

Process Data Place

A Generative Framework
for Multisensory Type Forms.

Vol.1 - Surrey

Research

Monika Sowa

Process Data Place

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A Generative Framework for Multisensory Type Forms
Vol. 1 - Surrey

RESEARCH

Part one of a two-part project consisting of a research volume and a development volume.

This publication forms part of a research project examining the role of systems in typography, tracing their development from historical models of control to contemporary generative design practices.

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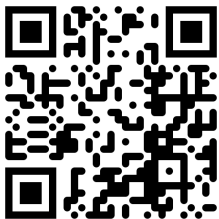
The project is further extended through an online platform:
process.monikasowa.com

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01

Introduction

“The conscientious designer does not himself design at all but rather gives the object to-be a chance to design itself.”

Anni Albers

SCOPE AND ARGUMENT

This study examines the role of systems in typography, tracing their development from historical models of control to contemporary generative design practices. Through analysis of key historical, experimental, and computational examples, it demonstrates how typography has consistently functioned as a system governed by rules, constraints, and relationships.

It explores how these systems have evolved from fixed organisational structures into adaptable frameworks capable of producing variation through execution and interaction, and argues that generative design does not represent a departure from typographic tradition but formalises its underlying logic by encoding these systems into dynamic and flexible processes, through which authorship shifts toward the design of conditions and behaviours rather than the production of fixed visual outcomes.

02

Definitions



TYPOGRAPHY AS SYSTEM

Historically, typography has operated within rule-based systems shaped by proportion, hierarchy, spacing, and repetition. Ellen Lupton describes typography as a structured practice governed by relationships between elements such as alignment, tracking, and line spacing (Lupton, 2010, pp. 36-41). In this sense, typography functions as a system organising language visually, ensuring clarity and consistency in communication. Johanna Drucker further positions typography as an active, meaning-producing system, in which visual arrangement constructs interpretation rather than merely presenting text (Drucker, 1994, pp. 9-10). Meaning emerges through relationships between elements, reinforcing the role of structure in communication.

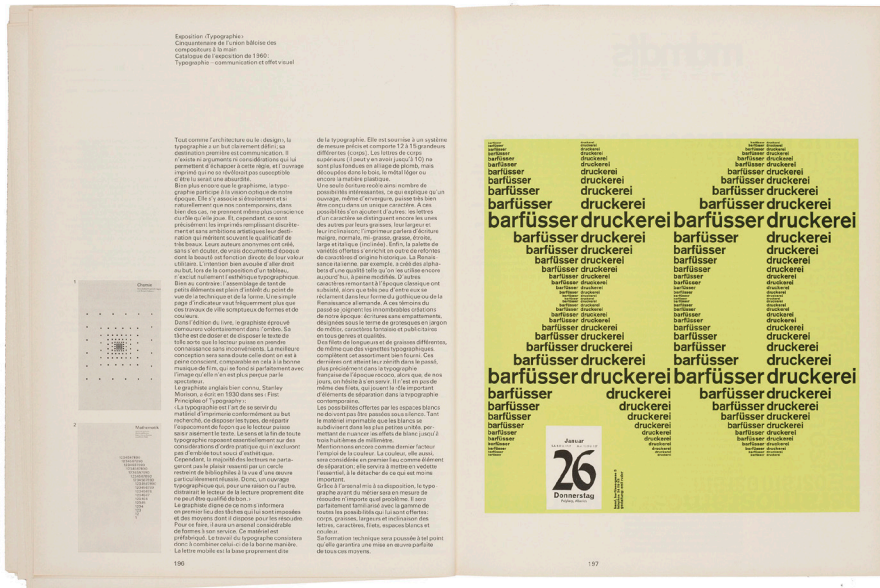


Fig. 1
Ellen Lupton (2024)
Thinking with Type

Typographic structure illustrating relationships between baseline, x-height, and alignment in organising letterforms.

Fig. 2
Emil Ruder (1957)
Typography: A Manual for Design

Editorial layout demonstrating typography organised through grid-based structure and relational systems.



EXPERIMENTAL TYPOGRAPHY

Experimental typography emerges through the questioning of these conventions. As Drucker argues, such practices gain cultural significance through their engagement with established systems (Drucker, 1994, p. 94). Rather than rejecting rules, they test and expose their limits. Poynor similarly describes experimental typography as an investigative approach that challenges expectations of clarity, revealing typography as flexible and adaptive (Poynor, 2003, pp. 8-9).

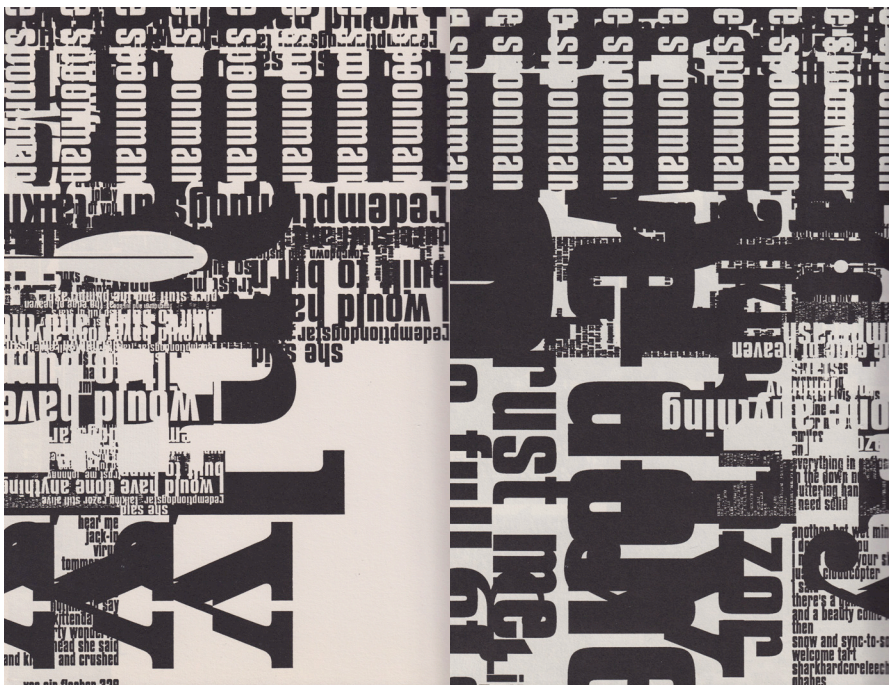


Fig. 3

Vilmos Huszár (1919)

De Stijl Magazine

Geometric abstraction demonstrating typographic systems based on modular structure and ordered relationships.

