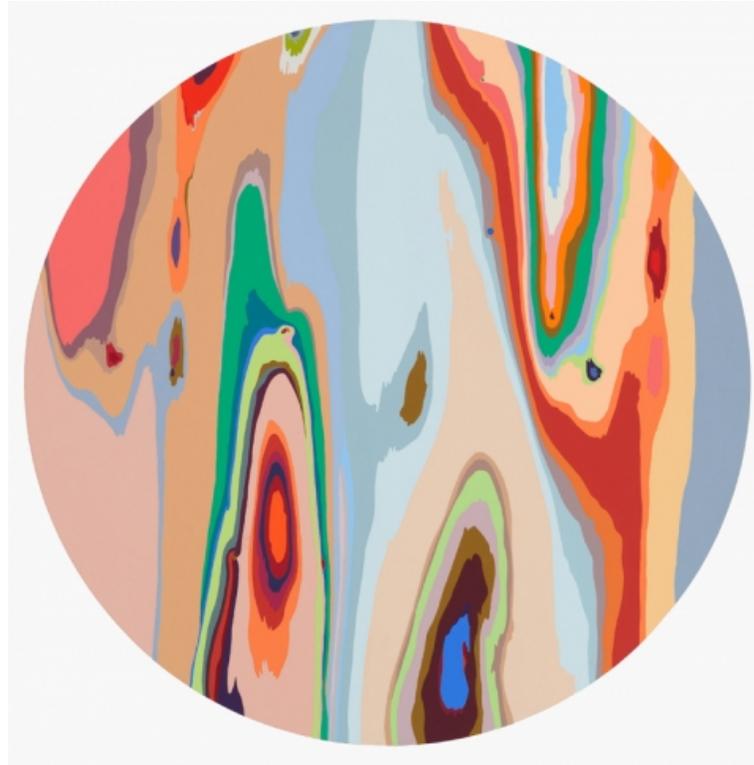


Irrational Qualities of Substance

by
Valerie Constantino



Beth Reisman, *Bodhi*, 2012
courtesy of the artist

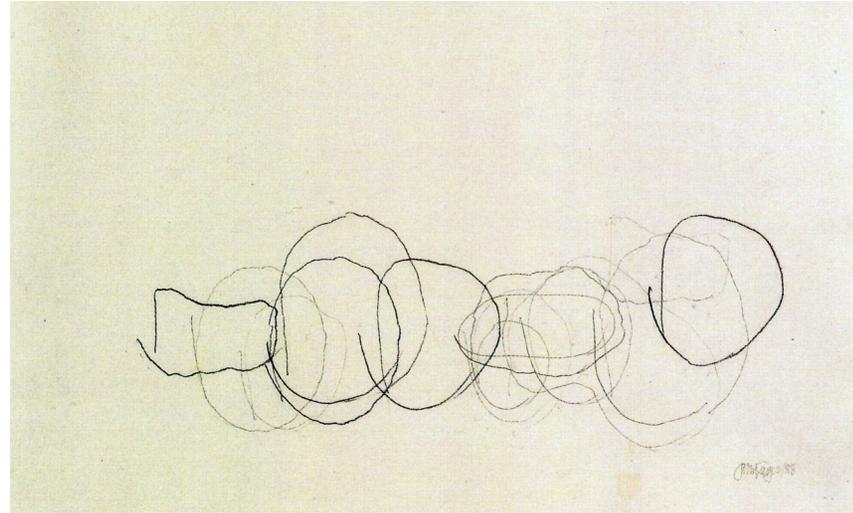
Inside the treasury of the Dharma eye, a single grain of dust.(1)

- Eihei Dogen

Out of the still nothing comes the eternal murmur of everything. The primordial void is ever so marvelously fertile. Ancient cosmologies tell of how the world emerged from an extraterrestrial egg that formed itself out of nothing but its own will. However vacant such a lone embryo may have been, it still had the capacity to attract that, which kindled its own latent power.

*There is no such thing as silence.
Something is always happening that makes a sound. (2)*
- John Cage

*Who then tells a finer tale than any of us?
Silence does. And where does one read a deeper tale than
upon the most perfectly printed page of the most precious
book? Upon the blank page. (3)*
- Isak Dineson



John Cage, *Where R = Ryoanji 3R/17*, 1992
courtesy of the John Cage Trust

The blank page or the white cloth represents the fertile ground upon which such a vital gesture or cipher may occur. Subtle stirrings of unseen forces are set in motion during *Shikan Taza*, a Buddhist meditative practice, sometimes called the *Silent Illumination*, as the practitioner sits quietly, facing a bare wall. (4) Thirteenth century Zen Master Dogen writes: *To carry yourself forward and experience myriad things is delusion. That myriad things come forth and experience themselves is awakening.* (5) The matter of being is a discernable result of intensifying dynamics, as substance itself is spun from nature's resolute hum.

