Working Against Type: Opening Gestures in Word-based Visual Art

Linda Carreiro

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Cardiff School of Art & Design,
Cardiff Metropolitan University,
Cardiff Wales

Director of Study: Professor Clive Cazeaux
Supervisor: Professor David Ferry
Advisor: Robert Pepperell

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Abstract

My practice-based thesis examines the effects of physical interventions on text and typography, and the signifying potential of these attributes in contemporary art. The title, *Working Against Type*, responds to common perceptions of text-based visual art, suggesting that viewable traces of production—the working—can alter the way we read, experience, and interpret words. Building from and working against assertions posed by a previous generation of word-based artists, I reveal the interventions as landing places where meaning is opened to include tactile, sensuous, and kinesthetic responses.

The practice-chapters analyze the effects generated from three distinct physical approaches. The first, *Breaking Words Apart*, adopts a critically reflective stance to examine interventions on existing texts, as they unfold into mark, texture, absence, and abjection. Diverted from their conventional paths, the reader jumps, pauses and meanders, amplifying the performativity of reading. *Messy Gestures* observes the impacts of the artist’s trace in hand-printed text, where the abstracted and expressive letterforms adopt a ‘voice’ for the reader. The blemishes suggest words as unfixed and uncertain, challenging the authority of text, while offering the impressions as aesthetic encounters that expand the connotations of words. *Words that move us* examines how words are changed for someone who must physically relocate their posture or position while reading. Much of the text is hidden or closed off unless the viewer engages in some demonstrable shift of their body, a term I call choreogrammatics, which highlights the agency of movement on reading.

Through this study, I identify how effects of physical interventions on typography can create interpretations outside and beyond the verbal, lexical reading. In so doing, I articulate a field of meaning for text-based artwork that has been overlooked.
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Working Against Type: 
Opening Gestures in 
Word-based Visual Art

Introduction

I had installed an exhibition, A Form of Words, in a gallery a few years ago, and a viewer reacted with enthusiasm when he saw one of my pieces. “Oh”, he said, surprised that something caught his eye: “I’m not used to even looking at art with text anymore. I usually find it so arid.”¹ I was taken aback at the term ‘arid’, since I experience words as rich, complex and expressive. Throughout many interactions with people, and even other artists, artworks with text have subsequently been described to me as remote, cerebral, and dull. One person noted that when looking at artworks comprised of words he feels there is always a particular inside joke, to which he isn’t provided access.² Others perceive, inversely, the words as a one-liner, read without further digestion needed. People have expressed feeling outside of, or indifferent to, text-based art. My own viewing of a recent exhibition, Down To Write You This Poem Sat, at the Oakville Galleries in Ontario, left me both excited by some of the digital explorations with words and voice, and responding flatly to the now-familiar black text on white wall, or the ‘dead-pan literality’³ of some. Even a faculty member at Cardiff School of Art & Design conveyed his dispassion for works with words, assuming he had already ‘seen whatever text-based artwork has to provide.’⁴ In the words of Joseph Kosuth: ‘One begins to get the impression that there ‘is nothing more to be said.’⁵ Yet, this argument doesn’t seem as present when discussing works of photography, painting or video, long established mediums that cycle through similar approaches and tropes.

My own experience, in fact, has been that those with backgrounds in literature and poetry are more apt to respond to the multiple meanings within text-based

¹ A viewer of my exhibition, A Form of Words, University of Calgary Department of Art Gallery, 2011.
² An MFA student, October 2014.
³ Quoting my companion, artist Richard Smolinski, July 9, 2016.
⁴ CSAD, November 2014.
artworks because of their comfort with words as intersubjective spaces. While contemporary art asks for more open responses to counter the ascribed symbolic works of former academic models—particularly in light of postmodern, feminist, post-colonial and queer studies where the subject is not a fixed-form viewer—artwork with words are not always approached so openly. The post-structuralist argument for writerly texts and the plurality of voices is not well understood, with the term ‘deconstruction’ misapplied to any form of work that simply reveals decay or takes sections apart. This reverts back to the idea that artworks with text are only understood or appreciated by a select group with access to the arguments around language as a construction. A chicken and egg circle, where the reader doesn’t necessarily feel the same space for personal response to the words as other forms of art, in fact reloads the words again as a more privileged signifier.

To add to the perception of ‘arid’, words within a gallery setting have been ascribed a sensibility and appearance by a lineage of text-based artists, particularly those laid down by the Conceptualists. When cursive is employed in an artwork it easily becomes equated with a sense of touch from an individual. Artworks using typography and printed text have, in contrast, become associated with post-studio production, employing industrial or technological means to produce words that remove the artist’s trace. Moving away from the ‘idea of aesthetics as art’\(^6\), the Conceptualists rejection of expressionist approaches found in formalist works—what Kosuth determined ‘decoration’\(^7\)—positioned linguistic representations of the object as a means to forefront the conception over execution. The physical structure of the artform, viewed as unnecessary and extraneous to the idea, needed only tautologies,\(^8\) descriptions or instructions as a prompt. However, Conceptual Art, as Peter Osborne points out, was unable to escape its anti-aesthetic stance: placing words over walls and architectural forms, a viewer would be involved in a spatial relation to the text, eliciting a visual and experiential response.\(^9\) While moving away from overt gestures of painting or the sensuous forms of sculpture, the works still produce an aesthetic encounter, even

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\(^6\) Kosuth, 16.
\(^7\) Kosuth, 17.
\(^8\) Kosuth, 21.
in its simplest impression as colour, form, and shape. In Kosuth’s interest to position concept over form, he asserts: ‘Any and all of the physical attributes (qualities) of contemporary works, if considered separately and/or specifically, are irrelevant to the art concept. The art concept…must be considered in its whole. To consider a concept’s parts is invariably to consider aspects that are irrelevant to its art condition—or like reading parts of a definition.’\(^{10}\) The statement that ‘qualities are irrelevant to the concept’ has been challenged by Osborne in his reexamination of Conceptual Art, and I pick up the task with this thesis. In what Osborne describes as a ‘post-conceptual’\(^{11}\) art field, where everything is determined as content, aesthetics are part of the concept. The words, how words are applied, and spaces in which they reside, are positioned in relation to their context, necessarily placing all the components within a discursive framework.

This research stems from a desire to re-open how we could reexamine text-based work in the 21\(^{st}\) century, proposing we may have overlooked some aspects of visual art using typescript and printscript by assigning a ‘type’ to it. While my interest is not to debate Kosuth on whether formalist art is art or purely decoration, or to wholly criticize an influential movement that vanguards text as art, I am concerned with questions related to the ‘components’ of a work being examined in relation to concept, particularly in works dealing with expression and words. Is it possible that the components can each be separate concepts, when interpreted as such by the viewer? Can the spaces between words gain significance, or can meanings arise from physical traces of making the words? What do looking at these components potentially add to the concept beyond the artist’s intent? Rather than reassert any sense of authorship in the wake of post-structuralist calls for the death of the author (or birth of the reader), or to suggest that the Conceptualist employment of text is no longer relevant, my interests instead are to examine the effects of bringing the body back into play with text-based artworks. What might these physical gestures contribute to the words and to the way we make meaning from them? As opposed to being perceived as arid or redundant, maybe the complexity of words can be revealed through these forces.

\(^{10}\) Kosuth, 23.

\(^{11}\) Peter Osborne. *Anywhere Or Not At All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London: Verso, 2013), 3.
The title of my research programme, *Working Against Type*, makes reference to surfacing the efforts of making—the ‘working’—involved in current studio practice using text. It also conveys the interest of some contemporary artists using typography to make imperfect, often labourious forms that go against text as clean, smooth or effortless. When using the terms text and typography, I distinguish forms of words that are historically associated with the dissemination of knowledge and information such as printscript or typescript, as opposed to cursive. Differentiated from handwriting, the glyphs I examine are printed, stamped, typed, or otherwise associated with mechanical processes, such as in the production of books, posters or signs. In this research study, I also work against the perception of text-based artwork as tautological, univocal and readable, instead proposing to reveal other qualities that enable many ways of reading and engaging with the works.

In Chapter One, *Setting the Type*, I lay out the salient influences and arguments that define the reception and interpretation of text in modern and contemporary art. Particularly post-structuralist theories where text is viewed as malleable, constructed material, are positioned alongside the semiotics of typography to question what adding gesture and material to words might expose. Theories of reading as an active, meaning-making practice are equally nestled with phenomenological encounters, particularly through kinesthetic movement of the artist and viewer, to suggest that alternate, performative experiences with the text and reading are generated. I found that to make readers savour and reread, or to create new pathways that invite movement while reading, the text can open to a dynamic, sensate experience beyond the lexical. Reading becomes playful, frustrating, challenging, participatory and performative, as I will address in all three practice-chapters. In doing so, I analyze what might be suggested by using the ‘wrong’ type; or using type ‘wrongly’.

Following these positionings, Chapter Two, *Print, rinse, repeat*, lays out the methodological approaches to this qualitative, practice-based thesis, philosophically and practically. Using Leon Anderson’s analytic autoethnographic approach, this methodology examines my artworks as the main subject, analyzing the outcomes within a larger critical framework. The chapter outlines key components that induce findings, including critical
reflection on the artwork; the involvement of informants outside of the studio; connecting the work to other text-based artists, both modern and contemporary; evaluating and analyzing the works in relation to theoretical concerns; and positioning my own practice as a central subject in the writing. Looking at the test pieces and resulting artworks as a text, the methodology includes documentation of the works in progress and at completion, as well as recordings and photographs that capture impressions from observers of the work. These documents, alongside an aesthetic judgment formed over years as an artist and educator, comprise significant measures of evaluation. The methodology is based on a structuralist model, whereby I find and define connections, correlatives and repetitions to ground the research gathered from the layers of data collection.

The subsequent practice-focussed chapters analyze the effects and responses generated from three distinct physical approaches with type. Chapter Three, *Breaking Words Apart*, adopts a critically reflective stance to examine physical interventions on existing texts, as they unfold into mark, texture, absence, and abjection. Using weaving, drilling and pulling as manipulation tactics, the words are forced from their conventional paths. As a result, the reader jumps, pauses and meanders, amplifying the rhythm and performativity of the reading. While the departure from linear reading has been established through a generation of Dadaists, experimental typographers, Concrete and Visual poets, the works here posit that less constructed, more improvisational trajectories arising from the physical interventions equally elicit improvisational, multi-modal readings. The resulting works ask readers to hook onto letterforms or fall into the spaces between textual abstractions and play with their associations. This chapter relies on my own and others’ observations and reflections on the work, assessing the potential effects of physically broken and reshaped readings paths, and how multiple meanings can be derived.

In Chapter Four, the second practice chapter, I observe the effects of the artist’s trace in hand-printing text. Whereas *Breaking Words Apart* employs existing texts that are manipulated, in *Messy Gestures* the letterforms are forcefully created using traditional sorts, stamps and typing. Looking at the distinctive characteristics beyond just the selection of typefaces, and beyond the letterpress grid, this part of the research reveals how the resulting abstracted and expressive words adopt a ‘voice’ for the reader. Research from this part of the study
suggests these viewable traces are interpreted as more personal or conversational, inviting sensual and tactile engagement with words. Comparing these works with the clean, post-studio pieces usually ascribed to word-based art, the resulting blemished letterforms infer words as imperfect and uncertain, challenging the authority of printed text. Both informal and formal participant involvement contributes to my own analysis in this chapter, alongside documentation of viewers from gallery exhibitions, primarily: A patina of consonants at Harcourt House in Edmonton, Canada; Testing Texts at the Little Gallery at the University of Calgary, Canada; and Inside Out of Words at The Center for Book Arts, New York City, USA.

The final practice chapter, Words that move us, looks to strategies that prolong and exaggerate forms of movement on the part of the reader, in order to examine and analyze the relationship of movement to responses to words. Much of the text is hidden or closed off unless the viewer engages in some demonstrable shift of their body, up, down, sideways or forward. Readers have to modify their stance, to relocate their posture or position in order to commence or resume reading. Referred in sculptural works as an ‘ambulatory viewer’¹², certain artworks require the animation of a viewer to fully engage with them. The addition of reading text adds another level of involvement whereby kinesthetic movement and relocation proffer a shift in both place and meaning. Building upon syntagmatic (surface) and paradigmatic (associative) reading, I devise the term choreogrammatics to analyze the potential agency of movement on reading. Choreogrammatics is a theory of meaning-making centred around the body’s experience with words, and how the words appear to deepen and shift as the viewer’s movement becomes more acute. This chapter is supported by formal interviews with participants, as well as extensive photo and audio documentation.

Working Against Type is a provocation of sorts—both in reference to ‘of a kind’ and also to sorts, the term for the type tool used for printing letters. I aim to push against some established conventions related to word-based visual artwork, using my practice as a means to generate new understandings within a post-conceptual setting. Within the existing literatures, there is a notable gap in the

¹² A now common term to describe the necessity of the motile viewer role in experiencing an artwork.
relationship of the body to text-based artworks, or even to alternate experiences generated by physical interventions on words. I propose to reveal how the imprints of making and viewing text-based artworks can move words beyond the purely lexical into material, abject, sensate, tactile, performative, and choreogrammatic. Shifting our familiarity with reading, these prolonged encounters assist in opening implications that tackle assumptions of text-based artworks as arid, proposing instead to reveal words as generative spaces inextricably linked to expression and the body.

i. Linda Carreiro, detail of Selection (2015), hand-printed bronze on sewing pattern paper.
Chapter One

Setting the type: Reading the field

1. Introduction

My research questions what significations arise when word-based visual art reveals the physical interventions of both maker and viewer. As a response to the flat, clean, manufactured type that is familiar both in artworks using words and in our everyday experience to print, I propose we have overlooked the significance of type as an expressive gesture. This study posits the body as an active agent in both making and viewing artworks with text, a means of coaxing responses outside of those which textual conventions (which intentionally remove the trace of production) might elicit. Using a practice-based, subjective model, alongside interviews and participant observation, this research project explores and analyzes the effects of the physicalized application of text. Throughout this dissertation, I initiate and establish a series of experiments and artworks to observe how conventional reading is challenged through the bodily interventions on words. My findings reveal prolonged, multi-modal and sometimes intensified responses to the words that move beyond conventional semiotic readings. Instead of linear pathways that assume familiarity, the physical gestures open avenues for viewers to experience the words as abstracted trajectories and formations—sensuous, tactile, absent, illegible or abject, and participatory.

‘Type’ in my thesis connotes on many levels. Firstly, I address typescript as a representation of printed words, as signifiers of language and its ascribed (albeit malleable) meanings. Typography as a form of communication is also implicit, here moving away from clarity and readability to create emphasis, punctuation, absence, and questioning. I also explore type as style, not only in the appropriate selection of a typeface but using the hand-printed attributes to provoke a more tactile, sensate ‘voice’. Equally, I dig under certain aesthetic and conceptual attributes commonly associated to text in visual art, which has been typecast, so

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13 The idea that words are arbitrarily assigned with no relationship to the form itself, with shifting meanings and connotations, has been well expressed by a lineage of structuralist (Benjamin, Saussure) and post-structuralist (Kristeva, Barthes, Derrida) theorists.
to speak. The overall title of my thesis, *Working Against Type*, responds to common perceptions of text-based visual art, suggesting that viewable traces of production—the working—can alter the way we read, experience, and interpret words beyond the lexical and verbal. Building from and working against assertions posed by a previous generation of word-based artists, I reveal physical interventions as landing places where meaning is opened to include tactile, sensuous, and somatic responses.

Throughout this thesis, my efforts have been influenced, informed and debated by significant literatures related to this trajectory of contemporary text-based art. In this chapter, I will summarize the resonant areas of critical inquiry, extracting key areas of significance to this practice-research. Histories of type and printed letters frame the basis from which I discuss issues of legibility and the significance of a ‘voice’ within text. Established structuralist and post-structuralist assertions of language as material, and in writerly, performative text, also form a strong foundation in this research. Theories of reading as an active involvement, coupled with kinesthetic movement studies and phenomenology, particularly for the last chapter, address how meanings might arise from ambulatory reading. Over the past few years, as I made my way in the studio, salient questions arising from this literature review propelled a set of arguments, while the artworks generated their own set of questions and ultimately, responses.

ii. The right type

Typescript and printscript has traditionally been about selecting the ‘right’ type for the job—for communicating the message and the underlying tone of the text’s intention. Even Lawrence Weiner’s selection of *Franklin Gothic Condensed*, with its sans serif, rigid appearance, was the artist’s averred response to *Helvetica*, underscoring his interests in anti-decoration and fabrication (post-studio production).\(^\text{14}\) While my work addresses contemporary word-based artwork that employs text, I look to some key writings from typography history and theory as

\(^{14}\) In an interview for *Eye*, author Russell Holmes states: “Weiner is disinclined to post-rationalise the development of his typography, stating that one of his few criteria was to avoid using *Helvetica*, a typeface he associates with the excesses of late Modernism and bourgeois middle-class culture.” *Eye*, No. 29, vol. 8, Autumn (1998).
a preliminary foundation for this research, an area more readily explored in relation to typography, design, and book arts. Particularly in this study, concepts of readability, legibility and altered reading are examined, and how breaking the familiarity of reading can challenge a text’s authority and open the content. The typographer and editor Beatrice Warde—in what is now an infamous term amongst type designers—asserted that text should be ‘invisible’; it should not interfere with the content of the words or draw attention to itself, instead allowing the reader to glide easily over the page.\(^\text{15}\) She equated this to drinking a fine wine from a crystal goblet, so that the wine—the substance—was the focus instead of the glass. In discussing readability and legibility Simon Garfield, in *Just My Type*, summarizes these concerns as the ease of reading through typographic selection and layout, to ensure that words are effortlessly passed over without ‘interference’ of the type itself.\(^\text{16}\) Writers on typographic aesthetics and history, including Robert Bringhurst in *Elements of Typographic Style*, convey that evenly printed type, evened letterspacing, evened kerning, measured intervals, and open shaped letters, are basic ways of creating ‘rhythm and proportion’ in typeset, so that readers can effortlessly move through a text.\(^\text{17}\) While Bringhurst acknowledges that typography ‘can be deliberately misused’\(^\text{18}\) as part of the content, he asserts that, ‘typography must draw attention to itself in order to be read. Yet in order to be read, it must relinquish the attention it has drawn.’\(^\text{19}\) While Bringhurst establishes the formal grounds for laying readable type, Garfield suggests for a typeface to be readable it also needs to be familiar, something similar to what our eyes have encountered before.\(^\text{20}\)

A century of designers and artists have consciously created ‘impudent’\(^\text{21}\) text by playing outside the margins of readability, using strategies of low contrast, shifting faces, or defying the letterpress grid. I consider the works of type designer Phil Baines, for example. His typeface, *FF You Can Read Me*, is missing

\(^{18}\) Bringhurst, 17.
\(^{19}\) Bringhurst, 17.
\(^{20}\) Garfield, 53-54.
portions of each letter, relying on the remaining curves as an exploration on legibility and altered reading (Fig. 1.1). Like him, I’m interested in the effects of disturbing a smooth reading process, of upsetting familiarity to alter the reading act. Stephanie Zelman points out in Looking into Space, that contemporary graphic designers’ awareness of the post-structuralist theories, for example, urges them to explore the interpretative possibilities of the viewer, where words are positioned so as to invoke connotations and suggestions. Zelman’s assertions are aligned with my own research interests in associative considerations of text, where words are reiterated as aesthetic encounters, enlivening the characters to create emphasis and to underscore thematic concepts. Postmodern and experimental typography are in proximity to this thesis research, wherein I question what creating aesthetic—or anti-aesthetic as the Conceptualists term—encounters do to the text itself. I am careful to distinguish my own work from typography and design, however. While many contemporary designers playfully corrupt typefaces, there are still constraints they maintain: keeping text on the page, usually confined to digital fonts without notable surface mars. With a shared understanding that type can underscore content, I further question and counter readability to not only call attention to the letterforms, but to dismantle and open reading paths. If the cleanliness, facility and familiarity of words are actually messed and obscured, can we complicate and unfasten what is being communicated? I propose this is especially true when contemporary text-based art is not in book form, instead spread over walls, ceilings or floors of spaces.

More recent experimental type-artists (Drucker, Calvert, Beaulieu) have also built upon post-structuralist play using formal strategies of punctuation, repetition and font shifts to alter conventional reading paths and draw attention to language. The notion of play and corruption called for within post-structuralist writings, particularly posited by Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes, may be further amplified through the addition of overt physical gestures and the emphatic materialization of the words. I argue that tenuous marks associated with hand-impressed words tend to counter a fixed surety, a highly designed or constructed set of patterns. I ask what occurs when reading paths are not just altered, but physically dislodged and dislocated, forcing material, sensate and

23 Garfield
choreographed experiences with the text. In what might be suggested as looking for the ‘wrong’ type, legibility and readability are not only not desired qualities in this research, the challenged reading that occurs through the physical applications and bodily viewing are central to this programme.


### iii. Character traits

Lately, it is commonplace for graphics and advertisements to use fonts that emulate the look of antique or letterpress texts, despite that the words are obviously composed on computers and printed digitally. The fonts try to replicate the inconsistent marks of a hand-printed form, where portions of a letter are not intact, or they imitate the surface variances of a letterpress character with visible streaks or small pockmarks. These are marketed with the understanding that they elicit ‘the handmade.’ However, every letter ‘T’ in these copies, as an example, remains consistent, and the paper retains a smoothed surface since the digital technology does not produce a noticeable physical impact upon the substrate. Nina Nørgaard, in her work on semiotic typography, notes these marks as discursive import, meaning they are transplanted into another form to suggest context.24 The example used is the implant of *Courier* font in a contemporary novel to evoke vintage typewritten documents, an “illusory

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index” of hand-produced technology. This discursive import is apparent in my own use of My Underwood font for the titling of chapters and series in this thesis, even though it may appear to contradict my interest in actual hand-printed texts; I employ this strategy to call attention to the character of typefaces, and to visually separate ‘voices’ within my thesis. Nørgaard references, in particular, aesthetic decisions for type in literary texts, and how the choices of face and font form part of the content, a study echoed by Megan Benton and Paul Gutjahr in Reading the Invisible, where they explore the selection of type to underscore the narrative characteristics in literary works.

The decision to use particular typefaces, as Bringhurst reminds us in Elements of Typographic Style, goes hand in hand with the intended ‘tone and timbre’ of a text. The interest in returning to vintage characters—what Clive Cazeaux refers to as ‘the marketization of nostalgia’—is part of a larger traditional revivalism

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26 Bringhurst, 22.
to counter the profusion of technology, here specifically the appearance of consistently printed forms. The selection of type to convey a sense of character is an established territory, particularly in design. Theo van Leeuwen, in his article ‘Towards a semiotics of typography’, proposes that viewers can make meaning of typefaces through either connotation or experiential metaphor. We perceive different fonts to evoke certain associations, both personally and culturally. Through connotations, the weight, curvature, serif, slant, and other attributes of a typeface will bring about suggested meanings. For example, the **ENGRAVING** typeface has characteristics derived from copperplate *engravure* and thus may convey more antiquated or traditional ideas. Experiential metaphors, on the other hand, propose attributes based on our history or acquaintance with similar forms, such as the perception of rounded, balloon typefaces being playful due to childhood toy advertisements. Bolding, scale and punctuation might emulate a speech act, with capital letters and exclamation points used for shouting in contrast to tiny, faint words to suggest whispering. van Leeuwen equates light, small fonts as similar to a throaty, breathy singing voice invoking sensuality due to our associations of lowered speech in intimacy. Eva Brumberger, through a study of effects of typefaces on readers’ perception of a text, provides ‘strong evidence that readers do consistently ascribe particular personality attributes to typefaces and text passages,’ with the data supporting ‘that visual language is analogous to verbal language in carrying connotations.’

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28 van Leeuwen references Lakeoff & Johnson’s connotation and experiential metaphor, from their work on Metaphor.
30 van Leeuwen, 146.
31 van Leeuwen, 146.
32 van Leeuwen, 147.
The significance of appropriate fonts, of selecting one with the appropriate ‘voice’ for the projected artwork, infers a personality within a printed text; however, my interests move beyond the simple selection of type to examine qualities that emerge from not only letterpress text, but from text that becomes more immediately realized from direct hand-printing. Most individuals now are very learned in typefaces, as the range of fonts available to them in any word-processing program or for download are seemingly endless. This has created a heightened discernment regarding fonts, where type is carefully chosen to set the tone of the document or create personality in the content. Nørgaard and van Leeuwen’s studies on the semiotics of type are an important grounding for my own research into how readers perceive and receive varying letterforms, and how connotations can be absorbed. However, questions arise as to what point we can potentially ‘predict’ how a typeface will be received? If Simon Garfield’s notion of familiarity equating to readability are positioned here, could the same suggestion not be proposed regarding typefaces? Could their familiar serifs, slants or curves already establish the ‘tone and timbre’ for readers through their everyday use? As I physically intervene upon type through visual artwork, my thesis asks what alternate character or tone might emerge beyond the fonts themselves: can surprising or unfamiliar elements contribute different or distinctive associations?

Historian and critic, Liz Kotz, in *Words to be Looked At: Language in 1960’s Art*, explores Carl Andre’s hand-typed poetic formations. Kotz suggests that Andre’s experiments with a manual typewriter were not intended to ‘suspend the referentiality of words, but to foreground the palpable, tactile and material quality of words.’ Through pressure, the position of his hands while typing, the limitations of fingers, and the wearing down of certain keys, changes in intensity and depth would naturally occur as ‘inevitable slight variations.’ These factors created, in Kotz’s view, a ‘vulnerability and poignancy’ by revealing the artist’s physicalized imprints onto the paper. Further noting John Ashbery’s typewritten-

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34 Many typographers and typography scholars refer to the ‘voice’ of fonts; this makes an interesting connection to Barthes’ interest in ‘the grain of the throat, the patina of consonants, the voluptuousness of vowels.’ *The Pleasure of the Text.*

35 Garfield.


37 Kotz, Words to be Looked At, 143.

38 Kotz, Words to be Looked At, 143.
collages as making ‘no effort to erase the shattering effects of their dislodging.’\textsuperscript{39} Her suggestions allow us to look back at works of Andre, Yoko Ono, and Dan Graham, for example, with a new view of what these physicalized impressions might infer—before ergonomically designed keyboards and laser printers. My own interests parallel Kotz’s, proposing that other characteristics derive from the direct impact of artist, tool and text—a practice knowledge that drives this thesis research. A history of text can be linked with a performance of the body making gestural text, the often forceful marks of Asian calligraphy or \textit{les automatistes}, for example, positioned the expressive, iconographic residue as priority over a recognizable sign system. In contrast, my intention is to make the text familiar enough to be recognizable and potentially read, but convoluted by the physical application or intervention. Particularly in the contemporary context when digital text is constrained to tidy, clean surfaces, I look to unexpected significations that occur from revealing obviated physicalized gestures, and examine what they might display. Beyond the ‘illusory index’ derived from a hand-made appearance, this dissertation analyzes how these disturbances contribute to the meaning of the words.

The examined effects of more tactile, material letterforms also nods to similar anti-aesthetic use of type by artists in the 60’s, including members of Fluxus. While the Conceptualists noted the term anti-aesthetic in reference to their removal of the artist’s trace, historian Betty Bright describes it as ‘dirty’ type by contrasting crude printing techniques to the ‘fine’ art of typography and type design. Bright notes: ‘Artists who confronted the conventions of letterpress aesthetic sought an alter-lineage aligned with an avant-garde heritage, which instigated debate, and welcomed improvisation.’\textsuperscript{40} My second set of explorations in Chapter Four, \textit{Messy Gestures}, picks up on Bright’s use of the term, ‘dirty’, wherein I describe the more direct contact of hand-impressed print onto paper, and the resulting effects of the blemishes and imperfections for the reader. The notion of dirty—of messy, uneven, textured—is taken literally in this thesis research, as well as the idea of alter-lineage: this study proposes a different trajectory from the clean, clear text we ascribe to much word-based artwork. Instead, type as texture, as abject mark, as pattern or even lace, may create the

\textsuperscript{39} Kotz, \textit{Words to be Looked At}, 102.
\textsuperscript{40} Bright, Betty. ‘Handiwork and Hybrids: Recasting the Craft of Letterpress Printing,’ \textit{Extra/Ordinary, Craft and Contemporary Art} (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 139.
impulse for touch and close inspection, adding sensuous components to the words. Positioning the works in this study as both anti-aesthetic, since they rely on messy, against-conventions printing, and aesthetic, I equate the effects to expressive paint marks and question how these gestures can contribute meaning.

Beyond the connotations and associations—the characteristics—of type, Beatrice Warde’s petition that words not be used ‘in order to gratify a sensory delight’ is particularly challenged in this thesis, to a point of provocation. Picking up from Roland Barthes’ plea in The Pleasure of the Text, for ‘language lined with flesh, a text where we can hear the grain of the throat, the patina of consonants, the voluptuousness of vowels, a whole carnal stereophony’—which opens Chapter Four of my thesis—the emphasis on bodily, sensuous responses to words is forefronted. This ‘bliss’ in reading—echoed by Julia Kristeva’s desire in language—takes place through a rupture or destabilization, where the monotone/monovoice is replaced with sensuality and plurality. How might we add a patina or grain to words? What do these words signify outside their signs, beyond the ‘voice’ of typefaces? I look to the early Dada publications as influential, as impulses for performative, sensate and vocal. Raoul Hausmann, a founding member of the Berlin Dada group, improvised with words, material, format and type application: an interplay between language and the body. For Plakatgedicht (Poem-Posters), he randomly selected letterpress sorts at hand, inking and printing them. Printed in lower-case text, he positions punctuation marks between letters to impede any smooth or logical reading. The resulting poems were then performed by the artist to an audience, a series of sounds projected from the nonsensical runs. Hausmann expanded this play with visual/aural/oral (alongside Hugo Ball and Kurt Schwitters) in, kp’erioUM, where he used font size, bolding and spacing to express sounds in an

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41 Warde, 92.
44 Dada artists used DADA, dada, and other playful variations of this word. I select to use the standard form for writing about this movement, Dada.
'optophonetic poem'. His improvisational poster poems and optophonetics operate similarly to some of the more constructed, designed works of Concrete or Visual poets in their unconventional, sometimes pictorial, reading paths. However, Hausmann’s words underscore his interest to visually depict and imitate sounds, impelling the reader (and himself) towards more vocalized responses to the text. While my work does not propose to ‘depict’ sound, two keys areas of Hausmann’s works are influential in this research. Firstly, the improvisational approach where words are malleable and adaptable, often shifting in pronunciation and shape; and secondly, where the reader is enticed to physically and sensually perform the works.

