FRED SMEIJERS

Counter punch

making type in the sixteenth century

designing typefaces now
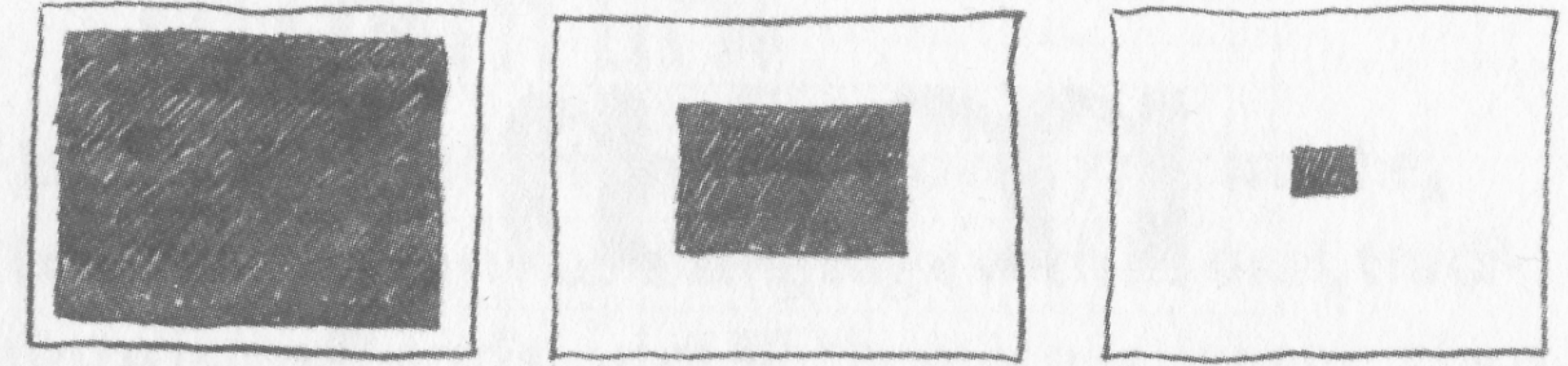
4.1 You cannot change the foreground without changing the background. It is a unity.

4 Type: a game of black and white

As the last chapter has shown, only some some letters are typographic letters. Nowadays type may look like almost anything. There are no rules. You cannot recognize type by its form, use or treatment. But it distinguishes itself from other kinds of letters – and this has always been true – by being intended for reproduction and by the way in which it is designed to form words. This way of making words is like a process of prefabrication. Typographic letters are words made, seen and reproduced by means of machinery, whether digital or any other kind. A manual typewriter is perhaps the simplest form of typographic machine. This is now the only possible definition of type; but maybe it was always the only possible definition. Some readers may find this too simple. But I do not know of a better definition of type that covers present developments and those of the past too.

What makes a letter a letter, and a word a word? It is an old story, which one cannot avoid retelling. It all depends on an awareness of and a respect for the shapes between and within the letters. The white shapes make the background, the black shapes make the foreground. The background makes the foreground, and the other way around. Change one, and you change the other too [4.1]. It really is a game of black and white.

You learn to play this game first by learning to look at the spaces within the characters: the counters. They have to be equal in optical value [4.2, 4.3]. For example, the counter of n has to be equivalent to that of m. Characters don't mean very much on their own, so we put them together to make words. In doing this we have to deal with another problem: namely the spaces between the letters. These spaces have to be in balance with each other and, at the same time, in balance with the spaces within the characters [4.4]. Do this and you can create an acceptable word-image.

We are dealing here with a fundamental of all design: the creation, testing and, if necessary, readjustment of order. In graphic and typographic design this order starts with the word-image. Every student graphic designer needs to be aware of this, certainly when working with present-day software. Writing with a broad nib is an essential foundation: not because of some vague notion of tradition or sense of monkish duty, but because there is no more direct way for a student to grasp this basic principle of design. Writing with a broad-nib pen helps students develop a consciousness of two-dimensional space and visual rhythm that is independent of time, style and technique.

The basic principle of creating order in foreground and background goes for all visual messages, no matter what technique is used. The more formal the character of the design, the more this principle holds true. If visual form and content are very informal this rule might become less applicable. Take two banal examples. A sign system for an airport has to be very legible, and so it has to be very formal in character. But my shopping list might as well be a barely legible piece of scribbling; despite the fact that I am a type designer.

