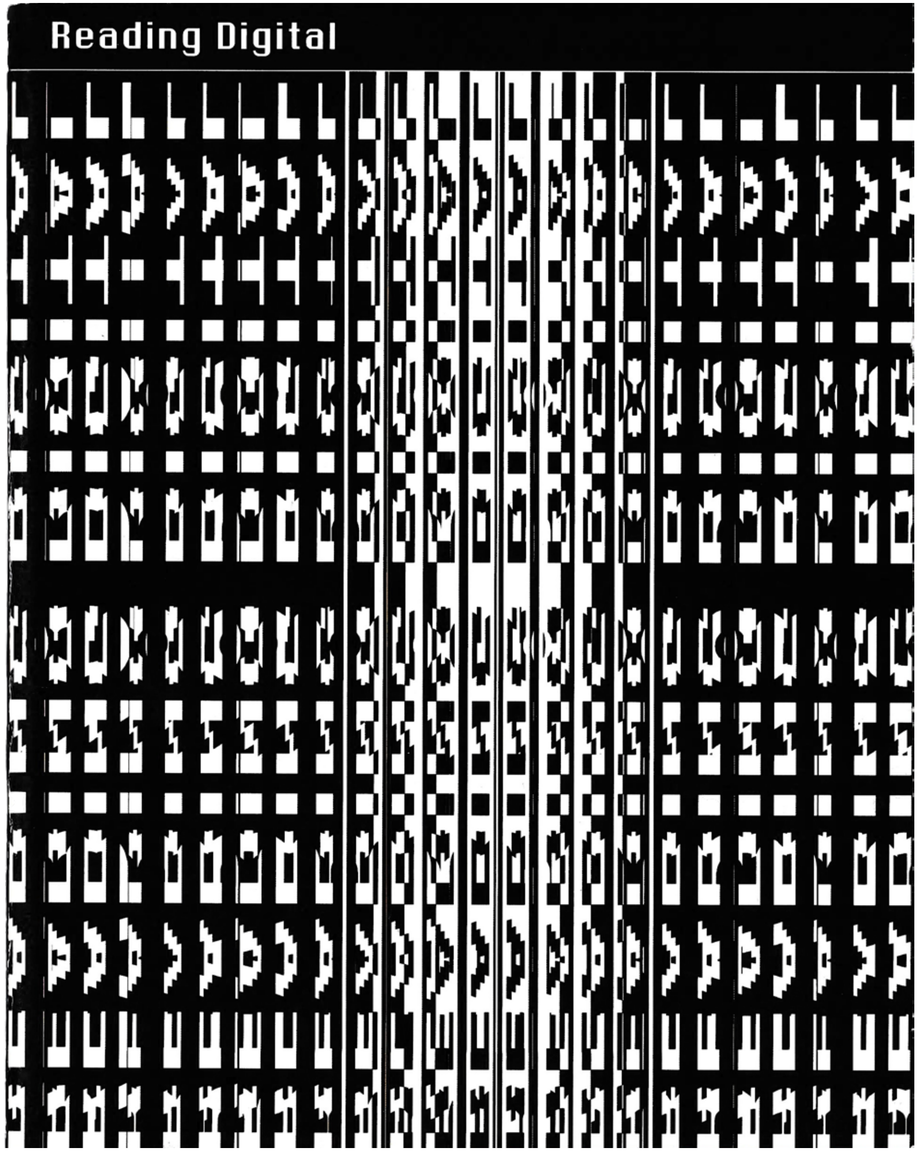
Reading Digital



Just My Type Reimagined

"It was beautiful, historical, artistically subtle in a way that science can't capture, and I found it fascinating."

Steve Jobs – 2005

"Computers have rendered us all gods of type, a privilege we could never have anticipated in the age of the typewriter."

Simon Garfield – 2010

Reading Digital
Lucy Nicholas

Preface

Reading Digital (2025)

Drawing from Simon Garfield's Just My Type, this project explores how typography and typesetting influence the way we read, particularly in relation to screens and modern-day technology.

This publication is aimed at readers with a passion for typography, Swiss and modernist design, books, and the hidden histories behind everyday objects, celebrating the art, craft, and culture of type.

It offers a fresh perspective on the letters that shape our world and how digital reading has transformed the way we interact with them today.

Just My Type
by Simon Garfield

Just My Type (2010)

The book begins with an unconventional love story; one that starts in a calligraphy class at Reed College, where a young Steve Jobs first discovers the beauty and craft of letterforms.

That quiet fascination would later influence the Macintosh computer, exposing the world of digital font choice to the common man and forever changing the way that we experience typography.

Just My Type explores how these small decisions about letters and typography have had a lasting impact on how we read, communicate and design.

It uncovers the stories behind the world's most recognisable typefaces, from timeless classics like Garamond and Caslon to modern staples such as Verdana and Gotham.

Each letterform carries a unique history and personality, quietly and subtly influencing our emotional interpretation of the words they constitute.

Introduction

On 12th June 2005, a fifty-year-old man stood up in front of a crowd of students at Stanford University and spoke of his campus days at a lesser institution, Reed College in Portland, Oregon.

"Throughout the campus," he remembered, "every poster, every label on every drawer, was beautifully hand calligraphed. Because I had dropped out and didn't have to take the normal classes, I decided to take a Calligraphy class to learn how to do this. I learned about serif and sans serif typefaces, about varying the amount of space between different letter combinations, about what makes great typography great. It was beautiful, historical, artistically subtle in a way that science can't capture, and I found it fascinating."

At the time, the student dropout believed that nothing he had learned would find a practical application in his life.

But things changed.

Ten years after college, that man, by the name of Steve Jobs, designed his first Macintosh computer, a machine that came with something unprecedented – a wide choice of fonts.

