

*Benevolent Flux*

*Master of Fine Arts Thesis*

*University of Michigan  
School of Art & Design*

**Ben Van Dyke**  
April, 2006



Benevolent *flux*

*I dedicate this thesis to my wife, Kayla who didn't deserve this, and all of it.*

BENEVOLENT FLUX

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## BENEVOLENT FLUX

*Art transforms life and done properly, transforms oneself. —Nietzsche*

### < INTRODUCTION >

A year and a half ago, I found myself in the parking lot of Long John Silver's with a bucket of chalk. My goal was to re-examine a personal experience through typography. With chalk and a camera, I recorded the event on the impartial pavement of the lot and photographed as a disinterested worker followed the order to wash it away. What I didn't know then is that I was entering a world of changed graphic design based on complexity, uncertainty and interference. My thoughts on complexity arise from the tension between redundancy in the advertising industry and the strategies of Friedrich Nietzsche and the Dada movement. I engage these historically grounded tensions through design interventions in public spaces, critiquing the cultural dialogue between accepted norms and the economic potency that our society has found comfort and complacency in. Using Haridimos Tsoukas's research on organizational epistemology and integrating Tsoukas's theory of complex systems, I will build from my own history in the advertising industry a theory of complex graphic design that in my opinion will slow societal speed, enabling viewers to engage visual culture on a deeper and more meaningful level. This thesis is divided into sections in order to provide background information and a framework for my creative work which will supplement my theories and ideas on complexity and interference in contemporary visual culture. I will draw from past digital projects as well as performed public experiments that have led me to define the role of complexity in my studio practice as well as the dynamic role it has in my professional design practice.



< DEFINING COMPLEXITY >

Identifying complexity is a difficult endeavor, but necessary in preparing a foundation for my work. To me, the word complexity always meant “intensely difficult to understand”. I wasn’t too far off in my assumptions, but my past use of the word indicated a gut reaction to the concept of complexity and the actual work that I felt compelled to create. The word complexity comes from the Latin word *complexus*, which denotes “entwined” or “twisted together”. In the process of creating my works of art and design, the formal elements always emerge from an identifiable “warm center” or “ground zero”. While making work, there is an intuitive sense of organic growth of the composition’s elements. For example, If I have a fragmented piece of type darting across the composition, it is probably because, in my head, that piece of type emerged or originated from another element of an emerging structure. Everything on the page is connected to and originates from something else

and, for me, the need to do this comes from my ability to see complexity by feeling a rhythm and improvisationally following that rhythm until the composition ends by itself. The Oxford dictionary defines something as complex if it is “made of (usually several) closely connected parts”. Based on this, complexity is increased as the number of parts increase. When a piece is nearing success, the puzzle-like structure of several closely connected parts come together to create a complex system of visuals containing a multiplicity of informative rhythms and language.

In an article entitled “What is Complexity” written by Francis Heylighen, he explains that complexity has two characteristics, distinction and connection. I found Heylighen’s analysis of complexity to be fairly scientific, but relevant to my ability to create a framework for my work in terms of the fragile existence between the positive and negative characteristics of an underlying system.

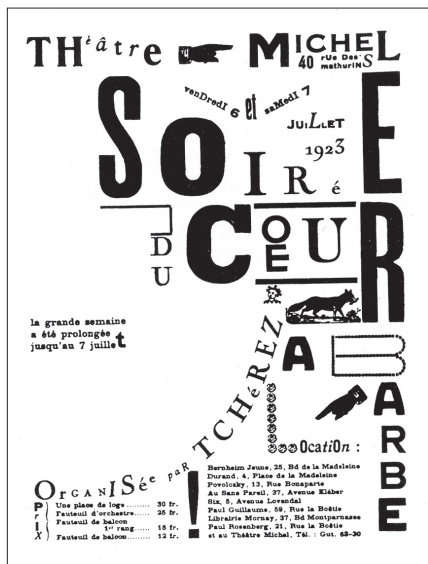
“Distinction corresponds to variety, to heterogeneity, to the fact that different parts of the complex behave differently. Connection corresponds to constraint, to redundancy, to the fact that different parts are not independent, but that the knowledge of one part allows the determination of features of the other parts. Distinction leads in the limit to disorder, chaos or entropy. Complexity can only exist if both aspects are present: neither perfect disorder (which can be described statistically through the law of large numbers), nor perfect order (which can be described by traditional deterministic methods) are complex. It thus can be said to be situated in between order and disorder, or, using a recently fashionable expression, ‘on the edge of chaos’.”

Heylighen contends that within complexity, one can find just as much order as there is chaos. On a scale of one to ten, (ten being complete chaos and one being order and stability), complexity would rest on five with the assumption that the teeter-totter can tilt in either direction but cannot hit the ground. In 1965, Andrey Kolmogorov proposed a definition of complexity as “the notion of randomness dealing with the quantity of information in individual objects.” Similar to Heylighen’s explanation, this definition is based on the analysis of the amount of information.



In the book, “Complex Knowledge” by Haridimos Tsoukas, he defines complexity in terms of the ability to locate and define the contents and pieces of a system. “It is our contention that the puzzle of defining the system leads directly to concern with description and interpretation and therefore to the issue of second-order complexity.” (p.235) Tsoukas goes on to say that nobody has been able to come up with a sufficient definition of complexity in order to “measure exactly how complex a system is”. Here is an example of his explanation: “in a series of numbers there is a clear pattern. (2 2 5 6 7 2 2), whereas in another series the numbers are randomly placed (2 6 2 7 2 2 5), the latter is more complex than the former, because no shorter description can be given other than repeating the series itself.” I have always been more interested in creating works that would be a closer match to Tsoukas’s random number pattern because of the opportunity to allow for different interpretations from more than just mathematicians.

< FRINGE BENEFITS >



My experience as a graphic designer in the advertising industry inspired me to contemplate the manner in which design was being implemented in ways that allowed cliché to become an acceptable tool of graphic design. This logic, of course goes back to the earliest commercial iconographies. In order to break this trend of redundancy, there has to be an intervention. Looking back at the Dada movement, I can learn from the original interventionists. Dada artists relied on randomness and absurdity to contradict and provoke discussion on the standards of art in the early 1900’s. The

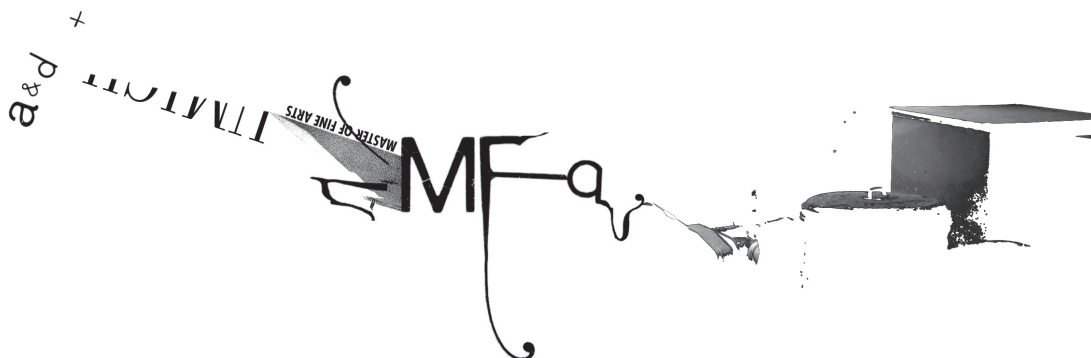
Dada movement provides me with a precedent for seeking an alternative perspective on culture through performance and art.

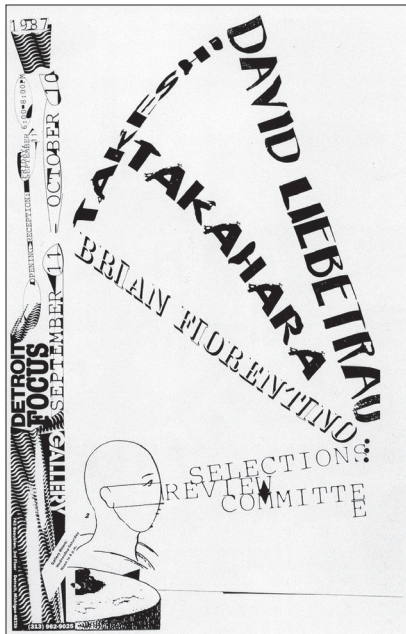
Over the course of my professional experience, I had a reputation for inserting ambiguity in my design proposals for mainstream clients. The creative directors I worked for didn't see the value in the unproven, the ambiguous — the unknown was too risky. I plugged away with my daily tasks, but the appetite to push beyond the expected grew stronger, and my colleague's patience for my antics grew shorter. I was missing the tools with which to begin a dialogue on alternative approaches to design so as to move toward a Dadaist philosophy of creating design for commercial use. I began to associate commercial design with repetition, cliché and excessively ordered contractual relationships. I decided to follow my instincts and traded my well-paying job for an intense immersion in unknown territory — an MFA program. I wanted to live the work — living and moving in unpredictable ways with the intention of finding the potential in my curiousness. I am able now, three years later, to interpret this intuitive move through an analysis of Michel Serres who creates a poetics of “the fringe” between “noise” and “order”. Serres uses the term “noise” as a phrase that interprets an intervening entity in a closed system. Just as I decided to reorder the mundane system of my life, the deconstruction of comfort is frightening and Serres acknowledges this in the first sentence. “Noise destroys and horrifies.” After that, his explanation points to my feelings of numbness and redundancy that are fostered by the repetition and complacency I had previously found in my everyday life. Serres also uses the colorful analogy of eternal dreamless sleep — brought on by the lack of new information that challenge all that we know. From this, I understand the idea that redundant information becomes vacant and unnecessary knowledge dangerously linked to comfort, causing a false sense of confidence.

“Noise destroys and horrifies. But order and flat repetition are in the vicinity of death. Noise nourishes a new order. Organization, life and intelligent thought live between order and noise, between disorder and perfect harmony. If there were only order, if we only heard perfect harmonies, our stupidity would soon fall down towards a dreamless sleep; if we were

always surrounded by the shivaree, we would lose our breath and our consistency, we would spread out among all the dancing atoms of the universe. We are; we live; we think on the fringe, in the probable fed by the unexpected, in the legal, nourished with information.” (Michel Serres 1982a: 127 / quoted in *Complex Knowledge*, Tsoukas, pg.280).

The MFA program at the University of Michigan offered a place where the “fringe” condition is more willingly embraced, a space where order and chaos are differently mediated than in the commercial domain, where there is cultural capital in complexity. Uncertainty then, is apparently what got me into the graduate program at the University of Michigan. According to a faculty member who attended my interview, I had a portfolio of interesting professional design with a hint of something unfamiliar. A glimmer of something else must have been showing — the ability to take risks or the ability to recognize dramatic potential in the unknown. I hoped that my undeveloped talent could become a catalyst for change in the design industry and, more meta-physically, that I could accomplish this by discovering the difference between complication and complexity in design. I started by explaining to my wife that if we sell our house and I quit my job, that doesn’t necessarily complicate our lives, rather it creates a rich complexity defined by learning how to reframe our lives. I couldn’t tell her with confidence that there would be any monetary benefit, but what we would find along the journey would be a completely renewed fascination with the world not simply a one-time defamiliarization, but a strategy for maximizing this new life. We trusted this uncertainty and it made all the difference. It has indeed sustained life on “the fringe”.





In the late 1980's, one of my favorite designers, Ed Fella, began creating design projects based on irregularity and inconsistency. Fella termed his technique “anti-mastery” and consistently referred to the general public as “fully capable of negotiating these complexities.” Fella’s work was inspiring to me not only because it was visually stunning, but also because he believed in the power of complexity in graphic design. Fella was originally a commercial graphic designer working for many of the biggest advertising agencies in the Detroit area. He fell out of love with agency life and pursued an MFA from Cranbrook Academy of Art at the age of 48.

His extensive professional experience gave him pools of technical skills and knowledge to create powerfully subversive graphic design. In an article reviewing Fella’s work as an artist in residence at Monash University entitled “An Evening With Fella,” the author points out one of Fella’s brave characteristics: “Instead of visualizing quickly digested data, he asks us to slow down and scrutinize, to linger before we leap” (<http://www.agda.com.au/eventsnews/vic/events/2002/AnEve.html#up>). This parallels my own interest in finding the opportunity to motivate people to contemplate the speed at which information is digested.

A fellow designer turned me on to the First Things First Manifesto. The original First Things First Manifesto was written in 1964 by Ken Garland in support of counter-culture of the sixties in order to reinvigorate alternative thinking and chip away at privileged society in Britain. In 2000, the manifesto was rewritten and redesigned with the backing of *Adbusters*, *Emigre* and the *AIGA Journal* in North America; *Eye Magazine*, and *Blueprint* in Britain; *Items* in the Netherlands; and *Form* in Germany.

The original creator of this manifesto, Ken Garland, was unaware of the interest in reinstating his “reversal of priorities in favour of the more useful and more lasting forms of communication.” As the 2000 signees noted in exasperation, “In 1964, 22 visual communicators signed the original call for our skills to be put to worthwhile use. With the explosive growth of global commercial culture, their message has only grown more urgent. Today, we renew their manifesto in expectation that no more decades will pass before it is taken to heart.” I continue to be influenced by the recontextualized 2000 version of the manifesto, which spoke directly to the professional context I was seeking to detach myself from.

“We propose a reversal of priorities in favour of more useful, lasting and democratic forms of communication – a mind shift away from product marketing and toward the exploration and production of a new kind of meaning.” In an attempt to restimulate radical design and designers, the manifesto helped solidify in my mind the fact that there is a purpose for a graphic designer like me other than selling toothpaste to as many people as possible. From that, I concluded that my views had a context and history. I too was a part of a movement of thought in (and against) the graphic design and advertising community:

“We, the undersigned, are graphic designers, photographers and students who have been brought up in a world in which the techniques and apparatus of advertising have persistently been presented to us as the most lucrative, effective and desirable means of using our talents. We have been bombarded with publications devoted to this belief, applauding the work of those who have flogged their skill and imagination to sell such things as:

Cat food, stomach powders, detergent, hair restorer, striped toothpaste, aftershave lotion, before shave lotion, slimming diets, fattening diets, deodorants, fizzy water, cigarettes, roll-ons, pull-ons and slip-ons.

By far the greatest effort of those working in the advertising industry are wasted on these trivial purposes, **which contribute little or nothing to our national prosperity.**”

This document connected my attraction to complexity to an economic (or even a political) critique of design in a consumer culture. The manifesto was inspiring in that it validated my aspiration to become a designer with a social role beyond multiplying miniscule differences in consumer products. The last sentence really struck me: “—which contribute little or nothing to our national prosperity.” It provided a framework for my gut feeling that I must sell almost everything I owned and leave all that I knew to be comfortable in pursuit of an intriguing life. 33 new graphic designers got the blessing of the original manifesto’s creator to rewrite and reinvigorate the discussion of design’s potential. The last sentence of the 2000 version became the driving force of my work. “By far the greatest effort of those working in the advertising industry are wasted on these trivial purposes, which contribute little or nothing to our national prosperity.” It is a true manifesto in risking the articulation of what historian Robin Kelley calls “freedom dreams,” drawing on traditions of the radical imagination, its characteristic tonality of hope in real time. From that point on, I decided to refuse to allow my work go unnoticed or to be discarded because it didn’t have obvious economic value.

Every so often, I re-read the manifesto as a reminder that there is a historical precedent for the work I create, with both complexity and new social or political dynamics in mind. I am interested in what happens to viewers when ambiguous ideas (formal and conceptual) are incorporated into mainstream communication design. The designs that I create often fall flat because of the negative economic implications and risk that my work can represent. This also happened when the University of Michigan School of Art & Design became my client. Some of my posters for the Penny Stamps Distinguished Visitor’s Series were criticized by those who wanted to “sell” the lecture series, which suggests that the tension between transparency and “noise” is not just a feature of the commercial environment, though it is more acute there. At the School of Art & Design, ambiguous work is produced and articulated and time is available for discussion and debate in a protected yet still public environment. My creative process is still based on almost impossible circumstances — engag-

ing chance and embracing uncertainty. The manifesto supports this reaction against conventional design by making social sense of a methodology that lacks reliability. By presenting consumers with unexpected answers, they might ask unexpected questions.

< PENNY MADE SENSE >

In the Spring of 2004, I was asked to redesign the identity for the Penny W. Stamps Visiting Artist program at the University of Michigan School of Art & Design. I felt confident in proposing a design that did not represent the visiting artists in their entirety; in fact, it was nearly illegible at first glance. I knew the Dean of the School of Art & Design would support the idea unpredictability of such a project — I knew it had the potential to create a buzz. From the massive amount of feedback I got, both positive and negative, I felt like the design was a success and the response from members of the administration was for the most part positive. They supported my attempt to recreate the identity of the program with an experimental style. Since creating this poster, I have often been asked to explain why the illegible is worthwhile.