Fig. 4

Wolfgang Weingart (1974)

Visible Language

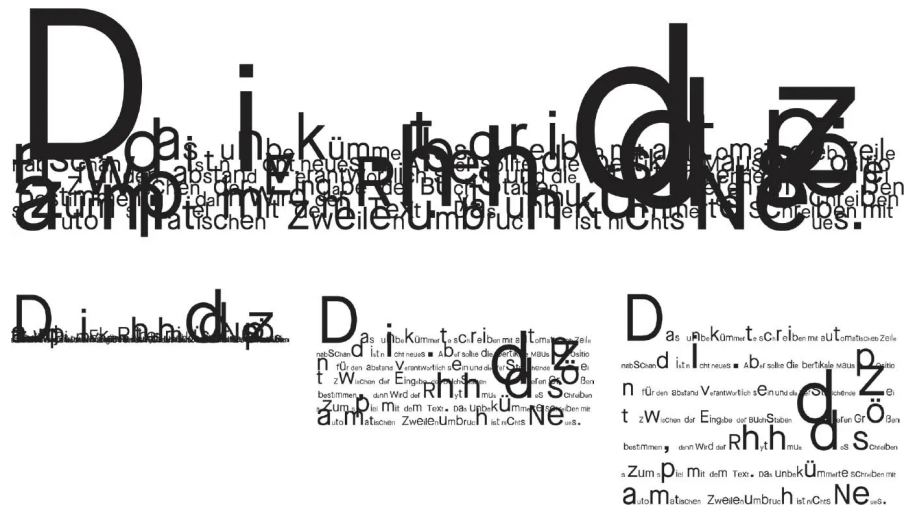
Experimental typography treating language as a visual system, where structure is tested through variation and disruption.

Fig. 5

Karl Hyde & John Warwicker (1994)

Skyscraper I Love You

Typographic composition disrupting hierarchy and legibility through fragmentation, layering, and non-linear arrangement.



GENERATIVE TYPOGRAPHY

Generative design extends these principles by formalising rules into systems capable of producing variation through execution. As Reas and Fry note, generative systems produce form through defined instructions rather than direct composition (Reas and Fry, 2007).

This approach redefines authorship, as outcomes emerge through the execution of rules rather than predetermined design, with the designer “effectively orchestrating the decision-making process of the computer” (Gross et al., 2018, pp. 3–4, 244).

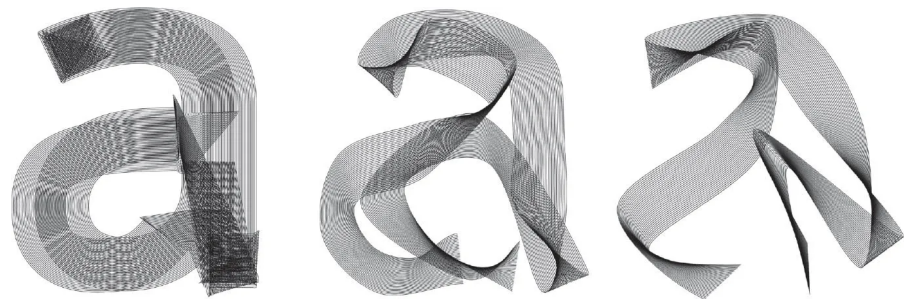


Fig. 6
Gross, B. et al. (2018)
Leading (line spacing) is controlled by vertical mouse position, resulting in variable levels of legibility across typographic outputs.

Fig. 7
Gross et al. (2018)
Typographic form generated through rule-based processes, demonstrating how variation emerges from the iterative transformation of a single structure.

03

Historical Systems



ROMAN AND GEOMETRIC CONSTRUCTION

Typography has long been governed by systems of control that prioritise consistency and reproducibility. Early Roman inscriptional lettering demonstrates a procedural approach, where letterforms were constructed through geometric relationships. As Meggs explains, classical letterforms emerged from Greek geometric systems that standardised the alphabet into a coherent visual structure (Meggs and Purvis, 2016, p. 27-28).



Fig. 8
Timotheus (fourth century BCE)
The Persians, papyrus
manuscript.

The Greek alphabet shows the symmetrical form and even visual rhythm. These qualities made the Greek alphabet the prototype for subsequent developments.

Fig. 9
Trajan's Column inscription,
Rome (c. 113 CE)

Example of capitalis monumentalis illustrating the use of geometric proportion and structured relationships in early typographic systems.



BAUHAUS

In the twentieth century, these principles were extended through modernist design, particularly at the Bauhaus. Typography emphasised clarity and functionality, rejecting decorative traditions in favour of systematic and purposeful communication (Bartram, YEAR, p. 48). This approach is also evident in the work of Anni Albers, whose woven compositions demonstrate how structured systems generate variation through repetition and material interaction.



Fig. 13
Herbert Bayer (1926)
Universal Alphabet
Typographic system based on geometric reduction, enhancing legibility.

Fig. 14
Piet Zwart (1923)
Vickers House advertisement
Modular typographic composition organised through grid-based structure, where geometric elements are arranged dynamically to produce variation.

Fig. 15
Anni Albers (1936)
Ancient Writing
Woven composition demonstrating variation through repetition and material interaction within a structured framework.



SWISS GRID STRUCTURES

Swiss graphic design further systematised this approach through the use of grids. As Meggs and Purvis note, mathematically constructed grids organised elements into coherent structures (Meggs and Purvis, 2016, p. 397). Bartram emphasises their role in relating disparate components to create “unity within diversity” (Bartram, p. 96).

Across these developments, typography is established not as an expressive artefact, but as a structured system in which form emerges through defined relationships and controlled parameters.

Fig. 16

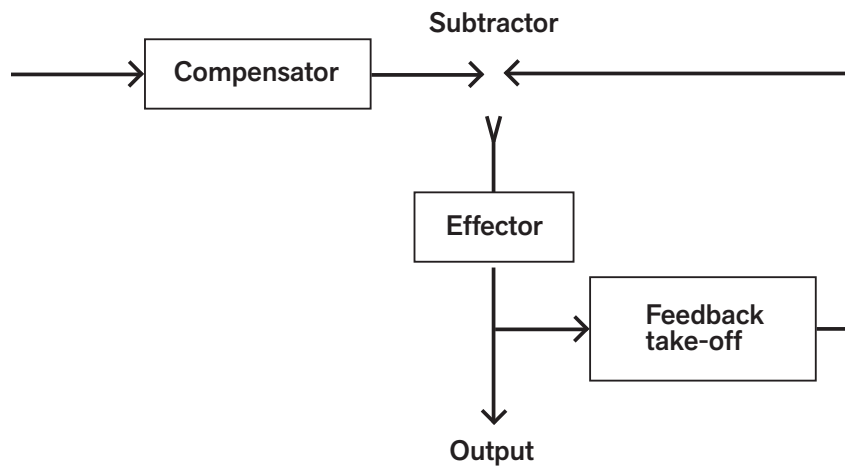
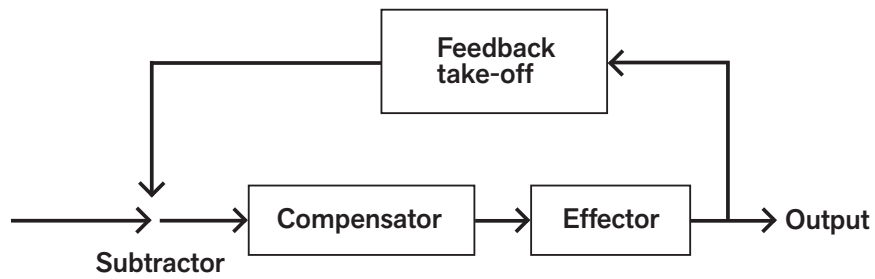
Josef Müller-Brockman (1970)
Musica Viva poster

Typographic composition organised through a structured grid, illustrating systematic relationships between elements.

