



An ABCs of
Jessica Jackson Hutchins

Compiled by
Amanda Donnan



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Sculptural letters by Jessica Jackson Hutchins
Text compiled by Amanda Donnan

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ABOUTNESS—Jessica Jackson Hutchins has an aversion to aboutness: the tidy packaging of an artist's work as being "about" this or that, the propensity to make it mean or "do" something specific and to prop it up with quantifiable references. Art objects aren't about things, they are things; they don't need an urtext or referent, they are the original. In fact, Hutchins is on record saying her work *is* about something—but it is nothing less than "everyday life."

What one can speak about are the approaches and affects of Hutchins's work—the desires and compulsions from which it arises, its expressive sensibilities and material qualities—and no one does that better than the artist herself. It seemed appropriate, then, in planning a publication to accompany her uncomprehensive, nonchronological twenty-five-year survey, *Wrecked and Righteous*, to foreground her voice and adopt a dual logic of index and collage. Structured as an ABCs, or abecedarium, what follows offers snatches of thought and conversation, resisting linearity and completeness in favor of textural fragments. Except where otherwise noted, the quotes are excerpted from email correspondence between the artist and myself during the months of July and August 2023.

Amanda Donnan



BANALITY AND BEER CARTONS—

The process of framing a banal object and inviting the viewer to project, create, participate in the creation of its meaning is something I have been committed to since the very beginning of making art.^[1] I've always made my work from the stuff in the room. When I drank a lot of beer, I used the cardboard packaging and the bottles; now I drink more coffee and have used the coffee cups, clothes, and furniture.^[2]

With the beer carton pieces, I really wanted to point to the Potential and Process—the inherent meaning embodied in all things and the urge in us humans to make meaning out of all things—by just altering minimally the things around me to indicate a way of reading them. *Look, if you just staple these two bits together it's an elegant facade. Or just paint this bit pink, and it's like a clitoris. This section looks like the very common outline of a house. And when I hung them, I felt like the nails, or the putty, and the spacing all were part of a syntax and punctuation that created this language. Made up of shitty beer packaging and incredible, desperate longing.*



CERAMICS—The evocative quality of materials is seminal for me. Ceramics, for instance, have this totally practical and prehistoric always-ness about them. Every culture for all time used ceramics to eat and drink from: couldn't be more basic and utilitarian. And when I make a pot or something out of clay, I am connecting my hands to all of theirs. The piece I make has all that content of practicality and constancy. Papier-mâché has a different set of associations: newspaper is free, again ubiquitous, but more ephemeral. Because I use common printed matter, the papier-mâché connects the objects more to the present moment. It expresses a resistance to perfection and polish. That is all necessary to the meaning. Both materials have a childlike accessibility and immediacy but also resist conventional likability. My work relies on these qualities, emphasizes them.



DARRYL STRAWBERRY—Around 1999–2000, I started collecting newspaper clippings about Darryl Strawberry—at that time a criminal, a junkie, and one of the most charismatic, exciting baseball players. He had been arrested again and was on the run. I was moved by the outpouring of public empathy in those headlines, in contrast to the self-righteous condemnation addicts usually get from straight society. Eventually those clippings, combined with cutout pictures of butterflies from all kinds of sources, became an installation. A girlish adoration, symbolic transformation, love, communion. . . . A few years later, I filmed groups of those clippings pinned on my wall with a Super 8 camera and transferred that to video [to create *Wounds of Compassion*, 2006].



E **XTRAVAGANT (AND UNDERWHELMING)**
GESTURES—Sometimes I want . . . to just suggest that positioning something as an object of contemplation is a leap of faith, a real event. At the same time, I feel like everything is paradoxical. So while I sometimes want to suggest that it is an extravagant gesture, I also want that gesture to announce some self-awareness and to be underwhelming—I hope there is humor in that.^[3]



FLESHY LETTERS—I'm just such a lover of language: I love the never-ending possibility of it, and the extravagant ambitiousness of trying to say something difficult the right way. I think of my work as a way of making visual languages, of the materials and forms gaining meaning through repeated use and context. Making letters, graphic symbols, in "fleshy" material is the other side of the coin, I suppose. I want to feel the weight of time and life and dimension on what could be a fast, thin stroke. Making a line fat or giving it body is also giving it time (literally my time) but also real shadow and dimension—a kind of life. Perhaps for me that is the deepening, the profundity. [The philosopher] Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote, "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world." I think my job as an artist is to expand and transgress both those limits. Artists need to say the things that haven't been said—maybe not in words, maybe in things or equations, whatever, but to invent and refine a language so that we can say something that matters.



