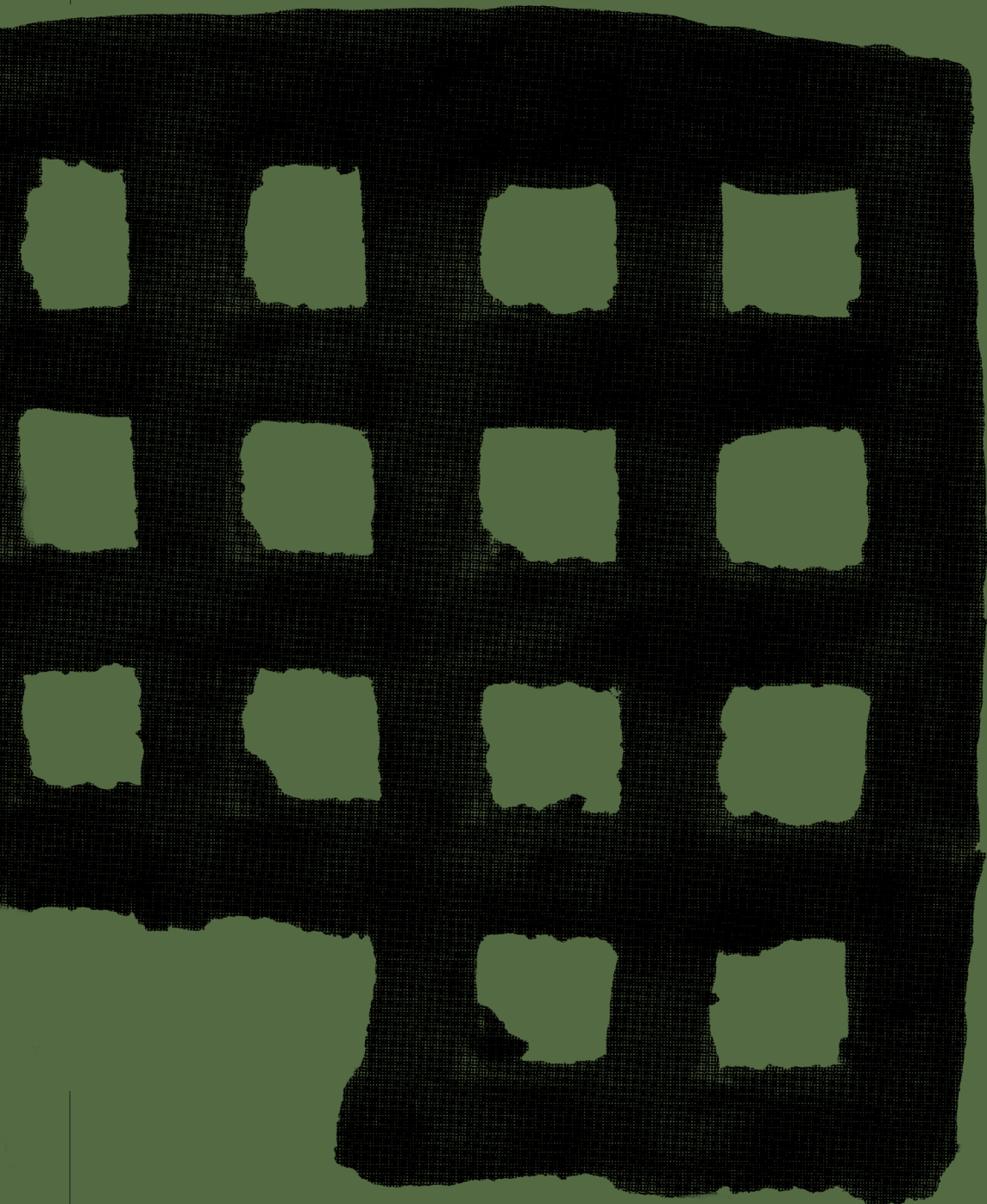


Research Field Station #6

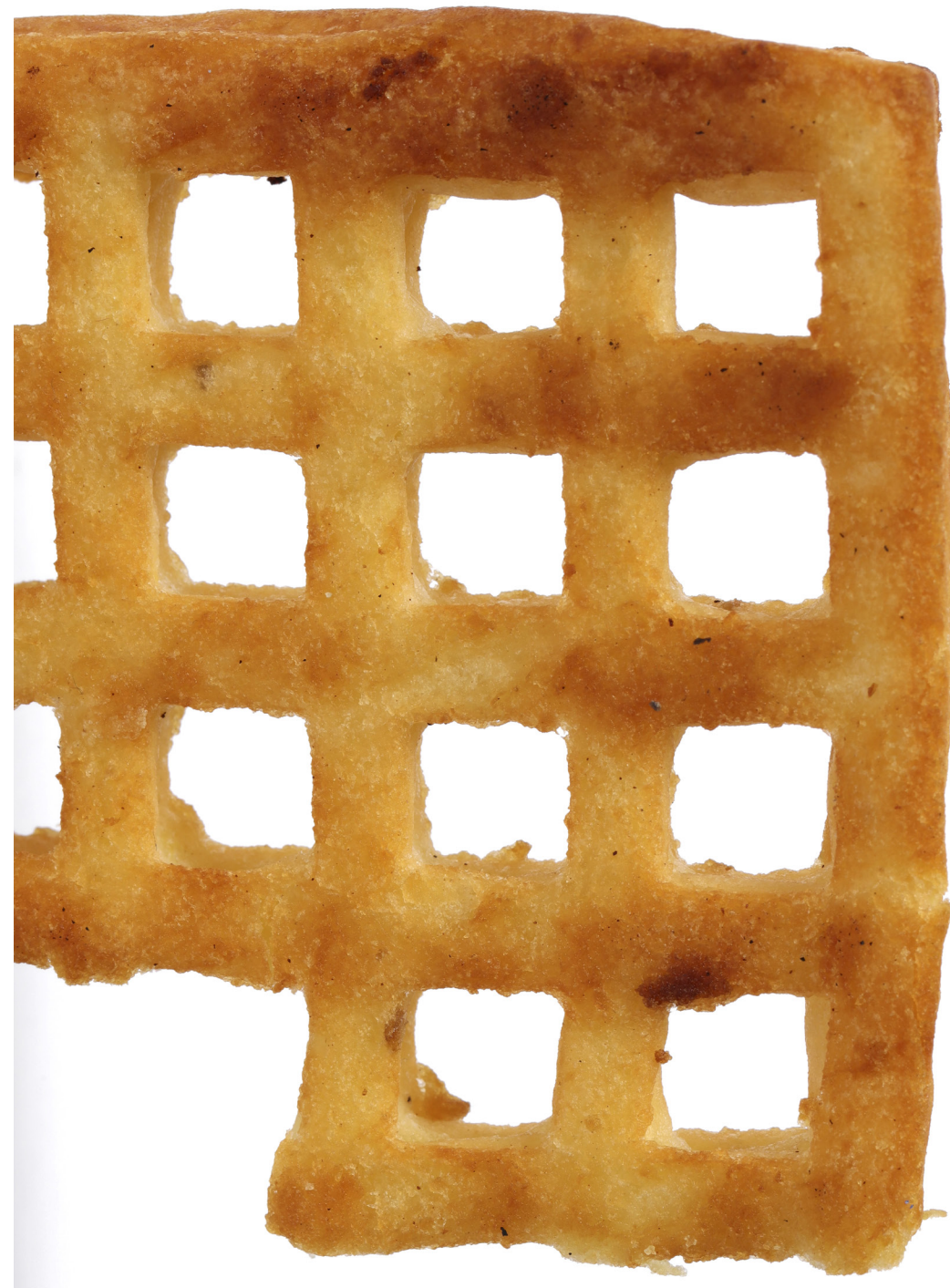
Anti-Sonnets



by Mark Staniforth

*I will put Chaos into fourteen lines
And keep him there;
 and let him thence escape
If he be lucky*
- Edna St. Vincent Millay¹

Research Field Station #6
Anti-Sonnets



by Mark Staniforth

Anti-Sonnets comprised the creation of one sonnet per day over a year, irrespective of personal circumstance. Each sonnet's subject matter, and perhaps also the perceived quality of its artistic execution, would reflect the tribulations of daily life. *Anti-Sonnets* aimed to challenge assumptions associated with the sonnet form, and to champion the ascendancy of context over content. Writing in *The Cambridge Companion to the Sonnet* (2011),² the poet Stephen Burt identified "a commitment to dailiness, to impressions without an overarching order, each in its separate frame, as in a notebook or calendar ... [a]s each sonnet records an occasion or a day, a set of sonnets can take its own larger shape."³

No poetic form is richer in historical referents, nor so evidently shaped by its own processes of production, than the sonnet. Since the Italian scholar Francesco Petrarca was credited with its creation in the 14th century, it has intimidated and belaboured some of most prestigious poetic minds.

Shakespeare sought to establish a new form which deviated from Petrarca's strict rules; Wordsworth and Keats each issued paeans to its paradoxical freedoms; Edna St. Vincent Millay feared its composition so delicate she may make it "burst"⁴.

Yet the sonnet's fundamental tenets have endured for centuries, whether as a structure for strict adherence or simply a scaffold for intentional dismantling.

