

Rendered Illegible: Ornament, Letterpress and Imaginary Alphabets



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MFA Thesis: Written Component
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Summary

The Master of Fine Arts thesis project consists of an artistic component *Rendered Illegible* displayed as part of Kuvan Kevät between 4th of May and 2nd of June 2024 at the Academy of Fine Arts in Helsinki, and a written component titled *Rendered Illegible: Ornament, Letterpress and Imaginary Alphabets*. The written thesis aims to give an insight into the exhibited work: describing the research and studio process, and reflecting on the final work and its exhibited form.

The written MFA thesis begins with a contextualisation of my practice: the positioning between graphic design and fine art printmaking, with 'print' being an overarching theme linking together multiple components: letterpress, typography and an interest in publications. The thesis examines several sources which were influential in my research process: the book *Nineteenth Century Ornamented Typefaces* by Nicolette Gray, the art piece *Book from the Sky* by Xu Bing and the Voynich Manuscript (author unknown, ca. 1401-1599).

The thesis gives an in-depth account of the creative process, resulting in the work displayed during Kuvan Kevät. The project begins with research into letterpress, 19th century decorative type in Britain, and imaginary languages, followed by the creation of 26 imaginary characters forming a fictional alphabet. The thesis documents a studio-based practice and its stages: drawing, exploration of woodblock printing, creation of sculptural objects and the decisions behind the installation of the work. The artistic component consists of a collage of work displayed as a 3.2 x 6 metre installation including prints, drawings, sculptures and woodblock matrices. *Rendered Illegible* touches upon subjects of visuality, semantics, cognition and perception and the value of aesthetic qualities of language in and of itself. It encourages us to think about the visual forms which surround us on an everyday basis.

Information on Artistic and Written Components

Artistic Component:

Rendered Illegible, 2024, installation of woodblock prints, woodblock matrices, drawings and wooden sculptural elements, 3.2 x 6 m.

The artistic component was displayed in the form of an installation, consisting of 45 objects. The artwork was accompanied by a written explanation of the research and process behind it in the form of an exhibition pamphlet.

Date of exhibition: 04.05.2024 – 02.06.2024

Written Component:

Rendered Illegible: Ornament, Letterpress and Imaginary Alphabets.

Submitted 01.10.2024.

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Contextualising my Practice

In my studio practice, I am focusing on the ornamental aspects of letterpress printing and typography: printer's ornament and decorative type of the 19th century. I am visually linking these to imaginary alphabets from the same time era, the creation of fictional writing systems, and the idea of coding and decoding written text. I am taking a step back from looking at the alphabet, typography and writing as carriers of information: rather, I am examining them for their visual and aesthetic qualities. The title of my Kuvan Kevät work, *Rendered Illegible*, activates the ideas of legibility, unreadability, changing forms from one to another as well as the act of translation between languages.

What connects different areas within my practice is the overarching theme of print: design for print (publications, posters etc.), printmaking, and the history of print. I am drawn to materiality and tactility, the printed word and image, and the process behind making physical objects through print. My work examines print and its histories, and uses print processes to make physical, tangible objects. Materials play an important role: whether that is through printing on paper, creating printed publications or experimenting with new, tactile processes. In my work, I look back at the history of print, and hope to give it a new relevance through the lens of a contemporary art practice.

For Kuvan Kevät, I am looking at what can be labelled as the 'decorative aspects' of typography. More specifically, the use of ornamental elements in letterpress printing, the creation of decorative wooden typefaces as an outcome of industrialisation in 19th century Britain, and the spike in creation of 'utopian' or 'imaginary' languages and alphabets within the same time period. With letterpress and typography being the starting point, my research and process touch upon the topics of fictional languages, semiotics, semantics, legibility, perception, cognition and visuality. The work questions what we perceive as type, letters or the alphabet, and plays with the blurred perception of the viewer.

I am interested in the archival aspect of letterpress, such as the differences in collections based on cultural context. My work is usually driven by gathering and analysing information and findings I come across while reading, browsing archives or the internet. Following initial research, my work is based around a studio practice, where play and experimentation with printing processes are driving forces, and the final outcomes vary in form. My practice is process-led and based on experiential and experimental knowledge, often making links between seemingly unrelated topics.

I work with typography in an image-based, experimental and playful manner rather than in a meticulous way. The reason for deciding to pursue a Printmaking degree is linked to the idea of being able to explore the field through a loose and nonconventional angle – unlike the work of type historians or type designers, I am not preoccupied with the ideas of detail or perfection in typography and it is not the details of constructing type or its legibility which matters to me. Areas I look for inspiration also consist of textiles (especially pattern-making, and the link between text and textiles), sculpture (and its link to tools and objects, such as with the work of Rachel Whiteread), drawing (as a method of idea generating) and a focus on experimenting with colour and investigating its interaction with materials.

I explore metal type and wood type as both the medium, but also the subject of my work. I am interested in typography as a cultural and historical carrier, and through my work I respond to the hidden narratives letterpress so intricately manages to portray and epitomise. I think back to a talk by Slavs and Tatars I watched during the pandemic: "the

pickle is the vehicle,” said Payam Sharifi (Slavs & Tatars 2021). What the artist and curator has in mind is that a pickle can be explored not as an object that it is, but as a metaphor for the different phenomena which it represents. Letterpress is in my case a pickle I use as a portal to explore typographic micro-narratives and the cultural contexts surrounding them. In a similar manner to Joanna Drucker’s description of artist books, which she describes as “a unique genre, ultimately a genre which is as much about itself, its own forms and traditions, as any other artform or activity” (Drucker 2007, 14), I think of letterpress as a self-descriptive genre: often the work I make through letterpress explores letterpress as its subject.

Another question which arises when thinking about the positioning of my artistic practice in context, is that of the relevance of book arts, letterpress printing, and the creation of artist books in the 21st century. I see it as the overarching theme of my work and perhaps my ‘purpose’ as an artist is using traditional ways of working and making these ways relevant, understandable and interesting to a contemporary audience. Typography, print history and letterpress have been paramount inventions in human history, and they continue to shape the ways in which we think and develop as societies in the present day.

My practice within the context of a Masters in Fine Art is very much influenced by the background which led me to study Printmaking. In 2019, I completed a BA(Hons) Communication Design degree from the Glasgow School of Art (GSA), specialising in Illustration. With GSA having a reputation amongst UK institutions for its experimental approach, my degree bordered on a boundary between design, and a conceptual emphasis which in many ways felt more like an artistic practice than a design one. In my 3rd and 4th year of the BA, I found myself using the Caseroom – a letterpress and book arts workshop – to complete my projects, with my final degree show work concentrating on the story of Doves Type. It was the first project I worked on which combined research in the areas of letterpress, typography, print heritage and which had an archival focus. I mixed sculpture, photography, multiple printmaking methods, book design, as well as collaborating with prose and poetry writers.

After graduating from GSA and into the pandemic, I began applying for jobs and internships in publishing houses and small design studios focusing on design for print. While that felt like a struggle, simultaneously several printmaking opportunities came my way, and I completed two artist residencies at The Caseroom SWG3 in Glasgow and Hot Bed Press in Manchester. This then led me to apply for a European Solidarity Corps project at the letterpress and paper art centre TYPA in Tartu, Estonia, where I had the opportunity to work from February to December 2022. There I developed a project which concentrated on diacritical marks. I was interested in looking at what letterpress is when letters themselves are taken away from the equation. With the Estonian language consisting of several letters with diacritical marks, there was quite a variety to work with. When the focus was taken away from the letter and onto the diacritical mark, these became abstract shapes, often ornamental in form. During my time at TYPA, I was lucky to meet artist residents from different backgrounds and different stages of their careers. Being exposed to their ways of working, as well as feeling a sense of self-direction outside of an academic institution for the first time, I began to change my approach to art-making: taking what interested me from the fields of communication design, book arts, fine art printmaking, mixing it and making it my own. I then applied to study MFA in Printmaking at the Academy of Fine Arts in Helsinki.

Other than the idea of having two years to fully focus on my work surrounded by peers and professors, another reason for deciding to pursue a master's degree was the access to facilities I base my practice around. With printmaking history being the core of my subject matter, using print equipment is a natural and logical way of creating. Often, I find that I need to be around the equipment I use in my daily practice to discover new areas of interests and processes of working. With that in mind, my process is nearly always project-based rather than a continuous artistic practice which evolves in a more organic way. I like to come up with a concept or question and execute it, usually adjusting my working methods to the concept I am currently working with.

Another reason for deciding to do a master degree in Printmaking was the idea of expanding my knowledge in areas of printmaking outside of letterpress. While my knowledge of letterpress is quite advanced, I wanted to use the time to execute my ideas through other processes. What I would like to get out of the degree is an increased knowledge both in terms of processes and ways of thinking.

What feels like a new possibility and what one of my professors labelled as a 'sweet spot' of my current practice is that I am trying to define myself with a context of an MFA – however very much basing my work around the theory of graphic design. I occasionally continue on working as a freelance graphic designer, and outside of my studies see myself as both someone who has an independent, non-conclusive artistic practice and someone who can work with client briefs. These two areas mutually influence each other, as I wouldn't be the type of artist I am without my design practice, and vice versa. I see them as very much intertwined.

My description and positioning of artistic practice is constantly in flux. It is easier to describe what areas I work within than what I 'am': design, books, print. Today I would describe myself as an artist and designer working predominantly with typography as a subject matter, but this description may change depending on whatever I am currently working on. While this might feel like a vague description, artists who are influential to me, such as Rahel Zoller, also use similar ways to describe their practice: "artist, book arts and design specialist' (Zoller 2023) Another creative whose work has been influential in my current studio practice is Éloïsa Pérez, who describes herself as "specialised in book design and publishing, [her] approach is built around a strong use of typography and [she] pay[s] special attention to the material character of objects." (Pérez 2023)

Having spent my early adulthood and acquired a degree in the UK, I am struggling to define myself as an artist within the Finnish context. The tradition of print studios in the UK, as well as a larger art scene (or multiple scenes) meant that there I found it easier to identify myself as the type of artist/designer that I am. The likes of Glasgow Print Studio, London Centre of Book Arts, or Hot Bed Press centre around areas of printmaking, book arts, self-publishing and graphic design: all of which seem relevant to my practice. In Finland, I have yet to find a community or organisations which work in combination of these areas. During the process of preparing for Kuvan Kevät, I often questioned my practice within the context of KuvA and Helsinki's art scene. However in hindsight I am happy to see that there are opportunities for me to implement my practice, such as being commissioned for a public art piece by Helsinki Art Museum following the master's exhibition.

