

THE UNCOMMON THREAD



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JODY ALEXANDER AND LISA KOKIN

NOVEMBER 15, 2013 THROUGH FEBRUARY 1, 2014

The Uncommon Thread

Jody Alexander and Lisa Kokin

in exhibition at the
San Francisco Center for the Book
November 15, 2013 – February 1, 2014

Curator: Donna Seager
Special Contributor: Maria Porges
Exhibition Coordination: Mary Austin
Exhibition Design: Donna Seager
Catalog Design: Kathleen Burch
Cover Concept + Design: Kathleen Burch
Copy Editor: Samantha Hamady
Creative Direction: Kathleen Burch,
Mary Austin, Donna Seager
Photography for Jody Alexander’s work:
R. R. Jones
Photography for Lisa Kokin’s work:
Lia Roozendaal, Jagwire Designs
Catalog Printing: Inkworks, Berkeley,
California

ISBN: 978-0-9882067-0-0

First printing, November 2013

©2013 the individual artists and
the San Francisco Center for the Book
375 Rhode Island Street
San Francisco, California 94103
sfcb.org

A portion of the purchase price of this
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Cover

Above: L. Kokin, *Recapitulation*, 2008
Below: J. Alexander, *Sedimental #9*, 2010

Frontispiece

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This exhibition made possible
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designed by Terminal Design. The San
Francisco Center for the Book logo was
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The San Francisco Center for the Book,
founded in 1996, fosters the joys of books and
bookmaking, the history, artistry, and
continuing presence of books in our culture
and enduring importance as a medium of
self-expression.

The SFCB was co-founded by Mary Austin and
Kathleen Burch, who recognized a growing
need in San Francisco and the Bay Area for a
facility specifically designed and equipped for
the book arts. The first Center of its kind on
the West Coast, the SFCB now offers over 300
workshops and many free events a year,
including the annual street fair called
Roadworks: Steamroller Printing Festival. In
addition to workshops and events, there is a
thriving artist-in-residence program,
producing numerous artists’ books every year,
and collaborations with many local non-
profits, museums, and libraries. The SFCB also
hosts special visits and hands-on demonstra-
tions for students of all ages, teachers,
librarians, corporate team building, collectors,
visiting printers, artists, writers and designers.

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Exhibition curator Donna Seager owns a respected contemporary gallery in Mill Valley – the Seager Gray Gallery – that also specializes in artists' books. She mounts an annual exhibition at her gallery entitled THE ART OF THE BOOK, bringing together fine press, artists' books and contemporary sculptors using books as subject and material in their work. Her mission is to expose the arts community to the rich array of talented printers, binders, printmakers and book artists associated with the San Francisco Center for the Book and encourage notable fine art collectors and museum curators to consider book-related works as an important genre in its own right.

As a gallerist, it has always been my intention to present book-related arts in a contemporary gallery atmosphere. It is my belief that the book as a medium for art offers an æsthetic experience unlike any other. This extends itself to fine press editions, handmade unique offerings, sculptural and altered versions. Great art inspires multiple associations. The associations book lovers have with books extend to not only the text and content, but also to the hand held object, its papers, illustrations and cover. In the hands of an artist, form and content can come together as a resonant harmonic chord.

I had two goals guiding the development of this exhibition. The first was to curate a show that would draw the attention of young artists and collectors of contemporary art. My hope is to build a bridge between the fine art world and the world of printing and book making. My second goal, related to the design of the exhibition, was to expand ideas of how the book influences contemporary art. I purposefully selected two Bay Area artists, Jody Alexander and Lisa Kokin, who had already made names for themselves in the contemporary art world and whose original experimentations using the book as a medium for art developed past any conventional uses and explored new territory.

In Jody Alexander's case, entire installations based on quirky, isolated characters incorporate stitching, photography and book pages. She embeds exposed spines of books in tea-stained layers of cloth, creating a visual abstraction that is both entirely unexpected and somehow familiar. Lisa Kokin works in thread and recycled materials, in this case, book elements. Her work offers themes of political and social subversion while conveying a remarkable respect and delicate tenderness in the treatment of her materials. Kokin transcribed directly and entirely in thread pages of *Das Kapital* from a copy in Yiddish found in her Romanian grandfather's belongings. In other works, she utilizes the foil-stamped titles from self-help book spines sewn together with thread in mesmerizing wall sculptures, a commentary on a national obsession with self-improvement.

The *Uncommon Thread* as the title for the exhibition refers to the artists' use of sewing and stitching in their practice of making art.

–DONNA SEAGER

I.

Outside of a dog, a book is a man's best friend. Inside of a dog it's too dark to read.

– GROUCHO MARX

Maria Porges is an artist and writer whose work has been exhibited widely in solo and group exhibitions since the late eighties. She received a SECA award from the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and has twice been in residence at the Headlands Center for the Arts. For over two decades, her critical writing has appeared in many publications, including ARTFORUM, ART IN AMERICA, SCULPTURE, AMERICAN CERAMICS, GLASS, THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW, and a host of other now-defunct art magazines. She has also authored essays for more than sixty exhibition catalogues and dozens of scripts for museum audio tours.

Porges is an Assistant Professor at California College of the Arts in the Graduate Program in Fine Arts. She likes to topiarize unsuspecting shrubbery and read out loud.

Like a warm woolen jacket or a patchwork quilt, the structure of a book that is made to last is created with thread, its parts sewn together into something beautiful, strong, and perfectly suited to its task – whether that might be presentation, communication, exhortation, or all three. The attractiveness of such an object for artist-bricoleurs (those makers who handily adapt objects and materials to their own devices) should be obvious. A book, already a container of meaning (both literally and metaphorically) can be un-made, altered or reconfigured in a dizzying number of ways, all of which “book artists” have seemingly investigated.

The Uncommon Thread: Jody Alexander and Lisa Kokin was inspired by the annual “Art of the Book” shows presented at the Seager Gray Gallery in Mill Valley for the last nine years. Works included have ranged from exquisite fine press editions to extraordinary transformations of discarded volumes like the ones presented here, in which Kokin and Alexander explore every part of various volumes they have appropriated for use. The works included were chosen by curator Donna Seager to demonstrate ways in which books are both bona fide substance and inspiration for art, and to create a bridge between the worlds of contemporary art and the fine book. What joins much of the work presented in this show is thread itself. Filaments of white or tan or red travel through many of these pieces, drawing neatly-stitched lines across and around text, accumulating in disorderly bundles, or joining parts together in a new textile language – sometimes, in place of the words that were once on the pages now fashioned into art.

Alexander – artist, librarian, bookbinder and teacher – draws on all of her various identities for the construction (both literal and meta-

phorical) of pieces like *Often it is Necessary to Make a Person Insensible* or *Late in Life, Healing is Complete* (both 2012). In these and other similar works, the book's cover is removed to expose a single page which then forms the foundation for a delicate image-and-text narrative literally stitched together and even excavated into the book's surface. *Often . . .* includes a bullet, circled in red thread, next to an enigmatic photo of a boy in bathing shorts; *Late in Life . . .*, a tiny lightbulb, nestled into a carved cavity. In *Asparagus [In the New World]* (2010), thread becomes a way to mark a specific line of thought, both mending and scarring the printed words across which the stitches meander. To create the piece, Alexander joined together eight page-spreads of dense text into a vertical rectangle of vertical rectangles. Sewn lines trail downwards from a mass at the top, in a pattern based on a drawing of the actual root structure of asparagus. As Alexander has put it, "the roots . . . represent not only exploration but also growth, a search for home and, depending on your point of view, invasion."

To make *Felix's Notebooks*, Alexander stripped several volumes of their covers and stitched them almost obsessively, page by page, with scarlet thread. Loose ends accumulate around each bundle of page signatures in a halo of red, the soft chaos of thread contrasting with the orderly patterns sewn into and through the books' texts. Based on a dream about a friend's difficulties with balancing his creative side with new family obligations, this piece also reflects on the balance that artists must achieve between life and artmaking – or, perhaps, between creativity and obsession.

