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FACULTY OF DESIGN

DEPT OF VISUAL COMMUNICATION

THE CLARITY / VITALITY AXIS

AN ANALYSIS OF CONTEMPORARY TYPOGRAPHY

by JOYCE CARROLL

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF

HISTORY OF ART & DESIGN

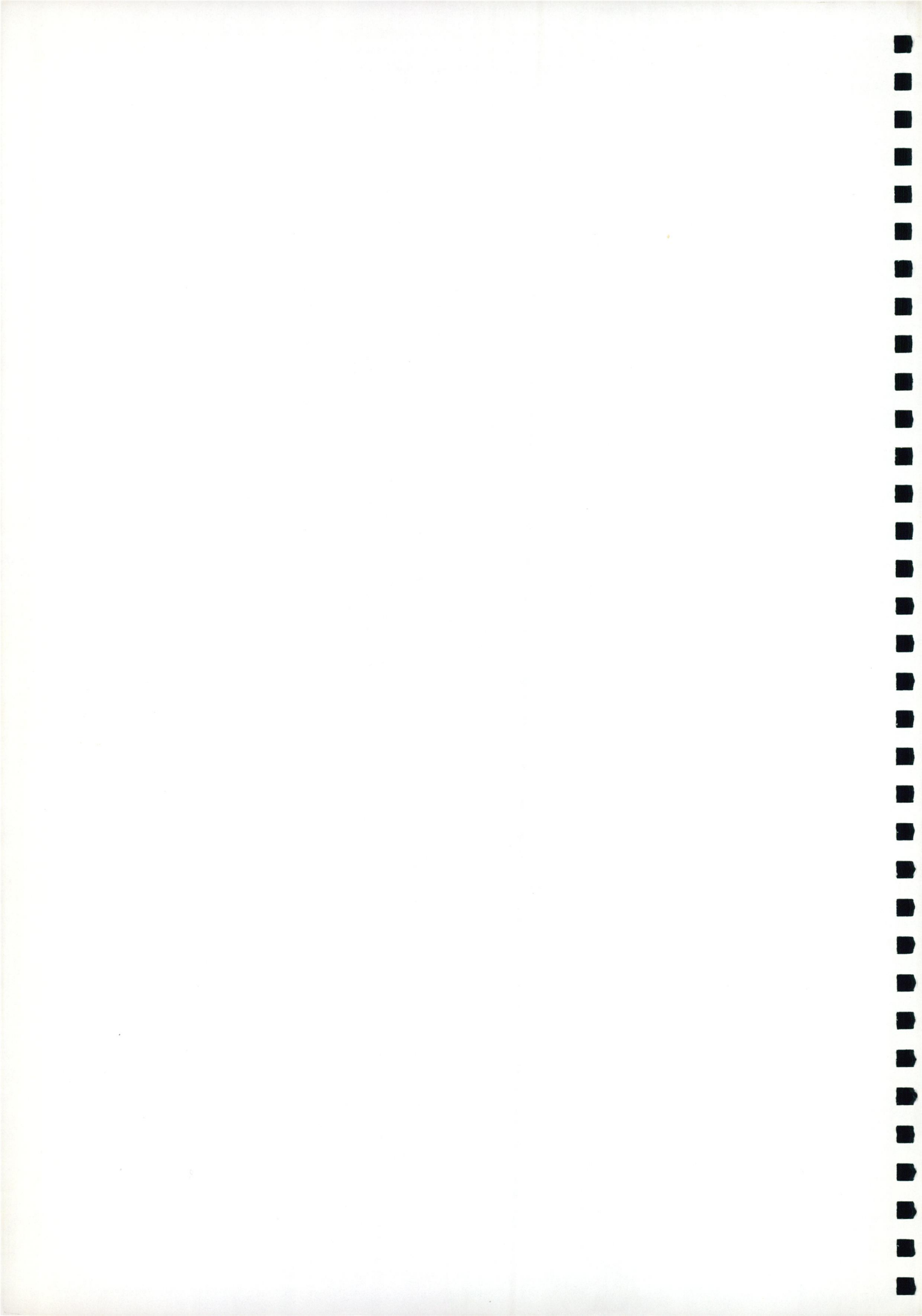
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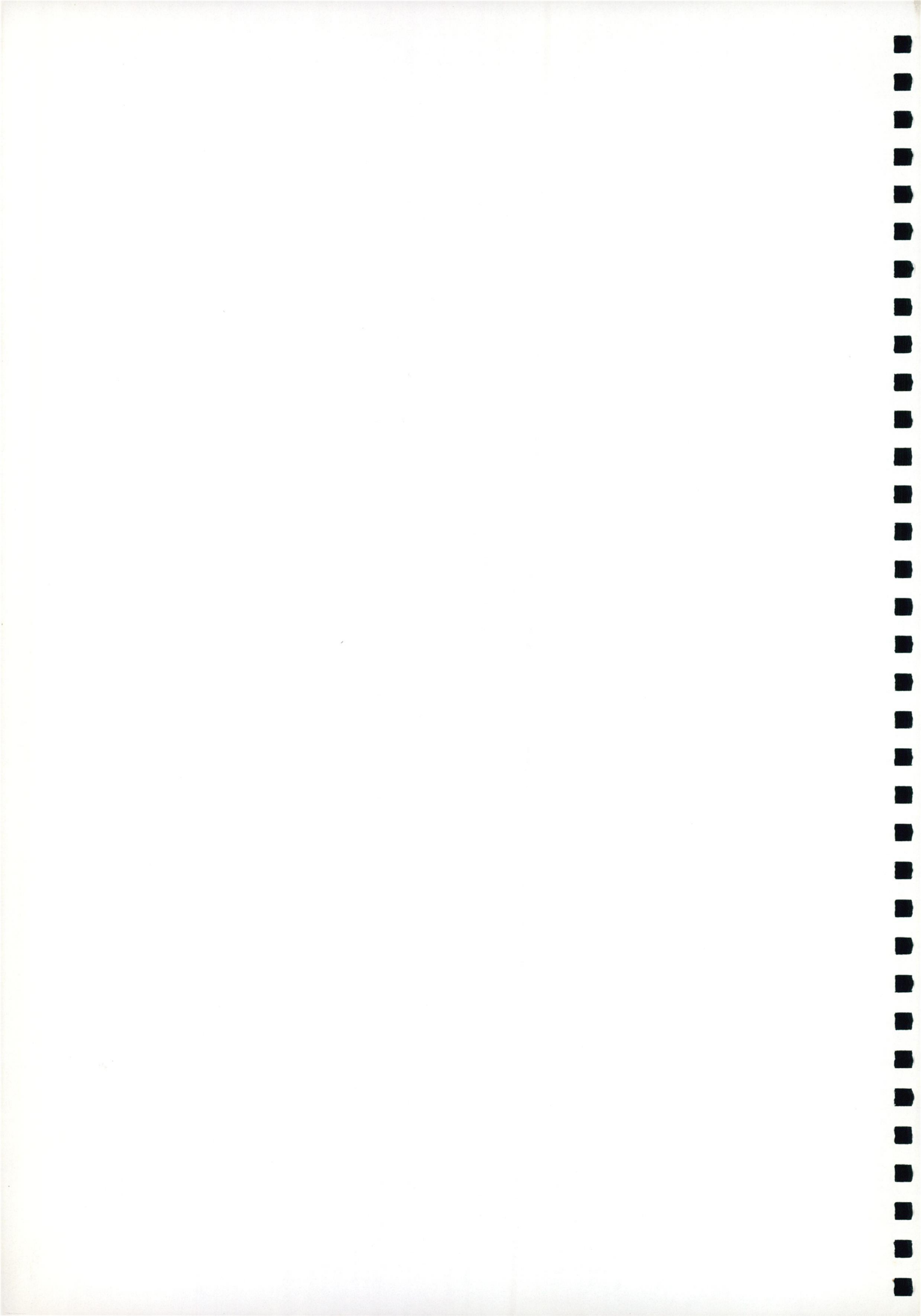


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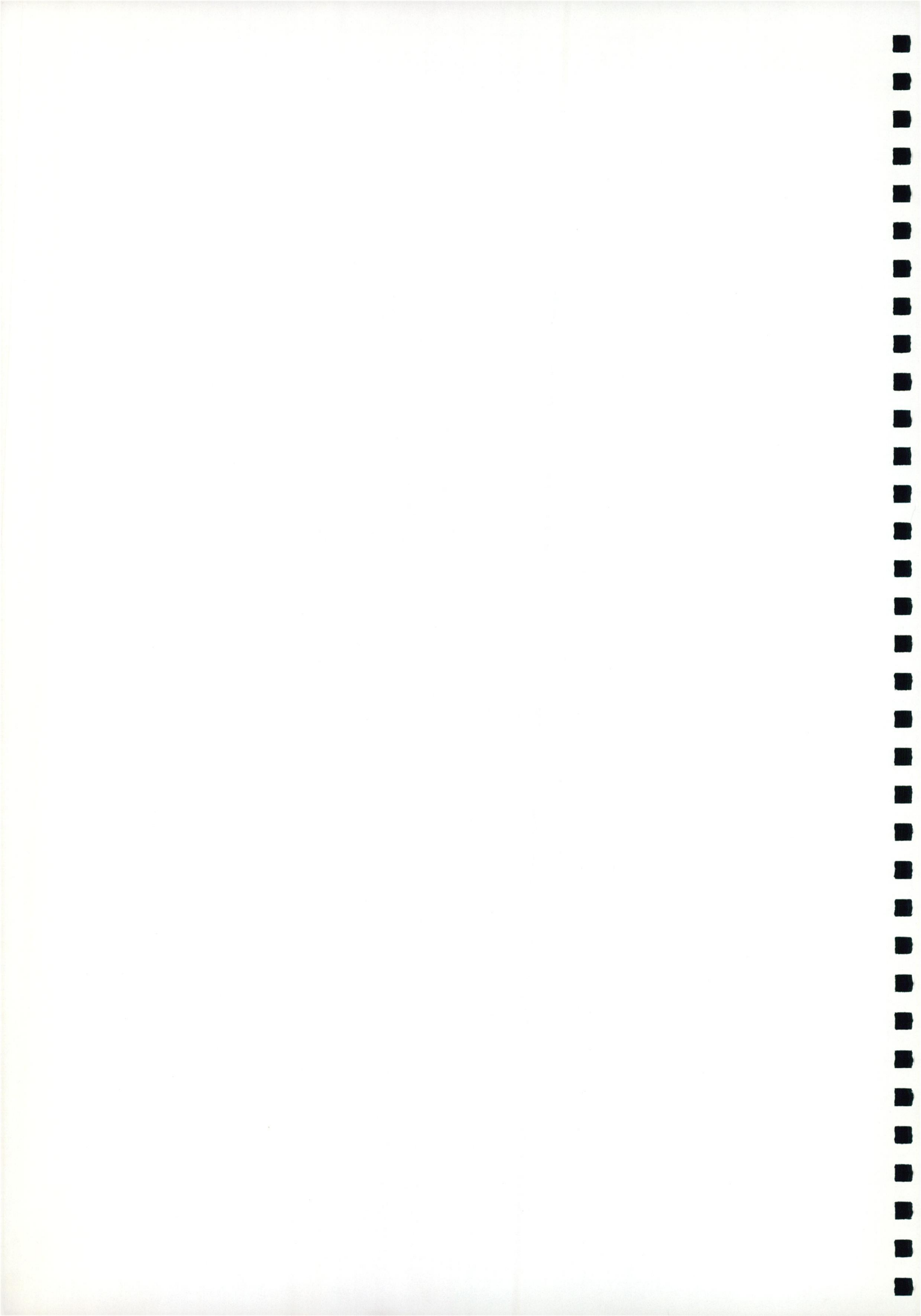
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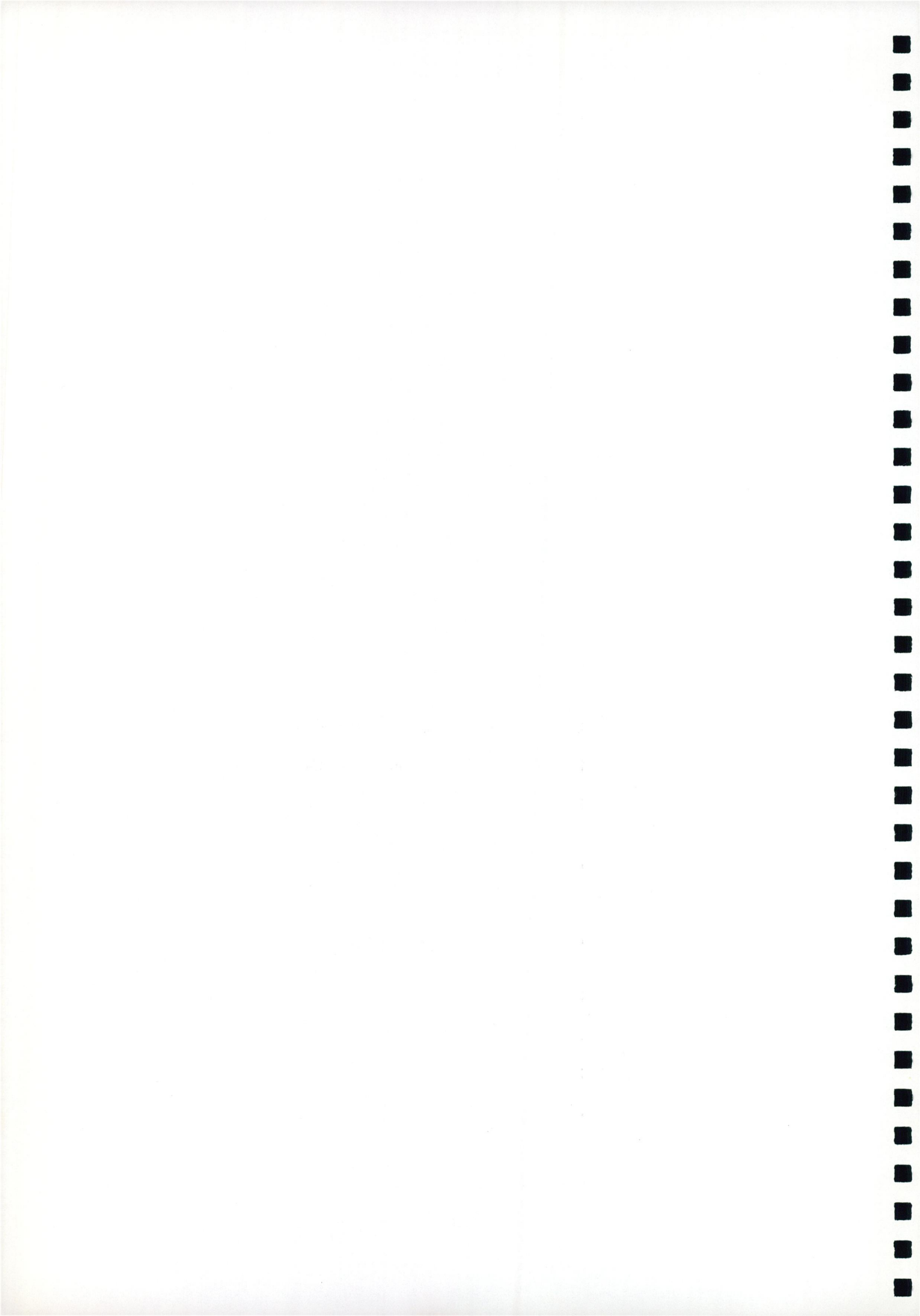
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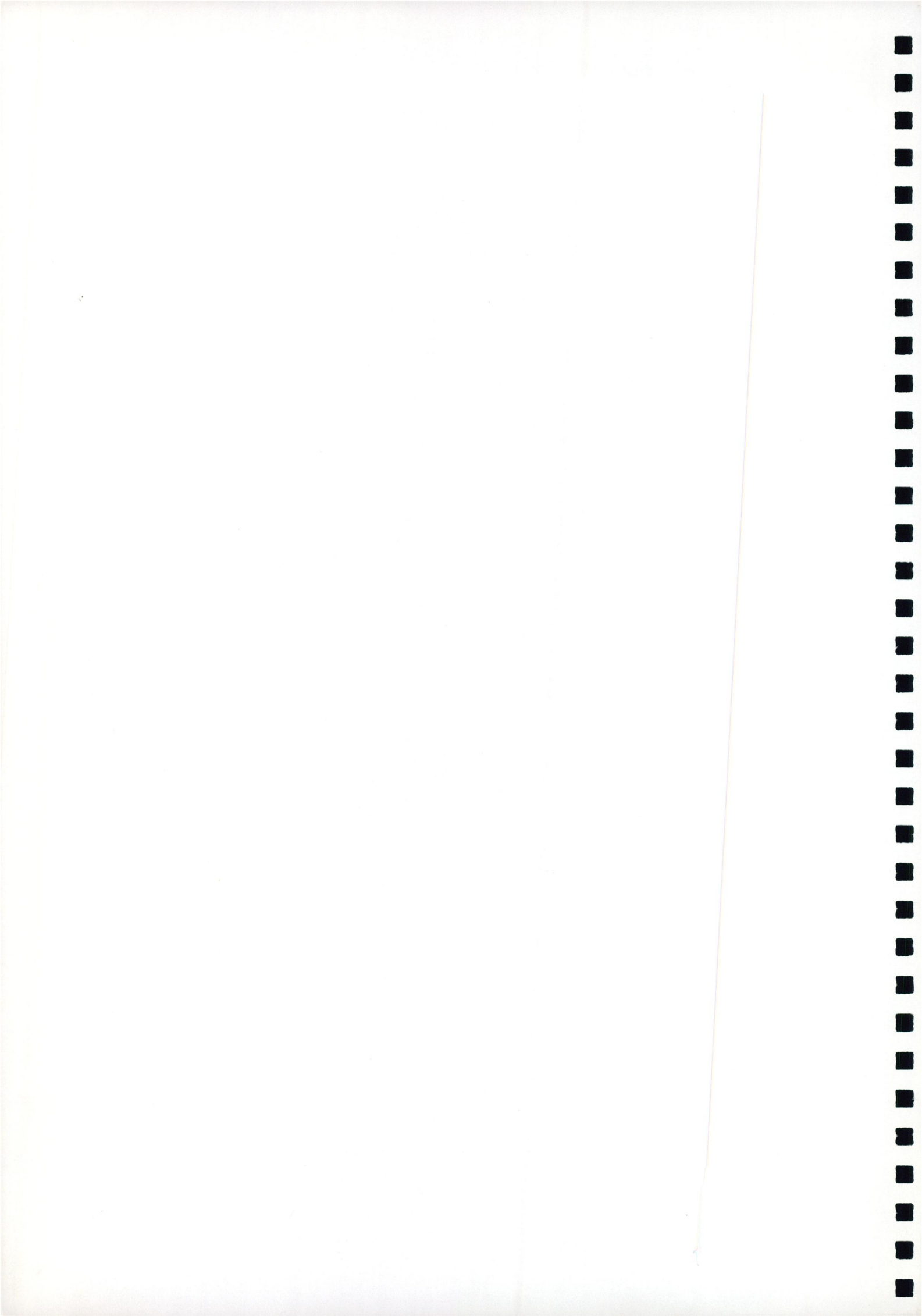
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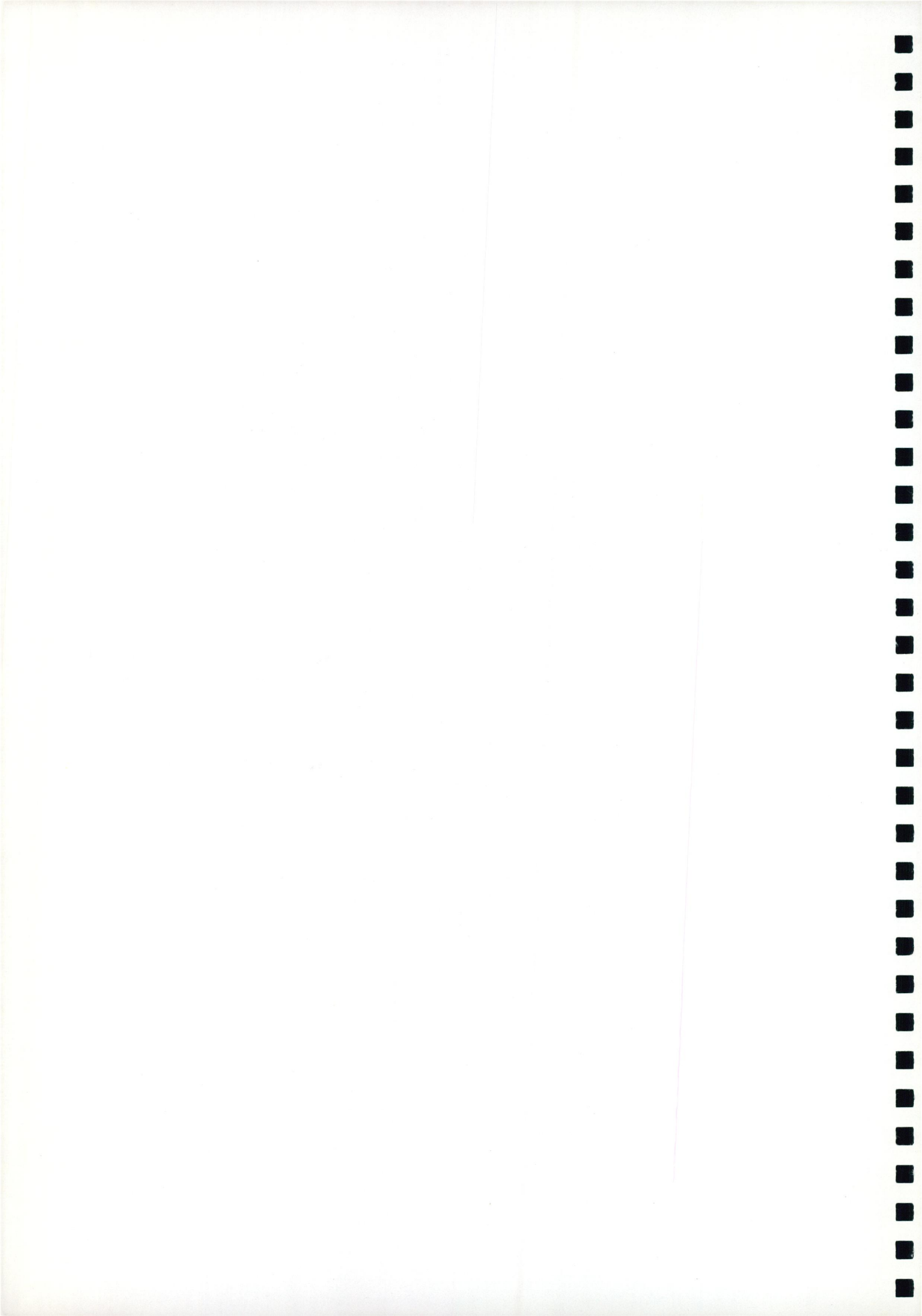
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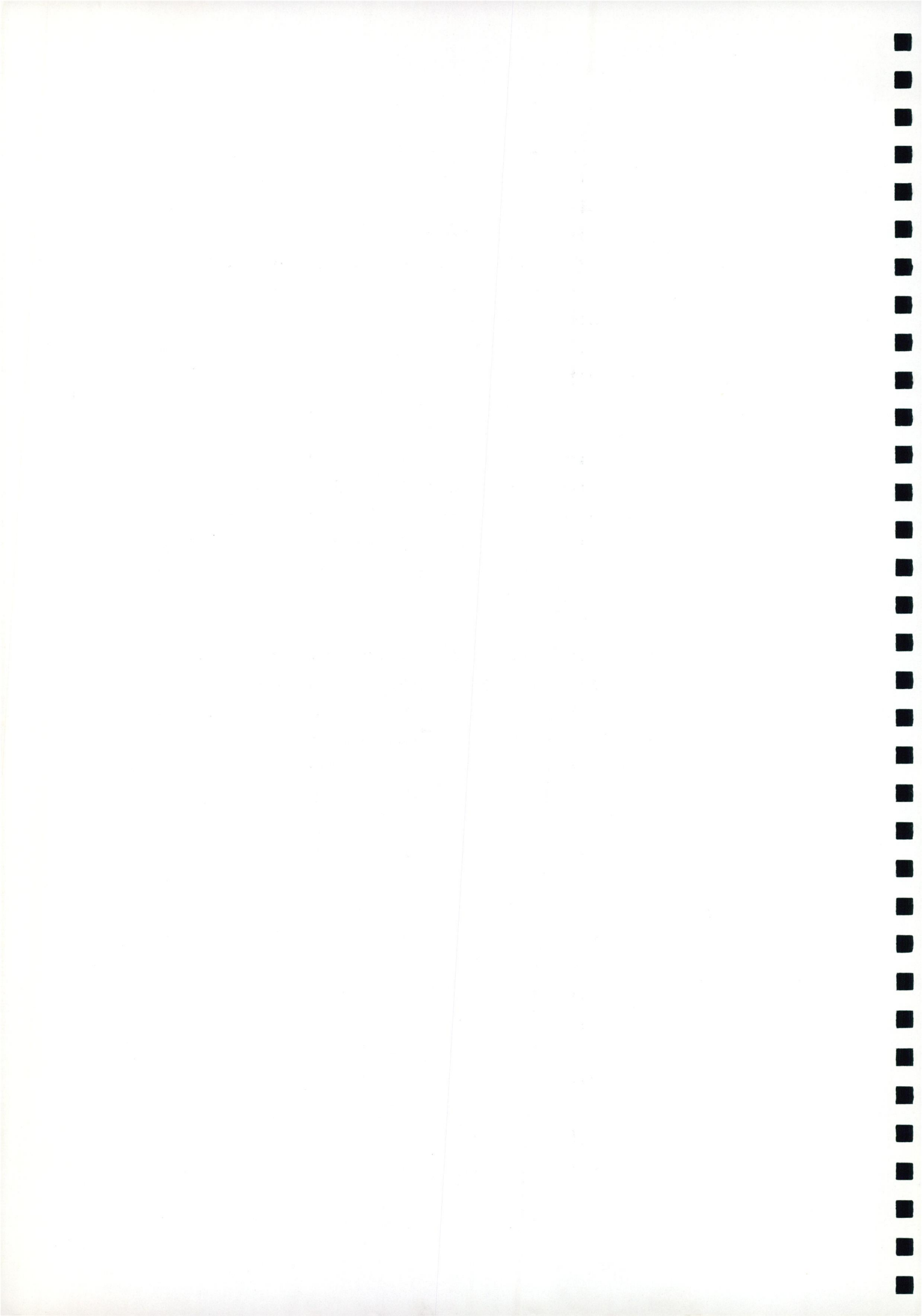


• • • • • I N T R O D U C T I O N

Dynamic and exciting, as invigorating and arresting as its approaches are wide and varied, vibrant and ultimately irrepressible, the typography of today is an explosive mixture of multi-layered image propelled creativity. Uplifted by the surge of new technology, typography is now more liberated than ever before. High powered colour screen computers, laser copiers and colour scanners and printers have virtually overtaken the role of the typesetter, the middle man of graphic design positioned between a good idea and its true realisation. Now with the controls firmly in the hands of the designer and with the wealth of possibilities the Macintosh, Quantel Paintbox etc. have on offer (as opposed to the handling of cumbersome metal type), the typographer can enjoy a new and more complete command over the practicalities of his art form. Coupled with a new attitude towards freedom of layout, all this has unleashed a torrent of wildly explorative and highly innovative work bursting with vitality and new found energy and depth. Characters are enlarged and cropped, turned upside down, reduced to miniscule scale; lines of text are twisted, turned and manouvered into all kinds of angles; a myriad of fonts are used on the one piece, even sometimes within the one word; layers of texture and photomontage underly layers and layers of distorted type; perspective and dimension take on a whole new meaning. For contemporary typography it seems that the sky is the limit.

But of course there are no limits and now with so many restraints removed, the path of modern typography represents a re-evaluation of the aesthetics of visual communication. The inherent discipline imposed by the old technology has evaporated and with this has come a whole string of creative and pragmatic questions with regard to typographic aims and values. When will the escalating complexity of computer produced design become simply a burgeoning monstrosity? At what point do the superimposed layers of texture and type interfere with basic legibility beyond retrieval? And when does confusion and incipient mannerism take over and innovation become gimmick?

It is another variation on a theme, perhaps the most insistent theme in typographic design since the turn of the century. It is the tug of war between the advocates of clarity and order in design of printed communications and the advocates of visual vitality.



Designers of the subjective school often accuse the Swiss designers and their followers of being excessively rigid, cold static, visually antiseptic and advocates of objective design have labelled subjective designs as illegible, ineffective and graphic horrors (Gottschall, 1989, p. 11).

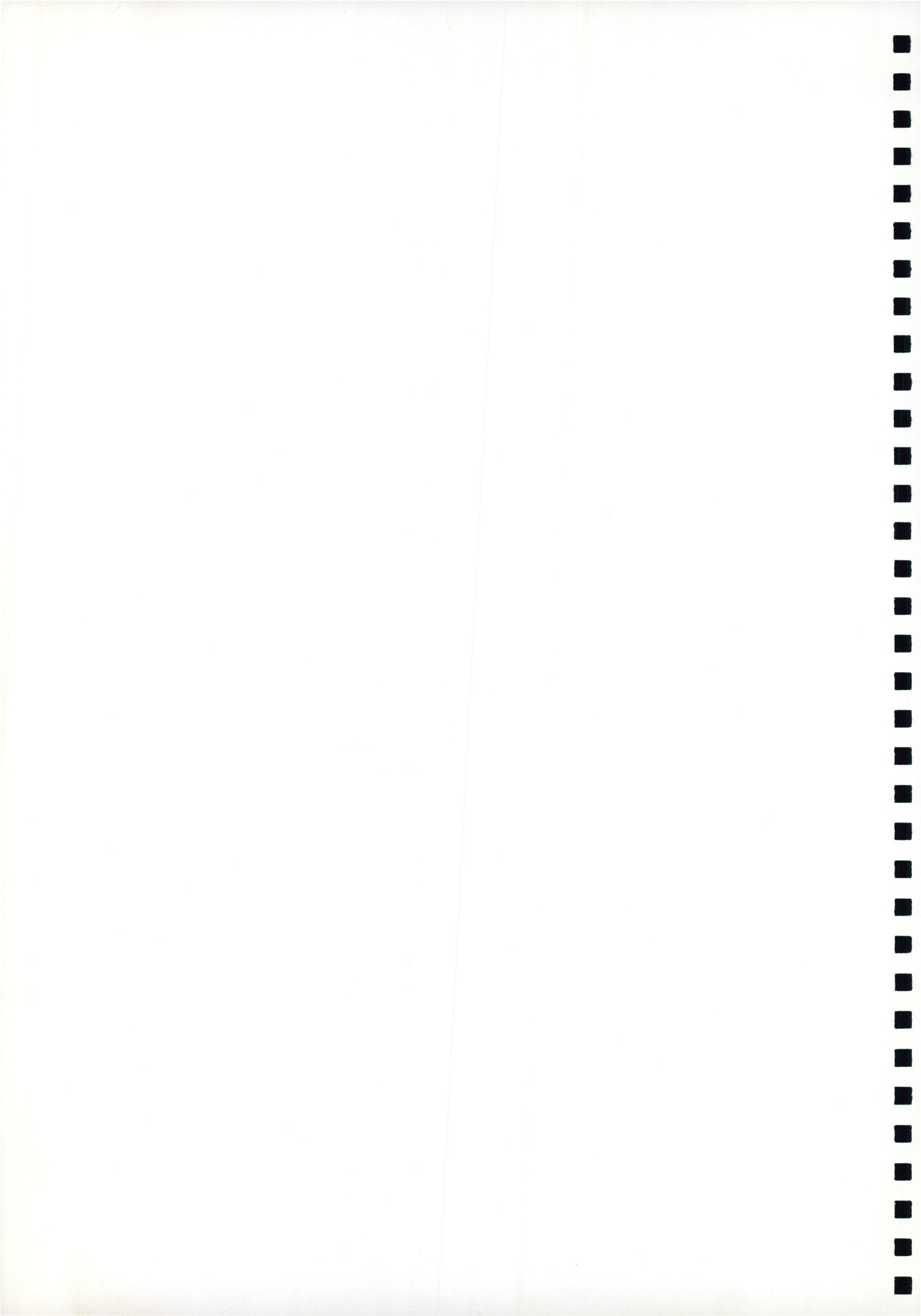
Simplified, its a case of grid versus free form. One can position much of the typographic history of this century on such a "clarity/vitality axis" (Gottschall, 1989, p. 10), with examples of Futurism and Dadaism at one end and the strict application of a grid system at the other. It is a case of opposite approaches to typography and design existing side by side, one promoting simplicity, clarity and harmony; the other advocating wildly chaotic, excited presentations.

The aim of this thesis is to examine current trends in typography through the stylistic and attitudinal dichotomy which exists in the field, namely the "clarity/vitality axis", (Gottschall, 1989, p.10). By looking at specific examples of present day graphics and by linking them to their historical roots, I will highlight the existence of the dichotomy in early 20th century typography and graphic design.

