

THE BOOK OF THESIS BOOKS

Introduction

All graduate students at RISD write, design, and submit a Master’s thesis book—a lasting record of work, process, research, and ideas. While the criteria for the thesis book vary from department to department, most describe and illustrate the thesis project or body of work. Some include additional projects or pieces made throughout the graduate program at RISD. Most place the work in historical, theoretical, cultural, and/or personal context. Some are scholarly, some practical, some poetic. The variety of thesis approaches reflects RISD’s variety of disciplines, their related professional practices and traditions, departmental priorities, and the distinct interests and intentions of the thesis writer. All thesis books are collected in the Fleet Library; descriptive records are logged in the Library’s database; and PDFs are posted on RISD’s Digital Commons site.

You’re holding the very first edition of the *Book of Thesis Books*—a guide featuring 37 recent thesis books that are exemplary both overall and for their particular and diverse qualities of research, writing, documentation, and design. The theses were chosen and annotated by staff of the Center for Arts & Language (A&L): Jennifer Liese, Director; Emily Cornell du Houx, Faculty Mentor (MFA Sculpture 2012); and Aaron Simmons, Graduate

Assistant (MID 2018), following recommendations from Graduate Program Directors and faculty and review of about 300 theses. The book was designed by Elizabeth Leeper (MFA Graphic Design 2017). The paradigms and wisdom of Anne West, Senior Lecturer and A&L Faculty Mentor, continually lit the way.

This guide is intended to help future thesis writers understand the range of approaches to and content in RISD thesis books, locate some especially strong examples in the Library’s vast thesis collection, and imagine and plan their own theses. It is one among many of RISD’s thesis-writing resources (see p. 88). The examples, drawn from all of RISD’s graduate programs and disciplines, are organized into five categories:

Academic Thesis a scholarly document emphasizing bibliographic research, arguing or staking a position, and contributing to the field’s discourse

Monograph a study of one subject or body of work and its context, focused more on product than process; leans toward art disciplines

Project Document a study of one subject or body of work and its context, focused more on process than product; leans toward design disciplines

Mosaic Essay a collection of short writings in multiple styles that cohere into a whole; some may reference the work only obliquely

Artist’s Book a work itself, plays with narrative or genre and emphasizes materiality

These broad categories are fluid and overlapping; many books are hybrids. Choosing among (or combining) them is a decision based on departmental guidelines, consideration of audience and purpose, professional ambitions, personal interests, and what your work “needs.”

Each thesis book is represented by an interior spread, a short excerpt, and a descriptive summary that highlights the content, qualities, or strategies that make it exemplary (e.g., inviting abstract, strong precedent study, lively interview, engaging tone, effective information graphics, and so on).

We hope you will enjoy and revisit this guide often, finding ideas and inspiration along the way. You may want to scan all of the descriptions and highlights to imagine a range of possibilities in the early stages of thesis development, then read closely and consult specific thesis books for deeper study and understanding. It is the thesis books themselves, of course, that will instruct and amaze you, as they did us. —Jennifer Liese

Chaitra Bangalore
(Teaching + Learning in Art + Design, 2017)

Liat Berdugo
(Digital + Media, 2013)

Alper Besen
(Interior Architecture, 2013)

Kendra Kirchmer
(Furniture Design, 2016)

Anina Major
(Ceramics, 2017)

Jagdeep Raina
(Painting, 2016)

Zoe Schein
(Teaching + Learning in Art + Design, 2017)

Emily Frances Winter
(Textiles, 2015)

Academic Thesis

The academic thesis is a scholarly document emphasizing bibliographic research, arguing or staking a position, and contributing to the field’s discourse.

Annotations by Emily Cornell du Houx (ECdH), Jennifer Liese (JL), and Aaron Simmons (AFS)

REF = located in Reference; ARC = in Archives; DC = on Digital Commons (as of 2018)

Let’s Get Hairy: Women, Body Hair, & Stigma in Arts Education

ARTE 2017.B35, REF/ARC/DC
86 pages

Chaitra Bangalore



“Madame Josephine Clofullia, America’s first ‘bearded lady’ performed in P.T. Barnum’s circus. Born in 1865, she began her career with Barnum as an infant. One might think that Madame Clofullia caused people to question her gender. Surprisingly, due to her success in the circus, she was viewed with wonder as opposed to disgust. Madame Clofullia was of Swiss descent, identified as a woman, and was well educated. While she wasn’t treated as completely ordinary, these qualifiers kept her from being denied her womanhood.”



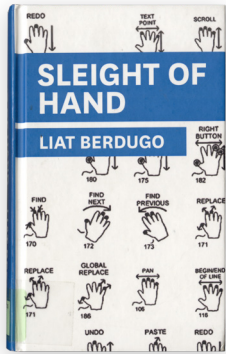
Figure 3 Identity is Hairy (2017) [Digital illustrations]

With depth and clarity, Bangalore makes a **major contribution to a topic** that is both little-researched and taboo: perceptions of women’s—particularly dark-skinned women’s—body hair. In the vein of **arts-based research**, the text and the work are completely tied, answering the **thesis question** “How can creativity work to dismantle stigma?” and catalyzing “a better understanding of how body hair functions within our society” with the goal of helping to normalize it. Bangalore conducts a **literature review** of relevant topics—feminist theory, gender and identity, and socially engaged arts education—and lays bare **historical representations** of body hair. Through all her sources, across time and subject matter, she keeps coming back to her **own experiences**, tweezing and depilating, for example, and those of the women she interviews. Her **methods of inquiry are especially varied**: she also experiments on herself by growing out her own hair, analyzes ads for hair-removal products, and dissects hair-associated moments from popular culture. Her **research is wide-ranging yet specific**, including everything from a history of bearded ladies to analysis of Veet commercials bearing the slogan “Don’t Risk Dudeness” to a description of a scene from the sitcom *How I Met Your Mother*, in which a main character repeats the mantra, “If I don’t shave I must behave.” In the end, Bangalore proposes ideas about how creativity and visual art can expose body hair to greater understanding so that its maintenance becomes more a personal choice than a social mandate. —ECdH

Sleight of Hand

DM 2013.B4, REF
287 pages

Liat Berdugo



“We are living in what French philosopher Jacques Ellul called a ‘technological society’: a milieu dominated by efficiency, the machine, and all its surrounding behavioral and cultural effects. ... It is increasingly difficult to separate the digital from the analog, the online from the offline, the real from the virtual. These divisions no longer govern; they are eroding, they have eroded. They live only as digital *Mauern im Kopfs*—as virtual walls in the head—whose memory traces remind of a previous era. There is no Second Life, only a first: a life that encompasses the digital, online worlds and analog, ‘in real life’ (IRL) worlds as an intimately and indistinguishably intertwined, singular universe.”

My iPhone is Everything, 2012

My iPhone is Everything is a series of sixteen videos in which iPhones and iPads are recast as objects that they could never truly be. As these devices become the do-anything Swiss army knives of an increasingly digitized world, *My iPhone is Everything* asks, what would it look like to push these limits to their absolute extremes? What is it that we are ultimately willing to believe technology can do? And, can an iPad really grate cheese?



Video stills from My iPhone is Everything, v.7, 2012



Video still from My iPhone is Everything, v.2, 2012



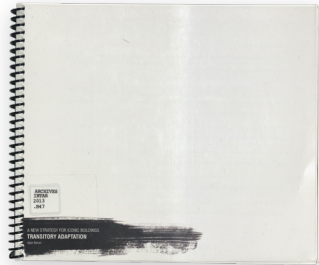
Video still from My iPhone is Everything, v.3, 2012

In *Sleight of Hand*, Berdugo enters the “technological society” headlong, observing its quirks, percolating its theories, and **positing arguments through her work and writing**. These arguments are nonevaluative and openended, as she carefully points out in the abstract and introduction, rejecting both utopic and dystopic views of technology and listing its simultaneous promises and failures—that it offers virtual geographic freedom and immobilizes the physical body, for example. Four chapters follow, each comprising a steady rhythm of **thematic essays followed by project descriptions and documentation**. On topics from humor to gesture to magic to the seductive “halo” designed around digital devices, Berdugo offers both **extensive research** and her own **original contributions to new media discourse**. Her documentation includes series of video stills, installation views, and a performance script, **extending the typical scope of reproduction**. While most of the book is **scholarly, self-reflective, or descriptive in tone**, the final chapter and back matter are experimental. A “**visual essay**” compares magic and technology by juxtaposing respective how-to illustrations. Berdugo **coins her own term**, the “magi-tech cycle,” to describe how the two seemingly disparate fields interact. An **enigmatic artist statement** and an **interview with her “artistic soulmate,”** Claire, touch on a few more topics—repetition, absurdity, and Bad Art—in a **performative voice** that, quite like a magician’s sleight of hand, is accessible and mischievous at once. —JL

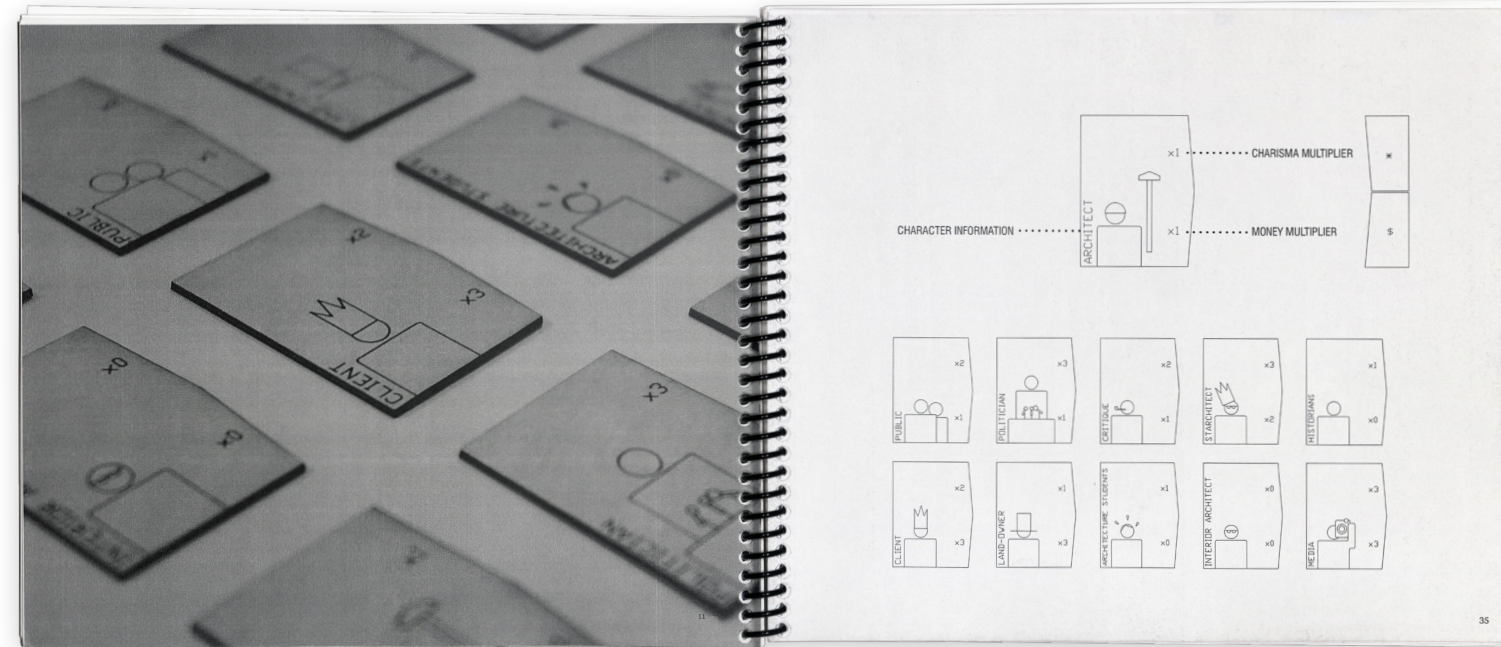
Temporary Adaptation

INTAR 2013.B4, ARC
146 pages

Alper Besen



“Thanks to the current speed of social change, the prominent buildings of recent history become obsolete far more quickly than their predecessors. The leading architecture of a recent era can become a historical icon or totally lose its importance overnight. This temporary state of value renders us incapable of evaluating these buildings’ future. When we are faced by the need to reuse buildings, the permanent nature of current adaptations clutch, pierce, and bruise the host building. This attitude erases the original experience in an irreversible way and shackles future generations to present choices. The morality of this relationship must be questioned.”

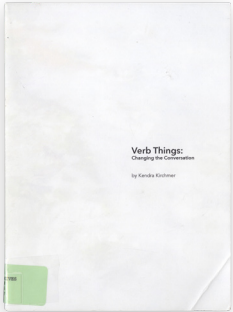


Besen’s proposal for “temporary adaptation”—an ephemeral intervention that falls somewhere between pure historic preservation and enduring adaptive reuse—is **manifesto-like** in its conviction. In the **context-setting introduction**, he describes buildings as no less than “a constant struggle between the forces of nature and actions of men” and unpacks the power, politics, ideologies, economics, and ethics behind architecture throughout history. He draws on the **theory** of Baudrillard and Heidegger and integrates **architectural precedents** such as Mies van der Rohe’s Barcelona Pavilion with authoritative ease. The introduction is followed by an emphatic **illustrated summary**, and Besen makes good use of **diagrams and concept maps** to track his processes. **Early experiments** are documented in gridded photographs of wooden blocks inventively altered to test his adaptive concepts. His final project—a proposal to convert the Richard Meier Smith House into a residential alcohol and drug rehab center—is represented in **dozens of diverse renderings** of section plans, circulation analyses, additions and subtractions, and detail views of “connections” and “marks.” Reading the instructions to his Game of Architecture, in which players choose pieces and cards representing buildings and characters and through their play “destroy, alter, or mummify” a building, is yet another tantalizing way to engage with Besen’s **persuasive proposition**. —JL

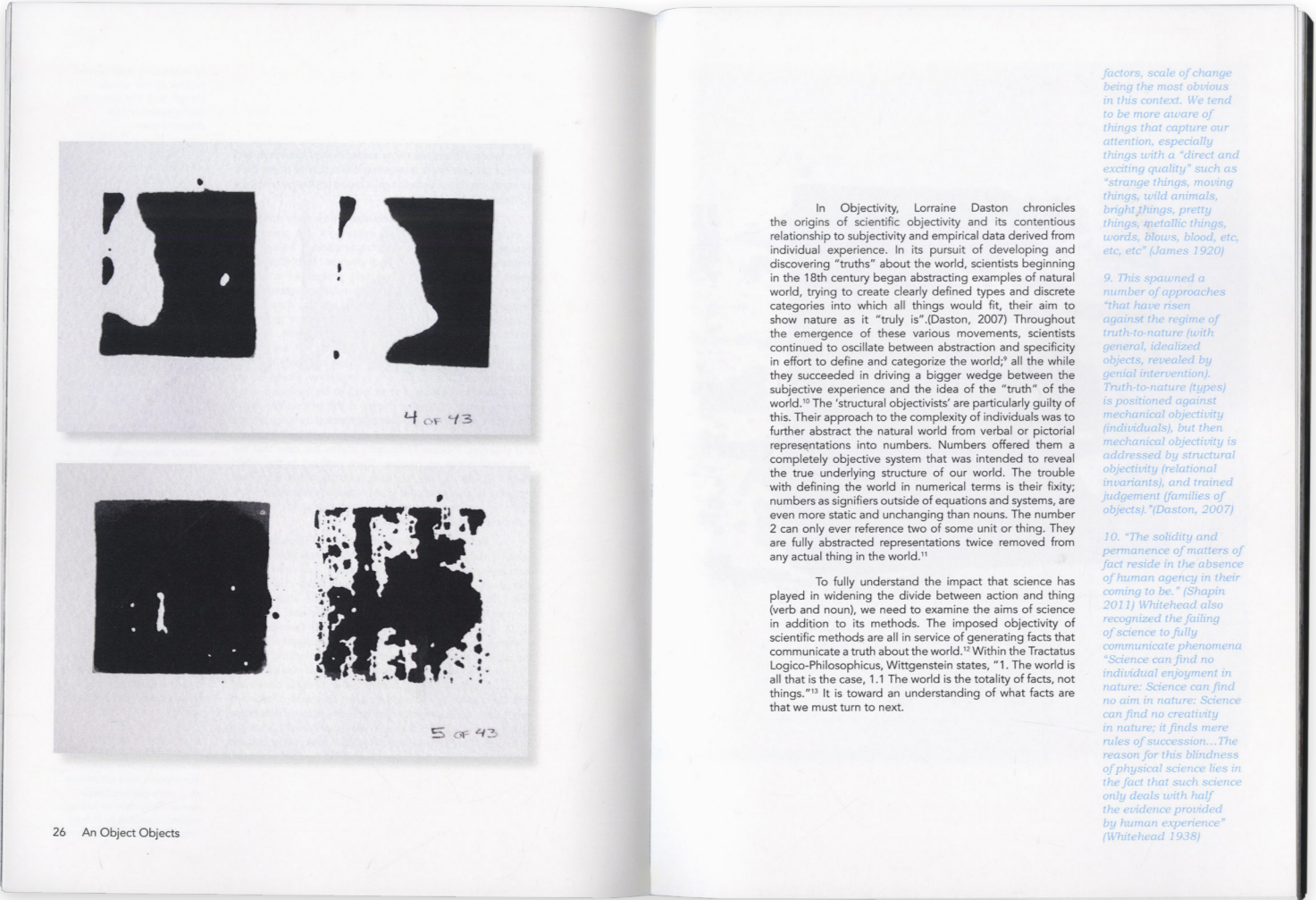
Verb Things:
Changing the Conversation

FURN 2016.K5, REF/DC
89 pages

Kendra Kirchmer



“Much like looking out across the ocean at the far away horizon creates a sense of unchanging stillness, despite the turbulence of the waves, the closeness of the immediate shore reveals that any notion of stillness is an impossibility. ... The more layers of connections we have with a thing, the closer we are able to feel it. The less distant and abstract a thing becomes, the less noun-like and more verb-like it is. The more furniture becomes entangled within our activity, through sharing with us a part of its own, the more opportunities there are for connections to form.”



