

## “NO MAN IS AN ISLAND”: UNIARTS HELSINKI PRINTMAKERS’ JOHN DONNE PROJECT AT IMPACT CONFERENCE, SANTANDER (2018)

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Figure 1

*An acquaintance, nearing 50 but fit, breaks down on his Sunday jog due to cardiac arrest. He is saved by the accidental passing of a medically trained couple with a defibrillator in their car and the ability to use it.*

*Starting to cycle down a hill after work I realise too late that my bike's brake cables have been intentionally detached. Unable to decelerate, I hurtle down the road, shouting at people to get out of the way, finally coming to a halt after 500 metres, without injury to either myself or others.*

*The English poet and Anglican cleric John Donne (1572 – 1631) fell ill on the eve of his daughter's wedding in late November 1623. The diagnosis of 'relapsing fever' could mean – despite seeming betterment after the 'first critical week' – that the patient 'suddenly succumbed during convalescence' (Motion in: Donne, 1624/1999, XII).*

Figure titles and information:

Figure 1: KuvA printmakers (University of the Arts, Helsinki) *Devotions upon emergent occasions, after John Donne, 2018* (Installation view, mixed media: wall piece, artist's book, sound piece), IMPACT Conference, Biblioteca Central de Cantabria, Santander, 2018 (Image credit: Laura Vainikka)

The keyword in these 'vignettes' is precariousness, a state of being uncertain, unstable or dependent on chance.<sup>1</sup> For John Donne this condition was unthinkable without ultimate reference to the consoling power of a Christian God. This governing ethos of his life was most profoundly documented in his famous prose text of the twenty-three days of a life-threatening illness (*Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions, 1624*). Donne's comfort through faith, however, is not accessible for many who are facing contemporary crises, be they linked to the recent pandemic and its fall-out, or any of the other manifold present emergencies. Instead, as numerous commentators have pointed out, if one is to single out one major feature of our current predicaments, it is their demonstration of global interdependence. This is the case whether the latter is interpreted as positive or not. While the understanding of our interconnectedness is often voiced, it serves far too rarely as the spirit of our interactions with each other or our environment. Yet it was, of course, pre-empted by Donne in his most frequently quoted passage of *Day XVII of Devotions*: 'No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main' (1624/1999, 103).



Figure 2

I would like to argue that *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions (after John Donne)* (2018) (hereafter abbreviated as *DuEO (after JD)*), the art work by Uniarts printmakers – students, alumni and teachers from the University of the Arts Helsinki – was motivated and is animated by the notion of interdependence through the associated value of collaboration. My aim is to provide an account and critical discussion of the installation, to make it visible beyond its brief exhibition and open it up to debate. Too often, sadly, such initiatives remain undocumented and consequently fail to contribute to the long-term discourses in our field, and contemporary art in general.<sup>2</sup>

Unlike Donne's single-authored publication, as well as so much artistic production in general, *DuEO (after JD)* was a collaborative undertaking. It was on view during *Impact 10*, the international printmaking conference, in Santander, Spain, in September 2018 where I saw it.<sup>3</sup> Viewers were presented with a large wall-piece measuring 400cm (W) by 300cm (H) (fig. 1). A large book work (H52 x W80cm) was displayed on a stand at a few metres' distance from the wall piece (fig. 2). The latter was accompanied by an audio work (accessible via headphones attached to the stand).

As its title indicates, the project took its impetus – and tri-partite structure – from Donne's prose text. Divided into twenty-three parts, each corresponding to one day of his illness, each section or 'day' is further split into three:

*1. Meditations, upon our Humane Condition; 2. Expostulations, and Debaterments with God; 3. Prayers, upon the severall occasions, to him.* This trilateral division of each 'day' is in allusion to the Holy Trinity. On a pragmatic level, the text entails a daily record of the author's sickness. At the same time it acts as the spiritual lens through which Donne considers the human condition in its abject state on earth. For him, its only salvation is through the relationship to God. The possibility of death was always present – the more so for people of the 17<sup>th</sup> century

<sup>1</sup> Precariousness: 'The state or condition of being precarious (in various senses); esp. insecurity, uncertainty, instability'. Precarious: 'Dependent on chance or circumstance; uncertain; liable to fail; exposed to risk, hazardous; insecure, unstable.' OED Online.

<sup>2</sup> Conferences, such as IMPACT, have provided a welcome platform to change this situation.

<sup>3</sup> Participating artists: Miina Aho, Maria Erikson, Johanna Heikkilä, Inma Herrera, Tatu Liimatainen, Ignata Elena López, Celeen Mahé, Tuuli Ojala, Laura Pakarinen, Ari Pelkonen, Emma Peura, Jenni Rahkonen, Harriina Räninä, Mia Seppälä, Suvi Sysi, Emilia Tanner, Milla Toukkari, Laura Vainikka, Anniina Vainionpää, Emma Valkama, Annu Vertanen.

It was the second collaborative project during Professor Annu Vertanen's tenure. The first one was a collaborative book project with Dean Dass, Adam Wolpa and their students at the University of Charlottesville, Virginia, during 2016-17. In 2019 staff and students – together with three other universities – participated in *Graphica Creativa 2019* – the international print triennial at Jyväskylä Art Museum in Finland. Another collaborative project with printmaking staff and students at Geidei University, Tokyo – originally to culminate in an exhibition in and visit to Japan – fell through due to Covid.

Figure 2: KuvA printmakers (University of the Arts, Helsinki) *Devotions upon emergent occasions, after John Donne, 2018 (Artist's Book)* (Image credit: Petri Summanen)

than for most of us today, at least in the West – but became imminent due to his illness. For Donne this prospect constitutes both threat and release. In the end, the poet’s recovery becomes a sign of God’s grace – and for those of us less religiously inclined, of hope perhaps.

### DuEO (AFTER JD) WALL PIECE

The wall piece comprised of twenty-three elongated sheets of paper or prints, each measuring H13 x W400 cm (fig. 3). Each was produced by one of the participants in response to a specific day of Donne’s text. (The latter had been allocated randomly by raffle.) The upper length of each sheet was attached to a wooden lath structure, its lower edge hung free, slightly overlapping the one underneath. The overall effect of the structure was eye-catching and substantial, evoking a large abstract painting. The surface with its undulating, almost wave-like effect partly resembled a relief-type sculpture. Its composition of individual “leaves” made it reminiscent of an enormous book-like object, as was the intention of the artists. The piece’s overall appearance – notwithstanding the actual labour of putting together the structure – was that of a light, perhaps temporary, maybe even slightly precarious assemblage. A construction that could be seemingly put together effortlessly and taken apart easily – perhaps to be reassembled elsewhere.

Its inspired arrangement of combining each individually designed leaf – like a page in a book or a film strip of quasi-narrative length – led to the creation of a ‘narrative’ tapestry. This was despite the abstract character of many of its individual contributions. Hence the wall piece combined the scale and narrative potential of a large painting – releasing its ‘story’ all at once – with the spatiality of a book, divulging the narrative in stages.

Although, as indicated, a collaborative work – an important point to which I will return – each participating artist had the freedom to respond in whichever way they chose to the specific theme of ‘their’ Donne day.<sup>4</sup> Only adherence to the pre-determined dimensions, material support (such as specific paper) and certain colour restrictions were stipulated.

With a few exceptions most artists treated the long thin horizontal ‘strip’ as if it were an excerpt or ‘snapshot’ out of a larger composition that could, ostensibly, continue above, below, before and beyond the visible. Some artists deployed additive ‘frames’ (fig. 4) as with a film strip (see Inma Herrera’s repeat etching – fourth from top; or Tuuli Ojala’s small prints and drawings which were attached to the main sheet of paper (fig. 5). This method proved particularly conducive to the uncommonly elongated shape of the individual paper sheet.

