

**Debbie Millman: First—the most asked question of 2020 must be asked—How are you both doing during this utterly surreal year?**

Wael Morcos: I'm not entirely sure! This year has been such a drag, especially with everything that's happening in Lebanon (the Beirut port explosion). Surprisingly, work is going great. We have moved to a new studio space and are busier than ever with several interesting projects from identity work to editorial design and the Arabic type design in parallel. We're trying to make use of whatever warm weather is left of this year to take on some outdoor activities: Roller skating!

Jon Key: I am feeling grateful that we have been so busy, but we also have been trying to find moments of rest. Time away from the news and the rather depressing stories being shared. Anxiety, rage, sadness, grief, really all the emotions, have been triggered over the past few months. And yes! Roller skating has been such an amazing release and activity.

**Wael—how are your friends and family in Lebanon? Do you have any plans to visit Beirut in the future?**

Thankfully my immediate family is doing well. After the August 4th explosion, some friends and acquaintances got injured from fallen glass or had their place of work seriously damaged. It's a major setback for the country that hasn't been doing well anyway. I usually visit Beirut at least once a year but with covid, it's unclear when the next trip would be.

**You've stated that your work at Morcos Key delves into your personal histories about your families, where you come from, and your interaction with the world. You use narratives inspired by your roots in America's deep South and the Middle East. What commonalities have you found?**

This is a great question and one we are still answering. It has been interesting establishing a studio design language that feels authentic to both of us. I think formal design choices enriched by specific cultural narratives is an innate impulse we have been investigating since before officially joining the "design world". Often, I think about the design objects we created while in our respective homelands before we met and the stories we naturally gravitate towards. I think growing up, we were both nerdy kids interested in how technology can be a catalyst for communication and identity. Jon began teaching himself HTML at the age of 10 and would code websites and create animated graphics for fictitious kid clubs or sites for family businesses. He would create posters for church events and later create logos for friends of family boutique stores. Similarly, Wael spent his time drawing photoshop and vector illustrations of his favorite characters and celebrities. This vector illustration quickly transformed to typographic explorations for family events and experiments with friends. All of this to say, we started using design for the communities immediately around us rather organically and definitely pre- any formal design education and that sticks with us today.

**How do the differences in your approach to work fuel your collaboration?**

Jon is a very image oriented thinker and focuses on the craft of storytelling and creative direction. Wael is a formalist, a type designer and thrives in systems. Our skill sets complement one another really well. We are able to visually call and respond to each other in the design process. This duality, or balance, allows us to be a nimble duo and really understand where our creative strengths are.

**How did you first meet, and what made you decide to create Morcos Key together?**

We met at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), in Providence (USA), in 2011 when we were both studying Graphic Design. We actually met in an art history class about self-portraiture. During the class, I think we were impressed by each other's research and style. This quickly turned into late night work partners helping each other tackle assignments after class. After graduating RISD in 2013, we both moved to New York and took full-time jobs. Jon worked as a Designer & Art Director at Grey advertising where he worked on the Whitney Museum relocation campaign and moved on to work for a start-up and in house for HBO, Ideo and A&E. Wael worked as a designer at C&G partners, entering the world NYC brand design studios. Wael would go on to work with Base Design, 2x4 and MTWTF. While we had our full-time jobs, we still came home every day and continued other freelance and personal projects. We would again stay up late at night assisting and critiquing one another. In 2017 our friends at Isometric Studio recommended us for a job. We got a call from Ellen Lupton to design an exhibition at the Cooper Hewitt Design Museum. And in order to do this project we had to be registered business to work with a Smithsonian institution. Immediately after the call we went online and registered our studio and Morcos Key was born. We had been talking about starting a studio for a few years and this was the perfect catalyst.

**What were some of your other early projects and how did that influence your style as an independent design firm working in New York?**

We were freelancing together before the studio's founding. We worked on branding projects like *Slay*; a global queer network, a combination of internet TV/production studio/full service digital agency created by and for the LGBTQ community of color, that fills a critical gap in media representation. We also worked on the branding of *Heartbeat Opera* a theatre company transforming works from the operatic canon through visionary adaptations, radical rearrangements, and intimate, visceral productions. Our previous corporate experiences gave us the chance to learn by observing and participating in other people's processes until we formulated our own. Who we are as people is very clear to us but our process is very elastic and adaptable.

**Wael, you worked in Beirut for four years while working on self-generated type projects in Arabic. You've continued your work with in Arabic type here in the United States. You've said that, "Graphic Design and Arabic didn't have a lot in common. Everything felt outdated, nostalgic or simply badly done. Things are changing for the better and it's up to us—the new generation, to re-invent a contemporary visual language that represents us." How are you currently doing that and what are the biggest challenges you face?**

As a studio, we're dedicated to the development of modern Arabic typography and to making it accessible and available to the public. Since 2017, we have worked with various type foundries to adapt Latin typefaces to Arabic, including Graphik and Lyon from Commercial Type and Brando from Bold Monday (co-designed with Khajag Apelian). We've also published with Google Fonts (Kufam, co-designed with Artur Schmal) and IBM (Plex Sans Arabic co-designed with Khajag Apelian) to develop Arabic typefaces for open source release. Alongside Khajag Apelian and Kristyan Sarkis, we started the Arabic Lettering Workshop, a series of educational classes focused on the advancement of Arabic lettering.

