

2012

Elevating the Everyday: Designed Objects as Companions

Cassie Hester

Virginia Commonwealth University

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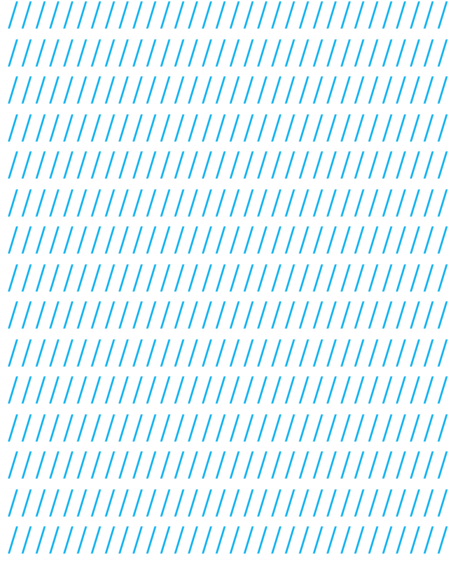
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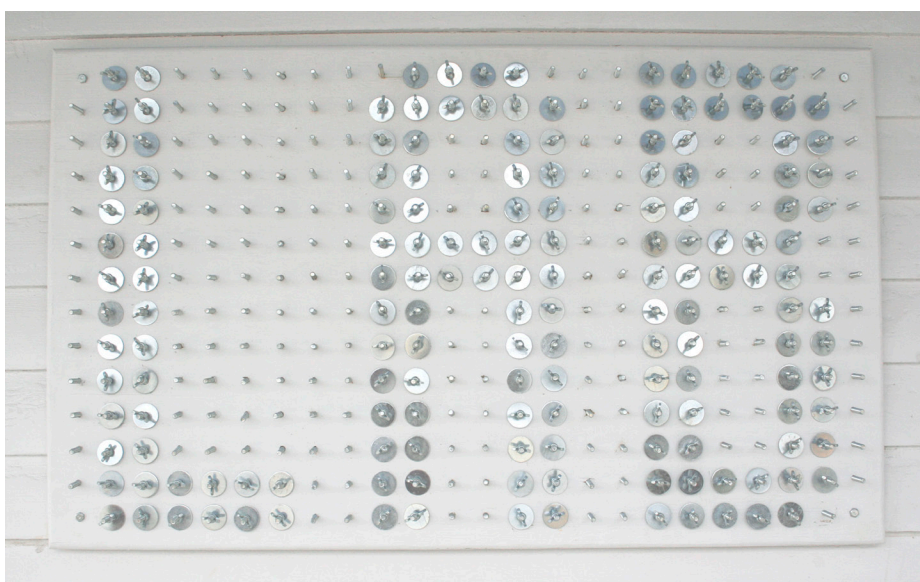
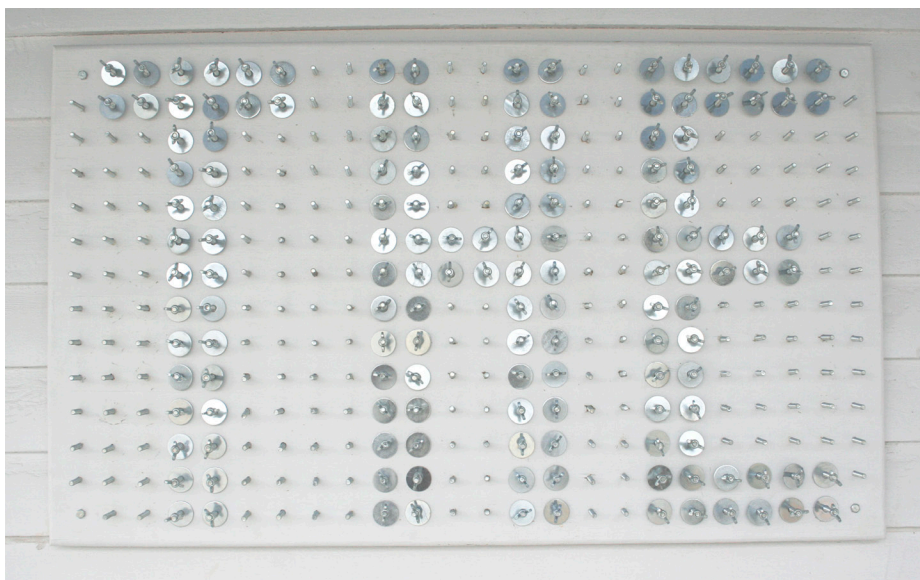


CASSIE HESTER///2012
MFA DESIGN/VISUAL COMMUNICATIONS
VIRGINIA COMMONWEALTH UNIVERSITY
RICHMOND, VA

ELEVATING THE EVERYDAY

DESIGNED OBJECTS AS COMPANIONS

From fleeting interactions to long affairs, our relationships with things are diverse and complex. Like people, designed objects and environments are close companions in our lives. The way we understand and engage with artifacts is parallel to the way we interpret and interact with each other. A constant source of comfort and delight, frustration and anxiety, their personalities inform our everyday dialogues and experiences. Designed artifacts assume engaging and pleasurable personalities when they transcend materials, challenge perceptions, and garner active, reflective interactions. Through the investigation of familiar materials such as concrete, crayons, paper, sequins, and thread in unfamiliar formats and contexts, I am creating objects that are playful in construction and interaction. By imbuing objects with friendly and intriguing personalities, everyday interactions and experiences with these objects are elevated, as users invest in pleasurable forays and relationships.



LONG DAYS/GOOD CAUSE

Shortly after graduating with a BFA in Graphic Design from the University of Georgia, I attended Project M¹, an annual month-long program that brings together creative volunteers and advisors from all over the world to collaborate and design for the greater good. In June of 2008, the Project M team congregated in Greensboro, Alabama in Hale County to work closely with HERO² (Hale Empowerment and Revitalization Organization, Incorporated) and Auburn University's *Rural Studio*³ to benefit the local impoverished community. By the end of the month, we had established a permanent work space—The Project M Lab. The lab is open to any and all who wish to collaborate to benefit the local community and/or work on larger “greater good” initiatives. Since the lab space is used by many different groups for various projects, the exterior sign needed to be versatile or modifiable so that each group could make the space their own.

The sign I designed is inexpensively constructed and respectful to Greensboro's aesthetic. It uses a system of washers and wing-nuts that can be arranged on a grid of bolts to articulate whatever the M'ers, inhabitants, and/or Greensboro residents desire. The existence of a grid constructed of familiar, common materials coupled with the provision of washers and wing-nuts close by is enough to communicate the intended interaction.

In 2010, *New York Times Magazine* interviewed locals about Project M's work in Greensboro for an article. Charles Johnson, the beauty-shop owner said, “I saw the sign and I asked, ‘Is this some kind of radio technology or space-center stuff?’”⁴ Though the initial reaction to recontextualizing simple materials was, for some, intriguing and intimidating, most took to the design with ease.

Participants chose simple words and images in deference to the limited density of the grid and often made their contributions a reaction to the contribution of the previous participant. The most common creations were the initials of individuals, illustrating how people used the interface as an opportunity to immortalize their existence for a brief period in time.

In Project M, I began to explore the idea that familiar materials, rendered new and flexible, can be empowering—that old friends can become even closer, intimate friends. Graduate school has given me the time and means of exploring this idea further.

¹ PROJECT M/// www.projectmlab.com

² HERO/// www.herohousing.org

³ RURAL STUDIO/// www.cadc.auburn.edu

⁴ Edge, John T. “Pop Up Community Center: Pie + Design = Change.”



PROJECT M LAB SIGN///2008/// 24" x 48"
Greensboro, Alabama. Treated plywood, bolts, wing-nuts,
washers, + white paint.

ANALOG DEVICES/TANGIBLE COLLECTIVES

Due to technological advancements of the past few decades, it has never been easier or more complex to engage with a world that has, at once, become both smaller and larger. In *Relational Aesthetics*, Nicolas Bourriaud asserts that “the emergence of new technologies, like the Internet and other multi-media systems, points to a collective desire to create new areas of conviviality and introduce new types of transaction with regard to the cultural object.”⁵ While it is true that conviviality is easily found via digital means, “new” types of pleasurable transactions can also be introduced through the facilitation of more intuitive forms of interaction—“good old” physical interaction and collaboration in public contexts. By reclaiming an analog participatory landscape, we regain the pleasure of employing and practicing intuitively understood models and methods of interacting, collaborating, and creating. Through the construction and installation of refined, intuitive, and user-friendly interfaces in public spaces, I have been exploring the affordances of physical interaction and the semantics of materials in technology while bearing witness to the reactions and contributions of participants as they think and create with things.

The pursuit of pleasure is a profound motivator in our lives and essential to our decision-making process. As social creatures, engaging with others is an exceedingly pleasurable pursuit. And, as the research of human-centered design expert Elizabeth Sanders illustrates in *Scaffolds for Everyday Creativity*, creative pursuits provide great satisfaction. “It has become increasingly evident that everyday people are no longer satisfied with simply being ‘consumers.’ They want to be ‘creators’ as well.”⁶ That is to say, Sanders believes that people are generally dissatisfied with a purely consumptive mindset (shopping, buying, owning, using) and yearn for tools that allow for more creative interaction (doing, adapting, making, creating).

