

Unheard Voices

Unheard Voices:
Serigraphic translations
of narratives from
underpaid workers in
New Zealand



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The poet Ben Okri said,

*"To poison a nation, poison its stories.
A demoralised nation tells demoralised stories to itself. Beware of the
storytellers who are not fully conscious of the importance of their gifts, and who
are irresponsible in the application of their art: they could unwittingly help
along the phisic destruction of their people". (1997, p. 109)*

我在忙,請不要跟我說話

1.2

Introduction

This paper is concerned with the marginalised stories of employees who in New Zealand have been forced to work for an illegal income below the minimum wage. In response to the nature of this investigation its discourse is formatted as interplay between the recorded spoken voice and the typographic 'essay'. This essay re-negotiates certain conventions of academic writing because it contains a conversation between oral histories, essay writing and typographical responses.

In 1896 New Zealand and Australia were the first countries in the world to establish a national minimum wage to protect their workers. Today this minimum wage applies to all workers aged sixteen years or older, including home workers, casuals, temporary, and

part-time workers¹. The adult minimum wage is (as of 1st April 2011), NZ\$13.00 an hour. However, in New Zealand there are still workers who experience exploitation from employers who illegally navigate pathways around the legislation.

This article does not claim to present a complete picture of this exploitation but it does offer a reflection on the experiences of three individuals who have lived on a salary paid below the minimum wage. In doing so it presents stories what would otherwise be statistical data.

In this paper I interpret these workers narratives through the eyes of a graphic designer. In designing the 'essay' I have constructed a bifurcate voice that contains the worker's narrations, and typographic artworks that are my

creative reflection upon, and response to, their stories.

The typographical artworks are sections of what were originally, large serigraphic prints (a graphic medium traditionally associated with working-class politics)². In this article, elements of these prints artistically interpret elements of the worker's narratives by being positioned in discourse with audio excerpts of their recorded interviews. When one encounters an image, the worker's recorded voice will begin speaking. By adopting this approach to the essay I do not elevate my interpretation above the worker's narrative but position it in visual conversation with it.

1. Minimum Wage Order 2010: revoked, on 1 April 2011, by clause 7 of the Minimum Wage Order 2011 (SR 2011/26).

2. The history of serigraphic printing serving the 'imaging' of 'labourers' may be traced back to the Workers' Rights movements and the British Unions in the 1900s. Serigraphic processes were also evident in prints generated for the IWW (Industrial Workers of the World, USA) in the 1920s. However, the distinctive aesthetic generated by this process of printing is probably most widely associated with depictions of the Soviet worker in political art generated in Russia between 1913 and 1940.

1.3



The graphic designer as an authoring phenomenon

Traditionally, the primary function of a graphic designer in a commercial environment has been to create communicative texts that promote ideas or products. In this role the designer is generally anonymous and excluded from exercising a political or personal voice. Their communicative abilities serve the needs of their clients.

However, when a graphic designer is involved in research in an academic arena, the ground shifts substantially. Whilst he might use similar tools to orchestrate the communicative potential of a text, the purpose and outcomes are significantly different.

The designer's position as a social commentator has historically been a contested one. Ambivalence over a graphic designer's role is located inside an active and relatively

robust debate. On one side of the schism is the traditional framing of graphic designers as articulate service providers. On the other are those who argue graphic design as a realm for authored vision and socio/political positioning (Burdick, 1992; Ings, 2011; McCoy 1990; VanderLans, 2005).

In 1992, Burdick proposed that designers must consider themselves authors, not facilitators. This shift in perspective, she believed, implied responsibility and voice. Such a reframing she argued, results in a more personal connection with design.

In 1996, Michael Rock raised issues of authorship in graphic design and profiled examples of practitioners who used "the medium of professional graphic design to create self-referential statements and compositions" (p. 243). Operating in a space between

service-oriented projects and 'free expression', these designers, he argued, moved beyond the parameters of a client relationship to "imply that authored design holds some higher, purer purpose" (ibid.). Since these debates, writers like Lupton (2003), Ings (2011), Mermoz (2006), Moline (2006), and Tremlow (2006), (although their positions differ), have discussed the functioning and role of authored narration in graphic design. In their deliberations, the designer is no longer seen as invisible or relegated to the position of articulating a client's voice. Their writing reflects an understanding of Golden-Biddle and Locke's (1997) observation that in research "... authors never can choose to vanish from their texts; they can only pick the disguise in which they will appear" (pp. 72-73).

