

Since handwriting is individually unique, it clearly points backward to me as its human creator. The consumer here is less clear, to be determined by the eventual context and medium of encounter.

## **all the *f* words we used to know**

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Photos of handwritten list of the 2,000+ F words listed in the 1996 version of *Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language (Deluxe Edition)*, published by Gramercy Books of Random House Press in Avenal, New Jersey. Verb tense conjugations and plural nouns are omitted.

An analysis briefly contextualizes this artwork in relation to semiotic theory, contemporary text-based and word-based art and arts practices, social theory, and art education.

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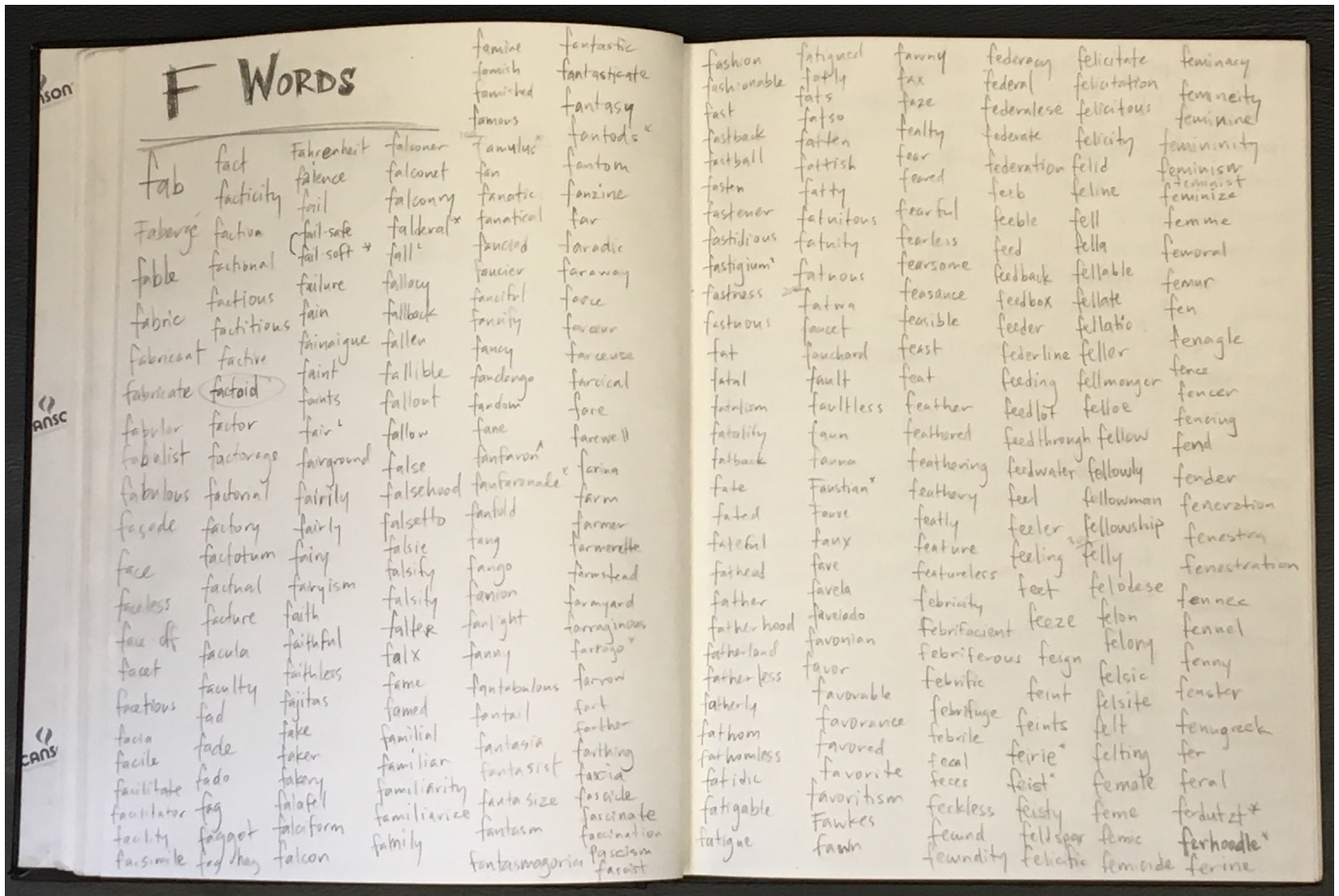


Figure 1. all the f words (fab to ferrine)

As a former high school English Language Arts (ELA) teacher, I embraced the domain, the structure, craft, and aesthetic aspects of words. I love everything about words. I love teaching and learning about texts, as consumers and composers, as meaning-makers. ELA shares similarities with meaning-making processes in other arts, without being directly analogous. Using words—language itself—not just as the medium but also as both subject and object of art activates the complex, critical-creative, and transdisciplinary processes of meaning-making.

**object + word + image = written text**

The blending of text and art has a long history. In what may be the oldest written language, Egyptian artifacts from 3,300 BCE document the early use of hieroglyphics, a logographical language system that developed alphabetic features over its 3,600 years of active use. Approximately two centuries later, examples of recognizable Chinese logographic script

appear, and then evolve, with pictograms assuming more abstracted shapes, developing more complexity in meaning and aesthetic refinement across its long history spanning into today's current written Chinese (Lo, 1996-2012). In 4th century Greece, scholar and poet Simias of Rhodes produced the first Western piece of text-based art: a poem about an axe written in the shape of an axe (Ross, 2014), or what we now call *concrete poetry*.

With the dawn of Islam in the 7th century, Arabic script becomes a medium for aesthetic expressions and representations of the divine and moral aspects of power and beauty. The Islamic discouragement and rejection of figurative representations of humans, or "aniconism," transformed Arabic calligraphy into a medium for integrating "artistry and scholarship" and spirituality, weaving form, content, and meaning into a transcendental whole (Reza, n.d.). In Western Europe by the medieval period of the Renaissance, texts combined with visual embellishments become

