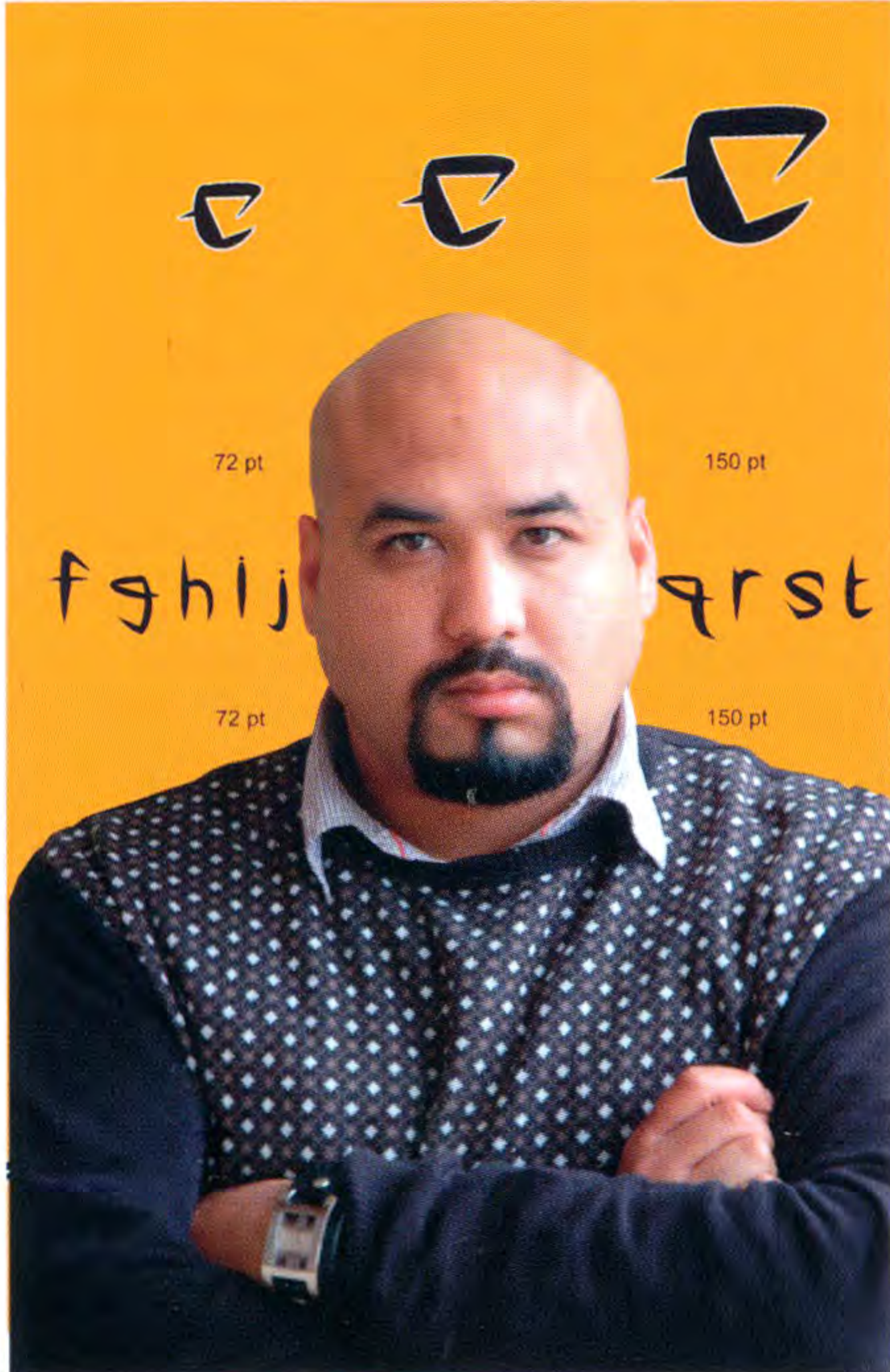


New Foundry a Font of New Ideas



In a history-steeped studio on the University of Cape Town's original Hiddingh campus on Orange Street, Kurt Campbell is challenging the notion that innovation is the domain of the hard sciences.