In this and other cases the abstract responses of the artists are suggestive of both the unexpected and unknown bodily changes or symptoms that an illness can produce. Furthermore, they evoke the ensuing fear in the patient who witnesses the familiar (their own body) turn into an alien entity, out to attack.

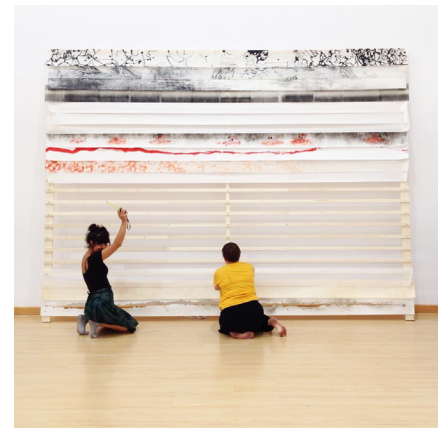


Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5

<sup>4</sup> The instructions for the contribution to wall piece set up certain restrictions: ‘The material for the wall piece is paper. The paper has to be either from a roll of either bright or natural white Hahnemühle or Koze. It is permitted to collage other papers on to Hahnemühle or Koze. ... There are limitations regarding the colours to be used. Artists can use only vermilion, white, black and transparent inks. Inks may be permitted to be mixed freely.’ Compare this to the more open guidelines for the book: ‘The material for the printed book pages can be chosen freely! The only rule is that it has to be “something paper-like” and you have to be able to browse the book. There is no limitation as to the visual content, images’ size or placement on the page or on the spread. No limitations regarding colour or medium.’ (Information provided via email by Professor Annu Vertanen.)

Figure 3: KuvA printmakers (University of the Arts, Helsinki) *Devotions upon emergent occasions, after John Donne*, 2018 (Installing the wall piece at IMPACT, Santander, 2018) (Image Credit: Annu Vertanen) Figure 4: Details of the wall piece (Inma Herrera fourth from the top) (Image credit: Annu Vertanen) Figure 5: Details of the wall piece (in the centre of the above image, see Tuuli Ojala’s small prints and drawings attached to the main sheet) (Image credit: Annu Vertanen)



The impression of a 'snapshot' taken out of a continuum also applies to Emma Peura's eye-catching painterly input of *Day XIV* ('The Physicians Observe These Accidents to Have Fallen upon the Critical Days'). It comprises of a bright carmine-red line, starting with a strong, full mark on the left (the direction of writing in the West) and stretching unbroken, yet with irregular thickness and ragged edges, across the whole width of the sheet (fig. 6). Gradually it becomes weaker and disappears below the upper sheet for a short bit. Yet it re-emerges, albeit broken and thin, as it approaches the right-hand side – as if to move, however falteringly, beyond the right-hand edge. Undertaken without refilling the brush, its act of making is not only a durational feat. It can be seen as an imaginative performance by the artist of the uncertain and perilous existential situation to which it refers – one that includes endurance, as well as a faint glimmer of hope.



Figure 6

Similarly hazardous in its making, but contained – albeit precariously – within the width of the paper, is Emilia Tanner's *Day I* ('The First Alteration, the First Grudging, of the Sickness'). Hers is the initial sheet marking the lower edge of the wall piece. Like Peura, Tanner has applied a line across the whole width of the paper. But unlike Peura's 'continuing' line, the starting point in Tanner's case is a few centimetres in and the end point finishes short off the right-hand edge of the strip of paper. Her line comprises of a stretched-out open gap with ragged edges and charred smoky veils along its entire width. The sheet is barely held in place by the short section of intact paper at either side. This is a result of Tanner's unusual method of sandblasting the paper. The evident fierceness, even violence, of this atypical treatment of the material can be read as corresponding to the reception of the sudden change that has befallen Donne. Despite all his declared acceptance of God's will, it is evident in his somehow incredulous outcry and argumentative elaborations of *Day I*: 'this minute I was well, and am ill, this minute' (1624/1999, 3). His unexpected plight is made more intolerable by all the previous care – the enumerations of which sound positively contemporary – lavished upon the body in vain.<sup>5</sup>

These visually and materially striking contributions alternate with ones where the imagery is more delicate and elusive or almost disappears.

Thus the wall piece seems to lay open its 'message' all at once – notwithstanding various contributions that generate their impact in understated ways that may require closer inspection, as indicated. An artist book, by contrast, discloses itself in quite a different way. Its distinct material qualities (of fine paper, tactile cover and design, perhaps involving the embossing/debossing of its title, its visible 'stack' of marked leaves or pages) hold enticement and generate anticipation. But they do so by giving merely clues of what is to come. The temporal quality of a book – much more versatile in an artist's book than a text book, even in *DuEO (after JD)* with its pre-determined chronology – is supplemented in the present piece by an audio work. It was created in a similarly collaborative fashion as the other two components. Individually gathered sound fragments were edited by Ignata Elena López into a collage of recognisable sounds (string bows, footsteps,

Figure 6: Upper half: Emma Peura's red line; bottom: Emilia Tanner's sandblasted line (Image credit: Laura Vainikka)

<sup>5</sup> 'We study health, and we deliberate upon our meats, and drink, and air, and exercises, and we hew and we polish every stone that goes to that building; and so our health is a long and regular work: but in a minute a cannon batters all, overthrows all, demolishes all; a sickness unprevented for all our diligence, unsuspected for all our curiosity; nay, undeserved, ... summons us, seizes us, possesses us, destroys us in an instant.' (3)



voices, bird song). These were combined with digitally or mechanically strained, sometimes almost strangulated noises or just vibrations. This blend of contrasts, of louder or softer, deep or shrill, echoing, rustling or swooshing sounds, combined the familiar and the strange, abstract and identifiable, harmonious and discordant. It found a counterpart in the imagery of the artist's book.

### DuEO (AFTER JD) ARTIST'S BOOK

The book derived its immediate materiality, its object-character, from its sizeable dimensions (H52 x W40cm with the full double page spread amounting to 80cm) and cover plates that were made of ordinary ply-wood (fig. 7). Laser-engraved into the wood of the front cover were the name, title and date of Donne's text piece in a period-style font type.<sup>6</sup> The inscriptions' receding excisions into the wood were reminiscent of the indentations of the intaglio plate used in etching. This is the opposite of the more typical relief or projecting nature of the woodblock matrix usually associated with the material. The fact that the letters are seared into the wood of the cover by the heat of the laser beam – evident in their light brown, 'burnt' colouring – can be seen as an apt metaphor for the seriousness and intensity of Donne's illness. Moreover, it hints at the violent incursion of the signs of illness on the body. But this literally searing visual effect also corresponds to the affective nature, the passion and even the speed of Donne's poetic undertaking.<sup>7</sup> Fire's association with cleansing and purification – the latter a constant theme of Donne's text – is also fitting

Each double spread of the book (with a few exceptions to which I will come back later), was carried out by one artist and, as with the wall piece, tallied with one day of Donne's prose text.

The majority of artists used both the left and right-hand sides of the double spread page (or even two double spreads (fig. 8)). One artist employed seven sheets of double spread pages (Vertanen). Some only engaged the right-hand side (for example *Day I, II, VII*); one only the left (see *Day XIV*). This diversity attests to the freedom with which each artist was able to interpret the brief, even in terms of the spatial occupation of the material.