Through academic research, personal observation, object analysis, and her own studio practice, Kirchmer argues for the “verbing” of things. She draws on sources from philosophy, architecture, and fiction to describe how we increasingly perceive the material world to be still or static, and works to undo this belief through a “metaphoric re-languaging of the way we understand our objects.” Her writing is remarkably clear, balancing an objective and engaging tone with richly described observations of the shifting material world, from seaweed to rust to her own reading habits. The document is well cited in the traditional academic way but also manages to riff on the form of the academic paper, using the footnote as a stand-out design feature that offers a secondary narrative to Kirchmer’s main argument. This Nabokovian approach to structure suits her topic well, as it animates and sometimes disrupts her linear, rational argument—a cultural preference for which she believes partially contributes to our understanding of the world as “fixed.” As the text progresses, she turns to “misinterpretation” and “entanglement” as techniques to unlock materials from their perceived static nature. The book’s overall design is clean and consistent, punctuated by luscious full-page photographs, which document her work and visually highlight the shifting material world. —ECDH

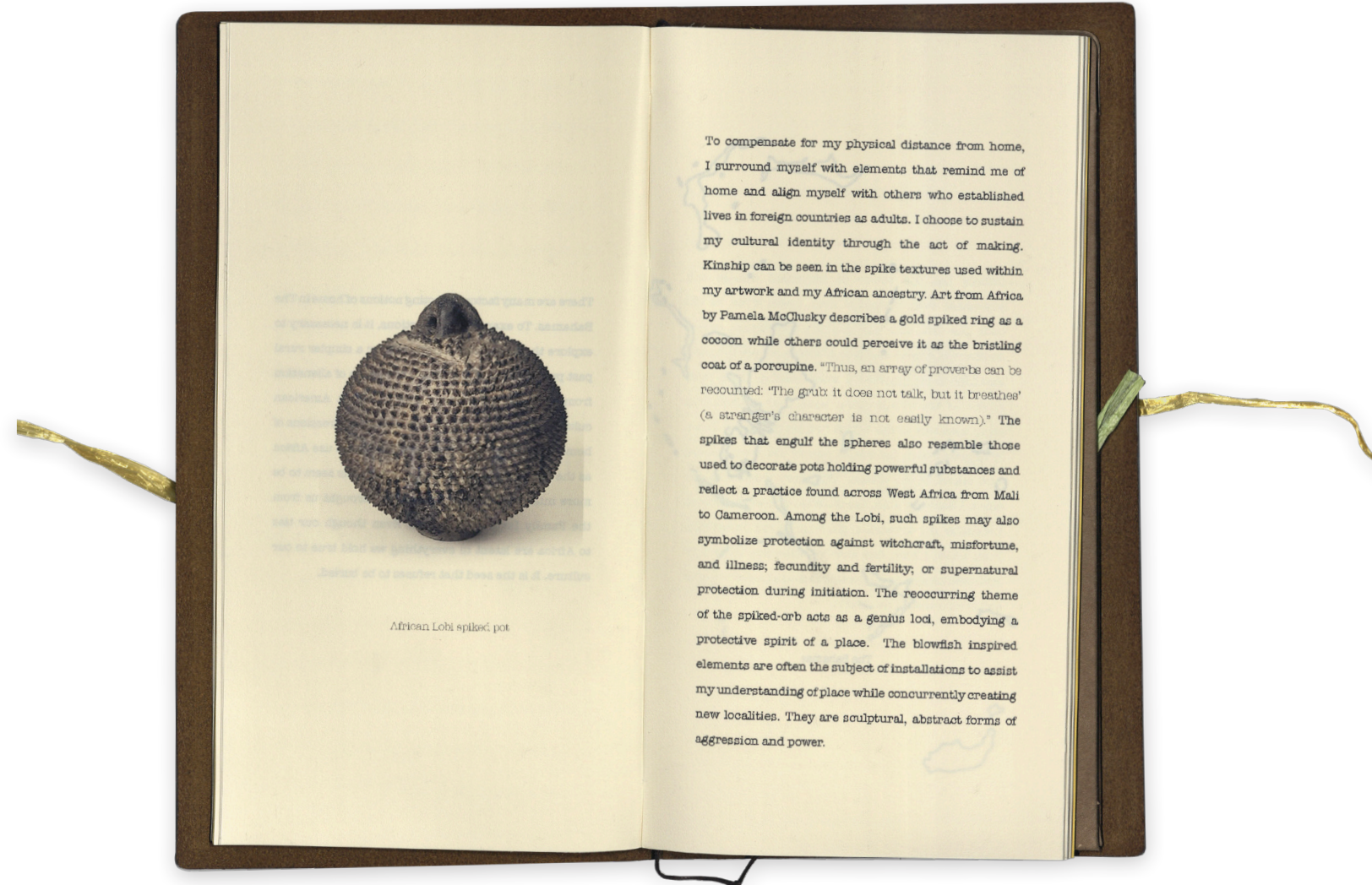
In the Marketplace

CER 2017.M34, ARC/DC
no page numbers

Anina Major



“To further explore my own migration and the emotional complexities that surface, with a desire to fabricate terms of cultural integrity and its defining influence. To express poetically the kindred ideals that resonate from home and intertwine those values to cultivate moments of reflection and acceptance. To promote encounters between past, present, and future by weaving the memories of my own background and experiences, consequently unveiling a rich culture composed from diverse views. ... To embrace the histories of textiles and ceramics as signifiers of culture that map the migrations of tradition and identity.”

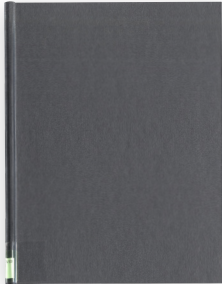


Major’s thesis book opens with a **manifesto** in which she lists her aims and actions, through which she seeks to lighten “the emotional weight of separation” from her home in the Bahamas and reconcile her “trans-national identity.” Her writings, printed in an **authentic-looking typewriter font**, share her **research into a wide range of subjects** central to her work: colonization; current trends in globalization/Americanization; sociological, philosophical, and psychological aspects of being home and away; the marketplace as a site of transaction, trade, displacement, belonging, and cultural adaptation; African art and craft; and traditional Bahamian straw-plaiting techniques. Major’s grandmother, “Mar,” a master weaver of baskets and purses, is honored as an **early inspiration** for Major’s work. The book is bound in a **leather wrap cover**, with **rich print quality**, and features a pocket at the end with **inserted glossy 4x6 images** of her work, including **photos of her thesis exhibition installation** (a nice solution to the fact that printer deadlines always precede the thesis show). This is the first time we see Major’s work at all, and suddenly all her contextual research is visible in form. —AFS

To Live in Hearts We Leave Behind Is Not to Pass but to Live On

PAINT 2016.R34, REF
no page numbers

Jagdeep Raina



“The precarious history of Punjabi communities exists in overlooked archives: books, oral history manuscripts, VHS tapes, records, and cassettes tucked away in cardboard boxes, yellow photographs in peeling albums stuffed in cupboards and shelves, in basements, on sporadic online databases, and in the research of quiet scholars who have dedicated their lives to painstakingly recording a history lived in the margins. Sifting through these sources, I grasp at whatever I can find and hold on long enough until I swallow the images and histories whole, then resurrect them in works of art.”



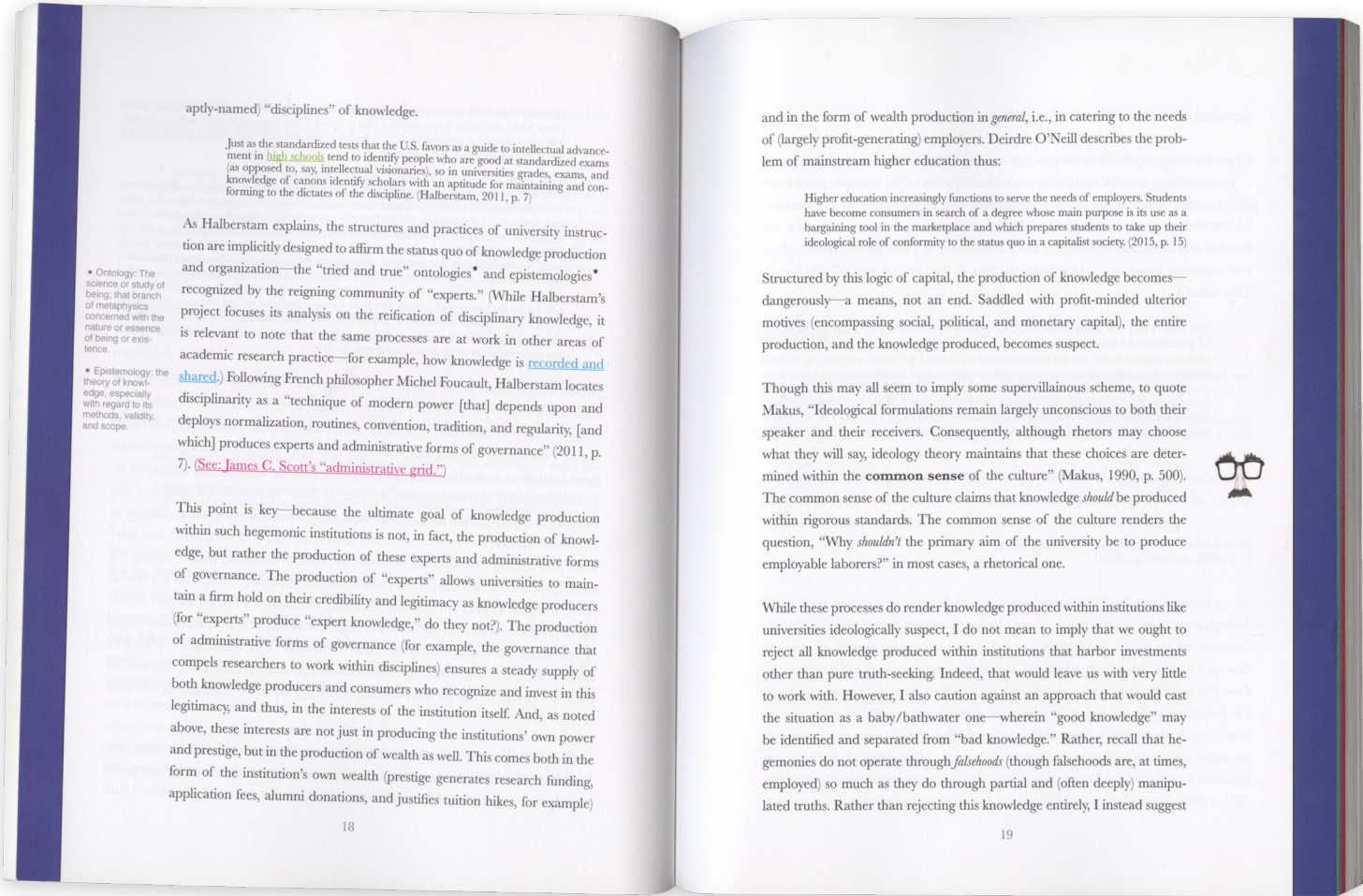
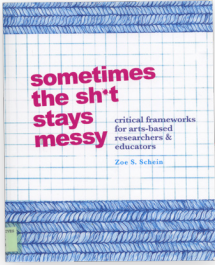
Raina’s extensive and varied archival and bibliographic research is source material for his vivid, monumental drawings, which appear nowhere in this thesis book. Here, instead, the research becomes his medium. In a series of nine short, powerful, and moving essays, Raina documents, reflects on, celebrates, and mourns the experiences of diasporic Punjabi Sikh communities, particularly in Canada, where he grew up. Each essay begins with an epigraph or two—quotes by philosophers, theorists, and artists that elucidate his subject. The first essay, introduced with lines from Bachelard’s *The Poetics of Space*, chronicles the construction and destruction of North America’s first Sikh temple, in Vancouver. “Ennui” reflects on the dreams of immigrants, who come for the promise of freedom and opportunity and instead find racism and low-wage jobs, drawing on poetry, graffiti, and a mid-century portrait to represent these experiences. “The Gift” conveys the reciprocal generosity Raina feels in both having access to the archives of historians and libraries and offering all first-time visitors to his studio a token of gratitude. The book’s plain design—8.5 x 11 paper, Times text with a one-inch margin, and color-printer images—reflects a tendency to downplay book design in the Painting department and also suits Raina’s archival aesthetic. This book is about logging, not decorating, a necessary record. —JL

Sometimes the Sh*t Stays Messy: Critical Frameworks for Arts-based Researchers & Educators

ARTE 2017.S34, REF/DC
117 pages

Zoe Schein

“Hegemonies are systems of thought—or elements of those systems—that are so widely and powerfully held that they appear not to be systems of thought at all, but objective, natural fact. ... Hegemonies organize. Hegemonies obfuscate. You can see the hierarchies already emerging. Straightness is natural, queerness is not. Men and women are legible, and therefore sensical; trans*, intersex, genderqueer are scribbled, confused, confusing. Western cultures drive toward completion. Others languish, unfinished.”



Schein’s thesis is as compelling for its playful interventions into the form of the academic research paper as it is for its content, which makes perfect sense given her project: to integrate queer theory and arts-based research toward inventing a “counter hegemonic knowledge practice.” Faithfully enacting academic writing norms, Schein integrates sources drawn from a thorough literature review (from Foucault to bell hooks), carefully defines her key terms, and presents persuasive arguments. Satirizing those norms, she swaps in ink splotches for footnotes, adds color-coded “hyperlinks” to distant sections of the book, and places comical masks in the margin any time a hegemonic term sneaks in. (All of this is explained in an opening note on “How to read this book.”) A reflective introduction recalls Schein’s prior academic and work experience. Two appendices—an experimental narrative loosely exploring “how to draw a lesbian” and drawings rendered on and off a grid—activate the space between image and language. Two core chapters follow a problem-solution model: the first demonstrates the inequity of higher education; the second describes how queer theory and arts-based research together can foster democratic pedagogy. Schein stops short of proposing a comprehensive plan, but builds a foundation for the reader to start imagining “social liberation on a structural scale” right alongside her. —JL

Over/Under

TEXT 2015.W56, REF
81 pages

Emily Frances Winter



“Wrapped up in every cloth, in every static, flat fabric, is the thing that happened: the series of actions that resulted in the object. By expanding the fabric’s scale, by exaggerating its components, we can start to see all that it holds. Within the tight, controlled, and singular space of the cloth, there is action, labor, and time. ... I am thinking about the ways in which fabrics are elemental, the ways in which information is embedded and represented in and around them, and the ways in which we can understand the act of making (verb) the resulting object (noun).”



Over/Under opens with a tribute to Anni Albers’s *On Weaving* and takes a similarly **adventurous and interwoven approach**. This thesis is many books in one. It is part **philosophical inquiry**, asking the epistemological question “How can a fabric live both as an object and a representation of the elements and processes of the making?” It is also a **handbook**, describing and diagramming various textiles, from the simplest hand-made warp-weft to complex Jacquards. It offers a **history** of such diagrams, with samples dating back to the 1700s. It features a **portfolio** of Winter’s own pattern-demonstrating black-and-white textile designs and textiles **case studies** from the RISD Museum collection. **Archival research** into efforts to increase workers’ efficiency in early 20th-century factories leads to its final section—a **humanitarian polemic** proposing that textile mills, primary sites for industrial capitalism and labor abuses, are ripe for reform—and asks, “Where better to reformulate the capitalist mode but at the heart of its figuration?” As it turned out, Winter’s thesis built a foundation for an extraordinary post-grad project, The Weaving Mill (theweavingmill.com), an ethically focused weaving studio that partners with artists and adults with developmental disabilities to “bring the mechanics of textile production into wider view.” —JL

Christina Chen
(Industrial Design, 2017)

Ling Chun
(Ceramics, 2016)

Elise Kirk
(Photography, 2015)

Pedro Letria
(Photography, 2012)

Ziqing Liang
(Glass, 2016)

June Shin
(Graphic Design, 2017)

Mallory Weston
(Jewelry + Metalsmithing, 2013)

Monograph

The monograph is a study of one subject or body of work and its context, focused more on product than process; leans toward art disciplines.

Magkasama

ID 2017.C4, REF/DC
199 pages

Christina Chen



“Pray for Us reflects the tension younger generations experience when forced to participate in Catholicism. The tradition is deeply rooted in colonial violence and greed but is masked under holy pretenses. To communicate this cultural conflict, I used emoji motifs that I digitally embroidered onto the dress. The two rows of characters represent Spain and the Philippines. On one row is the Spanish flag, cross, crown, and jewels. Below it is the Filipino flag’s sun with chains, swords, and guns. These symbols create a narrative depicting Spanish violence under the intent of spreading their religious agenda.”



Chen’s thesis is inspired by trying to understand her own Filipino heritage and help other Filipinos understand theirs, using apparel as a medium for making culture visible. She worked extensively with other young Filipinos, interviewing her “user group” about their experiences and designing garments that reflect those experiences through integrated photographs, patterns, and symbols, as described in thorough project descriptions. The book borrows the format of a fashion magazine, with full-bleed images and participant quotes dominating the pages. The images, shot by Chen, are pristine and evocative, and speak to the value of photographing one’s own work and process. The quotes are particularly poignant, and Chen uses them collectively to tell a compelling story of growing up Filipino in America. The longer texts, some framed as an alpha-betical glossary (“C is for Colonialism,” “D is for Diaspora,” “E is for Erasure”), provide enough contextual research to offer a basic education on Filipino history. Chen also connects to contemporary politics, placing her project against the backdrop of post-2016 election racism and noting that her designs also considered the wearers “safety and security.” In the “Closing Thoughts” Chen outlines future ambitions and proposes the wider potential for her methodology to make other cultures visible. —AFS

**Meltdown:
Stubborn Categories**

CER 2016.C58, REF
76 pages

Ling Chun



“When I was eight, I began a practice of Chinese calligraphy that lasted about four years. ... The relationship between the visible ink stroke and my own gesture is undeniable; without knowing and understanding the flow and nature of the stroke, I cannot follow and respond to its movement. In this way, my understanding of self and of my materials are one and the same; stroke and gesture inevitably coexist. This understanding has deeply influenced my ceramic work, and I have come to conceive of the clay surface as an index of my bodily gestures.”

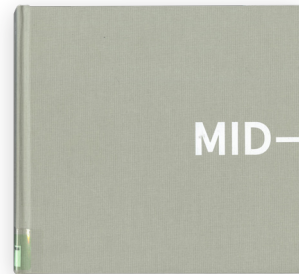


Chun’s ceramic sculptures—large-scale, multi-part, thrown and hand-built, gushing with rainbow glazes, pierced with multi-colored hair—are the exuberant focus of *Meltdown*. Functioning like a **hybrid portfolio/exhibition catalogue/magazine**, the book is dense with **gorgeous images of her work**, shot against white backdrops so they appear to float on the page and printed so crisply you feel you could touch them. Captions are held until the book’s end, allowing the images to speak for themselves. A half dozen texts are interspersed between the images, many reflecting on the “stubborn categories” of the subtitle: categories that distinguish between cultures (East and West) or mediums (ceramics, painting, and sculpture) or that, when combined, make clay (flux, silica, and alumina). Chun lays out her **artistic lineage**, citing Peter Voulkos and Sterling Ruby in ceramics, Meret Oppenheim’s fur teacup and Nick Cave’s Soundsuits, and the use of hair in indigenous New Guinean ritual and Victorian mourning jewelry. One text outlines Chun’s **process in 27 steps**, proceeding from form-making to painting to glazing to affixing hair and “plating” on shaped concrete plinths. Images of splats of powdered glaze, fingerprinted lumps of clay, and the artist’s dusty hands appear throughout the book as both tiny flashes of her process and **decorative elements**. Chun writes that she hopes with her ceramics to “invite viewers into an experience of desire and fun.” Her book does that, too. —JL

Mid-

PHOTO 2015.K5, REF/DC
175 pages

Elise Kirk



“The scope of my work cannot represent the Midwest in its complex entirety ... I invite viewers to read the work not as documentation of complete fact but as expression through fiction of a subjective truth. It is a contemporary displacement myth set against the metaphorical smaller-town transient belt of my return—a story perhaps common to anyone in any town or city nation-wide always considering the next move. I can only hope to toss a line through shared recognition of our collective drift.”