GUTTERAL UPCHUCKS—I appreciate some things that I've made for how the materials are just so extremely elemental and unrefined: some expression of the id, the mystery of the unconscious. Something guttural and raw. I think because I leave the work and encounter it again at different times, I am sometimes really surprised by how objects that I made are so undone, so barely made, and simple and yet rather powerful. I think there's need for the presence of this kind of surprise and discovery in the effort to say something in a real way. I need always to be surprised by occurrences in the materials for the work to stay decent.



HUMOR AND HEAVINESS—Even when I got more eccentric, making ceramic forms that were really difficult to wear or use, I wanted them to declare a certain utility. You can still eat soup out of it. And they relate to motherhood, of course, where your body is the food and transportation and life source—it wasn't consciously on my mind, but you sure can't argue with it. Really, my first thought was of practicality—you can walk around and have snacks—but also the humor. I thought, *The tray in front can hold deviled eggs and the vessel in back, red wine. You can serve the eggs, but if you spin around you make a big, dumb mess.* My formal curiosity, though, made it so the wearable objects got bigger and weirder and more extreme, so a heaviness, burdensomeness, is in there. But the intention is that they are convivial, too.



INTUITION (VERSUS) ILLUSTRATION—

Presence—not a narrative recounting or explanatory accounting—but summoning the presence of intuition and mystery is so much more profound than illustration or dogma. I don't want my work to be restricted to some theory or info gathered or the latest book I read. We work with materials so that we can slip in and around language but also let the work be and do more than can be said. Something strange and more surprising.



JACKSON, AS IN TINA JACKSON

HUTCHINS—My mom was an African art historian. In 1970 she was getting her PhD from Northwestern; I think she went ABD or dropped out of the program because of child-rearing duties. In 1965 she worked for Dominique de Menil [cofounder of the Menil Collection, Houston], writing an inventory of her collection on 3 × 5 index cards in longhand. Even though she was a young working mom and then she got sick with ALS and was wheelchair-bound before I was nine, the house was full of art history books, and we went to the Art Institute [of Chicago] together; it was all in my blood. My mother had a small but really high-quality collection of African art. When I was a little girl, I would play with the sculptures and make up dances with them and my dolls. I made up stories with her Akan gold weights; I'd dare myself to hold the scorpion weight for five seconds because for some reason it terrified me. I didn't think about the connection consciously until just a few years ago, when I realized that I am still making up rituals with sculpture.



K **NOWING (OURSELVES THROUGH THINGS)**—Stuart Horodner: . . . [W]hen you nestle or prop ceramic objects on awkward plinths and furniture there are all of these associations built into that. The ritual of sitting in your favorite chair, eating at the table, sitting on the toilet—all of those residues and connections to living, to stains, spills, and repairs are in the work.

JJH: It's all about positioning and specificity, to get down to making a piece that means something but also that evades meaning a little bit too. Transformation, evidence of work, accidents, the time contained in the humanity of the objects—all that stuff is crucial to get at what I'm trying to get at, which is ways of connecting to the world, ways of knowing ourselves through the things we encounter.^[3]



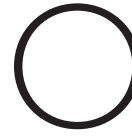
ONLY DINNER—With the Lonely Dinner project I started to get into collapsing quotidian actions into ritual. That dinner really felt like a meaningful and transformative ritual, while simultaneously carrying on like any dinner party. This was the dinner when I served foods made from abject times in my life and served them on ceramics that I made specifically for the dishes. For instance, there was a platter for the ham we ate after my mother's funeral, and as we shared that food the guests spontaneously shared their dark stories and shameful experiences. And it was redemptive without being forced or authoritative. ^[1]