The letter-press-like text<sup>8</sup> inside the book entails the contents page which lists the name of the artist next to the respective day (in Latin numerals) of Donne's text (fig. 9). There is a preface giving a brief introduction to the historic text and the artistic project. A page bearing the number and Donne's descriptive title for each day precedes each artistic contribution. While Donne's text is otherwise absent from the book, focusing on the individual visual responses, instead of an image the prayer for *Day XII* ('They apply pigeons to draw vapors from the head') is fully reproduced.

There is a congruence between the design for the wall piece and the book in some contributions: Take *Day III*, Ari Pelkonen's abstract patterning of many tiny lozenge-shaped scarifications that resemble



Figure 7

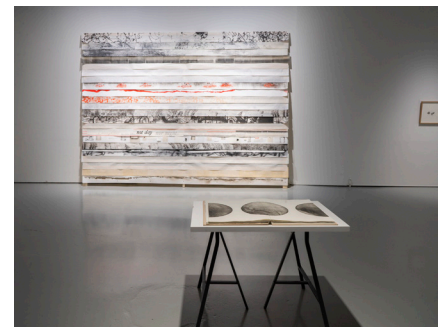


Figure 8



Figure 9

<sup>6</sup> The date printed on the cover is '1623'. While Donne was ill in late 1623, the text was published in early 1624. See Motion, in Donne, 1999, XII-XIII. <sup>7</sup> Andrew Motion comments on this in his Preface to the 1999 British edition of *Devotions*: 'Donne seems to have been over the worst of the early stages by December 6 (1623), but he was still feeble two months later.' ... 'The fact that Donne managed to plan, write and publish his *Devotions* during this extremely difficult time is remarkable. ... He began to take notes for the book as soon as the first wave of his illness was broken, organized its intricate structure at a feverish pace, and completed it during his recovery' (XII). The manuscript 'was entered in the Stationers Register on January 9 (1624) and printed 'by February 1' (XIII).

<sup>8</sup> Despite its 'look', the text was not printed by letter press but is a case of skeuomorphism – where a digital interface is made to look like its 'real-life' counterpart. In this case, the digitally created text file was competently laser-engraved into the paper by Milla Toukkari. This method of printing does even imitate the indentation of the (wooden or metal) font type that 'true' letter press printing achieves; in a way it mimics the specific tactility and effect of letter press printing. The soft brown effect of the laser-cut text passages into the paper also repeated the appearance of the burnt-into-the-wood look of the front and back cover where the text was more dramatically laser-engraved into the wood. Thus a congruence was achieved between these different elements.

Figure 7: The Artist's Book: Cover (Image credit: Petri Summanen)  
 Figure 8: The Artist's Book: Double-spread (Image credit: Petri Summanen)  
 Figure 9: The Artist's Book : Contents page (Image credit: Petri Summanen)

a hide- or skin like texture (fig. 10). The artist's adroit manipulation of the properties of liquids that either attract or repel the ink has resulted in the plain paper being exposed in places – the surface acts like skin laid bare, or indeed, new skin. These material manoeuvres parallel the physiological vagaries of the illness and their metaphorical implications of both disease and (hope of) renewed wellbeing.

Annu Vertanen's *Day XV* ('I sleep not day nor night') similarly probes the material properties and the structural elements of the book form. Utilising overlays of transparent sheets and repetition in the wall piece as well as the book, she has put into effect a range of methods in the latter (figs. 11-14). For example, she plays off left and right-hand page and exploits the sequencing of the book format. The resulting complex material assemblage across seven double pages creates a dense and durational element as invoked by the title ('I sleep not day nor night'). Concurrently, it mirrors the anxious recursive repetitiveness of the condition the title describes. The imagery consists of varying and repeated abstract motifs, made up of linear patterns, mostly horizontal lines. These are either soft and organic; but can also be white, sharp and thin, emerging out of deep black. They may be interrupted by a spike here and there and resemble a scientific sleep pattern chart. Alternatively, the lines are crisply, mechanically delineated in red, curving back on themselves and forming into an ouroboric shape. These largely page-covering motifs are interspersed or overlaid with large letter press word fragments, taken directly from Donne's title. A whole page early in the spread in monochrome light-blue stands out (fig. 12). Although printed in oil-based ink, its subtle look is that of Vertanen's favoured printing method, water-based Japanese woodcut or Mokuhanga. The page therefore provides not only an intimation, but a direct sensory opportunity for the viewer to feel momentarily the calm that is so anxiously desired, but not reached by the writer of the title lines. In this way, both format and imagery manifest the characteristics of the condition alluded to in the title – and known to many of us to this very day.

*Day VI* ('The physician comes'), Harriina Räninä's double spread (technically a monoprint) likewise conjures the tribulations of the illness, especially its tortuous, difficult condition, its figurati "knottiness" (fig. 15). It does so quite literally by a direct imprint of tangled stripes of paper of varying width and length. The larger lines undulate across the whole width of both pages. Some of them peter out into pure single, occasionally straight lines. Others are twisted and turn onto themselves, forming the proverbial knots as well as loops and clusters. The imprinting in some areas is strong and black, in others faint. The directness of the monoprint, that is the straight printing of the shapes without a separate matrix as is usual in printmaking, lends the image an almost photographic quality, a 'realism' that chimes with the visceral nature of the illness.

*Day XIII*: 'The sickness declares the infection and malignity thereof by spots'. Across both pages appears the close-up photographic overhead view of *Stachys Byzantina* or Lamb's-Ear (fig. 16). Fittingly



Figure 10



Figure 11

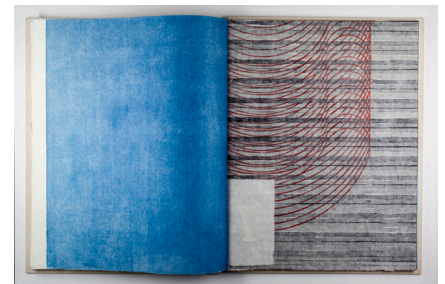


Figure 12



Figure 13



Figure 14

Figure 10: Ari Pelkonen *Day III* (woodcut and Indian ink) (Image credit: Petri Summanen)  
 Figure 11: Annu Vertanen *Day XV* (woodcut) (Image credit: Petri Summanen)  
 Figure 12: Annu Vertanen *Day XV* (woodcut) (Image credit: Petri Summanen)  
 Figure 13: Annu Vertanen *Day XV* (woodcut) (Image credit: Petri Summanen)  
 Figure 14: Annu Vertanen *Day XV* (woodcut) (Image credit: Petri Summanen)



a plant chosen by the artist, Milla Toukkari, on account of its medicinal properties and applications.<sup>9</sup> It is shown removed from its natural habitat and spread out flat – specimen-like – against a dark background, like a dead or ill body laid out for dissection or inspection. The jumbled, intertwined roots are displayed on the left-hand side and the curled, twisted stems and leaves on the right. This realistic, tormented-looking image is punctuated by a random pattern of large white circles, revealing the unprinted paper. The impression is of ‘holes’, seemingly excised from the pristine photograph. The qualities of photopolymer etching<sup>10</sup> that Toukkari has skilfully employed enhance the already subtle and varied tonal qualities of the black and white source photograph. They extend these from the deepest, velvety black to almost white, thus heightening, even exaggerating the photographic realism. Simultaneously, the cut-out blank or empty dots challenge photography’s customary, assumed realism. (They also provide a witty, tongue-in-cheek allusion to the “spots” in Donne’s title of *Day XIII*.) This contradictory shuttling between the real, as indicated by the photographic image, and the not-real (or differently real in case of the paper) may be read as an analogy to the fact that the signs of illness (‘the infection and malignity by spots’) stand for far more than physical disease. They point to other, psychological as well as spiritual ailments. Moreover, just as the impending possibility of annihilation by death, the ‘holes in the picture’ represent an unsettling intrusion of a quite different real, namely a glimpse of “no thing” or “nothing”. The latter, for most Westerners, even (or especially) Christians like Donne, amounts to a mere threat of extinction. By contrast, in the increasingly popular, if not always well understood Buddhist philosophy it is an intimation of ultimate reality, hence possibility (Boone et al, 2015).



