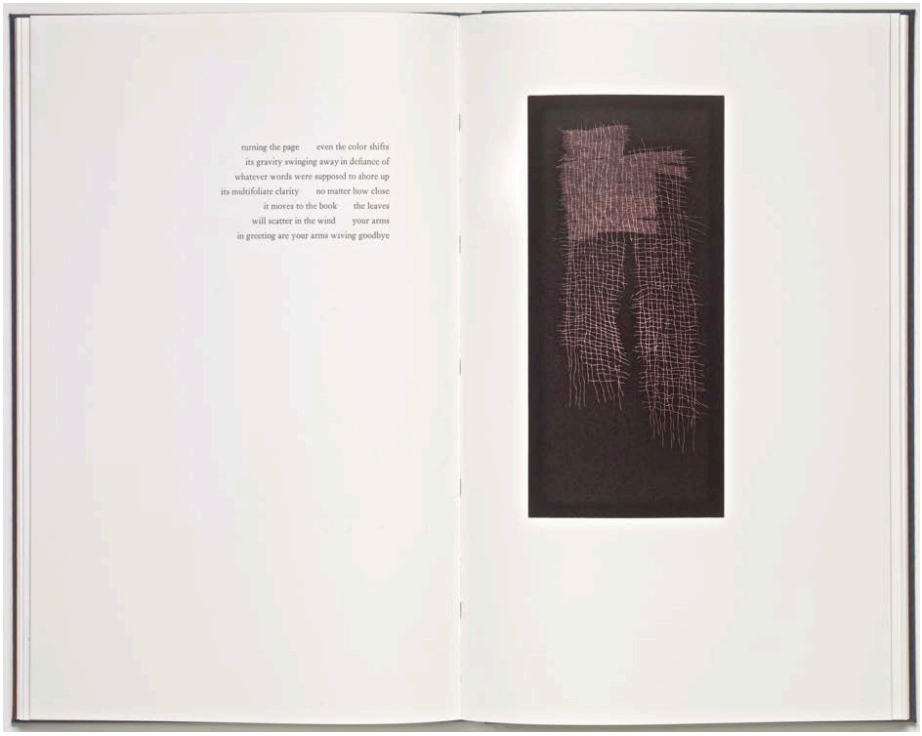

Figure 1: Left, Page spread from Loom *(Santa Rosa, California: Nawakum Press and Mixolydian Editions, 2014). Poem by Alan Loney. Wood engraving by Richard Wagener. Edition of 46. Below, Image still from* Loom, *a process video shot by David Pascoe of Nawakum Press. Accessed at bookways.com/loom/.*

THE LINE AND THE LOOM: WEAVING, POETICS, AND ARTISTIC COLLABORATION

by Melina Moe

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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"HOW MANY THREADS DOES IT TAKE to make a weaving?" wood engraver Richard Wagener asked as he began his book of prints, *Loom*. "It isn't two. It isn't three. So how many is it?"[1]

This query about how individual threads add up to form a weaving became the heart of a collaborative volume, *Loom* (2014), that Wagener created with New Zealand poet Alan Loney. "There is no real answer," Wagener said, "but I began with a very simple drawing as a starting point. As the drawings progressed, the weavings became more complex."[2] Wagener and Loney's *Loom* is a fine art book—typeset, printed, and sewn by hand—that pairs sixteen minimal prints with a long poem by Loney. The two artists agreed that the words would not illustrate Wagener's engravings, but that both image and word would meditate on the shared question of what makes a weaving.

Weaving mediates the collaborative book project of engraver and poet. Long a metaphor for connectedness, from social fabrics to professional networks and idea webs, textile becomes a shared platform for Wagener and Loney to communicate. The spare engravings and tightly regulated poetic form reflect on the act of paring down the process of mark-making to the line, the thread, and the cut. Throughout, *Loom* evokes text and textile's shared Latin root in *textus* and *textura* (also the name for blackletter), without proposing to give a precise definition of the ancient connection between poetry and weaving. Loney reflects in his short essay, "Threading the poem," included at the end of *Loom*, that the connections between weaving and poetry felt familiar initially and only gradually revealed themselves to be still vital and open-ended. The linguistic linkages between weaving and

writing "might have been little more than an unraveling of a series of rather straightforward puns," he writes, but "while this is no doubt true, these puns turned out to be a set of terms that are central to [his] sense of the poetic," terms that connected "the line of a poem, a line of type, the line of a cut, the Dantean 'dark wood' as the matrix of light in the print engraving, the thread of a cloth that is humans' second skin, [and] the thread of life itself as the fabric in which threads & lines meet, break, lead nowhere or somewhere not guessed" (fig. 1).[3]

