Sequences of Touch: Dried Flowers; Linen Rags; Rotten Potatoes; Wool Roving

Sheryda Warrener

in dialogue with the tensile properties of material, I make my way to the fifth floor of the Guggenheim and find a spot on a bench facing 'Expanded Expansion', a sculpture by Eva Hesse (figure 1). This work is on display for the first time in 35 years, after a meticulous conservational intervention. Behind me and to my right, a series of small studio experiments are displayed in glass cases. I change spots a few times, look from different vantage points, sketch and take notes, leave the room and return through another door. I take up the invitation to touch the samples of rubberized cheesecloth, feeling for myself the material transformation over time. Sample A is new, soft, pale yellow; Sample B, from 2007, is noticeably less malleable and has darkened in colour, with an early pliability and movement lost. I'm in good company here among the tucks, folds, creases. To sit in front of this sculpture, to sit with any of Hesse's work, is to be struck by its defamiliarizing effects. The draped fabric is resinous, cracked, like the stretched hide of an animal, and it's also unlike anything else and can't be easily compared. Outside the exhibit, the city's surfaces transform: haptic, textured, vibrant, glowing, absurd, alive.

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I'm a poet with a studio practice. Through the work of Eva Hesse, I have come to approach poem-making differently. In particular, the test pieces or 'studio leavings' (Sol LeWitt's term for Hesse's small experimental works) have upended my thinking about process, and serve as the inspiration behind a collection of provocations I'm designing in collaboration with artists, experiments for poets based on visual art strategies and modes.

This piece is a collaboration between Sheryda Warrener, Claire Battershill, Amy E. Elkins, and Jayme Collins.

A provocation, as I've come to define it, prioritizes a tactile experience; is a vehicle for exploration with no desired outcome; and is designed to stimulate imagination, curiosity, associative thinking, and the conditions for creative work. The notion of *provocation* is situated in feminist experimental craft practices: Anni Albers's typewriter studies; Ruth Asawa's drawings that informed her lobed metal sculptures; Sheila Hicks's miniature weavings, made on a hand-built loom with unconventional materials such as leather, nylon, found objects, razor clam shells, feathers, and porcupine quills. The studies of pattern, feeling, and form undertaken by these artists subverted craft traditions and led to works that blurred the line between textile, painting, sculpture, installation.

After seeing Hesse's work in person, and coming to know her process over many years through writing about it, I began to wonder what would happen if writers experimented with language with the same concentration artists apply to their materials. Could poems also be 'intensely handmade'? While poets are certainly devoted to language, perhaps we assume we know it because we use it as a primary mode of communication. This misleading assumption is one I set out to disrupt; in order to come to know language as an artistic medium, we have to take a hands-on approach, manipulate it, test its limits and capacities, and determine its creative, visual and formal effects. By foregrounding the material experience, provocations reverse-engineer poem-making. Applying an idea from Hesse: the poem becomes, simply, an artifact; the *process of making* is the art.

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1.

Installation view, 'Eva Hesse: Expanded Expansion', Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 8 July – 16 October 2022. Artwork copyright The Estate of Eva Hesse, courtesy Hauser & Wirth.

2.

The matière workshop, part of the course *Thinking and Writing through Art*.

For the workshop, I lay out tinfoil, shredded filler, pellon, foam drawer liner, sponge, pencil shavings, moss, linen swatches, pine tape, coffee filters, steel wool, sandpaper, bubble wrap, dried flowers, dried garlic skins (figure 2). I give the poets a simple instruction: *combine materials in unexpected ways, heightening your attention as you go.*

This matière studies exercise was invented by Josef Albers, a critical force behind Black Mountain college's experimental interdisciplinary pedagogy. These exercises became the backbone of his innovative instruction: 'Whatever form they took, the pedagogic premise was constant: by taking textures out of their normal contexts and placing them in relationship to one another, Albers's students suddenly began to see the world of materials around them more acutely.'[1] It's worth noting that Eve Hesse, Ruth Asawa, and Sheila Hicks all have ties to Black Mountain, and were all students of Albers's at one time; Anni and Josef Albers were married and both taught at the college.

When the poets have a matière at hand, I ask them to use it as a visual prompt to generate as many descriptive words as possible by feeling, listening to, and observing their textural combination. I challenge them to make lists of words that are textural (spiky, willowy, rough, fluffy, etc.) and then to draw any associations that come to mind: memories, dreams, phrases, vital words. I hope to spark an electrical current between hand and mind. At this point, I share an excerpt from Susah Howe:

> The English word 'text' comes from Medieval Latin textus 'style or texture of a work', literally 'thing woven', from the past participle stem of textere: 'to weave, to join, fit together, construct'. In several notebooks she labelled

1. Helen Molesworth, *Leap Before You Look: Black Mountain College 1933–1957*, Illustrated edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), p. 86.

2. Susan Howe, *Spontaneous Particulars: The Telepathy of Archives*, Reprint edition (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 2020).

