

***these three words*; community activation, knowledge sharing and collaboration through letterpress printing**

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Abstract

Commoners Press is a small, newly established experimental letterpress studio in North Coburg, Australia. As part of the 2022 Melbourne Design Week, Commoners Press presented the project *these three words* in response to the festival's theme of 'civic spaces'. This article discusses the project as an example of a mode of public pedagogy (Charman & Dixon, 2021) which enables moments of collective reflection, inclusiveness, community activation, local knowledge sharing as well as collaborative making, creative exploration, social aspiration and being together. The project asked participants to respond to the provocation: Thinking about the future liveability of your community, what three words come to mind? Participants set their 'three words' in type and they were letterpress printed in a moment that externalised and materialised participants' concepts in ink and paper. Thus the redundant technology of letterpress introduced – through its labour and slowness – a sense of mindfulness, achievement and 'access to the means of production' that elevated participants' words into a public collaborative endeavour. As each participants' printed words were revealed, they were celebrated and discussed within the group. A week later participants were given the opportunity to attend a roundtable to reflect on their own and others' 'three words' as a collective imagining of possible futures, all different, all together (Escobar, 2017). The pedagogy here brought participants together to form an "interpretive community" (Santos, 2017) by allowing them to teach one another new things about community, collaboration, creativity, and what the future may hold.

Keywords

letterpress, participatory printing, public pedagogy, community activation, interpretive community

Introduction

This article reflects upon a participatory print project staged as part of the Melbourne and Geelong Design Weeks in March 2022 by Commoners Press entitled *these three words*. In exploring the potential to host participatory public print projects, Commoners Press discovered a potential for public pedagogy within the normative space of the technology of letterpress printing, which is activated in relation to the rich historical legacy of such technology. In this paper we firstly set out to introduce letterpress technology in its historical, political and social contexts. We then detail the *these three words* project activities and outcomes. We complete the article by situating the Commoners Press within a framing of print capitalism and cosmotechnics and finally public pedagogy.

In *Imagined Communities* Benedict Anderson (2016) relates affordable book printing technology like the letterpress to the rise of modern nationalism proliferated by the dynamic of a capitalist market-place, and consequently leading to the early formation of European nation states in the nineteenth century. Anderson termed this “print-capitalism”. Fast-forwarding 200 years to the present, we have shifted to a different technological paradigm often described as “cybernetic capitalism” (Ström, 2021). However, according to Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2017) the current paradigm is rooted in the same cognitive conditions of knowledge creation, which he identifies as a Westernised epistemology reliant on dualisms (like subject-object or culture-nature among others) that came to dominate the West over the last 200 years. Santos calls this the “cognitive empire” or the “epistemologies of the Global North” while emphasising that even within the dominating context of the West or Global North exists a plurality of diverging epistemologies and related rationalities.

Following what Don Ihde (2005) has termed a postphenomenological approach to technology, we want to look at how a technology like letterpress affects intentionality and modulates human perception and cognition while mediating the relations between humans and the world. We base this on the premise that technical artefacts are “multistable” (Ihde cited in Verbeek, 2005, p. 170), stressing that their functionality and meaning varies with the use scenario and cultural context. By drawing on, and at same time, extending Martin Heidegger’s thinking about technology beyond his Western universalist frame, Yuk Hui advances this notion calling it “cosmotechnics” (Hui, 2020a).

Looking at the three ageing letterpress machines that Commoners Press purchased from a retiring pressman in his eighties, the machines can be seen to have become stranded assets from a former industrial epoch. Reflecting upon this ‘stranded-ness’ we want to add to the discussion here another aspect to Ihde’s ‘multistability’ of technology: that of becoming ‘redundant’. The circumstance of technology becoming redundant also could be understood via a Heideggerian twist as a form of disentanglement from the world and its commercial pressures, a release from its *enframing*.

Being freed up – so-to-speak – from its intended use scenarios, allows now redundant technology to aspire to reach its “ownmost potential” (Heidegger, 1996 [1926], p. 166). Something Heidegger called “disclosedness”, which signifies both how the world opens itself to human beings and the opening up of the world – the essential feature of human existence.¹ Which poses a question, we aim to discuss in this article; can the operating of redundant technology be understood as a pedagogical opportunity?

We discuss the project *these three words*, its workshop methodology, outcomes, as well as its technologic context to see if the *these three words* workshops constitute a form of cosmotechnical

praxis that might demonstrate the potential to subvert eurocentric, westernised knowledge models and pedagogies of the Global North. Our aim is to investigate if a project framed in this way contributes to a methodology of collaboration in the spirit of what Santos (2017) calls the formation of *interpretive communities*.

In *Decolonising the university: The challenge of deep cognitive justice* Santos (2017) critiques the perceived universalism of technology as a Western specific and reductionist worldview. That is, a universalism that assumes that dominant experiences (the experiences of a dominant class, gender, race or ethnicity) are universal experiences (objective truths). He proposes a “new aesthetic common sense” (p. 134) which can be enacted through “interpretive communities” emphasising localness and argumentativeness and allowing for new configurations of the plurality of different knowledges and alternative rationalities to surface.

