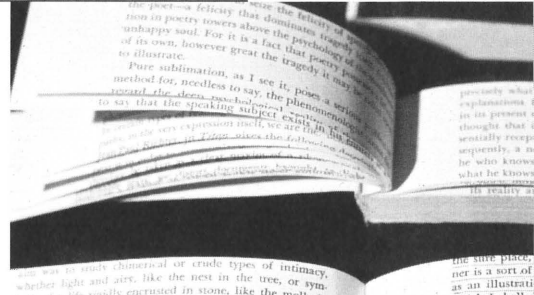




# Word Space / Book Space **Experiments in**



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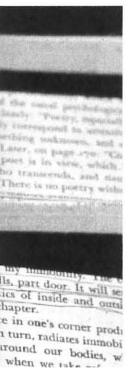


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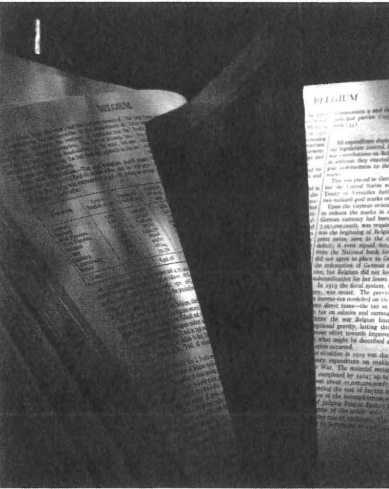
# Poetic Space: Transformation

This paper began to develop during my graduate years working toward the completion of my MFA thesis *Poetics: Toward an Understanding of Words and Space*. I combine my interests in words (meaning) and developed a series of two- and three- dimensional which explored the relationship between words and reality and the manner in which their environment meaning. This paper discusses these ideas as revealed elements. Further, it discusses the potential use of such the education of graphic designers.



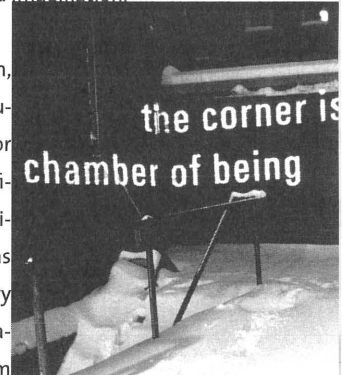
The space we love is unwilling to remain permanently enclosed. It deploys and appears to move elsewhere without difficulty; into other times and on different planes of dream and memory.

GASTON BACHELARD<sup>1</sup>

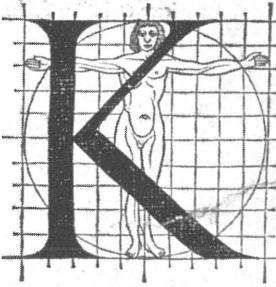


The space I have loved since the beginning of my conscious memory – the space that refuses to remain enclosed, is book space, or perhaps more specifically word space: a space that contains the possibilities, depth and richness of stories, poetry and history: “Inside books there is perfect space and it is that space which allows the reader to escape from the problems of gravity.”<sup>2</sup> It was in that land, surrounded by words, letters, paper and binding, that I spent much of my childhood (and on into adulthood for that matter). I had an early obsession with books and words, with the book as object, and with the actual appearance of words on the page. Even as a child I had a sense of there being something extraordinary about those abstract symbols which could, when compiled in a particular order, create meaning, evoke emotion, trigger the mind’s memory and imagination.

Words and letters carry the portent of possibility, expression, openness of language and articulation of thought. And when situated in unusual places, or when used in sculpture or as texture or material, words and letters carry with them an allure that is difficult to articulate but has charged the work of artists and artisans since the Roman empire. From the monumental letterforms of the Trajan column to the illuminations of the ninth century *Book of Kells*; from the divine proportions of Renaissance alphabets to the frills and furbelows of Victorian typography; from dada, cubism and fluxus, to more recent works by such artists as Ian Hamilton Finlay, Barbara Kruger and Jenny Holzer (to name just a few), words and letters have been used to suggest authority, faith, progress and failure, ambiguity, poetry, formal geometry and inherent beauty, irony and humor.



A roundabout path brought me from the role of reader, critic, editor and even consumer of words, to now maker, designer, composer and arranger of visual language. I am a graphic designer and a design professor whose primary interest is in words and letters, as functional narrative tools, but also as pure material. Anyone who works in the world of letterforms and typography must consider how words exist in space. Even in customary two-dimensional arrangements, letters, in order to become legible, require space: letter space, word space, leading between lines. Margins and line breaks are necessary spaces for creating order, breathing room and visual comfort. The surface of a single page is spatial in that it is composed. It almost goes without saying:



# words exist in space.

What is interesting to consider, however, is *how* particular spaces effect words. Most of us think of letters, words, texts as existing primarily in a two-dimensional realm, a realm to which we as readers bring our own inner space: personal context and interpretation. What began to interest me, however, was the consideration of what external space, or more simply “environment,” whether existing or manufactured, does to the meaning and interpretation of words. Words unleashed from their traditional habit-bound existence in linear two-dimensionality, can contain more than just the semantic coding of their mutually agreed-upon and contextualized definitions.

Words and letters can be called upon to reflect and respond to their environments, while simultaneously an environment can be altered by the introduction of words and letters.



Words and letters possess an inherent aura: at once clear and ambiguous; persuasive and poetic. They contain the ability to instruct clearly or suggest poetically. They contain potential and flexibility, and because of their use throughout history as purveyors of “truth,” they contain power and authority in a way that few images do. Their aura can be made especially evident when words are produced materially in three dimensions, built out of unusual materials or placed in unusual locations. By transferring text from the two-dimensional surface to multi-dimensional space, a new context can be created allowing readers or viewers to read, see and experience **word : environment : material : meaning** simultaneously. The viewer’s attention is brought to a more heightened awareness and is drawn toward a holistic experience that goes from merely looking,

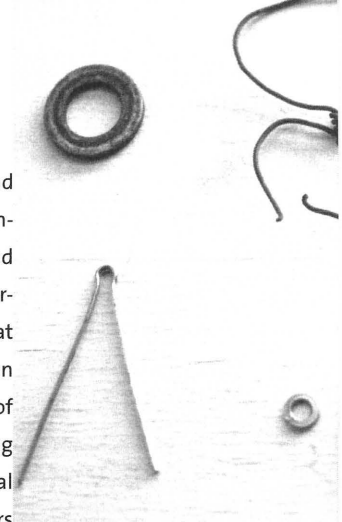
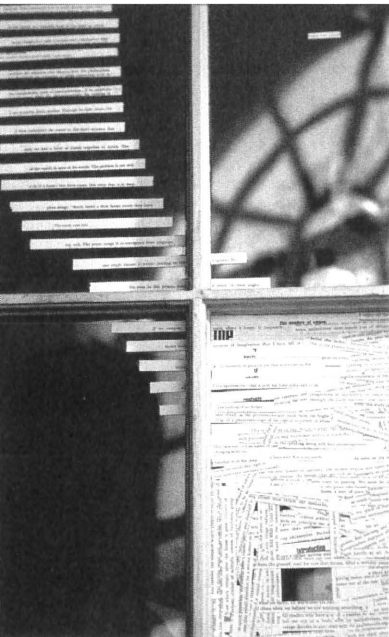
to seeing,

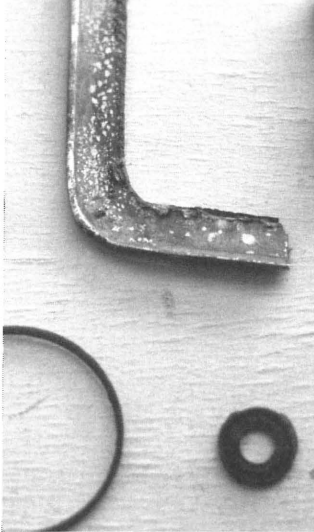
feeling

and sensing

all at once.

