

Recursive Making and an Epistemology of Process

Palimpsest: a multi-layered record

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Abstract

This practice-led case study examines recursive making as a non-linear model of iteration in design. While design discourse often treats iteration as refinement toward a resolved artifact, *Palimpsest: a multi-layered record* reframes making as structured through repetition, material alteration, and accumulation rather than linear improvement, hypothesizing that repetition under fixed conditions produces divergence rather than convergence. Across more than fifty weekly sessions over four semesters, twenty-seven source images underwent repeated cycles of fixed reproduction settings and controlled material interventions—such as tearing, stapling, painting, and saturation—followed by re-capture. Both analog and digital states were archived without curation. When legibility across the set reached sustained abstraction, a system-wide intervention was initiated: an earlier iteration was reintroduced through multiple exposure, projection, or scanning across all twenty-seven images. Comparative analysis tracked shifts in legibility, divergence under identical conditions, and the effects of accumulated material history on subsequent outputs. This process shows that in recursive making, repetition under fixed conditions does not produce consistency. As material history accumulated, outputs diverged, legibility shifted non-linearly, and prior forms returned only in altered states. Meaning was generated through comparison across iterations, with earlier versions materially influencing subsequent production rather than remaining static records. These findings intervene in contemporary models of design that equate repetition with refinement and closure. By demonstrating that recursive making generates relational knowledge through accumulation rather than progression, this study calls for reconsideration of how process, archive, and duration are evaluated within design inquiry.

Keywords: design, design-research, design-practice, epistemology, recursive making

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Introduction

This paper aims to show that knowledge can be generated through making, through designing, and through the process of creating. Knowledge does not appear fully formed at the beginning of the process. Nor does it reside at the end in a fully polished deliverable. Instead, it is something that emerges and accumulates through the process of inquiry—of experimentation, of curiosity, of testing—through material engagement and through the in situ synthesis of findings.

For the purposes of this paper, there are two overarching approaches to design colloquially called lowercase-d design and Capital-D Design.¹ The first refers to the traditional, teleological path toward producing deliverables for a client. In this ontology, the process of iteration is for the express purpose of refinement. The second, Capital-D Design, aligns with what Nigel Cross argues as a “designerly way of knowing” (Cross, 1982, p. 221), which values process as knowledge-bearing.

Palimpsest: a multi-layered record argues against using iteration solely for the purpose of refinement. This inquiry-based system shows that within process itself, divergence, accumulation, instability, residue and altered return can be knowledge-bearing. At its core, *Palimpsest* is a recursive image-making system and active archive that began as a reflective look at my experiences with chronic pain conditions. Because lived experience, material process and knowledge production could not be cleanly split, the system and archive developed into an inquiry-driven, practice-led, embodied research project. However, it is important to note that pain was the catalyst and the system was not developed to heal or for therapeutic reasons.

What I became the most interested in while this system was developing was this: what kind of knowledge emerges through recursive making under fixed conditions over time? In other words, what happens when the design process becomes non-linear, anti-teleological and resists closure? *Palimpsest* demonstrates that repetition under fixed conditions does not produce consistency because the fixed conditions themselves are not neutral. Knowledge emerged when plates diverged and legibility shifted within a layer. This divergence led to the epistemic mechanism of material comparison across plates and layers. Finally, when the archive became active, through the reintroduction of earlier layers, these returned only in altered states.

Context and Framework

Because this paper frames Capital-D Design as process-based and reflective, I argue that it can be framed as epistemic. Bruce Archer argues that there “[is] a designerly way of thinking and communicating” (Archer, 1979, p. 17) that moves Design beyond applied service and into knowledge production. Design, then, is distinct from science and from the humanities. I argue that it is its own method of knowledge production that is rooted in active inquiry and constructive making.

