

Hold Hands Spring Tide

Megan Kennedy

Hold Hands Spring Tide (HHST) is an artist book that developed over a period of psychological instability and healing. Constructed from reclaimed textiles, embroidered text, found objects and metalwork, the work functions as a material archive, a site of reflection and a document of lived experience. Developed over an extended period of making, the project became a means of tending to uncertainty through the slow and repetitive processes of stitching, writing, collection and assemblage.

The artist book occupies a unique position within my practice. Combining textile traditions with diaristic writing, *HHST* explores the relationships between care, survival, memory and language. In its pages, personal experiences ranging from hospitalisation to everyday life are recorded and transformed through textile labour. In this sense, the work is an active framework through which experience is processed, preserved and revisited.

This essay examines the development of *HHST* through several themes. It considers the relationship between textiles and care, situating the work within broader histories of making, maintenance and repair. It explores the artist book as a companion object and tool of survival during a period of heightened mental illness. Finally, it considers the role of stitched language within the work, examining embroidery as a slow and materially grounded form of writing that fronts the limitations and possibilities of written communication and bodily experience. These themes locate *HHST* as a practice of sustained attention, where textile processes become vehicles for reflection, testing preservation and phenomenology.

The Artist Book

At its most basic, *HHST* possesses the structural features of a book: a cover, pages, a spine, text and imagery within. It has an author and was made to be handled, viewed and read. Pages are turned and returned to - symbols are prodded and deciphered. Measuring 20 x 22 cm closed, it can be easily carried beyond the studio. Throughout its development, it remained close at hand, accompanying cycles of work and rest.

Beyond these physical characteristics, however, *HHST* is an *artist book* - a distinction. While books and artist books share a common structural framework, their purposes differ. Conventional books are typically designed to communicate a narrative, information, or knowledge. The artist book adopts the physical form of the book while exercising broader artistic freedoms. Whereas commercial books are generally mass-produced, artist books are often unique objects or produced in limited editions. Significantly, artist books invite active engagement through rhythm, materiality, physicality, design and tactility. Structure, material and sequence therefore function not merely as supports but as critical conceptual devices.

Within *HHST*, each page operates as a site of encounter - thought, memory, speculation, process and sensation converge. The bound structure holds both abstract and practical value. A cover

suggests protection, skin, intimacy and beginnings. Page-turning becomes an act of revelation - an intimate gesture akin to reading a diary or journal. For the viewer, each page offers a connection to a broader narrative, metered by the sewn spine, a mechanism of exclusion and opportunity. The textile nature of *HHST* encourages touch and the forward turning of the page becomes analogous to the passage of time as we experience it. Therefore, the artist book is a framework through which memories, reflections and material traces are continually reactivated. As *HHST* is deployed, page by page, the viewer becomes an active participant in the work's animation, much like the hand that turns the crank of a music box, bringing its dormant melody into being once again.

Initial Stages and Care

The earliest incarnations of *HHST* emerged from a course led by Dr Deidre Brollo in 2024 at the Australian National University School of Art and Design, where I was completing my masters in contemporary art practice. Initially, I approached the artist book as a vehicle through which to develop, refine and archive textile techniques directly onto bound fabric pages. However, as my mental health deteriorated over the semester, I began searching for a more restorative mode of psychological maintenance. The developing artist book was consequently reconceptualised as a site of reflection, unburdening and documentation: an armature for sustaining and exhibiting experiential fragments.

Constructed from torn bedsheets, pillowcases and other reclaimed textiles, *HHST* draws upon materials already imbued with intimate histories of use. I anticipated that the slow and repetitive labour of embroidery across these fabric pages would enrich the material archive, allowing acts of making to accumulate alongside the quieter narratives embedded within the cloth itself. Here, the textiles became associated with notions of care.

Within visual art, care describes the intersection of wellbeing and creative practice. It's formalized in some contexts through art therapy. The relationship between artistic production and care, however, extends beyond contemporary therapeutic models. Throughout history, artistic practices have been intertwined with ritual, mourning, healing and remembrance. Textile scholars have argued that cloth has long functioned as a repository of care, carrying social, physical, communicative and spiritual significance. Ancient Egyptian funerary textiles provide a notable example, the wrapping of the dead in carefully prepared linen was an act of profound care, protecting the body, facilitating passage into the afterlife and upholding cultural duties. These ancient textiles required extensive labour, including spinning, weaving, washing and wrapping, often undertaken collectively.