II.

*A book must be the ax
for the frozen sea within us.*

– FRANZ KAFKA

For over two decades, Lisa Kokin has explored ways to sew together image and text, using books, photographs, and, most recently, thread alone as a palette for narrative expression. Her series based on self-help books thriftily incorporates the entirety of each volume she uses – snout to tail, so to speak – in different works. The book's covers, for instance, appear in *How to Stop Worrying and Start Living* (2010), cut into stylized petals sewn into bulbous, determinedly cheerful flowers ("which I hope will create eternal happiness for the viewer in five days or less," Kokin avers.) Each of the irregular, rock-like shapes in *Room For Improvement* (2010) consists of the pulped pages of a single book, mashed and molded into a tiny boulder to be pushed à la Sisyphus, up the steep slope of acutely-felt personal lack towards some unattainable goal. (The size of the rock is determined by the scope of the book; surprisingly – or perhaps, not surprisingly at all – one might be a thrifty little ovoid, while another might be quite large.) In *Treatment* (2010), the book's spines are sewn, row after row, into a free hanging, vertical form, not unlike a Venetian blind. Kokin, often pointedly humorous, creates a vaudevillian double play on words with her title. Not only do all of these volumes purport to assuage the doubts, ills, and problems they describe, but the blinds that the piece's form mimics is also known as a window treatment.

The recent *Das Kapital* series (all 2013) continues a different path in Kokin's work: a more serious one, in which she has addressed her relationship to history through members of her family and, more broadly, the Jewish diaspora. For each of these works, she has used her grandfather's Yiddish copy of Karl Marx's famous polemic on capitalism as her model, copying the letters of a single page of text in thread, word for word, onto a rectangle of delicate lace. To most viewers, the meaning of these lines resides in their formal beauty; the number of people that remain on this earth who can still read Yiddish

in the Hebrew alphabet has become a tiny fraction of what it was when the book was printed, before a century of violence shrunk their numbers. The shroud-like, disintegrating lace, seemingly held together as much by the text as its own structure, invokes the lost traditions of another era.

III.

*Men have had every advantage
of us in telling their own story . . .
the pen has been in their hands.
I will not allow books to prove
anything.*

– JANE AUSTEN

In all of these works, the dexterous use of thread as metaphor, connective tissue and drawing material comes together in a complicated narrative that can constructively be described as feminist in nature. Women are not the only artists who love books or who understand the ways in which books carry both specific and universal meanings, but Kokin and Alexander both display an infinite patience and attention to detail, stitch by stitch, that is arguably gendered. For both, the book has been a point of departure as well as one of arrival; the content, something that becomes generalized into what is held between the covers of all books – all of the stories and texts, instructions and imprecations – and something that is unique, book by book, to be savored and understood. Books are like this, these pieces seem to say to us. They speak to us, and us alone, but they are also the voices that we use to talk to each other, the language that we share, sometimes across all languages, to communicate what we know, what we feel, and what we yearn for.

– MARIA PORGES

THE UNCOMMON THREAD

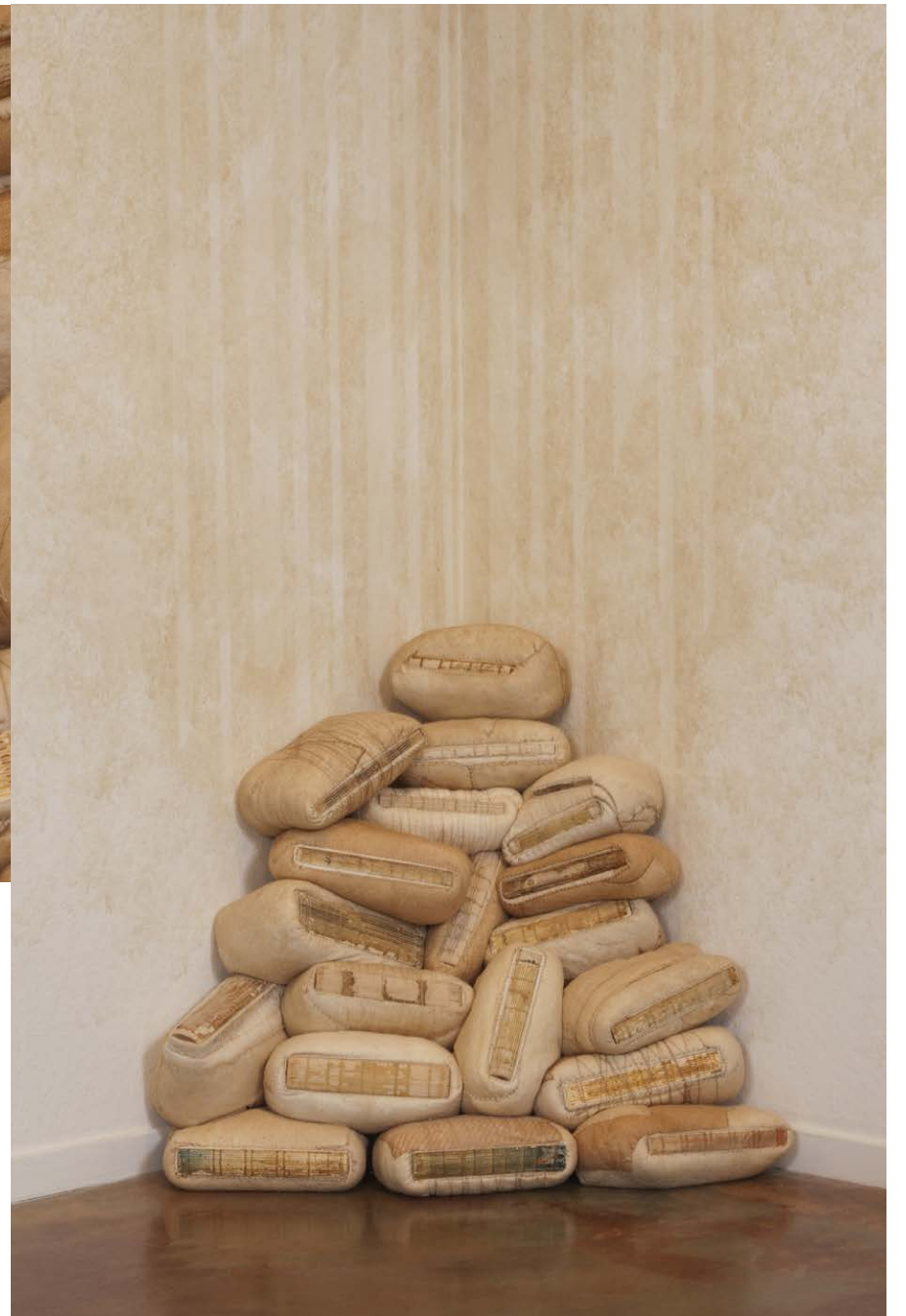
Jody Alexander



Felix' Notebooks
2008
21 x 10 x 7 inches
Discarded, disbound and rebound books, red thread



Exposed Spines, No. 7, 8, 9, 10, 11*, 12, 13, 14, 15,
16*, 17, 21, 24, 25, 26, 27, 29, 30, 31
8 x 6 x 4 (varied) inches
Discarded book, fabric, thread





