TYPE AND CONTEXT

LEARNING FROM THE INSCRIPTION IN THE COURTYARD OF THE PALAZZO DUCALE IN URBINO

ROMA CDLXX

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ON INSCRIPTION

THE LAPIDARY TYPEFACE FOUND IN THE MAIN COURTYARD OF THE PALAZZO DUCALE IN URBINO REPRESENTS AN EXCELLENT EXAMPLE OF THE EVOLUTION OF LETTERING IN THE RENAISSANCE PERIOD. IN PERFECT HARMONY WITH THE SPIRIT OF THE TIMES, AS WELL AS WITH THE NEW ARCHITECTURAL CONSTRUCTION PRINCIPLES.

CONSIDERING THAT THE TEXT REFERS TO DUKE FEDERICO'S SUCCESSES IN BATTLE, IT IS BELIEVED THAT THE INSCRIPTION DATES BACK TO HIS DEATH IN 1482 AND WAS PROBABLY COMMISSIONED BY CARDINAL OTTAVIANO UBALDINI. AROUND THAT TIME, THE COURT OF URBINO WOULD HOST MATHEMATICIAN FRA' LUCA PACIOLI, WHO BECAME A TUTOR OF GUIDOBALDO DA MONTEFELTRO. IN 1497, AT THE COURT OF LUDOVICO IL MORO IN MILAN, PACIOLI WROTE THE 'DE DIVINA PROPORTIONE' (1509). THIS TREATISE CONTAINS THE DESIGN OF ORIGINAL LETTERS THAT DISTANCE THEMSELVES FROM THE CONTEMPORANEOUS CHARACTERS OF CALLIGRAPHIC TRADITION. BUILT ON THE SQUARE, THE SHAPES OF PACIOLI'S LETTERS ARE THE RESULT OF RIGOROUS GEOMETRIC REASONING, A WRITTEN TESTIMONY OF THE REDISCOVERY OF THE CLASSIC AESTHETIC CANONS THAT INSPIRED A LARGE PART OF THE RENAISSANCE TYPOGRAPHY OF ITALY AND BEYOND.

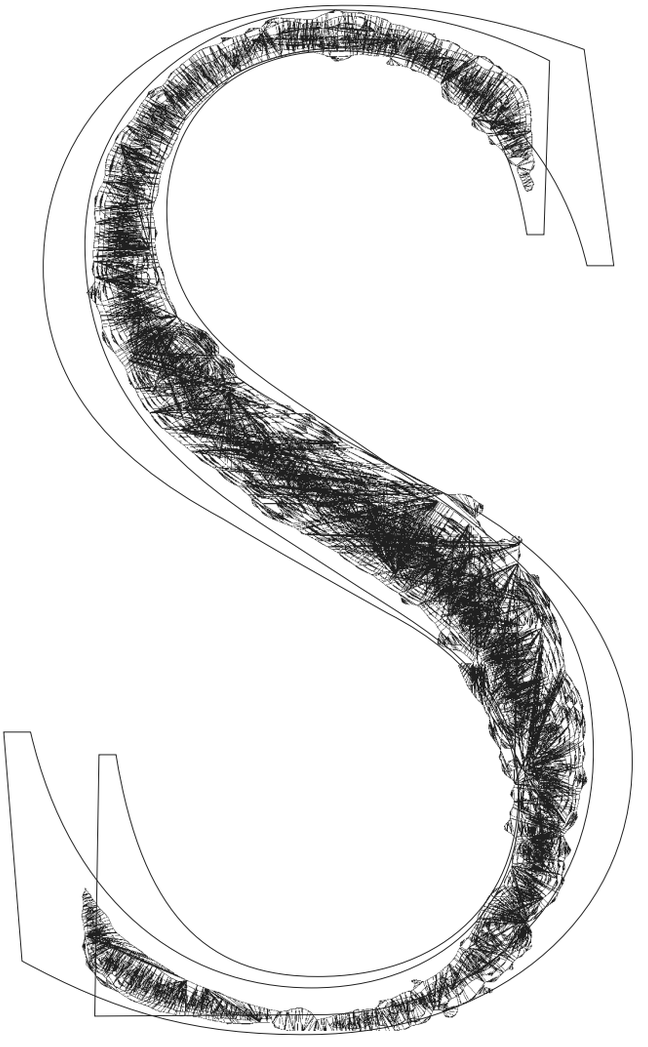
HOWEVER, THE LETTERS FROM THE PALAZZO DUCALE HAVE A LIFE OF THEIR OWN. APPROACHING THEM, AND STUDYING THE FORMS ANALYTICALLY, THE GEOMETRIC CANON SEEMS TO BE NO LONGER SUFFICIENT TO EXPLAIN THEIR ORIGIN. IN ADDITION TO THE INCONSISTENCIES DUE TO THE MANUAL EXECUTION, THE INSCRIPTION OF THE COURTYARD REVEALS ITSELF BY PRESENTING A GREAT VARIETY OF DESIGNS FOR THE SAME LETTERS, AS WELL AS DIFFERENCES IN THE TYPE OF SERIFS AND TERMINATIONS USED, AND IN THE PROPORTIONS.

