

Against the Grain

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Katina Strauch

Matthew Ismail

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ATG Interviews Jan Middendorp

Author / Publisher, Druk Editions

by **Matthew Ismail** (Director of Collection Development, Central Michigan University) <matthew.ismail@icloud.com>

and **Katina Strauch** (Editor, *Against the Grain*) <kstrauch@comcast.net>

Introduction: *Jan Middendorp's book Dutch Type* (Rotterdam, 2004), an overview of font design in the Netherlands, has been out of print for ten years. A very good used copy is available today on Amazon for \$495, however, suggesting that demand remains strong even after a decade!

Now, I didn't know about **Jan Middendorp's** work when he recently contacted **ATG**. **Jan** told us that he regained the rights to *Dutch Type* from the publisher and is starting a **Kickstarter** campaign to republish it. Given that **ATG** has connection to both the world of libraries and to publishers, **Jan** wondered if we could help him gain an audience for his campaign?

I was immediately interested. **Jan** is a distinguished European journalist and critic of the arts and design and his book clearly still resonates with those who are passionate about type design. Since I have also sought to regain the rights to my work from a publisher, I was also somewhat envious that **Jan** is able to give his work a second chance!

Rather than just help **Jan** with his marketing, I was very pleased that he consented to give us an interview. — **MI**

ATG: Please tell us where you were born, what sort of education you had, how you come to speak such fluent English, and why you chose to become a journalist.

JM: I was born in The Hague, a centre of Dutch rock and pop music in the '60s and '70s. Today it's the place where the **Royal Art Academy** (or **KABK**) runs one of the world's most renowned type design courses. As a teenager I was already writing and designing magazines and drawing logos for fun. I didn't really consider studying at the **KABK**, because there were such talented illustrators in my high school class that I was totally intimidated. Also, I didn't think of graphic design as a skill you could learn. But throughout my studies I continued making publications and posters. Nevertheless, language was my main focus. At school I had taken all three foreign languages — English, French and German — plus Latin. At 18, I decided to study modern Latin at university. That is: Italian. Which became my other second language. My first second language is English. I've been writing mainly in English for the past 15 years. Dutch is such a small culture... Now that I live in Berlin, German is becoming my fourth language, which used to be French. I have no trouble switching from one language to another, and I don't consider that a great skill. Just something I do without great effort, like dancing.



I always considered myself a kind of journalist, or reporter. Professionally, I first wrote about theatre, dance and experimental performance. Occasionally music. Later I moved to design and typography — back to my earliest fascinations. See below.

ATG: Where did you work as a journalist? Did you have a favorite assignment?

JM: I wrote for the school newspaper at 16, for a couple of student papers at 23, and got my first professional assignments at a daily newspaper during college as a theatre critic. For a while I was a somewhat known critic of new theatre in Holland, Belgium and Italy. But things shifted. They became really interesting to me personally in the late 1980s, when I chanced upon people who were getting famous as trailblazers of communication. I met **Neville Brody** in London, and **Emigre's Rudy Vanderlans**, a fellow Dutchman, in Berkeley. I did what was natural to me: I interviewed them, and published about them. That's how my old hobbies became my profession, and I rolled into the typographic world.

ATG: Your CV includes not just your work as a journalist since 1980, but also your work as an author, designer, teacher, and performer. Do you think of yourself primarily as a journalist or as something else?

JM: If I had to choose one word that describes me, I'd say: critic. Of the arts, of typography, of society. And a DJ, which is also in my CV.

ATG: Holland is a very well-established center of publishing, boasting such venerable institutions as *E. J. Brill*, *Wolters Kluwer*, and *Elsevier*. Did this have anything to do with your interest in such a specific aspect of design? If not, what is the origin of your interest in type design?

