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Metonymies

Four works by Julie Ault and Janette Laverrière

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Abstract

This thesis asks how textual form and physical form relate in writing about art and design. In four essays about works by the American artist Julie Ault and the Swiss interior designer Janette Laverrière, the project explores how writing may be capable of enacting a theory of form's transposition between writing and objects.

Each chapter addresses a single work by Ault or Laverrière by taking up a formal part or aspect of the given work—curve, refraction, fold, supplement—as its method and form. This approach, termed 'metonymic writing' in this thesis, explores how formal aspects might act as values—transubstantiating powers, per Simone Weil—that precipitate form's sliding across texts and objects.

Metonymic writing in this thesis proposes how and also where writing can meet art and design and supposes a constitutive stake for writing in material practices, and vice versa. This experiment is interwoven with original research into Ault and Laverrière, two influential practitioners for whom form presents via affinities, histories, relationships, and narratives. Informed by Ault's and Laverrière's respective methods, the thesis approaches writing and research as inherently interdisciplinary and relational, prone to both incompleteness and spilling over.

The project's scope of reference draws Ault's and Laverrière's bodies of work together with bodies of thought on the basis of metonymic resonance or contiguity. The method of citation and reference changes according to the subject of each chapter, at the level of criteria for relevance and in the way the source is incorporated into the text — footnote, quotation, and so on. Citation becomes a key way for writing to show its in-formed nature. The scope of reference includes texts from poetry, philosophy and literature, as well as theoretical, scientific and art historical writing that employs literary or poetic form.

Taken as both a creative and critical proposition, this thesis makes new claims for writing's potential to presence or figure art and design objects in terms other than representational proximity or distance. Writing form's sliding is also writing's sliding, an experiment in form and practice as well as a methodological contribution to art and design research.

‘An introduction’

This writing began with a desire to understand association: what does it mean to see *a* and think of *b*—and with *b*, *h* and *t*, *c* and *y*; and how is it that these thoughts, images, sensations of relation seem to occur spontaneously and without hierarchy, the most obvious and the most oblique equally apparent, seemingly generated by the same operation at the same time? Why does this constellation seem to shore up the original subject rather than dissolve it into extraneousness? And what about all this produces a leveling sense of self as one element in the mix and a subject alongside the initial subject, *a*, as if placed together on a table, rather than a sense of self as backgrounded and omniscient, a centre that sees?

It happened with art and design objects for me. A detail or quality would become the projective site of constellations that seemed to say something about the work in relational terms—about the work and the world, the work and I. I wondered what following a given work’s associative unfolding could say about the work and writing. I wanted to know if writing could do as well as describe this unfolding, differently for different works each time.

Eileen Myles has a phrase in their poem ‘My Box’ where they talk about lifting fear like a bonnet to “kiss your living face”.¹ I wanted time, work, shape, story, fear, feeling, the living face, expressed in formal relationships between the physical and the textual. I wanted to see if, or how, the sometimes intuitive, sometimes presumptive, sometimes arbitrary nature of working associatively could deliver the original subject shored up, expanded, made weird and primary, as if a shimmering value already present had multiplied, become prismatic.

I wanted to see if research was love. “Whether or not it is worth it it occurs. Whether or not it is to be believed it is”,² Ariana Reines writes. What substance this hunch had as a research project was the adventure of the work that follows.

I knew I loved Julie Ault’s work, and Janette Laverrière’s. Ault is a contemporary American artist, curator and writer. Laverrière was a Swiss interior designer active in France from the late 1930s until her death in 2011. I encountered them in my work of writing about art and design for magazines and searched often for new writing about them—there was so little—until it was clear I had to do my own.

¹ Eileen Myles, ‘My Box’, *Ploughshares*, 38:1 (2012), 114-116 (p. 114).

² Ariana Reines, ‘[Love]’, *Mercury* (2011), *Poetry Foundation*
<<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/55574/love-56d2374e5c442>> Accessed 12-09-2020

Ault makes objects (infrequently), exhibitions, books, archives—what she calls “spatial and temporal configurations of interconnected events, activities, and associations of ideas nested in cultural circumstances”³—in which history is a material and a method, a subject and a form. Laverrière’s political and social life of practice spanned almost a century, embodying her interest in narrative—her own story as she told it, and those of her influences—as form. Janette’s halo: a personal alphabet of objects and symbols.

From certain angles, one tended toward the other, even as their contexts and approaches didn’t rhyme or stack: Ault’s critical and curatorial work addressed questions of spatial hierarchy and display; Laverrière’s equidistance was politics and sculpture. But the point they always seemed to return to was form. Form as methodological and modal, an “immense activity”,⁴ “never at a loss to create any matter, any substance whatsoever of which it stands in need”.⁵ Form as formula⁶ and model,⁷ form as “active”,⁸ in-formation.

Their work felt personal to me, to my writing, by which I think I mean resonant. To place them together was critically and creatively interesting:⁹ to work across these practices that have ostensibly nothing to do with one another but are each invested in their own inexhaustible associative logics and in form as where that logic shows up. More and more I was wanting my writing to do more and more to formally relate to the subject at hand. And here were these two divergent practitioners who had never otherwise appeared together, whose work seemed to come to form as an axis of reference, politics, sociality, aesthetics and chance.

Ault’s and Laverrière’s are not works that get worked with. There are a few who consistently engage with them, always with a kind of devotional—which is not to say uncritical—

³ Julie Ault, *In Part: Writings by Julie Ault* (New York: Dancing Foxes Press, 2017), p. 40.

⁴ Henri Focillon, *The Life of Forms in Art*, trans. Charles B. Hogan and George Kubler (Brooklyn: Zone Books, 1992), p. 38.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 94

⁶ Vilém Flusser, *The Shape of Things: a Philosophy of Design*, trans. Anthony Mathews (London: Reaktion Books, 1999), p. 25.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁸ Keller Easterling, *Extrastatecraft: the Power of Infrastructure Space* (London: Verso, 2014), p. 148.

⁹ Sianne Ngai’s ‘Merely Interesting’ (2008) addresses the history of criticism’s investment in the aesthetically “interesting”, an affective uncertainty, and therefore in elaborating the relationship between criticism and aesthetics.

attention. Nairy Baghramian integrates Laverrière's objects in her sculptures and exhibitions with a frequency and intimacy that reflects their deep connection while Laverrière was alive. Marvin Taylor, the Director of Fales Library and Special Collections, where Ault instituted the Group Material archive, is one of the only people to have written about Ault more than once, often in collaboration with¹⁰ or proximity to her in some way.

But proximity is also a kind of limit, over which a greater presence for Ault's and Laverrière's work relative to their contemporary influence has not been established. There are no books about Ault that she has not written¹¹ or organized¹² herself, although Triple Canopy produced a booklet for a benefit in Ault's honour in 2016,¹³ featuring short texts about her by 35 contributors and a biography by Alejandro Cesarco. There is one monograph on Laverrière from 2001 by the design historian Yves Badetz,¹⁴ one canonical interview by Vivian Sky Rehberg¹⁵ and another, untranslated into English, by Laurence Mauderli,¹⁶ as well as handful of robust catalogue essays stewarded by Laverrière's former gallerist, Michel Zeigler, and a few magazine articles, but no subsequent extended writing.

It is too easy, I think, to say that Laverrière's lack of affiliation with a canonical male designer of her era is the reason her work has not found a place in the zeitgeist for mid-twentieth-century female designers like Eileen Gray and Charlotte Perriand. Or that Ault's shifting status as an artist–writer–curator and her sometimes ephemeral, sometimes historiographic methods make the forms of her practice too indistinct to be seen as primary. There is something resistant—contained, resolved—about Ault's and Laverrière's work even as their worlds of reference, context and value are surplus.

¹⁰ Julie Ault and Marvin J. Taylor, *Active Recollection: Marvin Taylor in Conversation with Julie Ault* [exhibition handout] (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2014).

¹¹ Ault, 2017.

¹² Julie Ault, Martin Beck and Richard Birkett (eds.), *Tell It To My Heart: Collected by Julie Ault, Volume 2* (Berlin: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2016).

¹³ Alexander Provan (ed.), *A Benefit for Triple Canopy Honoring Julie Ault* [Benefit program] (New York: Triple Canopy, 2016) <https://tc3-production.s3.amazonaws.com/upload/5850354d8a5f3d000400002a/2016_benefit-program.pdf> Accessed 15-10-2018.

¹⁴ Yves Badetz, *Janette Laverrière* (Paris: Norma Editions, 2001).

¹⁵ Vivian Sky Rehberg, 'Use & Value', *Frieze* (12 March 2009) <<https://frieze.com/article/use-value>> Accessed 17-12-2018.

¹⁶ Laurence Mauderli, 'Pariser Geschmack an der Waadtländer Riviera: ein Interview mit der Innenarchitektin und Designerin Janette Laverrière', trans. Miranda Siegel [unpublished text] *Kunst + Architektur in der Schweiz*, 56:4 (2005), 26-31.

So I went from there. Ault describes display as carrying “the potential to make meaning, to encourage or discourage specific experiences, to confer value, and to create and focus desire”.¹⁷ I started looking for related ways to work with Ault’s and Laverrière’s work that didn’t begin with proximity, nothing to do with close reading, nothing to do with closeness at all. These seemed to weight subjectivity too heavily, and I wanted something slipperier: to pay attention, including lapses, breakthroughs and misdirections, to what is passed back and forth, distributed, or resonant between these works and my writing—to attune writing to what is allowed or enriched because the work is being itself and I am, as Simone White writes, “being interested”.¹⁸

This mode or texture of working comes up in contemporary critical writing like White’s that takes its formal cues from poetry and reads the material world as writing’s material and ethical conditions. In Fred Moten’s work it’s “more + less... more + less... Something getting ready to get made and unmade out of nothing up in here”.¹⁹ In Bhanu Kapil’s it’s turning towards “the dormant yet demonstrative materials: there”, even if, “in reality, the apparatus was not accessible; the wire cages kept getting caught”.²⁰ “I can’t fix what materiality is,” Lisa Robertson writes. “I enter a relational contract with whatever material, accepting its fluency and swerve. I happen to be the one reading”.²¹ Bewilderment, Fanny Howe’s non-method,²² is all over my writing in too many places to count.

And so, so much not-explicitly-critical writing models an attention to material specificity that is less about knowing than about receptivity, being informed. Georges Perec in Paris, of course. Sri Aurobindo’s *Savitri*. Clarice Lispector’s liquid address: “When I paint I respect the material I use, I respect its primordial fate. So when I write you I respect the syllables”.²³ Donald Barthelme in ‘The Balloon’ with Donald Antrim reading, and Antrim again on

¹⁷ Julie Ault, ‘The Subject is Exhibition’, in *Wolfgang Tillmans* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), pp. 119-137 (p. 120).

¹⁸ Simone White, ‘Statement. New American Poets: Simone White’ *Poetry Society of America* (2013) <<https://poetrysociety.org/features/new-american-poets/simone-white-selected-by-anna-moschovakis>> Accessed 16-09-2019.

¹⁹ Fred Moten, *Black and Blur (consent not to be a single being)* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), pp. 168-169.

²⁰ Bhanu Kapil, *Ban en Banlieue* (New York: Nightboat Books, 2015), p. 11.

²¹ Lisa Robertson, *Nilling: Prose Essays on Noise, Pornography, The Codex, Melancholy, Lucretius, Folds, Cities, and Related Aporias* (Toronto: Bookhug Press, 2012), p. 15

²² Fanny Howe, ‘Bewilderment’, *HOW2*, 1:1 (1999) <https://www.asu.edu/piperwcwcenter/how2journal/archive/online_archive/v1_1_1999/index.html> Accessed 02-11-2019.

²³ Clarice Lispector, *Agua Viva*, trans. Stefan Tobler (New York: New Directions Books, 2012), p. 48.

listening to music: “I wasn’t wired. I was wire”.²⁴ Gaston Bachelard in his transcendent narrativity. Patricia Highsmith’s constructive bad mood.

And poets: Bernadette Mayer’s quotidian rhythms.²⁵ Mei-mei Berssenbrugge on dresses²⁶ and stars.²⁷ George Oppen, “Which is the world—”,²⁸ and Leslie Scalapino: “This is a mirage, though”.²⁹ Erica Hunt’s time pieces.³⁰ John Ashbery, Wallace Stevens, Frank O’Hara. Édouard Glissant, miraculous thinker of convergence that “publishes itself in the guide of the commonplace”.³¹ Wayne Koestenbaum’s librettos. Nathaniel Mackey’s recursion and extension, reaching round and reaching back.³² Kay Gabriel, Ariana Reines and Rachel Rabbit White in the warm blue light of the present.

If my genealogy is a little sporadic or weird, it anticipates the scope of reference in the work that follows. How I cut together and include sources in my writing also relates to the emerging fields of critical poetics and citational poetics,³³ coined by AM Ringwalt, in which a source’s relevance can be its rhythm, style, context, or other implicit aspects. Sources in these fields are coextensive. Resonance on multiple levels became my primary criterion for reference. Using parts or pieces of other writing in my sentences became a rhythmic habit.

Citation happens differently: sources appear in formal relationship to a given work — other writing than my own reflects on, relates to and elaborates the given work of art and design — and enact formal relationship to that work as forms of writing in that their criteria for relevance or resonance is in-formed by, shifts and changes according to, the form of the subject of the chapter. A chapter about a mirrored doorframe invites refractive footnotes; a

²⁴ Donald Antrim, ‘How Music Can Bring Relief During These Anxious Times’, *The New Yorker* (13 April 2020) <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/04/13/music-will-be-important>> Accessed 15-04-2020

²⁵ Bernadette Mayer, *Works & Days* (New York: New Directions, 2016).

²⁶ Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, ‘A Placebo’, *Hello, the Roses* (2013), *Poetry Foundation* <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/58185/a-placebo>> Accessed 02-05-2021.

²⁷ Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, *A Treatise on Stars* (New York: New Directions, 2020).

²⁸ George Oppen, ‘Of Being Numerous’, in *New Collected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 2008), pp. 163-188 (p.179).

²⁹ Leslie Scalapino, *O and Other Poems* (Berkeley, CA: Sand Dollar, 1976), p. 7.

³⁰ Erica Hunt, *Jump the Clock: New and Selected Poems* (New York: Nightboat Books, 2020).

³¹ Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing. (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2010), p. 45.

³² Nathaniel Mackey, in Will Alexander and Nathaniel Mackey ‘Will Alexander + Nathaniel Mackey: Vocarium Reading Series’ [Online talk], *Woodberry Poetry Room* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 7 October 2021).

³³ A.M. Ringwalt, ‘Introduction: Citational Poetics: a Series’, *Action Books* (2020) <<https://actionbooks.org/2020/07/citational-poetics-a-series-introduction-by-am-ringwalt/>> Accessed 14-01-2021.

chapter about a figure that doesn't appear includes sources and references that appear figuratively, as characters or impressions. My use of citation is also an ethics: the proliferation and formal presence of citation, a way of writing showing its capacity to be informed, is also a way of giving over to, as Simone White writes, "the fact of the writing that is there already".³⁴

Citation in my thesis is a mode of thinking, an evolution of unbounded associative thought, and a method of working: it happens differently in each chapter for each work, is a way of drawing the form of those works of art and design into further thought, into writing, such that writing becomes, and shows itself to be, in-formed. Citation acknowledges that something is already going on: "the writing that is there already",³⁵ per White, but also a sliding in writing of form made possible by the appearance of formal relationships between text and object.

A copy of Henry James's *The Figure in the Carpet* on my desk returns me to the ironic goal of writing about art and design in terms of what is not totally or just not transmissible: its physicality. My idea was to see what writing can do to show its relationship with the whole constellation of what is there already, and in so doing open itself, open writing, to the possibility that what carries through in this transference—not to be too psychoanalytic or, conversely, mystical about it—might exceed intention on either side.

I don't want to be overly ambiguous about agency. I chose four works. But also: four works assembled for me as a group of starts. A curved wooden platform and a desk with a folding top by Janette Laverrière, and a mirrored doorframe and one volume of a catalogue by Julie Ault. I had seen all of them in person, excluding the desk, which is in the holdings of the French Mobilier National (National Furniture Archive). I loved the look of them. They had great names—*A Desk for the Ambassador's Wife*, *An Apparition by Liberace*—and idiosyncratic connections to the domestic lives of their makers—the platform was Laverrière's primary sofa, the catalogue contains only photographs of Ault's homes.

I was interested in the slight overburdening of the objects by language and in the unit of the room as a kind of key. Each work was singular but also somehow in excess of itself, in a

³⁴ Simone White, *Dear Angel of Death* (Brooklyn: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2019), p. 109.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

complex or ambivalent relationship with expression but a direct, even transparent relationship with desire.

I wanted these works as metonyms for practices that have relatively resisted being placed in dialogue in the context of exhibitions or art and design discourse despite Ault's and Laverrière's ongoing presence, especially in the contemporary art world. The works also seemed—an interpolation—to want something from writing, like writing's mimetic attention rearranged as contiguity. Each work posed a different formal question: (how) can writing curve, refract, supplement or figure?