According to Sanders, there are four levels of everyday creativity. The first and most basic level is *doing*. This level requires minimal interest of the participant and has a low skill requirement. An example of doing is purchasing an object and using it. The next level is *adapting*. Slightly more advanced, adapters modify an object to make it their own or better suit their needs. Requiring more investment and skill, this level requires some creativity. The next level is *making*. “The motivation behind making is to use one’s hands and mind to make or build something that did not exist before.”⁷ This level

requires a significant amount of commitment and expertise. However, in this case, individuals are not creating things from scratch and guidance is usually found in the observation of related objects—patterns, recipes, and notes. The fourth and final level is *creating*. Individuals create because they have a desire to innovate and truly take ownership of a process or experience. Creating differs from making in that the individual is creating something from scratch, with no supporting materials like recipes or patterns. Therefore, considerable commitment and skill is required by the creating level.

Examples of everyday creative activities are found in both the physical and digital/virtual realms. One can research and decorate their home or apartment while doing the same in the online game, *Second Life*. But of course the digital realm goes beyond mimicking our physical lives and provides users a unique landscape for creation and interaction through flexible frameworks. *Facebook*, *WordPress*, *YouTube*, and *Flickr* all support varying levels of creativity for individuals from all walks of life while exposing them to a world that is, at once, both larger and smaller. One can connect with select groups of people united, not through traditional proximity, but interest, while simultaneously gaining exposure to a global interconnected population.

Popular online environments allow individuals to explore all levels in Sanders’ scaffold of creativity—from doing, to adapting, to making and creating—satisfying their desire to participate in the design and construction of their experience. That said, just as the level of individual commitment and expertise changes as one moves through the four levels, the complexity of technology required to support creative acts shifts as well. This is true whether the environment in question is digital or analog.

All artifacts, physical and digital, are communicative vessels though some are more informative than others. In *Thinking with Things*, Esther Pasztory argues that there are three main technologies of communication. The first is *aesthetics* which, as ethnographic studies illustrate, are “the means of technology in archaic type societies.”⁸ *Writing* is the second form of technology. The third is *mass media and replication*. This third major technology utilizes the first two but has, on a certain level, “usurped the language of traditional technologies, creating a dense and insistent world of visuality, but at the same time [it has] nullified old functions by integrating them into a seamless web

⁵ Bourriaud, Nicolas. *Relational Aesthetics*.

^{6–7} Sanders, Elizabeth. *Scaffolds for Everyday Creativity*.

⁸ Pasztory, Esther. *Thinking with Things: Toward a New Vision of Art*.

of power that seems to emanate from an anonymous culture.”⁹ These three technologies exist in a complex and constantly shifting hierarchical relationship in today’s society with mass media and replication often residing at the top. Pasztory debates whether some traditional technologies will be usurped by others or lost forever. But she believes that “traditional aesthetic technologies, because they are so close experientially to the body and its space and unconscious needs, will find some forms of continuation.”¹⁰ Given the status of contemporary culture, this belief is proven to be true. Traditional technologies are still utilized and often replicated in new digital technologies. However, effective use of digital tools/technological frameworks rely upon the understanding of a complex, somewhat counter-intuitive system.

As usability expert Donald Norman explains, *affordances* refer to “the perceived and actual properties of the thing, primarily those fundamental properties that determine just how the thing could possibly be used.”¹¹ Digital interfaces function through the use of a distinct set of signifiers and mostly perceived affordances designed to allow user’s to adapt to new methods of creating—transforming complex programming and design into an understandable system of conventions, constraints, and manageable tools. However, the analog realm provides more actual, physical affordances that are much more intuitive. For example, we’ve been physically manipulating objects and interfaces according to their formal properties—Pasztory’s first technology—from childhood; a round peg goes in the circular hole, *Legos* can be connected and stacked, a ball can be rolled and bounced. By contrast, learning the conventions and constraints of a scroll bar or cursor as it relates to the physical affordance of a mouse is much less intuitive. “When affordances are taken advantage of, the user knows what to do just by looking: no picture, label, or instruction needed.”¹² The prevalence of Pasztory’s third technology has assured that the necessary knowledge of technical interfaces are learned, practiced, and assimilated from a young age, resulting in a new standard skill-set within our culture.

But in our technologically advanced world, there is also a potential in applying open framework principles of digital interaction into physical designs that foster creativity and peer interaction.

“Tools foster conviviality to the extent to which they can be easily used, by anybody, as often or seldom as desired, for the accomplishment of a purpose chosen by the user.”¹³ And, according to Liz Sanders, we’re adept at designing for consumption and less practiced in designing for audience adaptation or co-creation.

Through the exploration of materials and conventions in combination with principles of Sanders’ *Scaffolds for Building Everyday Creativity*, I am investigating the creation of interactive, enjoyable engagements while simultaneously examining principles of interaction design: navigation and intuition, consistency and usability. It is my belief that more enjoyable experiences and increased emotional investments can be enjoyed by people who play a role in the design process, people who are elevated to the status of adapters/makers. It is my hypothesis that participants feel a sense of empowerment through a guided level of ownership and the ability not only to interact with the design(s) but also to invest in interactions with their immediate community—to react and respond to the contributions of others. A primary concern of my research is to create sensitive interactive frameworks that provide enough structure and support to limit frustration and anxiety while still allowing a maximum level of freedom and creativity. The resulting interfaces provide an inviting and unassuming personality by rejoicing in their use of simple, everyday materials and their refined, exposed mechanics. Familiar interactions and affordances allow users to respond intuitively and with little cognitive effort.

Human beings are inherently interested in pleasurable, provocative interactions that elevate their everyday experience. So, too, is it with the designed world. We think with, invest in, and express ourselves through design; therefore, novel and human-centered artifacts are empowering, resonant, and key to creating extraordinary experiences.

9–10 Pasztory, Esther. *Thinking with Things: Toward a New Vision of Art*.

11–12 Norman, Donald. *Things That Make Us Smart: Defending Human Attributes in the Age of the Machine*.

13 Illich, Ivan. *Tools for Conviviality*.

THE PERSONALITY OF DESIGNED OBJECTS

We humans have an exceptional capability to quickly recognize, categorize and reason about our environment. We are able to effortlessly assimilate a constant influx of sensory information, freeing our minds to focus on more pressing concerns. While this cognitive ability is essential for survival, it often prevents us from truly studying and critically contemplating our world. The people we encounter, the environments we navigate, and the objects with which we interact are all rife with communicative power. And yet, most of our world is almost instantaneously processed and dismissed by our minds. This is not to say that we are unobservant—merely visually savvy navigators of the day-to-day interactions we experience in our designed world. This ability allows our minds to frequently adopt a passive, experiential cognitive mode. When we are learning to drive, a stop sign is met with reflective contemplation as we consciously judge the distance, apply the brake, and carefully roll to a stop. Given time, our responses to stop signs become automatic. However, when we encounter something that does not allow for automatic assimilation, we become engrossed in an active, reflective cognitive state.¹⁴ This effect is summed up by Andrew Blauvelt, “A paradoxical presence in our lives, design is both invisible and conspicuous, familiar and strange.”¹⁵

The way we understand and engage with artifacts is parallel to the way we interpret and interact with each other. Both humans and designed objects are interpreted through formal and contextual information. Many human attributes are manifested visually—from a person’s physical features to the clothes they wear and the things they own. The comprehensive experience of these details provides a glimpse into the complex set of characteristics that define our perception of people’s personalities. Contextual clues help us determine appropriate social customs and conventions for engaging with someone. A badge marks authority, a name tag renders one approachable, a wedding ring communicates commitment, and so on. The means of assimilating designed things is semiotics; the triadic relationship of syntax, semantics, and pragmatics in a given context. From form, content, function, and context, we find meaning. Perhaps, more significantly, we find personality—the conversational nature of the object.

Assessing someone or something is an active process that demands varying degrees of reflection and scrutiny depending on the situation. There are personalities who fade to the background and don’t entice interaction—wallflowers, if you will. There are people who seem strangely familiar, those who evoke a mixture of intrigue and allure. And there are true companions and confidants, personalities that are supportive and compatible. These varying relationships range from fleeting and ephemeral to enduring and intimate.

First impressions are of utmost importance. That is to say, the semiotic reading of things is of a great importance. Of all the strangers we encounter every day, we choose to indulge our curiosity in those who are approachable and intriguing. Attempting to get to know a stranger is an exciting and somewhat perilous endeavor. The very uncertainty of their nature is what makes interactions with them so enticing and uneasy. We engage in subtle investigation through polite conversation to reveal traits. If we like what we see, casual companions can join the realm of confidants—those that are steadfast and close to our hearts.

¹⁴ Norman, Donald. *Things that Make Us Smart: Defending Human Attributes in the Age of the Machine*.

¹⁵ Blauvelt, Andrew. *Strangely Familiar: Design and Everyday Life*.

STRANGERS

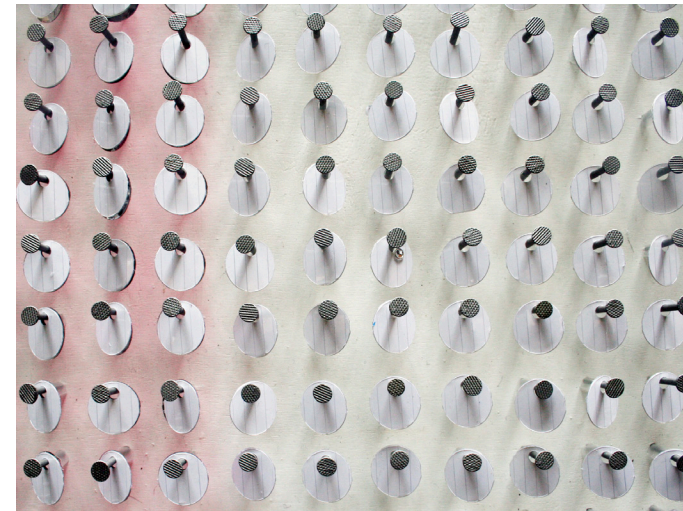
When meeting someone new, my hands shake, my voice quakes, and I mentally wince at every less-than-impressive thing I say. I talk too fast and hold my breath as I don't pause enough for breathing. Meeting, and subsequently trying to impress someone is a unique affair. We put our best face forward and engage with new acquaintances with a mix of optimism and wariness—hit it off, and you could gain a close companion; fail to impress, and your relationship could be over before it even starts.

