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## Design Practice as Palimpsest

ROBERT HILLIER

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# Design Practice as Palimpsest

Robert Hillier, Norwich University of the Arts, UK

*Abstract: Drawing on my personal design practice developed and created over the timeframe of a decade, this paper investigates the creative process, visual methodologies, intrinsic unpredictability, and ambiguity associated with ideas of visual change, altered states, and particularly processes of progressive effacement documented during that period. In doing so, the paper views the potential of developing design practice through the notion of palimpsest, both literally and metaphorically. Palimpsestic design can include either the application of new and alternative renderings over existing documents (the literal) or evidence aspects of change produced over a period of time (the metaphorical). Consequently, existing ideas and situations form a foundation and act as the physical ground for new ideas through design iterations that have been reused, altered, and represented in order to suggest alternative meanings and readings. This idea of design as palimpsest is evidenced through practice-based work that includes my artist book “Any Other Business,” “Drawing in the Margins and Beyond,” the List Landscapes series of photographic and typographic prints, the Driftworks photographic print series, and a selection of preparatory photographs that inform these design outcomes.*

*Keywords: Palimpsest, Graphic Design, Destruction, Deconstruction, Erasure, Traces, Change*

## Introduction

Drawing on my design practice developed and created over the timeframe of a decade, this paper investigates the creative process, visual methodologies, intrinsic unpredictability and ambiguity associated with ideas of visual change and altered states. Research for this design practice was assembled and documented during that ten year period. In doing so, this paper views the potential of developing design practice through the notion of palimpsest, both literally and metaphorically. I argue that palimpsestic design involves two distinct approaches. Firstly, there is the application of new and alternative renderings over existing documents. I view this application as a literal approach, in that the design outcomes echo the notion of what a palimpsest has traditionally been defined as, namely “a very old document on which the original writing has been erased and replaced with new writing” (Merriam-Webster 2014). The second application is more metaphorical, in that the design outcome can loosely evidence aspects of “change produced over a period of time” (Merriam-Webster 2014). Consequently, these two approaches form a foundation to my practice and act as the physical ground for new ideas progressed through design iterations that have been reused, altered and re-conceptualized in order to suggest alternative meanings and readings. This idea of design as palimpsest is evidenced through selected examples including my artist’s book *Any Other Business: Drawing in the Margins and Beyond*, the *List Landscapes* series of photographic and typographic prints, the *Driftworks* photographic print series, and a selection of photographs from which the design outcomes have been sourced.

## Visual Methodologies

The research combines visual methodologies specifically viewed from a graphic design perspective. Therefore, the visual outcomes focus on three sites involving the production of the design, the design itself and the audience of the design. The modalities of each site typically include aspects of the technological, the compositional and the social (Rose 2001, 16–17). The visual methodology involves an iterative approach to the generation of a series of design outcomes through a particular manner of working and reworking. Importantly, these visual outcomes are not concerned with the commercial function of graphic design usually associated with “problem solving” but can be considered within a wider (and less restrictive) context that

embraces the social, educational and informational aspects of the subject (Noble and Bestley 2005, 20). The methodology focuses on the analysis and synthesis of palimpsestic design through an epistemological framework that included a variety of media: photographic, typographic and written language theories, which help to critically frame and define the project's intellectual terrain. The research therefore prioritises the palimpsestic opportunities offered by graphic design as a subject. In *Graphic Design 1* (Figure 1) and *Graphic Design 2* (Figure 2) the words "GRAPHIC" and "DESIGN" form the main visual elements of each design outcome. In these instances, it is the literal meaning of each word as well as the physical relationship of the typography between each word that is explored. Consequently, a primacy of one word over the other is established through a palimpsestic process of layering two words.

## What is a Palimpsest?

As indicated earlier, the term palimpsest has traditionally been applied to a written manuscript. Before the age of print, scribes would often scrape off written text from parchment and reuse the material with newer texts added. This was a normal practice undertaken as a cost cutting measure because parchment (frequently created from vellum) was a scarce, and therefore, expensive commodity. The practice, however, often resulted in the earlier texts not being completely erased, resulting in traces of the older writing becoming visible beneath or alongside the new. Such an artefact is referred to as a palimpsest. This early example of sustainable recycling sometimes involved the removal of writings by a chemical process that was occasionally unsuccessful, resulting in the reappearance of the earlier texts. The process made once hidden text visible through layering. "Therefore, even though the process of layering which creates a palimpsest was born out of the need to erase and destroy previous texts, the re-emergence of those destroyed texts renders a structure that privileges heterogeneity and diversity" (The Chicago School of Media Theory 2014). This idea is developed in the artwork *Elvis* (Figure 3). The image was made on the day after the singer died. The making process involved the layering of destroyed texts through a method of visual erasure and superimposition. Newspaper and magazine clippings of Elvis Presley were positioned over each other and fixed using glue, gum and paint. Each layer created a new erasure and therefore new "texts." In turn, these new texts created the potential for new erasures.

## Destruction

The idea of destruction is central to the notion of a palimpsest. Can palimpsests be viewed as the outcomes of historical vandalism? A common 19<sup>th</sup> Century practice in the English book trade was to bleach any sign of written notes that appeared in the margins of a book. A personal copy of John Milton's *Areopagitica* was bleached, yet traces of the original marginalia can still be seen. Scholars subsequently realised what was actually bleached out was, in fact, Milton's own handwriting (Armitage 2014). It raises the paradoxical question as to whether the desecration of the book was due to Milton's own notes, or was it the bleaching process designed to remove those notes? Although the *Areopagitica* example may not be a palimpsest in the strictest sense of the term, it illustrates an interesting point. A more recent example of destruction is perhaps evidenced in *Traffic Control New York City* (Figure 4). The photograph depicts palimpsestic ideas of evolution and change. The traffic control box is, superficially, damaged by the on-going application of graffiti, fly posters and stickers. However, does the image evidence a destructive act or can it be seen more, as we shall see later, an act of deconstruction? The image offers readings ranging from control to chaos, the formal to the informal and the civic to civil.

