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IN SEARCH OF WHOLENESS: A CONVERSATION ABOUT TRANSCENDING LANGUAGE(S) AND ART FORMS

Natasha Lvovich
Kingsborough Community College, CUNY

Olga Mezhibovskaya
School of Visual Art, NYC

Introduction: NATASHA LVOVICH

When creative multilinguals, like my fellow émigrée from Moscow, the interdisciplinary artist Olga Mezhibovskaya, switch languages to speak, write, and live, they may feel a similar way about switching art forms and genres. Yet the relationship between multilingualism and creativity may not be one of cause and effect but of a more complex and interactive nature—and this is what we set out to explore in the following conversation. When the theme for this Special Issue emerged, Olga Mezhibovskaya's name immediately came to mind: bilingual in Russian and English, trained as a musicologist and a choral conductor (in Russia), who later became a successful book designer and design educator in the US, she is now teaching at the School of Visual Arts in New York. In her classes on typography, students (many of whom are non-native speakers of English) work on creative interdisciplinary projects, such as Visual Music, Language and Fashion, or Calligraphy and Dance, featuring performances as cathartic codas. I attended many of them: it is the theater of true polyphony.

LVOVICH: What is the role of English in your creative life and career? How did you learn English? You told me that English had opened a new world for you: new perceptions and perspectives and a new 'translation' which illuminated your creativity. Is going between Russian and English

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in your bilingual life similar to 'translating' from music into art? This is just an analogy, but one that may take us to the main theme of this interview—and of this Special Issue.

MEZHIBOVSKAYA: English has played several roles in my life: one of immigrant necessity and one of professional significance, when I became a book designer and design instructor tasked with translating written words into visual language.

My relationship with the English language actually began when I was a child in Moscow, Russia. Even though the idea of immigration was non-existent at the time, my father predicted the importance of learning English as a tool for a successful future. My parents required my older sister Galya and me to attend one of the elite schools that emphasized learning English much earlier and more intensely than regular schools. Despite my parents' insistence on the practicality of learning English, I was dreaming about music, a different language altogether. The importance of studying English was drastically diminished for me to the size of a thick Russian-English dictionary propping me up on a piano stool to better reach the keys.

A big-time leap forward and many career transitions later, I am now a book designer and Instructor of Typography at the School of Visual Arts in New York City. As a designer, I have to capture the essence of a book and express it graphically.

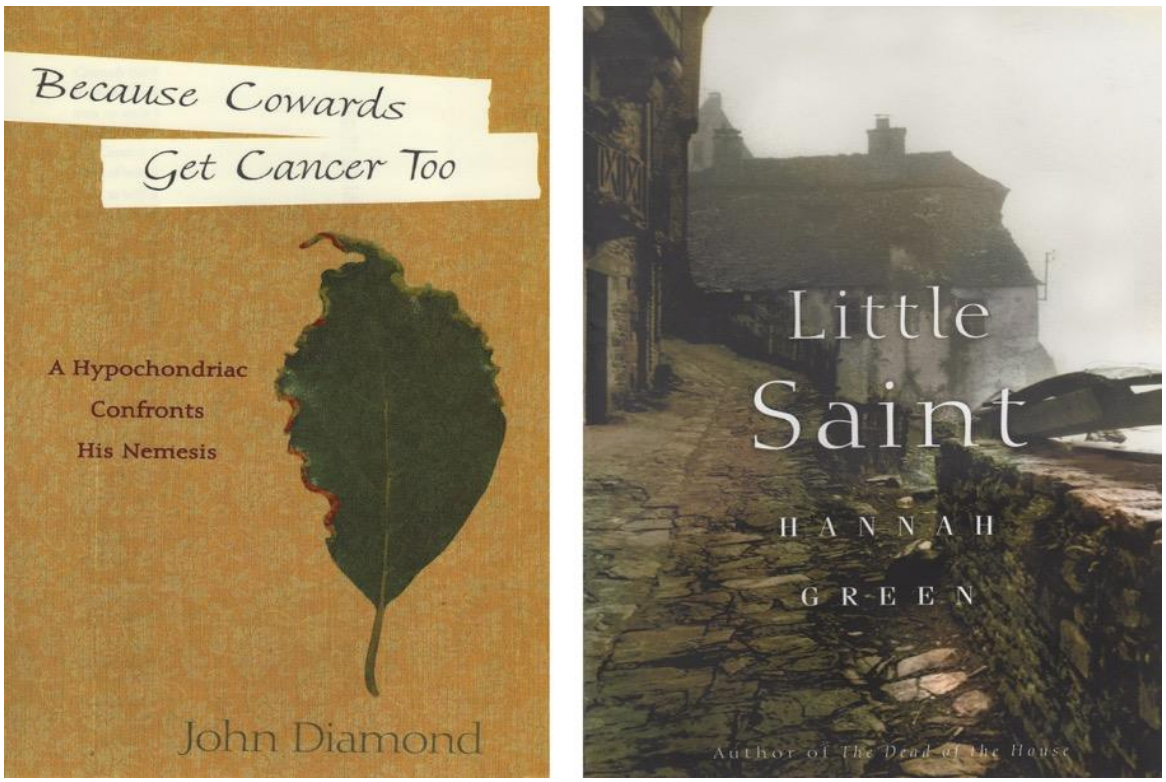

Figure 1: Covers of *Because Cowards Get Cancer Too* by John Diamond (Times Books, 1999) and *Little Saint* by Hannah Green (Random House, 2000). See more at olgamezhibovskaya.com.

As an instructor, I teach my students—many of whom, like me, are second language speakers of English—how to make the English language shine on the page, from the individual letters to sentences, to magazine columns, to poetry books, to playscripts, to posters, and more. English is literally the substance and the matter that I've been working with every single day for over twenty-seven years. As a result, English is no longer a "foreign" language that requires constant translation from the "native" language—now English and Russian function as two parallel worlds and I often unconsciously transition from one to another without recognizing the switch.

