

# Helvetica A Documentary Film by Gary Hustwit

## PRESS RELEASE

"Helvetica" documentary to World Premiere at SXSW Film Festival

"Helvetica," a feature-length documentary about typography, graphic design, and global visual culture directed by Gary Hustwit, will have its World Premiere at the South By Southwest Film Festival in Austin, Texas, on March 13th, 2007. The film is part of the festival's "Emerging Visions" program for first-time feature directors.

"Helvetica" looks at the proliferation of one typeface (which celebrates its 50th birthday this year) as part of a larger conversation about the way type affects our lives. The film is an exploration of urban spaces in major cities and the type that inhabits them, and discussions with renowned designers about their work, the creative process, and the choices and aesthetics behind their use of type. "Helvetica" invites us to take a second look at the thousands of words we see every day.

The film also serves as a long-overdue profile of some of the greatest graphic designers and type designers working today. Participants in the film include Massimo Vignelli, Matthew Carter, Erik Spiekermann, Wim Crouwel, Hermann Zapf, Neville Brody, David Carson, Stefan Sagmeister, Michael Bierut, Paula Scher, Jonathan Hoefler, Tobias Frere-Jones, Experimental Jetset, Michael C. Place, Norm, Alfred Hoffmann, Mike Parker, Bruno Steinert, Otmar Hoefler, Leslie Savan, Rick Poynor, Lars Müller, and more.

Why make a film about a font? "Every day we see words on signs, advertisements, emails," said Hustwit, "but we rarely stop to think about the typefaces in which those words are presented, the fact that people actually designed them, or how those typefaces affect the way we process the information they're delivering. I chose Helvetica because it's the most ubiquitous typeface in our lives, and Helvetica's 'career' also made it a great structure to look at the last fifty years of graphic design. The advancements in computer technology have now made us all graphic designers in a sense."

"I also think it's interesting how versatile Helvetica is, how it can be used for the titles of a film like 'Little Miss Sunshine' but also for 'Seven.' It's the logo of a company like Fendi but also JC Penney's. It's spray painted on the gutters in major cities, but it's also on the side of the space shuttle. Brian Eno had a great quote about ambient music, that it is 'as ignorable as it is interesting.' And I think that Helvetica is a lot like that, it's all around us and we take it for granted, but once you start looking at it, you realize how much a part of our lives it actually is."

"Helvetica" is a production of Swiss Dots, in association with Veer. Key crew on the film include director of photography Luke Geissbuhler, who was also DP on Sasha Baron Cohen's "Borat" film, and editor Shelby Siegel, who has worked on HBO's "The Wire" and edited the feature "Forgiven," which premiered at the 2006 Sundance Film Festival. "Helvetica" was shot in high-definition digital video on location in the United States, England, the Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland, France and Belgium during the summer of 2006.

"Helvetica" will be screened at film festivals, art house cinemas, museums, art schools, and design conferences worldwide throughout the year, with a DVD release in fall 2007. The screening schedule will be posted soon at the film's website: <http://www.helveticafilm.com/screenings.html>

Links:

Filmmaker Blog: <http://www.helveticafilm.com/blog>

Director's Statement: <http://www.helveticafilm.com/director.html>

Video Clips: <http://www.helveticafilm.com/clips.html>

Director Gary Hustwit and the designers in the film are available for interviews, please contact:

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(Press Release, Cont.)

## About the Typeface:

Helvetica was developed by Max Miedinger with Eduard Hoffmann in 1957 for the Haas Type Foundry in Münchenstein, Switzerland. In the late 1950s, the European design world saw a revival of older sans-serif typefaces such as the German face Akzidenz Grotesk. Haas' director Hoffmann commissioned Miedinger, a former employee and freelance designer, to draw an updated sans-serif typeface to add to their line. The result was called Neue Haas Grotesk, but its name was later changed to Helvetica, derived from Helvetia, the Latin name for Switzerland, when Haas' German parent companies Stempel and Linotype began marketing the font internationally in 1961. Introduced amidst a wave of popularity of Swiss design, and fueled by advertising agencies selling this new design style to their clients, Helvetica quickly appeared in corporate logos, signage for transportation systems, fine art prints, and myriad other uses worldwide. Inclusion of the font in home computer systems such as the Apple Macintosh in 1984 only further cemented its ubiquity.

