MATERIALITY

Materiality is defined by the sensory qualities of an object that give it a particular character as part of its meaning. It includes the visual, spatial, tactile, auditory, kinesthetic, and temporal characteristics of form.

At a time when most things are digital—really just electronic patterns of *on* and *off*—it is easy to forget how much of communication design is the result of a very physical process. Desktop printing has reduced the practice to one of manipulating pixels on a screen, hitting "print," and watching the design emerge from the hidden innards of a laser or inkjet printer. But consider how much of the "stuff" of design has origins in much more material processes (by hand or by manufacturing) and what the residues of these processes contribute to meaning.

Serifs in type design likely had their origins in the tap of hammer to chisel when ending a stroke in carved stone. The thicks and thins in strokes of Old Style typefaces, such as Garamond or Goudy, reflect the gesture of the hand holding a flat-nib pen. The heavy horizontal and thin vertical strokes in Chinese woodblock letters reflect the strength in the vertical grain of the wood. In fact, with almost every new technology we build new relationships to the materiality of its production. Even laser printing leaves a slight trace of its fused toner on the page, different from the spray of inkjet printers.

Much of modern design practice has been a back and forth between two opposing forces: the desire to make invisible the means of production in order to foreground the subject matter and demonstrate precision, and the celebration of production technologies that draw attention to how things were made and the mark of the designer's hand. What explains this tension and what is the impact on the interpretation of text and image?