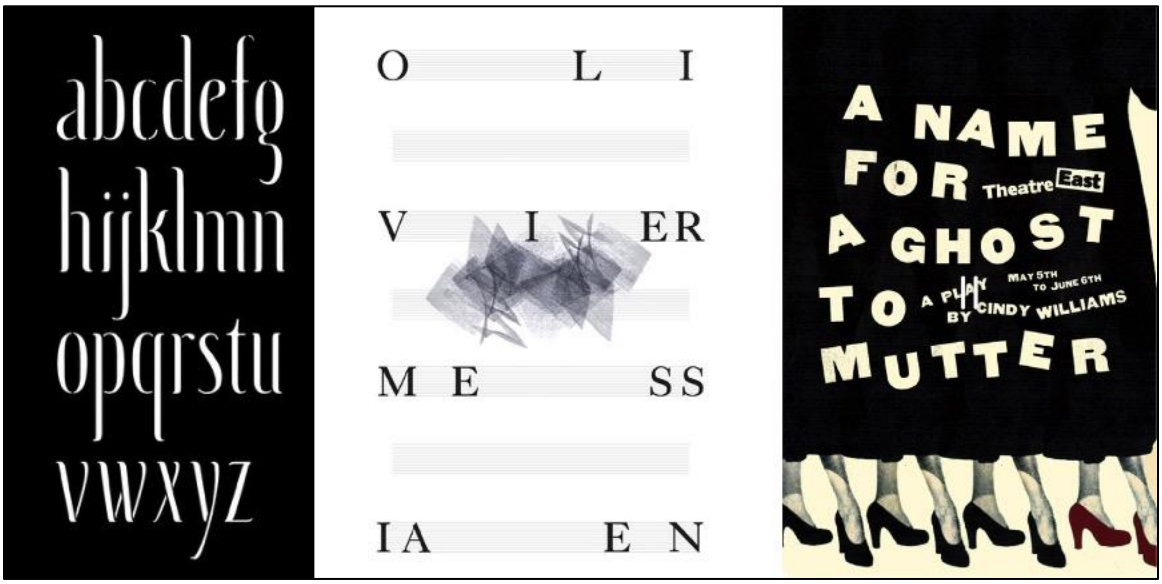

Figure 2a. (Left): Student Typeface design by Renee Tranter (SVA, 2015). **2b** (Center): Book cover by Changyong Yang (SVA, 2015). **2c** (Right): Theater Poster Design for Theater East performance by Minase Yamada (SVA, 2016).

It is this constant navigation between languages that laid the foundation for my interdisciplinary teaching style. Now I teach my students to 'translate' the worlds of music, dance, fashion, literature, and theatre through the lens of typography. Yes, you can say there is a great similarity between my Russian / English bilingualism and Music / Art interdiscplinarity—in both cases, I find myself interested in the crossing-over, overlapping, or fusing of each pair, and this experience is larger than simply the sum of two. After having left Russia with a degree in Musicology and Music Theory, and after establishing myself in the world of graphic design in New York, I have finally found a way to reintroduce and expand my knowledge of both music and typography by intertwining the two fields and building onto each of them through other fields of expression.

To go further back—or forward—I want to talk about the importance of my relationship to the Russian language in my life that I recognize now, after almost three decades of immigration, as a huge distance from the roots, home, childhood, and as a nostalgia for a lost connection. As a native language, it was everywhere, like the air we breathe—vital but hardly noticeable.

In one of the chapters of my MFA Thesis, entitled "A Stranger from Within," I wrote: "My estrangement from some deep personal layer of experience only led me to want to connect with myself later in life." And to my great surprise, not the Russian, but the English language played the role of a safe sacred space for me to preserve that distance, and it allowed me to be more honest, open, and more objective. Yes, it compensated for the loss. Here, I am an outsider and I have to make extra effort to concentrate on expressing myself clearly. The need to assimilate, to be accepted and understood, brought discipline of thought and deep interest in linguistic expression and in vocabulary growth.

I think that the process of translating from Russian (personal) to English (required and then personally needed) is similar to the translation process, equally important, from musical experience, as a musicologist / performer / music educator to visual experience, as an artist / designer / design educator. These are two very different languages, but there was a strong need to grow to the same level of professionalism in a new field, and the more I was immersed into the visual / design world, the louder my musical world demanded to be included.

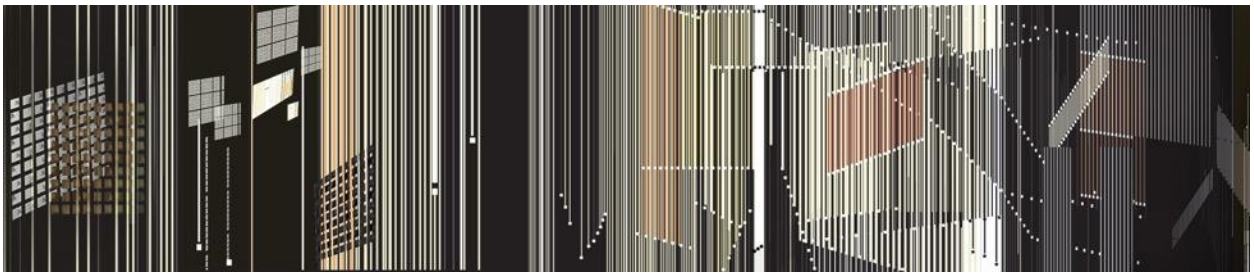

Figure 3: *Sonata*. Print, 6"x 30" (2003).

LVOVICH: Your MFA Thesis at Goddard College (2003), a 200-page opus, written combining traditional academic discourse with personal narrative (in excellent English!), is entitled *Unfolding Wholeness: The Flow of Art Forms, Musical Cycles, and Life Patterns*. It is perhaps what can be called a prophetic vision of your career path, creative interests, and personal philosophy. So let's define *wholeness* in creative work first, which, as far as I know, was the topic of your studies in music theory back in Russia and continued to unfold during your studies at Goddard. It is still unfolding, isn't it? As part of your theorizing, you mention two major concepts: *interdisciplinarity*, meaning not only fusion of fields but of art forms, and *translation*, the metaphor for a relationship between *parts* within a *whole.*

MEZHIBOVSKAYA: Let me start by saying that the answers to these questions are quite complex. *Wholeness* was the theme of my Musicology thesis in Russia and of my Interdisciplinary Studies thesis at Goddard. This concept is constantly changing and evolving for me, but a few

things remain the same: I am seeking interconnectedness and belonging. I am *the whole* made up of millions of influences—personal, cultural, societal, and spiritual—but I am also part of the world and I influence other people, things, and movements around me. *Wholeness* is an ever-flowing conversation between me and my surroundings, a system of concentric orbits holding contextual details that help me understand it, both as a *whole* made of many *parts* and as a *part* within a larger *whole*.

