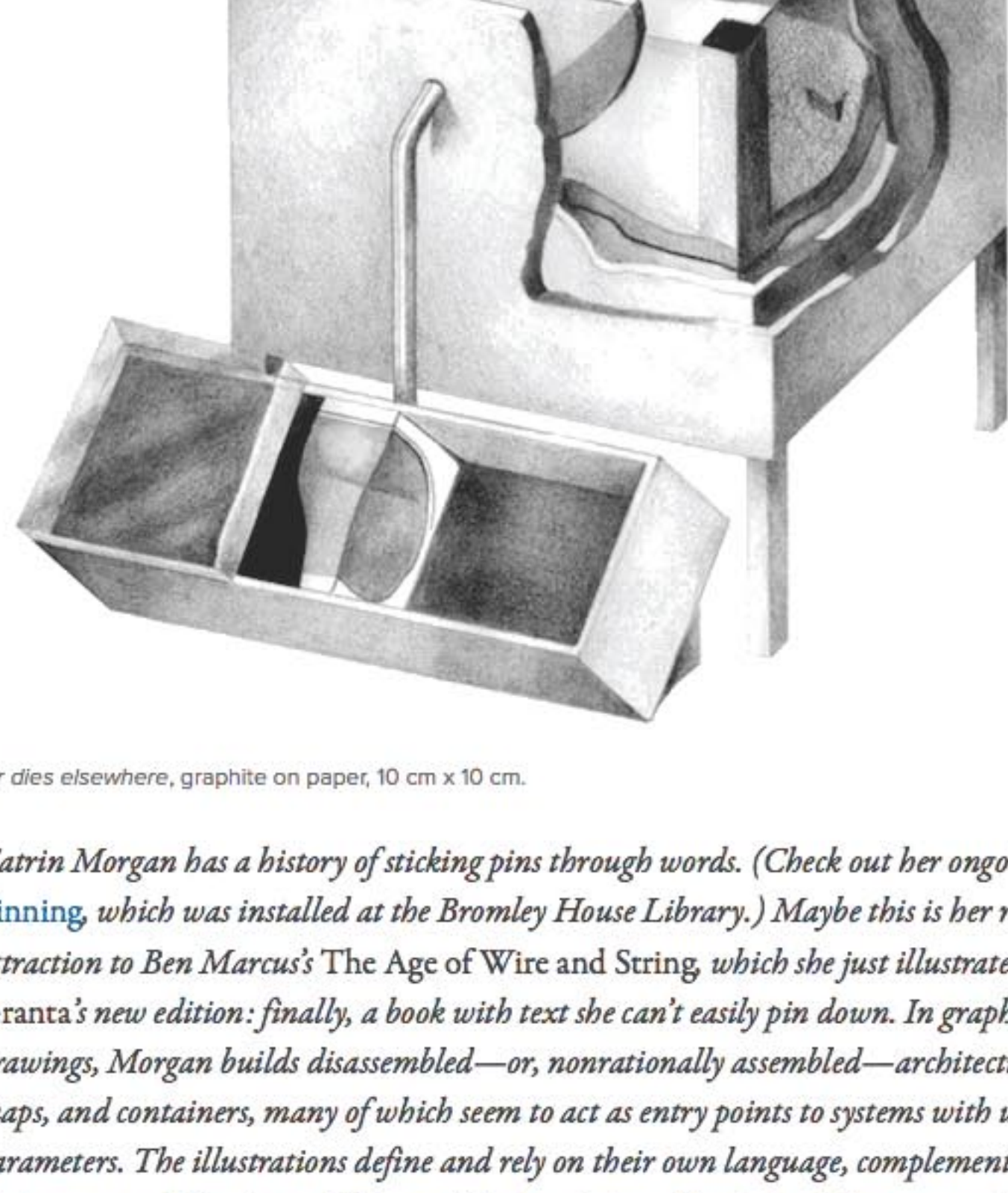


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AT WORK
Pinning Down: A Conversation with Catrin Morgan

