

THAT
PLACE,
AT
ANY
RATE

That place, at any rate

Ken Garland

That place, at any rate

Observations on street lettering, from corporate logotypes to graffiti

Illustrations

7

Éditions

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Horrible, horrible?

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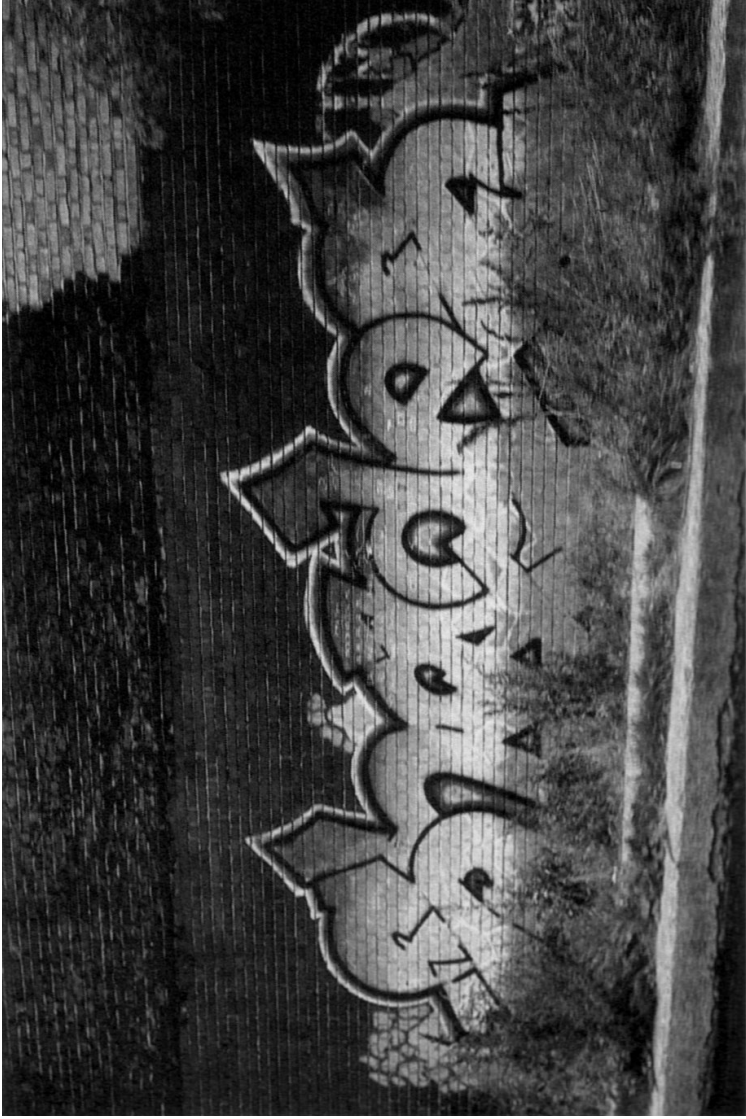
Improper lettering

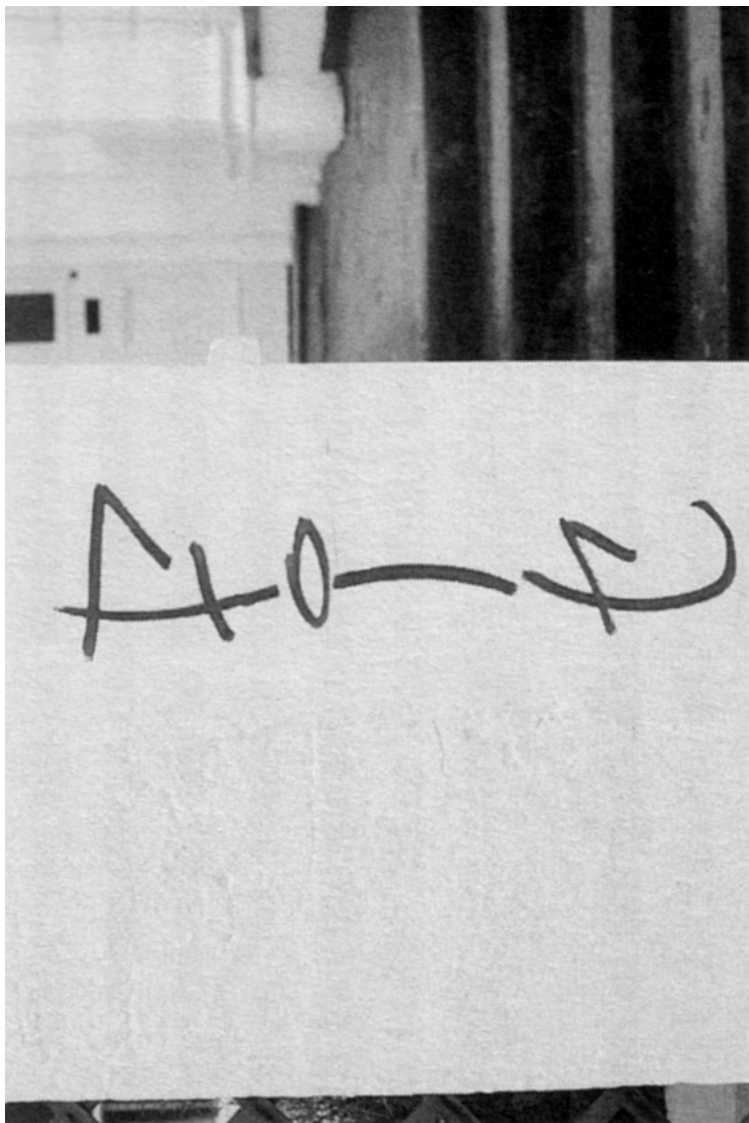
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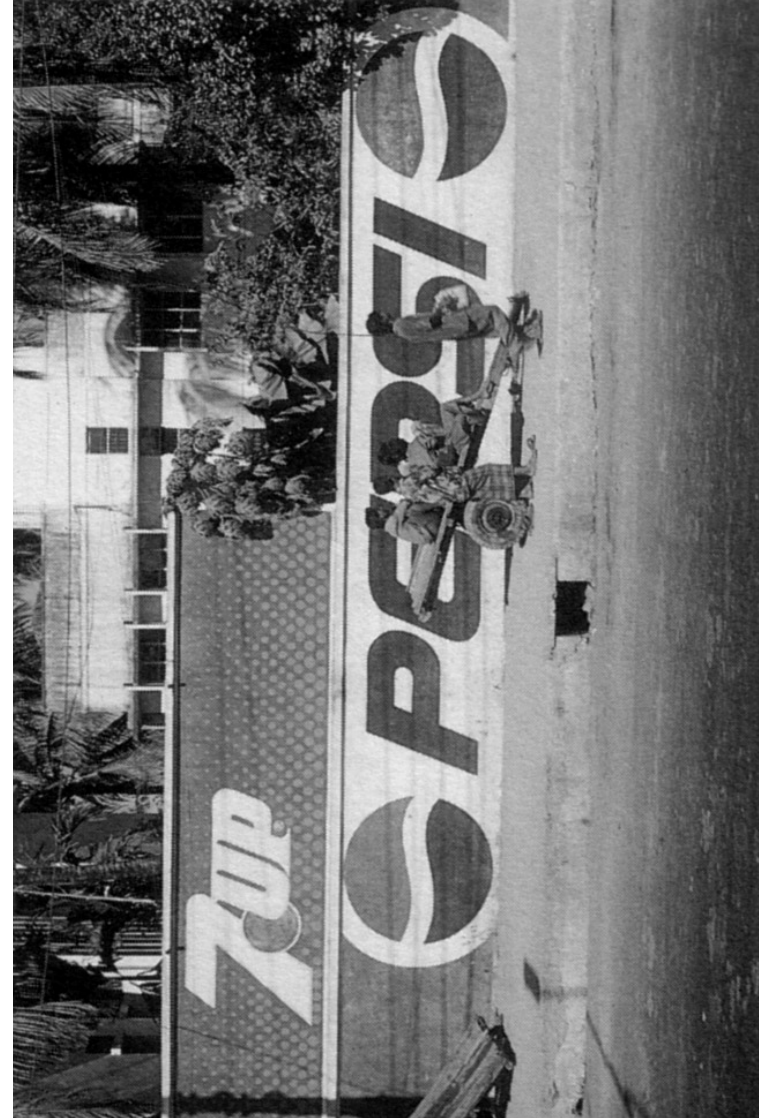
Design and the Spirit of the Place