Santos (2017) writes:

A new aesthetic experience must be offered against them. This experience cannot be reached through the easy way of aestheticising the brutality of the present, such as it exists, but rather through the difficult way of re-enchanting all that in the world can be known, to prevent it from collapsing into the ‘clonic’ future that the automatic utopianism of technology has in store for it; in sum, by re-enchanting all the local-global, immediate-final social practices that may be reasonably considered as partial trajectories from colonialism to solidarity. (p. 137-8)

these three words – a series of participatory public print workshops

The *these three words* project itself included workshops through which participants produced short aspirational statements followed by a roundtable in which those printed statements were collectively viewed and discussed. We ask, what is enabled in coming together to articulate future aspirations and in sharing those aspirations as externalised printed outcomes? Can we, as the Commoners Press, facilitate a different space for discourse? Can we, through accessing the poetic in the political, access a new aesthetic common sense?

Commoners Press, through its organisational aspirations and its nature as a press, uses redundant technology to investigate contemporary alternatives to established economic and social models of what practices do, how businesses work and the role ‘making’ plays in our contemporary social sphere. As owners of old printing presses, we reflect upon this ‘redundant’ equipment to situate the press historically, both from Western capitalist histories but also through the growing need to problematise universalist understandings of commercial technology and its underlying knowledge paradigm to reach for more plural, open, discursive and inclusive ways of being, making, doing and knowing.

The Commoners Press at Coburg Studios in Melbourne

The Commoners Press is an experimental printing press cooperative, formed in 2017, which works with artists and designers on small to medium volume print projects, tailored to the specific needs of the print project. The Press aims to provide access to thoughtful and sustainable print production to the community of Coburg and Melbourne more broadly. It owns three letterpress machines, the oldest of these, a 1927 Chandler and Price foot-pedal operated letterpress machine along with two Heidelberg Platen presses from the 1950s. Commoners Press purchased the three letterpress machines, a paper guillotine and various other printing equipment, inks and typefaces from Excell Press, a small Press in Brunswick, Melbourne, whose owner, well into his eighties, decided to retire and close his printing business.

The Commoners Press is a ‘business unit’ of the ‘Commoners Coop’, a registered Australian cooperative, and therefore subscribes to the Commoners Coop’s principles of community activation through contribution to the regeneration of the ‘commons’.

Commoners Coop (2023) engages in a variety of activities in urban and regional Victoria “to encourage new ways of working together to build social and economic resilience and provide examples of transitional practice” (n.p). Here the definition of what exactly constitutes a ‘common’ is left to each initiative, with emphasis placed on the process of ‘commoning’. This approach is theorised by historian of the commons Peter Linebaugh (2009) and theorist David Bollier (2020). For Bollier the “point of commoning ... is to de-commodify or mutualize the provisioning of needs so that they can be available to all” (2020, n.p).

Expressed in the notion of “commoning as a verb” (2016, p. 342), Bollier’s approach draws on the network of social relationships that revolve either around a certain place and specific natural or social resources related to it, or certain activities like shared knowledge of a particular practice. Commoning then is about bringing people together with a shared understanding that some things belong to all of us – which is the essence of the commons itself – while foregrounding that it is these social connections that form the lifeblood of a commons.

In 2021 Commoners Press moved from Brunswick to Coburg North, part of the city of Moreland, recently renamed Merri-bek (Barraclough, 2022). Commoners Press locates its mission and purpose in the cooperative and commoning principles outlined above, its location in Coburg, and its role in the creative community of Coburg Studios. These places and entities are coming into being and Commoners Press takes its part in this becoming.

Coburg Studios is situated in a previous factory building in North Coburg, an industrial area changing through population pressures, shifts in economic activity, and gentrification. The suburb is becoming more focused on housing and, through local government initiatives, on stimulating creative communities. With a large 9m high-ceilinged ground floor and two upper floors of studios, Coburg Studios now has over 40 tenants: designer-makers in wood on the ground floor, and screen-printers, ceramicists, fine art painters, crafts-people, and other creative practitioners on the top two floors. Due to the weight of the printing presses Commoner Press occupied space on the ground floor when moving in with other founding tenants in 2020.

***these three words* at Melbourne and Geelong Design Weeks**

Being part Coburg Studios, *these three words* took place in the context of a number of community outreach efforts facilitated by Coburg Studios sponsored by the local Merri-bek (previously Moreland) council as part of its program to support and foster creative communities in the council area. These activities included an inaugural ‘makers market’ in June 2022 through which tenants and interested others could exhibit and sell their work during a sunny morning of live music and food.

these three words was submitted by Commoners Press as a project proposal for 2022 Melbourne Design Week and Geelong Design Week which ran simultaneously in late March. Melbourne being the capital of Victoria, Australia, is a large sprawling city of some five million, whereas Geelong is a much smaller regional city about 100 kilometres to the south-west of Victoria towards the Bass Strait coast.

these three words ran in the same week in both cities as a combined project. It was conceived as an internal challenge for the Press, and its operators, to explore the kind of projects the Press could take on and develop a project methodology for participatory public printing. The creative challenge

for Commoners Press was how to experiment with design, making, collaboration, and public participation in a workshop format and have letterpress printing as a participatory, collaborative generative activity.