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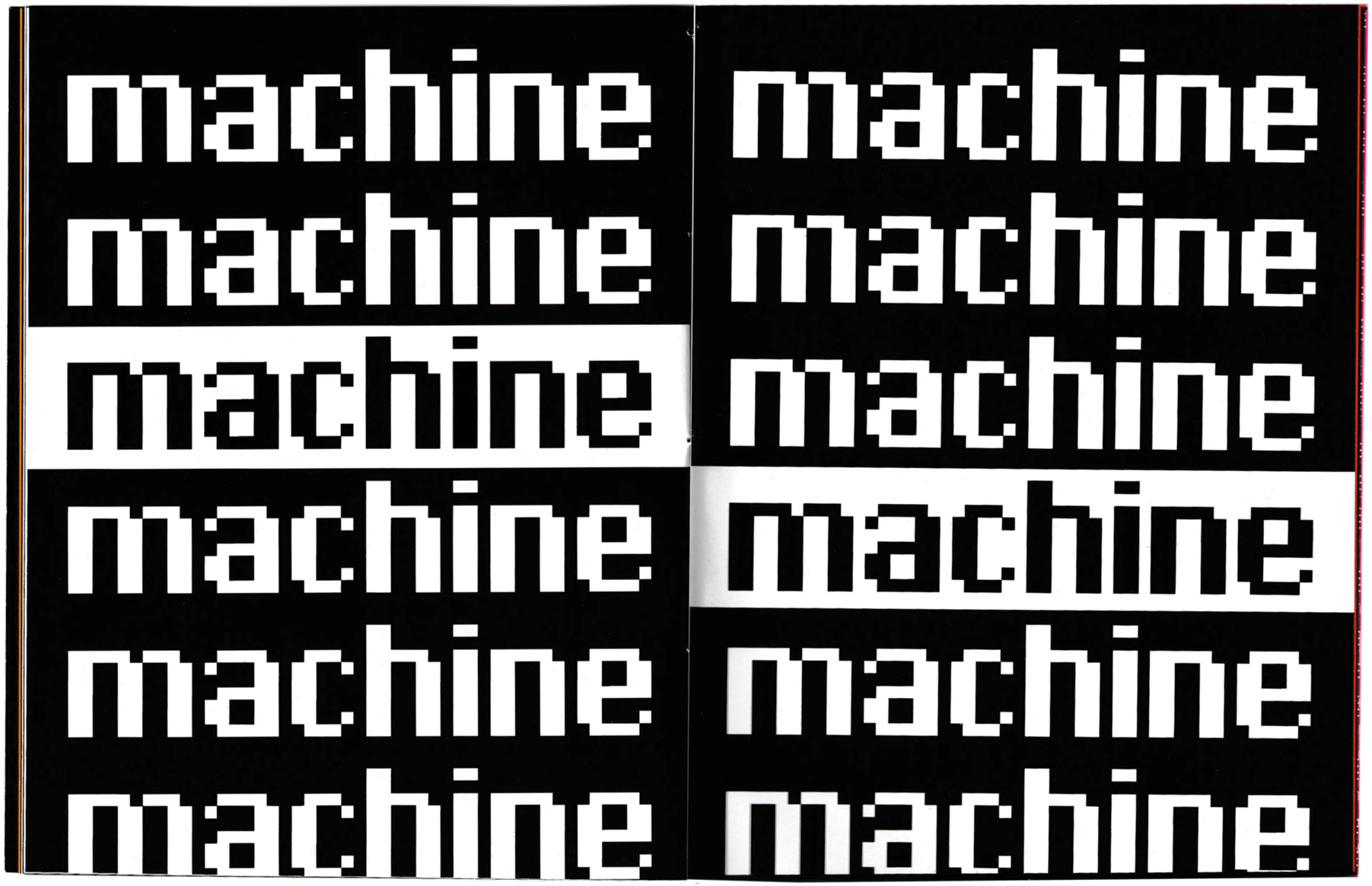
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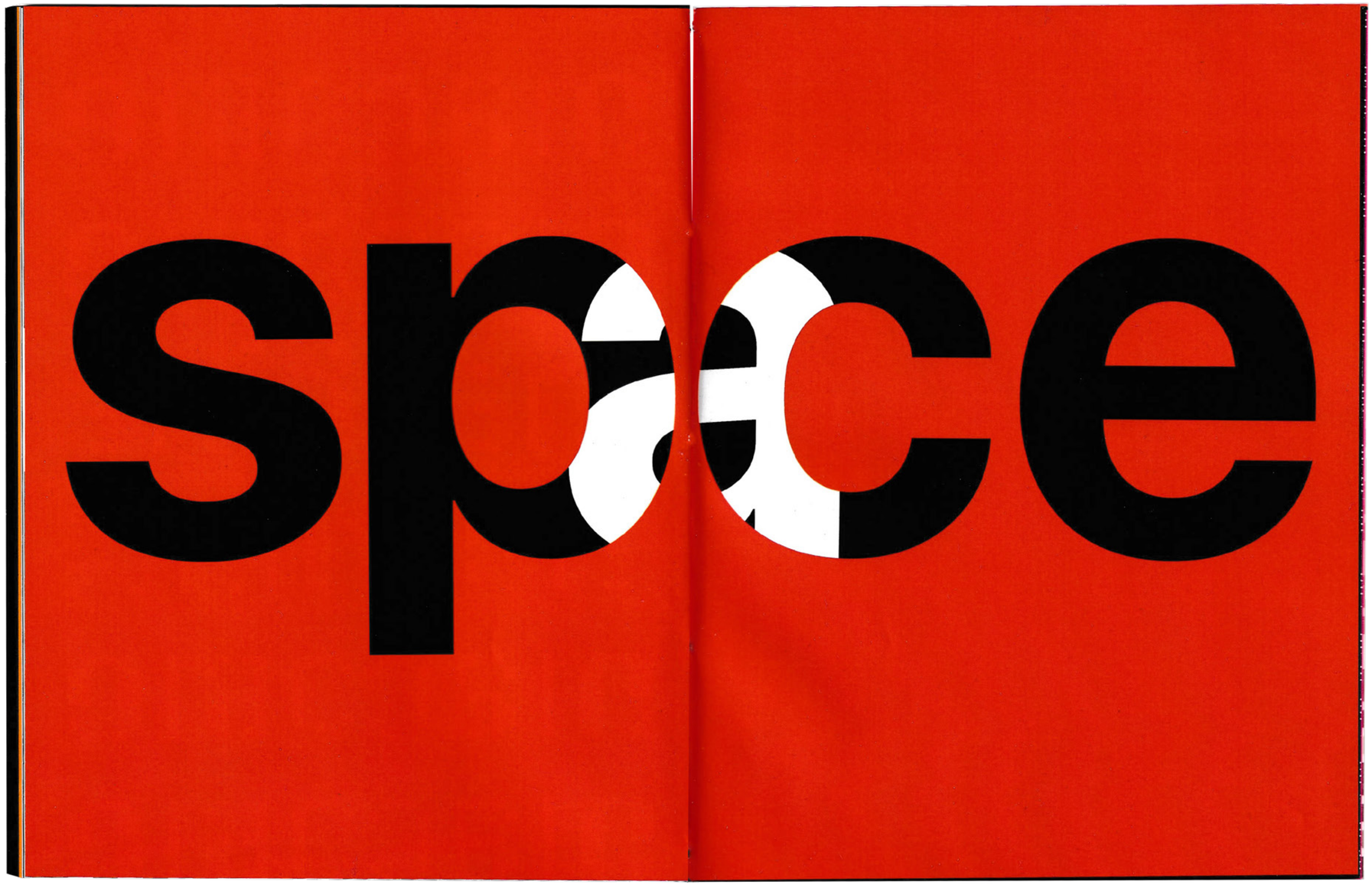
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Love Letters