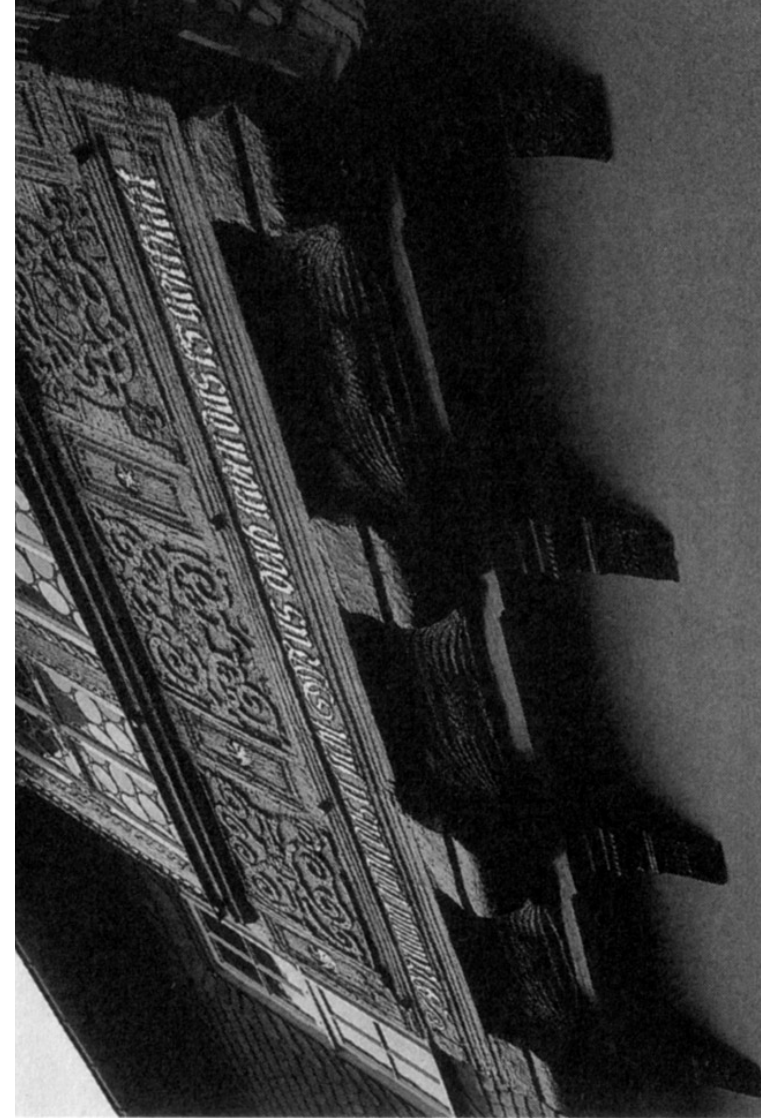
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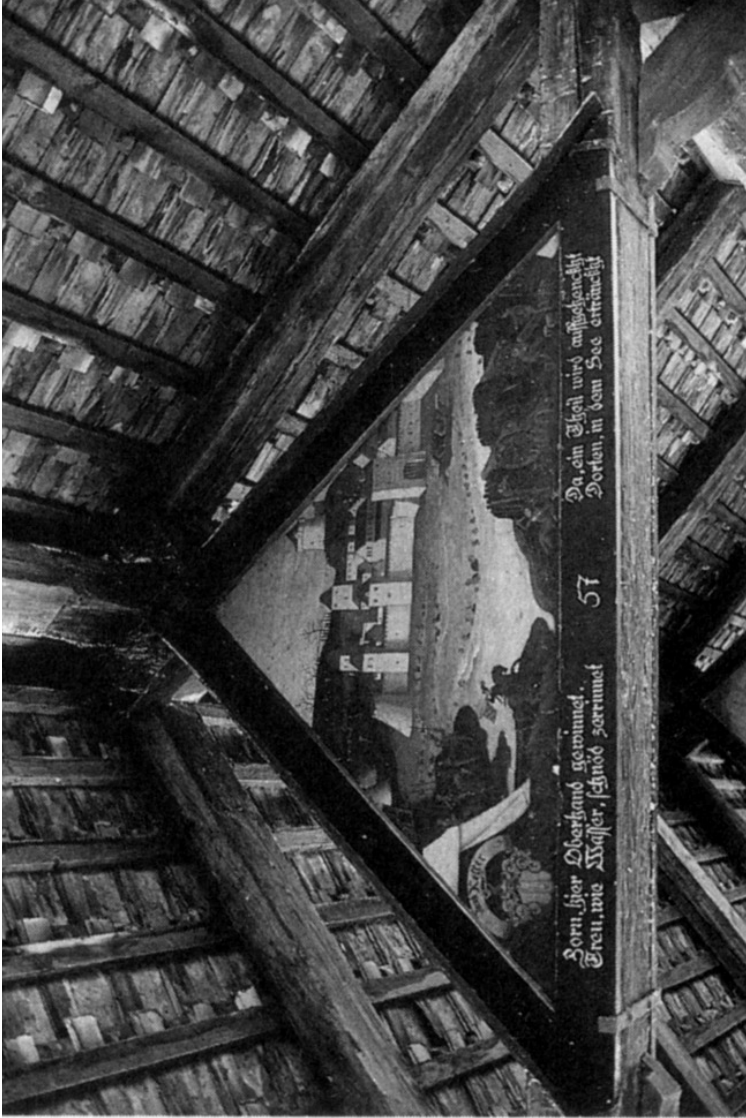
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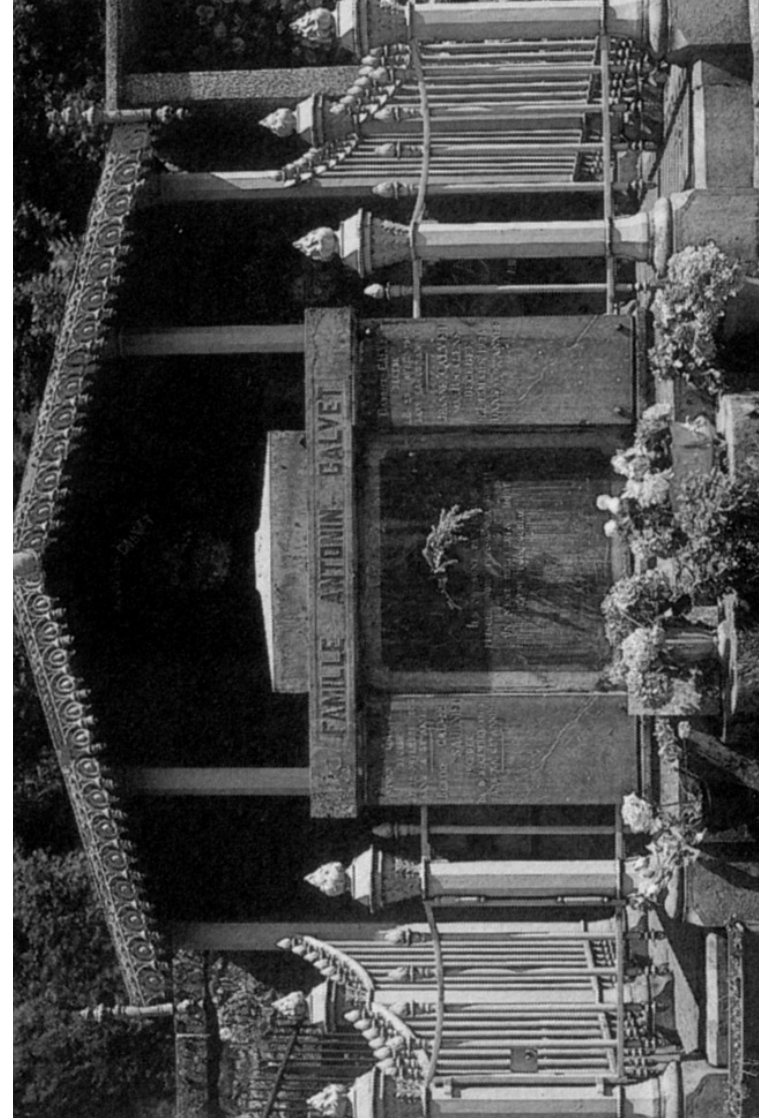