Palimpsest sits squarely within this framework. It rejects the ontology of lowercase-d design and instead embraces knowledge production through inquiry and process. Nithikul Nimkulrat argues that a knowledge of a practice comes from within the practice itself, in other words, the

¹ I use both terms lowercase-d design and Capital-D Design as disciplinary shorthand rather than formal categories attributable to a single theorist. In this paper, lowercase-d design refers to deliverable-oriented design practices, while Capital-D Design refers to process-driven, epistemic practices.

act of creating generates knowledge (Nimkulrat, 2012, p. 2). In this paper, the claim becomes methodological: recursive making is not merely an art practice, personal expression or documentation. Instead, it becomes the object of research and study and is also the source from which knowledge accumulates and emerges.

Methodology: Recursive Making as a System

Because *Palimpsest* utilizes specific internal labels, I define key terms here before I describe the methodology.

- **Source Plates:** Initial 27 analog units, the origin point for the archive.
- **Plate(s):** Individual printed/captured units in both analog and digital forms; i.e. IMG_01_01, TRC_01_01, MM_01_01
- **Image(s):** Refers to the visual/captured state of Plates.
- **Print(s):** References specifically to analog paper output.
- **Layer(s):** References the iteration number, or accumulated state, of a weekly set of plates.
- **IMG:** References the photo-based body-part set of plates.
- **TRC:** References the tracing-based body-part set of plates.
- **MM:** References the mind map tracing set of plates.

At its core, *Palimpsest* is a recursive image-making system based on 27 source plates. These are organized by three archival labels IMG, TRC, and MM. In the first category, IMG, we have eight photographs of my body parts most affected by pain symptoms (Fig. 1). The photographic representation becomes a metaphor for how I present to the world. The second category, TRC, is those same photographs traced by hand. The tracing and the abstraction represent how I feel in the world (Fig. 2). The third category MM, consists of 11 tracings of an initial mind map (Fig. 3). Taken together these 27 source plates are the base of the project.

Figure 1
Eight Initial Starting Images



Note. Top row l to r: IMG_01_01 - IMG_01_04; bottom row: IMG_01_05 - IMG_01_08

Figure 2
Eight Initial Tracings



Note. Top row l to r: TRC_01_01 - TRC_01_04; bottom row: TRC_01_05 - TRC_01_08

Figure 3

Eleven Initial Mind Map Tracings



Note. Top row l to r: MM_01_01 - MM_01_04; middle row: MM_01_05 - MM_01_08; bottom row: MM_01_09 - MM_01_11

The mind map and tracing need clarification as both are fundamental registers to the project. The mind map was the genesis of the project, built as an attempt to externalize a non-linear structure of pain. Within that structure, the MM plates came to represent the memory, association, and embodied thought that accompanies the experience of chronic pain. I photographically captured the initial physical structure pinned to a board as an image and traced the outline and shape of the note cards and string, creating an abstract representation. Both the act of tracing and the result of it became another register of perception, simultaneously a thing and an action. Once the first 27 plates were complete, they entered the system—and archive—as material trace.

Before I describe the operational aspects of *Palimpsest*, I want to frame it first as an embodied archive. At its core, the system is image-making, driven by inquiry. However, the work is more dynamic than just images; the work is the behavior of the system and the archive over time. Knowledge emerges here, not only through the recursive nature of repetition, but through the material conditions, material interventions and the accumulated history of these actions. To

understand the behavior, we must first describe and define the fixed conditions under which *Palimpsest* operates.

Fixed Conditions

Fixed Condition Terms

- **Capture/Recapture:** Initial capture, and activation of system, by iPhone. Recapture method varies: digital camera, iPhone, scanner, and 35mm film.
- **Print/Reprint:** Always printed on 11x14 tracing paper.
- **Material Intervention:** Pre-planned variable, mechanical and/or analog intervention applied to each newly printed plate.
- **Time:** The recursive cycle occurs no more than once a week.
- **Archive:** Both analog and digital states are archived without curation. The archive itself is not a fixed condition, but the result of the system operating under fixed conditions.

