BENDING, BREAKING, WRAPPING, BINDING: MATERIAL KNOWLEDGE AND THE CREATION OF A SERIES OF ARTIST'S BOOKS FOR CATHARINE CHRISTINA ANDERSON

by

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A Major Research Project
presented to Ryerson University
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
in the English MA Program
in Literatures of Modernity

Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2017
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I. Introduction

In March of 2016, my Grandmother called me to ask if I could help her lift my aunt Tina out of bed and into her wheelchair. Born with spina bifida, Tina was paralyzed from the waist down; she lived with my grandmother who took care of her. Increasingly, a migrating pain that had first begun in her knee was making ordinary tasks difficult. That night, my grandmother picked me up in her old green car and brought me to Tina's bedside. I locked my arms through hers while my grandmother lifted her legs. As we pulled her into her chair, she cried out in pain. I hesitated, but at my grandmother's urging, we continued. This had become normal. Once in her chair, Tina was pale and hardly spoke. I said goodbye to her, and my grandmother drove me back home. Later that night, when my grandmother couldn't get Tina back into bed again, she called my parents' house—I was there for dinner. *We're calling an ambulance*, I heard my father say. My grandmother and Tina had adhered to the same daily rituals for at least twenty-six years; the whole length of my life. Now, they had reached a point where this was untenable. The paramedics picked Tina up that night. Within a few days, she was diagnosed with neuroendocrine cancer. She passed away three weeks later, shortly after her 52nd birthday. My grandmother and I both, separately, took the books off our bookshelves and put them back in order.

This is a personal story, one that should perhaps be tucked away. Important details are missing—some gaps are intentional while others are inevitable. The incapacity of words becomes embarrassing: what is achieved by translating these moments into a few lines of text? Why let death overtake the narrative? My grandmother and Tina's lives had seemed to tread through time with perfect continuity. Their lives were not 'normal' in the broadest sense of conforming to a statistical average, but they had lived in a measured, steady way that was, to me, rich in detail. Their normal had been my normal—*our* normal. I only became cognizant of the fact that our normal was not in keeping with the 'broader normal' when I was a teenager. For instance, it occurred to me surprisingly late in life that most families don't have a *Grandma/Grampa* and a *Grandma/Tina*, or that the words for my relationship to Tina were niece/aunt.

In the weeks leading up to Tina's death, we lost grip of our normal. It was taken first by cancer and then by the *actual* meaning of the word. We had understood our own private definition of the word, but beyond the material specificity of our day to day lives it was no longer something we could lay claim to. As the disability theorist Lennard J. Davis points out in "Constructing Normalcy," the term is a relatively recent invention, only entering English around 1840 (4). It describes a set of assumptions about averages in a population. Davis writes that "[t]he concept of a norm…implies that the majority of the population must or should somehow be part of that norm. The norm pins down that majority of the population that falls under the arch of the standard bell-shaped curve" (6). During Tina's lifetime, disability placed us on the broad, anomalous outskirts of this curve. Disability is, however, as Davis writes, an "unstable category" and not a heterogeneous identity (309). When Tina was alive, we took this for granted—her life was informed by spina bifida as lives can be informed by any number of things. In narrativising her life however, even simple details—like explaining to friends that my *aunt* has cancer, when I have never in my life called her my aunt—push the person that we knew away from us and towards ready-made categories that people understand: *aunt, disability, cancer, normal.* This story demands specificity, or it risks becoming lost in these broad strokes.

Tina had a master's degree, spoke several languages and worked as a translator; she was certainly accomplished, but an account of her life that focuses only on moments of productive value erases the person that we knew. It expunges whole years, days, and moments; it erases her body and in doing so, expresses a world-view that has no room for disability and the person that we loved. In “Disability and the Theory of Complex Embodiment,” Tobin Siebers writes that “the ideology of ability stands ready to attack any desire to know and to accept the disabled body in its current state. The more likely response to disability is to try to erase any signs of change… to insist that the body has no value as human variation if it is not flawless” (328). My grandfather, for one, was embarrassed by Tina’s disability. According to my mother, he never spoke about it. He eventually left my grandmother and cut himself out of our lives. *He found it unbearable to be stared at in public,* my mother says. My grandfather hated existing on the outskirts of normal. His story of Tina might emphasize her accomplishments, though I can’t be sure—I’ve only met him twice. When Tina passed away he cut off all support payments to my grandmother, served her with papers and told her to sell her house. *I feel bad for him,* my grandmother tells me, *he didn’t really know Tina.*

A conventional linear narrative could not sufficiently represent Tina’s life as we knew it; no single story can comprehensively articulate a person’s life. Instead, I’ve attempted to accumulate and compile a series of moments into a diffuse portrait, one that draws attention to the impossibility of its own completion. The fragments that I have gathered—including hand-drawn images and text from interviews with my grandmother and mother as well as some of Tina’s own writing—have been hand-bound together into a small collection of artists’ books. These books gather minutia of my aunt’s life to create a constellation of thoughts, ideas, memories and objects that point to her absence. I would like to create a narrative that, in its detail and strangeness, upends casual or careless assumptions that the word ‘disability’ conjures and allows the reader to perceive my aunt’s life without preconceptions.

I want to construct a narrative portrait of Tina as we knew her, partly because the impulse to erase disability is so strong in our culture. I know that my grandmother worries that Tina will be forgotten. Her story of Tina is not a simple one, and it does not fit with narratives of 'lacking' or 'overcoming.' I am wary of telling this story because I don't want to put words into Tina's mouth or pin her experience to a single kind of representation. Still, I feel that the details of her life are worthy of being remembered and known in their individual complexity. I can no longer speak with Tina, but I do intend to speak with my grandmother and my mother; I hope that the narrative will be a comfort to them and will depict Tina in the way that they knew her.

The books in this series are material, textual objects; they are made to pass between hands and to be held by individual readers. Materiality is a forethought—not an afterthought—and the books themselves cannot be simply defined as incidental vessels for text. In "How to Be Complicit with Materials," Petra Lange-Berndt writes that "[f]rom a critical perspective, the term 'material' describes not prime matter but substances that are always subject to change, be it through handling, interaction with their surroundings, or the dynamic life of their chemical reactions" (12). Materiality implies a process of flux and becoming; materials are non-transcendent and non-replicable. They change over time—are shaped, damaged, and adjusted, sometimes by human hands.

Touch is the sense most closely associated with materials and working with materials implies an embodied mode of thought. As disability theorists such as Siebers have pointed out, the body is essential to the production of knowledge—a point that is frequently dismissed or forgotten in discussions of philosophy and language. Siebers writes that, "[a]s a living entity, the body is vital and chaotic, possessing complexity in equal share to that claimed today by critical and cultural theorists for linguistic systems. The association of the body with human mortality and fragility, however, forces a general distrust of the knowledge embodied in it" (328). Because of the fragility and mutability of our physical selves, embodied knowledge is traditionally considered to be coarse and limited. By telling a story that retains its proximity to materiality, I hope to create a text that questions this tradition and acknowledges the embodied way that knowledge is apprehended.

This project in an integration of storytelling, craft, and theory. As Esther Leslie writes in "Walter Benjamin: Traces of Craft," "[g]rasping the truth, seizing the future; the hand is a political organ. But it does not work in isolation. Intrinsic to the craftsman, and the gesticulating storyteller, too, is the accord of soul, eye and hand. Thinking, seeing, handling in tandem, this mesh grants a praxis" (6). While element of touch in these books is intended to be connective and not therapeutic, the act of making is a gesture of care that starts with the hands. As an accompaniment to the physical creation of these books, this paper situates the books that I have created within a critical and art historical context. In the following pages, I articulate the theoretical parameters that have underscored the creation of my books. I begin with an exploration of the process of making the objects themselves, followed by a discussion of the historical conditions within which artists' books have emerged as a medium. I then discuss the distinction between material and form, the location of artists' books in institutions and touch as a tool of aesthetic appreciation in comprehending the books that I've created. Finally, I will focus on the work of two Twentieth Century American artists Judith Scott and Vija Celmins whose work has informed and inspired the creation of my own books. While the books that I have created stand-alone, this paper provides an outline of the personal, historical, and theoretical problems that I have considered though the process of making them.

II. Creating an Edition of Artists' Books

I have created six small books whose contents will vary with each edition. These books—while carefully made—are intended to be imperfect objects. Images and text are drawn onto semi-translucent kozuke paper and are fastened together using a stab-stitch binding technique. Some elements—drawings or portions of text, for instance—echo throughout the series, but the books themselves are not identical. The string of the binding extends beyond its functional application on the spine and weaves through holes that have been punctured in the books' covers. On each of the books, the punctured holes roughly indicate the atomic structure of one of the six most significant elements in the human body: oxygen, carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, calcium, and phosphorus. Found objects are wrapped in the binding string that weaves through the punctured covers. I am conceptualizing each of these books as a point within a constellation. While many contemporary artists' books are made to be displayed, the engaged act of passing a book between hands is a key component of the series that I have created. The narrative space of these books reaches into the haptic as well as the visual and textual in that images and text are inseparable and the text as a whole cannot be fully comprehended by sight alone.

