

SOME VIRTUES OF DESIGN

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By Gui Bonsiepe
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By James Craig
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(The Six Memos for the Next Millennium)

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PREFACE

AN UNFASHIONABLE TERM

Dealing with **virtues** today provokes associations with outdated issues, covered with mold, dry greyness - what in German we call *moralingesättigt* (saturated with moral appeals). The supposed outdatedness, the supposed loss of contact with the real stuff of the present world fulfils occasionally a role as a candidate of benevolent - or not that benevolent - dismissal.

It seems to have become a pet theme in publications, particularly in the US, that deal with the future, especially information technology and management. Hardly one can open an issue or attend a meeting in which there is not an open or oblique reference to Europe as being off-the-track. The issue, of course, is not a supposed lack of dynamics and of competence in innovation, but a barely camouflaged appetite for an imperial design that considers everything deviant from the one-dimensional dream as an offense.

Confronted with an aggressive missionaryism of competition ad ultranza that pretends to have found in itself the measure of the world and for the world, one might ask, with what kind of social phantasy we deal that puts competition and fighting at the center of society? What I am questioning is not only the ambition of any universal scheme, whoever is purporting it, but the divergence between advanced information technology and atrophy of sociocultural imagination.

I chose to focus on the issue of

virtues of design when I was reading - once again - the *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* by Italo Calvino. As is known, he finished only five out of a plan of six memos before he died. In this remarkable small volume he speaks about the **values he would like to see maintained**

*and brought into the next millennium as far as literature is concerned. These shared values he calls virtues. Taking his approach as starting point I want to talk about the **shared values of design for the next millennium.***

ONE LIGHTNESS

Without wanting to push the issue, several of these values for literature can be - with due corrections - transferred to the domain of design. A literal transfer certainly would be naive and inappropriate. But parallels and affinities seem to exist. For instance, when Calvino defines

Lightness as the attempt to remove weight from the structure of stories and from language,

are there not analogies in the field of design? Lightness in design might be a virtue to be maintained, especially when we reflect on material and energy flows and their impact on the environment and when we confront the mundane issue of congested lines cloaked with digital trash in the Net.

