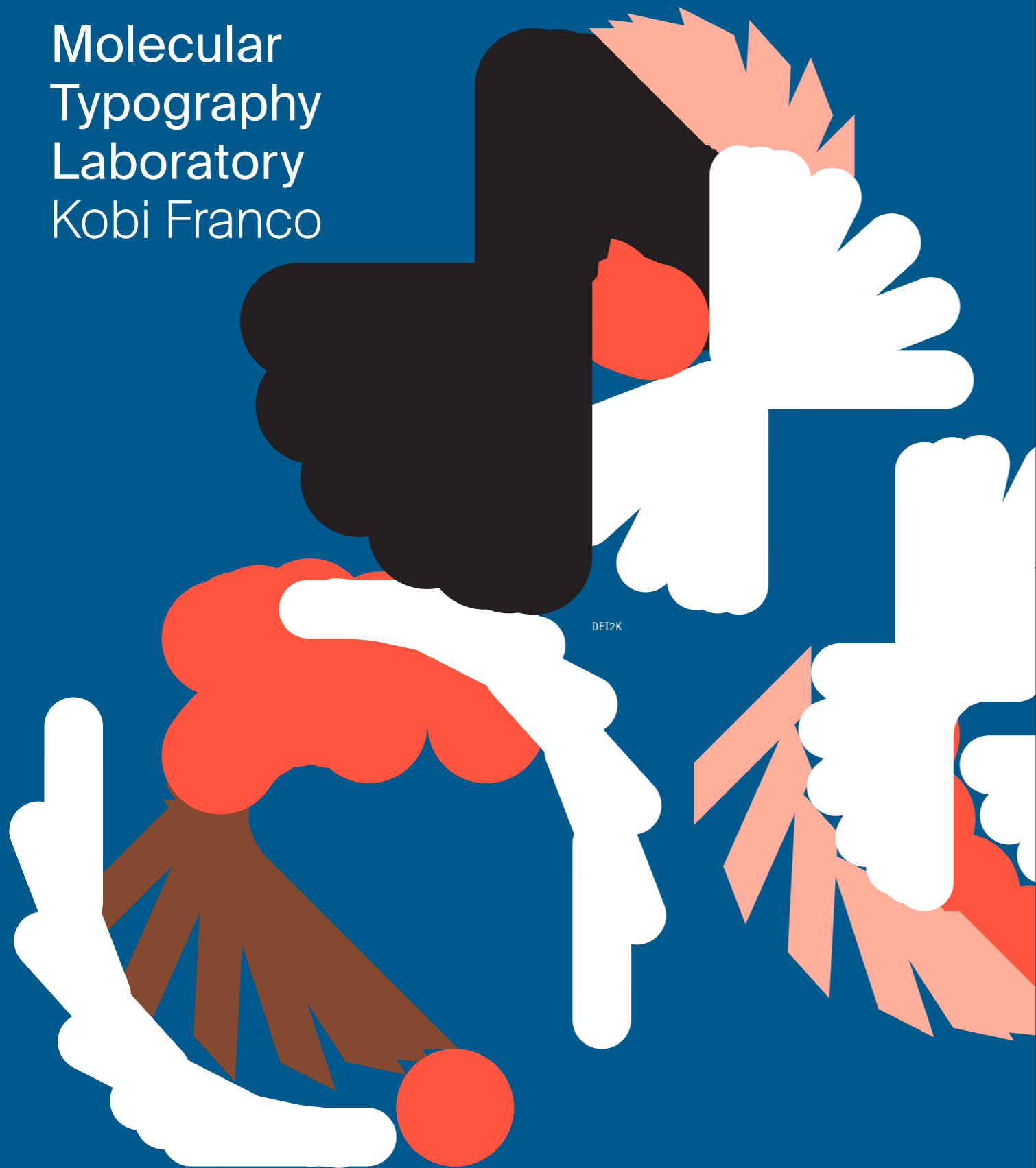


Molecular Typography Laboratory Kobi Franco



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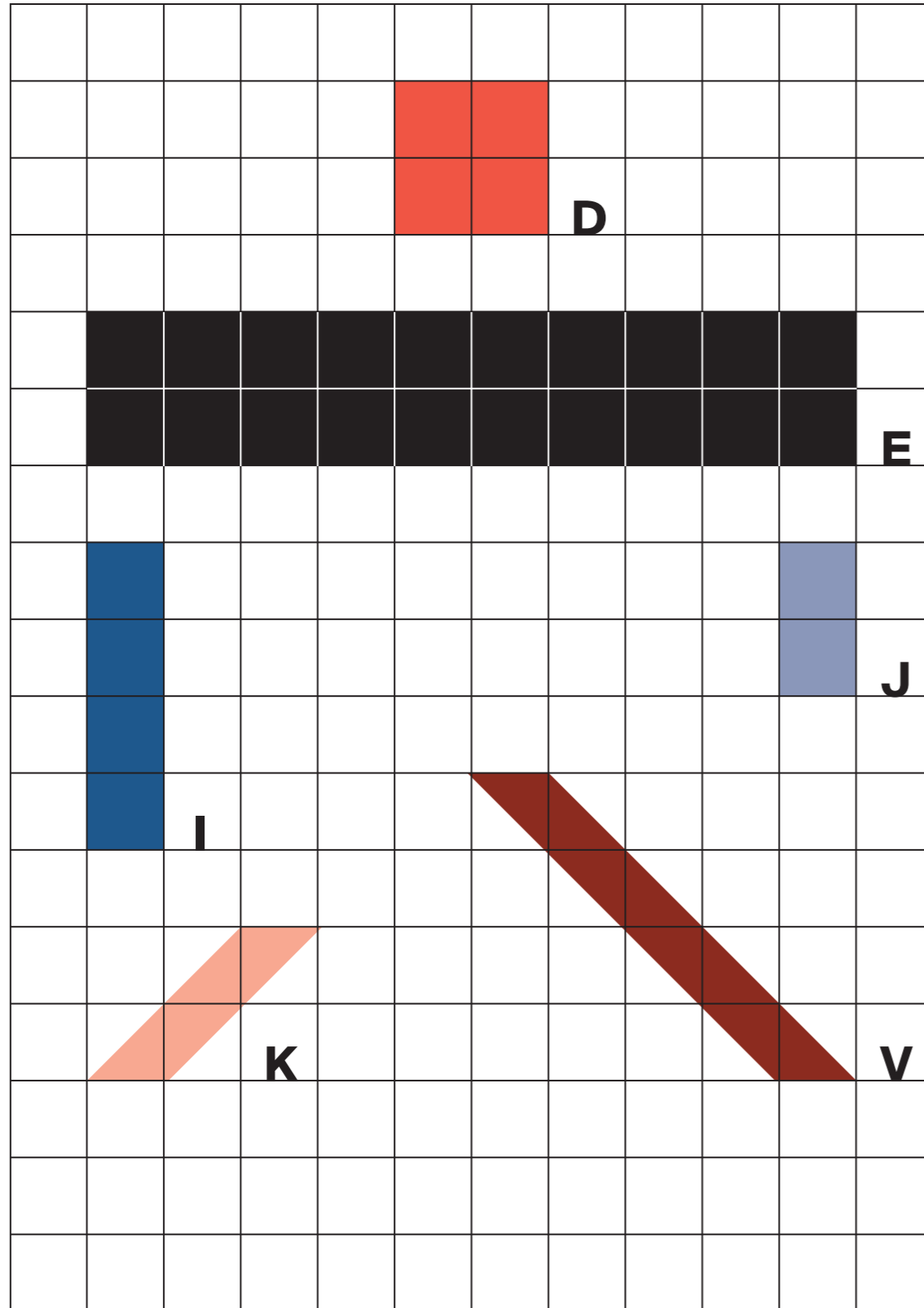
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בדיקה מס' A_001 Test No.

The atoms are based on a square modular grid. Each atom is identified by means of a color and a name: a Latin letter reminiscent of its visual form.

האטומים מבוססים על גריד מודולרי ריבועי. לצורך זיהוי קיבל כל אטום צבע ושם: אות לטינית המזכירה את צורתו החזותית.

Word-Covenant Ori Drumer

"A short interview:

- Do you believe you possess the right to do anything at all in the Hebrew language?
- Until further notice, the Hebrew language is my private domain."

David Avidan¹

Kobi Franco's artist's book, *Molecular Typography Laboratory*, is an experimental typographical journey. It explores the practice of typography using a fictional-scientific method, applying it to the letters of the Hebrew alphabet by means of conceptual frameworks such as function versus aesthetics, or content versus form. This fictional-scientific study positions Franco as an experimental artist, who seeks to expand the limits of his practice and to explore complex challenges, in the spirit of avant-garde movements such as Dada, Lettrism in

France, or the Beat movement in the United States. In the spirit of artists such as William Burroughs and Brion Gysin, who wrote surrealistically inflected novels in order to reveal the hidden agendas underlying technological and political processes in the 20th century, Franco's experimental work can be seen as an attempt to expose the typographical unconscious.