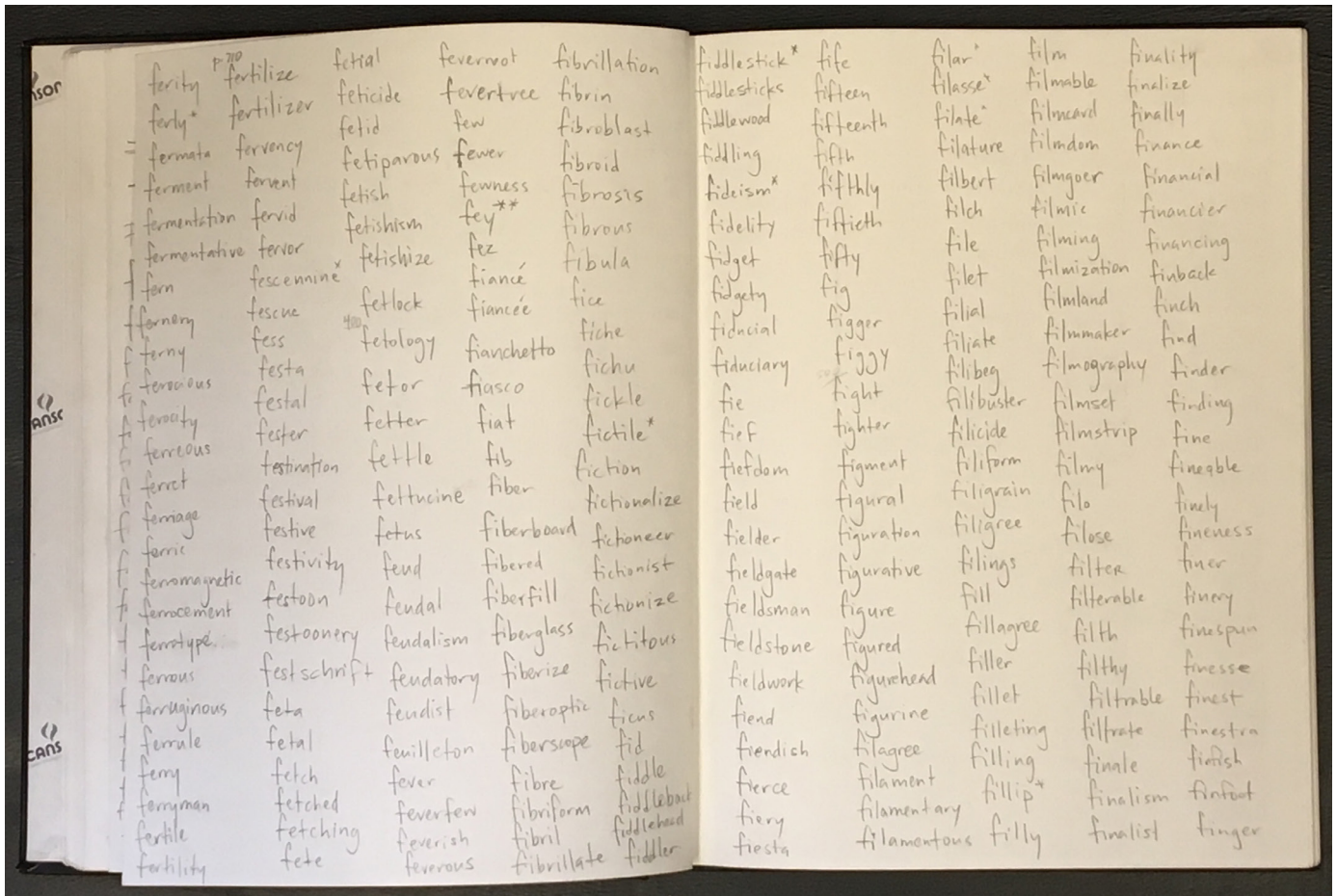


Figure 2. all the f words (ferrity to finger)

increasingly popular and widespread. Starting with illuminated manuscripts of religious texts, the decorative and then informative practice eventually spread into academic and more popular texts and publication forms. An increasingly literate and liberated public appreciated accessible written content combined with aesthetically appealing and inspirational imagery.

### from language to art

The study of English itself begins officially in the 16th century with the first grammar books written in English not Latin, proceeding to add the study of literature and writing over time. The deliberate inclusion and study of text in/as art has a more recent though relatively robust history, spurred into action partially by the field of semiotics. Linguist Charles S. Peirce (1998) theorized a three-part relationship between a word (*sign*), the object of the sign (*signifier*), and someone capable of recognizing and “understanding of the relation between signifier and signified” (*inter-*

*pretant*) (Ogden, 2016, para. 6). Building on this, in the early decades of the 20th century, multiple individual artists and collectives began experimenting with language as a material for artmaking. In 1911, Georges Braque began stenciling letters and numbers into his paintings, quickly followed by Picasso (Galenson, 2008).

By 1915, dadaists were pulling language apart, reorganizing its components into deliberately disruptive and nonsensical arrangements. Then they began using text in their other works: paintings, collages, sculptures. The semiotic work of linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1915), with its arbitrary, inseparable link between a representation (*signifier*) and its referent/meaning (*signified*), influenced artists including Kurt Schwitters and Marcel Duchamp to explore further the relation of text and art.

In Magritte’s *The Treachery of Images* (1929), juxtaposing the visual image of a pipe with text announcing that it is not a pipe visually exposes a key conundrum