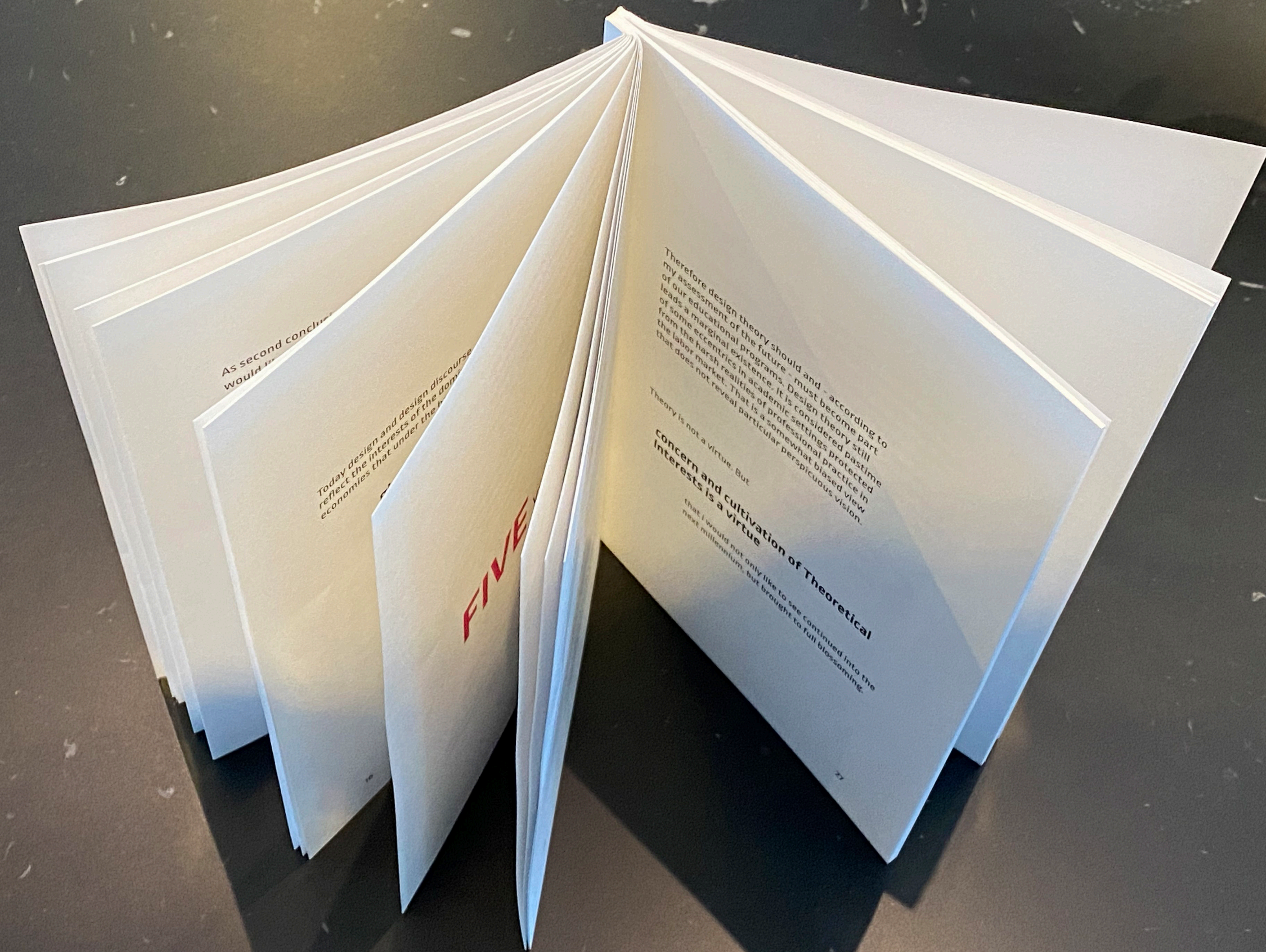
When later on he refers to the

“sudden agile leap of the poet-philosopher who raises himself above the weight of the world, showing ... that what many consider to be the vitality of the times - noisy, aggressive, revving and roaring - belongs to the realm of death, like a cemetery for rusty old cars”,

lightness acquires a critical dimension and dissipates wrong associations of easy going aloofness and superficiality. Definitely I would include under the term Lightness the notions of

humor, wit and elegance

for which we have particularly in Italian design so well known examples (e.g. Castiglioni's tractor seat mounted on a flat elastic steel profile); or to take an example from the host country, the graphic design of the passport for the citizens of this country. These examples represent the virtue of Lightness in design.



SEVEN BASICS OF TYPOGRAPHY

The art of designing with type

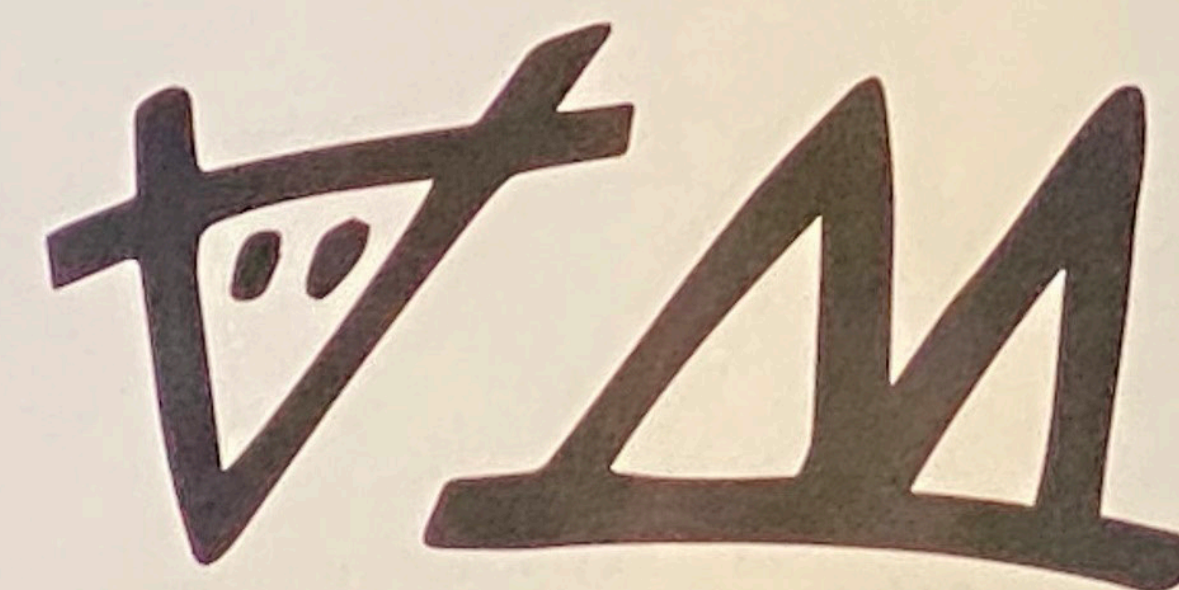
began in the West around 1455 when Johannes Gutenberg perfected the craft of printing from individual pieces of type. From this early technology we draw a great deal of our current terminology. This section introduces the origins of the alphabet, and defines the terms and measurements that will form the basis of your typographic vocabulary. Once you are familiar with this information, you will be able to communicate your ideas clearly and work efficiently with type.

Origins of the Alphabet

Before proceeding with the more practical aspects of typography, let's first consider the twenty-six letters we call our alphabet. We tend to forget that the alphabet is composed of symbols, each representing sounds made in speech. The symbols we use today are derived from those used thousands of years ago. However, the ancient forms did not represent sounds but were pictures of things or symbols for ideas.

Pictographs

At some point in time, people began to communicate visually. They made simple drawings of the things that existed in their world—people, animals, tools, and weapons, for example. These basic images, called *pictographs*, were symbols representing objects, such as an ox or a house (1).