This exploration, which centers on the practice of the researcher himself and the deconstruction of its building blocks, is revealed to be a personal study of the body, of being and identity, and of the relations between subject and other, in which letters function as an extension of the researcher's body. The artist's book and the accompanying research project

¹ David Avidan, *The Complete Poems*, ed. Anat Weissman and David Weinfeld (Tel Aviv and Jerusalem: Hakibbutz Hameuchad and Bialik Institute, 2009-11), Vol. II, pp. 106-107, in Hebrew.

provoke further thought, curiosity, and imagination, and their exploration is accompanied by a desire to decipher and name the letter images functioning as body parts.

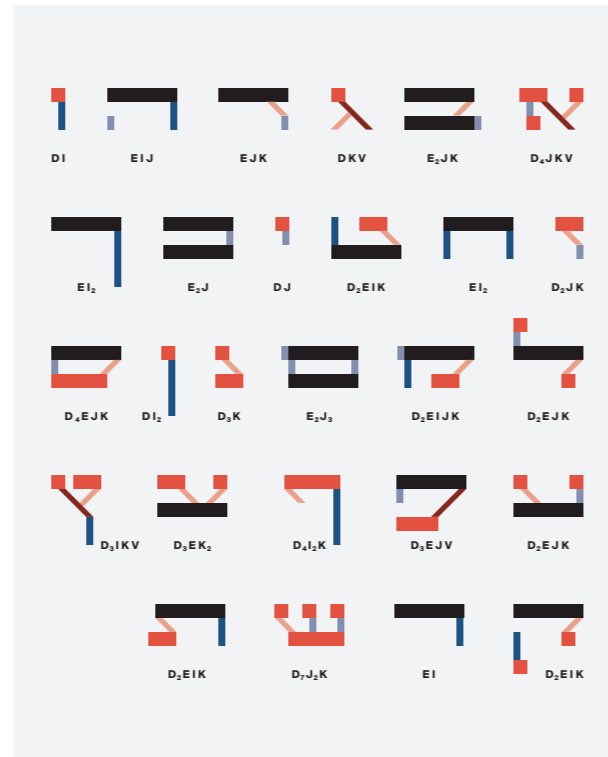
Self-Letter

The raw materials constituting the *Molecular Typography Laboratory* are the Hebrew letters. Franco presents a unique visual language, a spectacle of complex relations with the letters, which he puts to various uses. Removed from their familiar context, in which they function as signs, the letters are subjected to unusual typographic processes, so that they become images charged with meaning.

At the basis of Franco's project are six body parts – which he calls “atoms” – and which he views as the basis for all the letters of the Hebrew alphabet.^{fig. 1} The body parts, which may be viewed as part-objects, serve as the building blocks of a world of images populated by rotated two and three-dimensional structures and recurrent systems, static and animated structures, whose textual appearance points to each letter as an arena: a site in which form penetrates content and content penetrates form in a continual process.

The typographical techniques employed by Franco – ranging from the atomization of each letter, its subjection to various processes, and the subsequent construction-creation of new hybrids – give rise to images that demand to be deciphered by the viewer. The sum of these processes gives rise to a private language, an arena of encounter between image and text that shapes a singular identity.

For Franco, the letters are not only morphological signs, while the laboratory undermines the arbitrary character of the sign. Franco plays with the conventional linguistic mechanism that arbitrarily ties together sign,



1 Test No. A_005: The alphabet formula

signifier and signified, undoing the connection between letter and representation to create a personal interpretation and a new structural logic that is highly personal. The result is a private, symbolic typography, which nevertheless has meaning and content in the actual world.

Jacques Lacan, who is known for basing his psychoanalytic theory on linguistic phenomena, and arguing that “the unconscious is structured like a language,” underscored language’s formal characteristics, in contrast to an approach based on identification and on an imaginary understanding of linguistic contents.² Lacan distinguished between language and codes, arguing for an incompatibility between signifier and signified that he referred

² See Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1996).

to as “sliding.” Moreover, Lacan did not see letters as graphic representations of sounds, but rather as the material basis of language itself. From this perspective, Franco’s use of the letters as a raw material is related to a constant sliding underscoring the fluid relations between letter and sound in a manner that diverts our interest from the letter to the related image. The removal of the letter from the conventional sphere of habitual, everyday use can be read as a design-based form of subjectivity, a personal, singular, unique handwriting: a self-letter.

