

# Susan Johanknecht & Katharine Meynell

A printed project tipping our hats towards the many women reflected in our practice (rip-off, homage and transcription) in five sections, first exhibited at the Poetry Library, South Bank Centre, London, March – May 2012



## Poetry of Unknown Words

<sup>1</sup>Footnote

This collaborative book *Poetry of Unknown Words*, is a development, transcription and homage to Iliasz's *La Poesie de mots inconnus*.<sup>1</sup> In particular the format of our project references Iliasz's illustrated anthology of (mostly men's) concrete and experimental typography and sound poetry, in folio form. In our use of title, simply translated, we contain a more modern sense of an 'unknown' which plays on feminist concepts of 'hidden from history', and it is from this position that we are examining content through materiality, both past and present.

We are taking Iliasz's format and applying it to a new series of works that, in themselves, directly reference and quote already extant works by a group of women artists and writers and thinkers. Our overall structure is bundling into subject areas, chronologically referencing works made between 1700 and 1970. These printed sheets pay attention to a particular individuals' relationship to their

contemporary technologies and the consequent scientific and artistic applications. We are not trying to create facsimile – but to respond to existing artifacts, making new works.

*Poetry of Unknown Words* explores an expanded notion of the book and the archive socially, culturally and politically. Using a number of libraries & archives (including the National Art Library, the Hepworth Wakefield, Henry Moore, British Library, Saison Poetry Library, the Women's Library, RHS Lindley Library, and Yale Special Collections) we reference what we understand as key works, in a variety of technologies moving between the digital, letterpress and hand made mark. We are responding to existing artifacts, making new works, through which we examine issues of material values and shifting meanings. This interest in the artifact itself, rather than the signifying text/image alone, gives us the opportunity to understand historical context through material means. Work aware of it's history allows what Caroline Bergqvist refers to as: "a re-emergence of (that) history through detail" to not replicate or eradicate history but to keep the origins as visible traces.



Iliasz's *La Poesie de mots inconnus*, is an exemplar of avant-garde typography and design and is the structure we have chosen to transcribe –this is a series of folded folio sheets written and illustrated by prominent writers and artists. Five bundles are wrapped in a vellum folder, the outer appearance of which is a squat thick volume with embossed title. Johanna Drucker describes this as:

“one of the more remarkable productions of book arts and literary history in the 1940’s ...the first exhaustive anthology of concrete and experimental typography and sound poetry... Printed in a fine, limited edition, the work has not had the historical recognition it deserves as a landmark piece of anthologizing or for the actual substance of material it contains.”<sup>2</sup>

In our transcriptions we are reworking the ‘thingness’. If the medium is the message, and the site and location also carry meaning, these must be accounted for in a re-rendering – the physical qualities of the paper, ink or fustiness of the rare books collection – being mindful that what is left out, is also of consideration. Implicit in this is our acknowledgement of the untranslatable, the lost nuances, and the stains collected by the shifting of context within a new language, or medium. In both translation and transcription there are taints, residues and colouring, both lost from the original, and acquired in re-forming a work in a new guise.

In considering the difference between translation and transcription it is useful to remember that one is notionally linguistic, and the other moves between modes of expression such as in music or in painting, or between movement and reenactment. What we understand we are doing in Poetry of Unknown Words incorporates both. For us these are open and moveable concepts, responsive and pragmatic. The primary source has been structurally examined for Illiadz’s radical disruption of normal conventions of print, image, and text.

In *La Poesie de mots inconnus*, the text frequently suggests odd utterances, dada texts and extensive breaks with the semantics of language. The dual format of the book (folded in two, or flat sheet in 4) allows different readings that, however, keep a close relationship between them. The fold thus choreographs a series of actions in the handing and revealing process, prompting embodied engagement that cannot rest on a single meaning.

The philosophical resonance of the fold or ‘pli’ is perhaps aptly invoked here as the suggestion of a “structure of ideas”. A structure of ideas that could be applied to our Poetry of Unknown Words as it does not imply doubt or hesitation but implication, explication and replication. Our use of the folded sheet in un-sewn form enables us to keep an open research and production methodology, moving between source, historical context and contemporary reworking. It is vital to keep the means of production within our control. Our research is through making and handling of processes – the knowledge of what is learned through the hand as well as the theoretical. Keeping a plurality between concept and object, folding, unfolding and refolding.