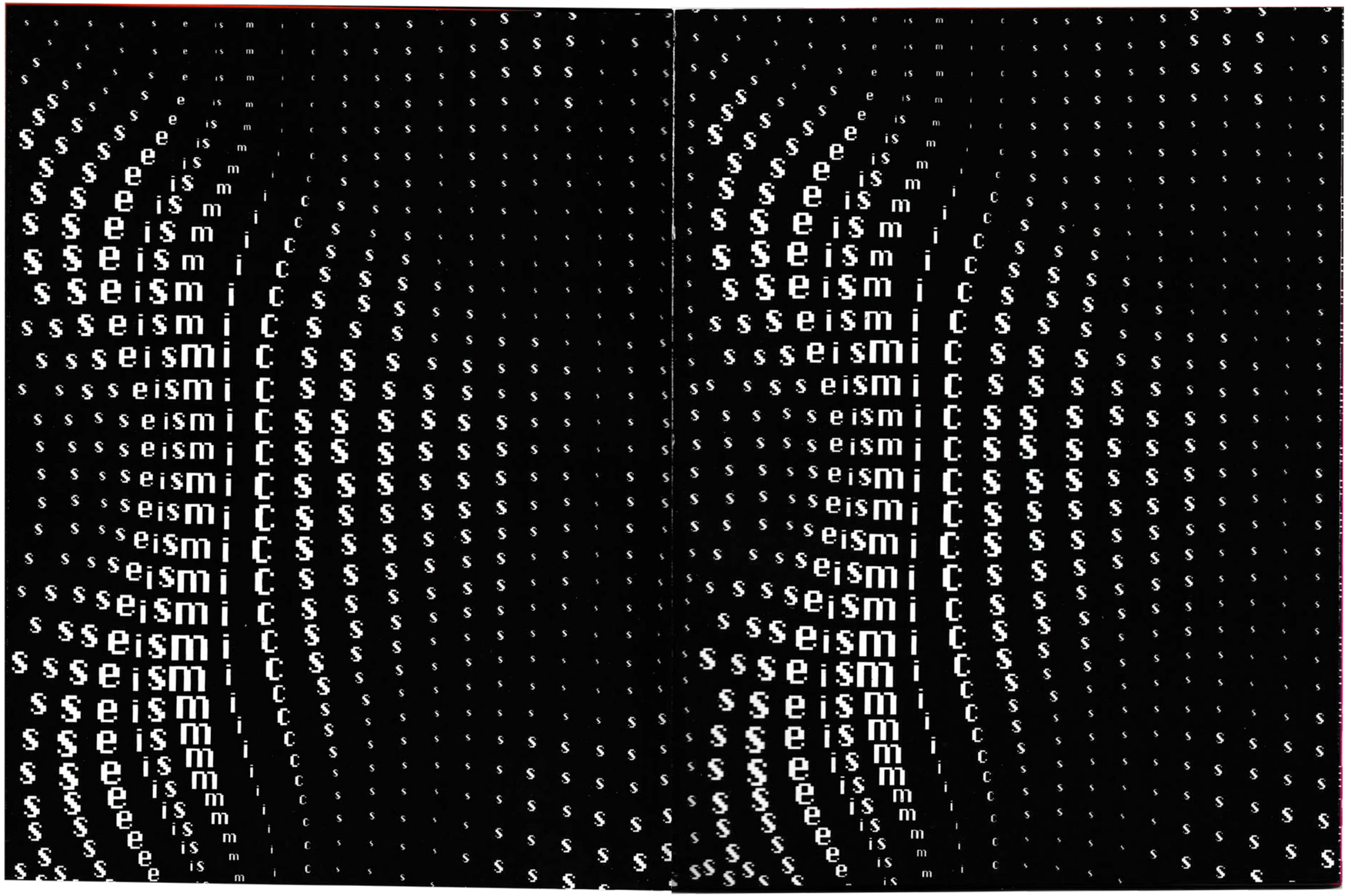
As well as including familiar types such as Times New Roman and Helvetica, Jobs introduced several new designs, and had evidently taken some care in their appearance and names.

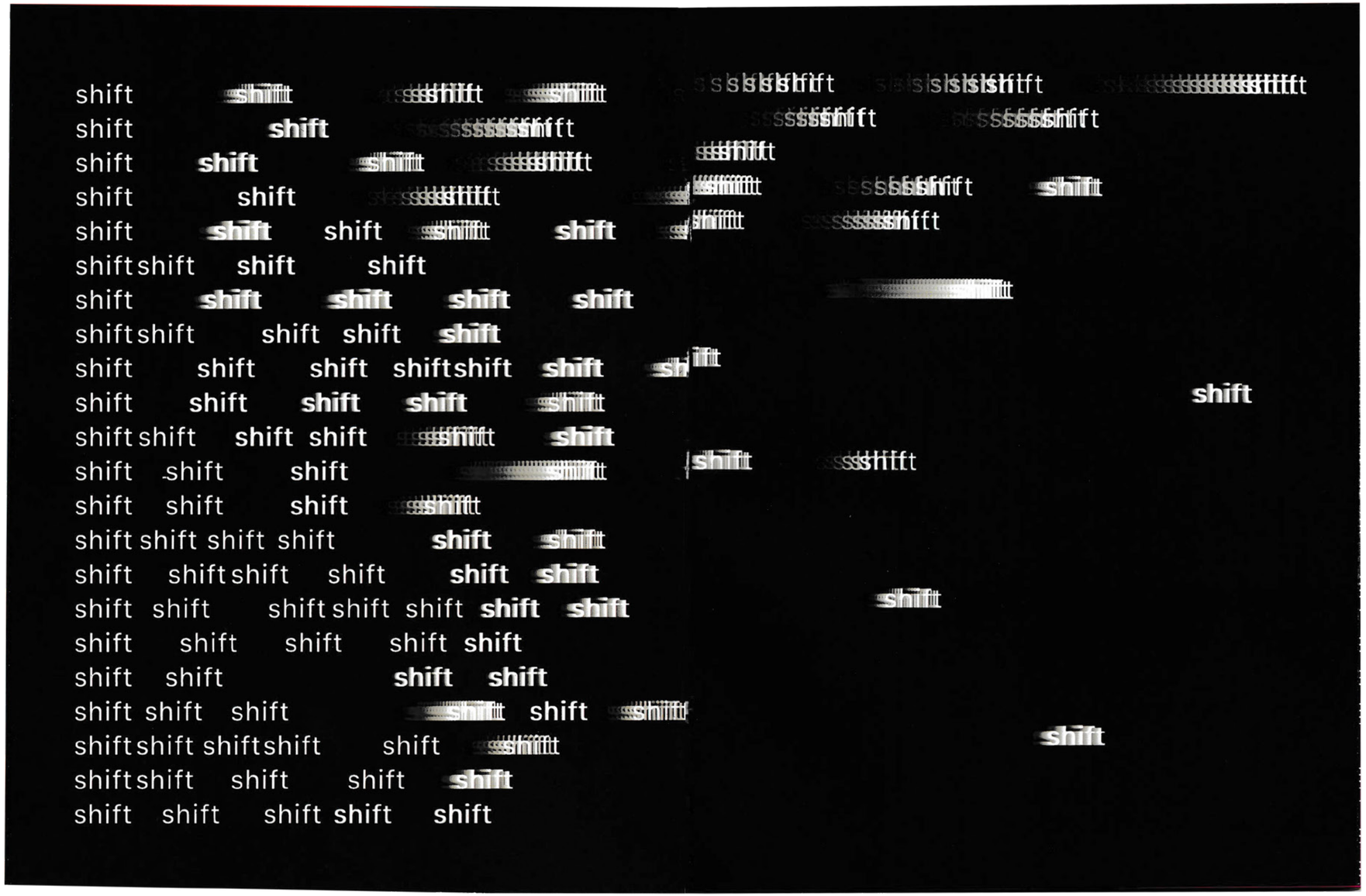
They were called after cities he loved such as Chicago and Toronto. He wanted each of them to be as distinct and beautiful as the calligraphy he had encountered a decade before, and at least two of the fonts, Venice and Los Angeles, had a handwritten look to them.

