

IN / AUTHENTIC NOISE

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Integrative Project Written Thesis

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Introduction

“One of the things that [I am] concerned with...is that our ability to connect, that our basic day to day interaction to connect on the things that matter is breaking down, that we have more ways to communicate than ever but less of an ability to connect and engage meaningfully and respectfully”

- Joshua Johnson, NPR¹

My dad won't talk about anything except my school/career. One of my closest friends calls to “vent” but rewords my advice to fit her needs. My aunt asks questions in a quest for information instead of genuine curiosity. I run into my roommate and have the same conversation that I had with my classmate an hour ago. I notice myself asking and answering the same questions in the same way too many times a day. To me, these daily connections miss the mark of authentic communication. They are one-sided and don't invite us to learn new things about each other. I've noticed a tendency to take existing relationships and daily conversations for granted. As a result I have identified this lack of routine authentic conversations to be the problem. I want to disrupt the monotonous interactions by interjecting my thoughts and try to spark more thoughtful, critical thinking about conversations.

Every day we exchange words and information. We see them, we read them, we type them, and we write them. But more directly we say them and we hear them. My thesis project focuses on these routine verbal exchanges. Living in such a fast-paced world, we are bombarded with distractions like social media. In combination with our rushed lifestyles, I find it difficult to have genuine conversations with other people and walk away feeling like I know them better or that we really connected. The sheer amount of these types of conversations highlights the lack of more intimate ones that I think we inherently seek. We have a strong desire to connect with others, and a need for human interaction and relationship. But so many of our connections are composed of superficial, repetitive exchanges of words and gestures.

Why does this happen so frequently and why do we not seek more genuine and authentic conversations regularly? Although small talk can be an important and essential part of a conversation, how can we get past that basic level of communication?

I have created a typographic installation using modes of light and layering to comment on the “excessive noise” of our daily interactions and uncover ways to reach authentic speech. I aim to comment on the large amount of information we hear every day and the subsequent “missed” communication in established interpersonal relationships. I will use gathered data from my and others' conversations with projected motion graphics, layered transparent acrylic, and hand bound booklets to communicate these ideas within a physical environment. The intersection of materials and the content they hold seeks to interrupt the conversations we are used to having. The goal is to experience the more intimate ones that we seem to lack. I want to illustrate my frustrations with conversations while advocating for deeper, more meaningful connections. This work can allow for others to consider their own relationships and seek deeper connections. Real connections matter because they force us to learn and grow by listening to thoughts other than our own; but, too often our conversations are filled with empty or trivial messages that don't break through the barrier of intimacy. I want people to abandon their routine and choose to engage, either with people in their own lives or with this installation in thought. By noticing the noise we can learn to limit it and speak to others more authentically.

¹Johnson, Joshua, and Ailsa Chang. “Aiming To Break Down Barriers, Joshua Johnson Brings New Show To WAMU.” *NPR*. 01 Jan. 2017.

The Psychology of Conversation

Beyond my personal relationships I wanted to see if other people were experiencing similar interactions and frustrations. Late writer and essayist David Foster Wallace identifies our environment as one of “‘Total Noise,’ in which we are constantly bombarded with ‘the seething static’ of limitless information, communication and choice.” He establishes our roles through these tensions of being “simultaneously overstimulated and bored; enriched and empty; connected yet isolated and alone.”² In her work, actress and playwright Anna Deavere Smith seeks to break through these barriers and connect with one another. She said, “I wanted to get people to talk to me, in a true way. Not true in the sense of spilling their guts. Not true in the sense of the difference between truth and lies. I wanted to hear—well—authentic speech, speech that you could dance to, speech that had the possibility of breaking through the walls of the listener, speech that could get to your heart, and beyond that to someplace else in your consciousness.”³ *What is the catalyst to break through the Total Noise of our world and find the Authentic Speech to make deeper connections with one another?*

There is much to be said on this topic in the world of psychology and sociology. Reading *The Lost Art of Listening* by PhD Michael P. Nichols provided insight into what works, or doesn’t work, with communication in relationships.⁴ I learned that people are often not intimately connected with one another because they are reading the other person incorrectly. The attempt to communicate is missed. Both individuals are not fully present. And subsequently, one or both parties are left feeling disappointed. Another primary component of missed communication is the constant need to multitask. This leads to distraction and being less invested in the moment. Often times people feel the need to say something in a conversation instead of listening or just being quiet. By constantly filling the silence with an urgency to speak, much of our conversations are filled with inauthentic “filler words” that are not meaningful or representative of what the other person wants to say. Nichols’ writing supplies a good understanding about the psychology of language and communication within a relationship.