The study of textile, or more broadly, the study of materiality, engenders a meticulous examination of such imponderables: What is matter and how is it ordered? What holds it together and what tears it apart? Our observations reveal complex relationships between the visceral and poetic qualities of the things of the world, including the material form through which we each inhabit that world.

Growing up in New York City close to the Atlantic Ocean and the salt marshes of Brooklyn affected a particular kind of material sensibility throughout those early years. The smell of salt air, the sentry-like formations of gulls along the shoreline, tangles of mussels, crabs and seaweed; and sand, hot and dry to burn and buff the feet, and heavy and wet for mud pies and castles: I am as ever permeated with this atmosphere. Years later too, in the woodlands of Vermont the correlation between nature's substantive properties and its unpredictable forces drew evermore sharply into focus.

It was mid-January when we moved to Vermont. Determined that I *get my kid out of the city*, my friend Alan called to say that a neighboring cabin had become available. We drove up from Somerville, Massachusetts just to have a look and there it stood, covered in snow, an innocuous shack hidden beneath a luminous white surface. Little did I grasp its ramshackle interior: an oversight that would underscore my fragile place within the natural world.

With a sheet metal stove for heat, two weeks worth of wood, no running water, no phone and a borrowed car, we moved in. The constant din of city life to which I was accustomed, surrendered to the forest hush. Water turned heedlessly to ice in frozen stillness as I watched the slow gradation of light into darkness each day. There was nothing that ever seemed to occur to encroach upon the pristine state of those piney winter woods.

The Wicasa Wakan
loves the silence, wrapping it around
himself like a blanket - a loud
silence with a voice like thunder
which tells him of many things. (6)
- Lame Deer

Friends helped with occasional loads of wood, but eventually I was expected to fend for myself. Gathering, splitting and hauling logs into manageable bits stoked a relentless encounter with my pitiable ineptitude. Eventually though, through mandatory diligence, I would achieve a degree of familiarity with my tools. Intended to instill respect for the source of our fuel, a local saying reminds: *It heats you twice - first when you split it and again when you burn it!* Out there, on many industrious days, despite overheated efforts and smoldering frustration, I'd doubted ever getting to the burning part.

In addition to these necessary efforts required for heat, the only available water for the everyday tasks of cooking and cleaning was located in an underground spring, fifty yards sharply downhill from the cabin. In those days, snowfall often accumulated to four-foot depths in the woods; conditions which, though visually dazzling, required lifting the brimming buckets up above the snow line while carrying them back up that hill. Sinking waist deep with every step, I'd often lose my footing and then watch as my precious cache of fresh water disappeared into the crystalline surface. In time, such daily disasters came to signify, besides the need for constant do-overs, the ever-blurring line between the illusion of control and the surprisingly joyous abdication of control.

Having weathered the physical demands of that first year, an intimate relationship with the land evolved and we decided that our woodland plot should give way to a garden. Setting out to clear a spot, with great enthusiasm, I felled two or so dozen red pine trees. A neighbor with a backhoe pulled out the stumps and hauled them away. And then, after

repeated turnings of decomposed compost into the soil it was finally time to plant. We grew vegetables, flowers and herbs, designing according to complimentary plantings, learning which species of flora would deter the various fauna with whom although we shared the forest, we preferred not to share the whole of our harvest.



Jesse in the Garden
Vermont, 1975

That spring, all manner of growing thing burst upon the scene. We tended each plant, took note of every creature and inhaled the cool, dark scent of the earth. We gathered vegetables for dinner and culinary and medicinal herbs for drying, as we learned about the earth's virtues. We witnessed a lush and altering array of aroma and color through natural cycles of birth and death. Fall arrived and we were still harvesting. My small garden produced more than we could consume or put away. Winter followed. We placed the roots and stalks upon the ground and bid the earth goodnight. Everything slept in peace and quiet, until mud season, when melting snow and ice saturated the ground, readying the earth for spring, when it all began again.

During the years following the divorce, our family's geographic split between Vermont and the islands of Hawaii, necessitated frequent visits to that Pacific Ocean atoll. And there too, an elemental kinship with that primordial landscape rose to the surface like vapors escaping from well below the earth's crusted surface.