Little did I know that wrestling with this question would become the focus of my work in the future, as I was drawn into a domain where time was available for such queries to be debated.

As I was testing the social effects of complexity and discovering opportunities for creative inquiry, I also began experimenting with scale as an index of the personal. Smallness and the impact of the handmade generated a cryptic quality, a sensation of being overlooked that led me to think hard about the tensions generated by smallness and implied silence. These meditations ended up taking me back to a profoundly public or civic issue, which is also inevitably personal: the issue of safe spaces. Around the same time that I was starting work on the Penny Stamps poster, I was working in my studio on a series of typographic experiments.

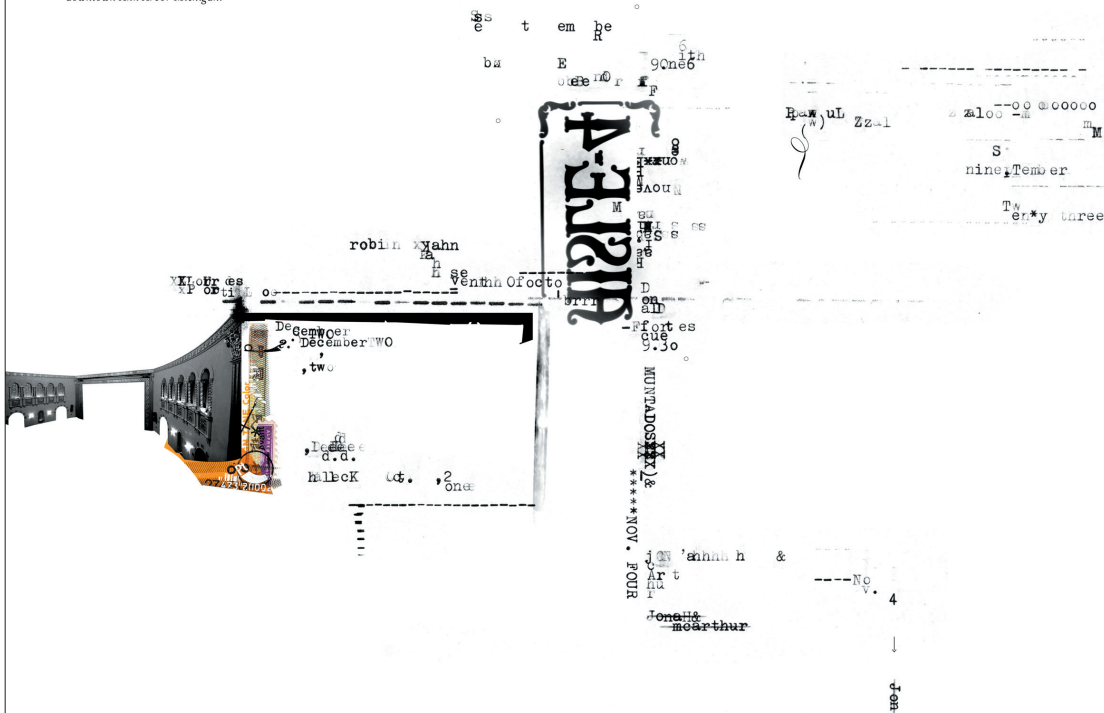
UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN SCHOOL OF ART & DESIGN

this  
Thurs.  
at 5pm)

at the Michigan THEATER

The Penny W. Stamps Distinguished  
Visitors Series for 2004 is being held at  
the historic Michigan Theater, an Ann  
Arbor landmark located at 603 E. Liberty,  
downtown Ann Arbor Michigan.

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PENNY W. STAMPS Distinguished Visitors Series

With the generous support of Art & Design alumna Penny W. Stamps, the Distinguished Visitors Series brings to the School a broad spectrum of emerging and established artists/designers to engage with students, faculty, staff and the larger University and Ann Arbor communities. Depending on the length of their stays and their particular areas of expertise, invited artists present public lectures, work with students, participate in panel discussions, generate site-specific works, and give public performances. For more information, call 734-763-1265 or visit [www.art-design.umich.edu](http://www.art-design.umich.edu). Sign language interpreter provided for lecture upon advance request. Design by Ben Van Dyke, MFA class of '06.





In these pieces, I experimented with materials and cryptic narrative in response to a challenge from my faculty advisor, Dennis Miller. He asked me to create one collage or experiment a day. I did this for over four months. I was compelled to use found objects and work very small in creating tiny little pieces of graphic design without the help of my Apple computer. What I found during this process is an extraordinary amount of beauty in the layering of images and typography from found objects. I created multiple layers of meaning and multiple levels of information accessed only by the willingness of the viewer to decode a complicated composition by getting very close to the tiny pieces. These pieces led to me to think about size and the relationship that size had with time. Does small equal insignificant? As individual works, these pieces did not have enough presence to slow people down to fully absorb their contents, they didn't work as loud stories. Rather, they were whispers and secrets that contained my life story and the feelings and emotions related to that story. This is when my studio practice started to become more personal. I did not want to be insignificant, nor did I want to be forgotten, but I was willing to be ignored. This state felt oddly reassuring.

From contemplating the identity of those small pieces, I used silence as an asset in my work. It allowed me to keep my information safe, and I became more and more preoccupied with this question of safety. In the gallery, I knew that I couldn't hang just one small piece on the wall; it would get swallowed whole by the rest of the exhibition. I struggled with how to display these unprecious

pieces that contained precious information. I decided to hang them all together, in random form. This allowed the pieces to breathe as individual entities but also allowed them to exist as a family of small chapters in my autobiography. That solution satisfied me temporarily, but, before the exhibition had ended, Dennis Miller challenged me to rethink the idea that these tiny chapters should be relegated to the status of individual pieces.

I thought about that challenge for quite a while, not entirely sure what he was suggesting. Over the course of the next few months, I was still working on the first Penny Stamps poster, and I was getting frustrated with that project. The turning point came when I started photographing and scanning the small collage pieces from the earlier exhibit. I incorporated them into the digital production of the poster and, finally, merged the digital and the analog. I used many of my fragmented pieces of type and layered imagery as tools for encrypting any piece of obvious information that the viewer of the poster may be trying to extract or enter into dialogue with. I realized the difference between encrypting autobiographical information and event information. In both cases, I was manipulating the access to the information but I think there is a distinct difference between the two effects. In the encryption of the Penny Stamps poster, the typography is manipulated by size, legibility and visual density in order to redefine readership as a negotiation of content between author and viewer. In the encryption of personal information, there's an opportunity for a much deeper exploration of ciphering content.

As with the small collage pieces, I desperately wanted people to slow down and visit with me through the art work. I wasn't willing to shout, so I had to be willing to wait. The safety that I had created in small secretive images yielded to a more sociable interaction with viewers. Complexity became opacity which translated into altered temporality; a time and space for discursive exchange. Putting the same idea to work in a piece of printed, professional advertising was inspiring. Dean Rogers com-

mission allowed me to create an environment that forced people to reanalyze their preexisting notions of advertising and consequently, the premises and the purpose of the School of Art & Design itself. With the dean's support, I was successful in creating a revised identity for the school as a place where things are happening — things that are on the remote edge of legibility. But I am puzzled with why this strategy was still a battle with some of the faculty and staff. Why was there such a strong resistance to change? The resistance came in the form of a polarized response to the poster and focused on questioning its original intent: to communicate the lecture series' schedule. This response was not surprising as I had created a complex solution that challenged the School of Art & Design to take a chance on being misunderstood, to go beyond the clarity of immediate understanding. The benefit of this risk emerges as an opportunity to reevaluate the school as a place where interesting and unexpected ideas were being proposed.

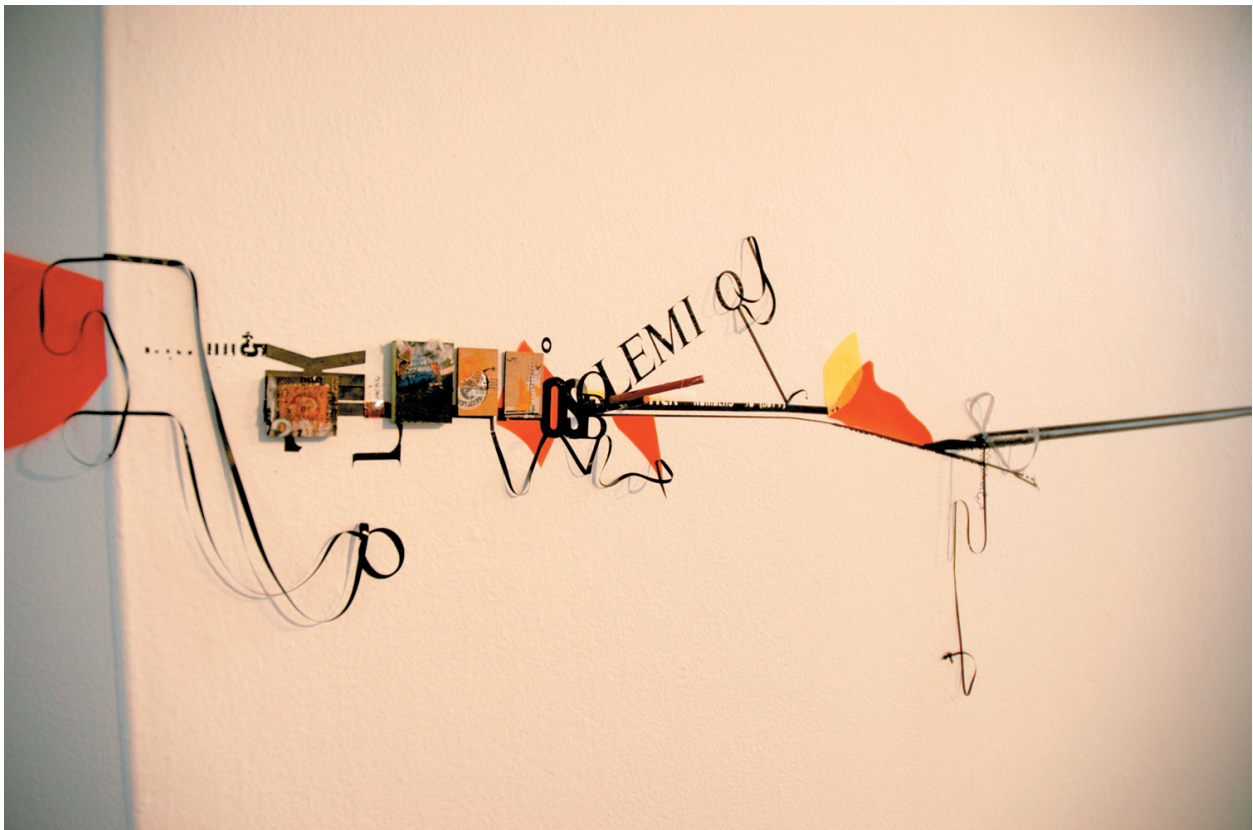
< TRAGIC COMEDY >

In reading Nietzsche, I found confidence in the idea that art has the power to transfigure and predetermine sets of knowledge structures. Writing, one could argue as a late romantic, Nietzsche thought that the tragic viewer was connected by music to a primal reality earned by enduring and accepting pain and suffering. According to Nietzsche, in tragedy there is always the destruction of the individual. Pain becomes a necessary antidote to a silent life without music. Thus, with the art of tragedy comes pain and with pain comes the joy of experiencing the world more intensely. For me, this somewhat melodramatic theory of art pointed toward a powerful concept of authenticity. Putting Nietzsche into the context of my studio practice provided a change in perspective on my own role in communication design. Nietzsche writes:

“What is it that the soul of the tragic artist communicates to others? Is it not precisely his fearless attitude towards that which is terrible and questionable? This attitude is in itself a highly desirable one; he who has once experienced it honours it above everything else. He communicates it. He must communicate, provided he is an artist and a genius in the art of

communication. A courageous and free spirit, in the presence of a mighty foe, in the presence of a sublime misfortune, and face to face with a problem that inspires horror —this is the triumphant attitude which the tragic artist selects and which he glorifies. (Friedrich Nietzsche / *Art and the Will to Power* p.105)

The poster was finished and unveiled shortly before the fall semester of 2004 began. The response was warm and curious, and I felt like I had been given wings. My next scheduled exhibition led me to struggle with whether or not to exhibit the remaining number of collage pieces that hadn't yet seen the light of day. The other work I had been creating was in the form of digital poster designs for the School of Art & Design, work that has a gallery much bigger than a single allocated space with nice lighting. Dennis Miller reminded me that the little chapters of my life could be situated so the gallery walls could become the pages of a story book. I obliged and found myself in the familiar territory of the unfamiliar. I worked furiously directly onto the gallery walls, removing any prepara-



**My Diseased Memory Skeleton** • Gallery installation, Warren Robbins Gallery. 11/04

[ See also Appendix C pgs. 60 - 70 ]

tory work that had originated in studio. The experience was invigorating! I began to tell an autobiographical story, right on the wall, using the same supplies I had used to make the small collage pieces except that now, my collage had gone from two inches square to eight feet by eighteen feet.

< CONVERSATIONALIZATION >

What I had discovered is that I didn't need to lock my stories inside these tiny little pieces, but in fact, I found myself experimenting with large scale, large presence, combined with small opportunities for dialogue. The visual presence of the installations took up much more space in the gallery, giving the perception of a louder voice, but in fact, all of the information found on the walls was cleverly encrypted so as to control the amount of personal information being passed on to the public. The issues of publicness and safety were coming to the foreground. In the gallery, I felt vulnerable and consequently I was still compelled to talk to people through the techniques of encryption. My technique was a system of locks and keys to slow people down in order to get to know me before I divulged the truth. The vulnerability came from my feeling that visitors to the gallery would come "face to face" with "a problem," the need to come up with their own definitions and solutions to my visual puzzles. Further, I became conscious of the amount of decoding that happens with my work, as I had during the public circulation of the Stamps posters. I wanted to push Nietzsche's idea of "the questionable" — the energy that forms when one is "face to face with a problem" as an artist or viewer.

As I was producing my final project, immediately preceding the writing of this thesis, I created a blog in which I worked on my own analyses, often through a dialogic exchange with observations and theoretical contexts proposed by others. One of the headings on my blog (unmakingculture.blogspot.com) was entitled Social Decoding. Social decoding is a term that explains how my work is often subject to multiple interpretations because of its visual complexity and the fact that it is inserted into a public space. I welcomed the discussions and decided to wrestle with this subject be-

cause it provided an analytical framework within which my quest for both difficulty and community made sense. In the decoding of information, there is a process in which the reader takes information, applies it in combination with pre-existing knowledge and decodes the content. I intend to interfere with the decoding process in order to slow the process of simple interpretation. I received more comments from visitors on this category than on any of the other terms I had posted on the blog. All of the comments challenged my negotiations with the public. Such exchanges underscored the way in which, for me, coming “face to face with a problem” is inescapably public, with all of the sense of lost privacy or lost safety that public exposure can bring. In this section of my blog, a comment submitted by a football coach, contained a clever analogy between his expert reading of the field of play, and my insider’s understanding of my own and others’ designs.

**Mark said...** [ 2:39 PM ]

When you ask the question if a viewer will simply ignore or decode a graphic, installation, or art of any type, you must also ask the question what is their background?

