

CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY
School of Graduate Studies

This is to certify that the Graduate Project Exhibition or Film Project prepared

By: Christeen Francis

Entitled: The Rest and the Void

Held at: MFA Gallery, Concordia University

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts (Studio Arts – Print Media)

complies with the regulations of the University and meet the accepted standards with respect to originality and quality.

Names of the final examining committee:

Mitch Mitchel
_____ MFA Studio Arts Advisor

MJ Thompson
_____ Faculty Examiner

Cheryl Simon
_____ Faculty Examiner

Nicola Pezolet
_____ Faculty Examiner

Esther Bourdages
_____ **External Examiner**

Approved by Kelly Thompson

Graduate Program Director or Chair of Department


Rebecca Duclos

Dean of Faculty

Date and Year March 21/2019

Printing the Politics of Displacement
The Rest and The Void

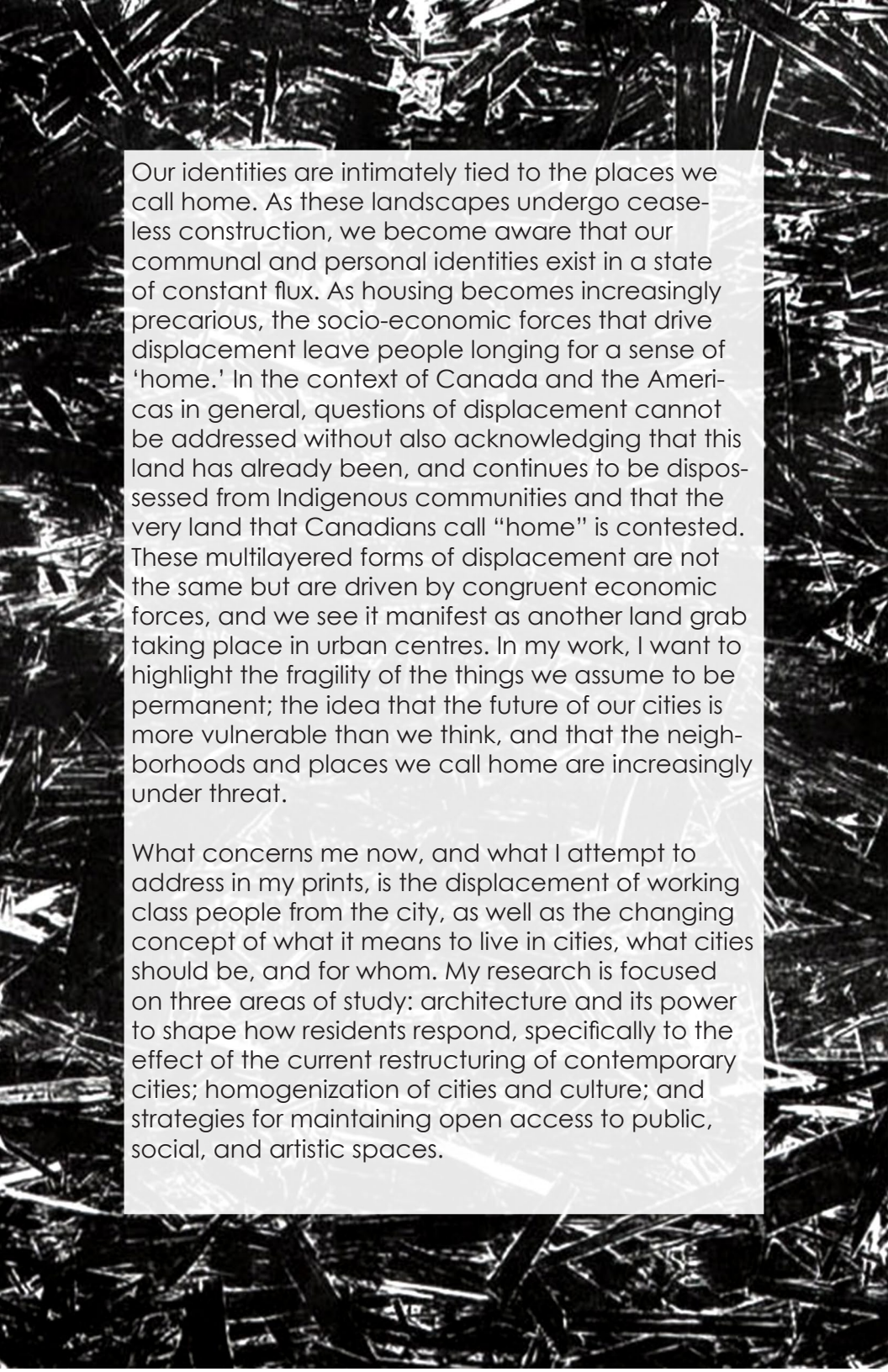
Christeen Francis



What are the ramifications of the shift toward homogenization of urban space on culture, artists, and the working class?

