



IT TAKES TIME

DIANNA FRID / NEW AND SELECTED WORKS / OCT. 21 — DEC. 17, 2017
University Galleries of Illinois State University

SPINNING AND DYEING; OR, READING, WRITING, SEWING, BREATHING, THINKING.

Dianna Frid and Kendra Paitz in Conversation

Kendra Paitz: Language plays a key role in your artmaking, but your exploration is much richer and more nuanced than simply utilizing excerpts or quotations.

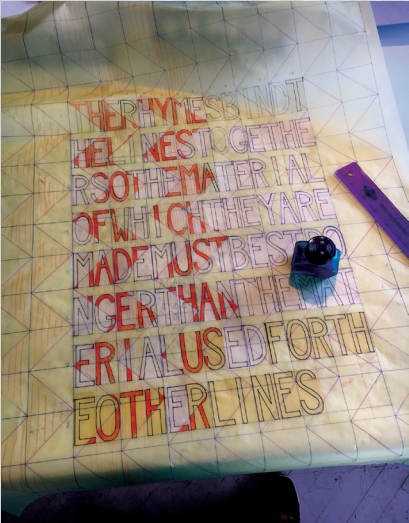
Dianna Frid: In my work right now, I’m straddling the linguistic, textual, and nonverbal. These linkages between language and matter started to happen to me shortly after I became aware of Clarice Lispector around 1995. Lispector was a revelation on so many levels. She is an author who invites me to think of words as objects. Words as things in process.

KP: I recently read a *New Yorker* essay about Lispector’s influence, and the author cited a quote about her writing: “It’s not literature. It’s witchcraft.” I was struck by that sense of words functioning in a magical or intoxicating manner. And although he’s a very different type of writer, you mentioned that Vladimir Mayakovsky has also made a strong impact on you?

DF: In his formidable yet brief book, *How Are Verses Made?*, Mayakovsky talks about the material of the rhymes as being stronger than “the other lines.” What is this material of rhymes and rhythms that Mayakovsky alludes to? It is material that exceeds the semantics of the poem. This has great resonance in all the senses of the word. While I frequently rely on systemic language, my work often comes from a place where there is rhythm before there is language.

KP: There’s a real rhythm to your process of embroidering letters and words, and those that you select are filled with potentialities.

DF: I’ve been reconstituting words to become, or not become, something else. The smallest unit of written language is the letter, and the force of the letter comes about as it gets combined and recombined into words. But, what if that unit was cut even more and split as in my piece *Weave*? I have been looking at acts of sewing, stitching, repetition—but also at acts of cutting and fragmenting to get inside the letter.



KP: All of those acts have come into play with the creation of your artist’s books too, made under the imprint Artery Archives since 1993. I’m thinking specifically of *The Waves*, and how a single word (WAVE) repeats, builds, crests, and recedes. Or *Leak*, which features an account of the sinking of a nuclear submarine. All of the text is hand-sewn onto canvas pages in such a way that, on any given spread, one can read bold red words, but can also see the stitched outlines of the words on the pages that come directly before and after. The viewer is constantly shifting between reading forwards and backwards, both in letter orientation and in the chronology of the story. You’ve also spoken so eloquently about the associations between text and textile. Anni Albers’ writings and designs have been particularly influential for you?

DF: Yes, very much so of late. The beginnings of the words text and textile are intertwined with cloth. Their shared etymology is from the Latin *texere* which means “to weave.” In her book *On Weaving* (1965), Anni Albers talks about Inca weavings from Peru as a form of writing. Of course, she was not the first one to address this, but in the context of her

book, it brings into focus how modern weaving is still a text, a code that can be read. Woven structures go back seven thousand years. Basketry is even older. These technologies are not going away anytime soon, so they are taken for granted as “not new”—that attitude in itself gets very old. Albers is one of several writers whose intelligence and love for the subject debunks this type of tired hierarchical thinking. I am not saying that Art and Craft / Text and Textile are one and the same, but we have to move on from the questions of what is more valuable. It is not productive.

KP: I agree. These distinctions are worn out, particularly at a time when many artists are making vibrant works that could not exist without interdisciplinary research or the cross-pollination of creative practices. For example, for your 2015 *Apuntes* book, you stitched designs onto imagery of ancient sculptures. And you’ve been working on a new series of related collages.

DF: In *Apuntes* I sewed onto photographs of Greek sculptures several diagrams of woven structures compiled in Albers’ book *On Weaving*. The new series you mention is called *Acoliths*. Generally speaking, in ancient Greece, an acrolith was a sculpture with garments made of wood and flesh made of stone. In essence, the substances were mixed. The *Acoliths* are mixed-media collages where I took photographs of hair and cloth in ancient Greco-Roman sculpture. I pay attention to the way fabric and hair drapes around bodies and how stone is used to represent and document a fact of what hairstyles and cloth do even to this day. For the collages, I isolate the suppleness of fiber. These folds, not the idealized bodies as a whole, are the intimate vessels that carry these figures to the present for me.



