

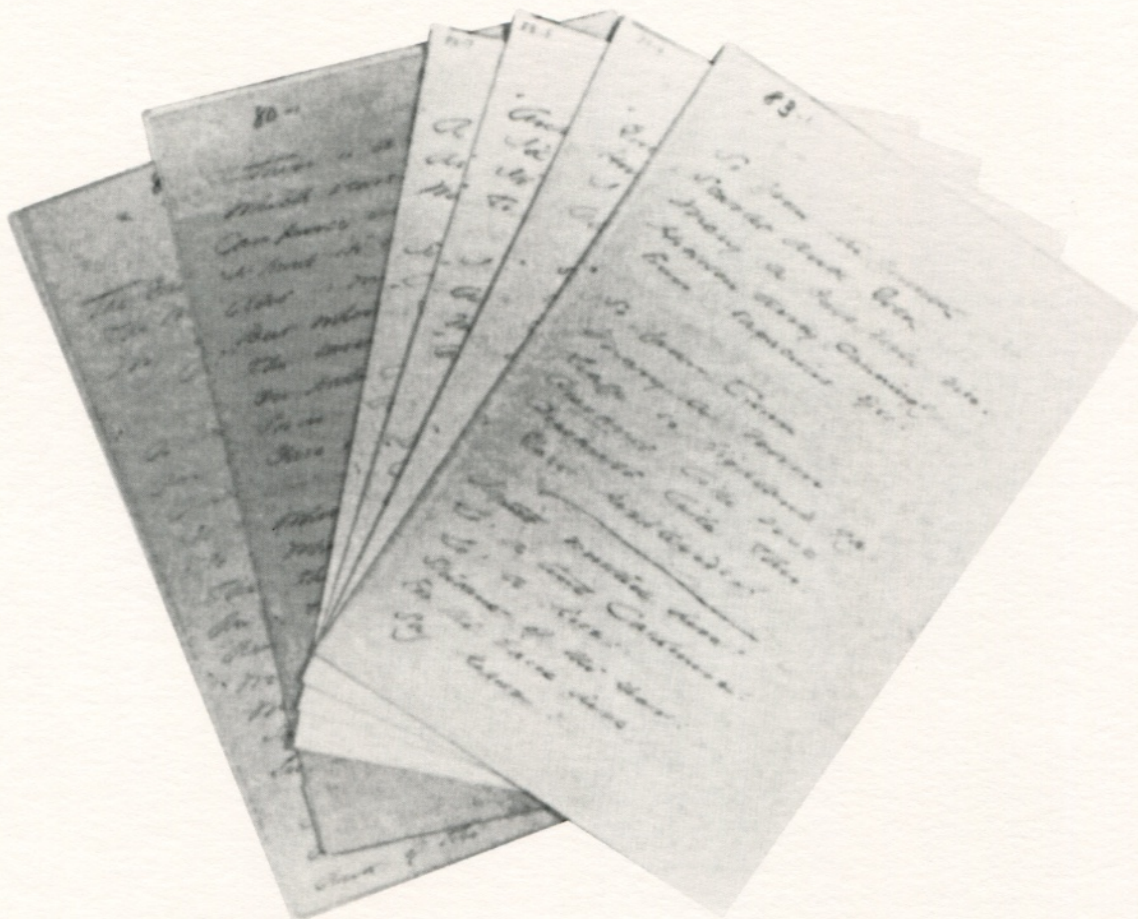


THE DICKINSON COMPOSITES

Jen Bervin



Granary Books
2010



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The Dickinson Composites draws upon a series of six quilts I made by embroidering the poet Emily Dickinson's unusual punctuation markings from her fascicles. Most contemporary readers are familiar with Dickinson's use of dashes, but few have had the opportunity to see her ubiquitous + marks or the variant words to which they correspond because they are typically omitted from print by editors. Dickinson's editorial legacy is complicated at best; her manuscripts were dismembered, regrouped, scissored, and marked by her various editors as they changed hands. Dickinson chose not to publish her work during her lifetime, but shared her poems selectively and often through correspondence with friends through the post. Dickinson's form of sharing her poems epitomizes Paul Celan's conception of poems as "gifts to the attentive," particularly because she retuned even the same poem subtly for different recipients. Dickinson instructed her sister to burn her papers after she died. Thankfully the request was not honored and approximately 1,800 manuscript poems and more than a thousand letters remain.

