Art and Science in Word and Image

Exploration and Discovery

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CHAPTER 18

Mapping the Text: A Practice-Led Analysis of the Creative Interfaces between Typography and Text

Tim Isherwood and Judy Kendall

Abstract

This essay and self-reflective case study focuses on the impact of the typeface in which written texts are set. It argues for the potentials that can be realized from foregrounding typeface in the creative process through typographic-poetic collaborations. By selecting poems to suit typefaces or creating poems for typefaces, poetry can benefit creatively from a typeface's materiality

Conventionally, the typeface in which creative written texts are set is rarely considered, as is evident in the startling impact of Anthony Haynes's setting of a poem in an unrelated unicase typeface not designed for this purpose. Typographer Tim Isherwood and poet Judy Kendall argue for the creative potential that can be realized by foregrounding typefaces in the creative process through a series of differently-configured typographic-poetic collaborations. These involve selecting poems to suit typefaces, creating poems for typefaces, allowing typographic control of poem-layout, initiating creative processes with consideration of a typeface's materiality, and working with typeface on poem drafts.

The transition from typeface as alphabet to typeface in a finished text inevitably involves a writer, and different configurations of the relationship between the typographer and writer alter the typographical and literary effects of the text they produce. To study these alterations both in relations and effect, the chapter's authors, Isherwood and Kendall, set up a creative collaborative partnership as typographer and poet. In a series of different creative ventures, they subtly altered the dynamics of their partnership, documenting the process as they worked so as to afford privileged access to their internal decision-making processes. Before discussing the outcomes of this collaboration, some typographical background is necessary.

Typography is all around us. We see and use it hundreds of times every day. Its effects, created through the judicious selection of typefaces, point size, line length, and letter-spacing are subtle, deep and complex. Lewis Blackwell

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observes: "[Typography is] where aesthetics meets engineering, where art meets maths, where the strictly ephemeral and decorative meets a quest for timeless values and transparent functionalism … [O]ver the past century, it has moved out of the print shop and become a subject with close connections to the development of art, technology and literacy … and can claim to be the architect of our written language" (Blackwell 7).

Although typography informs everything we read, typographic conventions demand that for type to be most effective in its role, it has to be imperceptible, an invisible container of message, medium, and text, like Beatrice Warde's goblet, "of crystal-clear glass, thin as a bubble, and as transparent" (Warde 11). If typography's essential function is to make language visible, this suggests that typography is in service to words, that without language it is redundant. In this, it differs from language, which, if spoken, does not need type, and which, if written, is often approached as if the typeface in which it is set does not exist. Writers tend automatically to use the default typeface on their computer, and then accept without question a new typeface when the text comes to publication, as if it does not affect the meaning or import of the text at all. Typefaces in conventional usage remain like the designers that create them, largely unknown, invisible, and anonymous not only to the reader, but also to the writer.

The exception to this is the typographic/design community and related commercial industries, such as brand strategists and advertizers. These experts scrutinize printed materials to identify the specific typeface in use. They are acutely aware of the powerful ability of typefaces to affect and shape the emotional and intellectual responses of the reader of a text. They recognize a typeface's potential, and exploit it accordingly, unlike many writers (and readers). Ellen Lupton, in her essay "The Science of Typography," suggests that "designers often distinguish 'legibility' and 'readability' as the objective and subjective side of the typographic experience" (Lupton), rather than taking a more scientific view that measures variables such as speed of reading or comprehension. Graphic designer Neville Brody, in Gary Hustwit's documentary *Helvetica* (2007), expands on the implications of this: "Advertizing tends to use typography to hide its, or to cover its, prime intent which is to do with mood-setting before the message is delivered. So the choice of typeface is a hidden tool of manipulation within society and I've always upheld that I think that all schools should be teaching typography. We should be fundamentally aware of how typographic language is forming our thoughts" (Hustwit).

Brody is here referring to the classic Modernist line in graphic design, initiated in the 1920s in response to the decorative illustrations and lettering of the previous era. Modernist typography emphasizes function over form, with the typeface remaining transparent, invisible, and serving only to transmit the

ideas contained in the text. This has serious implications for the writer and the reader. If industry professionals collude in maintaining the invisibility of typography, then the non-specialized reader not only remains unaware of typography and of its effects, but also of the influence a specific typeface might have upon their own financial or even political decisions. Writers that do not pay attention to the effects of the typography/type in which their work is set are, unwittingly or not, handing control of that element in their creative efforts over to others.