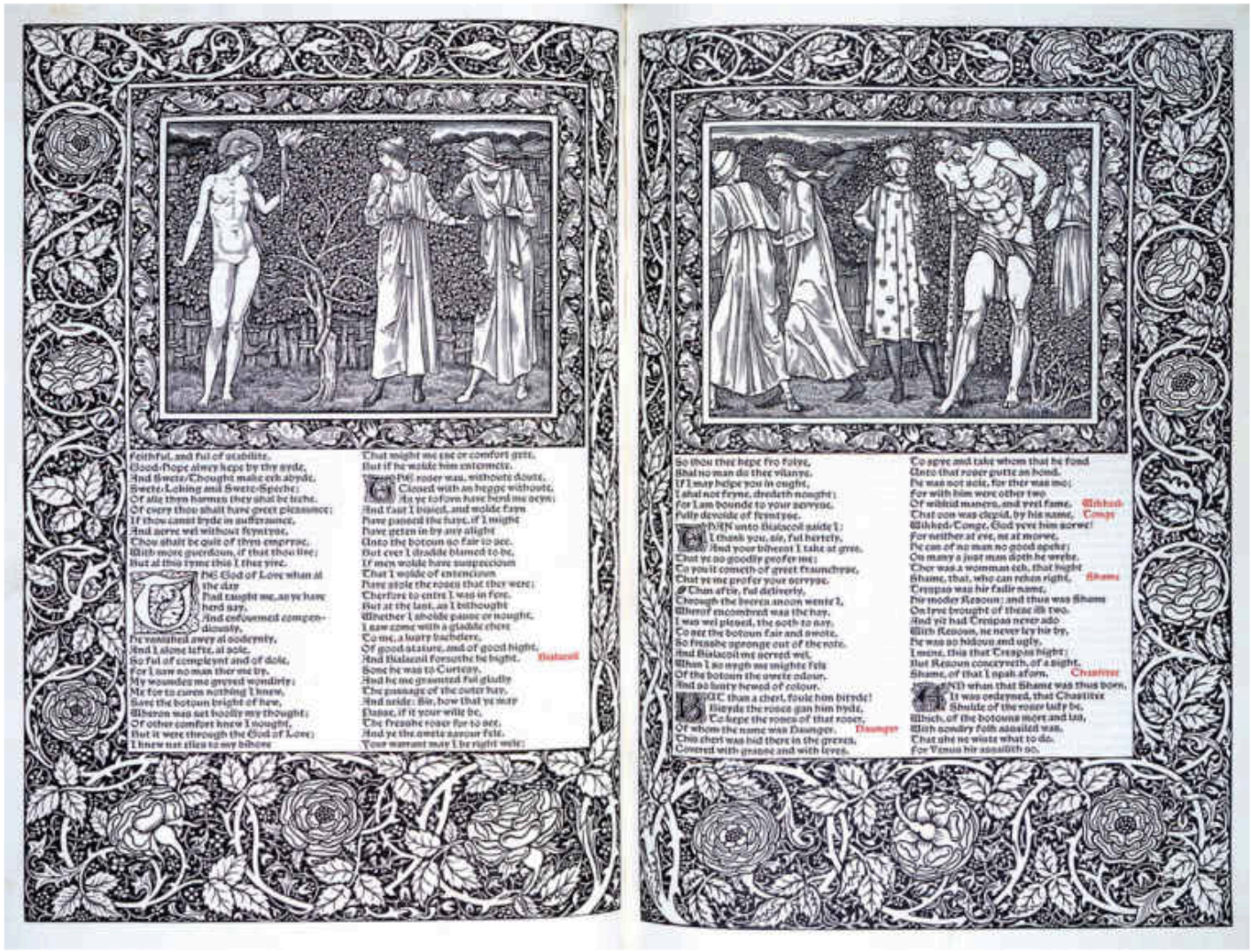

Figure 5.18

***Chaucer*, printed by the Kelmscott Press, 1896 William Morris (1834–1896)**

Unhappy with the quality of printed books at the turn of the century, William Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement returned to the art of fine bookmaking for the material qualities of the printed page. Letterpress printing has tactile and visual qualities not found in more contemporary production technologies.

It appears that in times when technology improves the precision or efficiency of production, designers often embrace manual processes that convey the human spirit. The work of William Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement in the early part of the twentieth century was a reaction to the qualities of machine production of the Industrial Revolution. Morris's Kelmscott Press responded to the ubiquity of commercial lithography by returning to traditional letterpress printing as a more "authentic" practice (Figure 5.18). Type was set one character at a time, inked, and pressed in contact with paper. Functioning much like a medieval guild, artisans produced elegantly printed books and prints, intended to raise the aesthetic standards of middle-class homes.

Today's book design wrestles with the technology of the twenty-first century. E-books imitate the qualities and behaviors of traditional books. Pages still "turn" on an iPad; the Kindle uses e-ink to simulate the reflective qualities of printing on paper, rather than the backlit attributes of a computer screen.

As we spend more time on screen with typefaces that reveal their origins in high technology and seamless Photoshop images that show little evidence of human intervention, designers again show interest in form that appears to be handmade. The popularity of hand-drawn typographic and illustrative form humanizes a visual world shaped by machines. It speaks with a singular, personal voice rather than with anonymity. When the communication task calls for evidence of the author or designer, or when the irregularities of older technologies seem appropriate to the message, form that forgoes computer precision contributes to interpretation.

