Design Credits

First seen on MyFonts: June 24th, 2007
Designed by: Joseph Churchward
Designed when: 2007
Letterform design based on: Churchward Marianna
Contained in Categories: Decorative & Display, Funny, Sans Serif
Design owned by: BluHead Studio
MyFonts Keywords: 3d, blimp, bulbous, cool, decorative, funny, headline, heavy, informal, newzealand, obese, outline, party, poster, retro, round, sansserif, shadow, signage, spunky [suggest]

Figure 1

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Figure 2

On the 9th of January 2008 the tag list on www.MyFonts.com for the typeface Churchward Marianna read: 3d, blimp, bulbous, cool, decorative, funny, headline, heavy, informal, newzealand, obese, outline, party, poster, retro, round, sansserif, shadow, signage, spunky [suggest].[1, Fig. 1] A few weeks later, around the 14th of February, a new word had been added to the list: biographical.[Fig. 2] How did this word come to appear there? What could its relation be to a typeface?

[...]

Marianna,

Your Dad was working all the time; like you said (drawing out the 'loved') "He LOOOOVED it!". He designed this typeface in 1969, when you were six, and he named it 'Marianna'.

It was through you that I managed to get in contact with Joseph in the first place, so finally meeting you in Dublin last December felt like quite a significant moment.[2] I was set to interview you on a specific perspective of his practice – connected to how we perceive and understand our parents' JOBS as children. But this was quickly replaced by a lengthy exchange: stories about you growing up, around and eventually working at Churchward International Typefaces Limited, were interrupted by the things I had discovered and made about your Dad's body of work over the past two years. Incidentally, the interview turned into a conversation. It was quite soon after, maybe even on the ride back to my accommodation in town, that I began to reconsider a question that had been introduced to me in the preceding months by a fellow designer.[3] It was a question that had simultaneously annoyed and intrigued me: 'Can a typeface be biographical?' I started to think about it in relation to the typeface your Dad designed for you. Driving through a rainy, dark Dublin night it suddenly occurred to me that the first time we may have actually 'met' was by virtue of your typeface in 2005.

Looking back to 2005, in my very first interview with Joseph that you conducted and transcribed for me, he touched briefly on what influenced the typeface Marianna.

> I called it Marianna because Marianna was fat in those days and it was a fat design . . . You were plumpy . . . That's why I called it Marianna, because it was plumpy.[4]

I remember, quite vividly, reading this quote for the first time. It made me laugh out loud. But my laugh was coupled with that warm, prickly-scalp sensation you feel when embarrassed. Being fresh to his work at the time – and it being the closest I had yet come to his speaking voice, well, it just seemed too . . . unequivocal. Even though it touched whole-heartedly on one of the well-established methods of finding a name for a typeface,[5] I didn't really know that more could be made of it. The 'Marianna Quote', along with some other potentially cryptic answers to my initial questions, was stored away in a folder on my computer's hard drive.

About a month after this interview I was given an assignment to design a poster for our end-of-year exhibition.[6] Spurred on by a friend, it seemed like a good opportunity to fish out Joseph's quote. The idea was similarly unequivocal: to try and keep the spirit of my initial interpretation while setting the quote about

Werkplaats Typografie end of year presentation and exhibition 2006.
Opening: Wednesday 28.06.06 at 17.00 with presentation by publisher Lars Müller followed by party with drinks from 18.00—21.00.
Exhibition open to public on Friday 30.06.06 from 12.00—19.00.
Location: De Ateliers, Stadhouderskade 86, NL 1073 AT, Amsterdam.
Werkplaats Typografie, +31 (0) 26 3535774.
WT is part of ArtEZ institute of the Arts.

‘I called it Marianna because Marianna was fat in those days and it was a fat design… you were plumpy… that’s why I called it Marianna, because it was plumpy.’

New Zealand type designer Joseph Churchward,
from interview with David Bennewith 11.11.2005.

Opposite: Figure 3

Marianna in the eponymous font. At the time a digitised version of the typeface didn’t exist.[7] I began the activity of cutting and pasting the quote together, using a scan from an old Churchward’s type catalogue. It felt like the closest (digital) equivalent I might get that would hark back to the good-old-days of composing headline lettering by hand, just like your Dad did (and you, too, some time after).

The process of constructing the quote - spacing and composing the letters to make the design - unveiled a discovery that, in hindsight, could be best described as serendipitous. Aside from the result being a bit humorous to read and look at, the form and content were now mingling with one another. Marianna (the type) not only became more animated all of a sudden, but hinted at something that went beyond the corporeality of the quote. It had acquired an independent, yet discrete personality that seemed to populate the letterforms. An oral, descriptive and formal conflation of Marianna had resulted in a tangible response to my initial disenchantment. I was surprised to notice that it was the work that was speaking.[fig. 3]

This idea was made more apparent when, in a telephone conversation with Joseph, the subject of Robert Louis Stevenson came up. Joseph said something that really struck me: “Perhaps

designing a typeface is like writing a book."[8] It became clear that by using the common definition of 'biography' as a catalyst, while also considering this particular insight into your Dad's designing process, I could make a connection to your typeface. What I mean, is that through Joseph's process of designing, a narrative was occurring that would result in a biographical disposition being instilled in the Marianna alphabet.