Such weighty tradition is perhaps why experiments with the form have, with a handful of notable exceptions, been relatively reserved. Sonnets languished unfashionably in the minds of most post-modernists and Beats, and their potential was also broadly ignored by the 1960s concrete movement.

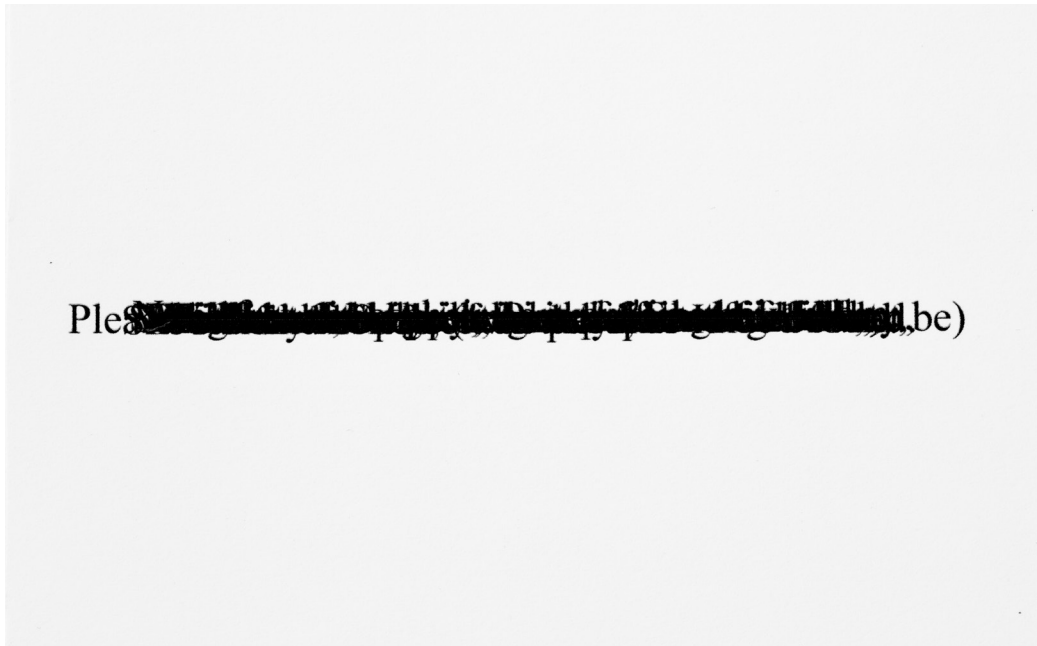
The Swiss concrete poet Eugen Gomringer began his career writing sonnets before, having perceived that he had reached a "dead end,"⁵ abandoning them entirely. Allen Ginsberg derided the form as a kind of confidence trick, insisting: "Of the fourteen lines, twelve lines set up this inexorable death of love, and a completely hopeless scene, so you could actually pile it on ... and then the last two lines pull the rug out from the thought and change it completely."⁶

Only in recent years has the sonnet shown signs of re-emerging, as a new generation of poets show less compunction in trampling its sacred ground. *Anti-Sonnets* set out to discover its 'bursting' point, and to chronicle every day of the journey. "The sonnet ... is a portrait of the mind in action," wrote Phillis Levin in her introduction to *The Penguin Book of the Sonnet* (2001), "a mini-guide to the progress of an emotion."⁷

Sonnet XI: Sonnet for Wordsworth

For William Wordsworth, in particular, the potential of the sonnet form resided less in its ability to evocate unrequited romance and metaphors for moonlit nights, than in the laying bare of the constructive struggle. In his *Scorn not the Sonnet*, Wordsworth recalls how the form had “cheered mild Spenser, called from Faery-Land / To struggle through the dark ways; [...]”⁸ On the same theme, in *Nuns Fret Not...* he bemoans the “scanty plot of ground”⁹ the sonneteer is afforded, before concluding, conversely, that such constraints are integral to the form: that others suffered under the weight of “too much liberty”.