*She Pours Out Tears in
Her Efforts of Defense*

2012

7.5 x 5.5 x 1 inches

Discarded book, found photo, fabric,
thread, chemistry glass and sea salt

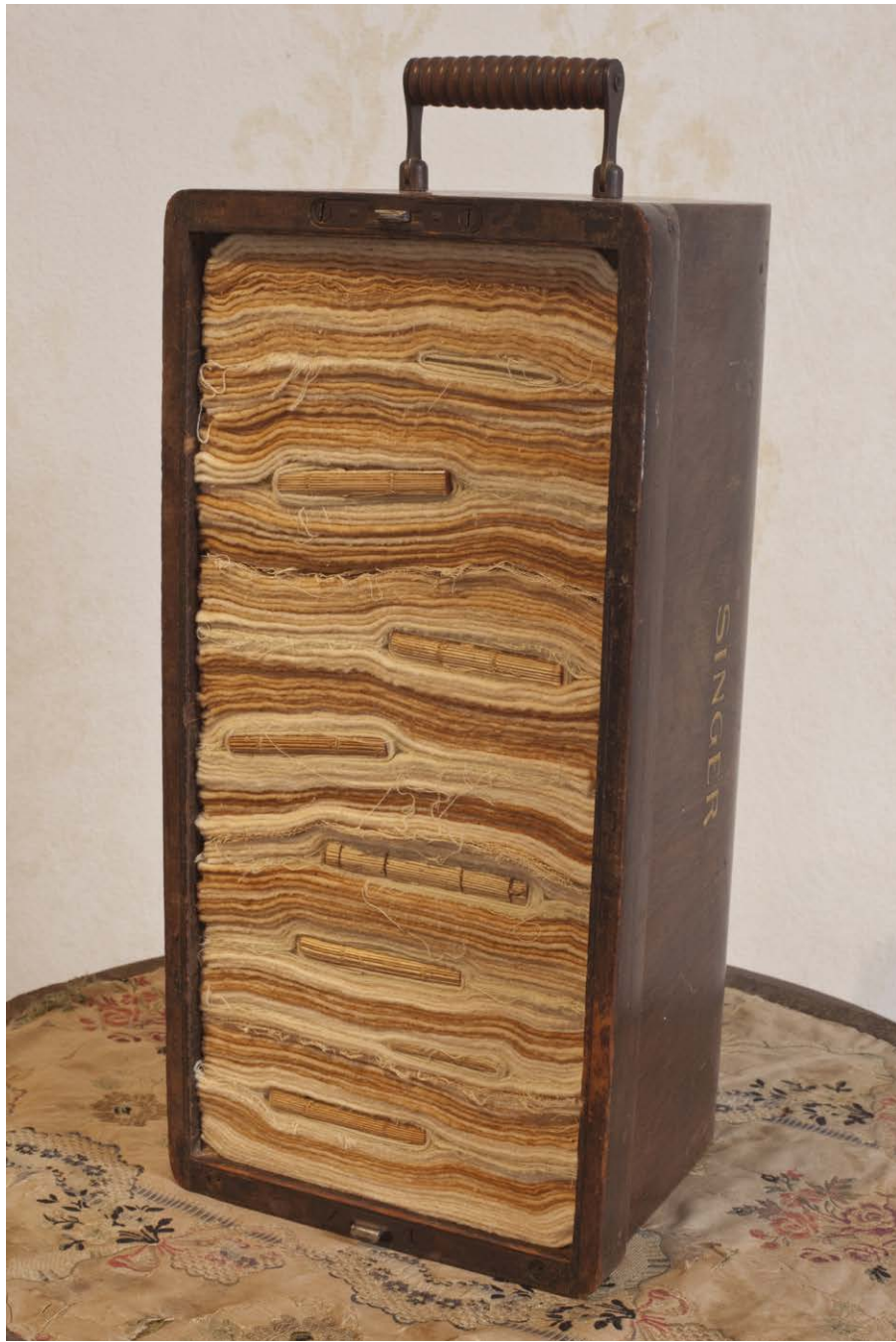


Sedimental #9

2010

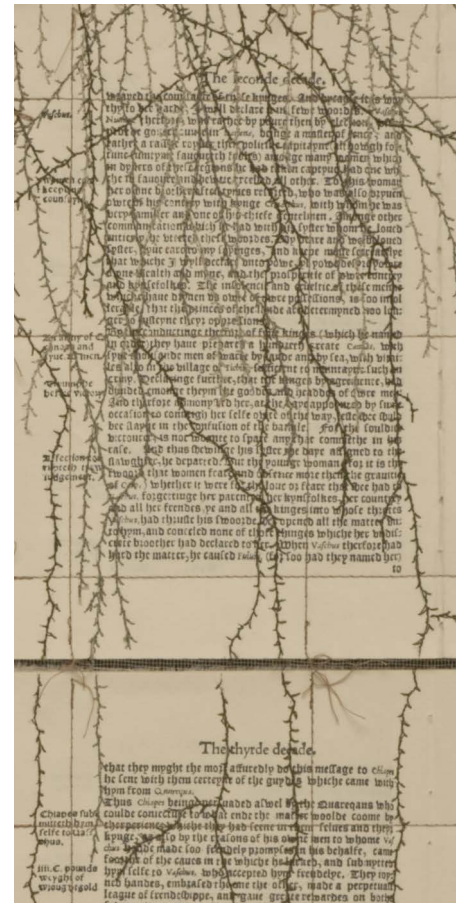
32 x 25 x 10 inches

Bookshelf, discarded books, fabric



Sedimental #4
2010
17 x 8 x 10 inches

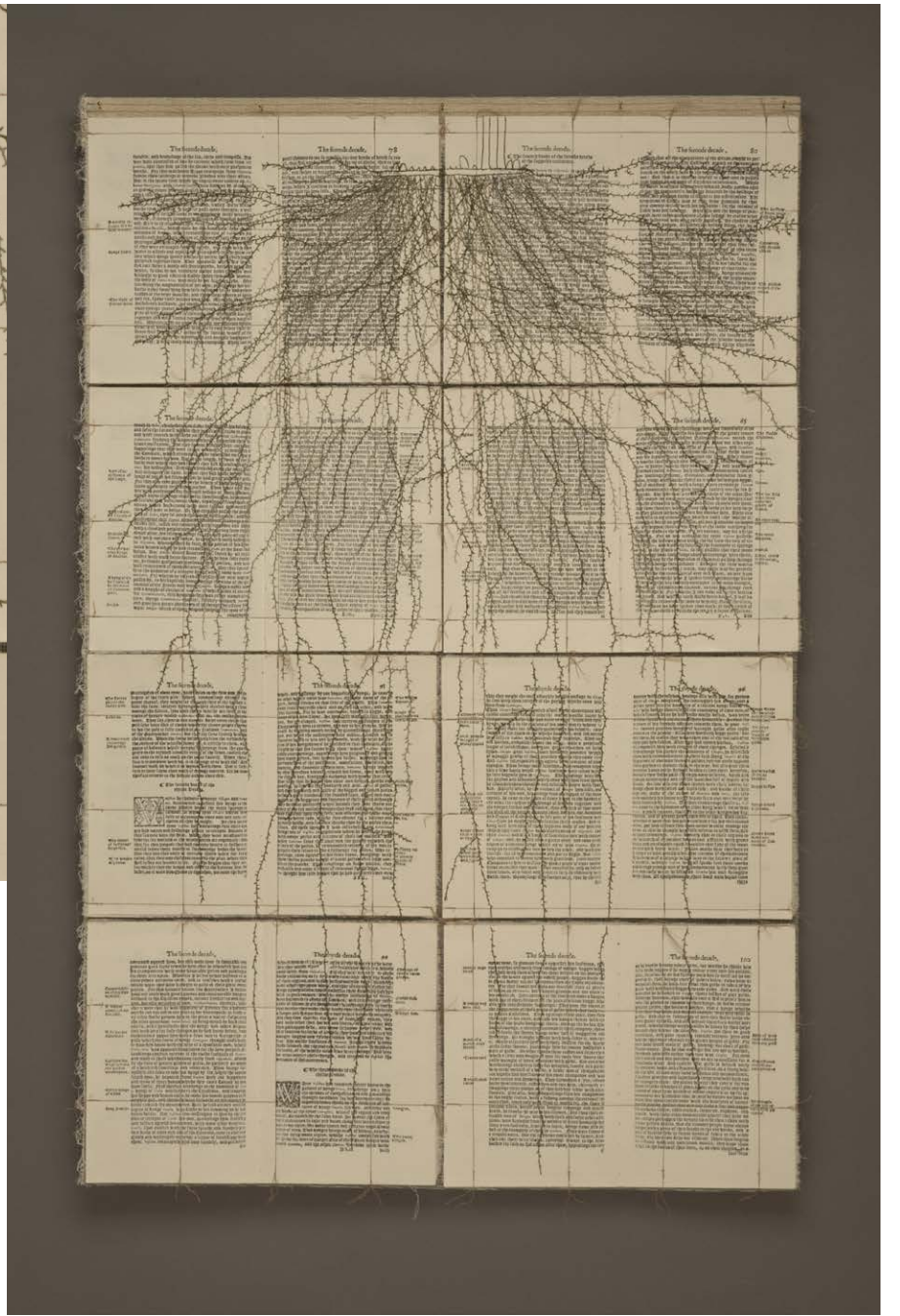
Wooden sewing machine cover,
discarded books, fabric