Something else as well. During our conversation in December you reminisced about the occasions when you would sit in your Dad's studio, swinging your legs on the office chair. Not really talking much and trying to be on your best behaviour because your Dad was concentrating on his designs. I like to imagine that Joseph was designing Marianna during these moments, writing as he was designing. This time he happened to be busy writing about you. Each character – glyph, letter, digit, mark – has something about you programmed into it. Like the time you broke your leg. For the first few days you needed help from your family to stand up and get around and your Dad saw the opportunity to design the ligatures.[9, Fig. 4]

Of course – as is generally the case with typefaces – this type of information is often divorced from its expected function. But it could be argued that influences live in a kind of palpable creation system that exists in the circumstances of its genus. This is a place where Roland Barthes' 'natural state of the letter'[10] might be compared with the natural innocence of the child. This idea is perpetuated in the essay 'The Storyteller' by the philosopher, Walter Benjamin, where an equal relationship between the storyteller and the craftsman is elucidated."

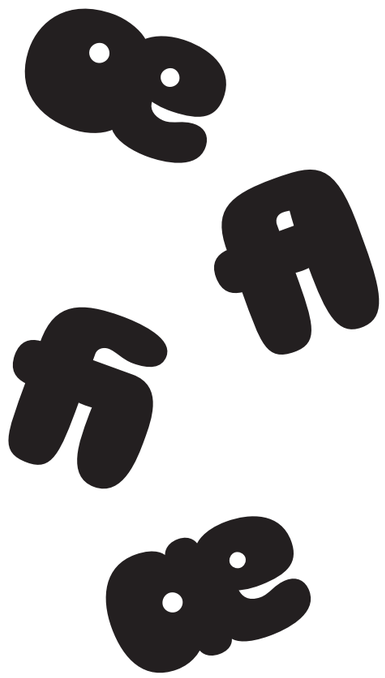
For your Dad, a typeface is complete when the balance of the letters are found, then – without much pause for reflection – the next one is diligently begun.[12] Even though it is your Dad's wish that the alphabets are used, this is not the primary reason he obsessively designs them. Instead, he describes it as an 'inquisitive urge'[13] or (more tellingly) as 'Chinese ghosts' "[Which push him to] do the bloody work!"[14] Perhaps it is in this hypothetical space that the alphabet could also develop a hidden personality. A latent spirit that was planted in the crafting grows and remains embedded as a cipher or code. Maybe these are things are conveyed in transmission. 'Invisible' traces to which a viewer might be sensitive; traces that are apprehended for later reference. More often than not, this is how we come to understand, or react to, a style. We receive a signal before we start reading.[15] On the other hand – as your Dad quite clearly reflects – 'It's there, you just have to find it'.[16]

Figure 4

Figure 5

Figure 6

Figure 7 [a+b]



ABCDEFGHIJKLMNO
PQRSTUVWXYZÀÅÉÎ
ÕØabcdefghijklmnop
qrstuvwxyzàåéîõøü&
1234567890($£.,!?)

Hey!

Looking further, I discovered that these kinds of transmissions are not uncommon in various historical manifestations of communicative writing. For example, in Oriental calligraphy, or ideographic writing cultures in general, the practitioner's hand infers an important layer of meaning and narrative. In the early Irish written tradition from the time of the Book of Kells, complex scripted letterforms were 'inhabited' with stories, symbols and figures. These figures were apprehended by the speaker and the receiver, the literate and illiterate, as much by the eye as by the ear.[17] Fig. 5 More recently, these visual transmissions seem to prevail in the coded backgrounds of uncontained letters that are found in multitudes of graffiti pieces. Similarly, a more specific example is seen in 12-year-old Kate McCann's entry for the 2008 'Doodle for Google' competition. Miss McCann's work is entitled 'Up My Street'. The small 'g' of Google is a school; the 'e' is a fully fledged train station.[Fig. 6] It seems the activity of inhabiting letters with ulterior meanings is still prevalent.

