

The book remembers  
everything.  
The work of erica van horn

*Exhibition Note*

The following essay describes work featured in the exhibition “The Book Remembers Everything: The Work of Erica Van Horn,” on view at the Beinecke Library from January 13 to March 27, 2010 and in an online exhibition: <http://beinecke.library.yale.edu/exhibitions/vanhorn>. Both exhibitions highlight the Beinecke Library’s outstanding collection of Erica Van Horn’s work, representing aspects of the artist’s development over more than thirty years, calling special attention to several themes: the artist’s frequent exploration of the details of her life, the objects around her, the routines of her days, and her most familiar relationships; her long fascination with the ways language both describes and creates community, even as it determines individual identity and shapes personal memory; Van Horn’s interest in the essential elements of narrative forms and structures, in both word and image; and the artist’s frequent use and re-use of saved or salvaged materials as the raw materials of her work, documenting her creative process and making both beauty and meaning from fragments and remainders. All quotations of Erica Van Horn in “The Book Remembers Everything” are from her books or from personal correspondence with exhibition curator Nancy Kuhl. Erica Van Horn’s books and all text and image therein are protected by copyright and are used here with the artist’s permission; Van Horn’s permission is required to reprint or use this work in any way. To contact the artist, visit Coracle ([www.coracle.ie/pages/contact.html](http://www.coracle.ie/pages/contact.html)).

*An Introduction to the Work of Erica Van Horn*

In the work of American artist and writer Erica Van Horn, books collect, absorb, make use of, and transform remnants and remainders. From fragments and pieces, what is left behind and what might otherwise be forgotten, Van Horn makes



[Illuminated Books #18: *Demon Tumbling Down Stairs*], [Paris: s.n.], 1988

Van Horn calls these painted books “a bit of play with the term Illuminated Book”; this spine-painting is, also, an inversion of the rare and beautiful book art of fore-edge painting, in which landscapes and narrative scenes are painted on the edges of an splayed open book’s pages. The artist struck upon this unusual format as “a way for people who have no wall space to have a painting, and for people who don’t read to have books.” To make her Illuminated Books, the artist purchased inexpensive books at a used bookstore in Paris, until the booksellers discovered what she was doing with them—wiring them together and rendering them unreadable—and refused to sell her any more.

meaning in beautiful and unexpected ways. “I use the portability of the printed sheet, mostly in book form,” Van Horn writes, “to construct a narrative around the incidental parts of my life.” During a career that has spanned more than thirty years, the artist’s body of work has included prints and works on paper, elaborately illustrated unique books, and printed and editioned works in a wide variety of formats. Born in Concord, New Hampshire, Van Horn studied at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She now lives in rural Tipperary, Ireland, where she is the publisher, with Simon Cutts, of Coracle, a small press producing creative and critical works of various kinds in small editions.

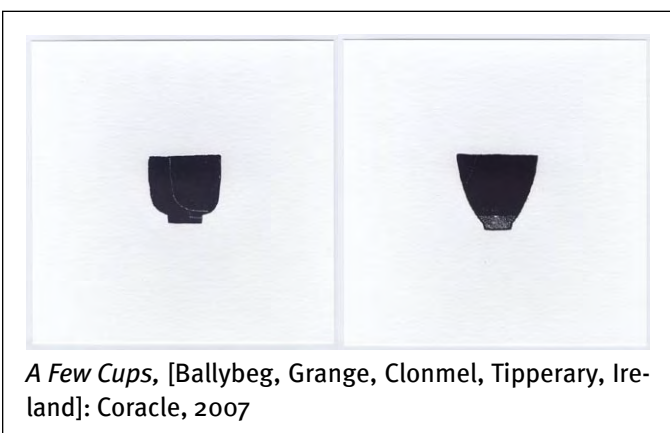
Throughout her career as an artist, Van Horn has woven together her methods and preoccupations into a common fabric of artistic practice and subject. Her interest in exploring the daily aspects of her life through her art, for instance, is informed and determined by her frequent use and reuse of ordinary and cast-off materials as the raw materials of her work. In remembering and making beautiful mundane aspects of life, Van Horn celebrates the significant but often unnoticed habits and customs of family and friendship, the exquisite qualities of home, the work of making art. Her attention to the “everyday” is also an act of recording that which is most important to her; Van Horn creates work that serves as an aid to memory and as a hedge against the inevitable passing of one day to the next. In this way, Van Horn’s work is a kind of talisman against the eventual end of a ritual, a place, a relationship, a person.

Regularly drawing the subject of her work directly from the details of her domestic and artistic work, the simple household objects at hand, the day-to-day aspects of familiar relationships, Van Horn locates the aesthetic qualities of the most immediate world around her, and, by extension, around her audience. In *Rusted* (2004), for example, Van Horn unites a series of simple drawings, described in the book’s brief text: “six small iron articles of unknown use found & drawn.” Describing the work in greater detail elsewhere, the artist has written: “Over the last ten years, I have found these metal implements: sprockets, chisels, cotter