Applied to musicology, *wholeness* was a lens through which I could view a musical piece. My thesis was born out of my dissatisfaction with narrow musicological methods of analysis of the meaning and structure of a musical piece, which were limited by the parameters of music history / theory. For example, when I analyzed a piece of music, I felt it was important not only to study its technical details within the realm of music, but to look at it in relation to other fields, such as philosophy, linguistics, psychology of perception, and systems theory. I zoomed in on the composer, where and when he lived, and on how his composition responded to his culture and society, how people responded to his music, and how the whole language of music is sublimated through this one piece. Only then did the musical piece begin to fit into my story of the world.

After leaving Russia, I put my theories of *wholeness* on a shelf in the back of my mind. It wasn't until years later, when I attended Goddard, that I was able to revisit those theories. I was once again seeking to be *part* of the *whole* where music was a point of departure. Therefore my MFA Thesis at Goddard was the exploration of "The concept of *wholeness* as the dialectics of *parts* and *whole* in a wide range of aspects, such as the interconnectedness of the processes of creation, perception, and organization, and it was instrumental to express my holistic interdisciplinary approach to art / music / life relationships. Applied to my personal and artistic transformation, it allowed me to synthesize my thoughts about the notion of translation in the larger sense of the word, in search of harmonious connection between times, cultures, and languages through the metaphor of the evolution of musical forms (Monody, Rondo, Old Sonata, Open Form). Reinterpreting my personal history and embarking upon the personal quest for spiritual and religious identity brought me to a deeper understanding of communal history. Focusing my research on the complex and ambiguous issues of integrating into the American / Jewish culture and of nostalgia for the Russian culture led me to the awakening of my social awareness." Therefore one of my projects, the artist's book *Restoration of Mother's Tongue and Father's Spirit*, was included in it.

Figure 4: Installation *Home* and book restoration.

LVOVICH: What *wholeness* are you looking for today?

MEZHIBOVSKAYA: I am aspiring for synthesis and for the idea of *wholeness* to expand and to be enriched by thinkers from different disciplines, e.g. the physicist David Bohm (1994, 2002), the literary scholar and semiotician Yuri Lotman (2001), the artist and educator M.C. Richards (1980), the neuroscientist and fiction writer David Eagleman (2017), the philosopher Ken Wilber (2001), and the cosmologist Sean Carroll (2010).

I am looking to enhance my artistic and pedagogical endeavors through collaboration. The theme of interconnectedness and the interconnectedness between people are both woven into my work as an instructor. I bring professionals from other fields into my classroom and ask my students to build a bridge between fields through typography—i.e., I ask all of them together to create an *interdisciplinary* platform.

LVOVICH: Could you please elaborate on this "bridge building"—the interdisciplinarity which is part of your thinking, feeling, and creative and pedagogical work?

MEZHIBOVSKAYA: When I was a musician, I always used visual analogies to capture the essence of music and when I was a music teacher, I acted as an artist / musician / author and designed performances and stage sets, played piano, choreographed dance, and taught voice in connection with movement. At Goddard, I structured my MFA thesis in sections which traced the evolution of music forms, from Monody (chant), to Dialogue (polyphony), to Sonata, to Open Form (entropy):

> Music and art are intertwined in me as the red and blue lines are on a medical illustration of the human circulatory system. You can't separate them and you can't blend them together either. They live simultaneously in my mind challenging me with the ambivalence of their relationships and encouraging me to constantly look for a common language. That interdisciplinarity is embedded in my body and mind. I used the idea of evolution of music forms as a metaphor for my own evolution as a person, musician, artist, thinker, and a teacher.

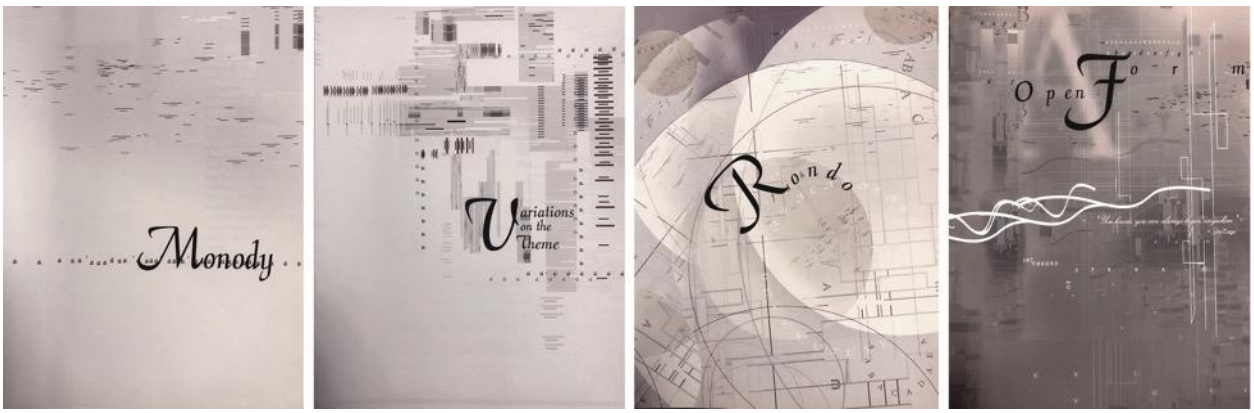

Figure 5: Thesis Chapter openers.

Many years after my studies at Goddard, I was reading the multilingual writer Milan Kundera's *The Art of the Novel* (2003) and I couldn't quite understand what made his writing form so intriguing for me until I came to a chapter where he talks about *polyphony* and why he writes in a seven-part-form. I discovered that he was a musician! Kundera writes,

> My point is that the seven-part structure doesn't represent some superstitious flirtation with magical numbers, or any rational calculation, but a deep unconscious, incomprehensible drive, an archetype of form that I cannot escape. (86)

> Let me return to the comparison between the novel and music. A part is a movement. The chapters are measures. These measures may be short or long or quite variable in length. Which brings us to the issue of tempo. Each part in my novels could carry a musical indication: *moderato, presto, adagio*, and so on. (88)

LVOVICH: We have talked in the past about synesthesia, a spontaneous neuropsychological blend of senses, (in my case) grapheme / phoneme/digit color and image synesthesia--what Nabokov called "audition colorée." Besides this most common type of synesthesia, there are quite a few idiosyncratic blends, like 'seeing music' or 'smelling shapes.' I described my synesthesia in my autobiographical book *The Multilingual Self* and more recently in an article "The Gift: Synesthesia in Translingual Texts."