IT IS EASIER TO IMAGINE THE END OF TEXT THAN THE END OF THE ROMAN ALPHABET

JAMES LANGDON

I.

IN 2002, THE YOUNG ZÜRICH GRAPHIC DESIGN STUDIO NORM PUBLISHED A BOOK TITLED ‘THE THINGS’, THE CENTREPIECE OF WHICH IS A DENSE TABLE CONTAINING 65,535 COMPUTER-GENERATED GLYPHS [𐤀], DISPLAYED ACROSS 60 PAGES. THE APPLICATION THAT PRODUCED THESE GLYPHS SIMPLY CONNECTS POINTS ON A SQUARE, 3×3 GRID WITH STRAIGHT LINES [𐤀]. THERE ARE 36 POSSIBLE CONNECTING LINES BETWEEN ANY TWO POINTS ON THIS GRID, MEANING THAT, EVEN ACCORDING TO ITS REDUCTIVE SPECIFICATION, THE APPLICATION CAN DRAW 2^36, OR 68,719,476,736 UNIQUE GLYPHS. BY FURTHER CONSTRAINING IT TO ONLY THOSE DIAGONAL CONNECTIONS WHICH MAKE CONTACT WITH THE CENTRE OF THE GRID, WHILE ALLOWING ALL OF THE POSSIBLE VERTICAL AND HORIZONTAL CONNECTIONS, NORM ARRIVED AT THE SUBSET SHOWN IN ‘THE THINGS’. IF YOU SQUINT, THESE DEMONSTRABLY ARBITRARY GLYPHS, WITH THEIR ENCLOSED SEGMENTS, PROTRUDING STROKES, AND RECURRING FEATURES, RESEMBLE THE FAMILIAR MORPHOLOGIES OF UPPERCASE AND LOWERCASE LETTERFORMS. THEY COULD, BELIEVABLY, BE FUNCTIONAL LETTERS FROM COUNTERFACTUAL ALPHABETS.



