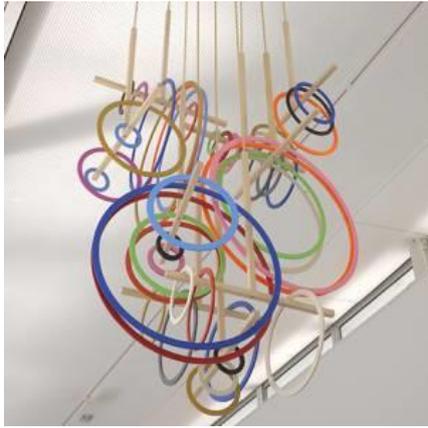


A Means of Exchange 2



Emily Floyd *Nomadic Shepherds* 2013 wood, synthetic polymer paint 200 x 100 x 100cm

In a recent profile on the artist's work published in *Frieze*, Wes Hill noted that Floyd, 'explores the history of pedagogical play in her work, employing it as a frame for investigations into design, typography, protest, public art and the legacy of Modernism'. (In Focus, *Frieze* Issue 155)

Floyd has mined her own history in the process, from her early childhood helping in her family's business of making wooden, brightly coloured toys and kindergarten building blocks, to her initial artistic career in graphic design and her study of modernist, constructivist principles.

As part of her residency at Dundee Contemporary Arts Floyd created '*Nomadic Shepherds*' a sculptural cornucopia of references, some of which are identified here by Heide Museum Curator Sue Cramer:

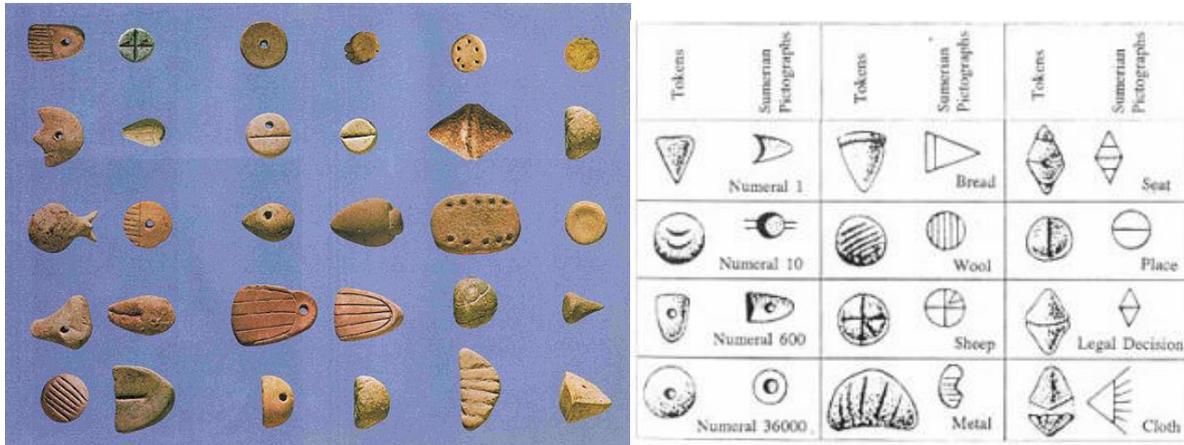
...children's hoops, quoits and the interlocking circles of the Olympic Games logo. They also relate to Steiner's Eurythmy, a physical movement discipline still taught today in Waldorf schools, in which participants wear single colour gowns and through their collective flowing, often circular, movements to music create harmonious relationships. The work's enigmatic title makes reference to collective forms of governance practised by nomadic shepherds in Rajasthan and points to an interpretation of this sculpture as a kind of diagrammatic model of social organisation.

When exhibited in DCA's 'There Will be New Rules Tomorrow' 2013 exhibition, which celebrated the art and influence of Sister Corita Kent, there were additional correspondences to Kent's theories on art education through play, networking and the value of collaborative production. Further influences are taken from Floyd's visit, during her BAS residency, to the reconstructed schoolroom of New Lanark Mill, home of the utopian socialism of visionary industrialist Robert Owen (1771-1858) that accomplished the beginning of infant schooling in Great Britain. With items like a giant globe and abacus for teaching, the room furnished Floyd with new geometries of scale.

The brightly coloured rings of *Nomadic Shepherds* are hung over a framework engraved with web addresses for collectives that echo the aspirations to the Nomadic Shepherd communities of the title.

One significant group of nomadic shepherds existed in ancient Sumeria, and used small clay tokens moulded into geometric solids. These tokens are now widely believed to represent one of the main origins of the phonetic alpha-bet. The most commonly found is an incised disc thought to represent a sheep, and to have been used as a counter or receipt in sheep-trading. A differently incised disc represents wool. Denise Schmandt-Besserat theorized in the 1970s that these signify the first step

made by humans in the mental journey required to see a symbol as a sign, first of another object, and then as a sound, independent of its original meaning. Eventually the symbol can be drawn or marked on a tablet, along with others, to express ever more complex ideas. Writing in its origins is thus a cryptic code and the ancient shapes are echoed in Floyd's sculptures of children's toys and blocks.



