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Introduction: Letterpress printing: past, present, future

Caroline Archer-Parré and James Mussell

In the basement of the School of English at the University of Leeds there is all the material required to make a book from scratch. There are dedicated rooms for making paper, setting type, printing and binding; there are also deckles and moulds, cases of type, presses, guillotines and book frames. The workshop originates from 1963 when the literary scholar, Andrew Gurr, purchased an Albion press and fount of Caslon founder's type in order to teach Shakespeare. By demonstrating the material processes through which the plays were produced, students would be better placed to account for textual variations they encountered, whether between copies produced in the same run or between those in different editions. The press and type were not just a teaching resource, however, but quickly put to work printing original material. Between 1964 and 1969 they were used to publish the Northern House pamphlets, editions of poetry by Jon Silkin, Ken Smith, Geoffrey Hill, Tony Harrison, and others.¹ The press was later incorporated in the Institute of Bibliography and Textual Criticism and remained under its custodianship until the Institute closed with the retirement

¹ See 'Stand and Northern House', *University of Leeds* (no date),

<<https://library.leeds.ac.uk/special-collections/research-spotlight/38>>, accessed 2 January 2022.

of its director, John Barnard, in 2001. The press fell into disuse and the basement was used for general storage.

In some ways, the decline of the print room was emblematic of what was going on in letterpress printing elsewhere. Although the commercial use of letterpress machine printing survived well into the second half of the twentieth century, the widespread uptake of offset lithographic printing and phototypesetting, and, later, digital production processes, made it increasingly unviable as a commercial process. Many machine presses were sent to scrap while some surviving nineteenth-century hand-operated iron presses, such as the Columbian and Albions, were displayed in museums, the foyers of arts schools or the reception areas of printing houses, cherished for their historical or symbolic value. As the last generations of trade printers retired, taking their knowledge and skills with them, letterpress printing looked destined to be consigned to the metaphorical basement.

Yet this has not quite come to pass. A few years ago, the Centre for the Comparative History of Print revived the printing room at the University of Leeds. Whereas bibliography and other approaches to the material text had become marginalised in literary studies, the emergence of the digital humanities made them seem urgent once again. Letterpress has also continued to be taught in schools of art and design, usually as part of broader programmes in the graphic arts, and it continues to find a home in the book arts more broadly. Museums play an important role in preserving the material heritage of printing, but many also put their presses to work, drawing on the expertise of retired printers and so helping to preserve their experiences too. And there are many flourishing independent letterpress studios, where printers and printmakers, networked in the age of social media, continue their practice while

learning from one another. Commercial letterpress may have lost its place to more recent techniques, but it has found new and exciting uses elsewhere.

Letterpress, from the hand-press to machine printing, was the dominant mode of textual reproduction in the west for over 500 years. This book is about the resurgence of letterpress printing and its contributors consider what it means to print using letterpress today. As such, they engage with the legacy of letterpress, from how it has shaped the look of the page to its characteristic techniques and methods. They recognise the inheritance of letterpress, whether that is in the material form of presses and type or less tangible heritage of skills and experience and acknowledge that in many cases this inheritance is fraught. Without the benefit of apprenticeships or recourse to master printers to instruct them, today's letterpress printers must actively seek out its traditions to learn their craft and to understand how what they do relates to what has been done before. Our contributors outline some of the challenges: how to access training, how to locate parts, to situate themselves with regards to what has already been printed, to situate themselves within print today. But they explore the opportunities too. While the displacement of letterpress from industrial printing has threatened its survival, it has also liberated the practice from some of its institutional constraints. The apprenticeship system, for instance, ensured that skills were passed from generation to generation but also restricted who could handle type and use the press. Similarly, while there are usually practical reasons for why things were done a certain way, today's letterpress printers often have little option but to experiment, incorporating new techniques and new technologies in order to compensate for the declining availability of equipment and materials, or gaps in knowledge or training.

