

Reading Scott Makela: The Subversion of Dyslexic Deconstruction¹

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Since its proliferation as a field in the nineteenth century, graphic design has constantly renegotiated its ambiguous position in the spectrum of visual culture. As Marcus Verhagen has written, art nouveau posters, for example, were met with numerous polemics surrounding the contested status of the poster in fin-de-siècle Paris, which was widely criticized by an appalled conservative contingent, partially on the grounds that both its imagery and its style courted the viewer like a street-walking prostitute.² Though the metaphor may well sound rather exaggerated, or even absurd when taken at face value, this criticism does raise a significant issue pertaining to the proactivity, or “theatricality,” not only of art nouveau posters, but perhaps more broadly, of graphic images in general. I borrow the term, “theatricality,” from art historian and critic Michael Fried, whose work since the 1970s has been influential in introducing the role of the spectator as an object of study. As I will outline below, Fried’s conclusions about the relationship between the viewer and the image are markedly conservative, as if to side with the opponents of Chéret and Toulouse-Lautrec mentioned above. Fried’s terms, however, represent a language useful for speaking of the relationship between an image and its viewers, and indeed I will ultimately suggest that part of the significance of the recent model of deconstructive design, particularly as exemplified by the work of Scott Makela, lies in its ability to scandalize Fried’s classically inspired paradigm.

Fried’s model theorizes a dichotomy, which pits the “absorptive” against the “theatrical.”³ The former, epitomized by high classicism, neoclassicism, and more recently, selected examples of formalist painting, he describes as an art so self-absorbed as to be utterly unaware of and indifferent to the presence of the viewer. In figurative works, such absorption manifests itself not only in the engaged gesture and expression of the figure, but also, and for my purposes more importantly, in the seamless technique of the artist, which disguises itself in such a way that one sees only the narrative illusion and not the strokes of the brush or the chisel. In short, neither the figure nor the artist actively solicits the viewer’s attention. In such works, Fried maintains that viewers would be so

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- 1 This is a revised and expanded version of a paper presented at the 2002 College Art Association Conference, for the panel “Do I Make Myself Perfectly Clear: Readability and Legibility in Graphic Design,” chaired by George Marcus. Both versions of the paper owe thanks to my colleagues Michelle Bowers and Paul Wittenbraker, who generously shared their time and resources.
- 2 See Marcus Verhagen, “The Poster in Fin-de-Siècle Paris: ‘That Mobile and Degenerate Art,’” in Leo Charney and Vanessa Schwartz, eds., *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 103–129.
- 3 See Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

convinced by the illusion of an autonomous reality that they would even unwittingly project themselves into the image, thereby attaining a direct, unmediated relationship to the content of the painting, and consequently losing themselves in a similar state of contemplative absorption.

By contrast, the theatrical, in Fried's particular use of the term, is that which acknowledges and indeed panders to the presence of the viewer, whose own self-awareness consequently precludes an aesthetically transcendent experience. In other words, a work that more overtly solicits attention, whether through imagery or exaggerated technique, reminds its viewers that they are the embodied spectators of an object of artifice.⁴ For Fried, the absorptive and the theatrical represent not only a dichotomy, but also a hierarchy, privileging the absorptive, which he favors as a superior form of experience.

Mired in the humanist presumptions of the "fine arts," Fried likely would have little to say in defense of graphic design, particularly in its overtly "applied" manifestations. His rejection of the notion that an artwork might be created for any purpose other than to quietly signify its own integrity is representative of a longstanding, but recently reconsidered, marginalization of fields such as graphic design, which might seem, at least in one sense, to be of its very nature theatrical rather than absorptive. In the instance of client-based or advertising design in particular, I specifically mean that the designed object seems to know that its purpose is to acknowledge, address, speak to, and ultimately persuade a human subject. It is quite significant here that graphic design would begin to fashion itself as a field and a profession in the capitalist marketplace and society of spectacle of Western culture in the late nineteenth century.⁵ The degree to which posters, images, and advertisements would increasingly find themselves competing with one another in city streets for the attention of the passerby has only escalated in our own time. Thus, as previously suggested, design has evolved, as if of necessity, as a medium aspiring to actively court the viewer's attention in order to viably compete—and hence communicate—in a world of visual distraction.