A later example of textile care can be found in the medieval Bayeux Tapestry, where rich textile art making operates as a form of cultural care designed to cement and transmit historical narratives across generations. *HHST* intersects with these histories through a methodology that aligns with phenomenological study - the philosophical and methodological investigation of conscious experience from the subjective, first-person perspective. Through the slow processes of stitching, writing, collecting and assembling, the work functions as a form of self-reflective care, sense making, record-keeping and emotional restoration. It creates a space in which

observations, memories, frustrations, dreams and psychological states can be acknowledged, held and examined.

As Rozsika Parker argues, embroidery has always been shaped by systems of discipline and gendered expectation, while also offering a space for subtle resistance and expression.¹ Materialist philosopher Maria Puig de la Bellacasa sees care embedded in the mundane doings of maintenance and repair that sustain everyday life.² In the face of adversity, the ecology of textiles reflects a type of mindful endurance and conservation, positioning cloth as a medium deeply connected to maintenance, preservation and relational exchange. And while *HHST* does not attempt to resolve psychological unrest completely, it embodies self-care through the cultivation of space for reflection, growth, connection and diversion. *HHST* can therefore be understood as a practice of care enacted through textile labour, documentation and ongoing engagement with lived experience. In this way, the artist book becomes both a material archive and a framework through which complexity, vulnerability and personal history can be recognised and measured.

Survival

While making does not eliminate unrest, it can provide an alternate space for it to reside. The title *Hold Hands Spring Tide* comprises two parts. A spring tide occurs when gravitational forces align during the new and full moon, producing the greatest/least tidal reach of the month. Mariners are attentive to these periods of heightened fluctuation, where the highest highs and lowest lows increase the risk of groundings and generate faster-moving currents. Within the title, the act of holding hands proposes an image of connection, support and adaptation - an endeavour to maintain wonder and stability amid the inevitable and oftentimes brutal cycles of mental illness.

For many, survival evokes dramatic imageries of wilderness expeditions or extreme physical adversity. More often, however, survival is more covert. As the semester's psychological upheaval culminated in hospitalisation, the developing artist book assumed a heightened therapeutic purpose. It was a reliable fixture to grasp onto. Throughout uncertainty, doubt, depression, anxiety and paranoia, *HHST* functioned as a stabilizing presence: a site where experiences could be filed, held, unfolded and examined. Instead of ruminating, I gathered data to reflect on holistically as I stitched.

Within the ward environment, my stay and my artist book contributed to a greater personal healthcare structure that rewarded patience, attentiveness, hope, honesty and observation. This has not been the case for all. Much of historic psychiatric confinement was regularly characterised by isolation, neglect and suffering. Here, creative practices emerged as vital expressions of anguish and endurance. Lorina Bulwer was a British needleworker who spent her final decades in the Great Yarmouth Workhouse Asylum, starting from between 1893 and 1901. She created brightly coloured expressionist samplers stretching up to 4 meters, using stitch to furiously document her outrage at being institutionalized.³ The jacket embroidered by Agnes Richter in 1895 demonstrates how stitched language can function simultaneously as a personal record and material expression. Likewise, although never institutionalised, Louise

¹ Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2019)

² Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More than Human Worlds* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017)

³ Rachel May, "Transforming the Decorative into Dissent," Wellcome Collection, <https://wellcomecollection.org/stories/transforming-the-decorative-into-dissent>

Bourgeois lived with profound anxiety, depression and a lifelong fear of abandonment. She relied upon psychoanalysis and artistic practice to process these experiences, describing her textile works as acts of repair and recollection in which fabric carried the emotional residue of memory and domestic life.

These examples of survival through material practice resonate with the development of *HHST*. While my work does not emerge from torturous institutional confinement, it was shaped by inevitable periods of profound psychological precarity. Like Bulwer's samplers and Richter's embroidered jacket, stitching functions as both record and expression, tuning intricate interior states into material form. Echoing Bourgeois's knowledge of textile practice as an act of repair and recollection, *HHST* positions cloth as a bearer of survival, where fragments become repositories shaped by personal histories and ongoing processes of healing.