Eileen Myles's poem 'My Box' begins:

“in terms of
design one
box is colored
orange

the one you wanted
always is and
sits in the bathroom
of anyone's
house cause
that's what
she wants
it's choosing
that wakes things
up”³⁶

I supposed I could choose where to begin with these works. Part guess, part divination, not to overstate the case: I started writing where each work's specificity surfaced in relation to—Simone White again—“my happening to be there, among all these practices today”.³⁷ For

³⁶ Myles, 2012, p. 114

³⁷ White, 2013.

White, choosing to be there in relation to genealogy and waiting for poetic arrangement is a form of “makeshift will”.³⁸ I likewise wanted to be there with these works, among their associative possibilities, somewhere between waiting and choosing.

Curve, fold, refraction, supplement: I started to think of these formal aspects or qualities as values. Value concentrates where I arrive at a work’s outermostness and indexes the work’s specificity—value is what is capable of standing against dissolution, in my writing, into arbitrariness. Value is a power and a part, inexhaustible and bounded, where what is tangible and what is associative meet. I started to think of value in my writing as a sliding factor.

Working backwards from Paul Valéry, Simone Weil wrote that “since value is nothing but an orientation of the soul, posing a value to oneself and being oriented towards it are one and the same thing”.³⁹ I like how Weil augments Valéry’s idea of “spiritual” or “poetic” value⁴⁰ as subject to market-like mechanics of delivery and receipt, to claim something at once greater and more graspable, a power that orients all of life and is nonetheless “purely and simply accepted”⁴¹ in the act of “reflection”.⁴²

Weil’s value is an intercession of agency and receptivity. It requires a reflecting subject insofar as it manifests when “admitted”⁴³ in the co-constitution of life and thought, but it is still closer to a kind of autopoiesis⁴⁴ than to Valéry’s “imposition” of “spiritual exchange”,⁴⁵ or, more recently, to Isabelle Graw’s “value reflection”, in which a “projecting subject”⁴⁶ is needed for the “epistemological *potential*”⁴⁷ or “subjecthood”⁴⁸ of artworks to present.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Simone Weil, ‘Some Reflections around the Concept of Value: On Valéry’s Claim that Philosophy is Poetry’, trans. Eric O. Springsted, *Philosophical Investigations* 2:37 (2014), 105-112 (p.109).

⁴⁰ Paul Valéry, in David Lloyd, ‘Valéry on Value: The Political Economy of Poetics’, *Representations* 7 (1984), 116-132 (p.117).

⁴¹ Weil, 2014, p. 107

⁴² Ibid., p. 110

⁴³ Ibid., p. 107.

⁴⁴ Mónica J. Sánchez-Flores, ‘Human Language as Trans-Actional Autopoiesis’, in *John Dewey and the Notion of Trans-action: a Sociological Reply on Rethinking Relations and Social Processes* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), pp. 253-283 (p. 269).

⁴⁵ Paul Valéry, in D Lloyd, 1984, p. 117.

⁴⁶ Isabelle Graw, *Three Cases of Value Reflection: Ponge, Whitten, Banksy* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2020), p. 31.

⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 10.

⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 21.

Value in my work is somewhere in the middle. Value is where I wait and what I choose. It is what makes a given work both given over to and discrete from my writing, is the fulcrum for my work and theirs, form and writing, work and I. My concept of value allows that the part of form that indexes the specific life of a given work is also where that work opens to these contiguities. It invests in the paradox of how each work's specific life both antedates and is inflected by, has nothing and something to do with, my choosing in writing a part of the work with which to begin.

Value as access to form and form as a way to write: there's a bridge I'm trying to cross here between value as a formal index and writing as in-formed. The fold of the desk, the curve of the platform, the structure of the doorway, the composition of the book, gave me a place to arrive in relation to the works in writing. These formal parts, starts, also anticipated the way of my writing, what written form each work's associative spinning-out could take, based first on what the work concretely is.

Quoting Jean-Paul Sartre, Isabelle Graw writes that Francis Ponge "aimed to express things 'according to their own instructions' and through their 'enigmatic fullness'".⁴⁹ Patrick Meadows suggests that Ponge produced "analogically formal [duplicates] of [his subjects]"⁵⁰ in which "the structure of his language [...] parallels the structure of the external world as he understands it".⁵¹ These are slightly different. And something I want to be clear about is that my attention to form and formal value is not about revealing or uncovering a boundlessness or infinitude that is other to form. I'm interested in form as both specific and mediative, a way for writing to participate in and be informed by the life of these works that is already inherent.⁵²

⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 22.

⁵⁰ Patrick Meadows, *Francis Ponge and the Nature of Things: From Ancient Atomism to a Modern Poetics* (London: Associated University Press, 1997), p. 114.

⁵¹ Ibid, p. 108.

⁵² I am interested in Anna Kornbluh's (2020) critique of vitalism in contemporary writing as an unproductive rejection of anything approaching causality, hierarchy or finitude, but I don't agree that all contemporary writing invested in fragmentation and formlessness—she particularly singles out Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, and Giorgio Agamben—seeks to obviate form. All three writers are obviously deeply invested in textual form and its causalities. It's strange to me to imagine reading Agamben's *Stanzas* (1993) or Moten and Harney's *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (2013) and missing the fact that the hybrid text or the textual fragment, for example, is a form, as Jean Genet (2003), for one, exemplifies, rather than form's breakdown or rejection. Or that form might be the place where specificity and infinitude coexist other than dialectically, as Karen Barad (2007) and others have shown.

Graw suggests that “one could opt for a type of writing (like Ponge’s) that would be sensitive to the material substance of things”,⁵³ but she doesn’t really *do* it—sensitize her writing to the materiality of her subject, Ponge, or his work—herself. Value’s opportunity in my writing is to attend to physical form in such a way that it informs writing—makes the form of writing do more to communicate and relate to the work at hand.

Writing is Ponge’s object-subject, the thing, or perhaps the—Fred Moten again—stuff⁵⁴ that allows him to create “homologies”,⁵⁵ but I am writing about objects with authors. (That artistic labour shows up at all in artworks is a “fantasy”, Graw writes, that “artworks are nevertheless able to nourish and materially substantiate”,⁵⁶ but not spontaneously, and not alone; I am less oriented toward labour in the Marxist sense than to work, which I am thinking about as a proximity over time of practice and object, or, to paraphrase Marie Darrieussecq, what is “all there [...] to do”.⁵⁷)

I wanted to work somewhere between Ponge’s transformation of writing into objects and Gertrude Stein’s transformation of objects into poetry.⁵⁸ Gustave Flaubert does it with the last line of ‘The Legend of Saint Julian’ in which the story is a stained-glass window.⁵⁹ David Rimanelli does it at the end of a piece about Jack Pierson’s *Silver Jackie* (1991), with the single-word sentence, “Maybe.”⁶⁰ As does Darrieussecq in her biography of Paula Modersohn-Becker, with four lines about her own dead brother: “I will write his short life [...] But the time has not come for that yet”.⁶¹

Eileen Gray wrote that art is “not just the expression of abstract relationships” but that which “must encapsulate the most tangible relations, the most intimate needs of subjective life”,⁶² and I like that she does not say whose. Value as I came to decipher it slides across

⁵³ Graw, 2020, p. 26

⁵⁴ Fred Moten, in Hanif Abdurraqib, ‘Hanif Abdurraqib & Fred Moten – Building a Stairway to Get Us Closer to Something Beyond This Place’, *Millennials Are Killing Capitalism* [Podcast], Season 1, Episode 99 (2022).

⁵⁵ Meadows, 1997, p. 108

⁵⁶ Graw, 2020, p. 8

⁵⁷ Marie Darrieussecq, *Being Here is Everything: The Life of Paula Modersohn-Becker*, trans. Penny Hueston (South Pasadena, CA: Semiotext(e), 2017), p. 127

⁵⁸ Gertrude Stein, *Tender Buttons: Objects, Food, Rooms* (Mineola: Dover Publications, 1997),

⁵⁹ Gustave Flaubert, *Three Tales*, trans. A.J. Krailsheimer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 70

⁶⁰ David Rimanelli, ‘Close Up: Stages of Grief’, *Artforum* (April 2021)

<<https://www.artforum.com/print/202104/david-rimanelli-on-jack-pierson-s-silver-jackie-1991-85253>> Accessed 20-03-2021

⁶¹ Darrieussecq, 2017, p. 142

⁶² Eileen Gray, in Jasmine Rault, *Eileen Gray and the Design of Sapphic Modernity: Staying In* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), p. 17

subject/object without relinquishing specificity. It has no problem taking form as transference and also stuff.⁶³

When Jacques Derrida writes that Ponge “knows and hears himself in writing—the thing”,⁶⁴ it’s about writing as a resonator for associative integrities—how multiple subject/objects can be formally present in Ponge’s writing: writing, the subject and object, and Ponge the writer, I, sponge,⁶⁵ with which Ponge self-remarks.⁶⁶

In this writing, I am contextual, a shifter,⁶⁷ and I am interested in how this contiguity affirms the specificity of “I”, “this”, and “that”, rather than their interchangeability, as its condition.⁶⁸ Between the works and I, I am, as Roland Barthes writes, and perhaps it’s appropriate to use someone else’s words here, “individual but not personal”;⁶⁹ not quite Ponge’s split and doubled “Is it me, or...”, nor Michael Taussig’s mimetically merged “Hang on, this ship is me!”⁷⁰

Right where I’m treating these fragments as textual objects is where poetry becomes important again and I’m going to talk about myself. Trinh T. Minh-Ha suggests that poetic language destabilises the speaking subject because “the nature of poetry is to offer meaning

⁶³ Moten, in Abdurraqib, 2022.

⁶⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Signesponge/Signsponge*, trans. Richard Rand (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p. 18.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 68.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 6.

⁶⁷ Julia Kursell, ‘First Person Plural: Roman Jakobson’s Grammatical Fictions’, *Studies in East European Thought*, 6:22 (2010), 217-236 (p. 220).

⁶⁸ In addition to Jakobson’s writing on shifters, two concepts from Michel Serres (the ‘quasi-object’) and Donald Winnicott (the ‘transitional object’) informed my approach to “I”. Serres (2007) uses the example of the game *furet*, in which the titular object, when passed around, “makes the collective”, and “if it stops [...] makes the individual”. Serres’ *furet* figures the individual as both sliding and specific, less a matter of identity than identification, to borrow a distinction from Judith Butler (2002) that I will reuse later. For Winnicott (in Agamben, 1993), transitional objects, “the first things [...] that the child separates from external reality and appropriates”, are how the self figures itself as individual in the developing psyche. Giorgio Agamben (1993) writes that transitional objects slide insofar as they “properly belong neither to the internal and subjective nor to the external and objective spheres, but to something that Winnicott defined as ‘the area of illusion’, in whose ‘potential space’ they will subsequently be able to situate themselves both in play and in cultural experience.” This “‘third area’” is “distinct both ‘from interior psychic reality and from the effective world in which the individual lives.’” Agamben (1993) calls this sliding site of “I” a “topology” within which “the question ‘where is the thing?’ is inseparable from the question ‘where is the human?’” The project arising from this double-edged question, he concludes, is the work of writing.

⁶⁹ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), p. 62

⁷⁰ Michael Taussig, ‘Mastery of Non-Mastery: Extracts from a manuscript’ [Unpublished text] (New York University, 2017), p. 5.

in such a way that it can never end with what is said or shown”.⁷¹ In this way, it is antonymic to stereotype, “an”—she also cites Roland Barthes— “arrested representation of a changing reality”.⁷²

Example:

“What were the rights and the right ways?
Did we invest our strength in the kind grains
Of conversation that blew across our page, and out?
Is this the time to tackle a major oeuvre,”⁷³

Poetry is not necessarily discursive, even when it is, and I wanted that freedom, that reflexivity, a way of moving that begins with form, to apply to me, that is, to I. What I mean is that I don’t believe that language is to blame for art’s dissolution into discourse, a problem outside of the scope of this thesis but which this thesis, dealing with relationships of art and language, is nonetheless in relation to. I do believe that what is offered by poetry — meaning, affect, and form — is a model of how art and writing can relate in language at the level of form, not discourse. I, destabilized as Minh-Ha suggests by poetic language, is an instrument and expression of this.

Jacques Lacan says: “What we must say is: I am not, where I am the plaything of my thought; I think about what I am where I do not think I am thinking”.⁷⁴ I slide with the house,⁷⁵ in other words. “What thinks in my place”,⁷⁶ as Lacan puts it, or in the place of an I that might otherwise express my specific subjectivity, is—work/form?

Associative thought has a kind of autonomy or agency that in this writing is transferable to form: a way to read this work is that whatever writing says of Ault’s or Laverrière’s work is what writing is formally doing — is writing’s own approach. I am one way writing signposts

⁷¹ Trinh Minh-ha, in Nancy N. Chen, “‘Speaking Nearby’: a Conversation with Trinh T. Minh-Ha”, *Visual Anthropology Review*, 8:1 (1992), 82-91 (p. 86).

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 86.

⁷³ John Ashbery, ‘Opposition to a Memorial’, *The Paris Review*, 176 (Spring 2006)

<<https://www.theparisreview.org/poetry/6982/opposition-to-a-memorial-john-ashbery>> Accessed 23-04-2021

⁷⁴ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), p. 430.

⁷⁵ Susan Howe, *Concordance* (New York: New Directions, 2020), p. 10.

⁷⁶ Lacan, 2006, p. 436.

this. Citation and the use of sources is another. And at times, I is the aperture that lets citation in. My hope is that these formal elements let writing do what it says artworks do while making known how writing does what it is doing. And that this formal doing and showing of doing might constitute a kind of poetic economy (of form) in which the expansiveness of associativity is not foreclosed.

The four works show that associativity has formal economy: Laverrière's seating platform, a single idea or shape, and Ault's mirrored doorway, a sylph, especially, but also the desk in its resolute self-envelopment and the catalogue that doesn't perform. So as not to be afraid of determination, I went towards overdetermination, which led me to figure, which overflows interpretation,⁷⁷ affirming partiality and presence at the same time.⁷⁸ Figure in my writing is both the textual form of a work's value and the addenda, where they appear, to the main body of the text.

"As I am someone who cannot define or effectively describe the distinction between poetry and prose, I will speak instead about its fragrance",⁷⁹ Anne Carson writes, figuratively. Of course it is Anne Carson and Roland Barthes who rescue overdetermination as a type of economy in the form of tact, which eliminates redundancy, preserves inventiveness, has limits but "resembles an amorous state".⁸⁰ I also got particularly into an analogous image in Erich Auerbach's writing of figure as both sides of a wax seal.⁸¹ But I won't say more about figure or love now because they show up where they're needed in the chapter on the desk.

(In this meeting of writing and object, tact—that is, economy—is needed and I hoped I could call it poetics).

I will say more about the desk itself. The desk's subject, the Ambassador's Wife, is overdetermined by language and doesn't appear. This folds the chapter, which by the end is

⁷⁷ Robertson, 2012, p. 11.

⁷⁸ This definition derives from Barthes, who uses figure to contrast representation in *The Pleasure of the Text* (1975) and to name his passages in *The Neutral* (2005); Robertson's (2012) extended footnote on figure in *Nilling* (2012); Agamben's use of 'gloss' in *Infancy and History* (2007); and others (Leland de la Durantaye, 2009; Erich Auerbach, 1984; Yve Lomax, 2017).

⁷⁹ Anne Carson, 'Economy, its Fragrance', *The Threepenny Review* 69 (1997), 14-16 (p. 14).

⁸⁰ Roland Barthes, 2005, *The Neutral: Lecture Course at the College de France (1977-1978)*, trans. Rosalind Krauss Krauss and Denis Hollier (New York: Columbia University Press), p. 35.

⁸¹ Erich Auerbach, 'Figura', in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), pp. 11-76 (p. 11).

over itself. In a way the desk is the clef of this thesis in that figure as a shimmering value or part multiplies and becomes prismatic like Fra Angelico's saints.

The chapter about Ault's mirrored doorway is about halos and also shimmer, an imperfect communication at the surface, a glancing between subjects, a skipping stone.

Which is also to say: each chapter metonymises a stage or aspect of the process of writing, as well as a physical part or attribute of each work.

I got interested in metonymy as a form of attention to the part, then as a model of how writing can figure art without being metaphorical. Studying aphasic disorders helped Roman Jakobson to understand how metonymy differs from metaphor even though both are "figurative transformations of literal statements",⁸² because metonymy relies on a contiguity, rather than a similarity, of terms.⁸³ What the deep is to the sea, for example: a property, not a likeness.

I of course liked this word, contiguity. A beside that doesn't have to be close. Not quite an adjacency, a nearer next to, although it speaks of adjacency too. Reading David Lodge on Jakobson, I also liked how metonymic contiguity is twofold: it occurs both in language (and redoubles, present in the message as well as the code), and in the material (or "actual") world. In Lodge's example, "the keels ploughed the deep",⁸⁴ deep is contiguous to sea at the level of contexture, the way a linguistic unit both produces the context for, and obtains its context from, surrounding linguistic units, and in the sense of "actual existential contiguity in the world",⁸⁵ whereas "there is no such contiguity between"—a metaphor—"ploughs and ships".⁸⁶

⁸² David Lodge, *The Modes of Modern Writing: Metaphor, Metonymy, and the Typology of Modern Literature* (London: Edward Arnold, 1993), p. 76.

⁸³ Roman Jakobson, in Morris Halle and Roman Jakobson, *Fundamentals of Language* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2002), p. 90.