Russian Formalist, Viktor Shklovsky, stated that “perception becomes habitual, it becomes automatic.”¹⁶ The recourse against habitualization is *defamiliarization*,¹⁷ the conscientious creation of strange, unfamiliar, and challenging work in order to stimulate a different perception. For me, a big part of defamiliarization is recontextualization—challenging traditional materials, conventions, and contexts.

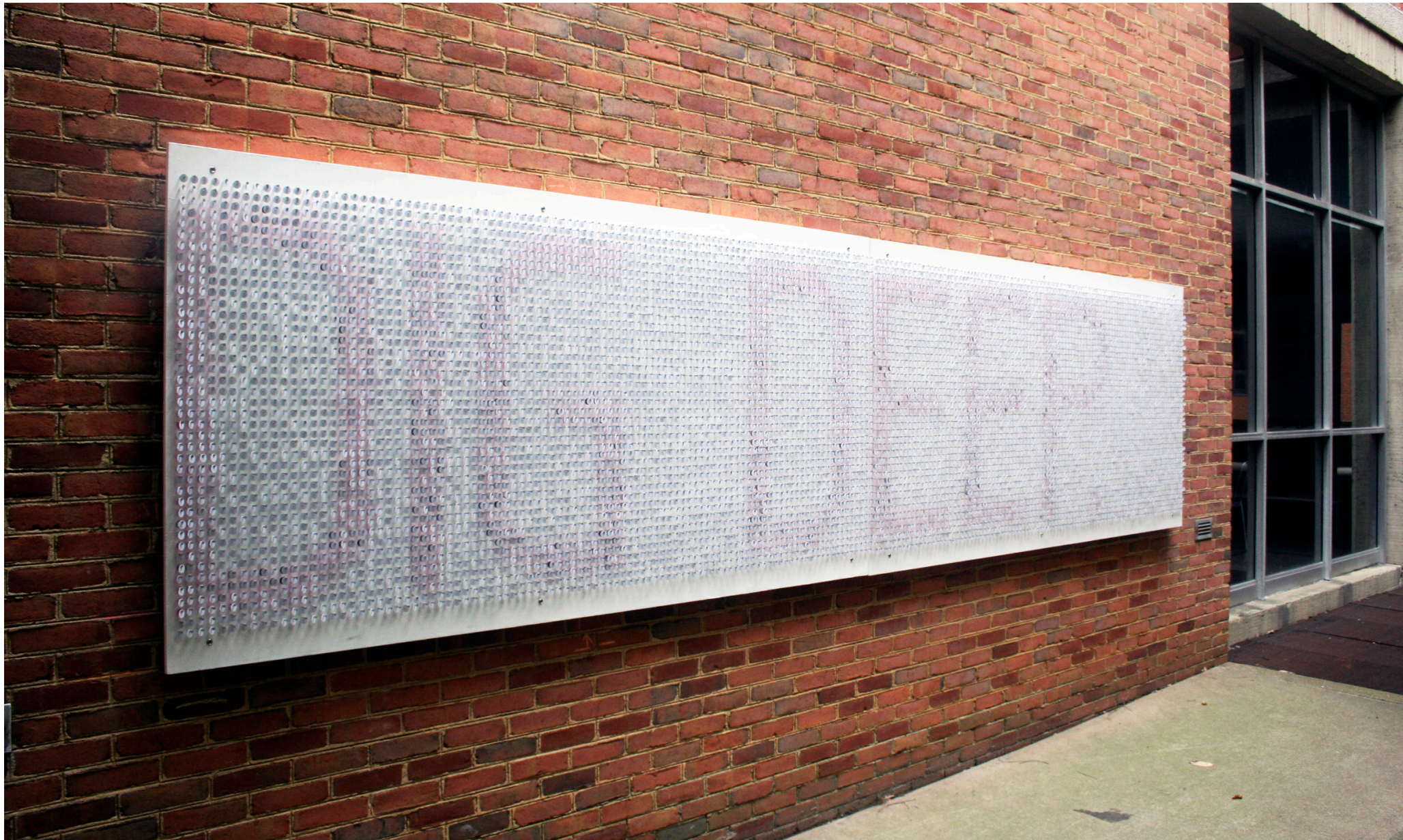
DIG DEEP

Dig Deep is an example of my work that evokes the qualities of a stranger, but a “strangely familiar,” and approachable one. Installed on the exterior wall of the Pollak Building, one of Virginia Commonwealth University’s design facilities, this 16 foot by 4 foot typographic installation is made of treated plywood, white paint, galvanized nails, clear plastic straws, and pink and white outdoor sequins. Each nail on the one inch grid contains at least one sequin and a clear plastic buffer between it and the board. The nails that comprise the message feature two sequins, a white sequin facing the viewer and a pink sequin facing the board. Reflected light makes the words visible. By nature of its scale and use of flashy sequins, one could assume it has a loud and overbearing personality. However, these less-than-desirable semantic qualities are softened through the unconventional use of reflected light.

Individuals interact with the piece by viewing it from afar and coming in close to analyze the detail. On days without wind, people often blow on the surface or fan the piece with their arms, causing the discs to flutter and form a living surface. On windy days, it is not uncommon to see people pause and observe the piece for a few seconds in their rush to get to and from classes. Traits and secrets are revealed through reflective conversations with the piece.



DIG DEEP///2011///DETAIL



DIG DEEP///2011///4' x 16'

Richmond, Virginia. Treated birch plywood, galvanized nails,
plastic straws, pink and white outdoor sequins, + white paint.



SINK OR SWIM

This piece consists of concrete letters cast from five inch by one inch thick silicone molds, which are then ground and hand sanded to distinct angles. The resulting forms were placed on the sidewalk so that the letter-forms appear to be sinking as they deliver an apt message for the final weeks of the school year: "It's time to either buckle down and end the year strong, or sink and finish with a lackluster performance."





SINK OR SWIM///2012
Richmond, Virginia. Concrete letterforms + 3M Exterior
Weather-Resistant Tape.



EXPLORE

The overhead projector evokes memories of the classroom. Countless hours of our formative years are spent watching teachers systematically guide us through mathematical equations on overhead projectors. By removing the bottom panel of the projector and placing it on top of outdoor recessed lighting, the nature of the overhead projector is subverted.

The piece is able to exist in unique spaces, thereby defamiliarizing the projector through recontextualization. The message, "Explore," references the piece's ability to wander and suggests that learning is sometimes best found outside the classroom and through explorative, curious investigations.





EXPLORE///2012
Overhead projector, outdoor recessed lighting,
+ transparencies.

IT'S FLEETING/LIGHTEN UP

Lighten Up is a typographic installation designed to reveal a message as it interacts with sunlight. Laser-cut into a sheet of stainless steel bent at a ninety degree angle, the piece presents two words, "IT'S FLEETING," and "LIGHTEN UP." Laser-cut messages are cut from both planes—one with the message "IT'S FLEETING" and the other with "LIGHTEN UP". Installed at eye level and flush against the wall, "IT'S FLEETING" is always be visible and "LIGHTEN UP" is revealed as shadow as the sun passes overhead. If the weather/lighting is cooperative, this stranger will share its secret with you.





IT'S FLEETING/LIGHTEN UP///2012///26" x 108"
Laser-cut aluminum.

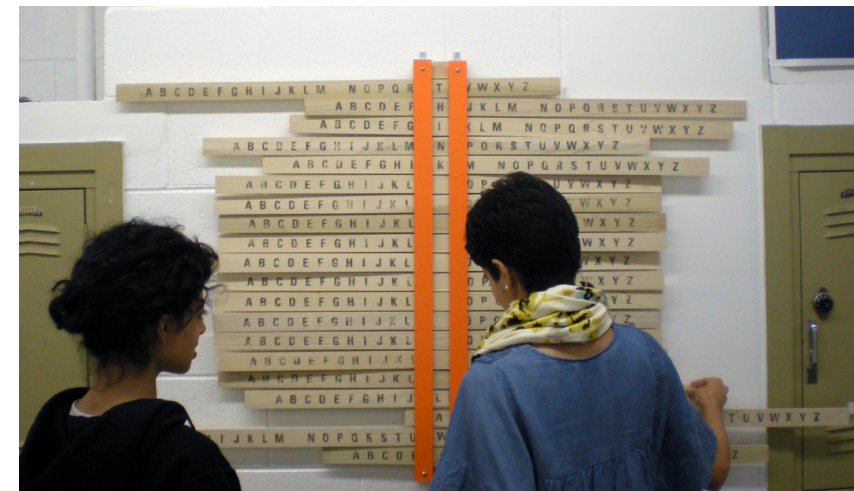
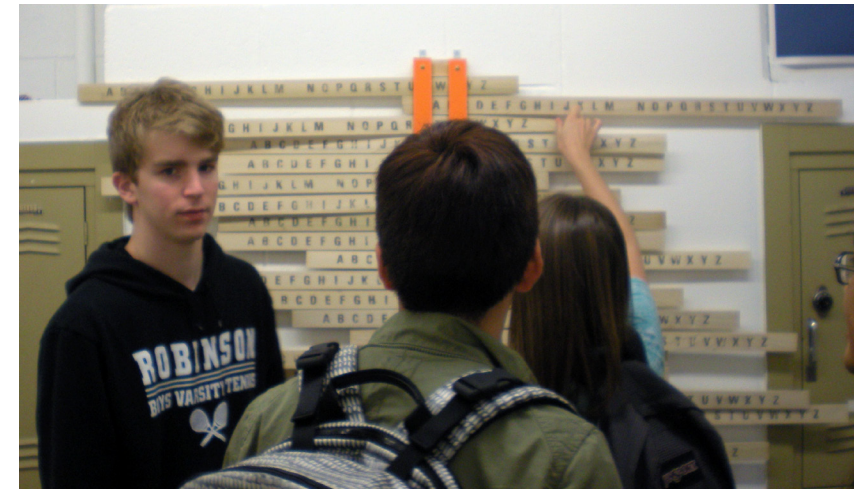
COMPANIONS