The inclusion of text would seem to further contribute to the theatricality of design images and advertisements in two ways, the first being in the sense that words are arbitrary signs, which acknowledge—and indeed assume—a reader. Secondly, however, imagery designed to incorporate text also is theatrical in the sense that the juxtaposition of two-dimensional words onto an illustration or photograph generally qualifies whatever narrative or spatial illusion may be implied by the image, thereby destroying any classical pretense of autonomous self-absorption to which the image might have aspired.

Ultimately, of course, the point that text, including slogans and product names, would play a central role in the development of

4 Bertolt Brecht's theory of distanciation would purposely adopt this sort of "theatricality" as a form of protest against the conventional, classically realist theater, which actually conformed more closely to Fried's model of absorption.

5 See Steven Heller, "Advertising: Mother of Graphic Design," in Michael Bierut et al., eds., *Looking Closer 2* (New York: Allworth Press, 1997), 112–18.

graphic design is a notion that requires little belaboring. And yet one finds that the widespread—and allegedly modern—form-follows-function ideology of the early twentieth century would define the role of type in terms which would seem derived from a classical aesthetic theory of visual restraint, and which therefore would seem to exist in a paradoxical relationship with the seemingly theatrical purpose of most designed images, as discussed above. Thus, even in an age characterized by the rise of discourses of graphic design and widespread typographic experimentation, the classical, or absorptive, paradigm—and the hierarchy it implied—would seem to have held fast to its ground.

Specifically, I speak of the implicitly universalizing presumption that the goal of text is “invisibility,” meaning that the viewer would read the type without looking at it, without, in other words, being distracted by the visuality of the text. That text should be seamlessly self-absorbed is a notion implicitly articulated in “The Crystal Goblet, or Printing Should Be Invisible,” a 1932 essay by Beatrice Warde, in which she famously surmised that text should function transparently, like a clear glass, a vessel to be looked through but not at. While the notion of “transparency” at the heart of her metaphor bears some print-specific connotations distinct from those of Fried’s model of “absorptive” painting (and vice versa), the terms overlap in their adoption of the classical assumption that restraint in form enables a higher relationship to content, which consequently can be accessed without barriers. Excesses of the artist’s or designer’s hand, however, are to be dismissed as undesirable distractions. Indeed, articulating her concept of the transparency of “good” type, Warde speaks with great enthusiasm of print’s potential to communicate content without mediating or qualifying it: “The most important thing about printing is that it conveys thought, ideas, images from one mind to other minds. This statement is what you might call the ‘front door’ of the science of typography. Within lie hundreds of rooms, but unless you start by assuming that printing is meant to convey specific and coherent ideas, it is very easy to find yourself in the wrong house altogether.”⁶ According to this formulation, text, therefore, was to be not theatrical but invisible, speaking to the reader, but doing so without its form being seen in order to avoid any distraction from the “specific and coherent” content to be conveyed. As previously suggested, Warde’s notion of “invisibility,” would seem to be based on a classical model, evoking the ancient Greek dictum that the height of art is to conceal its own artifice.⁷

Of course, numerous designers in recent decades, such as Paula Scher and David Carson, have disrupted the hierarchy of the symbolic word over the visual text, in the process overturning the notion that the height of typography is to conceal the type. Such efforts have been successful to such a degree that Warde’s essay today reads almost like a satire. And yet while designers and histo-

6 Beatrice Warde, “The Crystal Goblet, or Printing Should Be Invisible,” in Gunnar Swanson, ed., *Graphic Design and Reading* (New York: Allworth Press, 2000), 92.

7 The same idea also is described by Katie Salen’s metaphor of the visual voice-over. Of course, when we see an image of a woman washing dishes, and we then hear a man’s voice say, “Joy softens hands while you do the dishes,” this should destroy the illusion that we are voyeuristically seeing into an unmediated slice of this woman’s life. Yet with the baritone voice, which speaks with perfect diction, a formulaic intonation, and a standard Midwestern accent, we have been conditioned to assume that indeed we are hearing the disembodied voice of truth, which has become so familiar that we don’t even notice it. See Katie Salen, “Surrogate Multiplicities: In Search of the Visual Voice-Over,” in Swanson, 77–90.

rians have recognized this as a significant paradigm shift, I would suggest that perhaps the theoretical implications of such a shift have yet to be exhausted. To support this latter claim, one might note that such experiments primarily have been theorized in rather simplified terms as “subjective,” or as symptoms of a distraction-laden, channel-surfing culture out of control. Here, however, I wish to address the potential of such works to speak to the issue of the gaze as it manifests itself in the classical, self-absorbed model of invisible text. As stated above, client-based design and typography are largely functional in nature: design and text are created to speak to and acknowledge a human subject; but perhaps inevitably, this has involved the presumption of a particular type of subject. Much discussion has been directed in recent years toward the implied presence of a “male gaze” in visual forms of communication. In similar terms, I wish to propose that conventional design recognizes and addresses what might be termed a “normalized gaze.” This notion is particularly implicit in Warde’s text, when she states, for example, that:

There is no “explanation” whatever of the fact that I can make arbitrary sounds that will lead a total stranger to think my own thought. It is sheer magic that I should be able to hold a one-sided conversation by means of black marks on paper with an unknown person halfway across the world. Talking, broadcasting, writing, and printing are all quite literally forms of thought transference, and it is this ability and eagerness to transfer and receive the contents of the mind that is almost alone responsible for human civilization.⁸

According to her statement, therefore, Warde’s thought is simply transferred through text, directly, correctly, and without mediation. Implicitly enabling such a statement is the presumption not only of a seeing, literate, English-speaking subject, but also of a viewer or reader who conforms to a classical, or Cartesian, model of cognition, one which maintains that sensory information, in this case visual text, objectively imparts itself onto passive human organs of sight, sound, smell, etc., and that the viewer’s perceptions and corresponding knowledge can be objectively confirmed as correct.⁹

But what of the dyslexic, the viewer who perceives and processes information differently? How can this viewer be acknowledged? Designer P. Scott Makela was himself such a viewer, one who saw forms instead of words, the very text which was allegedly invisible. Without wishing to overemphasize its importance to his work, or to suggest that it was the primary influencing factor in his process,¹⁰ I believe that the notion of dyslexia can function as a potent metaphor and theoretical touchstone for Makela’s work, and more broadly for contemporary graphic design and typography in general, particularly as they intersect with theories of deconstruc-

8 Warde in Swanson, 92.

9 Similarly, the point might be made that the classical painting of which Fried spoke assumes a viewer with “normal” perceptions of color, spatial representation, etc.

10 Other traits for which Makela and his work are well known include collaboration (particularly with Laurie Haycock Makela), viscerality, high energy, and multidisciplinary.

tion which have been appropriated into these fields. Thus, the remainder of this paper will explore the implications of Makela's "dyslexic" gaze, suggesting that it not only challenged the hierarchy of words over text, but that it subverted the underlying assumption of a "normal" gaze which had empowered the classical model for so long.

As its etymology directly suggests, dyslexia has been defined as a neurologically based learning disorder, "characterized by difficulties in single word decoding," which can impair the dyslexic's ability to process, or "decode," visual manifestations of language.¹¹ Though the condition has been known to manifest itself in many diverse ways, it has been suggested that some dyslexics may have acute abilities in other areas, such as physicality and spatiality, which can compensate for a lack in more conventional skills, and it is perhaps not coincidental that these are indeed traits for which Makela's work is known. Yet generally speaking, dyslexic characteristics may be adapted to Warde's metaphor as a fog complicating the transparency of the goblet, causing one to look at the glass rather than through it, by extension prohibiting—or at least problematizing—the direct access to the symbolic word of which she spoke.