From Denise Schmandt-Besserat, *Before Writing, Volume I: From Counting to Cuneiform and Before Writing, Volume II: A Catalog of Near Eastern Tokens*. University of Texas Press 1992

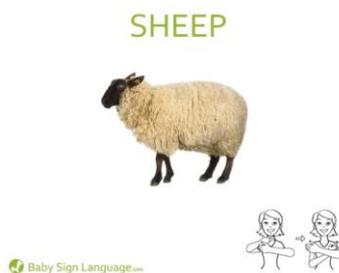
In her graphic work Floyd investigates how sophisticated formal languages are used to communicate political ideologies. The first thing one might note about her prints however, (other than their wonderful, elegant design) is that the text does not appear to communicate at all. They present as puzzles of codes and encryption, beginning with the highly original and geometry-based alphabet Floyd has devised.



In order to read the two simple words here, we are returned to a child-state of having slowly to trace and de-cipher each individual letter before we can put them all together into a word-form.

ABSTRACT
LABOUR

This is the case even if we are told what the words are, as a child with a flashcard. Eventually, as with flashcards, it is the gestalt shape of the words we may recognise intuitively. In effect Floyd's abstracted open-form letters make a concrete piece of text.



The flashcard has a brief to make the word as plain and legible as possible. Floyd, by contrast, pushes the text to the limits of legibility, breaking rules of typography at every turn. Letters are rotated, reversed, compressed and stretched, broken down into simple shapes and differently sized, upper and lower cases are mixed in the same words. What may at first appear random is in fact created by the artist's own set of rules and strict geometry, and it is the high level of systemisation that renders it esoteric. The disorientation felt by the reader is similar to that of being in a foreign country where one is faced with, for example, Cyrillic or Greek characters (assuming one is not already familiar with them) where one cannot even make out familiar place names.

Floyd does in fact cite Cyrillic typographers Bannokova Favorsky, Baryshnikov Gennady and Lyubov Kuznetsova as references for her work, as well as early learning systems from Pestalozzi, Steiner and Montessori, and modern era art movements such as Dada, Constructivism and Bauhaus.

So with the text of Abstract Labour she succeeds in sharing with us both the child's experience of learning to read, and the sense of being a traveller in a foreign land.

In fact children will probably learn Floyd's alphabet faster than adults, as they have yet to acquire a facility with skimming and speed-reading; adults' habituation to text making it difficult to slow down and really look at it. Once we have learned to read, according to Gestalt theory, our patterns of recognition are not easily dislodged or replaced.

The immediate effect of Floyd's puzzling text is to draw the viewer in, and frustrate the impulse to read and move on. This gives physical experience to anthroposophical theories of learning through seduction and interaction. Given that gallery visitors otherwise spend around 3 seconds looking at each exhibit, this prolonged engagement is a good start to developing a dialogue, from where they may carry on to interrogate the context and meaning of the words.

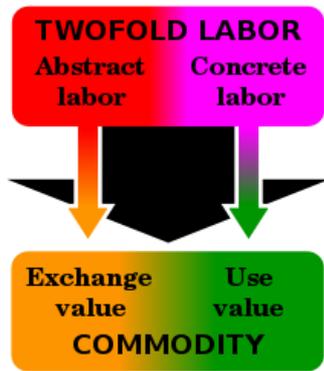


Image by Beao – Public Domain

Abstract labour is a Marxist term identifying the commoditisation of human activity in mass-production. It describes a process that pulls away from the personalised, artisanal and creative, that breaks down the human into the unit of production and renders that unit dispensable and replaceable.

The history of print fonts also moves from its original mimicry of hand-scripts to roman stone-carved texts and on into the abstraction of modernity, progressively using geometrical theories to evolve, but also responding to technological developments in printing processes (Floyd takes this a step farther to create a font that could be an improvised solution to a lack of type blocks, using children’s play blocks to spell out words.) Printing is the progenitor of all mass-production processes, and as it progressively abstracted text from individual handwriting into stereotype, it mirrored and foreshadowed Marx’s concept of the human unit of labour becoming a moveable commodity.



Emily Floyd *Herrnhut Commune*, 2012 Three colour plate lithograph

In previous graphic works, where Floyd has used this alphabet, the text is accompanied by an image, in a unified design where the text forms both title and base for the whole. As in the lithograph *Herrnhut Commune*, the Constructivist aesthetic blends with that of poster art immediacy and polemic. In *Abstract Labour*, the text becomes both the image and the subject – so an image of an abstraction. In a further development *Abstract Labour* is now a major sculptural installation at the

Heide Museum in Melbourne. Here it becomes truly concrete text, and forms and references a children's playground.



For the *Abstract Labour* edition Floyd chose to use screen-print, due to the larger format achievable at DCA, the vivid colours available, and for its frequent use by grassroots activist groups as a cheap and easy printing method. This last being particularly relevant, as the print was part of her homage to Sister Corita Kent's dedication to activism and education and her use of screen-printing as a medium. Kent was renowned for her creative and experimental use of typography as abstract image, and for her vibrant colour combinations. She was at her best when working collaboratively with her students and following her profound political and religious convictions. She pioneered the recognition of screen-printing (then considered exclusively a commercial, industrial process) as a valid medium (serigraphy) for fine art and exploited the motifs and texts of mass-production, a decade before Warhol.