A contemporary example of marginalia removal can be seen in the development of this particular paper that informs a themed session at the Design Principles and Practices Conference in Chicago in March 2015. In order to attend the conference, I needed to apply for external

funding to support accommodation and flight costs from the United Kingdom. The funding application I produced was subject to the scrutiny and revisions to the original text made by a number of colleagues at Norwich University of the Arts. The tracked changes using Microsoft Word highlighted their suggestions on how the proposal could be improved in *Abstract* (Figure 5). Indeed, this paper itself has also gone through a similar palimpsestic process, and as such, could therefore be viewed as being developed through both destructive and deconstructive actions.

## Evolution and the Cumulative

A palimpsest can occupy other forms and contexts. The architectural term *cumulative palimpsest* can be applied to mean successive episodes of deposition and layers of activity that are superimposed or mixed together. This, in turn, can provide a narrative of origin or evolution (The Chicago School of Media Theory 2014). This idea of the cumulative is an important aspect of my practice. In the experimental layout *Weehawken, New Jersey, Sunday 26<sup>th</sup> 2007 August* (Figure 6), the visual elements are not literally layered or mixed together but they do include the cumulative. The subject of the layout is the town of Weehawken and offers three views taken from one single position. These cumulative perspectives inform potential narratives of origin concerning nature and the man made and, so, explore notions of evolution through the visualization of the new and the not so new.

The Internet can also offer layered narratives of evolution that can be viewed as contemporary virtual cumulative palimpsests. Constant change is evidenced over a periods of time through the successive superimposition and constant refreshment of hypertext on web pages. In the context of an architectural cumulative palimpsest, change may be revealed over thousands of years. In the case of the Internet, change is revealed over nano-seconds. Like the Internet, this idea of perpetual change can be evidenced in the sign outside the *Fox News Headquarters* (Figure 7) on 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue in New York. There is constant refreshment within the 24-hour news cycle. The focus is always on the current. The now. The old is continually evolving, worn, erased, and over-written.

## Deconstruction and Erasure

The images I have designed and developed draw on Jacques Derrida's analysis of deconstruction and, in particular, his notions of erasure. Deconstruction denies the possibility of a pure presence and therefore any associated stable meaning. Richard Galpin (1998) states that in discussing the general strategy of deconstruction, Derrida (1982) speaks of “the irruptive emergence of a new ‘concept,’ a concept that can no longer be, and never could be, included in the previous regime” (42). The photograph *Entrance* (Figure 8) depicts the primary school entrance I walked through every day as a child. The entrance is now no longer there having been bricked-up over time. It is now, paradoxically, a barrier that was once a gateway. Its original function has been undermined as an irruptive change of use emerged.

This idea of an irruptive emergence where the new replaces the old seems apposite within the context of the palimpsest design—as does the concept of erasure. Erasure or what Martin Heidegger refers to as “sous rapture” (with erasing lines), is a philosophical device that investigates ideas concerning both presence and absence of meaning. Within the framework of deconstruction theory, “sous rapture” was further explored and extensively referenced by Derrida to signify the “inadequate yet necessary” (Sarup 1993, 33). *Cereal Cross 2* (Figure 9) is comprised of five identical versions of a single image of a cornfield. The single image seen in isolation can be viewed as being limited, narrow in perspective and somewhat inadequate. However, using a process of rotation and layering through the application of InDesign computer software, the five images have evolved and changed through time to create broader perspectives

and other meanings. This process involving layering through computer software can be viewed as a palimpsest approach to design and can offer the potential to develop reused, recycled and re-born imagery. In doing so, the inadequate has become more necessary.

The implication of Heidegger's "presence and absence" of meaning coupled with Derrida's notion of the "inadequate yet necessary" provides the potential to develop visual ideas relating to paradox and uncertainty that seem appropriate to the often arbitrary nature of palimpsestic design. *Power Swamp 3* (Figure 10) depicts two identical photographs of the contemporary Manhattan skyline foregrounded by an ancient New Jersey swamp. Palimpsests can connect presence and present, absence and the past. This image forms part of the *Driftworks* series of photographs and was created through layers that explore change through symmetry and notions of the kaleidoscopic. It is interesting that the word palimpsest rhymes with *Rorschach Test*. *Driftworks* always have a mind of their own.

It is important to note that erasure can also offer more concrete and less ambiguous meanings. The term can literally signify something that has been achieved or completed. Something that has been and is now gone. For example, the typographic print *To Do List, April 2009—September 2011, Version 1* (Figure 11) documents actions I completed over a 29 month period. Every action accomplished has been crossed off, actions that were once significant to me but insignificant to everyone else. The act of applying erasing lines allow the resultant print to act as an info-graphic, a diagram or bar chart of my working life. The erasing lines also become a metaphor for the completion of an action whilst also attempting to illustrate more amorphous and less certain ideas concerning presence and absence of meaning. It is this contradictory and oppositional relationship between the significant and insignificant and therefore the presence and absence of meaning that can inform and enrich palimpsestic design practice. Consequently, the presence and absence of meaning offers the potential to develop further alternative visual narratives, readings and interpretations.

The notion of alternative narrative also features strongly within my practice. A narrative is not necessarily a linear device involving a beginning, middle and end. It can be multi-faceted, open-ended and often disruptive. The palimpsest offers opportunity for unexpected interventions through erasure and traces that can often conflict and confuse readings and interpretations. This sense of disruption is supported by Michel Foucault's idea on genealogy that states that "the beginning of things is not the inviolable identity of their origins; it is the dissension of other things. It is disparity" (The Chicago School of Media Theory 2014). This sense of dissension and disparity can be evidenced in the experimental layout series and outcomes such as *Lowestoft, Suffolk, 24<sup>th</sup> January 2010* (Figure 12). There is a dissension occurring from elements depicted in the photographs such as the sea wall made of boulders and the eroded sea posts made from wood. The lost and the near lost. The ancient is replaced by the new. The long gone and the short present. Similar themes are explored in *New York (New Jersey), Friday 23<sup>rd</sup> July 2010, Version 2* (Figure 13). There is a disjointedness between geography, time and space in both outcomes. There is a typographic disparity between the dates when the photographs were originally taken and when the layouts were completed. Disparity is also evidenced in the spatial and contextual relationships between the photographs themselves. From the old world in Suffolk, England to the new world in West New York, New Jersey.

