Geoff White

Awarded an Honorary Fellowship

Typographic 70

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Geoff White was born in 1928. He left school at fifteen and began his working life as a messenger in the same firm that employed future Pentagram partner Colin Forbes. It was Colin Forbes who suggested that Geoff should apply to the Central School which he attended in 1949. Geoff was a contemporary of Peter Wildbur and flat-mate of Ken Briggs. Whilst at the Central, Geoff encountered influential tutors such as Victor Pasmore, Jesse Collins, Anthony Frøshaug and Herbert Spencer. He was particularly impressed by Frøshaug’s basic typography projects, such as starting with a single size of type, then introducing bold, and then two sizes. Geoff was later to carry on this approach when teaching at Ravensbourne College of Art and Design.

He was also influenced by Victor Pasmore who taught basic design at Central. It was Pasmore that introduced him to the intricacies of colour theory. He took a wider international influence from artists such as Max Bill, Kazimir Malevich and El Lissitsky as well as film-makers Leni Riefenstahl and Akira Kurosawa. Geoff sought inspiration from the European publications New Graphic Design and Graphis where he read Emil Ruder’s ‘The Typography of Order’. After graduation from the Central, Geoff went on to work as a typographer in several advertising agencies on projects such as the Co-operative Society and National Cash Register. He later joined the Central Office of Information in 1960. Bill Slack, a friend of Geoff’s, was art editor of the Architects’ Journal at the Architectural Press. Gordon Cullen was art editor of the companion Architectural Review and was assisted by Dewar Mills. The Architectural Press sought to improve the quality of the advertising appearing in both publications. This enabled Dewar Mills to establish a separate business for this purpose. Geoff joined Dewar Mills, where he was able to adopt a more Modernist approach not current in the agencies of the day. During 1961–62 Geoff started to combine professional work with teaching at the London College of Printing.

Geoff White had long been motivated by a sense of ethics within the discipline and during 1964 was one of the signatories of the First Things First manifesto. Geoff had joined the Labour Party aged eighteen in 1946. The personal, professional, political, society and the individual’s contribution were all connected in Geoff’s mind.

It was Ken Briggs who recommended Geoff White to Ravensbourne, an institution with which he is primarily associated. This connection began in 1966 on a part-time basis and then eventually full-time from 1971. Geoff initially taught the final year before establishing himself in the role of year one tutor. It was in this role and along with his students that a fresh approach to British Modernism was to take hold. The combination of teaching with professional practice suited Geoff’s temperament. His freelance work of this period included an identity for Bedfordshire County Council; promotional work for Ravensbourne; catalogues and leaflets for ILEX furniture and interior design; and special issues of the Architectural Review during 1978 and 1988 with Michael Burke. He favoured the approach taken at Ravensbourne, which was influenced by the Bauhaus and Hochschule für Gestaltung at Ulm.

As a first year tutor, Geoff was able to collaborate with others to continue the development of a unique education in basic design and typography. The spirit of Modernism flourished within the studios at Ravensbourne and began to influence a new generation of designers emerging through the 1970s, 80s and 90s. The use of sans serif typefaces such as Univers within a strict hierarchy of sizes and weights and structured to an underlying grid system became prevalent within the work of Geoff and his students. The approach wasn’t purely typographic. Geoff was able to integrate his previous experience with drawing from the Central years. He was particularly impressed by the combination of type and image associated with practitioners such as Armin Hofmann at the Basel School in Switzerland. Geoff has kept an international perspective, and has keenly observed and blended within his own practice the work of experimental designers such as Wolfgang Weingart.

During the mid 1980s Geoff enlisted new members of staff to aid on year one of the course at Ravensbourne. These included Hamish Muir and Simon Johnston of the newly formed 8vo. Staff and students were absorbing European Modernism, but transforming this into British Neo-Modernism.

Over his working life Geoff has produced a prodigious body of work. Peter Werner, the head of department, commissioned the graphic design work associated with Ravensbourne. Geoff designed posters, invitation cards and leaflets for the college.

Geoff had been profiled in Octavo Issue Two, soon to be revisited by Unit Editions with Mark Holt and Hamish Muir as Octavo Redux. Geoff and his work with students at Ravensbourne had been previously exposed through Igildo Biesle’s book Graphic Design Education. Later Rupert Bassett was to reflect on the influence of Geoff White’s teaching in Lucienne Roberts’ book Drip Dry Shirts.

In 1993 Geoff White formally retired from Ravensbourne although he continued on a part-time basis for a further two years. Some forty years after his first teaching job at London College of Printing, Geoff was to return there to deliver his unique take on visual language and typography. Geoff connected with the international students on the Postgraduate Certificate and Diploma Design for Visual Communication courses. He had built up a wealth of teaching material, much of it originated and compiled by himself, which he shared openly. Geoff doesn’t pontificate or promote himself, rather he genuinely hypothesises, based on his lifetime of knowledge and experience.

Between 2008 and 2009 Geoff developed further his practice as a graphic designer through his poster work for the Talking Graphics series at London College of Communication. Working either by hand or on a computer Geoff continues to explore new visual languages to extend the possibilities within his work. Colin Banks once described typography as a lifelong apprenticeship. Geoff White exemplifies this continuous striving to learn and discover more.