The Laboratory as a Scientific-Fictional-Poetic Dream: Jacob’s Dream

In his Introduction to the current project, Franco recounts how he came upon the combination “molecular typography” while randomly surfing the Internet in search of the word “typography.” He found this combination in a lecture by Woody Leslie concerning the book *Understanding Molecular Typography*, by the linguist H.F. Henderson. Both the lecture and the book, however, were revealed to be a fictive project. As Franco discovered, the semblance of an academic study and the lectures delivered by Leslie were in fact part of an artistic project. Yet the disappointment following upon this discovery did not dissuade Franco, but rather planted the first seed for his own speculative project.

In her book *The Words to Say It*, the French writer Marie Cardinal describes her process of self-searching in her quest to become a writer. She recounts a dream she had dreamt towards the end of her psychoanalysis that led to her decision to become a writer, and in which words appear as boxes containing objects:

At once I understood that this splendid water carried along glittering oblong objects. I saw that the objects were finely worked silver cases, each one more beautiful than the next, all different and yet united by their form: they were round though more or less elongated, like sausages you get by rolling modeling clay between your hands ... I understood that words could be allies or enemies but that, either way, they were strangers to me. They were tools fashioned long ago and at my disposal in order to communicate with others. The doctor and I had put together a small, ten-word vocabulary, which for the two of us, encompassed my whole life. Man had invented millions of words, all of them as important as those we were using in the cul-de-sac, and which expressed the universe in its totality. I had never thought of this, never understood that any exchange of words was a precious event. It represented a choice. Words were boxes, they contained material which was alive.³

I would like to suggest viewing the *Molecular Typography Laboratory* in a similar manner, as an exploration that unfolds simultaneously in the dimension of a stunning dream and in that of its interpretation, as a spectacle of letters in boxes that contain the molecules of the alphabet: six primary forms constructed upon a grid, which serve as the basis for the creation of a private new visual universe, creating hybrids of different letter parts and carefully documenting their progeny. This spectacle is accompanied by a symbolic and linguistic interpretation of content, meaning, and naming. The *Molecular Typography Laboratory* is a scientific-fictional-poetic dream in a state of wakefulness,

³ Marie Cardinal, *The Words to Say It*, trans Pat Goodheart (Cambridge, MA: Van Vactor & Goodheart, 1984), pp. 238-239.



2 Ze'ev Raban, design of lettering, doors and reliefs for the Community Council House of Jaffa and Tel Aviv, on a drawing of the facade by the architect Dov Hershkovitz, 1925



3 Kobi Franco, *Va'ad* typeface, 2005

a state of consciousness similar to that described by the philosopher of the poetic imagination Gaston Bachelard as a creative power that endows the word with value, as dreaming of latent being.⁴

The Politics of Language: Body-Typeface-Committee

The letters in the *Molecular Typography Laboratory* are based on a sign created by Ze'ev Raban. As Franco notes concerning his first encounter with the letters that served as a basis for his typeface:

I saw the drawing of the building called Beit Va'ad Hakehila (Community Committee House)^{fig. 2} years ago in the book: *Ze'ev Raban: Hebrew Symbolist*.⁵

I was captivated by the letters he drew, and decided to create an entire typeface based on these letters. I called this typeface *Va'ad*, short for

Beit Va'ad Hakehila.^{fig. 3} I later visited the building itself on Rothschild Boulevard and saw the physical sign, which was then still the original one, prior to being redone. While undertaking research in the laboratory, I decided to use this typeface and atomize it. Due to its geometric structure, it appeared to me to be a simple and easy typeface to deconstruct into basic forms. At the same time, it was not too simple, since it was composed of thick horizontal lines and thin vertical lines.⁶

Beit Va'ad Hakehila is located on the corner of Yavne Street, at 42 Rothschild Boulevard in Tel Aviv. The building, one of Tel Aviv's first public buildings, was home to the city's Chief Rabbinate, Rabbinical Court, Hevra Kadisha (burial society), and other religious institutions. In the 1920s and 1930s, numerous weddings were held on the building's roof. In 1958, the offices of the city's Religious Council were moved to the north of Tel Aviv, and the building was sold by the municipality to a private bank. In 1991, it