⁸⁴ Here, Lodge (1993) writes that keel is a synecdoche for ship (synecdoche is the subcategory of metonym that takes the part for whole), because the keel is a part of the ship, and deep is a metonym for sea, "not because of any similarity between them but because depth is a property of the sea". Plough is a metaphor for the ship's movement, because of ostensible similarity.

⁸⁵ Lodge, 1993, p. 77.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

Metonymy intensifies writing's materiality and in-the-world-ness. It gave me a way to think about what a work's value is to both the work and to my writing, and about the operation by which the transfiguration of physical form into textual form might take place.

It also introduced a little chaos. Common definitions of metonymy,⁸⁷ including Agamben's,⁸⁸ call its operation substitution, but Lodge via Jakobson writes that metonymy is really about deletion, the "illogicality"⁸⁹ at its heart: in the notional sentence "the keels of the ships crossed the deep sea", the items removed are not the items it would be "most natural"⁹⁰ to omit. For Lodge, metonymy as "a figure of nonlogical deletion"⁹¹ telegraphs "a specifically literary motivation for the selection of detail"⁹² that he later calls "poetic".⁹³

A tuning fork is struck and vibrates at a sympathetic frequency. This happens in writing and in the world. "The metonymic text [...] seems to offer itself to our regard [...] not as a model of reality, but as a representative *bit* of reality",⁹⁴ Lodge writes. I liked the idea that poetic writing comes between intention and confusion, that my writing might be a bit...

This bit.⁹⁵ These parts. This piece that digresses.⁹⁶ I looked around. Metonymy is "the *something*"⁹⁷ for Kay Gabriel, and an act of vivacious "clinging"⁹⁸ for Hélène Cixous. A "rubber logic"⁹⁹ and a "topological structuring"¹⁰⁰ that "leaves gaps"¹⁰¹ for Lacan. A kind of negative theology¹⁰² for Reginald Gibbons. "As though proximity were tantamount/To metonymy, which it isn't, not in real/Life", Ariana Reines writes: "What's metonymy/In real

⁸⁷ Lodge (1993) cites the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, "a figure in which the name of an attribute or adjunct is substituted for that of the thing meant, e.g. *sceptre* for authority"; and Richard A. Lanham's *A Handbook of Rhetorical Terms*, "substitution of cause for effect or effect for cause, proper name for one of its qualities or vice versa [...]"

⁸⁸ Agamben, 1993, p. 32.

⁸⁹ Lodge, 1993, p. 76.

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 76.

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 94.

⁹² Ibid., p. 94.

⁹³ Ibid., p. 109.

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 109.

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 109.

⁹⁶ Jakobson, 2002, p. 92.

⁹⁷ Kay Gabriel, *Elegy Department Spring: Candy Sonnets I* (Charlottesville, VA: BOAAT Press, 2017), p. 7.

⁹⁸ Hélène Cixous, *Tomb(e)*, trans. Laurent Milesi (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2014), p. 16.

⁹⁹ Jacques Lacan, *Formations of the Unconscious: the Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book V*, trans. Russell Grigg (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017), p. 65.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 65

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 65

¹⁰² Reginald Gibbons, *How Poems Think* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), p. 105.

life. You rub up/Against something; some of its/Truth and incompleteness/Is transferred onto you”.¹⁰³

Not *real* definitions. But for Lacan metonymy is “not in reference to the real”,¹⁰⁴ in the same way it is “not [...] a substitution”¹⁰⁵ or a metaphor. Lacan’s metonymy is a “word-to-word [*mot-à-mot*] correspondence”¹⁰⁶ and a “sliding (*glissement*) of sense”¹⁰⁷ that exists “along the length of the signifying chain”,¹⁰⁸ which he describes elsewhere as “links by which a necklace firmly hooks onto a link of another necklace made of links.”¹⁰⁹

I started thinking about metonymy as what I was doing after I read Della Pollock’s ‘Performing Writing’. Pollock describes metonymic writing as an “active, material, signifying process”¹¹⁰ that evokes what writing isn’t—its subject—by elaborating what it—writing—is.¹¹¹ Pollock’s metonymic writing is inherently partial¹¹² yet alive with motive, driven to write “into”¹¹³ while foregrounding its own materiality and plentiful limitations.¹¹⁴

Lacan helped me understand why Pollock’s Lacan-ish suggestion that metonymic writing “gains by losing”¹¹⁵ didn’t quite fit. Whereas Pollock’s metonymic writing is partial insofar as it displaces itself in order to enact its lost subject,¹¹⁶ I was interested in metonymic writing as partial insofar as it privileges figural economy, what a part or value¹¹⁷ can do. As the

¹⁰³ Ariana Reines, *Coeur de Lion* (New York: Fence Books, 2011), p. 5.

¹⁰⁴ Lacan, 2017, p. 65.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Gallagher (2010) translates this as “sliding of meaning”. I am using the psychoanalyst Peter G. Young’s (1998) unpublished translation.

¹⁰⁸ Lacan, 2017, p. 65.

¹⁰⁹ Lacan, 2006, p. 418.

¹¹⁰ Della Pollock, ‘Performing Writing’, in Peggy Phelan and Jill Lane (eds.), *The Ends of Performance* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), pp. 73-103 (p. 85).

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid., p. 82.

¹¹³ Peggy Phelan, in Pollock, 1998, p. 84.

¹¹⁴ Pollock, 1998, p. 83.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, pp. 84-85.

¹¹⁶ Ibid, p. 83.

¹¹⁷ Lacan (2017) writes that metonymy is “the locus where we must situate [...] the dimension of value,” insofar as value “refers itself to the diversity of objects already constituted by language, into which the magnetic field of each person’s needs, with their contradictions, is introduced”.

method and form of my work, metonymic writing became a creative and critical proposition for how writing about art and design can affirm partiality and presence at the same time.¹¹⁸

With metonymic writing, I am proposing that a given work's specific life—its material, style, references, critical and historical contexts, shape, poetic intimations, opacities, uncertainties, concomitance with the artist's life and practice, and on—informs or shows up in my writing in the instance of my choosing a value or part of that work with which to begin. And that this choosing opens my writing and the work I am writing about to formal resonance, where my writing can take part in and give form to the work's associative, constitutive interplay.

Lacan's chain, additive to the point of superfluity and specified at a single point by the gesture of hooking one to one, images for me how metonymic writing is alive as a process. Metonymic writing is, and is about, the contiguity of form and form, is, and is about, form's associative sliding. As a critical proposition, metonymic writing elaborates specificity through formal relationships. Creatively, it deals in two-headed logics of intuitive and given, poetic and critical, collective and specific, associative and concrete.

"Make it concrete" is something Donald Antrim used to say in lectures I attended. Make it concrete. I always liked that. The idea was that if you want the table to grow wings and fly in the second chapter of your novel, you had to know what type of wood it was made from and how many legs it had. He didn't mention the feathers, and I don't necessarily want Ault and Laverrière's works to fly, even if I do aspire to some type of transforming magic. I do want this writing to capture their uniqueness alongside their infinitude, and for this thesis to offer up four experiments in form's productive sliding, which has often felt to me like magic, also like work.

¹¹⁸ A metonym indexes the contiguity of the two terms that produce it (the word-to-word correspondence) as well as the process by which one comes to mean the other (the sliding of sense). To me, this means the first term stays present partially because the second elaborates itself alongside and in the shape of the first.

This chapter is about how work begins. Where does writing pick up, at what edge or extent, in relation to physical form? How can that edge be both a “living face”, as Eileen Myles writes, and a line of thought? What is the shape of writing that can examine this face and follow this line? This chapter takes as its starting point the curved inner edge of a wooden seating platform (1977/2009) by the interior designer Janette Laverrière.

Opening with an image of Laverrière’s living room in which the platform appears at first anomalous in its simplicity, the chapter takes up its one distinctive curving line and follows it backwards through Laverrière’s oeuvre of drawings and commissions. Resurfacing at times of personal and political crisis, curve shows itself to be forthcoming: discovered then invented, imagined then induced, a transmutation of formal conditions taking place repeatedly and out of order. The way time curves — from Laverrière’s later life in Paris to her earliest days in Switzerland — aligns form and practice along the line writing traces. The curve becomes a delineation and then an elaboration of the edge between object and text.

And every poem I write is the wavy chalk line I've drawn around
Myself, the perimeter I venture toward where I might meet you
And the boundary of what can be said for inner facts I'm bound
To testify to the existence of even as I am determined to not
Betray them.

— Ariana Reines, 'Mother of God'

I'm looking at an image of the interior designer Janette Laverrière's living room. It's dimly lit and taken from a high angle, framing a slice of space narrow enough to seem intentional but lacking an obvious focus. I found the image floating online and saved it along with the caption, now sourceless: "Janette Laverrière Cocteau-Spiegel, 1989", naming not the room but one of Laverrière's self-described "useless"¹¹⁹ objects, a circular mirror covered by a hinged wood panel in the shape of an eye. *Cocteau* (1989) was the first of these *Evocations*, a series of mirror works Laverrière continued until her death in 2011 at age 101.¹²⁰ *Cocteau* is affixed to the wall here, beside a pair of small black and white paintings, slightly askew.

The brightest point in the image is a lamp like a drawing of a flying saucer with a glowing red ovoid base and a metal shade perforated with ellipsoidal holes, emitting a loose corolla of light. A few red pillows in the back corner draw the eye upward to a curtain of brightly coloured fabric strips in varying lengths, which frames a sliver of window: night. Inside are living things. *La Coccinelle* (1987), the ladybug, a Formica and Perspex coffee table concealing a bottle of port beneath its red wings,¹²¹ and rubble-piles of cushions, books and magazines. More lamps, a little silver CD player and a stylish round tray. Just visible beneath the domestic ephemera, a long, low wood platform quietly skirts the room.

With no arms, no legs, no back, minimal as to be almost featureless, the platform barely draws focus in the crowded image but for one long, undulated inner edge that slips like a sine graph— or, better, a ribbon, a rhythm of advance and retreat that frames the room in curves. How did it fit through the door, which is not in this picture? The platform is a solid, singular thing. Arched like an eyebrow, crisp like a bracket. Supporting everything,

¹¹⁹ Rehberg, 2009.

¹²⁰ 'Janette Laverrière CV', *Silberkuppe* <<http://silberkuppe.org/janette-Laverrière-cv>> Accessed 17-12-2018.

¹²¹ Nairy Baghramian, 'Ménage a Trois, Quatre, Cinq, Six...', in Fionn Meade (ed.), *Question the Wall Itself* (Minneapolis, MN: Walker Art Center, 2017), pp. 230-231 (p. 231).

suggesting something. This edge at which the room is held in balance. The work begins at this edge that is unforeseen.

The platform retains its elliptical quality and its definitive power when it resurfaces no longer ensconced but nakedly apart in images of exhibitions curated by Laverrière's gallery, Silberkuppe, at museums in Bergen and Basel in 2010. Here it is replicated in plywood¹²² with its back to a series of photographs by Josephine Pryde, beside a stylised metal tent by Etienne Descloux which by contrast looks complicated.¹²³ Or near, but not that near, to three of Laverrière's own *Chapeau Chinois II* (1952/2011) wall lights, which crane their thin necks toward it like crows on a wire.¹²⁴ Here it is, an "untitled seating platform"¹²⁵ or just *Untitled*,¹²⁶ as peripheral as furniture,¹²⁷ as central as a theme.

Shown with two of Laverrière's almond-shaped *Black Eye* (2009) coffee tables,¹²⁸ the platform is pareidolia,¹²⁹ a face in space. Replicated as two identical pieces, it's a "centrepiece",¹³⁰ "symbolic focus",¹³¹ or more ambiguously, "social island",¹³² which would seem to name the island-shaped space formed by its facing halves. A "viewing oasis".¹³³ A "conceptual space for informal discourse".¹³⁴ Nonprescriptive, an open form, and "utopian",¹³⁵ in that it places you and I "eye to eye on one level".¹³⁶

¹²² Enrico David, 'Silberkuppe: Old Ideas / Museum für Gegenwartskunst Basel', *Vernissage TV* (2010) <<https://vernissage.tv/2010/01/20/silberkuppe-old-ideas-museum-fur-gegenwartskunst-basel/>> Accessed 17-12-2018.

¹²³ 'Old Ideas (2010) slideshow' *Silberkuppe* <http://silberkuppe.org/old-ideas-slideshow/a_1226296-18444-jpg> Accessed 17-12-2018.

¹²⁴ 'Under One Umbrella: Silberkuppe at Bergen Kunsthalle' *Silberkuppe* (2010) <<http://silberkuppe.org/under-one-umbrella>> Accessed 17-12-2018.

¹²⁵ 'Under One Umbrella slideshow' *Silberkuppe* (2010) <http://silberkuppe.org/under-one-umbrella-slideshow/4429917806_93873079b8_o-jpg> Accessed 17-12-2018.

¹²⁶ Dominic Eichler and Michel Ziegler, *Under One Umbrella* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2010), p. 131.

¹²⁷ 'Silberkuppe at the Hayward Gallery Project Space' *Starship Press Agency* (2010) <<http://starship-magazine.org/blog/?storyId=20091227122511&sessionId=>>> Accessed 17-12-2018.

¹²⁸ 'Silberkuppe Curates Old Ideas', *e-flux* (14 January 2010) <<https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/37304/silberkuppe-curates-old-ideas/>> Accessed 17-12-2018.

¹²⁹ David Bussel, 'Think Local, Act Global? On Silberkuppe at the Hayward Gallery Project Space, London', *Texte Zur Kunst*, 77 (2010) <<https://www.textezurkunst.de/77/think-local-act-global/>> Accessed 20-12-2018.

¹³⁰ Robert Clark and Skye Sherwin, 'This week's exhibitions: previews', *Guardian* (2 January 2010) <<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2010/jan/02/exhibitions-previews-the-guide>> Accessed 17-12-2018.

¹³¹ Bussel, 2010.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ 'Under One Umbrella: Silberkuppe at Bergen Kunsthalle'.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

“[...] The useable seating platform based on designs from the 1950s and 1960s by designer Janette Laverrière”¹³⁷ is “Setting: A furniture ensemble; normally found in architectural and/or spatial circumstances with the ability to accommodate numerous bodies, usually culminating for the purpose of both consumption and conversation”,¹³⁸ conceptually heterogeneous and a functional table and chairs. The work is made and remade with each appearance and the dates bounce back and forth over a span of time that seems impossible for one idea: 2009, 1937, 1968,¹³⁹ then 1977 and 2008 on her official website. These dates describe a gap between design and manufacture that was usual for Laverrière, who saw very few of her designs produced in her lifetime.

“Beautiful things for working people” is how Laverrière described her project. As a child she sees a cabinet for a sewing machine in a model worker’s cottage at a design fair founded by her father and imagines she might make “things for everyone”.¹⁴⁰ She begins working in the 1930s and is most active by the middle of the century when female designers and interior design as a field are all but barred from recognition.¹⁴¹ “It was terrible,” she says. “At exhibitions, women were put in dark corners”.¹⁴² She co-founds the Decorators Trade Union and the Front National des Décorateurs for members of the Resistance in 1944,¹⁴³ and self-describes as a feminist and for a time a Communist. Laverrière is teleological. Laverrière tells the story of her work: “I was a student in Switzerland, then I came to Paris for internships, and then—such is life—I started working.”¹⁴⁴ Here is an incomplete story of how one idea survives as a curved line.

Such is life. But curve is suggestive, not assertive. Laverrière’s line of practice, her historical order that is also the order of her forms, leads to a curving work. How can this curve be written, or how can writing curve? One distinctive edge or side that writing is compelled to follow: here is an incomplete story of how one idea survives as a curved line.

¹³⁷ ‘Silberkuppe - Under One Umbrella’, *Kunstaspekte* (2010) <<https://kunstaspekte.art/event/silberkuppe-under-one-umbrella-2010-03?hl=en>> Accessed 17-12-2018.

¹³⁸ Eichler and Ziegler, 2010, p. 131.

¹³⁹ Ibid., p. 131.

¹⁴⁰ Rehberg, 2009.

¹⁴¹ Lucinda Kaukas Havenhand, ‘A View from the Margin: Interior Design’, *Design Issues*, 20:4 (2004), 32-42 (p. 34).

¹⁴² Janette Laverrière, in Robert Wiesenberger, ‘Janette Laverrière: Evocations’, in Fionn Meade (ed.), *Question the Wall Itself* (Minneapolis, MN: Walker Art Center, 2017), pp. 126-135 (p. 131).

¹⁴³ ‘Vita’, *Janette Laverrière: JL Editions* <<https://janettelaverriere.com/vita>> Accessed 25-02-2020.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

Curve ebbs, at once meaningful and unspoken for, which is notable because Laverrière preferred to speak for her work and speak first. Her desk is *A Work Desk for the Ambassador's Wife* (1956). Her dresser, daybed and curtain are *Between two acts, the actress's dressing room* (1947). She implicates time, work and subjectivity in her long and evocative titles, sieving narrative through her innovative forms. The *Evocations* figure “Jean Cocteau, Dorian Gray [...] or the smile of the Cheshire cat”¹⁴⁵ in allegories of wood and mirror.