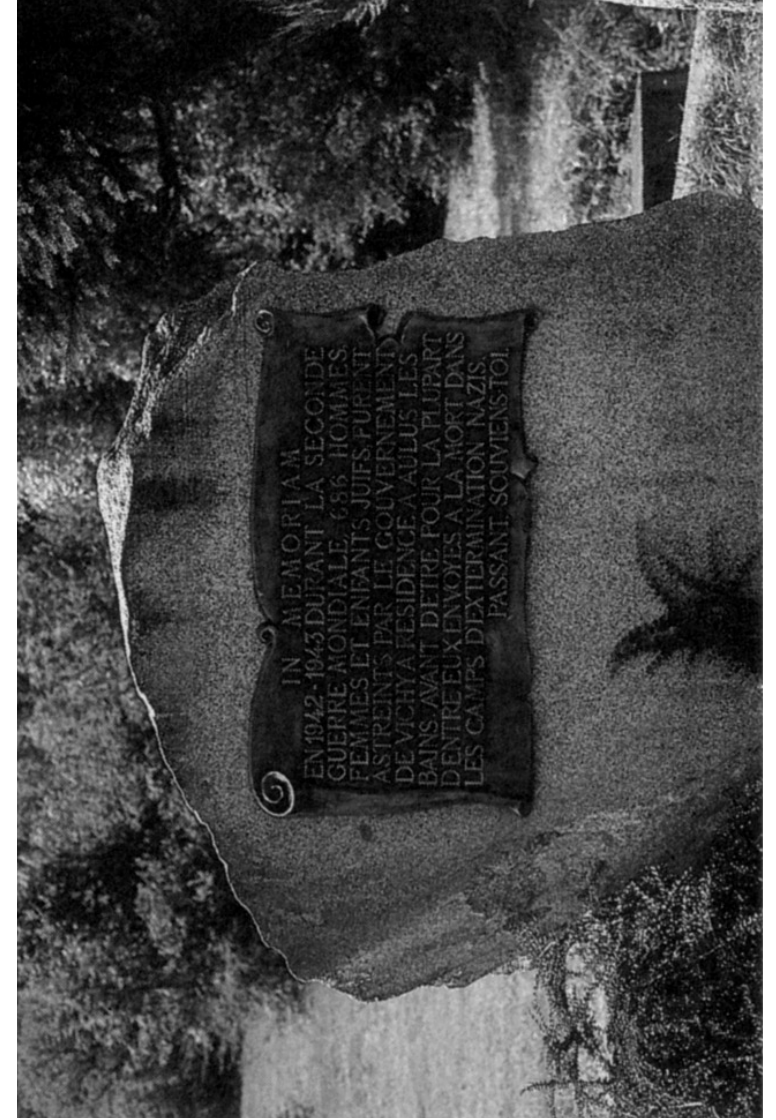














Horrible, horrible?

from *The Monotype Recorder 7* (new series). Monotype Corporation, Redhill 1988

Three years ago I went for an evening jaunt along the Regents Canal in North London, on a narrow-boat hired by my friends in the Camden Town Amenity Group. We were a congenial bunch, united in our concern for the urban environment, our affection for the familiar surroundings and our enjoyment of liberal supplies of a well chosen wine.

Then something happened.

On a particularly nondescript part of the canal near Kentish Town a new vision arose before us: emblazoned on a brick wall beside a derelict warehouse was a Tag. It said 'Shades'. Just that; no 'Hands off Nicaragua', no 'Pakkys go Home', no 'Maggie out', just a tag. An embellished *nom-de-plume* with no other purpose than its own existence. I loved it. I loved its impudence, its incongruity, its virtuosity and its vulgarity.

But everyone else hated it. Their faces wrinkled up like prunes as they stared at the unwelcome intrusion. They also stared at me in frank disbelief when I said I loved it. 'You can't be serious,' they snarled, 'It's horrible, horrible!'. So I took a surreptitious photograph of it and shut up. Then, about a hundred yards further on we came to another vision. This one said – hang on, what *did* it say? It might have been 'Kom' or 'Rom' or even 'Rome'. I loved this one, too, even though I didn't know what is spelled. To a renewed chorus of snarls I took another, extremely surreptitious photograph of it and said nothing (they were in a lynching mood by now, my friends).

What was happening to me? By all the criteria of lettering and typography that I normally subscribed to, these creations were inadequate: being illegible, or almost so; and having no significant information purpose. In earlier years I had shrunk from the spraycan throwups on the New York Subway, been enraged by the casual desecrations of the wall of churches, synagogues, concert halls,

art galleries and you name it; and appaled more than anything else by the wilful graffiti additions to lovingly rendered 'legitimate' wall murals. Now, like Saul on the road to Damascus was experiencing a sudden conversion. Graffiti can be good!

Not *all* graffiti, of course; my conversion was conditional. A lot of the kids who take up a spraycan or a giant feltpen only succeed in demonstrating in the most public fashion that they have no talent for it, and we have to suffer the evidence of their ineptitude. But if it comes to that, have you never been confronted with the work of an inept architect, or poster designer, or sign writer, or shop fitter, or sculptor? Ineptitude and virtuosity sit side by side in all creative fields and we do not, surely, condemn the rare examples of the latter because of the prevalence of the former, whatever the context?

Well, you might have thought this a reasonable assumption; but it is not so. My environmentally conscious companions on the canal trip are not the only ones who regard all graffiti as inexcusable vandalism, not to be countenanced under any circumstances. A substantial number, possibly the majority of those reading this article, may hold to this view. If so, you are in sturdy company. Certain estate agents who conduct their business in my part of London (Camden Town) have delivered themselves of stern statements about the activities of the graffiti fraternity. 'Anti-social' 'warped', 'a menace to the community' they claim, 'what are the police doing about these lawbreakers?' But if ever I heard a case of the pot calling the kettle black, this is it, for these same estate agents plaster their hideous sale boards all over my neighbourhood with flagrant disregard for byelaws or common decency; if anyone is an anti-social menace to the community it is more likely to be an estate agent than a graffiti writer.