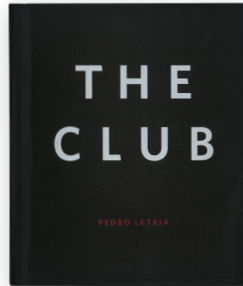


In *Mid-* Kirk calls on her experience as a native Midwesterner to question the common perception of its “flyover” status and explore the widespread contemporary sensation of rootedness and restlessness, or “dislocation dilemma.” In her **extraordinarily eloquent writing**, Kirk combines **personal narrative, contextual research** drawing on sociological, art-historical, and literary sources (see the **annotated bibliography**), and **reflections on her process and practice**. Her articulation of **artistic inspirations** (Dorothea Lange, Robert Frank, Alec Soth) is rich and thoughtful, and anyone wondering how best to balance personal and expository writing, or connect one’s own experience to wider cultural phenomena, can learn from her. A **beautifully printed plate section of photographs** features images of the open road, liminal places, and people both in transition and in repose. The design neatly distinguishes **family photos** and **precedent images** from her own work through shifts in scale and section and leaves lots of **crisp white space** for the words and images to resonate. (Kirk collaborated with Graphic Design grad Diane Lee on the design.) Kirk’s **reflections on critiques**, polling of fellow students on their views of the Midwest, and detailed description of the nuances of shooting with a large-format 4 x 5 camera are also noteworthy. —AFS

The Club

PHOTO 2012.L4, ARC
125 pages

Pedro Letria



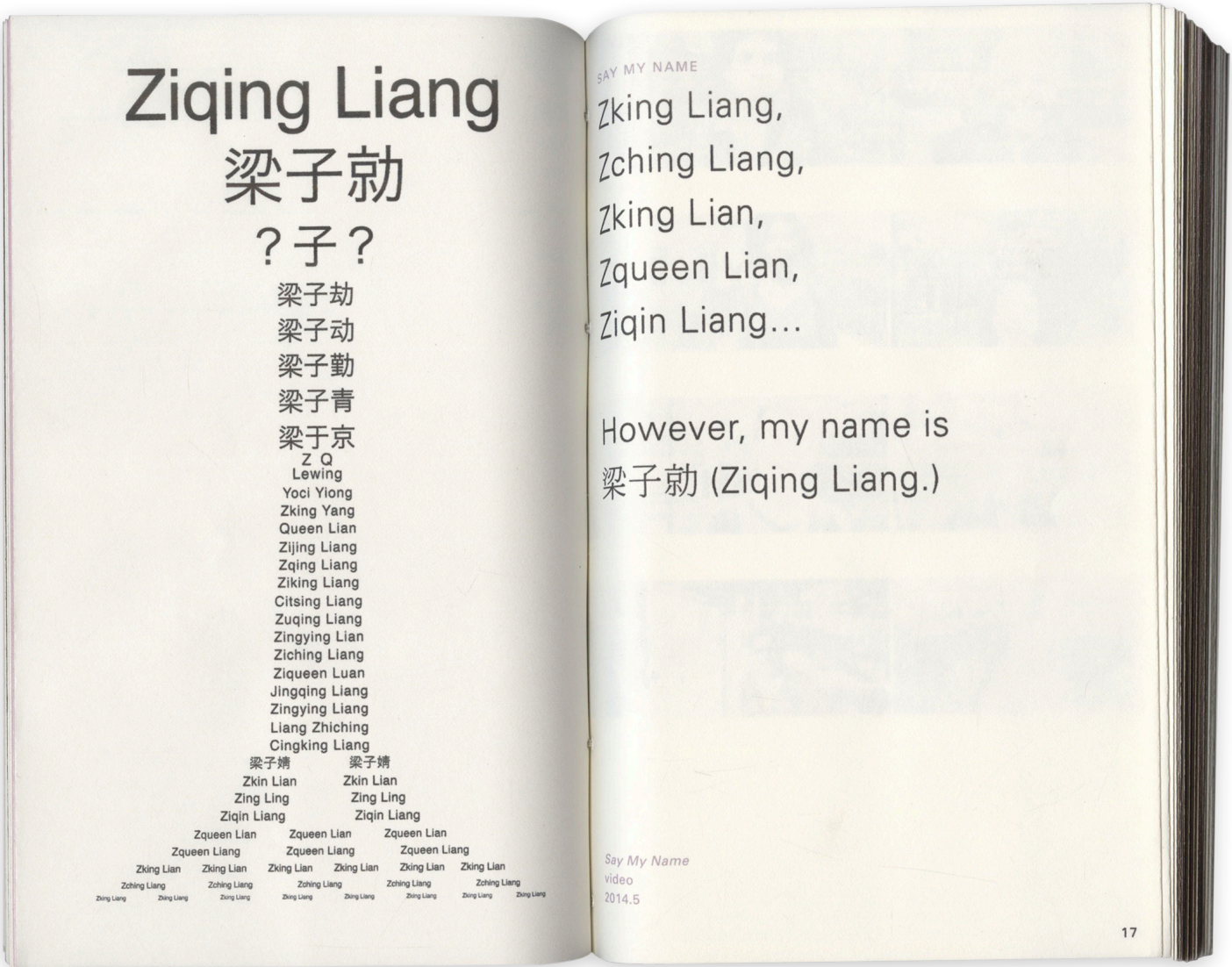
“I have drawn, freely, from each immigrant’s own endeavors and dreams in the New World, and the resulting combinations form a lens through which to view belonging and variation, and, ultimately, allow for a way to navigate my own estrangement, as it stands, punctuated by distance from family and land. Although I am aware that these immigrants’ freedom of choice was limited by specific economic contexts and filial loyalties, and never equal to the one I created and enjoyed, it is my conviction that what is voiced in this body of work emerges from a shared human condition, and its collective desire to belong, affirm, and signify.”



In *The Club* we follow Letria, a native of Portugal, as he explores the private Portuguese-American social clubs of Rhode Island (a state where 8.2 percent of the population has Portuguese roots). Through this **anthropological study engaging the local community**, he contemplates this engagement, his own sense of displacement, the power of the image, and its relation to fiction, documentary, and storytelling. The book’s content is split into three types: photographs documenting the clubs, captions specific to each photo, and narrative reflections that run throughout the chapters. Together the three forms of content create a cohesive whole. The photographs picture the social events, banquets, bars, and classrooms that find life under the clubs’ roofs. The **discursive captions** offer short anecdotes that describe the happenings in that particular photo and give us a wider view into these private worlds. The narrative chronicles Letria’s ongoing exploration and highlights the tension the artist feels in being a Portuguese citizen interacting with historical immigrants to the United States, displaying an exemplary sensitivity and genuine interest in **working with communities other than one’s own**. Letria notes that he maintained a **related blog**—daysofprovidence.tumblr.com—throughout his thesis development, “both generating an audience and establishing a destination for these dispatches of sorts.” —AFS



“When I asked the strangers to read my name, some of them did not want to read it, because they knew that they cannot pronounce my name right. ... I feel that as long as someone calls me a lovely name, whether it is Zching or others, I am open to a variety of versions of my name. I understand how difficult it is for people to say my name correctly. ... Many people asked, ‘Did I pronounce it right?’ To be honest, at that point, they did not. However, isn’t that what makes this project interesting?”

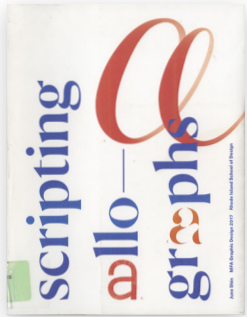


Liang’s thesis book—a meditation on translating language and meaning between Chinese and American cultures—is organized as a series of **extended project descriptions** of seven works, divided into two **thematic sections**: language and everyday actions. This **simple organizing structure** in no way limits conceptual complexity, as each project is elucidated through **expressive self-reflection**, **formal analysis**, and connections to **artistic inspirations**. *Say My Name*, a video in which Liang asks passersby to pronounce her name, occasions thoughts on the connection between one’s name and identity. *Osmosis*, an installation of glass pillows arrayed on the floor, each with embedded text, is described in all its variations—one with layers of English and Chinese text whose legibility fluctuates depending on the viewer’s position, for example. South Korean artist Do Ho Suh’s life-size fabric replicas of the homes he has left behind around the world are presented alongside Liang’s work *Window*, a video in which sunlight seen through a window is projected on her Providence studio wall at night, aligning with the time of day back home. Liang’s **tone is direct and personable**, her **design warm and generous**, especially the lavender section-break pages, full-bleed images, and large yet delicate type. A few grammatical variations remind us that the thesis itself was written between languages. —JL

Scripting Allographs

GRAPH 2017.S55, REF/DC
286 pages

June Shin



“Although the alphabet is a given, there are countless ways in which a single letter can be visualized. Every person has her own handwriting or lettering style, and every time, even if drawn by the same person, the same letter inevitably looks different. ... In Ancient Maya, glyphs were never standardized; rather, the scribes were encouraged to use their imagination to render them. ... In linguistics, the term ‘allograph’ is used to describe such variance. Stemming from the Greek for ‘other writing,’ allograph is defined as every possible variant of a grapheme or a letter; for any letter, its uppercase, lowercase, and italic forms, as well as all of its handwritten forms.”

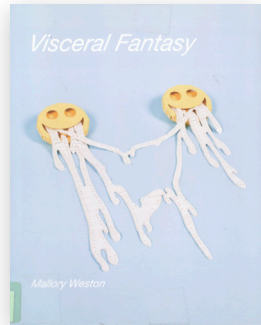


As a “**Note to the Reader**” describes, Shin frames her thesis as a curriculum for design school, **borrowing genre conventions** such as a syllabus, lecture, and briefs. In the introductory “Syllabus,” Shin says she wants to encourage us, her student-readers, to love type, and she really does, sharpening our eyes to its nuances and bringing its allographic varieties to life. The “lectures” are a series of five well-researched **essays that trace major themes**, from close looking to letting go of perfectionism. Grouped under each lecture, **projects are concisely described and documented** and include fonts inspired by utility workers’ spray-painted marks and manipulating wood blocks representing pixels. Ample **sketchbook scans** and a “**catalog of tangents**” at the end make space for **process documentation** and works that fall outside the thesis framework but still matter. **Interviews** with class “guests”—two prominent designers—are models for their range of questions and genuine rapport. The book’s **design is structured and full of surprises**; a **glossy centerfold section** of many letter a’s designed in response to *Oblique Strategies* prompts; **large-type phrases** filling whole pages and eliciting a pause; even **ombré-tinted gutters**. (And be sure to remove the cover wrap to reveal the **handsewn section binding**.) The **colophon** on the inside back flap details additional design choices and sources—from fonts (of course) to printer to binder—one last sign of the author’s deep and adoring attention to detail. —JL

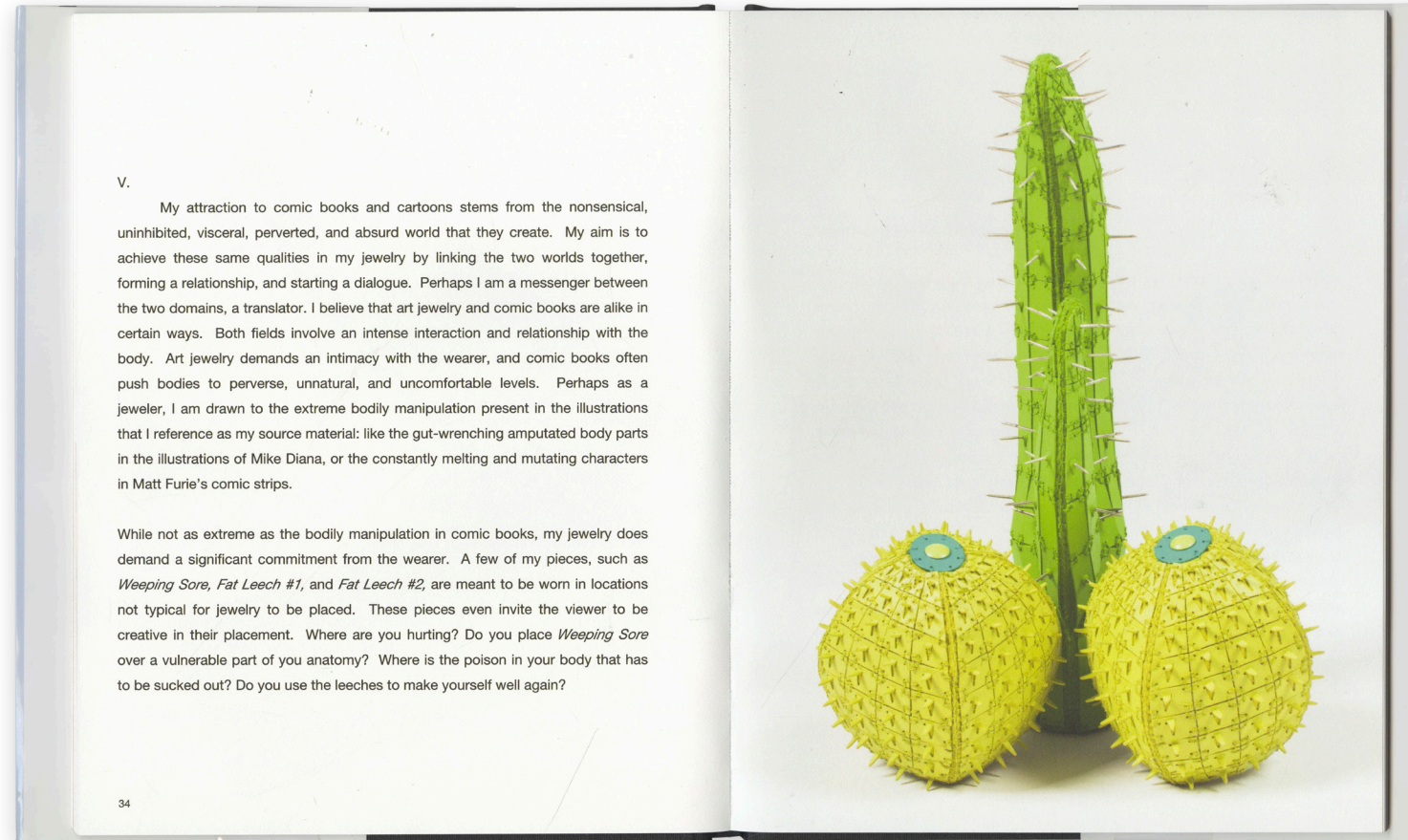
Visceral Fantasy

J&M 2013.W4, REF
73 pages

Mallory Weston



“The bodies in contemporary alternative comic books are rendered violently, grotesquely, and unnaturally distorted. ... Bodily fluids are everywhere: vomit, blood, semen, tears, mucus, excrement, urine, and spit overflow or appear in the drawn environments. Bodies are pushed to extreme levels: eyes pop out of the skull in surprise, limbs stretch, and facial expressions contort in unrealistic ways. I am enchanted by this disgusting world of mutants.”



Weston draws inspiration for her jewelry from the world of cartoons and comics, with the stated goal of escaping “the pretensions of her field.” The majority of her writing offers a straightforward **analysis of her sources in relation to her own work**. She compares elements of her brightly colored, playful, bodily objects to examples from her favorite cartoonists, breaking each down to their essential elements. About three-quarters of the way through the thesis, Weston’s voice abruptly shifts as we encounter **raw process writings** that are just as visceral, provocative, and corporeal as her own work and influences. She quickly returns to a more distanced voice, but the glimpse resurfaces as the thesis concludes. The textual tip-of-the-hand is tantalizing, and suggests a whole other layer to Weston’s exploration of seduction, fear, and fluids. The work itself is **crisply photographed** against clean white backdrops, and printed on **oversized, matte paper**. On some pages, the otherwise white background is replaced by a **solid spot color** drawn from the work’s luscious palette. This single, repeated graphic technique results in a **simple, consistent aesthetic** that allows the work to shine. —ECdH

Cem Eskinazi
(Graphic Design, 2017)

Elias Gardner
(Architecture, 2013)

Rebecca Li
(Furniture, 2017)

Falon Mihalic
(Landscape Architecture, 2012)

Lucia Monge
(Sculpture, 2015)

Hobin Song
(Interior Architecture, 2017)

Diana Wagner
(Industrial Design, 2014)

Kelsey Wakefield
(Landscape Architecture, 2017)

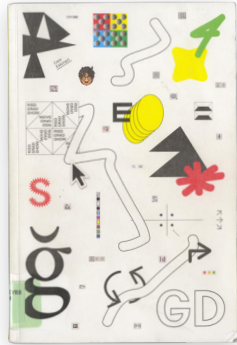
Project Document

The project document is a study of one subject or body of work and its context, focused more on process than product; leans toward design disciplines.