Letterpress, 19th Century Type and Professionalism

Nicolette Gray and *Nineteenth Century Ornamented Typefaces*

With the emergence of moveable type and letterpress printing being a groundbreaking invention in human history, this thesis assumes a certain knowledge of the process, familiarity with its history and its wider cultural importance from the reader.

What is important to focus on within the context of my work are the conditions which allowed for the rise of ornamental typefaces to emerge in the early 19th century Britain. The invention of the modern face and the break away from the centuries-long Renaissance tradition in typography was a turning-point which occurred in the mid-18th century, allowing for the introduction of a wider variety of typefaces. Industrialisation created a change in the way type was used: while for centuries it was primarily used for book work, industrialisation created a demand in commercial type. The invention of the fat face (typeface with bold design for advertising purposes), was a stepping stone to the demand for further new designs and rise in ornamental typography of the 19th century. (Gray 1976, 11)

The first and most prolific academic to document and write about 19th century ornamented type was Nicolette Gray in her book *19th Century Ornamented Typefaces*, first published in 1938, and later reprinted in 1976. In the book, Gray argues that the introduction of the modern face was “important, partly as a gesture proclaiming freedom of the designer to invent and experiment, partly as an intermediate step in the creation of the fat face. With the invention of the fat face, the stage is set for the development of new art. [...] The new market, that of advertising and printing, has been recognised, and the new idea of calligraphy discovered.” (Gray 1976, 11) Industrialisation therefore changed the context in which new type specimens were created and was the reason behind the demand for new, decorative type.

Alongside decorative typefaces, the idea of ‘artistic printing’ is also covered in Gray’s chapter *Nineteenth-Century Typographical Layout*, which consisted of using the so-called ‘printer’s ornament’: metal embellishment and decorative pieces, used for the creation of borders, title pages etc. While in the context of the thesis, printer’s ornament is not discussed, it forms a large component of my overall area of interest in the research around letterpress and ornament:

Within the last decade quite novel, and, generally speaking, beautiful “fancy” types have been brought out [...] Along with these have been introduced a great variety of typographic borders and embellishments. These have enlarged the possibilities of letterpress printing to an enormous extent, and made practicable many artistic and decorative effects. (Southward 1982, 2)

In *19th Century Ornamented Typefaces*, Gray documented the development of ornamented type chronologically (e.g. 1800 – 1815, 1815 – 1832, etc. through to 1892 – 1900) with particular attention to the changes in typographic components and the socio-political context shaping them. The descriptions of typefaces throughout the decades range from having ‘an unmistakable romantic tinge’, being ‘light, yet square and solid’, ‘remarkably firm and complicated’ or being described as ‘exercises in sophistication – but crudely divergent’ (Gray 1976, 28, 37) Gray is both admiring and critical of the different type periods. More importantly for the context of this thesis, Gray provides a detailed *Chart of Ornamented Typefaces (1800 – 1900)*, which she describes as ‘an attempt to list all the design

in the British nineteenth-century books' and giving 'a very fair indication of the relative inventiveness or initiative of British firms at different periods throughout the century' (Gray 1976, 168) Within the context of this thesis, the chart serves as a source for visual research, providing typefaces which became the starting point for my imaginary characters.

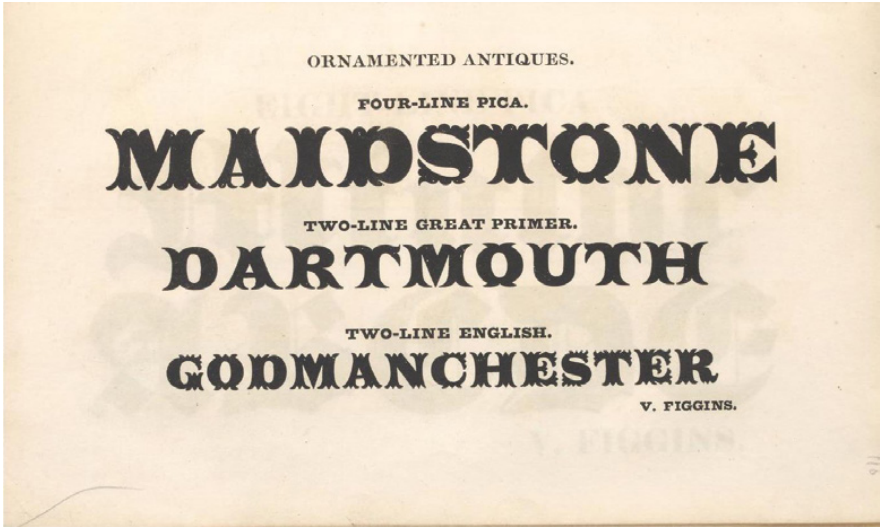


Fig. 1. Vincent Figgins, *Specimen of Printing Types*, 1828, ink on paper, St. Bride Library Archive. Available at: https://archive.org/details/6012_20220629/page/n4/mode/1up

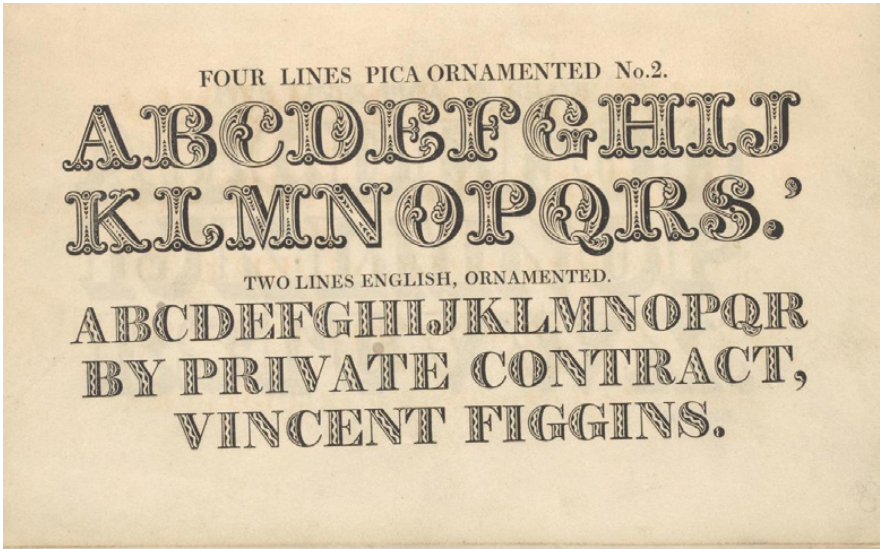


Fig. 2. Vincent Figgins, *Specimen of Printing Types*, 1824, ink on paper, St. Bride Library Archive. Available at: <https://archive.org/details/22226/page/n163/mode/thumb>

The type of 19th century followed both the idea of “static, self-contained beauty; a beauty independent of any connection with the sense of what is written,” (Gray 1976, 8), and Gray describes the creation process “as if the designers were absorbed in enjoying the ingenuity of their own invention.” (Gray 1976, 28). This gives the suggestion that the typefaces were perhaps invented through the imagination of their makers, rather than through demand. However rather than the typefaces being created ‘on a whim by [their] maker’, Gray argues otherwise:

The school has also a characteristic which extends its importance out of the field of aesthetic interest and into that of history. The changing moods which are recorded in Victorian type designs are not those of the individual artist, but a reflection of the mood of his society. The typefaces were designed by the anonymous employees of commercial firms of founders, supplying commercial printers. The aim of both the founders and the printers was continuously to supply the public with novelties which would attract and please; to succeed in this they had to keep in exact touch of the moment. Their business being purely commercial, considerations of scholarship, individual personality or typographical principle do not blur the contact. (Gray 1976, 9)

Gray argues that 19th century ornamented type was created as ‘communal art’, produced en masse, by anonymous craftsmen, describing the work as ‘the folk arts of early industrial society’ (Gray 1976, 1) This is a clear contrast to the idea of the typographer as an individual with a strong academic background, a profession formed as a result of modernist ideology becoming prevalent in the 20th century. This leads us to the notion of professionalism and its ambivalent definition, explored in the next section.

Professionalism

An important aspect in both Gray’s and my own work is the notion of ‘professionalism’ within typography. As Gray herself states, “I was very conscious of my temerity in rushing into the closed world of typography with qualifications only in mediaeval epigraphy, and did not wish to get on to sacred ground.” (Gray 1976, 1) The feeling of not knowing enough, being an outsider to the field with very specific standards and definitions of professionalism is something I too explore within my own work. Reading *Natural Enemies of Books: A Messy History of Women in Printing and Typography* (MMS 2020), the centuries-long idea of gatekeeping within letterpress printing and the wider book arts scene has become apparent:

In my search for knowledge about lady bibliophiles, I climbed the library ladder and among the books on collecting saw *The Library* by Andrew Lang, London, 1881. Confident that I would find some charming and sympathetic essay on the subject, I took it down and turned the index, but evidently I had forgotten Lang’s prejudice, for to my horror the starting lines “Women the natural foes of books” met my eye. They were classed with the other enemies of books; damp, dust, dirt, book worms, careless readers, borrowers, book stealers, book-ghouls, etc. so I hastily turned the page and read: *Almost all women are the inveterate foes, not of novels of course, not peerages and popular volumes of history, but of books worthy of the name.* (MMS 2020, 171)

Another issue with defining the notion of ‘professionalism’ is the blurred line and intertwined history between typography, lettering, calligraphy and handwriting. This flux is what I am interested in exploring within my work: “[...] for a time, typography was the daughter of paleographic handwriting, itself linked in a troubled way to official epigraphy. With the appearance of typography, the three forms became entangled in a permanent conversation.” (Chancogne 2023, 19)

By definition, what differentiates typography from lettering is not only the professional status of its maker, but more importantly the reproducibility through a matrix: whether it is printing individual wood type letters, or pressing a keyboard on our laptop. However, the grey zone between typography and lettering is an area of interest within my own artistic practice: how the two zones can influence one another, how they both stemmed from writing, and how for the first hundreds of years of type history, type was made to look like idealised version of lettering.