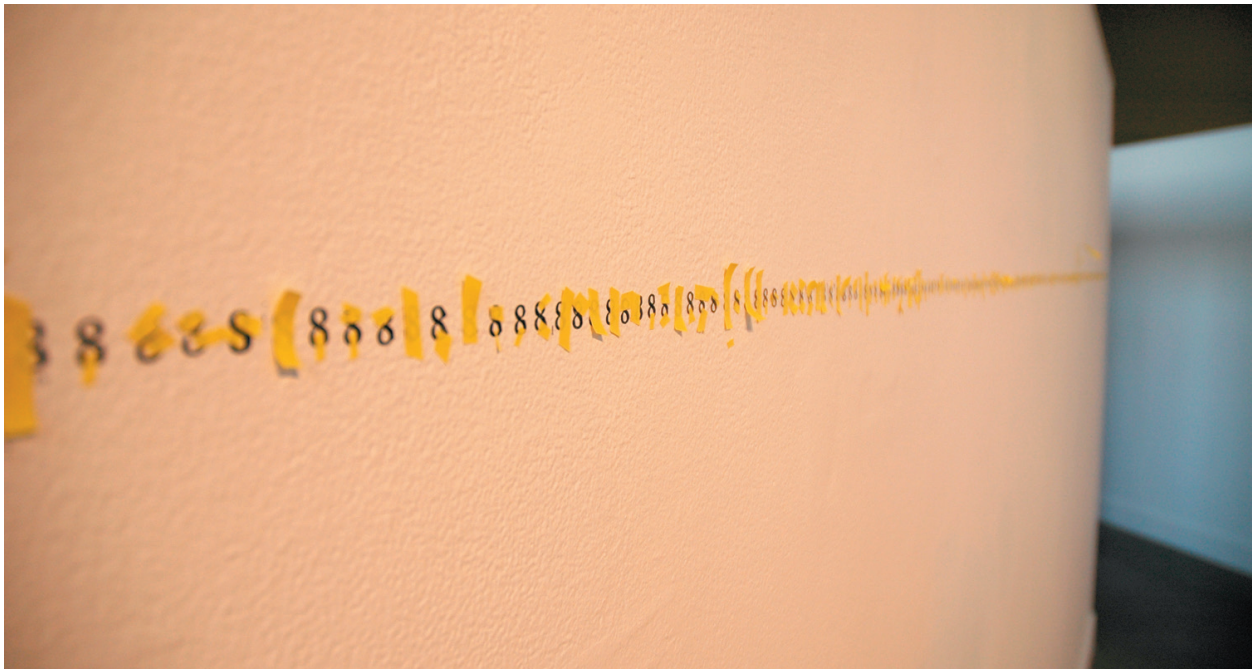
For me as a football coach I can never look at a football game the same way, no matter at what level. I am constantly thinking about what plays are happening, what the refs are doing, the position of the ball, and many other things that can determine the outcome of the next few seconds of the football game. However, to the standard viewer of a football game it’s just 22 people running around on a field beating the crap out of each other. When you look at a piece of art I am sure you are able to pick it apart millimeter by millimeter and see the finer parts of the piece. While a normal viewer says “hey, I think that’s red”

Mark’s comment led me to reexamine the idea that I was simply pushing people away. In a conversation with another faculty advisor, I was challenged to think about the idea of access points and finding a balance between locks and keys. In a previous installation, my encrypted language peaked to a breaking point with very few keys and quite a few locks. I had created an alphabet completely out of the number eight by subtracting elements of the numbers form to create different letters of the

alphabet. I had chosen the number eight because it represented, not only the symbol for infinity but also because it was the complete form of all 26 letters of the English language.

For example, if you took a cutout of all 26 letters and set them on top of each other, the physical addition of all of the letters would form the number eight. From this, I concluded that the sum of all letters equals eight and the process of creating individual letterforms begins by the subtraction of the number eight's shape. I repeated the number eight on the wall with a tight fit — horizontally for 15 feet. By editing part of each eight, I was able to form a letter, word, sentence, paragraph and eventually a complete story by completely representing every combination of letters that make up words within each individual character. This created an enormous amount of visual interest, packed full of a conversation between Ben and Ben, and it was up for grabs...if anyone was willing to decode the equation.

After finishing the installation of eight's, I began to reflect on the intensity with which I locked up my information. This led me to experiment with work that offered more keys than locks. I created

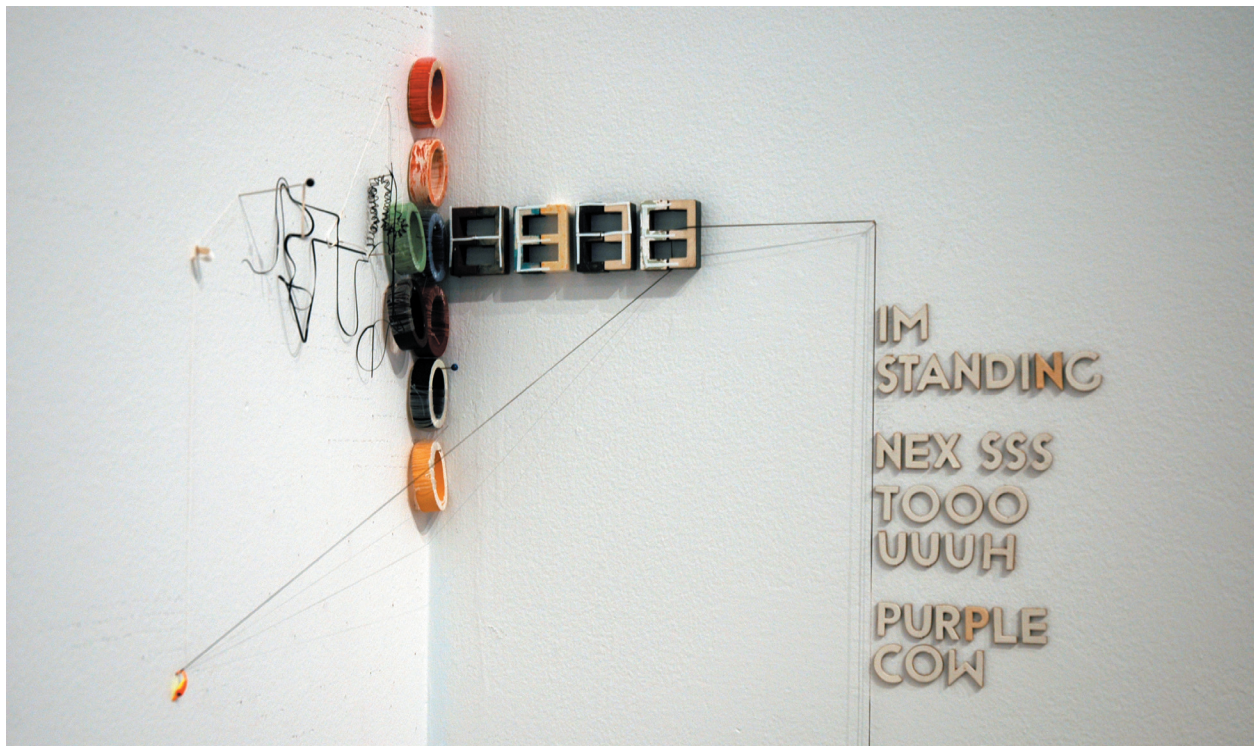


**My Favorite Memory Is With My Dad...** · Gallery installation, Warren Robbins Gallery. 11/04

[ See also Appendix C pgs. 60 - 70 ]

the installation in a corner of the gallery's main room, assuming that the corner was the most likely space to be ignored by the curator. I used my entire bag of tricks to encrypt not only the obvious content, but encrypt the encrypted. In the installation entitled "Languish", I took the idea of eight one step further. I abstracted the number eight to two zeros on top of each other. This created another level of encryption that contained a necessary piece of the puzzle. The story began in Morse Code on the left side of the corner. I debossed the Morse Code on the wall with the head of a pin and a flat head screw driver. Needless to say, this was extremely small and hard to read but the pattern was visually stunning. The story on the wall represented the tricky relationship between my wife and me as a result of trying to grow up together and stay married at the same time. The piece ended with a poem which appeared to be unconnected to the rest of the piece but in fact, was written phonetically. The rhythm of the syllables became Morse Code containing the missing link and the punch line.

The conversation about access points with my advisor challenged my interest to keep the public at bay and asked me to consider more keys than locks. The encoded story inside the "Languish" instal-

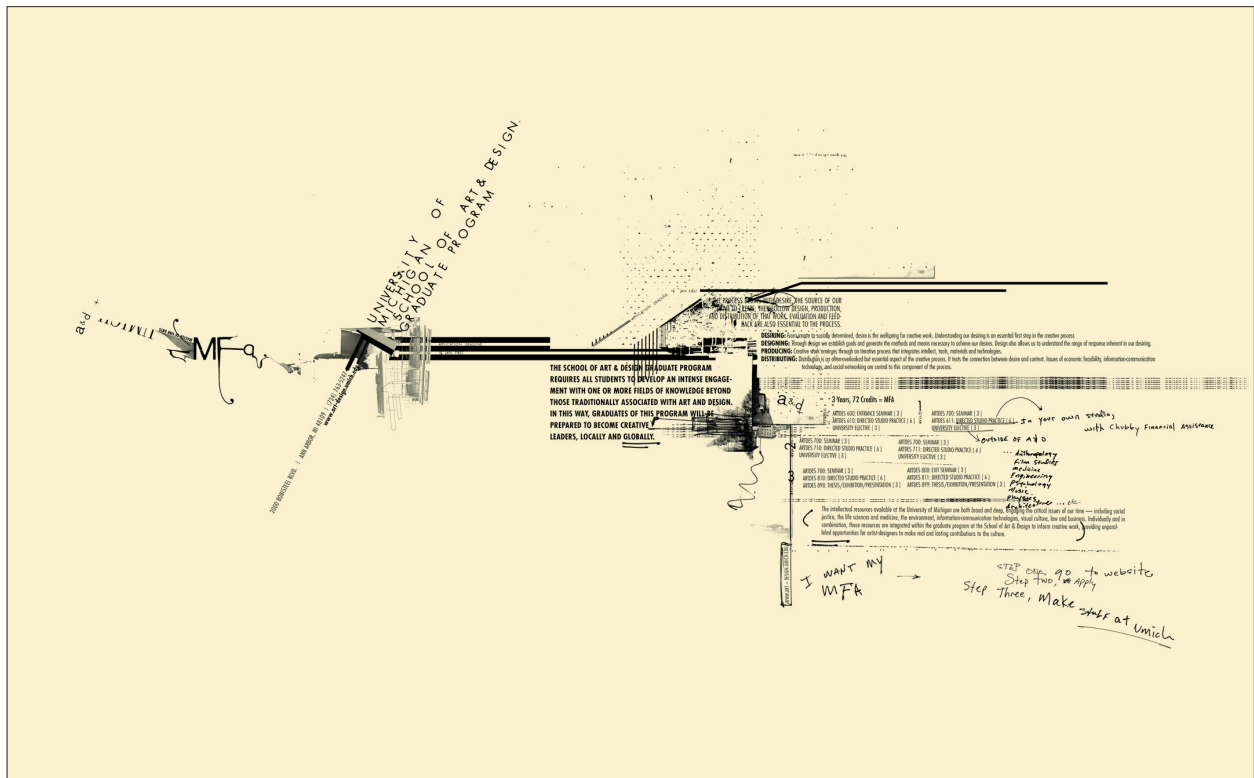


**Languish** · Gallery installation, Slusser Gallery. 4/05

[ See also Appendix C pgs. 60 - 70 ]



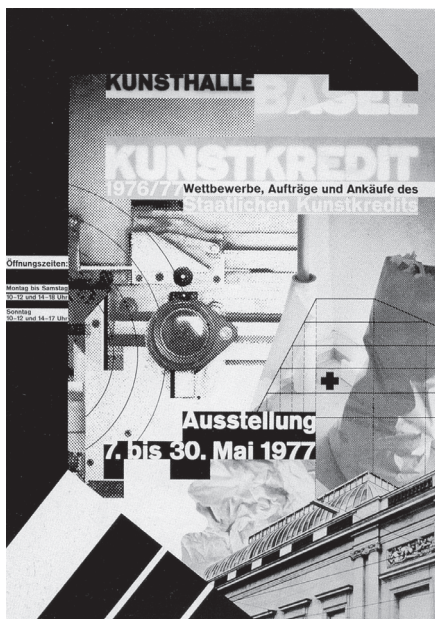
lation was an initial experiment with access points. As I continued through the year performing more installations, I realized that, just as I had been clever with encryption, I could also be clever with access, inviting a response in order to begin a dialogue. The same challenge would come from Mark, the football coach. The MFA poster that I used as an example in my blog appeared to him, the inexperienced viewer, as typography that acted like a bunch of letterforms beating the crap out of each other, like football players to the untrained eye. This made me realize that there is a finer line than I had realized between challenging readership in communication design and simply exerting my power over the message by not allowing anyone to get too close.



MFA Poster · Poster design commissioned by the University of Michigan School of Art & Design. 10/04  
[ See also Appendix A pgs. 46 - 55 ]

## &lt; RECENT HISTORY &gt;

In the 1960's, Wolfgang Weingart pioneered a new development in graphic design that would soon cause him to be referred to as a postmodernist. He began as a typesetter and was asked to follow a formula for 'correct answers' in all of his projects. Weingart was quoted saying, "It seemed as if everything that made me curious was forbidden." His spontaneous design inquiries began to chip away at modernist Swiss typography. Throughout the 1970's and 80's, Weingart used his learned technical skills for the advance of his experimental and intuitive style. Weingart became a big influence in the success of his student, April Greiman at the Basel School of Design in Switzerland. She explored, in-depth, the Swiss design style, and paying close attention to Weingart's personal explorations in developing new forms of design that defied the conventions of graphic design. In the early 1980's, April Greiman became a lonely advocate of the Apple computer and its integration into design. Simultaneously with Greiman's momentum, Katherine and Michael McCoy accepted the position of reinventing the 2D and 3D departments at Cranbrook Academy of Art. The McCoy's early pedagogical influence at Cranbrook was directly influenced by the work of Wolfgang Weingart. "Complexity, layering, syntactical playfulness, irony, vernacular forms, and classical premodern typography were explored in an outburst of energy. But for all its rule breaking, this dissecting and

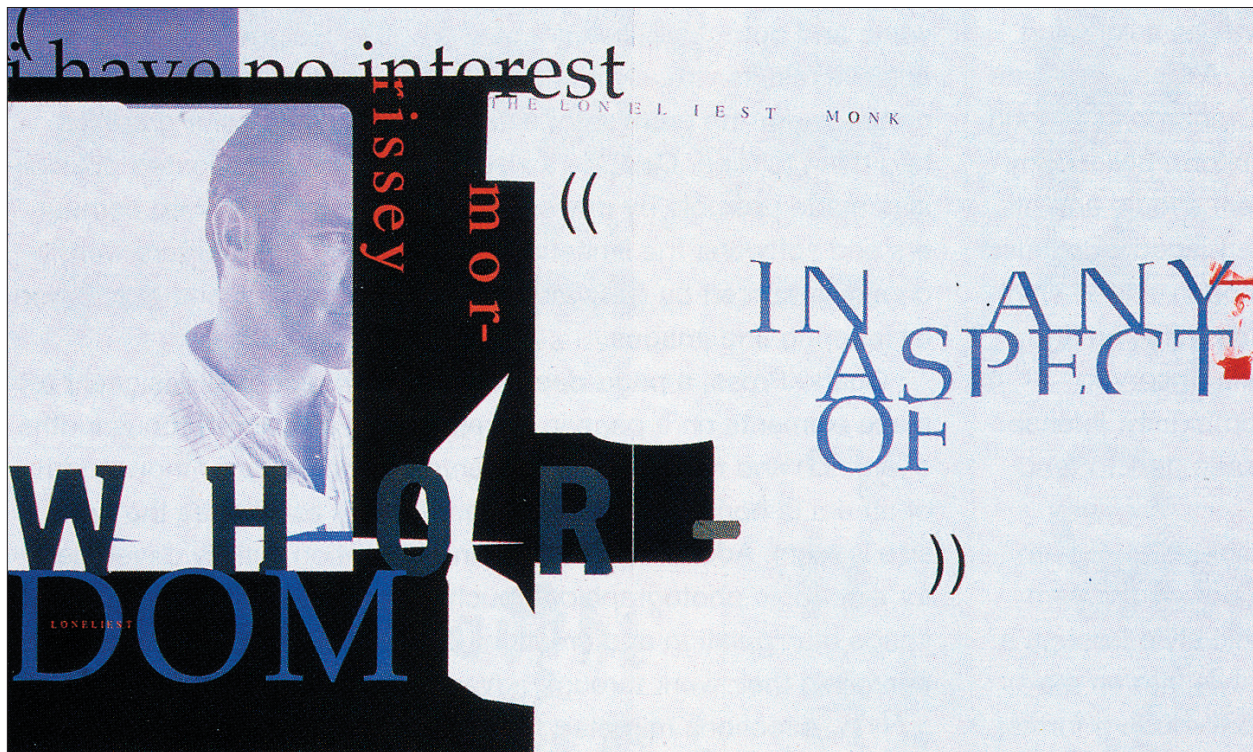


recombining of the grammar of graphic design was a logical outgrowth of the Modernist emphasis on structural expression" (*The New Discourse*, 1990). In the twenty-four years at Cranbrook, Katherine and Michael McCoy fostered the first intensive revision in Design education moving toward a bold, experimental format. This postmodern movement in graphic design, that gained momentum in the 70's and 80's, brought rise to a very intellectual form of subversion in graphic design by creating a foundation on which others could build.

