

THESIS

BUILDING CHARACTER THROUGH TYPE

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ABSTRACT

BUILDING CHARACTER THROUGH TYPE

Typography, the art of designing with type began in the West around 1455 when Johannes Gutenberg perfected the craft of printing from individual pieces of type. Typography is the graphic designer's domain. It is the vehicle that clearly communicates a message. The expectations of designers are increasingly broadened, and as a result less time is given to understanding the craft. In my professional experience typography has broken down into five specific categories: calligraphy, hand lettering, type design, print design and digital design. Calligraphy is the art of writing, while hand lettering is the art of crafting specific characters for a particular goal. Type design is the creation of an alphabet including all of its characters numbers and glyphs. Print design ranges from movable type to any type where the intended output is print, whereas digital design has been created specifically for digital use. Today's designers are exposed to digital type from the beginnings of their educations. The lack of working, creating and experiencing type in the physical realm combined with the access to thousands of poorly designed typefaces has muddied the understanding of type. In this work, my intent is to expand my knowledge of typography through hand lettering combined with site-specific installations. Within the field of graphic design, typography is the most important element and the hardest to master, therefore it is imperative to learn type through a tactile process. The information you receive through a physical relationship is substantially different than the insight you would receive through an abstract experience.

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INTRODUCTION

Through conversations and personal photos, memories were extracted to make up the content of this project. The memories were distilled down into small phrases and in one case, a single word: *My Son Did Not Die*, *We Make One*, *Pervukhin*, *Cancer Consumed Her*, *They Were Teens* and *You're Not Me*. Constructing the characters by hand took abstract experiences and made them tangible. Each phrase has multiple levels of meaning, illustrated through material and location. The materials related to the origin of the phrase, were practical and were instrumental in communicating a message to the audience. Each location provided unforeseen challenges that had to be overcome during construction. Recording the installation through photography provided visual data that could be used in a multitude of ways. The experience of working with type on a larger scale will undoubtedly increase my ability to communicate with type.

MY SON DID NOT DIE

My Son Did Not Die (Fig. 1) reflects an event that took place August 2010. At three in the morning I received the news that my teenage son had fallen from a two-story parking garage onto the concrete below. He shattered both ankles, one knee and both wrists. He hit so hard that the impact to the front of his skull fractured the back of it, allowing his brain to swell. He consequently avoided a brain injury. It was his level of intoxication that saved his life. Because of the severity of this event, it was the strongest candidate to begin the group of site-specific installations.

When first approaching this project, I found myself having to work through cliché solutions. The obvious idea was to incorporate a parking garage or concrete. This response seemed too easy and shallow. During a recreational outing to Horsetooth Reservoir, the location and material presented themselves for the first installation. The flagstone that makes up the reservoir naturally breaks apart into abundant blocky shapes. Parallel to North County Road 23 about one hundred yards to the west, lay a flat,

strip of earth flanked by water on both sides. The distance from the road and the length of the natural jetty dictated the scale of the type. The total span equalled 42 feet. Construction began after clearing a 50 foot strip and isolating stones suitable for stacking. The stones for certain characters came from as far as 100 yards away. I then measured and marked the spacing for each character, standing roughly 30 x 24 inches high, with 6-8 inches of spacing in between. The average depth was 10-12 inches. Due to the nature of the material the letters, e.g. "s" and "e" had to be converted into ligatures, a character consisting of two or more joined letters, "so" in the word son and "ie" in the word die.

I was limited to use what could be moved by hand. Even though the location of the installation was navigable, some of the stones had to be retrieved from very arduous areas. The uprights of the "m," for example each weighed more than 100 pounds. After the first five characters had been constructed, I stepped back to view the readability of the type. This is when the second challenge became apparent. At that time, with the sun hitting the face of the letters, and casting shadows behind, the characters blended into the background. One consideration was to wet the faces of the letters to create more contrast, but a final assessment could not be made until all of the characters had been completed. When *My Son Did Not Die* had been fully constructed, the sun had passed to the backside of the characters creating the contrast needed for readability. Another element related directly to the readability was the use of ligatures. Generally, designers use ligatures to elevate the quality of type and to deal with technical issues with letter combinations such as "fi." The ligatures used in the phrase were less about aesthetics and more about the structure of the type. Therefore the challenge was to keep the readability. As soon as I moved back from the piece local climbers, dog walkers and cyclists descended upon the phrase. For the next few days I returned to the site to see how the letters were holding up. Much to my excitement, during the first two days they remained unchanged. Stacking the flagstone became the perfect metaphor for the forces involved

in my son's accident. It was gravity which brought him to the concrete, and it was gravity that held the characters together. The delicate balancing act of life was represented literally. By the third day, the controlled water level of the reservoir had risen to the point where the entire phrase was submerged. This provided a peaceful resolution.