It was the beginning of something – a seismic shift in our everyday relationship with letters and with type.

An innovation that, within a decade or so, would place the word 'font' –previously a piece of technical language limited to the design and printing trade– in the vocabulary of every computer user.

You can't easily find Jobs' original typefaces these days, which may be just as well: they are coarsely pixelated and cumbersome to manipulate.





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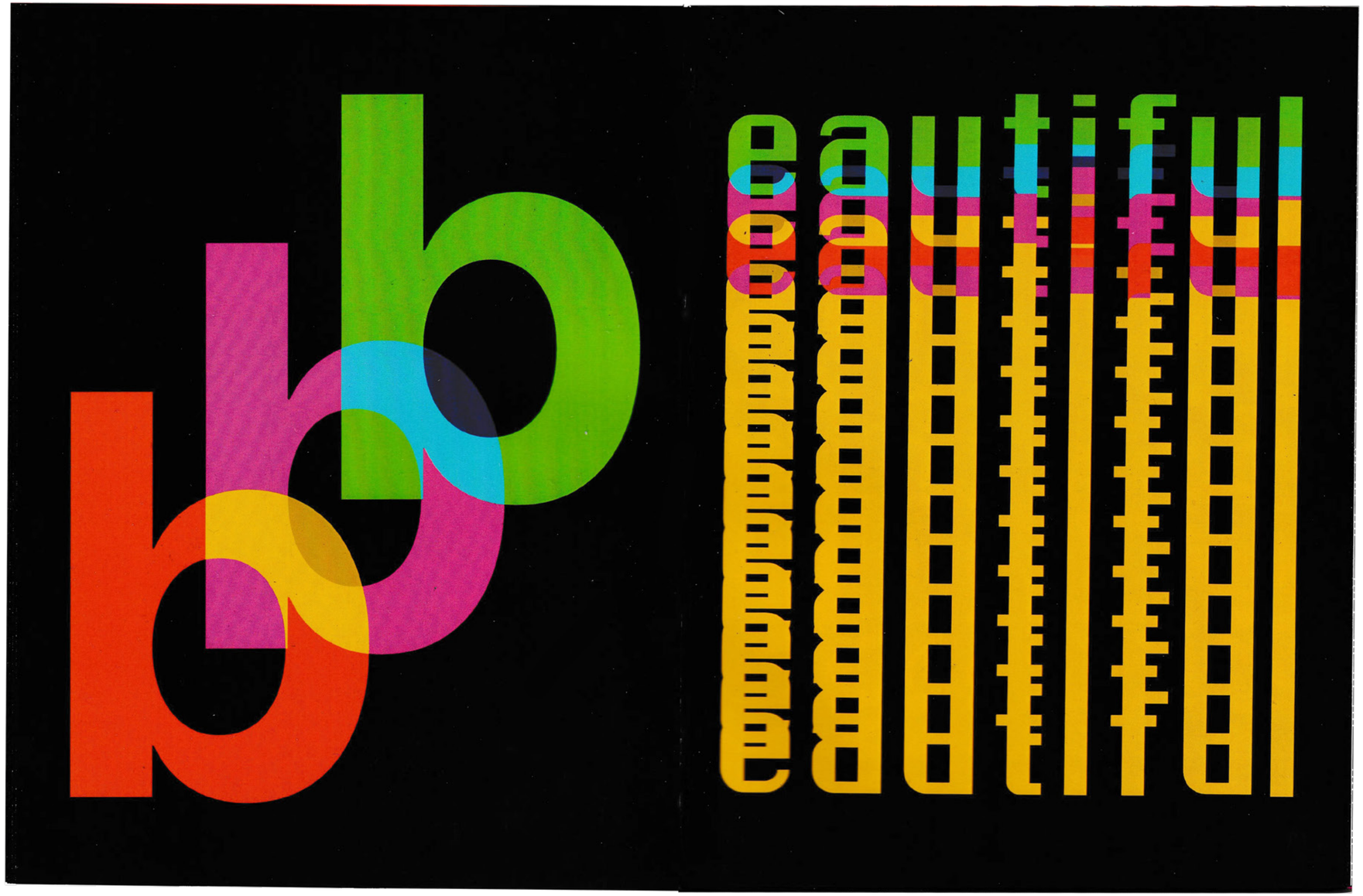
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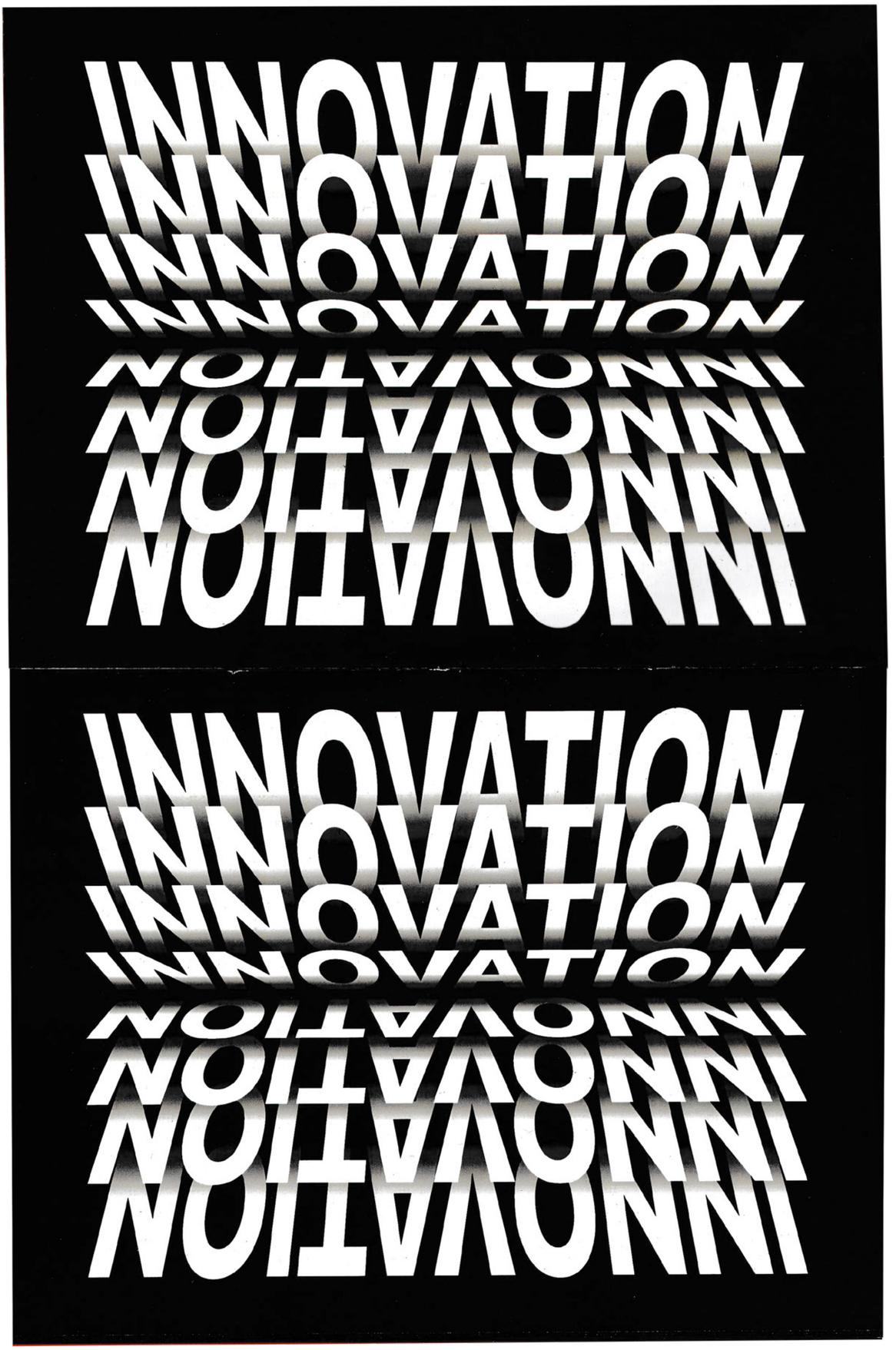
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Love Letters

