

# Letter Form

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*Letter Form* is a typographic study that examines the shape of language. Typography is, at its most basic description, “the mechanical notation and arrangement of language.”<sup>1</sup> This definition posits that, without typography, written language would be inconceivable. Even the Latin alphabet—a perpetually modified set until recently—crystallized only with the advent of metal type.<sup>2</sup> The type, lead or otherwise, is a system of communicative building blocks. Each letter can be used in conjunction with others to create words, sentences, and so on, which form the basis of written language. It is natural and practical to think of letters as inextricable from language; literacy depends upon, before all else, the recognition of letters. Can these forms be extracted from language and function as objects of beauty—in their formal and physical presence? Do these forms transcend the function of verbal communication, or does a lack of language marginalize them? In a collection of large-scale relief prints, this project ponders the separation of language and typography: letter forms not meant to be read, but simply to be seen. This study seeks to separate the form of language from the language itself.

- <sup>1</sup> *Type & Typography*, 2005, p. 7—Baines, a tutor at Central Saint Martins College of Art & Design in London, discusses many possible definitions of typography with his students, among them: *the sculpting of experience, the management of letters, the engine of learning, a formal extension to memory, and painting with words.*
- <sup>2</sup> *Ink on Paper*, 1963, p. 17—Arnold qualifies, “Attempts to change [the Latin alphabet] have been desultory and ignored.” But a case might be made for the addition to our alphabet of emoticons, being not linguistic but certainly typographic.



figure 1. The printing process.

## Typography as Language

Most people think of typography as the way they “color” their text by font selection, sizing and page layout. For the average layperson or desktop publisher, this definition may be suitable. However, it is important to assess the vital role that typography plays in language-based communication. The writer may decide on a typeface, or pay it no attention whatsoever—either way, typography is not just font selection; it is the system that makes written language possible. “Typography is language made visible,” writes Phil Baines; “Typography is to language what maps are to geography, scores are to music and algebra is to mathematics.”<sup>3</sup> It is the means by which we communicate using printed language; it can be recorded, stored and reflected upon; it empowers the literate. Printed words, therefore, are integral to our everyday communication. In his 1963 graphic arts handbook, *Ink on Paper*, Edmund C. Arnold writes, “Printing is a form of writing that lubricates all the wheels of modern living.”<sup>4</sup>

Because of our daily interaction with letter forms, it is difficult to divest their functional aspects from their formal presence. Despite our preoccupation with typographic voice (*ie* whether a given font is the appropriate stylistic choice), we often neglect the formal qualities of the base letter form—what makes an A an A, what makes a B a B, and so on. Whether this is a serif or a sans-serif, or whether it is humanist or geometric or modern, or whether it is roman or italic or extended or condensed—these classifications are inconsequential to the base form. Typesetting requires great attention to those details, and we can recognize their features in the *Letter Form* collection, but they ultimately either enhance or obscure the base form.