Whenever I encounter graffiti or desktop vandalism, I itch to contribute. As I contemplate a painstakingly carved *LW+GD 4 Ever*, I speculate about the person that carefully inscribed the bubble letters as I formulate possible love stories in my mind. There is something wonderful about anonymity—sharing with strangers, being privy to their intimate thoughts.

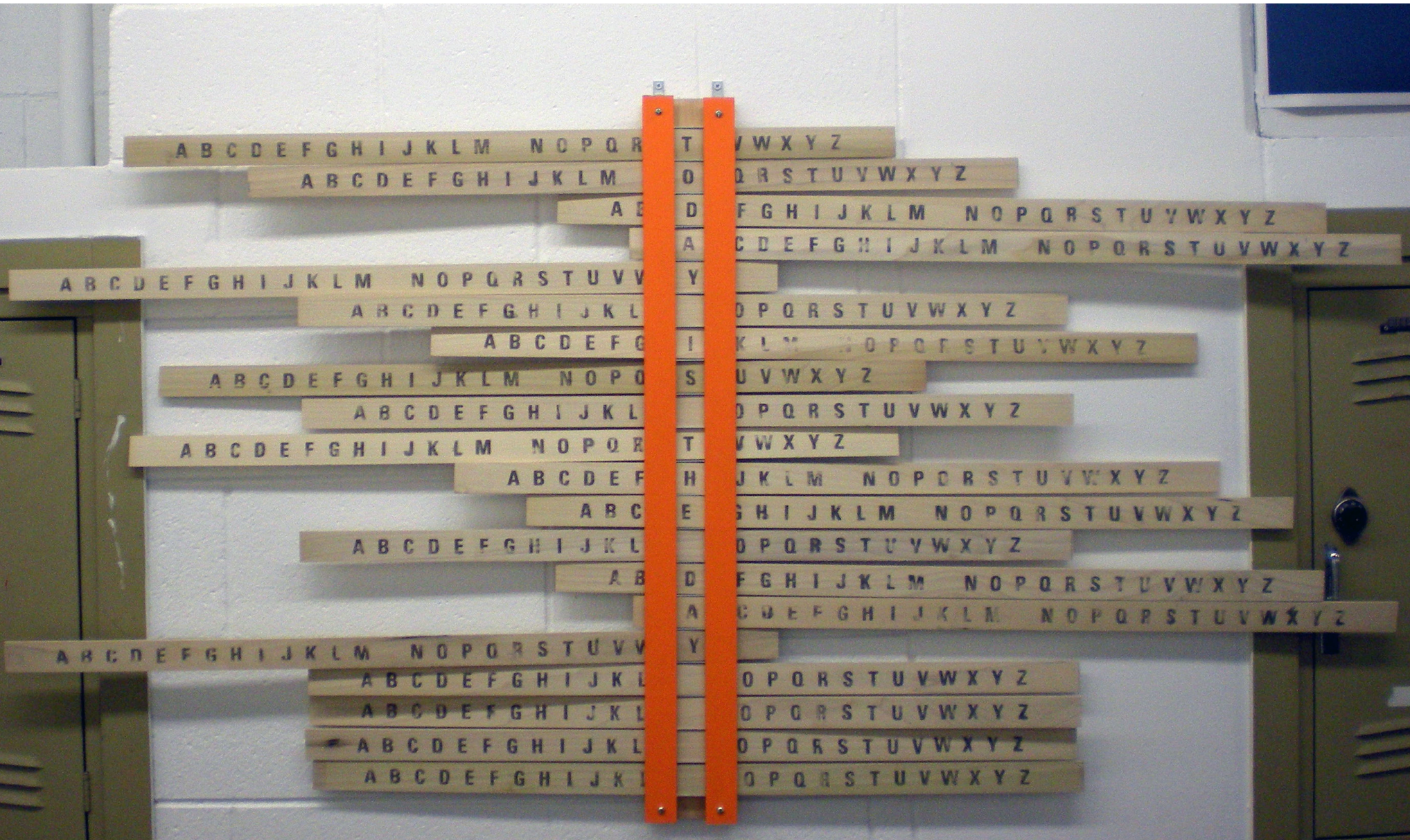
By encouraging the sharing of secrets and experiences, design artifacts can transcend their “stranger” status and assume very supportive and companionable roles. Inciting an individual’s curiosity and subsequently supporting their desire to interact and create with analog devices of social interaction allows for playful and empowering relationships.

ALPHABET SHIFT

Alphabet Shift presents an interface in which the physical affordances of pushing and pulling facilitate the creation of messages in a public space. The piece has been installed on the third floor of the Pollak Building, the main library at VCU, and a common space at VCUQatar. The structure consists of birch strips supported on a frame made of birch and aluminum braces. Each strip contains a full alphabet and one blank space. The strips can be pulled to the left or the right to highlight one letterform in the frame, creating a message. The interaction is quick, short and easy, so the interface garners a lot of attention. Instructions are not necessary as the simple mechanics appeal to intuition. Many inhabitants of the third floor chose to interact with the piece, creating messages alone or with the support of their friends. Most messages were status updates for the floor. Others were short poetic or provocative statements and conversations. From “MIDTERM REVIEWS SUCK” to “FORM LIKE VOLTRON ON” and “ILLUMINATE MY COCK,” the messages created a brief ethnographic glimpse of the third floor. Not only did the sociable personality of the piece promote intrapersonal exploration, its communal nature allowed individuals to invest in interpersonal relationships by participating in collective conversations.



ALPHABET SHIFT///2011

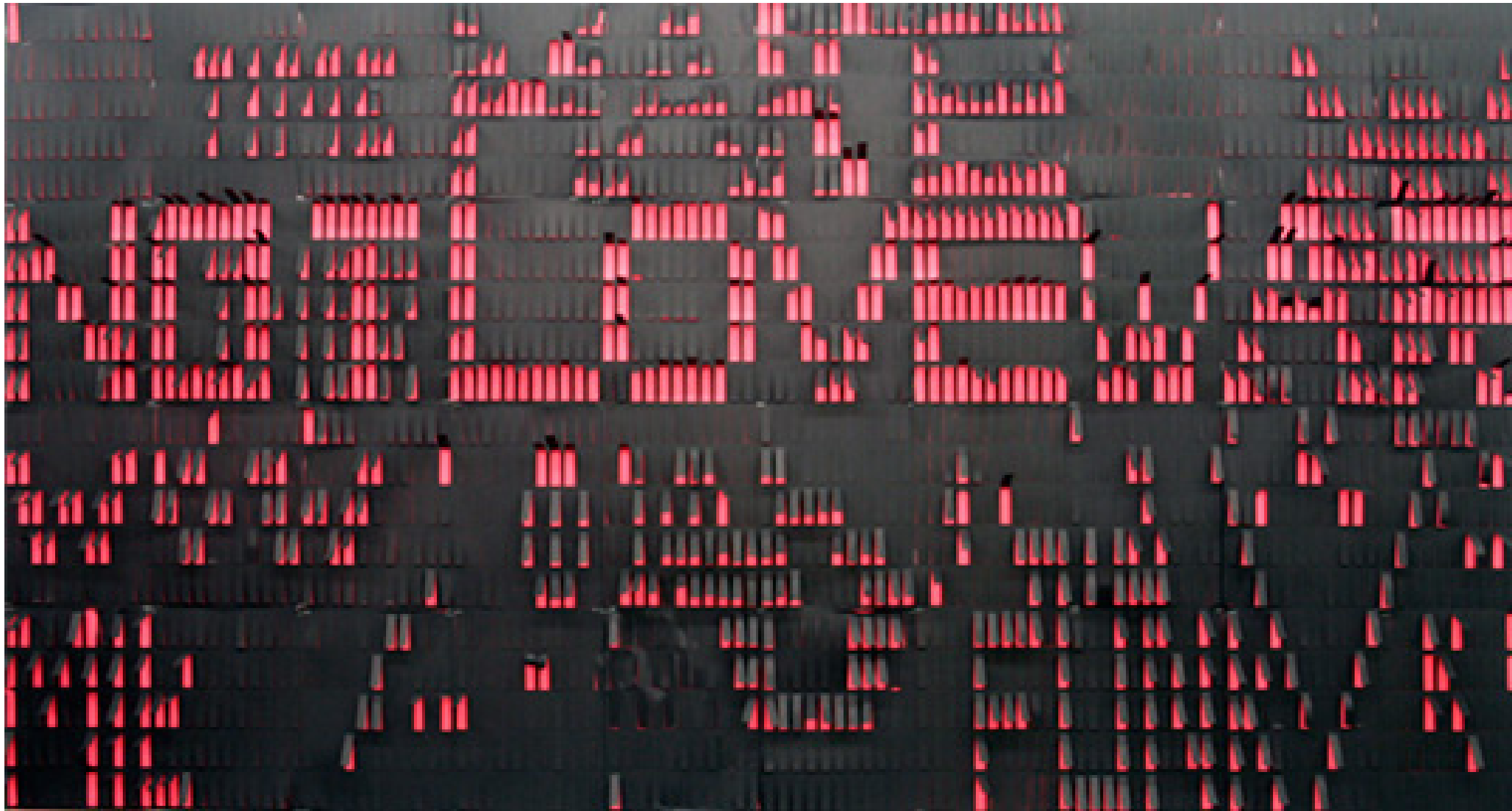


ALPHABET SHIFT///2012///32" x 28-52"
Birch, aluminum braces, marker transfer, + various hardware.