An alternative approach includes typography within the self-sufficiency, inclusivity and boundlessness of writing, subscribing to the Derridean assertion of no extra-textual authority or additions: "il n'y a pas de hors-texte" ("There is no outside-text"; Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 158). If nothing is external to the text, then the position of typography shifts from that of replaceable "extra" in the paratextual margins of invisible functionality to that of essential active player within the text. Such an emphasis suggests that typography has the potential also to act as an explicit form of visual creative expression. This has enormous implications for the readers and writers of creative text who engage with it. It obliges them to consider the contributions typeface, letterforms and their specifically designed variations make to the mood, atmosphere, rhythm, pace, harmony, and even intellectual encounters with a piece of writing. It also brings into focus the impact a text can have on a typeface, and suggests the possibility of creating text with the qualities of specific typefaces in mind.

A recent example of a publisher that has prioritized typeface is Anthony Haynes. In 2013, his imprint Creative Writing Studies published *Caves of Making* as a direct response to Jeremy Tankard's typeface Redisturbed, a striking unicase typeface, (one set of characters that combine features of both upper and lower case forms) that is also a display typeface (type intended to be used in large sizes and not for reading large blocks of text on the page). Redisturbed is a reinvention of a previous typeface by Tankard, Disturbance, in which some letterforms differ from their Roman originals. As Tankard reports, "The typeface was named Disturbance after one of my lecturers said 'you can't do that to the alphabet, it's too disturbing'" (Gross 34). Reading text set in the reinvented Redisturbed is also a startling experience (fig. 18.1).

Anthony Haynes found Redisturbed irresistible: "When I saw the typeface for the first time, I knew instantly that, as a publisher, I'd like to share it with readers" (Gross, publisher's foreword ix). *Caves of Making* combines a previously published poem, "Cave diver in the deep reach," with a commentary upon the making of the poem by its author, Philip Gross, and also includes an account of the process of designing the typeface by Tankard, and the front cover by book jacket artist, Rika Newcombe. Everything is set in Redisturbed.

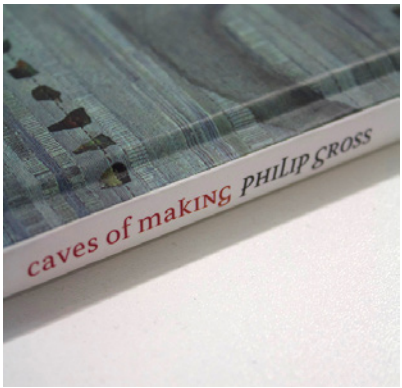

FIGURE 18.1
Philip Gross (1952–), *Caves of Making*, 2013. REDISTURBED TYPEFACE DESIGNED BY JEREMY TANKARD.

The project is an experiment in egalitarian presentation of image, type, and text, and on investigation of the creative process. In the publisher's foreword, Haynes notes that "*Caves of Making* re-presents Gross's chapter from *Creative Writing: Writers on Writing* in a new context" (ix), and in the foreword Amal Chatterjee adds that "the poem works with the map of its invention, complemented by typeface and image—to be savoured each for itself and for the light it sheds on the creative process" (xi).

Gross's writing and Tankard's typeface were conceived, designed and written long before the project began. Neither was altered in any way before they were placed together. This apes the more conventional working patterns of writers and typographers, where a writer sits down to write text and a publisher selects a typeface in which to house it prior to the joining of the two. Similarly, in *Caves of Making*, Tankard had no part in the writing of the poem or commentary, Gross no part in the selection of Redisturbed, and neither was involved in setting the writing in the typeface. However, in a reversal of the usual process, Redisturbed was chosen as a specific focus for the book before the text was selected. Redisturbed was thus the driving force in the project, setting its tone. The result is a book in which typeface is as dominant as text, arguably more so, and this has turned *Caves of Making* into a showcase text, giving readers, "a unique opportunity to see how Redisturbed functions in use" (*Caves of Making*), and causing mayhem with normal bibliographic conventions. Shifting the role of typography also throws up questions of authorship. Listing *Caves of Making* by author rather than typographer or publisher name begins to seem provocative.

