



IN FRAGMENTS

AN EXPLORATION OF LIFE ART

IN FRAGMENTS

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Film Credits
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This booklet is a textual companion to the twenty-one films that make up *In Fragments*. As the films are mostly wordless, these texts may help to illuminate dimensions of the project that are difficult to grasp from viewing the films alone.

INTRODUCTION

*How does a person break free of the past?
How does a place change its patterns?
How do our actions travel through time?
If life itself is the medium, what are the tools
for working with life?*

Such are the questions explored through *In Fragments* — a six-year ritual journey initiated in 2015, just before the death of my mother.

After her passing, I found myself grappling with the complicated inheritance of our ancestral family home in the small town of **Shelburne, Vermont**. A place of great natural beauty, **High Acres Farm** also harbored a difficult legacy of alcoholism, divorce, depression, infighting, trauma, and secret abuse, stretching back in our lineage for generations. Haunted by its history of suffering, yet inspired by its future potential, I performed a series of twenty-one “rituals” seeking to heal and transform these old patterns — as a way of preparing myself and our land for the best possible future.

In Fragments offers an example of what I call “**Life Art**” — art that works with an actual life situation, using whatever tools, materials, stories, and dilemmas are endemic to a particular frame of experience. Through their intense specificity, these radical rituals offer an open template for others to adapt, inviting us all to be active co-creators with life.

— Jonathan Harris, October 2021

1. (PROLOGUE) THE JOYOUS, LAKE

“No human being is constituted to know the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth; and even the best of men must be content with fragments, with partial glimpses, never the full fruition.” — William Osler

High Acres Farm is a 176-acre private estate established by my grandparents in the early 1950s, on land that’s been in our family for 135 years, since 1886.

Our land is situated beside a primordial body of water known as **Lake Champlain**, which stretches five miles across, with a geologic history going back half a billion years, when the lake was a shallow tropical sea, located near the Equator, and home to some of the oldest fossil reefs in the world.

Around 400 million years ago, this so-called **Iapetus Ocean** started to close, leaving deposits of sedimentary rocks such as **limestones** and **quartzites**, which were folded and faulted to form the **Green Mountains** — and through this process of mountain-building, were transformed by heat and pressure into metamorphic rocks such as **marble** and **slate**.

Three million years ago, as the **Great Ice Age** began, a mile-high sheet of ice overtook this whole area and transformed the landscape as it moved — scouring out valleys, eroding mountains, and depositing glacial till.

12,000 years ago, as Earth began to warm, this ice sheet finally melted, and waters began to arrive from an inland arm of the **Atlantic Ocean**, carrying saltwater creatures like beluga whales into this newly formed **Champlain Sea**.

Around 10,000 years ago, as the saltwater inflow receded, the leftover water became present-day Lake Champlain — covering 435 square miles, with 600 miles of shoreline, holding a volume of 6.8 trillion gallons, now a source of fresh drinking water for 200,000 people.

The indigenous people who inhabited this area prior to European contact referred to the lake as **Pitawbagok** (Abenaki) and **Kaniatarakwà:ronte** (Mohawk) — meaning “Middle Lake”, “Lake in Between”, or “Double Lake” — sandwiched as it is between two ranges of mountains: the **Adirondacks** to the west, and the **Greens** to the east.

In the ancient Chinese oracle, the *I Ching* (*Book of Changes*), Hexagram 58, *The Joyous, Lake*, offers the evocative image of a “double lake” — one lake resting on top of another.

The classic commentary by **Richard Wilhem** explains:

A lake evaporates upwards and thus gradually dries up; but when two lakes are joined they do not dry up so readily, for one replenishes the other. It is the same in the field of knowledge. Knowledge should be a refreshing and vitalizing force. It becomes so only through stimulating intercourse with congenial friends with whom one holds discussion and practices application of the truths of life. In this way learning becomes many-sided and takes on a cheerful lightness.

This image of a joyful community of learning on the shores of a peaceful lake has helped to guide and inspire our dreams for the future of High Acres Farm.

This sparse opening ritual is a meditation on the motherlike presence of this primordial body of water through its many moods and seasons — a glassy witness to the human dramas that unfold along its rocky shores. With the horizon line perfectly centered from image to image, the mirror-like surface of the water creates a set of two lakes and a set of two skies — a living version of the Hexagram, marking the place where above meets below.

Performed in 2015 — Duration 3:51



2. LINSTONE



A line is defined as a series of points that extends infinitely in two directions. It has one dimension: length.

Along the rocky shores of **Lake Champlain**, the beaches are covered with iconic gray and white stones — gray **Iberville shale** transected by veins of white **calcite**.

These stones have an interesting origin story...

500 million years ago, when this entire area was covered by a shallow tropical sea, silt gradually accumulated on the seabed floor, eventually hardening into shale.

Meanwhile, sea creatures used the **calcium carbonate** floating in the water as a construction material to build their bodies and homes (e.g. corals, shells, etc.).

Every so often, a seismic event would occur, causing the seabed of shale to split open and water to travel into the fissures and cracks, carrying dissolved calcium carbonate from the former bodies and structures of creatures.

This process continued for millions of years — the calcium shifting from the water, to the creatures, back to the water, and eventually into the splits of the shale.

100 million years later, when the tropical sea had receded, what remained was a base of hardened gray shale, criss-crossed with long white veins of calcite, tracing out the routes where the water (and the former bodies and structures of creatures) had traveled into the cracks.

Eventually, that hardened shale broke off into smaller stone fragments, which were softened over time by water and wind. Each of these fragments is totally unique, with its own special patterning of white calcite veins running through the gray background of the stone.

Today, we encounter these enigmatic “**linestones**” as evidence of ancient times — each stone a kind of puzzle piece or pointer, hinting at some long-forgotten wholeness, when the fragmented segments used to connect.

This ritual presents an early attempt to access this elusive sense of wholeness — through the childlike gesture of collecting a number of linestones and arranging them side by side on the beach, so that the white veins of each stone connect with those of its neighbors.

This simple act symbolizes the connections that are possible between apparently disparate people, elements, and ideas.

In the final moments of the ritual, I lay down on the beach beside the long line of stones, and use my own hand to continue the line — implicating my physical body in this lineage of geologic connection, linking the human story here with that of the land.

Performed in 2015 — Duration 3:58



3. URIM AND THUMMIM



The **Urim and Thummim** are a mysterious set of objects first mentioned in the Hebrew bible’s *Book of Exodus* — believed to be a set of “seeing stones” used by the **High Priest** to engage in **cleromancy** (*discerning the will of God*).

They were traditionally worn as a part of the **Hoshen** (*sacred breastplate*) attached to the **Ephod** (*sacred vest*), though their exact composition is never directly described, as the stones were kept carefully hidden from view.

In the tradition of **Mormonism**, the “Urim and Thummin” came to signify any set of tools, objects, or instruments that could be used for receiving divine revelations, such as **Joseph Smith’s** pair of spectacles that he used to translate the **Golden Plates** into the *Book of Mormon* in 1827.

In Smith’s subsequent 1835 *Doctrine and Covenants*, the scope of the *Urim and Thummim* is described as being even broader than that:

The place where God resides is a great Urim and Thummim. This earth, in its sanctified and immortal state, will be made like unto crystal and will be a Urim and Thummim to the inhabitants who dwell thereon, whereby all things pertaining to an inferior kingdom, or all kingdoms of a lower order, will be manifest to those who dwell on it; and this earth will be Christ’s.

Then the white stone mentioned in Revelation 2:17, will become a Urim and Thummim to each individual who receives one, whereby things pertaining to a higher order of kingdoms will be made known;

And a white stone is given to each of those who come into the celestial kingdom, whereon is a new name written, which no man knoweth save he that receiveth it. The new name is the key word.

The phrase “Urim and Thummim” is usually translated as “lights and perfections” or “revelations and truth” — and its Latin equivalent, **Lux et Veritas** (*light and truth*), is used as the motto of several prominent universities, including **Yale**, which many of my ancestors attended.

In **Paolo Coehlo’s** popular 1988 novel, *The Alchemist*, the *Urim and Thummim* are black and white fortune-telling stones that Melchizedek gives to Santiago, with black indicating “yes” and white indicating “no” — but Santiago never uses the stones, having promised himself to “make his own decisions.”

This brief early ritual takes three iconic “linestones” from the **High Acres Farm** beach, and uses them as a localized *Urim and Thummim* — placed above the eyes and taken in the mouth to receive a spontaneous vision of the unknown journey that is to come.

As the film concludes, the image withdraws into a void.

Performed in 2015 — Duration 2:00





4. NOT A SINGLE POINT



A point in geometry is a location. It has no width, no length, and no depth. A point is shown by a dot.

The central teachings of the various **Dharmic** religions (e.g. Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism, Jainism, etc.) are often illustrated through the metaphor of “**Indra’s Net**,” first mentioned in the *Atharva Veda* around 1,000 BCE.

The metaphor describes an infinitely large net of cords, stretching out in every direction, with a multifaceted jewel at each vertex, each jewel reflecting all the other jewels.

Everything that exists, or has ever existed (including every person, place, thought, idea, experience, feeling, and memory) is said to be a single jewel in Indra’s Net, reflecting everything else.

The image of Indra’s Net is used to communicate the Dharmic teachings of “**Sunyata**” (*emptiness*, or that all phenomena are fundamentally void of any intrinsic existence), and “**Pratityasamutpada**” (*dependent arising*, or that all phenomena only exist in relation to all other phenomena).

Alan Watts offers the more familiar image of a spider web:

Imagine a multidimensional spider’s web in the early morning covered with dew drops. And every dew drop contains the reflection of all the other dew drops. And, in each reflected dew drop, the reflections of all the other dew drops in that reflection. And so ad infinitum. That is the Buddhist conception of the universe in an image.

This ritual presents the first stage in the journey as glimpsed through the *Urim and Thummim*: an early attempt to synthesize a sense of wholeness beyond the individual fragments — using the limestones gathered in *Limestone* as a proxy for myself.

At the edge of **Lake Champlain**, I use my grandfather’s handheld sledgehammer to pulverize the collection of limestones into a fine stone powder, breaking apart their uniqueness to uncover what they share.

I collect the jewel-like points of powder in my mother’s white cotton sheet, laid across the beach like a net.

While hammering away at the limestones, the moon descends behind the lake, and the cedar driftwood fire becomes the only source of light — until it, too, is being hammered away along with the stones, and along with the sound, until tiny points of light are dancing in the darkness, shrinking down to be a single pixel, which is there for just a moment, and then gone.

This brief film begins to work with the plane of perception — linking the gestures of the ritual with the editing style of the image and sound.

Performed in 2015 — Duration 1:18



5. PROCESS OF ELIMINATION



With the pulverized limestone powder produced in *Not a Single Point*, I construct a simple viewing apparatus using wood and glass, into which I pour the sandy grains. As they gradually accumulate, I carefully take the time to inspect every particle, until the living image of me has been totally buried behind the dark powdery pile.

After removing a stopper to restore the flow of the powder, it eventually finds its “**angle of repose**,” leaving an empty negative space that resembles the space between Jesus Christ and John the Baptist in **Leonardo Da Vinci’s Last Supper** — an empty space that’s said to represent the **Holy Grail**.

The word “grail” is derived from the old French, *graal*, and the earlier Latin, *gradale* — a deep platter used for serving food at medieval banquets, over multiple courses.

In this sense, the original meaning of “grail” was not a cup or a chalice, but a “graded” series of courses (as in an elaborate meal). So the grail, usually considered to be an *object*, may be more accurately understood as a *journey* with a series of stages or steps.

