



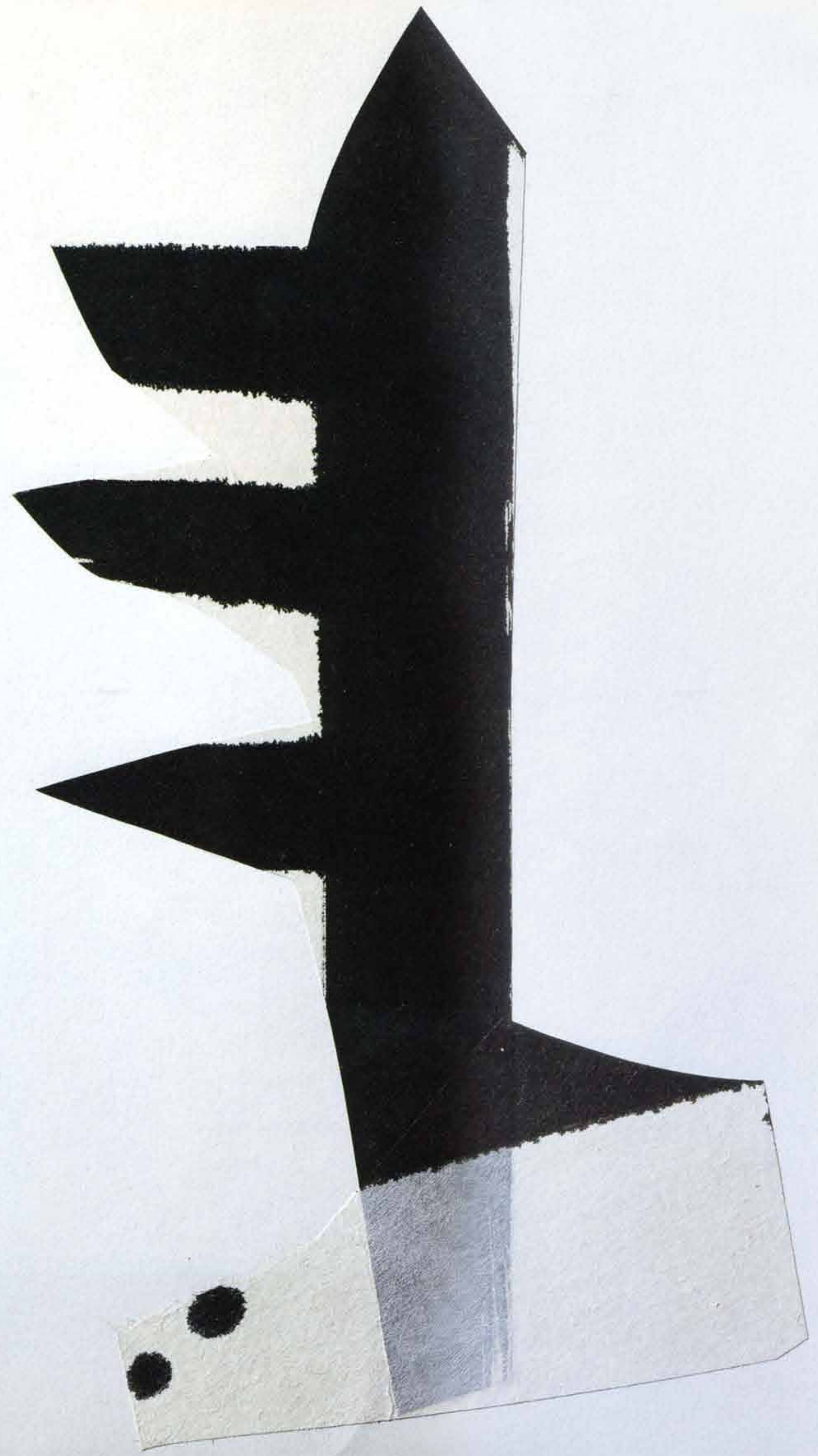
Catherine Zask: "First the Word"
Text by Brigitte David
Portrait by Bruno Jarret

My craft is completely determined by my desire for words. Words for me always lead to images.

Catherine Zask

Independent of pre-existing codes, Zask isn't working in the field of communication. Her work is pure research.

Eve-Marie Cloquet, Executive director of communications of the SAC-ALU (The French Society of multimedia artists)





Everything starts with an absent-minded, mechanical and repetitive gesture. Sometimes a form arises from spectral pictures and thoughts fixated upon doodles. Lines combine into a woolen ball, or unwind again to become the entangled threads of Ariadne's clue. Typographer Catherine Zask explores the leftovers, the latent space, searching for the unfinished gesture, the brisure, the hesitation, the smudge, the ink stain—in a word: uncertainty.

Zask was first attracted by the "the facile lure of ink," and calligraphy is often brought up when talking about Catherine Zask's work; it provides something of an antithesis to how she works. "Calligraphy is not a good term to describe my work," she says. "I work in the negative, in a radiography of thought with muddled lines coming out of the unconscious." Whereas calligraphy comes from the breath, in a continuous and flowing movement toward the exhaustion of the ink, Zask inflames the relation between the sheet of paper, the ink and her paintbrush, adding tools such as the cutter, scissors, and the computer. And it's with "chopped breath" and in "slicing beats"—to use the butcher's vocabulary that she employs—that Zask composes her graphic universe.

In an iconoclastic frenzy she breaks the lines and splits up the letters. Zask's broken and entangled *Alfabetempo* is her signature style. *Alfabetempo* came to life in 1993 in Rome, where Zask spent one year as an artist in residence at the Villa Medici. This project synthesizes her whole process and research of letter deconstruction. *Alfabetempo* is a process that isolates the strokes of letters. Letters can lean against an imaginary support or skirt around virtual edges. They are constantly decomposed, reconstructed, and mixed up. For example, they might repeat themselves on the six sides of a cube or come loose, shade off, and disappear. With paintbrush and ink, Zask explores the line (and boundary) of the letter whether it is written, cut, or formed out of traces.

