The Art of Printed Words:
An Auto-Ethnography

by

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Class of 2014

An essay submitted to the
faculty of Wesleyan University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts
with Departmental Honors in Anthropology

Middletown, Connecticut

April, 2014
1. An Anthropology Senior Essay and an Art Studio Thesis

In the spring of 2014, I will be putting up an art show in Wesleyan’s Zilkha Gallery as part of my studio art honors thesis. All studio art seniors are required to put on a formal exhibition, which for me was both an exciting and overwhelming prospect. In its original conception, this senior essay in anthropology, my second major, was intended as a quasi-supplemental piece for my thesis show. I saw the senior essay as a potential vehicle to express the creative objectives for my studio art thesis—a vehicle for both comprehending and articulating aspects of the art production experience that often go unexamined. I envisioned it as an auto-ethnography, which—loosely defined—is a piece of ethnographic writing in which the researcher interprets his/her own experiences in a particular social world in order to comprehend their larger, cultural import. But if this essay began as a loosely structured piece that attempted to examine my creative process during the initial phases of my thesis, the research and writing of the essay soon began to inform my thesis work, conjunctively expanding it in scope and ultimately developing side by side my thesis into a piece that both anthropologically investigates the objects and places involved in my art production process as well as infuses an anthropological point of view into my thesis work.

Because of this unexpected mutual influence, a brief introduction to my thesis is necessary: Although it is formally classified as an exhibition in typography—my
concentration within the art major—my show has transformed into a performance aimed at drawing attention to art production and exhibition as anthropological processes and at analyzing changes in the experience of time within these processes by reflecting on how social media platforms have altered the way in which we produce and consume language. Since its conception, my thesis has been primarily driven by my fascination with the machine used in the conventional practice of typography. Before advancing any further, I want to define a few typography terms. In its proper definition, the term “letterpress” refers to a method—the physical process of pressing letters into paper (Maravelas 4). The machine used in this process is called a letterpress printing press. A printing press, then, is any mechanism that uses type, blocks, or plates to print on paper. Printing presses are most commonly used by printmakers. Letterpress printing presses refer to a specific type of printing press that was made with the intention of solely printing text. Furthermore, letterpress printing presses all use the same printing method—relief printing—that consists of impressing paper down onto raised, inked surfaces. In most instances, the inked surface is comprised of movable type. Movable type refers to the metal or wooden sets of individual letters that can be composed and recomposed together and used to print text; this is the crux of the letterpress process. For the purposes of this essay, a letterpress printing press will be referred to as a “press” and will be conceived of as used only for the printing of text. Lastly, in the conventional terminology of typography, “printer” is used to refer to the person who operates a press; unlike contemporary usage in digital technology, “printer” is never used to describe a machine.

Originally, I wanted to put up an exhibition that would reveal what I consider to be the neglected physical beauty of presses and demonstrate how letterpress printing
forces printers to painstakingly consider and thus revere every word that they produce. Over the course of the fall, however, my thesis evolved from a project based solely around the mechanism of printing into a larger commentary on the change in how words and, more generally, language is produced, conceived, and projected in our digitally driven society. During my research, I became very interested in the drastic changes brought about by social media and its massive role in shaping how we use and consider language. In particular, I found myself gravitating towards Twitter due to its complexity as a ubiquitous platform for quick, easy messages. I considered Tweets (the messages sent via Twitter) as the perfect foil through which to examine the letterpress process in order to highlight precisely what I find to be the press’s enthralling qualities.

For my show in the spring semester, I plan to bring one of Wesleyan’s presses into the gallery space and then proceed to “live-tweet” the event of my own exhibition on the letterpress. As defined by the Twitter Developers, “live-tweeting” is to “engage on Twitter for a continuous period of time—anywhere from 20 minutes to a few hours—with a sequence of focused Tweets. The focus can be a big live event that everybody's paying attention to (e.g. a TV show or an award show) or it can be an event you create yourself” (Twitter.com). When Twitter users live-tweet, they do so on their Smartphone (typically an iPhone). Smartphones allow people to comment on a live event and disseminate it in a matter of seconds. In contrast to this seemingly immediate form of communication technology, I will be typesetting and printing tweets on my letterpress, which is a slow, physically involved, and protracted process. The irony will lie both in the speed of the action and the tactility of the product. By bringing the letterpress into the gallery space and printing during the exhibition, my show will become an interactive performance of sorts.
To more accurately capture the technological dichotomy and expand on the tensions produced by this juxtaposition of technologies, I also plan to record different digital sounds and amplify them through the letterpress during my performance. Whereas the letterpress emits distinctive sounds during the printing process, digital modes of communication (computers or Smartphones) produce enigmatic and clouded drones. By amplifying these often-unnoticed sounds within the gallery, the space will become infused with a perplexing industrial and digitized aura. Surrounding me during the performance will be long reams of white and translucent paper. Before the show, I will have printed hash tags “#” onto these streams of paper with the letterpress. Solely due to Twitter, the hash tag has become a charged symbol that has transcended far beyond its original value. By repeatedly printing the hash tags until they overlap and become obscured geometric forms, I hope to present not just an aesthetically intriguing pattern, but also a print that makes viewers question how this simple symbol has permeated our everyday language and promoted associative thinking outside of the Twitterverse (the Twitter community). As a performance and installation piece, my goal is to encourage visitors to consider how language has been shaped by these new platforms.

A caveat concerning the timelines of my thesis and essay projects must be noted. Since the due dates of the two projects do not align, and this essay must be completed three months prior to the actual performance of my thesis, the event that my essay research and writing worked towards was not the Zilkha Gallery exhibition but the Midyear Critique for studio art students, an interdisciplinary critique at the end of the fall semester where each studio art student presents his/her work and is then evaluated by a group of studio art professors. Whereas such critique in many art classes are the sole
mode of evaluation, the thesis Midyear Critique is really intended to be a chance for students to present their work and receive suggestions from professors in a variety of fields. For my project, I used the Midyear Critique as a test run for my performance. I was not able to transport the press to the location of the critique, so instead I performed in the print shop—Wesleyan’s workshop for typographers and printmakers. Prior to the performance, I put up my hashtag prints on the walls transforming the print shop into a space that would convey how I intended to also transform the gallery space during my show in the spring. My performance consisted of my setting the type for a single tweet: “OMG live tweeting the midyear #thesis.” I then printed it on the press and handed it out to the audience. I remained silent throughout the performance so that the only sounds were the noise of my movements (e.g. placing the type, locking up the furniture, etc.), the clamor of the press’s motor, and a muted digital noise playing from a set of speakers that I had placed inside the press. The performance was informative in ways that extended far beyond the comments and suggestions I received. The act of setting type in silence created an unexpected tension that—for many of the students and professors—was one of the most impactful effects of the performance. Later in the essay, I will reflect more on the critique as an enlightening event and delve into specific moments and reactions.

2. Artist as Ethnographer: the Artistic Process

My thesis began to evolve when, early in the fall, my perspective on my studio art thesis changed from that of an artist to that of an artist and an ethnographer. As an artist, I had been in contact with the objects and existed in the spaces of art production for a
few years. However, it was not until I began to analyze the social life of these objects and spaces ethnographically that I began to perceive them differently. The objects and the space of the print shop fascinated me. But why? What exactly was their allure? What drew me so forcefully to them? Answers to these questions began to emerge only after I adopted the artist-as-ethnographer stance, which compelled me to approach every aspect of my thesis in a more critical manner, spawning a deeper understanding of all the elements involved in my process of production as an artist.

This switch in perspective, however, wasn’t without its challenges. As my viewpoint acquired an increasingly ethnographic character, my creative process, at times, became complicated by what felt like extraneous concerns. In certain instances, when printing, I became so fixated on the process that I would lose all concern for the ordered and linear quality of the product—which was an uncharacteristic change. I have always been attracted to the notion of elegance in simplicity, and my artwork has tended to express this affinity. My work in typography commonly focuses on the formal beauty of letterforms when characters are isolated and presented in unexpected fashions. Consequently, as I began to push the press to produce text in ways that it was intended for, my artwork lost the linear and organized value that I usually took most interest in. This was not necessarily a negative effect, but as work produced within a practice centered on precision and control, I began to question the typographic value of my prints. At the same time, I began to notice how I had became less concerned with the production of physical pieces of artwork and started gravitating towards literature on art movements centered on looking at artists and art in itself as subjects (e.g. Process and Relational Art). In retrospect, the gradual change in focus illuminates how influential this
anthropological perspective was in shaping the trajectory of what I considered to be my “style” of artwork.