SONNET XI emphasises Wordsworth’s “scanty plot” by compressing his *Nuns...* into a single line: its palimpsest emphasising the impossibility of the words (and letters) breaking free from their designated frame of reference. Here, as with almost all of the *Anti-Sonnets*, what counts is not the nuance of rhyme and meter, but what the American poet Craig Dworkin, referring to physical manifestations of illegibility, calls their “abstract force.”¹⁰



NUNS FRET NOT AT THEIR CONVENT'S NARROW ROOM

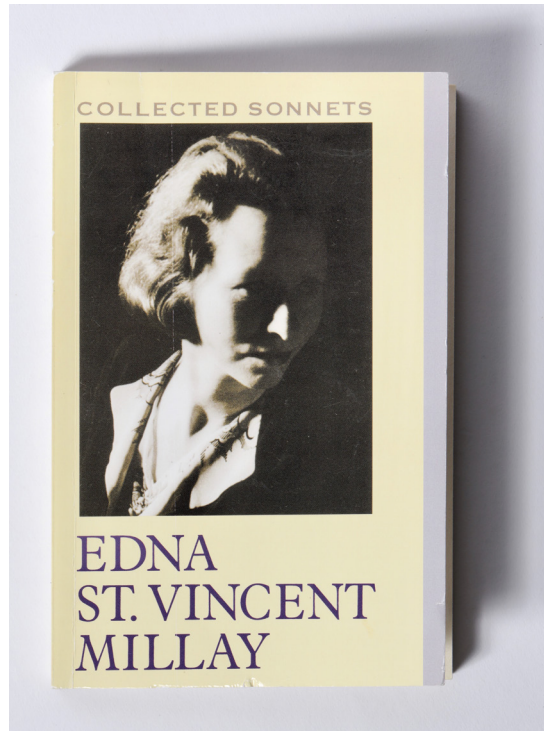
Nuns fret not at their Convent's narrow room;
 And Hermits are contented with their Cells;
 And Students with their pensive Citadels:
 Maids at the Wheel, the Weaver at his Loom,
 Sit blithe and happy; Bees that soar for bloom,
 High as the highest Peak of Furness Fells,
 Will murmur by the hour in Foxglove bells:
 In truth, the prison, unto which we doom
 Ourselves, no prison is: and hence to me,
 In sundry moods, 'twas pastime to be bound
 Within the Sonnet's scanty plot of ground:
 Pleased if some Souls (for such there needs must be)
 Who have felt the weight of too much liberty,
 Should find short solace there, as I have found.

— 25 —

1

Sonnet CCLXXII: Sonnet for Edna

Despite expressing fears over the potential consequences of “bursting” the form, Millay gained a reputation as one of its leading subversive exponents in the first half of the 20th century. Millay adopted the sonnet as an unashamed expression of her personal preferences, particularly sexual. “*What my lips have kissed, and where, and why, / I have forgotten [...]*”¹¹ Millay begins in a poem, first published in 1920, which could be read not only as a paean to her promiscuity, but a provocative declaration of such. She imitates Shakespeare in eschewing classical notions of beauty—“*Thou are not lovelier than lilacs, - no,*”¹²—and wastes few opportunities to stick two fingers up at a form filled with emotionally passive females and tortured masculinity:¹³ “*I will put Chaos into fourteen lines / And keep him there,*”¹⁴ she vows, railing against the societal confines of her time. *Sonnet CCLXXII* concretises Millay’s *Chaos* in a gaudy, B-movie aesthetic implying revolution and empowerment; a desire to usurp the established order. It imitates the colour-saturated work of the early 20th century Fauvists, whose name, derived from the French for ‘wild beasts’, alludes to another of Millay’s sonnets, in which she bluntly describes her eroticism as “*This beast that rends me*”¹⁵



Sonnet CLVII: 130x130

In his *Poetry from Statement to Meaning* (1965),¹⁶ Jerome Beaty places Shakespeare's *Sonnet CXXX* firmly in the "old tradition" of the "anti-sonnet ... which attempts freshness either through denying the usual images ... or through adopting supposedly shocking directness."¹⁷

In it, Shakespeare directly ridicules the sonneteer's penchant for prescribed beauty, providing a veritable inventory of the ways in which the woman of his affections failed to live up to the (probably unattainable) 16th century poetic norm: her breasts are dun, her cheeks are pale, her breath smells, etc. He ends, in a classic example of the form's *volta* or rhetorical shift, by dismissing the *false compare* of such expectations, effectively concluding that his mistress is all the more endearing because her beauty is unique.

Throughout *Anti-Sonnets*, Shakespeare's *Sonnet CXXX* is employed as an appropriative contextual resource, manipulated and abstracted in pursuit of the point at which, as Millay feared, it might finally "burst". For *Sonnet CXXXVII*, it is pushed consecutively through every available language on Google Translate; in *Sonnet CXL*, it is re-rendered in emojis; in *Sonnet CXXXVIII*, its text is replaced with suggested alternatives from *The Wordsworth [!] Thesaurus of Slang*.¹⁸ In *Sonnet CLVII*, it is typed out 130 times in succession, referencing the Elizabethan fashion for long sonnet sequences.¹⁹ Presented without editing or deletion, few, if any, of the transcripts in *Sonnet CLVII* are flawless: here, it is not so much the 'mind in action' but its attendant flaws that seize centre-stage.



Sonnet CXLII: I am a Sonneteer!

Gertrude Stein wrote: “There can be no repetition because the essence of that repetition is insistence ... and if you use emphasis it is not possible while anybody is alive that they should use the same emphasis.”²⁰ *Sonnet CXLII*—which simply repeats its title fourteen times—simultaneously shouts, implores and pleads for recognition, changing its meaning with each intonation. In doing so it illustrates the insecurities the sonnet has engendered in poets over centuries. Ron Padgett’s *Sonnet / Homage to Andy Warhol*,²¹ written in response to Warhol’s release of his first feature film, SLEEP, consists of fourteen lines of text made up entirely of letter Zs. In *Nothing in That Drawer*,²² Padgett likewise repeats the poem’s title fourteen times. “If you see it in a book or on the page it looks the same,”²³ says Padgett, “but when you say it out loud, it doesn’t sound the same.” Padgett’s friend and fellow post-modernist Ted Berrigan professed more cynical reasons for adopting the form: “I thought something like, ‘What do you do if you are a poet and you are just starting out, and you want to be big? [...] I decided you wrote a sonnet sequence. So I wrote a sonnet sequence’.”²⁴ Berrigan’s intent was itself a novel way of exploiting the contextual impact of the sonnet, and he would subsequently go further than most of his predecessors, employing fragmentary and found texts in a diaristic manner, rich in everyday referents.

I AM A SONNETEER!
 I AM A SONNETEER!
 I AM A SONNETEER!
 I AM A SONNETEER!
 I AM A SONNETEER!
 I AM A SONNETEER!
 I AM A SONNETEER!
 I AM A SONNETEER!
 I AM A SONNETEER!
 I AM A SONNETEER!
 I AM A SONNETEER!
 I AM A SONNETEER!
 I AM A SONNETEER!
 I AM A SONNETEER!