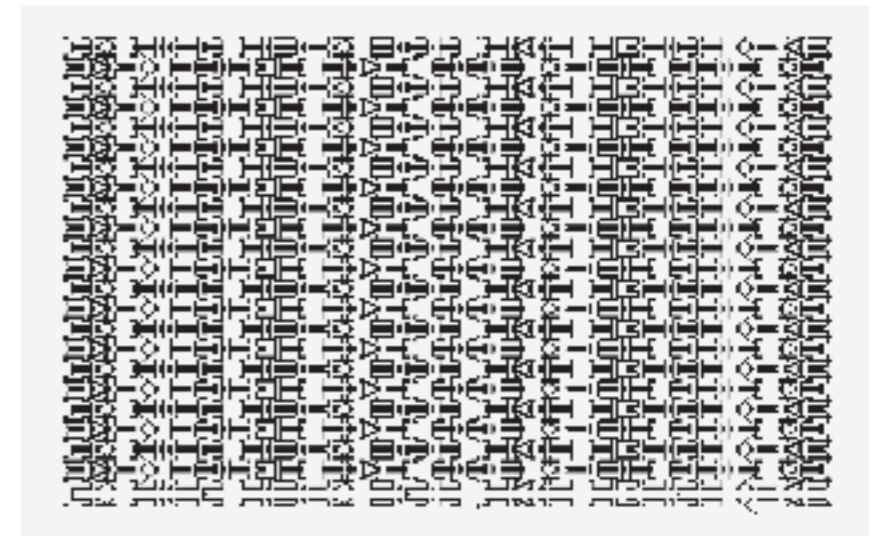
4 Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. M. Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969).

5 See *Ze'ev Raban: Hebrew Symbolist* (exh. cat.), curator: Batsheva Goldman-Ida (Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 2001), p. 152.

6 Kobi Franco in conversation with the author. All subsequent statements by Franco are quoted from these conversations and from the notes accompanying his research.



4 *Vote Kof*, poster, 2015, digital print on paper, 100 × 70 cm



5 *In This Scalding Country, Words Should Shade*, 2015, digital print on glass, 235 × 495 cm



6 *The Sacred Kof* (6/32 ק), 2018, digital photograph on Polaroid paper, 10.8 × 8.9 cm



7 From *Object*, 2018, HD video on four screens, loop



8 *The Mark of Cain*, 2023, tattoo, 11 × 2.2 cm (tattoo by Omri Goldzak)

was slated for preservation, and renovated as part of the construction of the First International Bank of Israel tower, which was built adjacent to it. Today, it is part of the bank's main branch. As Franco notes, the original architectural plans for this building featured a sign designed by Raban, which bore the building's name. This sign was the basis for Franco's *Va'ad* typeface, which later served as a point of departure for the construction of the "atoms" underlying the *Molecular Typography Laboratory's* research project.

Among other things, the *Va'ad* typeface was used by Franco in the projects *Vote Kof* (2015),

In This Scalding Country, Words Should Shade (2015), and *The Sacred Kof* (2018).^{figs. 4-8} This is a personal typeface whose name is far from personal, since a "Va'ad" is a committee of people appointed to play a certain role as representatives of a larger group, or as part of a bureaucratic organization. Despite its name, however, I will suggest that this typeface be seen as an individual endeavor, especially since Franco does not view the letters as sacred objects, but rather uses them in accordance with his personal will and desire. In other words, he frees the letters from the sphere of the law

or of sanctity, transposing them into a profane sphere that is both human and personal, and where they can be freely used in a daily context.

The original designer of the letters, Ze'ev Raban (1890–1970), was a painter, graphic designer, industrial designer and teacher at the Bezalel School, as well as a homeopath and a follower of anthroposophy. Raban designed symbols and letters for numerous local institutions, including the letters of the address that appears on the plans for Beit Va'ad Hakehila, and which were especially created to complement the building's architectural design. Raban had studied architecture, as made evident by the visual proximity between the form of the letters and the outline of the building on the architectural drawings. Over the years, his posters, books, and signage often combined image and text; the documents pertaining to the planning of Beit Va'ad Hakehila may also be seen as posters of sorts, which combine drawing, architectural elements, and “vertical” Hebrew letters.

Raban's line, as created by the manual movement of a writing implement, is charged with the legacy of a Jewish culture influenced by the European design traditions of Art Nouveau or Jugendstil. This line, with its cultural charge, is imported by Franco into the design world of the 21st century, rendering it contemporary. At the same time, Franco's stylistic choice undermines the association of the original letters representing the local Jewish community's bureaucratic institutions, in which there was seemingly no room for personal expression; here, by contrast, the letters are used to create a private universe.

Raban, who viewed himself as a pioneering participant in the renewal of the Jewish people's artistic tradition in the land of Israel, took part in reviving the Hebrew language

from a formal and visual perspective. In his own way, Franco continues to follow down this path, which is devoted to a revival of the Hebrew language. The laboratory offers a living testimony to the enduring life of the Hebrew letters, which are pregnant with the resonances of the past, while producing or birthing contemporary meanings and a new identity associated with Hebrew culture and language.

