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Jen Bervin's Silk Poems

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*It is a function of poetry to locate those zones inside us
that would be free, and declare them so.*

—CD Wright

The relationship between written text, textile-making methodologies, and the performance of both has been a longstanding interest of artist and poet Jen Bervin, extending back more than two decades. Her project *The Dickinson Composites* uses thread to transcribe Emily Dickinson's extensive, complex, variant manuscript marks onto quilts. Embroidered in red thread on cotton batting, the marks, made visible and independent of the page, become physical traces of an alternate text, extending the relationship between the movement of the hand and the mind. In two other related works, *Tactile Language* and *Draft Notation*—a series of videos and visual poems inspired by the textile design work of Anni Albers—a text is enacted on a typewriter that operates much like a loom. And in *Weaving*, Bervin performed a month-long, durational weaving at Gridspace in Brooklyn, New York. Using the fence in front of the gallery as a loom, the work interfaced directly with the neighborhood and actively invited the conversation of passersby.

A recent project by Jen Bervin, *Silk Poems*, comprised of a video, a book, and imprinted silk film, encompasses more than six years of research during which she consulted over thirty international nanotechnology and biomedical labs, textile archives, medical libraries, and sericulture sites in North America, Europe, the Middle East, and Asia, including traveling to Tbilisi, Georgia; Hanzhou, China; Lyon, France; and Kyoto, Japan. In addition to an interest in the five-thousand-year-old global history of silk production, Bervin's investigations for *Silk Poems* were propelled by new scientific research that explores biomedical uses for liquid silk. The project was created in conjunction with the Tufts University Omenetto Silk Lab, and exhibited at MassMoCA in 2016. An accompanying book of poems was published the following year.

Silk is biocompatible with the human body, and biosensors are in development that can be implanted under the skin to monitor shifts and changes, for example, in hemoglobin. In some cases, these nanopatterned surfaces can be optically monitored visually through the skin. For someone who would receive the biosensor technology in their body, one imagines conditions of great urgency; it is often illness that demands this close attention to and monitoring of the body's data. Bervin's *Silk Poems* reminds us of the almost occult power of language to perform a task on and within the body, and that the text written on such a sensor demands rigorous consideration, a consideration she engages with great sensitivity and care.

To implant a biosensor and cross the threshold of the body through the skin enacts one of the great transgressions of medicine, entering a space of acute vulnerability for a patient. While often a necessary impropriety enacted towards assistance and healing, the ways in which that act is performed can determine an ethics of respect. Overwhelming forces of illness challenge the subjective agency of a patient, and relationships with the medical establishment can either affirm or combat experiences of powerlessness. In a sense, a patient faces a potential double agential loss: the body rebels (we might say "against itself"), and the medical system enters through that space of vulnerability in attempts to repair or monitor the condition. In these moments, a patient seeks ways to recuperate psychological as well as physical power, for the body is both psychical and biological.

In research labs, the logo of the institution or funder is often imprinted on new technology. When Bevin first saw this imprint on a silk biosensor in the Tufts labs, she wondered if that site might bear a text that is more meaningful for the patient. If we imagine that the biosensor is implanted in order to operate as translator of the body's text—in essence reading the body for a doctor's interpretation—we can also imagine the sensor as chosen by the patient, read by their body. And, Bervin suggests, the lived body becomes a library for the sensor, a library that includes a lifetime of recorded marks and traces. It is this intersection and intersubjective reflexivity that is opened up by Bervin's *Silk Poems* investigation. The work is brought to life by the act of reading, the body's intimate and moving encounter with the world. In this sense, the power of language is amplified, and the writer's job is one of great power, necessitating rigorous consideration, and perhaps even dialogue with a patient. Acknowledging the occult powers of language to name and bring into being, or to cast a spell, Bervin suggests her work might harness the power of the talisman, in a sense a physical prayer carried by the body for safety, protection, and healing.

