

## *Brassica Abecedaria*\*

Emily King

KOOL is a Latin font formed from pieces of red cabbage. It includes 26 lower-case letters, 26 capitals, a full set of numerals, 16 punctuation marks and 6 symbols. The inspiration for it came about five/six years ago, when its author Magali was eating coleslaw for lunch on a regular basis. One day, having eaten a salad of red cabbage, she looked at the remnants of the vegetable on her plate and perceived them as having formed the word ‘england’. It is a charged term and, back then, in the aftermath of the Brexit vote when the English electorate opted to take the whole of Great Britain out of the European Union, perhaps it was even more so. Maybe if the slivers of red cabbage had spelled out, say, ‘dangle’, Magali would have moved on, but by forming themselves into the word ‘england’, they held her attention.

The cabbage font concept was planted, but, rather than acting on the idea immediately, Magali waited until the early 2020s before she began experimenting with her vegetal alphabet. The first nascent use of the letterforms was in the photo series *Landings* (2023) in which she placed pieces of fruit in domestic shipping containers. The results were brutal yet highly aestheticised disjunctions between what is generally framed as natural and the explicitly industrial. These images hark back to the impossible flower and fruit compositions by early eighteenth-century Dutch painters such as Jan van Huysum, in which plants and produce from different seasons and environs are

combined into a single image. Latterly the industrial production of food means that the coexistence of crops grown in contradictory conditions no longer requires painstaking construction. Rather, it has become an everyday supermarket-shelf reality. Explicitly addressing this trashing of seasonality, Magali made a companion group of *Landings* photographs, using the same industrial settings, but with sets of red cabbage slivers spelling out the months of the year. No longer being a condition of growth, Magali's cabbage calendar suggests a performative take on seasonality.

Soon after making these works, Magali extrapolated the letters she'd already formed into a full set. Once her font was finished, she named it KOOL, meaning 'cabbage' in Dutch, and began to think about creating a type specimen book. And that's what we have here. Over the years, Magali had amassed a library of such publications, both recent specimens and those from decades past. She is particularly attracted to their use of language, the way in which their words are chosen, not primarily for their meaning, but for their ability to show as many different letterforms and juxtapositions of letterforms as possible. What emerges is a kind of concrete poetry. In theory the text is generated with only display in mind, yet, perhaps inevitably, it is redolent of some kind of authorial intention.

In terms of the full scope of human history, written language is a relatively recent invention. The earliest-known example is a tablet written in Sumerian script that was found in present-day Iran and which dates back, roughly, to 3400 BC. The development of writing is often linked with that of trade, and in particular with the notion of debt

– a promise to pay later, which implies that the lender has more than they need for their immediate subsistence. The amassing and exchange of a surplus involves record-keeping, and the keeping of records requires some form of writing. Writing also allows the preservation of memory, the recording of stories and the making of laws, which are vital if a particular group of people, likely a group of people with a surplus of goods to their name, want to extend their power and influence beyond those with whom they are in day-to-day contact.

Brassicas, of which the red cabbage is a species (*brassica oleracea L. var. capitata f. rubra*), were vital to human nutrition well before people were writing, but their cultivation probably happened at roughly the same time that writing emerged (give or take a millennium or two). Estimates suggest that humans began breeding more digestible, tastier and hardier varieties of cabbage around 6000 – 4000 BC. Red cabbage itself was probably bred much later, around the sixteenth century, and the vegetable became a popular ingredient during the years of Europe's industrialisation, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The red cabbage's defining quality is its colour, however this can vary widely according to the soil in which it has been grown. Acidic soils lead to brighter red leaves, neutral soils to purple shades, and an alkaline soil will generate a more conventional greeny-yellow cabbage colour. When a red cabbage is heated it tends to turn blue. The vinegar that is a feature of many a hot red-cabbage recipe is not only a seasoning, but also allows the leaves to keep their characteristic hue.

Significantly, red cabbage keeps better than white or green varieties and, while it is often pickled, it can last a winter in its fresh state. To extend the connection between red cabbage and written language, both are instances of taking something fleeting and transitory (spoken language and green leaves) and evolving it into a robust, future-proof form. Returning to the *Landings* series, in spelling out the months in red cabbage, Magali was addressing the relatively recent loss of seasonality, but, in fact, people have been striving to overcome climate-related restrictions on their diets for millennia. That scientists are now experimenting with growing certain species of cabbage in space is an extension of the c. 8,000-year effort to transcend human limitations via the brassica.

KOOL is a display font. Rather than being intended to disappear in the act of reading – that is, to become secondary to the sense of the text that it carries – its explicit purpose is to inflect the meaning of any sentence that it spells out. In terms of the making of the font, Magali claims to have allowed the forms that emerged from the straightforward shredding of the cabbage to dictate the shape of the alphabet. Instead of deliberately cutting particular letters, she found them on her chopping board. That said, there is obviously a certain amount of manipulation of cabbage slivers into readable forms involved in the design.

In hovering between the found and the made, KOOL brings to mind other letterforms made by artists. In the late 1960s Ed Ruscha created a number of paintings of what he called ‘liquid words’. The first of these, from 1966, is *Annie, Poured from Maple Syrup*. The letterforms in

the work are akin to those associated with the branding of the ‘little orphan’, except that they appear to be made from a mass of sticky liquid. Also in the series is *Adios*, the word appearing in an unappetising spill of red kidney beans, and the single letter *U*, rendered in bubbles, near illegible against a background that is the deep-blue of a twilight sky. Ruscha allowed his letterforms to drift towards the edge of abstraction and, in doing so he hinted at the sense that they have been happened upon, yet, of course, they are indisputably made. A tension arises from their appearing incidental, both in terms of content and form, while being anything but.

Meanwhile, the artist Paul Elliman has been finding alphabets in industrial waste for over thirty years now, amassing a collection of pieces of metal, plastic, cardboard or wood that bear a resemblance to individual Latin letters. He has grouped this collection into propositions relating to typography under various titles including ‘Found Font’ and ‘Bits’ and has described it as an exploration of the relationship between the commodification of language and lethal processes of industrialisation. On a less apocalyptic note, he has also stated: “Writing gives the impression of things. Conversely, things can give the impression of writing.” The role language plays in perception gives rise to a propensity to perceive language all around. Which takes us back to Magali and her lunch leavings. Like Elliman, she initially found her font, but later, like Ruscha, she manipulated her material to make it legible.

Common to all the alphabets under discussion – Magali’s and those of Ruscha and Elliman – is that the letters sit at the threshold of the

legible and the abstract. Each individual letter is much more discernible in the context of its fellows, such that reading them requires an effort adjacent to decoding. Readers must be willing to play their game. And, even while they function as fonts, it remains evident that they are sets of images, pictures of objects. Regarding KOOL specifically, there is no need to buy my theory about the relationship between the cultivation of brassicas and abecedaria, but you do have to allow your eye to find the words in the leaves. Approach it as a typographic slaw: it might require a bit of visual chewing, but ultimately it will reward your effort.

\* **Emily King, *Brassica Abecedaria***, in **Magali Reus, *KOOL. A Type Specimen***, with texts by Emily King and Rebecca May Johnson, Fondazione Arnaldo Pomodoro / Lenz Press, Milano, 2024.

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