

Lessons of Darkness

April 5- May 4, 2018, Simpson Library



The CCA Libraries Exhibition Program presents *Lessons of Darkness* by CCA faculty member Emily McVarish. *Lessons of Darkness* is inspired by the French baroque musical genre *leçons de ténèbres*. These settings of the Lamentations were performed during Holy Week on the days separating the commemoration of Christ's death from the celebration of his resurrection. During tenebrae services, candles were progressively extinguished, leaving the church and its attendants in darkness.

The book's themes stem from a sense of antithesis between the contemplative quality and function of this music on the one hand and the habits of contemporary interactivity on the other. A reflective experience of darkness (incalculable loss, unknowable death, *unknowing*, in general) is more or less what we avoid when we check our phones. It recasts darkness as devicelessness and stages an attempt to face what an absence of interactivity might reveal. The text's composition is based on syllabic schemes and typographic settings derived from the phrasing of extended melismas on the letters of the Hebrew alphabet that introduce sections of François Couperin's *Leçons de Ténèbres*.

Couperin's three lessons and their fourteen parts structure the book. Pitch positions and bar lines combine with grained blocks to score its pages. Fragments of a city map and urban imagery punctuate and at times submerge the spaces created by these overlapping grids. Distinctions in typographic color mark Couperin's doubling and intertwining of voices in the third section. The entire text runs in a single line along the bottom of the book's pages as a subtitle to its musical settings.

The exhibit includes McVarish's book *Lessons of Darkness*, one 22-minute film, a binder of source materials, and *Music With Words: A Composer's View*, by Virgil Thomson, an inspiration to the artist.

Emily McVarish is a writer, designer, and book artist who lives and works in San Francisco. Her work has been exhibited internationally, published by Granary Books, and collected by the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Thomas J. Watson Library and the British Library among other institutions. McVarish is also Associate Professor of Graphic Design at California College of the Arts, where she teaches typography, writing, and design criticism.