The *Evocations*, like the platform, induce interpretation that is personal: they are “subjective deportations into history, literature, and innuendo”,¹⁴⁶ “intellectual self-portrait[s]” that “do not give back reality but reflect the reality of their maker”.¹⁴⁷ *La Commune, hommage à Louise Michel* (2001), for the Paris Commune’s revolutionary and schoolteacher, a red-lacquered rosewood box with a small inlaid mirror and a metal door perforated by faux bullet holes in a tribute to executed Communards, is included in an exhibition in 2011 titled ‘The Usefulness of Useless Things’. A reviewer writes:

“In fact, one of the more interesting revelations [of the exhibition] [...] is that the Swiss furniture designer-turned-artist Janette Laverrière (1909-2011), who inspired this show, waited until she was 80 to indulge herself in her own art. (Luckily for Laverrière, she lived to 102, long enough to draw and make models for a number of what she referred to as her ‘useless things,’ conceptual mirrors honouring people, places, and events that affected her life.)”¹⁴⁸

What was it like? It was like this: a late re-entry into prominence. Laverrière starts working with Silberkuppe when its co-director, Michel Ziegler, and the artist Nairy Baghramian find Laverrière’s only existing monograph in a second-hand bookstore and go to visit her in Paris. Ziegler and Laverrière agree to release a small series of editions, including the platform. Laverrière makes her elliptical way into art discourse. In an interview with the artist Emily

¹⁴⁵ Nairy Baghramian, ‘Janette Laverrière’, *Frieze* (17 January 2011) <<https://frieze.com/article/janette-laverriere>> Accessed 12-17-2018.

¹⁴⁶ Fionn Meade, ‘Question the Wall Itself’, in Fionn Meade (ed.), *Question the Wall Itself* (Minneapolis, MN: Walker Art Center, 2017), (pp. 18-47) p. 34.

¹⁴⁷ Wiesenberger, 2017, p. 126.

¹⁴⁸ Edith Newhall, ‘Galleries: Infusing Useful Objects with Unexpected Identities’, *The Philadelphia Inquirer* (17 April 2011) <https://www.inquirer.com/philly/entertainment/20110417_Galleries___Infusing_useful_objects_with_unexpun_exp_identities.html> Accessed 08-04-2021.

Wardill, Hans Ulrich Obrist asks: “Jeannette Laverrière (sic), an extraordinary one hundred-year-old designer in Paris, asks visitors, ‘Are you political?’, and if you say no she doesn’t see you. So are you political or do you think art is political?”¹⁴⁹

(Wardill says: “The project comes out of a longing to set up a group of people for whom the process of discussing [the work] becomes part of the final product”).¹⁵⁰

There are contradictions. Writing in 2008, Katarina Burin notes that the “rosewood, mahogany, and shiny lacquers” used throughout Laverrière’s prototypes “are hardly materials that aspire to be mass-produced for the working class, but it is this combination of master craft and a critical political-personal edge that gives [her] objects such a strong impact.”¹⁵¹ Laverrière’s stories point to her work, and her work points back at her, something the critic Robert Wiesenberger hits on when he writes, “much of her work seems so specific and personal that it is hard to imagine it in mass production”.¹⁵² But “useless” for Laverrière was political and formal, conceived of with a social life in mind. *Inutile*, superfluous, is something additive, not missing: a way of prioritising form’s expressive play and narrativity without excluding the realities—biographical, aesthetic, political—of how work is made.

“Up until recently I made objects that were useful to everyone”, she says. “Then, suddenly, I stopped and said: I want to make something that pleases myself. But I do think there is still a link to my earlier work, perhaps the fact that, even then, the forms were not always driven by utility [...] So there I was in bed, thinking: I am not going to do anything useful anymore, I do not want to, I cannot, so I will do useless things. All of a sudden, a new world opened up for me”.¹⁵³

Useless is deconstructive for Laverrière, a new approach to form and meaning that foregrounds mutuality. Useless is a method; form is a mode of being in company. Now

¹⁴⁹ Hans Ulrich Obrist, ‘Hans Ulrich Obrist interviews Emily Wardill’, *MAP*, 23 (2010) <<https://culturenightlosangeles.wordpress.com/2013/10/20/hans-ulrich-obrist-the-contemporary-artworlds-curatorial-king/>> Accessed 04-08-2021.

¹⁵⁰ Emily Wardill, in Joanna Fiduccia, ‘Emily Wardill’, *Artforum* (4 March 2010) <<https://www.artforum.com/interviews/emily-wardill-talks-about-her-latest-project-and-exhibition-25049/>> Accessed 04-08-2021.

¹⁵¹ Katarina Burin, ‘Critics’ Picks: Berlin: Janette Laverrière’, *Artforum* (2008) <<https://www.artforum.com/picks/janette-laverriere-19810>> Accessed 18-12-2018.

¹⁵² Wiesenberger, 2017, p. 126.

¹⁵³ Rehberg, 2009.

political for Laverrière means to be in concert with “those familiar voices from the other side”.¹⁵⁴

Useless is a politics and a sort of negative capability in Laverrière’s work. It is also a formal proposition. This says something about curve, which is different. Curve means to amplify, coextend. Perhaps other forms, other voices can become part of the throughline here—can be conscripted into the project of a curving work.

Where useless is personal, curve is general, encompassing in its arc the possibility of completion (as a circle) only realised as perpetual beginning, interruptions or at least deviations in a line that might otherwise be straight. “It was rocking before I saw it”, writes the poet John Ashbery, “And is presumably doing so still”¹⁵⁵— one way of imaging or imaging how curve is found then invented. Curve outlines the possibility of working narratively but not sequentially: of following a line that is indirect, of politics as a search for stylistics, “a synchronization of desires and actions”.¹⁵⁶ Of the body of thought in everything that’s new.

Roland Barthes’ research on living together takes the form of “culture or *paideia*; in other words, the curved line, fragmentation”,¹⁵⁷ and although he wonders (wanders) aloud whether this constitutes “‘hysterical’ structure”, he reaffirms the capacity of indirection to preserve “distance and respect, a relation that’s in no way oppressive but at the same time there’s a real warmth of feeling”.¹⁵⁸ Love describing curve, curve describing work. Reaching for a curving work, curve as a way or reason to work and think. Curve meanders and delineates. “The ocean keeps on waving”,¹⁵⁹ Alan Watts says, and that edge becomes a shoreline or pattern of cascading metaphors. What is a curved method? A mode. Curve, modelling a certain freedom (politics) to include what is beside the point.

¹⁵⁴ Daniel Birnbaum, ‘Christian Boltanski (1944-2021)’, *Artforum* (August 2021) <<https://www.artforum.com/print/202108/daniel-birnbaum-on-christian-boltanski-86685>> Accessed 13-12-2021.

¹⁵⁵ John Ashbery, ‘Friends’, in *Selected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2002), pp. 240-241 (p. 240).

¹⁵⁶ Michael Gardiner, ‘Foucault, Ethics and Dialogue’, *History of the Human Sciences*, 9:3 (1996), 27-46 (p. 29).

¹⁵⁷ Claude Coste, in Roland Barthes, *How to Live Together: Some Novelistic Simulations of Everyday Spaces*, trans. Kate Briggs (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), p. xxiii.

¹⁵⁸ Barthes, 2013, p. 132.

¹⁵⁹ Alan Watts, ‘Our Place in the Universe’, *Alan Watts: Being in the Way* [Podcast], Season 1, Episode 4 (2021).

“This work induces form without relieving the pressure of form”,¹⁶⁰ write Lauren Berlant and Kathleen Stewart in their book of fragments, on how bringing into play the “concrete texture”¹⁶¹ of the world—Henri Focillon—is nothing liminal. Curve is a way to “find form”, the artist Amy Sillman writes, quoting Beckett, on Louise Fishman, “to accommodate the mess”;¹⁶² or is it “merely a kind of freedom—” Patricia Highsmith writes, “freedom, organized”.¹⁶³ A lifestyle and a dream.¹⁶⁴ An arrangement, or “the *frame*”—now I’m skipping to Jean-François Lyotard— Jean-François Lyotard writes, “in which the given gives itself”.¹⁶⁵ The platform acts as silent impresario, arranging other ideas, other voices along its line. Curve is one way freedom bears repeating in relation to in Laverrière’s work.

In an interview, Laverrière is asked to elaborate on her political commitments. “My commitments are linked to the war”, she says, “when I experienced firsthand the consequences of Marshal Philippe Pétain, who headed the Vichy Regime, betraying France in order to save the rich [...] I was working in a weapons factory, and we were told that half of France—the southern half—would be saved, since it was in the ‘free zone’. Then, four days later, the Nazis took control of the weapons factory. Little by little, I got to thinking, and I read Karl Marx’s *The Communist Manifesto* (1848). But since I am a critical person, I saw that the Soviets had betrayed Marx, and I know that Marx is outmoded. I live in my times”.¹⁶⁶

After the war, Laverrière is a single mother of two in Paris, having divorced her first husband, Maurice Pré. She gains sustaining although limited access to opportunities and commissions in these years and attributes this to her political activity as a founder of two Leftist unions for interior designers.¹⁶⁷ But in 1968, she leaves the Communist Party in a self-described state of “disillusionment”¹⁶⁸ after Soviet tanks enter Prague, killing and injuring hundreds and

¹⁶⁰ Lauren Berlant and Kathleen Stewart, *The Hundreds* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), p. 5.

¹⁶¹ Focillon, 1992, p. 33.

¹⁶² Amy Sillman, ‘Passages: Unstraight Lines – Louise Fishman (1939-2021)’, *Artforum* (November 2021) <<https://www.artforum.com/print/202109/louise-fishman-1939-2021-86934>> Accessed 14-12-2021.

¹⁶³ Patricia Highsmith, *Plotting and Writing Suspense Fiction* (London: Sphere Books, 2016), p. viii.

¹⁶⁴ Coste, in Barthes, 2013, p. xxiii.

¹⁶⁵ Jean-François Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, trans. Antony Hudek and Mary Lydon (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, 2011), p. 17.

¹⁶⁶ Rehberg, 2009.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Janette Laverrière, in Anniina Koivu, ‘Interiors from Time Regained: *Evocations* by Janette Laverrière’, *Abitare*, 480 (2008), pp. 81-87 (p. 83).

terminating the democratic reforms of the Prague Spring. “Any regrets?” Vivian Sky Rehberg asks Laverrière in an interview. “I regret that life hasn’t been easier”,¹⁶⁹ Laverrière says.

But she also calls the late 1960s and early 1970s “exciting years”¹⁷⁰ during which she works “to remain an independent woman”.¹⁷¹ At the invitation of the President of Niger, Hamani Diori, she undertakes her largest-ever commission from 1961 to 1963,¹⁷² furnishing 14 rooms with over two hundred pieces of furniture¹⁷³ for the Presidential Palace in Niamey, Nigeria. The design historian Laurence Mauderli suggests that this work brought Laverrière prestige, which brought more commissions, mostly for private homes.¹⁷⁴ “Did you ever feel that you were treated equally?” Rehberg asks Laverrière. “Yes, but I am not sure when it started,” Laverrière says. “Perhaps around 1968”.

I’m looking at a gouache from that year in two-point perspective of Laverrière’s design for the actress Claudine Baschet’s living room,¹⁷⁵ etched in chalky white lines on red tracing paper. Yves Badetz, her biographer, writes: “The decorator for the first time [...] chose an extremely Spartan approach, envisaging in the salon only a raised platform in pine which undulates around the whole center of the room”.¹⁷⁶ In 1968 the platform is an edge, not freestanding but inbuilt, bordering the room with patient winding and a sudden protrusion of volume on one side that juts as if interrupting an existing line mid-flow. The arrangement of floorspace as defined by the curve is generous, flexible, ceding its surface area differently at points. A wide stairwell cuts into the drawn shape of the protrusion, narrowing its bulk to a sloping point.

In two earlier drafts,¹⁷⁷ the platform appears as levels in the ground. In the larger, a perspective study, Laverrière’s blue ballpoint lines are light and sketchy except for the platform which is gone over repeatedly. The curving shape is mirrored to make a small amphitheatre, enclosing the ground like a pool, and its large, stepped levels alternate purpose: some have chairs or cushions, others host small planted areas of sprigs. The curve is more

¹⁶⁹ Rehberg, 2009.

¹⁷⁰ Koivu, 2008, p. 83.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., p. 83.

¹⁷² Rehberg, 2009.

¹⁷³ Mauderli, 2005.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Badetz, 2001, p. 130.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Eichler and Ziegler, 2010, p. 130.

imposing and less tensile; the room is all shape, all surface. In the smaller drawing, which is formalised and includes some colour, the platform is one level at floor height so that the void its inner edge describes is a further excavation. Two adjoined columns and a recessed ceiling echo the curving suggestion that space in this room is determined by the interaction of space and form.

Not so much that something is missing but that displacement appears: In 1971, Laverrière designs a large coffee table for a financial director—a photograph shows cross-shaped metal legs and an ultramarine glass top that has been sandblasted with a fishtailed ellipse. What starts as excavation becomes impression, mutable. This “abstract shape,” writes Yves Badetz, “illustrates [Laverrière’s] consummate control of curved forms”.¹⁷⁸ That the table is aggressively right-angled falls beyond notice. Definition arises as a displaced limit, what has moved.

Now curve becomes driven, rhythm. Curve moves writing along and concentrates changing conditions: “The activity that *is at the limit*”,¹⁷⁹ is how Gilbert Simondon describes the way “the entire activity of [...] the physical individual [may be] concentrated at its boundary with the outside world”.¹⁸⁰ Simondon’s idea of limit is useful at this moment in writing because it models how this boundary which is also a concentration perpetuates: through a process he calls transduction, the way “an activity propagates itself from one element to the next, within a given domain, and founds this propagation on a structuration of the domain that is realized from place to place”.¹⁸¹ Transduction is how limit as a formal aspect stays timely, not quite a Romantic or atomist idea like Paul Valéry’s of form as both the sum of its physical characteristics and indissoluble,¹⁸² closer to Theodor Adorno’s of how form transfigures the existing, “counter to which it represents freedom”, even if for Adorno¹⁸³ “form inevitably limits what is formed”.¹⁸⁴

¹⁷⁸ Badetz, 2001, p. 132.

¹⁷⁹ Gilbert Simondon, ‘The Position of The Problem of Ontogenesis’, trans. Gregory Flanders, *Parrhesia* 7 (2009), 4-16 (p.7).

¹⁸⁰ Gilbert Simondon, ‘The Genesis of the Individual’, trans. Mark Cohen and Sanford Kwinter, in Jonathan Crary and Sanford Kwinter (eds.), *Incorporations* (New York: Zone Books, 1992), p. 305.

¹⁸¹ Simondon, 2009, p. 11.

¹⁸² Paul Valéry, in Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1967), pp.32-34.

¹⁸³ Robert Sheppard, ‘Form and The Antagonisms of Reality: Barry MacSweeney’s Sin Signs’, in *The Meaning of Form in Contemporary Innovative Poetry. Modern and Contemporary Poetry and Poetics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 213-239 (p. 215).

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

Curve iterates; curves pile up. Each curve is a body and a line. In Simondon's writing, one image or model of transduction is a crystal in its "mother liquid",¹⁸⁵ one "resolution" of a system of potentials—form, matter and energy—that is always poised to become structured.¹⁸⁶ His molecular thought would make curve, which is ranging, seem brutal. But time is the granular force at curve's limit: curve outlines and informs time, is the shape of curve's movement (rhythm) in one time and another. "The faceted crystal, the prism of a whole artistic destiny [...] [and] a singular, and even modest, object", the art historian Georges Didi-Huberman writes, transducing the artist Alberto Giacometti's sculpture *Cube* (1934-5) in his writing, with what he calls his "logic of both this and that".¹⁸⁷

Writing in 1967, Susan Sontag proposed style as a kind of mediative limit, "the degree and manipulating of [...] the conventions of distance" between work and world—"but the notion of distance [...] is misleading, unless one adds that the movement is not just away from but toward the world. The overcoming or transcending of the world in art is also a way of encountering the world".¹⁸⁸ When Laurence Mauderli asks Laverrière about her "Parisian style", Laverrière dismisses the phrasing: "Questions of style were not really of any importance to us", she says. "We started with the clients' needs and then kept looking for the best solutions. It was always my desire to create something new in life. I tried to integrate this mentality into my designs."¹⁸⁹

Counterposing, Laverrière treats "style" as preconceived, and "new" as a formal extent that is mediative or timely. In his drawing studies, Paul Klee leaves one curve and redacts another¹⁹⁰—something about repetition as iteration, which is habit forming—Laverrière designs and discovers this edge that has always been here. I am thinking about the paradox Saint Augustine writes about, of "living man", who, "when [he] finds his place in the pre-existing creation he is born into , [...] turns the fabric of creation into the world".¹⁹¹ But

¹⁸⁵ Simondon, 2009, p. 11.

¹⁸⁶ *ibid*, p. 16.

¹⁸⁷ Georges Didi-Huberman, *The Cube and the Face: Around a Sculpture by Alberto Giacometti*, trans. Shane B. Lillis (Zurich: diaphenes, 2015), p. 23.

¹⁸⁸ Sontag, 1967, pp. 30-31.

¹⁸⁹ Mauderli, 2005.

¹⁹⁰ Paul Klee, in Allan McRobie, *The Seduction of Curves: The Lines that Connect Mathematics, Art, and the Nude* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), p. 4.