3. Briony Fer, *Eva Hesse: Studiowork*, First Edition (Edinburgh and New Haven: The Fruitmarket Gallery, 2009), p.24.

'Sentences' (1928–29), Gertrude Stein writes: 'A sentence is partly softly after they write it. What is the difference between a sentence and a sewn. What is the difference between a sentence and a picture. They will sew which will make it tapestry. A sentence is not a carrying away. A sentence furnishes while they will draw. A sentence is drawer and drawer full of drawings. A sentence is an imagined masterpiece. A sentence is an imagined frontispiece. In looking up from her embroidery she looks at me. She lifts up the tapestry. It is partly … Think in stitches. Think in settlements. Think in willows.'[2]

I invite the poets to take up Stein's (and Howe's) mode to think together the language generated across the session into a poetic-paragraph-as-weaving, using the structure of the definition 'A sentence is …' 'A poem is …' 'Short talk on language …' or depart from this entirely, and go their own way:

> A sentence loops, torn and pinched.
> I unravel a coil of neon paper clips, my
> heart a red brick tentacled with string. Anything
> with two hemispheres falls apart when you tent your
> hands like that. A strip of shadow, a strip of light.
>
> Emma Cleary

> A sentence is the crinkly baby of raspy pink skies,
> borne from messy kindness. A sentence is the language,
> bhashas, lenguas, langues of spiky life. A sentence
> is a shiny insult and soft anxiety,
> their corners lifted. It is the sung
> repetitions of us around you.
>
> Tanya Banerjee

> Folds of empty space, scrushable,
> ground to a grounding halt – and this
> is what I mean by a blank world, torn
> and moving, a letter just a bended
> kite, paper thrown edgewise & light
> came through and halved a shadow
> twice; slipped an edge, greened it.
>
> Edie Reaney Chun

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The provocation collection activates a material intelligence through poetic encounters with a range of physical experiences: fragrances, public spaces, still lifes, trash, clay, broken objects, weather, wool roving, voice recordings, photographs, meaningful collection of objects. My aim is to disrupt the poet's perception just enough for imagination and intuition to take over so that meaningful subject matter, unexpected metaphors, and formal concepts are revealed; ambiguity is grappled with; and questions begin to emerge.

'The inevitable circuits of touching and seeing that are involved in the simplest gesture of shaping a piece of material are infinitely complex,' writes art historian Briony Fer about Hesse's studioworks.[3] I want to invite my students to bring the dimension of touch into language so that language might touch back, intimate, evoke exchanges of energy. When the body is directly engaged in poem-making, words *are* sensation: they bristle, stir, and move.

'What Gioia Timpanelli called the "hand's imagination" extends beyond the trace of touch … to the imaginary realm of its handling in a larger sense, which incorporates arrangement and rearrangement.'[4] Just as Sol Lewitt procured pastry cases from Canal St. to display Eva Hesse's test pieces (figure 3), I want to present the material artifacts back to the poets in order for them to see the 'history of the impulse to make' embedded in the work, and to make a deeper understanding of one's intuition possible.[5]

3.

Installation view, Eva Hesse's 'Test Pieces,' Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 8 July – 16 October 2022. Artwork copyright The Estate of Eva Hesse, courtesy Hauser & Wirth.

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I'm a poet with a studio practice. A container of random discards sits on my work desk: green plastic wrap from a bouquet, an opalescent rectangle of tablecloth, strips cut from an old silk blouse (figure 4). Stored in a box nearby, various textured papers, magazines, fabric swatches, string, twine, yarn, silk threads, a collection of soft wooden objects resembling natural elements. *In time, and with a little play and imagination, poems will emerge.*

☞☜

4.

The poet's materials.

Claire Battershill

Offcut play, a collaboration with Rosie Battershill, age 4.

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Sometimes they arise from the most unexpected of materials: from the leavings of a larger project. From the scraps. When a bookbinder trims text blocks or mitres corners, they leave fragments behind. Thin hairy strips, and long rectangular blocks of paper, cotton mull, and bookcloth exist outside the margins of the book and become, usually, discarded or recycled waste.

These scraps have tremendous tactile potential, and Josef Albers recommends offcuts as the perfect materials for conducting design experiments with colour:

> Sources easily accessible for many kinds of color paper are waste strips found at printers and bookbinders; collections of samples of packing papers, of wrapping and bag papers, of cover and decoration papers.[6]

During the COVID lockdowns I tried, after a long time of messing around making books on my own, to take a 'proper' bookbinding course online through the bookbinder's guild in Canada (CBBAG). Despite the kindness and patience of the instructor, it was stressful. Nothing I made was perfect, or really honestly any good. I did notice as I was going, though, that I was generating a lot of beautiful garbage. Dozens of brightly coloured triangles, long thin strips of paper in various thicknesses that I could weave and fold and braid. Funny little rectangles, endearingly lopsided. I liked these scraps better than I liked the books I made, which looked both displeasingly amateurish and just like everyone else's. The offcuts were untidy by nature, and they were welcoming. I began to arrange them in patterns and structures on my desk during endless Zoom meetings and while playing with my daughter in the long lockdown hours we spent together.