04

Systems, Rules and Cybernetics

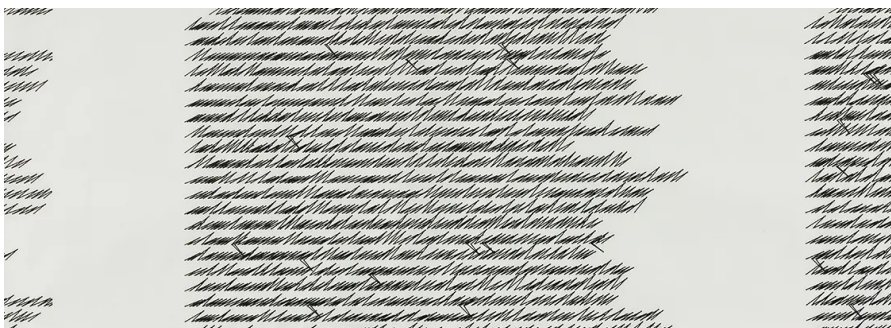
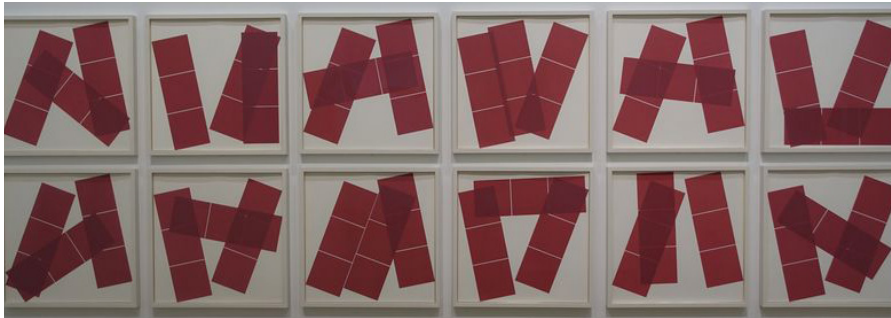
Feedback Loop



FEEDBACK AND CONTROL

The shift from static systems to adaptive processes is linked to the emergence of cybernetics. Norbert Wiener introduced systems governed by feedback, control and communication, where behaviour is shaped through relationships between input and output (Wiener, 2019, p. 152-153). In this model, systems are not fixed but dynamic, capable of adapting through interaction. Variation is inherent to system behaviour rather than externally imposed.

Fig. 17-18
 Diagrams adapted from
 Norbert Wiener (1948)
Cybernetics
 Feedback system in which
 behaviour is shaped through
 relationships between input,
 output, and control.



EARLY GENERATIVE ART

Early generative artists such as Vera Molnár extended these ideas by using rule-based processes and controlled randomness to produce visual variation (Guillermet, 2020, pp. 2-3). Molnár's work demonstrates how structured systems can generate multiple outcomes through iterative logic. In this context, structure and variability operate together as interdependent aspects of system behaviour.

Together, these developments establish a model in which design operates through systems of rules, feedback, and variation, forming the foundation for contemporary approaches. Within this framework, the role of the designer shifts from producing fixed outcomes to defining conditions through which form emerges as process.

Fig. 21
Vera Molnár (2023)
La Vie en M
Typographic forms generated through rule-based variation.

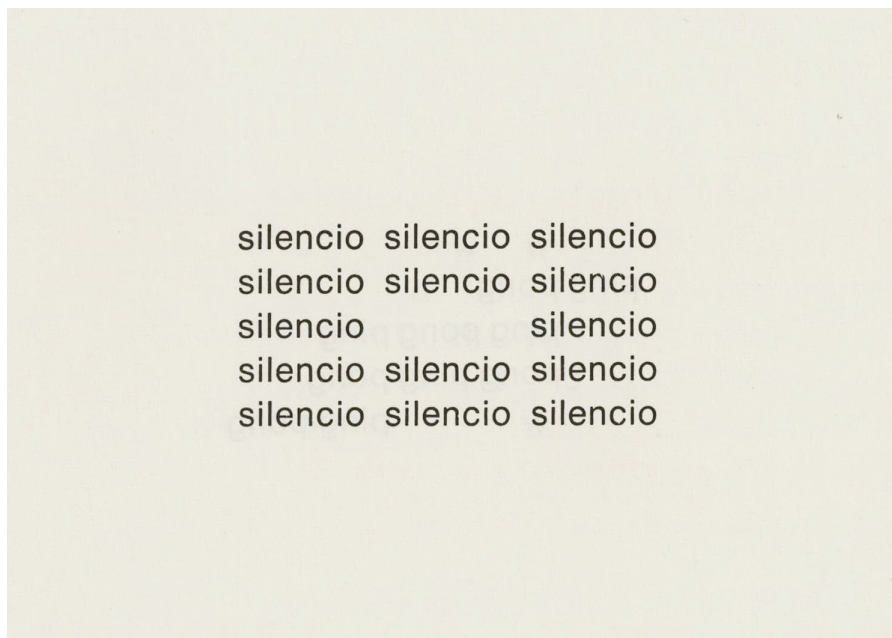
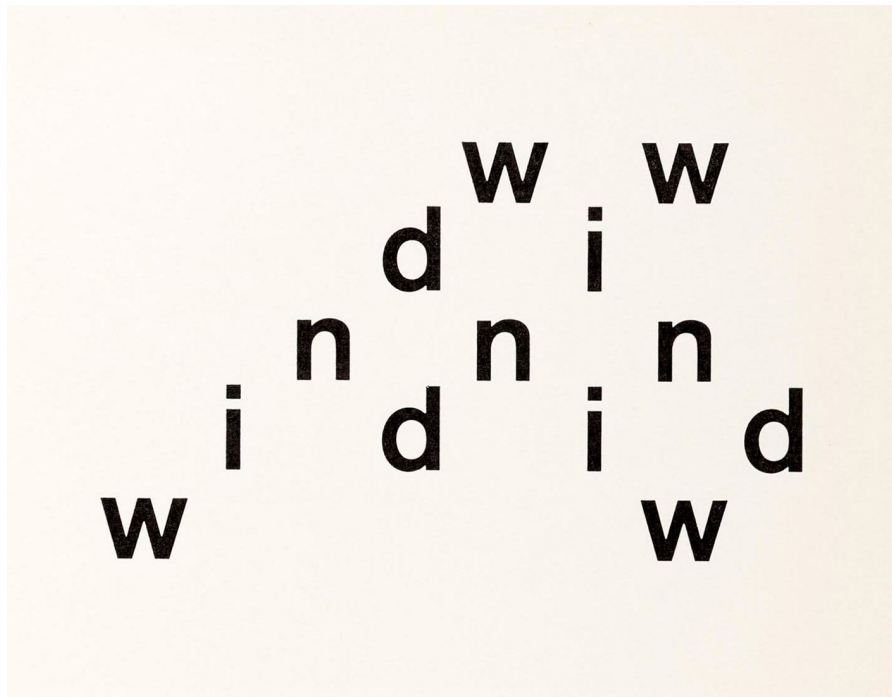
Fig. 22
Vera Molnár (1994-2017)
Les Métamorphoses d'Albrecht
Iterative transformation of letterforms demonstrating variation systematic manipulation.