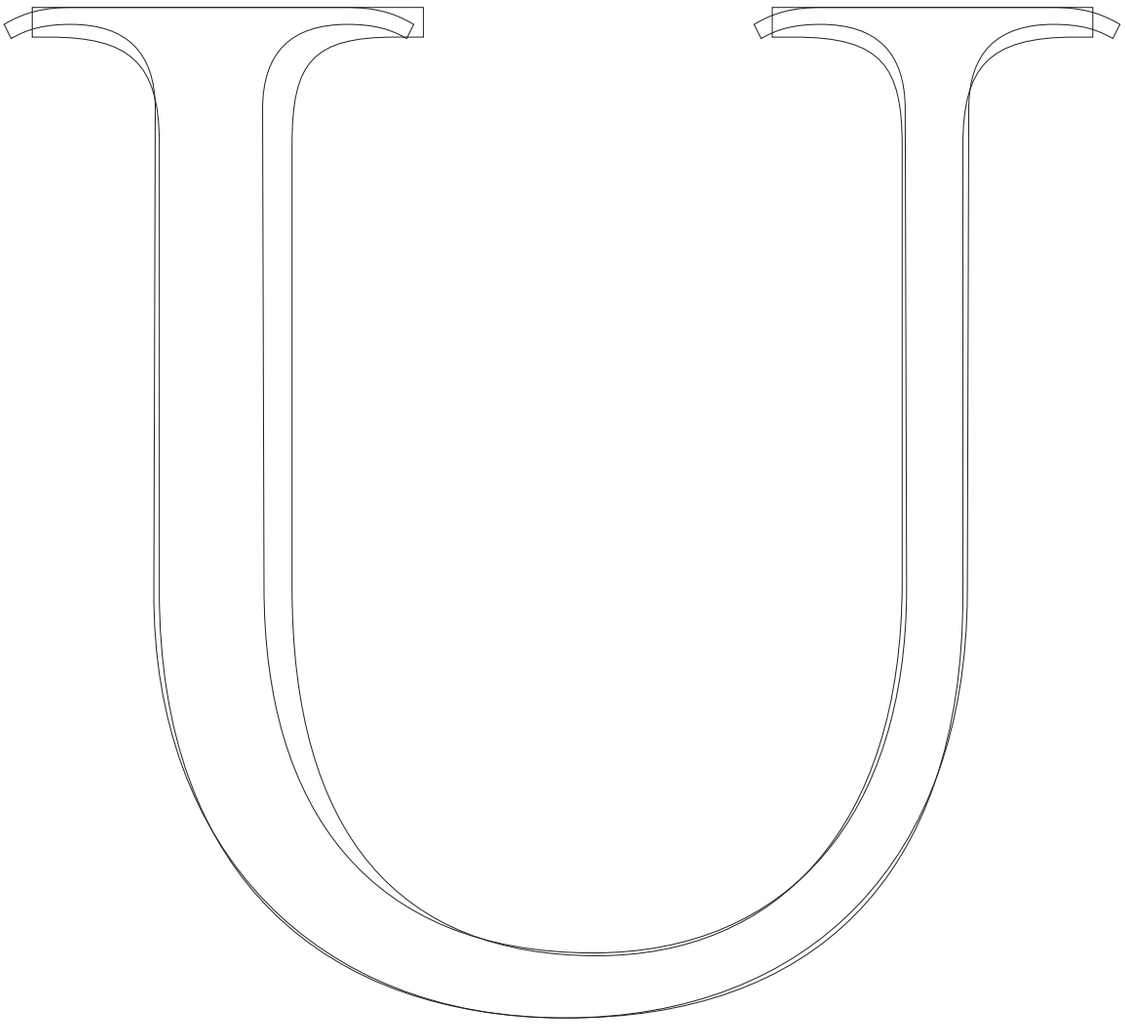
II.

THE SHEER VOLUME AND VARIETY OF FORMS RESULTING FROM THIS EXERCISE IS IMPRESSIVE, BUT THE INTENT IS NOT TO INSPIRE. THE MANIFESTATION OF THESE GLYPHS IS A LAMENT, A MELANCHOLIC CHARTING OF FORMAL REALMS TO WHICH THE CONTEMPORARY PROFESSIONAL TYPE DESIGNER, REALISTICALLY, HAS NO ACCESS. THE COMPUTERISATION OF ALL ASPECTS OF TYPOGRAPHIC LABOUR PURPORTED TO BE A LIBERATION FROM THE CONSTRAINTS OF TECHNIQUE AND HARDWARE. TO LOOK OVER ANTHOLOGIES OF GRAPHIC DESIGN FROM THE 1990S, WITH THEIR UNRULY, PAINTERLY AESTHETICS, IS TO SEE, EMPHATICALLY FULFILLED, THE RHETORIC OF THE SOFTWARE COMPANIES WHO REFIGURED TYPOGRAPHY'S TECHNICAL INFRASTRUCTURE IN THE 1980S. BUT, IN THE PRACTICES THAT HAVE EMERGED SINCE, IT IS APPARENT THAT WHILE COMPUTERISATION ENABLES VIRTUALLY INFINITE TECHNICAL POSSIBILITIES FOR THE TYPE DESIGNER, CULTURALLY LETTERFORMS REMAIN INEXTRICABLY BOUND TO THE ROMAN ALPHABET. OF COURSE THEY DO! HOW COULD IT BE ANY OTHER WAY? SUCH IS NORM'S LAMENT: "THE POSSIBILITY OF SUCCESSFULLY MARKETING A NEW SYSTEM OF WRITING NO LONGER EXISTS…"[1]



