

Title: TACTILE TYPOGRAPHY IN THE NEW AESTHETIC

Visual arts research investigating ways craft methods can be employed to reimagine the digital aesthetic, reconnect with our sense of touch in graphic communication and instil a greater appreciation for typography as an art form in the digital graphic design landscape.

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ABSTRACT

Modern design communication fails to engage our tactile senses. In an age where the majority of messages are delivered digitally, this preferences our eyes and ears over the remaining senses and as a result, the touch or 'tactile' senses are being neglected. Imagine a child born into a digital world where they no longer get to touch the 'real thing'. What happens to us when there is no longer a stored memory of textures?

As a child, touching rough, smooth and a variety of different textures to discover what they 'feel' like is essential to developing an understanding of our world (Elgin 1997). Since the introduction of digital technology into our everyday lives however, the computer mouse, keyboards, trackpads, and touch screens are fast becoming the main textures we spend our day touching (Bergmann 2010).

If we as graphic communicators ignore the tactile, we are missing out on delivering some valuable sensory information by neglecting touch in the communication equation. My studio research seeks to discover if engaging with touch and re-imagining the digital aesthetic as analogue 'one-offs' are effective ways for graphic designers to reinvigorate their creativity and enrich visual communication within the digital landscape.

The desktop computer has ultimately been responsible for a wealth of changes to the graphic design landscape. Typography as an art form, is also undergoing reinvention as a result of the digital revolution, but type usage is still embedded within graphic design as a primary tool of communication. Typography as an art, if it is to be preserved, must have a clear and renewed focus as a visual art form.

‘Tactile Typography’ is a visual art form which seeks to interrogate ways in which typography can intervene in both installation space, and the ‘printed’ page. By creating graphic communication that is tactile rather than purely visual, my work successfully focusses renewed attention on the messages being communicated, by cutting through the visual clutter in a digital landscape.

The work examines how the visual appeal and communication effectiveness of vernacular typography can be increased by the unexpected use of everyday materials, and encourage renewed interest in typography, without rejecting the digital advances.

By using everyday materials such as string and nails, ribbons, beads and buttons to create artworks that communicate using text and textures, I have discovered that online audiences are much more likely to appreciate written messages if the typography is executed in a way that is clearly time-consuming, creative in its use of materials, and exhibits a visual tactility rather than being entirely digital in its delivery. ‘Touch’ is not solely for communicating with the vision-impaired, and texture made visible in online images satisfies an innate craving for the tactile and hand made (Lederman 1983).

It would appear that haptic *anticipation* is enough for the audience to appreciate the way the message has been communicated. The need to physically touch the objects is replaced by linking to a stored memory of what it would actually feel like to touch it (Loomis et al 1991). Using everyday and commonly touched materials is more successful than unusual materials and surfaces, as the audience can reference a stored memory bank of touch sensations.

In the digital era, graphic designers have demonstrated a need to creatively express themselves outside of their commercial work and tactile typography is emerging as a unique visual art form within the field of graphic design—fuelled by the popularity of online image sharing. My

research set out to discover if engaging touch was an effective way to reinvigorate communication and my own creativity, and at this stage within my own work, the results are very positive.

Tactile Typography is important to the field of graphic design as a whole, because it cuts through the visual clutter in a world over-saturated with digital images. By including touch in the communication equation, I have ensured that my words are much more likely to be read by the receiver.

Statement of Originality

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university.

To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

(Signed)_____

Dominique Tania Falla

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INTRODUCTION

Modern design communication fails to engage our tactile senses. In an age where the majority of messages are delivered digitally, the digital revolution appears to give preference to our eyes and ears over the remaining senses (Witham 2005). As a graphic communicator, one has to ask “what about the sense of touch?” If we fail to ask this question, we are missing out on delivering some valuable sensory information by neglecting touch in the communication equation.

The digital revolution has created an environment where the work of many designers and typographers is devalued and they are no longer afforded the creative freedoms they once had. Since the desktop computer was introduced in the late 1980s, graphic design has undergone a revolution where the need for traditional skills has lessened. What was once a profession filled with mystery and wonder is now available to anyone with a computer and an Internet connection (Cole 2005). Royalty free stock images, free fonts and professional quality templates have enabled anyone with even basic skills to create ‘designs’ as competent as any pre-computer designer (Austin 2002), and as a result, graphic designers are seeking new ways to express themselves creatively.

‘Tactile Typography’ is a visual art form I am pioneering which seeks to interrogate ways in which typography can intervene in both installation space, and the ‘printed’ page. By creating graphic communication that is tactile rather than purely visual, my work successfully focusses renewed attention on the messages being communicated, by cutting through the visual clutter in a digital landscape.

My work for examination is a series of large-scale typographic interventions in a gallery space, using multiples of everyday objects to recreate the digital aesthetic. The installations are accompanied by low relief tactile typography within the confines of an artist’s book which are ‘safe to touch’. All of the typographic works are unashamedly bespoke and time-consuming,

which contrasts them with their digital counterparts.

The work examines how the visual appeal and communication effectiveness of vernacular typography can be increased by using everyday materials in an unexpected way, and encourage renewed interest in typography as a craft, without rejecting the digital advances.

THE RESEARCH QUESTION

My studio research seeks to discover if engaging with touch and re-imagining the digital aesthetic as analogue ‘one-offs’, are effective ways for graphic designers to reinvigorate their creativity and enrich visual communication within the digital landscape.

CONTEXT OF THE RESEARCH

Design theorists agree that the digital revolution has changed graphic design forever—desktop computers and the Internet having had the most impact (see for example: Oxman 2006, Cole 2005, Armstrong 2009, Heller and Ballance 2001, Heller et al. 1997). There are divergent opinions about the future of design, however. Some would argue that the computer has emerged as an essential ideation tool across all design domains (Jonson 2005) and others view new technology not as the cause of the problem, but the solution (Noble 2003). Steven Heller, however, is one of the leading exponents of graphic design theory and history, having authored, or co-authored, over one hundred books on design, and he reminds us that the computer is simply an aid to the process, and the future of design lies with the designer’s ability to innovate (Heller and Talarico 2008).