Sister Corita Kent Screen Prints with permission of Corita Foundation.

The history of screen-print itself is one of the industrialisation of a highly skilled art; that of the Chinese papercut used as a stencil, and delicately mounted with human hair. Its appropriation for crude but rapid stencilling on packing cases was what gave it the lowly status that for decades prevented it being considered a suitable medium for an artist. In fact it was that very plebeian and democratic aura that attracted artists like Kent, Warhol, Lichtenstein and latterly Christopher Wool.



Christopher Wool Detail *Untitled* 1991

Where Shrigley's solution to printed text eschewed everything but the most direct and hand-made, Floyd's fonts have a complexity of design, hypergraphically refined to the point of excluding the hand. Despite being at opposite ends of the spectrum, both could trace a direct lineage back through avant-garde art movements to the direct influence of Duchamp - whose original trade and passion was typography and printing, and who first differentiated the work of art from the labour of production.



Duchamp 1925 poster

Floyd's art is abundant in abstract historical references that are deeply personal to her, and in fact become concrete in both her life and art. For almost every utopian theory, manifesto or website that she cites she can trace an influence played out in her own life or community. Major nineteenth- and twentieth-century political, educational and philosophical movements caused, for instance, her Hungarian grandparents to bring traditional eastern bloc and De Stijl toymaking to Australia, and her mother to become a left-wing, feminist activist. She explores how children and women have inspired and developed these movements and been in turn inspired by them. Working through the parallel developments in art-isms, graphics and design theories, like a present day Synthetist*, she blends these diverse and multi-layered influences into a richly coded personal expression.

There is therefore something intriguing about the fact that *Abstract Labour* is not a unique work, but a limited edition. The limited edition (in this case thirty) nods to the principle of mass-production, in that it depends entirely on the use of technology to create the means of reproducing an image multiple times. The promise of the maker is that after the agreed number has been produced the 'mould will be broken' and no more produced. This print however is not machine-made but a hand-crafted multiple, dependant on the craft skills of the printer to make each copy a work of art, and there are often slight variations between copies, which are actually valued by collectors.

In addition a limited edition is usually commissioned and therefore intrinsically a collaboration between publisher, artist and maker (printer). It is produced by a socially cooperative venture. The labour of the artist is 'concrete', particular and unique and brings the 'use-value' to the production in the form of the concept and design. The 'abstract' labour of the printer brings the edition into being, and plays a part in establishing the exchange value of the edition. The publisher brings the capital. A means of exchange between the parties is represented by the final product, which is itself divided between the parties in an agreed proportion to their investment of creativity, labour, or capital. Other exchanges are involved in that the printer must be paid, the artist receive a fee, and the publisher bear the risk, or earn the profit.

These rules underlay even the most anarchic editioning co-ops, where the roles may be interchangeable, and the only profit the dissemination of a message. However, many questions can and do arise among printers who are also artists, for example: Should the printer, who often has a major creative input, not also sign the edition? (This was the practice up to the early twentieth century when the majority of editions were made by engravers whose skill was seen as approaching that of the artist.) Where do abstract labour and concrete labour divide in creation of an artwork, where the input of artist and maker are both integral?

The resulting work is not in the pre-Duchampian tradition of a demonstration of the artist's dexterity of execution or their facility with nostalgia in 'capturing a moment' figuratively. The process itself is one of abstraction, and the physical dexterity is embodied in the printer. The artist need not have any 'mastery' of printing at all, which is not to say that they are unskilled. The signature of the artist is not required to guarantee the hand of the artist as in painting, but to 'authorise' the work. The signature of the printer is superfluous for this purpose.

Floyd is typical of many contemporary artists in that although she has skills, much of her work is by necessity fabricated by specialists. Her strengths lie in imagining, designing, planning, communicating, commissioning and project-managing successfully. She has established networks of fabricators, printers and artisans with whom she collaborates and whom she also employs. This relationship between artist and 'not-making' was established early on in the history of editions and multiples. However in printing, the tradition draws largely on the commercial practice of reproduction, say by a printer making a copy of an artist's painting. This can cause confusion as an artist's original print should by definition be a work uniquely conceived by an artist for print media – not a copy of a work in another media.

The subject of Abstract Labour and the many encoded references within it are therefore a very real part of Floyd's practice as an artist and the issues are far from academic. In this the work embodies another feminist mantra of the 1980s, 'The Personal is Political'. In the very creation and design of her work she encodes and decodes whole languages, whilst managing to keep meaning open-ended and engaging – the reader's labour 'writes' the text.

* from the French *synthétiser* (to synthesize or to combine so as to form a new, complex product). Paul Gauguin, Émile Bernard, Louis Anquetin, and others pioneered the style during the late 1880s and early 1890s.

Synthetist artists aimed to *synthesize* three features:

- The outward appearance of natural forms.
- The artist's feelings about their subject.
- The purity of the aesthetic considerations of line, colour and form.

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia