Alan Kitching: Typography manual
(297 x 210)
Two antitypes

Two antitypes. Published 1980, in: Norman Potter, Designing a present [bbl. 131].

Designing a present was a pamphlet issued to accompany the second edition of Potter's What is a designer (see texts 32 and 33). Contributors were asked to 'nominate two designs of the 1970s that had given them special pleasure'. The images included here are as in the original publication.

AF's letter to the author and the publisher of Designing a present, accompanying his submission of this text, is reproduced on p. 80 above.

These two productions span the decade. Kitching's Typography manual was completed in August 1970; Sinclair's ZX 80 was first announced in January 1980. Each represents a form of communication characteristic of their and of our time: Kitching, the printing type; Sinclair, the video screen. Each, in its design, also relates closely to the hand: ergonomically to the size of the human hand and spacing of the fingers, visually to the written hand and letter-forms adapted to other techniques of origination.

Alan Kitching conceived his preliminary layouts as a summary of his previous six years of learning & influences: after his apprenticeship as a compositor he had gone to Watford College of Technology to study for his Higher National Diploma and at the beginning of 1965 had joined the staff of the associated School of Art as Senior Technician in Printing in time for the start of a new Diploma course in Visual Communication. By 1968 he was also a member of the visiting teaching staff.

In designing the 136-page Typography manual he was concerned 'to produce a good-looking, efficient book out of the material available' in a minimal workshop, under the constraints of a standard A4 size and 12 point structure, and of a desire to show not only justified & unjustified setting but also the fullest information about the set system and width of characters of all the sorts and all the sizes of the metal type held in the school.

The Manual is a one-man job: Kitching designed it, did the setting and read the lines, made them up into page, proofed them, corrected them, imposed them. He then spent the whole summer vacation of 1970 travelling up from Richmond to Watford to work at the school, printing the job on a hand-powered cylinder proofing press, each sheet a printed token of a walk alongside the machine from feed-board to the end of the bed and back. Finally he gathered, folded, and guillotined the sheets into pages before binding them into the finished work. It is significant of his influences and approach that one of the most thorough contemporary expressions of information about an old technology should be as well attempted, designed and accomplished as were books produced when that technology was new.

Some twenty years ago, Clive Sinclair expressed part of his approach to design in a handbook he wrote on transistor subminiature radio receivers: "... simplifying
circuits and obtaining the maximum performance from a limited number of components is an intriguing pastime. Since then, his name has been associated with kits for digital audio amplifiers for hi-fi (X-10, 1965), matchbox-sized radios (Micro-6), calculators; with hand-held tv, programmable calculators, digital multimeters; the present zx80 personal computer is characteristic in its miniaturization.

The limits of size of the zx80 are largely conditioned by the comparatively large size of the human hand, and thus of the keyboard, which occupies one-third of its area. The keys are arranged in the ‘universal’ QWERTY configuration: it is probably now too late to rearrange a juxtaposition of keys originally disposed to avoid digrams & trigrams in English lying adjacent to each other, and thus causing the type-bars to clash. Just as the impact of the typewriter gives necessary feedback to the typist, so does the momentary flicker of the tv image confirm input as each key of the zx80 makes contact. In addition, the more common statements in BASIC, the high-level language used, are entered by pressing a single key (just as the early issues of The Times were set logographically, from combinations of characters cast together as a single type). Each byte thus accessed appears however on the screen as a complete word in matrix caps (LET, RANDOMIZE, CONTINUE), some indeed being located on the key of their initial letter (RUN, INPUT, GO TO). Syntax is checked automatically.

The computer trade specializes in design rip-offs; this is why parts of the design of this machine seem intentionally devious. On removing the case, the path-marked printed circuit board, littered with resistors and capacitors, the zx80-type processor, and the concentration camp hutments of random and immutable memory chips, has the scarred beauty of the moon. The voltage regulator gets hot – the z-shaped aluminium heatsink is there to dissipate that natural heat – but it looks as though the six painted go-faster stripes on the hump of the top casing, directly over it and the UHF modulator are vestigial or pseudomorphic air-vents (the zx80 is in fact extremely fast). Indeed this white casing, with its over-size black & orange lettering, combined with the blue, yellow & black of the wipe-clean keyboard, lends an unfortunately toy-like appearance to a highly-sophisticated and serious device. It is sad that Sinclair has not proclaimed the identity of electronic devices and the ingenuity of his circuitry by the use of a transparent acrylic case.