My interests as an ethnographer also guided my decision to live-tweet my exhibition. At the beginning of the fall, whenever I would try to visualize my thesis I would hazily envision a room that contained some variety of letterpress printed prints. Never did I consider the possibility of actually performing during my thesis. But as I continued to write and think about what I found most anthropologically interesting about my practice, I began to recognize how central were the letterpress machine, as the art-making object, and the process of print making to my project. Would an exhibit of only prints do justice to the larger historical and material dimensions of letterpress production informing my practice? The potential of conducting a performance piece at the gallery thus arose, one that would draw attention to the links between art, materiality, history, and language, and in the process disrupting assumptions about the gallery space as a mere medium of art presentation. By engaging in art production in the gallery space as part of the piece, I would become an agent within the show. As I moved around and operated the press, the room would transform from a static space of display and art consumption into a kinetic environment of art production. As a charged element of the show, I would have the ability to use my body as a tool for experimentation as well as communication with the audience. Because, ethnographically, I am most interested in the potential effects of incorporating interactive components into the show, I would maintain a dual-perspective, both performative and interactive, through the use of live-tweeting. Live-tweeting is a phenomenon centered on temporality and spatiality. By broadcasting one’s tweets as well as the immediate responses to them regarding an event that one is currently attending, live-tweeters virtually bridge place and time divides.
through their language. Even though live-tweeting transpires via carried devices—an inherently mediated form of interaction—as the frequency of the messages being sent and received increases to near immediacy, tweeters commonly begin to perceive the interaction as an unmediated experience. This phenomenon occurs through a process called “telepresence,” defined as the “perceptual illusion of nonmediation,” and is used to understand the perception of technology users who feel as though they are present and not experiencing a mediated form of interaction (Murthy 8). As an ethnographer, I have always been fascinated by how people produce places through physical interactions with a space and with each other. The temporal and interactive nature of live-tweeting will allow my performance to become an event that examines how the virtuality of these forms of language works to simultaneously promote and prohibit the construction of place.

3. Artist as Ethnographer: the Writing Process

As I became increasingly interested in performative elements for my thesis, my writing simultaneously also shifted in focus. My writing began as a collection of process notes—snippets of descriptive, observational, and self-reflective passages that I had jotted down while working in the print shop. These notes were mostly concerned with my relation to the prints I was producing. But as I began to rethink my thesis as a performance, my research and writing concerns switched from the products I would display to the places where I would produce them. Because I would be producing the work in front of the viewers, I began to analyze the process of production and how my body operates within these spaces. Therefore, my essay became less about my creative
process aimed at a particular stylistic intervention, and more about understanding and unpacking the allure that the spaces and objects of art production possess for me.

As an auto-ethnography, writing became a way for me to deconstruct what I can only refer to as the barriers surrounding my artwork. As a vehicle for communication, artwork has the unique ability to bypass language. By observing and writing about every aspect of my artwork, I placed language in between my work and myself. For many artists, this may be considered a limitation; however, for an artist/anthropologist, this occurrence is inevitable. During this period, my artwork and writing engaged in a reciprocal relationship of crosspollination, informing and influencing each other continuously. From this experience, I came to realize that the pieces of artwork that I was producing had never been my primary concern. It was the event of producing them that consumed me. This compelled me to produce highly transparent pieces of artwork—raw prints that exposed every step of the process. During this period, language, and more specifically the production of the written word, increasingly became ethnographic objects.

I have structured the essay into three sections: “Object,” “Place,” and “Body.” Each section offers a glimpse of how I have approached and investigated these different elements of my thesis as well as their interrelationships. Within “Object,” I examine the enigmatic qualities of the press and how they have shaped the way in which I perceive the machine. In “Place” I delve into how I occupy and experience the workshop where I produce my artwork and conceptualize the gallery where I will present it in the spring as “places” versus “spaces.” Finally, in “Body,” I look at how the movements of my body and the bodies of others within these places of production can be used as tools for understanding how we imbue the places with distinctive meanings.
1. The Press as an Extension of Self

Is the letterpress just a machine, a tool for production? I want to argue that, for the printer, the letterpress is an extension of self. The mechanics of the press reveal this relationship. Before proceeding, I must first define the type of press that I operate on. There are three main models of letterpress printing presses, with a number of smaller variations within them. The first is a rotary letterpress, which is mostly used in commercial printing due to its ability to efficiently produce a high quantity of prints. The second is a platen-type press, used mostly for quick, smaller-scale projects. The third is a flatbed cylinder press, the slowest model, which uses either a horizontal or vertical bed to lock up the type and a large cylinder to roll the paper over it. The physicality involved with operating a press varies considerably with its model and size. With most presses, the period of heightened exertion is during the setup phase. Then, once all has been prepared, the actual printing requires minimal effort. If a press is an automatic model then it requires virtually no interaction while printing. If it is a hand-fed press, then the extent to which a printer must exert physical effort to produce prints is primarily based on the size of the machine. The Wesleyan press that I operate is a hand-fed horizontal flatbed cylinder press, made by the company Vandercook Proof Presses as an oversized model. The rollers in this oversized model admittedly require far more strength to turn than most presses. But I favor this type of press for exactly that reason. Besides the
obvious advantages in terms of greater dimensions for printing, the larger sized press heightens the printer’s awareness of the physicality of printing—something that imbues it with anthropological value. The term “press,” then, will heretofore refer only to this over-sized model that I have become accustomed to.

In order to operate the press, I don’t just use my hands. I secure the paper onto the rollers, step on a pedal to raise the grippers, feed the paper underneath, and then release the pedal so that the clamps fasten down correctly. Thus, my extremities extend beyond my hands and feet, assuming the chief functions of the press. While my eyes focus on the paper, my hands arrange and my feet press. A continuous line runs through my body, connecting me to the machine. At this moment, my body no longer works like an independent entity—it has become a fundamental piece of the press. If I cease to exist as the operator, then I have become a component.

The next step, following the paper feeding, is the act of turning the rollers, the crux of letterpress printing. By turning the rollers, the paper comes into contact with the inked type and becomes a printed page. Along with being the pinnacle procedurally, it is also arguably the most physically exhaustive step. Because printing requires a delicate touch, my eyes are usually transfixed on the tips of my fingers as I am forced to become acutely aware of how my hand interacts with the objects that I am touching. But during this phase, a soft touch and delicacy bear no significance on the print: The only factor is the speed in which I turn the rollers. Because of this, when I am turning the rollers, I no longer conceive of my arm as ending at my hand; instead, it extends through the crank into the large metal cylinder that claps down on the precious paper. The roller is my arm and the metal grippers my clenched fingers. As the finer movements in my hand lose significance, I focus on the larger muscular motions of my upper body. The crank
that connects to the rollers operates in a similar way to the hand crank on a standard pencil sharpener: by turning the crank clockwise in a circular fashion, the rollers spin. But whereas turning a pencil sharpener involves using one’s wrist, turning the press’s rollers involves using one’s entire arm and shoulder. Rollers are not light. By nature, they have to be heavy so that they can supply sufficient downward pressure onto the type. Due to the way in which they spin, controlling the rollers is never considered an effortless task, even with smaller presses. Whereas pencil sharpener rollers gyrate in place, the press’ rollers gyrate while moving horizontally down the bed at a calculated length so that the paper hits the block of type at the desired position. Because of this, turning the rollers is not a static action. While turning the crank, I must walk down the press so as to maintain control of the rollers. In order to not trip, I face the press and side shuffle down as I spin the crank, moving in direct correlation with the press. During this step, I am never looking at my hand. As my feet shuffle, my eyes are fixed on the large spinning cylinders. After years of habitual and mindless spinning, my shoulder has come to know the weight of the cylinder’s core better than the weight of any backpack—a sort of bodily knowledge that bypasses intellectual processes.

What is this affinity between shoulder and cylinder, printer and machine? Does not the press become an extension of the printer and the printer an extension of the press only in a fetishistic fashion? The entry point of this rationale is my attraction for letterpress ink. Not all printers feel a connection with the ink that they use on their presses. Many will wear gloves while printing so that they can keep their hands clean; this type of ink will burrow in the skin and remain there for a long time. That said, a substantial number of practicing printers—including myself—intentionally neglect to wear gloves. Without the latex barrier, my hands inevitably become discolored and oily.
Even after meticulous scrubbing, my skin always retains remnants of the ink. By consciously refusing to take the precautionary measures to protect my skin, I encourage the machine to leave its mark on me in an almost fetishistic fashion. The connection manifests itself in my blackened cuticles and glossy calices, indexes of my devotion to and intimacy with the machine. The dangers associated with refusing to wear gloves make the act exclusionary, thus infusing the decision with even more potently transgressive allure. Instead of the machine becoming an extension of the printer, with its physical, dangerously intimate connections, don’t I slowly become an extension of the machine?