I curled the longer strips around my fingers in a kind of meditation. 'How do we choose our specific material, our means of communication?' asks Anni Albers: '"Accidentally" Something speaks to us, a sound, a touch, hardness or softness, it catches us and asks us to be formed.'[7] The offcuts were an accidental find, certainly, but they've offered me something I didn't quite realize I needed about the process of research and about all the things we leave behind when we try to tell a historical story. So this piece, too, is structured like a mixed bag of offcuts: little bits and pieces of material I've been considering on the subject of paper as simultaneously tactile and metaphorically rich.

Offcut: Rags and Domesticity

Jonathan Senchyne points out that in previous centuries 'the rag content of paper served as the crucial material link uniting private and public spheres'.[8] He reminds us that rag-collecting for papermaking was itself a learned skill: 'From the late seventeenth- through the late nineteenth-century, women and girls were frequently offered lessons about maintaining the household economy of rags, as well as the value of rags for papermaking'.[9] Advice manuals, such as *The American Frugal Housewife* by Lydia Maria Child show that the 'ragbag' for collecting materials to be made into paper became itself an object that could give a kind of decorative pleasure: '"The ladies in several of the large towns" of Connecticut and Massachusetts display an elegant work bag, as part of the furniture of their parlors, in which every rag that is used in the paper mill, is carefully preserved'.[10] An aesthetics of beautiful discard is built into the history of Western papermaking.

Offcut: What Paper is Made Of

Leaves, coarse brown paper used for packaging, old fishing nets, mulberry bark, hempen ropes, abaca fibres, linen rags, cotton

5.

Offcuts from bookbinding projects.

4. Ibid., p. 156.

5. Ibid., p. 24.

6. Josef Albers, *Interaction of Color: The Complete Digital Edition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2023) para. 3.

7. Josef Albers, *Interaction of Color: The Complete Digital Edition*, para. 2.

8. Jonathan Senchyne, *The Intimacy of Paper in Early and Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2020), p. 69.

9. Senchyne, p. 70.

10. Ibid.

rags, all the rags, the interior and exterior bark of trees, wood pulp, other paper.

Offcut: Ripping, Crumpling, Burning

Often, paper exists in a state of destruction: tearing, ripping, shredding, burning, and crumpling. A far cry from the crisp folded signatures of guild-approved bookbindings. For Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, for instance, paper appears metaphorically in bits and pieces, flying about all haphazardly, torn and burnt and lost to time, the body and mind 'like scraps of torn paper tumbling from a sack'.[11] This 'wastepaper modernism,' as Joseph Rosenberg calls it, 'marks a brief but vital moment in which literature recognized its own materials as occupying the border between meaning and unmeaning. A moment in which it attempted to make a text of its own texture.'[12] Recycled paper was used for actual munitions, explosive and violent – the opposite of the smooth, pristine safety implied by a neat and orderly book. As Rosenberg also points out, the visceral aesthetics of destruction and waste immediately evokes the idea of book-burning, as well as the burning of personal papers, and the scraps and fragments of history that are all we have to go on.

I am not sure, though, that what interests me most about paper is destruction. There is radical potential, of course, in ripping apart a sheet of paper. Or of wearing it away, as in the intensely artful holes in the middle of Sandra Brewster's photographic gel prints (*Blur*); or eating it, like my friend and collaborator Kit Macneil does in their printmaking as performance art (*How to Do Things with Your Mouth*). But right now I think I am more interested in something else: not in destruction but in learning how to bind together. How to build something new.

Offcut: Surfaces

Part of what I like about the offcuts comes down to a surface aesthetic interest – in the threads of gold through the Chiyogami paper, or the geometric printed squares, or the texture of washi. The early twentieth century seems like a golden age of surface decoration, with Enid Marx and her beautiful repetitive designs, the Curwen Press works that straddle the line between Modern and Victorian, with florid bookwork at the borders, and new starker woodcuts trying out more straight lines. But surfaces, what is printed on the paper can make us miss the messy, tactile, ethereal elements contained within the eventual smooth sheets. The watery sludge of 'stuff' – wet rags beaten, so the phrase goes, to a pulp. The pulp stage of papermaking is absolutely replete with what Amy calls the 'queer potential' of texture and mess. Staying on the surface of paper also misses the material itself almost entirely: the linen or cotton rags beneath and within.

8.

Making paper.

7.

Film still, *Paper Making*, Ford Motor Company, 1919.

11. Virginia Woolf, *Orlando* (Penguin, 1975), p. 217.

12. Joseph Elkanah Rosenberg, *Wastepaper Modernism: Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Ruins of Print*, Oxford Mid-Century Studies Series (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), p. 189.

13. Ford Motor Company, *Paper Making* (1919), at <video.alexanderstreet.com/watch/paper-making> [accessed 30 April 2023].

Offcut: How To

A documentary film from the Ford Motor Company, produced in 1919, demonstrates the process of papermaking.[13] A strange moment near the middle of the film shows a hand ripping through several sheets of paper over and over again. A fissure in the mechanical order of things. A moment of disruption. A glitch.

