Today Sans Serif

Ever tried to design a 'humanist sans serif'? No, not like Optima, more like Gill. Only a few have tried and fewer have succeeded. Apart from Eric Gill and Hans Eduard Meyer (Syntax) nobody came up with anything reasonable until 1987. At least this was my view of the world somewhere in the early 80s, as a student at the Royal Academy of Arts in The Hague. I envisioned a sans serif design that would in fact be a Garamond without contrast, and (of course?) have no serifs. I tried the best I could and left out everything that could be seen as an idiosyncrasy. I strongly disliked Eric Gill's circular o, the symmetrical g, and the 'amateurist M' as I called it; I could not get away with the a in Syntax, and Gerrit Noordzij had just taught me that the italics of both designs were in fact hybrid. Could there be a greater challenge? I was amazed when I discovered Frutiger's Frutiger. Somebody else had almost done it! But there was still something to be done; after all he hadn't done a 'proper' italic either… . I kept on drawing, and every time I had photographed my paste-up (the outline fonts for the Mac had yet to be invented) of 'Pa's wijze lynx bezag vroom het fikse aquaduct' (the Dutch version of 'the quick brown fox'), I realised that it would really be difficult to improve on these guys … .

Then summer came. The ATypI Congress and Working Seminar were about to take place. For the first time I met other designers, almost as famous as the aforementioned three, who had obviously been working on similar designs! At the Congress in Kiel Georg Salden unveiled his Polo (half under the table; we had to be quiet because the meeting of the Committee of Manufacturers and Designers was in full session and we were sitting next to Hermann Zapf, who was just teaching all of us a lesson about the illegal copying of fonts). The Working Seminar was held in Hamburg, and there I got to know Bernd Möllenstädt of Berthold, who showed me his almost finished Formata. I decided that I liked this one more than Polo. The g was much better, but why did he attach those serifs to the stems? Should not we try to do without them? After a few days I got to know Volker Küster. I had not really noticed him during the first days of the Seminar, because he could hardly get out of the type department of Scangraphic. Until very late each evening he was busy realizing the previous night's dreams (and nightmares) of Bernd Holthusen, the visionary Managing Director of the Company. I got to know him too, because I joined Scangraphic 18 months later. After Bernd Holthusen left the dream was over, so I finally left for URW. Volker left a bit earlier, leaving the type department to me, but not before realizing his own dream: Today Sans Serif.

At the Working Seminar he had just finished the text version of the design. Because coincidence does not really exist, his type was exactly positioned in the field where I was drawing my lines. But this was not all. It disobeyed all of the rules that I had thought to be appropriate for such a sans serif design. It looked so irregular, with each character featuring its own peculiarities. To my eyes it was sparkling with detail in all of its elements. It was one big idiosyncrasy. I showed him my design and told him that I was striving for evenness and harmony by repeating as many forms as possible. Volker explained to me that he was doing exactly the opposite in order to achieve the same goal. This was how I started to get a visual grip on the interaction of readability and legibility, and this is why for me Today Sans Serif is best to be remembered.

ALBERT JAN POOL

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Albert Jan Pool, like Petr van Blokland and Peter Matthias Noordzij, was, and is, a key member of what we like to think of as the Dutch mafia, the unmistakably bright alumni of Gerrit's classes in Holland. For the past few years he has been digging himself in at Peter Karow's URW in Hamburg, where most of the pioneering work on outline technology was started in response to the needs of the late Walter Brendel.