

Typographic Trends

For almost seventy years, the Type Directors Club has honored the best typography in the world in its annual eponymous competition.

The TDC competition, established in 1955, is the longest running, and arguably the most prestigious, global typography and type design award—all centered around how letterforms are used and drawn.

At first glance, this process of recognizing typographic excellence seems to be a straightforward endeavor. But every year, the judges must grapple anew with the practical reality of identifying typographic stand-outs amid an environment of ever shifting aesthetics and technologies.

Typography is a tricky thing to critique. The success of a piece of type hinges on a delicate negotiation between form and function; the artistry of an exceptional workhorse typeface is often invisible to the layman's eye, but the faults of an ineffective or illegible one are immediately visible to even the most casual reader. Typographers, (whether graphic designers using type, letterers, type designers, or even the everyman who only interfaces with type directly when face to face with a Google doc) must constantly navigate the constraints imposed by the very language they seek to represent. Subtle variations in the shape, weight, composition, and layout of type can evoke diverse emotions and cater to different contexts—so long as the product remains carefully within the boundaries of the expected forms and structures of the depicted language. Type is haiku, not free verse; theater, not improv.

Yet, year after year, designers are finding ways to iterate and manifest the new, creating countless variations despite perpetual constants that are required by typeforms. From alphabets made of rendered buildings to inflated letterforms almost bursting at the seams, typography in 2023 remains a site for experimentation and innovation. But if the work in TDC 69 is a petri dish of the larger typographic world, what are the trends permeating the ecosystem?

Perhaps the biggest change in this year's competition is the decision to create a separate discipline for Lettering alongside the mainstays of Type Design and Typography. Lettering has always been a part of the TDC competition, but previously, anyone who had a Lettering entry would enter in Communication Design (with many lettering-forward designers such as Gemma O'Brien and Timothy Goodman winning over the years). While



Gemma O'Brien

this new category might seem like a departure from tradition to some, or an unnecessary delineation to others, in many ways it's a natural extension of a broadening view of "good type," and a landscape in which type design and typography are beginning to feel a lot more customized. Illustrative, custom, and emotionally evocative type has been sparking the fringes of the zeitgeist since the first backlash against Modernist "blanding," but in 2023 the trend has finally ignited, and the boundary between type and lettering is dramatically narrowed.

Some of this boundary blurring is driven by technology, of course. This year saw an increase in variable typefaces across a range of languages, from the Latin *Marientyst* to the Arabic *Yasar*, all of which allow for type to operate more like lettering: bespoke and flexible. Logistically speaking, the metrics of variable type allow designers to play with legibility very literally—pushing forms to the extremes of an axis until they're just shy of readable (or past them, if you're feeling freaky). Type designers too can use variable type to explore unconventional forms indirectly without having to risk spending months or years developing a typeface that's potentially too avant garde to be functionally marketable. Technology also emerges in explorations like *NATURE/CODE/DRAWING*, *Generative January*, and the *UC AR Augmented Reality Annual Report*, where designers develop previously impossible or laboriously complex forms using custom tools as intermediaries.

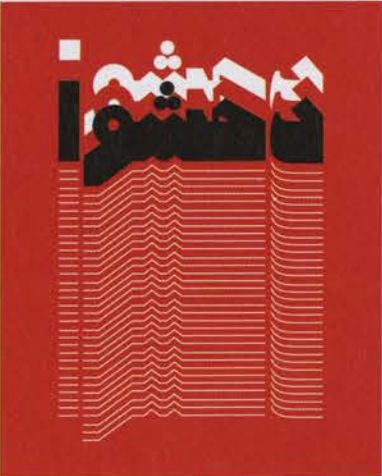
Outside of logistic and technical explanations for more expressive typography, which only cover a narrow band of the global typographic product, things become a bit murkier. The explanations for the rise of expressive type are multifold, and vary from critic to critic. It might be a nostalgic response to the ennui of the pandemic, resulting in a desire for the pre-digital era, à la 60s Psychedelia and *The Whole Earth Catalog*—or, even just desire for the grit of early digital type, as in the work of Ray Gun or Emigre. Maybe we can credit a simple pendulum swing back from the sans-serifs of the 2010s (themselves a pushback to the irregular grunge of the 90s, a result of new technologies and a response to the posh condensed serifs of the 80s, and so on back to the earliest origins of commercial typography).



