Design Notes Episode 23 - Ksenya Samarskaya

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Liam Spradlin:	Design Notes is a show from Google Design about creative work and what it teaches us. I'm your host, Liam Spradlin. Each episode, we talk with people from unique creative fields to discover what inspires and unites us in our practice.
Ksenya Samarskaya:	Typefaces really absorb connotations from the environment, or the place that they're in. So if, like, one style of lettering is used in cafes in Barcelona a lot, all of a sudden it takes all the connotations of what that café is, and how it feels. And it soaks it in like a sponge in a certain way, and then you have the memory and you have the association of: now, whenever someone sees those types of letters, their memory is triggering any time they've seen a postcard, or a photo, or have traveled through that space.
Liam:	That was Ksenya Samarskaya, a New York-based type designer, whose work intersects information, identity, and environment. In the interview, we talked about the way type design conveys more than the words it spells, encoding and decoding identity, history and place in the world around us. Let's get started.
Liam:	Ksenya, welcome to Design Notes.
Ksenya:	Hi. Thanks for having me. Glad we're finally doing this.
Liam:	Yeah! I feel like I should mention to the listeners that Ksenya and I met about three and a half years ago, now, at Span in New York, and we've been trying to set up an interview ever since.
Ksenya:	(laughs)
Liam:	And now here we are. (laughs)

Ksenya: Indeed.

Liam: To start off the same way I always do, I wanna know about your journey. Because I'm interested in the different ways that people come to design and to the disciplines that they do.

               So I wanna know how you came to type design, and also how you think that experience reflects your approach to the work.

Ksenya: So the way I came to type design, is possibly a slightly non-traditional route, but in some ways that was appealing about type design at that time, is ... When I entered, almost no one in the field studied type design. A lot of people came from different directions. So it seemed like a really interesting combination that really appealed to my personality.

               What I actually studied was a lot of fine art, installation art, communication design. And upon graphic design briefly, my realization was that graphic design is really just all dealing with fonts. You're either selecting fonts, or you're manipulating 'em. And if I wanted to be really good at it, I needed to fully understand type and typography, and get really deep into it.

               I didn't imagine staying in the field for as long as I did, and then just kinda ... Yeah. One thing tumbled after another, and I landed here. And it's been a fun ride.

Liam: I feel like a common theme, as I continue to talk to folks who work in different disciplines, is, like: design solves problems. People approach design projects in a way that figures out what problem it's addressing. So I wanna know, from your perspective, how does type solve problems?

Ksenya: In the typefaces that I've worked on and I've designed, there's a couple different categories of problems. There's, uh ... Certain typefaces, there's been a lot of, like, trying to deal with problems of legibility, and trying just really functional, like ... How do you design a typeface for broadcasting? How do you design a typeface for really rough newsprint? Where is it gonna live, in terms of materiality, and how do you work with that? There's another category of typographic problems that I deal with when I deal with branding, which is: how do you get type, or a typeface, to communicate someone's personality? And a mood, and a brand, and just all of the intricacies of history, and I love that condensed problem of: how do you get so many different fields of data and touchpoints, and get it down to a letter, or a set of letters?

And then the third, uh, issue that I deal with a lot is: I do a lot of multi-script type design. I deal with Latin, Greek, and Cyrillic, and I've done, also, research into other minority scripts, and there it's somewhat related to, like, the branding problem, but on a different scale, and from different touchpoints, of: how do you talk to different groups, different nations, different communities of people, and how do you fold in all of their history with type form and reading, and how are you sensitive to that, and how do you respond to that and translate it that a way that kinda works within this matrix?

Liam: When you're approaching a multi-script type project, are you seeking to balance those scripts in a way where they can live in harmony in the same family?

Ksenya: Absolutely. And that's definitely one of the things we get hired ... Um, my company is me and a couple other people that work with, so a lot of times when I'll say "me," it is ... or ... I am talking for a group, in all of this. But a lot of the problems, they do come to us that way. It is: someone has a Latin, or someone has a need, and we're doing a lot of extensions, so we are looking to harmonize. And it's a question of: how do you just not, necessarily, repeat the shapes, but how do you also harmonize the tone, and the mood, and the idea, of a brand, and ...

           So it's looking from where the original typeface is coming from, and then where it's going, and what combination of countries or people it's gonna be speaking to.

Liam: I'm really interested in this question of, like, building identity into type design. So, lie, what are some of the ways that you do that? I guess, first, in discovering the identity, and then also, like, translating that into something like type design has a very richly historical, systematic aspect to it.