WE MAKE ONE

We Make One (Fig. 2) is a nod to my relationship. Although the phrase may sound trite it represents the reality that my girlfriend, Stephanie Gibson, and I both participate 100 percent, and take on life as a single entity. Completely committing myself has truly exposed the power of two people working together.

During finals week of Spring 2011, my graduate studio was to be relocated. While moving out of the original 928 square foot studio, a 32 x 8 foot cinderblock wall was exposed. This wall was scheduled to be demolished the following Monday for remodeling. With department approval and a 35 pound rotary drill the installation began. I marked out the 21 x 42 inch letters, leaving 1-2 inches of space between each character. The letters had to be written from right to left and backwards on the side of the wall where I would be drilling from. This is a lesson taken directly from my experience with moveable type. This concept was utilized by taking a 1 inch rotary bit and punching through the wall. Each letterform was made of multiple holes, with the intention of creating a bullet hole effect. The entry hole is the size of the bullet, whereas the exit is substantially larger. Using the fundamental concepts of gestalt, the holes were placed in close enough proximity for the human brain to complete the letterforms.

When reflecting on this piece, two stories stand out. First, the department chair gave me permission to work on my installation over a weekend. Due to the fact that the Colorado International Invitational Poster Exhibition (CIPE) catalogue deadline was staring me in the face, I decided to complete it that Thursday. The project went well. To my surprise, the school's demolition crew had already knocked the wall down the

following morning, taking the letterforms with it. While the installation was developing I was nearing the end of being ill from two months of mono. On that particular day I had a fever of 102 and in no way should have been working. Not to mention the project fell in the midst of finals week. During the production, classes were in session and the ruckus created raised curiosities from faculty and student's alike. Explaining the phrase to passersby solidified my commitment to my relationship. The intense physical labor that it took to create the nine letterforms became a romantic metaphor for the tireless effort required to sustain a healthy relationship. Holding a 35 pound hammer drill horizontal for an extended amount of time was the most physically demanding of the challenges. After beginning the project, it was discovered that some cavities of the wall were hollow and other areas were completely filled with mortar. Drilling through solid mortar overheated the drill bit and took about 20 minutes per hole. From the beginning, the type was meant to be condensed and geometric. In hindsight, the letter spacing should have been 4-6 inches versus the 1-2 inches that was implemented. On the computer a designer can make necessary changes at any stage of the design, but when working physically with type the decisions made can become irreversible. Therefore it is imperative to consider all typographic decisions before production begins. A strong result of this piece is the photographic stop motion of the process. The characters are compelling and easy to read when viewed in a stop animation.

PERVUKHIN

Eric Pervukhin is the single most important influence in my design career, as well as a true friend. He is a renowned Russian illustrator, typographer and professor of graphic design at Missouri State University. By example, Eric instilled in me the reality that it takes a lifetime to become a master typographer. The first semester that I was his student, without any disclaimer, he made the entire class watch John Water's film *Pink*

Flamingos. It was the typographic assignment in response to the film that solidified my interest in typography.

Due to Eric's cynical relationship with kitsch objects, taking a literal approach seemed appropriate. After researching the cost of pink flamingo lawn ornaments, I decided that the price was too steep. Months later, through word of mouth I became aware of a property in Florissant, Colorado that had an abundance of pink flamingos. Upon arrival there were many flamingos, but not nearly as many as were foretold. The original phrase intended was *I'm in debt to a Russian*. After doing a head count and only having 49 flamingos, that phrase would not work. Therefore it was decided to create Eric's last name, *Pervukhin* (Fig. 3). Adjacent to Highway 24 was a drainage ditch with high banks that would give me a perspective needed to view the letters. There was only a 50 foot space with enough slope to create the characters. A flamingo was strategically placed on every point needed to build each letter. Each character was 5 x 9 feet with 12-18 inches in between. Construction tape was used to connect the flamingos through line.

One aspect of *Pervukhin* that was important in this installation was the readability to traffic driving down Highway 24. Because of the curve of the land, the letters had to be skewed and elongated in real time to read correctly. This is commonly used when type is placed on roads so that the driver of a vehicle can properly read the word, "STOP." When viewed from directly above, the letters look stretched from top to bottom. In order to increase the readability of *Pervukhin* and as a symbol of Eric's vast knowledge of language, bilingual caution tape was used to connect the birds. The amount of tension put on the birds to create a straight line was compromised every time the wind blew. The contrast of the yellow construction tape with the natural colors of the Colorado high country did not produce the readability I desired, so I doubled up the caution tape. The flamingos, having been exposed to the elements for many years, were brittle and difficult to work with. I did not want to damage the landowner's personal belongings, so

working with the flamingos slowed the process down dramatically. The dense soil, the temperature, the wind, the condition of the birds and even the natural color palette all had to be assessed and dealt with on site. It was unexpected how protective the local residents were of the flamingos. There were multiple neighbors stopping to question my presence. The entire type installation was being built above what was assumed to be the carcass of a deer, possibly a young elk. Eric truly would have enjoyed this uncomfortable scenario. Being cynical of people who decorate their yard with kitsch items, I found it meaningful to be creating a message to my mentor using just such items.