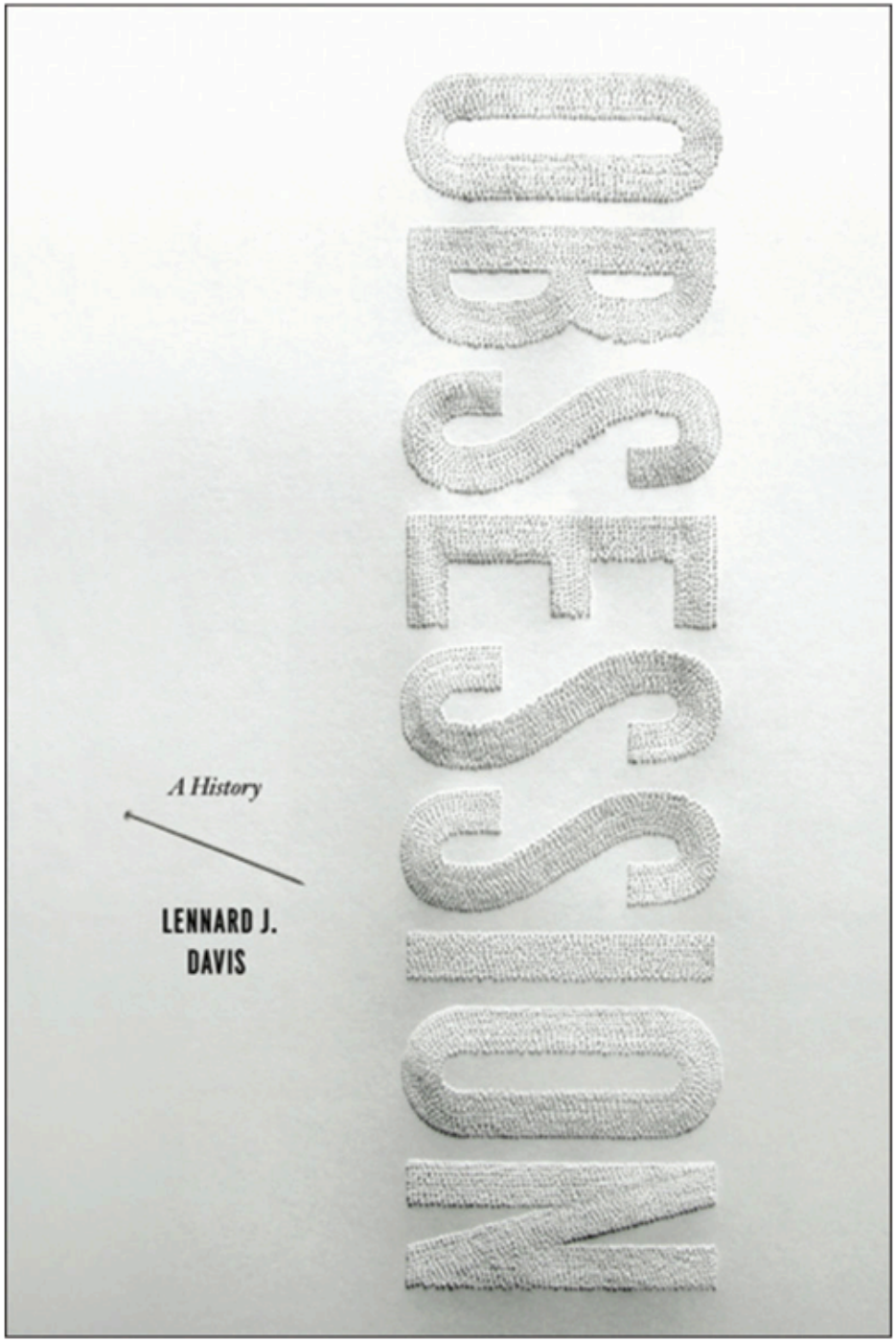
OBESITY
A History
LENNARD J.
DAVIS

Figure 5.19
***Obsession* book cover, 2009 Isaac Tobin and Lauren Nassef**
Tobin was dissatisfied with attempts to produce the cover to Obsession digitally. Instead, he returned to the original efforts by Nassef to pinprick the letterforms in paper. Materiality, in this case, is evidence of painstaking work by hand and consistent with the content of the book.

