

University for the Creative Arts
Research Project Portfolios

Books as Bodies

By Amanda Couch



Project Details

Name of Researcher:	Amanda Couch
Name of Output:	Books as Bodies
Output Type:	T – Other, multi-component output comprising artist’s books, exhibitions, performance-lectures and a journal article
Year and mode of dissemination:	<p>ARTIST’S BOOKS</p> <p>2016: <i>Entrail Troyen</i></p> <p>2016: <i>Huwawa in the Everyday: An Almanac</i></p> <p>EXHIBITIONS</p> <p>21 April - 25 September 2016: <i>Prescriptions: artists’ books on wellbeing and medicine</i>, Beaney House of Art and Knowledge, Canterbury</p> <p>1 August – 17 November 2017: <i>Prescriptions: artists’ books</i>, Templeman Library, University of Kent, Canterbury</p> <p>PERFORMANCE LECTURES</p> <p>17 November 2016: Books as Bodies, Bodies as Books, Performance-lecture, Wellcome Library, London</p> <p>24 January 2019: Books as Bodies, Performance-lecture, Wellcome Library, London</p> <p>JOURNAL ARTICLE</p> <p>2019: ‘Reflections on Digestions and Other Corporealities in Artists’ Books’, in: Stella Bolaki, ed. <i>The Journal of Medical Humanities - Special Issue: Artists’ Books</i>. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10912-019-09592-8</p>

Project Details

Further details of artist's books (catalogue details):

Entrail Troyen (2016)

Double-sided inkjet print on variety of Japanese papers, variety of weights, with salami skin collage and threads, bound in 300gsm Waterford folio with wax seal. 178 × 18.5cm. Limited edition of 25.

Collections: Special Collections & Archives at the University of Kent; and Wellcome Library, London.

Huwawa in the Everyday: An Almanac (2016)

Six double-page folded leaves, laser printed on 120gsm Munken Lynx paper, sewn at tab, with 320gsm somerset satin collograph and embossed print cover, brass eyelet and mix-media cord. 20.9 × 11.1 (closed) / 39 × 28 cm (opened). Edition of 35.