These books are created to be critical of their own limitations without confining themselves to obscurity or non-existence. Images in the books include elements collected from daily life such as drawings of objects, reproductions of photographs and visual re-imaginings of rooms in my grandmother's house. The physical properties of the books—for instance the weight of the paper, the binding thread, and the covers—are not selected arbitrarily. These materials do not necessarily have symbolic meaning, but they contribute to the books' physical presence. I conceive of the act of binding as a kind of performative mending as well as an engaged remembering—a literal and figurative attempt to gather fragments and hold them briefly in the form of a portrait. These fragments form an impression of an absence and point to what representation cannot do. These are not objects that attempt to 'transcend' the ordinary, but instead pull close to the ordinary and draw attention to the unknown that exists within the known.

The emphasis that these books place on touch and embodiment confronts an aesthetic tradition that has continually dismissed haptic, physical, and tactile modes of perception. Yet, as Siebers points out in *Disability Aesthetics,* the field of study begins with an emphasis on corporeality. Aesthetics, he writes, "tracks the sensations that some bodies feel in the presence of other bodies. This notion of aesthetic, first conceived by Alexander Baumgarten, posits the human body and its affective relation to other bodies as foundational to the apprehension of the beautiful" (1). Depictions of the body are still essential to much artistic production, and yet critical discussions of the role of the body as *both* a subject and an object of art to art are underrepresented. Siebers writes that "there is a long tradition of trying to replace the underlying corporeality of aesthetics with idealist and disembodied conceptions of art" (1). Visuality is frequently taken for granted as the predominant mode through which art can and should be contemplated, and yet "the twentieth-century notion of "opticality" denies the bodily character of visual perception. The result is a nonmaterialist aesthetics that devalues the role of the body and limits the definition of art" (Siebers 1). Siebers makes the case that our bodies play a key role in our apprehension of aesthetics—a fact that is so powerful that it is difficult to effectively suppress. He writes that an understanding of aesthetics that considers the role of the body, and especially the disabled body, "enlarges our vision of human variation and difference, and puts forward perspectives that test presuppositions dear to the history of aesthetics" (3). While I will not be representing bodies per say, physical consideration—in particular the ways that bodies interact with and shape materials—will underwrite nearly all my aesthetic decisions in creating these books.

As the cultural historians David Howes and Constance Classen note in their book, *Ways of Sensing,* dematerialized and disembodied conceptions of aesthetics are not universal but culturally specific. Howes and Classen draw attention to the Japanese concept of *wabi sabi* which "finds beauty in austerity and mutability as exemplified by old, weathered objects" (23). In this tradition, material changes that occur over time—such as scratches or variations in texture—add rather than detract value (23). Howes and Classen write that this aesthetic belief "celebrates sensory and mental engagement with the flow of life. Death and dissolution are essential to this flow, and to the aesthetic experience" (23). The concept of *wabi sabi* accepts the perpetually shifting state of materials. The books that I make should steer towards this conception of aesthetics, where the potential for damage is a part of the life of an object. Just as the concept of a 'perfect body' is an oppressive myth, so too, I argue is the concept of the 'perfect object'.

Text is integral to this project. Almost none of the text within the books has been composed by me. Instead, I have transcribed portions of interviews conducted with my grandmother and my mother about details of Tina's life. The details of these interviews are not intended to be comprehensive; I think of them as touchstones that map small but significant moments. My grandmother and Tina lived through a series of rituals—daily or weekly tasks around which they oriented their lives. Their house has looked the same for as long as I can remember; the 1970s-era orange sofa has become cat-damaged and books have shuffled between rooms, but little else has changed. A window over the dining room table is lined with shelves of coloured glass, filled with candy that has been left to linger. When light shines through the window, you can see dust drifting between connecting rooms. On the dining room table, Tina kept a stack of newspapers dating back several months that she intended to read in their entirety. Every day she would sit at the end of the table with her cat—Sasha—on her lap. She read from the stack, article by article. When she died, we were left with her unfinished papers. My grandmother kept them on the table for a few months before throwing them out. What is the significance of this? These details are clues to who my aunt was, how she lived and how she thought. They help to formulate the picture that I have of Tina in my mind. Rather than attempt to interpret details such as this, I have attempted to collect and arrange them so that the texture of her life as it is remembered emerges. My memories have informed the questions that I have posed to my grandmother and mother, but the details that I've transcribed extend beyond what I could know myself.

These books are an idiosyncratic record of a dialogue between three generations of women—my grandmother, my mother and I.[1] This dialogue is an engaged process of remembering, one in which the blank space of forgetting is an intrinsic part. As Walter Benjamin describes Penelope's labour of weaving in "Picturing Proust" as both the "labour of bearing things in mind" and the labour of forgetting, this is a process "in which remembering is the weft and forgetting the warp" (127). The creation of these books implies both a literal and a figurative process of weaving. On the one hand, the stab-binding technique means that each page of the book will begin as a loose sheet and then, at the end, will be stitched to the other sheets to create a whole. The process of binding these fragments can be seen in the context of the figurative process of "bearing things in mind" as Penelope does while she worked at her weaving. As Benjamin writes, "[w]aking up each morning we hold in our hands, usually feebly and slackly, only frayed scraps of the tapestry of lived existence, as forgetting has woven it within us. Yet each day with its purposive actions and even more with its purpose-rooted recall, unpicks the web, the ornamentation of forgetting" (127). The emphasis on materiality in these books implies that they are not atemporal objects—the process of forgetting (or losing) is a part of the process of remembering (creating). Once created, these books will pass between hands and will inevitably become separated and no longer whole. As material objects, these books are made to be bound together and then dispersed; they have a life cycle, one which mirrors the warp and weft of a loom or the process of remembering (and implicitly, forgetting and re-remembering) a life.

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[1] While family trees are most frequently built along male lines, I think of my mother's family as being matriarchal. The last time my grandfather saw my mother—at the hospital visiting Tina—he didn't recognize her. It had been more than a decade since they'd seen each other. "Who are you?" he asked her, frustrated as she interjected into his conversation with a nurse. "I'm your daughter" she declared and the nurse cupped her hands over her mouth in horror.

My aunt loved language and was detail-oriented to the extreme. She completed jobs slowly, working word by word to achieve a perfect translation, but was rarely satisfied. Personally, I have struggled—particularly in the process of printmaking and bookbinding—to create perfect images and objects. My training in print emphasized technical proficiency. My teachers subscribed to Robert Bringhurst's model of *one correct way* to produce a print. Bringhurst asserts in *The Elements of Typographic Style* that, "the principles of typography…are not a set of dead conventions but the tribal customs of the magic forest, where ancient voices speak from all directions and new ones move to unremembered forms" (9). This mystical sense of setting type may be useful for some practitioners, but it is deeply limiting and makes profound assumptions about *who* is important in the history of printmaking. It denies the validity of other means by which language is put on a page. When I studied printmaking, I was enamored by the meditative process of setting type, but I also loved other, messier forms of production. After being introduced to the Bringhurst model I strained to set type ‘perfectly’ but always found little mistakes cropping up. I tried to eliminate these mistakes, but even at the time a small part of me secretly loved their rebellious incoherence. I can’t help but laugh at Bringhurst’s magic forest and I doubt that the voices of tradition would accept me as a practitioner (if not because of my inclination towards error then certainly because I am a woman). For Bringhurst, there is one correct—and even transcendent—way to set type but also one way for language to exist in a book. The goal is for text to disappear and allow the meaning of the words to emanate from the page, uninhibited by self-indulgent variation (18). While I respect and appreciate the training that I received, I have increasingly come to think of ‘perfection’ as a cruel concept, one that does not have room for the multitude of ways that people make things and the even greater multitude of ways that people reflect on existing in the world. I reject any model that has no room for the messiness of human bodies as they are and hope that my books will be aesthetically interesting, impermanent, and ‘incorrect’ objects—objects that ‘indulge’ in variation and embrace the potential embarrassment of materiality over transcendence. In service to Tina, I will look for perfection but celebrate the imperfect translation that I find.

In her book *Living a Feminist Life,* Sara Ahmed writes about books in a way that binds the physical and the intellectual. Of her own personal feminist archive, she writes, “[t]he materials we include…could also be called feminist classics. By feminist classics, I mean feminist books that have been in circulation; that have become worn from being passed around”

(17). These books are not necessarily canonical, but have allowed for spaces of connection and for the formation of communities. Recalling a feminist reading group that she attended at Lancaster University, she writes that what she appreciated in the group “was the attention to the books themselves as material objects. Each of us had different copies, some of them tattered and well read, worn, and, as it were, lived in” (17). Feminist communities, she writes, are often formed through the passing around of books: “[t]here are so many ways that feminist books change hands; in passing between us, they change each of us” (17). The books in her archive are not only sites of intellectual engagement but “spaces of encounter; how we are touched by things; how we touch things” (17). Feminism, she writes, is “a *fragile archive*, a body assembled from shattering, from splattering, an archive whose fragility gives us responsibility: to take care” (17). Ahmed observes text and knowledge in the context of the material forms that we apprehend them through. The fragility of her archive does not pre-suppose the fragility of femininity per say, but the fragility of bodies in general. Feminism, she argues, is *felt* before it is theorized. This kind of felt knowledge requires care, for ourselves and our communities. It is this mantle, *to take care* I hope to take up in my project of creating an edition of artists’ books.