TAB INSTALLATION

In another project, I explored the affordances of tearing and folding by the use of paper tabs. I laser cut black paper and layered it over neon papers which were then tacked on a hallway bulletin board. Tabs are a familiar convention in print design, often accompany posters as a row at the bottom where passersby can tear off a tab containing information relevant to the posting. Relying on the familiarity of the form, I did not supply instructions or any indication of the intended interaction. Within a few hours of its installation, people began interacting with the piece. As students emerged from their classes they began folding—not tearing—the tabs to reveal the bright red base paper and in doing so created words and images. They reacted to the contributions of their predecessors, lifting tabs to transform words into new words, letterforms into images, and so on. As the installation became crowded with imagery, interaction slowed drastically and eventually stopped as the piece ultimately hit its capacity.





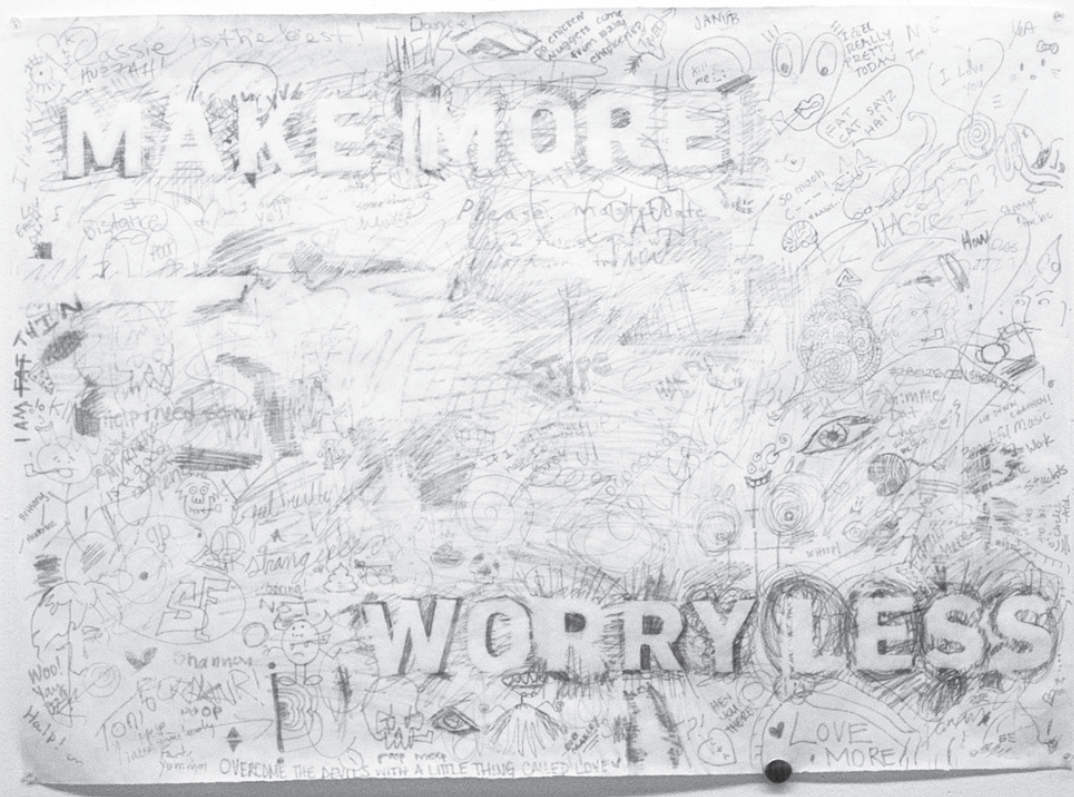
TAB INSTALLATION /// 2011 /// 44" × 85"
Laser-cut paper, neon red paper, + staples.

MAKE MORE/WORRY LESS

This companionable piece takes advantage of marker technology that allows one marker to create invisible masking elements on a page, and another that cannot effect the masked off area. I installed what appeared to be a blank sheet of 16 by 22 inch paper on a bulletin board in the Pollak hallway and provided markers for passersby to use if desired.

As participants interact with the piece, they indulge their creative impulses in a relaxed, playful manner. Visual expression becomes a source of great pleasure and anxiety in art and design programs. Get back to the joy of creating—*Make More/Worry Less*.





MAKE MORE/WORRY LESS///2012///16"×22"
White paper, secret message markers, thread, + tape.

IMAGE SLEEVE INSTALLATION

In this installation, three-ring notebook card collector sleeves were slightly modified and arranged in a grid to facilitate image-based storytelling and collaboration. Each collector sheet contained nine sleeves originally intended for storing playing cards or collectible cards such as baseball cards. Stacks of random *Google* images printed on 65# cover were provided in a simple shelf underneath the grid. Occupants of the third floor of Pollak were implicitly invited to insert images into the sleeves in order to create and/or modify visual narratives.

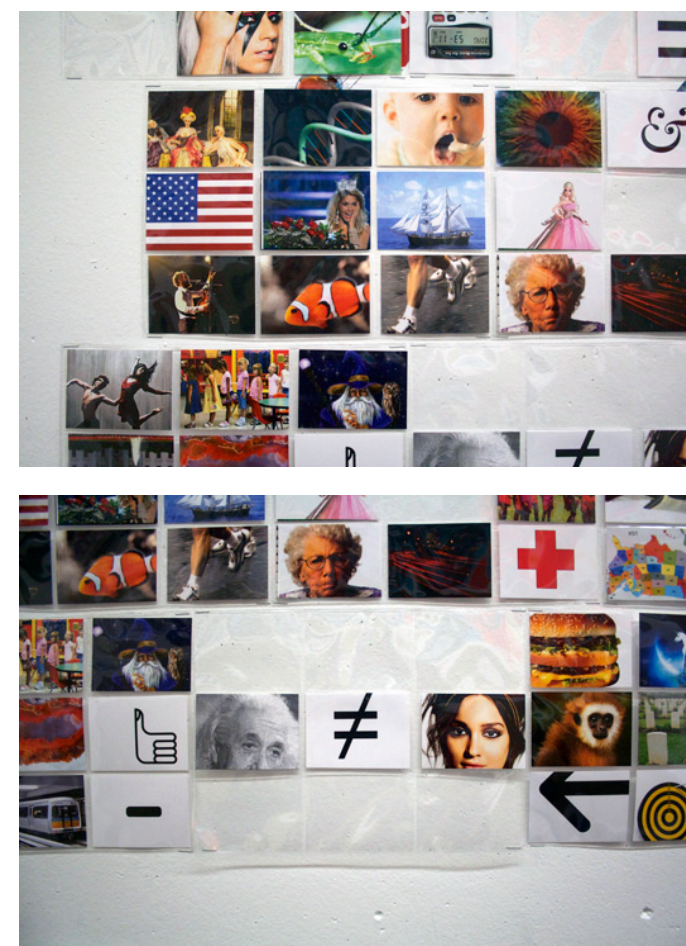
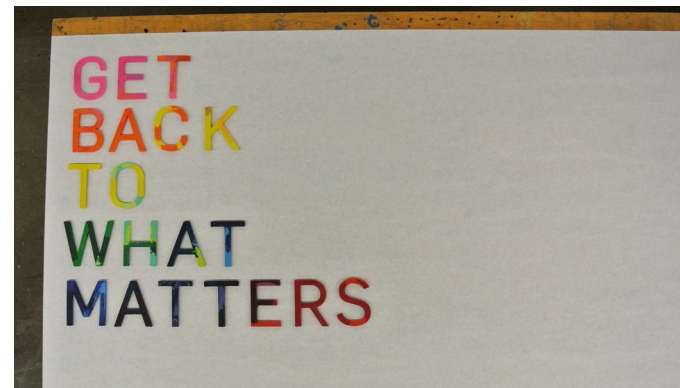




IMAGE SLEEVE INSTALLATION///2012///25.5"× 48"
Collector sleeves, 65# cover images, stainless steel shelf,
+ staples.

GET BACK TO WHAT MATTERS

The semantic elements of the *Get Back to What Matters*, evoke a simpler time, when drawing and being creative was a source of delight. Placed in the high-stress environment of a design department in the midst of the last few weeks of the semester, this fleeting crayon installation is a reminder to get back to what matters—making with your hands, interacting with others, and exercising your imagination.





GET BACK TO WHAT MATTERS///2012
Crayon letterforms + white paper.

