

# Exploring Materiality in Graphic Design Through Creative Play

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## **Abstract**

Graphic design can be investigated through the process of creative play where thinking and making are connected through materiality. This thesis explores three different methods of creative play that can be used by designers to generate concepts and challenge established ways of working. A research study on materiality and affect was conducted in the first phase of the thesis in order to locate a starting point for the visual explorations. From here, the process was divided into three different categories: improvisational, structured, and interactive play. Improvisational play can foster an understanding of materials and involves an intuitive way of working, without having a specific content in mind. Structured play focuses on how materiality can be manipulated to reflect content where materiality is used as a rhetorical device. Interactive play involves eliciting tactile engagement, where physical materials are implemented into the final design artifact and encourage engagement through touch. The process helps to explore the visceral nature of different materials and their meaning within the context of everyday life. Creative play allows the designer to develop an understanding of how materials can engage audiences by tapping into the physical world.

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We made a great team!

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## Introduction

The rapid technological changes of the digital age are dramatically impacting the nature of how graphic design is physically manifested and perceived. Modes of production are becoming ever more ubiquitous and technologically advanced, where methods of working are less tactile and less physical. As modern society becomes more accustomed to immaterial digital realms, the nature of graphic design processes change as well, potentially becoming less connected to the physical and tactile world. With the progression of technology, what does materiality have to offer in graphic design? This thesis examines what is gained when materiality becomes an integral part of the design process. *Materiality* refers to the quality or character of being material, or composed of matter (Mills 2009, 1). I am not only investigating a material aesthetic, but also the cultural and social phenomena related to materiality in graphic design and the impact that a tactile and physical process has on the maker.

Materiality allows a designer to translate his or her personal signature and manual dexterity through a design. This is because designers have different approaches to working by hand. An additional layer of personal meaning and expression comes through which is not often seen in a mechanical mass produced process. Katherine McCoy, an American graphic designer and educator, best known for her work as the co-chair of the graduate design program at Cranbrook Academy of Art notes:

Emotion, subjective interpretation, and hand gestures are what humans can contribute and computers' expert systems cannot. Highly technological societies will likely put a premium on subjective human values. This suggests the possibility of a renewed appreciation and new applications of our earlier, intuitive, image-oriented, hand-generated design approaches. Design as a cultural activity, including aesthetic and personal expression, may be the essential source of values, emotions and play that we all need in the digital domain (Heller 2009, 12).

McCoy suggests that the advance of technology reveals a greater need for human connection, values, and physicality, which is not often prioritized in a mass produced process in graphic design.

Materiality can also be used as a rhetorical device or metaphor to communicate meaning. All materials are charged with their own histories. Through materials, designers can create a relationship and understanding between the design artifact, and its interrelations with society. The paint chipped wall on a street or the sun bleached poster on a telephone pole all hold meaning by demonstrating the progression of time, or decay. Materials are embedded in the social fabric of a community, and designers can communicate through them. Using materiality in graphic design is another way of tapping into the physical world and connecting the social and cultural dimensions of a community. Materiality provides a much needed anchor for the manifestation of human touch, physicality and tactility in an age often mediated by digital interfaces and screen technologies.

These aspects of materiality are evoked for the designer through the process which I refer to as *creative play*. Creative play is inspired by ways of working in craft and visual arts and involves acquiring knowledge through physically working with materials and can trigger a sense of engagement that becomes evident in the final execution of the work. Meaning lies in the physical act of making, where materials, and the contexts with which specific materials are associated, can support as well as carry meaning in design. I divided creative play into three separate methods which are, improvisational, structured, and interactive play, that investigated the effects of each approach with regard to its social, and cultural meaning, as well as the impact on the maker. Ideas for each process was taken after further analysis of the research study and a reflection on the work I have already created through understanding the different ways materiality was used. Each process was also influenced by the importance of play in the cognitive development of children and the different ways in which children learn through physically interacting with materials. The paper concludes with a discussion of my final projects, research study, and an investigation of various works by artists and designers, each of whom explore materiality as both a process and a dialogic way of creating meaning in graphic design.

## Materiality in the Context of Craft

In order to understand how to incorporate materiality into graphic design, it is important to situate materiality within the larger framework of craftsmanship. Around the end of the 19th century, the term “craft” entered the vernacular as a way to describe the marginalized practice of mechanical arts, minor arts, lesser arts, decorative arts, and applied arts (Alfoldy, 2007, xvii). Although the marginalization of craft was eventually given critical attention, definitions often remain fragmented, sparse and disparate, where traditional definitions and perceptions do not take in account the constructive and conceptual qualities of craftsmanship.

It is important to understand that craftsmanship is not limited to the making of one-of-a-kind artifacts. Instead, craftsmanship includes a type of knowledge that is gained through the experience of working with materials. Graphic designer and educator Lorraine Wild, describes her experience at the Cranbrook Academy of Art, which involved her search to understand craft’s critical effect. She encountered the book, *The Art of The Maker*, by late British design theorist Peter Dormer, in which he discusses craft in terms of two types of knowledge. The first is theoretical knowledge, the concepts behind things, and the second is tacit knowledge, which is knowledge gained through experience. Dormer notes:

The tacit knowledge required to make something work is not the same as a theoretical understanding of the principles behind it. Theory might help you understand how to make something better, but craft knowledge (sometimes also called “local” knowledge) has to be experienced on another level. For Dormer, these two types of knowledge are completely intertwined (Dormer 1994, 8).

Craft knowledge is developed by experience through physically working with materials, the designer understands how the material's qualities can be worked in concert with the content of the project, thus being a tool for constructive communication. This is created through the material's social and cultural existence, and the ways in which designers can subvert, critically assess and bring attention to how society perceives materials and their social constructions. Elaborating on the dialogical potential of materiality, Howard Risatti states, "materials have a social life, a social existence, if you will, in the sense that they help shape how we see and understand the world, the things in it, and our relationship to these things" (Risatti 2007, 185). Materials have a presence in the world, where some are ephemeral and show the progression of time, some are transparent, and others give the effect of surprise or wonder. Materials encourage designers to think about non-digital means of production, by tapping into the physical world. Materiality as a process combines making, thinking and engaging with materials and can offer a meaningful alternative to constraints limited by mass production and machine-made objects.

A craftsman with a high level of skill is able to capture a material's innate qualities, particularly its essence, ambiance and visceral affects. The ability to connect cognition to creation comes from the comprehension of these qualities.

For the craftsman, the special qualities imparted even to unfinished material were appreciated by the skilled maker and helped to ensure that material maintained a close connection to its source in nature and to the object of which it would become a part, it was not easily reduced to a simple, abstract commodity divorced from its origins in nature or the human hand (Risatti 2007, 191).

Craft's potential comes from the desire to maintain a material's original qualities. Georg Simmel, one of the founders of modern sociology, suggests that in keeping a material's original qualities, the object "stands forth" before us in a way machine-made objects do not (Simmel, 1971). Simmel experienced the immediacy of social and political changes wrought by industrial production. He was concerned that machine-made objects had no interaction between hand, material, and concept, they were devoid of autonomy and uniqueness. In his view, machine-made objects do not properly reflect the maker's identity and essence. In their "machine-made-ness," objects seem to exist without an origin, as something solely defined by and through mass production.

How can the uniqueness and visceral qualities of handcrafted objects be introduced into graphic design, a practice rooted in mass production? Handcrafted objects are formed through the process of physically working with materials where thinking and making comes with the understanding of how different materials can contribute to the overall design. As Peter Dormer states, "to know a craft, the individual has to make craft knowledge his or her own so that thinking and making flow together" (Dormer 1994, 100). Through the experience of making, the designer develops knowledge and craftsmanship, as well as an understanding of how materials can engage audiences by tapping into the physical world. The uniqueness of handcrafted objects can be integrated into graphic design by evaluating the creative design process. A more material and physical way of working brings the tacit knowledge known to craftsmanship into a design process, which may lead to new explorations and discoveries.

## **Materiality in the Context of Graphic Design**

Graphic designers have long used physical processes of working such as the letterpress, and screen-printing. However, most twenty-first century production practices are digital for reasons of efficiency, cost, distribution, and scale of reproduction. As a result, digital design work is often restricted by the limitations of software. German architect Gottfried Semper maintains that machines have dramatically transformed the cultural understanding of man-made objects once they become the product of an autonomous hand (Semper 1998, 331-336). Semper discusses how evidence of the human hand in the making process changes its ontological meaning to the viewer. This relates to the field of graphic design where the perception of an image may change if there is an indication of a handmade process. Machine production encourages a different worldview because of how it operates. It shifts the focus onto the material's "machine-ability," which transforms a sense of the material itself, and the types of objects it manifests. The result is that materiality may become limited to the capabilities of machine production.

Is there a way designers can draw from related disciplines such as craft and visual arts to incorporate materiality in graphic design? Certain graphic designers continue to investigate how to implement material techniques by working between the boundaries of art, craft and design. These designers are best understood as hybrids of artist and designer, and their work suggests an alternate path where craft and visual arts techniques are integrated into graphic design. Some of these designers are in favor of tactics that emerge from an appreciation and immersion in the forms, forces, and functions of the street, and the material culture of everyday life.

## Andy Warhol

Andy Warhol's philosophy of art highlighted his self-perception as a commercial artist: he believed that, "Making money is art, and working is art and good business is the best art" (Urist & Unruh 2010, 44). Warhol became interested in how to produce art as a business, and demonstrated his interest in working with pop culture, glamour, and celebrity figures. His work subverted the spectacles of everyday life from the rows of Campbell's soup cans, to Hollywood glamour and celebrity icons. His production of artwork used the language of mass production, by working with methods such as screen printing, letterpress and photography. Even though he worked as an artist, he was interested in the art of mass production, and worked with materials in ways that adhered to the possibilities of graphic reproduction.

One of Warhol's most popular designs was the cover of The Rolling Stones, *Sticky Fingers* album released in 1971, which controversially presented a close-up of a man's groin clad in jeans. The visually suggestive image was a perfect incarnation of the band's iconoclastic reputation. The success of this album allowed Warhol to fulfill his desire to be consumed by the masses, while comparatively few people were fortunate enough to own a Warhol original artwork. Although Warhol tailored his designs to accommodate the requirements of mass production, he still included materiality in his work. For instance, the album cover for the American rock band, active between 1964 and 1973, *Velvet Underground & Nico* (see Fig 1) included instructions to peel before use, while the album cover designed for The Rolling Stones, *Sticky Fingers* album included a real zipper as part of its evocative design.