Nor are some of our most prestigious architects free of all taint when it comes to visual abuse. They rarely break byelaws it is true, but their soulless facades, blunt, bland and bereft of feeling, are an insult to the community on whom they are imposed; and they are an open invitation to embellishment. Just up the road at Swiss Cottage are the Library and Swimming Baths designed by the late Sir Basil Spence. The ground floor presents a typically blank stretch of stucco – several hundred feet of nothing at all – to the citizens of Camden. The smooth surface proved irresistible to the local graffiti writers. Their efforts range, in mere competence, from the awful to the totally assured; but they are *all*, whether beautiful or ugly, tokens of some sort of humane presence, evidence that creatures with individual feelings, each with his or her own style. The smaller scale graffiti, as against the full-colour throwups,

are now done in felt pen rather than spraycan; this switch of instrument has resulted in a genuinely calligraphic style and one can see clearly those writers who enjoy the variation between thick and thin strokes. The comparative delicacy of the felt pen also permits the development of more elaborate *tags*.

But the grand set piece still flourishes undiminished. Though essentially lettering designs, they may now incorporate pictorial elements as well. Such complex designs take a long time to execute and need a team one of whom designs the whole and supervises the rest who specialize in particular parts or effects. Increasingly, local authorities, schools and even some businesses have commissioned works from graffiti writers and this allows them to take whatever time they need, no longer under the pressure of being jumped on by the law or by an irate property owner. But for some this freedom from harassment is a turn-off and they claim they perform less well when they haven't got the excitement of engaging in an illegal act to keep the adrenalin flowing.

Apart from the pleasure good graffiti can give to any lay person unblinkered by prejudice, they have a special interest for the practising calligrapher, lettering artist and typographer, since they are lettering-based. Though the models for many letters are School of Mickey Mouse Weekly or Superman Comics, the wild and often illegible forms that emerge are very much the product of their time, place and circumstance. They are about lettering as image; whatever meaning they have for the viewer is in the *way* they are done, not what they say. Outrageous as this may seem to some, they have much in common with the decorated initials of a mediaeval manuscript like the Duke of Berry's *Grandes Heures* or the *Book of Kells*. They have the same over-the-top invention, the same mix of delicacy and vulgarity, and most strikingly of all, the same vitality.

In the corner of one of his New York pieces the graffiti writer whose Tag is 'Lee' has encapsulated his and his fellows' sense of purpose in these words:

'There is only one reason for art: to know that you are alive.'

Improper lettering

paper given at *Lettering forum*, University of Oxford, January 1988

I have been asked by the Gulbenkian Craft Initiative to offer you some opinions on the lettering we see around us in the street. As a graphic designer I suppose I might be expected to present a selection of good work by my fellow designers, to regret the many bad examples and to offer some earnest exhortations to those with the power and the money to have effect on the appearance of signs on shops, offices and public buildings.

But I have chosen not to. Rather than postulating any ideal and indulging in unrealistic propositions intended to transform the urban scene into a designer's paradise by some unspecified magic, I wish to look, in as detached a way as possible, at the real scene. To do this I have examined my own neighbourhood, where I both live and work; and for the most part my examples are drawn from Camden High Street. London, and the streets nearby.

The strongest lettering to hit my eye as I walk up the main street is that on estate agent's boards **IO**, as they dangle, jostle and compete with one another for my attention in the most exuberant and unrestrained fashion over my head. They incorporate those aspects of public lettering most dear to those who strive in the marketplace: their house styles are contrived to distinguish one agency from another at a distance of two hundred paces; their message is simple and stated without frills; and the scale of the letters is such as to compel attention even from the most unobservant. They are among the most vivid, unmistakable tokens of free, unbridled competition.

To me, they are obscene, arrogant, presumptuous – and entirely suited to the social climate of our time.

You may say: if they are indeed obscene, then let's make them neater. Let's have some order in their appearance and siting. Let's have some regulations about them, for heaven's sake. But this, I suggest misses the point. In all their profusion and assertiveness, they are only the outward

and obvious mark of a rapacious, property-obsessed society. In that respect they are, it seems to me, honest graphic designs, wrought by honest hands for honest purposes.

So they are, the horrid things, poised over our heads; and there they remain, long after the premises have been let or sold, inescapable monuments to the property deal struck some three, four or six months ago. Meanwhile, what of the shop fascia lettering they so often appear to upstage?

Well, the chain stores in our high street, you may or may not be relieved to learn, are in no way overawed by the estate agent's signs. Though unable to aspire to the lofty stature achieved by lettering on edge-of-town hypermarkets, their marks of identity are nevertheless burgeoning, in three dimensions, from their fascia boards in ever more impressive fashion, to the extent that one sometimes fears to walk underneath, in case one of them detaches its vast bulk from the shop and descends to crush you to death on the pavement.

Less wealthy shopkeepers – tobacconists and newsagents, for example – may solve the fascia problem by accepting the aid of the tobacco companies with the predictable result that the fascia is 75 per cent tobacco and 25 per cent the rest.

Nor is tobacco the only product to replace the identity of the small shop: the credit companies are doing a grand job here too, to the effect that it appears more significant to know that so-and-so's shop welcomes Visa cards or Access cards than to know who so-and-so is.

Is there any evidence, in the lettering confronting me in my perambulations, of informality, of casualness, of friendliness? Oh yes sort of. There is, for example, the studied informality of Prontaprint's scripty name style, derived from the late Roger Excoffon's Mistral typeface; the neon sprawl of Camden's Friend, a Chinese restaurant; and the 'handwriting' of André Bernard's hairstyling salon. But these are tired, unconvincing substitutes; they have nothing personal about them and they fool nobody.

(Notice, incidentally, the tobacco-inspired fascia next door to Prontaprint – 75% to Benson & Hedges, 25% to Camden Bazaar – and the three-dimensional burgeoning of the BSM letters next to André Bernard.)

