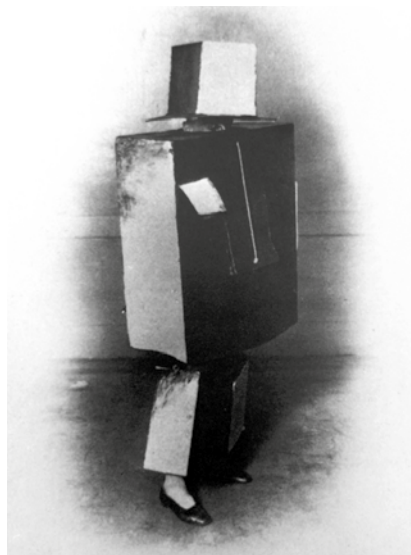


# Poetry of Unknown Words – for the book to come: process notes and reading (im)material scraps

Susan Johanknecht  
Katharine Meynell

*(take boxes off heads)*

In this talk we will be addressing material conditions of literature, ambiguity, process and serendipity. Considering works in movement that are read.



Costume d'Iliazd *Bal Banal* 14 mars 1924

In 1949, Iliazd published *Poesie de mots inconnus*, in Paris, under his imprint Le Degre 41, printed at a number of specialist ateliers. A collective work by 23 poets and 23 illustrators – a male line-up with two women.

In this collaboration Iliazd served as master craftsman but also as curator of a series of works by artists and writers many of whom he felt had been instrumental in the development of concrete typography and sound poetry since 1910. This was his response to a bitter argument with the Lettrist movement claim to be the originators of sound and visual poetry in 1948.

**ILIAZD, Ilja ZDANEVITCH** (1894-1975)

*Poesie de Mots Inconnus*, Paris: Le Degre 41 [Iliazd], [1949]. In-folio (360 x 255 mm)

Poèmes de **Ronke AKINSENOYIN**, Pierre **ALBERT-BIROT**, Jean **ARP**, Antonin **ARTAUD**, Jacques **AUDIBERTI**, Hugo **BALL**, Nicolas **BEAUDOUIN**, Camille **BRYEN**, Paul **DERMEE**, Raul **HAUSMANN**, Vincent **HUDOBRO**, **ILIAZD**, Eugene **JOLAS**, Velemir **KHLEBNIKOV**, Alexis **KRUTCHONYKH**, Pablo **PICASSO**, Boris **POPLAVSKY**, Kurt **SCHWITTERS**, Michel **SEUPHOR**, Igor **TERENTIEV**, Tristan **TZARA**.

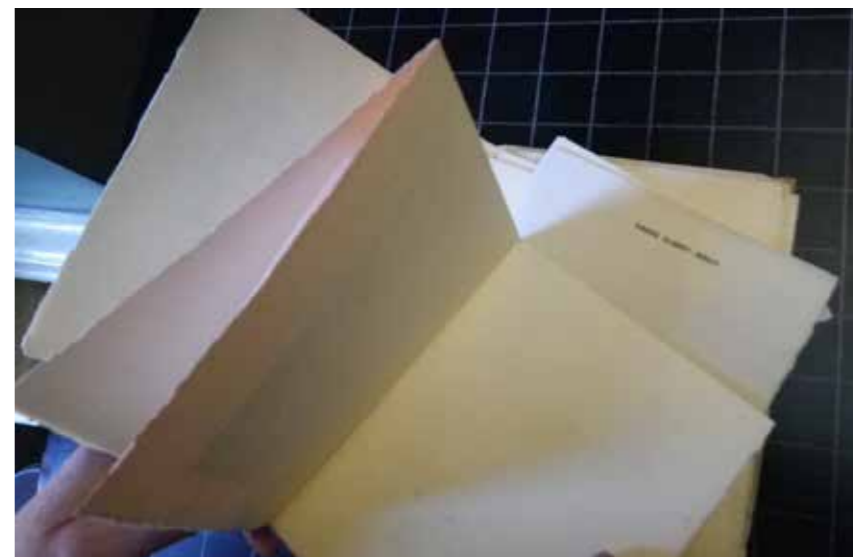
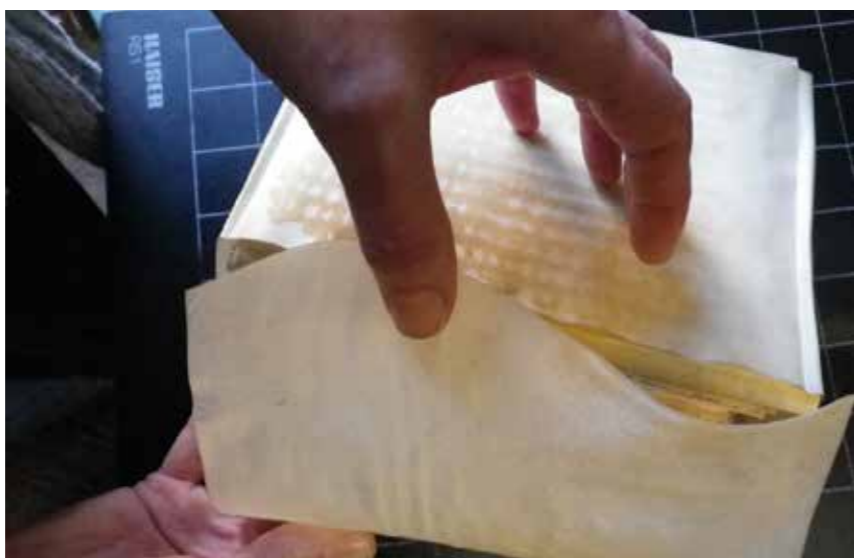
Illustrations de **Jean ARP** (deux bois), **Jacques VILLON** (une eau-forte), **Oscar DOMINGUEZ** (un burin), **Henri MATISSE** (un linoléum), **Pablo PICASSO** (un burin et deux lithographies), **Georges BRAQUE** (une lithographie), **Jean METZINGER** (une pointe-sèche), **Sophie TAEUBER-ARP** (un bois gravé par ARP), **Albert GLEIZES** (deux eaux-fortes), **Camille BRYEN** (un bois et une eau-forte), **Henri LAURENS** (une eau-forte), **Raul HAUSMANN** (deux bois dont un en couleurs), **Alberto MAGNELLI** (une aquarelle), **Fernand LÉGER** (une lithographie en couleurs), **WOLS** (une pointe sèche), **Andre MASSON** (une aquarelle), **Marc CHAGALL** (une eau-forte), **Alberto GIACOMETTI** (une eau-forte), **Serge FÉRAT** (une lithographie en couleurs), **Leopold SURVAGE** (un bois en couleurs), **Edgard TYTGAT** (un bois) et **Jean MIRÓ** (une lithographie en couleurs).