In the early 1990's, David Carson joined the magazine Ray Gun as an Art Director and started a wave of intentionally illegible design as a movement against the narrow-mindedness of modern design. Carson's magazine work resonated with many young people and inspired a re-evaluation of design much as Ken Garland's *First Things First Manifesto* did in 1964. He was referred to as the 'Father of Grunge' and hailed as the most important designer of the 1990's. With the onset of 'dirty type' and illegible articles on pop culture, Carson's style started to gain momentum as a result of calling attention to the expressive, not just informational, form of communication design. It's hard to argue with Carson's success, he's been featured in the New York Times (May 1994) and Newsweek (1996), and his techniques have earned him a client list with some of the biggest corporations in the world including AT&T, Sony, Toyota, CNN, MTV, Nissan, Quicksilver, Intel, and Mercedes Benz. Carson's style found a way to get experimentation into the mainstream. He took design that had previously existed in the shadows, propagated by American subcultures and turned it into a completely new way of communicating.

Carson's work has set a precedent for taking chances and proven that the alternative isn't always negative. This makes me think that what I am delving into, the abstract style of design, isn't something that has been avoided over the course of design history, but is in fact, something that has, even in recent history, found an audience. Thanks to David Carson, this style has permitted people to see the value in this technique which others have dismissed. In the reactions evident on Wikipedia's page on David Carson, one commentator notes for example, he is often criticized for not following through with his content. "When viewing one of his works for the first time, the audience may have the impression that what they see is full of meaning and content. Upon closer inspection, it might become clear that they have been 'fooled,' as there is great disparity between what is promised and what is actually delivered. Also, in this process, the message can become unclear to those not initiated in his particular visual syntax" ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David\\_Carson\\_%28graphic\\_design-](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Carson_%28graphic_design-%28)

er%29). In contrast, my own work has provoked the opposite critique. In fact, once viewers indulge themselves in my design, they will often find too much information, not a lack of information. New connections can be made, and beyond that, multiple layers and levels of meaningful content. What Carson and I do share is a common belief in re-addressing what legibility means. For me, the limits of legibility are subjective, but can often predict notions of validity. Exploring access points in my installations has allowed me to indulge the far regions of legibility, as well as what it means to have a dialogue with the public in those regions.



David Carson · Magazine spread for Ray Gun. 1994

## &lt; THE GRAND RAPIDS PROJECT &gt;

In the Winter semester of 2005, I decided to take a risk and enroll in Julie Ellison's "Culture, Citizenship and the Public Sphere" class in the Program in American Culture. In this class, I felt like I had just left home — again. I took the class knowing that I was out of my league, but I knew that this opportunity would offer me a new and diverse perspective. My installations and design work for the School of Art & Design were gaining momentum, and it seemed that I could do no wrong, so I tried something where I thought I could do no right. By reframing all that I knew about design and visual culture through the lens of race, class and gender, and what nuances these categories bear on citizenship and culture, I was able to reevaluate the complexity of my own work in a social context. The result marked a distinct turning point in my thinking and practice. The final project for this class was in fact, a literal turning point, as I traded aesthetics in Ann Arbor for intensity of experience in my home town.

The project focused on how memory can morph traumatic events in particular public locations into strange, lingering feelings of rage and resentment. During my late teens, I found myself in a few very uncomfortable situations, two of which caused enough physical damage to warrant hospital time. One happened in the parking lot of Long John Silver's and the other in a public bathroom at a local shopping mall. Significantly, both sites were public, but commercially controlled locations. Over the last twelve years, I believed that the incident in the parking lot was defined by race. There were no arrests, there was no justice. In fact, in both cases, the men who beat me up made a clean getaway. I did not know the people involved and to my knowledge, I have not seen them since. This ambiguity made the restoration process, a term derived from practices of restorative justice very difficult because there was no one to confront ("Restorative Justice — Healing the Effects of Crime." Colorado State University. <<http://www.restorativejustice.com/>>). This also caused my memory to identify stereotypes of race and class with these faceless male shapes. As a result, I carried

the burden of racism and the promotion of stereotypes in the back of my mind. I realized that even though there is no opportunity for actual restorative justice, my own version of that could be created through a visual project related to the two incidents. Building from my previous collage pieces, I had the opportunity to think about the definition of place, what safety means to me, and how to define and find safe space. It took me a long time to feel comfortable talking about the two incidents but, in fact, time played a crucial role in my ability to find a resolution. Time caused my mind to morph the incident into variables of race and class. Time has also allowed my voice to mature and connect with my rational brain.

The conversation in my head never changed with the Grand Rapids project, I merely exchanged hope for pleading. I took the mysterious access points that I kept buried and allowed them to create a giant gaping wound from which the public had no choice but to respond and comment — thus be-



ginning the conversation I had been hoping for. The two phases of the project emerged simultaneously. The first phase was a mental project. This involved the reconfiguring of memory by engaging the philosophy of restorative justice. During the course of my studies in American Culture 699, I was introduced to the website [restorativejustice.com](http://restorativejustice.com). This website is dedicated to healing the effects of crime. The site has links to case studies and documentation of cases where a crime was committed against an innocent person and the responsibility of healing remains with the offender, the victim AND the community. The second was physical: I traveled to the two locations in Grand Rapids and performed acts of restorative justice using visual typographic interventions. The result I was hoping for was the documentation of possible disruption by citizens and/or Police (which did not happen during the actual crimes) and the replacement of my painful memories of those locations with new memories, or changed ones. I abandoned all of my pretty typography and exchanged my box of tricks for that bucket of chalk.



In a state of nervous agitation, I started at Long John Silver's by writing out the story of the assault with chalk on the cement parking lot where I had been assaulted and mapping out the location of the people involved on the broken pavement. My writing was a loose scrawl, utterly undesigned and messy, with no tinge of the artful. This is where the confrontations began. A restaurant employee confronted me, expressing a great deal of discomfort, and immediately started to undo the story with a mop. I raced to grab my camera and documented the subtraction of my restoration project. Just as I had come there to edit my memory and erase the resentment I felt, the intervening employee promptly edited my story because he felt compelled to wash away the discomfort it caused.

I accepted the responsibility for creating an understanding of justice. There would be no court case, there would be no arrests, and there certainly was no one to provide an admission of guilt or an apology. I came to terms with that and realized that if justice were going to take place, it was I who had to craft it. By the end of the parking lot experience, I was already out of sorts. My body felt like a muscle that had undergone a severe workout, ripped apart in order to rebuild with greater strength.

By this time, the parking lot was wet from being hosed down, people were everywhere, and I had secured the past inside the camera. I was outta there! As I left, I felt weird, almost as if there should have been some kind of event, some skirmish, possibly a police confrontation. I had thought of so many scenarios in my head that the actual event seemed like a let-down. 68 pictures, 83 pieces of chalk, 4 bloody knuckles and 35 minutes...swept away in a wet parking lot, almost as if it had never happened at all.



That same day, I travelled to the second location, the bathroom of Woodland Mall. Each of these incidents happened within the same late-high school time frame. I decided to confront my memory of this crime on the same day because of the similarities in the events that caused the same outcome — me lying in a pool of blood. Instead of using chalk, I used oil pastel on the ceramic tile of the bathroom. I mapped out the events and told the story with big letters. My public intervention in a private space (the men's room) caused a lot of uncomfortable looks and stares. Over the course of a half-hour, I drew and photographed the scene while talking to a man who wanted to know if what I was doing was vandalism. “pictures in the bathroom, huh? That’s weird.” I agreed that he had a good point. He talked to me the entire time he was going to bathroom, all the way to the sink — he was telling me that vandalism in the bathrooms around here had gotten very bad. In fact, the bathroom was spotless — I was the only vandal. At this point, people were coming in and out and nobody else said anything to me —maybe this was because this other guy was talking to me, so there must be a logical explanation as to why I was there with a camera.



There was no communication, no incident, just me and the walls in the place it happened. This man who stopped to talk seemed genuinely interested in wasting some time so I started to tell him the story. He seemed sincere and sensitive to what I was doing and as I told him the story, I realized that I was afraid that he would find the story was silly and my project boring. This made me want to embellish the story. It wasn't Hollywood enough without an ambulance or maybe I could tell him that I was in a coma...but I didn't, the conversation ended with him walking out, saying "yeah, I remember those days...kids used to hang out a lot at the mall...making trouble — gangs used to be a real problem around here." I hadn't said anything about gangs.

I finished taking pictures and decided to clean the walls, mostly because I felt guilty leaving them as graffiti, but also because I didn't want to involve anyone else in the story. It took a while and I didn't think I was going to get out of there without a slap on the wrist by a security guard but nothing...no one scolded me and I was glad. What I didn't realize at the time is that I had erased the story just as the employee of Long John Silver's did earlier that day. In a matter of an hour, each of these projects were started, completed and completely erased. When the incidents happened, they too started abruptly, ended abruptly, and the people involved were completely erased from my memory.

In these projects I chose to confront, in a dramatically personal way, my memories of the violation of safety in public places. Scholarship on restorative justice focuses on victim's rights and the reintegration of both victim and criminal into the larger community. This approach was made more powerful and nuanced by recent work that conjoins feminist ethnography, cultural anthropology, and memoir.

In Ruth Behar's book The Vulnerable Observer, she writes about a tragic accident in which she broke both her legs and spent an entire year in a body cast. As a result of the accident, she had man-

ifested feelings of pain, anxiety and agoraphobia. Over time, she realized that she had a responsibility to herself to regain her space. She needed to travel to Cuba, but fear and self-critique had become her road block:

“I had always known that one day I would tell the story of the car accident. And yet I kept censoring it, wanting to remain loyal to the adult injunction not to make too much of the whole thing, to insist that it could have been much worse. I would tell friends about the accident and my broken leg, and found that I’d get irritated if they showed too much sympathy for the girl in the cast. I certainly had no sympathy for her. She had been a crybaby and a coward and I was ashamed of her. Not until my unconscious restaged, so many years later, the memory of my confinement to my bed and the dread of having to stand on my own two feet did I begin to feel empathy for the young girl I had been.” (p.126)

This story resonated with me because Behar knew that she had a story to tell, despite her hesitancy in telling it. Because of the time that had passed since the original event, Behar seemed to know that what happened to her after the accident was just as important as the accident itself. And after all of her reflection, she refused to see herself as a victim; she didn’t want any sympathy, nor was able to feel empathy for her earlier self. After reading this chapter of Behar’s book, I wondered if I felt empathy for the boy I had been in the parking lot and in the restroom? After all, I too have no interest in sympathy, but I do want to see those incidents as experiences that have positively shaped my later years as a reflective member of a multicultural community. From this project forward, I knew that safe space does in fact exist, but only because I have equipped myself with a toolkit for understanding the relationship between the personal memory, the public construction of meaning, and the ongoing reality of being semi-comprehended.

My actions in the parking lot and in the bathroom begged for a response and I got it. I allowed a surprising amount of access into a complicated issue and started a new chapter of conversation with my work. I was gearing up for another big project, one that represented the culmination of

my graduate experience. The Grand Rapids projects were stylistically the antithesis of complexity. My handwriting was legible, my personal story was overt, and I explained it to anyone who asked. The anxiety induced by exposing my trauma took my memories of the original assault to the second power. The project established the utmost limit of exploring safety and pushed me for the first time to an extreme of legibility. It was complex in so far as the revision of memory was a complicated temporality in meaning, but it involved neither codes nor ciphers, nor games with scale. It provided me with the insight of balance. Having engaged both extremes of complexity, formally and conceptually, I found the knowledge to push the limits of both and the possibilities of bringing them together were endless.

< COMPLEX KNOWLEDGE / NOISE >

At the beginning of the Fall semester, I had just finished yet another Penny Stamps poster, I was getting ready for the final year of my graduate work and reading Complex Knowledge: Studies in Organizational Epistemologies, by Haridimos Tsoukas. This book influenced another critical turning point for my work. I was still struggling to explain the benefits to the complexity in my work. Tsoukas analyzes the structures and forms of complex organizations and shows how we can put complexity to use. For me, the text has been important in understanding the structures of management and strategy. In a chapter titled “Noisy Organizations: Uncertainty, Complexity, Narrativity,” Tsoukas discusses the concept of uncertainty and the role it plays in organizational systems:

“An information-processing view of organization design aims primarily at enabling organizations to manage uncertainty. Since **uncertainty increases the amount of information that must be processed during task execution**, organizational forms vary depending on the extent to which organizations are capable of processing information about events that could be anticipated in advance.” (Tsoukas pg.280)

Tsoukas’s analysis of uncertainty led me to a logical explanation as to why uncertainty should be avoided, allowing me to understand why people avoid complex work, but also provided me with a

clear insight into the benefits of uncertainty. More information can be accessed when uncertainty destroys efficiency. The complexity of my design work increases uncertainty and can therefore increase the amount of energy one needs to digest the visual information, resulting in a new experience. New and previously unrelated connections can be created as a result of the complex system that I have created in the form of an invitation to reorganize information.

In order to get more input on this from different sources, I dedicated an entry on my final project blog to the concept of complexity. I started the entry with my take on the topic and used the visual example of the Penny Stamps poster from Fall of 2004 to backup my ideas.

There is a fine line between being confusing and being complex. To be confusing is to cause someone to be unable to think with clarity or act with intelligence or understanding. By creating complexity, there is an increased awareness of the world allowing for multiple connections to be made between hundreds of different ideas previously thought to be unrelated (the richness of knowledge gathering/making). I have no intention of creating misleading or misguided maps for people to chase a communicative visual element around like a wild goose chase. I am merely attempting to publicize the benefits of **remaking** the current trend in digesting visual information. I designed the above lecture series poster with this idea in mind. I wasn't trying to doom the lecture series to campus obscurity / just the opposite.....it created a "what the hell" response from most people and the others couldn't ignore the fact that something very strange is happening at UofM's art school right now.

I only got a few comments because I did all the talking, but one person, an art school colleague did in fact make a point leading toward the benefits of complexity in design.

**Elisabeth said...** [ 10:29 PM ]

Complex design leads to complex questions, which in turn lead to (in the best case scenario) a complex discussion, where the lines between what a society demands and what it needs are blurry and at best a tone of grey that easily blends into the background becoming nothing more than a shadow of something we thought was real.

The project in Grand Rapids was an attempt to interrupt, interrogate and destabilize the existing stereotypes that formed my opinions and memory of the incidents. The project also began a complex conversation on cultural meaning and identity. This conversation will undoubtedly be continually and ambivalently negotiated in my head but not necessarily resolved. By not allowing permanent closure, I can pursue a never-ending education in negotiated spaces and use this vocabulary to become an ambassador to the stubborn.

Management is historically taken to be about effecting and managing closure: buffering the organization so that uncertainty is minimized, external dependencies are reduced, and, thus, closure is achieved (Thompson 1967). Such a view, a thoroughly modern one, assumes time to be symmetrical (or reversible) and, therefore, inconsequential—the future is, more or less, **the past played forward**. A closed system is one in which time irreversibility has been established; such a system maximizes efficiency, perhaps, but is short on novelty. (Tsoukas p.263)

My experience in the advertising industry has led me to know that this is exactly true — use what works and what works is what worked last time. Novelty is taken out of the sequence of designing as a result of planning ahead to avoid uncertainty which leads me to link novelty to uncertainty. The “past played forward” that Tsoukas refers to is a repetition of the past, a characteristic of modern management, responsible for redundancy in the context of the advertising industry. In direct contrast to this is my portfolio of work which seeks to embrace complexity by remaining open to the accidents of time.

## &lt; THE POSTING WALL &gt;

The second and final semester of my third year brought me to putting all of the pieces together in a final exhibition. After deciding not to participate in a traditional exhibition, I searched the local community for a place to incorporate my thoughts on space, improvisation and complexity. My sights landed on The Posting Wall located in Haven Hall, the epicenter of student traffic on Central Campus at the University of Michigan. When Haven Hall was enlarged and renovated several years ago, this site was designated for intentional flyer postings, student organization activity, and hanging out that characterized the old lobby of the building. In fact, The Posting Wall represents a fairly successful gentrification of the space. I decided to use this space as the location of a thesis experiment in a similar method to the Grand Rapids project in that it was a space not originally designated for exhibition. My thesis project revolved around an aggressive insertion of visual elements into



**The Posting Wall** · Documentation from my thesis experiment in Haven Hall. 4/06

[ See also Appendix D pgs. 71 - 83 ]

a space characterized by an already complex visual field, the documentation of my creative process, and the public negotiation of space.