Until fairly recent times, most dyslexic children, with Makela likely included, lacked the power of the word "dyslexia" to describe and validate their experiences. Painter Chuck Close, for example, himself dyslexic, has spoken of his own early schooling as a double frustration. He was neither able to succeed at academics nor to explain to himself or his teachers why his countless hours of studying failed to pay off. Makela similarly seemed to have had great difficulty at feeling successful not only at conventional academics, but also at drawing and handwriting.¹² Like many contemporary designers, however, he found salvation in the computer. This would afford him the alternate strategies necessary to exploit his own unconventional abilities.¹³

Yet more important to my purposes here is that during his experiences at Cranbrook, first as a graduate student, then later as a designer-in-residence and co-chair of the 2-D department,¹⁴ Makela was exposed to recent French literary theory which advanced notions of deconstruction. Whether or not he would himself recognize it in such terms, the experiences of a frustrated and marginalized childhood dyslexic would find validation in a theoretical paradigm which posited that the subjectivity of the reader—or viewer—played a critical role in the creation of meaning. In such a model, texts and objects no longer could be conceptualized as neutrally imparting their own true meanings. (Such a supposition would be dismissed by Derrida as "metaphysical.") Thus, the resultant theory would recognize not only the existence of the reader, but the temporal and contingent nature of the reader's experience. The reader also could no longer be conceptualized as a neutral and passive vehicle

11 The Orton Dyslexia Society Research Committee, April, 1994.

12 Makela himself would describe this condition in less explicit terms as "a childhood combination of poor motor skills and hyperactivity." (Scott Makela, untitled interview, *Emigré* 23, 1992).

13 For more on the computer's influence, see Stephanie Zelman, "Looking Into Space," in Swanson, 51–60.

14 Scott Makela co-chaired Cranbrook's 2-D area with his wife Laurie Haycock Makela from 1996 until his sudden death from a viral infection in 1999.

onto which information objectively projected itself. Instead, the reading subject would become an active participant not only in the construction of meaning, but in the unraveling of the narrative's—or the image's—absorptive illusion of self-sustenance. Importing such literary theories to the field of graphic design, Makela would simultaneously impose a dyslexic gaze, forcing the viewer into activity, making him or her see the words as letter forms, and making the reader work, much as he had had to work to read even allegedly “invisible” text.

Makela's font *Dead History*, for example, raises key issues pertaining to ways in which one does or does not experience “legibility.” Described by Philip Meggs as “rather jarring,”¹⁵ and weighing in with other “deconstructive” fonts which have been rejected as illegible by traditionalists in the field, *Dead History* boldly juxtaposes elements from seemingly incompatible fonts, both serifs and sans serifs, which are forcefully melded into an unsystematic arrangement of hybridized forms. But what is to be read into controversies surrounding such deconstructive, or “post-modern,” fonts, which are anything but “invisible”? While Emigré's *Zuzana Licko* has famously surmised that we read best what we read most, numerous researches and polemics have been dedicated to the question of which font or fonts have the greatest legibility.¹⁶ Factors such as retinal regression and blinks per minute have been measured to resolve the issue; yet in the end it can perhaps only be concluded that the question is itself unviable, not only because various polemics have reached entirely contradictory conclusions, but also because the very posing of the question implies both that the goal of typography is invariably facile legibility, and that perception can be unproblematically standardized.

Figure 1
Scott Makela, *Dead History*, Bold (1990).
© Copyright Emigré, Inc. 1995–2002.

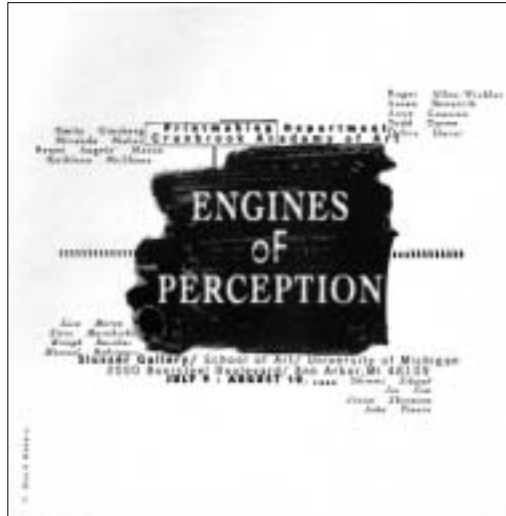


15 Philip Meggs, “Dead History,” *Print* 49: 3 (May/June 1995): 118–19.

16 See Rolf F. Rehe, “Legibility,” in Swanson, 97–110.

Figure 2

Scott Makela, *Engines of Perception*
Exhibition Invitation Cranbrook Academy
of Art (1990), with permission of Laurie
Haycock Makela.



