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Written in connection with development of the Schabloneneschrift (Stencil) alphabets circa 1926

P22 Font Foundry / Josef and Anni Albers Foundation

Translation: David Blocher

“Regarding the Economy of Typeface”^a

Flowing type – that is, written elements lined up in a regular fashion – corresponds to flowing speech, to the uniformly stressed linguistic representation. Epic language requires its purest application.

We don't speak like this at all any more. Life today doesn't take place at a steady pace; we can no longer be classical.

Time is money: events are determined by economics. We live at a fast pace and move accordingly. We use shorthand and the telegram and code. They are not the exception, but rather the rule. Our speech is condensed, and using only expression and gestures as language can no longer be forbidden, as it was with the Greeks.

Because we must increasingly think in economic terms, we will become more and more Americanized. A new world is coming. The new libraries in America have few books, but very many magazines. We're moving in the same direction. We read newspapers more frequently than books. The book dealers' business isn't very good; who wants to have a multi-volume work today, and where are the young people who bury themselves in books all day long?

There are already overview-magazines^b without articles. Keyword excerpts which replace many essays of many periodicals. And of these, we prefer the ones with pictures: the picture informs better and more quickly; the page of pictures can be comprehended in seconds. All typefaces are experiencing strong competition from photography, cinema and radio.

We have to read quickly, just as our speech is condensed¹. Thus, flowing typefaces can no longer dominate. The accentuated, emphasized, underlined, abbreviated, illustrated font will predominate. As will the notice, the declaration, the appeal, the program, the abbreviated word, the keyword in speech. We must be able to understand the poster when riding by in a street car or in an automobile.

Thus, we are moving away from the book. And in doing so, from the typography of the book. Most printed material is no longer in the form of books. The language of daily contact is no longer that of books, and the concept of written language has almost exhausted itself. And yet, in non-book printed materials, the typefaces and the typesetting which are found in books wrongly predominate. Their most important element is the uniformly gray type area on the page, which is valued most highly as an

undivided, square block of text without the thickening of black and gray or the accumulation of white^c.

That was developed correctly by the inventors of the art of book printing as a result of the technical possibilities and goals of their age. Since that time, the elements of typography have become extraordinarily richer – its tasks, corresponding to our different needs, have changed and are now contrary^d.

Flowing writing and the gray type area demand balanced spacing between letters, as Johnston, Larisch and most penmanship teachers and writing experts require for handwritten text. Thus, certain indeterminate values and blank areas instinctively result, which exclude the precision required in today's economy. Especially when performing preliminary calculations that are often necessary and which are done to determine the available space. If the balanced line is considered to be the only correct one, then the typewriter must, of necessity, write incorrectly.

Rational times bring constructive emphases along with them.

Standardizing and schematizing the typeface begins with Dürer. It expands more in a horizontal direction, while previously the tall and lean shape was what was considered important. Today, with a different outlook on life, the width of the line is emphasized (especially by using bold typefaces), just as the horizontal is generally becoming dominant in many forms.

The constructive intentions of Dürer and his successors (only applied to characters of the alphabet) couldn't have their effect in typesetting so long as the book was considered to be a "work of literature". Until it recently became more a product of printing and the press. Now, the printer of books can no longer create the typesetting. Instead the typographer, the typesetter does.

The typographer, just like the first printers, must invent our form anew, because he most often encounters worn-out forms. To stand on his own two feet, he must reflect on the elements of layout, perhaps also study the ancients in order to recognize how they arrived at their form and why it no longer belongs to us.

The new orientation of social feeling^f is unable to acknowledge that one thing is primary, the other thing is considered to be only secondary or to rely on the first. Who knows exactly who is more important in the factory, the general manager or the boiler inspectors? In transportation: the ministers or the engineers? It does not help to subordinate and superordinate things, but rather to correctly evaluate individual elements. Accordingly, attempts are already underway to shape paper (i.e., the mostly white, passive background) more independently. The unprinted portions do not remain simply blank, but rather become active negatives, just as empty spaces are structured positively in architecture and sculpture.

The organized play between background^g and printing and the calculated weighting of the black-gray-white shades, combined with logically responsible dynamics^h will determine the new form. And when that happens, all secondary embellishments will disappear; the things, in and of themselves, structured in clarity, are most compelling today. Economy² and therefore technology and transportation prevail, and thus rigid standardization is required. Everything demands concision.

The stencil typeface, which is published here for the first time, is an attempt to shape in a standardized way the typeface in its relationship to its individual elements and in various typefaces' relationship to one another. It does not claim to be definitive and its intent is to solicit interested parties for their critique and collaboration.

