

to put a pin in a cloud

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Abstract

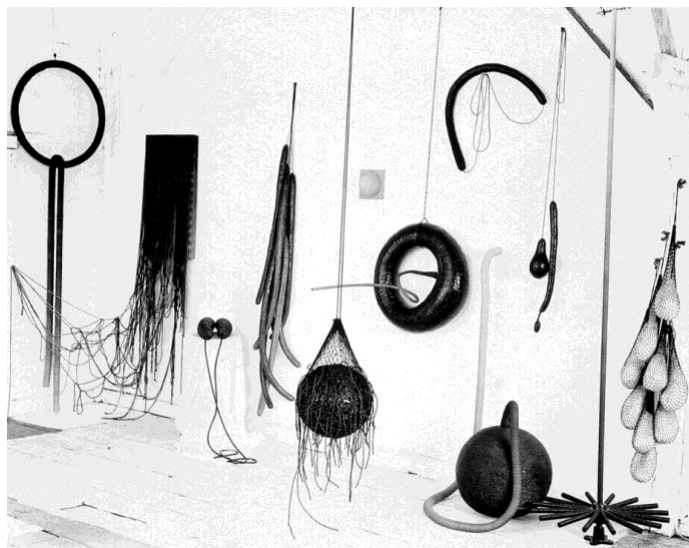
This thesis is a map of the internal logic of my sculptural practice, as explored through associative memory, poetry, visual reference and metaphor. The intent of this exploration is not to draw an overarching conclusion from the intersection of the work I have collected and created, but to illustrate the variety of collection, adaptation and interpretation processes in my practice. This thesis is intended as a poetic contribution to the discussion of soft, non-concrete logic and its relationship to established processes of making meaning through material in sculpture. This text is intended to be read as an attempt to describe what cannot be fully shown through text, image or object alone. It is a documentation of in between spaces in perception, the recollection of core memories and the impact that has on the choices that are made in artistic creation. I attempt to show here that material metaphor, textile craft processes and the use of evocative poetic language is a valuable and effective method of communicating sculptural concerns in a fine arts context.

Ch. 1

the chunk

When I think of an ideal sculpture that I would have in my oeuvre someday, something I would be truly proud to have brought into the world, this empty space I project into forms the beginning of my obsession with what I now call "the chunk."

This idea exists as a point of density, a concentration of information which acts to ground chaos by a point. It's something I only recently noticed that I had been creating in my own work as well as collecting for inspiration from other artists. One of my core art idols, Eva Hesse, worked with this chunky form often, a prime example being the tendrils falling from a dense dark center in her piece *Vertiginous Detour* from 1966, pictured in the photo at right. Years ago, I was gifted a copy of Lucy Lippard's book¹ on Eva Hesse and photocopied a page from it that showed a group of works arranged along one wall in her studio. This would live on my own studio wall in America until my move over to Belgium.



Studio View, 1965-1966. Photo: Gretchen Lambert



Eva Hesse, *Untitled*, 1966. Enamel Paint and String over Papier-mâché with Elastic Cord. 85 x 65.9 x 6.4 cm.

You can see several of my favorite pieces in this photo, including *Vertiginous Detour* hanging in the center-bottom. Moving upwards in the photo, the arc above the cord-wrapped inner tube shape, is an untitled piece from 1966 which is hung in a position that differs from its more widely circulated photo (pictured at left). This is another one from Lippard's book which has been burned into my memory. The fact that many of these pieces have been presented in other photographs hung in alternate ways, or even being touched, manipulated, cared for, is an idea that I've tried to embrace as much as I can in my own practice- that those things can be kept in flux, the piece can be kept variable and thus available for continual re-interpretation, re-engagement with the original idea.

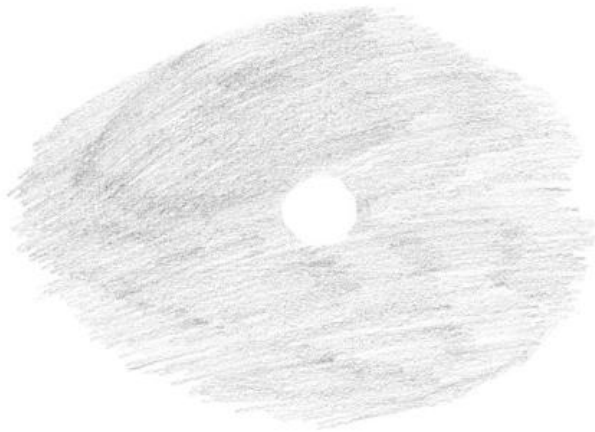
I begin with these photos because they are very personally precious in terms of my conception of the chunk in its variable meanings. This photo at left is a deep anchor point in my visual memory. I have had a persistent feeling of being misunderstood artistically, sometimes like my thoughts and interests are completely incomprehensible to anyone but myself, so then the act of looking at this photo, having it etched onto my core, is a way for me to link myself back to the outer world in a concrete form. Hesse made works that I understood on a grounded, visceral level. Her method of using materials retains an essential tactility, communicates the movement of the hand that worked with them as much as the motion of the method she used to turn them into these sculptures. For me, these photos represent the fact that communication of those abstract internal ideas and impulses and undulations *is possible*. If I can feel something so strongly through looking at this studio photo from so long ago, then I can in turn do that for someone else feeling as impossible-to-understand as I have.

¹ Lippard, Lucy. *Eva Hesse*. New York University Press, 1976. Reprint ed., Da Capo Press, 1992.

The chunk is like a core memory. It is a powerful vessel, a fertile metaphor, a kind of holographic entry point² that can open up a well of feeling and relation and still the whirlpool that surrounds it, centers it. I write poetry as a component of my visual practice, which usually expresses these connections that are made in a subconscious way— I'm mentioning this because this concept of swirling around a point in order to define it relates to a poem that I wrote several years ago, a section of which goes—

at whatmoment is that which WHAT is on my face
become COMES to become TO BE attached to me
livesinmy muscles
find to define how try to define
edge along its sides to find it defined
a period connotes that itself

The idea of having to *edge along its sides to find it defined*, of only being able to find definition through peripheral demarcation is recurrent in my textual work, something I feel that my texts have the power to communicate more explicitly, or maybe more *concretely* than in my visual work (there's a degree of irony there). I have some previous comics work, an excerpt shown below, which I feel succeeds with its dual visual/textual communication, but I've been looking for ways to transfer this more fully into visual, sculptural work. Truly, no disrespect to comics, but I need to feel something in my hands. Once a thought turns physical, I feel as though I can assess it more objectively, see how it works into other patterns I act out.



a hole is only a hole if something surrounds it

Emily Hutchings, excerpt from *Boring Comics*. 1st ed., Bred Press, 2015.
Text reads: "a hole is only a hole if something surrounds it"

In this vein of thought, then, like Hesse, I enjoy the "compulsive work"³ which working with fibrous textile material requires. Wrapping, knotting, knitting, twisting: these are the action components of what I do to work towards the objects that result. That handwork is the same marking of the periphery to define a central point- I can only come to know the finished object, and the thought it contains, by working meticulously to stipple and shade every part of it until the essence of the thought comes into focus, finally. This is why I have trouble sometimes knowing exactly what a piece is *about* exactly while I am working through it. I follow my compulsions as a rule, and only after exiting the maze through the thread that guides me out, am I able to receive the birds-eye view which can allow me to know what I have just done.

This conception of the chunk, the centerpoint of that cloud of maze-navigation, is still becoming known to me, and I cannot rush it to its conclusion. If it is any indication of the time span on which the processing of these ideas operates, the poem excerpt and illustration here are from 2016 and 2015, respectively. I must wait for the grass to grow at its own pace.

² Andy Yang borrows this term from Thomas Kasulis in his book, *Shinto: The Way Home* in the essay *An Egg as New Media: Holographic Entry Points of Learning*, saying that when we consider an egg as a holographic piece of media, "it is a medium of its own existence as well as for the ecology of other objects, activities, histories, and possibilities that connect the matrix of mental and material associations that it (the egg) can evoke."

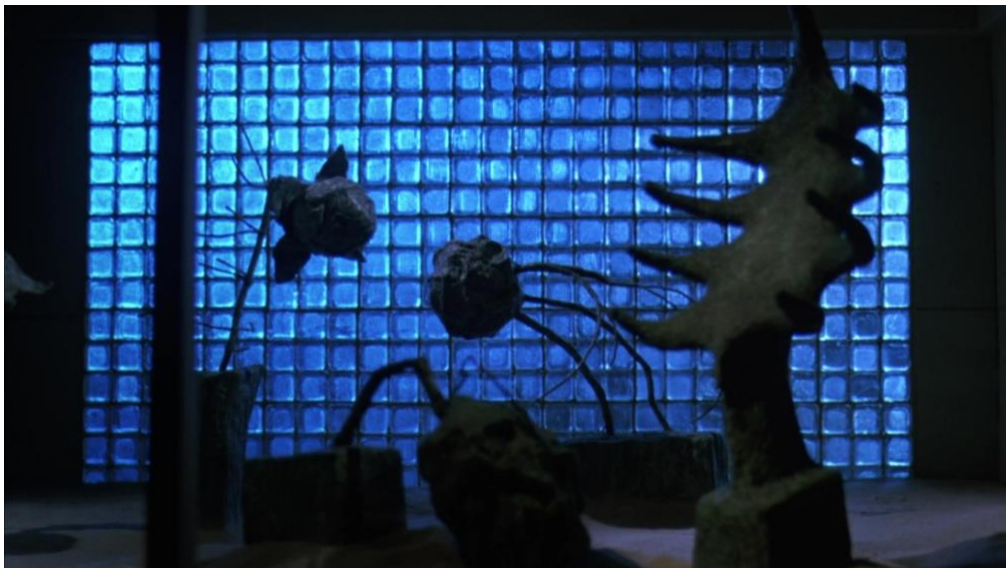
³ Eva Hesse, From a letter to Rosie Goldman, December 14, 1964. from *File Note 47: Eva Hesse*, Camden Art Centre, 2009.

There is a visceral, material *safety* in the presence of the concrete chunk that I can hold in my hand and divorce from the wildness⁴ of conscious thought while I roll around in the sensory experience it relays. This will, I believe, become more apparent as this text goes on and I try to define the term from its peripheral concepts. However, I find it useful to show and describe some objects and artworks here which I consider to be chunky, both relating to the material and the personal sensory and emotional memories I attach to them.



A Mermaid's Purse

This is a type of shark egg case, colloquially referred to in my family and childhood as a "Mermaid's Purse." The texture is vastly different when wet and when dry. Wet, it has a gelatinous feel to it, similar to hydrated seaweed. Since it is found washed up on beaches, that texture is normally paired with the grainy feeling of sand clinging to its wetness and half-dried edges, crusty and papery. Once dried, it is leathery and smooth with distinct ridges. It's very fragile and inflexible when dry, and its bloated center pouch has a hollow and very lightweight feel, in contrast to the hard and sharp tendrils. These tendrils are as essential to my conception of the chunk as the volume in the center, which I will expand on in chapter two.



Beetlejuice, dir. Tim Burton, 1988.

⁴ Anne Hamilton talks about the viewer's experience of the relationship between the undulation of swaths of fabric and an actual physical anchorpoint, a swing, using the language "wild and safe" in her [Art 21 segment](#) from 2013 on *the event of a thread* (2012), an installation at New York's Park Avenue Armory. This isn't necessarily a reference, but I love this piece.

The sculptures in Tim Burton's *Beetlejuice* from 1988 have been a part of my conception of "sculpture" since the beginning of my life. I don't know if I had encountered the idea of sculpture as a medium before seeing this movie as a very young child, and I have always associated it with this kind of spooky, creepy style of cast bronze, rebar and concrete. In the movie, the sculptures become possessed by ghosts and are shown in stop-motion animation, chasing and physically restraining the house's inhabitants. The tendril-tentacle shape of the Mermaid's Purse is repeated in the sculpture on the far right, the overall form of which is the most permanent in my memory. Remembering the stop-motion animation of these sculptures in the movie makes me realize a formal association I have paired with it: I went to medieval-themed renaissance fairs every summer as a kid, where I would see people creating pulled sugar sculpture lollipops in the shape of dragons and dolphins. That action, then, of tweezers stabbing into a chunk and pulling a putty-like substance out, extending it into forms that look like the triangular fin-claws above, is one that I have permanently associated with the chunk and its tendrils.