JM: Oh, I don't think I was very aware of the international import of those names. **Elsevier** was also the title of a conservative weekly, **Wolters Kluwer** was where our school dictionaries came from. **Brill** was special to me because they made such exotic books, some of which ended up in a remainders book store — a national chain — and became really cheap. That store, called *De Slechte*, became my main source of arcane typographic publications once things got more serious and when I began thinking in the late 1980s of typography and type design as a niche where I could be of some use. I had no talent for type design, in spite of my attempts at lettering as a young guy; but I understood letterforms, and did realize I had a good feeling for page layout, which allowed me to become a self-taught book and magazine designer.

ATG: How has your type design-related work changed since you first became interested?

JM: I happened to move from Holland to Ghent in Belgium towards 1990, at a moment when **FontShop Benelux** (Belgium/Netherlands/Luxemburg) did the same. I first got to know them as a customer, then proposed a piece for their little magazine. A few years later they gave me *carte-blanche* to be the editor, main writer, art director and designer of a new quarterly magazine, which I called *Druk*. The English phrase that explained that versatile Dutch word was: "Druk means printing, pressure, busy and crowded." All true, and all applicable to a designer's life. So people in Belgium and the Netherlands identified with that mag's name. I really enjoyed watching, up close, the adventures in the laboratory that was digital type design in the 1990s and early 2000s.

My work for the regional **FontShop** helped finance the research for my first books on graphic design: a Dutch-language history of graphic design since 1945 in The Hague, and my encyclopedic survey of type and lettering in the Netherlands, which came out in 2004. For both books I interviewed perhaps a hundred designers of all ages, which was fantastic fun.

After I moved to Berlin I worked for **FontShop International** for a while, making an exhibition and a book about the **FontFont** type library with **Erik Spiekermann**. But after that they didn't see a role for me, and I continued to design and occasionally translate books for publishers in the Netherlands and Belgium (later I wrote a few for *Gestalten* in Berlin). But then I was fished up by various companies in the type trade. Ever the freelancer, I worked for **Linotype**, **LucasFonts**,

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and finally **MyFonts**. Edited their newsletters for nine years, and fought for quality control, creating an internal group I called the Review Team.

ATG: *If you were just beginning your career today, do you think you would still become interested in type design?*

JM: It's complicated. Its research component has become very technical, and esthetically the spirit is not as subversive as 20 years back. There's still a sense of adventure, but a different kind of adventure. But living in Berlin, probably Europe's capital of type design, is wonderful because design culture here is so multifaceted. The type world is energetic, full of new initiatives, very democratic and friendly, and with a nice distribution of ages, nationalities and gender. So I am where I should be and have probably contributed a bit to what the place is now.

ATG: *Why are you based in Germany these days? Does it have advantages over The Netherlands?*

JM: See above. I've been away from the Netherlands since 1989 — was only there part-time during a couple of years around 2000 while preparing two books on Dutch design. I lived in Belgium for 16 years, and have been in Berlin since 2005. Each move felt natural to me.

ATG: *Your book "Dutch Type" was published in Rotterdam in 2004. Why are you seeking to reprint it in 2018?*

JM: There were various reasons not to do a reprint right after the book sold out in 2007-2008. Publishers often fear printing one edition too many — which can turn a profitable project into the opposite. When *Dutch Type* sold out so soon, who could guarantee that there'd be 3,000 more buyers to justify a second printing? But we're now almost 15 years later and I've often had complaints about the book being untraceable or embarrassingly high-priced. Having quit at **MyFonts**, now a **Monotype** subsidiary, and having gone through a period of sickness and convalescence, I was suddenly in the right mood and felt the right energy to revive the book and become a self-publisher. I had help from friends. I might never have gotten around to it without the gentle pushing and assistance from my friends **Ramiro Espinoza** and **Paula Mastrangelo**, two Argentinian designers in greater The Hague. So I was chuffed (and flabbergasted) when the minimum necessary for producing the book was reached in less than 24 hours after launching the **Kickstarter** campaign.