With the exception of Ralph W. Franklin's landmark two-volume facsimile edition¹ of Dickinson's handwritten manuscript poems, Dickinson's editors have restructured her poems considerably for print; even the current variorum edition of Dickinson's work persists in "correcting" her line breaks and removes or replaces her crosses with brackets and numbers to clarify, i.e. change, the system that Dickinson authored. There is no typeset trade edition of Dickinson's poems with her line breaks, markings, and variants intact. The manuscripts, though they are the only authoritative versions of Dickinson's poems, have had little authority in typeset publications thus far. By imposing conventional views of literary authorship and divorcing her poems from their formal integrity and its specificity, the implications of an

unusual, complex, and remarkably beautiful variant system are lost.

Between approximately 1858 and 1864, Emily Dickinson grouped her poems into forty stab-bound packets (non-nested sheets of folded paper) containing eleven to twenty poems per packet. These packets were posthumously called "fascicles" by her editors, assigned numbers 1-40, and ordered chronologically.² Fascicle is a clumsily term, given that it means "a section of a book published in installments as a volume or a pamphlet" and Dickinson gives no indication that she considered the groupings published, nor that making a larger book was her intention. She used stationery typical of nineteenth century correspondence to write her poems—folded sheets with four writing surfaces—two outer and two inner—with a small, embossed image in the upper left corner.³ She copied her poems out in ink onto the individual folded sheets, extracting them from their nested clusters to do so and gathered them together with a very humble binding—a single long stitch of red and white twist thread, similar to the kind you'd see tied around a box from the bakery. The stitch served mostly as a grouping device; it teetered near the folded edge, holding the folds ever so slightly closed, secured by a simple granny knot. There are no covers, no titles, and no outward formal indication of an extended sequence beyond the individual binding.

After fascicle 40, Dickinson continued to work on similar pages but she stopped binding them. Her visionary late work turns almost completely toward the fragment, both in textual and physical form.⁴ I chose to work with Dickinson's groupings of the fascicles because it is where the variants first surface and her experiments with them are borne out.

LEFT: *Fascicle folios*. Image courtesy of Polly Longworth and the Amherst College Archives and Special Collections.

By variant, I refer to any word, phrase or line
Dickinson preceded with a + mark inside the body
of the poem or any word, phrase or line preceded
by a + mark in a cluster at the end of the poem like
a postscript.

Here is a transcription of poem 645 from Fascicle 34
on the right:

*Bereavement in their
death to feel
Whom We have never seen –
A Vital Kinsmanship import
Our Soul and their's – between –*

*For Stranger – Strangers do
not mourn –
There be Immortal friends
Whom Death see first –
'tis news of this
That paralyze Ourselves –*

*Who, vital only to Our Thought –
Such Presence bear away
In dying – 'tis as if Our + Souls
Absconded – suddenly –*

+ World – selves – Sun –

To read the variants in the context of the poem on
the right, find the word preceded by a + in the body
of the poem and replace it with each word preceded
by a + from the variant cluster at the end. Doing so,
you have:

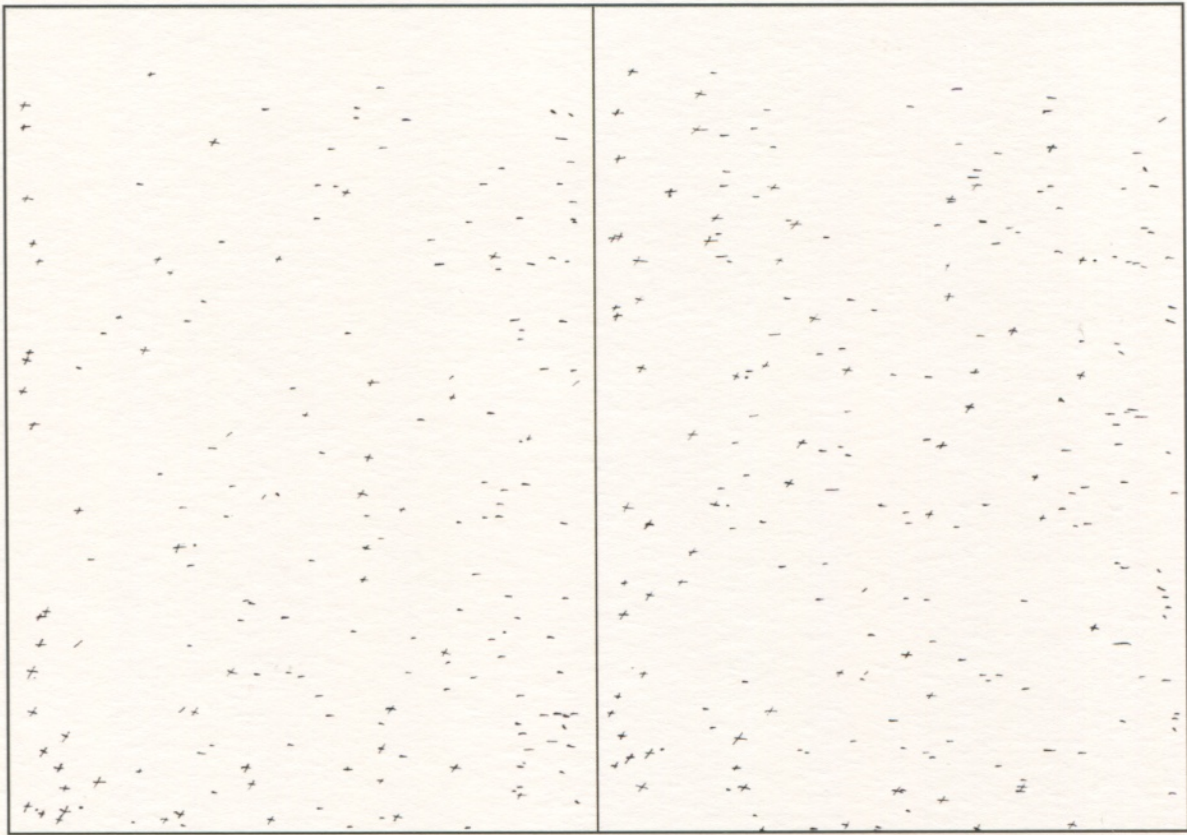
*In dying – 'tis as if Our + World –
Absconded – suddenly –*

