



feature Typed Art

By Sarah Handyside

Sex sells. Often it shouldn't but, nevertheless, London's phone boxes remain papered with something almost as symbolic of the city as their container. So-called 'tart cards' – miniature advertisements for local call girls – invite readers to pick up the phone and order teasing and tying up, whips and chains, massages and more.

The crude cartoons and plays on the word 'cum' may not be high art, but they are pervasive, occasionally pretty, and an influence behind a surprising range of mainstream artists. The iconic cut-up lettering of the Sex Pistols' designs owes much to the bold graphics and seedy undertone of these cards, as does Tom Phillips' melting together of word and image.

But the tart card has become more than an influence on others – it is an accidental artwork in itself, Marcel Duchamp's *objet trouvé* (found object). It is the subject of research, historical and cultural interest and discussion. Website The Typographic Hub proclaims that 'to anyone interested in printing and graphic design the cards form a microcosm of evolving typographic tastes and techniques', and whilst one of their most appealing elements in terms of aesthetic critique is undoubtedly the marriage of graphic and type, tart cards go further than this. That typographic element means that language is as inherent to these intriguing objects as image; they are a microcosm not merely of cultural evolution but also of multiple forms. Word and image meet here, and in an arena refreshingly free of pretension.



Ii

Chris Thelwell



Old
English
Slapper

Call 07818 057 132

Matt Joyce

Je t'aime, je t'aime oh, oui je t'aime!
moi non plus oh, mon amour... comme la vague
irrésolu je vais, je vais et je viens entre tes
reins je vais et je viens entre tes reins et je
me retiens je t'aime, je t'aime oh, oui je
t'aime! moi non plus oh mon amour... tu es la
vague, moi l'île nue tu va, tu va et tu viens
entre mes reins tu vas et tu viens entre mes
reins et je te rejoins je t'aime, je t'aime oh,
oui je t'aime! moi non plus oh, mon amour...

Je t'aime... moi non plus. Written by Serge Gainsbourg (1967). A card set in Comic Sans and Helvetica 55 Roman by John Rooney.

Their crudeness, in fact, is the key to their persistent intrigue.

So deceptively simple are tart cards, so joyful in their *not* taking themselves too seriously (these cards have a straightforward commercial purpose, after all), that they offer an unusual window into criticism and interpretation. Numerous art groups and schools, galleries and websites have taken it upon themselves to explore the phenomenon.

A simple internet search throws up a spectrum from coy ‘playschools for naughty boys’ to ‘brunette bondage bitches’, touching on more unusual tastes (‘get a buzz at Madame Electronique’s’) along the way. Likewise, the internet displays a plethora of competitions to find new takes on the tart card, applying the economies of space and detail, the wry mix of humour and sordidness, the bold graphics and colour to new formats. Earlier this year, the University of Salford’s School of Art and Design similarly called for artists to ‘find the tart hidden in every type’, creating tart cards specifically for either a typeface or a letter of the alphabet. John Rooney, who organised the exhibition, was keen for it to reflect the swiftly developing technology on the world of typography as well as that of the tart card.

“I reasoned that this kind of service would now be offered to clients online,” he explains, skirting around the ‘professional services’ offered by tart cards’ owners. It’s a clever turn of phrase, touching on the numerous other ‘professional service’s at play here, from designers through

to printers, and reminding us again of the commercial and the mercantile that are central to this art. And of course, where is commercialisation more evident than in the world of technology, that which we both consume and use to consume?

As such, the Type Tarts exhibition was originally showcased at the school’s MediaCity base on an interactive digital display. “I wanted to reflect this change of delivery from the physical to the virtual in the way we would present the cards produced by Salford. I briefed Christine Charnock, a Digital Media student at Salford to develop an interactive digital display to present the Salford cards,” adds John.