A talismanic object holds magical power, and is believed to bring good luck or protect the wearer from harm. Instructions for the construction of these objects

are elaborate and detailed, mostly impressing upon the maker the gravity and potency of their actions and words, and delineating the ways in which the making of the object must replicate the intended aims; any symbolism must mirror the purposes the talisman encodes and will enact. Medical practitioners prescribed talismans during the medieval period; rituals, including ritual use of talismans and amulets, were commonly enacted to balance and assuage the universe of overwhelming forces that threatened one's life and well-being. As examples of art forms that unite material form and text, these objects not only "mean" but also "do," they perform a text on and within the body. In fact, the word "talisman" comes from the Arabic *talsam*, and the Greek *telesma*, meaning "I complete, or perform, a rite." Fulfilling the requirements of J.L. Austin's "performative utterances" (as described in his book, *How to Do Things with Words* [1959]), talismans are created in order to perform an act—and specifically to perform acts of healing and protection.

In 2016, at BRIC, in Brooklyn, Bervin created a durational performance in which she drew on a large window leading into the gallery. Using a white grease pencil, she articulated the unfolding path taken by the silkworm as it writes its cocoon. The repeated lemniscate (figure-eight-shaped) path overlaps in multiple layers, and Bervin's drawing is laced progressively on the glass rendering visible the filament pattern. This work, *Silk Line*, allowed Bervin to "digest" her extensive research and consider the role of the silk worm in the creation of silk and the medical biosensor.

Echoing this performance, the *Silk Poems* project "poem strand," was written in a six-character form modeled after the beta sheet for silk, a secondary protein structure at the DNA level that contributes to the exceptional tensile strength of silk from both spiders and silkworms. Remarkably, the beta sheet formation follows a meandering path of looped hairpin turns almost identical to the path a silkworm enacts as it lays down its silk thread in the cocoon. The meander is also evocative of a weft thread as it snakes back and forth within a woven textile. All three pathways enact a back-and-forth movement to create—and strengthen—a fabric. Using these resonances, Bervin created a six-letter enjambed line of poetry that takes the shape of a ribbon of text following the path enacted by the silkworm's production. This text was then imprinted on the sensor.

Influenced by the ways in which Islamic textiles incorporate multiple smaller letters within the forms of larger letters, the *Silk Poems* create the larger shape of the silkworm "writing" its own cocoon. In keeping with the rigors of talismanic production, the poetic form mirrors the material production of the biosensor and, in so doing, echoes the aims of both silkworm production and the sensor: to create a strong "fabric" that enacts a form of taking care. In the silkworm's case,

this is the protective cocoon; in the case of the biosensor, it is the biocompatible silk material that assists in monitoring a medical condition and contributes to healing. The lines in the book form of the poem are compressed and enjambed, contributing to an impression of short pieces or fragments of text cut from the ribbon. The compression takes some work to read, as one must tease out words and meaning from a series of unfolding letters without spaces. This slowness of reading, and the possible misreadings, complicate the reader's experience of the text, slowing one down perhaps to the pace and world of a chewing worm. Wonderfully, the void eaten out of a mulberry leaf by a silkworm is a ribbon akin to the shape of the worm itself and, when extended, resembles the lines of text in the book.

Perhaps most surprising and delightful, the text of the poem is written as a persona poem in the voice of the silkworm, who says, "I thought you should know how it is with the creatures who made this." Bervin says she feels certain that the history of sericulture is not going to be told by an American, but rather by the voice of one more versed in the five-thousand-year-old history, in this case a Chinese silkworm. From the perspective of one with "hundreds of siblings," the worm reveals its initial inception from hatching from an egg through five successive developmental stages, or instars, and its short death. The entire five-and-a-half- to seven-week lifecycle of the silkworm is placed against the millennia of collaborative silkworm-human production. Our worm guide is as likely to tease out the hubris in human historical accounts as it is to throw back its head and laugh—and in its excitement, suddenly, oddly, to fall asleep.

This voice, given its placement on a silk biosensor to be implanted in the body, is eerily intimate, as close as a whisper in your ear or even closer. Of course, the nature of a persona poem is that the mask turns two ways, toward the audience and back toward the actor. Certainly, the very particular eye and interests are Bervin's, and the elections of craft and presentation, while resonating with the movements of the silkworm, are also the artist's. She wrote the text, after all. It is Bervin who whispers in our ear. But the script of the silkworm's story inhabits an independent character: informed, sly, charming and a little daffy—an eating, transforming silkworm, whose personality is light and playful in the face of life-challenging transformations and mortality. For while the silkworm aims to get the facts straight, it also speaks directly to the reader, revealing a wisdom about life-cycles, death, and how the readers themselves might digest these often painful transformations.