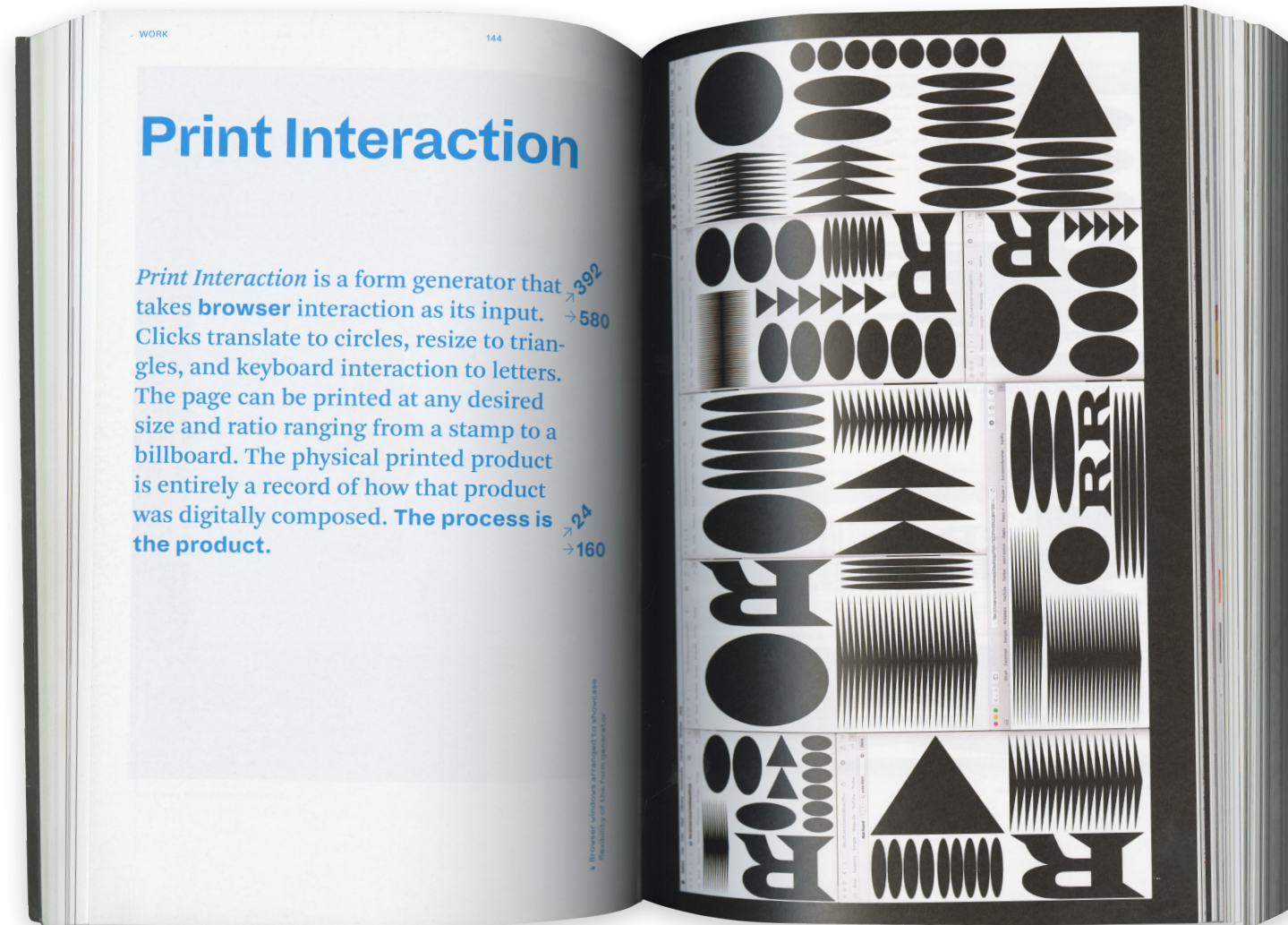
Playgrounds

GRAPH 2017.E85, REF/DC
671 pages

Cem Eskinazi



“I am challenging the idea of authority and the amount of hand holding we must offer as designers. ... This book offers neatly organized parts but never dictates a singular clear route. It allows for personalized experiences and possibilities to decide. Go ahead, read it however you want! Jump from page to page as you wish. It is your unique experience, and who am I to dictate that? I am merely an enabler, a curator of universes and paths. Today, we are all more invested in experiences than products. This fact renders my design approach more relevant than ever.”



Eskinazi’s thesis book exemplifies a common approach in Graphic Design: **documenting an entire body of work produced at RISD**. The book is lengthy and dense, and its scope allows for extreme depth of documentation not often found in shorter books, but, as Eskinazi points out, it is **designed to be flipped through as well as read**. Opening with an **experimental abstract**, Eskinazi introduces his work, thinking, and research process by revealing the **e-mails he wrote to potential interview subjects**. Following a series of **essays on key topics** such as “ornament” and “face” and an index of “all Wikipedia articles accessed” (**a unique sort of bibliography**) the book becomes a portfolio of dozens of projects (posters, maps, books, icons, etc.), all introduced by **concise project descriptions**. Of particular note is documentation of *Vernacular Spectacular*, **an exhibition he co-curated at the Gelman Gallery**. Recurring elements in his work (modularity, for example) are “hyperlinked” via **cross-referencing marginal page numbers**. While not necessarily unified by an overarching narrative or structure, *Playgrounds* ties a diverse body of work together in way that is cohesive and playful. —AFS

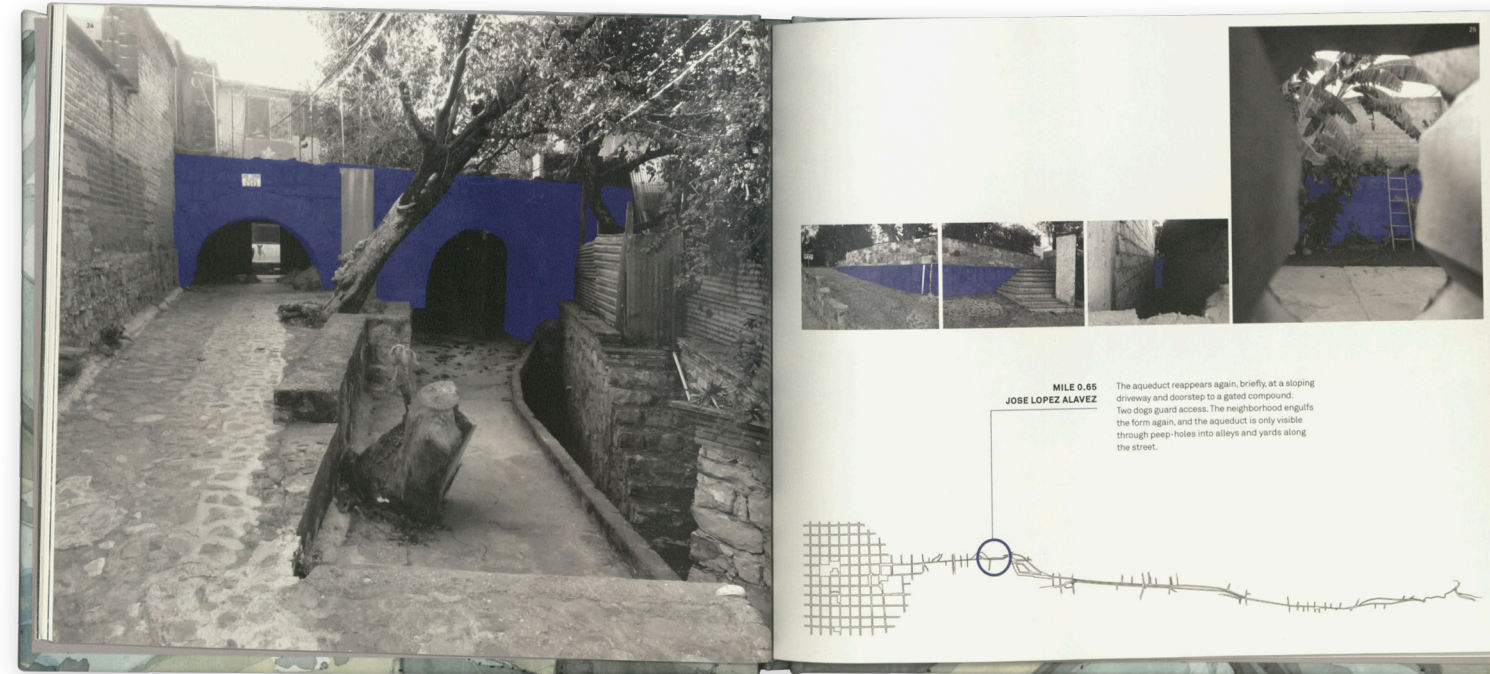
Watershed

ARCH 2013.G37, ARC
91 pages

Elias Gardner



“By designing a resource library specifically to better equip subversive behavior, am I allowing the city at large to better suppress the uprising? Or am I giving the banditry more visibility to help promote the cause? Is this intervention a recruiting tool, a means to entice the children across the street to abandon their history books and come learn about the APPO, Brad Will, and Sub Marcos, or is it a trap to liberate them of their lunch money?”



Gardner’s thesis project, The Oaxaca Water Collective, is a “flexible urban event space that also harvests, purifies, remineralizes, bottles, and distributes rainwater for human consumption.” His thesis book, *Watershed*, fulfills both meanings of the word: distinguishing multiple streams (of research) and marking a turning point (in practice). *Watershed* opens with an **origin-point story**, narrating Gardner’s first spark of interest in his topic, when he noticed that single sites serve multiple uses in overcrowded cities. A series of **quotes by influential figures** (from Bernard Tschumi to Simone de Beauvoir) follows, drawing us in to his emerging ideas. Extensive and **well-illustrated precedent studies** follow, with images and annotations that pinpoint exactly the features he is interested in. Next, Gardner presents **vibrant site analyses** in Oaxaca, Mexico, visually documenting the 3.5-mile length of an 18th-century aqueduct and verbally documenting the local system of water distribution. Two **research essays** follow: one on “issues of visibility, access, and social identity” as reflected in Oaxaca’s water infrastructures, and one on Oaxacan social movements, protests, and rebel art collectives. All of this research leads to a proposal for a Center for Banditry and Subversive Acts, but Gardner then questions making such a radical move, weighing the **ethics of cross-cultural design**. The Water Collective on which he lands is described in **detailed renderings** and text before he ends on an overriding challenge for the future: “How do architects take action?” The book’s progression from research to prototyping to project to projection feels entirely **linear and logical**, which may or may not reflect such a rational process, but certainly reflects **careful organizing and editing**. —JL

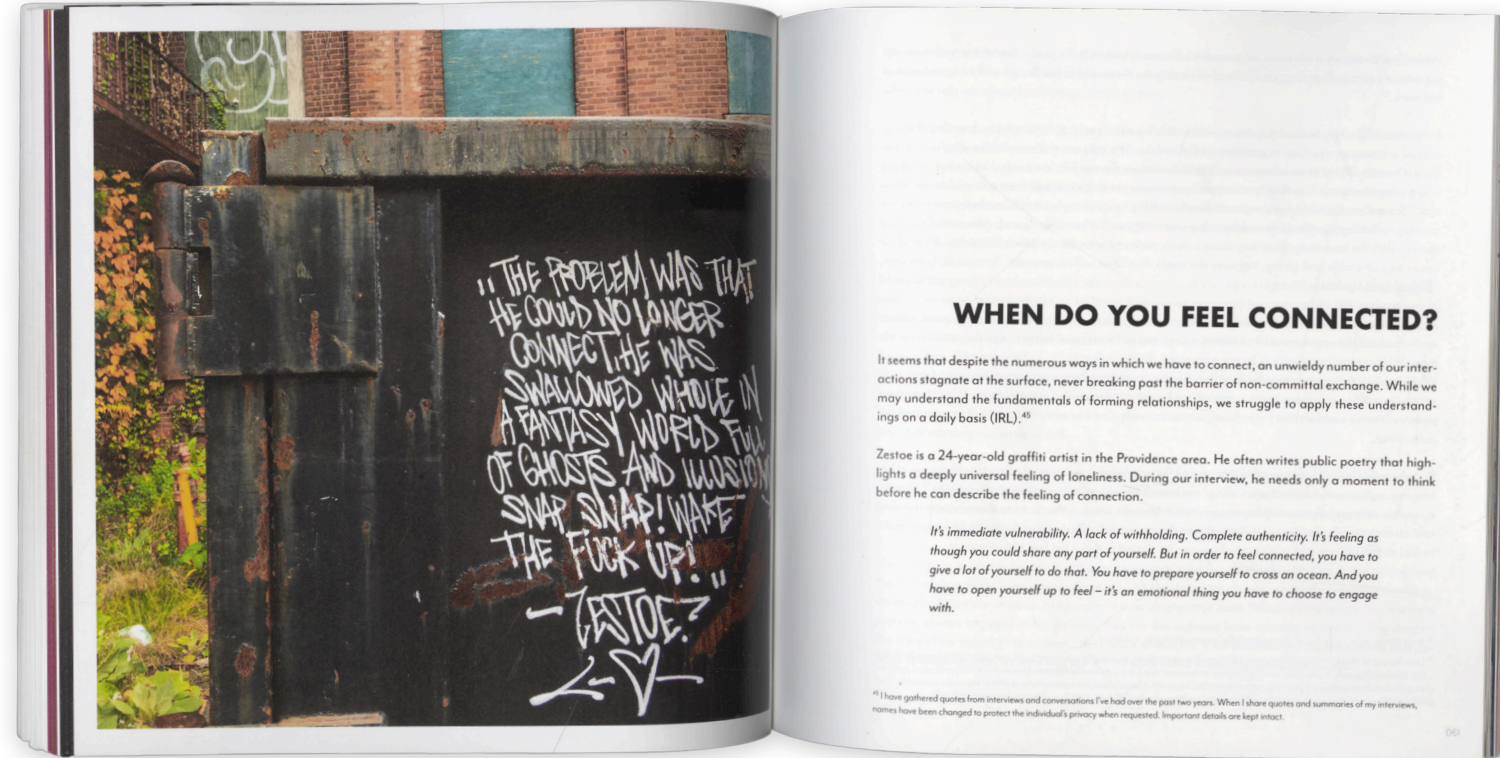
Familiar Strangers

FURN 2017.L5, REF/DC
118 pages

Rebecca Li



“Even in a digital age, there is an indisputable link between our social interactions and the physical spaces in which these interactions occur. Whether in our homes, restaurants, or on the streets, my work explores how objects within these environments can invite us to engage in internal and external dialogues. After all, our digital devices are just tools. And if it is a surface for social interaction, a printed memory, or a collection of objects that contain our own histories, we should not forget that the world around us contains a richness of other tools that can aid us in the pursuit of connection.”

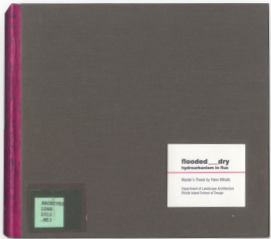


Familiar Strangers is a collection of short texts that range in style, voice, and form—from **fiction to letter to research paper to reflection**. A half dozen **project descriptions** interspersed throughout the book document the work, while other texts provide varieties of context. The essays **can be read in any sequence**, offering a spectrum of insights into Li's central thesis question: How do we forge human connections in a digitally saturated society? Li approaches this question through a range of design research practices, including **interviews** and **mini-sociological experiments**, situating her designs in sites around Providence and recording the results of people's interactions with them in both images and text. **Well-considered graphics** include Li's **hand-drawn cartoon characters**, little humanoids who act out the darker side of our digital natures and guide us through the book. Despite the urgency of the subject matter, the book's overall tone is **lighthearted and approachable**, aptly inviting a strong human connection through its pages as much as through the work itself. —ECdH

Flooded Dry:
Hydrourbanism in Flux

LDAR 2012.M53, REF
107 pages

Falon Mihalic



“The Northern-most waste water treatment plant is bordered by Oleta State Park (“swamp”), big box retail on the Biscayne Blvd. highway (pedestrian hell), and Hlldale Village (trailer park). The plant processes an average of 112 million gallons of waste-water every day. ... Ocean outfall pipes partially treated sewage out to the Atlantic Ocean. Commonly known by local fishermen as ‘the stink hole,’ this is where nutrient rich water exits the pipe and causes a plume of dark water.”

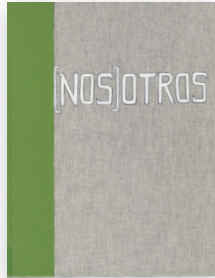


Mihalic proposes a plan to utilize partially treated wastewater and integrate public recreation and housing on a university campus mangrove swamp. Her thesis follows a clear path through the stages of her research and design development, moving through contextual research, precedents, site analysis, program, process, site design, and conclusions. A preface establishes her deep connection to the coastal Florida landscape (“I grew up in Florida. Actually, sometimes I feel like I am made of Florida.”) and the vivid verbal descriptions and visual representations that follow speak to this insider knowledge and affinity. Each section begins with a frontispiece image and quote to set the tone. A glossary defines terms, and precedents are helpfully divided into categories such as municipal systems and environmental art. The book’s range of visual information is unique and compelling, including digitally rendered maps; bird’s-eye landscape views; sketches; clay and foam models; “perspective study collages” representing concepts such as stillness, spectacle, and wilderness; abstract ink studies; and atmospheric photographs of various environmental effects—slowly moving water, wide horizons, distinct plant forms, and so on. The high-quality printing and descriptive captions bring the images fully to life, and the handbound binding allows the book to lay flat when opened. A conclusion and final note on “future research” detail Mihalic’s plans for a summer GS Grant-funded project and cohere her commitment to hydrourbanism as a lifelong pursuit. —JL

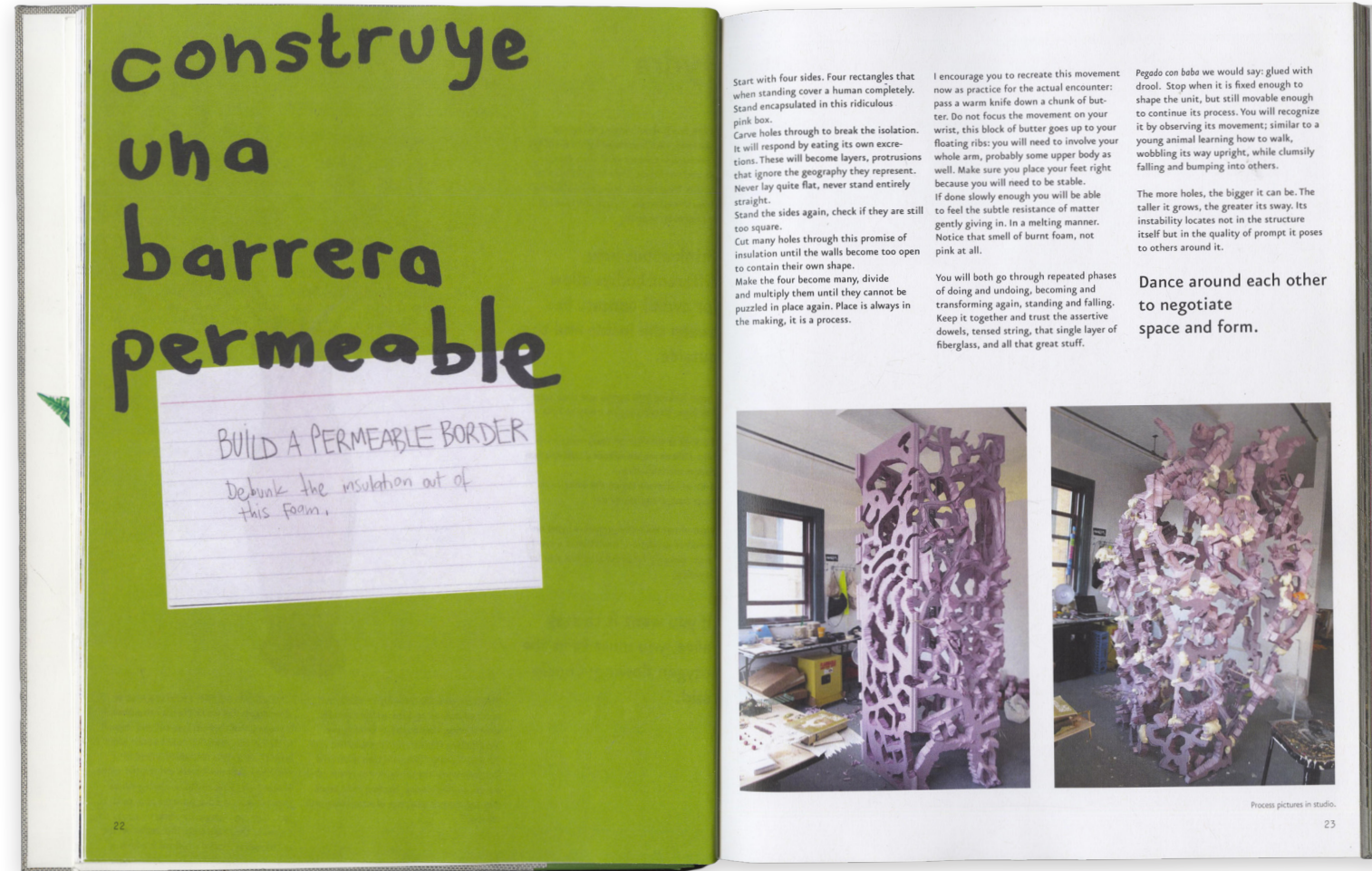
**[Nos]otros:
La Práctica**

SCULP 2015.M66, REF/DC
107 pages

Lucia Monge



“Engaging with environmental issues is a challenge. Nonetheless, I believe true transformative change has to start small and close-up. ... By using movement we can come to the physical and cognitive realization that there are many other living forms coexisting with us (even in the most urban settings) and feel what it is like to be in their roots or legs (even if it is eight of them). Through sculpture and movement I am probing to initiate awareness: a deep, personal understanding of our relationship to the plants and trees that cohabit with us.”