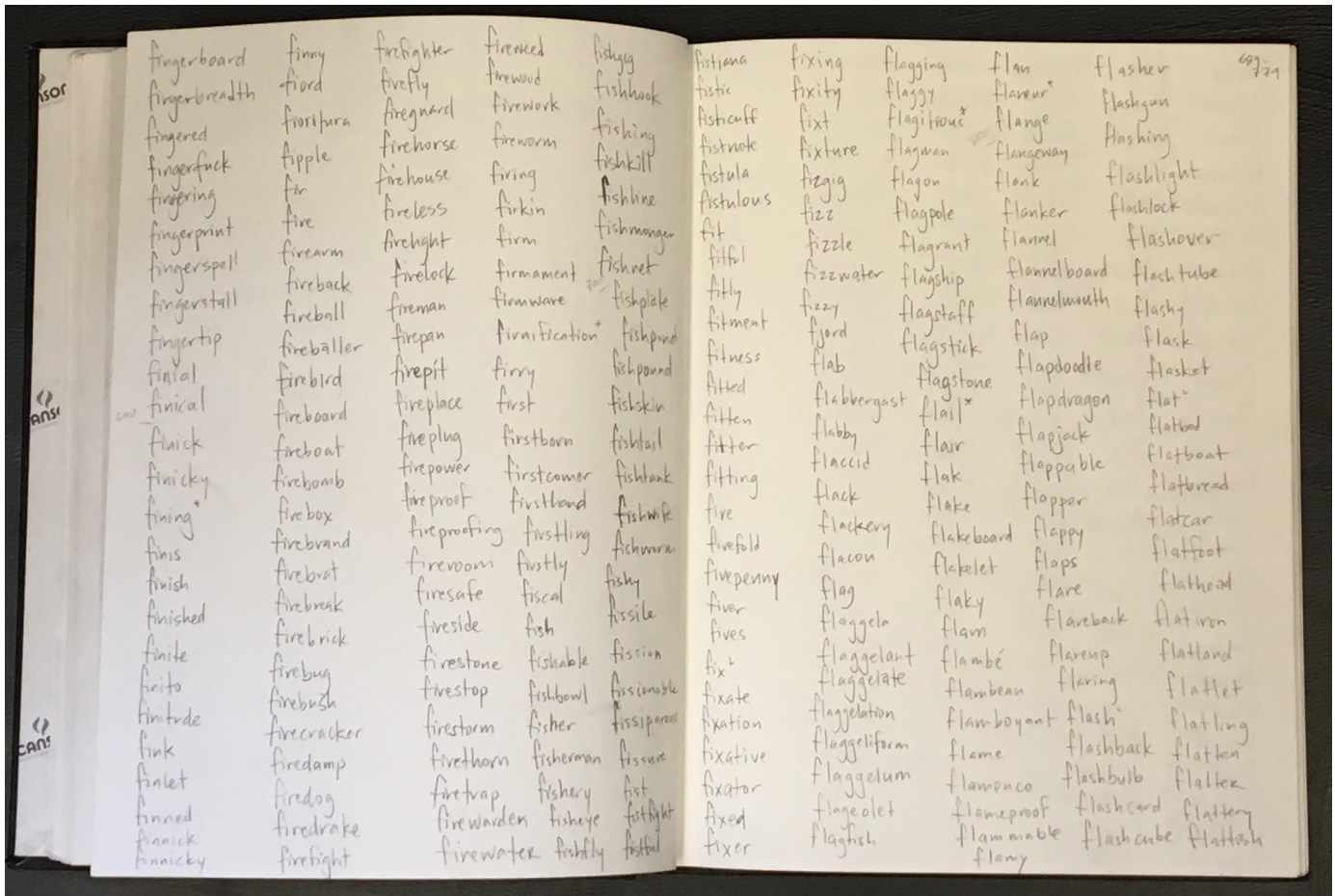


Figure 3. all the f words (fingerboard to flattish)

of semiotics and communication: the irrational relationships between an object/concept and how we language, or thing-ify, that object (Jaworski, 2015). Other artists began playing with this text/image intersection. Though very incomplete, an initial list includes artists like Ed Ruscha with his onomatopoeic pop paintings like *Oof* (1962/1963); Tom Phillip's *Humament* (1966-ongoing), his series of hand-altered printed copies of a Victorian novel; Yoko Ono's *Painting for the Wind* (1961) and *Grapefruit* (1964); and, directly referencing Magritte, Joseph Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs* (1965) piece combining an actual chair, a full-size photograph of the chair, and an enlarged photograph of the dictionary entry for *chair*.

**language as im/material**

Artists increasingly explored the im/materiality of language, translating it into multiple media then applying arts-based processes to it, like reproducing, objectifying, appropriating, disrupting, conceptual-

izing, embodying, transgressing, re-imagining, etc. (Jaworski, 2015). Conceptual artists worked with language and ideas as art. Sol LeWitt's (1967) instructions in *Paragraphs on Conceptual Art* and Lawrence Weiner's (1968) *Declaration of Intent* both emerge contemporaneously. Concurrently, On Kawara's aesthetically minimalist two-color *Date Paintings* (1966-2014) documented time and existence, recording it in the simplest terms possible. Barbara Kruger, Jenny Holzer, and the Guerilla Girls continue to employ alphanumeric texts *as* and *with* visual representations, often adopting the language and tropes of advertising or public informational materials, working through media from paper to granite to digital signs. Similarly, Glenn Ligon's quotations from famous African American writers, speakers, and artists in black oil stick on plain white doors begins in crisp clarity, then, through the process of stenciling, they transform into increasing blurriness, crowded into a dark chaos (Wetzler, 2011). Outside the purview and limits of the



Figure 4. all the f words (flattop to fly)

official art world, graffiti continues to be one of the most timeless, popular, accessible, and internationally visible forms of text-based art, using names and words as public aesthetic representation, pronouncements, and celebrations.

**art + verbs = translation**

Although this handwritten list of words from a dictionary (see Figures 1-11) offers multiple intertextual art references, the most prominent is Richard Serra's (1967-1968) *Verb List Compilation: Actions to Relate to Oneself*. In the sketchbook-bound, two-page, four-column spread pictured in the photograph, Serra presents a handwritten list of 84 infinitive versions of transitive verbs, including *to roll*, *to splash*, and *to join*, interspersed with 24 possible contexts, or forces capable of impacting materials, including *of tension*, *of inertia*, and *of reflection*. Seaberg (n.d.) calls Serra's *Verb List* a language-based drawing, noting it became Serra's *To Do* list for experimenting with nontradition-

al sculptural materials and processes, often resulting in artifacts he exhibited. Similarly, *all the f words we used to know* is a record of the temporal process, the "residue of a particular activity" (Seaberg, n.d., para. 2), in this case translating precise and mechanically reproduced text painstakingly into handwritten, imperfect graphite traces. Like Serra's list, *all the f words we used to know* relies more on referencing and documenting the process of an activity and less on formal qualities like technical skills and elements and principles of art and design (Carpenter, 2005).

**i write me**

In some ways, although this work looks clinical and sterile and purports to represent *all the F words*, it betrays itself. It betrays parts of me, exposing us however inadvertently. This work is produced by and caught in the intersectionality of *my* identities, of the universal with *my* particulars (Collins, 2015; Wilson, Shields, Guyotte, & Hofsess, 2016). This work clearly