Wagener insists that his works are not "engravings of weaving"; rather, they are what resulted when he applied his craft of wood engraving to the idea of a loom. In *Loom*, each print captures a delicate tabby or even plain weave, standing out as light-hued lines against an inky background. The fragile nets are loosely "woven" by the marks dug out of a tight-grained boxwood block with an engraving tool called a burin. Black rectangles of ink, measuring 8 inches tall and 4¾ inches wide, float on a larger sheet of off-white paper and show the dimensions of the woodblocks out of which Wagener carved his weavings.

Each print is oriented vertically, like yardage of cloth when pulled off a loom. And yet, throughout *Loom*, the structure of a loom is only implied in the images. Weavers well know the impossibility of weaving without tension, whether it be provided by the ancient technology of loom weights, the weight of the body looped into a backstrap, or a strong pull on the warping bar more familiar to weavers today. In many historical depictions of weaving, the tension of the loom calls attention to the domesticity, containment, and hard work associated with weaving. In William Holman Hunt's pen and ink study, *The Lady of Shalott* (1850), the weaver is entangled in the threads of a floor loom that enwrap her from all sides.[4] In a compositionally similar image of Penelope caught in the act of undoing her day's weaving, John Flaxman shows the weaver standing in the center of a vertical frame loom, pillars on either side of her and a taut string held between her body and a group of hopeful suitors (fig. 2).[5] The weaver is both protected and encircled by her weaving.[6] In Wagener's engravings, the tension that holds the threads is invisible: no loom, no selvedges. Instead, the delicately entangled warp and weft are organized by the grain of the wood, the lines held by the strongly inked background of the engraving block (fig. 3).

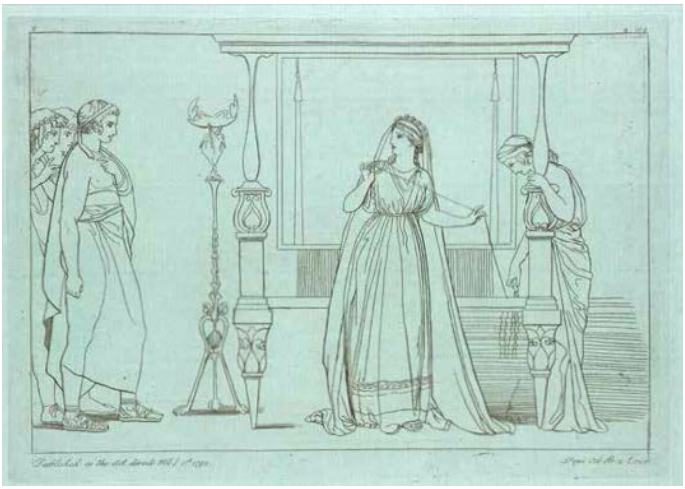


Figure 2: Top, William Holman Hunt, The Lady of Shalott *(1850). Black chalk, pen and ink. 23.5 × 14.2 cm. Felton Bequest, 1921; National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia. Accessed at ngv.vic.gov.au/explore/collection/work/28208/. Bottom, Penelope caught in the act of undoing her day's weaving. Plate 2 from* The Odyssey of Homer Engraved by Thomas Piroli from the Compositions of John Flaxman, Sculptor *(Rome, 1793). Beinecke Library, JFn 18 193.*

Much like weavers, wood engravers are often drawn not only to the formal potentials of the medium, but also to the forms of sociability that arise out of meticulous, specialized, and often intensely laborious artistic practices. For years after doing graduate work at ArtCenter (now ArtCenter College of Design) outside Los Angeles, Wagener made abstract paintings. While ACCD is best known for incubating Southern California's graphic design talent, Wagener found himself drawn to the less institutionalized world of printmaking, a discipline situated slightly outside the limelight focused on painting and design. Wood engraving is an art form whose practitioners, like textile artists, often share a hybrid label of artisan/artist. With an array of specialized tools, a tolerance for laborious processes, and a readiness to move between handwork and the management of temperamental machines, engravers share