*In dying – 'tis as if Our + selves –
Absconded – suddenly –*

*In dying – 'tis as if Our + Sun –
Absconded – suddenly –*

There is only one word marked within poem 645,
but in other poems, you might find a dozen marked
variants in the poem. To read them, you travel back
into the poem to search out their corresponding
locations. This process of reading backwards always
reminds me of Dickinson's fragment:

*Did you ever
read one of
her poems back-
ward, because
the plunge from
the front over-
turned you?
I sometimes
often have
many times have —
A Something
overtakes the
Mind —
(A 851, Prose fragment 30)*



The digital composite for The Composite Marks of Emily Dickinson's Fascicle 34

I wanted to map Dickinson's marking system, to visibly reverse its omission. Using scans of Franklin's *The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson: A Facsimile Edition*, I made digital composites of the patterns that form when all of the + and - marks in a single fascicle remain in position, isolated from the text, layered in one composite field. The fascicles from which I made composites showed clearly identifiable shifts in the size, frequency, and distribution of the marks.

The first time I saw the manuscript punctuation markings, I thought they looked like electron clouds in and around the poems. I felt that the dashes might need to be seen in relation to the + marks, that they both weigh in the balance—a sort of temporal space out (-), space in (+) the poem. I am inclined to understand both these marks and the variant words as carefully chosen and integral to her poetics, however private. I've come to feel that the specificity of the + and - marks in Dickinson's work are aligned in energetic relation with a larger gesture that her poems make as they enter, exit and exceed the known world. They go vast with her poems. They risk, double, displace, fragment, unfix, and gesture beyond—to loss, to the infinite, to “exstasy,” to extremity.