Nevertheless, Gross's text plays a very important role in the book. Haynes was drawn to Gross because of his interest in shape and space, evident in Gross's poem commentary: "the poem is more than its content; it is also the

particularly-shaped space it creates in the air, on the page and in the minds of readers. Its nature unfolds differently according to various spaces into which it steps. One kind of space may be form, but there is also the space of a relationship with a reader, real or imagined—and with commercial markets" (Gross 24–25).

Set in Redisturbed, Gross's close discussion of the visual effects in his poem has an odd, disorientating, disturbing impact due to the text's omission of any reference to the startling visual effects of the typeface in which it is now set. Perversely, the lack of reference to this visually arresting typeface, increases the reader's awareness of it. Such qualities are common in concrete poetry, as in the unannounced but visually-arresting apple-shape of Reinhard Döhl's "Apfel" poem, and in the position of the "wurm," placed where it will be read last, in the bottom right section of the poem, the delay of its discovery adding to its eventual impact (Döhl). In Döhl's case, however, there are clear and logical connections to be made between apples, worm, and the fact it is only revealed once the apple has nearly been consumed, or read. In *Caves of Making*, the reader is acutely aware of unfamiliar typeface, but remains with a residual puzzlement, unable to comprehend the intent behind its unusual visibility.

A reader will by choice drop straight through a typeface to consider textual content and therefore avoid seeing that typeface. However, as Glyn White observes in *Reading the Graphic Surface*, "By increasing the difficulty of perception, and enforcing the expenditure of extra time in order to understand a passage, texts can produce numerous very different effects" (White 11). Redisturbed achieves this, obliging the reader to grapple with unusual and non-conventional uses of space, and to remain with the typeface rather than the semantic content. The text is legible, but because of its own unusual use of space, it requires a conscious effort to decipher. The reader is therefore more than usually aware of the mechanics involved in the reading process. At moments the type becomes image, and the emphasis shifts from semantic meaning to visual impression, and to text as pattern of white space and ink. Awareness of space is therefore writ large. The reader starts reading as typographers do, observing "the space between the blacks" (Massimo Vignelli in Hustwit), or, as Erik Spiekermann puts it, "what is between the black marks is as important as the black marks themselves" (Brook and Shaughnessy 80). Thus, *Caves of Making* offers the ordinary reader a precious glimpse of the typographer's approach to words and language.

It could be argued that, fascinating as *Caves of Making* is, it does more to highlight disconnects between typeface and text than collusions and collaborations. However, in its deliberate foregrounding of the typeface, it goes some way towards questioning the necessity of typography's subservience to

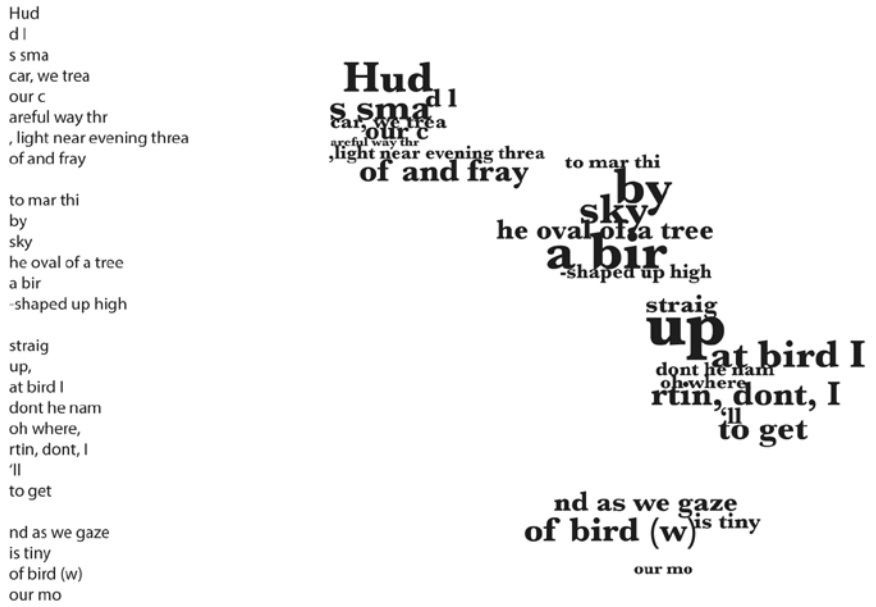

FIGURE 18.2 Judy Kendall (1960–) and Tim Isherwood (1974–), "Huddled," *Collaborative Typographic Poems* (unpaginated).