A sensual torrent of volcanic rock and soil, the unrestrained potency of the ocean and pahoehoe lava, tropical heat, musky fragrances and prolific vegetation, endless variations on green, fish markets with alien species, boats and tackle, and distinctly diverse food and language. It was here in this place, so many eons ago, that our antecedents wriggled out from beneath knotty seaweed, from watery, salty clefts. And it was here too, where the links between nature's flux and the workings of my own states of affairs came into focus again under a clear equatorial light.

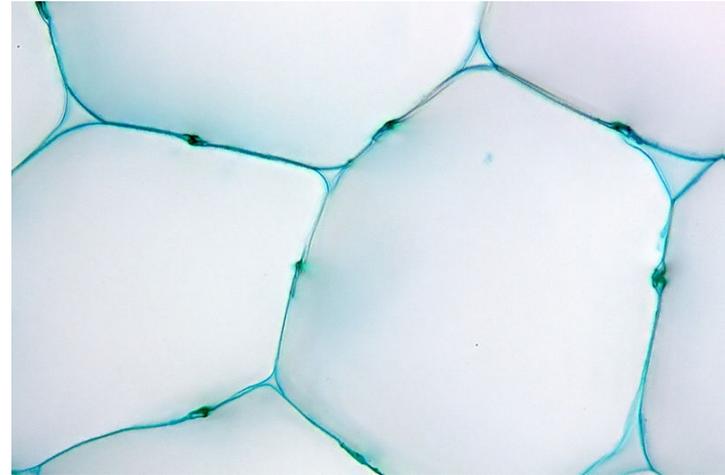


Aerial view over Kilauea
Hawaii, c. 1980

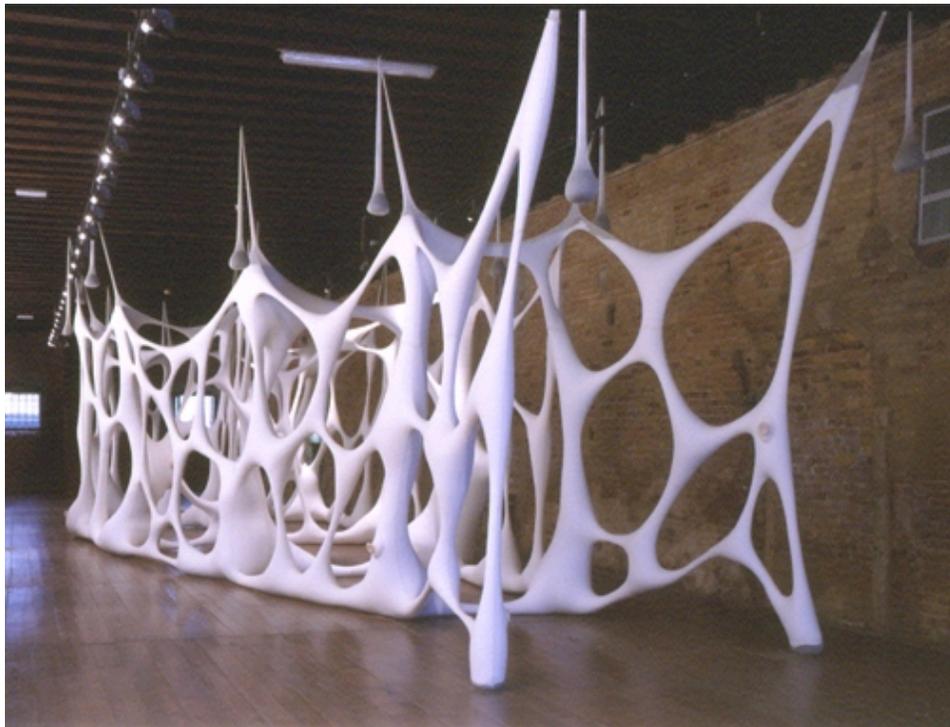
Ubiquitous metaphors such as the *web of life*, the *fabric of life*, and the *thread of life* (the filament-like DNA), point to an unseen network of all things living, while authenticating the synesthetic experiences of life lived as sensual material beings in a sensual material world.

During the last several decades the language of *superstring theory* has entered the vernacular of academic as well as mainstream culture, extending and corroborating the poetry of interconnectedness. Often dubbed the *theory of everything*, superstring theory aims to unite the formulaic discrepancies between space, time, matter, and the forces that generate

motion. (7) Introductory readings enthused textile artists in particular, as the visualization of the most fundamental element of matter as a tiny, vibrating thread-like loop, seemed justifiably evident to us.