Ksenya: Answering this question on radio, uh ... is gonna feel kinda like dancing about architecture. Um ...

Liam: (laughs)

Ksenya: (laughs)

           Like, how do I translate and describe this?

In branding projects, the biggest part of, like, the time is really, like you said, the understanding, and trying to learn what they're trying to express. It's a lot of conversation, it's a lot of questions. It's a lot of keywords and associations, and having the client pick between things, and really state their priorities. It's learning who the client is, it's learning their history, finding some materiality to ground and then be able to triangulate against.

Once that part is done, for me, the part of translating it into type and visuals is actually much faster, but, again, that comes from being completely immersed in the field, and all the years and time I've spent researching in the past.

And typefaces really absorb connotations from the environment, or the place that they're in. So if, like, one typeface is used ... or one style of lettering is used in cafes in Barcelona a lot, all of a sudden, that typeface isn't just, uh …

Liam: It feels like a café in Barcelona typeface.

Ksenya: Exactly. It's no longer just, like, a set of decisions about weight or proportion, all of a sudden it takes all the connotations of what that café is and how it feels, and it kind of, like, soaks it in like a sponge in a certain way.

And then you have the memory, and you have the association of: now, whenever someone sees those types of letters, their memory is ... their memory is triggering any time they've seen, you know, a postcard, or a photo, or have traveled through that space.

So a lot of it is knowing history and geography of styles and trends, and what they've been in. So once you learn from a client what their takes are, and how they wanna be associated, you just kind of map it to the ... to other spaces that are similar, and the typographic decisions that were made there, and then you kinda just DJ remix them in a way that, hopefully, is also fresh and interesting, and adds to that realm, rather than just copying one source directly, or …

Liam: Right.

Ksenya: Kinda doing a derivative.

Liam:	How does that line of thinking change when you're working on a project that involves multiple different applications of type? I remember reading about a project you did that involved, like, sign-painting, and a printed typeface.
Ksenya:	That's, I think, where families or package things do come into play. Like, that's why a lot of type families will have, like, a text face, and a display face, and a caption, and those can have different correlations, or how similar they are.
	So a lot of it also comes down to: you're not necessarily gonna use one style, or one font everywhere, so you try to build a package, and you kinda build a system that will work.
Liam:	I guess I'm also interested in whether, in building a family like that, or building a multi-application, like type system, if you can create that association, or that feeling, on your own. Like, absent of external histories.
Ksenya:	I think you can create a completely brand new thing, and will have ... You know, you can create something that's, like, harsh, or fuzzy and bubbly, or whatever else. But I think you're still always connecting it.
	I just recently did a piece of lettering that I wanted to reference a dessert, and kind of, like, those spiky little flowers and tumbleweeds, and things like that. And so it's ... So that has a certain feeling of sharpness, or barrenness. But, again, it's working through metaphor, association, or …
Liam:	Yeah.
Ksenya:	... connotation. And I think all type will.
Liam:	I guess, ultimately, if it exists in the world, it's going to refer to the world. (laughs)
Ksenya:	There's also that, yes. (laughs)
Liam:	(laughs)
	While we're on the topic of expressing an identity in a type design project ... I remember in an interview in 2015, you were talking about the ways that identity finds its way into type. And I'm wondering if you find that there are any ways that your own identity is expressed in the things that you create.

Ksenya: Oh, absolutely. I don't think ... I don't think anyone creates something that doesn't ... Like, you're always making choices, and I think there is a habit that leans you making one choice over another, and I ... and I feel like ... Like, I can usually look at a typeface, and I can tell where someone studied. I can tell a Cooper type student form another student, because there are habits, or patterns, or a way of looking that are discernible. And I remember, like, seeing that in art, like, when I was a kid ... um, looking at people's figure drawings and things like that, and noticing that most people drew people like themselves, rather than like ... Or it was, like, some weird overlap between themselves and what they were looking at, and I think that always exists, and I don't think you can escape it. Nor ... Nor should you.

Liam: That last part is interesting. Why do you say that?

Ksenya: That you shouldn't-

Liam: Yeah.

Ksenya: ... try to escape it?

Liam: Yeah.

Ksenya: I don't really believe in neutrality. I think our values, and our histories, and our experiences are everywhere, and in everything we do, and I think, instead of trying to hide 'em, we should own it, and just try to be conscious of them, and make sure they're aligned and in harmony to what we wanna bring to the world.