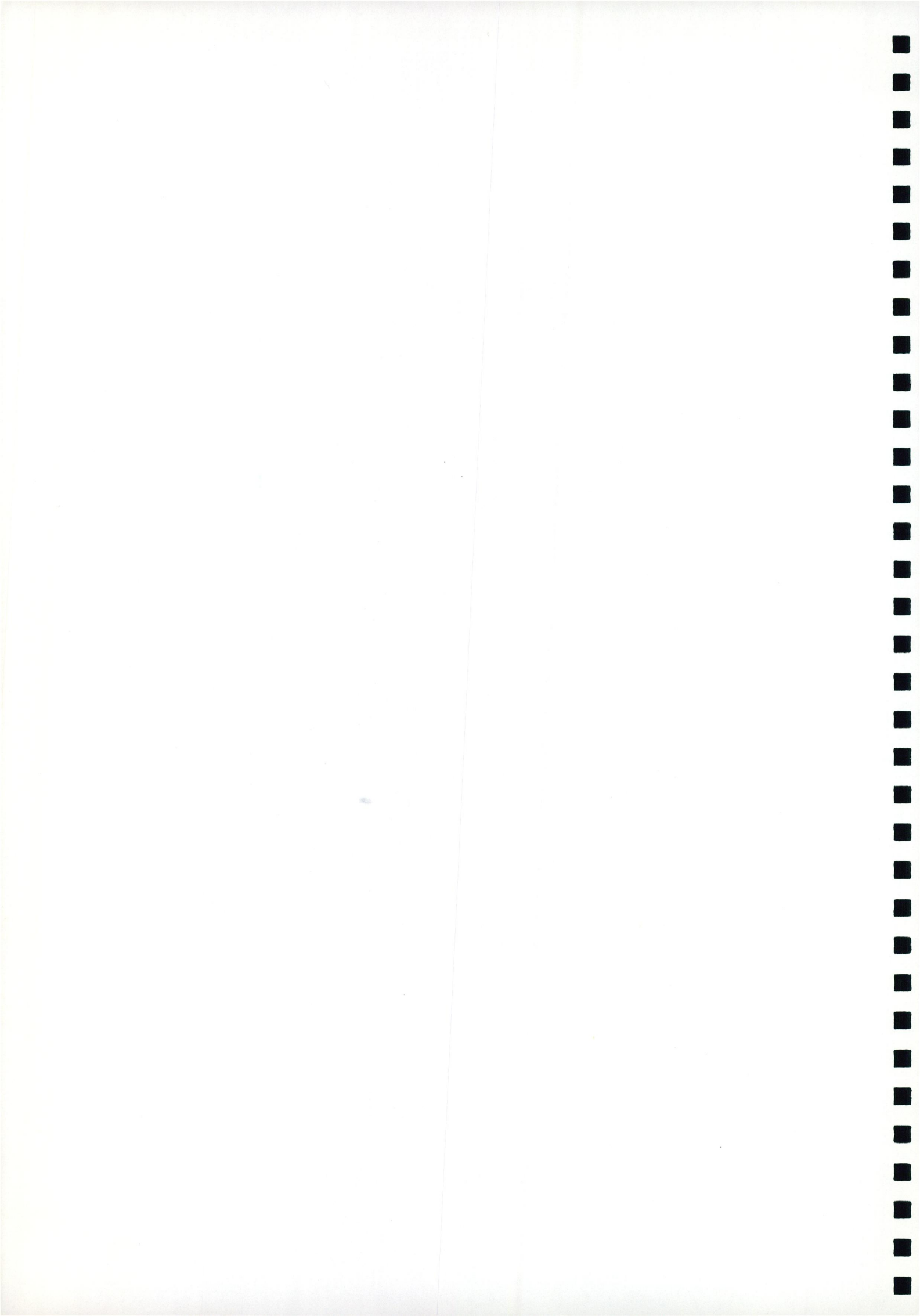
The thesis will explore and analyse contemporary typography; the speed at which it's influence is growing; the booster new technology has been to its ongoing advancement and ultimately the re-evaluation technology driven type is causing in the aesthetics of visual communication, dealing with specific issues such as legibility and exclusivity. This exploration will be conducted in the light of the overall theme; that of the clarity/vitality axis.

The procedures I used to accomplish my aims included a collection process whereby I gathered examples of contemporary typography from books, magazines, posters, fliers, etc., and analysed them, incorporating them into the main theme. Research in libraries provided a historical background, while the study of numerous contemporary magazine articles gave a current account of typographic progress. Questionnaires were sent to practising designers in England and America. Feedback from these, and discussions with tutors, visiting lecturers and students alike, gave me an invaluable insight into the creative and practical questions raised by technology's advancement into the realm of typography.

Typography is one of my favourite areas of study. I wanted to write about the clarity/vitality axis to highlight the fact that the dichotomy which exists



today in style and attitude is not an isolated phenomenon, but an undercurrent theme throughout the history of typography. The questions and issues generated from the tug of war between the two camps are of particular interest to me, and are of significant importance, in that these are issues which are not only global in scale but issues which affect us as students of typography and graphic design and our future within the discipline.

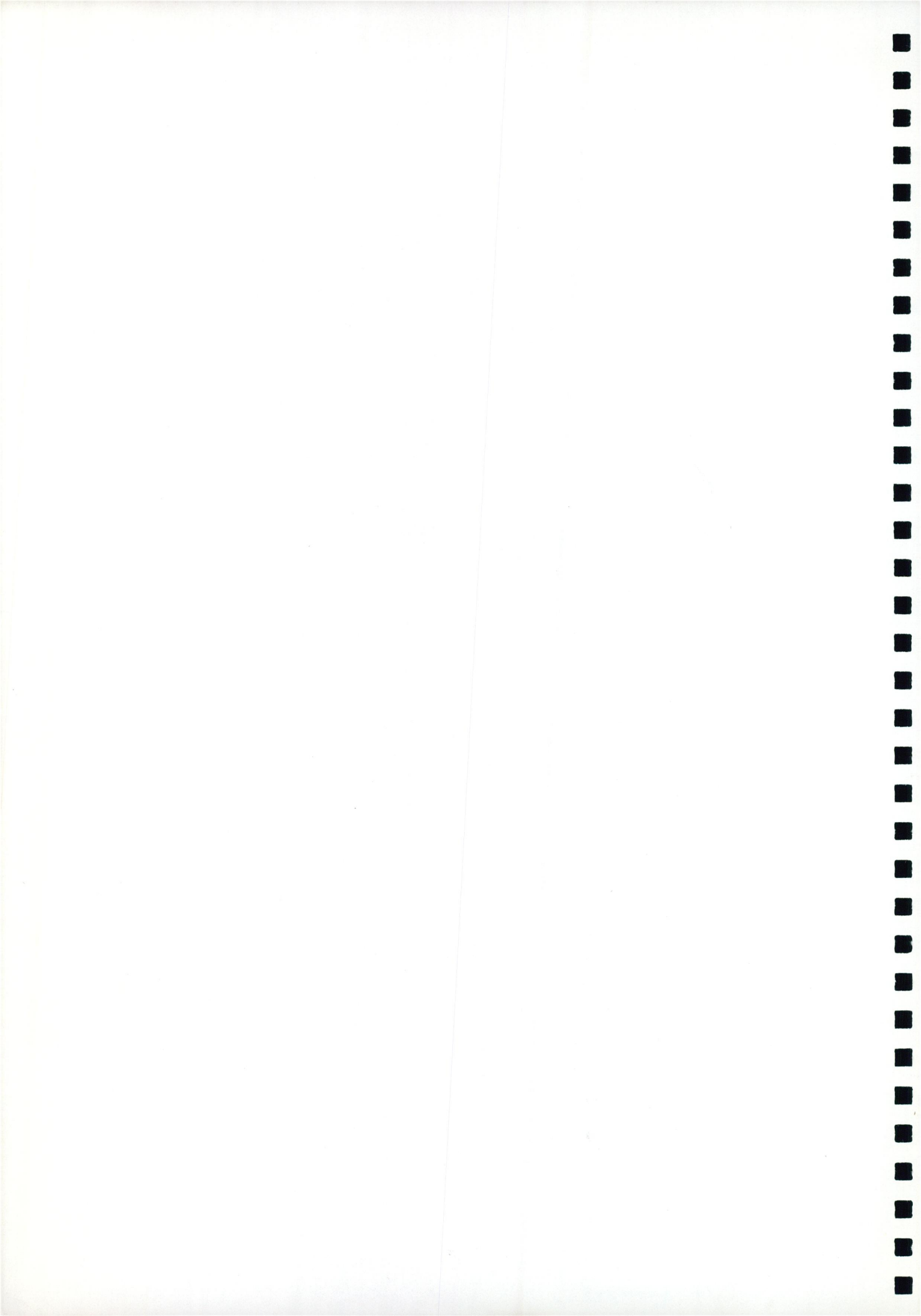


*"The clarity/vitality axis;
an undercurrent theme."*

This chapter will begin by outlining and clarifying the clarity/vitality axis theory and establishing it as an undercurrent theme.

It will attempt to explore the clarity/vitality axis' links with history; contrasting the visual excitement of the Futurists with that of David Carson, Tschichold with that of Vignelli, etc.

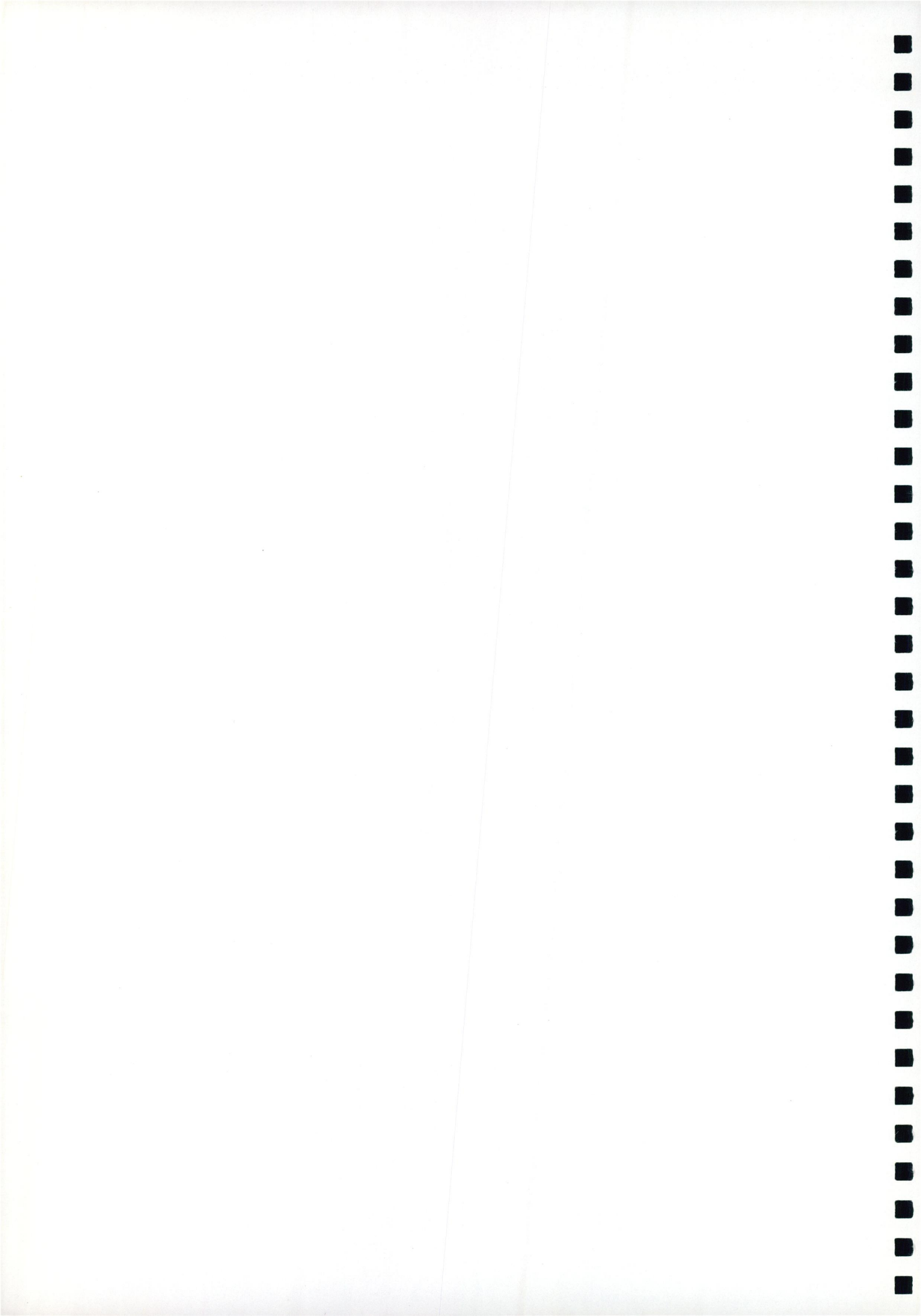
By looking at specific examples of present day graphics and by linking them to their Futurists and Bauhaus roots, I will highlight the existence of the dichotomy in early 20th century typography and graphic design. The axis exists not only visually but theoretically, reflected in the philosophy of past and present designers.

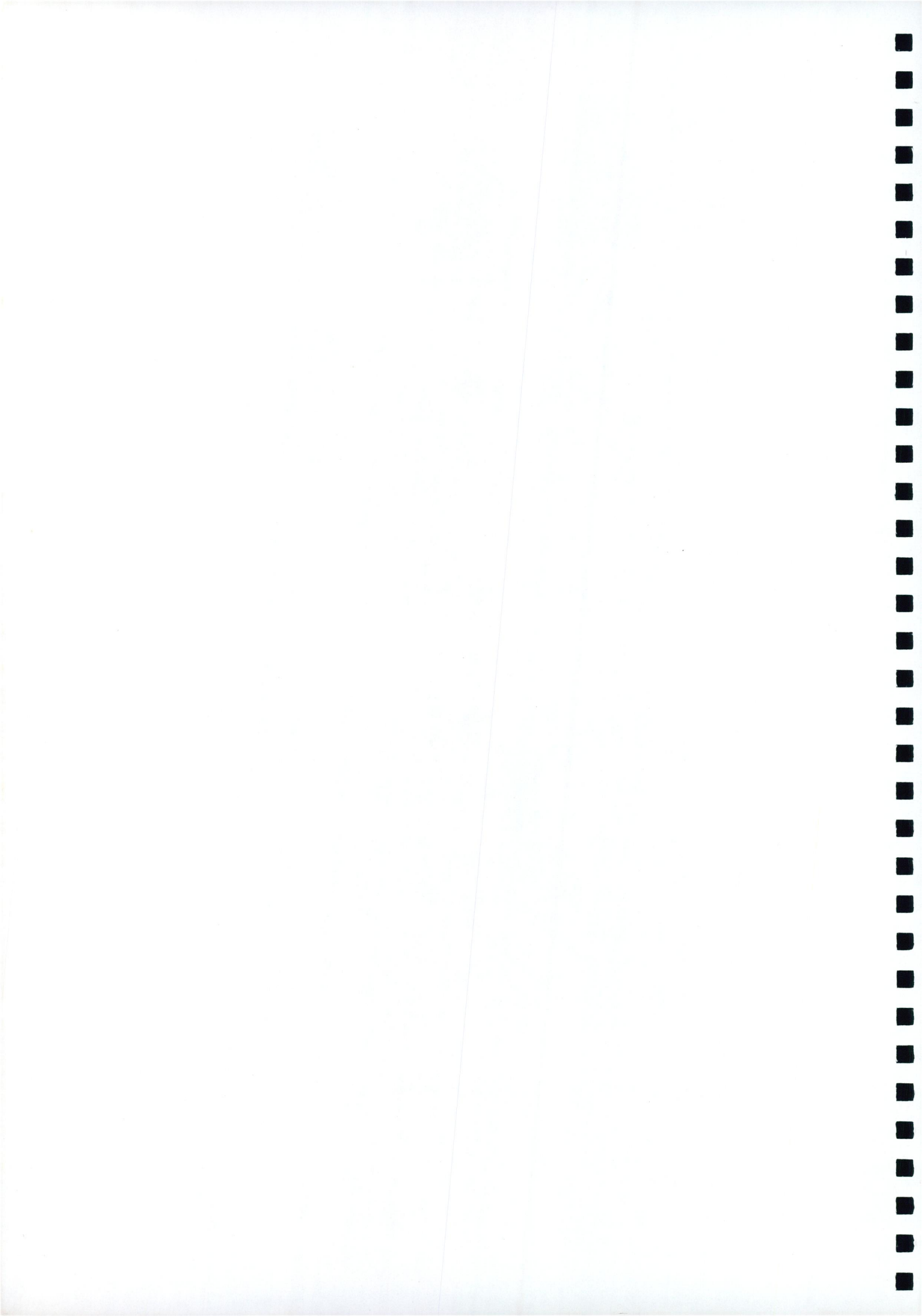


From the vitality of the likes of Art Nouveau, Futurism and Dadaism, to the clarity and order of DeStijl, Constructivism and Bauhaus, clarity and vitality exist side by side in the continuous spiral that is the development of typography. At times one approach is more dominant than the other. It is the co-existence of two levels of thinking; 'clarity' calling for the "unencumbered functionalism of typography" (Tschichold, *Die Neue Typographie*, 1928) and 'vitality' claiming that "there is no beauty except in strife, no masterpiece without aggressiveness" (Marinetti, *Le Figaro*, 1909).

According to Leu, graphic designers are seismographs of their society and environment. If they're good, they're like sponges. They suck up the zeitgeist, process it and spit it out again, freshly filtered. (Leu, 1992, p. 4). Graphic design and, specifically, typography are part of an ongoing revolution; what has been achieved before is assimilated into the mainstream of typographic thinking, later to be drawn upon for inspiration and subsequently reincarnated in a new form, fashioned by advancing technology. We inherit the legacy of graphic experimentation and resulting wisdom - we also retrace the steps that have been taken before, translated into our own systems of communication. In the continuous spiral that is the development of typography, the theme of clarity versus vitality remains ever present.

Indeed, contemporary typography of the multi-layered kind has strong links with the past. Its random use of type is not unlike the experiments of the Futurists in the early 1900s. Take, for example, Ardengo Soffici's powerful piece of 1915 Futurist typography, FIG. 1.1. Visual excitement dominates, legibility follows. There is a dynamism, an urgency about the composition. Letters are scattered and strewn in four irregularly shaped groups. Upper and lower case are mixed as are different fonts and type weights. The large capital 'A' in the left hand corner distracts our eye but with a purpose. It acts as a sort of visual grabber which leads our eye to the small text and directs us to the starting point. Although the type seems randomly dropped on the page, the text which carries the important information is perfectly legible. It may take one longer to find it, but when discerned, the message is ultimately readable. What initially appears as purely rhythmic and based on startling emphasis is also, in fact, an effective, workable piece of design.





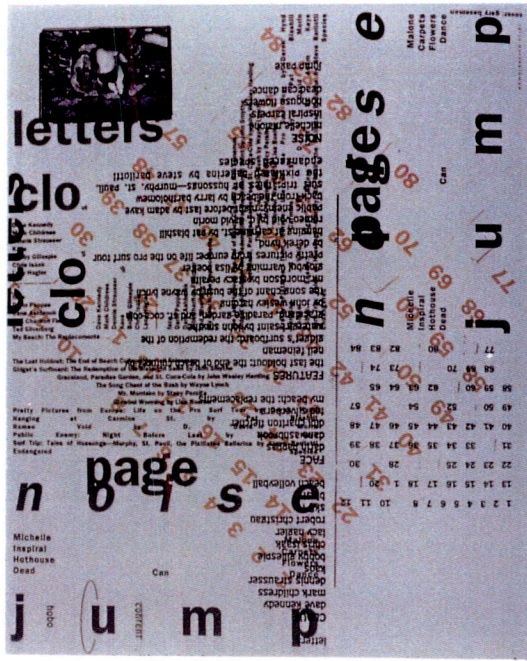
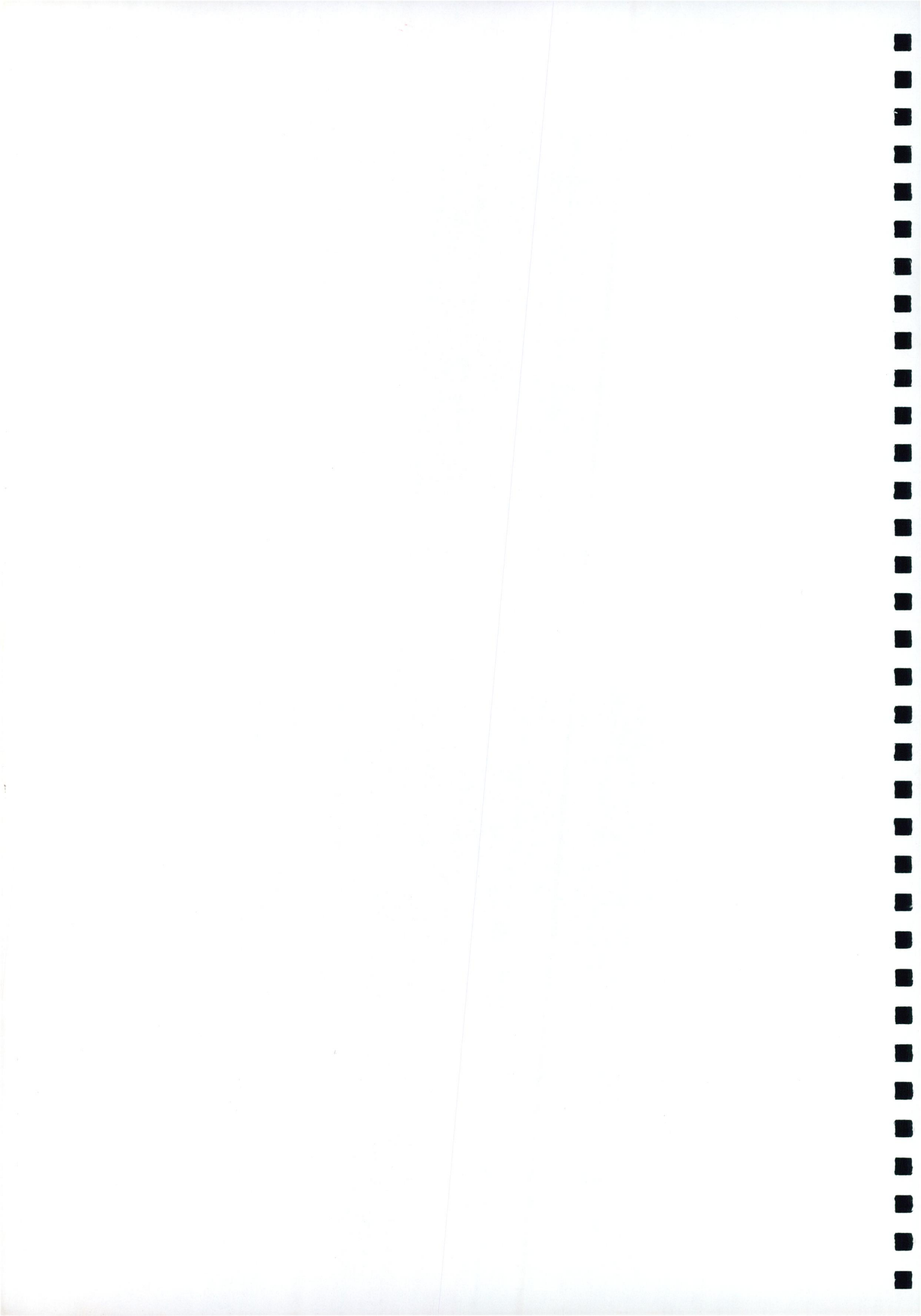
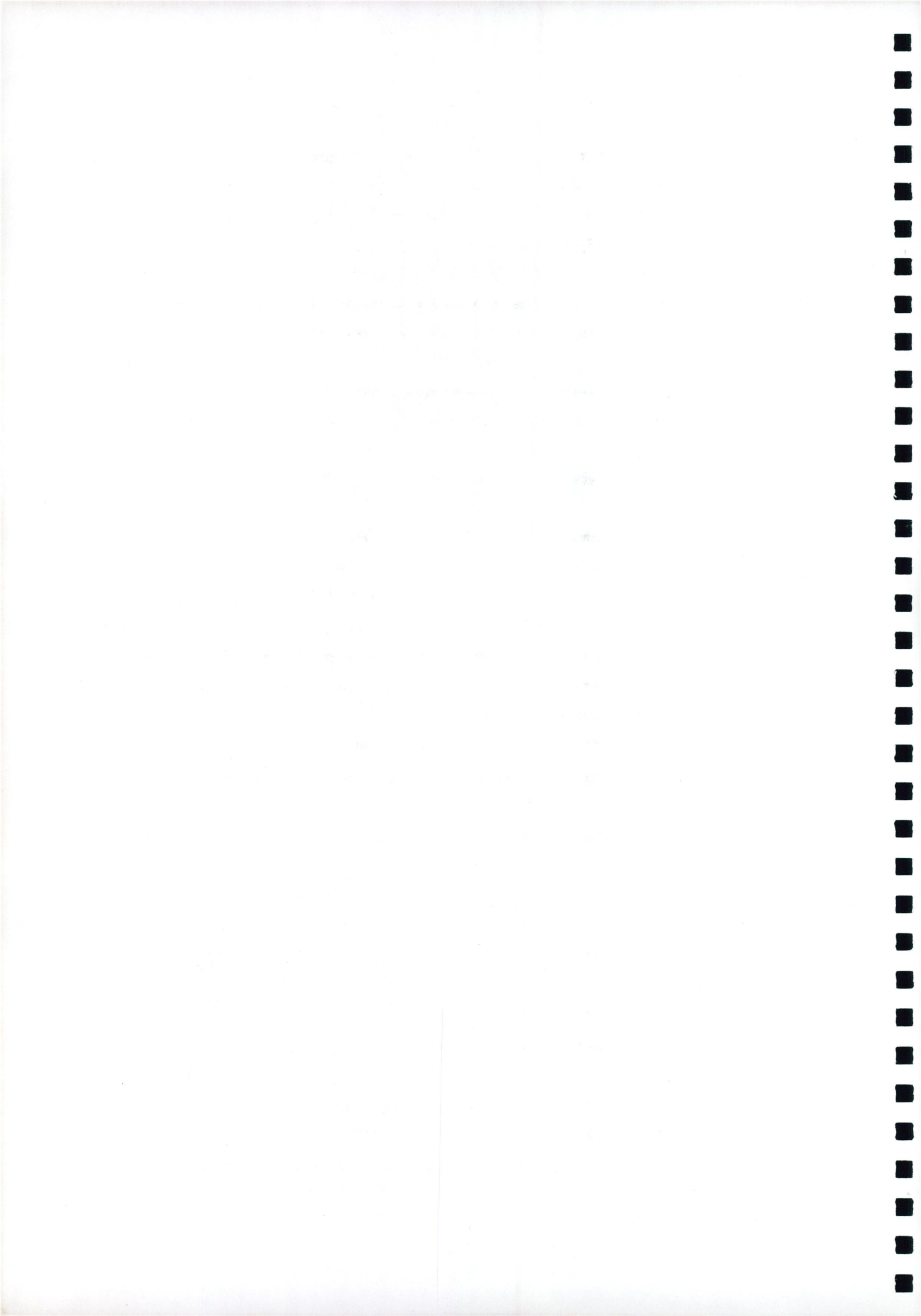


FIG. 1.3. CARSON, David, *Beach Culture*, Surfer Publications, USA, 1991.



FIG. 1.4. KISMAN, Max, *Type Catalogue*, The Netherlands, 1990.

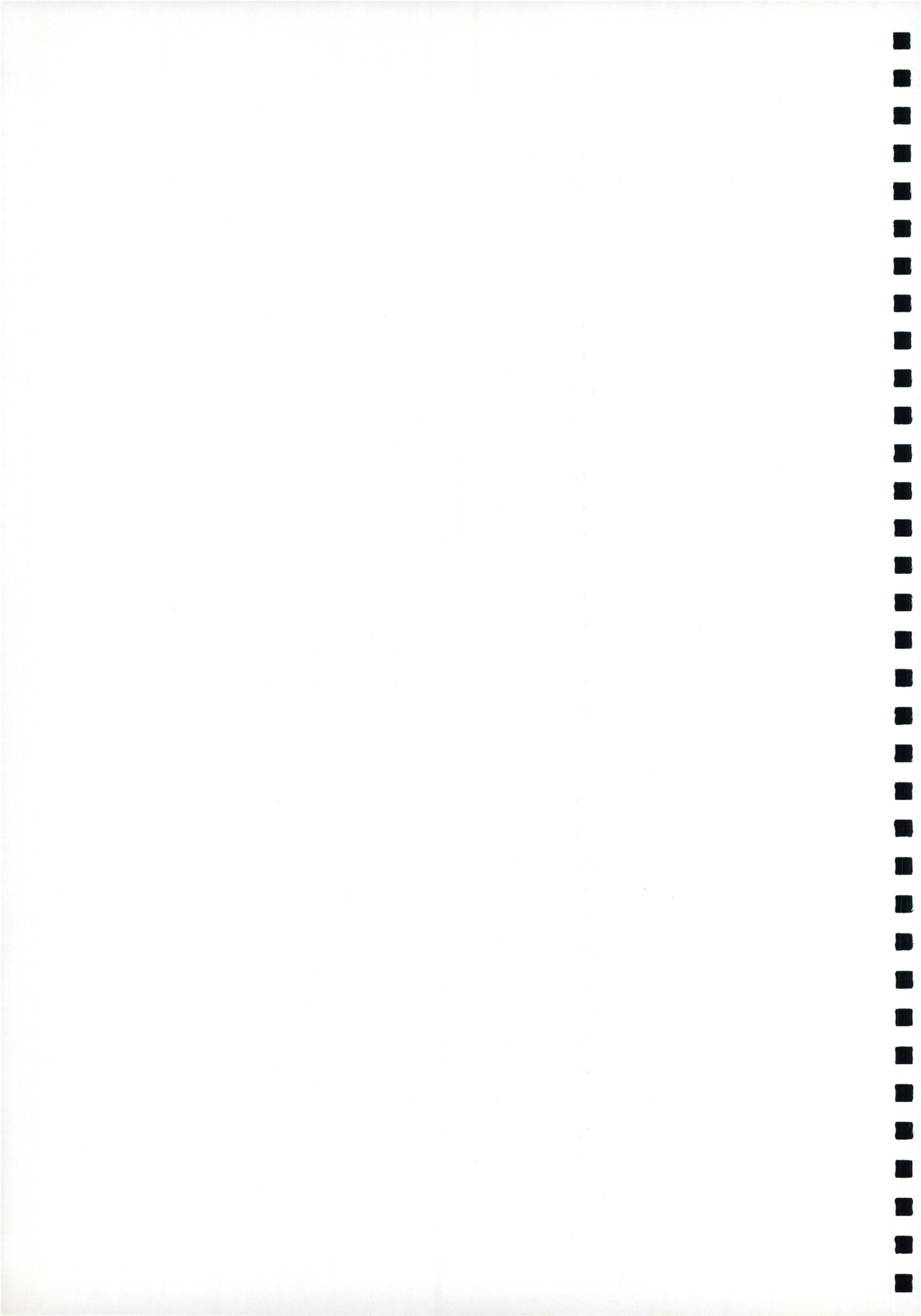




This piece and other works like it, for example, Marinetti's 1919 work, *Les mots en libertes futuristes*, FIG 1.2, have qualities in common with the work of David Carson, art director of *Beach Culture*, the contemporary Californian surfer magazine, FIG. 1.3. Carson plays with type in somewhat the same manner, giving the impression of casually strewn type; some letters are upside down, some are cropped, some are even overprinted to the point of ruination. Legibility takes a back seat to self expression. Max Kisman's type catalogue, from 1990, FIG. 1.4., is another case which relates strongly to Marinetti's work, although they are distanced by over 70 years. The heavily overlaid sections of type contrasting with the lighter weight panels of text are punctuated with enlarged bold lower case characters - all of these elements combining to give the piece a rich, dense and ultimately textured look; the same textured effect being evident in Carson's 1991 work, FIG. 1.3.

Edward Fella, a former commercial artist, is another contemporary designer whose work is reminiscent of Futurism. In FIG. 1.5 Fella probably breaks every known rule of typographic decorum and allows the type to have a life of its own. "In Fella's agitated hands, the type is spun, tilted, stretched, sliced, fractured, drawn as if with a broken nib and set loose among fields of ink blotter doodles and networks of rules" (Poynor & Booth Clibbon, 1991, p. 12). As with Marinetti in FIG. 1.2, type seems to be all over the place. It gives the appearance of a collage of odd type, cut indifferently and pasted with just as much conscience. But despite this Fella's message is legible; not instantly clear but legible nonetheless.

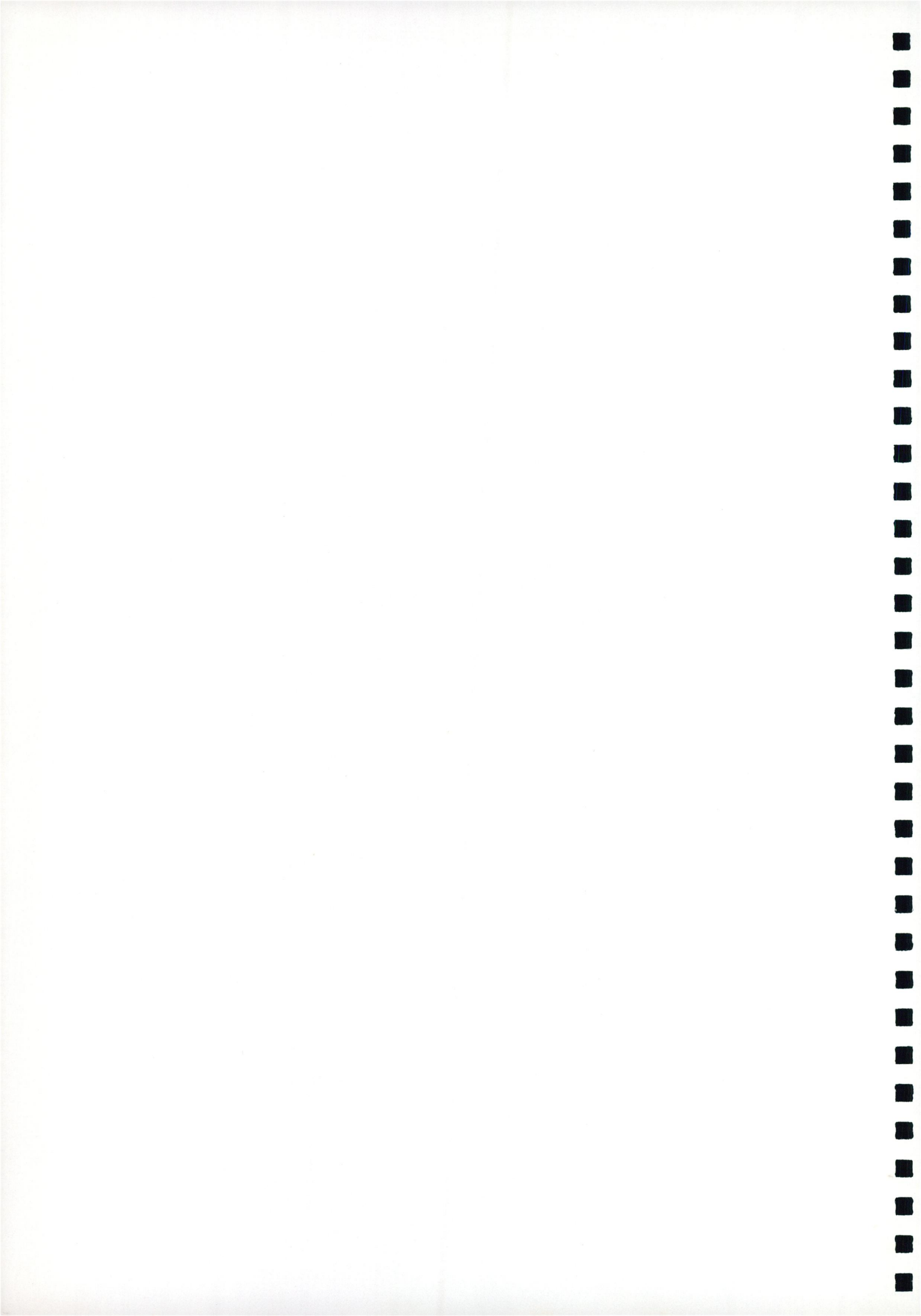
The Futurists sought out new forms that would enable them to break the limitations of two dimensions; they sought to express revolution and movement and in typography, they demanded that the form should intensify the content. *Mirth*, a contemporary, promotional postcard/flier for *Restaurant Florent*, USA, 1989, by McCarty and Kalman, FIG. 1.6, bears a striking resemblance in this respect to the 1916 "lyrical ideograms" (Spencer, 1982, p. 17) of Guillaume Apollinaire such as *Il Pleut*, FIG 1.7. Both use typography to stress the essence of the poem. Both use typography expressively, almost as a means of illustration, both with a certain degree of charm and humour. The typography of "Mirth" is in particular amusing; the way in which male and female are suggested in the use of different typefaces for the word 'friend', the positioning of the words 'glass', 'sip' and 'fork', to indicate eating and drinking, the 'napkin' strewn on the floor, not far from the



'crumbs', while the words 'mirth', 'glow', and little 'giggle' describe the scene and convey a relaxed, sociable atmosphere. It is a delightfully playful piece, in the same way that *Il Pleut* is playful and figurative. To me, the more recent piece undoubtedly bears the hallmarks of Futuristic influences.