Sonnet CCVI: Fugitive in the Forest

Sonnet CCVI takes its title from the headline of a 1980s local newspaper report about the hunt for a man suspected of killing two policemen in a North Yorkshire forest. An Ordnance Survey map of the area is overlaid with a fragment of the report, partially hidden like the suspect himself. Referencing the pastoral history of the form, *Sonnet CCVI* nevertheless wrenches the focus away from bucolic farm-scapes and skylarks to re-position the countryside as a place of threat and fear. Its cartographical element emulates Mary Ellen Solt's *Moon Shot Sonnet*,²⁵ which consists of fourteen lines of symbols used by scientists in a diagram in the *New York Times* to illustrate the topography of the moon. Solt's work also references a recurring motif of sonneteers throughout history, in this case the moon and its romantic properties: from Sir Philip Sidney's *Sonnet 31* ("With how sad steps, O moon, thou climb'st the sky"),²⁶ through Shakespeare's *Sonnet CVII* ("The mortal moon hath her eclipse endured"),²⁷ and especially (and sometimes subversively) by Millay: "I too beneath your moon, almighty Sex"²⁸. Despite being one of the few concrete poets to experiment with sonnets, Solt was dismissive of its continued relevance. She described *Moon Shot Sonnet* as "a spoof of an outmoded form of poetry" and "a statement on the problem of the concrete poet's search for valid new forms."²⁹

I even called him Sir. I said, excuse me sir, out of the car. Nothing. He never even looked at me. I said, I don't tell anybody twice. Out of the car, now. Then I saw the gun. I know for a fact he was going for my head. He shot me across the nose. The young dog came out then. He shot him twice, which just gave me enough time to start and run.

picks to citizens.

FUGITIVE IN FOREST IS NAMED



DETECTIVES today named the man they want to question in connection with the shooting of a police dog handler in Dalby Forest.

He is Barry Peter Prudom, otherwise known as Barry Peter Edwards, aged 37, from Leeds.

His name is not being linked specifically with the deaths of PC David Haugh near Haregate and of Mr George Luckett at Gorton, North.

The Sgt John Charlton, deputy head of North York-shire CID, said Mr Pruden-om "may not be in possession of a firearm, and the police believe him to be dis-armed."

Members of the public having any knowledge of his whereabouts should immedi-ately report the police.

They must not under any circumstances approach him.

Warrant

Barry Peter Prudom

THE Royal baby has been named William Arthur Philip Louis.

He will be known as Prince William of Wales, a Buckingham Palace spokesman announced today.

The baby son of the Prince and Princess of Wales, who is second in line to the Throne, was born last Mon- day in St Mary's Hospital, Paddington.

The Prince was quick to for- get all any his home made with King William III - the William of Orange still revered as the hero who drove the Dutch from the throne.

Godparents

"The baby will be known as Prince William, and the name will be chosen in his own right."

The godparents will be the King of the Maldives, Lord Stirling, and Laurence Van der Pong, Princess Alexandra, the Duchess of Kent, and Lady Susan Hussey.

The spokesman said he had no information as to why the names William and Arthur were chosen by the Prince and Princess.

But Arthur is one of Prince Charles's nicknames - he is Prince Charles's (Philip Arthur George).

Philip is the name of Prince Charles's father, and Louis is that of his mother's uncle, the late Lord Mountbatten, who was awarded an OBE for his services.

FLASHBACK: The Princess of Wales leaving hospital with her baby last week.

is not likely. He could grow up as Prince Arthur but they would normally choose the first name unless there was an overriding reason.

"William is not a surprising choice. It has among the names favoured by many people."

"William comes around only to Charles in the world's catalog of boys' names, announced in the Times.

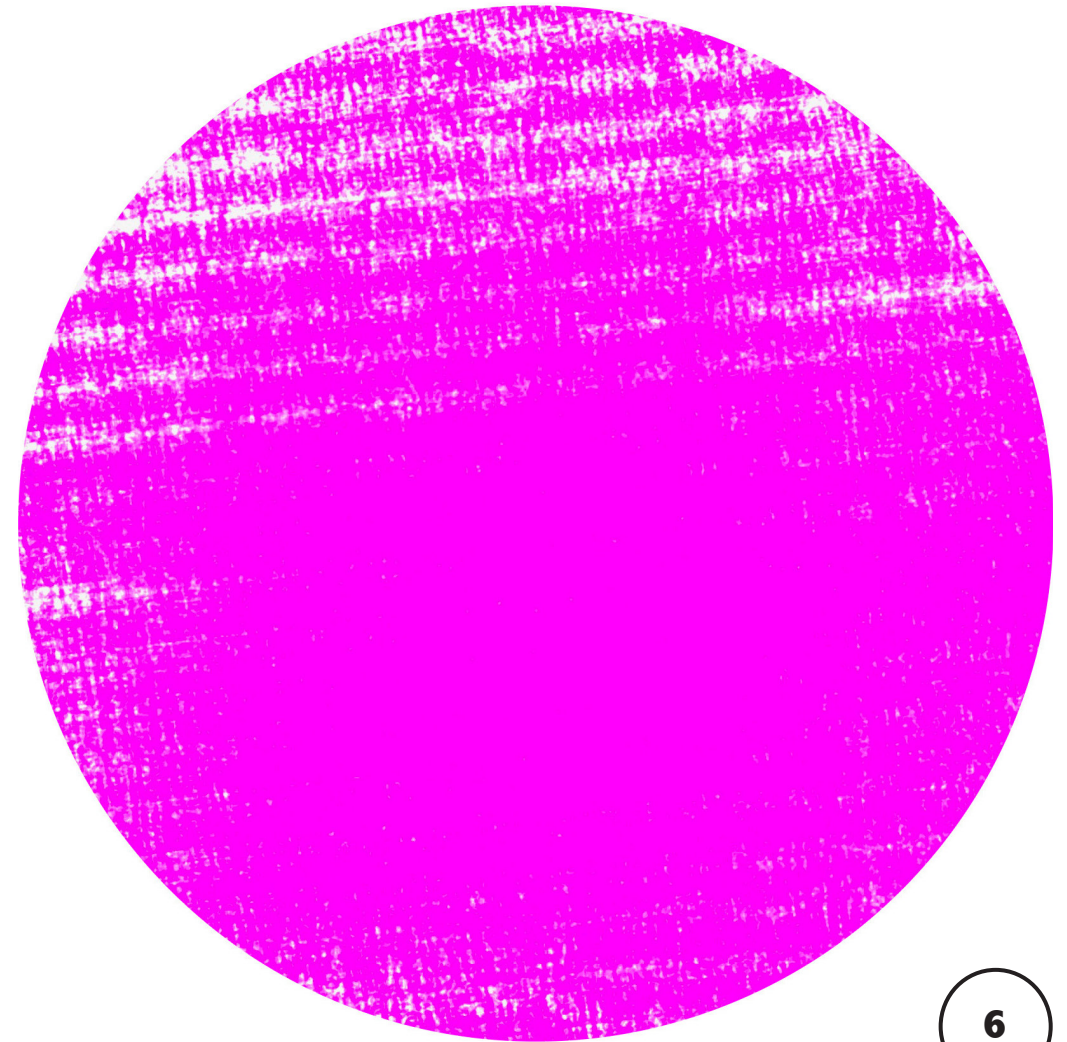
And there is a connection on the Princess of Wales's side of the family - her first cousin, Prince Charles's father - was Colonel William Smith Gill.