Regarding "Stencil Typeface"

It is intended to be a typeface for advertisements and posters, especially for larger sizes, which is clearly legible at some distance. The legibility of the most commonly used typefaces decreases with distance, probably the least with "Egyptienne", which was first developed as a military typeface under Napoleon I. The "stencil typeface" increases legibility at a distance.

It is made up exclusively of basic geometric shapes, as are "Egyptienne" and "Grotesk" in part, and specifically of the following three: the square, the triangle (half of the square cut diagonally), and the quarter circle whose radius corresponds to the side of the square. The elements of the letters combined from these shapes stand unconnected next to each other: the hairstrokesⁱ are replaced by relationships of size and movement of the purely flat elements.

The size ratio is 1:3 throughout. The height of the small main stem [Balken] equals three times the width. The distance between the letters is 1/3 the width of the bar. The sides of the triangle (square divided diagonally in 2) are 2/3 of the total of the square's sides. The minuscules measure 2/3 of the ascender. The distance between the characters is uniform throughout, so there is no compensation or adapting as is otherwise customary with round shapes. The furniture (overhang?)^j is, on both sides, equal to the inner distance. In doing so, and by composing it of the same elements, a standardization of the typeface proportions results. The type and furniture can thus be cut precisely with machines.

The line does not have any tracking added to it, it is no longer justified.

The distances between words and letters, giving the impression of variously sized gaps, are no longer the exception, but rather are dispersed all over the writing area. They [the spaces] will enliven it, just as large capital letters did when placed in the middle of a word during the Baroque era. Thus, justified typesetting is abandoned. The vertical orientation of the line may be on the left or right, as one wishes, or not at all, possibly alternating with each paragraph. Because the vertical orientation is not always on the left, the transition from the end of one line to the beginning of the next is made easier

when reading. When there are long lines in justified text, the next line is often incorrectly identified or one might re-read the same line. The eye never errs before or after an indented line because it unconsciously notes the distance. If the line is vertically oriented to the left side, finding the beginning of the line is made more difficult.

The standardization of the constitutive elements of the letters allows reducing the letter to its basic elements when there is a modest need for especially large typefaces. The extent of the typesetting material is significantly reduced and at the same time we obtain parts for lines and geometric shapes, arches, circles, etc.; in short, elements for a wide variety of material that may be used for emphasis.

(a) Translator's note: I have attempted to render his style in English – sentence fragments and all – as precisely as possible, but the terseness and density of his writing point to the problems one might have with the condensed form of expression he promotes and which he suggests is emblematic of modernity. By using a concentrated style of writing in this essay – short sentences and sentence fragments – he seems to be aiming for a scientific mode of expression that also illustrates the language he advocates. The density of his language in German makes the essay both allusive and elusive, causing the reader to pause and ponder the multivalence of his writing. My comments appear in footnotes (using the letters of the alphabet) or brackets in the text; Albers' original notes in the essay appear as numbered footnotes. Thanks goes to Petra Vetter for her invaluable help in understanding the typographical terminology; any mistakes in rendering the German are mine.

(b) Translator's note: this appears to be a neologism of Albers. What may be meant is a magazine that has perhaps a picture and just a caption without an accompanying article, or a journal consisting of only abstracts.

(1) Only schools still forbid one – incorrectly – to speak in incomplete sentences.

(c) Translator's note: "Weißhäufung" means literally the "accumulation of white".

(d) Translator's note: alternative rendering: "in opposition to the earlier goals"

(f) Translator's note: I believe what is suggested by social feeling [soziales Empfinden], is the influence of political thought [i.e., socialism] on the relative importance of the various elements that make up the whole. The examples that follow illustrate the socialpolitical aspect.

(g) Translator's note: i.e., the paper.

(h) Translator's note: "logisch verantwortliche Dynamik": I don't know what this is supposed to mean, so I have translated it literally.

(2) In both an intellectual and a material sense.

(i) Translator's note: the German is "Haarstriche", which I assume means the thin lines that connect various larger parts of a letter to one another.

(j) Translator's note: I have been unable to find a translation for "Stegüberstand", which is almost certainly a term specific to typography. "Steg" apparently means "furniture" in typography (although I don't know what this means), and the native speaker suggested that "überstand" is any sort of overlapping or going past a certain point (in this context, extension below the line on which the letter is written, as with j or g). The native speaker offered another possible translation for "Steg", which she remembers from her first grade penmanship lessons: the line on which the letters are written. From the context then, it seems that what is meant is that the distance that characters like j and g extend below the line is equal to the internal distance (whatever that is: possibly the distance between letters?)