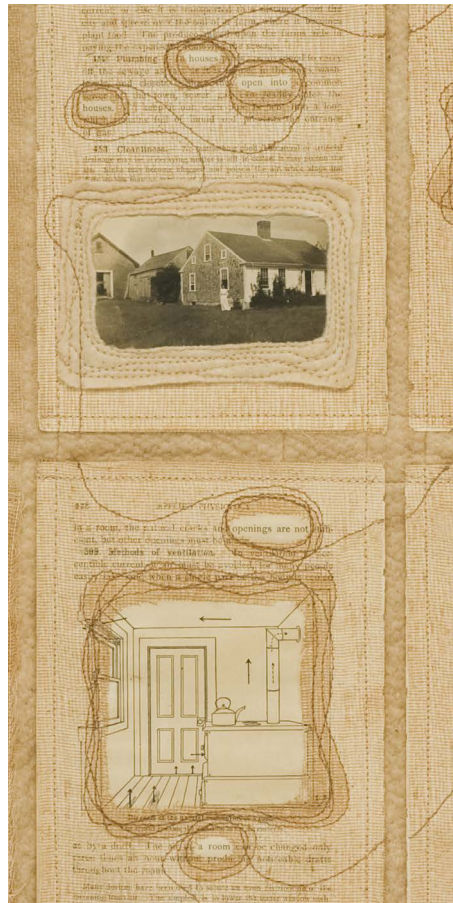


Asparagus (In the New World)
2010
22 x 30 inches

Discarded book pages, thread, muslin,
thread

From the collection of Jeanne Lewis





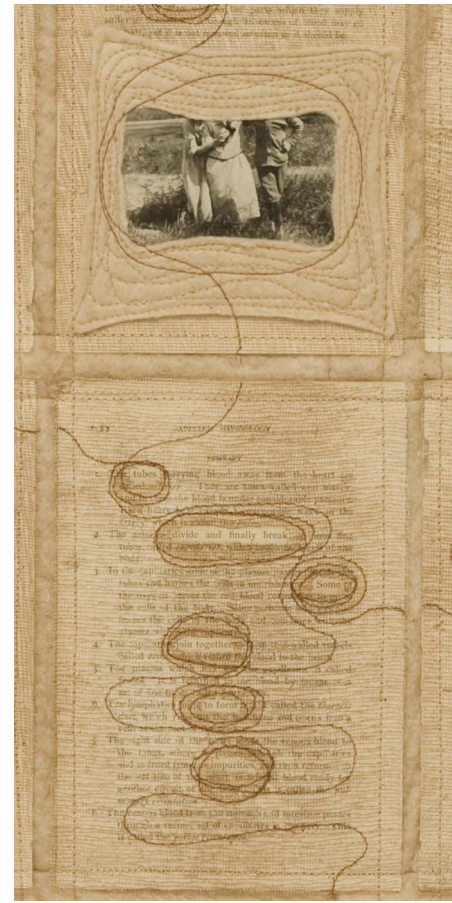
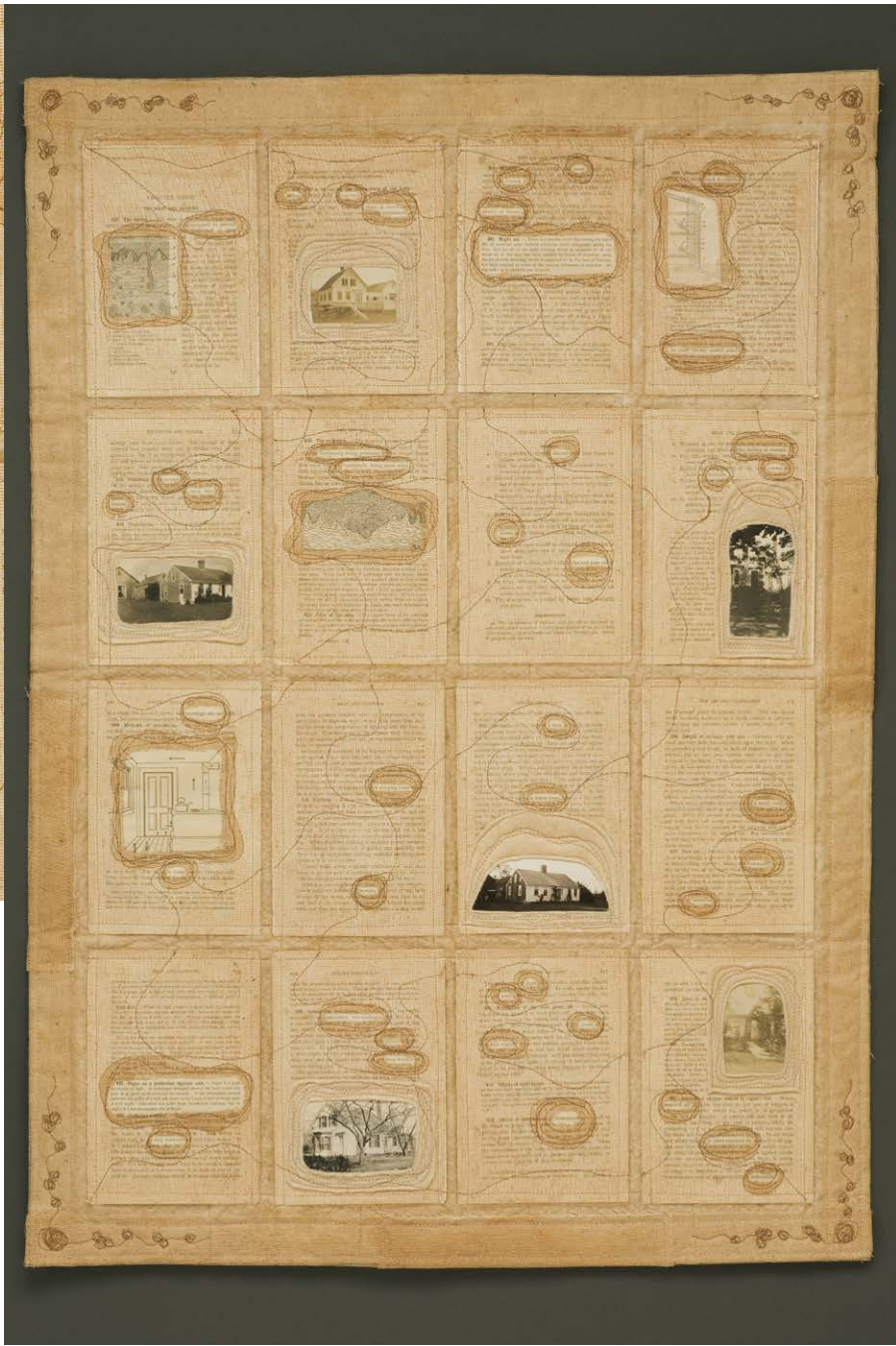
The Odd Volumes of Ruby B., No. 137