The conversation about this cross-modal perception seems appropriate in your case. Do you have synesthesia as well and, if yes, what type? Could you talk about synesthesia as a metaphor and a 'method of translation' (which, as far as I know, you use in your teaching)?

MEZHIBOVSKAYA: Yes, as a child, I felt pain in colors. I don't feel it physically anymore, but the idea of synesthesia has continued to fascinate me since then. I definitely see music and hear art and I don't know where one ends and another begins—both synesthetic experiences overlap and become a rich source of inspiration for me as an artist and as an educator.

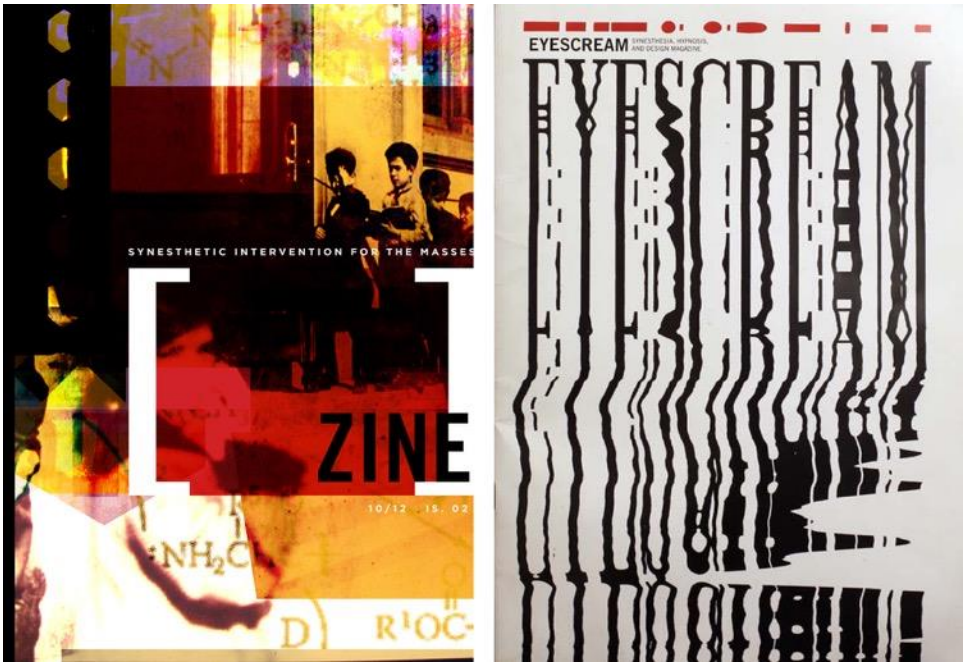

Figure 6: Student Work: *Synesthesia* Zine covers. Christopher Wright (SVA, 2014, left). Sirah Yoo (SVA, 2014, right). Exhibited in Listening in Print.

In addition to being a designer and an educator, I recently immersed myself in the world of ceramics. In 2016 I was able to bridge the typographic work of my students with my personal work in ceramics in an exhibition titled *ReVERBerations* at Mansfield University. My ceramic pieces were created in an attempt to physicalize my sense of music through the abstract plasticity of clay and to demonstrate the transitional quality of the creative process through liquid and solidified forms and audible properties of ceramic vessels. Acoustically, reverberation is possible only when sound bounces off various surfaces, such as inner chambers of instruments or rooms. *Interdisciplinarity* creates the space where disciplines join as one, forgetting the time when they were compartmentalized and torn apart. From particles, pigments, pixels, and sound overtones to the most profound meta-structures and concepts, the show expresses how each discipline's specific philosophy, terminology, tools, and skills echo with

another discipline's vocabulary and functions, which eventually points to the interconnectedness of the world.

Figure 7: *ReVERBerations* installation (Mansfield University, 2016)

I am doing ceramics because it is a connection between different parts of my life and especially with the memory of my father, who was a chief engineer of a ceramics factory in Moscow. I feel the strongest connection with the kiln. It is a place where everything is literally and physically melting together, when all forms and all glazes find themselves transformed at high temperature. When those pieces are cooled down, they carry subtle memory traces of the transformation. The kiln is a wonderful metaphor of interconnectedness, interdependence, and communal transformation.

Synesthesia, the cross-sensory neurological ability, is a metaphor that allows me and my students to freely "travel" from one field to another, from one discipline to another and penetrate foreign territories without "asking for permission." Synesthesia as a metaphor has been a very important tool for me in teaching *interdisciplinarity*. Here (below) is the interdisciplinarity logo that we ask students to create in our Interdisciplinary Design class that I co-teach with cinematographer Nada Ray. They are asked to express the meaning of *interdisciplinarity* in a concentrated, clear and memorable visual form of a logo.

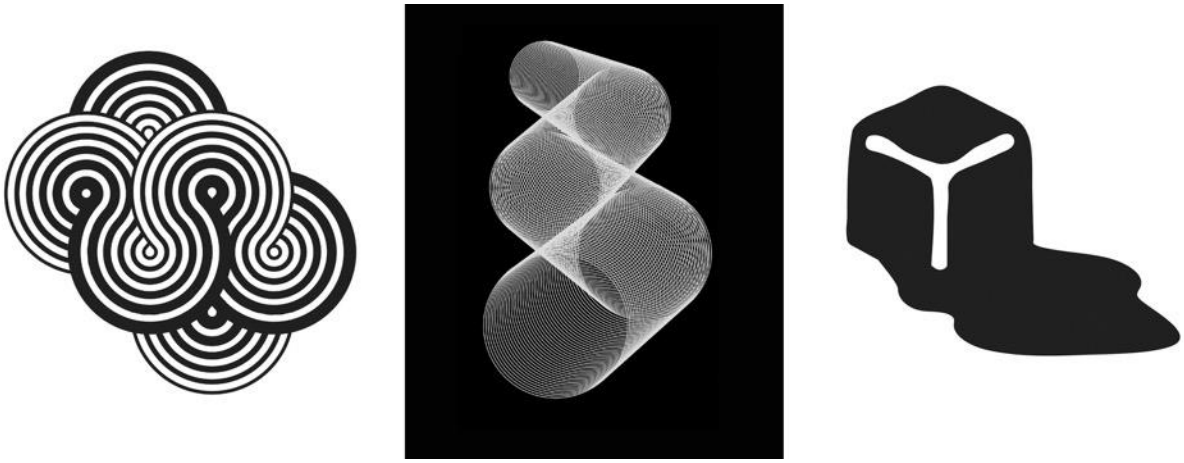

Figure 8a (Left): *Nubia* by Jay Giraldo (SVA, 2016). **8b** (Center): Tim Trautmann (SVA, 2016). **8c** (Right): Koki Kobori (2016). See here.