But the ability to change fonts at all seemed like technology from another planet. Before the Macintosh of 1984, primitive computers offered up one dull face, and good luck trying to italicize it. But now there was a choice of alphabets that did their best to recreate something we were used to from the real world.

The chief among them was Chicago, which Apple used for all its menus and dialogs on screen, right through to the early iPods. But you could also opt for old black letters that resembled the work of Chaucerian scribes (London), clean Swiss letters that reflected corporate modernism (Geneva), tall and airy letters that could have graced the menus of ocean liners (New York).

There was even San Francisco, a font that looked as if it had been torn from newspapers – useful for tedious school projects and ransom notes.

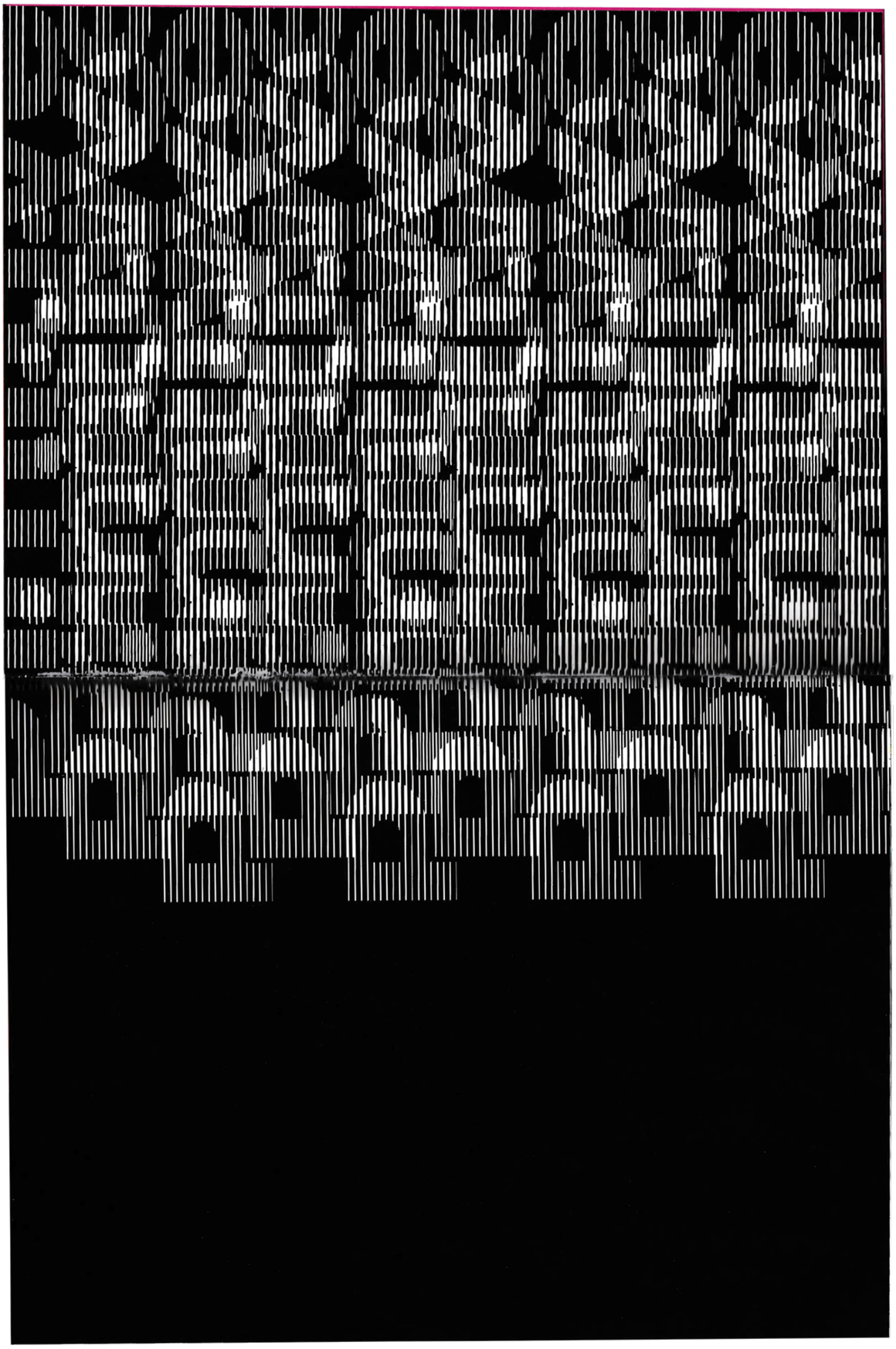
IBM and Microsoft would soon do their best to copy Apple's lead, while domestic printers (a novel concept at the time) began to be marketed not only on speed but for the variety of their fonts.

These days the concept of 'desktop publishing' conjures up a world of dodgy party invitations and soggy community magazines, but it marked a glorious freedom from the tyranny of professional typesetters and the frustrations of rubbing a sheet of Letraset.

