

Lesley Dill and Emily Dickinson: In the Service of Auratic Magic*

The artist Lesley Dill dislikes the term ‘appropriation.’ She feels it is “outdated” and undermines her deep relationship with other artists, most of whom are deceased. She explains her process:

“It is more how Jonathan Edwards, the Puritan minister, would call being swallowed up by God. May we let the work speak for itself? My relationship to words is so deep and so intimate and so forceful, it feels as if the theme of appropriation undercuts my psyche.”¹

Her complex mind is on display in her art, which includes photographs and lithographs; textile sculptures with thread; bronze sculptures with horsehair; foil installations with muslim, wire and organza; even an opera. But her work is also filled with other people’s words, especially the poetry of Emily Dickinson, Pablo Neruda and Tom Sleigh, as well as lines of prose from Franz Kafka and Nathaniel Hawthorne. It is actually impossible to look at any piece by Dill and not see their words or hear their voices. But that is her whole point. She wants the viewer to be inspired and moved, maybe not as much as she is to the point of ecstasy,² but at least to feel “the potent marriage of language and image.”³ To create this synergy, she uses words like any other fibrous material in her work. “A solitary sentence becomes a kind of cloth, or a ribbon, draped and reprocessed.”⁴ Text is woven, wired, painted, printed and sewn into ribbons and banners.⁵ This process imbues her pieces with an aura that could not be achieved otherwise. Ironically, it is the act of appropriation—the replication of other artists’ language over and around her images—that make her pieces so striking and original. Also, her auratic “magic”⁶ would not be possible

¹ The Maine Arts Journal: The UMVA Quarterly, “Fall 2019 — Maine Arts Journal: Appropriation Archive page - The Maine Arts Journal: The UMVA Quarterly,” December 28, 2019, <https://maineartsjournal.com/lesley-dill/Fall>.

² “Art Wise: In the Studio With Lesley Dill,” 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KXtPwuVhYwo>. 12:52.

³ Figge Art Museum, *Lesley Dill, Wilderness*, 2021. p.17.

⁴ Lesley Dill, *I Heard a Voice: The Art of Lesley Dill*, 2009. p. 29.

⁵ Figge Art Museum, *Lesley Dill, Wilderness*, p. 27.

⁶ Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings: 1938-1940* (Harvard University Press, 1996) p. 106.

without the hands of so many other people: studio and museum assistants; metal makers in the foundry; weavers; composers; musicians; and nude models. Many people collaborate on a single piece. Often, in her mechanical process of creating, the main noise comes from furnaces pouring bronze; or scissors cutting wires; or feet moving back and forth as thread is woven into a costume; or hammers banging foil onto a wall. Like Sol LeWitt's artist-helpers, Andy Warhol's "Factory" assistants and Donald Judd's metalworker, Ed Bernstein, other people help to reproduce Dill's ideas into originals. Many of her pieces are also part of larger series. This added layer of multiples enhances the individual pieces. For example, Dill's *Wilderness* series of sixteen textile sculptures of iconic American historical figures (Anne Hutchinson, Mary Rowlandson, Sojourner Truth, Black Hawk, Walt Whitman and Nathaniel Hawthorne, to name a few) is breathtaking when viewed as a group.

This paper examines five works of art and one series that utilize a range of materials: *A Word Made Flesh...Throat* from her photolithography series; *Paper Speaking Dress and Paris Speaking Dress*, two similar performance pieces using textiles and paint; *Rush*, an immense foil and wire sculpture; *Ecstasy*, a bronze and horsehair sculpture; *Divide Light*, her Emily Dickinson opera; and *Wilderness: Light Sizzles All Around Me*, a series of textile sculptures. In all of them, appropriation and replication of language produce her unique auratic magic.

