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**SFMOMA SHOWCASES EXPERIMENTAL TYPE PLAY IN
BELLES LETTRES: THE ART OF TYPOGRAPHY**

Literally “beautiful letters” in French, the term *belles lettres* aptly describes works of graphic design in which typography plays an aesthetic role, elevating print communication to the realm of art. From October 30, 2004, to April 17, 2005, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) will present *Belles Lettres: The Art of Typography*, an exhibition highlighting contemporary type treatment by twenty-six design visionaries from around the world including Saul Bass, Rebeca Mendéz, Jennifer Morla, Makoto Saito, Jennifer Sterling, Thonik, and Martin Venezky. From edgy spreads in alternative magazines to design-forward institutional identities, *Belles Lettres* looks at how designers employ contrast, scale, layering, and formal manipulation to both reiterate and transform content in ways that images alone cannot.

The exhibition, drawn entirely from the SFMOMA collection, is organized jointly by Darrin Alfred and Ruth Keffer, SFMOMA curatorial associates of architecture and design, and presents posters, magazines, brochures, and books as well as everyday items such as stamps and playing cards that exemplify boundary-breaking innovations in typography since the 1960s.

“Typography—how type is used rather than the specific design of typefaces—has always been a primary workhorse for communicating content,” explains Alfred. “In recent years, rapid advancements in technology and the increasing overlap of fine art and commerce have lead to an unparalleled expansion of typographic approaches.” Keffer adds: “This exhibition represents some of the best efforts by vanguard designers to invent new visual languages through typography.”

The exhibition features key projects by **Martin Venezky**, the San Francisco designer and principal of Appetite Engineers, including *Open: The Magazine of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art*. For the initial spread of *Open No. 5*, Venezky lavishly multiplied and layered individual letterforms to create a riot of distorted type that spills across the pages in biomorphic shapes. Playing with the decorative side of typography, his influential style



Jack W. Stauffacher, *Vines Going Mad*, from *The Vico Portfolio*, 2003; print on French Rives BFK moldmade paper; 18 x 13 inches; Collection SFMOMA; © Jack W. Stauffacher

encompasses heavily treated type and complex digital manipulation, taking the simplest information on a page and elaborating it into a tapestry of associations.

Working at extremes in scale, San Francisco-based designer **Jennifer Sterling** constructs arrangements that often project the illusion of more than two dimensions, pushing type to the brink of where it functions equally as object and communication. For instance, her *San Francisco Performances DV8 Physical Theatre* poster, created for an experimental dance project, integrates photography and contemporary sans serif type in lyrical arrangements suggestive of rhythm, balance, and motion, thereby mimicking the entity it represents. In nearly all her work, Sterling engages letterforms as devices to create dialogue between negative and positive space, both within each character and within the context of a specific word or paragraph.

At the forefront of Dutch design, the Amsterdam-based firm **Thonik** takes a unconventional approach to typography that tends to favor a dry simplicity. Headed by founding partners Thomas Widdershoven and Nikki Gonnissen, its style is radical, but generally springs from bold concepts communicated in the most direct and logical manner. For a series of catalogues created for the Dutch Council for Culture, the team devised a title graphic that plays out across the covers of all the publications as one unit, and loses its coherency if a single issue is removed. Widdershoven and Gonnissen's clever style and formal discipline add a level of aesthetic sophistication to a design strategy that emphasizes clarity and functionality.

Los Angeles-based designer **Rebeca Mendéz** incorporates transparency, motion, and layering of type and image in a highly intuitive method that often results in passionate self-expression. Described as visceral and sensuous, her work is remarkable for its lyricism that exists in tandem with a measured, rational order. Her designs hinge on this constant tension between freedom and confinement, such as in the elegant arrangements in *Exposición Mundial en Hanover, Expo 2000, 1997*, a poster created for the World Expo 2000 in Hanover, Germany. Completed in only three days, the design is based on a sense of excitement and unease associated with the advent of a new millennium. Like the intuitive forms that visually underscore the content, the organic, spiraling type reinforces the identity of the concept.

A different approach can be found in the work of **Jack Stauffacher**, a master printer and preeminent book designer who has operated the Greenwood Press in San Francisco since 1947. Stauffacher, who was recently awarded the AIGA Medal for book design and printing, explores a longstanding fascination with modern design theories while working within the classic letterpress tradition. His work transcends typographical conventions through his experiments with wood type, which he uses to create semiabstract graphic compositions. His most recent creation, *The Vico Portfolio*, 2003, is inspired by an eighteenth-century edition of a book by the humanist and philosopher Giambattista Vico. The set of ten prints integrates large letterforms with snippets of text extracted from Vico's *New Science*. Similar to the effect of concrete poetry, these typographical arrangements form a visual design that conveys meaning on multiple levels.

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Museum hours: Open daily (except Wednesdays) 11 a.m. to 5:45 p.m.; open late Thursdays until 8:45 p.m.; summer hours (Memorial Day to Labor Day) open at 10 a.m.; closed Wednesdays and the following public holidays: Fourth of July, Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year's Day. Koret Visitor Education Center: Open daily (except Wednesdays) 11 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.; open late Thursdays until 8:30 p.m.; summer hours: open at 10 a.m.

Admission prices: Adults \$10; seniors \$7; students \$6. SFMOMA members and children twelve and under are admitted free. Thursday evenings, 6 to 8:45 p.m., admission is half price. The first Tuesday of each month admission is free.

SFMOMA is easily accessible by Muni, BART, Golden Gate Transit, SamTrans, and Caltrain. Hourly, daily, and monthly parking is available at the SFMOMA Garage at 147 Minna Street. For parking information, call 415.348.0971.

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