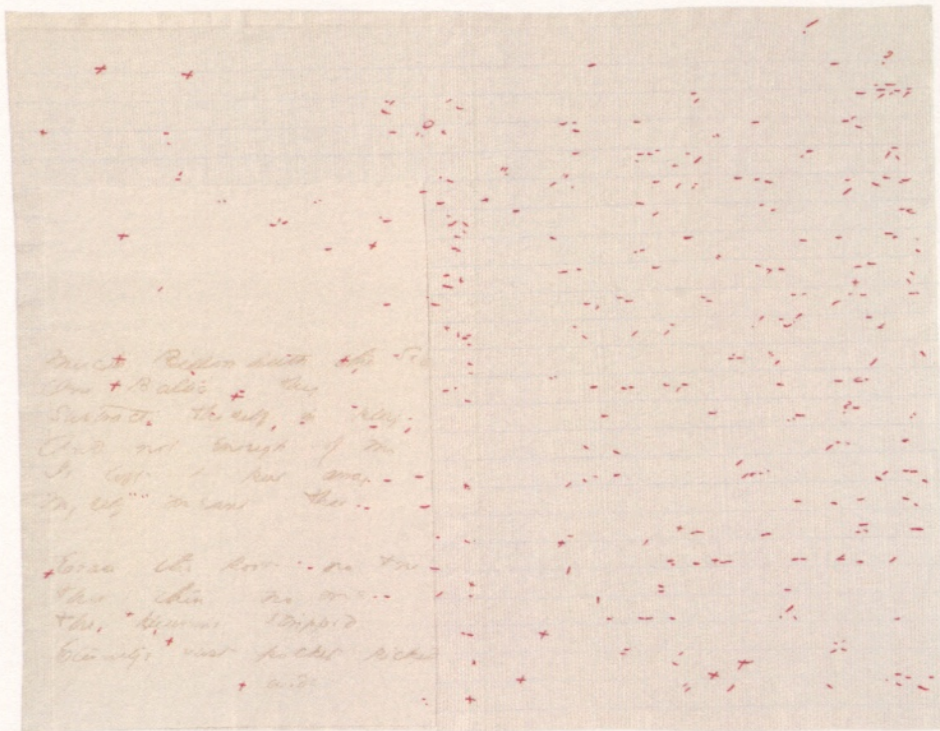
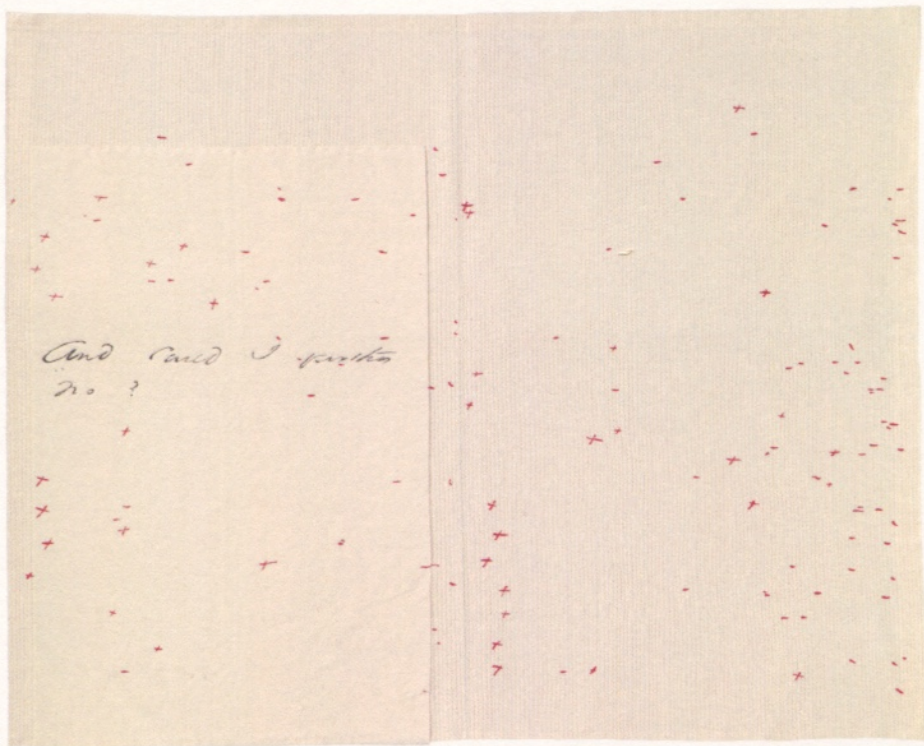
The embroidered works I made are quite large to convey the exact gesture of Dickinson's individual handwritten marks. Each quilt is 6 x 8 feet (1.83 meters x 2.44 meters), made from a sheet of cotton batting backed with muslin. I selected the batting because it looked like magnified paper; the muslin gives it strength. On each quilt, I hand-sewed a vertical center line (a stand-in for the folio fold) and then machine-sewed a subtle ground of lines that replicate those of the ruled paper and/or light-ruled laid paper. I transferred the digital composite marks onto the batting with a projector and pencil, and embroidered them with red silk thread—red because it consists of the longest wavelengths of light the human eye can see.