Whilst the text and photographic elements in the experimental layout examples are visually separate and discrete, each element can be seen as an interchangeable and multi-layered record of the same location that evidences change over time. Although not stylistically "layered" or "erased" they, nonetheless, can be viewed as palimpsestic in that they offer evidence of change over a relatively long time frame. Unlike the experimental layouts, *Ice Pool Circles 3* (Figure 14) is more obviously layered and illustrates change evidenced over a much shorter time frame and narrower perspective. In this example, close-up photographs focus on the tiny frozen pools that were formed over a few days in a field in Norfolk. Separate visual elements are infiltrated and become contaminated by each other through localised micro change. A process of layering

creates a palimpsest that partially erases the previous forms. The outcome has a metaphorical value that extends beyond the literal status of erasure of text. In this instance, the layers and subsequent erasure is created by and through ice. The resulting forms offer new contexts and alternative ideas.

### **The Hidden and the Revealed**

The layering and erasing aspect of palimpsestic practice informs the development of oppositional ideas such as the hidden and the revealed, the lost and found, the conscious and unconscious. In Sigmund Freud's essay "A Note upon the 'Mystic Writing Pad,'" he compares a common children's writing toy to the "structure of our perceptual apparatus" of the mind (Freud 1925). Memories can be wiped clean, similar to images erased on the surface layer of a mystic pad. However, like the wax layer below the surface layer of the pad, they are permanently retained yet hidden. In my drawing *Blackbird Skull* (Figure 15), the image has been made using carbon paper. The carbon paper was used to create a series of more finished drawings. The marks on the carbon paper were therefore part of an earlier drawing process that was not intended to be seen publicly and that are usually considered to be the "hidden" aspect of the process. This process can be linked to Freud's analogy of memory and the Mystic Writing Pad. The idea is palimpsestic in that some memories are on the surface and can be superficially wiped clean, however, those cumulative memories are not always hidden as traces still remain.

A palimpsest can therefore be viewed as an agent of memory as in this quotation from Thomas De Quincey (2006): "Everlasting layers of ideas, images, feelings, have fallen upon your brain softly as light. Each succession has seemed to bury all that went before. And yet, in reality, not one has been extinguished." This notion of memory made visible lies at the heart of my practice. In *Bird Tracks* (Figure 16), the track made by a Wood Pigeon walking in fresh snow has been recorded through three sequential images. The outcome contains an impression, traces, a memory of another time. Implied signs of life that has recently gone. The hidden and revealed. Presence and absence.

### **Three Artist Influences**

Many visual artists have created works that can be viewed as palimpsestic in nature. This is partly because of the development of techniques such as under-painting as manifested in the watercolours of Joseph Mallord William Turner (Axton 1977). It is also due to the all too human propensity to avoid closure as demonstrated, for example, by Vincent van Gough's paintings that were reworked and refined many times (The Phillips Collection 2014). My palimpsest design practice is therefore located and informed by numerous visual practitioners. However, it is the work of André Masson, Tom Phillips and Ed Ruscha that has a particular importance and influence on my practice.

Ideas of presence and absence of meaning were explored by the surrealist artist André Masson in the 1920s. He was a proponent of automatic drawing with no preconceived subject or composition in mind, demonstrating his interest in the dual process of both unconscious and conscious activities. This involved each activity eventually folding into one another and, consequently, resulted in unforeseen outcomes that were open to new readings (Ades 1987). This clearly palimpsestic process reflects the "irruptive emergence of a new 'concept'" described by Derrida when discussing deconstruction (Derrida 1982, 42). Automatic drawing also echoes a cumulative idea where layers of activity have been superimposed or mixed together to offer new insights into potential meaning.

The use of the automatic drawing technique is a key aspect of my artist book *Any Other Business: Drawing in the Margins and Beyond* (Figure 17). It documents drawings made over a ten-year period during the course committee meetings I attended at Norwich University of the

Arts. The original texts were the committee papers that formed the base imagery and physical ground for drawings that were reused, altered and exploited in order to suggest alternative meanings and readings. Rather than attempting to conceal and hiding these marks, the potential of the image has been developed through both destructive and deconstructive actions. This imagery was then further erased and replaced by new imagery leaving only traces of the original still visible. The book is palimpsestic in both a literal and metaphorical sense. The drawings and writings in the margins of committee papers have been exploited and developed, however, the visual outcomes of *Any Other Business* have no fixed meaning, they are ambiguous and open to interpretation (Figures 18, 19, 20, and 21).

Tom Phillips' palimpsestic book *A Humument. A Treated Victorian Novel* also informed *Any Other Business*. Phillips states on the dust cover of *A Humument* that he undermined the original text of a Victorian novel to "make it yield the ghosts of other possible stories, scenes, poems, erotic incidents and surrealist catastrophes which seemed to lurk within its wall of words" (Phillips 1980). The polarity and tension that undermines the original text in order to exploit a "wall of words," again allows for the exploration of new meaning whilst still retaining elements of the old. This oppositional idea is supported by what De Quincey refers to an "involuted" phenomenon where unrelated texts are interwoven and compete and infiltrate each other (The Chicago School of Media Theory 2014). *Any Other Business* offers similarly abstruse ideas particularly through the juxtaposition of external, official, formal and agenda-driven precepts of a committee meeting with the sometimes internalised, subversive, unstructured and chaotic ideas experienced by a committee member (Figure 22).