How did Dill become entranced by Emily Dickinson? How did her artwork become consumed with the poet's words? She remembers the exact moment it happened. Two decades after she graduated from college where she had ironically "dismissed poetry,"⁷ Dill received a book of Emily Dickinson's poems from her mother, a former theater teacher who loved spoken word, as a fortieth birthday present. "The words came from the book into my eyes as if they were

⁷"Lesley Dill: We Are Animals of Language," 2007, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w-srK3vgOSA>. 7:11.

electrical blue hummingbirds, went down into my body...then up surge images for art making.”⁸ These “strange and poetic texts” filled her with fear and ecstasy.⁹ She moved from “despair to exhilaration.”¹⁰ Dill still thinks of them as “magnets of resonance and recognition that pull me to an edge.”¹¹

When the artist is interviewed, she often describes Emily Dickinson's words as being “like fishhooks” reeling her creativity in. They “lifted up an idea plus an accompanying ‘make me, make me now’ urgency” that fuels her passion to make art.¹² Dickinson’s text also mixes with Kafka and other famous writers on the fabric banners and human bodies of Dill’s creations. She is instinctively drawn to both dichotomies and double meanings in language. Dill attributes her preoccupation with the darker side of language to her father. “Because he was a paranoid schizophrenic, language was particularly freighted for him. There was a secret meaning, and there was a surface meaning...I was really aware that words mean something, and they also mean something else, and they probably mean something else.”¹³ For years, she lived in an environment where language could be frightening, radiant, fearful, mysterious, and inspiring all at the same time. In her work, Dill uses this multi-dimensional power of words, as Walter Benjamin once said, “in the service of” making artistic “magic.”¹⁴

A Word Made Flesh...Throat (1994) is a photolithograph measuring 29 7/16 by 22 1/16 inches. It captures the dualities of female strength and vulnerability, freedom and violence, poetry and protest. Language covers up the body of a nude female figure and exposes it at the same time. Before Dill photographs the model, she and her assistants paint words on her body

⁸“Lesley Dill: We Are Animals of Language.” 12:52.

⁹ “Art Wise: In the Studio With Lesley Dill.” 27:35.

¹⁰ “Art Wise: In the Studio With Lesley Dill.” 27:35.

¹¹ “Art Wise: In the Studio With Lesley Dill.” 15:54.

¹²René Paul Barilleaux, Jody Blake, *Lesley Dill: Performance As Art*, 2015. p. 16.

¹³ “Lesley Dill: We Are Animals of Language.” 11:20.

¹⁴ Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*. p. 106.

from the first two lines of Emily Dickinson's poem #1090: "I am Afraid to own a BODY—I am Afraid to own a SOUL. "They were literally made flesh by being painted on bodies," Dill explains of her process.¹⁵ Afterwards, she color-etches the photograph with blue aquatint, soaks and stains the paper in mulberry tea, and then hand-sews it onto buff-wove paper. Like the eighteenth century master printmaker Giovanni Baptista Piranesi, she uses a hand-scraper and sandpaper to etch the woman's neck. These cuts or engravings almost look like they were made from nails digging into skin. The words in black start to resemble dark blood.

The outside edge of the paper is intentionally rough and ragged, breaking down the line between subject and viewer, making for an uncomfortable reading of the photograph. The viewer feels like a voyeur looking through the dark space that surrounds the naked body. The figure's eyes are closed, but her neck is open and outstretched. "Afraid" is capitalized and repeated twice. Her skin says what her mouth doesn't dare to speak. Is her head raised up to show inner strength? Or, are her invisible eyes meant to hide fear? More of Dill's dualities and dichotomies. Maybe the artist sees herself in the poet's words and remembers her own terrifying "revelation" at 14-years-old.

I stood up and my visual screen went black and I could see nothing except I felt an immense sense of rapture and bliss and I was given to see war torment and torture and somehow there was a message in there that everything was all right.¹⁶

Dickinson's words inside Dill's photograph help to "extend and replace reality," as Rosalind Krauss once wrote. "The writing of the photograph" creates a new aura between subject and viewer that moves beyond appropriation.¹⁷ Dill says she is drawn to this medium, because "it

¹⁵Barilleaux, Blake, *Lesley Dill: Performance As Art*. p. 18.

