

INTRODUCTION

Nice to meet you!
I'm Emma, and this
is not quite my full
portfolio...

but rather a comprehensive walkthrough of select works from it. You'll likely notice that most of the designs in my portfolio fall into two categories: square event promotions or editorial illustrations. This is because I only started "designing" a little over a year ago.

My first (and so far only) formal position in this field is currently as the lead designer at the Asian American Writer's Workshop. (I had previously done a brief work-study stint at a small, underfunded, and understaffed department at my university.) Since 2017, I've worked at AAWW — first as a digital media intern and subsequently as a part-time designer and illustrator — to create visuals for the editorial and event branches of the organization.

Prior to joining the workshop, I had no academic or working experience with "graphic design;" my background had primarily been in fine arts (painting, drawing, and mixed media). As such, my time at AAWW has been spent not simply creating content but also building a foundational understanding of what design is. (For this, I'd like to briefly thank Britt Gudas and Axel Jenson for their mentorship!)

I wrote up this informal pamphlet to allow myself a space to map and discuss my process, primarily because I don't currently have access to such spaces at school or among peers (for context, I attend a liberal arts university with no graphic design program, and one class in design that is only offered one semester a year in a neighboring college). In other words, though I'd prefer to participate in formal studio critiques with others, I at least hope the introspection offered in this pamphlet allows a more holistic view of my conceptual and technical methodology. I'm sincerely grateful for your time and patience in following this self-reflective exercise with me.

With love,
Emma

CASE STUDY 1:

Promotional material for *Dispatches from the Ministry of Truth* (humble beginnings!)

The workflow I follow to start a design hasn't changed much since I started, in part because AAWW, as a small literary non-profit, is essentially brandless.

What does it mean to design for an entity that has no "brand identity" (save its logo)? For AAWW, this means that every project has a life of its own, governed by an ethos of freeform ambiguity that could only be possible without a style guideline. It also means that I needed to collaborate directly with editorial and events staff to conceptualize designs from start to finish. This deeply collective process

typically starts with a lot of dialogue, research, and hoarding. For my first assignment, a promotional illustration for an upcoming event, I began what would come to be a familiar process based in hours of visual research. My cues from the events department were "the ocean" and "surveillance," prompting me to start my search in the aesthetics of surveillance art/digital archiving/3D mapping.

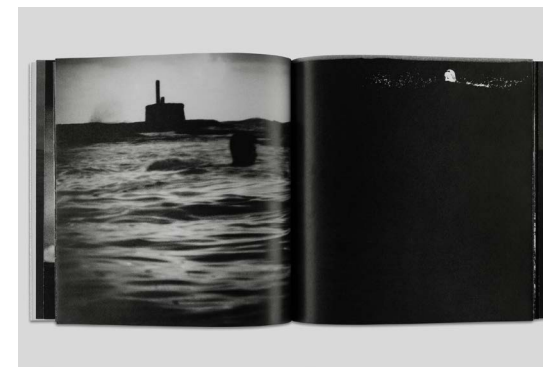
Initial research: finding inspiration from artists + public domain image databases



(above) Rabih Mroué
The Fall of a Hair: Blow Ups
2012

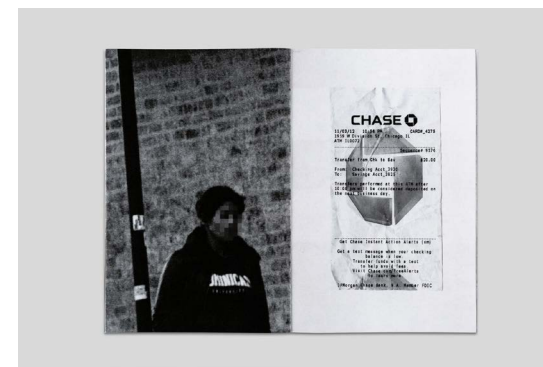
(right) Aerial surveillance photo
of the USS Bainbridge while
apprehending Somali pirates
090409-N-0000X-136.jpg

sourced from Wikimedia Commons



Selected spreads from an online
preview of *Surveillance Index
Edition One*

(from left: *Periscope* by José
Diniz, *Getting to Know My
Neighbors* by Joseph Wilcox, and
*Exposed: Voyeurism, Surveillance,
and the Camera Since 1870*)



Seeking source images that offered more questions than answers



One overarching visual similarity among the sources I had collected was the low-resolution quality of the surveillance image, whether real or replicated by artists. This inspired me to attempt to manipulate the grain (pixels, artifacts) of found digital images in order to push the connection between technology and contemporary surveillance techniques.