The notion of such a quest was first mentioned in print in **Chrétien de Troyes’s** unfinished romance, *Perceval, the Story of the Grail*, written around 1180. In this text, the grail is described as a golden serving dish, and equal attention is lavished on a special lance — perhaps for the hero of the story, **Perceval**, to use to “pierce the veil” (from Old French: **Percer**, *pierce*; **Val**, *valley*) of his own perception.

With her deep love of **Richard Wagner’s** final opera, *Parsifal* (for Wagner, meaning: **Parsi**, *pure*; **Fal**, *fool*), about the brotherhood of knights who guard the Holy Grail, I wonder whether my mother consciously considered my paternal grandfather’s given name, **Percival Harris**, when deciding to marry my father.

Once the powder finds its angle of repose, clear glass marbles fall out of my mouth onto the slate floor. This gesture of “**losing my marbles**” signals a willingness to go beyond conventional sanity in whatever ways might be needed.

Each marble is like a jewel in **Indra’s Net** — a spherical world reflecting all the worlds around it, having emerged, as for **William Blake**, from the grains of sandy powder:

*To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour
It is right it should be so
Man was made for Joy & Woe
And when this we rightly know
Thro the World we safely go
Joy & Woe are woven fine
A Clothing for the soul divine*

Performed in 2015 — Duration 2:04





6. INDIVIDUATION



For **Carl Jung**, “**Individuation**” was the process of self-realization — the discovery of meaning and purpose in life, and the way one finds out who one really is. It is a process of **differentiation** and **integration**, becoming fully the “fragment” as part of the whole. It is a journey available to each of us.

In *Process of Elimination*, every grain of powder was inspected as a way of understanding the pieces that make up a limestone. In this ritual, I seek to examine the pieces that make up my understanding of myself.

With a special selection of limestones gathered from the **High Acres Farm** beach, I fill up a small wooden cigar box that belonged to my grandmother, **Kate Prentice Jennings**, which she used for keeping photographic negatives.

I funnel the pile of pulverized powder that I examined in *Process of Elimination* into my father’s white silk handkerchief, and I fasten the bundle with a piece of red wool, snipping the string with my mother’s silver scissors, which she used for making newspaper clippings.

With these humble gifts in hand, I set out across America to visit with a handful of mentors, teachers, and friends who have helped to shape my understanding of myself and the world:

- Brian Kernighan** in Princeton, New Jersey;
- George Harris** (my dad), in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania;
- Godfrey Reggio** in Santa Fe, New Mexico;
- Henry Rich** in Truro, Massachusetts;
- Joanne DeLuca** in Pleasantville, New York;
- Max Schorr** in Los Angeles, California;
- Mike Swetye** in San Francisco, California;
- Sep Kamvar** in Concord, Massachusetts;
- Steve Murray** in Lawrenceville, New Jersey.

During each visit, we have a long one-on-one conversation, after which I offer a limestone as a simple gift of thanks.

Once a stone has been selected, I gently draw a line of gray powder from cheek to cheek across the person’s face — as a way of inviting his or her spirit into this transformational process.

At the end of the ritual, I return to the old High Acres Farm stables, re-entering the space where the process began. With a dab of white paint on my finger, I draw a line across a clear sheet of glass in front of the camera — inviting the viewer into this transformational process as well.

As **Bob Dylan** might say:

Everybody must get linstoned.

Performed in 2016 — Duration 3:15



7. EQUIDISTANT (LOSE YOUR ILLUSION)



A plane is a flat surface that is infinitely large. It has zero thickness.

We are taught to believe that the world is an objective three-dimensional space, and that it can be mapped using concepts such as “**points**” and “**lines**” (e.g. this point represents where you are and that point represents where you are not; this line represents the boundary where this thing ends and where that thing begins; this thing is near and that thing is far). This **Cartesian** view of reality is so deeply ingrained in our sense of perception that we rarely question its truth.

And yet, upon closer reflection, there is something very strange about its logic...

A point is defined as purely a location, without any width, length, or depth — and a line is merely defined as a series of points. In other words, a point is something without any actual apparent reality, and a line is a series of these very same somethings, none of which have any apparent reality either.

Thus we arrive at the geometric concept of a “**plane**”— a flat surface that is infinitely large, but which has zero thickness (i.e. also without any apparent reality).

In this sense, a plane can be understood as encompassing either nothing or everything, or neither, or both.

In our ordinary perception, we have the sense of certain things being “over there” and other things being “over here” (e.g. the mountains are farther away than the rock, the sky is farther away than the water).

And yet, with a slightly different way of looking, we can perceive the plane of perception itself.

In this altered view, everything we perceive is equidistant with everything else — merely phenomena arising and falling in perception, which encompasses every discernable something all together at once.

This ritual works with this altered plane of perception — collapsing dust particles, objects, memories, histories, landscapes, environments, and everything else into a single surface that can be treated as one — swept up, studied, smashed.

In the hayloft of the old **High Acres Farm** barn, sixty years of dust are swept up into a single shaft of sunlight. The peaceful lake is interrupted on a quiet summer evening by a sudden splash of water. A fake deer is shot with an arrow, and the kill is marked by a sudden splash of red.

In the living room of the old main house, a camera is positioned looking through a sheet of glass. The day proceeds; the shadows move across the landscape. As evening arrives, the sheet of glass begins to reflect the interior. At twilight, we see half within and half without. At dusk, the outer world has vanished, and all we see is the inner room — a painting of two cheetahs in Africa, hung above a floral couch, an image of domesticated wildness. The footage shifts from timelapse photography to video as I walk into the frame with my grandfather’s hammer and smash the space that he built.

In the renovation of the main house that followed in 2017, the wall where the cheetah painting once hung was completely demolished — replaced by an archway with a view from the front door of the house straight through to the lake in the “distance”.

Performed in 2015 — Duration 2:23





8. SCARECROW



Ho'oponopono is a traditional Hawaiian prayer practice of reconciliation and forgiveness.

It originates from the widespread **Polynesian** belief that a person's errors cause illness, and that until those errors have been acknowledged and forgiven, misfortune will continue to affect the entire family system — through sick children, sterile land, and other forms of inherited suffering.

Ho'oponopono is defined in the *Hawaiian Dictionary* like so:

To put to rights; to put in order or shape, correct, revise, adjust, amend, regulate, arrange, rectify, tidy up, make orderly or neat, administer, superintend, supervise, manage, edit, work carefully or neatly; to make ready, as canoemen preparing to catch a wave.

The rendition of the *Ho'oponopono* prayer included in this ritual was recorded in 2015 at a special plant medicine ceremony by a group of close female friends, who sang it as a healing offering for my ailing mother:

I love you. I'm sorry. Please forgive me. I thank you.

With deep childhood trauma (some remembered, some repressed), my mother's inner world was riddled with fear, and **High Acres Farm** had become her private prison — both the site of her half-recalled traumas, and also her chosen refuge from the world beyond its gates, a world she tried to keep at bay through a life of isolation in her upstairs bedroom, which is where she spent much of the final thirty years of her life.

Her fear was palpable here. She had burglar alarms installed at every downstairs window, triggering a computerized voice in her bedroom announcing any time a window was opened or closed in the house. She sealed off all

the fireplaces with heavy sheets of plastic, so that insects couldn't enter through the chimneys. She kept the doors to the house locked all day long, and locked herself in her bedroom each night before going to sleep.

For many years, this climate of fear kept me away — as stepping onto the land here felt like entering a zone of sadness and suffering, and after more than a few days, those qualities would start to feel contagious.

In this ritual, a handmade "**scarecrow**" is assembled, using my mother's standard summer uniform of plaid linen pants, a plain cotton shirt, and a pair of white athletic sneakers.

The scarecrow is moved around the upper lawns of High Acres Farm, visiting the various sites of her possible traumas, before entering the house, climbing the stairs, moving down the long hallway into her bedroom, and finally taking its place in her bed.

As the scarecrow travels, it receives the healing *Ho'oponopono* prayer in each location — acknowledging and forgiving the past, while sending love and gratitude into the future.

Though this ritual was filmed around six months before my mother's death, its final moments eerily foreshadow her passing, as she ended up dying in the very place where the scarecrow was ultimately laid.

In the filming of this final scene, an aberration in the lens caused a shadow to pass across the image of the scarecrow just as its head unexpectedly fell to the side — as if its spirit, giving up its burden, were finally leaving its body.

Performed in 2015 — Duration 3:31

9. SPACE SUIT



After many years of indecision about engaging with **High Acres Farm** (inspired by its beauty and potential, haunted by its legacy of suffering), during a trip to India in the fall of 2015, I finally decided to move home, choosing March of 2016 as a moving date.

Starting that same fall, my mother began to experience severe breathing problems from fifty years of cigarette smoking, and she was sent to the hospital by ambulance multiple times. For the next few months, she was in and out of the ICU, a local rehab center in Burlington, and her bedroom at High Acres Farm, where she eventually entered hospice care in February of 2016.

On March 4, 2016, I loaded up a U-Haul truck in Brooklyn, New York to finalize my move to Vermont, arriving home at High Acres Farm that evening. The following afternoon, just after the truck had been fully unloaded, I received a call from my sister, telling me to rush upstairs to our mother's bedroom, as her health had suddenly become precipitously worse. As I arrived at her bedside, she asked me to put on her favorite recording of **Wagner's** final opera, *Parsifal*, about the knights who guard the **Holy Grail**.

While the gorgeous music played, my sister and I lay together with our mother in bed, as she was coming in and out of consciousness, talking to us whenever she could. By the late afternoon, with the winter sun going down behind the Adirondacks, our mother had taken her final breaths, and her body had become limp in our arms, as my sister and I held her and cried.

A few minutes after her passing, I found myself alone with her body. I felt a sudden urge to look in her eye, so I rounded the bed to kneel on the floor beside her, and with one hand holding her forehead, with the other hand I gently lifted her eyelid.

As I looked into her eye, I marveled at its beauty, remembering all the times I'd looked into that same exquisite eye over the many years of my life. And yet now, her eye was missing something ineffable.

Like gazing into a glass marble, I saw my own rounded reflection looking back at me. And in that moment, I realized that my mother's body was only her **spacesuit** — allowing her to be here on Earth for a while to experience this human life, with its strange phenomena of time, touch, choice, and emotion. Her body was her spacesuit, but it wasn't really her, and where she was then I could no longer say. From that point on, the subsequent tending to her body was like putting away a costume from a long and beautiful (and yet finally finished) performance.

This ritual documents the experience that followed three days later, when our mother was cremated by **Stephen C. Gregory and Son Cremation Service** in nearby South Burlington, Vermont. The process — careful, meticulous, and full of love and respect — was carried out by **Gary Reid**.

In the back room of the crematorium, where few families ever ask to go, the owners of the chapel had parked their fiberglass boat, presumably waiting out the winter for future summer adventures on nearby **Lake Champlain**. I remember glimpsing their boat in the distance, and imagining my mother's spirit stepping out of her spacesuit and into this watery vessel, chatting with the boatman while traveling the **River Styx** to her next incarnation.

The music that accompanies this film is the opening prelude to *Parsifal*, which we introduced after the edit was already complete, but which matches the picture in an eerily natural way.

Performed in 2016 — Duration 5:10



10. MAKE ME A VESSEL



After witnessing my mother's death and cremation, these rituals, which were previously marked by a kind of conceptual or cerebral detachment, suddenly took on a newly visceral reality.

The indelible images of the cremation were imprinted in my memory — *the furnace, the fire, the metal rod, the ashes, the sifting, the sorting, the precision, the care.*

Years earlier, I'd been introduced by a friend named **Vera** to a local glass artist named **Ethan Bond-Watts**, whose art show in Burlington she and I had once attended together, and his meticulous work had always remained alive for me.

I contacted Ethan to see if he would be interested in making glass together. When we met up one early spring evening in a bird sanctuary a little south of here, we built a small fire in the woods at the edge of the water, and cooked steak and broccoli together on the open flames.