Here, Barthes and Kristeva are particularly resonant for my exploration of character traits, as I carve under their desire of texts to suggest how individualized hand-printing might reveal the ‘patina’ or ‘grain’, opening sensual, material, visual and even aural qualities for readers. While the research area of character traits in typefaces is well laid out by van Leeuwen and Nørgaard, I ask what the physicalized, fleshy gesture might contribute to our connotations or associations with typefaces? I argue that words take shape beyond the informational or authoritative when they lack clarity, as the grit and grain springboards into other forms of reception; where Velcro-like texture might help a viewer to stick and explore. Picking up on Bright’s reference of the anti-aesthetic, and van Leeuwen and Norgaard’s semiotics of type, I question what significations the unprettified, gestural denotations that mark the body’s scoring of words might open for readers. Could the rupture or break from the familiar letterforms create equally grainy or obscured responses, where visual, tactile and vocal move words beyond the lexical?

iv. **Text = Art**

Engaging in an intensive program of word-based visual art, I am aware of stepping into canons, arguments, and paradigms—both creative and critical.

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Language has been examined, both in structural and post-structural positions, in relation to logocentrism (speech/writing debates); cultural, gender, racialized and political discourse; as expression and repression; as a means of play and malleability. Artists have employed text within visual art to explore a range of socio-political and philosophical issues, particularly over the past century where words moved from the page to the wall of the gallery. In *Writing on the Wall: Word and Image in Modern Art*, Simon Morley traces the long history of text within visual artwork from the early modern era to the present, impressively archiving and interpreting a chronology of artworks using words. While prior uses of text supported illustrations or added poetic flourishes, over this past century the incorporation of textual components in visual artworks has enabled language to act as a potent catalyst for artistic interrogation, social critique, and cultural exposé.

Morley’s text briefly denotes the postwar interests in returning to the body through phenomenology, while also commenting on its absence in text-based artwork. He notes: ‘But a celebration of an art grounded in the life of the senses…also invited suspicion of the mediated, discursive and mental nature of verbal language.’ Works evoking the spiritual, sensual, bodily and expressive in modern art have an uneasy, non-lateral transition into the ‘intellectual’ focus of postmodernism. Words were employed as a means of ‘corruption as part of a ready-made code’, according to Morley, reaffirming the conventions of twentieth century text-based art as one where ‘bodily presence is rigourously denied.’ The most recognized artworks employing typography in the past fifty years embarked upon a manifesto of art that intentionally moved away from bodily gestures within written language. The Conceptualists, notably Art & Language, Lawrence Weiner, and Joseph Kosuth, rejected the Expressionist movement and formalist approaches to art, particularly the sensuous attributes of painting and sculpture. Peter Osborne, in *Rewriting Conceptual Art*, re-addresses the position of

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49 I use ‘intellectual’ with some irony, as the separation of ‘body and mind’ is now understood to be irreducible.

50 Morley, 106.

51 Although Weiner takes exception to his work as categorized as a Conceptualist, he is always included amongst Conceptualist movements and included in exhibitions around this proposition.
Conceptual Art within the realm of philosophy (thought) and outside of the sensuous or visual:

Conceptual art is not just another particular kind of art, in the sense of further specification of an existing genus, but an attempt at a fundamental redefinition of art as such, a transformation of its genus: a transformation in the relationship of sensuousness to conceptuality within the ontology of the artwork which challenges its definition as the object of specifically ‘aesthetic’ (that is, ‘non-conceptual’) or quintessentially visual experience. Conceptual Art was an attack on the object as a site of look.\(^2\)

The idea of ‘look’ as a privileging of aesthetics also presupposes a particular convention of reading. The question with artworks using solely text, however, is how can one not ‘look’ while reading? The very act involves the visual scanning of symbols, made meaningful through its positioning and context. There is an implicit sensuality when viewers take in words, whether beheld in paper or positioned across a wall, as our eyes are—as phenomenologists Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty suggest—interconnected with other senses. I amplify the sensuality in this research to open a form of reading that employs looking, moving, touching, one where the body is ‘rigourously’ emphasized. This question of tactility (or indexicality) is tangentially taken up by Liz Kotz, in *Words to Be Looked At*, where she outlines the shift to textual art in the 60’s not only as a reaction against expressive forms of painting and sculpture, but also as a forceful, performative posit of written language within the increasing use of technology at that time (sound, video).

Not withstanding the range and variation of conceptual production, the text works of Conceptualists, particularly Art & Language, were concerned with removing outward signs of the artmaking process and studio production, setting forth to critique the commercialized art market that values ‘decoration’. In doing so they moved away from revealing expressive gestures or the creation of art objects wedged into valuation based on the artist’s name (ergo by validation of critics such as Clement Greenberg).\(^3\) They responded by replacing the artworks with the linguistic signifiers, fabricating words using signmakers, printing


\(^3\) Kosuth, Morley, Art & Language.
houses, or photocopiers. While certainly not confined to these modes of working, the employment of tautologies and enunciations as textual strategies offered an averred ‘democratization’ of the artwork; the underlying argument that anyone with access to the words also has access to the idea. Notwithstanding the privileged position of this utterance, Joseph Kosuth in Art After Philosophy, asserts: ‘the separation between one’s own ideas and one’s use of materials . . . becomes almost uncommunicatively wide when confronted by a viewer. I wanted to eliminate that gap.’ Kosuth’s interest to place idea over artistic or aesthetic production, and to ‘question the nature of art,’ created what Peter Osborne references as post-conceptualism after Duchamp, meaning contemporary viewers now assume any work and all its material facets to have intent and content. It is interesting to look back upon the Conceptualist’s works and see that they, in fact, have a great potential impact on the viewer’s aesthetic responses: they propose the reader shift their familiar viewing experience of words on a page, and to consider them as forms. By placing words on gallery walls, and making this the focus of the viewer’s experience in that space, the words necessarily impact on the viewer’s expectation of space, prompting certain associations. To this day, Lawrence Weiner continues to assert his works as ‘sculpture’, ‘material’, and ‘experience’, and more recently suggests that his works are ‘tactile’ and ‘sensuous.

While at the MoMA in New York City, I viewed Weiner’s large-scale work, A Wall Pitted By A Single Air Rifle Shot, a phrase positioned over the stretch of one gallery wall between two doorways. A viewer has to slightly raise their head and scan the wall in order to view the piece. This proposes Weiner’s text can be experienced as spatial as well as linguistic, making the wall, the words, the viewer and the space all implicit in the reading act. Employing clean, flat type, the entire phrase can be viewed from a distance without any challenges for

54 Lawrence Weiner uses this phrase to describe his textual works.
56 Art After Philosophy, 5.
57 Osborne, Anywhere Or Not At All, 3.
58 I would add ‘extent’ to this list, as the external or way the work extends to the viewer.
59 Interview with Benjamin Buchloh, reprinted in Alberro, Sperlinger and others.
sighted readers to gain access. Observing visitors to the gallery over the period of a morning, I noted that individuals spent only as much time with the piece as it took to read the phrase. The ‘experience’, it suggests, might seem lost to those did not make connections beyond a flattened set of words neatly appended to the wall. Weiner’s concepts rely on his Declaration of Intent, and so doing, purposely remove his own trace of materiality and process. While it cannot remove the trace of expression entirely—the body of the viewer scanning large lines of type, text as a spatial and architectural element, colour and design choices—my research, in contrast, explores what happens when physical interventions are apparently and abundantly imposed on the text, both by the artist and the viewer. How can the looking, the moving to read text, the gestural application of the words, the spaces between words and the substrate, all become part of the reading and meanings? In the post-conceptual arena, can the return of artmaking gestures and sensuous materiality still be seen merely as decoration, especially when coupled with words?

Like other text-based artists, I am influenced by Smithson, Bochner, and Weiner, but moreso contemporary works by Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, and Mark Titchner, who similarly employ post-studio and spatial approaches to text, with decidedly political underpinnings. My intention is not to object to the Conceptualists’ assertions, understanding that each manifesto emerges as a reaction to something else—in their case, the ideals of Modernist formalism. However, I question how we might reconsider the lexical representation as revealing something ‘outside’ of the words, to reference Derrida, in this case the agency of the body. Ruth Blacksell, in Design Issues, reminds us that publications and printed matter from Conceptual artists, ‘was a context in which the spectator could conceivably encounter the artwork through the active process of reading rather than through any particular form of visual contemplation. I offer an examination and analysis of what happens when we place the expressive gestures and trace of the artist within the reading, whereby we offer the act as visual, material contemplation. Contemporary British artist Fiona Banner’s

61 June 25, 2015.
62 Lawrence Weiner. Declaration of Intent (1968). ‘1. The artist may construct the piece. 2. The piece may be fabricated. 3. The piece need not be built.’
textual pieces are an example of reading being deepened by the physical application. Labouriously hand rendered, her works request viewers to connect the words directly to the artist’s tangible response to a subject. In *Almost Fluorescent Nude* (Fig.1.3), the tension between her matter-of-fact description and the gestural application, proposes the text as raconteur.

Similarly, Glenn Ligon’s repeated stenciled assertions about race (often through references of colour and blackness) bring the viewer into a personal and political space, his overwritten or textured phrases becoming a visceral record of action
with and against language. If linguistic representations replace the art object in order to forefront ideas over contemplation, my work asks how we envision the role of the reader. Considering the post-conceptual arena, can we ask a set of words to stand in for our complex plurality of experience and understanding without assuming some subjectivity? Working against some common assertions of text-based artwork, my research finds an opening of meanings and different ways of reading which may actually assist in undermining the authority, or authorship, by placing the reader as writer, thus allowing meaning to emerge and unfold through their engagement.

v. When words perform

Laurence Sterne’s *The Life and Times of Tristam Shandy, Gentleman*, is often pointed to as one of the earliest examples of creative manipulation of the book page format. A novel published in 1759, the writer broke with many literary and formatting conventions: implanting curvilinear, directional intrusions; blackening a page to indicate the death of a character; inserting a marbled page in the centre of the book; and replacing words with dashes. This early example of textual intrusion invites the reader to participate with the text in unexpected ways. Christopher Fanning comments on Sterne’s use of grammatical or visual disruptions throughout the early editions of the novel, noting ‘This spatial arrangement helps to establish a rhythm and a pace for the chapter…treating the chapter as a score for performance.’64 This score, slowing and speeding a reader’s rhythm, is a significant means of active engagement since it breaks from skimming or scanning a text, something that occurs with the familiarity of reading. Varying sized dashes, with little or no words, proffer spaces for asides, pauses, and interjections that recruit the reader to engage beyond facilely read lines of text. Through Sterne’s attention to the positioning of words on the page—the shift in paragraphical structure and spacing—reading is made a more conscious act. The words emphasize and stutter through spaces, symbols, and punctuation, making the page a rhythmic, active space for the reader.

64 Christopher Fanning. ‘On Sterne’s Page: Spatial Layout, Spatial Form, and Social Spaces in *Tristram Shandy,*’ *Eighteenth Century Fiction,* 10 (July 1998), 444.
Subsequent textual experimentations early in the twentieth century by Surrealist, Dadaist and Concrete poets similarly conveyed the significance of textual intervention to an expanded form of reading. Text as conceptual and visual material freed words from their linear configuration by breaking them and moving them around on pages, creating new forms from different arrangements of text and building patterns from words, often constructing pictorial, sculptural formations. Ruth Blacksell notes artists such as Robert Smithson and Carl Andre, ‘applied classic Minimalist strategies, such as interruption, accumulation, fragmentation, and repetition to reduce and isolate texts into independent units ....’ She likens these formations to their sculptural works, the text creating diagrammatics that propose dimensional objects. Beyond the patterns, interventions were further proposed through orthographic and phonetic challenges, as in Duchamp’s disc poems, replacing words with a homophone to make the reader trip over language. Like Fanning, Kotz similarly notes the idea that text becomes a kind of score for artists. The importance of this formation, in my research, is not just the alteration of reading paths, but in determining how improvisational, unexpected and unfamiliar ways of forming words can potentially coerce the words to be read, reread, performed and interpreted in multivariate ways.

One strategy points to artist-poet Ian Hamilton Finlay’s poster poems, which shift the familiarity of reading by withholding a clear distinction as to the beginning, middle or end of a text (Fig. 1.4). The invitation to readers to approach a text ‘without order of entrance’ enables shifts and veers, with multiple possibilities in both the manner and pace in which it is read. Reading ‘le circus!!’ first leads to the possibility of moving right to encounter, ‘on the right, a red blinker’—words which seem to playfully affirm the reader’s decision about direction. Choosing instead to go to ‘smack’, then ‘K47’ below the initial line, this potential movement back and forth or up and down nudges reading from its conventional linear path, engaging the reader as an active decision-maker in the piece. Words, arranged in pathways that enable jumps (or leaps) back and forth

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65 The term attributed to Parole in Libertià, a group of artists/poets from Italy, in the early twentieth century.
66 Blacksell, 68.
67 Kotz, Words to be Looked At.
and up and down, do something unexpected, thus heightening our awareness of reading. Unlike some of the more formed Concrete or Visual poems, where the reader is lead through a highly constructed iconographic pathway, here readers can encounter the words in a variety of ways—much as we would encounter objects on a circus ground, depending upon where we choose to look first. The spatial and visual strategy, and the decisions offered to the reader elaborate on reading as dynamic: as writing while one reads.

Alternate visual arrangement of text is a well-laid out terrain, as Apollinaire, Andre, and e.e. cummings’ formed words reveal. While some of Finlay’s configurations offer the reader more movement through the text, my thesis further indulges the participation of the reader, offering, at points, impossibly limitless trajectories. Bringing the artist’s physical trace into the arena, I nudge the reading directions even more acutely and apparently. In my first practice chapter, Breaking Words Apart, I examine the potential interpretations of a pick-up sticks formation to text, whereby the words are randomly scattered and reformed, clearly from physical intrusions. Taking up the Conceptualists’ stance against expressive gestures, and adding to the previous poetic and artistic
inventions where text is realized through numerous or unconventional paths, I posit the painterly, material and disorderly into the reading act. What might we have overlooked by suppressing the bodily aspect in approaches to text-based art? Building upon the idea of opened reading paths as a musical score, I further examine what happens when I push text towards improvised jazz or choreography, letting the paths become tangled, overwritten or silenced. Adding the obviated physical breaking of words, through tearing, drilling, weaving, overprinting, I propose improvisational, incidental interventions offer not only alternate, thwarted reading directions, but a form of reading that transfers text into material, absence, textile, and tempo. What might be performed when words are embedded into other gestures? What happens to reading not only when it is moved out of its conventions, but when it is physically realized as such.

vi. Ways we read

Following on the participant reader who can select, unlimitedly, the direction and interpretations of the broken text, reader-response theorist, Wolfgang Iser, describes the process of meaning-making in the reading act, wherein reading, reception, and response are actions. Ways of reading infers not only the physiological way we navigate lines of type, but also the way words are linked together to create meaning. Reading is taught as a progression, usually line by line, and this familiarity can create passivity when encountering some texts. The propensity to scan over assumptions or skip dull parts of a text results from the reading act repeated in the same manner each time. The space of something like a literary text, however, usually requests readers to interpret symbols, scenarios and signs along the way, pointing towards a layered semantical involvement. As Iser explains: ‘Effects and responses are properties neither of the text nor of the reader; the text represents a potential effect that is realized in the reading process.’ In other words, a reader cannot make meaning without the text, and the text cannot have affect without the reader. Rather than a space for passive reception, whereby the reader awaits a coded set of objects posited by the author for deciphering, an active reader draws from and within the writing through their interaction and interpretation.

Similarly, in Roland Barthes’ notion of the writerly text, the reader is an essential contributor of meaning-making as they bring their own experiences and ideas in order to create significance to the words. In ‘Work to Text’, Barthes conveys how a piece of writing, classically known as a ‘work’, moves into a more active space of something called a ‘text’, something written at the time it is engaged with.\(^\text{70}\)

The reader must interact, not passively consume the words towards some awaited outcome or set of codes. In S/Z, Barthes reveals the numerous ways that one can ‘decode’ an author’s words, including semiotic, cultural, historical, psychoanalytic, and metaphoric associations. He separates fragments (sometimes only a few words) of Honoré de Balzac’s Sarassine, to advance how one could create multiple interpretations of the work; his efforts reveal the text from numerous perspectives, rather than assuming it eventuates at a set authorial intention. Barthes’ notion of writerly versus readerly texts emerges, whereby the reader makes meaning in unlimited, ‘constellative’\(^\text{71}\) ways. Works that are writerly, Barthes argues, enable the reader to become participants in the text,\(^\text{72}\) positioning the reader as writer through a collaborative involvement. He states:

> The more plural the text, the less it is written before I read it; I do not make it undergo a predicative operation, consequent upon its being, an operation known as reading, and I is not an innocent subject, anterior to the text, one which will subsequently deal with the text as it would an object to dismantle or a site to occupy.\(^\text{73}\)

Readers, and ways they read, are integral to meaning, and not outside of the words, as Jacques Derrida also argues.\(^\text{74}\) This post-structuralist approach proposes to open texts beyond their linguistic foundations and shifting signifiers, instead evaluating and questioning words as signposts that perpetuate cultural structures. In what Julia Kristeva calls ‘intertextuality’\(^\text{75}\), the lineage of texts presumes a continuous quoting of earlier texts, and rather than fully embed signifiers, readers bring their responses and experiences to these codes. Kristeva


\(^{71}\) Barthes. S/Z.

\(^{72}\) Barthes, *From Work to Text*.

\(^{73}\) Barthes, S/Z, 10.


refers to the space of a text as ‘dynamic’, ‘an intersection of textual surfaces as opposed to a point (a fixed meaning), as a dialogue among several writings: that of the writer, the addressee (or the character), and the contemporary or earlier cultural context.’\textsuperscript{76} Her notion of ‘surface’ is especially relevant here, as layers of accretion, a means of proposing text as texture or tissue (from the root words \textit{texere} or \textit{textus}). Words, as arbitrarily assigned names, are equally prone to shift, adaptation, and reinvention through cultures, genders, ages, and contexts—meaning the text is not static. Not closed in by a firm or final interpretation, paradigmatic writerly texts enable connotations that can even change through each encounter with the same text.

Both Nørgaard in ‘The Semiotics of Typography in Literary Texts: A Multimodal Approach’ and Alison Gibbons, in \textit{Multimodality, Cognition and Experimental Literature}, drawn upon Gunther Kress and van Leeuwen’s ideas of multimodality as an alternating or ‘toggling’ between significations. Specifically addressing this concept in relation to experimental literature, Nørgaard and Gibbons propose that visual and textual modes provide continuous slippage between different comprehensions for the reader. Neuroscience researcher, Tuomo Hiippala, tackles literary multimodality by suggesting that reading paths, the structure by which we navigate a text, and semiosis, the cultural codes that govern how we read a text, operate hand in hand.\textsuperscript{77} Thus, while there may be design and modal approaches to leading a viewer through a visual or textual work, equally there are layers of semantic involvement that determine reception and perception. While I am cautious not to apply a purely literary interpretative lens to visual art, the word-laden specificity of text-based works necessitates that linguistic and literary theory be positioned as reference points in this thesis. However, this study proposes that the material and gestural aspects I expose alongside and within words can bring new meanings. Thus, \textit{Working Against Type} aims to add to literary understandings of the writerly text and semiosis through the lens of visual art. Hiippala submits that what we understand to be reading paths are not cut and dried: they are learned and habitual. Not only demonstrating how nuanced and open understandings might be attained by context, I intrude upon reading assumptions so as to lead the reader onto other

\textsuperscript{76} Kristeva, \textit{Word Dialogue Novel}, 66.
pathways—semiotic, material, physical—where text-based artworks position the body as an active agent in both making and viewing. I propose these intrusions can coax other attributes into the significations, shifting our response and relationship to words.

The way we read, and the very act of reading is examined within this study. Reading, as Barthes notes, ‘is a form of work.’ The assertion proposes that we cannot be passively consuming a text, pouring page over page towards a resolution. The ‘working’ in Working Against Type plays upon an ideal: a reader actively making connections, drawing out nuances, constructing analogies, and finding significations as they engage with words. It also proposes dynamism, an altered way of moving over the text—even to the ambulation of the viewer during reading. This way of interacting with a text proposes alertness and openness to discovery, and my research/practice reveals ways in which movement can activate physical and conceptual interest. The materials, gestural applications, tactility, aesthetics and ambulation all become important invitation points for the reader, as I observe and analyze the ways in which efforted reading begets meaning.

vii. You gotta move

The gesture of my own body making the words is a central part of this thesis, and how these physical imprints add meaning to the work. This research programme also investigates the body of the reader: from the altered pathways that form new rhythms from the text, to the more obviated physical engagement of reading. All reading necessitates a bodily engagement, even if just through simple head movements as we scan lines of type. My research amplifies the movement involved in reading, both in regards to how we are directed over a page of unfamiliar textual patterns, as noted in When words perform, to forcing readers to physically navigate words within a space.

Kinesiologist Maxine Sheets-Johnstone and philosopher Alva Noë write about the importance of movement to understanding the world around us. Not only navigating the objects in our path, our motile relationships can equally generate

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78 Barthes, S/Z, 10.
altered perspectives, actual and metaphorical. Both theorists tackle the belief that neuroscience can explain our complex responses to pictures, images or objects, each exploring the different ways—presence and kinetic movement respectively—that meaning can formulate. Noë, picking up from Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, examines how perception and responses to pictures can notably shift as we move around forms, and how understandings can unfold in concert with this relocation. It is also during movement, Noë proposes, that we are most acutely aware of our interconnection with things around us, since we physically engage with objects and forms that create resistance or compliance to our efforts. He also suggests that, ‘We enact our perception; we act it out’, meaning our bodies can formulate an understanding through physical engagement with a work, but also through the repetition of this action. This idea stages an important concern within my research: the movement of the body can generate new perspectives, and further, the ‘acting out’ becomes generative through a performing and re-performing of reading. Repeated readings that elicit more exaggerated movements, as my chapter **Words that move us** examines, may loosen and unravel layers of responses. The relationship of movement to reading is amplified, the expanded efforts of shifting and bobbing provoking potentially intensified receptions to the words.

Speaking more directly about the body’s ability to generate responses, Maxine Sheets-Johnstone asserts the primacy of movement as a significant form of knowledge, one acquired by individuals even before language. In *The Primacy of Movement*, she forges the impact that movement has on knowledge: ‘In making kinetic sense of ourselves, we progressively attain complex conceptual understandings having to do with containment, with consequential relationships, with weight, with effort, and with myriad other bodily-anchored happening and phenomena that in turn anchor our sense of the world and its happening and

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80 While readings on phenomenology in art (Mearleau-Ponty, Crowther, Cazeaux, Boetzkes) have informed this part of the study, I purposely steer from the word ‘embodied’, as it tends be overused and over-prescribed.
phenomena.’\textsuperscript{84} She suggests that movement is ‘foundational’\textsuperscript{85} to all the arts, because of the muscle activation involved in making and viewing, and ‘in our natural disposition to be moved to move, and in our experiencing other animate beings moving and being moved to move.’\textsuperscript{86} She underscores that physical, dynamic processes involved in movement have the potential to generate feelings, and equally, emotions can stir our bodies.\textsuperscript{87} Writing about affect created through movement she states, ‘To recognize the dynamic congruency of movement and emotion is thus to recognize an essential fact: an ongoing kinetic form is dynamically congruent with the form of an ongoing affective feeling. A particular kinetic form of an emotion is not identical with the emotion but dynamically congruent with it.’\textsuperscript{88} Sheets-Johnstone’s studies of the knowledge of movement gained from dance is relevant to my interests in choreogrammatic reading, noted in the introduction. Within my study, I examine the relationship of moving to reading, an amalgam of two seemingly unrelated activities. Mobilizing the ambulatory viewer into the position of reader, I propose these intensified actions may also heighten our relationship to the words. I look to Sheets-Johnstone and Noë’s research particularly in my final practice chapter, \textit{Words that move us}, where the significance of language, cognition, sensuality and movement form key components of the study; here in the specific relationship to text-based artwork, a form not enfolded into their research queries. This distinction is pivotal, as my research proposes to have individuals experiencing and responding to material, kinesthetic and sensual attributes at the same time as they are digesting words (Fig. 1.5).

Influenced by Sheets-Johnstone, Carrie Noland, in \textit{Agency & Embodiment}, speaks specifically to bodily gestures that can create agency. She proposes that ‘kinesthetic experience, produced by acts of embodied gesturing, places pressure on the conditioning a body receives, encouraging variations in performance that account for larger innovations in cultural practice that cannot otherwise be

\textsuperscript{84} Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, \textit{The Primacy of Movement}, 118.
\textsuperscript{86} Sheets-Johnstone, \textit{Movement and mirror neurons}, 10.
\textsuperscript{87} Sheets-Johnstone, \textit{Movement and mirror neurons}, 11.
\textsuperscript{88} Sheets-Johnstone, \textit{Movement and mirror neurons}, 16.
explained." Using the example of graffiti, which leaves a direct trace of the arm’s movement, she explores the direct correlation of the body to action. Shifting the body from its expected mode and habits, she argues, can potentially generate cultural modifications (an echo of Garfield’s familiarity with typography), a premise that I strongly assert in regards to reading. I question how altering a viewer from their familiarity with text and ways of reading might subsequently shift their responses and understanding of the words. Noland describes Michaux’s inky gestures as an on-going series of works that attempt a kind of ‘alphabet’ of markmaking. Examining these as if through the lens of a dancer with the body as cultural sign, she determines his markations as a record of learned gestures, revealing the ‘increasing range and exploration of his repertoire’ as he repeats the exercise over time. She suggests his body, like a choreographer, ‘combines learned and borrowed gestures in new ways,’ something I explore particularly through active, bodily reading in my last chapter. While Noland sets the tone for movement—for choreography—in relation to writing through theory and theorists, my research examines the effects of the body through practice, and affect on the readers of the work. The research initiates the improvisational, performative reading pathways opened in Breaking Words Apart, and terminates in those eliciting the entire body of the viewer to perform the work in Words that move us. What I term choreogrammatic reading sets up the potential physical navigation for reading, as viewers move over, through and with words at their own pace and level of engagement. Choreogrammatic is essentially the way a body physically moves and is impacted by written words. It is also a push against Weiner’s assertion that certain forms of artwork which determine how viewers navigate a space, is nothing more than ‘choreography,’ and ‘aesthetic fascism.’ I take up this argument in Chapter Five, where I examine the relationship of movement and

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90 Noland, 169.
91 Noland, 169.
92 Noland, 169.
93 With credit to Clive Cazeaux for teasing out this term during a discussion.
text working in tandem, and the impact as readers experience the challenge and dynamism of word-based visual art.


viii. Ready, set, go

The six thematic concerns—The right type, Character Traits, Text = Art, When Words Perform, Ways We Read, and You gotta move—are outlined in this literature review as a readying for the upcoming practice-research chapters, a means of setting the ‘tone and timbre’ of the arguments, to note Bringhurst. They represent the critical themes—concepts of readability and reading paths, of the writerly text, the painterly text, the performativity of reading, and kinesthetic engagement with words—underscored throughout the subsequent chapters, and discussed with varying intensity within them. These outlined issues and debates are threaded in and out of the three main practice chapters: Breaking Words Apart, Messy Gestures, and Words that move us. In determining significant, established critical positions for this study, I posit issues of reader/response, type and readability, and sympathies to the writerly
text, throughout each chapter in varying ways. In outlining these influences, their relevance is understood to be significant throughout my practice, and arise at different points in the subsequent chapter discussions. The discussions of typography and readability should also be viewed as underlining all subsequent considerations of text in this thesis, as a supporting foundation by which the physicalized gestures can be built upon. Since my work deals with literary and language theory, post-structuralist positions of language as plural, writerly, and malleable can be applied to any contemporary discussion on text, and this thesis is no exception. How the physical interventions effect words and the reader, and how they counter previous conceptions about text-based art, are also situated throughout each chapter as I counter established ideas about text-based visual art. Issues of kinesthetic movement, while addressed in more subtle ways early on in the practice, are central to Chapter Five, **Words that move us**. There are crossovers and commonalities, but throughout these salient areas of research, I propose to address these main issues as the basis for my programme, responding to the questions through my practice.
Chapter Two
Print, rinse, repeat
Research Methods

1. Introduction

Print, rinse, repeat\textsuperscript{95} playfully references the application, continuous reinvestigation, retrials and patterns, which outline the methods and approaches for my research programme. Based on a structuralist model, I find and define connections, correlatives and repetitions to ground the research proposal. This approach gathers from a triangulate of data collection—criticism and theory, reflections on practice, and participant observation—allowing inductive argument to evolve from the variety of sources. The practice-based, qualitative methodology forefronts the observation and analysis of repeated patterns that emerge from intensive studio practice, validated by other connections to form a fuller supposition. More intensively, this research is conducted from the ‘insider’ position of autoethnographic research, wherein my studio practice and the resulting works form the subject of study. Included in the inductive methodology is a comparison to other text-based artists, historical and contemporary, and responses gleaned from observers of the artworks, which help to formulate effects generated by the research. Finding commonalities, salient, repeated responses, and analysis of the documentation, I find a space within existing critical texts to brings new understandings to word-based visual art. As I argue throughout this thesis, the conjoining of physicalized text and movement forge a space that has not been previously discussed, proposing future study.

ii. Analytic Autoethnography

Autoethnographic methods have been employed by researchers in sociology and medicine, with the resulting narratives providing key correlatives that allow a picture to emerge—a strong characteristic of qualitative study. Unlike

\textsuperscript{95}I mentioned this title in discussion with a colleague, Jennie Suddick, and discovered she too had used this phrase as a title in a promotion—neither of us knowing the other had been employing it. While not a citation, I still feel it relevant to note her parallel use of the phrase.
autobiographical or lived narratives that comprise many autoethnographic methodologies, my thesis is not a story or account, yet is comprised from the reflections and observations of a practitioner positioned in a dialogical framework with the art and within a critical terrain. Using Leon Anderson’s idea of analytic autoethnography, this research comes from a perspective wherein the researcher is an active member of a community but one who also links, inevitably, to larger social, cultural and theoretical views.\(^{96}\) Anderson’s proposition is a challenge to ‘idiographic particularity’\(^{97}\) of some autoethnographic studies, with corresponding criticisms of ‘self-indulgence.’\(^{98}\) He denotes five key features of analytic autoethnography: the individual has ‘complete member researcher (CMR) status’\(^{99}\), representing and connected to a group; the researcher employs ‘analytic reflexivity’\(^{100}\), wherein constant and consistent evaluations occur; there is ‘narrative visibility of the researcher’s self’ within the outcomes; a ‘dialogue with informants beyond the self’\(^{101}\); and there is ‘a commitment to theoretical analysis.’\(^{102}\) Similarly, Andrew C. Sparkes imparts the significance of ‘featuring of multiple voices, and the repositioning of readers and ‘subjects’ as coparticipants in the dialogue.’\(^{103}\) All of these features played a role in my research and writing, particularly as the study is related to my artwork, but is not about me. In this study, I have condensed Anderson’s approaches into three main trajectories. Firstly, rigourous critical reflection from studio practice is combined with early interviews of text-based artists in Canada and the UK as an ‘insider’ position. Gleaning impressions—both vocalized and viewed—from observers of the artwork in various seminar and gallery settings, I also seek outside perceptions as a site of interpretation.\(^{104}\) The words of

\(^{97}\) Anderson, 378.
\(^{99}\) Anderson, 378.
\(^{100}\) Anderson, 378.
\(^{101}\) Anderson, 378.
\(^{102}\) Anderson, 378.
\(^{104}\) Kearney, 129.
participants in my interviews and seminar discussions, in fact, are noted in italics in efforts to distinguish their voices from my own. Thirdly, I continually link the findings to larger theoretical ideas, those laid out in Chapter One.

iii. From the inside: reflections

Dwight Conquergood, a leader in Performance-ethnography, addresses the significance of the insider reflection in autoethnographic scholarship, noting:

Ethnography’s distinctive research method, participant-observation field-work, privileges the body as a site of knowing... getting one’s body immersed in the field for period of time sufficient to enable one to participate inside that culture. Ethnography is an embodied practice; it is an intensely sensuous way of knowing.105

As a visual artist, the appreciation for Conquergood’s underscoring of an immersive, participatory, embodied mode of research is significant, as it parallels the acquisition of specialized knowledge that comes from a long-term involvement in studio research, with its very direct connection to the body and training of aesthetic judgment. Studio artists, despite usually enacting their ‘fieldwork’ in solitude, participate in a form of research that is often highly embodied and sensate. Despite years of work as a studio researcher and teacher, however, initial difficulties with the reflexive component of autoethnography early in my study meant I was jumping too quickly to assertions about intentions, as the ‘insider’ with intimate knowledge of making. I needed to train myself to look more objectively at my work as a text—to analyze how one might ‘read’ the pieces, in a similar manner I had critically addressed works not of my own making. Much of the first practice chapter in this thesis, Breaking Words Apart, emerges from close observations and analysis of my own work, distancing myself from the intention, where possible, and relying instead on potential impressions as a reader.

