A theoretical and scientific proposal for breaking typographic free of its shackles and improving its functionality by substantially altering today’s basic alphabetic structures in order to increase readability.

Brant Papazian is not a person likely to go unnoticed, except when you cross him in the street. Personally he is quite unremarkable; nevertheless in the anonymous world of the Internet his personality metamorphosed and he changed into the face a bull in a china shop, with ideas that at first glance often seem out of all reason and yet deep down are well thought out.

He states what we already know yet through laziness do not take full advantage of: that the alphabet is a common birthright of mankind, that deserves and needs change to optimize its performance. He gives his proposals solid and ethical backing, and presents us with a scientific and critical standpoint which we are not in the habit of contemplating.

The point is whether we agree or disagree with Brant, but of learning more about his, at times, strange, at others eccentric, and always enriching, way of thinking. The point is learning to question our unhealthy habit of accepting things simply at face value. Who would dream of thinking that letters, which have served us for thousands of years, could be perfected with a few brushstrokes?

Brant’s thinking is disturbing because he subverts the state of things in typographic design. His proposals are important, amusing, unprejudiced and energetic. The study of his work demands taking sides with a very suggestive title: A theoretical and scientific proposal for breaking typographic free of its shackles and improving its functionality by substantially altering today’s basic alphabetic structures in order to increase readability.

The most important condition for thinking properly is the ability to question what we believe. The ability to question and think properly is the true challenge of the 21st Century. It is in this spirit that Brant’s book is written. It is an invitation to shape an approach that is new and different.

The Latin alphabet is enjoying increasing prominence across the globe. It possesses a level of abstraction that facilitates cultural migration, and its compositional simplicity and small symbol set make it very easy to ‘quantify’ to automate its use, from Germany’s mobile typeface all the way to bi-lit Excel. But the Latin alphabet is also imperfect: specifically it is not well-handed to the human visual physiology and the adult reading process, as I will show. The purpose of this work is to arrive at an improved alphabet that can be read more fluidly.

The alphabet has evolved over the centuries, and contrary to popular perception it continues to evolve. Except for notable but rare cases such as the Carolingian standardization of the lowercases forms, its evolution has been driven by non-conscious forces such as the need to write more quickly. Moreover, archeologically considered conscious design choices such development can have detrimental effects. For example the Greek lowercases letters Ï, Ï, and Ï (which in fact resulted from the need to write quickly) are much more easily confused that their uppercase parents Ï, Ï, and Ï.

Writing versus Reading. Until the advent of printing from movable type we read handwriting exclusively, the written and read letters were the same. However with the spread of printing we started to read typeforms increasingly detached from the hand. This is entirely normal – even desirable – because writing is fundamentally different from typography. This difference is most startlingly demonstrated in the PalmPilot device which allows us to execute handwriting typeforms (illustration 17) using a ‘pen’ but converts them real-time to typographic forms intended for reading. In fact you don’t even see the forms as you’re writing; you’re just certain movements which quash the desired letter.

On the other hand, mainstream type continues to be largely descended to its handwriten parent, singing close to it as a child. If we assume typography to now be a mature self-sufficient craft this strong attachment is unnatural and unhealthy; it needs to become its own master if it is to achieve true promise. The best way to accelerate typography’s independence and improve its functionality is through the reform of our basic alphabetic structures, breaking free of the hand and aiming for greater readability.

Necessity versus Sacrifice. Reform is compelling in its challenge and good intentions. But reform by definition entails sacrifice, and for any change to be visible to necessity must handily outweigh any sacrifice. The gain of reforming the alphabet is unlikely to be of monumental importance as we must not expect any active sacrifice whatsoever on the part of the reader. All we should ask for – and not necessarily explicitly – is open-mindedness. This means that an improved alphabet must be composed of letters that remain desi-
pherable with no conscious learning effort. It might seem that this absence of conscious learning effort is a measure of how thoroughly a person understands material while maintaining high deceptibility but a study of human cognition and the physiology of reading reveals a very interesting avenue.

How We Read. Countless studies by some of the keenest minds in the field of linguistic cognition have yet to estab

lchem in the visual receptive field or at the eye in a general sense. It has been shown that the human visual system can process words rapidly and efficiently, even when the task requires high-level cognitive functions.

The brain does not usually need to make out the meaning of text that has already been scanned, as reading is a continuous process. During a fixation all the words of the given line in the field of vision are processed in parallel. However, the exact amount of text varies greatly across the surface and we can often perceive text clearly even when it is not completely visible.

So, What’s the Problem? Readability is proportional to reading speed which in turn is a function of reading com

From Derrick de Kerckhove and Charles J Lumsden, eds. ÇCanons of linguisticsÈ (The Netherlands), A. W. Sijthoff, 1938, p. 213. To determine the origin of the Universe, and to symbolize this concept he chose the circle, considered to be public propertyÈ. It cannot be promulgated but has to be emphasized by individual typographers, with the support of individual type designers.

The reading public obviously plays the biggest part in this effort. It is not necessarily a non-ramose-like action, but a significant one. The reformed alphabet has been adapted on the premise that requiring any actual effort on the part of the reader is not possible. The public should not be subjected to probing about the benefits of a book in a set or typeface. Although a short slant in the colophon points to the use of the marquee legibility optimized typeface, it might be a good idea, the six o’clock news need not carry a story. The main daunting task now is to convince typographers of the benefits of this effort, as they are the ones who hold the greatest power to improve the product.

To understand his life, at a distance of one hundred years from his birth, we need to recover the diversity of his work, to see a close look at his enigmatic personality and the story of Argentina, in order to identify his incomparable personality which would have yielded the formula of beauty.

To understand his life, at a distance of one hundred years from his birth, we need to recover the diversity of his work, to see a close look at his enigmatic personality and the story of Argentina, in order to identify his incomparable personality which would have yielded the formula of beauty.