Fig. 23
Vera Molnár (1994-1995)
Triades Roses (n° 1 à 12)
Modular compositions produced through recombination of elements.

Fig. 24
Vera Molnár (1988)
Lettres de ma Mère
Line-based drawing generated through controlled randomness within a structured system.

05

Experimental Typography



LANGUAGE AS SPATIAL SYSTEM

Early forms of experimental typography can be traced in movements such as concrete poetry, where language was treated as a visual and spatial system. As Johanna Drucker notes, post-war typographic practices sought to disrupt conventional linguistic structures by fragmenting and reorganising the sign across the page (Drucker, 1994, p. 226). Text is no longer presented linearly, but arranged as a field of visual relationships in which meaning emerges through structure.

As Bassnett suggests, these works operate through a balance between regularity and chance, where established patterns are interrupted to generate new meanings (Corbett et al., 2019, p. 15). Visual form becomes as significant as linguistic content, positioning text as both language and image.

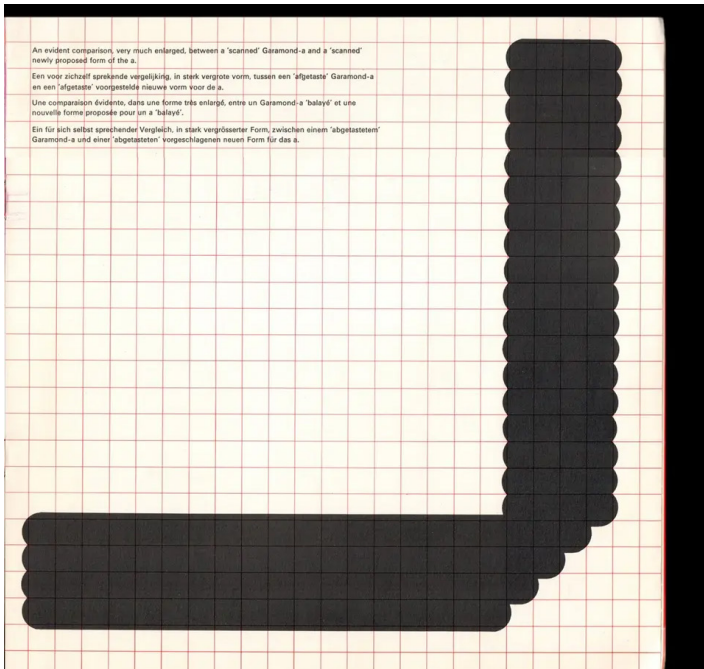
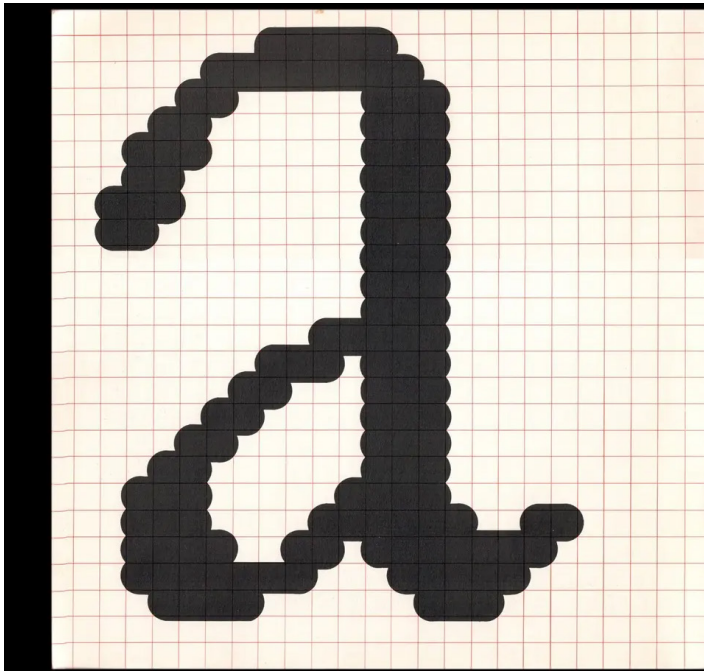
These systems are often shaped by material constraints. As Hilder explains, the typewriter produces an inherent grid through fixed spacing and alignment, structuring how language is arranged (Hilder, 2016, pp. 177–178). Variation arises through repetition and positioning rather than linear syntax.

Moreover, concrete poetry challenges conventional notions of authorship by treating language as an autonomous structure. As Hilder notes, “for the concrete poets as well as Barthes,” emphasis shifts away from the author toward the organisational system of the text itself (Hilder, 2016, pp. 184–185).

This shift in the role of language parallels developments in conceptual art, where Sol LeWitt described the idea as “a machine that makes the art”, shifting emphasis from individual expression to system-based production (Hilder, 2016, pp. 166–167).

Fig. 25
Eugen Gomringer (ca. 1968)
Wind in Visuelle Poesie
Text arranged as a spatial system, where meaning emerges through the distribution and positioning of words across the page.

Fig. 26
Eugen Gomringer (1954)
Silencio
Repetition of a single word forming a structured field, generating meaning through pattern, absence, and spatial organisation.



GRID SYSTEMS AND LEGIBILITY

Wim Crouwel extended this logic through typographic systems grounded in modernist principles. His *New Alphabet* reduces letterforms to a strict grid structure, prioritising systematic consistency over legibility (Kortteinen, 2015, pp. 10-11). Central to his practice is the use of modular grids, through which elements are both controlled and varied. As Kortteinen notes, such systems enable flexibility within constraint, producing variations that remain structurally coherent (Kortteinen, 2015, p. 9). However, this reveals a key tension, structure both enables and limits communication.

Fig. 27-28
Wim Crouwel (1967)
New Alphabet
Grid-based typographic system in which modular construction produces variation within constraint.



SYSTEM-BASED TYPOGRAPHIC PRACTICE

These ideas are further developed in the work of Hamish Muir and Paul McNeil. As Muir and McNeil note, their work explores “systematic and algorithmic methods in type design”, structuring outcomes through defined parameters and variation (MuirMcNeil, 2026). Their *Two Type System* operates as a modular framework of over seven million geometric type forms, developed through a combination of design decisions, chance occurrences, and formal rules (Muir and McNeil, 2024, p. 7). The system produces a continuously evolving body of work that is simultaneously ordered and unpredictable, demonstrating how controlled constraints can generate extensive variability. Rather than composing individual forms, the designer defines conditions through which variation emerges.

This marks a shift in authorship from organising systems to constructing them. Control is maintained, but outcomes are not fixed, enabling generative approaches in which form emerges through process.



Fig. 32-33
McNeil and Muir (2024)
Two Type System
Series of typographic variations illustrating how controlled constraints generate multiple possible outcomes.