The choice of the *Va'ad* typeface was motivated by the enchanting visual affinity between the form of the letters and the outlines of the architectural building. At the same time, in terms of the relations between form and content, its processing in the laboratory reveals it to be an act of resistance to the clerical world represented by Beit Va'ad Hakehila – thus constituting a political act that is undertaken through the individuation of writing.

The choice of this typeface is an interesting point of departure for an examination of the research laboratory and its products. In his historical survey of typography as a medium of research, Franco notes that typefaces created during the 1920s “were designed while effacing the individuality of the letters, and underscoring the grid and the method”; furthermore, he argues that type designers during those years saw the new industrial world as the basis for what has been described as “democratic, egalitarian and social design, which was related to the erasure of individual characteristics.”⁷ In this context, the typeface chosen for deconstruction into six primary forms, and for the molecular creation of a private universe of meanings, was predicated on a letterform which served the official representatives of the Jews

7 See: Ellen Lupton and J. Abbott Miller, “Laws of the Letter,” *Design Writing Research: Writing on Graphic Design* (London: Phaidon, 1999), pp. 58–59.



9 Childhood drawing, 1976, pastel and marker on paper, 21 × 29.7 cm (image processing)

of Jaffa and Tel Aviv, and of their clerical institutions, which were responsible for the religious and social affairs of the community. The deconstruction of this typeface in the laboratory thus embodies the deconstruction of institutions representing authority and the social order, as well as the very concept of the law.⁸ This act underscores the return of individuality and personal expression, which had been lost following the industrialization and standardization of typography and type design. From the perspective of the connection between form and content, this process amounts (perhaps unconsciously) to an action that undermines communal values and overturns authoritative structures and the emphasis on community frameworks and signs in favor of singularity. The deconstruction of the typeface amounts to an individuation of the letters and a return to handwriting as a personal, intimate imprint. The laboratory is thus an arena of

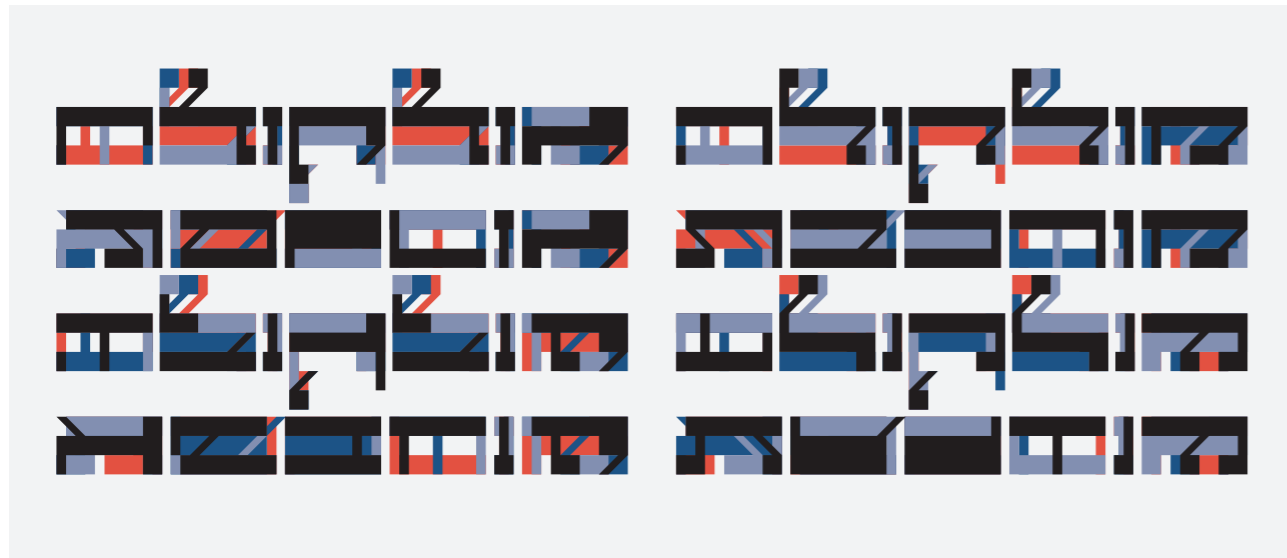
8 See Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996).

research whose subject is the sociopolitical dimension of Israeli reality. In the current climate, such processes of research and invention may in fact be considered subversive.⁹

The Abandoned Letter: Childhood

In one of my conversations with Franco about his laboratory, he showed me a drawing that he had created when he was three or four years old, saying: “This is a childhood drawing kept by my mother. I don't know how to draw, yet I observe the world through the prism of form, color and texture. Without realizing it, I had in fact drawn a formal palindrome, an aesthetic of patterns and replications.”⁹

9 These ideas were elaborated upon in earlier studies of mine. See: Ori Drumer, *Michel Opatowski: Pahhad, from the 1970s to Eternity* (exh. cat., Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art, 2017); *David Avidan: Media Prophet* (exh. cat., Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 2019).