1.4

Ethics and experience

Accordingly, in this project I am concerned with my contributing voice as a designer. In this state I also declare a potential bias. I grew up as a working class London boy who after leaving school to become a labourer, eventually entered the graphic design profession. My childhood was spent living in tenement buildings, being raised by a solo mother supporting a family of children on money she could glean from incidental cleaning jobs. It is the experiences generated by my background that activated this research project and also afforded the project a distinctive level of participant trust.

While gathering data for the project, I was often able to ask questions framed in a language participants understood and recognised as familiar. In addition, as an interviewer I was also sometimes, able to make intuitive connections between circumstances and the narratives that

issued from them. Occasionally this led to more fruitful levels of questioning than might have occurred where degrees of common experience were dissimilar.

Finally, because I declared my background to participants they were often comparably more trustful of me than they were of the University's ethics procedures. Although these written provisions outlined institutional protection for participants, it was a shared common spectrum of experiences and a mutually understood caution regarding safety and declaration that provided access to often very personal and intimate narratives of exploitation. In all outcomes generated from this research the agreed anonymity between researcher and participant is carefully protected and no publication, formatting, or presentation occurs without ongoing and attentive consent.

Since 1906, following the passing of the Industrial Conciliation Act, the wages of the working class have been fixed by the State. This has led to a steady increase in the standard of living, and the working class has been able to enjoy the fruits of the industrial revolution. Today, the working class is no longer a class of the poor, but a class of the middle class. The working class has become a class of the future.

SEMIO TICS
of the working class

Methodology

In discussing the methodological approach to this project I am cognisant of the 'storied' nature of our lives³. Therefore, in actuating this work I employed a form of narrative inquiry. A narrative inquiry is more than a recorded interview (Clandinin 1986, 1989, Hoffman 1988, Korma 1983), because it can reach into dimensions and nuances beyond the spoken text. For example, when one is interviewing a participant in their home, one is attentive to not only the content but also the context of the interview. A room or a workshop may speak articulately of the environment of a lived experience.

Narrative inquiry engages a process of collaboration involving mutual story telling. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) suggest that people by nature lead

storied lives, and tell stories of these lives, whereas narrative researchers describe such lives, collect and tell stories of them, and write/create narratives of these experiences. Therefore a narrative inquiry may be understood as two narratives, one is the participant's and the other is the researcher's. These two narratives are seen as one conversation on the same subject. Thus, narrative inquiry becomes the vessel for producing data for a 'designed voice'⁴. Each story shares two narrators. The first is the participant whose audio narrative relates to their experiences working below the minimum wage. The second is the graphic designer whose images constitute a researcher's reflection on, and story of, the participant's narrative. This discourse is therefore a 'shared narrative'.

The graphic designer's voice is reflective, subjective, and critical. It is located in the main body of the graphic works and operates as a discourse between words, pictures and contexts.