I told him about my mother's recent death and cremation, and described the ritual journey that I had begun about six months before. I described my wish to make glass using the materials of our land — mixing crushed-up limestone powder and other special elements with my mother's cremated remains.

Neither of us realizing at the time what an odyssey we were about to begin, we agreed to work together in this way.

This ritual presents Ethan in his element — the master glass artist at work, virtuosically crafting an exquisite funeral vase to hold my mother's remains.

Working with his assistant, **Kraig Richard**, Ethan moves like a dancer around **AO Glass**, a glass shop in nearby Burlington, while creating the beautiful vessel.

Using a trick and a tool he picked up in **Venice**, he punctures the gummy glass with a spiraling series of air pockets in a **Fibonacci** distribution, rendered in my mother's favorite color palette of pinks, violets, and blues.

The aesthetic parallels with the crematorium are striking: *the industrial setting, the blazing furnace, the metal rod, the piles of powder, the transformation of materials, the care.*

Once completed, the vessel shifts to **High Acres Farm**, where my sister, **Amanda**, and I funnel our mother's cremated remains into Ethan's newly crafted vase.

For me, this ritual carries a double request — a request of Ethan to make me a literal vessel to hold my mother's ashes; and a request of life to make me a vessel for whatever kinds of transformation need to happen through me.

Performed in 2016 — Duration 7:40



11. APPRENTICESHIP



Even after twenty years of working with glass, including a time of study on the island of **Murano in Venice**, **Ethan Bond Watts** had never known anyone to make glass completely from scratch, using naturally gathered materials.

Glass artists usually begin with "**cullet**" — recycled bits of glass from previous creations that can be easily remelted.

To make glass directly, three primary ingredients are needed: **silica** (SiO_2 , to create the basic structure of the material); a "**flux**" such as **potassium carbonate** (K_2CO_3 , to lower the required melting point of the silica); and **limestone** ($CaCO_3$, to increase the hardness of the resulting glass).

These ingredients are typically sourced in bulk from industrial suppliers, to guarantee their purity. Once sourced, they're usually heated in a high-powered propane or electric furnace to reach the temperatures required for the so-called "**glass transition**" to occur (2,500+ degrees Fahrenheit).

All of this complexity makes the prospect of manual glass-making more or less quixotic, and so it is rarely attempted.

Beyond the quest for glass itself, this ritual was also a way for me to become acquainted with the physical realities of life at **High Acres Farm**. For many years, I'd lived in New York City, working within the "global idea economy" as an "Internet artist" practicing "data visualization" and "interactive storytelling." I'd never really worked with physical materials before — never driven a tractor, never used a chainsaw, never swung a maul. Through my apprenticeship with Ethan, I was learning not only the creation of glass, but also the ways of being a Vermonter.

In this ritual, we set out to gather the various ingredients from around the local landscape to make our own glass completely from scratch, including building our own hillside furnace.

To gather **clay** for the walls of our furnace, we dig a series of pits in the fields of High Acres Farm, and mix the harvested clay with water, gravel, and straw to create a **cob** mixture.

To gather **potash**, we use a two-man band saw to fell a dead tree, a chainsaw to slice it up into sections, and an axe and a maul to split it into logs. We make a bonfire to burn my mother's private paperwork — her divorce agreement from my dad, her medical records, her marked up books on psychology, and other sensitive documents. We harvest ashes from the dying bonfire, dissolve them into water, then pour the settled water through a series of sieves, eventually boiling off the liquid to isolate its potassium carbonate to use as our **flux**.

To gather **silica**, we visit the "**scree fields**" of the nearby Bristol Cliffs Wilderness to harvest **Cheshire Quartzite**, the mineral with the highest concentration of silica found anywhere in Vermont. We pulverize the quartzite at a plywood crushing station using my grandfather's sledgehammer, his heavy steel anvil, and an old steel tamper bar. We sieve the resulting powder to isolate its finest particles, ending with a granularity of **300 mesh**.

To gather **limestone**, we visit the local **Shelburne Quarry** where we harvest a few jar-fulls of powder.

Certain other steps are not shown in the film — notably the lightning strike that destroyed the nearby "**Old Dairy Barn**" at **Shelburne Farms** on the morning of September 11, 2016. The barn housed a twenty-year-old collection of lumber that was blackened and largely destroyed in the fire, but much of this lumber we salvaged and used to feed our furnace.

All together, these steps took seven months to complete.

Performed in 2016 — Duration 17:20



12. PHASE CHANGE (THE GLASS TRANSITION)



“The deepest and most interesting unsolved problem in solid state physics is probably the theory of the nature of glass and the glass transition.” — P.W. Anderson

Glass is one of the most enigmatic materials in human civilization — ubiquitous, endlessly useful, and yet still a mystery to physicists, who continue to debate its true nature.

The many uses of glass are staggering to consider. Through the **lenses** of our **telescopes**, **microscopes**, **binoculars**, and **spectacles**, we use glass to help us see the very big and very small (and through **cameras**, to document our world). Through the **screens** of our **cell phones**, **televisions**, and **computers**, we use glass to inform, entertain, and communicate. Through our **fiber optic** cables, we use glass to carry the **Internet** under the ocean and across other great distances, enabling our **virtual worlds**. Through orbiting **satellites**, we use glass **mirrors** to send **data** back and forth to Earth, and to probe the limits of faraway **space**. Through the **windows** in our **homes**, **cars**, **trains**, and **airplanes**, we use glass to modulate our sense of within and without. Through the **faces** of our **watches**, we use glass to track our sense of **time**. Through our various **cups** and **vessels**, we use glass to measure, mix, cook, hydrate, celebrate, and cultivate romance. Through the **mirrors** in our homes, we use glass to reflect on our **appearance** and to observe our **bodies** as we age. Without the technology of glass, human life on Earth would be radically different.

In solid state physics, the so-called “**glass transition**” is the mysterious shift that occurs when a hard and brittle non-crystalline solid gradually becomes viscous, liquid-like, and “**glassy**” through a sustained increase in temperature. As this “glassy” material cools, it undergoes a process known as “**vitrification**” — retaining the amorphous molecular structure of a liquid while hardening into something that is effectively solid.

This paradoxical quality of being both a liquid and a solid at the same time is fundamental to the enigma of glass — it is **neither-nor**; it is **both-and**.

In this ritual, I work with **Ethan Bond-Watts** to build a handmade **cob furnace** in a hillside at **High Acres Farm**. We seek to use the furnace to transform the ingredients we gathered and prepared in *Apprenticeship* into our own homemade glass — incorporating the cremated remains of my mother, and other materials of our land.

We set out our collection of powders on a twenty-foot table made with maple slabs harvested from **Shelburne Farms** — our **silica** (from the Cheshire Quartzite); our **potash** (from the bonfire of my mother’s papers); our **limestone** (from the Shelburne quarry); our **linestone** (from the High Acres Farm beach); and my **mother’s ashes** (in Ethan’s handmade vase).

For the **crucible** to hold our ingredients, we use an old clay vessel which was gifted to Ethan by one of his mentors, and which was made at nearby **Goddard College** in the 1970s.

Our furnace has three distinct chambers: one to hold our wood and fire, one to hold our crucible, and one for annealing our glass. The doors of the latter two are made of clay, while the door of the wood chamber is made from the metal roof of the 1890s “**Old Dairy Barn**” at nearby **Shelburne Farms**, which was struck by lightning and burned to the ground during the time we were building our furnace.

To accelerate the airflow into the fire chamber, we insert an old High Acres Farm gas-powered “**Weed Eater**” leaf blower into a rusty eight-foot iron pipe — propping up one end of the pipe on a sawhorse, with the other end poking into the fire chamber of the furnace. In this way, we can protect the plastic neck of the leaf blower from melting in the powerful heat of the fire.

On **November 1, 2016** (the **Day of the Dead**), we light our furnace at dawn, and all day long we feed it firewood to help it gather heat, to the roaring sound of the leaf blower.

By nightfall, we’ve added our ingredients, and we take turns sleeping in shifts on the hillside, as the glass transition works its magic from within the heart of the furnace.

Around midnight, the fire is so hungry for oxygen that its flames are licking out of every available opening, including around the edges of the crucible chamber door, and through the small circular hole in the center of that door.

These wildly flapping flames, unplanned and unexpected, evoke a mythical **Phoenix** — the archetypal force of transformation, bursting forth from the crucible at the heart of our raging furnace.

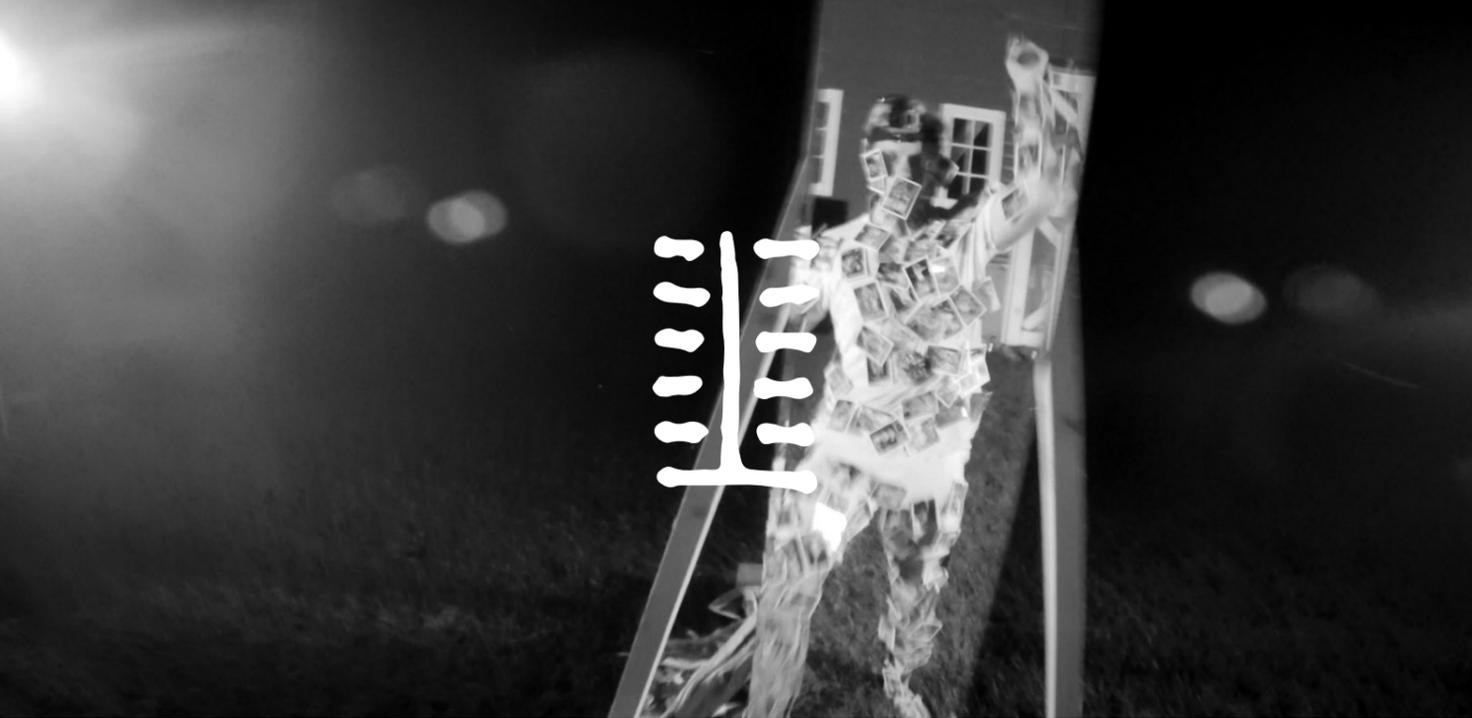
Around 4:00 AM, an unfortunate crack appears in the crucible, and the molten mixture begins to leak away into the fire. The leaf blower suddenly stalls, and when we try to restart it, the cord breaks off, so it can’t be started again. We assess our quickly changing situation.