Lynn Chadwick, *Lion (Maquette)*, 1961. Bronze. 104.1cm.

Years ago, in attempting to find out who the artist of the *Beetlejuice* sculptures was, I was led via search engine image results to learn of the sculptures of Lynn Chadwick. I was working on a curatorial project at the time which had to do with screening a series of movies that related to my and my community's core memories and looked at the formation of identity and visual concepts as absorbed by our child selves through those early film memories. Lynn Chadwick was not the artist of the movie's sculptures, but his style was evocative of the same feeling I got from remembering them. The flipper-claw-tendrils-crutch supports and the weight of the *chunk* of what rested on them felt to me like how Eva Hesse's pieces activated the material they were made of. They are both defined by the concretizing processing that made this hyper-solid form in cast bronze and plaster-hardened iron filings, and yet still felt elastic and manipulable to my eye, as though it was one iteration, one frozen moment of a concept that could have been expressed in many ways.



Lynn Chadwick, *Conjunction*, 1953. Iron and Plaster. 42 x 32 x 22cm.

Ch. 2

the spindles, the crutches and the tendrils

This part is play. In flux. Manipulable. Amplified through multiplicity. Bolstered by accumulation.

The spindle is a tapering off the material which the chunk contains, as well as a leading *to* that form. In textile language, a spindle is the axel which spins to provide twist to refine the cloud of combed fiber into a thread, string or yarn. To *spin* is to exert a hand's control on the fiber, to manipulate it into a workable building block of most other iterations of fiber handcraft. As author Claire Pajaczkowska writes,

"Learning [to spin] ... involves using the hands in a gesture in which the amplification of the grasping reflex becomes a hyperbole of control. The use of the hands to exert pressure in order to exercise mastery through the deformation or manipulation of innate material properties to bestow utility on the maker carries connotations of the manipulation and the cleverness, calculation or craftiness attributed to manual dexterity."⁵

The spindle is the axis—the *point*—on which this material manipulation occurs; It is a spike which guides the transformation, through hands, of that cloud into a concentrated line. The line then can be knotted, knitted or otherwise twisted and compressed in more meticulous ways.

That axis, in the language of spinning thread, is called the "drafting triangle" and is defined as such by its tapered shape. That concentration, density, at the point of that triangle, is where my own working concept of the spindle, the crutch and the tendril, connects to the chunk. The contrast in density between a string and the cloud of wool that creates it is what I am drawn to in this pairing of concepts, pairing of forms. The fact that the cloud can coagulate into this other form by way of compression, pushing, squeezing— that this density can be expanded again, unspun, re-formed— this feels to me as essential of an action to examine conceptually in sculpture as the act of breathing to the continuity of thought.

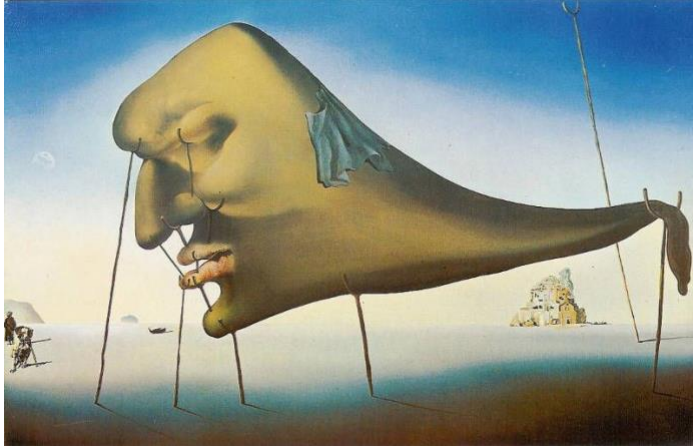
The compression of material into a kind of thin, reaching pedestal, a crutch for something chunky, blobular, abstract— this is something that I've been using as a metaphorical concept for explaining certain difficult-to-describe feelings and impulses and reasonings. It's very easy to understand that I'm talking about some emotion that's very chaotic and powerful, uncontrollable but restrained in some way, just within grasp, if I bring my hand up and tense my fingers in a claw formation, comparing the way I feel to *The Eye of Sauron*, of all things. It's an immediate conceptual transfer that helps to impart the intensity of action in that axis.



The Lord Of The Rings: The Return of The King, dir. Peter Jackson, 2003.

⁵ Claire Pajaczkowska, *Making Known: The Textiles Toolbox— Psychoanalysis of Nine Types of Textile Thinking*. pp. 84-85, from *The Handbook of Textile Culture*, Edited by Janis Jeffries, Diana Wood Conroy and Hazel Clark. *Bloomsbury Academic*, 2016.

I see something similar in Salvador Dalí's crutches, Lego hand-like, cupping the blob in *Le Sommeil (Sleep)*. While the crutch in Dalí's language can be interpreted with a humorous edge, as a fragile or insecure propping up of one's idea of reality or of the physical body in decline, I am not as interested in assigning it that kind of moral judgement, or any at all. As I see it, the axis of the crutch bears the weight of the abstract, offering itself as a simple support structure to aid in the propping up of what would crumple without the structure it gives. For my own interpretation of the crutch and the spindles within my language, I suppose I see it as more of the shape of the hand in a claw-like holding form, as a **grasping container** for something that lacks permanent and static form (if not materially, then conceptually.)



Salvador Dalí, *Le Sommeil (Sleep)*, 1937. Oil on Canvas. 51 x 78 cm.