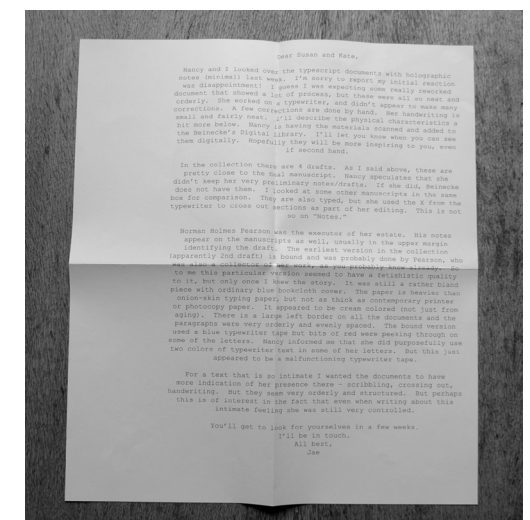
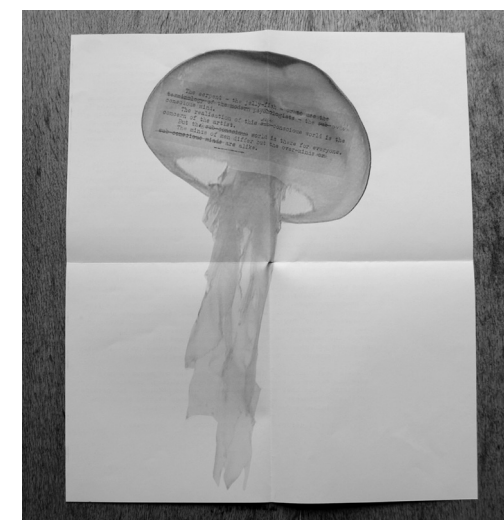
This first section recently shown at the Saison Poetry Library celebrates and responds to writings by HD, Emmy Hennings, Gertrude Stein, Valerie Solanas and Mary Wollstonecraft.

This use of archive (library) addresses the collection and places back into that archive new material.

*Poetry of Unknown Words* is our personal anthology accounting for women’s ideas – of which this is the first part – to eventually be formed into five bundles (literary, horticultural, painterly, scientific, structural) each we will exhibit within many of the research archives consulted. The completed project is being published as a *Gefn Press*<sup>3</sup> imprint in an edition of 20.

The points of reference we have used in *Poetry of Unknown Words* has been driven by an accumulation of our own histories of interests and the processes of discovery within the archive. There are things we seek out knowingly and things we stumble across fortuitously. We bounce ideas back and forth and use our collective selves to reflect upon the material we are using. We have by chance similar experiences of the world, both coming from transatlantic families and a combination of artistic, literary and artisan milieus. As mothers and academics we see similar shadows lurking just out of view. Our choices of material to reference are those that hold significance for us. The plundering of the archive provides influx, chance, harmony and dissonance. Thus this work is in part anthologizing our perception of what has been formative for us as artists and makers, and crucially, what we wish to re-circulate and bring back to the surface. The literary section shown at the Poetry Library, South Bank Centre included:

<sup>3</sup>The Gefn Press imprint was established in 1977 by Susan Johanknecht, in Vermont USA. It has been located in London since 1981.

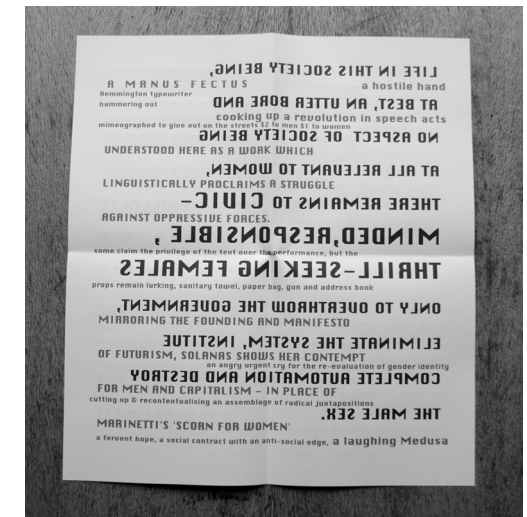
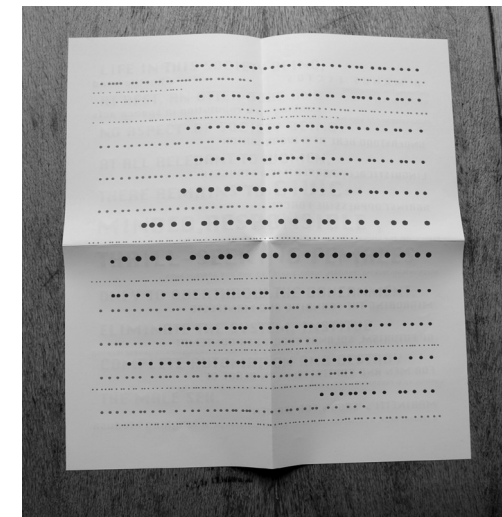
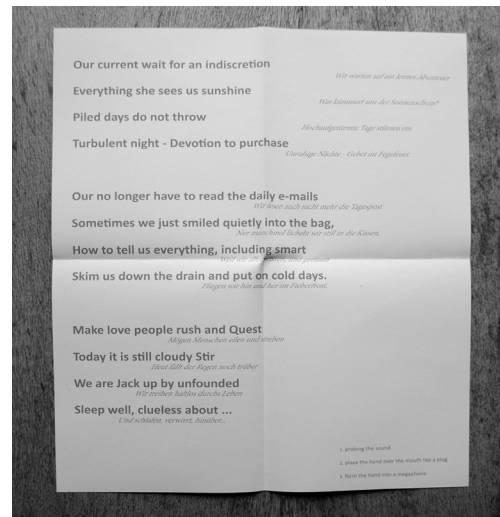
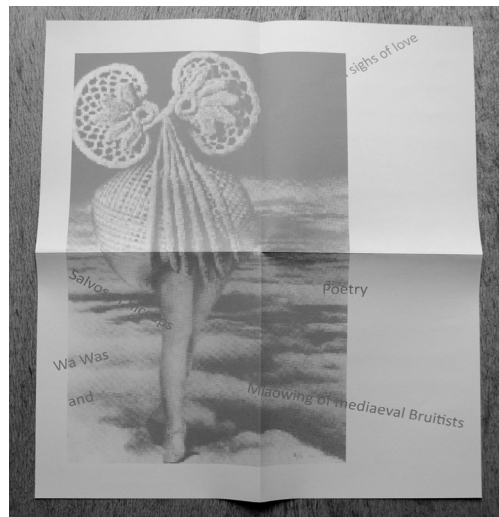


