The Inclusive World of Multisensory Typography

What happens when designers embrace the senses beyond sight?

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designers, we should consider all of the senses when we design—not only so we can more fully connect to our audience, but also so we can be more inclusive.

Every person brings their individual history with them when experiencing a design. The scent of chalk or the sound of it rasping against a chalkboard can evoke memories of grade school. Drinking hot chocolate by a fire can whisk you back to holidays long ago. As graphic designers, we often neglect many of the senses beyond sight, but typography and design are multisensory experiences that can tap into everything from touch to sound.

When we design for all five senses, we create a richer, more meaningful, and more personal experience for all people, while simultaneously accommodating those who may have to rely more heavily on one sense. Historically, designers haven't widely taken advantage of the multisensory opportunities available to them, but a growing number of designers and artists are utilizing mediums beyond the purely visual to welcome a wider array of audiences.

In Meg Miller's article “Is It Art, or Is It Type? What We Learn When Language is Built, Not Written,” she writes about how type designers often “think of language as something physical, as matter. They also disassemble and reassemble it, constructing an alphabet from its constituent shapes.” When designers consider traits of typography (How would this feel? How would it smell? What might type taste like?) through personification, physical construction, and other means—they open up new doors for user experiences. Below, we'll explore a few senses that designers have embraced.
02 “Dig Deep” by Cassie Hester. Installed on the exterior wall of the Pollak Building at Virginia Commonwealth University, this 16×4-foot typographic installation is made of treated plywood, white paint, galvanized nails, clear plastic straws, and pink and white outdoor sequins.
The origins of typography are tactile: letterforms were carved into stone and pressed onto paper. However, today most people encounter typography digitally, removing audiences from traditional tactile experiences. Still, there are ways to evoke the sense of touch through typography, even if it’s only conceptual in nature. For example, nearly everyone knows what it is like to be cold or hot, or to burn their hand, or to feel pain. Translated to typography, designers can summon the sensation of heat through singed type or cold through visuals of ice. Artist Sair Göetz tapped into that innate knowledge for a recent piece called “IVECHANGED, which integrates large typographic forms constructed of ice.

Göetz, collections programming manager at the Letterform Archive, is an artist whose work “seeks to leverage the weightlessness of language to complicate, manipulate, and annotate the weighty matters it circumscribes.” They do so through a combination of bodily performance, video, installation, and signage. During the performance for “IVECHANGED,” a group of 20 friends carried large ice letterforms reading IVECHANGED into the Olentangy River, where they floated until melting into the water. While this occurred, the artist read “To Be Honest” by Deb Olin Unferth and changed the pronouns in the poem/essay to neutralize gender.
Through this work, Göetz explores both the physical and metaphorical heaviness of words, along with the ephemeral nature of materials. “Speech has a weightlessness in comparison to writing or physical text,” they said of their work. “One of my goals with ice type was to have something that began as weighty and melted away – just as language does – so that written words could have the ephemerality of spoken words.” “IVECHANGED” is a coming out piece, although Göetz reflects upon how
In a way, all of the senses involve touch. We see because of the way light hits our eyes. We smell and taste when particles enter our noses and rest on our tongues. We hear because of the physical vibrations in our ears. In essence, all that we experience connects to how we touch the world and how it touches us. As Diane Ackerman, poet and author of *A Natural History of the Senses*, puts it, “The mind doesn't really dwell in the brain but travels the whole body on caravans of hormone and enzyme, busily making sense of the compound wonders we catalog as touch, taste, smell, hearing, vision.” As designers and typographers, we must consider all of the senses.

Smell

In *A Natural History of the Senses*, Ackerman writes, “Nothing is more memorable than smell. Still, when we try to describe a smell, words fail us like the fabrications they are. The physiological links between the smell and language centers of the brain are pitifully weak, not so the links between the smell and memory centers. Our sense of smell can be extraordinarily precise, yet it's almost impossible to describe how something smells to someone who hasn't smelled it (e.g. a new book, lilac).” For designers and typographers, smell can be one of the most challenging to harness—particularly because most of our devices integrate sight and sound, but few enable integration of smell or taste.