Futurism, in its basic ideology, embraced modern civilisation and recognised the powerful beauty of machines. Marinetti once said of book design that it "must be the futuristic expression of our futuristic consciousness" (Spencer, 1982, p. 15-16). Futurism was, as its name implies, futuristic, forward looking. Marinetti's proclamation on book design may well have stood for the complete, overall attitude of Futurist design. Are we not the same now? Contemporary typography, like that of Carson and Fella, embraces the technology available to it in the form of the Macintosh, etc. As Vince says, the computer has been a radical stimulus in the way ~~stimulus~~ the written word is captured, manipulated and distributed, and they have provided a fantastic medium for the world of images (Vince, 1992, p.2). The computer is a milestone in the the development of technology and, ultimately, civilisation. What we produce through this facility is a futuristic expression of our futuristic thoughts. If it is highly complex, intricate and for some, mind boggling, then perhaps it is fair to say that it is a true reflection of the state of our society and way of life today.

So if Futurism of the early 20th century represents the vitality end of the clarity/vitality axis, the Bauhaus (1919 - 1933) and more particularly, Jan Tschichold, must represent the clarity end. It was Tschichold's strong belief that "Simplicity of form is never poverty, it is a great virtue" (Spencer, 1982, p. 152). It is ironic that Tschichold was neither a student nor a teacher at the Bauhaus, but there was no more passionate advocate of the new typography and no one whose name became more synonymous with it, than he. In his gathering together of important manifestos and samples of work of the avant garde designers including El Liissitzky, Moholy Nagy, Bayer and Schwitters for the 1925 special issue of the magazine *Typographische Mitteilungen*, Tschichold set out the main principles of the new elementary typography he so believed in. He advocated clear, simple type, the exclusion of anything superfluous, the use of colour not for decorative purposes but as a form of emphasis, no romanticism and no artistry. The aim was to improve readability; clarity of form and content being the ideals pursued. In a way,



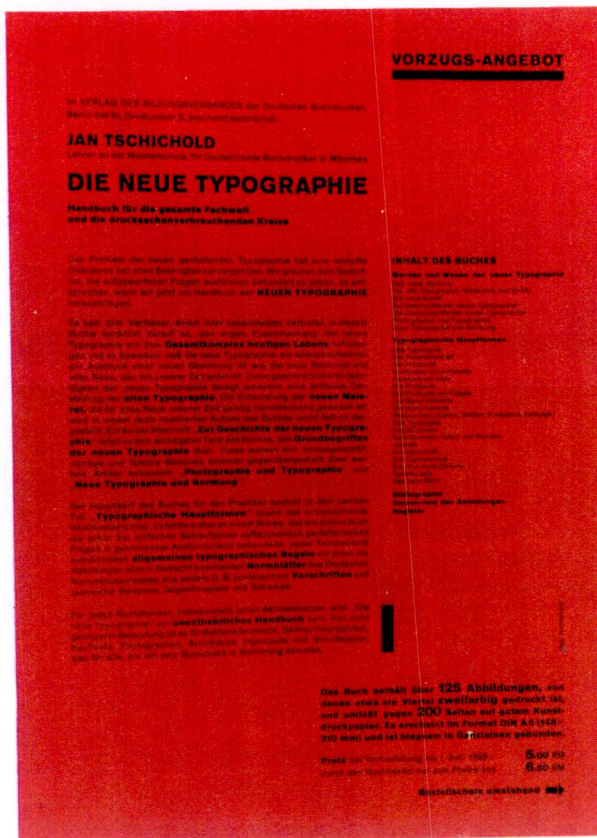


FIG. 1.8. TSCHICHOLD, Jan, *Die Neue Typographie*, 1928.

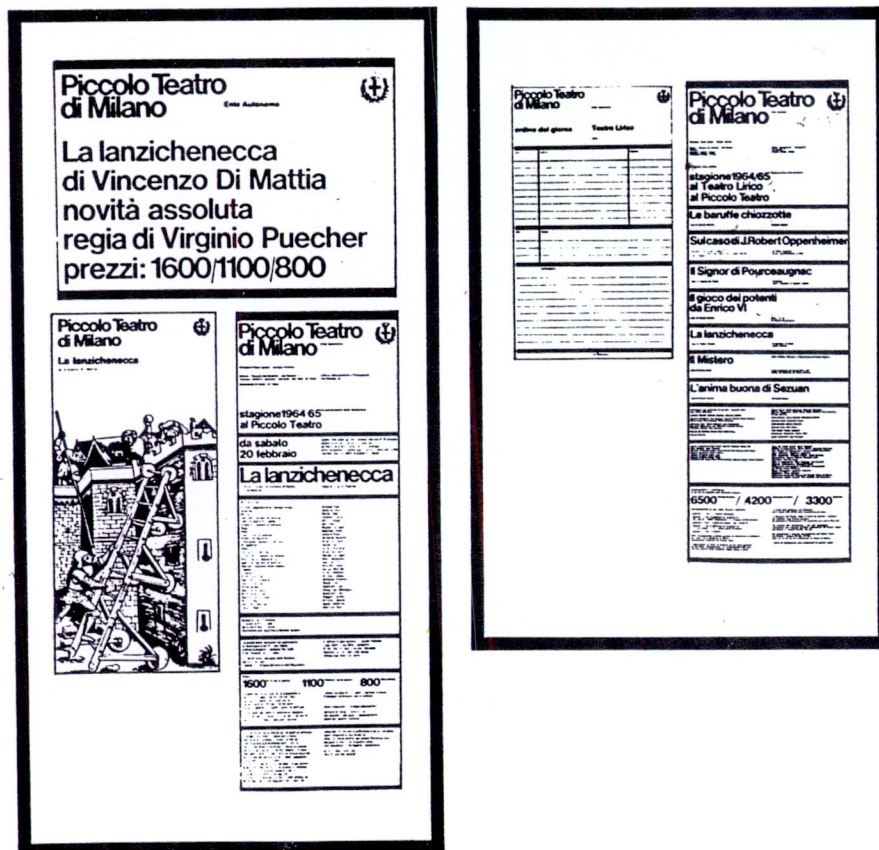


FIG. 1.9. VIGNELLI, Massimo, *Graphics for the Piccolo Teatro di Milano*, Late 80s.

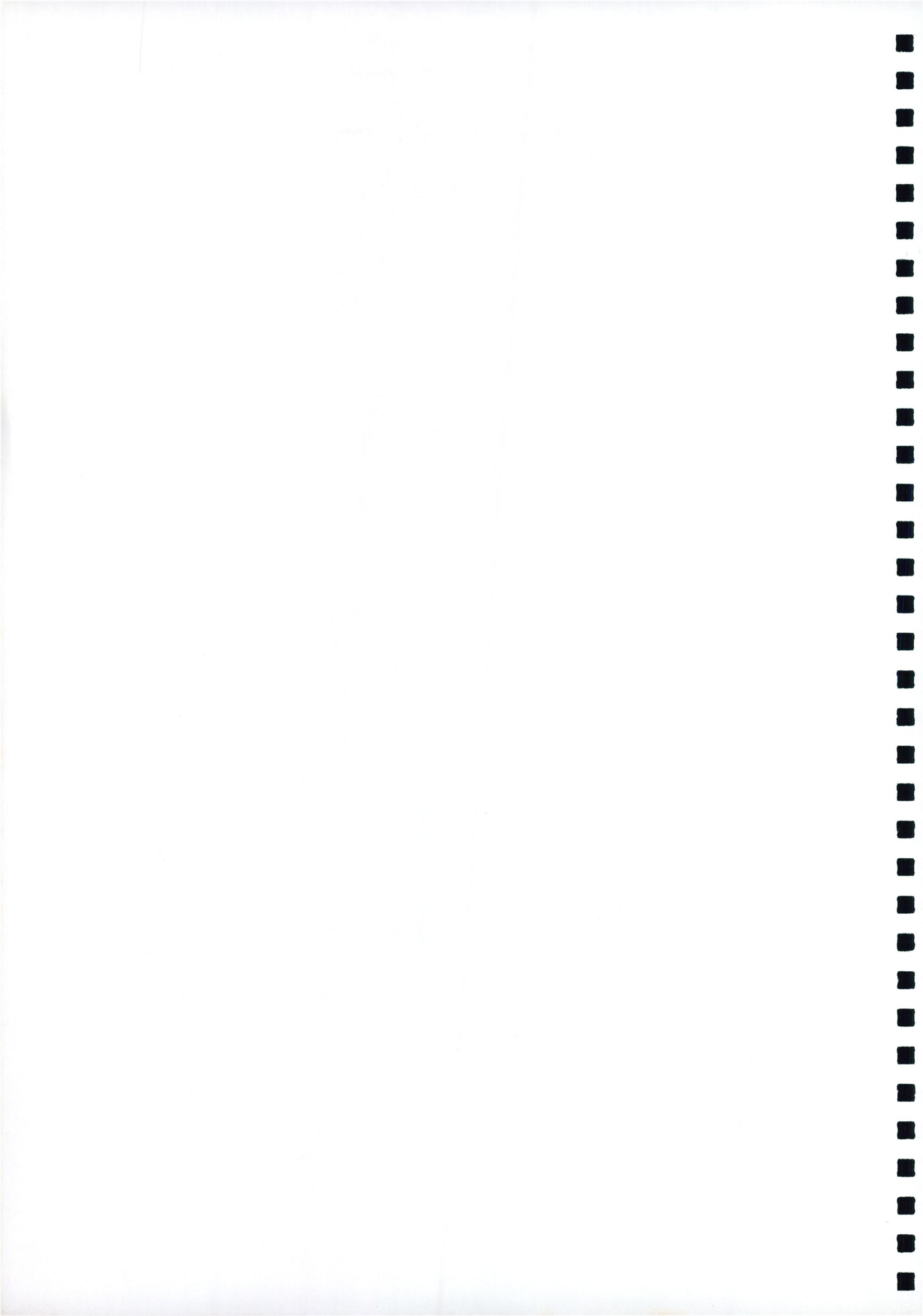




FIG. 1.10. GREIMAN, April, *Workspirit* magazine pages, Vitra, Germany, 1988.

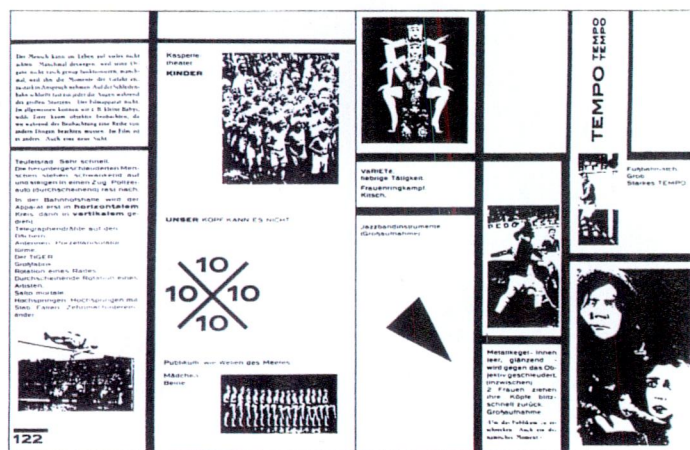
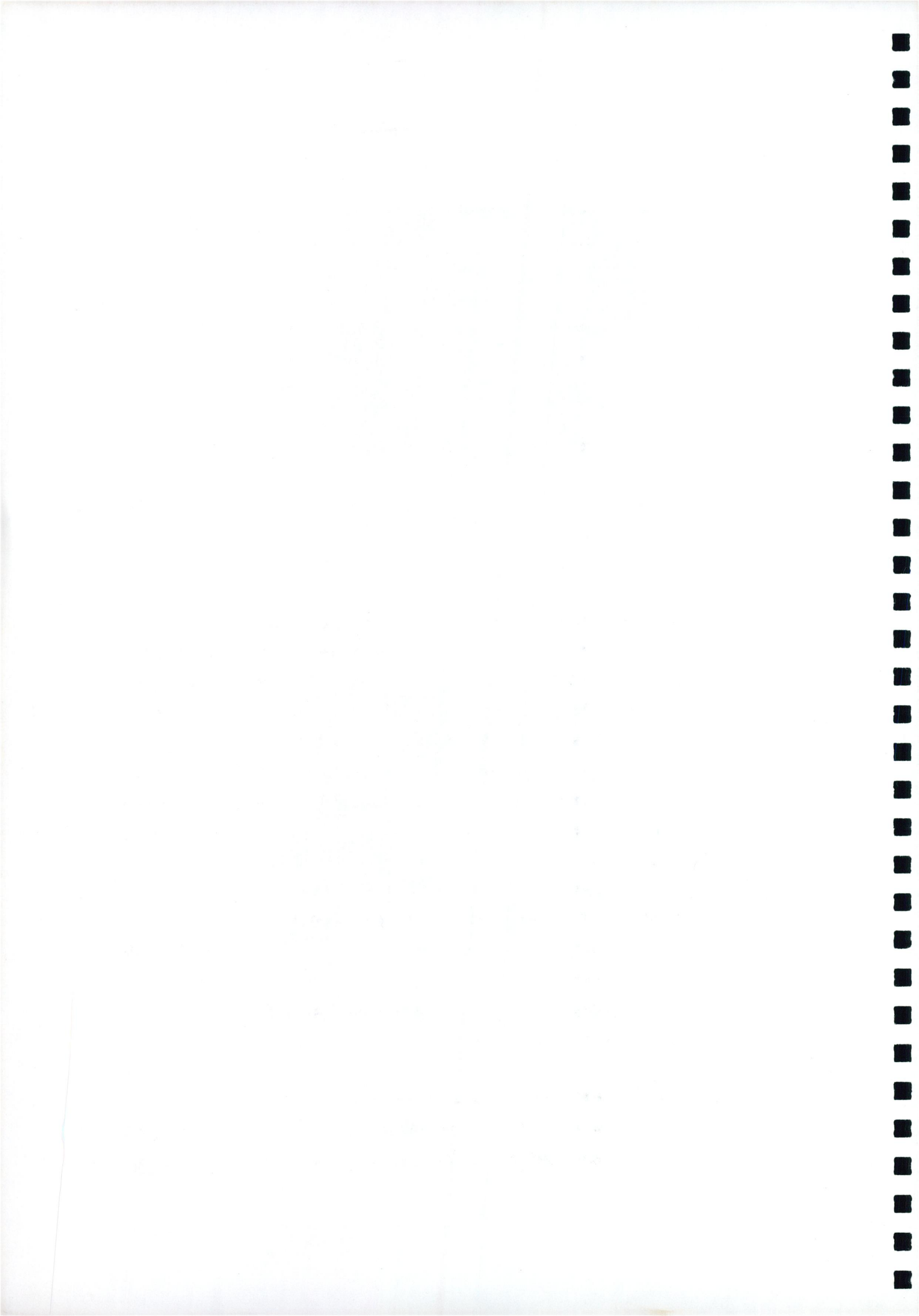


FIG. 1.11. MOHOLY-NAGY, Laszlo, *Malerei, Photographie, Film*, double page spread, 1925.



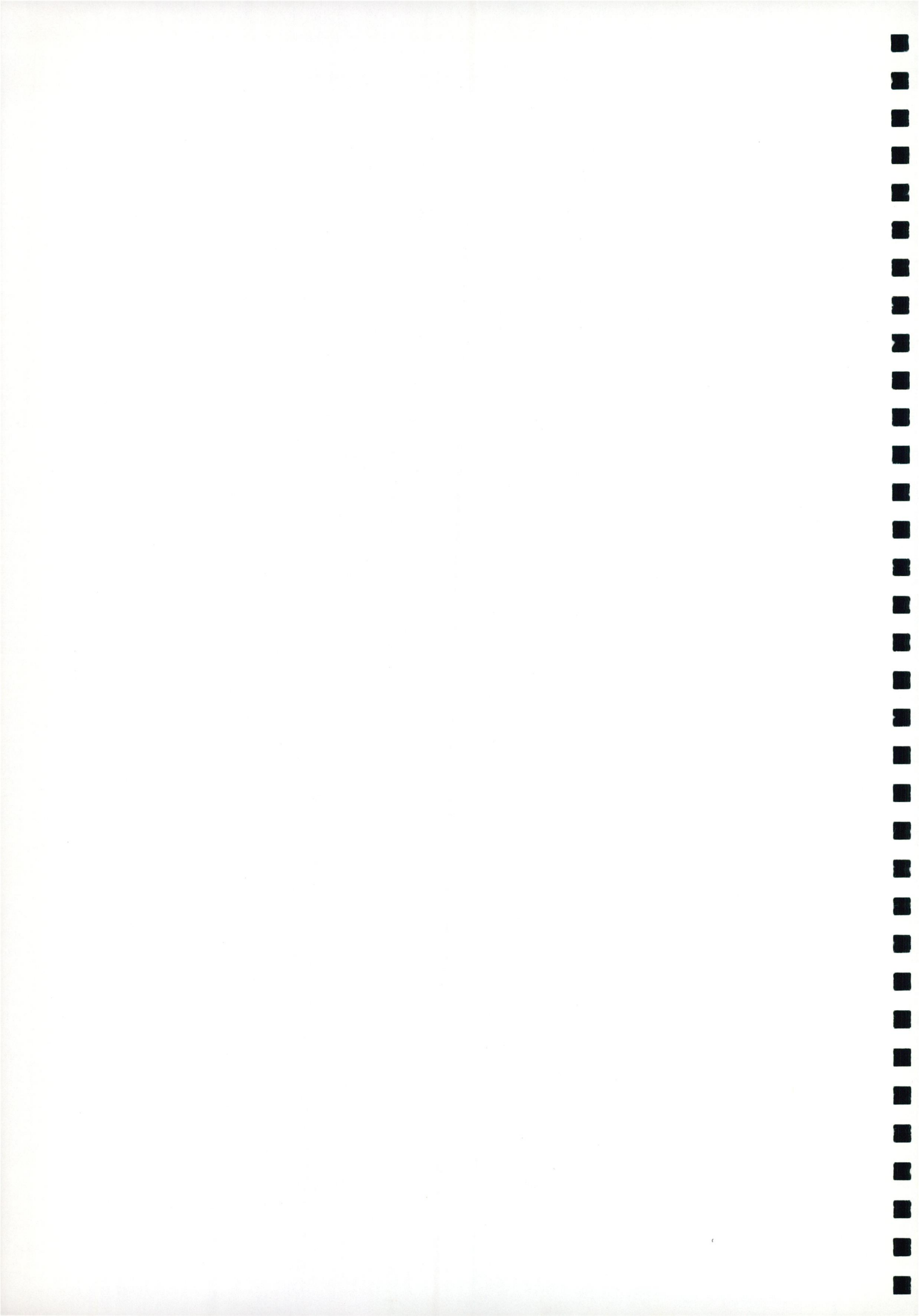
El Lissitzky began the gospel which Jan Tschichold spread. Clarity and simplicity are the essence of their work. All unnecessary elements of decoration are done away with and a purely clean, unadorned functionalism takes its place. Sans serif typefaces were favoured not for their novelty but for their function. Tschichold realised that not only were the new sans serifs simple in design, some were full family designs with four roman weights and corresponding italics, whereas many traditional faces were not that complete. This encouraged designing within one type family and mixing of light and bold typefaces of the same family; thus making possible the contrast that Tschichold felt was crucial to effective typographic design.

He opposed letterspacing of lowercase copy, whether to justify lines or for emphasis. He felt that letterspacing of text matter made for irregular white spots, broke up the colour of a type block uncontrollably, was less pleasing and less legible. (?) should rarely be set in caps. (Gottschall, 1989, p. 40)

So in short, clarity was all important; clarity and subsequently, ease of legibility.

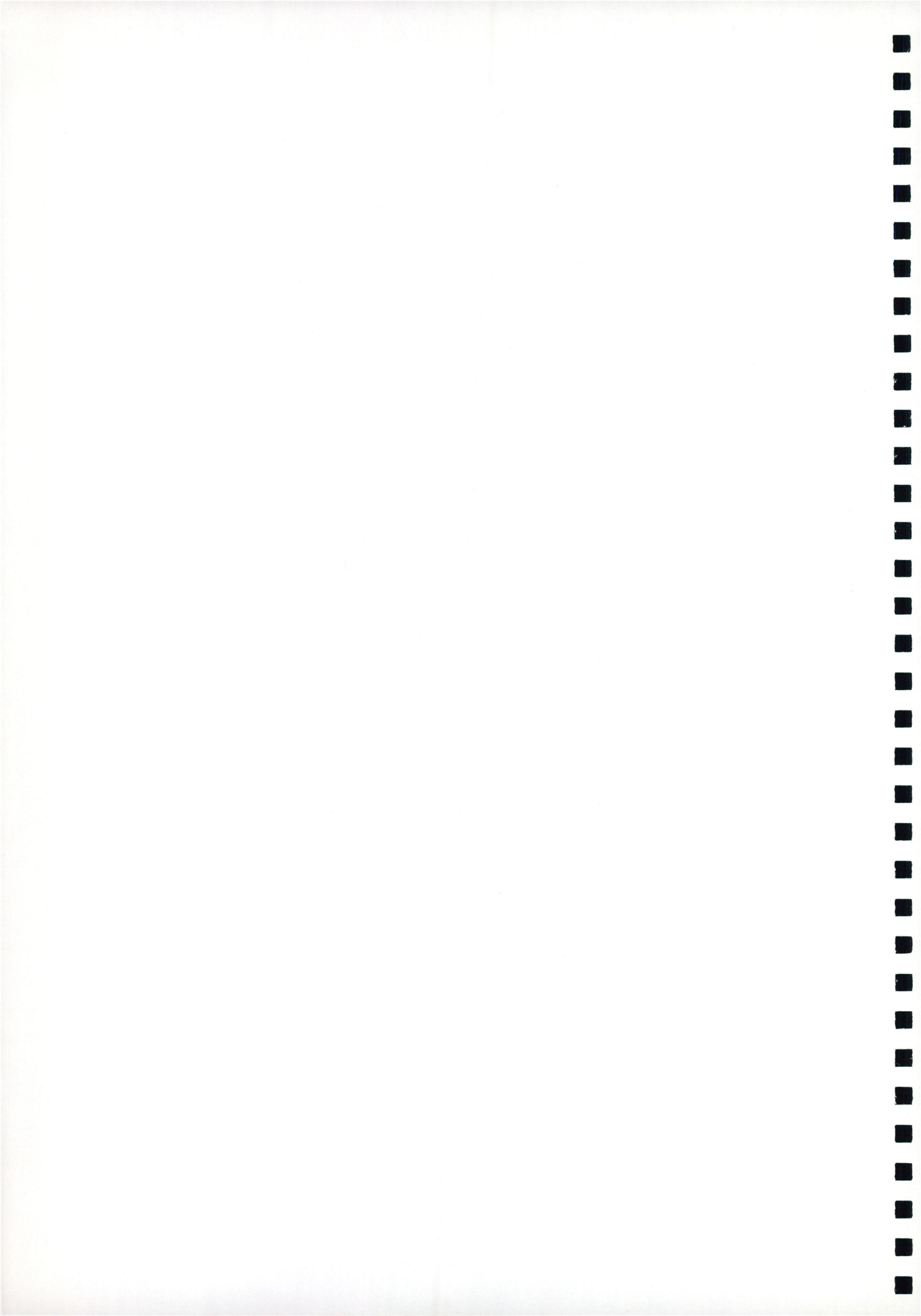
Tschichold's efforts eventually precipitated the grid system and his influence can be seen in contemporary typography. Compare his brochure for *Die Neue Typographie* of 1928, FIG. 1.8, with Massimo Vignelli's graphics of the late 1980s for the *Piccolo Teatro di Milano*, FIG. 1.9. Both designers' work appears very functional, very elementary. Sans serif typefaces are used for maximum clarity and ease of legibility. Vignelli has digressed a little from the complete doctrine with his use of illustration, but this too is very linear and clear, and its containment in a rectangular box allows it to link as another element of the design, similar to the text boxes which are outlined also. Both FIG. 1.8 and FIG. 1.9 are highly organised structures of information; negative space is used carefully, although I think Tschichold is more effective with his asymmetric design in this respect. Vignelli even takes his cue from Tschichold with regard to colour. Red and black is all that's used as colour identity for the Vignelli theatre design, while Tschichold's piece is simple black type on a solid red background. Simplicity of form with emphasis gained through contrast in type size and weight is a key common factor.

April Greiman's 1988 *Workspirit* magazine pages, FIG. 1.10, seem to also draw inspiration from the work of Tschichold and are not unlike the magazine spreads by Moholy Nagy published in 1925, FIG. 1.11. It's the same use of sans serif type



faces, the emphasis and space created by varying type weights, careful use of colour and strategically placed bars, horizontals and verticals being a dominant feature. Greiman's piece exudes the qualities of the 1925 New Typography: clear, simple and elementary. others.

Looking at these two areas of typographic history is not forgetting all the other influences which came together to bring the art of typography to where it is today: Art Nouveau, de Stijl, Suprematism, Constructivism, among others. But it is these two areas, i.e. Futurism and Bauhaus, which pinpoint, perhaps better than any others, the two extreme poles on the clarity/vitality axis, which are still very much in evidence today in contemporary typography and form the subject of much heated debate.



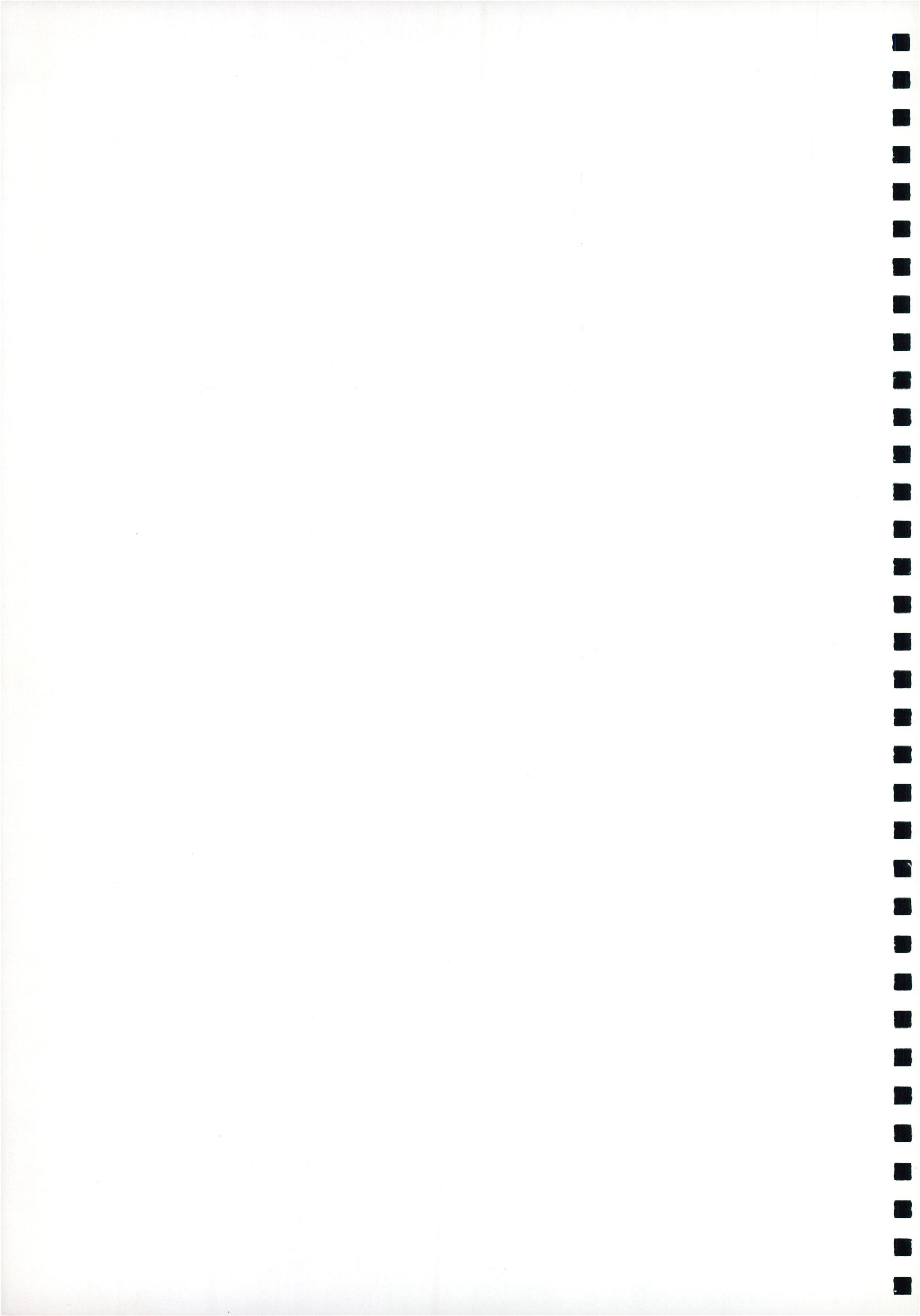
"The Legibility Question"

Using the clarity/vitality axis as a springboard, I will look at the issue of legibility in contemporary typography. How important is legibility on the list of today's typographic priorities?

Has typography become a case of too much subjectivity: glorified personalised style over content, freedom of design for its own sake?

Can this subjectivity be justified and, if so, is the message any better communicated as a result?

Have we become a worldwide nation of decoders, or is the 'sophisticated society' idea really a hyped up self serving argument?



At the heart of this ongoing debate between clarity and vitality lies the crucial issue of legibility; whether the insistent layerings and adventurous deciphering games have obscured legibility to the point where self expression and personal style take over. Has it become a case of freedom of design for its own sake, use and abuse of technology to the detriment of basic legibility? Or is it more complex than that? If legibility is relative to our society and its changing state, is it then more a case of the birth of a new concept of legibility, a new code of interpretation and recognition, whereby our fractured lifestyles endow us with the power to understand and receive the fractured and deconstructed messages of high tech, multi-layered graphics and typography?

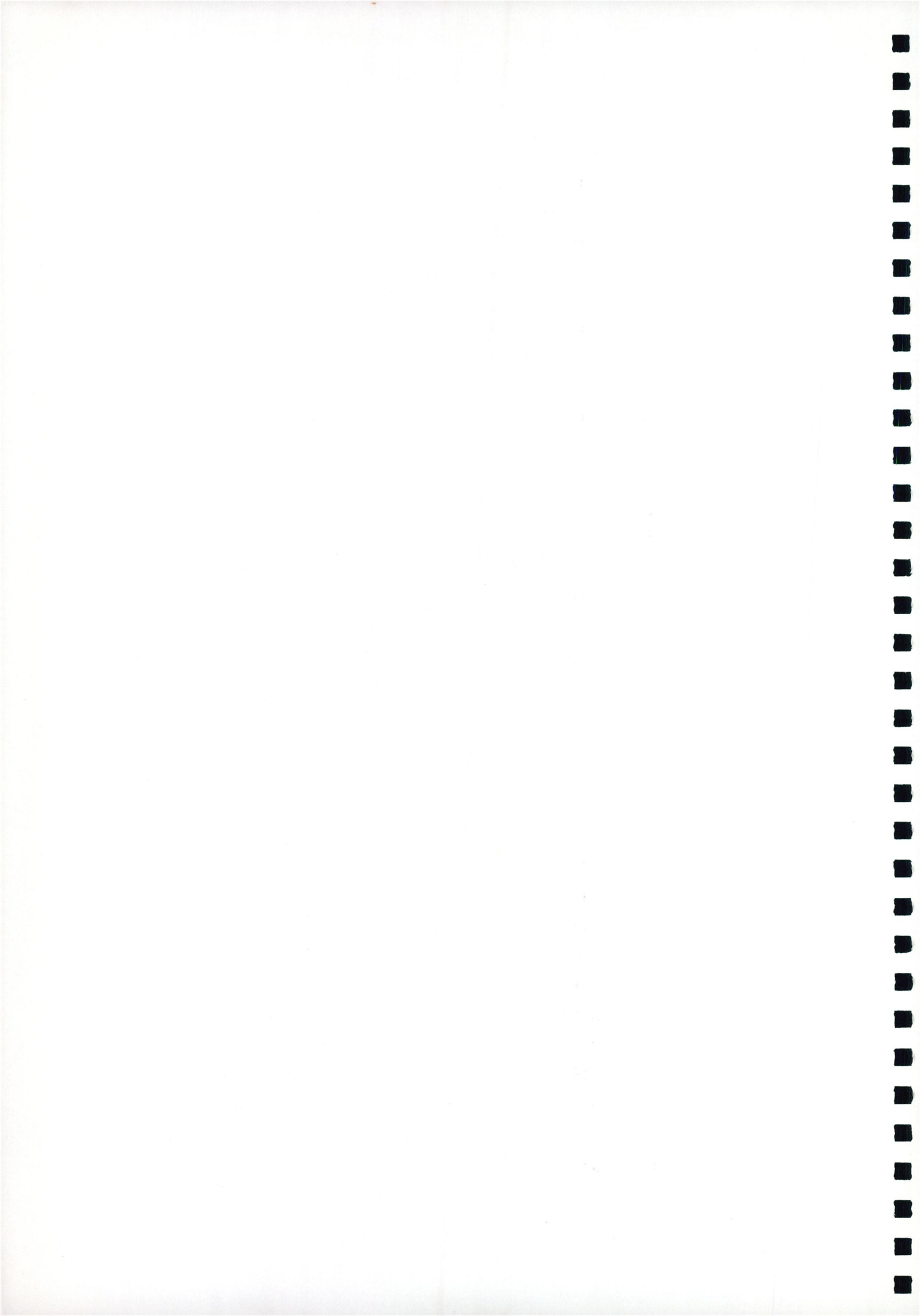
Legibility in its most basic sense consists of the deciphering of verbal and numerical information without ambiguity, "a certainty of deciphering" (Neuenschwander, 1993, p. 25). However, there is a current debate between those who promote legibility in the sense of clarity of text type and instant readability, and those who support legibility in the sense of text in overall context and the conveyance of the appropriate subliminal, non-literal messages as well. Clarity versus vitality surfaces once again. It is interesting to note Tschichold's remarks on the *Freie Richtung* (free typography) movement of the late 1890s and the *Juendstijl* (Art Nouveau) movement of the early 1900s:

They attempted to free typography from its greyness and disorder, its illegibility, but failed to make typographics more readable and more effective because they only replaced old restrictive rules with a clutter of their own (non functional) rules and ornaments. (Gottschall, 1989, p. 40).

