Rebel Without a Caslon:
An Interview with Cyrus Highsmith

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Cyrus Highsmith graduated from the Rhode Island School of Design in 1997 and immediately joined the Font Bureau. Over the past 10 years, he has designed more typefaces than you can shake a composing stick at, including: Amira, Antenna, Benton Sans, Daley's Gothic, Dispatch, Eggwhite, Escrow, EW Sans, Loupot, Novia, Occupant Gothic, Prensa, Quicosco, Relay, and Stainless. Whew! Impressed by Highsmith's promising talent, Roger Black says, "He is the antidote to the revival school." Highsmith also has a strong command of typographic history, which he borrows from and revises on a regular basis. Here, Highsmith talks about his own history, type's legacy and why we need more letterforms, not less.

Heller: You've heard the canard that there are too many types in the world already. Why make more?

Highsmith: It's true, there are a lot of typefaces already. But I believe that by seriously focusing on craftsmanship and the needs of your audience, you can make innovative and imaginative work. The audience for typefaces is very diverse and has strong opinions about what it wants. So if you listen and look closely enough, you will find there is still a need for more.

Heller: Roger Black says you are taking type design away from what he calls the "revivalist" movement (of which he calls himself a member). But since many of your typefaces are rooted in old forms, would you consider yourself a "rebel?"

Highsmith: Yeah! I am a rebel without a Caslon. I am sorry—that was terrible.

Heller: Uh huh, it was. But do continue…

Highsmith: I've drawn some typefaces based very directly on older typefaces. What I really like to do, though, is draw new typefaces. My goal is to be able to draw the things that just I can draw.

The revivalist is interested in trying to get inside the head of the person who drew those older forms and trying to understand what they were thinking. They try to become that person, almost, and draw typeface as if they were them. The result is a body of work that doesn't usually have a single style running through it, or at least a strong single style.

I have a different approach. I have my own ideas about form, space and rhythm that I am exploring in different ways in all my typefaces. When I look at existing typefaces, I look at them from the perspective of these ideas. I look at what I can learn from them. I don't get inside old typefaces like a revivalist does. I use them as fuel, burning them so I can get somewhere new. My body of work is more like a series, you can see more of my hand running through it.

Heller: So, you are more original than the average revivalist?

Highsmith: That's my theory, at least. Maybe a quicker way to say it is: "A revivalist copies other people. I copy myself." I think I got that from Matthew Carter, actually. He is a designer who is definitely more in the revivalist camp, and also one of my heroes.

Heller: In addition to commercial considerations, what factors determine the types you will design?

Highsmith: It'll sound funny, but I often like to make up imaginary users or fictitious publications and then draw typefaces for them. It's sort of like how some architects like to invent characters and then design buildings for them. And who knows, maybe someday some one will see one of my typefaces and somehow recognize themselves as the user and create the content to go with it.

I think the important thing, though, is that there always has to be a user for a typeface. That is what drives the design. Of course, I also like to just sketch whatever comes into my head, and I love to just experiment with letters and draw and have fun. I save these ideas in sketchbooks, and later I might find away to apply them in a typeface for a specific use.

Heller: Let's talk novelty. Many of your faces, like Benton Sans, are truly work-horse, though elegant; others, like Eggwhite, have a more superfluous feel. Would you agree? And if so, why design faces that may have such ephemeral applications?

Highsmith: Yes, I agree Eggwhite is a novelty typeface. Novelty typefaces can be really fun to draw. That kind of thing can be a nice balance to doing more serious and traditional work. I remember drawing Eggwhite especially—it just sort of squirted out. Of course, then it needed some kind of refining before I could publish it. But why not publish it? Digital typefaces don't take up so much space. And I like to see what people will do with them. Even the novelty stuff has an audience in mind.

Heller: Clearly, you're not a type design purist who rejects novelties as sins against perfect form. But are there directions in which you will not venture because they might compromise your aesthetics? Indeed, are there faces out there today that offend you?

Highsmith: The philosophy I learned from David Berlow is that a good type designer should be able to draw everything. We are hired guns in that sense. So, no, I don't think my aesthetics would prevent me from drawing anything although I may not always be happy about every project. But sometimes a typeface that is outside of what I would normally draw is one that I will learn the most from. Novia is a good example—that's a revival of a very traditional style of calligraphic lettering. It's not my taste at all. But it was a challenge to draw, and it got me thinking about white space in a different way.

There are typefaces out there that I like a lot and others that I don't like. The only ones that really annoy me are the ones that are in the "I'm smart so I don't have to draw well" sort of style. Usually they are based on some kind of vernacular thing, but the designer seems to be making fun of it, not celebrating it. This attitude is a drag.

Heller: Naming faces is kind of like a cross between naming a child and a rock band. How do you brand a type for all eternity?