Offcut: Tactile Encounters (or, Getting My Hands Wet)

I didn't know before I tried making paper by hand that I didn't understand it. I thought I knew fair bit about it, actually. After all, as a book historian I had read a lot of books about it. I'd examined a lot of books made out of it. I had held many old books up to the light to see the hidden messages in the fibres. I understood in theory how the process worked, how the watermarks are shaped from wire, the difference between wove and laid paper, between wood pulp manufacturing and paper made from linen, or cotton, or mulberry.

I first made paper with my students in early 2020 at Paperhouse Studio in Toronto. The students were tense and worried about perfection, they made many uneven sheets. So did I. Only when they/I learned to relax into the mess of it, did

Making paper using a deckle box.

9.

things work out a little better. A little smoother. It's hard to teach that part of the process, because that part, the most vital part, is a feeling. It's not a technique or a term or a mode of critical analysis. Just a feeling you either have or don't.

Offcut: The Trouble with Paper Papers

Talking to a colleague a few weeks ago I complained lightheartedly about the difficulties of coming out the other side of a big project and writing something new. *I don't know what I'm going to do about this paper paper*, I said. *The paper paper is maybe not even a paper. I'm not sure it's even about paper anymore.*

Somehow, this flippant remark about the slippage between paper the substance and paper the piece of academic work led me back to Fredric Jameson's *The Modernist Papers*, and particularly his positioning of that continually perplexing relationship between self and theory, field and work:

> The coherence of any serious and extended engagement with cultural experience depends on a productive coordination between contingency and theory; between chance encounters and an intellectual project … we always try to resolve this tension one way or the other, by philosophically confirming the aleatory nature of the experience, or subsuming the personal under a theoretical meaning. But the vitality of the engagement depends on keeping the tension alive. In practice, this probably means the construction of a Gestalt which can be read either way.[14]

14. Fredric Jameson, *The Modernist Papers*, Reprint edition (London: Verso Books, 2016), ix.

10.

Amy E. Elkins

So here we are again, back at the flickering and destabilizing reality of metaphor.

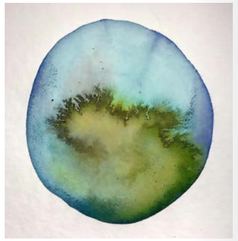
A year ago, the frail lilac bush in my yard started to flower, as did the more vigorous cherry blossom trees across the street. Winter in Minnesota had seemed interminably bleak, and the blooms delivered a painterly splendor that felt hopeful. I wanted to distill the feeling spring evoked, bottle it, keep it, and preserve it. In the following months, I continued to forage and collect things with pigment potential. I wrapped my fingers around the pudgy wild grapes growing on a neighbor's fence, taking just enough to boil down later for a little dropper bottle of deep purple. I saved avocado skins and pits, gathered oak galls from my tree – thanking the wasps for their little tannic

15. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), viii.

16. Jason Logan and Michael Ondaatje, *Make Ink: A Forager's Guide to Natural Inkmaking*, Illustrated edition (New York: Abrams, 2018), pp. 164, 179.

17. Paul Muldoon, *Paul Muldoon Poems 1968–1998*, First Edition (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), p. 333.

13.



14.

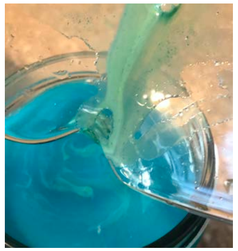
creations – and picked up copper scraps to add to a jar of salt and vinegar. All of the inks were made in a base of water from Hot Springs, Arkansas (where I grew up and where water quality is revered) and preserved using a single whole clove with a few drops of binder. Cooking inks feels like a bubbly, witchy process (figures 11, 12). It is organic, slightly dangerous, and interconnected.

I made art from my colors – large scale pieces, backdrops for other works, magic swatches of planetary amalgams (figures 13–15), and a twenty-piece series of multimedia artworks called *Theories of Making*. Each work in the series connects to a maker, writer, or theorist I've felt inspired by and incorporates my handmade inks along with paper handcrafted by Chicago-based artist and scholar, Melissa Potter. But as I came to the end of this series, I realized the inks were going bad. I tossed a couple of bottles that had developed mold, which floated like fetid lilypads at the top of the liquid. Sheryda suggested to me the 'durational poetics' of my media – how my own urgency to complete my series before the inks went off formed an additional layer of material meaning.

11.

Handmade inks impose a deadline. In choosing the constraints of Potter's paper and my own handmade inks, I'd envisioned a certain theoretical collaboration with my materials and the plants they were made from, but ink's organic matter wielded certain durational tendencies I hadn't expected. Jane Bennett offers the concept of 'vibrant matter' to describe the agency of the nonhuman world as a way to 'encourage more intelligent and sustainable engagements with vibrant matter and lively things,' which can 'impede or block the will and designs of humans but also … act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own'.[15] Ink's vibrant materialism made itself known through various hues, textures, and reactions, including a disruptive character, or timeline, of decay. In going bad, the inks ultimately determined the speed of my creative practice, a sort of alchemical pacing that reinforced the power of working with living, vibrant concoctions. Ink demanded a response, determining a new kind of relationship to my creative-critical project.

12.



15.