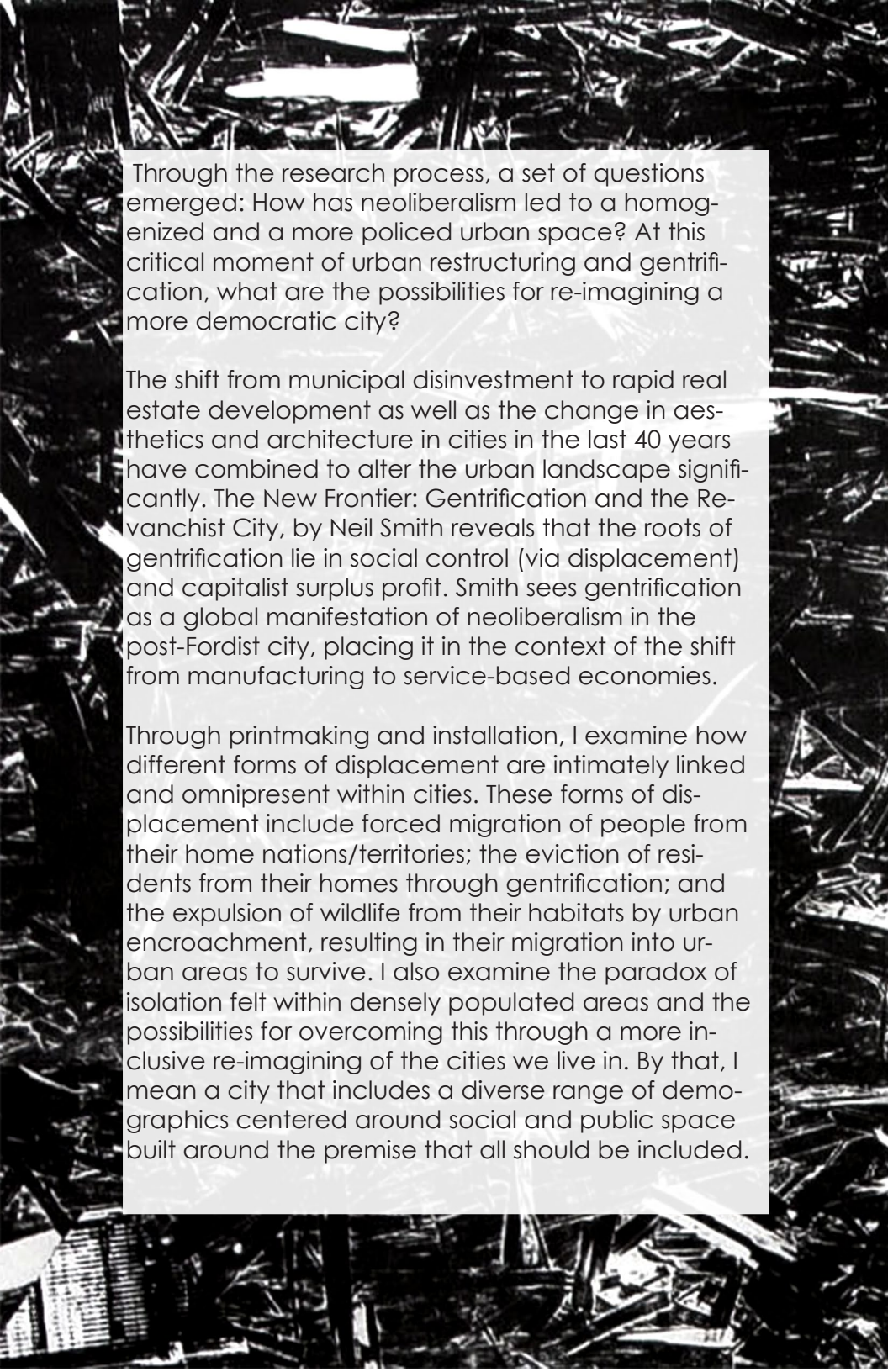
What is the role of artists in resisting this?

When I think about my prints, it is always in the context of cities; the lived realities of its inhabitants, the politics of displacement, home, constant change, and restructuring. I think a lot about cities, as I have always lived in them. Like those who seek the great outdoors to escape, I have always found solace in walking the streets, finding new paths through transitory or in-between spaces. There is always something new and unexpected to be discovered. As a kid, I roamed the tracks looking for wildlife and treasures. Later, I roamed around the city late at night with friends, exploring abandoned buildings and doing graffiti, something I thought of as an expression of public and accessible art, that remains a core value for me in my work. As a teenager, I became involved in the punk and DIY art scene where I made some of my first prints. It seemed natural that I gravitated to printmaking as a medium, because it lends itself to the production of multiples which are easily installed in public places, both as a means of communication and as a reclamation of space. These ideals continue to feed my interest in the tradition of printmaking as a technological advance that led to wider dissemination of information, especially that which was contrary to traditionally held beliefs and social norms. I am attracted to the bold graphic language of broadsheets and political posters and continue to design and print ephemera for social movements with which I am involved.



Our identities are intimately tied to the places we call home. As these landscapes undergo ceaseless construction, we become aware that our communal and personal identities exist in a state of constant flux. As housing becomes increasingly precarious, the socio-economic forces that drive displacement leave people longing for a sense of 'home.' In the context of Canada and the Americas in general, questions of displacement cannot be addressed without also acknowledging that this land has already been, and continues to be dispossessed from Indigenous communities and that the very land that Canadians call "home" is contested. These multilayered forms of displacement are not the same but are driven by congruent economic forces, and we see it manifest as another land grab taking place in urban centres. In my work, I want to highlight the fragility of the things we assume to be permanent; the idea that the future of our cities is more vulnerable than we think, and that the neighborhoods and places we call home are increasingly under threat.