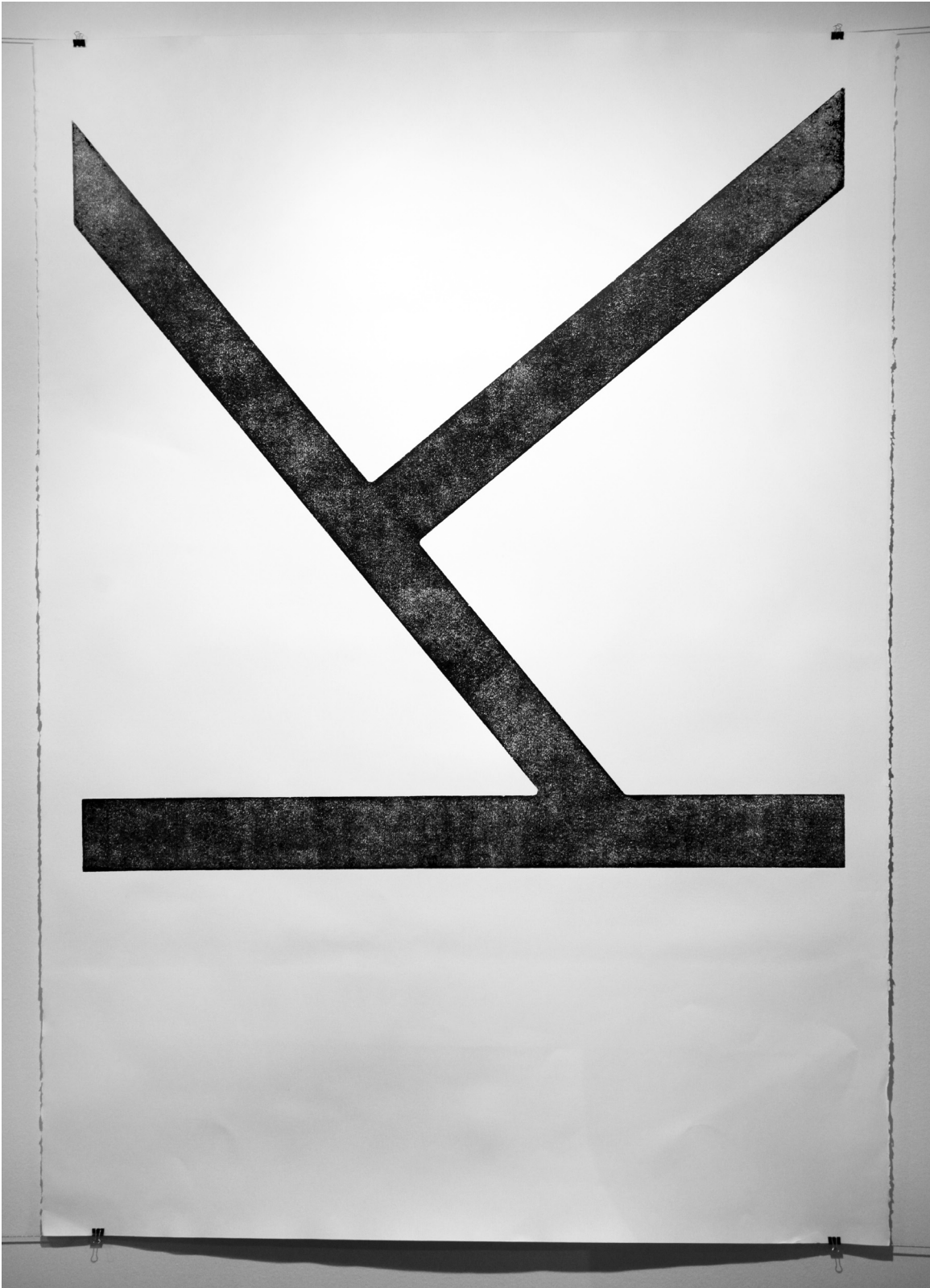
## Typography as Form

The content of the *Letter Form* prints is purely typographical and focuses on the letters as forms detached from language. The intent is to communicate not with words, but with forms. It is somewhat difficult to see letters rather than read them, unless, of course, you look at a printed foreign language. Often the lack of comprehension can enhance the power of the language’s own form. The Anglophone perception of hieroglyphic language is an extreme example.

In the literate world, typography is a normal, inextricable part of everyday life, but typography is also a necessary preoccupation of the designer. I am surrounded by typography: the language densely packed into books, the words emblazoned on posters, the letters brandished on wood type blocks. Typographic specimens comprise a vast proportion of my personal surroundings. As an outlet for my obsession I keep a blog, called “Type Around Town,” which documents examples of vernacular typography in signage and hand lettering in Ann Arbor and elsewhere. Part of the allure of vernacular signage is indeed the scale of its letter forms, which are often quite large and individually constructed in three dimensions. At that scale, letters become sculpture and, rather than acting as components of language, tend to act as pure forms. It is therefore easy to perceive these forms not as communicative, but as graphical—an idea to which I will return in a moment.

<sup>3</sup> *Type & Typography*, 2005, p. 10—Because he does not concern himself with spoken language, Baines refers commonly to written language in his book simply as “language.”

<sup>4</sup> *Ink on Paper*, 1963, p. 2—Arnold designed more than a thousand newspapers and was Editor of the *Linotype News* even after he left Mergenthaler Linotype Company for a teaching position at Syracuse University.



*figure 2. Figures 2–9 represent the extent of the Letter Form collection on display in the gallery.*



figure 3.



figure 4.



figure 5.



figure 6.



figure 7.



figure 8.





*figure 9.*

## Process: Analog and Digital

No discussion of a contemporary exploration of typography would be complete without addressing the historical significance of digital typography. The digital interface presents the first new surface for typographic communication since the invention of the printing press by Gutenberg in the fifteenth century. In the nearly 600 years since, typographic design has evolved, albeit slowly. In *About Face*, typographer David Jury writes:

*Typography has always been a labour-intensive activity—in 1890, printing was the second largest source of employment in London—and in some ways, whilst technological developments have completely changed who does what, where and how, typography is still a time-consuming part of the design process.*<sup>5</sup>

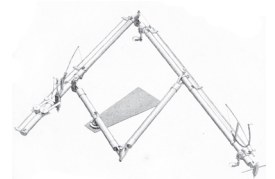
5 *About Face*, 2002, p. 6

While there seems to be somewhat of a renaissance in terms of digital typography and typesetting, most of the letterforms being designed today are still destined for print.<sup>6</sup> It is for this reason that I have focused on printed typography as the basis of a discussion on letter forms. The *Letter Form* collection responds to the history of printing, but more importantly, it embraces a shift in design methodology toward the harmonious integration of analog and digital processes.