Today, in addition to multitasking, we are surrounded by many distractions like media and technology. The conversations we do have become infrequent and compete with these alternative “conversations” on our devices. Communication is a necessary tool but, according to Fast Company, 60% of conversations are spent talking about ourselves. This increases to 80% when on social media, and the explanation is simple.⁵ It feels good to talk about yourself. However, it seems like people don’t really value silence. There is also a very unequal, and probably noisy, distribution of talking and listening time between two people. As a result, I believe people rarely actually hear what is being said by the other person.

Through some psychological research I made interesting discoveries about how we interact with people depending on our level of comfort with them. Shankar Vedantam, NPR’s social science correspondent, discusses our level of comfort with strangers, and that we might be able to learn more than when talking to someone we already know.⁶ With those who we are seemingly closest to, we struggle to have regular conversations that are as revealing and open as those initial ones we have when meeting a stranger. Through experimentation, Kenneth Savitsky at Williams College in Massachusetts found that more is at risk when talking to people close to you because we often incorrectly assume we will be on the same page. He says that we put more effort into understanding a stranger than we do people we already know.⁶ Because of this research, I narrowed in on these problems that lie within already established relationships. People get too comfortable to work for a conversation and gain new insights from each other because we feel that we already know the person.

²“Offline is the new luxury (1).” *Flow Magazine*. 24 Aug. 2016.

³Popova, Maria. “How to Listen Between the Lines: Anna Deavere Smith on the Art of Listening in a Culture of Speaking.” *Brain Pickings*. 24 Feb. 2017.

⁴Nichols, Michael P. *The lost art of listening: how learning to listen can improve relationships*. New York: Guilford Press, 2009.

⁵Dishman, Lydia. “The Science Of Why We Talk Too Much (And How To Shut Up).” *Fast Company*. 11 June 2015.

⁶Greene, David, and Shankar Vedantam. “Hidden Brain: How Miscommunications Happen.” *NPR*. 22 Sept. 2015.

Text in the Contemporary Public Space

I began to look at artists and designers utilizing language at a large scale in public settings. I was drawn to this type of work because of the sheer attention to a message that a public environment offers. I was not interested in this approach for the publicity of ad campaigns. Instead, I wanted to use the same elements of scale and location to communicate an important message to a large number of people in a more natural way. Stefan Sagmeister, who creates many large scale installations using typography, works with contemporary and universal social issues like happiness and confidence. He references maxims in his work, short statements of truth, which I saw as potential solutions to convey my frustrations about communication.



Banana Wall, from Sagmeister & Walsh's Deitch Projects



The Uselessness mural, from Sagmeister's The Happy Show

Jenny Holzer's work with text similarly uses short phrases of language to convey strong and provocative messages. She works at overwhelming scales, projecting on sides of buildings, often exposing intimate messages for all to see. Her use of projection as the channel for her messages immediately captivated me by the way it interacts with the environment and the people walking by or through it. It is a dynamic form of using text that ignites the space in which it is placed.