An essential aspect of this experience is the involvement of the viewer’s self or body in the process. Take for example Barbara Kruger’s extraordinary 1997 word-earthwork built into the landscape of the North Carolina Museum of Art in Raleigh. Massive eighty-foot tall letters spell out “Picture This” on the grounds of an open-air amphitheater and park, and can only be viewed in its entirety from the air. A large audience can be seated in the ‘c’ to view films. Visitors can park their cars in the ‘t’, or clamber on the boulders that fill the final ‘s.’<sup>3</sup> While the immense scale contributes to the sensation achieved by this extraordinary piece, so do the different materials which make up each letter. But it is the combined impact of scale, material and message, replete with irony and cultural associations, that conjoin to become the crux of the work. The words, with all their complex semantic and physical properties or “signs,” are further enriched by their ability to literally and conceptually contain hundreds of people.





In the past several years, my investigations into the manner in which words can occupy and affect various spaces, and vice versa, have resulted in experiments of my own doing as well as projects I have assigned to students in my design classes. In the following pages I will describe several of these experiments, considering aspects of book space, imaginative space and three-dimensional space. In each case I will address how the particular characteristics and parameters of the experiment influence the way in which the final piece communicates.

The experiments I have conducted and the projects I have assigned serve to explore various aspects of our conceptual, emotional and imaginative response to words and letters and to the manner in which they exist. These projects create the opportunity to reconsider the power of the written and viewed message, and they ask us to enter a deeper level of poetic imagination that can occur when removing text from its habitual role as invisible purveyor of unencumbered meaning. By considering the role of letters and words materially, spatially and conceptually, a heightened awareness of making and affecting meaning becomes possible. In the words of the designer Bethany Johns:

“questioning the authority of a visual/verbal situation with seemingly intractable concrete traits and redirecting its interpretation is the root of it all. Transforming the banal into the poetic is the basis of creating a sign or symbol, which lets a designer, through brevity and veracity,

leash the instinctive meaning(s),

(re)direct the associations,

and allow the viewer an emotional response.”<sup>4</sup>

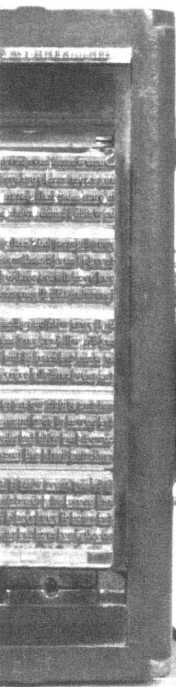
Unassisted I have set the type and turned the press and accomplished the binding. Such as it is, the book is 'my very own.'

L. FRANK BAUM<sup>5</sup>


### EXAMPLE 1: Letterpress Printing

One of the first places I became aware of words off the page was, not surprisingly perhaps, while learning to print with metal type. In fact, the letterpress shop can be considered one of the first places in the western world where words and three-dimensional space collided. Five hundred or so years ago with the invention of movable type, typesetters and printers were experiencing a kinesthetic relationship to the forming of words and the manufacturing of messages. A tactile and spatial aspect to what we now refer to as hot metal printing connects the typesetter /printer to the text in a way no digital form of typesetting and printing can do. This is due not only to the locating, choosing, aligning and locking up of the type itself, but also to the fact that in letterpress printing, everything which is to appear empty, anything which we would call 'negative' or 'white space,' is actually arrived at through the careful placement of palpable spacing material: quads, ems, ens, wood and metal furniture, reglet, lead slugs, coppers and brasses. There is more material devoted to the designation of space in composing metal type than there is type itself. Between the 1500s and the 1970s, this fact would hardly have seemed worth noting. But now, in a time when typographers and type designers are learning their trade on computers, when empty space is an intangible given of digital media, the physical elucidation of space, combined with the tactile experience of handling the sorts, can be a useful and even intellectual exercise in connecting meaning to form and process. Here is an exquisite thought:

in letterpress printing, to create the open space of repose necessary to a readable composition, you must first fill it with matter.



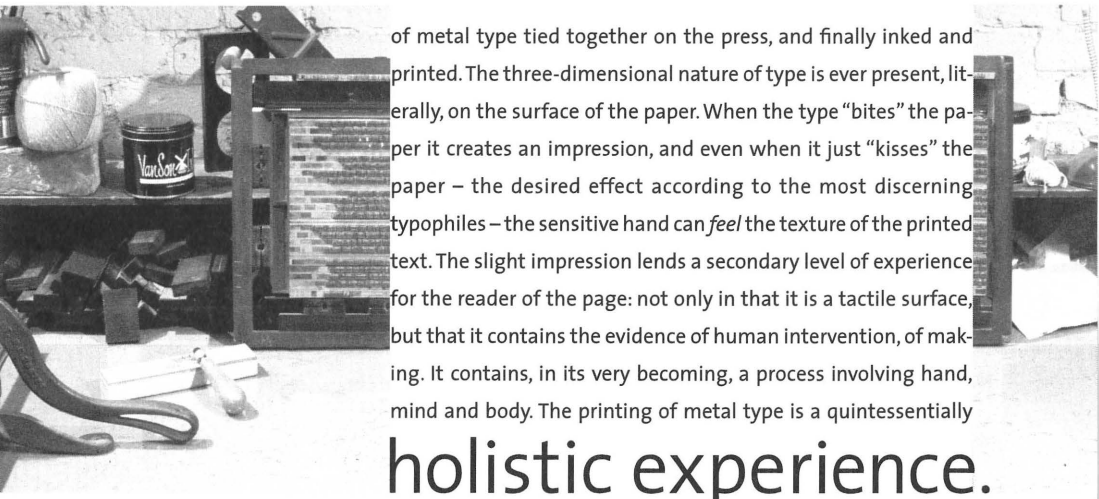
The physical relationship of words to space is fully lived in setting metal type. Words begin as separate letters and are brought together carefully to become text. Their stability is tenuous until they are locked up in the chase or onto the bed of the press. They can tip over, they can get crushed (lead is soft), they make your hands dirty – even toxic! They try your patience and your dexterity. Metal type can be small and seemingly delicate, but it has a satisfying heft when held in your hand. And a single mistake, usually noticed only after printing a proof, requires the dismantling of the whole lock-up.



The process of setting the type, inking and printing, requires a partnership between mind and body. The fingers learn the feel of the type, searching out the 'nick' to be sure the words are in their correct orientation in the composing stick. Turning the crank of an old vandercook proof press, the standard in most schools' letterpress shops (for those fortunate enough to still have such a shop), forces the printer to be exquisitely aware of her position in relation to the press, and of her timing as she grabs the paper off the tympan and slips another piece of paper under the grabbers, and prepares to print again. Every minute detail of making up the type must be attended to for the process to work correctly. The intricacies of letter spacing, the process of justification or centering, each being difficult in its own way, and the tightening of the quoins as the type is locked into the chase, becomes a part of the text itself. These multiple processes become an experiential part of the whole, giving the moment and the making poetic resonance.