Letterpress Printing: Past, Present, Future brings together scholars, collectors, curators, printers and printmakers to explore the forms of contemporary letterpress in the context of the long history of printing. As the chapters that follow make clear, this resurgence is characterised by its moment. Choosing to print with letterpress means choosing to employ a mode of textual production whose time has ostensibly passed. Yet that does not mean that those using letterpress are motivated by nostalgia. Letterpress is a distinctive process, and its rhythms, materialities, and production constraints results in a particular aesthetic effect which appeals to many. There are also printers who turn to letterpress in order to preserve skills and equipment, keeping this process alive for others to use. And there are those whose interest is historical, working with letterpress to better understand how these effects were produced in the past. Many contemporary printers draw upon new methods and materials to print in ways not possible before. Today's printers use letterpress for many different reasons. *Letterpress Printing* asks what is significant about this moment. How do these diverse communities use letterpress? How do they engage with letterpress printing's rich history? And how do they safeguard its future?

The resurgence of letterpress

The revivication of the printing room at Leeds was a response to broader intellectual shifts. The rise of digital culture has denaturalized printing, making its specific material properties newly legible. Similarly, within the academy, the methods gathered under the name digital humanities have prompted renewed attention to the properties of nondigital media as they have studied the materialities put into play by hardware and software. Without a neutral ground from which to scrutinize different media formats – the results must be recorded

somewhere – comparative approaches become necessary.² Bringing the printing room back into use provides the means to learn about the historical production of print media but also allows questions to be asked of the digital.

Leeds is just one of many institutions restoring its bibliographic press. In 2016 The Pathfoot Press was founded at the University of Stirling, bringing back into use the Columbian press previously operated by the Stirling Bibliographical Society (1981–89).³ The following year, Bath Spa University, which already incorporated letterpress in its School of Art and Design, acquired an Albion press for its Corsham campus, intending it to be used by students in the humanities as well as for public-facing events. Similarly, in 2019 the Thin Ice Press was established in the Department of English & Related Literature at the University of York.⁴ Further afield, the Huskiana Press was established in the English Department at Northeastern University, Boston, in 2019 and its founding director, Ryan Cordell, is in the process of establishing a press at the University of Illinois Urbana Champaign. Existing bibliographic presses have also responded to the resurgence of interest in letterpress. In 2015 the Bodleian’s Bibliography Room, Oxford, which was established in 1949, moved into premises in the Old Bodleian Library from its previous home in the Story Museum. As part of the move, a working press was located in the foyer of the refurbished Weston Library for better

² See, for instance, N. Katherine Hayles and Jessica Pressman, eds, *Comparative Textual Media: Transforming the Humanities in the Postprint Era* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

³ See *The Pathfoot Press: The University of Stirling Centre for Letterpress* (no date), <<https://pathfootpress.com/>>, accessed 10 January 2022.

⁴ See *Thin Ice Press* (2019-), <<https://thinicepress.org/>>, accessed 10 January 2022.

public access. The Historical Printing Room at Cambridge University Library has been teaching printing to students since 1974 but its important collections, particularly of punches and matrices, have attracted research projects that utilize the latest technology. In 2017, for instance, researchers from Birmingham City University collaborated with the Birmingham Assay Office and Cambridge's Digital Content Unit to study John Baskerville's punches, analyzing their constitution with x-ray fluorescence technology while producing high-resolution images and 3D-printed replicas for further research.⁵

In schools of art, typographic equipment, previously used to instruct exclusively male printing-trade apprentices, has piqued the interest of present-day students of art and design, both male and female. Not only have old machines, tools and materials been reimagined for contemporary use, but so too have the pedagogical practices in which these workshops were formerly situated. Whereas originally the letterpress workshops were intended to produce a workforce for the printing industry, they are now spaces through which students explore all sorts of creative practice. Alex Cooper, Rose Gridneff and Andrew Haslam date this shift to the 1960s and the introduction of design into the curriculum at schools of art where graphic design students were invariably taught separately from printing trade apprentices.⁶

Subsequent developments in the industry, such as the introduction of desktop publishing, saw the responsibility for many distinct areas of production – text composition and graphic reproduction – devolved to the designer and by the end of the twentieth century the schools

⁵ Caroline Archer, Ann-Marie Carey and Keith Adcock, 'Baskerville Punches: Revelations in Craftsmanship', *Midland History* 45 (2020), 176-189.