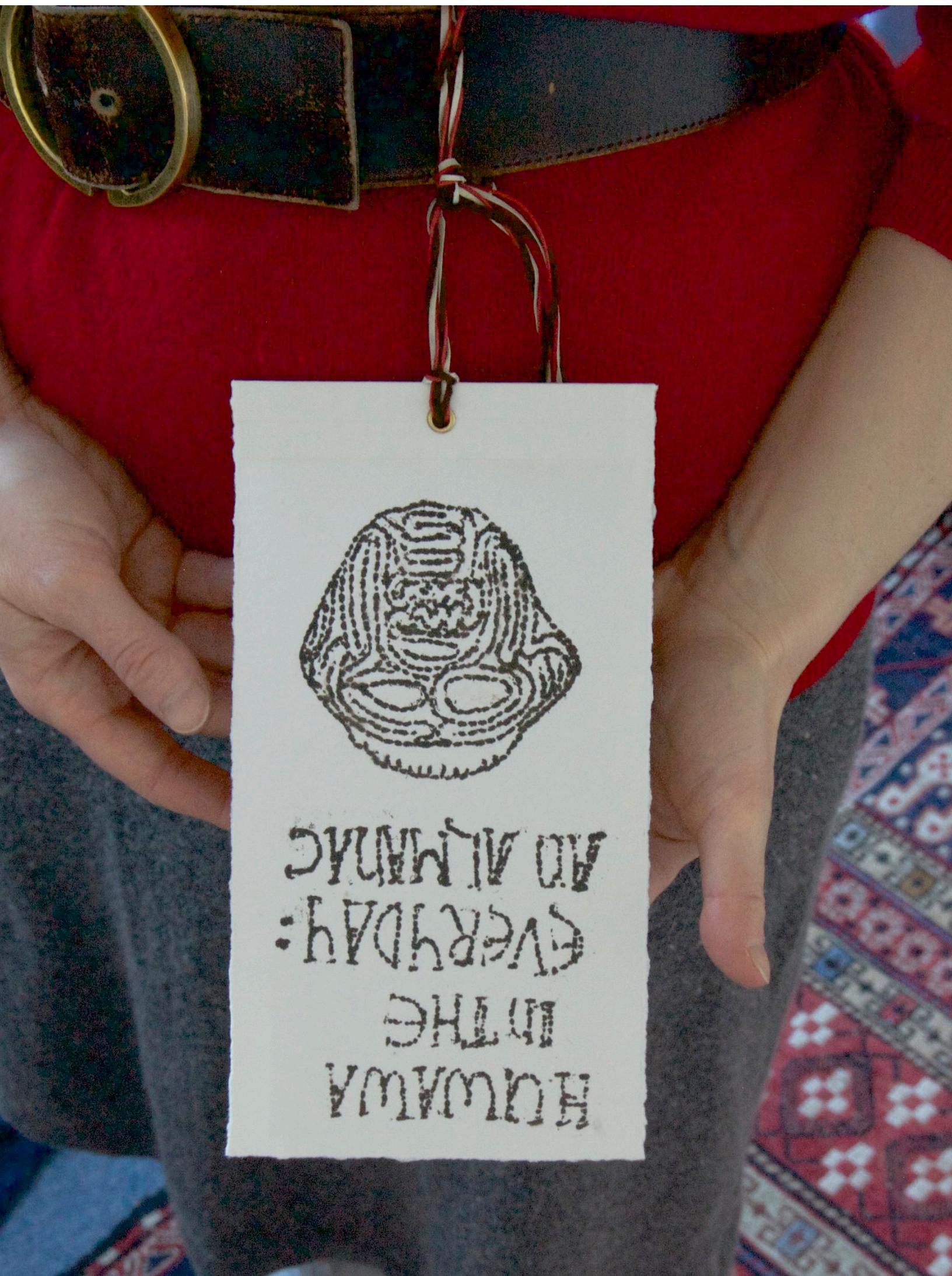
Collections: Special Collections & Archives at the University of Kent; and Wellcome Library, London.

Key Words:

Embodiment, artists' books, materiality, corporeality, performance, feminism, skin

UCARO link:

https://research.uca.ac.uk/view/projects/Books_as_Bodies.html



Huwawa In The Everyday: An Almanac (2016)

A photobook in the form of a medieval medical folding almanac. Folding almanacs were worn from the belt, containing astrological, medical and calendric information, and employed by physicians to prognosticate and diagnose.



Huwawa In The Everyday: An Almanac (2016)

This book contains twelve images, one for each month, of coiled materials encountered in Couch's art materials, research and everyday life that might resemble the demon Huwawa's face.

Huwawa In The Everyday: An Almanac (2016)
This book makes reference to the Mesopotamian divination model housed in the British Museum, which portrays Huwawa's face as coiled intestines.



Synopsis

Books as Bodies is a multi-component research output comprising two artist's books, two exhibitions, a number of lecture-performances and a journal article. The research explores embodied ways of knowing and becoming. It extends and enacts ideas emerging from research activities such as engagement with rare materials and historical artefacts, material experiments and making through printmaking, scribing, bookbinding, washing, sewing, performance, as well as theoretical and autobiographic writing.

The research enacts new materialist approaches of human and non-human intra-action and agency through the entanglements between the metaphorical bodies as books and books as bodies. Of the latter, the research considers books to be holders of experience and knowledge, exploring the representation of bodies as books as well as books composed of actual bodily material, for example, skin, parchment, leather, hair, blood, and intestines. This is enacted through the creation and exhibition of Couch's artist's books and extended upon

within the article in *The Journal of the Medical Humanities*.

