



OREGON ARTSWATCH

OREGON'S ARTS & CULTURE NEWS

The show must go on.

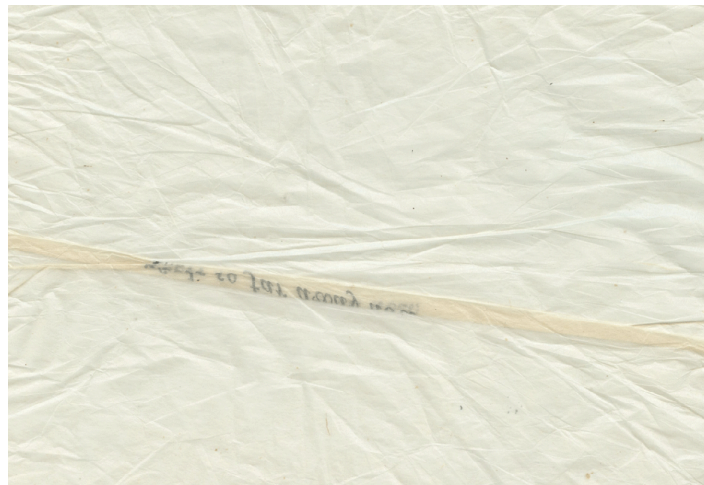


CULTURE

Alyson Provox: Out of Nothing

Provox's innovative print work showcases resourcefulness in both medium and audience engagement

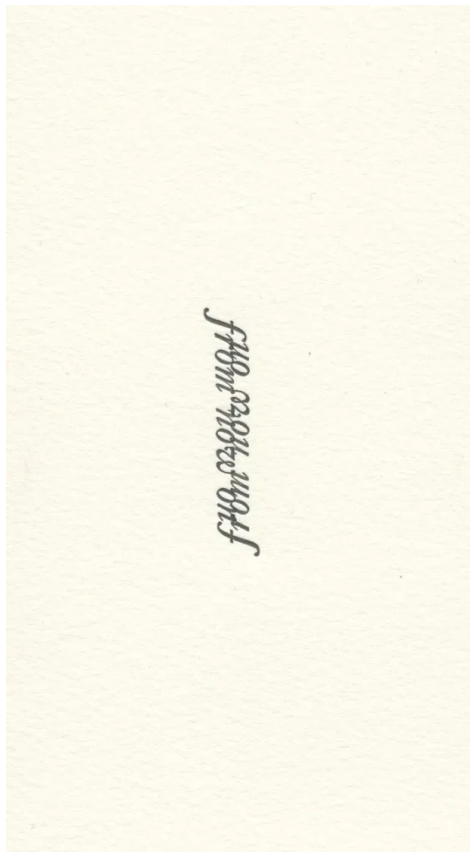
November 7, 2020 // [CULTURE](#), [VISUAL ART](#) // [Lindsay Costello](#)



Untitled (feels so far away now), letterpress on gampi / animated gif

Sometimes simple phrases say it best. [Alyson Provox's](#) letterpressed and animated piece *Untitled (feels so far away now)* is increasingly relevant in light of COVID-19's impact on daily life. Although many institutions have resumed in-person viewings, a carefree visit to an art exhibition remains a distant dream. Portland artist and printmaker Provox acknowledges this challenge with versatile viewing options for her latest exhibition, *Out of Nothing*, at Clark College's Archer Gallery. The show is hosted on Archer Gallery's [website](#), supplemented by a snail-mail art reproductions series, downloadable mobile wallpapers, and a Zoom artist's talk and workshop. The show experiments with subtle human connection through language and offers new possibilities for togetherness in redefined spaces.

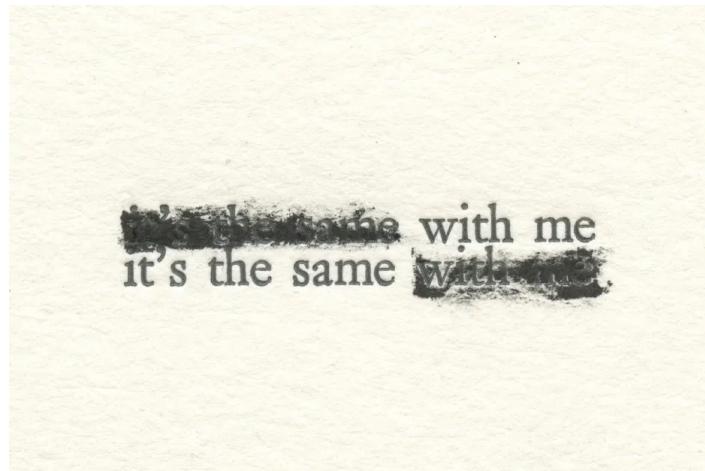
During her artist's talk, Provox explained the exhibition's title; inspired by the phrase *ex nihilo*, or "out of nothing" in Latin, it conjures images of the void and the universe's creation. It also suggests a resourcefulness requisite to daily pandemic life. Provox is known for devising art projects from unconventional sources and in unusual places. Her previous projects include text-based artworks on billboards and public benches. She's pulled source texts from *The Bachelor* and a UFO sighting website. With this in mind, a question arises: What strategies for togetherness can we invent from the tools we have at hand?



