

***Surface materials and aspects of care:  
A study in modes of being in a visual art practice***

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## ABSTRACT

This research extends from a critique of surface as the under-acknowledged partner in the making and viewing of drawings. Within a practice-led approach I explore ways of responding to and engaging with the peculiar qualities of surface materials and through this creative inquiry, reveal a broader ethos of practice. The particular qualities of surface materials – paper, fabric, board – lie in their shallow extension, their detachment from any substantial form or depth, and, as such, their equal availability to ruin and expression. In any interaction with such materials a constant negotiation of these terms insists upon a kind of care that does not entail preservation so much as an enlivening of matter. In this thesis, I propose that care arises as a mode of being between the artist and work, the work and beholder, and even between the parts of the work. The thesis therefore proposes a mode of being that situates the art practice within an ethical framework, premised on an ontological equation, taken from Heidegger, of care with being.

While care, as a theme in art practice has been explored explicitly through a range of contemporary practices, these have largely engaged the medium of performance or ritual. This current research seeks to show how care is operative in material practices, where the particular qualities of those materials generate the terms for care as a particular mode of engagement that is reciprocal and intransitive.

Key words: surface materials; care

## **Signed Statement of Originality**

The work contained in this thesis has not been previously submitted for a degree, diploma or any other award at this or any other higher institution. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due acknowledgement is made in the text.

Signature:      QUT Verified Signature

Date:            21 September 2015

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## INTRODUCTION



*Figure 1.* My left hand with paper dust, September 12, 2013

These hands, so central to the making that has guided this research, are the enactors of decisions made possible precisely because of the hands' ability to act in particular ways. This simple chiasmus of practice manifests equally in the care taken in acts of making, and the force that comes with the decision of destruction. Like many other artists, I periodically purge my studio of old works that serve no longer to provide either the clarity of answers, or the thrall of ambiguity. Most of the time, they put up little or no resistance, neither accepting

nor disputing their redundancy. It is not usual that I would heed an ethical imperative given on the part of the object. But once, not long ago, I felt the sad submission of an old sculpture, a small thing, under my hand, as I brutishly shoved it in the waste, and immediately sensed the confusing shame of a repentant transgressor. It was a complex mix of emotions that can be summed up, partially, in a recognition of this: I had cared, and I cared no more. But now I saw that it was not just about me, and that it was too late to withdraw the care I had administered to that object, now deemed obsolete. The care I had given was no longer mine to take. The ethical sense was not one experienced from the perspective of ascribed values, but, in the terms defined by Levinas an ethics that arises from “an access to exterior being” (1990, 293), to being beyond myself. This ethics is, then, more causal than theoretical, more material than emotional, and happens as things come into contact in the making of a world.

This small incident was not one of those fortuitous epiphanies that can turn a research question around, and from which moment all becomes clear. It came, rather, toward the end of the research, when I had already been thinking about care as cause, a ground within which I could argue my practice emerged. It was precisely because I had been immersed in this speculative scholarship, that I was now viewing this object differently. Speculation does not give rise only to speculative outcomes but can function as a lens through which attention is tuned and the world experienced differently. Far from advocating mindless hoarding, I am suggesting through this research that care can be found in unlikely places, holding things together, and reaching out from objects and people alike, that have

been invested, and continue to be invested, with care that endures beyond its administering.

What is important to this study as a material and practice-led one, is that the emphasis of care is founded upon the particular materials – that is, surface materials – and the processes and resolutions that have made these considerations about care possible. I do not intend to make claims about artworks or creative practices generally but to focus on the special qualities of surface materials both in my own work and within a range of other works that are otherwise considerably diverse. That is not to say this notion of care could not be extended to other modes of practice, since the investment of care is not confined to any single type of worldly stuff. However, what interested me in this research was how *particular* materials and approaches to them could lead to *particular* theoretical propositions. Rather than beginning with a theory of care and seeking to illustrate it through the work, the notion of care arose from an inquiry embedded in the material practice, from a responsive, empathic rather than functional way of working with materials such as paper, board and fabric. Through a responsive approach, despite their physical differences, they turned out to have much in common, whether suggestive of walls or blankets, and in turn came to offer a compelling image of subjectivity.

From an initial study of the drawing surface as a partner to its markings, not merely a background, I came to regard these other sorts of surface objects as sharing a qualitative and functional genealogy. They are those materials or objects that are thin, extensive, that have area, but little or no depth; that merely

transition from one side to the other but do not develop or conceal subcutaneous systems – materials, as I have mentioned, like paper and fabric, but also objects like walls, curtains and blankets. As a special category of object, these things have also come under the ontological scrutiny of Michel Serres, who identifies their unique intermediary qualities:

Veil, canvas, tissue, chiffon, fabric, goatskin and sheepskin... all the forms of planes or twists in space, bodily envelopes or writing supports, able to flutter like a curtain, neither liquid nor solid, to be sure, but participating in both conditions. Pliable, tearable, stretchable...topological (Serres in Connor 2004a).<sup>1</sup>

It occurred to me, in the course of working with and thinking about these things, that they are a rarity in the natural world, but found everywhere in the manufactured, as if they were standing in for something from which the outer layer had been abstracted to act alone. Similarly, following Michel Serres, Steven Connor acknowledges that “membranes, borders and boundaries” are “abstracted forms of the skin, the skin emblazoned, stretched out, explicated” (Connor 2004b, 40). The surfaces we most often encounter, with which we enfold, house and convenience ourselves – curtains, chairs, tables, benches as well as containers of all sorts – have entered our cultural worlds as abstractions of skin and the body, the earth and cave. For example, a chair or table might be thought of as a technology that has raised upward, the ground, to meet us half way; the blanket imitates a skin; cup, the hands; house, the hollow, one-sided space of the

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<sup>1</sup> Originally in Serres, *Atlas*, 1994, p.45. Translation is Connor's.

cave; paper issues from ground, skin, and rock. On this account, they could be said to be mediators, translators of earth into world. Bringing together this assortment of objects in a single conversation is possible, in one sense, by virtue of metaphor. But as Rebecca Solnit reminds us “nothing can be crossbred that doesn’t have a common ancestor” (Solnit 2003, 10).

The relevance of surface objects to the theme of care lies in their very material qualities and their relationship to human sensibilities: surface materials wrap, enfold, protect, shelter, conceal and hold. In short, they are involved in acts of care with a particular sort of intimacy and efficiency that is qualitatively different to the type of care that might be said of objects of depth or bulk. Further to this affordance of care, because of their material nature as shallow and extensive, they often find themselves in places of exposure, and vulnerable to tearing, saturation, puncturing and wearing, without a body to back them up. Thus, in the business of care, they become casualties of the dangers and contingencies they absorb on our behalf, requiring a return of the gesture of care, in order to forestall their demise.

In the artworks I look at in the exegesis, including and in addition to my own, the vulnerability of these materials is often exploited, though their rupture is sometimes revealed, counter-intuitively, to be a kind of responsiveness that might be considered as an act of care. For example, Lucio Fontana deliberately slashed and punctured his canvases, but he did so with the utmost consideration of the material qualities he was working with, and the strength and restraint of his own hand. Contemporary artist Elana Herzog frays the weave of fabric to



near dissolution, but with every rift comes an act of mending, until the rhythms of ruin and repair merge. It is, therefore, on account of the vulnerable nature of surfaces, that the forces applied are made with an understanding of and concern for the materials, such that the breach becomes an index of restraint as much as it is of force.

Care is thus seen to have a dialectical constitution that does not merely imply preservation. Indeed, preservation may well be anathema to care, since the ultimate preservation for the artefact is the museum; for the infirm, life-support; for the idea, the doctrine. An argument could certainly be presented for the advantages of these encasements, and yet in this notion of care as preservation, life as continuity and dynamism is compromised. Care therefore might be said to be found in relations of mutual interest, where two materials, for example, draw each other forth, give issue to one another, such as ink and paper, stone and fabric. As a form of interest rather than preservation, care in the creative work and care as it is discussed here, will always entail some form of risk and thus a dialectic form.

There are three levels of care documented in the work and in the exegesis. The first regards mostly the care that is enacted between artist and work, with the observation that the work and materials also administer actions of care, in a causal rather than emotionally responsive sense, and that the act of making is a dialogue, a collaboration, rather than an imposition of will. The second regards the forces that animate the assemblage that is the work of art, or, as I discuss specifically in this exegesis, the drawing. In this, I refer to the mechanisms of

figure and ground, of inscription and page. To the extent that figure and ground in certain drawings – for example, Kiki Smith’s *Born* series 2001; Dorothea Rockburne’s *Locus* series 1972 – appear within a mutually negotiated presencing, they might be said to be involved in terms that are defined by mutual responsiveness, rather than struggle. Thus in the third chapter, I raise the possibility that the conflict in Heidegger’s Earth-World ontology, might be recast as a dynamic of care.

The third level concerns what I call an intransitive care, where the one that cares, gives of itself *as* care, and thus I relate it to theories of giving. As the artwork and the discussion turn from what is more familiarly seen as drawing to more emphatically engage with surface materials, care is seen as an approach to the artwork, on the part of the artist and viewer – or, as I will call the one who cares to attend, the beholder.<sup>2</sup> Here, care is discussed as a reciprocal operation in which the work is seen to extend or return the care that has shaped its own being. Beyond the making of the artwork, it is the possibility for this reciprocal care that endures. Much of the exegesis is given to providing examples of these mobilisations of care both in my own work and in a selection of others. The scope of the exegesis therefore is eclectic, though with the aim of presenting a cohesive document in its focus on the twin themes of surface materials and their involvement in functions of care, especially reciprocal care.

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A foundational assumption from which the claims given throughout this research are presented, is that the material and formal decisions made within an art

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<sup>2</sup> While I do not elaborate at length on the role or activity of viewing, it becomes clear, particularly in chapter four, that the self-giving of the art work, after the making, concerns the attentive viewer / beholder.

practice are somehow bound up with a broader sense of how knowledge and how being are enacted. In support of this active and generative relationship between artist and materials, Barbara Bolt has noted that materials both shape and are shaped by the artist, and alerts us to “the reflexivity of the work of art” (2011, 154). Similarly, though in a more ontologically oriented tone, Gaston Bachelard in the words of Dennis Slattery holds that “the material imagination, whose function is to imagine beneath images of form...is called upon to discover deep aspects of the unconscious” (Slattery 2012, 117). Materials and being are deeply entwined, a reminder of the impossibility of imagining the creative act to be simply the imposition of subjective intention upon matter, or the reapplication of a tested method. The choice of these materials is, therefore, already a recognition of a familial connection, as if those materials already had some investment within my being, and is reflected in the ontological tone of much of the enquiry. To know something about these surface materials, is, I argue, to know something about care and equally about the self. In chapter two, I establish this ontological premise through Heidegger’s identification of being with *Cura*: care, or concern. Where Heidegger allocates this quality to human subjects alone, I argue that it is inherent to Being more broadly and it is through this argument that I support the assignation of care to the art object.

This research takes as its method a practice-led approach, where the creative work both embodies and triggers theoretical claims and responses. Thus the function of this written document is twofold. On the one hand, it is expository, where I put the practical work into context – although that context is emergent rather than grounding. On the other it is elaborative, where the observations and

findings made within practice trigger an extension of theoretical speculation. Yet it is also cyclical, where intellectual and studio based findings excite each other to further investigation, opening the possibility for both studio and written work to be subject to curiosity and new ways of looking and doing, as suggested in the opening anecdote. Maintaining a balance here is critical to resisting the illustrative approach, where creative work adopts a supportive role for theory; or theory subjects the uncontainable in the artwork to a reductive framing. There are ample references in the literature to the problems of such encasements (O’Sullivan 2006; Durré 2008; Carter 2010; Bolt 2010), some of which I will discuss in the methodology chapter.

The style of the writing frequently bridges the literary and the theoretical, an approach defended by writers such as Donna Haraway (2004) who observes the transformative and surprising potential of the medium:

Writing does things to the writer. Writing is a very particular and surprising process. When I am writing, I often try to learn something, and I may be using things I only partly understand...It is like a child in school learning to use a new word in a sentence (Haraway 2004, 332-333).

Further on Haraway writes: “My texts are full of arguments, it must be said...But my writing style is also intuitive” (2004, 333). These insights reflect the intention I establish for the writing in this thesis. It is not the objective partner to the subjective practice, but continues the generative processes that are

expected from the studio. What I like about Haraway's writing on writing, is her particular attention to the medium. She attends as much to the sentence, the phrase, as she does to the concepts they endeavour to contain. The medium in this sense inflects, diffracts, deepens and layers the message.

In the typically interconnected architecture of practice-led research in the creative arts, the aims, not just the art objects, have come about as a result of the practice, visual and written. Questions often arise in hindsight, in reflective practices, where the intuitive responses to materials and forms, can be seen to be generating patterns, repeated approaches and insistences. Equally, reflection reveals divergences, and diffractions (Barad 2007), movements away from the consistencies that would make for a smooth alliance between questions, methods and contexts. Yet where particular materials are seen to be permitted and others excluded; where, in the meticulous choices and decisions of practice, associations arise between works; where disparate materials appear to enter a conversation, one can begin to articulate a theme, which, short of being exhausted by practice, can be refashioned as a question. In this research, that question can best be articulated as follows: *How might surface objects in a visual art practice reveal actions of care?*

The field of inquiry wherein I initially situated this study was contemporary drawing research, the foundational relevance of which is discussed in the third chapter. Drawing provided not so much the parameters against which the ideas could be tested, as the field in which they emerged. Thus the legacy of drawing, in an expanded field, is implied throughout the research, both in the exegesis and

in the creative work. All the works maintain a tension between, and an integration of surfaces and markings – such as tearing and creasing, sanding, grinding and stitching as well as graphic markings. However, as the question became more specific, so too did the field. A post-critical, aesthetic discourse became a platform for thinking the drawing beyond the binary terms of figure and ground, and instead came to consider its relations in the world and my mode of engagement with it. No longer defined by meaning making or symbolic figures, the drawing, through the elevation of surface as an articulate material voice, became an active force with real material weight. If meaning had to be read in the marks, it became clear that the reading could not ignore the surface.

Likewise recognising the inherent forces and available relations within and given by an artwork, Gilles Deleuze, effectively replaces questions of art and signification with questions of “what a particular art object can do” (O’Sullivan 2001, 130). Simon O’Sullivan, within a Deleuzian discourse, identifies a trend away from signifying strategies in some contemporary creative works and a turn to the “aesthetic potential of art” emphasising “art is more than just an object to be read” (O’Sullivan 2010, 190). He argues here that this release from signification increases our ability to act in the world and, indeed, that it builds positive affect. In her book *Art Beyond Representation* (2004), Barbara Bolt presents her findings through the notion that art does not merely represent, but performs (2004). Once the artwork is considered as active and motivated, rather than representational, the forces that animate it can then “act upon us from the outside” (Smith 2012, 143). Simon O’Sullivan contends that, by producing a situation for a different approach to an art work, “new ways and times of being

and acting in the world" (2010, 196) become apparent. Each one of these observations articulates the impetus by which my thesis developed, throughout which I explore the ways in which surface materials in creative practice can exhort us to enact and enjoy the empathic and reciprocal forces of care.

Where is the gap, then, within this discourse, that I address in the current research? The question that remains for me in the critical and post-critical discourses of art is precisely at this level of modes of being with the artwork: what is it that circulates, in an encounter and in the process of making? How does an art work gain the autonomy to act back to the beholder? Simon O'Sullivan has suggested, and I would agree, that the art work gives back by producing positive affect, or materials designate something about subjectivity, or in a general sense, as Barbara Bolt so incisively recognises, the art work is reflexive, and acts upon us. So if my approach is one of care, what then happens to care, once it becomes part of the object that emerges from this special attention? Care begins as a meeting of an internal valorisation of matter and an imperative from that material as a singular and particular object, that causes me to respond in a singular and particular way. If the care that I enact is accompanied by an affect, that is not to say that affect or sentiment are necessary to care. I argue that it is also a materially responsive, or causal event that may be emotionally though not substantially disinterested, and therefore can be said of material artefacts. As the research is practice-led, what I aim to show is how my surface materials and objects operate aesthetically within the foundations of reciprocal care, and how it was that I arrived at this notion. What the hypothesis suggests is that foundations

– final causes – may be found not in solid ground at all, but in the ongoing reciprocity of care.

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The exegesis is structured in the following way. In the first chapter I lay out the methodology. It seems inherent to the nature of practice-led research to develop method in the course of research, as, to some extent, one of its findings. Thus methodology requires attention to particularities as well as general principles of method. One of the questions I raise in this section concerns the boundaries of methodology. There seems to be nothing incidental, either in the materials, the temporal rhythms of practice, the studio or the environment beyond, that might be considered peripheral to an explanation for the particular: that which makes of a creative practice grounds for an original inquiry. This potentially unwieldy problem is resolved with the understanding that practice will always exceed any methodological system, and that the decisions to include or exclude details from an account of the practice, already begin to reveal a valorisation that spills over into the content of the work. In the end, methodology cannot be wrenched away from the business of making. In addition, I outline what I intend by a material practice, the relationship between practice and theory and how this is negotiated in the course of the study and synthesised in the outcomes.

The second chapter is dedicated to the theme of care. I had thought to place this chapter at the end of the exegesis, since it came late in the research as a binding idea. However, it was only my recognition, not the care itself that lagged, and therefore I believe it frames the study more effectively, establishing it as a context, to place it at the outset. Care is discussed in terms of a material



responsiveness, as well as a condition of Being. Referring to Heidegger's use of care as a key characteristic of Dasein (1962), I trace the origins of this association and, arguing for a slightly different reading of the Hyginus myth to which Heidegger refers his use of "care", I suggest that it might be re-imagined as applicable to Being more generally. This chapter also introduces Jean-Luc Marion's phenomenology of the gift and giving, in which I find a parallel text to the ideas regarding reciprocal care. In the absence of a theoretical platform dealing with the notion of care, beyond the human administration of it, Marion's theory of reciprocity in giving provides a compelling way for considering care as self-giving, or what I have called intransitive.

In the third chapter I present a background to the study and the emergent themes where the emphasis is on the mechanism of figure and ground in drawing. In turning to a number of anecdotal accounts from both my early drawing education and witnessing a friend in the act of painting at twilight, I illustrate how ground, usually the silent, contextualising partner in drawing can be made explicit in moments of awkwardness or difficulty. At such times, the ground becomes active, agential and presents the possibility for difference. The artworks I explore in this section express themselves in such a way, where there is no longer a separation between figure and ground, but reciprocation in the form of an understanding and empathy between the two. My references here are taken from disparate sources, including Thomas Lamarre (2002), discussing the extraordinary papers that are central the Heideggerian poetic form. I also discuss a number of modern and contemporary sources, including works by Kiki Smith, Dorothea Rockburne, Lucio Fontana and Judith Kentish. Reflecting again on

Heidegger, this time his Earth / World account of the work of art, where meaning and matter are given as conflictual, I propose that this dynamic be recast as one of care. Finally, in this chapter, I explore the congruencies between surface objects and subjectivity, finding in paper, fabric and walls, a map of the self that is traversed in ways that manifest notions of care.

The fourth chapter is dedicated to a discussion of the works that emerged within this study. The appendix of images, particularly 1, 2 and 4, should be considered as an elaboration of the themes covered here. Throughout this chapter I trace the emergence of a recognition of care as a central motivation in the practice. To begin with I highlight my exploration of surface where, in the early part of the research, notebooks, oversized paper, and a horizontal inclination all contribute to an hypothesis that implicates surface objects with acts of care. I show that as surface becomes more explicit, through a range of movements and material intuitions, so too does this imperative to care. The realignment of the surface from the vertical to the horizontal is one such movement, where the differences in beholding are significant. Likewise, the choice to use fabric, in the later part of the study, facilitated the synthesis of different levels of care, since cloth is implicated most explicitly in acts of care, and is also most vulnerable to acts of neglect.

The final chapter is brief and focused specifically on the exhibition, *The murmur of surfaces*, held at the Caboolture Regional Art Gallery from May 2 until June 20, 2015. The context of the exhibition presents a set of considerations that do not arise in discussing the works within their site of production, and thus extend

the theme of care, particularly in relation to the beholder, in very different ways. Incorporating several works from prior to the research period affords the possibility to consider the current works within the context of an evolving practice and ethos.

The form of the exegesis, explained in greater detail in the methodology, departs from the standard format, to disperse the contextual review throughout the text, since it was a constant partner in the research rather than a platform from which a single stream of argument developed. Rather than a weakness or compromise I see this as indicative of the strength of creative art practice to guide inquiry toward genuinely new ways of knowing. The research is presented in the form of an exhibition and this exegesis, including its attached appendices, with a weighting of fifty percent given to each.

**A note on the appendices:**

The seven appendices attached to this exegesis as a CD ROM may be used in the following way. Appendices 1 and 2 supplement the methodology chapter, in that they show the reflections, questioning and weaving of theory into reflective observations. They also supplement 4.1, where I discuss the notebooks more explicitly and refer to a particular sort of thinking that they invite. Appendix 3 provides further images to accompany the garden drawings that are shown and discussed on pp. 135-139. Appendices 4, 5 and 6 document a large number of works that were part of the exploratory process, throughout the course of the study. Appendix 7 documents the exhibition, *The murmur of surfaces*.

## CHAPTER 1

### METHODOLOGY

The material imperative of practice-led research broadly defines the methodological approach in this inquiry. Barbara Bolt has described it as the “material nature of visual thinking...a knowing that arises through handling materials in practice” (Bolt 2010, 29). For artist Michel Elliot “(m)aking is a way of finding out, a working through and thinking in materials” (Elliot quoted in Bolt 2011, 154). The outcomes of this method of inquiry, for me, include a major exhibition of creative works, *The murmur of surfaces*, which represents both the findings and progression of the research in material form, and an exegesis which both contextualises the work and elaborates on findings arising from the creative work. This exegesis is accompanied by an extended appendix of a large number of works that were included in neither the exegesis nor the exhibition, but contributed to the progress of the research and so should be considered as evidence. There are a number of images in these documents that may seem to be at odds with the works discussed more fully. I see many of these little sketches, in words and pictures, as images of the mechanics of thought, rather than the content of the thoughts themselves.

There are three main considerations within this general method of research that require clarification: how material handling constitutes a framework for knowledge; how the research question is defined and addressed, and how the written component relates to the practical work. Implicit here is the understanding that practice-led research differs substantially from both heuristic

and hermeneutic approaches most often associated with research in the sciences and humanities.

One of the major differences that impacts on the approach to both the research as creative practice and its analysis, is the recognition of knowledge as *particular* to its processes of emergence so that, rather than producing abstract models and theories that can be generally applied to a specified field, a practice-led approach does not “dematerialise thought from its matrix of production” (Carter 2010, 16). Similarly, Isabelle Stengers has noted the problems of defining knowledge when materials are taken into account. As she has written, “the demands of materialism cannot be identified in terms of knowledge alone, scientific or other” (2011, 369). Relating her argument to the Marxist class concept, she writes that “materialism loses its meaning when it is separated from its relations with struggle” (ibid). Both Stengers and Carter ascribe an ethical dimension to this primacy of materiality. Whether it is through struggle or care, materials make demands that often run counter to the theories into which we endeavour to enlist them, or interfere with theories that endeavour to exclude them.

Caroline Durré champions the necessity for creative and mental freedom in creative practice research. While she recognises that artists work within their own systems – processes that maintain the creative impetus – they do not constitute methods that are transferable, “unlike the rigour which underwrites the probity of other disciplines” (Durré 2008, 37). She writes, “(f)olded into this ‘system’ is the idea of personal vision, of the potential for originality, of the work having an autograph” (ibid). Robert Morris recognises within the creative

process, “a complex of interactions involving factors of bodily possibility, the nature of materials and physical laws, the temporal dimensions of process and perception as well as resultant static images” (Morris 1993, 75). These essential ingredients obviously pose problems in framing a research method, problems that I aim to address in what follows.

The methods are given in some detail, for two reasons. First, as stated, the approach differs significantly from traditional methods and therefore needs clarification. Second, the methods constitute, in part, findings that emerge from the research. The expression of care in the working process, has become elaborated as a finding in terms of a wider approach and rationale of art practice, and can also be defined as integral to a working method. Yet, as I have expressed in the following section, it is only with some compromise that method or models are separated from the site and moment of material handling.

### **1.1 Material handling as a framework for knowing**

This section is divided into three parts. The first surveys theoretical accounts of material practice, looking particularly at the importance of defamiliarisation, a movement away from knowledge, in the emergence of the new. Knowledge here is not seen as the discovery of new information that responds to a definable problem, but more, the release of new ways of thinking and doing. In the second part I will give an account of the studio practice as an engagement of the particular, in an environment that is not isolated from, but deeply immersed in the contingencies of being in the world. In the third part I will discuss the importance of maintaining indeterminacy in the practice. At every level there is

the opportunity to maintain a dimension of the unknown that can shift the practice to new registers, even where repetition and patterns are central to the working method.

### **1.1.1 Breaking with the familiar**

In his essay, *Interest, the ethics of invention*, Paul Carter defines the premise from which a methodology for enquiry becomes emergent, recommending that the condition for invention is found in “the state of being that allows a state of becoming to emerge” (Carter 2010, 15). What is implied here is that invention is not prescribed by a defined need, or gap, but by the unknown conditions of being. In this sense, invention reveals not only new forms, but addresses new ways of being in the world. These conditions that give issue to invention begin, continues Carter, in “a perception or recognition, of the ambiguity of appearances” (ibid). In suggesting the known world be reducible to appearances, Carter shows that renewal, or invention, can arise from changed categorical thinking. Thus we understand that research, as an opening onto the new, begins from a firm knowledge of things. This is not strictly in order to build on that knowledge, but to question the models through which we claim our expertise, and, to a large extent, to “unknow” the categories by which sense is made. It is by this that we can clear a site for new ways of thinking about the world.

This image of knowledge as a series of disruptions and reorganizations, removes the unitary stature from knowledge as an edifice of truth, and re-establishes it as a process that alters in the constant re-examination of the particular. Carter writes of a “double movement” of invention whereby, in “decontextualisation, found

elements are rendered strange, and of a recontextualisation, in which new families of association and structures of meaning are established” (2010, 15, 16). Carter’s eloquent formula is also found in Simon O’Sullivan’s analysis where deterritorialisation in the event of art practice is emphatically equated with the aesthetic. O’Sullivan writes of art that it “might be understood as the name for a function: a magical, an aesthetic, function of *transformation*” (O’Sullivan 2001, 130). The alchemical insinuation in O’Sullivan’s definition recommends more than a mechanical approach to the business of art making, proposing a way of being, with transformation as its aim.

Clearly this double movement defined my research early on when I moved from an established paradigm of drawing, to casting my attention to its material characteristic as a surface, though curiously, one that did not act as a surface to anything beyond. I then used this recognition to gather a new family of objects, under the general definition of “surface objects”. The important point to be made here is that this move happened in the course of the studio practice. Identifying the significance of the drawing as a surface object occurred, for instance, as it collapsed about me, in the process of removing it from the wall, a moment of struggle in which the paper asserted its materiality beyond my expectation of its behaviour. In light of this, it was impossible to think about surfaces generally. For example, surfaces that belong to other objects I saw as categorically different. These surfaces were ones that could crumple, tear, fold and permit the passage of light. They were not to be identified by their ability to recede as a background. Parallel to the material interest this recognition provoked, it also provided analogous bridges to subjectivity. Furthermore, to specify this spatial



object as a thing of interest, opened its relations to apparently unrelated things – walls, curtains, blankets, veils – by which I was then able to identify the enactment of reciprocal care as a key focus of interest.

The integration of materials and thinking begins in the formative phases of inquiry, prior to isolating a distinct question, field or problem. These arise from the practice rather than the practice serving to address prescribed categories of knowledge. Material thinking thus establishes a sort of reverse order to the practice-led research. The isolation of the research question will be discussed further on. On the basis of this, I would agree with Barbara Bolt that the assignation of “project” to the inquiry is misplaced, since “the art project sets in place intentions and preconceives the outcome in such a way that we are no longer open to what could emerge in the process” (Bolt 2011, 61). The suggestion, here, of a kind of serendipity is given clear material responsibility in a separate text where Bolt recognises that “the materials and processes of production have their own intelligence that come into play in interaction with the artist’s creative intelligence” (Bolt 2010, 30), reflecting Carter’s notion of collaboration. The fact that materials exceed a mere use value, to enter into a dialogue with the artist, engenders the necessity for an attitude of respect, attentiveness and care.

In support of creative research that is founded in material practices, Estelle Barrett argues that such approaches give rise to “multiplicity, ambiguity and indeterminacy” (Barrett 2012, 63). Similar to Paul Carter’s claim that new families of meaning begin with decontextualising that which is known, Barrett

speaks of what amounts to an excess in meanings, which “fall beyond the codes of a given sign system” (ibid). It is by this excess that creative practices can be said to be productive rather than merely interpretive, but also ambiguous. Barrett draws on the work of Julia Kristeva to explain the mechanisms of experience-in-practice, noting her view that “creativity as material process...involves a disruption of the established codes of language that allow new objects of thought and understanding to emerge” (Barrett 2012, 64). Helene Cixous refers, likewise, to the sudden encounter with that which arises from a sort of blindfolded advance in writing and drawing: “These (writing and drawing) are often the twin adventures, which depart to seek in the dark, which do not find, do not find and as a result of not finding and not understanding, help the secret beneath their feet to shoot forth” (Cixous 2005, 21). Further on she reasserts the marvelous danger of the creative adventure with “our mistakes are our leaps in the night...I advance error by error with erring steps, by the force of error” (2005, 22). Error, I understand in terms of its Latin roots, *errare*, to stray, where the connotations of a movement away from that which is *right*, is replaced by a movement away from that which is *given*.