2. The Application of Marx

What if, following a Marxian logic, we were to conceive of the press as a machine driven by labor and analyze its relation to the human body in terms of preceding theories of labor and capital? Karl Marx’s theories concerning alienated labor, when applied to the examination of the printing process, illuminate certain unique and unforeseen aspects of the object’s mechanical nature. A German philosopher, economist and historian, Marx posited a wide array of theories concerning the progression of society: one of his central assumptions was the inevitable demise of capitalism and replacement by socialism. Marx saw capitalism as a system riddled with socioeconomic defects, in particular, the skewed relation that had arisen between labor and capital. Marx viewed labor within the capitalist system as a process that had become detrimentally external to workers (i.e. the actions of the workers were no longer his/her own). Thus, a dynamic arises in capitalist, industrial production—a system where the laborers no longer owns
Marx presents a radical stance on labor, arguing that within the capitalist system the laborer is estranged from his productive actions. His writings, however, address labor in relation to the dominant mode of production and never explicitly discuss the specific types of machines. Because Marx’s notions were centered upon stringently capitalist modes of production, the machines that he referred to were industrialized mechanisms associated with forms of strictly divided labor techniques. But, due to the inherently mechanical nature of the press, Marx may have viewed it as a similarly functioning object of labor to the machines that were involved in the forms of production that he was originally critiquing. His work on the alienation of labor, in fact, offers an interesting perspective on the relationship that can potentially be built between a single printer and his letterpress.

Marx was acutely aware of the intimate relationship between the worker and his/her production in pre-capitalist modes of production. In capitalism, things were different for the laborer. In 1844, Marx wrote that the political economy “conceal[ed] the estrangement inherent in the nature of labor by not considering the direct relationship between the worker (labor) and production” (Marx 20). The specialized machines of labor used within this political economy stifled the workers’ ability to maintain a sense of connectedness with what they produced. The actions that are performed during tasks of divided labor are simple, straightforward, and monotonous, and only give a fragmented sense of the production process. By nature, they have to be reduced to the simplest
action so that anyone can learn and perform them. These machines of labor are built so that a worker can perform with an easy physical maneuver that will alter a single portion of the product. If these machines of labor can be defined by requiring repetitive, physical exertion to operate, then the press can essentially be understood as a machine of labor. However, due to its arcane nature and the meticulous demands it imposes on the operator, attempting to view the press as a machine built for divided labor quickly becomes problematic.

The press is built to produce a printed page. The steps that go into producing this page can be categorized accordingly: composition, locking-up, and printing. Instead of having three separate workers execute the tasks, a single printer performs each step. The person who pulls each individual letter from the tray is the same person who rolls the paper over the locked-up type. Because the printer is involved in every step of the process, the product—the printed page—can no longer be conceived of as an object foreign to the printer, alienated from him/her. From the ink to the type, every aspect that went into the production of the page came into contact with the operator of the press. In this sense, the printer possesses supreme agency within the process and the product bears all his/her marks. Even when the printer has not authored the set text, he/she remains firmly connected to the product.

This single printer method is used in the majority of workshops. In smaller shops, dividing labor is always the wrong choice economically. But the primary reason for this method is that outside parties who have chosen to have their product printed on the press are usually driven by a desire to give the printer ultimate control. The way to maximize control of a product is to limit the number of people working on it. When a single printer performs every task, the printer evidently will feel an intense connection
with the prints. They are her prints. However, in some large-scale workshops, or for specific time-sensitive projects, these steps do in fact become divided.

In the Wesleyan print shop, there are many instances when more than one person will print on the Vandercook press. For many of my own projects requiring a speedy turnaround, I have enlisted the help of others to expedite the process. In other instances, I have been the one enlisted and have helped by working either as the compositor or the person locking-up. Even in these instances of divided labor when printing becomes specialized, we all maintain a strong connection with the pages we produce. This counterintuitive phenomenon reveals intriguing characteristics concerning the type of labor that is involved with letterpress printing.

Many of the tasks that go into a divided labor process in industrialized settings are hidden within the final product (e.g. stitching, assembling, etc). Conversely, in letterpress printing, each of the three main steps dictates an extremely important aspect of the final product, its traces visible on it. The compositor handles every single piece of type, placing each one in order onto a composing stick that he/she holds in his/her hand. The person locking-up takes this block of type and cautiously slides it onto the bed. Then, like completing a puzzle, he/she surrounds the block with wooden furniture until it becomes completely secured. Finally, after first inking the machine, the printer rolls the paper over the locked-up type, producing the printed page. Due to the inevitable imperfections and asymmetries caused by close, human interactions and each person’s touch, the final product provides evidence of the moments of physical contact from each of these workers. By examining the spaces between the words, for example, it is possible to see the different dashes that the worker’s hand placed on the composition stick while working as the compositor. Looking at a small drop-shadow in the letters
reveals the instances when the worker let a bit too much wiggle-room occur between blocks—a common oversight while locking-up. Finally, while running one’s hand over the backside of the page, letting the fingers skip over the embossment caused by the impression of the hard metal blocks of type into yielding paper, it is possible to feel the moment of contact while the worker spun the rollers. Even as single tasks, these actions are not simple movements. When one is printing one must carefully consider one’s movements—knowing that each moment of interaction causes an alteration in the finished product. Adeptness as a printer starts with aesthetic understanding but develops out of tactile awareness.

The meticulous and directly significant nature of these actions inevitably influences the relationship between a printer and the printed page. As a form of evidence, a letterpress printed page is transparent: By looking at the page, one can detect every moment when a printer came into contact with it, imbuing each action that the printer performs with weight and accountability. Marx posits that, “the direct relationship of labor to its products is the relationship of the worker to the objects of his production” (Marx 20). For Marx, these two relationships are equatable. But the order in which they are presented conveys that a worker’s sentiments towards the object of production constitute the connection between the object and the labor performed. This structure places the primary emphasis on the link between worker and product, implying that it is the constitutive relationship in this equation. But because they are equal, we can flip this statement (A=B : B=A). Now, instead of the equation stating that worker’s feelings towards the product forming the relation between labor and product, it now states that the worker’s connection with the product is formed by the relation between labor and product. In this framework, if the printer’s actions are deeply rooted in the final product,
then the printer herself becomes equally invested in it; therefore, it is the nature of the actions performed that informs the way in which a printer perceives the printed page. The relevancy of this exercise comes from the fact that, in letterpress printing, even the simplest actions performed by a printer will affect the end result; thus, printers invariably experience a sense of connection with their product.

Due to the implicative nature of a printer’s movements, attempting to label letterpress printing as labor is also problematic. The essential relationship of labor, according to Marx, is “the relationship of the worker to production” (Marx 22). In the letterpress printing method, the machine and the worker are performing together in every step to generate the product. When the worker is as deeply implicated in the product as a printer is in the operation of the press, production becomes less of a manufacturing process and more of a collaboration between the worker and the machine. Production is no longer viewed as a process alienable from the worker. As the letterpress increasingly becomes considered an extension of the body of the printer (“the shoulder knows the cylinder’s weight”), production becomes a “natural” act. Contrary to the sort of labor examined by Marx in capitalist contexts, as when he writes that “labor is external to the worker, i.e., it does not belong to his intrinsic nature” (Marx 26), labor performed on the press strongly belongs to the printer as an extension of the self. The final product not only retains the traces of a printer’s labor, it emphasizes them, values them. Is this why, in contemporary practice, many printers neither refer to themselves as workers nor their process as labor? Yet the industrial aura surrounding the practice that clouds these distinctions creates a narrow space where the printer and press are able to teeter between industrial and artistic modes of production.
In the print shop, surrounded by other printmaking presses, the press is an artist’s tool. If placed in a factory, the press is imbued with an overriding industrial quality. Factories are spaces for production. The equipment contained within a factory is usually conceived of as tools for manufacturing. To manufacture something connotes an assemblage, a construction process that usually involves piecing smaller parts together in order to create a larger form. In terms of mass-production, the press manufactures printed pages; but the letterpress does not assemble pieces like factory equipment. Instead, it compresses planes. This point of depressing instead of enlarging is a juncture where the printing machine can begin to be better understood as an instrument for craft versus an industrial contraption.

3. The Communicative Art of the Letterpress

Art in all forms is intended to communicate. In order to delve into the press’s communicative value, it is important to first differentiate between the titles of printer and typographer. In discourse surrounding typography, the two terms have become conflated. Conventionally, a typographer is a person who practices the art of typography. The term was conceived in correlation with the advent of the letterpress printing press. In its original definition, typography was defined as the practice of setting and arranging type on a press. The primary area of work for a professional typographer would be on a letterpress printing press working with typeset matter. The centrality of the letterpress to the work of a typographer reveals the deeply engrained importance of considering each letter within the art of typography. However, in contemporary artistic discourse, the term typography has come to connote any work or practice that involves the use of text,
digital or analog, imbuing the term “typographer” with the connotation of an art-driven, skilled activity. The term printer has thus replaced the conventional definition of a typographer. When I am teaching other students how to run the press, I am seen as a printer. Conversely, when I produce a page on the press that is primarily perceived as piece of art, I am considered a typographer.