Untitled (from now on), letterpress on Arches cover / cellphone wallpaper

Out of Nothing features nine letterpressed pieces on the Archer Gallery website; six are converted into animated .gifs. Provax chose a range of Japanese papers and a delicate serified typeface for the works, adding softness and ephemerality. Also found on the website, free mobile wallpapers encourage the viewer to engage with Provax's snippets of language constantly ([recent research](#) shows we pick up our phones about 96 times a day). The viewer can select between *Untitled (it looks different now)*, wherein the letterpressed phrase is repeated five times, overlapping and fading, or *Untitled (from now on)*, with a vertical phrase, flipped and mirrored, veering toward abstraction. (In all of Provax's pieces for this exhibition, the letterpressed phrase is in parentheses in the title.)

Provax's use of the .gif format brings her pieces alive, circumventing the flattened experience of viewing artworks on a computer screen. The viewer will likely be most familiar with .gifs as memes, shared among friends to express an emotional response without words. Here, Provax animates letterpressed phrases embodying anxiety, loneliness, isolation, and imperfection. The .gifs have an organic, breath-like quality, with phrases shifting on fragile, crumpled paper substrates. Provax uses repetition and overlaps phrases, building urgency and confusion. Creased and wrinkled papers generate dimension and disruption. Some phrases are "redacted" with dark ink. The .gifs can be found on [Giphy](#), downloaded, and used in conversation, again encouraging the integration of Provax's works into the viewer's life.

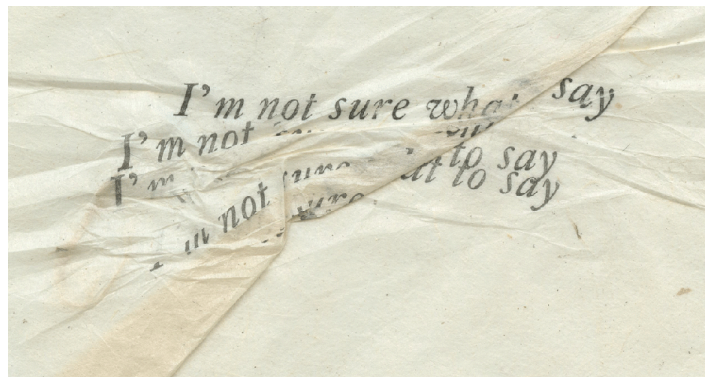


Untitled (with me it's the same), letterpress on Arches cover / vinyl sticker

Archer Gallery offered free mailed reproductions of Provax's works throughout October. Each time I received a piece, I wondered how the objects (a postcard, sticker, and button) strengthened Provax's intentions for *Out of Nothing*. Stickers and buttons function as adornment, assertions of personality and interests to the outside world. But in pandemic times, such decorations are less observed by others, thus shifting the purpose of the objects. They become more personal, contemplative mementos of Provax's works. This creates space for more questions. The option to own artwork from a gallery exhibition is often reserved for the wealthy, and Provax's free offerings flip this expectation, but the objects are still reproductions of original pieces. Without clarity on how the sticker, button, and postcard form a dialogue with the recipient, the mailings inch closer to a marketing campaign.

At the same time, the mailed objects reflect Provax's interest in unorthodox frameworks for togetherness. Delight arose each time I saw Archer Gallery's return address on an envelope. During a period of near-constant discomfort, anxiety, and doom-scrolling, the physicality of the reproduction pieces and their emphasis on connection was a welcome shift. The phrases on each object ("it's the same with me", "you know", and "I keep thinking of the things we should have done") gently acknowledge collective vulnerabilities and the search for common bonds. After receiving the pieces, I considered words like *reciprocity* and *correspondence*—where would the connection go from here?

One option Provax offered was a Zoom-based artist's workshop on the transformative possibilities of text-based art, now [available on Youtube](#), which pushed the exhibition's interactivity. She invited participants to create their own textual artworks using only supplies they had on hand, encouraging experimentation with font, color, size, repetition, erasure, and so on. The exercise also contextualized Provax's studio practice within the realm of emoticons, ASCII art, concrete poets, and text-based artists like Nathaniel Russell, Jenny Holzer, Tracey Emin, and Mary Ellen Solt.



Untitled (I'm not sure what to say), letterpress on kitikata / animated gif

Through *Out of Nothing*, Provax continues her practice of challenging where art can exist. It lives online, on mobile wallpaper, in text conversations, and in the mail. Her simple letterpressed phrases, fractured, creased, and duplicated, illustrate the grief experience in whatever space they occupy. Dichotomies of absence/presence, erasure/exposure, and expansion/reduction layer together, resulting in visual forms that intuit the complexities of human grief. This is a reality humans have always expressed, and perhaps it's how Provax's work functions best—as a reminder that opportunities for vulnerability are always available.