Autoethnographic methodology necessitates intensive reflection on my work in the studio, including documentation of the pieces in progress and completion, and linking the research outcomes to larger critical ideas. Therefore, every stage in the studio included documentation of the pieces in progress and completion, finding patterns in the work that both mirrored and contrasted with larger critical arguments, while offering new discoveries. Looking at the subsequent results, photographs and documentation of the works enabled a more distanced, critical stance. Through the removed gaze of the camera lens, I could more easily question and interpret the pieces, seeking resonant patterns to arise—albeit often dovetailed within multiple possible formulations.

Evaluating the resulting tests, documentation and artworks, I also kept notebooks of scrutinizing, insights and any resulting moves forward. These notes included similar thoughts found in a development portfolio, including dialogues and critical questions I was grappling with, observations from the studio, overheard remarks from viewers, diagrams, and copious notes taken from seminars. At many points, there is a ‘debate’ of sorts with myself, a realization of my intent overriding the potential receptions. Going back through the notebooks several times, I used highlighter markers to capture pertinent insights, comments, quotes, recognitions and realizations. Alongside my own growing analysis of how the works were operating, repeated phrases within the notebooks revealed the potential effects and affect generated by the works. This key method of evaluation enabled me to view my progress or conversely, observe when I was stuck in a repeated determination of an outcome.

As a main component of Anderson’s autoethnographic and reflective method (and in fact any autoethnographic study), it was significant to clearly position myself as an ‘insider’ within a community. Early on in the study I conducted interviews with selected contemporary text-based artists in the United Kingdom and Canada, those with a focus on intensive hand-processes to form typescript and printscript. Each of us had in common a use of text clearly created from hand-applied tools and processes, such as embossing, printing, drawing, typing, knitting, sewing, and painting, as opposed to digital or mechanized applications.

In *InterViews: Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing*, psychologists Steiner Kvale and Svend Brinkmann underscore their interview method as
placing ‘an emphasis on the local contexts, on the social and linguistic construction of a social reality where knowledge is validated through practice.’ Obtaining Ethics Approval from Cardiff School of Art & Design and the University of Calgary for work with human subjects, I interviewed emerging, mid-career and established artists, those practicing anywhere from between four to over twenty-five years. Using Kvale and Brinkmann’s approach, these interviews drew upon connections in our work to determine whether a pattern or corresponding set of ideas could be revealed. To that end, I set out to examine the importance of physicality to their artmaking, their tools and materials, and their use of selected words. The interviews lasted anywhere from one to two hours, and became increasingly open and conversational. Over a twenty-month period, I spoke with Canadian artists Bill Rodgers, Lisa Borin, Blair Brennan, Richard Boulet, and my partner, Richard Smolinski; artists from the United Kingdom included Pete Williams, Lou Thornton, Rowan Lear, Mike Dodd, Sheena Calvert, Scott Robertson, and Annelies Egli. My questions were initially steered towards some formal concerns about text and their application processes, but left room for personal, anecdotal, and unsolicited responses from the subjects to emerge. This form of interviewing presents a means of extracting significant nuances and trajectories that surveys or closed ‘yes or no’ interviews might overlook. My questions were set up to get a sense not only of shared interests, but also similarities in approach, trying to underscore differentiations from gestural painters or sculptors, artists who are more often associated with obviously physicalized practice. Transcribing these into written format, I was able to easily denote repeated phrases, common interests and vocabularies, even though I had not met most of these individuals before the interviews. Beyond existing textual sources, these discussions provided salient shared terminology for incorporation into my art and writing.

The most common elements to reveal themselves were, not surprising, the shared passion for language, word play and the formation of words into other forms. The recognition by the viewer of their effort in making words and the imperfections within these marks as denotative of a kind of performance or

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‘event’\textsuperscript{107} was underscored. The selected materials were also significant to their intentions, and in all the works, the ephemeral, erased or uneven application is purposely employed to more accurately reflect the nature of language to be malleable and fallible. There was a collective desire that language be questioned and interpreted, the artist often conveying their interest in corrupting texts: as Blair Brennan noted, in ‘breaking the controlling structure of language.’\textsuperscript{108} Like my own interplay with inverting the words in \textit{Inversions} (discussed in Chapter Five), there was an agreed idea that language is more powerful when it does something unexpected. Bill Rodgers called this a ‘whiplash’ effect with words, which snaps the viewer into attention.\textsuperscript{109}

While I did not, ultimately, include their interviews as part of this written thesis, positioning myself as part of this community helped to bring my own research into focus, allowing me to see common threads in our interests, as well as patterns and relationships in the resulting works. The conversations assisted me in reaching and grabbing important portions of my own text-based works for examination and filtering, of which there were initially too many multiple facets. I am immensely grateful to their participation, and to their words.

\textbf{iv. Looking out: Participant observations}

Adding to the evaluation of critical reflection and practice-based data gathering, the study required that I situate artworks in multiple settings to gather informant, coparticipant impressions, gleaning and clustering their responses. The feedback from informal observation, interviews and photo documentation created a comprehensive representation from which to examine, analyze, omit, and affirm certain findings. For instance, the idea that the hand-printed gesture needs to be obviated to add significance to a voice or character of the type, was gleaned from reactions in a seminar based on test pieces at the University of Calgary in the fall of 2014. When a participant could not determine that the works were labouriously made (seemingly too tidy), and therefore the

\textsuperscript{107} Sheena Calvert interview, June 3, 2014, referencing Deleuze’s notion of ‘event’, specifically as conveyed in Johanna Drucker’s ‘event’ of letterpress printing.

\textsuperscript{108} Interview with the artist, Calgary, March 23, 2013.

\textsuperscript{109} Interview with the artist, Calgary, February 22, 2013.
physicalized component had no meaning, I determined the interventions and impressions needed to become decidedly more ‘messy’.

Participant observation and interviews were particularly important through the research study, as I gleaned salient responses to works within the studio or gallery setting, enabling implicit concepts to become explicit. This was a crucial part of the research in Chapters Four and Five—Messy Gestures and Words that move us—viewing how the works are approached and responded to, especially both visual and verbal responses while reading. Both the seminar formats and eventually interviews with observers provided critical insights to the work, with often repeated or reiterated phrases, helping to track patterns. Observations within gallery settings were combined with the recorded interviews in seminar and studios to examine more experiential responses to the artworks, forming a main part of the correlates in this study. In all, there were 10 participants in the first MA seminar at Cardiff School of Art & Design; 6 at a seminar comprised of interdisciplinary textual scholars and artists at the University of Calgary; 20 students from the Alberta College of Art & Design in Calgary for an artist’s talk; 4 participants from a second seminar at Cardiff School of Art & Design; and 10 formal interview participants in fall 2015. Added to this were comments from informal visitors to my studio, gallery-goers at exhibition openings, and post-observations by viewers of the work. Recording and photographing the remarks and viewable responses to the works created a robust, critical addition to my own reflections, to the artist interviews and to the literatures. To ascertain that what I assumed was being imparted in a particular work, for instance, and determining it was not a significant feature for viewers (as mentioned above in relation to ‘messy’ gestures), made me shift or amplify research trajectories; conversely, repeated phrases or responses enabled me to induce particular qualities that supported the thesis. Salient phrases, such as ‘I become the artwork’, or ‘perform the words’, or ‘feels like a dance’, show repeated experiential patterns from readers. These were matched with the photodocumentation to reveal very physical responses to the works, which contributed to the evaluation. The extracted findings were measured and compared, approaching the studio works within the space of discovery and analysis. In the method of grounded theory, certain resonant findings are allowed to surface and take form; here, insistent remarks about materiality, reading, and play emerged from the seminars and interviews.
Through seminar discussions on my works—one in Calgary, two in Postgraduate courses in Cardiff—I was able to hear and observe how the artworks were perceived at points along the way. Initially formulating, then supporting and confirming findings in my research, these seminars played a pivotal role in advancing my research. The sessions were recorded, with participant permission and anonymity, and played back to glean repeated phrases, comments and criticisms. These seminars were followed with two main exhibitions of works resulting from this practice research, one at the Center for Book Arts in New York City, the other at Harcourt House Gallery in Edmonton. During these exhibitions, photographs of people engaging with the works and informal comments were noted and documented. Particularly the ways that people manipulated and moved while reading the works propelled subsequent investigations, leading finally to the significance of not only the impressions of my physical interventions in making meaning, but equally the body of the viewer moving as they read.

2.1 Page of transcriptions from interviews, highlighting repeated phrases and salient comments, which supported the larger thesis.
In a final participant study, a surveying of individuals took the form of recorded responses and notes (Fig. 2.1) to a set of texts using the same phrase: “it’s really upsetting”. The first sample was printed with a digital printer on plain white bond paper in Arial, with each subsequent iteration decidedly more messed and intervened through hand-printing, paint and shifting substrates. Reviewing the tape recordings, I could determine an average time spent on works with physical and material interventions as notably longer than the same words printed with a clear, black sans serif font on bond paper; on average, two to three minutes longer reading (rereading) and considering the broken iterations than the first more conventional version of the phrase in computer type. This significant time difference is observed in other works in this thesis, such as my previous encounters with Weiner’s work in MoMA, to suggest complexity is added with material and gestural interventions. Within these interviews, the less clear the presentation of words, the less clear the meaning appeared to participants, an important component of this research. Through repeated comments that interventions opened aural, tactile, and metaphorical associations, this information was used in tandem to form more clearly articulated implications in the upcoming practice chapters.

v. Devil's Advocate: Theory tackles Practice

While the studio research guides my materials, ideation, and approaches like an experienced teacher, critical literatures challenge me with tough questions throughout various phases of this doctoral work. Placing my work in conversation and debate with numerous literatures, both historical and contemporary, my research method draws from and responds to these sources as a grounding through which I compare, analyze and induce. The literature review, discussed in Chapter One, Setting the Type, conveys the significance that theoretical texts have played in this research, for instance how I turn the critical gaze of the somatic gesture into one explored through practice and reading. What are the effects on the act of reading, and how do the traces of making alter the words? Anderson’s method of autoethnography involves a dialogical positioning of my works in relation to discussions of Conceptual Art and contemporary word artists from writers such as Simon Morley, Peter Osborne and Joseph Kosuth from which I adopt a post-conceptual stance to
highlight the trace—the expression—in words as part of the meaning. Pushing against the idea of clean readable type as a form of accessibility for readers, I intentionally call attention to words and the aesthetic attributes as enabling a plurality of interpretation. From typographic theorists and writers, such as Robert Bringhurst, Simon Garfield, Nina Nørgaard, and Theo van Leeuwen, I argue that improvisational and painterly impressions can press open specific multi-modal interpretations and semiotic readings—such as materiality—beyond the lexical. I also look to reader/response theorists Wolfgang Iser and Roland Barthes to more deeply explore the dynamics of reading and the opening of potential meanings that occur from breaking familiar reading paths and habits. From language and literary theorists, Jacques Derrida, Hélène Cixous, and especially Roland Barthes’ and Julia Kristeva’s ideas of constellative interpretations and polysemic understandings, I propose how visual art practice can move words into performative and experiential spaces.

Looking at these literatures, there is a notable gap on discussions regarding physical gestures within word-based visual art, both those of maker and viewer. While there are some examinations on the aesthetics of letterpress (Bright, Drucker\textsuperscript{110}), and on the aesthetics of indexicality in type (Kotz), those accounts do not include viewer responses and reception to these physicalized gestures. Studies on the effects of surface and texture have been conducted normally within the realm of neuroscience, and usually in relation to computer technology. Conversely, discussions on movement and gesture (Sheets-Johnstone, Noë, Noland) do not take into account the unusual pairing of movement in relation to typography and reading. The emergence of materiality, sensuality, tactility, vocalization and choreography that occur from works in this study critically situate the overlooked impacts from physical interventions on text and type.

In summarizing the methods for this qualitative study, there is not one method at play; instead a layering of approaches and analyses, each one contributing to the overall findings. The research strongly underscores art as knowledge production, bringing new ways of understanding, of seeing, reading, meaning and movement. Through highlighting repeated signposts, I am able to induce findings. I am careful to say that these are not ‘conclusions’, rather suggestions.

\textsuperscript{110} Johanna Drucker. ‘Letterpress Language: Typography as a Medium for the Visual Presentation of Language.’ \textit{Leonardo}, 17 (1984), 8-16.
that may emerge from the physical intervention onto texts, and which might allow us to re-examine word-based art in a contemporary, phenomenologically influenced context.
Chapter Three

Breaking Words Apart: exposing meanings

If you hammer a nail into a piece of wood, the wood has a different resistance according to the place you attack it: we say the wood is not isotropic. Neither is the text: the edges, the seam, are unpredictable.

Roland Barthes, The Pleasure of the Text\textsuperscript{111}

i. Introduction

One of the pleasures of working with text is in the limitless trajectories that words can take. Roland Barthes describes these indeterminate or unpredictable qualities in text as \textit{jouissance} (bliss), a desire in finding ‘the irregular pattern of its veins.’\textsuperscript{112} In my first series of investigations for \textit{Working Against Type}, I collaborate with existing texts—familiar poems or prose—with the aim of discovering irregular patterns that occur when we knock a hammer against the words. What kinds of effects are created? How do we read the altered words? In \textit{Breaking Words Apart}, the title of this chapter of my doctoral study, I examine the effects of physical interventions on the texts—cutting, weaving, drilling, pulling—and what the resulting fragments and formations might reveal. These explorations determine how forefronting this physical trace, removed from much text based artwork, might contribute to post-structuralist positions on the writerly text; and further, what these might offer to the words in contrast to Conceptualist intentions to remove the trace. The term ‘break’ is not proposed as something beyond mend; instead I suggest the term as a kind of ‘cracking open’ to elicit possibilities of how words will react to physical interventions, like a chance hit to scatter the text. When I rip at printed pages, for instance, the paper reacts but also the \textit{words}. Breaking connotes an active process, a physicality which enacts to sever book pages; an interference with the predictable progression of a text to see what occurs.

When text does something unexpected, it calls attention to itself. Typographic writer Beatrice Warde cautioned against ‘type that intrudes upon a reader’s

\textsuperscript{111} Barthes, \textit{Pleasure of the Text}, 36.
\textsuperscript{112} Barthes, \textit{Pleasure of the Text}, 37.
awareness.’ My interest is to create type that ‘intrudes.’ Detouring the viewer from conventional reading paths, this research proposes more entry points by which we can experience the text, as readers succumb to blank spaces, get lost in furls, jump over shapes, and savour fragments. While visual poets and cut-ups have established that alternate textual formations change the reading, this study suggests unanticipated components resulting from physically formed, improvised texts contribute new means by which to examine both traces and words.

In this chapter, I document and evaluate three series of artworks produced in order to demonstrate specific alterations that occur through physical interventions upon an existing text: Writing and Difference; Entwine (Sons and Lovers); and Capillary. Whereas subsequent chapters in this thesis employ detailed participant observation and interviews, the works in this part of the study are mainly induced through critical reflection and feedback from seminars. Proposing Barthes’ idea of a hammer, the effects on the words are approached in three different ways: by manipulating a copied book page as it is fed through a printer; where a text is sliced and woven into a textile; and a third whereby a book has been forcefully drilled from centerfold to cover, then encased in wax.

ii. Writing and Difference 327, 352, 365

Breaking words in an aleatory fashion for this practice-based research project, it seemed appropriate to begin with my corruption of Jacques Derrida’s Writing and Difference. Derrida called for the corruption and play of texts in order to draw attention to their unfolding significations and the slippery, material attributes of words. This small series, using a digital printer and fibrous paper, examines what happens to the text as result of viewable physical interventions on the page of a book. Scans of Derrida’s Writing and Difference became my source material, subsequently made into pdfs and printed onto Shoji paper, a strong, fibre-based material that can withstand some force. Through Writing and Difference, Derrida argues that words are not stable, instead constantly differing to other texts, thus creating intertextual chains—a premise analogous to the writerly text’s endless constellations. Derrida also refers to decentering through the essays in this book,

113 Warde, 2.
wherein a word is constantly changing signification by what it is and is not. This proposes that if one attempts to define a word, it equally and inherently shifts to the opposite or other meanings. The notion of rendering texts unstable—decentering—proposes the means by which I approached this small series.

The scanned pages of Writing and Difference were fed through a standard desktop inkjet printer, purposely tugged and jigged sideways during the printing process. The thin, subtly textured Shoji got caught in the printer’s mechanism, creating wrinkles, creases, overprinting, and patterns of text (Fig. 3.1). Certain words became enlarged and curved, a direct result of pulling the page slightly left or right (Fig. 3.2). At points, the paper became jammed and I had to pull hard to release it from the machine; the paper tore, with the words clustering around the fissure or falling into the crevice. The uneven, fibrous surface also captured any excess of ink. Blobs of rainbow circles occurred, a result of the inkjet bleeding onto the permeable surface from being forcefully held in one place (Fig. 3.3). Since the ink bled or smeared, the pigment also soaked into the pores of the silky paper, creating areas like calligraphy painting or inky inscriptions. Countering clean lines of type that most people expect—and desire—from digital prints, the patterns in these works created geometric patterns, not dissimilar to the more purposely designed works of Dada or Concrete poets. These works were not organized and constructed consciously, however, varying greatly from sheet to sheet, and revealing my physical intervention through the resulting marks, creases, folds and tears. There was no way to predict the outcome of these experiments, revealing them to be, in Barthes’ words, non-isotropic forms: words became exposed as pattern and shape across the page.

Employing a close read to look at the resulting pieces, there are a number of effects, with a movement in and between different trajectories—material, visual, sensual, and textual avenues—as I will explain through this section. For instance, while some passages in the pages are clearly still readable, other sections are overwritten and dense, making it hard or impossible to decipher. Letters are elongated, incomplete or truncated, slowing down or even thwarting the readability. You can start to read by the conventional Continental pathway—left to right, line by line—only to hit against a cluster of words, necessarily pausing the act. These word-clusters accentuate as shape or mark, many creating a side-by-side rhythm from the curved pattern.
3.1 Writing and Difference 352 (2012), ‘hand-pulled’ inkjet on Shoji paper.
3.2. *Writing and Difference* 327 (2012), hand-pulled inkjet on Shoji paper. The image shows creases and ink-blobs, alongside the abstracted formations of text.
3.3. Writing and Difference 365 (2012), ‘hand-pulled’ inkjet on Shoji paper. The page shows geometric patterns, ink blots and a tear from the force of pulling the paper through the printer. The Shoji paper’s qualities, the sheen and embedded folds, are apparent.
Certain words seem framed by the murkier passages, highlighting the remaining legible phrases, ‘ones own death’ (327), ‘of play’ (352), or ‘being caught by the game’ (352) (Fig. 3.4). They jump out as something to heed, while other areas deprive access to words, forming intricate designs and shapes comprised of the buried, squished, overlapping letterforms. The emphatic words reassert Derrida’s own interests in decentering and playing with text, here made visual. By making the words quite literally destabilized and materialized, they poke and prod at the entire surface, asking the reader to take note of the reading act.

At times legible, the conventional reading paths have nonetheless been disturbed, and reading happens in fragments and sections. The physical actions have created visible intrusions so that readers’ eyes are pulled in different directions throughout the paper, attracted to the more compositional, design components. When they cease to be lines of type and morph into compounded or truncated forms, the words show their attributes as something formed and reformed, and text becomes apparently materialized. For example, in one area of 327, ‘fabric of meaning’ is positioned directly above a smear of words: ‘superimpression’, hooked above ‘reawakened or revealed’ (Fig. 3.5). The very
words suggest mutability and discovery, reaffirmed by their reformatations into blocks on the page. Half printed fragments and a large shadowy ‘except’ enable words to be plucked and pulled from the totality of the text, breaking into little arrangements that deny legibility, in some instances. These illegible words squeeze the reader into other forms of reading, where typography can be considered as expressive gestural mark, pattern, and material, something that will be examined in depth in the subsequent chapter, *Messy Gestures*.

Whereas Laurence Sterne’s playful novel, discussed in Chapter One, uses dashes, spaces and paragraph formations to make the page more performative, here the punctuated, patterned, and broken areas enable readers to move in multiple directions over a text. Thus, instead of just pausing and slowing reading, as Sterne’s effectively does, here the reading act is non-prescriptive, actively catching and releasing the reader in different ways, since the stoppages and jumps are less defined and less limited. The reader encounters tears, silken paper, rainbow blobs, stretched wordforms and thread-like letters, whereby the words can become lost and non-navigable. Forcing the reading through a series of stops,
starts, jumps, hesitations and protractions, the oscillation and expanded movements over the page allow readers to experience multiple layers—sometimes simultaneously. As Alison Gibbons points out in *Multimodality, Cognition and Experimental Literature*, we cannot stay focused on only one aspect when there is a strong interplay of elements; here adding even more components from the sheen and folds of rice paper, surface tears and strong shapes, trying to manouevre through the words necessitates a shift in our prescribed reading habits. The pace, the path, and the words are changed, as the text interanimates with other strong components, breaking the structure and the experience of reading itself.

![Image of page with text]

3.6. Detail of *Writing and Difference* 352 where the words appear to reassert the break of the structure.

Derrida’s own interest in questioning the structural aspects of texts is punctuated through the physical interventions: at the top of 352, the words ‘orient’, ‘balance’ and ‘unorganized structure’ curve and shift directly above ‘principle of the structure’, the letters of ‘principle’ visibly breaking apart (Fig. 3.6). These words seem to playfully point to and emphasize the results of my actions, and to the open-ended way this work can be approached. Breaking down the ‘principle’ of how we read and approach texts underscores the post-structuralist interest in questioning singular coded meanings, made apparent through the trajectories
offered. Here, the visual underscores the textual, with the words’ emphases displaying a breakdown in the structure through fractured, unstable wordforms. This allows viewers to import the words as signs, without reading line for line, but also opens potential encounters in other ways, such as where text breaks into pattern, mark and material. Gibbons discusses a similar effect on ‘reading’ and meaning in experimental literature:

Moreover, since multimodal novels exploit the visual surface of the page to communicate their story, the readerly performance of transportation from the discourse-world and submersion into the text-world is not as fixed as with traditional literary forms. Rather, a slippage occurs between discourse-world and text-world, in which the surface of the book’s pages also become a significant conceptual plane. In other words, multimodal texts demand a dynamic reading strategy in which the reader must ‘toggle’ between the mediating textual surface and cognitive worlds.\(^{114}\)

This toggling in the *Writing and Difference* series proposes that signification can shift between reading the words with multivariate associations, while also reading the page as composition, patterns and iconography for visual, conceptual engagement. Thus, the reader can move from word to word across the page, picking them up as punctuations, but also notice them amongst the design as formations. As you start to read lines, immediately you are confronted with a cluster of overwritten words: sometimes penetrable, but more often than not posing as shape and scribble. The reader is stalled at points, having to look into the patterns to retrieve lost words, actively working at the text, which has now made itself dense and noisy. At the same time, this anxious overprinting becomes markmaking, creating patterns and vibrations through the double, overlapping letters (Fig. 3.7). While one might make comparisons to the previously constructed posters of the Dadaists or the formed words of the Concrete Poets, where words begin to change shape, overlap and call attention to their visual composition on the page, the pages of *Writing and Difference* are disorganized through improvisational physical interventions, and the reading act follows suit. This is important, since the reader is not guided through a set of ordered words eventuating at an end point or outcome; instead, the words here warp, curve and cluster into shapes, making the page a space for visual exploration, aesthetic engagement and transmogrified text. Like a drawing or painting, the marks,

\(^{114}\) Gibbons, p. 114.
fragments, and shapes are open for reception; as text loses its lexical significance, these openings invite readers to move over the page in manifest ways.

Depending on the pathways the reader selects, certain words will come forth as significant, with the clusters of words taking shape visually and conceptually. But even blank spaces are significant, places where readers pause between the busy textual intersections. The negative space around the forms not only reiterate the shaping and fragmenting of the words, it becomes another way the reader participates in the text. Wolfgang Iser, in *The Act of Reading*, points to these gaps as spaces of indeterminacy and reconstitution, where readers start to make connections between salient areas of the text. Within the series, spaces between the dense words draw attention to the silken surface of the paper with definite wrinkles, creases and folds, particularly in 327. This emergence, awareness, of the materiality contributes a significant ‘modality’ of reading beyond conventions, bringing new propositions to the idea of multimodality. Materials are

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[115] Iser, 168.
immediately linked with touch and sensuality, generating a response to the pieces that are both outside of and connected to the words. Whereas conventional printing on bond paper will not likely cause a reader to note anything beyond the text, here the sensuous surface, crinkles and resulting shadows bring subtle dimensionality that interacts with the words.

A tear on 365 takes on particular resonance: clearly not a thin, straight tear from bond paper, this rupture separates the soft fibres in an uneven manner, creating a small mound of material from the tension (Fig. 3.8). Words appear to march towards the fissure, almost quaking; they fall around or into the split, emphasizing its impact. At the same time as the tear disables words, it draws attention to the substrate’s pliable characteristics, able to be yanked and tugged.

3.8. Writing and Difference 365, detail, showing overprinting and tear.
through the printer with some compliance, but ultimately breaking the tough fibrils. The spaces between words—as surface, silence, fibre—also more deeply propose activity and performance, highlighting the creases and folds as traces of the physical interventions and their effects on the material.

Materiality is equally apparent in the textual areas. On the rice paper, words appear almost as sweeps from a large calligraphy brush. The layered words, when viewed closely, create marks similar to etched or engraved lines, particularly on the soft surface of the paper. Letterforms hook onto the ones beside and in front, calling attention to the curves, circles, dots and lines, recollecting common attributes of all written language. The paper is like silk, and equations can be made with embroidery between the fine black ‘threads’ of the letters, and the rainbow blots of ink, spreading into the fibres like watercolour or sumi on rag paper. The silken surface, the gathered ink, the creases that appear more fabric than paper, the tears: all call attention to the materiality and alteration of the surface. At this juncture, the reading act oscillates between letter, word, mark, and shape, making an interplay of signs, while opening material as another form of meaning. These significations also visually support both structuralist and post-structuralist propositions of language as material, here displaying the theory of mutable words; as a series of marks, curves and dots, formed together to make meaning, the constructed text resumes its state as glyph, as drawing.