Figure 15

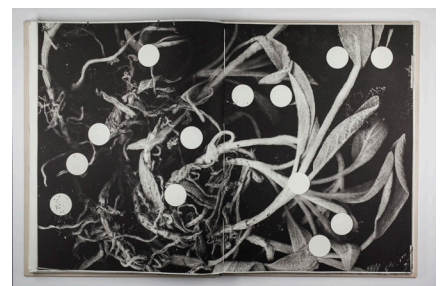


Figure 16

*Day XVIII* (‘The bell rings out, and tells me in him, that I am dead’), a mirror-imaged etching on both pages by Mia Seppälä, is a multi-levelled play on the idea of the page and its framing function (fig. 17). Like Toukkari’s contribution, it is also a play on reality and its representation and the inevitable gap between them.

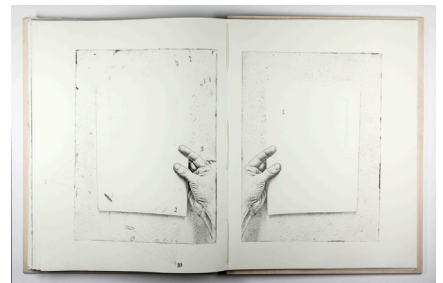


Figure 17

The printed image on the book page shows a realistically, almost photographically accurate drawn hand in the lower inside corner holding a sheet of white paper. Seppälä has ingeniously exploited the persistent convention of the impression of the plate as proof of the ‘fine art print’ status of the etching. This is indicated by the blank, yet deliberately smudged paper surrounding the indentation of the etching plate visible across the page. Its upper edge, however, is almost disappearing into the background of the page on which the image (of the hand holding the paper) is delineated. The literal impression of the etching plate, its outline, is here purposefully blurred, hence the image appears to ‘disappear’ into its support.

The image on the right-hand side of the book is mirrored on the left. Or at least, that is the first impression. The illusion of – or play on – the realism of the image by the means I have just outlined is reinforced as well as undermined by the mirror image. This is cleverly accomplished by the inclusion of various letter press numbers: There is a prominent ‘1’ in the upper left-hand part of the page in the image

<sup>9</sup> Its woolly leaves served to dress wounds in the past. It also possesses antibacterial, antiseptic properties.

<sup>10</sup> Toukkari used ImagOn which functions similar to photopolymer, but the material is purchased as blue film that is attached to a copper plate.

Figure 15: Harriina Ränin *Day VI* (monoprint) (Image credit: Petri Summanen)

Figure 16: Milla Toukkari *Day XIII* (ImagOn) (Image credit: Petri Summanen)

Figure 17: Mia Seppälä *Day XVIII* (ImagOn, collage and drawing) (Image credit: Petri Summanen)



on the right-hand side – a rather unexpected placing as conventionally one might expect the number to appear on the upper right-hand side. A '2' appears in the more standard bottom right-hand corner in the image on the left. This, however, leaves in doubt as to whether any one of the images on the two pages is indeed a mirror image of the other since none of the numbers appear in reverse. That uncertainty is reinforced by the number '5' which materialises in what seems to be the 'background' of the image on the left, just above the hand and outside of the represented paper sheet. And last not least, the number '10' makes its appearance outside the image demarcated by the etching plate – on the 'real' (book) page, but in no position usually designated for a page number. It therefore casts doubt not only on its function within the whole visual scheme, but on the representation itself. In other words, what we may be able to represent, either visually or verbally, is never everything there is to see or comprehend. Seppälä may be playing here on Donne's cogitations in Day XVIII of the miracle of the body's passing from the earth and the simultaneous 'transportation' of the soul into another "world".

These vexing and fascinating visual and conceptual puzzles also remind me of Andrew Motion's characterisation of Donne's text as profoundly 'paradoxical': 'It concentrates on death while celebrating life; it is somber but not sad; it is egotistical but alarmed by isolation.' (1999, XI) And however much Donne seems to accept 'that "the whole course of life is but an active death"' and 'anticipates the prospect of his release', he remains 'always buffeted by opposites' (1999, XVI)

Just as the poet's text, according to Motion, must be read as a brilliant 'performance', a scintillating display of virtuosity, even in light of both physical and spiritual tribulations, so Seppälä's contribution reminds us of visual art's 'artifice'. Like literature it can be considered as a performance which questions and illuminates our lives and ourselves at the same time as it delights. As neuroscientist and philosopher Alvar Noë (2018) puts it: There are 'first order' activities like walking, talking, singing, thinking, making and so on; and 'second-order' activities, namely art, that put first-order activities 'on display'. 'Dance as an art, or choreography, ... puts dancing, as we know it [in everyday life] on display; it stages it. And in doing so it stages, or displays us ...' (33). I would like to argue that the Uniarts project is at once a re-staging – in Noë's sense – of Donne's text and its themes from a contemporary perspective and for a contemporary audience. It is also an engagement with our relationship to books. Therefore, with history and knowledge, their transmission, exchange, their authority and power, their ability (and possible failure) to assume meaning for us. Simultaneously, through the multi-dimensional material encounter of the installation and its individual contributions, it is a staging of the transformative capacity of poetry, or indeed visual art.

This is not only due to the inclusion of the artist's book in the project. The wall piece's appearance and ostensibly mobile structure could also be regarded as an 'extended' book or a 'book at large'. (Even some of the sounds in the audio work fit in here as they could be associated with the rasping noises of the handling of paper.) Here, Jacques

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Derrida's (2005) comments on the book come to mind. His suggestion that the root 'biblion', of many of the words associated with books, first designated the bark of a tree before it became associated with a support for mark making (or writing) seems pertinent. This is not just in light of this artist's book deployment of 'bark', i.e. wood, but also in relation to the wall piece's multi-authored 'leaves' (6). Similarly his comment on the 'bibliothek' as the place where things are 'gathered together' could be identified in the generative principle of all the different parts of the project (7)<sup>11</sup>

The gathering together not of books as such, but the supports (the 'barks', or the paper) for mark making is also closely intertwined with the collaborative nature of the project.

Collaboration has become one of the key terms in contemporary art, a touch-stone of critique and the debate around the value of art, its most radical definition often rejecting the material, semi-permanent 'textual' output (the artwork) that for so long has been associated with authorial art (Roberts/Wright 2004; Kester, 2011).<sup>12</sup> Instead, a project will aim to generate 'participatory, process-based experience' (Kester, 2011, 7) 'in which the process of participatory interaction itself is treated as a form of creative praxis' (ibid, 9). One example of such a practice or practices is Deveron Projects in the small town of Huntly in the North-East Scotland.<sup>13</sup> Under the motto: 'The town is the venue' Deveron Projects was set up expressly to connect artists from all over the world and the community through collaborative projects. While not dismissing this position out of hand, another view is to emphasise the strength of art, following Claire Bishop (2012), as resting in its 'inventive forms of negation' (284). Such art at its best is able – through its sensory, material, formal creation – to make palpable 'the paradoxes that are repressed in everyday discourse, and to elicit ... experiences that enlarge our capacity to imagine the world and our relations anew' (ibid).<sup>14</sup>

In printmaking collaboration is one of the terms that often acts as a convenient label to argue for the medium's contemporaneity and topicality. Its actual meaning in printmaking practices is generally not well defined or critically reflected, although this is changing.<sup>15</sup> It could be argued that printmaking lends itself more easily to certain collaborative endeavours than other art forms. This is due to its technical, material complexity and the huge expertise often required, both of which often demand collaboration. But there are other reasons for its collaborative potential: Take its easily achieved multiplicity, its literal material lightness in form of paper or small multiples. Both of these characteristics allow for transportability and possibilities for exchange. For example, the practice of portfolio collaborations is well established. Often artists across wide physical distances engage in the production of a portfolio of individually authored pieces under a common theme, although variations as to the collaborative element exist.<sup>16</sup> The Uniarts project shares the 'gathering together' of individual contributions of portfolio exchanges but exceeds them formally and conceptually in ambition and scale.