language, and the extent to which it can be considered as an artform in its own right. Redisturbed's dominance over the text alerts the reader to its presence, but is it possible to privilege typography without letting it dominate the text? Visually-innovative writing over the centuries, such as William Blake's illuminated books or Mark Z. Danielewski's recent typographically-challenging novels suggest that it is. As Poynor notes of Danielewski's cult novel, *House of Leaves* (2000), "there is a carefully stage-managed relationship between typographic form and literary content: one expresses the other" (Poynor 143). It is this relationship between typographic and literary content and between typographer and writer that Kendall & Isherwood examine through the shifting dynamics of their collaborations and of the difficulty of perception of its individual elements.

The Kendall & Isherwood experiments began with relative orthodoxy (see. fig. 18.2). Isherwood typeset Kendall's existing poetry in a variety of typefaces, considering composition, scale, tone of voice, emphasis, space and meaning. This, although considered successful in a number of ways, emphasized the hierarchical relation of writing, as master, and typeface, as servant. When considering interpretation of space and use of language for emphasis, Isherwood, as typesetter, felt the need to submit to Kendall as creator of the text. This

meant he used his typographic skills in a conventional way—as a vehicle to aid the reading of the poem. In order that the perceived sanctity of the original written idea of the poem remained intact, the broken text was not changed and the flow of language not interrupted or consciously altered. Clearly, this was not an egalitarian collaboration.

Next, therefore, Isherwood and Kendall began to divide up and exchange their processes of making, and, particularly, their initial creative thoughts and ideas. This more serious challenge to conventionally hierarchical ways of working with poetry and typography resulted in a discovery of the poetic creative potential that a more egalitarian collaboration between poet and typographer might offer. However, the text still dominates. It is relatively easy to read. *Caves of Making* succeeded in foregrounding the typography partly through making the process of reading more effortful. A degree of illegibility challenges the reader's strong desire to make semantic sense of a text. It weakens the text's dominant hold.

In less legible typography, the text starts to dress typography rather than the other way round. Illegibility therefore provides a means of bypassing the language used by typeface and of exploring the contextual aspects of type. Degrees of illegibility became therefore a constant in Isherwood and Kendall's later collaborations, as in Isherwood's responses to Kendall's "Fiendsdale" series of poems (fig. 18.3).

In these typographical representations, the original text was photocopied several times, by enlarging it and overlaying different versions on top of each other. This enabled the creation of different textures and patterns that were then used visually to describe a series of photographs that Kendall had taken of Fiendsdale, photographs that had triggered the original text. The outcomes of this collaboration are more than combinations of text and image. They begin to make text image. The illegibility that Isherwood imposed on the original text transforms the use of type from secondary to primary. It works both in terms of what is visually registered and in terms of what carries the artistic purpose and effects. The result is a symbiotic hybrid of text and image. The typography expresses both text and itself. However, enlargement of the text also produces a third element.

The reader is now dealing with not just typeface and text, but texture (from the Latin "textura"—weaving, web, structure), the woven materiality of the text, as occurs literally in one Isherwood-Kendall Fiensdale experiment where variously-sized strips of text are woven into criss-cross patterns that emulate the contours of the valley. The Fiensdale series displays a thinning of the borders of typography and poetic composition. In Derridean terms, the "text" includes