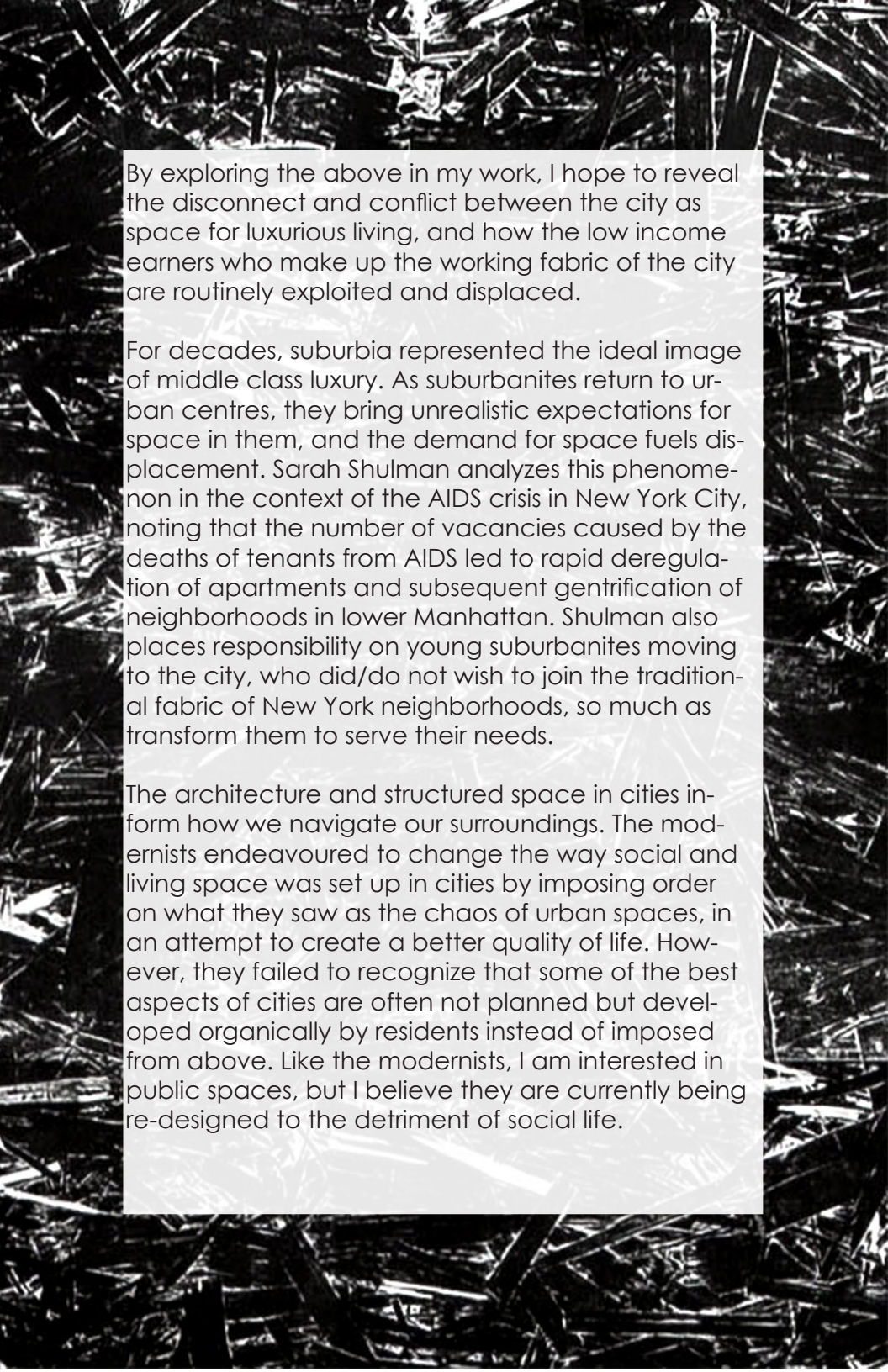
What concerns me now, and what I attempt to address in my prints, is the displacement of working class people from the city, as well as the changing concept of what it means to live in cities, what cities should be, and for whom. My research is focused on three areas of study: architecture and its power to shape how residents respond, specifically to the effect of the current restructuring of contemporary cities; homogenization of cities and culture; and strategies for maintaining open access to public, social, and artistic spaces.



Through the research process, a set of questions emerged: How has neoliberalism led to a homogenized and a more policed urban space? At this critical moment of urban restructuring and gentrification, what are the possibilities for re-imagining a more democratic city?

The shift from municipal disinvestment to rapid real estate development as well as the change in aesthetics and architecture in cities in the last 40 years have combined to alter the urban landscape significantly. The *New Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City*, by Neil Smith reveals that the roots of gentrification lie in social control (via displacement) and capitalist surplus profit. Smith sees gentrification as a global manifestation of neoliberalism in the post-Fordist city, placing it in the context of the shift from manufacturing to service-based economies.