This is a question we are dealing with all over again today: with all the complexities and distortions of modern typography claiming to achieve freedom and vitality, is the message any better communicated as a result?

It would seem that the advocates of free and expressively dynamic typography of the '90s are well capable of answering. The British typographer and letterpress exponent, Phil Baines, claims that the Bauhaus "mistook legibility for communication":

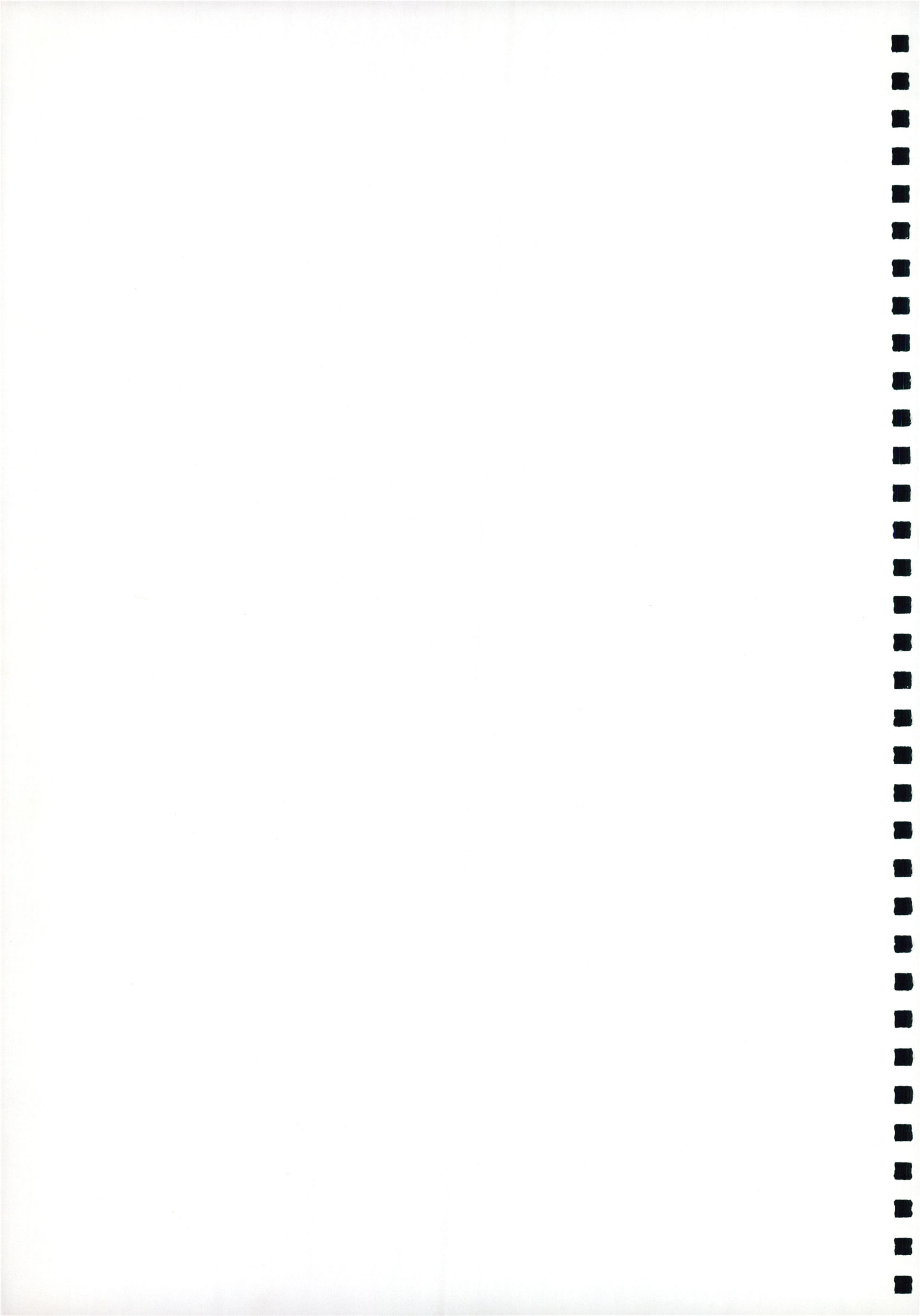
Legibility presents information as facts rather than experience. There is nothing wrong with logic and linearity, he argues but these qualities satisfy only the rational side of the brain. Typography should address our capacity for intuitive



insight an simultaneous perception and stimulate ousenses as well engaging our intellect (Poynor & Booth Clibbon, 1991, p.16).

Why shouldn't standards be turned on their heads? "Legibility makes for comfort of reading rather than a new visual interpretation, which leads eventually to a form of numb visual literacy" (Wilkins, Octavo, 1990). Indeed, visual complexity can give great visual excitement, e.g. FIG. 2.1 . Here in Jon Barnbrook's 1990 poster for the Royal College of Art and Design, London, the verbal, literal message is consolidated by his overall use of type and image. The treatment of the silent 'w' in the word 'written', the letter 'I' making a pun on the visual, the circle outlining the eye itself, lines of text at different angles; all indicate the amount of time and thought that has gone into this piece. The result is an active, enticing visual that, although complex, invites us to disentangle the information. The same visual excitement is evident in the 1986 Hans Bocktig poster *Largo Desolato*, FIG. 2.2 and, indeed, in John Weber's 1990 poster for the Columbus Society of Communicating Arts, FIG 2.3, where typography has become eminently functional in its role as a visual communicator. The characters and words seem to have lives of their own, becoming as strong a visual element in the collage as the images interwoven with them. Weber's piece is not unlike the *Folio-Qualitat* cover of 1931 by Moholy Nagy, FIG. 2.4; it bears a strong resemblance to Bauhaus collage.

It is said that "mere legibility in type is like mere shelter in architecture" (Neuenschwander, 1993, p. 29). The presentation of the written word is as important as the literal meaning itself. The way it is treated arouses our curiosity by intriguing the eye and makes the act of reading into a concentrated activity, stimulating the visual and intellectual senses. Take, for example, Fabien Baron's 1990 *Interview* magazine pages on Rob Lowe, FIG.2.5. The treatment of the actor's name makes the graphic unit of the page infinitely more exciting than if it were placed in two straight lines of 14pt helvetica type across the page. The excellent photograph by Wayne Masen accompanying the type makes the two pages a successful spread; it almost looks like Lowe could be shouting the words, all it needs is a cartoonish speech bubble. Brody's 1989 spread for *NIKE*, FIG. 2.6, and Kalman/Johnson's 1990 piece for *Interview*, FIG. 2.7, subscribe to the same approach. Both pieces embrace the vernacular, the rhythm of speech of a sector of the community, namely the black sector, from which they draw their inspiration. The type adopts the jauntiness of rap music, and by using different size and weights of



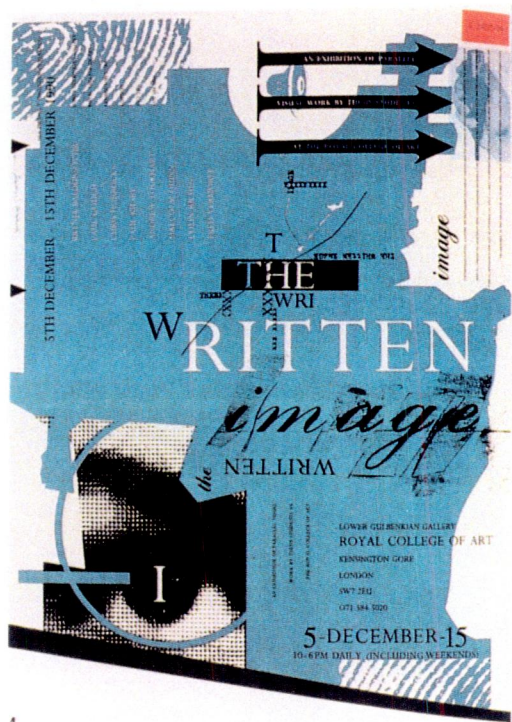


FIG. 2.1. BARNBROOK, Jon, *Poster for the Royal College of Art & Design*, 1990.



FIG. 2.2. BOCKTIG, Hans, *Largo Desolato*, Bristol, UK, 1986.



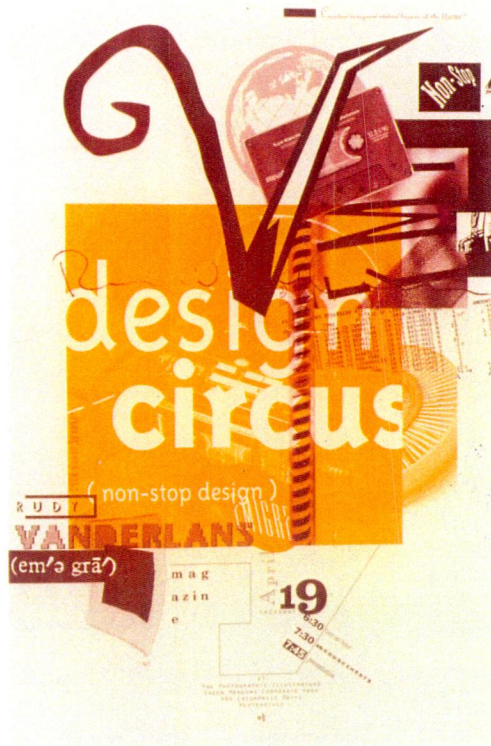


FIG. 2.3. WEBER, John, *Poster/Flier*, Columbus Society of Communicating Arts, USA, 1990.



FIG. 2.4. MOHOLY-NAGY, Laszlo, *Foto-Qualität* cover, 1931.



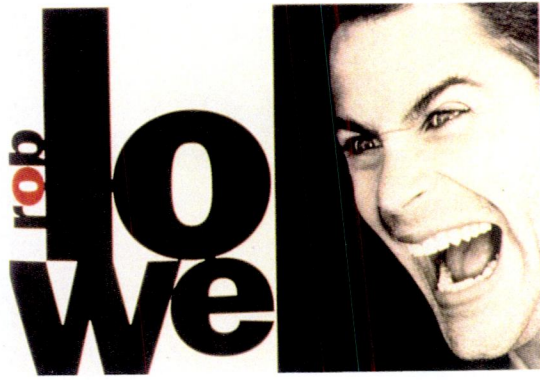


FIG. 2.5. BARON, Fabien, *Interview magazine pages*, Brant Publications, USA, 1990.

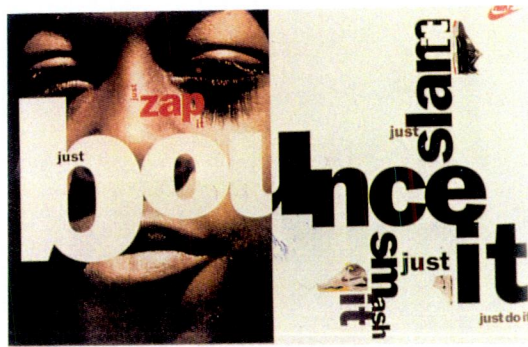


FIG. 2.6. BRODY, Neville, *Just Slam It*, Advertising campaign, NIKE, USA, 1989

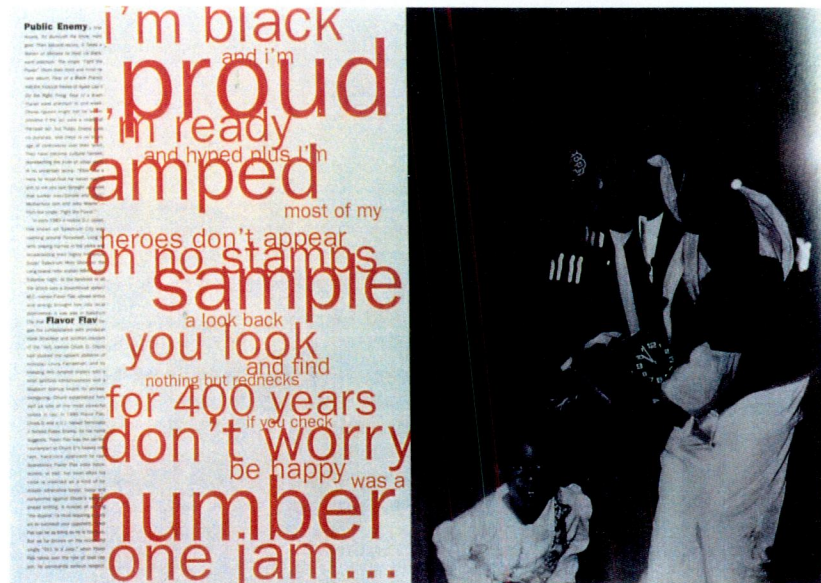


FIG. 2.7. KALMAN, Tibor & JOHNSON, Kristin, *Interview magazine pages*, Brant Publications, USA, 1990.



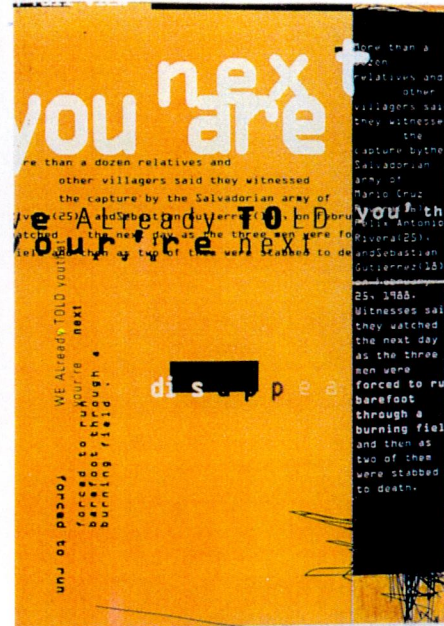
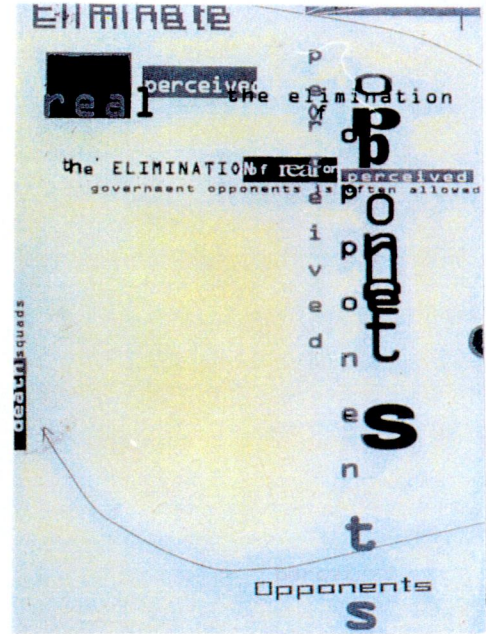
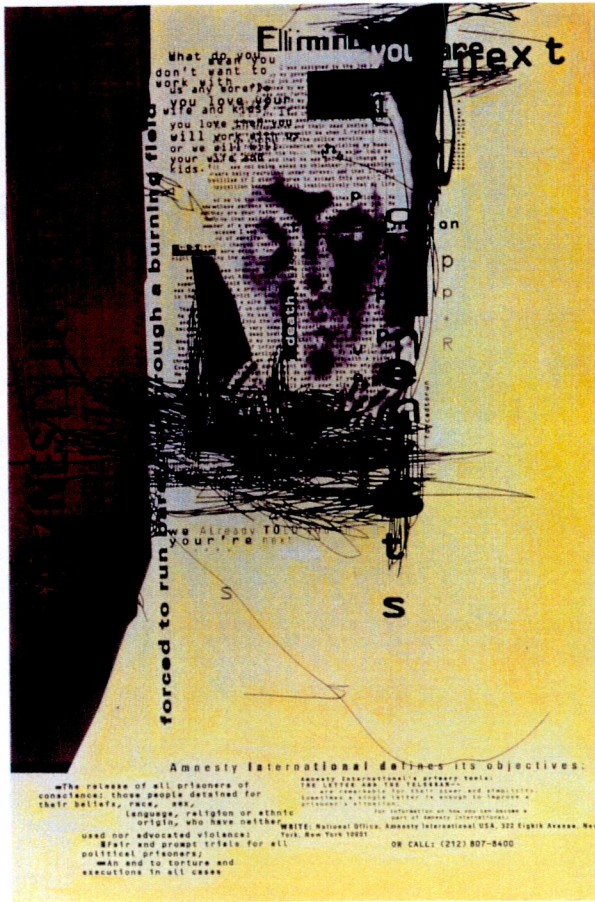
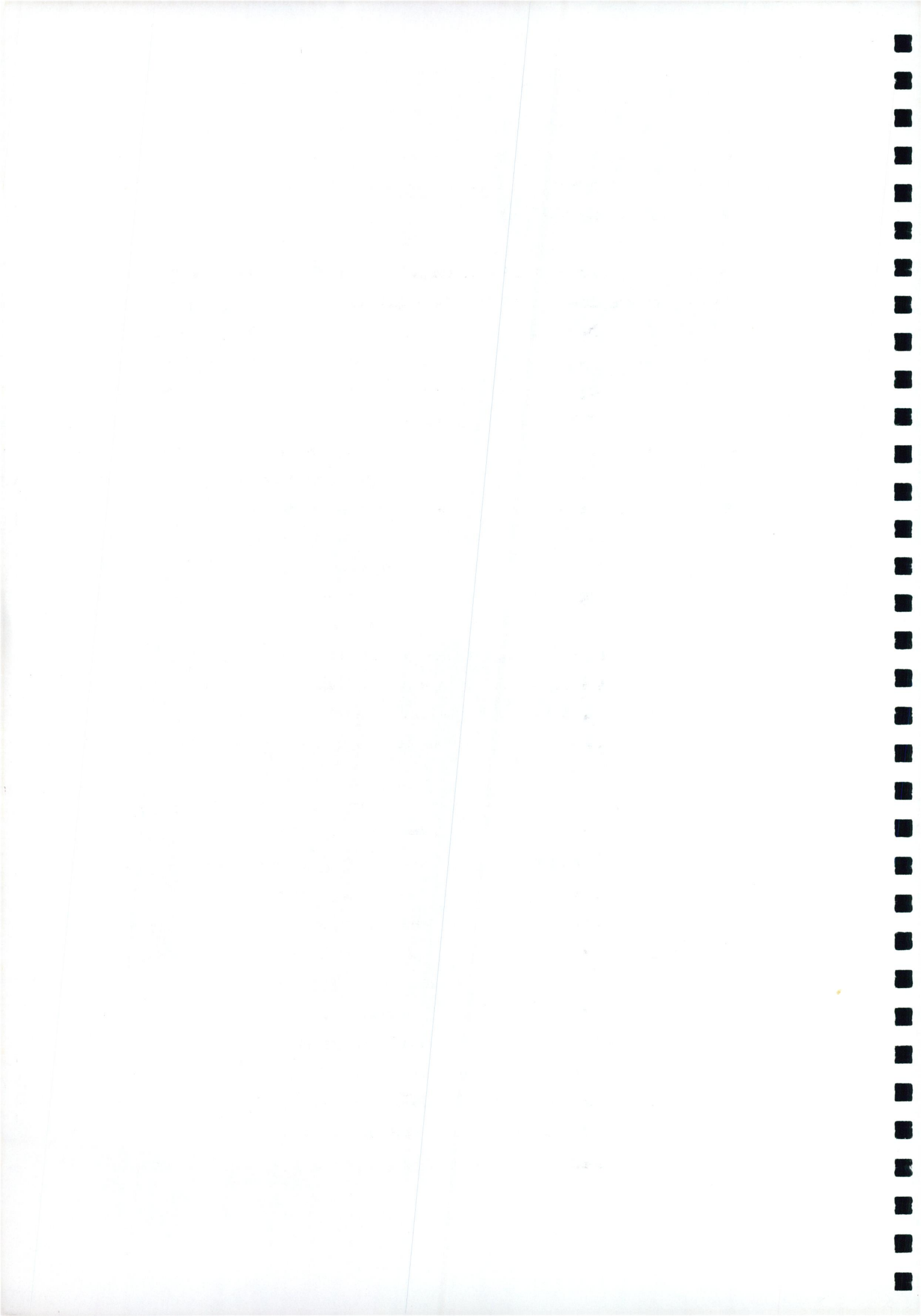


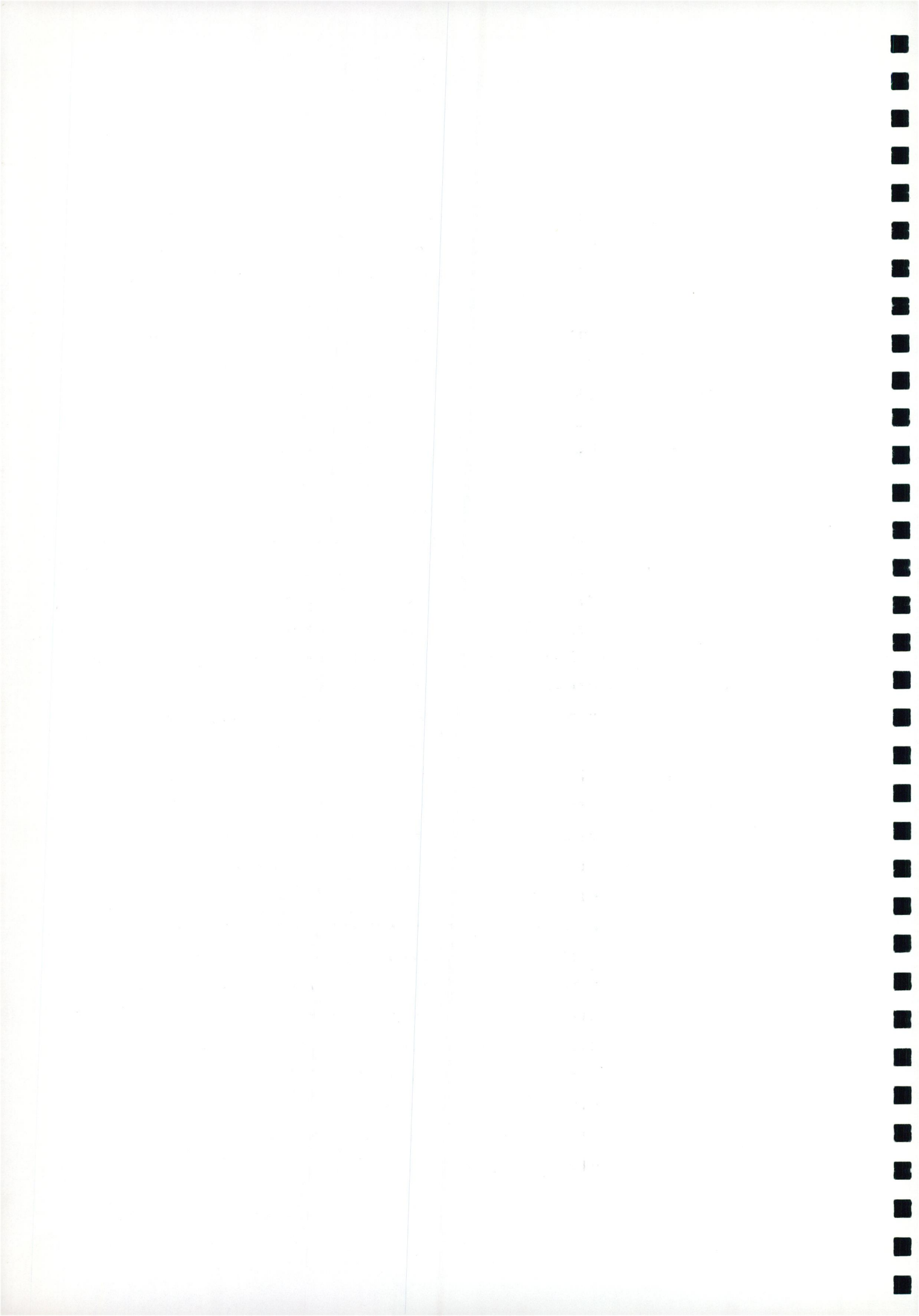
FIG. 2.8. DOBKINS, Joan, Poster and Leaflets for Amnesty International, Michigan, 1991



type it conjures up the voice and emphasis which punctuate the flow of speech. These two pieces in particular illustrate the power of type, the fact that it is never neutral, and indeed should never be so.

As Andrew Altmann of *Why Not Associates* argued at the Chartered Society of Designers debate, London, 1991: if type is laid out in an intriguing, playful and entertaining way, the reader may be immediately stimulated and then begin to break down the type until the message is received (Poynor, 1991, p. 30). This kind of typography is appealing to the intellect in a way that is new to us. Legibility is taken on board and treated in a new way. Instead of the information being presented to us in a completely up-front fashion, its intricacy and in some cases almost camouflage, invites us to interpret, decode and ultimately participate in the design. Joan Dobkins' 1991 promotional poster and information leaflets for *Amnesty International*, FIG. 2.8, have used legibility in a very clever way. The poster weaves together two stories that reveal the impossible political situation in El Salvador. Instead of presenting the stories as straight forward narratives, Dobkin gives us hints and clues enmeshed in a web of confused lines, forms and colours, the viewer must reconstruct the fragmented message according to his or her own experience. The blatant illegibility of these pieces makes a poignant statement about communication, or lack of it, within *Amnesty's* political sphere. It is a case of vitality winning out over clarity for maximum visual and emotional effect.

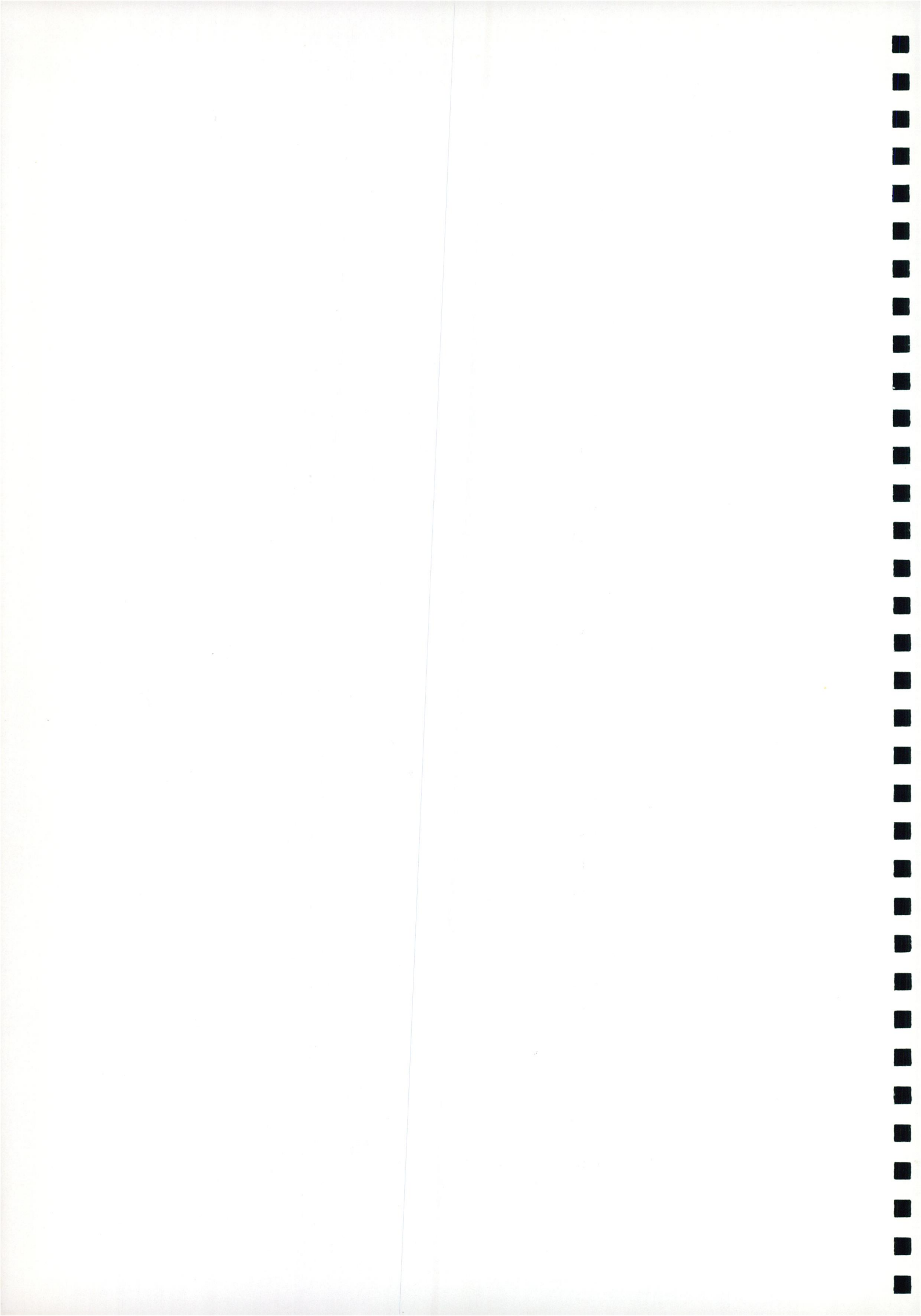
This kind of legibility demands more of us. We are made to enquire, decipher and piece together messages visually and verbally. The fact that our graphics and typography have become so intense and complex is a telling sign. We are a sophisticated society; after all it is the age of *MTV*, *Virtual Reality* and *Benetton* campaigns. We are a worldwide nation of decoders. We are conditioned by television and the media; through these our language has become abbreviated; we talk in shorthand, e.g. C.D., Hifi, AIDS, Macs, etc. We use shorthand visual forms and slogans without even noticing any more; we are used to the breakdown of things, the condensed form. *MTV* is like an animated version of some of the more visually challenging contemporary typography. Instead of running a sequence of images, seamlessly and logically by the viewer, he/she is bombarded with an energy rush of images, flashed at breakneck speed across the screen. It is left to the viewer to process them and receive the logic and sequence behind them. We have



been conditioned to read in a new way. We are now not only the recipients of information but also the interpretive participants in its re-construction. It is interesting to note how the Irish rock band U2, exploited this phenomenon to the full in their recent 'Zooropa' concert tour. The backdrop to their stage consisted of huge video screens each flashing different images at random speed. It is certainly impressive, I felt that the music was overshadowed by this huge futuristic graphic display. But more importantly, it showed how widespread this complexity of expression through technology has become, and how accustomed we are growing to seeing it. The typography of FIG. 2.1, 2.2 and 2.3 is an extension of this processing game; it's like a visual representation of a stream of consciousness. It is also a clear reflection of societies complexities, the texture of life and our progress in visual literacy.

This 'deciphering', hand in hand with the experimental explosion of complex, avant garde typography, represents the 'vitality' end of the axis. But as always, there is the other side of the debate, and the clarity/vitality argument carries on. "The first consolidation of typography is to be clearly read" (Debate, Chartered Society of Designers, London, 11 March, 1991; Poyner & Booth Clibbon, 1991, p. 16). The visual delirium of deconstructed type and image may well be formally stunning, but if its relevance to the content is not always clear, it must surely lose something.