Blurry-eyed and exhausted, we try to make a vessel before our molten glass is totally gone... As the first light of dawn appears in the east, we place a small glass cup in a bucket of **vermiculite** to cool — the “**phase change**” miraculously having succeeded.

We received two unexpected visitors bookending our night of glassmaking, each with an interesting name — in the evening, a local friend named Callie (as in **Kali**, the Hindu goddess of creation and destruction), and the next morning, my cousin **Lila** (the Hindu term for the dance of reality).

Performed in 2016 — Duration 12:50





13. USE A HAMMER



Many indigenous cultures mark the transition from youth to adulthood by orchestrating initiation rituals where the younger self is ritually killed or destroyed, so that a new and larger self can emerge.

These powerful ceremonies often involve psychoactive plants, fasts from food and water, solitary time in the wilderness, physical scarification, and other demanding ordeals.

In our modern American culture, we lack definitive rituals to mark the transition from youth to adulthood, relying instead on the “bar mitzvah,” the “sweet sixteen,” the prom, the driver’s license, the army draft, and the buying of booze.

Without a clear transition between youth and adulthood, adolescent behavior can linger on indefinitely — as evidenced by our cultural obsession with fame, sex, money, material acquisition, and other adolescent pursuits.

When asked in our culture “who are you?” it is customary to rattle off a chronological list of accomplishments — habitually reciting the all-too-familiar life story that keeps our sense of self comfortably (if speciously) intact.

This egoic sense of self is precisely what is targeted by traditional rites of passage, so that participants are forced to go beyond their egos to connect with something universal.

As mythologist **Joseph Campbell** explains:

The tribal ceremonies of birth, initiation, marriage, burial, installation, and so forth, serve to translate the individual’s life-crises and life-deeds into classic, impersonal forms. They disclose him to himself, not as this personality or that, but as the warrior, the bride, the widow, the priest, the chieftain; at the same time rehearsing for the rest of the community the old lesson of the archetypal stages.

In this ritual, I use simple framing lumber to build a large wooden easel, and place it at the edge of the field outside the old **High Acres Farm** cow barn, lit by twin pairs of halogen work lights.

One at a time, I place nine body-length mirrors onto the shelf of the easel. I choose nine different outfits representing nine distinct identities that defined me over the years: *the Baseball Card Collector; the Comic Book Lover; the Porn Concealer; the Deerfield Boy; the Water Polo Star; the Princeton Man; the Young Bachelor; the Data Artist; the naked body.*

One at a time, I put these outfits on, approach the mirror, and use my grandfather’s hammer to smash its reflection, before removing the outfit and discarding it on the growing heap.

Once all nine mirrors have been shattered, I use a butane torch to set the pile alight. I sit by the fire as the identities rise into the darkness, mingling together in sparks.

Performed in 2015 — Duration 5:53



14. HALL OF MIRRORS



The next morning, the ritual fire from *Use a Hammer* is a pile of ash and melted mirrors. The weather has shifted; the wind has picked up; summer is ending.

Using a steel bucket and a larger steel pail, I gather up every piece of melted mirror from the dewy grass.

That evening, I hoist the pail of broken glass into the hayloft of the old **High Acres Farm** barn, where I find a collection of small votive candles forming a “**golden rectangle**” twenty-seven feet long. Within the candle perimeter, there is a piece of red yarn stretched between four steel nails, drawing out a smaller rectangular space on the floor, itself a golden rectangle as well. The twin sets of halogen work lights from *Use a Hammer* are watching.

With great care, I place each piece of broken fired mirror within the bounds of the yarn, forming a fractured organic mosaic, whose structure comes into being with the addition of each new piece of glass.

This mosaic of mirrors “**transcends and includes**” all of the former identities. It doesn’t reject or repress them, but integrates them into a new and larger wholeness that is no longer constrained by the old definitions.

I work all night until dawn. As the lights go dark, the camera glides over the space as I lay on the floor, with the completed mosaic emerging from my head like some kind of thought bubble from a childhood cartoon — a new wholeness constructed from all of the fragments.

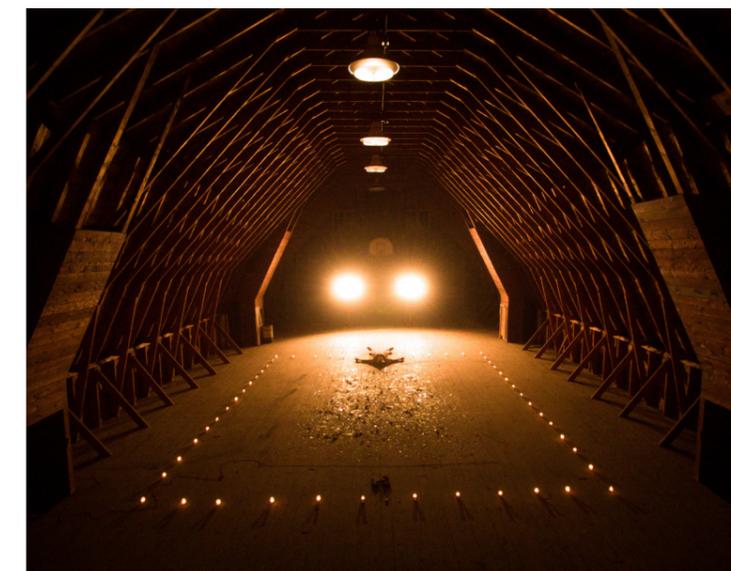
In the days that followed, I developed a strange inflammation of my tongue, lips, and mouth, where my taste buds became painfully swollen. Perhaps it was the dust from the barn, or perhaps it was the many outdated identities finally leaving my body.

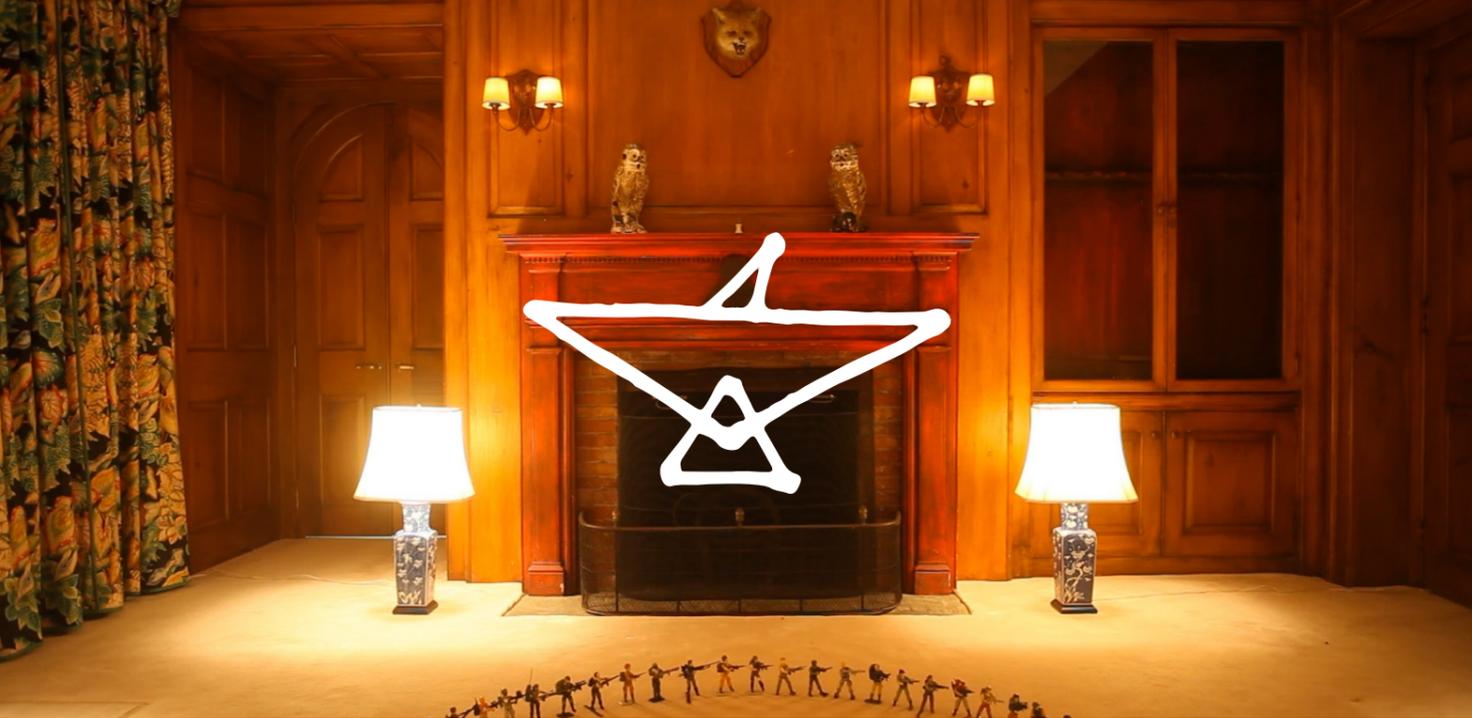
I didn’t know it at the time, but this mosaic of broken mirrors would end up remaining in that very place for the next six years — witnessing all the many changes that were about to unfold on the land. In this way, the mirrors were to become like batteries, absorbing the energy of the ritual work that was yet to come.

My former painting teacher at **Deerfield Academy**, **Tim Engelland**, once engraved these words of **Florida Scott-Maxwell** into one of his sculptures:

You need only claim the events of your life to make yourself yours. When you truly possess all you have been and done... you are fierce with reality.

Performed in 2015 — Duration 5:25





15. GIVE UP THE GHOST (FREE SPIRIT)



It is hard to identify where the suffering first enters a family — especially because suffering so easily compounds, finding new expressions in each generation, until somebody finally says “stop.”

I never met my grandfather, **Harry Havemeyer Webb**, who died from alcoholism in 1975, a few years before I was born. I know from my mom that he was a sweet and kind-hearted man, but didn't have the tools to heal himself from his addiction to alcohol, which came into his life in his thirties, many years after his service as a transport pilot in **World War II** had concluded. By the late 1950s, his marriage to my grandmother, **Kate Prentice Jennings**, was failing — plagued by infidelity, lack of physical intimacy, and a worsening disassociation from one another exacerbated by mutual drinking. By the time she left him for a swordfishing captain (named **George Seemann**), his daughters were away at school, and he found himself living alone at **High Acres Farm**, grappling with the isolation of his beautiful home.

According to a letter I received from his nephew, my godfather, **Sammy B. Webb**, Harry suffered from bad **PTSD** from his time in World War II — and would often wake up screaming at night, emerging from vivid nightmares of wounded troops crying out in pain from the back of his airplane. According to Sammy's letter, Harry would put on his old **Air Force** uniform at three o'clock in the morning, make himself a drink, and walk around the house, alone. I felt haunted by this image, and by the legacy of his unprocessed trauma, which I knew affected all of us in many untraceable ways. I knew that his suffering was still stalking the house.

In this ritual, I recreate his experience, serving as his proxy. I borrow his old Air Force uniform from the collection of the local **Shelburne Museum**, which was founded by his mother, **Electra Havemeyer Webb**.

I take his place in his bed, the same place where my mother spent her final moments, resting on his monogrammed “**HHW**” pillow. I sit up, screaming, and stumble across the hallway into his dressing room, where I step into his old uniform, which fits me more or less perfectly. I go into his bathroom, put on his tie, and clip it into place. I fasten his monogrammed belt buckle to tighten his pants.

I go downstairs, moving through the empty house, finding my way to the bar closet that continued to display his collection of alcohol, even forty years after his death.

