

Essay for *The Artist's Book Yearbook 2016 -2017*  
Impact Press  
Centre for Fine Print Research, University of the West of England

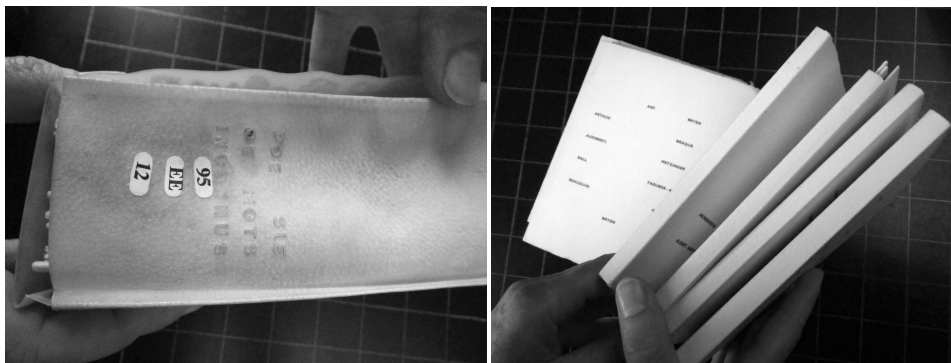
### **Gefn Press: Some notes on collaborative process**

In 1949 Iliadz published *Poesie de mots inconnus* in Paris, under his imprint Le Degre 41. This was a collective work by 23 poets and 23 illustrators including Artaud, Ball, Giacometti, Picasso, Hausmann, Matisse, Miro, Ernst, Khlebnikov, Tzara, Schwitters, Braque, with a few women - Ronke Akinsemoyin, Sophie Tauber Arp. In this collaboration Iliadz served as master craftsman, curating works by artists and writers he felt had been instrumental in the development of concrete typography and sound poetry since 1910. This artists' book was his response to a bitter argument with the Lettrist movement's claim in 1948 to be the originators this genre.

Iliadz's radical typography and skill as compositor allowed him to account for phonic experimentation and expressions of movement. In Russia he had previously 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."

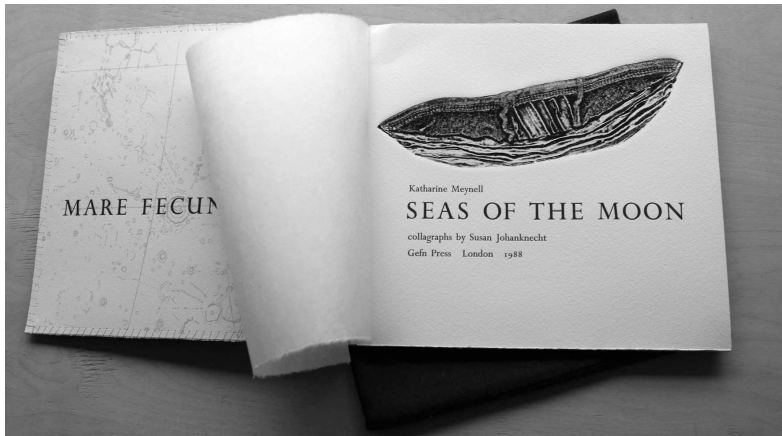
Iliadz's combination of collectivity, experimentation and skill drew us to him and in particular this work from 1949. We spent many hours at the National Art Library looking at this and handling it. In many ways it mirrored our values, but it included few women.



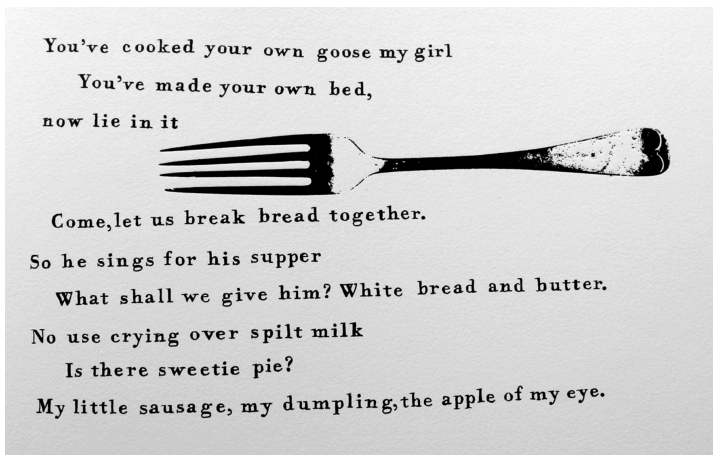
1949 Iliadz *Poesie de mots inconnus*

Taking Iliadz's expanded format of *Poesie de mots inconnus*, our current collaborative project, *Poetry of Unknown Words*, is a feminising response. As Kate Eichhorn says in *The Archival turn in Feminism*, the archive is not a place to recover the past but "...to engage with some of the legacies, epistemes and traumas pressing down on the present". 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.