III. Artists’ Books

Placing the books that I intend to create within a specific tradition is not without difficulty. There is no precise consensus on what constitutes an artist’s book; scholars, art historians and librarians including Johanna Drucker, Riva Castleman, Betty Bright and Clive Phillpot define artists’ books differently. In her seminal study, *The Century of Artists’ Books,* Drucker provides the most compelling—and agreed-upon—conceptualization of the form, arguing that an artists' book must interrogate "the conceptual or material form of the book as part of its intention, thematic interests, or production activities" (3). She makes this general assertion with the admission that "Most attempts to define an artist's book… are hopelessly flawed—they are either too vague ('a book made by an artist') or too specific ('It can't be a limited edition')" (14). Drucker has pointed out that as a form, the artist's book has not been sufficiently theorized and the field needs "description, investigation and critical attention before its specificity will emerge" (15). It is not clear, however, which discipline(s) artists' books definitively belong to and how they should be theorized. Book arts often occupy an awkward position between craft, fine arts, and literature. Drucker writes that

> [a]rtists' books take every possible form, participate in every possible convention of book making, every possible "ism" of mainstream art and literature, every possible mode of production, every shape, every degree of ephemerality or archival durability. There are no specific criteria for defining what an artist's book is, but there are many criteria for defining what it is not, or what it partakes of, or what it distinguishes itself from. (14)

She criticizes the art historian Riva Castleman who, in her 1994 exhibition *A Century of Artists Books* at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, included finely printed editions of poetry and illustration—or Livres d'Artiste—alongside works that display self-consciousness about their formal qualities as books (15). While Livres d'Artiste are finely crafted and are often produced by, or with the cooperation of artists and writers, they are ultimately market-oriented editions, not works of art unto themselves (4). In these works, "text, image, production (including printing, binding, typesetting, design, and so forth) are independent operations, guided by the editor, who engineers their compatibility with the necessary, consummate, taste" (Drucker 4). In other words, they are formatted according to industry standards of quality and do not push the boundaries of what a book can be or utilize the book form in a unique or compelling way.

The most recognized form of artist's books within the Western art-historical cannon are those associated with American post-war movements in contemporary art. This tradition was closely connected with conceptualism, which Lippard defined in *Six Years…* as "work in which the idea is paramount and the material form is secondary, lightweight, ephemeral, cheap, unpretentious and/or 'dematerialized'" (181). After 1945, artists' books in America were increasingly produced inexpensively and through processes of mass production. These works turned away from fine-printing traditions and rejected expensive or archival materials. Dematerialization implies that the true value of a work of art is conceptual and not material. Conceptual content cannot be commodified in the way that a bronze statue, for instance, might be. Cheap production methods also meant that these works could find wider audiences; they were conceived of by critics such as Lucy Lippard and Clive Phillpot as 'democratic multiples'—a denotation, that, as Drucker notes, was not without some paradox, given that physical and intellectual accessibility were not equivalently weighted (Drucker 72).[2] Dematerialized artists books were created as a way of circumventing the gallery system and putting art in the hands of ordinary people rather than wealthy patrons or institutions alone.

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[2] Lucy Lippard herself writes in her 1982 essay "The Artist's Book Goes Public" that "[o]ne of the basic mistakes made by early proponents of Conceptual Art's "democratic" stance (myself included) was a confusion of the characteristics of the medium (cheap, portable, accessible) with those of the actual contents (all too often wildly self-indulgent or so highly specialized that they appeal only to an elite audience)" (52).

While Drucker asserts that an artist's book can be a unique object with just one copy or edition, for Phillpot, an artist's book's reproducibility is its key feature. Artists' books, he argues, must necessarily be "produced by the artist using mass-production methods, and in (theoretically) unlimited numbers, in which the artist documents or realizes art ideas or artworks" (47). Edward Ruscha's 1963 book 'Twentysix Gasoline Stations' is the most iconic example of the dematerialized artist's book. In this publication, twenty-six black and white photographs of gasoline stations are printed alongside brief captions that note the station's location along a highway. Phillpot writes that in viewing Ruscha's work, "the customary aura of artworks was instantly dispelled. These were no precious objects to be locked away and protected from inquisitive viewers. They were obviously for use, and intended to be handled and enjoyed. Thus, Ruscha created the paradigm for artists' books" (96). Ironically, the success of Ruscha's work means that today, copies are more likely to be found in archives or special collections rather than supermarket check-out counters (Bury 9). Despite Phillpot's assertions to the contrary, Ruscha's books are not representative of the entire paradigm of artists' books. There are a multitude of ways to engage with the form; Ruscha's books are simply a forerunner of one mode of production.

The concept of dematerialization is best conceived of as a metaphor since printer-paper and thin black ink are not without substance or *actually* infinitely reproducible. Much of what conceptual artists had hoped artists' books would achieve is now more tenable online; the internet is, in theory, a democratic, dematerialized space. Of course, this still isn't exactly true either. The internet is material in that websites run on servers and there are many people who—for various reasons—are shut out. The internet has not made print irrelevant, but it has dramatically shifted the way that we think of books as objects. Just as the invention of photography changed the role of painting in the fine arts, online consumption of traditionally print materials has meant that the relevance of print forms must be re-negotiated. Part of this is considering what the material implications of the book form are and when it is more appropriate to print, to publish online, or perhaps both. For instance, there is no internet access in federal or provincial prisons in Canada. This means that any publication intended for inmates *must* be in print form. Conversely, a zine that hopes to reach a geographically dispersed audience at a low cost might find an online space more useful than a print edition.

Books that emphasize their own materiality are antithetical to Philpot and Lippard's definition of the artist's book but are included within Drucker's. In *The Century of Artists' Books,* she classifies books that are made as singular objects or limited editions as auratic. The books that I have created fit most readily into this category. These books do not necessarily have to be made from expensive materials, but they should be cognizant of their own physical existence as objects. They do not "fall into the conventions of **livres d'artistes** or fine printing" and are often hand-made using a wide range of materials that can include anything from rag paper to human hair (93). Drucker writes that "books which have an aura about them generate a mystique, a sense of charged presence…. It is as though they have been imbued with a power which animates them beyond their material limits generating a metaphysically charged atmosphere which surrounds the work" (94). Mira Schor's *The Book of Pages* (1976) is one such example of an auratic artist's book. In this work—which resembles a journal—text is scrawled in black ink onto translucent, weather-beaten rice paper. The text itself is nearly illegible and many portions are crossed out. Drucker writes that "[o]ne does not attempt merely to read this diary, but feels the experience of the material object as evidence of its distress, as a record of struggles and damage, survival and testimony. Such work constructs a metalanguage of the journal as a site of record, not only in a textual sense but also a physical, corporeal reality" (103-104). Auratic artist's books such as Schor's self-consciously facilitate an embodied response through their materiality. Their attention to physical presence does not imply that they are finely crafted, limited edition or expensively made. Instead, they harness cheap and ordinary materials in a unique way to create a space of record.

Drucker also cites the German artist Barbara Fahrner's work *Das Kunstkammerprojekt* (1988) as an example of an auratic artist's book. This work, consisting of eighty-four books arranged by theme, was inspired by the Renaissance concept of the kunstkammer, or 'cabinet of curiosities' as well as the concept of the Meimatmuseum, or local museum (117). Texts, drawings, charts and other materials are collected in these volumes and sorted according to the divisions indicated in the philosopher Guilio Camillo's work *L'Idea del Theatre* (*The Theatre of Memory)* (Drucker 117). Like the French poet Stéphane Mallarmé who aspired to create a "cosmological totality" in the books that he created, Fahrner's books "weave together in a form that she compares to a net"—albeit one that is necessarily incomplete: a net with holes (Drucker 118). Drucker writes that "The book is an ordering—singular and indefinite, not the order—definitive and transcendent…its incompleteness serves metaphorically to indicate the limits and lapses of Fahrner's own processes, while its repleteness serves as symbol of her existence as what she calls "a nomadic collector" (118). For Fahrner, the book form provides an opportunity to organize a poetic and artistic cosmology that draws attention to its own incomplete nature. This kind of auratic book object is much closer to the tradition that I will be working in than the dematerialised artists' books of conceptualism.

Perhaps the most notable creator of auratic artists' books is another German artist, Anselm Kiefer, whose work grapples with German history and identity in the post-World War II era. Kiefer frequently integrates text into his paintings and produces book works whose dense material qualities overtake semantic intelligibility. In Kiefer's *Märkischer Sand IV* (1977) for instance, photographs and wallpaper are bound together and overlaid with an increasingly dense layer of sand. The book's first photograph depicts what appears to be an empty barn—a barren interior with a dirt floor. In subsequent images, plowed hay fields become obfuscated by grit. As sand overtakes the photographs, the human aspect eventually disappears; the book becomes illegible. In the late 1980s, Kiefer began producing lead books. Weighing up to 600 pounds, many of these works could be opened and read in theory, but the task would require the effort of several people. Drucker writes that "Such works become affective pieces rather than textual vehicles bearing forms, their physical, tactile presence takes the iconic and cultural resonance of book" (117). Unlike conceptualism's democratic multiples, which hoped to divorce ideas from their material vehicles, these books rely almost exclusively on their materiality to convey meaning or a transference of affect.

