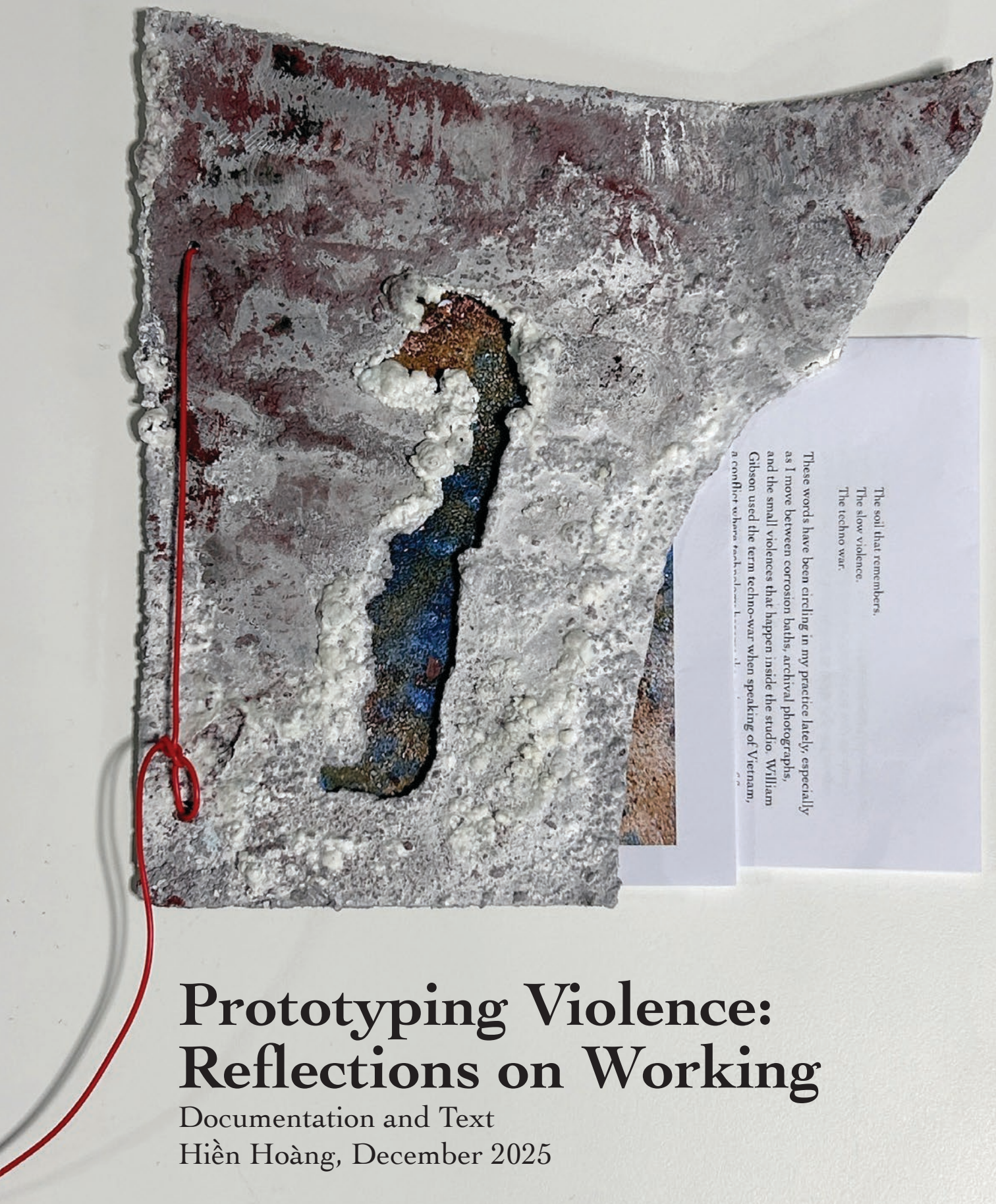