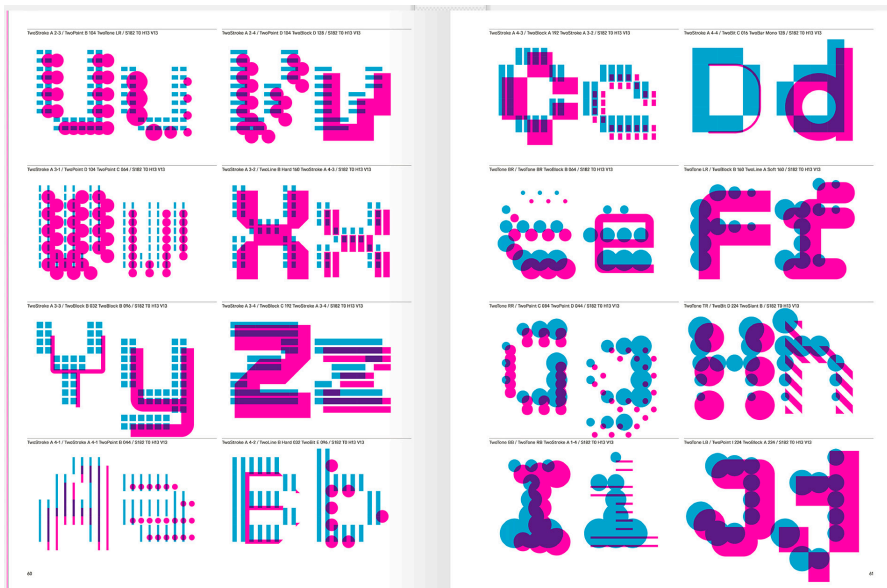


Fig. 34-35 (left)
McNeil and Muir (2024)
Two Type System
Complex compositions emerging from the system, demonstrating how rule-based systems generate multiple variations through controlled parameters.

Fig. 36 (top)
McNeil and Muir (2025)
Cheap Racket
Typographic system applied in practice (LP cover), demonstrating how rule-based variation generates complex and adaptable visual outputs.

06

Generative Typography

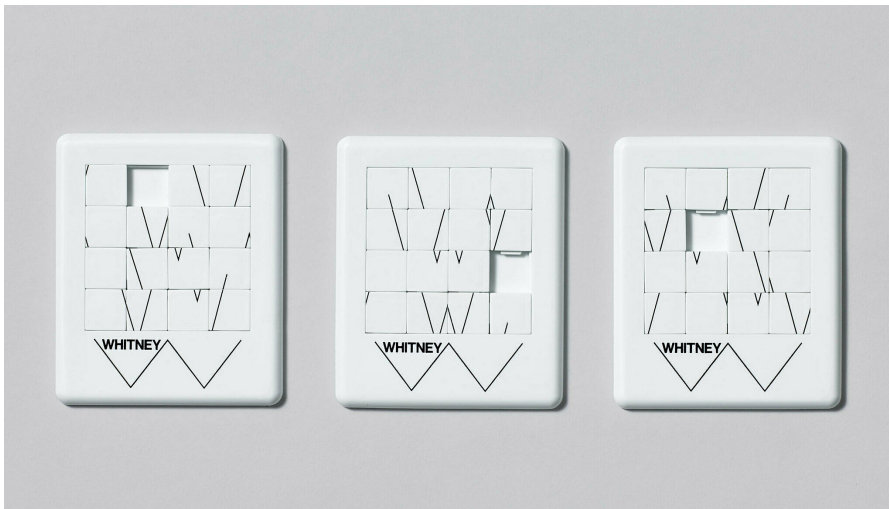
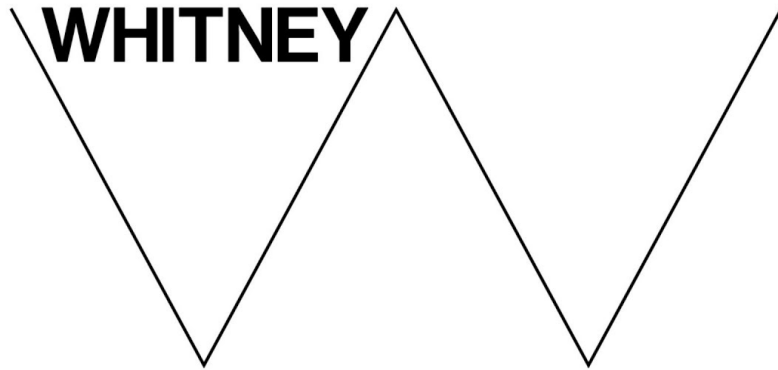


Fig. 37
Experimental Jetset (2013)
Whitney Museum Identity logo
Typographic system based on a flexible structure, where the “responsive ‘W’ generates variation and reflects the institution’s changing nature.

Fig. 38
Experimental Jetset (2013)
Whitney Museum Identity
System applied across media, where enabling variation through recombination while maintaining a unified identity.

CONCEPTUAL SYSTEMS

Generative approaches in contemporary design do not emerge solely from computational technologies but extend earlier forms of system based thinking into new contexts. The work of Experimental Jetset demonstrates how generative logic can operate through conceptual frameworks rather than algorithmic code. Their practice is defined by self-imposed rules, typographic reduction, and the consistent application of structures across projects, allowing variation to emerge through repetition and controlled deviation.

In this context, typography functions as a system governed by decisions determined in advance. Meaning arises through the organisation and recombination of elements rather than stylistic intervention. As Experimental Jetset suggest, significance lies in the “non identity that exists between a standard and its variation”, where shared structures enable diverse outcomes rather than identical forms (Metahaven, 2011, p. 54). This logic extends into applied design, as seen in the Whitney Museum identity, which operates as a flexible system that adapts to content and space, allowing form to emerge through interaction rather than remain fixed (Evamy, 2013, pp. 2–3).

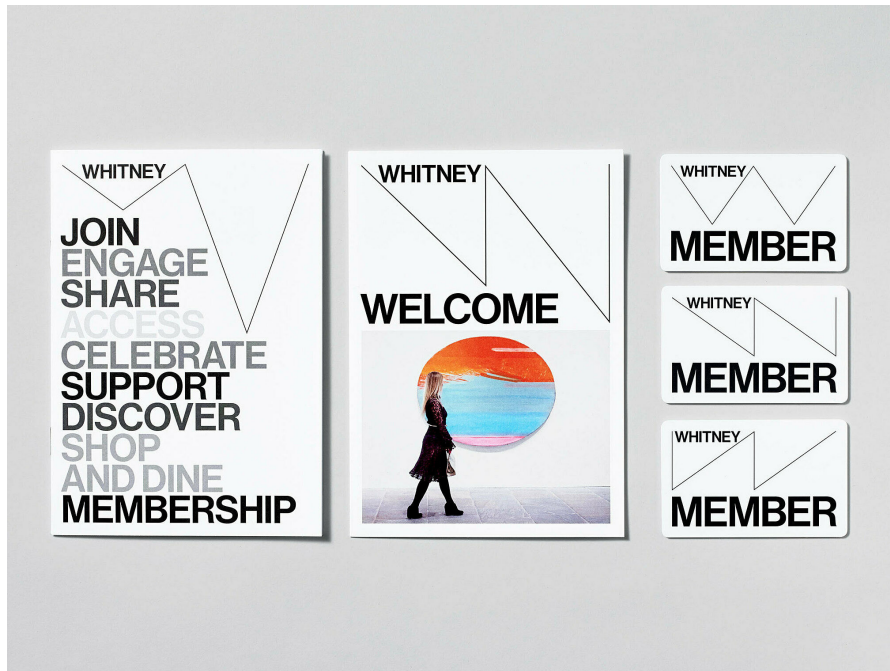
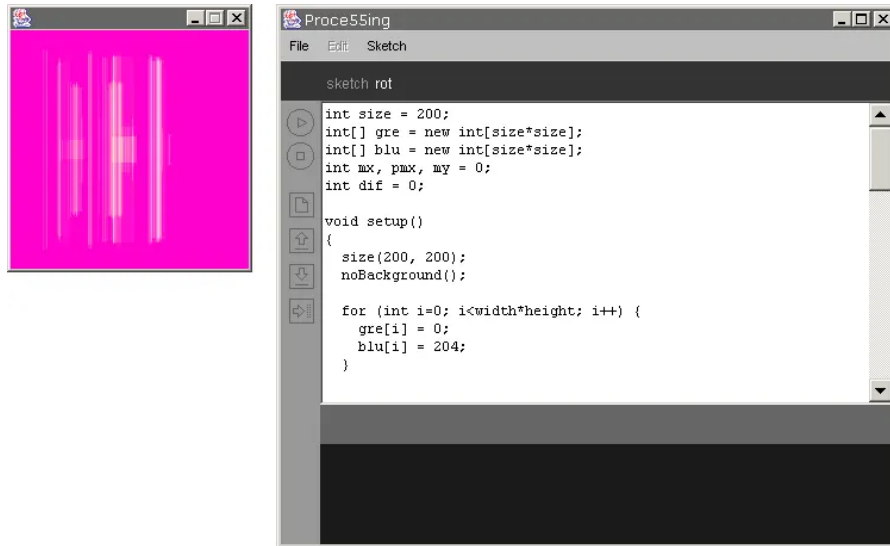