In the more black and white world of typefaces you might have to look a bit further to read these transmissions. There are other 'daughter' typefaces around, such as Eric Gill's 'Joanna'. Gill's emphatic insistence that letters were 'things, not pictures of things'[18] already presupposes an inextricable link between

Figure 8

Figure 9

Figure 10

Figure 11 [a+b]

both Joanna's letter and her anatomical renderings.[Fig. 7] Recently, on receipt of the type specimen for Typotheque's latest typeface, I encountered the eponymous Greta, adjacent to her alphabet, staring out at me from the cover.[Fig. 8] Again, Barthes is a good reference point about how, when regarding reading and form, these manifestations of transmission work. For example, when describing Erté's illustrated alphabet in 'Erté or À la Lettre',[Fig. 9] Barthes suggests a relationship between the human and the letter via the motif of silhouette:

> The silhouette, if only by its etymology, is a strange object, at once anatomic and semantic: it is the body which has explicitly become a drawing.

He concludes,

> The silhouette is an essential graphic product: it makes the human body into a potential letter, it asks to be *read*.[19]

When considering Marianna's optical provocations, and because it is evident that typefaces and humans share some common physical characteristics, I wondered if (in person) you might share 'common terms' with a written description of the typeface Marianna. Also, I was curious about how this description


Churchward Marianna

Purchase Options

$25.00

Churchward Marianna

AaBbCcDdEe

Add to Album

Churchward Marianna Shadow

Purchase Options

$25.00

Churchward Marianna Shadow

AaBbCcDd

Add to Album

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Churchward Marianna

Churchward Marianna and Churchward Marianna Shadow are two more OpenType font releases by BluHead Studio, LLC from the exciting and unique library of Joseph Churchward type designs.

The round, bulbous letterforms take on individual personalities of their own. These fonts can't wait to express humor, spunk and just plain bold fun!

might reflect back on you? [20, Fig.10] To test this out in a kind of controlled situation I consulted a curious feature of the MyFonts website. It is possible to search for a particular style of typeface by adjectives or keywords. A compilation of these related words (tags) is listed for every font in the MyFonts system. By revisiting this list (see the beginning of this essay) [Fig. 1] – and since meeting you – I could quite easily relate these words to your character: 3d, cool, decorative, funny, informal, newzealand, party and spunky. Used in this way, the adjectives create a set of idioms that relate to both the typeface and the subject. Consequently they touch on some kind of language that designers generally use to describe events or choices in their work – however much they're intended or innocuous.*

Inevitably, this led towards a curiosity about how these ideas might be transmitted in more tangible ways: through reproduction. (Designers, in general, are quite pre-occupied by reproduction.) When considering the many ways and means by which Marianna has been applied, printed and disseminated over the years, I wondered if this matter might contribute to a burgeoning biographical myth? During the course of its 39-year-long existence, Marianna has been rendered for use by the various available technologies of the day.

From its more humble beginning as hand lettered forms, to mechanical production as photo-lettering, Dia-type, Computa-type and Letraset, Marianna has recently been 'born again' as a fully-fledged Opentype version. It is within these systems of production and reproduction that a biographical message might be conveyed. If Marianna has been designed as writing, which is very much about you, each rendering also conceivably carries an adumbrated – albeit arrangeable – account of your story. Maybe this begins to up-size the original question from 'Can a typeface be biographical?' to 'Can a typeface be a biography?' That is, where the typeface is a kind of gestalt that captures the character of a person.

[. . .]

* To present a small digression: whenever I look at a typeface I feel I am being confronted with a surface paradox. It is something that meaning can be projected onto (whether designing or reading) and something that also has an intrinsic meaning, a meaning that stares straight back at you. I think this paradox is personified quite well by the teenage characters in recent Gus van Sant films. In Elephant and Paranoid Park, for example, the teenagers ultimately seem to be the proverbial 'blank slate'. They are characters that you can feel familiar with and can easily project your own thoughts onto. But as much as you can inhabit them, or read them, there are things intrinsic to their characters that you might never see – or be allowed to see. That is, unless you dare to go further. The action in these two films is a kind of testament to this (some characters are also quite dangerous). Fig. 11

Together

When taking these different prospects into consideration, two possible readings of Marianna in relation to the term 'biographical' seem to eventuate. First, there is the optical recognition of the alphabet – the messages sent via its morphology. Second, is a more latent message that exists in its crafting, or creation. Both readings seem capable enough of holding an account of both person and personality – and there exists the possibility that these accounts oscillate in this 'inhabited alphabet'.

Since its creation, Marianna has been published a few times over by a handful of different publishers. 'She' has been purchased, swapped and used by many people in different places.[21] Now that it is fully digitised it takes up just 120kb of hard disk space on a computer, so – if you have it – Marianna is always attendant. Whenever I make use of Marianna I am conscious of also sending something about you out into the world. Something akin to digital pollen, transmitted by wires, disks, signals, film, ink and paper that takes hold over screens, objects and printed matter.

David Bennewith, 2008.