With the idea of a grasping container in mind, I think of my recent sculpture *you make the rules, you make the rules* (pictured below) in which I have used the same material— wool—in the actions of compression and expansion to form an open place for holding in the suspended net and a tightly compacted, kind of pathetic anchor in the rope at its base. The steel structure which holds both textile elements has a strange relationship to the textiles that is hard to show in a photo due to the fact that when any light at all is aimed at it, you can only barely see the outline of the draping net which is the purpose for the vertical crutches' orientation. Past this crutch-holding-an-abstraction relationship, it

fractures into another level further when you are able to focus on the net itself. Each intersection of the grid is a hand-knotted compression of the material, holding the delicate threads in their ordered arrangement, like a fist attempting to keep some slippery string together. It comes together like it was hand-drawn, slightly imperfect and not fully perpendicular, but carefully and systematically arranged. This, to me, is the crutch-within-a-crutch, holding as many chunks as there are squirmy little knots, all in service of the *idea*, the absence of the chunk which could be held in the pedestal that the net creates in its limp, draping arms.



Emily Hutchings, *you make the rules, you make the rules*, 2023. Wool and Steel. 105 x 105 x 76 cm.

I'm still working through fleshing out this concept, (and knowing me, it will take years to get to the point), but I'll highlight some of my thoughts on it that can be examined through this piece.

you make the rules, you make the rules is a piece which capitalizes on textile's contrasting natural abilities- In the net, to drape and imply the gentle cradling of some object or body while keeping the purpose, the object, that is to be held in this shape, undefined. In the rope, the same wool material has been compressed into something meant to be tied, restraining, yet without a clear objective or even a form which would be available for that purpose. It's not actually a 'good' rope, in that you can't use it to tie anything with. The net isn't a 'good' net, either, since it's too delicate to hold anything, and has a scale which is neither practical for a decorative or useful function.

I like to work in this space between utility and futility. Here, I've tried to copy the material language of functional textile objects and twist it to bypass the presuppositions we have about the familiar materials that form them. I think a part of it for me is that to show these materials on the edge of usefulness breaks them out of being able to be a part of the less-visible background, and requires the viewer to do some mental gymnastics, trying to square away something that looks like it's made for use, but has a level of detail in its creation that would indicate an elevation above being a part of the everyday.

This aesthetic of uncanny similarity to both function and nonfunction is something that I took inspiration from through Charles Ray, in his early ink works that utilize the kind of subtle cleverness I hope to employ in my own work. Among the more minimalist ink pieces of this time, and acting as an indicator towards his future work, which walks the line between complete realism and uncanny valley simulacrum, is this piece, *Viral Research*, from 1986. Its mechanism, the tube connecting all of the vessels on the table, and the ink they contain, is simple to understand once you see how it works, and it's a clever result. Through my lens of spindle-chunk research, this piece activates a whole cascade of thought related to the vessels-and-tubes-as-crutch and questions how to expand the chunk as a concept— water always finds its own level, is formless until given a holding vessel.



Charles Ray, *Viral Research*, 1986. Plexiglass, Steel, Ink. 81 x 135 x 91 cm.

Ch. 3

writing as a generative method
and
the winding path of logic that leads me through

i try to think in a straight line.

when i'm trying to communicate, i move deliberately through explanations, carefully steering around ideas until i'm able to see the thread at the end of the ball of yarn and grab it, yank it towards me so that i may display it to the crowd like a severed head: "here! all that buildup, those words i choose deliberately, carefully, consciously- the rhythm of those steps allowed me to spin in the same direction as the thought, so i can capture this image for you, here!" Like following a ballerina with a camera, trying to match their speed to get the clear image to make itself available to you- this is how i try to explain things.

i hit upon a movement, a feeling which matches the intensity of that thing that i'm trying to shake loose out of myself, persistent in my attack on the tree that holds it- until its momentum slip-severs itself from stem, falling with a dull thud of, "oh, that's how it is. that gets it."

I look at that metaphor, that fallen fruit, from an arms length distance, and think, are there other ways—apart from what conjured it— in which this imaginary visual can hit on the connected parts of this feeling?
per example:

If a fruit is a fleshy protector for the seed,	(and if you think of the seed as a baby)
then if the seed consumed the flesh	(if something attached to seed logic happens)
is that then that the baby has eaten its mother	(is it then that baby logic applies to seed logic?)

Another, one that I've used recently, with more specificity:

If I am consistently drawing (or am drawn to) lots of sketches or representations of bowls, holes, concave structures,

(I look for a pattern in what pulls me in, gravitationally)

I try to look at that a little deeper:

what feeling do i associate with that shape? what defines this shape, to me? and what images do i connect with a pure (ideal/platonic) example of this kind of shape?

extracted from this, i get:

- a resting hand, gently laid on the table with fingertips up, slightly curled
- density at the base, thinning planes which create a kind of rim at the top
 - prince rupert's drops (tighttight base/spindly tentacle opposite)
- a hairy mass, condensed in the center with tendrils/strands sticking out
- rest/to be *at rest*, fetal position, lower back at the base and limbs curled up

these descriptions then lead me to:

"Ok. so, if a bowl, abstracted as 'a hole', has these properties- then, what actions would you actually take towards a bowl, a hole in the real world? It, as an object, works as what? Does what function?"
you'd fill it. permanently, or temporarily. It acts as transportation for the purpose of consumption. It is *a place to put things*. Or it's a decorative object- designed to be an extension of what fills it, an elaboration on the form of what is intended to complete it as an object, the living, shift-able matter which will fill the negative space and then leave its containment.

I also look at the way I feel: I find a bowl a comforting object because of the way that it makes my hands move around it, cradling its shape. The physical action that it *makes me do* because of *its shape* is one that ends up as comforting. It is in this vein that I try to let myself be a little loose, act human, bumble around and then look as close as I can at how I act when I am not actively analyzing what I'm doing. I ask, how do I use the tools which become a part of my body in the moment?