¹⁶ "Art Wise: In the Studio With Lesley Dill." 4:24.

¹⁷Rosalind Krauss, "The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism," October 19 (Winter 1981): p. 34.

literally makes a human being into a human piece of paper. It makes them frontal. It makes for a reading.”¹⁸

In a ten minute performance at the Guggenheim Museum in SoHo, New York, *Paper Speaking Dress* in 1983 and a related piece, *Paris Speaking Dress* in 1986 at the Maison Des Arts de Créteil in France, the artist reads aloud from Emily Dickinson’s poem #512: *The Soul Has Bandaged Moments*. These pieces, like *A Word Made Flesh...Throat*, draw in the viewer with a hypnotic mix of text, movement and materials. In behind-the-scenes photographs of the intricate process before performances, Dill positions a model in a long, white dress with a twenty foot train. The complete poem #512 is painted on top of that dress in thick, black, Old English letters. Four to six performers encircle the woman in the dress and slowly pull on long ribbons that are also covered in Dickinson’s words. The central figure’s eyelids, like those in the lithograph, are closed. “They are veiled by two fabric extensions that fall in a long trail downwards covering her eyes.” Dill calls these ribbons, “vision catchers.”¹⁹ They represent the artist’s interest in dichotomies—blindness and sight; “inner and outer worlds.”²⁰ At the same time, the poetry is recited in English—and French, in Paris—creating a layering of language that is both seen and heard.

Dill also made *Speaking Dress* as a symbol of the “skin of the body...It’s not just our mouth that speaks. In different ways our eyes, ears, nipples, sexual organs all emit various essences of the body,” she explains.²¹ Dickinson’s haunting words make word pictures on the fabric, so there is another layering, not just of sound and image, but of Dickinson’s art and Dill’s art: “ghastly Fright, freezing hair,” a “Goblin” sipping from “the very lips,” the “Soul” like a

¹⁸ Dill, *I Heard a Voice: The Art of Lesley Dill*.

¹⁹ Barilleaux, Blake, *Lesley Dill: Performance As Art*. p. 34.

²⁰ Barilleaux, Blake, *Lesley Dill: Performance As Art*. p. 34.

²¹ Barilleaux, Blake, *Lesley Dill: Performance As Art*. p. 34.

mummified ghost trying to “burst” out and “escape” the body. The cursive font is set against a white dress. Dickinson herself was often seen wearing a long white dress as she walked around Amherst, Massachusetts. More appropriation. In between the folds of fabric, language is sometimes visible and sometimes hidden. More intentional dualities. It seems that Dill wants the viewer to feel that words can make sense and illuminate but also be indecipherable and confusing. This clarity and confusion is a pattern in almost all of her pieces.²² “Leslie Dill addresses words as containers of both meaning and meaninglessness as tools of communication and as mute scribbles on a page....creating messages that are as much a kind of linguistic code—marks representing ideas—as they are mute blemishes, abstractions whose resonance has more to do with emotions than rhetoric.”²³ Like Sherrie Levine’s recreations of Walker Evans’ work, Dill’s appropriation takes Dickinson’s words and moves them into a metaphorical realm.

In *Rush* (2007), Dill captivates her viewer with a foil installation that is 20 feet high by 60 feet long, covering the entire length of a museum gallery. It contains words written on June 21, 1913 in the eighth notebook of Franz Kafka’s *Diaries*.

“*The tremendous world I have inside my head. But how free myself and free it without being torn to pieces. And a thousand times rather be torn to pieces than retain in me or bury it. That, indeed, is why I am here, that is quite clear to me.*”²⁴

Like the German writer’s language suggests—a world in danger of being “torn to pieces”—Dill’s visual world of foil figures is cut into hundreds of shapes and sizes. She has appropriated Kafka’s words and morphed them into a “rush” of human and animal forms. They seem to fly out of the back of a seated figure and into the viewer’s space. This idea of words being “riders on the back of Silence” is also appropriated from the poet, Pablo Neruda.²⁵ Dill explains, “I believe that we

²² Barilleaux, Blake, *Lesley Dill: Performance As Art*. p. 34.

