



# The Politics of Design

A (Not So) Global Manual for  
Visual Communication  
Ruben Pater

# The Story of the Broken Script

Fifty years after World War II, one typeface is still associated with Nazi Germany. The blackletter or *fraktur*, existed for many centuries in Europe, but the few years that it performed the role as the official typeface of the Third Reich has ruined its reputation forever.

Blackletter, called 'broken script' in German, first appeared in the twelfth century to keep up with the increasing demand for books. Its condensed design was space-saving and could be drawn faster than the round Carolingian script. It became a favourite typeface for manuscripts and bibles. Even the first printed book by Gutenberg was a bible typeset in blackletter to mimic the hand-drawn manuscripts.

The Renaissance saw a revival of Roman typography, also called 'white letter',<sup>1</sup> which gradually replaced blackletter in most of Europe, except for Germany where the blackletter remained in use well into the twentieth century, mostly for German literature and bibles, and was considered a symbol of German nationalism.

In the 1920s, the blackletter was considered outdated. The designers of the New Typography promoted sans-serifs as the new style.

## Fraktur

Schwabacher Gotisch

Griechisch

Cyrillisch

(= Russisch und Bulgarisch)

Türkisch (= Arabisch)

Chinesisch (= Japanisch)

Indisch

Schriften der Exoten

(Zulukaffern, Papuas usw.)

= NATIONALISMUS

<sup>1</sup> Image from: Tschichold, Jan. *The New Typography*. University of California Press, 1998. 74-75.  
→ Johannes Gutenberg, The Gutenberg Bible, 1454-1455. Actual size.

Filii iether: iephone et phalpa  
 et ara. Filii autem olla: aree et au-  
 hel et relia. Omnes hy filii aser:  
 principes cognationum electi at-  
 que fortissimi duces ducum. Nunc  
 autem eorum etatis que apta esset ad  
 bellum: viginti sex milia. **VIII**

**B**eniamin autem genuit bale  
 primogenitum suum: asbal se-  
 cundum ahara tertium. noaha quar-  
 tum: et rapha quintum. fueruntque  
 filii bale addaor et gera. et abi-  
 ud: abisue quoque et neman et  
 ahoer sed et gera. et sephuphan  
 et uram. Hy sunt filii ahod. prin-  
 cipes cognationum habitaculum in  
 gabaa: qui translati sunt in ma-  
 nath. Aooma autem et achia et ge-  
 ra ipse transtulit eos: et genuit

Jan Tschichold criticised the nationalism of the blackletter in his book *The New Typography* in 1928: 'The emphatically national, exclusivist character of fraktur—but also of the equivalent national scripts of other peoples, for example of the Russians or the Chinese—contradicts present-day transnational bonds between people and forces their inevitable elimination. To keep to these types is retrograde.'<sup>2</sup>

### Hitler Did Not Like Blackletter

When the Nazis came to power in 1933, they claimed the blackletter as part of German heritage and made it the official typeface. The New Typography and Bauhaus designers were branded as 'degenerate' and many designers were arrested or fled the country.

Apparently Hitler did not particularly like blackletter, 'Hitler liked Futura', as Judith Schallansky wrote. His 1932 election poster used a sans-serif similar to the Futura. The poster of the 1936 Olympics was set in a sans-serif/serif hybrid. The designer of the Futura, the German Paul Renner, was arrested in 1933 after criticizing the cultural policy of the Nazi's.<sup>4</sup>

Eight years later the Nazi government abandoned the blackletter. It turned out to be too impractical and people in occupied countries had trouble reading it. The official reason said the blackletter was found to have a 'Jewish origin': 'Regarding and calling the so called gothic typeface a German typeface is wrong. In fact, the gothic typeface consists of Jew-letters from Schwabach... The Antiqua typeface is to be called the normal typeface in future.' according to the NSDAP decree from 1941.<sup>3</sup>

### Fraktur Future

After World War II the use of blackletter in Western Germany was considered a taboo. As recently as 2005, blackletter typography in a worldwide Reebok campaign was replaced with a monospaced sans-serif only for the German market.<sup>4</sup>

Blackletter was used in Northern Europe for centuries. Newspaper headers and beer logos are a reminder that the long tradition of European hand-drawn lettering is more than a World War II stereotype.