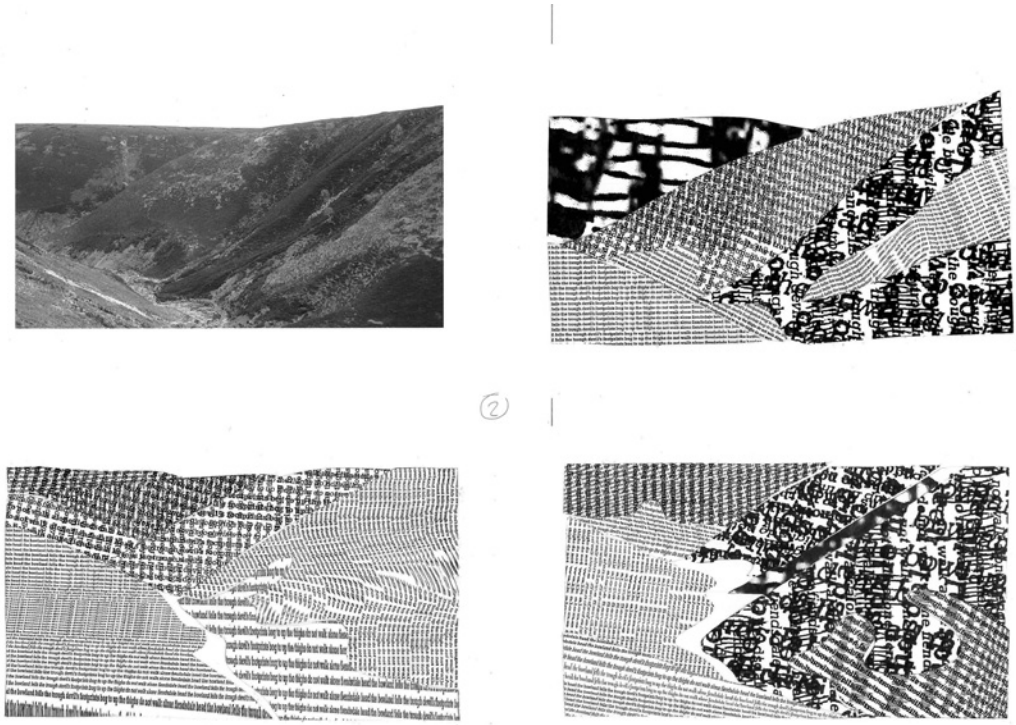

FIGURE 18.3 Judy Kendall and Tim Isherwood, "Fiendsdale," *Collaborative Typographic Poems* (unpaginated).

context; the "text" is its context: "Every sign, linguistic or non-linguistic, spoken or written (in the usual sense of this opposition), as a small or large unity, can be *cited*, put in quotation marks; thereby it can break with every given context, and engender infinitely new contexts in an absolutely non-saturable fashion. This does not suppose that the mark is valid outside its context but on the contrary that there are only contexts without any absolute centre of anchorage" (Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy* 320–1).

Context is therefore both typeface and textual content (text): text is placed in typeface, which becomes its context and the context of the typeface includes the text that is poured within it. If legible, the text turns the typeface into a container, perhaps a crystal goblet, but the less legible it becomes the more text acts as decoration for the typeface, dressing it. The context in which typography is placed also includes the paratextual elements Genette lists in *Paratexts*: the interview, preface, front cover and so on. These, as well as surrounding the text, are key parts of it. Appropriately, given the visual quality of typography, it is when discussing visual arts in *The Truth in Painting* that

Derrida expresses most clearly the boundlessness of frames and framing: "Where does the frame take place. Does it take place. Where does it begin. Where does it end. What is its internal limit. Its external limit. And its surface between the two limits" (Derrida, *The Truth in Painting* 63).

This is the territory of typography. A text's context can include frames, themselves a kind of container. Type both frames white space and is framed by it. In addition, the text it makes up is framed by the blank page, the page by its edges, the edges by the surrounding in which it is placed. The text itself is a kind of holder around which the typography can drape. Type is therefore both frame (or container) and item contained. It is context and text. It is part of all that is not "outside-text." As Baines and Haslam remark, "Typography is to language what maps are to geography, scores are to music and algebra is to mathematics" (Baines and Haslam 10).

Taking the idea of typography as a map of language, Isherwood created the display typeface on a football pitch. Over several weeks, he ran daily around the pitch with a GPS tracker in his backpocket. Running in specific patterns, he physically traced the design of each letter of the alphabet twice (lower and upper case) on the ground. These letters, each the size of the football pitch, were relayed via GPS to satellite and into his computer. The resultant typeface, TRACE, consists of the traces of those daily runs.

