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Washington University in St. Louis
Graduate School of Art

books / vessels / hours

Lara Head

A thesis presented to the
Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts
Washington University in St. Louis

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

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Abstract

My thesis works *two vessels*, *book : 300 hours* and *book : terrain* explore and enact states of meditation, focusing on the process of making and the specificity of materials used. The meditative aspects of my process of making correlate to an anticipated meditation in the observer's time spent viewing. I hope to spark in the viewer the same response and state that I myself was in while making. In this text I explore my artistic process and what I hope for the viewer to experience while they are spending time with my works. I discuss how spending time making the work has a direct affect on the philosophy of the finished work.

At the heart of my work is making objects. I use specific, often Japanese-made and hand-made paper as well as clay. My works often formally relate to containers. Minimalist and bare materials are meant to evoke ephemerality, humbleness and beauty. I hope to inspire a moment of pause and of hyper-awareness in the viewing process. I investigate and invite meditation through the repetitive and tactile process of making and through the use of the container as a form, to suggest containing something physical or non-physical. When I make containers, I think about boxes and ceramic vessels, but also about books and the human body.

Books are vessels for knowledge and contain textual information while the human body is a container for the mind, which holds thoughts, memories and feelings. As an artist, my mind often leads me into bouts of melancholia, striving for an unrealistic level of perfection in my work. During the process of making this body of work, I have learned to settle my mind and to make and share my meditative works with you, more freely.

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*Sitting quietly, doing nothing,
Spring comes, and the grass grows by itself.*
-Matsuo Bashō¹

Introduction

In my artistic practice, I make work that is produced through repeated actions. Employing my body to repeat an act many times, involving the connection of my mind with my hands, results in the entry into a meditative state. My thesis works are the physical representation of these meditations, either bound with thread or compartmentalized in its own container. Whether I am spending time binding the pages of a book or throwing ceramic vessels, it is a time for the mind to calm and be silent. In experiencing my work, I hope to allow the viewer to spend time experiencing a similar silent state of introspection.

I began this writing by creating a list of what is most important to me in my making process: the material and its impermanence, meditation and the usage of time, books and vessels as containers relating to the body, the importance of touch and the inevitable return of melancholia. The following text is the culmination and expansion of that list.

Notes on Containers

In my work, I try to offer an embodiment of control. My work often alludes to the act of containing and compartmentalizing through keeping order. The compilation of many pieces of paper bound tightly together to make one form creates a single object out of many previously disorganized pieces. I create containers not only as an extension of my collection, but as holders for the physicality of my meditations. The tearing, cutting and sometimes binding of pieces of paper is the meditative act. A box constructed specifically for the dimensions of these pieces is the holder, the binding together of that length of time.

I have always been a collector of containers. Decorated vintage tins, sculpted stone vessels, carved ceramic planters, paper covered boxes; each act as individual holders for specific things or collections of things. Organization through the use of different containers gives me a sense of control. By having the ability to control an aspect of something, I have a sense of overall control and a separation from chaos. To me, ceramic vessels are one of the highest form of containers, just below the container of the human body. The following is my simplified list of a personal container hierarchy from lowest to highest:

Shoe box: A shoe box is the lowest form of container, a useless space eater. You are forced to bring it home after buying a new pair of shoes, even though it barely fits in and rips the plastic bag the employee has given you to carry it. Once at home, it will sit around until you realize it is useless.

Jar: A jar is a useful container, as it holds items and preserves food to keep it fresh. Unfortunately, they often build up because we think we might need them later, which lessens their importance.

Ceramic vessel – Ceramic vessels are an ancient type of container. They are the holder of nourishment (food) or beauty (flowers) among many other things. The material is permanent, yet the vessel is fragile leading to a heightened importance.

Body – The human body is the highest form of container as it holds life and the mind, which is the container of thought, memory and feelings.

In Walter Benjamin's² essay *Unpacking My Library*, he describes the mindset of a collector. He says "every passion borders on the chaotic, but the collector's passion borders on the chaos of memories."³ Like any collection, my containers are a collection of memories. Each acquisition of a new container is accompanied by the memory of where it was found, when it was found and

how I was feeling at the time. They are also a collection that puts order to the chaotic. The containers on my dresser hold all types of jewelry, hair clips, books of matches, leftover foreign currency and spare house keys [Figure 1]. They separate these items, compartmentalize them in order to reduce the chaos. Benjamin goes on to say that “there is in the life of a collector a dialectical tension between the poles of disorder and order.”⁴ It is imminent that a collector will acquire more objects to add to their collection. The exhilaration that comes from the addition of new objects is enough for a collection to get out of hand. Keeping order is one of the most important aspects of collecting.

The realization of my container obsession came about when I stumbled across Hideyuki Oka’s⁵ book *Tsutsumu : An Introduction to an Exhibition of the Art of the Japanese Package* at a used bookstore. The beautiful high-contrast images show a multitude of hand-made containers made of materials such as paper, bamboo, ceramic and wood. At the time, I did not understand my attraction to this book, but I had a premonition that it would be important in my art practice. Its importance became apparent when I began to understand the book as a container. I began to look at these images of containers and imagine how each could translate into a book form. Upon seeing drying shrimp bound together with straw [Figure 2], I understood a correlation between those knots that connected the shrimp and the single sheet Coptic binding that I have been studying. In my work titled *untitled(bound shrimp)*, 2018 [Figure 3], I created a pair of books that are reminiscent of the hanging strings of shrimp. The paper has been waxed, nodding to the preservation aspect of the dried shrimp. They are complete with long strings that extend from the single line of binding, allowing the books to be hung on the wall alongside the shrimp.

I was inspired by the simple paper wrapping held together with a straw knot in the Kyoto pastries in *Tsutsumu* [Figure 4]. In my work titled *Sweets Box #1*, 2018 [Figure 5] I bind hundreds of pieces of Korean hanji lacquered paper together to evoke a sense of control and lack

of ability to control. This book is made up of many sheets of thin, straw colored papers cut to the same size. Together, they build a sort of box shape that is not ideally formed. The slightly curved pages do not align perfectly, creating a jagged, uneven edge that is reminiscent of a stack of newspapers. Along the top of the item, an organic landscape forms from the sandwiching of cut and deckled edges. The wispy edges, created by the process of pulling a sheet of paper from fibrous pulp, resemble thin strings of algae dried against a piece of glass. In some places, the wisps are barely visible, growing up from behind a piece of perfectly sliced paper. In other areas, the algae-like wisps grow nearly a quarter inch past the rest of the object. It is wrapped together on all six sides by a single black thread, keeping each page in its place. The tension of the thread is just tight enough to hold together the papers, but not too taught as to crease the points where the thread and paper interact. When you pick it up, it resembles a lightweight, miniature bale of hay. It fits well in the palm of your hand, making it comfortable to hold, but also fragile and tenuous. While the pages of the book are seemingly contained, referencing a box or package, a slight tug on the modest black bow could destroy the order of the piece altogether. This piece has only an illusion of control. The reality of the piece is its fragility.

Edmund de Waal⁶ describes the importance of a vessel being the inside space and what it contains. This is perhaps akin to Rachel Whiteread⁷ using the contained spaces of the inside of objects as her subjects. In her series entitled *Torsos*, 1988-present [Figure 6], Whiteread casts the inside of hot water bottles with materials such as plaster, resin and rubber. She uses these casts to record and expose the inner space of a container. Additionally, the curves of these cast shapes imply a bodily form which relate to the container of the self.

Notes on Time

I rely on the notion of *spending time* in both my making process and for my viewers in their time spent with my work. Spending time implies slowing down. It implies focus, thought and intention. When you spend time with something, you give your whole mind to it and you allow its contemplation. You do not cut corners or ignore any aspect of what is in front of you. I often exercise my mind by spending time. Along with my studio work being an instance of time spent, two activities I spend time with outside of my studio are knitting and playing cards. Others often classify these activities as ‘pastimes,’ but I categorize them as time spent. These activities promote meditation through repetition. They require the attention of my mind and body. Therefore, they are not done mindlessly but are exercises for the mind.

My work titled *book : 300 hours*, 2019 [Figure 7] is a record of time spent. At almost three feet long, I hope it is obvious that the making was an incredibly long process. The deckled edge of the paper reaches upward with the bound spine of the book hidden against the pedestal. It appears as though a thousand three by four-inch pieces of paper are floating upright, nestled against one another. The end of the book form becomes home to a jade stone, hugged by the slight curve of the pages. It is nearly impossible to imagine how many pieces of paper were cut and how many times I wove my binding needle through loops to attach a page. I hope for all of this to be contemplated by the viewer, forcing them to slow down, approach the work and imagine the process that took place in the making.