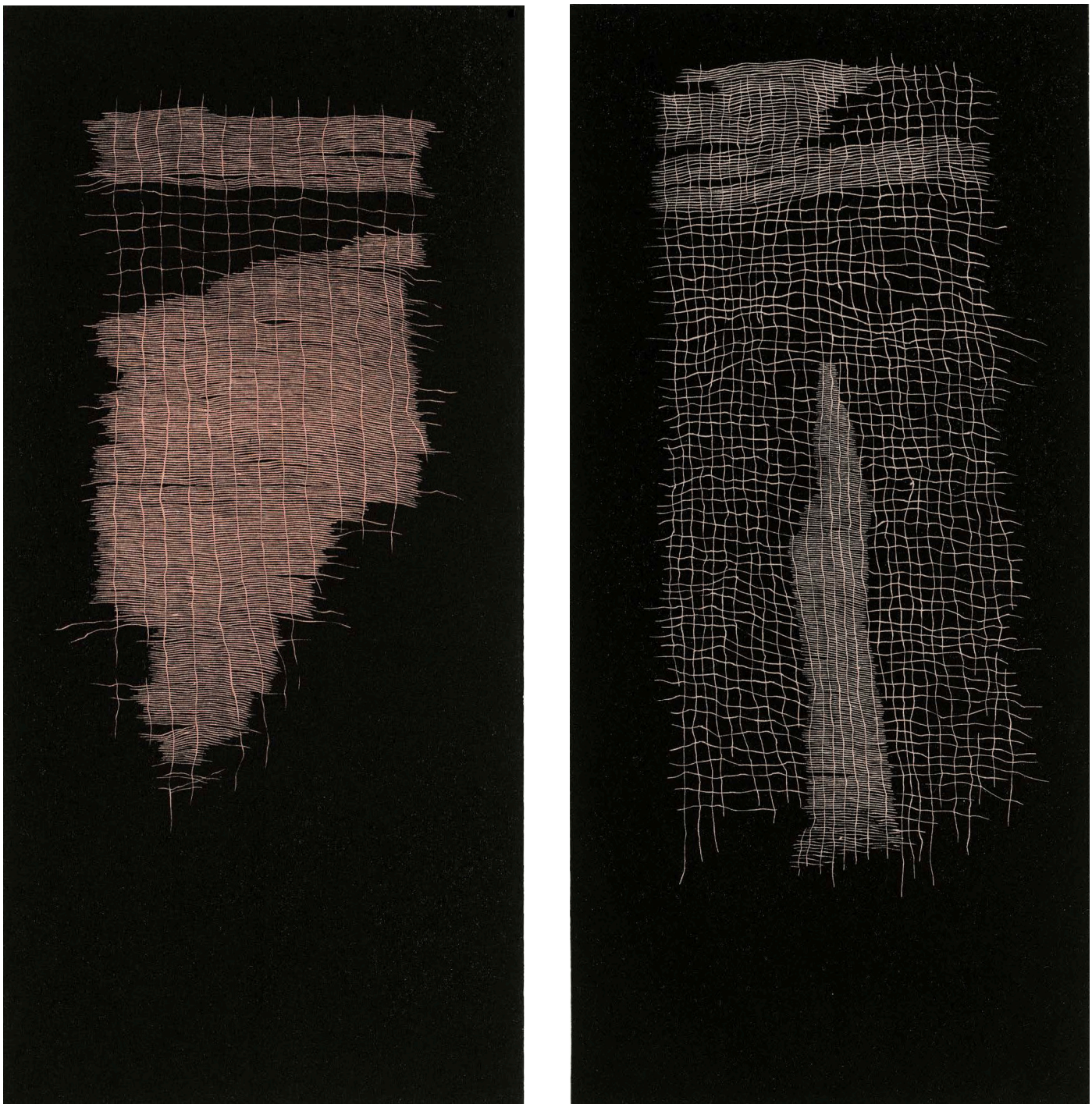


Figure 3: Two engravings from Loom.