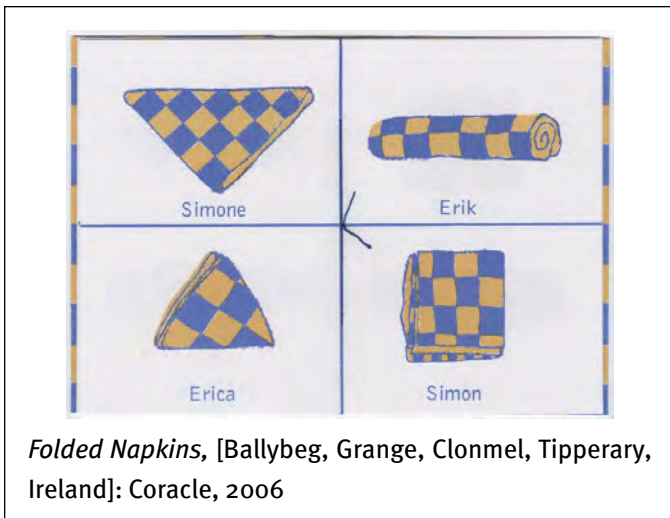


*Stiles & the Pennine Way*, Docking, Norfolk, England: Coracle, 1993

An unusual daily travel journal, *Stiles & the Pennine Way*, records an eleven-day-long walking trip in England; seven days of the trip were spent walking the Pennine Way, a trail ranging across the Pennine Mountains. To keep from getting bored and as a way to distract herself from the steady rain, Van Horn kept track of the stiles she passed through or over along the walk by making hash marks on the sleeve of her raincoat with a waterproof pen. “I was very tidy about my little group of tally marks,” Van Horn writes of her second day on the trail, “and found myself admiring my sleeve a lot through the afternoon, especially since it was raining hard and I had to keep my head down.” Though the book includes Van Horn’s prose narrative about her trip, her drawing of her sleeves interrupts the text in its center; in this way, Van Horn suggests that the marks and the practice of making them are at least as important as the straightforward description of the journey.



*A Few Cups*, [Ballybeg, Grange, Clonmel, Tipperary, Ireland]: Coracle, 2007



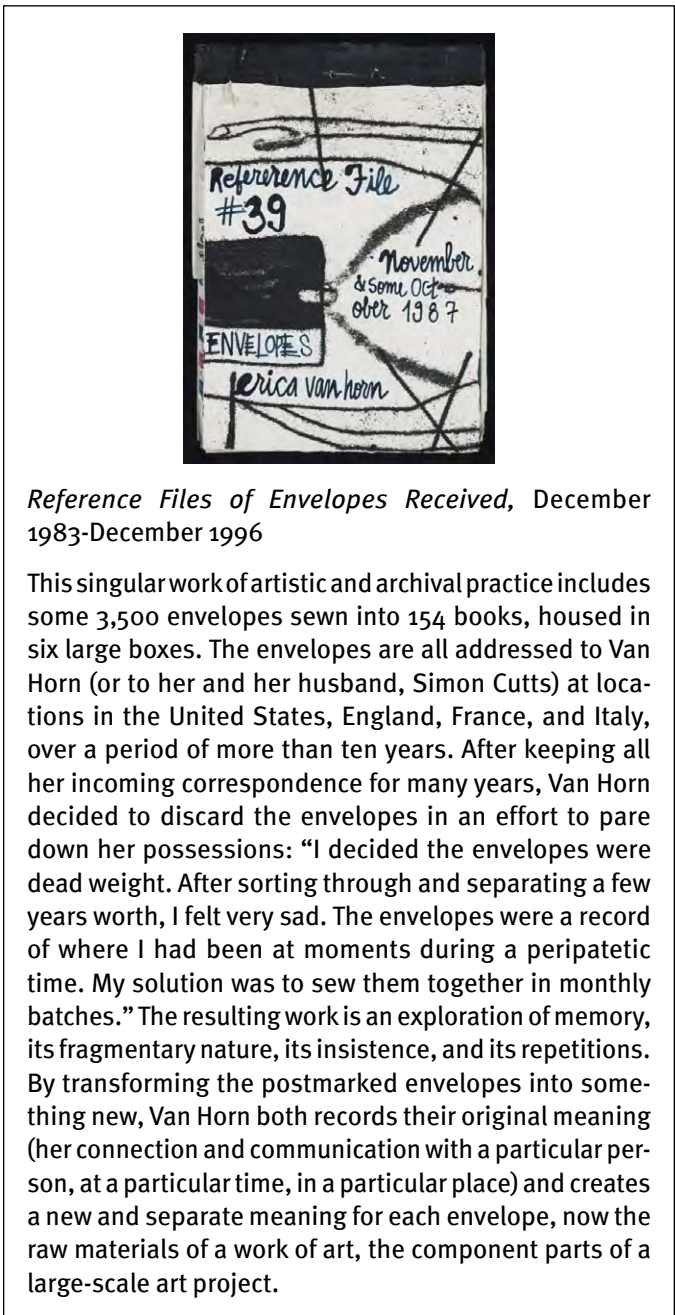
pins, mostly things for which I don't have names. They appear regularly in the soil of this former farm in Tipperary. Each metal piece was a part of something, a solution to a specific problem. That is all I know. I draw them in this simple silhouette form so that I will not forget them." *Rusted* elevates these unassuming articles, recording them as reminders of the quotidian practices of daily work but also as forms and objects of beauty and interest.