— from Page 7

Sonnet CCXIX: Shotcrete Sonnet

Sonnet CCXIX presents a literal interpretation of ‘concrete’ poetry: a name derived from its original association with Theo van Doesburg’s *Art Concret*, which emphasised mechanism, anti-impressionism and ‘absolute clarity’ in painting.³⁰

Shotcrete is “concrete ... conveyed through a hose and pneumatically projected at high velocity onto a surface as a construction technique.”³¹ For *Sonnet CCXIX*, a source text—in this case Yeats’ *A Crazy Girl*,³² chosen for its stark evocation of passion and madness—is converted into a pixel using a free GIMP graphics tool, and ‘sprayed’ within a circular boundary. Acknowledging a new era of sonnetary construction, Catherine Vidler also employed computerised copy-and-paste techniques for her entirely diagrammatic *Lost Sonnets* (2018)³³: “I began to make the lost sonnets after playing in Microsoft Word with the ‘insert shapes’ function,”³⁴ Vidler wrote. Initially clinging to associations with the number fourteen—fourteen lines, fourteen squares, fourteen corners, etc.—Vidler’s work becomes more oblique as the series progresses: it requires an increasing degree of exploration to find the ‘fourteen’ in the book’s later works, if it is there at all. And yet, as with *Sonnet CCXIX*, mere association with the form is enough to anchor its context.



Sonnet XIII: Failed Attempt to Write a Petrarchan Sonnet in Half an Hour

In 1995, six years before he won the Turner Prize for *Work No. 227: The lights going on and off*, Martin Creed conceived his *Work No. 88: A sheet of A4 paper crumpled into a ball*.³⁵ “[It] came from thinking, ‘ah, this is all rubbish,’” said Creed. “Maybe it looked like some minimalist or conceptual work, but it wasn’t supposed to.”³⁶ Inevitably, Creed’s “rubbish” evolved into anything but. Instead of being tossed in the nearest waste bin, *Work No. 88* toured some of the world’s eminent art galleries. Duplicates—which Creed concedes are “crafted objects”³⁷—are sold in specially made cardboard boxes, perch on a bed of shredded paper, and come complete with a certificate of authenticity signed by the artist.

By definition, rubbish as declared by an artist can seldom be so. In 1961, Arman Pierre Fernandez filled the Iris Clert gallery in Paris with detritus he had scoured from the streets. The resulting exhibition, *Le Plein (The Full-Up)* was prematurely closed due to the foul smell. To coincide, Arman sold 1,500 sardine cans filled with trash: they now fetch over £2,000 online.³⁸

Far from mere “rubbish,” *Work No. 88* may be seen as emblematic of the creative process. Creed has also said: “I sometimes think finished works don’t show the struggle—and I don’t like that.”³⁹ If, as we have found, failure and frustration are recurring and integral aspects of a sonnet’s construction—and if it is, to re-quote Levin, “a portrait of the mind in action,” then there must be attendant detritus: an over-scribbled draft; a page ripped out of a notebook in frustration and crumpled into a ball.



Sonnet CCLXVII: Sonnet for Gustav Metzger

In 1959, the German artist and political activist Gustav Metzger published his first *Manifesto for Auto-Destructive Art*.⁴⁰ Employing materials designed to erode his art in the process of its creation—he initially experimented with hurling acid at nylon sheets—Metzger sought to send a statement about the noxious nature of global politics. In his third manifesto in 1961, he wrote: “Auto-destructive art is an attack on capitalist values and the drive to nuclear annihilation.”⁴¹ In seeking the means to resist commodification, Metzger’s work emulated Situationists like Giuseppe Pinot-Gallizio, who proposed using gunpowder for his *Industrial Paintings*,⁴² in order that they may explode upon completion, and JV Martin, whose *Thermonuclear Maps*,⁴³ designed to conjure the state of the landscape after a nuclear attack, were made out of soft (and soon to be rotting) cheese.

At the same time as Metzger was introducing his Auto-Destructive art, the Fluxus artist Nam June Paik was conceiving musical scores which revolved around the destruction of instruments. In turn, his work inspired others, including rock stars like Pete Townshend and Jimi Hendrix, who burned their guitars on stage.

The remnants of *Sonnet CCLXVII* suggest a refusal to submit to the sonnet’s strict and archive-friendly historical forms. Yet its attempted erosion is futile: its defacement only serving to elevate the process and/or struggle.



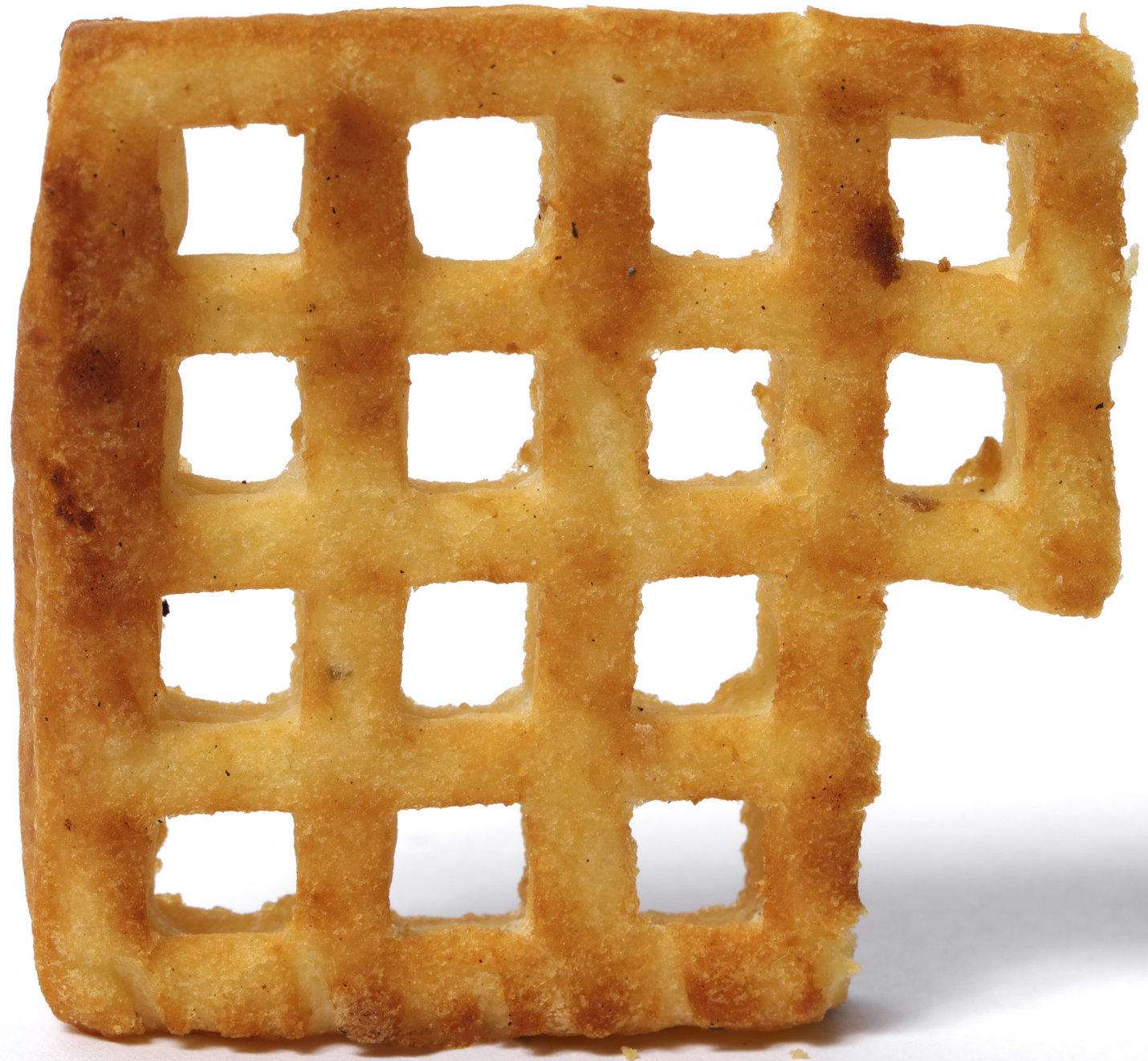
Sonnet XXXI: A Waffle with Fourteen Holes