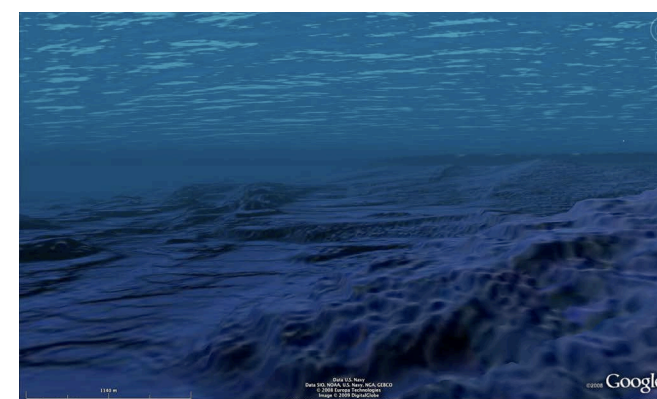
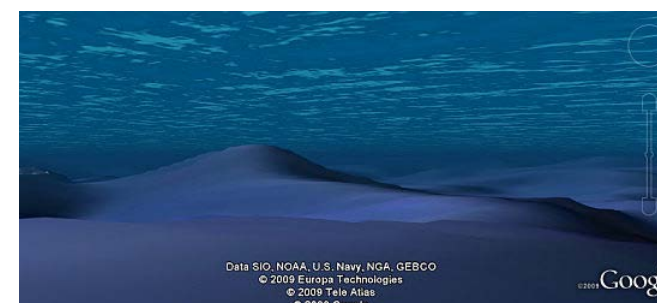


My initial approach was to use an online pixel sorting algorithm to expose pixels in the image's structure. I was particularly drawn to the way the pixel sort rippled the subject's form to the effect of making them seem to dissolve in the water; however, as I continued generating these images, I found that the source photo and the pixel sort didn't seem to have an interesting connection to the themes I had started with. The lone subject in the water suggested a straightforward narrative of a missing person, and the pixel sort was too clean, unlike the surveillance footage I had researched prior.