“Overall I was really pleased with the quantity and quality of the cards we created for the exhibition. Once up in the exhibition space, the screen-based work compliments the framed prints really well, and offers the viewer another way of interacting with the exhibition content.”

The Type Tarts exhibition now resides permanently in the St Bride Library permanent collection.

Submissions range from quirky puns (all over my Baskerville Old Face, anyone?) to illustrative representations of letters: splayed legs become a line of Vs; a woman’s crotch is reduced to a simple Y. Humour abounds – the ever-vilified Comic Sans is ‘just not my type’ – but the underlying discomfort and disturbance of this most abnormal, subversive of art forms is always present.

The real intrigue of tart cards is the complexity of the responses they engender – their very name purposefully grinds and vibrates against straightforward discourses of women, sex, transactions. How do we feel about the word tart? Is it simply a crass and sexist term that ought to provoke reactions of disgust and abhorrence alone? Is it also – reasonably – a little titillating? Is it amusing, and, if so, can we sit comfortably with our own amusement? Is there real power at play, or only the suggestion of it?

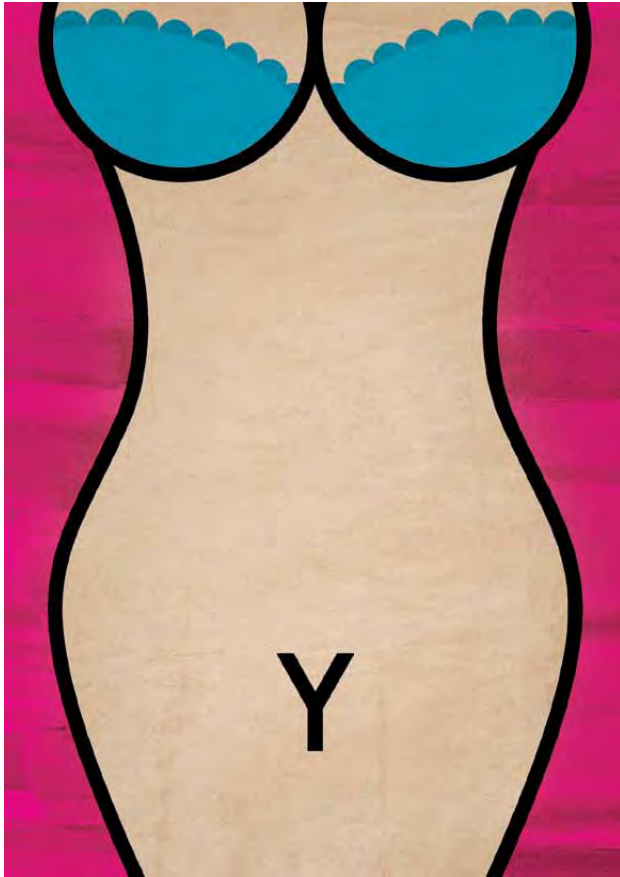
And so, is it acceptable for us to admire the creative and the clever here, the puns that can slyly lift a lip, the caricatures that happily hint at other eras as well as other sex lives? How do we really feel about Marcel Duchamp's theory of the objet trouvé when the object is that which we object to, and are we willing to stretch Andy Warhol's art of commerce to the commercialisation of women's bodies?

These are questions that we ought to ask of ourselves, while enjoying the very process of asking. That tart cards can provoke all those questions is a measure of their unexpected power. John Rooney and the University of Salford are incredibly timely in taking their explorations into digital formats, because tart cards look set to persevere in that environment too. If London's iconic phone boxes one day vanish, it seems almost certain that somewhere, somehow, these cards, and their unpretentious melting together of word and image, will remain.

For now, *blankpages* can only send you to one of the many outposts, physical or digital, where people have delved a little deeper into this cranny of the art world, and search for the (t)art hidden in every type.

usir.salford.ac.uk/20647/

studentdesigners.com/christinecharnock/type_tarts_exhibition



Michael Thorp



Simon Meredith