The collaboration between printer, artist and text leaves traces of the intervening process, and the obviated process of manipulation renders further significance. These physical indices are noticeable through the overall to and fro direction of the paragraphical curves as I pulled the paper left and right during printing. Barthes hammer into the text is salient here, allowing the machine and I to work together to establish a particular movement as paper is fed through the feeder, only to have it thwarted with unpredictable results. The crimps, creases, incidental smears and stretching bring attention to the manipulation that enacted upon the words. Anyone who has had to pull their jammed paper from a printer, or opened the machine to retrieve the crumpled remnants of a document, will recognize the frustrations behind this work. Most viewers would be immediately aware of the upset to the technology: jamming, ripping and curving letterforms instead of feeding cleanly through. Thus, alongside the sign, image, design and
material qualities, these somatic iterations call forward additional meanings for 
readers who might interpret the work as a trace of action. For example, a student 
at an MA seminar in Cardiff asserted that his recognition of the tampering in 
*Writing and Difference* allowed him additional access to the works, since he 
recalled his own frustrations with unintentional jams. He noted that he could 
“play through” the series, likening it to accompanying on an air guitar when 
listening to music.\(^{116}\) His intimate experience of this physicalized feature 
triggered an imagined bodily encounter with the artwork, one where he could 
visualize an interaction with the machine. The broken words, here viewably 
intervened, enabled him a connotative way to play along with the work, like an 
invisible instrument. For the reader, as the physical interference creates attention 
to the *manner* in which words are printed, this, in turn, enables another veering 
from the conventional textual path, towards an empathetic or embodied impact. 
The rips, creases, folds in *Writing and Difference* are reminders of the physical 
response of the pages to my manipulation, which alter the text from flattened, 
clean letterforms. In essence, these surface articulations are a performance of 
making the wordforms, and inversely, these effects perform along with the 
altered words, contributing to the viewer’s physical reading motions. The 
conventional left to right reading path has been replaced by less predictable, 
more scattered reading. These movements present reading as ever-shifting 
action: sometimes staccato, sometimes plodding, other times paused or reversed. 
This change in movement, a choreography, consequently alters the readers’ 
impressions and understandings, as the evidential destabilizing efforts make it 
harder to perceive the words as static or arid, as eventuating at one outcome. 
When compared to the tight clear textual works fabricated by machine and neatly 
appended to a wall, these works upend a similarly clean reading. By vigourously 
manipulating the words and featuring the material properties of paper and ink, a 
marked disturbance of line-by-line reading occurs. The slowing, snapping and 
shifting of the reader’s actions proposes reading as improvisation, more 
experiential and participatory—*played through*. In this way, the motions of 
reading echo the manipulability of words, revealing their potential to be 
formulated and experienced in unpredictable ways.

\(^{116}\) From an MA seminar at Cardiff School of Art & Design, June 20, 2013.
Crossing my own reflections with those of gallery goers and seminar participants, the repeated recognition of the labour within this work called attention to the physicality, but also to the resulting opening of text. As one participant in my studies noted: “It doesn’t tell me ‘read me this way’. It tells me, ‘read me whichever way you see, want.”117 As with Barthes’ notion of the writerly text, the removal of reading paths, but also the additional attributes from the forces, create a visual, sensual and material demonstration of the constellations provided the reader. While someone may find no access at all to these pieces— which could be argued for any text or artwork—those who opt in would find few clearly determined paths or determined code. Instead of viewing the traces as ‘subjective’ and ‘useless to anyone’ without connection to the maker,118 as Kosuth avers, participant comments suggest they offer another way ‘into’ the text, allowing not a portrait of the maker, but another form of recognition and signification. There was no inference that the physicalized traces point to a ‘biography’ of the artist; conversely, they suggest an opening for the viewer’s own phenomenological experience and interpretation.

Alison Gibbons likens experimental literature, where words are constructed as icon, to a ‘windowed object’119 where one form opens other windows of association. She suggests this as a mediating movement between two ways of considering the text: one being the content of the words; and the second, the visual surface of a page. Observing the many trajectories that the Writing and Difference series offer, the physicalized improvisations enable movement between emphases, and with them, even more ways of receiving and perceiving the resulting gestures. Thus, a reader can move between the tear, the overwriting, the scrimped, silken surface, or the absences, each aspect offering alternate ways of reading and meaning-making. While a generation of text-based artists have maintained the stance of language as material, this work displays language as manipulated, unstable material by making the text, the pulling, and the substrate inextricably intertwined. Recalling Kristeva’s interest in the intersection of textual surfaces, the combination of attributes and ways of reading through these layers moves beyond a representation or assertion of materiality of words, into a

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117 Calgary participant, October 5, 2015.
118 Kosuth, 22.
119 Gibbons, 115.
threaded network where words shift not only their meanings, but intertwine and commingle as, with, and around material.

iii. *Entwine (Sons and Lovers)*

As materiality emerged as a significant attribute in *Writing and Difference*, I was interested to manipulate found texts more conspicuously, moving the words from a flattened two-dimensions to create a kind of textile. Building upon the chance cut-ups originated by the Dadaist, Tristan Tzara, and made popular by Brion Gysin and William S. Burroughs, I acquired a battered hardcover of *Sons and Lovers* by D.H. Lawrence for 50¢, its spine held rigidly with overly thick adhesive and binding tape. Sections of the book, decades ago stitched together and laden with glue, were pulled apart and released from the confines of a badly damaged cover. The book sections were then taken to the paper cutter and sliced into elongated strips across the width of both sides. Once into strips, a weaving procedure began through a loose improvisational warp and weft. This dismantling and reconstruction of the material is significant: taking the form of a book into the form of a textile, and also taking the words along with it, into new trajectories.

Weaving the strips together, the title *Entwine (Sons and Lovers)*, came forth: a cheeky reference to both the theme of the source story—family, relational and sexual entanglements—and a reflection of the weaving process, where words become entwined and enmeshed. The fragmented sentences are positioned as a texture, wherein random phrases, words, or page numbers became highlighted. Here, rewriting multiple stories through fabricating the strips, words move in and out of the weaves, losing their orientation; this, in turn, both opens and thwarts the reading paths. Sometimes one or two lines of the story are visible, either fully or partially: ‘have a cup of Benger’s, she says’; ‘He was always very gentle if anyone were ill’; ‘Then night came up in dark blue vapour.’ These curled ribbons reveal only traces of the characters, plot and setting, removed from their entirety (Fig. 3.9). Unlike the pages of the book, with the organizing principle of lines, margins, chronological pages, the words in *Entwine* illuminate the physical dismantling of a narrative: if the reader tries to follow one sentence, they are quickly forced to a new passage. The weaving here naturally entangles the
words, the resulting tapestry offering multiple possibilities for the viewer who can choose to begin or end the reading process at any point in the piece. For instance, a viewer can read words as quick pulsations, finding highlighted phrases that emphasize or resonate, then rescan over the sea of words until others stand out. Like a seek-and-find game, repeated patterns, salient words and anomalies arise from the texture. Reading is clearly disrupted by the disappearance and transition of words, the chance connections made between random contingencies creating new texts from the old. As with the writerly text, readers come to pleasure in the finding, not in the finality. Far more complicated and infinite than the more contrived efforts of Finlay’s spatial configuration, instead of being limited by the space of a page or paper, the curled strips provide an equally circuitous or tangled form of reading—like navigating around an unknown city with only a few discernable markers (Fig. 3.10).
The intricate, complex surface moves text into tapestry. Through the altered, thwarted reading, *Entwine* brings illegibility to focus as a form of reading and signification—as inaccessibility, longing and discovery. At many points only half the words remain, with the tops or bottoms bisected by the paper cutter. The weaving revamps the remaining words and blank strips, becoming unreadable, mute at points. Like a nubbed or decorative surface of fabric, the typography creates an overall ground of small dark marks against the curled ivory ribbons. Viewers can try to follow the fragmentary text, but not without slipping at some point into the textural aspects. I start to read ‘She stood and looked’, before it is subsumed under a curved, whitened strip that intervenes with the passage, bringing me into a sea of other curls. Like trying to keep track of which wave is
which on an ocean, the small printed font slides into material as the text ultimately insists itself as pattern. Viewers can jump and land on words to explore them, but soon become lost in the busy textile. Concealment and revelation emerge as other propositions, frustrating and derailing reading, as text oscillates between textility and textile (Fig. 3.11). The words in Entwine lose their narrative or information abilities: their truncation shifts our reading habits as we are forced to imagine the space of their absence. This sudden loss jars the reading of the text, but their illegibility also offers words as sensual and tactile as we fall below the surface. Reading shifts between our interest in interpreting the words to our interest in touching the forms.

3.11. Entwine, close-up, showing bisected words, blank strips and partial sentences.

Entwine also interestingly establishes an entwining or weaving effect in relation to the text of the novel. The appearance and disappearance of characters, the intricate connections, the truncated conversations, seem to play with the source
text, visually conveying the entangled theme of the book. Not only placing words together that are remote in the conventional, linear setting of the source book, the weaving process also importantly conveys how the attributes of physically formulating the work can purport additional significance. Like the overtly physical pulling in *Writing and Difference* series, the apparent labour of weaving offers significance to time and efforts of making; but it also proffers visibility and invisibility—obstruction—as significant. These concepts become analogous to digging under any text, discovering more meanings with greater effort and then shifting suddenly towards yet another interpretation. Iser reminds us of the significance of readers to the meaning of the text, as participants in both ‘written’ and ‘unwritten’ aspects.\(^{120}\) Here the basis that applies to literary texts can be taken further, as there is no constructed framework in which the author hopes the reader will engage. The existing framework has been sliced and rewoven, so that reading paths are wholly unfamiliar. We recognize words and our habits want to follow these partial sentences, but this thwarted effort provokes us to contribute our own associations and assumptions to the work. The very act of reading, and the meanings that follow, are unfamiliar and unscripted. In discussing how correlatives and interpretations are actively gleaned from the text, Iser notes that when something is familiar it is ritualized, with less chance of active meaning-making on the part of the reader; unpredictability on the other hand, serves to animate curiosity, play and stimulation.\(^{121}\) With *Entwine*, the loss of conventional reading parameters forces new patterns of engagement and movement, which serves to alter the experience with the work. The words are familiar landing spots, and our recognition of them draws us into the work. Their twisting, turning arrangement, however, pulls us into unfamiliar terrain. Beyond constructed visual poems, the randomness and seemingly infinite possibilities of word paths here enable a multitude of approaches, a different rhythm and movement over the piece, one that varies each time. The corruption of the text and the opened pathways shifts the navigation and the subsequent meanings, as words open into material, textile and pattern.

Just as the spaces in *Writing and Difference* call attention to the creases and folds as manipulation, the interrupted words here are clearly brought about by

\(^{120}\) Iser, 168.

\(^{121}\) Iser, 134.
methodical effort that consequently make reading more challenging and labourious. The active space of reading, which Iser proposes, demands new meanings, new connections. Here, we see the text has been dismantled and decentered, and this proposes that all texts can be treated similarly, as open-ended and manipulable. The words still emerge as forms, but their submergence into other forms suggests that words, viewably broken apart, can perform as complex, generative and open signifiers. Even the edges of the tapestry, left loose and incomplete, infer that the piece can be added to or unraveled in a continuously shifting set of pathways and options. Made even more apparent in *Entwine* than *Writing and Difference*, the deprivation of conventional reading paths doesn’t simply offer, but necessitates new forms of reading. While distinctive abstract patterns emerged in the previous series, the evanescence created by the sea of twisted strips creates words that are unsettled and unfixed, depriving readers a smooth sailing of text. Through the obstacles provided by weaving, reading is magnified as tactile and in process, constantly shifting and incomplete.

**iv. Capillary**

Opening many ways of reading through physical intervention has been integral to this chapter. Through the attention to material and viewable forces, the unexpected striations that result propose readings beyond conventional semiotics. The improvisational fissures expose visual, tactile and material referents, adding other attributes and inferences to the words. For the final work of this part of the research, I determine to ‘hammer into the text’ more overtly and forcefully by rending and gauging into a book. This work is part of a series of altered books placed in vitrines, an influence from prior research trips to medical museums. My interest was to look at text as tissue—a relationship of the root word of text, *texere*, meaning ‘texture’ or ‘tissue’. Viewing the words as a potential form of dissection, experiments entailed cutting into books with only threads of text remaining. One of these works, *Capillary*, consists of a discarded copy of *Wuthering Heights*, bored nearly 100 times from centrefold to cover with a powerdrill and varying sized bits. After drilling, the book was laden in melted beeswax and paraffin, the holes interlaced with delicate threads (Fig. 3.12). Much of the text is unreadable beneath the wax, while the book’s title is still apparent.
on the cover so viewers can trace the source. The small codex, filled with fissures and heavy with wax, was then suspended from two hooks onto the lid of the Perspex vitrine, the entire piece treated as a ‘specimen’ to be viewed.  

Crude fissures with ripped edges, crooked angles, and uneven circles, are traces of the rapidly moving tool and my struggle and counterforce, through a couple of hundred pages of thickness. Coatings of wax solidify these torn edges, sealed into permanent abrasions that interrupt the text. In contrast to the other works in this chapter, these pages retain the recognizable linear elements of type but only as a residue under the waxy surface. This remnant of familiar reading paths and the still-recognizable shape of the book bring numerous associations, connotations and interpretations to ‘reading’, particularly the abject appearance of the work.

122 The series was initiated by a remark from my previous Director of Studies, David Ferry, during a committee meeting in February, 2012, who encouraged my words be treated as specimens—a recommendation I playfully interpreted.
The text is barely visible, transparent behind the wax, becoming more mark than information as words meld into other words, indistinguishable as to their position, front or behind (Fig. 3.13). Darkened lines with a few buoyant words become reminders of the conventional reading paths; by highlighting their recognizable linearity, but without clarity of the words, they become mnemonics for the act of reading. One viewer remarked: “Their [words] removal makes me question their absence.” When something is absent, it makes us aware; the words’ submergence calls attention to their inaccessibility, much like the illegible sentences in Entwine. Interrupted and broken by drilled perforations and the coating of wax, words leap out of the milky surface—breaking out of the material, becoming material. Another reader similarly suggested the relationship of the words to the waxy substrate:

They’re sharing the ground. The wax seems almost permeable, a membrane. There is a transmission between material and the text beneath it. The words are harder to read and so they become ambiguous, ephemeral. The whole thing brings me closer, and yet the message seems almost transient.

3.13. Capillary, page detail showing much of the text melded into the layer behind, suspending conventional reading

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I recall the works of Cy Twombly, who inscribes words and phrases into paint, then smears through the wet media to erase part of the text. As a viewer, the still-visible sections of words—partial or whole—become temptations, slices of a hidden message. The impulse is to peel the paint back to read underlying words, yet they are immersed and out of reach. Similarly in Capillary, the words become enmeshed with the material, submerging and emerging at points across the pages. As certain words come forward, others are absented, deprived, erased. Whereas the dashes or blank spaces in Tristram Shandy invite the reader to envisage what might occupy that space, the submerged areas here assert a conversation or piece of information that awaits excavation. This frustration proposes to animate the curious reader, who might conceptualize the missing portions (Iser), as with both Entwine and Writing and Difference. Reading is visually interrupted by the holes, erasures, and milky coatings overtop. The lines of the story are physically changed in appearance, in form. The erasure of the words through fissures and wax coating becomes a signifying act: text hidden, like the Twombly works, provoking an understanding that something has been covered. This signification of erasure—of concealment, banishment, removal, disguise—can be traced to a history of forbidden, censored words. Here, they have been quieted and muted, unable to be unearthed even with the removal of the wax. Reading becomes an archaeological exercise, necessitating attention, focus and imagination to uncover meanings. As a participant in my interviews noted: “it takes effort to decipher the words.” It is a part of Capillary that becomes strangely inviting: the faintly familiar lines of a book page overwritten, fragmented, arising and falling under the wax surface. The words that are absented or nearly there, ready for uncovering, give attention to their potentiality. This potential enables the reader to be an active participant in making the text, as both Iser and Barthes purport.

With the added materiality and apparent physicalized force, however, the words move from the purely literary terrain into visual, material and experiential terrain, forcing words to be examined in unfamiliar ways and unfamiliar contexts. The multimodal openings that Gibbons and Nørgaard discuss, move beyond the toggling of icon and sign within experiential literature or concrete poetry, to envelop a wide set of potential signifiers that includes sensual, material, tactile and gestural.
Similar to the *Writing and Difference* series, the remaining legible words in *Capillary* take on prominence as they dangle between hidden others; similar to *Entwine*, the strips of words are small and require intimate distance. The residue of linear reading paths, submerged beneath wax but still recognizable, beckon our familiarity with the action of conventional line-by-line reading where we progress towards an outcome. The remaining revealed text is only accessed with effort; as certain words emerge, we search for others submerged amongst the patterns, through textures and around fissures. Like my other explorations with words, *Capillary* entails a shift in reading, moreover, frustrating reading. Making the viewer move closely, intently, to decipher a clouded phrase, they are forestalled as they seek others, faintly viewable. This makes the searching for words an expanded experience, creating undulating jumps while scanning the shiny surface, or resulting in stilled, attentive pauses. The words, fragmented and read in pieces, mirror the way that we approach printed texts, not line for line faithful reading, but in, as Barthes notes, a series of pauses and gestures where our attention shifts: ‘I read on, I skip, I look up, I dip in again.’ The dip here is particularly resonant, as it reflects the dipping in and out of the surface from beneath the wax. Reading seems more conscious because it is slowed and stalled; the searching calls attention to the reading act itself, made more difficult and deliberate with the words undulations. Varying from *Entwine*, where the small words become lost amongst the sea of directional, rippling text formations, the still recognizable formation of coded linear reading here, and the emergence of certain words, enables an attentive, yet broken, form of reading. As a participant in one seminar noted: “A word will catch you, or a line. It’s about the strange business of reading. We’re not machine-like when we read. We have all sorts of distractions, and emphases.” The interrupted form of reading here is enmeshed with other receptions, such as the demonstrable force upon the book, and the abundant material.

Even the holes themselves, the forced fissures, take readers to other implications about embodied making. Like the gestures from pulled paper that arise within *Writing and Difference*, the recognition of the drilling pooled by wax, gives awareness to the physicalized qualities from the process, here more dramatic and

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125 Barthes, *Pleasure of the Text*, 12.
126 Seminar at the University of Calgary, October 15, 2014.
‘violent’ than previous works. When the work was installed in a gallery, one viewer shifted his attention between bending to read the words and expressing his repulsion and fascination with the piece. He commented on both the physical and psychological efforts of drilling through a book. Like a painter viewing another artist’s paint strokes, his recognition of the forced drill holes called attention to the palpable, and repugnant, efforts of shattering the text.

3.14. Capillary, back cover, made shiny and red by the wax. The tearing from the drill is exposed here.

This strong response was reiterated by others, who noted the visceral effect was amplified through the dull red cover deepened to shiny crimson, making it seem “bloodied, like raw muscle.” Adding red, twisting threads that move in and out of the crude openings, the piece seems a remnant from a dissection: bony and ossified on one side, visceral on the other (Fig. 3.14). This propelled one viewer to express her difficulty in looking at the piece—which she likened to flesh and

127 A repeated refrain from viewers of my work. A term also used by Derrida as a way to deconstruct a text.
128 Little Gallery, Department of Art, University of Calgary, October, 2014.
129 Studio visitor #1 in Calgary, February 2013
bone—while at the same time finding it hard to stop looking because the abjection was so compelling. Leaving the title apparent, readers knowledgeable with Wuthering Heights placed meaning on the obvious interventions to the literary work, construing this ‘abusive’ intervention as a commentary. One viewer contended I was able to “capture the story” of Wuthering Heights—a novel with underlying tones of pain, cruelty and unkindness—even with only the title revealed on the cover. She recalled her own reactions to the violence of the novel, and found the drilled holes, frosted text and wormy threads as conveying the coldness and discomfort of the story. The materials and physical interventions work as an important designate for her, underscoring the text to provide a fraught experience of the work. If we compare observer reactions to this abject erasure of words against flattened, clean type composed elegantly upon the wall of a gallery, Kosuth’s argument of decoration becomes blurred, questionable. The sense that gestures become a form of navel-gazing, or that, ‘Any and all of the physical attributes (qualities) of contemporary works, if considered separately and/or specifically, are irrelevant to the art concept,’ can be challenged. Comparing the many reader responses, the physical attributes—the holes, the wax, the blood-red thread, the hooks—are fused alongside the words to magnify associations and create meanings.

Most of the words are muted and immersed under several coats of wax, interrupted by the holes (Fig. 3.15). Others convey a kind of double-speak from the transparent layering, impossible to read. Highlighting salient words that do peer through the foggy luster—‘disarrange’, ‘Come’, ‘I cast out’, ‘sheen’, ‘enclose’, ‘I twisted’—the phrases seem to recall the actions I imposed upon the text. Each ‘component’, to argue Kosuth, appears to contribute to the concept, but importantly, one that does not provide an exacting, directed read. Not unlike the stretched and accentuated words in Writing and Difference, phrases that jump from beneath the wax here intermingle with the material and physical interventions to both provoke and estrange meaning. Instead of marks or expression as extraneous or self-indulgent, the approach and material add attributes which move beyond the words themselves, allowing the words to be

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130 Studio visitor #2 in Calgary, February 2013
131 Studio visitor #1 in Calgary, February 2013.
132 Kosuth, 17.
either scooped into the mix, or left aside. As different observers of the work repeatedly conveyed, the work became difficult, disturbing, but alluring. Not only coaxing the readers to look longer—like the observer who asserted she couldn’t look away—the forceful interventions and material additions offered significant connotations to these readers.

![Image](image.png)

3.15. Detail of *Capillary* showing the recognizable reading paths, submerged and broken under the wax.

Like Barthes’ assertion about the hammer, a text can be altered in unexpected ways when the words are impacted upon. This force becomes particularly notable in *Capillary*, where the incidental variations of words bring about strong associations and relations to material that contribute content, a countering of Conceptualist aversions to overt gestures as indulgent. Initially more apparent than the words, the holes act as portals—physical, visual and conceptual—through the dense object. They, and the waxy blobs, toggle reading between punctuated words, short phrases, ivory sheen, and residue. Even more than the works from *Writing and Difference*, the perceptible vigourous shattering of text in conjunction with highly tactile, weighty materials, generates layered responses that move from visceral or abject, to excavation or removal, from sensual to indexical.
In the introduction to this chapter I conveyed ‘breaking’ as a means of demonstrating the physical means of intervening a text, and a ‘cracking open’ to expose hidden dimensions. What does the ‘breaking’ in breaking words apart convey beyond the prior explorations of slippage, chance, and word play by artists and poets? Or the Conceptualists’ assertion that material components or the artist’s trace are extraneous to the concept?

Rather than constructed, determined paths, the improvisational renderings upon text within this chapter enable equally indeterminate interpretations. Here words are taken past the limitations of typewritten constructions; beyond the fabricated chance collaging of words in cut-ups. Even while retaining the page format in *Writing and Difference*, the physicalized actions working with and against the machine create effects unable to be replicated or determined. Barthes’ suggestion of a hammer into words becomes akin to opening a geode, the smashed portions revealing unpredictable complex structures and textures, allowing the reader to follow and discover numerous intricate ways of reading. Using the autoethnographic model where critical reflections and informant response suggest repeated, salient emergences, the works reveal that familiar reading is dismantled through the broken paths, and rerouted into other attributes. Where ‘language as material’ has been an avowed concern for most-text based artists over the past fifty year, here words and material are inseparable: commingled and threaded together.

Particularly the ways we read words when they are deterred from conventional linear configuration brings forth questions of reading itself. What is reading, and how can it be reconsidered? With the challenge of reading in an unfamiliar way, the breaking of words implicate the reader—both physically and conceptually—making them a more active participant in both the way words are received and perceived. This purports to reveal the dynamism of reading, as Iser, Barthes and Kristeva propound, as the ‘breaking’ here makes the reader jump, pause, and sideline; where words move in and out of lexical, material and physical significations. The improvised physical interventions take away the familiar paths, and our awareness of the text is expanded to include not only verbal and visual, but tactile and sensual entanglement with the text. The words can be read
alongside the textures, erasures and the imagined physical gestures, suggesting a more complicated relationship with the lexical. Instead of a set of ‘enunciations’, as Weiner proposes, the fragmented texts question or propose. For example, the woven pages in Entwine enable the words as texture, pattern, absence, and truncated narrative, and our eyes can wander in any direction to explore multiple dimensions—even text that is illegible. As the Conceptualists aimed to replace ‘looking’ with ‘reading’, attempting to steer away from expressive attributes, here reading and looking are intertwined. Countering Kosuth’s assertion that the additional materials and expressive properties become ‘useless’ or decorative, the complications of reading outlined in my reflections, suggest that they may implicate and extend responses. The ‘windowed object’ Gibbons references, analogizes the discovery aspect where the varying degree of textual intersections pulls the reader towards the words, then immediately steers them into other significations. The more involved the reader becomes, the more they continue to explore: “I’m more intrigued”, in the words of one observer.

In all three sets of works, the words alter conventional line-by-line reading, and offer more experiential responses to the words that move beyond prescribed tautologies, enunciations, or definitions. It is impossible to ‘read’ these works in the conventional way, as the improvised physical traces and opened materiality provide no clear start or endpoint. The words fail as information or narrative, continuously interanimating with and as textile, pattern, form and space. In the Writing and Difference series, for instance, the physical interference creates word as pattern, squeezing lines of type into unpredictable formations. The spaces—open areas that call attention to the sensuous Shoji paper substrate—push alongside the compressed, inky areas of letterforms, and text becomes impudent and abstracted. Like sumi painting, sweeping marks, here of words not ink, create an aesthetic encounter where reading pulls in unexpected directions. The negative areas around words and the dynamic vectors created by patterns make certain words within the text more salient or focused. Reading paths are not only thwarted, but reformed as shape or mass, and our response to the text utterly shifts in response. Both aesthetic in terms of references to traditions of painting,

133 Weiner often refers to his word pieces as ‘enunciations’.
134 Calgary participant, September 15, 2015.
and anti-aesthetic in the text’s warping and overwriting, the words are positioned as unfamiliar and unrestrained. The recognition of the efforts, a “playing through” as the participant noted, adds a sense of connection and somatic insight, opening yet another means of potential engagement.

In Entwine, the words are altered even more, making text into textile. Our reading adopts multidirectional paths, unable to replicate any trajectory or formation. Each time the text is read, it curls into new pathways, full of discovery. While this ever-promising discovery can parallel our experiences with any text, the impossibly-navigated pathways, with stops and starts at any moment, heighten the participatory involvement of the reader. Dislocation and disappearance become part of the meaning, as threads of text change direction before being buried and silenced. Entwine also provides tactility as a reading experience, whereby the words’ entanglement into texture pushes them into sensual objects. One can’t simply engage with the words without also becoming aware of the way the words are woven, and the resulting responses are as circuitous as the curled surface.

Capillary, in contrast, makes apparent the absence or removal of text as generating meaning. The material—submerging or breaching words under wax and drillhole—frustrates legibility and calls into focus other attributes. The coated words overtaken by the materials convey language as unknown, the lines of type as merely a faded track: in their absence, reading is channeled and changed. Reading happens in jarred and pulsing movements across the altered pages, our eyes falling into fissures and waxy pools along the way. This oscillation between words, holes, and material challenges the meaning of the words, as the connections between all the facets complicate attempts at clear understanding. One participant’s comment that, “There is a transmission between material and the text”, whereby the words are “ambiguous, ephemeral…almost transient”, transfers text from tautological into something less concrete, literal, or fixed. Chasing after the ‘transient’ words not only demarcates the shifting properties of language, but also suggests reading as an active form of movement, as the shifting pathways create a performance of words and their underlying traits.

135 Calgary participant, September 2, 2015.
What emerges in this practice chapter are approaches to reading that become more frustrating, playful and participatory, as materiality, absence and somatic trace change the act of reading. Considering the aims of Weiner and Kosuth to separate words from art objects, there is a privileging of one semiotic system over another; works in this study entangle the systems, whereby no one proposition takes priority. The possibility of the writerly, where words are written and they are read, is opened to include other ways of reading: material, tactile, sensual. It is important to note that these traits emerge from the physicalized actions I impose: the hammer into text. An unpredictable text is opened beyond explorations of concrete or visual poetry formations, as the surface attributes reveal unexpected veins and striations, like the clusters of words falling into the tear. The emergent variables propose that chance interventions generate equally variable and changeable encounters. The multiple interactions of force, materiality and word corruption compete and complement so that a reader may actively engage in variations of reading and in finding meanings.

One could argue that these ways of experiencing the text are ‘privileged’, as Weiner suggests of expressive, aesthetic works. The words, as recognizable entry point, however, cannot be separated from other attributes, such as weaving. In the case of one viewer, she noticed the weaving first, then expressed her surprise that words appear in the curves. Even without the extensive critical reflection I applied to the works, the tactile, material and physical attributes are hard to overlook and clearly stand alongside the words, contributing to the experience. The chapter title, Breaking Words Apart, enables an unfastening of text not just conceived of, but displayed. Breaking the words generate unseen possibilities in the words; perhaps connotations that already exist within words, as the Writing and Difference series suggests, but those somehow unveiled or uncovered through disturbing familiar ways of how we approach text. The text isn’t simply broken in the sense of line-by-line conventional paths—which is also the case—but takes on properties that move words beyond verbal and visual, unfolding into other interpretations. The uncontrolled, incidental marks, formations and fissures, are thus mirrored in the unexpected, unconventional ways of reading, where the letterforms, new reading paths, absences and textures are all potentially meaningful.

136 Testing texts exhibition, University of Calgary, October, 2014.
Chapter Four

Messy Gestures: the character of characters

What it *(writing aloud)* searches for (in a perspective of bliss) are the pulsional incidents, the language lined with flesh, a text where we can hear the grain of the throat, the patina of consonants, the voluptuousness of vowels, a whole carnal stereophony: the articulation of the body, the tongue, not that of meaning, of language.

Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*

i. Introduction

While the previous chapter explores bodily interventions that break words from their expected configuration and readability, works in this chapter propose that viewable somatic impressions from making the words can create expanded forms of reading in text-based artworks. Within this part of the research, I move from fracturing existing printed texts to creating hand-impressed printscript and typescript. While handwriting and calligraphy are immediately connected with gestures of the inscriber through associated movements of fingers, hand and arm, typography is not usually associated with traces of bodily impact. Yet, in traditional typescript and printscript, noticeable variances do occur from the changes in applied pressure, ink charge, as well as both substrate and tool condition. Coupled with the character many people ascribe to particular fonts, the resulting impressions provide what typographers term a ‘voice’ to the text. In this chapter, these impressions are pushed beyond the recognizable mechanized lettertype to portray more variant, painterly applications of text. By exposing these traces, I explore what qualities emerge when the gesture of typography is expressed.