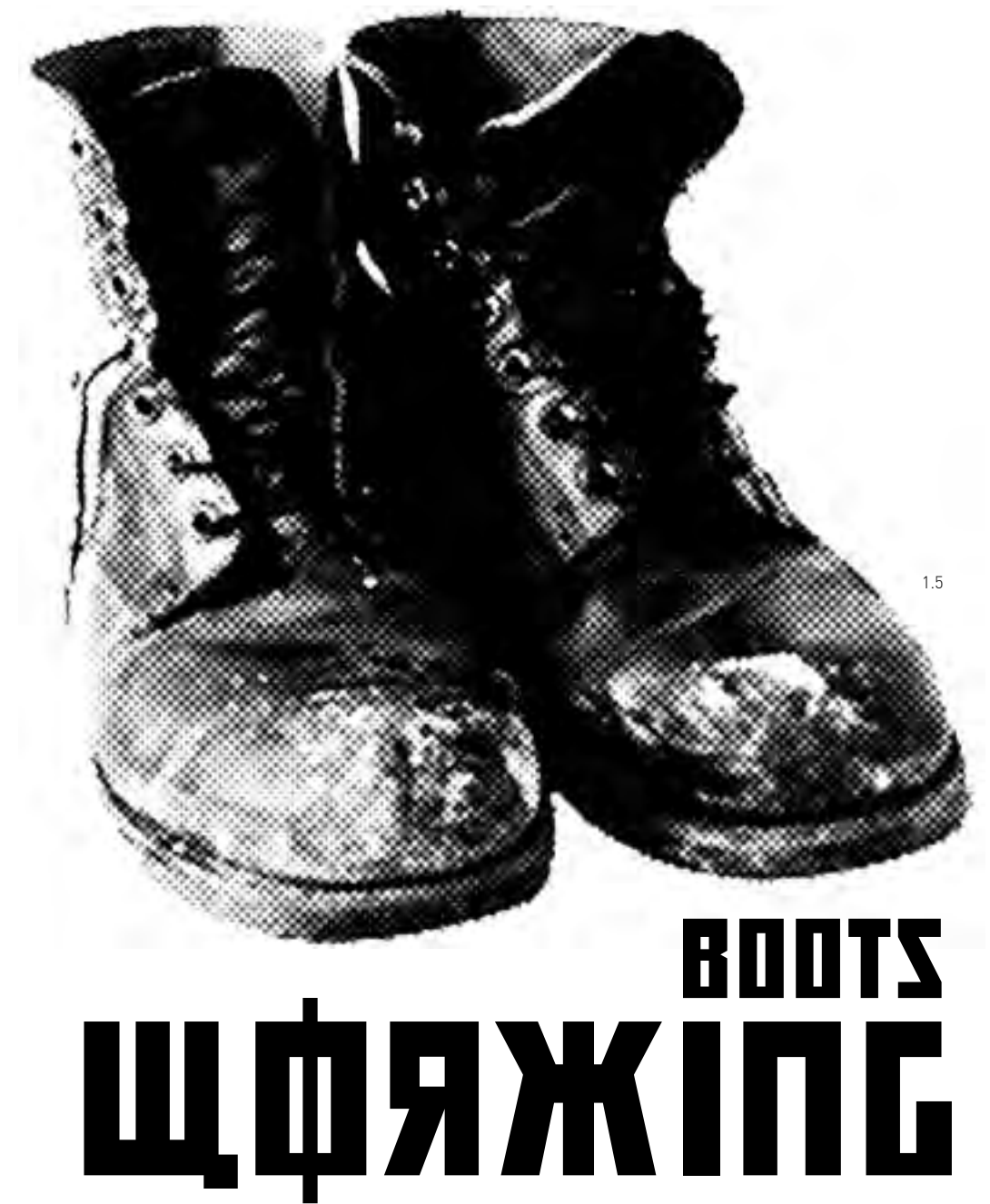
The participant's voice is a personal narrative. It is 'voiced' in a comparatively vernacular tone. This voice recalls histories or adds personal reflection in an almost conversational manner. In these recordings it is not only the words that are important but also the sounds, pauses and sighs. Thus in visually interpreting oral narratives the designer engages with both the linguistic and the paralinguistic. 'How' a story is told, its emphases and nuances all form data that is synthesized into the final works.

3. In terms of methodological approach the project employed a distinctive application of narrative inquiry [that extends notions of writing into communication through image], writers whose discussion of the 'storied life' and how this might be utilised in research [Boje 2001, Connelly & Clandinin, 1990 Reason & Rowan 1981, and Conle 2000], have been useful in framing and applying the methodology.

Conclusion

In designing this essay, I do not envisage that I will change the social landscape of New Zealand, but despite this, I have developed the research that maybe conceived as a form of social activism. In adopting this approach I have sought to creatively synthesize experiences into artworks that provide a deeper insight into the impact of underpaid work. Through this investigation I have attempted to contribute to a broader (and arguably more humane) consideration of underpaid work than what is currently provided through the analysis of statistical data, or in modes of dissemination and reflection generally employed in academic discourse.

4. By a 'designed voice' I refer to a conscious and critical orchestration of graphic elements/thinking into coherent, communicative texts. By adopting this definition, I suggest that graphic design can transcend binary conflicts regarding authorial or service-oriented purpose.



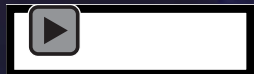




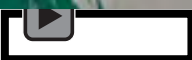
MONDAY - SUNDAY 65 HOURS PER WEEK.