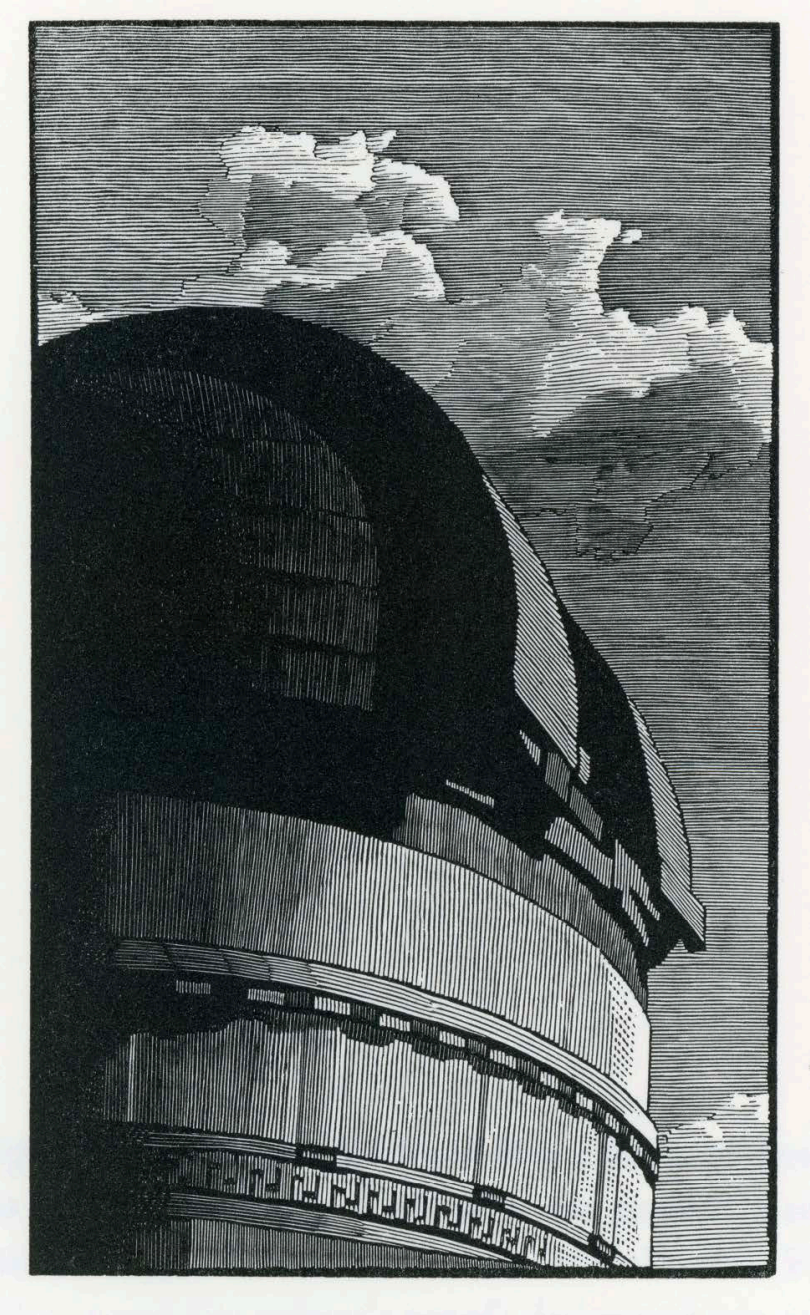
Figure 4: "Pantages Theater," below, and "Observatory," opposite. Wood engravings included in Cracked Sidewalks *(Santa Rosa, California: Mixolydian Editions, 2006).*

many of the qualities that characterize weavers. Traditionally, quilting bees, knitting circles, and *Spinnstube*, the practice of spinning together in the evenings, allowed handicrafters to share light and heat, flirt, and tell stories.[7] Communities of wood engravers, who are often also fine press printers, still draw upon the easy collaboration that their shared techniques and unfaddish medium facilitate. The catalogs of any number of fine presses reveal engravers and printers with dual roles, including two, Nawakum Press and the Codex Foundation, that showcase Wagener's work as editor, printer, and engraver.