Sonnet XXXI represents an unashamedly Duchampian attempt to undermine the form's aesthetic conventions. Marcel Duchamp, who sought to enter a standard, signed urinal, *Fountain*, in an exhibition in New York in 1917, declared that his ready-mades would be art just as soon as he declared them such. He chose objects based on an inexact equation of "visual indifference" and "lack of uniqueness";⁴⁴ often making small changes: a scrawled pseudonym; a scribbled moustache. In doing so, Duchamp wrenched art from its traditionally hierarchical confines and challenged its very definition. In that spirit, to paraphrase the American painter Robert Rauschenberg, *this is a sonnet if I say so*.⁴⁵

Unlike the participatory aspect required to fulfil most of Metzger's auto-destructive processes, the constitution of the waffle, its corner hacked off in order to fulfil the requisite numerical requirement, guarantees its own inevitable demise.

But the waffle's signifying element—its holes—resist physical deterioration. Holes were a recurring theme in Fluxus, a movement whose emphasis on process and performance, generally underpinned by the employment, like Duchamp, of ubiquitous, impermanent and/or ephemeral objects, provided one of the key inspirations for *Anti-Sonnets*: Ben Vautier's *Flux Holes*: a box of photo cards of holes—a drain, a keyhole, a hole in a wall, etc.; Ay-O's *Finger Boxes*: small boxes with a hole in the side inviting the participant to put their finger in; the *Flux Olympiad*, in which table tennis matches were played on tables with holes cut into either side of them.

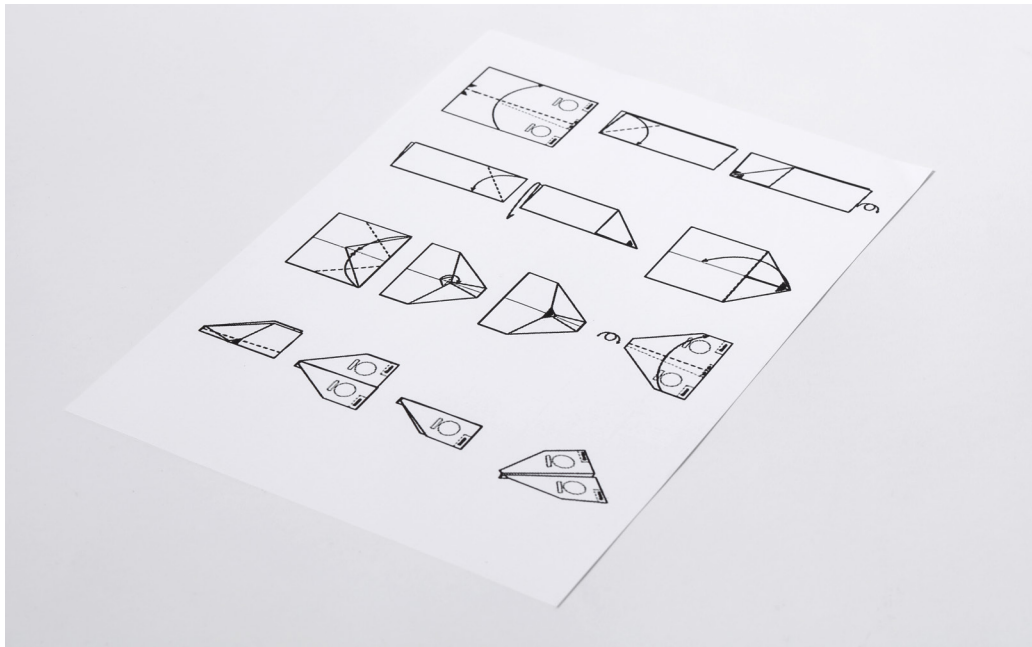
"For Fluxus artists the hole was anti-illusionistic, antesignificatory, brutally concrete" wrote the Fluxus scholar Natilee Harren. Linked to the notion of demise and disappearance, Harren added: "[Fluxus holes] call attention to the fugitive material presence of the thing at hand, reminding us that the artwork, like the body, will eventually deteriorate and disappear."⁴⁶



9

Sonnet CLVI: Fourteen Steps to Making a Paper Plane

Travel, or at least the notion of fantastical escape, was another *motif* of the Fluxus movement. Its founder, George Macunias, spoke of “leasing a STOL8 passenger plane” in order to visit “strange and inaccessible places”⁴⁷ in search of an island upon which he could establish an artists’ colony. Having travelled throughout Greece with Macunias in 1972, the American artist Carla Liss admitted: “We didn’t find an island, but we had a lot of fun looking.”⁴⁸ This tradition of (invariably failed) attempts—another Fluxus luminary, George Brecht, hired an office and drew up complex plans to “translocate” the Isle of Wight to the South Seas in order to afford it a more favourite climate⁴⁹—underscores the Fluxus philosophy of prioritising process over likely outcome, underpinned by a participatory ethic. The artist and collector Harry Smith was so enamoured with the idea of paper planes that he collected and catalogued hundreds of them from the streets of New York over a 20-year period. “I remember one time we saw one in the air he was just running everywhere trying to figure out where it was going to be,” recalled his friend William Breeze. “He was just like out of his mind. He couldn’t believe that he’d seen one.”⁵⁰ *Sonnet CLVI* invites the reader/viewer to indulge his/her own unlikely fantasy by creating their own impossible vehicle: its subsequent trajectory and inevitable crash-landing acting as a metaphor for the playful, process-over-outcome philosophy that underpins the *Anti-Sonnets* project.