At The Posting Wall, massive numbers of young college students participate in the evolution of visual dialogue. The Posting Wall, labeled by large three-dimensional letters, consists of 150 feet of glass sitting on top of a built-in bench. The wall frames the elevator leading to the building's departments in the College of Literature, Sciences and the Arts. What emerges here is one of the most complex and visually dense areas on campus, as well as a resting spot in between classes. Central Campus is divided into programs, colleges and disciplines, and beyond that sororities, fraternities, social clubs and co-ops. All of these different groups use The Posting Wall for flyers that announce activities or events. Every Friday, the maintenance crew responsible for the wall removes the flyers



**The Posting Wall** • Documentation from my thesis experiment in Haven Hall. 4/06

[ See also Appendix D pgs. 71 - 83 ]



down to the glass to moderate the space and allow for fresh postings to appear. Metaphorically, the wall is perfect because it represents complication in articulation created by an enormous number of individual elements that are each relatively simple.

I decided to conduct this experiment over the course of two weeks. I realized that there would still be an event analogous to a gallery opening on Friday night as an occasion for evaluation by my advisors. This created a sense that this project needed to peak at a very specific time. In the weeks leading up to the project, I traded emails with the maintenance staff. I asked questions revolving around the upkeep of such a self-governed space and asked about their role in the upkeep. After they explained that they clean the wall every Friday morning, I asked for a one week reprieve from cleaning so the intensity of the postings could reach a higher peak than usual. The emails I got were friendly



**The Posting Wall** · Documentation from my thesis experiment in Haven Hall. 4/06

[ See also Appendix D pgs. 71 - 83 ]

and inquisitive. I didn't give them too much information about my plans because I was afraid they might say no to the project, but I was surprised by their candid support. I decided to start a blog to create an online journal of the week's events, fully expecting there to be an intervention by students and/or the maintenance crew. The blog offers a real-time index of my anxieties:

**27 March 2006**

### **STARTING POINT**

I'll be the first to admit my reluctance to be confronted in a situation like this...I feel vulnerable. What am I afraid of? Failure, embarrassment, .....OK, just embarrassment.

An enormous number of people are using this space to relax, study, pass through, meet friends, etc. By standing on the ledge of the posting wall, I'm putting more than just myself on display. I'm invading other people's personal space in public. I'm taking a semi-safe space for everyone and pushing it to respond.

I was obviously skittish, just as in the Grand Rapids project, it took an enormous amount of courage to actually go through with it. The challenge was of a different kind, however. This did not involve revisiting sites of personal trauma but rather interfering with information to which other people had a strong claim. By energetically inserting my own personal work into this environment, I hoped to create nothing less than a discussion on communication in an over-saturated, uncertain, and fluid space, a space that invites do-it-yourself design.

Before I started anything, I wanted to try to fully embrace the idea of uncertainty to prove that the unknown leads to intensive improvisation and greater complexity. In retrospect, however, I did do some planning in the form of discussion about my upcoming project.

During the week, I caught myself making plans, escape routes and excuses, but at the same time, I was conscious of this reflex to plan ahead and suppressed my anxiety. If I had allowed myself to plan and strategize, I may have been able to work faster and possibly even been able to calm down a little,

but the results would have been precisely a repetition of that which I had done so many times before. All of my past installations existed in controlled environments (the gallery) and were seen by an educated audience that was prepared to see the unexpected. By removing all of those controlled variables, I felt completely naked in the space and my thoughts and actions were vulnerable to attack and embarrassment. In this new vulnerability, I allowed chance and spontaneity to perform along with my improvisation skills.

Nonetheless, I showed up on every day that observational week watching and blogging about the experience and the intensity of the wall. I observed hundreds of students passing by the wall, oblivious to its contents. I too have walked past this wall many times on my way to class. My response to the wall became numb, and it became increasingly easy to ignore.

My observations of how people reacted to the information allowed me to contemplate the metaphoric resemblance the wall had to the advertising industry and our visual culture in general. The density of information is intense, layers upon layers of brightly colored paper calling out for someone to notice. This saturation reminds me of working for an ad agency called Grey Matter Group. While working there as an art director, I was always amazed at the amount of mediocre design that we put out into the world in what seemed to be a reckless fashion. Instead of thinking harder about the effectiveness of an individual project, the company defined branding as a consistent badgering of the public. This tactic is one of careless redundancy confused for consistency and pattern.

The Posting Wall was similar in that students didn't rely on the design of the content to communicate, rather, they relied on the cleverness of the posting and distribution of the flyers in the form of obsessive displays of redundant information. The wall was changing rapidly, almost in 12 hour shifts. Between morning and night, the appearance of the wall would morph with the speed at which

students and community members were posting. Over the course of many days of observation, I thought to myself that the speed at which the wall moves is growing faster as a result of everyone trying to let their voices be heard in a noisy environment. The result is layer upon layer upon layer of information that for the most part is lost in the pile. In order for one's information to survive on this wall, it has to be big and loud or it runs the risk of being ignored. The normal wall postings are subject to uncertainty as well as intricate shifting layers of information.

### **29 March 2006**

The speed of this wall is faster than I previously thought. From last night, the wall has a completely new group of large-scale postings ranging from basketball games to garage bands. It's a little less though — it seems the heavy, super-super-saturated areas have been cleaned up by new flyers that needed the space. The people putting up new realized the lack of effectiveness in the density and corrected it to benefit themselves and their cause.

On the Wednesday before beginning my intervention, I noticed that the over-saturation had in fact caused someone to tear down and remove a large portion of the wall's contents in order to insert their own arrangement of flyers. It seemed that the space is even self-governed to the extent that posters are willing to edit each other when necessary. This observation gave me a clue as to how to begin the process of implementing my work into the space.

I started by cutting giant gashes in the thick layer of flyers and postcards, creating a gaping wound in the dense blanket of information. Instead of just tearing off large portions of the flyers in chunks, I created large geometric shapes intersecting one another, dissecting some with tape boundaries and removing others. This was my first engagement with the wall itself and I decided to start with a bold move. The cutting started on Thursday and at the beginning I got a lot of curious looks, but towards the end, I was successful in drowning out the traffic of suspicious eyes.

Over the course of the two days — Thursday and Friday, I created an installation using tape, flyers and some of my old posters that I had lying around my studio. I started by inserting an old poster containing no obvious content in the middle of the hole I created out of the flyers. The impact was immediate. As I stood back, it was obvious that there was a tear in the normal look and feel of the wall and inside that tear was something that looked out of place yet interesting. My posters are two-dimensional, there is type on them (which means they were communicating), so they were created from the same materials as everything else on the wall (digital output on paper), but they looked distinctly different. The longer I worked, the more people started to understand that I was up to something aesthetic. For the most part, people avoided me and watched from afar. After a while, I started to notice someone standing behind me, staring. I tried not to pay attention as it was obvious that I was doing something that was unexpected in a very public space. After about 10 minutes or so, the young man approached me and asked me what I was doing. I could tell he was a bit upset.



**The Posting Wall** · Documentation from my thesis experiment in Haven Hall. 4/06

[ See also Appendix D pgs. 71 - 83 ]

I explained to him my project and then asked for his opinion. He abruptly and with intense sincerity explained that it was his flyers I was using to accomplish my project. The simple explanation didn't calm him down, and I realized that he deserved a much more in-depth explanation because after all, I was editing his ability to communicate. We went back and forth for a few minutes and I tried to create a dialogue about whether or not I was successful in adding attention to his flyers by subtracting portions of them, removing others and keeping just a few intact. By removing the predictability of his flyers I took away the redundant information and created an unexpected display of the same information. These flyers were flanked by one of my posters that bled into the glass by way of tape and torn paper. He was satisfied and promised to return...he left as abruptly as the conversation had started by declaring "I have a quiz!"

The confrontation with this student was the beginning of the dialogue I was hoping to have. Earlier in the week, in an attempt to understand the strategies that students use in posting, I interviewed a few people putting up flyers on the wall. One woman explained to me her posting etiquette; she made sure that she didn't cover up anyone's message in its entirety, a show of sportsmanship. Another person that I talked to preferred the "no holds barred" approach to posting where you find a clever posting on the wall and cover it up with your own. The confrontational student who had to go take the quiz took the approach of seeing an opportunity in the gash I had created in the wall. He saw the tempting glass peaking through and the big empty shape that I created with my scissors. Instead of taking his flyers out of the space I had created, I instead decided to incorporate them.

I followed the etiquette of the wall and did not cover up the entire message of any one flyer. All of his message was still visible, but in a very different form than he had posted. More dialogue began. Before I was even able to finish, a woman came and covered up a smaller hole that I created on the other side of the wall. This time, I only watched. She followed the lines that I had created with tape

and allowed her postcards to become incorporated into my installation. The visual dialogue was happening as well as a verbal one. The next day was Saturday and the wall doesn't see much traffic on the weekend with the exception of a few dedicated students. Monday brought an onslaught of flyers and clever arrangements around my installation as well as on top of, in front of, and behind it. The conversation had started, and the wall had become a noisy room full of inquisitive people. The recurring theme of the project arose: addition, subtraction, revision. I performed an act of editing other people's content, thus subtracting them from the space. The large, initial wound that I created negated a large number of fresh postings and even more old ones. As a result of reduction, I gained attention from those that typically would ignore the wall. Over time, the wall's visual existence created a numb response in passers by. But, the subtraction of redundancy by an editor made the information newly relevant. I had created a short lived trend in how people affected the space by allowing others to edit me as I had edited them.

This project combined elements of the Grand Rapids project, my poster design and endless studio experiments. The Posting Wall was an intervention in public space with unplanned consequences. In combination with the similarities to the Grand Rapids Project, I also used what I had learned in my experiment with the number eight. Both projects utilized designed improvisations and incorporated my own graphic idiom to initiate a new form of complex knowledge. The culmination of putting these techniques together in one project required substantial tension between craft and uncertainty, predictability of repetition and improvisation, aggressive subtraction and aggressive addition.

## &lt; CONCLUSION &gt;

Complexity is defined by many pieces of an entwined puzzle that cannot be easily qualified with a simple explanation. After my experience in the advertising industry, I found that complexity and uncertainty are not palatable characteristics that I was able to incorporate easily. Thanks to the Dada movement and designers like Wolfgang Weingart, I learned that there is a history of incorporating design work that questions legibility and readability. By exploring forms of encryption in my gallery installations, as well as my professional design work, I embraced the notion that introducing uncertainty into a highly structured system creates nourishment and an opportunity for learning.

My interest in exploring encryption manifested itself in my gallery installations like the eight's project, and in my digital graphic design work like the Penny Stamps posters. In both of those projects, I was curious about how to control the safety of language by manipulating the access to the content. I wanted people to slow down and talk to me, spend time with me and become acquainted. By the time I began the Grand Rapids project, I had decided to become more contentious with my quest for social engagement. Just like the Dadaists, I became an interventionist with deliberate, aggressive provocation for dialogue.

In all of the projects outlined in this thesis, I gained a thorough methodology for exploring alternative forms of communication. I now find myself on a trajectory towards discovering community and the skills needed for the renegotiation of complex social hierarchies. According to Tsoukas, once we disrupt a closed system of operation, we construct the beginning of a plot. The system is the protagonist and the disruption of the system becomes the antagonist creating an opportunity for my story to move in unpredictable directions.



Ed Fella's works reinforce the need for designers to implement compounded visual stimuli into the graphic design discourse. His reference to the public's ability to understand complexity as something that can, and does, exist leads me to believe that complexity is a necessary tool for avoiding a cultural shift away from the richness of knowledge gathered from experience. From that, I conclude that greater efficiency can be linked to patterns of comfort and confidence from the pre-existing knowledge of ordinary things. This structure creates redundancy dangerously linked to atrophy — a cultural decay of valuable sensibilities. Uncertainty allows for chance to take flight, to pursue the renegotiation of existing power structures, creating new connections to form out of previously unconnected bits of memory.

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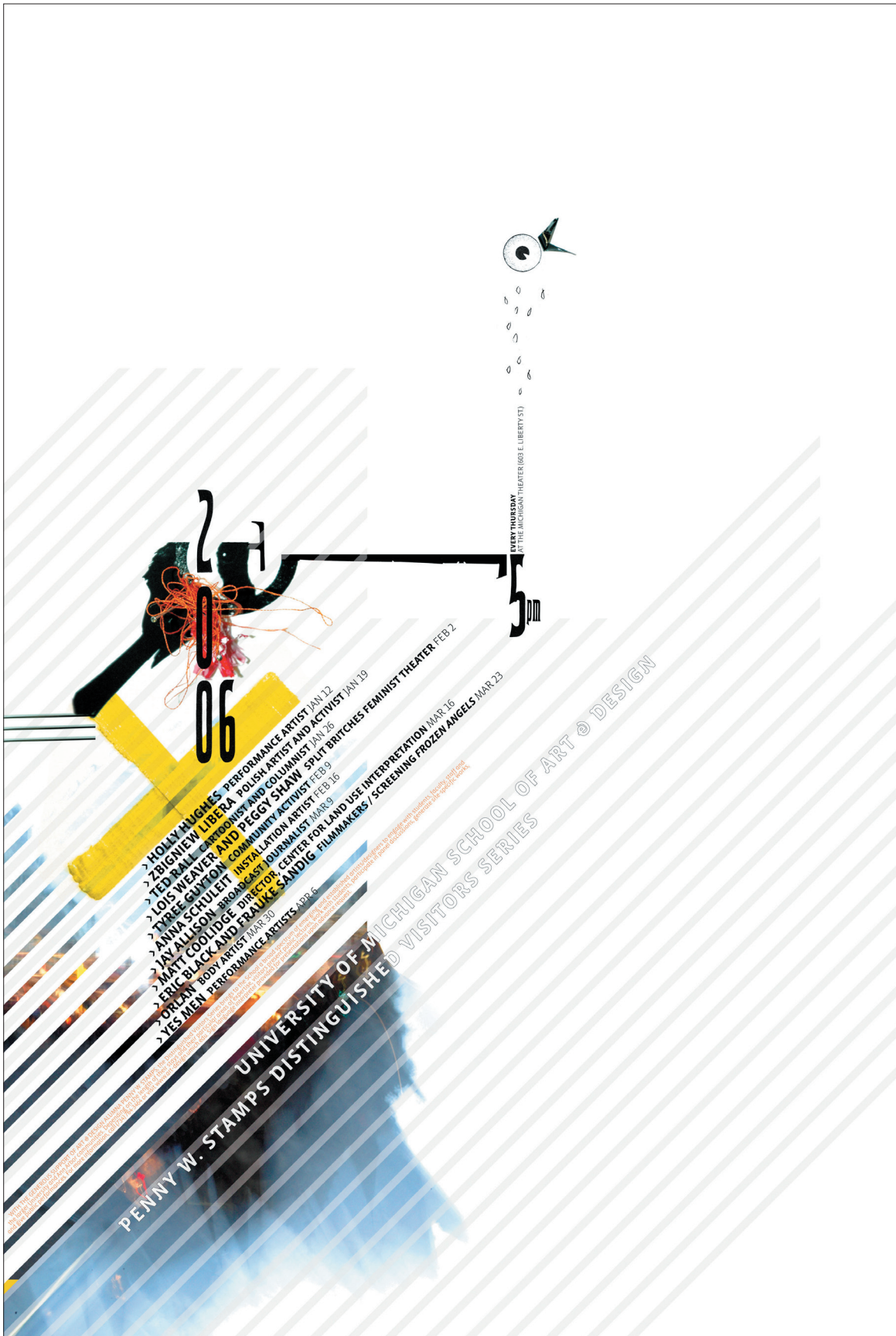
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APPENDIX A

[ DIGITAL PRINTS ]







Penny W. Stamps Lecture Series Poster • Fall, 2006

**TUCH SUNDAY**

**21 AUGUST**  
 ONE OF MIXMAG'S TOP 5 NIGHTS FOR THE SOUTH COAST!  
 All day Sunday (3pm until 3am)

**DJ Kriel (RADIO 1)  
 & A Guy Called Nic**

**KLUTE**  
 £3 entry  
 1/2 price cocktails all night  
 £3 double house spirits, Stella Bottles £2

(20 Exeter Road, Bournemouth, BH2 7JQ) B-O and beer  
 01202 252511 £5 all-u-can-eat Bar

[www.tuch.me.uk](http://www.tuch.me.uk)

Tuch Sunday • Bournemouth, England, 2005.