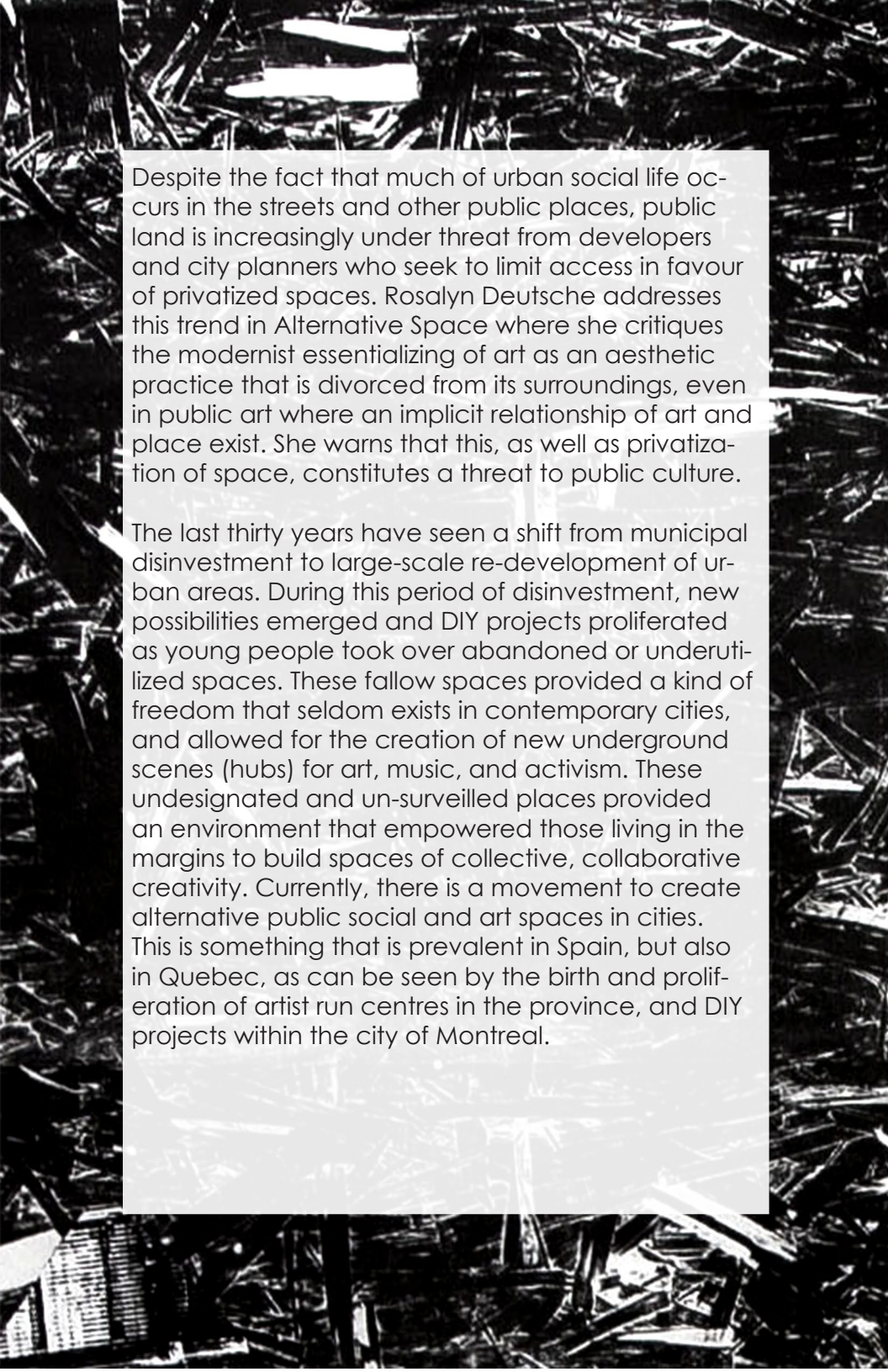
Through printmaking and installation, I examine how different forms of displacement are intimately linked and omnipresent within cities. These forms of displacement include forced migration of people from their home nations/territories; the eviction of residents from their homes through gentrification; and the expulsion of wildlife from their habitats by urban encroachment, resulting in their migration into urban areas to survive. I also examine the paradox of isolation felt within densely populated areas and the possibilities for overcoming this through a more inclusive re-imagining of the cities we live in. By that, I mean a city that includes a diverse range of demographics centered around social and public space built around the premise that all should be included.



By exploring the above in my work, I hope to reveal the disconnect and conflict between the city as space for luxurious living, and how the low income earners who make up the working fabric of the city are routinely exploited and displaced.