(House Dream)

2011

33 x 24 inches

Cotton batting, thread, mull, found photographs, thread, discarded book pages



The Odd Volumes of Ruby B., No. 117

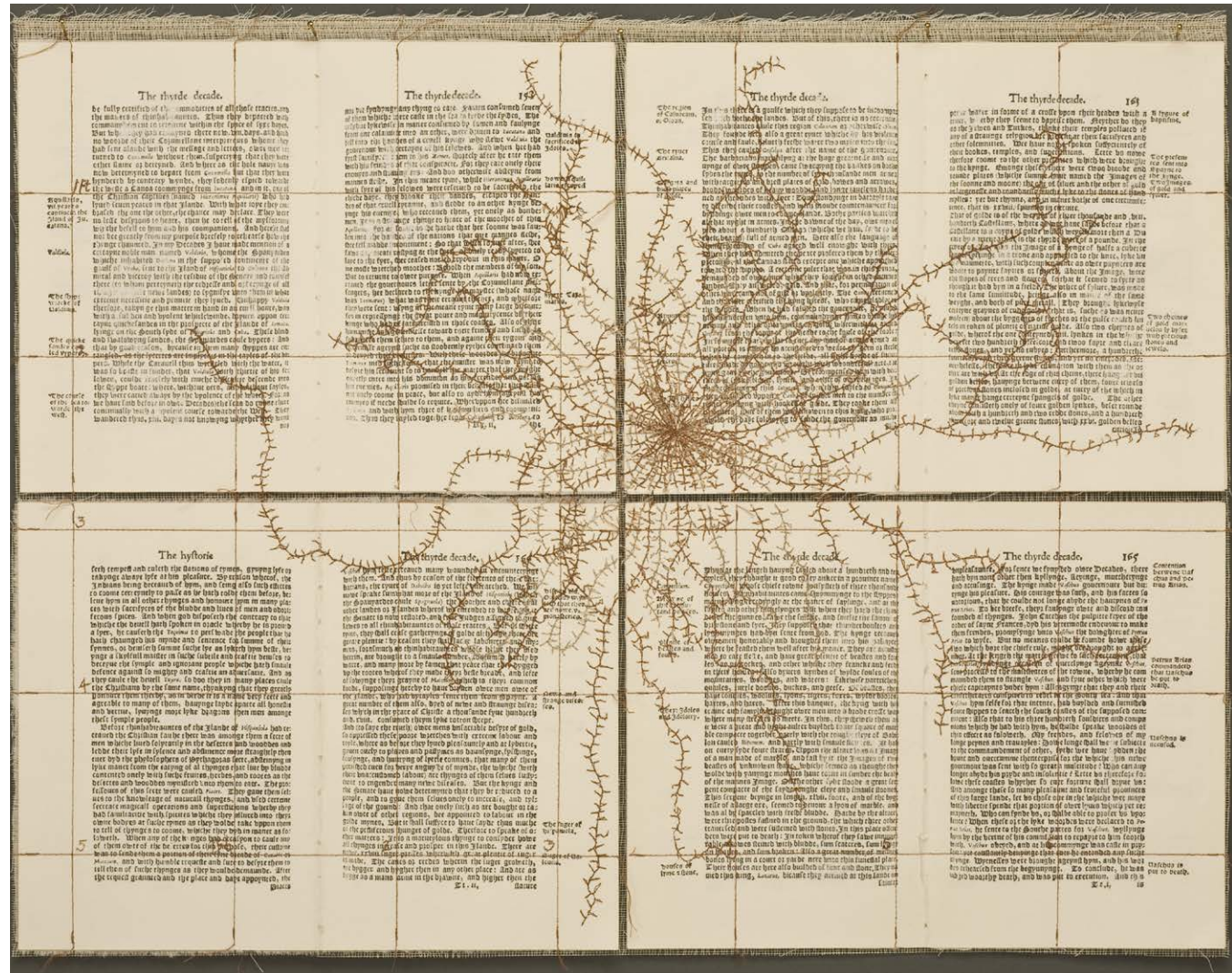
(Divisions of the Heart)

2011

33 x 24 inches

Cotton batting, thread, mull, found photographs, thread, discarded book pages





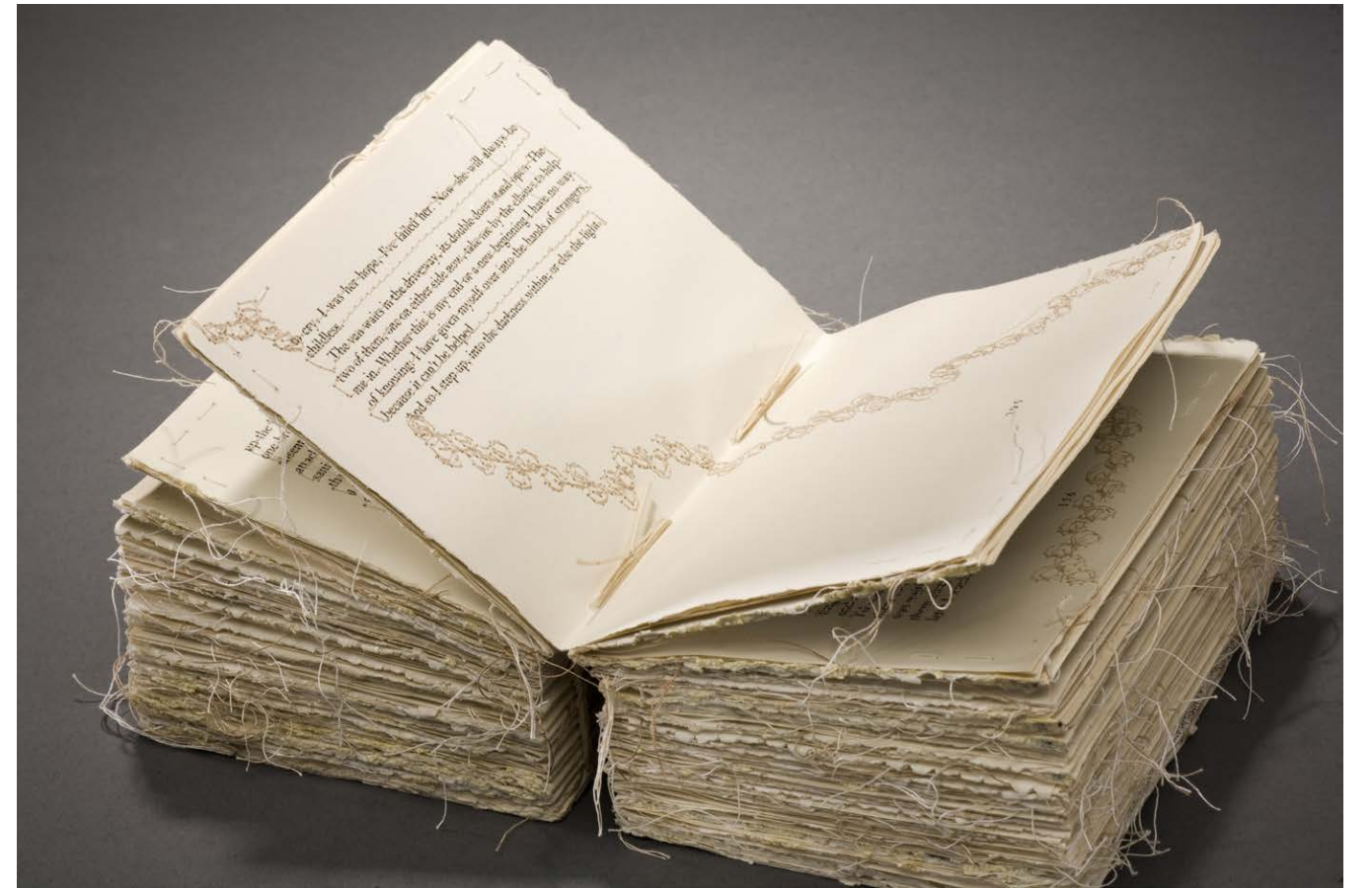
Wardwell's Kidney Wax Bean

(In the New World)

