

Letterpress is like baking: changes in proportion varies the outcome

Letterpress is not only about using the machine itself: setting the paper, inking the type and rolling for the print. ~~Rather,~~ there are a lot of previous and in-between printing processes that require testing out the components that ~~are set to~~ go through the machine. Thereby, small changes that shape legibility, negative spacing, and text composition are very noticeable in the printed material.

As a result, through the act of re-making, I encountered that letterpress is a very sensible technique. Despite being a mechanical printing method, it heavily relays on the decisions of the maker, making every outcomes different.

Although moveable types are tightly set on the presser, elements are still malleable within their locked-in block structure. Hence, movement became a common theme in the enquiries that sparked this technique, which lead me to consider:

How could movement be evoke in order to subvert the function and materiality associated with letterpress?

By exploring movement I want to put in question the idea of duplicate and seriality as a function we have given letterpress. At the same time, put in question the material qualities associated with letterpress. Such as: the rigidity of the tool (moveable types, leads & furniture), in order to attribute some fluid feeling to the technique.

To do so, I want to replicate “controlled anomalies”, which I defined as: details that are normally considered errors. Often moveable types are purposely moved to fix these anomalies and curate a final version that would be duplicated.

To explore the enquiry raised, I will take advantage of these instances that are inherent to the technique, to construct small moments using a single text set on the presser. The anomalies would be determined by: different combinations of spacing, and limiting to no additional type. Thereby, I expect to create a succession of subtle yet distinctive prints that as a collective show a storyline.

Overall, my proposal wants to enact anomalies in letterpress prints as opportunities to explore narratives. By moving the spacing system (leads & furniture), in order to evoke movement in a technique that is know for it's rigid block-like structure and seriality.

Letterpress Conditional Design: Baking a Ghost

Exploring how letterpress can evoke movement has become unintentionally a reflection of an ongoing conditional design project. ~~Given that conditional design principals,~~ can be traced out along the origins, framework, development and reflections of the proposal.

1. Process thumps product

The approach used to interrogate letterpress lands within the framework of a conditional design project. By concentrating on the processes of the technique too critically analyse it, the focus shifts from a specific outcome towards exploring a contradiction within the tool itself. This, became the approach and at the same time the end product of the project.

At the same time, the framework was the result of a process that reflected and collected emergent patterns of movement created by spacing changes. These normally considered print anomalies became visible and where plucked out as an opportunity to test function and material qualities assumptions in letterpress as a mechanical process that could evoke movement.

2. Logic is the guiding method

To explore movement I had to enact sequenced controlled anomalies. *Controlled* meant to plan to an extend how the type was set to move, in which direction and intensity. The framework set some conditions and limitations that allowed me to predict possible movement outcomes which were sketched. However, many elements and decisions where not yet outline: the content that would be manipulated, the type, the material printed on, the use of the ink, how will the succession of prints be presented/ensemble, and what other tools would be used.

Because of this, even tough sketches where made, these didn't design the development of the project nor the outcome so far. Since the framework still allowed external influences and inputs to change the outcome and developments.

At the same time, limitations where highly relevant for the process in order to avoid introducing type and content elements arbitrary. This condition kept the technique

practical. It allowed to make iterations by swiping elements without having to dismount the type from the presser.

3. Embracing external influences: inputs

There were a couple of inputs throughout the process that led the project towards new paths and enquiries. These became reflections and turning points for the exploration so far. In order to display the movement between the sequenced printed anomalies, stop motion was the method selected. However, how the stop motion would be assembled wasn't framed, and some control was lost during this process. As a result, using a phone scanner intensified the differences between the prints, and even distorted the dimensions, and the alignment of the type.