The less you observe this principle of balance, the less legible will the result be: no matter when or how it was done. Ignorance of this means that many messages look formal without being very readable: awkward both to look at and to read. Nobody complains, because, at first sight, it looks plausible. But in fact we are looking
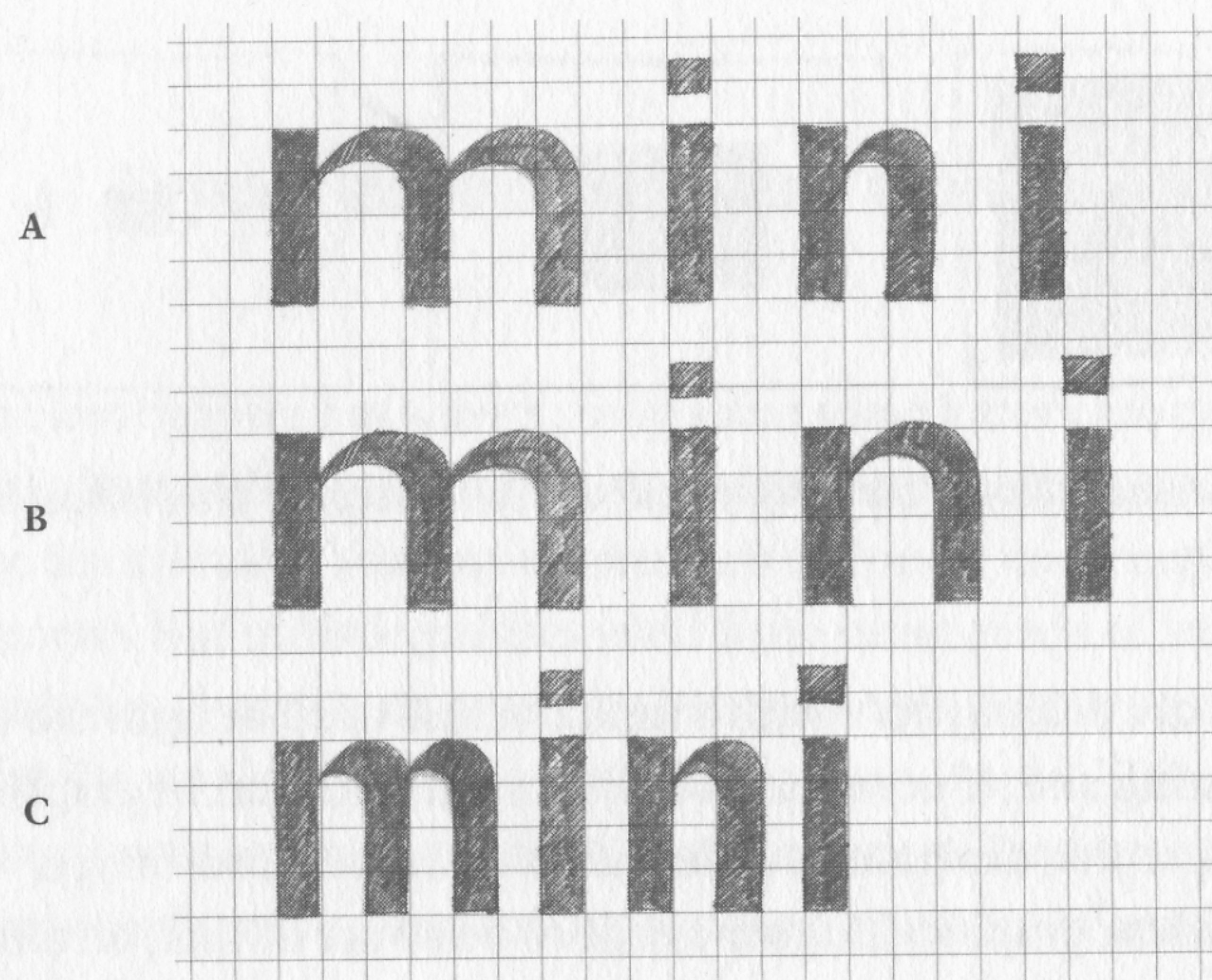
4.2 In A *we see a distorted word-image. The counter of the n is too small. If we want to improve it, the result would be as in* B. *Looking again at* A, *it is also possible to regard the counters of the m as too wide in comparison with those of the n. Then we would make the m narrower, and* C *could be the result.*

4.3 D *and* E *show another problem. Both make use of the same characters, yet their word length differs a great deal. The space between the letters in* D *is narrow but acceptable compared with the counters. In* E *the spaces between the letters are more or less equal with the counters.* D *looks good when used in this size, while* E *works best in small sizes.*

minimum

Johann Herder first proclaimed in 1772 that the basis of a nation was a language with its oral, traditional songs and stories. If there is a language, then it must be written down, given an alphabet and

minimum

standardized by deliberate selection from all its local variants. A dictionary must be written, and grammar must be provided for the children. A history of the people must be compiled. Folk-tales

minimum

and poetry must be collected and published to lay the base for a modern culture – or for a 'national intelligentsia' which will go on to compose a national literature.