Some of these medium-specific challenges might explain why this California wood engraver was drawn to the idea of weaving, though Wagener declares that his fascination remains a mystery even to himself. Wagener is best known for dramatic, highly controlled, and graphic renditions of the California landscape, from the High Sierra to iconic Los Angeles buildings. In his images, strong but intricate lines outline commanding subjects—strange cacti, the Pantages Theatre, or the San Jacinto mountains—that pop out from often minimal and abstractly graphic backgrounds. An aloe plant in *Exoticum*, Wagener's compendium of desert plants, rears up in photorealistic detail against a patterned background of nested squares, evoking a fusion of Josef Albers's *Homages* and Anni Albers's weavings. Wagener's comfort moving between realism and abstraction captures the peculiar melding of the artificial and the organic in Southern California, whether it is the pixelated sky of a smoggy LA day or the rich plant life that survives beside California's monumental highways (fig. 4).

Wood engraving, for Wagener, captures the California spirit of fluidity, freewheeling reinvention, and possibility. It allows him to move within the medium from abstraction to realism because, as he puts it, "all the potential is there in the wood." Wagener's artistic choices also seize something else about the California mythos, if not the typical lived reality of a twenty-first-century Angelino: a hunger for solitude. Wood engravers are a rare genus in the US art world, and in this sense Wagener is himself relatively isolated. This may be why Wagener's

prints embody a feeling of separateness that is still available in the big landscapes of the American West—the High Sierra and deserts, the wide boulevards of Los Angeles, the unexpectedly rugged Griffith Park—even along the increasingly crowded Pacific coast (fig. 5).



And yet, Wagener's work is also marked by collaboration. The confluence of artists, artisans, and poets that Wagener discovered in the Bay Area would influence his fine press career and his later partnerships with poets. It was while teaching at the Kala Art Institute in Berkeley that Wagener met artist and printer Peter Koch, with whom he would create his first hand-set, cast, printed, and bound fine book. Koch went on to found the CODEX Book Fair, now one of the largest fine book fairs in the world alongside those in Frankfurt and Oxford, and helped cement California as the center of the US's burgeoning fine books market. Today, CODEX brings together a wide range of artists and writers interested in the materiality of text. When he met Alan Loney at the 2013 CODEX Book Fair, Wagener was already searching for a way to develop his ideas about weaving.

Loney is a renowned New Zealand poet also known for his work as a fine press printer and as a scholar of the book. Soon after publishing his first book of poems, *The Bare Remembrance* (1971), he launched the Hawk Press in 1974. Loney's early commitment as poet and printer to considering the materiality of the text undergirded his founding of numerous fine presses, as well as Wellington's Book Arts Society in 1990. He maintained his role as poet-printer until recently closing his Electio Editions in Melbourne; however, Loney's most recent projects, such as *Loom* and his contribution to the book culture lecture series, Threads Talk, collected and published by Granary Press in 2016, reveal his continued preoccupation with the book as a material culture and art form.

Throughout his career, Loney has scrutinized the movement between text and object. His early influences included the Black Mountain poets, whose work emphasized dynamism of breath and the importance of physicality to form. Loney hit

Figure 5: "Euphorbia persistentifolia, Zambia," above, and "Agave attenuata, Mexico," opposite. From Exoticum: Twenty-five Desert Plants from the Huntington Garden *(Santa Rosa, California: Mixolydian Editions, 2017). Wood engravings by Richard Wagener. Essay by Edwin Dobb.*

it off with Robert Creeley when the poet toured New Zealand in 1976 and went on to publish his volume *Hello* with Loney's Hawk Press in Christchurch. The poetic principles of one of Loney's most important early inspirations, Charles Olson, continue to echo decades later in *Loom*. For Olson, the formal effects of English-language (or accentual-syllabic) verse arise from the *physical* experience of composing and reciting poems. Our breath is exhausted or contained by a line, and this establishes the basic unit of a poem. Locating form in the line instead of the metrical units of stress, Olson challenged our assumptions about form and content. His Projectivist theory of verse called on the poet "to register both the acquisitions of his ear *and* the pressure of his breath." The meaning of a line is expressed in the economy of human in- and out-breath, determining its length, its stopping short or going long, its spilling over into the next line (enjambment). As readers, we reenact the license and constraint felt by the poet. Throughout *Loom*, Loney's lines mimic the width of Wagener's weaving prints, also evoking the constraints a weaver feels in tossing the shuttle side to side, straining to maximize the arm span of a human body. The energetic act of weaving allows a breath to be taken as the weft is turned, a rest that Loney also allows in his verse.[8] By incorporating the physical constraints of art-making into verse via weaving, *Loom* suggests a new textural and material aspect to the familiar biological or nature-based metaphors for poetry, like heartbeats, breaths, or strides.