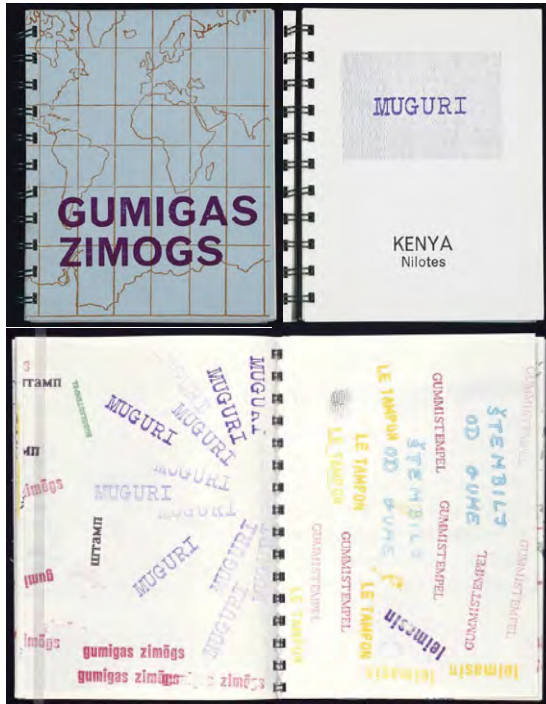
Van Horn's fascination with the aesthetic value to be found in the simple forms of objects she encounters in her daily life and her ability to focus careful attention on even the most familiar of objects is

also evident in *A Few Cups* (2007). In deep Prussian blue ink, Van Horn's nine prints depict the shapes and surfaces of simple kitchen cups; the work is a study in repetition and variation, and the pleasure of locating subtle differences in similar objects. In moving such things into the world of fine art, Van Horn insists on the value of simple objects and honors and commemorates daily customs.

Another recent book, *Folded Napkins* (2006), documents a collection of drawings Van Horn made over time with a specific purpose in mind: "When we have guests staying for a few days," the artist writes, "I ask them to fold their napkins in a particular way so that they will remember which one is theirs. Sometimes they remember and sometimes they forget, so I often make a drawing." If the book provides a whimsical record of visitors, it also obliquely highlights the importance Van Horn places on breaking bread with friends. Furthermore, in documenting this tradition, the artist considers behavior and tradition reflected in the personalization of social traditions.

Tied closely to Van Horn's interest in everyday objects and rituals is her frequent reuse of materials left over from other projects or salvaged from her daily life. Of this distinctive feature of her artistic practice, Van Horn has written: "I have a long habit of not wasting anything.... "[I have made] a great many books from the detritus of my own





*Gumigas Zimogs: A World Guide to Rubber Stamps*, London: Coracle, [1996]

*Remnant Book of Practice Pages for Gumigas Zimogs*, [London: Coracle, 1996]

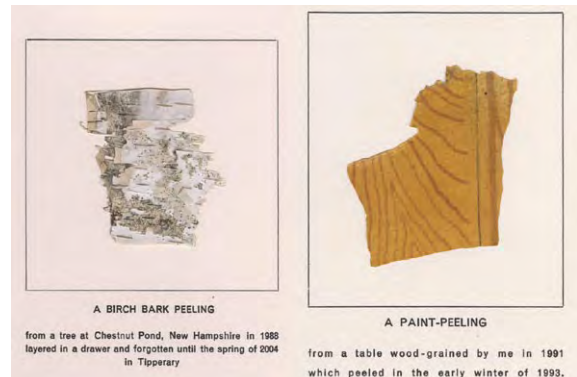
Van Horn’s “world guide to rubber stamps” includes the words “rubber stamp” individually stamped in numerous languages, representing countries around the world. The book, an obvious celebration of this utilitarian printing technology, functions as an album exhibiting a collection of a kind. That Van Horn’s interest in assembling collections of similar things extends to words, demonstrates her interest in language as an art-making material. The companion remnant book records and celebrates Van Horn’s artistic process.

work process. For me, they retain all of the excitement and the imperative quality of the act of making.” An example of the artist’s practice of reusing the test sheets created as byproducts of making a book can be found in *Remnant Book of Practice Pages for Gumigas Zimogs*. A unique book, *Remnant Book* is made entirely from practice pages for Van Horn’s *Gumigas Zimogs: A World Guide to Rubber Stamps*, a hand-stamped album celebrating this simple printing method. In part this derivative book serves to document Van Horn’s practice: “[The book] evolved from not wanting an integral part of the book process to be lost,” Van Horn writes. “After rubber stamping into 300 books, the practice pages stayed important as they reminded me of the point when the stamp colour and pressure was just right.” In addition to recording Van Horn’s creative process, this spin-off book is visually compelling in its own right, asserting Van Horn’s gift for creating and recognizing aesthetically appealing visual patterns in unusual configurations and repetitions of print, color, and shape.

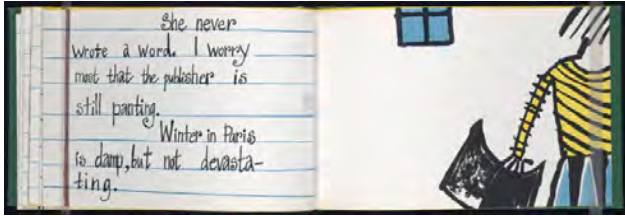
In addition to documenting the creative effort involved in making her books, Van Horn’s practice of reusing and repurposing saved and salvaged fragments reveals the ways such fragments make meaning. Histories and narratives can be embedded in ephemeral bits and pieces; scraps can carry substantial information. *Two Peelings: 1993 & 2004* (2004), a modest pair of folded cards, illustrates

Van Horn’s gift for locating complicated worlds of information in small remnants or fragments.