Along with spending time, the concept of passing time is also important. Passing time suggests allowing your mind to rest. The idea is comparable to the concept of leisure time. It implies an insignificant use of time, where the brain is not hard at work. While passing time may come across as not doing anything, there is a beauty in doing absolutely nothing, something that seems to be becoming lost these days. Many people believe it to be a negative thing to be passing time, doing something that is not the most productive activity that could possibly be done.

However, I think it is a much more positive notion, one that allows your brain to rest and more productively spend time in the future.

The production of all of my work has to do with spending time. Spending time is a practice of exercising your brain without hurry. In his book *The Way of Zen*, Alan Watts⁸ discusses an important principle of Zen saying “hurry, and all that it involves, is fatal.”⁹ He goes on to say that “it is only when there is no goal and no rush that the human senses are fully open to receive the world.”¹⁰ It is important for me to slow down while creating my work. If I so desired, I could make a piece in a fraction of the time that would have a similar visual outcome. I could use a heavy duty paper guillotine instead of a ruler and scalpel. I could create signatures of twenty pages to bind instead of binding each page, one at a time. But if I made my work this way, I believe a subtle nuance of time spent would be missing. As I have said before, my work is as much about the process of spending time making it as it is about the visual outcome.

When I create a book, each page that I add represents a fraction of time. The more time I spend, the more pages a book has and the longer it becomes. My print work is as much a record of time as the books I make. For example, in my woodcut print titled *adults in a twin bed*, 2017 [Figure 8], I carved lines following the two shapes, working from one edge to the next to fill the space with marks. Each mark is a record of time spent making the work. Through my repetitive work, I have collected many moments of time for the viewer to experience. I intend for my work to evoke a feeling of stillness, silence and freedom from word contemplation. I hope for people to slow down and spend time viewing my work to absorb its silence.

In an interview with BBC, de Waal talks about his work *a thousand hours*, 2012 [Figure 9]. He says of its construction, “it is a way of slowing down and making you look and think and walk around objects.”¹¹ The pots in this work are dispersed through different layers in large vitrines. There are sections of solid space and sections made of plexiglass, where the viewer can

peek through to see hundreds of thin ceramic vessels. This display forces people to *spend* the time, to look for the work and appreciate its placement in the space. Similar to de Waal's *a thousand hours*, I attempt to create a sense of mystery in the presentation of my own work, encouraging people to pause and spend time with the work. I want people to contemplate its construction and placement in space.

Notes on Meditation

I have migrated from printing visual information onto paper to cutting, tearing and binding paper. My process has always been deeply rooted in meditation, a sense of healing through connection of the body and mind. Repeating an action with the hands calms the mind. During the binding process, my body and mind are moving in a circle, akin to breathing:

*align page with previous page
 loop thread through left hole
 lift previous page
 thread through previous hole towards inside
 pull taught
 loop thread through right hole
 lift previous page
 thread through previous hole towards inside
 pull taught
 align new page
 repeat
 repeat
 repeat*

I have realized that although my mediums have changed over the years, the process has remained relatively the same. I work in repetitive processes where my mind and body naturally communicate with one another in order to complete the process. While carving repetitive lines into wood, my eyes and mind follow the previously carved line while the tool in my hand follows my eye to create a new line. While lifting the walls of a thrown vessel, my hands speak to each other through the clay, telling my mind to steady my breathing so that my eyes can follow my hands. I then carry on these meditations until I have created the piece I envisioned (or something close to it). Lee Ufan¹² describes a similar meditation through repetition in his collective book of writings *The Art of Encounter*:

In order to join the body and consciousness at a high level, I highlight this ambiguity and always do my best to act physically. I make art by performing repeated actions with the body...¹³

Combining repetitive thoughts of the mind with repetitive actions of the body can result in the entry into a meditative state. When the body and mind are in sync, anxiety is soothed and

replaced by calm. The passing of time becomes irrelevant, only to be noticed once released from the meditation. The quantity of time spent is now visible in the physical work that I have made. In my print work throughout the last five years, repetitive lines followed shapes in order to fill them out and give them dimension. For example, my work titled *poems to my guts*, 2018 [Figure 10] is a linoleum print diptych. I use repetitive line carving into a linoleum plate in this piece as a meditative process to completely fill the curling and wrapping lines of the space.

Much of my current book-form work consists of individual pages being bound together in a single sheet Coptic style. Each page is stacked onto the last and bound in a weaving pattern to the previous page. Some people ask me why I torture myself with these repetitive and never-ending processes, but I do not see them like that. I see my creative process as a time to pause the mind and spend time making. It is a time for the mind to be soothed and quiet, only focusing on the task at hand. I hope for my work to evoke a similar condition and experience for my viewers.

I often ask myself why I am so attracted to Eastern ideas and materials. It is possible that because I have been raised in and lived a very Western life, I am drawn towards the unknown of Eastern thought and aesthetic. I am not alone in this attraction. Isamu Noguchi¹⁴ gives reason to this in his essay *The Complete Artist*:

It is understandable then that having lost contact with the old revolutionary attitude which stemmed from Europe Americans now turn more and more to the Orient... The ideas of Zen Buddhism seem to offer to some at least the possibilities of contacts with further depths of inner experience...¹⁵

This ‘inner experience’ that Noguchi describes here is something that seems to be lacking in Western culture. I think that many Westerners migrate towards Eastern thought, specifically Zen thought, in order to understand how to look deeper into the self and our own experience of being.

Alan Watts also writes about this migration of the Western artist toward Eastern ideas in his book *Beat Zen, Square Zen and Zen*:

To the Westerner in search of the reintegration of man and nature there is an appeal far beyond the merely sentimental in the naturalism of Zen—in the landscapes of Ma-yuan and Sesshu, in an art which is simultaneously spiritual and secular, which conveys the mystical in terms of the natural, in which, indeed, never even imagined a break between them.¹⁶

Notes on Awareness

In my studio practice, I often create objects that take on the form of everyday objects. Books are the most common of these items. I make books that question the book form. Whether it is bound with an incredibly elongated spine or its pages are held together between two stones, the books I create alter the book form. I hope to intrigue viewers, to draw them in to look closer at how I have constructed these recognizable objects. I want them to force the viewer to truly see the work, not just look. It is common for people to think that they understand a work after viewing it for as little as a few seconds. Ufan describes this loss of awareness in his essay *Beyond Being and Nothingness*:

Everyday things that are passed over as a part of a world that we look at but do not see have forms, though their corporeality is alienated. They therefore constitute invisible space, as fictitious objects. So, the poet and the artist devote themselves to the intermediary task of giving bodily forms to things through dismantling the curse of the fiction of daily existence and illuminating things on the horizon of perception as visible phenomenon.¹⁷

In my work titled *book : 300 hours*, 2019 [Figure 7], I purposely do not show the binding of the book. I have displayed the book on a pedestal with the binding down, alluding to a mysteriousness on how the pages are held together. It appears as though the pages are weightless, floating vertically on the ledge of the pedestal. I intend for viewers to have a sense of wonder about this phenomenon, only to understand more after spending looking closely and contemplating the object.

Notes on Impermanence

I am interested in referring to and evoking impermanence in my work to point to the ephemerality of materials and objects. While some materials seem to be rather permanent, the truth is that there is very little that has absolute permanence. When I use my hands to form clay, what I am creating is in an incredibly fragile form. At this point, it is essentially mud that is formed into a shape. The clay is prone to cracks from tension, stress or drying too fast. If it gets too wet, it will deteriorate. When it is very dry, it can crack with the slightest bump. Once the clay is bisque fired¹⁸, it is slightly more stable but nowhere near permanent. It is only once the object is glaze fired that the clay reaches maturity. Now, the clay is in its most stable and long-lasting form

Clay is a curious material in that the fired ceramic itself is incredibly enduring, but the formed vessel is rather fragile. It is not hard to shatter a clay pot, but the pieces will remain for thousands of years. Because of this material longevity, potsherds are a common discovery in archaeological digs. For example, the study of Monte Testaccio¹⁹, a hill made entirely of potsherds in the middle of Rome, lead to both the understanding of the ancient Roman olive oil trade and the Roman's attitude that pottery was disposable.²⁰ Because archaeologists value potsherds as doorways to understand the past, sherds are collected from this literal trash heap, reconstructed into vessels and studied extensively.