Tim Ingold describes this notion, powerfully evoking the unique adventure that is “the integration of knowledge *along* a path of travel” (Ingold 2007, 88). He contrasts the array of perceptions and changing horizons by which the wayfarer makes a journey, to the journey that is mapped out in advance, where points of arrival and departure are clearly defined, and the contingencies of weather, terrain and encounters on the way are mere obstacles to be overcome. The analogy of the journey can be contextualised for the creative practice. We can

easily identify the model of the second type of traveler in the project approach to creative practice that Barbara Bolt cautioned against: the means-ends approach. The first, however, requires attention to the particularities of the practice – the environment, the routines, the peripheries. Just as it would be impossible for the wayfarer to provide a model of her journey – any account would have to include precisely what arose, the map fitting the territory – so it is necessary, in a methodological account of my research, to consider the particulars, bringing together the what and the how of the practice into a single account. To do this thoroughly would be impractical and yield little insight. Thus any account must be understood as a selection of processes, influences, and rhythms of practice, thus enfolding method with meaning.

### **1.1.2 Working methods and environment**

There is a peculiarly intricate account of a day's work in Pia Gottschaller's study into the relationship between Lucio Fontana's working method and his philosophical framework (Gottschaller 2012). The thesis in Gottschaller's research is that the connection between these is such that they demand parallel attention. In describing Fontana's work on the *Tagli*, the cut canvases that he made between 1958 and 1968, she includes details of where, and at which stage of his working day he took his lunch, when he took his siesta, and the fact that before making the cut, Fontana "would wet his moustache with his tongue...and shape it with his fingers while concentrating" (Gottschaller 2012, 72).<sup>3</sup> What is

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<sup>3</sup> Gottschaller's endnote tells us that the photographer, Ugo Mulas photographed Fontana's moustache for a book of photographs. Mulas had, in fact, wanted to photograph "every part of the artist's body that played a part in the creative process, to which Fontana responded that the whole body worked together and participated in the work (Gottschaller, 2012, p.131). It is impressive that Mulas was so aware of the insights that could be gained by the enterprise he proposed.

the purpose of such details in describing a working method? Clearly, in the gestures and habits that accompany the mechanics of the making processes, an affective dimension is revealed, a cartography of thought and matter. This detail affords us a sense of Fontana's thinking beyond that which he articulates in his interviews and writing: that in the approach to his encounter with the *infinite*, of which he saw these works to be representative, his hand turned self-ward to that little, personal gesture of intimacy. The insight poses a question as to the relationship between this harmless vanity and the incursion into infinite space. To outline method is to choose what is important and what is peripheral. In Gottschaller's account, such details are necessary in understanding how method was situated in both the habitus and finer gestures of the artist, eliciting a rhythm of practice by which we can enter into the "sense", and those excesses of meaning that avoid interpretation, as well as the mechanics of his creative work and life.

I do not intend to go into such detail here, merely to point out that method is always given as a valued extraction of details, and generally in accordance with an articulated aim. The rhythms of my practice are not to be compared with the formal regularities of Fontana's method. How to avoid a diaristic account, whilst nonetheless acknowledging the nuances of practice is problematic. Henri Lefebvre's *Rhythmanalysis*, (2004), which examines the rhythms of urban spaces and their effects upon the inhabitants, provides an interesting tool for examining the smaller realm of an individual practice. Lefebvre suggests "instead of going from concrete to abstract, one starts with full consciousness of abstract in order to arrive at the concrete" (2004, 5). In other words, he suggests, instead of

beginning with case studies and extracting general principles, we begin with the principle of rhythm, as a *real* force, and move toward a material account for invisible forces. Le Febvre writes: “Everywhere where there is an interaction between a place, a time and an expenditure of energy, there is rhythm”. He states that the events implied in this model, provide a “framework for analyses of the *particular*” (Lefebvre 2004, 15. My italics). Thus I will incorporate into a description of my studio environment, and those environments with which it connects, a sense of the rhythms that define and bind them, and in relevant ways, constitute my movements within them.



*Figure 2.* View of South Moreton Bay island cluster, (Russell Island – my home –centre left) from the SW side of Minjerribah. (Photograph, Sharon Jewell)

The island on which I live and work is one of four in the South Moreton Bay Island group. The effect of tides on these islands is to reveal wide stretches of mud, stippled and strung with mangrove roots, twice a day, at the ebb, and twice

a day to cover the littoral, up to the low banks. The movement between these markers is almost visible in the narrow passages between the islands. Island life means one's movements to and from the mainland are bound by the ferry times. One cannot just get up and go at any moment, and as such, there is always an awareness of the perimeter, pushing back, containing, defining an edge to things. There is a topological folding to island life, to the extent that what happens, happens within a given set of terms, with only conditional change exerted from beyond its shores. This open-closed system is reflected in but also open to the studio environment, where materials and tools inhabit the space with the fluid give and take of native species. Thus my working rhythms are mapped, threaded by the electric buzz of cicadas, the deep, distant constancy of ocean, and raucous yet predictable chorus of diurnal and nocturnal bird life. In the rhythmic perpetuity of this outward environment, I sense my movements entering an already motivated pattern, a method of things, already in motion and rhythm, already with purpose. I am constantly aware of the environment holding and directing me, like an ordinance, while I endeavour to *hold* the world around me by way of understanding it, not logically, but responsively, through material engagement.

Within the studio, the distinction between outside and in is marked by a gaping wall that looks over a north facing slope where the garden bristles and pulses with life. Inside, it is all surfaces, typified by a series of horizontally and vertically aligned planes: floor, ceiling, table surfaces on the one hand, and walls, windows and doors on the other. Chairs, like people are both horizontal and vertical, while benches interrupt walls, in a narrow lateral band. The horizontal

planes tend to facilitate, work, movement, the fall and placement of things, while the vertical tend to mark out limits and sudden ruptures to those limits – doors for example. I inhabit this space as a largely vertical element whose horizontal movement across the floor is interposed with more oblique gestures as I negotiate the spaces between horizontal and vertical surfaces: an arc of difference. Where these aligned surfaces give way to less planar limitations, I recognise the outside world (Figure 3).



*Figure 3.* Studio image, Russell Island, 2015. (Photograph, Sharon Jewell)

The mingling of outside and in coalesce in my work in a constant vibration between order and errancy. There are no works that do not demonstrate this dual habitation in very clear terms. Rather than constituting a representation, this repetition of the outer world in the work can be seen as a form of empathy, manifesting at the level of the senses. The outside also offers abundant materials.

Given the non-manufactured nature of these materials – stones, sticks – my intentions again overlap with the intentions of these objects. Difference becomes unavoidable, since the objects one finds in the natural environment are marked by the particular – I choose *this* stone or stick, rather than another. When these particulars come together in repetition, difference becomes a palpable element. Value is established in the particular in a way that is irrelevant in the manufactured material.

My choice of materials and the ways in which I collaborate with them, always invoke repetition and rhythms of labour. The large drawings, *Tracks dissolving in a drift* (figures 29 and 31 pp.139, 141); the series *Growth without pattern or design* (figures 26, 27, 28 pp. 135, 136); the carved panels, *Half open walls* (figures 36, 37, pp.153, 154); the stitched works (figures 6, 7, 8, pp. 56, 57): all these works have emerged through long hours of contact, wherein every part of the material is addressed with intimate and prolonged attention. My tools range from angle grinders and sanders to pens, sewing needles to the finest pin as an incisive tool. Not surprisingly, all my tools are characterised by their ability to delve into surfaces, or to pass lightly over them. They are excavators' tools that, instead of going down, move across, though sometimes in ways that plumb the shallows with the most intricate scrutiny. Scarcely a thread or grain of timber is left unattended, or paper untouched. In keeping with the material imperative of the practice, I suggest that the rhythms – the pace, the size and quality of gestures – are initiated in the grain and texture and weave of materials themselves. The warp and weft of fabric suggest a stitch size in response; the grain and striations



of the layers of ply, the dimples and fibres of the paper, equally recommend a counter gesture, an appropriate exertion as much as extension.

The dynamics of rhythm lie in their openness to change. Each rhythm is susceptible to a breach, a rupture: materials, the labouring body, repeated gestures. Spaces reach their limits; the body tires, or ignites with unexpected energy; internal thoughts mingle with external material agents both restrained and enlivened by architectural boundaries. These after all are just another rhythmic sequence. So the rhythms that are manifest in the works are really just an extension, an answer or counterpoint, to those that thicken and extend outward into the world and inward to the heartbeat, the breath, and diurnal cycles. The struggle, the repetition, the resistance and the fallibility, the reserve and fortitude of all these material-temporal things, including the layers of nested spaces by which these events are intimately bound reveal themselves as the space and time of practice.

### **1.1.3 Indeterminacy**

The kind of thinking implied by the methodological approaches discussed so far may suggest a counter-methodology, a deliberate sabotage of conclusions, final statements and verifiable truths. The problem is that, in order to be verifiable, a process must be able to undergo repetition, and produce similar results. Philosopher and author Michel Serres admits that “inventive thinking is unstable, it is undetermined, it is as little singular in its function as is our hand” (1995, 34). In support of the hand as a tool for thought, Terry Rosenberg, arguing for drawing as an ideational method, writes, “(a)s much as the hand enters thinking,

thinking can be of the hand” (Rosenberg 2008, 111). Where, in traditional research paradigms, objectivity is attained by replacing indeterminate tools with measurable ones, in this creative practice, the hand and its indeterminacies are central to the working method. That it does not produce predictable outcomes is central to the sense and therefore the meaning entailed by the work. For example, in the fabric and stone works the stitching of the grids in which the stones are contained, is necessarily done by hand, stitch by stitch, each one constituting a thought, decision of measure, direction, placement. The differences that arise in the indeterminacy that the hand brings, particularly to the striated weave of these works, is the means by which the grid is overtaken by the poetic. The hand is the tool by which affect, in the form of an excess – to the implied pattern – is able to find issue.

The indeterminacy and uncertainty that is clearly the generative principle in these accounts must, of course, be matched by a deep curiosity, indeed a sense of wonder or the inclination of a mystery; materials giving themselves as unutterable questions, not to be solved so much as exposed, deepened, celebrated and enlivened through an interaction. The materials, with which I choose to engage, are characterised by qualities that already incline toward a corresponding quality in my own being and thus the initial incursion into their surfaces is matched by a deeper sense of inauguration. As Gaston Bachelard writes: “... by our first act of choice, the object designates us more than we designate it” (1987, 3). Thus knowledge is not released *about* materials, but *between* them and me or, later, the beholder. It must be remembered that in the material account of creative research given here, materials are not selected to fulfill the demands of a project,

but out of a genuine inquiry into the qualities that arouse curiosity. Artist Silke Dettmers writes about both the importance and difficulty of justifying wonder as a welcome and necessary partner in the creative inquiry, since it “prioritizes the senses...is non-judgmental and non-hierarchical; wonder is a state before words and reason – all of which drives it to the margins of academic credibility” (Dettmers 2008, 41).

The point of research, typically “the elimination of uncertainty and doubt” (Dettmers 2008, p.41) is challenged by the insistence of maintaining ambiguity at the heart of the inquiry. This has nothing to do with a lack of rigour, but much to do with the fact that materials will always offer more than can be adapted to clear conclusions. I believe we can name the sense of wonder, as a methodological expedient, or condition, that we bring to the creative inquiry: wonder, curiosity, a sense of attraction to one material over another already should signal the detection of some form of knowing that is elevated from the imagination into the tangible world. The fact that wonder is never fully exhausted by written outcomes, but continues to maintain its currency within the interested circuit of the creative work and its beholders, allows that the ineffable need not be overwritten by the exegesis. That is the great value of the practice-led research: to allow the work to be more than a case study that leads to certain conclusions, placing the work behind models extracted from it. In the practice-led approach, the work must be considered as a measure of its own epistemological rigour, but also as witness to its own resistance to analysis.

## 1.2 The Question

The research question in this practice-led inquiry arose from, rather than prior to the work that led the research, as clearly indicated above and throughout the exegesis. The problem I faced with the question in the practice-led approach was how to negotiate a position of inquiry between questions of *what* and *how*. By “what” questions I mean those that seek to use the work as a carrier of meaning that illustrates or responds to something outside itself; in other words a representational approach to art practice. In these sorts of questions responses risk seconding the work to the issues they represent. Caroline Durré likewise recognises this problem, noting that by following methodological models from, for example, sociology and anthropology, “the work attempts to illustrate ‘issues’ bolstered by flaccid statistical research, random visual ‘evidence’, or meandering interviews” (Durré 2008, 38). By the same argument she continues to list the litany of problems encountered in situating the research in a cross disciplinary context.

Further to this I would add that there are considerations associated with questions styled as “how”, by which I mean those that foreground the methodology, where the creative work becomes a case study from which to theorise the mechanisms of the practice more broadly, and simultaneously build on the practice-as-research discourse. While both are valuable approaches, the greater part of my working time was carried out under the hypothesis that the work might present specificity in the question, whilst not fore-signing its own conclusions. Thus the question began to emerge through decontextualising the drawing surface – a move both in the practice and recognised formally in the text – and then

proceeding from this self imposed position of ambiguity. The question became specific, however, when I identified a point of congruence between the “what” – a surface ontology – and a “how” – care. The notion of care arose at the insistence of a vexed question from my supervisor: *Why do you do it?* “It” being “Art”. My vexed and possibly reactionary reply: “because I care” became the trigger for an unanticipated congruence of method and the particularities of the material interests. The key to revealing the question came in a move that augmented the how question with a why, thus highlighting the intimate links between the epistemological and ontological dimensions of the practice-led inquiry.

For Isabelle Stengers, the close association of epistemology and ontology in the use of *interest* as a method of inquiry – the term that lies at the heart of the question “why do you do it?” – produces a necessary ambiguity since questions of interest, concern, wonder and care place the embodied subject within the inquiry. Stengers admits to objections raised to this claim – “another version of an instrumentalist conception of knowledge, reducing it to the answers we get to the questions that matter for us” (Stengers 2011, 375). Instead she insists, and I would agree, that it is the character of interest that gives “the power to cause us to think, feel and wonder, the power to have us wondering how practically to relate to (something), how to pose relevant questions about it” (ibid).

Karen Barad’s diffractive method adopts the same concerns, responding to the discipline based separation of fact from concern or care. Barad proposes that questions of fact and questions of care or concern are intermingled when we

scrutinise the material world for “differences that matter in their fine detail” (Barad quoted in Dolphijn and Tuin 2012, 49). In the fine details that arise through care, manifest as curiosity or wonder, new categories of knowing are exposed that identify real links between the beholder – whether artist or viewer – and the thing beheld. It is by this argument that I am able to layer the discussion of surface materials with subjectivity. So, upon reflection, my response to the question “why do you do it”, although spontaneous, or perhaps because of it, was precisely given. “Because I care” defines not only why I do it, but also how, which is a question of method.

### **1.3 On the writing**

Wittgenstein gives a poetic and lucid image of the relationship between theory and practice, in his evocation of the walled swamp. As Hans Blumenberg recalls this eloquent allegory: “Swamp and wall – where would one ever find these two elements juxtaposed, for the wall cannot be identical with the border of the swamp” (Blumenberg 2010, 76). The wall, as we know, must stand on firm ground, and be read as “a sign which shows there is a swamp inside it, but not, that the swamp is exactly the same size as that of the surface bounded by it” (Wittgenstein 1975, 264). Although the creative work will always extend the theoretical framework by which we endeavour to explain it, that framing is, nevertheless a way of locating and situating, if not defining it. What Wittgenstein does not elaborate upon in his useful metaphor, is the particular nature of the wall. Is the wall to be seen as an abstract enclosure, or could we allow that it, too, has its own particular qualities that not only approximate the location of the swamp, but reflect upon it, elaborate on it and respond, in its own material way.

An enclosure, after all, might have its own windows and openings, that connect its purpose with a wider landscape, that beckon and conceal; it may reveal an outer coating of moss and lichen that mingles its pronouncement of limits with the fecundity of the world. Thus in this exegesis, I have allowed the creative work to inform the theoretical wall, so that, beyond bounding the work in explanation, definition and context – which to some extent it does – it also adopts the work as an invitation to speculate, and take on its own impetus.

The integration, rather than separation of theory, contextual review and discussion of the creative practice has become a useful approach by which to hone the research. The works that I have made, whilst situated within the broad idiom of contemporary sculpture and drawing have, throughout the course of the theoretical and studio research, invoked a context beyond these margins, and this is reflected in the progressive structure of the contextual review. The inquiry into the being of the surface and the naming of care as a way of being – with and within the surface object as artwork – incline the study toward an ontological and phenomenological discourse, which comes through in the art works and writers I refer to, and the nature of my questions. Heidegger is an important point of reference, particularly in chapter two in relation to care, and later, in chapter three where I concentrate on the relations of figure and ground. Jean Luc Nancy is also an important reference here, where I discuss his evocation of primitive man “painting in the grotto” (1996). The phenomenology of giving and the gift, in the writing of Jean-Luc Marion, becomes helpful in talking about care as an action of self-giving. Marion’s phenomenology of the gift problematises the indebtedness built into familiar systems of giving, and establishes instead a

structure that unifies gift and giver. The result of this, I argue, is something akin to reciprocal care. Reflecting upon the ontological implications of material valuing, my attention also turned to the poetic diffusion of being within the material reverie of Gaston Bachelard.

There is some support for this structural organisation suggested in Grounded Theory, which holds that any theory must arise out of research and not precede it (Glaser 1992). Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss emphasise the importance of data collection in grounded theory, as an original source from which theory emerges. Placing data collection, or what we might call process in creative practice, before theoretical frameworks has implications for the literature and contextual review. Glaser justifies a contextualising that comes after the discoveries generated through the grounded inquiry, since it is not possible to tell in advance what literature will be most relevant (Glaser 2010). While I have approached the contextual review from this angle in the initial stages of the research, the integration of theory and context is intensified as the research progresses, particularly since the contextual review functions as a form of data collection. While grounded theory has much to offer in terms of regulating the movement between theory and practice, its application in social sciences means that its outcomes tend to be less inventive than revelatory.

#### **1.4 Conclusion**

In this chapter I have presented, firstly, a methodology of research broadly defined as practice-led. The implications of this approach place it in a difficult position with regards to conventional structures of the academic thesis. The



emphasis is that the research is done through the materials in the process of an emergent field of inquiry and emergent question. Thus creative practice as research demands an attentiveness to details, including nuances of the environment in which the practice unfolds. Both environment and materials in this practice-led research, I treat as collaborators. An ethical dimension is seen here in the agency afforded the world beyond the self, placing the inquiry within the discourses of new materialism, where the blurring of ontology and epistemology are reflected in the methods proposed by theorists such as Isabel Stengers and Karen Barad, for whom wonder, concern and care are integrating factors. On the basis of these methods we cannot assume to be entering creative practice with the idea of marking a neutral ground with an indelible signature. Within a spirit of wonder and interest, as my will intercepts with that of materials and environment, the outcomes of my research come in the form of transformations of ways of thinking about and engaging with the world. In my research this has manifest as a recognition of a peculiar category of objects – surface objects – and the actions of care that they both demand and engender.

The implications for this method of research stretch to the research question and the relationship between the exegesis and the creative work. Inherent to material thinking, the question is emergent and comes in the form of observations and problems that arise in the active process of material collaborations. The relationship of this document to creative work is one of both contextualisation and interpretation. Also, however, in recognition of the unique substance of text, it is one of conjecture and speculation. The exegesis does not seek to wrap up the work in explanation, thereby matching or standing in for it. Instead it builds on

the definable insights gained through the work, whilst leaving the ineffable content to bear witness to its own indefinable affects. There are implications for the contextual review and broad exegetical structure. As the context shifts, as the research develops this needs to be documented. Thus the structure of the exegesis departs from the traditional organisation to intersperse the contextual review with the text relating directly to the work and the theoretical speculations.

The departures that a practice-led thesis makes from the traditional models of academic research are upheld by the recognition of knowledge as embodied, not merely disciplinary. The important point to bear in mind is that the creative works are to be recognised as research outcomes, not merely case studies that uphold or illustrate an idea that overwrites the particular in practice.

## CHAPTER 2

### CARE AS A MODE OF BEING

#### 2.1 The emergence of a dialectic of care in the art work

The commencement of this study coincided for me with an entry into island life, after the construction, there, of a house. When I began identifying the questions that both arose from and motivated my practice, I had been living for one year in a house that I had been instrumental in building. My involvement was thoroughly practical, so that I now know my new house in the greatest intimacy. In the way that one takes care of a dwelling, by maintaining it in good order, we took care with every inch of this complex structure, took seriously its every need, honoured its material strengths and frailties, beginning with its foundational relationship with the ground, for every building has its feet in the dark, damp earth, amidst roots and worms, ants and slaters. For the earth is, as Hans Blumenberg observes, “the unnoticed reliability of what is self evident” (Blumenberg, 2010, 75).

The telluric inheritance of the dwelling appears to dissipate as it rises upward and inward, but the expectations of reliability are invested largely in the stability of the ground. To the extent that the ground holds the downward force of the house, that it does not shift or shake or wash away, the ground can be said to *care* for the house, to hold and maintain it. Likewise, to the extent that the house covers and protects us, warms and offers solace, comfort, and secrecy, supports our weight and awaits our returns from absence, we can surely say that the house

*cares* for us. Here, care is understood not as a sentiment, but as a necessity, as an answer to a question in the form an exigency, and as always reciprocal.

The relevance of these reflections concerning the notion of care in relation to the dwelling, find a coincidence with the way I have come to consider not only my approach to creative work, but with a way of understanding the many relations that define art in its genetic processes and in the life the artwork lives after the making. These relations, which I will refer to often in the exegesis, include the relation of materials within their aggregate form, most particularly concerning the interactions of marks and surfaces in drawing – largely the subject of the following chapter; the relation of the drawing to the world; the artist to the work in process, and the special alliance between viewer or beholder and artwork, well beyond the making. By referring these relations to an act of care, I am suggesting a new way of thinking an ethics of art practice that finds a place in some ways within what has broadly come to be defined as a *new materialism*<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> New materialism in the creative arts refers to a post critical fascination with materials as possessing their own agentive forces, and as such “the anthropocentric narrative that has underpinned our view of humans-in-the-world since the enlightenment” (Bolt in Bolt and Barrett, 2012, p. 2) is brought to question, contributing to the merging of epistemological and ontological frameworks of understanding. In philosophy, it represents a diverse collection of ideas that share a concern for the integration of meaning and matter. Manuel de Landa, Rosi Braidotti, Karen Barad and Quentin Meillassoux are several of its principle voices.



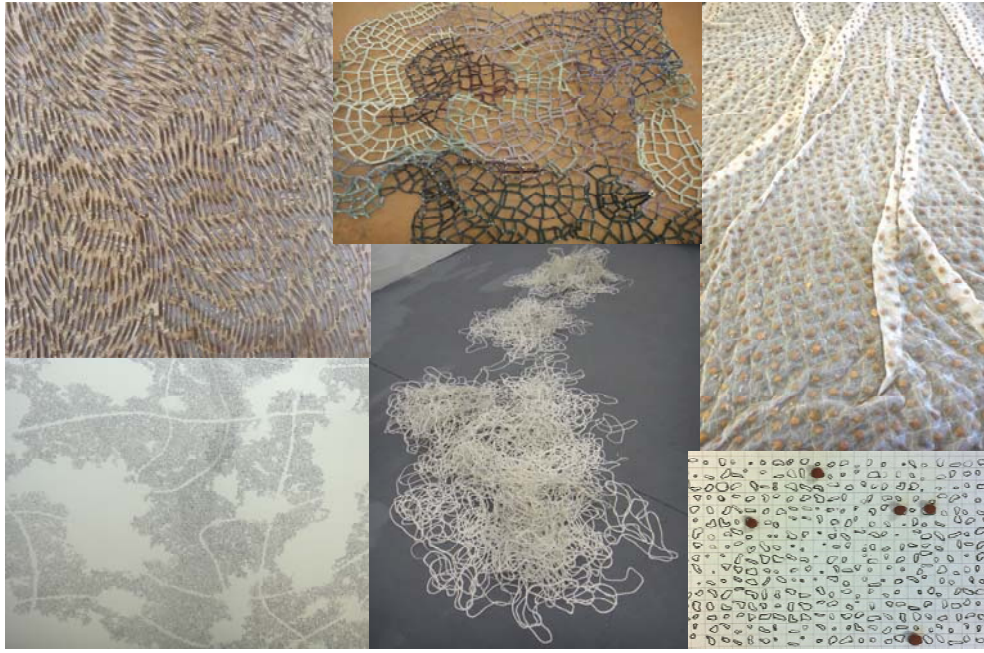
*Figure 4.* The house on Russell Island with long tree shadows, 2013. Photograph, Sharon Jewell)

It is important to note that the literature that comes under this banner has run an interested though independent course to the artists who seem to express this zeitgeist in their own terms. Within this ethos, materials or matter or things are seen to be agentic, rather than merely available for use, always defined by their interactivity with human agents. Into this discourse I introduce the terms of care,

as a particular kind of responsiveness, that lives on in the artefacts regardless of severance from their maker. In this speculative proposition, the care that inheres within the work then becomes available to the beholder who cares in attention. The work, that is to say, cares back. I do not wish to claim that this is the way all artworks function. But where care in the making is directed not to a cause, image or idea external to the work, but precisely to the work itself, in singular attention, then the care abides fully within the material body of the work itself. I discuss this further toward the end of this chapter, where I give it the name *intransitive care* and connect it to the phenomenology of giving.

In my studio work over the course of the study I note an increasingly singular approach where questions directed toward the meaning, form or function of the work, dissolved into the extended moment of making. Rather than asking what else I could do with a work, I was more interested in asking how long I could sustain an interaction, often in the form of a rhythmic pattern (Figure 5). As works increased, maintaining these patterns, they also became different, not just bigger. The increasing weight of the stone blanket meant a changing relationship to the body, whose presence it implied. In the end, it became almost too heavy to lift, whilst at the same time the watery quality of the fabric flowed more liberally. The mesh (figure 5, top and middle) began from a single centre, yet, almost without my direction, developed into multiple centres, thus expanding not only outward, but also declaring new points of convergence, arriving at no particular edge. All the works, in different ways, determined by the material, the tools and temporal constraints developed within a commitment directed solely toward the work as an emergent proposition.





*Figure 5.* Samples of works in detail, 2012-2014. Rhythm, repetition, and extension, wherein, for each, difference emerges over time.

In all the stitched works, the sequential, rhythmic patterns of the objects wove together past and future, for rhythm always anticipates its future pattern in the present action. Care was directed no longer at an idea or meaning externally located but toward this present sequence, these singular weights and material qualities, as they augmented and intensified in presence. It thus seems to me to be no coincidence that of all the objects I have made throughout this inquiry, the ones that most fully entailed care in the making, and thus best manifest the outward proffering of care, also resemble objects whose usual purpose it is to provide comfort and protection: that is, the blanket, the curtain and the tent-cradle (figures 6, 7, 8).



*Figure 6.* Sharon Jewell, 2013-2015. *Mineral Down*. Organza, stones, cotton. 300 X 145cm.  
(Photograph by Sharon Jewell).



*Figure 7.* Sharon Jewell, 2014. *Curtain*. Detail Organza, stones, cotton. 560 X 200cm  
(Photograph by Sharon Jewell).





Figure 8. Sharon Jewell, 2014. *Tent cradle*. Organza, stones, cotton, wood, 210 X 49 X 232 cm.  
(Photograph by Sharon Jewell)

As a way of describing an approach in work, or quality of action, or the expression of a causal relation – when the parts of the work seem to be mutually supportive or mutually giving of expressive access – care has emerged both as an ethics and functional expediency in the multiple relations that are enacted in this art practice. In this reading, care sometimes appears as causality, sometimes interest or inclination, a holding of attention; sometimes it appears in the labour or enactment of a skill; sometimes it arises in the more familiar actions of tending something with both determination and restraint. In one way or another all these manifestations of care are brought forth, I observe, in the course of my art making, and if I am to call them all care, then I understand them to be participating in a single idea, manifest diversely.

It is true that these reflections on the nature of care might be adapted to an examination of a vast range of art works and their making, regardless of their hardiness or ephemerality. It also should be pointed out that care, as a mode of being within an art practice, has been explored discretely through a number of important contemporary works. Janine Antoni, in 1993, produced the performance work, *Loving care*, in which she famously mopped the gallery floor with her long ink soaked hair, driving out the attendant audience as she pushed toward the boundaries of the room. Robert Enright and Meeka Walsh point out that Antoni's work frequently addresses the simultaneity of danger and defiance (Enright and Walsh 2010, 40), suggesting something akin to what I have identified as a dialectic structure of care. In another work, *Coddle* (1998), Antoni adopted a Madonna and Child pose, but cradling, instead, her own leg in a gesture of loving and tender intimacy.