Bouncy logos are rife among the American imports to Camden. Just up the road, for example, we are treated to the brash banality of the Holiday Inn logo that is so relentlessly duplicated on prime sites all over the globe. The power of this sort of corporate identity lettering is derived, not from the actual design, which is usually flaccid and

uninspired, but from its *ubiquity*. Yes, there's the trick, isn't it? Bung an unchanging version of your name all over the bloody place, using all manner of persuaders, financial or otherwise, to circumvent local planning authority objections; shove that same design on every paper napkin, every menu card, every porter's cap, every advertisement and every promotional device you can think of: and bingo! that little old bit of fancy lettering is more important to your marketing success than the buildings it adorns.

As for the informality referred earlier, it's not here; nothing could be less informal than a logo that is blazoned in such unvarying form in so many places, in spite of its apparent 'friendliness'.

As it happens, just across the road from the Holiday Inn is a wealth of informal lettering; not only informal but also, I am afraid, highly improper. As the only valid visual response to the ghastliness of the Swiss Cottage Community Centre, designed by the late Basil Spence, some naughty boys and girls have been at it with their graffiti. Note, by the way, that spraycans are joined by giant feltpens these days, the latter preferred for use on smooth, bland surfaces instead of the rough brickwork for which spraycans are the only suitable tool.

The 'tags' demonstrate mixed ability, to borrow a term descriptive of the local comprehensive schools from which the lads and lasses emerge at the end of the afternoon, feltpens up their sleeves and a nice bit of virgin wall in their mind's eye. Many of their creations are clumsy and messy, but some – and more than you might think at first glance, are full of life and invention. And because, customarily, the perpetrators only put up their own tag, they become more and more fluent in execution. This, at its best, is free, informal lettering of a high order.

Most graffiti artists stay close to their own manor. They like to be surrounded by the evidence of their efforts as they go from home to school, or work, or wherever they hang out if they have no work. Thus in Camden we have Rozza, Quill, Fit, Blade and Excel^{11 & 12}.

These 'artistic' as against purely polemical, graffiti, derive from the New York school. And did those heroes – Skeme, Lee, Phase 2, Chico all the others in Manhattan, Queens, Brooklyn and the Bronx, produce their individual, vigorous letterforms without reference to previous models? Of course not. They derived, in their turn, from comic strips and comic books, and from the untutored but fluent scripts of fishmongers, greengrocers and fruiterers.

You see, it isn't well-ordered and harmonious arrangements of lettering that I seek now, in the streets of Camden Town. My town is part of the disordered, greedy, self-seeking society that is so well served

by the uncaring governments we have wished upon ourselves. And I certainly don't want to give *them* any more opportunity to impose *their* kind of order. It could never be mine.

No, I look for the informal, the spontaneous, the unique, the non-standard, the quirky, the heretical and the improper. That's where we'll find vitality and innovation, not from vast schemes sponsored by governments, or multi-national companies, or, god forbid, agencies of the European Union and the United Nations. Personal things, whether vulgar or tasteful, crude or delicate, useful or trivial; things that tell you something about the persons who drew, painted, incised or carved them.

Now I ask you – you who love the unplanned, the unexpected, who want your life and work to be a casual celebration and not a pre-ordained parade, who would rather be surprised than standardized – who, really, are your brothers and sisters, or, more important, your sons and daughters: the self-important, pinstriped peddlers of financial futures and mega-mergers; or the naughty boys and girls with their giant feltpens and their nervous, irritating, vulgar but truly challenging attacks on an environment that has so far failed them – and *us*?

Design and the Spirit of the Place

invited lecture given at School of Art, University of Michigan,
March 1995

[Shows first slide: Holiday Inn exterior]¹³ OK, it's a Holiday Inn, but where are we? Los Angeles? Frankfurt? Bombay? Melbourne? Could be any one of them, couldn't it? And what about this [shows anonymous subway sign] I'll give you a clue: it's a subway sign. I bet you couldn't tell me whether it's in Berlin, or Stockholm, or Boston. Actually, it's in the Moscow Metro, but so what? See, the whole thing about Holiday Inns, and Metro signs, and airport signs, and McDonald's signs, [shows PepsiCola sign]¹⁴ and PepsiCola signs – this one's in Bangladesh, by the way, but more of that later – the whole thing is that they are *meant* to impose on the locality they're placed in. They are designed as ubiquitous, constant signals aimed at those who, it is presumed, are anxious to acquire a product or service that is of unchanging quality and type.

And why not, indeed. Should not the anxious traveller be given that assurance in the most immediate fashion: the Sign that Says it All. What better way to encourage world travel than to employ the easily comprehensible logotypes of the multinational companies, and the international sign system now so often seen in airports, railway stations, metros and yes – even in shopping malls?

All very plausible; and I have to confess I've found these very logotypes welcome from time to time, much as I may dislike the look of the damn things. But there is a heavy price to pay for such occasional convenience.

Firstly, there is the problem of the very ubiquity of these devices. When you don't want the service or product they represent – which is, after all, most of the time – they're still there, blaring at you. And what about those of us who *never* want they offer? A favourite topic of mine, this, that I've enlarged on under other auspices and no doubt will again. But more relevant to the subject of my lecture is the effect of these signs on the Spirit of the Place. In a word, the effect may be, and often is,

catastrophic. Does anyone here seriously doubt that the mere presence of two large gasoline filling stations straddling the approach to a small, historic village town in say, New England, replete with gaudy signage, constitute a visual threat to that fragile environment? Or that the impact of this [shows McDonald's sign in Kendal]¹⁵ graphic protrusion into the hitherto restrained High Street of a country town in England's Lake District is an inevitable affront to its setting?