While clay balances on a line of permanent and impermanent, paper is a fundamentally impermanent material. It can easily be destroyed by hands, the environment or the weather. Paper has the ability to survive many years, but unlike ceramic material, which can be buried underground, dug up and reassembled, it must be preserved in order to retain its quality. The simplest change in environment or acidity can cause its deterioration. Important documents undergo a sort of 'forced longevity' through intense preservation. Washington University in St. Louis' Olin Library houses one of the few remaining broadside copies of the Declaration of

Independence²¹ [Figure 12]. This document's ephemerality is made obvious by the conditions it is housed in: a dimly lit, temperature and humidity-controlled case, complete with a guard whose sole job is to watch over the Declaration.²² It is an example of how a paper object can be preserved in order to overcome its material impermanence.

In my work titled *two vessels*, 2019 [Figure 13], I juxtapose a fragile paper vessel with a durable ceramic vessel. Both materials have a level of ephemerality and rely on the other to be whole. The elongated, bound black book leans against the tall porcelain vessel. Both of these objects are empty with the suggestion of containment. The book is a sculptural object, but its pages, like any book, suggest the containment of information. The towering, vase-like porcelain vessel begs to be filled with flowers, but its task for now is to support the flimsy spine of the elongated book.

The Japanese art movement of Mono-ha began in 1967 and lasted almost through the 1970s. One of the movement's founding members, Lee Ufan, described this movement as an "approach based on an attitude of bringing out the mutual relationship of the various elements rather than using things and space as materials for realizing an idea."²³ It explores and studies the interaction of materials in a field of permanence juxtaposed with impermanence. For example, in Koshimizu Susumu's *Paper (formerly Paper 2)*, 2012/1969 [Figure 14], he placed a giant granite stone inside of an enormous envelope constructed from Japanese paper. The materials work together to suggest ephemerality and contrast. The paper sleeve forms a skin that 'protects' the heavy stone which it contains.

Notes on Books and Bodies

My sculpture titled *two vessels*, 2019 [Figure 13] is made up of two parts: a light blue porcelain vase and a black hand bound book. While the ceramic vessel could stand alone, the nonsensically elongated spine of the book is forced to rely on the vase for support. The porcelain vessel is tall and robust. It is clear that the base is firmly planted to the surface. Its curvy body, tapering in at the shoulders towards the neck suggests the female form. The book leans against the undulations of the vase, causing the exposed spine to reflect the vase's bodily curve. The spine becomes the vase's spine, an extension of the body. These two vessels rely on one another to be whole.

The materials of *two vessels*, ceramic and paper, are bodily in themselves. Ceramic has a longevity and hardness similar to bone. Ceramic and bone can be buried underground and dug up later, revealing something of the past to the finder. Paper on the other hand is reminiscent of skin. Paper and skin are stronger than they seem but can deteriorate when exposed to the elements. They require upkeep and protection in order to stay whole. As the skin needs the bones to be a functioning body, the black book of *two vessels* requires the skeleton of the porcelain vase in order to maintain its book form.

The human body itself is a container. Not only do the skin and bones contain and protect the vital organs, blood and veins that it needs in order to function, it is also a vessel for the human soul and intellect. The brain contains the mind, which is the vessel for thought and memory. For many years, humans passed along history and skills by pulling them from memory. Although the human mind can collect and contain a remarkable amount of information, memories are also easily manipulated and modified by the mind. This problem was resolved by the creation of written language, which lead to books. Books are containers for history, created in order to hold useful information as extensions of the human mind. The association of the book with the human body is inevitable considering the base support of these two vessels are

identified by the same name: the spine. The importance of the spine in both books and the human body is the same. It is needed for support in order to be whole in both cases.

Notes on Tactility

I am curious how the touch of human hands affects an object. As an article is handled, oils and grime build up on them. This is especially noticeable in books, which often, if not always, show a visible evidence of their constant handling and shifting. Sometimes, a book is unreadable and therefore unusable as a result of heavy touch, but often they are able to build a patina that accentuates the beauty of the object itself. I find this especially obvious in the range of books I check out from the library. The buildup of oil from people's hands, marks from their pens and stains from their food tell a story of where that book has been. It makes me think about all of the people who have handled it before me and how it was useful for them. The grime of a library book, just as with other objects with a built-up patina, holds stories of past owners and past travels. Jun'ichirō Tanizaki²⁴ describes the beauty of objects that have been handled in his text *In Praise of Shadows*, where he explores the effect of Westernization on Japanese aesthetics:

Of course this “sheen of antiquity” of which we hear so much is in fact the glow of grime. In both Chinese and Japanese the words denoting this glow describe a polish that comes of being touched over and over again, the sheen produced by the oils that naturally permeate an object over long years of handling—which is to say grime. If indeed “elegance is frigid,” it can as well be described as filthy. There is no denying, at any rate, that among the elements of the elegance in which we take such delight is a measure of the unclean, the unsanitary. I suppose I shall sound terribly defensive if I say that Westerners attempt to expose every speck of grime and eradicate it, while we Orientals carefully preserve and even idealize it. Yet for better or worse we do love things that bear the marks of grime, soot, and weather, and we love the colors and the sheen that call to mind the past that made them. Living in these old houses among these old objects is in some mysterious way a source of peace and repose.²⁵

Everything I make is touched countless times by my hands. I use a variety of manual processes that lead to a work passing through my hands hundreds or thousands of times. These touches end up having a visual effect on the work, whether it be from oils on the skin or curved pages that I have clutched too tightly while binding. For example, my work titled *Shivers*, 2018 [Figure 15] is a single sheet Coptic bound book, made up of hundreds of pieces of a thick Japanese paper connected with thin white thread. It is visible in this piece that it has been passed through my

hands many times. The edges have curled from my grip on the book as I tightly wove the pages together. I caused indentations in the center of the pages as I held it between the lines of binding. These undulations create a story in the piece, showing both its past life and the process of how it was created in my studio.

During a recent studio visit with Buzz Spector²⁶, he mentioned that “any paper artifact intended to be read is intended to be felt.”²⁷ Since I agree with this statement wholly, I often invite viewers to touch and interact with my sculptural work. But sometimes, it is not necessary for the viewer to physically touch the objects. Sometimes it is best to create the tension of not being allowed to touch something when you really want to. For example, the soft, fuzzy landscape spanning the top of my work titled *book : terrain*, 2019 [Figure 16] has a visual texture. Looking at it, you know it will be soft and pleasing to your fingertips but being allowed to touch it would be too easy. There is a beauty in being forced to restrain yourself; you must slow down and contemplate the object and think about how it would feel, rather than actually feel it.

Having just visited Rachel Whiteread’s retrospective show at The Saint Louis Art Museum, I was for the first time able to see her work in person. I would have never anticipated the urge that came over me. I wanted, with all my heart, to touch her work. I wanted to feel the smoothness of the resin, the chill of the plaster and the jiggle of the rubber casts. Since I was in a large museum institution, the eagle eyes of the gallery monitors were on me at all times, ready to pounce if my hand got too close. While I wish I could have touched these objects, my inability to touch forced me to spend time contemplating how they would feel. In the end, not allowing touch is just as vital in art as allowing it.

Notes on Process

My work relies on process and its connection to meditation. I make work with clay and paper because they evoke states of body and mind for me. My process is a crucial aspect of my work because the most minute and physical aspects of it make what I am as an artist.

I begin creating one of my sculptural books by the measurement of a single empty page. The size of a page determines all dimensions of the end product except for the length. After I decide on this shape, I cut hundreds of pieces of Japanese paper in that size and lay them into an orderly stack. Cutting these pages is the first of three repetitive processes I do when creating a book. The second repetitive process is hole punching. I create a guide, which I then lay over each individual piece of paper, directing exactly where I punch my awl through the sheet. I repeat this task until all of the pages are prepared. Finally, I begin the last and most significant task: binding. I use a binding process called ‘single sheet Coptic’ style.²⁸ As you can see in [Figure 18], I bind sheets one page at a time, sewing each piece of paper to the last.

While many binding styles use papers prepared in folded groups called signatures, the Coptic method allows me to handle each page individually. The tenuousness of each page is especially apparent when binding. In order to connect the pages, I bring the needle and binding thread through the hole I created with an awl, wrapping it back over the page. I am cautious not to rip the thin quarter of an inch of paper between the punched hole and the edge of the page. I then sew the thread back through the loop on the previous page, securing the new page in place. I repeat this process hundreds, if not thousands, of times until the book form grows into shape.