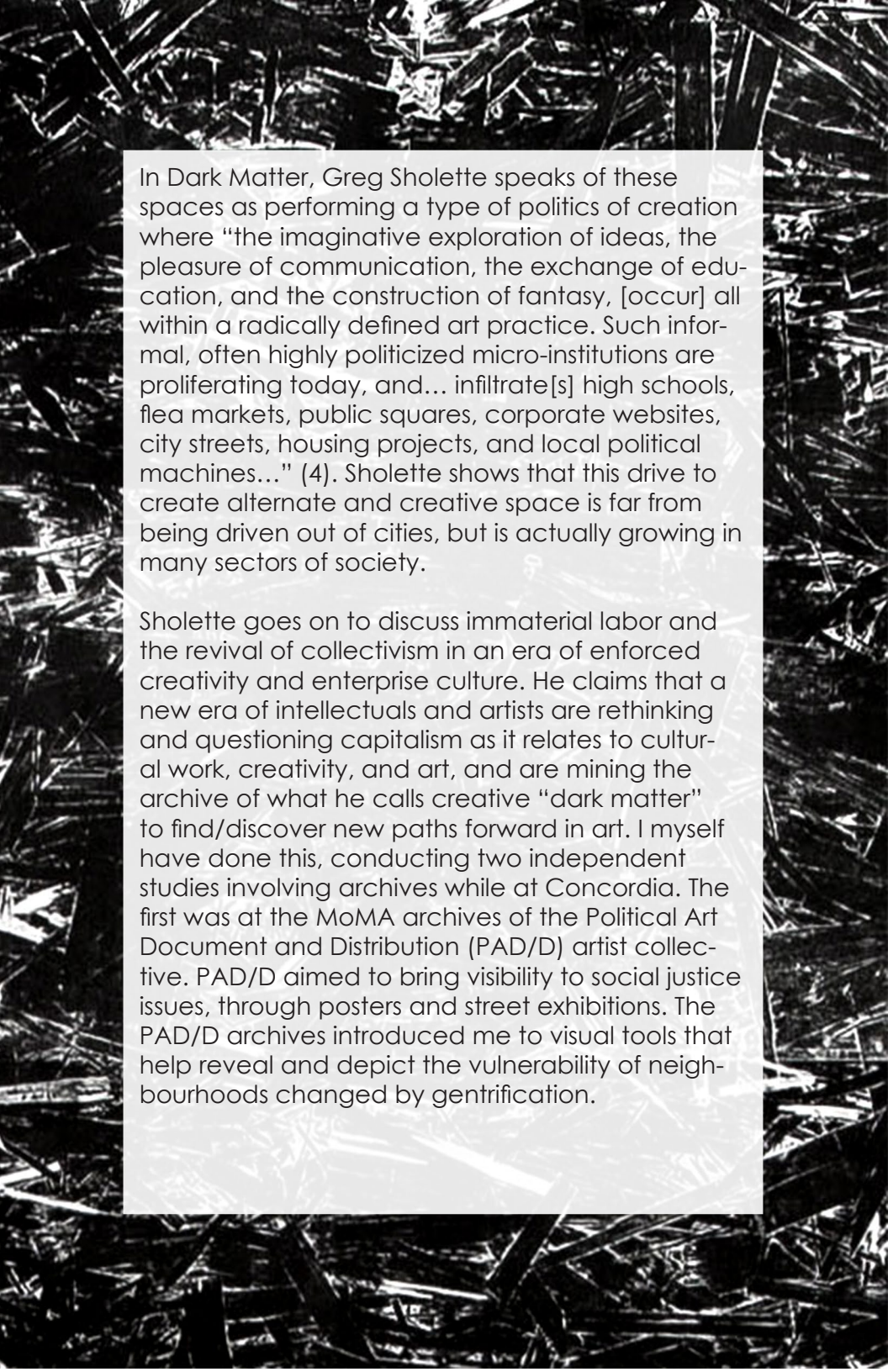
For decades, suburbia represented the ideal image of middle class luxury. As suburbanites return to urban centres, they bring unrealistic expectations for space in them, and the demand for space fuels displacement. Sarah Shulman analyzes this phenomenon in the context of the AIDS crisis in New York City, noting that the number of vacancies caused by the deaths of tenants from AIDS led to rapid deregulation of apartments and subsequent gentrification of neighborhoods in lower Manhattan. Shulman also places responsibility on young suburbanites moving to the city, who did/do not wish to join the traditional fabric of New York neighborhoods, so much as transform them to serve their needs.

The architecture and structured space in cities inform how we navigate our surroundings. The modernists endeavoured to change the way social and living space was set up in cities by imposing order on what they saw as the chaos of urban spaces, in an attempt to create a better quality of life. However, they failed to recognize that some of the best aspects of cities are often not planned but developed organically by residents instead of imposed from above. Like the modernists, I am interested in public spaces, but I believe they are currently being re-designed to the detriment of social life.




Despite the fact that much of urban social life occurs in the streets and other public places, public land is increasingly under threat from developers and city planners who seek to limit access in favour of privatized spaces. Rosalyn Deutsche addresses this trend in *Alternative Space* where she critiques the modernist essentializing of art as an aesthetic practice that is divorced from its surroundings, even in public art where an implicit relationship of art and place exist. She warns that this, as well as privatization of space, constitutes a threat to public culture.

The last thirty years have seen a shift from municipal disinvestment to large-scale re-development of urban areas. During this period of disinvestment, new possibilities emerged and DIY projects proliferated as young people took over abandoned or underutilized spaces. These fallow spaces provided a kind of freedom that seldom exists in contemporary cities, and allowed for the creation of new underground scenes (hubs) for art, music, and activism. These undesignated and un-surveilled places provided an environment that empowered those living in the margins to build spaces of collective, collaborative creativity. Currently, there is a movement to create alternative public social and art spaces in cities. This is something that is prevalent in Spain, but also in Quebec, as can be seen by the birth and proliferation of artist run centres in the province, and DIY projects within the city of Montreal.




In *Dark Matter*, Greg Sholette speaks of these spaces as performing a type of politics of creation where “the imaginative exploration of ideas, the pleasure of communication, the exchange of education, and the construction of fantasy, [occur] all within a radically defined art practice. Such informal, often highly politicized micro-institutions are proliferating today, and... infiltrate[s] high schools, flea markets, public squares, corporate websites, city streets, housing projects, and local political machines...” (4). Sholette shows that this drive to create alternate and creative space is far from being driven out of cities, but is actually growing in many sectors of society.