All of the above is expressed through work in my notebooks and sketchbooks- I work visually, sketching, alongside poetry and dictionary definitions, trying to iterate, improvise, until I get to the core of what interests me about any form or concept that I'm working on understanding more. Textually, I tend to work by way of following etymological tangents, following what looks the least clear and trying to understand a full picture of the words that have grabbed me. Practically, this works as trying to glean deeper meaning from the little differences in definitions that get to the *feeling* of the word, to dig to find out why that word is the word to be used instead of any other. I like to look at the meaning in words that stay very sticky in my memory. Why did they use that word? And what can that tell me about what they meant, or is it the word that keeps me stuck to that idea it was used to express?

I'll have lots of side references and visual or poetic anchor points coming through this method, as well- I've always been drawn to the language of the lyrics in my favorite music, and my favorite artists often use highly visual language in their songs. Fiona Apple's song *Window* comes to mind- I couple it mentally with Pipilotti Rist's *Ever is Over All*, for the obvious association of smashing windows, but also for the rhythm of each of these pieces, and the cathartic emotional intent of the smashing of windows that runs alongside them. Apple's song goes back and forth between a pleasant rhythmic section where she describes the window she is looking through and the feelings surrounding her having to look through it to see the outside world, and then, a bombastic, smashing interlude singing, "I had to break the window, it just had to be, it was in my way" before returning to that strolling pace of analysis. Rist's video piece has the same back-and-forth pace, with a song of her humming paired with the video's slow-motion walk, interrupted by a loud sound of smashing glass as the subject in the video smashes car windows. The result of this double reference in my mind is that whenever I encounter this metaphor of women breaking windows, it already has a background in my lexicon and an association with these works. I use this reference in my own language, with the background of these pieces, so that when I use a window or a pane of glass in a metaphor, it is through this definition that I see it.

I then find this associative writing as a method of working useful because it exposes those kinds of rhythms, patterns, refrains in my thought processes and memories. It's often that I will look into the definition of a word and find that its etymological history, or even just its literal definition, removed from its casual conversational meaning, relates to a concept which interests me in other, visual realms of what I make. Often also, this is something I haven't been able to express *with words* when working visually. My art and writing can be sometimes separated, invisibly, by a thick pane of glass that I don't realize is there until I shift my footing to see it.



Pipilotti Rist, *Ever is Over All*, 1997. Left Channel Still from Two Channel Video Installation.

I'll transcribe one of my sketchbook pages here to illustrate the process I've described:

I want to find, define-
first steps to define

(always the need to orientate)

- orient, like a compass, not a map⁶

Sloughed off (shrugged off)

("The rest of the world is sloughed away")

but a sloe

- quote from my dad, on what the experience of looking at my art
feels like, from around 2012.

(a culmination)

(the fruit of)

(to bear the fruit of)

(berry)

(to) bear

(bare-y)

(is only) barely

(barely)

(is) bare

sloughed away

(to) bury

fades away;

(a) berry

Definition:⁷

1. to SHED

or REMOVE

— "skin sewn on in shee-e-eee-ts"⁸

as in a layer

2. to get rid of something no longer required

↓

(THE REST OF THE WORLD)

and so what remains is of paramount importance,

IS THE ESSENCE OF

3. to Drop off

Shorn as in a glacier dropping off a face of itself;

Shorn/sheared/shared/shard(ed)

shed

(slid) into a depth

yet defined by what leaves, (it is a verb) - the verb must be for something

slough— is a carving method. lopping off shards - to find what lies inside

} to reduce the broth, essentialize

} is this really what i feel it is?

I think it's more... like a Hitchcock zoom. Everything *else* fades away.

⁶ Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass* p. 7- "The Skywoman story, shared by the original peoples throughout the Great Lakes [region], is a constant star in the constellation of teachings we call the Original Instructions. These are not 'instructions' like commandments, though, or rules; rather, they are like a compass: they provide an orientation but not a map. The work of living is creating that map for yourself."

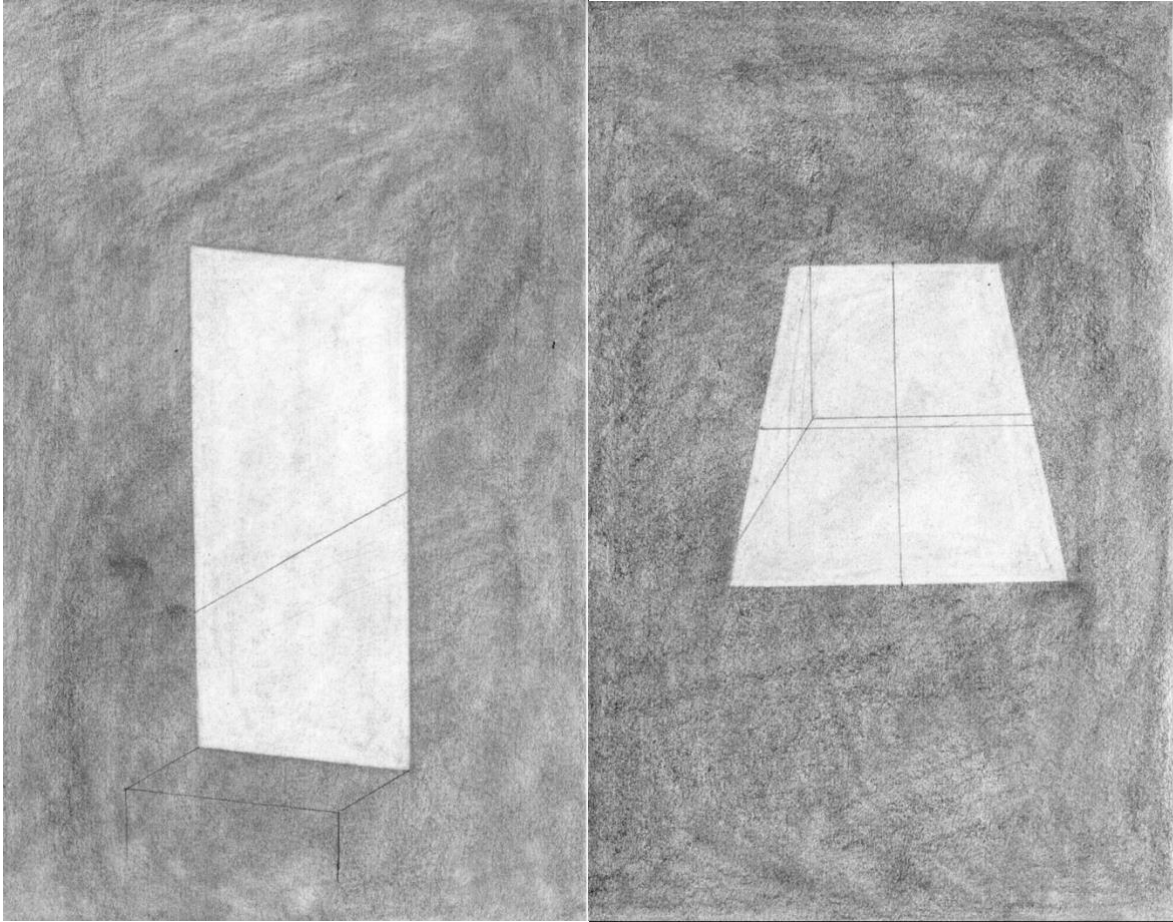
⁷ [Oxford Languages](#)