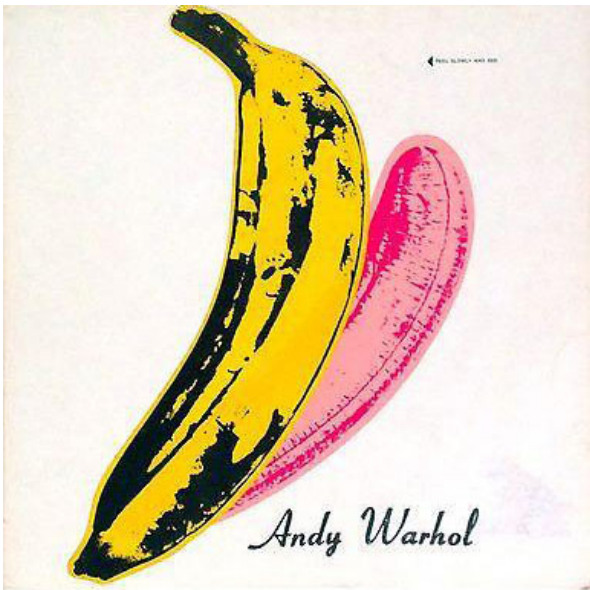


Figure 1: Andy Warhol, *The Velvet Underground* Cover, 1967

For *The Velvet Underground*, Warhol created an album cover which instructed viewers to “peel before use.” His other artwork included using materials such as screen printing, letterpress and photography derived silkscreening in paintings.

## **Martin Venezky**

Graphic designer Martin Venezky on the other hand, has a different approach to image making than Andy Warhol. Venezky is known for slowing down the design process, and as Kenneth Fitzgerald states, “Venezky refrains from the digital, for time-consuming, handmade constructions in which found imagery plays a prominent role” (Fitzgerald, 2005). Venezky’s approach to making is rooted in the tangible, unpredictable realm of chance, and he creates designs that retain the feeling of the handmade. Venezky incorporates the emotions of melancholy and sentimentality in his creative process and uses the effects of fragility and decay in materials as a metaphor or rhetorical device to convey layers of meaning.

Building a design by hand, piece by piece, alone in focused concentration is an idyllic pleasure to me. That was exactly how I felt as I created the Sundance collages and I wanted more. I've always kept an area of my office clear of computers and stocked with materials, tools and toys to play with. Now I make an effort to spend more time in this non-digital oasis. Here the work develops organically (Venezky 2007, 93).

Martin Venezky works with images in a way that evokes the above statement. His approach to working with materials is an emotional response, through collage and working with materials and imagery from everyday life that he keeps in his studio, *Appetite Engineers* (see Fig 2).

At the California College of the Arts, where Venezky currently teaches, he developed a class on form making in order to study the formal qualities of materials and processes. Each student received a different object, such as a paper clip, plastic bag, sponge or comb. He told his students to, “find the essence of the object. What is the object supposed to do? What are their intrinsic qualities and how can they be revealed?” (ibid, 189) Students’ explorations involved physically working with the objects resulting in cutting, destroying, melting, scanning, and disrupting the pieces. Physically working by hand, students experimented with many different methods where new discoveries were created. As Venezky explained, “the topic is form, but the class is really about developing methods of investigation, tools that will serve the students in every creative pursuit” (ibid, 189). Venezky’s form making class is similar to the ways in which craftsmen work with materials. As noted by Howard Risatti, a craftsmen’s unique process comes from their ability to capture the material’s intrinsic qualities.<sup>1</sup> In Venezky’s class, discoveries and explorations are found through letting go of established end goals or expectations, and rather following what the material leads the designer to do, and discovering its inner logic through visual exploration.

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<sup>1</sup> Howard Risatti, *A Theory of Craft: Function an Aesthetic Expression*, (Chapel Hill: North Carolina Press, 2007)



Figure 2: Martin Venezky, The Appetite Engineers office space.

Venezky uses a variety of different media in his work including ephemeral objects which visualize temporality.

## Edward Fella

Edward Fella, artist, designer and past professor at CalArts in Los Angeles, transformed himself from a “commercial artist” to a designer who works on problems only as he defines and sets them up. His explorations are exemplified by his dictum, “Keep the irregularities inconsistent” which intends to liberate design from the surface of perfection associated with digital competence, simultaneously ‘getting down and dirty’<sup>2</sup> with the vernacular while attaching it to the free play of language and form associated with art and poetry. Lorraine Wild notes that Fella introduced themes of ambivalence and ambiguity into his work, the multiple meanings of design as text and subtext, and that graphic designers are really artists (Wild & Blackwell, 2000). Fella’s handmade doodles, marks and gestures, (see Fig 3, Fig 4) gave identity and personality to once-anonymous work. Fella’s distinctive voice brought discourse into the design field at a time where Modernist design approaches dominated commercial practice.

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<sup>2</sup> Lorraine Wild and Lewis Blackwell. *Edward Fella: Letters on America*. (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2000)

The importance of Fella's drawings in his design practice exposes the uniqueness of the hand, where his dexterity and hand gestures emanate from the body, creating a personal signature. According to philosopher, Giorgio Agamben, a human gesture is not merely a coded bodily movement, but rather expresses the body's capacity to communicate (Agamben 1992, 5). Fella's handmade doodles and gestures are a form of discovery, and a means to unconsciously communicate his personality. Fella notes, "the drawings are an unconscious release of all the styles and forms that I used as a commercial artist for 30 years where I did it every single day" (Wild & Blackwell, 2000). He states that his doodles have become part of his sub-conscious discharge, where the lack of awareness may lead to more unexpected results in his work.

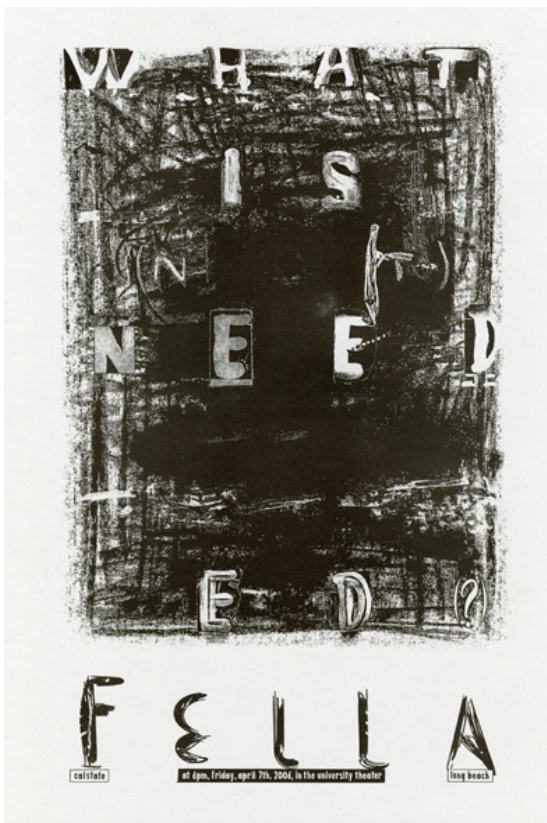


Figure 3: (left) Edward Fella, 1987

Figure 4: (right) Edward Fella, Ed Fella in Stockholm Sweden, poster-flyer, 1991

## Rebeca Mendez

Graphic designer and artist, Rebeca Mendez draws on natural phenomenon and materials in her professional work. She designed the catalogue for the exhibition, *Suprasensorial: Experiments in Light, Color and Space*. The book design reflects the participatory nature of the exhibition and invites the reader to actively explore and experience its material form. The specific inspiration came from Carlos Cruz-Diez, who, in the documentary film *Life in Color: Cruz-Diez* by Cine Archivo released in 2006, explains how he was able to produce a whole solar spectrum using only two colors, red and green: 'If the two colors are side by side, a third color is generated.' By turning a rectangular module into a linear one and engaging in a specific action, he was able to generate a third color (yellow) where the two lines touch (Mendez, 2010). As seen in Figure 5, The form of the book encourages the reader to interact with the different sheets of colour, revealing how a new colour is generated once two sheets are put together. The materiality becomes an interactive element to stimulate active viewing and uses the formal aspects of graphic design practice as a dialogic device.



Figure 5: Rebeca Mendez, *Suprasensorial* Exhibition Catalogue, 2011

Mendez used two different colours of acetate to create a third colour.

## Marian Bantjes

Marian Bantjes is another designer noted for working with the materiality of everyday objects. As she explains, “I work with unusual materials, and common materials in unusual ways. So this requires figuring out how to get the most out of a material’s innate properties and also how to bend it to my will. So ultimately my goal is to create something unexpected” (Bantjes, 2010). Bantjes states that she is more interested in the ethereal qualities of a work of design. She looks for whether her work evokes an effect of curiosity, awe, or wonder (Bantjes, 2010). Similar to Martin Venezky’s design practice, Bantjes utilizes a material’s innate qualities by finding new ways to represent and communicate meaning (see Fig 6, Fig 7). Bantjes uses methods of play by having a specific content and methods in mind, and experiments with various materials to communicate that content.