Typesetting as a collaborative workshop methodology

Along with the letterpress machines and a large industrial guillotine, Commoners Press also purchased more than twenty typefaces in metal ‘movable type’. These typefaces are the mechanism through which text was prepared for printing prior to early twentieth century mechanisation, and then later, digitisation of the process. Individual ‘movable type’ letters are combined one by one to form words, after which word spaces are added and combined with images or symbols to create a complete printing block or ‘forme’. The metal and wooden components are ‘locked-up’ in a ‘chase’ with ‘quoins’ and other typesetting ‘furniture’ to create the rigid printing forme.



Figure 1. Typeset forme, with moveable type, furniture, quoins and chase. (photograph Kirsten Haydon)

The forme is mounted into the letterpress machine. When ‘inked-up’ and operated the press rolls out the ink evenly, transfers it onto the printing forme and then presses a sheet of paper stock onto the forme; literally pressing the paper against the raised inked-up areas and transferring an

image. The Chandler and Price machine, used for the first part of the *these three words* project, requires the operator to manually place and remove each piece of paper stock as printing is completed.

This is mechanised, yet slow, human-operated technology. It is highly manual. Operators are required to place the paper in the correct manner, ensuring fingers are clear when the press activates. The operator needs to generate power for the machine by applying pressure through a foot pedal; pedalling the machine as it cranks, turns and presses the inked-up forme onto each piece of paper stock, thus transferring the image.

For the Commoners Press operators – who are self-trained and have not completed any lengthy apprenticeships – it is possible to print approximately 50-100 items an hour. During the *these three words* workshops each participants' forme was printed between 10-15 times.



Figure 2. The *Chandler and Price* letterpress in operation during *these three words*. (photograph Kirsten Haydon)

The bulk of the printing in this workshop was completed on the Chandler and Price. As a 100-year-old cast iron machine, it clearly comes from another era. It is 'redundant' technology, in that its use value has been superseded by many generations of newer, faster, more efficient technology,

removing it from its previous role in an ‘economically viable’ printing industry. Although its bearings may be worn, when rotated up to speed by hand then powered by foot it evokes a past world of fine mechanical engineering design, communicating thoughtful design and engineering finesse. It continues, after 100 years, to work smoothly with its oiled gears revolving and its cast-iron members and steel ‘platen’ (the flat plate upon which the paper stock is mounted to be printed) all moving in unison and in an observable, open system very well designed to fulfil its purpose. It has a strong audible presence as well, as it gently rotates and repeats, a gentle clanking, rotating sound from a previous era of production.

Typesetting; selecting individual metal letters and placing them together then into a ‘forme’ – is exacting work, challenging for the uninitiated and requiring patience and keen eyesight. It is very easy to make mistakes. Each letter needs to be placed in reverse and running backwards to achieve a correct print. ‘Minding your ‘p’s and ‘q’s’ is an idiom that derives directly from letterpress typesetting work; it is a challenge to know if the letter you are holding is a ‘p’ or a ‘q’, and these errors often only become clear once printed.

The project *these three words* was the first time the public – albeit Design Week participants – had been invited into the Commoners Press in an organised workshop activity. The intention was to devise an activity that could be collaborative, involve enough time to allow for focussed activity without becoming a burden – one or two hours – in a process that generated interest and conversation without being overwhelming.

Interpreting the festival brief for letterpress printing

The brief from Melbourne Design Week was ‘Design the World You Want’ with an additional prompt for projects to engage with ‘civic good’. Commoners Press developed the prompt *Thinking about the future liveability of your community, what three words come to mind?* Participants arrived at the Press, a short introduction was given to the letterpress machines and the typefaces sitting on the worktable, then participants were asked to typeset their ‘three words’ along with their first name and the suburb or town in which they lived.

**Equanimity
Bravery
Felicity**

**Nicole
Melbourne**

As such the project provided a framework for participation. The work could be accomplished in one sitting by someone new to typesetting. Through its limitation of ‘three words’, the process provided a format creating a distillation of the very complex aspirations and thinking that one may have about *the future liveability of their community*. For Commoners Press this work of engagement with past technology to create printed personal statements evokes Heidegger’s discussion in which he positions technology² as being a “bringing-forth” with the capacity for *alētheia* or revealing; “there was a time when the bringing forth of the true into the beautiful was called *technē*. The *poiēsis* of the fine arts was also called *technē*” (2008 [1927-1964], p. 339).