⁸ Perfume Genius, [Queen](#) (2014)

I think one way that I can visually grasp this, another way of knowing something in its definition sense, is to interpret it through repeating it. By tracing or copying its essence, noticing the part that I find the most interesting, what caught my attention, and repeating it, amplifying it, echoing it. I've done this before, in different ways, and it works from visual language, not verbal, so I must show to tell:



Emily Hutchings, Cell Phone Photos, 2020-2021.



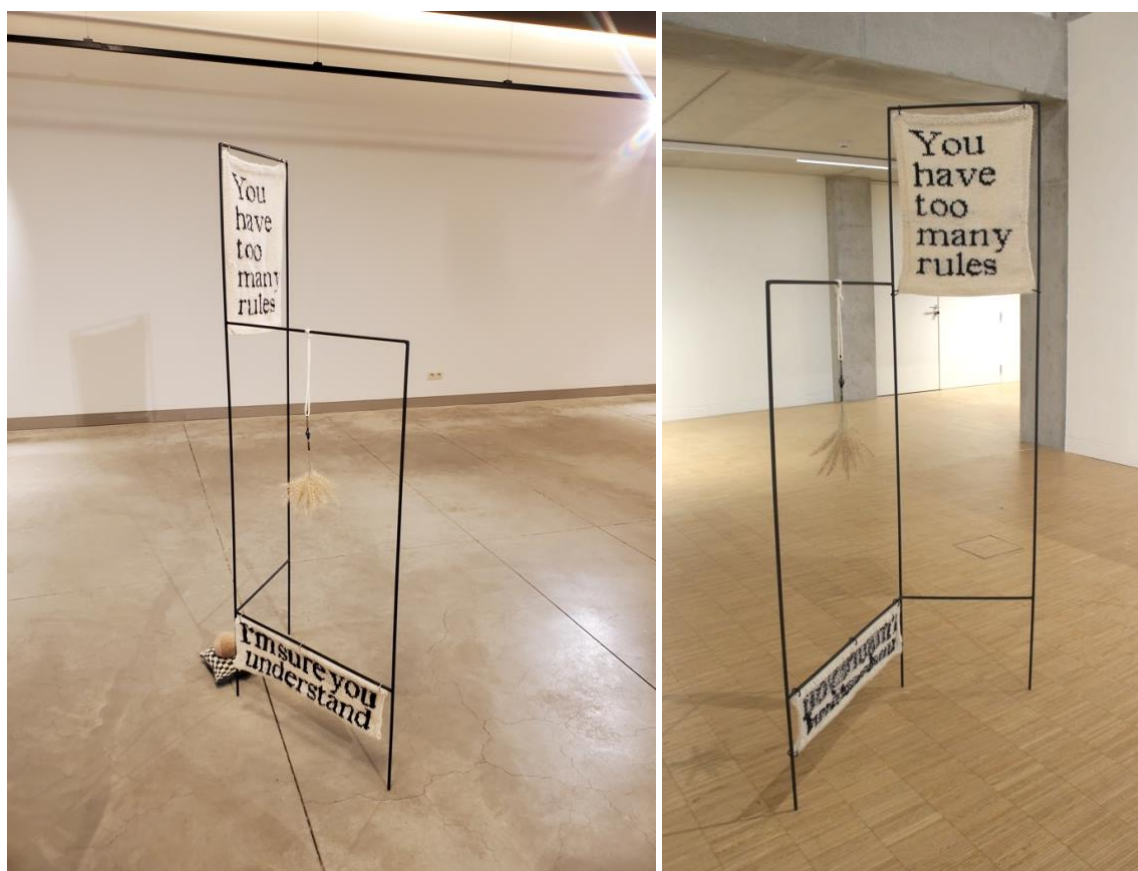
Emily Hutchings, Lol Stein II, 2015. Graphite on Paper. approx. 15 x 21 cm.

Emily Hutchings, Lol Stein III, 2015. Graphite on Paper. approx. 15 x 21 cm.



True Stories, dir. David Byrne, 1986.

All that's been described above in the textual processing and the visual doubling is what I poured into the piece *too many rules/i'm sure you understand*, pictured here on the left in its first iteration, from September of 2022 and then on the right in its second iteration, from January 2023.



Emily Hutchings, *you have too many rules/i'm sure you understand*, 2022-2023.
Wool, Alpaca, Cotton, Steel, Glass Beads, Linen Thread, Beeswax, Grass. Approx. 175 x 122 x 25 cm.

This piece makes me recall what I'd stated earlier, in chapter 1, about how I have trouble knowing exactly what a piece is about while making it- the beginning of this piece happened when I was trying to process some heavy feelings surrounding my father and I becoming estranged in early 2022. The phrases are both things he had said to me, either repeated while raising me (as in "You have too many rules") or as the closing line of the last communication we had ("I'm sure you understand"). This kind of heavy topic, mucking through decades of feelings and just not knowing how to process what was happening at the time, led me to lean into the action of knitting, which I'd been able to rely on before as a meditative action to help with my anxiety and tendency towards overthinking.