In my ceramics studio I create wheel thrown vessels. I prepare the wheel with a bucket of water at my side and I throw a ball of clay onto the middle of the wheel head. The first step is to center the clay. By using my hands and the rotation of the wheel to push the clay perfectly and entirely into the center, I may start throwing a vessel. This step is crucial to the process, as clay not well-centered will cause my entire vessel to run askew. This may be the most difficult part of

throwing. The ability to center is not entirely based on strength. What is important in centering is posture, stability, breathing and mind space. The process of throwing is about balance, patience and haptic response. If I cannot first center my mind, I will be unable to center my clay.

Once the clay is centered, I use my thumb to make an opening and lightly draw out the floor, leaving a thin layer of clay between my fingers and the wheel head. Now I am ready to lift my vessel. Throwing is a balance between too dry and too wet; too hard and too soft. If my clay absorbs too much water, it will become weak and collapse. Alternatively, too little water could cause my hand to snag on a dry spot and destroy the piece. If I apply too much pressure, I could throw the piece off center, past the point of return. With one hand inside the spinning pot and one hand outside, I begin to slowly lift the pot upward. My hands have learned to speak to each other. My right hand feels the energy of my left hand through the clay, therefore knowing where to correctly position itself in order to squeeze the clay walls upward. My hands move upward at a speed that is complementary to the rotation speed of the wheel, developing evenness in the sides of the form. My breath aligns to the rotation of the wheel and the rise of my hands to form a vessel. Edmund de Waal describes a vessel:

A vessel is the air within. And of course, what it really is, is a breath. So each of these vessels that I am making is a series of breaths, with different kinds of exhalation. And that's poetry, that's language, that's sound.²⁹

In de Waal's work *For Agnes Martin*, 2010 [Figure 19] a white plywood cabinet holds one hundred and sixty-six porcelain vessels. The cabinet is separated into twelve shelves that each hold its own grouping of ceramic pieces. Slightly imperfect cylindrical pots in varying heights undulate along the length of each ledge. The space between each shelf is tight, giving little room to breathe between the top of some of the vessels and the shelf above it. The pots are finished with glossy glazes in muted tones: clear over the white porcelain scattered near the occasional slight grey or off-white. Some vessels are stacked inside of larger ones, but most stand alone.

Each porcelain pot reads as an individual breath on the shelf. The lines of the shelf suggest the lines on a page, with pots irregularly placed and stacked. Specific placement is chosen for each pot in a way that implies words or writing. *For Agnes Martin* evokes the sense of reading a page of poetry. There may not be physical words, but the spaces, clusters and lines suggest a visual poetry.

Similar to de Waal's piece titled for her, Agnes Martin's³⁰ drawing *Untitled*, 1960 [Figure 20] reminds me of a page of text. Drawn perpendicular to the matrix of twenty-seven evenly spaced vertical lines are hundreds of horizontal lines. These lines start and stop at different points, creating a rippling vertical edge on each side of the grid not so different from the text you are reading right now. While both this drawing and my book sculptures suggest the presence of text, they are in the end, silent and wordless. Martin discusses her interest in silence in her book *Writings* by saying:

My interest is in experience that is wordless and silent, and in the fact that this experience can be expressed for me in art work which is also wordless and silent.³¹

Notes on Melancholia

The recurrence of melancholia has long been a factor in my artistic practice. Sometimes fueling the making and sometimes halting it all together, melancholia, for me, is inescapable. It leads to overthinking and hyper awareness of the futility of the human experience. Melancholia is the weight of the world on your shoulders. Learning to accept and integrate bouts of melancholia into my work has made me a more thoughtful and reflective artist. What many people fail to understand is that melancholia is not the same as sadness. It is a feeling of helplessness, loss and dread.³² Agnes Martin perfectly describes the melancholic state:

Helplessness, even a mild state of helplessness is extremely hard to bear. Moments of helplessness are moments of blindness. One feels as though something terrible has happened without knowing what it is.³³

Perhaps the leading cause of artistic melancholia is the artists desire for perfection. When an artist begins a new work, they have an image of the work they want to produce in their head. The next step is to produce this work in that likeness, but many artists become upset with themselves or their work if it does not resemble that original idea in their mind. Lee Ufan says:

Emotion and accident are eliminated from works of art, just as if they were industrial products, and it is thought to be important to fabricate them with the same perfection as the products of an automated manufacturing system.³⁴

What he is saying is that many artists are striving so much for perfection, they desire for a mechanical outcome: an idea comes into the brain machine; it is fabricated by the hands and comes to fruition to look exactly as imagined. Naturally this is unrealistic, but it is a phenomenon of the artistic brain.

Agnes Martin's *Stone*, 1964 [Figure 21] is a drawing that, from first glance, appears to be a perfectly spaced and squared grid. However, upon further inspection, you can see that it is far from perfect. The individual gridded shapes are more rectangular than square; some lines go past where they meet with the last perpendicular line. Some lines do not make it all the way to close the shape. This work is an example of an artistic strive for perfection that cannot realistically be

reached, often leading to a melancholic state. Martin admits: “My formats are square, but the grids never are absolutely square; they are rectangles, a little bit off the square...”³⁵ She later continues to say:

Perfection, of course, cannot be represented. The slightest indication of it is eagerly grasped by observers. The work is so far from perfection because we ourselves are so far from perfection. The oftener we glimpse perfection or the more conscious we are in our awareness of it the farther away it seems to be. Or perhaps I should say the more we are aware of perfection the more we realize how very far away from us it is. *That is why art work is so very hard.* It is a working through disappointments and a growing recognition of failure to the point of defeat. But still one wakes in the morning and there is the inspiration and one goes on.³⁶

I am an artist who suffers from waves of melancholia and strives for perfection. As described before, I envision an idea for a piece of work and I anticipate that I will be able to produce the image in my head. But, like Agnes Martin’s gridded drawings, my work is never quite ‘perfect.’ When I had the idea for *book : terrain*, 2019 [Figure 17] in my mind, I imagined that I would be able to align the edge of each piece of Okawara paper with the last. I thought I would be able to create a perfectly smooth, fuzzy surface. But, as you can see in the side view of *book : terrain*, 2019 [Figure 17], the hundreds of pieces of paper are not at all perfectly aligned. Additionally, in a detail shot of my linocut prints *poems to my guts*, 2018 [Figure 10] you can see spaces where, just like Martin’s drawing, I have overshot the spot where I had meant to stop. These parts of my work used to upset me, sending me deeper into melancholic thought. Over time, I have learned to accept, even embrace, the changes that my work undergoes during its transition from thought to completion. I have in no way overcome the melancholia, I have only learned to accept it as part of my process.

Notes on Paper

Paper is the base material of my work. All paper holds textural, textual and visual information that is at times printed or suggests imprint. A blank page suggests information. I am attracted to the idea of paper that is silent. Tone, texture and weight matter, but I wonder what sound is made (or not made) when a roll of paper is rolled out? Perhaps this is the most important factor in choosing my material. The allure of Japanese papers, for me, come from their mysteriously light sounds, delicate array of white and off-white tints and wispy deckled edges.

Tanizaki describes his thoughts about paper:

Paper, I understand, was invented by the Chinese; but Western paper is to us no more than something to be used, while the texture of Chinese paper and Japanese paper gives us a certain feeling of warmth, of calm and repose. Even the same white could as well be one color for Western paper and another for our own. Western paper turns away the light, while our paper seems to take it in, to envelop it gently, like the soft surface of a first snowfall. It gives off no sound when it is crumpled or folded, it is quiet and pliant to the touch as the leaf of a tree.³⁷

My love of Japanese papers began when I was a young printmaker, printing most of my work on the white cotton of BFK Rives paper. One day Tom Lang³⁸ suggested that I try printing on a paper called Kitakata. I was immediately captivated by it: the delicate, organic edges that varied piece by piece, the soft mellow color that diffused the light and its incredible weightlessness. Discovering this paper opened a whole new world of papers for me and my work. It was not until I read Tanizaki's remarks on Japanese aesthetics that I realized the reason for my attraction to Japanese papers. As the writer describes, these papers are quiet. They make little to no sound when they are being worked with. Their physical lightness causes them to move organically with a breeze and feel natural in my hand. Because of the tactile nature of my work, I feel as though it is necessary to understand the different natures of these two papers. Attached on the following page are samples to be felt, folded, caressed:

Kitakata Natural (90% Philippine Gampi 10% Sulphite Pulp)

BFK Rives (100% Cotton)

In my work titled *you can put a rock over two sheets of paper and call it a book*, 2019 [Figure 22] I use paper and its edges to create a landscape-like book form. Hundreds of strips of green Kitakata paper are aligned vertically on a surface. Thin wisps of paper rise from the paper landscape. On each side, they are sandwiched by half of a geode. This piece focuses on the plane of paper edges. The one and a half inch tall vertical strips are reminiscent of a sliced deckle, the edge of the paper that many people reject. They are collected together here to create a form from forgotten parts. They are tentatively held together by the two geodes, which could be removed at any time to remove the feeling of control and return to a chaotic pile of paper strips.