Back to the drawing board, and a return to the Wikimedia image hunt

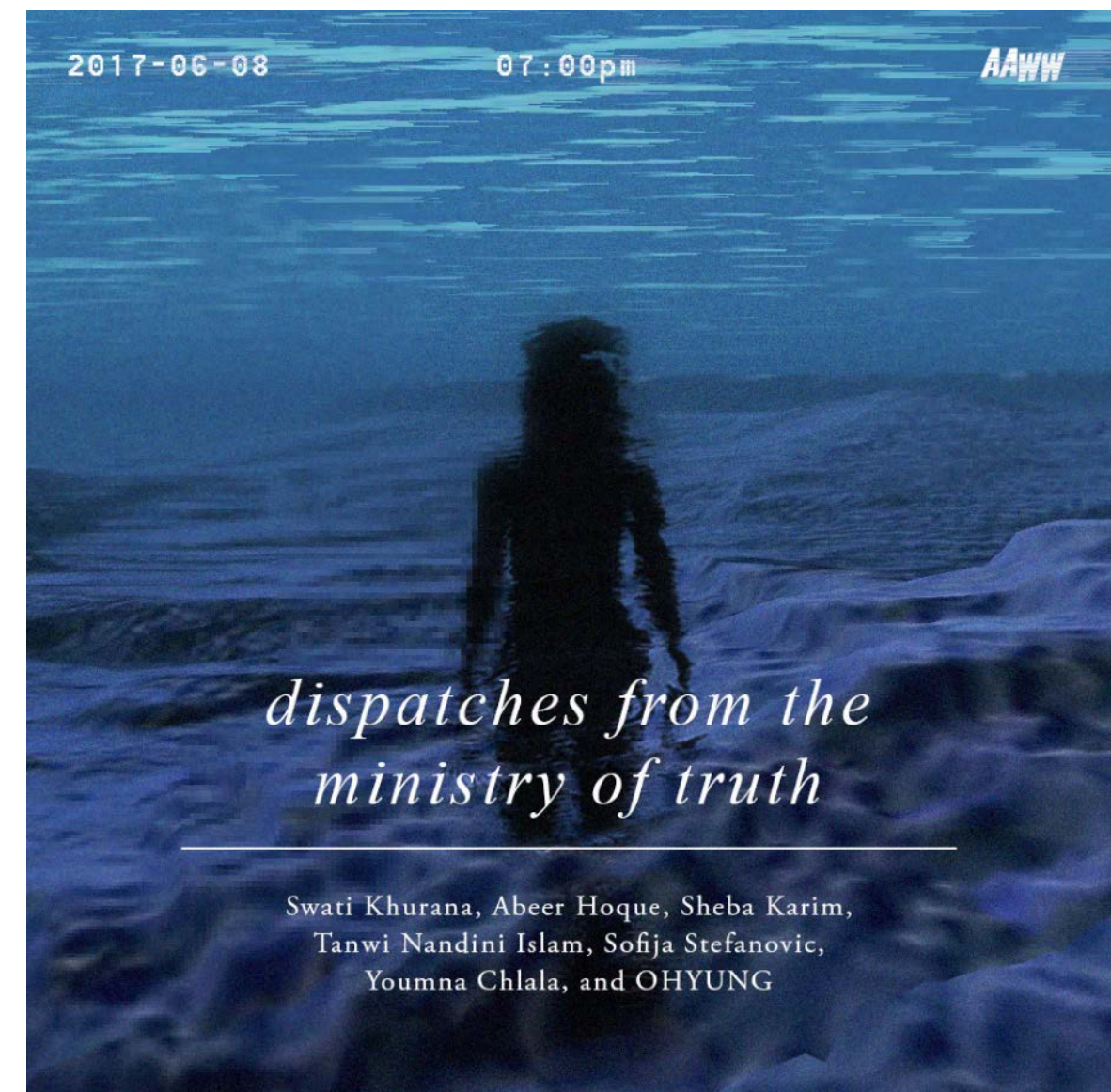
Starting over, I ditched the pixel sort technique but still sought to include an image of a person reflected in water in order to replicate the rippling effect I had been drawn to earlier. I also continued doing more visual research and ultimately paired the image on the right (a model walking on a beach shore) with snapshots of an underwater landscape mapped by Google. The digitally reconstructed ocean floor in these images had a granular, artificial quality that was unsettling, yet still retained the evocative properties of an ocean environment.



Isolating the body's rippled reflection with a layer mask resulted in a more organic and subtle effect reminiscent of the fascinating pixel sort texture I artificially made earlier. I was also drawn to the ambiguity of the body's pose: for instance, the audience doesn't know if the subject is facing towards or away from us (in the first image, we do). Either way, that the subject isn't positioned at an angle implies some kind of direct, subversive action. Compare this with the more passive, unwilling gaze of the subject in the first image.



The final image was my very first design for AAWW! For this composition, I let the central image do much of the conceptual heavy lifting — at this time, I had no idea how to select typefaces, let alone design with them in mind. Most of my typographic choices were consequently based on instinct: that is, I cycled through system fonts until something looked elegant. The retro/VCR-esque monospaced type at the top was a reference to found surveillance footage snapshots.



CASE STUDY 2:

Research-driven graphic work for *Race, Music, and American Ghost Stories*

Warming up to this new workflow, I sought to produce designs that derived their thematic complexity not simply from their source content, but from the intentional manipulation of found images. Textual and historical context now informed not only my hoarding process, but also the methods I used to splice, reassemble, and superimpose forms together.

My assignment was to create a promotion for a conceptually complex event about “music and the ghosts of America’s racial past.” I took up the challenge to avoid abstracting away the subject matter, relying heavily on the research process I was now comfortable with.

Combining all three major themes was daunting, but as it turns out, not impossible

Those three themes being, of course, “race,” “music,” and “American ghost stories.” (For context, the two featured authors, Margo Jefferson and Hari Kunzru, had both published notable works regarding the cultural impact, circulation, and appropriation of Black American music.)

After many hours of agonizing over this assignment, I finally settled on an initial point of reference: the gestures associated with performing music.



It didn’t initially occur to me to collect photos of jazz pianists, but as it turns out, there are a lot of these photos circulating on the public domain web. Moreover, the gesture of playing the piano is distinct in that the actual piano does not have to actually appear for one to understand the action of pressing on keys (playing a saxophone or trumpet, for instance, seems to necessitate the appearance of the instrument).



