

Anthony Froshaug: Typography and Texts / Documents of a Life, 2 v. Robin Kinross, editor. Hyphen Press, 2000. 254 pages (vol. 1) and 272 pages (vol. 2), b&w illustrations. ISBN 0-907259-09-X.

Reviewed by Victor Margolin

Few designers have been as well served in the documentation of their life as Anthony Froshaug has been served by Robin Kinross. This two-volume collection of Froshaug's design work, texts, letters, miscellaneous notes, and writings about him has been assembled by Kinross, primarily from the late designer's personal archives. The project was clearly a labor of love. More than fifteen years elapsed between the time Kinross was first asked to help organize Froshaug's archive after his death in 1984 and the time this book was published. Kinross states in his introduction that he chose to produce a collection of documents rather than a biography because he believes that the appropriate form of remembrance for a man as factual as Anthony Froshaug must also be "factual, critical, aware of its own purposes and methods, explicit about these and its limits." (vol. 1, pg. 9) As a result we hear Froshaug's own voice far more than we would have in a biography. Kinross has organized the documents into two volumes: the first for Froshaug's design work and writings on design and the second for his notes, exchanges of letters, and writings by others about him. The editor limits his own intervention to extensive notes and comments which are set off from the primary documentation by a smaller type size and different typeface. Although the documentation includes writing by others besides Froshaug, Kinross treats it as part of the larger narrative of his life. His notes are essentially background material for the documents, including information on when, where, and why they were written.

Anthony Froshaug is perhaps best known outside England for his teaching at the Hochschule für Gestaltung Ulm in the early 1960s. There he developed a course for training visual communicators that complimented the systematic instruction of Otl Aicher, and he laid out the school's journal, which today remains a masterpiece of modernist design. But his life was far richer and more complex than could be contained within the confines of Ulmian pedagogy and the four years he put in at the school were probably as much of a constraint to the expression of other parts of his personality as he could bear. As it turned out, he did not leave the school of his own accord nor did he have an easy time working within the confines of England's best art schools, particularly the Royal College of Art and Central St. Martins.

What Kinross's almost unwieldy collection of documents shows us is that Froshaug was a man of many interests who found it impossible to fit into a mold cast for him by others. He changed jobs as frequently as he changed wives and many people found him easier to like from a distance

than from situations of intimate engagement. His life choices were not those of a careerist designer. In 1937 he entered the Central School of Arts and Crafts to study illustration and book production but left after two years. He did not serve in World War II and during the war years he was a member of the Communist Party for which he did various small design jobs. In 1944 he discovered a used copy of one of Jan Tschichold's books in London and he became a convert to the "new typography" espoused by Tschichold in the late '20s and early '30s. Froshaug was one of the first designers in England to take an interest in Tschichold's work and he hoped to publish an English translation of Tschichold's *Typographische Entwurfstechnik* through a small publishing company he co-founded, Isomorph Ltd. But the project did not come to fruition. Nonetheless, Froshaug adopted Tschichold's modernist orientation, which he retained throughout his career, refining it in successive designs of his own as well as in his various teaching situations.

He began to apply it as a jobbing printer with a small press he acquired shortly after the war ended. The approach was evident in the one book that Isomorph Ltd. published, Helen Rosenau's *Women in Art from Type to Personality*, and it was also manifest in a bevy of smaller projects, especially exhibition announcements and catalogues for St. George's Gallery in London. These, as well other designs, have been meticulously reproduced in color by Kinross, all consistently reduced to 33 percent of their original size.

Teaching sustained Froshaug throughout much of his working life and he instructed some of Britain's best and brightest graphic designers. Regarding Froshaug's qualifications for teaching, Kinross provides a fascinating exchange of letters between Froshaug and Max Bill, the first rector of the Hochschule für Gestaltung Ulm. Froshaug had laid out an article by Bill for the *Architect's Year Book* and Bill was vehemently opposed to his decisions, declaring in a letter that he could never hire a design teacher who made the kinds of aesthetic decisions Froshaug did. These largely had to do with issues that today would not raise such hackles but in the 1950s were issues that caused extreme rancor among hard-core modernists. Bill was upset, for example, because Froshaug had put the names of the author [Bill] and the translator on the same line and had also broken up the title on two lines in way that Bill did not like.

But Froshaug was subsequently hired by Tomás Maldonado after Bill left the school. At Ulm, he created a course in visual methodology which introduced students to mathematical theories of graphs and lattices. Such theories were also popular with other instructors at the school. Kinross includes an article that Froshaug wrote about the course which shows how the theories could be applied to real life problems such as mapping the circulation of a house, altering the street plan of a city, and producing a map for an underground railway system. Froshaug also

wrote a lengthy document on the history of the Ulm Foundation course which contains much interesting information about the school in general as well as the course.

Back in England after his departure from Ulm, Froshaug was invited to teach at the Royal College of Art where he remained for several years. During this period, he continued to develop his interest in the relation of science to design and made some connections with the incipient design methods movement in Britain. Given the fact that his departmental colleagues at the RCA included John Lewis and John Brinkley, both advocates of a traditional approach to graphic design and typography, it is easy to imagine that Froshaug's intense questioning of how and why graphic design should be taught at the RCA, as evident in a 1961 document, might have put him at odds with the departmental philosophy. It may also be that his early interest in radical politics impelled him to seek work situations that were more autonomous and tolerant of independent initiatives than he found at the RCA.