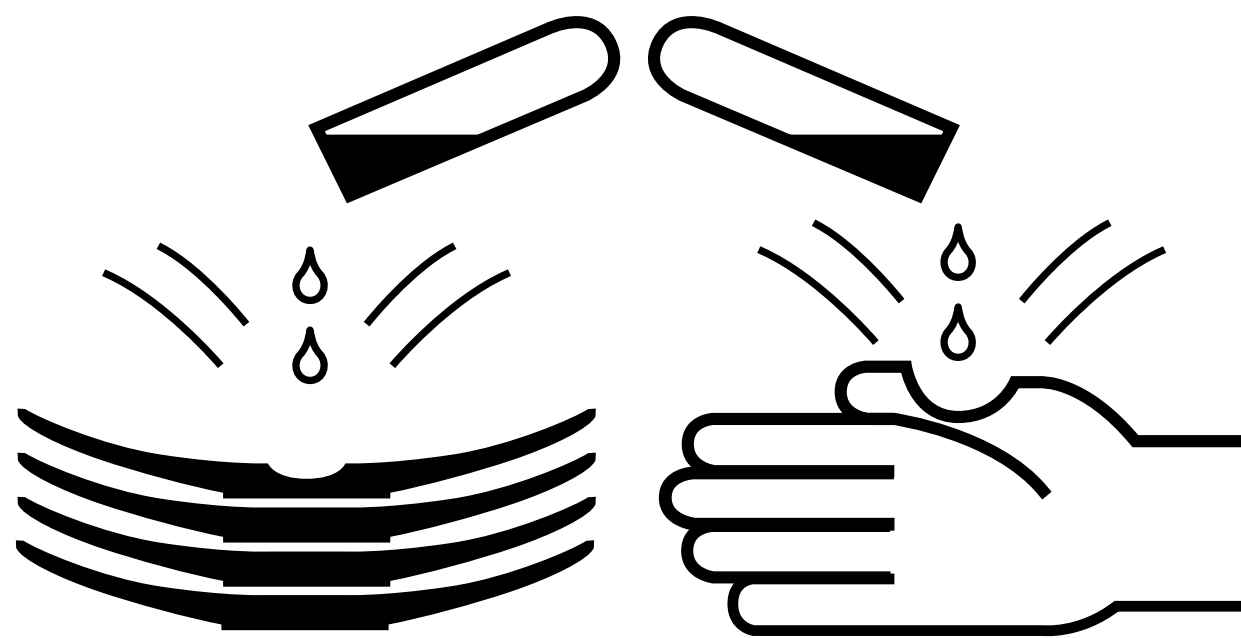
TO CORRUPT



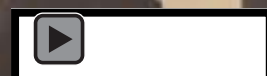
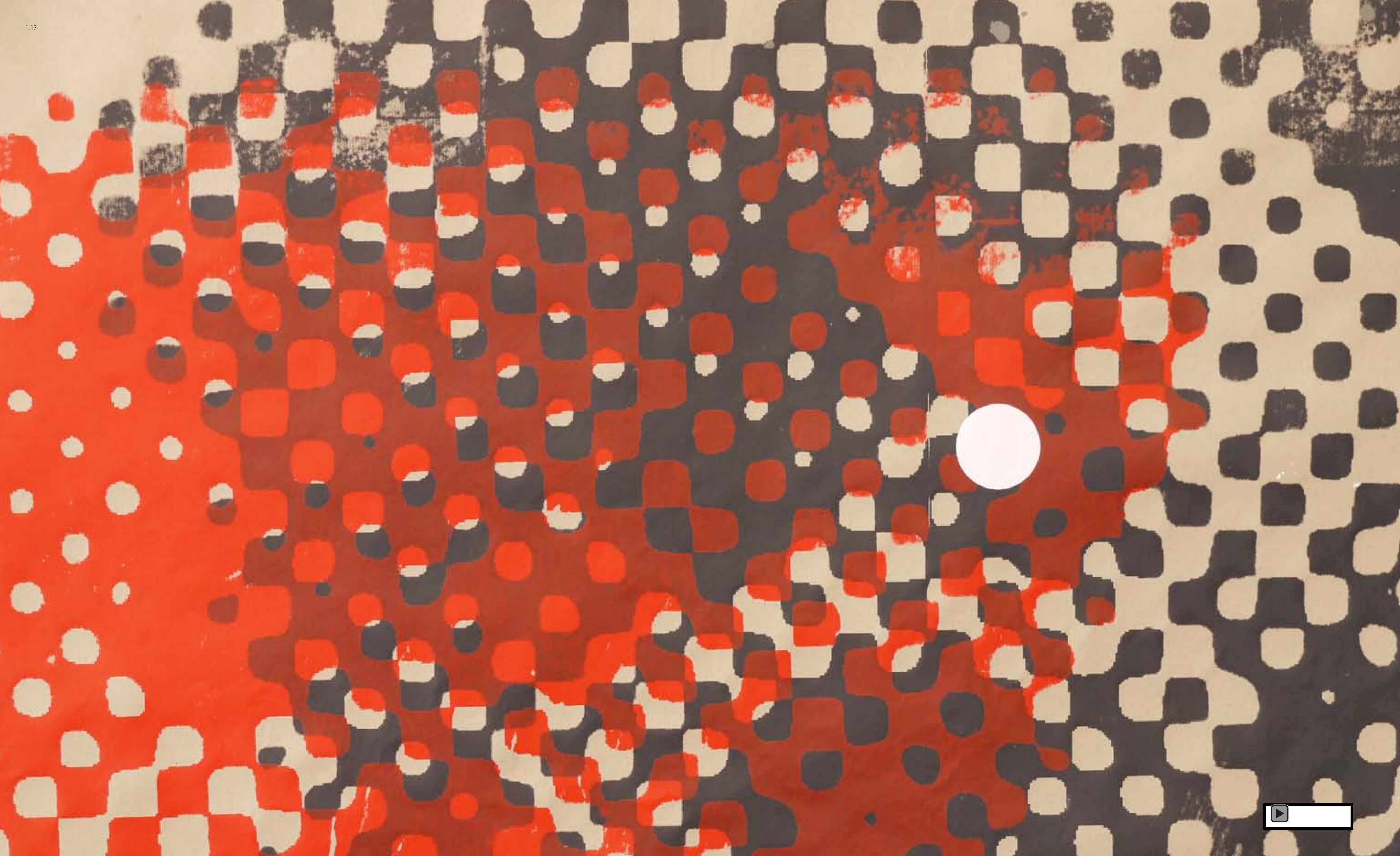