While designers are rarely afforded the luxury of incorporating smell into their work through specialized printing techniques, they can still trigger emotion by evoking the memory of a scent. Smell is inherently visceral; when people see type that is rotting, for example, they immediately feel revulsed based on prior experiences. Packaging designers often play into this phenomenon with designs and typography based around the scent of a product, but exhibition design is where smell can be fully embraced.
Graphic designer Cassie Hester created a series of works called “Build It Up to Burn It Down,” for which she cast a set of bronze brands in Univers Condensed and then burned them through leaves and linen thread into paper. During the exhibition of her work, Hester said visitors could smell the typography before they saw it. The scent hung in the air a bit like remnants of a campfire. On designing with smell, Hester reflected that “smell can be tricky, because I avoid the gross and synthetic. I find the most satisfying fragrances are those that emerge naturally as a part of the process of creating the work.”
04 Cassie Hester’s “Build It Up to Burn It Down.”
When it comes to typography, sight and sound are closely linked. As the writer Robert Bringhurst aptly described it: "Writing is the solid form of language." Designers often convey the concept of sound through scale and weight. For example, 72 point heavy Helvetica is much louder than an 8 point Mrs. Eaves. A layout with lots of white space will feel much more calming and quiet than a spread with tiny margins packed-to-the-brim with content.

In the book “French Fries,” designer Warren Lehrer created a layout that choreographs the sounds, dialogue, and interactions between characters and their relationship to place (in this case an American fast food joint). He cast each character of the book in an individualized typeface, style, and color. When a political argument breaks out (set at the height of the Cold War), we can practically hear the overlapping voices and strongly held beliefs against the din of a video game room at the back of the fictionalized Dream Queen restaurant. The typographic design reflects the sonic or what Lehrer calls the “psycho-acoustic” environment as it engages readers to discern foreground from background noises and navigate between legibility and chaos.
and forms make for an excellent working medium. Food invites a sense of play and taps into deep associations. For example, if someone carves “summer” into a piece of watermelon, I remember specific memories and the taste of a sweet, juicy watermelon. Another wonderful property of food is that the form can change over time when cooked: sugar caramelizes, dough turns into pretzels, popcorn kernels can become popped corn. This evolution is a tool that can be used to creative ends, but it's also the reason edible typography is temporary, by nature.
Lauren Hom, the lettering artist behind *Hom Sweet Hom*, often works with food as a lettering medium. She says that cooking is “baked into her DNA.” Hom recalled how growing up her mom would make cheese and cracker snacks for her and her brother, and she would cut the cheese slices into the letters of their names. Today, Hom designs lettering using food like coconut milk, cookies, and flour.
compared to “sand art—and the temporary nature of it all.” Photography is the primary way audiences engage with her food lettering pieces, which means she is often the only person who gets the full experience of smelling, touching, and tasting the work.

Next year, Hom is attending culinary school to bridge the gap between her lettering practice and her love of cooking by potentially opening her own establishment. She sees the incorporation of food into her art as an expansion (not a pivot), and says that “art will always be a central part of my work.”
Fully immersing audiences in sensory design is a challenge, but designers are exploring how to do so through mediums like virtual and augmented reality. In one compelling example, Derek Ham, Department Head of Art + Design at North Carolina State, created “I Am A Man,” an interactive Oculus Rift VR experience about the African-American Civil Rights Movement. During the experience, viewers go through the 1968 Memphis Sanitation Worker's Strike and witness events leading to the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. By merging visuals, audio, and interactive motion, Ham creates an emotional connection with his viewers.

Ham believes that audio is one of the most underrated elements in design. “The profession of graphic design rarely focuses on audio components, but when I really want immersion and connection-to-space, both the large and small strokes of audio design paint the scene,” he says. Ham recalls how as an undergraduate architecture student he had a professor who was all about the senses. One time his class went on a site visit and his instructor asked the students to close their eyes and listen. The professor asked, “What is the quality of the site? What is the tactility of the ground?” Ham said that moment has always stuck with him, and that an underlying texture of sound accompanies everything that you see. That sentiment is prevalent in “I Am A Man,” which Ham says he hopes will make this piece of history feel more real to those who didn't experience it firsthand. “If we use immersive environments to talk about history, it will be real. I think of this in relation to racism as well. What we do with history is distance ourselves. But immersive technology can re-humanize events. Let’s talk about what needs to be done. What still needs repair?”

As a visual communication designer, I often find myself relying too heavily on the purely visual. Design is not meant to just be seen. It is also meant to be heard, smelled, tasted, and touched. Designers feel type—
Does Hershey’s taste like chocolate? Can a brand have a flavor? Would the chocolate taste differently without the text? Blind taste tests say it would, as studies have repeatedly shown people perceiving different flavors depending on what brand they think they are tasting.
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