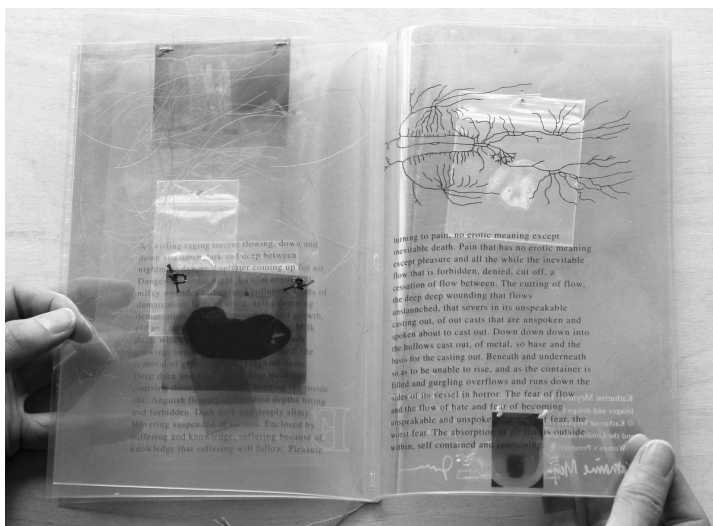
We have been working together since the mid 1980's and have engaged with a range of collaborative structures. As with Iliadz, these have sometimes been collaborations between the two of us and sometimes have included a wider community of artists.



1988 *Mare Fecunditatis: Seas of the Moon* made in an edition of 40; text with intaglio collagraphs printed in green-black, and screen prints printed in silver. This was exhibited with Book Works at the V&A.



1990 *Eat Book* made in an edition of 150, with linecuts and duotone photographs. Gefn Press Co-published this with Janus Press, Vermont. Exhibitions included *Text as Inspiration: Artists' Books and Literature* at National Gallery of Art, Washington DC.



1992 *Emissions* an edition of 40, funded by Arts Council and London Arts Board. This transparent book was commissioned by Book Works and shown at the exhibition *Book Works: A Women's Perspective*.



2000 *Volumes (of vulnerability)* in an edition of 160, an anti-heroic millennium project by: Sophie Artemis, Caroline Bergvall, Penny Bernard & Stephen Williams, Stephen Bury, Helen Douglas, Cate Elwes, Joanna Hoffmann, Susan Johanknecht, Lilian Lijn, Lily Markiewicz, Katharine Meynell, Jim Mooney, AMES, Hayley Newman, Colin Sackett, Gary Stevens, Ulrike Stoltz, David Thorne, Claire Van Vliet, Elaine Worth. Works contained in a tin, with a fold-out catalogue (contributions by Clive Phillpot and Colin Sackett). Part-funded by the Arts Council, toured internationally.



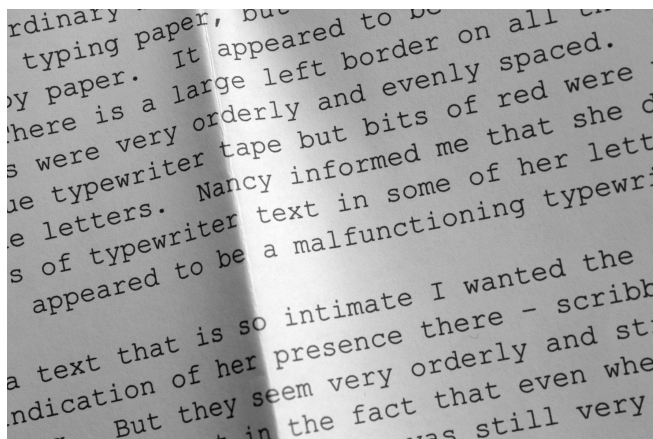
2007 *Cunning Chapters* Kelly Wellman coptic stitched chapters by: Stephen Bury, Georgios Boudalis, Clippetty Clop (lead singer Aaron Williamson), William Cobbing, Electric Crinolines (Redell Olsen and Drew Milne), Sigrid Holmwood, Susan Johanknecht, Katharine Meynell,

Louisa Minkin, Kate Scrivener, Finlay Taylor. This was first exhibited at the British Library to coincide with the opening of its new Centre for Conservation. *Cunning Chapters* was Awarded Yale University Purchase Prize, 2009.