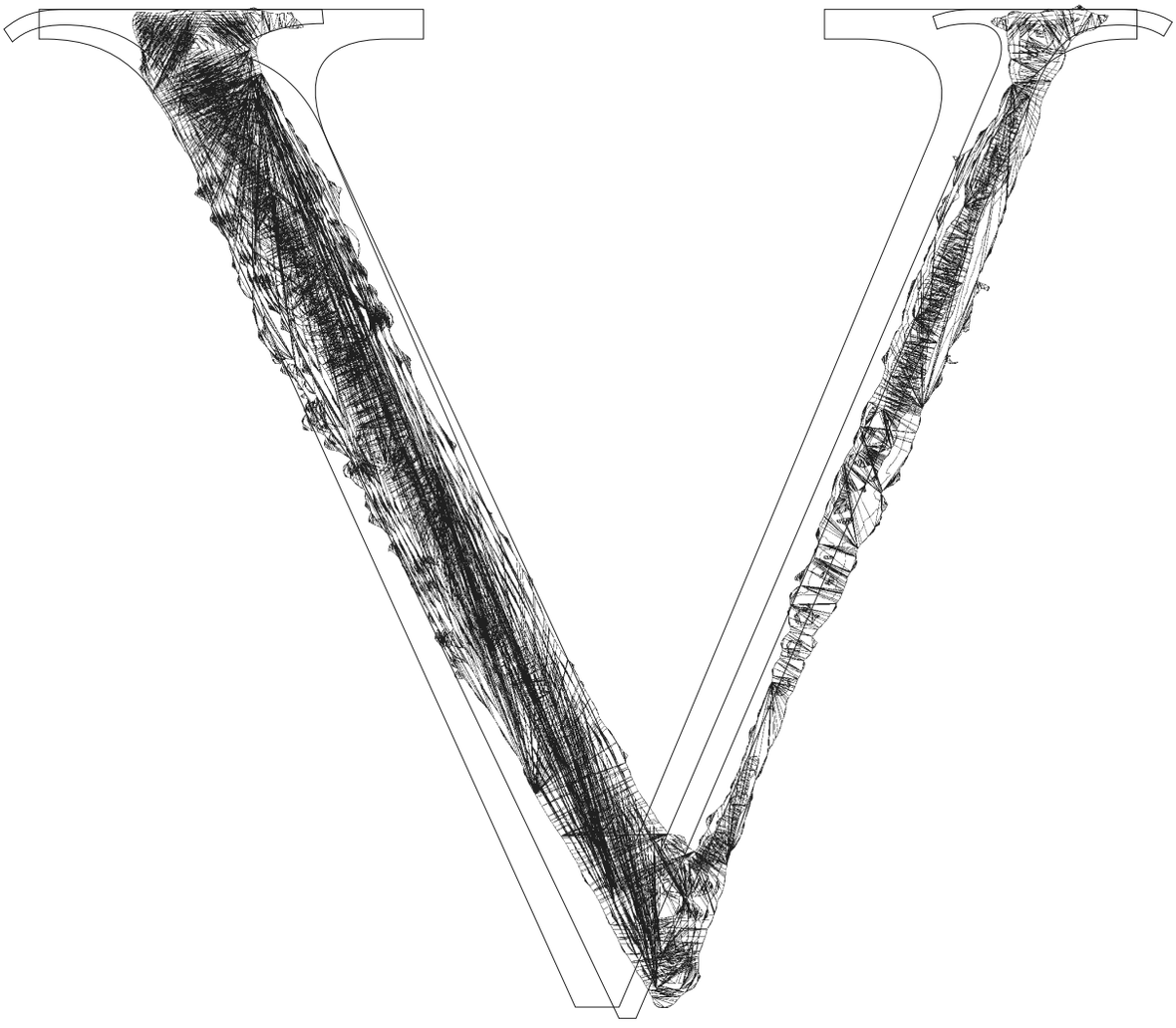
III.