Iliadz, unlike Mallarmé, was able to unify/control/realise concepts as both typographer and printer to produce the graphic page.

Iliadz's radical typography and skill as compositor allowed him to account for phonic experimentation and expressions of movement. Previously in Russia he had been part of avant garde groups such as the futurist sdvig and linguistic experiments of zaum which fractured language and orthography – breaking typographic, grammatical and semantic conventions.

In *Figuring the Word* Johanna Drucker writes, zaum "was a highly idiosyncratic invention. The search for a language which would transcend the conventions of ordinary language, which would communicate directly through the power of sound, was a curious outgrowth of a late Symbolist synesthetic sensibility combined with a rigorous linguistic investigation."

Iliadz' combination of collectivity, experimentation and skill drew us to him and in particular his this work from 1949. We spent many hours at the National Art Library and Bibliothèque Nationale looking at this and handling it.





*Poesie de mots inconnus*

Taking the expanded format of *Poesie de mots inconnus* we are making new work, our current collaborative project: *Poetry of Unknown Words* is a feminising response to Iliad.

In *Poetry of Unknown Words* we are making a series of transcriptions using an expanded sense of authorship and relationship with others through time. In working in this manner our methodology disrupts the single authorial voice, it is fragmented and partial, destabilising borders of subjectivity.

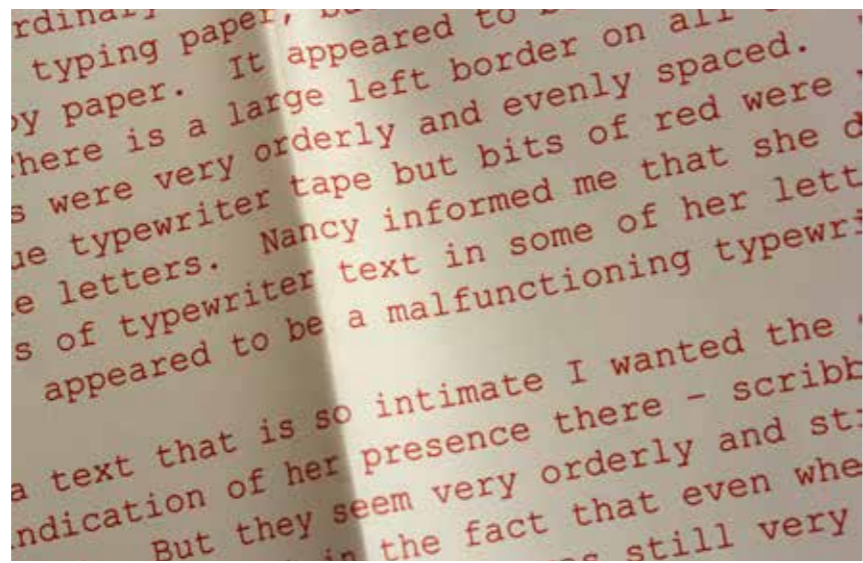


(sheets folded quarto)

pli  
 The philosophical resonance of the fold or 'pli' is perhaps aptly invoked here as the suggestion of a "structure of ideas".  
 A structure of ideas that could be applied to our *Poetry of Unknown Words* as it does not imply doubt or hesitation but implication, explication and replication.  
**our process notes:**  
**scraps and fragments:**  
**ambiguity chance and serendipity:**