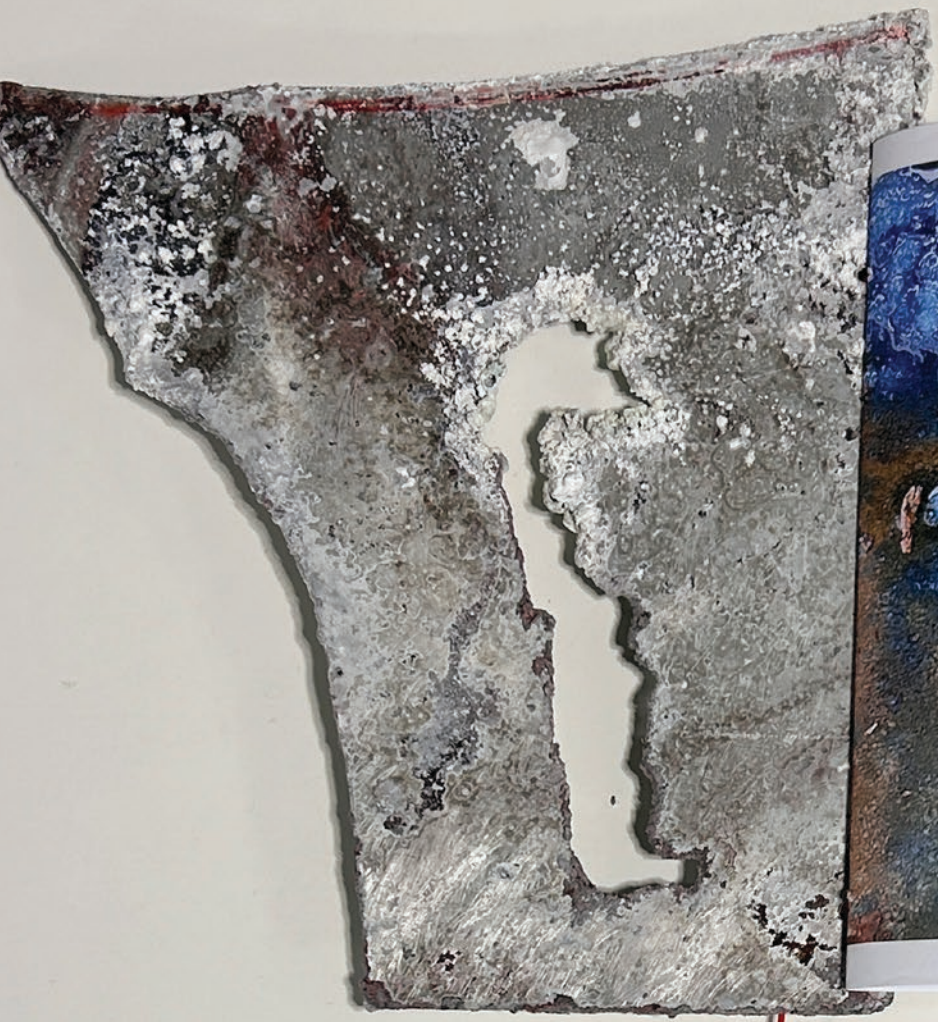