One of the challenges graphic designers face in the middle east is the lack of resources and proper documentation of graphic design as a field. The most vivid visual culture artifacts we had as design students in Lebanon are from the golden age of Egyptian and Lebanese cinema. Télé Liban, the Lebanese broadcasting company, was the first TV station to operate in the region starting its first

broadcast in 1959. It's refreshing to see Instagram emerging as a platform for collecting artifacts on Arabic design and connecting designers across the world.

Our own research is put to work in our studio's graphic design projects where Arabic language plays an important role. Our goal is to actively contribute to the global library of modern Arabic fonts to help build a discipline capable of nurturing robust and vibrant discourse.

**You believe that graphic design and typography can be used to preserve language. How so?**

Typography is what gives language its form. Despite losing impact among youth, the Arabic language is still a great unifier across the Middle East. If we invest in the typefaces we use in our physical and digital interface (from books, to signage to screens) we'll be moving our calligraphic heritage into modern typographic contexts.

**Jon, you also co-founded Codify Art, a Brooklyn-based multidisciplinary artist collective whose mission is to create, produce, and showcase work that brings the voices of people of color, highlighting women and queer people of color to the foreground. Can you talk about some of the work you have done with Codify Art?**

Yes! Since our founding in October 2015 Codify has produced several gallery shows, open mic nights, networking events and workshops. Some of our most notable works include a workshop at the Whitney Museum where we were asked to select work from their permanent collection and lead a writing & zine making workshop. Recently, we completed an art supply drive in partnership with the Public Theater and BRIC to collect paint supplies, canvases, brushes, markers etc to donate to New Alternatives an LGBTQ homeless and educational center. Pre-corona, Codify Art hosted 3 workshops using these supplies as vehicles for conversations around identity and resilience. Since being quarantined, we have been trying to figure out the best ways to be useful for our community. Many artists and designers have been severely financially impacted since the lock down. We decided to start Mutual aid funds to give emergency funds and grants for Queer and Trans Artists.

**Wael, you've said that "Designing a typeface is like designing a tool that gives people the chance to appropriate something and re-contextualize it in ways a designer might not have thought of." Can you talk a bit more about how that happens? Is this always a good thing?**

A font is a piece of software that has no function unless someone uses it, except maybe as a digital archive of a set of letterforms. What brings a typeface to life is the message that is communicated when the font is used. Type designers create typefaces for graphic designers to use, hence the implicit connection that exists between those two roles. I play both. As a type designer, I can design for the function. For example a design suitable for big headlines, running text or for small captions. I can also design the formal flavor of the typeface, for example, something that feels intricate, soft, energetic, or restrained. The graphic designer adds one more layer, perhaps the most important of all, the meaning of the words.

**You both were recently part of a group of BIPOC and LGBTQ+ artists that took over the NYC subway station at Brooklyn's Atlantic Avenue terminal at Barclays Center. What did you create and what were you hoping to accomplish with this work?**

Wael: One of the pieces is a smiley face with a yellow background and Arabic typography forming the smile. It reads "Tomorrow's a better day", a message of hope in the midst of the COVID-19

pandemic and the political unrest in Lebanon. It's really important for the Arabic language to be presented in positive and exciting ways. I don't remember ever seeing Arabic in the subway in NYC even though over one hundred thousand Arabs and Arab-Americans live in Brooklyn alone—according to the Arab American Association of New York. It's important to be part of the conversation.

Jon: The other collage pieces are from a book featured in this exhibition called *12*. This project began with Wael showing me all of his old photographs growing up in Lebanon via the website Flickr. At that point, I had never been to Beirut and I loved scrolling images of his family, friends, memories and locations that were dear to him. He was getting ready to go on a trip home for 12 days, and I decided to create portrait love letters to him. In a way, collaging these images made me feel more connected to Wael and his home. The results were 12 portraits as I see them. This is a story of learning, love and power of memories. I love that this project was featured in the subway. It exclaims the power and imagination of queer love.

**The Center for Book Arts is currently exhibiting a selection of your book projects. The exhibit also includes a selection of books from your personal libraries that have been instrumental to your practice and are in dialogue with the projects being exhibited. Which book projects are included in this exhibition and why did you choose these specific projects?**

The books that we have made (designed or authored) range from journals, art books, newsprints, zines, type-specimens and more. We have included 20 books that we made and 20 books that we pulled from our personal library. We can discuss a few of each!