MONOSYLLABIC, SCULPTURE AS—
I love . . . [how] sculpture connects to the body and at least has a chance at a moment without masses of linear thought. I think although they can be about all sorts of things as well, there is the possibility of a monosyllabic impact. . . . The familiarity of [the furniture] connects to you right away. That's what sculpture can do. I find that paintings operate more like texts. There's a way in which they're explicating; they're like language on the wall. ^[3]



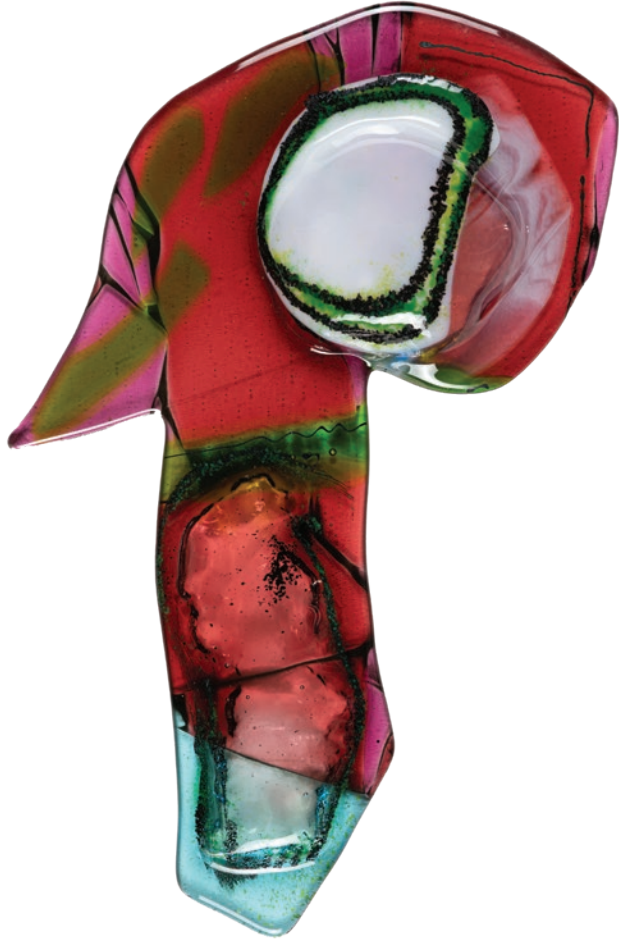
NEEDELEPOINT—The main thing is, I just think needlepoint is beautiful. I've never cared much about knitting or crochet; it's too practical and bumpy. . . . Using needlepoint, I love working against the grid of the canvas and the contrast of the prissy little stitches against raw painted canvas and discursive shapes. I also build compositions through specific shapes of discrete colors in a similar way when I work with fused glass in large-scale installations. But needlepoint is soft and private, sweetly nostalgic, and you can do it in bed.^[4]