10 Test No. F_044: "Complex Molecule." Use of the typefaces *Square Molecule 1, 2, 3, 4*

The drawing is a colorful composition arranged in a grid. Each square represents a child's attempt to create a balanced, symmetrical structure, and includes signs reminiscent of letters: recurrent forms, straight lines, some of which are slightly rounded, triangles in different colors, and dots. In one of the squares, Franco signed his name in letters composed of straight vertical and horizontal lines, which may be seen as nearly identical atoms. One can note a resemblance between the atoms of the letters created in the laboratory and the forms and letters making up his name in this drawing.

Indeed, the drawing may attest to the fact that the *Molecular Typography Laboratory* began as a spontaneous experiment in early childhood, many years before it was defined as a pseudo-scientific medium, which according to Franco is also a playground. The laboratory amounts to a return to the world of child's play, in which the letters are no longer forms which are taken for granted, or conventional signs designed for the use of adults who are immersed in the world of language and signs. The decon-

textualization of the letters, which are treated individually by means of research and scientific conceptualization, restores to them their original status in the child's consciousness, prior to their fixation as meaningless black forms appearing in books.

Whereas typography, according to this vein of research, is a representation that is distanced from its source of meaning, Franco's treatment of the letters – their deconstruction, rotation, playful connections and couplings of different parts – restores the primal, intuitive connection between image and meaning.^{fig. 10} This is the experience of an internal, pre-linguistic world that is present in that child's drawing, created at the threshold to the world of language; the world of a child who has yet to experience the crude split between signifier and signified, the letter and its meaning.

Lacan was interested in the non-communicative aspects of language; in the primal, chaotic platform containing the multiple meanings out of which language is constructed. He argued that language's primal register was one

of enjoyment, which he called *la langue*.¹⁰ One can thus see the products of the laboratory as a visual spectacle arising from a pre-linguistic world, a visual spectacle of *la langue* that presents the Hebrew letters as fetal forms, existing prior to the covenant with words. These forms are the products of a covenant with the letters themselves.

The Clinic of the Image

Sigmund Freud concerned himself with the word as image as part of his study of speech disturbances:

From the point of view of psychology the unit of the function of speech is the "word," a complete presentation, which proves to be a combination put together from auditory, visual and kinesthetic elements ... Four components of the word-presentation are usually distinguished: the "sound-image," the "visual letter-image," the "motor speech-image" and the "motor writing-image." Furthermore, he adds, "We learn to spell by linking the visual images of the letters with new sound-images, which, for their part, must remind us of verbal sounds which we already know. We at once "repeat" the sound-image that denotes the letter; so that letters, too, are seen to be determined by two sound-images which coincide, and two motor presentations which correspond to each other."¹¹

10 Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*.

11 Sigmund Freud, "Appendix C: Words and Things," in *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, XIV: On the History of the Psychoanalytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology, and Other Works (1914-1916)*, ed. and trans. James Strachey et al., London: Hogarth Press, 1966, pp. 210-211.

In discussing the study of reading and writing, Freud describes repetitive back-and-forth movements that also rely on the visual dimension – on the visual pictures of the letters – by means of the eye and the hand. One can find in Freud's "word-image" (the picture of writing, the picture of movement, the picture of reading and the picture of the sound)¹² a description of the connection between the letters and the body that occurs in the process of reading and writing. In Franco's laboratory, these visual connections and pictures are unravelled in favor of new connections between the letters and the body.