The lecture-performances were articulated as extensions of the form of the artists' book, weaving theory, storytelling and the performing of gestures and artefacts to enact research which champions the re-emergence of the body as a site for discussions of knowledge and knowing. Through engagement with materials from the Wellcome collection, sensual and personal identity and the nature of the artistic process itself were examined, expanding upon the context of the artist's book. Within this research the body asserts its voice through form, materiality, action, intention, and tactility, bidding the bodies of audience-participants to respond to their own experience to enact situated ways of knowing and becoming.

This portfolio includes evidence of the research aims, context and processes which led to new insights. It also includes images of Couch's performance-lectures and artist's books. The books themselves and the article are appended.

Context

Books as Bodies is a multi-component research project which explores and enacts embodied ways of knowing and becoming. The lecture-performances at the Wellcome library in 2016 and 2019 wove theory, storytelling and the performing of gestures and artefacts together in order to champion the re-emergence of the body as a site for discussion of knowledge and knowing. In this it draws from and builds on the rich field of scholarship around embodiment, defined by phenomenologists as a term which ‘has a double sense: it encompasses both the body as a lived, experiential structure, and the body as the context or milieu of cognitive mechanism’ (Varela *et al*, 1991:xvi).

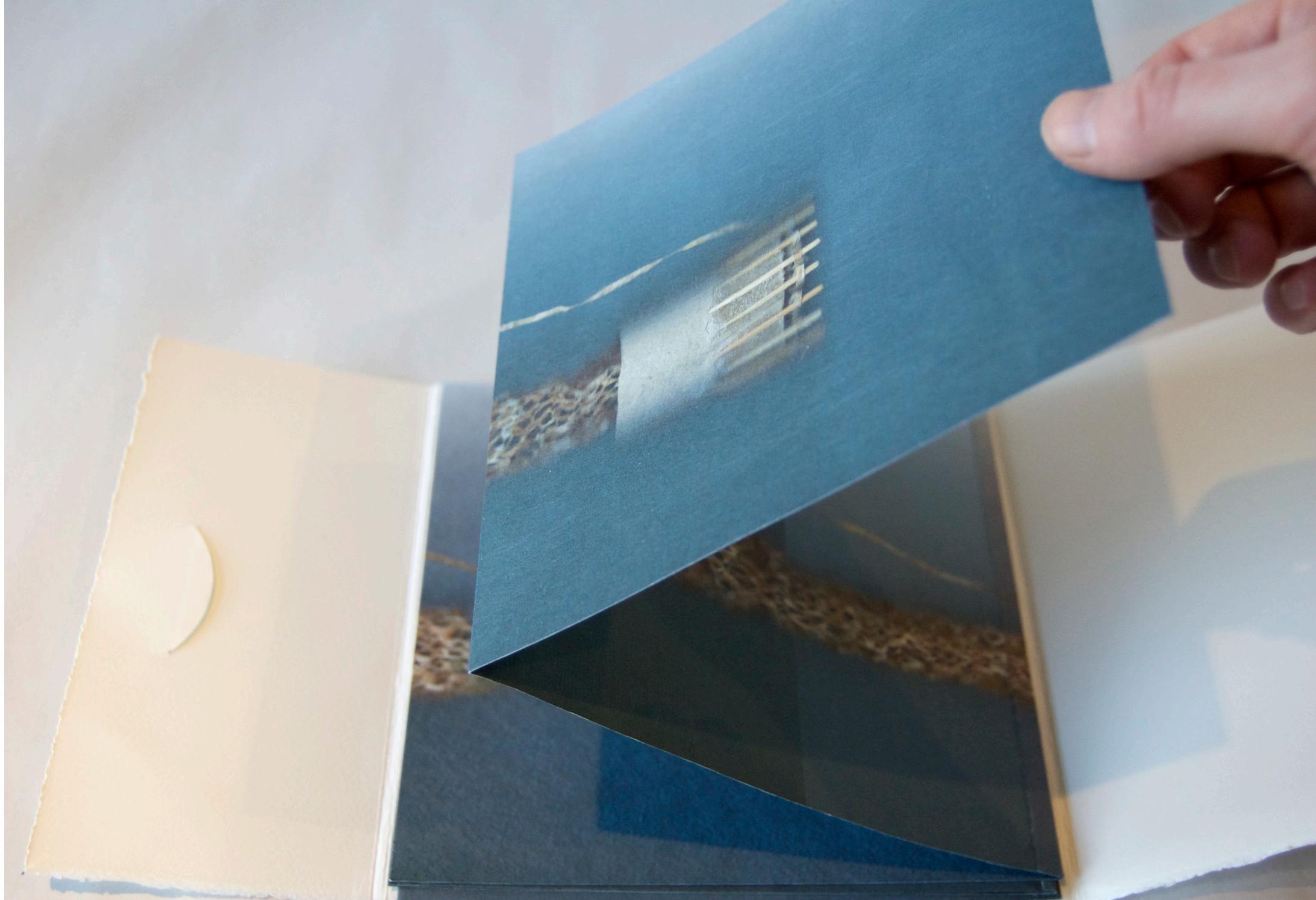
The research also draws upon feminist theorists, such as Rosi Braidotti, who writes that ‘the body, or the embodiment, of the subject is to be understood as neither a biological nor a sociological category but rather as a point of overlapping between the physical, the symbolic, and the sociological’ (1994:4), and Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey who suggest that taking bodies ‘seriously as both the subject and object of thinking’ (2001:203) is a feminist project.