As a technology created for the mass dissemination of knowledge, the letterpress possesses a historically grounded communicative value. Letterpress printing was invented in the mid-fifteenth century by a German printer named Johann Gutenberg. Circa 1450, Gutenberg simultaneously invented the core element of letterpress—movable type—and its associated printing machine—the letterpress printing press (Maravelas 3). Letterpress formally homogenized letterforms and drastically expedited the process of printing text onto a page, which in turn equally expedited the process of printing books. The first book that Gutenberg printed using the movable type was the Bible. This particular creation is now referred to as the Gutenberg Bible. By creating the possibility of mass-distribution of text, formerly accessed by a privileged few, Gutenberg allowed the printed word to become a globalized commodity. Even if the printer is not the author, there is a recognized power in this occupation since it is printers who assemble these words. Letter by letter, the person composing the text has physically created a message on the composing stick. The centrality of the composed word to the letterpress disqualifies the machine as a mere production tool. Instead, the letterpress presents itself as a significant intellectual object. The core of this significance derives from the moment when the page comes into contact with the block of text.

The importance of communication within the letterpress process imbues every moment of impression during printing with a weight that transcends the mechanics of
the press. All the steps performed in the letterpress process build towards one moment: the instant when the page comes into contact with the inked block of type. During this moment, words are produced. Whereas the pivotal moment in other forms of production may be the combining of two objects, for the letterpress process, it is the compression of two surfaces: a block of text and a page of paper. When all the letters and spacing have been composed into one rectangular form, the singular mass is referred to as a block of text. A block is essentially a stamp. At the moment of contact, the flat paper rolls over the block at a specific height so that the protruding letters puncture the plane and impress into the page. The letters do not sit idly on top of the page’s surface. They break through the page’s face and extend beyond its limits, straining the paper’s fibers and coating them in ink as the letters create geometric forms. The event occurs within a few seconds. Almost instantaneously, the page goes from having a flat, barren face to bearing a series of inked depressions. The page does not simply display the letters; it bears them. When I turn the rollers, causing a brief moment of interaction between two planes, the machine speaks. With each roll, the press reiterates. However, as a practice that began with the mass-production of a religious text, letterpress is unavoidably steeped with meaning, evoking what can only be called a mystical quality.

This is why I dwell on the foundation of letterpress—as a printing method that commenced with the mass dissemination of the Bible: It helps us to understand it as a process potentially imbued with religious potency. If the Bible is a book composed of God’s words, then the process of letterpress printing it transforms into far more than a prosaic printing of text onto a page. By letterpress printing a page of the Bible, a printer physically presses the words of God onto a page. The page itself acquires sacred dimension as the plane impressed by the Lord himself. Furthermore, the blocks of type
used during printing obtain an even greater divine value. The blocks of type are comprised of the individual characters that have been arranged to God’s message. Thus, the block itself can be understood as a containing God’s words. In this perspective, after the block of God’s utterances has been inked and impressed into the paper, the page of the Bible becomes a remnant of God’s messages, evidence of a prior contact. Therefore, each time that a page of the Gutenberg Bible was printed, God spoke.
Growing up my favorite novel was *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*, the first in a series of seven fantasy novels written by the author C.S. Lewis titled *The Chronicles of Narnia*. The series begins with a group of children living in England who, while playing a game of hide-and-go-seek, accidently stumble into a magical realm filled with witches, wizards and miraculous creatures named Narnia. Finding the print shop is, to me, like finding Narnia—the only way to do it is by getting lost. The print shop is located at the end of a nondescript hallway, hidden deep within a dark, subterranean passageway known as the Center for the Arts (CFA) tunnels. For those who do not frequent the CFA, the act of finding the tunnels can be a difficult venture. Within the tunnels, trying to orient oneself is even trickier. Due to the labyrinthine design of the tunnels, room numbers provide no semblance of guidance; therefore, knowing that the print shop is #004 quickly becomes a moot piece of information. But upon arriving to the print shop, all the confusion and bewilderment involved in its discovery dissolves immediately.

But the connection between the print shop and the fictional realm of Narnia extends beyond their comparable elusiveness. They share a similar effect in their method of entry, which is commonly referred to in the discipline of architecture as the effect of compression and expansion. The passageway that connects earth to Narnia is a small, wooden wardrobe. To enter, characters squeeze past rows of clothing until they are
suddenly faced with an enormous magical kingdom. By passing through a constricted area, the perception of their destination’s magnitude amplifies.

The effect of entering the print shop functions on the same principle. To get to the room, you must walk down a narrow, barren hallway. Due to the darkness of the passageway, as you approach the space all you can see are the objects directly inside the door. But then upon entry, the room explodes deep into space. You perceive it to be taller than the hallway, even though they are the exact same height. In addition, time in the print shop moves the same way it does in Narnia. In the tales of The Chronicles of Narnia, the moment when a human enters the magical land, time stops, so that once they leave through the wardrobe and reenter reality, nothing has changed. Although time does not actually come to a halt, every time I enter the print shop, it is as if it does. I lose track of time completely. There is a fully functioning clock located on a sidewall, but it rarely gets noticed. You get lost in the print shop, consumed by the music and the buzz of the machinery. There is no feeling of transience associated with the room; people enter under the assumption that they will remain in there. Not until I experience something like, say, pangs of hunger—my body reminding me of the structure of outer world routines—do I realize that I have to depart in order to take care of mundane needs.

If these allusions to Narnia seem capricious, to me, this comparison between print shop and Narnia is not inconsequential. My early fascination with the novel is the best point of reference I have for the allure that this room has for many of its users. Narnia is a secretive space known by a select few. Upon entering, these few lose all concern for the outside world, becoming lost in an all-consuming, enchanting place that invariably distorts one’s sense of time.
As a place for artistic production, the print shop commonly gets grouped with other studio spaces that exist in the CFA. The room’s uniquely absorbing environment begins with the larger edifice that the print shop is in: the Art Workshops. But the print shop is not a studio. At Wesleyan, the studio spaces are split into two identical buildings: Studio art South and Studio art North. Walking down the CFA, the first studio on the left is Studio art South, which houses painting. Directly in front is Studio art North, the home of architecture and sculpture. Both studios present a long, flat façade, only subtly interrupted in the middle by the cut out of two doors. Essentially replicas, both buildings consist of two levels of open workspaces with a professor’s office shooting off on the ground floor. Walking past the studios, one is confronted with the small doors to the CFA theatre, to the right of which is a large lawn that falls back towards the soccer field. The lawn ends at a nondescript ramp that rises up into a platform with two mirroring doors. The door that faces the walkway leads to the Zilkha Gallery. The other door, which is only visible by walking up the 30-foot ramp, leads to the Art Workshops. Whereas reading the code for Studio art South, “ARTS,” definitively indicates its purpose, looking at the Art Workshop’s building code, “AWKS,” provides no form of clarity. It instills an enigmatic quality onto the structure, reserved for those in the know, even before one enters the building. Composed of six rectangular blocks each, the North and South studios are geometric twins, stacked next to each other so that they essentially operate as a unit. All the studios spaces exist above ground, with one side made solely of sliding glass doors so that they are visually and physically transparent. They are close to Wesleyan’s student center and easily accessible. But the Art Workshops are out of the
way. Getting to them from the campus’s center requires twice the time. Disconnected from the body of floating geometric forms that are the studios, the workshops exist as a unique, opaque entity submerged into the earth. While it adheres to the orthagonality of the larger vocabulary of the CFA, the AWKS is not another assortment of studio spaces. It is a collection of workshops.

And there are fundamental differences between a workshop and a studio. In its simplest definition, a studio is a place where an artist produces artwork. It is a room for any creative professional (painter, musician, dancer, etc.) to practice their art form. A workshop, as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary, is a “room, apartment, or building in which manual or industrial work is carried on.” Studio and workshop differ through the type of production that occurs within them. Artists will commonly construct pieces with their hands or use tools or some kind of machinery, but the studio in which they perform these tasks would rarely be said to have industrial qualities. Conversely, workshops are imbued with an industrial aura. The experience of walking into the print shop elucidates the potency of the workshops’ distinctive reliance on mechanical technology and their rather factory-like atmospheres.