Multiply such typical encroachments a thousand, a hundred thousand, a thousand thousand times, and you are facing the wholesale dissolution of unique, irreplaceable environments in favour of this mass-produced syrupy overlay. The paradox is that much of the homogenous horror – the monotonous livery of the vast hotel chains, for example – serves the very tourists who travel the world in search of the precious environments they are threatening; and the quest for these disappearing treasures grows ever more frantic as the tourist hotels spring up to accommodate them.

Time was, we wouldn't have to be on this quest, you and I and all the Holiday Inners. Then, the Spirit of the Place was self-evident. We – well, our ancestors, to be more accurate, had only to look around them: each farm, village, market town and city were unique and unmistakable. The barns and cattlepens and sheepfolds of the farms were made by local craftsmen from local materials; [shows sequence of farm, village, town and city] as were the inns and the manor houses and the cottages of the villages; as were the parish churches and the merchants' house and the market halls of the town; and as were the theatres and the mansions and the workshops of the city. Even the great cathedrals, intended though they may have been by their patrons to reflect the higher glory with their altarpieces, stained glass and chancel screens by master craftsmen of international repute [shows rose window from Chartres and gargoyle], were nonetheless built from local stone and timber, and were decorated with gargoyles and misericord wood-carvings and all manner of ornamentation that betrayed, or rather celebrated, their local origin.

Of course, there is still much historical evidence of vernacular art and craft; there are even some towns that have nurtured it so carefully one could almost believe it was still vigorous and thriving. Take the town of Goslar in the Harz Mountains of Saxony, North Germany. [Shows sequence of carved lettering on medieval houses]¹⁶ We cannot doubt the genuineness of these facades. When I photographed them in 1989 they were freshly painted and in perfect condition; they looked pristine. But the sense of being 'original; still pure; unspoiled' (Webster),

they are not entirely pristine. You see, I remember visiting Goslar in 1950. After ten years of wartime and postwar neglect, the facades were unpainted, the wood splintered and warped, and the plaster cracked and peeling. So, genuine though the facades are, they have now been subjected to the sort of dedicated refurbishment and renewal usually associated with art galleries and museums. They are well worth preserving, insofar as they retain the original configurations of the carving and, perhaps, something of the original colouring. But delightful as the town now appears, there is more than a whiff of formaldehyde in the Spirit of the place.

Now, it may be that the Swiss city of Lucerne has a rather better claim to a living tradition. The 17th century painted panels adorning its famous wooden bridge may smack somewhat of artful preservation [shows covered bridge and gable paintings]¹⁷ but the long-established custom of painting the walls of its buildings produce images and decorations that are fresh and vigorous, and are regularly renewed by artists and craftsmen who are able successors to their fellows of earlier centuries. [Shows sequence of wall murals] However, I still have that nagging feeling that it's make-believe – like an up-market Disney World. And there was something in Lucerne that gave another, less charming but perhaps more real picture, and which I'll come back to under another heading, as it were.

In my own neighbourhood of North London I set about the search for the vernacular of the here-and-now. Hastening along my Main Street underneath the threatening, three-dimensional fascia lettering [shows sequence of these] and the chaotic clusters of realtors' For Sale signs [shows one]¹⁸, I turn into a side street and there they are: the hand-wrought price tickets on the fruit and vegetable stalls of my local street market [shows price tickets]¹⁹; Yes, I know they're a very modest contribution; I know they're taken for granted by both stall-holders and their patrons; and that they'd probably laugh their heads off if they learned I was commending their little efforts so earnestly. No matter: they *are* expressive, inventive, vigorous and confident. And in their unpretentious way they tell me much more about the real life of the street than any of those soulless, chain-store fascias or those rapacious realtors' signs. Nor am I talking only of the time-honoured tradition of the stall-holders tickets and suchlike, for with the new phenomenon of inner city freeway flyovers have come the defiant graffiti that transform their grim substructures into things of beauty. Some of them are subtle, even delicate [show one such]; others are powerful, [show one] sometimes offensive. They, and their companion works flanking the

tracks outside our rail stations, are surely genuine tokens of the New Spirit of the Place – *that* place, at any rate.

It's all a bit of a struggle though, this hunting for the genuine among the mass of corporate dross of our cities, isn't it? What about more pervasive, less fractured evidence? OK, here are two pieces of evidence. The first is one I haven't seen myself but offer you through the courtesy of the heroic photographer Peter Magubane and *National Geographic*: in KwaNdebele, South Africa, the women of the Ndebele nation decorate their houses, and themselves, in a style which is unique, and breathtaking, and *modern* – modern is the sense that it is changing and developing all the time [show sequences of courtyard and people]. Although their art, their life style and their very identity has been under threat, present indications are that all have a good chance of surviving because they are vigorous and determined and inventive, all of which you could have divined from their art, could you not?

The second piece of evidence I have seen and can vouch personally: it is the glorious and *recent* explosion of street art in the form of the decorated cycle-rickshas of Dhaka, capital of Bangladesh. We may well be seeing the peak of this amazing manifestation, which took off with a flying start when the country gained its independence in 1972 and has gone on getting better all the time [show sequence of decorated rickshas]. This is a popular art form, of course; but it is not untutored or amateurish. Its exponents are highly skilled and highly thought of. Dhaka is blessed and transfigured by their achievements. And we should take two important lessons from them: one, their art is joyfully spontaneous, unrelated to any profit motive, since no-one (except, perhaps, the odd visitor like me) is going to select a ricksha on the basis of its decor; two, it has no financial sponsorship of any kind from the city or the government. Can it be that any genuine expression of the Spirit of the Place must be spontaneous and unofficial? By the way, I noted earlier that I would be mentioning Bangladesh in relation with PepsiCola. So here we are: as the result of the intense competition in the world by Pepsi and Coke to sell their gooey and expensive syrup to the poorest people in the world, they have swamped the country with their billboards [show sequence of billboards]. Not only that: they are now hacking away Bangladesh's precious and rare bits of hill in order to superimpose their monotonous imagery; their graphics are literally carving up the country!