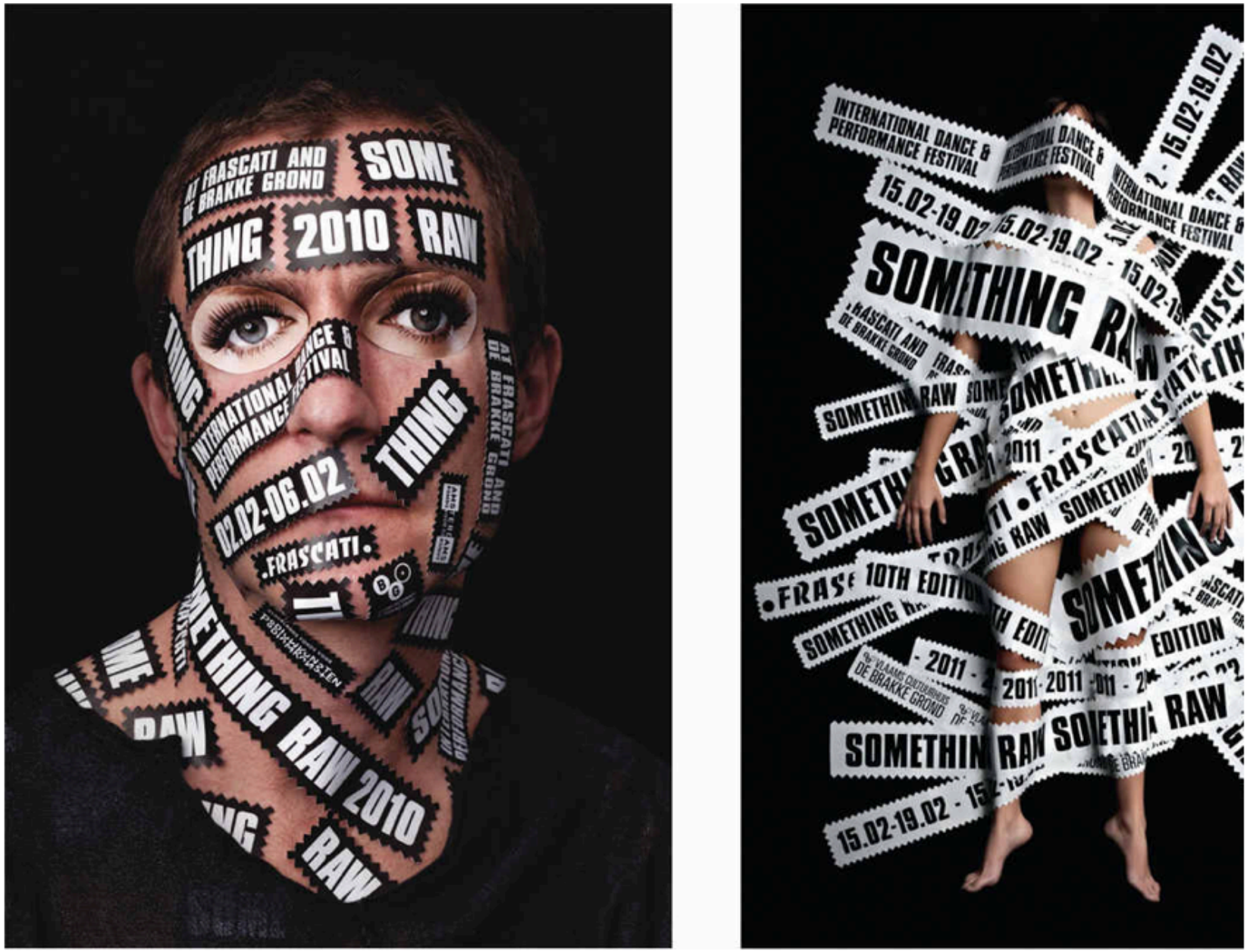

Figure 5.20
Campaign for Something Raw, International Dance and Performance Festival, 2009–2015 Theater Frascati/Flemish

Arts Centre De Brakke Grond Concept and Design: De Designpolitie Photography: Arjan Benning

The design solution for promoting a dance and performance festival is decidedly material. Performers are literally taped with information. The direct physicality of this interpretation is appropriate for the title and content of the festival.


A|X
ARMANI JEANS
WASHES
STYLE SELECTION
STYLE SELECTION

Figure 5.21
A|X: Armani Exchange packaging and signage program for Giorgio Armani, 1992 Alexander Isley, Inc. Ad Agency: Weiss, Whitten, Carroll, Stagliano Creative Director: Alexander Isley Designers: Alexander Knowlton, Tim Convery
The package design for Armani Exchange uses simple craft materials, reinforcing the fashion company's use of natural fibers and accessible line of street chic clothing in the Armani brand. Boxes open like drawers in a dresser or closet.

Isaac Tobin, in his design for the book cover *Obsession*, tried to produce the effect of pinpricks on the computer (Figure 5.19). He said, "My first attempts were made on the computer, but just didn't work—the computer made the repetition meaningless" (Tobin, 2008). Tobin then created the typographic form in paper and photographed it for the finished effect. The slight irregularities are evidence of how the form was produced. De Designpolitie's solution to advertising a dance and performance festival also depended on the material qualities of the image. Oversized tape carrying the title of the festival, *Something Raw*, was applied directly to the bodies of performers (Figure 5.20).

In some cases, the materials used carry the message. Alex Isley's packaging for Armani Exchange uses earthy craft materials (cardboard and rope) to communicate informal style and the use of natural fibers. Known primarily as a high-fashion company, the A|X materials set the identity for this casual line of clothing (Figure 5.21). Similarly, the Graphic Thought Facility design of signage for a business school is the opposite of the slick materials and consistent typography we associate with corporate wayfinding systems. A collection of differently sized components uses raw wood, stencil letters, and metal troughs to "collage" identification signs for various rooms in the building, a reclaimed brewery in London (Figure 5.22).

Materiality, therefore, contributes to what things mean. Materials and processes signify things

over and above the denotative content of the message. They speak to the origins of form and to their individual authorship.


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HCLC


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C.3
MEETING ROOM

Figure 5.22

Hult International Business School – Wayfinding Wayfinding and Graphic Elements: © Graphic Thought Facility Project Architects: Sergison Bates Interior Design: Fiona Kennedy Project Management: David Harris Photography: Mike Bruce

This signage breaks with the convention of single-surface, silk-screened nameplates and a consistent typographic treatment. Numbers and letters on differently sized materials sit in metal troughs mounted on walls, functioning as sculpture in the environment. The stenciled letters and ad hoc quality of their combination feels appropriate to the school's location in a reclaimed brewery in London's Whitechapel.