In this case, the “Two Peelings” contain the shadows of stories that cross time and space. The brief information on each card suggests absent narratives about the times of Van Horn’s initial interaction with these materials, when they were whole, and her later rediscovery and reuse of them as incomplete peelings to be incorporated into her work. The brief text further locates the peelings by tying them to the artist’s three primary homes—New Hampshire, where she grew up, and Docking,



*Two Peelings: 1993 & 2004*, Ballybeg, Grange, Clonmel, Tipperary, Ireland: Coracle, 2004



Erica Van Horn & Some One Else, *Scraps of an Aborted Collaboration*, Docking [Norfolk, England]: Coracle, 1994

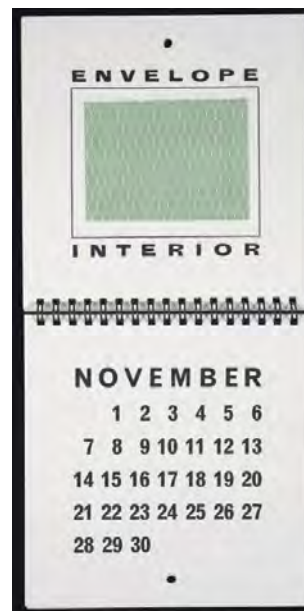
In this short, image-rich narrative, Van Horn relates the story of a failed collaborative project. She uses illustrations she made for a proposed children's book, appearing here as details and pieces, alongside a comic tale about her collaborator's failure to produce a promised text to accompany them. Van Horn mimics the lined pages of a school notebook and handwrites the text, establishing an atmosphere not unlike a children's book, creating a lively tension with the story's biting wit.

the envelope." In focusing careful attention on this most invisible example of visual pattern and image, Van Horn reveals the irony of her statement even as she transforms the envelope interior's function. As what she calls "emblems of materiality and tactility" in an increasingly electronic world of information, Van Horn finds the continued use of content-obscuring envelopes "a cause of much surprise and wonder." The works in Van Horn's "World of Interiors" transform a mundane and daily material into fine art. The value Van Horn places on both the simple visual patterns and the very paper on which they are printed calls attention to the role of beauty in a world of disposable products and objects; by exposing the interiors of printed envelopes and repurposing them in works of art and books, Van Horn upsets our expectations about her seemingly ordinary materials and about fine art, printing, and books.

Van Horn makes an art not just of the envelope interiors she collects, but also of the activities of collecting and organizing them; the very process of making is part of Van Horn's artwork. Her *Envelope Interior Reference File*, (2007), exemplifies this aspect of the "World of Interior" projects; after

England, and Tipperary, Ireland, two places she's lived for much of her adult life.

Perhaps the most substantial example of Van Horn's practice of reusing ordinary, found materials in her work might be called, to borrow a title from one of the works in the series, her "World of Interiors." For more than fifteen years Erica Van Horn has collected, considered, cataloged, and displayed paper envelope interiors, creating a large-scale, ongoing art project that includes bookworks, collages and works on paper, public installations, and paper ephemera. "The only function of an envelope interior," Van Horn tells us, "is to hide the contents of



*Envelope Interior Pin-Up Calendar*, [Clonmel, Ireland]: Coracle, 1999

For a period of years, Van Horn made small-run editions of monthly calendars, each of which was hand assembled including twelve unique pieces of envelope interior papers. The calendars present a kind of self-referential turn in Van Horn's envelope interiors projects: the project as a whole celebrates commonplace materials and employs them to make art objects; using these materials to decorate hand-assembled, letterpress printed calendars highlights the "everyday" quality of the papers and the value of art in our daily lives. Additionally, Van Horn is also playing on the more traditional "pin up" calendar, featuring photographs of women. "I thought to use the same term but to display something that I thought was interesting and at least as varied as women's bodies," Van Horn writes. "My pin-ups were labour intensive—lots of letterpress printing and pasting in the interiors obsessively one at a time. Every single 12 month grouping was different, while the world of naked lady pin-ups is all about shiny paper and airbrushing and achieving a safe sameness to the commodity being displayed."



Erica Van Horn & Harry Gilonis, *Envelope Interior Art History*, [London]: Coracle, 1997

In this witty envelope interior album, Van Horn and her collaborator Harry Gilonis see the work of various important artists in a collection of repeated visual patterns; represented artists include abstract and conceptual artists, such as Jasper Johns and Sol LeWitt, alongside more classical artists, such as Gustave Caillebotte, whose famous painting *Paris Street, Rainy Day* (1877) is represented by a pattern depicting two figures walking under an umbrella.