Portrait of Ralph Burns, Bill Harris, and Dave Tough, Three Deuces, New York, N.Y. Photograph by William P. Gottlieb (ca. Apr. 1947)



John Malachi. Photograph by William P. Gottlieb (between 1938 and 1948)

I decided to use these two images for their formal similarity (specifically in the subject's pose and angle relative to the camera), interested in how I could perhaps understand this "echoing" of the body's motion into a kind of visual "ghosting." "Ghost" as a noun can refer to an afterimage or a trace of a since-departed object; as a verb, it can refer to the actions of a "ghostwriter." (Just a single word held so many visual possibilities!)

It was also important that the men pictured in the photos were not of the same race — the historic origins and eventual appropriation of the jazz/blues genre (or the "ghosting" of this style) in America was something I didn't want to shy away from. This historical context would inform my research and my inquiry into the concept of the "ghost."

The central collage: giving a body to a conceptual ghost

This edited image was a fun exercise in Photoshop's lasso and masking functions. The sharp angles in the "cut-outs" were both due to the cropping of some source photos as well as a desire to convey some of the rhythmic properties of jazz music.



I continued to layer images and textures behind the main collage in order to not only create depth but also push the viewer to think about what was hidden, excluded, or cut out.



Charcoal pencil marks were added to further communicate this idea of the gestural and rhythmic (this was following a generous tip from my mentor, Axel, to refer back to Kandinsky's famous compositions). The final design (sans some of the more technical copy) is below.



CASE STUDY 3:

Mouth to Mouth Open Mic Series

Starting out with image-heavy designs allowed for an easy transition from the familiar realm of traditional fine arts/digital illustration. I continuously relied on intricately composed collages and manipulated photos to carry the compositional and emotional weight of a design; my research-heavy process was distilled into images by colors and gestures. Gradually, I warmed up to the previously foreign world of typography — starting with my work for AAWW's Mouth to Mouth Open Mic series.

Obstacles to relying on type to carry aesthetic + conceptual weight

Despite the conceptual flexibility offered by the lack of a brand guideline, it was incredibly difficult to work generously with typography. A number of technical challenges stood in my way:

1. Facebook's 20% text to image ratio algorithm — limiting the size and amount of text that could be used
2. Facebook's image compression — limiting what colors could be used
3. 1:1 and 4:3 aspect ratio restrictions

Image Text: **Medium**

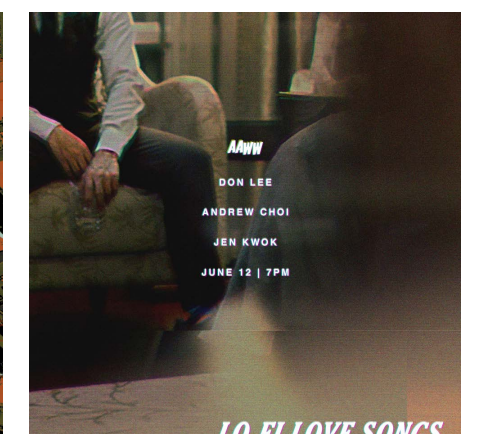
Your ad's reach may be much lower.

Your ad reach may be much lower than usual because there's too much text in the ad image. Facebook prefers ad images with little or no text. Consider changing your image before placing your order.

truly, my greatest enemy...



Of course, there were also personal challenges to overcome: lack of typography knowledge + high cost of typefaces + limited access to design mentors = images as a compositional crutch, over and over again! I would often treat type as secondary to a central image, and simply fit copy wherever there was negative space.