CONFIDANTS

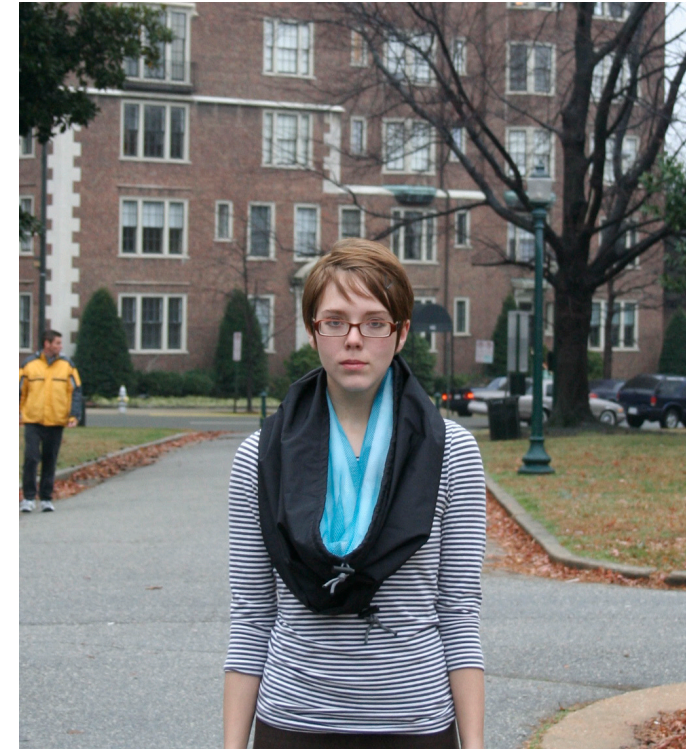
My significant childhood friendships were always celebrated with friendship necklaces. In third grade, a friend and I bought a necklace set featuring pendants of two slices of bread, one with peanut butter and the other with jelly. Though I have long since forgotten my third grade companion's name, whenever I come across this pendant in my jewelry box, memories of our exploits quickly come to mind.

From the supportive and steadfast to the sentimental, objects of personal interaction and expression are confidants. These objects become formal extensions of ourselves. They signify part of the formal code that informs others of our dispositions and help shape the interactions we have with others.

SCARF/HOOD/BACKPACK

Smart, multifunctional clothing is essential to the nomadic lifestyle. Protection against the elements is necessary not only for individuals but also for their possessions. Similarly, the ability to dress in layers is crucial. A bulky coat is useful only for the winter months whereas a light jacket, a couple of sweaters, and a few t-shirts can serve you for all seasons.

With these considerations in mind, I designed and prototyped a versatile accessory that retains its usefulness year-round. Unisex and one size fits all, the garment features a *Gore-Tex* exterior and quick-drying nylon mesh lining. This simple tube of fabric containing two drawstring casings at either end is a scarf, waterproof hood, and water-resistant pack. This garment fulfills a variety of functions while remaining democratic in its simple yet fashionable design. People from all walks of life can appreciate its versatility and style.



SCARF/HOOD/BACKPACK///2012



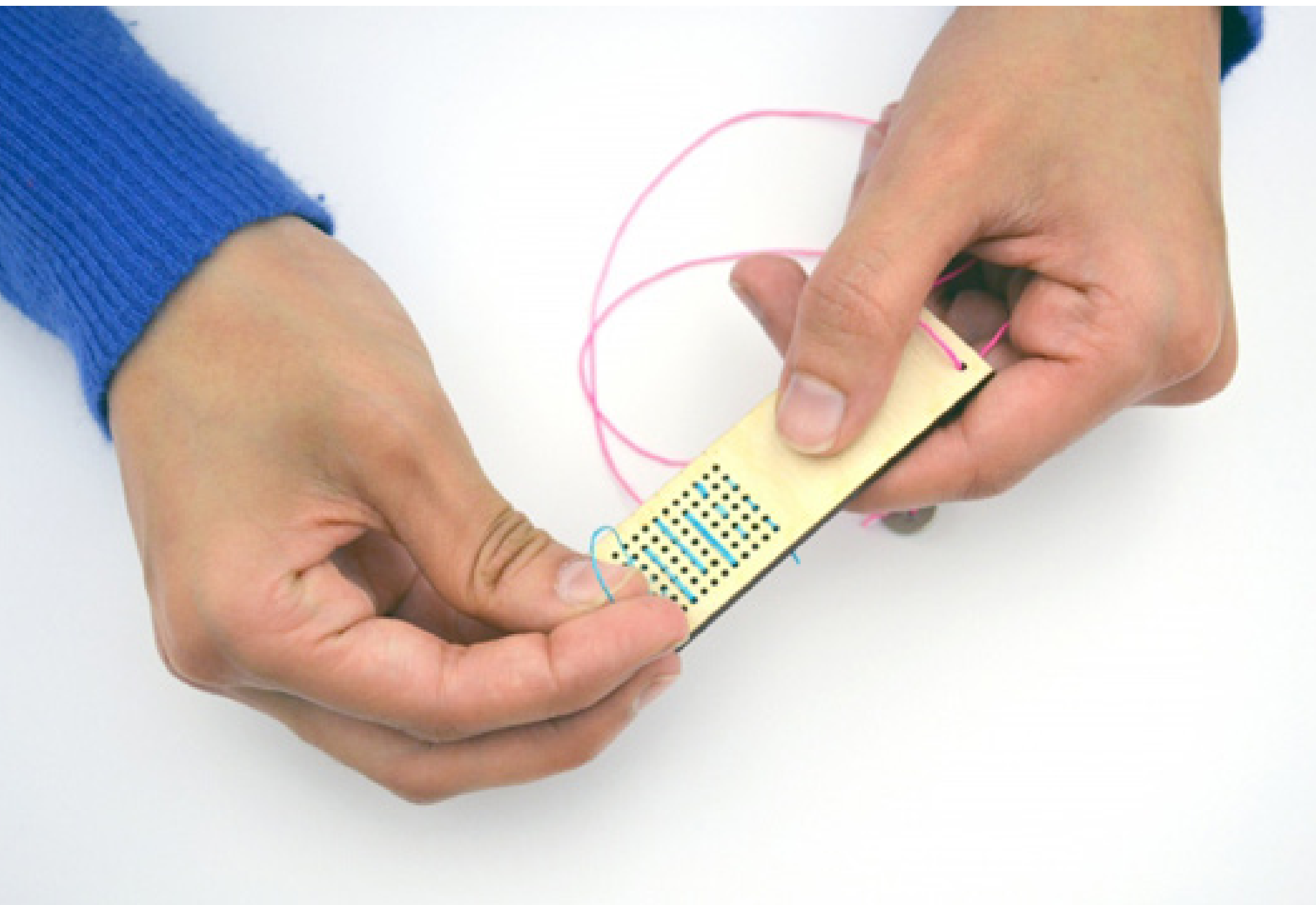
SCARF/HOOD/BACKPACK///2012

Gore-tex, hand-dyed nylon mesh, nylon cord, nylon thread,
double-barrel clasps, + plastic snap.

EMBROIDERY NECKLACE

This interactive necklace allows the user to create custom patterns that suit her personality. A birch pendant featuring a simple laser-cut grid of holes is paired with colorful bobbins of thread. By weaving and knotting, the owner can indulge her creative side while expressing herself through sartorial code.





EMBROIDERY NECKLACE /// 2012
Laser-cut birch, hand-dyed linen thread, bobbin, and
one stainless steel clasp.

BE BOLD

Be Bold is a typographic thaumatrope. The horizontal and vertical strokes of geometric letterforms exist on opposing sides of an aluminum pendant. Only through spinning the pendant does the piece confide its secret message.



BE BOLD PENDANT///2012

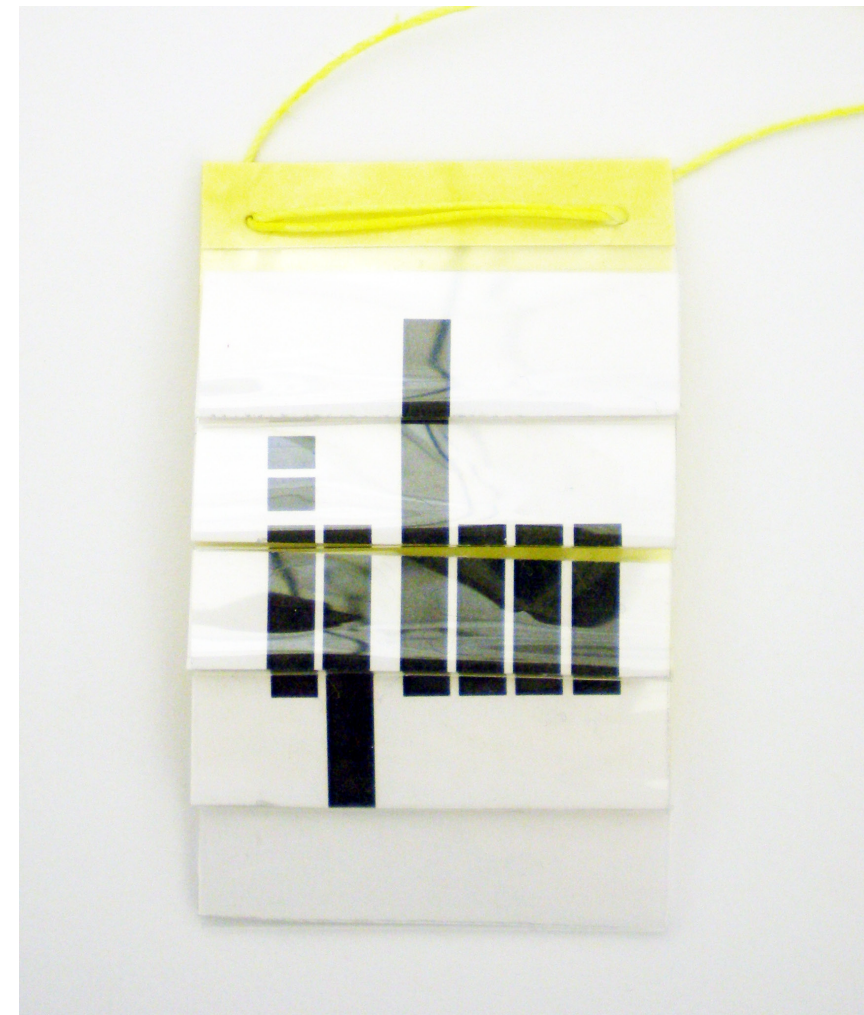


BE BOLD PENDANT///2012

Laser-etched aluminum, linen thread, + stainless steel clasp.