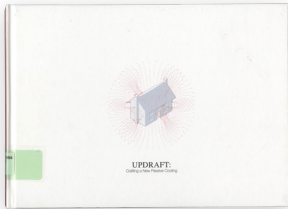


This thesis begins with linguistic play in its title—which brackets the “us” from the “others” in Spanish—and that **spirit of play** extends throughout the book. Though the approach is light, the message is strong. Monge asks, “How do we relate to other living beings around us, determine what is living, and decide who is part of our own kin(d)?” **Expanding the conversation** around biophilia and drawing off of the work of ecologists like Aldo Leopold, Monge sees a deep “interspecies connectivity” in the natural world—where hierarchies are abolished and humans and plants share the same value. This flattening of hierarchies extends to her studio, as product and process are given equal weight. Elements of play, movement, and interconnectivity color Monge’s **documentation of making** and all the things that get caught up in it like a tumbleweed—in her case, a collection of short written pieces that vary from an **instructional how-to** to **clear project descriptions**, littered among **scans of notebooks**, **scrawled Post-It notes** from the studio, **shots of works in progress**, **questions-to-self**, **extended scientific descriptions**, and **charts** of endangered marine ducks in Rhode Island. Here then, the **objective, scientific, personal, and artistic** merge. The flurry of activity is anchored by a **clear structure, documentation** of the finished pieces, and **cogent essays**. —ECdH

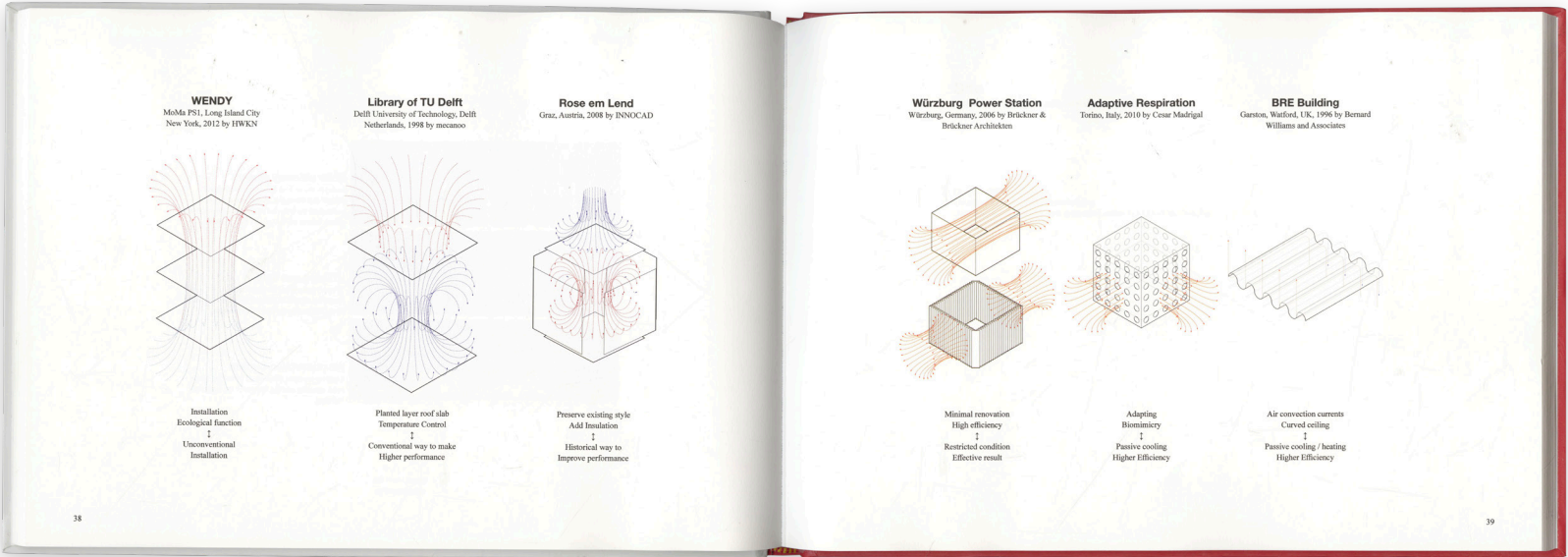
Updraft: Crafting a New Passive Cooling System

INTAR 2017.S66, REF/DC
99 pages

Hobin Song



“How can we resolve heating and cooling the Metcalf Building without creating other issues? ... Air convection is the circular motion that occurs when warmer air—which has faster moving molecules, making it less dense—rises, while the cooler air drops. Using this principle, the hot air inside the building is discharged to the outside, and the cold air from outside is sucked in to create a natural air-conditioning and ventilation system. An example of this phenomenon is the termite habitat: termites circulate air using the temperature difference between the habitat and the ground.”

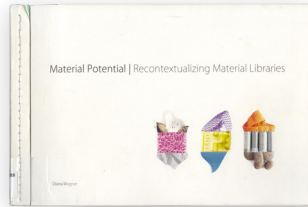


Song’s thesis surveys the ways in which different structures “breathe.” He looks to **natural phenomena as models** for passive cooling systems, then turns to human structures, and finally focuses on RISD’s campus, specifically Metcalf, which he determines to be compromised based on thermal imaging analysis and a breakdown of existing insulation, air conditioning, and ventilation systems. His **writing is clear, to-the-point, and minimal**. It maintains an **objective tone**, saying only what it has to and allowing the book’s **beautifully composed diagrams** to speak for themselves. Each drawing of **design precedents** contributes to building a **sophisticated visual language** that describes how air moves through different building spaces, creating a **typology** of internal weather systems. The overall design of the book is clean with **ample white space**. **Well-chosen photographs** expand on the text that accompanies it. The book is largely monochrome, using a **referential palette**—reds, yellows, and oranges—to conjure the heated air addressed in the work. His final project includes a rooftop garden, a plan to redirect cool air to discharge hot air, and the use of the campus’s central power plant to generate passive electricity from Metcalf’s discharged heat. Overall, the book feels meticulous, every detail expertly managed, with no excess. —ECdH

Material Potential: Recontextualizing Material Libraries

ID 2014.W33, REF/DC
133 pages

Diana Wagner



“Material libraries offer an innately physical experience: samples can be handled and responded to on the basis of our sensory reactions to the aesthetic, tactile, and inherent qualities a material evokes or conveys. We rely on our senses to consider whether a material is right or wrong for our process or product. This notion sparked my curiosity to investigate a taxonomy based on human or personifying qualities of materials. What would a material library look like, for example if all the samples were classified as dynamic, humble, or balanced?”

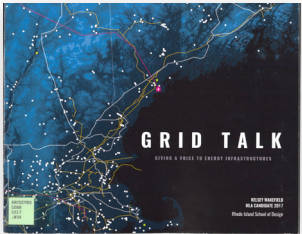


For two years, Wagner served as a graduate research assistant in RISD’s Material Resource Center (MRC), where she noticed the limitations of the solely compositional taxonomy common to such collections. Her thesis book documents an **in-depth and varied research process** that engaged extensively with students and campus resources and shared knowledge via incremental publications and exhibitions (rather than saving it all for the thesis book). Wagner first **recounts early experiences** that preceded her graduate work—collecting and arranging objects as a child, running a recycled materials non-profit after college—as a signal of what’s to come. In a **conversational narrative voice**, she then shares **precedent studies** of other material collections; **theoretical and biological touchstones** (Foucault and the collecting Bower Bird); and **material experiments** of her own. Extensive documentation of her research and activities follows: her own **taxonomical experiments**, arranging the collection based on color, for example; results of **student questionnaires**; a **booklet of prompts** for users to engage with material samples on their own; an **exhibition of student-made materials** she curated at the MRC; and an **intervention in the RISD Museum** that asked visitors to associate material samples with paintings by Picasso and van Gogh. Wagner must have had a camera always at hand: each activity is documented with **lively photos** integrated into a **consistent yet flexible three-column grid**. **Pull quotes** facilitate a quick read. A close read fully reveals an **original theory and methodology** by which MRC users can collect, arrange, and annotate materials based on a range of aesthetic, ephemeral, and ontological qualities. —JL

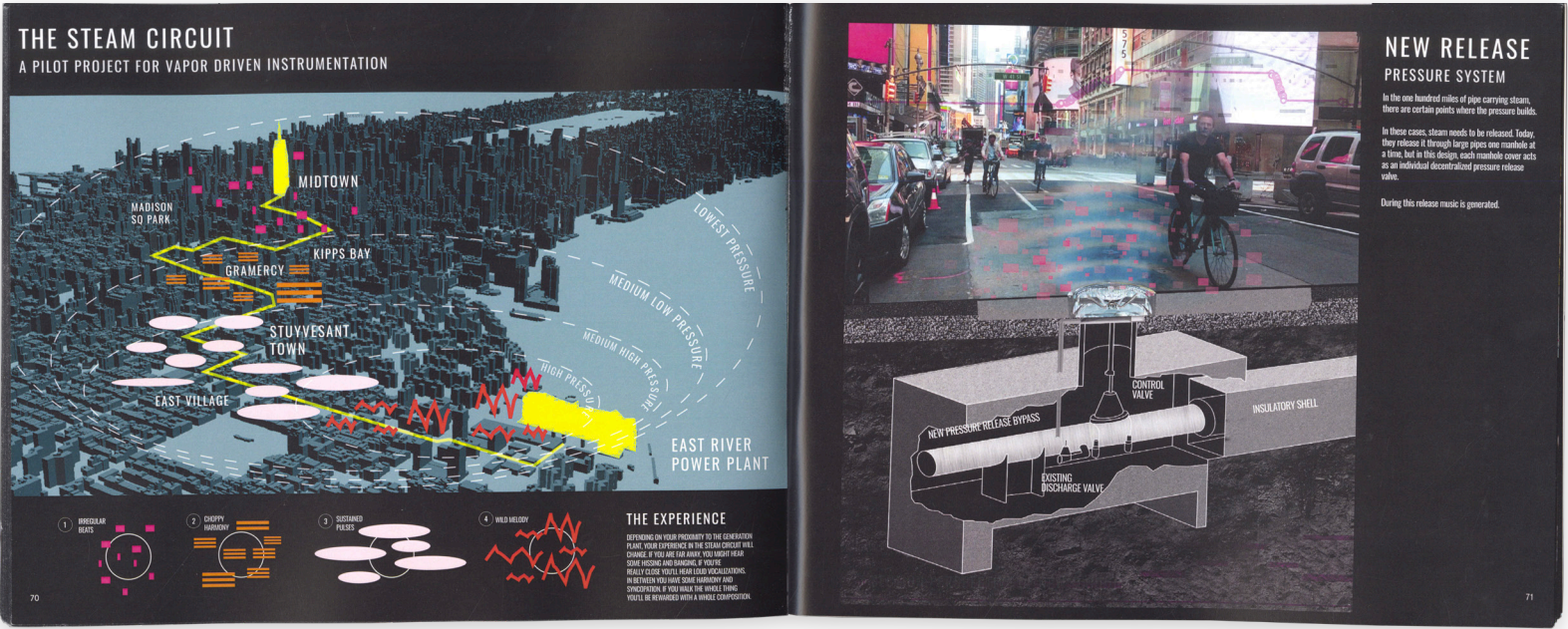
Grid Talk: Giving a Voice to Energy Infrastructure

LDAR 2017.W34, REF/DC
83 pages

Kelsey Wakefield



“As a constituent, the ability to know where your energy comes from is limited. Most multinational companies, like National Grid, buy and resell from smaller generators. This is the equivalent of taking water from Mongolia, Lake Erie, and Jordan, mixing it in the same bowl, and reselling it as a pure item. Like other consumables, energy is site specific. It is our job to highlight its use and transferal through the global economy to create a responsible user base. ... Public works should be revered, maintained, seen, and integrated into the lives of the taxpayers who support them.”



Wakefield’s **strong, persuasive abstract** follows a **classic problem-solution model**, establishing a problem, its cause, and its impact before proposing an urgently needed solution. Her argument, in short: humans have lost their connection to energy production infrastructure, which is now crumbling and corrupt; a “seamless political integration of the public realm and existing essential infrastructures” will create transparency and revive stewardship. An **introduction provides context** around dramatic growth in energy consumption and the inequity of the global energy trade, arguing that “landscape architecture has skirted around these issues, prematurely greenwashing and solar paneling the world.” She also cites **precedents** such as Niagara Falls and the Hoover Dam, which were widely celebrated as truly *public* works. **Documentation of three research phases** follows: of electrical energy distribution in the Northeast; steam distribution in New York; and the final thesis project. **Diverse research methods** are identified at the start of each phase—from mapping data to primary research on historical accounts to building models. Each section ends with self-reflective **assessment and next-phase planning** in real time (rather than the retrospective synthesis found in most theses). **Bold, annotated infographics** clearly illustrate the history and mechanics of electricity and its sources and patterns across the United States. **White text on a black background** throughout conveys a sense of gravity. So where does all this research lead? Thrillingly, to a proposal for “vapor-driven instrumentation”—a system for turning manhole covers in New York’s steam system into organ-like instruments that play music through their porous tops. Finally, Wakefield outlines an **ambitious future plan**: to found a DesignCorps that would contract 2% of all public works budgets for creative interventions like hers. —JL

Ji Won Choi
(Digital + Media, 2010)

Julia Gartrell
(Sculpture, 2015)

Alicia Oas
(Textiles, 2017)

Anna Plesset
(Painting, 2011)

RaMell Ross
(Photography, 2014)

Bret Tonelli
(Furniture, 2016)

Brynn Trusewicz
(Industrial Design, 2016)

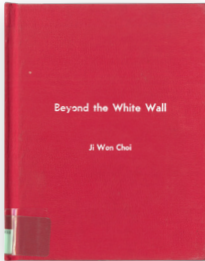
Mosaic Essay

The mosaic essay is a collection of short writings in multiple styles that cohere into a whole; some may reference the work only obliquely.

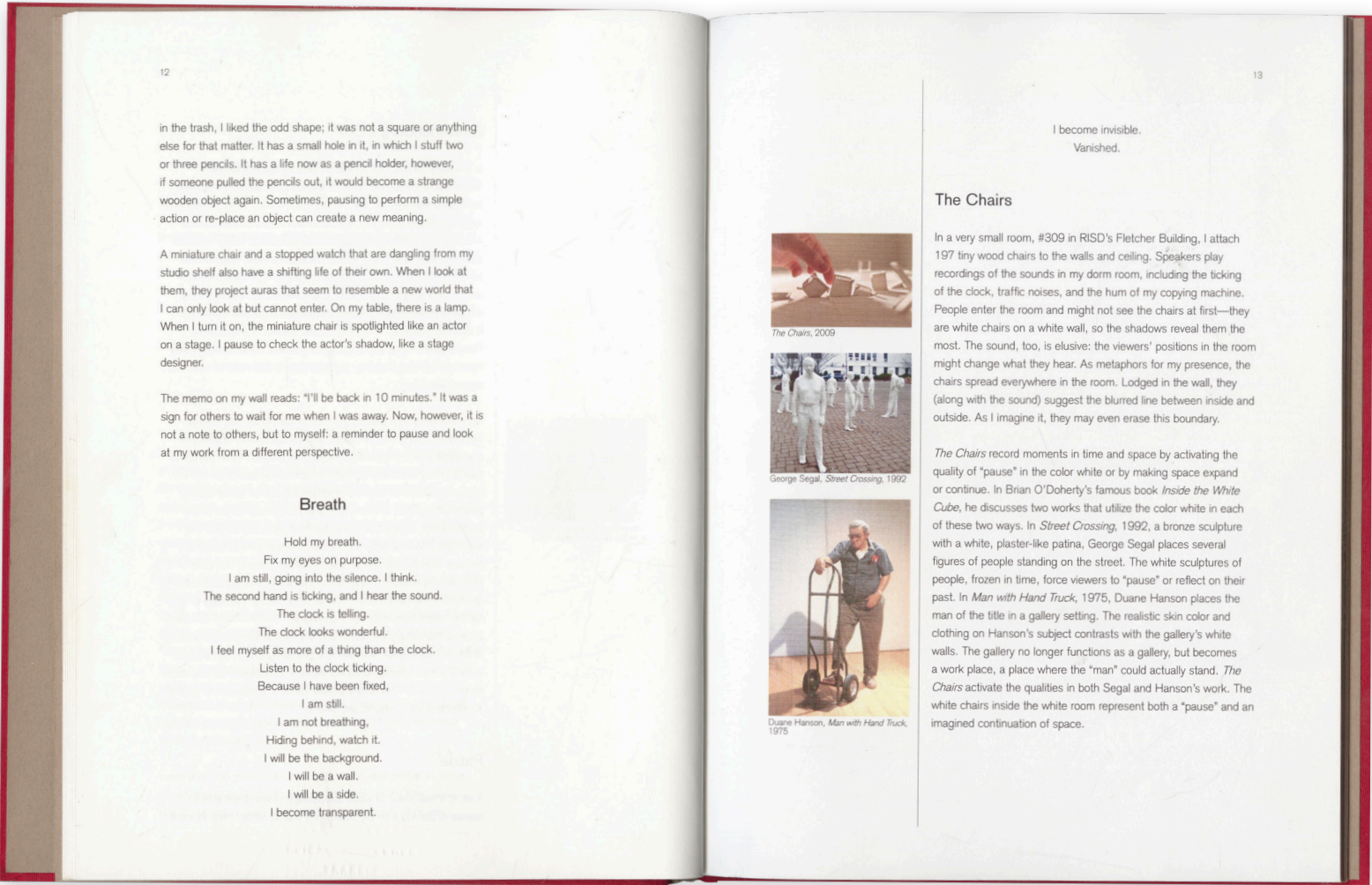
Beyond the White Wall:
A Thesis

DM 2010.C46, REF
55 pages

Ji Won Choi



“Roni Horn’s *Weather Reports You* is a book containing 100 interviews about weather with people from the Snaefellsnes Peninsula in Iceland. Through these interviews the artist comes to the conclusion that everyone has their own personal sense of weather and that the weather deeply affects peoples’ everyday lives. ... My weather is color. ... At sundown, the entire world turns red and my wall becomes red; specifically, the shadows on the wall become red. At night, the sky becomes black, and my white wall becomes black.”