David Carson's work on the California magazine, *Beach Culture*, is undoubtedly formally stunning. His highly individualistic and innovative style, as in FIG. 1.3, is again evident in FIG. 2.9 and FIG. 2.10. Grid lines go out the window; there is an increased emphasis on white space, letter spacing and novel typography. Names are set in lower case or, indeed, just the initial letter is lower case. Type floats in and out of the page as though it were not anchored or printed there. It is no longer a question of reading but of deciphering. In a sense, Carson provides a sort of showcase environment, a diverting one, in which the readers become viewers experiencing the visual tensions of pages designed more for style than for content. Each page, like a poster, stands on its own. The magazine becomes a hand held gallery. Carson's design has immediacy and vigour, but from the point of legibility, the eye is teased from one area to another. As a result, we emerge with many impressions, some facts and pieces of stories and personalities. We have been entertained more than edified. It's an example of what Andrew Altmann of *Why Not*



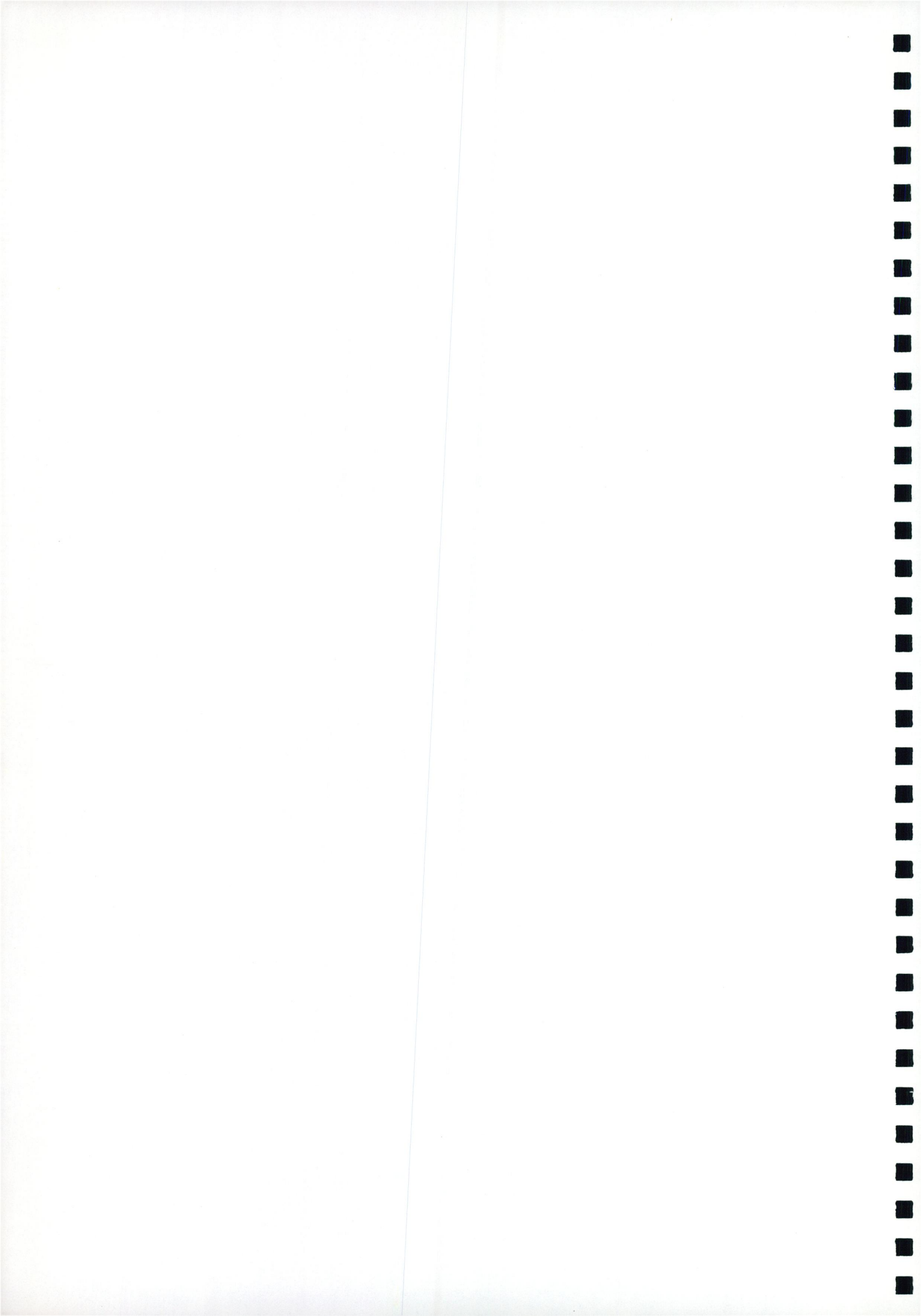
Associates calls type as entertainment. "The design functions decoratively as a means of engaging, amusing, persuading and no doubt sometimes infuriating the reader, rather than as a vehicle for extending meaning or exploring the text" (Poynor & Booth Clibbon, 1991, p. 15). While to a certain extent Carson's work is visually engaging, it almost seems that his typography has become a case of too much subjectivity, personalised style over content. Granted, he has created an identity for *Beach Culture*, but his layered and disjointed typography is bordering on gratuitous, and practically superfluous to its actual meaning.

If Carson's illegibility seems somewhat hollow, the two page spread in *Octavo* magazine, FIG. 2.11 must surely give those advocating the clarity end of the axis ample ammunition for their argument. For typographer/designer Ken Garland, on reviewing the spread, "something snapped." He describes the piece;

The tiny half tones, their details only discernable with the aid of a magnifying glass, topped by vertical black bars whose only purpose apart from being an outlet for the designers whimsy, was to contain a tiny caption number; horizontal rules dividing close set lines of type for no clear reason; slabs of varnished colour applying meaningless emphasis to random portions of text; and lines of text up to 250 characters long.

"Typographic footling" he calls it (Garland, 1993, p. 12). I agree, this piece pushes , the boundaries of legibility too far. If it subscribes to the idea of intriguing the eye, then it confuses it to the point of frustration. The Harper/Maybury design brief for the Wiggin's/Teape 1993 student competition is particularly infuriating, FIG.2.12. Of all things I believe a brief must be clearly legible. Instead, Wiggins/Teape have taken the opportunity to create a piece of "typographic footling", with the panels of type, disjointed, turned on their side, turned upside down, with tiny numbers by their sides which have to be hunted out so that a sequence can be discerned. It seems like a conflict of interests. I suppose the assumption here as in FIG. 2.2 for example, is that the viewer will share the designer's aesthetic pleasure and that the pleasure will compensate for any difficulty in deciphering the text. So we can advance the argument that the public is more sophisticated than ever in the way it filters and interprets visual signs. Maybe it is, but as Rick Poynor points out, it is indeed a self serving argument (Poynor, 1991, p. 31).

Contemporary typography of today in its exuberance and experimental fervour is



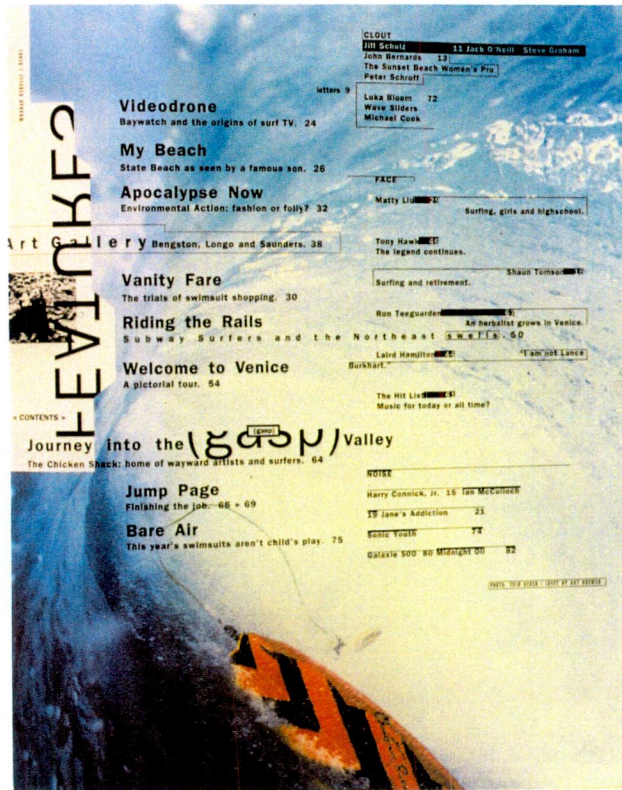


FIG. 2.9. CARSON, David, *Beach Culture* magazine pages, USA, 1990

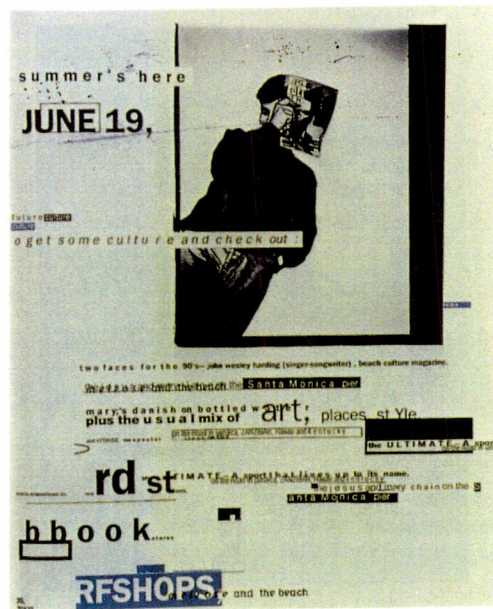
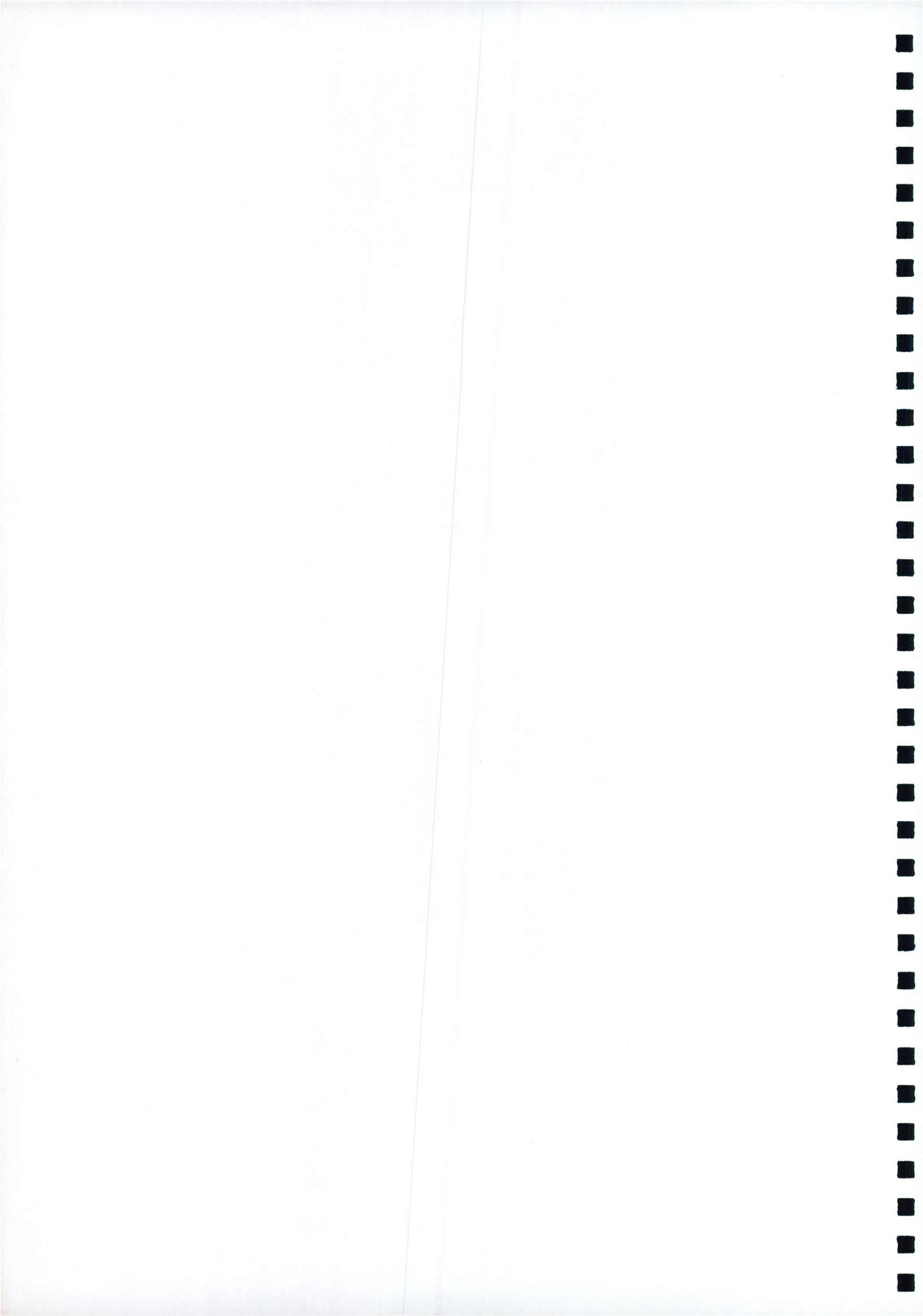


FIG. 2.10. CARSON, David, *Beach Culture* magazine pages, USA, 1991.



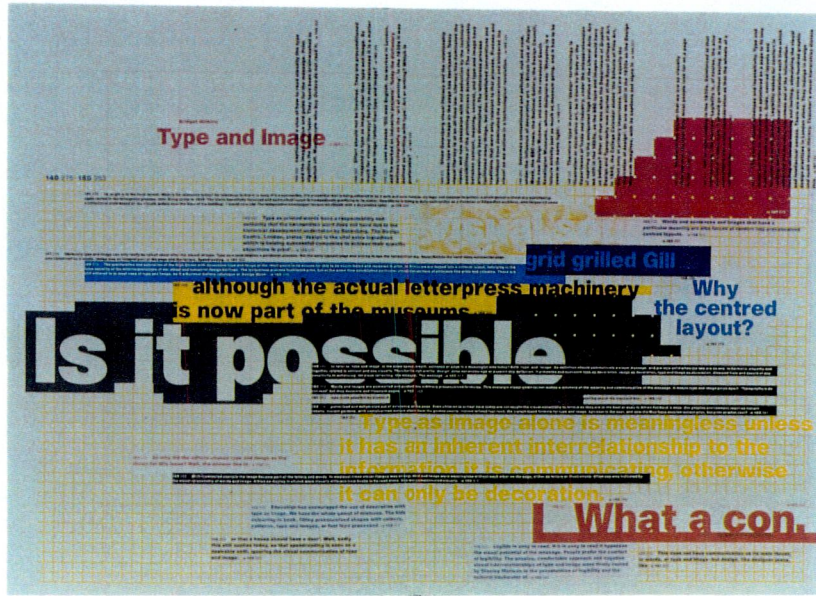


FIG. 2.11. 8vo DESIGN, Octavo magazine pages, UK, 1990.

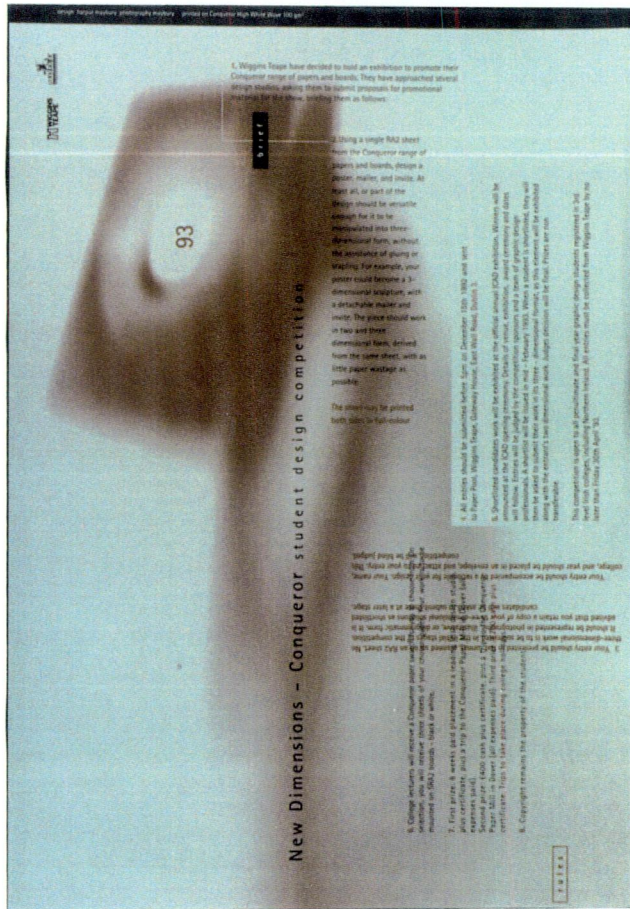


FIG. 2.12. HARPER/MAYBURY, Brief for Wiggins/Teape design competition, Ireland, 1993.

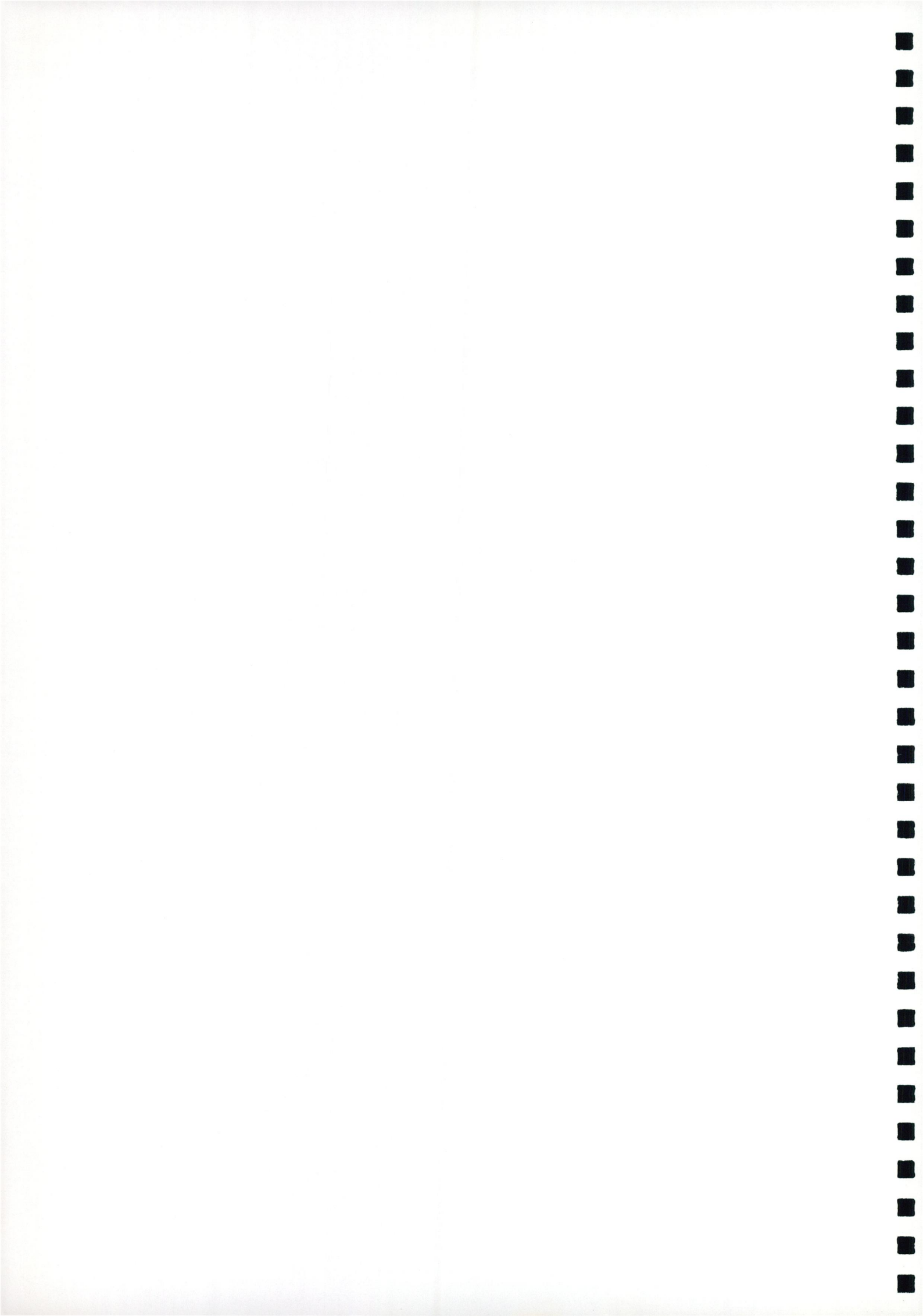
[Faint, illegible text, possibly bleed-through from the reverse side of the page]



indeed under much scrutiny; the clarity/vitality axis and the fine line of balance between them is a subject of ongoing debate. But it need not be a battle between wildly experimental 'vitality' pieces and their counter current 'clarity' advocates denouncing them as illegible "ugly excesses" (Heller, 1993, p.52). To quote Gottschall, "dull look-alike pieces are not inevitable when organising information on a grid, anymore than confusion and poor readability must be accepted as the price of dynamic free form layouts" (Gottschall, 1989, p.12). Look, for example, at the work of Russell Warren Fischer, FIG 2.13, whose newsletter for *British Telecom* is a mixture of Dutch influences and Swiss austerity. It is a legible, well organised design with an inner energy brought about by the large '8' overlapping the word 'international', the cropping of the letters 's' and 'T' in the disjointed word 'Translated', the layering of type and the juxtaposition of type at different angles, etc.

But in reality there is no typographic ideal. Such is the beauty of typography; there really is no set guideline. Some designs go for traditional values, other designers' only values are not to have any set values. From Soffici to Tschichold, from Carson to Fisher, wildly diverse approaches to typographic design exist and, to a greater or lesser extent, are accepted. Ultimately, the criterion is not really which one is best in a general sense, but which one is most appropriate as a design solution to a specific problem. True, it is impossible not to notice the unexpected. But attracting attention is only the first step in the communication process, and if confusion or obscurity follow, then the eye-stopping devices have overpowered the message they were designed to empower. On the other hand, clarity and order alone are rarely enough. If a piece is boring or indistinguishable from many others, it may lack the power to attract maximum readership or make a deep or memorable impression. Appropriateness is the key; the backbone of all good design. Without a good rationale, even the most illustrious and initially impressive design will essentially be nothing more than hollow. Where free form may be appropriate for one solution, tight structure may be the answer for another; the strength of a design lies in the appropriateness of its application.

In a way, the see-saw between advocates of free form and advocates of traditional structure is good for the art form in that it provides a tension that keeps typography fresh, updated and healthy. The question of legibility precipitated by this



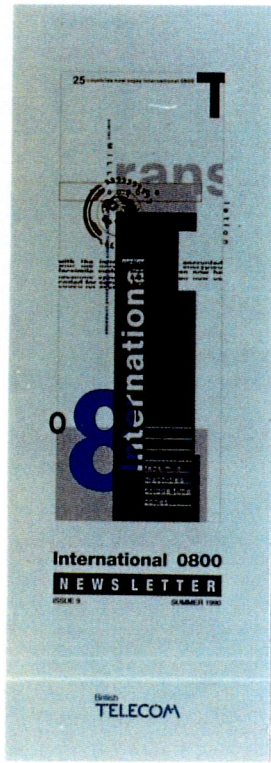
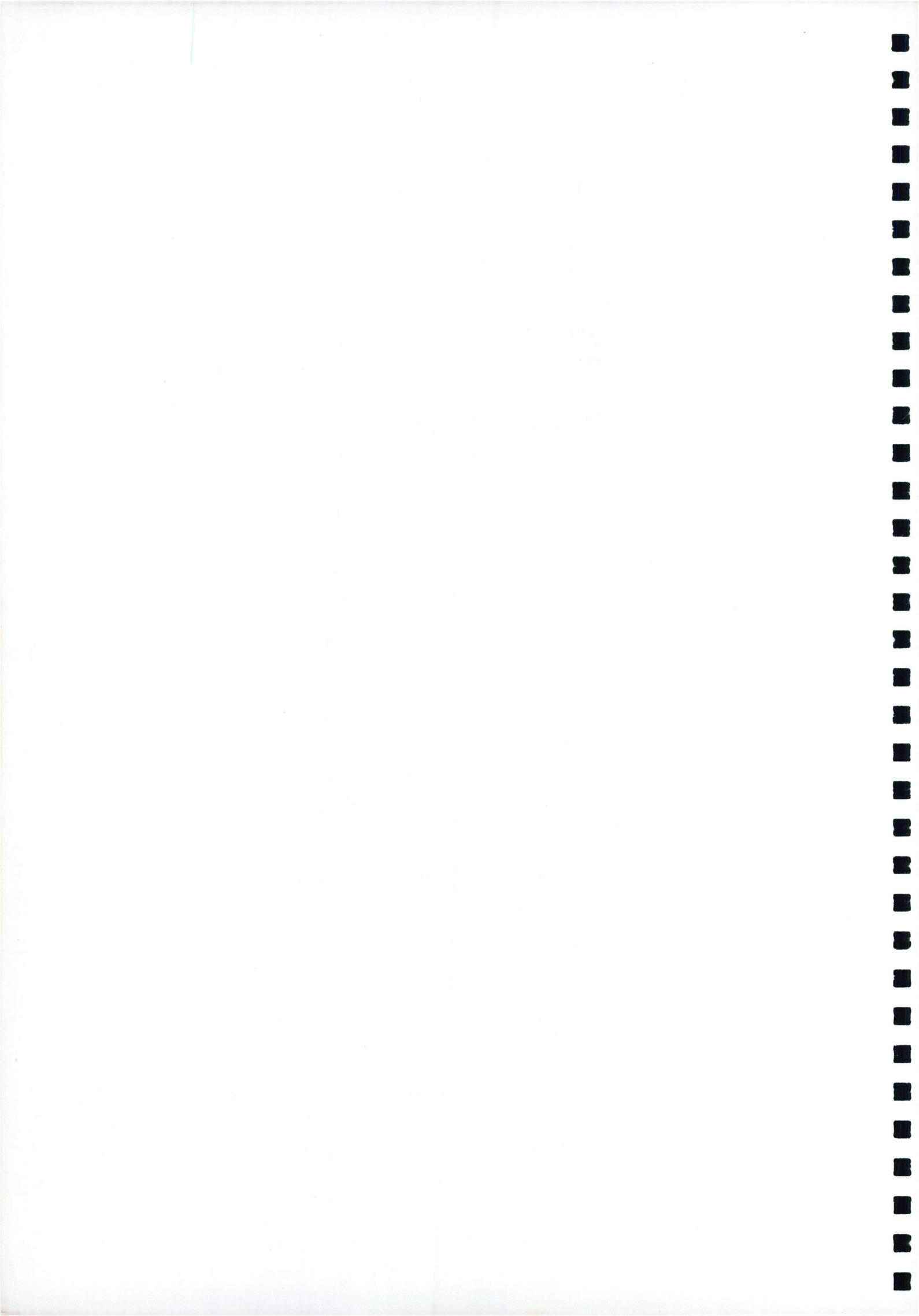
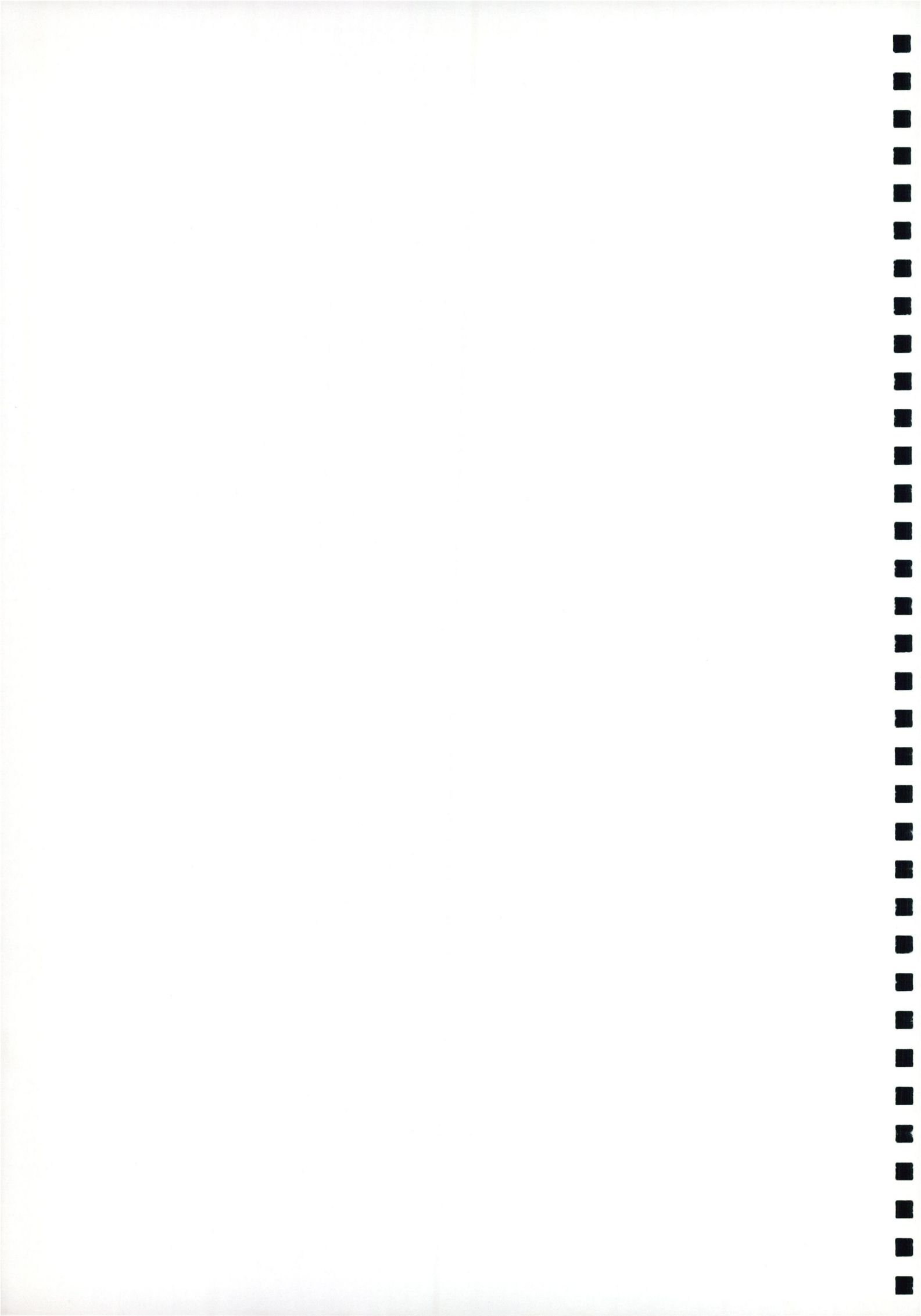


FIG. 2.13. WARREN FISHER, Russell, British Telecom Newsletter, 1990.



experimentation points towards an amount of indecision in the sense that today there is no general consensus on typography. The legibility question is also a product of our technological progress; the same technological progress that has left us with what is essentially an open forum on typography. Our language, the way we code, read, interpret and understand our language is being re-evaluated. It is a case of a co-existence of extreme forms of precisely ordered design, wildly alive design and many intermediate forms striving for the best of both worlds, in a period where technology rather than fine art is the great modifier of typeface and typographic design.

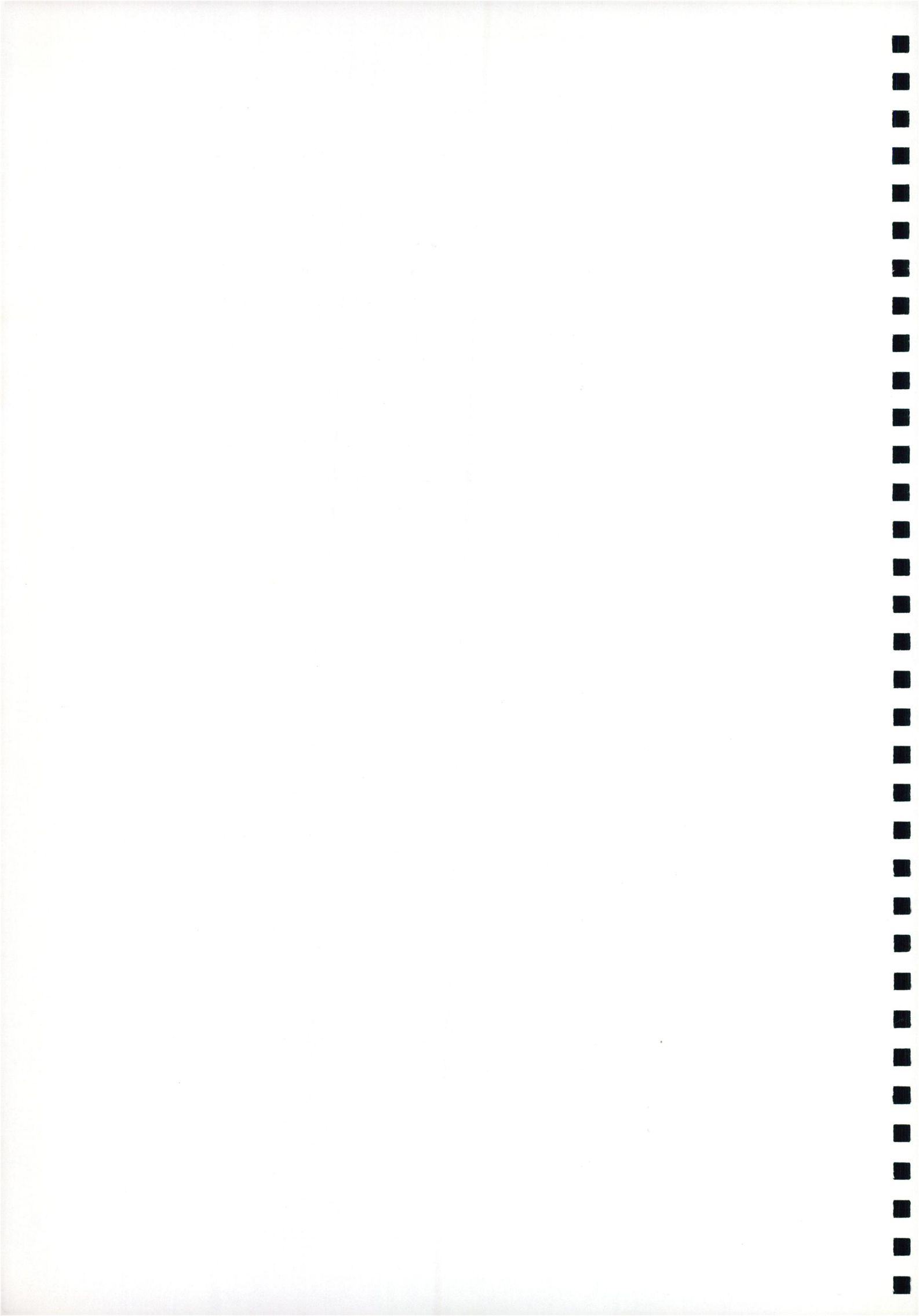


"Exclusivity?"

With trends towards out and out illegibility, does the new typography lend itself to an exclusivity that is self destructive?

Has it become a case of designers talking to designers, or to a limited audience?

If so, have the aims, values and aesthetic guidelines of typography changed, and with them typography's role within society?



With the limitless opportunities offered by computer software and desktop publishing, technology has given a new dimension to the word experimentation. Letters can now be subjected to any form of manipulation - scaled, slanted, stretched, interpolated at the touch of a key. Lines of text can be set in an undulating wave, wrapped around a circle or wound into a spiral, effects which would be practically impossible to achieve manually without destroying the kerning of the letters. Many graphic designers have harnessed this power to great effect, others less so, but as they journey towards the creation of multi-layered, complex and intricate outputs they face the issue of legibility. In their efforts to innovate, they develop a style, 'a look'. But there is another issue, borne of all these. It is more than the legibility question; it is more than just self expression versus the supposed 'professional result': more than a development of style. It's about the generation of a graphic language that is exclusive. With trends towards out and out illegibility, does the new typography lend itself to an exclusivity that is ultimately self-destructive? Has it become a case of designers talking to designers - a selection of audience? If so, have the aims, values and aesthetic guidelines of typography changed, and with them typography's role within society?