Water Shade & Kindness

Sylvia
Winchelsea

‘these three words’ as a public workshop setting

Distilling complexity into *three words* may be a challenge but the setting and process allowed complex conflicted issues to be treated light-heartedly; it was in the coming together of the various statements that complexity became present again and multiple, diverse, perhaps contradictory aspirations could be made public together in a discussion celebrating the collective achievements.

The project attempted to tackle significant social and complex issues in a somewhat playful manner, allowing participants to air personal aspirations in a group setting and in a supportive and celebratory environment. The highly manual, focussed activity of hunting for letters and arranging them around the right way, and designing the layout for their type would it be ranged-right, centred or situated towards the base of the paper – also distracted from over-thinking or internal criticism. As individual participants typeset their words there were jokes about mis-spelt words and comments about this or that word, but the overriding sense was of a collective collaborative spirit coming to grips with the letterpress technology.



Figure 3. these three words workshop introduction at the Commoners Press. (photograph Kirsten Haydon)

One participant expected that their *three words* would be brought into deliberate discussion and critique, perhaps in order to generate a consensus or agreed future aspiration for the group. However, whatever words were chosen were simply accepted, and Commoners Press operators helped locate typefaces and letters and advised on how to create a stable printable forme.



Figure 4. *these three words* printed outcome during workshop. (photograph Kirsten Haydon)

The two workshops were held at the start of the Design Week; in Melbourne at the Commoners Press, and the second in Geelong at the community hub ‘Creative Geelong’. For the Geelong workshop it was not possible to access the printing machines, so trays (cases) of type were transported to Geelong for the workshop and participants typeset their words. These typeset words were then locked together and later printed at the Commoners Press in North Coburg.

The second aspect to the project was a ‘roundtable event’; a meeting, discussion and collaborative printing event conducted in Melbourne as a face-to-face and as an online meeting. At this event participants’ printed outcomes were exhibited and discussed. Commonalities and differences were commented on, and the diversity of outcomes were celebrated. Following discussion, the participants then were given a similar prompt but this time it only asked for a single word; ‘How could Commoners Press support the futures that were proposed in the *these three words* statements?’. Commoners Press had created a simple electronic form on their website which allowed the collection of these single words from all roundtable participants in Coburg, Geelong and elsewhere. Connected via video livestream, the Melbourne participants then set out to typeset everyone’s word and add it to a collective single typeset ‘forme’, which was printed as a poster on one of the Heidelberg machines.

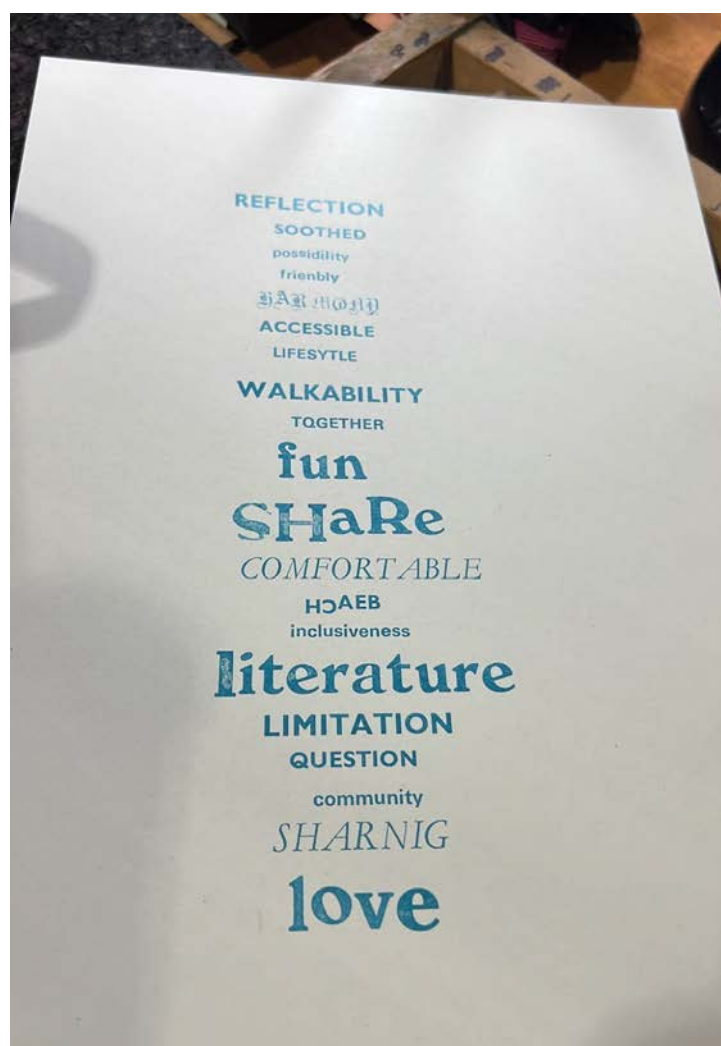


Figure 7. Collaborative poster printed during ‘roundtable event’ (photograph Neal Haslem)

these three words as an event, invited the participants to visit the Commoners Press studio, learn about the press, its operations and aspirations and take part in a collaborative public printing project. Before we discuss *these three words* workshop methodology as a form of public pedagogy, we want to review some aspects of the historical legacy of letterpress printing and the role of technology in shaping communities including aspects of its colonial work.