The difference between typography and lettering is also important in the context of 19th century type. Gray emphasises the fact that while 19th century book typography was 'depressing' and 'dreadful', it is important to acknowledge that "the Victorians lost the idea of good type to read" but not "the idea of good lettering." (Gray 1976, 7) With book typography in the 19th century being highly scrutinised, the 20th century saw a counter-reaction to what was seen as a 'decadence' of typographic style. The modernist movement within the context of typography propelled the strict sense of 'good' design; non-decorative, rational, and universal work. It was Modernism that established the title of a 'designer', rather than 'a commercial artist, a printer or scribe.' (Keedy 1995)

Perhaps what differentiates 19th century ornamental type from later decorative typography, and thus makes it more interesting for me to investigate, is that the former emerged prior to the 20th century modernist definition of 'good' and 'transparent' typography. 19th century typography was a wild market undefined by rules and laws, with the outcome being a vast collection of highly ornamental wood type. Gray argues against the modernist idea that "the primary purpose of all lettering must be legibility, that its only perfect attribute is simplicity. Such doctrine excludes almost every great school of calligraphy – I use the word to include all forms of beautiful lettering." (Gray 1976, 7) Modernism narrowed down the definition of typographic design, setting industry standards which still prevail today. Despite many contemporary designers working against these rules, decorative typography still seems overlooked:

Furthermore, decorative and illustrative typefaces and text design seem as disregarded in the field of design as they are in traditional literature. One description example is the authoritative Finnish typography textbook *Typografian kasikirja* ("Handbook of Typography"; Itkonen 2007), which distinctly sets illustrative typefaces apart from all proper typography. Instead, the former are consigned to a category called *fantasy letters*. This category includes typefaces that "might resemble humans, animals, plants, or [...] might consist of *any component alien to typographic design*" as well as typefaces that "do not have any connection to basic body text typography or history of typography" (ibid. 64, our emphasis). (Karhumaa 2024, 263)

It is for this reason that I find ornamented and decorative type interesting to investigate. Within letterpress, my interest often lies in typographical objects other than letter-shapes: the specific tools, storage systems, wood and metal type as sculptural objects, printer's ornaments and diacritical marks. To me, ornamented type falls into the same category: it lies on the peripheries of typography rather than within its centre, yet still holds historical value. As Frances Robertson puts it in *Post-print Culture?**: "discredited, outdated and 'merely decorative' items also have weight." (Robertson 2018, 33)

Imaginary languages: Xu Bing's *Book from the Sky* and the Voynich Manuscript

Book From the Sky

Book from the Sky by the artist Xu Bing has had a particular influence on my current practice. The art piece covers a broad set of themes prevalent in my own work: interest in the expanded definition of a book, questioning of language, typography and legibility of characters, as well as being heavily influenced by and alluding to the history of printmaking.

Bing's work came to my attention when starting my MFA in Printmaking, and it both intrigued me with its concept, while simultaneously feeling familiar and relatable in terms of the ways of working. Having discovered the process of an artist working in a manner relevant to my own processes, I was excited to investigate the work in-depth. The correlation between my work and *Book from the Sky* can be seen in the relation to letterpress printmaking, and the understanding of typography as a carrier of cultural, social and political phenomena.



Fig. 3. Xu Bing – *Book from the Sky*, 1987-1991, multi-media installation, installation view, *Xu Bing: Thought and Method*, Museum MACAN, 2019, photo: Xu Bing Studio. Available at: <https://publicdelivery.org/xu-bing-book-from-the-sky/>

First exhibited in Beijing in 1988, the work *Book from the Sky* is a large-scale installation consisting of numerous components: the basic unit being a “four-fascicle book stored in a wood case. Each fascicle compris[ing] between 61 and 96 folded and stitched sheets, each page printed using hand-carved movable type.” (Bing 2020, 9) The different components together create a ‘textual space’ which the audience enters and becomes submerged within.

Xu magnifies the impact of his text by creating an environment that immerses the viewer in a sea of imagery words, with an array of open books spread across the floor and long sheets suggestive of handscrolls and hanging scrolls suspended from the ceiling and walls. (Hearn 2013, 45)

The woodblock prints consist of incomprehensible, meaningless characters designed to imitate traditional Chinese Sing script: a choice made in order to avoid ‘carrying the scribe’s personal style’ of a regular script and to ‘appear authentic in form.’ (Bing 2020, 10,13) By choosing a historic script, Bing aims to confuse the viewer: when entering the installation, at first glance the characters appear traditional in form, and therefore the viewer is expecting to read them: however upon further investigation, it becomes apparent that the characters are devoid of semantic meaning and therefore do not carry information beyond the visual. What comes to my attention is the difference which such work presents by being set in a character script, rather than a letter-based alphabet – such as the Latin alphabet, which I work with and which is linked to my cultural background. The ‘tricking’ of viewers would not be as achievable in an alphabetic script, due to the fact that the ‘fakeness’ of characters would be visible from an earlier point in the viewer’s interaction with the text. This demonstrates the importance of context and cultural awareness while creating work which references social carriers such as typography. The difference in Chinese script and Latin alphabet can also be seen in the ease with which such a project can be physically performed and manufactured, with Bing himself stating that his “analysis is that moveable type printing was not suited to the Chinese character system, but was better suited to alphabetic scripts.” (Bing 2020, 14) This indicates that while the specific project derived its meaning from being set in Chinese script, overall the ease of using moveable type is linked to working with alphabetic scripts.

The process behind the *Book from the Sky* is as important of a factor worth investigating as the final piece. *Book from the Sky* took a total of four years to complete, with the artist initially carving 4,000 pieces of woodblock matrices himself, before deciding to commission the job. The way in which the piece was executed, by referencing and copying the traditional craft of woodblock printing, engraving and Chinese bookbinding, is an essential part of the final work. The tangibility and quality of print are highly linked to the idea of ‘appearing authentic in form’ and ‘to be grounded in knowledge.’ (Bing 2020, 10)

Looking at the work of Bing through a wider historical angle, *Book from the Sky* falls into a category of art dominant in the 20th century: the use and investigation of language by conceptual artists, as well as it falling into the ambiguous space between an exhibition and a book: not in the most common sense of exhibition in a book format, but rather the artwork only truly becoming a book within an exhibition setting.

In the chapter titled *Books as Verbal Exploration* from the book *The Century of Artists’ Books* by Joanna Drucker, the author describes text as something ‘malleable’ within artists’ books: “sometimes the very form of writing is invented so that the marks are closer to images than letters and make use of production methods generally reserved for pictures.” (Drucker 2007, 227) This statement seems relevant to the work of Bing – while the characters take the form of Chinese script, they are indeed closer to images or abstract shapes, carved

to become woodblock prints in the same manner. Drucker manages to describe the very essence of what draws me to Bing's work and the overarching theme of imaginary alphabets I am exploring within my master's degree:

There is something about invented writing which exerts a fascination. [...] The marks are imbued with meaning but seem to belong to a secret realm which charges these invented signs with power and value. One is drawn to their curious forms with an intense desire to decipher, decode and get their elusive content. (Drucker 2007, 227)

What particularly resonates in Drucker's description of invented alphabets is the idea of 'deciphering', 'decoding' and 'coding' – both a factor present within my own practice as well as in the *Book from the Sky*. It is based on the idea of dissecting written language and investigating it, to then recompose it again in a way that mirrors tradition, but is devoid of meaning in a linguistic sense. The work, despite being technically text-based, carries meaning through a visual rather than a written form: "Xu's text conveys the illusion of legibility but remains defiantly undecipherable." (Hearn 2013, 43)



Fig. 4. Xu Bing – *Book from the Sky*, 1987-1991, installation of hand-printed books and ceiling and wall scrolls printed from wood letterpress type, ink on paper, dimensions variable, installation view, Blanton Museum of Art. Available at: <https://publicdelivery.org/xu-bing-book-from-the-sky/>

Investigating Bing's work, while at the same time focusing on historical aspects of letterpress printing within my own practice, I often question the validity of the exploration of language in contemporary art. Questions which arise are linked to the feeling of unnecessary repetition of concepts or themes from past decades, as well as my awareness of the human-centric focus while working with such topics, which the contemporary art scene can be critical of. However, in both my case and that of Bing, the idea of partially preserving, and partially altering and adapting the heritage of printmaking, language and typography is the purpose of creating new work. As Bing himself states, *Book from the Sky* "takes context of a tradition and is a variation on that tradition. It both carries the heritage of that tradition and is the expression of an artistic method that alters the character of that heritage." (Bing 2020, 28) While referencing tradition, *Book from the Sky* serves as social and political commentary on Chinese society of the 1980s and became known both

on a national and international level. Therefore, it can be argued that art which deals with heritage and tradition, in this particular instance of language and print, can also be reflective and analytical of the present, not only the past, and continues to be relevant into the 21st century.

Bing's dedication to the authenticity of the piece is something I wish to carry on in my own MFA practice, while at the same time finding my own sense of relevance in working with language and typography in contemporary art. Interestingly, Nicolette Gray makes the link between Chinese calligraphy and 19th century ornamented type by saying:

Chinese calligraphy goes beyond the idea of using letters to express the drama of the sense of the text, and uses them to express the personal mood of the artists. [...] It requires no knowledge of Chinese to recognise the power of the scribe to convey even to our untutored senses his compassion, or his sense of life's transitoriness, or his drunken abandon. It is to this last idea of calligraphy that the Victorian school of ornamented letter design belongs. Suddenly, without warning, the insular English craftsman began to use complicated and sophisticated artistic medium in a way totally foreign to his culture, and used it with verve and subtilty. (Gray 1976, 8)

Mysterious Letters: Voynich Manuscript

Another key reference in my research has been the Voynich Manuscript (VM), connected to the idea of decorativeness, meaninglessness, coding and decoding. Yale University hosts the manuscript in its digital collection where it can be fully accessed, and describes it as: "a scientific or magical text in an unidentified language, in cipher, apparently based on Roman minuscule characters" and "an unsolved puzzle" with the author of the work being unknown. (Yale University 2024)

Having been introduced to the Voynich Manuscript by my professor Annu Vertanen, I was quickly drawn to the manuscript visually: it encompasses similar qualities of visual richness, coded information, and tactility which I want to emulate in my own work. Written and illustrated by hand, the VM is meticulous in detail and made with visible dedication. The cipher consists of pages and pages of coded writing, together with illustrations of both imaginary and botanically indexed plants. While its meaning and origin are debated – researched in academic settings and through amateur conspiracy theories – to me it is its visual and mystical, unexplainable energy which is full of appeal.