WHEN GUTENBERG INVENTED PRINTING WITH MOVABLE TYPE IN EUROPE IN THE 1450S, HE WAS CAREFUL TO RESPECT TRADITIONS FOR PRESENTING LETTERS AND WORDS ON A PAGE. GUTENBERG WAS NEITHER A SCRIBE NOR AN ARTIST. HIS BUSINESS PLAN WAS TO OFFER A NEW DEMOGRAPHIC—A NEW MARKET OF READERS—"A PRODUCT AS CLOSE AS POSSIBLE TO THE MANUSCRIPT."[II] THE ESSENTIAL MODERNITY OF THE PRINTING PRESS WAS IN THE MULTIPLICATION AND DISTRIBUTION OF DOCUMENTS THAT IT MADE POSSIBLE, NOT ANY PARTICULAR GRAPHIC NOVELTY OF THOSE DOCUMENTS. IN THIS HISTORIC MOMENT, THE HANDGIESSINSTRUMENT, GUTENBERG'S DEVICE FOR CASTING LETTERS—TYPEFACES—IN METAL ALLOY, EFFECTIVELY CAPTURED ALPHABETIC FORM. PRIOR TO THIS, WRITTEN LETTERFORMS HAD EVOLVED ACCORDING TO CIRCUMSTANTIAL FORCES: CONTINUALLY APPENDED AND MODIFIED, COMPELLED BY THE MIXING OF POPULATIONS OVER CENTURIES. THE TYPEFACE, THOUGH, BELONGED TO A NEW CLASS OF MODULAR, INDUSTRIAL ASSET, AND IT SOLIDIFIED A SINGULAR SET OF LETTERFORMS—OUR ROMAN ALPHABET—IN HARD CAPITAL. THIS ALPHABET IS NOT THE CULMINATION OF AN EVOLUTIONARY PATH TOWARD FITNESS AND OPTIMAL FORM. IT IS A SNAPSHOT. A MUSEUM PIECE: CAPTURED, INSTITUTIONALISED.



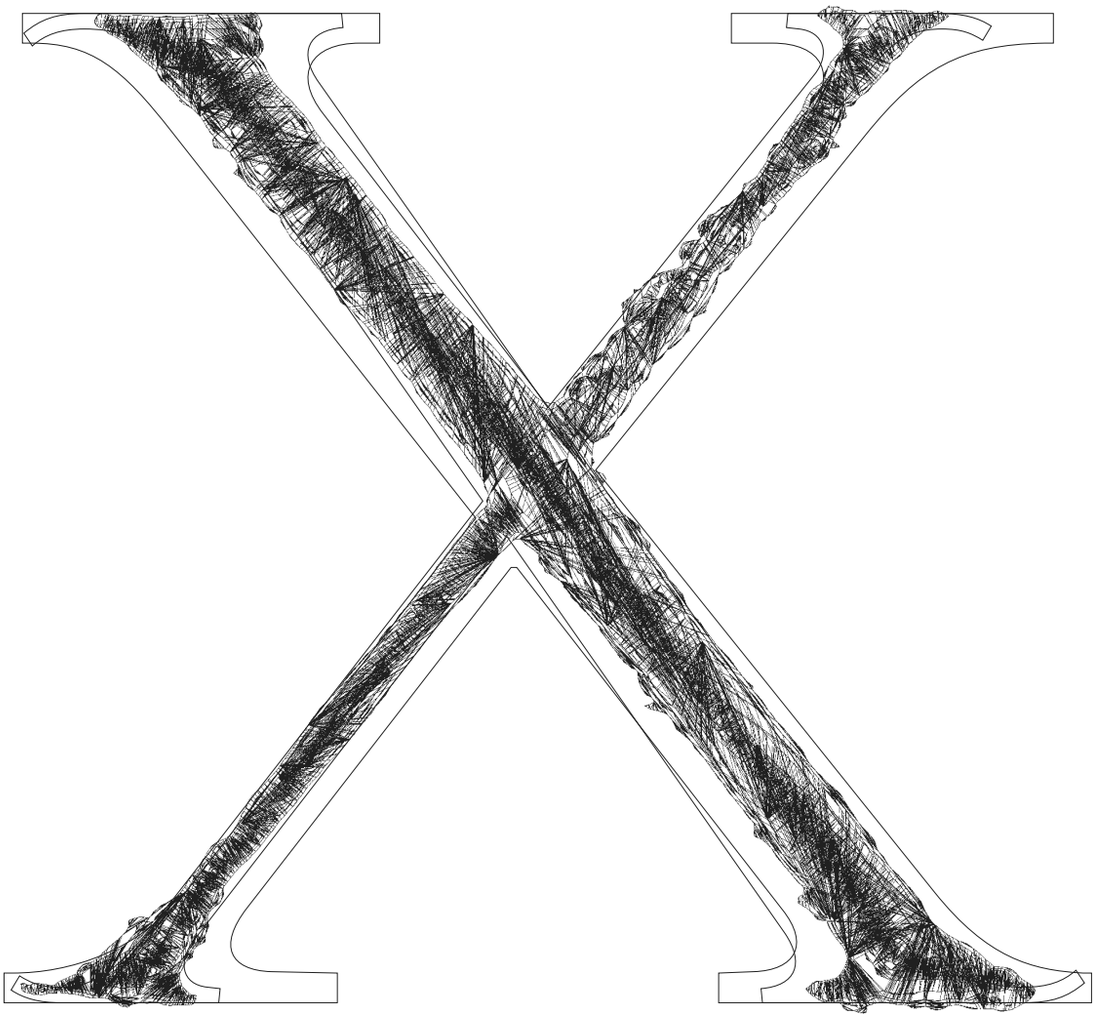
IV.