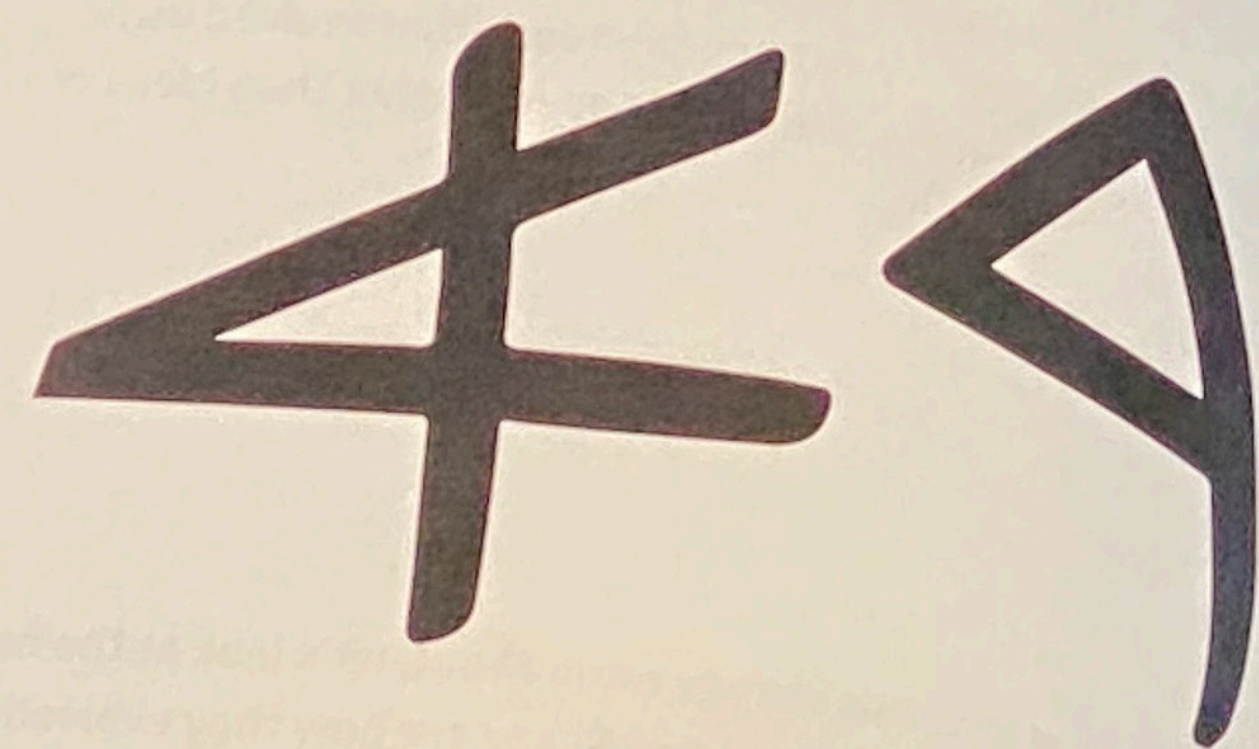
1 | Pictographs

Ideographs

As the need to communicate more abstract thoughts developed, the symbols began to take on multiple meanings: ox, for example, could also mean food. The new symbols would represent not objects, but ideas and are called *ideographs* (2).



2 | Ideographs



3 | Phoenician aleph & beth

They did the same for the sound "B," which was found in their word *beth*, meaning house. Again, they took the existing symbol for the house and applied it to the sound. This process was continued until the Phoenicians had assigned a symbol for each sound. In all cases the symbols were of common objects or parts of the body, such as water, door, fish, hand, eye, or mouth.

The Phoenician alphabet required far fewer symbols than the picto-ideographic system. Furthermore, the simplified letterforms could be written more rapidly, were easier to learn, and provided an ideal means of communication. By developing a standardized phonetic alphabet, the Phoenicians made a major contribution to Western civilization.

Aa Bb

8 | Humanistic lettering

Punctuation

In early Greek and Roman writing, there was no punctuation as we know it. Words were either run together or separated with a dot or slash. This can be seen in the handwritten specimens of the Rustica, Half-Uncials, and Carolingian minuscules below. It was not until the fifteenth century, with the advent of printing, that the rules of grammar and punctuation began to become formalized.

The Alphabet

As illustrated, our alphabet is made up of distinct symbols that represent thousands of years of evolution. As a designer, you can simplify or embellish the letterforms, but if you alter their basic shapes, you will reduce their ability to communicate effectively. Even within this seemingly fixed structure, you will find these symbols provide a lifetime of creative possibilities.

𐤀𐤁𐤂𐤃𐤄𐤅𐤆𐤇𐤈𐤉𐤊𐤋𐤌𐤍𐤎𐤏𐤐𐤑𐤒𐤓𐤔𐤕𐤖𐤗𐤘𐤙𐤚

Phoenician alphabet (circa 1000 B.C.E.) reads from right. Small letters indicate sounds.

ΑΒΓΔΕΖΗΘΙΚΛΜΝΞΟΠΡΣΤΥΦΧΨΩ

Greek alphabet (circa 403 B.C.E.), adapted from Phoenician around 900 B.C.E.

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ

Roman alphabet (circa 100 C.E.), adapted from the Greek alphabet

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Lettersoup.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'EA', located below the text on the left page.