My last point is a difficult one but important – to me, at any rate – so I'll do my best to make it clearly. Last summer I spent several weeks in a French village at the foot of the Pyrénées [shows sequence of

views]. A delightful place, though somewhat less prosperous than it was during its heyday at the turn of the century when it was popular with the wealthy middle class as a spa. It is dominated by its beautiful church and its people appear devout. The graveyard contains the most lovingly wrought stonework in the village, in the form of the elaborate monuments to the deceased members of its most prominent families [shows sequence of graveyards monuments]²⁰. You might, at first, have assumed this to be a community at ease with itself and its religion, proud of its past and determined to preserve what it can of it: fundamentally conservative without being overtly political, one way or the other. The Spirit of the Place is not difficult to discern here: in Aulus-les-Bains, what you see is what you get. But wait a minute: what do we have here, in this quiet corner of a quiet village [shows views of house]?

A little house festooned with symbols of the wartime Resistance Movement; defiantly festooned, what is more, as though its owner wished to administer a sharp reminder to his fellow villagers. «Vivre libre ou mourir!» (Let us live in freedom or die!) he proclaims on a freshly painted slogan²¹, beneath a representation of the French tricolore emblazoned with the dates 1940–1944 and the symbol of the Resistance, the Cross of Lorraine. What could have happened here during those terrible years, that required such a trenchant reminder? One possible answer is supplied by a sombre bronze plaque fixed to a stone slab beside the road out of the village. Less noticeable than the crucifix on the opposite side of the road [shows plaque and crucifix] it reads as follows²²:

‘IN MEMORIAM

IN 1942–43, DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR, 686 JEWISH MEN, WOMEN AND CHILDREN WERE HELD BY THE VICHY GOVERNMENT IN AULUS-LES-BAINS BEFORE BEING, FOR THE MOST PART, SENT TO THEIR DEATH IN THE NAZI EXTERMINATION CAMPS. REMEMBER, YOU WHO PASS BY.’

Suddenly, the Spirit of this Place is seen to be darker, more complex and, most significantly, less isolated than it first appeared. Here is a vivid lesson for us designers: that we should not go for the simplistic, the easy, the obvious. Who would have thought there was a direct link between a remote, peaceful village in the Pyrénées and the deserted killing ground of Auschwitz-Birkenau with its stark memorial [shows memorial slab on site of camp crematorium]²³? No, our job as designers when invoking the Spirit of the Place is as subtle and intricate as the role of designers

working for multinationals appears to be crude and insensitive.

There are no easy answers. But surely, if we can take the time and thought to get them right, they are far, far more rewarding?

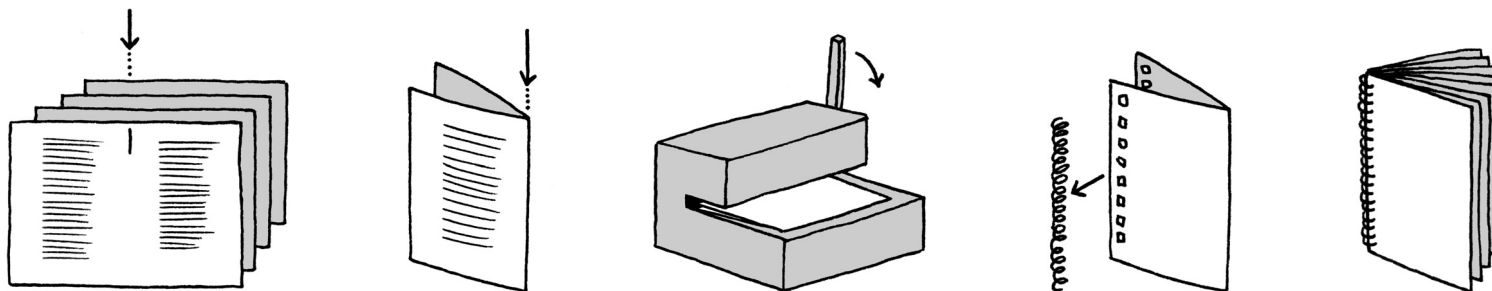
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A word in your eye: opinions, observations and conjectures on design, from 1960 to present

Departement of Typography & Graphic Communication
The University of Reading
1996

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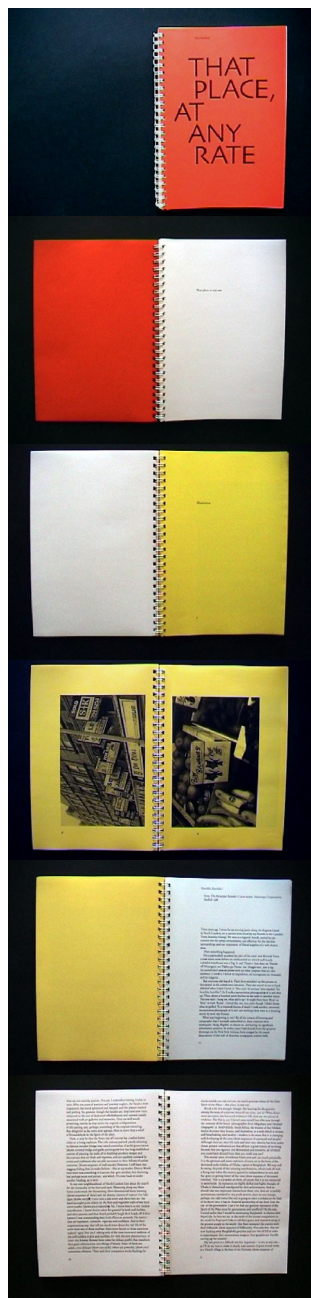
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