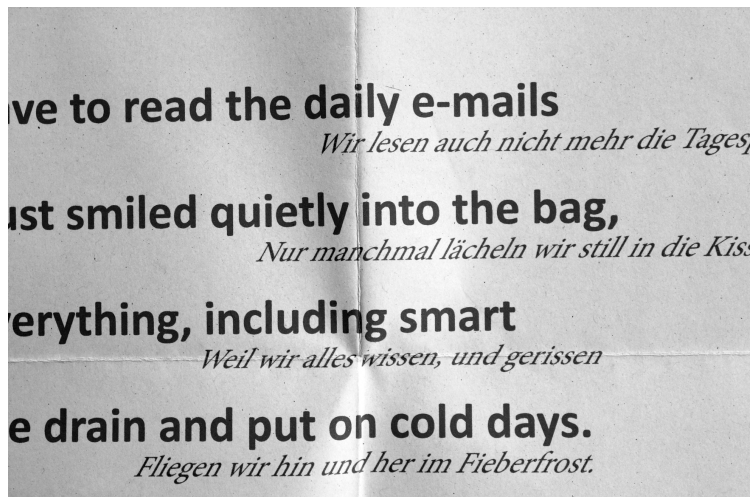
These previous works explored different collaborative associations. *Poetry of Unknown Words* started in 2012, considers the complex layers of our collaborative and historical 'situatedness'. We delve archive collections to provide material for a partly fictionalised play that is in 'conversation' with others. Aspects of the unknown or obsolete are recovered and transcribed. Working through the archive is essential to our practice, with archive being more than institutional depository. This is an engagement with material, tenderness towards the object.

Process notes are evolving through the project with increasing prominence. We find that our making and research is as important as the thing made, and so we have moved them from the appendix into the main body of this work. Process notes expose a collective methodology and subtexts involved. These affirm the personal of feminist pedagogy and are written anecdotally. Grand narratives may be implied but this ahistorical form frees us from backward glances and romance with the past. It connects us as if 'in confidence' with the reader, we elicit identification and response without demanding authority.

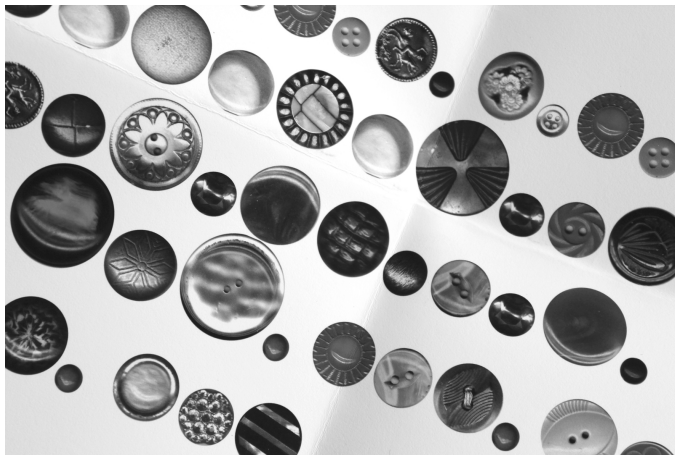
Some notes:



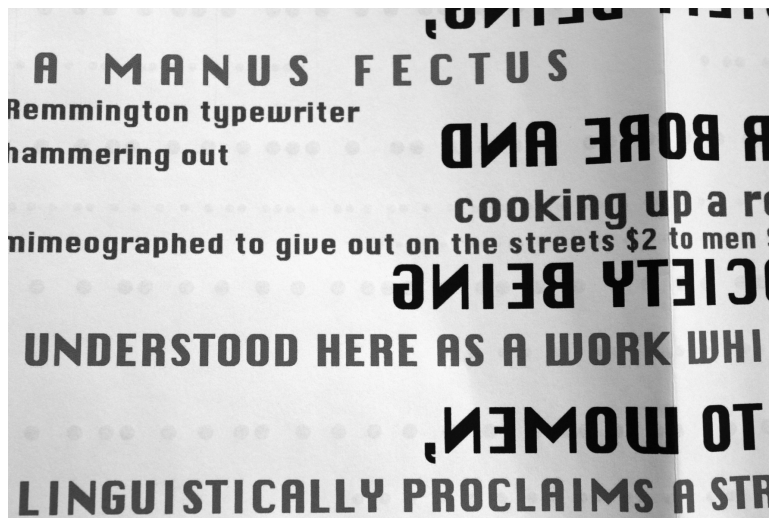
Browsing in Poetry Library: Mina Loy is our initial search but we are put off by the 'eugenics' implied in her manifesto text. On the shelf near by, we are drawn to **HD's** notes *on thought and vision* 1919, a book we had not previously encountered. In this she takes the jellyfish as an erotic symbol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



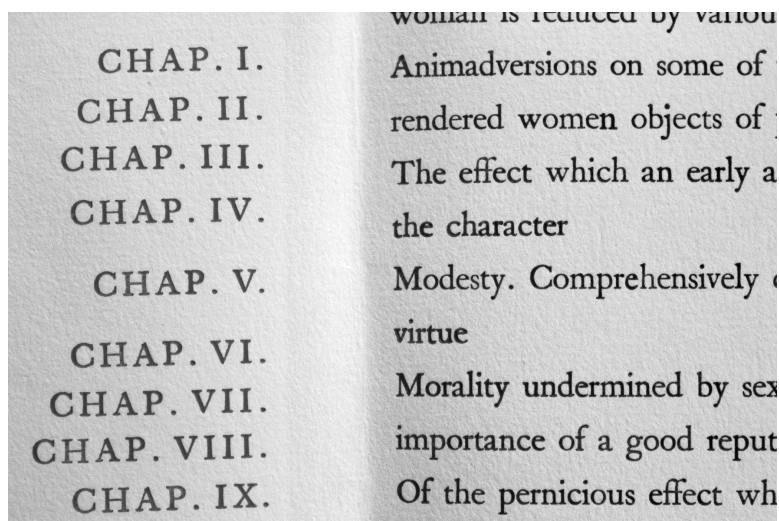
**Emmy Hennings**, the poet, performer and co-founder of the Cabaret Voltaire; and in the spirit of Dada we apply Google translate to her poem *Morfin* in British Library café. We rework it to our own sense of the absurd. Digitally print on recycled paper with performance instructions. Verso, is a found 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. In Humanities 2, at the British Library, a fragment of red felt cover breaks 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.



**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. 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.



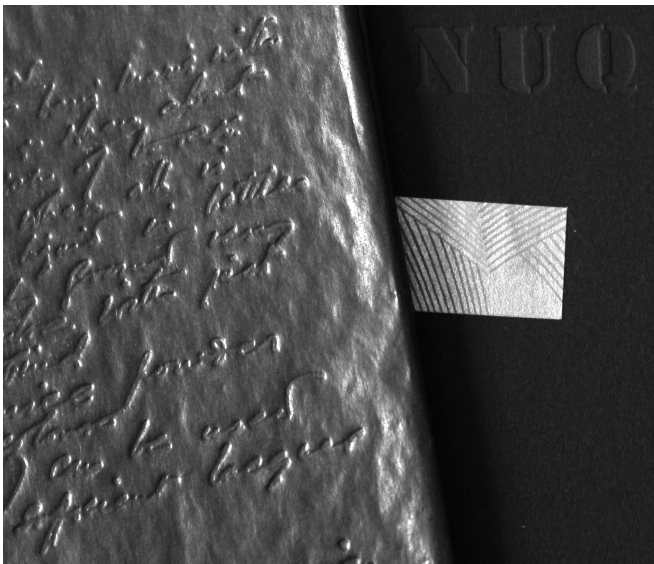
*SCUM Manifesto* 1967 was originally hammered out by **Valerie Solanas** on a Remington typewriter. She mimeographed it to sell on the streets, \$2 to men and \$1 to women. This manifesto is a literary work. We visually mirror Solanas' contempt for men and capitalism (in place of Marinetti's "scorn for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