An example of this innovation lies with the combining of the digital and analogue, and New Aesthetic is a burgeoning art movement which does just this. Founder James Bridle sees the New Aesthetic as “a blurring between ‘the real’ and ‘the digital’, the physical and the virtual, the human and the machine.” (2012, 1). He discusses at great length his thesis of ‘machine

vision’ and the idea that art should be the result of the partnership between artist and machine. According to David Cox (2012, 3), “The New Aesthetic invites us to have fun with urban space; to instantiate bits of virtual vision into it.” In his interview with Bruce Sterling, Cox argues there has always been a move to the physical, ever since there were media (2012).

Whilst the full effect of the digital revolution on the field of graphic design is still a topic for discussion, it is clear the fate of typesetting was decided in the 1980s (Bigelow and Day, 1983, McCoy 2001, Spencer 2004). As an arcane art form, traditional typesetting may remain for now, but in general, the profession no longer exists and digital typesetting is the widespread standard (Heller and Meggs, 2001). Regardless of what technology is in use, the core fundamentals regarding the use and handling of typographic conventions appears to have remained intact, and the theoretical underpinnings of typography, in terms of history, are as valued today as always (Lupton 2010, Lewis 2007, Stockl 2005, Gill 1993).

My work seeks to engender a renewed appreciation of typography as a ‘lost art’, but not in a nostalgic sense, more a renewed expression of letterforms as a modern art form. Many people aim to ‘preserve’ the craft of typesetting—the rising popularity of letterpress and typesetting workshops amongst designers demonstrates the bespoke art form’s popularity (Florance 2010)—and the cult of ‘type nerds’ and grammar ‘nazis’ are ensuring the proper use of typography within their own digital graphic design niche, but for the general public, (and indeed most computer users) typography represents a means to an end. By treating words and letterforms in an unexpected way, my work takes the everyday and draws attention to the typographic forms themselves, as well as the meaning of the words.

THE DESIGNER AS ARTIST

As a direct result of the changes in the digital graphic design landscape, the work of the designer has steadily been devalued, and in many cases is now a more passive role, one of “consulting, styling and formatting” (Cole 2005). Many graphic designers are creating visual art, and self-initiating projects to help build their profile as a visual artist, but also to reinvigorate their creativity within their commercial work (Wragg 2011, Austin 2002). One such designer/artist, Troy Archer, describes himself a ‘night illustrator.’ (2010), in reference to the time of day he is able to work on these self-generated projects.

This need for Archer to invent a term hints at a deeper issue, and the interchangeable vocabulary in use, from ‘designer’, ‘fine artist’, ‘visual artist’, ‘illustrator’, ‘typographer’ to ‘commercial artist’, demonstrates the need many graphic designers have to define these terms for themselves (Boccalatte 2011, Fegan 2008, Little 2011, Sagmeister 2009, Heller et al 1997, Bantjes 2010). Indeed, an argument could be made for the introduction of a new expression which describes the “designer ‘slash’ artist”.

My non-commercial work has been shown in galleries as both installation works, and hung on the wall as ‘art’ but always comes from a place of design context, exhibited in a traditional fine art setting. My work also extends to tactile design objects, such as artist’s books, again ‘infringing’ in space traditionally reserved for ‘artists’, but created very much from a graphic design sensibility, with typographic layout and communication at its core (Rock 1996).

Traditionally, art critics question the validity of this type of work as having no theoretical underpinnings and dismiss it as purely ‘decorative’. Commercial graphic designers also tend to reject this type of work because it has no commercial value or problem to solve and as a result the personal work of a graphic designer is often caught in some kind of limbo or creative ‘never-land’. The term designer/artist, refers to not one, not the other, but a third place where art and graphic design intersect (Poyner 1992).

Apart from creating their own products, or working beyond the brief as a way to reinvigorate their creativity, there is also a growing movement of graphic designers who advocate a return to the tactile, handmade and bespoke, as a reaction against the generic, machine-made, mass-produced offerings of twenty-first century digital graphic design (Wray 2009, Witham 2005, Perry 2007).

Rather than rejecting the computer outright, many authors and graphic designers argue the case for a combining of the computer with the tactile qualities of handmade elements (Associates, Millman and Chen 2006, 2011). Few designers look at typography exclusively however, most regard tactile ‘design’ as a combination of both word *and* image.

Arguments over nomenclature aside, no matter how you choose to describe the group of practising designers who make art to satisfy their innate creativity, the majority of this group deal primarily with visual art, rather than typography. They usually leave the layouts and typography at work and create paintings, drawings, digital art, etchings, engravings, and sculpture which has more in common with a traditional studio art or illustration practice than a graphic design one (Poyner 1992). My work fills the gap in that there are not many designer ‘slash’ artists whose work looks solely at typography and as a result, my body of ‘tactile typography’ work has had a widespread impact on the online design community (Falla 2013a).

METHODOLOGY

My studio research into Tactile Typography began in 2009 and has undergone four stages or phases of evolution since then. The first stage looked at ways graphic designers find new

expression for their work through visual art and how this research might inform my own studio practice. This initial research resulted in a body of visual art that was purely typographic, a reflection upon the unique perspective of a ‘graphic designer as visual artist.’ The work also became handmade and tactile, as a result of positive audience engagement with the work.

Suzanne Boccalatte (2011) suggests artists and designers are different because of who their work is for—artists ideally make work for themselves, and designers make work for an audience—and this is an essential difference when classifying visual artists into groups.

Designer Stefan Sagmeister looks at this division another way: “Artists look down on designers and designers don’t care about artists.” (2009, 179). If this is the case, people trying to work within both spheres could well find themselves isolated from both camps, and indeed this did emerge as the crux of the issue for the majority of designer/artists I looked at.

Steven Heller addresses this in his introduction to *Design Culture* (1997) arguing that graphic design occupies some kind of ‘netherworld’ between art and commerce, and so the initial issue my research hoped to address was not about one camp versus the other, it was trying to find a place or identity for the group of people who shared a little with both.

Celebrity graphic designers like Stefan Sagmeister have managed to build careers for themselves where their self-initiated creative work is essentially subsidised by their clients (Sagmeister 2008), but for the majority of graphic designers in the digital age, this is simply not an option. Commercial work often comes with a set of inbuilt conditions, from the whims of clients, to deadlines, tight budgets and the demands of the marketplace (Lionni 1997), all of which make it nearly impossible for self expression to make an appearance in the work.

