

Poiesis and purpose: lessons in making

Printing technologies come and go as new methods override past practices, yet letterpress persists within our educational contexts. In terms of design education the rationale for this fixture has been mostly framed in haptic pedagogy. As Anthony Froshaug recognized back in 1946 there was a benefit to the typographic training of a designer in handling type, which bridged the experience of design as specification with the reality of print production.¹ Convinced of its educational potential Froshaug established an early precedent for design-led letterpress tuition, inviting Edward Wright to run evening classes at the Central School from 1952–56. Within the post-digital environment, screen-based design for printed outcomes similarly operates as a form of specification with what David Jury describes as, the ‘implicit knowledge gained by handling and moving real things around’, still helping to inform awareness of production.² However, as Eric Kindel has noted, contemporary interest in letterpress is also driven by a renewed valuation of the materiality of print itself and its offer of, ‘a counterweight to the disembodied digital form of much present-day typography and graphic communication.’³

Yet, there are potential dangers in foregrounding materiality in the rationale for maintaining letterpress in teaching and learning at a time when design education faces new challenges and transitions. What Meredith Davis has identified as ‘the artifact-driven goal of design’ is being held to account by critics such as Bridgeman, for its contribution to the ‘global machinery of production and consumption’ and its failure to be able to adequately respond to the resulting complex and uncertain problems that society now faces.⁴ In response, a new pedagogic climate is emerging which favours the strategic design of immaterial services over material products.⁵ Letterpress sits here precariously. The practical logic of ‘the bottom line’ is often hard to negotiate and the education of a strategic thinker is cheaper than that of the materials-based practitioner. Further, exaggerations of materiality and the handmade as evidence of craft have become something of a trope in letterpress, and, as Rafael Cardozo has recognized, the identification of, ‘imperfections and deviations ... as legitimating characteristics’ leads only to the danger of being, ‘cornered into a position of terminal nostalgia.’⁶

What is needed are ways of thinking about the processural experience of letterpress that recognize the potential for a maker-intelligence which combines the material and the conceptual through a reconnection of head with hand. Such an approach to thinking-through-making or what A.Telier describes as ‘situated doing’ move beyond production-centred models, and as Martina Margetts explains, ‘The plan of a design alters in its doing or, conversely, the beginning of making with the hands enables a plan to evolve.’⁷ Or as Robin Fior perhaps best expresses it – ‘The secret of *poesis* is in the making’.⁸

¹ R. Kinross, *Anthony Froshaug. Documents of a life*, 2000: Hyphen Press, p.70.

² D. Jury, *Reinventing print*, 2018: Bloomsbury, p. 172.

³ E. Kindel, ‘Letterpress: possibilities & practice’, 16 March 2018

<<http://typography.network/2018/03/16/letterpress-possibilities-practice/>>

⁴ M. Davis, “‘Normal science’ and the changing practices of design and design education’ in *Visible Language* 50.1, April 2016; Bridgman (2002), in Bailey *Towards a critical faculty*, Parsons School of Design, New School, NY Winter 2006/7.

⁵ Findeli, for example, argues for an attitude to design that would reject the, ‘product as work-of-art, heroic gesture, genius mentality and fetishism of the artifact’ in favour of an approach more interested in the human context of the design “problem” and which would emphasize the design of immaterial services (such as hospital or school bureaucracies) rather than material products. In Bailey, *Towards a critical faculty*, Parsons School of Design, New School, NY Winter 2006/7.

⁶ R.Cardoso, ‘Craft versus design: moving beyond a tired dichotomy’ in *The craft reader* (ed. G. Adamson), 2010: Berg, p. 327.

⁷ A.Telier (Binder, De Michelis, Ehn *et al*), *Design things*, MIT: 2011, p.11: ‘Practice in this perspective is situated doing [...] An important characteristic of such situated doing, and of the knowing that is constructed and transformed in activity, is that it is open-ended’;

M. Margetts, ‘Actions not words’, in *The power of making* (ed. Daniel Charny), 2011: V&A, p.40.

⁸ R.Fior, ‘Recollections of designing and politics in London, 1957–1970’, *Typography Papers*, 8, 2008: Hyphen Press, p.140.