A personal change of typeface really said something: a creative move towards expressiveness, a liberating playfulness with words.

corporate

modernism

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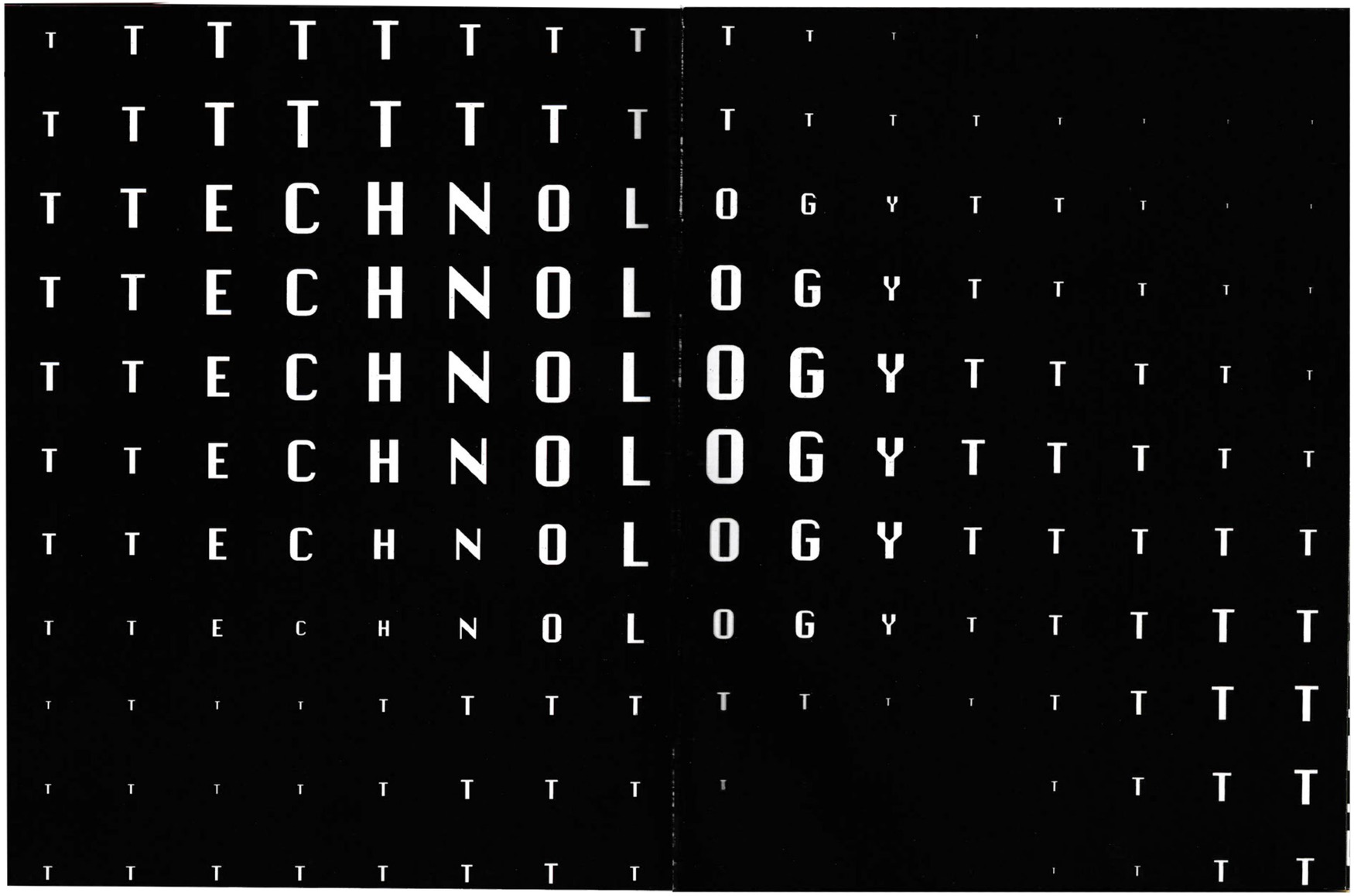

TECHNOLOGY

And today we can imagine no simpler everyday artistic freedom than that pull-down font menu. Here is the spill of history, the echo of Johannes Gutenberg with every key tap.

Here are names we recognize: Helvetica, Times New Roman, Palatino and Gill Sans. Here are the names from folios and flaking manuscripts: Bembo, Baskerville and Caslon. Here are possibilities for flair: Bodoni, Didot and Book Antiqua. And here are the risks of ridicule: Brush Script, Herculanum and Braggadocio.

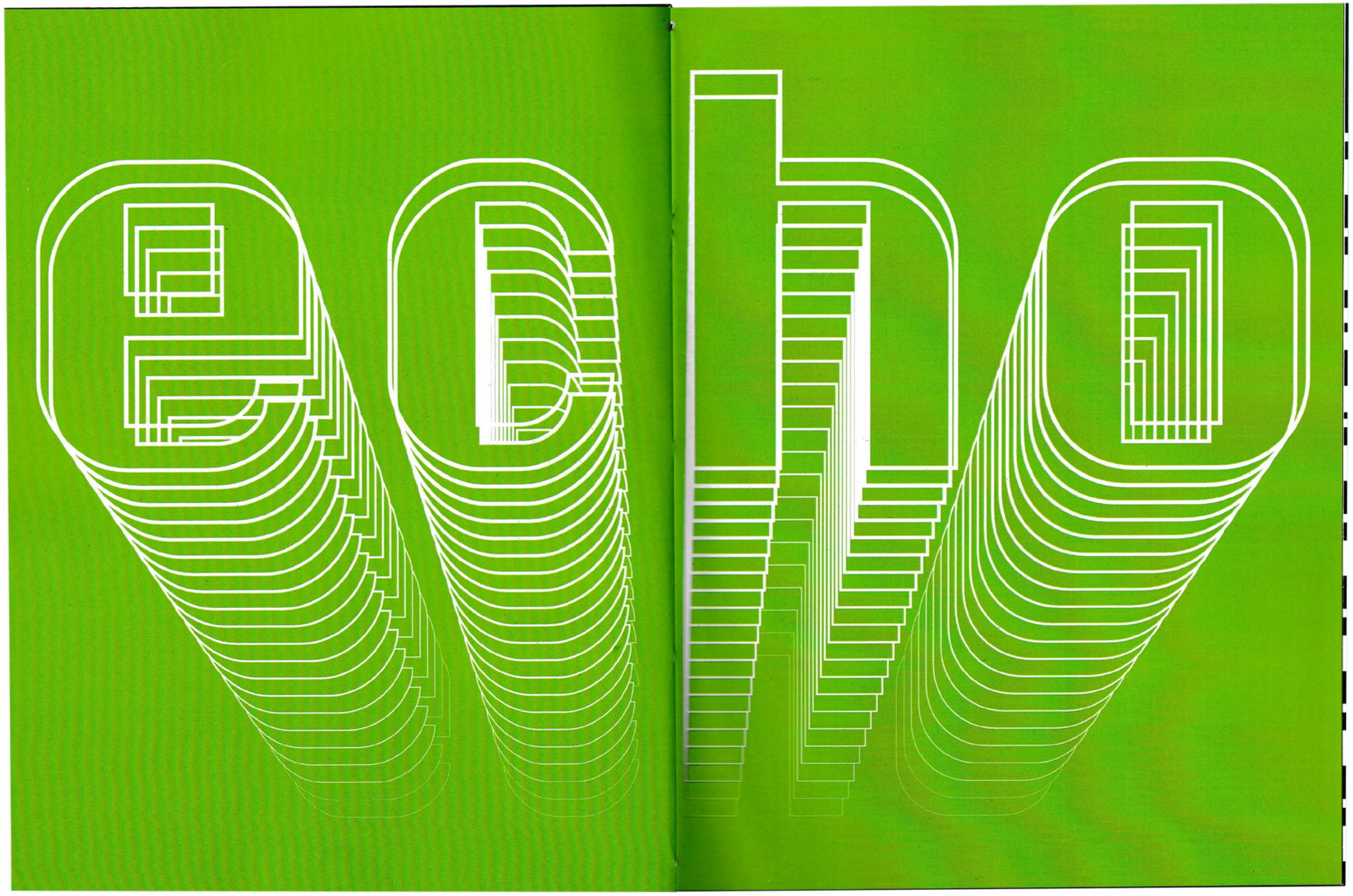
Twenty years ago we hardly knew them, but now we all have favourites. Computers have rendered us all gods of type, a privilege we could never have anticipated in the age of the typewriter.