The result of this change in conditions is a new group of creatively frustrated designers indulging in “design for design’s sake” to enjoy their craft without a budget or client in mind. Nicki Wragg (2011, 22), when discussing Edits by Edit, one such self-generated project, argues

that this process of designing for the sheer joy of it results in a playful experimentation that: “liberates the mind and frees the soul” and ultimately filters creativity back into the designer’s commercial projects.

Illustrator Ian Noble (2003) suggests that Illustrators and image-makers can use new technology to not only explore how it affects the construction of images, but also to produce, promote, and distribute their personal creative projects. It would appear the School of Visual Art (SVA) in New York agrees with him and program chair Steven Heller declares in the introduction to his book *The Design Entrepreneur* (2008, 10), “The computer age has made the design entrepreneur possible.” Entrepreneurship is not a new idea, but the combination of graphic designer with new technologies and the know-how to conceive of a wide range of marketable ideas (and fabricate the products themselves) is revolutionary.

Whilst the ‘designer as author’ idea is a useful one, the outcomes of these self-generated design projects are driven very much by commerce and entrepreneurial spirit rather than a desire to communicate ideas to a wider audience. The ‘graphic designer as entrepreneur’ is widely recognised as a separate genre (Heller and Talarico 2008), as is the ‘graphic designer as illustrator’ (Noble 2003), but the ‘graphic designer as visual artist’ is not. Establishing the need for this as a separate genre, even if only for my own purposes as a methodology, is something my research continues to pursue.

TOUCH AND THE HAPTIC

Research in the field of touch falls into two distinct categories. The first group of researchers examine vision-impaired people and ways to increase their sensory awareness through touch (Schiff and Foulke 1982, Edman 1992). The second group examine the psychology of touch and cognitive processing in sighted people, often regarding childhood development (Lederman 1983, Loomis 1986, Bliss and Crane 1965, Zigler and Northup 1926, Loomis et al 1991) with

psychologists Susan Lederman and Jack Loomis leading the field in this research.

In my experience, the terms ‘haptic’ and ‘tactile’ are used interchangeably—which suggests a universal misunderstanding—but when authors address the haptic, it usually specifies a form of nonverbal communication (Tiest 2010, McLaughlin et al. 2001). All researchers agree however, that touch is vitally important in developing our understanding of the world and it aids in communication—both verbal and nonverbal—for ‘touch focused’ people in particular (Elgin 1997).

THE NEW AESTHETIC

An emerging group of visual artists currently exploring the haptic possibilities of ‘machine vision’ are known as the ‘New Aesthetic’. Trans media artist James Bridle pioneered the idea, and coined the term whilst curating an online gallery (2012) and Cyberpunk author Bruce Sterling became the primary advocate for the movement with his 5000-word essay for WIRED magazine (2012) after witnessing a SXSW Panel discussion chaired by Bridle.

Sterling’s article describes the New Aesthetic as an “eruption of the digital into the physical” and instigated a wide range of excited online discussion and Internet responses (Cox 2012, Rhizome 2012, Sefton 2012)—and some less excited (Jackson 2012)—but all describe a body of visual art which recreates the digital aesthetic in the tangible world and paves the way for a burgeoning art form which already sees examples in fashion, sculpture and home wares, but the graphic design field, and typography in particular, has yet to capitalise on this New Aesthetic.

GLITCH TEXT

From the outside, it would appear that ‘Glitch art’—often referred to as Gli.tc/h—forms part of the New Aesthetic, and there are clearly typographic art forms emerging from this genre, but the aestheticisation of digital errors, such as artefacts or bugs in code remain firmly embedded in the digital realm. Gli.tc/h artists are more interested in capturing the digital images in a digital

format, with printed outputs the only physical manifestation of the work (Virilo 2005). Without the transition to analogue output, glitch art remains a purely digital art form and this is one of the key factors that differentiates it from the New Aesthetic.

Gli.tc/h text or Gli.tc/h alphabets are a subset of Gli.tc/h art in which the form and legibility of typography is distorted through a process of deliberate or arbitrary manipulation (Gli.tc/h 2011). Most Gli.tc/h text practitioners challenge themselves to capture or manipulate 26 letters of the western alphabet to form a complete set, such as the seminal work *Alphabent: Experiments from A–Z* by Stolen Projects (2012).

ARTIST’S BOOKS

At polar ends of the typographic spectrum is the analogue artist book. Artist’s books are generally ‘works of art’, usually presented in the form of multiple bound pages. Artist’s books can be published in small editions, but are more usually produced as one-of-a-kind objects referred to as ‘uniques’. These books can take a wide variety of forms, including concertinas, scrolls and fold-outs, as well as the more commonly accepted book form with multiple sheets bound along a spine. Artists have been active in printing and book production for centuries, but the artist’s book is primarily a 20th century art form (Drucker 1995).

Publishing and commercial book production falls squarely within the realm of graphic design, and so it makes sense that as a practitioner who straddles between designer and artist, the book form would be a useful way for me to bridge the divide.

TACTILE BOOKS

From a production standpoint, Braille books are also relevant to this discussion, as they are a primary source of ‘tactile books’. Used by the blind and visually impaired, Louis Braille’s alphabet is ‘written’ with embossed paper. The raised dots are produced by a machine so these books can be mass produced, and touching them is the only way to ‘read’ the text. Braille is

usually targeted at vision-impaired adults, as the alphabet needs to be ‘learned’ in addition to the language alphabet (Bickel 1989).

Other forms of ‘tactile books’ are multi-sensory books and teaching tools, specifically produced for children, babies and toddlers—sighted and non-sighted. These tactile books are designed as educational tools to encourage multi-sensory learning by encouraging children to touch different textures, shapes, fabrics and so on, and are particularly useful for children with learning disabilities (Landua and Wells 2003). These tools tend to focus on the textures, sounds and images themselves, rather than communicating anything specific using tactile typography.

My tactile book work juxtaposes the philosophies underpinning traditional printed and artist books, with the production methods of multi-sensory tactile books in order to present my tactile typography work in an environment that facilitates multiple levels of interaction. The haptic structuring of the book form encourages the audience to interact with my tactile work in an intimate way that a gallery work or installation does not. The reader must turn the pages in order to engage with the piece, and is invited to touch the haptic elements, as well as reading the text as they progress through the book.