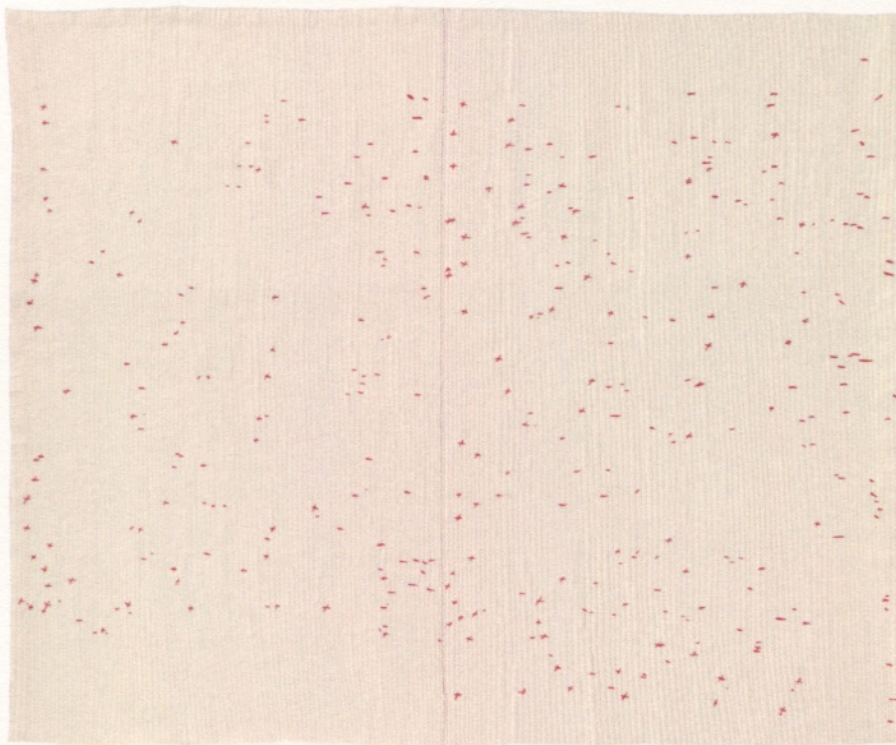
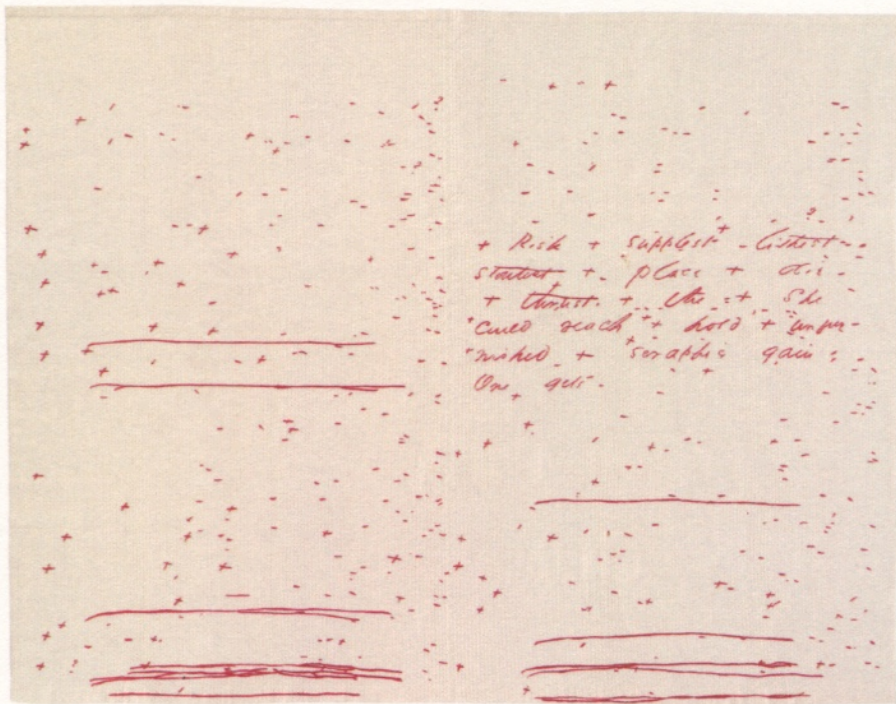
The Dickinson Composites are mends of omissions, samplers of “a system of Aesthetics - / Far superior to mine” (Poem 137). I wanted to visually reassert the vital presence of the omitted marks, to raise questions about them. Choosing to circumvent what seemed like an intractable editorial situation, I tried to make something as forceful, abstract, and generously beautiful as Dickinson's work is to me.