FILE TAB NECKLACE

An example of a designed artifact that exhibits the qualities of a confidant is the file tab necklace. These necklaces are made of window file tabs, hand-dyed linen thread, and buttons. By appropriating the language of a common object, these pieces become easily understood and customizable objects of personal expression. Through committed and sustained interaction, the owner of the necklace can imbue the piece with elements that provide a glimpse of their individual personality.



67///



FILE TAB NECKLACE///2012
Window file tabs, hand-dyed linen thread, and one stainless
steel button.

CRITICAL REFLECTIONS

As our lives are nourished by a dialogue with the world around us. It only seems natural that we should have a more reciprocal role in the relationships we have with the designed environment. The creation of engaging and challenging personalities in artifacts, from the strangely familiar to the human-centered, is pleasurable and empowering for both the designer and the audience.

In *Evocative Objects: Things We Think With*, Sherry Turkle states that “we think with the objects we love; we love the objects we think with.”¹⁸ Artifacts provoke thoughtful contemplations while inciting emotional responses, rendering interactions emotional and informative experiences.

We visualize to understand, but we also engage in playful and imaginative engagements in order to understand. It is my belief that pleasurable forays into unfamiliar contexts and environments lessen user anxiety, allowing for more productive and informative experiences that lead to more complex or serious engagements. Playful and imaginative pursuits are plentiful in the digital realm, while often lacking in our physical environments. Although it is acceptable to continue imaginative interactions in engaging activities such as video games and social media as adults, many stop physically playful and creative pursuits after childhood—abandoning art, acting, performing. One has no compunctions about sharing a sentiment on someone’s wall in *Facebook*, but to express oneself on an actual wall is considered vandalism. Pasztory mentions the emergence of an “anonymous culture” as a result of mass media and replication.¹⁹ This anonymous culture provides paradoxical comfort in which one can participate in massive collectives while preserving distance. Digital interactions provide codified methodologies for interacting with others. People often interact with others through a controlled, faceless interface and a population so large as to render it anonymous. The conventions of digital pleasurable engagements provide information as to how one should adapt to the environment while providing space and distance for one to participate and interact in ways that would prove intimidating in real life.

In my investigations, I confirmed that there is a desire to physically engage with objects in order to create, express, and share. Interacting with a digital interface comprised of mostly perceived affordances is distinctly different from engaging with a physical interface even though the motivations for interacting remain the same. By relating to the physical senses, a three-dimensional object—inviting interaction and situated in a carefully chosen space where it can be engaged by a proximally close population—has the potential to foster collective/communal exchange.

Analog engagements create a space for collectives to form based upon proximity and interest in which participants learn about the potential of an object being manipulated through their own manipulations as well as the alterations of others. Individuals become part of and invest in a tangible collective through their actions.

In my investigations, certain outcomes are encouraged through critical contemplations of the object. Great care has to be taken to find the right balance of user-flexibility and constraints within the system while also communicating function. Individuals are free to leverage the conventions of the piece in any way they see fit in pursuit of a desired outcome. In the projects I have carried out to date, the way in which the affordances of the physical interfaces were manipulated did not yield many surprises, although the content created through interactions provided many inter-esting moments. The imagery/messages of my installations provided formal, ethnographic glimpses of the hallway inhabitants. A vehicle for playful expression became an effective cultural probe of sorts.

My research will benefit by continuing to create analog interfaces that explore more physical affordances and constraints. The installation of these designs in diverse contexts to gauge how interactions and contributions change given different demographics will also yield more comprehensive evaluations of my interfaces. My belief that individuals have a desire to be creative and expressive in their physical interactions was affirmed. The construction of interfaces utilizing informative but nonrestrictive conventions for the purposes of playful, convivial interactions proved to be effective. Individuals engaged in a lively manner with the interfaces, the environment, and each other through the shared experience of navigating the interfaces. A key to navigating and investing in contemporary society is through exposure to thoughtful encounters with human-centered things. Participation and co-creation solidify thoughtful and emotional connections between humans, objects, and environments and the resulting collective experiences created by these encounters. We learn and grow through a dialogue with the world around us. Moreover, amusing experiences are fostered through this dialogue as we ground ourselves in physical existence—the pleasures of our moment in time, presence in space, and place in a community in which we reestablish and reinvest in tangible collectives.

¹⁸ Turkle, Sherry. *Evocative Objects: Things We Think With*.

¹⁹ Pasztory, Esther. *Thinking with Things: Toward a New Vision of Art*.

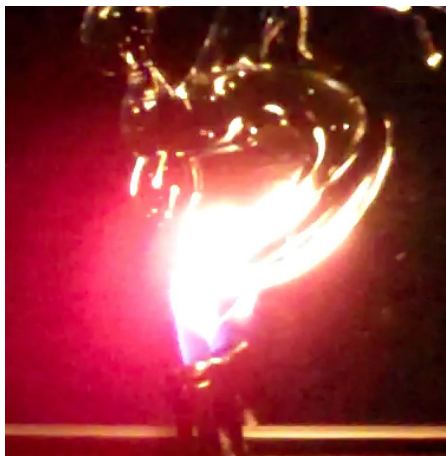
THE PLAY INSTINCT

Make More/Worry Less. It's Fleeting/Lighten Up. Be Bold. Get Back to What Matters. The messages of my work speak to a wide audience, but are also reflective of my personal desires. I spend so much of my time stressing about my work that I often forget to take a moment to regain perspective. To enjoy myself. To invest in the endeavor that fuels all of my creative work—the play instinct.

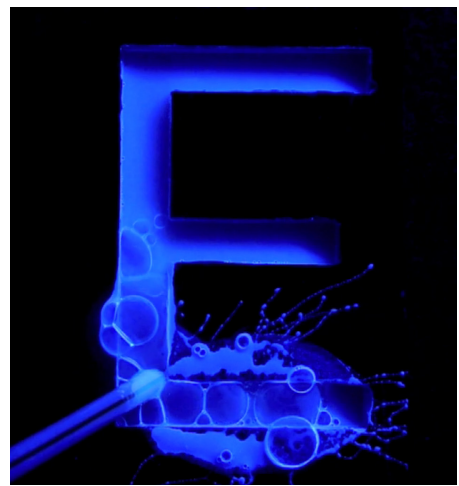
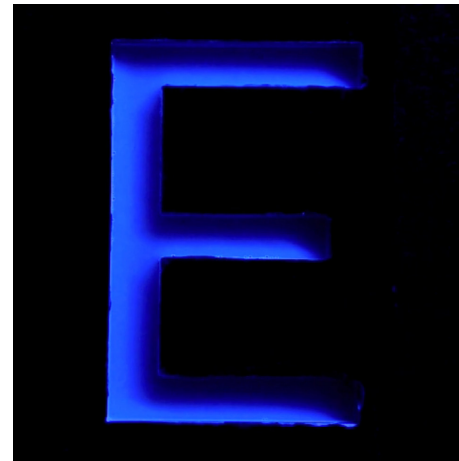
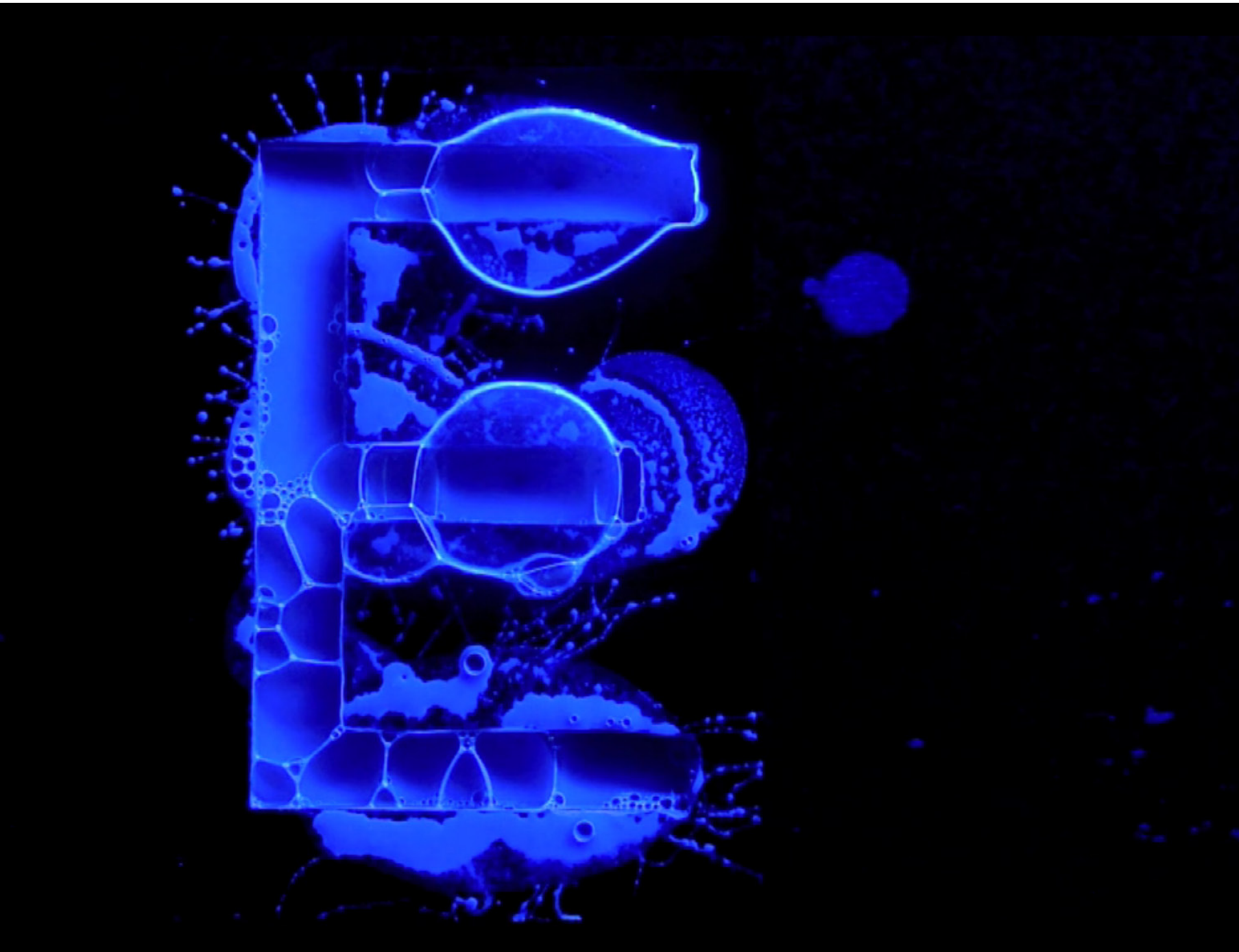
Play is a pleasure in itself. “Playful” investigations—that is to say investigations that are less concerned with the outcomes than the process—are essential in creating interesting and pleasurable artifacts. Work that was fun to create is much more likely to be pleasurable to interact with.