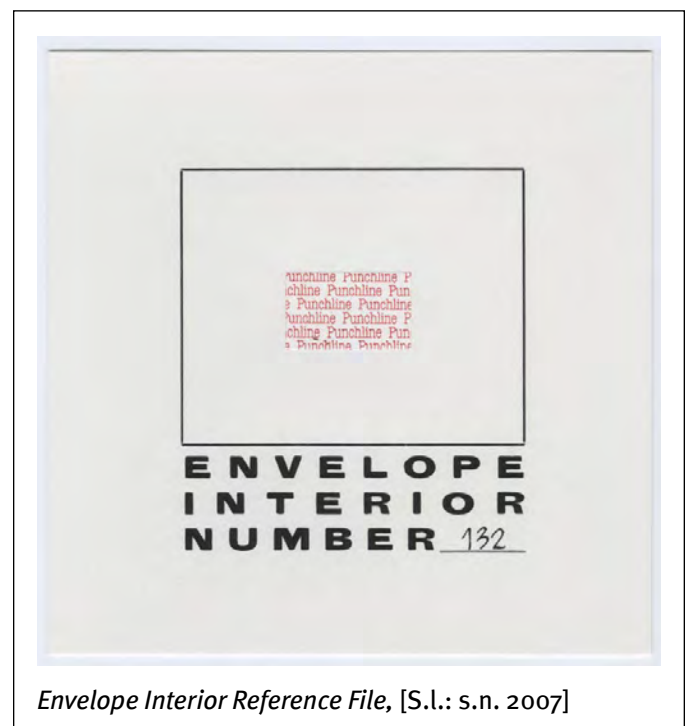
more than a decade of collecting and making art with the patterned interiors of commercially printed envelopes, Van Horn created a carefully organized index of her collection, including more than 500 letterpress-printed file cards, each bearing a scrap of envelope interior paper.

The cards are arranged by category, including headings such as “Red Words,” “Very Small Patterns,” “Airmail,” “Triangles,” and “Big,” each of which Van Horn has written on various section markers, thus allowing her own handwriting to become part of the pattern-scape of the file. “The building of the file index box announces the end of trying to keep track of the seemingly endless variations [of envelope interiors],” Van Horn has said of the *Envelope Interior Reference File*; “finding the descriptive headings to categorize various forms of zig-zags, and subtle differences has made me a bit crazy.... The box is covered with a blue buckram to approximate the colour most often used in the actual interiors.”

Describing her inspiration for a book gathering together various envelope interior pieces (after the

idea of collecting such samples was suggested to her by her friend, artist David Bellingham) Van Horn writes, “I felt that such a scrapbook belonged as much in the world of train spotting and stamp collecting as in the world of art.” By comparing her project to hobbies such as stamp collecting, Van Horn reminds us that collecting can also be an art form, one that values daily practice, a careful eye, a completist sensibility. One resulting book, *Envelope Interiors*, (1996), suggests that even the most commonplace kind of collection might be imagined as a kind of art project. This volume is one in an edition of only nine copies, each hand assembled over time as Van Horn acquired the requisite number of envelope interiors. Describing the edition Van Horn writes, “9 books . . . may take me awhile to finish because I will be filling the spaces as I find the envelopes. I will stay inside the lines.”

The artist’s deep interest in visual patterns extends well beyond her work with envelop interiors. In her



*Envelope Interior Reference File*, [S.l.: s.n. 2007]



*Yellow Woodgrained Table*, [Paris: s.n., 1986]

The very exaggerated wood-grained surface of the table in this work makes the table's surface as significant as the objects it holds, creating a curious still life in which the focal point of the painting seems to shift from foreground to background and back. Remarking on the format, Van Horn calls this work "a folding painting, a kind of non-religious version of a retable." The accordion format makes this work a text-less book, a visual tabletop sequence of images unfolding panel by panel.

book works, Van Horn often explores the elements of visual pattern and narrative, considering the ways those elements might be exploited and subverted within the linear structure of the book. In an entirely modern reinterpretation of the heavy use of visual texture found in the borders and backgrounds of much Medieval art, Van Horn uses the recurrence of lively repetitive designs to frame and shape scenes and figures and to underscore what might be thought of as plot points in her visual narratives.

With little or no text, Van Horn suggests lively, dramatic, and compelling stories. *Black Dog White Bark* (1986) clearly illustrates Van Horn's interest in experimenting with the most pared down elements of narrative. A unique hand-painted book, the images, bearing the title as the book's only text, was later produced in a printed edition, which described the work as a collaboration: "text by Louis Asekoff; drawings by Erica Van Horn." The work, Van Horn has written, "evolved from a conversation with the poet Louis Asekoff. What I refer

to as his story was nothing more than the four words which stayed with me after the talking."

In Van Horn's work every day patterns like the number and grid of the calendar or the irregular loops and swirls of cursive handwriting are infused with narrative significance. In 1989, for instance, Van Horn creates what is on its surface a kind of calendar recording her travels in 1989; the varied representations of days in the calendar portion of the book correspond with the dates in the index, which indicate where Van Horn was on all the days of the year. The visual patterns of the book, both the calendar pages and the dates and location index, are immediately recognizable, and so at first glance, the broad narrative of the book seems obvious. Following the index, however, Van Horn includes a kind of ratio: 365 / 231. The index and calendar do not reveal the nature of the 231 days, complicating what seems like a straightforward story. In this case, Van Horn uses visual patterning both to