²³ Michael O’Sullivan, “Lesley Dill, in so Many Words,” *The Washington Post*, July 24, 2003, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/2003/07/25/lesley-dill-in-so-many-words/6faf5fe7-2744-45dd-846b-6c81f4b94c42/>.

²⁴ Franz Kafka, *The Diaries of Franz Kafka* (Random House, 2024). p. 294.

²⁵ Pablo Neruda, *The Book of Questions* (Copper Canyon Press, 2001).

as human beings are riders on archetypal images from thousands of years of our forebears and their myths and cultures...I was very interested in the nature of the back of our bodies. We're so frontal as alert animals—the back body has a more animal, more irrational, awareness.”²⁶

Rush was the centerpiece of her 2007 exhibition entitled, *Tremendous World*, at the Neuberger Museum of Art in Harrison, New York. It was carefully assembled by a team of workmen from the museum's facilities on accordion lifts, a curator and numerous assistants. Film of the process shows everyone working from an elaborate plan sketched by the artist of the final design. It almost looks like a topographical map laid out on the floor. Eventually, it becomes a floating, shimmering cloud on the wall. First, sheets of foil figures are spread out on the floor according to their specific location on the map. Then, several men on lifts transfer the pieces one by one and attach them with hammers to the wall. Each “mythological” image is “scrubbed to different shades of silver and backed by organza, all delicately sewn together with wire.”²⁷

Dill does not appear to be on site while the piece is being assembled. Like Yaoi Kusama's *Infinity Nets*, perhaps *Rush* is not meant to evoke Dill's presence but her absence, disappearing into a glimmering, repetitive design that is similar to the “looping patterns,” “interlocking zeros” and “biological cells” which spread across Kusami's canvases with “no beginning and no end.”²⁸ Dill's “rush” of images and the “retraction of the artist's hand” is also reminiscent of the repetitive lines of lead in Sol LeWitt's work, *Wall Drawing #1211*.²⁹ A video of his eight

²⁶ Staff, “‘Fierceness and Fragility: A Conversation With Lesley Dill,’ Sculpture - Arthur Roger Gallery,” Arthur Roger Gallery, December 5, 2013, <https://arthurrrogallery.com/2010/11/fierceness-and-fragility-a-conversation-with-lesley-dill-sculpture/>.

²⁷ Lesley Dill, “Lesley Dill's Rush on View at the Neuberger Museum of Art June 9th-December 31st, 2021 — Lesley Dill,” Lesley Dill, June 18, 2021, <https://www.lesleydill.net/press/lesley-dills-rush-on-view-at-the-neuberger-museum-of-art-june-9th-december-31st-2021>.

²⁸ Louise Neri and Takaya Goto, *Kusama* (Rizzoli Publications, 2012). p. 62.

²⁹ Annie Ochmanek, “Bernstein Brothers Sheet Metal Specialties, Inc.” in Judd (Museum of Modern Art, 2020), p. 166.

assistants working in an assembly-line style, similar to the workers on Dill's wall, captures a human machine engaged in repetitive motion for many hours.³⁰ Two processes of different artists that are mechanical and impersonal, and at the same time oddly quiet and intimate. More dualities creating more auratic magic.