← Friedrich Heinrichsen, *Type Specimen Gutenberg Stempel*, 1935.

1. Bigelow, Charles and Kris Holmes. *Typeface Design & Research*. July 1, 2015. [bigelowandholmes.typepad.com/bigelow-holmes/2015/07/](http://bigelowandholmes.typepad.com/bigelow-holmes/2015/07/).

2. Tschichold, Jan. *The New Typography*. University of California Press, 1998. 74-75.

3. NSDAP Newsletter, signed by Martin Bormann, München 1941.

4. Schallansky, Judith. 'Hitler Mochte Futura'. *Freitag*, Kultur sec. June 1, 2007.

# Modernist Men

A typeface about which books have been written and even a movie is made, Helvetica is the most famous typeface in the world—a typeface so ubiquitous we can hardly imagine the world without it.

Helvetica was designed in 1956, but its roots lie in the principles of the 1920s' New Typography. Jan Tschichold wrote in 1928, 'A typeface expressive of our own age, free from all personal characteristics'. Of all the available typefaces, he wrote, sans-serif 'is the only one in spiritual accordance with our time.'<sup>1</sup> Sans-serifs had existed since the 1880s, but they only started to become the preferred style of typography from the 1930s onward.

## The Beginning of a New Face

The rise of international business after World War II demanded clear and structured forms of communication. The International Typographic Style applied the modernist design principles to the world of international business. Massimo Vignelli, with his office Unimark, and later Vignelli Associates in the U.S., performed a leading role. Michael Bierut, who worked for Vignelli for four years said, 'I had no doubt whatsoever that the purpose of graphic design was to improve the life of every person on earth beyond measure by exposing him or her to Helvetica on a three-column grid. That was certainty, and it made design into a crusade.'<sup>2</sup>

Designer Katherine McCoy had a different experience during her time at Unimark in 1968: 'During that year, the designers I worked with, save one notable exception, were all remarkably disinterested in the social and political upheavals taking place around us. Vietnam was escalating with body counts touted on every evening newscast; the New Left rioted before the Democratic National Convention in Chicago; Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy were assassinated; and Detroit was still smoking from its riots just down the street from our office. Yet hardly a word was spoken on these subjects. We were encouraged to wear white lab coats, perhaps so the messy external environment would not contaminate our surgically clean detachment.'<sup>3</sup>

→ Image by Ruben Pater. Based on an original design by Experimental Jetset, © 2001.

1. Mendelson, Edward. 'The Human Face of Type', *The New York Review of Books*, 2011.

2. Bierut, Michael. *Seventy-nine Short Essays on Design*. Princeton Architectural Press, 2007. 64.

3. McCoy, Katherine. 'Good Citizenship'. In: *Citizen Design*, 25-28. Allworth Press, 2003. 3.





## Myths and Ideologies

Helvetica became the symbol of progressive design with a flavour of objectivity, which is how it became the default choice for business and corporate culture. Even more than fifty years after its design, Helvetica's popularity has not declined amongst designers. A movie was dedicated to it in 2007, and designers like Experimental Jetset have given the typeface a more contemporary image. Not many regard it as neutral anymore as Helvetica has such strong connotations with 1960s design and corporate culture. 'We fully realise that no typeface is neutral, and that the objectivity of Helvetica is a myth,' said Experimental Jetset in an interview in *Emigré* in 2003.<sup>4</sup>

Jan Tschichold changed his mind about his New Typography after he was arrested by the Nazis in 1933 for communist sympathies. Over the following years he revisited his modernist ideas: 'To my astonishment I detected most shocking parallels between the teachings of Die neue Typographie and National Socialism and fascism.'<sup>5</sup>

## New Standards

The sans-serif aesthetic of Helvetica is still regarded by many designers as the most neutral and universally pleasing form of typography, even though its dominance is relatively recent, and happened mostly in Western Europe and North America. The fact that it is regarded by some as a default 'universal' typeface has more to do with the influence of West European modernism design, the branding of multinationals, and the success of these multinationals in dominating world markets.

The glorious *Mad Men* days of design, with design icons like Wim Crouwel, Paul Rand, and Massimo Vignelli have taken on mythical proportions for new generations of designers. In 2014 two designers raised money to reprint a limited edition of the original identity standards manual of the 1970 New York subway, designed by Unimark. It contains 352 pages of measurements, numbers, and instructions printed in full colour and nine Pantone® spot colours.<sup>4</sup> It immediately sold out, but copies can be obtained second-hand for between \$350 to \$950. A technical manual that was used to instruct low-skilled workers to implement design rules has become a design fetish object today.