As referenced in the thesis Introduction, our expectations of text-based art have been forged from the Conceptualist’s idea that the artist’s trace is unnecessary to the condition of the artwork; any aesthetic expressions are decoration. Submitting Jackson Pollock’s expressive drips as ‘ejaculatory’, Kosuth privileged clear, readable and mechanized words on the gallery walls, the

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138 Kosuth, 17.
139 Kosuth, 21.
linguistic representations replacing the art object to prompt questions as to the nature of art. As art is projected in the mind of the ‘receiver,’ the words propose the artwork is accessible to anyone who can read the text. Peter Osborne argues the Conceptualist’s anti-aesthetic stance doesn’t really hold, since anything positioned as such on a wall is an aesthetic choice, and that aesthetics are a reflection of context and concept. I further propose that as a result of this lineage of the anti-aesthetic, a now standard convention in word-based art for clear, fabricated type, has itself become a highly selective aesthetic choice. This chapter proposes to complicate our response to text-based art by questioning how we might view words that mess up the ‘convention.’ Firstly, as structuralist (Benjamin, Saussure) and post-structuralist (Kristeva, Barthes, Derrida) theorists will convey, words are not static and stable, instead changing their meaning over time and through varying readers. We now understand the reader will bring their subjective connotations and experiences to a text—vis-à-vis culture, gender, race—thus the idea of a fixed reader with easy understanding to any set of words has been supplanted. Secondly, the removal of the artist’s trace to draw attention away from ‘decorative’ or expressive marks also needs to be reconsidered within the contemporary arena. As Liz Kotz describes Carl Andre’s variable typewritten formations to be ‘vulnerable’, I similarly question what physicalized traces potentially say when linked directly to words. How do they make meaning within, around, and outside of the words?

Responding to these questions, text in this chapter performs in two ways: firstly as a demonstrable expression of words as something created, which presents noticeable, tactile qualities in the letters and impacted substrates; and secondly as a manifest action that alters and interrupts fluid reading as viewers look for things beyond the words. Roland Barthes’ appeal for a ‘voice’ is made passionately in *The Pleasure of the Text*, whereby the idea of ‘language lined with flesh’ urges text to more immediately reveal its interconnection to the body: to create ‘bliss’ from the edges and fissures. Conveying their imprinting, artworks in this chapter implore the ‘grain and patina’, to reference Barthes, as inflection within the words. Both ‘grain’ and ‘patina’ evoke a sense of pigmentation and texture,

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141 Osborne, *Conceptual Art*, passim.
142 Acknowledging that many contemporary artists are using the convention of clean type on a wall as a format to underscore the effects of colonialism and the power of language.
sensuous effects of weather, wear or time. While words in the previous chapter invited the readers to jump, pause, and shift their reading from familiar pathways, pieces in these investigations ask readers to slow or reread, savouring the gestural qualities of words as a way of performing (and undermining) the text.

My own purchase of a Standard Underwood typewriter (circa 1915) provided potential for a similar engagement as Andre’s, whereby the minute impressions resulting from the actions of my fingers upon keys expressed an immediate trace of making words (Fig. 4.1). Removing the ribbon from my vintage machine, I conducted a series of stream of consciousness writing performances in 2012 as part of this research, in which my physical interaction with the keys was correspondingly impressed into the substrate as slightly embossed words. The words are full of mistakes, recorded from an old technology where it is more difficult to ‘correct’ an error. Results from these experiments are subtle—quite subtle—and it would require a curious viewer to take the time with the words, barely whispers upon the white page. Yet the mistakes, surface variations, and uneven characters provide a distinctive feature to each letter, unable to be replicated or repeated, much like my studies of printed lettersorts reveal in the next section.
In this chapter, I discuss the effects of textual artworks that employ hand-printed typography, in what I term ‘messy gestures’. Curator Betty Bright references the notion of ‘dirty’ versus ‘fine’, in comparing traditional to more contemporary interests in letterpress printing. Her reference to ‘dirty’ conveys an appropriation of type by artists in the 1960’s who favoured the improvisational or imperfectly printed type as a way of revealing its process and performativity. Building on this term, I convey these qualities as messy, since the letterforms are impressed individually, revealing a high degree of variance and blemishing from the process. The word ‘gestures’ evokes the hand-printed application of these letterforms, the direct and physical contact by which the words come into play, like a paintbrush. As Carrie Noland asserts, gestures are both physical action, as well as indication. While the word ‘messy’ might presume a hurried, unconsidered approach—an ironic contrast to the slowed efforts of printing each character by hand—I employ the term to reflect variant, uneven letterforms with tails, mars, misalignment and errors obviated. My process often has me applying the pigment by brush to the stamp or sort before handprinting, thus the impressions vary even more greatly than those conducted on a press. The resulting letterforms contrast to tidy, consistent digital printings, where no viewable surface articulations or variations are desired; also to the interests of previous designers and typographers for neat, consistent letterpress printings, without bleed or blemish. They contrast the flat, clean industrialized text employed by Conceptualists, whose interests were to refrain from expressive marks or, in Peter Osborne’s words, ‘to negate the intrinsic significance of visual form.’ In this chapter, the textual is acknowledged as highly visual, highly sensual.

This part of my doctoral study includes findings from two sets of works, Inversions and Fabricate, and how critical reflection and participant observation helped shape the conclusions. My previous chapter proposes that by physically intervening with the familiar formations of text, scattered, layered and oscillated reading paths can move readers to a constellation of entries and directions, as well as multiple inferences and meanings. Here, I examine the effects of words as

144 Noland, 6.
145 Osborne, Conceptual Art, 31-3.
gesture and expressive form, suggesting that a voice, or character, can be conveyed beyond simply selecting the ‘right’ font. My findings propose that messy qualities create curiosity and lingering in the reading, along with performed vocalizations, wherein words appear more personalized to the reader.\textsuperscript{146} The resulting wordforms tease out what Barthes refers to as ‘writing aloud’: the verbalized and performative over purely lexical qualities of words.

Typography scholars have discussed attributes of typography (Bringhurst, Garfield, Drucker) as significant features for allowing the reader’s eyes to ‘fall upon type, and not through it.’\textsuperscript{147} Typefaces are known as characters. In my research, I play with the double entendre of the term, the character of characters. I propose to slow reading through revealing forms where the letters take on individual characteristics—a material quality that invites closer contact and reception. Character is, naturally, found in all typefaces, even those on web printed documents and designs, as discussed in Character Traits, in Chapter One. When I use the term character, I define it not only as a sign, but something with unrepeatable, distinguishable attributes. This is often revealed in altered surfaces with textures or indentations, and the variations of value, outline, and print quality within the letterforms.

\textit{ii. First Impressions}

At the outset of my study, a collection of typesorts and printsorts, continually charged and recharged with pigment and hand-impressed onto numerous substrates, were then rinsed of residue, used again and again, often having to be replaced from wear through the prolonged study—as my methodology chapter \textbf{Print, rinse, repeat} conveys. To conduct something often enough is to see what common and anomalous effects emerge, as a testing ground for pushing certain traits forward. Through an initial series of investigations, conducted between 2013 and 2014, I set out to evaluate the quality of physicalized typeforms compared to mechanical or digital texts. I examined the notable distinctions of hand-printed text, with mars, tails, glitches, slips, gaps, uneven value that occur

\textsuperscript{146} All terms used by participants in my study to describe the hand-printed letterforms.

\textsuperscript{147} Warde, 16.
from the processes. Returning to traditional tools for creating print and typescript without a press, through stamping and embossing, I pushed the applications further into almost painting, often brushing the pigment onto the sort before impressing the matrix directly onto the substrate. Variations and unique characteristics clearly emerged from the processes, as they rely on the direct and directed contact of tool and human arm whereby changes in pressure, inking, surface of paper, and force, as well as the condition of the typeface itself, all contribute to the letters’ individuation.

Repeated tests reveal how a row of hand-printed ‘s’ or ‘e’ can demonstrably vary, despite being impressed at the same time, from the same pigment, on the same paper, and from the same stamp (Fig. 4.2.) The pigment pools in some areas; headers and footers vary from the pressure and paint; and some areas do not print at all, leaving small gaps in the letterform. While variations similarly occur in letterpress printing, the distinctions are more noticeable here due to the hand contact, which means not only uneven inking can influence the letters, but also
the uneven push of each individual lettersort. The results are (desirably) less predictable and obvious, performing in a similar manner as painting marks. Brushmarks have limitations from the bristle shape—round, flat, or filbert—just as typesorts have limitations from their outlines and size. The distinction is that the thrust of the full arm and build-up of pigment in painting tends to bring about more obviated, and recognizable, surface alterations. But the variances in printscript are quite notable in my test pieces, each one demarking the movements and materials in contact with the paper, even impressing the sweeping marks from charging the pigment on the sort with a brush (Fig. 4.3, 4.4).

As Wolfgang Iser proposes, breaking a familiarity of reading is a significant way of making the readers more active, a suggestion that Alison Gibbons, Simon Garfield, and Nina Nørgaard analogously summon. Placed side by side, the differences in these printed letterforms elicit our tendency to compare and evaluate similar things, moving more slowly in order to note and compare distinctions: falling upon a form to examine unexpected pigmenting or marks, much as we could note a sweeping paintstroke.

The imprinting process revealed in the work equally seems to proffer an aural materialization of the words, conveyed through vocalizations. In participant responses to the phrase ‘it’s really upsetting’ (noted in Chapter Two) printed in varying degrees of type cleanliness—from digital to barely readable and laden with materiality—the more gestural hand-impressed letterforms clearly evoked alterations to how the words were perceived. There was often a ‘trying out’ of multiple voices, as if trying to find the right one for their impression of the words. Through the repeated sonic iterations from multiple participants, the suggestion that other physicalizations were opened through letter placement and messy font was summarized by a participant: “The meaning has changed even though the words are the same.” Like Raoul Hausmann’s optophonics works, the playfulness of sound and rhythm while reading proposes a performance, something that I explore more deeply in this chapter.

148 The sort is the physical block which supports the typeface and gets positioned on the press bed.
149 Calgary participant, September 15, 2015.
4.3 Letters printed with bronze pigment using wooden typesorts reveal the range of marks from the application, easily viewed as small sweeps, scrapes and ridged contours.

4.4 Letters printed with bronze pigment using wooden sorts.
iii. Inversions

*Inversions*, the first series in this chapter, plays both with language and with variations of printed letterforms. The works use several forms of resistance to counter readability: low contrast text in lower case; an inversion of familiar phrases; small scale; material interference; and messy gestures. The subtle, almost indistinguishable white words on ivory wax necessitates the reader to come closer to read (Fig. 4.5) This intimate reading is subsequently jerked by inverting two words within familiar clichés, for example, ‘made it by the skin of my teeth’ is rendered as ‘made it by the teeth of my skin’; or ‘curiosity killed the cat’ is altered to ‘the cat killed curiosity.’ These shifts force the reader to stumble and become more aware of their reading, much like a pedestrian will be more cautious after tripping on an uneven edge of the sidewalk. The inversion of ‘the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach’, altered to ‘the way to a man’s stomach is through his heart’, turns a trite domestic advisory into proposed violence, calling attention to suppositions we make about words. Inverting two words within the works, I rely on the reader’s expectations that once a phrase is recognized, a misreading of the words will follow—that our fluency with these phrases have us simply pass over the words, assuming the familiar order. In observing a pattern of engagement with readers with this series, I noticed that once the inversion is discovered, readers reread each piece more slowly to catch the new iteration, like the walker who has tripped on the pavement. Just as the viewable breaking apart of words in the previous chapter changed the reader’s movement over the page, *Inversions* attempts to slow and pause the rhythm of reading, making readers ‘stick’ instead of scanning.

For the works, small squares of paper were dipped into a heated wax mixture, with just a few centimeters of bare paper left at the bottom. Wax was used specifically for its sensuous sheen and suppleness, something that invites touch. The drips and pooling become a significant feature, and printing on top of this uneven surface creates even more noticeable variations in the letters, as the rubber on wax naturally slips (Fig. 4.6). Adding the hand-printed type on wax along with the inverted phrases, I provided stumbling places where reading was impeded.

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4.5. *Inversions (2014)*, printed acrylic paint on wax on paper. The works are seen lined up over a wall, wherein the reader has to bend in to see the subtle words on the surfaces. *Photo: Stacey Cann*

4.6. *Inversions*, detail, showing surface mars and glitches in the printing.
Setting up the piece in my studio and in two gallery exhibitions, one in Calgary and one in Edmonton, I observed and collected impressions of reading *Inversions*. The quiet text is barely noticeable until the viewer is in close proximity to the pieces, making the words seen initially as a shift or mar on the surface. Some viewers did not even approach the works, simply scanning the pieces from afar, then moving on. Those who did approach conveyed the discovery of words emerging from the white marks as surprising, one seminar participant uttering it was “a moment of a gift.”\textsuperscript{151} The work not only relies on discovering these subtle words, but also the quality of the text as viewers look closely. The thin pigment separated from the raised portion of the rubber stamp, creating an outline or halo around the letterforms. These halos, slightly raised or bumpy in parts, are easily viewable and palpable. Thus, ‘inversions’ also refers to their contrast from the traditional embossment of letterpress printing; here the clearly textured face, along with extraneous lines, blotches, and half-printed areas, present more as

\textsuperscript{151} Seminar observer, October 15, 2014.
gestural paint strokes. At times, it is difficult to distinguish which letterform is before us, seemingly only a shape, particularly the ‘e’ which often fills in nearly as a circle, or the ‘h’ which collects the ink in its counter (interior) to varying degrees (Fig. 4.7). The words in Inversions are also not quite aligned or kerned and varying in intensity, exposing the blemished application.

Underscoring text as both impression and expression, the letterforms convey the words as a trace upon a substrate, as well as a more somatic, gestural composition. Even though the range of gestures from printing with a letterstamp may not be as great as a paintstroke with brush, there are easily notable variations in surface and form. The individuations make it harder to simply browse the text, since the small white letters take extra care to discern. Our eyes naturally linger over distinctive characteristics and surface articulations, since they are unfamiliar (Iser), and especially if the letters are not entirely legible. In ‘pull the eyes over his wool’, some letters become almost abstracted forms. Each letter stands out from among the phrase, and a viewer can land on one, much like we savour an expressive charcoal stroke or brush mark. Looking to participant comments and observations, the qualities had readers repeatedly conveying a sense of impact or attention from the application. A seminar participant from Cardiff stated, ”I enjoy the areas that have a kind of brush,” clearly characterizing it as a more expressive effect. Another’s recognition of the tactile, hand-printing conveyed, “it makes me focus on each individual word.” The idea of focusing on the distinctive qualities of the words was conveyed again and again, altering the scanning effect of some reading acts into a leisurely experience where words are considered within the sentence, but also as separate objects—a pause which naturally opens potentiality. In Calgary, a participant similarly conveyed that he started to consider words more when they were distinct and variant, sensing “emphasis” in them. This perceived emphasis had him looking for missing elements and meanings, assuming some significance to the words. Similarly,

152 Only intaglio printing has potential for notably textured ridges, as the plate is etched into the metal, and the paper pushed into these crevices during production. The ink, pulled from within the etched grooves, becomes ridged on the paper.
153 Participant in seminar, Cardiff, November 2013.
155 Participant in Calgary studio, September 15, 2015.
156 September 15, 2015.
another participant suggested: “the labour in making these words give the words more import, more importance. They seem more pressing.” The physical pressing of words equates to a more pressing emphasis on the words themselves, as opposed to effortless digitized text. The typographic expressions make the letterforms harder to decipher, but also appear to draw readers to notice the anomalies and quirks, placing weight on how they relate to the inverted words.

Highlighting these messy, expressive gestures, Inversions proposes a different tone to the phrases than if presented with a smoothed, clean face. This is evidenced by my study with various physicalized type applications, but also from the repeated comments of seminar participants and gallery goers, who continuously remarked on the play between the messy type, the words and the material. An artist visiting my studio noted the type qualities took on significance for her the more she read, and she soon equated their awkwardness to the unexpected twists within the phrases. Her first reading, interrupted as she caught her assumption about the familiar cliché, was easily contrasted with the rereading, the latter altered and more cautious, aware that something might be missed. This prolonged action made her reading a more conscious action, slowed and alert, apparent from her observed rereading and slowing. Like the jumps and departures of the broken words in the last chapter, Inversions also changes the reading tempo. The process was repeated again and again in galleries, where readers would embark upon the piece, catch their misreading, then move to the left to begin reading again, more slowly. The mars and shifts disclose the mistakes in printing, traits which subsequently underscore both the inverted words and misreadings.

As the reader looks at the variances, the uncertainties of the printing marks seem to compound with the inverted phrases, and readers begin to question their reading and meanings. The piece ‘the storm before the calm’, for example, had many viewers questioning if this wasn’t indeed the correct version. This pause and second-guessing is reinforced by the messy gestures, the imperfect letters viewed as less committed or sure than clear, crisp text. This questioning counters

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157 Participant in Calgary, September 2, 2015.
158 Calgary studio, June 2014.
159 Harcourt House Gallery, March 2015.
a notion of authority in printing, one that I address more directly in the next piece of this chapter. The waxen substrate was also noted by viewers, a material underscoring malleability and potential change which points to the mutable words overtop.\textsuperscript{160} It could be said that the relocation of words in the familiar clichés are reinforced here by the materiality of both text and substrate, and we question their fixity.

![Image](image.png)

4.8. *Inversions*, detail. The ridges and stipples are easily seen forming on the outlines.

Much as the focus on material, sensuous aspects in *Breaking Words Apart* cause readers to connect these attributes within the words, here the letterforms become material through their obvious texture and mark. The raising makes the text tactile, our eyes naturally hooking on the surface as if rubbing across Velcro, a sensuous effect amplified by the glassine substrate. In ‘see the empty as half glass’, small stipples arise from the viscous pigment, along with ridges on the letter outlines, inversely ‘etching’ the words (Fig. 4.8). The texture invokes an edge or small shard, sort of inscribing words ‘glass’ into their materiality. The light letterforms on ivory ground also create an appearance of dried water droplets on a window, or residue on grainy sand (amplified by the bits of

\textsuperscript{160} A post-graduate seminar participant in Cardiff, November, 2014, and reiterated by attendees at my opening reception at Harcourt House Gallery, March 2015.
embedded grit). Thus, the effects of the printing open up the inverted cliché, making the sharpness of glass or the emptiness and sheen of the background intensified. Rather than simply an illustration or representation of the words, however, the material and tactile letterforms oblige the viewer into a more prolonged reading act, where nothing is assumed. The phrase ‘see the empty’, a form of seeing nothing, on top of the ‘half glass’, evoking the shiny wax surface, makes the reader question, proposing metaphors or states of mind. As one reader put it, “Actually, what you see is not what you see,” as the obviated materiality provides a stopping point, wherein the word inversions, waxy background, messy letters and scale all interplay with reading and interpretation. Another participant noted, “I’m really trying to figure this out; how it has changed,” his sense that the cliché was no longer straightforward, with the inversion requiring more time to make meaning.

As variations in Inversions seem to draw the reader into more careful consideration by calling attention to each letter and word, they do so in a different way than bold or decorative typography of graphic designers. The perceived touch from the tactility of hand-printing makes readers view the typography as ‘subjective’. In referencing my notes, nearly all of my research participants and informal observers conveyed that the gestures made the text ‘more human’ or that it provided ‘humanness’, moving words into something more personal. While this perception may be the appeal of the vintage or ‘illusory indices’ Nørgaard refers to, there is an understood touch equated with this direct hand-printing which appears to form a connection. Particularly, these typographs propose that the visual fluctuation throughout a sentence forms an equally undulating timbre or vocalization. This was notable through the change in every single participants’ voice as they read and reread the words aloud in my test pieces, discussed earlier; first the intoned, straightforward readings of the digital prints, followed by the increasingly more melodic readings of hand-printed scripts. The hand-printed samples were often read—vocalized—more than once, the readers repeating the phrase and shifting their voice, almost ‘trying on’ different voices to find a match. One reader noted the hand-printed

161 Participant in Calgary studio, October 5, 2015.

162 Testing Texts seminar, Calgary, October 2014.

163 Participant in Calgary studio, September 15, 2015.
text as “personally directed at me, as if it is trying to communicate.” Hearing the tone seems to produce the effect of a conversation, as the vocalization immediately made text into speech.

The hand-printing also seemed to convert the words into materializations. One participant posited there is more ‘narrative’ invoked in the hand-produced printscript, where “meaning begins to seep out.” This phrase, ‘seep’, conveys something fluid and malleable (similar to marks within a painting) but also suggests that things can emerge the longer something infuses—seep being a slow leak, as opposed to a flood. The words were also described as ‘leaky’, by another reader, since they do not stay within the confines of the contour, spilling and oozing from the squeeze. He noted, similarly to the previous participant, “Leakage suggests possibilities for something further to occur, that it’s not static.” One reader described the resulting hand-printed letterforms as ‘tender’, ‘earnest’ and ‘vulnerable’, an interesting echo of Kotz’s sentiments regarding Carl Andre’s typed works, and in contrast to the ‘straightforward’, ‘authoritative’, ‘command’, ‘falls within the rules’ perceived by participants of the digitally printed example. While these ‘fall within the rules’ fonts equally invoke a voice (perhaps one that is arid or ‘dispassionate’ as Garfield suggests), the idea that someone is intimately engaging with the messy type was noted time and time again. Like a hand that waves, summons or brushes aside, the messy gestures seem to similarly invite more intimate engagement and interaction for viewers. The consistent assigning of attributes to test pieces in my studio, through adjectives such as ‘tender’ and ‘humble’ towards the hand-printed type, indicates an interpretation of inflections as mirrored by the notably varying printing. The tone of the voice further appears to draw the readers into dialogue—or potentially argument or intimate discussion—becoming shifting variables in a two-way conversation.

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164 Participant in Calgary studio, October 6, 2015.
165 Participant in Calgary studio, September 16, 2015.
167 Participant in Calgary studio, September 2, 2015.
168 Participant in Calgary studio, September 2, 2015.
170 Brumberger, 221.
171 Comment by a seminar participant in Calgary, October, 2014.
More importantly, beyond just the perceived tone of selected typefaces, the distinguishable touch in the hand-printed words realizes the voice in a different way. My interviews and observations of Inversions in two galleries suggest that perceived character within these glyphs becomes a part of the content, a ‘seepage of meaning’ whereby the reading and rereading stewards a more conversational response. While Weiner and Kosuth valued manufactured words for their remoteness from overtly expressive conveyances, Inversions, in contrast, argues that by revealing a physicalized inflection, the perceived subjectivity invites the reader to a more prolonged, performative engagement. Readers might dawdle simply from what they think the words are intoning—like the participants ‘settling’ on the voice they regard as matching the text—meaning they are spending more time with the words, mulling over connections and associations. Or they may start to question what the words are really saying, as noted by the earlier reader: “what you see is not what you see.” In contrast to seemingly straightforward phrases generated by computer, one participant in my study noted that hand-printed characters “are laden with more meaning than the words themselves; it kind of opens my experience with the words.”172 The mixing of the familiar into ironic remarks in Inversions couples with the grainy tone from the printing. Another viewer noted, “I have the sense of an author working here,”173 similar to those expressed earlier by another participant, who conveyed his feeling of being personally spoken to by the words.174 Rather than submitting the words as the ‘authorship’ of one writer, however, by comparing the repeated participant comments of human, personal, and author, alongside their vocalizations, the words seem to open Kristeva’s sense that all texts are plural; each reader brings their understanding of previous texts and experiences to the meaning, where readers approach the text as a space of interaction and performativity. Other post-structuralist ideas that language must be corrupted and played with was also supported by my observations that most readers of Inversions started openly laughing, sometimes calling their friends over to read—making reading a shared experience (Fig. 4.9).

172 September 2, 2015.
173 Participant in Calgary studio, September 15, 2015.
174 Participant in Calgary studio, October 6, 2014.
4.9. Viewers at Harcourt House, Edmonton, laughing at the Inversions. The shared experience of reading out loud and laughing makes the work performative and involved. *Photo: Richard Smolinski*

The idea of someone—an author—‘working’ also doubles-back to a connection with the artist’s physicalized making of words. The character of character could be suggested as printing a *presence*. This facet brings numerous connotations. In one instance, it allows the reader to imagine the artist’s efforts to create and communicate. This was something put forth by many participants, who noted strong connections with the marks as traces of contact. The words, imprinted letter by letter onto the waxy surface of *Inversions*, are done by hand, too clumsy and blotchy to be otherwise. There is palpable action in their application, and the resulting variations and blemishes are apparent to most readers. These expressive qualities become not only a signifier of the maker in terms of voice, as was discussed, but also a reminder of touch. Watching and hearing some viewers move slowly through an exhibition by Rembrandt at the National Gallery in London, many of them—myself included—marveled at his gestural brushstrokes. The marks drew us in, each touch of his brush mirroring his

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movements to bring about the skin and muscle he conveys. The fully realized portraits from a distance read as volumetric and solid; at close proximity, the visceral, sweeping marks trace demonstrative gestures of the artist’s hand and arm. Like Carrie Noland’s example of the graffiti trail in *Agency & Embodiment*, these marks bring urgency and connection, as we can envision the artist’s action over the canvas, a point of communication beyond the representation.

While certainly not comparing the quality of mark and expression in my works to Rembrandt’s remarkable œuvre, participants similarly recognized the distinctive variations within *Inversions*, submitting the qualities of the gestural hand-printed typography as an evocative connection to both the touch and effort involved. This accentuates the inextricable connection of words—of expression—to the body. The idea is supported by the comments of many viewers, but particularly posited by a student at one of my artist’s talks, who noted the “energy” within the letterforms, an awakening to the fabrication process. He suggested the attributes make the piece “come alive.” The sense of a dynamic body arising from the words appears to enable some readers to connect more strongly. If we compare words flattened to a gallery wall, the notion of touch removed, the experience, the sensation and tempo of words, is different here. Using the clustering of responses, including the recurring statements of seminar and interview participants, text is perceived as more directly related to ‘human’ when obviously conducted by hand, and these traces instill a strong association to the reading. As one interview participant stated: “The content is now shifted from semantic to artistic; the signifier is no longer just the words.” While one could point to Kosuth’s argument against art as purely expressionistic—the marks for marks sake being decorative, irrelevant to the conception—here, the text’s messy imprints point instead to the idea that someone making the words is helping them to ‘come alive.’ Touch is affiliated with an individual in dynamic, creative

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176 I also overheard one viewer at the exhibition negatively comment on the brushmarks; clearly bothered by their gestural appearance, she was uncertain why Rembrandt hadn’t ‘tidied’ them up.
177 Barbara Bolt, *Art Beyond Representation* speaks of the marks as suggesting more than the subject depicted.
178 From a lecture on my work to students from the Alberta College of Art & Design, Calgary, October, 2014.
180 September 15, 2015
dialogue, and this recognition enables many forms of connection to open beyond
the assumed linguistic signifier, in this instance to expose secondary meanings
from the vocal, aesthetic, textural, associative and intimate meanings. The
distinctive character of the letterforms creates inflection, a grain, that alters the
reading pace, while opening other attributes that enable the experience of words
as less distanced, less indifferent. Instead of an egoistic, biographic posit (the
‘ejaculatory’ Kosuth references in Pollock paintings), the marks beckon an
awareness of the reader’s own body; as they intimately draw viewers closer,
meanings ‘seep out.’ (Fig. 4.10)

4.10. Viewers at Harcourt House, Edmonton, Canada, bend to view the words within Inversions,
reading the contents aloud as a shared activity, 2015.  Photo: Richard Smolinski

iv. Fabricate

Drawing on the works of Lawrence Weiner, whose large-scale declarative
statements are positioned on gallery walls, I approached the words of Fabricate in
a similar manner. Moving from small, barely visible words of *Inversions*, to large-scale, dark type, I proposed a different character and different reception would occur. This piece, *Fabricate*, appropriates and plays off Weiner’s own statement of intent, where he urges the ‘works need not be made’, they can be ‘fabricated.’

Stemming from an earlier version on rice paper, I revisited the phrases, ‘This is the part that is the truth; This is the part that is not a lie’, using giant letterstamps and my body as tools (Fig. 4.11). The lettersorts are fabricated by me in the woodshop, the idea of fabricate furthered by the force of pressing the letters onto the gallery walls. Fabricate, as a word, suggests something constructed, like the lettersorts, the text and language. The word, fabricate, additionally intimates something invented or falsified, echoing the notion of ‘truth’ and ‘lie’ within the selected phrases. All of these facets, along with Weiner’s remarks, are embedded in the work.

4.11. *Fabrication* installed at Harcourt House Gallery, Edmonton, 2015, with hand-printed text on the walls, and the lettersorts left on the ground in front as a residue of the process.  *Photo: Stacey Cann*
Following the expressive letterforms from my printed test studies and from *Inversions*, I wanted to examine how messy gestures might contribute meaning to words when the physical impression is even more obviously realized. *Fabricate* is pronounced in size and gesture, printed directly onto two walls of a gallery in order to position a viewer directly between the phrases. While the two assertions in the piece have the same meaning, their nuanced phraseology connotes something different: the ‘truth’ takes on authority, as something unquestioned; ‘not a lie’ suggests there is wiggle room, that it may be something else. How something is offered in terms of wording is significant, Barthes notes, as readers toggle between semiotic, cultural, personal, connotative and metaphoric associations.\textsuperscript{181} Positioning ‘this is’ and ‘this is not’ around notions of truth, I present disparities, middle spaces, and nuances, reaffirmed by the placement of the viewer between the phrases and the lettersorts. While *Inversions* plays with both inversion of text and messy gestures to create a voice and rereading, here I also play with scale, texture and mark to create a stronger sense of questioning, a wavering of meanings connoted by the blemished printing. Measuring about 22 cm in height, the lettersorts are loaded with pigment, held with two hands, then firmly forced onto the wall with viscous relief ink. After printing, I leave the ink-filled sorts on the floor as aftermath and puzzle. Providing just enough room for the viewer between the wall and the stamps, I offer a stage where people potentially perform the piece. One viewer at the opening reception of the show, in fact, said they wanted to pick up the stamps and match it to the letterforms on the wall, “retracing the actions.”\textsuperscript{182}

During the printing process, some letters impressed more lightly than others, and there are places where the ink noticeably didn’t take to the wall; there is also some slight warping on certain letters, as the sorts slipped from the gooiness. Despite my best efforts to mark the placement before printing, the kerning and spacing are slightly, but noticeably, off. Loading the letterforms with ink, and then smashing them onto the wall was very physical. Little splash marks occurred from the exertion; stipples and gradations are left from pulling them off with equal force against the suction from the viscosity, here more exaggerated through the scale and impact (Fig. 4.12). Each letter has similar characteristics,

\textsuperscript{181} Some of the ways Barthes determines the writerly text can be interpreted, *S/Z*.