It is an approach to making that Daniel Charry argues has been devalued by educational institutions, even though it is exactly this kind of applied thinking that he argues should be a part of our future.⁹ It is easy to see why in the emergent maker-cultures which are bridging analogue-digital binaries, exploring hacking and open-source hybridities, and opening out what Ele Carpenter has enthusiastically welcomed as, 'a space for experimentation and collaboration production' and for, 'finding innovative ways to use, reuse and recycle the technologies and materials that we already have'.¹⁰ It is in this spirit that the industrial craft heritage of letterpress is being re-interrogated for a digital generation. A workshop for digital designers run by the Oficina Tipográfica in São Paulo focuses on the training benefits of surfacing the continual recalibration of design intentions that the limitations of letterpress can necessitate.¹¹ And in classes for students at Virginia Commonwealth University (2014) Dafi Kuhne explored alternative process workflows through the repurposing of unexpected technologies, at their grandest scale in the use of a steam roller more generally used for levelling roads than a printing surface. However, as Rose Gridneff and Alexander Cooper observed of the contemporary interest in re-interrogating letterpress back in 2010, 'Print does not need to be the end result.'¹² Rather as they had explored in the exhibition *The changing face of letterpress* the previous year, letterpress could be a medium for 'igniting process-driven work' and, as such, of pedagogic value beyond the usual concerns with print-centred knowledge-building or typographic understanding.¹³

While necessary and progressive, this open-boundaried outlook serves as a reminder of the need to re-evaluate past practices free from the lens of nostalgia, which has done so much to muddy articulations of letterpress practice and history. Wright's original design-oriented classes from the 1950s followed a similar 'cross-category drive' in terms of intended participants.¹⁴ And while anchored in material experimentation, the central preoccupation in Wright's letterpress classes was with the testing of communication and meaning at a much broader level in much the same way as contemporary making, as elaborated by Carpenter, is concerned with gaining an in-depth understanding of how things actually work.¹⁵

Within contemporary making, then, the craft competences of the industrial heritage of letterpress have an ongoing role to play, not least because there are worryingly few still around with formal training and an in-depth technical understanding of how many of the machines in our letterpress spaces function. Here it is important to acknowledge the possibilities to allow new identities around competences to emerge. It is a space Ane Thon Knutsen has sought to explore through her letterpress practice, realizing that in spite of having her technical abilities validated in a trade qualification, that, 'The industrial history is not mine to appropriate. I acknowledged that my place in history, as a female self-taught printer from the other side of the digital revolution, was in fact another.'¹⁶ Further, any ambition to preserve specialist practice should contribute to a new, and as Neil Cummings describes, 'generous collective intelligence'.¹⁷ This is aggregate knowledge-building of specialism which seeks to enthusiastically receive and not to control, with the intention of overcoming the protective barriers that a sense of specialism, especially one that is threatened, can all-too-quickly establish. Encouragingly, there is evidence of this in the operation of new maker-networks, including letterpress communities,

⁹ D. Charny, 'Thinking of making' in *The power of making* 2011: V&A, p.7.

¹⁰ E. Carpenter, 'Social making' in *The power of making* (ed. Daniel Charny), 2011: V&A, p.51

¹¹ See C. Dixon, 'São Paulo: a lesson in letterpress', *Matrix: a review for printers and bibliophiles* (28). 2009: Whittington Press

¹² In J. Pallister, 'Press Association' in *Crafts*, no.222, Jan/February 2010, p.38

¹³ Quotation taken from the exhibition poster. 2009: London College of Communication

¹⁴ R. Kinross, 'Letters in the city', *Eye*, no.10, 1993: Wordsearch, p.69

¹⁵ Ann Pillar is insightful in how Wright advances beyond the scope of existing teaching orthodoxies in both: A.Pillar, PhD thesis, *Edward Wright (1912–1988) artist, designer, teacher*, 2013, p.233 and A.Pillar, *Pop art and design* (eds. A. Massey and A. Seago), 2017: Bloomsbury, p. 137. Also Carpenter, 'Social making', p.51.