Choi’s thesis consists of 31 short writings, each a window into her practice, all held together through expertly handled transitions, which pull the reader from one writing to the next despite their disparate styles and lengths. Sometimes a word from the end of one writing appears at the beginning of the next, making it pop and resonate. In one memorable piece, Choi describes the white wall of her bedroom as she imagines it—with moments from the world outside moving across its surface cinematically. This notion, of animating blank barriers, is a key theme that also sets the book’s design in motion. The gutter and margins of the thesis are exaggerated to create consistent white space—a kind of white wall—where illustrative images appear, multiply, and disappear. Pages become divisions that we too animate mentally as we read. At the moment the author implores us to “erase the notion of partitions and dividers,” the page turns to reveal a full spread: a photograph of a wall, which we bypass by turning it over. Through techniques like these, Choi plays with the space of the book and tightly links the experience of the reading to the experience of the work. —ECdH

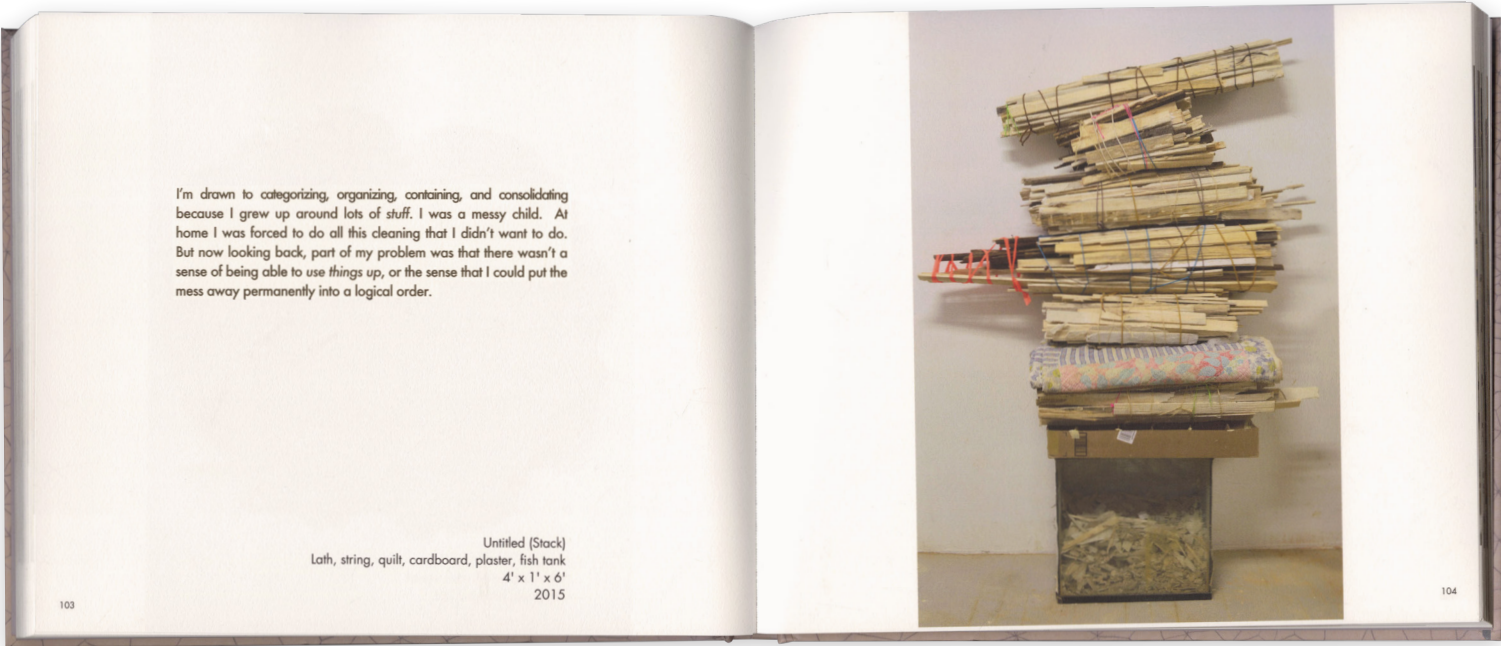
Terroir

SCULP 2015.G37, REF
153 pages

Julia Gattrell



“Well, skills were very sex-linked. Women were expected to cook and sew and maintain the house and take care of the chickens and do a large part of the gardening. And the men started out as farmers. In Whitestone a fair number of them worked in the mine. It was pretty divided. But even people working in the mines were farmers. Farming was the base of the economy. Canning and drying and preserving was the female side of the economy.”

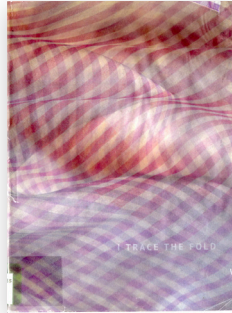


Terroir, as Gattrell notes, is a French word that typically describes the climate and soil in which “families” of grapes are grown for wine. She evokes the term to frame an intimate exploration of her own family roots. Gattrell and generations of her ancestors hail from the Appalachian Mountain region in and around Georgia, a place that serves as a rich source for her sculptures, both literally (she uses native clay) and conceptually. Her book is split into two parts: “Past/Present” and “Present/Past.” Each intersperses transcribed oral storytelling culled from interviews with family members with beautifully shot and printed photographs of her work, influential sites, and objects. In “Past/Present” we learn about great grandfather Pa, who could “build any damn thing” with the humblest materials; about great grandmother Ma Ma, a skilled dressmaker, and about Great Uncle Clarence, who made baskets out of kudzu plants. This everyday craft heritage infuses Gattrell’s own work, often made of humble wire, wood, and clay. In “Present/Past” the narrative shifts to current ruminations on the family’s tendency to collect too much. Again, the work on facing pages mirrors the theme, teetering into accumulated overabundance. While the writing is pure narrative, a bibliography maps Gattrell’s research into the South, memory, and loss. —JL

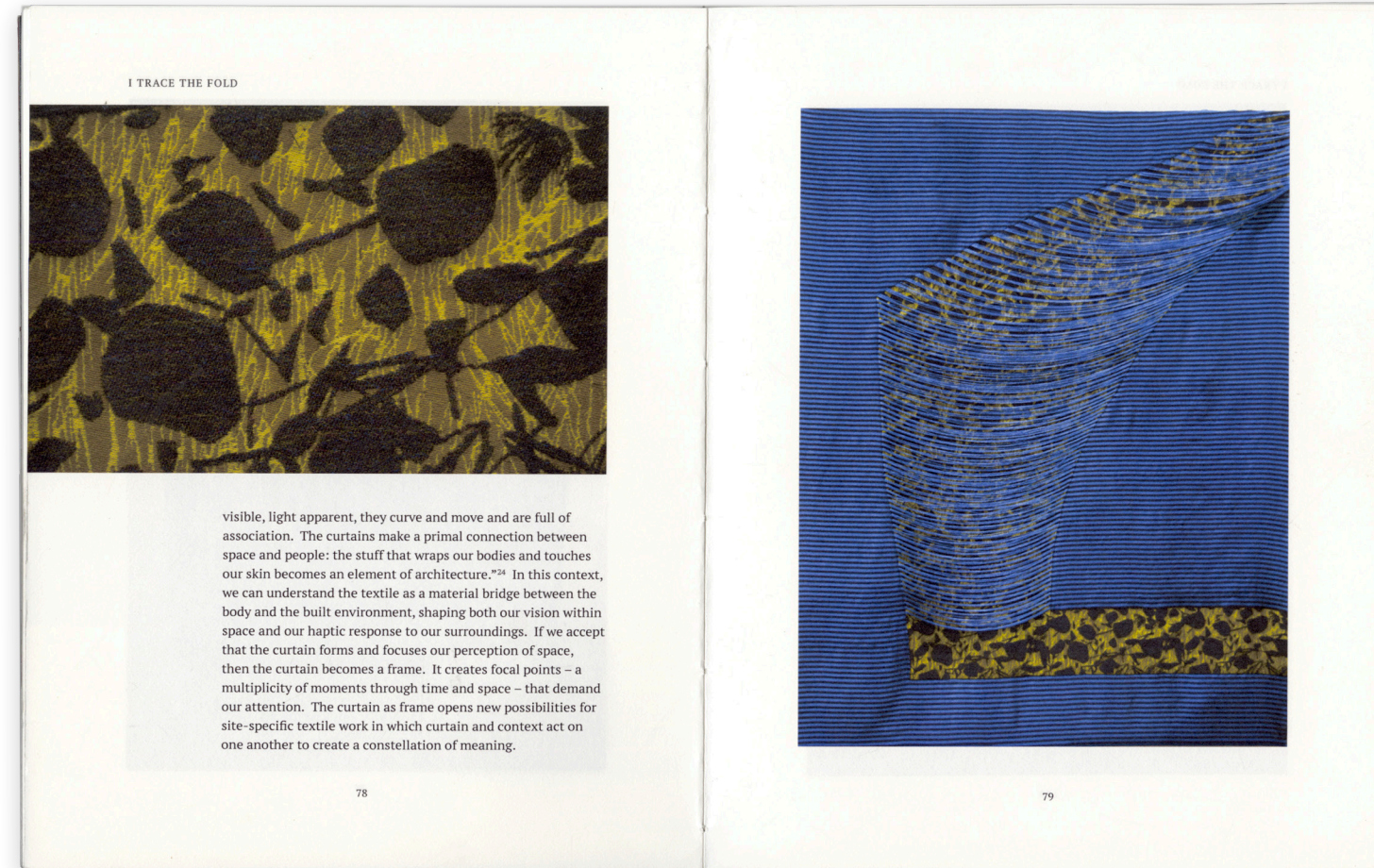
I Trace the Fold: Fluidity and Flux in the Terrain Vague

TEXT 2017.O33, REF/DC
112 pages

Alicia Oas



“Inside the oasis, the rubble disintegrates into dirt. Leaves, small stones, moss, and concrete powder melt together into an indistinguishable decay out of which new growth emerges. The manmade and the organic entwine. A tendril of an invasive weed crawls up a metal cable which hangs down from a defunct outlet on the back wall of the warehouse. ... I see layered surfaces: a fine metal grate, shattered panes of glass and, blocking my view of the interior, a solid plywood board. The industrial strata wink at a hidden past but offer a beautiful, urban pattern as an apology for this reticence.”



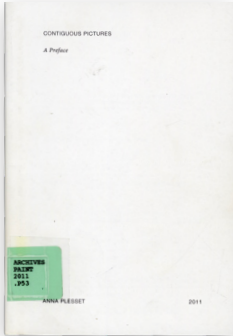
visible, light apparent, they curve and move and are full of association. The curtains make a primal connection between space and people: the stuff that wraps our bodies and touches our skin becomes an element of architecture.”²⁴ In this context, we can understand the textile as a material bridge between the body and the built environment, shaping both our vision within space and our haptic response to our surroundings. If we accept that the curtain forms and focuses our perception of space, then the curtain becomes a frame. It creates focal points – a multiplicity of moments through time and space – that demand our attention. The curtain as frame opens new possibilities for site-specific textile work in which curtain and context act on one another to create a constellation of meaning.

Oas borrows Ignasi de Solà-Morales’s use of the French term *terrain vague* to describe indeterminate urban spaces, focusing her attention on empty urban parking lots, alleyways, and decaying buildings. Casting a simultaneously **scholarly and poetic** eye on these places, she moves around various interpretations of *terrain vague*, deepening the definition of the term equally through her work and her writing. In the studio, *terrain vague* takes the form of curtains. In her writings—based on **memory, direct observation, theoretical and historical research, and reflections on her own process**—it becomes a type of ruin, where time flattens and breaks apart and light is geometric. The book itself creates spaces that could be described as *terrain vague*, placing interstitial fragments of writing between more concretely linear chapters. The design of the book is simple and consistent, allowing the **striking photography** and clear, bright writing to come to the fore. Oas leaves us with an **extended interview** with the Parks Director for Central Falls, RI, who is intimately familiar with abandoned urban spaces. Their conversation creates lingering questions that will propel Oas’s **future practice**, among them: How might we reconcile the aestheticization of *terrain vague* by artists with the hard truths of crime, poverty, and homelessness? —ECdH

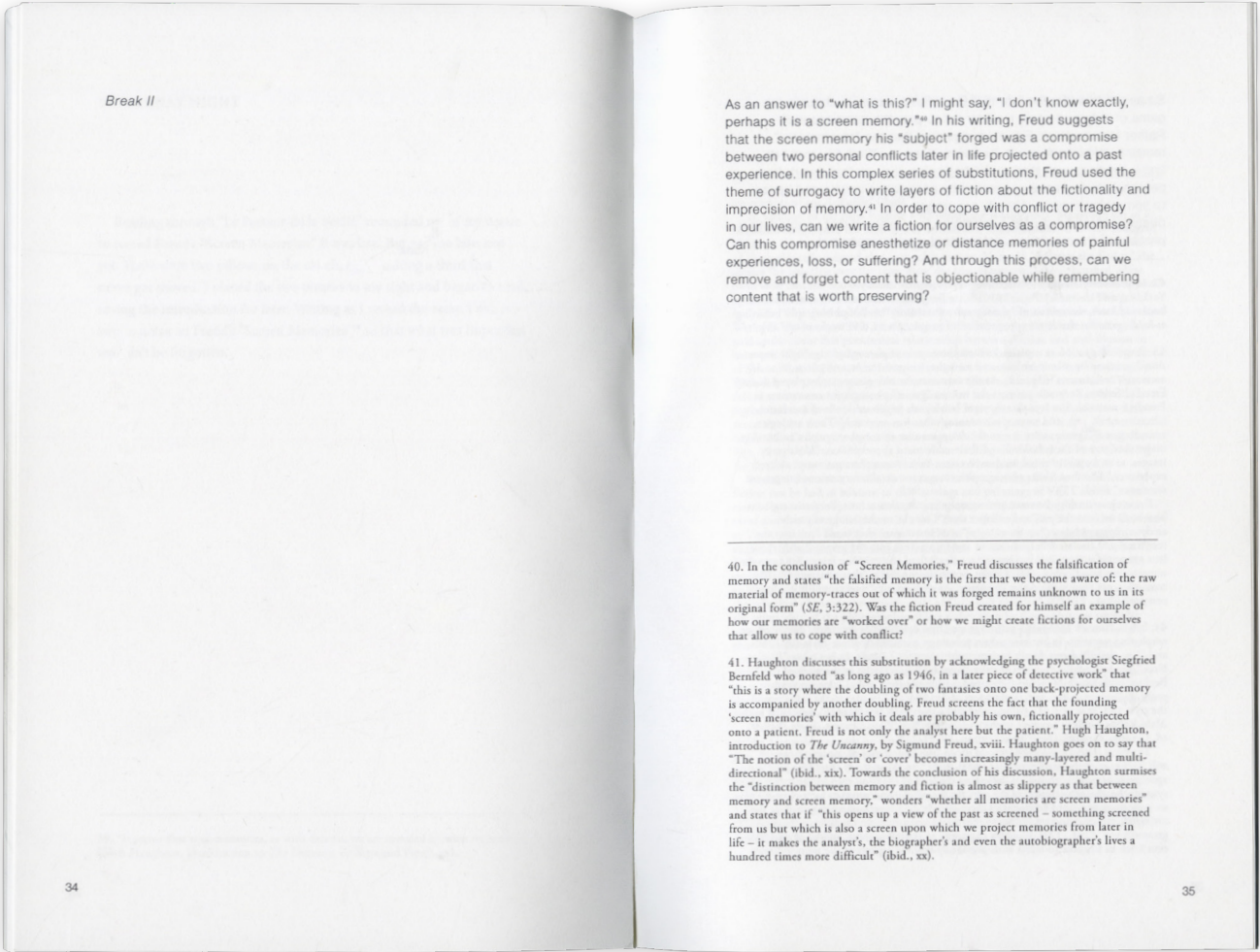
Contiguous Pictures

PAINT 2011.P53, REF
46 pages

Anna Plesset



“Freud used the theme of surrogacy to write layers of fiction about the fictionality and imprecision of memory. In order to cope with conflict or tragedy in our lives, can we write a fiction for ourselves as a compromise? Can this compromise anesthetize or distance memories of painful experiences, loss, or suffering? And through this process, can we remove and forget content that is objectionable while remembering content that is worth preserving?”

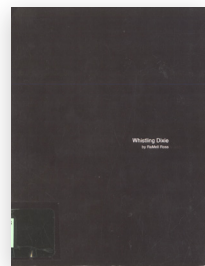


Plesset’s thesis is a reflection on remembering filled with gaps and spaces, with pauses and backtracks. Much like memory itself, it is **fragmented yet rational**, interpreted through narratives, and marked by striking images that rise to the surface after theory falls away: a bright orange burst, spring haunted by winter, eyes wet, faces glowing. It’s **meta, playful, cagey, heady, and well-written**. The introduction is a blank page; the (also blank) conclusion comes in the middle, and the **timeline** refers to “yesterday,” “yesterday afternoon,” and “today” with no concrete reference to a starting point. Even though it is broken and reconstructed in a way that emulates “the fragmented and imprecise ways we recollect, reinvent, and reconstruct the irreproducible conscious and unconscious past,” the book seems as if it is meant to be read from beginning to end, as Plesset’s **research builds logically**. Once Plesset writes “12 Notes on Freud’s “Screen Memories,” the thesis becomes an extended response to Freud’s writings. References cut in through footnotes, which provide a **sub-narrative** and at one point overtake the main text in an inflated surge. While Plesset’s **clever structural techniques** might threaten to overpower the thesis content, she offers enough cohesion, either through visceral writing or **well-described summaries of her sources**, that we follow her as she stages a subtle argument for the necessity of forgetting. —ECdH

Whistling Dixie

PHOTO 2014.R.67, REF
119 pages

RaMell Ross



“Imagine Jack, for every one, preimagined, problematized image of an African American, there are two quiet, roving, insurrectional images imbued with the nuances of humanity in the art of the black body in contemporary space, images speaking an unspoken language, a Bitcoin Black visuality Jack, taking the existing imagined black visual currency and converting it into something fresh, something out of the twilight zone. ... Imagine Jack, appropriating the troubles of the black body, imagine annexing the fetishization of its flesh and form, its propagandized intellectual property, its absorbed projections, and instilling them in the human-moment in play with life, instilling them into a quandary that elevates the otherwise into the iconic. ... Imagine Jack! Imagine!”

