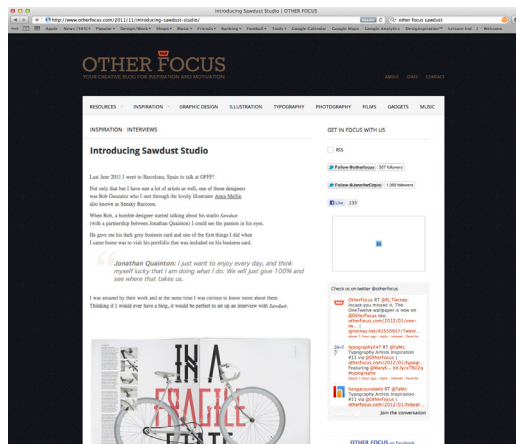




## Interview with Other Focus By Jennifer Cirpici

2010



### Can you introduce sawdust to us? What do you guys stand for?

**Rob:** We are Jonathan Quainton and Rob Gonzalez. We are graphic designers. We aspire to produce, and are attracted to, interesting type, form and composition. We admire design that breaks free from convention but has value on a commercial platform. There is so much outstanding graphic design being produced, however, much of it ticks similar boxes and adheres to familiar conformities — taking nothing away, it's not easy to produce design like this — but we're fascinated by how "less conventional" graphic design can serve clients commercially through, subtly, sophistication, bravery, boldness ... not necessarily all at the same time or in that order mind.

**Jon:** The aim was simple at the time — to build a design studio where we would have ultimate control over the work and to steer our own destinies. Although this is easier said than done, you can't just jump onto the scene and have everyone knocking on your door wanting experimental work that hasn't been created yet. Most people would say that we are specialists in minimal design, which might be fair, but this is not always the case. Our roots lie very much in the form and function of type and graphics, not just in a minimalist approach.

### Very interested where the name 'sawdust' actually comes from?

**Rob:** We liked the way it denotes craftsmanship. Sawdust is the by-product of a material from which something is being crafted, moulded and formed — a creation from somebody's imagination. We like to think of sawdust (our practice) as the by-product of our design output.

**Jon:** Sawdust fitted in with certain criteria that we felt were important not only to us but as a company. A short name, edgy, memorable and unusual.

Not only did we feel that the name suited our work it's that we could present ourselves with an element of intrigue too. A lot of people ask us about it in interviews but it doesn't really matter what you're called, it's the work you do that makes a lasting impression.

### What was it like to begin an agency?

**Rob:** The adrenaline and excitement of setting up by yourself is both a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, it's thrilling — a new lease of life and a whirlwind of energy that goes with. On the other, the thrill can mask the harsh realities of how demanding it is to run a design practice as an efficient and sustainable business. The truth is it's different for everybody but in our experience the highs far out way the lows — whilst we're enjoying what we do and clients are paying for it ... well, we'll just keep going.

**Jon:** Like jumping into a shark infested waters with raw meat strapped to your waist then told to swim to shore.

**Rob:** With little more than a wacom pen to protect you ...

### And what are the do's and don'ts in starting an agency? What should you absolutely keep in mind beforehand?

**Jon:** If you have no previous experience of running a company then you will need to be prepared to make a lot of mistakes, as we did at first, but that is part and parcel of it. It's not just about avoiding problems it's how you tackle them when they arrive, which they will quite frequently. One important thing is if you're going into business with someone else, make sure that you are going to enjoy their company and you can put your trust in them.

**Rob:** There's no definitive list for this, everybody's circumstances will be different based on age, experience, contacts, personal responsibilities and so on. We started out fairly young (Jon 23, and I was 25) which had pros and cons. We didn't entirely know what sort of animal we wanted to be, we didn't have many contacts and we didn't have a lot of money behind us. On the flip side, we didn't have families to support, we didn't have mortgages, we could live on beans on toast for months at a time and we had energy and drive in abundance.

In my personal experience I believe there are two fundamental components required to running a design practice that you'll be deeply proud of and happy to run, day in and day out. They have equal importance and rely upon one another — the first is acquiring work, arguably this is the easier of the two — it's not easy — easier. The second is design integrity — believing in your morals and fighting the good fight for what you believe to be good design, even when others disagree. If you can find a balance between these two then, I believe, you'll be happiest in the long term.

### We see lots of interesting clients and collaborations with different agencies. How did you guys get in touch with them?

**Rob:** It's simply a case of contacting people we'd like to work with when the job is right. We also welcome people sending us their portfolios and also having artists and designers pop in to take us through their work now and then (when we're not super busy).

**Jon:** Most of the time work has come through contacts that we know or have acquired along the way and also through our online presence. We spend a great deal of our time in the studio to produce work that we hope will attract more.



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**There's a lot of quality typography artwork, can you explain us the progress into making one?**

**Jon:** Essentially we try and produce type that works in harmony with the message it's communicating. The balance of the message and the artwork is paramount to the success of the piece.

**Rob:** It's quite a formulaic / modular process creating custom type, we've found that once you've developed an interesting character the other letterforms can follow a distinct set of rules.

There's sometimes a temptation to force original characteristics into each letter but you shouldn't feel compelled to do this — if you're creating an entire alphabet, some of the letters can be incredibly simple, especially if others are more complex and characterful.

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**What's your favourite project so far and why?**

**Rob:** I'm proud of our custom type created for the fabrice lig album. When we've showed it to people in the past, you can see it often goes straight over their heads — just a modular set of shapes arranged in an interesting way — but when we explain it's actually type spelling the album title it tends to blow their minds, which is nice.

**Jon:** I would have to agree, the depth with this piece is immense and to have that amount of trust to produce what we did from the music artist is a rare thing. This has gone on to inspire other pieces of our work as we like to evolve ideas from project to project, not to drop them completely. Credit to fine art recordings too for making that piece possible.

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**Any new projects coming up you're willing to share?**

**Rob:** We've got a very exciting project coming up for a design industry magazine, which we can't tell you the name of unfortunately. We're very much looking forward to getting started on that.

**Jon:** My lips are sealed.

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**Where do you think sawdust would be in 10 years time?**

**Rob:** That is always such a difficult question to answer. In all honesty, we're just taking one day at a time, trying to keep the quality of our design work as high as we can. We would love to see some of our work in motion in the future so who knows, perhaps that will start to happen. There's a smashing animation / motion / creative studio opposite us called The Found Collective, who we hope might end up working with us on a project one day.

**Jon:** If your talking location then, i don't think we are planning any major moves as we are enjoying it in east london — all but the weather. In terms of work then who knows, it's best not to set your sights too high in this industry when there are just two of you. I just want to enjoy every day, and think myself lucky that i am doing what i do. We will just give 100% and see where that takes us.

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**We would like to thank you for taking the time in this interview! Anything you would like to say as well?**

**Rob:** Nope, just thanks for interviewing us and we look forward to more rich content on the site.