Liam: I love that. (laughs)

             Switching to something maybe a bit more abstract. There is an interview in Print Magazine where you mentioned this idea of combining the thinking of art, and the tools of design, in your work. I'm curious what you mean by that.

Ksenya: So, for me, that's just what I know from my background, and my training, which is as ... I think there's, like, a couple different ways that that plays out.

             On a formulaic way, art teaches ... It taught me how to break the visual world down in ways that are kind of like these Lego tool pieces, and it's

really abstract. And it's learning how to abstract the visual world, and really just look at it. Which I think is incredibly useful.

Versus, in design, sometimes you're locked into already thinking it's design, or already thinking it's gonna be a typeface, instead of just kinda pulling it back and seeing it as these abstract shapes.

And the other side of that, and this is kinda more, I think, what I like, or I'm ex ... drawn to with ... in terms of art thinking, is: I was taught in a program where you're thinking about all the possible connotations to everything you do.

There's an essay online that I read a couple months ago that's really beautiful, that talks about art thinking as being the edge of thought. And it really talks about, like, what art thinking and the way that it opens your mind and kind of pushes certain boundaries.

But the other part of the question that I wanted to answer or get to is that art thinking taught me a certain responsibility for the effects of anything I do. It taught me to think about all the details. It taught me to really consider every connotation that something can have, or something can bring. And it taught me to have an opinion, and to have a voice, and to be responsible for that.

Which I think is a wonderful thing to also have. If you're a designer, you're designing things for culture and for society, and it's gonna have implications and ramifications no matter what you do. And so, again, this kind of circles back to not pretending that you're invisible, or you're just a hand in the machine.

And, again, and this is why I love type, there's a lot of really small decisions you can have that have meaning to someone else, or impact culture and ... Within any parameters, you have a choice on how you behave, and what you do, and that's an amazing responsibility, and-

Liam: Yeah.

Ksenya: ... something to own.

Liam: I think as you were talking, in my mind this distinction started to emerge between the concepts of art and design, but how would you describe that distinction, if it exists?

Ksenya:	In my work, I completely merge the two, and I go back and forth between the practices, and find it pretty seamless.
	To me, the most interesting people that are practicing today do kind of exist in this overlap, where they're using the tools of design, which to me are much more democratic than art ... They reach a different audience, and they're much more widely dispersed. Which it makes them really attractive, but you still have that same rigor, and responsibility, and openness, and willingness to push culture, or be in dialogue with culture that art has as its foundation, and that design can have but doesn't always.
Liam:	Yeah. Maybe sometimes it just lacks the acknowledgement that that's going on.
Ksenya:	Perhaps.
Liam:	Going back to the ubiquity of type, and how it informs a lot of the design around us, and takes place in culture, and geography, and history. You've said before that type can reveal complexities, as well. And I'm interested in the ways that it does that.
Ksenya:	Well, I think with type, and generally with design and with visual culture, where most of us are primarily visual creatures, we absorb it and we react to it, even if we don't necessarily know that we're reacting to it. And with type, like with a lot of design, same thing, like: you don't really notice it until it goes wrong. You can tell if you weren't able to read something, or if a word looked like another word, and you got lost at the airport.
	For a long time, the iPhone had Helvetica as its screen, and I could never, like ... The closed counters of the 6 and the 9, like, I'd be waking up looking at my phone titled, and I couldn't tell if it was 8 or 3, or ...
Liam:	(laughs)
Ksenya:	You know. Whatever.
	And I think there's a lot of things that ... Again, it happens on this level that we react to, even if we're not super aware, like: were you able to read that sign in time? Or did you get a feeling, did you get a memory? Did it spark any other associations or nostalgia? Was it hard to read and get through?

Did you get tired, visually tired of reading by the end of the book? All of that kinda comes across.

Liam: You mentioned Helvetica as a system font. I'm interested in your thoughts on system fonts, like Roboto, or, today, like San Francisco. Because type is such a layered creation that we're, like, subconsciously reacting to, how do you see their role in communicating to the user, or for the user, or for the developer who's using it in their app? Or even for the company that builds the platform?

Like, what ... What is the responsibility of a system font?

Ksenya: The main challenge, and the main thing there, is to be really legible at a small size. So you're dealing with a lot of just, like, form distinctions and legibility issues. Like, we're still mostly looking at fairly small devices that have a lot of information packed it.