Ed Ruscha's stylistic and aesthetic concerns and his interest in combining the fields of graphic design, typography, photography and drawing into his oeuvre has had a deep impact on my own practice. His work can be viewed as being loosely palimpsestic. James Ellroy (2010, 9) wrote about Ruscha, "Recognition becomes re-recognition as old visions are supplanted or replaced. The banal becomes supernatural; the squalid assumes new power; transcendent beauty accretes. The inherent simulation of newness is often the artist's best friend." In Ruscha's case, it is the constant change evidenced through time of his actual artistic process that is the palimpsest. This transformative process is echoed in my own practice. In *Power Tree D* (Figure 23) and *Power Tree G* (Figure 24) the banal images of a lamp post are transformed by overgrowing ivy. Nature changing the man made to create newer and more supernatural forms in order to develop alternative imagined landscapes. Newness infiltrates the old and in doing so facilitates opportunities to generate new palimpsests.

## Conclusions

This paper has considered the notion of design as palimpsest through the lens of my own practice. In doing so, ideas have been explored concerning how change in the form of progressive effacement can be represented visually within a number of graphic design territories, including photography, typography and illustration. The outcomes explore how the juxtaposition and placement of images can offer new and alternative meanings through ideas of destruction and deconstruction, erasure and evolution, the hidden, the revealed and the cumulative. The outcomes challenge notions of fixity, linearity, hierarchy and meaning and embrace aspects of links, multi-linearity and networks. Chaos and chance. The macro and the micro. The old and the not so new. The palimpsestic.