Prototyping Violence: Reflections on Working

Documentation and Text

Hiền Hoàng, December 2025

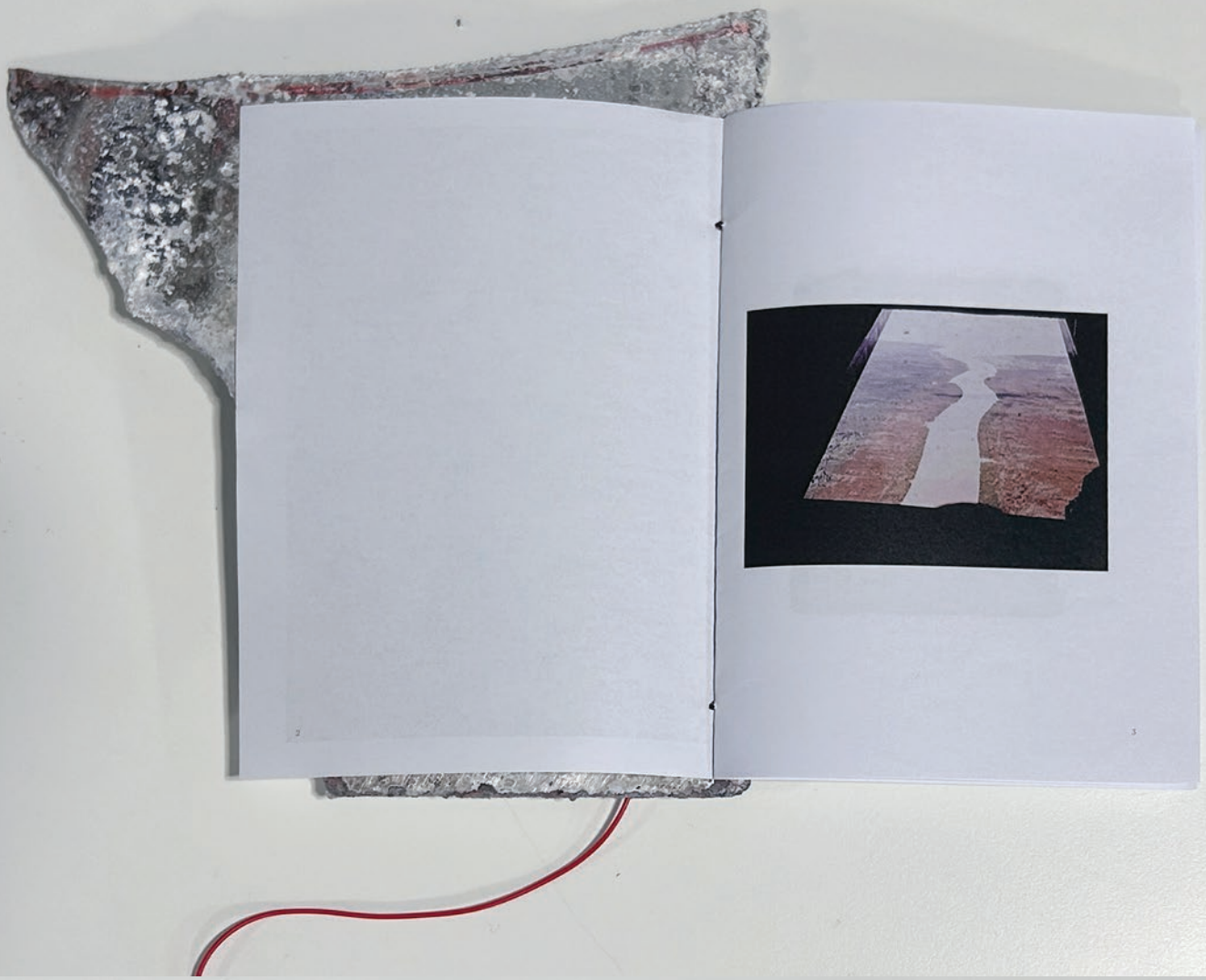


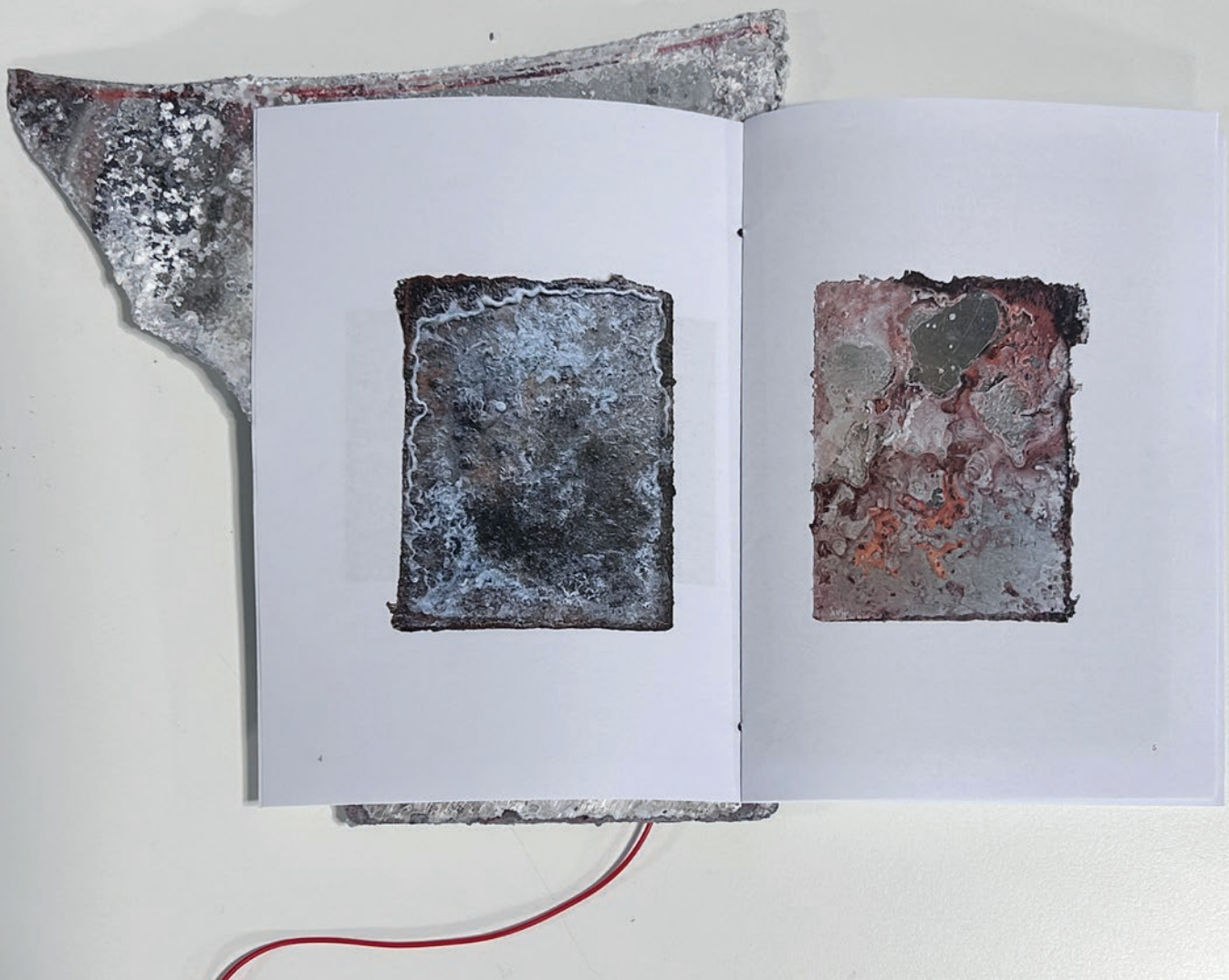
The soil that remembers.
The slow violence.
The techno war.

These words have been circling in my practice lately, especially as I move between corrosion baths, archival photographs, and the small violences that happen inside the studio. William Gibson used the term techno-war when speaking of Vietnam, a conflict where technology became the main executor of force. Hannah Arendt also wrote about this shift, about how violence and power drift apart once machines take over the task that once required a human hand. I think about this when I look at the image of Ca Mau after the first Agent Orange spraying in 1962, or the nuclear complex in Fordow after the recent missile strike. One is a split-second wound. The other seeps. Rob Nixon calls that seepage slow violence. He says its damage hides because it unfolds beyond the scale of our senses.