*The Tenth Magazine* vol. 4 and 5 were one of the first editorial projects that we completed when we moved to NYC. Founded by Khary Septh *The Tenth Magazine* is a contemporary fashion and lifestyle journal. The Tenth interrogates the myth of monolithic black community, specifically, the media's and popculture's caricature of queer black people, by offering vast perspectives, narratives about and by Black Queer and Trans People. The collaboration with The Tenth Team has been an invaluable educational experience and important for our growth as a studio. We have met and worked with so many photographers (Like Marcus Branch and Komillio, Harvey Jackson) and writers and artists in our community.

16th - 18th Century master drawings is our most recent project added. This was a design project for the Georgia Museum of Art. We love making art catalogues especially about subjects we don't know a great deal about. The designer's role becomes researcher and gets to investigate a new world.

We're also including 2 books that we designed for the inaugural Sharjah Architecture Triennial. Curated by Adrian Lahoud and titled *Rights of Future Generations*, the books look for surviving conditions of struggle, emancipation, and experimentation from around the world. They present responses to these conditions from the artists, architects, and theorists that participated in the Triennial. From trade networks in the Indian Ocean, to unstable land ownership in the Ganges Delta, to the interplay of gender norms and interior architecture in Iran's public housing, the essays help us to imagine possibilities beyond the existing arrangement of things.

*We*, small black soft cover, uses found historic photography from civil rights moments and my own photography and work into new collaged forms. This narrative is about the past and the present of civil right moments and how the images still remain the same yet offers some hope and resilience to

move forward. *We* was initially created in response to and support of the first wave of Black Lives Matter protests in Ferguson.

A dense deep visual dive into the first 2 years of our studio practice, 2 this booklet brings together sketches, projects, and photographs to celebrate two years of joint practice with work that spans the worlds of type design, lettering, identity design, branding, and editorial design.

Also included are two type specimens for Graphic Arabic and Brando Arabic, the typefaces co-designed with Khajag Apelian for Commercial Type and Bold Monday respectively.

### **A few selections from the READS**

*Bodybuilding* is a zine we found at the New York Art Book Fair, by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, a Pakistani visual and performance artist who currently lives in San Francisco. The zine combines black and white photocopied images of bodybuilders posing and fraternizing, with a thick undertone of homoerotic nuances. The whole thing is punctuated by Persian calligraphy as if it was a comic book; a perfect example of the Artist's work sitting at the intersections of queerness and Islam.

*Indengions Women* is by artists Martine Gutierrez is a powerful use of the editorial container to reconstruct and project your personal narrative. As said in her own words "This is not a magazine about fashion, lifestyle, or celebrity. Indigenous Woman is an independent art publication dedicated to the celebration of Mayan Indian heritage, the navigation of contemporary indigeneity, and the ever-evolving self-image. It is a vision, an overture, a provocation. The word "indigenous" here is used to refer to native cultures from a particular region, but also as a synonym for the natural and innate..."

Jeff Shang's *Fearless*, designed by Isometric Studios, is a photographic journal documenting 200 out and proud LGBTQ student athletes. Personally, Andy Chen and Waqas Jaiwad have been critical mentors and supporters of our studio. Their studio investigates the intersections of design, photography and architecture through narrative forward projects. *Fearless* is an object sharing the physical and emotional journey of these students. The design punctuates the strength exhibited by these individuals with cascading quotes and jutting typography reaffirming its okay to stand out from the team.

*200 Trips from CounterCulture* is a constant source of inspiration for the studio! This book features graphics, zines, and posters from the Underground Press Syndicate. The Underground Press Syndicate was a community of underground publications and newspapers that started around the mid 60s. This anthology features a vast range of image making techniques and poster styles to discuss issues from sex worker rights, queer rights, free love and majurina use.

*Natbar, Vol. 2*, by Mohye Eddine Ellabad the egyptian illustrator, designer and writer. It is a journal published in 1991 and the only illustrated, critical, Arabic graphic design magazine, in the Arabic language!

**Can you describe the interplay in the dialogue created between the book projects you have worked on and the books from your personal libraries? What is the response you are hoping for when the public experiences this interplay?**

We are thrilled to be part of this unique exhibition. Our hope is to provide more information on the thoughts that surround the work we make: the ideas, beliefs, and values, both aesthetic and political in nature, that influence us. There's a cyclical relationship between making and reading where one feeds into the other. Friends inspire design, community inspires design, stories inspire design, art inspires design. Our work integrates all of these experiences and stories into typographic and visual landscapes. It's nice we can share the intersections that make our studio unique.

**The world is becoming an increasingly violent, polarizing, politically fueled place and designers are often being called to help communicate this unrest. Do you feel that designers can make a difference, and if so, how?**

I don't think graphic design can solve the world's problems, but I do believe as designers we can be thoughtful and intentional in how we use our skills (or not) and what we speak up about. Not everything needs to be a typeface and not everyone needs your rallying poster design. We often say to designers eager to get involved in protest work to recognize and evaluate who they are, where they are in the world, and how much space they take up in the world. Designing is planning ahead, anticipating what's not already here. If you don't know what you stand for, how can you build it?