LVOVICH: In my article on synesthesia I used your fascinating teaching experiment at SVA as an example of multimodal education: the synesthetic performance entitled *Found in Translation: A Typo-Philharmonic Conference.* Please tell us about that experiment.

MEZHIBOVSKAYA: *Found in Translation* was an interdisciplinary collaboration between the Graphic Design and Advertising students of the School of Visual Arts and the Graduate students of the New Music Ensemble of New York University. For several years, my typography class students have participated in an experimental assignment called "Visual Music," in which pieces of music were visually re-interpreted into typographic compositions. A selection of these typographic works was used as a music notation on the screen and performed by the New Music Ensemble of NYU under the artistic direction of Dr. Esther Lamneck. At SVA, this creative endeavor was supported, like many others, by the head of the Design and Advertising department Richard Wilde. The overlapping and dialogic fusion between typographic scores and music, created as an interpretation of the typographic scores, was an unforgettable discovery and proof of the power of 'multilingualism,' where each language found its own way to break its own boundaries during the performance, and where the specific roles of "composer," "author," "performer" became interchangeable. Each of these previously distinct roles merged, guided by the interdisciplinary role of the "interpreter."

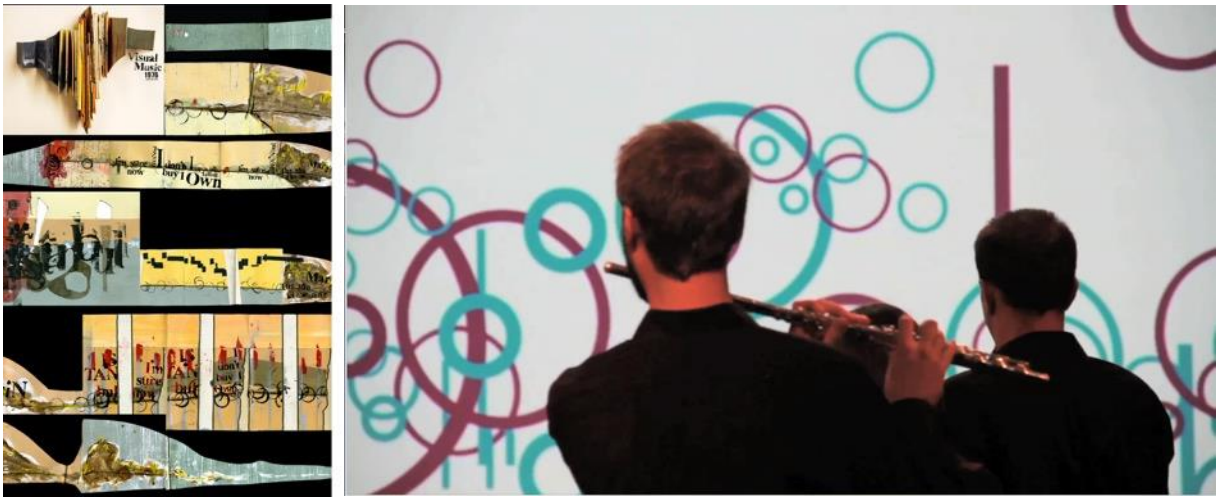

Figure 9: *Visual Music* by Jared Williams (SVA, 2012, left). *Found in Translation* conference. Students from NYU New Music Ensemble interpret a Visual Music project from SVA (2012, right).

LVOVICH: From the perspective of structuralism, the typographic view of language seems to represent "the second-order semiological chain," but Roland Barthes' theory (1972) notwithstanding, what is your definition of typography?

MEZHIBOVSKAYA: Typography can be seen as 'a notation of thought': It has all the attributes of musical notation, which was developed to depict the musical representation of fleeting moments of time. The color of type (light, gray, black) for instance, can be compared to volume (pianissimo, piano, forte, fortissimo) while units of space, the letter, the word and the sentence, parallel units of time with the note, the phrase, and the melody. Typographic notation contains the genes of the oral tradition. If we shift our attention from the written to the oral, we will experience liberation from the purely visual aspect of typography.

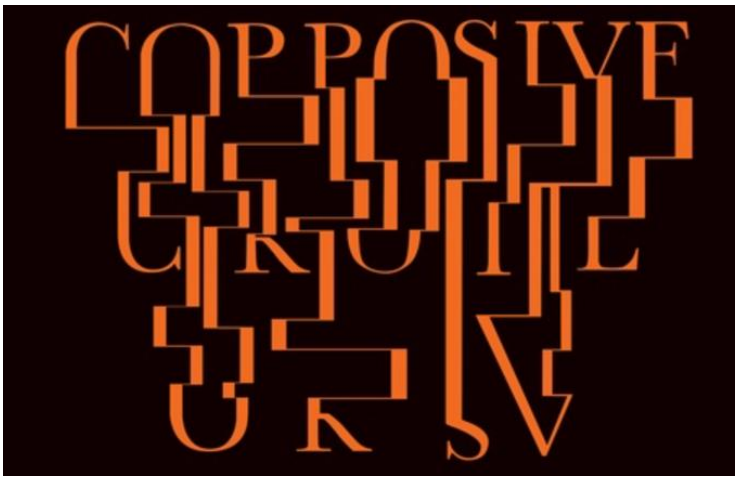

Figure 10: *Corrosive*, student typographic exercise by Ching Wu (SVA, 2015)

In my professional world they say that the more typography classes one takes, the better a designer one becomes: from the ancient methods of written communication, the art of penmanship, calligraphy, stone chiseling, casting and setting type, to the digital multiverse of endless possibilities of communication. Typography really surrounds us, on all possible or impossible surfaces: paper, metal, water, air, wood, glass, fabric, food, latex, skin.

I work with type as if it were clay (from the small particles of letters, words, sentences to complex structures), stressing the importance of grammar, legibility, hyphenation, terminology, history, the form of letters, typesetting, grid, and overall precision to make the reading experience the most effective—simply, technical professionalism and craftsmanship. At the same time, one can develop a typographic freedom of expression by weaving the language of typography with other human languages, such as theatre, music, science, philosophy, psychology of perception, theory of systems, etc.