Coincidentally several weeks after being introduced to the VM, *Mysterious Letters: Language, Science, and the Voynich Manuscript* edited by Anežka Minaríková & Marek Nedelka was published. The book investigates the manuscript through interviews and essays from a range of experts on the topic, attempting to give a broad overview of the theories surrounding the work. Despite my primary focus being on the visual quality of the VM rather than the mystery behind its existence, the text helped to contextualise my own work: the idea of forming something that lies between meaning and meaninglessness, being ambiguous in form and evoking rather than imposing meaning on the viewer. I came to the realisation that my work too can play with the idea of resembling cryptic information, or 'a message to be decoded' while actually being 'devoid of meaning.' (Nedelka 2023, 56) Just as the VM, the imaginary alphabet I construct can be 'a haphazard collection of invented characters' and 'a well-constructed hoax.' (Nedelka 2023, 50)



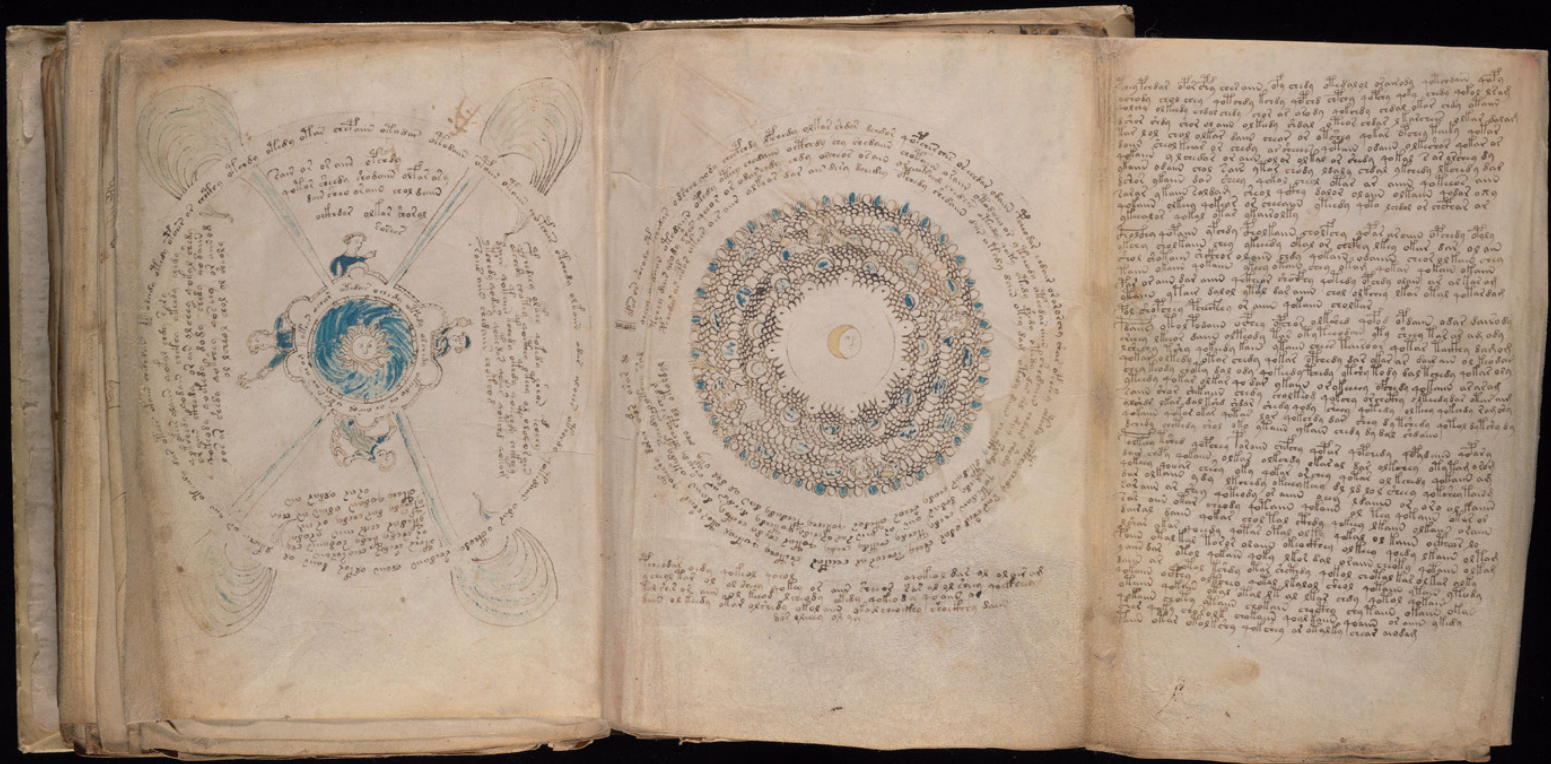


Figure 5 – 9. Voynich Manuscript. Book by unknown author. ca. 1401-1599. Yale University. Available at: <https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/2002046>

Artistic Process

In this section, I describe the process of working towards my master's exhibition. The section combines dated diary entries and reflective writing in a format which allows the reader to gain an insight into the creative process. The writing primarily consists of process description in an intimate and experiential language.

The starting point for my Kuvan Kevät exhibition was a combination of different areas of interest, including my ongoing research into ornament and decorative aspects within letterpress. In Summer 2023, I was interning with the design and letterpress studio S/O Helsinki, where I created the first edition of my artist book project *Ornamental Patterns*. While this project concentrated on using printer's ornaments (the decorative metal type pieces which are illustrative rather than typographic, and which were historically used for printing borders, chapter headings, etc.), I was also browsing through the studio's wood type collection.

When looking through collections of wood type in letterpress studios I have had the opportunity to work in, such as The Caserom (Glasgow), TYPÄ (Tartu), or S/O Helsinki, what always draws my attention are the unexpected, decorative, playful and over-the-top letters. The process can feel like a scavenger hunt: browsing through drawers, not knowing what you are going to find. What feels fascinating to me is the idea that while all these letters lie inside uniform chests of drawers, they were all made in a specific time period, place and used under different circumstances. In S/O Helsinki, I came across Delittle's York Script. I printed a set of letters for future reference. While temporarily working in letterpress studios, I often wish I could own the beautiful type that I find, and taking an imprint of them feels like a good-enough substitute. I have a tangible object, a documentation, a reference which I can look back on and use in the future.

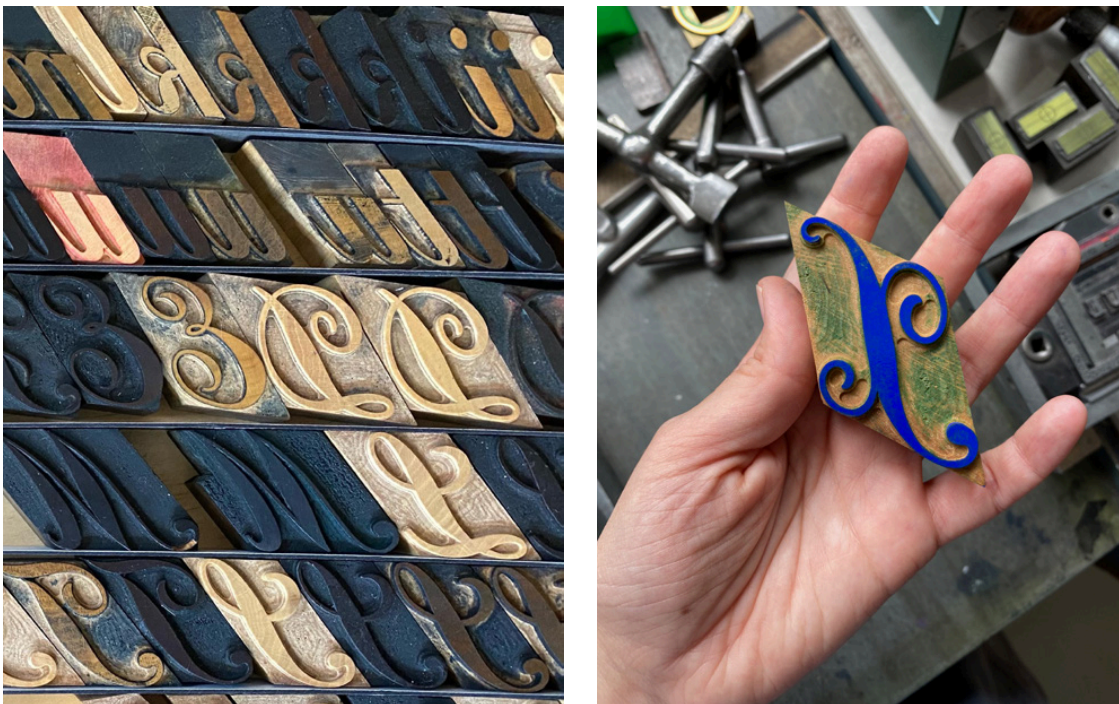


Fig. 10 – 11. York Script. Photograph by Julia Syrztie, 2023. Helsinki.

A couple of months after my internship, I went back to the York Script and started to draw specific parts of the embellished letters, such as their loops, bars and flourishes. At the time I was feeling quite stuck in terms of making: I was interested in printer's ornament, decorative type, and since reading about Xu Bing's *Book from The Sky*, I was also curious about the idea of making imaginary characters. Tracing over parts of the letters I printed several months before was intended as an exercise to make *anything*. It quickly developed into *something* I wanted to expand on, and I began to make large-scale drawings of the characters.



Fig. 12. *Initial Sketches*. Photograph by Julia Syrzig, 2023. Helsinki.

Prior to starting the Kuvan Kevät project, I was exploring systems of teaching writing and the alphabet to children, with a particular interest in the work of 20th century teacher Marion Richardson. This research had more influence on how I explored the Kuvan Kevät project in its early stages than I realised: stripping letters down to its components, and rearranging them to form new shapes, through a playful, child-like approach. It was only when reading about this topic later on that I realised the connection between the two projects. Another particular influence was Éloïsa Pérez and her PhD thesis extract *The Material Discovery of the Alphabet* published by Poem Editions. The publication exemplifies how my Kuvan Kevät work stemmed from the same approach of fragmenting type into 'manipulable units' and the 'assembl[ing] of pre-existing elements' (Pérez 2021, 5)

Attending the *Thinking Textiles* course run by Corinna Helenelund, I then transformed the characters into 3D soft sculptures, made from fabric. I liked the 3D and tactile element to the sculptures: they were playful and intriguing at the same time, and felt like they resembled Pérez's research into mid-century pedagogical objects.