← Images by Ruben Pater. Based on an original design by Vignelli & Associates, © 1972.

Top photo: Brad Clinesmith, [www.flickr.com/photos/macgodbrad/4911532101](http://www.flickr.com/photos/macgodbrad/4911532101)

Bottom photo: Otto Yamamoto, [www.flickr.com/photos/otto-yamamoto/8288634103](http://www.flickr.com/photos/otto-yamamoto/8288634103)

4. 'If We're Standing on the Shoulders of Giants...', *Emigre* issue 65, Princeton Architectural Press, 2003.

5. NYCTA Manual reprint by Jesse Reed and Hamish Smyth, [www.standardsmanual.com](http://www.standardsmanual.com).

# Decapitating Language

'Why two alphabets, when one accomplishes the same? Why write large if we cannot speak large?' read the Bauhaus letterhead design in 1925. The designer of the letterhead, Herbert Bayer, was an advocate of the New Typography that proposed to drop the capitals and use just lower case instead. Bayer found 'Modern life was too fast and too exciting to waste time on using two alphabets', writes Alice Rawsthorn.<sup>1</sup>

It is perhaps somewhat curious that only Latin, Greek, and Cyrillic alphabets use lower and upper case letters. The majority of scripts use just one letter case. The Roman alphabet consisted only of upper case letters, which were constructed using geometric forms. These were not very useful for handwriting, and the adaptations that emerged from everyday use were called Roman cursive. Over the centuries, Roman cursive gradually adopted different styles until they were formally incorporated in the alphabet in the Middle Ages by Charlemagne.

The modern Latin alphabet is a combination of the geometric Roman capitals and the lower case letters from the Middle Ages, brought together by Renaissance type cutters.

## The Capital Class

Having two alphabets brought on the option to discriminate and create systems of hierarchy. This becomes clear in how words and names are capitalised. The power relations between ideas, positions of power, and human relations could be judged according to capitalisation.

In colonial times, 'White' as a race was capitalised, and 'black' was written in lower case.<sup>2</sup> Titles like King, Lord, President, Pope, and Emperor were all capitalised, while words like peasant, slave, or serf were written in lower case. These titles stem from the time when power was hereditary, passed to male offspring—typographic conventions that are often still applied today. We see the same typographic discrimination in official and academic titles where the power of the capital still reigns: bachelor and master degrees (B.A., M.A., M.Sc., M.C.A.), law degrees (L.L.M.), and doctorates (Ph.D.)

→ Wim Crouwel, PTT Telefoongids 1977-78, the Netherlands, shown in actual size.  
Image: Museum voor Communicatie, Den Haag.

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## aalsmeer

(02977)