When I choose a new paper to work with, I pay close attention to its deckled edge. The deckle is a result of the hand papermaking process. A sheet of paper is pulled from a vat of paper pulp using a tool called a mold and deckle. The excess water evacuates through the screen of the mold, leaving only paper fibers in the shape of a sheet. The deckle edge comes from the long fibers that, once the paper is pressed, stick out from the edges of the perfectly molded sheet.³⁹ That imperfect edge of a sheet says a lot about how that paper will behave when it becomes an art object. For example, most thick, Western cotton-based papers have a dense, sturdy deckle (as in the previous page sample of BFK Rives). It is an irregular edge but has little to no movement. Many Japanese papers are made from long fibered plants, leading to a delicate, wispy edge (as in the previous page sample of Kitakata). I pay close attention to these paper details just as Isamu Noguchi pays close attention to the stones he chooses for his sculptural work. For example, [Figure 23] depicts Noguchi observing and selecting stones for a project in Japan.⁴⁰ His sensitivity to material is evident in his finished work. In his work titled *Kouros*, 1945 [Figure 24], Noguchi uses the particular material of pink Georgia granite. This material is a fleshy pink, supporting the figural title *Kouros*. I hope for the attention to material in my own work to be as distinct to my viewers.

I had in my possession a roll of Okawara paper that had crisp, machine cut edges. It took me some time to realize that the absence of the deckle is the reason I had been struggling to use that roll. The clean edges had a different aura than the irregularity of a deckled edge. Just recently, I purchased two rolls of paper, a type of mulberry which I have ordered many times before. To my dismay, when I unpacked these rolls from the shipment, I was surprised with two rolls with clean cut edges. I wondered what happened to the edges of my three deckle-less rolls of paper? Were they cut off with a machine post-production and cast away like meaningless fragments from a paper shredder? Had the edges been deemed too unsatisfactory for the customer to desire?

My book sculpture titled *book : terrain*, 2019 [Figure 16] began as a struggle with material. I still had the roll of Okawara paper lying in my studio, but with the absence of a deckled edge I had no idea how to use it. Creating a bound book with cut edges was out of the question, as the clean edges would take something away from the visual aspect of the book. After much studying of the material, I discovered that tearing this Okawara created a fuzzy edge that slightly resembled a delicate paper deckle. Once many of these torn papers were aligned in a stack, the combined fuzzy deckles created a texture as soft as a lamb's ear. Aligned vertically in a shallow box covered with golden olive green cloth, the landscape of *book : terrain* presents a visible texture that does not have to be touched to be understood.

My piece titled *Shivers*, 2018 [Figure 15] is constructed using the cast aside deckle of a previous work. It is made up of many pieces of a mysterious, thick Japanese paper⁴¹ which are bound in single sheet Coptic style. By making use of the trimmed pieces that were to be disposed of, I retrieve a part of the paper that would otherwise be lost.

As with my roll of Okawara, I find it very upsetting when paper has its deckle cut off. Is it unclean with a rough edge? The cutting of a deckle always feels to me like a form of

unnecessary cleansing many people do to their paper. One that, in my opinion, strips some of its life away. The loss of the deckle reminds me of an event that happens time and time again at any shared studio paper cutting station: every day, I find the remnants of other people's deckle massacre. To the right of the wooden Swingline paper cutter, in the spot where all the paper remnants fall, are piles of long skinny strips. These strips are the part of the paper that people did not want, thin strips cut just past the paper deckle. It reminds me of cast aside body parts, forgotten pieces that no one cared for or wanted to claim. In my work, I am especially observant of all of the small aspects of a piece. The slightest off-kilter decision has the ability to throw off a whole piece. In the words of Agnes Martin: "The wiggle of a worm [is] as important as the assassination of a president."⁴²

Conclusion

Throughout the sections of this text, I have described what is most important in my work to me. Above all are the materials with which I choose to create pieces. Everything from their textures and tones to the sounds they make when interacted with are vital. Next are the ways in which I put these materials to use through repetitive actions in a meditative process. This meditative state that is entered while making allows for a calm and silent mind, and I hope for this state to be relatable to those who experience my work. Tearing and cutting hundreds of pieces of paper then ordering them in some way, whether they are bound page by page or set orderly in a container made especially for them, results in a visual culmination of time spent. My goal in a viewer experiencing my work is for them to feel wordless and silent, a direct correlation of the experience I myself have while making the work.

Notes

¹ Matsuo Bashō (1644-1694) was the most famous poet of Edo Period Japan and is recognized as the greatest master of haiku.

² Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) was a philosophical and critical writer who contributed heavily to aesthetic theory.

³ Walter Benjamin, *Unpacking My Library*, (New York, Schocken Books, 1969), 60.

⁴ Ibid, 60.

⁵ Hideyuki Oka is the author of multiple books on Japanese packaging.

⁶ Edmund de Waal is a British ceramicist and author of *The Hare with Amber Eyes*.

⁷ Rachel Whiteread is a British sculptor who primarily makes works by casting materials such as resin, plaster, concrete and rubber.

⁸ Alan Watts (1915-1973) was a British-American philosopher and author who interpreted Eastern thought for a Western audience.

⁹ Alan Watts, *The Way of Zen*, (New York, Pantheon Books Inc, 1957), 175.

¹⁰ Ibid, 176.

¹¹ Art Documentaries, *Edmund de Waal – What Do Artists Do All Day?*, 02:50-03:00.

¹² Lee Ufan is a Korean artist and one of the founding members of the Mono Ha movement.

¹³ Lee Ufan, *The Art of Encounter*, (New York, Lisson Gallery and the Serpentine Galleries, 2018, originally published in 2008), 61.

¹⁴ Isamu Noguchi (1904-1988) was a Japanese American sculptor and landscape architect.

¹⁵ Isamu Noguchi, *The Complete Artist from Isamu Noguchi : Essays and Conversations*, (New York, H.N. Abrams Inc. and The Isamu Noguchi Foundation, 1994), 47.

¹⁶ Watts, *Beat Zen, Square Zen and Zen*, (California, City Lights Books, 1959), 4.

¹⁷ Lee Ufan, *Beyond Being and Nothingness*, (Review of Japanese Culture and Society, December 2013), 248.

¹⁸ Bisque firing refers to the first firing of a ceramic piece, where the object is fired at a low temperature in order to stay porous. This allows the piece to be strong enough, but still absorb the glaze for the final firing.

¹⁹ Monte Testaccio is a mound that was created during the time of the Roman Empire (27 BC – AD 476/1453) and is made up almost entirely of broken amphorae that held olive oil. The mound has been under archaeological study since 1872.

²⁰ Jarrett A. Lobell, *Trash Talk*, <https://www.archaeology.org/exclusives/articles/2892-rome-monte-testaccio-amphoras%22> .

²¹ The United States Declaration of Independence is a document that was written up by Congress on July 4, 1776 that declared the independence of the thirteen American colonies from Great Britain.

²² Julie Hale, *Declaration of Independence Exhibit Now Open in Olin Library*, <https://library.wustl.edu/brand/>.

²³ Ufan, *The Art of Encounter*, 186.

²⁴ Jun'ichirō Tanizaki was one of the most popular Japanese novelists of the twentieth century.

²⁵ Jun'ichirō Tanizaki, *In Praise of Shadows*, (Sedgwick, Leete's Island Books, 2008, originally published in 1933), 11-12.

²⁶ Buzz Spector is an artist who makes works in book arts, sculpture and printmaking, among other media.

²⁷ Quoted from Buzz Spector during an advising session in my studio.

²⁸ Refer to Plates 15 and 18 for an example of Coptic binding.