INSTALLATIONS

In stark contrast to the intimacy of the book form, installations are often site specific and designed to transform our perception of the space. Generally the term is applied to interior spaces, though outdoor installations are also possible. My intent with the final installation is to intervene in the traditional ‘white box’ gallery, using typographic hashtags and everyday materials to transform the space into an analogue representation of the digital.

UPCYCLING

The use of everyday materials in artwork tends to come about for one of two reasons. A primary

reason is the availability of materials at a low cost. Drinking straws, Post-it notes, drawing pins and so on, are commonly available in multiples. Large quantity manufacturing enables the cost per unit to be very low, and these common items are easily available and in large numbers, so for a visual artist working on a piece which requires tens of thousands of the same item, mass production is the only viable option. Tara Donovan's work for example, regularly uses large amounts of multiples, such as hundreds of thousands of plastic cups in the one installation. The environmental concerns that inevitably accompany mass production however, are a consideration for many and whilst the items might be easily available, the questions regarding the impact of their use often needs to be addressed. As a result, the other reason everyday materials might be used in artwork is to ask the audience to view these ubiquitous objects in a different light. By recycling, or 'upcycling', as in making the common object perceived as somehow 'better' by reusing it in an unexpected way, the artist might choose to make a comment on environmental responsibility, waste and mass production.

HASH TAGS

Since the 1900s, the number sign [#] has been utilised for many purposes, including the lb, hash, crunch and number, but in recent years, it has been adopted as a way of activating meta data within microblogging and social media services, such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter (Saffire 1991). For a hashtag to 'work', the word or phrases must be un-spaced and prefixed with the number sign, such as '#firstworldproblems' or '#quoteoftheday'. They can either appear within the sentence, or appended to it, but so long as the number sign is present, these social messaging services will activate the hashtag. The term was added to the Dictionary as late as 2014, but it has been in widespread use for many years (Martin 2014).

VISUAL CONTEXT

In the analogue world, Beci Orpin (2012), Fleur Harris (2012), and Tuesday Bassen (2012) are

commercial graphic designers who would consider themselves to be ‘Creative Entrepreneurs’, in that they generate ranges of products based on their own unique design styles. This group of designers utilise digital technology to facilitate production and promotion of their work and are well-versed in using social media to build a client base for their products. They work to self-generated briefs and make physical objects which are tactile by their very nature, but these designers are not necessarily motivated by touch as visual artists, they are more concerned with a return to craft and the hand made as designers, and produce small ranges of ‘designed’ objects for commercial sale.

Conversely, designers such as Stefan Sagmeister (2012), Anna Garforth (2012), and Marian Bantjes (2010), are more concerned with conceptualising an idea than creating a product. The thought behind each piece affords them more in common with visual artists, but they create work from a designer’s perspective. These designers often self-initiate projects and are mainly concerned with innovation, which is why they use unusual materials and locations, but again, they are not necessarily motivated by the tactility of a piece.

Designers Yulia Brodskaya (2012), Dominic Le-Hair (2012), and Evelin Kasikov (2011), on the other hand, are motivated by the tactile and choose to focus specifically on analogue typography. These ‘Tactile Typographers’ utilise dimensional materials, to make their typography ‘cut through the visual clutter’ and jump off the computer screen. They don’t seek to make political statements with the work and would classify themselves as designer/artists or illustrators, rather than fine artists. They choose materials based on their capacity to reinforce the idea, or communicate a particular aesthetic, and are usually displayed online or in print as tactile design outcomes, not in galleries or installations as works of ‘art’.

The work of Evelin Kasikov (2011) is of particular interest. She seeks to emulate the four printing plates of commercial offset printing, using cross stitch in four colours of CMYK embroidery thread. She meticulously reproduces the screen angles used in offset printing and

simulates other colours, using only the four printing primaries, in exactly the same way as offset printing does. It is a time-consuming craft-like reproduction of a mechanical process that graphic designers take for granted and the results are engaging. Her work asks us to reexamine something that is virtually invisible, by placing it in a different context and seeks to “challenge the preconceptions of embroidery.” My studio work aims to achieve the same thing with typography.

In response to some of the issues raised by changes in the digital graphic design landscape, I share most in common with the latter group, but all the aforementioned artists have something to offer my research. I have built a profile as a designer/artist and create pieces of tactile typography that engage the audience to want to touch, in a gallery context, as well as in print or online. By producing pieces of graphic communication that are ‘tactile’ rather than purely visual, I am reintroducing touch back into the communication equation.

Some other artists whose work is useful for the installation stage of my research hail from the New Aesthetic movement. Phillip Stearns (2011), Michael Kosmicki (2009), and David Bizer (2011), work in partnership with digital technology, such as computer glitch algorithms or tampered machinery, to produce digital images in the physical world. These analogue outputs of the digital aesthetic are rarely typographic, they are always abstract or visual images. Occasionally trans media and new media artists explore typography as a subject, but rarely, if ever produce analogue outputs.

Three such Gli.tc/h artists, Craig Ward (2011), Antonio Roberts (2009), and Daniel Purvis (2011), use computer algorithms to produce pieces of ‘art’ which may or may not be printed, but it is the captured pixels they are interested in, not the analogue intervention. These Gli.tc/h typographers explore the disruption of digital media and their work remains exclusively digital, never analogue (Goto10 2012).

Related to Gli.tc/h is the field of meta data. QR Codes, barcodes and other scannable digital artefacts are repurposed in analogue form by artists such as Richard Sewell (2010), Geoff Manaugh (2011), and Terada Design Architects (2010). These meta data artists take a digital tag and use it in the same way as graffiti artists would 'tag' a wall, only the meaning is not implicit in the graffiti itself and needs interaction with a digital scanning device.

This public delivery of hidden messages also interests Braille street artists, such as The Blind (2013), Austin Seraphin (2013) and Sonia Petruse (2014), and Scott Wayne Indiana (2007) use braille graffiti, which is always tactile and communicative, but doesn't use the letters from the Roman alphabet. These Braille typographers glue or attach dots to public walls in the form and shape of the international Braille alphabet to create public art for the blind. But as blind artist Austin Seraphin points out "I don't encounter that much Braille in public—it's not like you go around feeling surfaces" (Reso 2013, 2), so as a result, the work communicates in a multi-layered 'code'. This coded message must be touched by someone who can 'read' Braille, but pointed out to them first by a sighted person.