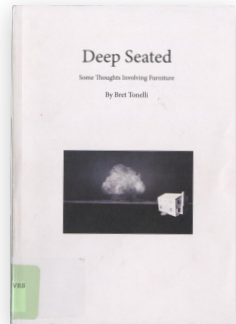


Ross's thesis opens with a **plate section** featuring his photographs of African American residents of Hale County, Alabama, where, in a noted **precedent**, Walker Evans captured iconic images of Depression-era sharecroppers collected in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Unlike Evans, a steadfast documentarian, Ross aims to “create my own fiction ... not a determinate story.” His openended approach to his work and writing serves both creative and political ends, resisting “tired regurgitations of pinpoint prose” and narrow, fixed portrayals of black subjects. Ross's writings range in style from **short poems to letters to interviews**. Many invoke a character named “Jack,” who acts as a kind of **alter ego or heteronym**. The central text—a long conversation between Jack and an imaginary mentor—is fever dream-like. A letter to the *Alabama Times* points out that its faulty printing makes people of color literally invisible in news photographs. A five-page grid of the name “Thomas Dartmouth Rice” repeated hundreds of times suggests like concrete poetry the weight of Rice's legacy as the “father of American minstrelsy.” The final texts, a pair of **self-interviews** between Jack and Ross, are guileless and clear. The first focuses on influences (Toni Morrison, Hank Willis Thomas) and **formal interpretation** (why, for example, so many of Ross's figures are prone). The second addresses the short film that eventually became Ross's *Hale County This Morning, This Evening*, which won the 2018 Special Jury Award for Creative Vision at Sundance. A **visual bibliography** (covers of influential books, etc.) rounds out this volume, whose **small scale**—it fits easily in one hand—both contributes to its intimacy and emphasizes its diamond-like compacted brilliance. —JL

Deep Seated: Some Thoughts Involving Furniture

FURN 2016.T66, REF
94 pages

Bret Tonelli



“It’s Tuesday morning at the large law firm you work for as a paralegal. Your boss has asked to see you. ... In the waiting room, the secretary tells you to head in. Rising, you take a deep breath to calm the butterflies, and your best brain reminds you there’s nothing to worry about, while your less-best brain continues gnawing at your nerves. You knock, a subdued but not unfriendly boss voice beckons you in. The door opens, and you move inside, not noticing until you’ve closed the door and looked up that there isn’t a single piece of furniture in the office.”

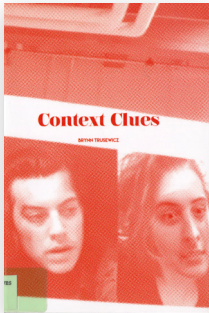


Tonelli’s collection of succinct writings investigates the subconscious worlds of furniture, pushing the limits of **writing about objects**. One piece describes the deterioration of his grandmother’s mind after she moved out of her lifelong home, linking the way we organize our physical and mental spaces. Another analyzes the form of the electric chair. Another is humorous and entirely **fictional**, an imagined meeting with a boss conducted in a room completely devoid of furniture. Because each piece has a distinct tone, **ranging from personal to analytical**, the collection may seem disjointed at first glance, but on deeper inspection the individual pieces begin to echo, and consistent themes—the link between physical and mental space, power, and comfort—emerge. We also see, in vivid detail, the particular places where Tonelli’s watchful eye lands and the wide **variety of influences** that simmer in his subconscious. The book ultimately feels **deeply honest without being confessional**. The **design is spare**, oscillating between black and white pages. While the text is at times a little small for optimal reading, the stark visual contrast between spreads suggests the hazy recesses of the subconscious, a flickering bulb on in the basement of the mind that reveals glimpses of carefully stowed objects in flashes of light. —ECdH

Context Clues

ID 2016.T78, REF/DC
85 pages

Brynn Trusewicz



“Stories of Marie Antoinette and Samson are both about power through their hair. ... Marie Antoinette, Queen of France and wife of Louis XVI, ... turned to fashion to elevate her status. Wigs became an important political statement for her. When Delilah cut Samson’s hair ... he lost his superhuman strength and was therefore powerless. By dramatically cutting the hair on my head, I would be losing the power that comes with choosing when and where to be invisible, and to whom. It would be a visual outing, one without language.”



The first thing you’ll notice about *Context Clues* is that its images and text are all **printed in orange-red**. There is no black-and-white here—an aesthetic “clue” that hints at the book’s topic: “the tensions between identity and appearance, especially as it relates to queer identities and the bodies that carry them.” In particular, Trusewicz considers the way others interpret their appearance in trying to decode their identity, **pushing the boundaries of design research** by centering their inquiry around their own experience rather than that of others. The book is filled with a wide array of stylistic experiments: from **instructions** (how to spy or eavesdrop on others), to **descriptive anecdotes** (of throwing up in a friend’s car), to a **word search** (the acknowledgements), a **pop quiz gameboard**, and a **series of text exchanges**. **Extended project descriptions** incorporate **contextual research** (e.g., Judith Butler), **reflection** (e.g., on cutting one’s hair) **and analysis** (e.g., of a live dating experiment). Two sets of fonts (courier and serif) and **varied column widths** help the reader distinguish types of content. **The extensive bibliography** is notable for mixing popular and academic sources. The book’s **overall tone is fun and engaging**, and it offers a great example of how concise prose can communicate complex ideas quickly and expressively. —AFS

Sameer Farooq
(Graphic Design, 2014)

Rene Galvan
(Jewelry + Metalsmithing, 2015)

Kate Logue
(Printmaking, 2015)

David Mortimer May
(Printmaking, 2011)

Bathsheba Okwenje
(Digital + Media, 2014)

Mara Streberger
(Glass, 2012)

Eugenia Yu
(Architecture, 2013)

Artist’s Book

The artist’s book is a work itself that plays with narrative or genre and emphasizes materiality.

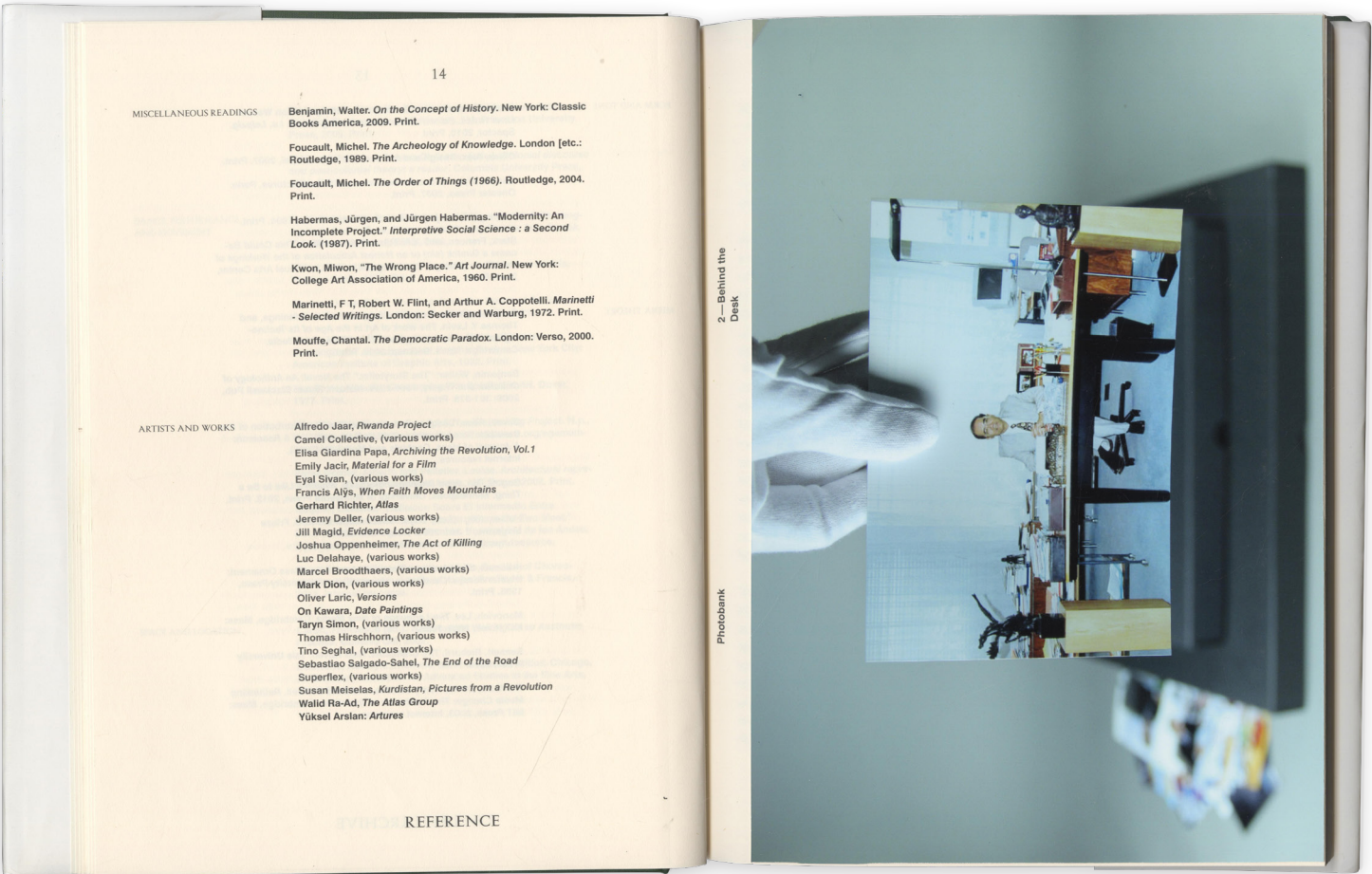
Speculative Archives:
An Index

GRAPH 2014.F37, REF
144 pages

Sameer Farooq



“I begin by defining the archive as a ‘place’: a repository for organized collections of documents, artifacts, or other materials. In our imaginations, this is a physical location of shelves stacked to the ceiling with dusty folders, meticulously ordered boxes, and secured vaults housing our collective memory. This place often refers to the contents held by museums, libraries, municipal archives, and so on. We can also stretch the definition to include a ‘non-place’—everything digital. ... Our assumption is that this space has no boundaries, and will hold all of our memories for safe keeping, forever.”

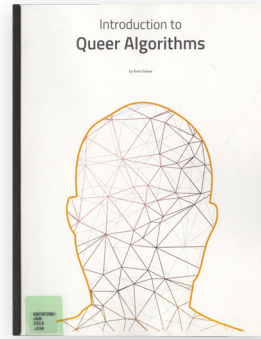


Speculative Archives is a complex and lucid dissection of the archive. Farooq **draws heavily from theory**, opening the thesis with an extensive list of thinkers who have engaged with his topic before. Through this inventory, which includes Walter Benjamin, Hal Foster, and other philosophers and critics, he **invites the reader to join the conversation**, to become an active agent in answering the question: “We can look at the archive with our eyes open, but how about with our eyes closed?” Through the studio and **consistent, fluid, and well-researched writing**, Farooq approaches this question, laying bare the driving forces behind his works and **identifying thematic through-lines**: visual gestures, the mirror, disorientation, disambiguation, multiplicity, seriality, and the hand. The thesis is a mashup of **various archival techniques**, each section functioning as a type of archive, punctuated by **full-page photographic inserts** of Farooq’s work, either presented on a gray background, with a scale or ruler, or held out with a white glove—all **compositional references to archival documentation of objects**. In one section, Farooq conducts an extended interview with the dancer, performer, and teacher Stephanie Turner; another section is purely composed of titles of speculative archives, such as “The Archive of the Abandoned,” “The Archive of Invisible Phenomena,” and “The Archive of Boredom.” He ends with a **visual “index”**—a black- and-white grid of items from his own visual art practice, once again referencing and questioning tropes of archival systems. —ECdH

Introduction to Queer Algorithms

J&M 2015.G34, REF
130 pages

Rene Galvan



“I love numbers. They are a language describing essential characteristics of daily life: order, quantity, relationships, space, and change. Mathematics does not have morality. This allows me to strategize and treat materials and techniques in ways that challenge my thinking around issues such as gender, race, or class, which provide an immediate judgement or biased understanding. Yet, for most, the mention of math inspires bad memories of word problems that seemed out of sync with real world applications. I use numbers to queer my making processes.”

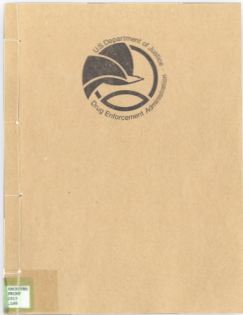


Galvan's thesis follows an **orderly organizational pattern**: a preface and afterword surround seven “chapters” that are in fact project descriptions explaining the mathematical basis (exponents, percents, probability, etc.) for each **well-documented work**. Interspersed between the chapters are a month's worth of daily **visual/textual diary entries**. Each day gets a spread. On the left, there's an image of a place where Galvan presumably was that day, overlaid with a silhouette of his head. On the right, there's a **short, poetic, intimate text** under a Polaroid of a part of a body. Running themes include grooming and body image, sex, safe sex, and others' persistent questioning about where Galvan *really* comes from. The book's design, with its standard paper size and color-coding, feels somewhere **between a manual and a text book**, which suits its subtly educational intent. Galvan seems to genuinely want to help us understand both math and queer identity. The afterword is an **extended meditation on an artistic precedent**: David Wojnarowicz's *Untitled (One day this kid ...)*. Galvan finds in this annotated photograph of the artist as a child a call to its viewer/reader to bear witness to the artist's endangered life and recognize his essential humanity. It's through this final text that Galvan's own combination of **self-portraiture and autobiographical narratives** snaps into focus as a profound act of self-disclosure and empathy-building. —JL

[Written Master’s Thesis]

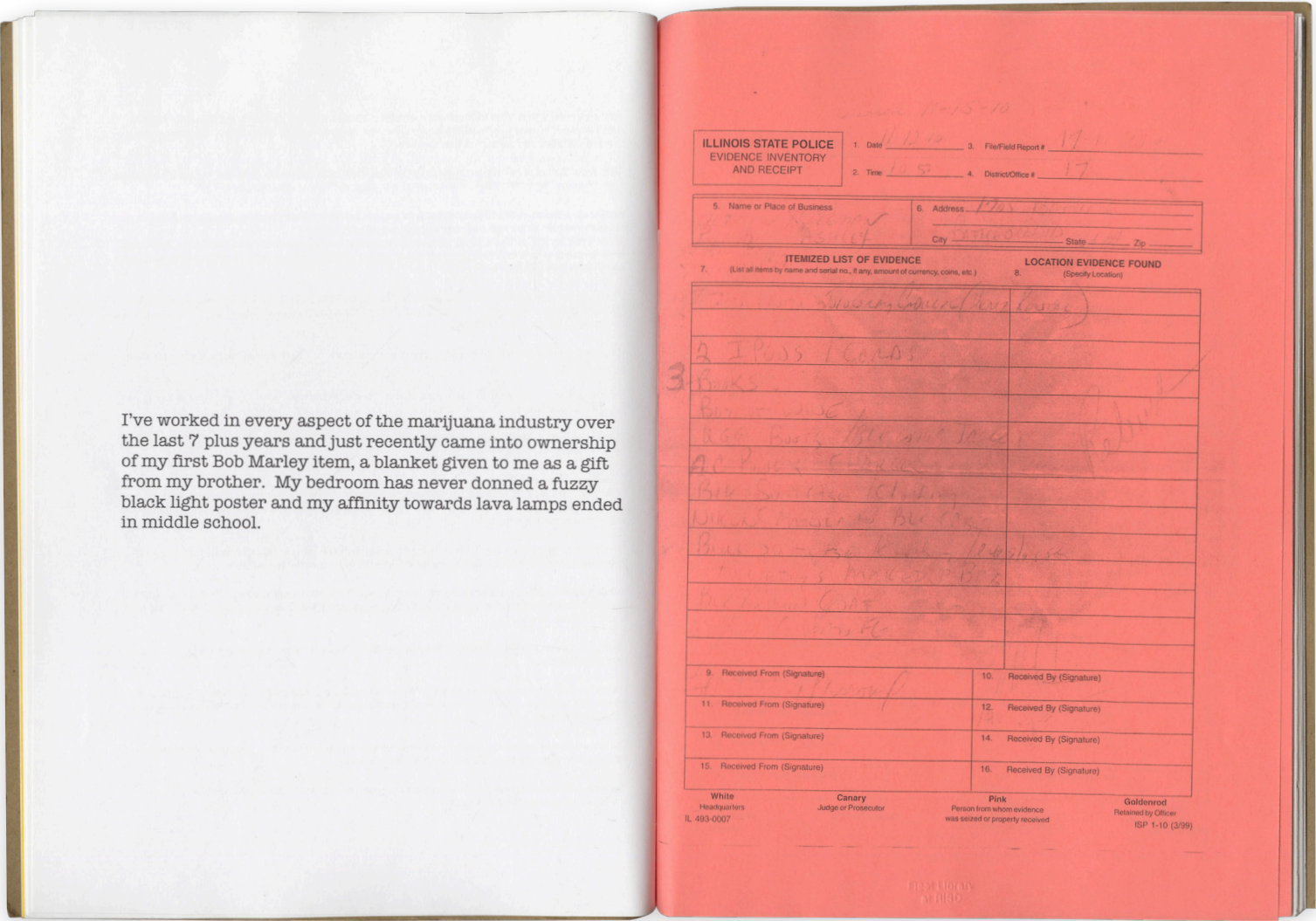
PRINT 2015.L68, REF
no page numbers

Kate Logue



“I was working with a new crew for the week. The girls were asking about another girl they had worked with in previous seasons. She had worked for a man late last season and became his girlfriend. The girls call them ‘Pot Princesses,’ someone who gets paid to stay home and be on call for whatever the grower might want. The guys call them ‘trimmers that never leave.’”

I’ve worked in every aspect of the marijuana industry over the last 7 plus years and just recently came into ownership of my first Bob Marley item, a blanket given to me as a gift from my brother. My bedroom has never donned a fuzzy black light poster and my affinity towards lava lamps ended in middle school.