\textsuperscript{182} Opening reception, Harcourt House Gallery, Edmonton, March 9, 2015.
such as the colour and peaks from the pulling, but the overall variations are very noticeable, both from a distance and close up. The vigourous application creates highly tactile letters, including indistinct areas on the contours, and places within the forms where the ink did not adhere at all. The footers reveal a linear indentation, a result of the slippage and uneven pressure. Like ‘dirty’ gestures referenced by Bright, whereby the artists had little concern for bleeding or even inking, here the text is even more sloppy and overtly physicalized—the trace of the impact.

4.12. Fabrication, details of stippling and pressure outlines, messy gestures resulting from printing directly onto the gallery wall.

The messiness of letterforms makes it difficult not to question the effects on the text—here complicating the simple idea of ‘decoration’, as the words are recognizable signs. While not everyone might fully recognize the messy gestures
in *Inversions*, due to the smaller scale and lighter pigment, the force of the body
evidenced in printing *Fabricate* is impossible to miss. An obvious display of
production, the gesture becomes a performance of the artist; though unseen it can
be acknowledged. The printing lines are slightly uneven and the letterforms vary
in value and consistency, with incomplete or half-printed areas. Leaning in to
examine the surface more closely, the physical attributes of the printing are more
apparent: fissured, textured, grainy and palpable. While observers connoted the
tiny text of *Inversions* with pleasant, intimate associations, the stipples, splashes,
and smears of *Fabricate* are a little abject. Like Theo van Leeuwen’s assertion that
lighter fonts convey breathy speech, the bumpy texture here suggests friction.
One viewer described the letters in *Fabricate* as ‘unpretty’, but then made
immediate connections with these ideas to the statements.¹⁸³ The ugly, broken
letterforms as representations of ‘the truth’, question the words through their
application: something not seamless nor always palatable. Likewise, the initially
perceived boldness when viewing the piece from afar seems worn out or
uncommitted seeing the printing up close, reinforcing the tenuous stance
between the two interpretations of the truth—or not a lie. The texture of the wall,
the gooey, green letterforms and the dimmed corner all contribute to the effect of
standing amongst something visceral, uncomfortable and grainy (Fig. 4.13). Like
the earlier discussion of *Inversions*, the obviated gestures here provide a voice,
albeit a very different one. Despite the declaratives, ‘this is’, and ‘this is not’, the
messy application—even through its forcefulness—questions and hesitates. Where the ink does not adhere, similarly we can view the truth as changing and
not fully intact.

Watching viewers in the gallery look right then left, then right and left again,
then to the stamps on the floor, there was an oscillation as people weighed
differences or similarities in the statements and application. One participant in
my formal interviews described messy gestures as “staticky and breaking up, like a
broken radio where the speakers aren’t being completely heard. It’s not together, not
uniform. There is considerable effort to break things up. I’m seeing it break into these
distortions.”¹⁸⁴ His comment suggests both the efforts and the resulting
impressions make words less assertive and subject to breach, as “broken” and

¹⁸⁴ Participant, Calgary studio, October 7, 2015.
“distorted”—or equally ‘unstable’\textsuperscript{185}, ‘lost’\textsuperscript{186}, and ‘veiled’\textsuperscript{187} as others’ expressed. In this piece, despite the ‘truthful’ assertions within the words, their appearance compromises their integrity, surety or verity. The participant further noted, “It doesn’t feel like it’s forcing a thought on me; it’s reflective without being aggressive.”\textsuperscript{188} In contrast, participants consistently described clean, digitally printed words as ‘straightforward’, ‘authoritative’, ‘matter of fact’, ‘static’\textsuperscript{189}, ‘generic’\textsuperscript{190}, ‘serious’\textsuperscript{191}: ‘meant to be delivered in a very clear fashion.’\textsuperscript{192} Words that are clearly articulated, it suggests, correspondingly represent a clear answer, an essence that supports the Conceptualist’s interest in replacing the art object with a linguistic representation.

4.13. The impressions clearly show slipping on the footing, uneven pigment transfer, and unclean edges. These variations are noted from a distance, but come significantly into play once a viewer approaches.
In contrast, the lack of clean edges, the fissures, stipples and half-printed areas in *Fabrication* echo the lack of ease in choosing the right word, the uncertainty revealed through mars and glitches. It proposes that text is not fixed, that words are interpretive spaces, and in this instance, ‘the truth’ is called into question. Weiner’s fabricated works are similarly situated on a wall, creating matter-of-fact statements, echoed in my *Fabrication*’s assertive phrases. In my version, however, the weight of ‘truth’ and of ‘lie’ are demonstrated as difficult and uneasy, mirrored through the splashy, slippery residue of the printing efforts.

The object or form is not significant to the idea, as Joseph Kosuth avers, nor the surface.\(^{193}\) Constructed by signmakers, his works, and the work of other Conceptualists, intentionally replace the artist’s hand. His own mechanized use of Photostat and fabricated neon counter Jackson Pollock’s paint splatters, marks he suggests are laden with ‘subjective meanings…useless to anyone other than those involved with him personally.’\(^{194}\) The ‘subjective meanings’, however, need to be viewed in a contemporary context where words are examined as loaded cultural, gendered, racialized, and politicized signifiers. The removal of the body from their instantiation assumes an unattainable neutral stance of language, as Judith Butler and Roland Barthes remind us.\(^{195, 196}\) In *Fabrication*, the question of ‘whose truth’ is integral: despite the forcefulness of the imprint and the force of the assertion, the letters are full of fissures. Even though its presence appears confident, like Weiner’s text pieces that I reference, the meaning of the statement here is actually muddied by the Pollock-esque gestures. The words are not clean and tidy descriptors, whereby the reader can remain at a distance without missing the offered components of the work. Weiner’s letters, appended flat against the wall without a noticeable surface grain, are not intended to compel closer examination: the words can be easily read and considered from a distance. The demonstrable traces of the printing efforts in *Fabricate*, however, with the apparent stipples and blotches, offer significance for readers who implicate the gestures with the words: ‘*staticky*, ‘*unstable*, broken up.’ Similar to *Inversions*, where the abstracted letterforms underscore malleability and alteration, the sheer

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\(^{193}\) Kosuth, 21-22.

\(^{194}\) Kosuth, 23.


physical force revealed in *Fabrication* calls attention to the facets and the thrust of the assertion, but equally the uncertainty of truth(s). The physicality of printing the words ‘truth’ and ‘lie’ also bring to the surface the *efforts* in weighing between words. Weiner’s *Balls of Wood/Balls of Iron* similarly weighs two phrases positioned beside each other. The words stand in for the materials—wood and iron—which results in a loss of texture or mass. Although the linguistic representation enables the viewer to imagine the forms in their absence, the piece does not significantly alter if viewed at close proximity, presenting clear, unquestioning descriptors.

4.14. *Fabricate* installed at Harcourt House, Edmonton, Canada, with viewers attempting to put together words and meanings from the stamps left on the ground. One viewer has moved right into the space between the printed wall and sorts, and another (left side) has turned to read from the side.

*Photo: Richard Smolinski*

Messy gestures, on the other hand, propose to complicate the straightforward readings, adding the expressive applications as a contributor to meanings by undermining clarity or certainty. Standing in front of my *Fabrication*, the type’s highly material traits suggest the piece is incomplete or prone to shift, especially
with the lettersorts remaining on the floor. Since the piece involves authoritative statements, it posits the voice of the words as large and bold enough to convey a sort of argument or open-ended dialogue, with the surface fissures revealing its insecurities. Leaving the rubber stamps—the tools—as a residue on the gallery floor in front of the work provides a further indication of the making, and also another portal for viewers to ponder. Positioned there, the stamps seem implicated in the statement about truth above it, as evidence or witness to the assertion. Coated in green, positioned inky side up, and loosely arranged, they comprise a new phrase ‘This tel par uno.’ The letterforms are reversed as with a traditional typesort, further adding to the conundrum. The cryptic phrase, suggestive of Latin, points towards a form of communication directed by the maker and at the viewer: ‘par uno’ (by one). The letters are, in fact, all that comprise both statements sitting on opposing walls above: ‘This is the part that is the truth’; ‘This is the part that is not a lie’. Placed both as trace and as game where letters can be shifted slightly to change the entire meaning, the phrase can be viewed as interpretive and formable.

I observed several people at the opening reception try to relate how the words on the floor related to the wall, a back and forth reading over the elements (Fig. 4.14). The playful opportunities with potentially rewriting the text, with looking and finding, highlights the performativity of the reader here, actively creating their own pace and meaning, and prolonging the act of reading. The possibility for readers to pick up stamps to make new phrases adds to the participatory element, but also points to the words as constructions, reasserting language as arbitrary indicator. In fact, when I received images from the exhibition taken nearer to the show’s closing, the stamps on the ground had clearly been moved around—inverted and out of order, new imaginings perceived.

Spacing ‘the truth’ and ‘not a lie’ low down on the wall near the floor, the reading flow is slightly interrupted. Even though people can see the words from a distance, reading them again on the wall in concert with deciphering the wooden stamps, made their heads move from the top of the wall to the floor and back again, the effort of reading conveyed. Taking words out of the expected convention calls attention to reading as a very involved, complex activity, the moveable lettersorts and the messy gestures complicating the meaning of ‘truth’—in fact, the difficulty of all language to own up. By adding a texture to
the voice, a visual timbre, something beyond the words is initiated: an undermining, where even a seemingly straightforward phrase can be opened and unfolded.

v. Retrospection on Messy Gestures

The character of characters, beyond the standard practice of selection of typeface, medium, scale, and spacing, took many forms in this part of the study. The gestural application of letterforms as a more direct extension of my body than mechanized letterpress, enables the resulting forms to record the alterations of pressure, ink charge, the skewed leading and kerning. Particularly the creation of raised texture, as inverse to the slight embossing of letterpress, and ancillary attributes such as filled-in bowls, sloppy tails, stipples, ridges and smears, make each letterform visually distinctive. The observations, interviews and my own reflections create a picture that suggests the effects of messy characters connect associations of materiality and perceived touch with the words’ meaning. Much as people regard characters to convey certain qualities, as van Leeuwen and Brumberger address, even moreso the recognition of the obviated letter imprints immediately draw references to the effort of production. This attribute was, in some ways, already anticipated before this study, given the ‘illusory index’ noted by Nørgaard, and the current trend for replicated letterpress characters to evoke the handmade. What materialized as significant within this part of the research, however, was that the noticeable tactility and surface of the hand-impressed letterforms pushed the ‘handmade’ representation to something directly related to touch and sensuality. These tugged open associations of the words as being ‘more personally directed’ at the reader: an invitation to engage in conversation. In contrast to Weiner’s interest in enunciation, one could infer here that the words are speaking to, instead of at, the reader. In my research, recognition of the efforts in making words similarly appears to give resonance and attention, as a place where contact has been made. As the earlier participant noted, ‘I have a sense of an author working here.’ This appears to make the gesture communicative and salient. The consistent assigning of the descriptors such as, ‘aliveness’, ‘human’, or ‘dynamic’, in the words of participants, points to the significance of somatic

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197 A reference to repeated assertions by people viewing hand-printed words that they feel more ‘alive’ than forms printed from a computer or mechanized process.
features as a means of connection—both in the sense of physical ‘contact’ and in allowing linkages. One participant commented, “I feel the words more”\textsuperscript{198}, a nice reference to both touch and emotion.

Understanding that ‘messy gestures’ counter conventions of seamless, smoothed text, the tactile, expressive effects of words in this study became significant in other ways. A main finding of the research study was the ability to argue that gestures from printmaking sorts and stamps can potentially provide marks as unique and expressive as those from a brush, and these marks form signification for readers. The messy gesture is a signifier, providing viewers the opportunity to experience the textures, surfaces, marks, and variations within words as part of the concept. The more physicalized or obviated gestures, like the splash marks from the forceful application of stamps in Fabricate, made the impact of these attributes more pronounced, and the readings follow suit. Blighted letters in conjunction with the phrase about truth, for example, make the assertions less solid and certain, as was discussed. This was also evidenced in the Inversions piece, ‘see the empty as half glass’, wherein the words ‘empty’, ‘glass’ and ‘half’ start to be echoed within the materials. Rather than simply acting as an illustration or representation of the words, however, the notion of ‘what you see is not what you see’ comes forward. In other words, the physical attributes made people question the words before them, with the effect of allowing words to be pluralized. The incidental marks and textures contribute to the words’ perceived meanings, creating an important correspondence between material and message. Leaving the sorts from the printing process on the ground in Fabrication further amplified this query as it made people discover relationships between letters on the ground, the construction of the work, the efforts of the work, and the printed text.

The Conceptualist stance against art for art’s sake—decoration—and their reference to a privileged language of paint marks/drips is a position certainly understood within the objectives and ideals of Expressionism. However, in Peter Osborne’s arguments on Conceptual Art and contemporary art, the material conditions of an artwork play a role not in their use as an endpoint—as painting for painting sake—but as a reflection on the social conditions in which the work

\textsuperscript{198} Participant, Calgary studio, October 5, 2015.
resides. If all aspects are considered integral to the meaning, looking at typographical gestures as a phenomenological encounter is significant. Beyond the handwritten cursive or inky gestural representations Noland addresses, here the materialized experience of printed words opens the means by which the text is understood. When Kosuth’s dictionary definition of ‘painting’ or ‘water’ lays-out the means by which we comprehend these words, we are less likely to cast doubt or question what the words are saying—even if questions arise regarding the intention of the piece. In Fabrication, we see that when clean text is replaced with the uncertain, apparently imperfect impressions from messy gestures, it undermines language as univocal, as ‘truth’. Whereas we can glide over readable typography, taking it in, my works propose that malleable, fallible hand-printed letterforms make us linger, tussle or come closer. This inspection equates to a questioning of the words themselves. What does it mean to have similar phrases, truth and not a lie, applied with so much force, yet without the form solidly sticking in spots?

The potential for analogies, for aesthetic encounters, was underscored by viewers’ responses, but also through observations and documentation which showed viewers playing with the words, coming close to inspect the texture, examining the awkward attributes, querying the scattered lettersorts, then making correlations between these aspects in relation to the words. The connotative and metaphoric associations from the ‘voice’ of mechanized familiarized fonts, pointed out by van Leeuwen, can be, it seems, made even more pronounced by adding individualized features from a gestural application. Whereas in the first series, Inversions, and in the studies in my studio, readers perceived a humanness and timbre that made them respond more personally to the words, in Fabrication, the ugly, stippled letters were perceived as uncertain, unreliable—opening, questioning. Contrasting with the assertive statement of ‘truth’, the materiality of hand-printed words poke holes into their surety and verity.

Words perform on many levels and the physical expressions involved in their making also calls attention to words as constructions, fabrications. The messy gestures provide a means of pause for readers, as they take note of the marks. The alternate forms of reading—moving back and forth, rereading, pausing, lingering over words—draws awareness to the reading act itself. This was
reflected in the survey set up in my studio, discussed earlier, where participants mulled over words that were hand-printed, perceiving the kerning, leading, fragmentation and marks as generative and significant: the seepage of marks correlating to the ‘seepage of meaning.’ They spent considerably more time on hand-printed words than the same words generated from a computer, the more clean and mechanized forms generally inducing a fully formed interpretation fairly quickly. This was made more manifest when readers were unclear as to how to ‘fix’ on one explanation about the hand-made words, rolling over a number of variables. As readers linger, the words gain complexity, moving beyond factual or univocal stances to one that becomes less settling and more open-ended. A main element of messy gestures, coupled with breaking words apart, was that the engagement with words was significantly longer than it took to simply read the words. As one participant nicely summarized: “I think discovering is part of the work.”

Rather assigning the expressive, aesthetic qualities as extraneous attributes of value, taste or decoration, as Kosuth proposes, perhaps hand-printed words can be viewed as mutable, unfixed, open for interpretation and response. Not only underscoring the arbitrary assigning of words in language—what Walter Benjamin referred to as a ‘royal robe’ over an object that can be removed and placed elsewhere—the character of the hand-printing seems less defined, less assertive.

For example, even when force is clearly employed, as in Fabrication, the imperfect indices call to question the certainty of the iteration. The condition of the text as almost dematerializing at points, denotes the transmutability of language. As subjective, as an inevitable trace or consequence from any action, this movement of making can be transferred to the words. While the tone of words in Fabrication are different to Inversions, the reader may similarly find the ‘humanness’ a dynamic quality, enabling an interconnection and space for active engagement, as opposed to a set of declarations.

The textural aspect, a tactile residue of the process, also seems to push open a visual voice for readers, like the ‘grain’ of words Barthes desires. Instead of quietly reading the pieces, many readers read the words aloud, or in the case of Inversions, read them in pairs, akin to Barthes ‘writing aloud.’ I observed a sense

199 Participant, Calgary studio, October 5, 2015.
that the words were becoming embodied through the readers’ voices; that they were performing the words. The ‘sound’ of the voice accompanying their reading revealed the experience as sensual, as ‘the language lined with flesh.’ This performativity was amplified by the shifting or turning movements needed to navigate the works, a choreography explored more specifically in the next chapter. The visual graining from stipple edges and smears also creates a textural spot—like Velcro—a place where readers get stalled. These attributes counter any swift scanning of words, something that was underscored in the short amount of time participants spent with the clear digital text of ‘it’s really upsetting’, in comparison to the iterations where it was messed. I used the term ‘printing a presence’ earlier, as the inflection seems to rub against the reader, slightly agitating or beckoning their engagement—like a tap on the shoulder—invoking an intimacy, immediacy and awareness of the maker. Both single letters and words took on resonance, as readers often lingered on these places.

This was then amplified for readers who further recognized the hand-printing as aesthetic gestures, pausing longer to notice the abstracted variations occurring. The materiality of inks, surface textures, tactile letters, scale and positioning on the wall, all slowed the reader, demonstrated again and again through observing people in the gallery and through the surveys in my studio. Language as expression—as creation—seemed mirrored in the numerous ways that people ‘played’ with the pieces. The sense that the viewer can potentially be effected in a way that relies not only on the words themselves, but the way the words come forward—how they create a presence for the viewer—conveys that the character of characters can add greatly to the insight or involvement with the text-based artwork.

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201 Many of these accounts are included in Chapter Five, ‘Words that move us.’
Chapter Five

Words that move us: Choreogrammatic reading

The pleasure of the text is that moment when my body pursues its own ideas—for my body does not have the same ideas I do.202

Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*

i. Introduction

In 2011, I created a series of textual veils, entitled *Poetry Skins*, linking poems letter by letter in a rice-paper lattice of horizontal words (Fig. 5.1). The words dangled sideways, effectively coercing people to bend laterally in order to decipher the disoriented text (Fig. 5.2). Extremely light and delicate, these works responded to every breath or approach, allowing them to almost dance with the viewer. Opening the possibilities of bodily movement while reading was an extension of the shifting reading paths required to navigate the fragmented and broken texts in the first two practice chapters of this thesis, here with the idea of the whole body elicited. Some of the smaller reading movements described in *Breaking Words Apart*, such as head and eyes jumping from place to place over a page, proposed a kind of relocation of the viewer wherein altered reading paths make people more conscious of the reading act. In this final chapter of my thesis, I expand from these former studies on reading shifts to investigate works that necessitate not just changes in reading pace, but an active motility of the viewer’s whole body in reading. Building from my interests in forefronting the body as an active agent in breaking and making words, in this chapter I observe, record and analyze the effect of kinesthetic movement while reading.

In a 1969 interview, Lawrence Weiner took exception to ‘impositional art,’ those works he felt had a directive, or erstwhile commanded particular responses through placement, site and form.203 He notes: ‘I don’t approve of art that you cannot supposedly experience unless you do prescribed things, because that’s choreography and, to me, really and truly is aesthetic fascism.’204 Wanting to

202 Barthes, 17.
203 Alberro, 92.
204 As cited in Alberro, 92.
distance his linguistic-based works from the instructions or imperatives provided by other artists working in that generation—Yoko Ono, Vito Acconci, George Brecht—²⁰⁵ he used phrases to suggest that the action has already happened.²⁰⁶ For example, ‘Placed Just Below the Horizon’, or ‘Dust + Water Put Somewhere Between The Sky & The Earth’, essentially replace the directive with the residue. Taking a spin on his reference, my interest in this chapter is to initiate a kind of choreography—a shimmy or stepping—not as a closed set of directives, but proposing this necessitated movement can propel and generate meanings. When text becomes impudent—when it misbehaves—our reading habits also misbehave, permitting a thumbing at the rules. Just as placing something upside-down will initiate an echoed sideways twist in the curious viewer, I similarly create an interplay with the texts in this chapter.

While the previous two chapters of my research program questioned how apparent physical interventions altered the text and the subsequent reading of that text, I set out to examine how the words might change for someone who must physically relocate their posture or position while reading. Poetry Skins suggested that in tandem with the reader’s amplified repositioning, new experiences and understandings occur. More specifically in this chapter, I examine works that initiate or coerce movement while reading to demonstrate the varying impact of different forms of motility. Here the ‘working’, in Working Against Type, refers to efforts made on the part of the reader: their gestures and movements while negotiating an artwork comprised of words. The works suggest a re-positioning—conceptually, aesthetically and physically—from the more static forms of word-based art that do not require notable movement in order to read. Examinations of the effects of moving while reading will be focused around two main bodies of work: Relay, a 10 metre, hand-printed scroll suspended and undulating from the gallery ceiling; and Bricoleur and Gallimaufry, two related installations of printed die-cut paper.

Necessitating pronounced movement and shifting rhythms on the part of the viewer, the words in these works cannot be glanced at a distance in a stationary position. Much of the words are, in fact, hidden or closed off if the viewer is

²⁰⁶ Alberro, 90.
unwilling to engage in some demonstrable actions. Unlike the purposely obliterated or overwritten text in *Breaking Words Apart*, the words in these pieces can potentially be fully accessed, but not without significant shifting of the reader’s body in relation to them. This part of the study expands on the jumping movement of the reader’s eyes over a broken text from Chapter Three, to a focus on the whole body of the reader as they engage with the works. I analyze what emerges from inviting stretching, bending, and repositioning while reading, a term I refer to as choreogrammatic. Building upon the linguistic terms for examining syntagmatic (syntax) and paradigmatic (connotation) cognition, choreogrammatic suggests a relationship between movement and reading words, and how the impact, affect and meaning of the text might be intensified through a bodily performance of reading.

Employing discussions on kinesthetic movement from Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, Alva Noë and Carrie Noland, addressed in *You gotta move* from Chapter One, I add new dimensions to the subject of kinesthetic understanding by involving text and reading. Rather than approach the subject from a kinesiologist, a philosopher or literary theorist, however, I examine the significance of movement through practice. Whereas the first two practice chapters employed observations and commentary alongside my own reflections, works in this study rely more dominantly on the feedback and responses from interviews. As Anderson’s autoethnographic model requires, through gathering participant responses—orally and in photographic recordings—I pull together implications from the data. Particularly resonant are the transcriptions of their words, noted in italics throughout this chapter. Even though I anticipated their experience would be altered through the addition of motility while reading, I was not entirely prepared for some of the intensive impacts that movement had on their responses. Therefore, it should be noted that the double entendre of ‘move’ in the
chapter title *Words that move us*, is intentional. While my artworks do not intentionally stir up sorrow or exploit enraging phrases, I understand words are culturally and socially coded expressions, with the ability to touch something familiar or intimate within the reader. Through the following instantiations, it was revealed that very personal receptions were invoked through the resulting interplay with words, many times urging a semantic questioning of certain words, presenting poetic responses, or calling up memories that perpetuated significations. In this series, words perform along with the reader to make meaning.

### ii. Relay

Emerging from the lateral orientation involved in reading *Poetry Skins*, *Relay* alternately attempts to expand the reading act over a span of length and time, like a marathon. 10 metres of hand-printed paper is stretched and suspended as a scroll at various heights across the centre of a room, with the start of the work near the ceiling and the end hanging onto the floor (Fig. 5.3). Like a relay, the words evoke both the meticulous, prolonged actions involved in hand-printing this scroll, and the extended actions of the viewer passing through the expanse of words from one end to the other.

Running the span of the paper, the text employs word slippage, phonemes and phonetics printed down the length of the scroll (Fig. 5.4). By replacing one or two letters from the previous word, moving a letter from the front of a word to the rear of the subsequent word, or using phonetics to play with sounds of words, a kind of relay race of language emerges. For example, ‘bitter, bittern, pattern, paternal, sternal, sterile, style, stole, stale, stalled, stilled, stiffed, stiffen, stuffing, suffering, rings, brings’ become a small run in nearly three hundred words. Phonemes have the reader sliding between languages—French, English and Welsh—over parts of the work: ‘tar, tart, ta ra, terroir’; or ‘brush, brusque, qu’est-ce que, quest, guest, jest, just, joust, roust, robust, bust, lust, slut, slot, sloth, sooth, soot.’ The slippage of words, where letters ‘pass’ and then repeat with a small change in letterforms, form a reading pace for viewers to keep step with. Drawing attention to the organization and arrangement of words—words as pattern—the piece also reiterates how small shifts can completely change a
word’s meaning. Through the slippages, the malleability and potentiality of words are laid out like a musical score, each a few centimeters apart. The words show the toggle and play involved in language, here the undulating form rolling along with the reader like a wave, which suddenly rises and shifts in another direction from the positioning. The reader is forced to pause at the more complex transitions and at the alternating direction of the scroll before carrying on with the reading.


I observed readers of Relay when it was installed at Harcourt House Gallery in Edmonton for my exhibition, The patina of consonants, and again in a project space at Cardiff School of Art & Design, where I was able to determine how movement worked in tandem with the words. Viewers cannot read this work all at once, nor standing in one place. While small sections can be easily viewed, the

207 March 2015.
208 November 2015.
soft-bronze letters on ascending and descending waves plus the sheer expanse of words, necessitate movement in order to fully engage with the piece. The complication and animation of reading happens on many levels, as I will discuss in detail: through the length of the work; through the distress of words on the tissuey paper; as words catch the light and force a sideways toggle; through subvocalization, vocalization and gesturing; and as an act of reading in pairs.

5.4. Relay, showing back side of piece as words cover the length of 10 metres.  
*Photo: Stacey Cann*

One of the most apparent ways I saw readers navigate the text was through a metered, gaited reading, walking forward, backwards or sideways alongside the piece as they read (Fig. 5.5). Some readers approached the centre of the work first—the most accessible area—to read a few passages, then moved around from place to place, selecting areas where certain words seemed to catch them. Most readers began with a few lines, then become caught by the game of words,
moving to the top to begin a more dedicated reading act. As people explore the piece from start to finish, the pace of reading words is echoed by their actions; they read and move at a slowed, measured gait, sometimes stopping at a trickier run of words, then resuming, creating a cadence of reading. Whereas I expected the small shifts from one word to the other might enable a quickened pace with the text, most people instead adopt a calm, rhythmic stride (Fig. 5.6). The replacement of one letter or phonetic shift of a word placed only 3 cm from the following word, seems to equally cause people to move in small slips, one step after another. This metered movement playfully recalls a Baroque dance, here gliding readers along with the words to experience them at extended tempo.

The unfolding of words as participants follow along the scroll makes the discovery aspect of the piece significant; the text sort of opens up as people approach each passage, not able to predict how a word might twist from the previous one. Altering the words from their easy line-by-line navigation, the
fragmentation or prolongation of the text in this piece requires caution, pause and relocation of the body, components that make reading more paced and savoured. The stride of reading seems directed by the equidistant placement of words, the word play, and length of the scroll. The reliance on phonetic changes, for example, calls for caution, and it sometimes takes rereading to position the word within the context—especially true if the word is not in English. Thus, this work relies first on lulling readers into rhythm, mirroring their movements as they read, then stopping and starting throughout the length. This proposes that rhythm and reading are merged, and the result becomes playful and musical—much like musical chairs, where the music starts and stops, and the participants follow suit. Differing from Gallimaufry, which elicits dynamic side-to-side and up-and-down movements, Relay generates a leisurely, gradual pace to reading, with subtle twists and turns of the body (Figs. 5.7, 5.8). This choreographed, metered movement is like taking a stroll with the scroll. It also seduces readers into participating in a relay—a commitment to navigate through the entire piece, top to bottom, and which takes several minutes to perform.

5.6 Viewers at Harcourt House, Edmonton, following along the length of Relay. This work guides viewers slowly, here showing participants’ feet softly stepping with the light scroll. Photo: Richard Smolinski
The rhythm of reading is accentuated by the shifts of the reader, not only as they traverse the scroll, but as they manœuvre through word interventions. For example, the tissuey paper didn’t allow for perfect printing, meaning certain letters are missing portions—with some parts of letters only half viewable, or
missing extenders, such as a part of the crossed ‘t’ (Fig. 5.9). The messy gestures here rely on readers to fill in gaps and create assumptions in order to complete the word, which entails the reader having to complete a letter through its positioning around the others, thus moving them closer to the piece. When a reader gets stuck on a string of words, they restart a few words back to try to fit the word into the context, and to pick up the rhythm of reading again. The words are also very muted against the ivory paper; printed in subtle bronze-gold pigment, at certain points they almost disappear when they catch the light, making them lift from the textured ground. This forces the reader sideways in order to capture the illuminated forms\textsuperscript{209}, an action similar to avoiding a glare or shadow (Fig. 5.10). Because of the fibrous nature of the paper, readers can also see through to the space behind the work at points, creating a sense that the words are floating. The small sideways-shifts slow and alter the reading, making the body’s actions significant and notable as people navigate the piece. As readers became aware of their body, I could see many start to sync their reading with the pacing, the choreography of the text and substrate enacting a performance. One gallery goer said, “I feel I’m being moved along the piece like a dance partner.”\textsuperscript{210}

The underscoring of movement while reading is essential, since viewers must reposition and relocate their bodies in order to engage with the piece. While this is true of any artwork, here it is exaggerated and prolonged, with the addition of words making reading an integral part of the experience—evidenced by the number of people who navigated through the text, often more than once. While the viewer’s body is implicated in any textual installation, as works by Barbara Kruger and Jenny Holzer attest, this work makes the rhythmic movement integral to viewing and reading. Viewers can’t help but be cognizant their body is being pulled through the work—‘like a dance partner’—as words unfold, and they subsequently respond, moving closer and away as words lose and gain readability through the materiality. The reader is also forced to echo the undulations, up and down, as they progress the length of the scroll. Relay can be read when standing still, but only in partiality; any extended reading necessitates movements in the form of walking, leaning, craning, side-by-side shifting and

\textsuperscript{209} The soft golden letters have an ironic reference to illuminated manuscripts, here the words common, unrefined, sometimes rude, and certainly non-sacred.