If the printer also happens to be printing a text or textural composition of her own creation, or a text which is meaningful to her in some way, then her involvement in the entire experience will be that much fuller, that much more complete. A writer who prints her own words experiences a series of transpositions, moving from imaginative space to physical space: words are first thought, then transposed into writing, then transposed again into a block






of metal type tied together on the press, and finally inked and printed. The three-dimensional nature of type is ever present, literally, on the surface of the paper. When the type “bites” the paper it creates an impression, and even when it just “kisses” the paper – the desired effect according to the most discerning typophiles – the sensitive hand can *feel* the texture of the printed text. The slight impression lends a secondary level of experience for the reader of the page: not only in that it is a tactile surface, but that it contains the evidence of human intervention, of making. It contains, in its very becoming, a process involving hand, mind and body. The printing of metal type is a quintessentially

# holistic experience.

Making, the creative combination of hand and brain, can be described as a three-dimensional poetic act. Successful making, like a successful poem, is the concentration of an idea realizing its purest form. Whether cooking, or designing, painting or setting type, in the act of making the maker’s body is thrown into the process, and becomes part of the idea. The string of decisions that get made, and the tangential thinking, even daydreaming, which can occur during the physical involvement of the body, become both part of the work itself and can be substantially informed by the process. This sort of thinking differs from the thinking which occurs when staring at a computer screen or doodling on paper. It has a visceral reality and allows the body to use its intuitive and sensory powers. If you trust in the body, the brain will follow along and make good of the work as it is being made and even after it is made. Our hands know so much; they can touch and negotiate material and things and space in a way that is impossible to articulate. Think of the sensitivity involved in modeling clay or cutting wood or making paper or even kneading bread.

Your hands,  
in complete partnership  
with your mind,  
feels the right thing to do.



I do not think of art as consolation. I think of it as creation. I think of it as energetic space that begets energetic space. Works of art do not reproduce themselves, they re-create themselves and have at the same time sufficient permanent power to create rooms for us, the dispossessed. In other words, art makes it possible to live in energetic space.

JEANETTE WINTERSON<sup>6</sup>

**EXAMPLE 2: Tristram Shandy**

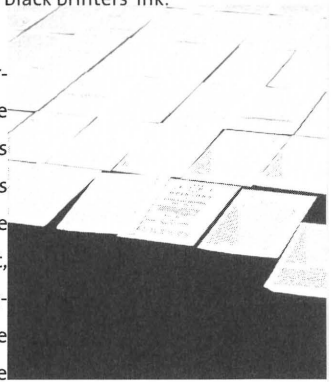
I have spent much of my life in the energetic space of books, in the huge, extraordinary, open and transporting space of books. But I have always been struck by the incongruity between the rigid, relatively inflexible structure of the book, and the infinite distances and spaces the pages can contain. Like most avid readers and collectors of books, I feel comfort in the presence of the tidy, familiar packages of paper and board, ink and glue, book smell and paper feel. The standard book is a consistent form: one page follows another, the pages are (usually) numbered, indexed, ordered. They are meant to be read sequentially and are arranged with the intention of delivering the text with the utmost clarity. In the traditional form, a book's essence and purpose emanate from its ordered words, from the culturally agreed upon meaning derived from the sequential reading of the grammar and syntax of first letters, then words, then phrases, sentences, paragraphs and so on. The book space is well defined, clearly, but also perhaps *confined*. Hundreds of years of design tradition is not to be scoffed at, and yet I found myself questioning my own complacency and acceptance of this form and wondered at the possibility of challenging the codex structure as a means of investigating the word/space relationship.

While considering this incongruity, I came across my cherished 1940 facsimile edition of *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* and realized that this was the perfect book with which to experiment.



When *Tristram Shandy* was published in 1759, its reception ran the gamut from guarded amusement to astonishment to complete ridicule. A book whose very existence questioned the historical position of the 'novel' or the 'text,' *Tristram Shandy* was truly radical. It appeared just as the novel itself was becoming a legitimate form of writing and in doing so managed to throw a wrench into the burgeoning literary genre. In this novel Laurence Sterne turned chronological story-telling on its head, left off chapters mid-paragraph only to pick them up again hundreds of pages later, left blank pages where he felt like, filled pages with Greek and Latin, tongue-in-cheek footnotes, squiggles and dashes, and even had one page covered entirely with black printers' ink.

The narrative itself performs a parody on the rigidity of then current storytelling practices. The title character tells much of the tale of his own life from within his mother's womb. It takes ages for him to be born (about 300 pages) and then what begins as autobiography races down the path of sheer tangentiality. Some have called this novel the greatest of all shaggy-dog tales. In fact, *Tristram Shandy* was a thinly veiled treatise attacking the dogmatic, overly rational and heavy-handed philosophies of what we now refer to as The Enlightenment. Sterne was protesting the tendency of the time to seek rational and scientific objectivity in a world where Sterne knew full well none (or very little) existed.<sup>7</sup>

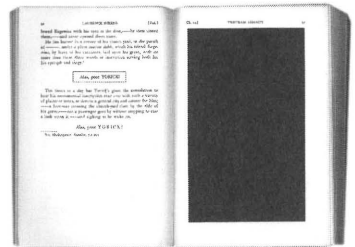
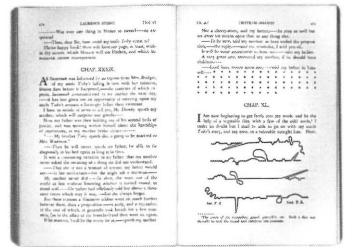


"By showing the reader that truth is found only in the natural vitality of the irrational, Sterne exposes the linearity of the highly edited providential engine as false and unrealizable. And ultimately, Sterne concludes, the very method of rationalization to support an untenable regime of reason is encouraging man's inability to cope successfully with the chaos of nature. In an

optimistic world, the institutionalization of knowledge provides a way to pin down a final authority, a final definition. In Sterne's pessimistic world, the universe cannot be regulated or controlled, there is no final authority."<sup>8</sup>

[*Tristram Shandy*] questions the authority of logic, reason, time and order, and I decided to use it to question the authority of the book form.

I began by taking my copy of *Tristram Shandy* and slicing off the spine. Suddenly a comprehensible, familiar and rather daunting looking book had become a stack of 647 slightly yellowed pages which, if dropped by mistake, would have rearranged themselves out of recognition. This one simple act caused what had been a book to become something other. One slice rendered bookness null and void. That small gesture was act one of my 'performance.' Act two lasted far longer and entailed the process of laying the 'book' out page by page onto the floor in consecutive order (with all the odd numbered pages facing up and the even pages facing down). I read each page as I placed it in position, and then taped the whole thing together into what looked at this stage to be a giant rug or alternative floor covering. I placed the pages in 12 horizontal rows with 27 pages in each row creating a squarish rectangle. The process took up 5 rolls of scotch tape (152 yards; 456 feet; 5,472 inches), and approximately 48 hours. I then reinforced the four edges of this now 10' x 9' sheet with book binder's linen tape and punched holes around the edge through which I hammered silver-colored grommets. Meanwhile, I built a large free-standing rack on wheels to which I finally laced up my 'book' like a sail, or a vertical trampoline, using letterpress typesetter's tying-up string. The result was a remarkable sensation. A book which was originally 4.5" x 7" and 647 pages thick had become tall, lean and far less intimidating even as it stood almost twelve feet high. The piece is now both an object to be viewed and a text to be read.