KP: Your experience with the rare books in the Biblioteca Francisco de Burgoa in Oaxaca, Mexico, seems like it may have been somewhat similar. In your *Materias* book, when discussing your research in the library, you describe the wormholes in premodern books as “speculative travelogues through the cosmos.” I love that phrasing to address space and time. I think we should title something after it!

DF: That’s an idea! I know you love naming your projects as much as I do! To answer your question, many of the books at the Biblioteca Francisco de Burgoa got damaged on their way to their current home because of how they were deaccessioned from regional collections in convents and monasteries. Part of the damage you witness in the books is due to larvae that nested in them and metabolized their pages. Tiny book-worms dug those holes to mature into insects. In Spanish, the term “materias” means both matter and subject matter, and

seeing the material conditions of these books made this palpable in both sensuous and intellectual ways. This double meaning was a coup of language for me because I had not worked in my mother tongue before. The concept of the wormhole (also known as a “black hole”) in astronomy comes from the experience of seeing a wormhole in a book. You move through layers directly, without the hurdle of the page. There is a carved tunnel from beginning to end, so to speak. Astronomers began to use the term to describe time-travel in the 1950s. I don’t know if this happens to you, but when I read a book that assails me—and this is not every book, of course—I also feel that I have traveled through something almost shattering. You come back and you are not quite the same. Some objects and texts have such power of transportation and evocation, if only partially. Art is, after all, imperfect.

KP: When the experience of reading a book has been “almost shattering,” as you say, I can still connect to that feeling, even from a distance. You mentioned time-travel. I finally read Octavia Butler’s novel *Kindred* last year, and it affected me every day for weeks. She used relatively simple language to address such complex and emotional ideas related to the histories of slavery and feminism. Dana, the protagonist, keeps jumping back and forth through time, but always with the knowledge of the present-day.

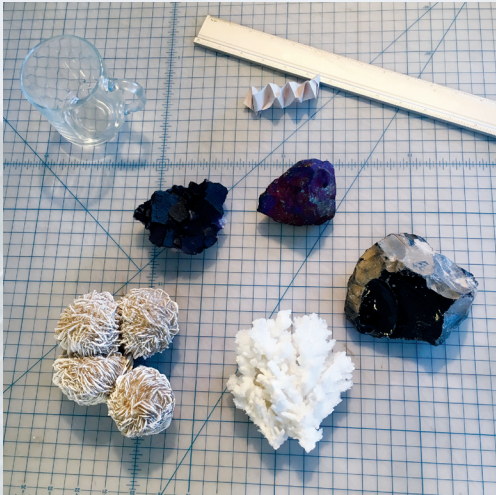
Time and distance play key factors in the content of your new sculptures. Can you talk about your choice of materials for *The Light Emitted Now Will Reach The Observer In The Future / The Light Emitted In The Past Could Have Reached The Observer At Any Given Time*? The reflective sheen on the expanse of foil offers a nice bounce of light in connection to your idea for the piece.

DF: The thought behind the work has to do with perceiving the light of stars from the past reaching us now, and about how the light that anything emits now will be seen in the future. Aluminum foil does not emit light, but it bounces light that has been emitted. As a material it has been present in my work for more than a dozen years. You see it in several works in this exhibit. The material is dynamic. It interacts with and changes according to the conditions that surround it. Perhaps this is a good time to ask you what you experience with this work. How do you walk around it and take in its physical conditions?

KP: You know I’m a fan of the detail of the very thin pink line above the foil. I’ve only had the chance to walk around the piece in your studio so far. Because of its size in relation to the work space, I’ve been very conscious of my bodily position. I’m looking forward to seeing it in the gallery, where it will not only have a great deal of viewing space, but will also be surrounded by your other work. And it will be near a window, so we’ll get to see some of the interplay between the foil and natural light. Another new sculpture, *From Before You Had a Name*, also incorporates the foil, but it importantly includes stones from the country in which you were born, and alludes to almost immeasurable time.

DF: All the stones are from Mexico, from before it was Mexico. With the title, we don’t know who the “you” is. Is it a country? Is it a person? What is before-ness? I’m thinking also of where I’m from—three countries—and the absurdity of borders. These stones are older than the borders. This piece relates to my artist’s book *Esta Mina*. As you open the pages of *Esta Mina* you begin to uncover stones and minerals, but you also reveal the holes in which they are ensconced. Where there is a hole there is a potential for it to be filled. Most of the holes in *From Before You Had a Name* are niches for a stone, but not all; some are filled with absence.

The minerals are concrete, not metaphoric. They are what they are—obsidian, desert rose, peacock ore.... The rocks are factual; they were made millions of years ago by geologic processes, some of which were extreme, but they are stable in this form. On the other side of the sculpture I allude to the force of heat or some other force that shaped the stones. But this is not factual to the extent that everyone who experiences the work has to share a name for what they see.



KP: The radiating yellow stitches really evoke the sunshine and heat you mentioned that you experienced during a late-spring visit to Cuba. Where does sewing come from for you? Did you sew as a child, or was that something you came to through your art practice? And do you have a favorite associated memory?