So, while presenting the viewer with a 'textual' output in visual and

<sup>11</sup> Bibliothek – in Greek designates 'the slot to deposit books, the place where books are put'. Derrida points out that in addition to 'the act of putting, depositing' this entails 'giving something over to stabilizing immobility ... and so to statute ... state institution'. But he then concludes: 'So the idea of gathering together, as much as that of the immobility of the statutory and even state deposit seems as essential to the idea of the book as to that of the library.' For one example only, see some of the exhibition projects undertaken by Susan Johanknecht, like *Volumes (of vulnerability)* (1999) which contained 23 artists' books in a battered tin (28 x 18 x 12.5cm). See: <https://www.gefnpress.co.uk/projects/volumes/index.html> [accessed 15/9/2023] <sup>12</sup> In Wright and Roberts' (2004) words: 'Collaboration eliminates art's 'most cherished expectations and ideals – individual authorship and autonomy – and thus addresses the very basis of art's relationship to democracy, the artworld and capitalist relations of production' (532). Wright (2004) favours a situation 'when artists do not do art' (535). Yet, as he concedes, 'it is true that art practices are invariably embedded with more reflexive competencies and perceptions than first meets the eye' (ibid). The latter concession chimes with the emphasis of Bishop's (and many other contemporary theorists' argument, see, for example, philosopher Timothy Morton's *All art is ecological*, 2018) that art's formal properties in the widest sense possess unique world-making or –revealing capabilities.

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.deveron-projects.com/home/> [Accessed 15/9/2023]

<sup>14</sup> Although Bishop's groundbreaking volume focusses ostensibly on participatory art, participation is often not only aligned with collaboration but frequently used synonymously. See Bishop's chapter 1: 'The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents'.

<sup>15</sup> For the problematics of the term 'collaboration' in printmaking, see the notion of the 'master printer'. This (surely outdated) term refers to the often supremely skilled specialist, who him- or herself is often an artist in their own right, who in print editions assists another, often better-known artist in making a print, if not wholly executing the work on behalf of the artist which is then signed by him/her and sold as his/her work. This practice is often discussed in terms of an equal relationship, even if it is frequently based on an artistically and economically uneven hierarchical structure. (For an example of this – unacknowledged uneven relationship – see, Andrew and Walter, 2013.)

oral form and eschewing the wholesale trend 'towards participatory, process-based experience' (Kester, 2011, 7), as outlined above, *DuEO (after JD)* nevertheless tackles some of the incongruences or indeed vexing paradoxes posed by the subject of collaboration in which the process of participatory interaction itself is treated as a form of creative praxis' (ibid, 9). Quoting Adorno,<sup>17</sup> Kester (2011) highlights the most obvious: 'Is the identity of the many based on coercive consensus or radical plurality?' Correspondingly, he stresses that the usual formal and conceptual parameters of art, namely 'unity' and 'authority' are threatened. In his words: 'the unity of authorial intention and of the work itself as a semantic construct' are endangered by 'any concession to contingency and multiplicity' (3).

In addition to the cohesion provided by the common reference point of Donne's text, it was the ingeniousness of the structure of *DuEO (after JD)* – however loosely individual participants responded to the text – that allowed for so many diverse artistic approaches to be present. These included a varied range of media – as indicated above – and styles (realistic, abstract, esoteric, surreal) to be present. Included were some weaker contributions, and even non-participation was accommodated. The latter was marked successfully by blank white strips of paper.<sup>18</sup> The structure was also capable to contain the potential compositional hazard that was posed by the themed chronology of Donne's text. The necessity of allocating – randomly – a day/theme to individual participants at the start of the project inevitably generated uncertainty as to the results of the individual artistic outcomes. In other words, the question as to how or if they were suited for incorporation into the whole in order to create a (certain) unity. This situation was exacerbated by the fixity of the chronological sequence. These risks were partially mitigated by the prescription of adherence to given dimensions and specific paper in the book. The wall-piece additionally demanded certain colour restrictions – black, white, red and transparent – thus setting some parameters for cohesion. All in all then, the structural formats – of assemblage in the wall piece, book and collage in the audio work – created an intriguing and meaningful whole.

If some of the collaborative elements have 'disappeared' into the art object rather than being made explicit – as is the case in the more process-based forms of recent practices – it is clear that a 'concession to contingency and multiplicity' was fruitfully integrated. While absolute unity (in terms of an authorial style, for example) was not a goal, I would argue that the three materially different elements of the installation, as well as the individual contributions that comprised them, achieved 'relative' unity, as my detailed discussion above has shown. In this sense, the project tallies with Bishop's (2012) categorisation of art, as quoted above, namely to make palpable 'the paradoxes that are repressed in everyday discourse, and to elicit ... experiences that enlarge our capacity to imagine the world and our relations anew' (284).

This was signalled by the project's theme with its avowed sense of gravity. At the time of its making in 2018 the implications of its themes were of a more metaphorical and general nature, alluding to concerns about the environment, increasing right-wing populism and

<sup>15</sup> (cont.) But also in other respects, collaborative projects in printmaking abound. For an indication of changing critical approaches to collaboration in printmaking beyond a discussion of the role of the "master printer", see, for example, Stephen Felmingham and Majella Clancy's project AILLEURS 2 (Elsewhere) involving student collaborations across different international institutions. Presented at IMPACT 10 (2018), AILLEURS 2 (Elsewhere) did include but also went beyond the deployment of printmaking and included a less tangible, performative outcome in form of a Potluck (or Potlach) dinner.

Sandra de Rycker's PhD project (funded by SGSAAH, Scottish Graduate School Arts and Humanities in collaboration with DCA-Dundee Print Studio) specifically aims to develop the methodological tools to assess collaboration in the studio between printmaking staff and visiting artists, the latter of whom are often without any knowledge of printmaking. See her presentations at recent Impact Conferences: 'The language of collaborative printmaking and the social turn in contemporary art: Printing with Andrew Lacon' (at IMPACT 10, Santander, 2018) and 'The Semiotic Situation: Situating Collaboration with Rae-Yen Song at Dundee Contemporary Arts Print Studio' (IMPACT 12, Bristol, 2022, unpublished).

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, the artists' collective Mokuhanga Sisters, nine artists focussing on the Japanese technique of woodcut. <https://mokuhangasisters.com/work> [accessed 5/9/2023] Their *Borderless Scroll* (2021), as indicated in the title, adopted the format of a continuous scroll and in this way allowed for the (almost) seamless "gathering" of individual contributions that were united by the format. This is in contrast to the more widely favoured simple "gathering" of individual prints in a bound (portfolio) volume or, as in the example mentioned in footnote 12, in a suitable, sometimes specifically crafted container.

<sup>17</sup> 'If oneness in art works inevitably implies the use of force against the many - phrases like "mastery over materials" in aesthetic criticism betray this state of affairs—then it follows that the many must also fear oneness' (T. W. Adorno, *Aesthetic theory*, quoted in Kester, 2011, 1).