It conveys a language of its own, more mysterious than Aramaic, to which no one but Zask has a key. But confounding a rational discourse with the uncertainty of her process, Catherine Zask keeps paradoxically claiming that her work is "becoming more legible and intelligible." For Peter Knapp, "the peculiarity of her approach and process makes her one of the five best graphic designers in the world." Accordingly, Zask is not only a graphic designer but a true artist. "Her research has no functional goal. The last project she did—the decomposition of a letter in volume—is perfectly fit for the gallery."

As a unique combination of typographer and graphic designer, Zask utilizes the word in many ways. *Alfabetempo* itself is a cunning fusion of Alpha, the first letter of the Greek alphabet, and the idea of tempo. Zask also plays with words using Plato's *Alcibiades*. In this dialogue between Alcibiades and Socrates, Zask isolates Alcibiades' text. She interprets the empty spaces between words as receptacles of Socrates' words, graphic reservoirs of unused forms. She keeps them and re-uses them, a process she will equally use with her client, the Paris-Malaquais School of Architecture. "She has an immense desire to build her own graphic universe," comments historian Michel Wlassikoff, publisher of the magazine *Signes*.

Despite her iconoclasm and post-modern tendencies, Zask's education

at Met de Penninghen's School of Design "was quite traditional," says Peter Knapp, her thesis advisor at that time. "We taught nude and line drawings, a sense of craft, just like we still do. After a four-year long curriculum, students are generally lost; they start to like all disciplines: typography, photography, everything. It's difficult for them to set priorities. However, I recall Zask's resolution. 'It's in black and white, it will be about writing, and I will use typography.' And still today, everything is done with an absolutist twist, everything with rigor."

Zask doesn't believe in strategically planning communication. People rarely know what they need, she says. She finds that vernacular material such as postage stamps, museum signage, train schedules, subway maps and catalogues is a unique inspiration. They epitomize the constraints of publicly commissioned work. When Zask sketches her own imaginary map of Prague, in which she signals the streets and places she visited, it certainly resembles Sophie Calle's autobiographic journey more than a straight answer to a client's assignment. Zask's commissioned and personal work are complementary, both being an inspirational movement, feeding from each other.

It is in the process of working that things appear. Working mainly for cultural institutions, Zask says that working for clients with whom she has maintained long-lasting relationships "doesn't mean that everything is easier. Tensions, bawling out, and rages are part of the work process." Words are very much part of the process. "My desire for typography is linked to my desire for words. My craft lies in this very place. Words for me always lead to images: I like to read, to say, to write, to decorticate, to rub the letters and the words against each other. Then the computer's fantastic reactivity shows me a visual step that produces another idea, opens up another pathway."

Catherine Zask puts the word in the middle of everything—a word's hidden meaning, the word one remembers, the word one clings to, the word one forgets. In her "Macbeth" poster designed for the National Theater l'Hippodrome de Douai, the word reveals, shouts, and kills. Black mountainous letters create a threatening universe, and the gold space between the first two letters forms a murderous blade. "This absolutely typographical poster was created out of a fantastic economy of means," Massin comments. The black negative space hints at the blood on Lady Macbeth's hands. The typography is the picture."

According to Stéphane Konopczynski, the general manager of the Hippodrome de Douai whose visual identity Zask renewed, Zask is "fed with words in order to create visuals." In her work, letters have bellies of saxophones, copper cornets, and the stiffness of a diapason. "She never used any photographs, pictures, or drawings," Konopczynski remembers, "just a graphic chart. It was pure typographic work."

Great things materialize when Catherine Zask works. "There isn't one method, one system, one process. The relationship implies the method. The idea is nothing. Empowering one's intuition is essential. Aestheticism makes me feel uneasy," Zask says. And yet Catherine Zask achieves a singular and complete work, even as when exploring the haunting remnants of the unconscious, and turning the experimentations and accidents of creation into rules and codes.

Credits & Comments

Pg.42 Catherine Zask, Portrait by Bruno Jarret, 2004.

Pg.44 Collage, 24 x 32 cm, 1987. This is a glimpse of how I used to work with brushstrokes, ink, signs, writing, cutting, recomposing, using leftovers will later become a recurrent aspect of my work. Here I use ink smudges left over from cutting out brushstrokes. When I went to the Villa Medici in 1993, it was in order to do further research into writing and recomposing signs based on letter strokes.

Pg.46, 48 I want Love, 2002. These two images are in fact one. "I want" on one side, "Love" on the other, all repeated sevenfold: a subliminal message for a double entry notebook.

Pg.49 "R's cut in four," ink on paper, 1993. (Each sheet: 30 x 40 cm) While in Rome, I simply wrote the letter "R" and I explored stratification: I wrote "R" on a stack of four pages that I then cut into four. Other "Rs", written in one layer and cut into four are used to recompose these signs.

Pg.50 M and its shadow in the studio, 1999.

Pg.51 Tes Mains, déroulé, 2002

Pg.52-53 Ink on paper; 76x 112 cm, 1994. Cut into four parts [R] waiting to be treated, 1994. Photo Bruno Jarret, 2004.

Pg.54-55 "Alfabetempo," 1995. Back in Paris, I systemized the alphabet that I've named Alfabetempo, which was born in Rome, during my Villa Medici residence, from decomposing the beats of letter strokes. Each beat is arbitrarily placed in a square.

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