In *Make Ink: A Forager's Guide to Natural Inkmaking,* Jason Logan establishes some 'Ground Rules of Natural Inkmaking', such as 'Ink is Alive: Stop worrying about how long your color will last in its current state and start delighting in the way it changes … It's living, ink'.[16] To be alive is also to be vulnerable, in flux, cyclic, transformable – susceptible not only to *change* but to the instability of existence itself. The Irish poet Paul Muldoon calls on the figure of ink in just this way, to capture the paradox of regeneration and decomposition intrinsic to loving, and then losing, someone. His partner, Mary Farl Powers, died of breast cancer in 1992 at the age of 43. An Irish transplant originally from Minnesota, Powers was a printmaker with an international reputation in the art world, and in his 360-line elegy entitled 'Incantata', Muldoon evokes the figure of ink three times in the poem. First, he describes,

> your hand moving in such a deliberate arc
> as you ground a lithographic stone
> that your hand and the stone blurred to one
> and your face blurred into the face
> of your mother, Betty Wahl,
> who took your failing, ink-stained hand
> in her failing, ink-stained hand
> and together you ground down that
> stone by sheer force of will.[17]

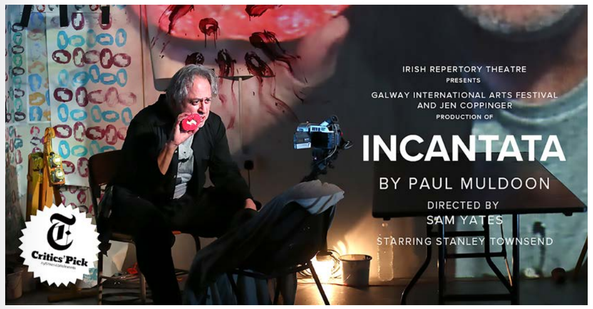
Powers's mother, Wahl, was a novelist, and in these lines, Muldoon brings together the art of literature with the art of lithographic printmaking – allowing the 'ink-stained hands' of mother and daughter to blur into one image of artistic (and maternal) creation. Later in the poem, Muldoon depicts his own process of writing with ink, remembering 'That last time in Dublin, I copied with a quill dipped in oak-gall, a poem for *The Great Book of Ireland*'.[18] The book was a project to which both Powers and Muldoon contributed, a cross-artistic collaboration with contributions from 120 artists, 140 poets, and 9 composers, housed in a board-box binding constructed from an elm tree planted by W.B. Yeats and inlaid with 3,000-year-old bog oak. In using a quill pen and iron oak gall ink (known for its archival durability and historical significance), Muldoon participates in the project's historicity, a poetic gesture of collaboration with other makers. His elegy for Powers concludes with the wish

> that this *Incantata*
> might have you look up from your
> plate of copper or zinc
> … that you might reach out, arrah,
> and take into your ink-stained hands my
> own hands stained with ink.[19]

Powers focuses her attention on the materials of her medium – the zinc or copper plates used for etching – while the speaker, eternally enchanted ('Incantata' meaning *spellbound*, *enchanted*, *beguiled by*), implores her to connect – physically and spiritually – one last time. His hands, 'stained with ink' from writing, and her hands, stained with ink from printmaking, join on the page of the poem itself.

In 2018, in Galway, I sat in the audience of the stage adaptation of Muldoon's 'Incantata,' a multimedia production directed by Sam Yates starring Stanley Townsend (figure 16). Townsend draws from a pile of spuds in the corner of the stage, which he carves and dips into paint, making a series of potato prints throughout the play (figure 17). The walls are also decorated with potato prints, and images of Powers's art are projected onto the backdrop.

16.



17.

Stanley Townsend in *Incantata*, Galway International Arts Festival (Image used with permission of Carol Rosegg).

18.

18. Muldoon, p. 334.
19. Muldoon, p. 341.
20. Muldoon, p. 331.
21. Ibid.
22. Muldoon, p. 113.

Dappled Torso by Mary Farl Powers, etching and aquatint on paper. Collection & Image copyright Hugh Lane Gallery and The Estate of Mary Farl Powers.

The repetition of potatoes as the primary artistic vehicle is no accident. In the poem version of 'Incantata,' Muldoon remembers Powers (and celebrates her art) through hands-on engagement with her processes:

> as I X-Actoed from a spud the Inca glyph for a
> mouth: thought of that first time I saw your pink
> spotted torso, distant-near as a nautilus.[20]

In a playful moment of erotic unveiling, the speaker recalls 'when you undid your portfolio, yes indeedy, / and held the print of what looked like a cankered potato'.[21] This opening stanza recalls Muldoon's earlier ekphrastic poem, 'Mary Farl Powers: *Pink Spotted Torso*': 'She turns from the sink / potato in hand. A Kerr's Pink, /…/ that will answer her knife / with a hieroglyph'.[22] Powers's torso series indeed resembles spotted potatoes, a printmaking aesthetic the speaker takes in hand – through his own potato prints – as a way to touch the spirit of his lover (figure 18).

Incantata poster, used with permission of the Irish Repertory Theatre.