Figures



Figure 1: *Graphic Design 1*, 2011  
Source: R. A. Hillier

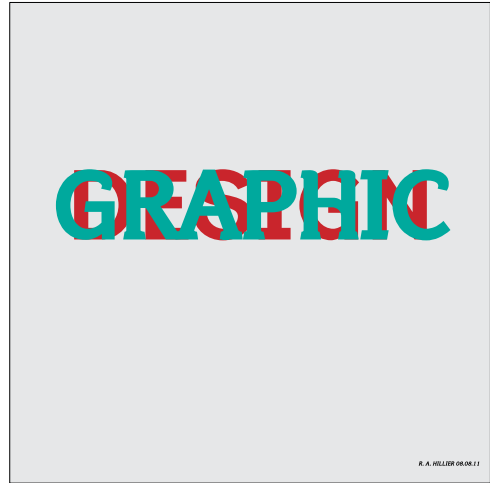


Figure 2: *Graphic Design 2*, 2011  
Source: R. A. Hillier



Figure 3: *Elvis*, 1977  
Source: R. A. Hillier





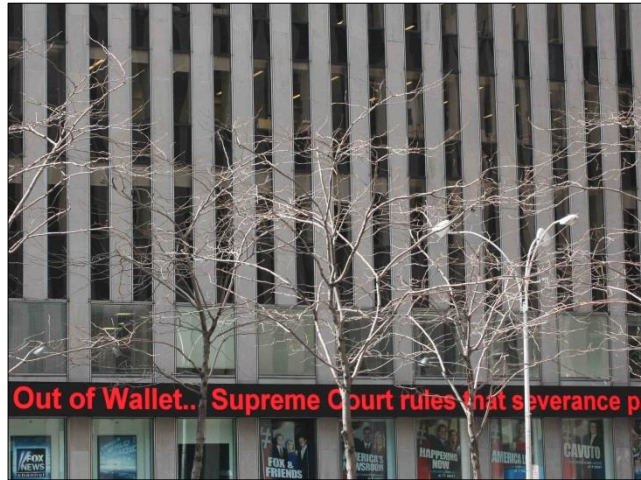


Figure 7: *Fox News Headquarters*, 2014  
*Source: R. A. Hillier*



Figure 8: *Entrance*, 2014  
*Source: R. A. Hillier*

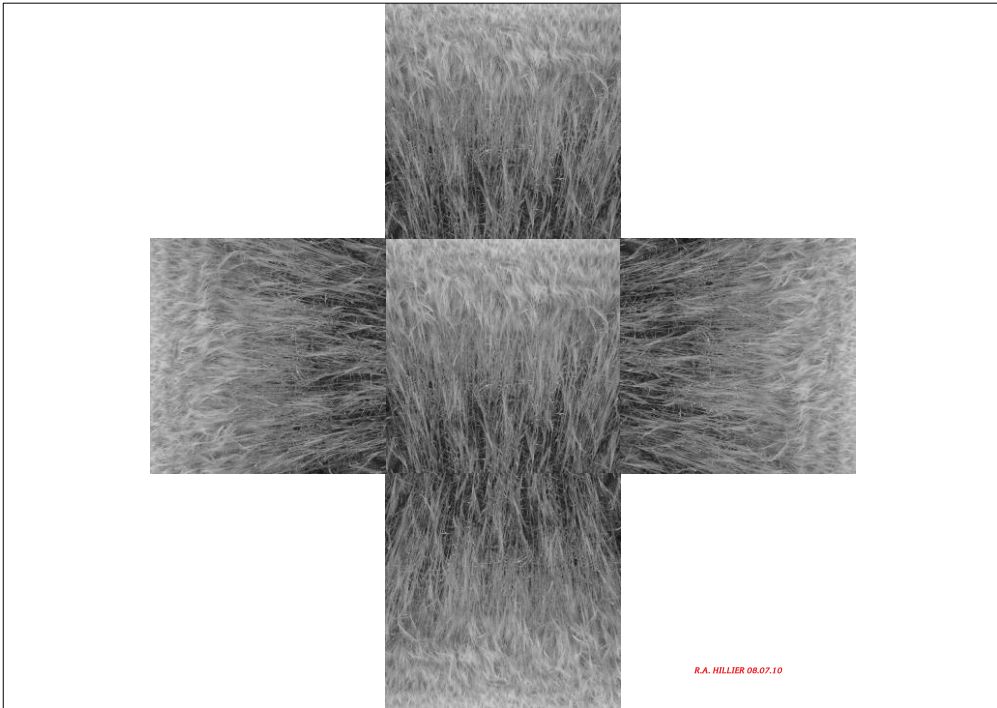


Figure 9: *Cereal Cross 2*, 2010  
Source: R. A. Hillier

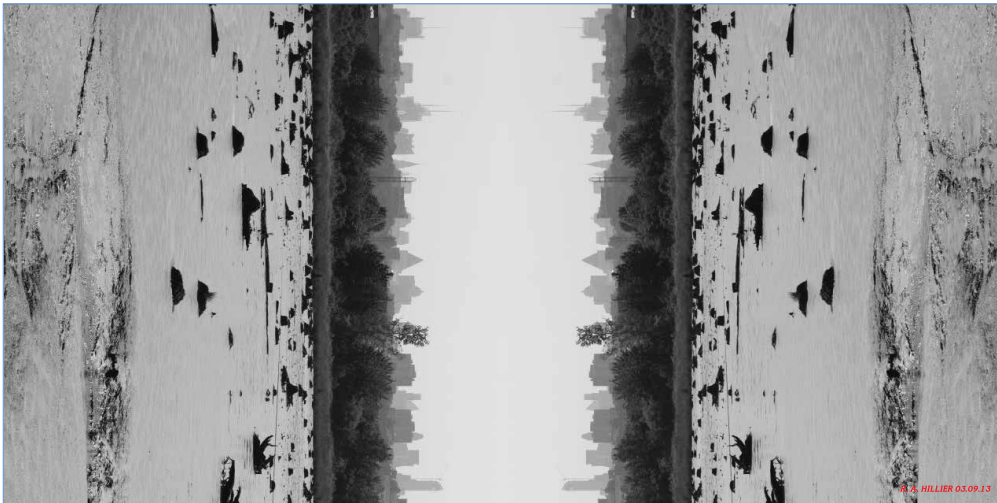


Figure 10: *Power Swamp 3*, 2013  
Source: R. A. Hillier

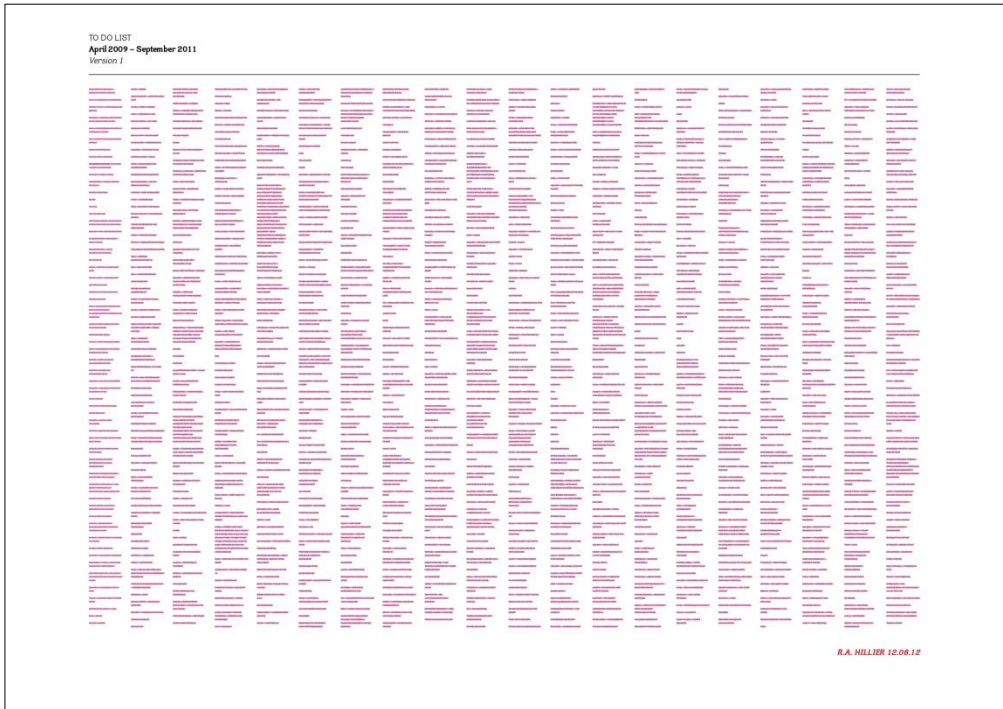


Figure 11: *To Do List, April 2009—September 2011, Version 1, 2012*  
Source: R. A. Hillier



Figure 12: *Lowestoft, Suffolk, 24<sup>th</sup> January 2010, 2010*  
Source: R. A. Hillier





Figure 13: *West New York (New Jersey) Friday 23<sup>rd</sup> July 2010 Version 2*, 2010  
Source: R. A. Hillier



