

Typographic interventions often incorporate multi-faceted textual renderings that are deeply intertwined with the communities they inhabit. These works are sometimes antagonistic social actions that express grievance and take a critical position.

Typographic Interventions: Disruptive Letterforms in Public Space

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We are surrounded by typography—on billboards, aluminum cans, pill bottles, and pixelated screens—but artists and art teachers, seeking out the materiality of their lived environments, should be able to look at text in different ways. Many artists utilize letterforms as a medium of juxtaposition and recontextualization (Gude, 2004) by placing text in places we don't expect to see it, or they subvert the messages we expect to read. Typographic interventions can be seen everywhere, by all types of artists, makers, activists, and dissidents. These interruptions could be framed as forms of socially engaged art (Helguera, 2011; Mueller, 2020) that "suspend the flow of everyday life" (Spector, 2013, p. 15). At times, these works offer a respite, a re-collection, and/or valuable critiques of the communities they inhabit (Helguera, 2011). This essay invites art educators to utilize letterforms as a material of provocation and interruption. The author sketches a few brief histories of typographic interventions, offers a few provocations for art educators, and provides some examples of student work as they respond to the proposition: *Use letterforms to subvert a public space in a positive way.*

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Why are conversations about typography typically relegated to design classrooms? Letterforms have a storied history, intertwined with every facet of art and society. Non-representational characters marked a shift in human consciousness that opened up countless possibilities for cognitive expansion and cross-pollination. The messages carried by text are very important, but the characters themselves also warrant our attention. Type designers are artisans working in a very long tradition, and the letterforms they create are complex symbols with many layers of cultural significance. Additionally, numerous artists have utilized typography in commercial and non-commercial realms to communicate, critique, and challenge. When art educators think of text, perhaps we could think of it as material, in the same way we might think of pigment, binders, wax, clay, or cardboard. By doing so, I believe we open up exciting potentialities for art praxis.

Typographic Disruption

We expect to see typography in commercial settings—on billboards, aluminum cans, and pill bottles—but artists often place text in places we don't expect to see it, or they subvert the messages we expect to read. These examples of juxtaposition and recontextualization (Gude, 2004) are hallmarks of postmodernity.

Typographic interventions can be seen everywhere, by all types of artists and non-artists. These interruptions could be framed as forms of socially engaged art (SEA) that “suspend the flow of everyday life” (Spector, 2013, p.15). At times, these works offer a respite, a re-collection, and/or valuable critiques of the communities they inhabit (Helguera, 2011). Other times they offer an esoteric puzzle, a cryptic message to decode, or a layered poem in any number of words. There are many

approaches, and there are many histories that could be traced.

Text in Conceptual Art

Within the conceptual art movement, letterforms have been established as a common tool for social disruption. This tradition of text-based intervention is rooted in the work of Robert Smithson (1967, 1969) and Dan Graham (1966-1967) who injected their work into the pages of art magazines by co-opting the spaces typically occupied by advertisements. “*The Second Investigation (Art as Idea as Idea)*” by Joseph Kosuth (1968-1969) went further by purchasing spaces on billboards, marquees, and newspapers. He culled fragmented text from *Roget's International Thesaurus* and disseminated it across the globe alongside classified ads and movie times. Nancy Spector (2013), former chief curator at the Guggenheim museum, wrote that Kosuth's work gave pause, created surprise, flouted expectations, and offered “a new kind of public art, one that infiltrated daily life, suggesting, rather than dictating, meaning” (p.15).

A few years later, Jenny Holzer expanded the field of typographic interventions. In her “truisms” project (1977-1979), she wheat-pasted papers around Manhattan, filled with curious textual matter. Later she began using illuminated electronic displays and light projections on architectural structures to present text in the public sphere. Holzer's work was “strategically interventionist” (Spector, 2013, p.15). Throughout her career, she has also utilized bronze plaques, stone benches, picnic tables, sarcophagi, printed pages, and LED diodes to inject texts into public spaces.

Artists like Felix Gonzales-Torres, Glenn Ligon, Barbara Kruger, Hans Haacke, Louise Lawler, Carrie Mae Weems, Richard Prince, Nancy Spero, Vik Muniz, Liam Gillik, Doug Aitken, Lawrence

Weiner, Bruce Nauman, Ugo Rondinone, and Stefan Sagmeister, along with collectives like Group Material and the Guerilla Girls, have taken up letterforms as a disruptive medium. These artists represent a variety of approaches and sympathies—and their work bleeds into the fields of design, performance, political activism, poetry, community organizing, pedagogy, environmentalism, investigative journalism, etc. Some of these artists, designers, and collaborators utilize text as a vehicle of antagonistic social action (Helguera, 2011) to open up pointed sociopolitical dialogue, while others simply lean into disruptive or poetic esoterica. Ultimately, however, these artists are united not solely by their usage of text, but by their engagement with social environs.