\textsuperscript{210} Gallery-goer response, March 9, 2015.
bending. At each point, the work invites a different motion, and the stopping and starting through the stumbles, pauses and missed lines accentuate the reading activity, made more like a dance rehearsal where one gets the rhythm, then gets a bit tangled.

Not only does the metre and rhythm of reading bear significance, equally the posture of readers became a strong component of the choreogrammacy. The words, configured on the undulating paper stretched over the gallery, elicit a physical, demonstrable shift in the reader’s gestures: moving their heads up and down, feet stepping one over the other, looking up or bending down to keep the reading pace, crouching at its culmination. Many viewers read aloud or mouth the words—subvocalizing—as they descend the scroll, so that not only arms, torso, and legs assume varying positions, but the mouth, throat and neck are also in motion. Others raise their fingers to follow along the text, not wanting to lose
their place in the string of words. One participant discussed her response when questioned about her vocalizing:

The length makes me come and greet it. I start mouthing the words, trying to do it like my son. All the singing, all the sound. Because I don’t know the written words, mouthing helps me keep on track. When we talk, our words fly on the ear, and they can be received by the listener. These sounds are for the air, meaningful only for the person who catches them. Here, you created visual sound waves.²¹¹

Her assertion of visual sound waves, of the ‘singing’ to keep track of the words, opens and amplifies the rhythm created in reading. Nodding of heads or mouthing words are embedded into our reading habits, since we learn to read by sounding out or by following lines of type with our fingers. Like the rhyming games children recite during skipping or hopscotch, Relay highlights this interconnection of body motion and body speech, in this case while reading. The obviated, measured pace toggles between matching, dictating and following the movement of reading, and in doing so, creates a choreography of and with text. Recalling a relay where pace and rhythm are critical for passing a baton to the next runner, the words and the movement here also become a sport for some, as I watched people moving determinedly, playfully through the expanse of the words. Much as the addition of messy printed gestures, discussed in the last chapter, can confuse or upset the authority of words, here the fragile substrate, word slippage, broken letterforms and fugue-like pace offer this text as a more challenging singsong. Observing participants throughout the exhibition’s opening reception subvocalize or vocalize this piece, I recalled Hausmann’s own performed printed poster poems, fostering reading as sensuous and public. The responsive, measured movements of the body seem to coax the strings of words into a rhythmic reading—like a skipping game. The pace of the reader works alongside the rhythm of the words, matching and leading each other. While the experience of reading aloud is familiar to many, by adding walking, stretching, sideways shifting and bending, along with the spatiality of the gallery setting and the prolonged word game, the reading act is participatory and conscious.

The idea of a skipping game, rap piece or word-fugue, is furthered by my observation that people often read Relay in pairs, making the reading act shared

²¹¹ Calgary participant, October 5, 2015
and performative (Fig. 5.11). Companions read the work together, out loud; they read to each other, then reread appealing sections, stopping to laugh or discourse. Sharing the reading shifts the rhythm even more, as participants volley words back and forth, like passing a ball where a pace is both established and broken. The word ‘relay’ comes well into play here, where words are shifted from one to another through slippage or phonetics, but also from reader to reader. Like the baton handed off to the next runner, the words also seem to hand off, and this chase slows and quickens the pace with each step.

![Image: Overhead view of reader as he moves through the piece. The pace of the reading is choreographed by the distance of the words, and slowed by complications, such as the undulating form, texture of the paper, hand-printed words, and soft bronze colour, which picks up the light. The words howl, howff and froth, seen in the bottom right, almost float from the interplay of light and shadow. The impediments to readability cause the viewer to pace, instead of hurrying or scanning. Photo: Richard Smolinski](image)

Even if a reader chooses not to read more than a few words, they are conscious of the presence and availability of words, and of their expanse across 36 feet in the centre of a gallery. The sense of the surrounding environment is made more apparent by small fissures in the paper so that while in the act of reading words,
the floor beneath becomes evident. This interplay while reading, especially reading in close proximity to the piece, makes the room, scroll and words interanimate. Reading the text, a viewer becomes conscious of the paper, then switches to the surrounding environment viewed through the holes and around the narrow scroll. The words are also visible from the back, inverted but recognizable as letterforms. Although many artists use words that create spatial and experiential encounters in the gallery, the words here are available as and through material, and as part of a complex, connective experience created by the movement. A reading of Weiner’s pieces can be conducted at any distance, without significantly changing the meaning. The choreography of Relay, on the other hand, coerces a set of movements more akin to viewing sculpture, one that intrudes upon the length of a space. The words form additional significance to the movement beyond just a sculptural work, since the words are familiar signs placed in an unfamiliar way.

5.11. Pointing, vocalizing and reading Relay together elicits an interactive response to the work, revealed here by two gallery-goers. This shared, participatory action reveals text as verbal, sensuous, spatial, and material, over purely lexical. Photo: Richard Smolinski
As the piece enacts movement and rhythm, it transforms reading into an active, participatory and spatial event. The reading becomes more conscious as words, strings of text, and their associations start to emerge and alter depending upon where you’re situated in the gallery. At the beginning of the piece, the viewer is looking up near the entrance of the gallery. Over the course of Relay, the terrain of the piece shifts, and the viewer’s surroundings change. Moving forward, if the reader elects, the perspective entirely changes from the format; now behind a peak of paper, or dipping down nearly to the ground, the physical role in reading is made integral. By the piece end, readers must crouch to gain access to the last few words, and both the expanse of the piece and the gallery are in view (Fig. 5.12). Similar to the runner who looks back towards the just-traversed racetrack upon reaching the finish line, the viewer becomes aware of how much reading has been accomplished. Through the span of the piece, the potential choreography is laid out through the placement of words and the placement of paper, yet each reader, or readers, enacts the piece differently. The pace of the body and words become intertwined in a rhythm, as the reader becomes performer.

5.12. After navigating a 10 metre span of words, a gallery-goer crouches to read the last run of Relay, at Harcourt House Gallery. Photo: Richard Smolinski.
iii. Bricoleur & Gallimaufry

As key implications about movement and reading were emerging throughout my research programme, a work from 2014, *Bricoleur*, arose as particularly significant. Installing the work over the wall of a gallery in Calgary, I observed how the viewer’s interaction with the reading process was adapted from the sweeps of text (Fig. 5.13).212 Watching individuals move side to side and up and down as they navigated the piece, and coupled with informal feedback, their physical engagement with the reading challenged their interpretations of the words, as I will expand on in this section. Certain components in the work were worth reworking into another, more flowing iteration, *Gallimaufry*, one year later. *Bricoleur* was suspended in fragments over four metres of a wall, and the subsequent version, *Gallimaufry*, was reworked and repeated with alterations to try to draw out certain noted aspects in the readings. I will discuss *Bricoleur* briefly, and the more efficacious iteration, *Gallimaufry*, in more detail, exploring the expansive significations that the latter elicits.


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212 Installed at the Little Gallery, University of Calgary, October, 2014.
My initial idea with *Bricoleur* was to flay the ‘page’, in a sense, the perception of peeled sections of a book spread and pinned across a wall. Using slices of die-cut packing paper, I hand-printed a collection of words from assorted texts over the strips, with the text notably distressed from the uneven surface of the substrate. The strips are fastened across the wall at varying heights, like the page of a book that begins to break up. Words are printed onto a perforated packaging material, where the die-cuts extend to a kind of honeycomb surface when stretched. This makes the printed words appear somewhat splintered at parts. Because the ridges and openings of the paper corrupt the integrity of the printing, the words disappear and reappear depending upon the position of the viewer. This necessitates a to-and-fro swaying, or up and down shifting along the sections in order to decipher the letterforms. The spreading segments of paper further coerce movement, as the viewer needs to navigate across the wall to read the flayed sections. The constant relocation of the viewer along the space adds an important challenge: similar to the intervened texts in *Breaking Words Apart*, this piece requires manoeuvering the text, while also manoeuvering the materials and manoeuvering the wall.

The work begins with printing the essay of the *Bricoleur*, where Jacques Derrida references Lévi-Strauss’ interpretation of bricolage: using what is at hand. Derrida’s interest in corrupting a text in order to convey its intertextual (Kristeva) nature—that words are always shared between sources—provokes my own intervention into his essay. I transcribe his words onto the hoarded packing paper using only what is currently around me in my studio: letterstamps, scalpel, scissors, paint, three types of wax. While my printing begins with transcribing Derrida’s theoretical text, it abruptly switches to a well-known nursery rhyme, *Simple Simon*, and finally shifts to passages of Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, where the heroine returns to Thornfield Hall. Piecing together unrelated forms of text proposes to open the space for the readers’ reception, allowing them to participate in the work by making connections from the selections.

The printing is conducted onto the packing paper with moistened graphite and pigment, using a vintage rubber stamp set (circa 1920) missing the lower case ‘r’ and ‘v’. The capital R and V stand in for these absent stamps, thus the terms ‘bRicolage’ and ‘bRicoleur’ arise from the printing, standing out throughout the passages (Fig. 5.14). They become visual exclamation points, like Hausmann’s
random selection of punctuation sorts in Poem-Posters, here making the reader pause momentarily as they encounter the letters. The honeycomb texture of the paper also varies when pulled or slightly manipulated, creating notable openings depending upon the viewer’s stance. This creates a kind of illusory effect while reading; certain letters lose their distinction when standing directly in front of them, and come into focus only when repositioning slightly left or right of the word. Forcing the readers to toggle until the words are decipherable enables a dance-like interplay through the reading act, as viewers sway and dodge. One seminar participant referred to it as “finding the sweet spot”\textsuperscript{213}, needing to move sideways until he could position himself to read a word, previously veiled from the excised surface. The term ‘sweet spot’ also suggests pleasure and reward, an affirmation of Barthes’ ‘bliss’ in reading.

5.14. Bricoleur detail, showing the capital ‘V’ and ‘R’, as well as the breakdown of words that can disappear until the viewer is correctly positioned, toggling right, left, on top or under the words.

Positioned as swooping ribbons, the banners of words invite the reader to shuffle and oscillate as they navigate the gallery wall. The progression along the splayed sections, coupled with the side-by-side pivot needed to find or focus upon fractured words, are both critical aspects of the piece. Reading cannot happen in

\textsuperscript{213} University of Calgary seminar, October 2014
one scan, nor in one spot; viewers have to pause, shift sideways, then jump to different points of the text. Much like *Relay*, it is difficult for readers not to be aware of their movements while reading, since they consciously toggle and shuffle while relocating across the wall. This rhythm brings attention to the physicality of reading, instilling awareness of their own body as they ambulate the piece through a variety of movements. Adding the mode of spatiality to the text-based works opens an additional means of reading the text as performance: stepping, swaying, looking up and down and across. I observed many readers repeat their reading of certain passages, particularly the flayed sections replete with adjectives from *Jane Eyre*. Like children’s counting games, some viewers began to read aloud or match their walking pace as they read the words—much like my observations with *Relay* and something consciously adapted for in the next piece, *Gallimaufry*. One seminar informant noted: “Caught by the texture of the paper. Caught by the text,” suggesting pauses both from the textual interruptions and from the trap of something seductive.

While certain sections of *Bricoleur* engage a very active read, the portions that looked most like book sections did not invoke motion or prolonged interaction. Viewer feedback suggested areas of text that were subtle or falling apart in the
fissures were more inviting, as they beckoned closer inspection. The bottom more ribbon-like sections were also more conducive to animated interplay, their expressive format echoing the gliding movements while reading. Like snippets of conversation picked up from the wind and spread across the wall, the flayed strips initiated bodily, performative readings, one that urged further critical study and observation. Taking a cue from the more striated portions of this piece, and softening the contrast between words and substrate, I reprinted another work onto the die-cut packing paper, and titled it Gallimaufry (Fig. 5.15).

The word ‘gallimaufry’ has a similar meaning to ‘bricoleur’: taking what is at hand to piece together a new formation. Gallimaufry derives from a form of stew whereby leftover ingredients are culled together for a new dish. Using not only the remaining packing paper, but also some of the central ideas from Bricoleur and Relay, I felt I was piecing together a tastier, more tempting work for reading. Building upon the textured packing paper that spread out and undulated, I hand-printed words onto the surface with a gold-bronze pigment. This shimmering hue created subtle lettering on the substrate, making it harder to read, thus
coaxing a more intimate viewing distance. The words are also positioned on narrower fragments of the packing paper, which are then rippled with fabric stiffener for more articulated bows and protrusions from the wall. I spread the piece to cover a large wall, about 3 metres, to compel movement while reading (Fig. 5.16).

5.17. Gallimaufry, detail showing text opening from the die-cuts, with strong shadows from the curved substrate. These interventions force the reader to reposition and relocate in order to gain access to the text, creating a dimensional and material formation of words. Photo: Blake Chorley

Comprised of selected texts from various sources—nursery rhymes, novels, anatomical texts, and well-known sayings—I interplay certain words against each other. For example, the first section employs the old version of ‘eeny meeny money might, butter lather boney strike.’ Picking up from ‘boney’, the subsequent passage references textbook sections on the articulations of skeletal joints. Throughout the printed textual strips, I pick up on salient words, and reform a relatable, yet unrelated, next passage. As discussed in Messy Gestures, both personal and cultural signifiers can be brought to typography and text through connotative and experiential metaphors (van Leeuwen). Based on previous works in all chapters of this study, I offer multiple connections and associations through the printing, the pigmentation, the honeycomb paper surface, the cast shadows, the swooping installation, the words and the
movements of the viewer. The overall effect of Gallimaufry on the wall is more sweeping than Bricoleur, with the fragments of text adjoining others with a notable shift between, and with a more fluid configuration. The paper’s opened, honeycomb surface creates fissures in the printed text, as with Bricoleur, as well as patterned shadows beneath the sections, dappling in various sizes according to the depth of the undulating paper (Fig. 5.17). The tendency in Western culture is to read left to right, and this provides a recognizable starting point for reading the piece: from the top, left-hand portion of the highest section and proceeding right, then to the phrase aside or below. All of the participants began to read in this way, even though the reading paths alter significantly, as I will discuss. The installative nature, the small type and textured paper, necessitates that viewers move close to the work. Pulled along the wall by the sweeping words, the viewers respond by becoming immediately animated. Certain portions are difficult to read, as the textured surface opens the spaces of the letterforms and, as with Bricoleur, the participants have to toggle around to decipher the words.

Setting up a formal study to observe and record responses of people reading this work—and receiving Ethics Approval215—I selected 10 participants of varying heights, ages, genders, cultural backgrounds (two whose second language was English), and degrees of mobility, including one in a motorized wheelchair: all individuals whose varying comfort with visual art and/or text would generate a range of perspectives. As I observed and recorded the participants, there were apparent shifts in their bodies as they read: bobbing and swaying as they moved across the wall. In many cases, the readers seem to be not only responsive to the disappearing or shifting words, but also to their own gestures, which start to amplify with each subsequent read. In the participant interviews, readers strongly conveyed a heightened awareness of their motions while reading, citing their own body as a significant factor in the work. They noted ‘performing’ with the piece, or having the sensation they were taking part in a dance. People consistently noted their postures, their sideways motions, their up and down positionings as they navigated the work. Every single participant reread the piece at least twice, and usually more. They repeatedly focused on certain sections, reading in alternate orders, amplifying their movements when approaching something they determined as resonant. A consistent reaction was the awareness

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215 Received from both Cardiff School of Art & Design, and the University of Calgary.
of their own bodies as they read the work; how this changed their experience of
the reading act, and also their interpretation of the text. One participant noted:

You totally have to change your angle to figure out the words. I love
how this part floats by itself, bringing me to the lower end of things.
There’s a difference in my reading; I go back and forth across it several
times. I can go down there, and then come back up. With a standard
text, you read it once. Not that this is overly difficult, but you need to
consider it more than once. I kind of have to stop and go ‘one, two,
three’. There’s no punctuation, and no capitals, and no periods. Yet, I
still define this (pointing) as the end of a sentence, this as the
beginning. I feel like I’m more of an active participant; I’m physically
made to move. A standard book is flip, flip, flip, but with this there is
more of a physical effort to get through the words. It makes me more
intrigued to read. It’s not a standard line, line, line. I’m not dragged
down. It’s a fun experience. It doesn’t feel like work, even though I have
to twist my neck and squint at the words. It’s a more involved
participation.\textsuperscript{216}

In this example, the participant noted the tradition of going line-by-line following
a predictable reading path in contrast to this piece, where her body sometimes
guided her reading. Much like the works in \textit{Breaking Words Apart}, this
reading did not presume one linear approach or outcome. Even though more
‘work’ or effort, she found the action of reading was engaging. She also noted a
compulsion to reread the work several times in different ways, since the
experience with words was more ‘involved’. She crisscrossed the wall over and
over, stopping at certain areas to reread and savour a phrase, before moving on
to other sections. She fixated, as many viewers did, on one portion, reading it
over to create connections and interpretations with other areas. Starting to make
assertions about the work as a shed skin initially because of the honeycomb
paper, this participant offered certain words such as ‘snakeskin’, ‘articulation’, and
‘transform’ to support this idea. The back and forth movements of her own
navigation across the wall, zigzagging and craning her head, also seem to have
contributed to this interpretation, or conversely, may have guided how she
moved. As she read, I noted how her motions became important, compelling her
to explore the piece in a deepened way. The associations made between the
tactile ribboned material, the words on the fragments, and the act of reading all
lead her towards a serpentine interpretation of the work. This participant was

\textsuperscript{216} Calgary participant, September 16, 2015.
joined by other study subjects who noted their engagement in moving over the wall in different paths. One stated:

I feel like I'm part of a performance piece. I feel like my interaction is part of the work, like a dance. There are certain movements I have to make to engage with the piece in order to get the message. I become the artwork. I interpret my movement is necessary for the artwork. I will never move exactly the same way twice. I can move however I want, but movement that brings me closer to the piece gives me access.\textsuperscript{217}

Watching him interanimate with the piece was very akin to choreography, as he moved towards the wall, then backed up, stretched up and crouched down (Fig. 5.18). The notion of choreogrammatic reading came forth, where the text forces movement, and conversely, words become informed by the resulting gestures. Another participant conveyed: “I’m required to play along. Not necessarily required… I can step away. But there are constraints set.”\textsuperscript{218} Similar to a dance piece where the steps are laid out, then improvised during each performance, the participant’s movements are guided by the form and format of the piece, which are then repeated with alterations each reading. The earlier participant stated, “My desire to reread has more to do with dance than with the words,”\textsuperscript{219} his reading becoming more about the interaction and feeling of his body moving along with the text. There was a visualization echoed by his body—and the body of other participants—as he followed the curves of the work itself by moving in and out from the wall, and dropping nearly to his knees, with all his weight, to read the bottom portion. Similar to choreography, the movement and form created from his body makes the experience sensual, kinesthetic and highly involved, here coupled with the experience of reading. This participation enables words to be performed, the ‘desire’ of physical engagement becoming a central component of meaning-making. People viewed their own bodies as integral to this work: “I become the artwork.” Even while one participant barely removed her hands from her pockets, she still swayed, bent and crouched as she read, her movements becoming increasingly physically expressive with each reading (Fig. 5.19). The animated body is generative here, the performing as significant as the words themselves.

\textsuperscript{217} Calgary participant, October 7, 2015
\textsuperscript{218} Calgary participant, September 16, 2015
\textsuperscript{219} October 7, 2015.
5.18. Participant in Calgary, revealing a choreogrammatic reading of the work. The range of twists and turns show the somatic engagement required for reading the words. Much like dancing, each participant explored and expressed their own range of postures to experience the piece, making reading a sensuous, expressive act.
5.19. Reading another iteration of *Gallimaufry* in Cardiff, November 2015, with viewable shifts in the reader’s stance and position
The words in *Gallimaufry*, while offering a sort of left to right reading route, are further complicated through the addition of materiality, dimensionality, texture, and forced movement. This, in turn, adds variation to the manner in which the viewer navigates the piece, involving them in a performance beyond conventional reading (Fig. 5.20). One participant conveyed, “I’ve stopped trying to decode it. Language is no longer cognitive; it’s more bodily.”

A simple scanning from a distance will not provide access to the piece, requiring instead notable shifts with each reader and each reading. As the previous research participant noted, *Gallimaufry* precludes someone from moving in the same way twice, since its layers of variations—surface undulations, broken, small text, shadows, and fragments—make replication difficult. It also requests that each individual find comfort with how much or little they move, not unlike being on a dancefloor. The choreogrammatic reading complicates and implicates the viewer: certain moves are necessitated for gaining access to the fragmented words, but each reader

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220 Calgary participant, September 2, 2015.
must determine their own pace, gesture, repetition, reach and duration. Designed like choreography to invite movement, it is performed by each reader, with each reading becoming a new reading with new meanings.

In Gallimaufry, reading is pushed into an active form, with the arms, legs, back, neck and head all animate in the event. One participant started to read quite stiffly, with his arms folded behind his back (Fig. 5.21). Within reading the first line—which he immediately read out loud—his arms slowly shifted to his sides, and his entire posture loosened. With his arms moved to his hips and thighs, and his body swaying side to side, the resulting reading was fluid and clearly
engaging to him; at some point he broke into a smile and started playing with the harder-to-see words on the honeycomb openings. He tugged at his mistakes, rolling over a word again and again, even settling on the word’s initial (mis)reading. In this instance, the forced movement seemed to relax the participant, welcoming a more inventive response to the words. Reading was made active on both levels: physically and conceptually.

The text in *Gallimaufry* shifts significantly in its reading just as the viewer shifts with the piece, fragmented and undulating. Participant responses acknowledged viewers becoming more conscious of their ‘reading’, but also more alert to the material aspects: the unusual texture of the paper, the layout of words in strips over a wall, and the uneven printing. The perforated paper takes on distinctive shadows from its positioning on pins, pulling some parts away from the wall. The shadows make apparent the qualities of the paper, the delicate filigree edges and honeycombed openings echoed onto the wall. The sweeping movement of the strips also creates a dynamic interplay of words, floating tenuously on the cut paper. Considered alongside the messy gestures and flayed sections, participants noted that this materiality compounded the interpretations, whereby the words’ seeming fragility came forth. One viewer noted: “It is textual material. The words are almost faint; they’re moving through the texture.” Another observer described falling into the die-cut spaces where words disappear; where the wall and shadows behind became a kind of hush or silence between utterances. My own experience was analogous to a space where words slip from the mind, taking refuge before they can be verbalized or written. As with some of the works in *Breaking Words Apart*, the visual, sensual aspects of the tissuey substrate and shadows enable the notion of transparency or disappearance to arise as relevant, forcing a reading of invisibility that contradicts our usual interests in text as legible and clear. Here, the words are faint and almost vanish at times, until you shift your body to align with them.

The significance of the movement in order to interact with this subtle reading invokes a probing and questioning. In fact, all viewers responded to the oscillation of text, material, shadows and wall as a sensuous constituent of

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221 Calgary participant, September 7, 2015.
222 Cardiff, November, 2015.
reading, rather than viewing the words as some coded set of phrases imposed upon a surface. Experienced in this way, the words take on more ethereal or ephemeral aspects, whereby participants can connect the undulating surface articulations as filigree or some sort of transparent veil. Through the reading act, not only the words but the textured paper, the open sections of wall, and the shadows became significant. Like in the previous chapters, the material interanimates with the words, creating analogies, poetic connotations or metaphors. One participant described her response:

"Certain words come out but there are multiple subtexts. I’m trying to read and reread. The words are my main focus, but I see more. The words and the spaces between them; there’s so much openness there. I’m greedy for meaning. My mind can go a thousand places. How would it be different if the paper was different? There’s so much air in the words. I’m reading it as poetry."

Not unlike the woven piece, *Entwine (Sons and Lovers)*, discussed in the first chapter, the words in *Gallimaufry* commingle as sensuous forms, encountered as a delicate relief on the wall. The addition of movement contributes further amplifications, as the sensation of movement is coupled with the desire to touch. The participant’s response to the earlier version of *Bricoleur*, in which words became threaded as part of the very fabric—“*textual material*”—proposes the lexical and the sensual as generative. Many people asked if they could touch the pieces, the waffled surface like a textile we feel compelled to caress. Adding words to the surface, the words are intertwined with this sensuality, inviting other sensations beyond visuality. As with many installative artworks, the kinesthetic movement alongside and around the materials enhances the experience; here even moreso the inclusion of words to the other elements is significant: reading begins to connect the other attributes to the words, and our receptions correspondingly multiply. The visual, the tactile, the material, form a ‘nebulae of signifieds’ where words can open, and be opened, to a layering of experience. Recalling the multimodal possibilities discussed in the first chapter, the complexity of oscillating between significations posits reading as a dynamic, not passive, activity. While reading is, arguably, always dynamic in the sense that

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223 Calgary participant, September 7, 2015

it activates many senses—the tactility of book pages, the shifting body weight, the absorption into imagined visuals—the exaggeration of these experiences here makes the familiar act of reading, unfamiliar. Sometimes the words are significant, at other times the material, at other points the bodily engagement: “the dance.” The physical and visceral signifiers are made more punctuated by the animation of the entire body, and the resulting reading follows along, making equally punctuated interpretations.

While Carrie Noland describes the cultural significations of movement through inscription, the performing body of the kinesthetic reader is absent from her critical examination. Positioned here through participant comments and photographs, I demonstrate the engagement of reading when coupled with the sensuous, material, and motile as a heightened experience. Even when the text is subsumed for more tactile or mobile experiences—more to do with dance than with the words—the words are embedded as signs to be read or disregarded. The implication with these works is that engagement is enhanced through the multiple forms of ‘reading’, and different forms of awareness arise from the reader’s gestures: material, sensual, spatial, visual, textual. Since the words are still present, their significance as a symbol remains—even if in a form of erasure through the disappearance between honeycomb forms. Thus, the importance of words as cultural and personal signifier is retained by readers, but these appear to become amplified as viewers physically engage with the words, enabling a heightened reading of textuality, visuality, materiality and motility. While I anticipated the increased awareness of body and materiality, an interesting sense of emotion was surprisingly generated for viewers of the piece. One participant notes:

> At first the piece was just aesthetic, but then I started to feel an emotional content. It’s odd to put an emotion to it, as the words are disconnected. It throws together words that don’t belong, yet I feel something.\(^{225}\)

Her rereading and further exploration of the words in the piece initiated inward sensations for her, and she began to question the proximity and relationship of the words in relation to these personal connections. Similarly, another participant

\(^{225}\) Calgary participant, September 16, 2015
noted the passage where ‘articulate’ is mentioned, then moves into anatomical descriptions of the articulated skeleton in the next segment, and how those became interconnected for her as something quite bodily and stirring. She summarized the experience:

I now feel the ‘articulation’ refers to language and movement and membranes. It’s all more combined and intense. Now I think of a body moving along these strips, along the perforated paper."^{226}

While I noted a pattern as certain participant’s ‘emotions’ or ‘intensity’ arising from the combination of words, materiality and movement, it was demonstrated most acutely by a participant noting his strong response to the phrase, “My mother said to pick the very best one and you are not it”, positioned at the lower end of Gallimaufry. Reading through the text, he moved his body throughout the work, up and down amongst the fragments of phrases stitched together. His encounter with the phrase, ‘pick the very best one’—separated from the other passages and set at the bottom—punctuated and punched him. This traditional way of selecting teammates for inclusion in games is uttered by children everywhere, and we take it for granted as a set of innocent words. Like many words, however, the meanings can be laden with discomfort. In my interview with the participant, he conveyed:

The phrase, ‘pick the very best one’; I’ve heard that phrase a million times, but I feel like I’m seeing it for the first time. I’ve never thought about what the phrase means. It feels so heavy all of a sudden. How often we say things we don’t know the meaning. There’s a reliance on language, but we don’t consider the meaning. Put it here with other beautiful phrases on delicate paper, I now consider the phrase differently. I start thinking more about my feelings, thinking about marriage and relationships. Now there’s an unavoidable feeling and weight to the words."^{227}

Hearing the words, listening to them many times, the phrase was familiar. After physically interacting with the work, he saw the words on the fragile paper in a different way. The words became laden with meaning: they became ‘heavy’. Through the movement, the reading had changed; separated out from the rest of

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^{226} Calgary participant, September 2, 2015
^{227} Calgary participant, October 7, 2015
the configuration, positioned at the bottom, the ‘delicate’ materials and his varying movements to finally reach them, all generated salience. Being forced to manoeuvre throughout the piece, ‘dancing’ with it, as he described earlier, meant that he was embodying the phrases at the same time he was reading them. His awareness of the words was brought forth through the rereading, and by his gestural approach to the work: the words ‘caught’ him. Roland Barthes suggests, in *The Pleasure of the Text*, that the body can lead us to our perceptions when engaging with text: ‘for my body does not have the same ideas as I do.’ The materials, the presentation as a flayed set of phrases, and his performances of the reading seemed to allow a different sensation of the words. He went on to describe the impact: “the presentation did so much to say ‘hey listen, what does this say?’ Now ‘my mother says to pick the very best one’ will never lose meaning.” Recalling some of the abject responses to *Capillary*—the drilled, wax-laden book from the first series—this piece was more surprising for initiating strong responses, since the same perceived violence or physical force is not viewable in the work. This suggests that the visceral responses are initiated or amplified from the movement invoked in the viewer’s body as they read: that somatic movements and the delicate substrate arouse emotions from the words.