It is a space divider, a mobile piece of furniture and a personal performance piece. The event which was the making was as much a part of this project as was the finished object.



# A book is a mighty object;

one we have been taught to believe in.

It is a structure whose very essence contains something akin to truth. But looking at this particular book in this particular format, the weight and the power seem diminished. It is friendlier, more open and flexible. It is huge, and yet feels smaller than in its original format. The words hang in space ready and willing to be approached from any position. Chronology and continuity remain to some extent – a qualification, some would suggest, required for “bookness” – but its form now allows the reader to become the author of the book’s time- and space-based reading experience. It is no longer necessary to enter the book at page one. It is freed and in motion if the reader wishes it to be so.

Whatever the affectivity that colors a given space, whether sad or ponderous, once it is poetically expressed, the sadness is diminished, the ponderousness lightened. Poetic space, because it expresses, assumes values of expansion. When a poet tells me “he knows a type of sadness that smells of pineapple,” I myself feel less sad, I feel gently sad. In this activity of poetic spatiality that goes from deep intimacy to infinite extent, united in an identical expansion, one feels grandeur rising up.

GASTON BACHELARD<sup>9</sup>

### EXAMPLE 3: Garden Space

When Bachelard speaks of “poetic space,” he often refers to imagined or psychological or language-based space. I was interested in pursuing some of my investigations about words in *actual* space while continuing to challenge the traditional format of text and book space. In this project, I was determined to achieve several things: to affect a space using words and vice versa, to spend time outdoors and to create a text space which could literally contain me. I found a small unoccupied walled-in garden, and after obtaining permission to work there, began to consider what to do with it. Just at that time I was reading Jan Tschichold’s *The Form of the Book* and came across these words:

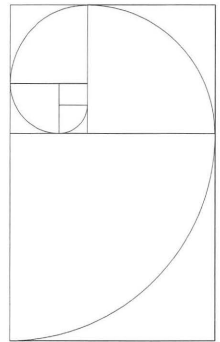
“In a pathological pursuit of things different, the reasonable proportions of paper size, like so many other qualities, have been banished by some to the disadvantage of the solitary and defenseless reader. There was a time when deviations from the truly beautiful page proportions 2:3, 1:√3, and the Golden Section were rare.”<sup>10</sup>

With this statement Tschichold reveals a real fear of disorder and subjective form making. Like the rationalists Lawrence Sterne was poking fun at, Tschichold suggests that without the guide posts of mathematical and scientific law, we would all – “defenseless reader” included – be lost in a sea of muddled communications.

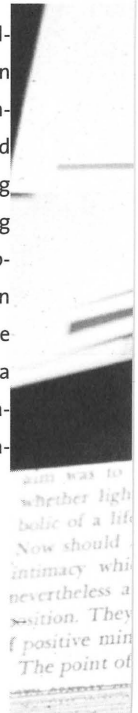
Like a siren’s call for deviation, Tschichold’s words were a challenge. They prompted me not so much to attempt to refute the tenets of classical (and modernist) traditions to which he clung, but rather to begin a new exploration of the ways in which words live in spaces. Thus I began my

## “pursuit of things different.”

The golden section, mathematically defined as the ratio 1:1.618, is a formula many book designers use when determining size and proportion of the page. Derived from a mathematical equation that mimics nature’s own innate rhythms and structures, these proportions have been used by architects and designers for centuries.



I decided to caption my entire project by removing this well-known form of the golden section from its usual location – in books and diagrams – and taking it out into my garden. I delineated the rectangles and squares with bamboo plant stakes and string. It was very big: 30 x 50 feet. I then described the resulting ‘golden spiral,’ by planting tulip bulbs six inches apart all along the curve, while keeping in mind Nabokov’s words from his autobiography *Speak Memory*: “The spiral is the spiritualized circle. In the spiral form, the circle, uncoiled, unwound, has ceased to be vicious, it has been set free.” In my garden the spiral became a symbol of my desire to chip away at some of the imposed limitations surrounding words and texts – it was a visual manifestation of openness, infinite growth and loosening of restraint.





This project unfolded over time and involved various component parts and ideas. Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*, which I had been reading almost compulsively since the beginning of these explorations, had informed much of my thinking. But even as I sought to challenge and question the book form and the authority of the book, I found I was clinging to this book like a fetishized talisman, a key to understanding that I was afraid to put down. In a very deliberate and forceful act of liberation, one autumn day I took my beloved, dog-eared copy of *The Poetics of Space* and, to the horror of my friends and colleagues, placed it ceremoniously onto the bed of our antique paper guillotine, and sliced it into ten or fifteen horizontal chunks. (It is very interesting to note how uncomfortable it makes people to see a book being chopped into pieces – even an inexpensive and readily available paperback.) The small, still-bound pieces of the book became symbolic remnants of a tradition I was getting ready to challenge. As I planted the tulip bulbs in the spiral, I ceremoniously placed with each bulb strips of the book I had so recently been devoted to, and by so doing was able to relegate what I had learned from it to the useful position of remembered information, while burying the physicality that the 'book' object itself represented.

... the poet – a felicity that dominates the tragedy of his unhappy soul. For it is a fact that poetry possesses its own, however great the tragedy it may be, to illustrate. Pure sublimation, as I see it, poses a serious method for, needless to say, the phenomenological and the deep psychological. In what way does the speaking subject exist in his language? In his expression itself, we are the following:

... what opens the plane of the social production of experience. But the poet states clearly: "Poetry, especially in its present endeavors, (can) only correspond to something thought that is enamored of something unknown, and is consequently a new definition of a poet is in view, which he who knows, that is to say, who transcends, and what he knows." Lastly, (p. 10): "There is no poetry without its reality and in its virtue."

... mechanical or crude types of intimacy, like the nest in the tree, or symbolized in stone, like the mollusk. My attention to impressions of the short lived or imaginary, have a human root, and do not need themselves to a direct psychology, even when for so much idle musing. One of my reflections is the following:

... the sure place, the place next to my immobility. The corner is a sort of half-box, part walls, part door. It will serve as an illustration for the dialectics of inside and outside which I shall discuss in a later chapter.

Consciousness of being at peace in one's corner produces a sense of immobility, and this, in turn, radiates immobility. An imaginary room rises up around our bodies, we think that the well hidden when we take refuge in the corner. Already, the shadowy walls, a piece of furniture, a barrier hangings are a roof. But all of



My garden, like much of the east coast that winter, was victim to an extraordinary quantity of snow. Beneath many inches of snow my golden rectangle/spiral lay dormant but significantly present. Like an invitation, or a blank sheet of paper, each new layer of snow compelled a new action. I began to place particular words on the snow and allowed weather to take its course. I planned on spray painting words directly onto the snow, but first decided to make 'sketches' by printing the words onto large sheets of paper and placing them on the ground so I could consider their placement and meaning. Having just done this, a storm arrived and covered the "posters" completely with snow before I had a chance to remove them. I photographed them as the snow began piling up and anxiously awaited the melting of the snow to photograph that process as well. Questioning the relationship of the space of the book to the space of the garden, and the way in which both can embrace a reader I wrote the following texts:

**READ THE BOOK / FEEL THE PAGE / SEE THE TEXT / KNOW THE WORDS / HEAR THE VOICE / CLOSE THE EYES / TOUCH THE SPINE / SENSE THE SQUARE / ENTER THE SPACE / WATCH THE LINES /**