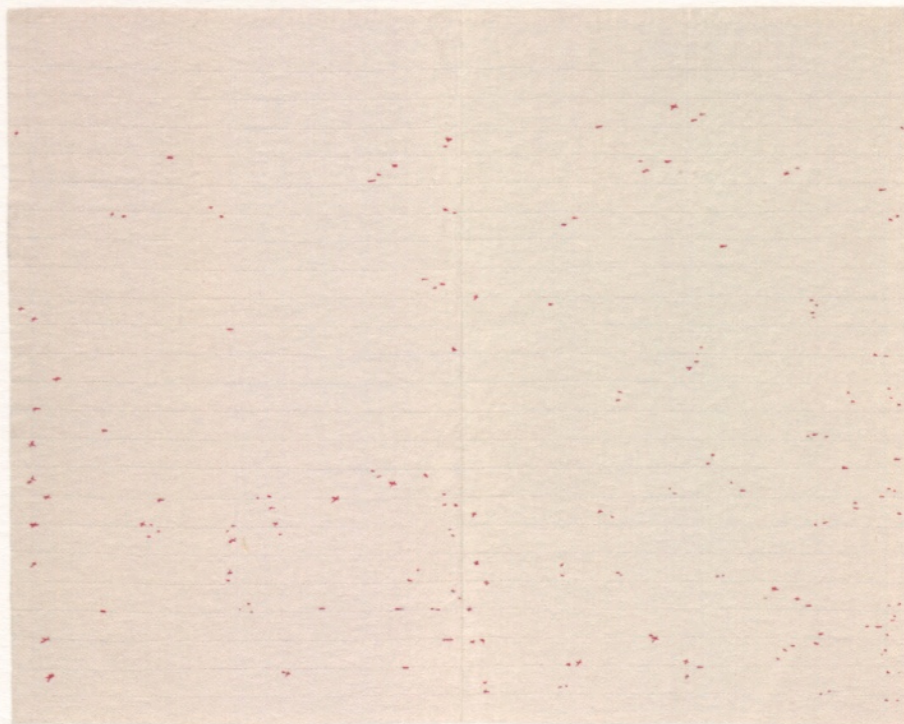
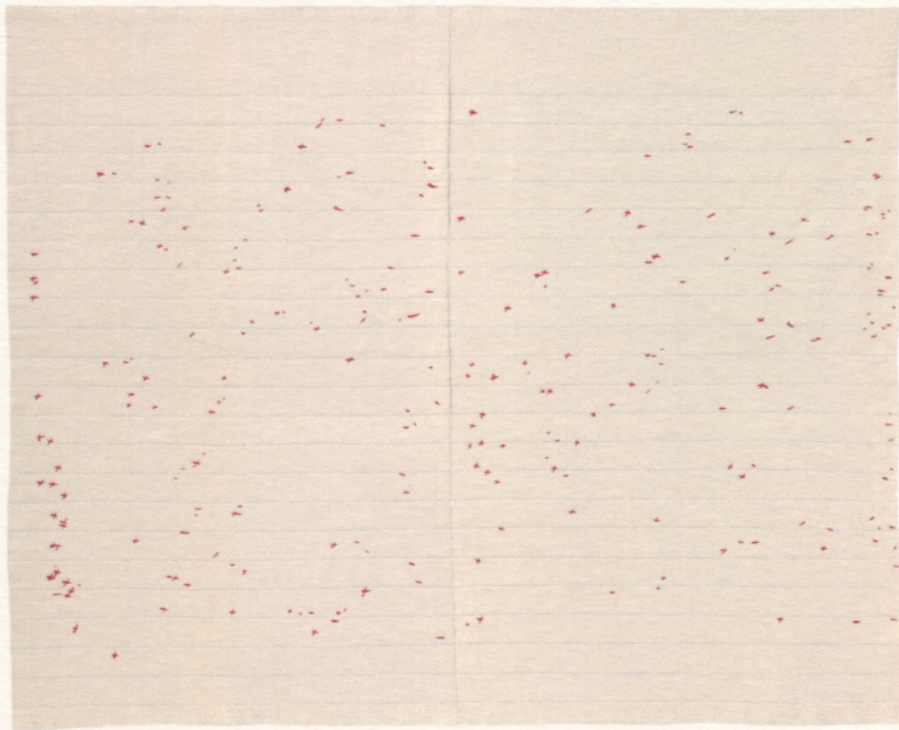




The Composite Marks of Emily Dickinson's Fascicle 40, 16, 38, and 34 *installed at the Wright Exhibition Space, July 2006*

