

Type designer Nina Stössinger speaks at 3rd Annual Updike Prize event

David Walden

The Providence Public Library (PPL) held its 3rd third annual Updike Prize for Student Type Design¹ award ceremony on October 23, 2017. This year’s finalists, announced by PPL Special Collections Librarian Jordan Goffin, were Joseph Allegro for his Meadows typeface and Erica Carras for her Raleigh Condensed typeface, with Carras being the winner. The three judges were New England graphic and type designers. The regional Paperworks company provided cash prizes. Carras also received a trophy made from a composing stick.

The actual award ceremony is a small part of the event and came between a presentation by a guest speaker, who is a professional from the type design world, and a question-and-answer session between the audience and the guest presenter. This year’s guest presentation was by Nina Stössinger.²

The title of Stössinger’s presentation was “Looking & Making & Questioning”, those words being the subtitles for the three parts of her presentation.

Looking. Stössinger showed lots of photographs of all sorts of different letters seen in everyday life—on the sides of trucks, on buildings, on posters, in store windows, etc., and in all stages of freshness from just printed/painted to seriously decayed, and across the spectrum from formal to vernacular. She is always looking at lettering as she goes through life (she showed a photo of a sign in the Providence train station taken as she was just arriving that day in Providence from New York City). What she sees may help her in unforeseen ways for future type design projects. She recommends looking.

Making. Stössinger told how she spent three years designing her FF Ernestine typeface.³ Wondering what to do next, she avoided starting the long process to design and perfect another typeface and instead spent several months doing daily type design exercises. She took these exercises from the website typemaker.com, drew them by hand, and published them daily online. She explored design decisions quickly, resisting polishing her drawings; and she didn’t draw words but rather experimented with odd or useful combinations of letters. She recommends cultivating such making.

Questioning. Stössinger compared typefaces that have the vertical parts of letters being wider

than the horizontal parts of them, as is common with Latin fonts, with typefaces that have the horizontal parts wider than the vertical parts, as in Hebrew letters. She noted that Latin letters in some “Wanted” or circus posters have wider horizontal parts, but this is not typical for letters for everyday reading. She set for herself the project of creating a “serif face with stressed horizontals” that was “nice to read”, wondering “could this work”. The result was her Nordvest typeface as used here:⁴

Rainfrogs

Of type design, Stössinger noted that “some rules really make sense” while “others are just conventions”. She encouraged questioning—“think of something new”.

Nina Stössinger is employed by Frere-Jones Type of Brooklyn where she also programs “scripts” to help with the repetition in type design. Some of these have developed into tools which she has posted at github.com/ninastoessinger.

Prior type designers who have spoken in the PPL’s Updike Prize series have been Matthew Carter (who spoke at the time the competition was kicked off, a year before the first prize was awarded),⁵ Tobias Frere-Jones (who spoke at the first award ceremony),⁶ and Fiona Ross (who spoke at the second award ceremony).⁷ Stössinger is perhaps the least well established of these speakers, but her abundant enthusiasm was surely inspirational to the student type designers in the audience.

A video of the 2017 Updike Prize event including Nina Stössinger’s presentation should eventually be posted at youtube.com/user/provlib.

“Updike” in the prize name comes from the PPL’s Daniel Berkeley Updike Collection on the History Printing.⁸ Updike, founder of the renowned Merrymount Press and author of the classic *Printing Types: Their History, Forms and Use*, over many years encouraged the PPL to acquire books and other historic materials and gave the collection much material of his own. To qualify for the Updike Prize, student competitors must visit the Updike collection at least once, in addition to submitting their new type design and an essay about it.

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walden-family.com/texland

⁴ ninastoessinger.com/typefaces/nordvest/

⁵ tug.org/TUGboat/tb35-1/tb109beet.pdf

⁶ tug.org/TUGboat/tb36-1/tb112beet.pdf, p. 4

⁷ tug.org/TUGboat/tb37-3/tb117beet.pdf, p. 257

⁸ provlib.org/exhibitions/

daniel-berkeley-updike-collection-history-printing

¹ provlib.org/updikeprize

² ninastoessinger.com

³ ernestinefont.com