Similarly important is Karen Barad’s (2007) notion of ‘intra-action’ which reflects on the ways in which non-humans (in this case, artefacts in the rare materials collection at the Wellcome Library, the skins, parchment, leather, paper, binding, inks, as well as materials and objects or props which Couch makes and performs with), are active participants in the making of the artwork. As expanded upon by Ashleigh Bowmott, with whom Couch maintained a dialogue throughout the project, intra-action ‘replaces interaction to describe the processes through which constituent elements of the world come into being through their relations with one another’ (2018:200-1).

Books as Bodies explores these theoretical foundations in different ways. The artist’s books are a pinnacle of intra-action in being created from and interacted with through the body. Through the performance-lecture identity and the nature of the artistic process itself are examined, expanding upon the context of the book by engaging form, materiality, bodily history, and the idea of the book as a vessel that contains and enacts knowledge, as well as the orality of reading through participation, sound, and the ingestion and digestion of information. The piece ‘blur[s] the boundaries of production and reception opening up possibilities to experience knowledge as a reflexive formation that is as much aesthetic as social — in other words, as an open feedback system’ (Frank, 2013:6). Finally, Couch’s journal article explored her artist’s books and these contexts in more detail.

REFERENCES

- Ahmed, S., and Stacey, J. (2001) ‘Introduction Dermographies’ In: Ahmed, S. and Stacey, J. (eds) *Thinking Through the Skin*. Abingdon: Routledge. pp.1-18.
- Barad, K. (2007) *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press.
- Bowmott, A. (2018) ‘Mixed Fibres: Human and Non-Human Collaboration’ In: *JAWS: Journal of Arts Writing by Students*, 4 (2), pp.191-203. At: https://doi.org/10.1386/jaws.4.2.191_1 (Accessed 26/03/20).
- Braidotti, R. (1994) *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Frank, R. (2013) ‘When Form Starts Talking: On Lecture-Performances’ In: *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry*, 33 (Summer): pp.4-15. At: <https://doi.org/10.1086/672015> (Accessed 26/03/20).
- Varela, F. J., Thompson, E., and Rosch, E. (1991) *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.



Entrail Troyen (2016)

A leporello depicting the life-size scan, 152cm, of a sculpture of the same name: a tube of French knitting made from salami skins. As various sections of the original sculpture are stitched from material collected from the casings of charcuterie (saucisson, chorizo, bresaola) with their diverse colours, transparencies, weights and strengths, so the pages of the book are printed on different types of Japanese papers (Kozo, Mitsumata, Inbe, Okawara).