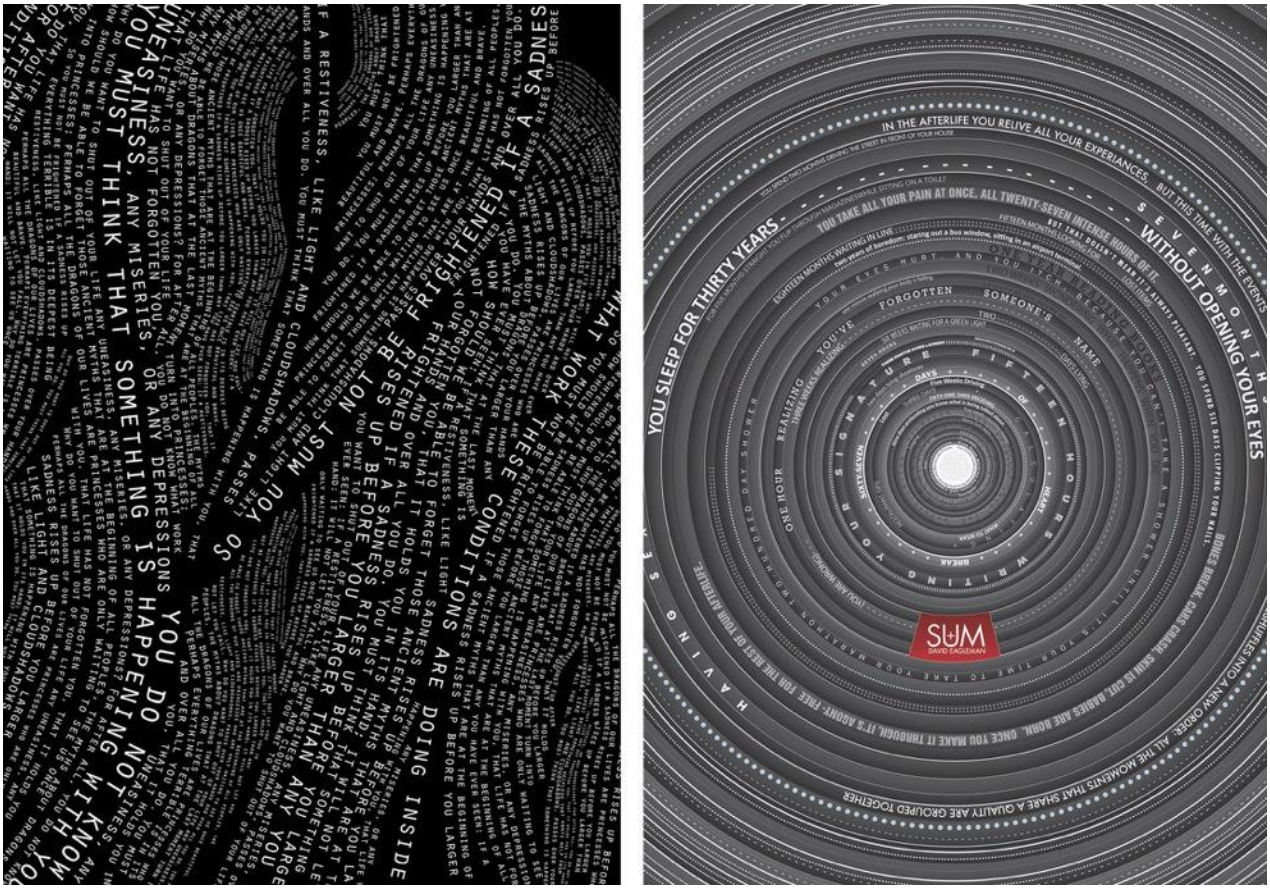

Figure 11: Student Typographic Weaving by Alyssa Colina (SVA, 2015, left). Infographic Poster by Anne Di Lillo (SVA, 2012, right).

LVOVICH: The following is a quotation from your blog about your 'visual music' project called "Listening to Print":

> If we shift our attention from the written to the oral and begin to see typography as notation, we will experience a liberation from the purely visual aspect of typography, limited by the size of the printed page, the computer screen or the movie screen, and return to the un-separated media, back to the beginning of thought, before the word was formed, before language recognized itself as a language, before the printing press, before calligraphy, before pictograms, hieroglyphs, cuneiforms, back to acoustics, raw perceptions, to the blurry vibration of thought and emotion, back to the gesture, back to sound, and to the time-based aspect of typography. Back to the chant. Where "the word" and "the gesture" and "the sound" were all one holistic unit of human communication and expression, not yet divorced into distinct disciplines.

Amazingly, your profound statement on the origins of art and language as 'fused' 'unseparated' media corresponds to one of the hypotheses about the origins of synesthesia as having to do with child development: infants are born with fused unseparated senses, the so called 'sensory soup,' which later in their development gets separated into five distinct senses, with the unnecessary combinations pruned in most but not all—hence synesthesia.

MEZHIBOVSKAYA: That "sensory soup" comes to me in the most creative moments, with a thought which lived before on some other level, at a different time, and in distant spaces of my universe. It is an incredible optimal experience of flow. It is like a gulp of wine sharpening the sensitivity of other flavors, memories, reverberations all at once, as if somebody "sanded" my tongue, and I could taste the *whole* thing through its *parts*. This description of the creative flow is very similar to the experiences of a synesthetic flow that has been shared with me by my colleagues and students. It can be also called the syncretic aspect of *wholeness*, when the observer and the observed are one monolithic *whole.*

I have found similar ideas in the writing of Robert Bringhurst. As a renowned interdisciplinary writer, poet, typographer, and linguist, Bringhurst is able to synesthetically connect form and meaning when speaking about human language. Below are two of my favorite quotes of his:

> Language listens to the world. I listen with it. What I hear when I listen is a question, which is listening itself. The question often changes from silence to breathing to speaking to music to voices to visions to silence again. But that is my vocation. (2009: 63)

> Languages are things I feel perpetually slipping through my fingers and melting in my ears like snowflakes on the tongue. But this is how it is with languages and trout streams. They go their way, like air flowing in and back out of our lungs, sounds bouncing off our eardrums, light careening past our eyes. They go their way like meaning: the meaning they are part of, the meaning that is part of what they are. Writing isn't, for me, a way of arresting the flow but of jumping in and swimming with the current, going for a ride. (2009: 10)

In addition to Bringhurst, two visual artists from whom I draw inspiration are Leon Ferrari (Argentine) and Mira Schendel (Brazilian), featured in the exhibit *Tangled Alphabets* shown at MoMA in New York City in 2009.