ATG: *Why was the self-publishing route more attractive to you than having "Dutch Type" re-published by a traditional publisher? What gave you the idea to launch a Kickstarter campaign to finance the book's publication? Did you consider any other avenues for financing besides Kickstarter?*

JM: I was on the fence for a long time. The advantages of an international publisher are obvious. To find your book in a bookshop in Paris or São Paulo is a thrill, and that happens thanks to large-scale distribution. Not easy to pull that off on your own. But having written and co-edited more than a dozen design books, I did have some experiences that were a bit less satisfying. I wrote and designed a book that teachers in Europe and the U.S. praised as the only typography primer their students thoroughly enjoyed, but my small Dutch publisher lacked international punch to make *Shaping Text* a real success.

As for *Dutch Type*, my original idea was to update it to 2018, which would imply adding 15 years, rewriting a big part of the text and replacing images, and thereby partly destroying the original book. Which would be a pity. It seemed like a more efficient plan to reprint the 2004 book, which lots of people craved for. I had already collected a long list of individuals who were looking for the book and couldn't afford the steep online pricing of stray copies of the first printing. The literally overnight success in reaching the **Kickstarter** minimum told me I must have done something right.

I chose U.S.-based **Kickstarter** in spite of the growing amount of European sites that offer a similar service because, as the original platform in this genre (or one of them), **Kickstarter** has become synonymous with crowdfunding and is simply trusted by so many backers, especially in the U.S. but actually across the world.

ATG: *For those unfamiliar with Kickstarter, can you explain exactly how you are using it to fund the re-publication of "Dutch Type"? How can people become part of the campaign?*

JM: It's a smart amalgam of begging around your circle of friends and family for a little investment in your crazy project that no publisher or manufacturer believes in (yet) mixed with social media, and online shopping. I am not sure if anything like that existed in pre-digital times. It's a disruptive new tool, but in a good way. It empowers people with unconventional ideas — about creating stuff or about social responsibility — to do it their way and not give in to marketing principles or corporate conservatism. As I have much less overhead than major publishers do, I can reinvest extra money into the book. I can decide to print my book at a Belgian printer I respect and can visit, instead of sending it to Hong Kong or Singapore and fuel its digital footprint. I can make the cover more attractive by adding silver silk screen, like the original version, pay the people who revived the Quark XPress files a little more, and put some money aside to finance future publishing ideas.

As for the last question: The campaign still runs until June 23, 2018, and can be found via bit.ly/DutchType.

ATG: *We understand that the book will be re-published by your own imprint Druk Editions, located in Ghent and Berlin. Do*

you have a projected timeline for its publication? Once the book is re-published how will interested readers and libraries get copies?

JM: In 2000, while living in Belgium, I founded **Druk Editions** (named after the one-man magazine I made for **FontShop** there) to publish my very first type book: *Lettered*, about the work of Brussels type designer and artist **Clotilde Olyff**. So I thought that in order to revive *Dutch Type*, it would be neat to revive **Druk Editions** as well.

I fortunately have some time to organize distribution, and collaborate with larger companies to do that professionally.

ATG: *Do you have a marketing plan to promote "Dutch Type" once it is re-published?*

JM: See above. I am not eager to turn myself into a big-time publisher. But I do hope to self-publish or co-publish a follow-up in the form of a magazine-as-a-book. The French called this "mook."

ATG: *What new projects are you working on?*

JM: Well, as I told you, when *Dutch Type* was hard to find, people naturally asked whether I would produce an updated second edition. For a while that was my plan, but I had so many new projects — books, articles, design assignments, eventually an informal type foundry called **Fust & Friends** (<http://fustandfriends.com/>) — that I opted for a revival of the original book, without throwing away a quarter of it to make room for the new.

But there *is* new stuff, and I do think there is room for publications about it. The Netherlands don't even have a major printed design magazine any more. But instead of going for the encyclopedic again it might be nicer to follow my intuition and write about people and phenomena that I think are fascinating. Perhaps make that magazine-book a semestral thing, with articles by me and others and nice big pictures, and call it *21st-Century Dutch Type*, or *Dutch Type Now?* 🌳