The scholar Aleida Assmann writes that Kiefer is a "memory artist" who "differs from the professional guardians of memory through his anamnestic sensibility; his own concern is to establish connections between what is temporally or spatially remote" (346). Like the theorist and art historian Aby Warburg, he is, she argues, "a seismographer of mnemonic waves in a cultural memory that, because of dramatic loss, violent disruption, and suppression, has lapsed into a cultural unconscious" (346). Kiefer's memory work utilizes the book form because books have historically been the most ubiquitous container for cultural memory. Assmann writes that artists such as Kiefer, "have discovered the materiality of the book at a time when image and writing have become increasingly virtual" (345). In a digital age where the materiality of texts is perceived as being under threat, Kiefer draws attention to the material aspect of knowledge production and the literal weight of history. Assman writes that,

> in the crude, abandoned shelves of the storeroom [Kiefer] recognized the basic function of the archive: in the bricks he saw the clay tablets of the ancient library, and in the loam from which the bricks were made, together with water and fire, he discerned the material substrata of culture itself—its construction and its fragility both out of and on the everlasting earth… Kiefer's books do not tell a single human story. Their tale is, rather, that of the earth's history from a distant, nonhuman perspective" (345).

Kiefer's books contain human memory, but their emphasis on materiality appears to suggest a turn away from culture as an entirely human-made entity. In his archive, culture is formed first from the earth and can be consumed by it again.

Kiefer's emphasis on the materiality of culture is a product of historical context. Born in 1945, Kiefer grew up during the aftermath of the Second World War, at a time when Germany did not yet have an open dialogue about the wounds of fascism and the Shoah. As a young artist, Kiefer continually prodded at historical wounds and asked uncomfortable questions about German identity in the postwar period. In the 1960s he constructed his work from the rubble of history and implored Germans to think about how the Nazis had re-shaped historical narratives about national identity for political purposes. History, Kiefer says, is itself a material (Kiefer 0:10:20-0:10:26). It was during this time that German scholars such as the art historian Monika Wagner began to argue that a philosophical tradition in which language and form are emphasized at the expense of materiality is not sufficient. Born in 1944, a year before Kiefer, Wagner's writing displays a "deeply rooted scepticism towards the acceptance of philosophy as unquestioned leader when engaging with art practices, an attitude…completely at odds with the order of the Anglo-American world" (Lange-Berndt 22). As Lange-Berndt writes, "Following the upheavals of 1968, intellectuals in Germany had to confront the fact that after the Shoah it was clear that the rich philosophical tradition of the country had not prevented fascism" (22). This shift in thinking had a clear impact on aesthetics and artistic production in Germany that has generally not been adopted into the English-speaking art-world.

Artists' books exist at an intersection between semantic knowledge and materiality. Books are objects that that are most often held and read in private but they also connect individuals to larger communities. For Kiefer, the book form must be considered not just as a vehicle for dematerialized textual information but as a cultural vessel that integrates materiality with history. My own books construct a personal narrative and not a national or historical narrative as Kiefer's book objects do. However, I think that it is useful to consider the books that I have created as being within the same auratic tradition as Schor, Fahrner and Kiefer. I also want to emphasize that the choice to embrace materiality is a decision that is both political and aesthetic, one that rejects dematerialization and turns instead towards the embrace of singularity, imperfection, mutability and variation. It does not escape me that during the Nazi period in Germany, those with disabilities were deemed to be *Lebensunwertes Leben—life unworthy of life*—and that prior to the end of the War, eugenics movements targeting disabled people were not confined to Germany alone (Barnes 26). It was only after the atrocities of the Shoah were revealed that overt discrimination towards disabled people was no longer socially acceptable in Europe (Barnes 26). This is obviously not the cultural moment that we are living in and yet there is continual evidence that those with disabilities are viewed as a burden. Take, for instance, the current efforts to abolish the Affordable Care Act in America: this is a political action that would be devastating to people living with disabilities who require ongoing medical assistance but don't have health insurance through an employer. The list of potential outcomes is long and complex, but at least one fact is clear: repealing the Afordable Care Act would put many disabled people's lives at risk.

I think about these issues in the context of my grandmother and Tina; they lived happily but frugally, without a single major source of income. Tina had several surgeries as a result of her spina bifeda and spent the last three weeks of her life in a sophisticated, expensive care unit at a major public hospital. This story would be very different if healthcare were not free and readily available for those who do not have insurance or wealth. It is terrifying to think about the devastation to individuals and their families. Not providing healthcare for those who need it and cannot afford to pay is a tacit assertion that disabled people's lives are not worth attending to.

Creating a series of artist's books about my aunt is a way for me to make her life visible and to assert its worth as we understood it, in a culture that routinely devalues the lives of those who exhibit difference or who are not considered productive contributors. To do this, it is necessary to engage purposefully with materials. While the dematerialized artists' books of the American conceptual movement in art are the most widely recognized and theorized artist book form, this mode of production is not adequate to address the highly personal nature of the subject matter that I have chosen. Instead, these books engage in the auratic tradition as it is defined by Drucker—a tradition that acknowledges the value of imperfection and engages with the intrinsic variability of material objects.

IV. Matter, Materiality and Form

In its noun form, 'material' is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as "[t]he matter or substance from which a thing is or may be made" ("material" def. 2.a). The word 'matter' comes to us in English through Anglo-Norman from the classical Latin *māteria* which is defined as “wood, timber, building material, material of which a thing is made, purulent matter, subject of discourse or consideration also (in philosophical use) ‘matter’ in contradistinction to ‘mind’ or to ‘form’” (“matter”). *Māteria* can be traced back to *māter,* meaning mother— “usually explained as originally denoting the trunk of a tree regarded as the ‘mother’ of its offshoots” (“matter”). As Lange-Berndt writes, the term “describes not prime matter but substances that are always subject to change, be it through handling, interaction with their surroundings, or the dynamic life of their chemical reactions” (12). Materials are, therefore, by their nature, defined in terms of their potentiality or their use. A material is that which is used to construct, it is a component in the act of making, or, to borrow from ancient Greek, poeisis.

There is a gendered distinction between *form* and *material* in the history of Western art that finds its origins in the writings of Plato and Aristotle. Aristotle first defined the distinction between material and form in *Physics,* where he writes that matter desires form, a kind of yearning akin to “the female desiring the male or the foul desiring the fair (ósper an ei thély arrenos kai aischron kalou)” (quoted in Wagner 29). Matter is conceived of as the coarse substance from which form takes its shape—when form transcends the material, the material itself ceases to be; this shift is apprehended in terms of desire and dependency. Wagner writes that “In an idealist tradition within aesthetic theory that referenced Plato and Aristotle, material was constantly regarded as the base and counterpart to artistic creativity, which, even in its most precious forms, had to be transcended or transformed by art as activity” (27). The idea of transcendence implies a hierarchical, binary opposition between the material and the metaphysical. Wagner writes that the “construction of gender duality explains why material was regarded as base and form as lofty. Moreover, it touches upon the binary construction of body and soul" (29). Within this framework, the material—which is feminine, earthy, and bodily—desires to be molded by that which is rational, masculine and formal. Form, but not material, is capable of transcending physical existence and achieving a closer relationship with the metaphysical. In aesthetics, form has historically been connected to an idealist tradition that constructs rational, dematerialized, masculine objectivity as the universal standard for perception and even genius.

The concept of form has received significant critical analysis, but the material qualities of artwork—associated with the body, femininity, desire and the anti-theoretical—have historically been left out of critical dialogues, or taken for granted. While many contemporary artists have grappled with the dichotomy between material and form in their work, discourse itself has lagged behind. As Lange-Berndt points out, "[f]or some, to engage with materials still seems the antithesis of intellectuality, a playground for those not interested in theory, while material studies are defined, at best, as an auxiliary science" (12). In writing about contemporary art, critical attention emphasizes formal aspects of a work while material is underrepresented. Lange-Berndt writes that, "[f]ollowing a philosophical tradition that privileges form over matter, design over material, drawing over paint and the spiritual over the bodily, such writings often ignore the role of material in the visual arts or take it for granted" (13). This hierarchy has been continually re-inscribed in much of the history of Western Art criticism. Most notably in the 20th century, the pivotal theorist of modernism, Clement Greenberg, established a "notion of an advanced art characterized by its medium specificity" in which "materials were defined as autonomous and essential, with distinct properties" (Lange-Berndt 13). For Greenberg however, the material or medium-specificity of the work of art is only relevant insofar as materials are the base components through which "pure *form*" and thus "transcendence" may be achieved (13). Once again, materials are the coarse groundwork through which a metaphysical status is realized. For Greenberg, materials are only relevant in so far as they facilitate a departure from their own physical properties.

In reaction to Greenberg's vision of the negation of the material in modernist art theory, scholars such as Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, and Briony Fer have emphasized "embodiment, touch and the materialization of thought processes" in their criticism (Lange-Berndt 13). Yet, Lange-Berndt points out, for these theorists, "materials are not allowed to be vagabond, dirty and contagious, they are only used to *think about* or to *think with,* and again act as the indicator of something else" (13). Lange-Berndt advocates for what she calls "material complicity," or a methodology that observes the agency of materials and their location in the world. Materials, she points out, are distinct from 'objects' or 'things' in that they are not defined in exclusively anthropocentric terms. She writes that "if one considers a broom, for instance, the broom is a thing while the material might be wood or plastic" (13). The plastic and the wood are autonomous substances that have been formed into the broom; as the component parts of a broom, they have become an object for human use. Materials hold the potential to become 'things' but they are not yet that.

To "follow the materials" implies a trajectory that is not entirely bound to human-made divisions (Lange-Berndt 16). Lange-Berndt writes that this trajectory is "not linear, not clearly divisible into avant-garde, high modernist, postmodern, and so on. Rather, one encounters entangled, anachronistic layers, incorporating references that point beyond canonical art-historical boundaries" (16). To look at art history through the lens of materials means to look at the ways in which objects are produced, where they come from, and how they come into the world; "[t]he point is to understand the history of the materials used, to research other contexts in which they were applied, to follow their traces, and most importantly, to find out how, in Derrida's phrase, to 'make the *materiél* laugh'" (Lange-Berndt 20). This process, as Lange-Berndt points out, moves beyond the form/material dichotomy and embraces that which is *not* transcendent, but instead holds the possibility of being messy, excessive, quotidian or even embarrassing (20).

To engage with materials in the creation of an edition of artist's books is risky for a number of reasons. First, the materiality of these books could potentially be viewed as a species of gimmick. Secondly, if any component of the books fail, the rest of the work will consequently suffer; everything must work in tandem. Thirdly, engaging with materiality turns away from the still predominant ideological tradition in aesthetics and centers the human body—in all its messiness and embarrassments—as the site of artistic appreciation. To me, this turn is necessary. As Siebers writes in *Disability Aesthetics,* "[a]t a certain level, objects of art are bodies, and aesthetics is the science of discerning how some bodies make other bodies feel. Art is the active site designed to explore and expand the spectrum of humanity that we will accept among us" (20). To embrace an aesthetic that emphasizes the integration of body and mind means embracing a wide and varied range of human experience. This methodology rejects universality and instead cleaves to that which is contingent and materially specific; it embraces ways of knowing that are squishy, that ooze, that break or bend and that are decidedly non-transcendent.

V. Artists' Books and Institutions

Materials are best understood through proximity and touch. An image of an object provides an idea of the physical entity, but cannot substitute the material specificity of the thing itself. Artists' books that emphasize their material nature—or auratic artists' books as Johanna

Drucker calls them—are not well suited to purely visual renderings or facsimiles or reproductions because part of their meaning is derived from their physical presence. Books in general require manual guidance. A book displayed in a gallery setting may have one page open and hundreds of pages hidden; in this context, it is essentially functioning as an image and not a book. The tactile nature of the book-form means that artists' books—and especially auratic artists books—fit awkwardly into galleries and museums that emphasize the visual nature of objects. Some of Kiefer's books display well in galleries because their visual nature is so intense that the inability to flip through pages is inconsequential. Other artists such as Nancy Spero have worked around this problem by creating book-like objects (instead of books) that are suitable in gallery spaces. For instance, in Spero's *Codex Artaud* (1971), drawings, collage, and text are situated along a large scroll-like piece of paper. These elements exist in a semi-narrative sequence, recalling "Chinese or Japanese scrolls, papyrus and funerary Egyptian paintings, and illuminated manuscripts and tapestries" ("Collection: Codex Artaud XII (1972)"). The form of Spero's work references the book while still effectively existing in a gallery space. They convey a progression of ideas that do not require a human hand to move through the sequence.

It is generally taken for granted that art museums are visual and not tactile spaces. There are reasons for this to be the case that are immediately apparent—art objects tend to be valuable. If every patron who entered a gallery space could touch the objects on display, they would quickly become damaged. Galleries are also visual spaces, however, because the modern history of aesthetics has privileged visuality as the purest sense. Howes and Classen write that in the eighteenth century, Immanuel Kant definitively reimagined contemporary aesthetics when "he drained it of its sensory plenitude and revised its significance to that of a 'disinterested' contemplation and judgement of beauty" (19). In Kant's conception of aesthetics, the visual—

abstracted as much as possible from the body—was conceived of as the highest means of contemplating beauty. Howes and Classen write that,

> both taste and smell were dismissed by Kant as senses that provide only sensations of pleasure or disgust and offer nothing to the contemplative mind. While hearing was praised by Kant for its objectivity, particularly when used to perceive the non-representational sounds of language, it was of little value in the perception of material works of art. Touch, in turn, was always part and parcel of any experience in which it participated and hence could never be disengaged in its perception of objects. The less we are aware of our bodies when we perceive, according to Kant, the freer we are to think and form aesthetic judgements about the thing being perceived. Only sight, the 'noblest' of the senses, seemed to have the detached 'purity' necessary for the task. (20)

The material qualities of objects are usually best understood through haptic engagement. Weight, texture and malleability are all facets of an object that are difficult to determine through sight alone. Wagner comments on this aesthetic history, writing that "the remote senses—hearing and sight—ranked highest in the hierarchy implicit in the European history of the senses because they came closest to knowledge of God. They seemed capable of perceiving the immaterial, whereas physical material, associated with touch, ranked lowest in the scheme of earthly cognition" (27). At this time, Art museums became sacred spaces, at a remove from the sticky temporality of human bodies.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the collections of early museums such as the Ashmolean in Oxford and the British Museum in London were available to be held by visitors (Howes and Classen 18). It was not until the nineteenth century that museums became exclusively visual spaces. As Classen points out in her essay "Touch in the Museum," in the late seventieth and early eightieth centuries, museums were operated much like the private collections on which they were based. Ideally, exploration of the museum was led by a tour guide, usually a curator, who resembled the figure of a host (275). The curator would offer guests objects to touch and explain their significance (275). Classen writes that until the eighteenth-century, touch was thought to be a necessary corrective to the misinterpretations of the other senses, a sense with "access to interior truths of which sight was unaware" (277). In these early museums, the proximity of touch also allowed for an intimate engagement with objects.

In the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, museums began to open their doors to the public; museologists hoped that these institutions would have a civilizing influence (Classen "Museum" 281). To accommodate this shift, the collections needed to be distanced from the human hand (Classen "Museum" 281). While this shift was occurring, a simultaneous shift occurred in the public perception of artefacts and works of art. Classen writes that, "[i]n the 1800s the "masterpieces" and "treasures" of museums came increasingly to be regarded as inviolable. Within the pseudo-sacred space of their museum-temples, artefacts were symbolically positioned outside of time and space, and thus removed from human interaction" ("Museum" 282). Artefacts took on a sacred quality and concerns about rare artefacts being damaged through touch increased significantly. Guests at museum spaces were now trained to accept that first of all they were "less important than the exhibits…Secondly that to touch museum pieces was disrespectful, dirty and damaging. Thirdly that touch had no cognitive or aesthetic uses and thus was of no value in the museum, where only cognitive and aesthetic benefits were sought" (Classen "Museum" 282). It was also around this time that scientific thinkers such as "Charles Darwin, Max Nordau and later Sigmund Freud contributed to the exaltation of sight as the height of civilized, adult perception, and the denigration of touch as the sensory recourse of primitives and children" (Classen "Museum" 283). It should perhaps come as no surprise that contemporarily 'touchable' exhibits are most frequently encountered in children's museums.[3]

This discussion of museums brings me back to artists' books and the reasons why—as Johanna Drucker has pointed out—they have not been sufficiently theorized as artistic objects despite their popularity and pervasiveness. Artists' books work better in archival spaces where people can move through the pages at will; they do not make sense as objects in institutions that privilege visuality over all other senses. This means artists' books are not as widely observed and consequently considered to be less valuable as objects than other modes of artistic production. Considering this history in the production of my own books means that I have had to keep a few things in mind—first of all, that my books are not made to be placed in galleries. If my books were to exist in a gallery space, would want them to be handled, even if they risk being damaged.

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[3] An anecdotal aside: As a child visiting the Art Gallery of Ontario, I can remember an installation that was situated inside a tent. In the tent, there were records and a small bed. My dad encouraged me to go inside the tent and look at the objects. While I'm nearly certain that we were allowed to enter the space, I can remember the apprehensive expressions of other gallery attendees as I picked up a record and turned it around in my hands. Even at that age I understood that this work of art facilitated the breaking of a rule. I also have very fond memories of Claus Oldenburg's gigantic *Floor Burger* (1962), which we called *The Claus Oldenburger.* I loved the sculpture's soft appearance, the fact that it was my height at the time, and its proximity to the floor. I am nearly positive I reached out to touch it when I thought no one was looking.

I do hope to digitize the books that I produce and upload them to a website such as archive.org where the pages can be flipped through virtually as physical objects.

VI. Theorizing Touch

Many of our intellectual traditions distance the production of knowledge from their very real physical location. While a few major philosophers in the 20th and 21st century have theorized touch—most notably Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Luc Nancy and Jacques Derrida—much of this work is produced at a remove from the literal human body. In "Fingerprints: Writing about Touch" Classen writes that, "[a]s regards philosophy, at least, I find that tactility often becomes desensualized and dematerialized as it is removed from its specific social and personal context. Like phantom limbs, however, theses absent domains of scholarship will at times prick us with a spectral presence, for they too form a part of the history of touch" (4). To consider touch and material is still more often conceived of in the abstract, perhaps because of the impossibility of translating an experience of embodiment accurately or comprehensively into linguistic terms. There is also, however, an ideological barrier that exists—as Classen points out, "the sense of touch, like the body in general, has been positioned in opposition to the intellect, and assumed to be merely the subject of mindless pleasures and pains" (5). She notes that this opposition between the hands and the mind is pervasive and can be seen in the class distinctions made between people who "work with their hands and people who work with their heads" (5). It can also be seen in the hierarchy that exists between craft and fine arts, in which craft is associated with the body (also, often with woman's work and domesticity) and Fine Arts are thought to be cerebral and capable of transcending the ordinary.

Only in extreme situations, when our bodies are under siege, do we recognize that our physical selves are our *only* conduit to the outside world, including all intellectual traditions. Classen points out that even writing itself is a physical process and that many of our words for thinking "are tactile in basis" ("Fingerprints" 5). For instance, words like "comprehend, cogitate, conceive, grasp, mull, ponder and ruminate. Someone who is intelligent (who is able to 'pick between') may be described as clever ('cleaving'), smart or sharp, able to penetrate complicated…or hard subject matter" ("Fingerprints" 5). It was during the Enlightenment era that words in English frequently used for thinking and intelligence became predominantly visual (for instance: bright, brilliant, clairvoyant, clear, luminous, perceive and of course the word 'enlighten' itself) ("Fingerprints" 5). While visuality was privileged because of its supposed distance from the body, it is important to emphasize that of course, *all* of our senses—including vision—are reliant on physical processes.

The artificial distance that is placed between our bodies and our perception of experience crumbles quickly under pressure. Physical states such as hunger, sleep deprivation and illness each shift our relationship to the world around us in obvious ways. Anyone who has tried to write with a bad head cold can assert that the mind is reliant on and affected by the body. Yet, as Siebers points out, "it is easier to imagine the body as a garment, vehicle, or burden than as a complex system that defines our humanity, any knowledge that we might possess, and our individual and collective futures" ("Embodiment" 328). Disability in particular, Siebers writes, "gives even greater urgency to the fears and limitations associated with the body, tempting us to believe that the body can be changed as easily as changing clothes" ("Embodiment" 328). This is of course not the case—our lives are difficult to parse from our experience of our bodies.

Siebers has argued that contemporary aesthetics is rooted in corporeal experience. I would add to this that our grasp of language and our ability to communicate is also inextricable from our bodies. This connection has never been more apparent to me than when Tina was diagnosed with cancer. Two nights after Tina was admitted to the hospital—before we knew about the cancer—she underwent a major surgery for which she need to be intubated. The night before her surgery, my brother and I went to talk to her at the hospital. This was the last time that we would hear her voice, a fact that we were unaware of at the time. After the surgery, Tina was conscious but remained intubated. During this time, we had to be creative about how we would communicate. We had a chart of letters that Tina could point to if she wanted to express something specific; otherwise, we asked her questions and she nodded or shook her head. My brother—the more talkative of the two of us—researched hockey games and came prepared with things to say; he conducted whole conversations that could for the most part be sustained by one voice. I've always been better at listening than talking—when we were children, my brother would talk and I would run, jump and crash into things. I've never been more grateful for his ability to fill space with language.

We communicated with Tina in other ways as well. I can remember the expression on her face when my partner and I came to visit after her surgery; she was happy that we were there, her eyes widened and she grinned. My mother says that she rolled her eyes once when my grandfather was brought up. A few weeks after her surgery we agreed to take the tube out of her throat; this put her life at risk but there would not be another opportunity. We wanted so badly to be able to hear her voice again, for her to be able to articulate with clarity how she was feeling and what she knew. I can remember, before the operation, my grandmother holding her hand and talking to her quietly.

After everything, my grandmother searched her answering machine for a recording of Tina’s voice, but couldn’t find one. She wondered *what would Tina say if she could have spoken? Did she understand that she was dying?* We couldn’t know many things precisely. We know that she wanted a popsicle and that we couldn’t give her one. We played music for her to listen to—she wanted to listen to the mix CDs that she had made us for Christmas one year. I could tell that she was glad that we were there; she told me that she was too tired to be bored. During this period of our lives we relied predominantly on touch to understand each other and I’m grateful that we had this.

Tactility will be essential to the creation and reception of my artists’ books. While some philosophers have theorized about touch in the abstract, it is essential to me that the element of touch in these books is entirely literal. Touch lacks the semantic precision of language, but I would argue that it is connective in a different, possibly deeper way. As Classen writes, “[t]ouch is not just a private act. It is a fundamental medium for the expression, experience and contestation of social values and hierarchies. The culture of touch involves all of culture” (“Fingerprints” 1). Furthermore, it is communicative and enables an understanding of ourselves in relation to others and the world we live in. This sentiment is echoed by Leslie who, in her essay “Walter Benjamin: Traces of Craft,” makes note of the philosopher’s descriptions of craft practices and knowledge that is based in tactility. For Benjamin storytelling emerges in the craft milieu, in the space where artisans, engaged in tactile work, listen to journeymen in their workshops (5). There is a rhythm in this exchange that is not just a way of passing the time but “mirrors a mode of processing and reconstituting experience. It imitates how experiences pass into and out of memory” (6). Leslie writes that for Benjamin,

> true experience is conceived as close and practiced knowledge of what is at hand. The

> hand touches, has practical experience of life. Recurrent in Benjamin's delineations of experience are the words tactile, tactics, the tactical, entering German, as it enters English via the Latin *tangere*, touch. To touch the world is to know the world. (6)

In this understanding, authentic knowledge and storytelling are inseparable from practical experience and touch. Benjamin uses the figures of the potter and the weaver to model this comprehension (6). The books that I create should be comprehended in this context; the engagement with the hands in this project is essential to its conception of touch as a form of knowing.

VII. Judith Scott

Lange-Berndt has asserted that "following the materials" leads to an "entangled" encounter with art history that is not easily divisible into "canonical art-historical boundaries" (16). Similarly, Classen has written that the history of touch "continually overflows the boundaries of any scheme of interpretation, just as the sense of touch overflows its own boundaries and merges with other sensory phenomena. Yet the significance and vitality of the subject matter rewards the effort" ("Fingerprints" 3). Many of the world's most prominent artists do not actually make the majority of their own work. Jeff Koons and Damien Hurst, for instance, each employ more than a hundred studio assistants (O'Hagan). Concept, form, and image are of greater importance to these artists than the tactile practice of making an object. In contrast, touch and materiality were integral to the American textile artist Judith Scott's practice. To contemplate what tactility means in the work of Judith Scott allows us to engage with the complex entanglements of her practice and its place in an art historical context. While Scott is not a book artist, her aesthetic sensibility and the way in which she expresses complex ideas through a haptic engagement with materials has greatly informed the production of my own work. Scott is a disabled artist whose practice disrupted assumptions about the construction of genius in art. An examination of Scott's work allows for a re-examination of conventional critical hierarchies that situate form and idea above material engagement; through an examination of her work, I hope to situate my own work within a divergent lineage of artistic practice.

Scott produced large, densely wrapped objects. The affective, haptic power of her sculptures has been considered by theorists such as Sieber and Eve Kosofsky Sedgewick. As Siebers writes, "[h]er work is breathtaking in its originality and possesses disturbing power and sculptural form" ("Aesthetics" 15). Scott has been called an 'outsider artist'—a term coined by the art historian Roger Cardinal in 1972, loosely defined as any artist who is self-taught or produces work outside of the context of the art world. Born in 1943, Scott lost her hearing at a young age because of scarlet fever during her infancy and could not speak; she had down syndrome and was deemed uneducable. At the recommendation of a doctor, she was separated from her family at the age of seven and put into an institution called the Ohio Asylum for the Education of Idiotic and Imbecilic Youth where she was essentially 'warehoused' (Siebers, "Aesthetics" 16). Thirty-five years later, her sister filed to become her guardian and brought her to live in California, where she was enrolled at the Creative Growth Center, a "program in Oakland designed to involve intellectually disabled people with the visual arts" (Siebers, "Aesthetics"16). For the first two years, Scott did not take an interest in the arts programming, until one day she wrapped an object in string. From that time until her death in 2005, Scott worked at an unrelenting pace and produced the body of work for which she is known today.

Scott's story is unique in that she is did not work within the context of a recognized artistic community. She produced work that resonated with her own sensibilities and not according to an art historical lineage. Even still, as Siebers puts it, Scott's sculptural works "invoke comparisons with major artists of the twentieth century and allude to a striking variety of mundane and historical forms, from maps to the works of Alberto Giacometti" ("Aesthetics" 15). The 'found' quality of the objects that she uses recalls the found-art of modernism, popularized by Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades. Frederic Jameson has written that an artist's inclusion in the canon is precipitated by the impact of the artist on the direction of art history (Pollock 87). As the art historian Griselda Pollok writes, "You get to be in that crowd if the appropriate legitimating discourse catches you at the right moment, and locates your work in that teleology" (87). Scott created sculpture presumably without the intention or dream of placing herself within a 'legitimating discourse', though her practice coincidentally came into being at a time when Cardinal and others were taking interest in work produced by 'outsider artists.'

