (‘penché’) version of \textit{Romain du Roi}, grids were skewed causing regular distortion of the letterforms contained within [22]. By placing a letterform onto a grid in this way, it is possible to stretch it to produce alternative weights, and to skew it in order to or create slanted/oblique versions of any letterform [23]. In the creation of slanted version of \textit{Romain du Roi} letterforms, through the manipulation of the grid, it became implicit that type may be considered malleable. Type, although static in print, has the potential to be manipulated. A single letter may, therefore, have multiple states, whose forms are dictated according to the angle of the lines of the grid on which they are placed; a single form may evolve into many new, visually different, forms which have the same alphabetic identity. The notion of deforming a typographic character allows for two very important ideas in relation to fluid typography: firstly, that a single form can have multiple alternative states or appearances; secondly that those different states may belong to the same object/space but at different times.

As with the construction of modular lettering in modernist typography (see above), the ultimate goal of the \textit{Académie des Sciences} was to develop a product (a static typeface).
The *Romain du Roi* typeface is intended for practical use without the grid, as in its first appearance in *Medailles sur les principaux evenements du regne de Louis le Grand, Avec des Explications Historiques* (‘Medals of the major events of the Reign of Louis Le Grand, with Historical Explanations’) in 1702 [24]. Plates in *Descriptions des Arts et Métiers*, published decades later, in several volumes between 1761 and 1788 [25], demonstrate the process of construction for each letterform (placed within a grid and alongside the circular outlines that are used to construct each letter). The presence of the grid in the plates published in *Descriptions des Arts et Métiers* indicates that the *Académie* considered the process of considerable importance: that it was not only the appearance, but the method of design that distinguished *Romain du Roi* from earlier typefaces. When we consider that the aim of the *Académie* was to separate type from craft, establishing it as a mathematical product, we can conclude that the inclusion of the grid, as a diagram, acted as both illustration and proof of the new method of production, and hence the new way of thinking about the nature of the letterform. It is this process, rather than the end-product, that was most influential in the later development of temporal typography. Though these plates exhibit letterforms within the grid, drawing attention to the production process, letterforms are only displayed in their before and after states: upright and slanted. Without temporal environments, the process of typographic manipulation could only be described, not recorded. In temporal environments, however, the process of distortion and manipulation may become the focus of a final artefact, as in morphing typography.

Other than its display in temporal media, the most notable difference between fluid metamorphosis and the creation of an italic typeface such as *Romain du Roi penché* is that transformation occurs not between two forms of the same letter, but between entirely different forms, many of which are not typographic. Distortion occurs to the extent that a form may no longer be recognised as a letter, becoming first an abstract glyph, and then, in some cases, a different letter, or in others, an image or object. In Zervos’ *Beer* each form initially presents one letter, then morphs until it becomes another entirely different letter. This process occurs several times, with each form adopting many different identities over time. In this process of metamorphosis, identities are completely replaced. Unlike the balloons in Five’s *Free*, or the architectural components of MPCs Channel 4 idents, every morphing letterform must abandon its old identity in order to adopt a new one. In processes of construction (as discussed above), the second identity is a masquerade [26]. The letterforms are a performance, a disguise which can be easily removed as component parts dissipate and return to their original, separate selves. The architectural objects in MPC’s channel 4 idents remain architectural, but momentarily fool the viewer into believing that they are in fact parts of a ‘4’. In metamorphosis, however, artefacts acknowledge that some things are inherently incompatible. There are some objects and forms that cannot co-exist. And yet, by
transforming from one to the other, they acknowledge that those two identities are connected. The two poles of transformation are often ‘clichés of opposition’ [27]. They are two identities that cannot co-exist, but through transformation of one to the other, their connection is made evident. The transformation from one identity to another ‘attempts to erase… binarism’, and yet asserts ‘sameness across difference’ [28]. By destroying one identity to reveal another, transformation marks similarity, but also ‘affirms a distance’ [29]. In fluid metamorphosis, the image cannot regain its initial meaning once it has been transformed into type, and vice versa.