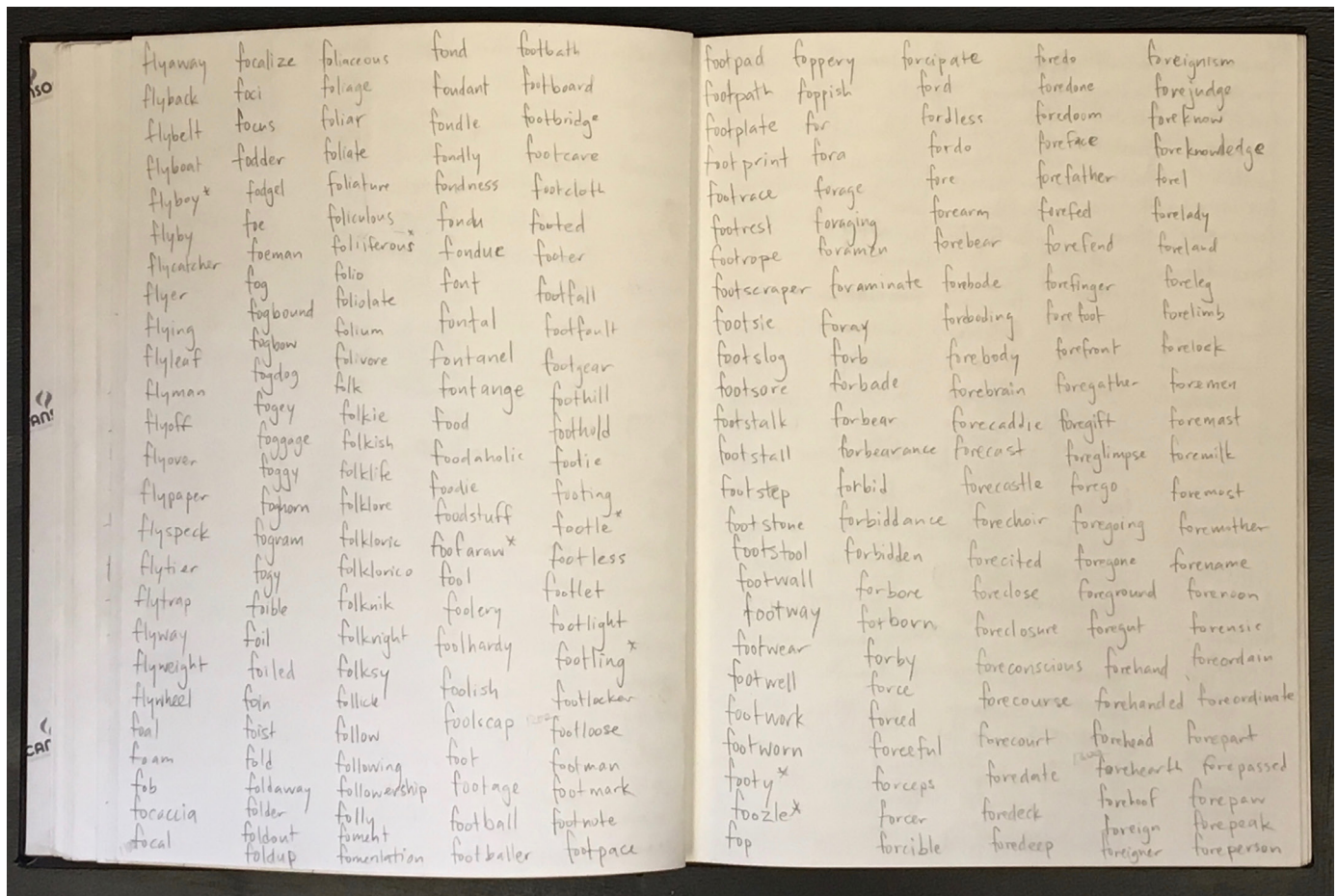


Figure 5. all the f words (flyaway to foreperson)

demonstrates *the double arrow of indexicality*, a semiotic principle that all signs “on some level, indicate both the creator and consumer,” simultaneously “pointing backwards to its origins, and forward to its addressees” (Jaworski, 2015, p. 79). In this case, since handwriting is individually unique, it clearly points backward to me as its human creator. The consumer here is less clear, to be determined by the eventual context and medium of encounter.

The arrow pointing to me becomes a timeline into my past, indicating the entwined roots of my love of text and arts. My working class family valued education and revered words—reading, learning, writing, and playing with them. My parents bought a hardbound set of *Encyclopedia Britannica* volumes the year I was born, an extravagant expense prominently featured in our small living room throughout my childhood. Several years later they both gave each other dictionaries for Christmas. Another year, they exchanged identical copies of a Shel Silverstein

book. Our home reference books provided us with useful materials for school projects and word games; they also provided a place for intellectual exploration. I needed no reason to pull one from a shelf and browse aimlessly, from one entry to the next, skipping around, following endless pathways in a chase to satiate an unquenchable curiosity.

Although I could read, write, and spell before I started elementary school, by second grade my handwriting remained a nearly indecipherable mixture of small cramped letters, slanted at different angles and crammed together unevenly. Instead of nagging me to practice, my parents lured me in, buying me a calligraphy set with pens, inks, paper, and a lettering guide. I was captivated, spending hours drawing letters and words that increasingly resembled their sources. Pages and pages of words and names. Writing became a creative undertaking, an art. My handwriting greatly improved (as did my forgery skills).

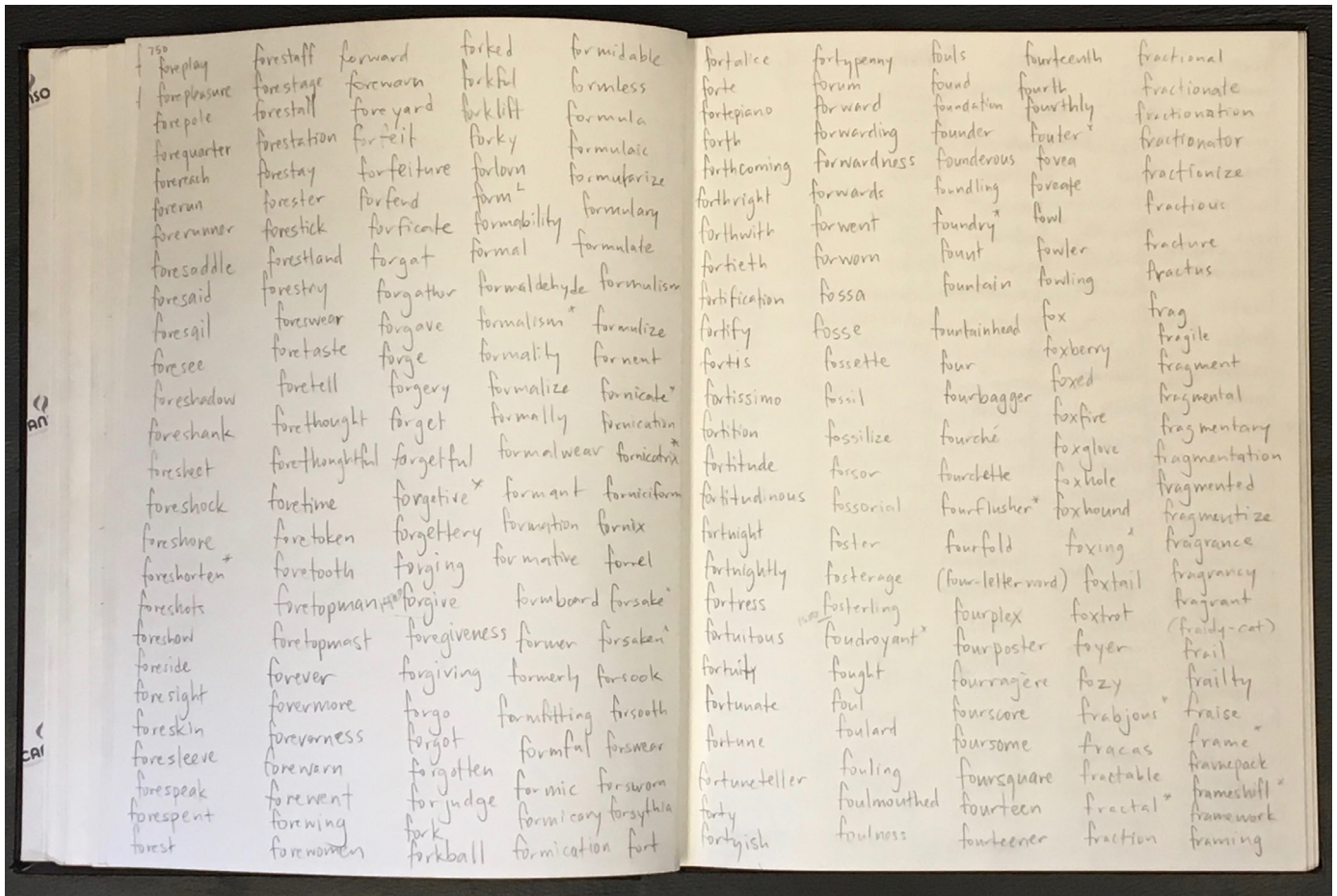


Figure 6. all the f words (foreplay to framing)

Outside of school, I spent hot Georgia summers surrounded by even more words. I stayed weeks at a time with my grandparents, working in their small family printing company—typesetting, developing plates, running presses, cutting paper, filing. I was enveloped by papers, words, images, and family all mixed with the rhythmic sounds of machinery and the persistent smell of ink and oil. We turned other people’s ideas into words and images, fashioning them into informational tools and useful objects.