So it does ... To me, a lot of these problems get to be more technical than emotional at this point. And it's working small and legible across a lot of different languages, which becomes a thing, like ... So it's also ... It's, one, designing the font itself, but also when you're designing the UI, like ... Okay, it works for English, but does it work for certain characters?

Liam: Because, as we've said earlier, like, these are artifacts that exist in the world and must reference things in the world, and come from influences that we have as designers, and as the people even using it ... How much opportunity do you think there is for those things to come through, in a system font, specifically?

Ksenya: In a system font, I think there will be more once ... Like, right now, we're talking a system font, we're really mostly looking at, yeah, these tiny spaces that are a watch or a phone. So with really limited pixels, so I think in there, there's ... It's a pretty small box within to run around.
Um, so there are certain things of ... Are you getting the characters right? Are you picking one style over another? In terms of the actual strokes of the characters. And lot of it too, like ... What languages, countries are you representing? There it gets into a lot of, like, inclusion and omission of glyphs, which different companies have different sensitivity to. And are you actually including local voices when you're drawing a lot of these other minority scripts, in terms of understanding whether you're doing it right. A lot of 'em get kind of hacked together ... (laughs)-

Liam: Yeah.

Ksenya:	... from scripts people are more familiar with. Um-
Liam:	I think that's a super interesting point. I'm very curious about the process of coming up with a family that represents many, many different writing systems. I guess I would ask: how, like, multiple designers' work can come together for that. What do you think that process ideally looks like?
Ksenya:	Type design is usually a relay. Like, I've worked on a lotta different typefaces, there's ... there's no typeface that I've done actually the entire thing. Even my own stuff, I work with people, and it is a collaboration. I feel like people are actually pretty good at working together, and taking an existing system and understanding how to kind of, like, tag in and jump and play with it, and I think it's just ... We already have that, for the bigger languages. And it's finding ways to get a lot of the more rarely-used languages into that system. Whether it's, like, going out and listening to people, and trying to get more consultants that ... Both the consultants that are expert in a certain range, but also people that are local, or teaching type design to them, and getting them to be part of the creation process in a way. And expanding who it is that actually draws type from the fairly small, homogenous, uh, population it is now.
Liam:	Yeah. Something that I'm personally curious about, as a student, is: um, the influence that the origins of writing systems have on type design. So the actual tools that were used to first create the writing system, whether that's a brush, or a chisel, or a stylus, or something like that. How that plays into the final letter forms. And I think in Latin character sets, it's already kind of a mix, but I'm interested in, like, once you're incorporating all of these other writing systems, how that influence kind of interplays with making a harmonious family out of it.
Ksenya:	That's a fun question. Like, I think in sans-serif faces you already have kind of a certain removal of traditional writing instruments. But I think there it's not necessarily, like, bringing together a type family that melds different instruments, but being open to learning and playing from each other.

So not necessarily making things that feel like Western European instruments in other scripts, but making it a two-directional channel of communication.

Liam: Yeah. Maybe inventing a new tool that covers everything. (laughs)

Ksenya: Well, digital is a new tool, and digital allows us ... Like, I'm not super-traditional, in many ways. Like, I think digital allows us to break free from tools, and while they're a great inspiration, the ability that we have to tweak and break that is actually really fun, and to be taken advantage of.

Liam: I guess would wrap up by asking ... I think a lot of people that I talk to about type design, who aren't type designers, find it to be a very mysterious and opaque process. How would you recommend that people get started, like, just learning about it, or demystifying that for themselves?

Ksenya: So the way I look at that is: type isn't this .. We use type every day. We look at type every day, we read it. And I think ... And we've been dealing and living inside of a world of typography all our lives. From the age of, I dunno, three, four, when you learn how to write your name, and you're already lettering. And …

Or when you're on your fridge, or playing with your blocks, and you're rearranging 'em, and there you're dealing with type.

So I feel like it's a misconception that it's an opaque thing that we don't interact with. We've been interacting with it all our lives. There's actually very few things that we're as intimately familiar with, and I think getting over that fear, and just being open to looking and learning from the type itself, and learning how to trust your own instinct and your own opinions of things is kind of the most important in that, and in opening up what typography is or can become.

Liam: All right. Well, thank you again for joining me, Ksenya.

Ksenya: Thank you so much.

Liam: Subscribe to Design Notes, so you don't miss our next episode with Clinton Cargill, visual director at Vanity Fair. Clinton and I discuss the ways intent is central to creative work, and how a spiderweb-thin tether can connect disparate ideas to tell a compelling story.

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