June 5, 2013 | by Daisy Atterbury



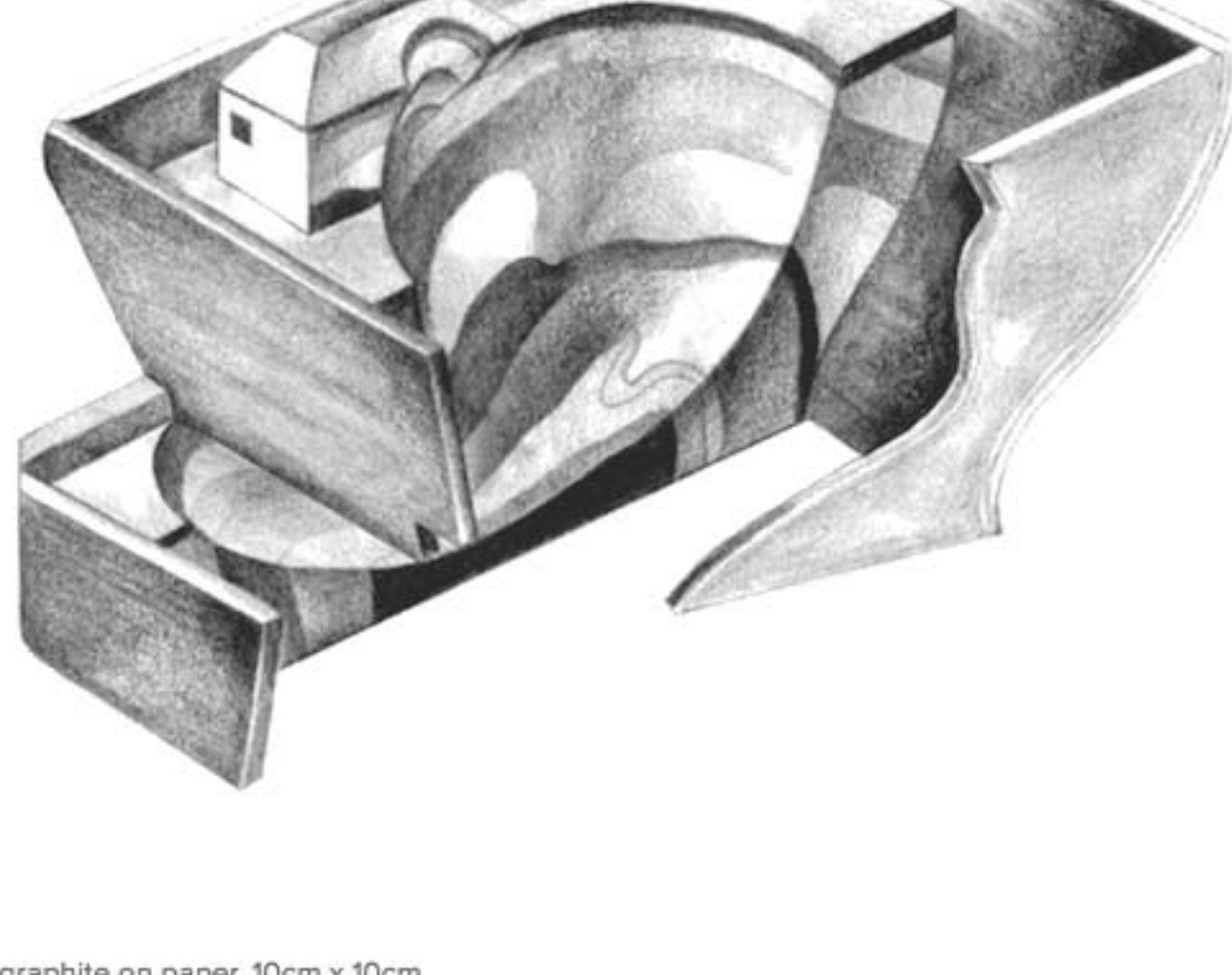
Air dies elsewhere, graphite on paper, 10 cm x 10 cm.

Catrin Morgan has a history of sticking pins through words. (Check out her ongoing project, *Pinning*, which was installed at the Bromley House Library.) Maybe this is her real attraction to Ben Marcus's *The Age of Wire and String*, which she just illustrated for *Granta*'s new edition: finally, a book with text she can't easily pin down. In graphite drawings, Morgan builds disassembled—or, nonrationally assembled—architectural objects, maps, and containers, many of which seem to act as entry points to systems with unfamiliar parameters. The illustrations define and rely on their own language, complementing the language of *The Age of Wire and String* nicely, self-contained discourses with overlapping vocabularies.

Your designs for *The Age of Wire and String* are almost all diagrams, fanciful maps or systems that have some kind of chronological or other organizational logic. Can you explain how the content and structure of the book informed your decisions here?