Sholette goes on to discuss immaterial labor and the revival of collectivism in an era of enforced creativity and enterprise culture. He claims that a new era of intellectuals and artists are rethinking and questioning capitalism as it relates to cultural work, creativity, and art, and are mining the archive of what he calls creative “dark matter” to find/discover new paths forward in art. I myself have done this, conducting two independent studies involving archives while at Concordia. The first was at the MoMA archives of the Political Art Document and Distribution (PAD/D) artist collective. PAD/D aimed to bring visibility to social justice issues, through posters and street exhibitions. The PAD/D archives introduced me to visual tools that help reveal and depict the vulnerability of neighbourhoods changed by gentrification.



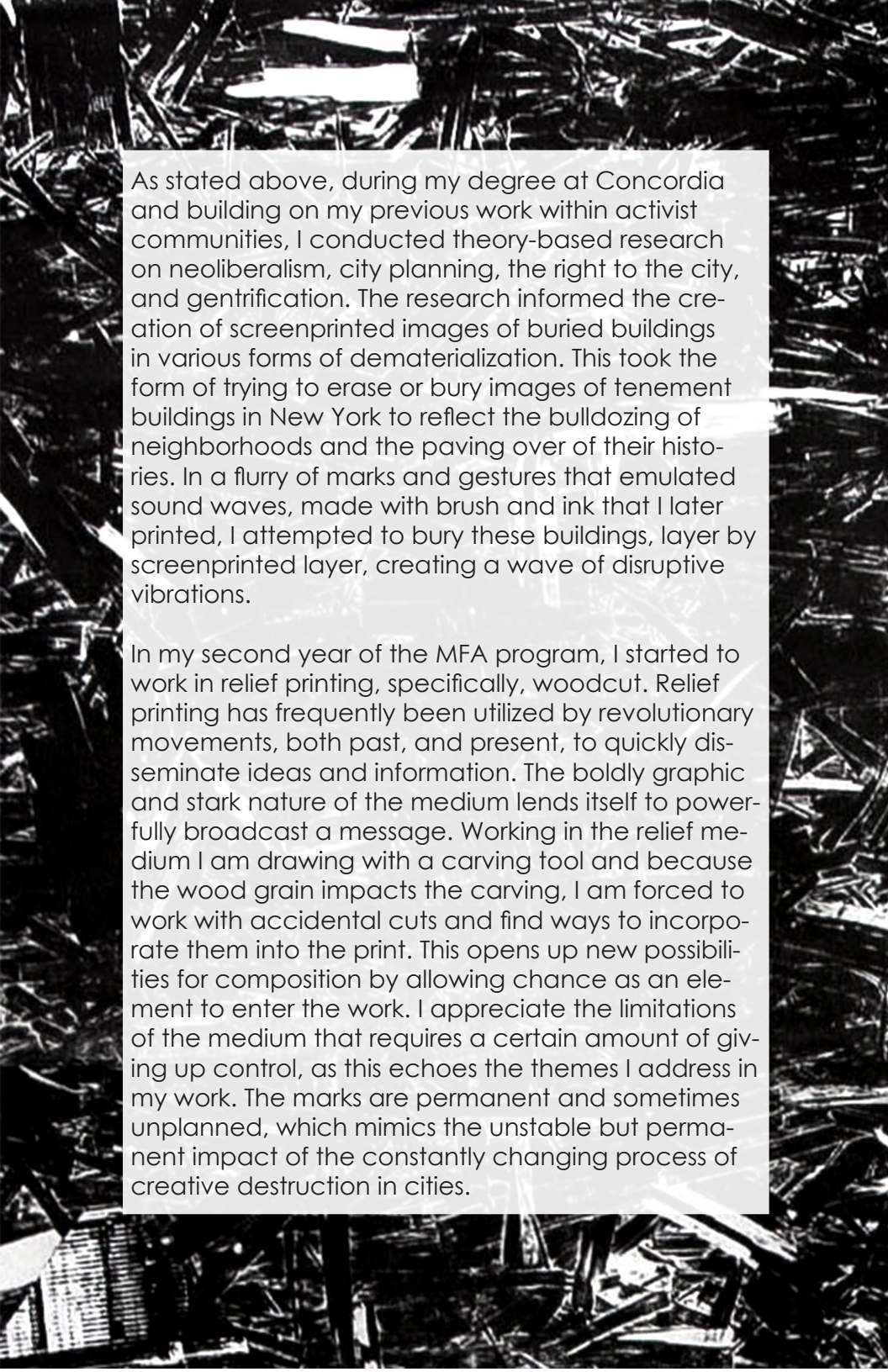
Further thinking on collectivity, art collectives and social space led me to Silvia Federici's inspiring research on the growing movement of "commoning" or "the commons" as a way to communalize reproductive labor, and as a form of mutual support. Federici sees this as a path forward that undermines the pervasive individualism encouraged by neoliberal capitalism that serves to isolate and undermine community bonds and power, which allows capitalism to continue. Sholette sees this manifest in the creation of archives that are commonly held, public, and accessible to the people. He claims that such archives are increasingly mined by young and/or emerging artists as a way to explore historical examples of activist art or work that existed at the margins.