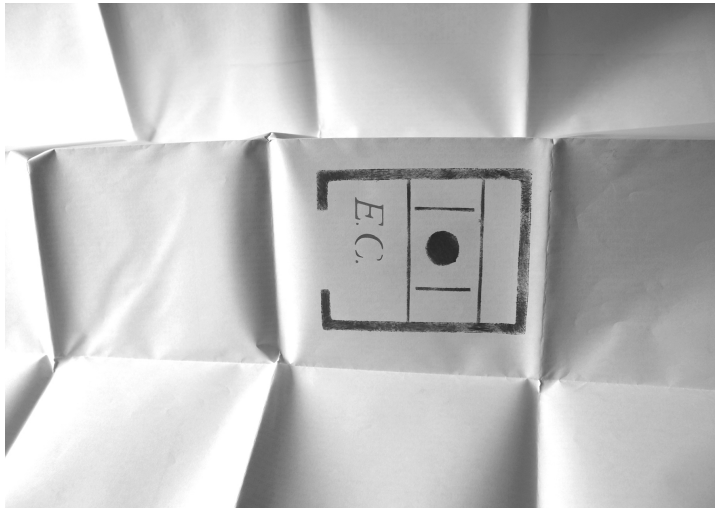
Winter 2012 we walk to Dulwich Park, site of the stolen **Barbara Hepworth** *Two Forms (Divided Circle)*. We take note of its absence. In the Spring we visit the Hepworth Wakefield (something between a holiday and a pilgrimage) travelling from Leeds through the 'rhubarb triangle' on a double-decker 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). 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.



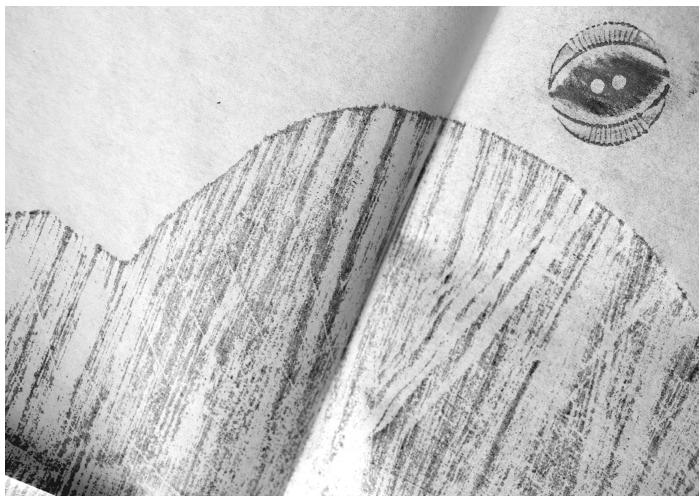
We go to look for other 'lost' Hepworths on a trip to V&A Archive and Library Study Room Blythe House, we are distracted by information on **Eileen Gray**. Fortunate in our timing as her notebooks are about to be sent to the Pompidou Centre on loan. These include detailed lacquer recipes, metal stencils, 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. 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, “Seemingly affronted that a woman could create such a fine work of Modernism, he asserted his dominion, like a urinating dog, over the territory” (R. Moore in the Observer Review, 30.6.2013).

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.



Our internet trawl for women architects throws up **Ethel Mary Charles** 1871–1962, the first woman member of RIBA. 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. Verso, we pochoir, in shit-brown ink, a schematic earth closet from Ethel Mary Charles’ drawings for labourers’ cottages at *Wykehamica* dated 1895.



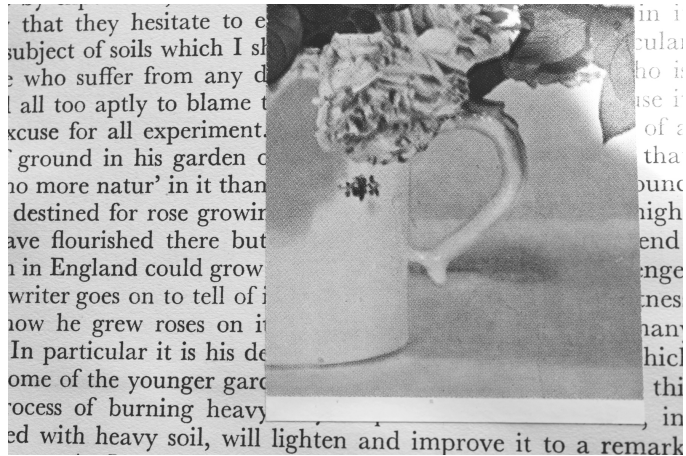
We are drawn to **Lucie Rie** pots in new V&A ceramics gallery. In room 142, case 18: bottle, 1959;



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. 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).