Cyperus Alternifolius Stalk
original image: Micropix
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Ernesto Neto, *Esqueleto Globulos*, 2001
© Ernesto Neto
Courtesy Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York

Accumulated minutiae form the vast just as the slightest fibrous element becomes thread, cloth, and covering through the repetition of a humble gesture. Tibetan ceremonial mandalas and ritual sand paintings of the Dineh made of crushed stone and colored sand, are like creations of cloth: gathering bits and fragments they reference the occurrence of matter and render the *fabric of life*.



Thiksey Monastery, Ladakh
film still, *Samara*, 2012
courtesy of Oscilloscope

Let the form emerge from what the materials can do. (8)

- Alan Kaprow

The study of art and art history brings to light civilization's perceptual shifts with regard to material being. Impressionist painters insisted on a more fluid representation of the world and its substances, comprehending light as a

palpable, interactive agent. Dada advanced an art of commonplace stuff and random juxtapositions and Abstract Expressionists sought material mixes and spillovers. Throughout the 1960's and 70's artists and schools of art embraced the spontaneous and intangible forces of nature and its substances, understanding creativity as a mutable, material event.

Along with these expanded sensibilities, the physical properties of textile and other flexibles, paper, plastic and latex for example, were considered in relation to sculptural form. The sculptural object need not be static or solid; like all matter, it is a variable thing in relation to place, atmosphere, air currents, waves of sound and light, and the passage of time.

The history of textile art itself indicated a marked shift from the flat to the multi-dimensional. Once freed from the confines of its two-dimensional rectangle, the question of just how such a non-self-supporting textile may occupy space remained. Armatures, fixatives, pedestals, tables, shelves, theatrical sets, suspensions and every conceivable alternative have been presented in response to this inquiry. More importantly though, sculptors and textile artists specifically of that period of exuberant experimentation contested the limitations of physicality along with preconceived mandates regarding what it means to make a work of art.

Sculptural explorations by Sheila Hicks, Nancy Graves, Eva Hesse, and Louise Bourgeois, as well as subsequent generations of textile artists, Warren Seelig, Pat Campbell, Inese Birstins, Anne Wilson, Joan Livingstone and others,

Inese Birstins, *Chrysalis*, 1983
courtesy of the artist
photograph by Nelson Vigneault



integrate a range of disciplines, as non-art materials and methods are exploited and the confines of material and structure are pushed to their limits.

These innovations admit too, our innate, subjective and ephemeral experiences. As conventions surrounding structure, technique and fiber *per se* expand; inclinations to replicate or analyze form for its own sake are superseded by the visceral exquisiteness of the subjects and substances of everyday life.

*Valued as currency, shroud, ancestor, royalty, or fashion, cloth represents
the key dilemmas of social political life: how to bring the past actively into the present.* (9)

- Annette Weiner

In common with the evolution of textile art, collage and assemblage developed in the spirit of redefining high art materials and methods. As chance itself authors arrangements of recovered fragments and random acts, bits of thread, cloth, and other fibrous ephemeron merge quite seamlessly into this way of working.

Like a quilt or rag rug, reincarnated materials merge, forming new life. Cloth conjures the specter of our ancestors, weaving the eternal with the present mundane. The textile, its materials and the processes of its making are relational, web-like, organic; it offers evidence of substantive links, seen and unseen, experienced and imagined.

Appreciative of the talismanic meanings of materials and events, artists Joseph Cornell, Hannelore Baron, Anne Ryan, Lenore Tawney and Dominic di Mare, and their contemporaries transform the dynamics of substance into an iconographic palette. By gleaning the lost and found and considering random associations in relation to personal and political poetics, these free-associative practices offer a matrix for what Baron describes as *the social issues and problems of the century, as well as the precariousness of existence of any time.* (10)

