

## THE PROBLEM WITH ODED EZER

A conversation with the artist Print once called a “mad typographic scientist”—a designer who manages to perplex, awe and outrage while simultaneously changing the way we look at type.

by Zachary Petit

Here he is eating type with chopsticks. Here he is producing 3D type sculptures that have grown legs and are running around like ants. Here he is illustrating letterforms to resemble a glowing half-type, half-spermatozoa hybrid.

... And yet here he is, creating a Hebrew font at his desk for commercial use, speaking in a low, gentle tone, a warm smile on his face.

Oded Ezer seems to exist in a bipolar typographic wonderland. There’s a jarring, enigmatic and seemingly irreconcilable dichotomy to his output, the experimental and the practical, the work and the play—a dichotomy that many (especially his critics) might not even be aware of, given the pop prominence of his experimental work over his “traditional” work.

Ezer began not as a designer but, aptly, as a musician and poet. After finding typography and studying design at the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design, he settled down in his native Israel in 2000 and opened his eponymous studio, Oded Ezer Typography, and later, the HebrewTypography foundry, where he sells traditional type work to mainstream companies. Commercially, he has designed for Sterling Brands, FontShop International and numerous other businesses around the world.

Along the way, he has produced his artistic “typographic design fiction projects,” from “Biotypography” to “Typoplastic Surgeries” to his “Memory Palace” videos, which have amassed him a global audience and prestigious accolades for both their beauty and the artistic questions they raise about



typography—what it is, where it has been, what it has become, what it can become.

Given the success of both his commercial work and his experimental work, we’re left to wonder: Which truly defines Ezer?

As viewers, we tend to want to put things into a box. And that’s the problem with Oded Ezer, and typography at large: You can’t.

In the dichotomy of commercial versus experimental, perhaps the reason we can’t wrap our minds around Ezer is that he’s one of those rare types who’s brilliant at both.

**What’s your work balance these days? How much “traditional” type do you create for clients versus working on your experimental projects?** I don’t know if I can measure it because it changes from time to time, but I can say that a large amount of time goes to, as you put it, traditional type design. A lot of it is Hebrew, of course. I think we can say a quarter of my creative time goes to that. And then there

is “regular design”—right now, I’m designing a logo for a band in New York City, and stuff like that. And then there’s the teaching, which is another quarter; and then there’s the experimental stuff, which is like the fourth quarter. But actually, it occupies my sleep, so you can say it’s much more than a quarter. [Laughs.]

**Do you have a favorite outlet from among all of those pursuits?** I must say that I see it as a whole. I don’t get up in the morning and say, “Oh, today I have to teach.” I’m happy, and I feel lucky to do all these activities. I learn a lot from every aspect of the work. I think I take things from the experimental field into my commercial one, and I take things from the commercial field into my teaching, and I learn some things from my students and put them back into my ... it’s like a yin and yang, you know.

**Do you feel it’s possible to express yourself creatively when making commercial type?** [Long pause.] I think it’s a very good and deep

question. It’s deep because I think every aspect of what we do—including making a sandwich for our children or something like that—it touches a level of our personality, of our creative personality. It depends if you’re ready to accept the fact that you have more than one level of creativity, and you are at peace with every level of your creativity. And of course commercial design can be creative. It’s awful if it’s not creative—I wouldn’t do it if it weren’t creative. But it asks a different level than experimental stuff.

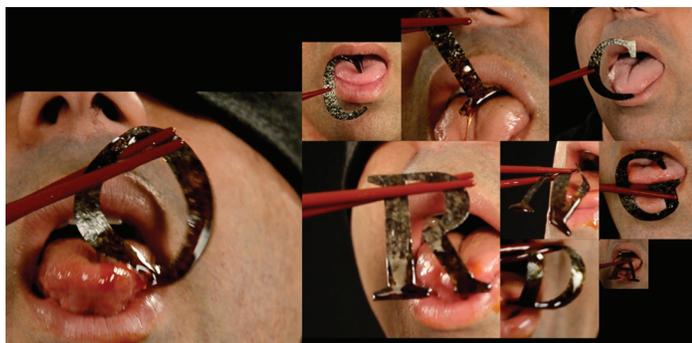
**Do you see type as more of an art, a science or an intersection of both?**

It depends. If you talk about type design, I wouldn’t say “science,” but I would say “precision.” ... Science is something that has to be tested repeatedly. If you are a good scientist, you can do the same test again and again and you’ll get the same result, right? But design, and specifically type design, is not like that. Type design is about a lot of intuition, knowledge [and] the ability to be almost a lunatic about details. It’s definitely a mixture of things. You cannot measure it, but you can feel it in your stomach.