⁶ Alexander Cooper, Rose Gridneff and Andrew Haslam, '6x6 Collaborative Letterpress Project: Introduction', *6x6* (Brighton, 2014), unpaginated.

of printing had been usurped by the schools of art. Those letterpress workshops that survived this transition have been readily embraced as part of broader design curricula. Fully-furnished with the tools of the historical trade that they used to supply, these workshops introduce design students to an older mode of text composition and reproduction, with its own traditions, providing them with new ways of working and graphic effects, informing and reforming students' own practice, whether in analogue or digital media.

Many graduates of these schools have gone on to start their own private presses in order to utilize redundant letterpress equipment, either in a conscious attempt to control production, or as a broader investment in historical print culture. In doing so, they join a rich and diverse community of printers. In Leeds for instance there is Red Eel Press, a small fine press specialising in working with printers' ornaments.⁷ There is also the Leeds Print Workshop, a co-operative membership-based printmaking studio that offer a number of courses and events for the community. Based in nearby Shipley, Nick Loaring's The Print Project is a well-established letterpress workshop; just down the road in Saltaire is the People Powered Press, a community arts organisation who, according to the Guinness Book of Records, have the largest press of its kind in the world.⁸ This is just Leeds and its surrounding area: other cities and towns in the UK have a similar mix of printers and presses.⁹

⁷ See Samantha King, *Red Eel Press: Letterpress; Artist's Books; Fine Press Editions* (no date), <<https://www.redeelpress.co.uk/>>, accessed 10 January 2022.

⁸ See *The Print Project* (no date), <<https://shop.theprintproject.co.uk/>>; *People Powered Press* (no date), <<https://www.thepeoplepoweredpress.org/>>. Both accessed 10 January 2022.

⁹ See, for instance, the Letterpress Collective in Bristol and Leicester Print Workshop. *Letterpress Collective: Letterpress Printing in the Old City of Bristol* (no date),

Just as the use of letterpress declined in the printing industry its value has been recognized in the production of bespoke products, gaining value as a craft or artisanal practice. There are many contemporary printers who have been able to exploit this market, producing small custom runs in letterpress of things like cards and wedding invitations, the income supporting other aspects of their practice. Others have found a market for high-quality publications produced using traditional tools and techniques. Many of these printers work in the fine press tradition or the book arts; others combine bookwork with jobbing printing. Phil Abel's Hand and Eye Press, London, produces fine editions of books as well as stationery, for instance.¹⁰ Graham Moss's Incline Press, Oldham, produces a range of books, pamphlets, chapbooks and ephemera, many of which engage with the history and practice of book and printmaking.¹¹ Founded by John and Rosalind Randle in 1971, the Whittington Press, Cheltenham, also specialises in fine books, each printed with type cast at the press, and also publishes the long-running journal, *Matrix*.¹² There are also trade printers, such as the Rufford Printing Company, Ormskirk, who have chosen not to be taken over by technology and have retained

<<https://www.theletterpresscollective.org/>> and *Leicester Print Workshop: Printmaking Central* (no date), <<http://www.leicesterprintworkshop.com/>>, both accessed 10 January 2022.

¹⁰ *Hand and Eye* (no date), <<https://www.handandeye.co.uk/>>, accessed 10 January 2022.

¹¹ *Incline Press: For the Reader Who Collects and the Collector Who Reads* (2018-), <<https://www.inclinepress.com/>>, accessed 10 January 2022.

¹² After their acquisition of Oxford University Press's monotype matrices they now have what is probably the most complete collection in the world. See *Whittington Press Shop* (no date), <<https://whittingtonpressshop.com/>>, accessed 10 January 2022.

older methods of production such as letterpress.¹³ Some commercial printers have even begun relief printing from polymer plates to reproduce the characteristic impression of type on paper. Far from being backward looking, these trade printers use old and new letterpress technology in order to satisfy current commercial markets. The number of businesses printing for profit using letterpress equipment is on the increase and the range of work they produce is varied. It is certainly a niche market, but one which not only helps preserve the machinery and materials associated with letterpress, but also the tacit knowledge required for its production.