ENDNOTES

1. MyFonts.com, http://www.myfonts.com/fonts/blhd/churchward-marianna/.
2. 1.12.2007.
3. Interview with Will Holder, Maastricht, 5.2007.
4. Joseph Churchward, unpublished interview with David Bennewith, 20.10.2005. Conducted and transcribed by Marianna Churchward.
5. Emily King. 'Thirty-six point Gorilla', first published in Eye, No. 23, Winter 1996. Text can be sourced online from Typotheque.com, www.typotheque.com/articles/thirty-six_point_gorilla.
6. Year 7 students of the Werkplaats Typografie Masters programme, Arnhem, Netherlands, 2006-7.
7. Since 2007 a digitised version of Marianna has been available for purchase from MyFonts.com. Digitisation by BluHead Studios of Norwood, MA, USA.
8. Telephone conversation with Joseph Churchward. David Bennewith. 21.11.2007.
9. Sebastian White. Instabilities in writing and standing, 'Memory Character, Resurrection Character', workshop, Royal College of Art, 26.02.2008, David Bennewith. 'In writing and medical tools a ligature occurs either when two or more letterforms are joined as a single glyph or a patient's leg or legs are injured and are unable to support body weight. Ligatures usually replace consecutive characters sharing common components, or legs.'
10. 'Such is the alphabet's power: to rediscover a kind of natural state of the letter. For the letter, if it is alone, is innocence: the Fall begins when we align letters to make words' in Roland Barthes. 1991. 'Erté, or Á la lettre', 'M', The Responsibility of Forms. Translated by Richard Howard, The University of California Press. p. 127.
11. 'An orientation towards practical interests is characteristic of many born storytellers . . . It contains, openly, or covertly, something useful'. See Walter benjamin. The Storyteller. Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov. www.slought.org/files/downloads/events/SF_1331-Benjamin.pdf, p.2.
12. David Bennewith, Joseph Churchward and Warren Olds. 1.2007. 'Churchward Video Notes A-J'. National Grid #3, p. 54.
13. Joseph Churchward, unpublished interview with David Bennewith, 20.10.2005. Conducted and transcribed by Marianna Churchward.
14. 'Churchward Video Notes A-J'. Op cit. p. 57.
15. Edward Wright. 'Conversation, Handwriting and the Poster'. Edward Wright. readings, writings. Department of Typography and Graphic Communication. University of Reading, United Kingdom, p. 39.
16. 'Churchward Video Notes A-J'. Op cit. p.58.
17. 'To the early Irish, Latin was 'primarily a written or 'visible' language . . . [apprehended] as much (if not more) by the eye, as by the ear.' [. . .] In the Book of Kells (late eighth or early ninth century) occurs the famous CHI-RO (folio 29), an elaborate motif in which the letter [a sort of 'P'] encrypts a human form.' Jed Rasula and Steve McCaffery, 2001. Imagining Language, An Anthology. MIT Press. p. 380.
18. Eric Gill, 'Autobiography' in Fiona MacCarthy, 1989. Eric Gill. A Lovers Quest for Art and God. E.P. Dutton, New York. p. 144.
19. 'Erté, or Á la lettre', The Responsibility of Forms. Op cit. p. 107 ['The Silhouette']; p. 113 ['The Letter'] (Author's emphasis).
20. See 'And Joseph Churchward', Paul Elliman, p. 241.
21. You proudly told me that Marianna is one of your Dad's best-selling typefaces. Conversation with Marianna Churchward, Dublin, 1.12.2007.

FIGURES

1. MyFonts description as at 9.1.2008.
2. New keyword 'biographical' added as at 14.2.2008.
3. Werkplaats Typografie Graduation Show 'Marianna', David Bennewith, poster/invite, 700 x 500 mm, black and white, 2006.
4. Ligatures of Churchward Marianna, Joseph Churchward, 1969. BluHead studios, 2007.

5. CHI-RO. Folio 29, Book of Kells, image sourced at http://www.wsp.krakow.pl/whk/konkurs/szkola.html
6. Up my Street, 2008 by Kate McCann. Age: 12, Howard of Effingham School, UK. http://www.google.com/intl/en_uk/doodle4google/vote.html#
7. [a] Joanna, Eric Gill. pencil and crayon on paper, 260.35 x 349.25 mm, c. 1920. [b] Joanna, Eric Gill. 1927.
8. Greta, Typotheque specemin no. 4, Peter Bilak & Nicola Djurek, Typotheque VOF 2007
9. Erté Alphabet, http://www.erte.com/alpha.html
10. MyFonts, 2008.
11. [a] Elephant, Gus van Sant, 2003. Still, http://farm2.static.flickr.com/1259/761078952_e84d7f8c1a.jpg [b] Paranoid Park, Gus van Sant, 2007, Still, http://img.photobucket.com/albums/v651/verbal_jr/movies/Paranoid%20Park/ParanoidPark.jpg

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