> "... chemical and radiological slow violence is driven inward, somatized into cellular dramas of mutation, into unobserved special effects... Maintaining a media focus on slow violence poses acute challenges, not only because it is spectacle-deficient, but also because the fallout's impact may stretch beyond the horizon of imaginable time." (Rob Nixon, 2011, p. 47)

This slowness has shaped the way I handle material. When I place aluminium scraps into a bath of copper sulfate and water, the reaction begins but refuses to rush. These scraps come from the metal workshop's bin. Their edges are uneven, bent, already carrying previous histories. I flip them when I remember. Sometimes I listen to the bath to hear how the air touches the





"... metal as the exemplar of a **vital materiality**; it is metal that best reveals this quivering effervescence; it is metal, bursting with a life, that gives rises to 'the prodigious idea of **Nonorganic Life**.'"

Jane Bennett (2010, p. 56)

Prototyping Violence: Reflections on Working

Notes in 2025

Hiền Hoàng

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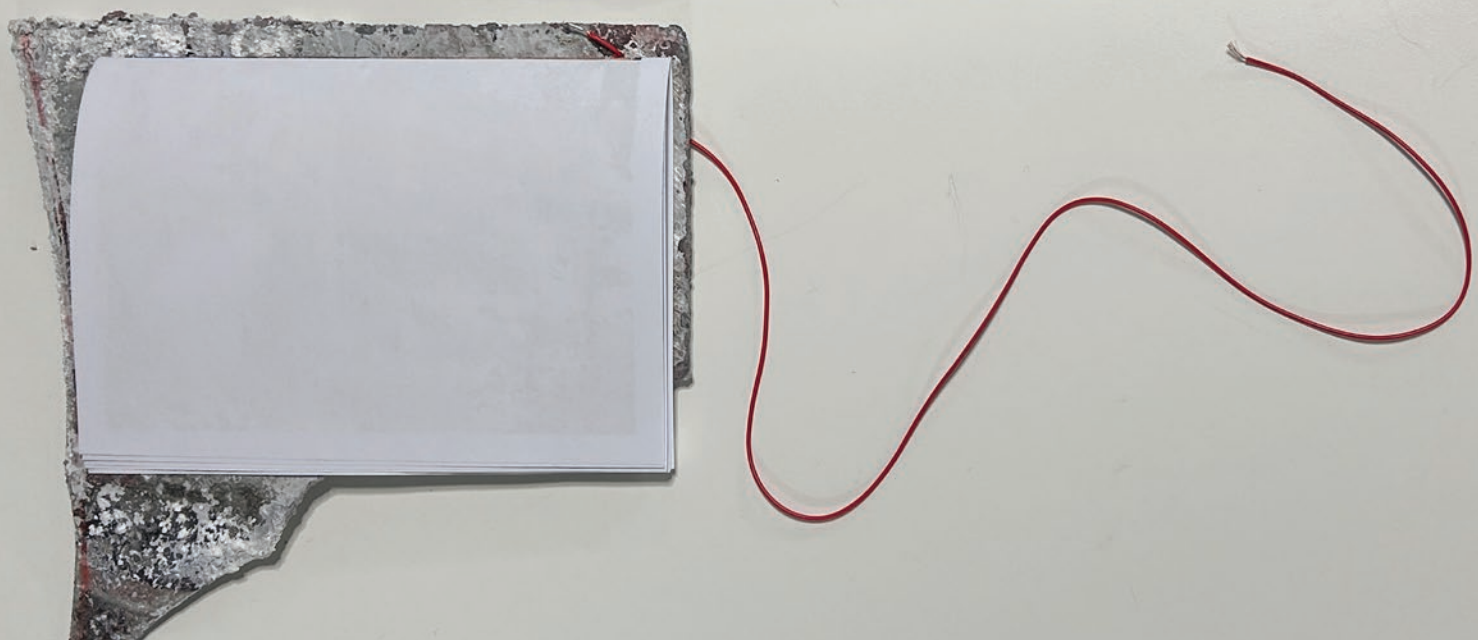
This slowness has shaped the way I handle material. When I place aluminium scraps into a bath of copper sulfate and water, the reaction begins but refuses to rush. These scraps come from the metal workshop's bin. Their edges are uneven, bent, already carrying previous histories. I flip them, wait. I remember. Sometimes I listen to the bath to hear how the air touches the