It seemed to me that by attempting to illustrate *The Age of Wire and String* directly, by illustrating very faithfully the images suggested by the text, I would close it down. What I love about *The Age of Wire and String* is the space it opens up in my imagination and I didn't want my images to take that space away from new readers. In the end, the images I created aimed to respond to the tone and construction of the text and to behave in a similar way. The text subverts our expectations of familiar patterns of language, and so I created images that appear familiar but in fact are always doing something that belies their appearance, so what appears to be a map is in fact composed of sleeping figures, and a circuit diagram is based on the floor plans of a building. The images also reference directly illustrations from manuals and encyclopedias, as I felt like the deadpan tone of this kind of illustration suited perfectly the tone of the novel.

The set of illustrations I ended up with are a representation of the world that *The Age of Wire and String* projects within my mind, and some of them were created without planning exactly where they would go in the text. When placing them I looked for shared co-ordinates between an image and a piece of text, so that the image and text spoke to, but did not explain each other.



Rule of exit, graphite on paper, 10cm x 10cm

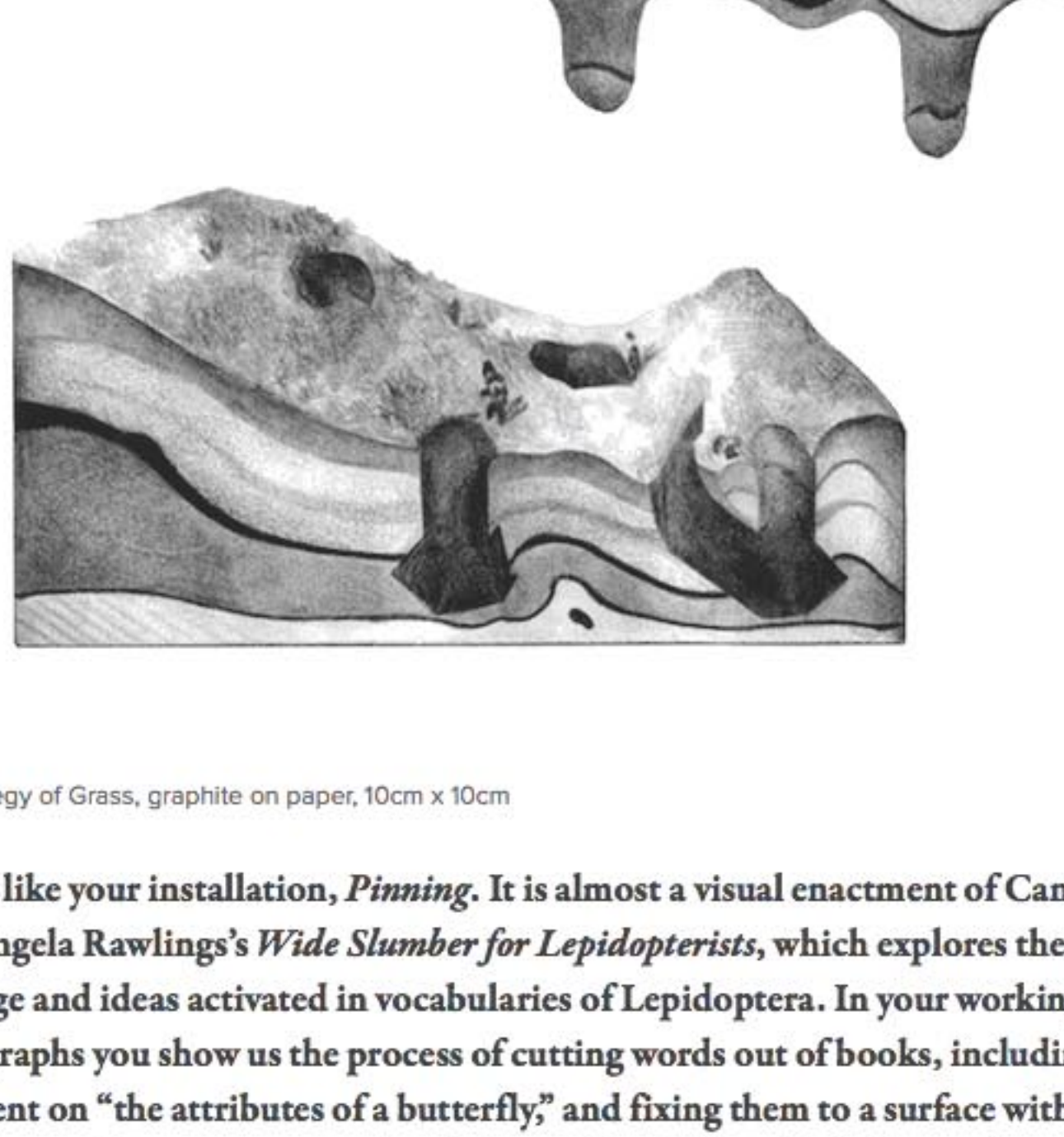
What kind of thinking or research went into your preparation for book illustration? How many times did you read the book? And sort of parallel to that question, does illustration feel more like representation or interpretation—or is there another term you would use to describe the work?