<sup>18</sup> Some of the students participated in only one part of the project, the book, which left a 'gap' in their respective day of the wall piece. The substitution of a simple blank sheet of paper did no harm visually - on the contrary, it created quieter passages which could also be read as an analogy to the sheer boredom that often accompanies illness, or even the ever-present threat of annihilation or death, the nothingness discussed elsewhere in the essay



authoritarianism world-wide, the steadily widening gap between the very wealthy and the poor both within individual countries as well as globally, the fault lines in Europe made virulent by the British exit from the EU and so on. However, recent events have bequeathed it a much more specific and topical relevance. Today, three years after the pandemic, the work appears uncannily prescient and indeed, together with Albert Camus's *La Peste* (1947) and Thucydides's thoughts on the plague (430-426 B.C.E.), Donne's text has been revived in the public's imagination – not only in its country of origin.

To me the installation was a moving invitation to 'enlarge our capacity to imagine the world and our relations anew', in terms of the need for our ethical commitment to the notions of connectedness, diversity, collaboration and a literally 'light' foot-print. This was realised by its simple, unassuming material constituents. At the same time, the work's tri-partite structure choreographed an immersive environment. It therefore immediately engaged the viewer directly, actively, multi-sensorily, combining the intimate (looking at the book while listening to the sound piece) and the 'public' statement (confronting the wall piece), introducing a distinct spatial presence as well as kinesis. Despite its solemnity it was also intensely uplifting, even if prints are generally not any more endowed by viewers with the miraculous power ascribed to them in earlier times. The work as a whole represented a successful combination of ethics and aesthetics, as defined by Juliane Rebentisch<sup>19</sup> – and an impressive manifestation of the ethos of the Uniarts Printmaking Department, the quality and dedication of the teaching, its fostering of a truly communal spirit and future-oriented educational approach.

In her contribution to *Imaging the Spiritual Quest*, published in 2018 by the Academy of Fine Arts, Helsinki, art theorist Riikka Stewen examines the genealogy of the relationship between art and religion in the last two hundred years. She ends with saying: 'I find myself ... thinking that perhaps now, in this moment in time when it is more vital than ever before that we understand the interdependence and mutual belongingness of all things, what we most need is art as a way of life that is attentive to connectedness and togetherness' (30).

*Devotions upon emergent Occasions after John Donne* by Uniarts printmakers can be regarded as the result of and tribute to this idea.

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<sup>19</sup> Rather than opposing ethics and aesthetics, as is sometimes the case, according to Rebentisch (2015), art 'opens up the present to the question of the future as well as to that of the past' and 'designates what inextricably conjoins reality with possibility'. Art and the role of the artist is 'as a witness to his or her cultural and social present'.

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## AUTHOR

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Ruth Pelzer-Montada, PhD, has been lecturing at Edinburgh College of Art for many years, both in the studio and in Visual Culture. Her main research focus is the role of print in contemporary art, both theoretically as well as practically. As an artist, she has exhibited her work locally in Scotland and internationally and curated exhibitions in Scotland and Ireland. She frequently lectures and teaches abroad and contributes to national and international conferences and symposia. Her writing on contemporary printmaking and art have appeared in both general art and specialist publications. Her critical anthology *Perspectives on Contemporary Printmaking* was published by Manchester University Press in 2018. For further information, see Ruth's research profile: <https://www.eca.ed.ac.uk/profile/dr-ruth-pelzer-montada>

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IMAGE GALLERY



Figure titles and information:

Figure 1: KuvA printmakers (University of the Arts, Helsinki) *Devotions upon emergent occasions*, after John Donne, 2018 (Installation view, mixed media: wall piece, artist's book, sound piece), IMPACT Conference, Biblioteca Central de Cantabria, Santander, 2018 (Image credit: Laura Vainikka)

Figure 2: KuvA printmakers (University of the Arts, Helsinki) *Devotions upon emergent occasions*, after John Donne, 2018 (Artist's Book) (Image credit: Petri Summanen)



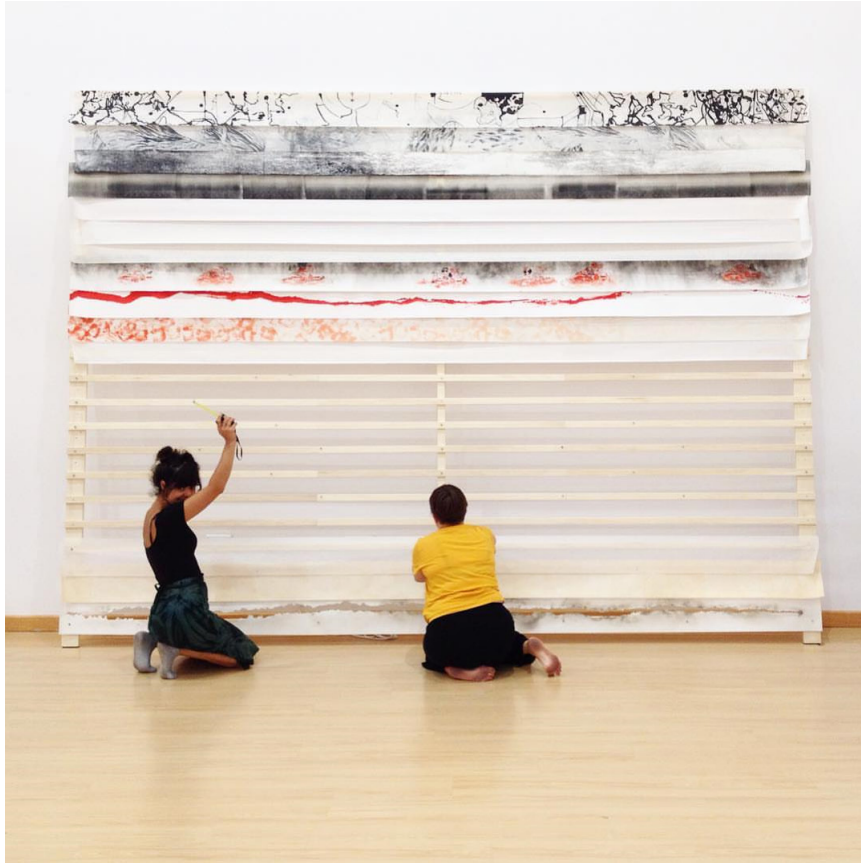


Figure 3: KuvA printmakers (University of the Arts, Helsinki) *Devotions upon emergent occasions, after John Donne*, 2018 (Installing the wall piece at IMPACT, Santander, 2018) (Image Credit: Annu Vertanen)

Figure 4: Details of the wall piece (Inma Herrera fourth from the top) (Image credit: Annu Vertanen)





Figure 5: Details of the wall piece (in the centre of the above image, see Tuuli Ojala's small prints and drawings attached to the main sheet) (Image credit: Annu Vertanen)

Figure 6: Upper half: Emma Peura's red line; bottom: Emilia Tanner's sandblasted line (Image credit: Laura Vainikka)





Figure 7: The Artist's Book: Cover (Image credit: Petri Summanen)

Figure 8: The Artist's Book: Double-spread (Image credit: Petri Summanen)