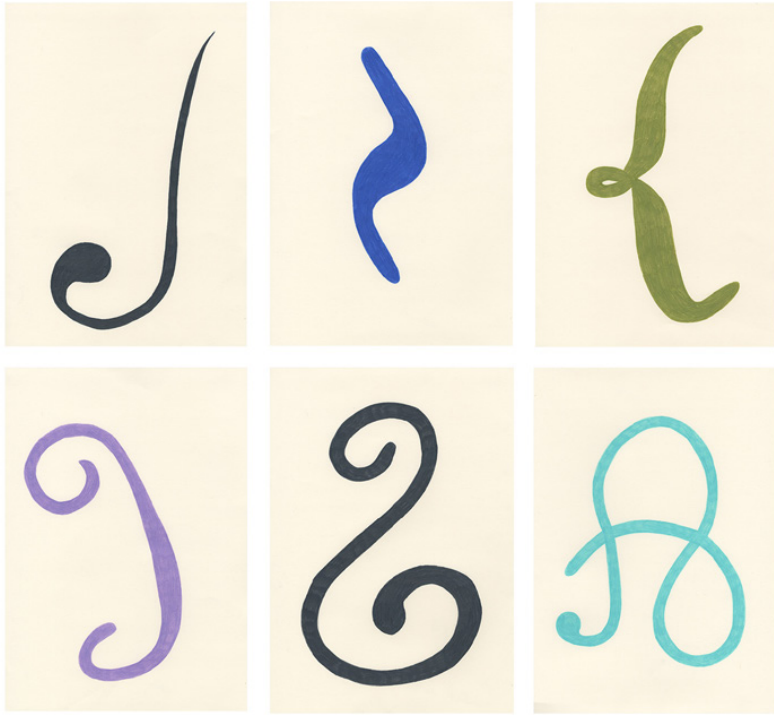


Fig. 13. *Initial Drawings*. Digital scans by Julia Syrzig, 2023. Helsinki.

Fig. 14. *Soft sculptures and drawings*. Photograph by Julia Syrzig, 2023. Helsinki.



It was also Corinna who introduced me to *Lingua Ignota*. While I didn't do extensive research on Hildegard of Bingen's coded language, the idea I had in my head of the 12th century nun creating an imaginary language to code her mystical writing was enough information for me to find that exciting and to try to embody some of these qualities in my own work. The same rang true for the Voynich Manuscript – I liked the fact that these factual yet somewhat mystical narratives had just enough information missing from them for the imagination to see them as more special than it would do given all the factual information. This idea is also mentioned by one of the interviewees, Reed Johnson, in *Mysterious Letters*:

Imaginative play is something that the Voynich itself both represents – because it seems very playful and imaginative – but also elicits from people, in part because it is evocative. It's enough of something to get you thinking, but it's not so detailed and nailed down that it closes down thinking. The cracks in the inexplicable is exactly where imagination blooms and is allowed to take over. (Nedelka 2023, 131)

Sometimes the idea of embodying Hildegard of Bingen or the unknown maker of Voynich Manuscript was what kept me keep me engaged in my making process: in moments when I questioned whether the idea of making an imaginary alphabet was just a bit pointless, unengaging or unjustifiable, I would think about the fact that it was the unexplainable that sparked my interest in *Lingua Ignota* and the VM.

I also came across the exhibition *Quasi: Experimental Writing Systems* at the Hoffmitz Milken Center for Typography in Pasadena, California. The exhibition “explor[ing] writing systems as a creative and expressive medium,” was focused on many similar themes I wanted to explore in my own work: ‘writing systems as speculative process[es]’, ‘exist[ing] in a realm where functionality becomes entirely irrelevant.’ (HMCTR 2024) Hearing about the exhibition gave a sense of meaning and amplified a sense of my work belonging to a specific niche area of art and design. It was important for me to feel that there are artists, designers and researchers focusing on exploring similar themes to me, as novel as it felt doing it in the context of an MFA at KuvA:

The projects present new configurations of signs and symbols, transcending the boundaries of established writing systems with examples of imaginary or invented scripts and asemic writing inspired by mythology, science fiction, codes, modern technology, sound, nature, and communication with the dead. Through this exploration, Quasi opens conversations about re-worlding, imagination, and the importance of playing with language to foster linguistic diversity that can reshape our collective narrative. (HMCTR 2024)

Another way of finding meaning in my work was through conversations with my supervisors. Having both Inka Bell and Edwin Pickstone as my supervisors felt like the perfect fit from the beginning. Inka's work encompasses experimentation and visual qualities I was striving to achieve. Edwin on the other hand, has extensive knowledge in the area of letterpress and an approach towards teaching which I value and miss from my time at Glasgow School of Art: one that pushes conceptual thinking. My initial studio visit with Edwin over Zoom had a big impact on the direction of my project:

15/12/23

My recent studio visit with Edwin felt like a big turning point in my project in terms of direction. When telling Edwin about my interest in decorative typefaces and imaginary visual languages, he stated that a lot of these ideas originated in the 19th century: the rise of industrialisation causing a sudden demand in decorative typefaces, as well as the interest in utopian languages of the time era. It feels comforting having the assurance of someone who knows so much more about what I am researching, while telling me that it's ok to make *while* researching, and that you will never reach a point where you will know everything. And that making work as you find things out is okay too.

Having been introduced by Edwin to the aforementioned work of Nicolette Gray, I narrowed my research by looking at British 19th century type, selecting specific typefaces from which to construct new characters. I browsed through many 19th century type specimen books on Archive.org uploaded by St. Bride Library, eventually taking a trip to London to visit the Central Lettering Record, where Gray's findings are kept. I printed pages and pages of type which I felt had elements which were visually stimulating. Knowing that my approach towards this project was not coming from a type design angle, I wasn't looking for consistency when it came to creating a whole set of characters. I found a similarity between the organic qualities of the VM and the bifurcation and trifurcation in Tuscan type, and started creating characters which felt more organic in nature. I was thinking about the idea that I wanted to create characters which felt both crafted by hand and organic at the same time. In *19th Century Ornamented Typefaces*, Gray argues that Tuscan type was created to resemble fish tails, and refers to Tuscan type as 'organic' and 'foliated' (Gray 1976, 159), while Schultz de Carabobo lists them as resembling "tree branches, vines, floral tablecloths, bones, geometric bars and even clouds." (Schultz de Carabobo 2021) which made sense in terms of my choice. I began to make characters which had a very different quality to what I made before the winter break: they felt more lively, complex and creature-like.



Fig. 15 - 16 . *Imaginary alphabet drawings*. Photographs by Julia Syrzig, 2024. Helsinki.

05/02/24

I had two studio visits recently, with Tuomo Rainio and with Annu Vertanen, and both of them asked me questions I've been thinking about myself:

- What is the relevance of working with 19th century ornamental typefaces + imaginary alphabets in the present day?
- Am I trying to communicate with the audience of my work? If so, what?

I think that these two questions are related: in my work, using historical typefaces is an important factor in itself. By researching and using typefaces, I am questioning the relevance of letterpress printing in the present day, seeing how a traditional medium can be adapted to feel contemporary, while simultaneously being preserved by being used and thought about. Is it enough to say that this subject feels contemporary simply by being made in the present day?

I also explained to Annu that what I am trying to achieve is this idea of remystification of type: in the way that the Voynich Manuscript was made, or how Hildegard of Bingen invented *Lingua Ignota* for mystical purposes, I am trying to take a similar approach. I am making an imaginary writing system that I am hoping will make the audience feel a sense of curiosity and mystery. I am remystifying forms that the audience feels are familiar – instead of the focus being on what letters can communicate, the focus is on the value in their aesthetic qualities themselves.

From this point, I had a sense of clarity that what I am playing with in my work is the very fine line between letters as cultural representation for sounds associated with language, and letterforms as visual images. This idea is also emphasised by Pérez in *The Material Discovery of the Alphabet*: “when it is relieved of the semantic value conferred upon it by the mastery of the alphabetic code, the Latin letter appears as an image.” (Pérez 2021, 2)

The idea of remystification serving as a source of interest for the viewer, which I describe in the above diary entry, ties in with how the Voynich Manuscript is described in *Mysterious Letters* by one of the interviewees, Reed Johnson:

That this manuscript is so suggestive but doesn't offer anything concrete gets to the reason it's such an enduring mystery. I love the writing of the Voynich Manuscript. It was something that appealed to me from a purely aesthetic point of view. I think the writing is beautiful and I want to look at it more. I think if the manuscript were written with Latin letters and no illustrations, I don't think people would be that interested. (...) It would be completely lost in the archives. (Nedelka 2023, 123)

I've also been thinking about my work in relation to 'professionalism' in typography. I am drawn to imperfection and to where the human hand is visible. There is also a sense of my work being an act against the 'man-made rules' of letterpress and typography – the reason I am exploring these ideas through a fine arts master's rather than a type design degree is to allow myself the freedom of doing it my way, through an angle which doesn't necessarily fit the professional field of typography. I refuse to make work that aims for perfection, transparency, logic and which abides by the rules. I embrace ornamental and decorative elements, which are often seen as 'unnecessary' and historically associated with 'female'.

Maybe I am coming to understand the broader context of what my work is, the different aspects of it and how they connect. Or just being able to verbalise all these ideas that have been evolving for quite some time.

While the creation of new characters was underway, it coincided with a woodblock print course led by Ari Pelkonen. This felt like a good natural progression in terms of my process: I knew that I wanted the characters to eventually become prints. My bachelor's degree in Communication Design has instilled in me the idea of a creative process consisting of idea generation, followed by working on an intended outcome. However, while deciding on how to approach my Kuvan Kevät work, I was encouraged by my professors to follow the idea of generating a body of work, without an intended 'final product' in mind. I decided that I wanted to create a large-scale installation based on 26 characters that I was going to produce, and the exhibited pieces would be selected from the body of work I created. This approach held a sense of security: by knowing that not everything I made had to be included in Kuvan Kevät, I felt some pressure of having to make something final lift off.



Fig. 17 – 18. Woodblock matrices and initial print. Photographs by Julia Syrztistie, 2024. Helsinki.

