

On the Poetry of Printing

When someone says, *there's poetry in that work*, or *she's poetry in motion*, they mean there's something beautiful manifesting... not just to the eye, & not just 'classically' beautiful. Putting the poetry into something is making one's moves conscious, shapely or pleasing in a heightened way. Emily Dickinson said it was 'distilling amazing sense from ordinary things'. Lead type and old presses are ordinary things, yet they do distill.

Some people practice letterpress as a trade; some as a hobby. But quite a few have seen its capacity to make a unique kind of art akin to printmaking. It's not a stretch to see the 'art of letterpress' as a bona fide genre, distinguished from the high-end craftsmanship usually called fine printing. Of course we respect the old craft, and honor the diligence & accuracy it requires. But the fact that it is left behind as an industry frees us to use it as an art.

While its graphic power to plant ink into paper inclines one to use the term art, its essence is making words...& the art of words is poetry. What that means aesthetically in the 21st Century is certainly not what it meant to Dickinson in 1855. The beauty & truth formula now stretches to dada and rap, vernacular simplicity or subrealism. But at our best, we're seeking any of those poetries *in the printing*...using the type & ink as if we were players in a jazz club, or a meadow full of crickets.

eric johnson *Nov. 18, 2013*