is instrumental, but it is care, nonetheless. It makes me wonder if violence in the studio remains incomplete, because it is always followed by a sustaining gesture, by the desire to keep the material alive for longer.

This contrasts sharply with the violence in the world. The Agent Orange mist did not come with a gesture of care afterwards. The war did not return to tend to the landscapes it destroyed. The violence ended in abandonment, in the long ache of slow decay. My question now is whether violence becomes violence in its fullest sense only at the moment when care stops. If the continuation of care interrupts the totality of violence, what does it mean that my practice keeps the material close, keeps returning to it, keeps allowing it to transform?

This leads me back to Hannah Arendt. She wrote that violence is a means, a tool, but it can never be power. Power is born from people acting together. It comes from relation, from trust, from the fragile fabric that binds individuals into a collective. Power requires forms of care. It requires empathy. It requires listening. Violence, on the other hand, appears precisely when power is absent, when the bond between people breaks.

So I begin to see a constellation forming. In the studio, violence and care are not opposites. They touch each other. They lean into each other. The corrosion, the bending, the pressure – they all come with gestures that hold the material together, that keep it from collapsing. But in the world, when violence breaks the relation, when empathy dissolves, when no one stays to witness or tend to the wound, violence becomes something else entirely. It becomes absolute.

Maybe this is why I return again and again to these materials. I am looking for the moment where violence transforms into care, or where care prevents violence from becoming complete. Where a body, even a corroded one, is not abandoned. And where holding it, even if only materially, becomes a fragile form of power.

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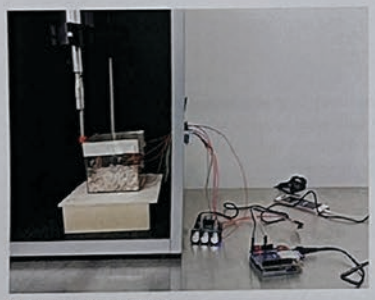

Experiment of measuring Mycelium's reaction to a modified memory: the extraction of electric signals was successful, but not of CO_2 value, which is hard to understand for the moment. But I accept it and keep moving ahead, while framing the artistic approach as a more important factore to the correctness of scientific consideration.

The corrosion bath:
I collected different types and shapes of scrap aluminium plates and placed them together in this bath. Beneath them, i layered archival photographs of post Agent Orange landscapes in Vietnam, along with images of pistons spraying dimin during Operation Ranch Hand.

Image References

Page 3
Image from A. Young, The History, Use, Disposition and Environmental Fate of Agent Orange, published in 2009.
Source: A. Young, 2009.

