

Blunt Explicit & Graphic Design Criticism Now Conference Paper Proposal Letterpress: Looking Backward to Look Forward

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Context

Until the latter half of the twentieth century, the majority of art schools and colleges in the UK housed letterpress workshops for the teaching of composition and typography, both as a craft and as a trade. This paper explores the value of retaining these workshops, not merely as a tool to understand our past but as a means to critically reflect upon our future. Letterpress has traditionally been taught through a ‘training’ model, which characteristically prioritised the acquisition of skills to enable the production of artefacts. ‘Expert’ technical demonstrators, themselves ‘trained’ in production, have been responsible for imparting their knowledge of a process to students. This didactic model of ‘instruction’ was formalised within the training of apprentice compositors and printers.

The research into the positioning of the letterpress process is pertinent at this moment in time; with a marked shift from the teaching of a trade to a tool for investigation as the last of the trained compositors responsible for the letterpress workshops retire. We are now entering an era where letterpress practice continues but is not in the hands of anyone who is formally trained within the apprenticeship tradition. A younger generation who were educated as designers have appropriated the space to reinvigorate traditional letterpress values from a design perspective, placing letterpress solely in the hands of those who have not undertaken a formal apprenticeship. This has radically altered not only the approach to teaching, but also the work produced.

The 1960’s were a decade of change in the UK for Art Schools politically, culturally and academically. In 1959 decisions were made to develop a Diploma in Art and Design nationally as a result of the Coldstream Report¹. The introduction of the NDD in Graphic Design in the 1960’s and subsequent adoption of the Mac in the 1980’s saw many art colleges in the UK dispose of their letterpress equipment, believing it to be redundant. The value of retaining such workshop areas within the art school has been identified on a national level by The Council for Higher Education in Art & Design (CHEAD) who have undertaken research into ‘minority specialist subjects’, which encompass, ‘subjects that are concerned with the teaching and learning of core skills, materials and processes; specifically this covers subjects that are concerned with non-digital issues, and with the physicality of processes/materials². Identified through case studies and research include technical and workshop areas such as ceramics, metalwork, textiles, bookbinding and letterpress³. Farren argues the economic value of these subjects, which have traditionally formed a part of the core learning of art and design education that has given the UK its creative ‘edge’. Furthermore, the benefits of teaching graphic design students letterpress to understand typography are well documented. Spencer argued for retaining ‘craft’ subjects as the physicality of processes including letterpress foster immersive learning⁴. Edwards argues that the letterpress process is a significant teaching tool that complements, and should act in conjunction with, computer-based design education⁵. Cooper & Gridneff⁶ have previously stated that processes such as letterpress should be explored beyond the value of a teaching tool. They argue that letterpress is valuable due to the transferable skills it can

¹ First Report of the National Advisory Council on Art Education (First Coldstream Report), London: HMSO, 1960. Second Report of the National Advisory Council on Art Education: Vocational Courses in Colleges and Schools of Art (Second Coldstream Report), London: HMSO, 1962. Third Report of the National Advisory Council on Art Education: Post-Diploma Studies in Art and Design (Third Coldstream Report), London: HMSO, 1964.

² CHEAD definition of Minority Specialist Subjects, 2008. Art Design & Media Subject Centre, Higher Education Academy [online] Available at: www.adm.heacademy.ac.uk

³ Farren, I., National Arts Learning Network (NALN) & Council for Higher Education in Art and Design (CHEAD), 2008. Materials and Processes: The Future of the Craft of Making. British Library, October 2008. London: NALN & CHEAD.

⁴ Spencer, H., 1982. The Graphic Crafts. Crafts Magazine, May/ June issue, pp.86-88.

⁵ Edwards, S., Lockheart, J. and Raein, M., 2005. Codex, TypoGraphic, Issue 60.