Browsing in Poetry Library: Mina Loy is our initial search but we are put off by the 'eugenics' implied in her manifesto text. On the shelf near by, we are drawn to HD's *notes on thought and vision* 1919, a book we had not previously encountered. In this she takes the jellyfish as an erotic symbol of creative force. We don't read this as biologically determinist, but as a metaphor.



In Humanities 2, at the British Library, a fragment of red felt cover brakes off in our handling. We wonder if we could keep the relic, but aware of cameras in the room... and find ourselves anxious as we return the book – own up to unintentional damage, but are not reprimanded.



We print on thin photo paper to reference the 'flimsy' typewriter paper in the HD Archive at Yale. Translucent & visceral.

Verso text, is an email from archivist Jae Rossman. We use 'typewriter' font onto a facsimile detail of HD's manuscript with penciled crossings out – revisions, thought processes and her psychoanalytic take on creativity.



Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons* (1914) forms the basis of digital transcription – words to buttons. We lay out buttons with colour and shape as equivalents for speech/sound and the dynamic non/sense of words. We use buttons from our mothers and grandmothers button boxes giving a sense of personal chronology. Boot-buttons for punctuation, large glossy coat-buttons for words such as 'glees' and 'capable' – each one individually scanned and laid-out in In-design.



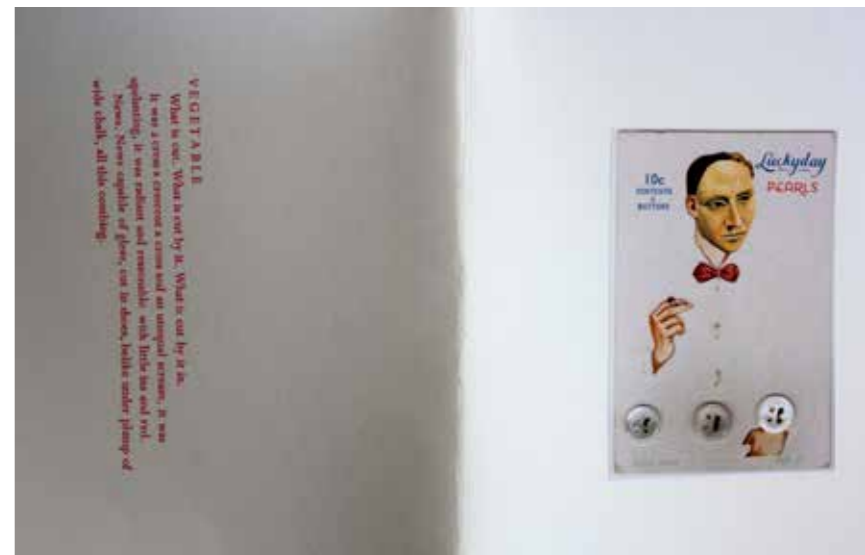
Emmy Hennings, the poet, performer and co-founder of the Cabaret Voltaire; And in the spirit of Dada we apply Google translate to her poem *Morfin* in British Library café. We rework it to our own sense of the absurd. Digitally print on recycled paper with Dada performance instructions.

Verso, is a found dance image, that pops up on a search engine (we are unable to trace the source). This is a small file – it blows up into exaggerated pixels. We add a bitty account of Hennings work from the *Dada Almanach*, 1920.