I take a swig from his bottle of “**Old Grand-Dad**” whiskey and step into the room where *Process of Elimination* was performed, still decorated with the matching heads of bucks he shot and killed while hunting in the Adirondacks. I sit down between his hunting trophies, and thumb through a stack of his photographic memories — *parents, childhood, sports, lovers, wedding, war, children, divorce, solitude* — making his memories my own.

These memories are intercut with flashes of scenes from the house — fox head trophies, owl statues, a wasp walking across his silver monogrammed lighter, my childhood collection of **G.I. Joe** figures, their plastic weapons. Then the flashes shift to the outside lawn, where his old red parachute is spread across the dying grass, littered with alcohol bottles and “action figures” tumbling through the ground, as I writhe around in this historical detritus.

I gather up the parachute, and all of its contents, and proceed to the “**Trophy Room**” building at the edge of the woods. The room is lit by the halogen work lights from *Use a Hammer* and *Hall of Mirrors*, and hung with animal heads killed by Harry and his mother during family hunting trips to Alaska. There is a brown bear, a moose, a caribou, two rams, several deer, a bobcat, a porcupine, and an owl.

The animals watch as I carefully arrange the alcohol bottles in orderly lines on the floor, before standing a G.I. Joe figure at attention in front of each bottle — linking my experience of war with his.

I make a concoction of all **100 alcohols** in an empty whiskey bottle, and I take a swig of this potent elixir. Then I pour the solution into his monogrammed silver bowl set atop a butane camping stove, which I ignite with his monogrammed lighter. I use a red parachute cord to hang the empty bottle upside down above the boiling spirits, to catch their rising vapor. Once the liquid has been fully evaporated, I take down the bottle with the captured spirits, and I walk outside to meet the dawn, placing the bottle on a wooden altar, set at the edge of the High Acres Farm field.

I pick up Harry's **hunting rifle**, put a bullet in the chamber, walk back twenty paces, and cock the gun. With a single shot, the bullet shatters the bottle, “**freeing the spirits**” into the landscape, where they can be subsumed and finally healed.

I return to the house to find a small white plate of flowers lying on the ground. I take them to the edge of the field and toss them as an offering to the spirits of the land. The G.I. Joe figures have now exchanged their plastic guns for flowers, passing tiny floral bouquets from soldier to soldier.

A couple hours after completing this ritual, demolition began on the old main house at High Acres Farm, Harry's home for many years. Over the next eleven months, the house was completely transformed through a “gut renovation” — producing the warm and welcoming space that guests know and love today.

Performed in 2016 — Duration 13:42





16. PAPER WEIGHT (SWEET DREAMS)



*"Time held me green and dying
Though I sang in my chains like the sea."
— Dylan Thomas, Fern Hill*

My mother, **Kate Webb Harris**, selected that quote as the closing sentiment of her 1969 college thesis, *A Song in Chains*, which analyzed the work of Russian novelist **Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn**, who was awarded the *Nobel Prize in Literature* the following year, before being expelled from the Soviet Union in 1974, and ultimately seeking refuge here in Vermont in 1976.

My mother was fascinated by Solzhenitsyn's theory of attaining spiritual liberation from within a situation of physical confinement, as he experienced in the "gulags" of Russia.

Writing in his 1966 novel, *Cancer Ward*, Solzhenitsyn posits:

*A man is happy, so long as he chooses to
be happy and nothing can stop him.*

Even as a young woman, the seed of this idea was planted in my mother's imagination — little did she know how her own life would end up testing Solzhenitsyn's hypothesis.

Beginning in 1989, my mother started seeing a psychoanalyst in New York City, to help her process frequent nightmares, a debilitating depression, ambivalence about whether to end or continue her marriage, and her long-time struggle to give up cigarette smoking.

Her therapy consisted largely of **dream analysis**, so she began a meticulous practice of recording her dreams, which she carried out for the next thirteen years in a series of spiral-bound journals. After she died, I came across her collection of journals, which I read through word by word over several long and challenging winter days.

Without going into too many details, a picture is painted of half-remembered childhood abuse that cast a long shadow on the rest of her life, tainting her view of men and sexuality, and creating deep levels of fear and anxiety that caused her to withdraw more and more from the world as she aged.

Mainly, reading her journals made me feel enormous compassion for her situation — which, like her father, she was never quite able to transcend and escape.

This ritual deals with the process of transforming her dreams, so that her spirit (and this place) can be free of their old and heavy burdens.

An old white wooden bed that belonged to my mother's great-grandparents is placed in a maple sugarbush in the **High Acres Farm** woods.

The maple trees are tapped and the early spring sap is flowing, with blue cords criss-crossing the woods. In the bed is "**Baby Linda**," my mother's 1950s childhood doll.

Nearby, the snow is falling. I've laid out my mother's dream journals on an old wooden table. I take the glass vessel from *Phase Change* and sprinkle cleansing water over the journals, and then into the landscape, where the snow suddenly clears.

I walk into the forest and come across the **maple sugarbush** with the white wooden bed, greeting little Baby Linda.

I take the journals from my bag, and begin removing sheets of paper, which I attach to the blue cords with wooden clothespins, airing out the dreams like dirty laundry. I repeat this process with hundreds of pages, until the woods are festooned with white sheets of paper, like strange New England "**prayer flags**," slowly being sweetened by the **spring sap** that's dripping from the trees.

As night falls, the haunting sound of baby frogs takes over the forest, and a freeze-frame nightmare sequence begins.

In the morning, the sound of the nightmares gives way to the sound of crows, echoing through the empty woods.

I return to the sugarbush with my sister and her kids, to gather up the sheets of paper. We carry the bundle of collected dreams to a nearby hillside, where two tables await us — one made of wood, holding a collection of my mother's beautiful glass **paperweights**; the other made of glass, propped up between two columns of bricks from the old High Acres Farm chimney that was removed in the 2017 renovation.

One by one, paperweights are placed atop the stack of paper dreams, causing the glass sheet suspended between the bricks to sag and dip precariously. As the final paperweight is placed and moved, the sheet of glass suddenly cracks, and four white doves (released by **Gary Reid**, who five years earlier performed the cremation depicted in *Space Suit*) emerge from the empty space created. There is a dove for me, a dove for my sister, and one for each of her children.

As the wind picks up, we begin a family process of kite-making, with Baby Linda watching. Little **Norah** and **Julia** decorate the paper dreams with drawings of flowers. I build a simple wooden frame (the same shape as the spine of the figure from *Scarecrow*). **Amanda** snips it to size, and we tape the sheets of paper into place. Norah rushes into the field, with her new kite flapping wildly behind her.

The dreams are swirling and soaring in the bright Easter sky, their heaviness finally made light.

Performed in 2021 — Duration 9:45





17. HEXAGRAM



“The essential feature in quantum interconnectedness is that the whole universe is enfolded in everything and that each thing is enfolded in the whole.” — David Bohm

The land that constitutes **High Acres Farm** was acquired by my great-great-grandmother, **Lila Osgood Vanderbilt**, and her husband, **William Seward Webb**, in 1886.

Using inherited money from railroads, and acting through a group of anonymous secret agents, they purchased thirty-two contiguous homesteads encompassing nearly 4,000 acres, displacing a close-knit local community of farming families who’d worked the land for more than a century — as those same farming families had displaced the community of local **Abenaki** a century before.

Such is the story of land use in America — each generation doing what seems to make sense at the time, often leaving complicated legacies for future generations to untangle.

In the early 1970s, the descendants of Lila Vanderbilt Webb founded an environmental education nonprofit to protect their beautiful land from the pressures of future development.

In 1994, their organization, **Shelburne Farms**, had the opportunity to reacquire the majestic but dilapidated 1890s **“Breeding Barn,”** which had previously passed out of the family estate. As part of that transaction, Shelburne Farms negotiated strict land use agreements with all the adjoining landowners, limiting any future use of the neighboring properties to *single-family residential and agricultural* use only. Any educational or cultural uses would require the specific written consent of the Shelburne Farms board, and any amendments to the agreement would require the consent of all of its signatories, which as of now number ten — effectively enshrining a private gated community and creating a stasis.

Over the past six years, this agreement has been a block on our dreams to share **High Acres Farm** with others, as a gathering place for creativity, culture, and learning.

We’ve tried what feels like every imaginable angle around its many restrictions, but so far have only encountered rejection — stemming from a fear of further change felt by Shelburne Farms and by our neighbors.

Usually legal agreements are engaged with on the level of other legal agreements — yet not knowing any conventional pathway around this particular blockage, this ritual was a way of handing over the situation to a higher power, and trusting that somehow, a solution would be revealed.

In this ritual, I enter the High Acres Farm boathouse at the edge of **Lake Champlain**, where I read and review my mother’s copy of the *1994 Easement and Land Use Agreement* — before ripping it up into shreds.

Using the glass vessel from *Phase Change*, I scoop water from **Lake Champlain** into a bucket, and leave the shreds of paper to soak for the rest of the day.

That evening, I use a granite **mortar and pestle** to mash the saturated shreds into paper pulp, and use a **mould and deckle** to pull new sheets of paper from the **slurry**.

I cut these new sheets of paper into dashes and lines to form *I Ching Hexagram 59, Dispersion* (which follows Hexagram 58, *The Joyous, Lake*).

The paper hexagram is left to dry on the smooth surface of an arched mirror, which is hung in the High Acres Farm boathouse at the edge of Lake Champlain, attached to the ceiling of the space using three blue cords from *Paper Weight*.

The commentary for **Hexagram 59** advises:

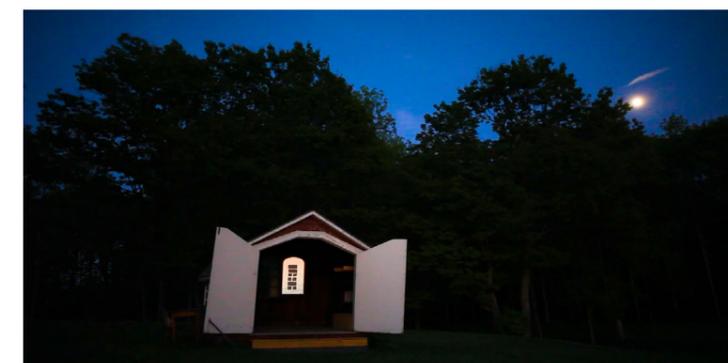
Dispersion shows the way, so to speak, that leads to gathering together. Religious forces are needed to overcome the egotism that divides men. The common celebration of the great sacrificial feasts and sacred rites, which gave expression simultaneously to the interrelation and social articulation of the family and state, was the means employed by the great ruler to unite men. The sacred music and the splendor of the ceremonies aroused a strong tide of emotion that was shared by all hearts in unison, and that awakened a consciousness of the common origin of all creatures. In this way disunity was overcome and rigidity dissolved. A further means to the same end is co-operation in great general undertakings that set a high goal for the will of the people; in the common concentration on this goal, all barriers dissolve, just as, when a boat is crossing a great stream, all hands must unite in a joint task.