⁶ Cooper, A. and Gridneff, R., College Art Association, 2010. The Changing Face of Letterpress. Chicago, February 2010. New York: College Art Association.

equip students with, such as an appreciation of physical space and the slower speed of work fostering reflection through design. Steve Rigley, Head of Graphic Design at Glasgow School of Art and project participant, discusses the importance of decision making that is inherent within the letterpress process, as ‘the problem is that default settings on the Mac stop students from really looking and making genuine design decisions. The actual restrictions of letterpress can be really liberating.’⁷

6x6: Collaborative Letterpress Project

6x6: Collaborative Letterpress Project brings together six UK based Higher Education Institutions with letterpress workshops to explore an alternative model of learning; learning through shared and immersive experience. The University of Brighton, Camberwell College of Arts, London College of Communication, Central Saint Martins College of Art & Design, Lincoln School of Art & Design and Glasgow School of Art each have letterpress workshops with a dedicated member of technical staff. Each are engaged with practice-led research, but there has until now been no mechanism for collectively reviewing and sharing this research. The project follows a participatory action research model⁸, with students involved at all stages and playing an integral and equal part in the design and execution of the research. This collaborative practice has been conducted in the same manner across all partner colleges, within an agreed timeframe.

The project combines a traditional understanding of letterpress composition with a contemporary approach to design education. This has been realised through the collaborative creation of: a letterpress printed publication, reflective essays, a traveling exhibition, conference papers and the initial phase of the construction of an inventory of type and equipment within letterpress workshops in art and design schools in the UK.

The six participating colleges responded to a set brief, contributing six pieces student and staff work. Participants were asked to respond to the immediate 1200ft radius of their letterpress workshop. Collectively, these prints provide a positioning of not just the geographic location of the workshop, but also the positioning of students and staff in regards to their approach to the letterpress process. Each college has printed work in an edition of 200 to form the publication which when published alongside the essays and type inventories, provides an overview of contemporary letterpress practice within design education.

Approach

The work produced demonstrates a diverse range of approaches to contemporary letterpress practice, with a broad range of methods employed for generating content. Many prints have been developed according to the geographic positioning of the workshop, examining the physical location where the work is being created; be it the city, the college or the workshop itself. Other pieces of work utilise content which explore the discipline of typography and the nature of letterpress practice. These are executed through varied means, from expressive prints which celebrate the process through overprinting, to analytical pieces of documentation and information design. Projects from across several of the colleges make use of archival material within the workshop; found formes and image plates. What is notable is that amidst common thematic threads within the work, there is no dominant method of working apparent.

The project has clearly outlined each institutions different approach to the process, both through the method of selecting content and through the tools that have been used to execute these ideas. Each set of six prints from each college are clearly defined by the constraints they were created within, with specific typefaces available in each workshop that collectively form what would once have been

⁷ Steve Rigley, ‘Thinking in solid air’, Eye, no.57, London: Haymarket 2005, p.41

⁸ Krimerman, L., 2001. Participatory Action Research: Should Social Inquiry be Conducted Democratically? *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, March 2001 vol. 31 no. 1, pp. 60-82

referred to as the 'style of the house'. A far cry from the easily disposed of digital typefaces, students and staff in each workshop have been presented with the legacy of the type that has arrived in the workshop by differing means. James Edgar, Senior Letterpress Technician at Camberwell College of Arts, argues that, 'There is a visible language that exists from choices made in the past, students and practitioners using the workshop can expose a renewed interest in the typefaces that have been selected from history. The letterpress workshop at Camberwell is unique in that it is situated in the space where it originated in 1905. The typographic choices available in the present have been very much informed by the past.'⁹

For Lincoln School of Art, this historical understanding is informed by the staff's own experiences as students, noting that 'As the academic side of the team involved in this project, we are of an age where the experience of going to Art School was very different from that of a University. Art Schools had a core business of reading and drawing. Art Schools were very physical experiences. They all had workshops; ceramics, sculpture, glass, photography... and print rooms. These were full of processes such as etching, stone based lithography, screen-printing – and, of course, letterpress.'¹⁰ Unlike Camberwell, Lincoln College of Art has operated from many buildings within the city and the original letterpress workshop no longer remains. Their workshop is a collection of type and equipment that has been gathered by Graphic Design Lecturers Barrie Tullet and Philippa Wood, situated in the studio for the students use. This isochronal approach has in turn informed the visual language of the work, as 'even though we have to work more in the spirit of Werkman than Warde, we have begun to know the nuances of our press and find work-arounds for the lack of chases, leading, furniture, composing stones and all the things we took for granted when we were students.'