Contemplation of Scott's work has engendered considerable debate about whether work can be considered art if the artist is not aware that they are making art. If Scott cannot speak, read, write, or comment on her own work, can she still be considered a genius?[4] These debates point to a central inadequacy in the way that we define art and artists. As the critic Linda Nochlin famously argued in her 1971essay, "Why Have There Been No Great Woman Artists?," the concept of genius itself is an insufficiently vague and critically lazy way to describe the trajectory of art history. Genius, she writes “is thought of as an atemporal and mysterious power somehow embedded in the person of the ‘Great Artist.’ Such ideas are related to unquestioned, often unconscious, meta-historical premises” (147). As Siebers pointed out in 2010, even contemporarily, the concept of genius is still the premise of many value judgements in art. He writes that “Traditionally, we understand that art originates in genius, but genius is really at a minimum only the name for an intelligence large enough to plan and execute works of art—an intelligence that usually goes by the name of ‘intention.’ Defective or impaired intelligence cannot make art according to this rule” (“Aesthetics” 15). Scott’s work presents a problem to an aesthetic teleology that has valued distance, rational perception and form over matter and touch.

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[4] It is worth noting that Scott *did* comment on her own work, just not in the conventional sense. When a piece was complete, a staff member at the Creative Growth Center would hold it up to her. If she gave the staff member the thumbs up, it was done. Walking away, the staff member would look back at her—if she gave the thumbs-up again, the piece's completion would be verified.

Scott’s inability to read, write, or speak—that is, to communicate with language—has been at the crux of the debate about whether she can be called an artistic genius, or even an artist. The psychoanalytic critic John MacGregor was one of Scott’s first major advocates but has also underscored Scott’s lack of artistic awareness. As Sedgwick points out in *Touching Feeling*, “MacGregor…[is] compulsive in applying to her the language of emphatic negation” (23). Scott was deaf and did not receive a formal education of any kind—it is unlikely that she encountered or was aware of art historical conventions. Macgregor writes, for instance, that “There is not the slightest possibility that Judith envisions the eventual outcome, the final form, of her work” (quoted in Sedgwick 23). Macgregor’s statements seem to assume that an inability to read or speak points to an inability to conceptualize or think in general. Sedgwick notes that “MacGregor also seems to consider that all of Scott’s artistic activity—maybe all of her activity, in fact—must be categorized as “unconscious,” perhaps because she does not use language” (23).

In this mode of thinking, the only valid form of conscious thought and intentional communication is linguistic.

While Scott did not speak in her lifetime, her sculptures are evocative precisely because they are expressive. They suggest touch, protection and a practice of cocooning. Many of Scott's sculptures appear to depict human forms; one sculpture in particular resembles two nearly-identical figures locked in an embrace. This sculpture closely resembles the French-American artist Louise Bourgeois' sculpture "Couple" (2001). Unlike Scott, Bourgeois is known for her skill with language; much analysis of her work has focused on what she herself has said, sometimes, as Mieke Bal has pointed out, at the expense of the "visual nature" of the work itself (180). While on the surface, these two artists could not appear to be more different, an emphasis on touch and materiality instead of language allows for art historical boundaries to dissolve and similarities between their respective practices to emerge. Like Scott, Bourgeois' sculptures frequently probe the complexities of touch and the desire for contact. Both artists produce work that resonates on a deep, extra-lingual level that could easily be overlooked if the legitimacy of the haptic is disregarded.

Touch has not been considered a valid cognitive tool for much of Western history (Classen "Sensing" 3). In *Ways of Sensing,* Classen quotes Stewart Rapalje who wrote in 1887 that a person born blind and deaf was "supposed incapable of any understanding, as wanting all those senses which furnish the human mind with ideas'" (quoted in Classen 3). This, of course, we now know to be incorrect. Classen provides the example of Helen Keller who demonstrated that "it is possible to experience a socially and symbolically-meaningful world through touch, smell and taste alone and to communicate and think using tactile sign language" (3). As a child, assumptions were made about Scott's intellectual abilities based on her deafness and the fact that she could not speak. For this, she was essentially punished—placed in an institution away from the care of her family, and hidden from view. In this institution, she was deprived of touch and was not allowed any personal possessions. It is assumed by her care-givers that this deprivation was one of the motivators for her practice. (Siebers "Aesthetics" 16). In "Fingerprints: Writing About Touch," Classen points out that,

> The inability to touch the subject matter of the images that surround us, even though these have a tremendous impact on our lives, produces a sense of alienation, the feeling of being out of touch with one's society, one's environment, and one's cosmos—an isolated fragment in an indifferent universe. Perhaps this explains in part the contemporary practice of cocooning, the creation of a safe, enclosed microcosm in which comfort compensates both for the seeming hostility and the apparent indifference of the outside world. (5)

Classen could easily be describing Scott's practice in her analysis. At the Centre for Creative Growth, Scott demonstrated a need to work continually, sometimes until her fingers were raw. While she was not able to articulate her motivations during her lifetime, it is reasonable to imagine that her sculptures express a need to bind, cocoon, and protect—a? desire for haptic engagement that resonates with her early experiences of deprivation. In this context, her sculptures appear to be complex tactile expressions of her experience, not arbitrary forms.

In *Touching Feeling,* Eve Sedgwick writes that an image of Scott with one of her sculptures compels her as writer and theorist (22). Sedgwick argues that "the obvious fullness of her aesthetic consciousness, her stubbornly confident access to autotelic production, her artist's ability to continue asking new, troubling questions of her materials that will be difficult and satisfying for them to answer—these privileges seem to radiate at some angle that is orthogonal to the axis of disability" (24). Like Sedgwick, I admire Scott's confidence and engagement with materials, although I object to the idea that Scott's artistic abilities exist in opposition to her apparent placement "on the axis of disability" (24). To acknowledge the role that disability has played in establishing Scott's talent is to recognize the value of divergent perspectives. Disability forces us to acknowledge that there is no universal or singularly legitimate perspective or way to produce artwork. In Scott's practice, touch is a literal (not figurative or metaphorical) site of knowledge production that does not hinge on language. If we are to look at art history from the entangled perspective advocated by Lange-Berndt and Classen—a perspective that is more attuned to materials than philosophical traditions—then non-conventional lineages emerge. My intention has been to produce work in a lineage of my own choosing that is attuned to the specifics of materiality and that includes artists whose perspectives and practices trouble conventional wisdom about genius, intelligence, and legitimacy.

An unconventional lineage is important to me in part because artists' books—especially the kind of auratic artist's books that I have produced—do not, as Drucker has pointed out, fit within a clearly defined historical trajectory. Their haptic nature is antithetical to the mode of artistic production intended for predominantly visual galleries and museums. A self-chosen lineage that raises questions about who has authority and why also serves the biographical underpinnings of these books. My grandfather—whose absence is a break in our family tree—is a professor of geology at the University of Toronto; as a very young person I was fascinated by the authority of his role. A few years ago, he wrote a letter to his grandchildren that he gave to my grandmother, who gave it to my mother, who did not give it to us. She told us that we could read it if we wanted to, but there was nothing in it for us; it was self-indulgent, a reflection on his own life. I can remember visiting him at the university with my brother when we were small children. He gave us interesting rocks: zebra striped sediment, translucent crystals and shining opaque minerals. As a teenager, I sat in the dark and rotated through a deck of slides that he shot on a Leica camera during a research trip to Iceland. In my early twenties, I googled him and learned that he had written a book called *Truth and Beauty in Thermodynamics*. I've left his book unread and his letter unopened—I've trusted instead in the authority that my mother and my grandmother have demonstrated. I'm sure that he knows about thermodynamics, but of what relevance is that to me? I trust my mother when she says, *you can read his letter if you want to, but there's nothing in it for you.* I trust what I've learned from Tina and remember my grandmother's words: *he didn't really know her.*

Following the materials and paying close attention to artists and practitioners who deviate from conventional forms of knowledge production is a way of observing structures of authority from a different angle. It is not my intention to pick at established authority for the simple purpose of contradiction, but instead to investigate how alternative forms of thinking might trouble the logic of structures and practices that are taken for granted. Careful thought about disability implies the dismantling of perspectives that have not historically accommodated or considered those who exist outside the scope of normalcy. It appears that many of the systems of authority that I have taken for granted were not constructed to accommodate me—or Tina, or my grandmother, or Judith Scott. Attention to artists such as Scott, whose work leans on haptic forms of knowledge production, allows for the reassessment of otherwise fixed orthodoxies.