## About Gary Hustwit:

Gary Hustwit has produced five feature documentaries, including "I Am Trying to Break Your Heart," the award-winning film about the band Wilco; "Moog," the documentary about electronic music pioneer Robert Moog; and "Drive Well, Sleep Carefully," a tour film about the band Death Cab for Cutie. "Helvetica" is Hustwit's directorial debut. Hustwit worked with punk record label SST in the late-1980's, ran the independent book publishing house Incommunicado Press during the 1990's, was Vice President of the media website Salon.com in 2000, and founded the indie DVD label Plexifilm in 2001.

## About Swiss Dots:

Swiss Dots is an independent film production company and design brand based in London.

## About Veer:

Veer sources and delivers visual elements with imagination and style to help creatives diverge from the norm and generate fresh solutions. Veer presents a discerning, design-driven selection of photography, illustration, type, and footage, including exclusives and world premieres. Its products are used daily in advertising, print and web design, corporate communications, and publishing. The privately held company has offices in the United States, Canada, and Germany and serves its global base of customers through its call center and award-winning web site at veer.com.

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## Technical Specifications

Copyright year: 2007  
Country of production: United Kingdom  
Running time: 80 minutes  
Director's first film: Yes  
Format: High-Definition Digital Video  
Screen ratio: 16x9 (1.78:1)  
Sound: Dolby Surround LTRT

Available screening formats: HD-CAM, Digibeta (PAL & NTSC), Beta-SP (PAL & NTSC), DVD (PAL & NTSC).

## Production Credits

*Helvetica* is a production of Swiss Dots, in association with Veer.

Produced and Directed by:  
Gary Hustwit

Editor:  
Shelby Siegel

Director of Photography:  
Luke Geissbuhler

Additional Photography:  
Colin Brown, Gary Hustwit, Pete Sillen, Chris Wetton, Ben Wolf

Additional Editing:  
Laura Weinberg

Sound Editor:  
Brain Langman

Sound Mixer:  
Andy Kris

Sound Recording:  
Dan Johnson, Sam Pullen, Victor Horstink, Jörg Kidowski, Reto Stamm

Associate Producers: Andrew Dreskin, Sharon Hustwit, Jakob Trollbäck, Antoine Wilson, Chris Levinson Wilson

Production Assistance:  
Tyrone Braithwaite, Amy Harrington, Christina Ross

Titles and Motion Graphics:  
Trollbäck & Co.

Music:  
Battles, Sam Prekop, Four Tet, El Ten Eleven, Caribou, Kim Hiorthøy, Motohiro Nakashima, The Album Leaf, Chicago Underground Quartet

## About the Filmmaker

Gary Hustwit has produced five documentaries, including *I Am Trying To Break Your Heart*, the award-winning film about the band Wilco; *Moog*, the documentary about electronic music pioneer Robert Moog; and *Drive Well, Sleep Carefully*, a tour film about the band Death Cab for Cutie. *Helvetica* is Hustwit's directorial debut.

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## Director's Statement

Why make a film about a typeface, let alone a feature documentary film about Helvetica? Because it's all around us. You've probably already seen Helvetica several times today. It might have told you which subway platform you needed, or tried to sell you investment services or vacation getaways in the ads in your morning paper. Maybe it gave you the latest headlines on television, or let you know whether to 'push' or 'pull' to open your office door.

Since millions of people see and use Helvetica every day, I guess I just wondered, "Why?" How did a typeface drawn by a little-known Swiss designer in 1957 become one of the most popular ways for us to communicate our words fifty years later? And what are the repercussions of that popularity, has it resulted in the globalization of our visual culture? Does a storefront today look the same in Minneapolis, Melbourne and Munich? How do we interact with type on a daily basis? And what about the effects of technology on type and graphic design, and the ways we consume it?

So let's just say I had a few questions, and I thought making a film would be a good way to answer them. I also thought that looking at Helvetica's "career" would be a good structure to look at the past 50 years of graphic design, and a starting point for some interesting conversations in the film. And hopefully the film could make people who aren't in the design trade think twice about the words that surround them, and the effect that typefaces have on the way we process those words.

I definitely did not want to make a film that had 75 people all saying one quick sound bite about Helvetica, all chopped together. Since there really haven't been any great documentaries made about graphic design and type, I wanted to try to focus on the interviewees in the film as much as the subject matter. Wim Crouwel, Massimo Vignelli, Matthew Carter... these are incredibly talented, knowledgeable, humble people, who each deserve an extensive documentary about their careers. And there are so many younger designers doing amazing work today as well, work that hasn't been celebrated in documentary form yet. So I hope that in this film you'll be able to get to know some of these people a little, see some of their work, and then hear their thoughts on type, and, of course, Helvetica.