Robert Duncan would later say that the effect of Olson's strident syllables was like energetic walking, or the transformation of an intuitive activity into a strenuous one. In his correspondence with Olson, Duncan said that he had discovered in his friend's writing "a very structure of act, a speech as learned in the hand-ear-to-mouth as walking, an athletic language."[9] Olson had defined "the two halves" of poetry as

> the HEAD, by way of the EAR, to the SYLLABLE the
> HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE.[10]

Duncan hailed Olson's explanation of poetry as the unified dichotomy, writing "it's no choice between the two"; rather, it

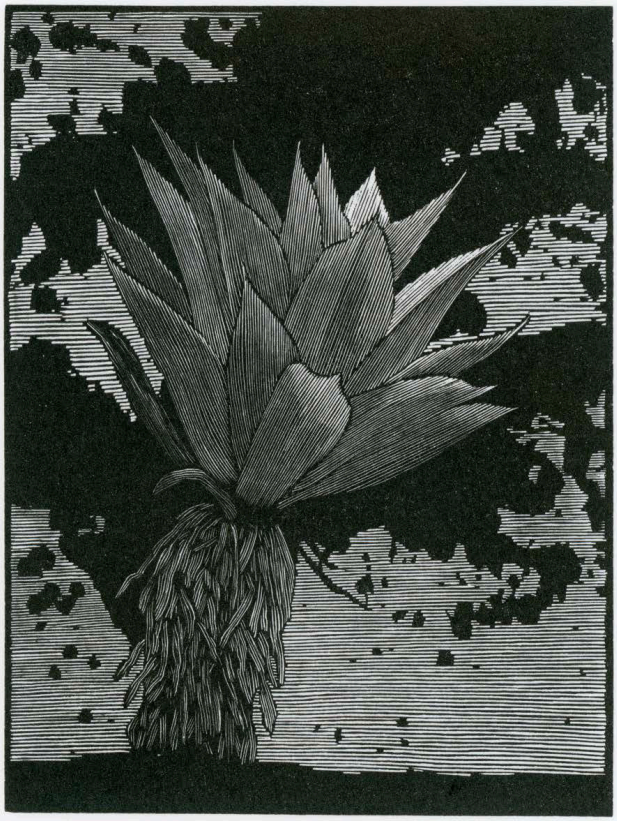
> is this *practice* of the outside and the inside
> to learn, as surely as we learn to walk (which is simultaneously
> by a practice of the inside and the outside, of the ear-organ
> equilibrium i.e.) to dare to exist.[11]

Two centuries earlier, James Boswell had recounted the important coordination of walking, singing, and weaving in the craft-centered Scottish towns he and Samuel Johnson visited during their tour of the Hebrides.[12] Boswell recalled seeing women singing "waulking songs" as they "waulked," or beat, new tweed. These "waulking"

songs, so called because they helped weavers keep a regular pace when felting new cloth, synchronized the work of many bodies as they fulled the stiff, new tweed.[13] Boswell visited during a moment of transition, when traditional craft ways were slowly giving way to industrially organized production. Still, in Olson's poetics and in Loney and Wagener's collaboration, we see the continuation of a long tradition of linking spinning and singing, weaving and telling tales: the rhythmic Gaelic songs and steady walk pulse like the collective rap of a beater on a loom or the punctuated syllables of a long poetic line on the ear (fig. 6).