The poet-speaker tries to commemorate her life, extending it through the formal duration of the long elegy. The art of commemoration, however, is difficult in the wake of grief, as he struggles to speak as 'a potato-mouth in a potato face', invoking Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* in 'trying to make sense of the '*quaquaqua*' / of that potato-mouth; that mouth as prim / and proper as it's full of self-opprobrium'.[23] Here the ink-stained poet is a potato (or as articulate, in his deep grief, as a potato-mouth), and the potato is Powers's haptic device, her tool.

In Muldoon's elegy, potatoes are a fraught, decomposing metaphor for grief, even as words fail in 'mak[ing] sense of the "quaquaqua"' of loss. And yet, Muldoon's poem effectively elegizes Powers on the page with his own inky practice of poetry-writing. In both the poem and the play, the grief-stricken speaker processes loss through his own hands-on experiments with potato printing.

Potatoes, as poetic symbol of love and grief, also play an important role in French filmmaker Agnès Varda's 2000 documentary, *The Gleaners and I*.[24] Varda describes the traditional practice of 'gleaning', or collecting leftover remainders of food such as corn, potatoes, or grapes. A practice traditionally upheld by women, gleaning still occurs in some rural communities, which Varda champions gleaning as a practice of community care, sustainability, and self-acceptance. Sorting through leftover damaged and small potatoes, a fellow gleaner notes, 'some are misshapen. Heart-shaped', and Varda exclaims, '*I want the heart!*' (10:43–46) (figure 19). Engaging in the beauty of the extreme closeup, she instructs the audience in an *alternative* collection practice: 'There's no law governing this type of gleaning – of images, impression, emotions. And 'gleaning' in the dictionary has a figurative meaning as well: to glean facts, actions, and information' (32:51–33:05). Before the potatoes go bad, gleaners collect and use them, just as the aging feminist filmmaker figuratively gleans by collecting material for her documentary – or, in Muldoon's case, how a poet assembles images and impressions for an elegy.

The Gleaners and I, directed by Agnès Varda.

20.

19.

The Gleaners and I, directed by Agnès Varda.

Varda's playful gathering of sensory impressions inspired two artworks in my *Theories of Making* series. The first participates in a game she plays while driving down the highway, which she describes as, '[a]gain, one hand filming the other, and more trucks' (43:29). She plays capture with her hand, forming a lens with her fingers to catch and release things as they pass by (figure 20).

In *Catch a Spirit*, I used my gleaned, handmade ink to create a heart-shaped potato print next to a gesture that recalls Varda's hand-lens; my own hand touches itself, capturing in its negative space a cyanotype of Varda's feet running to the beach (figure 21). The title draws from a line in 'Incantata' expressing Muldoon's attempt, through his elegy, to catch the spirit of his loved one.

In *The Gleaner's and I*, Varda says, 'I like filming rot … leftovers, waste … mold and trash' (1:13:44–53). As in Muldoon's elegy, full of cankered, carved, and inked potatoes, the durations of organic decomposition emerge as a paradox: a form (or medium) of artistic inspiration, even as deterioration feels like an all-too-visceral metaphor for death, grief, and suffering. In *Muse: Rotting Potato*, I mirrored Varda's intimate technique of close-up to capture the sensuous excess of the potato-as-muse in Muldoon's poem against a subtle wash of copper ink – a toxic, smelly ink that explodes with rust dust every time I attempt to use it (figure 22).

The decomposing potato is puckered and dappled like aging skin, a texture further emphasized in the texture of the paper, which beckons you to touch. Papermaking, like inkmaking, is a process of gleaning scraps and materials, which are reconstituted into an art surface. These textures emerge from processes of foraging, collection, and the material rhythms of growth and decay. Like the seasonal growth of organic matter, *we linger, we collaborate, we break down, grow, and*

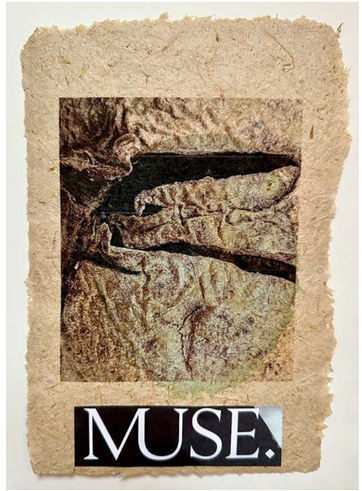
21.

Muse: Rotting Potato by Amy E. Elkins (2023).

23. Muldoon, p.336.

24. *Les Glaneurs et La Glaneuse*, directed by Agnès Varda (Ciné-tamaris, 2000).

Catch a Spirit by Amy E. Elkins (2023).



22.

Jayme Collins

When I first presented a version of this paper, attendees were invited to participate in a minor act of iconoclasm. A piece of red wool gleaned from a performance by Chilean poet and artist Cecilia Vicuña was passed among the audience, who were invited to pull off a small chunk and pass it along (figure 23). Throughout Vicuña's expansive practice, which includes language, painting, fiber art, and performance, red wool frequently appears as an object of reverence, a ritual part of an extended blessing. But I invited attendees to 'parse' the wool: to pull it piece from piece and then to put it back together in new shapes, exploring with their fingers the tensile processes of wool and its worlds. As wool moves through the stages of textile making from roving to thread to knot, it is pulled, twisted, and looped. Approaching Vicuña's poetry, too, begins with this experience of touch.

come around again.