Page 11
Corrosion residue applied onto an archival photograph.
Original image: Aerial photograph showing the effects of Agent Orange. The land on the left has not been sprayed, while the land on the right has been sprayed. Vietnam, circa 1961–1971.
Collection: Admiral Elmo R. Zumwalt, Jr. Collection. Agent Orange Subject Files, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University.
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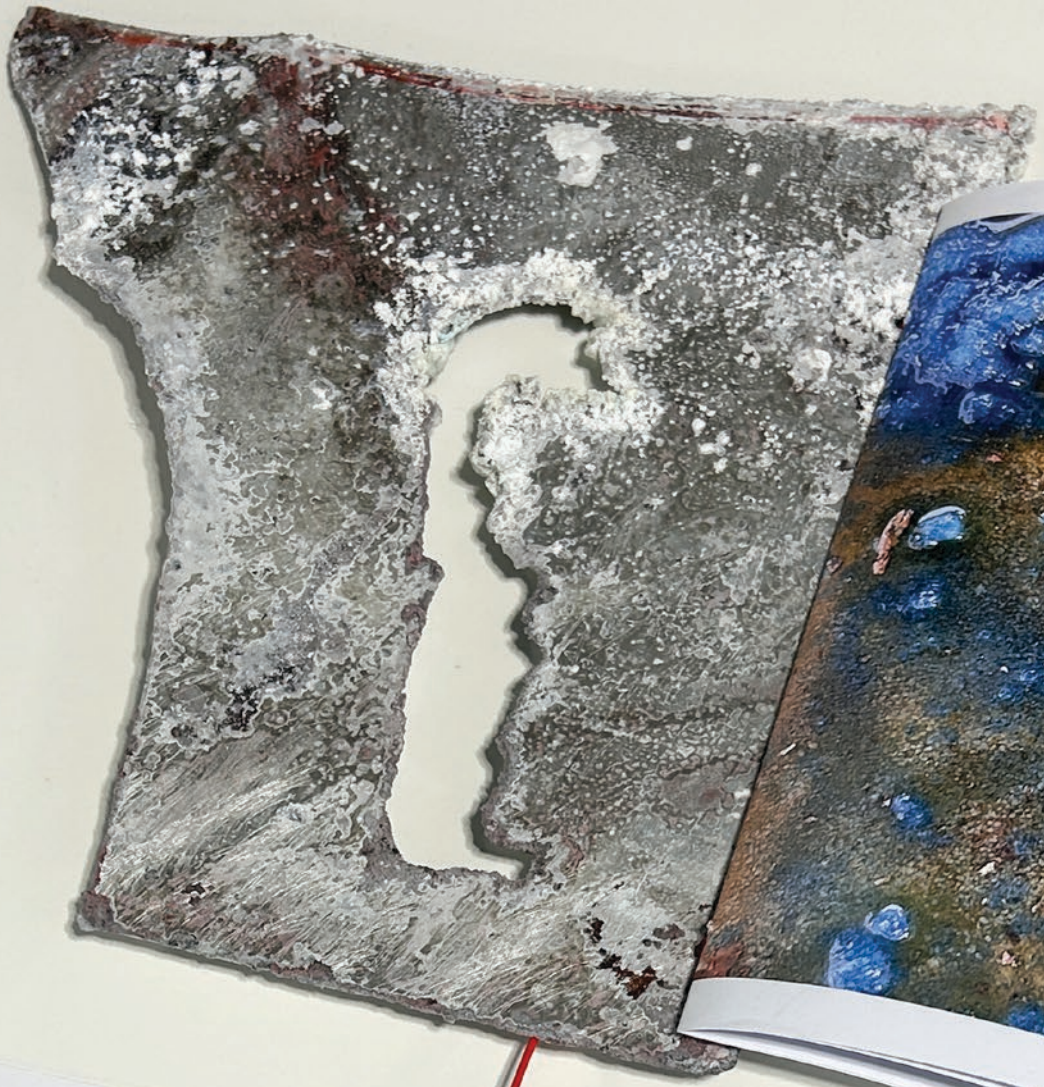
Detail from a painting depicting a gardener.
Exhibited at the Garden Museum, London, 2025.
Source: Garden Museum, London, exhibition 2025.



Prototyping Violence: Reflections on Working

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This slowness has shaped the way I handle material. When I place aluminum scraps into a bath of copper sulfate and water, the reaction begins but refuses to rush. These scraps come from the metal workshop's bin. Their edges are uneven, bent, already carrying previous histories. Sometimes I listen to the bath to hear how the air touches the chemicals. Without sanding the surface,

the corrosion advances in its own rhythm, slow, but steady. White bubbles form, flakes lift like scabs, and the metal becomes stiff. When I try to bend it, it threatens to break. It feels like a survival response, a body holding itself together after impact.