These constraints were not arbitrary. Though these conditions are labeled fixed, they are fixed only insofar as they are the prescribed steps of the process. This intentionality created a repeatable methodology. Despite the fixed conditions, the output was anything but neutral. This allowed divergence to accumulate, revealing the system's behavior over time. In lowercase-d design, fixed conditions are often used to produce consistent, polished products. *Palimpsest* counters this by valuing divergence as knowledge-bearing.

Non-neutrality of Fixed Conditions

The system takes on the nature of the Ouroboros at layer two, after the first recursion has occurred. After this point, it becomes impossible to pinpoint a starting or finish point—as each plate and layer is supplied by the past and feeds the future. The palimpsest emerges from this recursion, a multi-layered record, carrying the past forward in altered form. Because the fixed conditions are non-neutral, each cycle does not simply reproduce the past. Instead, it alters what comes next. As a result of the ouroboric nature of the recursive system, it is nearly impossible to begin to describe one fixed condition without needing to refer backward or forward. For the purposes of this paper, I will begin with the capture method and work forward.

Capture

As mentioned, the Source Plates were captured by iPhone. Later, other capture methods also became part of this fixed condition including the use of 35mm film, flatbed scanner, and DSLR. At the surface level, these methods of capture may seem like the fixed condition most likely to remain neutral in their output; however, there are multiple conditions that challenge this assumption. First, the capture occurs once and only once. This is not a typical photo shoot where the best shot is used. If an image came out blurry or in harsh conditions, this was the output that became part of the archive. Second, as with any camera and lens, optical distortion occurs because of the shape of the lens. Lastly, even within a studio setting, subtle atmospheric variations affect the output; the harsh fluorescent lighting combined with the changing natural light conditions produced subtle, nuanced variations. Each method, whether DSLR, scanner or film, would each impart its own distinct output variations, some more blatant than others. These rules are deliberate. They kept curation at bay and forced variability to the surface from a fixed condition. This reinforced the concept that the process itself was the work. The layers held equal value as residue of the process.

Printing

Printing produced the most frequent and most blatant forms of non-neutrality from a fixed condition. As stated, each plate is printed on 11x14 tracing paper using a large format inkjet photo printer.² The printer itself is a workhorse, designed to produce gallery-quality images, with one caveat—the paper. Because I used tracing paper, the machine—and thus the fixed condition—was destabilized. The printer generally handled one or two plates without issue, but when 27 were stacked in the queue, reliability was volatile. While I cannot diagnose the exact behavior of the machine, it was explained by tech support that heat and friction have a tendency to interact poorly with thin substrates. Therefore, the condition of the output was left to chance with an array of outcomes from pristine to shredded. Much like the rule about one shot per capture method, the rule was the same for the printer—one sheet per plate, no matter the condition.

Material Intervention (as a Mode of Inquiry)

Once the new set of plates (layer) emerged from the printer, the next step in the system was the material intervention. Each week—taking inspiration from Sol LeWitt's Wall Drawings—I would predefine an inquiry before the layer emerged from the printer; this kept the intervention from becoming corrective (LeWitt, 1967, p. 17). It is important to clarify that though the material intervention acts as a fixed condition operationally, its purpose is distinct: to impart deliberate change as a mode of inquiry. Before I describe the different categories of interventions it is important to note that these are executed through analog or mechanical methods, not through software intervention. This became foundational. To be clear, software editing is a valid workflow, especially for efficiency, but the outcomes are usually more controllable and correctable. For *Palimpsest*, the focus was on inquiry, on the process, not the outcome. Thus the no software rule was established at the project's onset.

For the purpose of this paper, analog is defined as an intervention completed by hand: examples include tearing, painting, drawing, saturating, and sewing. Mechanical is defined as an intervention through the use of an apparatus or machine, like a stapler, or multiple exposure in camera, as well as layering/overlays in capture. Though these methods are distinct execution modalities, there are many examples of both being used to complete the intervention.