4.4 *At the top: a very restless gathering of words. The spaces within characters (the counters), and between them, differs constantly. The thickness of strokes is irregular too. The second text looks better at first sight. Now the counters are harmonized and there are no longer any striking differences of weight. But space between characters is not balanced, and so reading the text is still a tough assignment. In the third example, space between characters has been improved: the text is easy for the eye to scan, and thus easy to read. If we want to make text legible, certain basic visual and perceptual facts have to be observed. But if we want to irritate people, we know exactly what to do.*

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BASSIST URGENTLY REQUIRED

ELECTRIC AND/OR UPRIGHT

To be active member in young
country / blues / roots band
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4.5 *These signs carry comparable messages. One is produced with computers. In the other just pens and scissors are used. One does its job badly (spot the postcode!); the other very well. Visual effect does not depend on technology.*

here at something like my shopping list, only scribbled with formal means [4.5]. The creators of this stuff must think that quality is based on means of production. So a pencil-written message is always lesser than a piece of real typesetting. It is not true. Quality in visual messages is in the first place a matter of proper configuration, and not the result of a certain technique of production.

At the root of configuration or overall visual arrangement is the design of the word. This element of design used to be beyond the reach of most people and was also more fixed materially than it is now. Knowledge – or ignorance – of how to treat words has not changed much over the years. Misuse of type has nothing directly to do with computers and DTP-software. But now anyone can easily change the design of words. Anyone who, no matter how, gives language a visual form, with given signs that they call up themselves, is designing words. And this, in the end, is also true of someone who designs a typeface. Though it might seem that the type designer's aim is to make new characters, the real goal is to create a new word-image.

A word-image can have many different qualities. Here one can point out the difference between designing typographic characters and the same process for other kinds of letters. For example, a logo-type, or words on packaging, or an inscription cut in stone. When we are making characters that are not type, the content of the message that has to be given form is already known. Here one is giving form to given words and so making word-images that will never vary This makes it 'easy' You can focus just on this word-image. Someone designing a typeface does not have this given information. Their task is to ensure that the result looks good no matter what language or what words are set in these characters. (And, to keep things simple, this leaves the size of letters out of the discussion.) To be more specific, the word-image has to have a good or at least an acceptable quality, no matter what character combinations occur. We can put this fundamental difference between typographic and other characters alongside the distinctions made in chapter 3.

n o

4.6 *Two counters that are different in shape but yet have more or less the same value: their surface area is about 200 mm²*

To solve this problem of typeface design, we come back to the golden rule: space between characters has the same optical value as space within characters. You soon discover that this space is also a certain surface area. The troublesome thing is that this quantity of space has to fit into different shapes [4.6]. These shapes are usually of a kind that make the surface area hard to measure. In short, a type designer is someone who is always measuring the areas of constantly varying shapes. When a shape has an area that is too great or too small, this shape will disturb the word-image. Experienced type designers develop a keen eye for this. They search constantly for imperfections and make corrections.

The space within a character can be divided into three subcategories. There is the closed space or 'counter', strictly defined: as in 'o' or 'p'. The second kind is the almost closed counter: as in 'n' or 'a' Third is the open counter: as in 'c' or 'z' It is not so difficult to put characters next to each other properly, when they contain closed or nearly closed counters [4.7, 4.8]. And when these shapes are very simple and easily perceived – then of course it is simple and easy But things get harder when characters with open counters have to be fitted in. The golden rule breaks down here, and has to be modified.