**Justice
Space
Cooperation**

**Jennifer
Princes Hill**

Printing communities - from 'print capitalism' to 'cosmotechnics'

In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson (2016 [1983]) connects book printing technology like letterpress with the emergence of the nation-state in Europe, legitimising the nation to be represented by the state and therefore becoming the primary political actor in modern society.

For Anderson the underlying concept of the early formation of the modern nation-states in Europe was what he called 'print capitalism' as it was the printed book that cemented the formation of a social group to imagine themselves as part of the next larger cohort – the new nation in the forming. These 'imagined communities' were indeed shaped by the commercial impetus to popularise book printing technology and reach a larger audience with printed products, while consolidating this developing audience by stressing the use of one common language. For Anderson, printing technology in Europe helped to bridge different local dialects and created national print languages (2016 [1983]).

Historian Christopher A. Reed (2004) stresses that print capitalism must be seen within the larger context of the triptych: print culture, print commerce and print capitalism. Looking at printing through this conceptual frame helps to align a common perception of its historical development. Letterpress printing with movable type is by and large associated with the Gutenberg-style printing press in 1454 in Europe. Today we know that printing with movable type already was practised 200 years before Gutenberg by master printers in Koryo (Korea).³

However, in Europe the Gutenberg press technology was used to print books like the 'Gutenberg Bible' as well as *Malleus Maleficarum: The hammer of witchcraft* by the German churchman Heinrich Kramer, who was instrumental in establishing witch trials in the early modern period (Monter, 1969). Important here is that these books were printed in common vernacular languages and not exclusively in Latin, the authoritative language of the Roman Catholic Church, to the effect that these new printing practices helped lead to Lutheran Reformation in Europe.

**Imagination
Connection
Seating**

**Andy
Preston**

In 1517 Luther initially wrote his *95 theses* by hand and nailed them on the doors of the All Saints' Church and other churches in Wittenberg, and consequently his theses circulated as print. In this manner his thoughts managed to speak to an audience large enough to create a popular momentum, which widely signalled the birth of Protestantism. As Anderson argues (2016 [1983]), this became a watershed moment indicating that the power and influence of the Catholic Church was waning, leading to the gradual establishment of the nation-states and an early form of capitalism in Europe – assisted by print technology.

Although it is established that print culture and print commerce originated in the East first, historian Christopher Reed emphasises in *Gutenberg in Shanghai: Chinese print capitalism, 1876-1937* (2004) that a decisive moment was reached when the continuous mechanisation of letterpress printing to an industrialised scale was re-introduced to China via missionaries and merchants throughout the 19th Century.

In contrast to Europe when the missionaries started their presses in the 'treaty ports' of China and in neighbouring countries, they introduced different forms of mechanical printing as a Western technology into a print culture that predates European printing by about eight Centuries. The missionaries set out to print bibles and other religious texts to have them distributed in mainland China, to which they were not granted access by the Chinese government.

Reed argues that it was this advanced level of mechanisation that laid the material foundation that made print capitalism in China and elsewhere possible (2004, p. 9). However, given the cultural and cosmological specifics of China, he concludes that the same technologies led to a different kind of print-capitalism in China than it did in Europe. Reed refers to the work of historian Marie-Claire Bergère (2009 [1986]) studying China in the early twentieth century, who argues that "capitalism [did] not spring from a multiplication of markets nor even from their more or less organised integration, but from the introduction of mechanisation into a highly commercialised society" (Reed, 2004, p. 28).

The key differences for Reed are that over the period from 1876-1937 that Chinese press operators made very selective decisions which specific print technologies to adopt, which led to a different form of print capitalism than in the West. The main reasons that Reed states are the pre-existing community ideals of Chinese literati culture, that associate more cultural than economic values to the selling of books as well as aesthetic preferences around calligraphy that the hard-won Chinese fonts made by the missionary presses did not meet. Reed finds that this influenced Chinese printers to focus on lithographic printing initially and only in the progressing twentieth centuries did they settle on letterpress printing due to its increasing developments in speed and its growing capacity to print larger print runs. By then, most printing presses were owned and run by Chinese businesses, transforming the former backwater town of Shanghai into a bustling industrial centre of China.

Not to mention that after 1905 educational and revolutionary movements under the late Qing dynasty came to appreciate the technological hardware introduced by the missionaries more than the religious material they used to print. In the end it is fair to say that this print technology did not lead to a new Christian kingdom as envisioned by the missionaries, but to the Communist Party's establishment of the People's Republic of China.