To navigate the territory between analog and digital typography, I have combined the most useful aspects of both processes. Some manipulation of the image is performed digitally, with digital type or digital drawings of printed lettering, and yet more is performed while printing. The blocks used for printing—the impression of a raised form into paper—are created from large sheets of inexpensive MDF (medium density fiberboard), which are “carved” using an automated digital process on a three-axis CNC (computer numerical controlled) mill. Acronyms aside, the mill carves the block much like wood type is cut on a pantograph<sup>7</sup>; the first is a digital translation, the second a mechanical one.

The prints are created by a normal relief process, but rather than on a press they are printed using a Japanese hand tool called a ‘baren.’<sup>8</sup> Not only was the biggest available press too small to accommodate these prints, but the manual technique yields an image unlike that from a press—especially in evidencing the involvement of the artist’s hand. The application of pressure to these prints is therefore much more nuanced, whereas attention is given and regiven to one portion at a time, in contrast to the single stamp or sweep of a press. Because so much less pressure is applied to these prints, the inks were also modified slightly<sup>9</sup> in order to achieve an appropriate level of coverage. The texture and inconsistency of the *Letter Form* prints are a direct result of these adaptations.

6 This technological shift opens a discussion on raster typography (letters designed to conform to a pixel grid) versus vector typography (infinitely scalable, numerically defined curves). The letters on your screen are always a raster approximation even if they are defined by vectors.



7 A pantograph uses a system of hinged and jointed rods to translate the master image to a smaller analog.

8 Used to burnish the back of the print until the ink transfers from the block to the paper. The baren can vary in size but is essentially a round wooden handle with a flat, circular bottom. For these prints I used barens ranging from two to four inches in diameter—a smaller surface can apply greater pressure and yields a darker print.

9 After some technical trials, the perfect formula emerged: black relief ink with the addition of a few drops of oil. Thinner ink sacrifices edge resolution of the contours.





*figure 10.* Parking signage on Washington Street in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

## Intimacy of Scale

Each of the letter forms used in this project have been culled from digital versions of fonts that predate the computer<sup>10</sup>—in some cases by a century or more. Lead type cut by hand for printing, later drawn digitally and now, once again, manifested as a physical object used for printing. In the course of my investigation I have encountered the type at all stages of the conceptual evolution: lead type on letterpress, digital type on the screen, and finally the macro type blocks used for these prints.

From all my work with typography, it is clear that scale determines whether typography's role is form or language. That is, prose set at 10 points tends to create an intimate relationship with the content of the language rather than the forms of the letters. Large display type, however, affords an intimate relationship with the letters rather than the words they form. These relationships are evident to each person involved; the printer in his careful selection and placement of the type, and the reader in his evaluation of the content. Consider this very sentence; you, the reader, are not examining each letter, you are comprehending my language. Climb the stairs and get close to the forms of the parking signage in figure 10 and you may begin to see each one as sculpture.

To force the same kind of intimate relationship with the *Letter Form* prints, their scale is large: sheets of heavy printmaking paper at 42 by 60 inches.<sup>11</sup> Scale and physicality, as well as their relationship to each other, transform the content—essentially a typographic specimen—into macro sculptures. These are sculptures that reveal not only the formal qualities of typography, but also the human impulse to want to read words. Great care is taken in the curation of these prints so that their letters do not inadvertently spell words, in whole or in part. But resistance to the power of language is futile—typographers and linguists will clear even the highest hurdles, finding words in the most jumbled sets.

## Conclusion

Printing these forms using an analog relief process not only speaks to the history of printing; it also forges a close relationship between the printer and the viewer. The handmade print is an artifact that tells the whole story. It reveals the existence of a physical process—one of many physical materials (relief block, ink, paper) and physical methods (cutting, inking, pressing). It betrays the involvement of the artist's hand, paradoxically in the precision and the imperfections. It provides historical contrast to fleeting, contemporary methods, which ultimately elevates the print to a position of authority and permanence. A preoccupation with analog finish and resolution helps to draw attention to the quality of the form, whose contours, composition, and negative space function as content.

Amid the discussion on typography and language, *Letter Form* is, in essence, a study on human mark-making. The scale and ambiguity of their graphic presence allow these typographic prints to supersede the function of printed language—a phenomenon that defines typography as graphic art. Walter Benjamin wrote in 1936, “Graphic art was first made technologically reproducible by the woodcut, long before written language became reproducible by movable type.”<sup>12</sup> In light of this history the *Letter Form* collection repositions movable type as elements not of language but of earlier, purer graphic communication.

10 **Fraktur**  
**Akzidenz**  
**Futura**  
**Helvetica**  
**Sabon...**

11 Rives BFK; 100% cotton. The sheets are soaked in water at least 60 minutes before printing and blotted as in the normal relief process.

12 *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, 2008, p. 20—Although *Letter Form* does not focus on the reproducibility of the work *per se*, Benjamin's insight on printed language provides much of the inspiration for this project.



## References & Suggested Readings

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