A desire to dig deeper into communally held alternative and art archives led to my second independent study at Interference Archive, an open stacks archive of art and cultural production related to social movements, in Brooklyn, NY. This took the form of an on-site internship and a research trip to Spain with my colleague Lani Hanna (UC Santa Cruz). Together we conducted field research in Madrid and Barcelona looking at collective projects of art, archiving, as well as cooperative bookstores and social centres. We found that the notion of collectivity and the commons as Federici defines it is very present in Spain, and that this has enabled the creation and maintenance of collective alternative social spaces. The willingness to work collectively has led to large scale projects being accomplished through cooperation that exists outside and in opposition to capitalist modes of extraction and commodification of public life.




These include large social, art, and music complexes, an extensive web of radical publishing and distribution, as well as the building of a cooperative condo highrise. The hypothesis we came to while in Spain is that social space is essential to fruitful cultural and political life; allowing people to come together and creating room for dialogue, exchange, and ultimately, solidarity between different social groups. These spaces are the literal grounds through which contemporary art and social movements organize, and they are essential for imagining new possibilities for the future.

When I speak of displacement I am also thinking of it in the context of artmaking, arts funding, and the consumption of art. I think there are parallels in the way that cities and the architecture therein, are built and rebuilt to a certain aesthetic, for a certain demographic, and which kinds of art and culture are promoted or supported. The city has of late, been the place that people come to be artists, to form communities, and exchange ideas. What will happen if they can no longer do so? In asking these questions I seem to echo those posed by Rosalyn Deutsche thirty years ago, that nonetheless seem increasingly relevant today: what happens to culture when we have evicted the workers and artists from the city? Can we keep culture public? What happens when we create a hybrid of public and private space that is accessible only to a certain sector of the population? I believe these are crucial questions to consider when thinking and planning the future of city space.



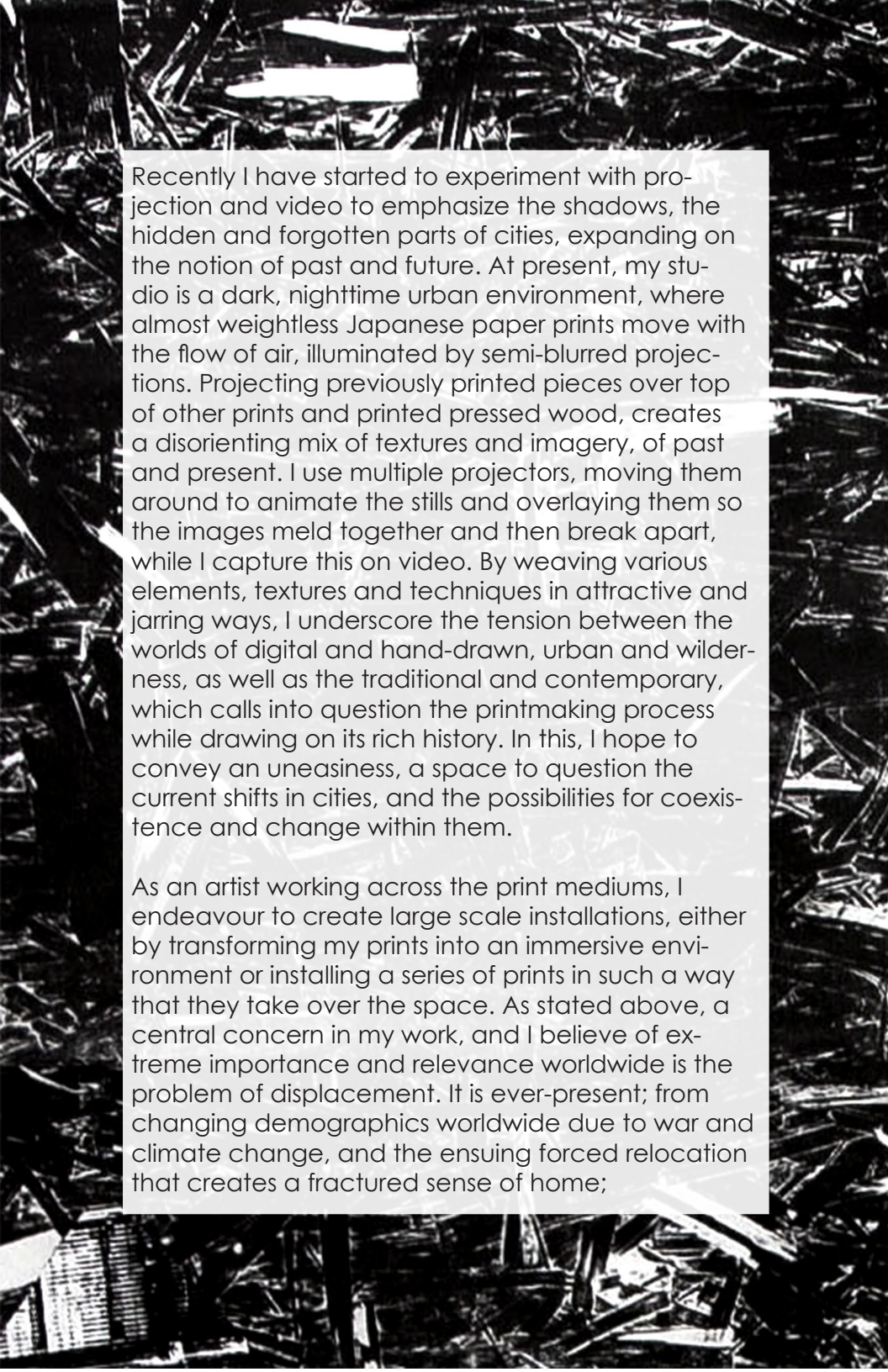
As stated above, during my degree at Concordia and building on my previous work within activist communities, I conducted theory-based research on neoliberalism, city planning, the right to the city, and gentrification. The research informed the creation of screenprinted images of buried buildings in various forms of dematerialization. This took the form of trying to erase or bury images of tenement buildings in New York to reflect the bulldozing of neighborhoods and the paving over of their histories. In a flurry of marks and gestures that emulated sound waves, made with brush and ink that I later printed, I attempted to bury these buildings, layer by screenprinted layer, creating a wave of disruptive vibrations.