AUCT alumnus, Campbell is also challenging the historic hegemony of typeface and creating new fonts that are imbued with a sense of African and more particularly, South African, cultural heritage.

Now back at his alma mater as a lecturer in the New Media section, Kurt is grateful for the creative freedom academia gives him. Aside from his teaching responsibilities, he produces his own works of art and sculpture and has embarked on a crusade to create fonts that reflect the shapes and textures of the African continent.

"Although creating new fonts has a strong design element, I still see it as making art. It involves using tools that are commercial, but using them with a creative focus," he explains.

Campbell has already meticulously researched and designed several new typefaces, whose very names embody his innovative quest for fonts with an African identity: Mapungubwe, Kaggen and Heirloom.

Mapungubwe's reference points are the contours of the famed gold foiled rhinoceros discovered during excavations of the 13th century settlement in Limpopo province. The figurine has become symbolic of the sophisticated civilisations that existed in Southern African centuries prior to colonisation. Kaggen alludes to the mythical Khoisan deity which took the form of a praying mantis and whose claws have inspired Campbell's design of this particular font.

Campbell describes his Heirloom font as "...visually undermining the idea of design categories and glyph evolution". While at first inspection the letters appear to have a distinctly European blackletter gothic origin, in fact they were constructed by only using the patterns and diamond shapes found on traditional Zulu headrests.

His font making also has a strong academic focus. He uses his knowledge and expertise in this field to further develop the existing curriculum, which until recently only focused strongly on the history of Western fonts.

This very Eurocentric approach prompted Campbell to shift his research. He investigated the roots of African fonts, charting the history of fonts on this continent.

"I really want to give a balanced view of the history of typography and writing systems to the students that include the crucial influence of African," he says.

He observes that while in recent times Postmodern and Postcolonial schools of thought challenged the dominance of Western and Eurocentric ideas in many academic disciplines, resulting in many curriculum overhauls, the status quo of typography had not been affected."

Campbell is in the process of establishing a font foundry – the Iron Age Font Foundry – that will serve as a repository for his creativity and also facilitate commercial application of the new fonts. "Part of the foundry's strategy is to create new avenues for the fonts to be taken up and used in a variety of ways – from corporate logos to signage and everything in between."

To establish the foundry and bring three fonts into a commercialisable format, Campbell accessed UCT's Pre-Seed funding that is administered by Research Contracts and IP Services (RCIPS).


Piet Barnard, Director: RCIPS, said that ***"it was pleasing to receive a proposal from the Humanities as the majority of the applications come from science or engineering. Kurt executed his project really well, made strong progress, and ended it on brief, on time and on budget!"***

It was actually the first of our Concept Fund projects to be completed and it provided a great deal of insight into the commercialisation of fonts, such as how to present them electronically as an interactive marketing tool, but preventing them from being copied, what they were typically sold for and the various business models used. The knowledge and infrastructure developed during this project has paved the way for Kurt and others to make use of the foundry as an outlet for their work. Kurt has already used the Mapungubwe font to develop

a logo for UCT's Africa Alive Corridors™ initiative and they will use this inherently African font in their publications.”

Aside from creating a platform from which new fonts can be launched, the Foundry has the potential to bring in a third stream of funding for our department, says Campbell, “For example in creating bursaries and increasing our academic resources.”

“Good fonts stem from in-depth research and a consideration of history and they must also be pleasing to the eye. Reading is an intimate act, a one-on-one experience that typography can uniquely exploit,” says Campbell.

“And with this in mind, the field of typography should continue to develop in increasingly sophisticated ways as a commercial tool, as well as a critical part of visual research in the Humanities.” 

For more information about the Iron Age Font Foundry contact kurt.campbell@uct.ac.za