In a recent lecture given as part of the *Threads Talk Series*, Loney reached for a weaving metaphor to describe not only poetic form, but reading as a practice of moving between the physical and the formal, or "the outside and the inside," as Duncan would have put it. "Reading a book and reading a text," Loney argued, "are examples of indeterminacy; we cannot do both at once. There is instead a kind of shuttling back and forth, loom shuttle, weaving, *textura*, however rapid between the two."[14] Between the physical body of the book and the immaterial quality of reading, Loney sees that focusing on any one quality of book culture can be an act of exclusion, from selecting one book from your library and leaving others unread on the shelf, to opening a page of one book and occluding the rest, to paying attention to the physical quality of the book and turning away, however briefly, from reading the text. Bringing these acts together borrows from the practice of the weaver, whose cloth is comprised of a single thread but also countless discrete throws of the shuttle. In reading, Loney argues that we shuttle our attention between book and text. He found himself caught in the same activity throughout his collaboration with Wagener. When writing *Loom*, he toggled between the competing demands of the wood slab and the spare incised lines, between background and foreground. Olson had said, "form is never more than an extension of context," and when encountering "the black slab," Loney "often wondered if the 'real' subject of the prints was the black rectangle rather than the lines marked within it."[15]

The *Threads Talk Series* sought to bring together "various strands of book culture that are often approached in isolation," from publishing and design to literary history and critical theory.[16] The series included a number of textile artist/poets, such as Jen Bervin and Cecilia Vicuña, whose work highlights the conceptual importance of weaving to poetry, as well as its foundational role as a material and technique. And yet, Loney is as interested in the sparseness of a single thread as he is in interweaving the many strands of book culture. As a recently retired printer, Loney contemplates never producing or buying another book. He asks how one printer's or writer's body of work fits into the totality of texts, which are "a



Agave attenuata
Mexico

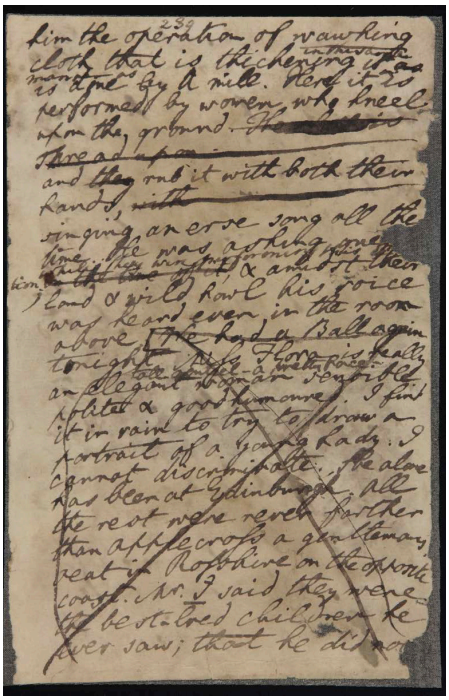


Figure 6: James Boswell, Journal of the Tour to the Hebrides *manuscript page (1773). Beinecke Library, Gen MSS 89, Box 40, Folder 970, Item 239.*

ground cover like moss that covers the surface of the Earth."[17] Rather, how few books might make a library? How much can be gleaned from a single text? How few threads make a weaving?

Though Wagener's engravings came first, the poem does not illustrate the images. Rather, the two artists share an idea and a question: how do poetic lines, single incisions, fragile threads aggregate to form a weaving? Their collaboration constitutes the loom itself. Such a collaboration would, like Loney's idea of how attention distinguishes between the physical and formal qualities of the book, require the reader to weave.

Wagener recounts that once he started engraving, he felt unusually driven to push the project forward: "I was engraving, but it was a kind of engraving that felt electrically charged; something I was so consumed with that it felt it was being pulled out of me and pulled together at the same time."[18] After engraving and printing the sixteen prints on his Vandercook proof press, Wagener sent an edition of prints, as well as one printing block, halfway around the world so that Loney could also live with the idea that had haunted Wagener's creative process for years (fig. 7).

Loom is a remarkable art object and codex. Its pleasantly springy light blue cover flops open easily, and it is a pleasure to turn its heavy pages, though today volumes can be found only in rare book libraries and private collections (there is, as of this writing, only one available for sale on the open market). Perhaps surprisingly, given all that is said nowadays about the demise of print media, the market for books like *Loom* is thriving. Patrons will wait years for the publication of a project, which can often involve the contributions of a half dozen artists. *Loom* is the product of a network of artists who mastered the exacting techniques—and antiquated machinery—required to make a book by hand. David Pascoe of Nawakum Press collaborated on the design and copublished *Loom*. In Sebastopol, California, Patrick Reagh cast and typeset Janson type before turning to his Heidelberg cylinder press to print the proofs. These were transported to San Marcos, Texas, where Craig Jensen of BookLab II sewed each binding by hand, using strips of linen tape and a case of handmade paper. The result is forty-six numbered volumes, each almost immediately snapped up by collections like that of the Huntington Library in Pasadena, where I encountered the work.