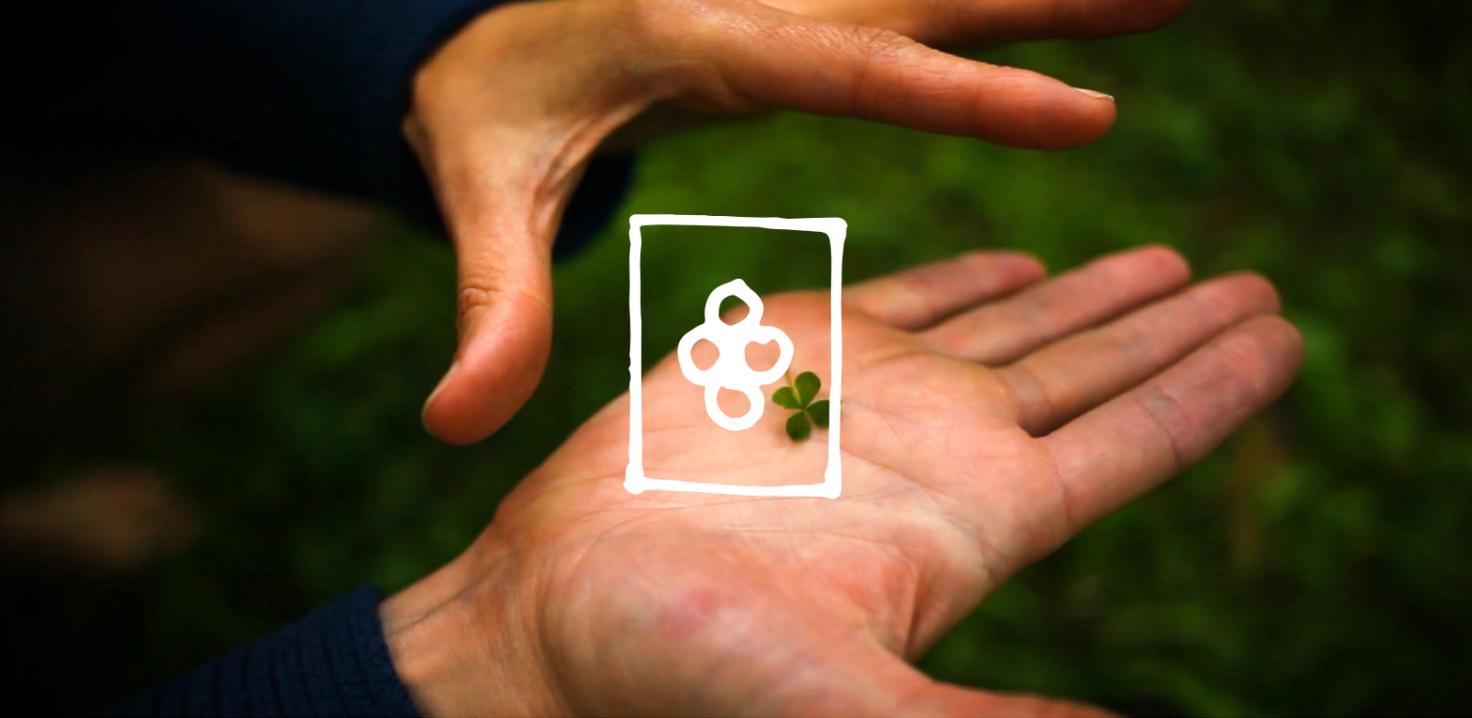
But only a man who is himself free of all selfish ulterior considerations, and who perseveres in justice and steadfastness, is capable of so dissolving the hardness of egotism.

The Hexagram remains in place for three consecutive days and nights, witnessing three important astronomical events on **May 26, 2021** — the full moon; the total lunar eclipse; and for the **Toltecs**, the long-prophesied transition from the “Fifth” to the **“Sixth Sun,”** said to mark the beginning of a new cycle of consciousness on Earth.

In the final moments of the film, myriad points of sunlight are seen reflected in the surface of the water — dancing, diving, dispersing, forming new shapes and structures.

Performed in 2021 — Duration 10:12





18. A WITNESS TO LIFE



In 2009, starting on my thirtieth birthday, I began a simple practice of taking a photo and writing a short story each day, and posting them online each night before going to sleep. I continued this daily ritual for **440 days**, calling the resulting project *Today*.

I began *Today* in order to become more conscious of my life experience as it was happening, to create more vivid memories, and to explore my relationship with time.

During the process, it occurred to me that others could benefit from exploring a similar practice, so I created a storytelling platform called *Cowbird*, where anyone could share their life stories.

Cowbird launched in December of 2011 — offering a deeper, slower, more contemplative (and ad-free) alternative to existing online spaces like *Twitter* and *Facebook*.

The vision was to create a “public library of human experience” so that the wisdom accrued in individual lifetimes could live on as a part of the commons.

Cowbird quickly attracted a community of over 15,000 storytellers from dozens of countries, who used the space to share heartfelt, personal stories.

Sensing its further potential, I arranged a seed round of \$500,000 from a handful of Silicon Valley investors — but at the last minute decided not to take the money, realizing that accepting the investment would set *Cowbird* on an immutable path defined by the pressures of growth.

So *Cowbird* remained a labor of love, but without the capital to invest in a technical or marketing team, the project was soon eclipsed by newer offerings such as *Medium* and *Instagram*.

By 2016, the *Cowbird* community had coalesced around a group of about 150 authors, who spent huge amounts of time on the platform, commenting on one another's stories.

When I tuned in from time to time, I was struck by the sense that *Cowbird* had become an addictive and unhealthy space — an emotional crutch for people who longed for a deeper sense of connection (a need that I knew a website could never truly meet).

In 2017, I made the difficult decision to close *Cowbird* to new contributions, while keeping it online as an historical archive for the sake of posterity — a decision that was met with great sadness and frustration from within that core group of authors.

In order to help them process their grief around the loss of this platform they loved, I invited those authors to visit me in Vermont later that summer — to meet one another in person, and to share stories together around an actual bonfire.

That July, around forty *Cowbird* authors traveled from Spain, Norway, Japan, Canada, and many American states to converge at **High Acres Farm** for a three-day gathering.

On the first night, we cooked steak (**cow**) and on the second night, chicken (**bird**). We hosted an “open-mic” slideshow where each author was invited to present his or her favorite *Cowbird* story to the rest of the group. Then we shifted to the High Acres Farm beach, where we had a joyful bonfire next to the water, with moonlit swimming under the stars.

On the final morning of our gathering, we performed this gentle ritual together, as a way of closing *Cowbird*.

In a grove of ash trees next to the water, I hang a collection of my mother's sterling silver picture frames, after removing their glass and their backings.

The empty frames are carefully placed to highlight pieces of moss, leaves, twigs, tree bark, and other exquisite details of the forest.

I invite the *Cowbird* authors to enter the grove with bare feet and in silence, as quiet witnesses to what they perceive, embodying *Cowbird's* longtime motto: “A Witness to Life”.

Each author is invited to find a frame that resonates, to take it into their hands, and eventually to carry it home as a gift.

Through the shining rectangles of these simple silver frames, the authors examine the trees, the brook, the ground, and one another.

The silver frames help them see that every act of perception is itself an act of framing.

Cowbird the website is no longer needed.

As **Toni Morrison** writes in her novel, *Tar Baby*:

At some point in life the world's beauty becomes enough. You don't need to photograph, paint, or even remember it. It is enough.

This brief film is accompanied by the beautiful song of the **Hermit Thrush**, Vermont's state bird, which **Walt Whitman** called “nature's finest sound”.

Alongside the birdsong is the constant sound of flowing water from a vernal stream traveling into the lake — as though these peaceful visitors, merely through their attentive presence alone, are nourishing the landscape. And so they are.

Performed in 2017 — Duration 3:08





19. SEE GLASS (NEW FOOD)



To the **Q'ero** people of Peru, the most important principle in life is what they call "**Ayni**" — the understanding that everything in the universe is interconnected, and that a respectful balance must be carefully maintained through cycles of reciprocal giving. Similar notions of **reciprocity** abound in traditional cultures worldwide.

In modern American culture, our mythology is "survival of the fittest," "winner take all," "every man for himself," and "he who dies with the most toys wins" — encoding the brittle doctrine of selfishness into the very fabric of our society. Even our modern environmental movement is grounded in a fundamentally economic view of reality, speaking in terms of "natural resources," "carbon counting, taxes, and credits," and other ideas that seek to collapse the living world into a series of quantifiable spreadsheets — as if nature were something "out there" to be objectively studied and managed.

When we forget that we *are nature*, that nature reflects us, that it's all a vast and mysterious hall of mirrors, we can start to lose faith in the exquisite gift of human life.

In his classic book, *The Gift*, **Lewis Hyde** advises:

Out of bad faith comes a longing for control, for the law and the police. Bad faith suspects that the gift will not come back, that things won't work out, that there is a scarcity so great in the world that it will devour whatever gifts appear. In bad faith the circle is broken.

Walt Whitman offers a similar perspective:

*The song is to the singer, and comes back most to him;
The theft is to the thief, and comes back most to him;
The love is to the lover, and comes back most to him;
The gift is to the giver, and comes back most to him—
it cannot fail;*

In this ritual, the cycle of *In Fragments* approaches completion — by making an offering to **Lake Champlain**, which has witnessed each step in the journey up until now.

I visit a friend's **pine** and **spruce** forest in the nearby town of Charlotte, searching for **resin** — the sticky "scar tissue" produced by coniferous trees to heal the "wounds" of broken branches. I make an offering of three old pieces of sea glass from **High Acres Farm**, and use my childhood Bowie knife to harvest a few handfuls of resin. I thank the tree as I leave.

My grandfather's 125-year-old **birchbark canoe** stands by the High Acres Farm stables, awaiting repair.

At a small wooden table, I unload the harvested resin into a skillet, and set it to boil on the butane stove that I used in *Give Up The Ghost*. I pour the melted liquid through a strainer to separate the chunks of wood and bark. In a second skillet, I fry a stack of bacon and pour its grease into the monogrammed "**JJH**" silver bowl that I received as a gift for my 1980 christening. I mix the bacon grease with the harvested resin in a heavy iron melting pot, and set the concoction to boil until it foams over onto the table, placing the hot mixture on an old "**Flower of Life**" trivet where it can cool.

I carry the warm solution to the canoe, and use my great-grandmother's monogrammed "**EHW**" silver spoon to spread the gummy resin over the splits and rips of the bark, gradually mending the "wounds" of her son's "vessel".

With the canoe repair complete, I enter the barn and climb the ladder into the hayloft, returning to the mosaic of mirrors that I placed there six years before, now covered with layers of cobwebs, disintegrating wasp nests, and many seasons of dust. I open four old hay doors, one on each side of the building, as a way of opening up "**the four directions**".

I use my mother's silver scissors to cut the "**red thread**" that's been bounding the mosaic of mirrors. I walk its perimeter, wrapping the string around my hand, and then use the scissors again to release the container entirely.

The red thread is replaced by a single shaft of sunlight streaming through a hay door, reaching to the back of the space. I sweep the mirrors into a pile, and load them into two steel buckets and a pail, which stand by an open window with a view to Lake Champlain.

The next morning, I load the buckets into the mended canoe, preparing to take them out onto the water. After paddling away from the shore, I select a piece of broken mirror and toss it into the lake. Two birds appear on the horizon, flying towards the boat. I take a second piece of broken mirror and toss it in as well. Just as the second mirror enters the water, the birds pass directly over the boat, as if emerging from my hand by grace.