Robin Kinross's essay 'Modern Typography' documents how the modular and industrial logic of Gutenberg's invention gradually insinuated itself into European culture, establishing markets for print which came to demand standardisation, rationalisation, and economies of scale.[III] Initially, print accelerated the commensurate projects of modernity and capitalism. In twentieth-century print culture, however, concepts of rationality and economy became disconnected. Concerted efforts were made to overhaul Gutenbergian typography. The perceived redundance of Roman capital letters was the primary target of these rationalisations, put forward by notable protagonists such as Herbert Bayer, whose 1925 Universal alphabet abandoned capital letters altogether. In the 1960s, Wim Crouwel went even further. His new alphabet [Ʂ] dispensed with the whole acculturated edifice of traditional letterforms, glorifying a futuristic genre of glyphs not intended exclusively for human reading. Why did these efforts fail to rationalise how we read? Capital! It was simply not economical to make fundamental changes to the standards upon which an extensive infrastructure of interoperable hardware and labour practices depended. Ryan Gander's 2010 artwork New New Alphabet epitomises the fate of such projects. This digital typeface is a supplement to Crouwel's New Alphabet that makes a corrective gesture, helpfully providing the missing strokes required [ꟃ] to bring Crouwel's errant experiments back in line [a].



V.

An obvious weakness of the text-to-image, generative diffusion models that have been made public in the early 2020s is their garbled reproduction of text. For this technology, text is mere incidental content of image. Like Norm's array of arbitrary glyphs, text manifested in these generative images exhibits an impoverished form of magical realism. Our brains recognise these as letterforms, but they do not conform to any orthographic logic and cannot be read. According to Gutenberg's example, in order for a new media technology to obtain, it must be able to recreate the products of the techniques it is to succeed, and with greater economy. It follows that improving the appearance of text within commercial generative images —'scene text' in the parlance of computer science—is a high priority area of research. This work is being done not by typographers, nor type designers, but by the Gutenbergs of our time: opportunistic computer scientists with only superficial regard for the industries that their technologies mean to disrupt. Approaches to the problem of garbled text seem to be converging around so-called 'dual encoder' models, in which text content is separately generated by a transformer model —trained, of course, on the strictures of conventional orthography—and then reintegrated into a diffusion-model-generated composition.[IV] In this way the predominance of the Roman alphabet is again compounded.



I NORM, THE THINGS, (DIE GESTALTEN VERLAG, 2002). MY EMPHASIS.

II FRÉDÉRIC BARBIER, GUTENBERG'S EUROPE, THE BOOK AND THE INVENTION OF WESTERN MODERNITY (POLITY PRESS, 2017).

III ROBIN KINROSS, MODERN TYPOGRAPHY (HYPHEN PRESS, 1992).

IV SEE, FOR EXAMPLE: CHEN/HUANG ET AL., TEXTDIFFUSER: DIFFUSION MODELS AS TEXT PAINTERS (2023); JI/ZHANG ET AL., IMPROVING DIFFUSION MODELS FOR SCENE TEXT EDITING WITH DUAL ENCODERS (2024).

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