**In your experimental work, what sort of questions do you hope you’re posing about typography?**

It’s changing over the years. When I started working on my first experimental posters—it was back in 2005—I remember that I was fascinated by the structure of letters. I simply wanted to know why an ‘a’ looks like an ‘a,’ so I investigated that. Later on, I was fascinated by

## GRIDS+GUIDES/INTERVIEW



Clockwise from top left: Oded Ezer eats type for the "Sky Arts Ignition: Memory Palace" exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum, which brought Hari Kunzru's fiction to life; Ezer's "Art Vs. Design" from his "Practical Particles" exhibition at the Holon Institute of Technology; "This is an Original Design ..." flag, created for the "About Flags" exhibition in Mainz, Germany.

## ONLINE EXCLUSIVE

For a never-before-seen gallery of Oded Ezer's new works and some of his most stirring projects, visit [www.printmag.com/february-2015](http://www.printmag.com/february-2015).

biology and biotechnology, so I dealt with that in my Biotypography series. Recently, actually, I am fascinated by motion. And time-based typography. I don't really like what I see within this field of moving type. So I'm trying to figure out: a) Why I don't like what I see, and b) What can I do?

**To that end, I've read that boredom is one of your main motivators.** I'm looking at what's happening in a lot of YouTube movies, or even movie titles and things like that, and I'm simply bored, to tell you the truth. I mean, what's the classic movie title? It's a beautiful shot that they took of, let's say, a beach or a road or a beautiful woman, and then you see a tiny title in Helvetica. And everybody is very happy about that. It's boring. It can't be that typography, which is as powerful as photography, will be a companion to the image.

**Do you think that approach is a reflection of what people want to see, or a matter of people not recognizing the true art in typography?** I don't know. From time to time, we do see examples of a brilliant use of type, but it's so rare. I remember Neville Brody said in the '80s that if every designer would pay attention to type and invent their own type set for [a] magazine instead of crying about the bad quality of the pictures, everything would look much better. It's the same problem these days. Everybody is taking care of good photography, especially

in films, but almost nobody pays attention to the fact that if they would work harder on the type, everything would look much greater, much stronger. So I think it's just a matter of willingness to work on this aspect, and that's it.

**From combing blogs over the years, it always seems that there are certain type professionals who get angry about your experimental work.** [Laughs.] That's right.

**How do you respond to critics who say it's all for shock value, and this and that?** I don't say anything to them. [Laughs.] I mean, it's none of my business what other people think. My business is to go further with type. That's all. What I say is, "Sleep on it." It happens a lot that people get really angry about something I did and say, "Oh, this is not typography," and then a few years later, the very same people love what they hated. That's OK with me.

... I respect people who say that typography should remain, I don't know, "classic." But I respect this as long as they do what they do at a very high level. The problem comes from people who don't do anything, or do very little or they're afraid of their own creativity. I can't relate to that.

**How does the culture of Israel and your sense of place affect your work?** I think there are two aspects that influence me. One is positive

and the other is negative. The positive thing is that Israeli people love to improvise. I mean, the whole country was improvised, if I can put it that way. And this is a very deep aspect of the Israeli culture. And I think it's a beautiful aspect.

The negative aspect is that, as we know, this region is so hectic, and every moment there is something going on. It's crazy. So I think that I'm simply escaping to my inner world in order to find some peace. And even though I said it's negative, it's not very negative; it's positive because I find my way of coping with this.

**What's up next for you?** I'm working now on new material for an exhibition here in Israel. It's going quite well. I've recently become fascinated by animated GIFs, so naturally I'm trying to find how I can use them in a combined way with typography. I'm trying to reinvent myself within this theme of animated GIFs but in a different way than we actually know typographic animated GIFs.

**This is an overly broad question, but: On the whole, what does typography mean to you?** Freedom. [Long pause.] We all have a medium that we feel free to express ourselves through. The only question that we have to ask ourselves is, *is the medium that we deal with the right medium to open up new experiences for us, and do we feel as free as birds?*

That's it. For me, it's typography. ■