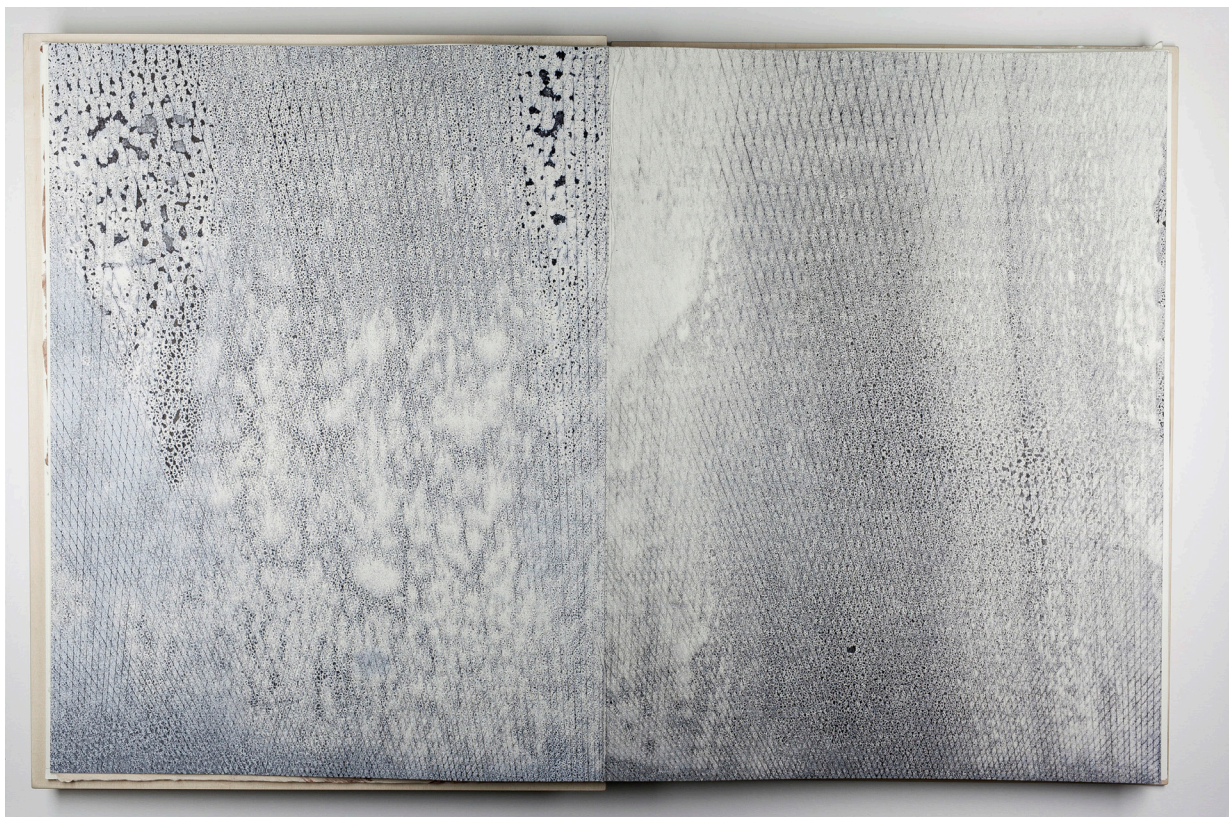


Figure 9: The Artist's Book : Contents page (Image credit: Petri Summanen)

Figure 10: Ari Pelkonen *Day III* (woodcut and Indian ink) (Image credit: Petri Summanen)



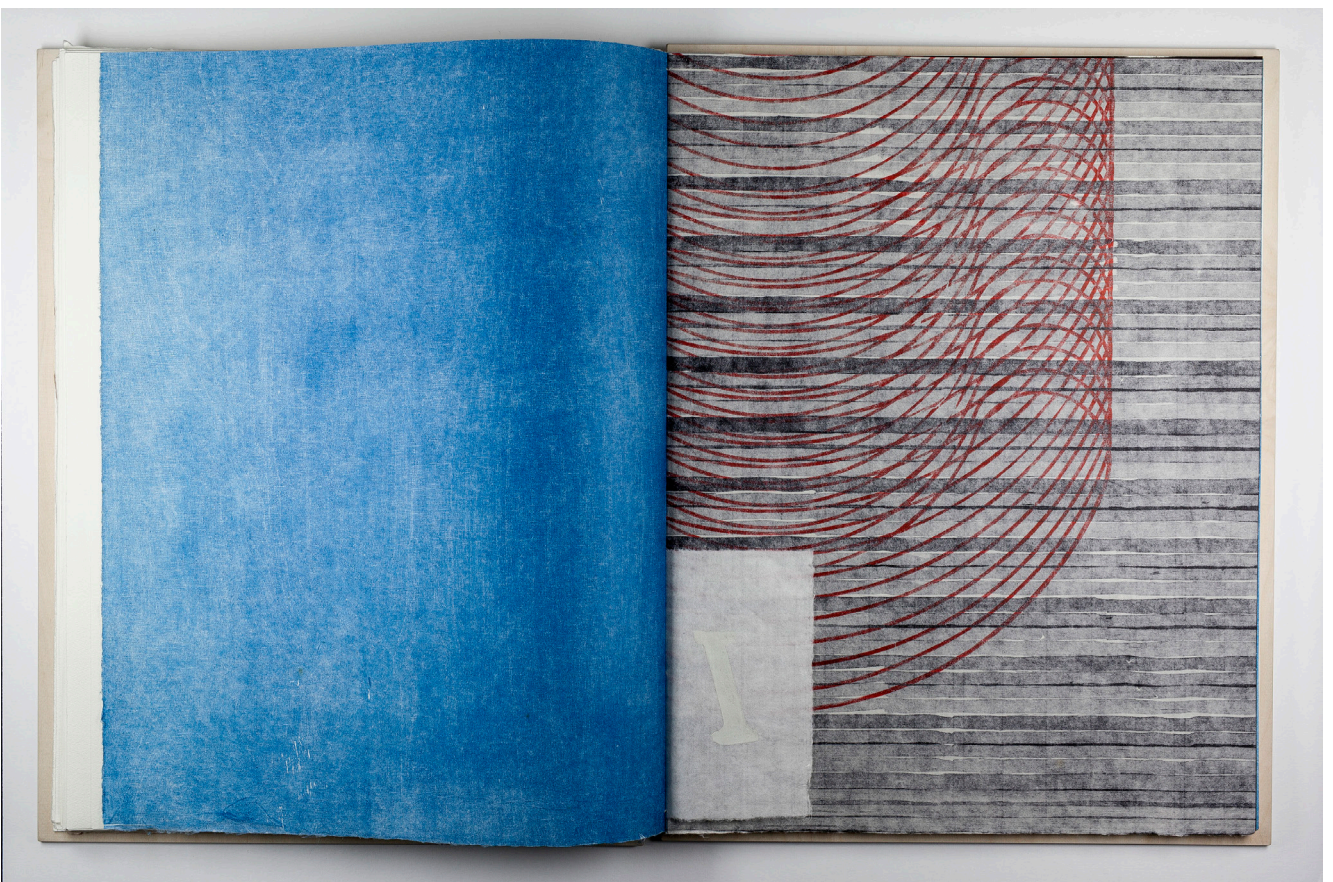


Figure 11: Annu Vertanen *Day XV* (woodcut) (Image credit: Petri Summanen)

Figure 12: Annu Vertanen *Day XV* (woodcut) (Image credit: Petri Summanen)