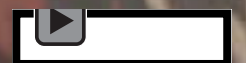
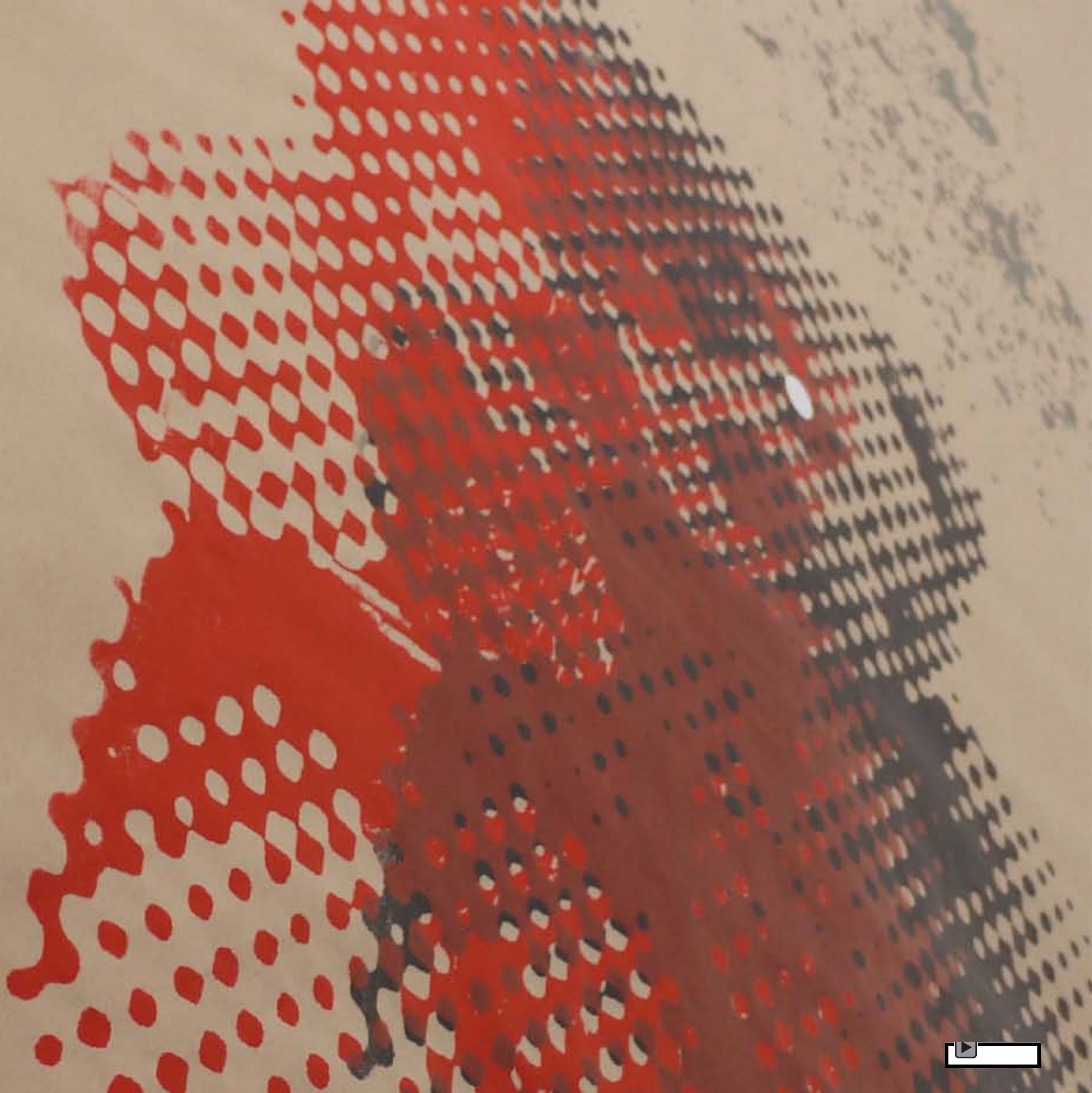
1.12 Vector drawing artwork from the corrosion symbol. Notice how the bar from the original symbol has been changed to a stack of plates.