¹⁹¹ Hannah Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 66.

making or remaking the world is not enough to feel at home in the creation. She must love the world, must love this edge, at which separability and belonging are mutually born.

A biographical timeline at the end of Badetz's book includes a small image of a balcony, captioned "terrace with slate flagstones in three colours for Mr. Chosson in Paris, 1971".¹⁹² This time the dais is staggered, resembling three joined pieces in ascending heights. The middle piece is stoutest, only betraying its curvilinear edge at one tapering end. "Exploiting differences in levels, she modelled benches and tables",¹⁹³ Badetz writes, but again it's all of a piece. Slate tiles cover the surface of the landscaped platform, appearing sharp where they're cut to make a uniform edge.

Recent rainfall or watering means the tiles are slick, and perhaps because of this the work looks tellurian, a sandbar or root. The Parisian skyline appears anachronistic; Laverrière is determining what's possible. Reflected light of the late day emanates from the variegated surface. "Space is defined by the rhythm of ellipses",¹⁹⁴ writes Badetz. As this shining sky-surface delivers the platform broad and languorous, a gap or gouge cuts into the back inner edge like a bite mark. The curve is announced again, pronounced again: a sinew.

"Thus the surface is nothing but the protrusion of an inner volume", writes the theorist Jacques Rancière, about the poet Rainer Maria Rilke's visit to the artist Auguste Rodin's studio in Paris. "The poet, on the contrary, emphasizes the 'hand' that externally limits the surface—that is to say, life, organizer of encounters that make something exist as a surface touched by light".¹⁹⁵ But the circle is intransitive—more of a curling. Curve comes between eye and hand, work and world. Curve is how Laverrière moves toward the world in spirals.

Curve comes between eye and hand in Laverrière's work, between work and world in this writing. Curve is how Laverrière and this writing about Laverrière move and try to move toward the world in spirals.

¹⁹² Badetz, 2001, p. 165.

¹⁹³ Ibid., p. 134.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid, p. 134.

¹⁹⁵ Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis*, trans. Zakir Paul (New York: Verso Books, 2003), p. 157.

Perhaps it's too direct to say that at this helix I am thinking about rule, a practice that "necessarily implies a community and a set of habits",¹⁹⁶ in Giorgio Agamben's writing, rather than an externally imposed law. Rule is how cenobitic monks¹⁹⁷—Agamben's example—inwardly and outwardly demonstrated life "as a common use",¹⁹⁸ where the monks' obligation ("cenoby" derives from "(*koinos bios*, the common life), the perfection of a common life in all and for all")¹⁹⁹ is concentrated in and informed by the habitual, a set of collective behaviours and standards that are ongoing and formal. The *habitus*, the monks' garment, was "both clothing and way of life"²⁰⁰—an example of form, the body of the rule, as where rule and life become indistinguishable,²⁰¹ and "a definition of life itself in relation to a never-ending practice".²⁰²

Barthes suggests that rule, which has its roots in "*regio*: the point reached by following a straight line [and] *Regula*: the instrument used to draw a straight line",²⁰³ is linked to regulation, "imposition of the social as power".²⁰⁴ But where regulation occurs "the moment the rule is set down in contract",²⁰⁵ inevitably "[giving] rise to infraction",²⁰⁶ rule retains the status of "an ethical act ([...] in certain cases, a mystical one) [...] [that gives] transparency to life, to everyday life".²⁰⁷ Rule is "the *systematizing*"— "active"— "of habitual behaviours",²⁰⁸ able to be practised and inhabited in a way that maintains "a constraint of distance [...] critical distance governing the relations between individuals".²⁰⁹

Desire or feeling at a distance is what curve partly draws, the something—habit, inhabiting, a kind of love—or "something else, assuredly, than the simple fabrication of a spatial object"²¹⁰—that curve unfurls in Laverrière's work. "What is desired is a distance that won't

¹⁹⁶ Giorgio Agamben, *The Highest Poverty*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), p. 58.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. xiii.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 33.

²⁰³ Barthes, 2013, p. 116.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

²¹⁰ Georges Didi-Huberman, 'Being a Dig', trans. Drew S. Burk, *Third Rail Quarterly*, 14 (2021) <<http://thirdrailquarterly.org/georges-didi-huberman-being-a-dig/>> Accessed 1-03-2022.

destroy affect [...]” Barthes says in his final lecture on living together. “A distance permeated, irrigated by tender feeling”.²¹¹

At home, Laverrière is interviewed by a reporter. Compelled by an almond-shaped table in lacquered cherrywood designed by Laverrière in 1961, “hinged at the centre so that it can fold neatly against a wall”,²¹² she slides her hand surreptitiously along the curving edge. “La courbe, la courbe”,²¹³ Laverrière says, and the reporter, struck by the repetition, turns to see Laverrière’s “softly wrinkled hand”²¹⁴ already “pivoting gracefully at the elbow to arc a perfect half circle in the air between us.”²¹⁵

“The right curve is essential”, Laverrière tells Badetz. “I wasn’t yet aware of this when I first entered, as a twenty-year old apprentice, the pompous empire of Jacques-Émile Ruhlmann. Believe me, I was appalled by his turgid style. Nevertheless, he taught me some important lessons: first of all, modesty. Then, the elegance of proportion, the meaning of millimetres, and the way to draw a curve with one single movement of the wrist”.²¹⁶

When Laverrière arrives at Ruhlmann’s workshop in the early 1930s, he is at the height of his power as the self-appointed “master” of the new style. Art Deco surfaces in the 1920s among designers seeking to reclaim what Jean Badovici called the “soul of geometry” from the fecundity of Art Nouveau: “undulating, flowing, and interplaying with others, sprouting from corners and covering asymmetrically all available surfaces”.²¹⁷ Ruhlmann is a prolific trout fisherman and espouses affiliated values in his practice: *Sobriety. Refinement. Discipline*. One contemporaneous review of his work states: “It takes uncommon skill and an incomparable sureness of taste to mould these almost imperceptible curves, to choose the one curve that will give the piece its ‘character’ and its supreme elegance”.²¹⁸

²¹¹ Barthes, 2013, p. 132.

²¹² Helen Brown, ‘Homes: Ahead of her Time’, *Independent on Sunday* (31 October, 2004), pp. 52-55 (p. 52)

²¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*

²¹⁶ Koivu, 2008, p. 83.

²¹⁷ Victor Margolin, ‘A World History of Design and the History of the World’ *Journal of Design History*, 18:3 (2005), 235-243 (p. 241).

²¹⁸ Florence Camard, *Ruhlmann: Master of Art Deco* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1984), p. 36.

The historian Richard Striner suggests that Art Deco “becomes useful precisely when the quest for a perfectly delineated ‘style’ yields to an appreciation of the volatility that characterized the early twentieth century”.²¹⁹ The emblematic curve is axial, for winding past and future around, and an index or compass for locating curve in history.²²⁰ Which are not the same. Curve as historical subject is bivalent, mediating competing styles and style and time. For Susan Sontag, it is exactly Art Deco’s “sharp lines and blunt massing of material, its petrified eroticism”²²¹ that exemplifies “the fascist style at its best”.²²²

Curve as a complex of curves,²²³ an ontological challenge and a living face:²²⁴ dynamical systems that are complex, concerning the interrelation of living organisms, are sometimes nonlinear,²²⁵ the same word used to describe algebraic equations for generating parabola curves.²²⁶ A “quality of straightness” has come to identify “lines *as lines*”,²²⁷ the anthropologist Tim Ingold writes, on how curve as a line doesn’t, isn’t. Ingold blames Ancient Egyptian surveyors, Le Corbusier (also singled out by Barthes)²²⁸ and Euclid, who each worked to obviate the curve in their own ways. Ingold cites Ruskin: “a great draughtsman can draw every line *but* a straight one”,²²⁹ but does not mention Ruskin’s other assertion, in his *Elements*, that “all beautiful objects whatsoever are thus terminated by delicately curved lines”.²³⁰

“Ruhlmann’s favourite line was that of the ogee, a double curved moulding”, writes the design historian Florence Camard. “[...] Its movement is at once harmonious, gentle and mathematically precise [...] the barely perceptible ‘movement which shifts the lines’ fades into flat surfaces”.²³¹ The curves couldn’t be, in Ruhlmann’s words, too “fat”.²³²

²¹⁹ Richard Striner, ‘Art Deco: Polemics and Synthesis’, *Winterthur Portfolio*, 25:1 (1990), 21-34 (p. 23).

²²⁰ Ibid., p. 21.

²²¹ Susan Sontag, ‘Fascinating Fascism’, *The New York Review of Books* (February 6 1975).

<<http://www.history.ucsb.edu/faculty/marcuse/classes/33d/33dTexts/SontagFascinFascism75.htm>> Accessed 3-3-2019.

²²² Ibid.

²²³ Donald Barthelme, ‘The Balloon’, in *Sixty Stories* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), pp. 46-52 (p. 55).

²²⁴ Myles, 2012, p. 114.

²²⁵ Heinz Gerngroß, Edmund A.M. Neugebauer and Christian Willy, ‘The Concept of Nonlinearity in Complex Systems’, *European Journal of Trauma*, 29:1 (2003), 11-22 (p. 11).

²²⁶ Tim Ingold, *Lines: a Brief History* (New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 161.

²²⁷ Ibid.

²²⁸ In a section, or ‘trait’, titled ‘Civilization of the Rectangle’, Barthes (2013, p. 114) calls Le Corbusier an “agent” of the “pollution effected by the rectangle”, a “regulatory line”, and the “basic shape of power”.

²²⁹ John Ruskin, in Ingold, 2007, p. 161.

²³⁰ John Ruskin, ‘On Composition’, in *The Elements of Drawing* (New York: Dover, 1971), p. 176

²³¹ Camard, 1984, p. 37.

²³² Jacques-Emile Ruhlmann, in Camard, 1984, p. 36.

“From 1931 to 1933, at Ruhlmann’s death, [Laverrière] developed a Draconian working method”, Badetz writes:

[...] She learnt modesty but also the importance of strict accuracy in proportion and how to plot a curve. Ruhlmann was careful to recruit the top graduates from the École Boulle and then made them sit down to draw the bent profile of a chair for weeks on end until the moment when, with a masterly pencil stroke, the Master perfected the final sketch before sending it to the workshop.²³³

Laverrière plots infinite curves freehand until “consistent accuracy”²³⁴ is achieved and curve becomes habit. Laverrière comes to inhabit, be at home in, curve. Curve as historicity. Curve as grammar. “To describe the exterior dress”, Giorgio Agamben writes about *habitus*, a form that “expresses the way of life of which [it is] the symbol”.²³⁵ Comma, bracket. Curve organizes work, is plot.

After Ruhlmann’s death, Laverrière collaborates with Maurice Pré on her first commissions. “The many projects which are still preserved attest to a real desire to experiment”,²³⁶ Badetz writes. As M. J. Pré, the couple receive their first big order of about thirty pieces for Solange Chiochetti, the daughter of a former student of Laverrière’s father. One of the pieces is an ebony pedestal table for the Chiochettis’ small salon, with a solid round top and two thick, vine-like legs entwined at the base in a self-enclosed loop.

“Line remains dependent on certain fashionable Ruhlmann-inspired designs”,²³⁷ Badetz writes: curve as canalisation. The underside of a small gilded and enamelled brass wall sconce from the series wraps into spirals that catch the light in their bulbous surfaces. The same gesture is repeated at scale for the stand of a massive ebony dining table. An accompanying set of satin-upholstered chairs interpret this helix in curved armrests that fold among themselves like wings.

²³³ Badetz, 2001, p. 14.

²³⁴ Ibid.

²³⁵ Ibid., p. 16.

²³⁶ Badetz, 2001, p. 18.

²³⁷ Ibid.

Another critic has a different take on what is inherited and what evolves: “In days when women were few and far between in the world of design, the budding designer could have made her life easier by relying on [Ruhlmann’s] patronage and glamorous clientele. Instead she made the unconventional decision to pit her own democratic aesthetic [...] against Ruhlmann’s”.²³⁸ As early as her early work, Laverrière “shows an understanding that Art Deco could no longer sustain the contradiction of striving towards modernity while remaining the luxurious style of the elite”.²³⁹

“Interesting”,²⁴⁰ says Barthes, observing the way a comic artist allows his characters to transgress the rectangular frame, a “regulatory line”,²⁴¹ “the basic shape of power”.²⁴² (“The comical is always literal”,²⁴³ writes Gilles Deleuze). “The subversion of a shape, of an archetype, is not necessarily effected by its opposite but by more subtle means”,²⁴⁴ Barthes says. The trick is to transmute formal conditions to imagine or induce something that is new, “retaining the shape and inventing a distinctive play of superimposition for it, or one of effacement, of overstepping its limits”.²⁴⁵ In a lecture on utopia, Barthes calls this “squaring the circle”.²⁴⁶

After leaving Ruhlmann’s workshop, Laverrière and Pré are living in the 7th arrondissement, within glancing distance of Pré’s father’s fine carpentry studio²⁴⁷ and the Eiffel Tower. The 1937 Paris Exposition is announced under newly elected Prime Minister Léon Blum. Encouraged by the illustrator André Édouard Marty, Laverrière and Pré join the Exposition in the class 38 category dedicated to individual pieces and furniture collections, overseen by the influential Art Deco designer Paul Follot.²⁴⁸ (The 1925 Exposition, titled Exposition des Arts

²³⁸ Muriel Zagha, ‘Amazon Grace’, *The World of Interiors* (November 2003), pp. 122-129 (p.128)

²³⁹ Ibid.

²⁴⁰ Barthes, 2013, p. 114.

²⁴¹ Ibid.

²⁴² Ibid.

²⁴³ Gilles Deleuze, ‘Bartleby; or, The Formula’, in *Essays: Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (Minnesota, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), pp. 68-90 (p. 68).

²⁴⁴ Barthes, 2013, p. 116.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

²⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 132.

²⁴⁷ Badetz, 2001, p. 28.

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

Decoratifs Modernes, had both introduced Art Deco as an aesthetic and given the style its name.)²⁴⁹ Pré qualifies as an interior designer, a newly invented designation.²⁵⁰

The Exposition quickly becomes a prominent contour of France's attitude of "appeasement and nonaggression"²⁵¹ toward Germany. Blum's approach is said to have taken his constituency and party members by surprise:²⁵² both Jewish and a Socialist, he campaigned on a platform of "republicanism, class interest, antifascism".²⁵³ Officials who inherit the preparations for the Exposition, along with two years of failed negotiations over Germany's involvement, "[work] intensively at securing the participation of the Third Reich".²⁵⁴

One photograph of the Exposition's opening,²⁵⁵ during which Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*²⁵⁶ was honoured with the Grand Prix,²⁵⁷ is captured over the heads of several men in bowler hats gathered on a viewing platform overlooking the main plaza. On one side, the Soviet Pavilion's imposing stone tower supports enormous statues of a proletariat man and woman brandishing the Communist hammer and sickle. Opposite, the German Pavilion, a neoclassical monolith designed by Albert Speer, rises even higher, its Reichsadler resembling in profile a caped human figure. Between them, bright grey sky throws the venous Eiffel Tower into relief.

"The ambitions of the artists and decorators and the expectations of the public were enormous", writes Badetz. "Both dreamt of a show which would both map out the general trends and provide the foundations of a new style. The reality was to be more complicated. Delays and a substantial cost overrun for the exhibition, combined with the tense political and economic climate, would have fatal consequences for the success of the show".²⁵⁸

²⁴⁹ Arthur Chandler, 'The Exposition Internationale Des Arts Et Techniques Dans La Vie Moderne, 1937' [expanded and revised from *World's Fair*, VIII:1 (1988)] <<http://www.arthurchandler.com/paris-1937-exposition>> Accessed 01-03-2019.

²⁵⁰ Badetz, 2001, p. 32.

²⁵¹ Karen Fiss, *Grand Illusion: The Third Reich, The Paris Exposition, and the Cultural Seduction of France* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009), p. 1.

²⁵² Ibid.

²⁵³ Ibid.

²⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 2.

²⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 6.

²⁵⁶ J. Hoberman, 'Triumph of the Will', *Film Comment* (January/February 2019)

<<https://www.filmcomment.com/article/triumph-of-the-will/>> Accessed 04-04-2019.

²⁵⁷ Alan Sennett, 'Film Propaganda: *Triumph of the Will* as a Case Study', *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, 55:1 (2014), 45-65 (p.45).

²⁵⁸ Badetz, 2001, p. 28.

Laverrière and Pré present *Pied-à-terre d'un archéologue*, or the smoking room in an archaeologist's pied-à-terre.²⁵⁹ Two images in Badetz's book show a small room containing a square, concave-edged wood coffee table and a matching wall-mounted wood sideboard with sloping undersides. Badetz notes that although both were made of exotic woods and meticulously varnished, they, along with two chairs, collaborations with Pré's father, "were designed in a rational way, so as to be easily manufactured".²⁶⁰ Between the chairs is a large globe that Laverrière, uncredited in exhibition notes, has painted mauve.²⁶¹ Tall faux windows fixed with filmy curtains give bright light diffusely. In this weather, "a low base of irregular width", no more than a foot high, encircles the room.

Laverrière and Pré noted that the platform "can be used to present *objets d'art*",²⁶² and the photographs show the platform as an active surface, displaying flowers in a vase and a bust sculpture on a plinth, framing a large ceramic plate, placed on the floor, with one of its sloping corners.