2008-2009

17 x 22 inches

Discarded book pages, thread, muslin, thread



Wrapped Words

2008

12 x 12 x 12 inches with stand

Re-imagined book: *Handmaid's Tale*, thread, cake stand, cheesecloth



THE UNCOMMON THREAD

Lisa Kokin

The Odd Volumes of Ruby B., Travelling Case containing No. 9, 11, 17, 33, 37, 39, 53, 59, 73, 79, 91

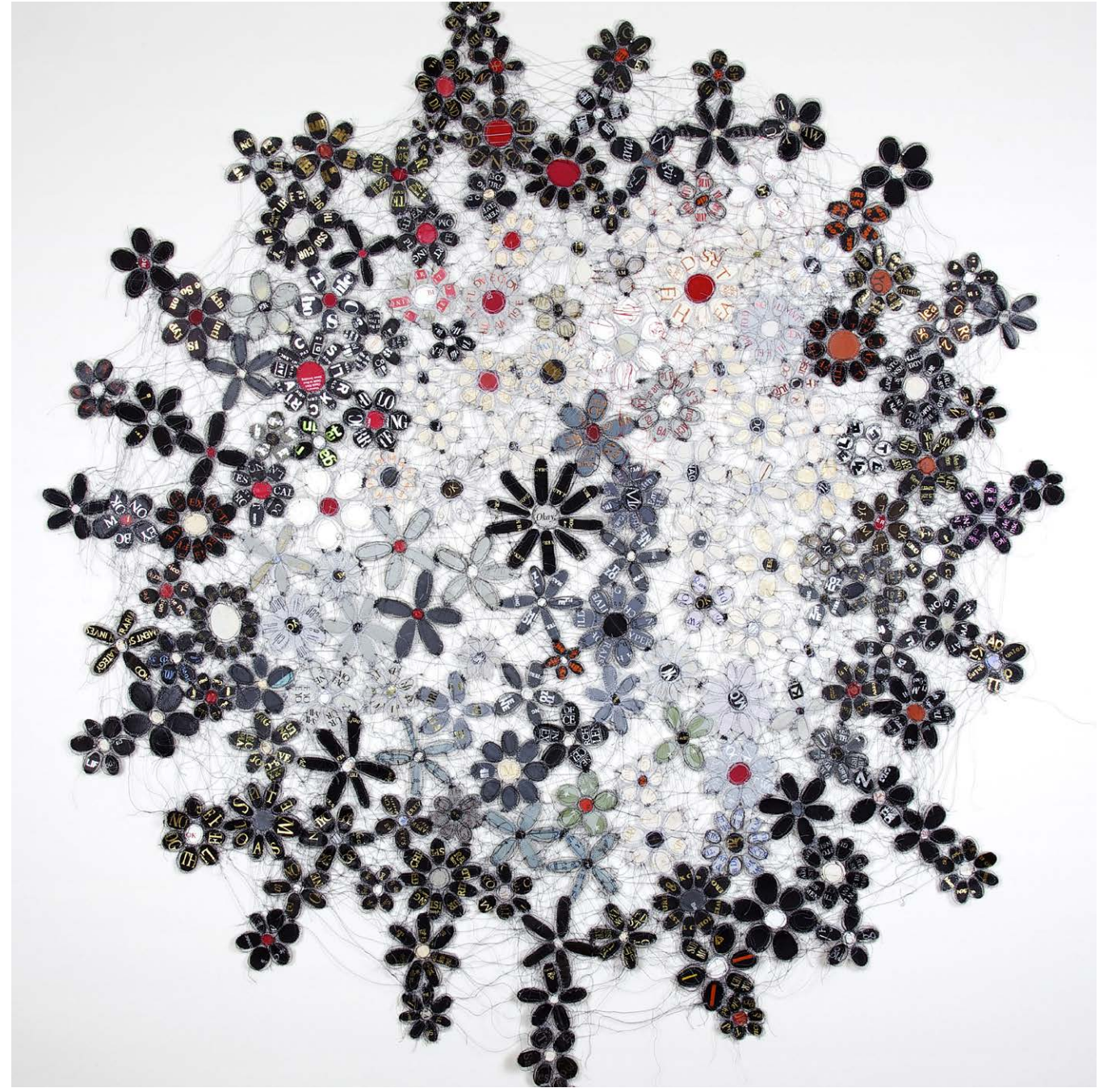
2009-2010

16 x 15 x 12 inches

Travelling dental case, fabric, discarded book pages, fabric, thread, found photographs, chemistry glass