I placed archival photographs under these plates: the plane spraying the chemical mist, the dead mangrove plain, two women standing in a field stripped of life, the soldiers bathing in contaminated water. After days in the bath, the images came out marked with rust and residue. The chemicals wrote themselves into the archive. Cathy Caruth's writing on trauma speaks to this. She writes that trauma is experienced only through its delay, through its inability to be fully felt when it happens. The corrosion on the photographs feels like that latency made visible, as if the past insists on showing itself through stains and ruptures.

> "The historical power of the trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all." (Cathy Caruth, 1991, p. 187)

This question of how material absorbs harm also makes me think of Berlinde De Bruyckere, whose wax bodies hover between pain, tenderness, and a kind of wounded grace. She once said she finds physical horror almost comical, but that mental horror is much harder to look at. Her sculptures carry that mental horror in the slowness of their suffering. They resist spectacle, even as they expose the rawness of the body. She warns that media images of pain are often drained of meaning through repetition, turned into icons that anesthetize our sensitivity. Her sculptures reclaim that sensitivity by giving matter the time to remember. This resonates with what happens when corrosion inscribes itself into aluminum

or into an archival photograph. The mark does not try to shock. It sinks in slowly.

Jane Bennett's reading of metal as vibrant matter makes me see these plates differently. She speaks of metal as a site of non-organic life, full of energy and change. Watching aluminum corrode feels like witnessing something metabolize harm. And then, when I photograph the surfaces, the camera amplifies everything. Through the lens the metal looks alive, almost breathing. I realized that the mediation is part of the transformation. Technology does not only record, but also shapes what we think life and damage look like.

At the same time, I am working with mycelium. To make it grow strong, we raise the CO_2 level and convince it that it will die, pressuring the organism to hold on to life. Once it reaches the density we want, we kill it with heat. Hardship produces structure, but not for the sake of the organism. The violence is followed by care only because we benefit from the outcome. This tension mirrors the gardener's tools I saw in the Garden Museum. Tools for nurturing are also tools for cutting and pruning. Every gesture of care contains a gesture of control. Every gesture of control holds a potential for harm.

And then, in the middle of these experiments, I realized something that sits at the core of my methods. In the lab or in the studio, violence does not end with abandonment. It is followed by tending. I check the corrosion bath. I stir the solution. I touch the plates carefully because I want them to survive the next stage. The bodies are preserved not out of benevolence but because the experiment needs them. The care is instrumental, but it is care, nonetheless. It makes me wonder if violence in the studio remains

incomplete, because it is always followed by a sustaining gesture, by the desire to keep the material alive for longer.

This observation contrasts sharply with the violence in the world. The Agent Orange mist did not come with a gesture of care afterwards. The war did not return to tend to the landscapes it destroyed. The violence ended in abandonment, in the long acheof slow decay. My question now is whether violence becomes violence in its fullest sense only at the moment when care stops. If the continuation of care interrupts the totality of violence, what does it mean that my practice keeps the material close, keeps returning to it, keeps allowing it to transform?

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In that sense, I begin to see a constellation forming. In the studio, violence and care are not opposites. They touch and lean into each other. The corrosion, the bending, and the pressure come with gestures that hold the material together and keep it from collapsing. But in the world, when violence breaks the relation, when empathy dissolves, when no one stays to witness or tend to the wound, violence becomes something else entirely. It becomes the absolute.

Maybe this is why I return again and again to these materials, as if they are calling me, asking for my presence, my attention,

asking me to stay with them as a companion. I am looking for the moment where violence transforms into care, or where care prevents violence from becoming complete. Where a body, even a corroded one, is not abandoned. And where holding it, even if only materially, becomes a fragile form of power.

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