10

Sonnet CXXV: Camouflaged Sonnet

In 2012 the Hayward Gallery in London staged an exhibition of what was ostensibly invisible art. Entitled *Art About The Unseen*, it included Tom Friedman's *Untitled: A Curse*,⁵¹ in which he hired a witch to cast a curse over an 11-inch space above an empty plinth; and James Lee Byars' *The Ghost of James Lee Byars*⁵²: a work activated after his death in 1997, consisting of an (otherwise?) empty and pitch-black room, in which the visitor is invited to linger. Most of the works in the exhibition conform to the central tenet of the 1960s collective Art & Language, who declared that "an artwork is determined not by its materiality, nor by its visibility, but by its capacity to provoke thought."⁵³ Similarly, physical works which are erased (the show also included Friedman's *11 x 22 x 0.005*,⁵⁴ erased Playboy Centrefolds) or hidden to varying degrees, prioritise the process of discovery. The Turner Prize winning artist Rachel Whiteread built her *Nissen Hut*⁵⁵ in the middle of Dalby Forest, and provided scant directions. "You will really have to find it if you want to see it,"⁵⁶ she said. Richard Serra's *East-West/West-East*,⁵⁷ consisting of four, fourteen-metre steel plates, is situated a remote part of the Qatari desert. Serra said: "I'm sure people will either walk or drive to the pieces. I'm positive of it."⁵⁸ Camouflage has played a similar role in the obscuration of art. "If something is camouflaged does it cease to exist?" asks the designer Hardy Blechman. "Perhaps it's this central idea of disappearing, blending in, or, inversely, standing out ... that makes camouflage so seductive to many artists."⁵⁹ Andy Warhol produced a series of camouflage prints and a self-portrait; the French painter Alain Jacquet re-created old, classic paintings in camouflage form. "My work is all about making images disappear,"⁶⁰ said Jacquet. All these works seek to retrieve the camouflage pattern from its myriad associations, from the militaristic to garish 1970s B-movies; perhaps even from the pastoral origins of the sonnetary form itself. The notion that there is (supposedly) a sonnet hidden within stirs the interest; the process of its attempted discovery consumes the desire to discern its actual content.



12

Sonnet CXXVII: Pile of Newspapers

In *French Writer Wins Nobel*, the American poet-provocateur Kenneth Goldsmith stands in front of a New York City news-stand, opens a daily paper apparently at random, and proceeds to read a short article. "Poetry is all around us," says Goldsmith. "We just need to re-frame it, and it becomes our own."⁶¹ Goldsmith's *Uncreative Writing* (2011)⁶² was a key document in early conceptual writing era, challenging accepted notions of authorship, and of poetry-as-craft. "What we criminalise as plagiarism," wrote Goldsmith, "can actually be reconstructed as a creative and constructive practice if we're made to be responsible for those acts."⁶³ When Goldsmith was invited to participate in a Celebration of American Poetry at the White House in May 2011, he stood yards from President Obama and the First Lady and read an excerpt from his book *The Weather* (2015),⁶⁴ comprising transcriptions of local radio weather reports around New York City. Goldsmith later said: "[the audience was] stunned that the quotidian language and familiar metaphors from their world—congestion, infrastructure, gridlock—could be framed somehow as poetry."⁶⁵ Goldsmith says he has never written a sonnet. Yet he claims authorship of *Day*,⁶⁶ in which he re-typed every word of the September 1, 2000 edition of the New York Times, stripping the piece of its attendant subjectivities by refusing to distinguish between the respective, perceived values of the different texts (editorial, photo captions, adverts, etc). On the basis of *French Writer...*, Goldsmith could in fact declare himself one of the most prolific sonneteers who ever lived.



Sonnet CVI: Burger King Sonnet

Given the sonnet's reputation for tortuous emotion and aspirational beauty, for general unrequited-ness, there can be few more appropriate contemporary settings than a fast food restaurant: home to so many first dates and dashed dreams. Social media aggregators like Reddit ring with sonnet-sized reflections on relationship breakdowns over strawberry milkshakes. They are as tortured and over-wrought as anything the Romantics could come up with; each (to re-quote Levin) a bona-fide and contemporary "mini-guide to the progress of an emotion." In *Sonnet CVI*, one such fourteen-line paean is scrawled across a fast food cup in marker-pen, its declaration likely as disposable as the physical object itself:

*after that,
we walked along the sea
listened to music
laid down on the hills
and nothing happened*

Fast Food Sonnet emulates Al Hansen's *Hershey Venus*,⁶⁷ a series of re-appropriated chocolate bar wrappers which illustrated "the banal association with consumerism complicated by the overlay of 1960s sexual mores."⁶⁸ Moreover, the object's re-contextualisation echoes the Situationist proposal for "a three-dimensional novel, cut into fragments and pasted on bottles of rum, allowing the reader to follow its narrative at whim."⁶⁹



Sonnet CCXXVII: Sonnet-Kit

With antecedents in the Duchampian ready-made and Fluxus 'Flux-kits', *Sonnet CCXXVII* comprises fourteen apparently random and everyday items; each having featured at some stage and to some extent, in the *Anti-Sonnets* series. The Sonnet-Kit is designed as a series of triggers to inspire further investigation: the experiential (chewing gum, chilli, etc.); the potential (a 14-1 betting slip); the nostalgic (kola cubes; a toy car (a Saab Sonett)); the titillating, the kitsch, etc.; crowded into an old cigar box which fulfils the role of both convenient 'ready-made' and a symbol of flawed and itself somewhat kitschy aspiration. The countless 'Flux-kits' produced during the movement's peak in the 1960s were often, like Ay O's *Finger Boxes*, designed to be handled and engaged with: their very manipulation (often involving taste and smell) intent on disrupting the prevailing "hierarchy of the senses"⁷⁰ and forging new narrative possibilities. Most materials used in 'Flux-kits' were cheap and familiar; almost always inconsequential. "Toys and kitsch," said the Fluxus artist Ben Patterson, "are instruments for measuring how much we have trivialised life." He added: "I am not convinced that if there is something to be said, it gains profundity through obscurity."⁷¹



14

Conclusion

It is tempting to wonder what Shakespeare would have made of the work of modern sonneteers like Jen Bervin and K. Silem Mohammad, who both re-appropriate his work to different effect. In *Nets*, (2013)⁷², Bervin creates poetic palimpsests, her chosen words blinking bold new narratives out of complete but otherwise faded Shakespearean sonnets. Bervin writes: "When we write poems, the history of poetry is with us, pre-inscribed in the white of the page; when we read or write poems, we do it with or against this palimpsest."⁷³

For his *Sonnagrams* (2010)⁷⁴, Mohammad feeds Shakespearean sonnets into an internet anagram engine: the re-arranged results yield works both far removed yet at the same time contextually inseparable from their origin.

Along with Vidler, these poets stretch the sonnet further than their predecessors could have imagined, yet in doing so they prove Millay's fears of "bursting" the form were unfounded.