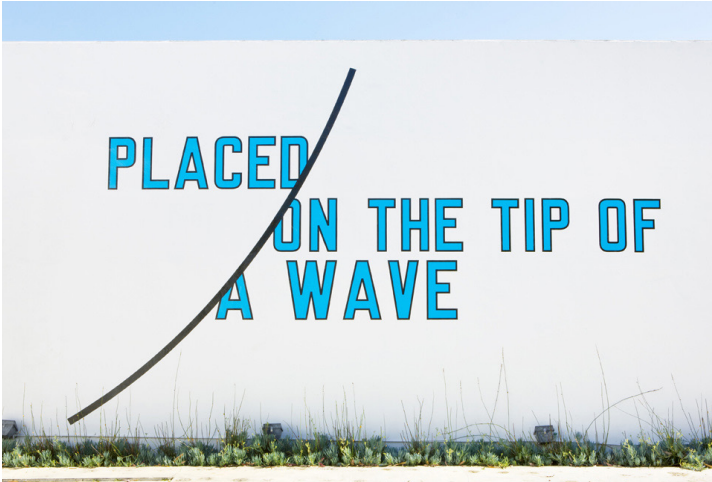


I Feel You, projection, San Diego 2007

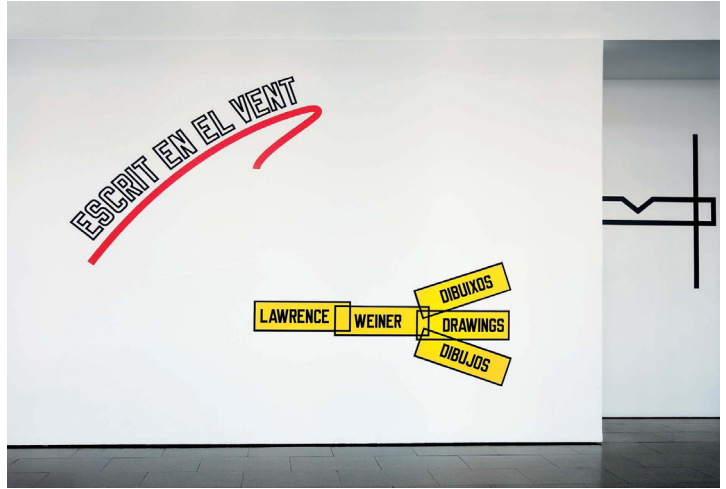


Expiring for love is beautiful but stupid, projection

Lawrence Weiner captivates environments, too, with text. His approach includes color and decorative elements that are not found in Holzer's work. Instead, he uses these additional components to supplement the message and communicate more information. His striking graphic style and utilization of the physical space provided many sources for inspiration. Through these textual "sculptures," Weiner creates motion and dynamic compositions that I try to utilize later on.

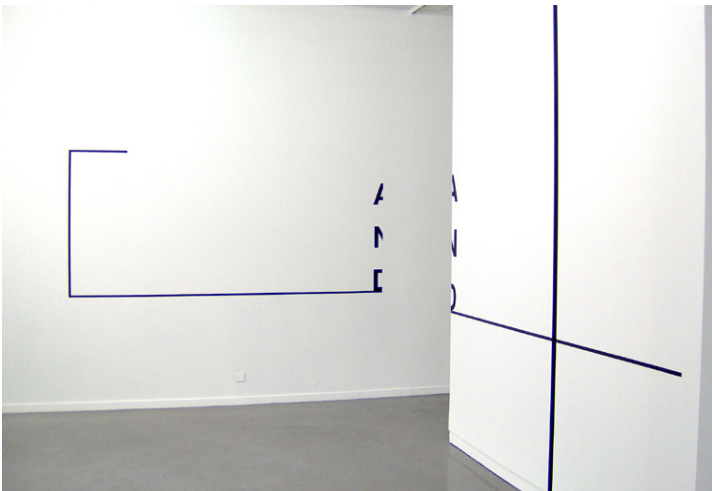


Placed on the tip of the wave, 2009



Written on the wind, 2013

Peter Downsbrough draws on similar concepts in a more simplified way. I was especially drawn to Downsbrough's fragmentation of text. The legibility is affected but it often slows down the comprehension of words and ideas, without completely jeopardizing the message. This balance requires iteration and thought, something that I quickly realized through experimentation. The spatial and printed versions of his work encouraged me to think about using forms other than the larger scale displays of text.