¹⁶ A.Thon Knutsen, from an online post about exhibition 'Ane Thon Knutsen 22.01.19 – 27.01.19' < <https://kunstnerneshus.no/en/exhibitions/ane-thon-knutsen> >

¹⁷ N. Cummings, 'Socialised affection' in David Blamey, *Specialism*, 2016: Occasional Table, pp.40–1

through peer-to-peer skill-sharing and making the process public, often using social media.¹⁸ The digital again fuses with analogue as online technologies support craft-making and the desire of makers to connect with others through their making. And as Rosy Greenless & Mark Jones have observed, ‘the desire to make together in a social context is growing ever stronger.’¹⁹

This concern with making as a means of connecting with others is set out by Matthew Crawford as a fundamental characteristic of craft, in which, ‘Skilled practices serve as an anchor to the world beyond one’s head – a point of triangulation with objects and other people’.²⁰ It is all the more emphatic in letterpress, which, anchored in communication and through its concretization of language, offers particular opportunities to connect people and ideas.²¹ This is especially true when it is remembered that a fundamental of the industrial heritage of letterpress was the repeat copy, and not the individual artisanal outpouring of what Norman Potter has skewered as, ‘peasant-revival knick-knacks for middle-class weekenders.’²²

The immediacy of access to a printing press and modest scale of production that letterpress affords has historically enabled printers and designers to engage in local forms of social and political activism. Desmond Jeffery and Robin Fior both identified a potential for political resistance in their use of letterpress during the 1960s and into the 70s. More recently the Argentinian designer Federico Cimatti has, under the imprint Prensa La Libertad, activated a press for the dissemination of messages of protest within his local community. In Spain too, an economic crisis prompted Catalan collective L’Automàtica to explore resourceful ways to continue their creative work. They took on a failing letterpress workshop, keeping the elderly printer on to train them, while also exploring the potential of the press to activate and engage their local community in helping to redress the dire political context. The idea of utilizing letterpress to directly equip a community has also been a goal of Atêlie Acaia, an educational initiative in São Paulo that invested in a second-hand printing press for a group of under-privileged teenagers living in the direst of circumstances. Through the production of books and posters for local clinics and services their ideas are literally transformed into solid and real pieces of communication, improving literacy skills and helping to prove to themselves and the wider community that they have something worthwhile to say.

Such work falls into a tradition identified by Robin Kinross of, ‘making it new with what is to hand’, and in which can surely be found a positive message for design education in an era of pandemic lockdown and faced with climate emergency.²³ Pandemic is also perhaps a moment to re-evaluate the value of making simply in relation to the well-being of our students. Pedagogically I have always felt such arguments to be lacking in rigour and vulnerable to accusations of unaffordable indulgence. Yet, it was to the stability of letterpress and the pleasure of making things by hand that Juliet Shen’s students turned when faced with the uncertainty of the dot.com collapse.²⁴ The uncertainty generated by our current situation renders such findings more prescient than we could have previously imagined. After all, as Jan van Toorn has argued, a

¹⁸ As Ele Carpenter describes, ‘Open-source digital-analogue hybridity is all about craft articulated through the language of technology: reverse-engineering to find out how things work, making your own tools, making the process public, learning through peer-to-peer skill-sharing.’ Carpenter, ‘Social making’, p.49

¹⁹ R. Greenless and M. Jones, from the foreword to *The power of making* (ed. Daniel Charry), 2011: V&A, p.5

²⁰ M. Crawford, *The world beyond your head*, 2015: Penguin, p.x

²¹ This idea comes from a presentation given by Jono Lewarne and Charlotte Hetherington on the letterpress work of Desmond Jeffery in which they discuss, ‘... a dexterity of practice, not just with the solid letterforms with which he printed, but with the relationships between object and space and, more importantly, people and ideas.’ J. Lewarne and C. Hetherington, ‘Desmond Jeffery, Type and space’, presentation given at *Something to say*, held on 9 November 2012, St Bride Library, London.

²² N. Potter, *What is a designer*, 1989: Hyphen, p.79

²³ Kinross, ‘Letters in the city’, p.68

²⁴ J. Shen, *Resurrection of a Reliance*, p.2.

liberating pedagogy is one aligned with recovering forms of thinking and making useful, 'in the search for conditions that allow for a more truly human existence.'²⁵

²⁵ J. van Toorn, 'Deschooling and learning in design education', in *User-centred graphic design: mass communication and social change* by J. Frascara *et al.* 1997: Taylor & Francis, p.127