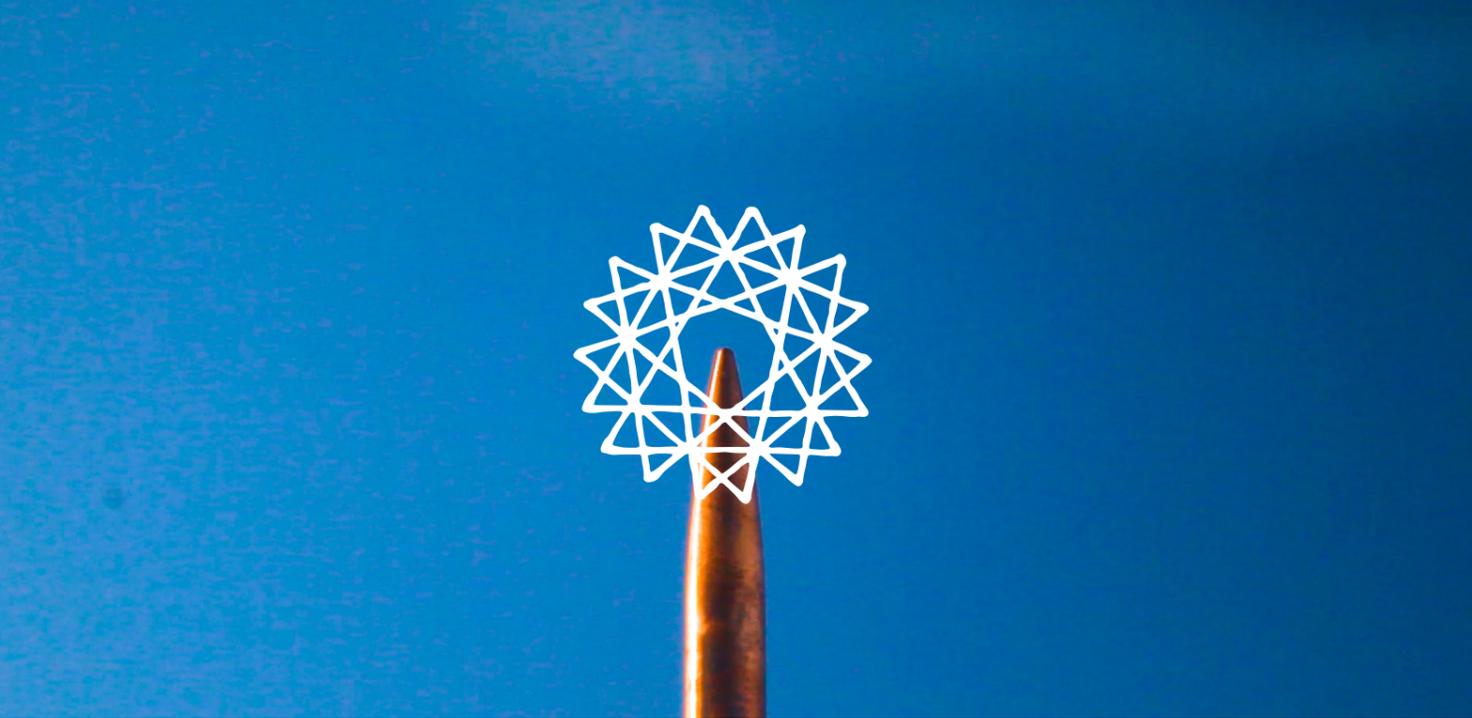
I continue feeding the broken mirrors into the water, seeding the lake with what will eventually be "sea glass" for future generations to discover — this time made not from the bottles of booze, but from the "fragments" of an ancestor's story.

A bird's eye view reveals the iconic shape of the mended vessel on the vastness of the lake — it is an **open eye** gazing up from this glassy plane of perception; it is an **official passageway** into this motherlike body of water; it is a **vesica pisces portal** to another zone of reality; it stands at the threshold of above and below, plumbing the space where we end and begin.

A flame appears, exploring a spiraling collection of sea glass. The offering is somehow acknowledged.

Performed in 2021 — Duration 8:27





20. ELECTRIC WEBB (POWER LINES)



“The sensation of nature waking up, and human beings helping to wake it up was luminous, like a hum.”

— Christopher Alexander

In 2015, a Tibetan Buddhist “**lama**” buried a special object known as a “**treasure vase**” here at **High Acres Farm**.

The practice dates back to **Padmasambhava**, and involves a small ceramic vessel filled with crystals, gems, shells, relics, and other sacred objects, to which monks and nuns say prayers and mantras over time. Once a treasure vase is ready, it can be deployed as a powerful healing force into a particular place — said to bring wisdom, protection, abundance, and many other blessings to the area where it is planted.

The planting of the treasure vase here occurred just as this series of rituals was beginning. Now, six years later, with the series approaching completion, it felt important to anchor the new and transformed energies of High Acres Farm with a consciously created (and not merely inherited) “**energy grid**” of our own.

Inspired by the exquisite early American quilts collected by my great-grandmother, **Electra Havemeyer Webb** (each quilt a whole made of many fragments), I began to explore the geometry of interlocking triangles — going beyond the familiar **Star of Bethlehem** found in so many textiles, into more complex Islamic **mosaics** and Hindu **yantras** such as the **Sri Yantra**, with its central **bindu** point anchoring the cosmic totality.

I eventually designed a geometry made of nine overlapping equilateral triangles — forming an iconic star-shaped pattern with eighteen outer vertices and nine inner vertices (twenty-seven in all), leaving a central **nonagon** (or **enneagram**) as empty space within.

Using satellite imagery and GPS, this geometry was then carefully overlaid on the High Acres Farm landscape, encompassing around **forty acres of land**, so that the pattern’s edges run across certain key locations where rituals and other important events have occurred.

The empty nonagon in the middle encompasses the core buildings (barn, stables, cottage, sheds) where we imagine that future cultural and educational activities will be rooted.

The geometry not only creates a kind of “**Magic Circle**” for High Acres Farm, but also, through its star-shaped structure, radiates outward into the surrounding landscape, connecting with other key locations on Earth, casting invisible blessings beyond the bounds of this place.

To bring this pattern to life, a set of twenty-seven mirrored “**lightning transformers**” were designed, fabricated, and installed in the landscape. Each contains a laser-engraved glass mirror showing a map of the overall star-shaped network with a single node circled, indicating that particular transformer’s location. Each mirror is also engraved with a single evocative word, and then encased in a sturdy powder-coated steel frame, attached to a steel pole anchored with concrete into the ground. Emerging from the back of each frame is a twelve-inch eased copper point, otherwise known as an “**Air Terminal**” or **Lightning Rod**, which connects with a braided strand of eight-gauge bare copper wire that circles the mirror two times, before traveling down the back of the pole and passing into the ground.

The resulting instruments function as lightning transformers — attracting lightning during summer storms, and transmuting the raw power of the electricity through the words engraved on each sign, which add those particular qualities to the energy as it passes from the sky, through the sign, and into the Earth.

Because all the mirrors face inwards, with a common center point, when any one transformer is struck, the event is transmitted to the rest of the network — flashing all the nodes at once with a sudden burst of light that charges the land with these twenty-seven particular qualities:

Adventure, Awe, Beauty, Blessings, Communion, Connection, Creativity, Dreams, Fertility, Flow, Grace, Gratitude, Imagination, Inspiration, Joy, Kindness, Love, Magic, Mystery, Passion, Peace, Possibility, Power, Protection, Vitality, Wildness, Wisdom

To activate the energy grid, I use my mother’s mid-1960s **Smith & Corona Electra 110** typewriter (the same machine that produced all the quotes seen in the earlier films).

With lightning bugs flashing outside, the “**Electra**” is placed in the hayloft of the old High Acres Farm barn, newly cleared of its mosaic of mirrors by the recently performed *See Glass*.

The *Electra* is flanked by two 1920s gold doré candelabras from **Tiffany Studios**, as benevolent guardian spirits.

Certain typewriter keys are carefully considered:

{ CLEAR, SHIFT, POWER SPACE

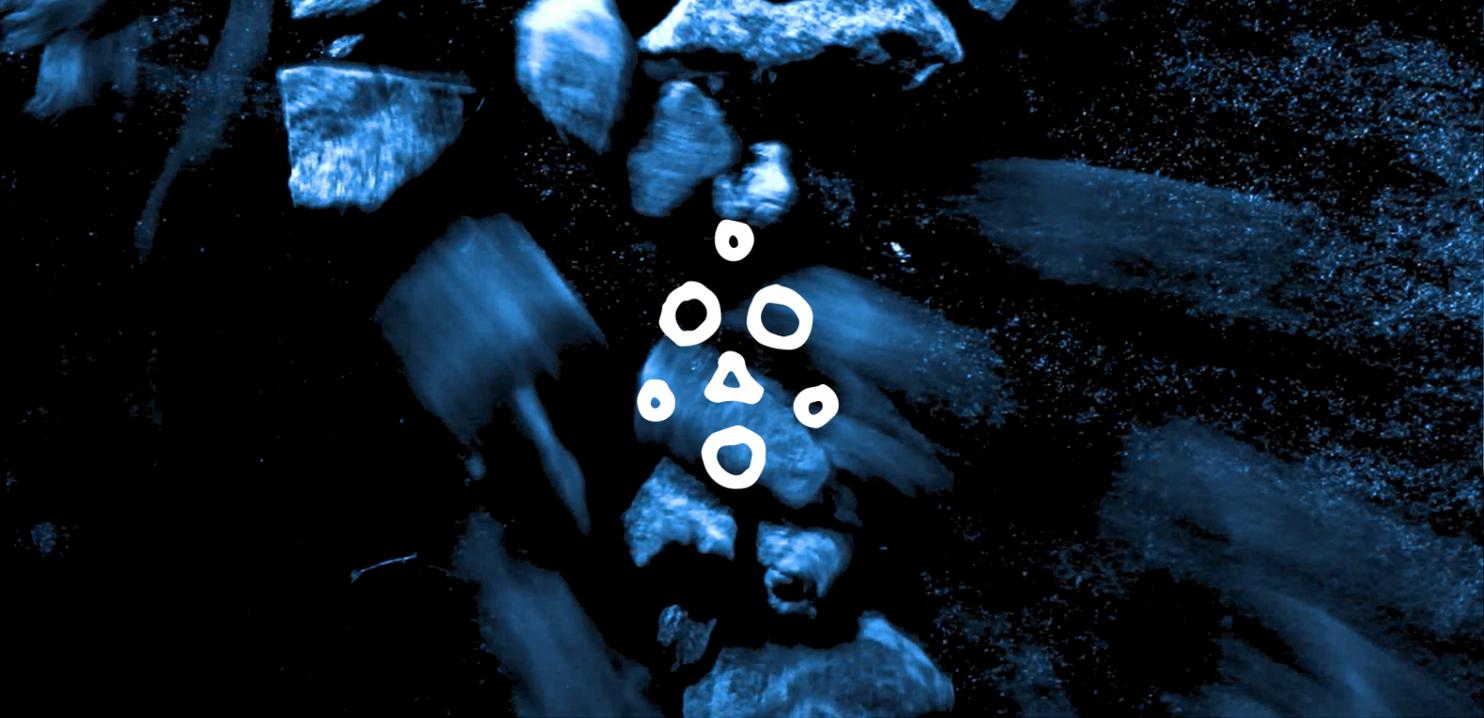
As the *Electra* is switched on, a powerful lightning storm overtakes the landscape, leaving the twenty-seven lightning transformers in its wake. The network’s geometry is finally revealed — an energetic quilt in the fabric of the landscape. The music subsides, and only the “**Schumann Resonance**” remains, droning the underlying tone of the Earth.

As **Carl Jung** writes in *Man and His Symbols*:

The mandala serves a conservative purpose — namely, to restore a previously existing order. But it also serves the creative purpose of giving expression and form to something that does not yet exist, something new and unique. The process is that of the ascending spiral, which grows upward while simultaneously returning again and again to the same point.

Performed in 2021 — Duration 6:50





21. IN FRAGMENTS



The only true voyage of discovery ... would be not to visit strange lands but to possess other eyes, to behold the universe through the eyes of another, of a hundred others, to behold the hundred universes that each of them beholds, that each of them is. — Marcel Proust

In the end, we return to where we began, but now with a new level of understanding. And so we return to the lake and the limestones — now seen at **100x magnification**, looking like some primordial cosmic event from before the beginning of time. The stones become a galaxy; the **ouroboros** eats its own tail. Two flames appear, searching for something not known. They explore the stones, the sand, and the water. They come too close to the glass, and it shatters into fragments. Twenty-one limestones flash across the frame, their white veins of calcite intact even at this microscopic perspective. The flames return, probing the fragments for some kind of meaning. A face or a mask is briefly discovered. The flames are swallowed by the void.