My books include language, but they attempt to engage with knowledge that is extra-lingual. The books are hand-bound. I think of the process of binding in relation to the way that Scott bound her sculptures: as a kind of protective measure that consolidates disparate objects, thoughts, and materials into a whole. The process of binding the books is analogous to the pulling together of memories or points of reference from Tina's life. Like a spider making its web, or Penelope at her loom, it is a memory work, and the process of making is an active form of remembering. This process is not intended to culminate in the formation a single stable work that transcends the material world, but to bind materials into a work that is continually in flux; these books are objects that are in and of the world, made by conversation and careful craft, to be passed from hand to hand.

VIII. Vija Celmins

The Contemporary American artist Vija Celmins produces work that—like Scott's—emphasizes physical presence and engages with materials in a way that is explicitly non-transcendent. She is best known for her realistic drawings and prints that flatten spaces of depth such as the night sky or the ocean. In a catalogue for a 1992 retrospective of her work, the art critic Dave Hickey wrote that Celmins' "has always made a virtue of displacement and has never found a comfortable niche within the art world's sedentary fiefdoms of style and territory… It always seems to have just arrived from someplace else… to have a kind of stateless foreign accent" (quoted in Relyea 54). Lane Relyea argues that to conceive of Celmins' work as 'displaced' or 'foreign' serves only to "privatize her stylistic independence, to cocoon her art and unnecessarily cut it off from history" (54). Celmins, he writes, has "three strikes against her"—first of all, at the time of her first solo show in 1966 the American art world was in the midst of an identity crisis in which the perception was widely held that—to quote the critic Michael Fried—"no more than an infinitesimal fraction of the art produced in our time matters at all" (quoted in Relyea 54). Secondly, Relyea argues, she "spent her formative years as an artist in Los Angeles, and thus suffered the dominant New York chauvinism that dismisses everything outside its zip-codes as ahistorical, idiosyncratic, provincial and finally without consequence" (54). Finally, Celmins is a woman artist and thus her work was not, according to Relyea, widely perceived as a "decisive contributor to public debates and cultural advances but as a private, inward-turned expression of timeless feminine sensibility" (55). A closer look at Celmins' work indicates that it is *not* ahistorical, 'merely' private, or timelessly feminine in character. It is more advantageous to look at her work as she herself describes it—in terms of attention, labour, and materiality.

Celmins is best known for her paintings of flattened photorealistic surfaces such as the ocean, a spider's web or the night sky, but she considers herself to be a builder (Rippner 9). Her drawings appear diffused of meaning; there is very little to grasp onto—no metaphorical or narrative content. In an interview, Celmins has stated that "I believe if there is any meaning in art it resides in the physical presence of a work" (quoted in Rippner 132). Celmins paints with minute attention to detail by building up a surface, sanding it down and then painting it over again. Her slow process creates a field of vision that is intended to draw the viewer in and then push the viewer out again. The critic Briony Fer argues that Celmins' process "effects a kind of pure touch that is detached from trace or texture…Whilst it might empty the work of expressive gesture as it has normally been understood, touch erupts on this surface as if it were the raw unmediated material of this dry world" (107). While Celmins often draws vast, unknowable expanses—such as the ocean or the night sky—her work flattens these spaces into textural surfaces. Fer writes of Celmins' night sky paintings that her "sense of the infinite is absolutely not transcendental or sublime but material and concrete…Celmins offers us a spectacular reversal: a vast nebulosus sky becomes the material world of a drawing" (102). Through a time consuming labour necessitating care and attention, Celmins builds images that are distant from the human mind but still distinctly human.

In 2005, Celmins created an artist's book with the essayist Elliot Weinberger entitled *The Stars* for the MoMA in New York. Celmins designed and produced three etchings for this book. The cover of the book itself is an etching inspired by the "worn binding of an early-twentieth century Japanese book" ("Vija Celmins"). In these works, Celmins recreates an existing object—in this case, the cover of a book that has been damaged by time—through a labored process involving time and care so that the texture of the facsimile is nearly identical to the original yet has its own material quality. Inside the book, Celmins has produced two inverse etchings of stars in the night sky. The final etching at the back of the book resembles a small screen with holes in it, or another image of the night sky, divided by a grid. To accompany Celmins etchings, Weinberger compiled a found poem from "a catalogue of descriptions of the stars drawn from around the world, and from an array of historical, literary, and anthropological sources" ("Vija Celmins"). As the catalogue description of the work for the MoMa reads, "This mythopoetic charting of the night sky evokes the vastness of the human imagination's response to a space itself vast and unknowable" ("Vija Celmins"). The text is translated into Arabic by Sianan Antoon, Chinese by Bei Dao, Hindi by Diddarth Chowdhury, Japanese by Hiroaki Sato and Maori by Piripi Walker. Weinberger's text and its translations are typeset and hand-printed. It is highly unlikely that any single person could read each of the book's translations; the type itself becomes textural, yet there is an understanding that each of the translations—while inaccessible to some—are accessible to someone else. As described by the MoMA's online catalogue

> the translations undo the familiarity of the written word, becoming visual experiences to complement the etchings. In addition, these varying scripts, equivalent in meaning yet at

> the same time mutually unintelligible, both embody language and escape its orbit, harmonizing in this way too with Celmins's views of the stars. ("Vija Celmins")

These books ask something different from the reader than merely to read the text; to access the work implies a space of encounter and the willingness to let go of a reliance on semantic intelligibility as the sole form of knowledge production or aesthetic appreciation.

I appreciate that *The Stars* has been constructed with the assistance of so many hands and voices. The translations in the book sit side by side as distinct variations. No single reader is likely to be able to read every translation and so some of the translations inevitably exist as marks on a page—letter-forms that contain meaning but are not immediately accessible. Similarly, the text in my own books is intended to be read, but also to be observed aesthetically. I have written the text in my own idiosyncratic scrawl and have included text written by other hands. Like Celmins' practice of building a work of art through continual mark-making, the images and text in these books are intended to be visual but also indicative of touch. The physical nature of these books as objects is intended to circumvent conventional forms of biography to convey a narrative about my aunt that could not be accomplished through written words alone.

IX. Making Artist's Books for Tina

In Disability Aesthetics, Siebers writes that, "[w]e are capable of believing at once that the body does not matter and that it should be perfected. We believe at once that history charts the radical finitude of human life but that the future promises radical infinitude. That we embrace these contradictions without interrogating them reveals that our thinking is steeped in ideology" (317). I chose to create a series of artist's books in order to emphasize the embodied process by which narrative comes into being and is received. In an art-historical tradition that has emphasized form over matter, the masculine over the feminine and the theoretical over the physical my intent has been to return to touch as way of knowing that interrupts these hierarchical binaries. To embrace materials means to accept imperfection and mutability—to accept the reality of our bodies as imperfect, varied and specific. It means making room for a narrative about my aunt as my family knew her, not who she could have been had she been able-bodied. Through the creation of these books I have attempted to bind fragments of an ongoing dialogue into material objects that are themselves imperfect, though made with care.

X. Conclusion

My mother tells me that my grandmother worried that no one would come to Tina's funeral. My grandmother does not usually express emotion openly. Over the phone, she talks to my mother about the price of romaine lettuce or the squirrels that are eating her tulips. But I know that she does not want Tina to be forgotten. She brings her up in small details—the waiter in Italy who complemented Tina's Italian accent; the way that Tina's cat Sasha became visibly lonelier when she was gone; the work-out mix CDs Tina made for us one Christmas; the story that she translated that won an award. Tina's funeral *was* well attended. There were many people who I'd never met before. The most remarkable people who I met were from Tina's fitness center, a center designed for people with disabilities. The community that Tina was a part of there was evident, but the center itself had problems—for instance, the club's members were prohibited from playing wheelchair basket-ball because of an administrative fear of rising insurance prices. There was one person, Tina's friend Sam, who she corresponded with over email. He was the person that she confided in and he knew about all of us.

My grandmother continues without Tina. This week she's fallen playing tennis, so my partner and I bring her pizza and a box of pastries. She has stitches on her nose and purple bruises below her eyes and she greets us wearing big Bob Dylan sunglasses that she says were once my mother's. She's grinning—*the fall didn't hurt too much* she says; it just looks bad. She's been reading William Faulkner's *A Light in August,* though she's looking forward to being done with it. *It's a very convoluted novel* she says, a*nd it's hard to read when I'm wearing the glasses.* I am perplexed at first—does she wear her dark glasses when she's sitting at home? Then I realize that she's been reading at the library, where she has her book club meetings. I imagine her there in her big dark glasses reading a novel that she is not finding enjoyable but that she needs to see through to the end. At dinner, Tina drifts in and out of the conversation. Her wheelchair sits in the corner of the dining room, below the shelf of colourful glass. *Tina didn't read that much for pleasure, did she?* I ask my grandmother. *No, she didn't.* I persist, *but she loved language.* My grandmother explains to me that she did, but she had difficulty focusing. *It wasn't easy for her…she had physical problems. I mean, with her attention. But she read from her stack of newspapers everyday.* My Grandmother tells me that Tina always read the sports section first, then the obituaries. *Why?* I ask, and my grandmother takes some time to think. *They're people's lives,* she says. I imagine Tina attending to a collection of lives tucked away at the back of a newspaper. When Tina passed, we wrote one for her—I had forgotten this, but it comes back clearly now. It had been so important to my Grandmother then, her most persistent request. *Tina loved them,* she said, and so we wrote one for Tina.

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