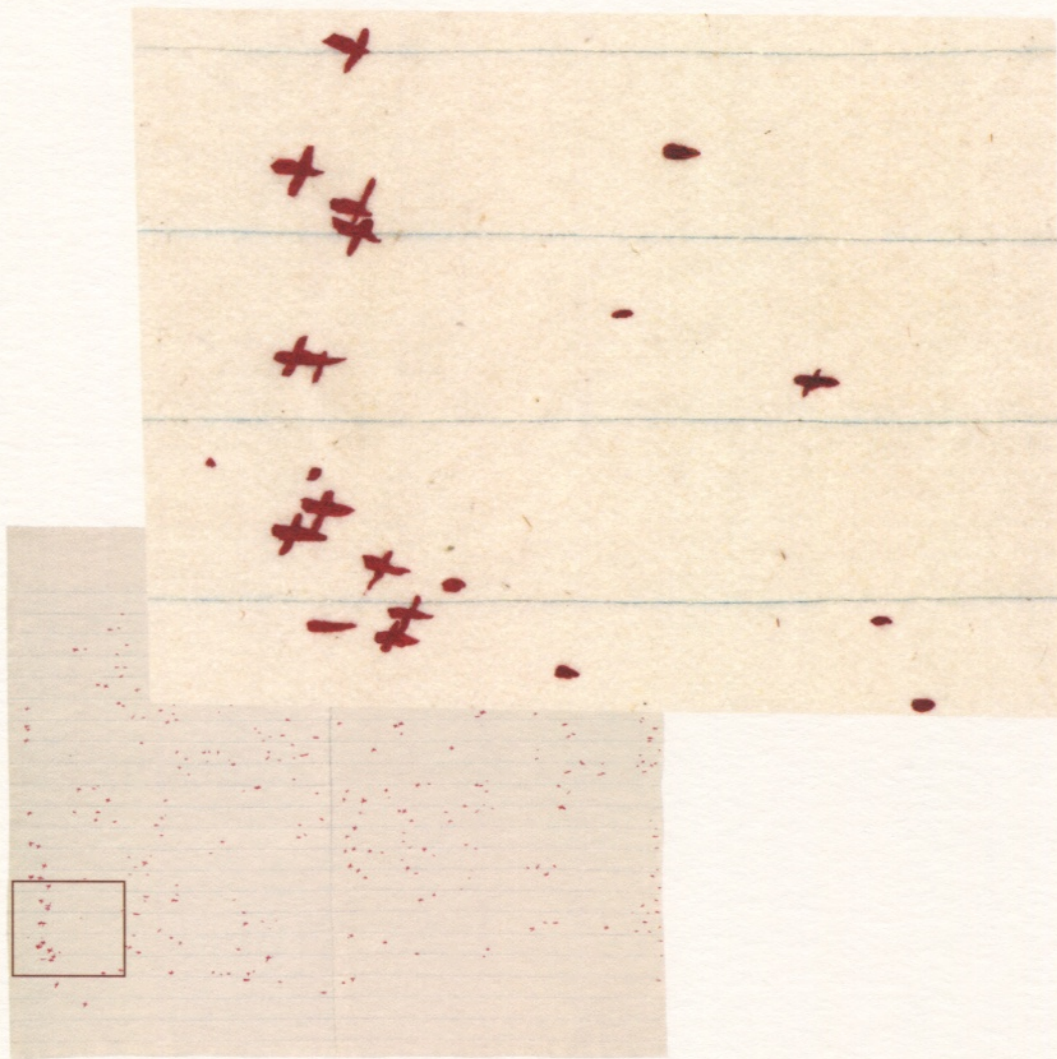








+ Rich + Supple - Gillett -
Stator + p. Cavi + 2.1 -
+ Chert + 2.1 + 5.1
"Cull road" + 2.1 + 5.1
"Wick" + 5.1 + 9.1
On 9.1



LIST OF WORKS

The Composite Marks of Emily Dickinson's Fascicle 16,
2004 (page 7)

Cotton batting, muslin, and thread. Laid lines,
pinned insert page on verso.

6 x 8 feet (1.83 meters x 2.44 meters)

Transcription of line embroidered in black thread:

And could I further / "no" ?

(A 68; Poem 446)

The Composite Marks of Emily Dickinson's Fascicle 19
2006 (page 7)

Cotton batting, muslin, and thread. Laid lines, blue rule,
pinned insert page on verso.

6 x 8 feet (1.83 meters x 2.44 meters)

The excerpt embroidered in a flaxen gold handspun silk:

Much Billow bath the Sea -

One Baltic - they -

Subtract thyself, in play,

And not enough of me

Is left - to put away -

"Myself" meant thee -

Erase the Root - no tree -

Thee - then - no me -

The Heavens stripped -

Eternity's + vast pocket, picked -

+ wide

(H 148; Poem 587)

The Composite Marks of Emily Dickinson's Fascicle 28
2006 (page 8)

Cotton batting, muslin, and thread. Laid lines.

6 x 8 feet (1.83 meters x 2.44 meters)

In composite 28, the long horizontal lines Dickinson drew
to signal the end of the poem are also included.

The variants from Poem 288 embroidered in red silk:

+ Risk + supplest - lithest -

stoutest + place + die -

+ thrust + the + she

could reach + hold + unfur-

nished + seraphic gain,

One gets -

(H 139; Poem 288)

The Composite Marks of Emily Dickinson's Fascicle 34
2006 (page 8)

Cotton batting, muslin, and thread. Laid lines.

6 x 8 feet (1.83 meters x 2.44 meters)

The Composite Marks of Emily Dickinson's Fascicle 38
2006 (page 9)

Cotton batting, muslin, and thread. Blue rule.

6 x 8 feet (1.83 meters x 2.44 meters)

The Composite Marks of Emily Dickinson's Fascicle 40
2004 (page 9)

Cotton batting, muslin, and thread. Blue rule.