Experimental, playful studies are important to my process and will continue to be a source of inspiration and delight as I move forward with my research and career.

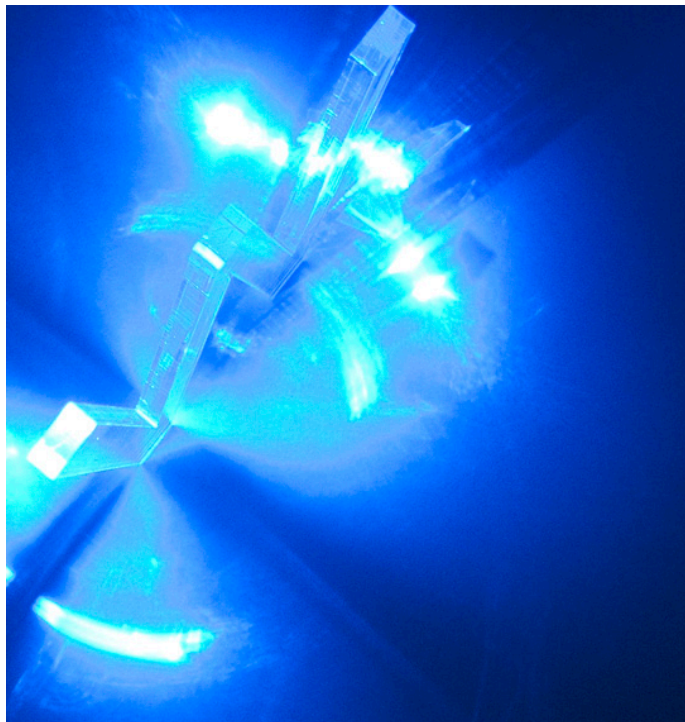
The following pages show a range of additional, partially formed ideas as well as experiments derived from my curiosity and love of materials. These explorations also relate to a class that I am teaching, *Experimental Typography*. In this course, I encourage students to thoughtfully and critically explore materials and typographic language through dedicated and rigorous experimentation. In sharing explorations, mine included, the class is able to learn from and build upon the knowledge and findings of others.



L///2012
Hand sanitizer, salt, and plexiglass.



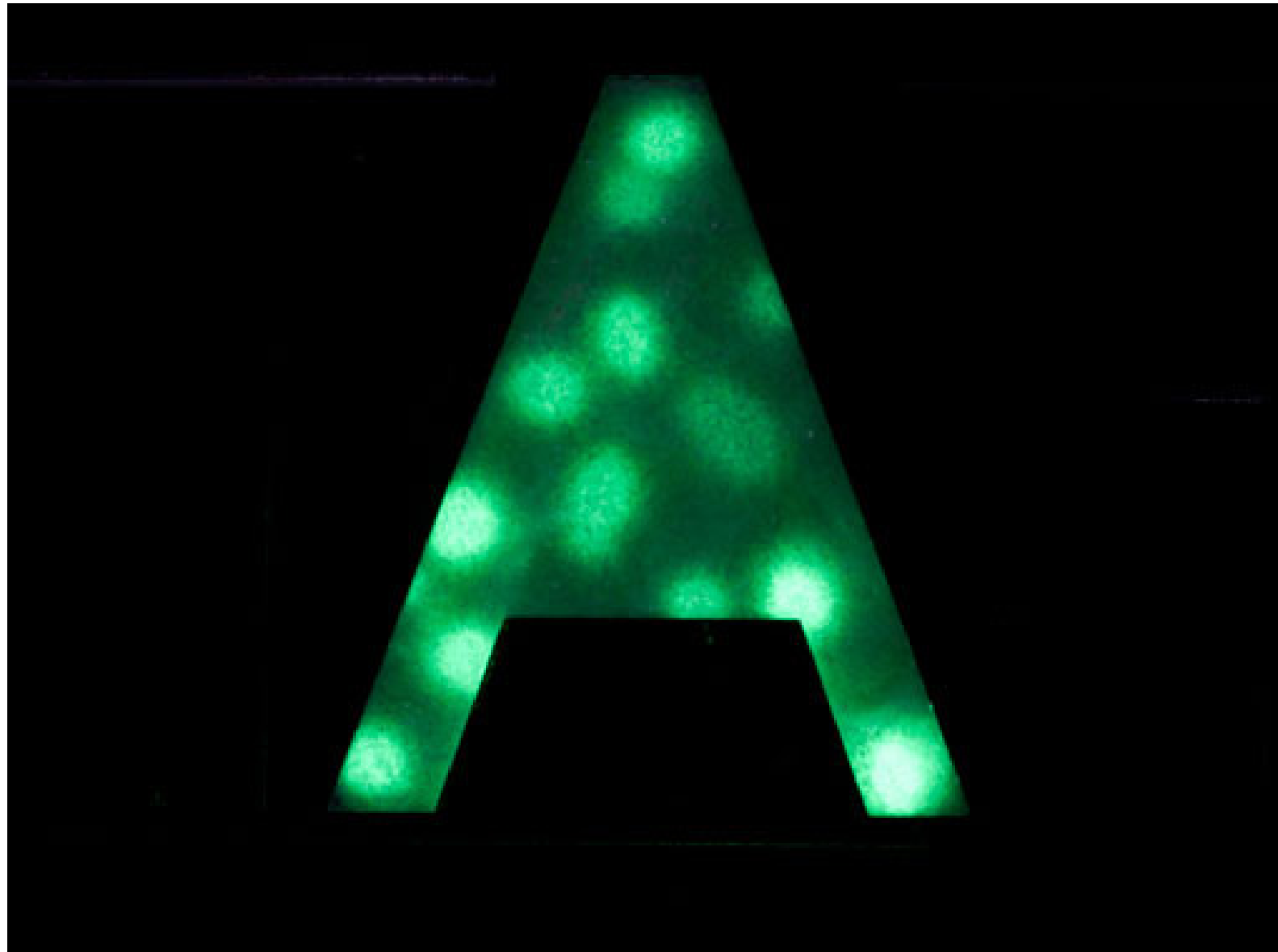
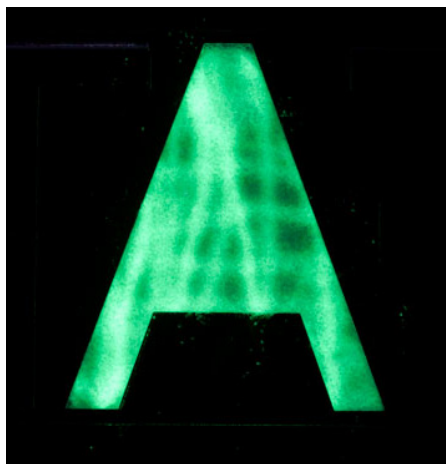
E///2012
Blacklight sensitive bubbles, silicone E mold, straw.



GLOW///2012
Acrylic letterforms, laser pointers.



B///2012
Honeybee comb.



A///2012

Acrylic form, glow-in-the-dark glitter, laser pointer.

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