In addition to Braille graffiti, it is useful at this juncture to mention an emerging art form known as moss graffiti, which effectively is a subset of reverse graffiti. Artists spray a mixture of moss spores and growth liquid through a stencil so that a few days later moss begins to grow on a surface in the shape of words or images. Reverse graffiti works in much the same way, but bleach is sprayed through a stencil onto a dirty surface, effectively 'cleaning' the design into the wall or pavement. This art form deals more with addressing the notion of urban graffiti being 'dirty' and guilty of making an environment ugly by using organic forms and cleaning products rather than paint, but the focus is not on the tactility in the environment in the same way as Braille graffiti.

This notion of using art to somehow 'fix' or comment on the environment has long played out in the works of up cycling artists such as Zoe Bradley (2012), Yo Shimada (2011), and Tara

Donovan (2006), who use banal, everyday materials, such as plastic cups, Post-it notes and drinking straws. These artists draw attention to the everyday materials by installing the works in traditional gallery spaces, but rarely create typographic installations. The works are usually decorative, organic or sculptural.

The final group of artists in my visual canon, book artists Elsi Vassdal Ellis (2011) and Emily McVarish (2009), explore notions of digital typography in hand made books. These book artists experiment with the print processes looking at letterpress, colour separation and platemaking. (Minsky 1994). Their work shares more in common with that of a 'text artist' or printmaker, rather than a contemporary book designer or typographer.

My work draws together many elements from this assorted, and at times seemingly unrelated canon. In the areas of most interest to me from a visual art standpoint, are those artists who deal with aesthetics of the digital in analogue form, such as New Aesthetics and meta data artists, but as far as installations go the up-cycling, and works using multiples of found objects, share most in common with my typographic interventions into space, but none of these artists mentioned are dealing with typography. The use of abstract and visual forms prevalent in their work means the work can traverse many cultures, but there is a gap in my mind that can only be filled with typography, specifically the western alphabet to communicate visually, rather than using any kind of 'code'.

The artists in this group who do work with typographic forms tend to be graphic designers interested in concept and communication and don't necessarily deal with typographic interventions in space, and none of them examine the digital aesthetic in the same way that New Aesthetic artists do.

For this reason, I feel my New Aesthetic typographic interventions break new ground in the realm between designer and artist. They draw into question notions of materials and materiality

and the interplay between analogue communication and the digital realm using meta data, but interacting with the materials in physical space.

STUDIO RESEARCH

One of my first forays into making visual art for exhibition, rather than brief-driven client work, came about because of *Flat White Spaces* in April (2011). The pop-up design collective organised their first exhibition and invited myself and twelve other designer/artists to produce work for their launch show. In the absence of any brief, I made typographic pieces inspired by the title *Flat White Spaces*. Due to the large scale of these works, they couldn't be printed at the size they were created, so the individual pieces were cut out of vinyl and manually applied to wooden boards instead (figure 1).

The result was a subtle low relief texture, and the use of touch resilient materials like vinyl and MDF, meant the pieces appeared 'safe' to touch in the gallery context and the audience found themselves drawn to want to touch. As a graphic designer accustomed to making works for the screen, the direct audience response was intriguing and motivated me to discover what it was about the pieces that made them want to touch them. There were many other dimensional pieces in the show, but this low relief tactile typography was the only work people wanted to touch, (albeit with my permission).

My research into the 'designer as visual artist' evolved at this point to ask a new question: in an age where digital technology and mass production has instigated a return to craft and the handmade, how will audiences respond to typography made tactile?



Typography as a form of visual art, is unique to graphic design. Most other forms of visual art draw upon image and abstraction, whereas much graphic design relies primarily on typography (Stockl 2005), and as a result of this, my studio work tended to focus exclusively on typography. The work evolved to become ‘tactile’ due to the positive audience response to my analogue outputs.

In her introduction to *Handmade Graphics*, Anna Wray hypothesises that the highly polished images produced by designers working on the computer come about because the elements of

chance, materiality, and texture are lost to the process and she asks “with the digital aesthetic becoming the norm, could it simply be that creatives are growing tired of staring at screens?” (2009, 3) Wray’s question addresses the reasons designers are craving a return to craft, but what about audiences and their desire for the unique and handmade? Is it the ubiquitous nature of digital communication, or the homogenisation of global brands?

My studio work examines ways to make typographic messages engaging by re-imagining the digital aesthetic in a way that audiences are not expecting. The visual language of the digital interface is something so familiar to modern Western audiences, that we often don’t realise what we are looking at until we see it presented out of context. Using unexpected materials for me is part of the engagement with the pieces, and the tactile stimulation I get from each new work encourages play and experimentation.

As my research progressed, there emerged a subset of designer/artists who work outside of the computer and combine analogue techniques with their digital work to give a three-dimensionality to their gallery pieces, rather than exhibiting the digital works themselves or printed reproductions. I began creating pieces where the work is created in a digital environment, but the output is analogue and the result is a unique ‘one-off’ piece.

Utilising this methodology, I produced a series of experimental Tactile Typography pieces for competitions and group exhibitions, from April until December 2011, resulting in a haphazard body of work. Surprisingly, some of these pieces were uploaded to websites such as Tumblr, Pinterest and Facebook and several of my pieces became very popular amongst people who share images using these websites. *We Are all a Part of the Same Thing* (figure 2) in particular, was ‘shared’ on Tumblr alone by over 22,000 people, in one instance and over 15,000 times again just recently (Tumblr 2014).

Further analysis into this phenomenon revealed that the pieces gaining most exposure on the

Internet due to ‘sharing’ were those which said something the audience could relate to, *We are all a Part of the Same Thing* (figure 2), *Relax & Unwind* (figure 3), and *I Could Do Anything ...* (figure 4), in particular, but they are also pieces where the tactility is visibly evident, and there is a certain anticipation of the haptic displayed on the web.

		
<p>Figure 2 Dominique Falla <i>We are all part of the same thing</i> 2011, pin and string, 90 x 40cm</p>	<p>Figure 3 Dominique Falla <i>Relax & Unwind</i> 2011, pin and string, 120 x 90cm</p>	<p>Figure 4 Dominique Falla <i>I could do Anything . .</i> 2011, pin and string, diptych 90 x 40cm</p>

In a digital photograph, subtle textures and low relief are difficult to translate. My pierced and vinyl pieces attract the audience to want to touch, when faced with the actual work, but the nail and string pieces, where the tactility is evident in the visual, became the most widely shared on the Internet (Pinterest 2011).