This concept of exclusivity is especially evident in the typography of many contemporary 'designer magazines', e.g. *Emigre*, *Beach Culture*, *Octavo*, *The Face*, etc. Neville Brody, in his 1984 'contents' and 'style' logos for *The Face* magazine, FIG. 3.1 and 3.2, experiments with the condensed form. The steady deconstruction and abstraction of the words 'style' and 'contents' ends in a sequence of symbolic shapes. It challenges legibility; it also says something about it. By abstracting the characters to mere shapes, Brody is playing an intriguing game of exploration into visual coding and understanding of language. According to Brody, "it is a question of visual coding as applied to written language" (Wozencroft, 1988, p.22). Poynor sees it as a much larger assumption;

Brody is "taking it for granted that graphic design can function as a kind of private language, with its own set of meanings. After all, the best-selling graphic design book of the 1980s was *The Graphic Language of Neville Brody*. He is claiming to be communicating in his own personal language" (Poynor, *Blueprint*, 1991, p. 35).

It is interesting how El Lissitzky's 1923 pages from Mayakovsky's book of poems use symbolic shapes not unlike Brody's abstractions, FIG. 3.3, - a possible precursor?

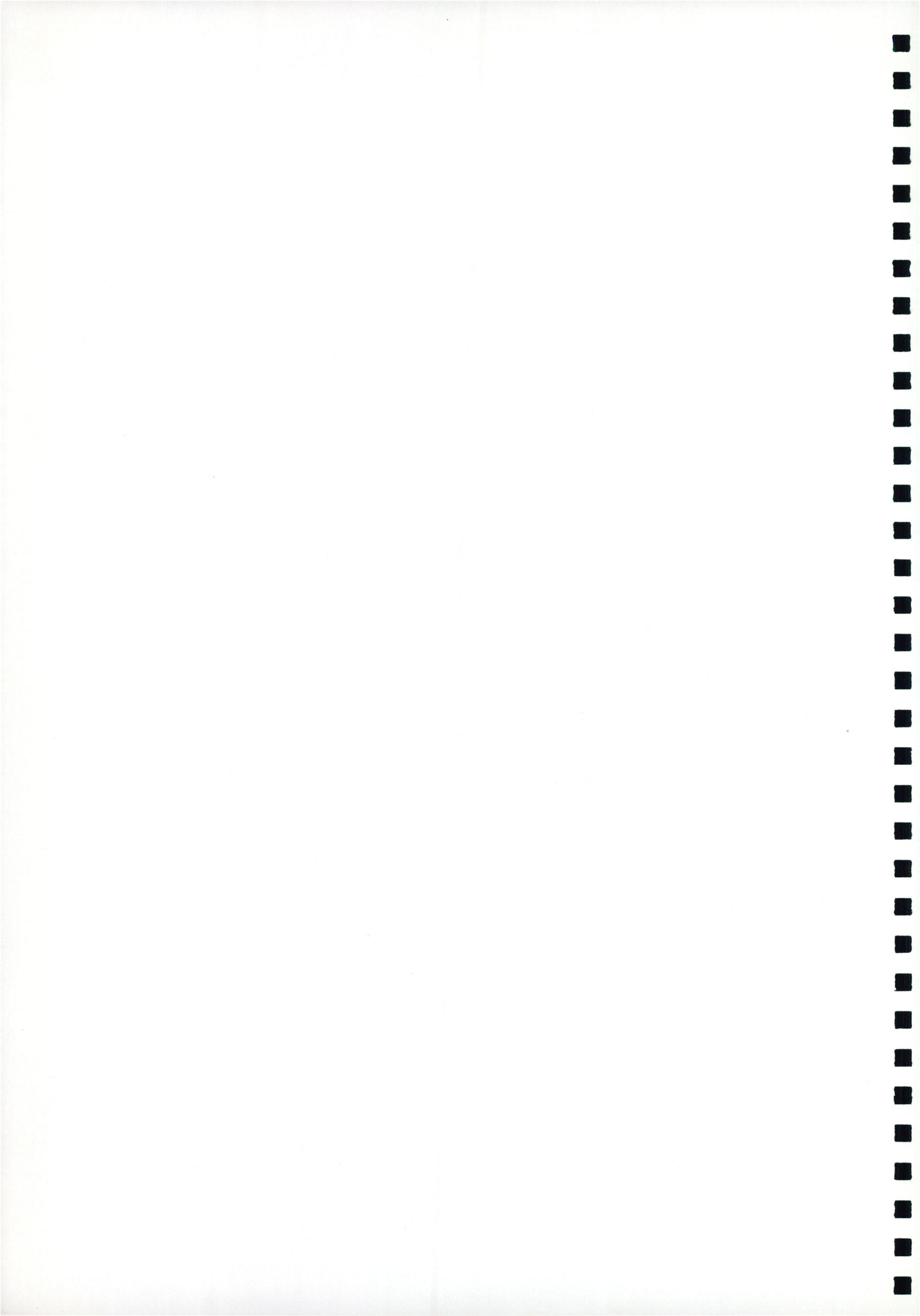




FIG. 3.1. BRODY, Neville, *Contents page*, The Face, Vol. 50 - 55, 1984.

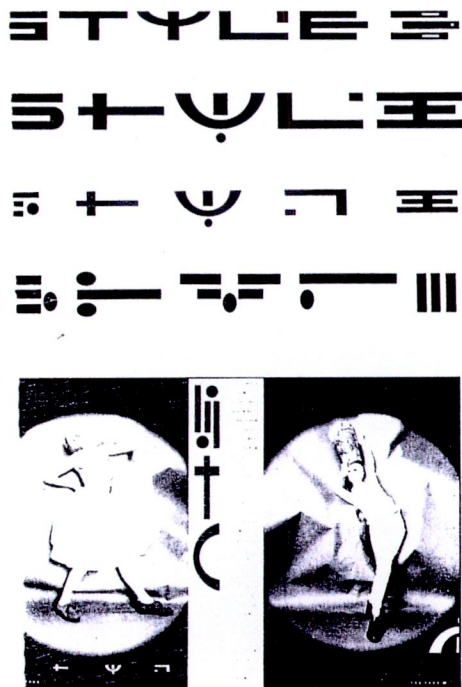
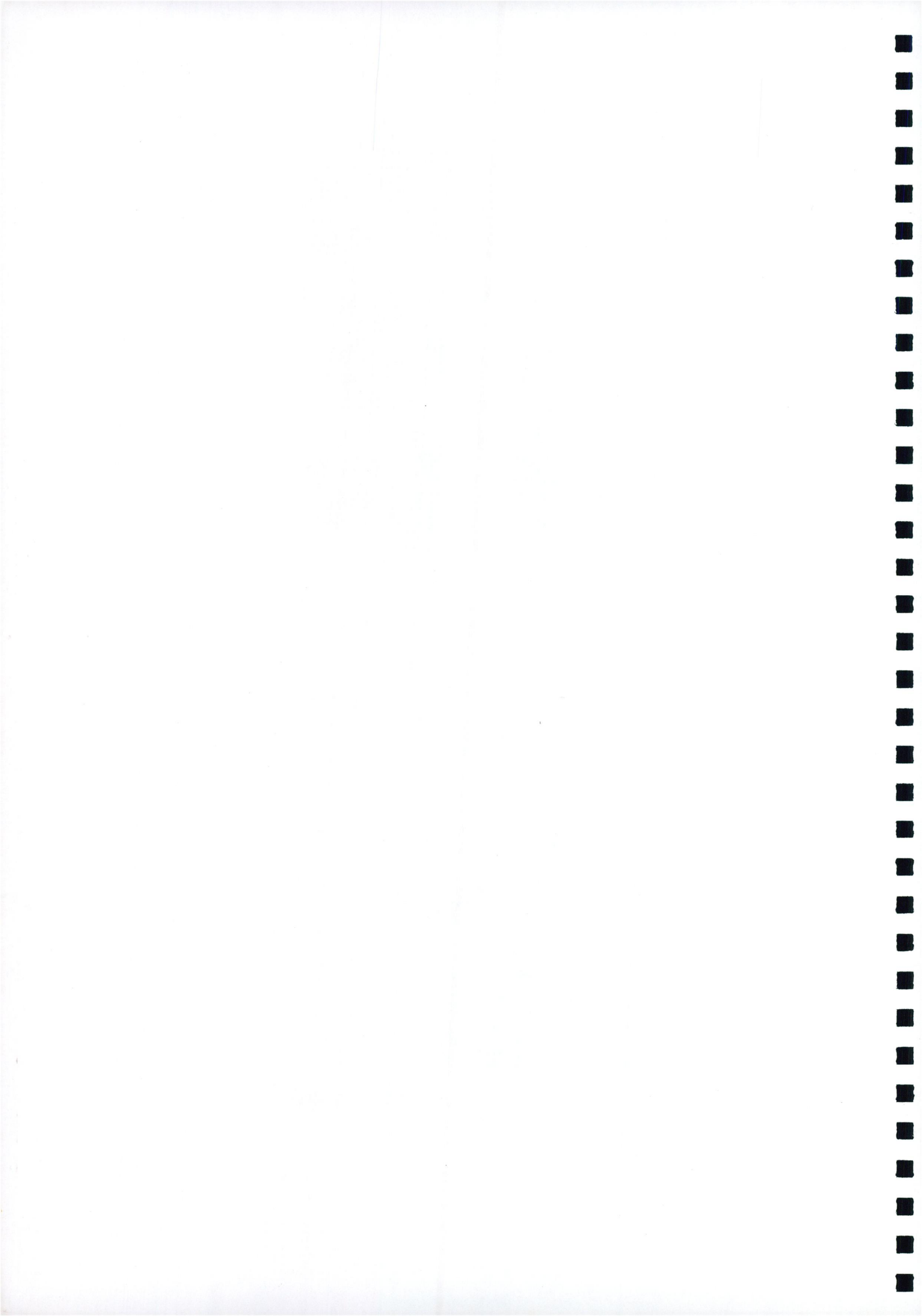
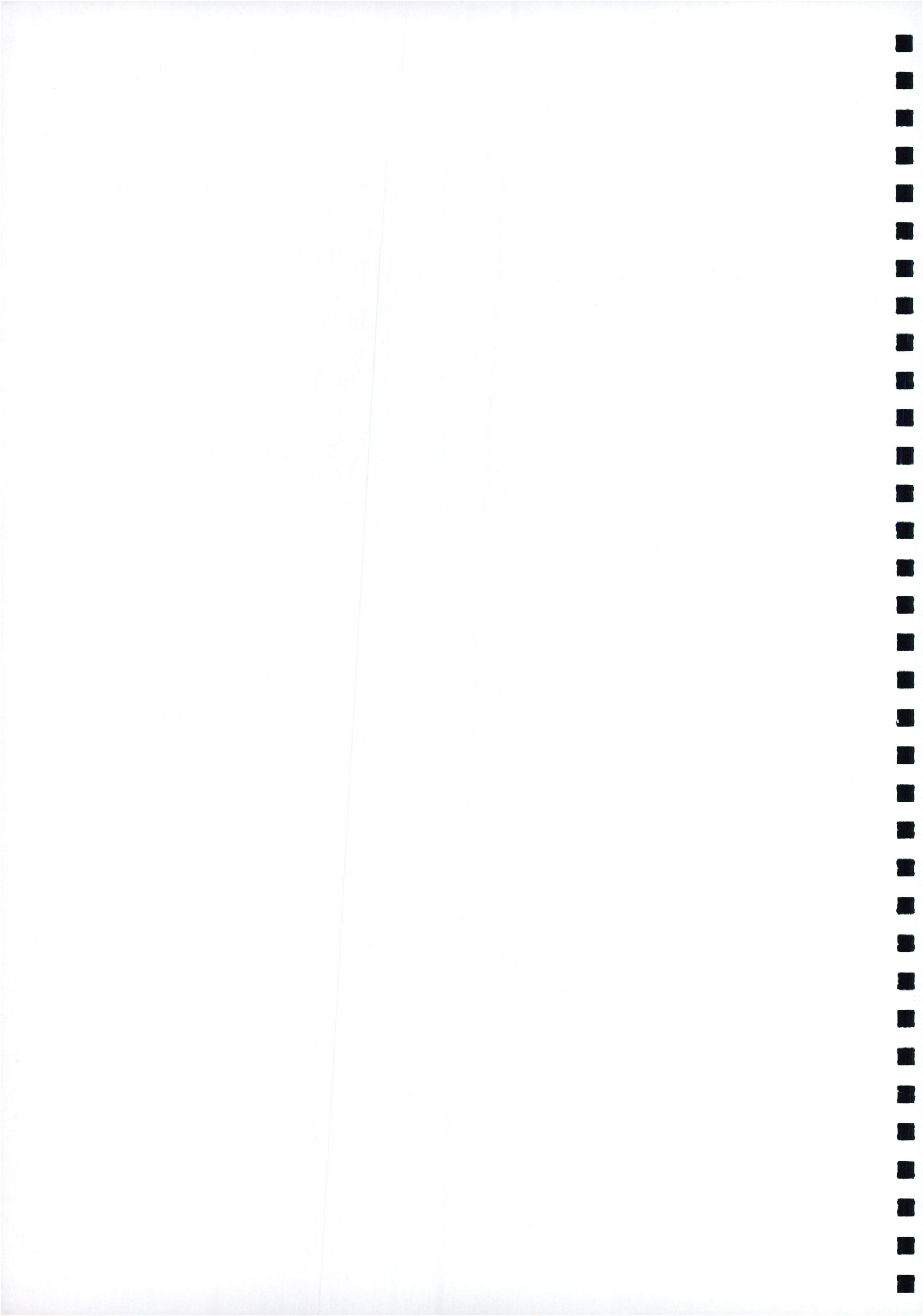


FIG. 3.2. BRODY, Neville, *Style Logo*, The Face, Vol. 49 - 53, 1984.





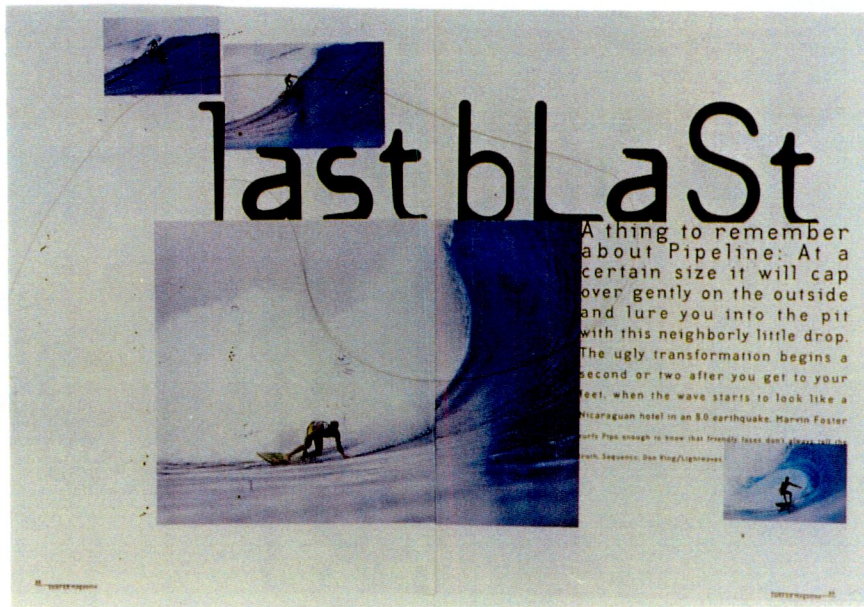
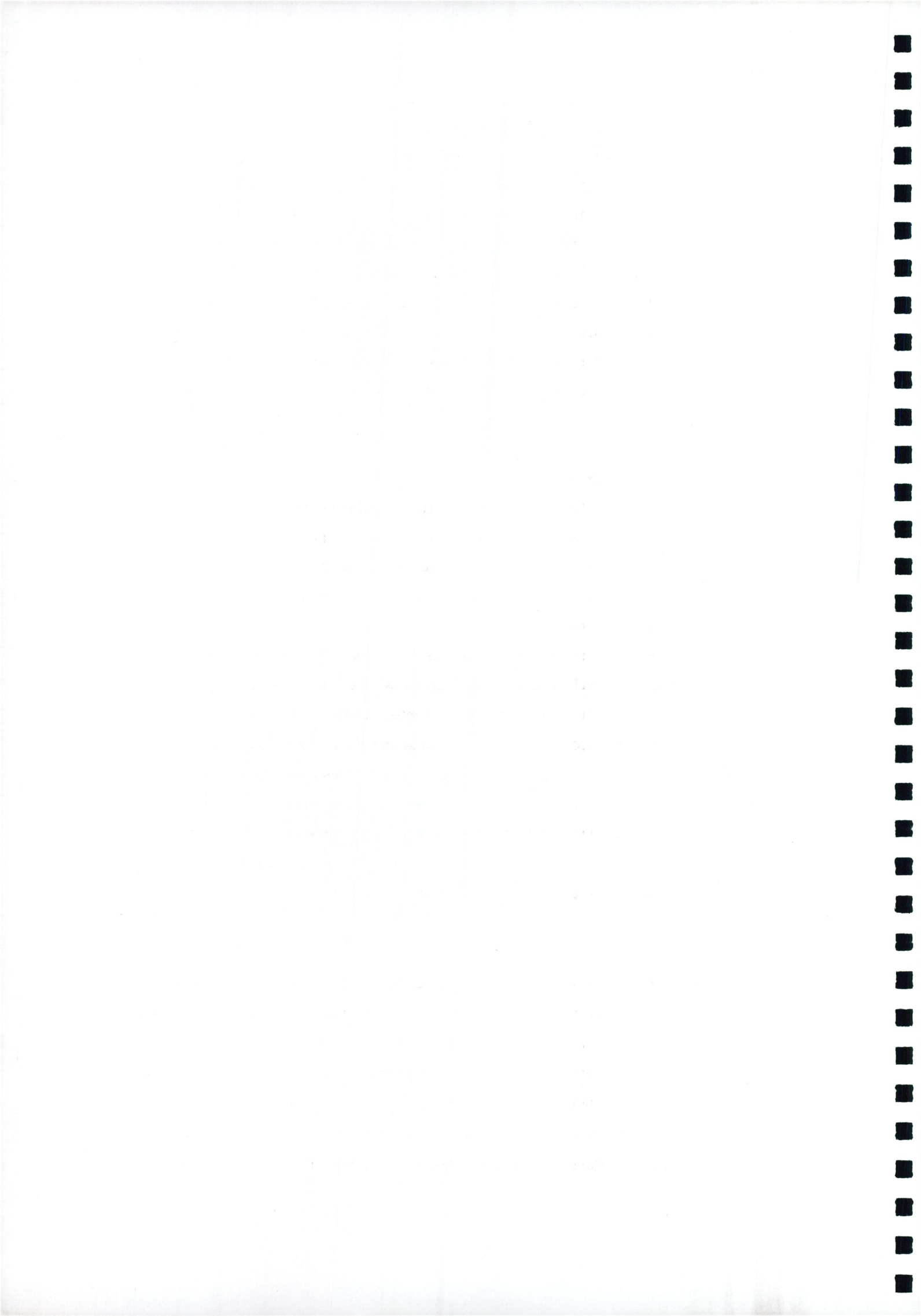


FIG. 3.4. CARSON, David, *Beach Culture, Application of Template Gothic and Industry Sans Serif*, Surfer Publications, USA, 1991.



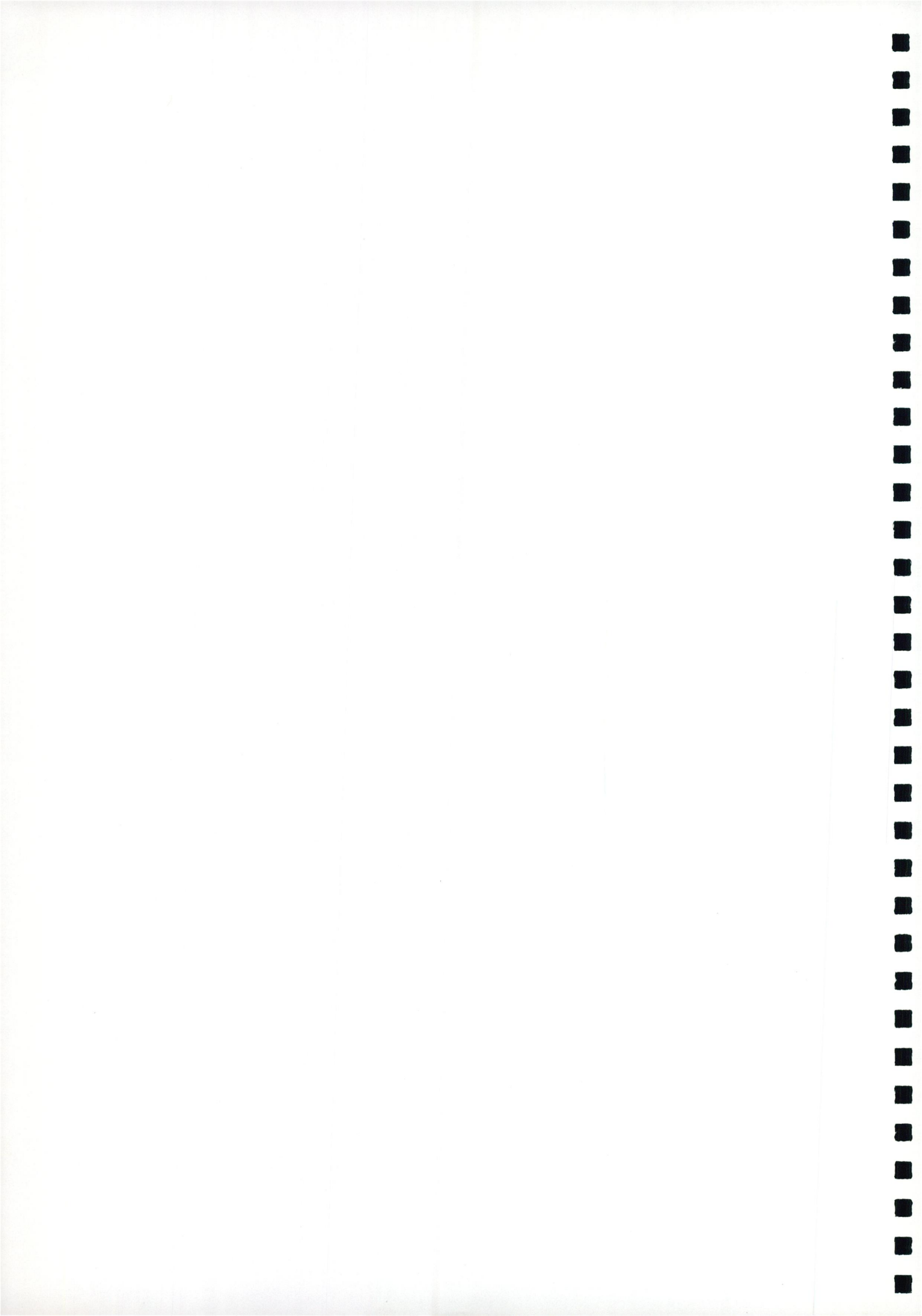
FIG. 3.5. CARSON, David, *Beach Culture*, Surfer Publications, USA, 1991.



But to the readership of *The Face* magazine, the words 'contents' and 'style' will be recognisable or interpreted in whatever state of abstraction they happen to be in, by virtue of their familiarity with the publication. The coding is like an in-house secret or joke. Brody is playing a clever game of exclusivity. But in this abstraction how far can these shapes go before they are little more than hollow, meaningless marks, recognisable to only those who have followed the development, or deconstruction of, the original typography? They have been inset with a life span, their novelty will be their ultimate downfall. The typography has gradually self destructed into illegibility. It is no longer a case of reading but, like morse code or braille, decoding.

When David Carson of *Beach Culture* is confronted with the legibility/ exclusivity question, he claims to have his own audience: "the person who picks up *Beach Culture* and hates it is not our audience" (Creative Review, 1991, p. 30). Maybe that's where all this lies; in limited audiences. New ideas are sure to attract some and alienate others. Carson's project could not be said to be part of the typographic mainstream or, indeed, reach a particularly wide readership, but it is significant in that it exerts an influence well beyond its milieu. Its audience, like that of *The Face* magazine, is well targeted. The person who buys *Beach Culture*, FIG. 3.4, FIG. 3.5, buys not only the publication, the printed item, but he also buys into the attitude, the projected lifestyle of the magazine. Like the viewers of MTV, the target audience is buying into an image. They are also buying into exclusivity. This exclusivity, which is generated by the type used and the treatment of it, will guarantee obsolescence, in that when it reaches its peak in readership and when type becomes completely illegible, the audience will exhaust, innovation, like the typeface 'Lazybones' and 'Bottleneck' of the 1980s, will become gimmick and the climax will pass.

As typography continues to push the boundaries of legibility, and subscribe to exclusivity, it is fast becoming a case of designers talking to designers, especially in cases like *Octavo* magazine, FIG.3.6, aimed at an elected circle of cognoscenti, rather than the public at large. In FIG. 3.6 the typographic gymnastics appeal to the graphic designers, which are its target audience, its potential customers. FIG. 2.11, in chapter 2, illustrates another spread from *Octavo* which would probably only be decipherable or indeed tolerable by designers. However, Rudy Vanderlans argues



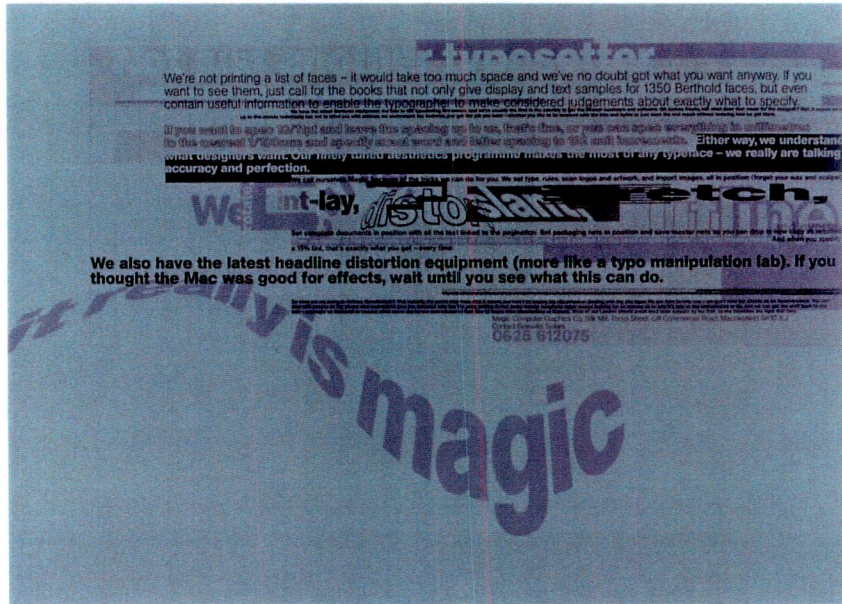
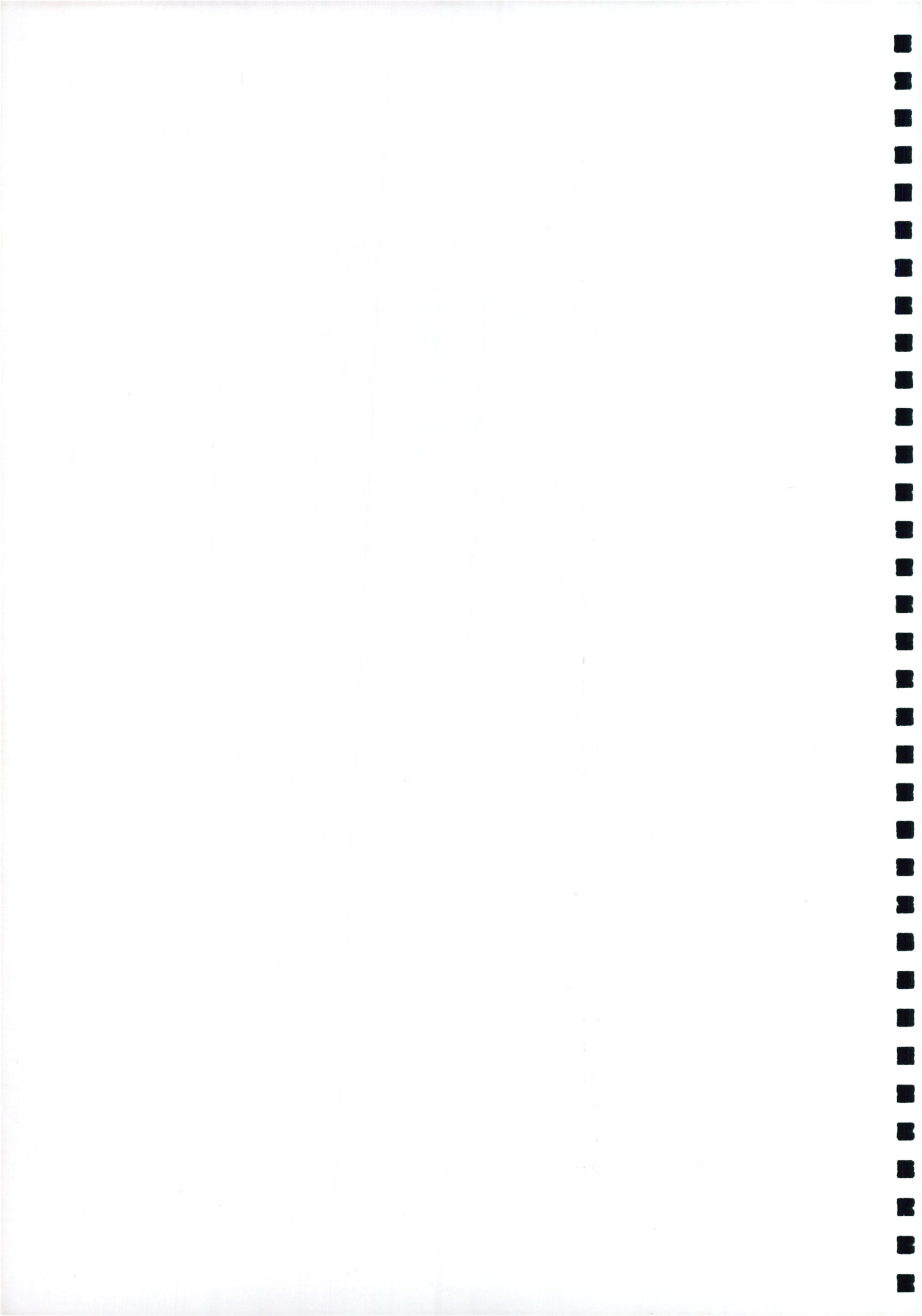


FIG. 3.6. 8vo DESIGN, Promotional poster, Magic Computer Graphics Co., 1990.

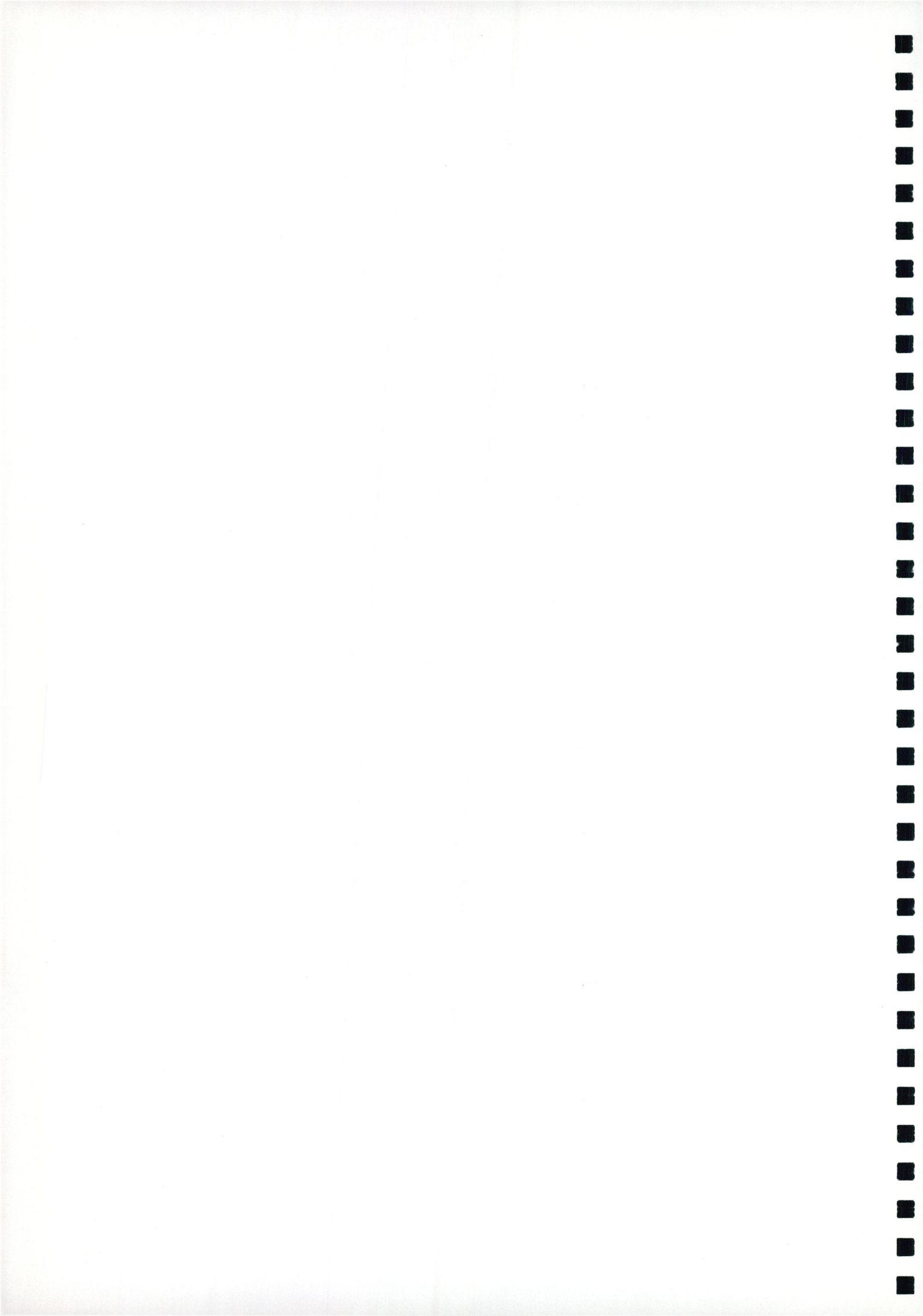


that while it probably is designers talking to designers, it is the designers themselves who have difficulty with legibility: "Most of them are typeface junkies, they are so conscious of type, it often hinders them trying to read, no matter if it's the best cut version of Helvetica or Totally Gothic. It's an intriguing problem" (Eye, 1992, p. 13). He puts forward the idea that the public will naturally and intuitively read into the rhythms and idiosyncracies of complex distorted type. It is a recurrence of the self-serving, 'sophisticated society' idea. If typography has become as complex as the technology which generated it, and it is now a ballpark game between designers, it seems that the art has become less a commercial venture or widespread unilateral visual communicator, but more an exclusive, self indulgent, ego trip of subjectivity.