If we insert a character with an open counter, we soon discover that there is no clear border between the space that belongs to

nn
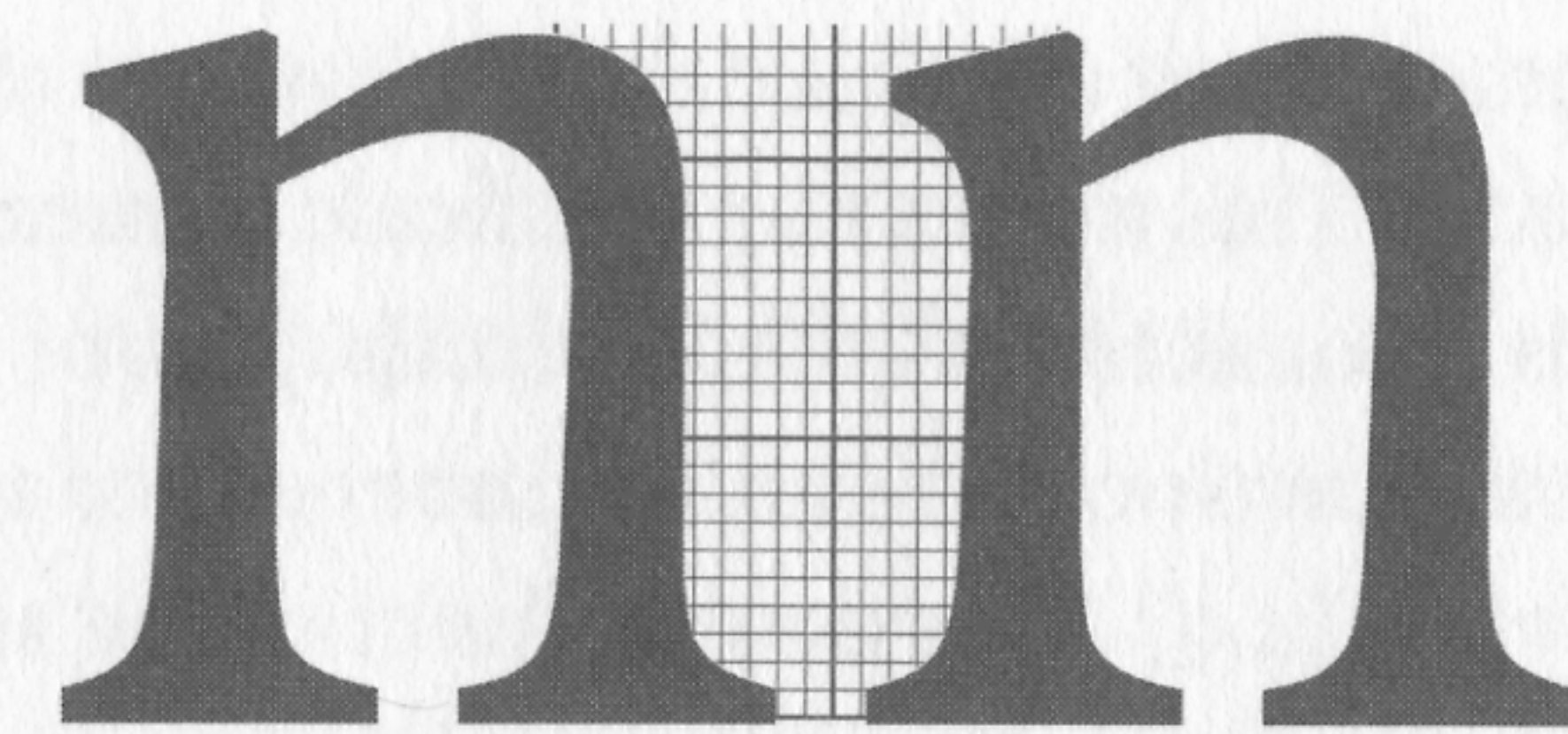
4.7 *The area between the two n's differs in shape from the area within each letter, but again its surface area is about 200 mm²*