Museums and other heritage sites also play a key role in the preservation of letterpress. There are many that work to collect, catalogue and archive not only traditional typographic equipment but also the skills and techniques associated with the trade, thereby preserving both the tangible and intangible heritage of the printing industry. These institutions function as guardians of typographic heritage, but they are also visitor attractions, running working presses, exhibition spaces, shops, and tea rooms and which provide the public with hands-on printing workshops, lecture series, and education programmes. There are large museums dedicated to printing such as the National Print Museum Ireland in Dublin, Ireland, the Musée de l'imprimerie et de la communication graphique in Lyons, France, the Museum Plantin-Moretus in Antwerp, the Netherlands, and the Printing Museum, Tokyo (established by Toppan Printing), Japan, but also smaller ones such as the Museum of Printing in Massachusetts, United States. In addition, there are working exhibits attached to other museums and heritage sites for whom printing is not the focus. Winterbourne House, an

¹³ *Rufford Printing Company* (2017-2021), <<https://www.ruffordprinting.co.uk/>>, accessed 11 April 2022.

heritage site and botanical gardens at the University of Birmingham, also has an active printing workshop as part of its visitor offering; Leeds Industrial Museum invites local printers to use its press during its annual Print Fest; and one of the first exhibits at Blists Hill Victorian Town, part of the Ironbridge Gorge Museums in Shropshire, was the printing house, which still operates daily producing period materials and merchandise for the museum (it opened in 1973). Some commercial firms have themselves become heritage sites. Hatch Show Print, in Nashville, Tennessee, United States, dates from 1873; it is now part of Country Music Hall of Fame but still operates as a press as well as being a living museum. Similarly, Hamilton Wood Type, in Two Rivers, Wisconsin, United States, dates from 1880, and while the company now specializes in the manufacture of wooden laboratory furniture the original workshop has become a type and printing museum. Large or small and regardless of their origins, these museums and heritage sites are destinations for curious tourists interested in seeing – and in some instances, experiencing – how printing happens, or happened.

There is no single reason as to why letterpress has attracted renewed interest. It is certainly appreciated for its tactile qualities and the three-dimensional aspects that the impression of type gives a printed product. Unlike letters on a screen, metal type is physical, it can be handled, has fixed dimension, weight and shape: it makes material people's understanding of written language. Whereas what happens between keyboard and screen is hidden, the processes elided to create the effect that they appear directly as a result of each keystroke, printing with movable type makes apparent the work involved. It is because metal type and letterpress printing appear more solid compared to the digital that many of those working with letterpress – and the clients they serve – find it a more human and humane technology with an intimate hands-on quality as opposed to the remote, virtual world of digital printing.

As such, the revival of letterpress can be seen as part of a wider group of movements – such as the Slow Food Movement – that exist to counteract the rise of fast living and combat people's dwindling interest in what they consume and how things are produced.

Letterpress is also seen to have everyday advantages. It is a versatile system that handles short runs more practically than many other processes and often more economically. There is a direct quality to letterpress: the compositor is always working to finished size, a proof can be taken immediately the job is set, and corrections made on the spot. There are also some typefaces that just look better when printed letterpress rather than offset lithography.

Letterpress equipment is generally cheap to buy and with no temperamental electronics.

Presses are built to last and seldom go wrong but when they do some spare parts can still be got from a limited range of manufacturers, or parts can be cannibalised from redundant presses, although, of course, this will become harder as time goes on.

Yet just as interest in letterpress printing has been enjoying a resurgence, those formally trained in its techniques are declining and their skills are seldom transferred to the new generation of creative printers. In schools of art, letterpress is inevitably subordinated to other more modern and commercially relevant techniques, relegated to a curious side-line in an already saturated curriculum. Heritage organisations, while keen to conserve the trade and its tools often struggle to find the space, resources, and know-how necessary to maintain their printing collections. Useable equipment and material are becoming increasingly scarce and those with the knowledge to repair and restore it are a dying breed. Letterpress, not for the first time, is in transition and facing an uncertain future. Classified as an endangered craft on

the Heritage Craft Association's Red List, letterpress only has sufficient craftspeople to transmit skills to the next generation, there are serious concerns about its ongoing viability.¹⁴