David Schorr, the professor for Typography and Printmaking at Wesleyan, essentially owns the print shop. His office is attached to the back of the room, and after forty years of running the shop, he has been credited as the chief designer of the layout of the place. Due to his love for outdated machinery, the walk towards the print shop becomes an educational experience regarding the history of printing. As the hallway that leads to the shop comes closer, the walls of the CFA tunnels are increasingly flanked by mechanic memorabilia. However, these are not small fragments or remainders of a previously assembled object. They are massive, archaic printing presses. Because the
tunnels are usually not a desirable place for loitering, for the most part these machines go unnoticed. It was not until half way through my first semester in the print shop, when I accidentally bumped into one of the presses while taking a phone call in the hallway, that I became aware of their existence. I was on the phone with my mother, engaged in a conversation concerning the fact that I had not called home in over two weeks. While explaining that my negligence was due to the consuming nature of Typography, a class I was enrolled in at the time, I made an impassioned gesture with my arm that resulted in my knocking the side of one of the presses. With my mother’s voice in the background, I turned around and examined what I had accidently struck. My hand had hit a long wooden lever that extended out from an old press. Backing up, I realized this machine was only one of a larger set of previously adored prints that now idly sit along the cold gray walls of the tunnels. They have surrendered to time, given into obsolescence. From condensed, intricate platen presses to soaring, bulky printmaking machines, the wall presents a range of printing devices that have entered a seemingly eternal sleep, content with an existence centered on acquiring outstanding amounts of dust on their surfaces. Examining this set of antiquated presses offered me a quick glimpse into epochs dominated by different printing methods throughout the past few centuries—as if momentarily transporting back in time with each touch. When I returned to the print shop, I continued to investigate, quickly realizing that the historical aura does not end at this wall. On the edge of the hallway that leads directly towards the print shop, I found boxes scattered haphazardly on the floor with old printing plates that had been engraved decades ago spilling out of them. I realized that, from the antique presses to the mysterious plates, Professor Schorr, wittingly or not, has designed the walk towards the print shop as more than just means to an end—it as an experience in and of itself. Every
time I use this passageway, my walk becomes an immersion into a history of a mechanical production and reproduction methods.

3. Objects Building Place

In order to properly understand the impactful nature of the print shop, it is imperative to first establish what I consider to be place, as an idea. In Getting Back into Place, the third in a series of books on miscomprehended and neglected notions within Western philosophy, the author, Edward Casey, asserts the importance of reevaluating our understanding of what we call “place”. According to Casey, in the discourse of Western modernity, place has been superseded by time and space, and ultimately reduced to an idea that signifies a “bare position in space…where ‘position’ implies an arbitrary location” (Casey xiii). Casey posits that reducing place to a matter of arbitrary position would be ignoring the immense power that it holds in our everyday lives (Casey xiii). They are not just locations in empty space; places are something that we experience, something that we shape but that also shapes us (Casey 30). This model, as experientially defined and transcendent of mere positional importance, presents place as an invaluable notion for my understanding of my relation with the print shop.

In contrast to the abstract entity of space, places can be seen as sites intimately connected to the body. In the epigraph to the first chapter, Casey presents a quote that cleanly condenses the distinction between space and place: “We do not live in ‘space.’ Instead, we live in places” (Casey xiii). As is evident from the sentiments attached to one’s home or residence, the spaces that we live in are considered more than just a physical dwelling. Places trigger visceral responses, anchoring and orienting us in space (Casey
Casey defines one of these sensations as “implacement”, the feeling of “being concretely placed” (Casey 23). This effect, the feeling of being physically grounded in the present, is a bodily experience, bypassing intellectual knowledge as it arises out of the experience of being-in-place. What if we are to push Casey’s idea of place further, applying it also to the contents within a place: if certain objects are a fixture of a place, can said objects be understood as possessing similar effects of implacement? And if so, how do these effects of implacement alter our perceptions of the contents within a place as objects versus things?

As I see it, then, the print shop is not a place with things; it is a place with objects. The terminological distinction between the term object and thing derives from the idea that things are objects that need not be given a specific name (oed.com). However, understanding the philosophical difference between the two ideas may become a valuable tool in this discussion of place. In the book The Things They Say, Jonathan Lamb explores the difference between objects and things, concluding that the distinction can be reduced to the fact that objects serve human purposes and things don’t (Lamb xi). In this strict definition, the majority of contents of both a studio and a workshop would be considered objects. However, what if were to momentarily stretch this rigid distinction, and instead consider the ideas as poles on a spectrum—object on one end, and thing on the other. In this perspective, could a workshop be understood as closer to a place with objects, and a studio closer to a place with things? How can the different relationship that a studio and a workshop have with its contents further elucidate this speculation? The area contained in a studio is never referred to as a studio place—it is a “studio space.” Conversely, when speaking about the print shop, no one ever refers to it as a space—the print shop is invariably considered “a place.” In our
definition of space versus place, both studios and print shops are places; however, does the fact that studios are referred to as spaces signify that there is a difference in the nature of the contents of the two rooms? If so, I believe that the difference primarily derives from the ways in which the users ascribe meaning to the contents of each of the rooms, to their level of attachment or mutual dependence on the specific items contained therein.

In certain periods during the semester, the easels that normally occupy the middle of the painting studio are removed. This is not an unexpected change. The contents of a studio are things subject to becoming rearranged, replaced or discarded. The way in which the place is perceived is in no way dependent on the things contained within it. In fact, much of the value of studio spaces lies in their convertibility, in their versatility to accommodate changing needs and uses. Conversely, taking the contents out of the print shop would gut the room entirely, not revealing its new potential as a gutted studio would but its unserviceable quality as an empty room. If one were to remove the presses from the shop, the room would lose the pieces that alone define its character. If the painting studio were to be removed of all its contents, a painter walking into room would most likely still describe it as their painting studio. If the same thing were to happen to the print shop, I would walk in and ask, “where did the room go?” Without its contents, the print shop loses its effect of implacement. It is this weight that is in great measure what distinguishes the nature of print shop’s contents as objects versus things.

In *The Chronicles of Narnia*, when the children do not inhabit the magical realm, Narnia ceases to exist. During these instances when the children exit the wardrobe, Narnia no longer subsists as the magical realm—it becomes an idea, an imaginative, inert space. In order to persist as a place, the children must enter and perceive it. Can the print
shop be understood as functioning in a related manner? If so, what consequence does this phenomenon hold for its contents? If an object exists only when it “serves human purposes,” (Lamb xi) does it transform into a thing the moment it ceases to be perceived? When the shop is devoid of inhabitants, when no one is there to interact with and perceive the presses in the shop, what do the objects become? Does their ontology change? Could it be that this causes a chain reaction: as the objects devolve into things, the place becomes more of a space? Clearly, the print shop does not actually disappear when people do not inhabit it, but this perspective highlights the importance of the relationship between the occupants and the objects in defining the shop’s unique character. As is evident from one of Casey’s assertions, that “knowledge of place begins with the bodily experience of being-in-place,” (Casey 46) our understanding of a place greatly hinges on our body existing and living in it; however, the print shop, as a place of personal significance, is equally dependent on the existence of its inhabitants (the printers) as the objects that it contains (the presses). That is to say that if either of these components were to change, the print shop, as a place, would also change.

It was not until I approached the print shop as an ethnographer that I began to become cognizant of these dynamics. From my unprecedented level of productivity during hours spent in the room, I was aware of the atmosphere of production that permeates the print shop. But I had never considered how every detail of the shop, from its cavernous entryway to its distinctive smell of oil and kerosene, played an imperative role in constituting how I experienced the room as a place. However, by focusing in the dynamics of my relationship with the room’s machines, specifically, it quickly became clear that certain aspects of the print shop have more of a defining character than others. I have hung a number of prints in my living room, and just by glancing at one of them I
feel the sensation of operating the press and the atmosphere of being in the print shop—an almost fetishistic sort of recollection. Evidently, the presses possess a staggering agency in terms of the generation the print shop’s potency as a place. From this example I realized that the print shop does not end or begin at its doors. The room’s environment pours out of the entranceway—I would experience intimations of the shop’s excitement far before actually entering the place. The feeling of the machines trickles out from every crack, spilling over the boxes of old plates and spreading towards the dark hallway. Even after departing the art workshops, these feelings cease to disappear.

It is evident that our awareness of places extends beyond their physical boundaries. In *The Fate of Place*, Casey looks at contemporary notions of place, deducing that “place remains something that surrounds, but no longer as an airtight, immobile, diaphanous limit. It is the event of envelopment itself” (Casey 339). Places follow us once we leave. We are constantly encountering residual feelings of the implacement experienced within a place’s confines. Even after exiting the wardrobe, the children in *The Chronicles of Narnia* could never truly disconnect from the place. The notion of the place became a shadow, following the children through day-to-day chores. The realm had pervaded real-life, reducing all other concerns into moot points. As I examined my relation to the print shop, I realized that I maintained a similar link. The shop became omnipresent: No matter what building I was in, or what class I was doing work for, I always felt a pressure to return. When I see a student in my major on campus, our conversation always ended in the simple question, “print shop later?” If I did not reply with an affirmative response, I felt guilty. I had never dwelled on this sentiment before my ethnographic work. This is an absurd sentiment to feel in this situation. Even when I
know no one else will be in the print shop that night, I experienced guilty sentiments if I
did not return, like I had forsaken some intimate friends. Through these constant
cconcerns, I animated the room, conceiving of it not just as a place, but also as its own
world.