In addition to the distinction between mechanical and analog as the way in which interventions were performed, I found it necessary to further sub-categorize the material interventions by type. As with the two main categories, there is also fluidity between these subcategories resulting in overlap. The purpose of the categories is not to impose strict taxonomy, but to provide both informational and analytical organization. The categories by type include the following:

- **Capture-based interventions:** These change how the image is recorded.
- **Substrate-based interventions:** These change the physical paper.
- **Repair / binding interventions:** These respond to rupture or fragmentation.
- **Surface interventions:** These alter opacity, color, texture, or legibility.
- **Archival / reintroduction interventions:** These bring earlier states back into the system.

² Printing was completed using Canon imagePROGRAF PRO-series (1000, 1100) large-format inkjet photo printers.

It is important to note that the individual fixed conditions can also impart mechanical interventions. Among these, there are several ways that this can occur depending on the fixed condition involved. The first avenue would be the predefined mechanical intervention with a more controlled output. For instance, while making a multiple exposure with a DSLR, the action is performed by me and there is instant feedback on the screen, but the final overlay emerges through the apparatus. In contrast to multiple exposure performed on a film camera, where there is no instant feedback, chance is built into this scenario. Lastly, in the case of the printer, a mechanical intervention can emerge unplanned, but will still be absorbed into the system. As stated, these categories are not discrete taxonomies of the interventions; overlap does occur. It is often in these overlaps where the most visually striking changes emerge.

Time

Time is the last fixed condition. Within the already established ontology of lowercase-d design, the market and revenue demand fast turnarounds. *Palimpsest* deliberately resists that tempo by allowing the recursive system to occur no more than once per week. This temporality allows time for not only making, but reflection on the process as well.

Recursive Cycle

Now that we have established the fixed conditions of the recursive system, we can see how it operates: 27 source plates were captured by iPhone, printed on 11 x 14 tracing paper, materially intervened upon, and recaptured once more. Each week the system produced 27 new plates that had been materially altered and reprinted on the same substrate in the same manner. As a result of these fixed conditions, the archive—in both analog and digital forms—was established to document and preserve the knowledge that emerged through the behavior of the system over time.

Archive as an Active System

Palimpsest began from a place of inquiry. There was no plan in place to build such a robust system. However, allowing the privilege of time to engage in process, allowed room for further inquiry. The result of this was several weeks' worth of layers and the organic beginnings of what I have come to call the active archive. Both analog and digital plates were catalogued and archived without curation. Initially, I had not thought much about what an archive was. I think I would have labelled it as a noun, as a repository of artifacts. However, as I will discuss in the findings, what I soon came to realize is that archives can be active sources of knowledge—in this case, through the reintroduction of previous layers as source material for future layers.

Analysis: Divergence, Accumulation, and Altered Return

Finding 1: Fixed Conditions Did Not Produce Fixed Outcomes

The conditions of the system themselves were fixed. 27 source plates were captured, printed, materially intervened upon, recaptured and then printed again. Each layer would be printed—from the same machine—on 11x14 tracing paper. Because of the repeated actions of the fixed conditions, one might expect stable, repeatable outputs. However, the fixedness itself belongs solely to the action of the condition, while the output was anything but neutral.

Because of the ouroboric nature of the project—once the recursion has begun, there is no true starting point—I will begin with the capture method. All modes of capture—various digital cameras (DSLR, iPhone etc.), film camera and scanner—produce nuanced reproductions that are never a true copy of the original. Camera lenses will capture light that reads as subtle atmospheric distortion, while the shape of the glass may also warp images. Scanners can also distort depending on resolution, contact with the substrate, exposure, and compression. Of the fixed conditions, the capture method produces the most subtle and nuanced of the non-neutral outputs.