Entrail Troyen (2016)
At the bottom of the book, image returns to material with collaged salami skin continuing the line, threaded through the folio cover, and held with a red wax seal depicting an anus.



Entrail Troyen (2014)

Salami rind and sausage casings, toilet roll, cocktail sticks, glue, 150 × 4 × 4 cm

Articulated loop by loop from a “thread” pieced together from a collection of salami skins and sausage casings: A script. Text and textile. A continual line of enquiry, knitting together a narrative embodied in the materiality of the “thread” fashioned from fragments of fiber that was once entrails, recalling the etymological link between intestines, text and textiles.

Research Questions and Aims

Research questions:

How might entanglements between the metaphorical bodies as books, and the representations of bodies as books be represented, enacted, and communicated to illicit a more embodied experience in the audience/holder/participant?

How might the form of the artist book and the performance-lecture traverse and blur the boundaries of object and reception to enact situated ways of knowing and becoming?

Research aims:

To practice, theorise and enact the feminist project of taking bodies 'seriously as both the subject and object of thinking' (Ahmed and Stacey, 2001:203).

To enact new materialist approaches of human and non-human intra-action and agency through the entanglements between the metaphorical bodies as books, books as kinds of bodies in themselves, holders of experience and knowledge and the representations of bodies as books, and books composed of actual bodily material.

Research Methods and Process

Where Couch's journal article reflects on the research methods which led to the creation of her artist's books, this portfolio provides the opportunity to consider the research processes of the performance-lecture.

In response to the invitation from the Wellcome to speak about her practice around artist's books and bodies, Couch chose rather to develop a performance in order to enact the ideas materially, as well as through the reading of a script: a narrative that weaves the theoretical, the personal, and reflections on process, through a kind of storytelling. For the first iteration, a series of chapters were developed which encompassed: birthing girdles; reading as rumination; livers as tablets; flap anatomy and folds as metaphors of digestion; and palimpsests and skin. In the second, a new chapter was created, *Skin, Tissue and The Apron* which replaced the chapter on the liver in the previous version.

Wishing to anchor the talk in and around artefacts held in the Wellcome library as well as the themes of her own research interest, artworks, and artefacts, Couch explored the library's rare materials as well as wider research in the library catalogue. For example, she focused first on materials and references found in the catalogue of the 'boundary-object' of skin (Ahmed and Stacey, 2001:2), the site of touch and performance between book and beholder, both the human (fingers, palms, arms, breasts, legs, wherever a tome is placed and handled) and the non-human (leather and parchment of books), which enact a corporeal connectivity. The skin in books are representations of bodies, containing bodies of knowledge, and the material of actual bodies. In the Wellcome

library, Couch discovered that some of the oldest parchment books were examples of preventive and curative medicine in the form of parchment amulet rolls for birthing, which she was able to view but not touch, and of course, unable to perform with during the performance-lecture. Like the practice of artist Roberto Cuoghi, who copies, imitates and replicates ancient cultural practices and artefacts, in order to reinvent and reinterpret them Couch decided to make her own versions of the birth rolls. She took numerous notes, measurements, photographs and written reflections with which to inform the making.

So often in museum collections, history and preservation are held in such high regard that their objects are inevitably separated from us. The conservation of their form is at the expense of their function and as a result it can sometimes seem as if history is perceived as much more of a thing, to be conserved and protected, fixed or to attempt to fix in the past, rather than a process, or a conversation, created in dialogue. By re-making, re-inventing and re-interpreting artefacts with which to play, informed by their historical counterparts, Couch enlivens history as an active process, to enable more imaginative embodied and empathetical experiences of artefacts and histories. The process of making, 'intra-acting' through the processing of matter and reflecting on the action of, for example, the washing of the parchment last will and testament of William Shrubsole which was used for Couch's own version of a birthing scroll, and the act of scribing the lives of Saints Margaret, Quiricus and Julietta, forms parts of the narrative of how and why the work is made and ideas communicated to the audience-participants.