In the Jewish mystical tradition, **Kabbalah**, the act of creation is understood as an act of stepping back or withdrawing, known as “**Tzimtzum**”. Through this act of contraction, a **void** is created into which new creative light can then flow, traveling forth in a series of **vessels**. However, these vessels are too fragile to hold the divine light that fills them, so they shatter into myriad fragments through a process known as “**Shevirah**,” casting “**holy sparks**” throughout all of creation. To restore the broken vessels, the sparks must be gathered together again, no matter where in the world they are hidden, through a process known as “**Tikkun Olam**” (literally, *world repair*).

This work of “**world repair**” is an invitation to each of us — no matter where in creation we may happen to be. It is ultimately personal work, less about moving things around externally, and more about resolving the enigmas within.

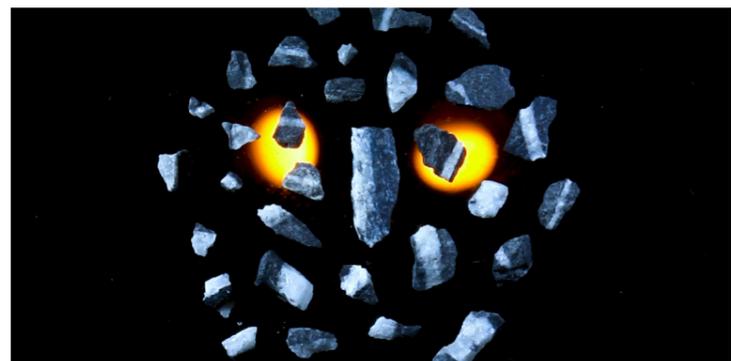
Joseph Campbell speaks to this paradox:

The world is a wasteland. People have the notion of saving the world by shifting it around and changing the rules and so forth. No, any world is a living world if it's alive, and the thing is to bring it to life. And the way to bring it to life is to find in your own case where your life is, and be alive yourself.

To mystics like the Kabbalists, speech is not merely a technology for describing the world, but a vector for applying intention — closer to the original notion of “**spelling**” as “casting a spell”.

This kind of sacred speech is not only what we say, but also what we think, do, and believe. It is a powerful tool for practicing *world repair* in our own unique life situations. In other words, it is a tool for making “**Life Art**” — using intention as an underlying technology and ritual as an amplifying force. Taken together, a potent portfolio for shaping reality.

Performed in 2016 — Duration 2:03



(EPILOGUE) SEED THE FUTURE

In Fragments is largely about dissolving the past — metabolizing the historical detritus of a difficult life situation to create fertile compost to nourish a more positive future.

In *Electric Webb*, twenty-seven words were engraved on the “lightning transformers” that make up the new “energy grid” of **High Acres Farm** — articulating the particular qualities we hope will help to shape the future story of our land. Yet that future story is left mostly undefined, as a kind of narrative **Tabula Rasa**.

To help us seed that new story, we invited 108 friends, relatives, teachers, mentors, and other guests to join us for a three-day gathering during the **2021 Fall Equinox**.

Guests were asked to bring a stone from wherever they live to help us initiate a **community cairn** near the center of our land. In exchange, each guest was given a small glass bottle of **silica powder**, a remnant of the crushing process that produced the materials for *Phase Change*. They were invited to speak into this powder something they sought to release, and then to give the spoken powder as an offering to **Lake Champlain**, filling up the empty bottle with lake water. Then, on the final morning of the gathering, they were invited to take a small handful of **glass marbles** from my mother’s childhood collection and wander into the landscape here, planting those marbles in the ground like **seeds** with their personal hopes and dreams for the future — then irrigating those planted seeds with the water from their little bottles. Finally, they were invited to fill up their bottles once more, this time with soil from our land, to take home as a kind of fertilizer to nourish the place where they live.

Now, looking out over the High Acres Farm landscape, we sense the presence of hundreds of hidden glass marbles, buried in the ground here, holding the precious hopes and dreams of our growing community.

As this place becomes more and more fertile over time, these planted dreams will be energized by that evolving fertility, growing here in our soil — now a **farm for dreams**.

On the second night of our gathering, we invited guests into the hayloft of our old “**Red Barn**” (the space in which *Hall of Mirrors* had been performed exactly six years before, and *See Glass* exactly two months before) to witness the premiere of the films from *In Fragments*.

We’d recently done a deep clean of the space, removing over sixty pounds of dirt, and power-washing every reachable inch with hundreds of gallons of water. Hanging from the rafters of the newly-cleaned space were forty-two of my mother’s vintage silk scarves — which, wrapped around her shoulders over the years, had witnessed hundreds of performances at the **Metropolitan Opera** in New York.

During that evening’s screening, with the old hay doors open to the cool night air, the scarves were gently swaying in the light autumn breeze.

Performed in 2021





(ORIGINS) WORKING WITH LIFE

In 2012, I had been working with the online world for more than a decade, focusing on the fields of **data visualization** and **interactive storytelling**, but had started to fall out of love with the Internet as a medium. Its early promise as a pioneering technological utopia had given way to widespread **screen addiction**, a vast **attention economy**, the consolidation of influence around a few enormous companies, and the cult-like worship of “**Big Data**”.

Furthermore, I realized that the works of art I loved the most rarely happened on the Internet — and that works in other mediums like literature, film, and music often touched me more deeply. This realization led to a frustrating period of stuckness that lasted a couple of years.

During that time, I began to explore philosophy, eastern religions, meditation, and psychedelics. I read troves of books, traveled down countless YouTube rabbit holes, and attended retreats in various traditions. Ultimately, this time of exploration led to a series of powerful plant medicine experiences from which I felt I would never return.

When I did return, I was left with the feeling of life being a dreamlike illusion, of my friends and family as exquisite apparitions — and the conviction that agreeing to participate in the world at all would somehow be dishonest, like agreeing to believe in a dream. I considered taking a vow of silence and retreating from the world into a more or less hermetic existence.

Shortly thereafter, I was fortunate to meet a mentor named **Ernesto Pujol**, a Cuban-American performance artist and former Christian monk. In 2015, he led a retreat called “**The Art of Consciousness**” at a meditation center in New Hampshire. I arrived on the heels of a particularly challenging plant medicine experience from the previous day, looking somehow to restore my belief in reality.

The retreat was held in silence — defined by Ernesto not as the absence of sound, but as the absence of distraction.

The first night, in his opening remarks, he told us:

The Buddhists say all of this is an illusion. If that's the case, then why not create beautiful illusions?

The next day, he had us tell our life story to each of the other participants, who were asked to listen in silence, simply saying, “Thank you, I have listened” at the end of each recount. After reciting the all-too-familiar life story but a handful of times, it begins to reveal itself as what it really is: a malleable collection of source material from which to draw as needed, a nebulous kaleidoscopic fiction that can be told and retold in myriad ways — something whose “truth” is largely determined from moment to moment by how it's presented and framed.

The next day, he had us move an old New England stone wall ten feet to the left. We moved the wall stone by stone in silence over the course of four or five hours, until the whole wall was standing in a slightly different place on the lawn. Then, he had us move it back, stone by stone, also in silence. At the end of the day, the wall was back where it had been for the last hundred years — the same wall, yet now also totally different.

The next day, he invited us to create artworks using a medium we'd never practiced before. I took a set of tea cups from the kitchen and ran them, one at a time, half a mile down the road to a small brook, where I filled each cup with water, before running it carefully back to the center. By the early evening, I'd repeated this process twelve times, once for each of the people to whom I told my life story. I lined up the cups on the ground, and asked each of my story partners to come forward.

Holding each person's hand with my own, I poured the water over our fingers, as a quiet gesture of thanks. This simple intuitive act felt beautiful, appropriate, and totally natural — and helped awaken me to the power of ritual.

From there, I shifted to a two-week residency at the **Vermont Studio Center**, where I sat by the banks of the **Gihon River** (named after a river of the same name from the biblical *Book of Genesis*), contemplating everything I'd recently experienced.

Through the harrowing dissolution of the plant medicine journeys, to the gentle restoration of Ernesto's retreat, I was left with the sense of *life itself* being the medium, and ritual as a powerful tool for “working with life.”

With these understandings in mind, I began to wonder how and where to apply them. From my wooden chair beside the river in Johnson, Vermont, my awareness shifted to **High Acres Farm**.

I thought of all the suffering that had happened there over the years — and the great beauty that was present there as well. I thought of my own wish to create a life there someday, and to share its potential with others, yet the trepidation I also felt about becoming trapped in its historical patterns.

It occurred to me that the complex life situation of High Acres Farm offered a natural context for me to explore and practice what I began to think of as “**Life Art**” — working to transform my experience of that place through the creative application of ritual.

In Fragments offers a vivid example of *Life Art* as applied to one specific life situation over time — showing a range of ways that ritual can be used to shape and evolve a particular experience of life.

The gestures and aesthetics of these twenty-one rituals emerge from the specific life context of High Acres Farm, whereas other contexts would suggest their own unique gestures and aesthetics, as appropriate to each situation.

Beyond their specificity, the rituals that make up *In Fragments* also touch on certain universal qualities:

*the balance between fragmentation and wholeness;
the role of destruction in creating new life;
the generative potential of processing grief;
the correspondence between sacrifice and results;
the power of symbolic action to alter belief;
the body as a vessel for enacting intention;
the malleable nature of perception and reality.*

Each place and person is totally unique, and the center of a world — while also existing in relationship with myriad other worlds, each also totally unique.

When we truly understand this insight, and fully step into its power, we can become active co-creators with the world that surrounds us — no longer pawns in the hands of fate, but conscious collaborators in discovering our own unique destinies, as they unfold within the wholeness of creation.

In *The Nature of Order*, **Christopher Alexander** offers this guidance for working with life:

Each center gets its life, always, from the fact that it is helping to support and enliven some larger center. The center becomes precious because of it. Thus, life itself is a recursive effect which occurs in space. It can only be understood recursively as the mutual intensification of life by life.

Written in October 2021



FILM CREDITS

Created by
Jonathan Harris

Edited with
Scott Thrift

With original music by
Julio Monterrey

Filmed on location at
High Acres Farm

With additional photography by
Ethan Bond Watts
Ssong Yang
Scott Thrift
Tracy Maurice
Jeff Herzberger
Ian Ray

With special effects by
Eric Epstein

Total running time
2:13:45

More information at
infragments.us

This booklet was made for the World Premiere of *In Fragments* at the IDFA Film Festival, in the beautiful Tuschinski Theater, where glimpses of the project were first seen in 2017. Thanks to the entire team at IDFA and DocLab for their kind support over the years.



BIOGRAPHY

Jonathan Harris was born on August 27, 1979 in Burlington, Vermont. He attended **St. Bernard's School** in New York City, then **Deerfield Academy** in Western Massachusetts, and then went on to study computer science at **Princeton University** and interactive art at **Fabrica**.

After keeping elaborate sketchbooks for many years, he shifted his focus to the Internet after being robbed at gunpoint in 2003. He was among the early pioneers in the field of "data visualization" through projects such as *WordCount* (2003), *10x10* (2004), and *We Feel Fine* (2006).

Feeling the pull back to embodied reality, he began to explore algorithmic approaches to documentary through projects such as *The Whale Hunt* (2007), *Today* (2010), *Balloons of Bhutan* (2011), and *I Love Your Work* (2013) — whose precise rule sets produced ritualistic experiences that straddled the physical and digital worlds.

In 2016, he returned to his family's ancestral land in Vermont, where his mother died the very day he moved home, after a long illness. Since then, he has been exploring what he calls "**Life Art**" — using the creative application of ritual to shape his experience of **High Acres Farm** and beyond.

In Fragments (2021) is his first new work in six years.

More information at number27.org





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