Between Wagener's stark engravings and Loney's poetic thinking, the two create a work that meditates on the importance of a line—from threads to text, from lines of print to those of the burin. Though both text and image have a spare aesthetic of openness and fragility, Loney and Wagener's combined art also suggests that weavings are hard to escape. Loney's poem declares that

> there is nothing about a simple line . . .
> but the whole grid the dense wood
> no telling if you're on the line
> or off the hook each always in
> the dark one line to the next.

Loom is recursive, building in the back-and-forth movement between poem and prints—much like weaving, the countless shots of weft moving horizontally back and forth, slowly, slowly building a length of cloth and an imperceptible movement forward.

When I spoke with him, Wagener admitted that he "has always been attracted to the distressed fragments of textiles that have survived from distant times." Susceptible to climatic and bodily wear, ancient fragments of textile are rare compared to artifacts made of stone, iron, or even glass and ceramic. Wagener and Loney's work responds to both the fragility of textiles and their ubiquitous presence in human culture across time and space. Wagener's sturdier craft protects these delicate images of weavings by surrounding them not only with the strength of a wood slab but with the sinuous text of Loney's poem, which imagines art as a process of recurrence, just as a weft travels across its warp, only to return to the same place, only slightly further on. Or, as Loney writes:

> the blocked slab on which work's
> body lies not stainless nor tainted nowhere
> to go from here but here itself
> all failures all come home to roost. ■

Figure 7: Loom *cover and slipcase for standard binding.*

NOTES

1. Interview with the artist, July 17, 2017.

2. Ibid.

3. Alan Loney, "Threading the poem," in *Loom* (Santa Rosa, California: Nawakum Press and Mixolydian Editions, 2014).

4. William Holman Hunt, *The Lady of Shalott* (1850). Black chalk, pen and ink. 23.5 × 14.2 cm. Felton Bequest, 1921; National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia. Accessed at ngv.vic.gov.au/explore/collection/work/28208/

5. Plate 2 from *The Odyssey of Homer Engraved by Thomas Piroli from the Compositions of John Flaxman, Sculptor* (Rome, 1793).

6. A fresco depicting Penelope held by the National Gallery in the UK, Pinturicchio's *Penelope with the Suitors* (1509) positions the loom vertically between the seated weaver and the crowd of men pouring into the room. Though she does not mention Penelope explicitly, Rosalind Krauss's canonical essay about the origin of the grid in modern art is useful for historically situating the repeated image of a woman standing behind a loom and glimpsed through its warp. See Krauss, "Grids," *October* 9 (1979): 50–64.

7. A. Roger Ekirch, *At Day's Close: Night in Times Past* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2005), 193–7.

8. Charles Olson, "Projective Verse" (1950). Accessed at writing.upenn.edu/~taransky/projective_verse.pdf.

9. Duncan to Olson, December 15, 1953, in *Open Map: The Correspondence of Robert Duncan and Charles Olson*, edited by Robert Bertholf and Dale M. Smith (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2017), 37.

10. Olson, "Projective Verse."

11. Duncan, *Open Map*, 89.

12. James Boswell, *Journal of the Tour to the Hebrides* manuscript page (1773). Beinecke Library, Gen MSS 89, Box 40, Folder 970, Item 239.

13. Ruth Perry, "The Finest Ballads: Women's Oral Traditions in Eighteenth-Century Scotland," *Eighteenth-Century Life* 32, no. 2 (2008): 81–97.

14. Loney, "What Book Does My Library Make?" *Threads Talk Series* (March 11, 2009). Accessed at writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/loney.php.

15. Olson, "Projective Verse"; Loney, "Threading the poem."

16. Steve Clay and Kyle Schlesinger, "Introduction," in *Threads Talk Series*, edited by Steve Clay and Kyle Schlesinger (New York: Granary Books, 2016), 1.

17. Loney, "What Book Does My Library Make?

18. Interview with the artist, July 17, 2017.

Images from Loom *used with the kind permission of Richard Wagener.*