07/02/24

I had a studio visit with Ari Pelkonen today, and he encouraged me to be more free with the types of marks and shapes I am creating, and that I have done enough research and gained enough knowledge to not have to feel like I am being unthoughtful or heading in the wrong direction if I do so. A part of me is saying “but it has to reference something to mean something”, though maybe that part of me is an old, male typographer who is guarding what he deems to be sacred (– it is not!) I guess I can simultaneously link the letters to specific typographic references *and* draw them more intrinsically. I also feel that this is where art and design do differ and the designer part of me feels like doing that is wrong, or too meaningless?

Ari also mentioned the idea of using matrices in a sculptural way (with the carved out parts being inked up / ran through with solvent to give them colour too). We also talked about the semiotic and cultural connotations behind some parts of the shapes I've used, and maybe creating shapes that feel more gestural will allow me to eliminate those accidental references? Though I guess everything humans create is linked to the culture we are positioned within – I cannot make something that is completely devoid of meaning.

At the beginning of the woodblock printing course, I carved one of the characters out in plywood, and the initial print felt a bit rough. Being new to the technique, I was trying to determine whether I would be capable of reaching a standard of carving I wanted to achieve, as well as printing the intended amount of characters by carving them out by hand. While I soon managed to get the hang of the carving process, I knew I wanted to create a large body of prints, and there could be an issue with time given that I only had two months left before install. With the carving process being time consuming, I decided to use digital tools to help me with the production. I wasn't sure if I should use laser-cutting or cnc-ing. As I wanted 19th century wood type to not only be a visual reference, but also something that I reference in the decisions I made in terms of my process, I felt conflicted about using digital tools. I thought in order to reference the 19th century system of wood type production, I would be better off hand-carving my plates. However, a studio visit with my supervisor ensured me that using digital tools was in fact the right decision:

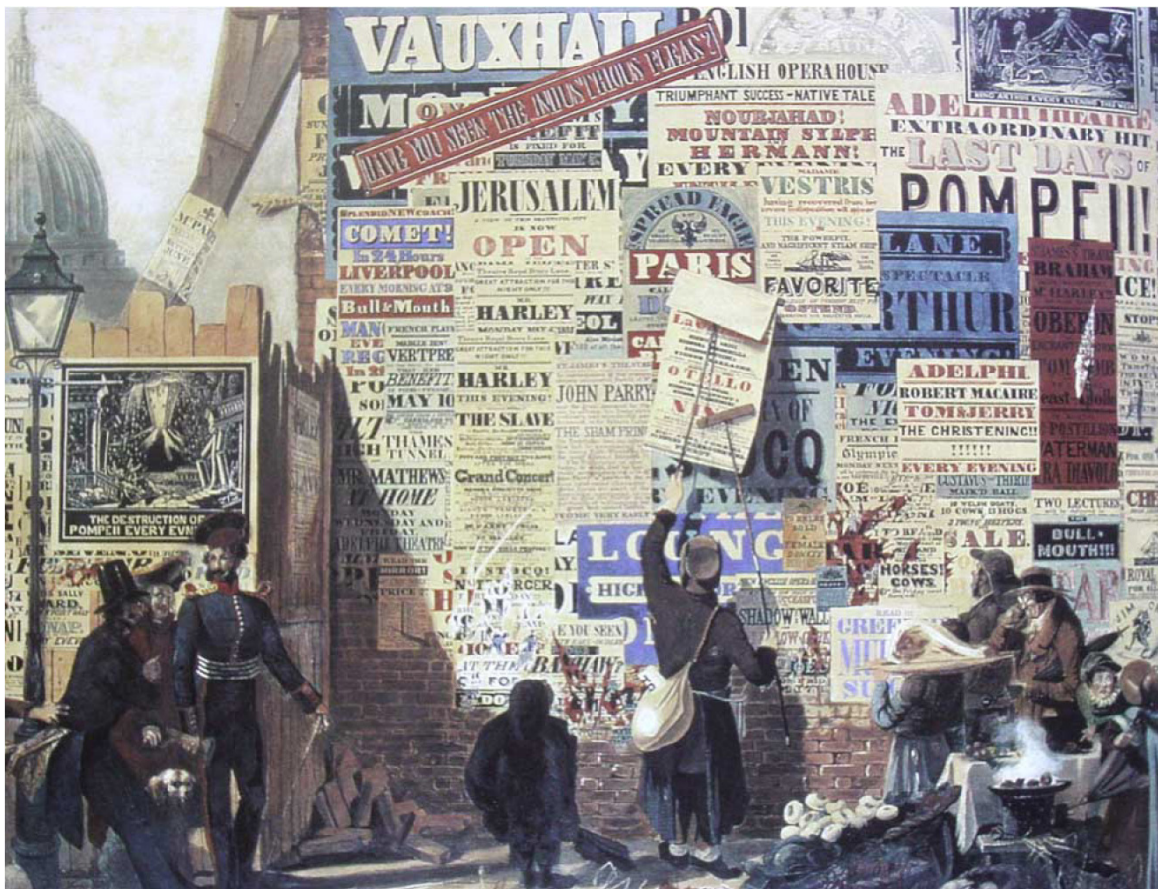


Fig. 19. A London Street Scene. Watercolour by John Orlando Parry, circa 1932-35. London.

19/02/24

I had a studio visit with Edwin Pickstone, which answered a lot of my questions and felt reassuring in terms of what to do next. One of those things is working with cnc / laser cutting instead of woodcarving manually, which also make sense in terms of how wood type used to be produced – which I was wrong about – as it was made using:

- a knife or graver up until 1828
- From 1828, laser router
- From 1834, a pantograph (Hamilton Wood Type 2024)

Edwin recommended two Rob Roy Kelly books about American wood type, which go deeper into the topic of wood type manufacturing. We also talked about how either in the final stages (i.e. post-laser cutting), I can add manual carving, or that the handmade aspect can be emphasised in other parts of the process, e.g. in how I use ink, or in the drawing stages prior to laser cutting. Edwin emphasised the idea of making a ‘collection’ at every stage of the project – to keep developing more letters (or shapes / characters, as “technically he cannot call them letters!”) through drawing, creating matrices, making prints and then working with prints as a form of collage. The idea is that I will have a body of work that does not consist of just the prints, but includes pieces from every stage of the process. I was happy to hear that Edwin liked the idea of displaying the blocks I print from alongside my prints and drawings in the show, as that is something that has kept coming up in other discussions. Also the link between the wheat pasting process in our recent woodblock print course and how historically wheat paste is what was used to paste wood printed type advertisements in Victorian times (Fig. 19). Another reference: historically, large wood type was printed on the long grain side of wood to cut on production cost, which is also what I am able to use within my own process.

Since the studio visit, I found out that the big press in the printmaking studio is out of use due to a warped bed, so now I am restricted to working with 120 x 90 cm matrices, which fit into the regular etching press. I can also go bigger and hand-print, but that goes against what Edwin and I discussed about wanting to print within the letterpress standard of balancing pressure and ink, so that the prints are not so washed-out. I need to think about the idea of using a metal brush over the surface to emphasise the grain of the woodblock more, and in the case of laser cutting or cnc’ing, I might need to do that before cutting.



Fig. 20 – 23. Woodblock matrices and prints. Photographs by Julia Syrzig, 2024. Helsinki.

The process of scanning my drawings, vectorising them in Adobe Illustrator and laser cutting was time consuming. Once I started printing the matrices and realising that I am actually quite pleased with the outcome, a part of me was able to relax and fully focus on the making, without questioning my work too much. From early March until the end of April, I developed a routine of drawing new characters every couple of days, then laser cutting and printing them on other days. There was a flow to my work which I like: doing multiple things in one day, each for a short period of time. This approach of always having multiple things on the go works well in a shared studio environment, as when the etching press or laser cutter was booked by other students, I could stay preoccupied with other creative processes. Printing intermittently together with laser cutting and drawing also meant that I didn't burn myself out physically or hurt my back (which I was prone to doing in the past). I am glad to know that this kind of scheduling works well for me. I see the best outcomes and feel that I am on a roll when I don't put so much emphasis on a single work, rather simultaneously working on multiple outcomes which feed one another. However, the excitement of making was mixed with stress or worry about the lack thereof:

14/03/24

I'm finding it quite hard to differentiate between feeling stressed about Kuvan Kevät, and feeling stressed about everything else that's going on in my life (or in the world). I'm definitely not feeling the same level of stress I felt a few months before my BA degree show at GSA, but at the same time what is worrying me is my lack of stress and the occasional thought 'is this it?' while looking at my work. It's very nice to be getting positive feedback from professors / other people I am having studio visits with, as well as other students, and the positive reception and engagement with my work is a big driving force at the moment. I do want to make work that makes others feel curious or at least feel an aesthetic appreciation.

Despite those thoughts, I do love the feeling of being on a roll, but knowing you still have quite a bit of time left and work to do before the deadline. I can't quite describe the feeling: it's a flow, an ease, excitement of what is yet to be made and comfort of being able to just 'do' after months of thinking, trying and questioning.

The studio is quiet today – no one else seems to be in. I hung all the pieces I've printed so far on the back wall facing the window. A small scale version of what my Kuvan Kevät wall will look like. I like seeing the letters alongside each other: how they interact, how the colours I have picked change depending on what surrounds them. Éloïsa Pérez's quote seems fitting for this process: "The letter unfolds its potential when it is arranged with others and articulated in space. This is how it attains order and renders a statement visible." (Pérez 2021, 16) Even though she writes that in reference to words or longer text, I think the same 'unfolding of potential' is what is happening in my current process of placing the characters alongside each other.

They are all quite large-scale (to medium size) and it's come up during several recent studio visits that I should make something very small as a contrast. Laura Vainikka also had the idea of somehow breaking the format of the prints: extending the letters beyond the rectangular paper. Either by overlaying with smaller sheets, or my idea, by cutting out parts of prints. Also I could laser cut some letters by breaking them up into smaller shapes and then assemble them back together. Ahhh, so many possibilities.



Fig. 24. *Studio view.* Photograph by Julia Syrzig, 2024. Helsinki.



Fig. 25 – 26. *Small prints.* Photographs by Julia Syrzig, 2024. Helsinki.