Over the course of a year, *Anti-Sonnets* pursued that bursting point: through flashes of creativity and sloughs of burdensome toil, through its rendering as a waffle or a fast-food cup; through exaggeration or erasure; and finally, as interest and inspiration waned, through carelessly conceived works which betrayed no evident poetic, let alone sonnetary, signifiers.

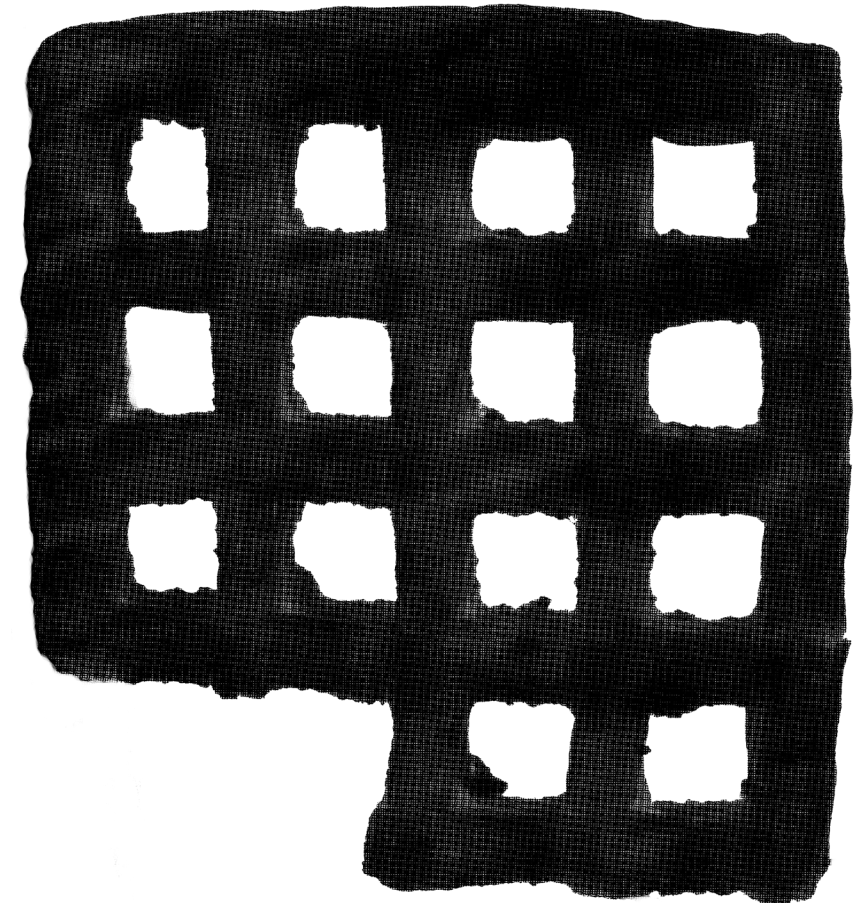
From the first *Anti-Sonnet* to the 366th (I erroneously published two sonnets on October 3rd), the frame of reference remains inescapable. Mere allusion to the form, even as part of a broader context, is enough to ground a work within such historical confines. *Anti-Sonnets* will always be sonnets, just as anti-art will always be art.

Yet it is in its failure to 'burst' open the form that the project confirms the robustness of the sonnet's future. The emergence of conceptual writing, in which context is often all-consuming, allied to a renewal of interest in concrete forms and the DIY ethic of the post-internet era, ensures the sonnet is unlikely to slink back out of fashion. Wordsworth's "scanty plot of ground" has become a vast plain of possibilities.

Sonnet CCXXXIII: Fourteen Ways to Destroy a Sonnet

1. TEAR IT.
2. BURN IT.
3. EAT IT.
4. CRUSH IT.
5. DROWN IT.
6. DELETE IT.
7. FORGET IT.
8. STAB IT.
9. BURY IT.
10. IGNORE IT.
11. CRUMPLE IT.
12. EXPLODE IT.
13. DISSECT IT.
14. RECYCLE IT.

- 55 Rachel Whiteread, *Nissen Hut* [concrete cast], Dalby Forest, 2018.
- 56 Rachel Cooke, "Rachel Whiteread: I couldn't stand Shoreditch any more ... every good artist has left", *The Observer*, September 30, 2018.
- 57 Richard Serra, *East/West, West/East* [Steel plates]. Qatar desert, 2014.
- 58 Nicolas Niarchos, "Richard Serra in the Qatari Desert", *The New Yorker*, April 15, 2014. <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/richard-serra-in-the-qatari-desert>
- 59 Hardy Blechman, "Camouflage"; in Various, *This Is Not a Book About Gavin Turk* (London: Trolley Books, 2014) p. 58.
- 60 William Grimes, "Alain Jacquet, Playful Pop Artist, Dies at 69", *New York Times*, Sep. 9 2008.
- 61 Kenneth Goldsmith, "French Writer Wins Nobel", *Huffington Post*, Feb 15 2015. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/kenneth-goldsmith-poetry_b_6334284
- 62 Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2011).
- 63 Anon. "Poet: Internet has revolutionized reading" [video], *CNN*, 2014 <https://edition.cnn.com/videos/business/2014/06/03/spc-reading-for-leading-kenneth-goldsmith.cnn/video/playlists/intl-reading-for-leading/>
- 64 Goldsmith, *The Weather* (Los Angeles: Make Now Press, 2015).
- 65 Mark Allen: "Proudly Fraudulent: An Interview With MoMA's first Poet Laureate, Kenneth Goldsmith", *The Awl*. <http://www.theawl.com/2013/02/an-interview-with-avant-garde-poet-kenneth-goldsmith>
- 66 Goldsmith, *Day* (Berkeley: Figures, 2003).
- 67 Al Hansen, *Hershey Venus* [Chocolate bar wrappers, various], 1966.
- 68 Hannah Higgins, *Fluxus Experience* (Berkeley: Univ of California Press, 2002). pp. 138–140.
- 69 Dworkin, *Reading the Illegible*, (Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 2003) e-book.
- 70 Hannah Higgins, "Dead Mannequin Walking: Fluxus and the Politics of Reception" in Amelia Jones & Adrian Heathfield, *Perform, Repeat, Record: Live Art in History* (Bristol: Intellect, 2012) p. 71.
- 71 Patterson, *Born in the State of FLUXus* (Houston: Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston) p. 115.
- 72 Jen Bervin, *Nets* (New York: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2013).
- 73 *Ibid.*
- 74 K. Silem Mohammad, *Sonnagrams 1-20* (Ohio: Slack Buddha Press, 2010).





LEEDS BECKETT UNIVERSITY

LEEDS SCHOOL OF ARTS

Typeset in: Univers and Cochin

Printed by: Platinum HPL

First edition: 500 copies

This exhibition and publication by Mark Staniforth are presented at Leeds Beckett University for educational purposes only.