Figure 14: *Ice Pool Circles 3*, 2010  
Source: R. A. Hillier

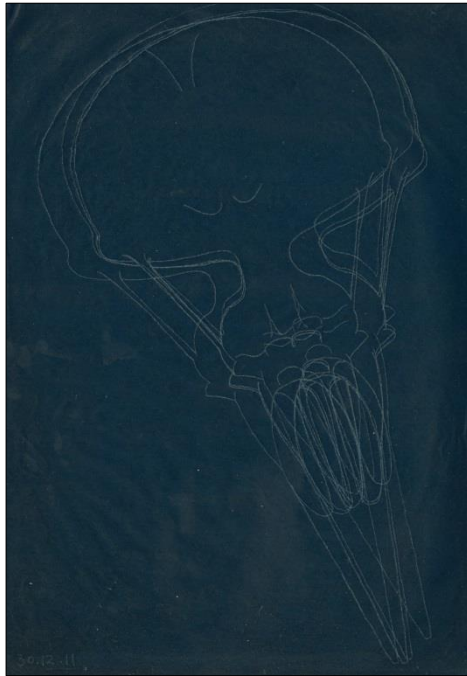


Figure 15: *Blackbird Skull*, 2011  
Source: R. A. Hillier

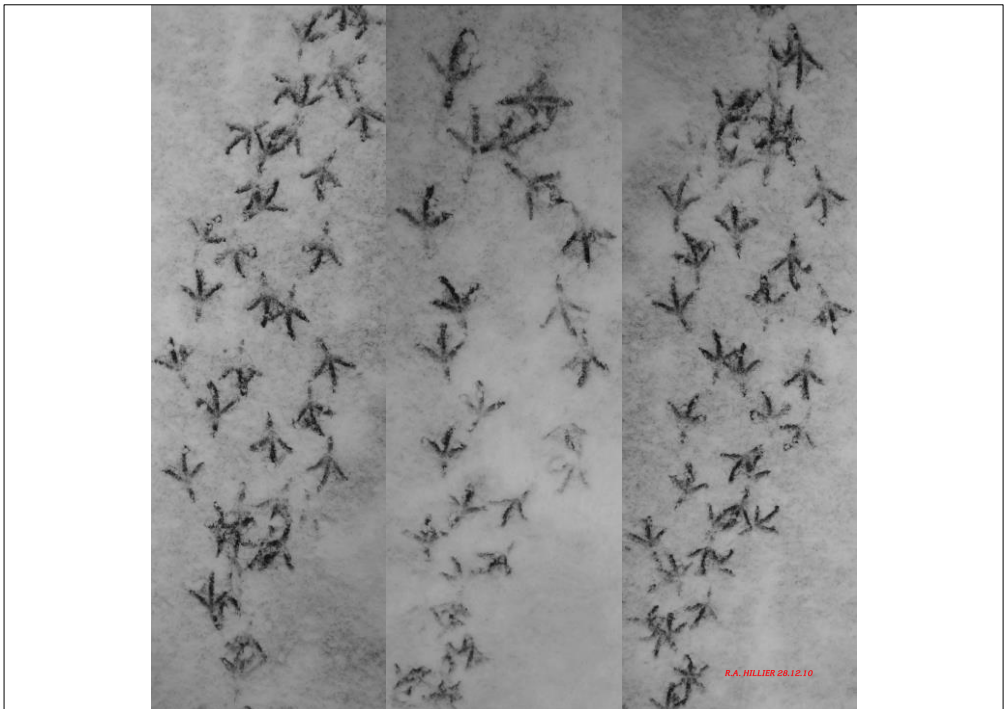


Figure 16: *Bird Tracks*, 2010  
Source: R. A. Hillier

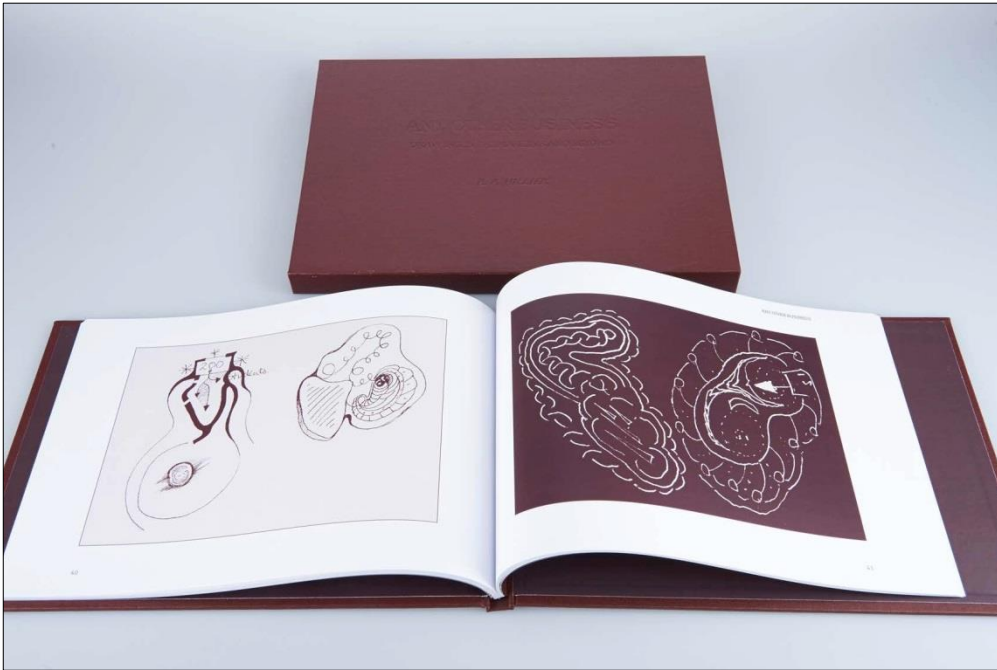


Figure 17: *Any Other Business—Drawing in the Margins and Beyond*, 2014  
Source: R. A. Hillier