FRIDAY 30 SEPT

MAIN ROOM DJ'S:

SWITCH (DUBSIDE)

KRIEL (RADIO ONE)

A GUY CALLED NICK  
(HOUSE POUND)

SOFA ROOM:

MACHINES SOUND SYSTEM  
MACHINES LIVE/DJ SET  
SPECIAL GUESTS

TUCH

www.tuch.me.uk

JAMMAL

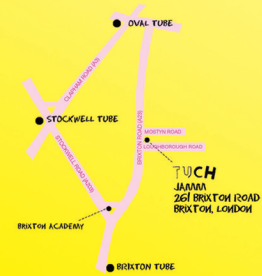


261 BRIXTON RD, BRIXTON  
07871 866024

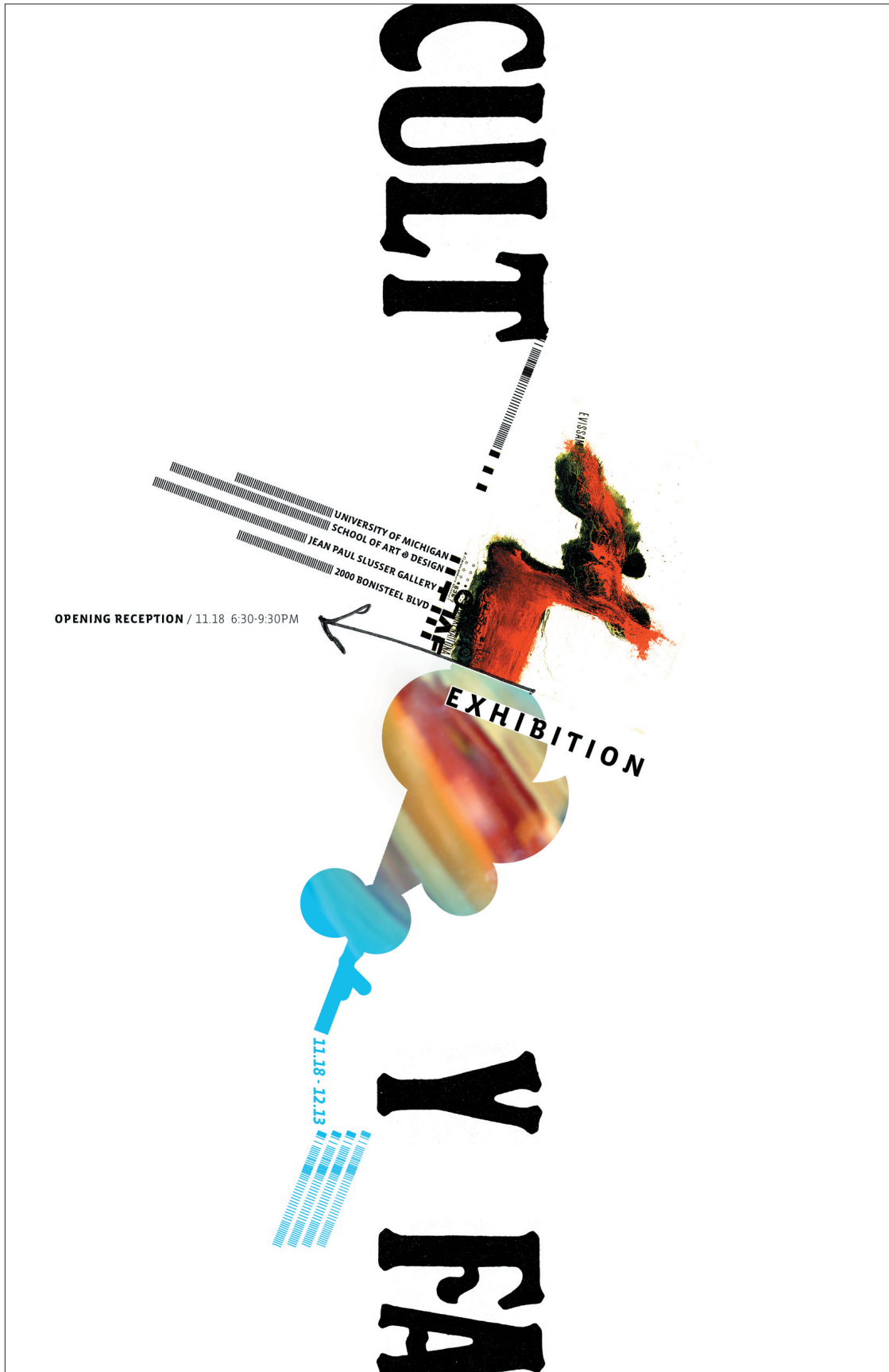
10-4

£6 / £00P

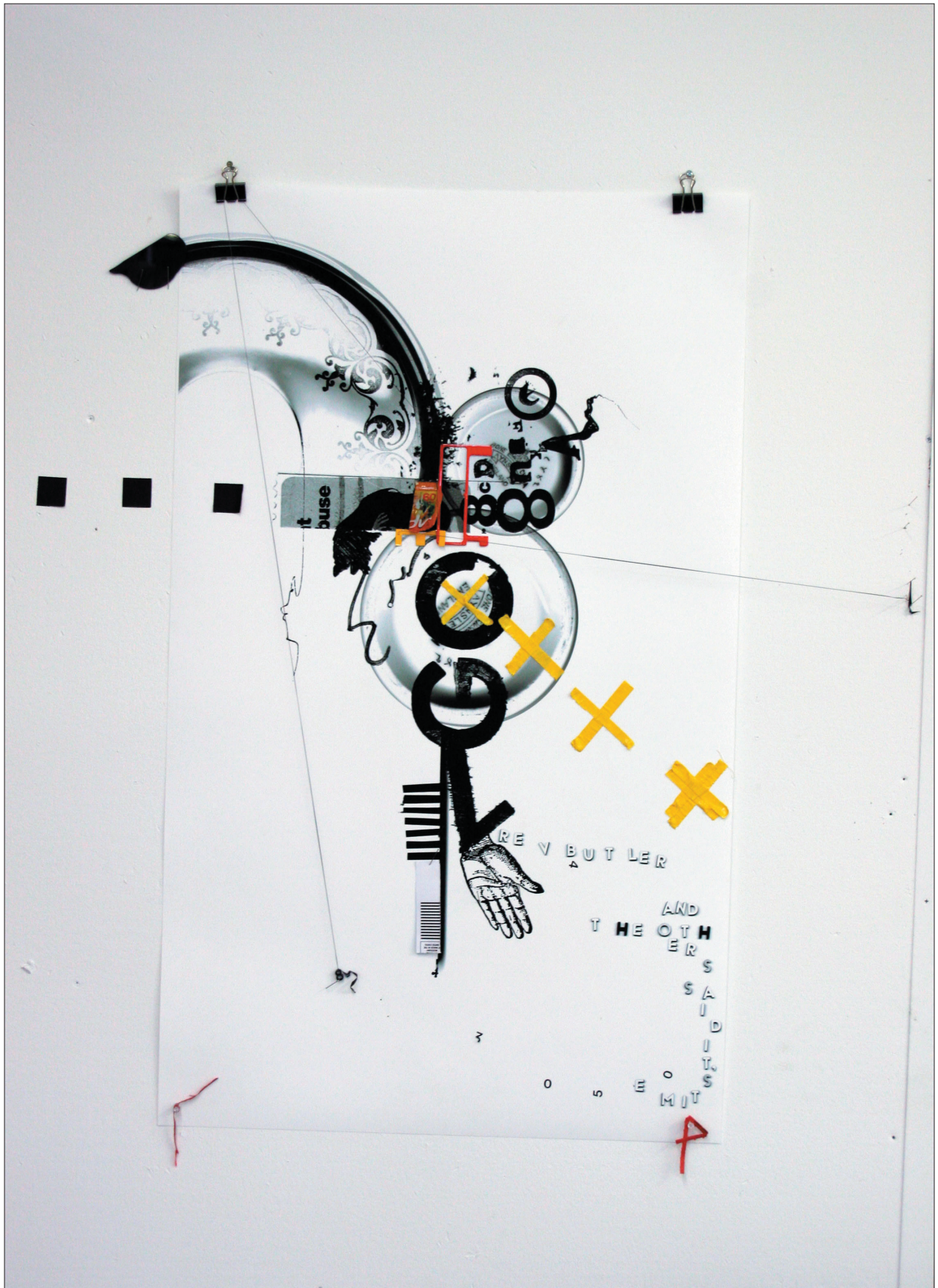
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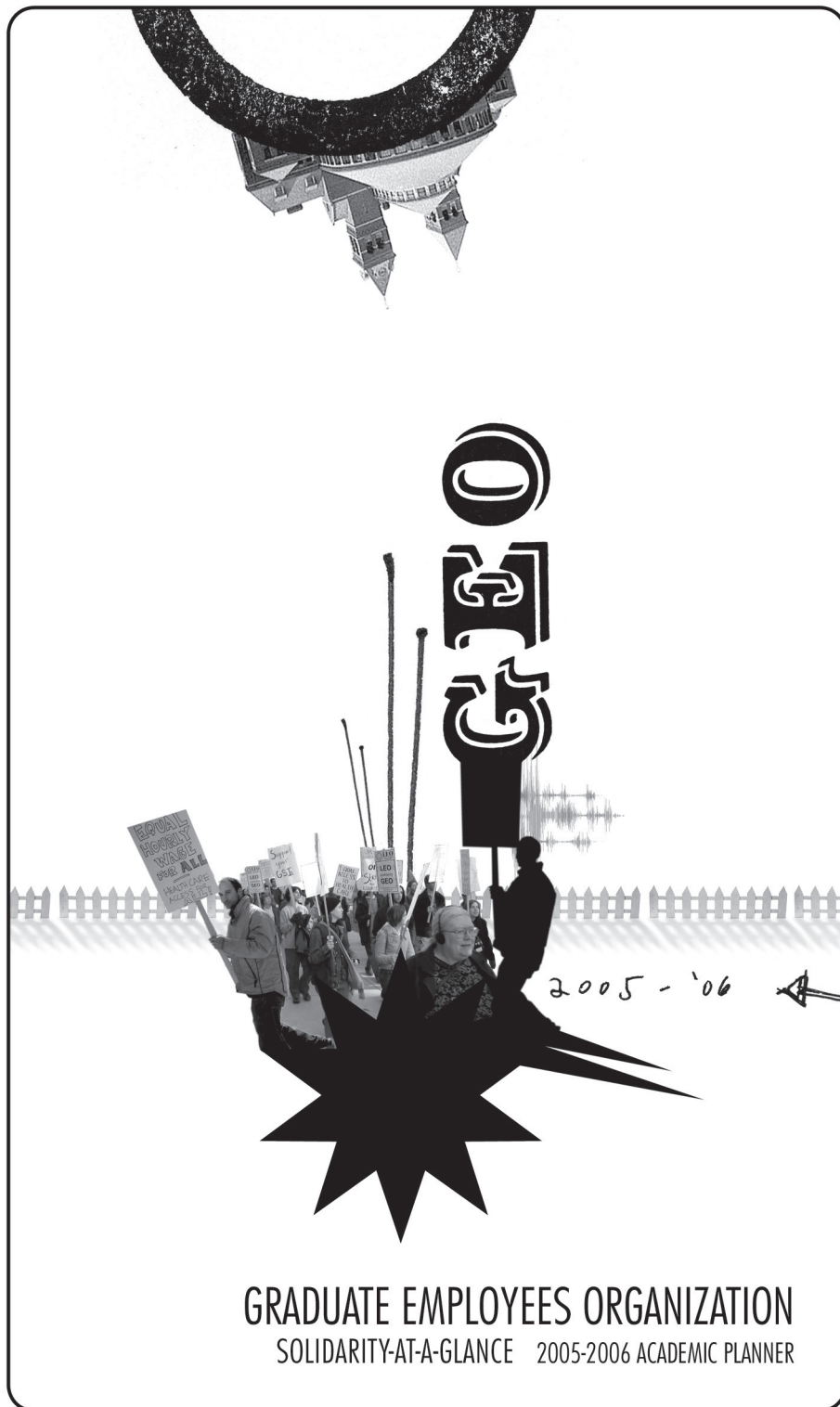
Faculty Exhibition Poster • School of Art & Design, University of Michigan, 2005.



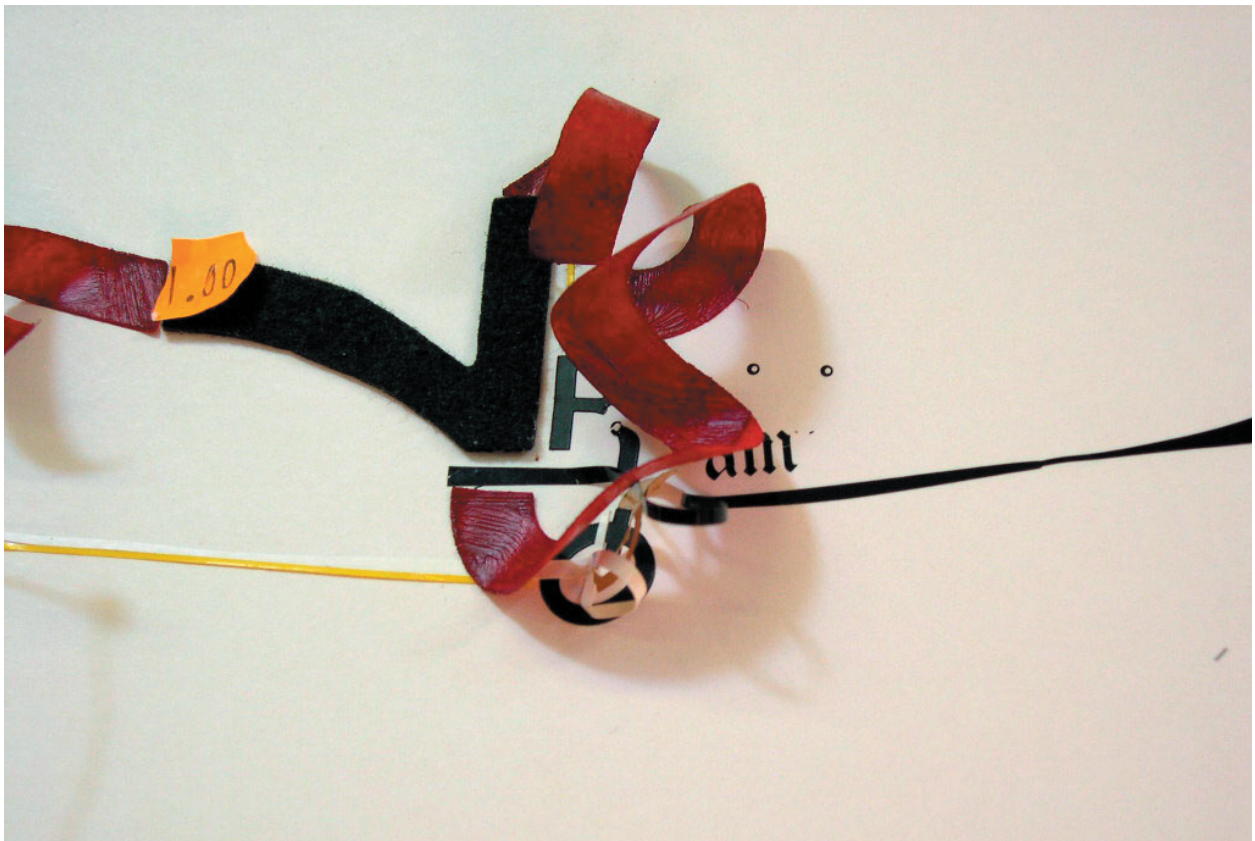
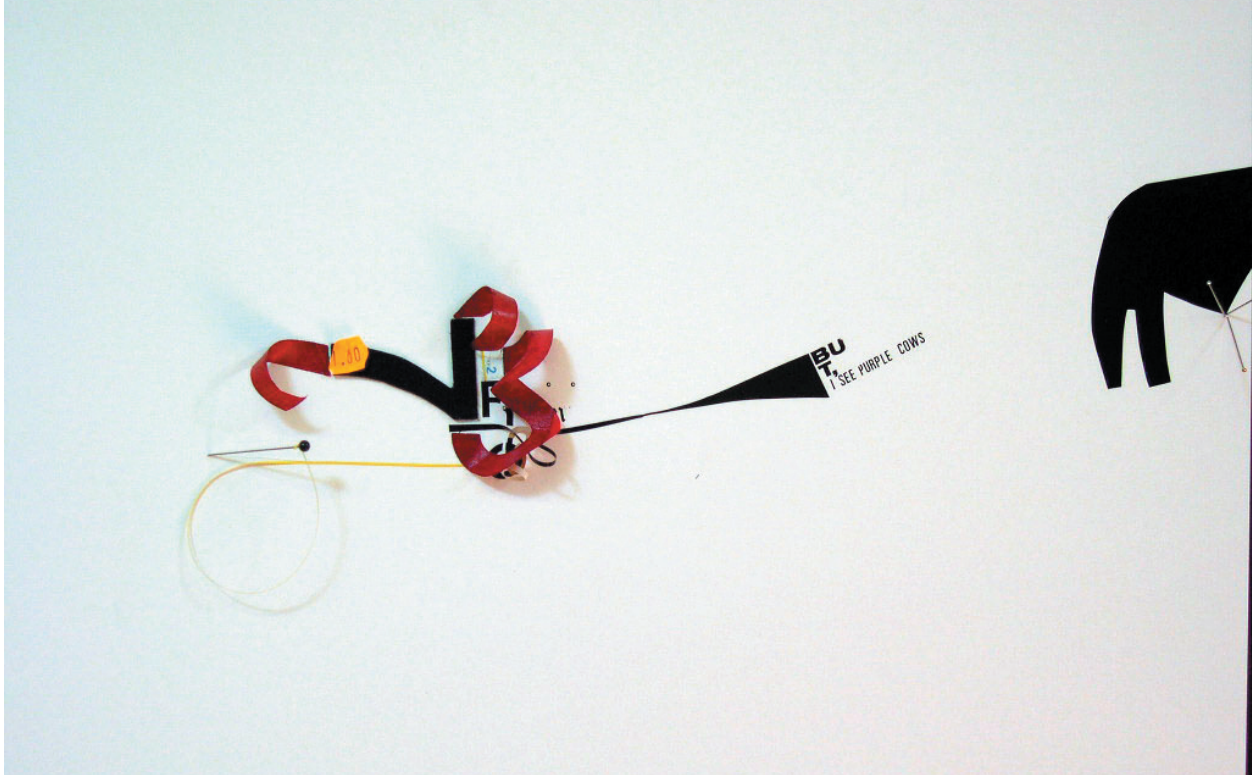
Studio Additives • School of Art & Design, Graduate Studios, 2006.