Fig. 39-42
 Experimental Jetset (2013) *Whitney Museum Identity*
 System applied across media, where repeated structure
 produces diverse outputs while maintaining a unified identity.



COMPUTATIONAL SYSTEMS

Computational practices extend this approach further by encoding rules into executable systems. Processing, developed by Casey Reas and Ben Fry, was designed to make programming for interactive graphics accessible, enabling designers to use code as a creative medium (Stinson, 2021, no pagination). Inspired by Maeda's *Design by Numbers*, it allows designers to sketch and test ideas through code, integrating programming into the design process (Reas and Fry, 2015, Preface/xi). Form emerges through iterative experimentation with rules, parameters, and behaviours.

As Frieder Nake argues, generative systems operate by delegating part of the creative process to a machine, allowing defined rules to produce multiple and variable outputs (Hubner, P. 2025, iii). Within this framework, the designer acts as an orchestrator of systems, defining parameters through which variation is generated (Gross et al., 2018, pp. 3-4).

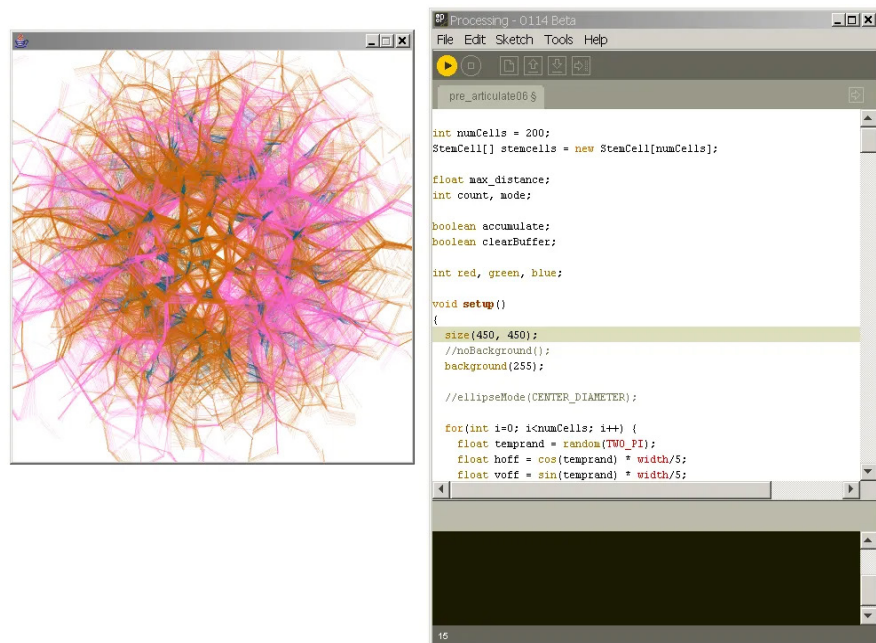
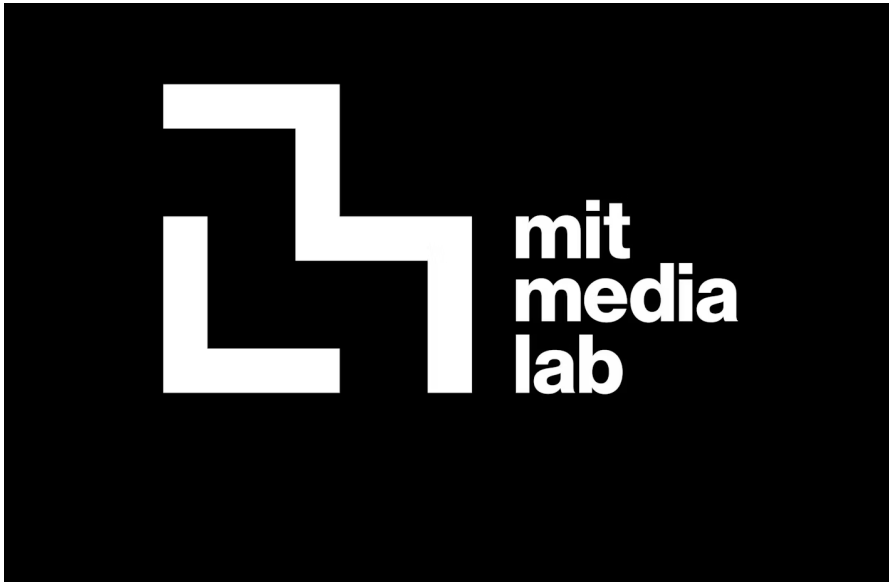


Fig. 43
Reas and Fry (2001)
Proce55ing ALPHA IDE running on Windows.

Early Processing environment demonstrating how coded rules generate visual output through system execution; The earliest version of www.proce55ing.net

Fig. 44
Reas and Fry (2003)
Processing Processing BETA IDE running on Windows.

Rule-based system in which parameters and iterative processes generate variation and increasingly complex visual outputs.



GENERATIVE IDENTITY SYSTEMS

These principles are evident in contemporary identity systems. The MIT Media Lab identity operates as a modular, grid-based system in which a single visual language generates multiple typographic and visual variations across contexts, maintaining coherence while enabling diversity.