In *Ecstasy* (2003/2008), a sculpture cast in bronze with horsehair and wire, Dill shows another solitary figure who is possessed by Emily Dickinson's words. This subject is in the middle of an ecstatic vision pouring out from her bent body. She is life-size and on her knees, approximately three by three feet and cast in solid bronze. Streams of horsehair sixteen feet long flow from both of her knees. The hand-dyed thread of her thoughts against the dark brown, man-made metal of her body are set against pure white walls and white floors. These color and material contrasts are striking. The duality of soft animal hair is juxtaposed against hard folds of bronze. "I wanted to make a fierce, kneeling woman—hands clenched, with her legs emitting language," Dill explains. She highlights her desire for "one area of clenching and one of release."³¹ On the figure's back are words from the first line of Emily Dickinson's poem #1640, "Take all away from me, but leave me Ecstasy."³² On the figure's front are the words, "A Wounded deer leaps highest." Nestled in the horsehair that swirls around the space is a word written in large, capital, wire letters: E C S T A S Y. Dill repeats this word often in her opera, *Divide Light*, her *Wilderness* series and her *Faith and The Devil* exhibition. The artist hopes that Dickinson's revelations will affect the viewer through her original art. In that way, we begin to imagine the kneeling figure as the embodiment of the artist—a fragile being searching for

³⁰ Henry Lydiate, "Authenticating Sol LeWitt," *Art Monthly* (July-August 2012): 41.

³¹ Staff, "'Fierceness and Fragility: A Conversation With Lesley Dill,' Sculpture - Arthur Roger Gallery," Arthur Roger Gallery, December 5, 2013, <https://arthurrrogallery.com/2010/11/fierceness-and-fragility-a-conversation-with-lesley-dill-sculpture/>.

³² "Take All Away From Me, but Leave Me Ecstasy by Emily Dickinson," Hello Poetry, <https://hellopoetry.com/poem/3659/take-all-away-from-me-but-leave-me-ecstasy/>.

bliss—and as Dill suggests, “a wounded deer.” It is intriguing to the viewer that she is made of metal and still radiates that kind of “vulnerability.”

So like *Rush*, *Ecstasy* is a piece of contrasts. The figure kneels alone and appears to be lost in deep thoughts. Yet those thoughts spill out and reach across the larger space of the room to connect with the viewer.³³ Like Dill’s textile costumes and paper dresses which are meant to be read, her sculptures are also “presented as spectacles of readings as they are unfurled, unrolled or scrolled out. How do we see, how do we think, how do we listen to language,” the artist is asking.³⁴ In both sculptural pieces, perhaps there are echoes of her childhood trauma living with a mentally ill father who felt the burden of language. Even though *Ecstasy* is cast in bronze, the horsehair gives it a lightness and weightlessness. “I want to make bronze as linear and light as possible,” she once said.³⁵ The bronze material becomes freeing to the artist, just like Dickinson’s poetry, “Hope” is the thing with feathers -That perches in the soul -”³⁶

When Dill visits the foundry where many of her bronze pieces like *Ecstasy* are cast, she seems to be less of a “circus ringmaster” like Andy Warhol was and more of an engaged collaborator.³⁷ The “here and now”³⁸ quality of her figures is conveyed through “the almost magical technique” of the lost-wax method where materials meet inside the plaster mold “without human hands or eyes” and transform into bronze sculpture.³⁹ This reproducibility has existed for centuries and was used by Rodin. The process adds another layer of replication to the appropriated text. It feels like the two originals (Dickinson’s words and Dill’s bronze figure) are

³³Dill, *I Heard a Voice: The Art of Lesley Dill*. p. 17.

³⁴ Barilleaux, Blake, *Lesley Dill: Performance As Art*. p. 19.

³⁵ “Lesley Dill: Faith & the Devil - Exhibitions - George Adams Gallery,” <https://www.georgeadamsgallery.com/exhibitions/lesley-dill-faith-and-the-devil>.

³⁶ “‘Hope’ Is the Thing With Feathers,” The Poetry Foundation, September 5, 2024, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/42889/hope-is-the-thing-with-feathers-314>.

³⁷ José Lebrero Stals, “The Sweet Abyss of Mechanical Art” in *Andy Warhol: The Mechanical Art* (La Fábrica, 2018), p. 19.

³⁸ Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*. p. 103.

³⁹ Ittai Weinryb, “Making” in *The Bronze Object in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge University Press, 2016), 52.