Sophie Calle addressed the theme of self care in 2007, with her work, *Take care of yourself*, for which she invited 107 women to help her interpret a break-up email, using the skills of their particular professions to do so. Barbara Bolt remarks of this work: "Each respondent and each response offered a different way of looking at, thinking about and responding to an extraordinary event in an ordinary life" (Bolt, 2011, 19). The work was Calle's way of taking care of herself in a situation that seemed beyond calculation. Finally, Dominique Mazeaud's project, *The great cleansing of the Rio Grande* developed into a monthly "art/life pilgrimage" between 1987 and 1994 (Greenmuseum, n.d.), where the care of the river became a response solely to the demands of a location, in need of attention. The critical resistance to this work, Suzi Gablik

argues, with justifiable cynicism, was due to the fact that “real-life actions can sometimes be art but only as long as they are not useful and serve no purpose” (Gablik 1991, 134). Gablik’s comment is a criticism based on the limitations of authenticity required in the sanctioning of a work of art.

What I want to show through the above examples, is that care has become a topic of some urgency, particularly in the work of a number of female artists, in response to both environmental and feminist concerns and is most often expressed through performative and ritual based practices. What the above works recognise is that care is essentially an action, not a theory or an idea; it is something that happens, that makes a difference. I mention these as a way of contextualising my own work and locating the differences. I am interested in revealing care at all levels of the practice, and into the long or brief life of the object created. What I argue is that the art object is not by nature an inert relic, but capable of continuing to perform in the spirit with which it was generated. As I have previously mentioned, the materials I have chosen to work with – paper, board, fabric – have several very particular features that make of their place in the discussion of care more than useful examples.

Surface materials are suggestive of care because of the broad face they present to the world, which makes them both vulnerable and generous. Because of their easy penetrability, but also because of their ability to wrap and shroud, warm and protect, be secreted away, and raised to the weather they participate in care on both sides of the definition: in extension, and in reception. Such is the dialectic nature of care, that it is evoked in the tenuous place between the too much and

the not enough. To wear, for example, is to wear out. To stitch is equally to ruin, by puncturing, and to mend by joining. To sand a surface is to tend to its tactile quality, but also to grind it thin. In much of my work care and damage appeared to be sought in one and the same action, and thus care came to assume a dialectic form.

## 2.2 Care in Heidegger and Hyginus: toward the reciprocity of care

Heidegger is the philosopher most singularly associated with the notion of care as an ontic touchstone. Heidegger qualifies this assignation through Dasein's, necessary dispersal, as *being-there*, in the world<sup>5</sup>; that by being-in-the-world, "Dasein must *deal* with that world" (Mulhall 2005, 113). Stephen Mulhall qualifies that it is not as though Dasein is always involved in considerate or sympathetic care, but merely that in the concomitance of world and being, there is no thinking one without the other. Heidegger lists the ways in which care or concern might come to be enacted:

having to do with something, producing something, attending to something and looking after it, making use of something, giving something up and letting it go, undertaking, accomplishing, evincing, interrogating, considering, discussing, determining. . . .  
(Heidegger, 1962, 56).

Given this wide ranging expression of care – essentially everything that is considered, or thought through, or that entertains a dialogue with and within the

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<sup>5</sup> Dasein is Heidegger's term for a subject's being. Literally it means "being there", by which Heidegger means that to be is to be somewhere. There is no independence from worldly context.

world, either thoroughly or weakly – it is not difficult to see how it is implicated in creative practice. My contention is that these relations happen between materials as much as they do between people and things. As for myself, the way I comport my body in the studio, and beyond, the materials I choose, how I procure and then engage with them, the inside and outside environments through which both thought and feeling and work arise, all involve me in an enactment of care. The dealings we have with the world, in care, give rise to our understandings of it. As Barbara Bolt writes, “[u]nderstanding is the ‘care’ that comes from handling, of being thrown into the world and dealing with things” (Bolt 2011, 24). As we consider the world through our actions within it, we come to understand ourselves as much as we understand that into and by which we are given. Care and understanding are intimately bound. Following this, I would suggest that as the earth, in all its large and small material affordances, supports us, as does the house, it too can be said to function within terms of care.

Here I see care not as a sentiment, but as an involvement, a responsiveness, an interest manifest in the form of an action. I only really understand the fineness of a material, or its resistance if I involve myself with it attentively, not imagining it serving the purpose of some other form, but working to elicit its qualities, to give them rein, through the qualities and means that I am able to employ. And, in so doing, I elicit qualities inherent to my own being, am familiarised with my strengths and frailties, and the blurred borderlands of my limitations. As such, material interactions map my being in new ways. Likewise, ink reveals itself in particular ways when it encounters paper as opposed to water; different interests or concerns are manifest. Ink and paper enjoy a conversation that is different to

the intimate discourse when the two liquids come together. When I am held by an artwork, as a beholder, I am one of two objects. It is as though that other one responds to an exigency within my presence; that there exists a kind of understanding or an interest, on the part of the object, that draws forth concealed elements of my own subjectivity.

Philosopher, Ian Bogost addresses this, I believe, when he writes “Objects try to make sense of each other through the qualities and logics they possess...by the means they know internally but in relation to the qualities in which they bathe” (Bogost 2012, 66). The consciousness we possess as humans is, therefore, one such quality, but not the precondition for meaningful encounter. These ideas regarding consciousness and responsiveness lead logically to Heidegger, who Graham Harman criticises for his separation of humans from all other things, on ontological grounds. For example, he notes that Heidegger, for all his phenomenological insight regarding Dasein, “does not see the collision of inanimate things as philosophically meaningful” (Harman 2005, 33). This introduces a contention that I also will take up but from a critique of Heidegger’s assignation of care to human subjects alone. Where Heidegger talks about Dasein, he is only interested in the human as Dasein. There is no place here for the inorganic, the inanimate, or the being of other living things. So, in order to proceed with a theory in which the artwork participates in care and reciprocity, it is necessary to depart from this core Heideggarian rationale. I intend to do this, however, by the same means that Heidegger singles out humans as the special inheritors of Dasein; that is, by way of the curious and poetic fable, penned by

the Roman scholar, Hyginus, in which Heidegger found his model for the personification of care in the being of Dasein.

In the fable, Care, or *Cura*, crosses a river, sees some clay and takes hold of a portion, giving it an unspecified shape. As Care contemplates her creation, Jupiter arrives and Care asks him to give the new form spirit, which he does. Care announces that she would give this work her name, but Jupiter insists that the creation should bear his. In the course of the ensuing dispute, Tellus, Earth, arrives and insists that, as her own matter inheres in the form, her name should be used. They decide to invite Saturn as arbiter, and he proclaims the following solution:

You, Jupiter, because you have given the spirit, should get it back upon death; you Tellus, because you have given the body, should receive again the body; Care, however, because she first thought of this shape, should possess it as long as it lives. But since the fight now concerns the name, it should be called “homo,” because it has been made from the “humus” (Blumenberg, 2010, 140).

While this myth is mentioned in numerous sources that examine Heideggarian care, (for example, Boff 2008; Groth 1987; Hyland 1997), Hans Blumenberg, alone takes license to ask two questions that seem so obvious, once asked: why does Care cross the river when, with greater ease, she could have gathered the clay from the bank? And, the second question, which turns out to be not unrelated: from what does Care take the form that she fashions? Blumenberg sees

the omission of explanation of these details as lacunae in the telling that suggest the myth's source in Gnosticism, wherein founding narratives frequently make recourse to mirroring (Blumenberg 2010, 141). With these considerations he concludes that Care crosses the river, and in so doing, observes her reflection, projected onto the clay bank of the river, which gives impetus to her action.

Blumenberg offers some credible reasons for this omission, though I feel he does not fully pursue their significance. First, we can understand that the act of shaping the clay, is neither arbitrary nor designed, but incidental to an interaction in the world. Care wanders, like Tim Ingold's errant traveler (2007, 75-76), extracting meaning in the course of way making. But in this way making Care observes, suggesting Care is not always aimed, but has a general way of being that makes her receptive. Second, and Blumenberg does conclude this, is the fact that Care gets to keep her creation not because she invented the human, "but rather because the human was made in her image and likeness, and thus partakes in her being" (Blumenberg 2010, 141).

The myth is dizzyingly cyclical, in a cause and effect way. What I believe can be inferred from this, however, is simply that Care begets Care. That is, care is not only the means by which something gets done, but it enters the made thing as a quality by which it proceeds to make its way in the world, keeping in mind that care is maintained only through enacting, not by appearance or intent. Thus I would conjecture that Heidegger's reluctance to ascribe care to the being of *things*, as much as to humans, was based on the privileging of the receptive and responsive mediator of consciousness as a precondition of care, rather than care a



condition of *Being*, if that being be conceived in care.

Of course, I have no way of proving or validating these readings, in the way one tests and verifies fact from fallacy in quantifiable questions. Neither myth nor philosophy can be of use to prove anything, but corroboration with experience makes the interpretation more or less reliable. What is this sense by which I am seized in spending time with the works I make? I wrap up time in the care I give, and it returns this finite labour in something infinite in that it offers itself in indeterminacy, beyond signification, and irreducible to the work given. No matter how much I put in, this thing that occurs is always more. My being is augmented in the rapture I feel when immersed in and then regarding the completed work; that sudden change of feeling one experiences when the giving, in the labour, turns into an eventful object, fully in charge of and charged with its own being, full of the care, I would suggest, with which it has been fashioned. And, replete with that care and temporality made infinite, it is available not only to me, but to anyone who cares to behold it, and thus to be held by it. Also supporting this reciprocal notion of care is the sense of nurture I receive from the works I care to behold and spend time with. I am buoyed, assured; in beholding I am *held*. In my reckoning, this is care. As the Hyginus myth shows, under Blumenberg's enlightened interrogation, Care not only gives considered form, but Care begets Care.

### 2.3 A dialectic of care and a review of works

At the outset of this investigation, I had asked what was, primarily, a question of foundations: Is the world the grounds for expression, and if so, *how does the world get in – into the mind, the soul, the body – in order to get out in expressive form?* As this initial curiosity was taking shape I was engaged in a series of drawings that evoked, it could be imagined, the tangle and chaos of complex systems, wild gardens perhaps, with patterns falling in and out of coherence and a sense both of growth and decay. What of the world triggered these formless yet purposeful studies? How had the world “got in” and what process of translation ordered it to “get out” in this way? Figures 9 and 10 reveal the incidental congruence between the drawings and the garden beyond my studio door. What is curious here, however, is that the garden, in the form shown, developed after the drawings, complicating the order of world and expression.

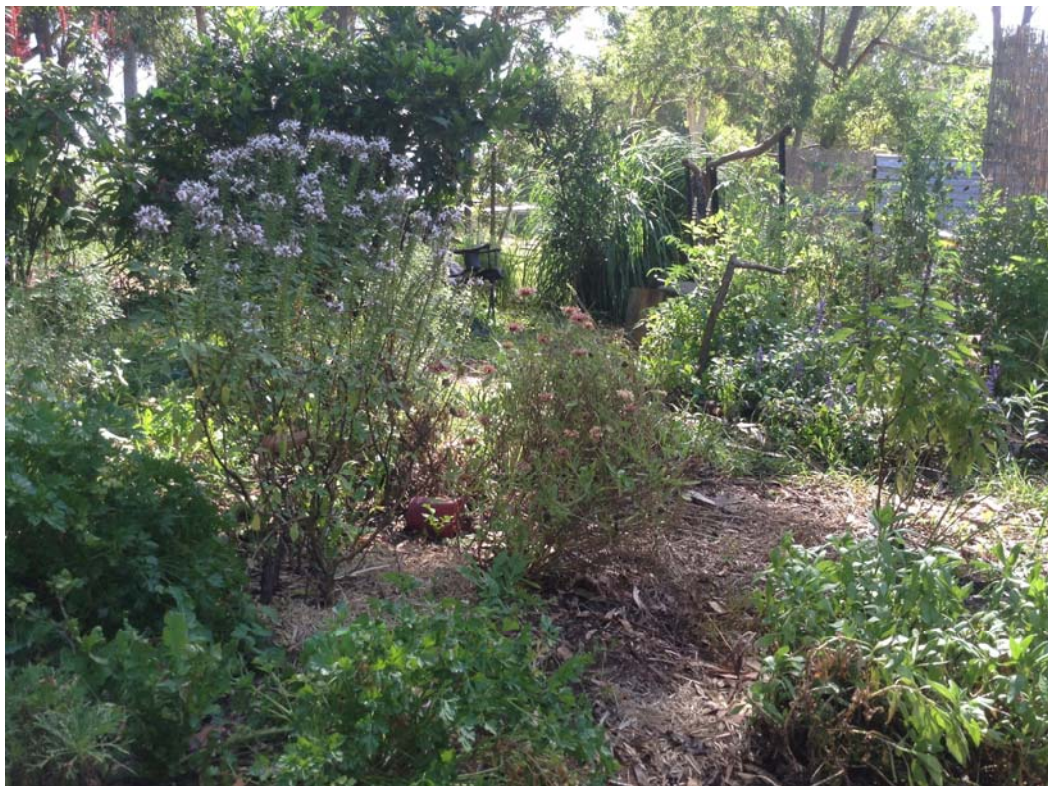
Jean-Luc-Nancy offers a credible response to the question of the movement of expression between world and artist, in writing of art, that it is “a double topology of presence coming into sense and sense coming into presence” (Nancy, 1997, 134); a reciprocity that seemed to echo, in some ways, the responsiveness of dwelling, described at the beginning of this chapter. While the idea of *sense* is critical to the apprehension of the world, care suggests a responsiveness, a handling of things in empathic awareness, which does not immediately suggest a gentle hand, rather a hand sensitive to the qualities of what it is addressing. And since care is particular, not general, then to be effective, not just theoretical, it must also imply action, and in action, things become different. Thus I suggest, in addition to Nancy’s formula, art might also

be thought of as a double topology of care coming into presence and presence coming into care.

If the sound construction of the house can be said to emerge in the enterprise and active engagement of care, returned by the house to its makers, then perhaps this formula can be applied to the art practice as well. If the act of making begins with a choice of materials, of an object, of a way of handling, then care is immediately implied; it is there at the outset: I choose because I care just as I care to choose, bringing to mind Gaston Bachelard's commitment to the imagination of qualities. For Bachelard, the qualities or objects that one dwells upon, particularly in oneiric contemplation are assignations of being. "Imagining a quality means giving it a value that either goes beyond or contradicts the sensory value" (Bachelard, 2011, 60). If this designation exists at the initial choice, then in art practice, it must continue throughout the process, and beyond the turbulence of making. For every moment in the creative process involves a choice, a designation, so that if we are to pursue Bachelard's claim, then the artwork in the making continues to designate the becoming-self through choices made. In this reciprocity of making – the work becomes as I become – care is manifest in receptivity and an impartiality that forestalls external references, with every action taken. The material activity and qualities unfolding in the work rub up against the awakening and maturing self, similarly buffing the materials into a new consciousness: a friction of two worlds, topologically intertwined, informing and tending each other.



*Figure 9.* Sharon Jewell, 2012. *Growth without pattern or design.* Detail. Pen and ink on paper. 150 X 100cm full size. (Photograph by Sharon Jewell)



*Figure 10.* The garden at Russell Island, 2013. (Photograph by Sharon Jewell)

Just as one cannot live a life without incurring a unique imprint of the world, neither is it likely for matter of any kind to present a profile devoid of worldly excursion. In working with materials that are receptive to the physical conversations that happen in art practice, both work and artist imprint each other, absorbing and returning the care given in mutual attentiveness. Materials and artist are entwined in a mutually informing reflexivity, in each, drawing forth rather than constructing, otherwise concealed profiles and qualities. It is in this system that the dialectic terms of care – the too much and not enough – become the currency of exchange. For example, at what point, and by what indications does the sensitivity and mutual responsiveness become dominated by the will of one actor alone, and how is this moment suspended? When is the paper ruined, rather than enlivened? (Figure 11). When does the stitch begin to weaken rather than strengthen the fabric, but also, when does this weakening become a new strength? (Figure 12). Surface materials are especially open to these considerations, because they are not backed or supported by internal structures or depths.

The durability of cloth, as anthropologist Warren D’Azevedo points out, is dependent on human intervention “as people variously attend to its preservation or destruction” (D’Azevedo quoted in Schneider and Weiner 1986, 179). The symbolic weight of cloth in many tribal communities and traditions, for which cloth is a mediator between the physical and spiritual is given by the “temporal dimension” where labour congeals within its substance (Biebleman quoted in Schneider and Weiman, 179).





*Figure 11.* Sharon Jewell, 2013. *Abrasion*, 3. Detail. Tracing paper. 100 X 100 cm full size.  
(Photograph by Leah King-Smith)



*Figure 12.* Sharon Jewell. *Curtain* (work in progress). Organza and stones.

Nevertheless, cautions Biebelman, “cloth is also susceptible to rotting, fraying and decay” (ibid). Human care or absence of it is immediately registered in cloth,

which cannot conceal its ailments in depths. When, in all their roles of covering and closing, concealing and holding, fabrics begin to tear or fall away, they are a reminder of the insubstantiality of the division that they appear to enact: the secreted *other side* of the curtain is only a fold away; the safety I feel beneath the blanket is not proportional to the tenuous weave of that familiar cover, though it gives me an inside that feels complete and inviolable. Surface materials, then, stretch in a thin place that is capable of designating two worlds. I would note, furthermore, that while other more rigid objects also are vulnerable to breaking, weakening or aging – the leg of a chair begins to give way; the motor in a tool splutters; a stone wall crumbles, the body grows frail – only cloth can *come undone*. Only cloth reverses the order of time in its return to thread. When Penelope wanted to draw out the weaving of the shroud, in order to waylay her suitors, she repeatedly *undid* a portion of her day's work. In *undoing*, as opposed to *breaking*, time is reversed, or stabilised. Undoing takes back, returns surface to line. If weaving maps the passing day, unweaving must reclaim it. For Penelope, a dialectic of care demanding equal attention to the making and unmaking of her time piece suspended the awaiting menace.

Contemporary artist, Elana Herzog, makes works that bring Penelope to mind, for these extraordinary pieces function clearly within the dialectics of care, where their mystique and enchantment lie in the meeting of ruin and redemption. (Figure 13). The difference is that in Herzog's work, the ruin and the making happen in the same direction, rather than in the forward and reverse of Penelope's weaving. Herzog describes her process in this way:

For the past ten years I've been making work in which I staple found textiles to the walls using thousands of metal staples. Parts of the fabric and the staples are then removed and sometimes reapplied, leaving a residue of shredded fabric and perforated wall surface in some areas, and densely stapled and built-up areas elsewhere (in Schmerler 2006).

The fabrics she uses often include old chenille bedspreads, a fabric manufactured as an imitation of (caterpillar) fur, and thus characterised by a deliberate “faux” quality. Only in their undoing, does the authenticity and ravishing beauty, of these objects come forth, as if, in their mint state, they were veils that concealed their own seduction. One senses that the fabric is dissolving under the repeated insistence of the staples. In parts, the one-time presence of fabric is indicated by no more than residual holes where staples once pinched. Fabric, suggestive rather than revealing, appears to have merged with the wall that both supports and reclaims, suspending dissolution in the grounded stability of the room. The cloth derives its articulacy equally from its absences and its material remains. Modest chenille takes on a value not generally associated with this homely rag, and appears to me to have reached a poetic intensity, on the cusp of its complete fragmentation. The wall surface moves both forward of the cloth, where it appears to have devoured or dissolved it, and behind it, throwing the residual patterns forward and suggesting their completion in vacant surfaces. Figure and ground wrap around each other in a vibratory, sensual push and pull.



Alberto Burri's *Sacchi* are similarly given to the negotiation between ruin and repair (figure 13), as suggestions of wound and stitch run through so many of his works. Despite Burri's protestations that the works are nothing more than "form and space" (Hamilton 2008, 31), it is impossible to ignore the presence of the surgeon's trade and the allusion to flesh and wound. There is the visceral quality of the materials he has used – melted plastics push through burlap, stitches line up like urgent sutures – and no less importantly, his own professional beginnings as a surgeon in the Italian army during the Second World War, which seem to confirm the suspicion that there is more going on here than a formalist rhetoric. Burri's familiar biography needs just a mention, since it is impossible to wrench all that followed in his artistic life from its beginnings in an American prisoner of war camp during the conflict. Here he began painting on the rough sack cloth known as burlap, a material he continued to use particularly throughout the 1950s when he produced hundreds of works collectively known as *Sacchi* (Hamilton 2008, 32). These works are broadly characterised by abstract compositions of irregular grids, made by suturing together the torn and reassembled burlap sacks.

Jaimey Hamilton cites Lorenzo Trucchi who observed that Burri's paintings were like "membranes" whereon "sensuality and nihilism are fused to the point of becoming a confusion of sensations, conflicts [and] nightmares" (Hamilton 2008, 33). Trucchi's interpretation of the work as "a skin of traumatic memory" (as Trucchi quoted in Hamilton 2008, 33), is the first reading in an unfolding sequence of interconnected traumas and reparations that, according to Hamilton, the works play out. Beyond a legacy of war traumas, Hamilton identifies a

“psychosocial suturing of the wounds of modernist painting, which was seen to be in crisis” (Hamilton 2008, 34). The *Sacchi*, according to this reading, bring together modernism’s statutory grid with the abjection of “poor” materials and a wound that refused to be healed. As Hamilton writes of the insufficiently mended gashes in the stretched burlap: “Stitches are placed in the wound’s context but refuse to sew it up, accentuating the need for reparation, rather than suggesting its happy conclusion” (ibid., 39). Hamilton also provides compelling evidence that the works in fact were a response to the Italian post war economy where a period of dependency on the US for food contributions – shipped in burlap sacks – led to a humiliating cultural dominance (ibid., 48). As long as the skins, implied by the *Sacchi*, remained independent of body, and therefore uncommitted to any single corresponding narrative, their language remained topologically mutable.

Burri’s silence on the works, coupled with their astonishing articulacy make for an intriguing study of the relationship between artist and work. What I want to take from this brief study however, concerns the importance of surface materials in the morphing narrative, and their investment in a dialectic of care. The latter scarcely need be restated, for it is an inherent quality in Burri’s oeuvre: materials are honoured in their ruin, while repair, always evident, refuses to close the wound completely. Pathos is sustained precisely because the healing is never complete. Jaimie Hamilton observes from a studio photograph that he “seems to be tentatively tearing at the burlap with the intention of not scarring its surface more than he must – a cut ultimately made for the greater good of the ‘patient’” (Hamilton 2008, 42). The isolation of metaphorical skin from body, allowed

Burri to maintain his spare formalist rhetoric, whilst creating works that could take on the form of a range of decisive social, political and personal moments. As long as they remained undetermined by subcutaneous definition, they would always perform in excess of signification.



*Figure 13.* Elana Herzog, 2007. No title given. From the exhibition *W(e)ave*, 2007, Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Ridgefield, Connecticut. (Photograph by Christian Saltas). <http://www.designboom.com/art/motion-blur-american-craft/> (accessed February 24, 2015).



Figure 14. Alberto Burri, 1952. *Sacco*. Detail. Burlap, stitching. From: Helen Molesworth, 2005. *Part sculpture, part object*. Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University. P.67.

However we may read their work for meaning, both Elana Herzog and Alberto Burri appear, in their use of fabric, to invoke the skin at a psychological register: the skin turned outward, detached from the body. For Herzog, the skin becomes an assemblage of wall, fabric and staples. As she says, “In these ‘drawings’ staples act as mark and material, penetrating, distressing, and ornamenting the skin of the wall.” (Herzog n.d.). Both artists evoke care in a dialectic way through simultaneous destruction and restraint, where restraint does not come at the end of the process, but throughout. For Herzog the too much and too little meet each other half way. As the staples accumulate, the fibres disintegrate and are pulled away. The more thoroughly they are held to the wall, the more they begin to disappear beneath this deliberate attention to their endurance.

Gaston Bachelard writes about the poetics of this dual operation of restraint and surfeit, referring to literary poetics in his example, but it is readily applicable to Herzog and Burri. He observes that certain poets are “great sensitizers of the imagination,” in their ability to “set excess (the *too much*) alongside insufficiency (the *not enough*) in a way that makes each the borderland of the other” (Bachelard 2011, 65). For Bachelard, such a dialectic is necessary if readers (beholders) are to participate in the impressions described (ibid). It is interesting that Bachelard recognises the active dialectic, rather than the resolution of a work, as that which gives access to a reader / viewer, and enables participation. In this definition, the poetic structure has much in common with what I have claimed for care in the event of the art work. To recognise participation, as opposed to understanding, suggests that there is a reciprocation of sensibility between the artwork and the beholder, that as I immerse myself in the concerns of the work, those concerns become mine also. The following section concerns how these considerations arose in a series of paper works which I have collectively called *Abrasions*.

#### **2.4 Skin abrasions: Studio works**

*Abrasions* is a series of six works I made during 2013 for which the above analysis provides an appropriate context (see figures 11 and 15 ). These fragile pages were made by stretching tracing paper over a square frame, and into this tight, drum-like skin, scratching repeatedly with a long pin, each tear releasing a little more tension from the taut surface. In the tear the surface was both ruptured and revealed, enlivened as it was destroyed, its frailty given by the same violence as its authority. As the paper began to slacken in the frame, tearing became

harder to control. As long as the surface was tightened, the pin met its resistance with equal force. Incisions were clear, sharp and controlled. In the loosening of the chafed skin, an absence of resistance, a depleted interest, made the pin, likewise, an inadequate tool, one that slipped across the surface of its target in druggy imprecision. As the tears began to overlap, the paper stretched and opened, buckled and heaved.

An analogous form is to be found in the overwritten page, where in repeated inscriptions, in the insistence of the message, sense dissolves into a ground of expressive intensity, such as in Emma Hauck's wrenching letters.<sup>6</sup> In these pages overwriting dissolves into the paper surface, to a point at which the grief of the writer, seems to be overtaken by a growing interest between paper and inscription. The markings into the paper reach a kind of saturation, where, as in the *Abrasions*, tears run into tears, and the paper hangs between an expressive transformation and exhaustion. These markings, coupled with creases and folds, inflect the totality of the page, define its limits, its capacity, resembling what Michel Serres has called noise, or *ichnography*, "the ensemble of all possible profiles...what is possible, or knowable or producible" (Serres 1995, 19). For Serres the ichnography, or noise, is the reduction of the figure and ground to pure ground (1995, 20).

The saturated page is its own grounds by which mark and paper hold each other in an urgent and mutual interest. Like the skin at the end of a life, the page has

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<sup>6</sup> Emma Hauck was admitted into a psychiatric hospital in 1909, where she soon began writing layered letters to her husband. Translated as "Darling come" the letters are so densely layered that grey tonal columns of blurred and scrambled text is all we see.



taken time into its fabric, not in any sequence, but in a simultaneity that alters the qualitative nature of the substance. When pinned to the wall, the paper slumps and folds like weary cloth. Yet in this draping, it also becomes a voluminous object, where space is contained in the breath of folds, and where it floats from the wall, at the ends of long specimen pins. The paper is a specimen, a frail skin discarded, as delicate as an insect wing, both abject and precious, ancient and renewed. The paper, once blind and passive, at the service of inscription, has emerged as the full extent of its marks, no longer available for use. To ruin is to give issue to the qualities of a thing, until that point of saturation, and there the object remains, poised between these two poles of expression and ruin.



*Figure 15.* Sharon Jewell, 2013. *Abrasion 3*. Tracing paper, car backing. 100 X 100cm.  
(Photograph by Leah King-Smith).

## 2.5 The phenomenology of care

### 2.5.1 The intransitive being of care and the gift

In the final section of this chapter I wish to address the problem of ascribing care, specifically reciprocal care, to non-sentience. In the previous section I developed a logical argument for the continuation of care in objects made through care's dialectic form. However, it remains to be clear how this care comes to touch the beholder; how it remains active. The art object reciprocates, but, not being of human consciousness, it cannot be said to *sense* care in the same way. If we associate care, when properly coupled with action, with a sentiment of human obligation, tenderness, emotional investment then we are saying that care is the mindfulness with which a thing is done, and not the action itself, regardless of the sense faculties with which a thing performs. However, if we eliminate the need for *sense* from a definition of care what avenues does that open up to argue for reciprocation?

Throughout this thesis, I have maintained the conviction that care is something inherently active, not reducible to sentiment or theory. That is to say, while it is possible to develop a theory of care, it is not possible to care theoretically. If an impulse to care is not enacted, then it must be thought otherwise, thus implying a connection, a proximity, even an intimacy between the actors of care. On the other hand, to care *about* a thing suggests a responsive act that does not necessarily make any single thing the target of an action, as it would in caring *for*. This attention to prepositions is not pedantry. For the *about* in care does not set a definitive radius, but a wide field that makes its object no single nameable thing. Caring *about* might give order to a *way* of behaving in the world, and it is



through concern for a *way* of behaving or *mode* of being, specifically as an artist, that I direct the inquiry toward the theme of care. Caring *for*, a far more direct and focused care, finds its expression in a defined space, the intimacy of the garden, the love of another, the protection of a frail painting in the skilled hands of the conservator or the wellbeing of aged cloth. Yet there is another way of thinking care that somehow comes prior to the will, or the responsive impulse generated in contact with an object or field of need. This care is an intransitive, taking no particular object or field of concern, but none the less, *expressed* entirely through the particular. The impulse to care, that generates action, is, I suggest, that which purposes my creative practice and working method. It is intransitive, because it comes prior to any object, issue, idea or demand. It is particular because every choice, every value, every attention is given in care, to the revealing of matter at hand.

