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Not to be type cast

Recommended Citation

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When a German typesetter challenged the rules of design and typography he changed the game forever. We look back at Wolfgang Weingart's Swiss Punk style that has been the subject of a major exhibition at HKDI

Wolfgang Weingart's work in the mid to late 60s, and through the 70s, revolutionised the world of typographics. Taking the Swiss style as his starting point, he deconstructed the rules of the day and created what is now known as Swiss Punk, or New Wave typography, paving the way for a new breed of designer. A major exhibition of his work has recently been on show at HKDI in Hong Kong in partnership with the Museum für Gestaltung Zürich (MfGZ), largely formed from a significant collection of Weingart's work and that of his students, donated to the museum. "We received a cross-section of his archive, with roughly two-thirds reserved for his own work and about one-third coming from his students at the Basel School of Design," says Barbara Junod, the exhibition's curator. "The donation included highlights like the TM cover series, but also examples of key design processes, which are very important to understanding Weingart's design approach and the way he taught." The exhibition shows both Weingart's and his students' work and their creative processes, grouping the designs in displays and visualising them in a documentary film and two animated sideshows. "My goal was to let visitors dive into Weingart's universe and discover for themselves that typography can actually be inspired and fun. It was less about showing the progress than about featuring the formal, technical and content-related aspects in Weingart's work and teaching," adds Junod.

What made Weingart so unique was his breaking of the strict grids and alignments of the time. "He was among the first designers of his generation to declare that typography can do more than just transfer information," says Christian Brändle, Director of MfGZ. "He took an artistic approach, a way of using this technique of typography that went much further. He opened up a totally new field of how type can be used." His new style was also

MUSEUM FÜR GESTALTUNG ZÜRICH, GRAPHICS AND POSTER COLLECTION. PHOTO: U. ROMITO © ZHDK

Above: Wolfgang Weingart, *The Swiss Poster 1900–1983*, 1984, poster, offset print (based on halftone film collage). Right: Wolfgang Weingart, *Round Compositions* (reconstruction of the 1962 experiments for the Darmstadt exhibition), one print out of a series of twenty-seven, 1990, letterpress
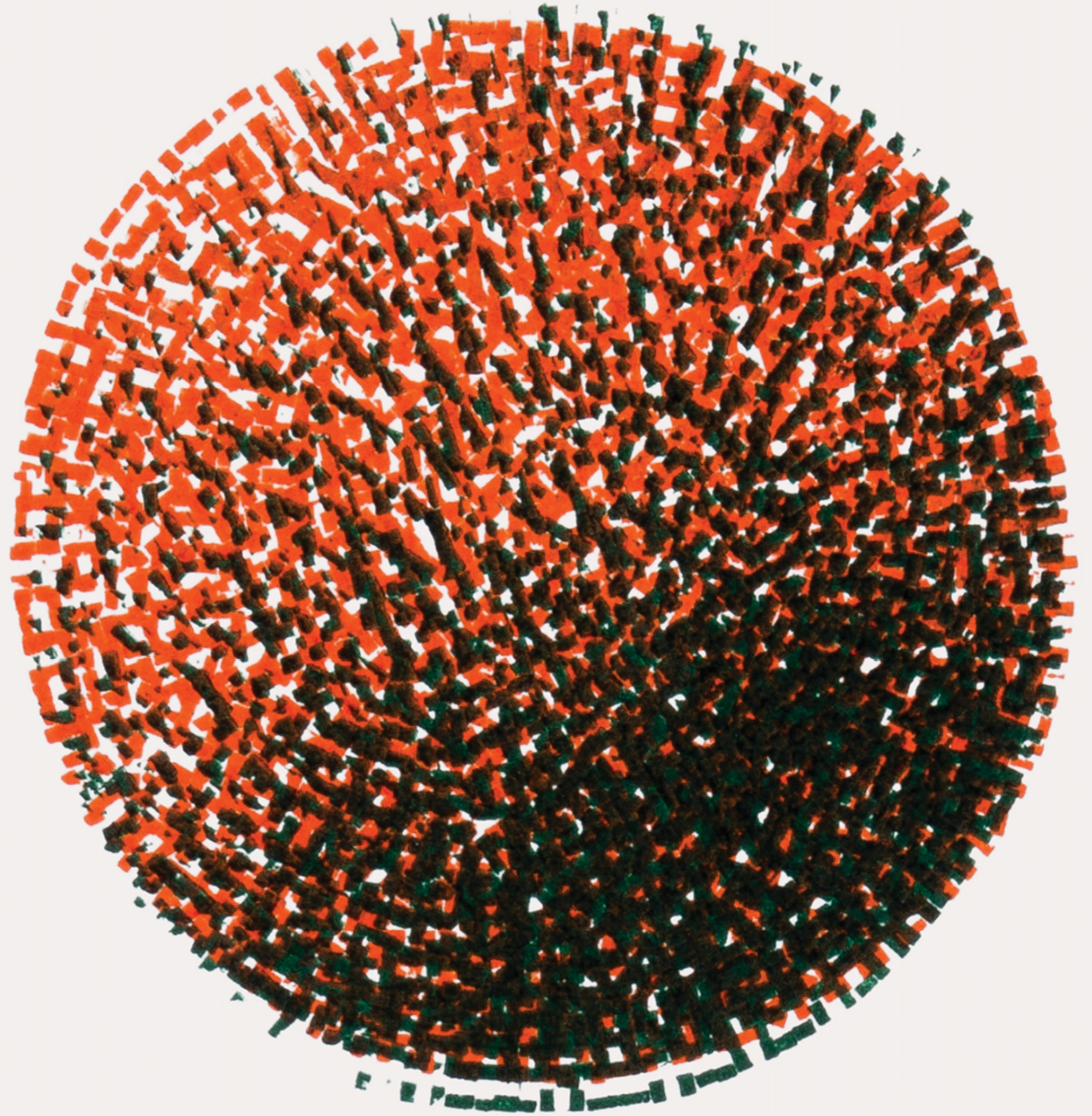