-Gary Hustwit

# Participants



## Michael Beirut

is a partner at the design firm Pentagram in New York. He has won hundreds of design awards and his work is represented in several permanent collections including: the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) and the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum in New York; and the Library of Congress in Washington, DC. Michael served as the president of the AIGA from 1998 to 2001. He is a co-editor of the anthology series *Looking Closer: Critical Writings on Graphic Design* and a co-founder of the online journal *Design Observer*.



## Neville Brody

is known for his work on *The Face* magazine and *Arena* magazine, as well as for designing record covers for artists such as Cabaret Voltaire and Nine Inch Nails. He was one of the founding members of FontFont (now FontShop) in London and designed a number of notable typefaces for them. He was also partly responsible for instigating the FUSE project an influential fusion between a magazine, graphics design and typeface design. He now continues to work as a graphic designer with his own design practise, Research Studios.



## David Carson

is best known for his innovative magazine design, and use of experimental typography. He was the art director for the magazines *Beach Culture*, *Surfer*, and *Ray Gun*, among others. His widely-imitated aesthetic defined the so-called "grunge" era. Carson has worked with clients such as Pepsi Cola, Ray Ban, Nike, Microsoft, Budweiser, Giorgio Armani, NBC, American Airlines and Levi Strauss Jeans. The first of his numerous books, *The End of Print*, was published in 1995 and became the best-selling graphic design book worldwide.



## Matthew Carter

is a type designer with more than forty years' experience of typographic technologies ranging from hand-cut punches to computer fonts. After a long association with the Linotype companies he was a co-founder in 1981 of Bitstream Inc., the digital type foundry. In 1991 he left Bitstream to form Carter & Cone with Cherie Cone. He has created many well-known typefaces in frequent use today (Verdana, New Century Schoolbook, Tahoma, Chin, et al), including commissions for Apple, Microsoft, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Wired*, *Sports Illustrated*, *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times* and many others.



## Wim Crouwel

is one of the Netherlands' great design icons and is renowned for his systematic and creative approach to the shape of letters. His Swiss-inspired training, stemmed from Bauhaus principles, fueled a career that has woven theory and practice together. In 1963 he co-founded Total Design, so called because it was the first multidisciplinary design practice in the Netherlands. In 1967 Crouwel published his *Proposal for a New Alphabet*, a revolutionary typeface, designed for dot matrix printers and on-screen viewing, which had no curves or diagonals.

## Participants, cont.



### **The Experimental Jetset**

is the Amsterdam-based design collective of Erwin Brinkers, Marieke Stolk and Danny van Dungen. Citing influences such as “punk, the Situationist International, Godard, Kubrick, the Dutch Provo movement, Frankfurt School, De Stijl, the Beatles and conspiracy theories,” they have emerged as one of Europe’s most inventive graphics teams through projects in the cultural, music, fashion and publishing sectors.



### **Tobias Frere-Jones**

has designed over five hundred typefaces for retail publication, custom clients, and experimental purposes. In 1992 Frere-Jones joined Font Bureau, Inc. in Boston. Over seven years as a Senior Designer, he created a number of the typefaces that are Font Bureau’s best known, among them Interstate and Poynter Oldstyle & Gothic. In 1999, he left Font Bureau to return to New York, where he began work with Jonathan Hoefler. His clients have included *The Boston Globe*, *The New York Times*, The Cooper-Hewitt Museum, The Whitney Museum, The American Institute of Graphic Arts Journal, and Neville Brody.



### **Jonathan Hoefler**

is a typeface designer and an armchair type historian who specializes in the design of original typefaces. Named one of the forty most influential designers in America by *I.D. Magazine*, Hoefler’s publishing work includes award-winning original typeface designs for *Rolling Stone*, *Harper’s Bazaar*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *Sports Illustrated*, and *Esquire*. Perhaps his best known work is the Hoefler Text family of typefaces, designed for Apple Computer and now appearing everywhere as part of the Macintosh operating system.



### **Lars Müller**

was born in Oslo in 1955; he is Norwegian and has lived in Switzerland since 1963. He opened his design studio in Baden (near Zurich) in 1982, and since 1996 he has been a partner of Integral Concept, an interdisciplinary design group, which operates in Paris, Milan and Baden. Lars started to publish books on typography, design, art, photography and architecture in 1983. In 2002 he published the book *Helvetica: Homage to a Typeface*. Müller is one of the world’s foremost experts on Helvetica, and one of its most ardent evangelists.