on
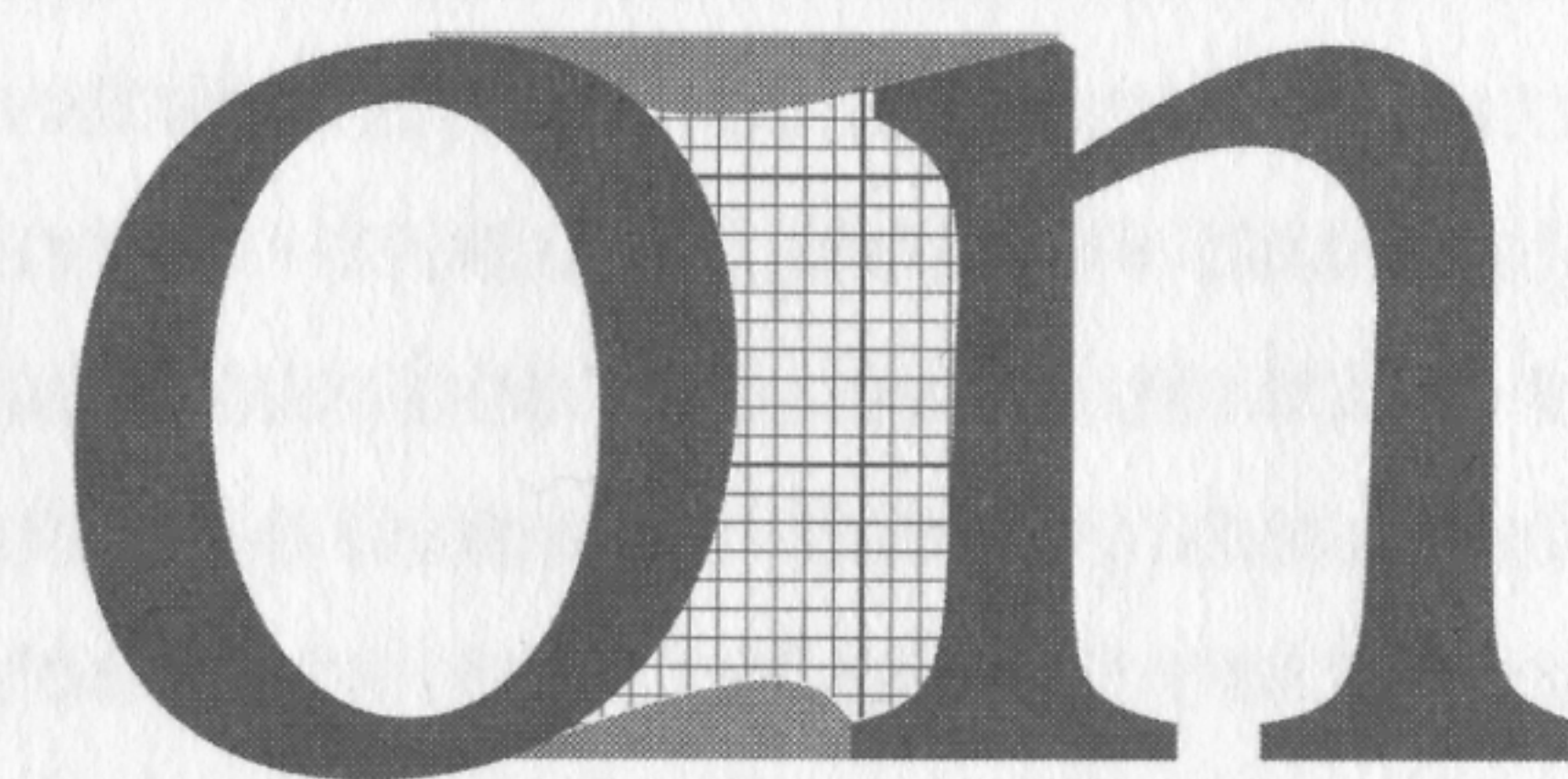
4.8 *Put an o next to an n. Somewhere in the two dark areas around the x-height and the baseline there lies the border that marks off the area between the letters from the space above and below the word. Exactly where we draw the border is a matter of personal judgement. Such areas of doubt make the idea of perfect spacing an impossibility.*