This, I would argue, explains the intricacy that characterises my working method. Care begets patience, because the satisfaction of completion is waylaid by the response to a need that is self-generating. As long as the work is in the process of being made, the work *is* its making that happens in care. There is no model, no external reality to which it defers in a representational sense that can be said to be a primary object of care. In this sense intransitive care, it seems, is a condition of the soul as it projects through the body, much as we say of the instinct to nurture, prior to any object that drives that urge.

In what follows, I explore this idea of care as both intransitive and reciprocal. In the absence of any substantial theory relating to care on its own or as a reciprocal

action in the creative event and art object, I draw on Jean-Luc Marion's phenomenology of the gift, which I believe lends considerable charge to a nascent theory of care. Marion's phenomenology examines the notion of self-giving where particular phenomena are "saturated". By this, he recognises phenomena that are no longer signifying and are therefore ungrounded – they are not given by any other representation or reason but themselves. Marion places art in the category of saturated phenomena which are revealed through a process where artist and phenomena come together in what I would call a mutual *holding*, or what Marion calls *resistance* (2002b). The reciprocation that happens in this situation is intersubjective, immediate and mutual, between artist and work and beholder and work.

Marion's theory effectively offers a critique of the gift as a cycle of indebtedness problematised earlier by, amongst others, Derrida (1992) and Godelier (1999). While it has been argued that Marion's saturated phenomena, by which he explains self-giving, is better developed through Martin Buber's I-Thou and I-It relationships (see Harding 2012), I feel Marion's account is most relevant in its analogous connection to the actions of care, for which I intend to account here. Marion's theory shows the artwork as agentive and that this agency is enacted as self-giving. Likewise, reciprocal care I see as a self-generating exchange, arising in the extension of a moment that shimmers with a shared attentiveness, between two subjects, both of which are giver and recipient, and where the gift is the unquantifiable intransitive care to attend. That this action works not only on the beholder, but also the art work, is eloquently observed by Jean-Luc Nancy when he writes:

The image touches me, and, thus touched and drawn by it and into it, I get involved, not to say mixed up in it. There is no image without my too being in its image, but also without passing into it, as long as I look at it, that is, as long as I show it *consideration*, maintain my regard for it (Nancy 2005, 7).

In the following section I will examine the mechanisms by which Marion's phenomenology comes to explain the intuition that Nancy articulates, and the mutual holding to which I have referred.

### **2.5.2 Jean-Luc Marion and saturated phenomena**

In the third book of his trilogy, *In excess: studies of saturated phenomena* (2002b) Jean-Luc Marion asks the question: "...how can a phenomena claim to be deployed by itself and in itself if a transcendental *I* constitutes it as an object, placed at one's disposal for and by the thought that governs it exhaustively?" (2002b, 30). Marion seeks an explanation for phenomena that are given not *by* but *to* consciousness, in what Marion calls a "gift of appearance". He reasons that if "a phenomenon shows itself, we would have to be able to recognise in it a *self*, such that it takes the initiative of its manifestation" (ibid). Marion's response proceeds from the recognition that, in order to show *itself*, it first must give *itself*. (ibid). He then asks, what sort of phenomena would manifest a *self* of givenness? What phenomena retain a trace of their givenness, as they show themselves? He answers his own question with the hypothesis that it is the phenomenon of the

*event* (2002b, 31). By this, Marion intends “that which does not result from a production, which would deliver it as a product, decided and foreseen” (ibid).

What appears in the event, “escapes all constitution” for it “shows *itself* from itself” (2002b, 33). Marion writes that the event “produces us, in giving itself to us” (ibid., 34). In this, we are introduced to the possibility of a simultaneous reciprocity in so far as a mutual presencing is implied. The gift, formally seen as an object that creates indebtedness is here seen as pure reciprocity in mutual self-giving. Marion differentiates the event from other phenomena on the basis of three levels of reduction premised on their intuitive content. By intuition, Marion means that which is prior to intentionality or signification; that which, in other words, is ‘originally giving’ (James 2012, 31).

The first reduction constitutes those phenomena that are ‘poor’ in intuition, such as formulae and abstract ideas, where the concept outweighs the affective or sensible intuition; the second reduction is in ‘common-law phenomena’, found in objects made according to design or formula, where intention precedes phenomenal presencing (James 2012, 31). To these most frequently occurring phenomena, Marion asks “can’t we oppose a phenomenon saturated with intuition?...why wouldn’t there correspond the possibility of a phenomenon where intuition would give *more*, indeed immeasurably more, than the intention would ever have aimed at or foreseen?” (Marion 2002a, 197). Such is the *event*, equivalent to the third reduction which “are so saturated with given intuitions that significations and corresponding noeses are lacking” (Marion 2002b, 51). For Marion, such phenomena must fulfill three conditions: they must not be

reproducible; the saturated phenomenon is without cause or “exhaustive explanation, and it cannot be foreseen” (Marion 2002b, 36). Thus on one side it opens out to its histories and reasons, while on the other, as it *shows* itself to me, it is intensified within the inexhaustible terms of its “*occurrence*” (ibid., 37). Marion calls these saturated phenomena.

Ian James writes of this third reduction: “The saturated phenomenon gives itself, as it were, absolutely and free from any conditioning by or analogy with already understood, lived experience” (James 2012, 32). In effect, then, the event is without grounds and must therefore *be* its own grounding, cannot be given and therefore must give of itself. In this sense the event looks remarkably like Being, in a Heideggerian sense, for whom Being, “[p]recisely because it is groundlike, groundgiving, it cannot need a ground” (Heidegger 1985, 170). Linking this to the previous section where I likened the groundlessness of Serres’ ichnography to the paper works *Abrasions*, these can now be seen to constitute what Marion is referring to as the event that is self-giving, in that, as ground, it cannot be given by any other thing, reason or cause. Two things remain to be expanded upon. One is, how can art participate in the revealing givenness, or saturated phenomena? The other is how can this astonishing potential of art be equivalent to care?

The implication of consciousness (which Marion refers to as *l’adonné*) with saturated phenomena, comes, curiously, in the form of resistance, or an obstacle to phenomena. “L’adonné phenomenalizes in receiving the given, precisely because it is an obstacle to it” (Marion 2002b, 50). Here we can see why Marion

refers to this third reduction as an *event*, that simultaneously strikes l’adonné and the phenomenal object. Marion writes, as if in response to Nancy’s observation above:

The given is therefore revealed to l’adonné in revealing l’adonné to itself. Each is phenomenalized in the mode of the *revealed*, which is characterized by this essential phenomenal reciprocity, where to see implies the modification of the seeing by the seen, as much as the modification of the seen by the viewer (Marion 2002b, 50).

Marion uses the wonderfully incisive analogy of an electric current to make this process clear. Saturation is equivalent to the resistance in an electric circuit, that occasions light or heat to reveal the otherwise invisible current. He says that an artist acts as just such a resistor, but a resistor to the flow of *given* phenomena, to the point at which the given *shows itself*, “in a phenomenon accessible to all” (ibid). In other words, the work of art *holds* the event of its givenness, prior to intentionality or signification. The analogy of resistance can be further deployed to reveal the relevance of “to behold” in caring. For there is, in *being held*, both a resistance – a restraint – and an affordance in the care that it designates. To be held and simultaneously to hold, in this sense, is to become effulgent and to bring about the effulgence of the beheld. A mutual holding between one phenomenon and the other – artist or beholder and work. So why not simply say that beholder and beheld – designations that are fluid between the two parts of the encounter – occur to each other as the event of the gift, as Marion defines it? Why now call this encounter one of care?

There are two principle reasons for this. The first is in response to the reassignment of care, as in Heidegger's reckoning of Dasein, to Being generally, discussed above. Having already established that we might say care defines encounters of all sorts in the world, Marion's theory of the gift, particularly as he explains it through the analogy of resistance, seems to me to provide a perfect means for showing the way in which care, particularly reciprocal care, operates. The second reason I defend the use of Marion's theory of the gift, is that it takes the fixed terms (nouns) of which giving is typically comprised – giver, gift, recipient – and renders them active and reciprocal: the gift is a reciprocal revealing of each term, as if one were polishing the other into a kind of receptive luminosity. My beholding does not simply carve an agreeable nook of aesthetic pleasure in the landscape of my subjectivity, but, in a way warms and buffs the surface of subjectivity to reveal itself to me. In Marion's theory, this works the other way too, for, as he has said in the above citation, "to see implies the modification of the seeing by the seen, as much as the modification of the seen by the viewer" (Marion 2002b, 50). It is the self-giving, active and reciprocal nature of the gift that most effectively speaks for the nature of care as I am arguing it in this thesis.

### **2.5.3 Givenness and care in the creative work**

Can these observations and convictions be applicable to the working processes and completed works that have formed the basis of this thesis? What is at stake in this question is whether the theoretical outcomes have arisen authentically through the practice. In this section I will review some of the works and processes that, particularly toward the end of the making, began to suggest these

notions of care and givenness. One question that Marion does not appear to address is how, in the resistance that gives visibility to phenomena, an art *process* is implicated. Marion's comments come to address the drama of resistance that makes visible the phenomena, the art work in its completion, as a visible transformation of the *event*. It does not make sense that the phenomena only attain visibility in the completed work. Marion writes that "the excess of givenness [transmutes] into a monstration of equal extent, that is to say, unmeasured" (Marion 2002b, 51). En route to the final monstration, then, is the work finite, in which case, the infinite in the finished work would present the aporia of a finite constitution? It is surely beyond the scope of this paper to address this question toward any resolution. However, its nagging presence is enough to cause me to reflect on process, suggesting that it may well be said to constitute, in its intricate series of events, the immeasurable.

While the materials I have worked with are diverse, my approach to them has been consistently delivered with an intricacy and intimacy of attention, that brings me close to their surfaces, measure by measure, moment by moment. In the fabric works, as the needle incrementally studies an acre of organza, stitch by stitch, it leaves its inclings behind as expositors of the smallest meetings of warp and weft. Although I make the stitch, it nonetheless reveals itself as a singular event, unrepeatable, utterly distinct from the one that is to follow or that came before. Is this right? Can I say so? That which qualifies the event is that which is beyond signification, is unrepeatable and without measure. Such is the (hand) stitch, in its singular measure; unique, not in spite but because of the very illusion of repetition.



The touching of materials in close attention reveals not only those materials but my own hand, my own sensibilities, now entwined with the qualities possessed by those substances – organza, stones, wood, paper. Their particular qualities are mediated not through the categorical knowledge contained within their nominal designation, but through my emergent sensibilities that are buffed by analogous qualities in the materials from the moment I am drawn to them, in the immediacy of true valuation. The event of care requires the particular to precede any broader designation. I care for the material at hand, in this moment, not for paper or fabric in general, for how can the immediacy of care and its reciprocation extend to the abstract? It is in encountering matter prior to its categorical assignment, that it might be, simultaneously, skin, earth, blanket, wall, or that being might be wall, shroud or door, as Bachelard allowed. The intimacy of care, then, both hones the object of attention, and unites a broader world in the unique sensibilities of the hand in its translation of being.

When asked why I do this, why I make art at all – a confronting and seemingly provocative question – and I responded, because I care, I had not in mind an object of care. This care I felt was intransitive, a way of being that precedes objects but is none the less a condition of being in the world. This care intercepts particular events in the world – the event that is paper, fabric, stone, wood – and in so doing, phenomenalises them. This care manifests as a valuation that takes its measure from an analogous relation to subjectivity.

## 2.6 Conclusion

In this chapter I have established a basis for the notion of care as a dialectic relation that maintains an ever adjusting position between inattentiveness and ruin, but that ultimately gives access to expression. In highlighting care as a way of being, I have examined briefly a number of art works that address the notion of care in performative and ritualistic ways. While situating my thesis within the same field of interest, I have sought to identify care as active at various levels and moments in the making process, within the artwork itself, throughout and after the making. I presented my argument through a speculative extemporisation on the on the Hyginus myth of *Cura* to which Heidegger refers the notion of care or concern in defining a key signature of *Dasein*. Through a rereading of the myth, I suggested that care might be said of Being more generally, since, in the story, Care makes her creation in her own image, thus implying that *care begets care*. In the interactions of an art practice, materials and artist mutually inform each other, eliciting qualities, otherwise concealed. A dialectic enactment of care means that this exchange broadens the terms by which each player is enlivened, but short of the determination of a single will.

I have shown this dialectic exchange, in the works of Elana Herzog and Alberto Burri, each using fabric as the material that undergoes the push and pull of care, and in my own works, using paper and repeated incisive markings. In this exhaustive rendering, figure and ground are reduced to ground alone. This final congruence of mark and that which is marked, can be thought as a form of care, where the negotiation between mark and surface allows each to attain the fullest expressive possibility, with the result of a new emergent ground. In the final

section of the chapter, I scrutinised the phenomenology of care, by relating it to Jean-Luc Marion's phenomenology of the gift and giving, and his notion of saturated phenomena. I argued for the relevance of this reference, on the grounds that the intransitive and reciprocal nature of care, as well as the mutual expressive access given in the encounter, had much in common with Marion's *self-giving*.

While this final section explores in some depth, the means by which an encounter with phenomena can be seen to happen within the terms of care, it remains to be seen how the parts of the artwork find mutual access by the same means, that is, through care. In the introduction I wrote that care is the mode of being both with and within the artwork. I referred specifically to the drawing where the action of figure and ground is the problematic structure that I addressed at the outset of the studio work. The action of figure and ground, therefore, becomes the subject of the following chapter. I begin by documenting how this presumption of drawing developed, for me, into different ways of thinking material relations, specifically tracing the emergence of the surface in drawing as articulate and motivated. While some of the experiences that I recount are taken from my past, for example, as a student new to drawing many years ago, it is in the persistence and rethinking of these memories that I defend them as significant points of reference in the current study.

## CHAPTER 3

### RAISING THE GROUND: STEPS TOWARD SURFACES OF CARE

In this chapter, tracing the foundations for the research, I show how the questioning of the figure-ground relation in drawing was the problematic trigger for a shift in thinking my drawing practice. I highlight that this recognition emerged through early experiences of the discomfort of ineptitude. From this, I explore the assumption that, in reading a drawing, it is the marks that carry the meaning, despite the material presence of the surface or ground, whose invisibility is assured by its immediate masking as pictorial space. I develop this theme with reference to Alain Badiou, and Jean-Luc Nancy, whose readings of the drawing surface, nonetheless, tend to maintain a figure and ground distinction. I counter this through reference to a number of salient examples from within the contemporary and modern fields of drawing, specifically Kiki Smith, Dorothea Rockburne and Lucio Fontana. I also bring in references to the written, or inscribed surface, where the page is read as an articulate body. Through these references, I introduce the proposition that a dialogue of care can be said to break down the differences within the binary function of figure-ground, and counter this to Heidegger's notion of conflict as the dynamic determination that defines the work of art.

#### **3.1 Drawing: Mal-a-droit (bad right > left)**

The first part of this section takes the form of three separate anecdotes each of which alludes to the way in which the ground in drawing pushes to the surface in moments of awkwardness and uncertainty. While these accounts do not address directly the theme of care, they lead the discussion toward the notion of figure

and ground as dialogical, the first step in naming care as the mode in which this dialogue emerges.

*First reflection: Before I ever made a drawing in the academy studio long ago, I knew very well what was expected. Nobody had to explain and no one asked what was intended by standing before a white, vertical field, a grey-black implement in hand, and a figure contained within a stage, before the hesitant inquisition of the collective gaze. To charge the empty page, to make meaning within the void: nobody needed to explain this; the imperative preceded both thought and action, and came from an authority beyond either page or model. In the early days when my handling lacked the precision required to reel the world in with confidence, my whole body was aware of the drawing act. I felt my stance as somehow implicated in every inaccuracy, my hand as heavy and unsympathetic, and my species, an example of which stood naked before me, as alien and mocking.*

*As I gained more expertise, confidence and authority over the enterprise of drawing from the world, this awareness subsided. Experience gave me levity and freed me from the jeers that would ricochet off the surface and back to the apologetic hand. The act of drawing no longer existed. It was from then on a matter of this drawing, the one at hand, not the whole great, mysterious, foreign business to which I had recently felt so alien. The ground had vanished. As a novice, the paper shone before my eyes, the one thing in the room that was perfect, right, already replete with the endless possibilities of what the drawing could be, until I began to mark it with the limitations of what it was to be. Prior*

*to the mark, the paper seemed to issue forth the light by which the object was perceived, and as the object began to take over the page, the glare diminished, overshadowed by the shadowy figure.*

*Second reflection: A step back: The surface, the pristine ground, and source of illumination: A friend came to stay, when I lived in an old place amid towering bunya pines, and began to paint one such tree at twilight in December. In the approaching gloom, the image became a cloaked Balzac, blotting out the sun, and inclining with all its shadowy weight, against the internal edge of the canvas. As the evening moved in, the shadow bloated into grotesque parody, while the painter laboured to maintain a hold on the form as it was engulfed by the night. There was a moment, though, before the complete fall of darkness, when what remained of the canvas ground seemed to shine forth, around the edges of the gluttonous silhouette. In that brief minute, the whole purpose, from my bystander angle at least, seemed to be this luminous halo, with the struggle now centred on sustaining the diminishing glow, a struggle lost as the pine completely dissolved into the liquid night.*

To mark a surface is to make a claim against the assertion of the ground. It is to exile the ground to the hushed nether region of props and supports. Graham Harman acknowledges such a world where the essential asides that make the immediate function are rendered invisible (2010, 97). Paper, as drawing support, is just such an object. This story of my friend and his exasperating painting, that mild mid-Summer evening, could be given as a tale of shifting grounds. The tree, one moment a background element of the landscape, is brought to the

foreground, its waywardness as an image-function, producing frustrations in my melancholy friend. The darkening evening, at one moment a translucent wash over the day, becomes the background for the cosmic inflections of stars. The canvas, disappearing beneath the Mars black smears and swirls of oil paint, at some moment malfunctions as a context for these gestures, which gutter into the viscous background of the night, and reasserts itself as a brilliant ring of light. Then, it all glides away: canvas, gesture, tree, and all the world that slipped between them to parade their differences. No more a ground than a figure; yet my friend remains there, plying on the dark stuff, not to be disturbed in his unraveling of some other saturnine dream.

The give and take of active figure and supine ground plays out differently for the expert and for the maladroit. When hands and eyes become adept, their concerns – charcoal, tree, model, surface – disappear into the handling, their strangeness conquered; an answer for every challenge. The marks left behind tell a new story, to which the world answers only as testimony. For the maladroit, however, the ground beneath the image keeps peering through: the paper becomes worn with too much over-drawing or too much erasure, the movement of the model is vexing, not just because we think this makes our judgments impossible, but because it brings him too much into presence: “an upsurge of bulky presence” as Harman, following Heidegger, would say of the sudden appearance of an object when it ceases to function in the expected way (2010, 97). The drawing meets the edges of the paper, like impassable frontiers, too soon, and suddenly the paper asserts itself over the marks.

For the maladroit, the ground is always rising up to deliver something more than what one expects. As a left-handed child learning to write, the page insisted on the direction of my script – right to left. As long as I had to train myself to form my letters from left to right, the page remained a mighty presence, exerting a lateral gravitational force upon my hand. While for the right handed, the page disappeared politely behind the words, for me it was the enemy of words. And when I did master the directional imperative, ink and graphite smeared under the drag of the hand, pushing the text back into the paper and imprinting the wad of flesh on the clenched side of the fist. Words were mere incidental blemishes, between hand and paper. Perhaps that was the attraction of drawing: it had no directional requirement, a freedom that correlated to the non-aligned world of things. Maladroit: badly skillful, gauche, or left.

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*Third reflection: An early memory of drawing – perhaps most novice artists or students, still learning to fit the world into a frame, have encountered it – is that of the lost limb. In drawing the upright figure, the vertical capacity of the standard page gives the dimensions of around two thirds of the figure, after which the lower limbs, if you have not planned for it, will taper off or simply be truncated at the bottom edge of the paper. One way of dealing with this problem, without having the figure float like a specimen in the broad expanse of the page, is to disregard proportion and taper the figure as it approaches the edges, creating a monstrous, top-heavy aberration. Or, as an enlightened teacher once memorably advised me, just add on another piece of paper. Literally, surgically fit a prosthetic limb. Maladroit, things become different, decisions are drastic, and nothing is simply given. Maladroit, the ground becomes active, because the*



*hand is too clumsy to keep it down. Short of the expertise that would come later, the prosthetic solution made of the life drawing an internal dialogue between surface as a material fact, and marks, and no longer between marks and referent, or marks and illusory space. No longer a context for the drawing, the paper, including its marks, was now an object open to the contingencies of the world. If it was possible to add one extension, then it was possible to add again and again. The world might be mapped in lines and marks, but also in the planes that cover it and match it, acre for acre.*

I recall my wonder and amusement at this thing that was not quite a drawing, but not quite *not* a drawing: a drawing, it could be said, in discussion with itself. The unequivocal purpose of graphic rendering, with its familiar order of things – marks *on* paper – had undergone a subtle disruption. The thing revealed was the surface itself, projected outward, into the open, but into an open that was the object of the drawing itself. Jean-Luc Nancy's assertion of art's genetic potential describes this aptly when he writes:

art is there every time to open the world, to open the world to itself, to its *possibility* of world...And it is also for this reason that we always say that each artist has a world, or one could almost say that each artist is a world (Nancy 2010, 93. My italics).

I love the necessary sense of contradiction that Nancy pulls out of this familiar Heideggerian formulation.<sup>7</sup> Both these terms, *world* and *possibility*, register clearly in my experience of art making. One term assumes a basis, the world in which I find myself; the other, *possibility*, invites the work that in turn, reveals a world: a cyclical process where world and possibility are mutually generating terms. Paul Carter recognised this too, I would suggest, for when he ascribed “disclosure” to the act of invention, (Carter 2010, 15) he did not mean disclosure of *extants*, but of *possibility*. So, I return again to the prosthetic drawing in order to show the cohabitation of world and possibility with a very simple, though supple example. For while the intention in those early drawing classes was, if you will, to *open* the world under observation – in the case at hand, the studio model – a recognition of the materials at hand, allowed something else to emerge, that was neither representation nor fantasy, but *possibility*. This drawing was not the extent of its marks, but the outward dimensions of its estate. Rather than finding the composition of the drawing within the frame of its support, the composition was now, firstly, the organisation of the surface itself.

These reflections have emerged through the course of this research, reflections on an event that resurfaced as a question regarding the space between, or the shared space of figure and ground. The decisive moment in which the sanctity of this binary structure began to falter, was, I suggest, one of care, not for the model out there, not even for the responsibility of the marks, but for this object, this papery tissue, this abstracted skin. As it fails to contain the rendering, surface is extended with a new limb; the paper reveals itself as a substance, with particular

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<sup>7</sup> In *The origin of the work of art*, Heidegger writes: “Art is the origin of the artwork and the artist” (Heidegger, 2002, p.182).

properties, creased and somewhat frail under the smeared tape that fulfills its surgical purpose. Because of, rather than despite this ungainly scar, for the brevity of its life thereafter, this humble and rather awkward work is testimony to an act of care, of fixing, holding, making better, but in so doing, opening up the meaning of the act and object of drawing.

### **3.2 Figuring the ground**

The link between the figurative usage and the material fact of ground lies in a traditional conception of drawing, where the surface or support provides the ground against which the figure – whether abstract, gestural or representational – is able to move, be visible, lurch forward and generally find context. It is particularly salient in drawing, because the ground is frequently seen in the presence of the raw surface material, such as the whitish paper, whilst at the same time, representing an otherworldly space. As Jonathan Harris has pointed out, “figure / ground relations are matters of both *literal* and *depicted* space or depth” (Harris 2006, 115), suggesting that they have no stakes in worldly matter.

It is a small move from this order of things, in the drawing, to the perception of the way things arise in the world. Alain Badiou recognises in this structure the configuration for the spatial jurisdiction of the drawing. He explains: “A thing exists more or less, and the intensity has no relation to being, but only with the concrete world in which the thing appears. *In Drawing, the world is symbolized by the background, pages, screen or wall*” (Badiou 2011. My italics). Badiou makes the assertion that a work of art is a “description without place” (ibid), by which I understand that it is sealed within its own world, that of the ground, the

support or surface on which it is given. He makes it clear that the surface will not be caught out, voicing its claims in the world of things, since it is required at the invisible servitude of the marks: “in a true drawing...the marks, the traces, the lines, are not closeted in the background. On the contrary, [they] create the background as an open space” (Badiou 2011).

Like Badiou, Jean Luc Nancy recognises the drawing from the point of view of the applied marks, which open the ground as an imagined space. He writes of the ground as “the dark side of the picture, its underside, its undesirable and backside, or even its weave or its subjectile” (Nancy 2005, 94). In his book *The muses* (1996), Nancy speculates on the origins of painting, where he imagines the solitary figure in the cave whose wall, no longer the hardened, coruscated substance of rock, “makes itself merely spacious” (Nancy 1996, 74). It is no longer *lived* space but “a spacing in which to let come” (ibid.). While the evocations of this “opening” of which Nancy loves to speak, are consistent with the drawing act, in this originary speculation of the being of the image, it seems strange that Nancy should so readily relinquish the ontology of the cave, forsaking rock for abstracted ground, in the way the picture plane stands in for the paper as substance. It may seem impertinent to subject Nancy’s poetic image to anthropological scrutiny, but the evidence from early European cave paintings is compelling, if we agree that origins are important to this discussion, as indeed, Nancy does.

In their study of European rock art, Christopher Chippindale and George Nash (2002) highlight the inadequacy of documenting only the linear traces of rock

and cave drawings. They caution: “By omitting landscape and, in particular, rock-art as place, one is only looking at subjectivity and ignoring media” (Chippindale and Nash 2002, 19). They suggest that on visiting these sites one not only records the sequence and nature of the figures on the rocks, but, in one direction, the larger landscape of the site and in the other, the intimate nature of the surface, including the environmental changes that it undergoes. For example, certain fissures and cracks in the rocks may be the reason for both the placement and form of the drawing. They admit that key information about these drawings would surely have been omitted over years of contemplating their printed reproductions away from places that form the primary content of their inscriptions (ibid., 21). This insight reverses the agency that Nancy suggests, as the isolated human reaches out and marks the wall with his subjectivity. In what Chippindale and Nash find, the site reaches out to the artist, acting, as Alphonso Lingis would say, as an *Imperative* (1998). There is no reducing the surface to a screen or page. The drawing, it could be said, is a reciprocal act between mutually motivated artist and surface.

It is curious, therefore, that in his endeavour to locate the being of the image Nancy effectively stages its dematerialisation. In *The Ground of the Image* (2005), however, he draws a connection between the idea of *distinction* that raises the figure or image, with the word, “stigma” – “a branding mark, a pinprick or puncture, an incision, a tattoo” (2005, 2) – bringing both mark and surface into mutual presence. The violence of distinction gives a different sense not only of marks but also of surface, to that defined, for example, by Kandinsky and his formalist legacy for which the marks are formal arrangements, hovering

before their background like actors moving in front of scenery. Take for example this evocation: “The point digs itself into the plane and asserts itself for all time” (Kandinsky 1979, 32). Clearly Nancy relates the stigmatic markings and their surface to the skin, which experiences the sharp heat of the incisive, probing tool, and by which mark and skin become complicated. Not only does the point assert itself but equally the skin comes into presence. Steven Connor notes that the transgressive nature of this alliance between skin and mark – or similarly, surface and inscription – is evoked by the phonetic closeness of the words, *tattoo* and *taboo* (Connor 2004, 94). Given the hegemony of the mark, the taboo might be imagined as the advance of surface into visibility.

### **3.3 Surface ontology**

By recognising surface as an active participant in inscriptive acts, be they writing or drawing, I suggest a disclosure of the kind that Heidegger develops in *The origin of the work of art*. Heidegger refers to “the uncovering of beings”, and signals this as the artist’s particular role (Heidegger 1971, 57). In this disclosure, argues Heidegger, the artist reveals the *truth* of things, not in resolution, but in the maintenance of the dialectic act of revelation. Truth, writes Heidegger, is “the conflict between lighting and concealing in the opposition of world and earth” (Heidegger 1971, 60). This distinction, extended to the work of art posits figure and ground, or form and matter, as disjunctive, but disjunction as a mutually revelatory conflict. In this formulation, earth is given as the background to the emergence of worlds of meaning, the immediate matter from which things are formed, or which, like the drawing surface, gives context whilst variously

implicating and asserting itself. Heidegger writes: “The world grounds itself in the earth and the earth juts through the world” (Heidegger 1971, 49).

Heidegger casts *truth* as willful and irrepressible, manifest in the oscillation between world and earth, for he writes: “Truth *wills* to be established in the work as this conflict of world and earth” (Heidegger 1971, 60. My italics). He makes it clear however that this conflict does not find resolution in agreement but in the maintenance of “strife”, explaining the sense, as mentioned earlier, of the drawing being in dialogue with itself, a dialogue that is maintained through difference. Barbara Bolt draws attention to the disruptive nature of this strife, writing that it is the “unsettling of preconceived or established ways of thinking that art enables” (Bolt 2011, 182).