CANCER CONSUMED HER

My grandmother Ena Jean Bass was my closest relative, my business partner and best friend. A day prior to her diagnosis of terminal cancer, we were engaged in an intense conversation about one of the real estate properties we were going to flip. She likely had the cancer for years, but was so tough that she ignored the signs. The next day she went to see her doctor because she felt irregular. She was immediately admitted to the hospital and never got out of bed again. From that day, it only took three and a half weeks until she had passed. Her absence is with me daily and was thus a necessary for subject one of the phrases.

Located outside CSU Visual Arts Building was a construction container being used as storage for the buildings summer construction. Adjacent to the storage container was a high traffic thoroughfare that provided an immediate audience. To begin this project, decades worth of the graphic design journal *Communication Arts* were hand torn. Different consistencies of wheat paste were researched with to find an adhesive that would dry quickly and successfully bond the paper to the container. Dividing the side of the cargo container into even spaces, a sizable margin was left around the *Cancer Consumed Her* (Fig. 4). This white space, also called negative space, raised the focus of the message. The balance between the letterforms and the white space is crucial to the

hierarchy of the information. The letter spaces were marked out 18 x 30 inches with 2.5-3 inches between. It was important to keep the strokes of the characters consistent. When crafting the letters, the paper was torn to create the aesthetic needed and control the line weight. My hand was used as a measuring device and literally had an active role in keeping the consistency. The corrugation of the cargo container had to be taken into consideration for the readability of the type.

When designing the type for this installation, monospace typefaces were referenced such as *Courier* and *American Typewriter*. Monospace typefaces are unique because every character, including punctuation, takes up an equal amount of space. Another unique quality is that the stroke of the characters are consistent throughout. When translating that knowledge to *Cancer Consumed Her*, the effort made to keep the line weight the same created an aesthetic issue with the "m" itself. Bringing strokes of the same thickness together in such a small space looked cramped in comparison to openness of the other letters. In retrospect, the monospace type was a successful choice but could have been a few inches wider. The only challenge that stood out was that the drying time of the wheat paste was unforgiving. Within seconds of its application the water evaporated, requiring that characters had to be created quickly. The irony in using the *Communication Arts* is that I have dedicated my life to graphic design, an industry that influences society on what products to consume. It is my belief that the abundance of cancer today is directly related to the products we put in and on our bodies. The second word of the phrase, "consumed," had two meanings. The first was in the literal sense that cancer fully enveloped her. Second, was that her consumption is what opened the door for the cancer. The installation was much more emotional than anticipated and I found myself tearing up during the process. Developing the letter forms one by one helped me accept the passing of my grandmother. As the installation was taking place many onlookers showed their curiosity. It wasn't until the phrase was completed that

people stopped to converse. As I stood observing what was created, I chose to take it a step further and dismantle the piece as if its time had passed prematurely.

THEY WERE TEENS

They Were Teens (Fig. 5) is a response to the guilt my mother and father carry to this day about the situation they brought me into the world. My dad was a janitor in the air force stationed in Wichita Falls, Texas and my mom had just graduated high school. They had both relocated to Texas as newlyweds in 1971. Before the age of three my parents were divorced. I spent the rest of my childhood being shipped around to whomever was having a gracious moment. The way this phrase is worded is to acknowledge my forgiveness for their choices. They were teens trying to be adults.

The location of this installation was at the end of Mulberry Street, on the West side of Fort Collins. Mulberry extends 50 yards past Overland Trail and dead ends at a berm. The phrase *They Were Teens* was constructed with scavenged 2 x 4's, a pound of 3 inch screws and a \$7 gallon of miss mixed paint. Each letter measured 30 x 60 inches. Because they were built from 2 x 4's, the stroke of each character was 3.5 inches wide. Stakes were custom made so that each letter could be driven into the berm for support. Because of the unevenness of the earth and the need for correct perspective, each individual character had to recede or advance to create the illusion of a straight line of type. The spacing was pre-measured and the stakes were inserted into the ground. Each character was then screwed to the stake. To create contrast from the natural background of the foothills, the letters were painted from the ground up.