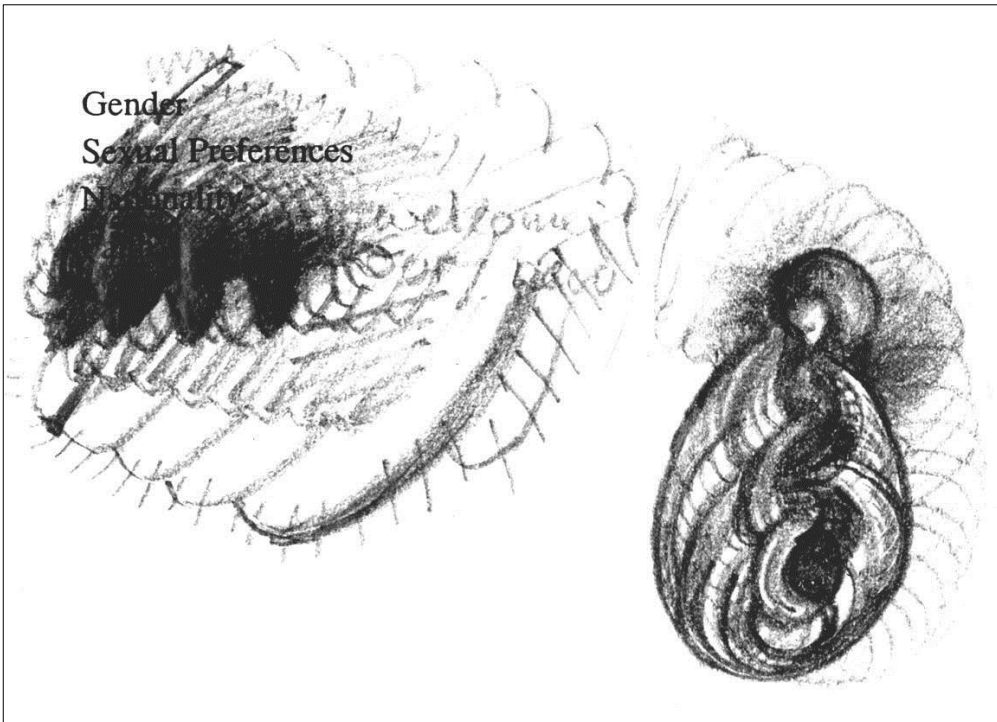


Figure 18: *Any Other Business—Gender*, 2014  
Source: R. A. Hillier



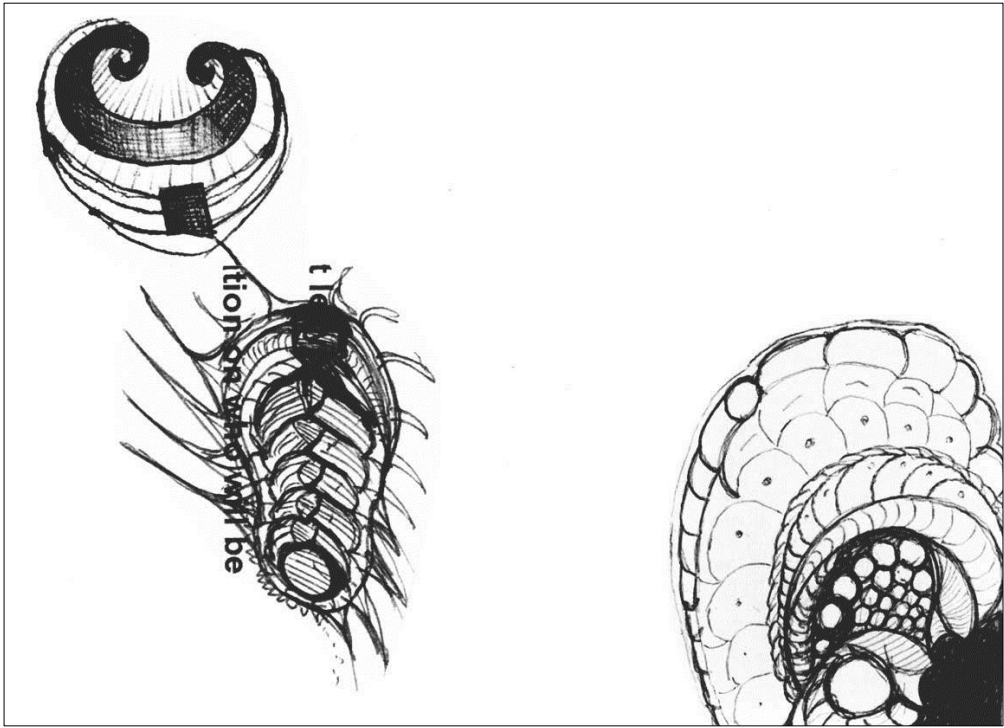


Figure 19: *Any Other Business—Ition*, 2014  
Source: R. A. Hillier

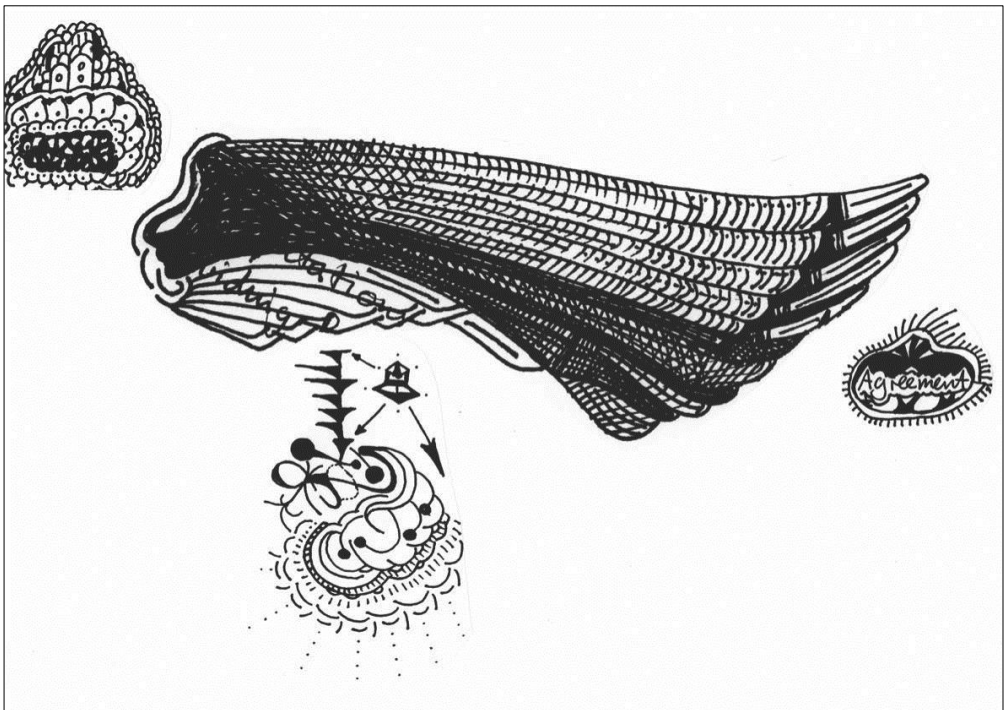


Figure 20: *Any Other Business—Agreement*, 2014  
Source: R. A. Hillier

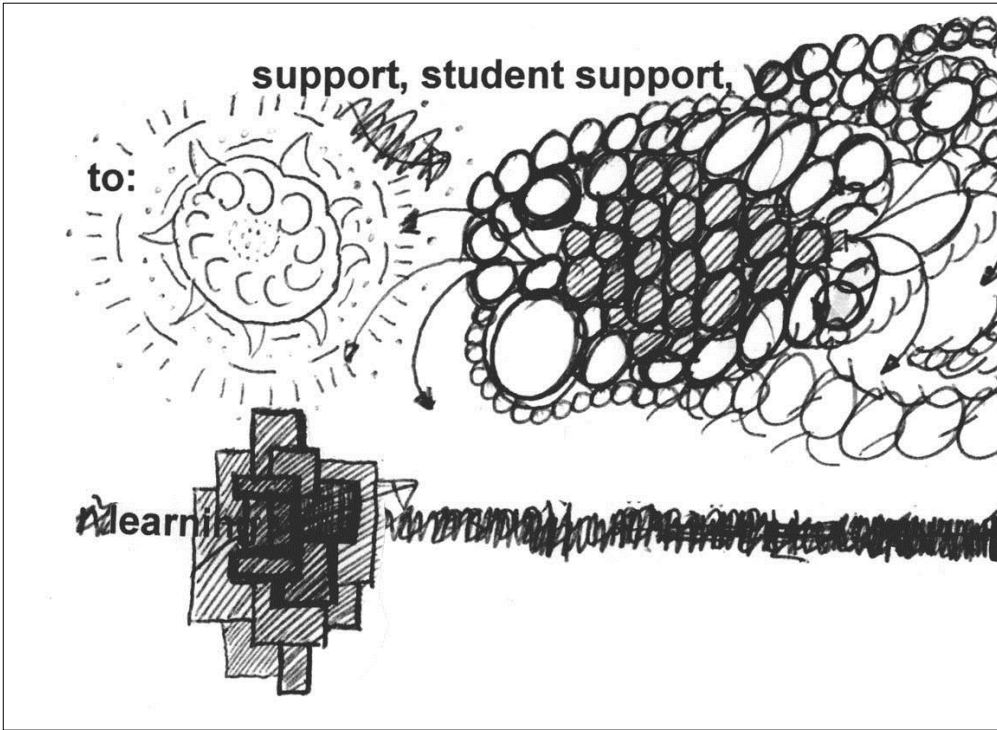


Figure 21: *Any Other Business—Support*, 2014  