The *active* quality of truth, rather than its resolution of conflict is important to its definition. Truth is neither recumbent nor final; it is not something that *is*, but something that *happens* as world and earth enfold. Iain Thompson observes, that the earth “provides that combination of ‘recalcitrance and support’” (Thompson 2011, 90) that allows for an abundance of possibilities. Likewise, Jean-Luc Nancy writes of the combination of compliance and resistance of surface and imprint, together producing a force (Nancy 2005, 7). In this definition, *Earth* – or ground – is a sensitive, yet firm provider indeed, as it “both informs and sustains [the] meaningful world and also resists being interpretively exhausted by it” (ibid.). The resistance to interpretation is, for Heidegger, not only a condition of the work of art, but also an essential ontological one.

For the remainder of this chapter, I will examine a range of works and contexts that acknowledge in different ways the dynamic relationship between figure and ground. Through these, I will conclude that the struggle that Heidegger perceives as the activity of truth, might be thought otherwise. Still maintaining the binary terms of earth and world, the activity might be considered, instead, as the responsiveness that comes with care. This, as has already been suggested, is not a care that is interested in preservation, but in expressive access, and a dynamic material empathy.

### **3.4 Surfaces and marks: dissolution, betrayal and care**

In researching the poetic inscriptions of the Japanese Heian calligraphers, Thomas Lamarre found paper and script to be almost indistinguishable, prompting him to assert: “The surface for inscription is never neutral” (2002, 149). This claim is echoed in Tim Ingold’s observation, “it is not enough to regard the surface as a taken-for-granted backdrop for the lines that are inscribed upon it” (Ingold 2007, 39). The various fibres used to construct these “paperscapes”, as Lamarre calls the Heian poetic documents, “result in papers that differ greatly in texture, that absorb ink differently, that affect the style and allure of the brushwork” (Lamarre 2012, 149). The differences that particularise each paperscape thus make the papers more than decorative substrates. Rather they are agents, even instigators, in the poetic inventions. The grounds here are active, vibrant and directive. The paper can no longer be seen as a unified, asignifying ground, rather it is already a multiple, an aggregate with its own internal references, though they speak of the same concerns voiced in the calligraphic inscriptions. The words mimic the paper where the themes often



evoke the inflected particles of the natural world. Or is it that the paper mimics the words? “[I]t becomes difficult to determine” admits Lamarre (2002, 151). “Petals flutter, rivers flow, autumn leaves scatter, bugs chirp and surrurate...moons wax and wane” (ibid., 150). The words that make up the poetic assemblage borrow from and lend themselves to the dynamic generative forces of the paper. The twin becoming of the paperscapes – “marked and unmarked, inscribed or uninscribed” produces an elevation of the poetic assemblage, “always a depth that rises to the surface” (ibid., 154).

The interweaving of text and paper is further developed in the palimpsest that arises in the reuse of previously inscribed papers, to “return text to texture”, creating an “art of text [that] emerges from an art of patchwork” (Lamarre 2002, 151). Previous inscriptions are erased by soaking; ink words returning to fluid, while dyes are used to cover the remains of calligraphic marks on the paper. Elsewhere, scraps, remnants and discards are assembled into whole new sheets, or whole sheets shredded and reconstituted (ibid). Text, here, is the aggregate of paper and inscriptions, where there is no conflict between matter and meaning, but a sharing of sense, an empathy and a mutual augmentation of being. Each assists the emergence of the other, and each intensifies the articulacy of the other. So that figure and ground become a single vibrating ground.

In Lamarre’s account, the assertion of the page has positive connotations, for the internal dialogue of textual parts becomes endlessly dynamic. This augmentation, or intensification of sense and receptivity manifests a mutual and immediate reciprocity between parts. What can be said, then, when the surface’s

assertiveness appears to be in conflict with the marks in either a drawing or text, when matter seems to prevail against intended meaning? This affliction arises as a concern in Jacques Derrida's inquiry into Antonin Artaud's use of the term "subjectile" to refer to what appears to be the surface of the drawing and text (Derrida 1998). Precisely what sparks Derrida's fascination is a sentence in a letter that Artaud wrote in 1932: "Herewith a bad drawing in which what is called the subjectile betrayed me" (Artaud quoted in Derrida, 1998, 61). Derrida is intrigued by this obscure term – subjectile – and becomes the arch sleuth as he picks up the clues that lead him back to the surface, as if the culprit were always there in the room. Derrida finds that the subjectile, "does not constitute an object of any knowing [that] does not come when it is called, or come[s] before even being called" (ibid., 63), evoking an image of menacing disobedience, disdainful of the author's wishes.

Derrida writes of this curious object that it is "everything distinct from form, as well as from meaning and representation. On the other hand, it is a permeable or porous body that is capable of engorging rather than supporting the drawing" (Derrida 1994, 156). In this reckoning, there is a shift in perception, from thinking surface as neutral, to casting it as a powerful protagonist, rising up to claim authorship. Its qualities are far from disinterested, for they can absorb, tear, crease and fold, taking in shadows along with inscribed lines. Derrida goes on to catalogue a range of materials as subjectile, subdivided by their tendencies either to absorb or resist. He thus contrasts "plasters, mortar, wood, cardboard, textiles, paper" with the non-porous, such as metals, "which permit no passage" (1994, 158). It seems that the broad membership that the subjectile invites, presents the

opportunity to introduce the drawing into a lively and diversely inhabited field, where, because the surface becomes an object of acute interest, as well as being acutely interested, the possibility of maintaining a concise rapport between figure and ground is no longer tenable or useful.

Derrida does not build on the categorical proposition here, though he entertains the possibility in a later work, *Paper Machine* (2005) where he recognises a reducible schema for surface structures, suggesting, in the form of a question, a typological congruence: “*Behind* these specific determinations (the support made of skin, or the paper, or other ones too), beyond or before them, might there be a sort of general, even quasi-transcendental structure?” (2005, 52). He asks whether, when we designate “paper” we are naming that material specifically, or alluding to this “quasi-transcendental” type “whose function could be guaranteed by any other ‘body’ or ‘surface,’ provided that it shared some characteristics with ‘paper’...(corporeality, extension in space, the capacity to receive impressions, and so on)?” (2005, 52). Derrida’s proposition that paper and the landscape of the mind – the quasi-transcendental structure – might be categorically related, draws attention to the significance of the abstraction of surfaces from bodies. For rather than equating the self with depths, we might begin to consider the operations of surfaces as indicative of subjectivity, whose various abilities to absorb, hold and resist typify their relations with and within the world.

The treachery that Artaud ascribes to the subjectile, is the treachery of Earth in conflict with world, that is, the materials overtaking his intention. Why he does not tolerate it is perhaps more mysterious than the subjectile itself, except to

acknowledge that with the disruption of figure and ground, the order of the world and subjective authority are thrown into disarray. Yet surely, if we are to understand, through Derrida's inquiry, that the subjectile is the subject-object of the drawing as surface matter, because of its power of assertion as well as its function of support, then betrayal might become, instead, shared agency. Such is the relationship, I would argue, between marks and paper in Kiki Smith's series of four drawings, *Born* from 2001.

These works are made with drawing ink and Nepal paper, pieced together in patches, forming an outer perimeter that escapes the formal rigidity of manufactured sheets. The naked female figure, in three of these, emerges alarmed, though yielding to life, from the birth canal of a delicate doe. The woman is drawn lightly, across the lower third of the horizontal patchwork, the under contour of her body opening *to* rather than *on* the skin-like paper. Or, I could say, the paper *is* the skin. For while the doe is quite isolated, floating distinct from the surface – a tattoo – the human figure emerges in the continuity of creases, joins and wrinkles. The three objects together form a cycle of connectivity, where the parent figure, the doe, is an emblem on the skin of the woman-neonate, who, in turn, emerges from this emblem into her own skin. This skin-paper asserts its binding power over the whole assemblage, reflecting the artist's view that "everything is related to everything else" (Becker 2001, 32).

The fourth drawing shows only the woman, pushing up to the limits of the frame, facing us and floating in a soft, upward, horizontal arc in direct proportion to the paper (figure 16). Yet while the figure curves upwards, pressing the extremities

into the top corners, the paper itself arcs firmly the other way, exerting a counterforce that makes it quite clear this paper is no passive support, no invisible background. The impressive scale of these works – between two and a half and three metres long – suggests that this skin / paper, could more than adequately be mapped onto an uncommonly large adult. The open lines of the figure, the skin-like quality of the paper and the format of the drawing object, together form an assemblage between whose parts there is no clear definition.

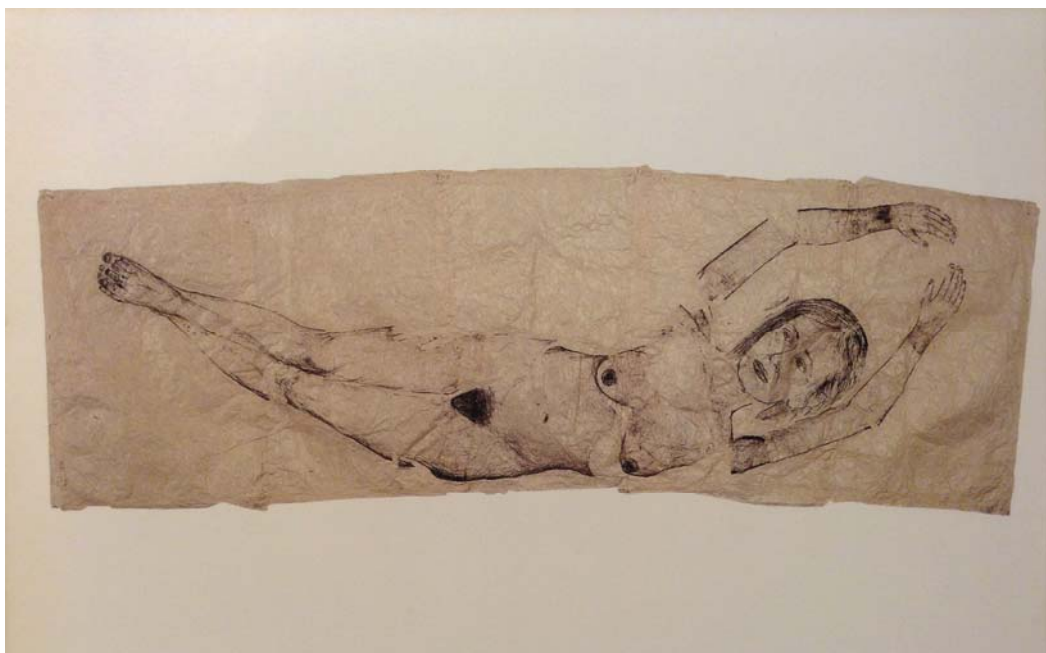


Figure 16. Kiki Smith, 2001. *Born*. Ink on Nepal paper. From: Reinhardt (Ed.) 2001. *Kiki Smith*. Ostfildern Ruit: Hatje Cantz. P.78

In *What is Philosophy?* Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari identify a zone of indiscernibility or indetermination as “something passing from one to another...as if things, beasts, and persons endlessly reach that point that immediately precedes their natural differentiation” (1994, 173). This, they assert, is “an *affect*” (ibid). Drawing on this notion of a zone of indiscernibility, I suggest it is the approach between ink figure and paper figure – their near difference and their near unity – that helps explain the affective presence of Smith’s drawings. The drawings open those affective reaches, where one thing

passes into another, human into animal, and material into sensation. I suggest, however, that the interchangeability of ground and figure in these works affords not an antagonism or tension between one and the other, but a dimension of support and concern. Fluid and indefinable as the parts of an embrace, ground and figure express and exchange their action through a gesture of mutual or reciprocal care. Thus where Heidegger has defined *conflict* as the condition of truth, through Kiki Smith's drawings, we might hazard the claim that *care* assumes that status. If the term seems too agentive, too emotionally invested to have any traction with the non-sentient objects under discussion, we might just as soon consider the same liberties at play with Heidegger's use of conflict. If it is possible to imagine the two-part system of earth and world endlessly playing out within the tension of conflict, equally it is possible to imagine them developing mutual visibility through an analogy of care, support or empathy.

### **3.5 The expanded field of drawing**

To a great extent the expanding field of drawing in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries was addressed towards the constraints of surface, limiting the spectacular gestural possibilities of line. The 2010 MoMA drawing survey exhibition, *On Line* convincingly demonstrates how in the twentieth century drawing made a logical break with surface altogether, particularly during the 1960s, to move into a fully spatial context with artists such as Richard Tuttle, Gego, Karel Malich and more recently Zilvanas Kempinas, producing exceptional line drawings in space. In her catalogue essay Catherine de Zegher identifies a moment when "leaving the surface and thus escaping surface tension" (de Zegher 2010, 34), line was freed to make an *extension* it had long craved. As de Zegher points out, *extension* takes

its meaning from ex-tension (ibid), thus associating this move with a fortuitous growth spurt and easing of restrictions. Equally, the exhibition included examples from contemporary dance, notably Ann Teresa de Keersmaeker (in de Zegher 2010, 90, 91) and Trisha Brown (ibid., 192, 193). The works represented by these two veterans of choreographic innovation, demonstrate the inclination of the curators to define drawing by its gesture and its trace. The suggestion pervading the exhibition is that anything foregrounding line can be designated as drawing. While this generous acknowledgement expands the field almost beyond definition, surface has tended to remain, for the most part, the silent partner, if not the enemy of drawing's expansion; that from which line takes flight, or against which it performs.

### **3.5.1 Dorothea Rockburne: the transference of thought**

There are significant exceptions to this. Issuing from the “optical flatness” of expressionist painting (see Joselit, 2000, 22), minimalist and post-minimalist drawing began to pare back the marks and pigment to reveal the surface material. By the 1960s, the painting and drawing substrate had begun a dizzying ascent, away from not only spatial depth, but from supportive obscurity, to the place where mark and surface mingle. In the 1970s Dorothea Rockburne produced works, still identifiable as drawings, that are a reminder of a profoundly different set of tensions, gestures and ontological assumptions, by treating surface not as something to be overcome, but as something to be regarded as a wellspring (figure 17). In her series *Locus* (1972) there is a mutual revealing of line and paper, an informing of one through the other such that, like Smith's drawings,

though in a more geometrically idiomatic way, creates a reciprocal holding, since there is a precise balance and interdependence between lines and surface.

In 1974, Rockburne articulated a series of questions and propositions that set out to explore this fascination. Of these, one proposed to “[c]onstruct an investigation of drawing which is based on information contained within the paper and not on any other information” and another, indicating the synthesis of the mark and the marked in the drawing, suggested that “[i]t seems reasonable that paper acting upon itself through subject imposed translations could become a subject-object” (Rockburne quoted in Lovatt 2007, 39, 40). Rockburne’s thesis regarding information and thought parallels my own, concerning care. For Rockburne, thought gets into the drawing as information, which thereafter becomes that by which the drawing gives of itself. Bruce Boice has interpreted Rockburne’s information transference theory in this way: “The information contained in a work by its being a product of the artist’s thought and intention, is retrieved from the work by experiencing ‘the evidence of intention’” (Boice, 1973). My point is that the words “information” “thought” and “intention” could be replaced by “care” to arrive at the exchange of empathic interest between artist, work and beholder, in the way that thought and information are exchanged for Rockburne.

For Rockburne, information is that by which the drawing gives of itself, because it is information by which it has been given (Boice, 1973), similar to the way in which I have argued that the work gives of itself as the care that has entered the work in the making. Beginning in 1971 and developed under the title *Drawing*



*which makes itself* (ibid.), Rockburne’s work generated a mutual “givingness” between the terms of the drawing. Lovatt alludes to this, referring to Rockburne’s carbon paper works, in recognising that “the traditionally passive surface of the paper thus acted upon the customarily active pencil, producing the line, which it then received” (Lovatt, 2007, 41).

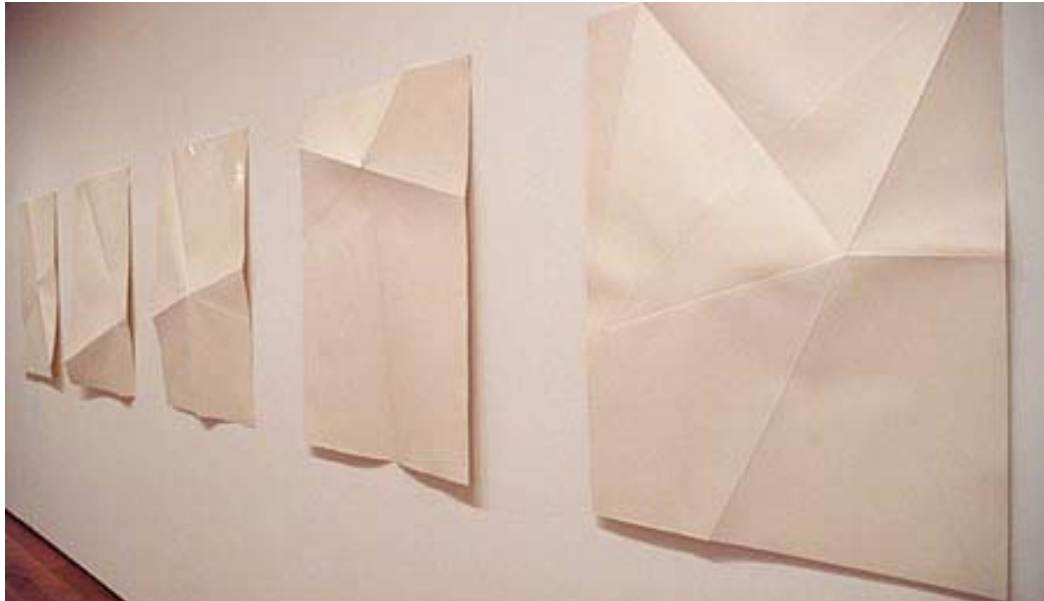
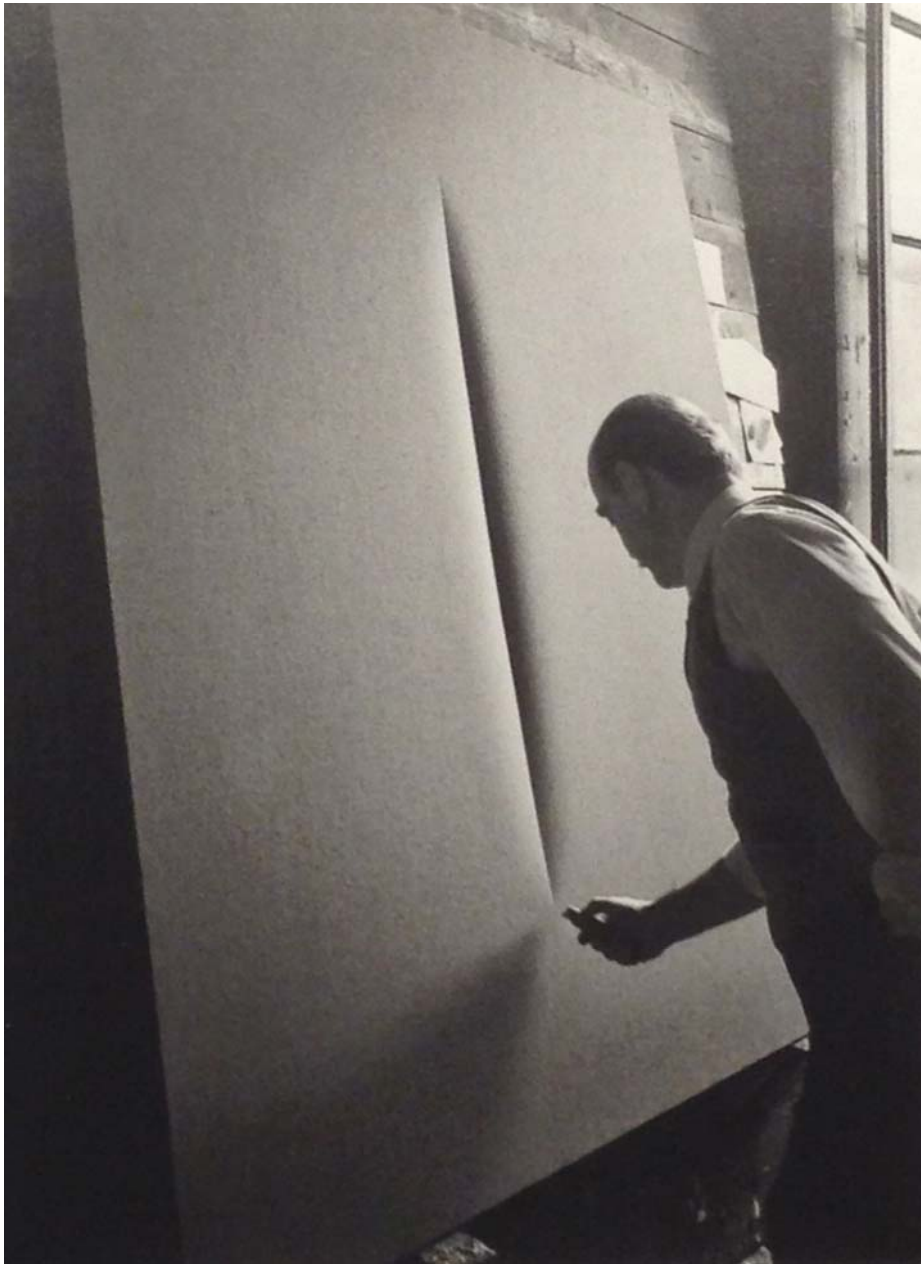


Figure 17. Dorothea Rockburne, 1972. *Locus*. Series of 6, etching, aquatint, folded paper. Each one 101 X 76.4cm. Available from CaiLun.info, 2008. <http://cailun.info/archives/314-MoMA-Sightings-Part3.html>. Accessed March 12, 2014

### 3.5.2 Lucio Fontana: canvas surface and the finite infinite

Once surface folds or crumples, and shimmies forth as an object of substance, its boundedness to the wall maintains, nevertheless, an invisible and a visible side, so that this other side, the shadow side, becomes a question or a problem in considering the ontology of the surface object. Lucio Fontana’s *Tagli* paintings of which he made no less than 1512 in the decade between 1958 and 1968 (Gottschaller 2012, 58) most emphatically bring the two sides into play through the idiosyncratic slashes that he made, either singularly or in series, into the taut drum of the stretched canvas. Fontana used the canvas surface as a penetrable membrane, slashing and puncturing it, rendering line and point as direct effects

of surface tension. Contrary to this material functioning of the works, Fontana intended his *Concetti Spaziale* as a “way of making the viewer look beyond the physical fact of the painting to what [he] was to call ‘free space’” (Whitfield 1999, 14). Fontana claimed the gashes and holes in the paintings, or, as he liked to call them, spatial concepts, “introduced a dimension beyond the painting itself” (Fontana quoted in Whitfield, 1999, 122).



*Figure 18.* Lucio Fontana, having made a *Taglio*. 1965 (Photo, Ugo Mulas. In Gotschaller, 2012, p.73)

The semiotic reading that Whitfield and Fontana give to the cut, that it “stands for the idea of a space without physical boundaries” (Whitfield 1999, 14) undermines, I believe, the actual effect of these physical blows in raising the surface to attention, and subtly alluding to the twin sides of this elegantly yielding object. It also effectively avoids the subjective revelation that the twin sides reveal, as I shall discuss in a moment. The works seem to be less about space, and more about the material substance of the surface object, in its perpetual state of both tension and release. Indeed Fontana went to some lengths and great care to achieve the sense of the infinite space that so intrigued him. In most of the *Tagli*, Fontana finished the work by applying a strip of black gauze to the reverse of the cut, effectively firming the gash, so that it would not slacken, but also to close the visual access to the wall beyond and fabricate a sense of the “imaginary Infinite” (Gottschaller 2012, 87). The reverse faces of these works appear even more intriguing when we learn that, from 1959 onwards, Fontana would often inscribe them with both his signature at the top, and various phrases “sometimes playful, sometimes banal” (Gottschaller 2012, 89). They would include mentions of “friends, visitors, his dog Blek, trips to embark on, political events, chores to do or expressions of sentiment” (ibid).

Compare these day-to-day musings with the stated intention of his works: “to bring, filtered through consciousness, the dark void of infinite space” (Gottschaller 2012, 19). Elsewhere we read that the works signaled “an existential sense of possibility and expectation in the present moment: the moment as an ontological opening into the spaciousness of Being” (ibid., 60), echoing the notions of disclosure and possibility discussed above. The quotidian and

reflective, the human and the mystical seem to be attributable to one side and the other of the canvas, so that we must ask what it was that Fontana meant by this. If there is a pulse in these works, it is that which moves between the contemplated and the lived, world and earth, outward surface and concealed. Fontana, in his keenly fastidious approach, would never allow the day-to-day to fall into the work. Instead, it plays out on the other side, as if to say, this is not an infinite space at all, rather it is that which is here and now, amid the cares and concerns of life lived.

In writing about these works – the Hein manuscripts, as revealed through Lamarre’s study, Smith’s and Rockburne’s drawings that eliminate the figure-ground distinction, though in very different ways, Fontana’s twin occupancy of the finite and infinite, and Artaud’s gnawing sense of betrayal by the surface of a drawing – I have concentrated on the ways in which marks are implicated with their substrate, suggesting the use value of surface is given over to a mutual holding, between surface and marks. While the notion of care may seem, again, too agentive to ascribe to the relations between materials, or parts of a work of art, I have suggested that it is no more so than the idea of conflict, in the way Heidegger assigns it to the struggle that sustains the dynamics of truth in matter, or the way in which Rockburne regards the activation of thought and information in the drawing. They are not so very different, but they interpret the relation differently. Where conflict is the struggle to assert, care is the relation that gives mutual access, that affords an elaborated presence. In the light of this study of surface materials and their special affordances of care and mediation, in the following section I wish to relate these observations to the self, and, with the

support of Michel Serres' and Gaston Bachelard's material metaphors, suggest a surface ontology to the human subject. In keeping with the notion of the particular, this section is divided between the actions of soft and hard surfaces.

### **3.6 Speculations on a surface ontology**

#### **3.6.1 The special case of cloth**

In Michel Serres' book *The Five Senses* (2008), fabric is likened to a skin, but with topological autonomy from the depths of the body. Sense comes alive when "skin tissue folds upon itself. By itself the skin takes on consciousness" (Serres 2008, 155). Here is an opening onto a recognition of the shared ontology of the self and surface objects, in this case, fabric. I would also suggest that when the skin / fabric is held in check, for instance, by way of a rigid frame, as in Fontana's works, then this possibility of folding is inhibited and the lateral partitioning prevails. It provokes me to suggest that for Fontana, the canvas stretcher served not only as a convenient and familiar support, but behaved perfectly to maintain the partition between the infinite and the finite imperatives of his own consciousness.

Like Michel Serres, Gilles Deleuze uses the image of fabric to show, in his analysis of Leibniz in *The fold* (1991), how innate knowledge responds to the demands of matter, sending "vibrations or oscillations" into the cloth of the soul: "a darkened compartment or study, furnished only with a stretched cloth 'diversified by folds,' like the bottom layer of skin exposed" (ibid., 228). Like the tribal cloth that mediates heaven and earth, as we saw in Schneider and Weiner (1986), and in Serres' earlier reference to cloth as an image of

communication, Deleuze recognises in the bridging membrane, special mediating qualities, in ripples and folds, positioned within the strange architecture of the Leibnezian soul.

I wish to complete the contextual review in this exegesis with a reference to works by artist Judith Kentish, which exemplify the notion of surface material, specifically fabric, as analogous with the self. Although I am thinking mainly of her cloth works, a quote from Elizabeth Ruinard's (1997) catalogue essay for Kentish's exhibition, *Blindfolds*, establishes a concise link to the ideas and speculations discussed above. Observing in Kentish's drawings a submerging of the body into space, she suggests that "the subject slipping out of form and its vertigo might also be a point from which we might capture a glimpse of the soul" (Ruinard, 1997). It is the skin, freed from determination, its draping formal-formlessness, that produces this sense in the cloth works also. The skin without body delivers the self from the identifications of form, to take on the qualities of "as-if". As if the self, in its ability to take in the world, and give it out as expression, were the ever moving folds of cloth. Corroborating Ruinard's interpretation, Michele Helmrich states without hesitation the shared genealogy of surface object and the self: "The cloth, the parchment, the page, becomes or stands for the psyche, the self" (Helmrich, 2007), echoing Derrida's earlier contention that a quasi-transcendental object precedes the material determinations of paper. This seems apt, whether in reference to the series *Dark sacs* (2005) or the stained, worn shrouds that are the earthy skins of the series *Mappa* (2006).



Figure 19. Judith Kentish, 2006. *Parchment #7*. Natural dyes, cotton voile, bleach, 110 X 260cm. (Photograph by Carl Warner). From the exhibition “Judith Kentish: Mappa II”, University of Queensland Art Museum, August 25 – September 23, 2007. Available from <http://judithkentish.com/mappa-ii/parchment-7>. Accessed May 20, 2015.