The meditative element of knitting is commonly understood within the world of hand knitters, but as craft and its history— folk knowledge and oral tradition— still tend to sit at a lower level in the hierarchy of artistic methods, it has found its theoretical justification in relating back to archeological finds and critical theory. As Claire Pajaczowska writes, "The thread is an activity which, becoming reflexively transformed into doubling back, a return, is a form of regaining a lost origin as a precursor to memory as an actively passive reflection. This may be seen in the symbolic use of knots used in the South American *quipus*, the leather thongs knotted in order to help orators recite the lineage of tribal descent, filiation and myth. It is also used as a form of accounting and debt reckoning."⁹

⁹ p 86, *Making Known: The Textiles Toolbox* by Claire Pajaczowska (from *The Handbook of Textile Culture*, Edited by Janis Jeffries, Diana Wood Conroy and Hazel Clark, 2016)

In my active-passive action of repeating a set of hand movements which have been adopted into my muscle memory, I am able to think about the letters which form in the knit piece as I make it and can slow down to assess the emotions and intentions behind the phrases which worked as a representation of my relationship with my father. Time is always baked into hand knitting, since there is no way to speed up the accumulation of stitches that are worked to grow the eventual object. I take a lot of time to do anything, needing to process and pause to understand. I often discount the background work that I needed to reach that conclusion, but by showing aspects of this process here in this chapter, I hope to bring process and piece together a bit more.



Emily Hutchings, Studio Progress Photo, 2022.

Ch. 4

*everything is sculpture
(immaterial + impermanent perceptions)*

How do we guess the weight of something?

Yes, there's an objective truth out there, a number that can represent that thing. But when I try to tell, to feel and translate that feeling into a number, I don't have a standard method of operation I can rely on. If I know the number-weight, I can compare the difficulty of lifting it to past experiences of that number. But without that number, it's a near-impossible memory exercise to try and remember a feeling, physically, and to feel certain about its truth. As an example, I know that I used to have to lift fifty-pound bags of silica sand for a job. I was stronger than I am now, out of having had to do that kind of labor a lot, so when I lift something with the current strength of my arms, I have to adjust my expectations accordingly. But there's no number there. I know well, in my bones, the weight of a thirty-five-pound piece of bronze— the heaviest sculpture I've made— but that was very, very dense and only took up a small amount of space, being about nine inches in diameter. If that weight is distributed over more area, it'll be easier to lift. But how do you add that adjustment to the feeling as you feel it? I don't know if it's possible to have an objective anchorpoint, despite the material and measurable fact of its weight. The measurement of your own sense needs to constantly be re-taken.

For recent work, I've been making rope. Feeling the physical tension of the fiber in the process of twisting is a kind of sense that I understand as being similar to feeling the weight of something, especially when there is a direct comparison between the strands, before you put in the final twist. You can feel when one strand is more tightly twisted in comparison to one that is less so. It pulls on your hand differently, a mini-perception that your body registers and categorizes, unthinkingly.¹⁰ The language used to describe these feelings is so vague, unsatisfying, in terms of what language can do to get close to the idea. It's *different*— It can only be told in non-linguistic terms, terms that refer to their own inability to describe something in words. 'Here, feel it, you'll see.' Feel it, feel it out. Feel it out of the realm of feeling and into a realm that is able to be communicated without the requirement of the body. But to explain *how* something feels is so hyper-specific to the way that I perceive it and what's familiar to me, what my lexicon for understanding and categorizing things is made up of. It will be different, inevitably, than how you do, or describe this same thing. In fact, if I explain it my way, it might muddy the waters for you in a way that holds you back from being able to perceive the information that's actually valuable, that's actually what I want you to know.

"because Hand-Craft signifies cunning, or sleight, or craft of the hand, which cannot be taught by words, but is only gained by practice and exercise'... Moxon argued that craft is something beyond words: something learned with the body rather than the mind"¹¹

If craft is something learnt with the body, and I tend towards intellectualizing things in order to distance myself from them, to see them more 'clearly' and 'objectively,' there is this gut feeling that still guides me that I need to reckon with- I don't forget my body fully, but I don't recognize it either. I have a sensitivity towards listening to objects, in the physical realm, and converting their secrets to a cloud that I take and descend upon other physical objects, attempting to translate lessons brought from one to another. I'm trying to interrelate my surroundings, to find a place of cohesion that I can inhabit, to make sense, to orient myself. I'm trying to pin down a cloud.

¹⁰ *proprioception* is the term used to describe the body's ability to perceive this kind of thing- stretch receptors in our skin and reactive muscle micro-adjustments are engaged unconsciously for us to retain our balance when something is pulling on us, like in rope twisting.

¹¹ Adamson, Glenn. *The Craft Reader*. 2nd ed., Berg, 2010. p. 7.

Ch. 5

guiding nature/noninterference (exaltation)
(material informing the creation of the resulting object)

You level up your materials, from microscopic to macro-
hair scales staple length spinning thread (considerations of twist and memory)
 weaving thread into cloth cloth draping, cloth connecting, making forms to try to harken back
to what that original material is doing on its own, *wants* to do on its own.

—

what is the nature of a hair itself?
scales stacked up, collagen and cuticle, tree growth rings extruded out of a hair shaft: *grown*
the length of that hair - the breed of a sheep /or the length of that fiber, how long is the stem of the flax
plant allowed to grow before it no longer supports itself and crumbles past a certain length

hair splits at its ends, flax and cotton fiber will be, what, eroded once it's longer than it can support?
or is it about the water, the water retention of the cells, that there can only be a set distance from root to tip-
top of the stem, before the distance separates the line so much that the sugar cannot travel to the end, and has
to give itself up, let its furthest relations, oldest members of the group move on, move away
 and then it is plied, brought together with a hand,
 its scales interlaced in felt or straightened to make a mass of *same*, in roving-
felt will act with tension in all directions
a plied strand is balanced, the final twist brings it into equilibrium with itself

—

When you level up these materials, try to understand them from base to top:
You work with the hair itself, you work with its smallest point, its beginning.
You work slowly, each step taken on a micro scale towards understanding the material itself, the way it grew
out of a living body, bringing the portrait of what you have in your hands into focus.