He thus went from London's premier art school to a lesser-known institution, the Watford School of Art, where he set up an experimental printing workshop and established a new course in visual communication. However, at the time Froshaug may have been doubting the intellectual and social value of graphic design since he left Watford after two years and entered the architecture program at the Architectural Association in London. The research that Froshaug undertook at the AA was impressive. He raised a set of interesting research questions about the timber viaducts constructed by Isambard Kingdom Brunel for the South Devon and Cornwall Railways and received scholarship funds to study them. But, he did not complete the study nor did he finish other work expected of him as an AA student. This is particularly regrettable since the documentation provided by Kinross suggests that he would have made a thoughtful and original architect.

Faced with the reality of earning a living, he returned to teaching at the Central School of Art and Design, which joined with St. Martins to become Central St. Martins while he was there. He continued to do Open University courses in mathematics and beginning in 1980 he developed an intensive interest in small computing devices, especially those developed by Clive Sinclair.

It is evident that Kinross took the wiser choice of commemorating Froshaug's life in a collection of documents rather than a biography guided by an authorial voice other than the subject's. For Froshaug's life is extremely difficult to characterize. He had many divergent interests and dabbled in areas, particularly science and technology, that were novel for graphic designers of his generation. He was also an incisive and engaging fiction writer as we see from a story fragment, "Noughts and Crosses" and he was a competent painter as well.

Through the writings of Froshaug's friends such as the German novelist, Wolfgang Hildesheimer who writes insightfully about their younger days in Cornwall, we get insights into

Froshaug's character and can begin to surmise how he was seen by others. Kinross made a decision, however, not to delve into the intricacies of Froshaug's matrimonial lives which raise many questions about the man due to the fact that there were so many of them. Hence, we know Froshaug primarily as a thinker and design practitioner although one picks up in the documents, including letters to and from friends and colleagues, hints of personal qualities that one would like to know more about. Thankfully, however, Kinross does not offer his own take on Froshaug the man; rather he provides ample evidence and leaves us to make up our own minds.

For myself, the welter of material in these two volumes has given me an impression of Froshaug that I can't imagine having absorbed from a biography. I was intrigued with his multifarious interests and his questioning personality and I can begin to understand why he was so frequently at odds with the institutions where he worked over the years. However, I am convinced that he was brilliant and, given a different personality, might have made a far greater impact on the course of art and design in Britain and elsewhere. Surprisingly, I concluded that Froshaug was far more important as a theorist than a designer. While I appreciate his designs, it is evident that his focus was much more on the intellectual infrastructure that produces visual communication than on the look of the pieces themselves. This is evident in his impatience with Herbert Spencer, one of England's leading proponents of modernist graphic design, in a review of Spencer's still-circulating *Pioneers of Modern Typography*. "What is not true," Froshaug writes in his response to the book, "is to suggest that the random placing of letterforms, not ranged in lines, (his reference here is to an account of certain examples of avant-garde typography) has anything to do with the proper business of typesetting, which is the arrangement of characters of constant body dimension from crown to sole of shoes, in words and sentences and phrases, divided according to the mode of their time – using the punctuation and syntax then accepted."(v. 2, p. 202)

Exemplifying this critique, Froshaug's own design work lacks avant-garde fanfare and the subtle rationale for its construction is likely to be missed by anyone not aware of the complex thought processes behind it. He always looked first at the theoretical argument for a design rather than an aesthetic one.

Fortunately, he did find some problems that gave full reign to his analytic rigor. His analysis of roadside traffic signs, which he presented in an article for the British magazine *Design*, is an excellent example.

Kinross, who designed the volumes as well as edited them, has striven to incorporate the same degree of intelligence in his design that Froshaug did in his own work, particular the orderly presentation of complex information and a minimalist graphic style that foregrounds the content rather than the designer. The covers of the two volumes, one with dark green type on a black

ground and the other the reverse, pay homage to a leaflet of Froshaug's entitled *Typographic Norms* which featured black letters on a black ground, similar to the barely discernible black squares of an Ad Reinhardt painting. The texts by Froshaug, his friends, and colleagues, are set in Monotype Plantin, a serif face, while Kinross's comments are in a sans serif Monotype Grottesque. The paper is a creamy white, although the catalogue of Froshaug's work at the end of volume 2 is a strong yellow which, contrasted with the black type, recalling the print material that Stanley Morison did for the publisher Victor Gollancz. What is problematic about Kinross's design, however, is the small size of the type that he uses for his own commentary. The general text type is also a little on the small side but is made easy to read by the generous leading but Kinross's extensive notes appear to be set in 8 point type or something close, which causes a great strain on the eyes.

Kinross has scrupulously reproduced black and white illustrations of many typed sheets from the Froshaug archive. This gives the documentation an added veracity but these pages, when reduced down, are impossible to read, although Kinross does provide typographic transcriptions. However, those archival pages that are reproduced full size are easily legible and it is more interesting to read them in this form than transcribed from their original source. The book also includes documentary photographs which Kinross, in his desire to impose his editorial persona on the material as little as possible, reproduces with their original white borders whenever he can.

Anthony Froshaug: Typography and Texts / Documents of a Life is a successful experiment in documenting a life. While its more than 500 pages of material can sometimes make for tedious reading, particularly in the case of Froshaug's personal notes and course outlines, after finishing the two volumes I have a sense of Froshaug as a complex and creative human being with a strong and original voice. This is due to the exemplary dedication of Robin Kinross who took the financial risk of publishing these volumes at his own Hyphen Press, thus sustaining a tradition of scholar-printers which hardly exists today. Just as Froshaug was a highly independent thinker and designer, so does Kinross follow his example and leave us with a memorable accomplishment.

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First published as "Anthony Froshaug: Typography and Texts [review]," in *Journal of Design History*, vol. 15, no. 2.