Text in the Streets

Outside of the institutionalized, frequently homogenous, mostly white art world, there are rich traditions of typographic street art. These interventions often incorporate multi-faceted textual renderings that are deeply intertwined with the communities they inhabit. These works are sometimes antagonistic social actions that express grievance and take a critical position. The strength of these types of confrontations lies in raising questions, not in providing answers (Helguera, 2011). Protest signs can also be powerful forms of text-based antagonistic action.

Problematic public monuments are another site where critical typographic interventions are commonly employed, especially in recent years in the United States. These public monuments often borrow the architectural language of Greek and Roman classicism—the material language of power and grandeur (Buffington & Waldner, 2012, p. 4)—and function as “a form of self-worship” (Browning, 2019, p. 122). Public monuments are pronouncements of power, and

they often enable hegemonic forces (Gramsci in Holob, 2014) by marginalizing demographics through the oppressive regimes of white-supremacy, capitalism, and patriarchal order (hooks, 1995).

In the communities where they reside, these sites provide looming, large scale answers to questions of power: “What is it? Who controls what? How? Under what circumstances? Who lacks it? Who has it?” (Weems, 2018). They function socially to maintain barriers (Buffington & Waldner, 2012) by telling communities who is at the center and who is at the periphery.

Artists and activists have used spray paint, fabric, vinyl, mud, moss, yarn, and light projections to confront the stone, steel, and bronze of public monuments. Through these guerrilla textual interventions, activists challenge “historical amnesia” (Browning, 2019, p. 122) and encourage the community to grapple with the consensual narratives (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014) that reinforce the values of dominant power structures. Even though many of these interventions are temporary, the conversations and questions they open remain salient.

The Proposition: Use letterforms to subvert a public space in a positive way.

I teach art at a public high school and a private university. After providing a brief survey of typographic interventions and discussing this art-making methodology, I offered this proposition to all of my students: *Use typography to subvert a public space in a positive way. Create an intervention using physical letterforms.*

Together we considered the following questions: How could our words meaningfully disrupt a public space and create new understandings? What words could present valuable critiques in our community (Helguera, 2011; Mueller, 2020)? How could our words or

phrases be encouraging, motivating, or empowering? How might we invite participation and dialogue through our work (Bishop, 2012)? How could we generatively unsettle (Kumashiro, 2004; Barney, 2009, p. 90) viewers by leading them into a state of discomfort or misunderstanding?

If discomfort can be a generative pedagogical space (Boler & Zembylas, 2003), and “misunderstandings [...] can become productive sites for imagining new participatory practices and collective formations” (Alves, 2020, p. 343), how can we operationalize these conditions?

We agreed that these should be ephemeral installations that would eventually fade away or be dismantled. We challenged ourselves to use materials and/or processes that we had never used before, and materials that wouldn't permanently alter the site. I also offered these provocations: Think of the ways Stefan Sagmeister uses fruit, fabric, coins, sticks, furniture, inflatables, skin, and hair, among other things, to create typographic messages. Think of Barbara Kruger, Liam Gillik, Lawrence Weiner, and Felix Gonzales-Torres, who use vinyl lettering in their installations. Consider Joseph Kosuth, Robert Smithson, and Dan Graham, who intervened in magazine advertisements, newspapers, and billboards. Think of Glenn Ligon and Bruce Nauman's usage of neon light. Consider Doug Aitken and Robert Indiana's sculptural letterforms. Remember Jenny Holzer's usage of paper, stone, metal, LED panels, electronic billboards, and light projections.

Together in class we contemplated different phrases and their implications. We each considered a variety of public sites and their histories. We researched various typefaces, and the weight they carry. We also discussed possibilities for creating the letterforms with

different materials and processes. These dynamic conversations enabled my students and I to work collaboratively as co-learners and co-makers.

As an educator I am moved by the invitation toward a more participatory conception of teaching as rendered by Davis et al., (2008). This more organic structure emphasizes improvising (Martin et al., 2006), occasioning (Davis et al., 1996), conversing (Ashton-Warner, 1963), and caring (Noddings, 1984). These frameworks encourage emergence, flexibility, contingency, and expansive possibility (Davis et al., 2008, p. 171). Our time working together on these projects reminded me that meaning is more complex when it is made collaboratively—that learning is networked, emergent, and rhizomatic—and that all parties benefit when the teacher is de-centered (Aoki, 2005).

I asked students to document their work with photographs or video, and I gave them about two weeks to implement their physical interventions. While they were working outside of class, we spent some of our in-class time exploring a second iteration of the prompt: *If you had unlimited funding and access, how would you push this project further? Use Photoshop to create a mockup of a typographic intervention you would like to see.*

Student Work

The following images provide a small sampling of student work. All documentation is provided by the students themselves. I have also included a few brief samples of student writing about their projects.



Samantha Peterson & Sophia McCandless (high school students), *"WE CAN STILL FIX THIS"* . Spray paint on a soon-to-be demolished brick wall.

