

The Tail of the Cat

*The Tail of
the Cat*

Looking at language

In the beginning was the Word. But who was the author? Where was the reader? What was used to write this word? Which tool? Which writing system? Which language? Where did all three come from? What did this word look like? Was it legible? Readable? Written? Consisting of letters? ALL CAPS, CamelCase, lowercase, SMALL CAPS? Sans, serif, ornamented, script, broken? And why was it made?

Letters

What is a letter? How could we describe the letter a? Its meaning? By itself and within the context of other letters? An alphabet? Its concept, covering all the various forms it includes, such as uppercase, lowercase and script? What's the difference between A and a? What's in between the two? Between any letters? Between two words, two lines of text, two languages, two different scripts? What's the relation between letters and punctuation, like .;!¿ and ?? Why do we combine letters, but not punctuation? Why does written language not allow for many different quantities of silence? Does it?

What's the difference between a regular exclamation mark and one that is bent? Between a normal question mark and one that is straightened! Do they function like the tail of a cat, where the tail is telling what the cat is thinking? The punctuation defining the meaning of the words? The tail defining the tale?

What do you think of when drawing a lowercase G? What do you see? Does it look like this g? Why? Why are most people unable to remember the letter forms they see every day in newspapers, phones and tv? Are seeing and reading two different things? How is it possible

that we recognize something, while we are not able to remember it correctly? What is handwriting? Is it really the hand which is writing, or the tool you're using? What does it look like to write with your hands, instead of using a tool? Like your fingers?

Why do we only talk about letters, while the shape in between letters is equally important? Can they live without each other? What do you get if you cut a letter in two? And paste two half-letters together again? A word? A letter? Is there a difference between a V and a W, cut vertically into two? Can we recognize a u which is rotated 180 degrees? A letter where one stroke is missing, like this one: F? What's the meaning of A? Of AI? Of a word? Of the word meaning? What does it mean to see A's and see As?

Do we have too many letters? Too little? Would it be a good idea to get rid of those we hardly use, like Y, X, Z? Or wouldn't A — M perhaps already be enough? Could we still read it then? Did you ever ask yourself why it is faster to recite A — Z than count from 1 to 26? Are letters the better numbers? Did you realize that if the letters F, L, M, N, R and S were pronounced as Fe, Le, Me, Ne, Re & See (instead of Ef, El, Em, En, Ar & Es), we could recite the alphabet even faster? How would the alphabet and figures look if it were re-invented with today's knowledge and standards? Is it possible to create a totally new

language with the knowledge generated by another one? Or is this new language only possible within the realm of the one within which it was created? Why are we so good at counting with numbers, but do not always know the position of letters within the alphabet?

If we accept letters as forms, can we then also conclude that every form is a letter? No matter whether graphical, sculptural or performative? Permanent or temporary? What does it mean when everything is type?

words

Can we think of something which does not fit into words? Can we think outside language? Or is everything we do by language? Our life, nothing more than the story we are telling? What does it mean to create a word? Our own words? And what do we really want to say, when we say there are no words? What do we think of when using language? While talking? When writing? While writing a note with a pen, typing on the keys of a keyboard, or designing a piece of text? What's our focus? The form of the letter, or the meaning they represent?

Is there a word which exists in every language? Huh? What's the most beautiful word we can imagine? Sonder? Is it possible to imagine words? Words we do not write, speak, think, but exist purely in our imagination? Do those words have letters? Do letters without words exist? Words without letters?

Can you make a connection between $\frac{p}{A} a \frac{6}{100}$ & the question 'souper à Sanssouci'? Between 'Ga' & 'J'ai grand appétit'? Between 'Bl e Bl' and Blume? 'bTb' and 'zwei kleine Beamte'? When are letters turning into words, and words into text, and a text into a narrative? A message? An anecdote, an article, a description, a drama,

a fable, a fiction, a history, a piece of information, a legend, a myth, a novel, a report, an allegory, a narration, a parable, an apology, a tale?

text

What's happening inside of us when we look at type? Receive a message? Read a text? Get lost in words? Right now? Reading this? Can reading be split up into multiple phases, like perception and consideration? Are there more phases? Look at those words, those letters. Read them? See them? This question mark? And this one? This text, these words, those letters? Ourselves? What is reading? Can we read something else than letters? An object? A place? Who is reading? Who gives meaning to a text, the author or the reader? Who's initiating the perception of text, the readers or the letters? Does a text exist before it's being read? Who is talking when we are reading? What's the difference between listening and reading? Are they the same? One loud, one silent? Why do we read? Can we understand the meaning of reading? Where is reading taking place? On our eyes, in our brains? Does someone born blind have a different understanding of language than we do? Does writing exist for him? Can he read? How does he read? And what about deaf-blind? What's the shortest question we can ask? This? Is? I?

things to do

Write a word in a way that it can be misread? Write with your eyes closed? Write without thinking? Write with your own alphabet? In your own language? Write like a drawing? Try to compress language? Put a word in a letter? A script into one letter? A language into a word? Looking at these letters without reading the words (just like we are normally reading a text without seeing the letters)? Write a text like a formula? Write something which is impossible to pronounce, just like ~~this~~? Write a rebus, where the images used are text, and the hidden message is an image? Ask questions we cannot answer? What's this question about? Is this a question? Perhaps it helps to bring us closer to finding out what written language is actually about?

drawing letters?

What does it mean to design type? To create forms, resembling typified language, based on a writing system? Making shapes outside an existing system? How do we describe the action of the person who invented the A (Unicode U+0041), by defining its form and structure for the first time? What was the person who proposed the emojis Jigsaw Puzzle Piece (Unicode U+1F9E9) and Luggage (Unicode U+1F9F3) doing? Why were they approved as part of Unicode 11.0? What is Unicode? The official global system for the registration, numbering and definition of all 'types'? A code? A language about languages? Both? What's the difference between a code and a language? What's the difference between a script and a language? What's a script without a language? And can we imagine a language without a script? Or beyond a script? And if letters are the question, what is the answer?

writing words

What does it mean to write words? Sentences? This text? What's the difference between handwriting, typing on a keyboard, and composing letters digitally? In a design program or manually? With scissors? Is there a difference in quality or just quantity? Are they exactly the same? Is one just more radical than the other? What does it mean to put letters on a piece of paper? Is this an act of writing or designing? Or both?

reading text

How many letters do we see every day, every year, in our whole life? Can we remember the moment we saw our first letter? The moment we read our first word? How do we remember all those things we experienced, before we understood the concept of language? Were the experiences different because we were not able to read and write? If we understand language as something which allows us to talk about things which do not 'really' exist — like countries, companies, laws — what does this mean for language itself? Does it exist — because we can talk about it? Or doesn't it — because we can only talk about it? Does language 'only' exist inside itself? Is there language outside language?

And what if the Word was not a word?

The Tale of the Cat

is written and published by Underware on the occasion of their lecture with the same title on Saturday 26 May 2018 at the Typo Berlin conference, Berlin, Germany. The text in this publication is set in the typefaces Duos & Dolly, the colophon in Zeitung.

Underware
Groenewegje 137
2515 LR Den Haag
The Netherlands
www.underware.nl
info@underware.nl

*Under
ware*