I was introduced to *The Age of Wire and String* whilst studying at the RCA and began working on it then, so even before I'd started to make the work for *Granta* I had been researching and making images for the book for four or five years on and off. Over the years I've read *The Age of Wire and String* five or six times cover to cover, and for this project I re-read several times, but as I was already very familiar with the book, my re-reading was somewhat fragmentary and disordered.

Whilst I was working I pinned every page of the novel to the walls of my flat along with the pictures I was making so that I could get a sense of the book as a whole and I'd find myself reading chapters and seeing how they should look whilst I was doing other things around the house. I'm not sure if representation and interpretation can be separated when it comes to illustration and to be honest, I find it hard to say which of these my work does most. Ideally I'd like to think that my work for *The Age of Wire and String* is an honest response to the text, a sort of visual parallel to Ben Marcus's writing.

How much interaction did you have with the editors and with Ben Marcus when conceiving and executing the pieces for *Granta*?

We showed Ben Marcus some of my early images for the book and he has been very generous and open about allowing me to work on it in my own way. The discussions I've had with *Granta* have all been very productive, everyone there has been hugely supportive in the way that they engaged with my work. They trusted me with a remarkably free hand, which has been a fantastic opportunity.



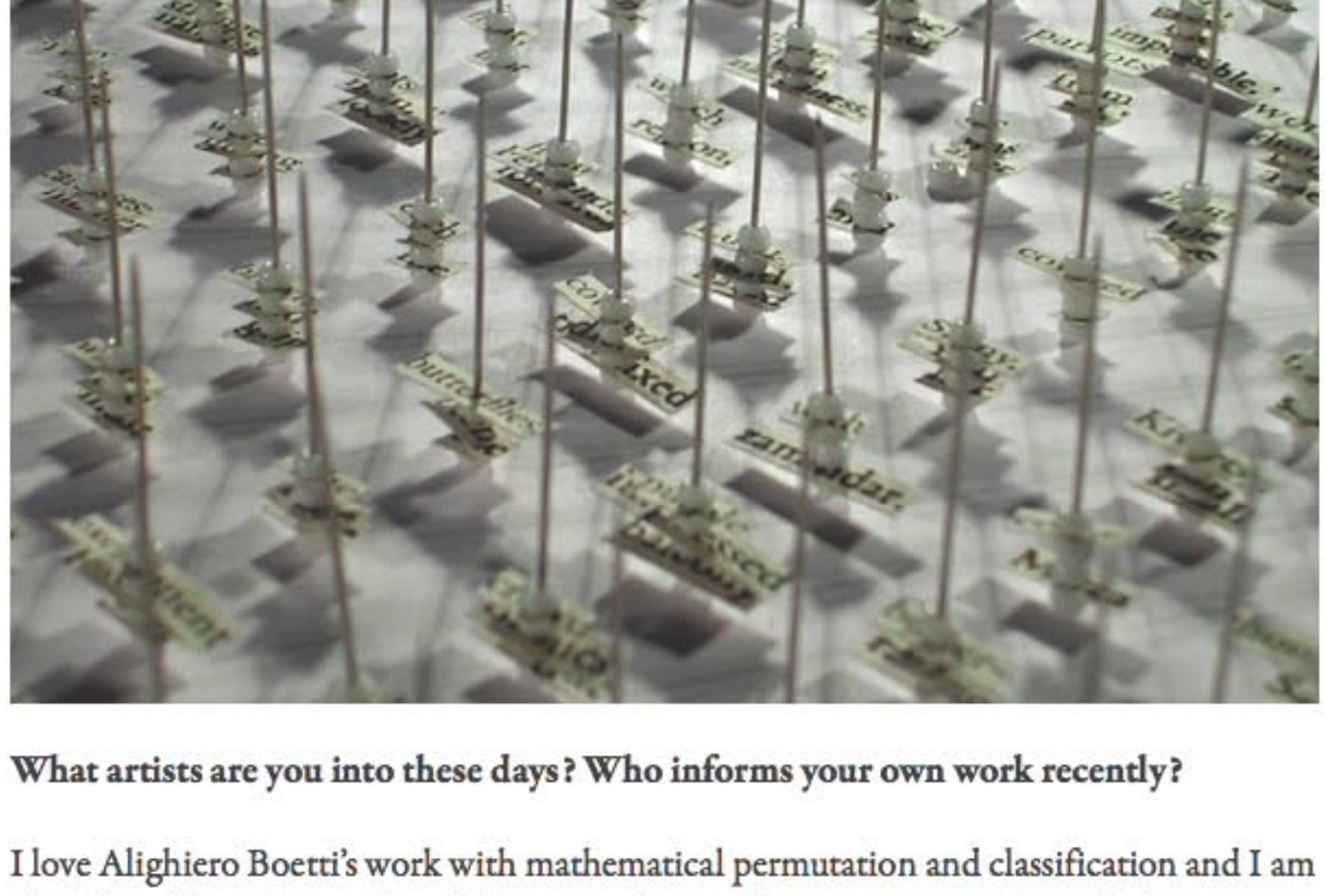
The Strategy of Grass, graphite on paper, 10cm x 10cm