(SILENT HULKING) OBJECTS—

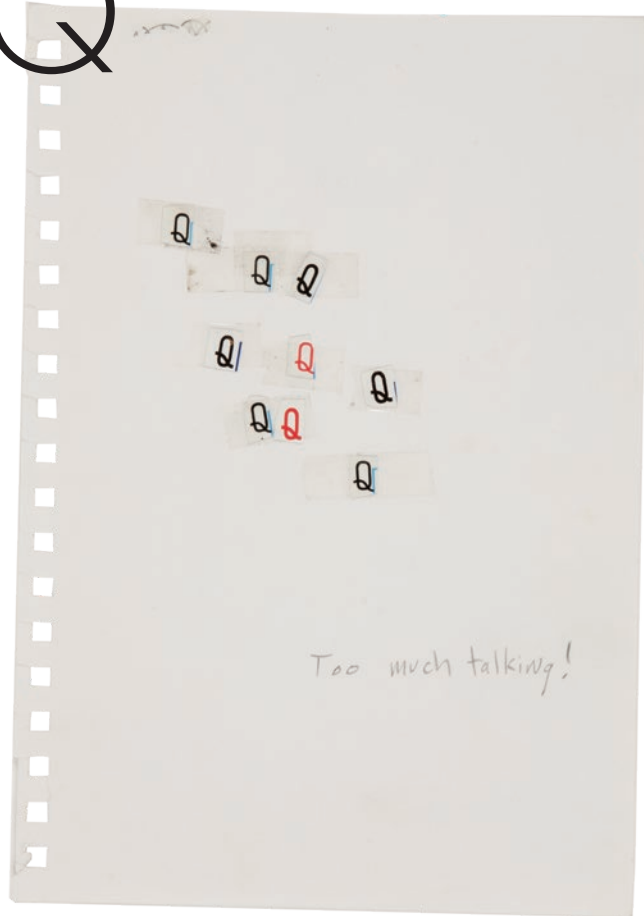
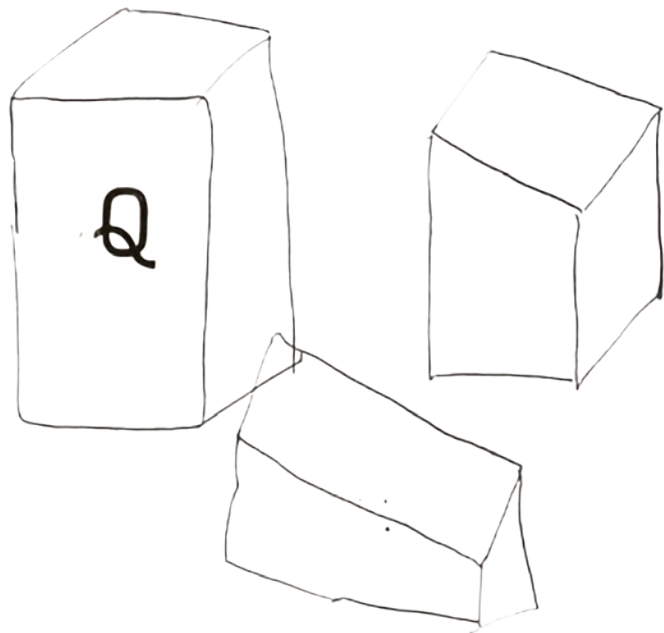
A silent hulk of an object, pushed forward for your contemplation within the authoritative setting of a museum . . . well, the demand upon the viewer has to be considered. We owe viewers a hell of a lot: deference, seduction, challenge, a certain inquisitiveness.

In [philosopher Emmanuel Levinas's] ethics, the self's sovereignty and autonomy is always at risk. I basically read it to mean that articulation almost inevitably confines and oppresses the Other by its demands. This understanding made my consideration of the viewer, and how I wanted to engage a viewer, so difficult. . . .^[3] For a while this line of thinking made it impossible for me to do anything without excruciating analysis, but ultimately sensitized me to the fraught and beautiful relationship that can occur through art.



PROSTHESES—[In the late '90s] I made limbs and body parts for people who were suffering. I made arms for junkies I knew out of wire and papier-mâché, where the negative space was really important. Wires are like drawing in space. I made a tongue for Syd Barrett, whose music I was extremely influenced by. I was thinking that all he needed was to be rescued from the garbled utterance of his life. He needed to be able to articulate clearly, because he was so crazy in the basement of his mind. I made [a] toe for Strawberry [when he broke his before the 1996 World Series]. I made a heart for Brian Wilson of the Beach Boys. Hands for Townes van Zandt.^[3]

I referred to them as prostheses at the time, or after the fact. They operate like *milagros*: stand-ins, symbolically, for missing or enfeebled parts. I was absolutely evoking a magical thinking around them. Superstition, a plea for healing, a certain desperation. It's drug addicts and criminals and baseball players who are the most superstitious. I knew I wanted this transformation process coming from those underground, misunderstood, semi-despised populations. Empathy for the unsympathetic.





RESPECT—I'm really not interested in process for its own sake or mine. There is a way of being in relation to objects and the process of making meaning together that I want to activate. I want the work to feel "true," or faithful to the intention, with materials used in a forthright way; "respectful," that is, giving pleasure, surprise, effort, humor, beauty, to the best of my ability; and "authentic," not because my own truth is terribly important but because inauthentic usually feels cheap.



SKILL—I obscure any sense of craft so that my own skill is not the subject. But at the same time, I think the look of the worn or worked is another way of showing respect; it says that some effort was offered up. I guess this is a little paradoxical. ^[3]



TRUTH (ACCORDING TO SCULPTURE)—

Amanda Donnan: You told me that your favorite aspect of the piece *And then we were married* came about by accident, when it broke in transit and then you bandaged it back together with fabric. This becomes such a beautiful allegory about human imperfection, acceptance, and—if we read into the title—marriage.