### **Norm**

is a Zurich-based graphics team co-founded by Dimitri Bruni and Manuel Krebs, which has defined and now executes an iconoclastic, but intellectually rigorous approach to typography and imagery. Known both for experimental work and commercial projects such as the typography for Cologne Airport, Norm recently won the prestigious competition to redesign the Swiss currency. A monograph of their work, *Things*, was published by Gestalten Verlag.

## Participants, cont.



### **Michael C. Place**

began his design career at Bite It!, London, with Trevor Jackson working on record covers for Champion Records, Gee Street Records and other labels. He started work at The Designers Republic in 1992 where he worked for 9 years on a diverse range of work, from Warp Records to the Wipeout series for Sony Playstation to the book *3D>2D Adventures In + Out of Architecture*. He left tDR to go travelling in 2000. On September 17th, 2001 he started his own design company “Build”, which is based in London. Build specialises mainly in design for print.



### **Rick Poyner**

founded *Eye* magazine in London in 1990, edited it for seven years and is now its resident columnist. He writes the “Observer” column for *Print* magazine and he has written about design, media and visual culture for *Blueprint*, *Icon*, *Frieze*, *Domus*, *I.D.*, *Metropolis*, *Harvard Design Magazine*, *Adbusters*, *The Guardian*, *The Financial Times*, and many other publications. His many books include *Typography Now: The Next Wave* (1991), and *Typographica* (2001).



### **Stefan Sagmeister**

has been a major force in the design world since arriving in New York on a Fulbright grant in 1987. He established Sagmeister Inc. in 1993 with an emphasis on concept over style, working primarily in the entertainment, art, and culture industries for clients such as the Rolling Stones, Lou Reed, and The Talking Heads. His work has been profiled in *The New York Times* and *Rolling Stone* magazine, has won Grammys and countless international design awards. In 2001, a monograph about his work titled *Sagmeister: Made You Look* was published by Booth-Clibborn.



### **Leslie Savan**

wrote a column about advertising and commercial culture for *The Village Voice* for thirteen years. She was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in criticism in 1991, 1992, and 1997. She has been a commentator for *Fresh Air* and has appeared on the ABC and CBS national newscasts, NPR, and *The O'Reilly Factor*. She has written for *The New York Times*, *Time*, *The New Yorker*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *Mademoiselle*, and *Salon*, among other publications. Her books include *The Sponsored Life: Ads, TV, and American Culture*, and her latest, *Slam Dunks and No Brainers*, published by Random House.



### **Paula Scher**

began her graphic design career as a record cover art director at Atlantic Records in the 1970s. In 1991 she joined the international design group Pentagram as a partner. In 2001 she was awarded the profession's highest honor, the AIGA Medal, in recognition of her distinguished achievements and contributions to the field. Her work has been exhibited all over the world and is represented in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art and the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum in New York, among others. In 2002 Princeton Architectural Press published her career monograph *Make It Bigger*.

## Participants, cont.



### **Erik Spiekermann**

is an information architect, type designer (ff Meta, itc Officina, ff Info, ff Unit, LoType, Berliner Grotesk et al) and author. He was founder, in 1979, of MetaDesign, Germany's largest design firm with offices in Berlin, London and San Francisco. In 1988 he started FontShop, a company for production and distribution of electronic fonts. In July 2000, Erik left MetaDesign Berlin. He now lives and works in Berlin, London and San Francisco, designing publications, complex design systems and more typefaces.



### **Massimo Vignelli**

is one of the world's most esteemed graphic designers. In 1971, Vignelli Associates was established in New York and subsequently designed corporate identity programs for Knoll, American Airlines, Bloomingdales, Xerox, Lancia, Cinzano, and Ford Motors. Vignelli, in partnership with his wife Lella, has also designed furniture for Sunar, Rosenthal, Morphos and Knoll. There is little that they have not conceived and executed, including directional signage for the New York and Washington, D.C. subway systems and for the Guggenheim Bilbao, Museum in Bilbao, Spain designed by architect Frank O. Gehry.



### **Hermann Zapf**

is one of the world's greatest living type designers. His designs, which include Palatino (1948) and Optima (1952), have been perhaps the most widely admired – and widely imitated – of the 20th century. Zapf's most notable achievement is his effortless bridging of the Medieval era with the Information Age; his types are all characterized by their strong calligraphic influence, but more than any of the other designers of the metal type era, he has adapted to the new digital technologies. Now in his late 80s, Zapf continues to work in Germany, drafting letters and practicing calligraphy.

**Additional participants TBA.**