Logue’s thesis operates as an art object, faux government file, archive of research, portfolio of reproduced prints, and a snapshot of her personal history in relation to the marijuana industry in the United States. The U.S. Department of Justice Drug Enforcement Administration seal on the brown paper cover is the first clue that this book’s form is aligned with its content. Each page is printed on the kind of white, salmon, or yellow 8.5 x 11-inch paper typically used for forms and receipts, making the book feel even more believably government issued. The title, *Written Masters Thesis*, adds an additional layer of standardization and conceals the content from anyone searching the library catalogue, hinting at the possibility that this book is better stumbled on than looked up. The content is mainly a selection of personal photos Logue transformed into lithograph prints, appropriated news articles about marijuana’s use, criminality, and increasing medical and recreational appeal, and copies of tickets, fines, and lists of seized evidence—all of which paint a subjective, mysterious, and dark picture of the marijuana industry in northern California. Logue’s diaristic vignettes, while brief and few, give just enough insight into the industry and her role in it to indicate that this archive is only semi-fictional. —AFS

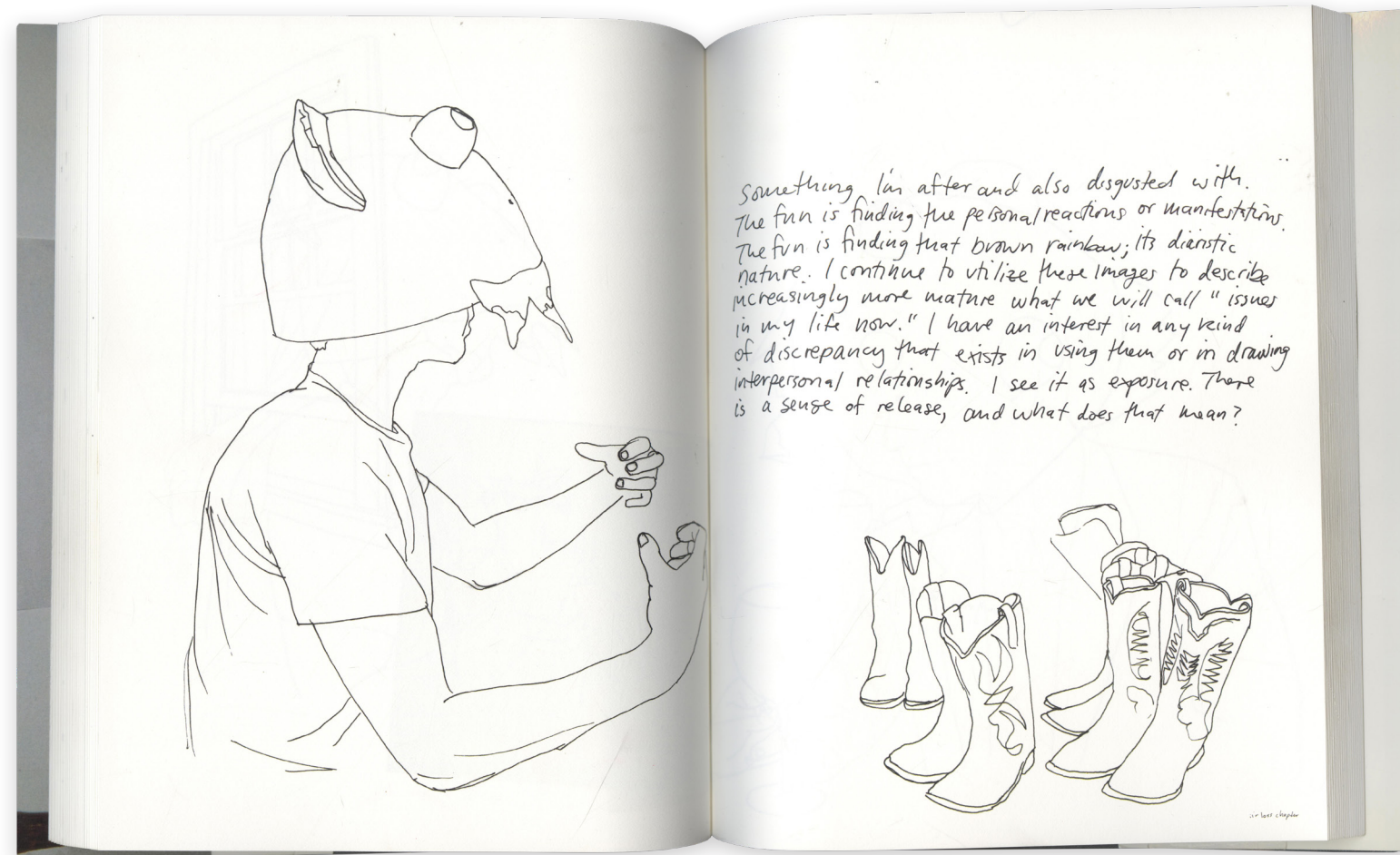
The Fish Market Restaurant

PRINT 2011.M39, REF
no page numbers

David Mortimer May



"I poke and prod orifices through the sex act, through digital manipulation. It makes me think about elasticity in a physical way with its reflection on aging as well as a comment on versatility in people and myself, or whatever. ... I like being unclear about what is genuine and what is actually felt. All the good stuff. Sex and the body are subjects we all have a relationship with. Creating episodic structure and collapsing on itself. Thinking about linear progressions, but then we've got plates and layers and there is the delay or slight lag. You can think about the relationship before and after or overlapping and happening at once."



May's thesis, a meditation on sexuality, aging, comfort, and compulsory behavior, is **entirely drawn by hand, including all the text**. Its level of finish ranges from **raw spreads** that appear as though they were ripped from his personal sketchbook, to beautifully drawn, **controlled compositions**. As the handwriting moves through states of process and polish, scrawl and legibility, at once withholding and revealing, so does its content. At times May is blatantly **expressive**, and at other times more **distanced**, observing the track of his own mind. We feel the push and pull of the personal and, more than that, the body behind the thesis's delicately sketched lines. His self-reflection sometimes feels lofty, but it is always eventually grounded by something fleshy and visceral. All of this creates a **highly effective rhythm** to the book, a pacing where the messiness of being human is contained and released. May draws people "poking, fondling, and fucking" from memory, in a way that is often abstracted or removed from the original context, with disembodied parts floating on the clean white page. Despite the fact that the text contains no direct citations, it has a pretty **extensive bibliography**, which is evidence of something the reader may have already gleaned from the text: this is a deeply rational mind attempting to both dissect and give in to, reconcile and celebrate, the human animal. —ECDH

Nile Mansions Hotel

DM 2014.048, ARC
no page numbers

Bathsheba Okwenje



“What does it mean to capture this kind of testimony after so much time—thirty years—has passed? Inevitably the intervening years have influenced the memories themselves as well as what is remembered, as my sister’s and my different memories reveal. But does this really matter if the intention is to communicate a particular sensibility of that time? Could the events remembered and presented as they have emerged act as an index of the sense of chaos inherent in a post-war country? Could they be an index of the internal tension that grows with imminent external danger? As long as the intention to communicate experience is achieved, does it matter whether the specific memories are fictitious or real?”



Okwenje’s extraordinary thesis project (it was **installed as her thesis show**) is best encountered with no preliminary briefing, in person, over several hours. So ideally you’ll stop reading here and go straight to Special Collections. For now, let’s say this: *Nile Mansions Hotel* is housed in a large, **red archives document box holding multiple parts**: a small, black-covered **book of memoirs** from a five-year period in the 1980s, when Okwenje was a child in Uganda; manila folders holding **copies of newspaper articles** from the period, **e-mails from her father, family photographs**, and **material evidence**; and a small, white-covered book that **fully describes and analyzes the project**. The **bibliography** in the latter includes references to other artists (Walid Raad, Sophie Calle, and others) who also work with archives, the subjectivity of memory, and the haziness of truth. These discrete parts can be **read in any order** and **cross-referenced via indexing codes**. This profound, richly observed, deeply questioned life story—already filtered through **multiple narrators** yielding multiple recollections and interpretations—is now yours to piece together. —JL

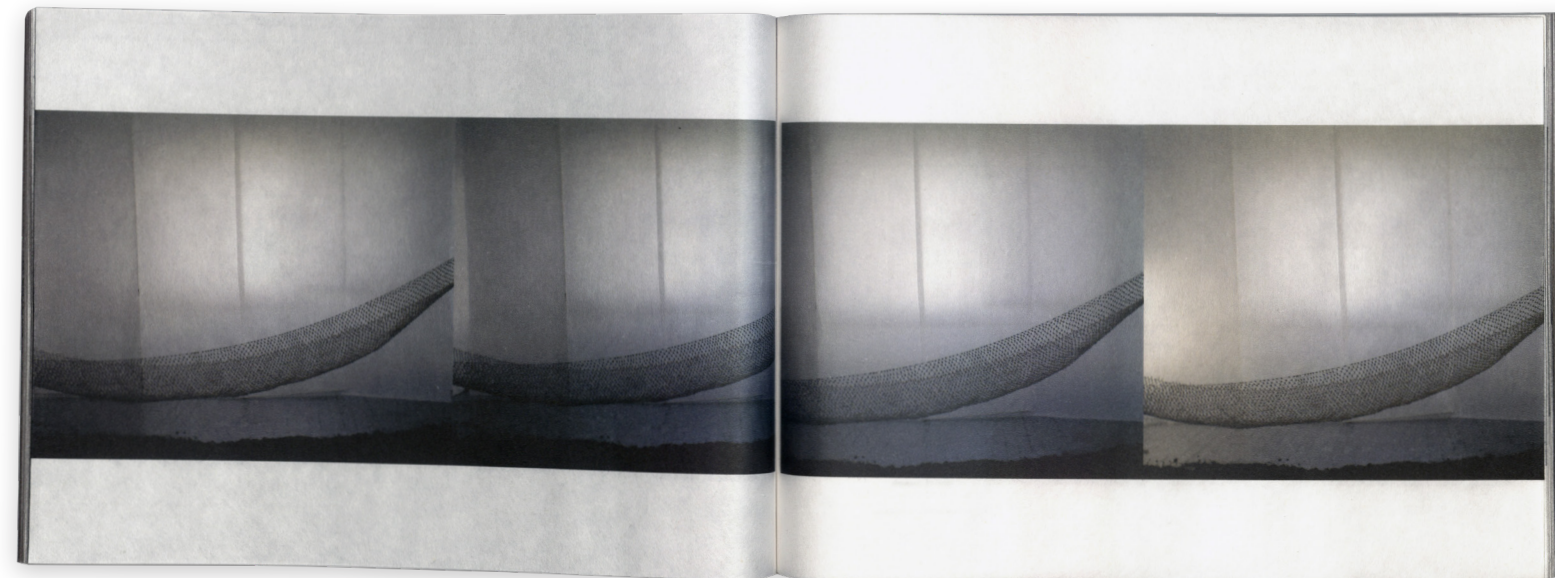
**The Aural Imaginative:
A Phenomenological Journal**

GLASS 2012.S87, ARC
144 pages

Mara Streberger



“The concept of *yūgen* is perceived as a form of invisible beauty bound to spiritual aspiration and yearning. As a notion, its existence is rooted in the desire to have sensuous images of the non-articulated reality of eternal silence and enigma in the midst of the phenomenal world. It does not pertain to another world beyond this one, but rather to the depth of the world in which we live, as experienced through cultivated imagination. It is an awareness that gazes intently at that which lies beyond the visible.”



Streberger’s thesis book is **monographic** in its range of subjects, **portfolio-like** in its generous presentation of work, and an **artist’s book** in its materiality. A meditation on the relationship between time and space and sound and light, it draws on her **personal experiences** of living in Japan for seven years, working in a traditional tea garden. She situates her work in relationship to Japanese concepts (*yūgen* and *ma*) and Western phenomenology. **Analysis of other artists’ work** goes beyond formal qualities to include other resonances, such as “embrac[ing] the idea of change.” Her exploration of Roni Horn’s work is especially strong. A “**sound journal**” records to the date and minute church bells ringing, snow falling, and toads trilling. Printed on **folded translucent paper** and **beautifully hand bound**, the book as object embodies the ethereal sensibilities of the artist and her work. **Sequences of images** travel across the page, **documenting time-based projects** and suggesting the passage of the eye across space. The final page notes that Streberger would soon depart for a year in Greenland and Denmark on a Fulbright, and there continue this phenomenological journal. —AFS

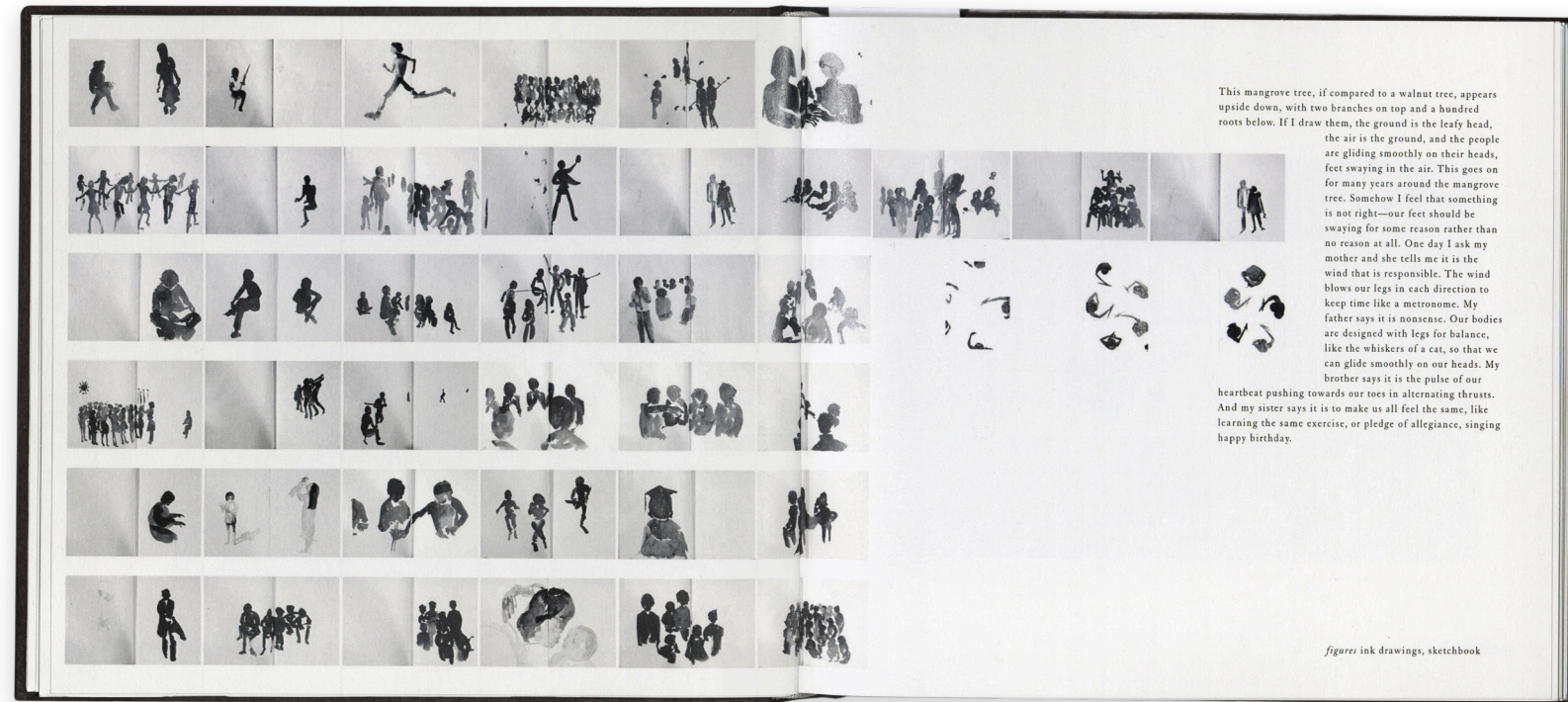
The Ear of the Tempo

ARCH 2013.Y8, ARC
119 pages

Eugenia Yu



“This thesis is a collection of stories in many forms, on many themes. One is architecture, another is humanity. ... I begin with a multitude of possibilities, a library of accumulated knowledge, recurring themes such as my family, the movements of Pina Bausch dancers on a dreamlike stage, the mute palettes of muslin and cotton canvas, long notes of the violin, the sad and supine cello, gunpowder strikes of Cai Guo Qiang who draws my ancestors, Borges’ stairs and labyrinths, falling sands from Kobe Abe’s *Woman in the Dunes*, avant-garde films and film noirs, Chinese scrolls, woodcut prints, mountains, water, and a sudden wind.”



Opening up the **clam-shell box** that holds Yu’s thesis book, you won’t know that you’re starting a breathtaking journey, but you will know you’re onto something special. Wrapped in fibrous, burgundy-colored **handmade paper**, its title **stamped in gold leaf** on the cover, the book is an object lesson in not trying to explain one’s work *in* the thesis but instead continuing to make it *as* the thesis. There’s even one **original print**, folded and bound, tucked away inside. The book intersperses images (of woodblock prints, ink drawings, a shadow-casting wood-and-string assemblage, film still sequences, and a marionette named Manette) and text (poems, prose poems, stories, and anecdotes). In the writing, **fonts change size** and **paragraphs shift margins**, a visual corollary for Yu’s “search in the underneaths of language, to be in the strangeness of words.” Several distinctive texts appear toward the end: a set of brief **descriptive notes on each of her projects**; a **poem** that iterates the percussive “ear of the tempo” of the title; and a set of **“audio notes”**—YouTube URLs for recordings of water drumming, a whistling woman, a flamenco legend, bluegrass clog dancing, and windchimes, among other sounds one might track down or just imagine. —JL

Thesis Book Support & Resources

Departmental Guidelines

Each graduate program has a different philosophy and set of expectations around the written thesis. You should receive guidelines outlining length, content, design, timeline, and other requirements from your professors or Graduate Program Director.

Thesis Committees

You will select or be assigned a thesis committee in the fall semester of your final year. These experts in your studio discipline and/or research interests will be active sounding boards in your thesis process.

Thesis Courses

Some departments offer or require courses that support the development of your thesis concepts and writing. The Graduate Commons offers interdisciplinary electives focused on deep inquiry into inspiration, process, and context surrounding studio practice. Other history-, theory-, or writing-focused courses also often help generate material for the thesis book.

A&L Workshops

Open to all graduate students, the Center for Arts & Language’s thesis workshops inspire, inform, and support the development of the thesis with sessions focused on generative writing, research, process documentation, writing an abstract and outline, book design, etc. Keep an eye out for announcements.

A&L Tutoring

The Center for Arts & Language offers peer consultation in thesis writing and book design. Grads may make one-hour appointments to review the thesis at any stage; weekly mentoring is available for those who are especially interested in or challenged by the thesis-writing process.

A&L Online Resources

The Center for Arts & Language’s website (artsandlanguage.risd.edu) has many handouts on thesis writing specifically and on all kinds of writing and visual communication topics. Our video tutorial on research-based writing offers a full overview on selecting, integrating, and citing sources.

Copy Editors

A&L distributes a list of freelance copy editors available for hire for those seeking comprehensive editing.

Fleet Library

The Fleet Library houses graduate thesis books that offer practical models and inspiration. RISD librarians offer individual research consultation to all graduate students. See risd.libguides.com/thesis to learn more and/or contact Research and Instruction Librarian Ellen Petraits.

Liberal Arts Faculty

RISD’s Liberal Arts professors act as committee members or informal advisors, often focusing on developing a literature review on a topic within their discipline.

Peer Feedback

Your peers are often the most constructive thesis readers. The Center for Arts & Language offers a set of peer-review guidelines; past grad students have held potluck thesis-writing workshops.

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