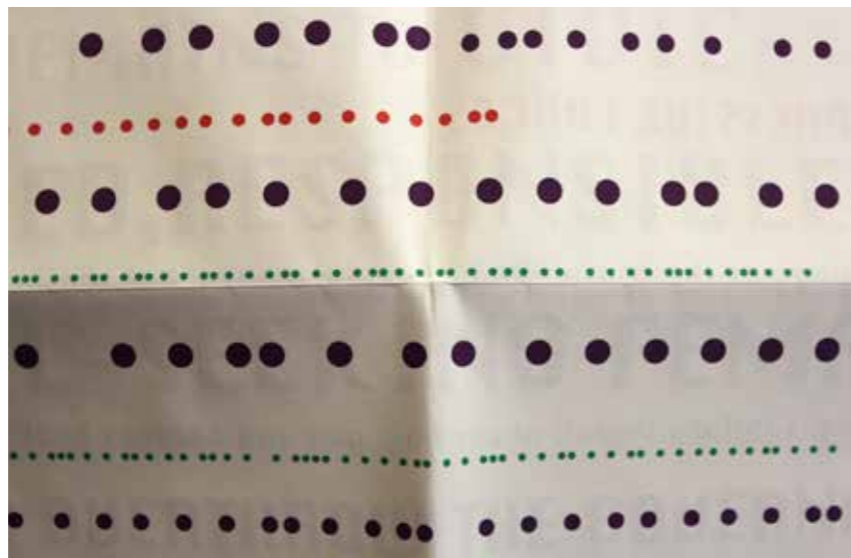
Verso, Stein's *Vegetable* text in letters (not buttons). We handset this in Perpetua and print using the Vandercook SP15 in my front room. Tip on a shirt-button card, collaged with Picasso's portrait of Stein, replacing a smoking man's head.

Out for dinner, in Joanne Hendricks kitchen, we see a first edition of *Tender Buttons*: handle with care.

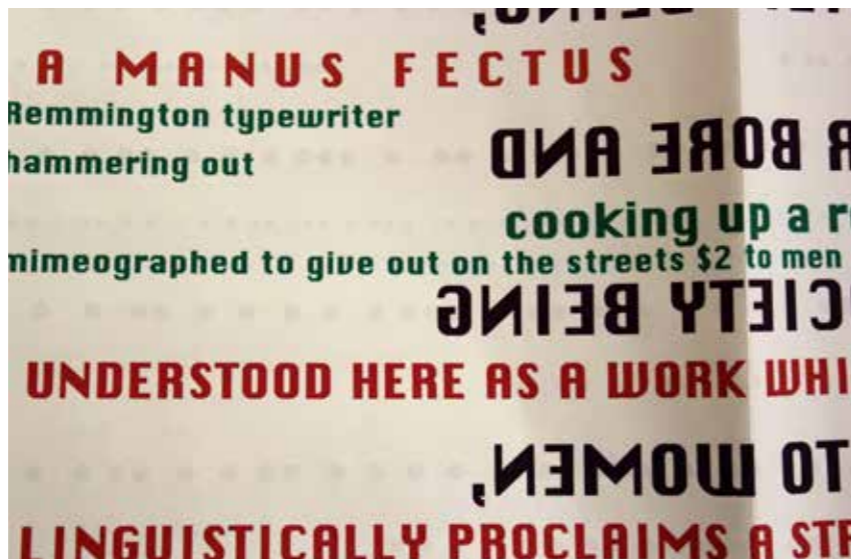


*SCUM Manifesto* (1967) was originally hammered out by Valerie Solanas on a Remington typewriter. She mimeographed it to sell on the streets, \$2 to men and \$1 to women. We visually mirror Solanas' contempt for men and capitalism (in place of Marinetti's "scorn for women") interweaving this with extracts and commentary.

We print on Mohawk Superfine paper and use 'Chicago', a font designed by Susan Kare in 1983. Inkjet as contemporary equivalent to mimeograph.



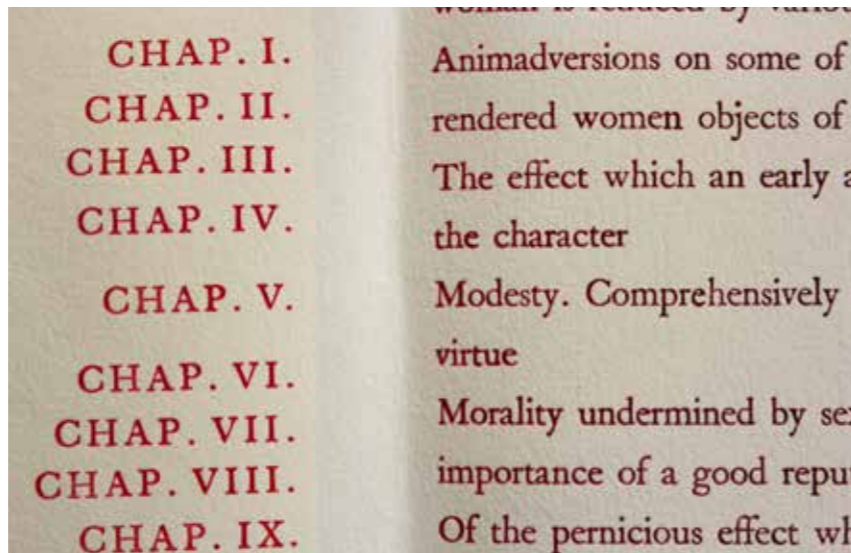
We email pdf files between our computers without realising the font isn't loaded. This re-forms the text as a series of dots (colour and point size retained). We like this default mode – it is indexical, unknown and coded. This becomes our verso.



*Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792). We read the first edition in the rare books room. And use the fabulously précised contents page to invoke the range and depth of Mary Wollstonecraft's writing – still clearly pertinent.

We letterpress Caslon type onto Fabriano laid paper, and tip on a piece of Payhembury marbling.

Verso we streak red and black ink across the roller, colours begin to merge. Glue on an illicitly scanned British Museum stamp.



Winter 2012 we walk to Dulwich Park, site of the stolen Barbara Hepworth *Two Forms (Divided Circle)*. We take note of its absence.

In the Spring we visit the Hepworth Wakefield (something between a holiday and a pilgrimage) travelling from Leeds through the 'rhubarb triangle' on a double-decker bus.

We are drawn to a display of maquettes amongst open rooms of sculpture, with large windows to the water below. We consider value, loss and vandalism in the formation of a legacy. We look up the value of scrap metal (it is £2.80 per kilo).<sup>1</sup>

We print an image of the recently missing sculpture covered in bright blue plastic sheeting and cordoned off with orange netting.



Verso, texts describe vandalisms of Hepworth's work dating from the 1960's.



We go to look for other 'lost' Hepworths on a trip to Blythe House,<sup>2</sup> we are distracted by information on Eileen Gray. Fortunate in our timing as her notebooks are about to be sent to the Pompidou Centre on loan. These include detailed lacquer recipes, metal stencils, brushes and photographs. This is all weighed on 'borrow' and 'return' to ensure nothing is missing.

We visit the Aram shop in Covent Garden to sit on reproduction Eileen Gray furniture.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.greengatemetals.co.uk/scrapmetal/prices/> (accessed December 2011).

<sup>2</sup> V&A Archive and Library Study Room at Blythe House.



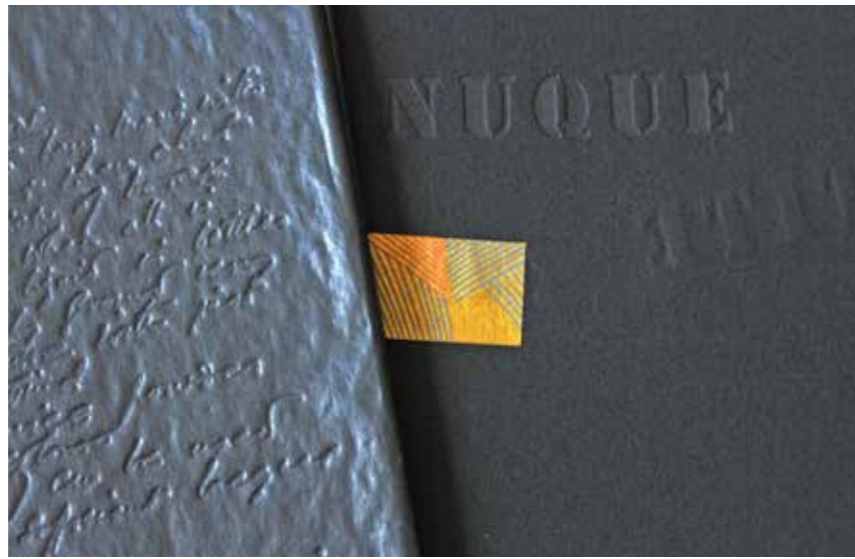
Recto and verso we use Gray's stenciled wall texts from *E1027* (The house she designed in 1929).

**Madame petite et coquette, entrez lentement, monsieur qui aime se regarder la nuque, defense de rire.**

Le Corbusier vandalized this in 1939, obliterating it with his crude murals. He was, to quote, "Seemingly affronted that a woman could create such a fine work of Modernism, he asserted his dominion, like a urinating dog, over the territory"<sup>3</sup>.

We hinge sheets with Chiyogami gold patterned paper, referencing Eileen Gray's screen in the V&A.

Wrap in black glassine embossed with Eileen Gray's handwriting – printed from polymer plates.