Enter: Mouth to Mouth



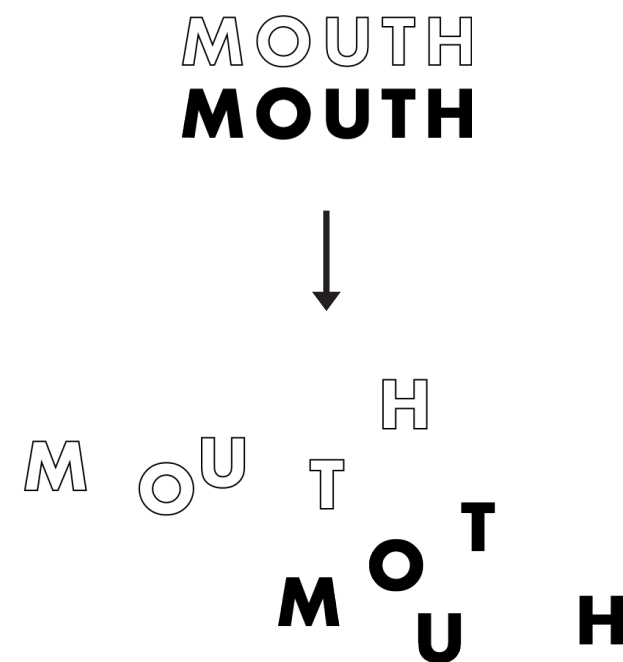
AAWW's monthly open mic series is not tied to any central literary theme or motif — the only commonality between all the events is its open mic format and its function as a platform for up and coming queer/trans POC artists and performers.

As a general requirement, Mouth to Mouth promotions must include portraits of the featured guests. This restriction on the type of image that could be used invited a deeper consideration of the use of type as a central compositional element.

Using type as a compositional and emotional element

My first Mouth to Mouth promotion (left) had a short turnaround time, but allowed me to experiment with a few key motifs that would guide future designs of the same genre:

1. CALL AND RESPONSE: The open mic format is not simply freeform/informal in structure but more importantly decentralized/non-hierarchical and collective. One tactic used by performers to not only gauge audience engagement but also bring the audience into the fold is to do a “mic check” exercise. Using the profiles of the featured performers allowed me to create this “call-and-response” feel that was echoed in the display type.
2. PLAY: Generally speaking, unlike other curated readings hosted by the workshop, open mic participants (volunteers or featured performers) don't need to take themselves too seriously; a spirit of play is at the center of these events. Though I feel that this specific element is strongly lacking in the typographic decisions I made here, I do think the color palette gets the idea across in a more subtle way.
3. RHYTHM/ACOUSTICS: Because the open mic facilitates performance, volume, inflection, and rhythm become critical factors in bringing the spoken word to life. This specific design is more coherent/compact than others but suggests a bit of staccato pacing in the display type's split alignment and in geometric breaks between the event date and time.

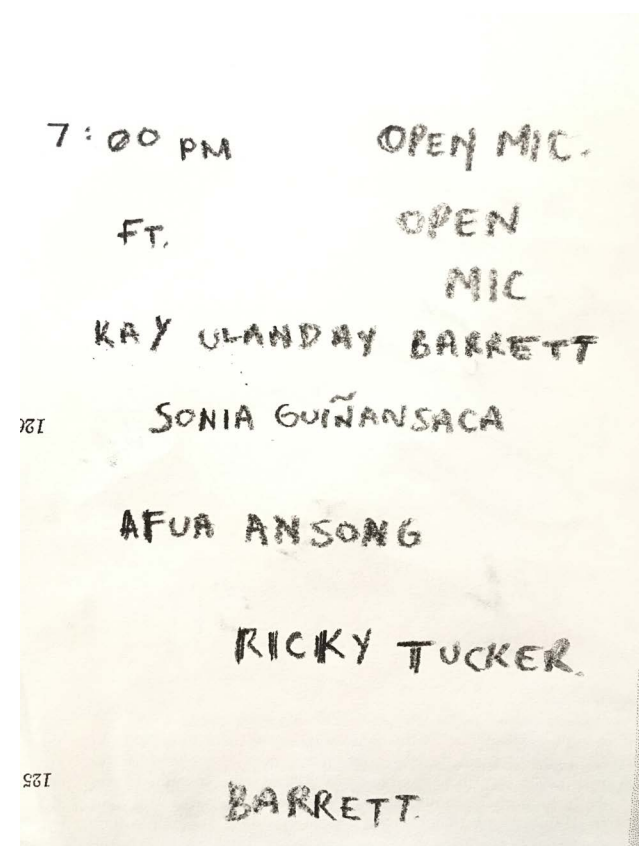


Experimenting with more organic, handwritten type

Driven by frustration with the typefaces I'd been using up to this point, I took a break from the computer screen and returned to paper to handwrite the design's remaining copy. For me, the texture, grain, and (for lack of a better word) human feel of the handwritten text was fitting for an open mic that encouraged the reading of rough draft work. Ultimately, I aimed to unsettle the geometry of Futura not only with uneven spacing/kerning but also with the hand-written copy.