**ENTER THE BOOK / SENSE THE PAGE / TOUCH THE TEXT / CLOSE THE WORDS / READ THE VOICE / WATCH THE EYES / HEAR THE SPINE / FEEL THE SQUARE / SEE THE SPACE / KNOW THE LINES**

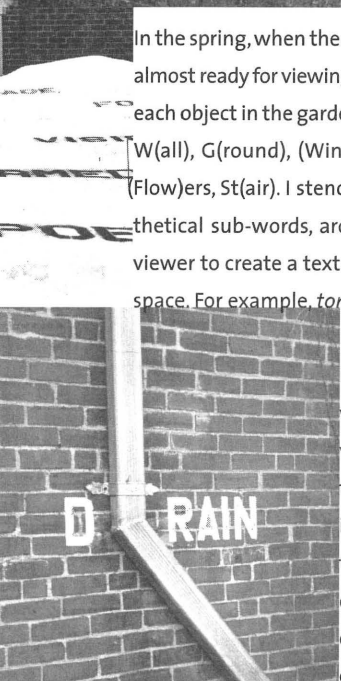
A large black arrow painted on the snow directed the viewer from one set of words to the next. Peeking up above the snow were a few inches of the bamboo stakes that marked the golden section, reminding the viewer of its presence beneath. It snowed yards after that, blocking all doors and gates to the garden so I had to wait for a thaw. After a few warmish weeks, the entrances were freed up and a fresh new layer of snow fell, covering the gray ice that old snow – even lots of it – tends to become. Like a fresh page waiting for a new treatment, the ground was perfect. I continued the project by painting the following text on the snow:



The letters were twelve inches high and were painted in black and red on the snow. The immediate effect was that the fine top layer of snow blew away slowly during the first day, leaving a clear but residual layer of paint. I photographed all through the first day and the next. Day one was windy, curling the paint up and dispersing bits of it over the ground. The night was warm, causing the words to melt away a bit, the paint to sink and settle, to move downward toward the earth. Day two was cold and gray. And then, of course, as it had done so often before, it snowed. Another page closing over the words, awaiting the next layer. I continued this procedure until spring when, as the final thaw set in for good, layers of treatments began to appear, like a strange archaeological palimpsest. Words in motion – slow entropic motion – affected the space, the spiral, the prospect of the blossoms in the future. Bits of the “posters” had flown about the garden like random signifiers attaching meaning wherever they landed.



In the spring, when the tulips were coming up and the garden was almost ready for viewing, it occurred to me that within the name of each object in the garden there existed a secondary word: Tu(lips), W(all), G(round), (Wind)ow, L(edge), S(tone), D(rain) G(utters), (Flow)ers, St(air). I stenciled these words, along with their parenthetical sub-words, around the walls of the garden allowing a viewer to create a text or poem as he or she moved through the space. For example, *tone round all air utters rain flow wind.*



Finally, I placed plant markers at the base of each tulip inscribed with Nabokov's words about the spiral (as quoted above). As the viewer walked the length of the spiral, moving physically through the space and bending over to read the words (an action which, incidentally, caused the reader to come into closer contact with the ground and observe the scene more intently), the text would connect her actions to the form of the place, the material, the environment and the overall experience. The various components of this garden, both visible and remembered, combined to create a poetic space that sensitized the awareness of any visitor.

How often we need to be assured of what we know in the old ways of knowing – how seldom we can afford to venture beyond the pale into that chromatic fantasy where, as Rilke said (in 1908!), ‘begins the revision of categories, where something past comes again, as though out of the future; something formerly accomplished as something to be completed.’

ROLAND BARTHES<sup>12</sup>

EXAMPLE 4: Italo Calvino

Re-reading a good book, something I often do, both reassures the existence of the past and welcomes the newness of the future.

For rereading revises understanding. Time passes between readings, and the reader changes as contexts change. Italo Calvino’s *If on a winter’s night a traveler*, is a novel that addresses such aspects of reading, and considers other related issues as writing, authorship and narrative authority. Written in 1979 and heavily influenced by the works of Barthes, Foucault and Borges, *If on a winter’s night* was the inspiration and starting point for my next experiment. Calvino’s novel is a hypertext puzzle whose make-up contains the beginning of ten disparate novels, linked through the machinations of two “readers” who are seeking (among other things) the conclusions of the stories. One of the most striking moments in the book occurs in the last chapter when a number of readers sitting in a library begin a discussion about their reading habits. Each has a different opinion, but one reader states:

“Every new book I read comes to be a part of that overall and unitary book that is the sum of my readings. This does not come about without some effort. To compose that general book, each individual book must be transformed, enter into a relationship with the books I have read previously, become their corollary or development or confutation or gloss or reference text. For years I have been coming to this library, and I explore it volume by volume, shelf by shelf, but I could demonstrate to you that I have done nothing but continue the reading of a single book.”<sup>13</sup>

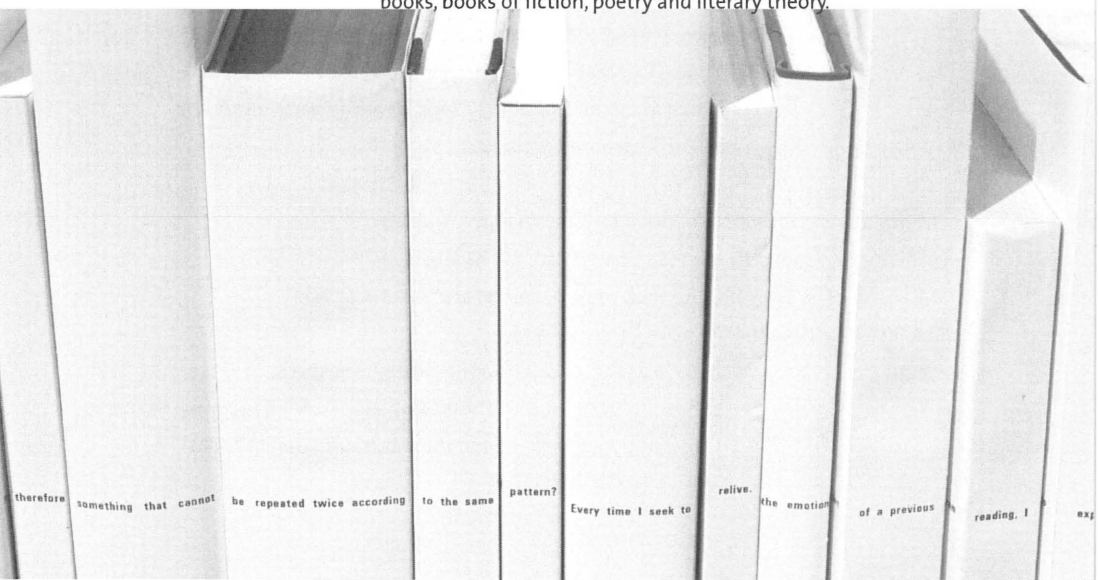
These words struck a chord and from this point I turned to the books I had on my own shelves – books I lug around with me whenever I move whether I plan on reading them or not. The privileged books come with me always, the less privileged remain in storage, in relatives’ attics and basements. My traveling library is a record of my own journeys. Each book conjures up memories of when and where it was acquired, whether it was for pleasure or work, and where I was when I read it. Some books that come with me have never been read and carry an air of anticipation with them, while some are old friends which have been read again and again. When observing my book shelves, I notice that, like the chapter titles of *If on a winter’s night* (which when read consecutively form the start of yet another story), the titles on the books’ spines can be read across the shelf and occasionally make interesting chance phrases. For example, from where I sit right now I can read the following titles all run together: *metaphors overlay information architects about looking inside the visible lost woods blue as the lake*.