MUSEUM FÜR GESTALTUNG ZÜRICH, GRAPHICS AND POSTER COLLECTION
PHOTO: U. ROMITO © ZHDK

significant because it was developed in the same country as those original, highly restrictive rules. It was an attack on the typographic establishment and therefore considered 'punk'. Weingart wrote in his own monograph that his first rule breaking experiments were due to an accident. "It all started when an old drawer full of thousands of lead characters had fallen to the floor and Weingart had to put the letters back into the typecase," Brändle explains. "It was obvious to him that this would take him at least three days to redo the whole thing. It was then that he decided to make a test, by filling a cardboard ring with the type, and printing both surfaces of the composition, the customary face of the letters and the bottom of the type."

But Weingart didn't stop with lead characters. Through his career he used new pieces of technology in alternative ways to continue his development of visual expression. "As soon as Xerox machines were available at the school, Weingart used them for his class. With his students he tried to find out how to use these machines in order to get new aesthetic results. Later on he bought the first Apple Macintosh computer and gave some tasks to the students, for example exploring the painterly possibilities of the program MacPaint," says Brändle. "In the mid-1970s, Weingart surprised the professional world once more with his unusual technique of halftone film collage, anticipating digital sampling and today's Photoshop software. The halftone film material's transparency allowed him to overlay text and image and to alter lettering with the repro camera," adds Junod.