Rudy Vanderlans, of the critically acclaimed magazine *Emigre*, makes no apologies. His arrival in America from Holland in 1981 inspired him to embark on a personal journey of discovery; *Emigre* was to be his vehicle.

Emigre is a tremendously self indulgent magazine. It *should* be that. The one thing Zuzana and I have always done with all our work is to try to please our selves, first and foremost. And then if people out there are also going to like it, that's just really great. But we have never believed in the idea that if we do *this* combined with *that*, then *those* people will like it. Marketing only looks into what people already like. Well we *know* that. Its' *boring*. We're interested in finding out what people *could* like in terms of what they haven't seen yet or heard yet. Which is a more difficult route to go, but it's more exciting for us. (Print, 1992, p.50).

With this outlook, Vanderlans, with his design associate and wife, Zuzano Licko, have designed typefaces and compositions without precedent, e.g. FIG.3.7 and FIG 3.8. This outlook promotes exclusivity but, more than this, it gives typography and design a new status or role. It has become more of a fine art in the sense that its primary concern is to please itself, to stand as a piece of design in its own right - appropriateness as a solution is secondary. This is not to say that the traditional idea of typography and graphic design, one of a client problem solving exercise, is not still existent, but that typography has become a visual entity in its own right, an end in itself. Pure experimentation is now justified as quality, the finished product. Magazines, in a way, provide the perfect environment for this kind of typographic experimentation. As a magazine, *Emigre* has a captive audience of design orientated people who are eager to witness Vanderlans and Licko's trials



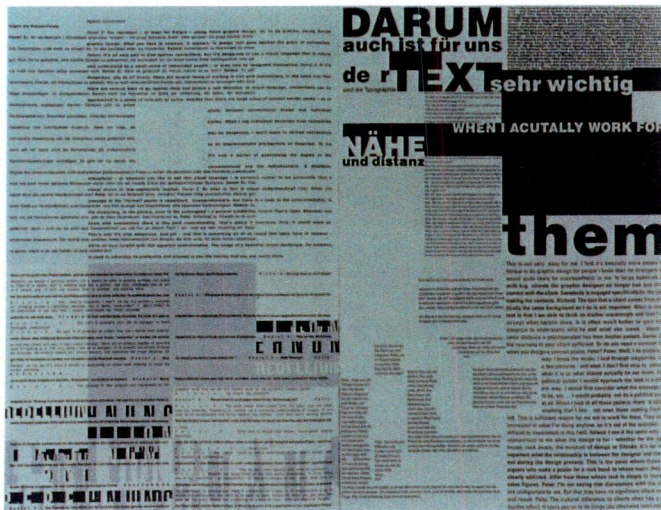


FIG. 3.7. EMIGRE GRAPHICS, *Heritage Issue*, USA, 1990.



FIG. 3.8. VANDERLANS, Rudy, *Emigre* magazine pages, USA, 1990.

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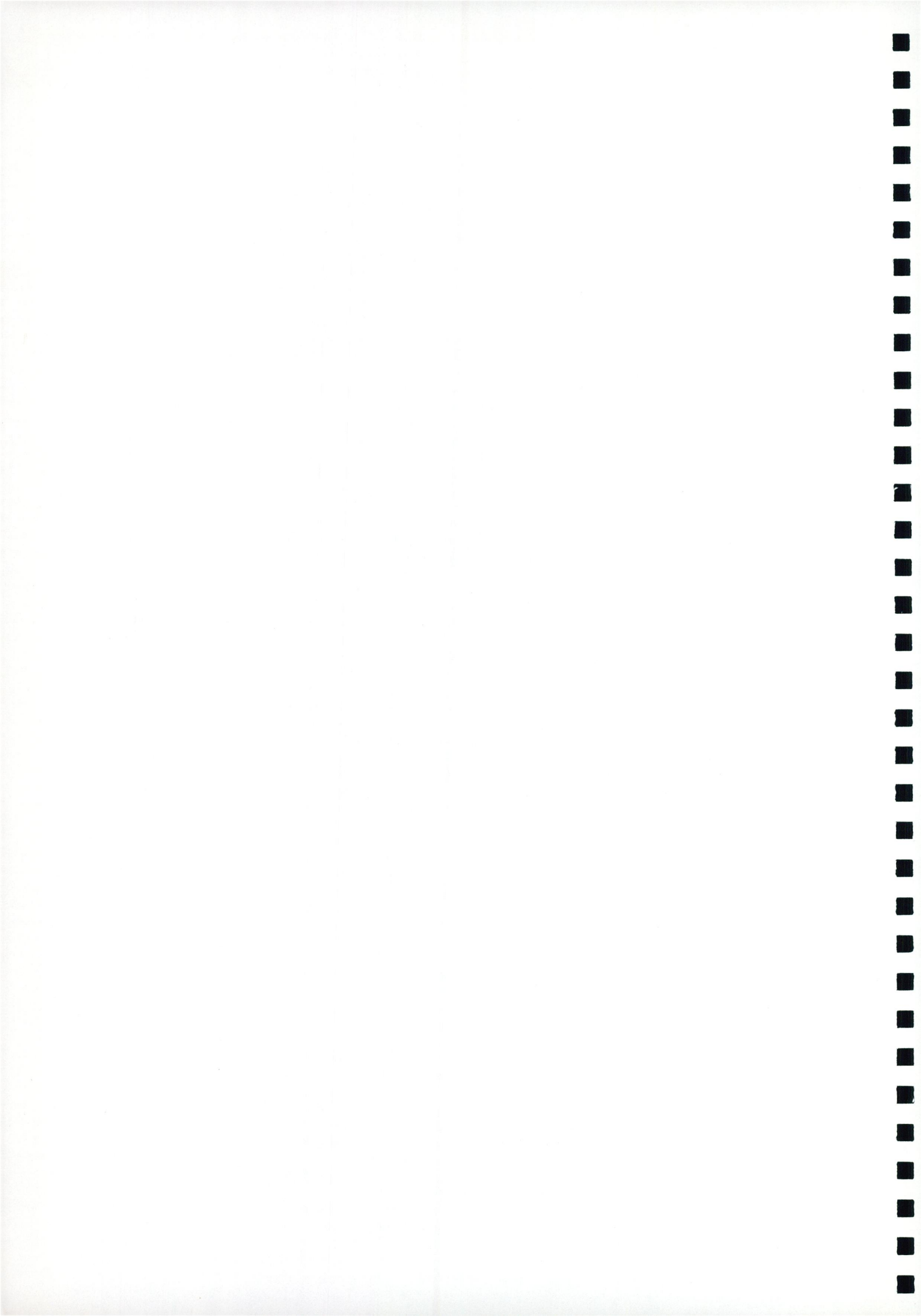
and experiments. But for the *Emigre* golden couple, the stage is theirs; the aims and goals have shifted; it's a case of personalised style over content. It's a new 'please yourself' attitude, if people like the work, well that's just a bonus.

As Poynor points out, it would be wrong, however, to accuse all new wave designers of using their clients simply as a pretext for self expression.

That would imply that the clients are being short-changed in some way. Most aren't - or no more than usual. They are willing accomplices with an acute understanding of the way in which graphic design and its audience have changed (Blueprint, 1991, p.34)

London's *Why Not Associates* were given the perfect opportunity to display their particular brand of individuality with the 1991 *Next* Directory. Here, *Next* might have been taking a risk commissioning *Why Not Associates* and type designer Jonathan Barnbrook for their Directory, but they knew the results would look state of the art. "Clients are quite prepared to have a subversive element if it adds interest to a mundane product", says Barnbrook, fully aware of the degree of "popstarism" involved in which designer gets chosen" (Barnbrook quoted by Poynor, 1991, p.34). In the partnership *Why Not Associates* lend their particular style to a company whose target market is between 20 - 35 years of age, independent, young, career motivated people. FIG. 3.9 is a beautifully spaced piece of design created in Adobe Freehand for *Next*, while Fig. 3.10 is pure type as entertainment, type as an entity in itself. In a way, this is a case of designers talking to designers with a collaboration of graphic and fashion designers aiming at an aesthetically aware and visually sophisticated audience. Their work is self expressive yet it solves the clients problem of appearing exclusive while still aiming at a mass high street public. As Altmann says, "You might as well be a painter if you are not solving the clients problem" (Eye, 1992, p.57).

The exclusivity of the typography of the likes of Brody, Carson and Vanderlans is a sign of changing emphasis in the aims of typography. While its illegibility may lead to an exclusivity that is self destructive, it is a statement about the designer's feeling about type. The rules of typography are not carved in tablets of stone nor should they be. Rules are made to be broken, boundaries pushed to their limits and technology explored to its full potential. If they are fully committed to experimentation, they must take the risk that they will reach perhaps only a small



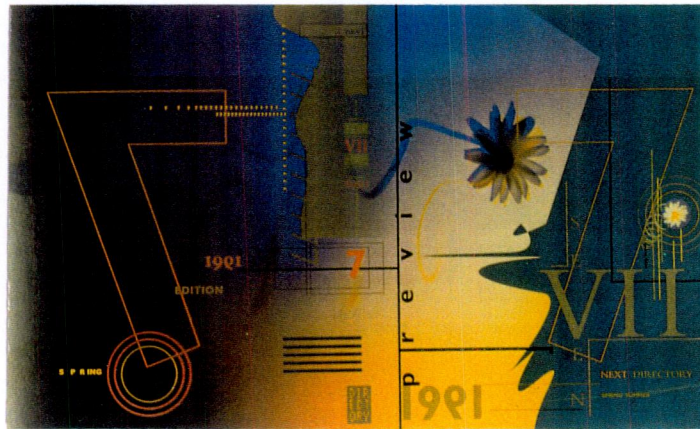


FIG. 3.9. WHY NOT ASSOCIATES, Next Directory Catalogue Cover, UK, 1991.

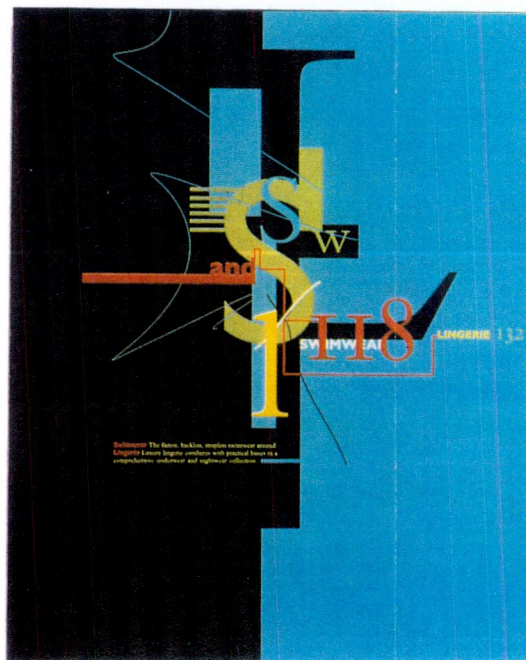
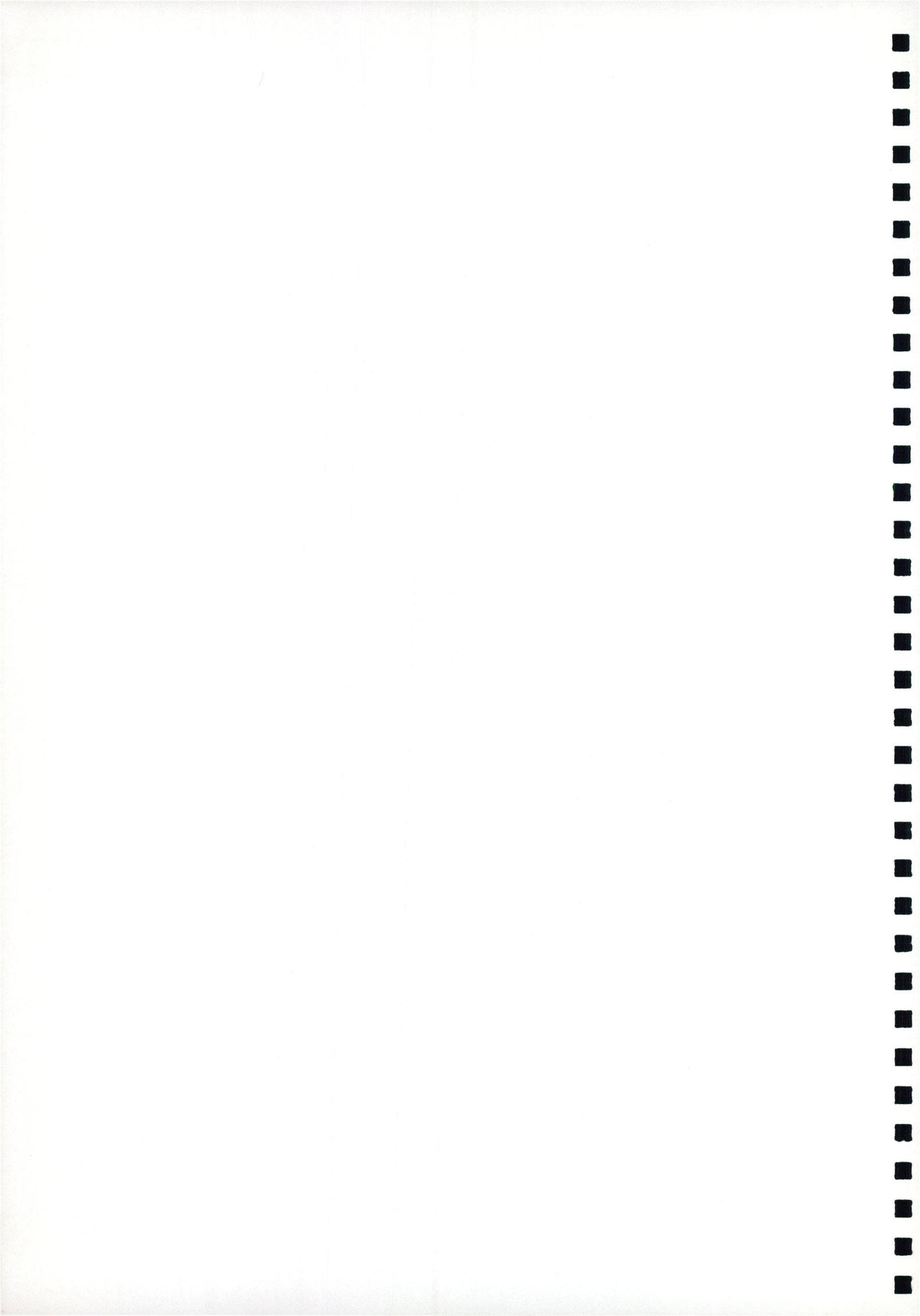


FIG. 3.10. WHY NOT ASSOCIATES, Section Divider from the seventh Next Directory, UK, 1991.

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section of the public at large. But these people are not about creating a new set of rules. With extremes there is a price, these people are about innovation, albeit self gratification, (as proclaimed by Rudy Vanderlans) but personal exploration as they see fit. In exploring deconstruction they have paid little heed to the tablets of stone which may have existed for Bauhaus typography or the Swiss school, and they are certainly not interested in constructing a new set. If their work expands our vision, makes us question accepted rules, intrigues us into exploration, opens up new ideas, in its excesses and extremes gives us a new insight into the possibilities of typography and language and leaves perhaps not a dogma but a lasting repercussion, then it has achieved its aim. If self destruction is its fate, then so be it.

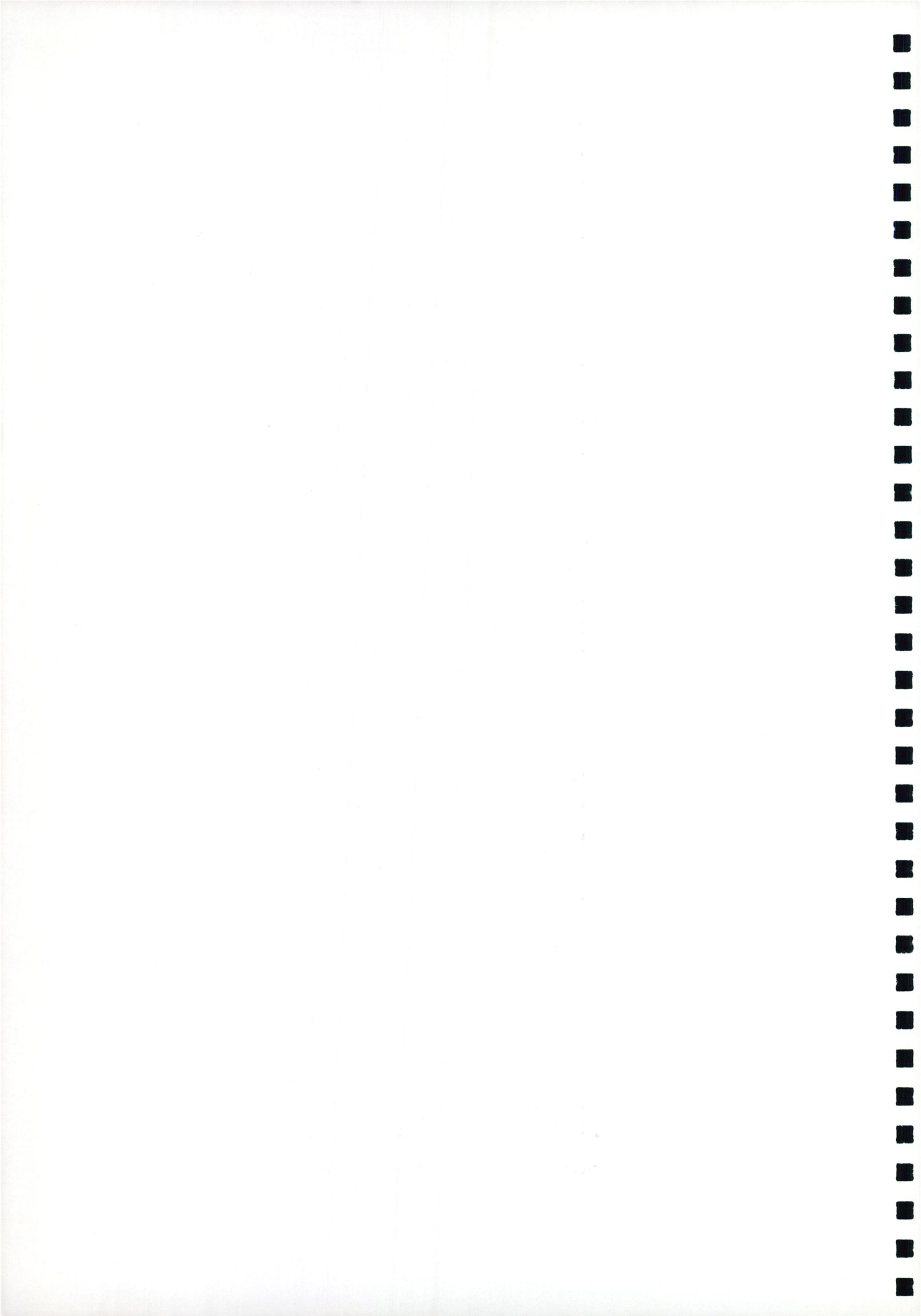


*"An exchange of one
uniformity for another?"*

There are those who accuse
the work of the Bauhaus,
for example, of generating work
which is monotonous, through
slavish enforcement of rules and
attitudes;
with the current leaning towards
heavy use of computers and all
that it entails, have we not
simply exchanged one uniformity
for another?

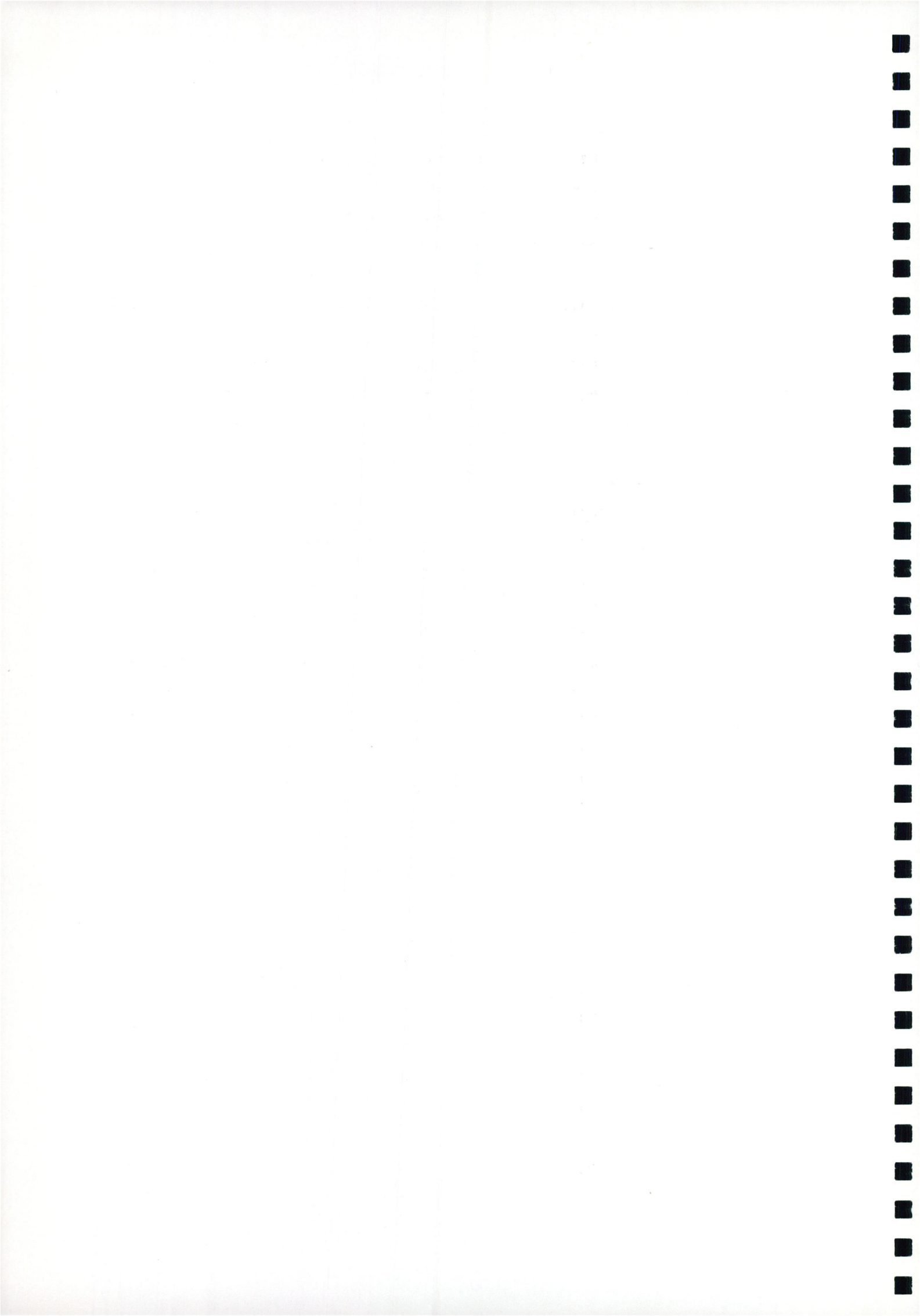
How far has technology
'democratised' type?

Where do we, the students,
stand and how are we affected?



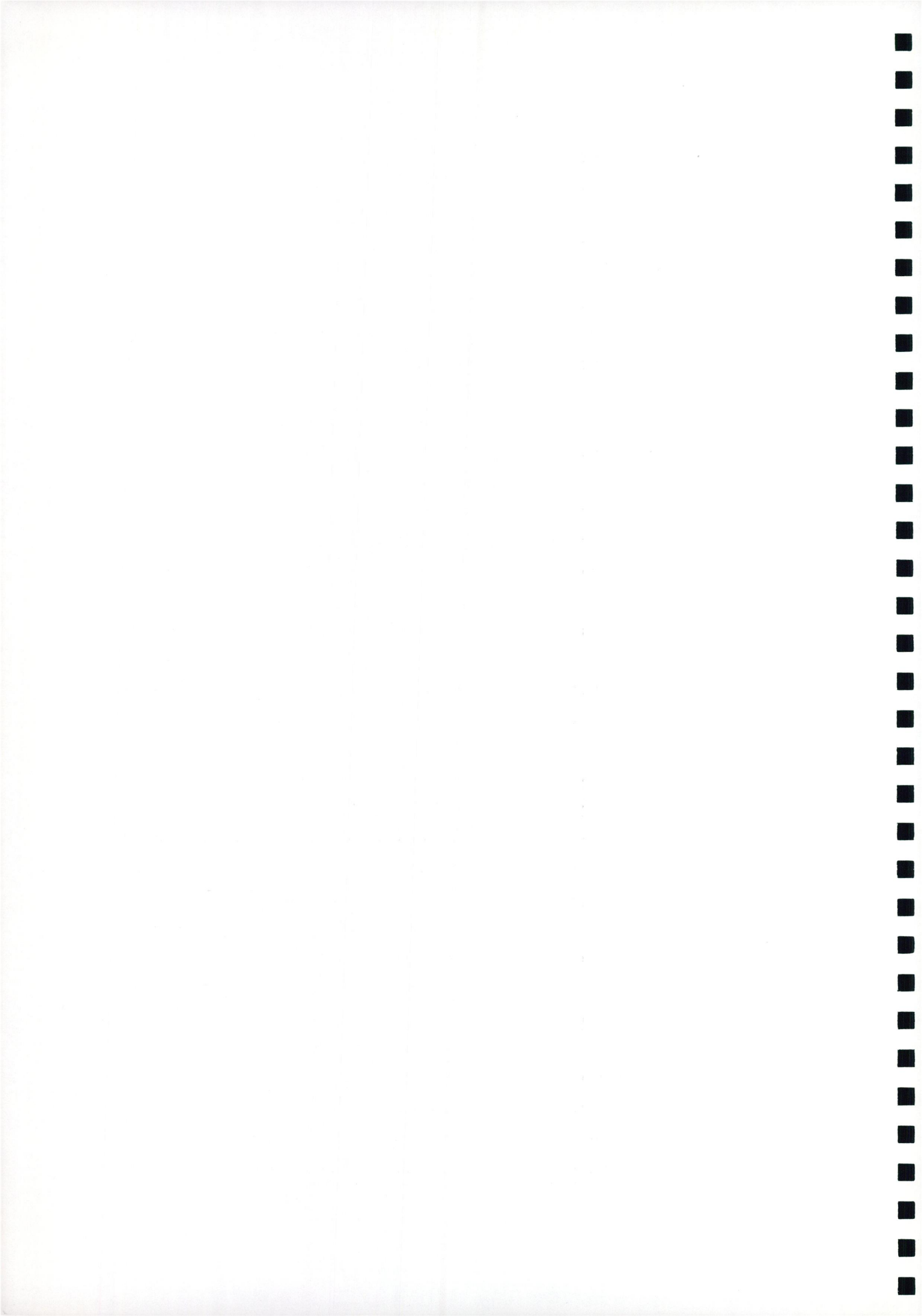
Recently a competition was held among final year graphic design students in Ireland to design a logo for the 1994 Eurovision Song Contest, which is to be held in Dublin at the Point Depot next Spring. There were around 130 entries in all, but of the winner and two runners-up, one characteristic was common, one which made them distinctively different to the majority of their competitors: they were not computer generated. The first prize winner was, in fact, an etching, while the third prize was traditionalist cut and paste paper on paper. The judges were looking for 'something different'. It is interesting how 'something different' is fast becoming synonymous with something that is not computer scanned, manipulated and printed. If this is indeed the case, what then does this say of the advancing generation of computer monopolised design? Technology has opened up a whole new world of design possibilities and it may well have given the typographer more complete command over the practicalities of his art for. It has offered us unlimited freedom and has given 'vitality' every opportunity to thrive. But is it, perhaps, a false freedom, in the sense that, in exploiting software and hardware programmes to their maximum potential, we chase after the technology, not the craft, and the work that is churned out becomes so computer stamped that everything begins to look the same? "Experimentation is the engine of progress, its fuel a mixture of instinct, intelligence and discipline" (Heller, 1993, p.52). It is when instinct overrides the other two and basic discipline is lost sight of that we are in danger. It is ironic that the technology that promised such freedom for innovation has a hidden pitfall that traps the uninitiated in overly complex meaningless monotony. There are those who accuse the work of the Bauhaus, for example, of falling victim to their own regimental rules of style; each piece looking no different from the other.. Now, with the current leaning towards heavy use of computers, have we not simply exchanged one uniformity for another?

Hand in hand with the wonders of new technology, go the claims of a 'new democracy' for typographers and those involved in type decisions. To a great extent, the freedom offered by technology has succeeded in opening up the doors for many a competent creator. The computers flexibility has meant that much more expert assistance has been made accessible to printers, publishers, etc. and other professionals, as well as academics, students and the public at large. So there is much talk of the 'new democracy', but the reality is somewhat less assured in what



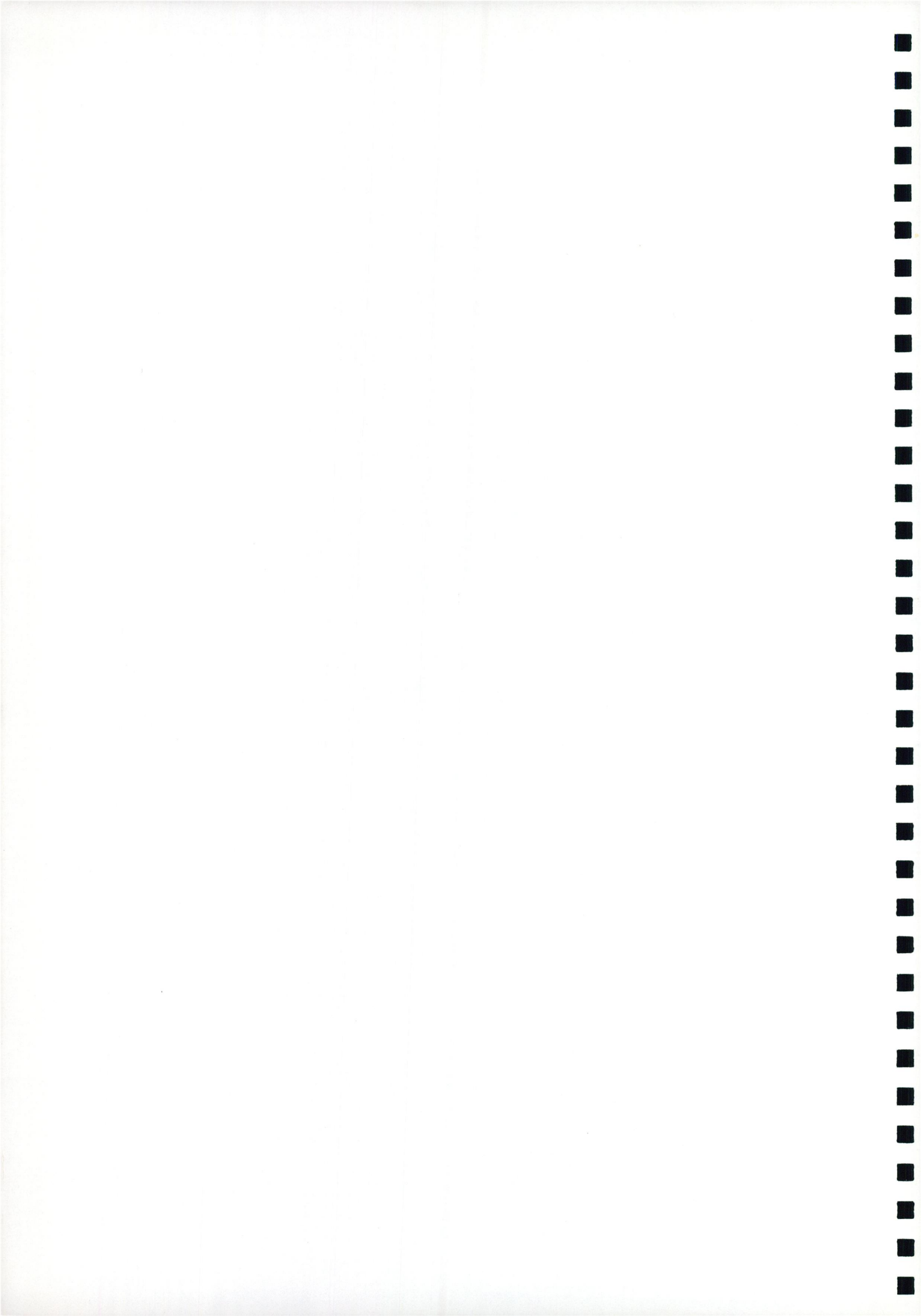
it means for creating good type and good typography. It all depends on what information you possess and what options you have in how you use it. The 'new democracy', an offshoot of the 'new freedom' ultimately gives the computer user enough rope to hang himself and in many a case he does it with gusto. Lewis Blackwell, reporting on the 'Monotype' typographic conference in New York, June 1991, fears the outcome is entirely in line with the normal fate of new democracies - the power is back with those who always held it. He claims that while type manufacturers may have relinquished control over being the almost exclusive creators of typefaces, the expertise and knowledge required in this field, now coupled with expert knowledge of the choice of hardware and software systems, means that either the traditional companies have evolved or their heirs have ascended to power - and certainly not that everyone who gets to grips with a keyboard can produce beautiful type. You need to rely on the experts for that just as you did before, both those with the creative knowledge and those with the technical knowledge (Blackwell, 1991, p.39). I agree; ten-twenty years ago graphic designers' only type option was the faces produced by the large type manufacturers, whereas today with the advent of the personal computer practically anyone with a grasp of Fontographer or the like, can produce their own personalised typeface. This is the democratic ideal: everyone has a chance to design their own typeface. But to produce a *good* typeface we still rely on the typographers for their creative expertise and the likes of the computer programmers for the facility to create it. In this it seems true that we have replaced one shackle or hierarchy with another. The typesetter of old has evolved under the guise of obstacles like System 7, Optical Scaling, True Type, Postscript, multiple masters etc. The new democracy has a debate but its openness is indeed questionable.