Revelation of Existing Letterforms

There is a third category of artefact which offers audiences a similar experience yet is fundamentally different to examples of construction or metamorphosis, in that no actual transformation occurs. In this final category, letterforms are revealed to the audience as already existing within an established scene. Here, as in construction and metamorphosis, the nature of a scene defies audience expectations: forms which are initially assumed to have one identity are ultimately revealed to have another. Unlike in the first two categories, these artefacts do not show the creation of a typographic form. Instead, they reveal it to have always been present within the scene, but initially hidden from view.

In revelation, there is no process of creation: fluidity does not require the literal transformation of a letterform. Instead, an apparent or perceived transformation occurs, prompted by external changes, so that fluidity is imagined. A number of different events may cause a letter to be revealed, largely navigation, rotation, or illumination. In virtual space, three-dimensional letterforms can assume ‘architectural’ [30] qualities, having multiple surfaces of different shapes. A virtual three-dimensional letterform may present different faces when viewed from different angles. An extruded letter ‘M’, for example, may present as a letter when viewed from the front, or an abstract rectangle when viewed from either side. These alternative identities may be accessed either through navigation around the object, or by rotation of the object itself. Kyle Cooper’s title sequence for True Lies (1994), initially presents apparently planar letters spelling the word ‘true’. These letters then revolve, revealing themselves to be three-dimensional, and simultaneously revealing the word ‘lies’, carved as voids into the side surfaces of the existing letters. In this example, the viewer’s initial assumptions about the nature of the on-screen space (apparently changing from two-dimensional to three-dimensional) and the nature of the type (apparently changing from ‘true’ to ‘lies’), are challenged as additional information is revealed.
Alternatively, illumination may reveal forms that have been initially concealed. Peter Cho’s *Letterscapes (H)* (2001, fig. 6) initially presents a single apparently abstract planar form. Through shifting illumination, provoked by the movement of the mouse, the form is revealed to be two three-dimensional ‘H’s, placed back to back. Even once the letter identities have been revealed, further movement of the cursor causes further shifts in tone and colour which again change the apparent nature of the object. The surface of each letter appears to shift to a new angle and location as the illumination is adjusted.

Figure 119. Peter Cho, *Letterscapes (H)*, 2005. Source: Peter Cho.

These processes are comparable to spectacles that occur outside of the field of typography: in particular, certain kinds of stage performance. In theatrical illusion, as in fluid typography, there occurs ‘a moment of surprise… when the spectator suddenly realises his expectations were wrong’ [31]. An object which at first appears to be pictorial is in fact revealed to be typographic, just as a illusionist’s wand is revealed to be containing a bunch of flowers. In Sichuan opera, performers change their masks on stage, in full view of their audience, using sleight-of-hand [32]. Here, each mask is always present, but concealed until the time of revelation. This centuries-old tradition has been updated for Western contemporary television and cinema in the form of prosthetic disguises, which are peeled back to reveal the true identity of a character (as in *Mission: Impossible*, Brian De Palma, 1996). A similar process occurs in temporal typography when typographic forms are
revealed to exist within an apparently pictorial scene. Objects which were initially assumed to be pictorial or abstract, are unexpectedly revealed as linguistic forms, as the viewer suddenly encounters a new paradigm.

Conclusion

Fluidity in temporal typography may involve the construction of a configuration, in which component parts collaborate in the formation of a new typographic identity, or it may involve metamorphosis, in which one form must abandon its old identity in order to adopt an alternative identity from a different paradigm. In many cases of fluid type, fluidity is perceived by not actually performed: typographic identities are revealed as already existing within a pictorial scene. In all of these cases, fluid letterforms cannot be easily defined as typographic. They are constantly in flux, and only temporarily typographic. They are hybrids of type and image, but can never reliably be defined as either. The process of designing writing, in fluid environments, is no longer a process of conveying linguistic meaning, but of negotiating the relationship between several different paradigms, in the creation of fluctuating, hybrid forms. In temporal media (which is, itself, hybrid [33]), fluid type may be a logical progression from the shift from text to image that we are experiencing across all media [34]. Temporality allows change. It allows identities to transform, thereby removing reliability and consistency. It allows focus to shift from the question of identity to the question of process. It is the process, and what occurs during transition from one form to the next, that is the most interesting part of this new form of typography.

References


[8] Ibid.


[17] Woolman and Bellantoni, Type in Motion, 34.


[27] Sobchack, ‘At the Still Point of the Turning World’, 139.

[28] Ibid.