Other examples of Makela's work invoke pertinent themes regarding the process of perception as an activity, rather than as a simple occurrence. A 1990 exhibition invitation, for example, seems to play off of the exhibition's title *Engines of Perception*. Though relatively restrained by the standards of Makela's other works, the invitation implies, but ultimately breaks out of an orderly grid structure based on a predetermined flow of information, from upper left to lower right. In this case, rather, the flow is nonlinear, and while the metaphor of the engine implies a kind of mechanical objectivity, what one quickly comes to realize is that the information here does not simply transmit itself. The mind is a machine, therefore, not in the sense that it is formulaically mechanical, but rather in the sense that it is at work, churning and making decisions about how to "read" this card which functions simultaneously as text and image. One is perhaps unlikely to lose oneself in a transcendent (re: metaphysical) state of contemplative absorption, while working to assemble meaning in this manner. Such deconstructive design, therefore, generally might be described as adopting a theatrical model of presentation, in order to expose, rather than conceal or render "invisible," the mechanisms through which both the image and its potential meanings are arbitrarily created.

A related work, also of 1990, is Makela's poster *Cranbrook design: the new discourse*. In this case, the analogy between mind and machine is made even more explicit, because the image of one is juxtaposed onto that of the other. With an engine ambiguously providing a backdrop/frame, the central photograph is of the brain itself, as seen from above, the vantage point which best accentuates its two hemispheres. The structure of this object divided in two is paralleled by the presentation of the text, in which the right half is slightly set apart and invariably off kilter with the left. The words themselves, authored by Katherine McCoy and Michael McCoy



Figure 3
Scott Makela, *Cranbrook Design: The New Discourse* Poster, Cranbrook Academy of Art (1990), with permission of Laurie Haycock Makela.

introduce, among other things, a set of dichotomies negotiated by the imagery: art/science, mathematic/poetic, mythology/technology, dangerous/rigorous, systematic/idiosyncratic, desire/necessity, being/reading, and failing/finding. The text, also involving a prose description of the dichotomies outlined, furthermore is layered over the image of the brain, and it expands and contracts to mimic the implied three-dimensionality of the object photographed. Here too, then, the form of the text contributes directly to its content and meaning(s), which exceed those of simple and direct signification. Of course, what may be the image's most notable feature is the morphing of the seemingly discreet elements, brain and machine, left and right, words and pictures, into a dramatic swirl, in which neither text nor image is legible. (Ironically, reading is one of the last words to retain a recognizable form.) Here, in particular, it is the form of the text alone which signifies and conveys, since the words themselves no longer function as signifiers. Yet they participate in the potential creation of new content, which seems to speak to the notion of blurring boundaries and problematizing the very premise of a fixed dichotomy. While the viewer's reading skills, whatever they may be, here are purposefully disabled, Makela creates an alternative means by which meaning can occur. As the last pair of terms provocatively suggests, this might be seen as either failing or finding.¹⁷

For my purposes here, however, perhaps the most noteworthy example of Makela's work is the 1998 book and Website *whereishere*, which Makela collaboratively produced with Laurie Haycock Makela and writer Lewis Blackwell.¹⁸ The project, in both forms, consists of a curated collection of images drawn from the global context of contemporary graphic design. Short texts, primarily authored by Blackwell, function almost like a manifesto of deconstruction and/or post-structuralist theory. For example, Blackwell states, as if in reference to Roland Barthes, "In this century, we have been told by some leading thinkers that we have an unavoidable dialogue with the audience. And the nature of a dialogue implies that the audience is reciprocating, sending signals back; it is in an unavoidable dialogue with the performer. Each performs for the other." Later, one finds that Blackwell has evoked a post-structuralist critique of identity in stating:

In this analysis, any idea of being a "creator" — through images, words or other projected experiences — is illusory. This is somewhat ironic: if you thought you were concerned with the illusions created by attempts to communicate, now you end up being presented with the illusion of such an action in the first place. You are left with only a sense of self to deconstruct as you melt down into a philosophized, psychoanalyzed messy blob. You and your putative audience [and its sense of you] is just part of a system so much larger, with dimensions impossible to conceive.