²⁹ Samuel Lind. "Edmund de Waal on vessels". 00:23-00:45.

³⁰ Agnes Martin was a Canadian American artist and writer.

³¹ Agnes Martin, *Writings Schriften*, (New York, Distributed Art Publishers, 1991), 89.

³² For more information on melancholia, look to Julia Kristeva's *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*.

³³ *Ibid*, 70.

³⁴ Ufan, *The Art of Encounter*, 60.

³⁵ Martin, *Writings Schriften*, 29.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 69.

³⁷ Tanizaki, *In Praise of Shadows*, 9-10.

³⁸ Tom Lang is a multi-media artist and the Chair of the Department of Art, Design and Art History at Webster University. He was my professor and advisor in printmaking and papermaking as an undergraduate student.

³⁹ For more information on paper making and Japanese paper making, refer to Sukey Hughes' book *Washi: The World of Japanese Paper*.

⁴⁰ Noguchi, *Isamu Noguchi : Essays and Conversations*, 45.

⁴¹ I bought this paper while studying abroad in Vienna in 2015. I have not been able to find it since or determine what type of Japanese paper it is.

⁴² Martin, *Writings Schriften*, 44.

Illustrations



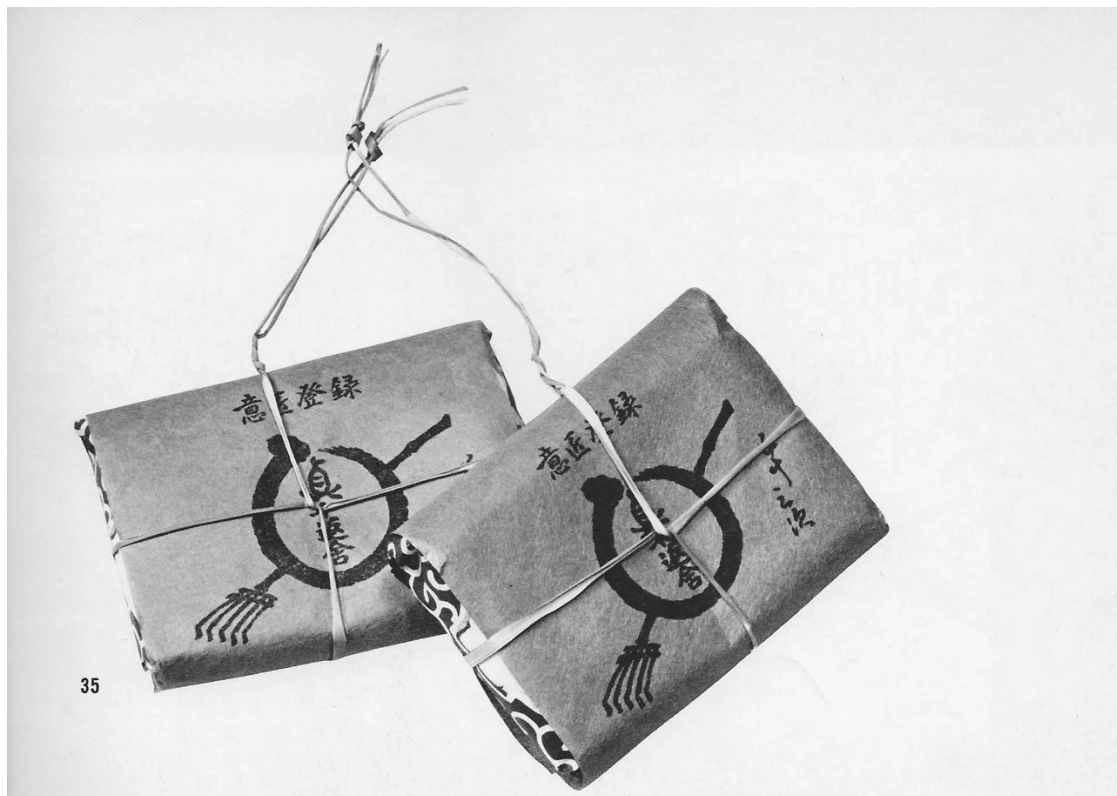
[Figure 1] Containers on my dresser. 2019.



[Figure 2] Drying shrimp from *Tsutsumu*, plate 188. 1975.



[Figure 3] *untitled(bound shrimp)*. Hand waxed mulberry paper, waxed linen thread. 1"x2"x3". 2018.



[Figure 4] Kyoto pastry package from *Tsutsumu*, plate 51. 1975.



[Figure 5] sweets box #1. Korean hanji lacquered paper, waxed linen thread.
3 ¼"x1 ½"x1 ¾". 2018.



[Figure 6] Installation view. Rachel Whiteread. *Torsos* series. 1988-present. Concrete, plaster, pink dental plaster, resin, silver leaf, rubber. Saint Louis Art Museum.

Photo: Lara Head



[Figure 7] *book : 300 hours*. Natural Kinwashi paper, Mulberry paper, linen thread, jade stone.
3"x4"x32". 2019.



[Figure 8] *adults in a twin bed*. Woodcut print on mulberry paper. 27"x30". 2017.



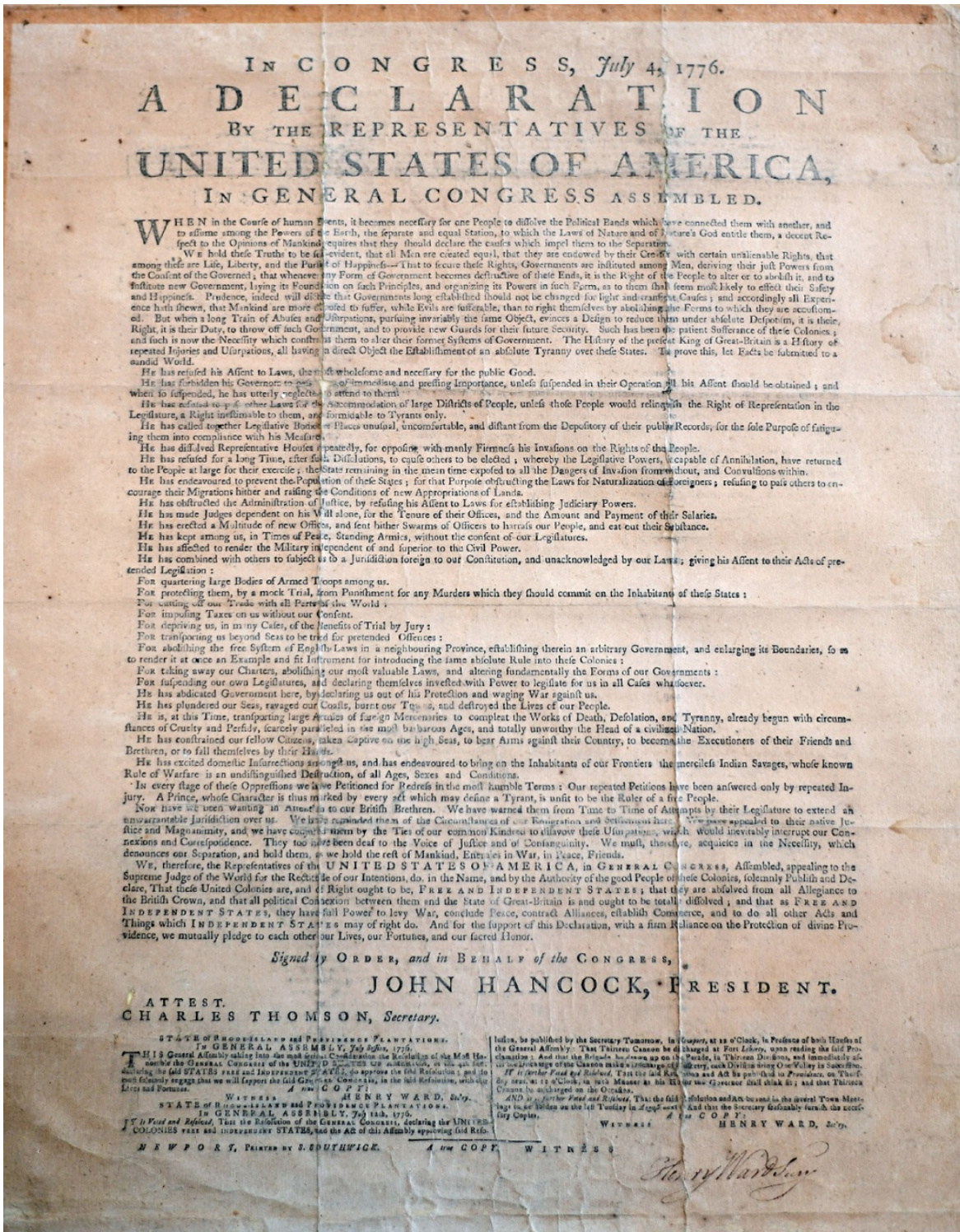
[Figure 9] Edmund de Waal. *a thousand hours*. 1000 porcelain vessels, aluminum and acrylic vitrines. 96"x82 ½"x82 ½". 2012.