After a while, I became influenced by online viewer comments and I found myself producing more of the types of work that were most popular in order to keep the impetus going. As a designer, it is only natural to want to improve audience response and interaction—the feed back loop is an essential component of how designers are trained to communicate after all, but as a visual artist, it can be distracting. I was more concerned with exploring new materials, but the Internet audience indicated one material was more popular than the others and this began to

influence my studio practice for a brief period (Falla 2013a).

GOODBYE HELVETICA

These initial tactile typography ‘experiments’ culminated in a milestone exhibition in February 2012. I proposed an idea for a solo show in T-Space, a refereed research gallery at the Surfers Paradise Transit Centre. The space was a deconstructed, newly refurbished glass and concrete construct within the centre and the show coincided with the end of a yearlong project where I had made a public declaration that I would devote myself for a whole year to one typeface and one typeface only—Helvetica.

Goodbye Helvetica was a unique typographic installation, and love letter of sorts, with the pieces talking about what I did and didn’t like about Helvetica and how I felt about the relationship breakup (figures 5, 6 and 7). Concerned the audience might be too scared to touch the work in a gallery, I made an installation instead (Falla 2012b).

		
<p>Figure 5 Dominique Falla <i>It's time to wipe the slate clean</i> 2012, chalk and slate, 120 x 90cm</p>	<p>Figure 6 Dominique Falla <i>I cheated on you once with Museo</i> 2012, painted concrete, 200 x 120cm</p>	<p>Figure 7 Dominique Falla <i>I'm going to miss your whole family</i> 2012, pierced paper window installation, 180 x 120cm</p>

The installation took five weeks to complete and was well received among my peers as evidence of how graphic design can transcend a gallery space by way of typographic installation. It was rewarding to see visitors to the installation space interacting with the pieces, but their response to the tactility was unexpected. The projection piece elicited the most interaction and the floor piece, by its very nature, was walked all over, but the 'visual art' nature of most pieces failed to engage the audience to touch them at all. I had mistakenly thought it was the gallery construct preventing people from touching the works, but they were still reluctant in a deconstructed installation space.

As T-shirt designer Eddie Zammit (2011) observed when he visited the designer/artist Jeremyville's 'salon', most galleries are quite literal in format, even though the works contained in them are not. As *Goodbye Helvetica* ultimately demonstrated, the audience is prepared to revere any work as 'art' no matter what it is or where it is displayed.

REFLECTIVE PRAXIS

Reflecting on this process revealed that face-to-face, the audience responds best when they feel it is 'safe' to touch the pieces. The Internet audience responds best when they can see evidence in the work that it was time consuming to make and the material textures are familiar to them. I respond best when it is enjoyable to make the piece because of my own tactile response to the materials. This left me with a choice: did I make work where touch was the main concern for the audience, such as clothing or textiles? Or did I make work where I enjoyed the sensation of making it, whether the audience got to touch it or not?

As a result of this reflective process, I observed that the computer is simply a tool, part of the creative process, and designers everywhere it seemed were also starting to realise this. We have begun to witness a return to the hand made in design (Perry 2007), however, a return to the

analogue that rejects the digital outright is foolish and is akin to throwing the baby out with the bathwater. I am interested in revisiting the tactile and hand made, from the *perspective* of the digital.

It also became evident at this point, that the Internet audience was gravitating towards my pin and string pieces, and even though there were 30 assorted pieces of work on my website at this stage (Falla 2012a), many people sifted through the works on my website, and curated their own virtual galleries of just the pin and string pieces (Deny 2012, Can.vice 2012).

The audience response to tactile typography as an art-form has been positive. Many thousands of my images have been ‘shared’ on image-sharing websites since I first coined the term in 2011. The most popular of these pieces appears to share common attributes—the audience can relate to the words within the piece, the tactility of the materials is evident, and the work appears to be time-consuming.

The interest shown by audiences in how time-consuming my pieces were was fascinating and again, unexpected. There has been recent media coverage of the idea of ‘Slow Media’, and professor of journalism Jennifer Rauch suggests that we are “observing a moment of transformation in the way that many people around the world think about and engage with mediated communication” (2011, 3). The term ‘slow’ is widely understood as a reminder to take our time with things, such as the ‘Slow Food Movement’ and therefore Slow Media can be understood as “both a philosophy and a practice.” Rauch indicates the term ‘slow’ can signal an “appreciation or reappraisal of ‘heirloom’ forms of media, such as print or analog”, furthermore, it refers to a ‘slowness’ in media production and consumption.

Traditionally, typography was a slow and time-consuming arcane craft. The time taken to create the piece was often one of the appealing facets of pre-digital typography. In 2012 however,



creating typography is quick and easy for just about anyone with a personal computer, and our appreciation of time-consuming activities increases, as our ability to do them diminishes (Rauch 2011). My work endeavours to bring attention back to the craft of typography and often my work takes a long time to execute, and this effort is tangible in the work.

Along with a renewed appreciation of typography and the patience required to complete something time-consuming, my work also makes use of disposables and multiples and asks the audience to reexamine everyday materials in a new light. Upcycling is a major part of my current studio work and examines tactile materiality within our daily lives, as well as in art making.

POSTCARDS FROM ROME

Another major project conducted during these early stages of research was a crowd-funded project where I undertook a 12-day School of Visual Arts typography Master Class in Rome. Billed as a 'Tactile Book Arts' project, the publication and fifty postcards were based on requests made by the resulting project backers.

The postcards varied in style and content, but a proportion of them were completed as pieces of tactile typography and again, whilst the audience couldn't actively touch the finished pieces, the anticipation of the haptic, as well as an appreciation for how time-consuming they were, meant that there was still renewed audience engagement with the meanings contained within the printed postcards (figures 8, and 9).

	
<p>Figure 8 Dominique Falla <i>Ossa</i> 2013, human bones, 20 x 15cm</p>	<p>Figure 9 Dominique Falla <i>Pasta</i> 2013, pasta, 20 x 15cm</p>

I was still drawn towards making work out of multiples of the same objects. Even though I was in Rome and surrounded by a wealth of inspiration, the pieces I ended up making gravitated towards this same practice. This was an interesting discovery—my work remained the same and obviously had little to do with the project, environment or resources, and everything to do with my process and visual aesthetic (Falla 2014).