Highsmith: Naming typefaces is always difficult. And then when you finally find a name you like, chances are that it is taken already or there will be some kind of trademark conflict and you have to go through the process all over again. My wife has named most of my typefaces, actually. We both riff on a theme and come up with a list of possibilities. The ones that stick are almost always the ones she came up with, though. Zuzana Licko is good at making up words for the names for her typefaces. I haven't ever been able to do that. I end up using existing words or names. The Yellow Pages can be helpful. I've tried baby name websites. I keep lists of words that I come across and happen to like.

Heller: What else is in a name? And do you have any favorites?

Highsmith: My favorite glyph in Relay was the letter "R," so a consideration in choosing the name for that series was if the name contained an "R."

Heller: As logical as that, eh? What would you say is the most important element of typeface design? Or, rather, what do you do before setting a typeface in stone?

Highsmith: Digital tools for making typefaces are cheap and fast so you can make a lot of mistakes and failures. You don't have to set anything stone. However, I don't like to waste time, so I do think things through and make a plan when I draw a typeface.

I think the most important thing is not to try to put too many different ideas in one typeface. A good typeface usually has just one simple idea that drives the design. Otherwise you cannot successfully carry the design consistently through all the different characters. You end up with groups of letters that don't look like they belong together. The most important element of a typeface is that all the parts can fit together to make text.

Heller: Matthew Carter, your hero, started by drawing his letters by hand. Could you design faces without a computer?

Highsmith: I love the digital tools we have now. I don't know if I could have been a type designer in an earlier era, to be honest. I have the skills to do it now, but I don't know if I could have learned them in the context of a slower and more expensive process.

Heller: Do you care about ultimate application? I remember Herb Lubalin opining about how Avant Garde was misused. Obviously, there is little you can do to control such things, but does it bother you?

Highsmith: I'm always very curious to see my typefaces in action. I try to keep an open mind about what designers do with them. I don't usually get annoyed. Sometimes I get anxious when I see them set with some kind of slight distortion though, maybe just a 90–95 percent horizontal squeeze. It can throw off the spacing or the proportions, but I won't be able to tell exactly what is wrong. To me, it will look terrible. And then I start to worry that I actually drew it that way, and I have go back and check my original drawings to be sure.

Heller: Does misuse reflect badly on you?

Highsmith: I think the fear type designers have is that when our typefaces are misused, they make the typefaces look bad and people won't want to use them. In general, I don't worry too much when I see my typefaces looking bad. I think designers remember the good examples of the typefaces they see for longer than the bad examples. That's how it is for me at least. Of course, I can see how in the case of something like Avant Garde, the sheer number of bad examples might overwhelm the good ones. But then you can always draw a new one.

Heller: I've always wondered if type designers see themselves as good designers or good typographers. Do typeface designers have to be good graphic designers, too?

Highsmith: I have wondered about this myself, and where I fit in. For a long time, I wasn't sure. Then one day I was hanging out with some type designers who used to work for Linotype back in '60s or '70s. They referred to the place where they worked as "the drawing office." A drawing office sounded to me like the coolest kind of office ever. If I had heard about a drawing office when I was a kid, that's where I would have wanted to work when I grew up. These guys from the drawing office referred to themselves as "letter drawers." I like this term very much also. It has an elemental sound and appeal to me. So, I like to see myself as a letter drawer.

I don't have much experience as a graphic designer, so I don't consider myself a very good one. But I am very interested in graphic design—and the rest of the two-dimensional world in general—and spend a lot of time looking at it and thinking about it. I like to work with graphic designers, listen to them and see what they do. This is probably an important thing to do if you want to be a type designer.

Heller: With design migrating to the web and other media, how are you designing faces for the eventual paperless world? Or is that just a *Star Trek* fantasy?

Highsmith: At this point, there are still a lot of technical issues you have to dive into when it comes to type on screens. Fortunately, I work with people who are much better at figuring out this kind of thing than I am. David Berlow is investigating these issues and doing some really interesting work. My role will be to assist him by developing tools to help with the production of new typefaces and of course drawing new typefaces for these different mediums.

Heller: Just assisting, not instigating?

Highsmith: Part of me just starts to feel tired and overwhelmed when I think about it. I just want to draw letters, and the print environment lets you focus on that much more than the screen environment because of all the technical issues that come with the screen. But the other part of me is excited to see what happens and is eager to make new things. I am very glad I don't have to do any of these alone.

About the Author. Steven Heller, co-chair of MFA "Designer As Author" at School of Visual Arts, is the author of Merz to Emigre and Beyond: Avant Garde Magazine Design of the Twentieth Century (Phaidon Press), The Education of a Comics Artist co-edited with Michael Dooley (Allworth Press), The Education of a Graphic Designer, Second Edition and The Education of an Art Director (with Veronique Vienne) (Allworth Press).