[Figure 10] *poems to my guts*. Linocut prints on Stonehenge paper. Each 19"x25". 2018.



[Figure 11] Detail of *poems to my guts*. Linocut prints on Stonehenge paper. Each 19"x25". 2018.



[Figure 12] Declaration of Independence Southwick Broadside. Photograph by James Byard. Original document 1776.



[Figure 13] *two vessels*. Porcelain, Khadi black rag paper, waxed linen thread. 16"x10"x12". 2019.



[Figure 14] Susumu Koshimizu. *Paper (formerly Paper 2)*. Hempen paper and granite. 108"x108".
1969/2012.



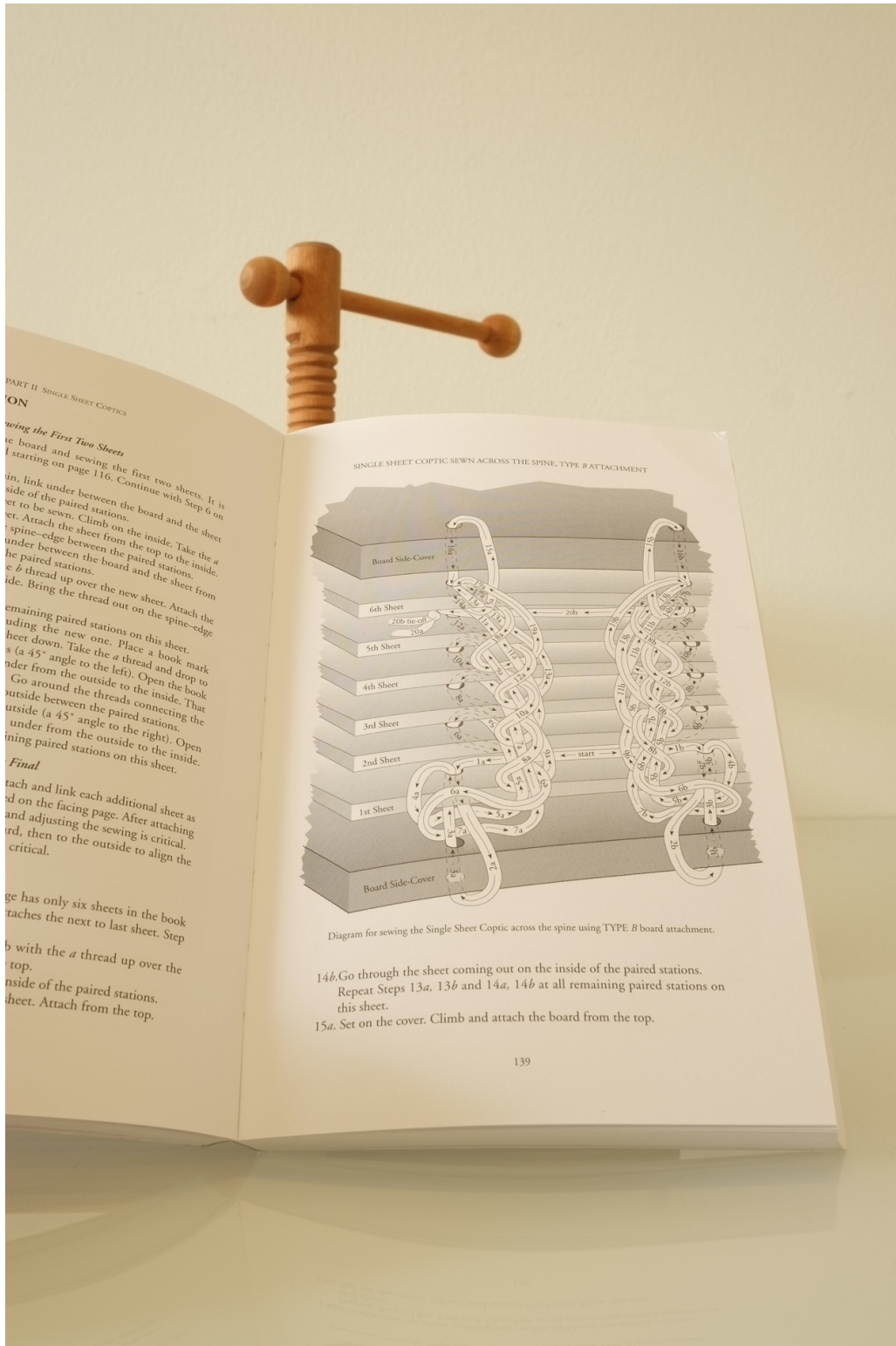
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[Figure 16] *book : terrain*. Okawara paper, Hikari Nashiji cloth-covered box. 2 ½"x8 ½"x19". 2019.