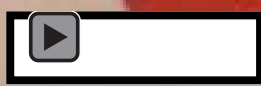
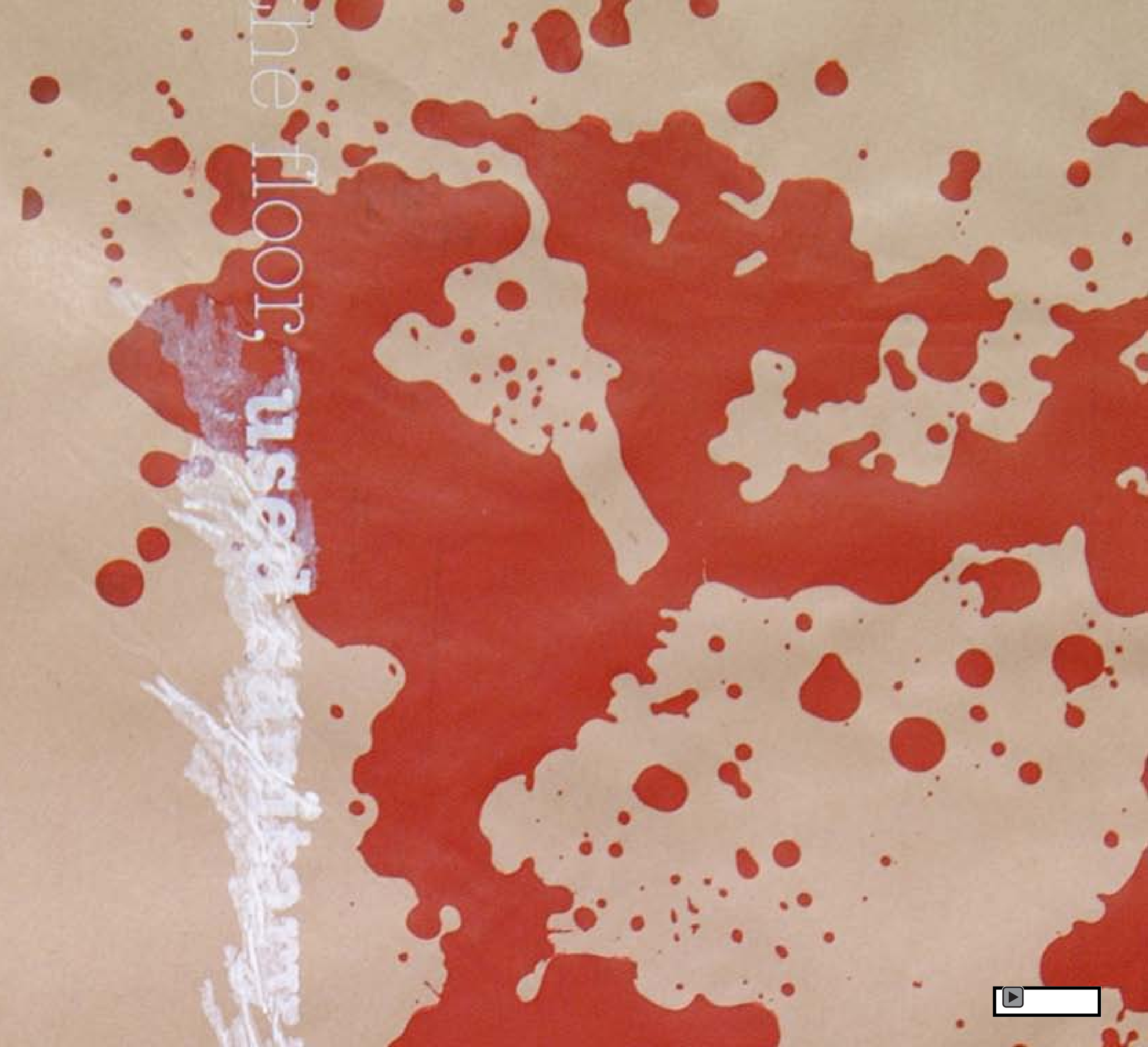
CORROSÃO