17 The theme of the brain as an organic machine also would be taken up more viscerally in Makela's designs for the title sequence to David Fincher's *Fight Club*, which begins inside the brain of the main character.

18 Lewis Blackwell, Scott Makela, and Laurie Haycock Makela, *whereishere* (Corte Madera, CA: Ginko Press, Inc., 1998); whereishere.com. (The introduction, cited below, is unpaginated.)



Figure 4

Scott Makela and Laurie Haycock Makela, *whereishere*, front cover (1998).

Figures 4, 5, & 6 reproduced with permission of Laurie Haycock Makela.



Figure 5

Scott Makela and Laurie Haycock Makela, Austria spread from *whereishere* (1998).



Figure 6

Scott Makela and Laurie Haycock Makela, Germany spread from *whereishere* (1998).

When appropriated into, or applied to the field of graphic design, deconstruction has involved—among other things—calling attention to the mechanisms of the image's own production, heightening the role of text as a visual element, breaking down both the modernist grid and the form-follows-function ideology which gave rise to it, and complicating the viewer's experience through the inclusion of characteristics such as visual double entendres, etc. In other words, deconstructive design has bluntly refused both the model and the metaphor of Warde's absorptive and classicizing "invisible goblet," and the normalizing assumptions which gave rise to it.

As previously noted, the language of whereishere quite directly frames the project within the rhetoric of deconstruction theory, and the book's design embodies many of the characteristics of deconstructive graphic design already cited. At the same time, the design almost seems to function as an inventory of symptoms of dyslexia. Without wishing to diminish in any way the collaborative contributions of Laurie Haycock Makela, I do, however, wish to illustrate the potential of whereishere to be viewed in light of the context of Scott Makela's experiences with dyslexia, although traits

associated with dyslexic perception are so prevalent and apparent throughout the book that the task of belaboring proof of their evidence seems unnecessary. I shall, therefore, offer only a few initial examples.

The viewer's encounter begins with a cover designed in such a way that the book might be taken to have two fronts. On one side, the text *whereishere* appears beneath a circle, the cardinal points of which are each met by a word. MEANS and OBSESSION appear right-side-up, but AUDIENCE and DEMATERIAL are upside-down. That one thus is left to question the orientation of the book is further reinforced by the fact that the opposite side contains the telling word POSITION, which also appears upside-down. But in these circumstances, what one is pressured to recognize is that upside-down is right-side-up when flipped over, and thus the issue of the relativity of "position" is performatively illustrated. Of course, both "where" and "here" are similarly relative terms by definition, and one might further realize that these three words in one may be posed as either a question, *where is here?*, or a declaration *where is here*. Similar ambiguities take place around the circle. For example, the *de-* in *dematerial* is the only text contained within the circle, suggesting perhaps that it is parenthetical, *(de)material*. Thus, materiality is or is not an issue depending upon context. But *means* is furthermore an ambiguous term in and of itself, bearing the potential to function as either a noun or a verb. Here we are presented with several possibilities for the construction of a sentence: *dematerial audience means obsession, audience means dematerial obsession, etc.* In accordance with notions of deconstructive theory, the viewer is put in the position of decision maker: *Which side is up? Is whereishere a question or a statement?, etc.* But at the same time, many of the decisions to be made have to do with an ambiguous sense of orientation. One form of dyslexia involves difficulty in distinguishing between right and left. Perhaps what the dyslexic realizes is the futility of a dichotomy which insists upon absolute orientations.

Yet other possible references to conditions of dyslexia include the lack of spaces in the text *whereishere*, with words appearing "pushed together," another potential manifestation of dyslexic perception.¹⁹ The shaping of the font plays a significant role as well, with the text appearing to have been cropped at the upper edge. Thus, not only do the rounded letters have an incongruous straight edge across the top, but the proportions appear distorted as well. Implicit within both these observations, however, is the notion that there is an acceptable norm determining both proportion and consistency. This text emphatically denies that the norm and the familiar are valid in and of themselves, and in the process, calls attention to the shape of the words, destroying their invisibility. This process may be alternately interpreted as deconstructive or dyslexic. The text in a sense deconstructs itself by reminding the viewer not

19 The Nemours Foundation Website:
http://kidshealth.org/teen/health_problems/diseases/dyslexia_p3.html.

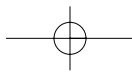


only that text is visible, but that it is constructed as well. It reminds the reader, in other words, that the illusion of an object which appears so neutral as to have willed itself into existence is just that, an illusion. At the same time, however, this font which so brazenly calls attention to its own visuality causes a viewer to perceive the words in a quasi-dyslexic manner, seeing letters as shapes, and not purely as linguistic symbols.