These last works achieve, it seems, a synthesis of earth and body, suggesting the topological fluidity of the skin disencumbered from the determinations of form. It is significant that the colouration Kentish brings to these skin / cloth objects, is applied through lengthy processes of dying. For it is in the dying, that new depths are found in the seemingly thin body of the cloth. Gaston Bachelard recognises the interiority that dyes seek out, applied to receptive surfaces: “We immediately sense that colour is surface’s seduction while dye is the truth of the depths” (2011, 25). As dye penetrates, it seeks out the qualities of a material, expresses itself in a will to know, to reach into and to be thoroughly held. Neither lingering on the surface nor falling rapidly through, dye, like care, does its work in time, with a sort of interest in its host fabric, that in turn shows interest by holding, spreading and keeping the dye within its fibre. In these works, the natural dyes

are given weeks to find their way into the depths of the cotton voile, steeping long days and nights in an iron pot (Helmrich, 2007), while “[t]he artist ‘tends’ the brew, without contriving the results” (ibid). Beyond the dying, the works that make up the *Mappa II*, of which *Parchment #7* (figure 19) is representative, have further undergone the inquiry of bleach, as the artist applies it in small dots, and allows it to do its work “at the structural level of the fibre” (Kentish cited from telephone conversation, May 24, 2015).

The “proof of time and being” that Kentish says of her work (UQ Art Museum, 2007) is as much in the meticulous touching of the surface as it is in the body that has laboured in touching. Of the intricate stitching in the works comprising *Comforter* – long pillow-like objects, covered in fine dark bands of meticulous hand stitching and filled compactly with human hair – Daniel Mafé writes: “Patient, involved, endless in repetition of minute difference. Each moment registered. Each moment touched, by the hand” (Mafé, 2010). Proof of time and being happens in this reciprocity of touch between hand onto fabric, fabric onto hand. Beyond the temporal rhythms of stitching and marking and the temporal duration of steeping – as in the natural pigment dyes - Kentish has considered these fabric works, speaking specifically of the *Mappa* series, as swathing the lifespan: “Swaddling cloths bind the new born; winding sheets wrap the body for burial” (Helmrich, 2007). As I behold these works, I am aware of their calm imperative to perform the skin’s work, on the skin’s behalf.

The cloth works are both testament and index of the touching touched, of the folding together of planes of matter and consciousness, of the moving stillness of



time, whose greatest offspring is the minutiae of difference. The fold, and its topological fluidity between interior and exterior, the absorbency that finds depths in the extent rather than the bulk of a thing, define the being of cloth as the being of the subject. This subject does not stand opposed to or outside the world, but enfolds with it, and absorbs, integrates, regards the patterns of time, rather than wears them like decorations on the surface of a disinterested skin. If the self can be read in terms of the surface object of cloth, what of the surface object that does not fold, but none the less maintains twin sides, such as walls and doors? Do these differ only by degrees of fluidity, or are they ontologically dissimilar? What are the mediating principles of these more rigid structures that can be said of subjectivity.

### **3.6.2 A special case of walls and doors**

“The fall of walls, the bursting of doors, the dissolution of the skin’s walls, the dissipation of bars, this is what the loving-beloved brings us” (Cixous 2005, 98). In Cixous’ evocation, the familial ties between walls and skin are resoundingly clear. The surface that is shattered falls complicit with, not in opposition to the affirmation of life and love that bridges the too much and the not enough, the dialectic signature of care. Walls fall and break not just to open a space, but for the very joy of bursting the doors, letting cracks relieve the secrets and silence of mortar, letting skin fall free of determination. The loving-beloved that breeches these thresholds, might also be given as the artist-beholder.

Walls, doors, ceilings and floors avail themselves to the structure of the human cosmos in ways that suggest more than a functional correspondence between the

house and its inhabitant. To this extent, their narrow substance, and their dialectic purpose of interiorising and exteriorising as well as their ability to open and close are key points of congruence. It is not that walls forever exclude, but that they are necessary to the hinging of doors and windows, intermittently allowing issue, and thus, variously open and closed: the respiratory rhythm of surfaces, elevated from the ground. As Joseph Amato has observed of the surrounding walls of old cities and towns: “Walls were the epidermis of a city – the living and respiring skin of an organism breathing in and out” (Amato 2013, 81). In their capacity to bear up to the elements, they also transport and translate weather, so that rain on a roof is not the same substance as rain on the porous ground; heat is absorbed into the shallow body of the wall and restrained between ceiling and roof. Like the skin of a drum, these surfaces mediate through a combination of resistance and absorption, deflecting the impact outward and inward, transporting to the inside a world not so much explained as poeticized.

The double articulation of the wall – mediating the elements through a poetic filter – forms the basis for an intricate puzzle of openings and closures that Gaston Bachelard attributes to being (human). While Bachelard does not refer to walls explicitly, it is clearly implied throughout his *Poetics of space*, where the imagination draws upon architectural form in the figuring of self. He writes:

The phenomenology of the poetic imagination allows us to explore the being of man [sic] considered as the being of a *surface*, of the surface that separates the region of the same from the region of the other...Then, on the surface of being, in that region where being

wants to be both visible and hidden, the movements of opening and closing are so numerous, so frequently inverted, and so charged with hesitation, that we could conclude the following formula: man is half-open being. (Bachelard 1994, 222)

Through this image of being that is not only likened to an architectural counterpart, but takes on its essential structure, the human subject can be seen to dwell in and as a dialectic of the open and closed, without the need to resolve any ambiguity. For Bachelard, resolution of opposites is not achieved in synthesis, but in the vibratory expression of difference “in which ambiguous being expresses itself as ambiguous being, as the being that has dual expression” (Bachelard, 2011, 61). The simultaneity that charges the open and closed surface, of interior and exterior, is the ambiguity that makes being active rather than caught in the stasis of identity. Relevant to this discussion, is George Kalamaras’ observation that paradox “possesses this peculiar capacity to make ‘everything come alive’ not by establishing experience as contradictory; rather through the use of apparent contradiction, it conjures a condition of reciprocity” (Kalamaras 1994, 153).

### **3.7 Implications and conclusion**

In his book, *Paper machine*, Derrida dismisses the idea of paper as “an inert surface laid out *beneath* some markings, a substratum meant for sustaining them, for ensuring their survival or subsistence.” (2005, 42). His criticism appears to have its ethical foundations in the equation of the paper with the human subject: If the paper is merely substratum, beneath, submissive and *subject to*, then it

would have to be said of subjectivity in general (ibid., 43). The tendency to regard the page in this way has been documented in this chapter, largely by reviewing works that, I have argued, make a claim to the contrary. However, the legacy of Kandinsky, for whom the picture plane mirrored a *tabula rasa* perception of the human subject, still has traction. Kandinsky saw the picture plane existing “as a blank autonomous reality, like a living being” (Henry and Davidson 2009, 58). The seventeenth century figure of John Locke comes closest to suggesting a coincidence between the paper surface, as a drawing support, and human consciousness with the notion of *tabula rasa*: “Let us then suppose the mind to be, as we say, white paper, void of all characters...” (Locke 1836, 51). This abiding image of consciousness, as much as this image of text, or the drawing, or, more generally, of the relationship of foundations with that which is founded, relies upon a profound disinterest between the two terms. Dependence, yes, but interest or concern, decidedly not.

Nevertheless, when surfaces are allowed to respond to and participate in their inscriptions and markings, as in the crumpled skins of Kiki Smith’s *Born* drawings, the creases in Rockburne’s *Locus series*, the dyes in Kentish’s *Mappa*, – admittedly, just several examples out of many – I suggest that the dialogue between the terms alters significantly, to become one of reciprocation. Heidegger provides the premise for considering the relationship between earth and world as one of interest. However, where Heidegger sees this interest, or what he calls truth, as something arising in conflict, I have considered it as a condition of care. Meaning arises as the mutual and reciprocal interest between materials: the dye seeks out the depths of fabric, while fabric receives and holds the dye. The

creases of the page have no argument with the lines that define a figure, but meaning emerges as each reaches toward the other. The reference to care in these terms suggests that what we might generally think of as care, has much to do with the responsive faculties we possess, and the triggers that compel us to act. If there is a mutual affordance, access or what I would call interest between the terms, then care as a dialectic and reciprocal action not only holds the parts together but enlivens them.

In this chapter I began with a background context for the study, linking it to my own education in traditional methods of drawing and a sense of awkwardness experienced in that situation. In moments of awkwardness or ineptitude, the “ground”, otherwise unnoticed as it functions merely as support, rises up to assert itself as active. While awkwardness was overcome with practice and increasing control, the early malfunction of the hand and eye opened up other possibilities. For the purposes of this research, the object that opened up, that became different and suggested other possibilities, was the drawing surface, reasserting itself as an agentive and articulate object. From the recognition of the drawing surface as an affective agent, I explored the figure-ground assemblage, mostly in terms of drawing but also relating it to a broader ontological discourse, referring to Martin Heidegger and Jean-Luc Nancy.

Care was seen to inhere between the parts of the work as well as being that which circulates between artist, work and viewer. I showed the functioning of this in drawings by Kiki Smith, Dorothea Rockburne and Lucio Fontana. In works by Judith Kentish the objects themselves, in their references to the body as binding

cloths, evoked even more specifically a sense of tenderness and care. The use of dyes within this context was seen to produce an internal interest between the parts of the work – dye and cloth and stitch and mark. Finally, in this chapter, I have situated the terms of the research within an ontological framework, suggesting that the surface provides an analogous structure for subjectivity. Gaston Bachelard has been a key referent here. Bachelard posits the subject as a surface that operates within the dialectic of the open and closed. Rather than creating limitations through possible paradox, the dialectic structure, even the ambiguous structure of being, maintains the necessary dynamics for reciprocity.

In the following chapter I will begin to document the ways in which the studio practice contributed to these speculations regarding the actions of care and their implications with surface materials. While many of the final creative resolutions, those that respond to the question most purposefully, make, as I have indicated, a departure from drawing, the key moments, observations and changes in the drawing practice require documenting here.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE CREATIVE WORKS: FROM MARK ON SURFACE TO SURFACE AS MARK

The creative work that gave impetus and meaning to the arguments and speculations presented in the previous two chapters issued from a practice that adopted a deliberately singular starting point: exploring increasingly small marks on increasingly large paper. While I have no intention to document here all the works and processes that pushed toward the outcomes that are – for the most part – presented in the exhibition, *The murmur of surfaces*, the methodological approach to this research means that neither processes nor beginnings are distinct from artefacts and endpoints. Thus I will examine and discuss the links from marks on paper to folds in space showing a credible translation that issues from questions concerned with the drawing as a substantial object. The first section takes a close lens to the incidental gestures of the practice, the asides where, in notebooks and on scraps of paper, I became aware of a different interaction between surfaces and marks. The extended appendix will form a relevant accompaniment to this chapter, particularly 1 and 4, though I do not refer to their pages specifically.

#### 4.1 Griffics > gardens > map and land

The word *griffic* may be more descriptive than *doodle*, in naming those small inscriptions conceived in a state of disinterested rapture, or even by accident (figure 16). The French word “griffe”, meaning both a scratching – by claw for instance – and a signature, brings together two contrary intentions that the doodle fails to register. For example, to scratch or to claw suggests an impulse to

remove, whilst the signature is a singular testimony to presence. So I am referring here to drawings and inscriptions whose familiar traces appear to invite reading, while in every other way they withdraw from sense: words get invented; images collapse into marks; ink leeches through the shallow surface of a page, delivering unintended messages to the other side (figures 17, 18). Griffics breathe through the medium of a surface, both held and dispersed by the page. But also they are defined and conjured forth by the page that links in proximity, apparently alien thoughts and inventions, compelling them to mutual consideration or interest.

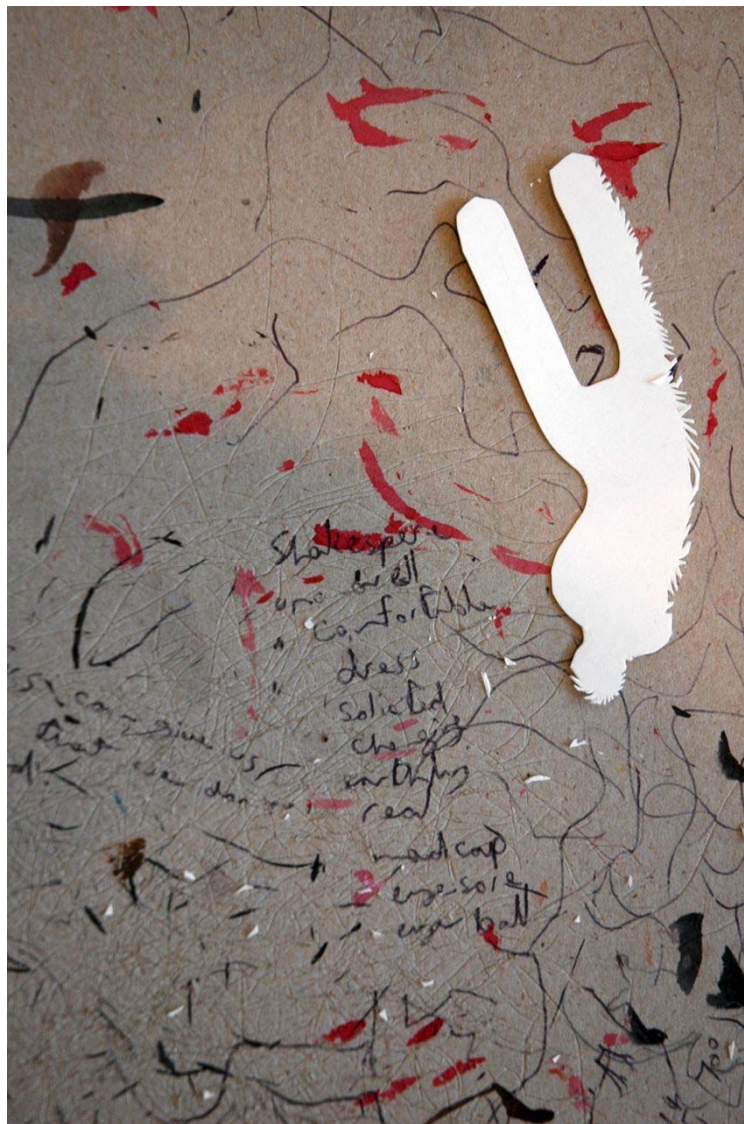


Figure 20. Sharon Jewell, 2011. Griffics on the back of a notebook.



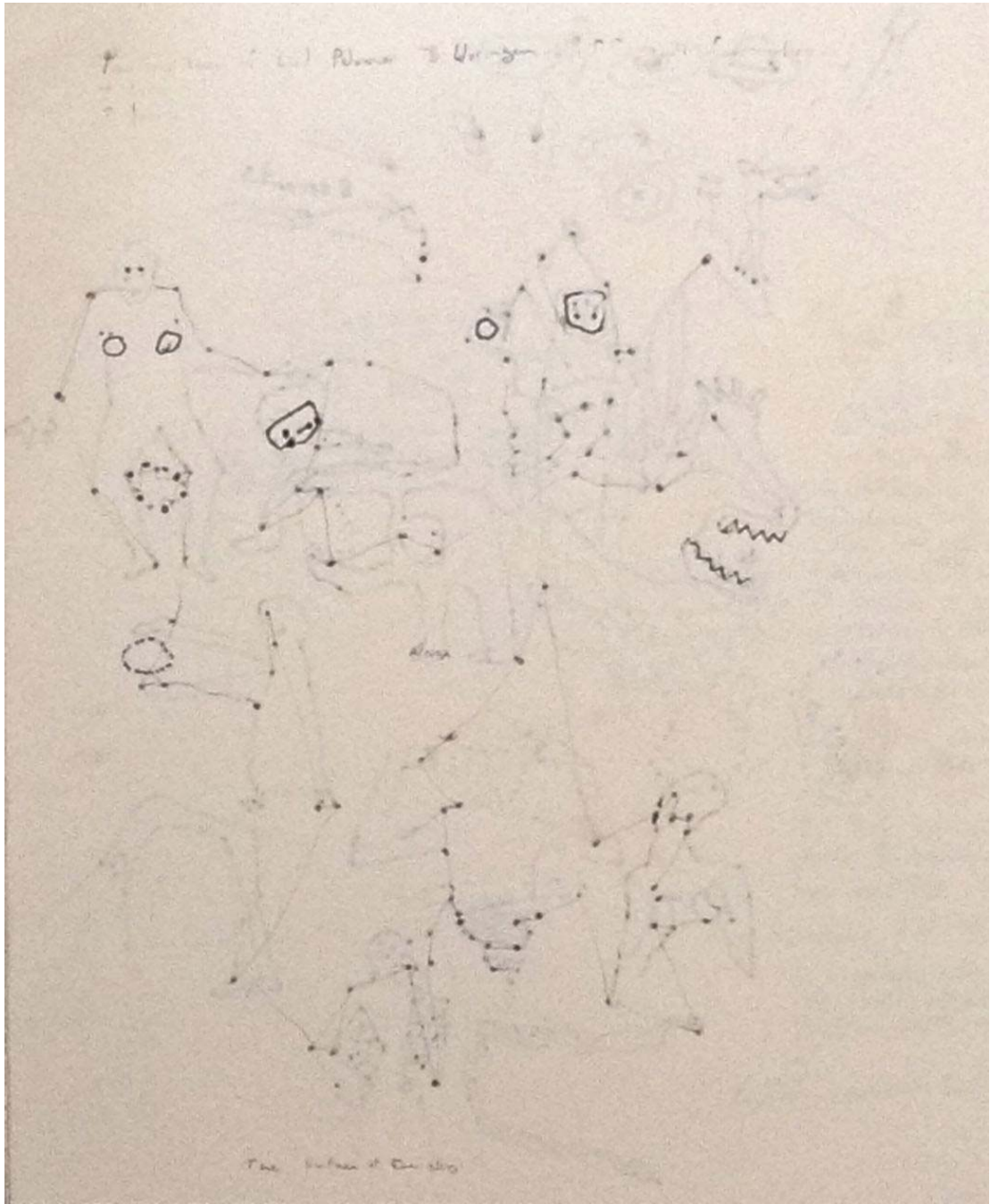
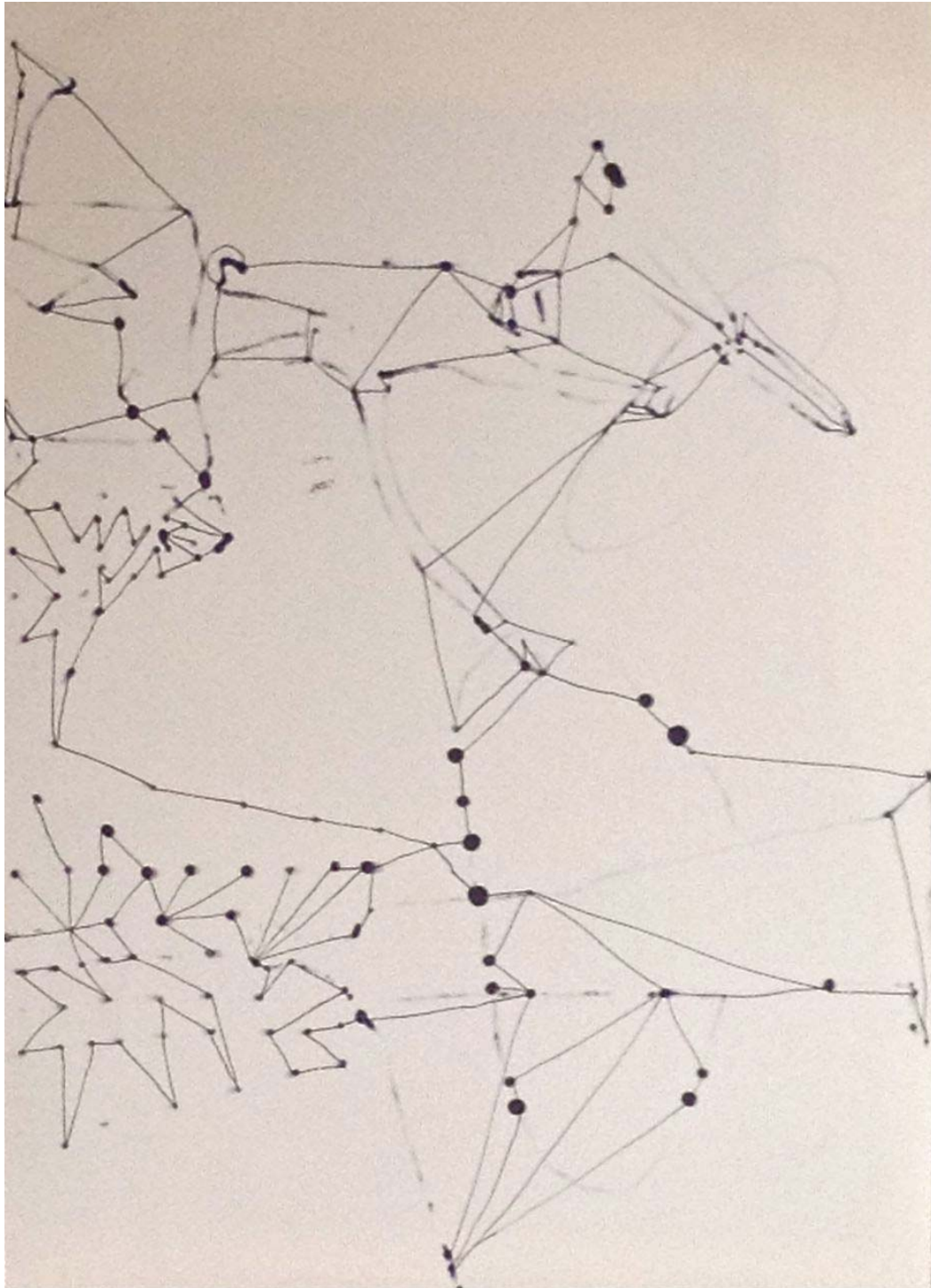


Figure 21. Sharon Jewell, 2014. Drawings on the recto, provide the imprecise information for drawings on the verso.



*Figure 22. Sharon Jewell, 2014. Another verso drawing*

Unlike the drawing that begins with good clean paper and, with the first mark, establishes the role of the ground against which the figure is animated, the griffic assumes the qualitative presence of the ground. This, also, characterises the chattering voices of the notebooks that were a constant source of invention,

disclosure, reminder, experiment and collaboration. Ideas are allowed a freedom of association in notebooks that is unacceptable in the formal text, and yet to translate their murmurings – native to the surfaces where they generate – is to exchange sense for reason (see figure 19. The list-like form of short phrases, free to wander without being overly anchored by prepositions, suggestiveness rather than explication, freedom of association, weeds as well as cultivated species, is what typifies the notebook.). In the notebook the pages both contain and *are* their content, generated by proximity of localised, isolated thoughts, caught like crazed moths in the ambit of an incandescent light. A notebook is an incandescent light, drawing in fragments of coherence, torn away from the steady flow of a logical world. Together, they make rather than find their own patterns and partners in reason.

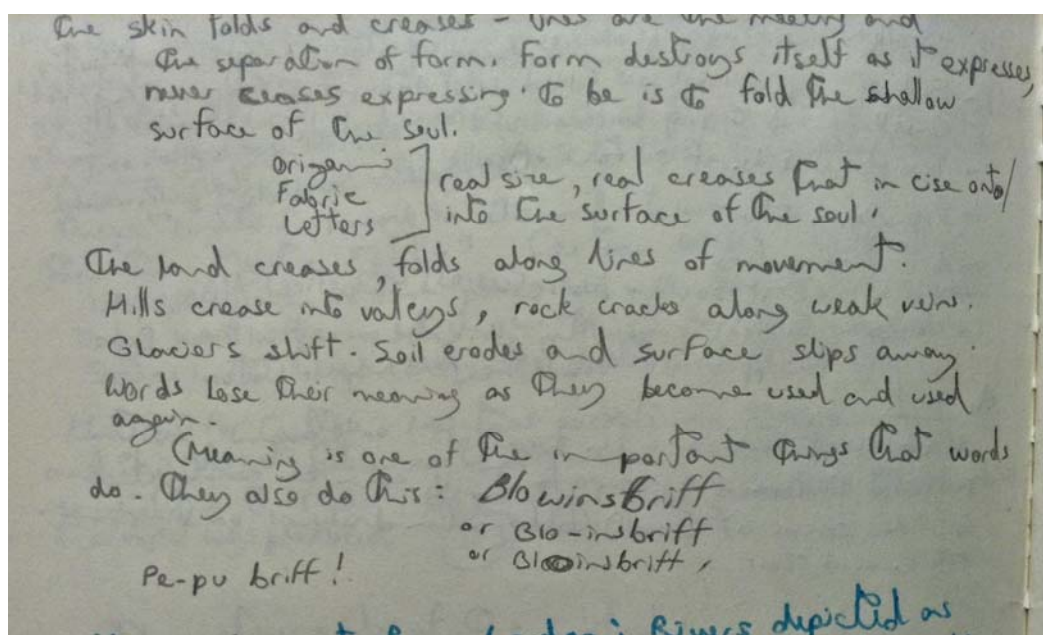


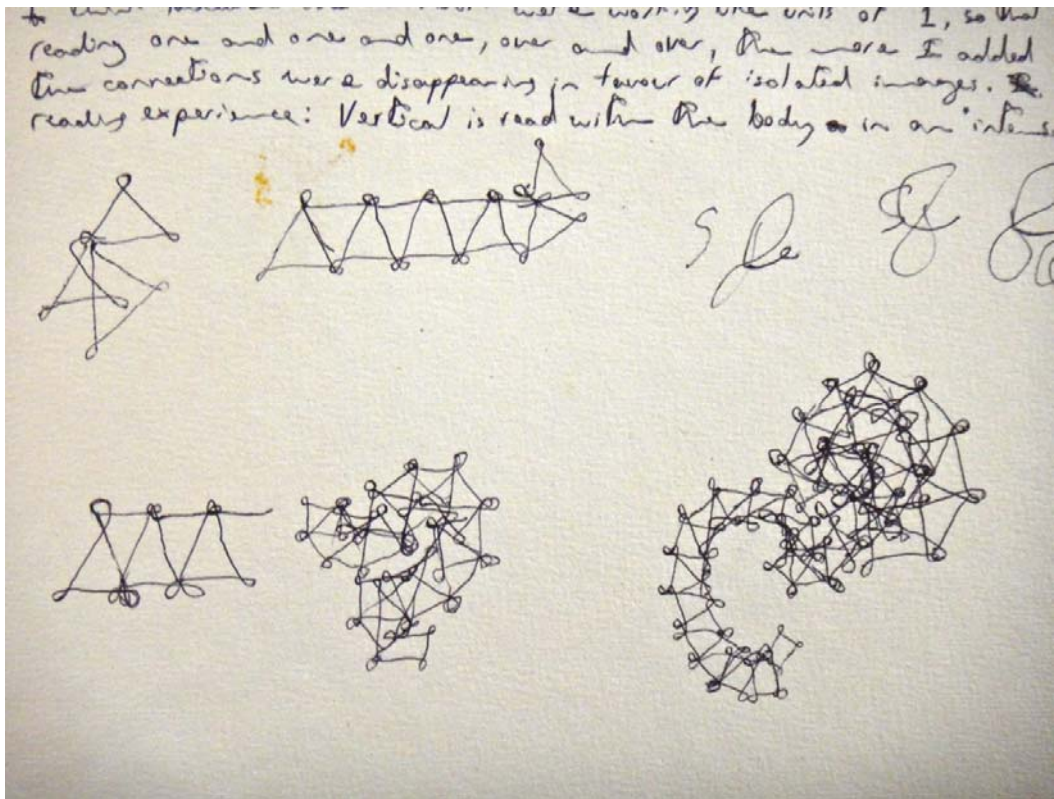
Figure 23. Sharon Jewell, 2013. Notebook page.