23.

Red wool from a Vicuña performance alongside unprocessed wool.

I. Roving

Vicuña asks: 'is the word conducting thread, or does the thread conduct word-making?'[25]. The question transforms wool into a live wire, granting it the power to connect and illuminate. Asking what a thread 'conducts' sends us into its inner fibrous parts, a thread's strands and hairs. Held in the hand, the wool is a mass of fibers too small to grasp and too entwined to pull one from one. I pull it into smaller and smaller pieces until I start to isolate one, two, three fibers at a time. The fibers are almost magnetic, catching on my sweater, my shirt.

Holding this not-yet-thread, I note its lack of lanolin, the oil that imbues wool, and which is frequently removed during processing – particularly during dying, which requires the addition of PH-changing chemicals. Raw fleece is oily, fragrant, and full of grass and twigs. What I hold is less soft, less greasy, less smelly, less embedded in the fields and lifeways from whence it came. It is in a medial place, suspended in the process of making – on the way to becoming, partially produced as a material for use but not yet spun into thread to be woven or knit or twined into something new.

In textile production, wool in this state – no longer raw but not yet yarn or thread – is known as 'roving'. This is the material that Vicuña uses in many of her performances and sculptures, as well as in her khipu (or quipu), which reference a lost Andean system of writing through knots. The texture of roving invites what Julia Bryan-Wilson describes as 'two distinct temporal imaginings, as the viewer considers the object's origin (looking back to its process of conception and the whole sweep of its physical existence) and projects forward to a future moment of speculative touch, fondling, and interaction'.[26] In Vicuña's practice, this temporal complexity oscillates between the semantic and textural registers of a work: between the work as text and the work as textile. Vicuña's more page-based poetries also demand a reading approach at the junction between eye and hand, rather than, for example, that demanded by lyric, which oscillates between the eye and the ear.[27]

25. Rosa Alcalá and Cecilia Vicuña, *New and Selected Poems of Cecilia Vicuña*, Bilingual edition (Berkeley: Kelsey Street Press, 2018), p.149.

26. Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Fray: Art and Textile Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), p.183.

II. Spinning thread

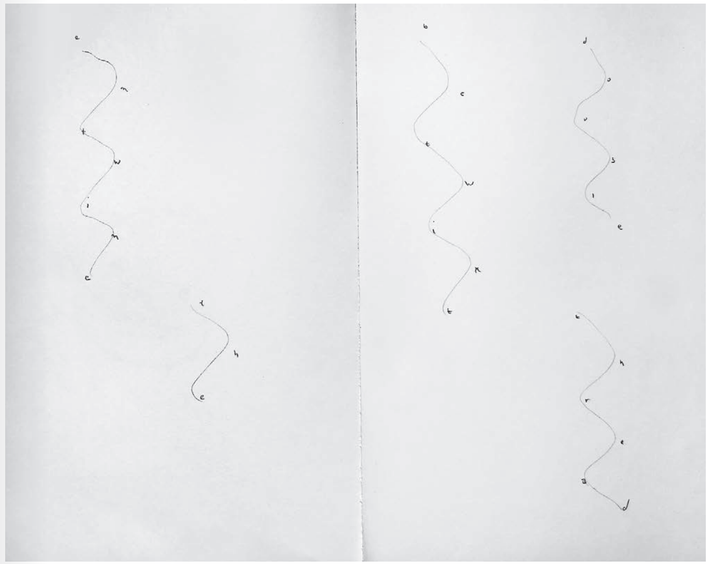
Vicuña writes that 'the encounter of finger and thread is torque and dialogue'.[28] Taking the pieces of roving strewn across my lap and clinging to my clothing, I attempt to make them into a new whole. I grasp them between my fingers and rub, and the strands wind around one another. Making a new whole from the pieces requires tension. I hold this first strand and add more bits of roving, I spin, the thread grows longer. The thread conducts dialogue through tension. This dialogue also appears in Vicuña's poetic works about strings and threads in her book of poetry *Instan* (2002).[29] The labour of reading her

27. Bryan-Wilson, p.186.

28. Alcalá and Vicuña, p.151.

29. Cecilia Vicuña, *Instan*, 1st edition (Berkeley: Kelsey Street Press, 2002).

24.



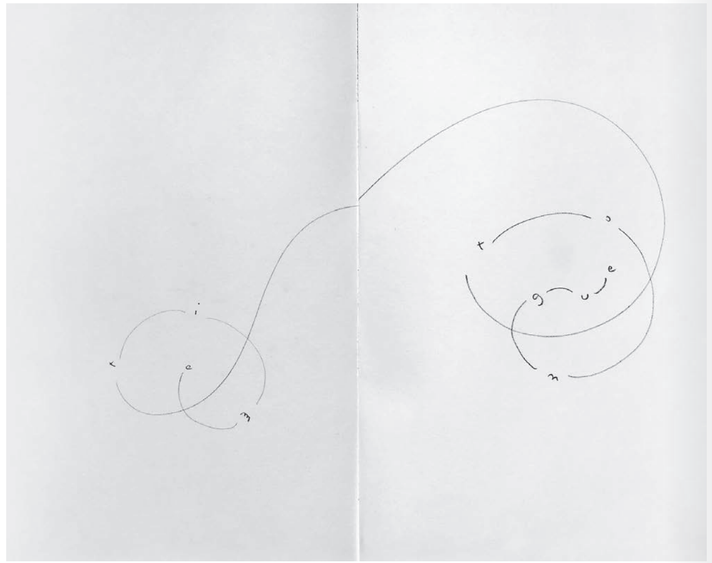
Poem-drawing by Vicuña from *Instan*, pp.4–5.

