



FUSE 1-20

By Neville Brody and Jon Wozencroft
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box, online font library, \$59.99
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Begun in 1991 by Brody and Wozencroft and published by FontShop, *FUSE* was not so much a magazine, but an ongoing virtual atelier that resulted quarterly in a cardboard package containing a floppy

disk of typefaces created around a theme, a set of folded posters deploying them and a booklet of essays. Themes ranged from those that seem apt for alphabet schemes like "codes" and "runes" to those that seem more tangential and decidedly sociopolitical like "religion" and "propaganda." The founders and guest designers sought to counteract what they saw as the strict formalism and accepted typographic tenets of the previous decades while embracing the democratization of type fabrication brought about by personal computers and software like Fontographer.

Somewhat controversial throughout the 1990s—indulgent to some, groundbreaking to others—*FUSE* produced 18 volumes (with two more, *FUSE19: Revolution* and *FUSE20: Antimatter*, released with this retrospective), 100 posters and 114 fonts by almost 100 graphic designers and type designers. All is reproduced here in one bound volume, plus the two sets of five posters for issues 19 and 20 and a keycard that allows access to the online font archive, all wrapped in cardboard.

FUSE positioned itself as a laboratory for "exploring visual language forms," a "catalyst," a "white paper." The publishers saw the status of graphic design as a battleground and *FUSE* as the uprising. "In a world of generic mediocrity and corporate obedience, new flowers of exuberance bloom in dark crevices." Some of the resultant fonts were stylized, some were minimalist letterforms or counter forms, some turned the Latin alphabet into crypto- or pictograms. And although one might wonder if decipherable words were being made a straw man (with defenses like "we could say that it is difficult to read because *reading is difficult...touché*"), the designers' interpretations/explanations of their typefaces and their creative process give food for thought. Some fonts recall the psychedelic posters of the late 1960s, like Paul Sych's Box from *FUSE6*: comprised of lozenge-shaped dots. Sylke Janetzky's Atomic Circle from *FUSE10* is an intriguing new braille alphabet built around a circle. For *FUSE18*, Matthew Carter created DeFace in which each letterform does just that to its neighboring letters in a word, recalling how tombstones and other memorial inscriptions can get defaced over time through weather or graffiti.

To jog the memory about how *FUSE* launched more than a few arguments, be sure to revisit Michael Rock's biting critique (found at eyemagazine.com), "Beyond Typography," although it was written in 1994 after only ten issues. "*FUSE* is not a project about type at all: the alphabet is not a vehicle for communication so much as a backdrop against which designers spin their elaborate narratives. While the forms assume the variegated surface of post-modernism, the underlying issues indicate that projects such as *FUSE* are deeply rooted in Modernist goals of avant-garde experimentation and artistic originality," Rock writes. Also worth rereading in conjunction with *FUSE 1-20* is Rick Poyner's careful essay "Rethinking Conceptual Type Design" (found at designobserver.com). The latter in particular puts *FUSE* in historic context and shows how explorations like those found in this book—free from clients, free from functionality—have their place in the present and future of design, for the student as well as the student within. —Angelynn Grant