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### alarmnummers

- 2 44 44 **brandweer**  
bgg (020) 45 45 45
- 2 30 55 **ongevallen**  
2 30 55 **politie**
- 
- 2 30 92 **aalbers, p w a**, hellendaalstr 3  
2 21 63 **aalbersberg, p**, sportln 75,  
bloemist
- 2 73 81 **aalsmeer's grondstoombdr**,  
aalsmeerderwg 28, fa f  
vreeken & zn  
2 49 34 bgg  
2 10 06 **aalsmeer's glorie export**,  
legmeerdk 313/32e
- 2 44 54 **aalsmeer boekhuis**, zydstr 12  
2 41 17 fil ophelialn 102
- aalsmeerder courant, de**, zie  
randstad publicaties bv  
**aalsmeers textielhuis fa g  
dekker**, zydstr 67
- 2 12 87 **aalsmeerse  
hengelsportvereniging vislust**,  
clematisstr 6
- 2 03 15 **aalst, mr w e. van**, fuutln 42  
kant, amsterd (020) 44 74 41
- 2 33 12 **aalst, d j. van**, hellendaalstr 31
- 2 75 41 **aalst, p c. van**, waterhoenstr 3
- 2 26 21 **aalst, d a m. van**, wilhelminastr 1
- 2 11 89 **aandewiel, j j**, julianaIn 185
- 2 62 14 **aardappelhhandel jac klein**,  
ophelialn 124
- 2 17 15 **aardewijn, t**, mozartln 49  
**aardweg, i w. vd**,  
oosteinderwg 579, bloemenkw  
(020) 45 81 09
- 2 24 66 **aardweg, s th. vd**,  
wilhelminastr 38
- 2 78 24 **aarsen, g l**, machinewg 302
- 2 54 76 **aarsen, d a**, ophelialn 223
- 2 20 03 **aaij, dr c**, karekietstr 6
- 2 06 19 **abbo, a w**, lunaln 2
- 2 06 19 **abbo-tilstra, b**, lunaln 2,  
internist
- 2 76 99 **abc computercentrum**,  
hadleystr 1
- 2 21 96 **abels, r**, emmastr 4/c
- 2 75 74 **aberson bouwmat nv**,  
2 73 26 dir a p c van iperen  
dir d e c van kuijk (03461) 19 22
- 2 26 35 **aertssen, n a p**, constantynstr 10
- 2 41 78 **ago verzekeringen**,  
geraniumstr 20, expert f j  
blommestijn
- 2 02 27 **agtersloot, j j**, emmastr 5
- 2 38 55 **agtersloot, h**, oosteinderwg 491
- 2 75 98 **agtersloot, j j**, wilhelminastr 2
- 2 16 74 **akker, r. vd**, clusiusstr 12
- 2 22 81 **akkerboom, t**, locatellihof 25
- 2 00 98 **akse, a**, hortensialn 79
- 2 38 11 **aktiviteiten centrum lich  
gehandicaptten, st**, zwartewg
- 2 67 46 **al & valk bv**, legmeerdk 313,  
veiling vba
- 2 77 08 **alberda, j**, julianaIn 189,  
ler hts
- 2 46 68 **albers, fa gebr**, machinewg 133,  
betonb enz
- 2 11 09 **albers, p g a**, oosteinderwg 250
- 2 06 43 **albers, h**, rietgorstr 12
- 2 19 82 **albers, h j**, uranusstr 10,  
dir
- 2 69 38 **albert heijn nv**, raadhuispln 10
- 2 09 61 **alderden, p c**, aalsmeerderwg 35  
bloemist
- 2 69 09 **alderden, j**, aalsmeerderwg 41
- 2 34 49 **alderden, h**, aalsmeerderwg 61
- 2 43 59 **alderden, a**, aalsmeerderwg 78
- 2 61 73 **alderden & zn, fa wed j**,  
aalsmeerderwg 80
- 2 60 46 **alderden, j**, aalsmeerderwg 92,  
bloemist
- 2 58 50 **alderden wzn & zn, fa d**,  
aalsmeerderwg 267
- 2 04 92 **alderden, j**, v cleeffkd 7/a
- 2 50 52 **alderden, m c**, cyclamenstr 1/a
- 2 36 89 **alderden, m w**, mendelstr 39
- 2 42 51 **alderden jr & zn, fa m**,  
oosteinderwg 161, kwekers
- 2 61 28 **alderden czn, w**,  
oosteinderwg 265
- 2 63 81 **alderden, c**, oosteinderwg 325,  
bloemist
- 2 12 43 **alderden p czn, w**, ophelialn 235
- 2 00 32 **alderden, m**, sportln 25
- 2 47 00 **alderden jzn, d**, stationswg 22
- 2 49 07 **alderden, a**, stationswg 24
- 2 56 06 **alderden, c m**, stommeerkd 9
- 2 56 06 **alderden, h**, stommeerkd 9
- 2 71 21 **alderden wzn & zn, fa p c**,  
stommeerkd 58
- 2 72 95 **alderden, p c**, stommeerkd 61,  
bloemist

## Eliminating Capitals

In 1925, modernist designers wanted to rid the world of capitals. Bauhaus teacher László Moholy-Nagy argued capitals were associated with power, authority, and tradition.<sup>1</sup> For Bauhaus designers, lower case text used less space, so keyboards and typewriters could be designed more efficiently. Typographer Jan Tschichold wrote, 'Elimination of all capital letters; a form of writing and [type]setting that is recommended as a new script by all innovators'.<sup>3</sup>

The Bauhaus vision of a new and more efficient language inspired modernist designers from the 1950s to the 1980s to work only in lower case. Using all lower case became fashionable beyond its revolutionary origins. In the Netherlands, Wim Crouwel designed an all lower case phonebook for the Dutch state-owned phone company PTT. A radical choice, given that the phone book at that time was an often-used public record to find the names and addresses of all residents.