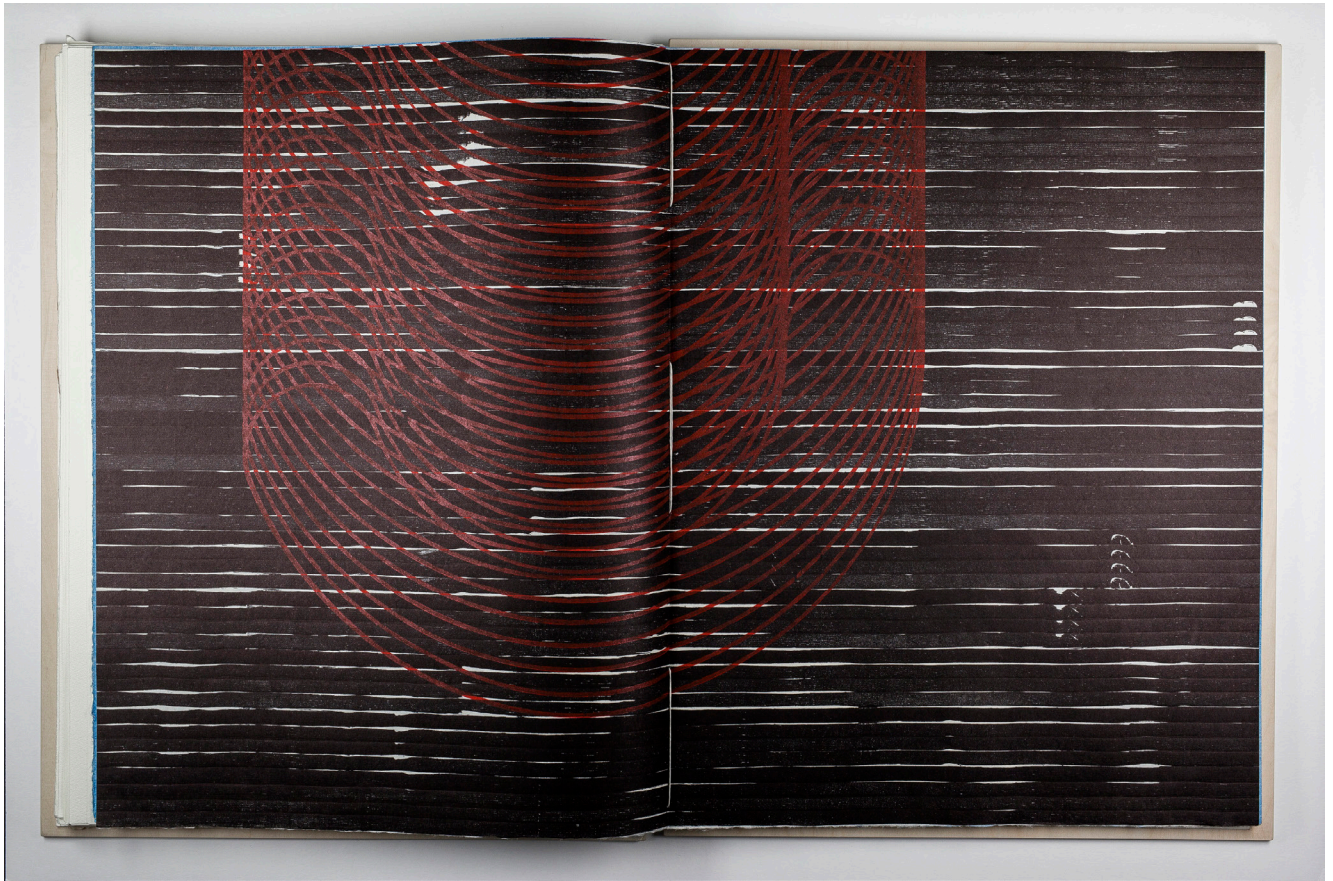


Figure 13: Annu Vertanen *Day XV* (woodcut) (Image credit: Petri Summanen)

Figure 14: Annu Vertanen *Day XV* (woodcut) (Image credit: Petri Summanen)



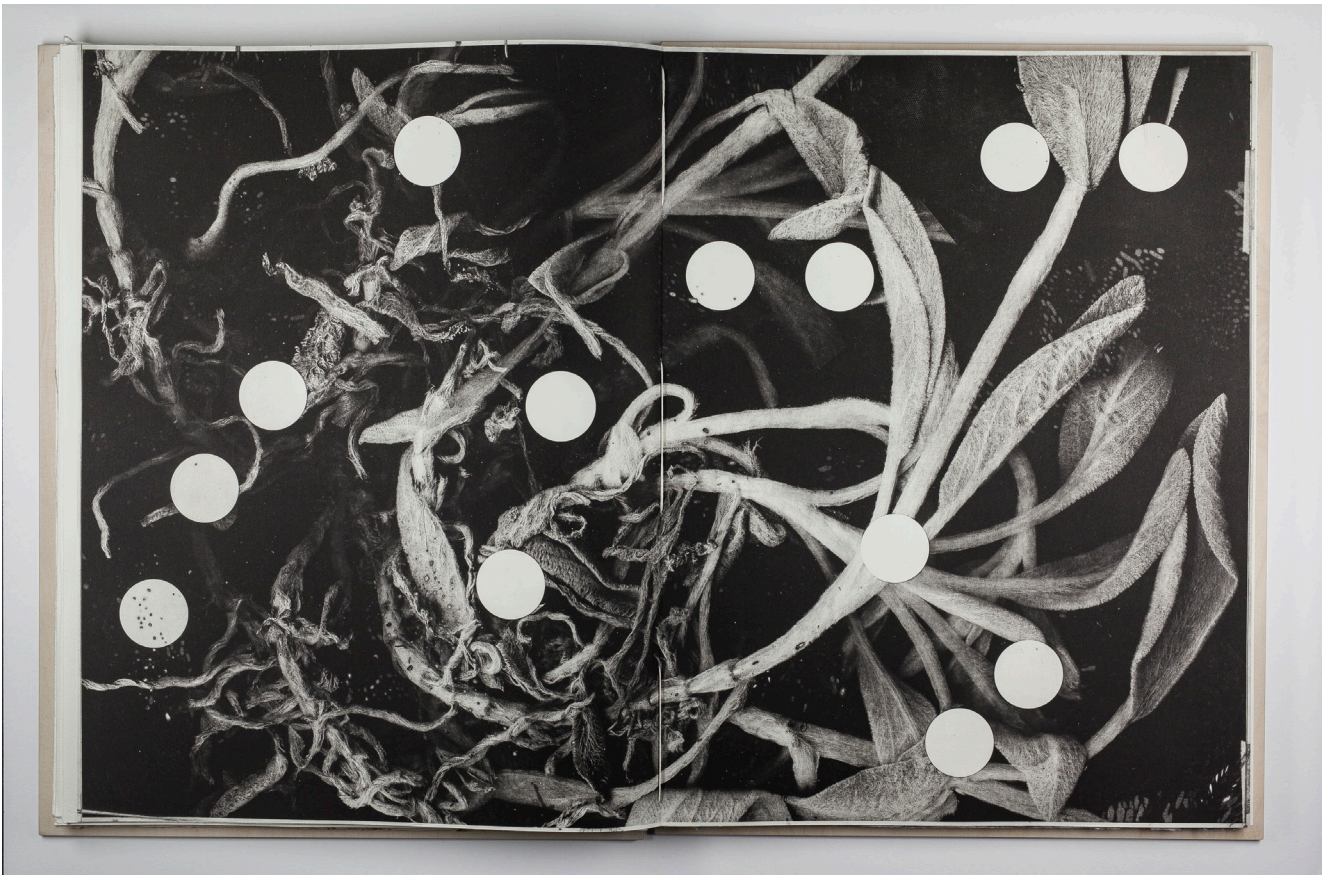


Figure 15: Harriina Räinenä *Day VI* (monoprint) (Image credit: Petri Summanen)

Figure 16: Milla Toukkari *Day XIII* (ImagOn) (Image credit: Petri Summanen)





Figure 17: Mia Seppälä *Day XVIII* (ImagOn, collage and drawing) (Image credit: Petri Summanen)