Still dissatisfied with the inability of the audience to touch the work, I began to focus more on one-off pieces and the idea of an artist's book rather than a commercially printed one.

THE DIGITAL AESTHETIC

Upon returning from Rome and completing the pieces, the process of using multiples firmly established itself in my studio practice and my research evolved further when my studio output became focussed towards recreating the digital aesthetic using tactile materials.

The New Aesthetic is a burgeoning art movement where the digital aesthetic is reproduced using analogue, three dimensional techniques and the work produced by this group of artists is highly relevant to the digital culture graphic designers are currently working within (Sterling 2012). Typography is notably absent from this body of work however, so I feel my tactile typography is well positioned to make a significant contribution to the New Aesthetic

movement as a whole.

There was potential here for a new phase of development in my work, for it to become touchable objects, rather than visual art hung on a wall, because traditionally, the gallery or installation environment discourages touch. Despite my best efforts, displaying tactile pieces in the same way as traditional visual art distances the audience, and tactile typography needs to be handled to be experienced at its full effect.


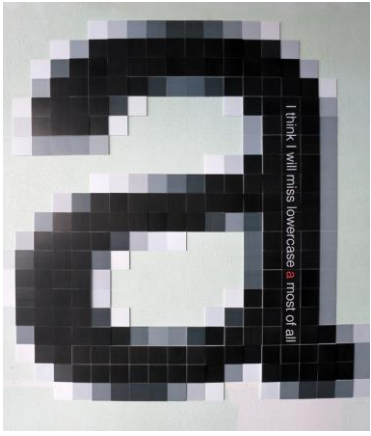
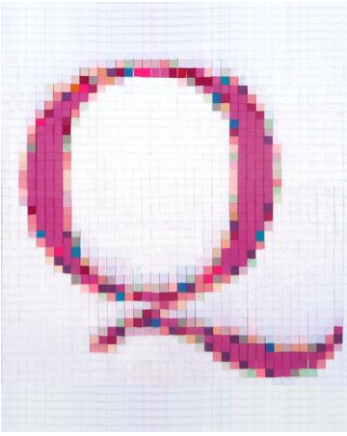
The majority of New Aesthetic works produced by others would fall broadly into the categories of sculpture, fashion, and textile and object, rather than traditional visual art, but as a graphic designer, I am most comfortable producing pieces within my own frame of reference, such as books and posters. As a result, the final body of work for examination occupies two streams. One is a series of typographic interventions into the gallery space, referencing the digital aesthetic of the hashtag, but in analogue space. The other is an artist's book which explores expressions of touch, utilising low relief tactile typography in the intimate confines of a book form.

MATERIALS

Stage four of my research examined materials and materiality. My New Aesthetic pieces usually required multiples of something, often in the 1000s, such as ribbons, paint swatches, straws, skewers, Post-it note pixels, beads, nails, string, pins and so on (figure 10, 11, and 12).

The reason for selecting these materials often revolves around cost and availability and I began using mass produced, everyday objects regularly because they were affordable and available. One piece (figure 10) took months because I could only source the map pins 100 at a time and the piece used 8100 in total, so I had to keep waiting for the retail outlet to restock, whereas

plastic cups, spoons, nails and so on are in much more plentiful supply.

		
<p>Figure 10 Dominique Falla <i>Ideas are 1% inspiration . . 99% perspiration</i> 2012, map pins, 80 x 30cm</p>	<p>Figure 11 Dominique Falla <i>I“m going to miss lowercase a most of all</i> 2012, paper pixels, 200 x 140cm</p>	<p>Figure 12 Dominique Falla <i>UPPERCASE Q</i> 2012, silk ribbons, 80 x 50cm</p>

The use of these everyday materials dovetails nicely with the concept that vernacular typography, such as printed signage, is widely ignored by the general public, but once the same typography is executed in a way that is tactile, conceptual, and obviously time-consuming, the audience responds to the written word very differently.

GOOGLE

In September 2013, search engine company Google commissioned an on-site branding installation in the foyer of their annual Zeitgeist Conference as part of their trade show. The piece (figure 13) was created with 7000 nails and 67 balls of string over three days (Falla 2013b). It was an interesting experience and begs the question why a company whose entire business is built on digital communication would choose an analogue method to communicate its conference branding—a conference dedicated to cutting-edge technology no less?



Figure 13 Dominique Falla *Here's to the Curious* 2013,
pin and string, 1060 x 300cm

As it transpired, they had made an informed decision because the analogue installation ‘cut through the clutter’ of digital innovations being showcased at the trade fair. As each new delegate, attendee and exhibitor came through the door, instead of commenting on the Google glass, driverless cars or other innovative displays of technology, they all commented on the ‘rad’ string piece, with many coming up for a closer look. Was this response purely due to the

unexpected contrast between the analogue and the digital?

It was disappointing that the work was unable to comment directly on communication in the digital age, but the conference branding and slogan “Here’s to the Curious” was represented by the interconnectivity of the web and the curiosity needed to seek out new information.

THE WAY FORWARD

In terms of producing work that is truly ‘tactile’ my initial explorations into tactile installation in *Goodbye Helvetica* proved a failure when it came to encouraging audiences to interact with the work in a gallery context. No matter how inviting, audiences don’t feel comfortable ‘touching’ work in a gallery space, but they will happily interact with tactile typography in book form. The artist’s book as an interplay between art and text, work and object, breaks down the boundaries of a gallery context and ‘allows’ the audience to touch. The haptic notions of the book form serve a useful purpose in this context and so my low relief tactile explorations will inhabit a book form within the gallery space.

My final body of work will be tactile, typographic, and presented in a traditional gallery, but in a way that encourages touch—an analogue typographic representation of a digital aesthetic—an intimate book object and a typographic installation in the environment which encourages interaction with the objects, both public and private.

By referencing the digital aesthetic in the work, but making it clearly non-digital in its output, the work makes a clear comment on their relationship. The visual joke is something that is enjoyed in person when people ‘get it’ and something that is enjoyed over the Internet as a ‘shareable object’.

