SOLEX

A family of eight text fonts designed by Zuzana Licko.
Available from Emigre Fonts.
For a full showing of Solex, and to test drive Solex on Typetease, go to:

www.emigre.com

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ZUZANA LICKO'S LATEST TYPEFACE FAMILY, SOLEX, IS HER FIRST RELEASE IN NEARLY two years. It is a more conservative and studious exploration of the industrial sans serif genre and its past than she has undertaken before. Licko has allowed herself to be lured by ideas that have interested many a type designer while maintaining a footing in her own ideas and using her own methods to express them. Readers who are familiar with her work will also see that Solex is in keeping with Licko's curious name choices. She has a penchant for giving her typefaces one-word names that end with x, such as Elektrix, Lunatix, Matrix, Triplex, Variex....

SEASONED TYPE DESIGNERS TEND TO FALL BACK ON OLD WAYS. SOME HABITS ARE EVIDENT IN THE design work and some are not. Much has to do with the way a type designer perceives letterforms and brings them to life as type. In Solex, traces of Licko's recent sans serif types, such as Base and Tarzana, can be seen. There are some very clear carry-overs, such as the way Licko tends to taper or turn the stub of a stem where it sprouts from a bowl, and the way she chooses to emphasize distinct geometric verticality in the shapes of counters. Both are familiar themes.

INEVITABLY, WHEN A TYPE DESIGNER HAS ALREADY designed several sans serif faces, personal biases become noticeable. In any survey of this sort, a certain amount of redundancy is to be expected. It's practically unavoidable. This is typical, too, when an artist uses a limited palette, as Jeffery Keedy observed about Licko's work in the foreword to *Emigre: Graphic Design into the Digital Realm* (1993).

SINCE SANS SERIF TYPES ARE UNADORNED AND SPARE, THEY normally allow for fewer design possibilities than serif types. This tends to be true in the limited domain of text, but not in the larger domain of display, which is where and why sans serif types were born. When designing a sans serif type specifically for text, there is not enormous latitude for experimentation, partly because there are no serif structures to design and test. Thus, there are altogether fewer details than one finds in a serif type. As a result, actual innovations are rare and repetitions are commonplace. Paradoxically, though, the array of sans serif types that could be considered marginally suitable for text is wider than the array of serif types considered marginally suitable for text – particularly with respect to weight, width, and proportion.

BECAUSE OF THEIR DISPLAY ORIGINS, SANS SERIF TYPES ARE LESS bound to scholarly custom than types cut purposely for extended texts. And, even though sans serif types sometimes do prove useful for short blocks of continuous reading, sans serif types are not *infinitely* useful for long tracts. They're not deeply rooted in the larger reading tradition. After all, sans serif types have existed for barely one-third of typographic history. They are still young, by antiquarian standards. Yet, despite their youth and their seemingly limited range of traditional uses, evidently, no one designer of sans serif types has explored all corners of the existing territory. Moreover, few designers have independently explored as many corners as Licko has, and even fewer have personally mapped as many new ones.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND & TERMINOLOGY
The first known specimen of sans serif type appeared in 1816, in England. It was called "egyptian" – not "sans serif," as we would refer to it today. Subsequent sans serif types issued by English foundries were called "grotesque." Similarly in Germany, early sans serif types were known as "grotesk." In America, serifless types came to be known widely but confusingly as "gothic." It was a poor choice of words for the American typographic lexicon, since the term also means "blackletter" – often dubbed "Old English" in the vernacular. (News Gothic and Franklin Gothic, two sans serif staples of the American newspaper industry for the better part of the last hundred years, are far from being Teutonic in origin. They could surely never be mistaken for the printing types Gutenberg used.)

ESSAY BY JOHN DOWNER

GROTESQUE (SANS SERIF) TYPES HAVE A CHECKERED PAST. THEY ARE AMONG BOTH THE MOST *IMAGINATIVE* AND THE MOST *IMITATIVE* FACES CUT FOR EITHER TEXT OR DISPLAY TYPOGRAPHY.