As previously noted, the book's interior consists of a compendium of works by designers, arranged by countries of origin, which are included in alphabetical order. Geography thus is dislocated by the arbitrary system of the alphabet, which locates Japan between Israel and Mexico. Orientation is further problematized by the images and the type which introduce the various nations. The photograph pertaining to Austria, for example, appears turned on its side, while the type is not only dissected by a thin blue line, but reads from right to left as well. This is not immediately apparent, however, because the first and the final pair of the blocky sans-serif letters are symmetrical, reading the same way in either direction. Confusing left and right, as previous discussed, of course is one of the best known symptoms of dyslexia, but another common symptom invoked by this text involves difficulties with spelling resulting from a desire to spell according to phonetics rather than convention. The word of, for example, generally is pronounced by native English speakers as if it were spelled with a v instead of an f. Similarly we find Austria seeming to be spelled with a z in place of the phonetically approximate s. Or perhaps not. In this geometricized font, it may be that the s has been reversed and compressed into the more angular form of a z. In any event, conceptual ambiguity and visual double entendre reign.

In texts introducing other nations, however, words read from left to right, but the letters are backwards, upside-down, or both. In several instances, letters work against themselves as they become other letters when flipped. Not only do ds become bs, as in Canada, but even the upside-down lowercase r of Brazil could be taken to be an uppercase L and vice versa. Throughout, there is little consistency within each word, with, in some cases, a single letter upside-down. The most common device, however, seems to be that the first and last letter of each word is capitalized, suggesting again that texts might be read in either direction. And here, with Austria, Brazil, and Canada, we have only made it through a, b, and c.

The effect, needless to say, is disorienting, even as the text tries to tell us exactly where we are. We come to expect the articulation of each new country's name, yet we find ourselves wondering, "Where is here?" In my own experience, I found context to be an invaluable aid to literacy. Struggling to read words such as Germany, which might seem to be spelled g-a-l-w-e-u-y, or Japan, which could almost be read as Nepal, I relied on the context of the images and even the order of the alphabet itself to determine the referents of the



words at which I was looking. And I dare say that I have never looked harder at words in my life. The ambiguity became a guessing game, in which I needed to actively pool my own resources to determine which of the numerous possibilities was the most viable. And yet in so many cases, I knew that an r could still be an L, thus preventing my conclusion from becoming closure, in the sense in which Derrida critiques this term as inherently metaphysical. Thus, the exercise of reading these words functioned simultaneously as a performance of deconstruction theory, and as an enactment of the extended effort of a dyslexic reader.

As a final note to whereishere, this latter notion is furthermore quite explicitly invoked in the notes to the work of American designer Peter Hill, which explain that "Hill concentrates on how words and letters lose their meaning to dyslexia sufferers, who become obsessed and distracted with form itself. This image began as letterforms, then transformed into incomprehensible groups and clusters."²⁰ In the case of Hill's work, the letterforms indeed are barely recognizable as such, as the ghosts of letters merge and mutate into hybridized shapes, and the seemingly three-dimensional structure of the whole.

Since Makela himself was generally less direct in acknowledging such a connection in his own work, in conclusion, I would reiterate that I do not wish to leave the impression that he must be theorized above all as a dyslexic, but rather, I would suggest that the condition of dyslexia, as seemingly manifested in his work, can function as a potent model for rethinking the assumptions conventionally implicit within the notion of the viewer's gaze. I would argue, therefore, that deconstructive design too often has been relegated to description by overgeneralized terms, such as "personal" or "subjective," which do not adequately speak to the political nature of difference. Thus, in the degree to which Makela's work calls attention to the biases of normalcy, it may indeed be understood as subversive.

²⁰ whereishere, 167.