HD's notes on thought and vision (written 1919, published by City Lights in 1982) takes the jellyfish as an erotic symbol of creative force. Our response is printed on thin photo paper to evoke 'flimsy' a typewriter paper, and the visceral qualities HD refers to within her text. The verso text, written by Jae Rossman (Assistant Director Special Collections, Yale University Library) describes HD's original manuscript in response to an exchange we had with her. It was this exchange of interest and information that prompted the original HD manuscripts to be digitized and made available on line.

"The serpent – the jellyfish – or to use the terminology of the modern psychologists – the subover-conscious mind.  
The realization of this subover-conscious world is the concern of the artist.  
But this sub-conscious world is there for everyone.  
The minds of men differ but the over-minds or sub-conscious minds are alike."

of a digital transcription from words to buttons, using her text to generate system and order. Scanned buttons represent words, set out as 'Type' in InDesign leading to a new typography and code, with colour and shape as equivalents for the speech/sound dynamic of the original words. The buttons used are from our mothers and grandmothers button boxes to give a sense of subjective chronology. We used boot-buttons for punctuation and large glossy coat-buttons for words such as 'glees' and 'capable'. On the verso, Stein's vegetable is handset and printed letterpress.

"VEGETABLE  
What is cut. What is cut by it. What is cut by it in.  
It was a cress a crescent a cross and an unequal scream,  
it was upslanting, it was radiant and reasonable with little ins and red.  
News. News capable of glees, cut in shoes, belike under plump of Wide chalk, all this combing."



<sup>4</sup>(ed. Huelsenbeck, 1920).

Emmy Hennings was a poet, performer and co-founder of the Cabaret Voltaire. In the spirit of Dada and non-sense, we have used Google translate to transcribe her poem Morfin with performance instructions on recycled paper. Verso is a 'found' dance image with a fragmentary account of Hennings work from the *Dada Almanach*.<sup>4</sup> From Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons* (1914) we formed the basis

Valerie Solanas' *SCUM Manifesto* (1967) originally hammered out on a Remington typewriter, mimeographed to sell on the streets, \$2 to men and \$1 to women, prompts us to consider the form of manifesto as a literary work, where we visually mirror Solanas' contempt for men and capitalism (in place of Marinetti's "scorn for women"). We consider the form of manifesto as a work, which linguistically



proclaims a struggle against oppressive forces. Printed on Mohawk Superfine, we used 'Chicago' typeface designed by Susan Kare in 1983. On the verso it is printed as a loss of information, without the font loaded, forming a series of dots in default mode.

Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792). We have used her fabulously précised contents page to invoke the range and depth of Wollstonecraft's writing produced across disciplinary boundaries — clearly still pertinent. A piece of Payhembury marbled paper and the use of Caslon letterpress, suggest the materiality of earlier book production methods. Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women*: using letterpress and random inking, presents her contents page with a digital facsimile library stamp.

CHAP.1.	The rights & involved duties of mankind considered
CHAP.11.	The prevailing opinion of a sexual character discussed
CHAP.111.	The same subject continued
CHAP.1V.	Observations on the state of degradation to which woman is reduced by various causes
CHAP.V.	Animadversions on some of the writers who have rendered women objects of pity, bordering on contempt

*Poetry of Unknown Words* is part of a wider initiative of our collaborative work in transforming and expanding the book, along with the earlier projects *Volumes of Vulnerability* and *Cunning Chapters*. The small editions we produce enable us to make materially complex work that would be prohibitive in larger numbers because of time, expense and the sheer tedium of hand fabricating in greater numbers.

*Poetry of Unknown Words* delves into the archive, resurfacing ideas. There is the implication of the degeneration of material and the retention of old concerns reshaped anew. We shamelessly quote and ransack to construct a cannon of personal and shared histories and experience, hinted at through image, text and material readings. This is an artists' use of archive that is simultaneously scholarly in interest and playful in intent.



“The notion of the archive at play is designed to intervene in the prevalent view of the modern archive as being merely an instance of technology, a technological memory who’s functioning is guaranteed by its rational foundations.”  
Sven Spieke

We combine linear time and historical process (dipping in and out and inserting interpretations) that operate in non-linear ways. Which has, in our life times, been influenced by the access to digital media and ways of retrieving knowledge.

With all these methodologies we have a feminizing project, a gathering of women from the archive, giving them pride of place.