For us, though, this historical comparison of the print technology like letterpress is a key example for what Hui describes as "cosmotronics" (2020a). It is these cultural and regional constraints, Hui points out, that re-situate technology in a broader reality, at the same time enabling

and constraining it. Today, letterpress printing technology has clearly been superseded and rendered redundant by digital technology and information networks. However, we still see similar universalist projections associated with the current technological paradigm like the Internet or Artificial Intelligence.

Moreover, looking at the aspect of redundancy of letterpress technology in the context of the *these three words* project provides a counter current that adds a similar cultural constraint – as we have seen with the letterpress technology in China – when it comes to developing cosmo-technical practices.

**Family
Friends
Connection**

**Simon
Coburg**

Redundant technology as pedagogical opportunity?

Revisiting the historic aspect of print capitalism embodied in the letterpress machines, it appears that two parallels can be drawn to our current age and the form of cybernetic capitalism most of the Western world has entered. The first one is the role of a particular technology serving as its single main descriptor. Cybernetic capitalism like print-capitalism is characterised by the dominating technological frame, the Internet and digital information processing technology as theorised by Manuel Castells and others in *The network society* (2005). This reductionist view is, of course, problematic, as it presents itself almost as the single cause and effect for history. Another – and likely to be a more consistent lens to read modern European history through brings us to the second parallel; a form of techno-utopianism of the scientific age (Santos, 2018) as an underlying current throughout modernity bringing with it a tendency to universalise historical developments in the West.

**Plant
More
Trees**

**Scotty
Sunbury**

According to Hui – whose work on the concept of cosmotechnics is of importance for us – one difference between print capitalism and cybernetic capitalism is cybernetics belongs to a larger paradigm in the sciences, namely, organicism, which originated from the criticism against

mechanism as a fundamental ontological understanding (Hui, 2020b, p. 55). This is the expression of the paradigm shift we have observed in science with the systems, network and more process related thinking taking charge over a mechanistic worldview.

Hui argues that the cybernetic Western tradition is still based on a single and universalised concept of technology rationalising one's desire to globalise one's outlook, which in fact is a residue of the desire of a particular kind of thinking. Paired with the history of colonisation and globalisation – and the economic advantages provided through that – such desire can lead to a detachment from reality, which Hui argues has given rise to a mono-technological culture in which modern technology becomes the principle productive force and largely determines the relation between human and non-human beings, human and cosmos, and nature and culture (Hui, 2020a, p. 2).

**Use
All
Waste**

**Rachel
Burke**

It is not just about re-localising technology and its use. Following Heidegger, cosmotechnics is the unification of the cosmos and the moral through technical activities, whether craft-making or art-making “in order to suggest that technology should be re-situated in a broader reality” (Hui, 2020a, p. 2). These forms of practice differ depending on their geographic context. What kind of morality, which and whose cosmos, and how to unite them vary from one culture to another according to different dynamics. There is not just one or two, but many cosmotechnics.

Diversifying these mono-technological tendencies, be it in the way we use technology to make business or organise ourselves in social movements may also be a step towards addressing the global problems we are facing, problems currently synonymous with our Anthropocene age.

**Sustainability
Equity
Kindness**

**Eliza
Brunswick West**

From Hui's cosmotechnics as a critique of a mono-technological culture it is indeed a rather small step to Santos and his work on the epistemologies of the South (Santos, 2018). To be attentive to the pedagogical implications of the cognitive bias in the Western approach to technology, Santos addresses the automatic utopianism of technology related to the scientific paradigm shaping Western modernity. For Santos the hegemony of scientific rationality in the West became a totalitarian model that was forcefully applied across different cultures denying “rationality to all

other forms of knowledge that do not abide by its own epistemological principles and its own methodological rules” (2017, p. 14).

In his search for modes of social emancipation, Santos acknowledges that to allow for identification of the limits and structural shortcomings of the modern scientific paradigm “is the outcome of the great advance in knowledge it made possible” (2017, p. 34). However, Santos’ main critique of the modern scientific paradigm remains unchanged. For him, it provided the theoretical conditions that led to European colonialism, which reflects a “specific form of ignorance” (2017, p. 123). For Santos:

The reduction of modern emancipation to the cognitive-instrumental rationality of science and the reduction of modern regulation to the principle of the market, fuelled by the conversion of science into the primordial productive force, are the determinant conditions of the historical process by which modern emancipation has collapsed into modern regulation (2017, p. 7-8).

**Support
Share
Talk**

**Luisa
Geelong**

In *Decolonising the university: The challenge of deep cognitive justice* (2017) Santos’ introduces his theory with a pair of pillars, capturing the dynamic tension present in Western societies. On the one hand social emancipation and on the other social regulation. His practical suggestion to overcome the cognitive biases of the Western modern project lies in focussing on the areas in our lives that modernity has yet to fully colonise. For Santos this is ‘the community’ in the pillar of regulation and aesthetic-expressive rationality in the pillar of emancipation.