This love for language led to an undergraduate degree in English, to a Masters’ in English Education, and eventually to becoming a high school English teacher, albeit one concerned with the overlaps and creative possibilities for combining language and arts. Students blossomed with creative, open-ended response choices for activities and assignments: they read and updated and illustrated folk and fairy tales; created, printed, and distributed a senior newspaper;

filmed scenes from novels; built multiple models; and created/curated musical compositions.

These creative language and arts integration opportunities invited students to make personal connections with class readings, to extend or disrupt them, to find ways to insert themselves into seemingly settled texts, including classic and contemporary novels, plays, stories, and poetry. This approach honored students’ agency, interests, and experiences as valuable assets, encouraging the continued cultivation of a communal collection of knowledge (Giroux, 1988; Kalantzis & Cope, 2008; Ryan, 2011; see also Friere, 1970/1972). This combination of language and arts recalls Smith-Shank’s (1995) vision of a semiotic art education where learning is a process of linking, expanding, and understanding texts—an ongoing inquiry that transcends disciplinary boundaries.

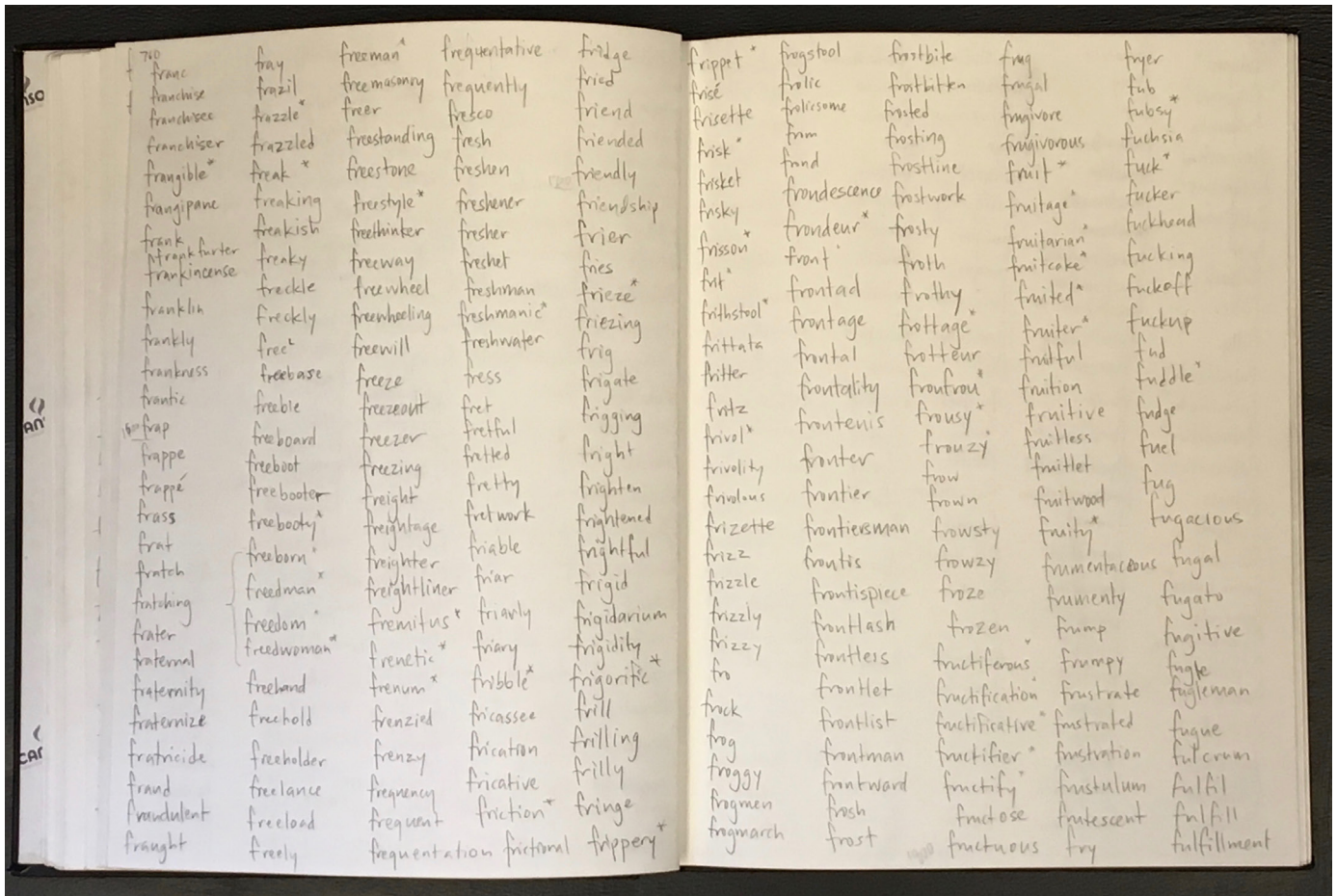


Figure 7. all the f words (franc to fulfillment)

**a call for all the f words**

This year's *Journal of Social Theory in Art Education* call for papers around the theme "All the F words" transported me back to this junction of language and arts, rekindling my love for both. But how to address such a broad topic? How to confront such an open sea? To start, I turned to an authority on words: my home copy of *Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language (Deluxe Edition)* (1996). This dictionary itself is a substantial object—a collection of printed text, approximately six inches thick, weighing probably ten pounds, its black cover embossed with golden type. A few jagged valleys expose the grey cardboard under the binding, revealing its regular use.

While I love the immediacy of the internet for a quick definition, I adore the process of looking up words in an actual dictionary. A search for something specific can start an educational expedition into motion. Using the physical text literally opens possi-

bilities for unexpected encounters, connections, and fortunate accidents.

After turning to the *f* section and reading a few random words and definitions, I started to wonder: could I create a work that incorporates all the *F* words? What are all the *F* words? Which ones are important? Which aren't? To me? To art education? Which ones do I need to know? To ignore? To share? How do I choose?