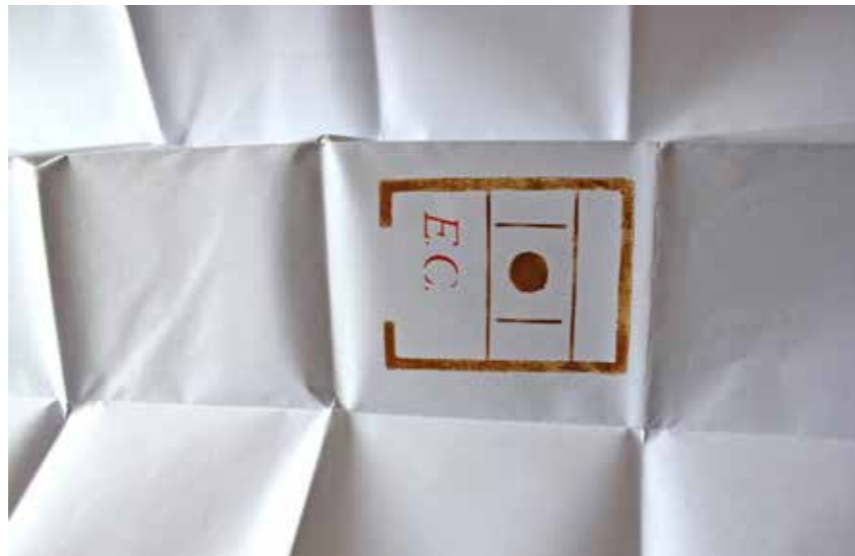
We are drawn to **Lucie Rie** pots in new V&A ceramics gallery.

In room 142, case 18: bottle, 1959;  
in case 4, shelf 2, pot, 1955;  
in case 2, shelf 3, thick pitted grey blue;  
in case 18: buttons and molds for buttons 1941–1947.



Our internet trawl for women architects throws up **Ethel Mary Charles** 1871–1962, the first woman member of Royal Institute of British Architects. Never heard of her. We are intrigued by her radical text *A Plea for Women Practicing Architecture*, presented to the fortnightly meeting of the Architectural Association in 1902.

We reproduce a scan of this as AO plan-print and fold down big and bulky.



Beside this case is a wacky film, with Rie bending over to retrieve something in a deep kiln, showing off her bottom to camera. A hunky assistant pulls her out by the legs (– is this a false memory? – we go back and look again).

In transcription from pot to page, what we are looking for? We hand burnish a log off the wood-pile. The shape of a cross-section of tree suggests a vessel. Wood-ring markings resemble pottery sgraffito. We print onto airmail paper in the garden (wind blowing).

Verso, graphite rubbings in silver and bronze using our button collection (again).



Verso, we pochoir, in shit-brown ink, a schematic earth closet from Ethel Mary Charles' drawings for labourers' cottages at *Wykehamica* dated 1895.



Strolling through the Huntington in L.A. on a family visit to the cactus garden (on a too-hot day) retreat to the cool of the gallery. Astonished to see *Zenobia in Chains* on display at the far end. This **Harriet Hosmer** sculpture was listed as 'missing' in the literature we consulted at the Women's Library.<sup>4</sup> We learn that although it had been lost for decades, this sculpture was discovered in a garden and sold at Sothebys to Huntington Library in 2008.

This sculpture was very much part of the political zeitgeist of its time – the abolition of slavery and the emancipation of women, and it was wildly popular. "a conventional treatment of drapery in a tasteless modern Italian style, a low kind of thing...".

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Accessed at the Women's Library, at London Metropolitan University, now located at the London School of Economics.

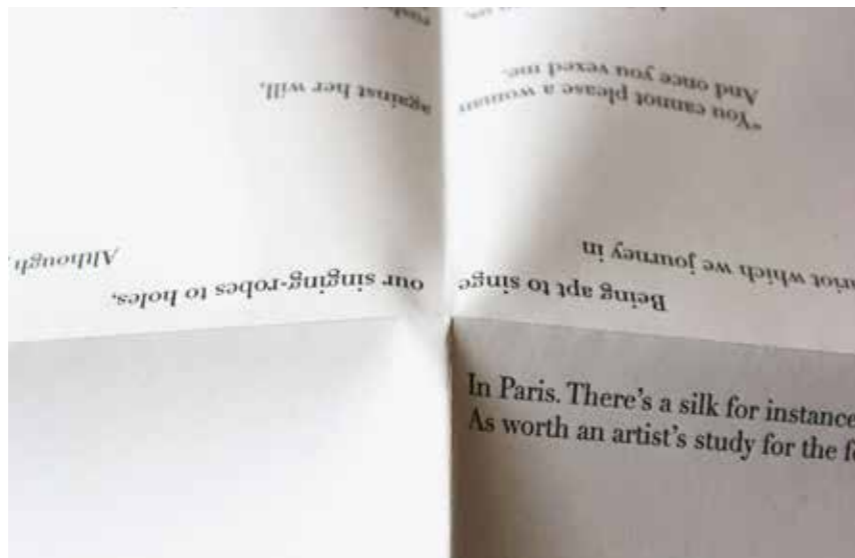


<sup>3</sup> Moore, R. 30.6.2013.