As an auto-ethnography, an important question must be asked at this point: why
Narnia? The answer to this elucidates why I essentially live today in the print shop. Past
their bedrooms, children are bestowed very little autonomy. Reading the Narnia books as
a kid was a way for me to create an autonomous place. While I read, I would fabricate an
infinite world in my imagination, one that I could transport to at any moment. As a
cryptic, shrouded room, the print shop has become this world for me. By conceiving of
the print shop as this fictitious world, I maintain a place of intimate pride that I can
return to while I navigate through college, the gateway into adulthood. However, the
influence of the print shop extends far beyond an existence as a room for retreat.

Places are powerful agents in our identity formation. In contrast to the inactive
nature of space—a homogenous and undistinguished medium—places have the power
to “to anchor and orient you, [and thus] become an integral part of your identity” (Casey
23). By securing our position in the present, place grounds us. Far from a static
existence, place is a reciprocal event—it acts on us just as much as we act on it. Casey
proposes that, “you are in [place] not as a puppet stuffed in a box…[instead] as living in
them, indeed, through them” (Casey 22). As a means through which we development, it is
evident that place plays a powerful role in shaping who we are. The print shop’s
influence in shaping my interests and who I have become at college reveals this
profound ability of place. Before my life in the print shop, I would weave in-and-out of
art classes, struggling to find a medium that truly enticed me. But once I started working
in the print shop, I not only unearthed a practice that captivated me, but more importantly I finally started to discover my identity as an artist.

4. Transgression in Exhibition & Gallery Space

Places associated with artistry can be divided into two broad categories: places for production, and places for presentation. Studios and workshops are the most common setting for artistic production. The place that is most definitively constructed for the purpose of presentation is a gallery space. For some artists, their studios will double as places for presentation; in others, artists are even displayed producing material. That said, “galleries” are truly meant for displaying purposes, for the exhibition, consumption, and circulation of artwork. Ranging from public to private, the term “gallery space” has come to take on a variety of meanings. The forms of gallery spaces that I would like to examine are the individual rooms within a larger, collective exhibition. These galleries possess a subtle charge that only becomes apparent once their normative environment is disrupted.

In our proposed model of place versus space, galleries are invariably understood as places. However, if we were to theorize place and space as poles on a spectrum—similarly to the exercise previously performed with object and thing—can galleries, as sites primarily purposed to display art, potentially be understood as a space rather a place? Walking into a gallery, attention is almost always directed towards whatever form of artwork is being presented. So as to not distract from the art, many galleries strive for an inconspicuous design and a subtle aesthetic that give a viewer the ability to lose herself in the artwork. There are certain expectations or norms of good behavior in
galleries that have been cultivated over years of exhibitions—unspoken understandings and unwritten rules concerning the relationship between the viewer and the artwork that plays out in the peculiar way that viewers walk, stand and converse in these spaces. How does breaking one of these norms affect the perception of the gallery as a space? When a show actively disregards these expectations, the focus shifts from the artwork to the space that contains it, a shift that requires all participants to examine the social character of the gallery as a place.

Acts that break norms are referred to as transgressive behavior. In the book *In Place/Out of Place*, Tim Cresswell’s discussion of transgression within places offers a unique lens that aids in our understanding of the hidden normative character of the gallery as a place. In the introduction, Cresswell astutely observes that, “we know that there is not, in everyday life, a direct correlation between place and appropriate behavior…in fact our consciousness of place all but disappears when it appears to be working well…we rarely sit and think of a working electric light” (Cresswell 10). An ingeniously simple point, this observation draws attention to how norms tend to fade from our consciousness; the normative acquires a sort of “second nature” invisibility that only becomes apparent again when a norm is violated. Cresswell further presents two important points in this statement. Firstly, he points out that despite the intense pressure we feel to act in certain ways in certain places, there is in fact no inherent connection between place and behavior. Secondly—and most importantly—he explains that, despite the contingent character of place norms, they grow to feel natural, logical, and indeed inherently connected to the place.
Exhibiting in Wesleyan’s main exhibition place, Zilkha Gallery, as an undergraduate is a privilege. This privilege is given to all studio art majors during the second semester of their senior year when they present their thesis as a show in the gallery. Zilkha consists of six sections: North gallery, South gallery, Front Bay, First Bay, Second Bay and Back Bay. Fitting in to the strict architectural language of CFA, the gallery is constructed solely out of monolithic limestone blocks and glass, giving a mysteriously austere impression to the visitor. Unlike many museums, the architecture of Zilkha does not guide the visitor towards one direction. Instead, you are given options.

In the lobby, the first option is to go through a pair of large glass doors on the right: the South Gallery. While usually functioning as a reception area, during thesis week students will commonly turn the small, carpeted room into an exhibition space. Once into the larger gallery, there are only two directions to take. Taking a right takes you into the long alley known as the Bays. If one chooses not to take a right and instead continues straight ahead, one will reach the North Gallery. The North Gallery is a tall, isolated room with no windows. It has a polarizing effect for artists; some love it, some hate it. Being among the former, it is in this room, the North Gallery, that I chose to perform my thesis show.

Approaching the gallery as an ethnographer is different than approaching it as an artist. At the beginning of the year, I considered the different galleries in terms of how they could be used to display artwork. In other words, I judged them on how well they could showcase my prints. But as I began to adopt an ethnographic stance, my criterion changed. I became less interested in what was put on the walls of the gallery and more in what happened in between them. My concern shifted towards delving into
the dynamics of what constitutes an art exhibition—the status of the work of art, the tacit norms ruling over the exhibition space, the audience’s expectations of the artist. This altered interest guided me in terms of choosing a gallery. By selecting the North Gallery, I have as isolated a site as possible, meaning that that I have full agency of how I construct the space of the gallery temporarily as a “place” of exhibition.

My ethnographic interests in understanding place and space have significantly guided my thesis. Instead of seeing the gallery as a showroom, I now consider it as a place for experimentation. My thesis is a performance—it is meant to be kinetic and explorative. In the book *Exhibition Experiments*, Macdonald and Basu discuss how contemporary exhibitionary practices should not be conceived as simply a means for displaying artwork and propagating preexisting knowledges (Macdonald and Basu 2). This goal has largely aligned and impacted the way in which I have approached the gallery that I have been awarded. I have decided to perform in the middle of the gallery space structure the room in a way that encourages viewers to stop and consider not just what they are observing, but also the place that *they* are in. By designing the show to be a performance that creates a kinetic environment, I will compel viewers to conceive of themselves as participants, with the goal of making them consider how the gallery space functions as a place and how communications technology have impacted our perception and experience of place.
1. A Printer’s Movements

For my show, I will be performing the process of the letterpress. I’ve always been fascinated by the machine as both an object and a tool for printing, but it was not until I decided that I wanted to include it in my exhibition that I began perceiving it differently. When I would watch someone print, I would look at the actions performed in terms of how they altered the product. But as I began to approach anthropologically the process of printing, I started to analyze the printer’s actions and movements. Out of context, the motions involved in operating a printing press seem unnatural and disjointed. Because of the necessity of the object for the action, without the press, the physical actions of a printer become abstract gestures. In this isolated context, these letterpress movements can be examined for their gestural significance. From the rotations of the arm to the lateral skips, these human actions acquire a mechanic character. As an ethnographer, I began to ask myself questions concerning how these movements will translate when performed in a different type of setting. How will these actions be perceived differently when performed in a gallery space versus a workshop? And what does the divergence in these perceptions elucidate about the nature of the actions and of art production itself?

The differences between miming in a workshop versus within a studio can reveal important features of a printer’s movements. What would happen if we placed a drawer
in an empty studio, took the pencil out of her hand and asked her to draw? She would most likely walk towards a wall, and with a feigned grip move her arm across the blank area. Even without the necessary instrument, these movements would still seem fluid, expressive, and comfortable. If a simple subject is chosen to draw, a viewer may even be able to tell what the drawer is depicting through her gestures. What would happen if we performed the same exercise with a printer in a gutted workshop? Where would she walk? Not towards a wall—directionally, that is the only certainty. Past that, there is no probable destination. If she were in an empty workshop that she was familiar with, she would most likely walk towards where the press used to reside. But this empty workshop is unknown to her. After arriving at her destination, how would she move? Inevitably—no matter how she approaches the space—mimed printing quickly becomes a perplexing endeavor. Without the machinery, it is a nearly undoable task. This perspective reveals the profound influence of the workshop tool on the artist as a performer. A printer’s movements are exteriorly produced responses—motions that are prompted by and derive from the machine, causing an expressive print to be defined by the extent to which it reveals the interaction between the machine and the paper. A printer does not perform corporeally; she performs mechanically. It was not until the culminating event of the semester—the Midyear Critique—that I began to fully understand the dynamics of these movements as performative acts.