DF: As you know, I grew up in Mexico City. I frequently asked to be taken to see the textiles at the National Museum of Anthropology. In Mexico—especially in the southern states but not just—textile codes are still present in indigenous garments. For example, a tunic worn in a village in Oaxaca or the highlands of Chiapas will vary from another in a nearby location. These layers of visual and material culture resonated with me then in ways that I am still assessing.

My maternal grandfather immigrated to Mexico City just before World War II. In Mexico he became an established women’s tailor—his specialties were coats and suits. My grandfather’s workshop was packed with treadle sewing machines. His feet, and those of his small staff, set the mechanism of the Singers in motion. I remember the rhythmic sounds of the machines in the shop and the bodies gently swaying. Those sways and sounds astonished! He also had a three-way mirror, and when you angled the panes correctly you would have infinite reflections! Those experiences of watching, listening, and paying attention, almost unawares, were formative. Nobody expected me to learn how to sew, and, as a result, I was not taught. But I gravitated to textiles on my own, particularly when I was an undergraduate figuring out how to splice film together and how to weld. I needed to touch the thing I was making, and this remains true today. I basically taught myself how to use thread, and to this date my technique is pretty rudimentary and crude. That does not mean it is not intentionally so, and the conversation about what we call “quality” is another one entirely.

KP: I haven’t heard the story about your grandfather’s shop before, but your description of the rhythmic sounds and swaying bodies calls to mind some of our other discussions about rhythm.

DF: The question of rhythm is connected to questions that are inclusive of craft: craft as both thought- and process-driven, verbal and nonverbal. I think that because rhythm recurs on many levels in my work, it’s relevant to mention looking for (and finding) rhythm in processes of reading, writing, sewing, breathing, thinking.

KP: Your graphite and embroidery work, *Spinning and Dyeing*, with its simultaneous reference to processing wool and to living/dying on a rotating planet, comes immediately to mind.

DF: Yes! The graphite I used for that, as well as for *Words from Obituaries* and *Evidence of the Material World*, is carbon. It has a great sensorial presence and a connection to life.

KP: We’re featuring almost the entirety of your ongoing *Words from Obituaries* series (2010–present) in your solo exhibition at University Galleries. Can you talk a bit about the impetus for the series and your process?

DF: I started collecting obituaries in 2002. At the time, I was working on a few projects dealing with the naming of planetary bodies such as satellites (e.g., the moon) and asteroids. The poet Stephen Motika and I collaborated on two projects on this subject. For one of them, he wrote a fictional obituary of a man who purportedly named the craters of an asteroid after fictional characters in novels and poems who were exiled or who had “left home.” We typeset this made-up obituary to look (and feel) just like an obituary from the *New York Times*. It seemed perfectly appropriate that a person would be remembered for naming craters after exiled protagonists in literature—after all, this echoes a longstanding tradition in naming planets and planetary features. A case in point would be the Earth’s moon, which has a crater named after Apollo, the Greek deity. This got me thinking about what language does in selecting how, who, and what we memorialize in naming, but also in eulogies. Working with Stephen was the first time I really began to pay attention to the obituary form, and, specifically, the formula that the *Times* so loyally follows. Not long after this collaboration, Noe Kidder, a remarkable artist and a friend, gave me the *Times* obituary of the musician Lucia Pamela because she thought it would interest me in relation to extraterrestrial speculations. Lucia Pamela claimed that she had travelled to the moon to perform her music. The obituary stressed her claim without making her sound crazy, and that mattered to me. I kept Lucia Pamela’s obituary with me for more than a decade, and, as you know, it was only this year that I made the piece based on it.

The first *Words from Obituaries* piece—from before this was even a series—is that of Allen Read (2010). It also mentions the moon, but in yet again a different context. Read was a linguist who studied the word “OK.” The printed obituary in the *Times* claimed that “OK” was the fourth word spoken on the moon. This was an error: if you go to the online obituary for Read you will no longer see that phrase. Yet those are precisely the words I transcribed with embroidery: THE FOURTH WORD SPOKEN ON THE MOON. My father had died earlier that year; it does not take a lot of thinking to deduce that this work came out of grief, however obfuscated. It was, at first, my way of asking this: how can any life be summed up? There is no answer to that question.

In terms of facture, when I describe the works I simply like to say that they are embroidered text on graphite. The graphite is drawn on paper with a pencil after all the embroidery is done and mounted on canvas. Elsewhere (on my blog) I have written about how the colors in the series operate. Basically, I concocted a color-coded system of classification. Allen Read’s is stitched with different shades of pink embroidery floss, so it followed that all *Words from Obituaries* pieces for people remembered for working with language, from translators to poets, from novelists to coders, would be made with pink thread.

When I read an obituary, I look for language that can be extracted without being fully descriptive, polemical, or narrative. I take the words as they come, and I simply remove the spaces between them. This slows down our reading. In my source material, I look for cliffhangers or for resonances that can survive being excerpted. Sometimes I want to find something in an obituary of someone I admire or even feel inspired by, but the “oomph” might not be there, so I let it go. At the same time, it is necessary to clarify that the series is not merely honorific. There are works in the series that refer to those who wrecked lives, namely war criminals and their collaborators. Death is the great equalizer.