As a result of these questions, I attempted to take the call for manuscripts literally, to write and submit a list of all the *F* words. I took out my letter-sized black sketchbook, found a #2 pencil, then opened the dictionary to page 68g and started writing words in alphabetical order from the beginning. This process, while seemingly mindless and mundane, became a meditation on language, text, and meaning. The process ranged from a relaxing immersive flow to cycles of choppy and compulsive re-readings of words and definitions.



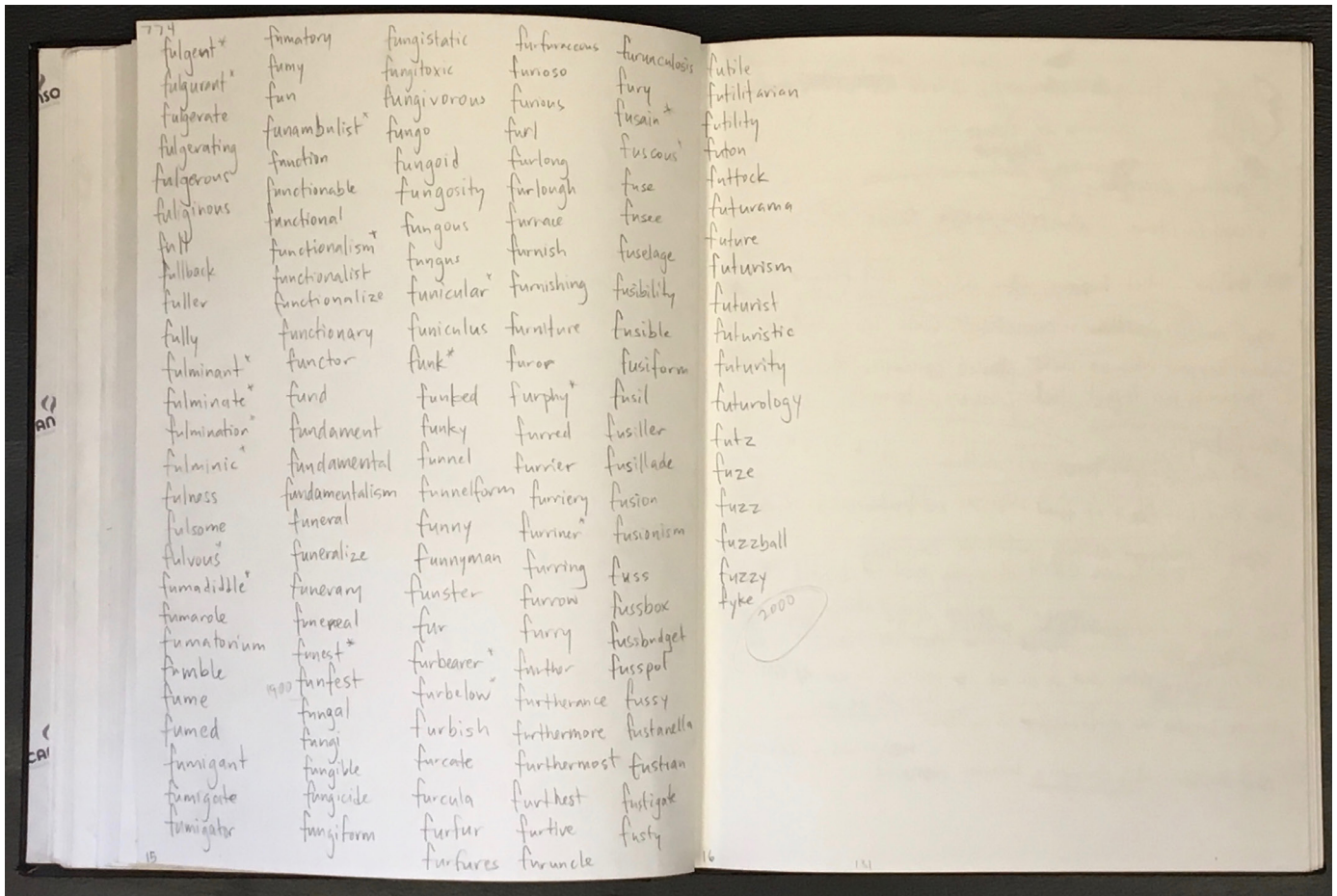


Figure 8. all the f words (fulgent to fyke)

### favorites

Along the way, I found *favorites* (see Figure 9). Some are based on definitions. A *fail-soft* is a system with built-in allowances for failures that keep them from being catastrophic, sustaining vital functions and reduced operations until remedied. *Firnification* is the process of snow transforming into ice. A *furphy* is Australian slang for a rumor or an unbelievable story purportedly based on fact from reputable sources. *Freedman*, *freedwoman*, and *freeman* are linguistic signs of the long struggle for equality in this country, a term signaling a contradiction to the assumption of slavery, designating a different way of *being* for many people.

Some are arts-related terms. *Foreshorten*, *foundry*, and *frieze* were obvious, but others were not. A *flong* is a papier-mache mold dating to the 1820s developed as a plate for relief printing. *Frottage*, commonly a sexual reference, is also the process of creating a design on paper by placing it over an uneven surface and “rub-

bing” it with pencil, charcoal, etc. A couple relate to colors: *fuscous* meaning dark-hued or brownish-gray, and *fulvous* being reddish-yellow or tawny.

I chose many based on an ineffable combination of sound, definition, and current relevance. Many of my favorites share commonalities of confusion, error, and nonsense: *falderal* (nonsense or foolish talk), *ferdutzt* (confused, bewildered), *flubdub* (nonsense, pretentiousness), *flumaddidle* (worthless frills), *fribble* (use wastefully or foolishly), *frillery* (unnecessary ornamentation), *ferhoodle* (to confuse or mix up), and *foozle* (botch or bungle).

### processing the process

*all the f words we used to know* comprises photos of the handwritten list of the 2,000+ *f* words in the dictionary, complemented by a handwritten shorter list of 110 favorites. Verb tense conjugations and plural nouns are omitted.