It was important for this particular piece to be placed directly in front of the unsuspecting viewer. This was the spot it had to be, though it was adjacent to highly protected federal property. Not only did the installation go up flawlessly, it stayed up for almost two weeks. I visited the site many times and arbitrarily observed the unavoidable curiosity that was created by the installation. This was the first time in three years my

son and I had created something collectively. It was powerful to see him start to understand my career choice. The attention to detail upon making the type readable, functional and elegant in its own right became justified. It was liberating to display a message to the two people who choose to keep me. The reason this location was paramount was that it contained *No Parking* signs, barbed wire fences and mountains. Each element was symbolic of the multiple barriers facing teenage parents.

YOU'RE NOT ME

As a graduate student, I found myself increasingly anxious with the lack of work ethic and accountability exhibited by my associates. There are hardworking responsible citizens everywhere, they just didn't seem to be around me. This anxiety became a handicap in my day to day life and there was no resolution in sight. Through counseling I learned a valuable lesson; I cannot expect people to care about or participate in life with the same enthusiasm and purpose that I expect from myself. *You're Not Me* (Fig. 6) is my mantra to deal with this understanding. An affirmative result of this philosophy is that I have learned to respect and appreciate people for who they are.

The location of this piece was dictated by the origin of the phrase. The structure has multiple sets of skylights that are situated at a 45 degree angle to the hallway. The southwest hallway provided an ideal location, due to the low arc of the sun during the autumn months. At approximately 1:05 p.m. the gridded shadow of the skylight framework rose perpendicular to the floor. Type was laid out digitally and then modified to account for the distortion that would change with the angle of the sun. The goal was to have a successful roman typeface exhibited at the highest point of the sun's path. The type was digitally printed on Epson professional paper and cut to create stencils. Each stencil was 22 x 25 inches. The skylight units measure 24 x 75 inches. In order to fully black out the windows and create the needed effect white packing paper was used to supplement the stencils. The material was taped from the exterior of the glass.

By far the hottest of all installations, the temperature breaching 100 degrees, the rooftop project was the most challenging to install. The paper and tape used reacted due to the amount of heat that was radiating off of the coated glass by warping and melting. Having to predict the dimensions of an ever-changing typeface proved to be more difficult than anticipated. The mechanics of the universe exist without our acknowledgment on a day to day basis. It is not until you are using the light from the sun as a tool that you truly recognize the intricacies of our solar system. Observing the letterforms moving across an interior wall exemplified the power of typography. When I viewed the installation from within the space, I knew that this application of type will be used in my future designs. It took the entirety of a day for the words to move down the hallway and *You're Not Me* became more visually active as clouds interacted with sunlight. When captured in stop motion, the movement was amplified. It was exciting to run into a faculty member and have him comment on how interesting it was to watch a typeface go from italic to roman as the day progressed. A common misconception about type is that italic and oblique are the same thing. Italic is a style of a typeface that is actually designed leaning to the right, and oblique is taking the roman design of a typeface and shifting the letters to be on a right slant. Not only did my installation go from oblique to roman but the state after roman which is called left-oblique and is not commonly used.

CONCLUSION

Reflecting back on the six installations, my expansion of knowledge has been both typographic and personal. There was apprehension in approaching several of the phrases because of the emotional content involved. It was difficult to plan for and anticipate the projects. Yet when the message began to materialize a sense of elation overcame me. Exposing the most intimate and often difficult experiences of my life was both therapeutic and freeing. The physical efforts to construct the type became as

important as the end result. The attention to detail when solving a typographic problem was necessarily implemented in these site-specific installations. Typographically, this work significantly advanced the knowledge previously acquired through my career, specifically hand lettering and movable type. With every piece my awareness has grown of the nuances of individual characters, as well as the relationship between them. The permanence of the installations required sufficient planning and even with the detailed preparation, allowed for insight into the type that would not be encountered working in the digital realm. With the challenges that emerged I researched typographic conventions that had not been referenced since my undergraduate curriculum. This brings forth the realization that it is my responsibility as a typographer to not only look forward but to reach back and embrace past knowledge. The final installation will again provide me with unforeseen challenges that will lead to typographic discoveries and emotional contemplation.

FIGURES



Figure 1. *My Son Did Not Die*, Eli Marco Hall, 2011



Figure 2. *We Make One*, Eli Marco Hall, 2011



Figure 3. *Pervukhin*, Eli Marco Hall, 2011



Figure 4. *Cancer Consumed Her*, Eli Marco Hall, 2011



Figure 5. *They Were Teens*, Eli Marco Hall, 2011



Figure 6. *You're Not Me*, Eli Marco Hall, 2011