With this in mind I began to develop my next project. I wanted specifically to respond to the idea that the act of reading is in itself an act of authorship, and that context and environment affect meaning. I wanted the piece to be interactive

and address book space,  
the dual open and closed nature of the book,  
and the space surrounding books.

In the end I made a sculpture entitled “Her Library” using all the books I had with me at the time. I covered each book in my collection with a glossy white book jacket. The only text I applied to these jackets was a long quote from *If on a winter's night* which ran across the spines, all in one typeface and size, with several words to a spine depending on the book's thickness. When all the books were lined up on the nine-foot-long Plexiglas shelf I built, with spines facing out, viewers could read the Calvino text as they walked along the shelf. However, if the viewer were to pull a book off the shelf, she would see that Calvino's words on the spine were imbedded in a sentence which I wrote that wraps around each jacket from back to front. And if the sentences were all read consecutively, they would come together to form an essay I wrote about my relationship to books and reading.

A row of books is a peaceful and potent sight and the effect was quite compelling. Against the white wall of the gallery where they were exhibited, the shelf of books was a beautiful object in itself: starkly elegant white jackets, with small black text running horizontally across the spines all at the same height. A sliver of color from the case bindings peeked out from above the jackets here and there, and of course the books varied in height. There were about 150 books on the shelf, from classical texts to reference books, books of fiction, poetry and literary theory.



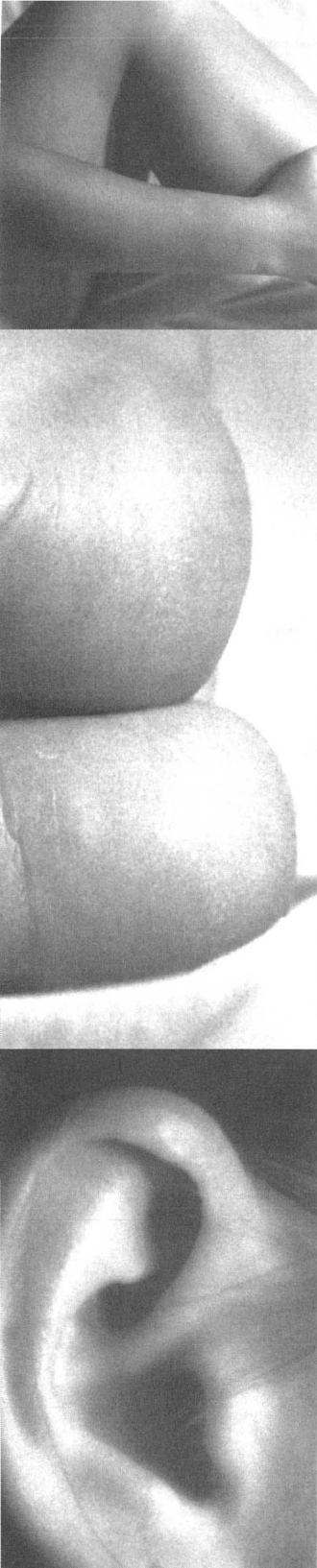
The process of making this piece was complicated, requiring me to write *around* another author's words. While maintaining the meaning he intended, I created my own new meaning. Below is a short sampling. The italic words are mine and moved around the spine from back to front, embracing, as it were, Calvino's text, which are in bold small caps:

*I wonder why it is that sometimes I FEEL THE NEED TO RE-READ BOOKS, rather than start reading new ones. Does it have something to do with the fact that I need to go back to the familiar? The known? If I decide to read something THAT I HAVE ALREADY READ, then am I closing down to new experiences? Sometimes I even wonder if it wouldn't be a good idea not to read, because it could be said that reading fills the mind with nonsense. Which might be why I so often stick to the old familiars. They are like family, BUT AT EVERY REREADING I SEEM TO BE getting further from my memory of what the book was like originally. When I reread this one a few years ago, I remember thinking it was like READING A NEW BOOK FOR THE FIRST TIME. I had romanticized it completely beyond recognition in my memory. Memory's selectivity can make a lot of things feel like they are happening for the first time. IS IT I WHO invent these re-collections or can I blame the books I read and their impact on memory? The authors of these books are like people who KEEP CHANGING the story around – who have the power to confound. How am I supposed to have any sense of certainty when in the act of rereading I am constantly reinterpreting, AND SEEING NEW THINGS OF WHICH I was certain were something else only a few months or years before? Some books are committed to memory, as though carved in stone. They are books which I never re-read. They are too good, or too accurate – which makes them frightening. Sometimes I say I have read books that I haven't. I WAS NOT going to admit this here but suddenly it seems important to say. The result is that I believe it myself to the degree that I'll think that I've read a book PREVIOUSLY but when I take it from the shelf and open it I come to discover that I haven't. Is this a phenomenon about which others are AWARE ... ?<sup>14</sup>*

The books contained, obviously, their authors' intended meaning, but were bound in the publisher's chosen covers, re-wrapped in my jackets which obscured the intentions of the original editors and designers, and were then surrounded by my text which essentially embraced Calvino's. These parallel layers of meaning were interacting with one another simultaneously. Visitors could navigate the collection's multiple criss-crossing layers of meaning, bringing to the experience their own individual past, context, expectations and ultimately deriving a unique meaning which, when taken together with the experiences of other visitors, would create a final layer just as integral to the piece as the other substrata.

Visitors were free to browse through the books, picking them up off the shelf as they'd do in a library or bookstore. If the books were put back on the shelf in the wrong order, so much the better! The spine text and the order of the phrasing would rearrange as a result of chance operations enacted unconsciously by the viewer, thereby altering the reading of the text, and consequently the entire piece, pointing again to the subjective nature of words. The potential meanings of such rearrangements are almost infinite, depending of course on how many times the books are shown in this way and how many viewers interact with them.

This project was a visual and physical manifestation of the idea that "every reading [of a text] is always a new act of interpretation. . . that there can be no final or complete explication of any 'text' because meaning is subject to changing context; that language is primarily a signifying system, not an expressive means; that there is an unconscious in the text that is not the author's..."<sup>15</sup> Most importantly perhaps, the piece points to the fragility of written (seen) words and their dependence for meaning upon spatial and sequential ordering systems whose structures are nearly as fragile and mutable as thoughts themselves.



## In the Classroom

Whenever I can I attempt to weave into my instruction, even in beginning level courses, projects which require use of poetic imagination, reverie, conceptual and adventurous exploration, and interpretive treatments of text, (since text, after all, is the stuff graphic designers work with on a regular basis). By combining a poetic paradigm with three-dimensional or unusual treatments of words and word space, students can practice exercising their imaginative powers, and begin to work in a simultaneous, tangential and holistic fashion. Words are the bricks and mortar of our profession, and are also the required material of poets. This observation of a fairly simple commonality is the rationale behind my notion that combining poetic thinking with a physical exploration of words as raw material, is of value to students who are attempting to understand the subtleties of human communication. In this way they can experiment with the most visceral, intense form of visual and verbal expression:

the poetic one.