I really like your installation, *Pinning*. It is almost a visual enactment of Canadian poet Angela Rawlings's *Wide Slumber for Lepidopterists*, which explores the language and ideas activated in vocabularies of Lepidoptera. In your working photographs you show us the process of cutting words out of books, including from a segment on "the attributes of a butterfly," and fixing them to a surface with pins. The outcome I'm most attracted to is the one in which each pin is spearing several words, as if each word is kinetic, activated by the feathery, winged urgency of the language beneath/behind it. (I'm also reminded that Nabokov collected and obsessively classified butterflies, and served as a curator of Lepidoptera at Harvard. Your piece *Pinning* strikes me as an appropriate visualization of some of the language in *Lolita*.)

The *Pinning* images are work-in-progress shots from a larger project called *The Collector or The Butterfly Library*. I wanted to create a piece of work that would illustrate the idea of butterflies as metaphors for mortality whilst commenting on the destructive nature of collection. I was thinking about Geoff Dyer's book *The Ongoing Moment* in which he argues that certain visual elements (such as the blind busker) recur throughout the history of photography and that no matter who the photographer is, it is essentially the same busker every time. I'd noticed that several of my favourite novels had very powerful sequences involving butterflies, and I hoped to show that by utilising the idea of butterflies—the novelists were entering the same idea space. I wanted to create a piece in which the word butterfly acted as a doorway between any text that used it, illustrating both my perception that ideas are pre-existing spaces that artists enter into and share, and also the particular idea being shared by these texts (of butterflies, mortality and the destructive nature of collection).

The project is ongoing. I'm still collecting books that contain butterfly passages and adding them to the grid. Books are added to the project in the order that I read them and I'm planning a Nabokov layer as many of his novels include butterfly references.

Many of my works involve underlying structures which govern their particular outcomes. I prefer to make work that, once the parameters have been drawn up, expands according to its own logic. I truly believe that it is only within the constraints of classification, underlying mathematical structures, or simply systems of rules that real creativity can happen. If the doors are all open then there is nothing to work against.



What artists are you into these days? Who informs your own work recently?

I love Alighiero Boetti's work with mathematical permutation and classification and I am a big fan of Arte Povera. The Oulipo are a huge influence on my work and I often turn to *The Oulipo Compendium* for inspiration. I think Dieter Roth is wonderful and have recently begun looking at Daniel Spoerri, particularly *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance*. For its incredible creativity within quite strict narrative constraints, I am very fond of George Herriman's *Krazy Kat*.

I'm also very excited by the sort of illustration that is becoming much rarer these days or is still around but overlooked, technical drawings, illustrated encyclopedias, marginalia, maps in whodunits, facsimiles of historical letters and documents; images which appear factual or schematic but which are in fact loaded with narrative.