Books as Bodies (2019)

24 January 2019, Wellcome Library

Photography: Steve Pocock, Wellcome Collection

The image shows the chapter on flap anatomy and folds as metaphors of digestion through the unfolding of the artist's book, Entrail Troyen (2016).



Books as Bodies (2019)

24 January 2019, Wellcome Library

Photography: Steve Pocock, Wellcome Collection

The palimpsest parchment with stiches of hair being shown and passed around. This performance prop was the outcome of the durational performance piece, Acts of Evocation: Re-Writing Skin and Hair 2017 in Housework/Artwork, curated by Sarah Gillham, Mindy Lee, and Catherine Morland for Artlicks.



Books as Bodies (2019), 24 January 2019, Wellcome Library

Photography: Steve Pocock, Wellcome Collection

For the chapter 'Reading as Ruminating' each participant was given a small handmade booklet containing edible paper printed with the phrase 'lubricious labial lips mouthing medieval murmurs'. The audience-participants spoke the words out loud together, repeating them five times, before tearing out a page and consuming the words.

Research Contribution

Insights and contribution:

The project extends ideas emerging from research activities and relationships around two fields, the artist book and the Medical Humanities.

The *Books as Bodies* lecture-performances could be articulated as extensions of the form of the artist book. Artists' books, and this wider project, marry form with subject, to enable the body to speak through the performative, haptic, situated engagement with the body. The body asserts its voice through form, materiality, action, intention, and tactility, bidding the bodies of audience-participants to respond to their experience to enact situated ways of knowing and becoming: enabling knowing as a process to be embodied, enacted and experienced rather than knowledge as a thing to be gained or contained.

Research Dissemination and Recognition

Further Dissemination Details:

EXHIBITION

21 April - 25 September 2016: *The Prescriptions: artists' books on wellbeing and medicine* exhibition at Beaney House of Art and Knowledge, Canterbury, had 71,898 visitors and was accompanied by a publication: <https://research.kent.ac.uk/artistsbooks/catalogue-preview/>

JOURNAL ARTICLE

The special issue, *Artists' Books and Medical Humanities* was developed from the research project, 'Artists' Books and Medical Humanities', led by the School of English at the University of Kent (UK) and the Maine Women Writers Collection at the University of New England (US). Funded by the Wellcome Trust, the project took place in Canterbury, UK in 2016. It included the exhibition, *Prescriptions: Artists' Books on Wellbeing and Medicine* (Beaney Art Museum, 21 April - 25 September 2016) curated by Dr Stella Bolaki, with book artist and researcher Egidija Čiricaitė; an academic symposium; and a series of book making workshops for health professionals, people with illness, and the wider public.

Follow-on Activities:

CONFERENCES

21 April 2016: 'Anatomies of a Book' - Paper Presentation at 'Artists' Books and the Medical Humanities - An Interdisciplinary Symposium', co-organised by the University of Kent's School of English and the University of New England's Maine Women Writers Collection, at Cathedral Lodge, Canterbury.

20 April 2018: 'Artists' Books Now: Here and Now', The British Library, London, event curated by Richard Price, Jerry Jenkins, Sophie Loss, & Egidija Čiricaitė, 20 April 2018 - Presentation and accompanying publication, edited by Egidija Čiricaitė.

Research Dissemination and Recognition

Follow-on-activities:

PRESENTATION OF ARTIST'S BOOKS

28 - 29 October 2016: Counter 2016, Plymouth Art Book (with Kaleid editions)

4 - 5 November 2016: Small Publishers Fair, Conway Hall, London (with bookRoom)

1 - 2 April 2017: BABE, Bristol's biannual artists book event, the Arnolfini, Bristol (with bookRoom)

10 - 11 November 2017: Small Publishers Fair, Conway Hall, London (with bookRoom)

15 - 16 November 2019: Small Publishers Fair, Conway Hall, London (with bookRoom)

PARTICIPATORY WORKSHOP

21 October 2017: 'What seems to be the matter? A hands-on exploration of health, body and illness through artists' books'. Shared delivery with the University of Kent's Artists' Books and Medical Humanities co-hosted at the Wellcome Collection, London.