**Poetics**, as I use the term here, is difficult to define, but let me try for the purposes of this paper. Poetics is a way, a path, a mode. It is a state of mind and it is flexibility. It is guts and heart and not knowing. It is sensitized awareness. The poetic experience can involve sound, image, text, texture and tone all at once and at varying levels in both time and space. Work which attempts to consider multiple senses at once is usually poetic. Poetics encourages the use of the space between seeing and knowing; it helps create the openness of possible interpretation. Poetics is not empirical or intellectual in nature but rather considers the instinctive level of human consciousness as it responds emotionally, sensorially, imaginatively and tangentially to a viewed place, object, idea, sensation or text. Poetics is a way of seeing and interpreting and cuts directly to the core of the conscious mind and the images that are created therein during and after the fact of seeing and feeling. And poetics, when brought forward and articulated in the classroom, can be a tool in ideation and brainstorming.



I try to present to my students the value of intuition, serendipitous discovery and poetic interpretation, not only for the sake of intellectual exercise, but for the simple virtue of feeding the soul with rich, visceral and intense experience. Artist and design educator Douglas Dowd expresses this beautifully:

“The wonder which lies at the heart of human experience provokes response. We are alert to the ineffable precisely because we cannot grasp it; if we apply metaphor to smoke, if we hurl paint at the Invisible Man, who can blame us? Shall we cease our efforts to learn what we cannot? . . . I submit that wonder is real . . . [t]he lyrical impulse – the drive to elucidate rhyme – seeks to approximate wonder in a structural form, through the manipulation of elements. Form, tonality, metaphor, sound. If the lyricist succeeds, we experience an aesthetic wholeness: as in the viewing of constellations, awareness emerges from the apparent accident of juxtaposition.”<sup>16</sup>

It is this accident of juxtaposition that is so supremely valuable in the learning experience. The lyrical impulse, the desire to seek a form for the ineffable, is akin to the relationship between words (a faulty vehicle when you really think about it) and the poetic idea. Words do their best as vehicles for the deepest thoughts. But for a word or words to achieve poetic resonance, there must be a shaping of some kind, and a conduit for the reader or viewer, as well as a context. As I have shown in my experiments, this need not always occur on the surface of a page. It can occur solely in the mind, or spatially in three dimensions, or in the form of sound or touch. The following are descriptions of studio projects and exercises which combine the poetic approach with words used visually, verbally and pragmatically, in both two-, three- (and even four-) dimensions.

Let your rhythmical sense wind itself in and out among men and women, omnibuses and sparrows, whatever comes along the street, until it has strung them together in one harmonious whole. That perhaps is your task – to find the relation between things that seem incompatible, yet have a mysterious affinity.

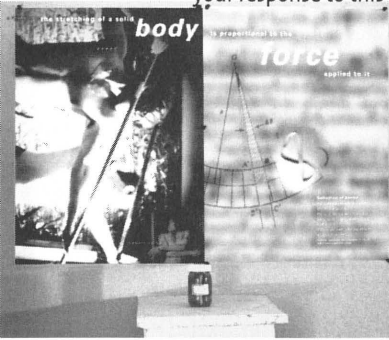
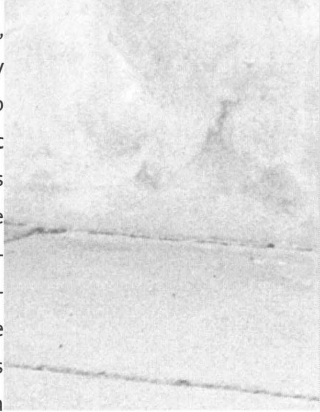
VIRGINIA WOOLF<sup>17</sup>

#### EXAMPLE 5: Interpretation and Imagination

Graphic design, more than any other discipline, requires its practitioners to maintain a collection of opposing traits. Designers must be flexible and firm, creative and structured, artistic and professional, directors and directed, all at the same time. We are called upon to interpret clients wishes, comprehend a designated audience, find appropriate styles for whatever the message, and in addition be handy enough to make sketches, dummies, comps and finished products. We must be broadly talented and are most useful when we have skills in a number of areas: *history* (both cultural and social – to aid us in understanding human problems and finding solutions), *literature*, (because we are wordsmiths, users of visual and verbal language), *diplomacy* (for client relations), *psychology* (for determining audience reaction) and *art* (because it is through fundamentals of the fine-art process that we become observers and makers).

In an elective course entitled *Interpretation and Imagination*, students were given the opportunity to work without fictional clients or pragmatic design problems. Instead they focused their energy entirely on the process of deep analysis, interpretation and (re)presentation, using the space of their imaginations to live and experience more fully than practical applications of these processes often allow. In this class I asked the students to practice their analytical and imaginative skills which would be required in their future professions.

For the main assignment, each student was asked to choose an object out of a box. These were banal everyday objects I had gathered together from around my house: a rubber band, a shard of glass, a whistle, a piece of twine, a small chain, to name a few. The students were asked to articulate in written and oral form, the material and physical properties of their objects, and any metaphorical, symbolic or associative thoughts which came to mind. They were asked to begin with a disciplined and scientific approach: what were the object's physical properties? What was it made of? How did it work? How do you interact with it? The responses to and results of this level of questioning were diagrammed coherently. Then they were asked to move into association: what did it make you think of? What is your gut response to it? What are some literal associations? Metaphorical? What is the essence of your object? They were then asked to develop a "story" in response to their intense study, a story being broadly defined as "what do you want a viewer to know about you and your response to this object?"



Finally, they were required to distill the most important aspect of their explorations into a new interpretive piece. The rubber band ended up in a specimen jar on a museum pedestal with a poster behind it showing how the human body stretches and bends and moves via the flexing and unflexing of muscle. The shard of glass resulted in a massive three-dimensional glass window box containing the burnt remnants of a text about the student's broken family. The twine ended up inspiring a very long scroll/book with a narrative written by the student and juxtaposed, in a visual ballet of typography, with a Wallace Stevens poem about time. Banal everyday objects, through careful study, controlled process and deliberate development, triggered poetic response and resulted in successful, rich and provocative work.

Poets help us to discover within ourselves such joy in looking that sometimes, in the presence of a perfectly familiar object, we experience an extension of our intimate space.

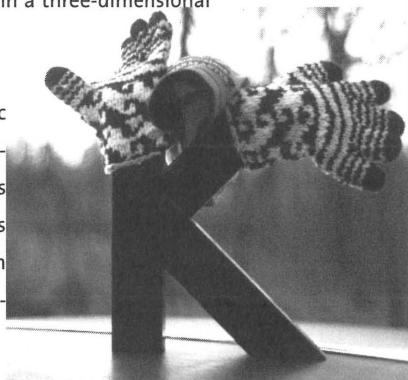
GASTON BACHELARD<sup>18</sup>

#### EXAMPLE 6: Three-dimensional Letterforms

Not long ago I taught a course in Environmental Graphic Design. This specialty of the graphic design field is defined as the planning, design and specifying of graphic elements in the built and natural environment. The word “environmental” refers to built spaces and places. The job of the environmental graphic designer is to shape messages that must appear in a three-dimensional context.<sup>19</sup>

I opted to teach this course from both a pragmatic and a poetic stance. Students need to learn about practical issues of designing in the environment, and must learn to deal with such limits as, for example, those placed on text that appears in public places as dictated by the Americans with Disabilities Act. They must learn about wayfinding, and signage and fabrication of various three-dimensional graphic elements.

Thinking that I was giving a very practical and pragmatic assignment, I asked the students to create a letterform in three dimensions, at least eighteen inches high and five inches deep. The issue at hand was legibility of three-dimensional typography. They were to photograph their letter forms in various environments focusing on material contrasts, lighting, point of view, legibility and practical use.