nzn
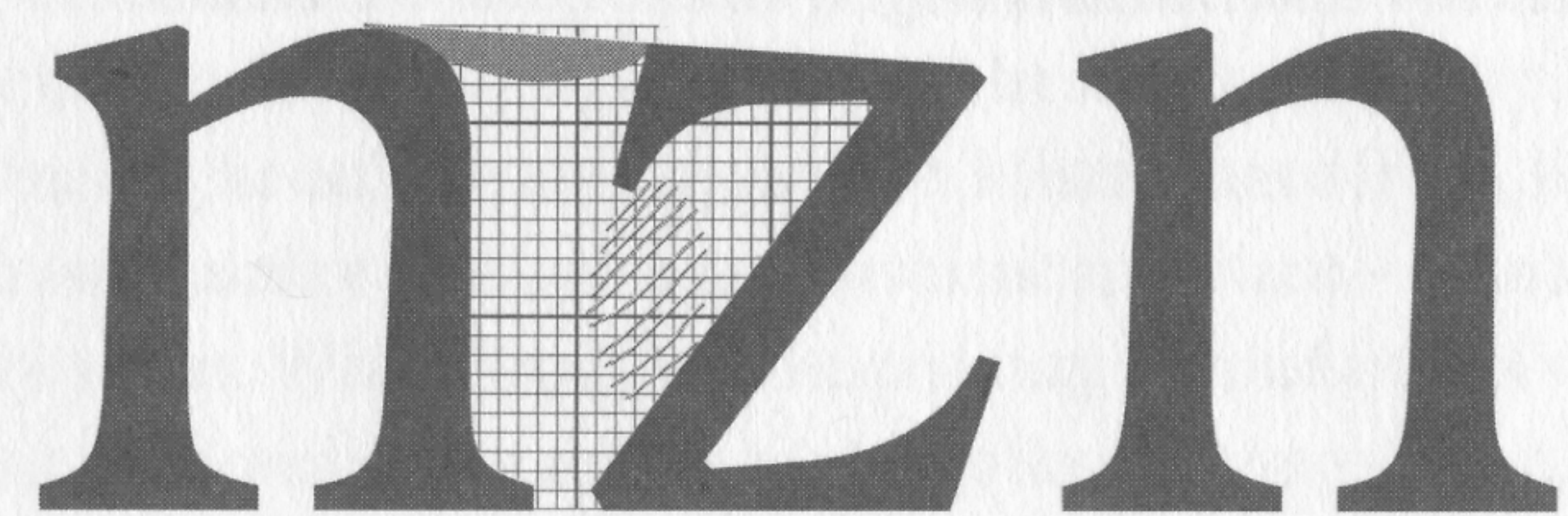
4.9 *Put a z next to an n and you have a further problem. There is the problem of the two n's, at the top of the letters. But then also: where does the z start? The hatched space is an example of a double-function area. This area belongs to the inside as well as to the outside of the z. It is clear of course that the serif makes this area smaller and more defined.*

the inner area of the character and the space that belongs to the area between the two characters. This makes them difficult to measure. The way to resolve this is to understand that a certain part of the adjoining space has a double function. This area is inner-space and outer-space at the same time [4.9]. This doubly functioning area stands on the border. It is not fixed, but moves and differs in size when the characters are enlarged or reduced. Another problem is the fact that everyone will define this area a bit differently. So it is certainly not objectively exact or constant.

These areas of double function (and of doubt) are everywhere in the word-image – in text. The importance of serifs now becomes clear. Serifs help the designer and – I strongly suspect – the reader to define inner- and outer-space more definitely and more easily. And just on account of these areas, perfectly balanced type does not and cannot exist. Any attempt to make such a type would be a waste of time. Even if this type were possible, perfectly balanced characters are visually without interest. This is not the issue, even within professional type design. The issue is to develop and find good balance based on and using these doubtful imperfections.

This, when it comes down to it, is all the knowledge you need to have to make word-images. And this knowledge runs as an invisible thread – in fact very visible – through all typographic history It is a history that consists largely of the quest for balance.

5 Comparing typefaces

Comparing typefaces is difficult, especially for students. 'Why is the a of this typeface better than the a of another one?' The question hardly makes sense: typefaces are sums of parts. And final judgement of a typeface may indeed be impossible and not worth attempting. But we can at least make clear what factors to look for when considering a typeface.

One can divide typefaces into two main categories. There are those that have a visual quality that draws attention to itself: in use, they work as much like illustrations as like text that you read. Then there are those typefaces that just work on the level of textual communication. There is no point in mixing these categories. There is no use in comparing the headline typeface Mistral (designed by Roger Excoffon) with the text typeface Romanée (by Jan van Krimpen). What I want to discuss is how to compare Romanée with Plantin.

Making comparisons between typefaces that have a strong illustrational quality may be harder than comparing typefaces designed for textual communication. A comparison between Mistral and one of Neville Brody's typefaces will be a very subjective matter [5.1]. One might only be able to say that Mistral has a fresh, lively, hand-drawn quality that belongs to its time and place – France in the early 1950s. While Brody's Industria may remind one of what was most fashionable in London in the 1980s. Having said that, there is not much more to say – or, if so, it lies outside the scope of this book.

Now all of this may imply that typefaces made just as text-carriers are removed from the question of personal taste. That is not true, of course. But these typefaces do present us with a dimension that can be discussed rationally and with some degree of objectivity