

Reading Color *Type in and on Color*

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Good evening everyone! As most of you know, I'm Jeanne Criscola, faculty here in the Design Department. This is my fifth presentation about a book I'm writing on typography and color and it's working title is *Reading Color, type in and on color*.

It will introduce a new pedagogy for learning typography and color in relationship to each other. It uses a synthesized, inductive, and experiential approach to help users understand the visual gestalt that letter forms and color create. Informed by Josef Albers's book, *Interaction of Color*, it provides a methodology that is currently absent in design discourse: *the study of color with variations of typographic dimension, scale, and proportion*. I'm referring to it as a "handbook" that "*places practice before theory*" allowing experimentation with letter forms and color to sharpen visual perception. The handbook demonstrates this and guides the user to create samples with combinations of fonts in color set on fields of color. Through the experiments, the user learns how simple and complex negative and positive shapes interact, preparing them to realize, conceptualize, and achieve more with today's digital tools.

My objective is to prepare users to see ways to place type and color together, arming them with a critical competency necessary for a contemporary media landscape that demands it. It initiates a new way to learn visual perception with color and letter forms, bringing together the typically separate disciplines of color theory and typography. It's for educators, practitioners, media producers, and art and design students. I want to illuminate what I find daunting to describe—how intrinsic, inseparable, and synergistic *type and color really are*.

I took a course in college where color was explored using a box of color-aid paper, an Exacto knife, and Josef Albers's' book, *Interaction of Color*. It taught me a lot about how color operates through positive and negative forms, shapes, and pattern. In the early 80s, I became a practitioner of design and an academic when graphic design started to flourish with its liberation from being a subclass to the field of art. I was learning Typography on the job and some of it is now obsolete. Color theory, a fundamental and critical skill in art, was dropped from the graphic design curricula. Graphic design majors were shifted into 2-D courses where

exercises explored the basics, patterning, texture, and color. Over the decade, I applied what I had learned to the root elements of graphic design: social concepts in typography and imagery with digital tools. During this time, the digital tool radically changed, print became more complex, screen design emerged, and academia started cutting costs and combining majors.

Upon my return to teaching in 2004 after raising my kids, I searched for a basic but comprehensive textbook for a class I was preparing in Media Design for communication majors. I considered the type books in my library by Robert Bringhurst, Walter Tracy, James Craig, Ellen Lupton, Rob Carter and others. I searched through graphic design books for chapters on color and typography. An internet search for typography with “look inside” features revealed many new books on the subject. I could even find older editions of books as pdfs. But none were quite what I was looking for. I wrote an outline for a book that explored typography and color theory in context and in situ and then I put it aside. In my studio and in my teaching, I continued to see a need for such a book in an environment that was rapidly changing due to technological innovations and more varied and profuse media. In 2018, I revised the proposal, expanded it, and started submitting to publishers this month.

The handbook is based on my observations and experience working with and teaching typography and its history. Through a historical lens, my premise to integrate the study of type and color is obvious and logical. I do hope this presentaion allows you to see the potential in this new field of inquiry.

The study of communication design is underpinned by the theories associated with the development of communication and language. Beginning with cave drawings, the through-line evidence shows how humans have employed the materials and technologies of their time to impact the evolution and design of written language. In 1455, Johannes Gutenberg’s technologies marked a milestone for written communication and its distribution with the mechanization of movable type and printing. Metal type was then upended by photo type around 1950. And a short time later in 1985, desktop publishing with a personal computer enabled the placement of black type and simple textures on a white field. Many innovations then lead to incremental changes that gave way to today’s digital typesetting technologies where applying color to letters, words, layers, and backgrounds came next.

In all, digital technologies have fused together typography and color to present limitless opportunities, myriad configurations of type design, fonts, size, and layouts suspended in seemingly infinite spectrum’s of color. There is even a new scalable vector format called *Chromatic Type*, which embeds color into a typeface design — unlike those pixelating Apple

Color Emoji's — which disappointingly only scale so far. Graphic design today shows strong evidence that technological advances are impacting and evolving communication modes and norms again. The future is colorful! Right? So, how should design education adapt for this paradigm shift?

Of course, type in color is not without historic precedent. We can see that Gutenberg's Bible used black and other colors — same as almost every print and screen-based graphic found today. But today's digital technologies do, in fact, present challenges for the fields of typography and color since each discipline falls short of modeling today's digital communication technologies. For instance, in coursework and in books on the subject of typography, examples typically use letter forms in varying degrees of sizes and contrast to demonstrate colors' influence on legibility. In books on color theory, the properties of color are often demonstrated with pie-shaped diagrams, color wheels, grids, and rainbow bands.

I'm always tweaking assignments to imbue typography with creativity—to make the indescribable—describable. Appropriating Josef Albers's book title, *Search versus Re-search* (Albers, 1969), my current search and “research” sets out to find ways to study type and color together. For educators, infusing color theory into the study of typography has advantages for curriculum and course development. For the design student, methodologies that facilitate the learning of color theory with letter forms would integrate their study and practice. Testing this new approach can only be measurable within a design program where typography in and on color are practiced. Programs unaware of their essential value on communication will be reluctant to add typography courses to their curricula, let alone color theory.

So far, my questions are what would educators, professional, and students alike need in order to facilitate the study typography and color together? What would they welcome? The application of Albers's experimental color studies and his Bauhaus mentor, Johannes Itten's contrast of extension theory that employs area, size, and proportion to color offer a starting point to study the visual gestalt of typography. Both Albers and Itten approached color theory through color perception with positive and negative forms, shapes, and pattern.

The handbook will be written for students of graphic design and will focus on color as it applies to message construction by mixing practical know-how and theory with digital and photographic examples in print, screen and dimensional forms. Each example will be examined for its typeface, style, orientation, and alignment—in and on color. It will be a hybrid in content and context—part reference, part inspiration—where type and color are bridged and evidenced in all media, with examples of alphanumeric characters in many

languages for a more holistic approach to a global audience of designers. This component is in homage to you, my students, especially those whose first language is not English—you're the inspiration and hopefully you will participate in the development of the handbook. I've also been inspired by Yale Press' *Interaction of Color* app for the Ipad and I'm experimenting with software to explore interactive possibilities.

None-the-less, it's a slow-going mission. I'm still in the gathering stage. Last week, I spent a day at the Josef and Anni Albers Foundation in Bethany, Connecticut and only came away with one example that I presented today. But it was fascinating to be there able to browse and touch the writing, sketches, copies, contracts, letters and other ephemera in the foundation's archives.

I want to thank you for coming and listening to my talk and I'd like to take your questions now!