"We wanted a message that was hopeful, even though so much is going wrong. There is a lot to worry about right now. But ultimately, we still believe that these problems are fixable—even major systemic issues like racism, sexism, homophobia, or global warming. We just have to listen to each other and work together. We made a large stencil and spray painted the letters on an old brick wall that will be torn down soon. We hope these words will encourage people to consider how they can take action in their own ways." S.P. & S.M.

Eveline Zarate (high school student), "LAND OF THE FREE"
. Light projected on a County Courthouse.



“I knew mass incarceration was a problem in the United States, but it wasn’t until 2018 that the problem affected my family. My uncle and my dad were incarcerated on two separate occasions. I mourn with the people in prison who haven’t gotten the justice they deserve. The U.S. makes up about 5% of the global population yet almost 25% of the worlds incarcerated population. People of Color are disproportionately imprisoned. Systematic racism is right in front of our eyes, and yet many people still choose to ignore it. It’s no question that I find this phrase ironic. I projected this text onto the Justice Building in my hometown, early in the morning.” E.Z.

Estrella Chinchay (high school student), "THERE ARE OTHER PEOPLE HERE TOO".

Vinyl lettering in a parking garage.



“It’s easy to dehumanize each other. It’s easy to turn away from problems that don’t affect us directly. I installed this vinyl lettering in a parking garage near my house, and I’m sure people will interpret it in a variety of ways. I hope it will encourage people to take care of each other with radical kindness and empathy. The goal was to remind people that we are not alone on this planet and our actions impact other lives. We are all human beings and should be treated as such. This project opened so many doors for me. I realized how much I love public intervention and sharing my voice. I loved the motivation of creating art for not just a moment, but a movement.” E.C.

“I wanted to explore relativism in this world of misinformation and fake news. Something special or sacred that rings deeply true to one person might be utter nonsense to someone else. I decided to play with perceptions in this typographic intervention. I stumbled onto the work of Austrian artist/designer Stefan Sagmeister, who has explored similar questions in his work. I created this installation using long strips of white fabric and a staple gun. The fabric was stretched in between trees to spell the word ‘Truth’ when viewed from a certain angle. As the viewer moves to the left or right, the text becomes increasingly scrambled and unintelligible. I’m coming to realize in my life that it’s impossible to find truth without changing my position.” C.P.



Cole Phillippi (high school student), "TRUTH". Fabric stretched between trees, seen from 3 angles.



Samuel Crane (high school student), *Keep Trying*. . Lego letterforms on a playground..



Julia Stark (undergraduate student), *I want tenderness...*
Vinyl lettering on an abandoned building.



Deanna Nielson (undergraduate student), *Hold Fashion Accountable*
Clothing on a sidewalk outside of a shopping center.



Josie Glover
(undergraduate student),
When you see this text me
Vinyl lettering at a bus stop.

Jadyn Baria (high school student), *bend. Foliage on bedsheet.*



Sophie Twitchell
(undergraduate student),
Bye.
Floral arrangement.



Madi Guthrie (undergraduate student), *Purpose.* Toothpicks and fishing line.



Jayde Jones (high school student),
*We need to get more comfortable with
being uncomfortable.*
Vinyl lettering on her back
windshield.



Andrew Hansen (high school student),
Relief.
Ceramic dinnerware, with instructions
for the viewer to throw rocks at the
plates and vessels until they're broken.





Hannah Landeen (undergraduate student), *Funeral Liturgy*. Digital mockup.



Megan Martin (undergraduate student), *FIGHT APATHY*. Digital mockup.



Estrella Chinchay (high school student), *Billboard #444*. Digital mockup.

Conclusions

The students created work that was surprising and innovative, and they pushed themselves into new terrain. Many of the students waited and watched as onlookers absorbed their work. A few students engaged strangers in conversation. In each case, the physical interventions raised questions (Helguera, 2011) and opened occasions for dialogue. Students produced spaces and situations that upended expectations in 'fun, strange, and liberating' ways (Thompson, 2016, p. 446)—and in some cases they attempted to activate these new perspectives by offering 'alternative, hopeful futures' (Brom, 2020, p. 347).

As Nancy Spector (2013) observes, these kinds of interventions are premised on the element of surprise. They catch you off guard, invade your space, and, in the process, offer an alternate reality. These 'microinterruptions in the streams of our consciousness can generate a meaningful impact' (p. 15).

In my personal practice as an art educator, this project reinforced Jorge Lucero's (2020) observation that "teaching is truly a social practice that comes with ready needs, ready politics and power dynamics, ready diversity and communities, ready desire for change and discovery, [and] ready social engagement" (p. 52).

Our actions were small and local, but they responded to large forces at play in our individual spheres. They co-opted unexpected sites and made them into adaptable spaces (Savage, 2006). These projects explored the intersections of art, pedagogy, history, and politics (Fisher, 2017) in our community, and the conversations they initiated will linger long after the interventions fade away.

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rich traditions of typographic street art. These interventions often incorporate multi-faceted textual renderings that are deeply intertwined with the communities they inhabit. These works are sometimes antagonistic social actions that express grievance and take a critical position.

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