While printing during my Midyear Critique, I became aware of the intriguing auditory nature of my movements. I had practiced my performance a number of times prior to the event, but because I had become a spectacle of evaluation during the critique, I began to consider how particular moments of my process were being perceived as part of a performance. Specifically, I became acutely aware of the noises
made from handling the printing materials. I had always been cognizant of the sounds that emanate from the press while it runs and prints, but I had never reflected upon the sounds that I made as a printer interacting with the tools and materials before and after printing. During the first step, setting the type, I started to recognize the potency of these noises. To set the type, I took each letter out of the tray and placed on the metal composing stick to create the message. A small but distinctive sound occurred with the placement of each letter. As the letters clicked and clacked into place on the composing stick, the metal, somewhat quiet contact noises would grow in crescendo and amalgamate into a single sound when produced in succession.

During the performance I realized that everything perceivable had become hyper-scrutinized, so my movements and the noises that came from them became focal points for the audience. Thus—as I transferred the set type to the letterpress’ bed—I began to act in a more deliberate and decisive manner to ensure the audibility of my movements. From years of practice, I am able to transport the block of type from the stick to the bed in one, swift motion. Instead, in order to emphasize the sonic character of this step, I slowly pushed the lines of type onto the bed, coercing each letters to slide off the stick and fall onto the hard, flat surface, creating a sequential, transient rhythm that sounded like a metallic waterfall. I felt the audience move closer. After performing the process so many times, I had become blasé about its sounds, deaf to them. However, it was clear that when emitted during a performance, these noises acquired an stimulating character. I found myself wanting to exploit this notion even further as I set the furniture and locked-up. Furniture refers to the wooden blocks that a printer places on the bed in order secure the block of type. Usually, I treat the bed like a puzzle, moving the blocks slowly and methodically. But during this performance I chose to move
vigorously. I swung the furniture to the edge of the press in forceful movements like I was playing air hockey. The moment of impact sounded like a gunshot, ripping through the calm clatter of the press’s motor as it reverberated through the print shop.

After the performance concluded, I was approached by a number of students and professors who wanted to talk to me about the sonic quality of the show. It had had an unexpected magnetizing quality, which in retrospect I believe illustrates the mechanic derivation of my movements as a printer. The noises were the sound of collision. Metal to metal, wood to wood, or wood to metal, each bang with a distinctive timbre. But past the materiality, the noises were also the sounds of my body colliding with the machine.

Before assembly, as I chose each letter and piece of furniture and held them in my hands, the type and wooden blocks were connected to me. Then, as I placed them onto the press’s bed, they became a component of the machine. This moment of transition was the climax of the collision between the human and the mechanical. My hands assembled the pieces of the machine like a puzzle. Thus, while composing the type and furniture, moving in these mechanical ways felt strangely natural.

2. The Transmission of the Letterpress

By looking at bodily movements as techniques, the process of learning how to print can be viewed as a procedurally historical narrative. In an essay titled The Notion of Body Techniques the French sociologist Marcel Mauss examines certain human movements as learned body techniques. In the text Mauss defines a technique as “an action which is effective and traditional…this above all is what distinguishes man from animals: the transmission of his techniques and very probably their oral transmission” (Mauss 104). I
began to consider how this understanding of techniques could be applied to the transmission of mechanical techniques, an area of human action that Mauss deliberately avoids. By revisiting my introductory art courses, I quickly realized the difference between the transmission process of the letterpress technique and the transmission process of the techniques of other art forms that I had learned, and how this fissure could reveal unique characteristics about the nature of each discipline’s actions. As I started to recall my first encounters with the letterpress process, I began to realize the extent to which printing techniques are historically grounded.

My process of learning how to draw differed greatly from my process of learning how to letterpress. In both processes, a teacher taught me the basic techniques, and then I proceeded to hone my craft independently. That said, during and after the two processes, my relationship with the educator differed greatly. The difference in my perception of the two professors had nothing to do with their personalities; in actuality, it derived from the different natures of the technical undertakings. In my introductory drawing classes, I was taught by my drawing professor, Mr. Harrison, how to refine a skill that I—along with every other student—already possessed (i.e. anyone with a hand can draw rudimentarily). At an introductory level, a drawer’s merit is assessed by their representational skill: how successfully one can depict what one sees. I understood this concept, and without any form of education I could attempt to achieve this goal. What I learned from my teacher was certain tricks that enabled me to perceive more clearly, techniques for more advanced and refined drawings that relied as much on my ability to look as they did on my ability to draw. Conversely, because I had virtually no knowledge of the letterpress, the process of learning the art of printing had to begin at ground zero.
I did not figure out how to operate the letterpress on my own. I was taught how. During a two-hour period, we watched Professor Schorr print a page of text from start to finish. Step-by-step, I observed exactly which levers he pulled so that when he rolled the paper, it would come out with words printed onto it. Afterwards, each of us had a one-on-one session with the teaching assistant where we would print our own page.

There is a distinct process that has to be performed in order to produce anything on the letterpress—a process that is in no way self-evident. It requires a number of esoteric tools and instruments in order to set up, and even then one has to know exactly how to handle the machine in order to get it to function properly. If I had not been directly taught how to operate the press, I would never have been able to print even the simplest of pages. Because this required tutoring, the actual process of being shown how to use the letterpress became an equally significant procedure in itself. I remember the types of skills I learned in my drawing course, but the actual moments of tutelage have dissolved in my memory. Conversely, the class period when I first learned how to operate the press is indelible from my memory. During those two-hours I did not just learn a skill: I learned a practice and began to acquire a technical mastery that was entirely unbeknownst to me.

The letterpress technique centers on understanding how to operate the press, a historical object. Because of the involved nature of the learning process, can the actions themselves that are being taught also be considered historical objects? On my own, I would have never been able to discern what sorts of actions I needed to perform to print. I needed to be told and shown them. Through this necessity of unmediated, oral transmission, the actions became heavily rooted in the person who taught them and in the way this person had embodied these techniques. Unconsciously, every time I
perform the movements I am transported backwards to the moment I was first taught. Even if I am producing what is meant to be ephemeral, the actions stay rooted in history, a history that is traceable through a personally connected straight line. In drawing class, I was a pupil; Mr. Harrison taught the class the customary fundamentals of how to effectively represent reality with a pencil. In typography, I was essentially an apprentice: Professor Schorr illuminated each student by showing us how to print in the same way that he was taught how to print. I was not taught to draw like Mr. Harrison; however, I was taught to print like David Schorr.

3. Letterpress Printing as a Technique of the Body

The technique of letterpress printing is largely developed in response to the features and limits of the press. But by isolating the movements, I began to look at them as techniques of the body. In the latter half of his essay, Mauss explains that he is considering the body as “man’s first and most natural instrument. Or more accurately, not to speak of instruments, man’s first and most natural technical object” (Mauss 104). Mauss is primarily concerned with movements performed strictly by the body, without any involvement of an exterior object (e.g. walking, dancing, and running). Not once does Mauss venture into techniques of the body associated with mechanical labor practices. I would argue that applying his understanding of body techniques back to instrumental labor could aid in exposing the nuanced relationship between body and machinery.

According to Mauss, “training, like the assembly of a machine, is the search for, the acquisition of, an efficiency. Here it is a human efficiency” (Mauss 108). Training in
athletics centers on the idea of the search for human efficiency. Professional runners will
devote their entire lives to the finding the way to move their legs in the most efficient
manner possible so as to use as little energy as they can. Because running is strictly an act
of the body, track training can arguably be conceived of as a search for a strictly human
efficiency. But I would argue that training in other sports could not be considered in the
same terms. For a quarterback, training is the search for the most efficient means of
going the football out of their hands while still managing to make it spiral. Whereas for
a runner training only involves the body, for a quarterback, training consists of working
on how he interacts with an exterior object (the football). Footballs are designed around
this interaction: Each ball has a set of leather straps sewed into its surface to create a grip
for the thrower. Quarterbacks will spend years perfecting how they interact with their
instrument. Although it did not occur on a field, I believe that my letterpress training can
be considered as a search for human efficiency in a somewhat comparable manner.
Similarly to the way that a football is designed around human contact, the press is
constructed with the intention of it being controlled, mastered by a printer. Furthermore,
in a similar way that the focal point of a quarterback’s training is to master how their
body interacts with their tool in order to make it function properly (spiral through the
air), my training centers on perfecting how my body interacts with the press so that it
prints the best possible page or, more precisely, the page that I envision. It was not until
I began to ethnographically examine my movements that I became aware of this
centrality. As I began focusing inwards, I noticed how my body naturally shifted towards
the areas of activity on the machine so that I could remain in contact with the printed
matter at all times. I was moving in conjunction with the press so as to promote an
efficient printing process. It became clear that my search for human efficiency during
printing did not involve training of unaccompanied body movements—it involved training my body to move in correlation with the movements of a machine. Once I had reached a satisfactory level of efficiency, I stopped trying to train myself on the press and began attempting to master it.