The reason for this is that the community was more or less absorbed by the principles of the market and the state remaining “less encumbered by determinations and in a better position to engage in a positive dialectic with the pillar of emancipation” (Santos, 2017, p. 49). The elements that constitute a community themselves are open and unfinished and therefore render a community ‘if not unrepresentable, only vaguely representable’ and “evade exhaustive enumeration” (2017, p. 49).

In the pillar of emancipation Santos differentiates between moral-practical and aesthetic expressive rationalities. Although both are permeated by “the cognitive-instrumental, performative utilitarian rationality of science” as in the case of the community, the “aesthetic-expressive rationality” in his view, managed to resist the full co-optation due to its essence of being “open textured and unfinished as the artwork itself” (2017, p. 51). In this regard the moral-practical rationality can also be considered an unfinished representation of Western modernity but for Santos, in terms of aiding the construction of an emancipatory knowledge, it is “... a point of arrival, rather than a starting point” (2017, p. 92).

In order to reconstruct emancipatory knowledge as a new form of knowing, we have to start from the unfinished representations of Western modernity, that is, from the principle of the community and from the aesthetic-expressive rationality: emancipatory knowledge is a local knowledge created and disseminated through argumentative discourse; its two characteristics (localness and argumentativeness) belong together, since argumentative discourse can only take place inside interpretive communities, which are the relevant audiences of rhetoric (2017, p. 92).

Against this background we feel that the *these three words* workshops used letterpress printing to facilitate the formation of such ‘interpretive communities’ as a form of public pedagogy by conversing between the moral and the aesthetic through technical activities. Here we extend Hui’s cosmotechnics emphasis on varying dynamics of different cultural contexts with varying dynamics of technology from different times.

**Security
Greenery
Roads**

**Simon
Bugolobi**

Pedagogy with communities

Commoners Press, as part of the Commoners Coop, has at its heart the aim to “... encourage new ways of working together to build social and economic resilience and provide examples of transitional practice” (2023, n.p). The project *these three words* attempted to activate this aspiration as an example of public pedagogy. *these three words* asked for participation as part of the Melbourne and Geelong Design Weeks. Often the projects in Design Week feature ‘cutting-edge’ design practice, interesting new designed objects, and emerging design practitioners. Commoners Press however proposed a public workshop that invited participants into the Press studio so they could experience it, and use the metal type to typeset their three words and be part of the process of printing.

**Friendly
Coastal
Innovative**

**Aaron
Armstrong Creek**

In Karen Charman and Mary Dixon’s *Theory and methods for public pedagogy research* (2021, p. 5) an “educative agent” is one who, through their presence and action, allows education to occur and knowledge to be exchanged and gained. For Commoners Press the workshops in Geelong and Melbourne – and the roundtable later in the week – were moments when all participants became

educative agents in a collaborative process. The ‘printing operators’ of Commoners Press; Rob Eales, Jan Brueggemeier and Neal Haslem, commenced the workshop by providing some background, a brief history, an overview of the press and the printing machines and how to select and typeset the type. Participants brought and shared their *three words* and constructed the printing forms – these were the critical moments of the collaborative workshop. The words, although designed to be simple and a low-risk ask for participants, were also clearly serious. “Thinking about the future liveability of your community, what three words come to mind?” asked participants to generate three words that, to some degree, summed up their relationship to their ‘community’ and their aspirational hopes for that community.

**Nature
Accessibility
Together**

**Jenny
3032 (Ascot Vale)**

These are important, personally held values. As aspirational they are personal, but they also communicate values linked to communities. The structure of the brief, with everyone’s first name and suburb or town included, situates all participants as having a voice as part of their community. For each author/participant this gives an opportunity to articulate that which is seldom asked. A manifesto of sorts, given its orientation towards future states of being.

**Culture
Diversity
Green**

**Amy
3070 (Northcote)**

For others each participants’ *three words* are a gift, immediately able to be extrapolated. We can expand, bring them together and bring our own experience to mind to make sense, understand and open each person’s subjective articulation to the lifeworld of the other.

**Opportunity
Optimistic
Young**

**Param
Werribee**

For Commoners Press it is useful to frame this methodology for public pedagogy in the making, sharing, and the collective presence of the multiple printed *these three words* outcomes. Each *three words* print has a sense of an incantation, they are aspirational, about the future not the present but in their making is a presencing of their reality. To spend the time to typeset and to print the simple *three word* statements is, in some way, to bring them into reality. The time intensive letterpress process and various other printing paraphernalia provides a somewhat distracting, sometimes fun, often demanding but nevertheless exacting process of production. Each *three word* statement, as it is completed and printed, is celebrated in the moment through conversation; “look at this!”, “here’s mine!”, “oh, I’ve got a character in the wrong place!”.