My initial practice of "worry stitching" on *HHST* became my first means of measuring time, each mark contributing to a sense of continuity and commitment. However, encouraged by previous experiences hand-embroidering panels for my graduating installation, I increasingly turned toward stitching diaristic text. Nurses and doctors would often ask to see the developing pages, gently affirming the value of creative practice in navigating psychological instability. I found myself noticing more, remembering more and paying closer attention, if only to preserve these observations within the growing pages of *HHST*. The artist book was not only a record of survival, but one of the tools through which survival was enacted.

Writing with Thread

As a child, I often wondered if every sensible combination of words had already been written in the history of the English language. I was fascinated by the invention of new words, the disappearance of old ones and the spaces that lingered beyond articulation. I understood early that not everything can be expressed through language; and I was drawn to these philological gaps. I invented my own languages, scripts and diagrams, testing and concealing a developing discourse. However, when I turned to writing for *HHST*, I found myself to be more accepting of both the limitations and peculiarities of established modern language. Despite the vastness of English, lexical gaps remain to challenge and to compel. Thus, my familiarity and training in this language allowed me to explore and manipulate it with greater confidence and nuance.

As Roland Barthes suggests, language does not transparently transmit meaning but instead produces it through unstable systems of signification.⁴ Meaning is therefore never entirely fixed; it shifts according to context, interpretation and experience. This instability grants language a peculiar vitality and written words are always partly wild, existing beyond the control of both writer and reader, continually remade through acts of interpretation. Penned or embroidered, writing has a distinct lifeforce with a volatile undercurrent. It can conform, compel, confuse or repel.

For *HHST*, I approached writing with an increasing freedom, often loosening conventional expectations of grammar, syntax and structure to better reflect the texture of my own lived

⁴ Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977)

experience. Structured and associative modes of writing were paired with lists, collected data, memories, dreams, poems, speculative reflections and stream-of-consciousness interpretations. The resulting texts encompass experiences of home, hospitalisation, electroconvulsive therapy (ECT), medication, transcranial magnetic stimulation (TMS), family life, love, nature, ethics, travel, animals and other impressions and observations. Much of this writing was generated as automatically as possible, drawing upon principles associated with Surrealist automatism. Errors, omissions and inconsistencies were often retained rather than erased, preserving evidence of the work's construction and reinforcing its commitment to process and temporality.

The translation of writing into embroidery introduced another layer of complexity, too. While words can be written rapidly with pen and paper, stitching is inherently slow. Most letters require multiple passes of the needle, making it impossible match the immediacy of conventional writing media. Initially, I viewed this delay as a loss. The distance between an experience and its stitched transcription seemed to diminish its urgency. Over time, however, I came to understand the rhythm of hand embroidery differently, drawing attention to the temporal delays that structure everyday perception. Reflected light takes time to reach the eye. Visual information takes time to reach and then be processed by the brain. From this received information, physical responses take time to organise and occur. Human experience is fundamentally retrospective, always occurring slightly after the fact. Viewed in this way, the delayed conversion of writing into stitch became analogous to perception itself. Meaning was not merely recorded but processed and enacted through the body. The embroidered text therefore emerged as a performative rhythm that maintains a connection to recollection and perhaps, the nature and acceptance of our limited physiology.

The writing in *HHST* inhabits the tension between what can be expressed, what can be understood and what remains beyond language. Through embroidery, however, writing is especially slowed and made material, modulating psychology through physical action. This approach aligns in part with the slow-stitching movement, a contemplative mode of textile practice that privileges process, sensory engagement and attentiveness over efficiency or outcome. As a deliberate and repetitive process, slow-stitching cultivates attentiveness and care, requiring sustained physical and mental engagement.