Source: R. A. Hillier

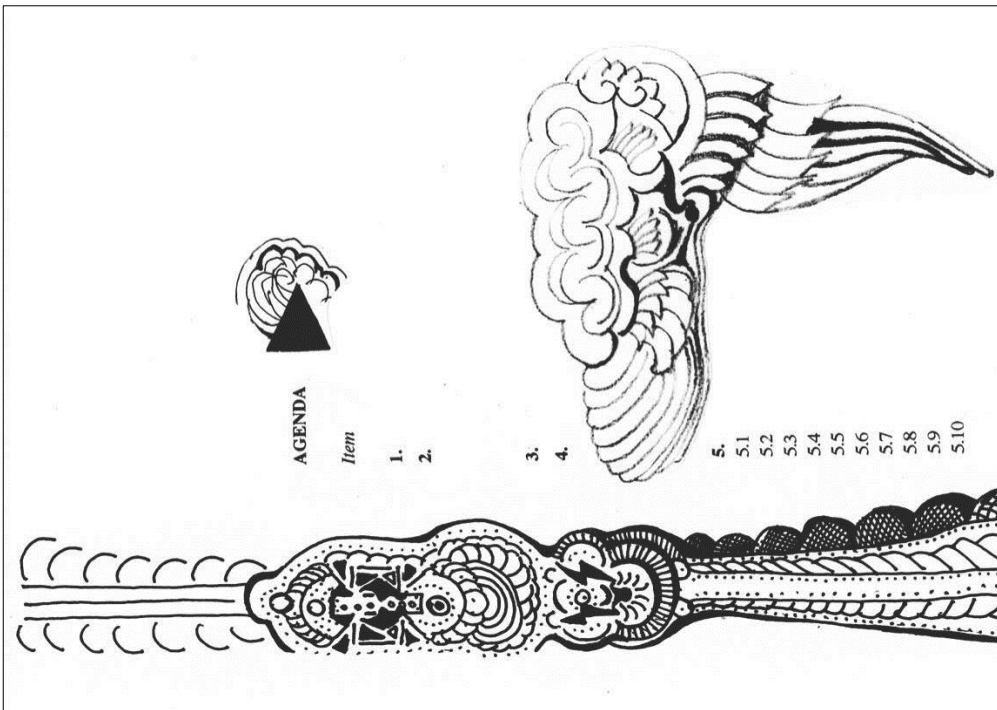


Figure 22: *Any Other Business—Agenda*, 2014  
Source: R. A. Hillier



Figure 23: *Power Tree D*, 2013  
Source: R. A. Hillier

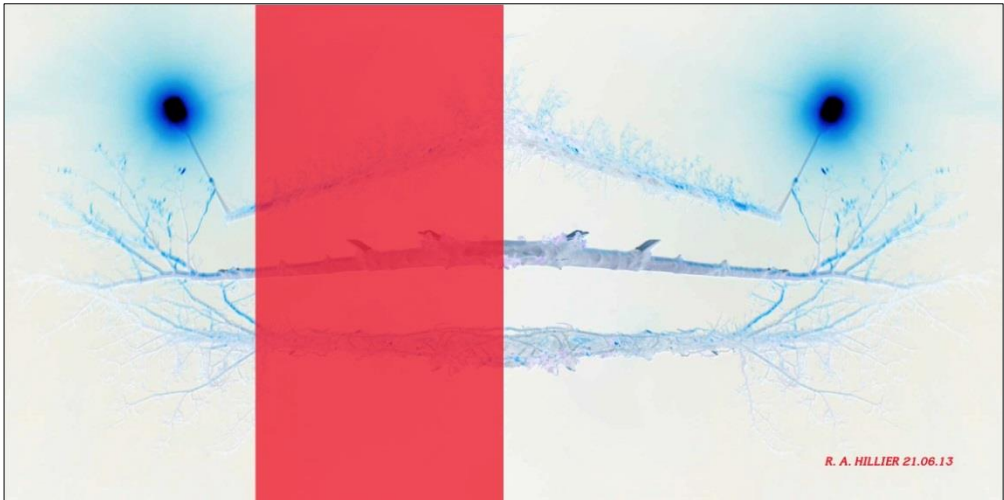


Figure 24: *Power Tree G*, 2013  
Source: R. A. Hillier

All images were created, photographed, and generated by the author.

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