The context in which TRACE was created (on a football pitch), and its method of production (a typographer running around that pitch), heavily affect it. TRACE sports the wobbly but energetic lines of a determined runner. The odd breaks in the letters are created by the runner-typographer's intent not to revisit/retrace lines of the letters as he traverses the football pitch, hence the gap at the bottom of the "O." The context in which TRACE was created, and the very strong qualities it carries (a determined, vibrant, almost menacing energy), at times upstaged the texts Isherwood and Kendall set within it. Like Tankard's Redisturbed, it tended to dominate the text.

In the manner of *Caves of Making*, Isherwood and Kendall set the typeface in a previously composed and conventionally laid-out poem:

> explaining himself
> a stranger pulls from the air
> details of my childhood
>
> KENDALL, *Presence* 33

As in *Caves of Making*, the choice of "explaining himself" was not completely serendipitous, but can be read as referring to the production method of the typeface (fig. 18.4). TRACE was itself pulled "from the air." However, the poem's

explaining himself
a stranger pulls from the air
details of my childhood

FIGURE 18.4 Judy Kendall, "explaining himself" set in Tim Isherwood's TRACE typeface. *Collaborative Typographic Poems* (unpaginated).

delicate line endings and interplay with silence and what is not said are occluded by the loud energy of the typeface. The typeface does not inform the poem, nor the poem the typeface.

Poems laid out in a less conventional way were more successful. Such poems are already working at a visual level, actively engaging with the space on the page, and so are more open to the specific visual contributions that a typeface can offer. Like the previous poem, "ownership" was also pre-written (fig. 18.5). This poem's emphasis on a lack of space and its implicit reflections on ownership and possession of space connect somewhat with the process of producing TRACE. This is partly because the poem already depends on visual cues for its effect. The omission of word-spacing and tension and disconnect between line and word endings contribute to an obscurity and difficulty of reading that fits the subject-matter. The poem is crowded; the land is difficult to own, claim or enter. Similarly, the poem's adoption of a non-semantic progression—more associative than logical, adds to this sense of there not being a way forward or out of the space. The somewhat overbearing and visually arresting nature of TRACE enhances this impression.

To develop this further, Isherwood and Kendall's next attempt was to write a text specifically for the typeface.

"Let's go," written specifically for TRACE, could be described loosely as in haiku mode, but is not traditional in form (fig. 18.6). It focuses on the energy and fragmentation that TRACE suggests, the urgent need to join up lines and the difficulty of so doing—as enacted by TRACE's letterforms. However, precisely because the original poem was written with predetermined but unconventional spacing and layout, the issue of sanctity arises again. If the typesetter respects the writer's decisions and does not alter the spacing and layout when reworking it as TRACE, TRACE becomes "just" a typeface into which to pour the poem. This did not matter with "ownership" perhaps because there were no letterspaces. The poem was crammed into an oblong block in Times New Roman and in TRACE, the qualities in the original text simply being enhanced by TRACE's disturbed and slightly wobbly qualities. In "Let's go," however, setting

ownership

untouchedbybrokerclaims
ownershipofthedogsoderi
lictbrokenupclaimingown
ershipofhowpathclaimsow
nershipofthebramblesclam
lmownershipofallthegrassc
lameownershipoftheretoday
claimsownashipofhowpathly
lanehandownershitofthedo
gainedohnotshithaofthebra
mblyodoursheofthegrassed
seedupnobrokerwilltouchit

ownership

untouchedbybrokerclaims
ownershipofthedogsoderi
lictbrokenupclaimingown
ershipofhowpathclaimsow
nershipofthebramblesclam
lmownershipofallthegrassc
lameownershipoftheretoday
claimsownashipofthepathly
lanehandownershitofthedo
gainedohnotshithaofthebra
mblyodoursheofthegrassed
seedupnobrokerwillltouchit

FIGURE 18.5
Judy Kendall and Tim Isherwood, "ownership," *Collaborative Typographic Poems* (unpaginated).

not home
knock twice for
walking boots
one big porch
lined up
a long row
mud or no mud
a place to leave
emptied

Let's go

FIGURE 18.6 Judy Kendall and Tim Isherwood, "Let's go" (Isherwood's version of Kendall's poem). *Collaborative Typographic Poems* (unpaginated).

the words in TRACE significantly altered the relations between the spaces and words so that even the original poet (Kendall) later said she would have changed the spacing in the TRACE version. With "Let's go," it appears that the typeface (and typographer) have remained subservient to the poem, although some advance on this has been made in terms of the writer's awareness of typography, since she recognized the need to rework the poem's spacing to fit with TRACE.