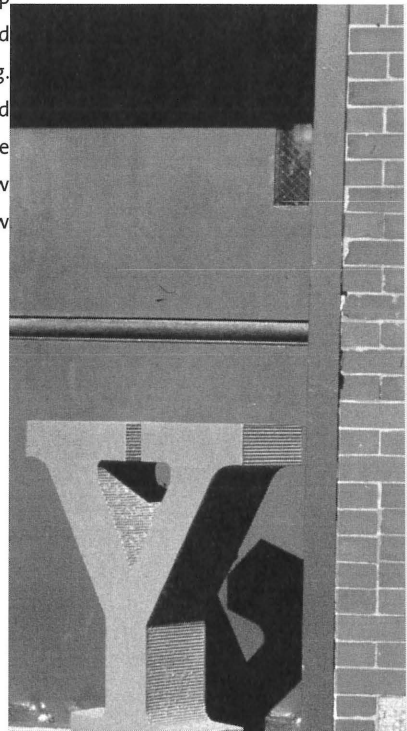


At the final slide presentations, I was surprised and delighted to find that the students, almost to a person, had animated or personified their letterforms to some degree, giving them character, posture and personality. In some cases it was unconscious and in other cases it was planned and orchestrated. One student took her letter out to dinner, arousing much comment. Another student strapped his letter into the seat belt of his car and drove it to the park, photographing it on the slide and the swing set, and putting gloves on it when it got cold. Yet another made a lowercase 'CT' ligature and photographed it creeping around town, lurking at street corners and intersections looking every bit like Sam Spade hot on the trail of some perpetrator. There was a drunk 'A' on a park bench and a suicidal 'G' that fell out of a window. A giant hollow 'Z' made of sharp and fine chicken wire was lethal to the hand but when suspended from the ceiling became almost invisible except for the lovely ethereal shadow it threw onto the wall. The letterforms, standing unattached in surroundings unused to containing freestanding large scale letters, drew attention to the place, while the place was in turn transformed by the potent symbol of a very big three-dimensional word not yet realized.



One student who took the course almost three years ago, phoned just the other day to relay a dream she'd just had. It went something like this: "I walked down to a small babbling brook. There, standing in the water, were several 'm's. Round, satisfied, three-dimensional letterforms, wading, as it were, up to their 'knees.' And the brook was making a pleasing, satisfactory sound. It was a low hum, like a sound one might make when thinking aloud. Spelled out, it would look something like this: 'mmmmmmmm.' Pure poetry. A satisfied river and a wading 'm.'

My students had unexpectedly imbued their letters with narrative quality and poetic intensity. Primary to this action is the fact that they created these letterforms by hand, and with great difficulty in some cases. These graphic design students learned to use power tools, weld, mold, curve wood, etc. These were not drawings or laser prints pinned to a wall. These were objects whose making involved the body, the self. And in that making, the students developed an attachment to the letters directly relative to the time spent, the physical investment expended and the tangential streams of thought which had time to develop in the time it took to make. While the letters spell nothing and contain no verbal messages, they embody the effort of making. Making slows us down, and in so doing allows for thought and consciousness to develop. The creation and end results of these letterforms took a poetic turn I had not anticipated, but now makes me eager to experiment with this project again to see how other students will respond.



I confess I do not believe in time. I like to fold my magic carpet, after use, in such a way as to superimpose one part of the pattern upon another. Let visitors trip. And the highest enjoyment of timelessness – in a landscape selected at random – is when I stand among rare butterflies and their food plants. This is ecstasy, and behind that ecstasy is something else, which is hard to explain. It is like a momentary vacuum into which rushes all that I love. A sense of oneness with sun and stone. A thrill of gratitude to whom it may concern – to the contrapuntal genius of human fate or to tender ghosts humoring a lucky mortal.

V L A D I M I R N A B O K O V <sup>20</sup>

#### **EXAMPLE 7: An Event in the Planning**

My final description is of a project still in the planning stages. Since arriving in Providence, Rhode Island, and moving into my office high up in the RISD Design Center, I have felt a strong compulsion to float something down the Providence River. It lies there invitingly seven stories below my office, and is visible from hundreds of other offices all along its banks. The question of what to float was easy: it had to be words or letters. But how? A graduate student with similar interests in poetic experience and words as material suggested we try ice.<sup>21</sup> This then is the current plan.

When I look out of my office window and when there is time to pause and reflect, I consider many things at once. The moment of viewing involves a semi-conscious understanding of numerous simultaneous events and thoughts:

I see the water, hear the muffled traffic,  
feel the distance from the ground, notice a student's yellow sweater  
as he skims by on a skateboard.

And while seeing these details I consider where the river flows. The essence of a river lies not so much in its origin or destination but more in the infinity of tangents and potential connections it represents. A river reminds us of the beauty in the ineffable, liminal space between two points, where beginnings and endings are less important than what happens in between. Suddenly it is this ambiguous quality of the *in between* on which I am focused.

My thoughts are with rivers and undefined spaces, my eyes are focused on the scene, and my imagination latches onto possibilities of transforming the landscape. I think of words because words are empty and full and waiting for context. Because words can describe rivers but aren't usually described *by* them. Gigantic ice-words would melt as they go, leaving the ephemeral nature of their semantic meanings behind. As they bump into bridges and debris, are witnessed by office workers and passersby, perhaps even stop traffic, they would adopt new meanings. And they would finally become mere memory as they dissolve, and become simply words which floated down a river and disappeared. They would embody notions of poetic reverie like great rafts of meaning whose only indelible quality is found in the way the idea of them plays in the imagination and memory: the experience of seeing words floating down a river where they oughtn't be.



What birds plunge through is not the intimate space  
in which you see all forms intensified.

(Out in the Open you would be denied  
your self, would disappear into that vastness.)

Space reaches from us and construes the world:  
to know a tree, in its true element,  
throw inner space around it, from that pure  
abundance in you. Surround it with restraint.  
It has no limits. Not until it is held  
in your renouncing is it truly there.

RAINER MARIA RILKE<sup>22</sup>

While these projects and exercises address a multitude of ideas about words and space, what links them is that they all perform an act of poetic and imaginative transformation. They all celebrate the potential materiality of words and ideas producing a symbiotic relationship in which one elevates and enhances the other. These projects and their end results don't purport to communicate better or more clearly than traditional printed texts or explanatory descriptions. But in the act of exploration, my students and I, and with luck those who view these works, experience the conjunction of thought,

reverie,  
tangible making,  
reading,  
writing,  
building

and imagining.

Every word uttered, written or thought signals the possibility of incalculable interpretations. The spaces we occupy contain immeasurable distances between past, present and future memory and being. And when we bring material words to the spaces of our conscious minds, we explode barriers, dismantle understanding and begin to see anew. Antoine de St. Exupéry, the well known author of the classic children's book *The Little Prince* was preoccupied with both language and space and expressed his thoughts poetically:

What is distance? I know that nothing which truly concerns man is calculable, weighable, measurable. True distance is not the concern of the eye; it is granted only to the spirit. Its value is the value of language, for it is language which binds things together.<sup>23</sup>

We have been playing with incalculable, immeasurable possibility, using language as our medium and hoping to discover new ways in which language can live in space: both actual and imagined.

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Image on page 191 was created by Shari Tow, Rhode Island School of Design.