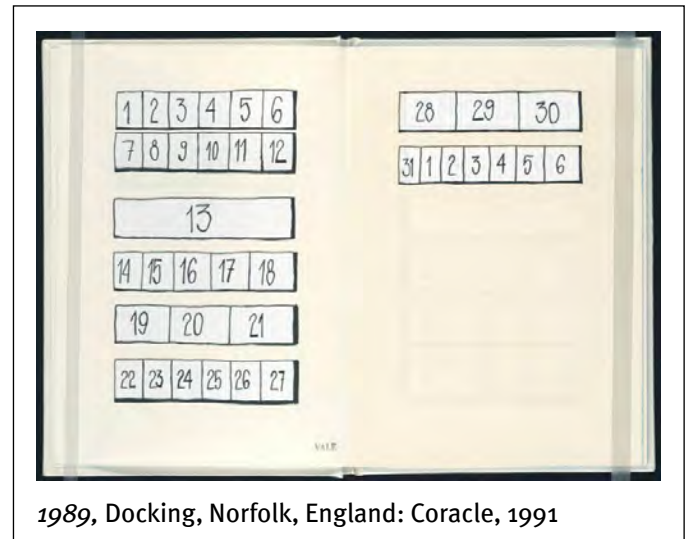
*Black Dog White Bark*, [United States?: s.n.], 1986

reveal and to conceal; a basic narrative is visible but a private narrative is hidden in plain sight. Van Horn underscores the personal and semi-private nature of this calendar-diary by using her own handwriting for both the calendar-drawings and the book's text.

Her frequent use of the accordion or concertina book format, which looks and functions like a book but can also be unfolded to reveal a many-paneled panorama, provides her narratives with a page-by-page pace while also calling to mind the scope and grandeur of panoramic images. In the tradition of 19th-century panoramic paintings, Van Horn often uses the form to depict landscapes, narrative scenes, or combinations of the two; in this way, these works can be viewed as idiosyncratic visual maps of key sites in the artist's life.

*La Ville Aux Dames*, for example, is Erica Van Horn's "fictional plan for a real city"; the artist writes: "La Ville aux Dames is an actual town in the Loire, not far from Tours. When I first visited, I anticipated beautiful Streets all named after famous women in French history. Instead, I found an antiseptic new town, with very little beauty to celebrate these women." Van Horn's reimagining of the City of Women includes the streets she anticipated, incorporating female forms and abstract representations of buildings and other features of the town.

A similarly lively and rich visual narrative, *Odyssey, Paris, 1982*, documents Van Horn's first trip to Paris, recording the artist's steps through the city (one sees her purple boots—garments which appear in several books of this period). The book is both a personal map and an illustrated memoir. The artist uses an accordion format to highlight the continual unfolding of her story. About the heavy use of patterning in this book, Van Horn writes "My first trip to Paris was a mission to explore and spend time with Medieval art. I wanted to learn about another way of making pictures. I had not expected to be so excited by the city itself. I tried to apply the world I was studying to the world in which I was living."







*Odyssey, Paris 1982, [France: s.n. 1982]*

A creative tension is present between Van Horn’s deep interest in visual narrative and her ongoing fascination with language as a practical and physical matter worthy of sustained exploration. She considers the textual qualities of identity, society, and memory in contrast and comparison to their imagistic counterparts. Van Horn’s work often explores language and its power to shape thought, experience, community, and memory; this exploration is, in fact, a key unifying theme in her work, crossing time, format, and material.

Exploring the relationship between language and place, the artist has considered “foreign” language and the site-specific “local” language of particular communities. While her focus is often on meaning, Van Horn never loses sight of the visual qualities of language and the ways in which handwriting and printing can inform our reading of both public and private documents, from books to signs to letters.

The tension that can exist in language between public and private experience is evident in several of Van Horn’s collaborations with the poet and publisher, Simon Cutts. When the artist and writer married in 1989, for example, they created an ephemeral work, *No Confetti or Rice, on the Steps or Inside* (1989), in celebration of their wedding. Reprinting a notice posted outside an English registry office, the document demonstrates the artists’ marked awareness of the words that are always around us, and the significant role such “background” communication can play in shaping experience. In this case, public address in the form of a prohibition becomes a private celebratory announcement, transforming both the form and meaning of the message.

In *Sans Signaux* (1990), another example of the repurposing of public language, Van Horn and Cutts collect “found” signs to create a kind of travel diary, recording quirky and unusual messages from shop windows in England, France, and Belgium. These simple announcements provide a clear sense of the character of the sign’s (often anonymous) maker and its setting. Removed from their usual contexts—and the book’s title indicates, perhaps, that the artists took each from its original location—these signs also highlight the inevitable idio-



Simon Cutts and Erica Van Horn, *Sans Signaux*, London: Coracle, 1990

IN ITALY ONE IS  
ONLY ALLOWED  
ELEVEN WORDS  
PER POST CARD

*Italian Lessons (Number 11)* [Docking, Norfolk, England:  
Coracle, 1992]

syncretisms found in words, phrases, and meanings that are specific to a particular place.

Living for extended periods in France and Italy, Van Horn has explored the languages of these places in text and image, narrative and abstraction, exposing much about their culture, landscape, and character. The *Italian Lessons* series for example—which includes works in a wide variety of printed formats, from small books to postcards to a commercially printed eraser—explores the process of language learning, the experience of living in a foreign country, and the relationship of lexicon to place. In addition

to using a variety of formats and materials, Van Horn's series of lessons makes use of narrative, humor, nostalgia, image, and rhetoric to demonstrate a small fraction of the ways one encounters and experiences a foreign language. The *Lessons* also serve to document something of Van Horn's time spent in Italy; they record not only the artist's attempts to learn a new language but also something of her daily experiences.