Looking Backward

This impact of history upon current practice is clearly embedded within each set of prints, and a common thread that runs through each of the six accompanying essays. The legacy of the retiring compositors clearly still resonates as many are mentioned by name¹¹. This poses new challenges, as Phil Baines and Catherine Dixon from Central Saint Martins question, 'it will be interesting to see what changes a new influx of technicians with very different backgrounds will bring to both practice and teaching and learning, especially in relation to the craft of printing.'¹²

The importance of oral history and capturing these last voices that signify the end of the division between design and production is demonstrated. The essay from the London College of Communication focuses on an interview with John Hembury, a compositor who formerly taught letterpress before moving across to run the computer suite. Higgins, a postgraduate student at the college who conducted the interview, notes that 'as a computer technician, his is a rather refreshing story; one that embraces technological change and proves that there really is a place for traditional skill in the ever-changing contemporary design industry.' John speaks of his training as a compositor, attending college as an apprentice, and the division of his day into different departments whereby 'we did 'design' in the evenings'.¹³ This echoes the experiences of Froshaug, who was denied access to the Central Saint Martins letterpress workshop both as a student and latterly as a tutor, not having undergone any formal technical training. Such was the demarcation between the areas of design and production that 'any engagement for the student of design with typography was always at a remove'.¹⁴ At Brighton, there has historically been a clear geographic division between vocational typographic training for the print trade on one side of the building, and the education of designers studying the newly validated DipAd course in Graphic Design on

⁹ Edgar, J., 2012. Graphic Archaeology, 6x6 Project.

¹⁰ Tullet, B. and Wood, P., 2012. We Are Not Like The Others, 6x6 Project.

¹¹ Peter Benham from Brighton, Cyril Parrott from Camberwell College of Art, John Hembury from London College of Communication, Ken Godfrey, Nick Nineham and Malcolm Parker from Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design.

¹² Baines, P. and Dixon, C., 2012. Changing Perspectives, 6x6 Project.

¹³ Higgins, E., 2012. A Life in Print: John's Story, 6x6 Project.

¹⁴ Baines, P. and Dixon, C., 2012. Changing Perspectives, 6x6 Project.

the other. The distance was defined not merely by academic approach, training or education, but reinforced by the physical space between workshop and studio.¹⁵

With the technical teaching of letterpress composition phased out at all participating colleges by the early 1980's, the workshops are now predominantly used by Graphic Design, Illustration and Visual Communication students. The mode of delivery varies from institution to institution, but the majority of colleges have an induction process to the workshop area, with subsequent student use largely optional. The colleges that have retained these workshops have long understood its value to the student's typographic understanding. The importance of maintaining relevance is a common thread within the 6x6 essays, with Baines and Dixon arguing 'our situation today is quite different from that described above when letterpress was so commercially significant. In a college situation letterpress is not a museum, it is a workshop, but we need to be clear about what it is actually good for.'¹⁶ This experience is echoed in Glasgow, where the School of Art is currently undergoing redevelopment, which will see the letterpress workshop moved to a more prominent place within the building with transparent walls for all to view inside. It is noted that 'whilst being an absolute necessity, rows of Macs can feel sterile in their uniformity. Studios and workshops may act as a counter to this impersonal environment providing a more concrete or located sense of identity, a strong driver in the competitive world of student recruitment.'¹⁷

It could be argued that it is fashionable to discuss the physicality of letterpress, the touch, feel and smell, the weight of the type and the value of the object. Staff from Glasgow question, 'Will letterpress merely continue to function as a sign for the authentic with the physical processes of printing as a form of re-enactment? Or will these processes be further investigated in order to articulate forms of embodied knowledge neglected within digital practice?'¹⁸

Looking Forward

The 6x6: Collaborative Letterpress Project has provided the opportunity for staff and students to reflect upon the nature of letterpress within their own institutions, and consider its role in the future. The involvement of students in this has been paramount, with many driving forward new ideas and ways of executing work. Collectively, 'we as tutors have spoken of our vision for how letterpress enhances current design curricula; to teach is to be open to learn. It will be interesting to learn from the students themselves, how they envision the possibilities of the composing room beyond our perspectives, beyond teaching, beyond even print.'¹⁹ This is demonstrated in the work produced, with students stretching the capabilities of the process through digital technologies available to them today. The workshop is an environment that fosters immersive learning, with this project enabling staff and students to work together on an equal footing. As neither generation have been formally trained in the letterpress process, it is possible to explore the paradigm shift as equal partners in research, empowering the students to have ownership of the workshops and influence how they move forward.