“connected to one another across *invisible webs*, generating mysterious effects of survival, revival and anachronism.”⁴⁰ When viewers observe *Ecstasy*, they “gaze” on it from all sides and every direction. What they experience is the “aura” of something original.⁴¹

During the pandemic, the artist produced a series of eight-foot-tall paper and textile sculptures representing sixteen American figures who lived between 1591 and 1980. It is intriguing to imagine her alone in her studio, creating these larger-than-life abstract apparitions. She calls them “familiar, each with the unknown luminosity and terrors of complicated, contradictory lives...”⁴² The sculptures dangle from the ceiling. They are all made out of cloth and covered in language from their lives. All the words are either written by them or about them. The figures “represent religious crusaders, social activists and Native American leaders whose voices have improbably risen from repression and exclusion.”⁴³ Sojourner Truth, Emily Dickinson and Sister Gertrude Morgan are a few of the female icons. To Dill, they represent the complex duality of “divinity and devilry,” the internal and external “wilderness” stirring inside early American women.⁴⁴ When the pandemic ended in 2022, the series was exhibited at the Figge Museum. The title of the show, *Wilderness: Light Sizzles Around Me*, is appropriated from the beginning of a poem written by Tom Sleight from the point of view of the Great Awakening preacher, Jonathan Edwards.

Through the curtain *light sizzles around me*
watching a spider dangling in a waterfall
of glare, God making me aware
of that light mumbling to itself in flashes and glints...⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Christopher S. Wood, “Chapter One: Credulity” in *Forgery, Replica, Fiction: Temporalities of German Renaissance Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2008), p. 22.

⁴¹ Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, p. 105.

⁴² Figge Art Museum, *Lesley Dill, Wilderness*, p. 19.

⁴³ Julie Lasky, “A Brooklyn Artist Adjusts to Making Art in Solitude,” *The New York Times*, April 2, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/02/realestate/coronavirus-brooklyn-artist-lesley-dill.html>.

⁴⁴ Lasky, “A Brooklyn Artist Adjusts to Making Art in Solitude.”

⁴⁵ Lesley Dill, “The Language Transcripts,” *Wilderness: Light Sizzles Around Me* (Figge Art Museum), https://mmfa.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/202109_Dill_The-Language-Transcripts.pdf.

One can only imagine the effect on the viewer of walking among all these giant sculptures. As a series, it seems more powerful than any one individual piece. The grouping creates an electricity and aura, because so many appropriated words are transposed in this new space. It almost feels like “a garrulous conversation among all,” “a gathering of souls that is prayerful, imperious and exhilarating.”⁴⁶

No work of Lesley Dill is more saturated with Emily Dickinson’s words than her opera, *Divide Light*. In 2008, it was performed at the Montalvo Arts Center in California and ten years later by the New Camerata Opera Company in New York. The opera mixes all of her media. Black and white photographs of nudes painted with words in her graphic, familiar style fill a large screen in the background. Images appear and disappear. Eight singers stand on stage and perform Dickinson’s poems, accompanied by the Del Sol String Quartet. Each singer wears a different costume. Textile and text are woven together just like they are in her *Speaking Dress* series. Large ribbons flow down a woman’s face. The cast sings the poet’s lines repeatedly as if they are a refrain: “The Maker of Ourselves”... “To be alive is Power”... “Divide Light if you dare.” The stage radiates light and song. In the center, a model poses dramatically in a scarlet dress decorated in black letters of different sizes. On the screen, words move towards the ceiling and disappear out of sight, suggesting the limitless nature of language. A performer stretches her arms towards an imaginary night sky while the others move in a circle around her.