Works Van Horn made while living in France often employ French words as key visual and narrative elements. While this is evident in her concertina format books, *Odyssey* and *La Ville aux Dames*, which map the (real or imagined) landscape of French cities using place and street names as significant design features, Van Horn's *Je Ne Parle Pas Francaise* (Paris, 1983), or "I do not speak French," plays in a very different way with the relationship between image and text.

Part book part board game, *Je Ne Parle Pas Francaise* "illustrates" various verbs with simple drawings that layer Van Horn's personal associations with words atop their standard meaning. Her particular choice of verbs—which includes activities, as in "to eat" and "to drink," verbs focusing on the visual, such as "to see" and "to look at," and others describing more emotional states, like "to be afraid" and "to amuse"—suggests a kind of narrative of the artist's experience of the time and place of the work's creation. The artist's intentional or accidental misspelling of the word "française" calls attention to her difficulty learning a new language. As a group, the works in which Van Horn employs foreign vocabularies also interrogate the ways language marks one as a foreigner, an outsider in a linguistically defined community.



*Je Ne Parle pas Francaise*, [Paris?: s.n.], 1983

As a long-term resident first of England and now of Ireland, counties whose residents share Van Horn's native tongue, she is no less interested in the sometimes subtle and sometimes obvious

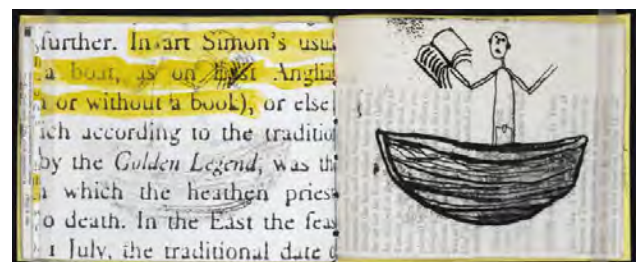
differences she finds in varieties of English. Van Horn explores language as a window into the life of a place and its inhabitants; in colloquialisms and regional usage, Van Horn identifies subtle truths about the ways language both describes and creates community. At the same time, the artist recognizes the deeply personal qualities of language and the significant part it plays in determining identity and experience, in making and understanding memory. A kind of companion to the *Italian Lessons* series, the *Living Locally* series (2001-2009) celebrates the landscape, culture, and community of Van Horn's adopted home in rural Tipperary, Ireland. Collecting, documenting, and illustrating the regional language of the area, she both acknowledges her position as a kind of outsider (a "blow in," in the local slang, referring to "anyone who moves here from somewhere else") and locates herself firmly within the community. The *Living Locally* series also calls attention to Van Horn's sheer love of the curious and quirky turns she finds in English, the aurally pleasing sound combinations, the paradoxically conflicting meanings from one locale to another, and the language's endless flexibility and transformability.



*Living Locally (Number 10)*, Ballybeg, Grange, Clonmel, Tipperary, Ireland: Coracle, 2007

In *Small Houses*, one work in the series, Van Horn honors another artist, a friend and neighbor who works in an unconventional artistic medium: a retired builder, Tom Browne makes miniature versions of the houses of friends and family. Browne's work is itself a kind of portraiture, a fact Van Horn recognizes and acknowledges by putting a picture of Browne's replica of her own house on the cover, essentially making the book a sly double portrait. In addition to celebrating Browne's houses, Van Horn's narrative in *Small Houses* reveals ways in which a maker's sensibility extends to Browne's quotidian chores and daily life in rural Tipperary. *Small Houses* is also a portrait of a place, a community and landscape as viewed through the work of one member and recorded and described by another.

This is just one example of Van Horn's engagement with what might be thought of as a kind of portraiture, the creation of imagistic and textual likenesses of both people and places. In depicting important individuals and locations in her life, Van Horn often uses a kind of visual metonymy to represent a person indirectly in the figures of closely related objects or words, reducing the idea of portrait to its most basic elements; her unique



*Simon (1st century), Apostle: Called either the Canaanite or the Zealot*, [Docking, Norfolk, England], 1989



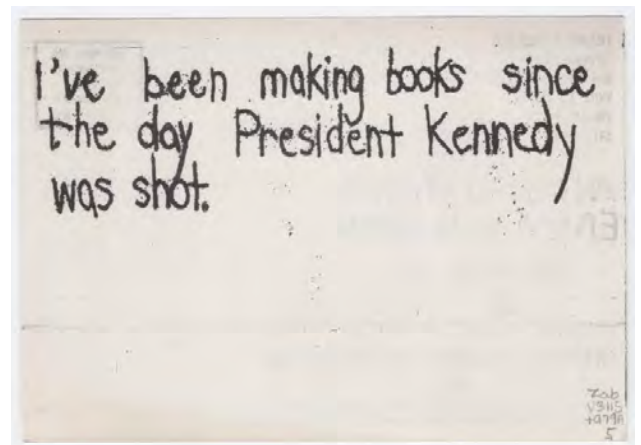
*Seven Lady Saintes*, Rosendale, NY: Women's Studio Workshop, 1985

and frequent-collaborator, fellow artist Simon Cutts. Together Van Horn and Cutts run Coracle, a literary and art press which takes its name from a kind of small boat very like those depicted in Van Horn's drawings.