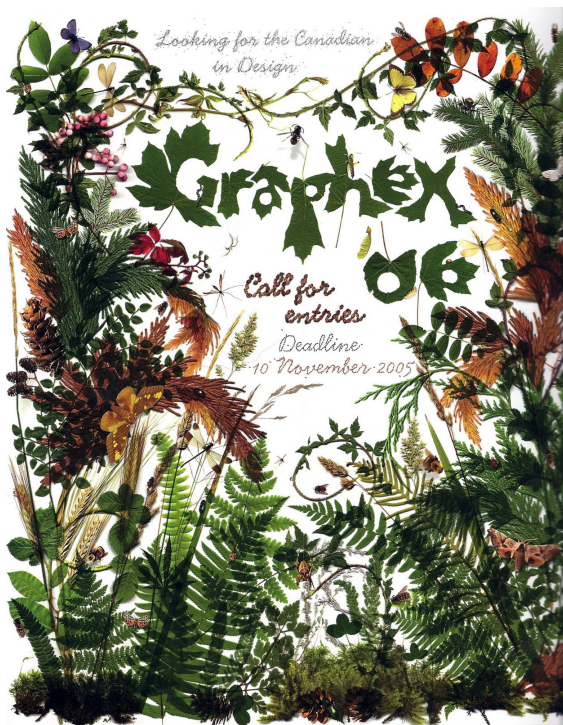


Figure 6: (left) Marian Bantjes, Graphex Awards 2006 Poster

Figure 7: (right) New York Magazine, 2011

## **The Process of Creative Play**

The process of creative play is a design methodology where the act of physically engaging with materials helps create an understanding of the relationship between a material and its meaning. The knowledge acquired through the process of play is tacit, meaning that it is knowledge gained through experience. This knowledge resides not in language, but in the physical processes involving the handling of the material. Play is often associated with recreational activities for children which contribute to cognitive development and socialization. Play that promotes learning and recreation often incorporates toys, props, and tools and interacting with materials. If children learn through touching and direct interaction, then why is this practice less common for adults? Why does our tactile sense become less important? Pablo Picasso noted that, “every child is an artist, the problem is how to remain an artist once they grow up” (Walsh, 2014). Stuart Brown directly connects childlike behaviors such as building and thinking with one’s hands, to greater creativity: he writes, “In playing, we create imaginative new cognitive combinations, and in creating those novel combinations, we find what works” (Brown 2010, 4). Brown’s research supports the convergence of learning and thinking through physically working with materials.

Incorporating play into graphic design can be broken down with an analysis of the design process, and how various ways of working with materials can trigger a sense of physical engagement. By working with tangible materials, designers directly encounter their physicality, rather than working solely with content that is represented on a computer screen. This may produce discoveries through experimentation, such as ‘happy accidents’ or natural irregularities and the designer may capture the material’s innate qualities and incorporate them into the design process. Through manipulation of materials, the designer can reflect and think about the ideas that emerge, thereby allowing the playfulness to inform the creative activity. This becomes a dialectical and dialogical process at the core of the act of creative play.

Historically, methods of play having been used by the Bauhaus School where courses were built on the notion that an understanding of materiality comes from physically working with materials. Josef Albers, who came from a crafts background, and possessed practical knowledge, began teaching a course – “Werklehere” – in the Bauhaus School department of design to introduce newcomers to the principles of handicrafts. His teaching method and course structure delved into the history of art and design, and he encouraged a process of play. Albers notes, “to start out by playing develops courage, leads in a natural manner to an inventive way of building and furthering the facility of discovery” (Lupton, & Abbott 1991, 12).

Johannes Itten was another instructor at the Bauhaus School, and taught students the basics of material characteristics, composition, and colour. Experimenting with the properties of different materials was a component of the Basic Course at the Bauhaus School. Specifically, Itten’s studies of texture compared different textiles, wood, and printed patterns. It also included lumbered wood shavings, steel wool, wires, string, polished wood, feathers, glass and tin foil, grids and weaves of all kinds. Albers, who later taught the materials course at the Bauhaus, described it as a form of play and experimentation:

Instead of pasting paper, we will put it together by sewing, buttoning, riveting, typing and pinning it and how each different method changes the way the object is interpreted. We tested the possibilities of its tensile and compression-resistant strength as well as its metaphorical meaning to the work (Droste 2006, 24).

A notable designer who was an early advocate for the usefulness of play in design is Bradbury Thompson. Thompson wrote, “there is no creative aspect of graphic design more enjoyable or rewarding than the indulgence in play” (Helfand 1997, 8). In a 1952 issue of *Type Talks* magazine, Thompson discussed that some of his design inspirations began with playing with his son. “A half-dozen pieces of large layout paper were spread on the floor, and tracks for toy trains were delineated with two bold layout pencils. The route was arranged and rearranged, placing bridges and villages, and plotting turns” (Thompson 1988, 49). This playful process turned into an inspiration for a magazine spread. Thompson further described his experience of play: “Here there was a sense of freedom, a place to forget the columns and grid patterns of typographic tradition. This was an atmosphere to mix words and images playfully together” (Thompson 1988, 43).

Contemporary designers also use play as a method for generating creative work. In an interview with Digital Arts online, Jessica Walsh states:

I love to play in my work as a creative. I actually see my work as play instead of seeing it as my job. When I look back at the body of my work, I realize that the more fun and more play that went into creating my work the better people respond to the end result. (Allsopp, 2013).

“Play has been the foundation of innovation for years,” Walsh added, highlighting people such as the Wright brothers and Steve Wozniak, whose use of play resulted in inventions that changed the world” (Allsopp, 2013). Graphic designer, Paula Scher, recognizes that the best work often comes from serious play. The unfortunate thing is that when good work comes from serious play and becomes successful, there is a tendency to recreate those moments of authentic spontaneity to continue creating great work (Scher, 2008). Thus, for Scher, trying to recreate a moment of spontaneous and uninhibited play that yields complex and exciting designs rapidly diminishes the designers’ capacity, and causes one to become stiff, stale, and solemn. Scher notes that the affect of spontaneous eccentricity is lost when a designer tries to recreate the result. She embraces the spontaneity that comes out of childhood play, which becomes harder to achieve as a designer matures. Scher offers her own experience:

I mixed up Victorian designs with pop, and I mixed up Art Nouveau with something else. And I made these very lush, very elaborate record covers, not because I was being a post-modernist or a historicist – because I didn't know what those things were. I just hated Helvetica. And that kind of passion drove me into very serious play, a kind of play I could never do now because I'm too well educated (Scher, 2008).

French designers, Antoine & Manuel state that their work, words and approach are not derived from any school of thought. They are not interested in the question of style, but rather are interested in the creation of an intimate world with many points of entry. “We draw our inspiration from our sensations, from childhood or from a sleepwalking state of searching” (Bérard 2009, 233). The starting point is always the same, “we start with a dream and arrive at a fairy tale” (ibid, 233). Their use of unexpected materials in their design work such as Play-Doh, helps create this “fairy tale.” Daniel Larrieu states, “the world of Antoine & Manuel is that of the gesture: the gesture that comes from childhood, from crayons, cut-out rubber stamps, collage, all the activities where one seeks not line but movement” (ibid, 237).

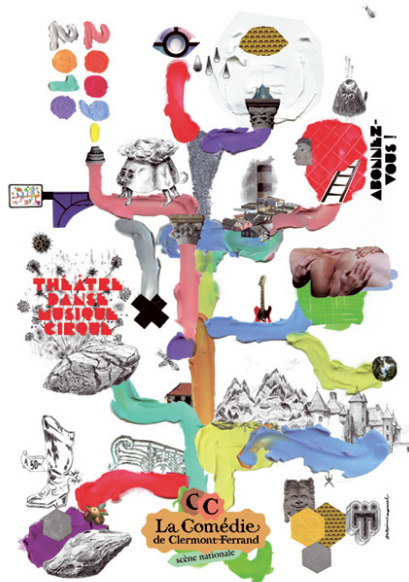


Figure 8: (left) Antoine & Manuel, Gods Series, 2008

Figure 9: (right) Antoine & Manuel, Comédie de Clermont Season Poster, 2009-10

As described, play has proven to be relevant and useful for designers as a creative process and can be used as an investigative tool to communicate meaning and emotion in graphic design. The next section describes a research study in which participants were asked to provide feedback on various design projects that were created using the process of play to enhance materiality.

## **Research Study**

### **Objective**

The research study explored how affect is created in graphic design using materiality. Affect is an important study for researchers in graphic design since it motivates how one may think, act and reflect upon him/herself. Specifically this study asked, how can graphic design generate affect by using materiality? Projects were inspired by the different ways in which designers experiment with materiality. For instance, Rebeca Mendez implemented physical materials in her book designs so that readers can interact with the content of the project, and Marian Bantjes explores the effect of working with materials in unusual ways to evoke their intrinsic qualities. For the purpose of this research study, I created a variety of projects that incorporated materiality in different ways. Some projects were tactile, where materials were implemented in the final design artifact, while other projects were digital. The tactile projects incorporated a sense of touch, or texture and the digital projects were flat where materiality was seen, not felt. The digital projects were mass produceable, while on the other hand, the tactile projects were created as one-of-a-kind artifacts.

## **Methodology**

Participants for this study were York University students, in the Faculty of Graduate Studies, who all had experience with the critique process. A critiquing environment encourages students to provide intellectual feedback on the work of their peers. Having experience with this kind of environment made the participants more open to discussing my projects. Four students participated in the study and the age and sex were not considered relevant for the research. Participants were asked to interact with objects and artifacts by touching, looking, assembling, handling and comparing various projects. Some projects included comparing tactile and digital artifacts at the same time with similar content. Different materials that were used to construct the projects included sand paper, paint, water colour, and spray paint. Participants were asked to provide their feedback on the projects and their comments were audio recorded. Additionally, participants were asked to complete a paper questionnaire in response to a series of tactile design objects.

The questions asked orally were:

“Comparing the digitally printed version with the tactile version of Project No. 1, how do the materials add to the overall experience of the design?”

“How do you interpret the meaning of Project No. 1? How do the materials in the tactile version contribute to the meaning?”

“Is the feeling of touch still stimulated in the digitally printed version of Project No. 1? If so, how?”

“Describe the relationship between vision and touch. Which sense is given priority when interacting with Project No. 1?”

After participants finished answering questions for each individual project, the research study concluded with participants providing written responses that compared all four projects.

The questions were:

“Comparing all the projects, which evoked the strongest emotional response or feeling? Why?”

“Do you think that adding a sense of touch to a work, elevates one’s understanding of the project and emotional take away? Describe how/why.”

Images of projects used in the research study:



Figure 10: (left) Nicole Beno, Flawless Magazine Touch Me: The Skin Issue, 2014, 3-D Version

Figure 11: (right) Nicole Beno, Flawless Magazine Touch Me: The Skin Issue, 2014, 2-D version

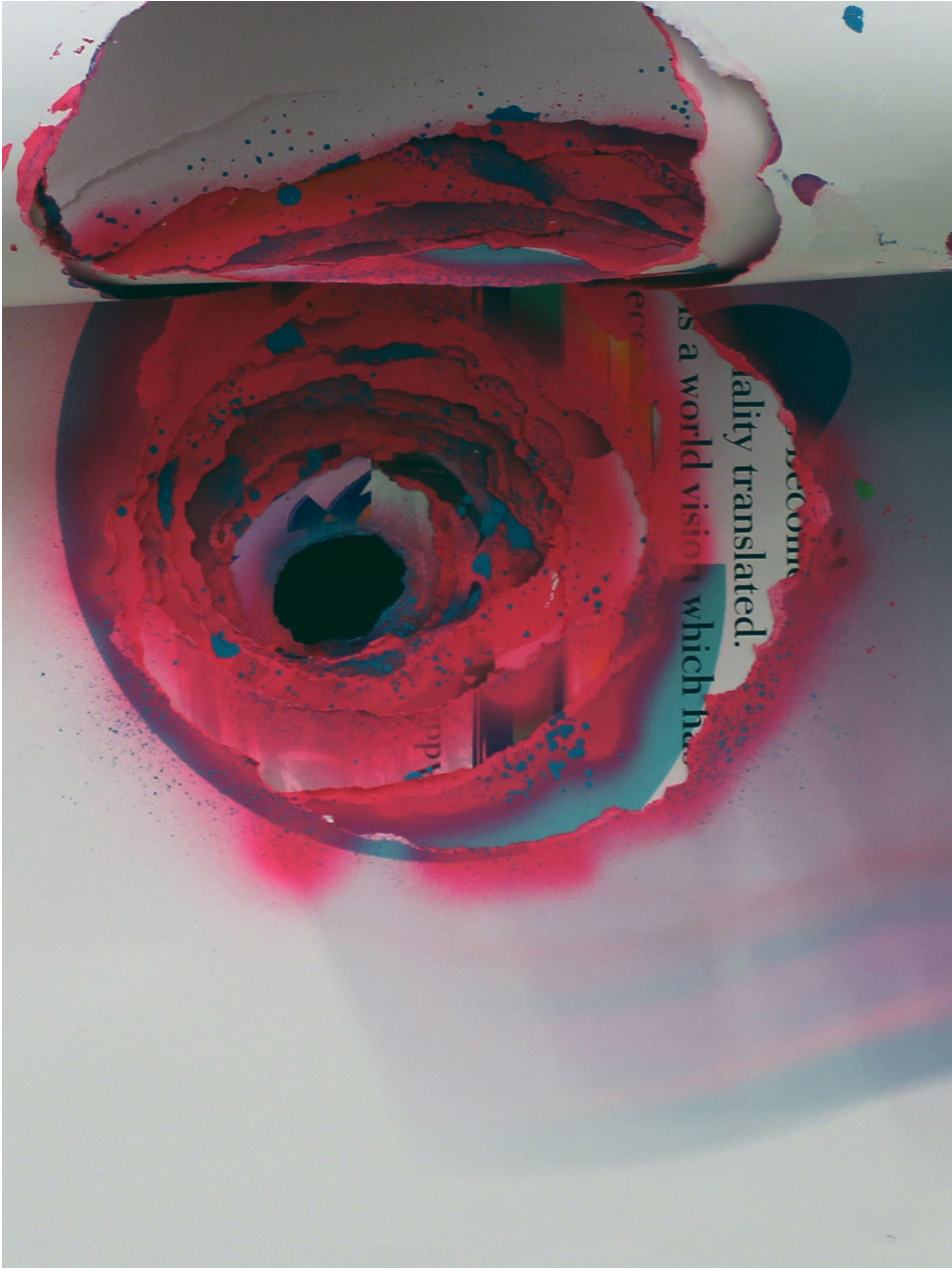


Figure 12: Nicole Beno, Society of the Spectacle, 2014



Figure 13: (top) Nicole Beno, The Art of Illusion, 2014, 2-D Version

Figure 14: (bottom) Nicole Beno, The Art of Illusion, 2014, 3-D Version

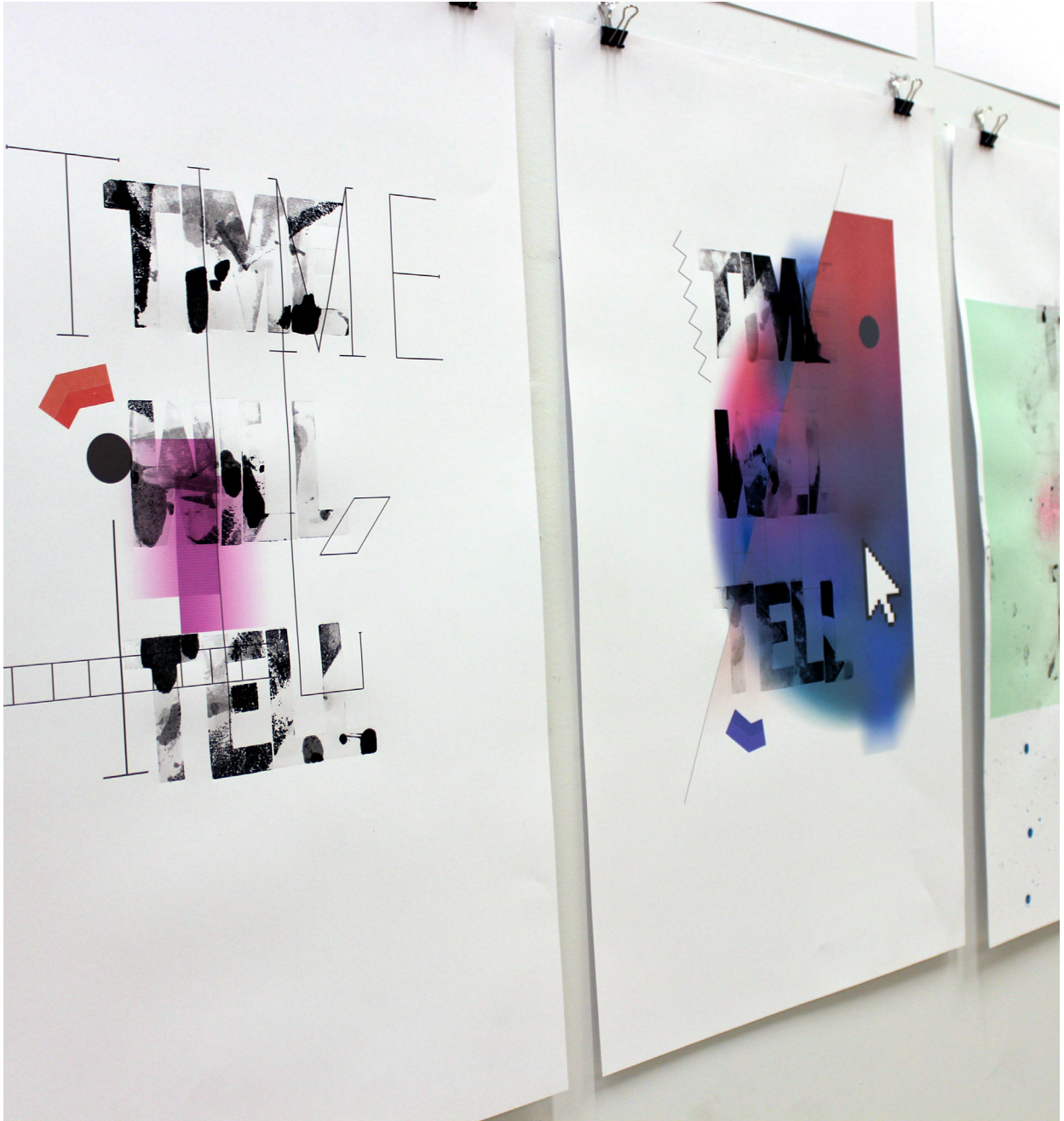


Figure 15: Nicole Beno, Time Will Tell, 2014

## **Process**

Participants interacted with the different projects one at a time. *Flawless Magazine Touch Me: The Skin Issue* (see Fig 10, Fig 11), and *The Art of Illusion* (see Fig 13, Fig 14) were created in pairs where one version was digital and the other version was tactile. The process of comparing one version with another was to understand how the viewer interacted and understood each project and if the material contributed to the overall meaning of the design. I introduced the participant to the first project, where I gave limited information on how to interact with it. I did not provide a rationale, since it might change their perspective and viewing of the project. I was interested in how each participant would interpret the meaning or intent of the project without a rationale.

As the participants were interacting with the projects, I made note of their physical/ facial reactions, as well as their responses to questions. Once I had asked all the questions necessary for one project, the participant went on to the next one. Projects included a poster series that hung on the wall, while others were books that were placed on a table. The process took longer than expected, as each participant talked about the projects, and what they thought they meant or signified. Once the participant had gone through every project, they received a sheet of paper with two final questions, where they were asked to provide feedback regarding all the projects. This presented the most insightful feedback, as participants were able to take more time to write down their overall thoughts.

## Results

The research study results were a comprehensive list of different responses from participants with diverse answers and observations. In regards to the question of how materials add to the overall experience of the design, participants noted that the materials in the tactile version dominated the images and typography in the design. Some participants agreed that the tactility was the first thing that caught their eye. In *Flawless Magazine*, (see Fig 10) the tactility of the sand paper was a disruption or distortion in the seamlessness and construction of the images and typography on the spreads. Other participants noted that their sense of sight still overpowered their sense of touch despite the materiality of the spreads. This led me to ask the next question: Is the feeling of touch stimulated in the digitally printed projects? If so, how? Participants noted that the feeling of touch was simulated visually, not physically in the digital version. This was because of the strong textural use of materials that were scanned and integrated with the visual content. One participant noted that the digital version evoked curiosity even though the materials were flat and digitized. The participant was interested in how the use of materiality lended itself to the content of the project. The visceral affect and curiosity may have been elicited through the process of digitization, in which the materials were adjusted, and distorted, becoming part of a new context.

Participants noted that the physical materials used in the tactile artifacts were able to be identified quickly. On the other hand, the digitized materials were not as easy to identify. This may have occurred because the designer had more flexibility since the computer technology allowed for adjustment, manipulation and addition of forms and layers. The digitized version captured the intrinsic qualities of the materials, while also adding a new layer of contextualization, that subverted or challenged the meaning of the materials.

## **Discussion Notes**

I recorded some observations while the participants were interacting with the projects, and made notes on their reactions. When participants interacted with the tactile projects, they were hesitant to touch the artifacts and some participants viewed them only from a distance, until I insisted they could interact with them. Other participants asked if it was okay to go up and touch the different artifacts. The participants' reactions were varied when interacting with the digital projects, where they did not hesitate to flip through the book, or get close to touch one of the posters. Their reactions indicated that the physically material projects were considered similar to art installations in a gallery wall, where social constructs indicate not to touch, and to only observe. One of the participants asked, "Is it okay that I touch this?" The hesitant reaction indicated that the observer felt there was a 'preciousness' or value in the artifact. Were the tactile projects perceived as more valuable because they appeared to be one-of-a-kind artifacts?

The tactile projects appeared to be not familiar enough to the participants to touch, and the work questioned what one can and cannot touch. The unfamiliarity of introducing another sense challenged the prioritization of visual perception. There seemed to be a disconnect between looking and touching as the participants interacted with the physically material projects, where the visual sense communicated a thought, meaning, or emotion in the project, but when the project was touched, the meaning was subverted or changed.

The research study provided an opportunity to further inform my creative design process and to explore the importance of materiality within the creation of visual and tactile artifacts. It also generated outside opinions from participants who were not designers, but had an understanding of the cultural and social significations of materials in everyday life. They provided feedback that was not only focused on the design aesthetic of the projects, but also the feelings, emotions and thoughts that were evoked while interacting with the projects and answering written and verbal questions.

## **Different Processes of Creative Play**

Based on the research study results, I outlined three ways of incorporating materiality as a discursive and dialogical approach, that can be used by designers in the creative process. Each process incorporates the term 'play' as a methodology, where thinking and making is explored through physically working with materials. This is also known as 'tacit knowledge,' which is knowledge gained through experience (Dormer 1994, 8). The different processes are, improvisational play, structured play, and interactive play. Ideas for each process was taken after further analysis of the research study and a reflection on work that I have already created through understanding the different ways materiality was used and applied.

### **Improvisational Play**

Improvisational play is unstructured, experimental, discovery-based, and open-ended. It imposes no expectations or inhibitions and relies on an instinctual way of working with materials, without having a specific content in mind. Instead the content is developed during the process where making and thinking occur simultaneously guided by improvisation. To explore this method I began by using analogue image-making techniques such as screen-printing and letterpress.

A fundamental difference I discovered between using an analogue and digital processes is 'AppleZ,' or the undo command. Digital programs can 'hold' a number of options and outcomes in their memory, thus allowing designers to endlessly 'undo.' Using analogue processes such as the letterpress and screen printing, changes the way in which mistakes and errors are handled. Mistakes are unable to be deleted or moved around, and the process may include having to reprint many copies to achieve an edition without errors.

Narrating my own experience in trying to achieve a ‘perfect’ edition, I limited the playful process, and instead the focus was on eliminating finger prints, paint spills, and residue rather than improvising and embracing the natural mistakes. Thinking less about perfecting the end result allowed for unexpected results to occur, creating new visual explorations and discoveries. Designer Alan Kitching states, “Designers adopt methods that force unpredictable things to happen, exaggerating the ‘errors’ to create a greater sense of ‘authenticity’” (Odling-Smee 2002, 24). Kitching has been known to deliberately ‘print badly,’ suggesting that for today’s design practitioners, it is often the imperfections of letterpress in particular that make the method so appealing” (ibid, 24). The materiality of the process such as the ink smudges, splashes of paint, and fingerprints came as a result of working by hand. They could not be erased or moved around because of the nature of the material, and instead were worked into the image (see Fig 16). David Jury’s insight on the letterpress further articulates the nature of accidental mistakes and flaws.

The process requires constant reappraisal, suggesting improvisations, deviations, even irregularities, and continually offering fresh and unexpected alternatives to form and pattern, colour and texture. Such variations are, in fact, slight and subtle. It is part of the unavoidable contrast and tension – between regulation and freedom, uniformity and divergence – that is at the heart of letterpress (Jury, 2004).

Jury describes the visceral affect of working with a mode of production that involves risk and improvisation, creating unexpected results. Learning how to work with the accidental marks, and unexpected irregularities with the content, is part of mastering the craft and using materiality. The improvisational process of working with unexpected results relates to craft knowledge. Craft knowledge is developed by experience, as one attains mastery, one does not over-intellectualize the experience but rather relies on instinct.

There are other reasons for my interest in the use of analogue processes such as the letterpress and screen printing. The main attraction is tactility, which computers cannot yet simulate. Michael Beirut points out, “Having grown so accustomed to the monotonous ‘flatness’ of digital printing, designers are increasingly attracted to the uneven, textured surface inherent to the letterpress” (Odling-Smee 2002, 22). The tactile qualities of analogue processes of working also helps define ways in which materiality can be used for dialogical inquiry. A dichotomy was created when I combined the analogue aesthetic of the letterpress to the digital aesthetic of a laser printer. This revealed an extra layer of meaning, where the connection between the old and new technology created a dialogical relationship discussing the application of a handmade technique within a contemporary digital context.

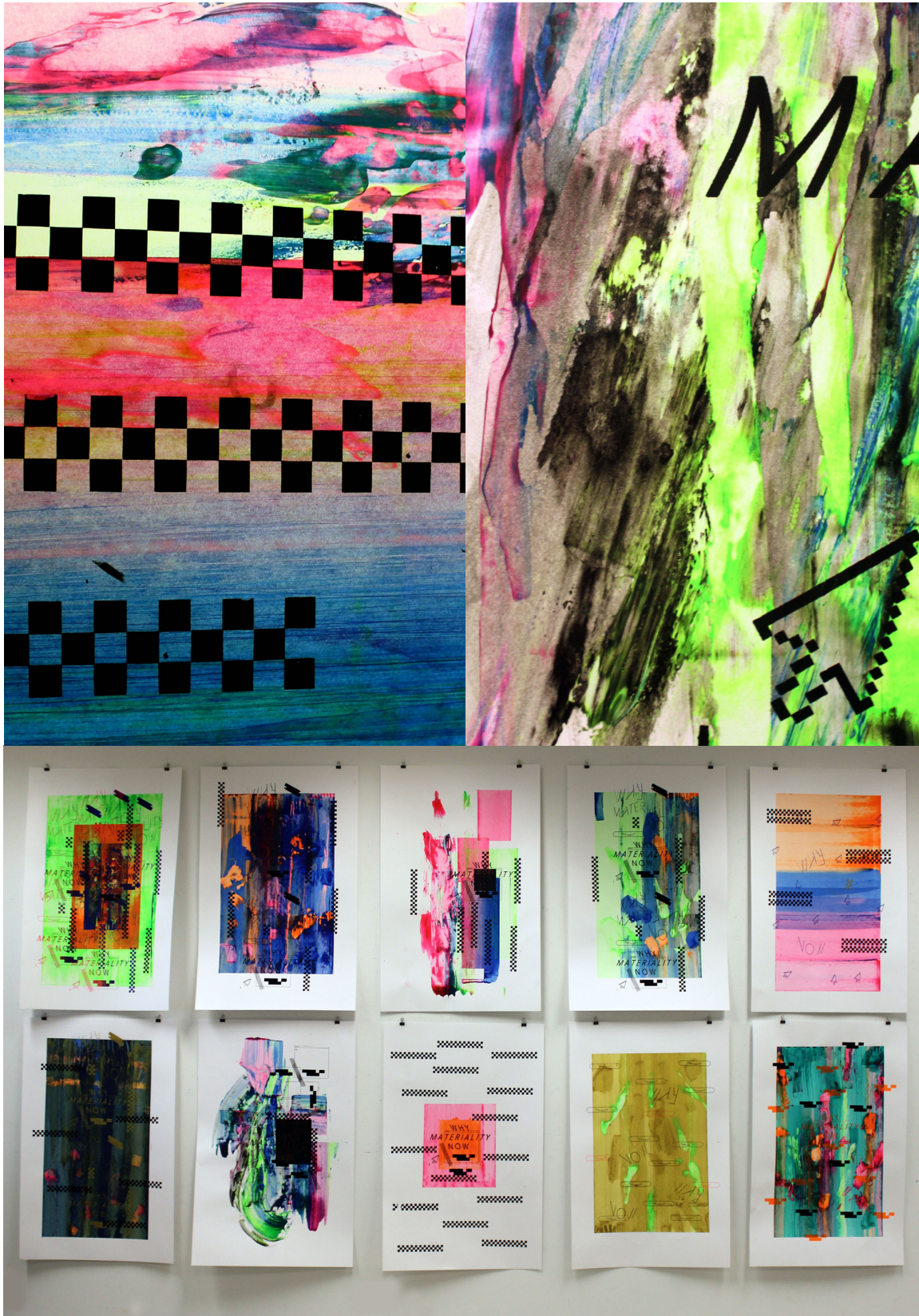


Figure 16: Nicole Beno, Screen-prints Experiments, 2014-15

## **Structured Play**

The process of structured play is generated by having a specific content and methods in mind, and experimenting with various materials to communicate that content. This began with the physical process of working with materials and literally playing with them. I began with an idea, a curiosity, or a hunch, that directed my image making process. The idea was not completely fixed or established, and instead relied on an intuitive and instinctual process of working. I used a high resolution scanner to appropriate, mix and distort materials in order to amplify their intrinsic qualities. The materials were appropriated to suit the content of the project, where they might lose their original context or constructed meaning. The curiosity came from how the materials would be represented once digitized through a scanner or digital camera. A reaction occurred when the materials were no longer recognizable objects: the effect could be described as surreal and alienating, signifying something unknown or unfamiliar. Scanning materials and forming narratives outside the restrictions of software, allowed for greater experimentation without a grid or typographic rules that form the underlying structure of most graphic design work. This relates to the ways in which Bradbury Thompson playfully worked with materials that inspired his design work (Thompson 1988, 43).

Once the materials were digitized, new layers of meaning were created when the materials were distorted, or appropriated, thus changing the way the piece was perceived. A new layer of meaning occurred through displacing and defamiliarizing the materials and removing them from their original context. Removing these materials from their familiar context asks the viewer to question their relationship to them. In working this way the aesthetic dimension of a work can be used to engage with the viewers, and entice them to stop and take time to contemplate and reflect upon the norms that are challenged.

Materiality in commercial design is often used to sell a product, service or brand, but designers can use the critical potential of materiality as a potent discursive device. Rick Poynor notes, “Design as we mostly practice it today understands itself as an integral service to and expression of capitalism. There are disciplinary debates surrounding the necessity for design to exist within capitalism and its potential as a constructive social tool” (Poynor & Rock 2010, 239). While designers work with materiality in commercial design, they often fail to address its potential to act beyond representation. Materiality instead can participate in re-thinking and re-evaluating cultural and social phenomena in everyday life and challenge or subvert the socio-cultural or commercial roles of design.

An example of this re-thinking is *The Plastic Donut* (see Fig 17) which used structured play to generate a set of posters that mimic the printed content often featured in grocery store food sale advertisements and promotions. The blue spray paint indicates the artificial ingredients and chemicals that are used in food production and packaging. The set of posters aimed to raise questions about consumer’s tolerance for artificial-looking food, which appears beautiful, glossy, and mesmerizing, even though it contains chemicals. The images are intended to overemphasize and overexpose by offering cartoon-like depictions of food, suggesting a grim, dystopian future of food in a mass-produced society. The project initially began with an experimental process in which actual donuts were spray-painted blue. Images were created using the icing, sprinkles, and breaking apart the dough to achieve different textures and the materials were appropriated to communicate the specific content for the project.



Figure 17: Nicole Beno, The Plastic Donut, 2014

## **Interactive Play**

Interactive play is a third process which involves physically incorporating materials directly with the content, in order to contribute to the overall meaning. Here materiality can be a rip in the page of a book, or the use of a different paper stock. The implementation of physical materiality into the final design artifact, creates an additional level of manual interaction as the viewer is an active participant not only in reading, but also in contributing to the artifact. In a way, the viewer has an opportunity to re-examine their relationship with the artifact by having agency to modify the final product. My process for designing these types of artifacts included thinking about how materials can lend themselves to the content, and how they can create a tactile interplay for the viewer.

*The Electronic Information Age* (see Fig 18) is a book designed as a dictionary and begins with pages taken from a 19th century Webster Dictionary found in a York University Library. Each page was horizontally perforated and as the reader flipped through the pages, the perforations increased, taking over the spreads. The perforations suggest a disruption running through the images and text, and when the pages inevitably separate, information splits and folds into sudden, unlikely combinations. The book is supposed to feel very unstable and embodies the notion that digital print media is challenging printed text and at any moment the book might completely deconstruct and destroy itself in the end.

As the reader progresses through the book, the text becomes more redundant, similar to the nature of 21st century texting, social media and quick access to information. Incorporating an interactive element to the book encouraged the viewer to examine the relationship between printed text and digital media, by having the opportunity to rip the pages apart, putting the fate of the book in the hands of the reader.



Figure 18: Nicole Beno, The Electronic Information Age, 2014

Exploring creative play through improvisational, structured, and interactive methods resulted in the understanding of how play and materiality in graphic design can be used as a dialogic and dialectical tool for communication. Play is an engaging process for the maker, and also for the viewer, being an active agent through interacting, exploring and uncovering the different meanings materials can hold. Through the exploration of working with 'happy accidents,' mistakes and flaws in improvisational play, and through creating new worlds and experiences in structured play, as well as generating tactile artifacts in interactive play, it is apparent that the process of creative play suggests ways that graphic design can manifest itself as a more physical process. The process not only has an impact on the maker, but also on the viewer by generating an affective and emotional response. Play is connected to the creative process in design, where ideas and imagination lead to new ways of communicating meaning and the intrinsic aspects of play that are valuable in childhood development, are also shown to be useful for designers. Each method suggests a special kind of unforeseeable and unpredictable creativity that emerges through the process of play and in direct interaction with materials. The physical act of play evokes new questions such as how to recognize and appreciate physical ways of working with materials, which challenge understandings of design as a process solely executed with a computer. The connection between thinking and making, also expressed as tacit knowledge, is a way to understand the social and cultural underpinnings of materials in everyday life.

## **Concluding Remarks**

This thesis demonstrated the multiple possibilities, processes, and variations materiality can offer in graphic design and how it can be shaped and refined by designers to effectively communicate meaning. Materiality was investigated through the process of creative play, where thinking and physically working with materials connect through graphic design. The different methods of creative play can be used by designers to generate concepts and challenge a designer's established ways of working as well as heighten materiality through direct engagement in the manipulation of materials. A heightened material process can result in a greater understanding of how to reveal the visceral affect, emotion and social and cultural meanings materials possess in everyday life. Through the experience of making, one develops and externalizes tacit knowledge and craftsmanship, and an understanding of how materials can engage audiences by tapping into the physical world.

As a way to break out of established processes where designers often work with materials in commercial design to sell products and promote brands, this thesis demonstrates that materiality has the potential to be used as a critical tool to investigate issues such as consumer culture and social phenomena. The research study investigated how materials can challenge visual hierarchies where tactility creates another level of interaction and opens new possibilities for materiality to be used as a rhetorical device in graphic design. As a result, materiality can make viewers think and reflect upon cultural and social issues where the viewer becomes an active participant in touching and viewing the artifacts. As Stefan Sagmeister notes, "I'm attracted to materials in graphic design because they allow you to make something that involves the viewer" (Street & Ferdinand 2001, 89). The visceral effects of materials are what constitute how one may relate to the world and the material culture of everyday life.

Designers can offer a more material way of working in a digital domain where processes are becoming less tactile and less physical. As Katherine McCoy writes, “Design as a cultural activity, including aesthetic and personal expression, may be the essential source of values, emotions and play that we all need in the digital domain” (Heller 1994, 12). Materiality is an extension of the maker involved in the work, which emanates from the body. As a result, the playful process of working with physical materials becomes directly connected to the maker, where dexterity, and hand gestures generate myriad possibilities for discovery and creativity.

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## **Appendix**

### Process Work - Visual Exploration

The pages that follow contain a variety of projects that were produced in the context of this thesis. The projects are explorations of multiple notions discussed in this paper, namely materiality in the process of making, and how using materials can be used as a rhetorical device, and explores different processes of creative play.

## **Save Money Live Better**

The concept behind “Save Money Live Better” talks about society’s obsession with buying cheap, plastic items with no use value other than a quick, fast thrill. Using the text, “Happy Objects by Sara Ahmed, the items exert a sort of pleasure when touched. I situated and designed the objects in a way to glorify them on a pedestal the same way that society does as well. This project used the process of structured play where I began with an idea and manipulated the materials to reflect the content.



Nicole Beno, Save Money Live Better



Nicole Beno, Save Money Live Better



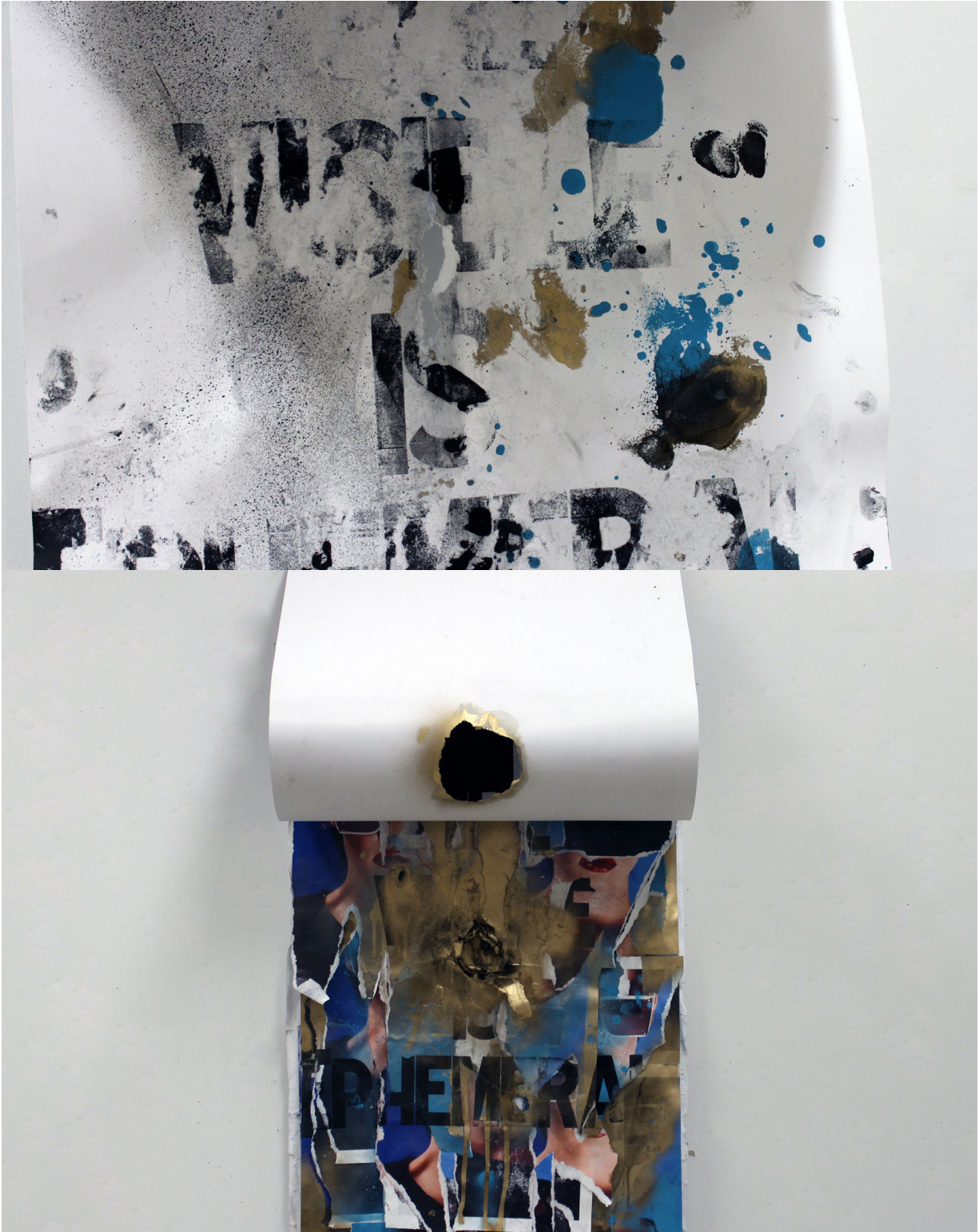
Nicole Beno, Save Money Live Better

## **The Visible is Ephemeral**

For this project, I used the process of improvisational play and decided to work intuitively, where the process becomes most important. The message, “the visible is ephemeral is repeated throughout each page with images of what resembles an advertisement. As the project continues, each page becomes more and more weathered and destroyed, as nature takes over each poster, making the posters feel impermanent or constantly changing. This connects with the image that is printed and repeated on the posters showing the impermanence of beauty, how it may fade or disappear overtime, acting as a layer or concealer.



Nicole Beno, The Visible is Ephemeral



Nicole Beno, The Visible is Ephemeral

## **Flawless Magazine Touch Me: The Skin Issue**

This project used a Surrealist aesthetic where the landscapes were meant to be dream like to emphasize the connection to the spectacle in Jean Baudrillard's essay, *Simulacra and Simulation*. Using interactive and structured play, the end of the magazine concludes by using the roughness of the sandpaper to signify the removal of all layers, portraying what is actually underneath the spectacle. the roughness and tactility of the sandpaper inside the glossy magazine, challenges the mundane and banal form of a commercial magazine, making viewers reflect on its purpose and meaning.



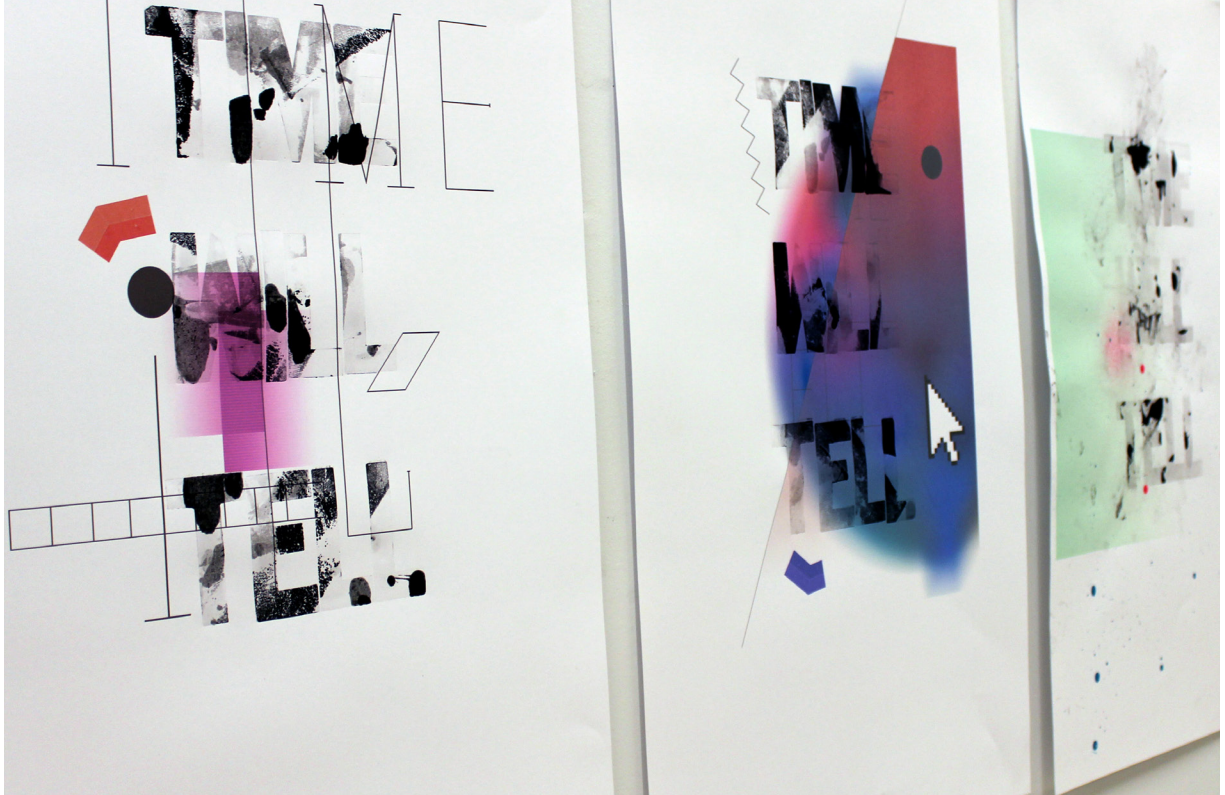
Nicole Beno, Flawless Magazine Touch Me: The Skin Issue



Nicole Beno, Flawless Magazine Touch Me: The Skin Issue

## **Time Will Tell**

Without providing any content other than the words, “Time Will Tell,” I created the challenge to let the material convey the message of the work. The materiality of the words, “Time Will Tell,” begin as tactile, letter forms printed using the letterpress. As the reader continues through the project, the materiality begins to change, and the letter forms are digitized, and eventually disappear. With the change of technology, the materials are supposed to feel very unstable, as if they are about to change again and again, such as the nature of constantly upgrading and changing our technology for something better, faster, and more productive. The meaning comes from the longing for the tangible, haptic, and analog qualities of the letterpress, as our society moves to a more digital future. I used the process of improvisational play to emphasize the intuitive marks of the letterpress.



Nicole Beno, Time Will Tell



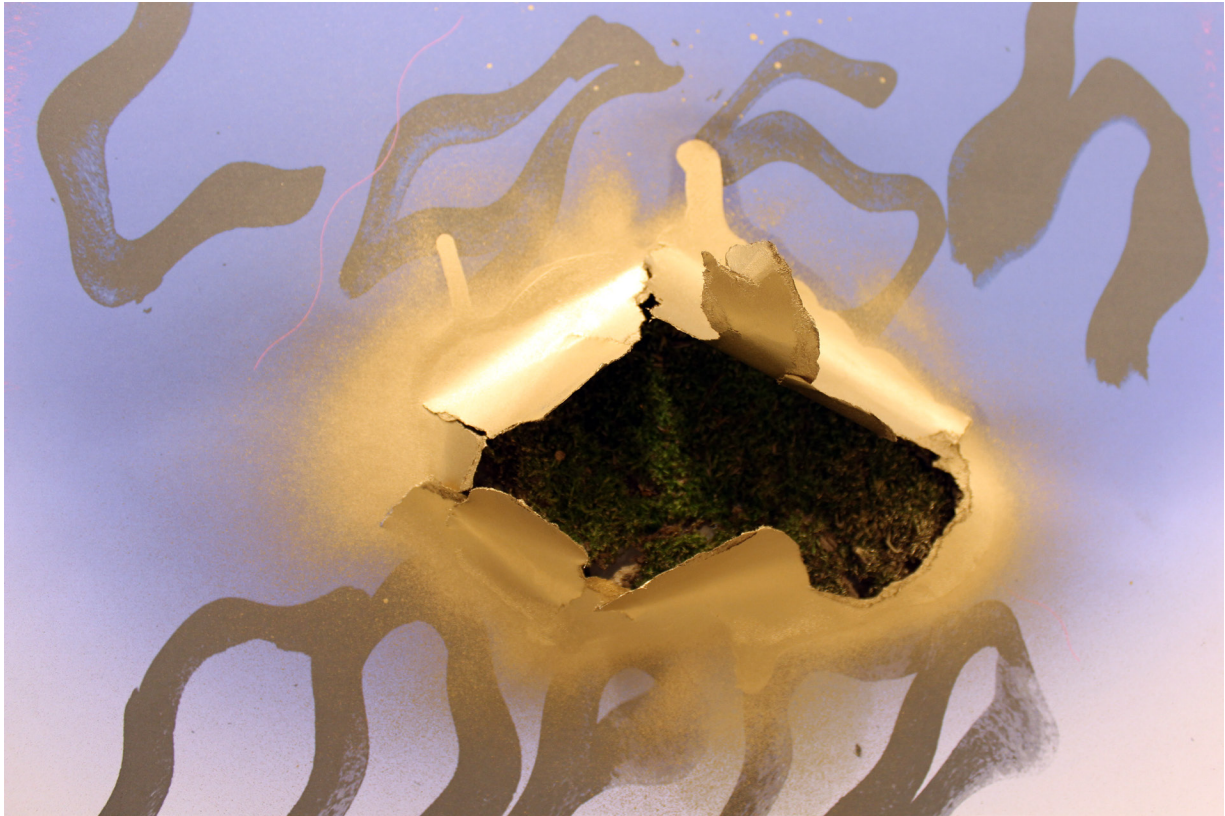
Nicole Beno, Time Will Tell

## **Natur**

“Natur” is the branding of a fashion line incorporating the copyright on selected natural materials. The brand creates fur out of grass, leather out of tree bark, and cashmere out of moss. The copyright of these materials addresses the privatization of everyday objects and uses spray paint as a metaphor for privatization. The posters represent fashion posters one may see inside a store. Using the process of interactive play, the viewer may question why there are tactile materials on commercial posters. Within the context of commercial design, materiality can disrupt and challenge consumer norms, where viewers may rethink their purchase or reflect upon the issues that are raised.



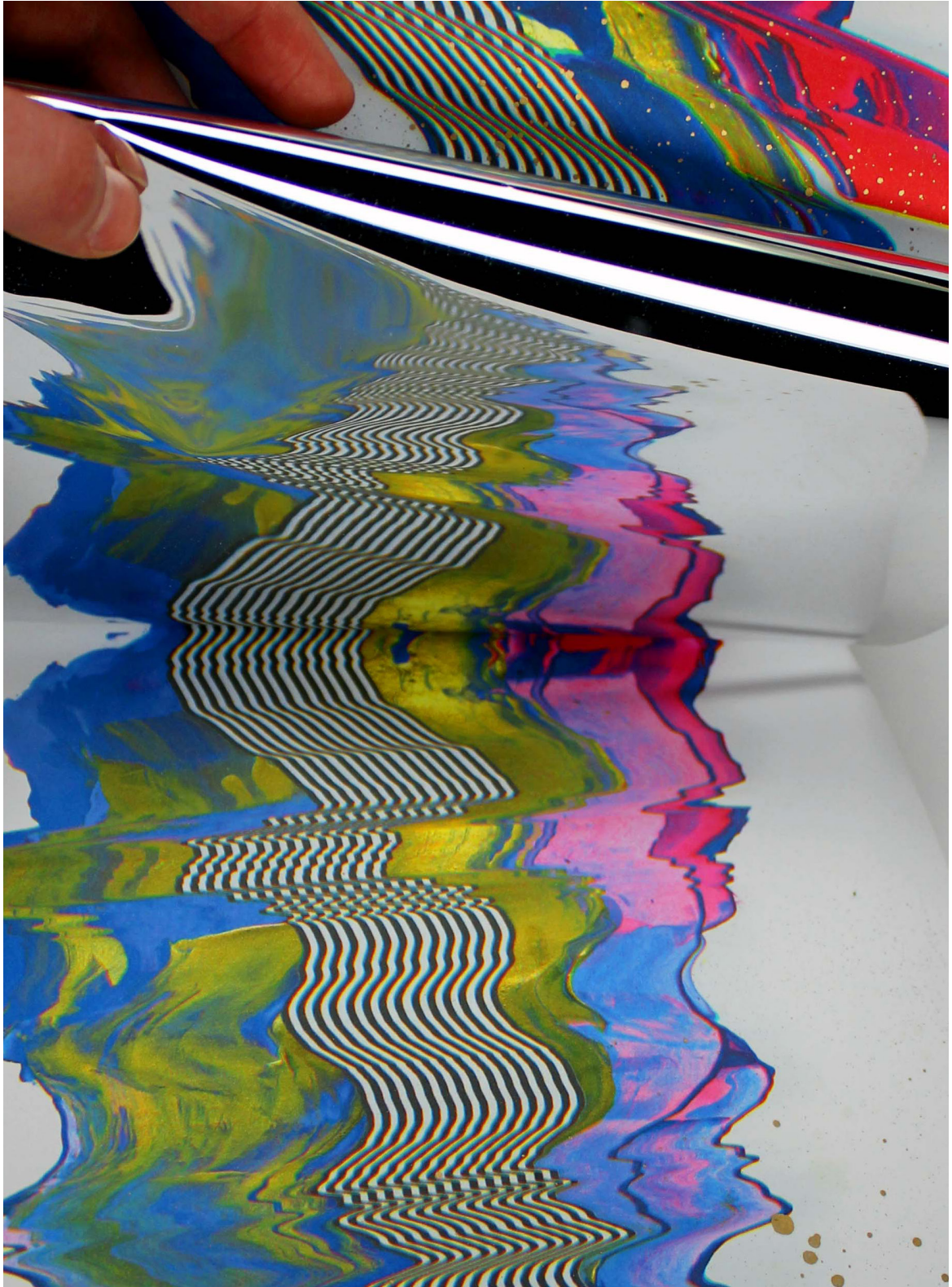
Nicole Beno, Natur



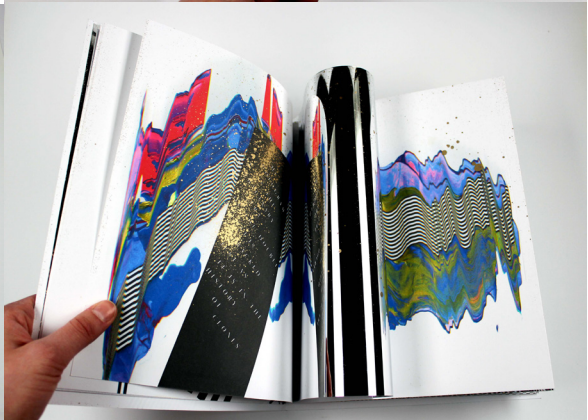
Nicole Beno, Natur

## **Simulations**

Simulations, is a continuation of several explorations which used the essay, *Simulacra and Simulation* by Jean Baudrillard. Using the processes of interactive, and structured play, I investigated different ways in which materials can be used as a rhetorical device to bring attention to how spectacles in consumer culture filter reality. The book itself is a form of simulation and illusion, using reflective sheets of paper to help emphasis the effect.



Nicole Beno, Simulations



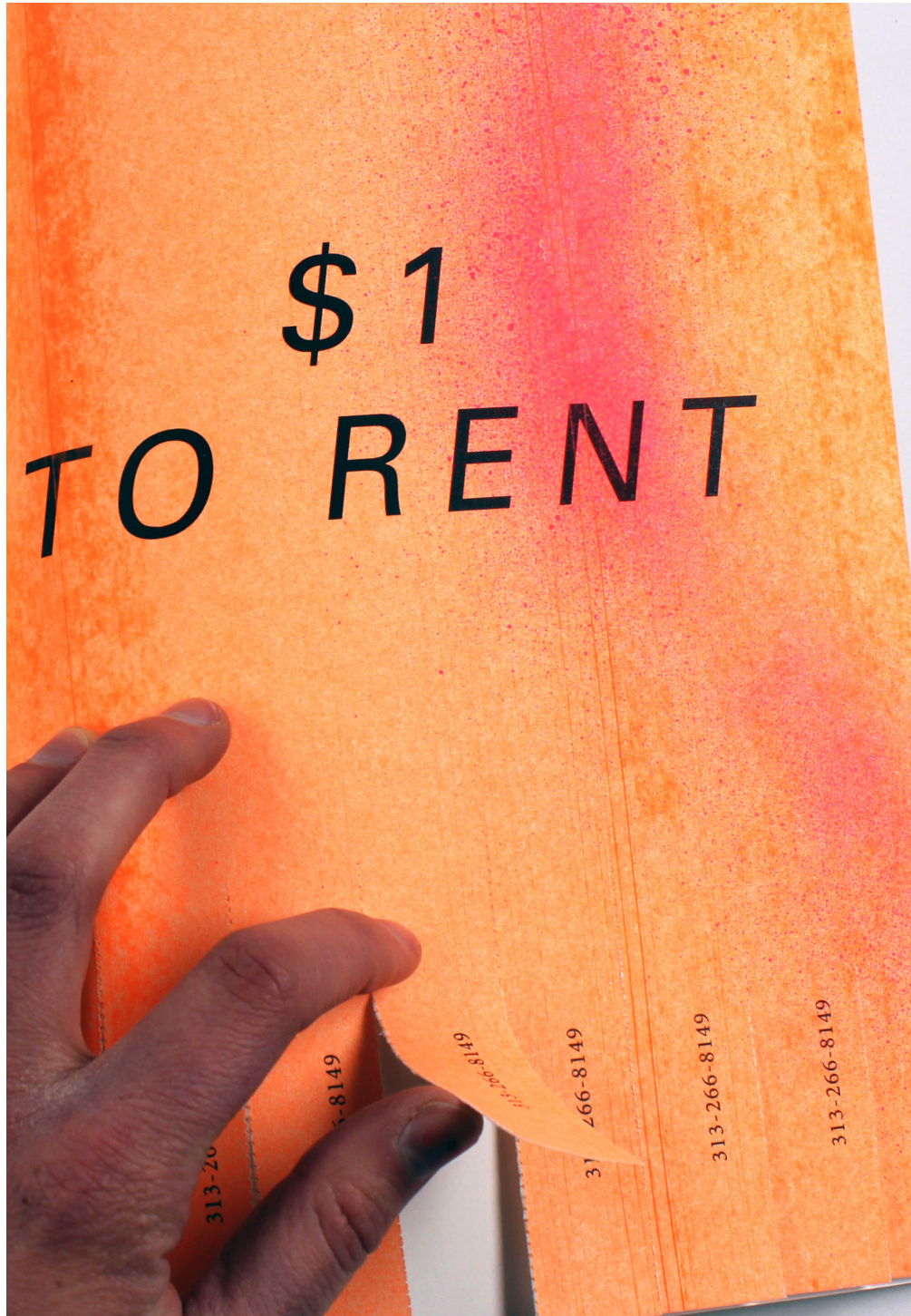
Nicole Beno, Simulations

## **Detroit: For Sale**

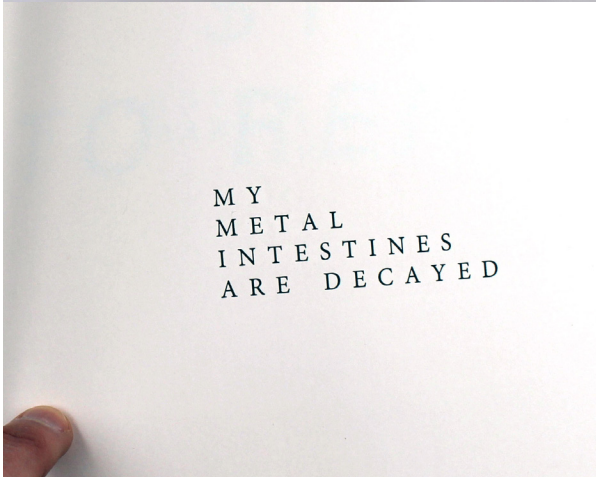
Detroit: For Sale, is a personification of the abandoned houses and buildings in Detroit, MI.

The narrative of the book is told through the perspective of the abandoned houses and buildings where they become living, breathing organisms, reflecting on the displacement of its past inhabitants, and lively neighbourhood. As the dialogue between the houses and buildings with the viewer continues, the affect of displacement is visualized by using posters depicting, “For Sale” or “\$1 to Rent” signs- as some houses in Detroit are being sold for one dollar. The posters have phone numbers attached, where people could rip them off, and call the number if interested in the house.

All the tags on the signs remain, showing the loneliness, these houses feel, as “no one goes here anymore.” The materiality of the posters helps visualize the displacement of communities in some Detroit neighbourhoods. It was also an alternative way to depict to state of some areas in the city as Detroit is often associated with urban blight and decay, where showing images of abandoned buildings are almost cliché. The process of interactive play was used in thinking about how the viewer would engage with the artifact.



Nicole Beno, Detroit: For Sale



Nicole Beno, Detroit: For Sale

## **Various Screen-printing Experiments**

Throughout the year I created various screen-printing experiments, which also incorporated the letterpress, digital media, spray paint, and water colour. Using improvisational play and analogue methods of working, mistakes and errors, that naturally occur in the process, such as paint smudges, and ink spills, are worked in with the content of the project.



Nicole Beno, Screen-printing Experiments



Nicole Beno, Screen-printing Experiments



Nicole Beno, Screen-printing Experiments



Nicole Beno, Screen-printing Experiments