This is not to criticise the work of those mentioned in previous chapters who are at the cutting edge of typographic communication, but rather to expose the democracy for the slight overstatement it is. If anything, I think the new democracy shows computers for the machines they are. Yes, they are extremely sophisticated and very powerful and, yes, they can offer a huge amount of mind-boggling freedom, but this freedom is truly only accessible to those with an education in typography pulled together with advanced technology. It is when the person lacks this kind of background that it becomes a false kind of freedom, which offers no guidelines, no safety net. The user is beguiled and entertained by the computer's



multi-faceted character and uses every facility available to him without restraint so that, despite his efforts, the work almost always bears the the distinct hallmark of computer generation, where the computer is seen first, then the idea. When good ideas become shrouded in this way, they fall victim to a computer induced 'sameness'. The very democracy which gave the freedom for its creation, inevitably condemns it to a boring mediocrity, or worse still, the realm of ugliness. Look for example at some of the work produced by the hothouse schools of deconstructivist design like Cranbrook, CalArts and Rhode Island, etc. FIG. 4.1 is a looseleaf sheet from the occasional publication *Output*, 1992, designed by students at the Cranbrook Academy of Art. "*Output* is eight unbound pages of blips, type fragments, random words and other graphic minutiae purposefully given the serendipitous look of a printer's make-ready" (Heller, 1993, p.52). Circulated to thousands of practising American designers, it is a testament to fashionable experimentation, technology over intelligence with its layered images, vernacular hybrids, low-resolution reproductions and cacophonous blends of different types and letters.

This 'freedom' and 'democracy' has also opened the way for all would-be type designers. Technology has made custom font design available to all. So why use someone else's typefaces, full of their own idiosyncracies, when you can use your own? At a stroke, traditional techniques and procedures have been challenged by placing a sophisticated typesetting facility in the hands of anyone with access to these inexpensive packages. A profusion of new typefaces are currently flooding the scene from young designers newly franchised by personal computers, encouraged and inspired by the likes of Barnbrook, Deck, and Dutchmen Van Blockland and Van Rossum who together have created the first 'variable typeface', randomly distorting the character outline each time it is printed out, FIG.4.2. Then there is the likes of Zuzana Licko, one of the most documented and critically acclaimed type designers of today, showcasing her work with each new issue of *Emigre* magazine. Vitality is represented in its most profuse and prolific form. Herbert Spencer takes a balanced view of the prospects for his discipline: "In making type available to everyone the new technology has led to some fresh and interesting approaches". But when asked if we need any more typefaces, he replies, "No, I don't think we do - we have far too many already. It's a strange situation we're in now, rather like the 19th century when there were no real economic restraints on the typefaces that were being produced. There was an absolute avalanche - some



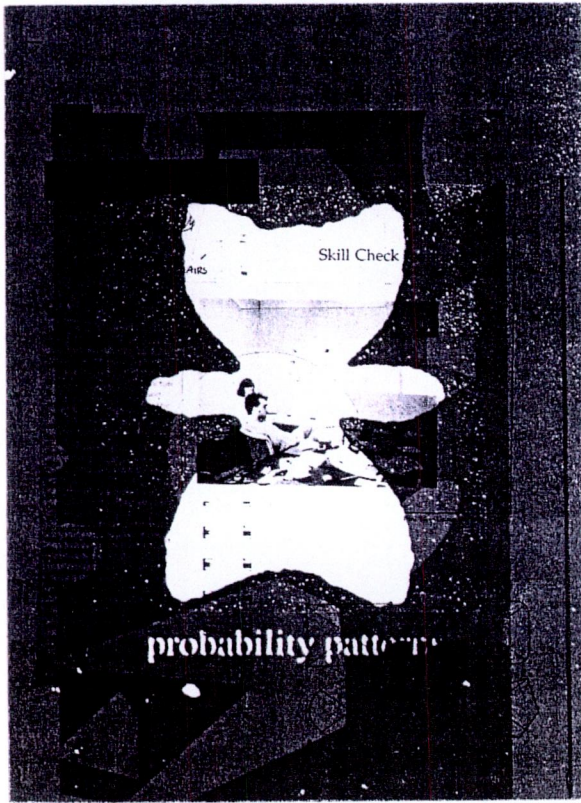


FIG. 4.1. CRANBROOK ACADEMY OF ART (STUDENTS), Output, Looseleaf sheet, 1993.



FIG. 4.2. VAN BLOKLAND & VAN ROSSUM, 'Beowulf', the first variable typeface, 1991

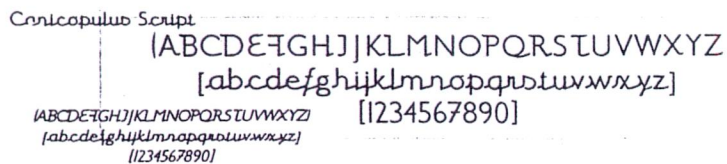
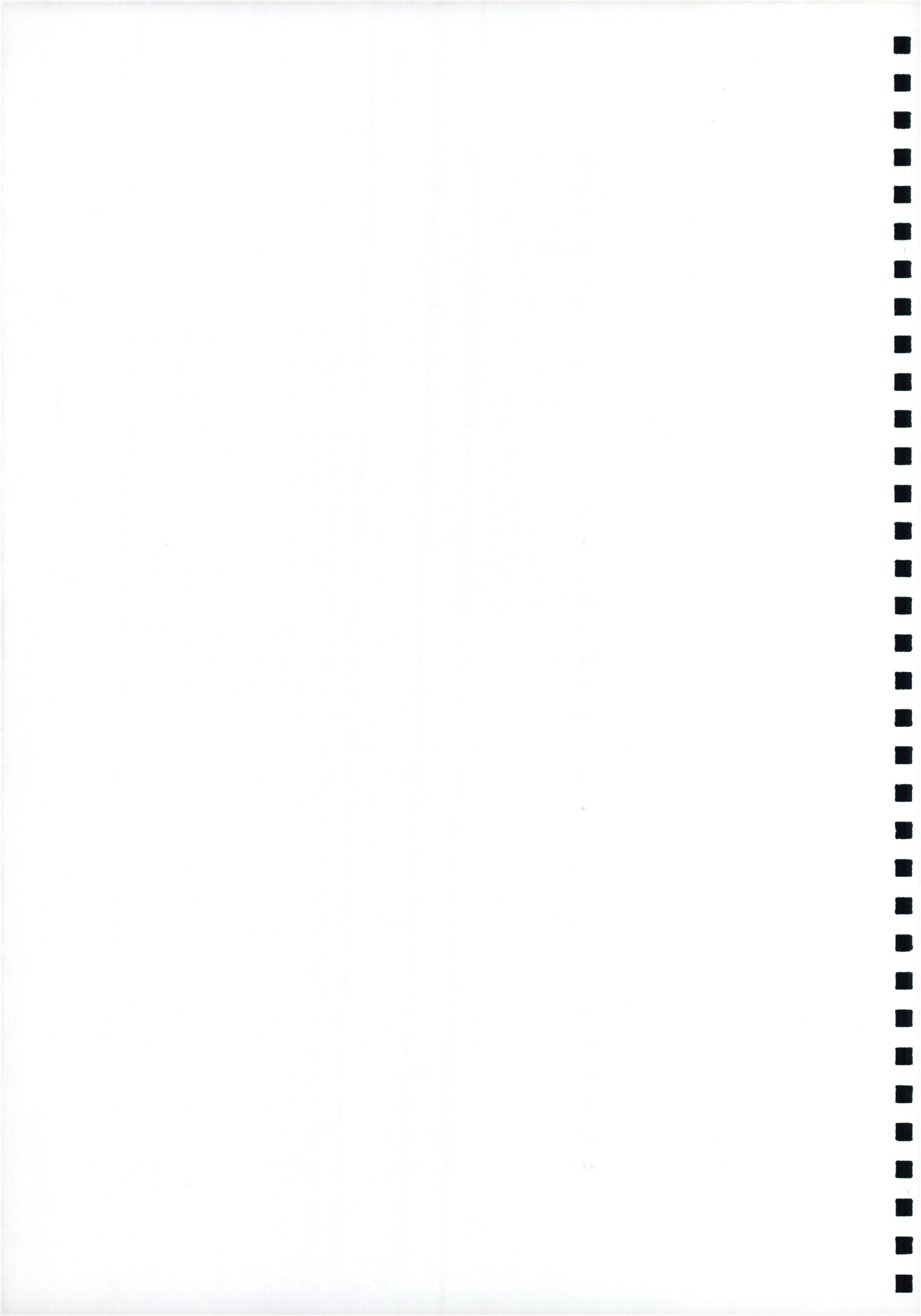


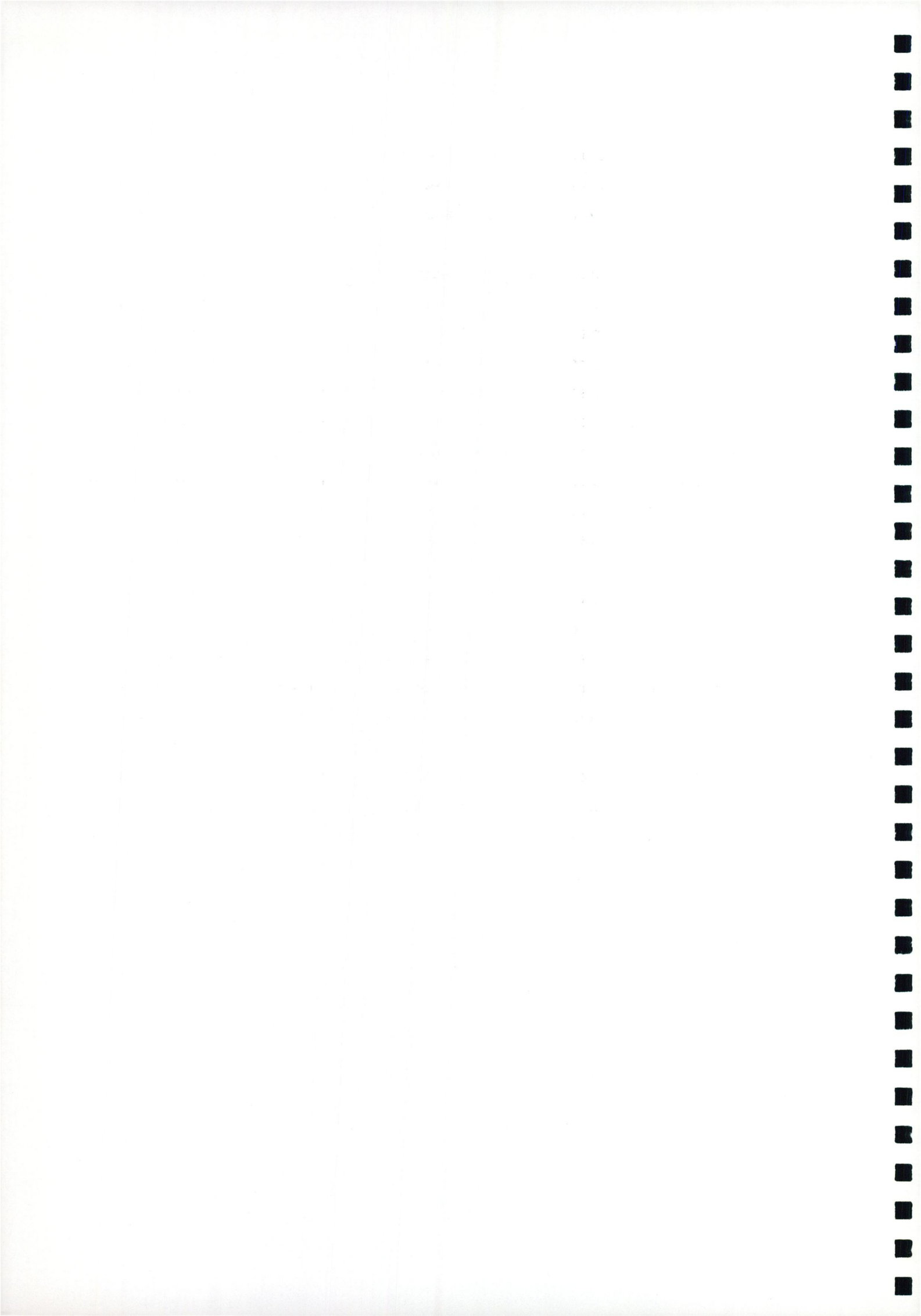
FIG. 4.3. DECK, Barry, 'Canicopulus', 1991.



good, some bad, some hideous. Eventually the cost became greater, limiting production. One now has to look much more carefully at the reader rather than at what the producer can generate." (Vickers, *Creative Review*, 1991, p. 29). Are we not faced with the same situation again now?

One could argue that it is excess just for excess sake, but then there is the personal side of it. For Keedy, Deck, Emigre graphics and colleagues such as Neville Brody and Jonathan Barnbrook in Britain and Max Kisman in the Netherlands, designing typefaces for personal use is a way of ensuring that graphic design projects carry their own specific identity and tone of voice. Both designers and the public are much more interested in the letterforms as an image as they have realised that the visual message is as important as the written one. Ultimately display type and text type are having their roles redefined - custom font design is revolutionising typography, with magazines like *'Fuse'*, edited by Jon Wozencroft and Neville Brody, which supplies fonts and encourages their modification. I agree with Barnbrook when he says of the 'fonts set free', "it can only be good for the industry, as it encourages more innovative thinking through greater competition and the input of non-designers", (Barnbrook, *Design*, 1991, p.26). I still however think that typeface classics such as Gill and Futura are not to be discarded but should be used to their full advantage and incorporated as springboards to further exploration, like as with the development of the typeface Rotis from, among others, Univers. Like others, typographer Jeffrey Keedy "realised when you try to do something contemporary, you rely on old typefaces and conventions" (Keedy, quoted by Poynor and Booth Clibbon, 1991, p.10). There will always be good and bad fonts, the new freedom or democracy will not change that. The pyramid of designers will get bigger, that's all. Perhaps what matters most, as Phil Baines points out, is that those who want to experiment with and design new fonts, are at last getting their say (*Design*, 1991, p. 26).

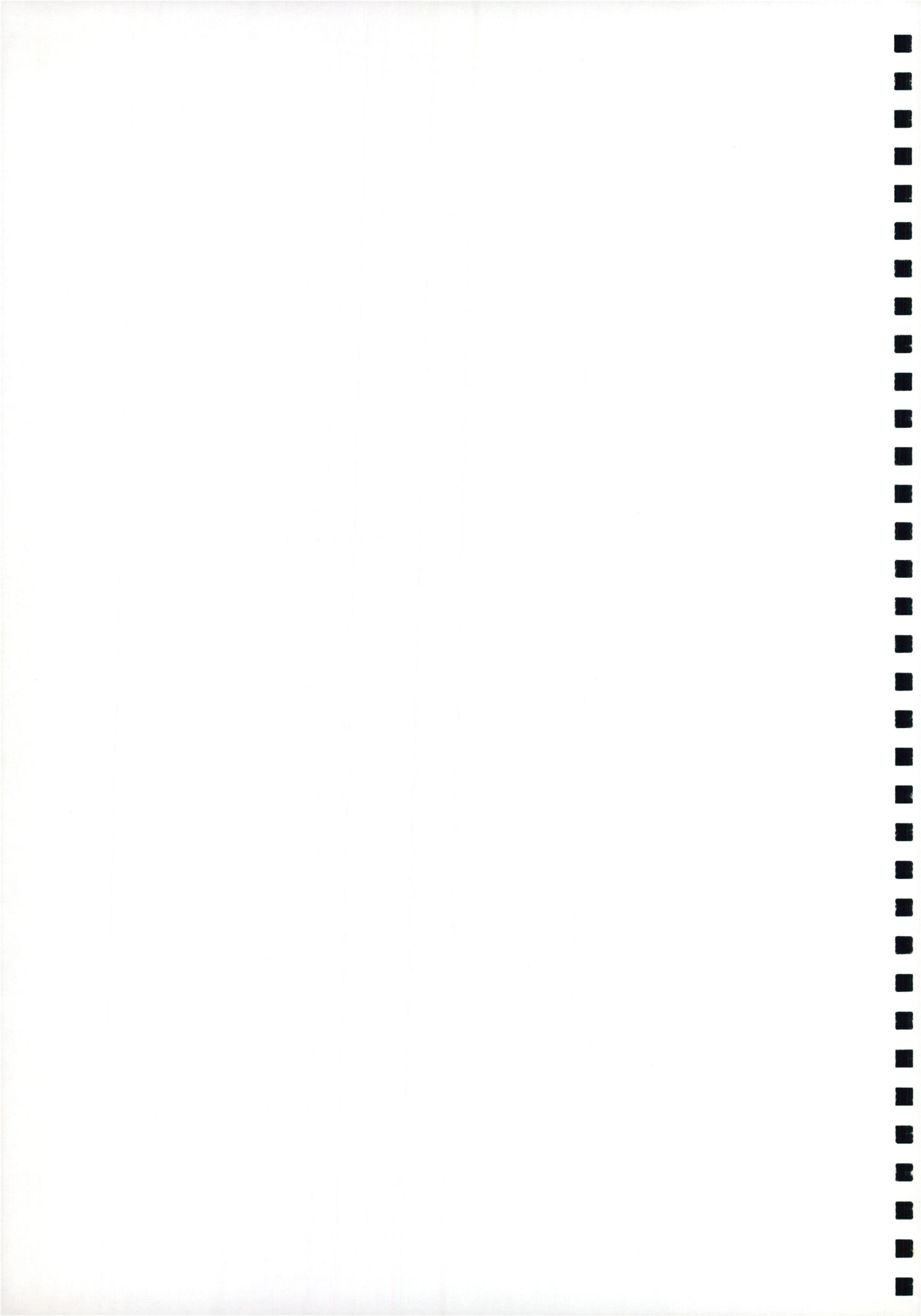
Spencer and Vignelli, once said that five typefaces would be as many as anyone would ever need, advocating clarity and stability, while on the vitality side, April Greiman asks, "Why not create a virus to destroy Helvetica?", (*Print*, Sept/Oct 1992, p. 50), Barry Deck puts forward his typeface, Canicopulus Script (Gill sans serif with the satirical addition of puppy dog tails), FIG. 4.3, while Jon Barnbrook goes a step further by extending a nihilistic randomising principle to the text itself. His



typeface *Burroughs* (named after the novelist with a penchant for textual 'cut-ups') replaces whatever is typeset with a stream of gibberish generated at random by the software. The whole debate is a sub-set within the clarity/vitality theme.

As students ourselves, where do we stand in all of this? We are most definitely part of the surge of new technology and are at the moment riding high on the wave of experimentation, taunting, teasing and stretching type. We are part of what is happening now, in a new wave of dominant vitality. Last year's NCAD degree show, 1993, showed extensive use of the Macintosh. However while there were indeed many competent and clever pieces, the sameness of their production somehow dulled their impact. I am not against computer generated design, on the contrary, I am thrilled by the effects that can be achieved but as a tutor once said, if you can see the typography in a piece, it has failed. The same might be said of computers; if you can see the computer in the piece, then I think it has failed.

It is interesting, how we are the products of the vitality surge, but we have more often than not been tutored by the clarity generation i.e. those who were taught in the modernist fifties and who were, perhaps, in turn influenced by Bauhaus tutors. I think this has been ultimately beneficial, as we can absorb many, sometimes conflicting, influences, on the clarity/vitality axis. So while we get the experience and discipline of an era when clarity was perhaps dominant, we draw the excitement and pace from the rebellion that is already on and in many ways almost run its course. How we, as the new designers, will chart the fate of the clarity/vitality balance remains to be seen.

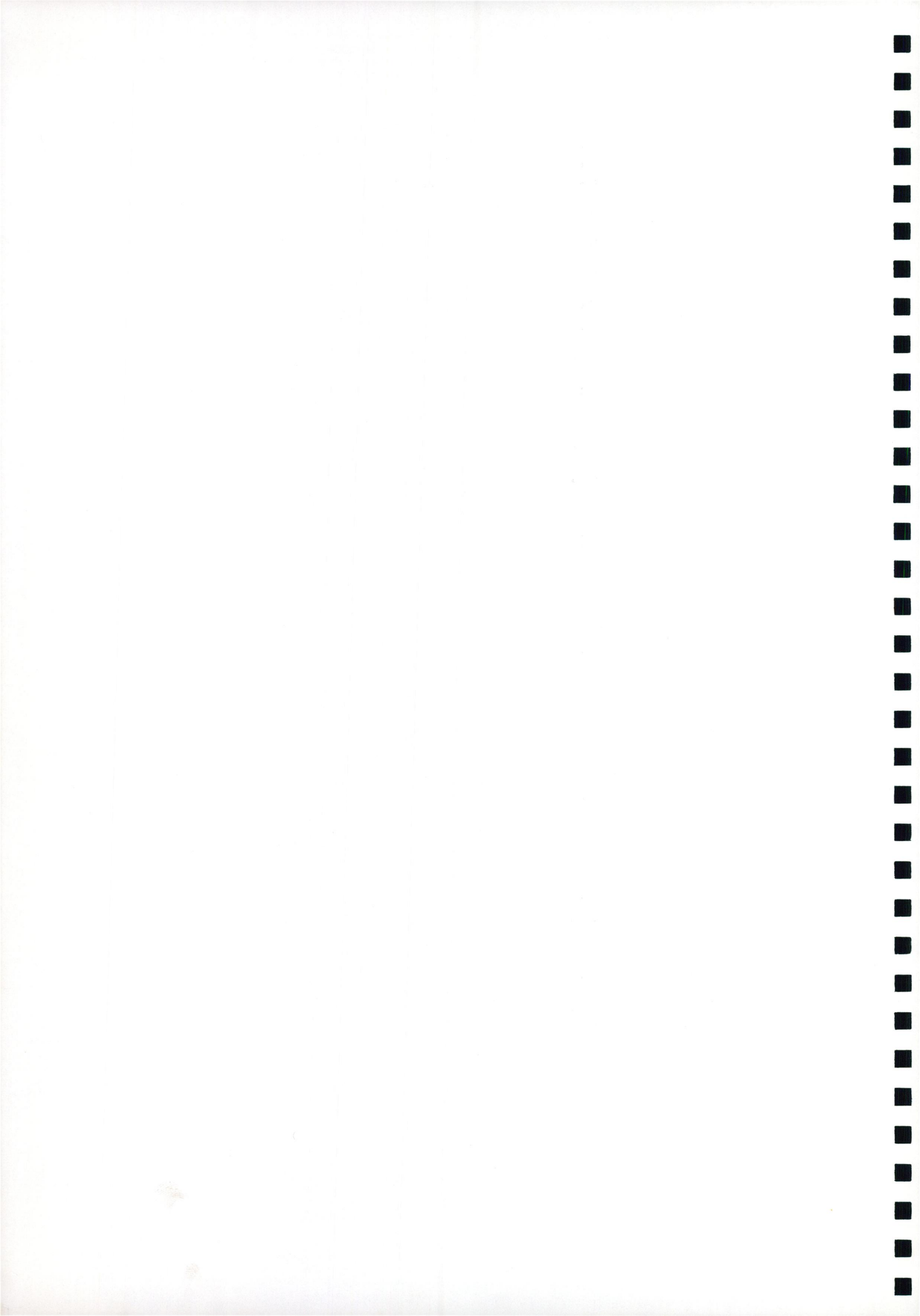


• • • • • S U M M A R Y A N D
C O N C L U S I O N

If, perhaps, my discussion seems one-sided in favour of the vitality end of the 'clarity/vitality axis', it is because I believe that vitality is now dominant over clarity in the typography of the '90s. Today we are on the course of vitality; experimentation, excess and extreme are in. Technology has a lot to do with it. It has afforded 'vitality' a new means of expression. This is the generation of computer graphics, characterised by dazzling visual and linguistic complexity. The creative and pragmatic questions raised by ongoing typographic experiments through technology (regarding legibility, subjectivity, exclusivity etc.), serve to further highlight the fundamental differences between the clarity and vitality camps.

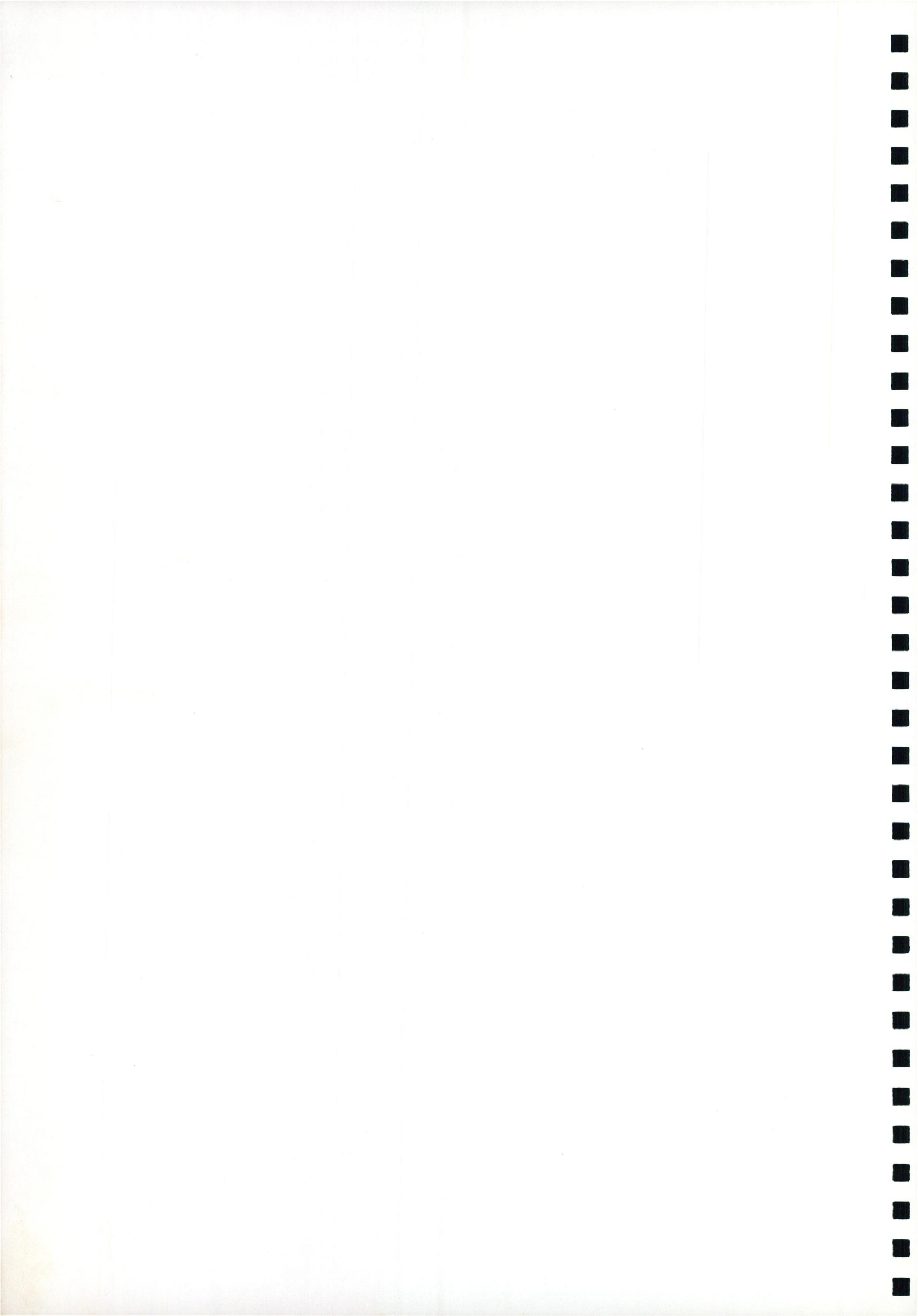
On the subjective note; it is interesting how the clarity end of the clarity/vitality axis, while it subscribes to the purist of forms, abstraction and simplicity, also advocates the pluralist or communist angle. The Bauhaus, for example, embraced a communist ideology that promoted good design for society at large and not just an elite. Modernism, too, aimed for unilateral, global communication. Vitality seems to be naturally associated with rebellion and the more subjective side, favouring individuality and multiplicity.

As regards vitality's current dominance, I believe that today's computer-induced typomania will transform gradually into a more subtle form. As Neuenschwander commented, just as the excesses of the Baroque and Rococo were followed by the refined simplicity of Neo Classicism, so too a new simplicity and classicism promises to succeed the initial elaborate style (Neuenschwander, 1993, p.143). Every period of rapid and dramatic change in art and design seems to be followed by a period of relative calm and stasis as artists and designers seek to come to terms with the change. As we learn more, the computer will no longer lead or direct our investigations but become an invaluable tool *in* our investigations - the difference is slight but immensely important. Clarity will, perhaps, once again come to the fore.



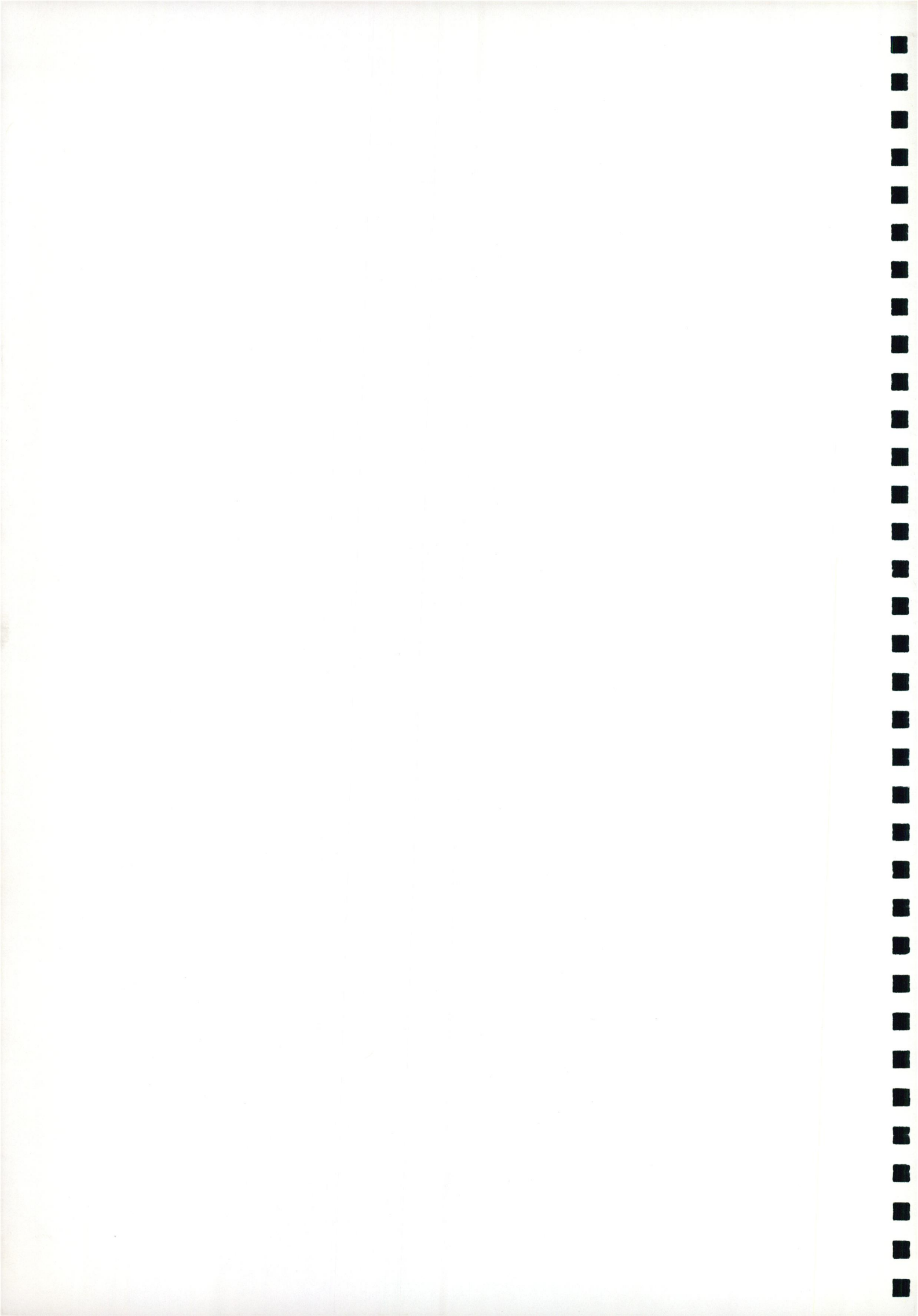
Rick Poynor talks of an alternative current of design which shares the same assumptions as the schools of deconstructivist design like Cranbrook, CalArts etc. but which puts the emphasis firmly back on content and aims specifically for clarity. The new design narrows the viewer's options, it encourages alternative ways of reading but not at the expense of coherent communication. Poynor cites Benetton's self-styled magazine, *Colors*, as a primary example of this trend. Their fourth issue deals with racism opening with a montage of violent racial incidents and words: "These pictures are our way of showing the problem quickly and bluntly" (Poynor, *Eye*, 1993, p.7). Like their poster campaigns, points are made visually with unflinching directness. The projects are conceptually based. Dublin's *Design Factory's* tenth anniversary brochure is another case in point; large areas of flat unobtrusive colour, clear, unobtrusive type and clever amusing illustrations following the theme of 'ten' (size ten shoe, ten green bottles, ten baby fingers etc.) placed on a full page on the right hand side of each two page spread. *Design Factory's* whole philosophy advocates the clarity end of the axis, direct communication, worthwhile design ideas and solutions. "*Design Factory* is not a movement. It makes no earth shattering statements about design. It stays well clear of design jargon and cliché. It is not a slave to fashion or fad. It is a communications business" (Clarke, 1993, p.1). The wave of vitality may well be running its course.

Contemporary typography, by nature, is something which is happening now, something which is presently in motion. So my thesis, far from being a final word, is but a documentation of a moment in time, a stage analysis of progress. The shifting of balance on the clarity/vitality axis, is an undercurrent and re-current theme, a tug of war between structure, formalism and calm harmony of the clarity school and the explosive, excited, deconstructivist nature of free form and its advocates. Today's typographic situation is not an isolated phenomenon, but a continuation of this theme. There is nothing happening in typography today that was not happening in spirit, ten to fifty to seventy years ago.



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