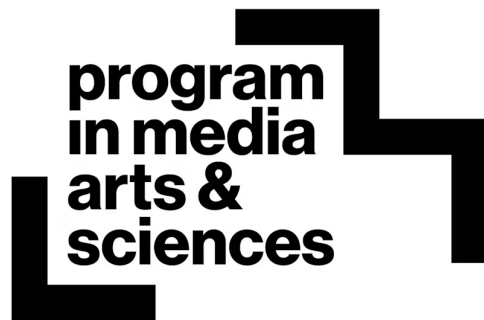


Fig. 45-46 (left)

Pentagram (2011)

MIT Media Lab identity

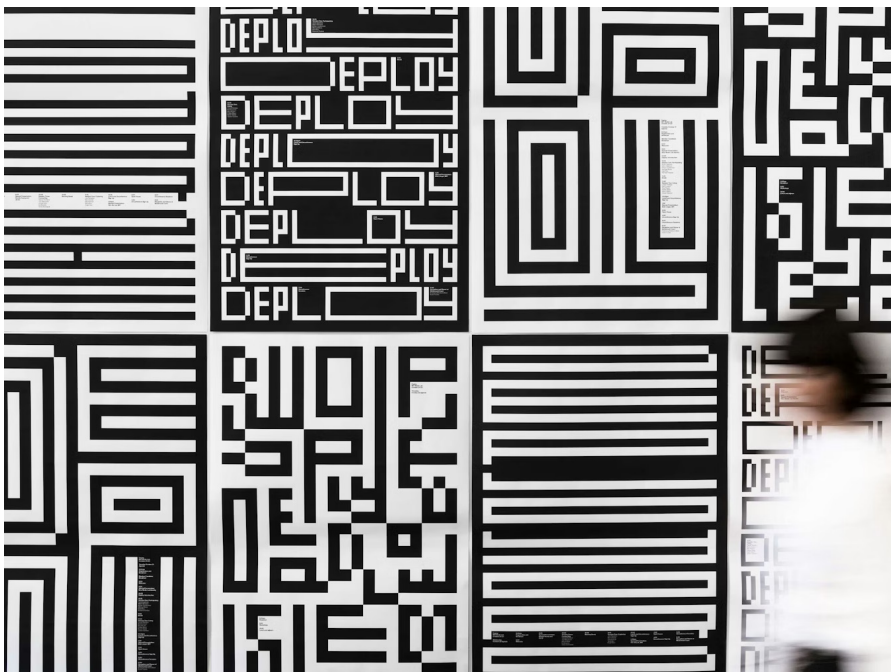
Identity system based on a shared underlying grid, extended across multiple research groups to generate distinct yet coherent visual outcomes.

Fig. 47-50 (next page)

Pentagram (2011)

MIT Media Lab identity

System applied across media, demonstrating how a shared structure enables variation while maintaining a unified identity.





The *evian+* campaign demonstrates generative typography as a rule-based system in which a custom typeface is produced through particle-based behaviours and interactions, allowing typographic variations to be continuously generated and adapted.

As Hubner suggests, such systems do not impose identity as a static form but allow it to emerge through interaction, producing outcomes that evolve and adapt across different contexts (Hubner, 2025, p. 118).

Together, these practices illustrate a broader shift toward adaptable design systems within graphic communication. Generative typography prioritises coherence through structure, variation through execution, and authorship through the design of rules, positioning generative systems not as a departure from typographic tradition, but as its contemporary continuation.

Fig. 51-54
 Patrik Hübner and
 Wieden+Kennedy Amsterdam
 (2021) *Evian+*
 Rule-based typographic
 system generating letterforms
 through particle interaction
 and parameter-driven
 variation.

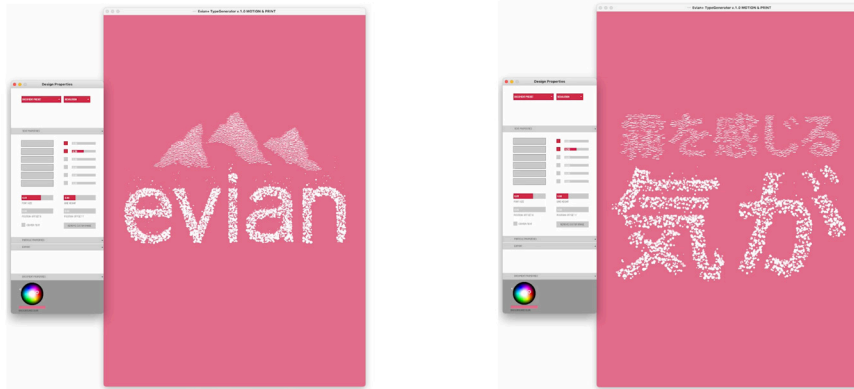


Fig. 55-57 (top)
Patrik Hübner and Wieden+Kennedy
Amsterdam (2021) *Evian+*

Custom generative type operating as a design toolkit, where parameters and user inputs produce adaptable typographic forms.

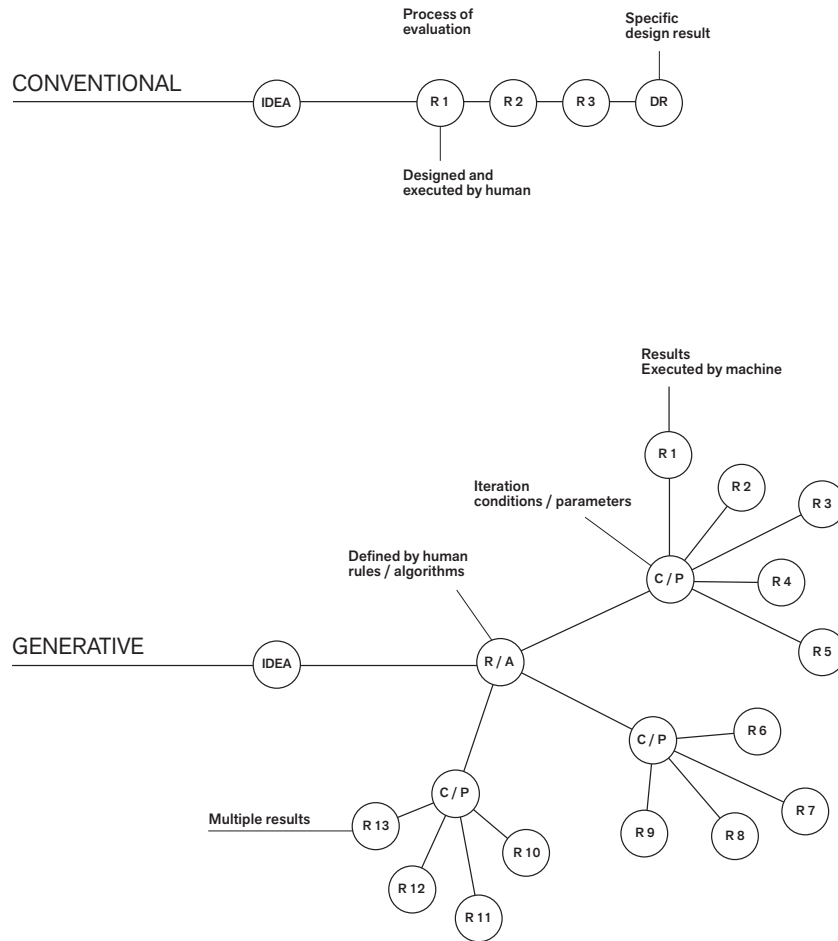
Fig. 58-60 (right)
Patrik Hübner and Wieden+Kennedy
Amsterdam (2021) *Evian+*

Typographic system applied in a global campaign, enabling variation and adaptation across contexts and languages.