Through the notebooks, it is possible to trace the tenacity of particular fascinations, and the redundancy of others. When I go through my notebooks, I scan them like scenery. One arbitrary passage haunting another, I hear them

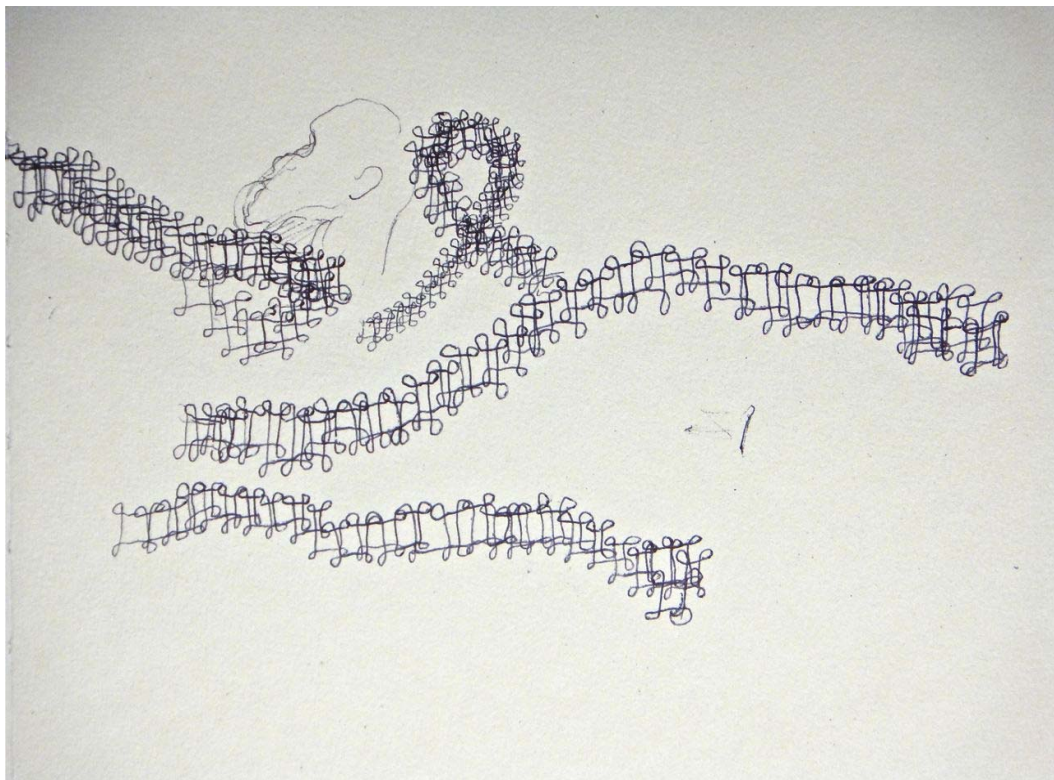
whispering in grey graphite dialect, from the yellow folds of thin paper. I feel the cramped conditions of words, pushing up against page edges like crowds gathered on precipitous rims. The notebook is a machine that produces certain conditions for thinking. My tendency to often use a very pale graphite, means that the rubbing together of pages sometimes clouds the marks, smears words to almost audible slurs, conspiratorially creating ambiguity and uncertainty. Such ambiguity becomes a fertile soil for the generation of new species, and at some point, lacing through the terrain of pages, like some form of elaborate punctuation outweighing the words it seeks to inflect, the Bowen knot emerges. (figures 20, 21).

The Bowen knot is a square whose corners are looped but left open at one end to connect with the next and the next. Germinated in the notebooks, I give them free reign on larger paper, where they rotate into spirals, squash into concertina-like folds, and eventually fracture into atomised particles that swarm amid the wider cast of large looped nets (figures 22, 23, 24). My Bowen knots stretch and collapse, cartwheel and careen off in uncontained abandon, until they meet the borders of the page. There is no organising principle by which these works emerge, no critical strategy to ensure a compositional logic. Like forest vegetation the drawing grows where it can: it strangles and struggles, collaborates when inclined, sends out, sends up, buds and spawns. These drawings do not proceed by codes, but by cadences, each one a record of a momentary topological organisation in a changing field.





Figures 24, 25. Sharon Jewell. Notebooks, 2012. Bowen knots



In photographing these works, I find that the details maintained this dynamic intensity, whilst in the image of the whole work, resolution and containment become the dominant forces. This can be explained by the boundaries of the page, a reminder that the world contained therein is an imagined one, and that pictorial space and paper are not involved in the same game. Yet as I work my way across them, I am not aware of this treachery. For I draw up close, myopically close, so that rather than prefiguring the trajectory of lines on my page, or the layout of shapes, my narrow visual field moves as the marks move. Every mark is localised, every line inscribes its own locale and its own value; even where they intersect a cloud of atomised marks, the lines move in their own current, their own stream. The drawing is this bustling of self-interested growth. The drawing is simultaneously an unwieldy sheet of heavy, cream-white paper, exerting a palpable force away from the wall at the fastened corners and edges: light, disorderly and multiple on the level of the marks; heavy, muscular and singular, at the level of the paper. These two properties, I find, are irreconcilable in a way that was never a problem when the griffics populated the lowly digs of notebooks and napkins.





Figure 26. Sharon Jewell, 2012. *Growth without pattern or design 5* (detail). Pen and ink on Fabriano paper. 150 X 100cm



Figure 27. Sharon Jewell, 2012. *Growth without pattern or design 4* (detail). Pen and ink on Fabriano paper. 150 X 100cm



Figure 28. Sharon Jewell, 2012. *Growth without pattern or design 3*. 150 X 100cm

While material bulk and weight of the paper is one way of recognising the demands of the surface object, the other is scale. Why is it that, with an increase in scale – increased to dimensions against which I am able to move, to traverse, to



be far from the edges – an accompanying diminution in the marks seems inevitable? The surface can never be large enough, because any possibility of continuity will always be betrayed by four edges. The marks can never be small enough because, beyond the length of a comma, a dust particle, an apostrophe, they want to *describe*, to assert some influence, give directions. The signature variety of the *Growth without pattern or design* drawings thus dissolves, to be overtaken by two terms only: that which is, though barely and small; and that which is not, though large and total (figure 25). Marks now reduce to the textural hum of the paper, and the lines become a memory, ghosts of structure, as though roots have been pulled from the ground and left their trace, or the tunnels of worms have been exposed. In the wake of line, surface murmurs through. The lines are the memory of a movement without a clear recollection of the thing that moved.

If the garden drawings were myopic, these larger, smaller ones are doubly so. My whole body becomes a symptom of shortsightedness, with the pen feeling out both ridge and grain of the paper. I bend and lean into the drawing, perch atop a ladder, squat low on a cushion, and travel at snail's pace across this surface that both appears and disappears beneath the marks. It is not these marks, however, these little gnats and microbes, that beckon, and that represent the labour. Just as gardeners do not principally toil with plants, but work the earth, the imperative in these drawings comes from the surface: a very particular soil, demanding a particular approach. On close inspection, ground is not the singular, unified whole beneath the active and multiple marks or vigour and variety of growth, but is charged with its own internal differences. Likewise recognising the agency of ground, Matthew Tiessen (2007) proposes that the earth is the motivating force

in the making of desire lines. He suggests “desire lines are the product of an earth – a natural environment – that desires us”, reversing the agency of the inscriptive act. He then establishes the partnership between surface and maker in this way: “To trace a line, then, is to respond to an invitation, to accept that a particular trajectory has been revealed” (ibid, par. 2). The revealing rather than marking of the map, is to recognise the prior motivation of a ground from which the traveler takes up the suggestion.

The sprawl of paper lays out its commands as I stand before it. Taking my directives from this authority, the authority of the ground, I move in close, and in this way the drawing avoids being reduced to the perimeter, taken merely as a dictate for composition, but maintains its material presence at every stroke so that from time to time, I am surprised to come up against an edge. In its minutiae, the surface expands exponentially; in the smallness of its parts, it is the shimmer of snow or sand, when these surfaces are seen to be countless glistening particles, and not at all a single blanket of whiteness.

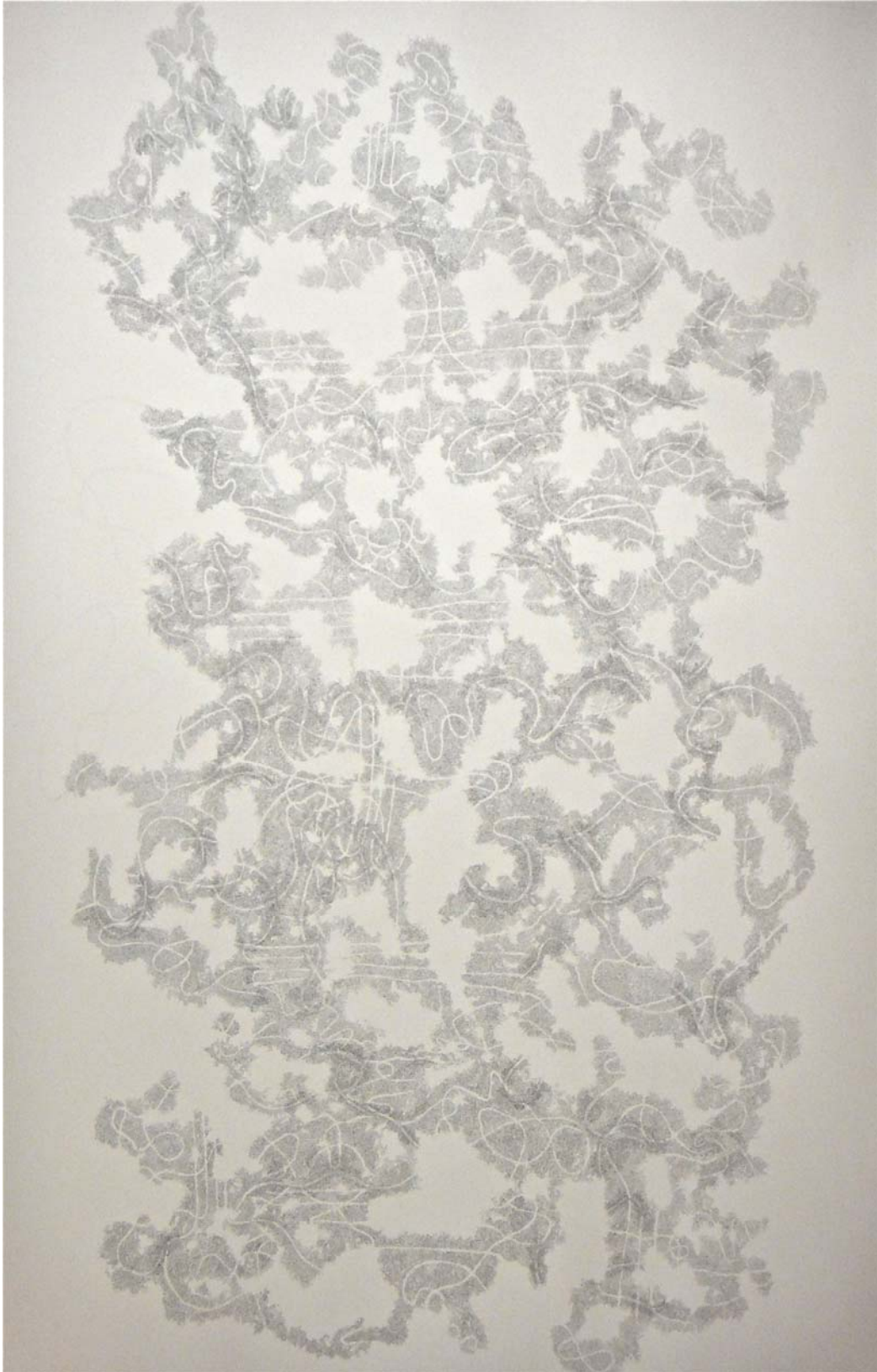


Figure 29. Sharon Jewell, 2012. *Tracks dissolving in a drift, 1*. Pen on paper. 229 X 147cm. studio wall (Photograph, Sharon Jewell)

## 4.2 The horizontal surface

As long as the drawing clings to the wall, we share the same axial determinants, and thus remain parallel, rather than intersecting. The hand and arm form a movable bridge between the drawing and the body but this only serves to highlight the rift. Furthermore to this symmetry of limitations, the wall of the studio to which the drawing is attached, renders it complicit in the act of enclosure. In sum, as long as this drawing remains wall bound, I will come up against it as a boundary, and as bounded. So, as I remove the staples, one by one and the paper yields to its own internal memory, it flings from the wall with all the drama of a sail broken from its mast, and flops about me with alarming presence, all its silent flatness now erupting into noisy and imposing folds. I struggle to keep it aloft of the dusty floor, and guide it awkwardly to the table (figure 30) where it finds an earthy repose, well suited to its weight. Here its edges can curl slightly away from the table surface, lifting upward with a muscular ease, as the ponderous table pulls ever downward (figures 31, 48).



*Figure 30.* The muscle and weight of paper, 2014. (Photograph by Mark Weiss)



Figure 31. Sharon Jewell, 2012. *Tracks dissolving in a drift, 2*, detail. Pen on paper. 229 X 147cm. studio table (Photograph by Sharon Jewell).

Once orientated horizontally, landscape becomes land, co-extensive with the world of things, where a complex of air currents, sounds, dust and cat move seamlessly between drawing surface and the ground that laps at its edges. Life passes across the horizontal, where it tends to slip off the vertical. Furthermore,



the axial determination that is fundamental to the vertical, bears no relevance in this reorientation. Although no longer aligned with my vertical body, the drawing is, however, now aligned with the movement of that body across the floor. On the horizontal, my mobility is increased, and thus the mobility of the drawing. Moving around, sitting within, leaning across, placing upon, gaining a topographical advantage only from a limited distance above and across a perspectival plane given in real space, demands a process of constant adjustment, where interest or care, are manifest through an active material, bodily relationship with the drawing, in addition to a concern for the marks that come to inhabit it. With this interaction comes a sense that I am dealing not with imaginary, diagrammatic or metaphorical space, but with real space, on account of and within which, things can happen.

In her practice based dance research, Kim Vincs discovers a similar alteration of possibility in shifting the active axis from the vertical (standing body) to the horizontal (body prone). In the horizontal position, she observes: “Any part of my body can initiate. Any part can take over” (Vincs 2010, 107). Rebecca Solnit has likewise recognised the important difference between the alternate axial determinations. In recent landscape photography she notes the tendency to incline the camera landward “to the earth, describing not the inhabitable space of landscape but the surfaces coextensive with the picture plane, land on its own terms” (Solnit 2003, 159). Perhaps the difference can best be described as a move from a subjective view of the land to empathic engagement and concern, less mediated by human stature and expectations. A similar randomness and topological flexibility opened for me in the drawings, once orientated parallel

with the ground. The axial shift not only produces possibility, but redirects the interest in the thing perceived.

How do surfaces change when they are horizontally aligned, at, for example, the height of a table? Raising or lowering the drawing on the wall alters the phenomenological encounter, making the drawing more or less accessible, in relation to one's own body height and visual acuity, but the relationship is of the same order: two aligned verticals facing across a gap. Horizontal surfaces imply an interaction, dependent on the lay of that surface. For example, floor and table each suggest specific types of active encounter and interplay. James Gibson stresses the relational qualities of *affordances*, whereby discrete environmental features give of themselves as particular functions to an inhabitant, determined largely by scale, and engendering a range of possible behaviours (Gibson 1979, 127). So it could be said that the surface attached to the wall affords visual scanning and contemplation, while the surface inclined to the table, affords a different sort of interaction, including perambulation, rather than stasis. With no fixed viewing address, the act of looking also becomes an act of making meaning, not just conceptually but bodily too. The table, already an object in the world, becomes unavoidably present in the work, in a way from which the wall, as an inherently background object, withdraws. Parading outward into the room, the table offers itself both as an affordance and an obstacle in the viewing and the negotiation of the space. And perhaps most importantly, as a horizontal proposition, the drawing now presents itself *as a place*, a contingent field, given to the weather and the messiness of things.

In the reorientation of the drawing as document / map / object, a question of care arises. The surface that looked after itself on the wall, pushed into the still peripheries of the space, now is exposed to a litany of dangers: scratches and marks from cat paw, the gathering of dust, the spill of liquid or bleaching from the sun or lifting by the wind, all of which come down upon it with interested appetites. These hazards impose themselves directly upon the paper, which, regardless of the graphic marks, inscriptions or gestures, regardless of its value, remains a body with a range of allergies, preconditions and sensitivities. Thus in the horizontal state, whilst animating its audience, and maintaining a lively axial indetermination, it pays for this assertion of agency with the full catalogue of ailments and vulnerabilities of any living thing. The drawing *in* the world, solicits an imperative to care. The response to this imperative, however, does not remain one of preservation. Possibility becomes convoluted with exigencies. Exiled from the wall, the paper moves freely under and into the hand. It has certain demands, but its demands are more to do with the release of its multiple qualities and possibilities, than the maintenance of a singular one. In the course of the creative practice, this simple shift in axis altered everything and set in motion the layered considerations of the dialectic functions of care.

### **4.3 Motivated ground: Cartography and pale-ontology**

Scrunching, crumpling, pleating, twisting and delving into paper produces a mutual interest between the two sides of the page, and thus the marks made with, rather than on the surface are interested, are invested in the being of the surface object. The large *Map* works were made by joining squares of tracing paper along a thin edge, to create a nine square gridded plane (figures 28, 29). Working



on the floor, and seated in the midst of the paper, accidental tears were countered with deliberate ones that became white line scars in the mending. Sometimes islands formed; sometimes rift lines, contours and creases and pleats left as traces of curiosity. Working my way across the plane with sharp pleats and easy ruptures, the paper became an abstracted land, a geosophical artefact where the residual lines of force became delicate seams, flows, fractures and streams, witnessed from a great distance, from where, like the distant view of earth, torment appears as delicate as lace.

If the *Maps* were suggestive of the cartographer in the act of revealing the land, then the small series of works, *Holding page*, was suggestive of the paleontologist, though effectively producing rather than exposing the very relics of her search. And if ontology seeks to understand the nature of being, *paleontology* > *pale-ontology*, it might be suggested, in a speculative interpretation of the word, seeks the being of spectres. For these works, I sanded into a heavy paper stock, gently reducing the robust surface to a tissue-like fineness, endeavouring to stop short of its complete return to pulp and dust. I found, however, pressed between the firm table and the upper surface of the paper, small things were leaving their traces, raising the surface very slightly where they lay, and offering themselves to the sander's orbit (figure 30). These works, then, sought out the holding capacity of the shallow body of the paper, and as the page became increasingly frail and translucent, it acquired depth and complexity, on account of these curious fossils. First it was fortuitous, but slowly I added a range of slender things – leaves, grasses, lace, feathers. Shearing back a thin layer of paper, not quite to the other side, measured the capacity of this

body by the objects that now appeared to inhabit it, like fossils preserved in limestone.



Figure 32. Sharon Jewell, 2013. *Map: The long island with sun*. Tracing paper, felt. 210 X 210cm. (Photograph, Sharon Jewell).

The exchange between objects and paper, of identifying qualities – that is, objects taking on the qualities of paper, paper taking the form of the objects – harks back to Heidegger’s earth world conflict. But here there is neither assertion nor withdrawal of matter in its mingling with form. The ghostly relic in the paper is also *of* the paper, and thus becomes a kind of consciousness that inhabits the surface. The dreams of matter are in matter’s ability not to be overwritten, reformed or brought into the service of ideas, but to find an understanding of the

world against which it presses, upon which it comes to rest. In this rethinking of the earth world conflict, each part of the enterprise is simultaneously earth and world, or figure and ground, exercising mutual interest, concern, or care. In the dialectics of care, further removal of the paper would turn care – interest – into destruction. The difference is very fine indeed.

While the body of paper is precariously shallow, yet somehow deepened in the complex traces and holding capacity revealed in its excavation, then the same can be said of walls, boards, thin and rigid sheets. In the previous chapter, I referred to Gaston Bachelard's ontology of the half open, suggesting that the human subject is, like the door, a half open surface that checks and mediates the flows between out and in. But what is the expressive capacity of this surface, before it breaks through to the other side? What can be asked of the wall itself, independently of the worlds that it apparently divides? In the following section I will focus on a series of works that continued to delve into the shallow reaches of the surface object, this time rigid wood panels.



*Figure 33.* Sharon Jewell, 2013. *Map: surface wrinkles.* Tracing paper, card. 210 X 210cm.  
(Photograph, Sharon Jewell).

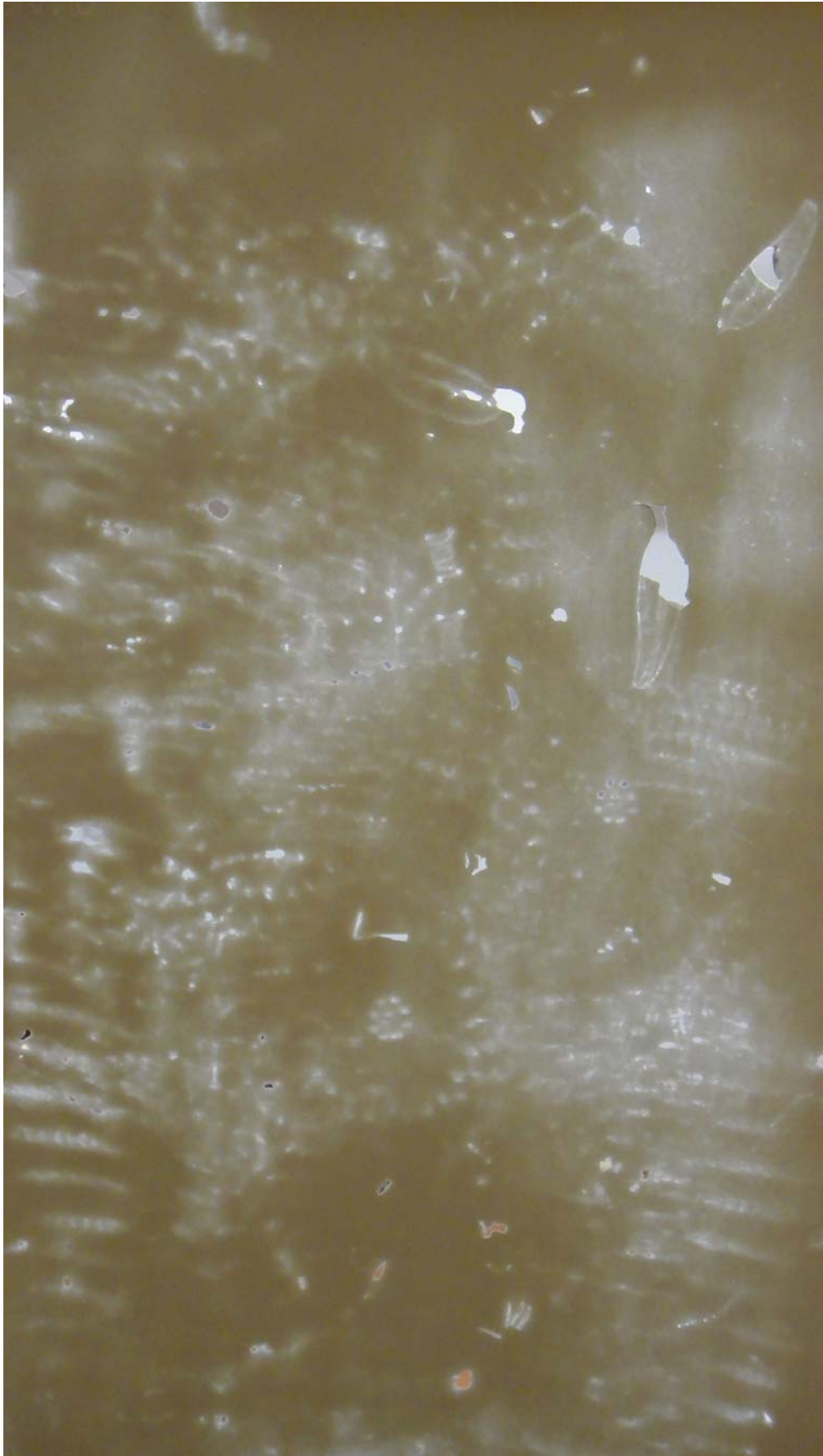


Figure 34. Sharon Jewell, 2013.  *Holding surface 1*. Fabriano paper. 142 X 76cm (Photograph, Sharon Jewell)

#### 4.4 Surfaces of many openings

*Half-open walls*, (figures 31-34) is a series of seven plywood panels, gouged, carved and lacerated to the extent that the rigidity of the material begins to give way to a more pliable body. The panels, with repeated incisions and holes have been made light-weight and, in the thinning of their slender depths, they slump against walls, while the floor based ones lift in long arcs, bowing upward from the ground. Because their raw material is the same stock and area – though slightly denser – that were used to clad the interior of the house and studio, I tend to associate them with walls, though much transformed. As a surface material, plywood is unique for its stratified composition. Its multiple layers, each one turned to cross the grain of the previous, restate surface at each level. Regardless of its density, depth in this substance yields only further surfaces, so that to dig down is to arrive again at a surface.

The plywood I used for these panels is constituted of five layers. Alternate layers are a darker wood, so that when an oblique gouge is made in this material, the striated layers are revealed as broad alternating bands that become complicated in the repeated gestures that intersect, dispelling any design, direction, pattern or order. Thus the panels reveal, across a single surface, two contrasting orders: the striated organisation of the panel composition, and the thoroughly smooth space regained through its excavation. Recall here that *smooth* does not refer to texture, but to the move toward entropy in the surface's distribution and organisation. In these works, smooth space accompanies an increase in texture and surface area.





Figure 35. Sharon Jewell. 2014. *Lifting ground (arc)*. Plywood, sticks. 2400 X 1200.  
(Photograph, Sharon Jewell, studio)

As I delve into and across the panel, the shallow rises and falls present openings to the outside from within the sealed wood: the buried strata are exteriorised in rhythmic ripples and intersections. They move in and out of presence, as if, instead of being layered in an orderly way, they were knotted, tangled together, showing equal interest in release and concealment. In some of the works more than others, the passage to the other side is swift and repeated, the holes offering a release from the drama of this tussle between order and chaos, such that these surfaces are half-open, half closed (see figure 32). In some, the meeting of two equally robust gouges, is held by nothing more than a splintery, tenuous membrane.

Where a calm continuity and disinterested stillness lulled the uncut surface, the shallow though thorough excavation shows the riot concealed beneath. The buried layers are awakened in the repeated and intersecting gashes made by the incisive tool, where the turmoil is both revealed by and produced on account of the forces wrought upon it. The dialectic of care, as discussed in chapter 2, is the animating force in these works, where a negotiation of the too much and not yet enough is delivered in the lacing of ruptures and gouges, where the full

expressive potential of the wood is negotiated. The self reflexivity of these works – they refer to no external source and they are not reproducible – conforms to Jean-Luc Marion’s givenness, in the event, also discussed in chapter two. It could be said that these works give of themselves, through the attention and care that has been administered in the making. In the making, I also find my limits, and the limits of the tools I use. Together we form an interested assemblage both wearing into each other’s surfaces and enlivening each other’s qualities, in rhythmic patterns of reciprocation. This interest and reciprocation, I suggest, are essential terms of care that push both artwork and artist into the open, and into new registers of sense. These works, like the drawings, confirm once more the insufficiency of design in the business of mutual giving, or reciprocal care, and suggest instead the immediacy of responsiveness.

So far I have examined the expressive affordances of paper and board, as I have come to know them, and as I have come to understand myself through them. I have shown how they engender the notion of care as a dialectic of extent in working within the limits of their material strata, and of their reciprocal relations with me, as artist and beholder. I have also shown how care can refer to the internal dialogue of parts within a work. In the following section I will look at the kinds of qualities released in the works involving soft, folding surface materials, specifically fabrics, and the three major works that issued from these interactions.





Figure 36. Sharon Jewell, 2014. *Half open wall, 3*. Plywood. 2400 X 1200mm (Photograph, Sharon Jewell, studio).





Figure 37. Sharon Jewell, 2013. *Half open wall, 2*. Plywood. 2400 X 1200mm (Photograph, Sharon Jewell, studio)





*Figure 38.* Sharon Jewell, 2014. *Lifting ground (breath)*. Plywood, paper, pumice. 240 X 120cm.  
(Photograph, Sharon Jewell, studio).

#### 4.5 Muslin, organza and mineral: touch sense / dream sense.



*Figure 39.* Lengths of Muslin laid out on the studio table.

My first inquiry into fabric involved twelve metres of white muslin. Reasons for the choice of this fabric, when no particular design guided the selection, might be sought in an early memory of mosquito nets, when once, from beneath a light drape of muslin, a sfumato impression of the room gave ghostly form to half familiar shapes. Thus muslin served as protection from the very phantoms it produced. Later in life, I used muslin to drain whey from curd in rudimentary cheese making, but it is too light and too disinterested in defined edges to



facilitate more fastidious design. It is, in any case a fabric that mediates, due to its translucency and its porosity, qualities given in its characteristically loose weave. Threads catch easily and when they pull, the fabric responds quickly by puckering around the wayward yarn. I had made a choice to explore fabric as part of this investigation into surface materials. But when it came to the selection, I was reminded that there is no single thing that is fabric. One must *choose*, and in choosing, when there is no object external to the choice demanding certain qualities, the choice is more important than all that follows. To reiterate Bachelard, "... by our first act of choice, the object designates us more than we designate it" (1987, 3). Although each fabric is rolled into a tidy bolt, and these stand like sentinels around the fabric store, they are not at all of the same order. I have found that selection of a fabric is not a matter of choosing between one or another, but about finding the one that the hands can already feel, that is already draped about the body. The trade in fabrics, is a trade in skins.



*Figure 40. Sharon Jewell, 2012. Muslin pulled and crumpled.*

The work I performed on the muslin became a sort of text. I found I could “write” its surface into various distortions, simply by pulling the warp and weft threads at different intervals, and tying them off, so that while the surface became increasingly expressive, increasingly determined by decisions enacted

upon it, it also became considerably shorter (figure 35). Twelve metres contracted to around eight by the time I put it aside. But it could have continued, could it not, to contract, for with every draw of a thread, another area revealed itself as *not-yet-drawn*? Thus the striated weave of the cloth, became striated a second time: a double layer of gridding crossed once and crossed again. The cloth itself gestured toward the unattended parts, as surely as the unwoven warp invokes the weft.

It became clear that to follow this provocation, would be to lose all trace of the cloth's extent to the intensive contraction of its weave. From plane to volume, the cloth began to consume itself through an excess of self-information, turning ever inwards, finding opacity in translucency, in an extraction of its own infinite profiles. What, then, intervenes, to say "enough"? No demand from an external agent will chime in. No rule of form, no objective interest. There is no definitive answer but what I want to conjecture is this: to over invest a material with its self-interest, is, eventually, to limit the interest it can return. *I* lost interest – another way of saying that I no longer could engage in the material collaboration – because the thing, under my labour, had turned all its concern inward. Is this not true of an over-polished surface, a surface so self-assured that at first attracts then, with nothing left of which to be informed or to inform, pushes back?