The relationship between speech and making, between language and textile, are magnified in the worm's telling. Regarding the line quoted from CD Wright at the top of this essay, the worm asks,



Jen Bervin, *Silk Poems*, 2016, Nanoimprinted gold spatter on silk film (first fabrication trial). Photo courtesy Charlotte Lagarde, © Jen Bervin.



Jen Bervin, *Silk Line*, 2015, Still from a performance drawing at the Cohen Gallery, Brown University, "From Line to Constellation," curated by Francesca Capone, Providence, RI. Photo courtesy John Cayley, © Jen Bervin.

AREYOUSURPRISED
IQUOTEAPOET

DONTBE
WEINVENTEDLANGUAGE

We learn that the pictographic characters for “silkworm,” “silk fabric,” and “mulberry tree” are found in divinations written in oracle bone script as early as 1050 BC. Our silkworm protagonist introduces us to the evolutions of language, in particular, unfolding the radical for the word “silk” in numerous Chinese words, including “textile,” “warp and weft,” “weave,” “write,” “edit,” and “spin.” In addition, the root form of the word is present in “body” and in “death.” The text incorporates the Chinese characters along with their English translation, revealing the visual repetitions within the text forms. The silk worm exclaims,

MULBERRYTRANSLATESUS
WETRANSLATEIT

LOOKTHERADICALFORSILK
ISINTHEWORD

TRANSLATE

The poem engages extravagantly with the sense of touch and sensuality—how does it feel to rub up against another, to feel the touch of a leaf on the tongue, to shed a skin—and that is how I come to know the silkworm’s story through my own body reading. The writing describes the struggle of the moth to be free of the cocoon—SOSHE/SPITS// ANDSHOVES/HERWAYOUT// ABATTERING/RAMBREAKING—and mating—ATREMENDOUS/FLUTTERINGENSUES—and the blissful pleasures of the small newly hatched worm eating fresh cut mulberry leaves—ISAVOR/GOSLOW . . . IFEELIAM/CERTAINLYLOVED. Later in the book, the worm asks the reader if it has mentioned what its horn is for, and a whole bright page is given over to the word: PLEA/SURE.

These descriptions derive from long hours spent observing the silkworms in their five instars and four distinct stages of development. This allowed Bervin to perform a kind of study as if for method acting, and in this way to interpret and translate the creature’s experience to the script. Persona poems are a form that engages heavily with fiction, and fiction allows us as writers and readers to engage with the experience of another, the practice of fiction supporting the development of empathy. Bervin seems to be conveying that this empathy can contribute, as well, to understanding the conditions of illness and anxiety.

Where does the work ultimately reside? For *Silk Poems*, Bervin's text was nano-printed in gold spatter, a method for use with transistor technologies that allows the sensor to be read through electronic devices, on a small silk disc the size of a contact lens. As of yet, Bervin's sensor is not actually implanted in anyone's body, but her work offers "proof of concept" that when it is, it can be encoded with significant and meaningful layers of language. At the moment, the only way we can see the inscription is through a microscope, and even there, the text is difficult to read. When we do read it, in the context of the book, the intimacy of the voice speaks infinitely closely, offering a talismanic prayer to our contemporary anxieties and physical ailments.

HOLDTHEBODY
FREEFROMHARM

HERE
ISTHISTHING

IMADEOFMYSELF
WITHOTHERS

ALIVEINYOU

Silk Poems resides in its largest sense in the imagination: in the imaginative potential of fiction, the experimental projections of science, and, significantly, performing its magic alive in the mind of a reader.

All correspondence with Bervin was conducted by the author, on March 9, 2018, via Skype.

JULIE POITRAS SANTOS's essays have appeared in *The Café Review*, *The Chart*, and *Living Maps Review*, among others. Also a visual artist, her interests include areas where visual art and language intersect. Her artwork has been exhibited widely in the U.S. and abroad. Poitras Santos works as a professor in the MFA program at Maine College of Art.