LVOVICH: I would add to your examples Marc Chagall's visual literalizations of Yiddish idioms and combining of visual imagery and writing in his three alphabets resulting in translingual text art. Being multilingual—borderless, hybrid, and 'horizontal'—seemed to enrich his cultural identity and creative expression with diverse hybrid forms: besides text art and literalizations, see his hybrid animals and other creatures, as well as new genres—ceramics, windows, murals—as well as verbal art forms (poetry in Yiddish and Russian). Roman Jakobson called it 'intersemiotic translation' (Jakobson 1959)—the transposition or transmutation of semiotic codes (different art forms).

Most of your creative projects include mixed art forms and genres (e.g. *Found in Translation*, *The Language of Fashion*, and the collaboration with Martha Graham Dance School). Their additional value, besides the aesthetic one, is educational and social. These projects represent what your students have worked for and accomplished and what all of you, teachers, students, and public, have learned and experienced in the process. Please tell us briefly about your most prominent creative / educational projects exemplifying 'intersemiotic translation.'

MEZHIBOVSKAYA: Can we really translate? Can I understand and be truly understood in a different language? I don't think so. But I think that from that very impossibility of translation the idea of *interdisciplinarity* was born. It is a question of transcending the essence beyond the limitations of form associated with two separate languages. I found myself at the crossroad, having to choose one against the other, forgetting (maybe even betraying) the first language and totally assimilating the new one and identifying with it. Instead of choosing, I embraced the image of the crossroad and gradually observed myself finding a dialogue between two semantics and syntaxes, in their peaceful coexistence. I gave myself permission not to choose, but to be both—and that is the way I function now. I am both—a bilingual / multilingual and interlingual creature, sort of a mutant, who is more interested in pre-lingual and post-lingual forms of human expression and who has embraced a broader perspective: traveling from the thought of music to the thought of design.

LVOVICH: Dear Olga, thank you for your insights on the subject of Multilingualism, Creativity, and the Arts.

MEZHIBOVSKAYA: I am honored to be just a small part of this interdisciplinary conversation.

Projects by Olga Mezhibovskaya:

THE LANGUAGE OF FASHION: The "fabric of language" or the "fabric of typography" understood quite literally, led to collaboration between my SVA students and *Spirit and Flesh* Magazine. None of us expected that our project would turn into a fashion gala, public installation, or be exhibited during the Fashion Week. This project, like many experimental assignments in my typography classes, continues to grow and foster more interactions between media and makers: typographers, editorial designers, fashion designers, fabric printers, fabric store owners, photographers, fashion gala managers, etc.

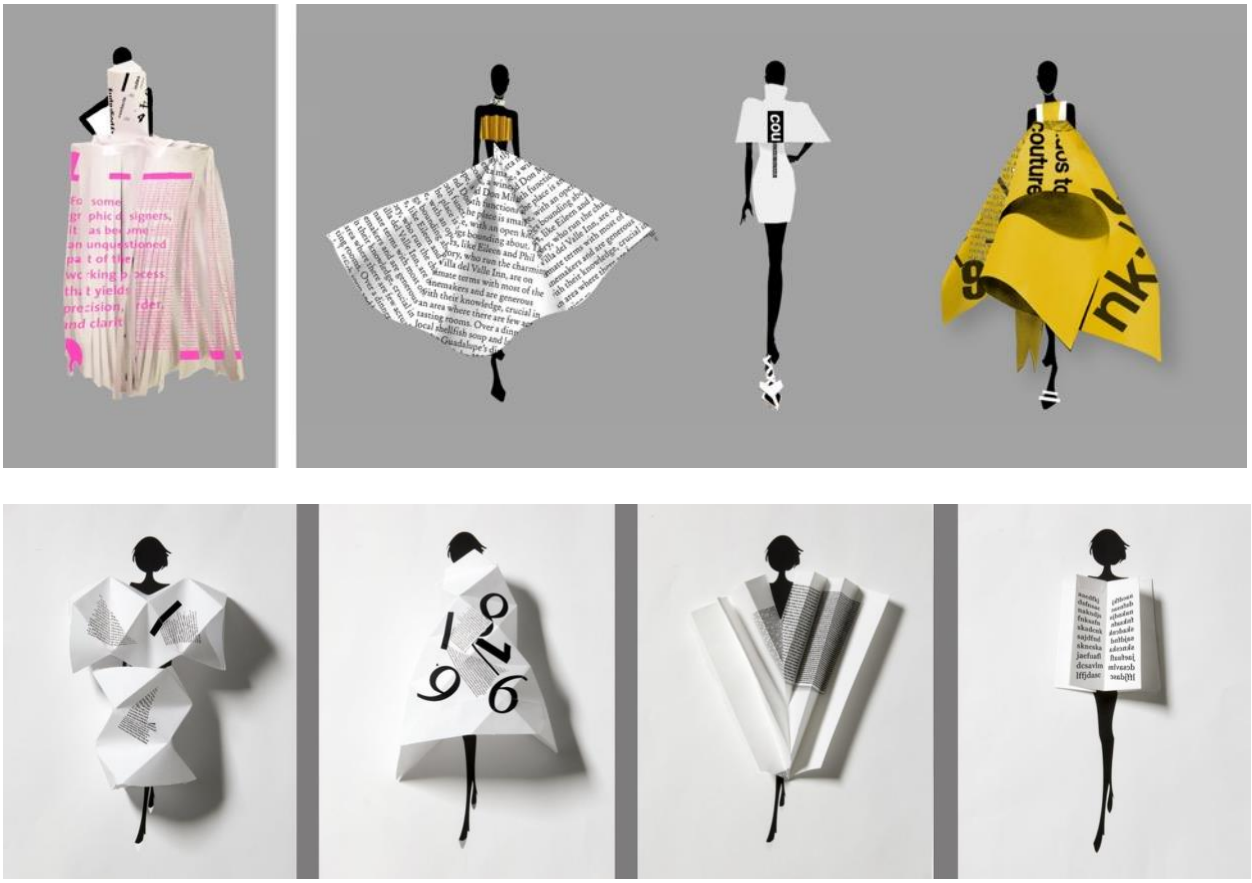

Figure 12: Language of Fashion. Student typographic dresses, by Jancy Buckles (SVA, 2015, top left). Youri Hwang (SVA, 2015, top right three dresses). Chushen Patrick Chen (SVA, 2015, bottom row).