Perhaps for current students 'for whom the Mac today represents their social-network, their television, their games room, their office and more, to step outside of that all-encompassing digital world is to really play? Certainly ideas of digital 'escape' are repeatedly found in rationales for working with letterpress with students, with the language of description frequently touching on the therapeutic, even spiritual.²⁰ However, beyond any art-house fascinations with the process of print-making and letterpress as aesthetic – 'the quirky spacing and chipped type factor' – there is a simple

¹⁵ Gridneff, R. and Haslam, A., 2012. Progress and Endeavour, 6x6 Project.

¹⁶ Baines, P. and Dixon, C., 2012. Changing Perspectives, 6x6 Project.

¹⁷ Pickstone, E. and Rigley, S., 2012. In Decant/ Keys Cut, 6x6 Project.

¹⁸ Pickstone, E. and Rigley, S., 2012. In Decant/ Keys Cut, 6x6 Project.

¹⁹ Baines, P. and Dixon, C., 2012. Changing Perspectives, 6x6 Project.

²⁰ Megan O'Connell, senior instructor at the University of Oregon, refers to the broadening in range of print experiences including letterpress as a 'tonic' for her students, (see Steve Rigley, 'Thinking in solid air', Eye, no.57, London: Haymarket 2005, p.40) while Juliet Shen talks of 'satisfying the soul' (see Juliet Shen, Resurrection of a reliance, Seattle (USA): Shen/School of Visual Concepts 2007.)

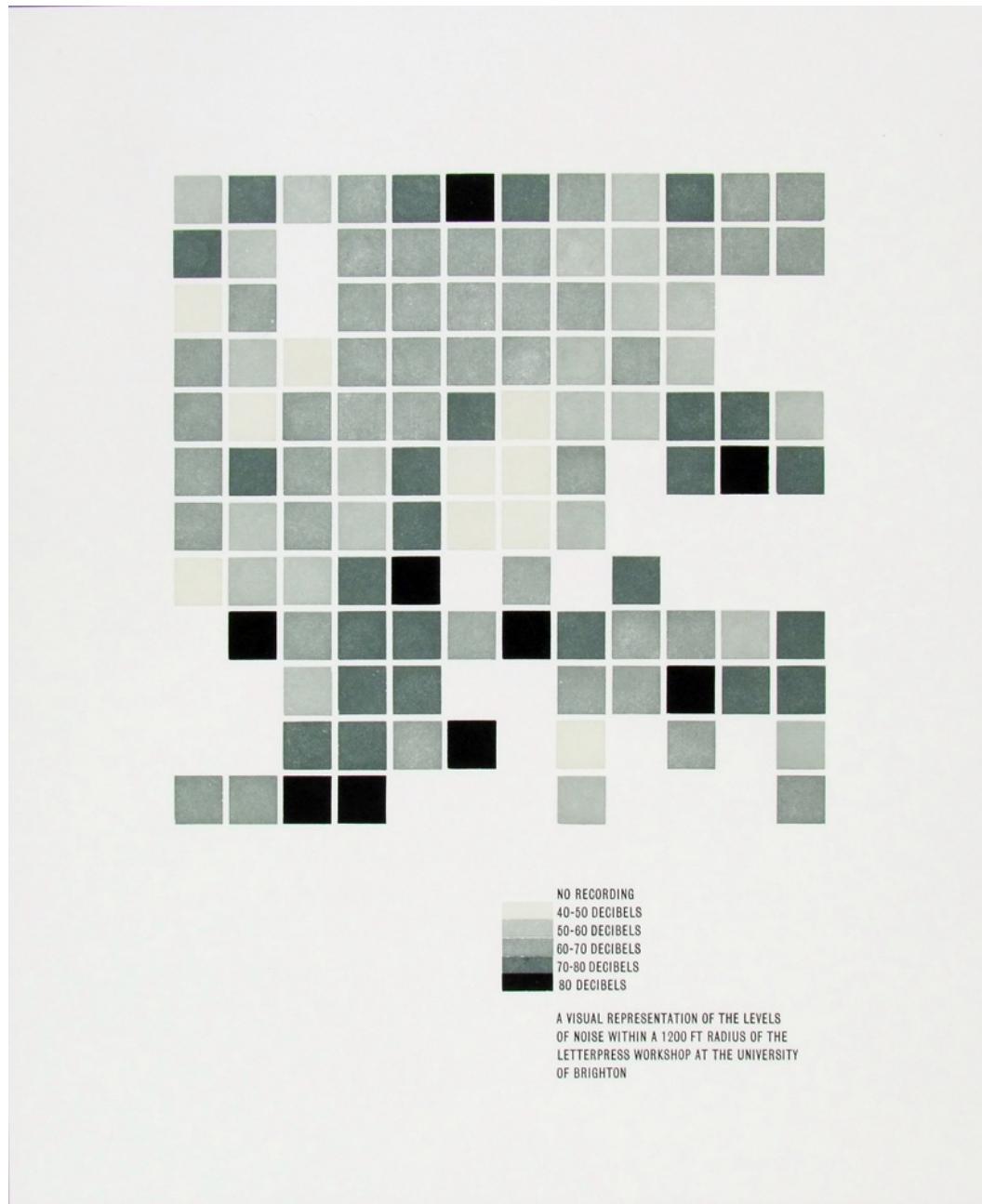
pleasure to be found in having such immediate access to a means to producing multiple works, that is to say, to publish.²¹