I'll get some raw wool and have to comb it out, clean it, tiptoe around it gently to release everything else
around it, to crack the eggshell off to get to the essence of what's underneath. I'm working slowly just to bring
it to a point of comprehension, to be able to see it *as* the material itself rather than this detritus, this discard
from another process, to start at zero- to create a clean bundle of potential energy.
Once that's done, you get to work a little bigger. Faster. You're bringing the material into a finer focus, getting
to see how it interacts with itself. Accumulation and assimilation.

You can only do so much with a tiny amount of any material. When I go to use plant-based dyes, I cannot
collect a single seed, a single leaf, a single berry. Accumulation is what allows the finer amounts of the essence
of the thing to be able to be expressed. It joins itself in chorus, echoes its own ideas, its own identity. The echo
grows in audible volume the more it grows in its material volume.

To spin wool, you assimilate something into itself, similarly. It's a repeat structure, joining ends of bunches of
wool by twisting energy into it so that it can grab onto itself, so that it can become stronger, more solid, more
tangible. Spinning is energetic, exciting.

It's something that, once begun, can endlessly consume itself. repetition, multiplication of the same gesture.
condensation of a cloud into a line.

I have been experimenting with different forms of repurposing and foraging from discard piles and 'undesirable' nature (weeds, leaf piles, prunings) for a few years, now. There is something about the collection and accumulation of a material that comforts me in a way which makes me feel connected to something solid: a stone, a chunk, a rock, a thing. Homogenous piles and stacks of the same thing. A factor of the comfort of this collection practice, I think, has something to do about fighting back against inevitable impermanence and the fugitive nature of all else in this world that is not a *thing*. Things, as well, are impermanent. Yet, the accumulation of them gives a kind of physically evident backup plan, there in plain sight.

I know that this obsession with accumulation has roots in reacting to having a lot of change around me as I grew up. As much as my mother tried to prevent it, I grew up in an environment that was constantly changing—I was always being split between divorced parents' houses, we moved four times before I turned sixteen, I changed schools five times, etcetera. There was very little stability in my world, aside from the control I had over the objects I surrounded myself with. I realize now that I was raised by parents with two very different *styles* of hoarding. One collected antique, shiny things with cultural, historic or monetary value that were scavenged for on weekends and stacked up in display cases and covering the walls, salon style. The other collected out of memory, and for souvenirs to decorate the bookshelves, mostly natural material or trinkets, to be able to touch and remember the time that caused its collection. I absorbed parts of each of these, but at heart, I was a material and texture collector, and needed things to stay the same:

When I was a child, age six or seven, I had two teddy bears which were my favorite comfort objects. They were filthy from years of well-loved cuddling, sweat and tears, and so my mom washed one of them, kind of as a test to see how I would react and if it would be okay to have them be cleaned, occasionally. It was a disaster. The texture was different on the washed fur, the color was foreign all of a sudden, and I felt utterly betrayed by the change in this companion of mine. The washed bear was discarded, eventually, and the second bear remains unwashed, and stored away at my mother's house to this day.

There has been that preservationist, hyper-materially-conscious aspect to me since early on, it seems. In this anecdote of mine, I see my early experiences with a fixation on the *essence* of a material, that essence being one of the core components of its identity as an object— and, that once it is changed on that level, it is no longer that object any more.

The celebration of that *essence* of a material is something that I've been internally referring to as an 'exaltation,' an ode to the material that I'm using to create with, and which I want, ultimately, elevate as the focus of its own monument,¹² as a window onto itself. This is something that I have trouble conceiving of a form for, and how exactly I relate to it— why *I* would be the one making this work? I want to show the inherent beauty and value of the materials I love, but they already exist as unfiltered and conceptually contained as a holographic object, and so what would I have to do with it? Why would I do anything to them? What function does my love of materials serve for their exaltation?

Perhaps, this is where accumulation can come in. Accumulation used as a method for exaltation, in which the material qualities can be echoed and amplified, zoomed in on. I do know that I have a quiet superpower, which is that I am able to listen, observe and pay very close attention to material. This attention is shown in part in the prose on the previous page, a type of exaltation in text. I then think towards the foraging that I've been employing as a part of my creative practice in Belgium. Collecting material and allowing it to speak to me, through its materiality, is my personal working antidote to overthinking and getting too far into the rabbit hole of the conceptual underpinnings of my work, and of that utility-anxiety as expressed above.

¹² Osip Mandelstam, in *Conversation about Dante*, describes the relationship between form and content that Dante uses in *The Divina Commedia* as analogous to the relationship between material and sculpture, writing: "Let us imagine a monument of granite or marble the symbolic function of which is not to represent a horse or a rider but to disclose the inner structure of the very marble or granite itself. In other words, imagine a monument of granite which has been erected in honor of granite and as though for the revelation of its idea."

Foraging is a quiet part of my practice, and it releases me from a lot of the selfhood which is tied to this angst I feel about my purpose as an artist. Walking around in the woods only really requires me to look and feel what is going on around me, grounding me in where-I-am-in-the-world. There, I work by discerning between types of plants in my identification efforts, and collecting excess and discard for my own purposes, trying to make as little impact as possible- a noninterference alliance forged between me and the material. I try to act tenderly, and walking around the same areas again and again through different weather and seasons allows me to have a continuous relationship with the plants that I watch sprout and grow, vining out. I've collected willow from the same tree for the third year now. I cried at a rose bush that was cut down, where I collected its rose hips for an unexpected coral-salmon colored dye. I know where the first crocuses bloom in the spring. But I don't know what to do with this knowledge yet. I want to protect this gentle world with a monument to it.¹³ But I might have to wait for the grass to grow at its own pace.



Emily Hutchings, Untitled (hole), 2016. Dirt. Approx. 170 x 76 x 20 cm.

¹³ Piero Manzoni, *Le Socle du Monde (Base of the World)*, 1961. Iron. 100 x 100 x 82 cm.

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