Panacea Pizpireta
2013
56.5 x 48.5 inches
Self-help book spines, mull, thread

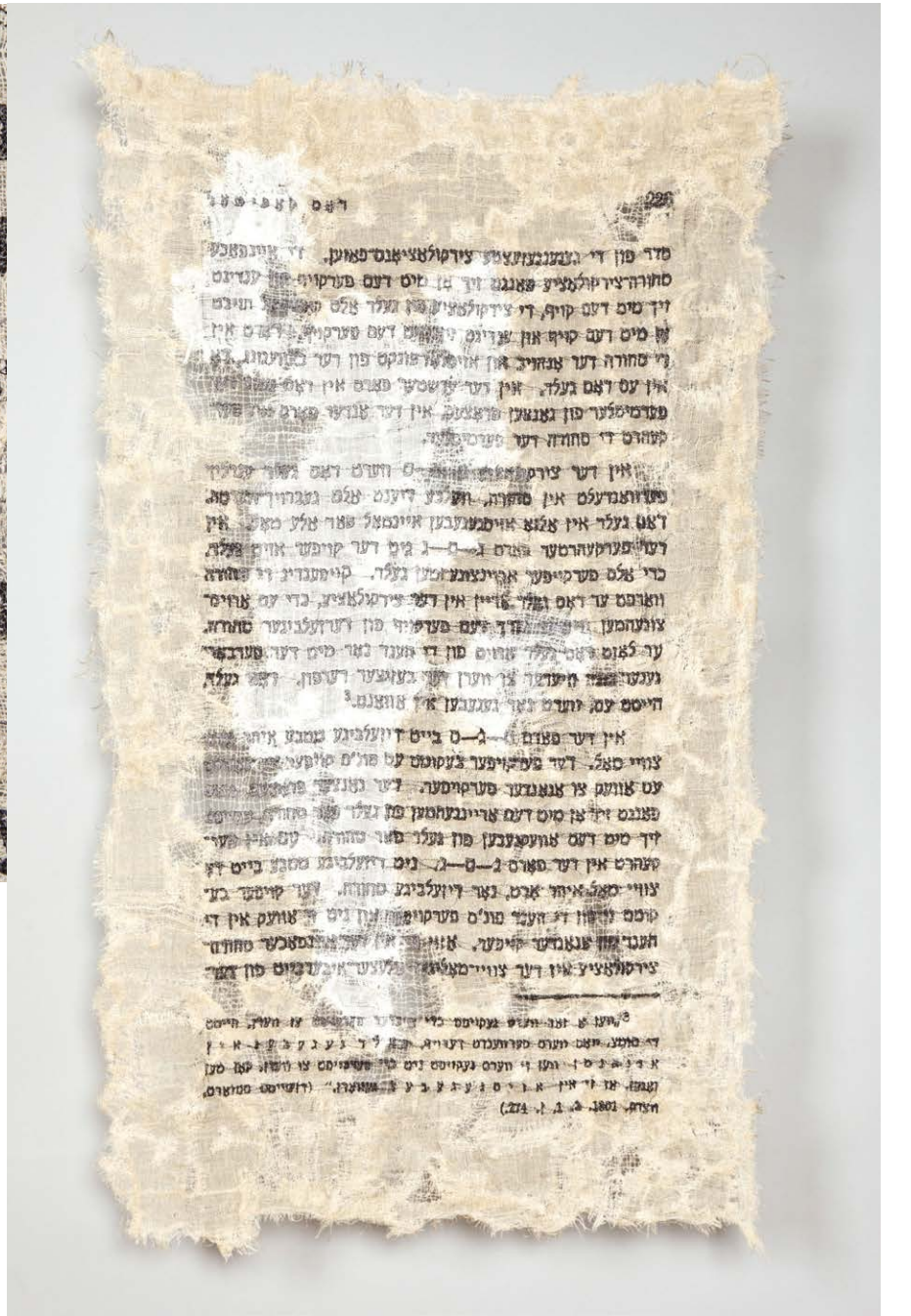




Das Kapital, Page 98
2013
37.5 x 21 inches
Linen, thread



Das Kapital, Page 226
2013
37.5 x 21 inches
Linen, thread

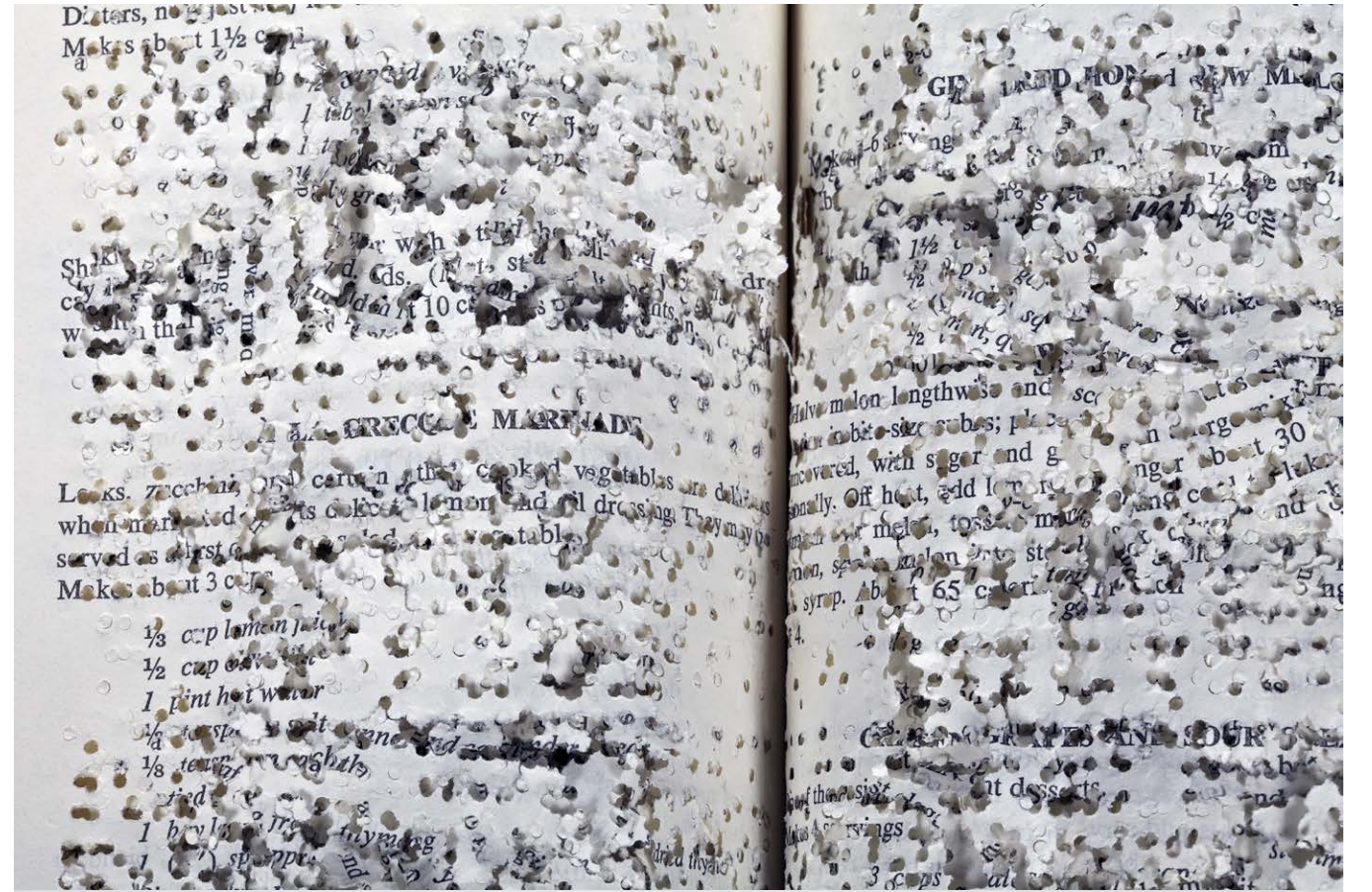




Das Kapital, Page 368
2013
37.5 x 21
Linen, thread



OPPOSITE
Irritable Vowel Syndrome
2010
8.5 x 20 x 10.5 inches
Altered book





Who Will Get Your Money?
 2009
 17 x 6 x 3.25 inches
 Book fragments, wire, wood
 From the collection of Lia Roozendaal



How To Stop Worrying and Start Living
 2010
 Size variable
 Self-help book spines, cotton batting,
 thread, waxed linen





Room for Improvement
2010
Size variable
Pulped self-help books



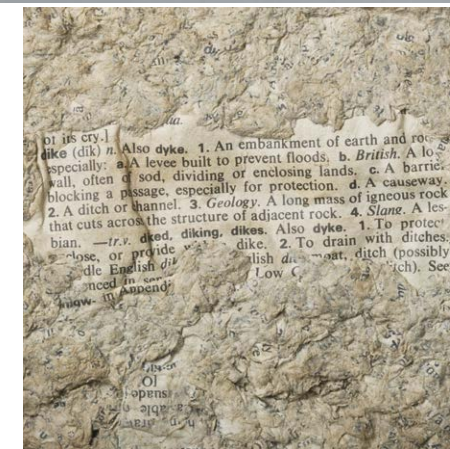
Recapitulation
2008
10 x 72 x 10.25 inches
Pulped books, wooden shelf