When Dill describes the process of making her opera, she sounds almost like an artisan. She wants each image to move “incredibly slowly” in order to create a “meditative state” for the audience. “I learned to direct my opera singers to face forward, with their throats up, not holding

⁴⁶ Figge Art Museum, *Lesley Dill, Wilderness*, p. 28.

the sound too deep in chest or throat, but to release it directly into the audience.”⁴⁷ The artist goes to extremes like gluing ribbons to a model’s eyelids and tying lit candles to the fingertips of her assistant who poses for one of the photographs. So many people and hands seem to be in motion—the composer, a set designer, costume designer, technical crew, film operator, musicians, performers and a number of assistants. The result is a collaboration that moves from reproduction into a liminal state between the original words by Dickinson and the becoming of a new original by Dill. “One is dazzled, but not blinded, and one hardly dares to breathe,” wrote a reviewer of the opera in *The Emily Dickinson Journal*.⁴⁸

Most of the auratic energy that Dill creates between her work and her viewer is a direct result of this reproduction and appropriation of other people’s words. But some of it also comes from two years in India where she lived inside a culture of words she “didn’t understand” and learned techniques about staining paper and skin with tea and ink. Indian newspapers printed with unfamiliar lettering intrigued her.⁴⁹ They embodied her love of the tactile nature of paper and “the mystery of language.” She dyed her hands and feet with henna designs. That experience would later give her the idea to tattoo models with words and paint letters onto cloth. “With its recognizable meaning removed, the aural experience of Hindi words and the equally indecipherable twisting of written Hindi script became a melodic and visual unintelligibility that would later influence the costumes, the music, and also the projected animations of my performance pieces,”⁵⁰ she explains. In addition, Buddhist prayer flags that she saw throughout the country repeat themselves in her work. In Nepal, “word-covered banners were a way Buddhist blessings were carried into the winds.”⁵¹ On Dill’s banners, hundreds of multi-sized,

⁴⁷ Barilleaux, Blake, *Lesley Dill: Performance As Art*, p. 21.

⁴⁸ “Divide Light Opera — Lesley Dill,” Lesley Dill, <https://www.lesleydill.net/divide-light-opera>.

⁴⁹ Dill, *I Heard a Voice: The Art of Lesley Dill*, p. 11.

⁵⁰ Barilleaux, Blake, *Lesley Dill: Performance As Art*, p. 19.

⁵¹ “Ascend: Until the Urge to Rise Meets the Urge to Fall — Lesley Dill,” Lesley Dill, <https://www.lesleydill.net/ascend-until-the-urge-to-rise-meets-the-urge-to-fall>.

cursive letters hold familiar poetic lines: *How Ruthless are the Gentle; To be alive is power—existence in itself—without a further function—Omnipotence Enough; The Soul has Bandaged Moments; I am Afraid to own a BODY, I am Afraid to own a SOUL.*”

In a documentary about Lesley Dill’s process, the artist moves quietly around her Brooklyn studio. She speaks extra slowly and thoughtfully to herself and the camera. She seems to think about the sound and shape of her words the same way she chooses the language of her poets—with care. Dill walks back and forth, looping long pieces of wire for a wall sculpture in progress entitled *Shimmer*. There is something otherworldly about her, reflected in her speech and movement. It is as if she is driven by a mysterious spirit. Her appearance makes the viewer wonder what Emily Dickinson, who was also spiritual and complicated, might think of Dill. Dickinson had visions and a complex family history, too. The poet’s fifth great-grandfather, Nathaniel Dickinson, was one of a group of New England settlers who appropriated indigenous lands, claiming ownership of them for his family.⁵² One imagines Emily Dickinson would have greatly admired the artist’s word choices and been intrigued by the radiance and resonance that her poetry brings to Lesley Dill’s remarkable works.

*Art in the service of magic is an idea put forward by Walter Benjamin. “We know that the earliest art works originated in the service of a ritual—first the magical, then the religious kind. It is significant that the existence of the work of art with reference to its aura is never entirely separated from its ritual function”

- *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Walter Benjamin, 1935.

⁵² Lisa Brooks, “Whose Native Place?,” in *Oxford University Press eBooks*, 2022, 17–35, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198833932.013.31>.



The making of “Rush”
(2007)



“Rush”
(2007)



“Paris Speaking Dress”
(1986)



“Ecstasy”
(2003, 2008)



“Omnipotence Enough” from the Wilderness Series
(2007)



“A Word Made Flesh... Throat”
(1994)



“Divide Light”
(2008)