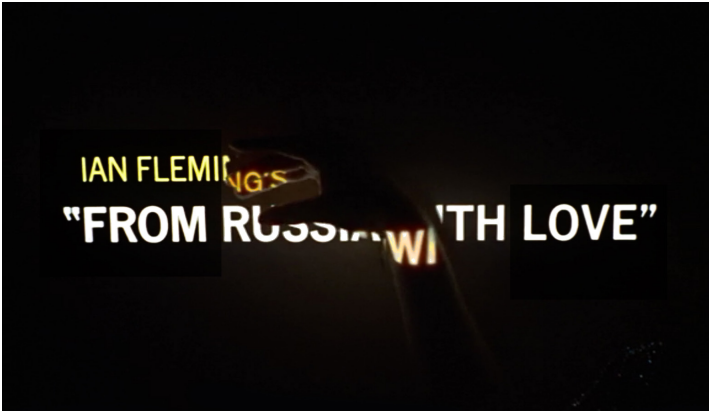


Typographic sculpture And, 2013

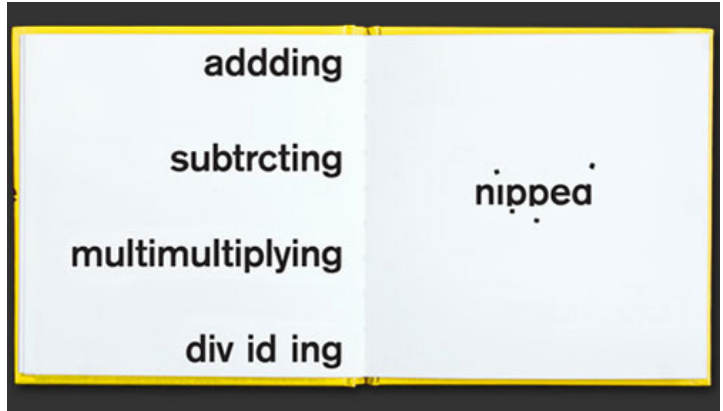


Spread from Now, 2010

Finally, Robert Brownjohn's abstracted and fragmented use of type translates from printed materials to motion graphics. Known for his title sequences in popular films, Brownjohn moved past static typography that references movement to explore territories of physically animated type. He also introduced more human interaction by projecting text and imagery on bodies, which also changed the way the messages are read. I was drawn to the human element combined with projection and integrating type within different moveable spaces.



From Russia with Love title sequence, 1963



Chermayeff & Geismar's Watching Words Move, 1959

Design and Language

"sometimes a few well-written words are worth much more than any picture"
- John Spencer⁷

During the research process I found myself struggling to develop some of the language I was hoping to use. Because this would become a text-based project, the content of the words displayed needed to be convincing and well-constructed. I looked for inspiration in the conversations around me and in different forms of writing, too. During my research, I came across a thought-provoking article by John Spencer from Design Week. He wrote, "language and design should be indivisible."⁷ He elaborated on their inherent connection, but that many educational and professional institutions lack the foundation for this kind of collaboration between writers that write and designers that design. This is something that I was up against. *Do I take on the role of the writer even though I might be more interested in the overall conceptual and visual elements?*

Finding an answer to this question was not easy. I think there are many qualified designers who write their content very well. I have been surrounded by them in professional and educational settings. I also think writing is not something that should be assumed to automatically happen or be taken for granted. As I have experienced it can be very complicated, especially when you are trying to convey a specific message without bombarding the viewer with text. This idea of content, and who has the authority to create it, is something that empowers collaboration and continued learning. *Am I an artist and designer as writer, or am I an artist and designer as curator of words constructed by someone else?* I challenged myself in this project to become the writer and the designer, although my inadequacies lie in the writing. *But aren't we all the writers of our verbal exchanges?*

Therein lies the focus of my project.

⁷Spencer, John. "John Spencer: "Language and design should be indivisible"." *Design Week*. 23 Sept. 2016.

Discovering Conversations

My goal for most of my work is to approach a project through type itself. My integrative project was no exception. I have always been captivated by letterforms and their evocative and transformative nature. I think the successful usage of type has helped shape my interest in the broader topic of conversation. The challenge for me was to integrate these two, seemingly obvious pairs of type and communication, in a visually interesting and convincing way.

The process of developing written content was challenging. I worked on replicating conversations, good and bad, and articulating my commentary on communication as a basis for this project. At first, I wrote down quick statements that I wanted “poor communicators” to hear. Then, I began to write down the repetitive small talk that I heard all day long. This was easy to reproduce because I was so familiar with it. I even found repeating them in writing to be just as frustrating and superficial as in their natural verbal element. On the contrary, I found drafting more intimate and authentic conversations to be the most difficult. I began to take note of the conversations happening around me. I listened, recorded, and transcribed some of my own conversations with my friends and family who were willing to participate. I also looked to other outlets for well-drafted conversations and thoughts. I found good source material from poetry and screenplays, but I quickly realized these are, in nature, inauthentic. They have been carefully crafted and revised, not a result of spontaneity. They lacked the raw element of genuine conversation for which I was looking.