Few visual artists explore tactile typography in its analogue form, with reference to the digital aesthetic of new media artists in the way that my work does. Evelin Kasikov is the only other

visual artist, that I am aware of, who explores digital typography in an analogue format, and her recent work is moving away from typography and towards the visual image (2011).

Along with many other visual artists, I have examined everyday materials in a gallery context. By using multiples of common objects in a considered, time-consuming manner to make pieces of vernacular typography that inhabits the installation space, my recent work challenges the audience to reexamine both the materials and the message contained within the piece, whilst also re-contextualising digital meta data in analogue space by using hashtags as a way to bridge the divide between digital and analogue communication frameworks.

The final step in the communication process comes when viewing audiences photograph the works to 'share' over their social media networks. The very act of labelling the work with its title, such as *#firstworldproblems* will enable the meta data, automatically 'sharing' it among other users of digital communication channels, such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, and the digital/analogue/digital loop will be complete.

In one way, the large scale typographic installations engage audiences by encouraging them to digitally 'capture' and 'share'. The low-relief tactile typography artist book engages audiences to share a more intimate experience with the text and the meaning behind the message. By physically turning the pages and touching the typography on each page, the audience is welcome to 'share' the visual experience with their social networks, but the tactile experience will be theirs alone. The user experience is unique and depends on the pathway they take through the book and the choices they make whilst interacting with it.

The book form is a more expected environment for typography, but outside the confines of braille or children's books, a tactile book is fairly unexpected, and the content and delivery of the words challenge our notions and perceptions of touch.

My final body of work combines the New Aesthetic, every day objects and multiples in a typographic installation which is not meant to be touched necessarily, but offers the anticipation of the haptic. The works will be accompanied by a tactile artist's book, in which the viewer has no choice but to touch.

Both outputs use typography to communicate ideas about the absence of touch in communication, and the oblique nature of communication in the digital age of hashtags, shorthand communication and meta data. The book object speaks to the pleasure of making and shows evidence of being time-consuming, whilst the gallery intervention draws on the hashtag as meta data to allow for layered readings of the digital aesthetic in analogue space. Both make comment on the changing nature of communication in the digital age.

My work originally used multiples of common, domestic objects because of speed and convenience. The works were small and made in the spirit of play and experimentation, but as my studio research progressed, the question of recycling, mass production and waste moved to the fore, as the pieces got bigger and more demanding. The issue of buying many thousands of one object to make a piece, moved to finding and collecting many thousands of objects in order to 'upcycle' them. The pieces take longer to create as a result, and a certain degree of artistic control is lost, as you 'take what you can get', but the opportunity to comment on the use of the objects, by using objects themselves, added a layer of richness and complexity to what were simply aesthetic pieces.

The piece *#firstworldproblems* for example, was made from 297 plastic water bottles, collected from friends, family and donations from students at Griffith University. The creation of millions

of plastic water bottles for a single use is a global problem (Ellsbury 2013), and whilst the hashtag #firstworldproblems is usually reserved for facetiously commenting on a 'rich western person's' complaint on social media, when reapplied to the issue of global plastic bottle waste, it points the lens firmly on something the first world is doing, which genuinely is a first world problem.

The addition of a tactile typography artist's book to the gallery space allows an interaction with typography on a variety of levels. The installations are large and 'public', the book is small and 'private', but both sets of work deliver on the same set of ideas: that typography as a craft is time-consuming and can enhance the meaning behind the message; that analogue interpretations of digital typography encourage added layers of dimensionality and meaning; that touch is missing from communication in a digital age and that everyday materials, when visibly hand made, can enhance the message and cut through the visual clutter in a world over-saturated with digital messages.

CONCLUSION

The introduction of the desktop computer has ultimately been responsible for a wealth of changes to the graphic design landscape. Typography as an art form, is also undergoing reinvention as a result of the digital revolution, but the use of type is still embedded within graphic design as a primary tool of communication. The art of typography, if it is to be preserved, must have a clear and renewed focus as a visual art form.

The findings of my research would suggest that online audiences are much more likely to appreciate written messages if the typography is executed in a way that is clearly time-

consuming, creative in its use of materials, and exhibits a visual tactility rather than being entirely digital in its delivery. ‘Touch’ it would appear, is not solely for communicating with the vision-impaired, and texture made visible in online images satisfies an innate craving for the tactile and hand made.

Haptic *anticipation* is enough for the audience to appreciate the way the message has been communicated. The need to physically touch the objects is replaced by linking to a stored memory of what it would actually feel like to touch it. Using everyday and commonly touched materials is more successful than unusual materials and surfaces, as the audience can reference a stored memory bank of touch sensations.

In the digital era, graphic designers have demonstrated a need to creatively express themselves outside of their commercial work and tactile typography is emerging as a unique visual art form within the field of graphic design—fuelled by the popularity of online image sharing. My research set out to discover if engaging touch was an effective way to reinvigorate communication and my own creativity, and at this stage in my own work the results are very positive.

Setting my own briefs has certainly reinvigorated my creativity. The designer ‘slash’ artist it turns out is me. I have successfully raised my profile as a visual communicator, working under the umbrella of tactile typography, and achieved creative satisfaction. As a result of the commissions I now receive, I have successfully added value to my role as a graphic designer, much more than my graphic design career before embarking on this research.

There are many graphic designers working within the companion areas of typography and fine art, writing their own briefs to reinvigorate their creativity and raise their profile as visual

artists, but none of them are using tactile typography specifically to reinterpret the digital aesthetic in ways which can be touched and experienced. This gap is one my studio practice has filled. By referencing the digital aesthetic in the real world, my ‘slow’ tactile typography gives new appreciation and awareness of typography as a craft, and the resulting body of work fits within the emerging confines of the New Aesthetic: time consuming artefacts of the digital world made real.

Over the last two years, I have established the term ‘Tactile Typography’ (see Google) within the online design community. I have created an innovative body of visual art which opened up a whole new field of creative practice that clearly engages the audience in both digital and physical realms, allowing myself—and others—to successfully straddle the divide between graphic design and fine art (Falla 2012a).

LIST OF WORKS FOR EXAMINATION

1. #firstworldproblems
2. #quoteoftheday
3. #worklifebalance
4. #repost
5. #rgb
6. Safe to Touch
7. Postcards from Rome
8. Goodbye Helvetica.

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