poem-drawing (figure 24) is the labour of making thread, of spinning, of bringing the left side over to the right over and over again. In reading the poem, the reader unknowingly enacts the directive in the text: ‘entwine the betwixt double thread,’ moving fluidly through the dialogue of text and textile, fiber and finger, winding them together. The knowledge on display here is tactile, embedded in the rhythmic twining of wool into thread. Like spinning, the poem lives in the temporal realm and requires lingering time to move through.

Spin is in the form of this poem. Along the length of the threads that connect each letter to the next, spin is the tension that holds the letters together into a word. Drawing the eyes in an alternating rhythm across the space of the page, the word emerges only through spinning the thread. In the difficulty of reading across the distance between letters – of maintaining the thread of the word – spin is the tension that holds the word together, that helps it make sense, that coheres it into a form. Without the spinning thread, the verbal units here would fall into disarray. In their sonic dimensions, words are formed like threads; or, as Vicuña puts it, ‘the core structure of words and sounds [are] akin to the structure [of] threads’.[30] In another poem from *Instan* (figure 25), this becomes even more palpable, stretching the words ‘emit tongue’ across an arching line of thread across the page. Reading the words, a reader moves through one letter at a time, holding the sound in the mouth while piecing together the words. The language itself comments on this physical action of utterance, of turning words into sounds. Following the poem, we might extend the action of emitting one’s tongue to lick the thread to poke it through the eye of a needle. The material here (thread) becomes an action (threading) after being ciphered through the mouth, that site of lyric utterance.

30. Cecilia Vicuña, ‘Knotations on a Quipu,’ transcribed by Lauren O’Connor, in *Threads Talks*, edited by Steve Clay and Kyle Schlesinger (New York: Granary Books/Cuneiform Press, 2016), pp. 75–84 (p. 81).

25.



Poem-drawing by Vicuña from *Instan*, pp. 2–3.

Tying knots

I have been rubbing and spinning the red roving in my lap, twining it betwixt around itself; I fold the threads over one another; I wrap them around themselves. In her essay ‘Knotations on a Quipu’, Vicuña describes the knot as taking the form of an ‘entangled pair’.[31] Knots use contrary tension to bind two threads together: in a knot, each thread pulls around and away from the other. To think of words and threads as ‘metaphors in tension’, as Vicuña does, is to knot them together while suspending the fulfillment of the exchange that metaphors promise. In a knot, both threads of a metaphor hang in unresolved tension in the space between text and textile. Knots appear as poetic form in a poem from *Cloud-net* (1999), a book of poetry that accompanied an installation of a suspended net of thick white strings interlaced into a grid.[32] In the book, an accompanying poem is spread out across the page in a kind of net, with 2–3 word groupings arranged as two-lined ‘couplets’ spaced across the page (figure 26). These groupings can be read as kinds of ‘knots’, covering the page in a net, so that each knot is in a triangular relationship to the other groupings next to it. Each is heavily enjambed, forced together by their spatial isolation on the page. While the arrangement of language on the page draws the lines together into entangled pairs, in each, enjambment also pulls them apart into strands. This structure of tension also appears in the poem’s language patterns. Across the page, threads of meaning and repetition pull the reader to form meaning between and across the threads in each pair – rhyme, as in ‘play’ and ‘way’; the repetition of methods of inscription like weaving, scribing, writing, painting; or temporal figures like ‘future’ and ‘sluggish’. The knot as a figure of tension shapes the emergence of meaning in this poem. The texture of the knot emerges between the catch of enjambment and its tension with meaning across the page.

In these poems, Vicuña draws readers into the processes of textile production: combing the wool, spinning it, knotting it, weaving. These are deeply embodied processes and fields of knowledge, inherited through tutelage and practice, and it is this knowledge that shapes Vicuña’s poetic forms. No longer is the relationship between text and textile etymological, ciphered through language; rather, it is understood through the body, through the hands parsing the wool and the mouth of lyric utterance that wets the thread. ‘Let the hand respond’, Vicuña writes, ‘her sweat knows’.[33]

31. Cecilia Vicuña, ‘Knotations on a Quipu’, p. 77.

32. Cecilia Vicuña, *Cloud-Net*, trans. by Rosa Alcalá, Illustrated edition (New York: Art In General, 2000).

33. Alcalá and Vicuña, p. 3.

Touching *is* *a* *dialogue*

with *the*

tensile *properties* *of*

From *Cloud-net*, *Selected Poems* pp. 166–67, Vicuña.

26.