Once again I battled with the notion of artist and designer as writer or as curator of words. I was in need of content and struggling to find it. Shorter statements of intimate thoughts seemed easy to be taken out of context, and could be mistaken for superficial small talk. Full length conversations seemed too extensive to display textually. I needed a middle ground: long enough to relate to, but not too long that they lose your attention. I also wanted them to mimic fuller conversations by showing a version that is emotionally and physically accessible to the viewer. Therefore, it was necessary to have some sort of dialogue so the “authentic” exchanges stand apart from the “inauthentic” one-sided statements. Eventually, I worked to obtain genuine conversations by transcribing conversations I recorded. I used those as the base for revisions to accommodate the length and conciseness of my project. Overall, I wanted to create an arc within the written conversations so people could relate to the raw emotion of a verbal exchange between two acquainted individuals.

Through this process, I became an even more astute listener and observer. I was looking for examples of conversations everywhere. To find intimate conversations, I quickly realized I couldn't just gather content by listening to other people's conversations in public. It is unlikely that most people would be having deep, emotion-filled exchanges for everyone to hear. Also, it would be illegal to record these conversations without them knowing. I needed to dig deeper to access intimate exchanges. So, I started consciously trying to have more meaningful conversations with my family and friends. I made an effort daily to avoid being repetitive and superficial. With my dad, roommate, mom, sister, and writing advisor, I attempted to speak deeply and authentically, hoping for the same in return. Some attempts were more successful than others. I came to terms with the difficulties we all face in reaching this level of verbal intimacy. It is not the most natural thing. However, I also acknowledge how rewarding it feels when the other person becomes comfortable enough in their vulnerability to speak to you freely about their deepest emotions and beliefs. These conversations that I eventually transcribed became the source of the intimate dialogue I would eventually use in my project.

Processing Projection

Integrating aspects of layering and motion as they apply to conversation played a significant role in how I constructed my project. The art of talking is layered. Words move, and we hear and understand them at different rates. Transitioning from small talk to more intense and personal conversations approaches deeper layers of intimacy. The sounds of conversation are spoken over one another, often making it difficult to hear just one. Behind the words being said there can be additional layers of meaning, complicating the true message being communicated. Projection, light layered on different surfaces, was a medium that allowed for this idea to come alive.

Initially I was interested in projecting on a large scale, much like the work I had admired of Jenny Holzer. I had initial goals of similarly using projection in public spaces so people could interact with the messages in their natural environment. Soon, however, I realized that the intimate connections I was searching for amidst the noise would not be found at this grand of a scale. After receiving feedback, I understood that this large, public idea may actually contribute more inauthentic information. From then on, my goal was to work more intimately. Ways of accomplishing intimacy included smaller scales for closer viewings and lengthening the time needed to read something.

Through my process, I was using my project to represent both aspects of authentic and inauthentic conversation. I projected large blocks of text containing the small talk we hear to show how prevalent it is. Simultaneously, I was projecting statements intended to be more thought provoking. “What are you even saying?” is fragmented, increasing the time it takes to read it. I was really fascinated with projecting on different surface planes, experimenting with how it changes the way messages are read through distortions caused by the projection. My next steps were to project longer pieces of dialogue and pursue the human element of interacting with the piece.

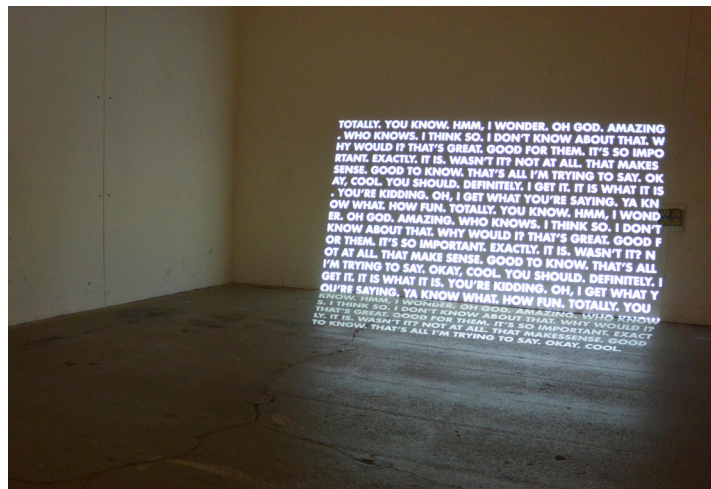


Figure 1
Projection of repetitive, superficial, “small talk” exchanges



Figure 2
What are you even saying?
projection

My first fully constructed plan relied on audience participation. Two chairs facing one another would invite the viewers to sit down. Once seated, projected lines of dialogue appear on the chests of the participants. Every few seconds the next line appears, like subtitles, requiring constant attention and engagement. One person can read the dialogue being projected on the person across from them, and vice versa, highlighting the need for two individuals to give their time and attention to the other person. Reading the intimate conversations projected upon another person would hopefully encourage reflection and introspection about one's own conversations.