Observing "[Laverrière's] dais with sinuous contours, an idea that she was to reuse later", Badetz finds the platform "at first glance unassuming", to be "an invitation to live closer to the ground", "a profound change in the organization of space", and ultimately a "remarkable work [that] contributed to its artists' growing fame and won them a gold medal".²⁶³ Not yet table or chair, communal or personal, habitual or utopian, the platform is first useless, insofar as form tells the story. Is this true in life or in writing? Which is first informed? At points undulation narrows into disappearance where the curve touches the wall, and the room arrives as asymptote.

The arrival of form as an abrupt change in form produced by gradual forces,²⁶⁴ expressed in the shape of a limit, or "cusp line",²⁶⁵ is what the mathematician René Thom called

²⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 32

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

²⁶¹ Ibid., p. 33.

²⁶² Ibid., p. 32.

²⁶³ Ibid., p. 33.

²⁶⁴ René Thom, *Structural Stability and Morphogenesis: An Outline of a General Theory of Models*, trans. David H. Fowler (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2018), p. 8.

²⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 79

"catastrophe",²⁶⁶ a topological graph for modelling dynamical systems, or change and interrelationship over time. Thom wanted to know how form unfolds.²⁶⁷ Catastrophe looks like two planes joined in an ogee, or S-shaped, curve, fluid like languorous handwriting or a cresting wave. (Ocean waves have their own model in Thom's theory, the "hyperbolic umbilic catastrophe", which resembles a curved piece of paper wrapping a folded one.)²⁶⁸

Entirely bordered by the platform for the first and only time, it is the room that seems to have surfaced in excavation. Its smattering of things references countless other things unearthed or discovered then invented as axes by the titular subject, whose profession had only in the previous decade²⁶⁹ come to signify the potential to draw lines between present and past. The archaeologist has left behind a pair of glasses. The archaeologist's sculptural bow and arrow is drawn and affixed to the wall. And the room fills with a pervasive haze, part smoke, in the story, part light.

Susan Sontag abhorred Art Deco partly because of how its orientation toward ideal or absolute form echoed propagandic "rendering of movement in grandiose and rigid patterns". She references *Triumph of the Will*, which "[...] rehearses the very unity of the polity", such that "the masses are made to take form, be design".²⁷⁰ When Agamben talks about forms-of-life, such as *habitus*, he stresses that the category or thought "must be understood not in the sense of an aestheticization of existence"—the ideal of life as art—"but rather in the sense that Michel Foucault seemed to have in mind in his last writings, namely a definition of life itself in relation to a never-ending practice".²⁷¹

I am not going so far as to call Laverrière's curve a form-of-life, even as I feel that, each time it surfaces, it approaches Agamben's most lyrical definition: "at once ontological and practical, interwoven with being and acting, with the divine and the human [...] [an]

²⁶⁶ Thomas Banchoff, 'The Seduction of Curves: the Lines of Beauty that Connect Mathematics, Art, and the Nude', *Journal of Mathematics and the Arts*, 12:4 (2018), 252-256 (p. 252).

²⁶⁷ McRobie, 2017, p. 88.

²⁶⁸ Thom, 2018, p. 75.

²⁶⁹ Matthew McCarty, 'French Archaeology and History in the Colonial Maghreb: Inheritance, Presence, and Absence', in Bonnie Effros and Guolong Lai (eds.), *Unmasking Ideology in Imperial and Colonial Archaeology: Vocabulary, Symbols, and Legacy* (Los Angeles: Cotsen Institute of Archaeology Press, 2018), pp. 359-382.

²⁷⁰ Sontag, 1975.

²⁷¹ Agamben, 2013, p. 33.

experience at once very near and remote”.²⁷² Curve, a flexible organisation of points, a catastrophe, charts “her personal ideas for the organization of varied spaces, articulated in a flexible way”,²⁷³ not quite “a life that is linked so closely to its form that it proves to be inseparable from it”²⁷⁴ but a form that gives life to form, describes and emerges from the co-constitution of form and life that is practice. This is also true of how curve emerges, gives life to form, in writing.

Perhaps where curve leads in this writing is always partly toward its own ends—toward the ends that curve together, in writing and otherwise.

In Barthes’s lectures on living together, he defends his use of alphabetisation to arrange the “traits” or parts of his research by saying that the alphabet, “aleatory with respect to reason, but not with respect to History”, is preferable to chance, which can inadvertently produce “monsters”, or logic. The resulting work, he says, reflects “chance conquered by familiarity”.²⁷⁵ Perhaps curve, a habit, is one such unprepossessing historical order.

Another interview takes place in 2003, for *The World of Interiors*, still five years before Katarina Burin writes: “At ninety-eight, the designer is finally receiving some much-deserved attention”,²⁷⁶ and over a decade until Robert Wiesenberger refers to Laverrière, posthumously, as a “still-emerging artist”.²⁷⁷ An image of Laverrière’s living room mentions the “curved sofa [that] runs its way around the walls [...]” and the article opens with an account of Laverrière being awarded her 1937 gold medal, and the fruitful few decades that followed.

Then—oblivion. But now, at the beginning of the 21st century, Laverrière is about to be rediscovered. How this came about is not without a touch of irony. Laverrière’s political ethos meant that she always wishes to have her designs mass-produced, but she was routinely refused by conventionally minded manufacturers and was therefore obliged to produce one- (or two-) of-a-kind

²⁷² Ibid., p. 12.

²⁷³ Badetz, 2001, p. 135.

²⁷⁴ Agamben, 2013, p. 9.

²⁷⁵ Barthes, 2013, p. 134.

²⁷⁶ Burin, 2008.

²⁷⁷ Wiesenberger, 2017, p. 135.

pieces. Because of this limited initial production, over the decades her work has become eminently collectable and thus right for reproduction [...] ²⁷⁸

“Everything I do is supposed to be rational”, Laverrière tells the reporter. “But not necessarily right-angled”. ²⁷⁹

A passport-sized photograph of Laverrière appears like punctuation at the end of the writing. Against a blue background, she is wearing a red sweater with a heavy twist of silver around her neck, and her hair is red and cropped short. Her eyes are brilliant blue and she is not quite smiling, although one corner of her mouth is upturned. The article mentions *Victor Hugo* (2001), one of her *Evocations*, which is not yet finished but will eventually comprise a long, narrow ovoid in varnished rosewood with a mirror running the length of its body and several cuts or speed lines painted in rainbow colours on its one generous wing.

‘Victor Hugo’ is Laverrière’s most elliptical mirror. The article suggests its inspiration is Hugo’s “seances and *tables tournantes*, the revolving tables through which Hugo sought to converse with spirits”, ²⁸⁰ but the shape approximates at best a spaceship, perhaps from Mercury, which Hugo learned about when he channelled the seventeenth-century alchemist Nicholas Flamell in 1854. Something Foucault says about the play of the symbolic in historically analysable practices comes improbably to mind: “There is a technology of the constitution of the self which cuts across symbolic systems while using them”. ²⁸¹

“[...] a network of smaller and bigger rotations producing a realistic thing, a state, a place, something anonymous and still that actually becomes porous”, writes Eileen Myles, about work, and about form as an ethical order.

“Laverrière”, is how the piece ends, “may well have one or two more revolutions left up her sleeve”. ²⁸²

²⁷⁸ Zagha, 2003, p. 126.

²⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 128.

²⁸⁰ Ibid.

²⁸¹ Michel Foucault, ‘On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress’, in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, trans. Robert Hurley et al. (New York: The New Press, 1997), pp. 253-281 (p. 277).

²⁸² Zagha, 2003, p. 129.

‘Like life’

This chapter is about friendship, or about being toward one another. Where and how does friendship—in and among people, objects, forms, ideas—take place? Where and how, at what surface, by what movement, does individual being exceed itself? This chapter asks how one introduces the possibility of more than one in the refractive surface of a mirror-lined doorway, titled An Apparition by Liberace (2014), by the artist, curator and writer Julie Ault.

Beginning with an oyster’s “room”, a lustrous interior/exteriority secreted over time, through Ault’s constellatory, context-laden “room” at the 2014 Whitney Biennial, to Liberace’s mythical house of mirrors, the chapter moves through states and spaces of shimmer, attempting to see where one ends and another begins. Where do these doors lead writing — toward intimacy or privacy? Is it possible for work to both turn back and move forward—begin again? How can writing look to art as if turning toward a friend? Reference — writing’s access to the work that is there already — becomes refracted in the chapter, a matter of appearance and disappearance; the mirror door of Ault’s work offers glimpses of the shimmering surface between art and writing.

I prefer ‘you’ in the plural, I want ‘you’
— John Ashbery, ‘A Blessing in Disguise’

To live alone; there’s a great dream!
— Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*

The work begins again with a grain of sand. An irritation, to the oyster. A possibility.²⁸³ Aware of a threat, or information, the mollusc secretes sheets of crystalline nacre to contain the intrusion, enveloping then re-enveloping the grain, now a nucleus, in concentric strata of substance. Nacre: deriving, maybe, from the Arabic *naqqāra*, a type of hide-headed drum often played in pairs; comprised of proteins and biopolymers made by the oyster, and particles of calcium carbonate filched from the sea.

This same material—nacre—coats the inner wall of the oyster’s shell, which is also its exoskeleton. Here, it is called mother of pearl—“*firmament*, (strictly speaking)”,²⁸⁴ writes the poet Francis Ponge—the substance of the process that allows the oyster to live within one expanding room for the duration of its life. At a microscopic level, unevenly imbricated platelets create a system of fissures and caves within the material’s surface. This rutted topography is what makes nacre both highly smooth and highly durable against tensile pressure, at once of its environment, in the particular sense, and against it.

When light hits nacre, it filters through these transparent sheets and refracts within their constellated structure, emerging scattered. Lustre: distinct from shine, and certainly from shininess, which, the critic Douglas Coupland writes, “smells like the interior of a new car”.²⁸⁵ Lustre looks like the inside of a pearl, its rich glow a quality of surface conductivity arising from speckled depths, molecular materiality that seems almost made for the eye—iridescence, from the Greek *iris*, meaning rainbow.

²⁸³ “[The oyster] is a world categorically closed upon itself,” writes Francis Ponge (2011, p. 22), in ‘The Oyster’. “And yet, it can be opened [...] It’s a rough job. The pounding you give it scars the envelope with white rings, a sort of halo.”

²⁸⁴ By “strictly speaking”, Ponge (2011, p. 22) may be referencing the etymology of firmament, from *firmare*, ‘fix, settle’.

²⁸⁵ Douglas Coupland, ‘Shiny’, *e-flux Supercommunity* (2015) <<http://supercommunity.e-flux.com/authors/douglas-coupland/>> Accessed 05-10-2018.

So this writing begins with a glimpse or a glimmer—so a glimpse or glimmer begins. Roland Barthes spoke “shimmer” or “shimmering” less than a dozen times in his lectures on the Neutral. Yet, according to Barthes, the Neutral—the culmination of his intention to “outplay the paradigm”,²⁸⁶ the suspension of all categories,²⁸⁷ “a borderline thought”,²⁸⁸ “time of the *not yet*, moment when within the original nondifferentiation something begins to be sketched”²⁸⁹—*is* shimmer, and shimmer is the Neutral, indicated in his lecture notes by the symbol =. Shimmer for Barthes is what makes the idea of lectures, let alone his lectures, possible:

“[...] The course is not the presentation of the current state of a ‘thought’ but rather (at least ideally) the shimmering of an individuation [...] one could then accept the word ‘course’ without bad feelings: its connotation being bad mostly if the ‘course’ is ‘magisterial’”.²⁹⁰

But why start or start writing with shimmer? Why write shimmer now? Shimmer as onset, shimmer as intimation. Shimmer as the possibility of communication, as glimpse. More that shimmers in *The Neutral*: the German philosopher and mystic Jakob Boehme’s notion of *qualitas*, the energetic quality of a thing;²⁹¹ pathos, “insofar as it changes, goes through changes”;²⁹² “diaphorology”, a “science of shimmer [...] or mottled effects”,²⁹³ never expanded upon in *The Neutral* or elsewhere, which Barthes says will facilitate a psychology capable of understanding predominance—the type of psychology we need, according to Barthes, nothing less than “the inventory of shimmers, of nuances, of states, of changes”.²⁹⁴

²⁸⁶ Barthes, 2005, p. 7.

²⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 45.

²⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 52.

²⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 50.

²⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 47.

²⁹¹ Ibid., p. 54.

²⁹² Ibid., p. 73.

²⁹³ Ibid., p. 83.

²⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 77.

Kinaesthesia, “shimmering state of the active and affected body”.²⁹⁵ The distinction, or separation, between “present” and “modern”.²⁹⁶ Nuance.²⁹⁷ Relativity.^{298,299} Difference.³⁰⁰

Like (but not exactly) Ponge’s oyster says: shimmer is a mirror and a door.

What is the pearl, to the oyster? “Impossible”,³⁰¹ insofar as “to speak it is to defeat it, but not to speak it is to miss its setting up”.³⁰² Barthes seems to index shimmer within his lectures not to ground it but to let shimmer do what it does: elude fixity, classification, even depiction, and at the same time avoid dissipation and other repudiations of subjecthood. Surging, circling, swooping, he frames and reframes the question: how to articulate that which both constitutes and is constituted by process, so as not to miss it altogether, so as not to freeze it “in place?”³⁰³ “Hence”, he says, “a series of very beautiful ordinary metaphors”.³⁰⁴

In a section or “figure”³⁰⁵ or “trait” or “twinkling” of *The Neutral* in which Barthes describes witnessing a spill of neutral colour paint (driving him, frustrated at the stain of identification, back to “discourse, which, at least, cannot say what the Neutral is”),³⁰⁶ he offers his most expansive articulation of shimmer:

²⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 228.

²⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 83.

²⁹⁷ Ibid.

²⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 51.

²⁹⁹ In *Relativity: The Special and General Theory*, Albert Einstein (1920, p. 117) famously referred to space-time, the infinite, abstract, non-rigid complexity of quantum possibility, as the “reference-mollusk”. The scholar Paola Villa (2020, p. 28) argues for the influence of Einstein’s term and concept on the work of Francis Ponge and Paul Valéry, in particular Valéry’s ‘Eupalinos, or The Architect’, and ‘Man and the Sea Shell’, in which “the text is constructed following the ‘ineluctable theme of the spiral’—layer upon layer, with continuous modulations, as if rhythmically distilled by the creature itself”.

³⁰⁰ Barthes, 2005, p. 51.

³⁰¹ Ponge’s ‘Oyster’ (2011, p. 22) ends thus: “On rare occasion the perfect formula pearls up in its nacreous throat, and we take it at once for our adornment.”

³⁰² Barthes, 2005, p. 29.

³⁰³ Ibid., p. 19.

³⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 22.

³⁰⁵ In her own extensive footnote on the figure, which fills almost the entire first page of her essay ‘Time in the Codex’, the poet Lisa Robertson (2012, p. 11) traces the etymology of figure to the philologist Erich Auerbach’s analysis of Lucretius, in his 1938 essay, ‘Figura’. Auerbach saw figure as pointing to “[...] the *changing* aspect of the permanent”, a “traversing”, in Robertson’s words, “a supple transference [...] which is also a simultaneity, [giving] occasion to the desire to interpret”. Robertson cites Deleuze, who wrote, in *The Fold*, also on Lucretius, “the object itself overflows its frame in order to enter into a cycle or field of meaning”, and determines that “what makes an object figurative, besides its productive origin, is its capacity to overflow intention. The figure’s agency is its historicity—it finds its dynamics in the inherent incompleteness of history”. At the same time, interpretability in the present is neither counters nor determines the figure but is instead the mechanism by which figural logic perpetuates, overflows (again).

³⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 49.

[The Neutral] substitutes for the idea of opposition that of the slight difference, of the onset, of the effort toward difference, in other words, of nuance: nuance becomes a principle of allover organization [...] that in a way skips the paradigm: this integrally and almost exhaustively nuanced space is the shimmer [...] that whose aspect, perhaps whose meaning, is subtly modified according to the angle of the subject's gaze.³⁰⁷

Elsewhere, shimmer is a “a region, a horizon, a direction”.³⁰⁸ Elsewhere still, “a passage”.³⁰⁹ Skimming, Barthes sparks a kind of conductivity through “the onset”—“the effort towards”—“difference”—“nuance”—linking them across his lectures as typologies of movement. Light refracts within the pearl before dispersing: a surface of interiors, this space of lustre. (“The mollusk is a *being—almost a—quality*”, writes Ponge. “To tell the truth, it is simply [...] a door latch and its door”).³¹⁰

Or: “the formation, not the form”,³¹¹ the Paul Valéry wrote, looking at a seashell then concluding that one is both. The surface, which is also the movement, which is also the instant “between distinction and indistinction”.³¹² The mollusk, dreaming of the sand.

Difference: “where” — this is Julie Ault speaking now,³¹³ “things get interesting”.³¹⁴ Shimmer as a start or state for writing is partly about differentiation: writing hopes to differentiate itself from nonexistence but also from its subject—to begin.

“Look at yourself in a mirror all your life, and you’ll see death at work”, Ault writes, speaking through the artist Jean Cocteau’s script for his film, *Orphée* (1950), in her essay

³⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 51.

³⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 45.

³⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 68.

³¹⁰ Ponge, 2011, p. 26.

³¹¹ Paul Valéry, in Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* [1958], trans. Maria Jolas (New York: Penguin Books, 2014), p. 126

³¹² Barthes, 2005, p. 51.

³¹³ This method of introducing voices is similar to the way the filmmaker Beatrice Gibson (2018) prefates her speaking through poets who are not shown in her film *I Hope I’m Loud When I’m Dead*: “This is Alice [Notley] speaking now”, says Gibson, when they arrive. “This is Audre [Lorde] speaking now.”

³¹⁴ Ault, 2017, p. 179.

‘Liberace’s Mirrors: A Glimpse’.³¹⁵ Ault, or Ault’s work and writing, enters the conversation staged in this writing and becomes its impetus: fascinated with the eminently radiant entertainer’s former Las Vegas home, in which multiple, entire rooms were lined with mirror, she describes finding footage online of “furtive walk-throughs and peeking-through-the-window tours”³¹⁶ recorded by real estate agents and curious fans after the property was foreclosed in 2013.

“Reflectivity seems to flow throughout the mansion”, she writes. “Entranceways are covered in mirrors, the hall of mirrors leads to mirrored double doors that open into a room with mirrored pillars and a mirrored ceiling [...] Reflection becomes the site of inexpugnable experience: a present tense of accumulated traces, in no particular order”.³¹⁷

(See Fig. A: Dreaming)

A few seconds of this footage is included in a short promotional video for *Afterlife: a constellation*, Ault’s contribution to the 2014 Whitney Biennial, a room of archival objects, artworks and documents on display.³¹⁸ The clip of Liberace’s house is grainy and jolting in the style of Handycam. The camera’s pace is gentle but its movements probe interconnected mirrored hallways, reception rooms and doorframes, disorienting, prismatic in effect. (“Visual apprehension gets slippery in the setting”, Ault writes).³¹⁹ Occasionally, a figure appears—there seem to be several, moving sylph-like through the disco ball—but only in part, refracted in continuous surface then gone.

Cut to Ault again, filmed at an angle, dark glasses glowing improbably with sunlight. *Afterlife* “[took] up”, she says, “in a very general sense, issues of disappearance and recollection, the way things are recollected—*histories* are recollected—through artistic

³¹⁵ Julie Ault, ‘Liberace’s Mirrors: a Glimpse’, in Dominic Eichler and Brigitte Oetker (eds.), *PS: Jahresring 61* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014), pp. 70-72 (p. 71).

³¹⁶ Ault, 2017, p. 237.

³¹⁷ Ibid., p. 237.

³¹⁸ ‘2014 Biennial: Julie Ault on Liberace’s Mirrors’ [Video], *Whitney Museum of American Art* (2014) <<https://whitney.org/WatchAndListen/218>> Accessed 05-10-2018.

³¹⁹ Ault, 2017, p. 237.

practices, through archiving practices”.³²⁰ Elsewhere, she describes *Afterlife* as a collection of “evidence and events”,³²¹ conjunction allowing the work to be both.

A room sheet accompanying *Afterlife* at the Whitney listed its contents:

A painting by Martin Wong

A photograph by David Wojnarowicz

A publication by Martin Beck

A sculpture by Robert Kinmont

A stereoscopic photograph by Alfred A. Hart

A text by Julie Ault

An apparition by Liberace

An excerpted passage by William Least Heat-Moon

An interview with Marvin Taylor

Documents and artefacts from the Downtown Collection at New York University

Two heliogravures by Danh Vo

*Two paintings and a film by James Benning*³²²

Works, works within works,³²³ documents, film. Part personal anthology, part associative index, part absurd taxonomy, *Afterlife* cast each item as a prism, a way to approach the whole through the specificity of the part, or, played backways, to see the specificity of each work most distinctly at the point at which it tended toward another, to overflow.

In an essay, the art historian Branden Joseph calls refraction an apt concept for Ault’s practice because it describes the deflection of focus from a single point.³²⁴ Refraction is the bend in a light wave that occurs at the threshold of two media in which light has different

³²⁰ ‘2014 Biennial: Julie Ault on Liberace’s Mirrors’, 2014.

³²¹ ‘Whitney Biennial 2014 Part II’, *Contemporary Art Daily* (May 2014) <http://www.contemporaryartdaily.com/2014/05/whitney-biennial-2014-part-ii/img_4134fwbsc/> Accessed 16-10-2018.

³²² ‘Whitney Biennial 2014 Part II’, 2014

³²³ The artist David Wojnarowicz’s enigmatic *Magic Box* (2018), itself a form of refraction or dreaming, contains 58 items, including postcards, toys, religious figurines, rocks, beads, a painted mammal skull, a bag of sixteen insects and bugs, prayer cards belonging to Peter Hujar and other ephemera in an Indian River Citrus crate labelled with masking tape and marker. The box was found under Wojnarowicz’s bed after his death in 1994. For *Afterlife: a constellation*, the Magic Box was displayed in a vitrine with some of its contents strewn around it and some still inside the box, not visible.

³²⁴ Branden Joseph, in Provan (ed.), 2016.

speeds:³²⁵ that bend, form (velocity) of passing-through, describes or pronounces the threshold to the eye. The movement, which is to say the surface, of the slightest distance, brilliant rapidity at varying degrees of instantaneousness, light that is multitudinous in its singularity, and in its multitude singular.

Liberace reappears in Ault's book *In Part: Writings by Julie Ault*, made up of fragments of writing covering Ault's exhibition-making and organising individually, in collaboration, and as a founding member of Group Material. Group Material were, according to a poster they made, "5 graphic designers, 2 teachers, a waitress, a cartographer, two textile designers, a telephone operator, a dancer, a computer analyst and an electrician".³²⁶ In a press release from in 1980, a year after forming, they described themselves as "a new collective of young artists committed to the creation and promotion of an art dedicated to social communication and political change".³²⁷

I am choosing two descriptions from hundreds in the Group Material archive Ault helped establish at New York University's Fales Library because part of her work across multiple formats since the collective disbanded in 1996 has been to institute or represent practice in a way that does not preclude disappearance—to look for and then attempt to show the surface at which culture and history become subject to, she writes, "reformulation".³²⁸

"Contexts cannot be replicated." Ault writes, introducing a book about Group Material. "It is impossible to reproduce the climate of circumstance and perception and understanding for events".³²⁹ But then, also, elsewhere: "Can contexts be, in effect, communicated?"³³⁰

(See Fig. B: The Writing That Is There Already)

³²⁵ Carl R. Nave, 'Refraction of Light', *HyperPhysics* (2016), Georgia State University <<http://hyperphysics.phy-astr.gsu.edu/hbase/geoopt/refr.html#c3>> Accessed 20-11-2019.

³²⁶ Group Material, 'Who is Group Material?' poster, Folder 6: Early GM, Box 1, Subseries A, Series I, Group Material Archive, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University

³²⁷ Group Material, 'Press Release (September 30, 1980)', Folder 6: Early GM, Box 1, Subseries A, Series I, Group Material Archive, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University.

³²⁸ Ault, 2017, p. 185.

³²⁹ Julie Ault, 'Case Reopened: Group Material', in Julie Ault (ed.), *Show and Tell: a Chronicle of Group Material* (London: Four Corners Books, 2010), (pp. 209-216) p. 212.

³³⁰ Julie Ault, in Lucy Lippard, in Ault, 2017, p. vii.

Context, a shimmering question, is in play in this writing. “The double edge of the mirror is its potential for vulnerability and, ultimately, disappearance”,³³¹ Ault writes, about Liberace. One of Ault’s questions is how to make contextual ideas, works, figures visible without losing specificity.³³²

Group Material wanted to make visible relationships between politics and aesthetics³³³ and the life of these relationships in specific historical forms. In a grant application from 1985, they wrote: “GM’s primary objective is to create a context for art exhibitions and cultural projects which is directly concerned with society rather than separate from it”.³³⁴ Decades later, in an interview with the artist Pauline Boudry, Ault says similarly: “Personally I am not interested in expediently separating out issues that I don’t think can be separated [...] This does not foreclose the fact that there are situations and contexts when one kind of violence or discrimination is particularly operable or emphasized, or where a single issue or topic should be privileged for a particular aim.”³³⁵

Alike in value, different in aspect, the forms of Ault’s practice after Group Material are, as the art critic Lucy Lippard writes, “all of a piece”.³³⁶ The critic Holland Cotter has called Ault’s mediums “collaboration and accumulation”,³³⁷ which Lippard expands on in reverse: “I have often insisted that if anything an artist does is art then anything a writer does is writing. Ault complicates this notion because she *is* an artist, albeit an artist who has seldom

³³¹ Ault, 2017, p. 237.

³³² In her preface to the first edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt (1973, p. vii-viii) argued for the political urgency of specificity as method for discovering “the hidden mechanics” by which its own destruction had taken place: “This book has been written against a background of both reckless optimism and reckless despair [...] Everything seems to have lost specific value, and has become unrecognizable for human comprehension, unusable for human purpose. To yield to the mere process of disintegration has become an irresistible temptation, not only because it has assumed the spurious grandeur of ‘historical necessity’, but also because everything outside it has begun to appear lifeless, bloodless, meaningless, and unreal.”

³³³ In a footnote to her introduction of *Alternative Art New York: 1965–1985*, Ault (2002, p. 16) writes: “From 1979 to 1996 I was a member of the artists’ collaborative Group Material, which produced installations and public projects exploring interrelationships between politics and aesthetics”.

³³⁴ Group Material, ‘Organization Grant Application form NEA-3 (1985)’, Folder 5: National Endowment for the Arts, Box 8, Series V, Group Material Archive, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University.

³³⁵ Ault, 2017, p. 31.

³³⁶ Lippard, in Ault, 2017, p. v.

³³⁷ Holland Cotter, ‘Julie Ault at Galerie Buchholz, the Curator as Artist’, *The New York Times* (January 8, 2016) <<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/08/arts/design/julie-ault-at-galerie-buchholz-the-curator-as-artist.html>> Accessed 17-12-2019.

produced an object or a solo show (her texts and exhibitions fill that role)".³³⁸ Association, consubstantial current of Ault's work, gives charge to affinity, adjacency,³³⁹ and fascination, which materialise ("she *is* an artist")³⁴⁰ most vividly where specificities of context and practice tend toward one another.

On turning the pages, *In Part*'s order at once activates and disassembles (or dissembles—does it trick?) Before the excerpt about Liberace is a personal essay about Ault's beloved aunt and uncle and the thoughtless discarding of their possessions— "personal belongings, treasures of shared histories, things kept so long they became valuable antiques",³⁴¹ Ault writes—by another family member. After Liberace is an obituary of Ault's father, John Lee Ault, who "loved to work and delighted in the convivial culture of teamwork".³⁴² An excerpt from an essay about archives seems to speak to the book's formal and informal logic: "It is difficult to identify where an association of ideas or interests begins, and it is just as complicated to pinpoint ending. A labyrinthine set of frictions that unfold in the archive is awaked here as well: past tense and present tense [...] remembering and forgetting [...] completion and continuance [...] the enduring and the ephemeral [...] a game of tag is set in motion."³⁴³

What sort of form is Ault describing—what refraction or adjustments at the surface of language—and what formal corollaries might therefore become possible in writing her writing, in writing her work?

Another excerpt: "Last night I read this letter that Felix sent to you in 1993", Ault tells the gallerist Andrea Rosen. Their conversation is about Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Ault's close friend and a member of Group Material in its middle years. The letter Ault refers to was sent while Gonzalez-Torres was dying,³⁴⁴ a fact Lucy Lippard identifies in her text but Ault does

³³⁸ I would like to supplement Lippard's (in Ault, 2017, p. v) sketching of Ault with the opening lines of Lippard's novel, *I see/You mean* (1979, p. 1): "Color slide, square, overexposed. Sky, water, surf, sand. An empty beach, the edges between elements somewhat blurred".

³³⁹ Lippard (in Ault, 2017, p. vii) complicates Ault's thinking on context with another statement, from 2002: "I work contextually, and a contextual approach means the material criteria and methodologies employed are contingent upon purpose, location, material parameters, and the issues at stake".

³⁴⁰ Lippard, in Ault, 2017, p. v.

³⁴¹ Ault, 2017, p. 236.

³⁴² Ibid., p. 239.

³⁴³ Ibid., p. 185.

³⁴⁴ Lippard, in Ault, 2017, p. xii.

not. The letter accompanied the gift of a Nelson clock,³⁴⁵ which Gonzalez-Torres collected. Ault and Rosen distributed the collection after Gonzalez-Torres's death in 1996 and Ault re-collected them for an exhibition called 'Ever Ephemeral'.³⁴⁶ Ault says to Rosen: "[...] The letter begins, 'This is not a clock. It's more than just a machine that marks time',³⁴⁷ and ends, 'To more time'".^{348,349}

(See Fig. C: Friendship)

Have I begun again? I turn back to Lippard's introduction, which formally picks up on Ault's indexical, associative approach. Thematic adjacency becomes an "accidental reward"³⁵⁰ of Lippard's alphabetisation. Refractive possibility in (written) form becomes another way of showing that it is not possible to work or write independently—of context, of friendship, of disappearance, of time:

COLLECTING

Writing about Martin Wong's home, his 'private cosmos' [...] Ault reflects on her own 'collection'— 'building blocks of identity'—uneasy about the term since her own considerable accumulation of art and objects has been an organic process. (Here too, I identify. If I ever write a 'memoir', it will be a description of the objects in my home and the threads that bind them together and to my life.) An artist's accumulation always reflects friendships, influences, and idiosyncrasies.³⁵¹

³⁴⁵ "Time and its passing weave through this book", writes Lippard (in Ault, 2017, p. xii), in a section of her introduction about Ault and Gonzalez-Torres, titled 'Friendship'.

³⁴⁶ Richard Birkett, 'Le respect pour les fonds', in Julie Ault, Richard Birkett and Martin Beck (eds.), *Tell It To My Heart: Volume 2* (Berlin: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2016), pp. 8-32 (p. 30).

³⁴⁷ At the outset of 'Endings', a chapter of *Dear Angel of Death*, Simone White (2019, p. 47) cites several passages of Giorgio Agamben's (2005, p. 79) writing on the poetic structure of messianic time, or the messianic structure of poetic time, in *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*. It is perhaps an appropriate addendum to Gonzalez-Torres' statement: "The poem is [...] an organism or temporal machine, that, from the very start, strains toward its end. A kind of eschatology occurs within the poem itself. For the more or less brief time the poem lasts, it has a specific and unmistakable temporality, it has its own time."

³⁴⁸ Ault, 2017, p. 177.

³⁴⁹ "Impatience is the mistake made by a person who wishes to escape the absence of time", writes Maurice Blanchot (1981, p. 72), in his essay on the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, "patience is the trick that tries to master this absence of time by turning it into another kind of time, measured in a different way. But true patience does not exclude impatience; it is the heart of impatience, it is impatience endlessly suffered and endured. Orpheus' impatience"—in turning back and therefore losing Eurydice forever—"is therefore also a correct impulse: it is the source of what will become his own passion, his highest patience, his infinite sojourn in death".

³⁵⁰ Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), p. 53.

³⁵¹ Lippard, in Ault, 2017, p. vii.

In the excerpt Lippard refers to, Ault visits Wong, who died in 1999, at his home. In her recollection, he shows her a Mondrian he keeps in his kitchen.³⁵² Ault is struck by how de-reification, supposedly a lessening, invites or allows “a multiplicity of passions”.³⁵³ Is this what sets an object in motion within what she calls, a page earlier, “communicative forms”³⁵⁴ or “temporary materializations”³⁵⁵? Ault indexes Wong’s affinities in her writing, calling to mind an enormous table across which all are spread, equal: “Chinese ceramics, the paintings of Thomas Eakins and Winslow Homer, calligraphy, archers’ thumb rings, children’s lunchboxes, Mickeys and Minnies and Donalds [...] Chinatown.”³⁵⁶

But in *Afterlife*’s inventoried contents, Liberace’s *Apparition* stands out. First, its stated medium, apparition, is spectacular, the only one in the index without an obvious formal corollary. And the item is attributed to its subject, rather than to Ault, which would make sense if it were a performance, if Liberace had not died almost 30 years before the exhibition, if the room did not already contain one piano-shaped object (Robert Kinmont’s *The Wings are in the Paper Drawer* (1972/73)), precluding the presence—Pauli’s exclusion principle—of a second. Or, if “apparition” did not seem somehow to foreclose suggestions of impersonation, mimesis, of a double, rather than a half. No. Liberace’s apparition, the work without form,³⁵⁷ the no-thing, the glimpsing, was blink-and-you’ll-miss-it: two rectilinear thresholds leading into/out of Ault’s exhibition room, their inner surfaces lined entirely with mirror.

Passing through into Ault’s room at the time, I remember being instantly transposed into its multiplicity—the multiplicity of the index—the more-than-total via the partial—inside the mirror-room of the door, less about seeing in its fullness than about catching a glimpse. Parts of my reflection as part/s among many within and just outside the room: other figures, works,

³⁵² Ibid.

³⁵³ Ibid.

³⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 202.

³⁵⁵ Ibid.

³⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 203.