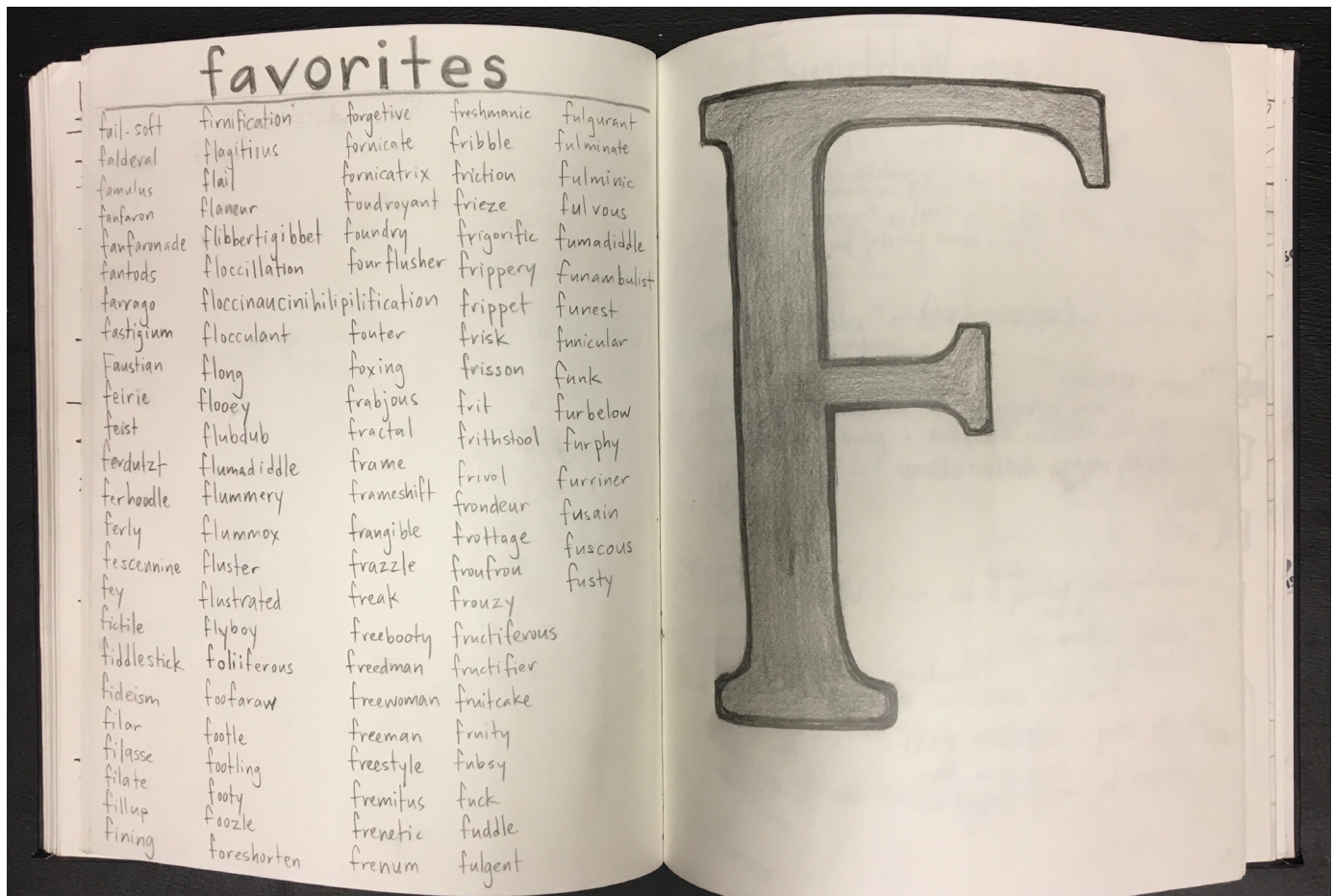


Figure 9. all the f words (favorites)

In writing these words, I am trying to claim them. I am surveying and studying them, repeatedly. In cycles. In waves. Moving my hands to trace their letters. Stuttering through their pronunciations. Picking them up and watching them slip through my fingers so I must reach for them over and over. It takes a lot of work to own a word, and there are so many words available. Learning them all is an ambitious and unlikely goal. They aren't all here. Increasingly, this dictionary is a relic, a reminder of an object-focused past, outdated. Today, language and texts in many ways are inherently more suited for the dynamic capabilities of digital media—rhizomatic, evolving, expanding—with free dictionaries for most languages instantly available online.

In the process of creating this work, I learned multiple things. Like the repetitive brush strokes of painting, the process of copying words can slip into the meditative, occupying the body, freeing the mind to float, following the words like waves into a flow of

ideas, associations, more words. I am reminded of the self-referential trap of language: to define it, we have to use it. I think about its unachievable impulse toward faux precision, the obsession that words and meaning can be fixed, that they can be exactly what we want them to be. Reading the dictionary reminds me of the imprecision of language, its instability, its slipperiness, despite our best efforts to control, contain, and master it. Like J. Alfred Prufrock, the protagonist in T. S. Eliot's (1917) famous poem, it is impossible to say just what we mean, misinterpretations are unavoidable. Approximations of meaning may be the best we can do. In this way, although we like to believe language offers a more universal means for sharing and making meaning, perhaps it is more like art: open-ended, subjective, contextual, interactive, complex. In art education we might consider ways we can engage and explore these similarities and differences as tools with our students and within our own work. We might ask more of language, using it as an artistic medium itself,