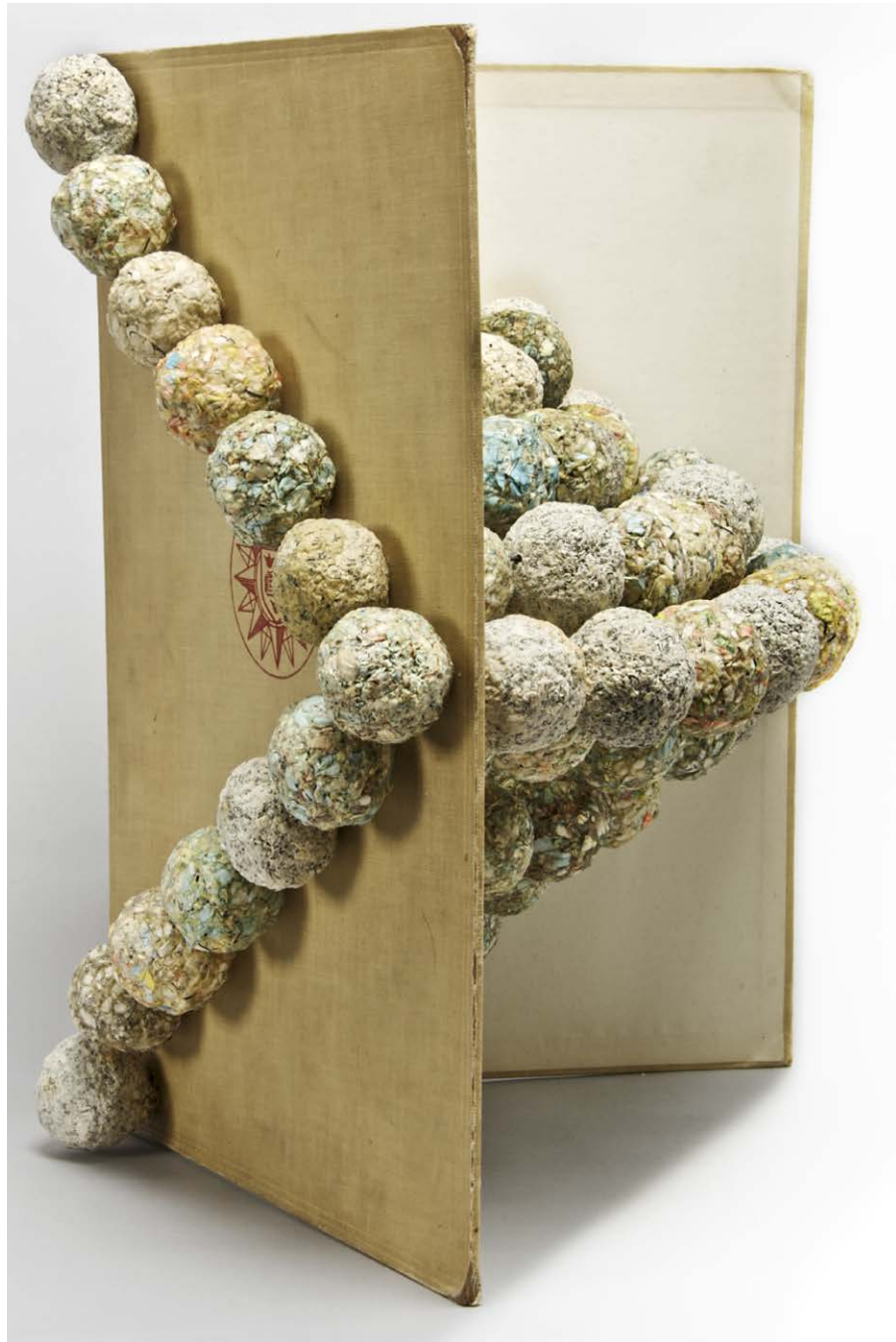


Me See How You Do It
2009
6 x 22.5 x 2.5 inches
Book fragments, waxed linen, spools, metal hinges



Abridged
2008
7.5 x 9.5 x 7.5 inches
Pulped dictionary, PVA glue, thread, snaps, mull





Four Balls Short
2008
15.25 x 15 x 10 inches
Shredded atlas, PVA glue, wire

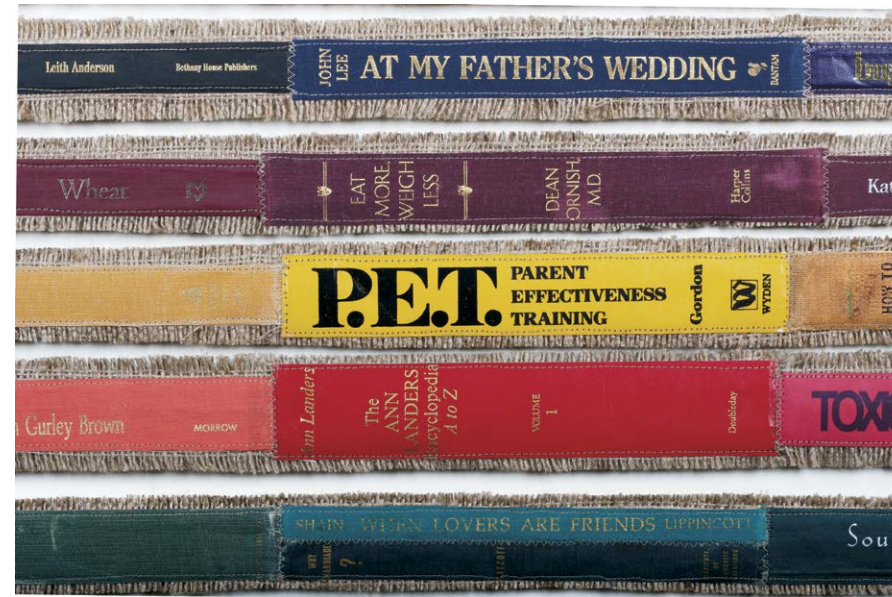




Fauxliage: Obligation to Endure
2011
70 x 24 x 8 inches
Thread, book pages, wire
From the collection of Nion McEvoy



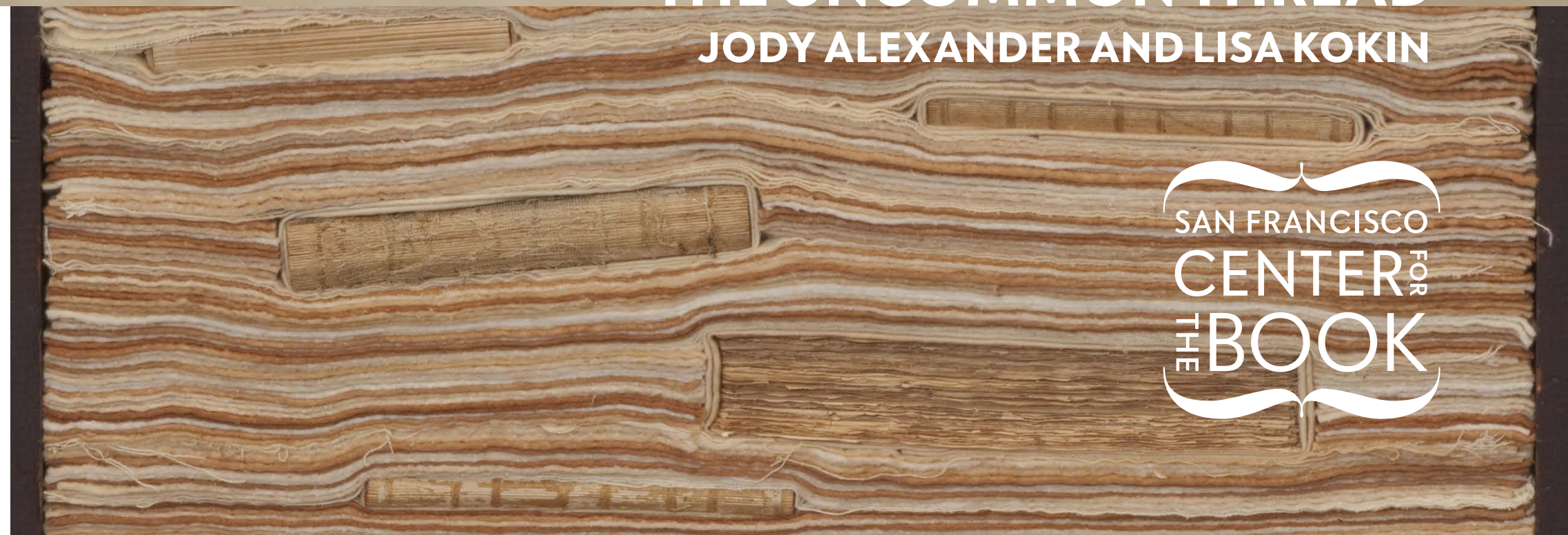
Treatment
2008
86 x 30 x .25 inches
Self-help book spines (double-sided), burlap,
thread, balsa wood, hemp, PVA glue
From the collection of Allan Basbaum and
Marcia Fortnoff







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JODY ALEXANDER AND LISA KOKIN



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\$38.00
ISBN 978-1-929646-03-6
5 3800 >
9 781929 646036