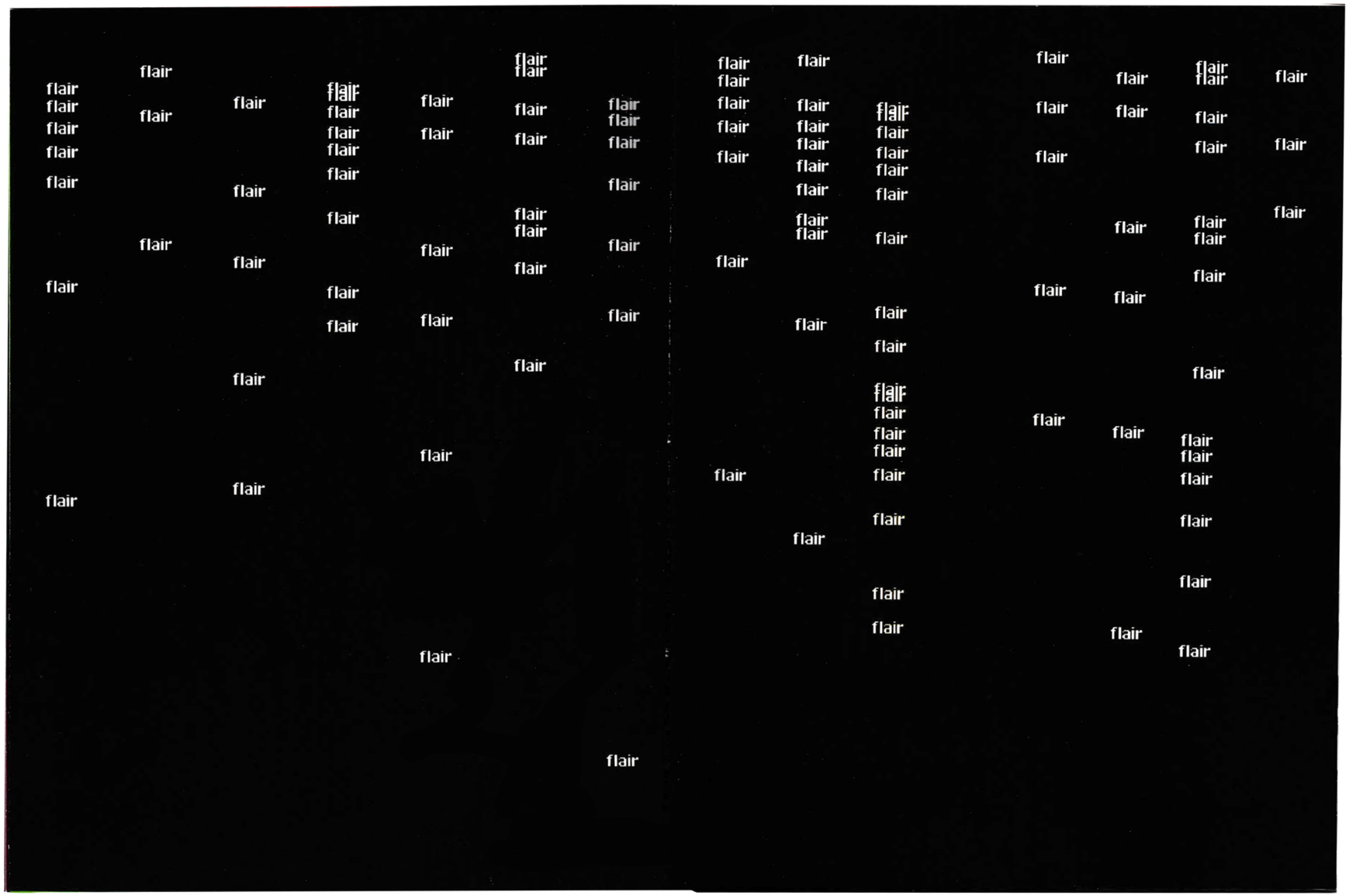
Yet when we choose Calibri over Century, or the designer of an advertisement picks Centaur rather than Franklin Gothic, what lies behind our choice and what impression do we hope to create? When we choose a typeface, what are we really saying? Who makes these fonts and how do they work? And just why do we need so many? What are we to do with Alligators, Accolade, Amigo,

Alpha Charlie, Acid Queen, Arbuckle, Art Gallery, Ashley Crawford, Arnold Böcklin, Andreena, Amorpheus, Angry and Anytime Now? Or Banjoman, Bannikova, Baylac, Binner, Bingo, Blacklight, Blippo or Bubble Bath? (And how lovely does Bubble Bath sound, with its thin floating linked circles ready to pop and dampen the page?)

There are more than 100,000 fonts in the world. But why can't we keep to a half-dozen or so – perhaps familiar faces like Times New Roman, Helvetica, Calibri, Gill Sans, Frutiger or Palatino?

Or the classic Garamond, named after the type designer Claude Garamond, active in Paris in the first half of the sixteenth century, whose highly legible Roman type blew away the heavy fustiness of his German predecessors, and later, adapted by William Caslon in England, would provide the letters for the American Declaration of Independence.