In my second year of the MFA program, I started to work in relief printing, specifically, woodcut. Relief printing has frequently been utilized by revolutionary movements, both past, and present, to quickly disseminate ideas and information. The boldly graphic and stark nature of the medium lends itself to powerfully broadcast a message. Working in the relief medium I am drawing with a carving tool and because the wood grain impacts the carving, I am forced to work with accidental cuts and find ways to incorporate them into the print. This opens up new possibilities for composition by allowing chance as an element to enter the work. I appreciate the limitations of the medium that requires a certain amount of giving up control, as this echoes the themes I address in my work. The marks are permanent and sometimes unplanned, which mimics the unstable but permanent impact of the constantly changing process of creative destruction in cities.




Through woodcut, I started disassembling buildings visually to create a sense of disruption and unease in the print composition, to speak to the fragmentation of self and home caused by displacement and gentrification. I developed a series of black and white woodcuts that, by virtue of their dimensions and verticality, emulated buildings in high-density urban landscapes, forming a cityscape that is both familiar and anomalous. In these prints, I integrated the photographic digital process, and hand carved elements. This allowed me to play with both ways of mark making, creating a mix of digital and hand-drawn imagery that corresponds to the blend of subject matter; from the fragmented buildings to the dismembered, hardly recognizable, coywolves weaving between them.

In *The Rest and the Void*, I elaborate on the techniques above, constructing landscapes by rearranging and stacking artifacts collected from sites of architectural destruction and construction in Montreal. These photographic images are then edited and modified using the language of print, through exaggerated use of digital halftone printing, degrading the image so it is not so clearly identifiable. The translated images are then cut into the paper itself, using a laser engraver. I then relief print sheets of compressed wood used to demarcate construction sites, to reference building materials, and to create interruptions in the print surface. This breaks down the photographic image of architecture, and combined with the chaotic pattern of the pressed wood, creates a visual confusion as the eye moves in and out of recognition.



Recently I have started to experiment with projection and video to emphasize the shadows, the hidden and forgotten parts of cities, expanding on the notion of past and future. At present, my studio is a dark, nighttime urban environment, where almost weightless Japanese paper prints move with the flow of air, illuminated by semi-blurred projections. Projecting previously printed pieces over top of other prints and printed pressed wood, creates a disorienting mix of textures and imagery, of past and present. I use multiple projectors, moving them around to animate the stills and overlaying them so the images meld together and then break apart, while I capture this on video. By weaving various elements, textures and techniques in attractive and jarring ways, I underscore the tension between the worlds of digital and hand-drawn, urban and wilderness, as well as the traditional and contemporary, which calls into question the printmaking process while drawing on its rich history. In this, I hope to convey an uneasiness, a space to question the current shifts in cities, and the possibilities for coexistence and change within them.

As an artist working across the print mediums, I endeavour to create large scale installations, either by transforming my prints into an immersive environment or installing a series of prints in such a way that they take over the space. As stated above, a central concern in my work, and I believe of extreme importance and relevance worldwide is the problem of displacement. It is ever-present; from changing demographics worldwide due to war and climate change, and the ensuing forced relocation that creates a fractured sense of home;



to the restructuring of cities to suit an elite demographic, to the loss of habitat, culminating in the migration of wildlife into the cities they now call home. Going forward, I intend to continue my work surrounding displacement using the above-listed methods. I hope to create work that is both powerful and accessible, that can be shown in, and outside the gallery. I will continue to work on the street, within DIY spaces, and in artist run centres. I have proposed a few projects I aim to carry out that require public participation for the completion of the project. This will be achieved through workshops that culminate in the production of a collaborative piece(s), that explores the themes the exhibition seeks to address.

The process-oriented nature, physical restrictions, and possibilities of printmaking have been pivotal in the development of my artwork. Because print media lends itself to reproduction, it has furthered the dissemination and democratization of ideas. Printmaking is not only important to my practice, but to my person, bringing with it a coded political language and link to liberatory movements that are vital to both my work and values. From this, I draw not only aesthetics but an ethic around which is built a community. I use print installation to communicate ideas around complex issues and to create an artistic and personal space for dialogue and exchange. Through the integration of digital technology and traditional print techniques, combined with the practices of political poster making, I am developing a visual language that is as fragmented and varied as the subject matter I choose to address.

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Thanks to all the friends and family who helped me through the last few years and MFA process. It's been real, and real tough at times. Thanks to Lani Hanna and everyone at Interference Archive. Thanks as well to Mitch Mitchell my advisor, and all the great faculty and students I got to work with at Concordia.
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