In representations of historic or cultural figures, Van Horn reminds us of the artist's ability to re-narrate and revise well-known stories, layering her own impressions or criticisms ovetop of the traditional texts; in *Seven Lady Saintes*, (1985), Van Horn's reimagining of the lives of virgin martyrs from the calendar of Catholic saints employs simple visual representations (which are also richly decorated and colored, in the tradition of much Medieval hagiographic art) and short texts to reduce the stories of these saints to the barest of elements, in much the way traditional depictions of Catholic saints use the saints' "attributes," associated objects, to represent the events of their lives. In her narratives of the saints' lives, which reveal the sometimes inconsistent and unlikely elements of such stories, Van Horn calls attention to a tension between portraiture and biography, and between the real and the imagined elements of

any historical biography. The artist also adds her own interpretation of the stories and of the very act of venerating martyrs by celebrating the brutality of their tortures and deaths

In various self-portraits, the artist explores the relationship between image and identity, the visual nature of memory, and the perpetual human need to re-imagine the self. In one example, *An Installation by Erica Van Horn: 11 Nov-20 Dec 1986*, (a post-card announcement for an exhibition) Van Horn begins to tell the story of her life as an artist. The



"An installation by Erica Van Horn: 11 Nov-20 Dec 1986," [New York: s.n., 1986]



*I am Trying to Exorcise the Demons from My Life, No. 2*, 1984, [Paris: s.n.], 1984

single sentence refers to the first books Van Horn made as a child: in the wake of John F. Kennedy's assassination, Van Horn began making books as a way to understand and process the traumatic and confusing events of the day. In this story of the artist's beginning, it is easy to recognize many of the distinctive and important practices and themes that define her oeuvre; for Van Horn, book making has been and remains a practice by which one can reflect on, work through, record, narrate, and honor complex experiences, feeling states, and relationships. That the text is written in Van Horn's own handwriting reflects both the artist's investment in the imagistic qualities of language and text and her acute awareness of the way handwriting, as a distinct and individual marker, can act as a visual representation of its writer.

*I am Trying to Exorcise the Demons from My Life, No. 2, 1984*, is a self-portrait of the artist by way of her "demons." Van Horn made several versions of this book, which she refers to as an "oft-repeated attempt to clear my life of negative habits and fears (ie. smoking, drinking, poor health, anxieties, etc.) which impede forward movement." *I am Trying to Exorcise the Demons from My Life* is one of numerous examples where Van Horn works over an idea again and again, trying to resolve questions of both form and content. In her practice of repetition and return, Van Horn reveals that many of the subjects she engages in her work are inexhaustible, irresolvable, and thus endlessly fascinating and ripe for continued artistic exploration. The books bearing this title, Van Horn tells us, "served to distract me, but I don't think any demons were exorcised."

A third self portrait project exemplifies other common features of Van Horn's work: *On Fruit & Vegetable Bags, 31 Portraits, Self & Projected: One a Day, May 1986*, demonstrates both Van Horn's interest in documenting her daily life and her practice of repurposing things around her as the raw materi-



*On Fruit & Vegetable Bags, 31 Portraits, Self & Projected: One a Day, May 1986*, [Paris?: s.n.], 1986

als of her work. This book is the result of Van Horn's habit, for 31 days, of making self-portraits. By drawing her own portrait—"self and projected"—each day, Van Horn documents the unglamorous daily work of the artist, while also exploring her own image, day by day and into an as-yet-undescribed future. Thus, Van Horn creates an unfolding visual autobiographical narrative, creating a record of her own evolving sense of herself. Of her choice of materials for this book, Van Horn writes "I loved the small paper bags given out in the greengrocers. This was a way to use them without having the bags be the focus. The bags were the everyday." In this way Van Horn reveals her interest in reclamation, reworking, and repurposing the things of daily life, including in this case the artist's own self image.

Erica Van Horn's work insists that the book is to be valued as a record—of an event, a landscape, a thought process, a creative vision, a fantasy or obsession, or the most quotidian practices and activities—even if the book revises or re-imagines that which it documents. Incorporating both a fascination with the materiality of language and an investigation of both simple images and complex visual narratives, the artist documents the struggle to understand the varied and shifting relationship between images and text, and the ways we use both to make sense of the world and our experience. Her sustained investigation of commonplace subjects and materials encourages her audience to consider the role of art in everyday life; Van Horn's work refuses to accept a basic separation between high art and the most daily and domestic of concerns. Drawing these varied concerns together through the intimacy and specificity of her subjects—her familial relationships, the domestic landscape, the daily practice of making art, the language used to describe these—Van Horn asks her audience to consider the art of the everyday and the universal value of the simplest and most complex kinds of beauty. In Erica Van Horn's work, books remember everything—they discover, explore, and sometimes enact their specific content, but each also tells the story of its making, its reason for being, and its creator's process.

—Nancy Kuhl

Curator of Poetry, Yale Collection of American Literature



*Eighty-Nine Women Drawn in a Book: 10 February 1987—1 February 1988, [New York: s.n. 1988]*

Within a found financial ledger book (several pages of which contain figures and calculations) Van Horn blends drawing, painting, and collaged pages from magazines to create eighty-nine images of women. Reusing found materials in combination with her own drawing allows the artist to revise and re-imagine commercially produced depictions of women: a woman in a photographic advertisement, for instance, might be transformed into a portrait of Saint Lucy, who happens to be the patron saint of salesmen.