The activity involved in reading *Galimaufry* resists a passive scanning of the words, as one might do with sitting with a book, instead engaging physical interaction which helps to generate more responses. The oft-familiar words included in the piece—eeny meeny, my mother told me, comme ci, comme ça—are positioned in an unfamiliar way, slowing the reader through softened bronze words distressed by cut paper and undulations, necessitating body shifts and ambulation when reading. In the previous instance, the research participant performed readings over and over as the words began to penetrate and take emotional form. The words moved (motile) as well as moved (emotive) this individual. The interconnection between the gestures involved in his reading and the words he explored while navigating the piece created a heightened poignancy, like an exclamation point. The quiet letters on white perforated paper positioned on a white wall, separated this section from the rest of the piece urging, in his words, a ‘listen.’ Like a whisper, it became a significant fragment for him, which made him question other parts of the overall work.

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228 Barthes, 17.
In an interesting comparison, one of the other participants also noted how her reading started to become increasingly complex and emotive the more she read and the more she moved. Fixing on a quote within the work from *Jane Eyre*—‘the characteristics of sad sky, cold gale’—each reading provoked deepened associations as she moved repeatedly through it:

*On rereading, you feel the words more. How much the punctuation controls and manipulates us! I’m thinking about the pattern; it’s cut and wrinkled. It plays with our visual understanding of the word. And, no punctuation. Maybe the punctuation is in the movement? I’m moving up, I’m moving down. Is this a metaphor? Maybe this is the punctuation? Maybe discovering is part of the work. The more I see, there are disconnections and discontinuances. We usually reread something to savour a passage, but here it’s pulling my memories, but also questioning how we use our signs. You released these words onto the paper. You left them there. If I read them, then they’re going to catch. It’s like a sad sky calling me to resist.*

Her usual pleasure in rereading a set of words in order to ‘savour a passage’, was replaced here by a sort of disturbing curiosity in going back over the piece; there was a sense the sad undertone of the words would ‘catch’ if she read them. Both her physical activity and how the words began to make meaning were made more acute by her prolonged encounter with the piece. Her movements—up, down, side to side—were perceived as a metaphor, and she began to interpret the words as such. Movement filled in for the missing punctuation as period (stop), exclamation point (look), comma (pause), again recalling Hausmann’s implanted punctuation, read as sounds. The up and down became a call for her to re-look, to question her perception: a request to view things with a new perspective, with discovery. In doing so, the words became metaphorical, something to ‘release and catch’, a kind of lure. The ‘sad sky’ of words pulled at her, like memories. Her body, being caught by the movements, was similarly catching the words, which compelled her to read and read again. Through this, her motions opened words as a metaphor, seeking associations. Whereas all words are available for discovery, conventional reading is often done with the aim of extracting information. In this instance, the performative reading enabled the participant more poetic, prolonged engagement with words on a gallery wall, as she searched through the passages and created analogies.

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229 Calgary participant, October 5, 2015
Maxine Sheets-Johnstone highlights the body’s own movements in resistance, extension, motion, as a form of knowledge. Both she and Alva Noë acknowledge our body’s contributions to understanding the world around us through our interanimation with objects. The idea of somatic, gestural movement coupled with moving through space as a form of ‘access’, as Noë conveys, is to continuously make meaning as one navigates—here both the kinetic and kinesthetic of experiencing artwork. Further, Sheets-Johnstone proposes an intensified awareness can occur through somatic movement of both making and viewing art, as it stimulates an activation of the entire body. She writes: ‘To recognize the dynamic congruency of movement and emotion is thus to recognize an essential fact: an ongoing kinetic form is dynamically congruent with the form of an ongoing affective feeling. A particular kinetic form of an emotion is not identical with the emotion but dynamically congruent with it.’

In the application of movement as both generating and expressing feeling while experiencing a piece of art, the addition of text in my study adds even more complexity. Beyond the body’s generative capabilities, the words contribute an additional level of expression in response to a recognizable sign. The significations of words, both associative and connotative, formed from cultural codes, as discussed in Chapter One, are coupled with the effects from kinetic and kinesthetic interaction with the pieces. Adding material and spatial aspects, this abundance of stimulation proposes to heighten responses, as my participants’ responses suggest.

Text is also a representation, a set of signs that stand in for an idea or form. The linguistic representations of Kosuth and Weiner are able to call up images of the objects they replace, and thereby question the necessity of the object to express the idea. Pushing against the semiotics of words, which provides a set of propositions for any reader, in Gallimaufry the cultural codes are edged into a place where assumptions about words are replaced with unfolding thoughts and responses. Movement seems to amplify and multiply the significations: movement adds ‘access.’ Just as the recognition of a somatic gesture in the previous chapter enables access to a perceived maker, through associations of dynamism and ‘humanness’, here access is provided by the reader’s own body coupled with the words. The dynamic interaction of reading and movement

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230 Sheets-Johnstone, 16.
becomes a literal one, as well as a conceptual one; the physical movement of the 
viewer requested in Gallimaufry seems to simultaneously propel trajectories for 
how the reader makes meaning. As the earlier participant noted: “It’s all more 
combined and intense.” Another reader clearly conveyed how the sentences had 
changed from his initial reading, to something more acute: “I’m going past my 
assumptions about the words. I have heightened awareness.”

In improvised music, the listener cannot predict where the notes will go; similarly with these texts, the words presented in an unfamiliar way encourage alertness, and openness to possibility and chance. In the desire to explore, 
discover and understand, the viewer moves as they read, and these readings 
bring the activity of looking to a more sensory level. In what Sheets-Johnstone 
describes as kinesthetic melodies, there is ‘a generative as well as expressive 
relationship between movement and emotion.’ With Gallimaufry, the 
relationship is compounded between material, words, movement, sensuality, and 
space. The amalgams of movement seem echoed in the reception, where not only 
one way of moving or understanding is opened; rather, an unfolding multitude 
of reading paths and meanings, often with poignant interpretations. When we 
read we move, even subtly. Within this study, participant after participant 
suggests that the exaggerated choreogrammatics allow more sustained and 
profound significations to take shape from the words before then. The body 
becomes a mirror to the words, and equally, the words mirror the bodily 
responses.

iv. Retrospection on Words that move us

After a strategy meeting with colleagues in Toronto, one of them suggested we 
should have been walking around the room during the meeting instead of sitting, 
since movement seems to stir up so many ideas. While this chapter was not 
attempting a scientific study to ‘measure’ the effects of movement on idea 
generation—something for more consideration and detail in a post-doctoral

231 Calgary participant, August 14, 2016.
232 Sheets-Johnstone, 14
233 Natalie Majaba Waldburger, March 8, 2016.
framework—my aim was to determine what might be elicited through reading and movement in tandem. Weiner’s claim that there is a closure in works that cannot be experienced ‘unless you do prescribed things’—an ‘aesthetic fascism’ as he suggests—follows suit with the Conceptualists interests in open reader reception. Whether ambulating in a particular way through a gallery space, or providing invitations to engage in a poetic directive (as the works of Yoko Ono propose), Weiner’s remarks don’t necessarily take into account the viewer’s ability for interpretation, even in a staged context. Placing a set of potential navigations for readers of my works, the implication from my observations and participant feedback is that the coerced movement actually compounds and intensifies the text, opening the words beyond their initial reading: beyond their ‘assumptions.’ A familiar word presented in familiar ways may be taken at face value; the words here, staged unconventionally in order to compel movement, seem to unroll meanings, making the reader continuously question their presupposition with a text. Movement is required to read these works, and the different movements appear to influence the interpretations, which range from personal to material to sensual to emotional to metaphoric.

The animated, physicalized body of the reader also offers the performative aspect as a significant part of the piece. Lawrence Weiner’s pejorative remark about artworks as ‘choreography’ undoubtedly need further context than an interview citation in a book provides. However, his remarks seem impossibly narrow when the potential for viewers to “become the artwork”, as one participant conveyed, has deepened influence on the readings—kinetically, kinesthetically, emotionally and conceptually. Choreography, like art, has shifted over the years. Previously a means of directing the dancers’ movements, contemporary choreography is more of a collaboration, enabling the dancer to interpret and improvise from a set of loose parameters. Similarly, I offer a choreogrammatics, where words are staged but performed differently by each reader, and where the body becomes an active agent in meaning-making. In my studies, readers approached each reading of works with a new set of movements, each reader with their own set of movements, and a subsequent range of interpretations and responses emerged from each physical encounter. This was conveyed through more gentle movements to engage with Relay being perceived as playful or game-like, with the ‘sing-song’ of words often conducted in pairs, in contrast to the pronounced
movements of reading *Gallimaufry*, which correspondingly stirred more intense receptions.

From observations, participant feedback and interviews, three main findings were suggested from initiating movement on the readers. Firstly, the prolonged interactive (re)reading from the physical elicits playful, even vocal responses to the work, which propels text into other sensual iterations. Secondly, the movements seem to provoke rhythms which enable thoughts and emotional responses to the words to more freely flow. And finally, the reader feels an integral part of the work, allowing more participatory and performative responses to the work to emerge. In all cases, a synergistic relationship is created between the text and the choreography.

In the first finding, just as *Breaking Words Apart* and *Messy Gestures* request more time and prolonged encounters through complicating reading paths, the response from participants, from observations and documentation determines that physical repositioning and relocating add further complexity and challenge to the words. As one of the participants previously noted while reading *Gallimaufry*: “There’s a difference in my reading; I go back and forth across it several times.” The difference was acute: not ‘line, line’ line’, as she noted, but something more organic that invites the rereading of certain sections to guide the movements, and alternately, enables the movements to shift the order and manner in which words are explored. The necessary toggling—side by side and up and down movement—made reading more efforted, but also more “involved”, as she iterated. The compounded interventions of dimensionality, materials, spaces, floating text, and the use of the wall and floor, take away the facility of reading—as in previous chapters—here encouraging readers to linger on words and material through an awareness of their bodily interaction. Through the back and forth actions of reading words and making movement, a sustained engagement enabled participants to see familiar words in a new light, such as one participant who connected the phrase ‘articulation of joints’ as the sections of joined text with the sensation of her own moving body.234

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234 Calgary participant, September 2, 2015.
The word ‘catch’ in relation to how words arise and fall into view was uttered again and again throughout my research studies, but particularly within this chapter where the pieces require movement. Like the sticky, textured letterforms of messy gestures, ‘catch’ conveys a pause or stoppage on the part of the reader, leading to a more conscious reading act. Rather than letting words flow easily over or through a reader, the notion of ‘catching’ implies more effort and struggle, lining up to have the words hit squarely. From the interviews, I determined readers generally read Gallimaufry three times, with highlighted sections examined over and over to unravel meanings. One of my research participants, when arriving for our scheduled interview, remarked that he had already read the piece Gallimaufry several times, since it was positioned in a hallway of the building over a two-week period. Remarking that the “desire to dance” made him reread, the clear relationship between the engagement of moving gave distinction to reading, and the resulting understandings of words compounded. The movement seems to consequently set in motion the ideas. Movement offers the unpredictable from the strings of words, since one’s perspective literally changes through the shifts of the body, but also through initiating alternate reads, rereads, and prolonged reads, each one compelling deeper and unfolding understandings. Reading is savoured, considered, made dance-like and immersive; the sensual, embodied experience of unfamiliar reading has potential to make the viewer invest and explore.

This prolonged engagement where words catch was coupled with the physical responses, and my second finding suggests the body starts to ‘lead’ the interpretations. Stretching, bending, walking along with words, toggling side to side, the physical involvement in reading seems to pick up on and equally inform the words, generating meanings as people navigate the works. Implicating the moving body while the reading triggers, like the firing of muscle synapses, multiple modes of responses. The interface of the work and the motions speak back and forth to precipitate associations drawn from the movement alongside the words. For example, the run of word slippages in Relay, coupled with the floating, delicate paper, create fugue-like steps to navigate the expanse of the piece, instilling readers with playful responses to the words. Viewers were observed laughing, working in pairs, volleying words back and forth, in contrast to the more intensive responses from Gallimaufry. Reading the marathon of words in Relay becomes a form of play, back and forth, especially when reading
happens in pairs, which it did often with this piece. The body seems to respond to the materials, the presentation of words, and the choreography, which then precipitates the readings.

In *Gallimaufry*, the variation and degree of motion compound the response to the words, evidenced by the people who expressed that the initial aesthetics of the words turn more to emotional reactions as they re-navigate and perform the piece. Much as the recognition of physicalized gestures of making letterforms in the last chapter instill a voice that readers respond to, similarly the movement in *Gallimaufry* appears to open expressive, gestural, and metaphorical responses to the collection of phrases and quotes. The participant who viewed the words as ‘heavy’ when he got to the bottom sections of ‘my mother told me to pick the very best one and you are not it’, fell to a crouch, creating a response to the words that are echoed in his movements; or inversely, a movement that influences his interpreting a ‘heaviness’ to the words. Similarly, the participant who sensed her action of looking up and looking down the piece as a metaphor for search and discovery, connects the choreography of motion and thought. The actions of her head bobbing and nodding propose a correlation with how she interprets the piece, with ‘the sad sky calling me to resist’ lest the words ‘catch’. Liz Kotz, in referring to how meaning is gleaned from words writes:

> By their nature, words are both here—concretely and physically present on the page, or in the moment of utterance—and yet also elsewhere—referring to, evoking, or metaphorically conjuring up sets of ideas, objects, or experiences that are somewhere else. 235

In essence, metaphors and associations are already present in words. Rather than aesthetic fascism, as Weiner suggests, my participant observations and interviews suggest the moving body widens the portal through which these associations—and feelings—are generously allowed to flow in response to the text. Implicit here is that kinetics and kinesthetics may make these associations more acute through inciting the body. I offer that a choreogrammatic reading expands improvisational spaces, where the dynamic of the moving form is both felt (somatically) and felt (emotionally). Taken here, the impulsion to move and the challenge of reading the words are synergistic; the pressing of the body seems

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235 Kotz, *Words to Be Looked At*, 3.
to press against the words, and these effectively work together to squeeze the text beyond a set of signs deposited onto paper.

Finally, and significantly, the relocation—large and small shifts—required of the reader also makes them an integral part of the piece, as they perform the text. During Relay, the movements become rhythmic and paced, like hopscotch or double-dutch. This creates an immediate pulse and rapport between the body and reading, one that is already implicit in any form of reading, here made explicit and performative. The performing body is not only integral to the piece, it is imperative for the piece to make meaning, albeit not in the sense of ‘impositional’ works of which Weiner speaks. The text is essential in initiating movement, since the words are accessible only if the reader is willing to move. But while the dance steps are proposed, the movement becomes a propeller for further, improvised kinesthetic engagement. As the previous participant noted: “Language is no longer cognitive; it’s more bodily.” Readers of Gallimaufry, in particular, moved again and again, often amplifying their gestures for each subsequent performance to the point where, as the participant noted, “I become the artwork.” The subvolcalization of mouthed words, or the open vocalization during the readings of both Gallimaufry and Relay, punctuate this performative element, and like the choreographed movements become different through each read. The performance seems to create layers of responses for the viewers; releasing words from their confines through releasing the reader from strict conventions of reading. The participant who perceived that her movement stands in for the missing punctuation marks in Gallimaufry, for instance, becomes essential to the work: it cannot be performed without this involvement, and further, it becomes her text to perform.

Just as works in the previous chapters provide openings for the reader through demonstrating the making of text, works in Words that move us, make text inextricably linked to the body, both maker and reader. Reading becomes notably active, sensual and performative, which guide a different set of significations directly related to the reader’s body and experience. If the writerly text requests that “I” is not outside of the text—that the text is writing as it is read—the collaboration of movement and reading propose new imaginings of this idea each time a text-based piece is performed.
This thesis began with an anecdote, a recounting of a viewer’s surprise that they did not find my word-based art ‘arid.’ In coming to a kind of circle, I invoke one of my study participants who eloquently spoke about the effects of physical interventions on the words. He stated: *The impact of the making gives a sense of consequence. When you mess it up, you create chaos with the meaning. The grand statement has now gained multiple elements. The more you add, the more complicated it becomes.* As I connect the dots of this research programme, I suggest the surprise of the earlier viewer may have been in response to unfamiliar ways of textual formations and formats, a display of physicalization not usually associated with typography in visual art. Revealing textual layers of signification by openly expressing its making, the notion of unfamiliarity plays a key factor in how the words in this thesis affect—complicate—the reading. The idea of ‘reading’ over ‘looking’ instituted by the Conceptualists, proposed a philosophical position against the problematics of aesthetics, but one that did not necessarily account for reading as a complex, multifaceted term. As Alexander Alberro points to in *Reconsidering Conceptual Art, 1966-1977*: ‘with its emphasis on a purely formal language, as much as on the belief that linguistically stated analytic propositions are capable of displacing traditional modes of visuality, is clearly based on a modernist model of language, one that correlates historically with the legacies of reductivism and self-reflexivity.* The criticism of ‘decoration’ by replacing the artwork with the linguistic referent seems confused, perhaps undermined, by a now-familiar, emblematic presentation of text on a gallery wall.

As I set out in Chapter One, *Setting the Type*, the interpretation and appreciation of word-based art are governed by assumptions or oversights that limit the recognition of the aesthetics of the genre. I convey the works in this study as both anti-aesthetic, since they rely on messy, against-conventions printing approaches; and aesthetic, since I purposely consider the expressive effects of physical interventions and how these alter the response to words.

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236 September 16, 2015.

Beyond just the anti-aesthetic/aesthetic stance that has instituted a particular form (and format) of word-based artworks, my interest was to determine the potential meaning-making for the readers who experience the overt somatic interruptions in words. Instead of replacing the art object with a linguistic signifier, I convey the linguistic signifier as object.

It seems important to convey that this research programme could likely only exist in the current era of digital type. In previous generations, the commonality of the typewriter or typeset would rarely have us focusing on the notable variations within a printed text. Instead of the strikethrough, we now have the delete key to cleanly erase errata; we print lines of evenly spaced words with ink neatly deposited over the page. Viewing text-based visual artworks in numerous exhibitions and publications over the years, a similar convention of fabricated, post-studio words prevails. In response to this standardization, many current artists have returned to Olivetti, Vandercook, and Letraset®, as tools for evincing labour and the hand. An artist trained as printmaker and painter, my shift into text nearly two decades ago naturally brought expressive attributes to the words, treating each letterform as an elaboration of learned movements and incidental marks. Looking at a community of artists revealing the trace of making, it was not enough to say we are working this way because ‘the hand’ is important. This study, therefore, set out as an inquisition to examine what qualities might actually be generated from the artist’s trace making words. More specifically, as an artist using typography, it was significant to examine how the physical interventions into words could potentially create new ways through which we respond and understand a less recognized form of contemporary text-based artwork.

In Chapter Four I argued that the anti-aesthetic standpoint carved out by the Conceptualists has, over time, become a kind of convention with text-based artwork, with clear, manufactured words appended tidily to the surface—usually installed on a wall. The words, as declarative, descriptive or tautological, set the ‘type’, so to speak, in both ‘tone and timbre’, to reference Bringhurst. Perhaps the notion of text as arid, remote, dull, is a result of our now too-familiar conventions of flattened text over a wall, leaving the words themselves—the tautologies and enunciations—to lie equally flat. Do we still consider bodily, material applications as indulgent, or have we moved to a space where words can reveal
their complexity through sensual, kinesthetic encounters? To that end, I examined three kinds of physicalizations in the previous case studies: the first conducting improvisational rends on existing words; the second, hand-impressing gestural letterforms; and the third, animating the viewer reading words.

In Chapter Three, *Breaking Words Apart*, the improvisational tears, cuts, and pulls, break words from their expected linear pathways, proposing equally improvised, unanticipated readings. Beyond designed or highly constructed Visual or Concrete poems, the unpredictable deformations (and reformations) caused by forceful intrusions upon the text—drilling, warping, weaving—push the reader into rhythmic jumps and circles. We see in *Writing and Difference* 365 that the tear both results from and traces the words, evidencing the physical action that caused the rupture (Fig. 6.1). This trait calls attention to the
manipulation involved in the making of the work, as words fall into and around
the rift formed from the excessive ink, and equally following the curves. Effects
such as these can neither be predicted nor replicated, creating innovative reading
paths that morph into shape and mark. As the reader from Cardiff noted, the
apparent physical interventions enable a reader to ‘play through’, cognizant of the
somatic process involved. The recognition of words moreso becomes an integral
and expanded facet, as we strive to read the quivering strings of letters, only to
be thwarted.

Similarly, the sliced and woven book pages in *Entwine* dismantle the previous
story and reformulate the text into sculpted fragments. The words carry the
reader only so far before they are shifted into patterned textile and absences, the
tiny text becoming a sea of black dots amongst the curls. The reading oscillates
between snippets of captured words, abstracted shapes and material, creating a
space where they intermingle with other attributes. The potential for changing
the pace of reading by making the reader shift, toggle, and pause, instead of
gliding over a smoothed, seamless set of words, calls attention to the reading
process as dynamic and performative—like a musical score, as Fanning, Barthes,
and Kotz note. Shapes, absences, fragments, patterns, and interstices all become a
seemingly limitless selection of signs for reading, and we cannot read in the same
manner as predictable formations of text. While all visual art is immediately
related with the senses, the broken words add an integral complexity, as they jar
the reader between words and other implications: an oscillating between
significations, as van Leeuwen, Nørgaard and Gibson’s multi-modality proposes.
As one participant conveyed about *Writing and Difference*: “When I step away it
looks like a beautiful drawing. Yet, the very fact that it’s text means it’s yearning to be
read. Otherwise, why have text?”238 (Fig. 6.2). Adding dimension and materiality,
the words become enfolded into other meanings; the text still operates as sign
with cultural and personal associations, but the interventions oblige the words to
be enmeshed with the material and textural aspects, even when the words
disappear—as they do in the sea of curls in *Entwine*. The viewable interventions
allow us to peer inside spaces, fissures, overwritings and material formations to
expand our connotations of the words. Torn paper and weaving further call
attention to the process and physical alteration of words through tactility; like a

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238 Participant in research study, September 16, 2015.
knotted thread protruding from a garment, we feel compelled to tug or pull it, never certain whether it will hold its integrity. While we have become familiarized with a generation of textual play and constructed formations of words, the significance of not only the chance associations, as with cut-ups, but the unpredictable encounters from the physical improvisations completely change the text—visually, physically and directionally. Whether words are amplified or subsumed, or still recognizable in and amongst the holes, stretched portions, or strips, they necessarily become implicated with the other attributes and we are forced to reconsider their meanings.

In the second set of research works, the concept of **Messy Gestures** offers additional cognition through both the expressive and aesthetic qualities of words: a character of characters. Participant feedback conveyed that hand-impressions prod at the printed surface to create an inflection, a texture that is often vocalized. Readers view this ‘voice’, or grain, as an invitation or beckoning, as words being “personally directed” at them. Beyond the connotations or experiential metaphors we ascribe to the personalities of typeface, as van Leeuwen
characterizes, these ‘broken’ or ‘staticky’ letterforms shake off some of their authoritative rigidity, constraining any sense of verity or consensus. Instead of tautological and enunciative, as Kosuth and Weiner proffer, the fissures and mars display the words as wavering, uncertain and unfixed. As with the notions of ‘truth’ and ‘not a lie’ in Fabrication, the reader is reluctant to assign the same assuredness to the text, even though the letterforms are applied with force to the wall. Liz Kotz describes the typewritten and collaged works of some of the 1960s poet-artists as revealing, ‘somatic energies of language systematically purged by the industrialized standardization of print culture.’ She goes on to propose Andy Warhol’s films as a kind of ‘aesthetics of the index’, whereby he conveys the ‘murmur and babble, the lapses of attention and unintelligibility, and the starts and stops of talk and noise and interruption that are the condition of meaning, but also its constant undoing.’ I argue that, similarly, the imprinted words are themselves a markation and index of the underlying fluctuations and insecurities of language, questioning its ability to remain stable or contain certainty. Type and print, we are reminded, are impressions, merely skins, like the removable coat Benjamin alludes to. The stuttering letterforms, with textured smears or stipplesthat read more paint than text, also flesh the meanings. For example, in ‘see the empty as half glass’, of Inversions, the shiny waxen background, blemished with bits of grit, add to the sharpened outlines of the stippled letterforms to evoke glass or sand (from which glass in fabricated) (Fig. 6.3). Or to potentially see the nearly invisible white letters as embodying the ‘empty.’ The material attributes are viewed as consanguineous to the words, provoking connotations and connections that might otherwise be overlooked in a set of words presented in a clean, straightforward manner.

Messy Gestures also convey letterforms that summon touch as both physical contact and as an intimate connection. The indices point directly to the event of making, providing some viewers a way of engaging with the work. As one participant noted: “The content is now shifted from semantic to artistic; the signifier is no longer just the words.” The gritty application helps the viewer ‘stick’ to the piece, making them linger over the words. In essence, the physicalized gestures

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239 Kotz, Words, 114.
240 Kotz, Words, 266.
241 September 15, 2015
seem to imprint a presence, albeit not in the sense of Benjamin’s aura, per se; rather in conveying the efforted, imperfect, ‘humanness’ of language, as flawed expression inherent in both the words as constructions and the constructions of words. Importantly, these findings support the ideas that material, somatic traces, absences, overwritten or abstracted letterforms can elicit sensual, tactile ways of knowing, which reveal associative meanings beyond a univocal lexicon.


*Words that move us*, the final chapter, demonstrates the capacity for word-based artwork to compel movement in the viewer, which influences their perception of the work. While the ambulatory viewer is well regarded in dimensional works of art, the addition of text and reading takes on significance, stepping outside the ways we normally consider word-based visual art. The words still operate as sign, with connotative and associative import, but literally and conceptually change for readers; not only as they relocate and reposition to view and experience the unfolding words, but also as the movements enact a different, unfamiliar reading. Words become implicated with kinaesthesia, each facet working in tandem, influencing and amplifying the other. Thus, as the words start to take on personal, emotional or metaphorical meanings, the body responds through a kind of ‘dance’ of rereading. The implication from this
research trajectory is that movement unfolds and opens the words, allowing responses to more freely flow. Particularly in *Gallimaufry*, the writerly text is made manifest, as I watched participants over and over again loosen their stances, gain comfort with the piece, and start to openly play with associations. Laying out the words, my observations of the choreography of the work doesn’t institute an ‘aesthetic fascism’ from readers’ movements, instead invites collaboration with the words in unanticipated ways.

We might also start to conceive of Kristeva’s idea of intertextuality in a different manner, as the reading of typography becomes informed by previous readings of the body, together generating linkages and insights. The conception put forward by the participant who noted her body ‘becomes the missing punctuation’ as she moved accordingly, may initiate this specific intertextual appreciation, connecting the text with the readers in unique ways. Referring to the actions and understandings as a choreogrammatics of reading, this part of the study proposes to make meaning through the interrelation of text and the body (Fig. 6.4). The body is an active agent in formulating cognition through the text, but also becomes a form of cognition, a way of understanding through movement generated by the words. While the ‘dance steps’ are proposed as a left to right starting point, each reader makes their own choreography, rereading through their own selection of textual fragments, creating emphasis and poignancy—much like the reader who fell with all his weight into a crouch towards a lower section of text he perceived as ‘heavy’. The improvisational and interpretative possibilities enable readings outside of syntagmatic or paradigmatic approaches to one that includes movement as its own form of understanding, thus forging a new relationship of textuality and corporeality. While this research is informed by Sheets-Johnstone and Noë, the perspective of artist-practitioner and viewer suggest meaningful contributions to rethinking our relationship with text-based artworks. Carrie Noland’s critical work on the gesture and its relationship to writing also provide a common grounding for my work in this area, as I envision and design textual pieces that further push boundaries for alternate understandings that come from a choreography of reading.

The notion of readability or legibility, when corrupted or compromised, shifts the reader out of their habits to enable new ways of experiencing the words: as material, tactile, performative, rhythmic, and kinesthetic. Replacing the
comfortable and familiar with the conscious and punctuated, even the words’ absence or submergence becomes a portal for questioning. As another participant noted, “Their absence makes me consider them more.” Similarly, it could be argued, the now-familiar smoothed words painted flatly on a gallery wall may have the effect of being easily scanned due to the canonical presentation. Garfield’s conveyance that readable is equated with the familiar can be expanded here to include not just the typeface, but the overall appearance and presentation. Material, expressive, tactile, kinesthetic attributes arise from the words in this study, and the unfamiliar mode of reading is proposed as more abundant, aroused and exploratory.

By physicalizing printed text, I hope to counter the notion of authorship, of objecthood or aesthetics as decoration, suggesting interventions instead crack open an immense strata for discovery. The reading of text, as it interanimates with other attributes displayed through the interventions, brings the body into focus as a complex form of meaning-making (Fig. 6.5). These meanings are intersubjective and multi-modal, as Nørgaard and Gibbons suggest; instead of landing on a closed conclusion or answer, they propose a widening and compounding of responses. In reaction to a tradition that regards text as a non-bodily encounter, this thesis argues for a different experience in light of more current concerns of phenomenological, post-structuralist and material considerations.

Throughout this study, my dialogue with critical texts and other text-based artworks enabled me to see an absence in the literature regarding reading and movement. This doctoral thesis should be viewed not just as personal associations drawn from my own physical interventions into words, but a possibility of how choreogrammatic reading could be applied to any text-based artwork. In contrast to post-studio productions of text, how do words change if we are aware of the artist’s trace? And how does it change the interpretation if we are aware of our own performance of the reading? What happens to the words when we envision them as inextricably linked to gesture and expression? While I have steered away from using the term ‘embodied’, as it is overstretched and over-employed in the vernacular, this research reveals that the relationship of movement to reading, of gesture to text, proposes to widen our experience with word-based visual art.

*Photo credit: Elmira Sharestadari.*


Carrasco, Isabel. *True to Type: On the Concept if the (Il-)Legible and the Un-Readable in the Works of Ana Sánchez*. English dissertation provided with permission of the author.