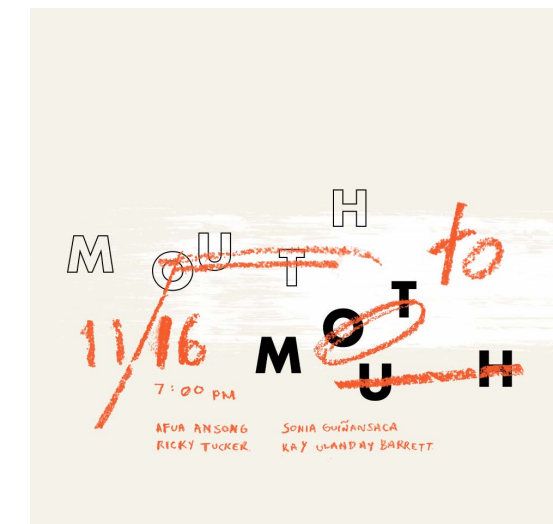
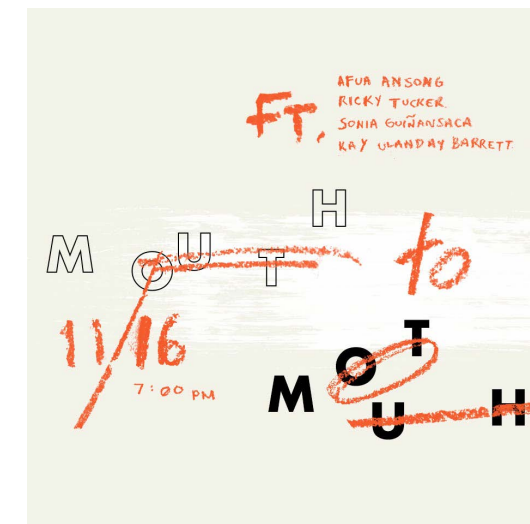
Breaking the baseline

In my second Mouth to Mouth design, I challenged myself to break type — of course, within the confines of readability and the 20% text algorithm. I did so first by treating each individual letter as a compositional element moving within its own system/iteration of “mouth.” The decision to leave one “mouth” as unfilled was instinctual but related to the action of manifesting a response to a call, as well as a play on open/closed type as corresponding to an open/closed mouth.

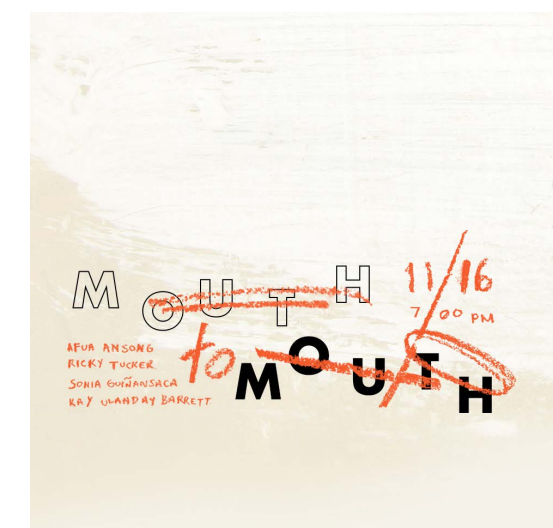


Early iterations

As I progressed with each draft, I had to reign in more and more of my scattered type; I found that early drafts were hard to read as the logical movement of the eye was often disrupted by the placement of certain marks and the scattering of the “MOUTH” text. For instance, the two drafts below read “MOUTH to MOTUH” due to the hand-drawn circle connecting the ‘O’ and the ‘T.’ Additionally, it didn’t seem really purposeful to connect the date to the first “MOUTH” with the diagonal slash.