## Lower Case Citizens

The popularity of lower case among graphic designers was about efficiency, aesthetics, and breaking with tradition. At the same time lower case also became a way for artists and writers to challenge the structure of text. One of the most prominent examples is bell hooks, an author, activist, and feminist from the U.S. who chose to take her grandmother's name, spelled only with lower case letters. Breaking with the patriarchal convention in language, she said that the 'substance of her books, not who I am'<sup>4</sup> was what should be emphasised.

The ideals of the New Typography did not all come true. Capitals are still used and there is no indication we will get rid of them anytime soon. However, the cultural heritage of two alphabets remains visible everywhere. As Robert Bringhurst writes, 'In earlier days it was kings and deities whose agents demanded that their names be written in a larger size or set in a specially ornate typeface; now it is business firms and mass-market products demanding an extra helping of capitals, or a proprietary face, and poets pleading, by contrast, to be left entirely in the vernacular lower case'.<sup>5</sup>

→ Wim Crouwel, PTT Telefoongids 1977-78, the Netherlands, shown in actual size. Image: Museum voor Communicatie.

1. Rawsthorn, Alice, 'A Symbol Is Born', *The New York Times*, June 3, 2012.
2. Widdershoven, Thomas, 'Crouwel en onderkast', *Opening overzichtsstentoonstelling Wim Crouwel, Stedelijk Museum*, September 9, 2011.
3. Tschichold, Jan, *The New Typography*, University of California Press, 1998, 74-75.
4. Williams, Heather, 'bell hooks Speaks Up', *The Sandspur*, October 2, 2006.
5. Bringhurst, Robert, *Elements of Typographic Style*, Hartley & Marks 2004, 49.