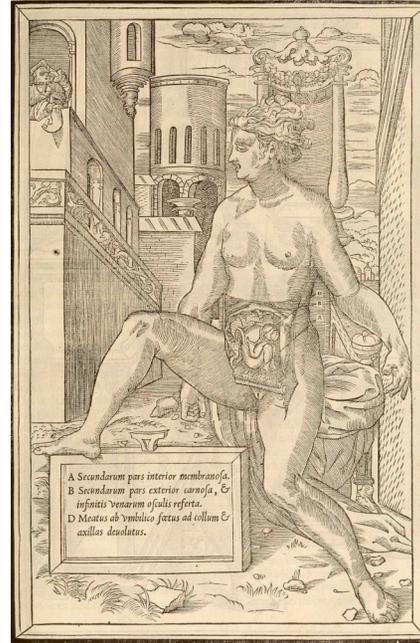


Hannelore Baron, *Untitled*, c. 1981
© Estate of Hannelore Baron

Beyond the lens of modern histories, explorations of societies whose ways of life are intimately woven into the cycles and substances of the earth expand our understanding of the energetic properties of material being further still. The animistic objects of tribal societies, ritual masks and headdresses, soul catchers and shields, simultaneously honor and are made powerful through the customary integration of potent plant fibers, and the feathers, bones and skins of honored animals. Here then, the boundaries between self and earthly matter dissolve, as the beauty, yearnings, sufferings, and transience of nature are precisely what we are.



V. Constantino
Filet Flayed, 1990



Charles Estienne, *Corpus Humani*, 1538
courtesy of
The U.S. National Library of Medicine

My grandmother sent a nightgown: a flimsy, cottony thing like my mother wore when she took to her bed. I slit the front from the throat to the navel, and inserted a trout skeleton set into a latex skin. It was flayed, like a fourteenth century medical illustration. Intent on recovering the healthy functioning of my body, I made a new internal composition at the heart of my matter.

– VC, journal

The properties of textile, its permeability and retentiveness, its fragility and strengths, evoke the compositions and dispositions of our bodies and selves. In time, the precariousness of my particular life circumstances began to alter the fabric

of my being, and I became increasingly aware of a host of disquieting symptoms. Unsettling too, were doctors' assertions after so many examinations, x-rays and tests, that my states of unwellness were inexplicable, untreatable and presumably imaginary.

In observation of these fugitive states of physical and psychological being, the notion of self seems more a conglomerate of innate and abstract elements rather than any reliable shape or form. From this mutable sensibility, the material body like all matter is perhaps then, repairable, like a sock to be darned.

*The story continuing in your body.
A rush of energy up your spine, soft vibration of
pleasure, the sinking collapse of weariness, chest
caved in, skin sagging, the long quiet night, after
which arms and legs stretched out of the dark
you are newly alive in the morning. (11)*

- Susan Griffin

Janice Gordon
Materia Medica / Metafisica VI, 2012
courtesy of the artist



*..the supreme miracle is accomplished, the transubstantiation
of the irrational qualities of matter and life into human words. (12)*

- Marcel Proust

The methods and metaphors of textile, perhaps like all creative activities, are not unlike Marcel Proust's alchemical experiment with the written word. The allegory of textile is synonymous with those of earthly and ethereal substances: water, wind, snow, sound, animal, grass, soil, dust, pollen, skin, time, gravity, light, feather, bone. Through our study of materiality, we may come to understand self and other, that is, all sentient and inert forms, in all of our alterative and indeterminate guises.

Like a darning or a surgeon I stitch these nuanced threads of thought and feeling to those more discernible strands, to those that seem more securely woven into the body of the whole. And it is just this sort of irrational quality of being that is the source of life and work; a selkie in search of her mislaid textile-skin, an abstraction of a lost terrestrial refuge.

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Images

1. Beth Reisman, *Bodhi*, acrylic on canvas, 2012. Courtesy of Beth Reisman.
2. John Cage, *Where R = Ryoanji 3R/17*, drawing, 1992. Courtesy of The John Cage Trust
3. Jesse in the Garden, Vermont, c. 1978. Personal collection.

4. Aerial view of Kilueha, Hawaii, c. 1980. Personal collection.
5. Cyperus Alternifolius Stalk
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cyperus_alternifolius,_stalk,_Etzold_green_9.jpg
6. Ernesto Neto, *Esqueleto Globulos*, installation, 2001. Courtesy of Ernesto Neto and the Tanya Bonakdar Gallery
7. Thiksey Monastery, Ladakh, film still, *Samara*, 2012. Courtesy of Oscilloscope
8. Inese Birstins, *Chrysalis*, 1983. Courtesy of Inese Birstins. Photograph: Nelson Vigneault
9. Hannelore Baron; *Untitled*, collage, c. 1981. Courtesy of the Estate of Hannelore Baron.
10. V. Constantino, *Filet - Flayed*, performance, 1989. Personal collection.
11. Charles Estienne, *Corpus Humani*, 1538. Courtesy of The United States National Library of Medicine.
12. Janice Gordon, *Materia Medica / Metafisica VI*, collage, 2012. Courtesy of Janice Gordon.