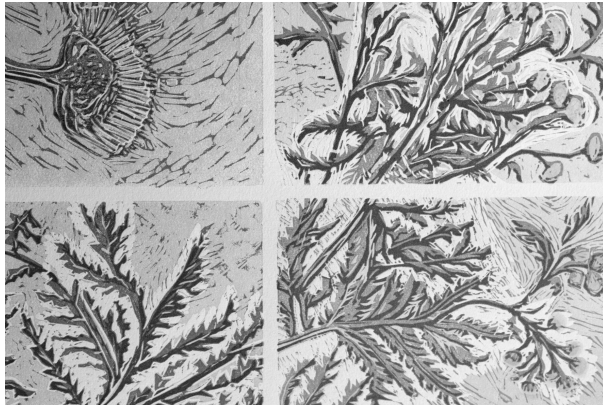
Strolling through the Huntington in L.A. on a family visit to the cactus garden (on a too-hot day) retreat to the cool of the gallery. Astonished to see *ZENOBIA IN CHAINS* on display at the far end. This **Harriet Hosmer** sculpture was listed as 'missing' in the literature we consulted at the Women's Library. 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...". 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. Letterpress imprint lightly shows through.



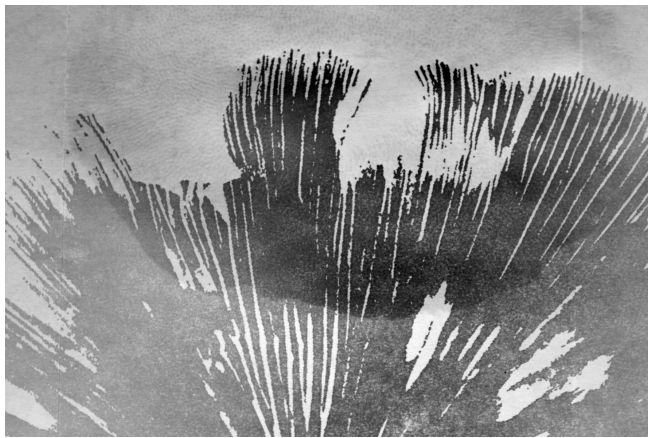
**Constance Spry** comes onto the radar / she is in the air and fades. We go to the play *Storm in a flower pot*. We read in the Lindley Library that in 2004 The Design Museum exhibition *Constance Spry: A millionaire for a few pence* resulted in the resignation of James Dyson. Writing in the Independent on Sunday, Stephen Bayley says “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, wheel barrows, celadon bowls, alabaster vases, marble tazzas, wall cornucopias, winged animals, bible boxes, etc.



August 2011, visit Sissinghurst – 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, looking for 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, manure notes, gardeners and their conversation.



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 cannot find who did the botanical illustrations for this. We like the ready-to-hand-ness 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*: Anthelmintic (vermifuge), Tonic (pick-me-up), Stimulant (to-urge-on), Emmenagogue (inducing menses).



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? And more mushroomy on the reverse? Materialise her role in creating National Parks by using old Lake District Ordinance 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 6<sup>th</sup> August 2013, we admire *Still Life of Fruit and Flowers*, painted by **Clara Peeters** after 1608. In *Great Obstacle Race* 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.” 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. Clara Peeters’ use of native species, in differing seasons; we interpret using species and seasons simultaneously available in our global economy. Verso, email exchange with Ashmolean archivist Jon Whiteley.

Publishing is traditionally a collective venture. Iliazd provides us with a sense of continuity in the production of collaborative work and in a variable arrangement of co-present ideas. The pages in *Poetry of Unknown Words* move across authorial voices and deliberately expose our serendipitous approach – blue skies practice that doesn’t know what it will find. A meandering research methodology necessarily foregrounding process notes, rooted in lived experience and concrete form. It is knowingly fragmented and partial. *Poetry of Unknown Words* resists ownership and commodification of ideas. We are part of a milieu, as exemplified in this Artists’ Book Yearbook.

Susan Johanknecht & Katharine Meynell  
June 2015

An earlier version of this paper was given in Leeds, at PAGES on 7th March 2015