There is a risk, too, that letterpress becomes understood solely in opposition to, or in reaction to, digital tools and technologies. In many ways, it is only right that those coming to letterpress understand it in comparison to more recent and familiar modes of textual production. The ubiquity of word processing, for instance, means that everyone today is their own compositor and as desktop-printers are commonplace most people have experience of printing too. Similarly, because the language of letterpress survives in word processing (fonts, justification, cut and paste etc.) and more broadly everyday language (upper-case and lower-case; out of sorts; the disputed 'mind your ps and qs' etc.), it is easy to use these familiar words and phrases to explain what they used to mean. While we have no choice but to approach old technologies and processes in comparison to those more modern, there is a danger that differences become magnified and continuities overlooked. For instance, while working with metal type feels more embodied than composing onscreen using a computer, both are material processes and both involve working with hand and eye. And while setting type and working a press might feel more direct than using a computer, it is still a mediated process, its aesthetic effect and power to reproduce resulting from the interposition of a machine. Neither the mechanics of letterpress nor the electronics of the computer are of any use without the human element of experience, intelligence and creativity, and that if the human element that controls the machines or electronics has acquired all the artistic qualities necessary in good printing, it is possible to produce work of quality whatever the process.

¹⁴ See Heritage Craft Association, *Red List of Endangered Crafts* (Heritage Craft Association, 2021), <<https://heritagecrafts.org.uk/redlist/>>, accessed 10 January 2022.

While its historical significance justifies its preservation, if letterpress is to become more than a static museum display it has to engage with its history while serving the needs of contemporary printmakers. In 2017, the Centre for the Comparative History of Print (CHoP) at the University of Leeds, in conjunction with the Centre for Printing History & Culture (CPHC) at Birmingham City University, formed a network, supported by the Arts & Humanities Research Council (AHRC), to investigate the role of letterpress in the digital present. Through a series of three workshops and a culminating conference at the University of Leeds, the network brought together scholars interested in printing history with museum professionals and practitioners to try and understand the contemporary relevance of letterpress and what might be done so it survives as a living, working process, in the future. They considered the current state of historical letterpress: what printing presses and type had survived and the reasons for its survival, and the current practices for its conservation, preservation and use. They also explored how letterpress and metal type were being deployed in research, practice, and teaching and considered additional ways in which it could be exploited. Participants also addressed the role of letterpress in the digital age and examined the interconnected histories of print and digital technologies in order to consider how each informs the other.

A selection of the papers given at these events are presented in this volume. Written by scholars, printmakers, and heritage professionals, the chapters discuss the changing profiles of those people involved in printing, the processes with which they engage, the products of letterpress both past and the present, and the potential and future of the process. The volume is divided into three parts: 'Letterpress in Transition'; 'Letterpress and Preservation'; and 'Letterpress's Future Potential'.

Letterpress printing: past, present, future

In the first part, 'Letterpress in Transition', three chapters each consider particular moments in the recent history of letterpress when the process can be seen to be shifting away from old traditions to new approaches not only within the trade itself, but also within education and practice. In 'Designers in the Composing Room: a Progressive Tale of Typographic Transgression', Catherine Dixon describes the mid-twentieth century changes in typographic education when advocates of a 'hands-on' approach to learning sought access to the composing room for design students. Using Central Saint Martins, London, as a case-study Dixon presents the key figures who helped change typographic pedagogy and moved the composing room from a trade training space to a craft workshop. Dixon first focuses on the 1930s educational experiences of Anthony Froshaug, when design students were excluded from the composing room. She then, by comparison, considers the experimental evening classes run by Edward Wright from 1952–56, which challenged the pedagogical limitations that persisted with trade orthodoxy by providing designers with recourse to the composing room. Finally, Dixon reflects on the links between these two experiences and the current normalization of designers in a composing room. In this chapter Dixon recalibrates typographic historiography and demonstrates that while contemporary advocates proclaim the haptic benefits of working with type, such arguments can be located much earlier and considerably predate the dominant exemplars of post-digital hands-on learning.

Chapter two shifts the focus away from letterpress as an industrial process to a period in the late twentieth-century when letterpress printing was being appropriated by artists rather than printers. In 'A Tangible Space: Letterpress Printing within Artists' Books and Small

Publishing Practice' Angie Butler constructs a lineage of the letterpress process within artists' books and small publishing thereby locating its historical and contemporary communities of practice. Firstly, Butler outlines how the decline of industrial letterpress paralleled the growth of artist-led presses in the UK. Secondly, she presents the emergence of artists' books, small publishers and practitioners during the 1960s and 70s who employed the letterpress process to print their own work. By focusing on this emerging community of practitioners, Butler demonstrates how letterpress shifted from an industrial process to an artistic craft and how a phenomenological approach emerged as a studio practice that united practitioner, process and form. Butler describes how this approach involved immediate surroundings and communities and reflected a creative and independent attitude to the developing genre of artist books and small publishing practices.