The print/reprint is the least neutral fixed condition and the biggest opportunity for chance within the system, which is ironic because within the ontology of lowercase-d design, the printer is what produces consistency. But here, it can print a perfect plate and then destroy the next despite consistent settings and operation. The substrate plays a major role here in that inconsistency and the non-neutrality of the output as the printer does not seem equipped to produce on such a thin material. The foundational rule—whatever emerges from the printer, in whatever condition it is in, is what is used—ensures that these non-neutral outputs are absorbed with equal weight and value into the archive. Because of the relationship between the printer and substrate, this fixed condition—print/reprint—is responsible for the majority of unintentional divergence.

The material intervention is only fixed in that it occurs as a prescribed step in the system. It is the fixed condition responsible for the majority of intentional divergence—as a primary site of inquiry. By nature, the material intervention imparts non-neutral outputs.

Time sits as the last remaining fixed condition within the system. While time itself does not actually produce non-neutral outcomes, it does allow for them to become visible within the system. Additionally, though *Palimpsest* is produced in chronological week-to-week making, it resists the linear path toward iterative refinement. This temporal resistance provides an allowance of space—against the often rapid timelines within lowercase-d design projects—for the non-neutrality of the other fixed conditions to rise to the surface and become visible through repetition.

These fixed conditions are only fixed in the action they provide—not in the output. This matters because we take for granted that when we hit print, what comes out will be uniform, whether it's two copies or two hundred copies. We are taught to value this uniformity. This project demonstrates that fixed conditions do not equate to fixed outcomes. Much of lowercase-d design privileges reproducibility and consistency as markers for effective design outcomes. *Palimpsest* offers a rigorous counternarrative.

Finding 2: Material History Accumulated and Altered Future Iterations—the Archive Becomes Active

Palimpsest resists teleological resolution. It assigns equal value to each plate and layer. It does not look toward a polished deliverable as closure. This assignment allows material history to be accumulated, which, in turn, alters future iterations. Again, the Ouroboric structure plays a key role here. Once the recursive cycle is in motion, it is almost impossible to start to describe a plate or layer without needing to refer back to the previous—by nature the system carries, or traces, material history from the past forward into the future.

Prior to *Palimpsest*, my thoughts on archives were that they were repositories for artifacts, a place for things. What I have found is that an archive can be a verb. It can be an active, knowledge-producing source. Because of the recursive nature of the project and the natural material degradation that occurred through the process, when a material intervention was applied that required a “remembering” through material history, the archive became active: its historical source material traces forward into future iterations. This activation of applying an earlier iteration onto a current layer—not in the hopes of restoration, but of altered return—generated a new material accumulation.

This is evident in the altered return of projecting the past onto the future in layer 50. In Fig. 4 we can see MM_07_49 taped against a wall with a projection of an earlier plate across it. The example clearly shows that the damaged substrate of MM_07_49 could no longer fully contain the projection; tears and curled edges allowed fragments of the altered past to pass through the paper and register directly onto the wall behind it, thus altering MM_07_50 and future iterations with the materially accumulated history of a previous iteration. The archive activates by remembering itself through the reintroduction of material traces. But those traces always return altered, so the system grows without ever resolving. The system itself changed, the archive changed, but it never resets.