After some testing, I experienced complications with this idea. The projection hits different bodies at different spots depending on their height. The messages also had to be cut down in length because of the body space available. Additionally, with the dialogue playing like subtitles, it turned out to be very difficult to read them in time, on different type of cloth. Despite these setbacks, I was still interested in the human body interacting with the “intimate” conversations amidst the repetitive noise. I found the large background projection of repetitive text to be working well but I was still missing the element of intimacy through projection.



Figure 3
Dialogue projected on figure



Figure 4
Dialogue projected on figure

Projection Realized

Ultimately, the projection I use in my final installation is similar to some of my early experiments. Projection and motion graphics were working in several ways. Most importantly, I had the opportunity to control the speed at which the phrases appear and disappear, and imitate the cadence of spoken word in conversation. The final projection serves as an immersive backdrop at six by eight feet in size, sitting three feet above the ground. This placement envelops the viewer into the the text being projected. The content is composed of snippets of “small-talk” conversations that we hear and say regularly, yet really hold no meaning.

Where are you off to?
You think?
Yeah, definitely.

The motion graphic animation is around two minutes in length but loops continuously to highlight the repetition and static noise that it inherently becomes. The phrases stay in the same place on the screen but appear at different rates, in combination with other phrases in conversation, and in random orders to represent the chaotic and often meaningless interactions these words can serve.