The third chapter in this section looks back to past sites of letterpress instruction to better understand present art and design education. Alexander Cooper, Rose Gridneff and Andrew Haslam's chapter 'An Education in Letterpress: Charting the History of Letterpress Education in the United Kingdom and Ireland' outlines the current breadth of letterpress practice within contemporary art and design pedagogy. Throughout the twentieth century, the teaching of letterpress was organized through training centres in technical colleges and art schools. Cooper, Gridneff and Haslam identify which of the original letterpress workshops remain, how they are used, and how they have survived the many educational, institutional and technological changes. The authors describe the equipment, presses and type that remains in the workshops and the physical layouts of each space which, in combination with dialogue with staff, provide an overview current letterpress practice within each institution and a critical analysis of the connections between people, space, equipment and pedagogic practice.

Part two, 'Letterpress and Preservation', confronts some problematic, and often controversial, questions around the conservation and preservation of historic printing equipment in heritage settings. In chapter four Patrick Goossens addresses the conundrum of whether printing equipment should be seen and not heard or whether the act of using the presses is beneficial for their survival. 'Preserving Historically Correct Letterpress Printing in Theory and Practice' presents the problem that faces all those responsible for collecting historical letterpress equipment: what is it that must be preserved? While it is important that letterpress machinery is collected as record of the craft, Goossens argues that preserving intangible knowledge of how to use this equipment in an historically responsible way is equally imperative. While simplified descriptions can explain static displays of printing machinery to museum visitors, it is only by seeing the presses in use can the public fully understand the mechanics of printing. By way of explanation, Goossens cites how, in the 1950s, the Plantin-Moretus museum in Antwerp tried to find a way to present the process of typesetting to its visitors: it did so by drawing on the tacit knowledge of those still employed by the trade. Sixty years later, much of this knowledge has disappeared, and what survives is on the cusp of extinction as the last remaining members of the trade pass away. Interest in intangible, tacit heritage has recently intensified, and in this chapter Goossens explains how museums are responding to this challenge.

In chapter five, 'Between Theory and Practice: Bringing Letterpress and Digital Together in Printing Museums', Alan Marshall discusses the contradictions and confirmations of theory and practice in the everyday activities of 'printing museums' and considers how such organisations cope with the digital extensions of letterpress printing. Marshall explains how the intellectual work of researching and managing museum collections complements the practical work of producing exhibitions and organising visits, demonstrations and workshops.

He describes how, in letterpress printing, the practical production process depends on the manipulation of a highly abstract representational system whose forms codify language and are a powerful vehicle of connotation. Marshall considers some of the questions that arise when exhibiting the intellectual and practical aspects embedded in letterpress printing and its digital extensions and how, for both letterpress printers and museum professionals, the dual nature of typography remains at the heart of their activity. In particular, Marshall considers the complementary roles of visits, demonstrations, workshops and other forms of mediation, and how these activities have to be balanced with the problems encountered when collecting, conserving and interpreting digital artefacts in a museum context.

In part three, 'Letterpress's Future Potential', our contributors turn to some of the ways letterpress is used today to address how it might be used in time to come. What unites them is an interest in how letterpress exists in dialogue with other media modes and technologies. In chapter six Nick Thurston looks backwards in order to assess how letterpress might go forwards. 'Immediate Writing: Pavel Büchler and the Logic of Letterpress' presents the work of Pavel Büchler whose training, first as a printing apprentice and then as a typographic design student in Prague in the 1970s, has marked his artistic life. Coming from Czechoslovakia to England, in 1981, Büchler's experience of living between communism and capitalism anchors much of his work. It is the slippages and imperfections in the various forms of cultural unity that preoccupy his attention. Thurston presents a series of close readings of Pavel Büchler's recent artworks that depend upon letterpress printing as both a technological referent and means of production. Through his post-conceptual misuse of the medium, Büchler's works pose a counter-voice to the digital media that dominates current text-led artistic practice. Thurston proposes that Büchler's counter-voice is an example of how the language arts can re-situate contemporary writing in a history of inscriptive,

publishing and reading technologies through a notion of what he calls ‘immediate writing’. In doing so, he uses Büchler’s practice to demonstrate how all acts of inscription are both of and beyond the specific media form in which they are written.