The modern English alphabet can be reduced to a small number of recurring strokes and gestures, exposing the formal, limited visual vocabulary from which countless meanings emerge. Faced with experiences that resist straightforward description, we persistently return to the same finite repertoire of words, sounds and marks. However, the closer I examined written text, the more abstract it became. Letters gradually ceased to function solely as carriers of information, revealing themselves instead as a tally of embodied actions in time. In this regard, the writing within *HHST* bears some affinity with Lettrism - the French avant-garde movement founded by Isidore Isou in Paris during the 1940s. Lettrist artists sought to reduce language to its most fundamental components, treating letters not simply as vehicles of meaning but as aesthetic forms. Through the invention of symbols, characters and experimental alphabets, they attempted to expand the possibilities of visual and linguistic communication.

Similarly, the stitched writing in *HHST* oscillates between language and image. Individual marks function both as components of a communicative system and as visual remains of labour. Bound together within the codex form, these accumulations of stitched text invite a reading experience that is simultaneously textual, material and temporal. The artist book becomes both

a repository for language and celebration of the body and its character, bringing language into being.

Other Artefacts

Aside from text, other elements contribute to *HHST*. Tarot cards, cut hair, receipts... but perhaps one of the most striking additions are the small silvery forms stitched onto the innermost pages, disrupting the book's predominantly soft textural rhythm. Although abstract, these forms suggest wonder. Invested in ideas of consumption through reading, the forms first emerged accidentally and were later developed more deliberately with experimentation. I came to embrace these strange solder-ball glyphs for their largely random and self-determined structures, like an alphabet. In this sense, the soldered inclusions act as invitations to reconsider materiality and the limits of language - a strange, sensorial collection to be experienced rather than simply decoded.

Because these forms bear no direct relationship to established written language, they prompt a different set of questions. What is reading? How do we read? What can be read? And, like all forms of experience, these artefacts carry an element of risk; a physical jaggedness that speaks to the coexistence of pleasure and hazard within embodied sensory experience. By archiving these objects within the book, I test the boundaries of the artist book's formal obligation, utilizing it as a platform for collection, scrutiny and safekeeping.

Another artefact appearing in the later pages of *HHST*: a scrap of cloth discovered in bushland near the hospital ward during a supervised patient walk. I noticed it partially buried but left it behind. That night, the cloth was animated in a dream. Caked in red dirt, it could not be brought back into the sanitised ward. So, the following day, I retrieved it with my sister, who took it home and cleaned it. When I was discharged from hospital, my sister returned it to me and I stitched it into the pages of *HHST* - a material relic of the uneasy intersection between nature and urbanisation, as well as a happy document of my time in that place. In addition, the material came to embody something more personal: an act of familial care. Preserved through my sister's intervention and subsequently archived within the book, the fragment carries remnants not only of a landscape, but of familial closeness and support.

Conclusion

HHST emerged from a desire to create a space in which experience could be held, examined and preserved through textile practice. Developed through periods of uncertainty, hospitalisation, recovery and reflection, the artist book evolved beyond its initial role as a repository for textile experimentation to become a framework for attending to need. Through the slow and repetitive acts of stitching, writing, collecting and assembling, the work provided a means of navigating psychological instability while documenting the labour of doing so.

This essay has explored the artist book through the interconnected themes of care, survival and written language. Situated within broader histories of textile care, *HHST* employs cloth not only as a material support but also as a conceptual structure through which memory,

maintenance and attentiveness can be enacted. Through embroidered text, the project also examines the possibilities and limitations of language, positioning stitching as a slowed form of writing that foregrounds process, embodiment and temporal existence.

Importantly, *HHST* does not seek to resolve uncertainty, psychological unrest, or the difficulties of communication. Rather, it acknowledges these conditions and creates space for them to exist. My artist book accumulated observations, memories, questions, associations and material traces without demanding closure. In this way, the work reflects an ongoing commitment to process.

Ultimately, *HHST* demonstrates how textile practice can evolve as a mode of sustained attentiveness. Through its pages, acts of making become acts of witnessing; fragments and textile practice become archives - a means of holding experience long enough for it to be felt, considered and embedded for future reflection.

References

Barthes, Roland. *Image-Music-Text*. Translated by Stephen Heath. London: Fontana Press, 1977.

María Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More than Human Worlds* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

May, Rachel. "Transforming the Decorative into Dissent." *Wellcome Collection*. November 30, 2022. Accessed June 20, 2026. <https://wellcomecollection.org/stories/transforming-the-decorative-into-dissent>.

Parker, Rozsika. *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*. London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2019.