07

Conclusion

Design Systems



SYSTEM, PROCESS AND VARIATION

Together, these practices demonstrate a shift toward adaptable design systems. Generative typography prioritises structure, process, and variation, positioning design as the organisation of systems rather than the creation of static forms. Rather than representing a break from tradition, generative design extends the systemic logic that has shaped typography throughout its history.

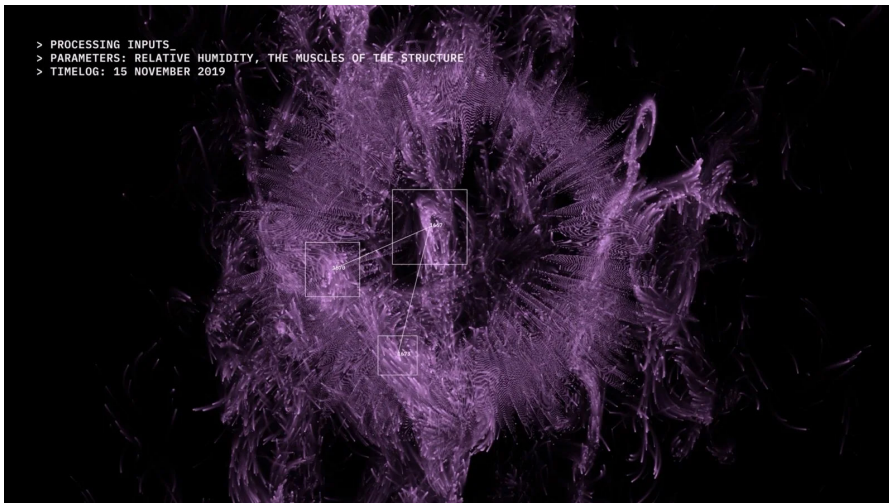
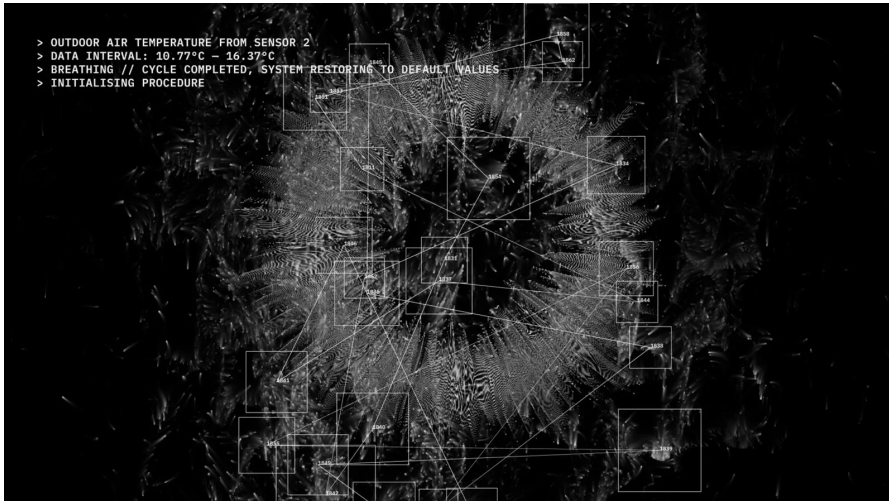
This continuity reveals that generative thinking is deeply embedded within typographic practice. What distinguishes contemporary approaches is the formalisation of systems into processes capable of producing variation through execution. As a result, authorship shifts from producing individual forms to designing conditions from which form emerges. Typography is thus repositioned as an evolving field where structure, interaction, and process generate meaning across systems.

Fig. 61
 Diagram adapted from
 Patrik Hübner (2025)
The Generative Mind
 Model illustrating the shift
 from linear design processes
 to generative systems, where
 rules defined by the designer
 are executed by systems to
 produce multiple outcomes.

08

Appendix

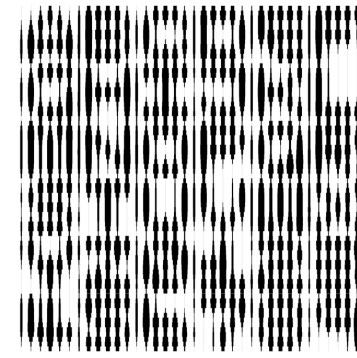
Extended Case Studies



Tiziana Allocci

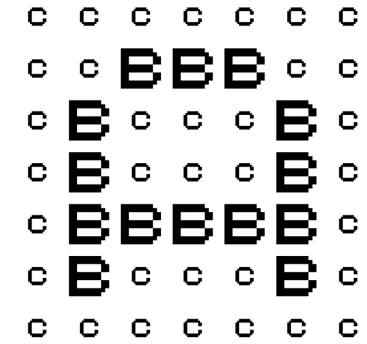
Explores the translation of data into experiential forms. Informs the use of environmental and sonic data as generative inputs for typographic form.

Tiziana Allocci (2026)
Datasonica
 Data translated into dynamic visual and sonic outputs through generative systems.
 Source: tizianaallocci.com



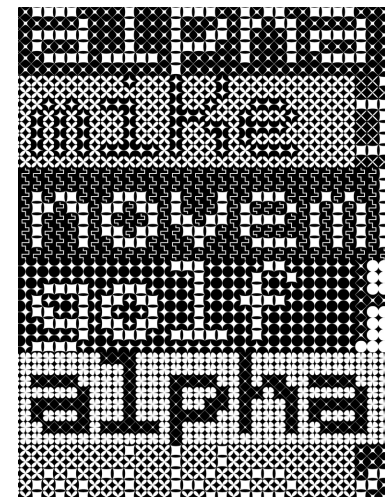
VA K A blurred matrix with absolute format of vertical lines, bold in foreground weight and light in background weight A-Z 0-9
 n. 81
 l. 81
 l. 0
 px. 900
 line 100
 wpt 500
 h. 100

V Vertical 616



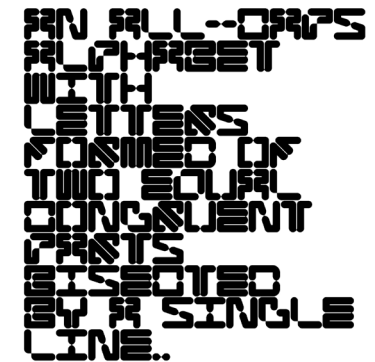
LA ABC
 1 385
 1 385
 1 0

L Letters-within-Letters 337



Nigel Cottier

Informs the construction of modular letterforms through a rule-based system, enabling controlled variation within a grid.



B.A *
 1 312
 1 312

B Bisect 069

Nigel Cottier (2025)
Alphabetical Playground
 Modular typographic system constructed through repeated geometric units and rule-based variation.
 Source: alphabeticalplayground.com

09

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Process Data Place explores a generative approach to typography shaped by image and sound. Using site-specific recordings from Surrey, the project transforms letterforms into responsive systems, where environmental data drives form, variation, and behaviour.

Through a rule-based framework, typography shifts from fixed glyphs to adaptive structures, proposing a model in which design emerges through the definition of conditions from which form is generated.

Processes Data Place Monika SOWA