6 x 8 feet (1.83 meters x 2.44 meters)

Sewn excerpt for *The Dickinson Composites*
(Granary Books 2010) from *The Composite Marks*
of Emily Dickinson's Fascicle 28 (page 10)

Cotton batting, muslin, and thread. Laid lines, light rule.

11 1/4 x 14 1/2 inches (28.6 x 37 cm)

An image of the hand-sewn sample enclosed in this
edition, with an image of the full quilt with excerpt area
marked. It is made at the same scale, in the same materials
using the same methods as the quilts.

Sewn excerpt for *The Dickinson Composites*,
(Granary Books 2010) from *The Composite Marks of Emily*
Dickinson's Fascicle 38 (page 11)

Cotton batting, muslin, and thread. Blue rule.

11 1/4 x 14 1/2 inches (28.6 x 37 cm)

NOTES

- 1 Dickinson, Emily. *The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Ralph W. Franklin, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1981).
- 2 Franklin, Ralph W. *The Editing of Emily Dickinson: A Reconsideration* (Madison, Milwaukee, and London: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1967).
- 3 For good physical mock-ups of Dickinson's manuscript folios, see *The Master Letters of Emily Dickinson* (a facsimile edition), ed. R.W. Franklin (Amherst, Mass.: Amherst College Press, 1986).
- 4 For brilliant work on the late fragments, see Marta L. Werner, *Emily Dickinson's Open Folios: Scenes of Reading, Surfaces of Writing* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1995); *Radical Scatters: An Electronic Archive of Dickinson's Late Fragments and Related Texts* ed. Marta L. Werner (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1999).

RECOMMENDED READING

For an extended study of the fascicles and variants, read Sharon Cameron, *Choosing Not Choosing*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

For historic, literary, and social context, see Jay Leyda, *The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson*, 2 vol. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960) and Susan Howe, *The Birth-mark: Unsettling the Wilderness in American Literary History* (Hanover, NH, and London: Wesleyan University Press, 1993); and *My Emily Dickinson* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 1985).

For a larger visual context for Dickinson, see Polly Longworth, *The World of Emily Dickinson: A Visual Biography* (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1990); *The Dickinsons of Amherst: Photographs by Joseph Liebling*, essays by Christopher Benfey, Polly Longworth, and Barton Levi St. Armand (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 2001); and *Emily Dickinson's Herbarium: A Facsimile Edition*, introduction by Richard B. Sewall, foreword by Leslie A. Morris, preface by Judith Farr, appendix by Ray Angelo (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001).

Jerome McGann, *The Textual Condition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991) and *Black Riders* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

Logan Esdale, "Dickinson's Epistolary 'Naturalness.'" *The Emily Dickinson Journal* 14: 1 (2005): pp. 1-23.

Dickinson, Emily. *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1986).

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Poet and visual artist Jen Bervin's work brings together text and textile in a practice that encompasses large-scale art works, artist books, poetry, and archival research. Her books include *The Desert*, *Nets*, *A Non-Breaking Space*, *The Red Box*, and *Under What Is Not Under*. Bervin's work has been shown at The Walker Art Center and is in many special collections including Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Library. She has received fellowships in art and writing from The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, The New York Foundation for the Arts, Centrum, Visual Studies Workshop, The MacDowell Colony, and The Camargo Foundation and lives and works in Brooklyn, New York.

ABOUT GRANARY BOOKS

For over twenty-five years, Granary Books has brought together writers, artists, and bookmakers to investigate verbal/visual relations in the time-honored spirit of independent publishing. Granary's mission—to produce, promote, document, and theorize new works exploring the intersection of word, image, and page—has earned the Press a reputation as one of the most unique and significant small publishers operating today.

The Dickinson Composites by Jen Bervin was published by Granary Books in New York City, September 2010.

The edition is comprised of 50 boxes, plus 5 hors commerce. Each box includes:

- One 11 1/2 x 15 x 1 1/2 inch lignin-free light tan archival box with chrome corners
- Two machine sewn and hand-embroidered samples excerpted from Composites 28 and 38
- Large individual color images of all six quilts, composites of Fascicle 16, 19, 28, 34, 38, and 40
- An unbound 16 page color booklet for context
- A folded sheet with silkscreen printed marks at quilt scale from Composite 38, sewn with linen thread and cotton tape

All interior paper is Monadnock Dulcet #80 cover weight printed at Prestone Print in Long Island City, New York. The silkscreen printing for the edition was done at Lower East Side Print Shop in New York City. The quilt images are courtesy of Don Tuttle Photography. Sewn samples for the edition were handmade in Brooklyn in 2010.

CREDITS

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