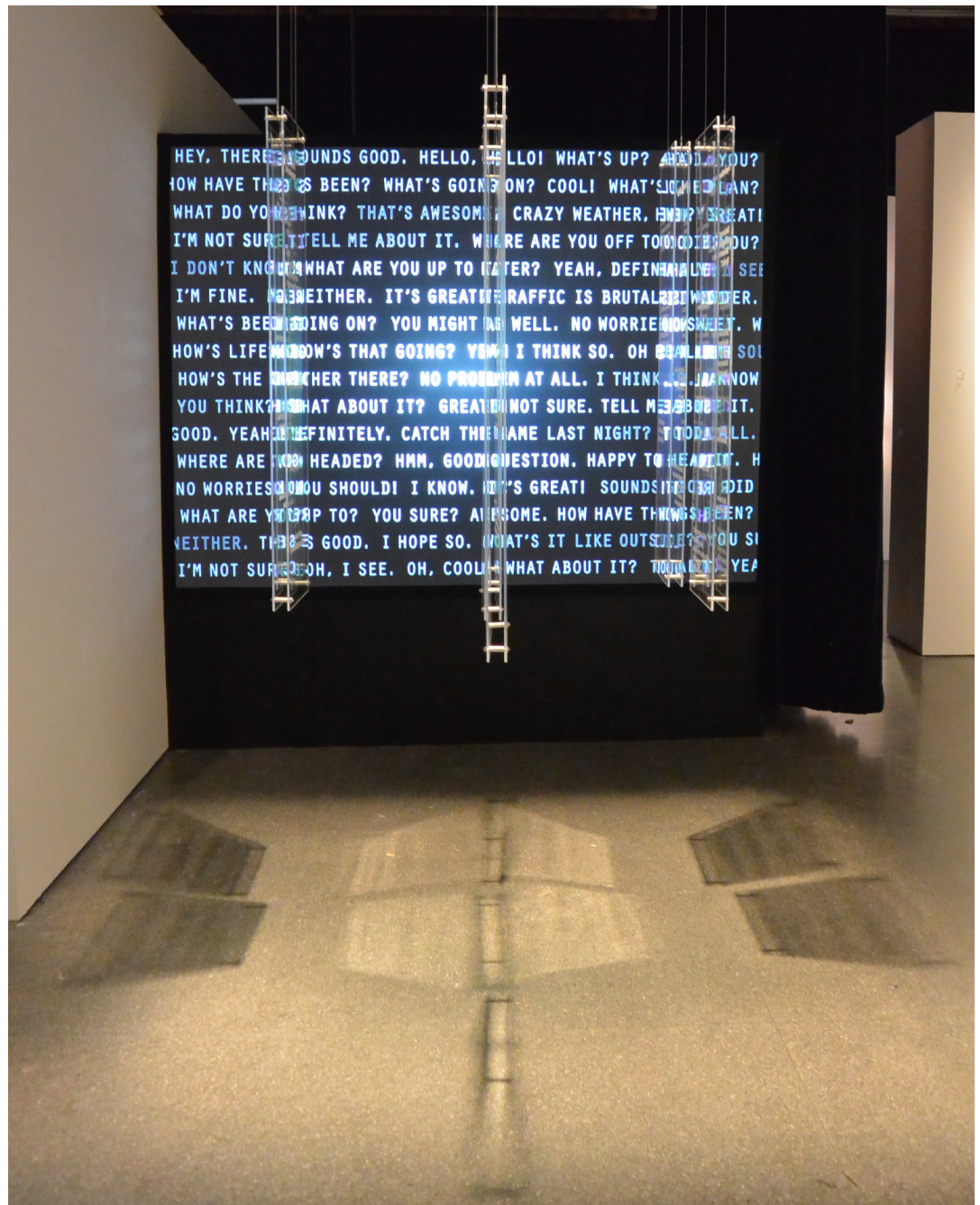


Figure 5
Final installation - front view of
projection, perpendicular acrylic
panels hang in front of screen

Etching Transparent

Working with projection has been a new experience and I have enjoyed the results, the natural quality of the light and how the text blurs when viewed at a closer distance. The animation of words and phrases resembled the “noise” but I felt that a different medium was necessary to showcase the intimate side of a conversation. Earlier in my process, I experimented projecting on different surfaces, including acrylic. It was a natural progression when I eventually decided to laser etch these parts of conversations into the acrylic. The transparent but permanence of the material lends itself to the vulnerability and importance of having good conversations.

At this time I was still developing the written conversations while working on the text size, typeface, and format of the acrylic pieces. I decided to include three different conversations to cover a range of topics that, hopefully, many people can relate to. Because the material is transparent, I used that to my advantage. I etched each side of a conversation on separate pieces, eventually combining the two pieces to form a completed dialogue. Once the etching was finished, only one half of the conversation can be read from one side. The other half of the conversation is inverted for someone on the other side of the acrylic to read.



Figure 6
Close-up of etched acrylic panels,
more intimate conversations

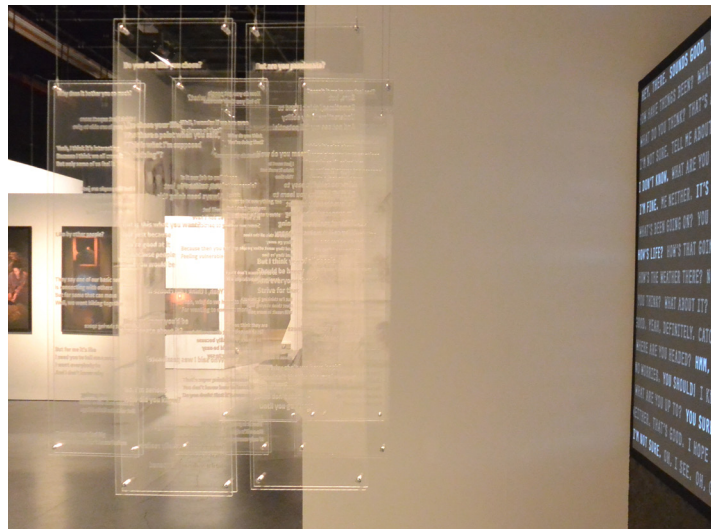


Figure 7
Side view of installation, hanging
acrylic in front of projection

Booklet Additions

In my work, I was focusing on the contrasting elements of “inauthentic” and “authentic.” I was attempting to show the disparity between the two and, although we are familiar with the former, highlight the inherent need we all have for the latter. Because these categories of conversations are being represented through different mediums, I found there was an available opportunity to connect the two. By designing and making booklets, I am able to create an abstract narrative of how superficial noise can develop into more meaningful interactions. This bridge from inauthentic to authentic allows for a more exploratory approach to express the spoken words typographically. I am also able to provide more context to this problem and explain the potential for change. This supplementary element provides another way to engage the viewer personally by looking through books and understanding the meaning behind the project. Additionally, to further combine the materials and content, I constructed the book covers out of etched acrylic held together by black clips. The process of opening the books itself requires time and attention that authentic conversations also require of the viewer. This elaborate process of unveiling the book can mimic the dedication and time it takes to reach the depths of a good conversation.



