

Labor, Process, Dialogue: Hand Papermaking as Collaborative Model

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Collaboration, in its diffusion of individual authorship, places the emphasis less on the who and more on the what. For us, working together makes public a commitment to the process of exchange that goes on whether it is an individual or group effort. Most important, collaborating is more satisfying than working alone.

—Ann Hamilton and Kathryn Clark, *View*, 1991.[\[1\]](#)

Collaboration is an integral part of hand papermaking in a studio environment, whether it is with master papermakers at a studio like Dieu Donn , or in my experience as a graduate student learning the craft as the basis for my own artwork. Many contemporary artists, like Ann Hamilton and Kathryn Clark, consider the process of collaboration increasingly important to a contemporary art practice because it fosters a dialogue that aids to a deeper connection to concept as well as to craft. As a way to focus more clearly on methodology behind the medium of paper, my co-curators Jessica Cochran, Hannah King, C. J. Mace, and I decided to work collaboratively, not only with each other, but also with the thirteen artists we chose to exhibit in *Material Assumptions*. We created paper in our studio that was directly tied to the concerns of each individual artwork, and through that specific attention, we could provide the artist with a tailored raw material to serve as the impetus for their piece. This handmade connection—creating the visual starting point—drew us further into each artist's intention; and as artists communicated their projects to us through proposals and emails, we gained a deeper sense of what the commissioned work would be, and how we would choose to arrange the work as curators in the gallery.

In *Material Assumptions*, my co-curators and I collaborated on multiple levels, and each stage became a complex conversation: choosing artists to participate in the show, finalizing the fibers to use in the handmade paper, weighing the choices the artists would have in finished sheets, devising a strategy to make samples so artists could easily understand the material, negotiating the need of each artist based on his or her vision and proposal—but most of all, making all the various types and sizes of paper

requested, by hand. We approached and executed these tasks with mutual responsibility, and the four of us quickly learned how to work together in a way that opened up the possibilities for the exhibition.

As artists, Hannah, C. J., and I work in the paper studio at the Center for Book and Paper Arts to carry out our personal work, usually making paper alongside our colleagues, but remaining focused on our individual pieces rather than collaboration. As part of a papermaking course, we have each worked with visiting artists to assist in producing an edition of handmade paper, but the scale has been quite small in comparison to the scope of a studio like Dieu Donn . Facing a project as large as *Material Assumptions* became an exciting endeavor, and our process-based approach to art making began to directly inform the way we worked together as curators and papermaking collaborators for this project. It is a rare experience as a curator to work so closely with materials before the selected artists have made the finished work. Hannah, C. J., and I carefully beat the cotton and abaca fiber to the correct consistency, formed sheets of various thicknesses and sizes, and chose the best method to dry the paper according to each artist's proposal. The papermaking ritual became a collaborative model for us, and strengthened our relationship to the material through the labor of craft.

My co-curators and I also engaged in a rigorous studio dialogue that has shaped the final outcome of the exhibition, beginning at the material level. Each artist proposed working with paper in a different way, and our methods in the studio had to be flexible enough to change with each individual artist's need. For example, we were acutely aware that the thin, translucent abaca we made for paper engineer Matt Shlian would directly affect his intricately folded origami forms. We chose to form Shlian's paper in a large deckle box and then cut the pieces down to size, so the final product could be as consistently thin as possible. In my conversation with Ian Schneller, we discussed the specific need for thick, absorbent sheets of cotton paper to allow him to easily mold the paper into sculptural, audio horn speakers. We pulled Schneller's paper by hand with a mould and deckle from un-sized cotton and created several extra sheets, in case he needed more room for trial and error with the new material. To accommodate proposals for large installations, including Susan Goethel Campbell's tiled matrix of relief prints and Anna Tsantir's wall of overlapping drawings on abaca, we had to dedicate an entire day in the studio to each artist and keep in constant communication about our progress. For Campbell's piece, which required thirty 20" x24" sheets, four of us worked at our own deckle box station to form cotton sheets identical in texture, with a fifth papermaker checking for the quality and consistency of the sheets. Tsantir's proposal called for a large quantity as well as a custom size, so we built custom moulds that allowed us to

form two sheets at once in an oversized deckle box, a process that took three of us to execute correctly each time, but greatly eased the total work load. Ultimately, the planning, consideration, and implementation of each artist's request resulted in more than one hundred sheets of handmade paper, formed from fifty pounds of pulp, over the course of just five days.

For me, *Material Assumptions* has been an educational exercise and a dialogue through making that has informed the final exhibition. As artists, Hannah, C. J., and I know that a connection to material is fundamental to the outcome of an artwork. Making paper for the participating artists has brought us closer to understanding their intention, and hopefully, their connection to the work is deepened by our conversations with one another and our collaborative effort to supply our skilled craft. As Ann Hamilton and Kathryn Clark proclaimed in their artists' statement for *View*, "In this, the work is both the labor and the thing." For us, the process of exchange is the dialogue around making, and communicating that process from hand papermaker to artist to curator is integral to the success of the *Material Assumptions* exhibition.

[1] Ann Hamilton and Kathryn Clark, *View* (Washington, D.C.: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, 1991). In *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art, A Sourcebook of Artists Writings*, compiled by Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 625–26.