JJH: Yes, that's it exactly, sure, but what's cool is that the piece is actually better. It is more beautiful because the break created a surprise and a challenging situation for me. I had to rethink the piece again, and the addition of the fabric is just what was needed. The work wanted another material, but when you are trying to make something right in one way, you miss the real rightness. So the sculpture turns around and tells us that the truth is that imperfections are more beautiful. That brokenness is the real opportunity.



U**NKNOWABILITY**—When art really offers me something, the succor is its unknowability, a quality that makes it impossible to ever have a complete handle on it or grasp its totality.

Books, like *Moby-Dick* or *Ulysses*, that I was really into as a teenager—even records like the Stones' *Exile on Main Street* and the Royal Trux's *Twin Infinitives*—there's an unknowability. In some cases it's from depth, in some it's from a deep chaos that meant there was always something more to live for. But it's also just a weirdness. I like art that is deeply weird, art that could have been made only by that person who made it. ^[3]



VICTORY—People sometimes talk about my work as being about failure, but I always feel that it's more about victory—made more vivid by the looming threat of collapse. ^[3]



WRECKED AND RIGHTEOUS—

[This title] just came to me, as sometimes titles do; it has a cool musicality and a punky sensibility. The hard lived, the desperate, the urgent are much more beautiful and profound (and funny) to me than the refined or skilled. It also suggests the presence of real authenticity, real righteousness. I realized later how much it echoes my husband's [Stephen Malkmus's] record title *Slanted and Enchanted* in the sound and meaning, too. This is fine with me—his band [Pavement] has been so important to me that a nod to it in the work and exhibition title isn't misplaced.



X-RAY SPEX—The words on the piece *Oh Bondage* (2017) are lyrics from an X-Ray Spex song. It's feisty and defiant and cool:

Some people think little girls
should be seen and not heard
But I think "oh bondage, up yours!"
One-two-three-four!



YOU—The viewer is the Whole Point; the goal of my work is always some kind of communion, gift, conversation.



ZUCOFSKY, LOUIS—AD: I read that Louis Zucofsky spent two-thirds of his life, forty-six years, writing his epic poetic masterwork "A." You said this text was important to you, that it gave you "permission." Do you have a favorite part?

JJH: What was moving to me about Zukofsky's "A" was that it's fragmented, at times overwhelmed by its own detail. The abundance of deeply personal moments makes it both obscure and mundane. I like the eccentricity and obscurity of it and that it seems to contain so many different voices, all coming in and interrupting each other in an epic, endless collage.

*He who creates
Is a mode of these inertial systems—
The flower—leaf around leaf wrapped
around the center leaf
— from "'A'-6"*

*River that must turn full after I stop dying
Song, my song, raise grief to music
Light as my loves' thought, the few sick
So sick of wrangling: thus weeping,
Sounds of light, stay in her keeping
And my son's face – this much for honor
— from "'A'-11"*

- 1 "Stephanie Snyder in Conversation with Jessica Jackson Hutchins," PLAZM, issue 29, January 2007. Accessed July 2023 at <https://magazine.plazm.com/jessica-jackson-hutchins-in-conversation-with-stephanie-snyder-ff1ee520bf41>.
- 2 Samuel Jablon, "Interviews: Jessica Jackson Hutchins on Furniture, Found Ceramics, and the Stories of Our Stuff," *Hyperallergic*, June 2, 2015. Accessed August 2023 at <https://hyperallergic.com/211389/jessica-jackson-hutchins-on-furniture-found-ceramics-and-the-stories-of-our-stuff/>.
- 3 "Jessica Jackson Hutchins by Stuart Horodner," *BOMB*, issue 112, Summer 2010. Accessed July 2023 at <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/jessica-jackson-hutchins/>.
- 4 "Influences: Visual Art," *BOMB* online, December 14, 2022. Accessed August 2023 at <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/influences-visual-art/>.

All artworks by Jessica Jackson Hutchins, except *T* and *H*, by Tina Jackson Hutchins; all images of those works courtesy of Jessica Jackson Hutchins. Photos by Area Array. Book design by Lexi McCauley.

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