CALLIGRAPHY, MUSIC, AND MOVEMENT: This typography project was truly multifaceted from the very beginning, when I asked my SVA students to express their own sense of music by calligraphic tools like charcoal, ink, pen / brush in a free gestural drawing. Then it was expanded to collaboration with Martha Graham Dance School, when its dance teacher Tadej Brdnik gave a dance class to my SVA students and I gave a calligraphy class to Martha Graham's students. This

exchange turned into a dialogue between two group members, and it finally ended with a performance where both art forms intermingled in an interdisciplinary experience.

Figure 13: Calligraphic studies (SVA, 2016, left). Dance Interpretation by Martha Graham Dance School (2016, right).

LISTENING TO PRINT: This was an unusual show at SVA, as visitors experienced a simultaneity of the visual and audio presentation. The walls of SVA galleries were covered with my students' experimental typographical projects inspired by music, sound, and noise. Others became an inspiration for musicians to interpret them musically. Forty headphone sets, through which those musical interpretations could be heard, were attached to the walls to create immediate interdisciplinary interpretations.

Figure 14: Poster for the exhibition *Listening to Print* (SVA, 2015, left). Photograph from the exhibition (2015, right).

TYPOGRAPHIC TEXTURE: Inspired by photographs of textures in nature and urban life, students created textural improvisations within a page of text. Readability, one of the main functions of typography, yielded to welcome type's many other communicative abilities, namely the

transference of sound, noise, silence, ambiance, and reverberation, which produced these TEXTiles. By straying from the traditional structure of text as a delivery system for information, the students moved toward the rhythmic TEXTual fabric of light and dark. An incredible variety of new typographical textures were created and inspired a variety of musicians to "read," "hear," and "see" them as musical notations.

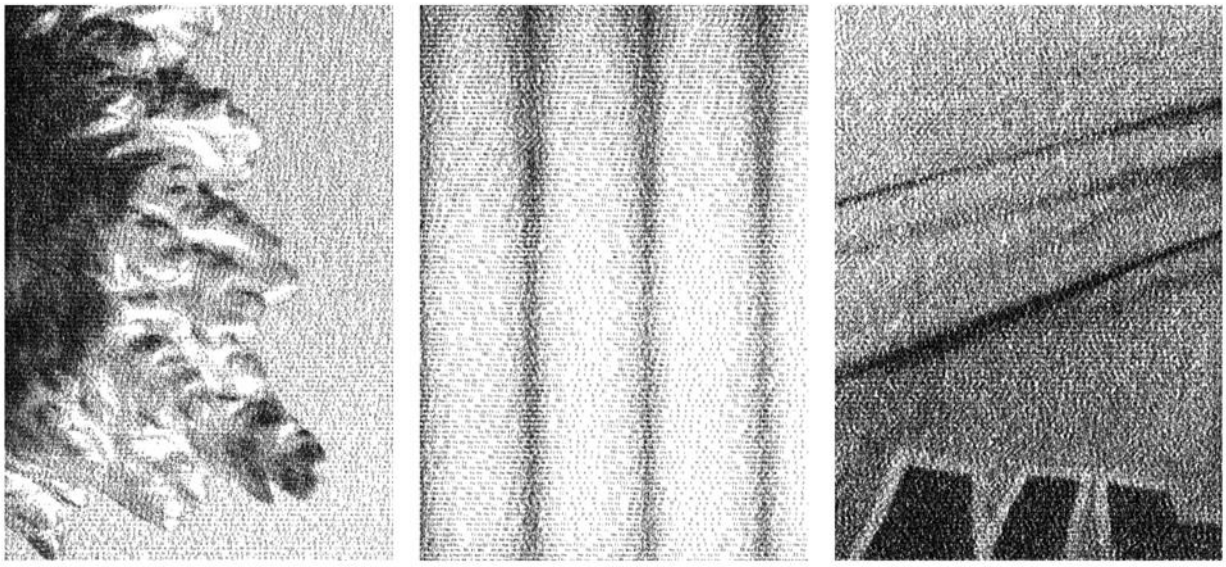

Figure 14: Student Typographic TEXTure by Leah Lehar-Drogin (SVA, 2017).

SEEING SOUND IN SHAKESPEARE'S SONNETS: The idea of type as notation implies, if not demands, performance. Poetry is an intensely physical art, one that activates several senses at once. ambic pentameter in a sonnet—previously hidden from the eye—is revealed through the abstract markers "U", "—", and "/". Similar to musical notation, they highlight sonic structures within the sonnet. By expressing the way actors read Shakespeare and the nature of the English language, these typographical devices, along with the play of two different typefaces, help us see the stressed and unstressed syllables of a written sonnet and hear the rhythm of it.

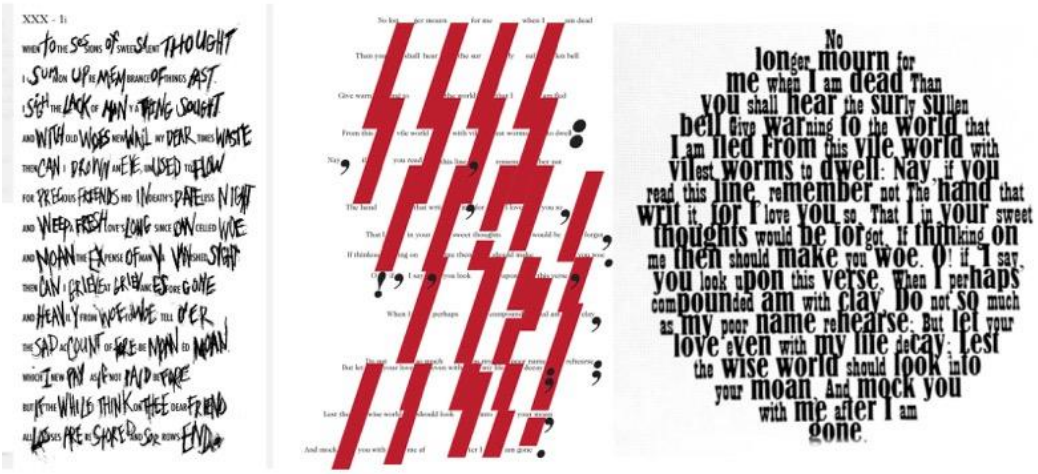

Figure 15: Student work: *Shakespearean Sonnet* by Daisy Millard, by Deanna Sperrassa, and by Chen-Wei Hwang (SVA, 2015).

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