It is this connection between design and production that was not so readily available to the first design students, that is enabling the process to reinvent itself beyond a working museum. The recognition of the value of letterpress in relation to the development of typographic knowledge is progressively evolving into the realisation that workshop environment actively promotes experimentation. Letterpress repositions the design student in a space which could not have been occupied by the apprentice, giving them creative ownership of each stage of the design process. As this moves forward, the challenge will be ensuring that the legacy of craft and skill traditionally associated with the process does not get lost as the technical knowledge diminishes. For students to continue to push the boundaries of the process, studies such as 6x6 allow them to gain a first-hand understanding of its traditions.

The project is currently progressing to include all colleges within the UK that are in possession of letterpress equipment, to document these resources, record their histories and ensure that the conversation develops as the process evolves. 'As those who teach in art schools, we are stewards of a discipline and not merely employees of our colleges and universities. We have a duty to that legacy in making informed decisions for those who follow.'²²

²¹ Design and letterpress studio owner Chrissie Charlton in Jennie Roper, 'Crafty printers revive Gutenberg's legacy', Printweek, 23 March 2012, see: <http://www.printweek.com/news/1123355/crafty-printers-revive-gutenbergs-legacy/> (accessed 12 August 2012)

²² Gridneff, R. and Haslam, A., 2012. Progress and Endeavour, 6x6 Project.



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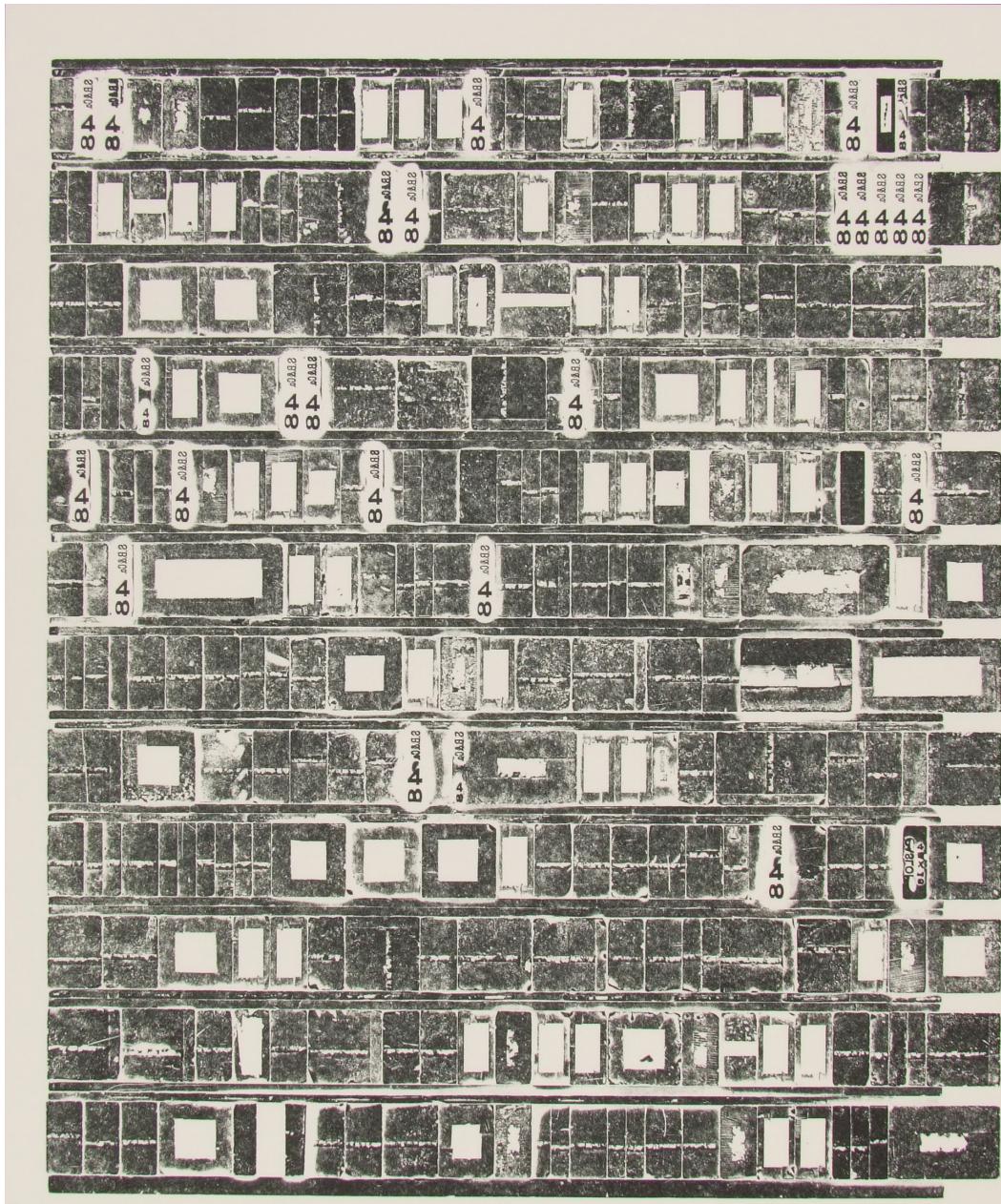
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Centaur	roman	W113		14	18		30	36		
Century	roman/italic	E9	6	8	10	12 14				
Century Schoolbook	roman/italic	E6				18	24	30	36	48
	bold					14	18	24	30	36
Columna		W113					24	36	48	
Elongated Roman		W113					30	36	48	60
Falstaff	roman	E6			14	18	24	30	36	48
	italic				12	14	18	24	30	36
Impact		E6			12	14	18	24	30	36
Ionic	roman	E6	5	6	7	8	9			
	italic		6	8	9					
Legend		W113					24	30	36	48
Marina	script	E6			12	14	18	24		
Mistral		W113					30	36	48	
Romulus	roman/italic	W110	8	9	10					
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	bold italic						14	18	24	30 36
	heavy titling						14	18	24	30 36
Typewriter		W110/4			10	12				
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Typefaces no longer available at the London College of Communication (formerly London College of Printing). Source: Stanbury, C. & Rea, P. (1981) Typefaces held at the Workshop and Graphic Design Departments. London: London College of Printing.

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ORTHEASER

CSM 2011: FROM WCI & 2 TO NIC

Freedom

The treatment or ‘planning’ of early printing—and generally of all pieces of lettering which are most pleasing—is strongly marked by *freedom*. This freedom of former times is frequently referred to now as ‘spontaneity’—sometimes it would seem to be implied that there was a lawless irresponsibility in the early craftsman, incompatible with modern conditions. True spontaneity, however, seems to come from *working by rule, but not being bound by it.*

EJ, *W&I, &L*, 1906, p.369

1982:
nothing
to do with
'proper' type
but

discovering the happy accident,
material as space,
modular & incremental
paper, [relationships,
and history & 'proper' type
eventually.

M
D
Y
C
StPKX

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