Figure 4

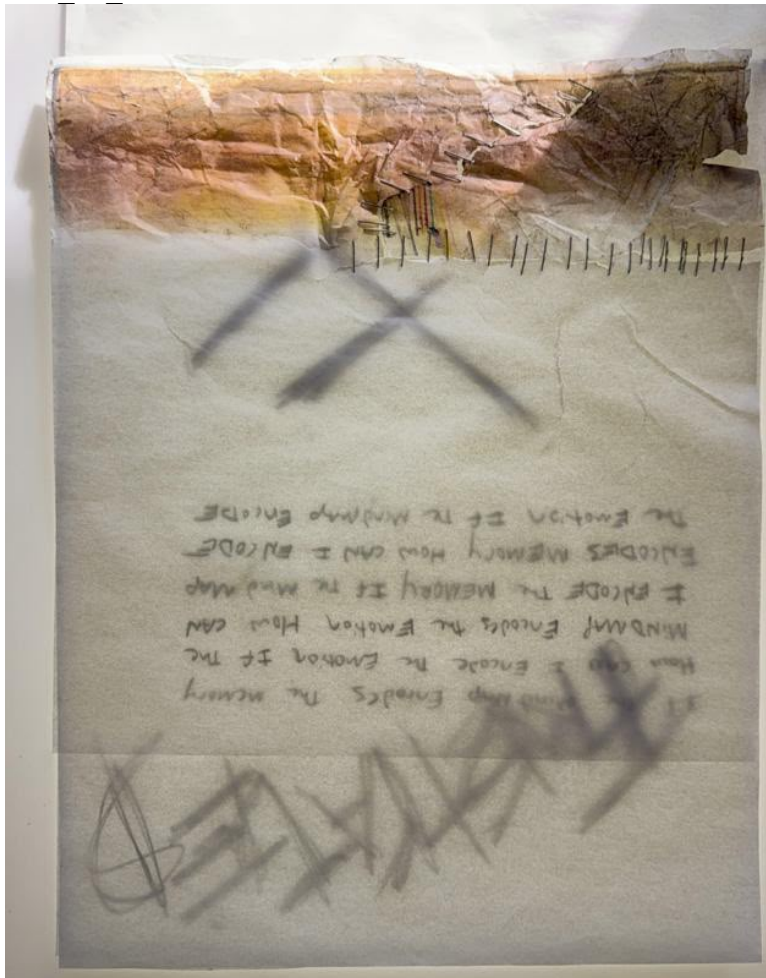
MM 07 50



Note. Showing MM_07_49 taped to a wall while an earlier archival plate is projected across it. Tears and curled edges in MM_07_49 allow the projected image to pass through the damaged substrate and register on the wall behind it.

Additionally, the archive became active when the system unintentionally produced brand new materiality in the form of MM_46_12 (Fig. 5). After printing the complete sets of IMG/TRC for layer 46, I started the process for printing the MM and left the room. When I returned, the MM process was complete, but the wind had strewn them about the studio. Gathering them up, several were torn, one was ripped completely in half and barely printed—but there were 12 instead of 11. I matched each physical plate to the digital version and was left with an extra. The 12th sheet was less than half-printed and ripped into two pieces from the printer, in other words, completely illegible. But because of the cardinal rule—whatever came out of the printer in whatever condition it was in was to be used—the system produced a new plate and the archive absorbed that as new knowledge in MM_46_12.

Figure 5
MM_12_46



Note. The unplanned twelfth mind map plate generated in week 46. The image also captures studio ephemera through superimposed typography, showing how contextual material can enter the digital archive without becoming part of the analog substrate.

Finding 3: The Analog and Digital Archives are Asynchronous

Palimpsest is archived in both digital and analog states without curation. However, each state represents divergent material accumulations. The physically archived iteration never matches the digital because of both material intervention(s) and the non-neutrality of fixed conditions. This becomes visible in the use of studio ephemera that is captured digitally when imprinted

upon the analog layer. However, unlike a physical imprinting that leaves an indelible trace on the substrate, the ephemera is captured through projection or multiple exposure and does not impart physicality to the analog state (Fig. 5, once more).

Likewise, when layer 46 produced a 12th mind map, the digital archive absorbed this new knowledge. This divergence in material accumulation begins to produce new knowledge. This emergence tested the system when faced with the rule of reintroducing a previous layer to the present with layer 49. MM_49_12 had no material history to look back towards in the way every other layer did. Therefore, the genesis, the actual physical mind map, was introduced into the system, without abstraction, directly as material trace and emerged as MM_50_12 (Fig. 6).³

Figure 6
MM_12_50



Note. Because the unplanned twelfth mind map plate first emerged in week 46, it had no earlier iteration to project across it. As a result, the original physical mind map was introduced into the system as material history for this plate.