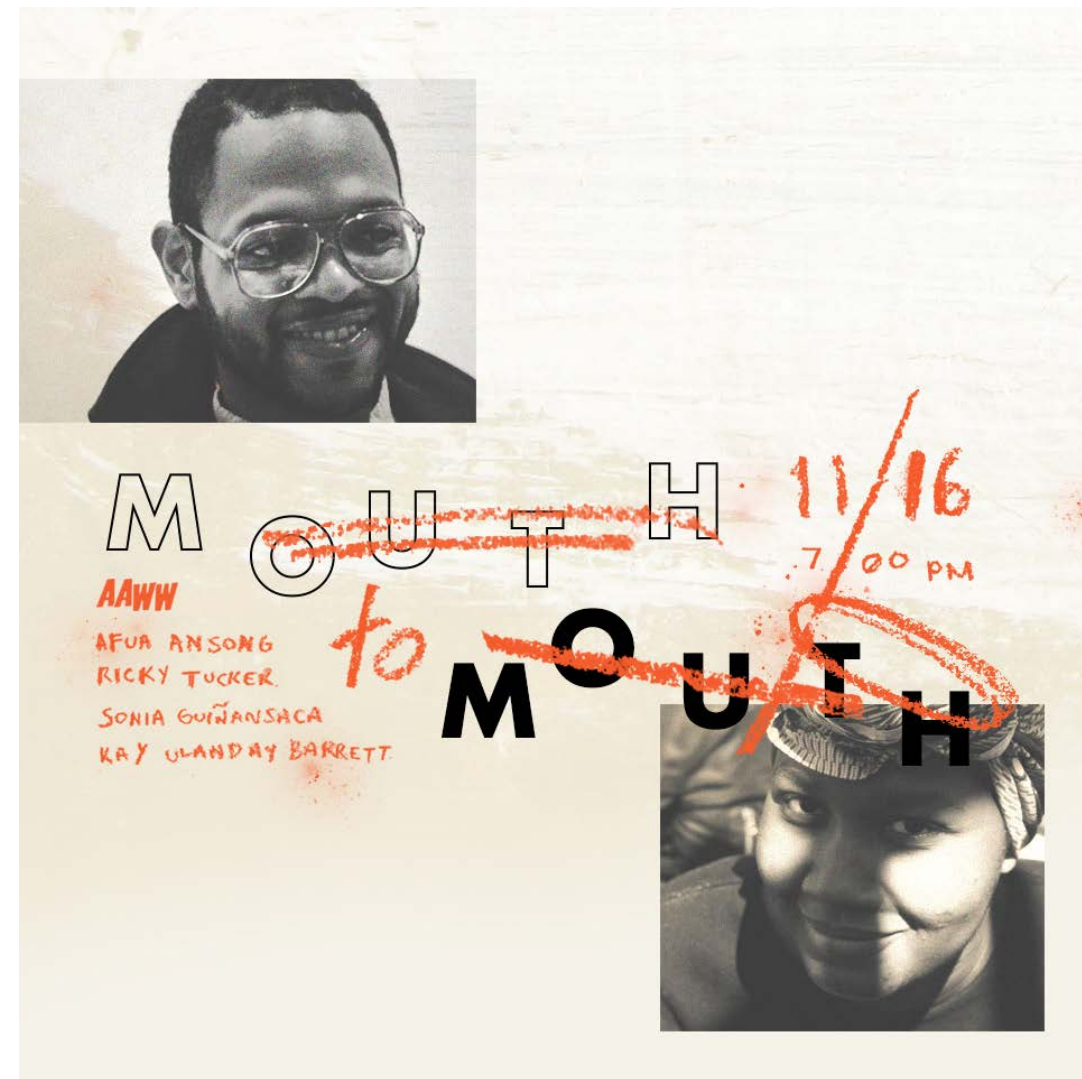


However, condensing all the copy didn't seem to work out too well either. It felt that each element of the composition needed to breathe — in other words, I needed to let some air into the canvas without scattering all the elements into chaos (and of course, keeping the design under technical restraints).



The final drafts: using images as a way to bring order

Designing without the author images had been a way to force me to create interesting compositions exclusively with type; however, this method ended up working to my disadvantage. Adding the images into my most recent draft just seemed to make the composition feel more cramped as if the images were two weights pushing up against the type. I then realized that the “weight” of the author images could be used to provide a kind of structural support to the composition.



In the final draft, I settled on the following solutions.

- Dropping the lineup, date, and time to the bottom left groups related information together but also gives a little breathing room to the title. In the prior draft, the date and time were placed next to the event title in a way that seemed to disrupt the reader's eye.
- Most of the visual chaos and disjointed rhythm created by the distributed type are now successfully reigned in by the static photos and the largely monochromatic palette. Both author images create strict rectangular space for the handwritten copy to fit into. The word “MOUTH” was placed on top of both images to evoke a kind of dialogue (a call and response, if you will).