Studio Additives • School of Art & Design, Graduate Studios, 2006.



**A P P E N D I X   B**  
[ S T U D I O   E X P E R I M E N T S ]



Studio Experiment with Type • *Tape, Felt & Glue*, 2005.





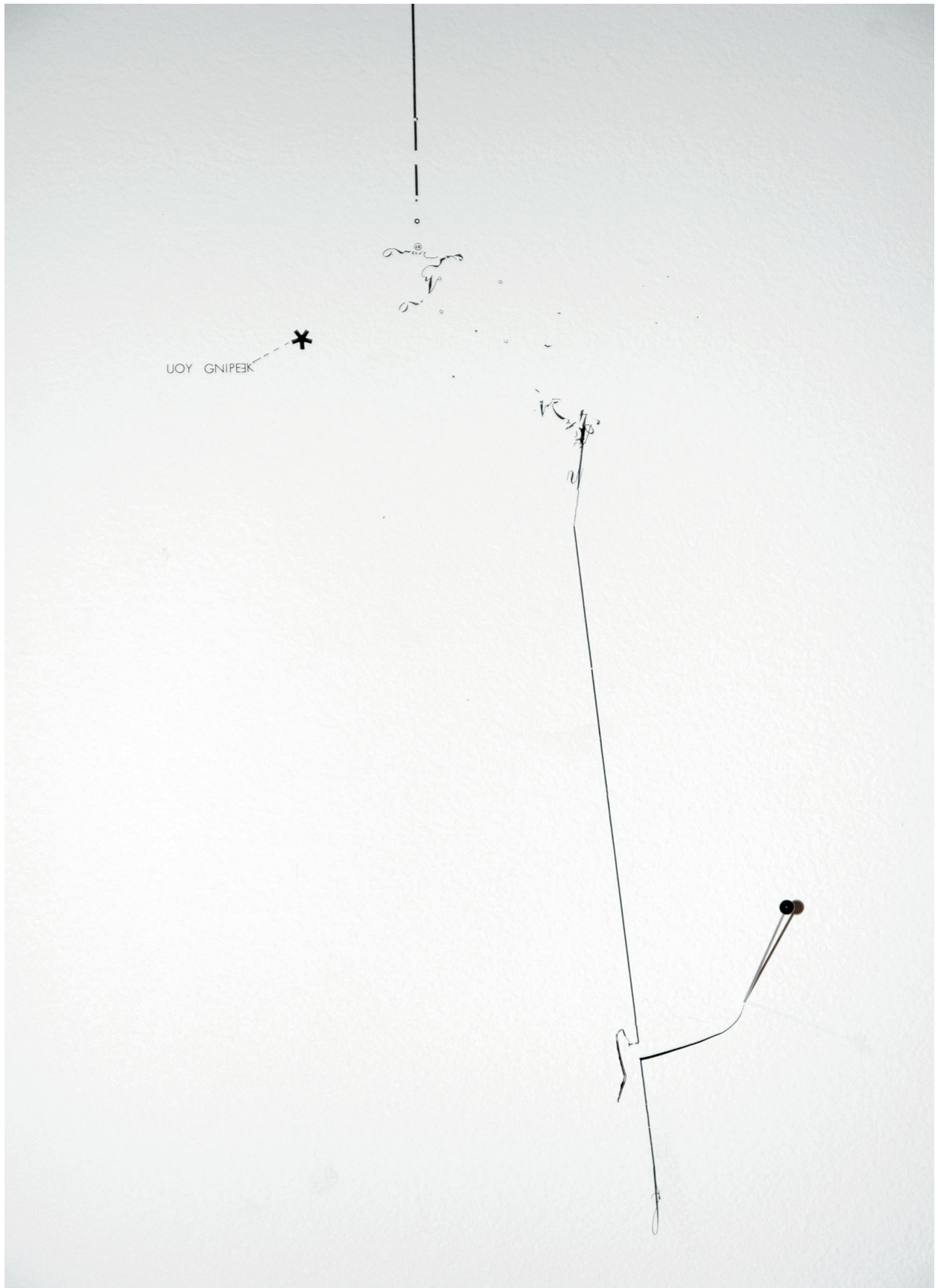
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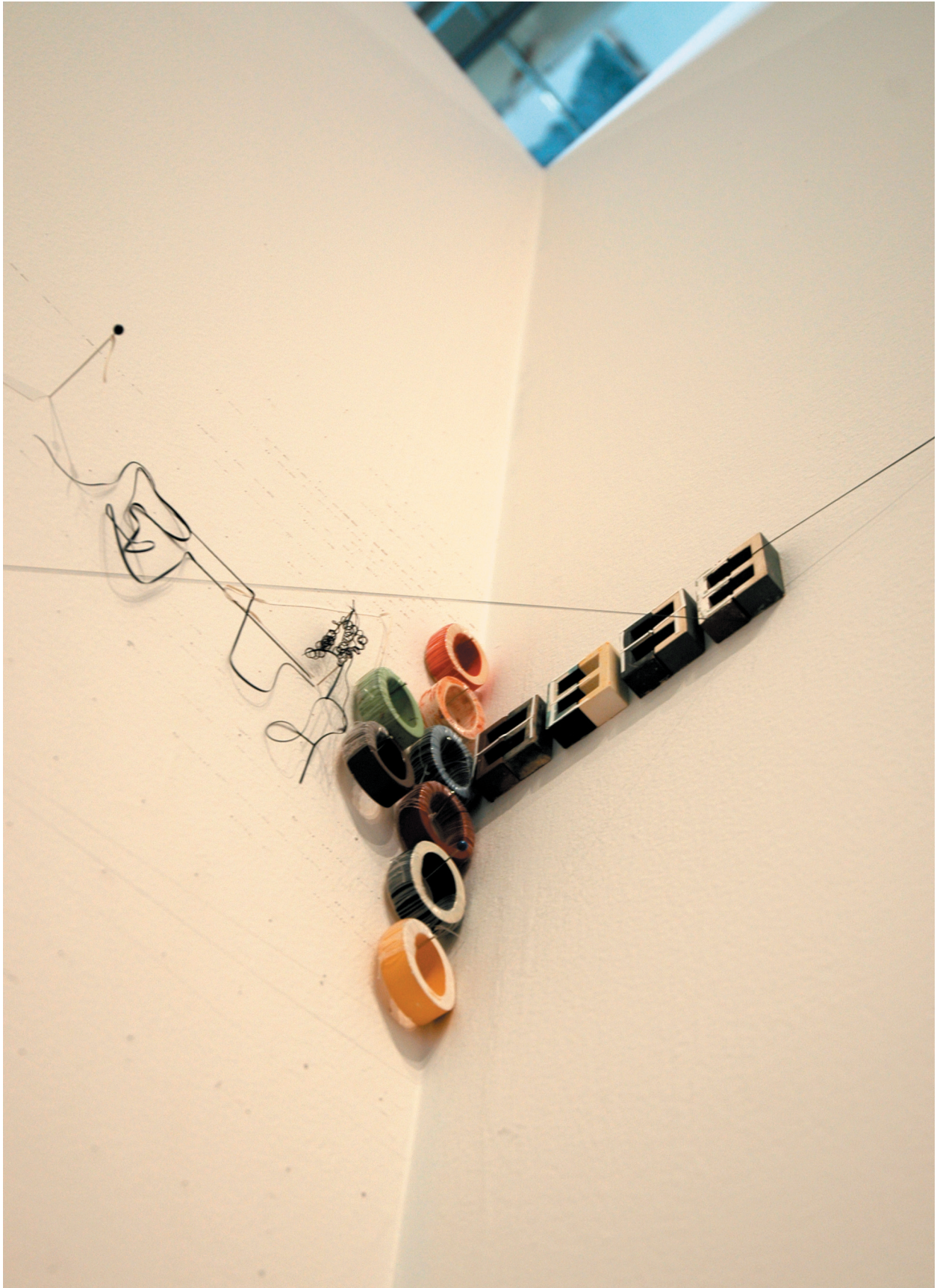
APPENDIX C  
[ GALLERY INSTALLATIONS ]



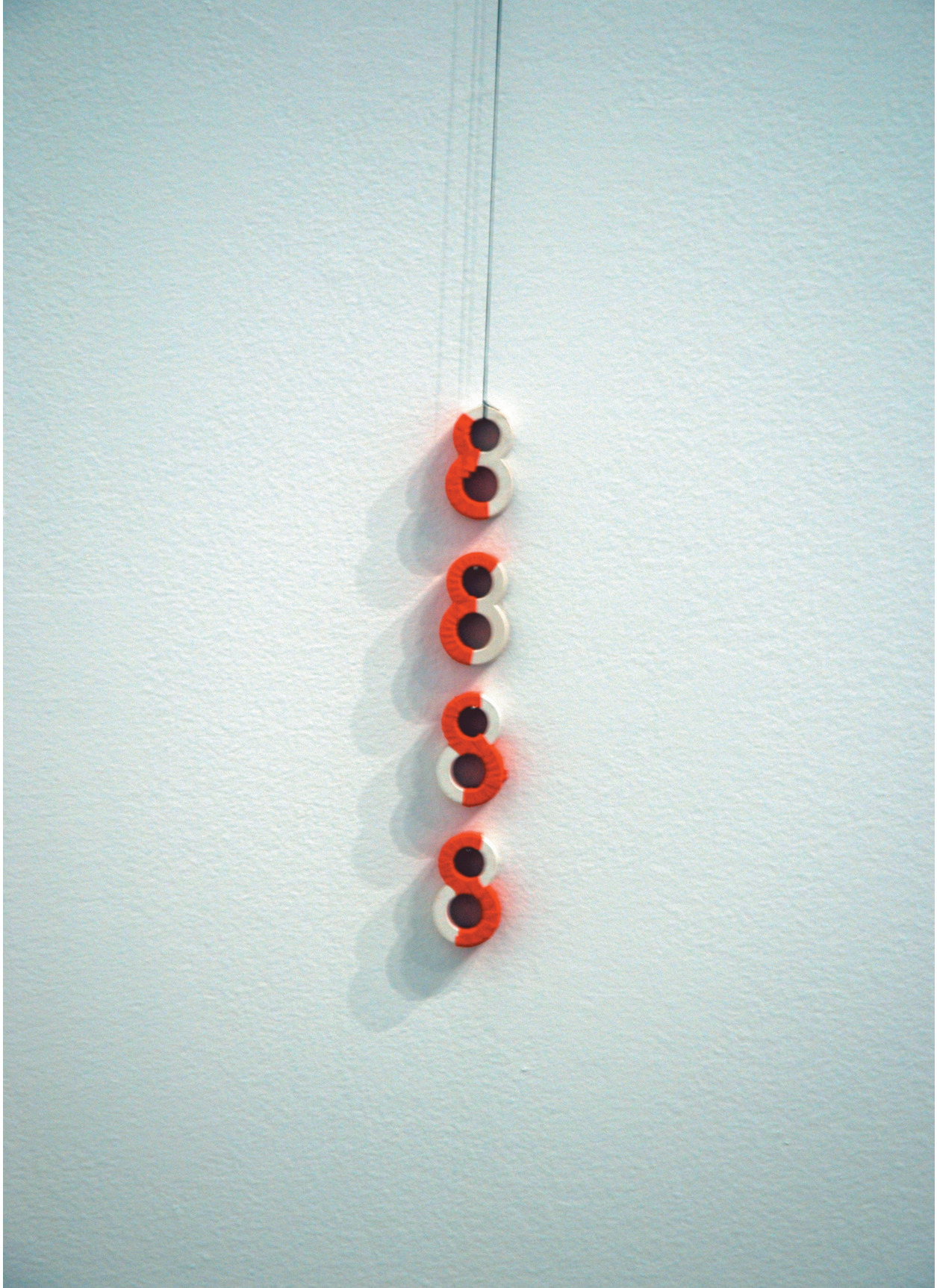
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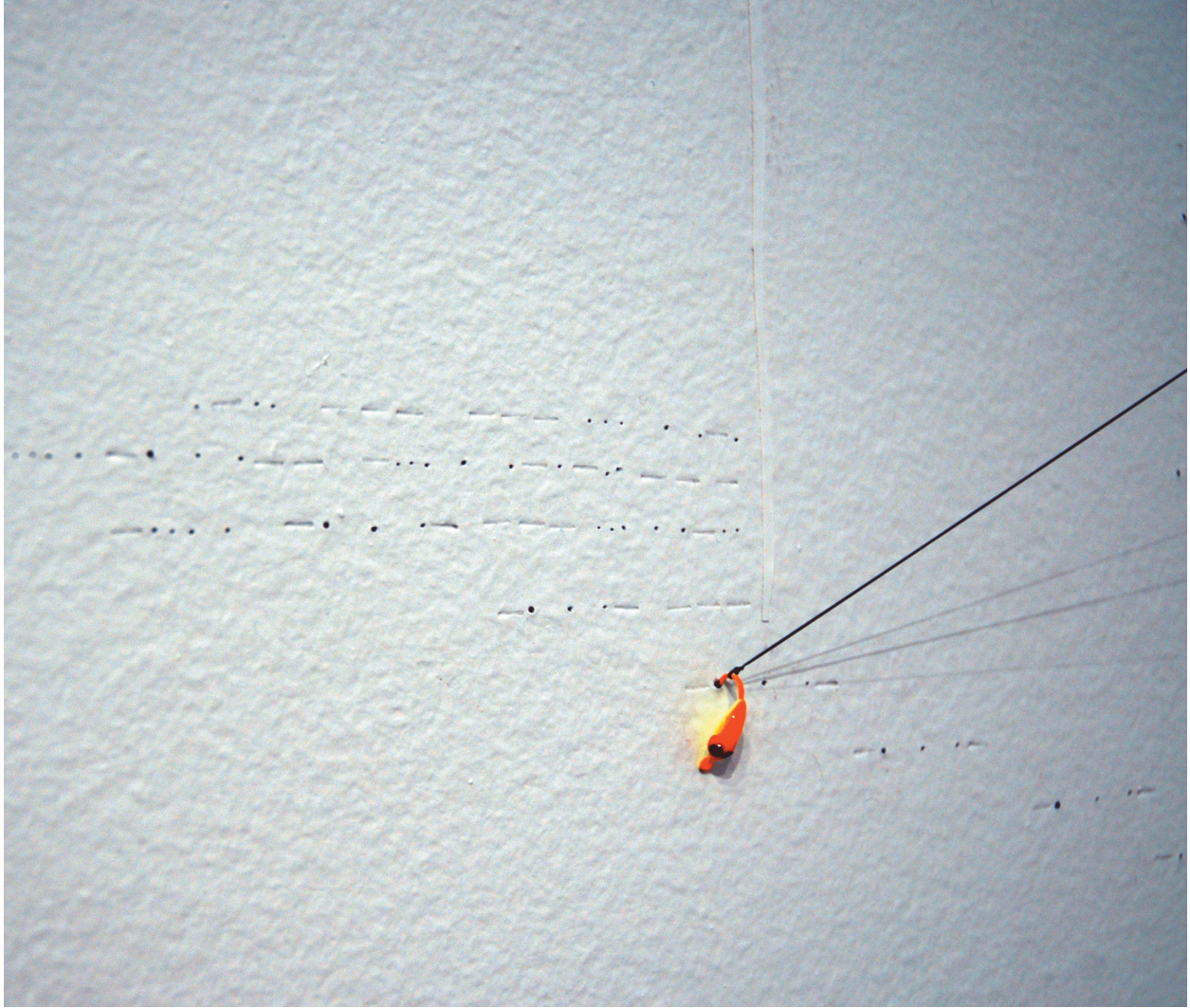
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**Gallery Installation** · *"Languish"* · Slusser Gallery, University of Michigan, 2005.