One of the pieces in the exhibition that really stands out for Brändle is titled *Moon Rufen*. The piece sees the words 'moon' and 'rufen', meaning calling in German, getting smaller, as if being called out and being lost in space as they head towards the moon. The letters themselves are actually made up of other characters, extending the font to create the diminishing effect. It's a simple yet very onomatopoetic image and one whose influence can be seen
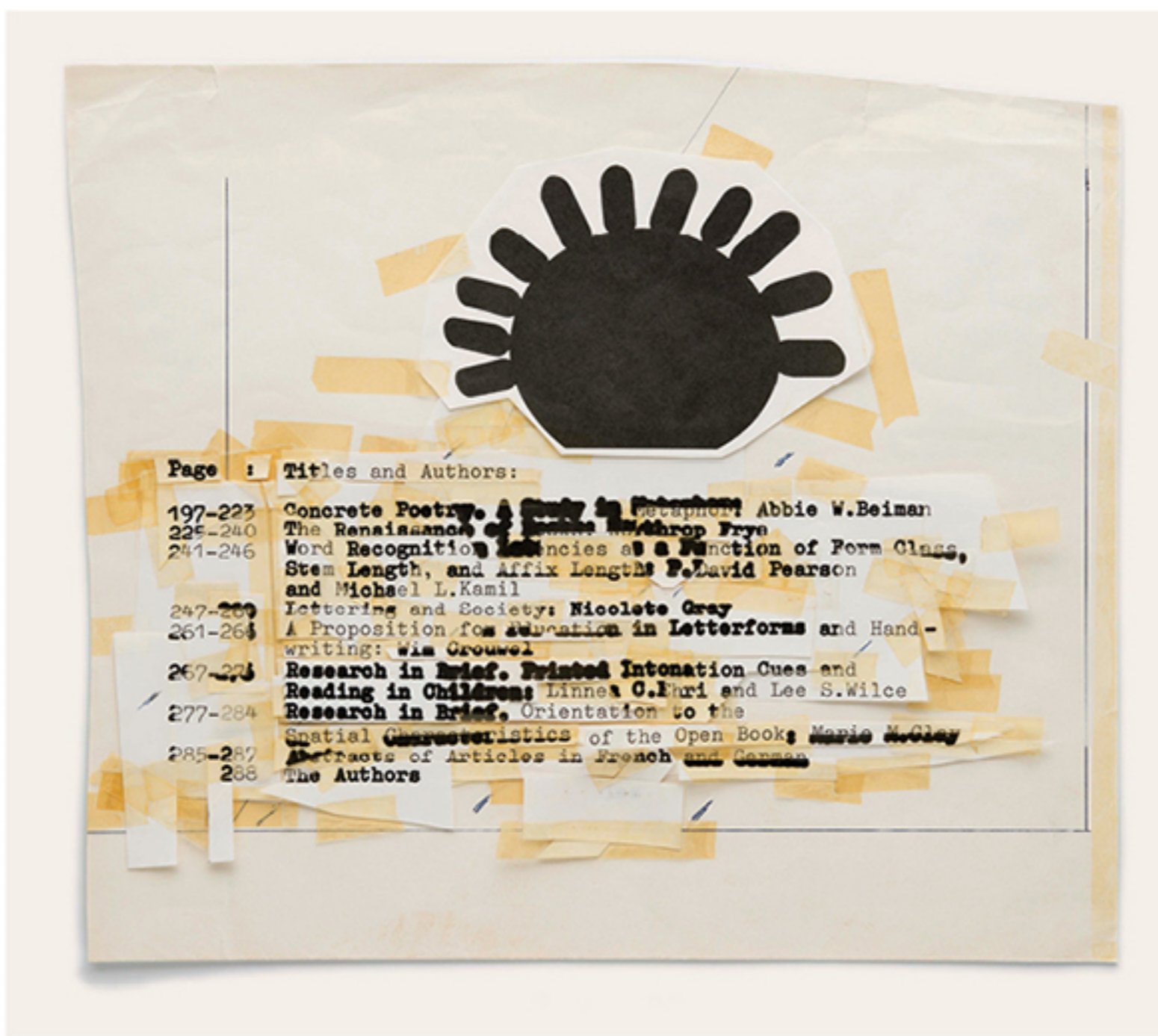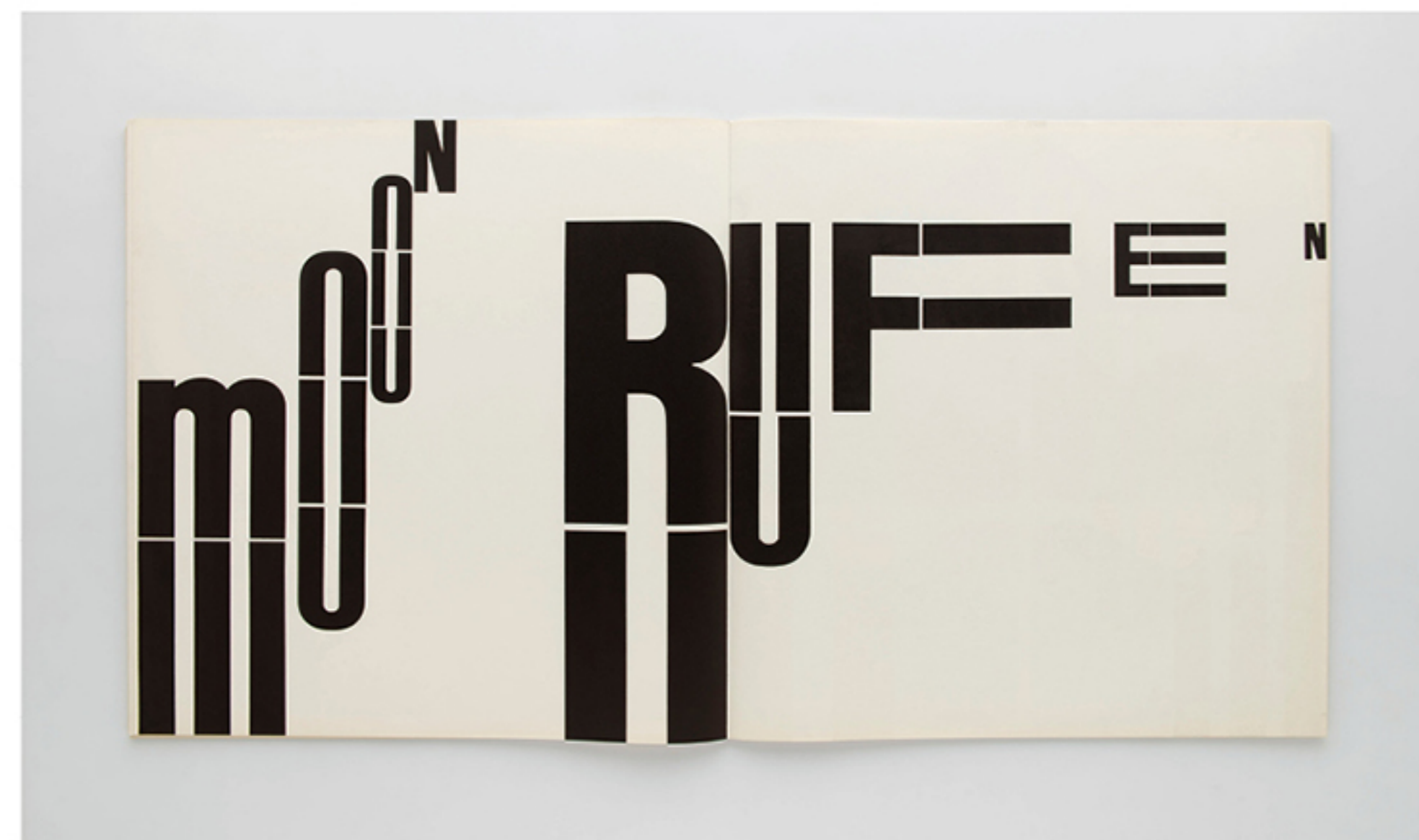

Wolfgang Weingart, *Visible Language* (American trade magazine), draft of magazine cover, 1974, photo collage

in more contemporary designs. For Junod, it is Weingart's free line pictures in lead from the mid-1960s that she is specially attached to. "They are so simple, but they have a very sensitive, musical touch," she says.

Weingart's influence on the world of design and his way of exploring and combining new and old technologies has been extensive, both in his own work and that of his students he taught at Basel School of Design. But according to Brändle there are still big changes to come in typography. "When I look, especially in Hong Kong, at other writing, like Chinese, Japanese, Tamil or Sanskrit, there's this whole universe waiting to be explored," says Brändle. "Imagine exploring Chinese characters the way we have with Latin. The modern Latin alphabet is extremely restricted, you have 26 different characters and it's done. In Chinese you have thousands."

The Weingart Typography exhibition at d-mart, HKDI

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Wolfgang Weingart, *Moon Rufen* (Call the Moon), in "The Vomitbook", book of typographic experiments, double page, 1970–1972, letterpress

Above: Wolfgang Weingart, *Wolfgang Weingart: Fabrica Treviso* (Italy), poster for a lecture, 1998, offset print (based on a collage with computer-designed elements) Right: The M cube exhibition at d-mart, HKDI