ARTIST'S BOOK

2019: *Digesting Ritual*, Amanda Couch and Adam Alston, designed by Kristen Fraser. Inkjet printed on Hahnemuhle Photo Book and Album 220gsm and Munken Lynx 120gsm, digitally printed cotton-linen, laser printed tracing paper and shortbread biscuit in bag. Published by bookRoom Press, Farnham. Produced and bound by Amanda Couch and Kristen Fraser. Collections: Wellcome Library, London; and the Arts University Bournemouth library.

Expanding from the themes of 'Books as Bodies', *Digesting Ritual* thematically brings together soil and landscape, pies as bellies, biscuit tablets, intestines, and the concertina format which emulates the fold and unfolding of the intestines.

Research Dissemination and Recognition

Follow-on-activities:

EXHIBITION

The second Wellcome Library event was attended by the curator and rare books librarian, Katie Birkwood at Royal College of Physicians (RCP), London, who became interested in the work and research, and invited Couch to be a part of the exhibition in 'Under the Skin: Anatomy, Art and Identity' from 10 October 2019 - 3 April 2020, where Couch exhibited two of the monoprints from *The Liver Models 2016*. An estimated audience of 568 attended in October - November 2019 and January - February 2020.

PANEL

As part of the wider events around the exhibition, Couch was invited to be part of the panel discussion, 'Whose body is it anyway' at RCP on 20 November 2019, for which there were 134 event bookings. The event was also livestreamed on Youtube: <https://m.youtube.com/watch?feature=youtube&v=ZGYgDjSSjxE>

PERFORMANCE-LECTURE

As part of the public programming event for the Museum Late at the RCP, Couch performed a new iteration of *Books as Bodies, Bodies as Books* on 5 March 2020, reworking the chapter 'Livers as Tablets' and creating a brand new chapter, 'The Matrix, the Womb and the Printing Plate' for 30 attendees.

COLLECTIONS

Huwawa in the Everyday: An Almanac (2016) and *Entrail Troyen* (2016) are in libraries and collections with links to health, for example, Special Collections & Archives at the University of Kent and Wellcome Library, London. Here, books can be experienced in teaching and research contexts to examine the body, health, illness and wellbeing.