the other I'll read know that my kids would have never



the floor, use of





S popping pain killers and



1.18



1.18 Computerised vector drawing from the original picture of the teddy bear.



I did not steal any money



00:00





Very cold and very dirty



Excuse to do...I can't apply another job



茶





Exhibition of final works: Photographs of exhibition

Address of exhibition: Gallery 2, St Paul Gallery, 40 St Paul Street, Auckland, New Zealand



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Sinfeld, D. L. *Ukraine worker*. Auckland: private collection of David Lewis Sinfeld

Fig. 1.4

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Fig. 1.5

Sinfeld, D. L. *Boots image artwork*. Auckland: private collection of David Lewis Sinfeld

Fig. 1.6

Sinfeld, D. L. *Blessed to have a job poster (detail)*. Auckland: private collection of David Lewis Sinfeld

Fig. 1.7

Sinfeld, D. L. *Blessed to have a job poster (detail)*. Auckland: private collection of David Lewis Sinfeld

Fig. 1.8

Sinfeld, D. L. *Blessed to have a job poster (detail)*. Auckland: private collection of David Lewis Sinfeld

Fig. 1.9

Sinfeld, D. L. *Corrosão poster (detail)*. Auckland: private collection of David Lewis Sinfeld

Fig. 1.10

Sinfeld, D. L. *Corrosão poster (detail)*. Auckland: private collection of David Lewis Sinfeld

Fig. 1.11

Sinfeld, D. L. *Corrosão poster (detail)*. Auckland: private collection of David Lewis Sinfeld

Fig. 1.12

Sinfeld, D. L. *Corrosão symbol*. Auckland: private collection of David Lewis Sinfeld

Fig. 1.13

Sinfeld, D. L. *Teddy bear poster*. Auckland: private collection of David Lewis Sinfeld

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Sinfeld, D. L. *Sanitary pad poster*. Auckland: private collection of David Lewis Sinfeld

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Sinfeld, D. L. *Teddy bear poster*. Auckland: private collection of David Lewis Sinfeld

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Sinfeld, D. L. *Teddy bear symbol*. Auckland: private collection of David Lewis Sinfeld

Fig. 1.19

Sinfeld, D. L. *I did not steal any money poster (detail)*. Auckland: private collection of David Lewis Sinfeld

Fig. 1.20

Sinfeld, D. L. *I did not steal any money poster (detail)*. Auckland: private collection of David Lewis Sinfeld

Fig. 1.21

Sinfeld, D. L. *Very cold and very dirty poster (detail)*. Auckland: private collection of David Lewis Sinfeld

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Sinfeld, D. L. *I can't apply another job poster (detail)*. Auckland: private collection of David Lewis Sinfeld

Fig. 1.25

Sinfeld, D. L. *Photograph taken from exhibition, Manifesto*. Auckland: private collection of David Lewis Sinfeld

Fig. 1.26

Sinfeld, D. L. *Photograph taken from exhibition, Manifesto*. Auckland: private collection of David Lewis Sinfeld

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