**Food
Mobility
Greenspace**

**Georgia
Richmond**

These are personal statements. They are not to be corrected, there is no wrong answer. For Charman and Dixon this act takes on the quality of *parrhesia* or truth-telling: “the possibility of authority and subsequent knowledge is a challenge to power that purports to be the authority” (2021, p. 28). Taken together as individual truths these printed statements form a new public dialogue, a discourse, framed and activated by one another and thus activating new concepts and aspirations. In this collective is commonality and difference, there is seriousness along with a sense of fun.

**Fun
Street
Signs**

**Jade
West Hobart**

The printing press traditionally is a private, commercial space – not public. Ownership of the equipment, the ‘means of production’ provides the capacity, the power, to print and to profit monetarily from the printing. Printing work is traditionally undertaken for a fee and allows a paying client to disseminate their printed outcome. For Commoners Press and for the *these three words* project, members of the public were invited into the press and took part in the act of production. There is a playful transgression in the invitation to the public to take part in the process themselves and – given simple instructions and some knowledge – being given the power to print.

**Wild
Life
Perpetual**

**Michael
Winchelsea**

Conclusion

The *these three words* project allowed Commoners Press to test its capacity to work as a facilitator for public pedagogy. In this project participants in the Melbourne and Geelong Design Weeks were invited into a working press, usually a private commercial environment, to playfully articulate important personal values around place, community and collective futures. The experience of the workshops and later roundtable was celebratory, vibrant, discursive and engaged. As public events they gave opportunity for light-hearted discussion and sharing of diverse knowledges and understandings through an activity based around economically redundant technology.

Does the nature of working with redundant technology allow new knowledges to come to presence? Does it foster a ‘flatter’ principle of ‘commoning’ that supports the articulation of individual knowledge and potentially de-stabilises hegemonic universalist structures? Perhaps so. Does it enable what design theorist Arturo Escobar describes as “an ethical and political practice of alterity that involves a deep concern for social justice, the radical plurality of all beings, and non hierarchy” (Escobar, 2017, p. xiv)?

By drawing on the concepts of theorists like Santos and Hui, we feel that the workshops did constitute an ‘interpretive community’ for a transient moment and this is evidenced in the produced print works. Commoners Press will try to keep its presses rolling and productive in an ongoing effort to investigate the potentialities hinted at here with *these three words*. Not just for creative community activation but for different collective futures, alternative economies and new ways to ‘become together’, inspired by public pedagogies.

**Make
Do
Care**

**Kirsten
Brunswick West**

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Biographies

Dr Neal Haslem is a communication designer, design educator and a practice-led researcher into and through communication design. He has a background in design studios across a wide range of media. Neal's research lies in the intersection of design practice and the community and the intersubjective action with which design reveals and actualises possible futures. He commenced his Masters by Research with RMIT in 2004 and following this his PhD, completed in 2010. He has been full-time with RMIT since 2011. From 2014-2018 Neal was Program Manager of the Bachelor program, from 2018-2022 he was Associate Dean, Communication Design. His projects include Homefullness; an international interdisciplinary project tackling the intractable problems of housing stress and homelessness and *Flowers of War*; an international collaborative commemorative artwork involving public participation. He is part of the *Commoners Press* experimental letterpress coop. Neal is a founding member of CDEN (Communication Design Educators Network).

Dr Jan Hendrik Brueggemeier is a media producer, creative-practice researcher and lecturer in Media and Communication at RMIT, Melbourne. His research interests lie in cultures of sustainability, environmental activism, and experimental media art. His media practice includes podcasts, media art installations and film scores. He conceived the environmental art/science project *Nature in the Dark* which projected video art into public space, displayed at Melbourne's Federation Square and the National Aquarium, Baltimore, MD, USA. Other works have been exhibited internationally at venues such as M+ in Hong Kong, Sonohr Festival in Switzerland, Radio Saout/Marakech Biennale 5, The Bauhaus Dessau Foundation, The Goethe Institute of Rome and Meteor Festival in Bergen. He is the co-owner of the boutique production company *2 genres* and a member of *Commoners Press*, an experimental print studio in Melbourne. He holds a MFA in Media Arts and Design from the Bauhaus University in Weimar and completed a Creative PhD at the Centre for Creative Arts, La Trobe University in Melbourne.

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¹ Following a postphenomenological perspective philosophers of technology like Peter-Paul Verbeek critique and extend Heidegger's concept of technology, which we will come back to. Verbeek (2005) writes: "Heidegger's hermeneutical approach attempted to understand technology as an alienating way of disclosing reality, reducing concrete technological artefacts to the fruits of such disclosing" (p. 100).

² For Heidegger in contrast to what the ancient Greeks called *technē*, most modern technology would be considered 'ein Gestell' (enframing) that "sees everything as standing reserve or as resources to be exploited" (Hui, 2020, p. 1).

³ Printing in China is estimated to predate European printing by about eight centuries beginning in the Tang dynasty (618-907). A Korean book called *Jikji* (printed 70+ years earlier in 1377), is considered to be the oldest example of a book printed from movable metal type (J. Willard Marriott Library, 2021).