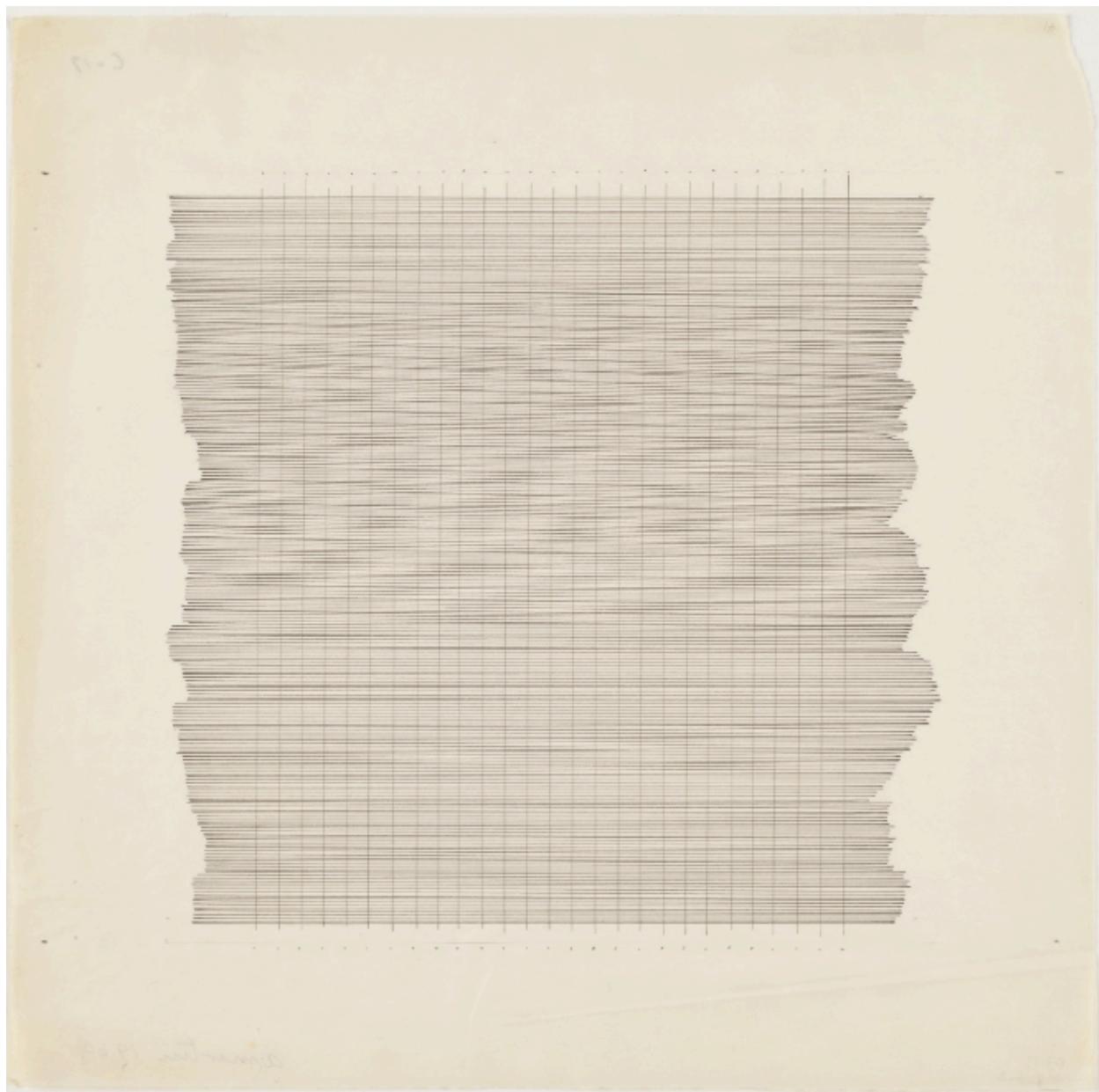
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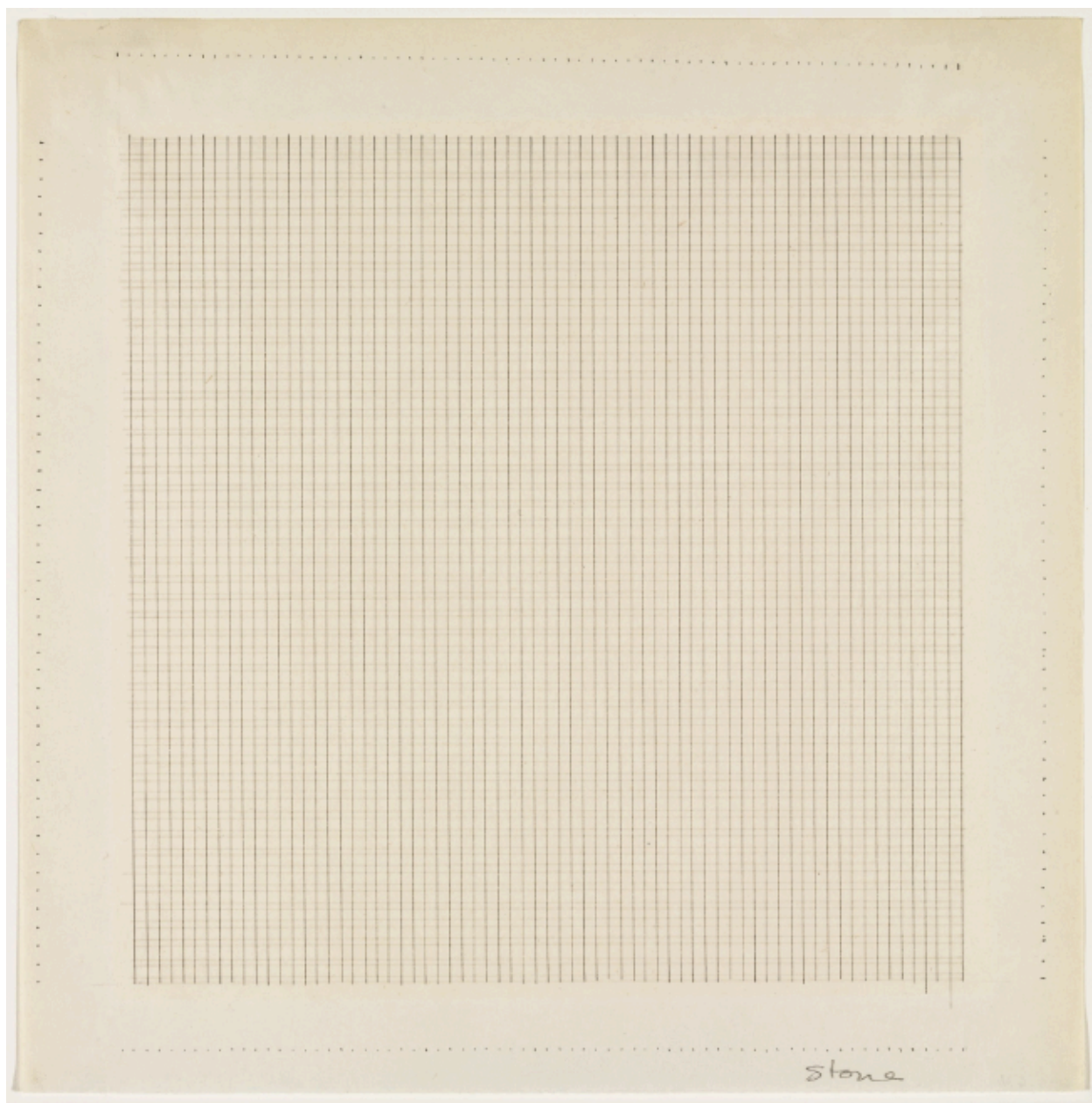
[Figure 18] Keith A. Smith. Single sheet Coptic diagram from *Smith's Sewing Single Sheets*. Page 139.



[Figure 19] Edmund de Waal. *For Agnes Martin*. 166 porcelain vessels, plywood cabinet. 35"x26". 2010.



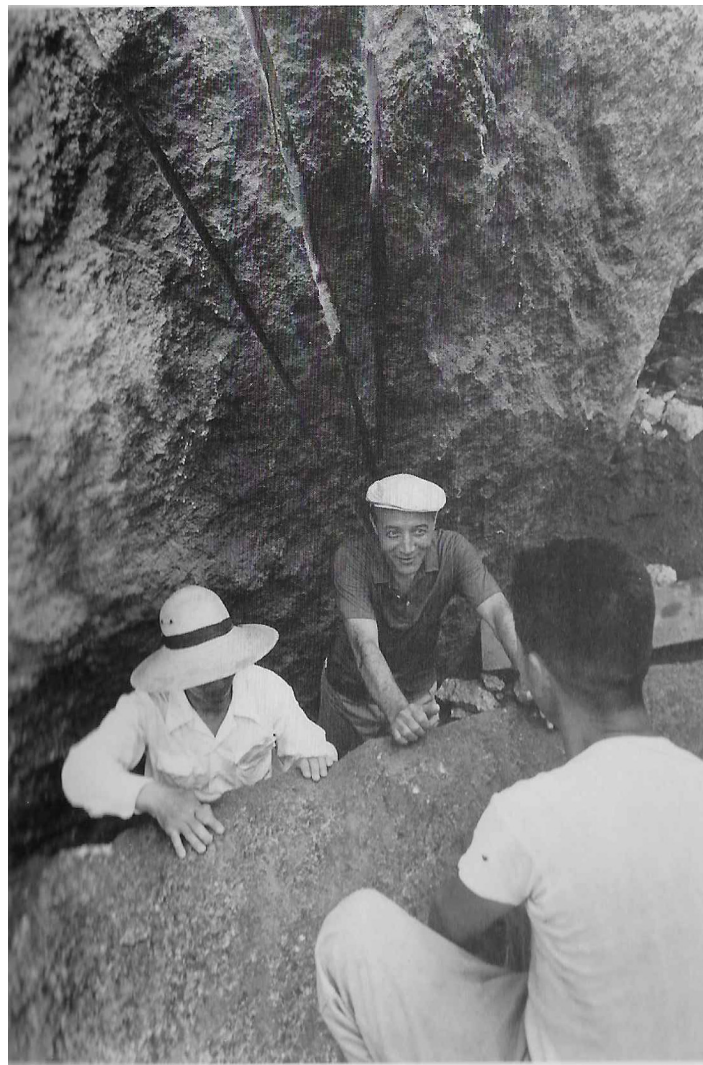
[Figure 20] Agnes Martin. *Untitled*. Ink on paper. 11 $\frac{7}{8}$ "x12 $\frac{1}{8}$ ". 1960.



[Figure 21] Agnes Martin. *Stone*. Ink on paper. 10 $\frac{7}{8}$ "x10 $\frac{7}{8}$ ". 1964.



[Figure 22] *you can put a rock over two sheets of paper and call it a book.* Green Kitakata and geodes.
10"x5"x2". 2018.



[Figure 23] Noguchi examining stones in Japan for a project. Photograph by Jun Miki. c. late 1950s.



[Figure 24] Isamu Noguchi. *Kouros*. Pink Georgia granite. 117"x42"x34 1/8". 1945.

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Agnes Martin. *Untitled*. Ink on paper. 11 7/8"x12 1/8". 1960. <<https://www.moma.org/collection/works/34006>>.

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Agnes Martin. *Stone*. Ink on paper. 10 $\frac{7}{8}$ "x10 $\frac{7}{8}$ ". 1964.

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