Can you tell me a little bit about *A Taxonomy of Deception*, your Ph.D. thesis?

I'm very interested in the way that fiction infiltrates fact, and the way that this infiltration might be facilitated by images or illustrations. A simple example of this might be a fictional street included on an A-Z or a fictional entry on an encyclopedia. Because these fictional elements appear no different to the factual ones which surround them they are often simply accepted as representations of reality. My Ph.D. (which is by practice) looks at the role that illustration plays in deception and attempts to taxonomise deception based on its aesthetics. So, for example, if you imagine document forgery as a design problem, there are certain aesthetic choices being made; to age the paper, adding coffee stains or grease spots, to mimic a certain person's handwriting, the choice of paper you make. It is then possible to divide deceptions into classes based on their aesthetics. I am hoping that this process will allow me both to say something useful about deception as a creative process and to create a new space for discussion within illustration.

What about your background? Do you have artists in your family? How did you gravitate to this way of mediating the world?

My dad paints and that has certainly had a very big influence on the way my own work has developed, but more than that, I think many of the interests expressed in my work come from discussions that take place at home. One of the most important things (for my work) that my parents have passed onto me is a love of mystery and puzzles. We are all avid readers of whodunits and my mum enjoys cryptic crosswords, something that my dad and I occasionally get involved with.

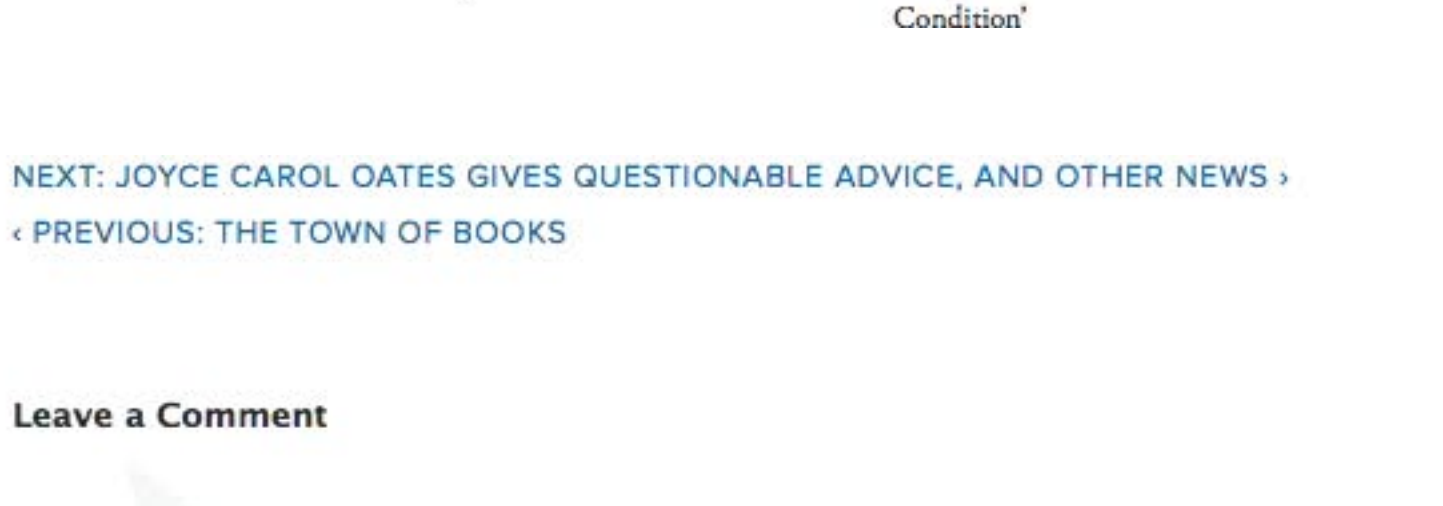
Another important thing that came from home was the idea that it is enough to love a book simply because it is beautiful. There was never a moment at which my parents told me I was too old for picture books, and I think this has been very important in shaping my beliefs about what a good book should be.

Catrin Morgan's work will be exhibited at *dalla Rosa Gallery in Clerkenwell, London, opening May 2.*

TACS Angela Rawlings, Arte Povera, Ben Marcus, Catrin Morgan, Daniel Spoerri, Dieter Roth, Geoff Dyer, George Herriman, illustration, Ighiero Boetti, Oulipo, Vladimir Nabokov

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