While Thurston considers the work of a single practitioner and how their work might inform the future of letterpress, Chapter seven looks at how individuals working in conjunction with contemporary collectives might inform and preserve letterpress for the future. In ‘Letterpress in Portugal: The Future of Design and its Engagement with Past Printing Techniques’ Pedro Amado, Vítor Quelhas and Catarina Silva discuss how letterpress printing is attracting the attention of Portuguese graphic designers, but also how the information and the expertise necessary to learn the process is scattered and scarce. Amado, Quelhas and Silva present a snapshot of current traditional letterpress workshops operating in Portugal, describing their main functions and practices, how they promote the craft, how networks of practitioners are being formed and how they contribute to sustain the practice. The chapter provides a survey of active workshops and discusses some in detail. Through interviews with practicing printers, the authors reveal three generations of practitioners currently working to preserve the practice in Portugal: some had formal traditional typographic education, while others originally trained as graphic designers. Despite the generation gap and different backgrounds, all are working together, sometimes in the same workshop, in an informal distributed network, to preserve the knowledge and practice of letterpress through craftsmanship.

In Chapter eight Richard Kegler presents a new process for manufacturing type that will not only potentially take letterpress forward, but will also reinstate typographers to their original, fifteenth-century role as having full command of all the typographic processes as makers of type, designers of layouts and printers of pages. In ‘P22 Blox: SpaceAge Letterpress

Modularity,' Kegler describes the origins of P22 Blox, a set of modular letterpress printing blocks made specifically for contemporary production. P22 Blox is Kegler's contemporary answer to an historical challenge of creating an alphabet from a finite set of parameters. The design is inspired by both Alpha-Blox (American Type Founders, 1944) – a system of both solid and linear shapes which combined to create all manner of typefaces, ornament and patterns in one or two colours – and Josef Albers's *Kombinationschrift und Schabloneneschrift* – a series of modular alphabets where an economy of a few shapes could render all possible letterforms. Rather than use wood or metal, however, P22 Blox is made from a thermoplastic elastomer that approximates linoleum or hard rubber and which is an entirely new medium appropriated for modern presswork. This process, Kegler argues, and the results of prints made with Blox, provide many insights about creating new letterpress tools.

In Chapter 9, 'East Meets West: Merging Technology, Language and Culture', Sidney Shep and Ya-Wen Ho introduce the work of the Wai-te-ata Press at Victoria University, Wellington. Wai-te-ata provides studio-based letterpress teaching, research digital humanities approaches to book history, and has a book arts printing and publishing programme featuring the 'digital handmade.' The acquisition of a unique collection of classical Chinese types catalysed new thinking about the role of letterpress in the twenty-first century and research trips to Taiwan and Hong Kong where the hunger for letterpress is strong, has ignited fascinating conversations about the revitalization of both the medium and the method. In this chapter Shep and Ho explore how best to honour the traditions exemplified by this collection as well as reimagine its relevance for contemporary makers and consumers, and present a public engagement strategy that relocates letterpress at the rich, cross-cultural intersection of technology, culture, and language.

Collectively, the chapters in *Letterpress Printing: Past, Present, Future* reassess the state of letterpress printing today by documenting its recent history, highlighting the decline of letterpress as a commercial printing technique and addressing the attendant risks this decline poses to our printed heritage. *Letterpress Printing* is partly concerned with loss, whether of tangible material like presses and type or the more intangible practices of their use. The volume, however, is also a celebration of the tenacity of letterpress as a process which continues to flourish, despite challenges both material and immaterial. *Letterpress Printing* examines the continuing life of letterpress and applauds its revival through describing the circumstance in which it flourishes and the uses to which it is now put. Crucially it connects these two narratives, setting out the ways in which current practice draws upon and preserves the history of printing while taking it in new and unexpected directions. Letterpress has a history and, as the principle means of textual reproduction for five hundred years, it is an important one, but that does not mean it belongs in the past.