Initially understood as a weakness within the process, this unfolded new inquiries. It allowed me to think, how other materials involved in letterpress apart from spacing systems (leads & furniture) allowed me to intensify the defined movement. By reflecting on this, I could identify other factors that were also enhancing the differences between each print. There were particularities in different papers that were showing on the scanning process, as well as an irregularity on how often the type was inked that affected each print. Even though these factors influenced the outcomes so far, external influences have also boosted the analogue and fluidity feeling of the letterpress experiment, while widening the inquiry on how seriality is a function of letterpress.

Baking a ghost: conditional design in letterpress movement

Letterpress is not only about using the machine itself. There are a lot of previous and in-between printing processes that require testing the components on the machine. Thereby, small changes very noticeably shape legibility, spacing, and text composition on the printed material.

Through the act of re-making, I encountered that letterpress is a very sensible technique. It heavily relies on the decisions of the maker, making every outcome different. Although moveable types are tightly set on the presser, elements are still malleable in their locked structure. Hence, movement became a common theme which led me to consider: How could movement be evoked in order to subvert the function and materiality associated with letterpress?

By exploring movement I wanted to interrogate the idea of duplicate and seriality as functions given to letterpress. Consecutively, question *rigidity* as a material quality associated with letterpress (moveable types & leads), to attribute some fluid feeling to the technique.

To do so, I replicated “controlled anomalies” defined as: spacing and direction details normally considered errors before the final version. I took advantage of these instances inherent to the technique to construct small moments. The anomalies were determined by combinations of spacing, and limited to a single text set on the presser. Thereby, I expected to create a succession of subtle yet distinctive prints that as a collective show a storyline.

Overall, my proposal wants to enact anomalies in letterpress prints as opportunities to explore narratives. By moving leads to evoke movement in a technique that is known for its rigid block structure and seriality.

To enact sequence controlled anomalies meant to extend plan how the type was set to move. The framework set conditions that allowed me to sketch predictions of possible outcomes. However, many elements were not outlined: the material printed, the ink, how the succession of prints would be ensemble. Hence, these sketches didn't design the development of the project nor the first results.

The initial framework allowed external influences, inputs¹, to change the outcomes. Simultaneously, limitations were highly relevant to avoid introducing type elements arbitrarily. This condition kept the technique practical, it allowed quick iterations by swiping elements without having to dismount the type set.

Stop motion was selected to display movement between the anomalies. However, how the stop motion would be assembled wasn't framed, and control² was lost during this process.

¹ Within the framework of the Conditional Design Manifesto, written by Maurer, et al, (2013) an input is defined as conditions that come from the outside and influence the process.

² In a Conditional Design project, control is reflected as the authoritative influence over a process. However, control is limited and is tied to the limitations and conditions set for the development of the project.

Using a phone scanner intensified the differences between prints: distorted dimensions, unaligned the type, enhanced paper particularities and how often the type was inked. These inputs boosted fluidity while widen the inquiry on how seriality is a function of letterpress.

Although the results responded to the project's objectives, these anomalies where not caused only by letterpress. The inputs unfolded new enquiries and turning points: How could I subvert the technique without using other tools?

By outlining the leads as the element that evoked movement, other core aspects of letterpress (ink, rollers, paper & where it was placed) where disregarded. To deepen the exploration further, the project had to explore how to visualise movement in letterpress as a still image. By defining all of the settings involved in letterpress, I intended to avoid uncontrolled variables causing irregularities rather than controles anomalies causing movement.

The choice of paper and ink use where two key elements that supported the movement of leads. There was value in the use of transparent substratum, as it allowed anomalies to build into each other, revealing a transition on a still frame. Additionally, the combination of pressing with and without ink permitted traces of anomalies to sit next to the final print.

As a result, exploring combinations of paper, ink and leads enable to subvert letterpress as it: contradicts the process by presenting anomalies on a same piece to evoking movement, and create a collection of prints that depend on each other to be read; subverting the idea of duplicating individual prints.

Refereces:

Luna Maurer, Edo Paulus, Jonathan Puckey and Roel Wouters, 'Conditional Design Manifesto', *Conditional Design Workbook*, 2013 [[pdf](#)]