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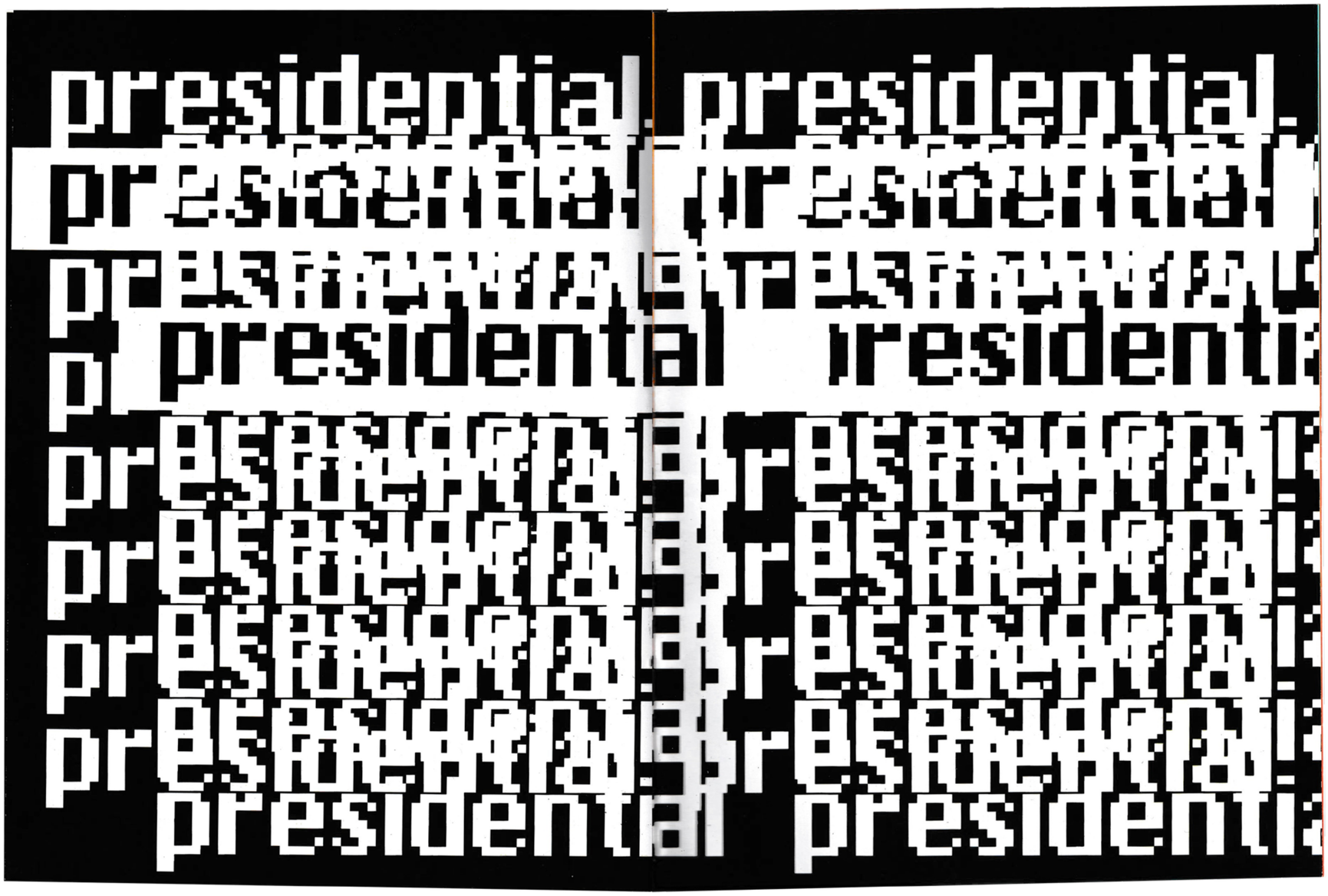
Typefaces are now 560 years old. So when a Brit called Matthew Carter constructed Verdana and Georgia on his computer in the 1990s, what could he possibly be doing to an A and a B that had never been done before?

And how did a friend of his make the typeface Gotham, which eased Barack Obama into the Presidency? And what exactly makes a font presidential or American, or British, French, German, Swiss or Jewish?

These are arcane mysteries and it is the job of this book to get to the heart of them.

But we should begin with a cautionary tale, a story of what happens when a typeface gets out of control.



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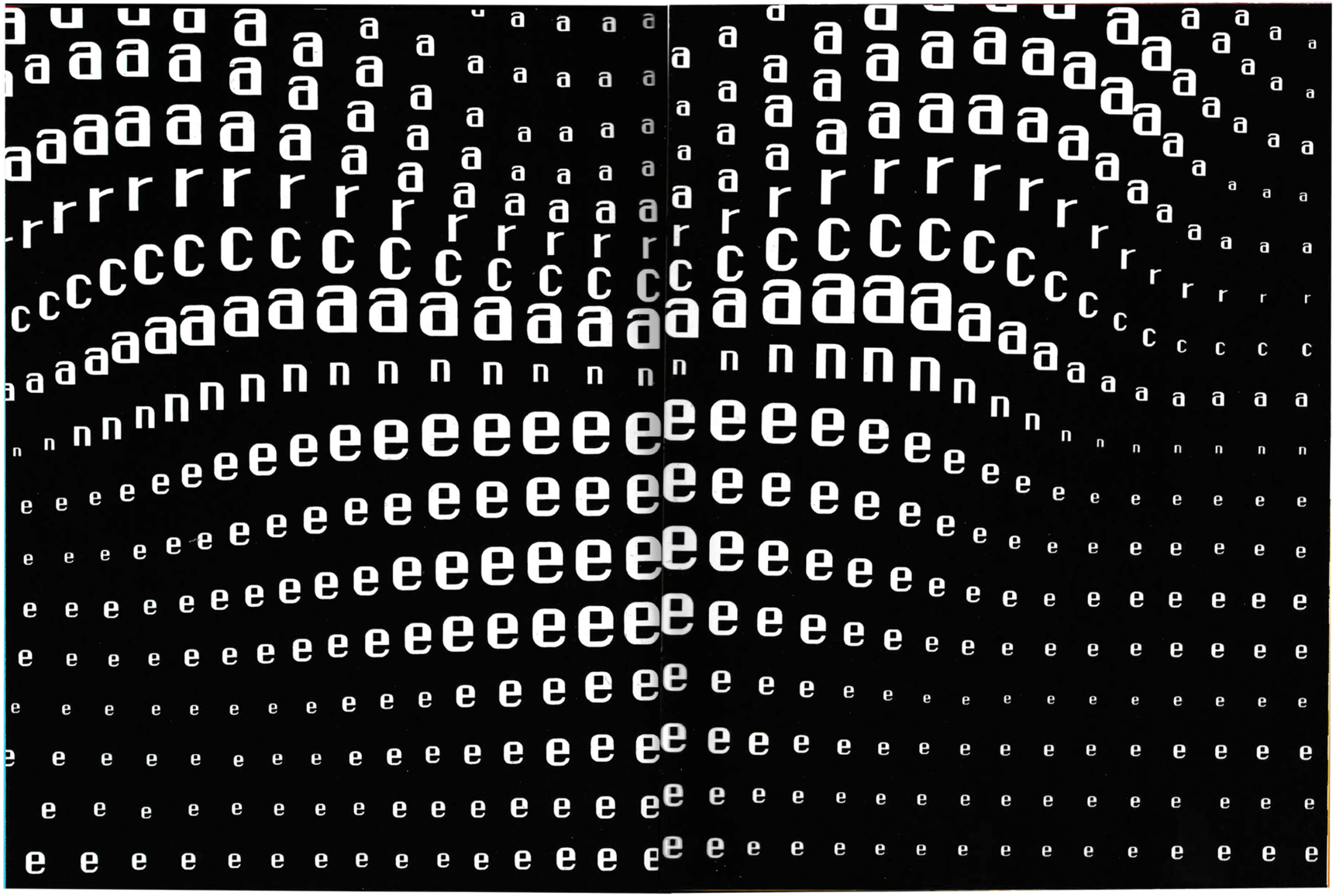

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“These are the arcane mysteries and it is the job of this book to get to the heart of them.”

Simon Garfield – 2010

Reading Digital

Inspired by Simon Garfield's *Just My Type*, this publication acts as a typographic visual tool rather than a traditional book – a curated exploration of how typography and typesetting shape reading in the digital age. Drawing from the opening chapter *Love Letters*, it transforms selected words and phrases into static designs that evoke movement, mimicking the dynamic experience of reading through digital screens. By making still typography feel alive, it reflects how screen-based reading has reshaped not just how we consume text, but how we see it.

Aimed at readers with an interest in Swiss and modernist design, typography, and visual culture, the project fuses conceptual design with typographic expression. It celebrates type as both craft and communication, while reflecting on how reading practices have shifted in the 21st century.