When I first began to acquire organza I was attracted by its secret life as glass. The evocation of its name, *glass organza*, was enough to fill the imagination with wonder for this unlikely double life. The name is decisive: this fabric is not *like* glass; rather it shares enough of the being of glass to be familiarly related.

Thus glass and fabric come together to make of this substance something fragile and icy, tinkling in glinting needles of sound, yet simultaneously fluid, folding and soft. The contradiction that lies at the heart of the poetic image is of central importance for Bachelard, for whom the poetic instant is a “harmonic relation between opposites” and “the holding of the plurality of contradictory events within a single moment” (Kearney 2008, 38).

By whom and under what spell this fabric was named is unclear. Following Bachelard, however, it quickly becomes apparent that *glass* gives not only a description of quality, but more precisely, a *value*. Bachelard writes: “Quality should not be sought in the object’s totality, as the deep sign of substance; it should instead be sought in the *total adherence* of a subject who is deeply committed to what he or she is imagining” (Bachelard 2011, 59). The excess and contradiction that an imagined quality affords is the first step toward a poetics of substances. Again, Bachelard is clear on this: “Imagining a quality means giving it a value that either goes beyond or contradicts the sensory value, the real value” (ibid., 60). Thus to know a substance through the reverie of imagination, is not the same as knowing it technically, or scientifically. It is not about accessing the use value of the material, or of explaining away its strange appeal, but the limitless, unnamable value that arises as a reciprocation of subject and matter in oneric contemplation. The oneric value of a substance supposes a reciprocation with the subject who dreams or imagines. Such is the abiding connection I have with this material that the conversations I have established with it are equally subjective and objective. This connection I suggest is one deeply connected to intransitive care, where the terms of the relation are mutually self-giving.



Figure 41. Sharon Jewell, 2013-2015, *Mineral down*. Organza, stones. 300 X 145cm

Already, it is possible to see the deficit in my dealing with the muslin through this tiny portal of insight. For where I sought to know the muslin through its inherent material qualities, I stopped short, despite the immanence of certain childhood Summer nights amongst its folds, of knowing it *poetically*. To seek out or research a material is to put it to the test of the imagination. So despite the intriguingly altered surface of the muslin as I sought to extract the strands of its self knowing, I failed to establish with it an oneiric value. The glass organza came with this, in the high pitched hum and tinkling of its glassiness, extracted from the shimmering ripples within its weave. And to this contradiction of qualities I brought another, in the form of literally thousands of variously sized and coloured iron “balls”; stones that you can skid on if inattentive, scattered in patches across the island where I live. So together, glass organza and earthy iron made for a ponderous lightness, mineral earth pulling at and disdaining glassy lightness, reflecting a poetic intuition of care’s dialectic action. They made for a veil of earth, revealed first in the work *Mineral down*, as if feathers had been given the weight of sleep (figure 36).



The three works, *Mineral down*, *Tent cradle*, and *Curtain*, (figures 36, 37, 38) all involving the glass organza and stones, form a central nexus for this thesis. It is in these materials and forms that the relationship between surface objects and the outward extension of care, is most apparent. The surface object in each of these works is manifest as, respectively, a blanket – *Mineral down*; a veil – *Curtain*; and an abode – *Tent cradle*. That each of these objects strongly invokes the enactment of care is indicative of a final conviction to acknowledge this as a principle that runs through my working methods and extends to a mode of being in the world. In recognising care as a key value, the importance of hand stitching becomes clear, as it brings my attention to every small inch of the large expanses of fabric, over hundreds of hours. The stones sewn into little pockets throughout these works, restate this enfolding, holding quality of fabric. They also create a poetic contradiction of lightness and mass, so that the overall effect is one of sheer weight.



*Figure 42.* Sharon Jewell, 2014. *Curtain*. Organza, rocks. 560 X 200cm. Image courtesy of Caboolture Regional Gallery. Photograph by Al Sim.



Figure 43. Sharon Jewell, 2014. *Tent cradle*. Organza, stones, wood. 210 X 232 X 49cm.  
Photograph by Sharon Jewell.

The gathering of stones emerged as a valuing of difference; again, an attentiveness. The valuing that comes with the collection is of a kind that does not cosset as precious, but celebrates as divergent. As Rebecca Solnit has observed: “The collection shifts emphasis from the object as emblematic to the object as divergent...Alone the object is foregrounded, but in accumulation, it becomes part of the background or a field” (Solnit 2003, 169). Perhaps “field” or “ground” is better than “background” in this context, because it seems what has happened is a merging of figure – the emblematic – and ground. In the collection, there is no more grounding, separate to the active elements, for they are their own ground, and as such they are able to fold and weave their differences. The collecting of stones also brought me down close to the ground, so close that it ceased to be a background, but the source of those miraculous little minerals,

spherical as marbles, red oxide, yellow ochre, and lustrous black and round as shot (figures 39, 40). The ground had spat these things out, and in all likelihood, still had a belly full. The ground as background disappears, when you put eye or ear to it, and once that background is gone, it seems clear that it was only ever there “as if”. Like the wall in Elana Herzog’s works, the ground first throws everything into relief then enfolds it, drops back, moves forward announcing its affinity in the same gesture that both consumes and holds.



*Figures 44. Minerals found on Russell Island (photograph, Sharon Jewell)*

I recall a work I made in 2013, whilst on a residency for the *Lines in the Sand* art and environment festival, North Stradbroke Island (Minjerribah), in which I explicitly embarked on an impossible task of care. *Mending the holes in cotton*

*tree leaves*, I made on site at the narrow entry to the precipitous South Gorge on Stradbroke Island (Minjerribah) (figure 37). For this work, I stitched, in red cotton, directly into dozens of leaves as they hung on the tree, across countless holes that were the work of the ravenous cotton bug. I quickly realised the insurmountable nature of the task, but pressed on despite this. Care became not so much an act of fixing, but an intensive engagement, a giving of self, in endurance, patience and close attention. While it could be argued that this act of care was more symbolic than real, more futile than effective, it nonetheless pushed the leaves forward, to the scrutiny of passersby, who were alternately moved and confused by this insurmountable and seemingly pointless gesture of mending. As with the enormous task set by the tiny stitches into the organza, care emerges firstly as a way of being in the world, and therefore, the practicality of a task is hardly a gauge as to whether an urge should or should not be pursued. I suggest that the willingness to take up the insurmountable task is a recognition of excess to reason with which Being manifests itself in the world.





*Figure 45. Sharon Jewell, 2013. Mending holes in cotton tree leaves. (Minjerribah)*

#### 4.6 Mesh



*Figure 46.* Sharon Jewell. 2012. *Mesh*. Sticks, fabric, wire

A final word must be given to the large mesh work to which I dedicated several months in the first year of the research. It is constructed from hundreds of small sticks, wrapped in many different fabrics. These fabrics were donations from a number of women, both friends and family, whose fine silk or silk like garments became entwined in this net that expanded outward, with no set destiny. There is no prescribed pattern to the mesh work. While it may have begun that way – at a centre now lost – the irregularities in stick length and curve, guaranteed that the

pattern altered very quickly, finding new ways, new intrigues, new relations. Of all the works made in the course of this research, this one most emphatically moved outward in search of its perimeter – or in a determination never to resolve one – widening as it travelled away from a centre, re-establishing new ones and growing away once again.

The mesh is a singular sort of surface material, flexible like cloth, but topologically different, in that it can pass through itself. The twin sidedness of other surface materials becomes difficult to follow in the mesh, particularly this *Mesh*, since the short lines that constitute it, transition to rather than define an other side. Where one face ends and another begins is a matter of estimation, and always ambiguous. Furthermore, and of relevance to the theme of ground that has moved through this research, Hans Blumenberg has pointed out, of nets – a species of mesh work – that they “require a medium and no longer a ground”. (p.73). Here he is acknowledging their dual participation in line and plane. In suggesting a medium, one imagines the skillful throw of the fishing net, hovering against sky and sinking into the water: alive in an open medium, but bereft and spent, on solid ground. The strangeness of the mesh led to other questions that began to move away from the central themes of this research – though the intensive care of labour was always there in the making – and which will, in time, be resumed in a further body of work.

#### **4.7 Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have traced my creative practice, over the course of this research, from the idiosyncratic behaviour of notebooks and griffics, where pages

drive meaning, often through ambiguity, as much as inscriptions, to the more substantial works through which the notion of care, as a mode of engagement with the art work, emerged. The account given has not followed a strict chronology but instead addressed the action of care and processes specific to three kinds of materials: Paper, wood panel, and fabric. The separation of these materials in the discussion acknowledges the particularities of matter, and the impossibility of always referring to the practice and the emergent theories, abstracted from the material matrix. Various qualities of fragility, structure and pliability have given rise to different ways of thinking care in the practice, as well as different associations with the substantial world. For example, paper, as it has been discussed here, evokes the earth's surface, in the kinds of ruptures and rifts through which this material expresses its qualities. The panels evoked both walls and the depth that is revealed even in shallow excavation. The fabric works evoked the protective affordances of blankets, veils and tents, as well as the obsessive attentiveness to the minute within the large, difference within the collection.

The qualities that emerged in all the interactions described here derive from the terms of "limits". All the works emerge from an engagement that pushes up to the border of the too much and not enough: the point at which the material reaches full expressive potential, a saturation prior to exhaustion. I have also suggested that it is within these terms that I, in my collaborative role with these materials, am also enlivened. Limits are reached for, in the repetition of a gesture in the work, falling short of the exhaustion by which the enlivening of the soul begins to falter. Care, in all these instances, becomes a negotiation of this region,



and is given in a reciprocal exchange between material and body: as the work becomes, so I become. Care is thus an attentiveness, an understanding, but an understanding that goes beyond a physics of material knowledge. This was raised in the section about muslin and organza where I defined a poetics of materiality, in the oneric contemplation of matter. In this discussion I referred to Gaston Bachelard's understanding of substance as given in poetic form, where ambiguity arises between the fact of matter, and matter as it is inflected through subjective contemplation. In this rendering, matter is augmented, and enters the definition of the beholder / artist as much as the beholder / artist inflects the material. I refer again to the words of Dennis Slattery, cited in the introduction, writing on Bachelard's poetic imagination of matter: "the material imagination, whose function is to imagine beneath images of form...is called upon to discover deep aspects of the unconscious" (Slattery 2012, 117).

## CHAPTER 5

### THE MURMUR OF SURFACES



Figure 47. Sharon Jewell, 2015. *The murmur of surfaces*. Caboolture Regional Gallery, May – June, 2015. Image courtesy of Caboolture Regional Gallery. Photograph by Al Sim.

This final brief chapter comes toward the end, not because it is an aside, or a coda, but because its topic, the exhibition *The Murmur of Surfaces*, came together and opened after I had completed the previous chapters. The works, having been discussed in isolation, now need to be considered in the context of this exhibition – where the gathering of works becomes a new object – and in light of what has been written above, on the theme of care. Particularly, the exhibition of works relates to the mutual holding that was discussed as the relation between work and beholder. The gallery, isolating the works from the scene of production, places them within a liminal zone, a space set aside for contemplation that invites a particular passage or trajectory between works, that establishes a particular tempo and proximity for that contemplation. In the

gallery, space also becomes charged in relation to the works, so that, rather than saying “between works” it may be more appropriate to consider the impossibility of defining where the shores of one work end, like an island whose littoral zones are not clearly defined, and those of another begin.

All the works, including the drawings, have a spatial presence, that is, the space of the beholder and that of the work is shared rather than bordered off. The long *Curtain* cutting obliquely across the southern end of the gallery takes charge of the space because of its scale, whilst dissolving within a glassy haze on account of its translucency, its spill of shadow onto the wall behind and its undefined edges, that fold and drape and fray. Yet this curtain does not divide two spaces marked for difference, and therefore attention is drawn to the object that typically withdraws into its partitioning role. The space of the gallery flows beneath, above and through this object, which, for that reason, serves instead to hold the space together, and create a sense rather than a designation of here and there, without driving a wedge through things. As the space that traverses the curtain is also that which is shared by the beholder, it might be said that, equally without strict borders, the beholder also flows and folds through the stone weighted fabric. Moving in toward the work, as its little stones invite, the breath can pass through the curtain, on account of its filtering weave and fissures and tears, thus mingling further, the beholder with the substance of the work.

The *Mineral down* and *Tent cradle*, with their liquid-like spills of weighted fabric onto the floor similarly make for indistinct borders and edges. The bed-like support over which *Mineral down* drapes, conjures rest or repose: the weight

of sleep with the lightness of dreams, its easy disarray suggesting or recommending habitation. *Tent cradle*, the more formal of the three stone-fabric works, meanwhile lingers in the periphery of the bed and curtain, alluding, it seems to me, to both the fancy and difficult passage of sleep and dreams. Together these three works form a cycle of mediation, where to linger is to respond to an ordinance on the part of the materials and their suggestiveness as sites of transition. In the gallery, as opposed to the studio, these transitions do not alight on the props and tools of manufacture, but on the connecting tide that links one island with another.



Figure 48. Sharon Jewell, 2015. *The murmur of surfaces*. Caboolture Regional Gallery, May – June, 2015. Image courtesy of Caboolture Regional Gallery. Photograph by Al Sim.

Each of the floor based panel works also resists definitive placement and perimeter, largely on account of the paper loops in one and the sticks that lift the obliquely opposed corners of the other. Without plinths beneath them, they glide across the floor like flotsam. Plinths have the effect of isolating and thus

separating works. By that definition, walls are like plinths in their tendency to separate, to place the work in a distinctly different place, visually though not physically accessible to the beholder. For this reason, the slumped forms of the standing panels bridge those two realms, casually dipping into the wide room, their commanding scale leaning down toward a common eye level, softening from their rigid origins to the body that moves toward them. From an affordance of enclosure, as the wall-like plywood panels once suggested, they now afford access: stepping out to meet the beholder, softening to the human subject, perforations offering access to the other side where their even softer shadows speckle the wall.



Figure 49. Sharon Jewell, 2015. *The murmur of surfaces*. Caboolture Regional Gallery, May – June, 2015. Image courtesy of Caboolture Regional Gallery. Photograph by Al Sim.

Similarly extending beyond the plinth and wall, the drawing, *Tracks dissolving in a drift 2*, laid out like a map to be surveyed on the cartographer's table invites a trajectory, like that described in chapter three where in viewing this work, one needs to lean not just towards it, but into it and over it. It does not meet at eye

level, but at the level of interaction, where the hands can easily grasp a table edge, and where one assumes the position of a surveyor. A similar drawing hung on the opposing wall does not extend the same invitation, so that it presents a more visual rather than fully kinetic encounter. Several visitors to the gallery, however, noted that, in moving toward the wall mounted drawing, patterns and marks revealed themselves gradually, so that what was tone at a distance, became texture on closer scrutiny.

In this exhibition the works that occupy plinths are those that were made prior to this research, works intended to be understood as belonging to a different time and therefore space. Those linear sculptures performing their writhing, knotted manoeuvres over the black plinths, were made between 2008 and 2010. They are included in this exhibition, largely because the Caboolture Regional Gallery curators had wanted to present what they have called an “artist in perspective” exhibition, and incorporate a number of earlier works to highlight changes over a period of time<sup>8</sup>. Five to seven years is not a great deal earlier, but it is long enough to have established some very clear developments. The plinths on which those earlier pieces stand, therefore, serve to place them in a distinct and somewhat separate temporal space, whilst the rest of the exhibition, the work emerging from this current research, is staged in the present. The inclusion of this earlier group of works helps to highlight the shift, not only in style but also in material thinking that lies behind style, from that time to now. In a very broad way, I would suggest that this can be characterised as a shift in emphasis from form to matter.

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<sup>8</sup> The only other work in the exhibition from the past is the small suspended figure, *Chrysalis* framed momentarily in the doorway of the tent cradle (figure 49).



*Figure 50.* Sharon Jewell, 2015. *The murmur of surfaces*. Caboolture Regional Gallery, May – June, 2015. Image courtesy of Caboolture Regional Gallery. Photograph by Al Sim.

While those earlier sculptures should not be assessed as output from this research, their presence performs a role of critique, that helps establish the context for the current inquiry. In the earlier works, plywood serves the complex forms that I have wrenched from the hard material. It does its job and shelters behind the excessive line work, revealing its origins ambiguously, in the stripes that run through the cross sections, along the twisting lengths of limbs. Planar has been translated into linear. A conflict ensues, where meaning – form / world – and substance – matter / earth – struggle for assertion. In the current plywood works, the material serves no purpose external to its special qualities. It is not coaxed into new shapes. The familiar dimensions of the board remain inviolable, while the substance of the plywood is revealed rather than disguised, through an attempt to turn it inside-out. Matter and meaning find common ground, mutual interest. In the earlier works, we see form first and matter second. In the panels,



the language is that of the material, translated into an dialect that already lies buried within its strata.

Nevertheless, the opposition that I have highlighted in this exegesis, between surface and depth, finds an intermediary in those linear sculptures. For, while these works clearly move in three dimensional space, their interiors reveal only the surfaces of line work. Depth comes on account of the folds and knots and multiple strands, not on account of a dark and impenetrable interior. Knotted and reflexive, these pieces reveal a writhing self interest: relations between parts are what hold these little sculptures together. The opening out that occurs in the current body of works, turns this self interest outward and it is by this inversion that the works offer themselves to the beholder in the form of interest, of a gift, or, indeed, of care.



*Figure 51.* Sharon Jewell, 2015. *Curtain*. Caboolture Regional Gallery, May – June, 2015. Image courtesy of Caboolture Regional Gallery. Photograph by Al Sim.



This exhibition of works is a distillation of all the many drawings, texts, sculptures, and notes made throughout the research. All these outputs are important to the current thesis though to write about them would be to burden and repeat them in less adequate ways than those by which they are able to represent themselves. The book that accompanies this exegesis, therefore, documents these works and some of the griffics and texts from the note books, with minimal explanation. This book of documentation produces a dialogue that appears as a murmur, filtering through, and through which are filtered those words and works that I have placed at the foreground, and merging the interconnected and multiple parts of the research process, into a single connected ground.

## CONCLUSION

### FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

The course of this research, from a reflection of past encounters with the motivated surface of drawing, to a reorientation of thinking and doing from the vertical to the horizontal, has provided the basis for the development of a theory of care in an art practice, the specifics of which are directly linked to surface materials. The praxical implications of the findings should not be construed as a theoretical basis for art practice. Instead, reciprocal care should firstly be seen as a way of being, of and with the artwork and therefore must be registered in the range of encounters that make all art practice collaborative: encounters between the parts of a work; the encounter between artist and world, between artist and work, and work and beholder. All these relations, I have argued, invite a mode of being that can be seen as one of care, also expressed in this thesis as concern, interest and attentiveness, the aim of which is not preservation, but an enlivening of the being of things.

The field in which this study is situated has evolved and therefore the references and contexts have followed the course of this exegesis rather than having provided a single immovable context. Given the conclusion that care, specifically reciprocal care, is a mode in which artwork, artist and beholder encircle each other in an ethics of self giving, the research has arrived at a place wherein it is impossible to wrench the ontological imperative from the epistemological. That is, care is both a way of being and a way of knowing.

The definition of reciprocal care as a material responsiveness, in which the artist and beholder, as well as the material components are involved, means that care is not to be confused with sentiment. It is for this reason that I have defended the notion that *interest* can equally express the effects of care, when that interest is active and directed toward the particular. That is, interest cannot be equal to care, when directed toward one thing, for the sake of another. Furthermore, care must always be active, not merely theoretical, abstract or sentimental. In this exegesis, I have contrasted the idea, *to care about*, where the radius of care is non-targeted but attends to a range of things interconnected in a field, with *intransitive care* which is care that is expressed through attention to the particular as, in a sort of chiasmus of practice, the particular arises in care. It is thus a self-giving and reciprocal revealing that occurs in the acute attentiveness of practice: as I attend to the thing that emerges on account of the attention, this care is deflected back to me as a revealing of consciousness. Art practice enacted within such terms becomes an enlivening of being.

Such is the phenomena of the gift, I have argued, as Jean-Luc Marion has developed it, through the notion of reciprocation. In his theory, Marion shows how that which gives, gives of itself, prior to the intentional object, which can only ever arrive as a preconception, a value given before the event. For Marion, the gift is the event of self-giving, where the artist receives and holds phenomena without translating them into logical categories or terms, and gives the phenomena a new material access. This, I have argued, is how intransitive care can be explained, with the term “beholder” an appropriate way of defining the sense of being held, and simultaneously, of holding the object of encounter.

The significance of this can be read on a number of levels, from its influence on artistic agency, to the defense of art practice as an alternative economy where value circulates in the self-giving that is defined here as care. This stands in direct contrast to economies of exchange, where value is a quantity external and arbitrary to the object at hand. Self giving, in the intransitive care of art practice, sets value at the level of the particular, prior to categorical identification, prior to the assignation of a use value, and as such, has the effect of augmenting rather than setting limits on the experience of world and self. Thus I have described my materials as objects of encounter and have avoided referring to terms that relate to use or expediency. In my encounters with materials, decisions arose as a collaboration between the substance at hand and that substance as it was experienced in oneric contemplation, where qualities became dispersed in a range of categorically different substances: Fabric became skin, but also glass; paper also became skin; wood, carved and complicated, became an image of being.

From these speculations and observations, I suggest that art practice, realised in the mode of care, lends considerable force to a contemplation of the nature of being in the world, while its neglect risks limiting material interactions to an economy of exchange, as opposed to the unconditional immediacy of reciprocation, proposed here. In my art practice, this has resulted in a very different way of critiquing, and thus engaging with creative work, since critique and practice are not separate. In the mode of care suggested here, critical judgments are not based on arbitrary or imposed aesthetic criteria, but on something like the right of an object to be, if it has been made or given in care.

Thus by the same logic, it reignites critique with a more human, as well as more material imperative. This does not do away with aesthetic judgment, but lends an ethical cast to such critique.

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Early on in the research I had queried that sense by which I am gripped, when facing a work of art, that acts at the affective level. It is more than a visual response, but a clear sense that the object of the encounter is acting upon me, reaching out. In Chapter 3 I discussed how Dorothea Rockburne theorized the movement of thought and information from herself to the artwork that is then able to offer that information and thought indefinitely. Likewise, in this thesis I have speculated that care, by which materials come to be enlivened in a work of art, continues to inhabit the work, which then gives of itself as care long after it has been completed. I have supported this speculation through Heidegger's contention that being in the world is enacted through care, or concern. As I have contended that care, by definition, needs to be active, not merely theoretical, the care that arises in a work, through care, must also perform care in an active way. To say that art concerns itself with the world, might therefore be taken quite literally, as, independent of the artist, the work continues to perform in a manner of self-giving.

Again, I have qualified this as a care defined by an attentiveness to the object and interaction at hand, distinguishing it from the care that is directed toward an external concern, for which the artwork becomes a medium. This definition acknowledges a material agency, that links this study with certain themes of New

Materialism, though its emphasis on the mode of care establishes a new way of thinking agency.

A further claim to care that I have made concerns the relationship between figure and ground in drawing. I argued that a mutual interest between the parts of a drawing effectively raises the background from obscurity to become motivated and articulate, along with the marks. The mutual activation of figure with rather than on ground makes of the drawing an object grounded in the world, available to all its contingencies and risks. In the drawings of Kiki Smith I identified this special engagement of figure and ground. In naming it care, I countered the assertion that Heidegger made for the interaction between matter and meaning, in the idea of conflict between earth and world. The dialectic that I have called care, where ruin and expressive assertion are always nudging toward each other, became particularly clear in the works of Elana Herzog and Alberto Burri, where a dialogue of ruin and repair was seen to be the enlivening force of the works, eliciting both empathy and an augmentation of material intensity.

In my own work, this dialectic was most apparent in the series *Abrasions*, where paper was scratched to within the limits of cohesion. But in most of the works, this dialectic was the motivating principle. For the series,  *Holding surface* and the wood panels, *Half open walls, 1-5*, *Lifting ground (arc)*, and *Lifting ground (breath)* the dialectic of ruin and preservation pushed the materials toward their limits, whilst augmenting their expressive strength or holding capacity. In the cloth works, care is assumed in the nature of the objects suggested – blanket, curtain, tent-cradle – while the dialectic nature of care emerges in the ambiguity

of weight and lightness, pushing each other toward a new register of sense. Additionally, in all these works, as well as the drawings, care as attentiveness has always manifest in the repetition, persistence, minute deliberation, that have brought me in close to the surfaces, caused me to consider the very small as acutely as the larger form. As I mentioned in chapter 3.1, a kind of myopia seemed to typify my interactions across these broad terrains of paper, cloth and panel.

The fact that I have chosen to work with surface materials is neither incidental nor peripheral to the conclusions I have proposed regarding care. Surface materials have been central to this study, for their peculiar expansiveness in area and absence of depth, which make them vulnerable to the exigencies of weather, wear, time and accidental and deliberate forces. Care comes intuitively when handling such things, whether it is in stitching a leaf, delving into thin board, coaxing the latent qualities from mute paper, or weighting sheer fabric with stone. The reciprocity of care, however, does not mean preservation. As I have discussed particularly in chapter three, it is managing to negotiate the *too much* with the *not yet enough*, not in order to find synthesis, but to maintain the vibration of life that happens as the limits of things are reached for. This reading of care might mean an act of force that breaks apart the cohesiveness of a surface. With surface materials, however, in any act of force, no depth is struck or shaken, no outpouring, no concealed matter revealed, beyond the matter immanent to the handling. The rend or the tear, the puncture or thinning, restates the surface, revealing what we already suspect, but in a way that has become heightened or expressive and that acknowledges the shared investment of subject

and object. In this regard, with one of many references to Gaston Bachelard, I have likened surface materials to the self, linking this study with an ontological discourse.

As a “half open being” the self variously gives and withholds access. But it is not necessarily the depths of self that are negotiated, so much as the self as a surface that suffers tears and rifts, and enjoys the touch of things, resonates with taut cohesion, that binds and holds, vibrates and collapses into the extravagance of folds. To speak of depths and surfaces is to find sense in one metaphor or another. Throughout the creative work the collaborations with materials chosen in intuitive responsiveness, and the parallel contemplation of a consciousness that finds itself dispersed within those materials, a study in surfaces has evolved equally within the terms of an ontological speculation.

If I were to make a statement issuing from this designation of surface materials to a wider ontology, I might speculate that being is not so much deep, as vast; that it extends into an ever widening perimeter, that is not given prior to the event of its being, and that it also folds back on itself. After several months working on the *Mineral down*, I was struck by the sense that I could commit myself to this singular task for the span of my life, that, rather than taking up novel challenges, I could nominate my vocation by this object and our shared processes. I will in all probability, respond to this urge, trusting that extent builds intensity, as the shifting perimeter touches the world in different ways. The same sense of perpetuity struck me with the *Mesh*, which even more emphatically claims no perimeter to define a necessary conclusion. Surface materials, which extend



laterally, and ask nothing of depths, lend themselves to this kind of extension, that marks equally space and time.

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The responding, attentive subject – maker or beholder – absorbs a share of the forces given to and returned by the work, either in the act of making or viewing. How long do we attend to a work? What determines the *too much* and *not yet enough*? And what is it that happens when we stay with something that troubles or insists? While these questions could continue to form the basis of a further study, this present one provides an opening. Do we not already use the language of “holding”? The work *holds* the attention, the eye, the entire being. And do we not say that we *behold* something, as a way of referring to our response to phenomena that detain our senses? Phenomena that insist make of us a vulnerable surface, all depth turned outward, and perhaps prepared to tear a little.

Such is the reciprocity of care: a mutual holding, a safe place to break, to open. Given the ways in which particular material fascinations have guided this study toward an ethics of encounter in an art practice, and an otology based on a particular deployment of matter, further studies might be directed toward other sorts of substances, examined with the same level of inquiry, with a similar methodology, based on material collaboration and indetermination, to establish the narratives that issue from a different constitution of matter. On the other hand, a study extending from this one, might take as a starting point an a priori recognition of care as a motivating force, to apply it to an analysis and application of a range of situations and materials. A question here could be, how might care be augmented within the world through creative practice? Such a

study could certainly extend beyond a studio art practice, though the challenge, from my point of view as an artist, is how to continue to use and develop an existing art practice, to engage with these broader speculations.

Thus the immediate implications of the research findings are to be found in their application in practice. They have the possibility to respond to these questions: *By what mode of judgment do I consider the work I do?* And, as stated above, *How am I to be with a work of art?* Needless to say, the answer to these questions is in the mode of care. This is not as simple as determining whether or not I care. In effect, it is to ask to what extent and how my interactions with materials set in motion a space for reciprocity, where the dialectics of care work upon all the agents at play, including materials, artist and, later, beholder. It was not until I was delivered the vexing provocation, late in the research process: “Why do you do it?” that I began to consider. In the heated moment of my response, I answered tautologically “Because that’s what I do,” but later considered beyond this to arrive at the – almost equally tautological – *Because I care*. As it turns out, each of these answers was of considerable use in shifting beyond the formal hiatus I had reached. In the first answer, I identified the intransitive nature of practice. In the second, I recognised that what was intransitive, was care.

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