Unlike the first roman types, which were made specifically for book printing, grotesque faces were made for use in advertising. Judging from old type specimen books, the range of deviation from prior typographic forms was far greater than the range of outright mimicry. It is important to remember that in the first part of the 19th century, grotesques constituted a new category of types: *a veritable frontier for adventurous type designers*. It was a field day for the peddlers of printed publicity. Referring to, and often copying, the early successful models was common practice, but there was still plenty of ground for new ideas to be tried.

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IN A SENSE, SOLEX MARKS AN INTERSECTION OF IDEAS that grew from two or three separate periods of development over the past hundred years; yet Licko, in her investigation of formal design possibilities for Solex, referred to relatively few historical models. Inspiration for Solex reportedly came from two principal sources: one *general* and one *specific*.

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ
abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz&

ALTERNATE GOTHIC (1903)

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ
abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz&

BAUER TOPIC (CIRCA 1950)

THE GENERAL SOURCE IS A CLASS OF SLIGHTLY condensed, rectangular, grotesque types made for newspaper ads and handbills. Most were cut after 1885, when an American inventor, Linn Boyd Benton, introduced and patented a pantographic engraving machine to cut punches and matrices. **Alternate Gothic** (1903), a popular stand-alone typeface, is a primary example of one style of grotesque produced in such a manner. **Standard Gothic** (1896), as well as **News Gothic** (1908), by extension, are both examples of series that included condensed styles that likewise became

popular and lasted well into the middle years of the 20th century. Later twentieth century examples include typefaces such as the condensed members of big, conceptual families like Folio, Eurostile, and Univers. Licko's typeface Modula Sans, modeled on a condensed oval; and Oblong (designed with Rudy VanderLans), a slab serif typeface modeled on a condensed rectangle, are worth mentioning, as well. They can be seen as Emigre's first steps in the direction of Solex, though they were both based on earlier bitmap fonts, not on metal typefaces, *per se*.

THE SPECIFIC SOURCE OF INSPIRATION for Solex dates from the 1950s. It is a typeface called **Bauer Topic** (a.k.a., **Steile Futura**) designed by Paul Renner, who also designed the larger and more influential Futura series more than 20 years earlier. Topic, however, bears little resemblance to other members of the Futura family. Futura is a sans serif typeface series of classical, yet geometric, proportions and widths. Topic is a design that has characters of relatively even widths. Renner sought to replace the roman widths with mechanical looking, static ones. It was an attempt to make his type modern and modular. A direct descendent of Bauer Topic is a digi-

tal font family called **Tasse** (Font Bureau, 1994). Tasse is essentially a large set of weight and width variations on the upright version of Bauer Topic. Solex, by comparison, is a font family that includes both roman and italic variants. In Solex, Licko has preserved the lone foot serif introduced by Renner at the base of many italic characters: a, d, h, k, l, m, n, u; and has added others where Renner did not: i, x. Licko has also introduced a head serif on letters where Renner put none: i, l, x. The added head serifs give Solex a trait often associated with monospaced fonts and typewriter faces, and give the i, l, and x two apiece.

Reminiscent of Italy
AN AGRICULTURIST

BAUER TOPIC ITALIC (CIRCA 1953)

Looking at the italic

v, *w*, *y*, and seeing how the three shapes relate to one another, one is again reminded of similar variety in *Modula*. The shapes don't strictly follow one another. Note also that the r in Solex Black relates less closely to the r in the other weights of Solex, but it seems very similar to the r in *Base*. There are, to be sure, several broader comparisons to be made. In Solex, there is obviously a lot of the superellipticality seen in condensed versions of Roger Excoffon's *Antique Olive*: the rather acute bends, plus the verticality of the clipped terminals on C, G, and S, for instance. Likewise, Solex revisits postmodern themes seen in Erik Spiekermann's digital milestone, *Meta Sans*, and its cousin, *Officina Sans*. In both Licko's and Spiekermann's designs we find a measure of rigidity, linearity, and noncalligraphic monotone. Indeed, Solex even shows faint signs of going in the direction of Matthew Carter's text series, *Bell Centennial*, with respect to the narrow (almost trapezoidal) bowls, slimmed interior strokes, and prominent traps. All the same, Solex has a look of its own in text settings, and it will likely find a place for itself among numerous other condensed grotesques in the years ahead.