|         |   |         |   |
|---------|---|---------|---|
| 2 77 34 | <b>andersen, j p m</b> , hortensialn 88   | 2 09 29 | <b>baarda, c</b> , marsstr 15   |
| 2 72 77 | <b>androtex</b> , beethovenln 88, won text  |         | radio veronique winkel (070) 63 00 02                                 |
| 2 23 06 | <b>mag, bennebroekerwrg 19</b> rijsenhout   | 2 54 49 | <b>baardse, p d</b> , aalsmeerderwrg 55                               |
| 2 73 50 | <b>anema, h</b> , begoniastr 87   | 2 04 03 | <b>baardse, k d</b> , v cleeffkd 9                                    |
| 2 58 10 | <b>anema, a</b> , hortensialn 30  | 2 05 51 | <b>baardse mzn &amp; zn's handelskw</b> nv, j, legmeerdk 313/b 8, vba |
| 2 27 34 | <b>anema, h</b> , zwartewg 7  |         |   |
| 2 76 71 | <b>angenent, a j l</b> , locatellihof 9   | 2 42 34 | <b>baardse dzn, fa d</b> , scarlattin 16, bloemist                    |
| 2 65 29 | <b>anker</b> , oosteinderwrg 273/a, geb kerk centr  | 2 46 31 | woonh j baardse   |
| 2 44 68 | bgg   | 2 58 43 | <b>baardse, d</b> , oosteinderwrg 159, bloemist                       |
| 2 73 15 | <b>ansems, j m m</b> , rameauln 16  | 2 45 19 | <b>baardse dzn, fa d</b> , scarlattin 16, bloemist                    |
| 2 52 26 | <b>antal, ir m</b> , handelstr 46   | 2 49 88 | <b>baardse, p</b> , sportln 46  |
| 2 44 76 | <b>apotheek groen</b> , v cleeffkd 2  | 2 28 87 | <b>baardse, j</b> , h de vriesstr 64                                  |
| 2 60 51 | <b>architecten en ingenieursbur</b> berghoef, zwartewg 3, hondius & lamers                  | 2 71 92 | <b>baars-klijn, w</b> , anjerln 23                                    |
|         |   | 2 07 35 | <b>baars, g j</b> , hadleystr 23                                      |
| 2 50 28 | <b>architectenbureau de heer</b> , legmeerdk 313  | 2 26 24 | <b>baars, p th</b> , sportln 50                                       |
| 2 41 95 | <b>architectenbureau j tromp</b> , linnaeusln 76  | 2 38 37 | <b>baars, p b</b> , h de vriesstr 96                                  |
| 2 26 89 | idem  | 2 53 20 | <b>baarse, a a</b> , aalsmeerderwrg 81                                |
| 2 19 54 | bgg   | 2 55 48 | <b>baarse, gebr a m</b> , aalsmeerderwrg 83                           |
|         | <b>architectenbureau a g dekker</b> , oosteinderwrg 568 (020) 45 14 57 woonh (020) 41 88 05 | 2 42 49 | <b>baarse, fa m d</b> , oosteinderwrg 111, kwekerij                   |
| 2 06 42 | <b>arend bv, technisch bureau vd</b> , f a wentstr 9  | 2 23 86 | <b>baarse, a a</b> , oosteinderwrg 276                                |
|         |   | 2 43 80 | <b>baarse garagebedrijf</b> , pontwrg 3                               |
| 2 37 46 | pieterse h j, serv mont   | 2 56 98 | bgg   |
| 2 60 83 | <b>arendse, aid</b> , aalsmeerderwrg 128  | 2 54 28 | <b>baarse, d</b> , valvdinhof 27, assur ag                            |
| 2 51 95 | <b>arendse, h</b> , aalsmeerderwrg 132  | 2 45 62 | <b>baarsen, k</b> , helling 12, slijt en lim fabr                     |
| 2 60 73 | <b>arendse, adr</b> , aalsmeerderwrg 134  | 2 57 78 | bgg   |
| 2 62 10 | <b>arendse, a</b> , aalsmeerderwrg 138  | 2 76 35 | <b>baarsen, f</b> , kerkwrg 25/a                                      |
| 2 55 11 | <b>arendse, e</b> , aalsmeerderwrg 140, telef distr a dam                                   | 2 47 78 | <b>baarsen dzn bv, joh</b> , machinewg 288, bloemenhdl                |
|         | <b>arendse, k</b> , legmeerdk 220/a, bloemist kwekerij (020) 45 01 06                       | 2 47 78 | idem b baarsen  |
| 2 00 97 | <b>arian mode</b> , v cleeffkd 13   | 2 56 74 | <b>baarsen, joh</b> , oosteinderwrg 109, multi flora                  |
|         | <b>ariëns, a j</b> , oosteinderwrg 563 (020) 45 81 57                                       | 2 59 98 | <b>baarsen, j p</b> , oosteinderwrg 121/d                             |
| 2 43 21 | <b>arkesteijn, j s</b> , dorpsstr 15, dir   | 2 52 40 | <b>baarsen, k</b> , ophelialn 178/a                                   |
| 2 41 13 | <b>arnold bik, dr ir r</b> , j p thysseIn 29  | 2 57 78 | <b>baarsen, k</b> , rozenstr 2  |
| 2 78 03 | <b>aronson, h l n</b> , rameauln 24   | 2 43 62 | <b>baarsen jr, joh</b> , j p thysseIn 23, bloemengroothdl             |
| 2 64 74 | <b>art floral</b> , oosteinderwrg 452, j atema  | 2 13 08 | idem legmeerdk 313  |
| 2 46 18 | <b>aseptafabriek delft</b> , oosteinderwrg 259 bgg (020) 47 07 18                           | 2 62 83 | <b>baartman, h</b> , azaleastr 10                                     |
| 2 38 45 | <b>aslender, i</b> , freesialn 6  | 2 72 35 | <b>baas, j</b> , wilhelminastr 42, chauff                             |
| 2 43 28 | <b>asperen-eveleens, mw m. van</b> , uiterwrg 399   | 2 08 82 | <b>baby speciaalzaak welcome</b> , oosteinderwrg 249                  |
| 2 52 93 | <b>assink, h p</b> , fuuth 32   | 2 24 83 | woonh b broeren bgg (020) 72 74 64                                    |
| 2 65 23 | <b>assurantie- en admin kant p w</b>  | 2 72 59 | <b>bader, c v m</b> , ophelialn 126, groent hdl                       |
|         |   | 2 20 44 | <b>bader, n g</b> , rietgorstr 33                                     |