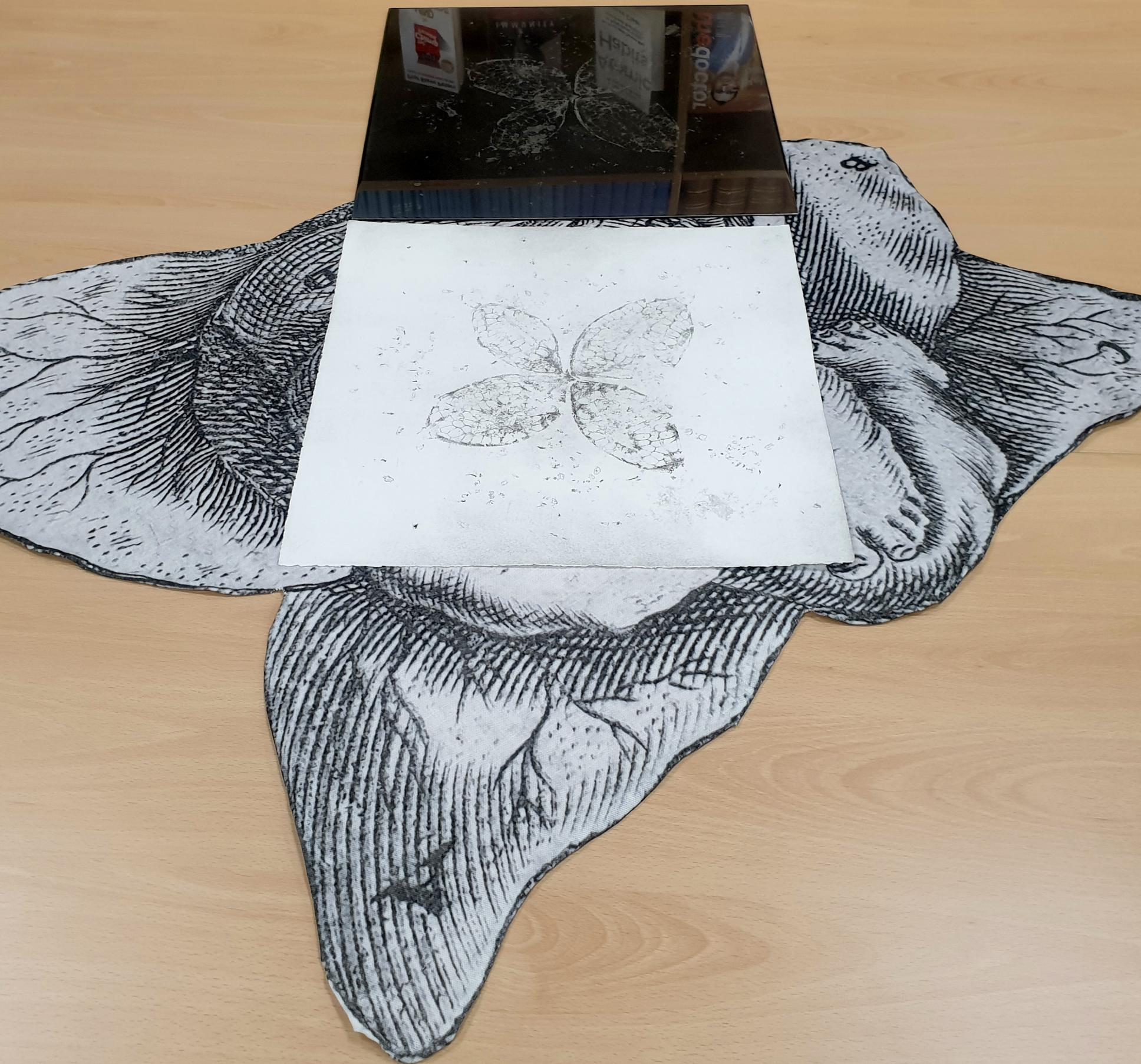
Digesting Ritual (2019)

Artist book publication with Adam Alston, designed by Kristen Fraser. Published by bookRoom Press, Farnham, 2019. Produced and bound by Amanda Couch and Kristen Fraser.

Inkjet printed on Hahnemuhle Photo Book and Album 220gsm concertina, containing two three-hole stitched bound pamphlets, inkjet printed on Munken Lynx 120gsm, a digitally printed cotton-linen insert, back page and shortbread biscuit in a bag, all contained within a belly band.



*Books as Bodies, Bodies as Books
(2020)
5 March 2020,
Royal College of Physician
Photography: Charlotte Couch
Books as Bodies, Bodies as Books
explored the corporeality of books
and the entanglement between
the metaphorical, books as bodies
of knowledge and experience,
and the material, books and prints
constituted of actual bodily matter,
parchment, leather, blood and hair.*



Books as Bodies, Bodies as Books (2020)

Artefact made for the new chapter, The Matrix, The Womb and The Printing Plate informed by Anatomische Tafeln (1707) and Jane Sharp's The Midwives Book: or, the Whole Art of Midwifry Discovered (1671) and through the etymological connection of the term 'matrix', which refers to printmaking matrices and the womb matrix.



University for the Creative Arts
Research Portfolios

© Copyright All Authors

Graphic Design:

Studio Mothership

COVER IMAGES

Books as Bodies (2019)

24 January 2019, Wellcome Library

*Photography: Steve Pocock,
Wellcome Collection*

*The front cover image shows
the chapter on birthing girdles
where an excerpt of the life of St.
Margaret was read to facilitate
and support the 'safe' and 'painless'
passage of the performance-
lecture, before Couch wrapped the
parchment roll around her belly.*