Making choices to do with shapes, scale and the processes went hand-in-hand with the process of working with colour. I had created a system for myself to work with: I was making new shapes based on specific instructions I set for myself, drawing each shape in approximately A3 size, then using laser cutting to create matrices to print from. Colour became the one element in my work which was not selected through a self-formed system or guidelines, but rather it was chosen more intrinsically. The starting point of my colour selection was the A3 drawings I created back in late Autumn – I didn't want the shapes to be drawn in black, so I picked a set of colours I simply just liked. When I began printing my matrices, I kept the colours used for my drawings in mind, and I began expanding the colour palette. Some days I would just mix ink in the studio based on what colour felt fitting for the specific print, or what colour I felt excited by in the moment. Other days, I would look at the work I had so far, and think what colour might add something visually to the set. When I didn't make colour choices at random, I used *A Dictionary of Colour Combinations* to help me with my decisions.



Fig. 27. *A Dictionary of Color Combinations*, Vol. 2. Book by Sanzo Wada, 2010. Japan.

I used colour not only in the matrices I printed, but also printing block colours of ink over different types of paper. I felt that this gave me more control over the particular shades of colour rather than buying ready-made coloured paper.



Fig. 28 – 29. *Printing block colour on paper.* Photographs by Julia Syrzistie, 2024. Helsinki.



Fig. 30. *Letterpress sculptures.* Photograph by Julia Syrzistie, 2024. Helsinki.

28/03/24

It's funny how much of a difference a couple of days can make – today I had a good day for the first time in a while, printing all the small-scale pieces, and I am feeling satisfied with the results. I also started inking up blocks of wood and nailing laser cut plywood characters onto them, to form sculptural objects. They resemble wood type blocks, yet feel like an artwork in themselves, because of the inking up giving them this shiny, nearly plastic-like quality.

Next week I am planning on laser-cutting more mid- and large-scale plywood pieces and printing them. Then I have to spend a couple of days doing mock-ups of my wall space and designing the riso print-out / exhibition text. Somehow I feel as though I really am on it, not feeling too stressed. Maybe just stressed about the idea of this flow soon being over.

The soft-sculpture pieces I made before Christmas feel too separate from the new body of work to include them in the show. It feels like a path I could have taken at some point, but decided not to. There's some reading I've been meaning to do around the link between typography and embroidery, and this is a direction I'd like to explore after the imaginary alphabet project feels completed. I also need to find a name for my Kuvan Kevät work soon!



Fig. 31 – 32. *Studio view*. Photographs by Julia Syrzig, 2024. Helsinki.

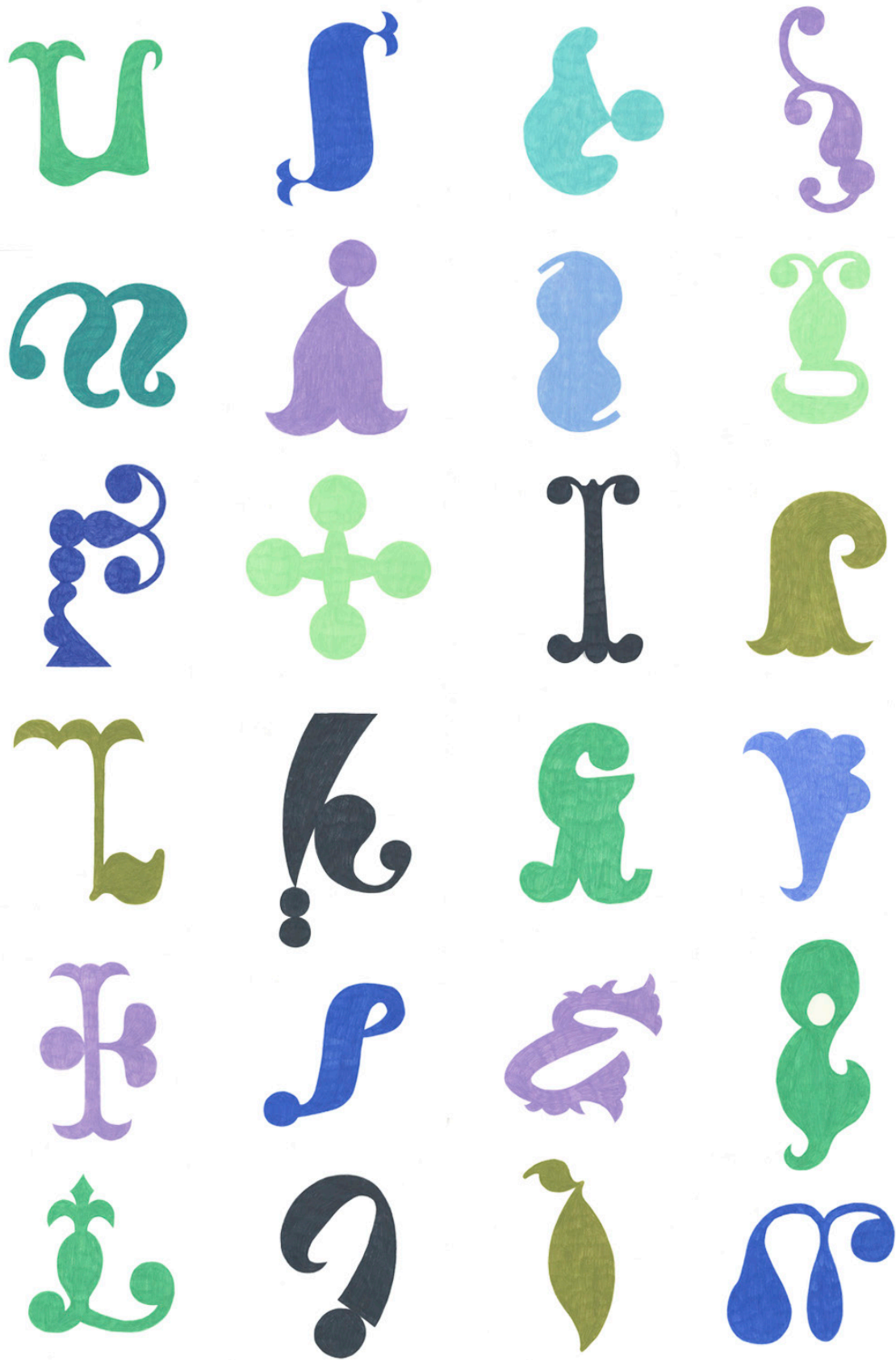


Fig. 33 . Whole set of the alphabet. Image by Julia Syrzistie, 2024. Helsinki.

03/04/24

Two weeks until Kuvan Kevät install starts! I had a meeting with Tuomo Rainio and I feel like I am getting quite conflicting ideas on how I should install the work. Tuomo sees it more as a pattern, with some sort of system / order / repetition, while Edwin for example sees it more like the John Orlando Parry image, with the prints pasted on top of one another with wheat paste glue. As always, it's easier for me to tell what I don't want rather than what I do want, and I have hesitations about both ideas. I am thinking about more of a dense grid idea. With or without overlap? I just feel like now that the job of creating the 26 characters is done, there are endless possibilities on what to create, how to display it and when is enough.

05/04/24

Yesterday was (possibly?) my last big printing day, and my body feels tired. I was really pushing myself to go through it and towards the end none of the prints I was making were good – oh well. The decisions I had to make given that I only had 2 days of my week to do Kuvan Kevät work (and the others filled with classes which feel very unnecessary at the moment) meant that I sacrificed quality over quantity: not every piece I made is of the standard I'd like it to be. But if I were to make them of a good standard (or at least a consistent one), I wouldn't be able to produce the whole body of work I have now. Maybe I'm just justifying myself, because I'm not feeling happy about every single print, but hopefully I have enough pieces to take out the ones I really don't like.

Now comes the editing stage! I need to document my work and start testing layouts in Photoshop. Though it feels different doing it that way rather than choosing in real life, so I booked a big space at school for next week to try laying out all the pieces together.

Having tried several different layouts in Adobe Photoshop, it was evident that the scale of the wall was impossible to reproduce digitally. When I zoomed out, all the small pieces became invisible, and when I zoomed in, I couldn't get a picture of the whole body of work together. Luckily booking a physical space in the Printmaking Workshop turned out to be a good solution, and I layed out the work there, marking 3.2 x 6 metres (the size of my exhibition wall space) with masking tape. I started intuitively assembling all the pieces together, starting with the biggest and working my way down to the smallest pieces. I asked Tuomo Rainio for a studio visit, and seeing his enthusiasm about the layout, I knew it was done. I documented the work as it was, got some second opinions from studio mates, and decided this was how I was going to install the work in the show.

Around the same time as I was installing the work, I spent a couple of days designing and risograph printing an edition of approx. 350 leaflets. These consisted of an exhibition text, which was important for me to include in the exhibition. With my work being so research and concept-driven, I wanted the audience to have the possibility of getting to know not only the work itself, but the ideas and references behind it. The exhibition text read:

Rendered Illegible is a collection of 26 shapes resembling letterforms: an invented alphabet. The forms are not representative of the speech sounds of any language, but instead expand and reimagine the idea and purpose of written communication. The shapes were created by drawing and gathering references from ornamental aspects of typography and letterpress printing: decorative typefaces and printer's ornaments. A particular visual influence has been the 19th century ornamented type that emerged as an outcome of Industrialisation, documented by the British lettering scholar Nicolette Gray.

Rendered Illegible was created by abstracting parts of these intricate wood type letterforms to create a new, imaginary alphabet. This process imbues the work with mystical qualities and links to the idea of fictional alphabets and utopian languages: the yet to be decoded Voynich Manuscript, Xu Bing's *Book from the Sky* or Hildegard of Bingen's *Lingua Ignota*. By presenting a series of prints and wooden matrices so closely resembling letters, *Rendered Illegible* asks the viewer to take a step back and focus on the visual qualities of typography, rather than treating letters as carriers of information, which we are so accustomed to doing. By remystifying forms that feel familiar, the work aims to show the value of aesthetic qualities of language and communication in and of itself and encourages us to think about the visual forms which surround us on an everyday basis.



Fig. 35. Exhibition leaflet. Photograph by Julia Syrztistie, 2024. Helsinki.

15/04/24

I started install yesterday, and by the end of today I had most of my work up. There's slight differences in how I laid out the works in the studio, but I guess that is inevitable. I've been hanging all the big pieces with white nails, small ones with tiny silver ones (as I couldn't find white ones in this size), but I don't think that this detail will be noticeable to anyone other than myself. Then I am using chunkier nails for all the plywood, with the exception of three heavier pieces which need hooks / screws. I'm surprised with how quickly install is happening – perhaps too quickly? Everyone seems to be taking their time or still working on their pieces, but I want to get it done and over with so that I can relax. I've not got much perspective on how it's looking, maybe once it's all done I can take a day or two away from it and see it through fresh eyes.