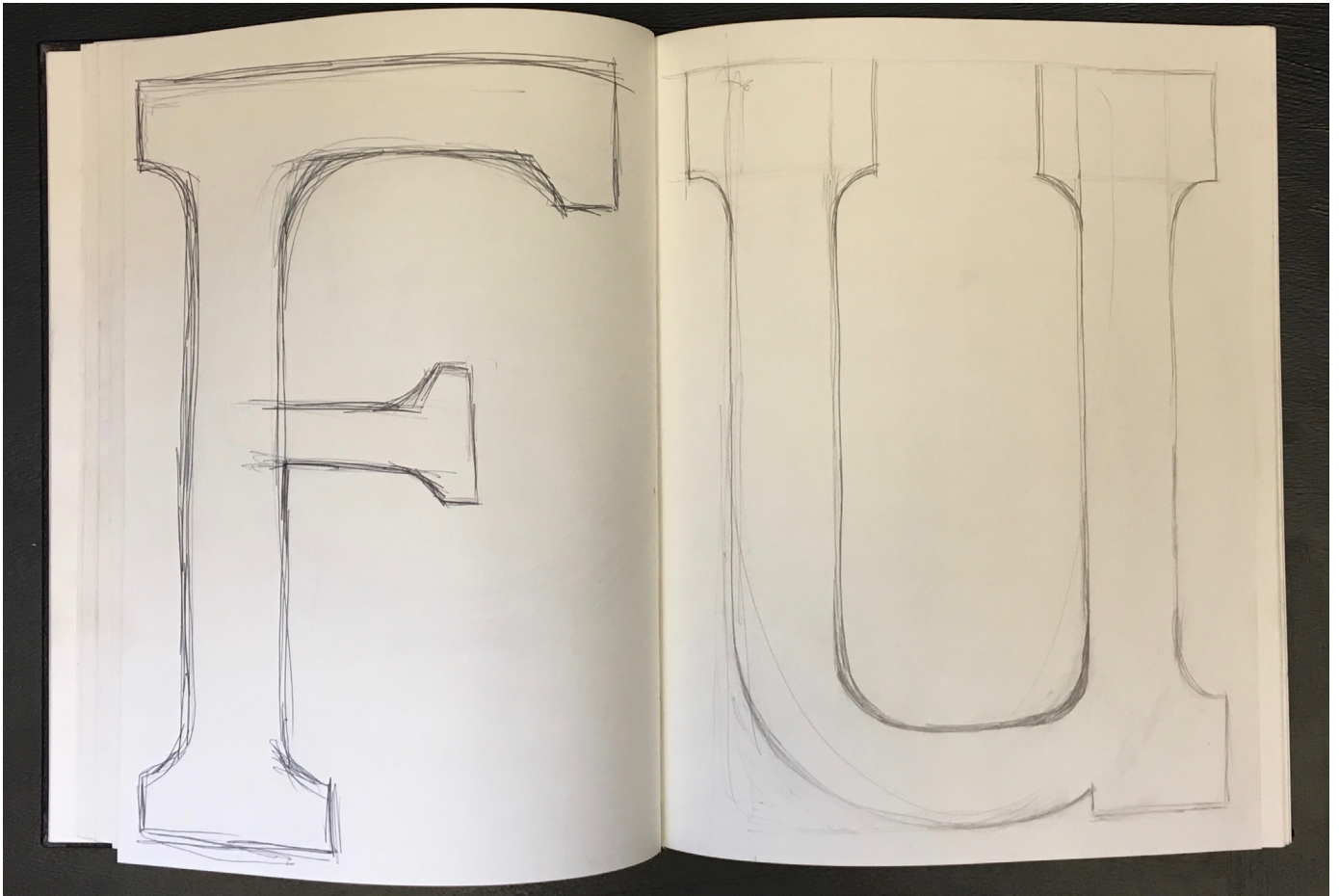


Figure 10. all the f words (FU)

as a tool for artmaking, as content, and as subject. We can make increasingly rich intertextual, theoretical, and practical connections.

As I continue to reflect on this piece and its production, I sense possibilities for extension. I think of Ann Hamilton's work commingling art, language, objects, interactions. I think of using digital media to record the process of creation, rewriting the list while recording audio and video, spelling the words, pronouncing them, maybe reading the definitions as I write. I think of documenting the act of writing, following the writing instrument closely, recording the hand in motion. I think about ways to capture more of the physical: the sound of a pencil tip moving across rough tooth paper surfaces. Alternately, I can choose a more digital route, using the recording capabilities of a tablet computer and applications meant to capture each movement in the creation of an image, like a recording of an image emerging spontaneously on the surface, extending across time.

### ***en fin (finally)***

As a handwritten list, *all the f words we used to know* represents and documents a return to the creative and educational potential, as well as the pleasure, of actively engaging in learning through arts-based approaches (Dewey, 1938; Edmiston, 2014; Eisner, 2002a, 2002b; Irwin & de Cosson, 2004; Springgay, 2004). More specifically, this work involves reconceptualizing language arts, transforming it from a subject into an active process. In languaging art, there are near-infinite choices for source texts and near-infinite ways to translate, rewrite, or re-present them. While *all the f words we used to know* is an artwork itself, it also offers a simple and easily-modified blueprint for engaging with language deeply as object and as a medium for learning and artmaking.

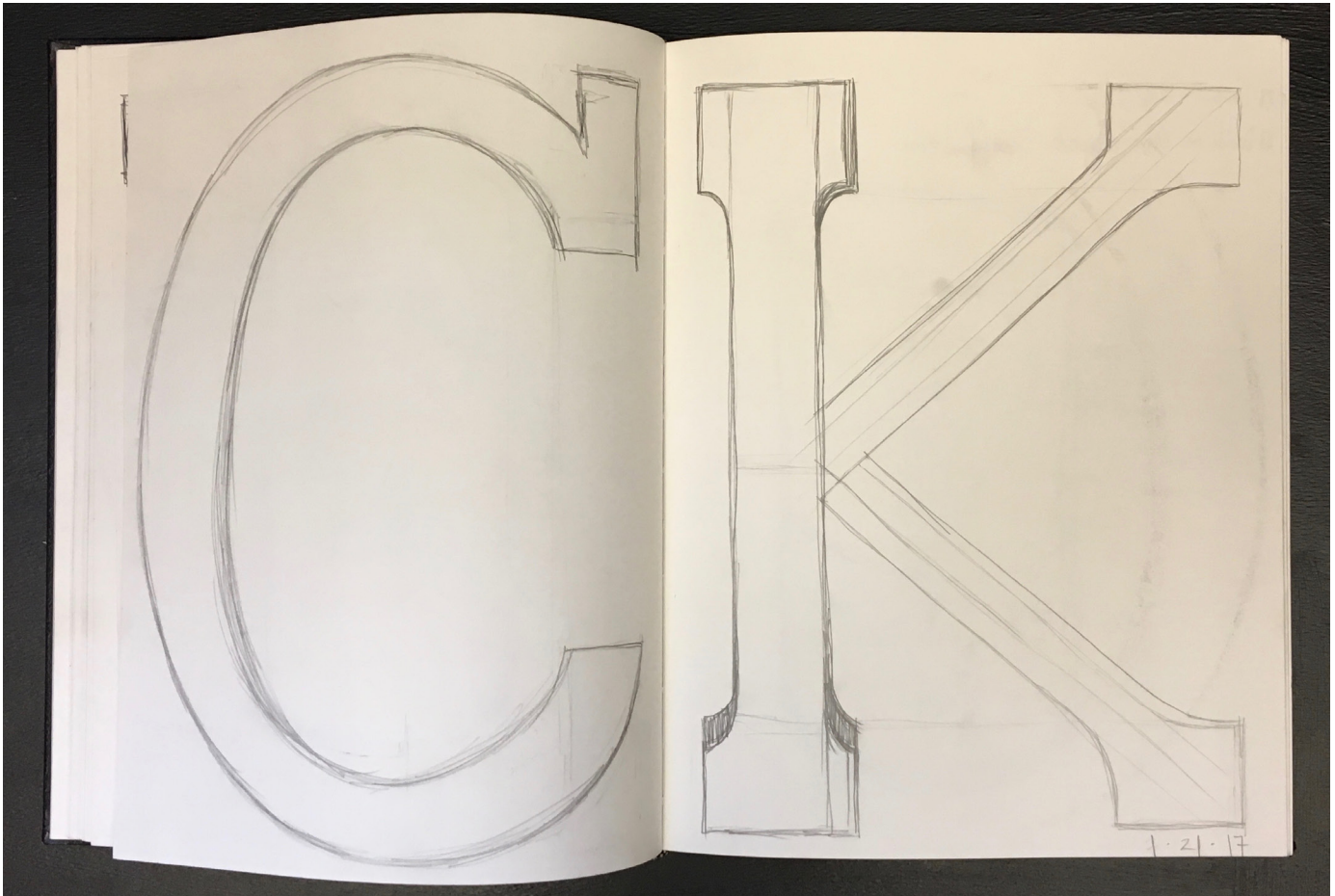


Figure 11. all the f words (C K)

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