I-identity

On different occasions, I have argued that contemporary performances of identity can be viewed as a product of the Society of the Spectacle. The contemporary arena of identity politics is nourished by the culture of the image and of screens – films, television, computers, Smartphones, as well as other digital apps and visual media partaking of pop culture and advertising. Typographers, who once worked with mechanical printing presses, today work with digital technologies; typography has been transformed into digigraphy.¹³ At present, identities emerge out of the proximity between the human body and such apparatuses, based on the relations of the body with the technological object: the camera, typewriter and radio that appeared in the early 20th century, followed by television, video, the computer, and Smartphones. Apparatuses have become an inseparable part of our body, giving rise to bodily metamorphoses and to a new world of images

12 Ibid.

13 I thank Dr. Malka Ben-Peshat for the introduction of this term.

that is at times bizarre and phantasmatic. So, for instance, in David Cronenberg's films – including *Naked Lunch* (1991), *M. Butterfly* (1993), and *Crimes of the Future* (2022) – there is an emphasis on identities that are not beholden to conventional limitations and social norms, including ones concerning sexuality and gender.

In the course of his research at the laboratory, Franco discovered that “certain letters are attracted to other letters regardless of the physical composition of their environment. These letters are sometimes also attracted to identical letters.” Following this discovery, Franco divided the letters of the alphabet into three systems – intelligent, binary and non-binary – creating what he describes as a different gendered continuum for every word in the Hebrew language. The gender-related discovery made at the *Molecular Typography Laboratory* is compatible with my argument that gender and sexual identity are the result of the encounter between body and machine. In this context, letters are revealed to participate in creating gender-related meaning.

Liquid Letters

The possibility of creating a private world of words and images can be understood in part in the context of “fluid modernity,” conceptualized by Zygmunt Bauman as the present incarnation of the modern condition, which others refer to as hyper-modernity or post-modernity.¹⁴ According to Bauman, what has rendered modernity “liquid” is its obsessive modernization, which continuously catalyzes and fortifies itself. As a result, forms of social life – much like liquid – do not preserve their structure over time. The dissolution of solidi-

ty is an inherent and quintessential aspect of modern life. Today, however, dissolving forms are no longer replaced by other solid forms that are seen as improved or more capable of enduring, but rather by forms that are equally prone to dissolving, if not more so, and are thus equally ephemeral.

Franco introduces viewers to a visual world that exists beyond the dissolution of the solidity and certainty associated with letters, and of the links binding them together. In doing so, he challenges the basic building blocks of language, reading and writing. He thus offers another perspective on identities within a liquid culture, in which language and its components are destined to dissolve.^{fig. 11}

The clinic of the image and its impact on individual identities can be explored in relation to the formulations of the Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan (“the medium is the message”), who studied the deep impact of technologies on individuals and society as extensions of the human body. Humans, according to McLuhan, create tools that serve them, while simultaneously transforming them.¹⁵ Following upon McLuhan, I would like to turn to the clinic of the image, which is concerned with the effects of the image on the body by means of technology. The clinic of the image explores not only how humans consume images, but also how images consume them. The clinic of the image studies the connection between humans and their apparatuses by means of their effect on subjectivity and the body, while raising questions concerning alienation and estrangement, place and identity.



11 Test No. P_151 (Master Class, Young Blood): poster, 2021, digital print on paper, 128 × 89.5 cm

The Spelling of Life: Body-Letter

Franco's *Molecular Typography Laboratory* shapes an encounter between the body and the world of letters by means of the digital medium of the computer, while giving rise to the identity of a researcher-typographer-creator. The laboratory's products reveal the determined wish to create a meta-letter, which will serve as a meta-consciousness that directly embodies the creator's identity and character, and their material and symbolic traits as both body and subject.

By playing with words, the creator and their practice (the researcher and the subject of research) become one, united as the total essence that is individual typography. The

products of this consolidated identity are presented as an imprint in the field of typography. This is the covenant of the word inscribed in the body, the coming together of letters and body.

“We are responsible for what occurs in language at any moment, for people like you and me are politicians of language. We determine the mechanisms of understanding, fine-tuning the mechanisms of reception and transmission. We have no money, no power, no authority. We have given these up in favor of being the first and last judges in the field of the politics of language. We instate language as politics, and politics as language.”

David Avidan¹⁶

Ori Drumer is a curator, cultural critic, artist, musician, and trained psychotherapist. He is an interdisciplinary fellow at the Tel Aviv Institute for Contemporary Psychoanalysis. Drumer was the founder of the band *Durallex Sedlex*, and has composed music for dance performances, the theater and cinema. His work as an artist has been showcased at numerous venues, and he has curated exhibitions at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art and the Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art. Drumer founded and directed the Interdisciplinary Art Department at the Musrara School in Jerusalem, and has authored research publications on alternative Israeli art.

¹⁶ Avidan, *The Complete Poems*, pp. 29-30.

¹⁴ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Malden, MA: Polity Press; Blackwell, 2000).

¹⁵ Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium Is the Message* (New York: Bantam Books, 1967).