26/04/24

I've been feeling so tired during and after install that I forgot to write in the journal. Install went surprisingly fast, despite issues with the wall. It is only 1.5 cm thick and made of plywood, so whenever I was trying to hammer anything new in, other nails holding the work up would fall out. At some point, one of the higher-up plywood matrices fell off, and dragged the large middle print in green and a smaller pink one down. So I had to reprint the big print, and throw the ripped ones away. I also had to glue some of the nails into the wall, as they kept falling out. I just hope that nothing will fall during the exhibition and get damaged. I made a plinth for my exhibition text leaflets, but it was quite wonky and did not look so good, and so I covered it with some of the spare Chinese paper prints I made. I think it looks quite nice!

The installation itself feels chaotic, but good – somehow all the colours come together and don't feel like they're 'too much'. Maybe it's to do with using the same inks as bases for mixing new colours together, and the different shades relate to one another.

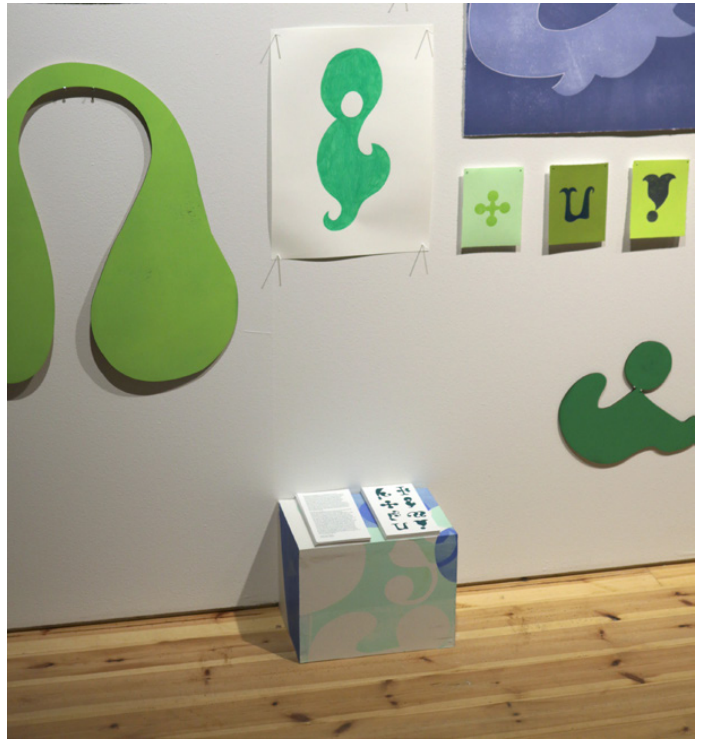


Fig. 36 – 37. *Exhibition install.* Photographs by Julia Syrztistie, 2024. Helsinki.



Fig. 38. *Final installation.* Photograph by Julia Syrztistie, 2024. Helsinki.

Reflection on Kuvan Kevät

09/05/24

Yesterday we had our Printmaking seminar with Annu Vertanen and Inma Herrera, and the discussion around my work felt really rich. We talked about the idea of my work being in a grey zone of communication: it so clearly portrays shapes which the human brain wants to decipher and give meaning to, but the shapes are abstracted just enough for that to not be possible, or at least not be easy. Words that came up were ‘mirroring’, ‘double’, ‘positive’ and ‘negative’, which aren’t words I used to describe my own work, but it is good to feel that the work has more layers than how I myself have verbalised it.

We also discussed the idea of decorativeness, the ornament and its association with both the feminine (in relation to beauty, the unnecessary, the superfluous) and the divine and mystical. Alexi Johnstone brought up the fact that in Islamic art, God cannot be depicted, and the ornamental nature of art is used in portraying the divine.

While the connection to religion and the mystical was not something I deliberately intended my work to focus on, several of my references, such as the work of Hildegard of Bingen and the Voynich Manuscript carry notions of the supernatural. The topic of religion was mentioned in *Mysterious Letters*: “religion also creates mysteries. Which results in the existence of multiple religions, stories, and fictions,” (Nedelka 2023, 123) as well as in other sources such as *The Other Side: A Journey into Women, Art and the Spirit World*, which I am looking forward to reading as further research. The book not only mentions Hildegard of Bingen, but also Hilma af Klint and Annie Besant, both whose work I feel are relevant to my research and process. I would like to investigate Besant’s *Thought-Forms* and perhaps explore the idea of assigning shapes to colours, rather than colours to shapes as an alternative pathway to take.

We talked about the idea of cultural appropriation, mentioning that this was an underlying fear of mine (work being received as appropriating ancient or disadvantaged writing systems), but the work is derived from decorative aspects of the Latin alphabet, and in that sense is devoid of any other references. The work poses as devoid of meaning in general, but nothing is ever devoid of meaning. In this case, meaning is formed through connotations the viewer associates with the shapes. Inma said that form over meaning can sometimes make artworks empty, but that in my case it was a conscious decision based on plenty of research and ideas, and that is what makes the project work.

Another topic which was discussed was colour. Colour was the element within my work which stayed more intuitive and developed nearly alongside the typographic work, as a parallel rather than an addition to the project. I talked about how mixing colours when printing, as well as observing the interaction of colour are both important factors in my practice. I wanted to use colour within this work not so much because it felt relevant to the concept, but rather because this project carried a potential for me to work with colour in itself. We pondered on the idea of creating this work in black and white. While it would still work, something about how the different prints interact with one another would not be the same.

16/05/24

I walk into the White Studio encountering Carlos Ludovico's installation, and it is only when I properly step inside the gallery space that my work becomes visible. The soft light is a contrast to the main KuvA / Tila space, and together with the wooden floor and echo-y acoustics, it creates a somewhat theatrical atmosphere. Each sound is emphasised and so is each artwork with the use of spotlights. My wall, together with Annele Lahti's work, is the only part in the White Studio which is fully lit. As I approach my work, I can feel the wooden texture of the floor below my feet. It's hard to know if I'm projecting this idea or not, but I feel like the first entry point of my work (right after seeing it as a whole) is the small plinth I have placed my exhibition text pamphlets on. I've seen several people reach for them as soon as they enter the space. The small body of text is quite a contrast to the large-scale installation itself. As I am sitting down on the right-hand side of my installation, I can see the prints from a slightly skewed perspective. To see the whole piece in its totality, one has to step several metres away from the wall, standing by Carlos's sculptures. It's really hard to think or experience my work from a bodily standpoint, as my working process is so based on research, history and systems I am familiar with, and I cannot separate that from the work itself. From the place I am sitting, what becomes my first notation is how the paper has changed since I installed my work. The flat prints have shrunk and expanded with the air, and are no longer as flat on the wall as they used to be. The colours in the installation are still appealing to me: I have printed the works individually, and since creating the installation, I have had little time to sit and think about the body as a whole, or how the different prints interact with one another. There are contrasts: the orange print alongside the blue matrix. But also slow progressions of colour from one shade to another. Someone recently commented on the work saying that there is a lot of movement within it, and maybe this is where the movement comes from: colours, shapes, and scale. The matrices which were still wet when I set up the piece are now dry, and their wooden texture has become more apparent. My eyes are jumping when looking at the piece – it is hard to keep them still. There is no element of visual control whilst looking at the work – it is beyond being graspable within a single look. This ties in with the spacial element of the work: it is large-scale and bigger than a human being. As I sit here trying to have a bodily experience with my work, I can't help but feel a sense of unease with the short amount of time that some visitors spend looking at the work that took many months to create.

I found it hard to document the work, due to the dim lighting, which made me realise that preferably I would have liked to exhibit the work in a setting where natural lighting was mixed with spotlights – colour being a major part of the installation. I felt as though the lighting was not working in its favour, and the material quality of the prints was slightly altered. I wondered if in the same way I found it difficult to document the work, its audience found it difficult to perceive it?

After the exhibition came down, I was still pondering whether the specific setting / theme of the exhibition space was how I intended my work to be perceived. I kept thinking that it could have been exhibited in the main KuvA / Tila space, in more of a 'white cube' setting. Would have that resulted in the work feeling more neutral, and open to the audience's interpretation? Did the specificities of the space as well as other works impact my work in a way in which I did not intend? The room was quite busy with non-exhibition related objects, with its multipurpose function also being a theatre room. I felt as though the room was more

full then I would have liked, and despite the wall being an ideal size, the dimensions of the room and the relation of my work to that of others felt quite tight. Perhaps exhibiting in the main KuvA / Tila space would have given it the airiness and space I would have preferred.

During Kuvan Kevät, I visited the space often, and it was a challenge to gain distance and evaluate my work while it was still displayed. I did however feel a shift in how I perceived the work on a wall rather than as individual prints. For months, I was working on creating drawings, prints and matrices as individual objects. Suddenly, there they all were, hanging side by side rather than laying flat. I was worried that the works wouldn't go together, that the combination of 45 different pieces of work was going to be overwhelming. Yet to my relief, they all worked together, transforming the pieces from prints and drawings into a flat, sculptural installation. The individual works were in dialogue with one-another, creating a dynamic whole.

Since the exhibition, I have presented my work in multiple contexts, one of them being during Muhu Print: a yearly one week printmaking getaway organised by the Estonian Printmaker's Association. After I had shown my work, I was pleasantly surprised to hear the conversation evolve on its own: other artists recollecting their own memories and sharing interpretations of my project. While during Kuvan Kevät I kept on reflecting on the visual qualities of my work, I came to the realisation that the work was successful on its own terms. It was engaging on a contextual and visual level, which were both objectives I was trying to achieve.

While the body of work and research which I presented feels complete in the work's exhibited form, there is an underlying feeling of limitless potential directions the project could have evolved into. One of my limitations was having to make choices, both in terms of what I produced, and what I chose to write about in the thesis. The research which led to the final work was broad enough for there to be many outcomes. Did I make the right choices which do justice to the topics I was working with? Equally, the potential material which I could have researched was so broad, that there could have been multiple areas of focus within the same subject matter. The hard part of evaluating one's own work comes with knowing that it could have been created in multiple different ways, yet the work created is just one of those possibilities. I feel as though the project has left me feeling satisfied, yet enthusiastic enough to continue investigating and visualising it further, both in the upcoming HAM commission and in my independent artistic practice.

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