³ The original physical mind map is the genesis of this project. However, once the abstracted tracings were created, the original map no longer operated as the primary source material. Its direct autobiographical content was too literal for the project in a way that the images of my body were not. The tracings replaced the literal with the abstract.

Discussion: Process as Epistemology

Much of lowercase-d design privileges reproducibility and consistency as markers for effective design outcomes. In this model repetition is often used to refine. *Palimpsest* shows repetition can produce divergence and that instability is not failure; degradation, residue, and altered return are also knowledge-bearing. In this project thinking did not precede making. Instead theory emerged through practice and knowledge emerged through duration, labor, and comparison. *Palimpsest* began from embodied experience. Its purpose was not as a form of therapy or healing; rather, the recursive-making system became a way of processing lived conditions as material inquiry.

In *Palimpsest* the archive is not passive storage; it is not simply a repository of artifacts. Here, the archive becomes a verb. It becomes active. In both digital and analog forms, the archive re-enters the system through process and in doing so it produces relational knowledge between plates and layers. The Oxford English Dictionary partially defines a palimpsest as “...a multilayered record” (definition 2.b.). The relational knowledge of this project is that multilayered record. *Palimpsest* expands what can count as design knowledge by treating process, archive, and material accumulation as epistemological structures. Process became the evidence of design knowledge. *Palimpsest* is anti-teleological in nature and resists closure. While lowercase-d design primarily places value in a polished deliverable, the ouroboric nature of *Palimpsest* places value in the process of recursive making.

Conclusion

Palimpsest remains ongoing. Its value is not in final resolution; rather, it lies in showing that process itself becomes the site of knowing. Here, recursive making under fixed conditions produces divergence, accumulation, and relational knowledge. It does not ask what design becomes when process reaches resolution; it asks what becomes knowable when process is allowed to remain active. Across each iteration, through each inquiry, the system did not move toward resolution, toward closure, and certainly not toward perfection. It generated divergence, altered returns, active archival behavior, and literally created new forms that were not present at the outset.

The system did not simply preserve knowledge; it generated new knowledge. Each iteration became a palimpsest remembering material accumulation. Taken together, those 27—and now 28—individual archives, each existing in both analog and digital form, comprise the project’s total active archive. In other words, repeated inquiries into recursive making under fixed conditions did not produce consistency; they produced knowledge through the behavior of the system over time.

This project changes what process is allowed to mean. If iteration, in lowercase-d design, is assumed to lead toward refinement, then anything that does not become cleaner, clearer, or more resolved can be dismissed as failure, noise, or wasted labor. *Palimpsest* argues otherwise. This inquiry-based process shows that divergence, accumulation, instability, residue, and altered return can also be knowledge-bearing. In other words, process itself—the act of recursive making—becomes an epistemology. Inquiry-based process gives designers, researchers, and educators another way to understand what happens when work does not behave linearly. It makes room for inquiry instead of only solution, accumulation instead of only progression, embodied process instead of detached output, and reflection on what emerges rather than only control over what is intended.

More specifically, it matters because many people are trained to believe that if a process does not move cleanly toward a finished product, then it has failed. *Palimpsest* offers a rigorous counterexample to that ontology. This leaves me with this central question: what happens when we allow inquiry-driven process, rather than resolution, to be the site of knowing?

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that Grammarly, an AI-assisted writing software, was used in proofreading and refining the language used in the manuscript. The usage was limited to correcting grammatical and spelling errors and rephrasing statements for accuracy and clarity. The author further declares that, apart from Grammarly, no other AI or AI-assisted technologies have been used to generate content in writing the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from careful and systematic conduct of the research.

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