Timothy Goodman



Marientyst



Yasar

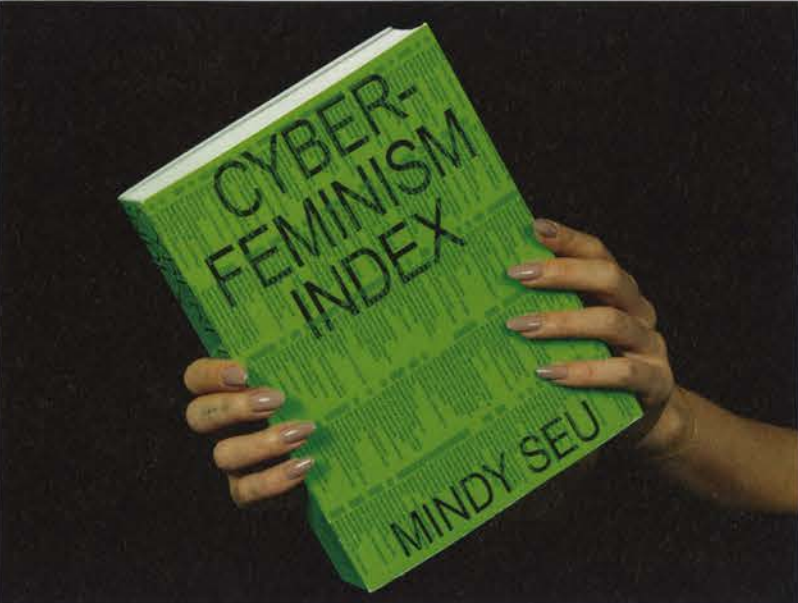
To me, the unifying factor is more emotional. Expressive type is an unapologetic exploration and a rebellious expression; a stake in the ground of one's personhood against the backdrop of a culture grappling with the specter of AI and a push towards homogenizing algorithmic curation. As such, what feels most unique about the typography of TDC69 is how decidedly human it is. This is typography that boldly makes itself known; type whose voice is inexorably entangled with the people who designed it and the lived experiences they bring to their work. After all, what is expressive type if not type that actively expresses something?

Pieces like the *Farsi Alternative Type Yearbook* explore a range of Perso/Arabic forms that nod to tradition while also bringing in a myriad of aesthetic influences like Art Nouveau curves and Brutalist geometry. Or, take *Noto Fangsong Khitan Small Script*, a typeface that revitalizes letterforms from classical texts of the 10th Century Liao dynasty, using type as a catalyst to further promote the study, digitisation and computerisation of a lost script. Another typeface, *Mangosteen*, finds a marriage between the recently revitalized trend of bulbous, trippy typography and the beauty of Mumbai—from the ripples in pools of water, to twisted mango leaves and patterns of Kolam. *Poizon Sans* looks to Chinese seals, *Rezak* to cut paper, and *Shin-Yi* to traditional martial arts. Here, type is diaristic story, shared history, and place-making heritage.

Beyond individual self-expression, typography possesses the capacity to reflect and influence wider social and political dynamics. This is evident in the works showcased in this year's TDC winners, where typography becomes a microcosm for activism and political interrogation. Noteworthy entries include *The Cyberfeminism Index* and *Schriftmeisterinnenbuch*, which offer insights into contemporary and historical feminism, and *I Want Sky*, a newsprint of poetry that commemorates Egyptian queer activist Sarah Hegazy and amplifies the voices of LGBTQIA+ communities across the SWANA region and its diaspora. In the midst of global conflict, typographic expressions can even come distilled acts of resistance, as demonstrated by *Lines From The National Anthem of Ukraine*, and *We are the Freedom* posters, which use typography to galvanize unity and demand justice for Ukraine, or *Woman, Life, Freedom*, a personal response to the death of Mahsa Amini and the resulting nationwide protests in Iran. In these cases,

typography becomes an agent of transformation, empowering individuals and communities to confront and reshape the world around them.

Legibility is a precursor for successful typography. But what happens when we approach legibility on our own terms? By challenging the limits of legibility, typography becomes a means of transcending mere functionality and entering the realm of artistry and self-expression—it invites us to explore the interplay of form, emotion, and interpretation, opening doors to new narratives and evoking a profound connection between the designer, the message, and the viewer. Expressive type that pushes boundaries thumbs its nose at peak optimization, forcing the reader to grapple with



Laura Coombs

the creator's intent on an individual basis. Rather than simply being the delivery mechanism for the message, type can be the message itself. In this realm of typographic rebellion, we are compelled to question the established norms and remind ourselves of type's limitless potential to shape culture, ignite imagination, and provoke thoughtful conversations.

— Elizabeth Goodspeed
TDC Advisory Board



Ilya Bazhanov



Poizon Sans



Rezak



Mykyta Kozlovskyi