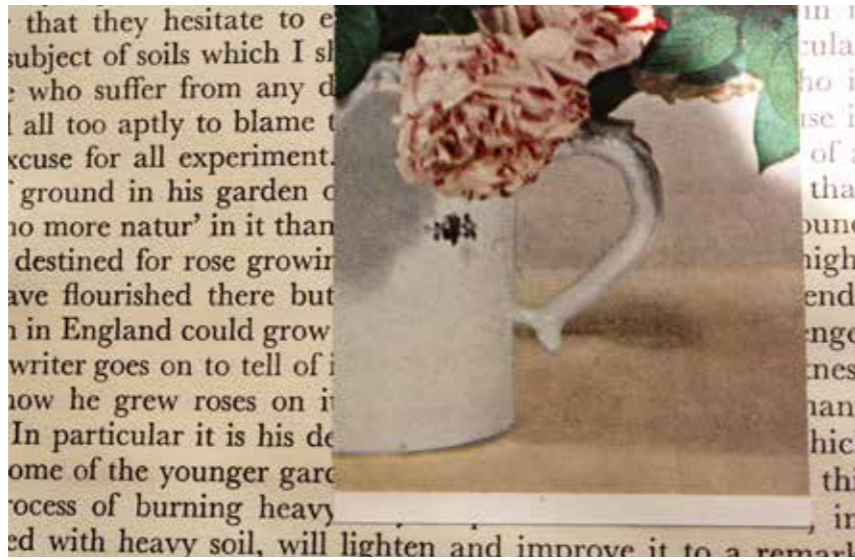
We print this on recycled paper giving texture to photos of marble, pitted and weathered in the garden.

Verso, we reference Harriet Hosmer's close relationship with Elizabeth Barrett Browning in Rome. *Aurora Leigh* written in 1856, was informed by this friendship.

We buy second hand paperbacks from SKOOB to annotate, choosing lines and phrases to give a sense of Barrett Browning's association with Hosmer's sculpture. Letter-press imprint lightly shows through.



**Constance Spry** comes onto the radar / she is in the air and fades. We go to the play *Storm in a flowerpot*. We read in the Lindley Library that in 2004, The Design Museum exhibition *Constance Spry: A millionaire for a few pence*, was despised and resulted in the resignation of James Dyson. Writing in a Sunday paper, Stephen Bayley said "you know where you can stick these (and it's not in my museum)".



We buy bargain first editions on-line of Spry's *Winter & Spring Flowers*, *Summer & Autumn Flowers* published in 1951. We tear pages from the bindings and collage Spry's text and the lurid hand-coloured plates. Flowers in old milk buckets, wheelbarrows, celadon bowls, alabaster vases, marble tazzas, wall cornucopias, winged animals, bible boxes, etc.



Visit Sissinghurst – when we get there, find it's closed. Sneaking in, we get rumbled by a gardener seeing us taking photos as well as trespassing – she gives us the 'green-finger' to fuck off. Lindley Library, FIND manure notes, by Gardeners **Pamela Schwerdt & Sybille Kreutzberger** Photograph a photograph of their white garden. Our sources reveal other sources – White garden, Moongarden; and this garden at Sissinghurst acknowledged to be influenced by Constance Spry

Verso, gardeners and their conversation:

**We apply kieserite and potash, withholding nitrogen, which might encourage soft sappy shoots prone to disease.**

**A foliar feed is often included as extra fillip.**

**Light rubbish is carried away in a cloth – we use a six foot square of hesian – finding it far quicker than negotiating a barrow up steps and through narrow entrances.**

**Hops are now almost unobtainable so this year we are experimenting with ground bark as an alternative.**



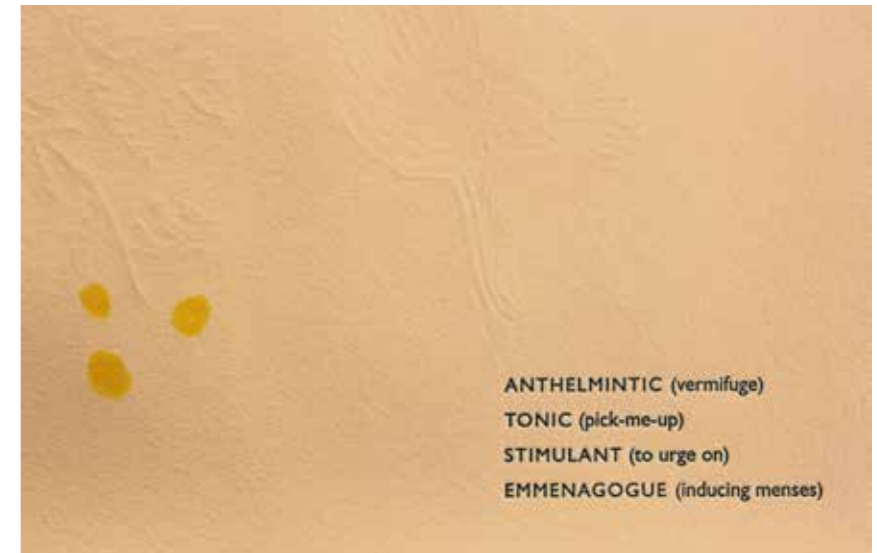
Go back to Lindley library, see First World War information pamphlets by herbalist **Maud Grieve**. These form the basis for her *Modern Herbal* in 1931. We like the ready-to-handness of the plants she describes. Tansy is growing on the verges of the road.