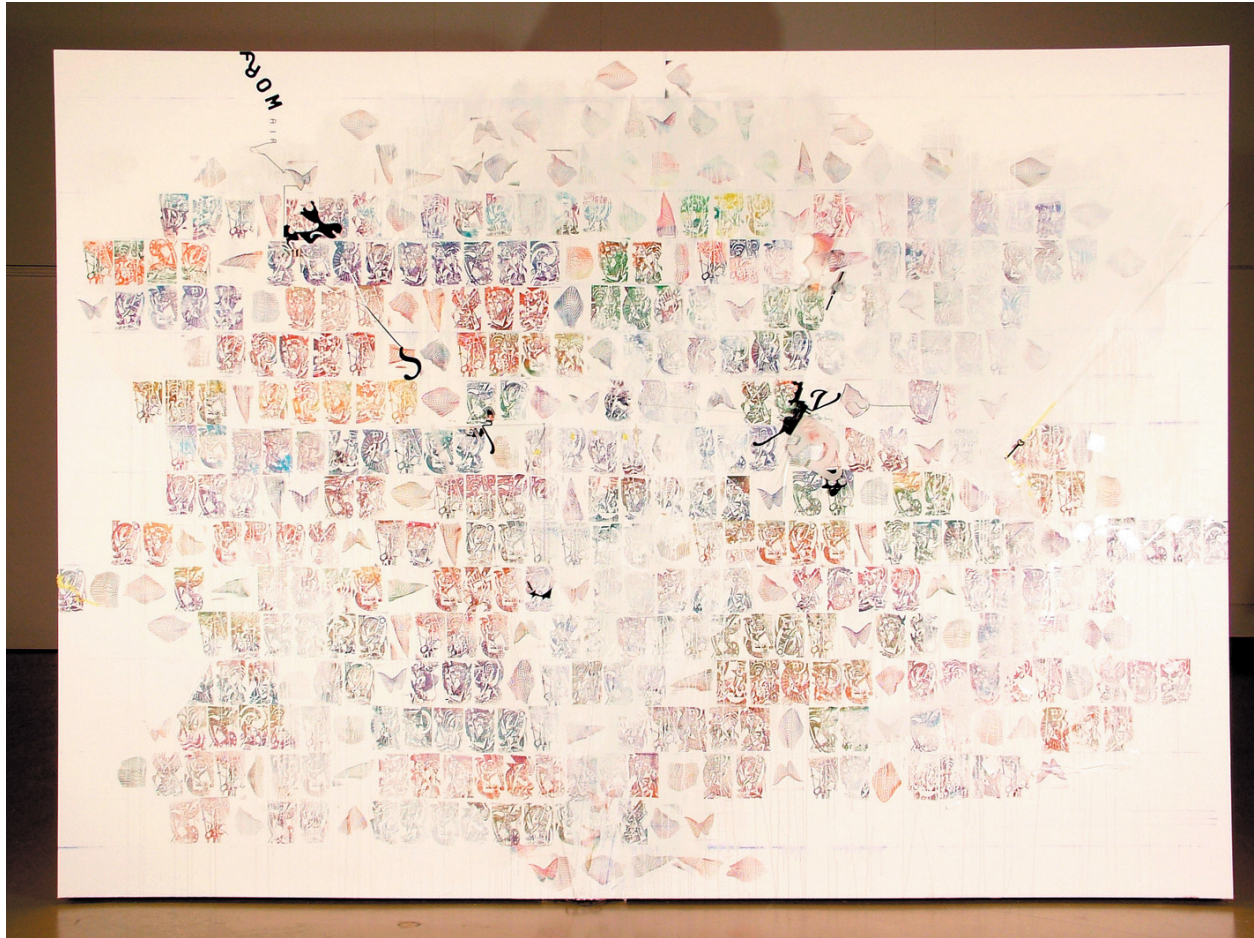


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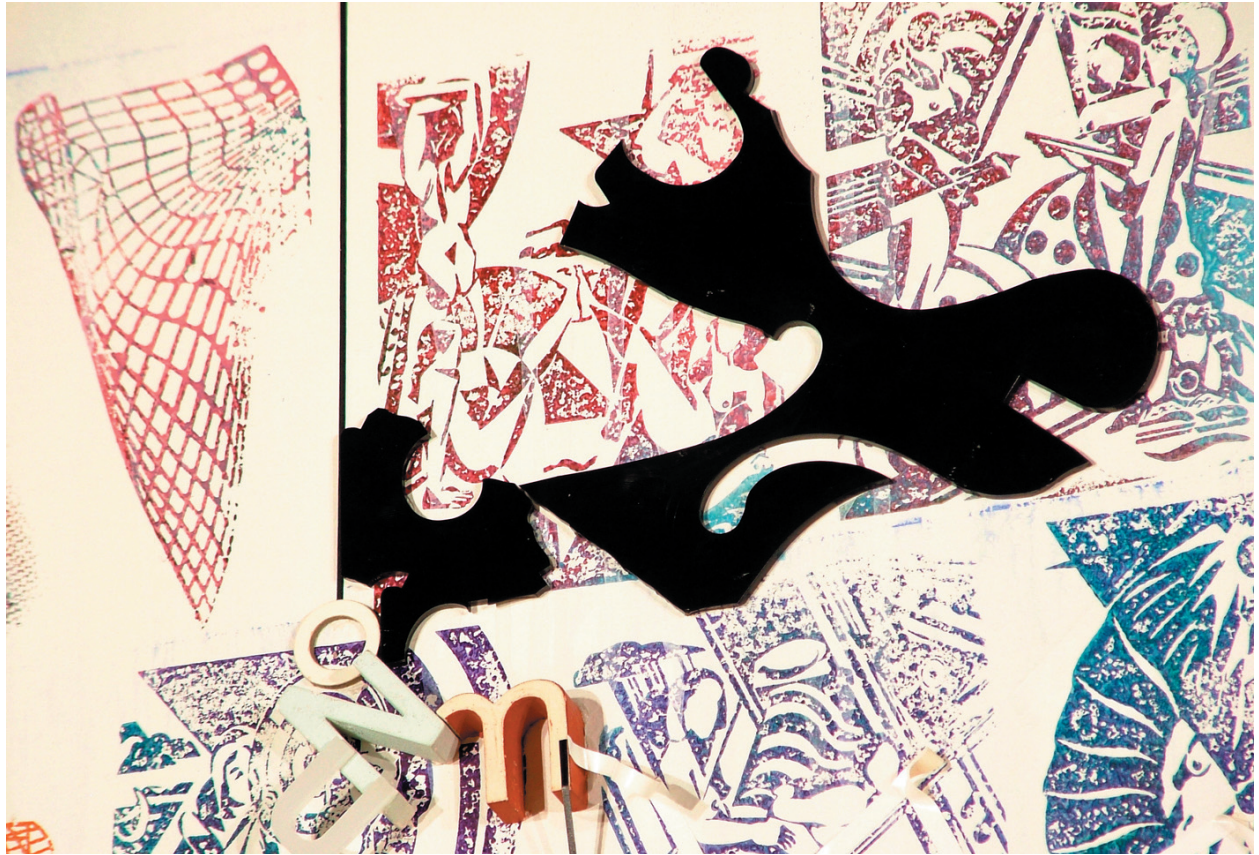


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**Gallery Installation** · *“Languish”* · Slusser Gallery, University of Michigan, 2005.

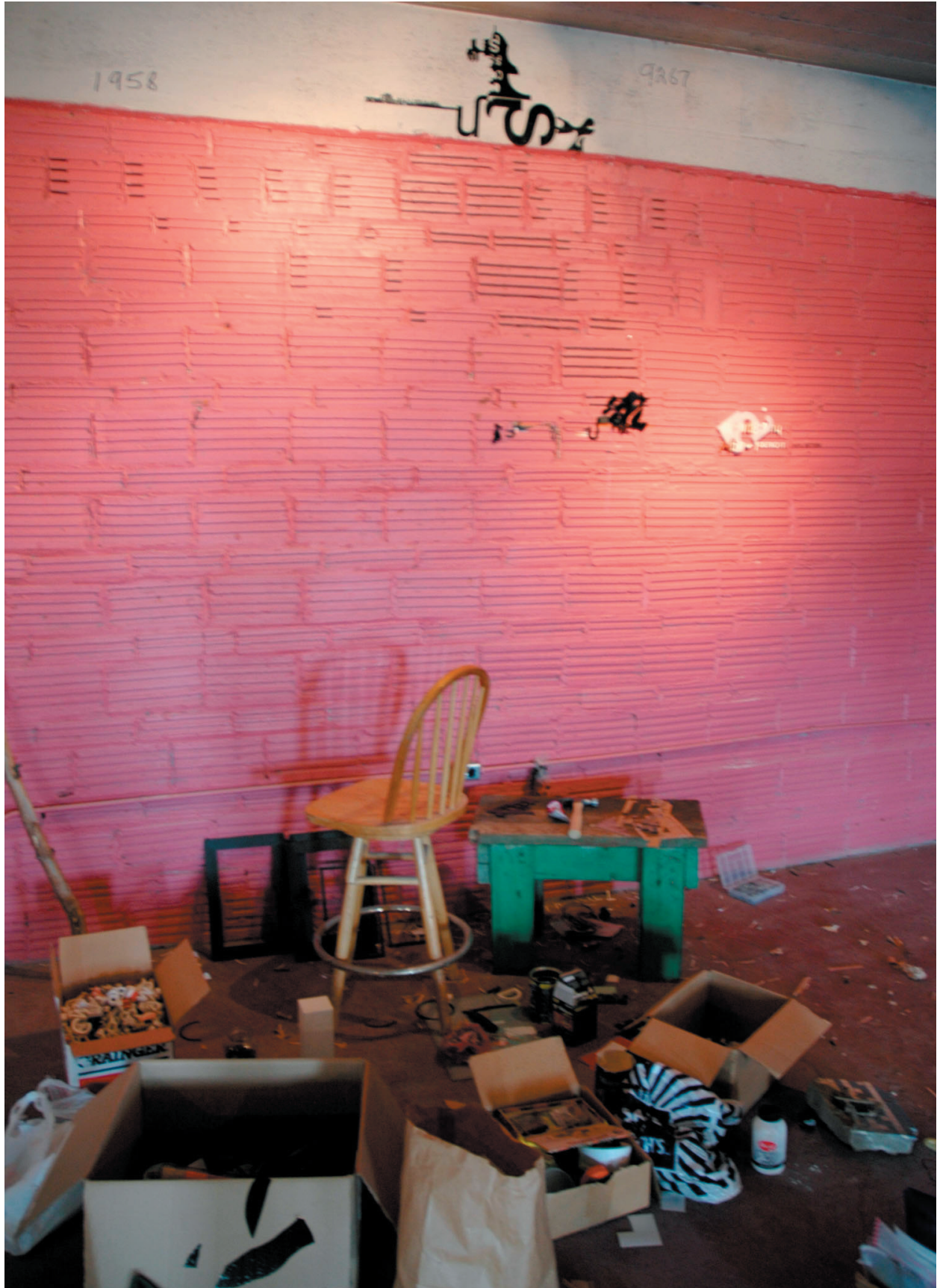


Gallery Installation • "Moby Dick" • Slusser Gallery, University of Michigan, 2005.



Gallery Installation • "Moby Dick" • Slusser Gallery, University of Michigan, 2005.





Gallery Installation · "Plexus" · 4731 Gallery, Detroit, Michigan, 2005.



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**Gallery Installation** · *"Plexus"* · 4731 Gallery, Detroit, Michigan, 2005.



Gallery Installation · *"Plexus"* · 4731 Gallery, Detroit, Michigan, 2005.

APPENDIX D

[ THE GRAND RAPIDS PROJECT ]



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The Grand Rapids Project • Long John Silver's, 2005





The Grand Rapids Project • Long John Silver's, 2005



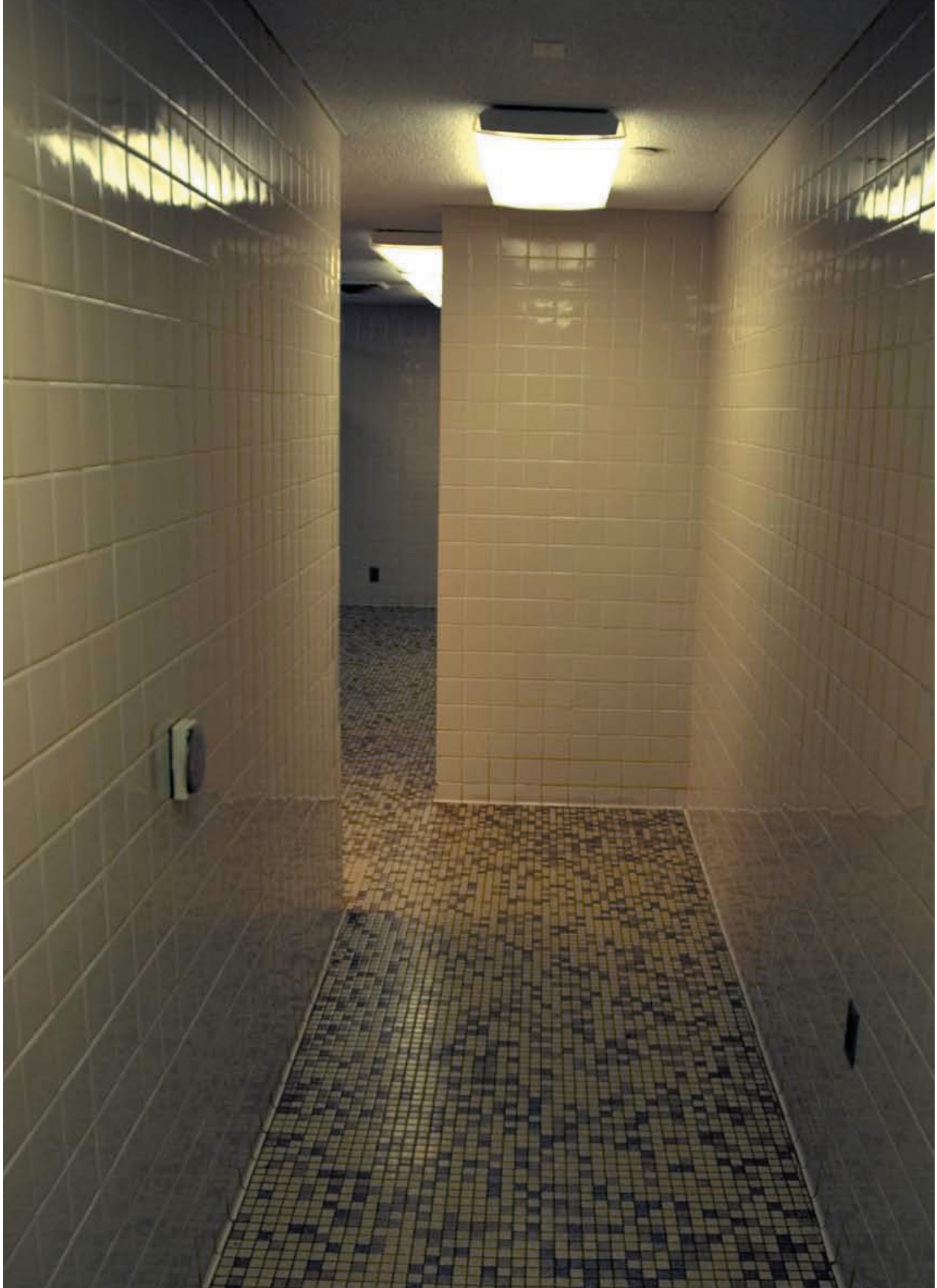












The Grand Rapids Project · Woodland Mall, 2005