Figure 8
Three booklets, hand bound using the drum leaf technique, etched acrylic covers with black clips



Figure 9
Tell me about it. Tell me about something. spread from booklet

Environment Created

Throughout this process I was really interested in the environment in which people have conversations as well as the environment in which people will experience the work. I wanted to create an inviting and thought-provoking situation for the viewer to reflect on these ideas, a space where people can physically interact with the installation and feel comfortable doing so. After testing multiple versions of the etched acrylic—in size, number, and proximity to each other—I settled on three conversations. Two are comprised of two sets of acrylic panels attached together, and the third is comprised of three sets. The arrangement of panels is staggered so viewers can navigate around the space and read both sides of the conversation. This was intended to be somewhat intuitive but also require effort and time to see the other side of the conversation. Enough room is left so the projected screen of inauthentic talk could be read on its own, too. A challenge I faced was accommodating the chronological order of the conversations. Because each conversation is comprised of several transparent panels, the order in which the conversations are read changes depending on the side from which you approach them. This complication is something I could have addressed more in depth. Ultimately, I decided to orient them chronologically—left to right—from the side I assumed most people would be approaching the exhibit.

I used rear projection so human interaction with the acrylic panels does not interfere with the light source coming from behind the screen. This screen, larger than the hanging acrylic panels, provides an immersive experience of the static noise viewers are used to hearing and/or having everyday. This familiarity is easy to identify at first, before noticing the contrast with conversations etched into the acrylic: permanent and more lengthy. The transparent acrylic serves as a reading surface, yet other people and the opposing sides of the conversations are fully visible and exposed. This element of exposure contributes to the raw nature of these intimate exchanges.

Figure 10
Final installation



Moving Forward

The visual language of letters and words can be found almost everywhere you look in our environment. From books to newspapers, text messages and billboards, type is designed with intention. Subsequently, there are opportunities almost everywhere to use this visual language to communicate even more than the content is saying. This is the aspect of graphic design and typography I find so captivating. When done correctly, the information becomes more convincing and real to the viewer. Graphic designers Ivan Chermayeff and Tom Geismar discuss their intuitive work with type as they “explore the evocative potential of words and vividly express their meaning”.⁷ They respond to the words themselves in their work by doing “to them what they themselves suggested.” By expanding our understanding of language, we can learn new ways to communicate. I will keep challenging myself to analyze written and spoken word and explore new ways to illustrate information to others. I feel like I have only scratched the surface of this topic. Like Nichols explains, interpersonal communication, and the associated complications, will always be a part of relationships. We will always need to communicate with one another no matter how advanced technology becomes. Our intrinsic need for human interaction can, in turn, be expressed visually through type—a vehicle to explain circumstances, ideas, and thoughts through words visually.

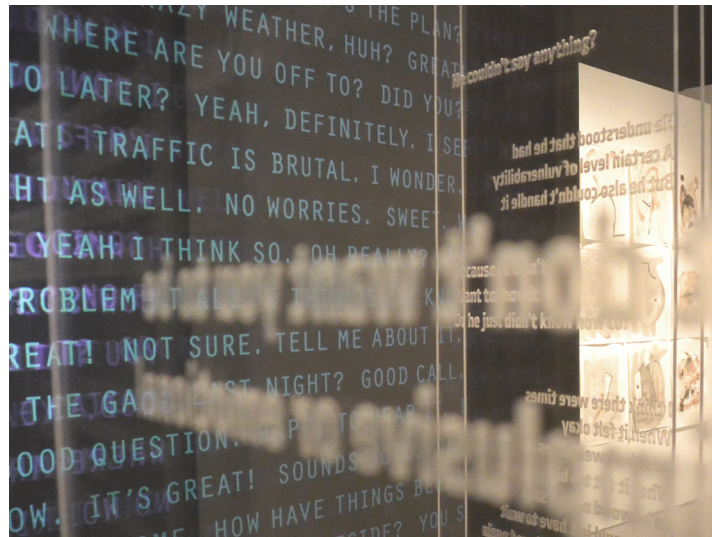


Figure 11
Close-up of etched acrylic, transparency shows the projection in the background



Figure 12
Booklets displayed alongside business cards and postcards with the rest of the installation

⁷Spencer, John. “John Spencer: “Language and design should be indivisible.”” *Design Week*. 23 Sept. 2016.

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