Reduction cut lino of tansy, print three layers, swapping blocks, our cutting is reckless. Intense summer showers, the cat is in and out.

Use Barcham Green, Camber Sand paper (saved for something special)



Yellow marker pen on Verso. Round abstract shapes, Tansy-like buttons with text from Grieve's *Medical Action and Uses*:

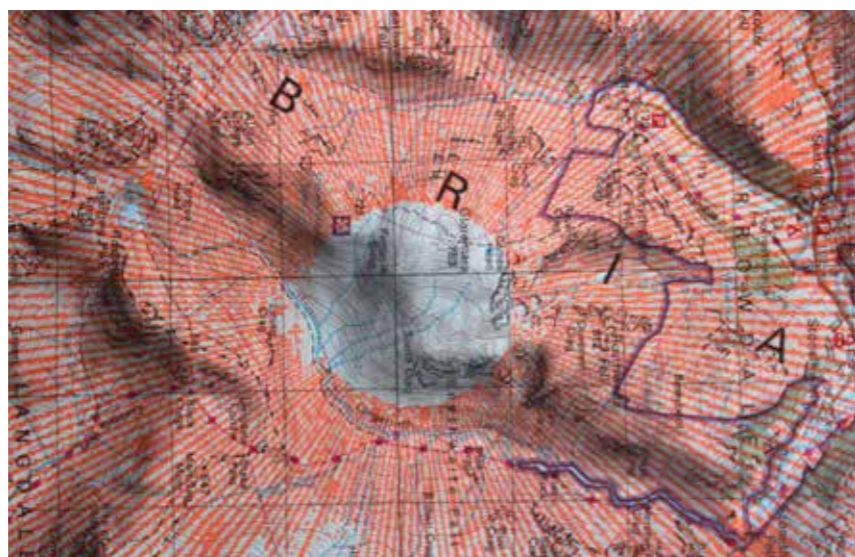


We acknowledge **Beatrix Potter** as a scientist, ecologist and artist. Her discoveries about fungi were dismissed at the time. Test spore prints on various papers, scan for polymer plates to be made. We have a lengthy deliberation about colour. Possible orange on the map side? More mushroomy on the reverse?



Materialise her role in creating National Parks by using old Lake District Ordnance Survey maps, cheap as chips. Cut and iron-out creases on the dining room table, evidence of previous use is still very much present.

Print a pair of dayglo spore-tits one side. Streaky inked bifurcated on the other. Boletus spore print like skin and rivers like vessels merging map with mushroom – disruption of scale. Try new folding possibilities to alter what has become an assumed order of reading. Can we call this sexto folding?



Ashmolean visit  
We admire *Still Life of Fruit and Flowers*, painted by **Clara Peeters** after 1608.

Germaine Greer describes this as:  
“Well balanced and painted with tentative and unsettling detail, Clara Peeters work is yet to be untangled from the toils of inept restoration and outright forgery, before we can assess the full extent of her subtle mastery.”<sup>5</sup>

We set up a still life of our own, mirroring everything in Peeters painting. Buy opulent produce to reflect the economic boasting she describes; iphones for coins, langoustine from Steve Hatt, physalis from Colombia, fig from South Africa, Spanish cherries, papaya from Brazil. She uses flowers in and out of season; we use rhubarb and borage from the garden, tulips from McQueens florist, wild cherry from the woods.



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Great Obstacle Race p. 237.

In conclusion, in *Poetry of Unknown Words* there is a negotiation between past and future.

Keeping women from the archive in circulation.

With our magpie approach to technologies – all of which will become archaic – we produce material readings that evolve.

At first sight *Poetry of Unknown Words* might seem to rely on analogue technologies but in fact much of it could not have been made without the digital.



Temporal shifts in how technologies are understood and is implicated in this mash-up. Much of the ‘text’ is in the material itself and there is always the struggle to access its meaning.

Through addressing material conditions of literature, ambiguity, process and serendipity, we have looked at the poetics of ‘thingness’ and text: that is the substance of the book –





We see an interdisciplinary opening out of the book, the fluidity of text and object in relation to the reader.

We see the book that has been, the book that is, and the book to come – simultaneously keeping reading, and the book, open.

Porous?