In a second attempt to write specifically for TRACE there was a deliberate attempt to write with the typeface (fig. 18.7). Because of lack of funding the typeface had not been digitized so Kendall cut the letters out and, as if a typesetter, laid them out by hand to make them into a text. Such close handling of TRACE resulted in Kendall focussing on the materiality of the letters, in particular that of the letter "e," the one letter that was most affected by a digital glitch in the GPS tracking software, creating sharper points within various sections of the overall shape, such as the counter, or middle of the letter, as well as naturally not possessing the slab serifs of the other letterforms: "This letter stands out from all the others. It seems both energetic and mean, almost threatening, especially in the unusually narrow and almost pointed shape of the counter (the enclosed space of the upper part of the letter)—quite disturbing" (Kendall, *Unprinted Notes and Critique*, unpaginated). Although Kendall's perception of the letter may be specific to her, her response is surely directly connected to this particular letter's unusual and non-conforming physical properties as compared with other letters in the TRACE alphabet.

"Bursting" was guided by the letterform, which dictated not only several words that are included in it, but the choice of word, and of emotion in the piece, as well as the spacing and location of those words. It marks therefore an advance in relations between typeface and poem: the writer writing not just for a particular typeface but for (and with) a particular letter.

In this last example, there is a reversal in the conventional relationship between text and typeface: the poem is written for the typeface. However, as previously, the spacing and layout are still dictated by the writer, not the typographer. If, however, there is a way of treating type as text, then, perhaps type and text, typographer and writer, reader and viewer, can begin to work on a more level playing field. To achieve this, the typographer has to become a poet.

Kendall took notes for poems during a trip to Sri Lanka with Ocean Stars Trust tsunami and war victim's charity. These comprize the equivalent to draft sketches for a visual artwork. Rather than working with a finished piece of work that he felt unable to alter, Isherwood was handed these rough notes from which to select a body of text to work with. Consequently, he was freed to produce a visual response that could react to, and help define, its text, and to

FIGURE 18.7 Judy Kendall and Tim Isherwood, "Bursting," *Collaborative Typographic Poems* (unpaginated).

FIGURE 18.8
Judy Kendall and Tim Isherwood, "Sri Lankan work" (Isherwood from Kendall's notes). *Collaborative Typographic Poems* (unpaginated).

reinterpret the initial written notes from a visual perspective (fig. 18.8). The outcome significantly steers the reader/viewer's approach to the work, and expectations of it. Kendall had little input into this process aside from provision of the initial notes, and one sighting of the work-in-progress. However, she was given the work displayed here to critique. Her impressions were predominantly drawn from the visual material: "The last lines seem to win out over the numbers which dominate in the middle and threaten to occlude everything but somehow as everything gets less so the numbers disappear—they drop down the middle of the page and the main text by moving away to the right and also tilting helps it escape both the certainty and the obscurity that comes with moving down with the numbers—saying something v. profound about the human condition (perhaps)" (Kendall, *Unprinted notes and critique*, 4 August 2014).

Thus, the initial text, worked on typographically, results in a distinctly visual and typographic piece in which image and text work as one.

It should now seem odd that writers tend to select text first and do not expect the typeface to comment on the text that is being dressed. This is partly due to ignorance and is not entirely the writers' fault. As Blackwell points out of standard Windows software, "the Help menu gives only one typographic pointer … There is no advice on what to do with the multitude of typographic features that have been stacked up" (Blackwell 11). Lack of guidance is problematic since the manipulation of typography is a learned skill, and inappropriate use has its consequences, both on the nature of the text, and its appreciation by the reader.

This situation needs to change. In *Illuminating Letters: Typographic and Literary Interpretation*, Paul Gutjahr and Megan Benton write: "As modern technology increasingly empowers writers to create their own typography, it becomes more important than ever to understand how authorial involvement further reveals the dynamic power of type to inflect literary content." (14) Equally, active and proactive typographical involvement in the creative process of writing text exposes and more deeply enables the dynamic power of type to inflect text, and of text to work in open dialogue with type.

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