Mastering the art of the letterpress involved a system of fine calibrations of my bodily movements. In order to successfully produce intended effects while printing, I have to have total mastery over how my body interacted with the machine. In my first few semesters with the press, during printing my body inevitably felt gangly and undirected. Overtime, I have learned how my body affects the machine, and in turn how it affects the printed page. Gaining mastery had been sort of corporeal osmosis—a slow, bodily learning process. When I would find that the paper was slipping from the roller, I would try to move my arm a tiny bit faster in order to maintain contact and then observe the printed page to see how this affected the print. I would repeat this process endlessly until I achieved the desired effect. It was a process involving small calibrations and recalibrations, not unlike the way one fine tunes a machine. I would make slight changes in my body movements (e.g. try to exert with a different muscle in my forearm, or turn the lock-up the bed with a minor change of force) then after perceiving the outcome of the modification, recalibrate accordingly. The process has essentially been one of honing my muscle memory. Muscle memory takes time to develop, and requires consistent rehearsal in order to maintain. Physically learning the press has been an ongoing process, the objective essentially being to train my body to move with the machine in a manner that feels as natural as the movements involved in walking. Now, by using Mauss’ notion of body techniques as a lens through which to examine the actions of other people—
specifically the actions of people when they are in the presence of artwork—I can begin to uncover the origin of the unique character of movement within galleries.

4. Viewers’ Movements

Mauss’ body techniques offer an interesting explanation for the homogenization of visitors’ habits within a gallery space. There are distinct body movements that commonly occur in gallery spaces. Visitors are expected to act as viewers, either standing still in front of something, or walking slowly towards something else. Once a visitor has settled upon a piece, a viewer will commonly take a sort of contemplative stance (e.g. crossing one’s arms, stroking one’s chin, etc.) If a visitor is part of a group or a pair, there are trends in terms of how they are expected to interact with each other while observing the artwork. If they choose to converse about a particular piece, visitors will most likely go over and stand side-by-side in front of it in order to discuss particular moments. If a visitor feels particularly passionate about a piece, he/she may even make a hand gesture towards it during a conversation. These techniques of the body are very much habits that are learned over time. Children in museums accord to none of these techniques. I remember going to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston with my family, and being scolded on numerous occasions for walking too fast and getting too close to the art. But as I grew up, I learned how one is expected to move in the presence of art. Mauss refers to this phenomenon as “prestigious imitation,” a process that involves a child who “imitates actions which have succeeded and which he has seen successfully performed by people in whom he has confidence and who have authority over him” (Mauss 102). Towards the end of elementary school, my parents noticed that I was
starting to excel in my art classes at school, and thus decided to begin taking me to more art museums in hopes of encouraging an interest. I had reached the age when imitation had extended far beyond basic body movements. I remember observing how my father would stroke his goatee whenever we arrived a particularly poignant abstract painting, and attempting to imitate this gesture with my hairless chin. Over the years I have unconsciously been molded to fit into the normative behavior of museums. As my movements increasingly accorded with this particular fashion, they transformed into “habits” (Mauss 101). For Mauss, habits are any form of learned body techniques associated with a specific group. By revisiting Cresswell’s discussion of behavior in place, the source of my desire to put up a show that promotes transgressive behavior within a gallery space is revealed:

One way to illustrate the relation between place and behavior is to look at those behaviors that are judged as inappropriate in a particular location—literally as actions out of place. It is when such actions occur, I argue, that the everyday, commonsense relationships between place and behavior become obvious and underlined (10)

According to Cresswell, in order to become cognizant of the normative behavior within a place, non-normative behavior must first occur. Because I find the habits of art viewers (myself included) to be frustratingly stifling, I have found that my decision making process for my thesis has been increasingly influenced by the desire to promote non-normative behavior in my gallery space. I don’t conceive of the audience as viewers—I conceive of them as participants. In the introduction of Exhibition Experiments,
Macdonald states that, by experimenting with the nature of exhibiting, “the exhibition [itself] becomes transformed from a space of representation into a space of encounter” (Macdonald and Basu 14). As an artist and ethnographer, considering the gallery as a space of encounter was a vital step in the development of both this project and subsequently my thesis show. The intent of performing during the thesis show is far more than to demonstrate the letterpress practice for viewers. By creating a fluid, unrestricted environment, I hope to promote visitors to become aware of the gallery as a place of potent interpersonal, intellectual, and spatial encounters.
— CONCLUSION —

In its initial state, this project primarily functioned as a means through which I could comprehend and attempt to articulate the objectives of my thesis show. However, it soon developed into more than just a supplementary place for contemplation. As the project evolved, I began to feel how the act of writing itself had transformed from a constructive exercise into an enlightening experience. Soon after the project’s outset it had become evident that my writing was beginning to inform how I considered my thesis; however, it was not until the project concluded, and I was able to reflect on its significance in terms of the entire semester, that I recognized how writing had impacted the way in which I considered myself as an artist.

Throughout my coursework in anthropology, there have been a number of cases when I have written auto-ethnographically about a personal practice. That said, the projects and the practice that they engaged with never aligned temporally: Freshman year I wrote an ethnography on Busking (musical street performance), an activity that my friends and I used to passionately engage in; however, at that point it had been over two years since we had performed. This made writing about these practices into a nostalgic activity illustrating the allure of a pastime. In opposition to the temporal disjointedness of these past projects, in this essay I was able to anthropologically investigate a practice that I was concurrently engrossed in. By writing and performing in parallel, I was able to fruitfully exploit my findings by employing them in practice. As Laurel Richardson posits in her essay Writing as a Method of Inquiry, “Writing is also a way of ‘knowing’—a method
of discovery and analysis. By writing in different ways, we discover new aspects of our topic and our relationship to it” (Richardson 923). Through experimenting with different writing styles and exercises (e.g. scribbling down process notes while I printed in the print shop or typing up an artist statements singular or plural? before a presentation) I was able to focus in on different dynamics that were at work in my process of production. The act of writing had become a tool for unraveling the connective tissue between my practice and myself.

Toward the end of the project—once I was able to look at it as a composite—I began to consider how the subjects might have been influencing the way I engaged with them. At the time I was unaware of it, but after rereading each section, I noticed the different paces and tones inherent within them. Was it possible that the subjects were dictating the way I wrote about them? When writing about the press in the Object section, I found myself writing in a sort of mechanical rhythm—weaving in and out of ethnographic and theoretical frameworks in a structured, paced manner. Conversely, in Place section, I noticed that I naturally tended to lose myself in descriptive narrative, similar to the way the print shop consumes me. It seemed as though each segment of writing had been influenced by the nature of its subject and my own relation with each subject—creating a distinctive writing style for each section. Could it then be said that, in a certain way, my writing had informed my writing?

With the conclusion of this project comes a simple question: what is my exact plan for the ensuing thesis show? The Midyear critique presented a few practical questions concerning my thesis alongside a number of suggestions about directions that I could take it in. After ruminating on all the ideas that were discussed, which ranged from proposals for interactive components to pioneering hanging methods, I have been
able to construct a basic blueprint for the show. For the sake of clarity, I have chosen to eliminate the large hashtag prints, so that when my show begins the gallery will consist only of myself, the press, and the other instruments. In this vision, as I live-tweet the show each day, the gallery space will slowly transform from nothing to everything as the tweets fill the space throughout the course of the exhibition. Furthermore, I will be installing a video camera that will record the act of my typesetting and project it outside the gallery so that all viewers can properly observe and hear my movements. By documenting each day with video as well as photographs, I hope to be able to compile the material into a cohesive narrative that cogently illustrates the evolution of the gallery.

Prior to this project, I had very little intention of continuing my artistic pursuits after graduation. Creating art had always been a cathartic diversion from my more rigorous academic coursework—thus, an activity that I felt hesitant to prioritize. But due to the unique circumstances of this semester (conjunctively writing an essay and beginning a thesis), the creation of artwork became the focal point of all my academic concerns. From the excitement experienced both while performing during the Midyear and during my writing process, I learned that I am far from done with the practice. Following the completion of my thesis, I am excited to pursue work in a letterpress shop so that I can continue to create projects investigating how this historical practice can be used as a tool for further understanding how the spatio-temporal development of new technologies have influenced the way in which we communicate.
Works Cited