³⁵⁷ I am invoking Georges Bataille’s ‘*l’informe*’ (“...affirming that the universe resembles nothing and is only formless amounts to saying that the universe is something like a spider or spit”) less for its aesthetic orientation (toward ‘base materialism’) than for its ontological status, following Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss (1997, p. 15), as “neither the ‘form’ nor the ‘content’ but the operation that displaces both of these terms”. ‘*L’informe*’ is helpful here insofar as it models, following Krauss and Bois (1997, p. 18), “neither a theme, nor a substance, nor a concept”, but a conduit arising from and returning to taxonomy, even if Bataille’s intention was “taxonomic disorder”.

Kinmont's "poetic misfile", two photographs taken almost two hundred years apart of tree stumps cut by the ill-fated Donner Party in 1846, a large wall work by Wong titled *Closed* (1984-85), a multimedia painting of locked gates, from the Whitney's permanent collection, part of the museum dragged into the mix as a fraction and changed—above my head, down my sides, within the mirror doors or rooms that flashed and fractured, broad at times, sharp at others, like facets on a cut diamond.

("Two slightly concave doors constitute its entire abode/", writes Francis Ponge, "First and last abode. It resides there till after its death./ There's no way to get it out alive./every last cell in a human body clings in the same way, and with the same vigour, to words—reciprocally").³⁵⁸

What does Ault's choice to call Liberace's presence an apparition rather than an appearance give to this writing, an attempt to write shimmer, which alternates appearance and disappearance? Apparitions of the Virgin Mary, or Marian apparitions, name direct, personal experiences of the divine that are considered other to recognised religious experience.³⁵⁹ Marian apparitions are wild, at once unimpeachable eruptions of faith and incursions on the church's organisational framework.³⁶⁰ Claims must be approved by a bishop. An index is kept. The International Marian Research Institute's website lists the year, place, number of people involved ("teen-age girl", "8 children", "crowd"), "approval of faith expression", and "approval of supernatural character" for all reported apparitions since 1900.³⁶¹ Mary is alike in value but different in aspect: she is Our Lady of Lourdes, Our Lady of La Salette, Our Lady of Guadalupe, where the possessive encompasses a presence that is manifestly specific and figuratively general.

Only "apparition" captures the spectacle of arrival, what Ault calls "the glamour of the entrance",³⁶² which Liberace favoured and was famous for. Glamour, from the Scottish

³⁵⁸ Ponge, 2011, p. 26.

³⁵⁹ Kristin Norget, Valentina Napolitano and Maya Mayblin, 'Introduction: The Anthropology of Catholicism', in *The Anthropology of Catholicism: a Reader* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017), pp. 1-33 (pp. 15-16).

³⁶⁰ "Where does our story take place", reads the opening narration of Cocteau's *Orphée* (1950), "and when? A legend is entitled to be beyond time and place. Interpret it as you wish [...]"

³⁶¹ 'All About Mary: Apparitions Statistics, Modern', *International Marian Research Institute, University of Dayton* <<https://udayton.edu/imri/mary/a/apparitions-statistics-modern.php>> Accessed 17-12-2019.

³⁶² Ault, 2017, p. 237.

glamer,³⁶³ a bewitchment, illusion, quick dazzling of the eye, in which the apparition pretends itself, folds perception, causing the one who's looking to see things as they aren't.

Where “apparition” suggests a materialisation that is shrouded or partial, remarkable and inexpressible all at once, the idea of appearance, benign on the face, carries intimations of unwanted exposure. Ault points out that Liberace hid or was hidden in his sexuality, “a conspicuous falsehood”³⁶⁴ aided at times by libel lawsuits,³⁶⁵ until his death from AIDS-related pneumonia in 1987.³⁶⁶ And some contemporary critics find this dogged and comprehensive deflection—attended in the Hall of Mirrors by refuge, safety, and in public by a kind of performatively veiled self-mimesis³⁶⁷—to be nothing less than an act of cultural violence.³⁶⁸ But deflection is central to Liberace's legacy, requiring, during his life, the collapse of absolute and unavoidable but also desired and desirable visibility into absolute interiority.

Picture, I am picturing,³⁶⁹ the glittering contradiction of Liberace's costumes: sequined, silken, shimmering, reflecting light away from the star to draw the eye toward him, dissolving his body in a brilliant cacophony while turning him into the source of light itself: “The performer [...] attaining the illusion of amorphous space, places to lose oneself”, Ault writes, in her elegy, “a form of magical privacy”.³⁷⁰ The glistening, the glamour, the glimpse: with his mirrors, Liberace created a palace of dispersal that was also a magnification, a

³⁶³ John Jamieson, *Jamieson's Dictionary of the Scottish Language* (Edinburgh: William P. Nimmo, 1867), p. 231.

³⁶⁴ Ault, 2014, p. 71.

³⁶⁵ Marvin Taylor, ‘Space Relations’, in Julie Ault, Richard Birkett and Martin Beck (eds.), *Tell It To My Heart: Volume 2* (Berlin: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2016), (pp. 40-65) p. 56.

³⁶⁶ ‘2014 Biennial: Julie Ault on Liberace's Mirrors’, 2014.

³⁶⁷ Marvin Taylor (2016, p. 55) writes *The World of Liberace* (1975) playing on the monitor at the entrance to Ault's 2013 exhibition ‘Macho Man, Tell It To My Heart: Collected by Julie Ault’, reminded him “of the scene from *The Loved One*, the star-studded 1965 film based on a novel by Evelyn Waugh with a script by Waugh and Terry Southern, in which Liberace plays a casket salesman. His character, Counsel Starker, is a highly opinionated, condescending aesthete who helps the main character select a casket for his departed uncle, a gay man who has committed suicide after losing his job as a set designer. This black comedy drips with biting wit, and Liberace plays his part with impeccable timing. The unspoken joke, of course, is that Liberace is playing a lispng, condescending homosexual aesthete, which, in fact, is what he might actually be, and which he certainly pretends to be before his audiences.”

³⁶⁸ “We could no longer afford”, Taylor (2016, p. 56) continues, “Liberace's playing at being gay and denying it when questioned”.

³⁶⁹ In her prose poem ‘Nicole Eisenman, I Need You to Make me a Picture’ (2019, p. 27), Simone White writes of that which “cannot be pictured but might be symbolically ‘pictured’”.

³⁷⁰ Ault, 2017, p. 237.

multiplication, a space of refraction that allowed him to, in a sense, exceed himself without breaching the surface of the interior.

(The paradox is of what “doesn’t hide but doesn’t show”, Barthes notes in his lectures, somewhat consternated, “= very difficult”:

“Here we are in an ideology of ‘depth,’ of the apparent versus the hidden. The hidden = rich, the apparent = poor. Evangelical theme [...] The Neutral = the back, but a back that shows without attracting attention [...] problem for us: is the Neutral really a breachable, peelable surface, behind which richness, colour, strong meaning hide?”³⁷¹)

An apparition doesn’t haunt, doesn’t hover, cannot definitively be said to appear. Its presence is the outermost surface of invisibility—the “breachable, peelable surface”³⁷²—the shimmer of disappearance. “In the end”, says Barthes, not even halfway into his lectures, “the ultimate opposition, the one that both fascinates and is the most difficult to think about to the extent that it self-destructs in its very statement is that between distinction and indistinction”.³⁷³ (He speaks through another German philosopher and mystic, Meister Eckhart,³⁷⁴ whose theology supposed that “the distinction between the indistinct and the distinct is greater than all that could separate two distinct beings from one another”).³⁷⁵

A question about voice or the invocation—meaning citation—of voices in this writing could be: how do—or do—these voices make the subject of the writing appear? But if “appearance” carries some sense of remoteness, calling to mind celebrities who appear only to be seen from afar, apparition suggests a closer distance: what takes place between the adept and their presence³⁷⁶ isn’t contact as such but the possibility of communication. “Apparition” not only

³⁷¹ Barthes, 2005, p. 50.

³⁷² Ibid.

³⁷³ Ibid., p. 51.

³⁷⁴ Barthes (2005, p. 51) notes that the negative mystics “clearly saw it”, emphasising without qualifying the nature of the “it” that’s there to see.

³⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 51.

³⁷⁶ The term ‘presence’ is intended to distinguish apparition, a surplus of being, from the liminal, anti-ontological non-being of Jacques Derrida’s hauntological spectre, of which Derrida (1994, p. 161) expressly stated: “To haunt does not mean to be present”. It is important to distinguish Ault’s practice, which in part explores the political and aesthetic possibilities of presencing historical specificities, from Derrida’s hauntology, in which, as the philosopher Martin Hägglund (2008, p. 82) notes, “what is important about the figure of the spectre [...] is that it cannot be fully present: it has no being in itself but marks a relation to what is no longer or not yet”.

speaks of the invoker's desire for something to take place, but also of their desire to cross that uncrossable distance—to take part.

Or, to try it another way: “What is it [...] that divides the atmosphere from the water?”

Leonardo da Vinci writes, backwards, in the early 1500s.³⁷⁷ “How many surfaces does a fish break when it jumps out of the ocean?” Roberto Casati and Achille C. Varzi write, citing da Vinci, in 1994.³⁷⁸ Sometime in that four hundred-year-odd interval, the fish propelled itself out of and into, breaking the surface tension of the water and so altering the pressure at sea-level, the surface of atmosphere itself.³⁷⁹ I, the writer, am saying that by propelling da Vinci into the fourth dimension, Casati and Varzi implicate movement in the question of where interstice meets substance, and where distinction, which is also to say indistinction, takes place.

At what outer surface, which is to say by what movement, does non-surface begin?³⁸⁰

(Shining there for a brief moment, the fish descends out of sight. Note: shimmer at the surface of a wave).

Another voice: “Now I am a lake”, opines Sylvia Plath's mirror, who “swallows” reflections, including that of the opposite wall. “I think it is part of my heart. But it flickers”.³⁸¹ But then, Ault's mirrors were doors. “Reflectivity seems to flow”, she writes, in part,³⁸² but when mirrors are brought to face, the result is not a greater depth of reflection nor the expansiveness implied by “flow”. Instead, an endless multiplication of the barely-there

³⁷⁷ Leonardo da Vinci, in Roberto Casati and Achille C. Varzi, 1994, *Holes and Other Superficialities* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), p. 10.

³⁷⁸ Casati and Varzi, 1994, p. 10.

³⁷⁹ If you hold a seashell to your ear, it becomes a Helmholtz resonator: a hard container of fixed volume with a smooth, curved interior and a single opening, wherein compressed air turns “springy” (Wolfe, n.d.) and vibrates at the frequency of the outside atmosphere, usually a low, gentle roar. Although it is not correct to say that you can hear the ocean in a seashell, it is correct to say that what you hear is the movement and rhythm of the atmosphere, the unit of measure for pressure at the surface of the sea.

³⁸⁰ The text that accompanies the Flammarion engraving, from Camille Flammarion's 1888 novel *L'atmosphère: météorologie populaire* (The Atmosphere: Popular Meteorology), depicting a missionary breaking through the firmament to see the hidden mechanics of the universe, famously reads: “A missionary of the Middle Ages tells that he had found the point where the sky and the Earth touch [...]”

³⁸¹ Plath's (1963, p. 28) temporal surface ends (her poem) thus:

“A woman bends over me,
Searching my reaches for what she really is...
In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman
Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish.”

³⁸² Ault, 2017, p. 237.

changes with the speed and direction of vision, quickening, current-like, just passing through. A partial body, at once above, behind and ahead, a back-of-hair, a shirt sleeve, the tail of a jacket. Motion, a figure, an instant, already past. A glint, a glance, a glimpse. A twinkling. Refraction. Conductivity that shimmers at the surface like heat rising from sand. (“It begins on a beach”, Lippard writes. “is that symbolic?”)³⁸³

When searching for a model to configure what he calls “tiny displacement” at the periphery, a little like the shimmer of this writing, yet no more or less in his writing than the insuperable distance between paradise and the mortal world, Agamben reaches for halos, a phenomena of “beatitude”,³⁸⁴ evidence (and function) of that to which “nothing essential can be added” except “surplus”.³⁸⁵ Referencing St. Thomas Aquinas’s treatise on angels, Agamben writes that halos embody “an ‘accidental reward’”,³⁸⁶ not “a property or an essence [...] [but] an absolutely inessential supplement”,³⁸⁷ “something like the vibration of that which is perfect, the glow at its edges”.³⁸⁸

This is important to (re)state because I don’t want to suggest that what barely shows up at the surface of the visible is contentless.³⁸⁹ I want to somehow say or say in a multitude of ways and voices that the infinitely marginal contains the infinitely maximal: the distinction, which is also the distance, between—let’s call it—heaven and earth. “This [displacement] cannot refer simply to real circumstances”, Agamben continues, “in the sense that the nose of the blessed one will become a little shorter, or that the cup on the table will be displaced exactly one-half centimetre, or that the dog outside will stop barking. The tiny displacement does not

³⁸³ Lippard, 1979, p. 1.

³⁸⁴ Agamben, 2007, p. 53.

³⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 54.

³⁸⁶ Ibid, p. 53.

³⁸⁷ Ibid, p. 54.

³⁸⁸ Ibid.

³⁸⁹ I am interested in the way Barthes’ idea of tact and Agamben’s idea of halo likewise figure the supplement, even though infinitesimal such as to be “between every thing and itself”, as an overflow, as a margin, as a slight displacement, diverging somewhat from Derrida’s assertion in *Of Grammatology* (in Royle, 1995, p. 22) that “the supplement is always the supplement of a supplement. One wishes to go back *from the supplement to the source*: one must recognize that there is *a supplement at the source*”. Derrida’s “logic of interminable, ghostly referability” (Ibid., p. 23) emphasises contextuality and reference, but I want to preserve the potential for specificity, intentional ‘perversion’, in Barthes’ terms, and presence, *within* contextuality and reference, that Barthes and Agamben’s supplements seem to better afford. (Derrida (Ibid.) does introduce a proximal possibility with his idea of “surprise”, what enables the supplement to mean “more, less, or something other” than what its speaking subject intends).

refer to the state of things, but to their sense and their limits. It does not take place in things, but at their periphery, in the space of ease between every thing and itself”.³⁹⁰

I’m picturing another video posted online in which Liberace takes a turn as himself,³⁹¹ a pre-recorded introduction to a 1981 performance at what was then called the Las Vegas Hilton. “Liberace”, the title screen proclaims, in looping, twinkling script. A long tail from the letter “c” forms the outlined shapes of a candelabra and a piano, also twinkling. The camera sails through the pristine gates of his mansion, pausing for a moment on a trompe l’oeil approximation of Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel ceiling³⁹² before floating over the gold rails of a four-poster bed. We are in the entertainer’s bedroom, and so is he, rising beatific with a yawn for flourish, radiantly more than a man. A butler cloaks his brilliance with a red silk-lined kimono, which itself begins to glow as Liberace walks to his piano, extravagantly embossed, bearing not one but two lit candelabras, lid propped open to display a pastoral relief. Standing, the entertainer plays the opening chords.

Have I begun again? Although for Agamben halo is the completion or “becoming singular”³⁹³ of beatitude, it is also beatitude’s supplement, its overflow, perpetuity temporarily bounded³⁹⁴ and the edge of the beginning of something else. “The singularity here is not a final determination of being,” he writes, “but an unravelling or indetermination of its limits: a paradoxical *individuation by indetermination*”³⁹⁵—or, “being that is its mode of being, which

³⁹⁰ Barthes, 2005, p. 53.

³⁹¹ ‘Liberace Music Video & Entrance 1981’ [Video] (2008)

<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dioRwB4RvrQ>> Accessed 10-10-2019.

³⁹² The replica in Liberace’s bedroom was painted by Stefano Angelo Falk, a descendant of the original artist, who signed his masterpiece: ‘Stefano Angelo Falk in cooperation with Michelangelo Buonarroti created this Liberace Sistine Chapel Ceiling’ (Devore, 2015)

³⁹³ Agamben, 2007, p. 54.

³⁹⁴ This is Herman Melville’s (2002, p. 309-10) poet, Ishmael, on the halo of (writing) eternity: “While composing a little treatise on Eternity, I had the curiosity to place a mirror before me, and ere long saw reflected there, a curious involved worming and undulation in the atmosphere over my head. The invariable moisture of my hair, while plunged in deep thought, after six cups of hot tea in my thin, shingled attic, of an August noon [...].”

³⁹⁵ Agamben, 2007, p. 54.

is its welling up”.³⁹⁶ His example of such an unravelling is from the ancient text, *Book of Muhammad’s Ladder*,³⁹⁷ involving the “apparition of a pen, from which ‘ink issued’”.³⁹⁸

(See Fig. D: Solitude)

Writing or a work coming into being or writing Liberace and Ault writing—what Gilbert Simondon might summarise axiomatically as: “to be is to be in relation”.³⁹⁹ Necessitating some, if some is possible, of the comingled intensity described in Jakob Boehme’s work, cited by Barthes, as the vibrational *qualitas*, not the intensity of a quality but intensification itself: “a theatre of battling forces”,⁴⁰⁰ that “rises out of things... throws itself, spurts and grows [...] ‘qualifies’”,⁴⁰¹ a wave like air moving.

Qualitas, like halo, names something supplemental, an overflow of the essential, the surface at which what is innate (movement within) meets what is nuanced (movement beyond). But unlike Aquinas’ halo, serene, glowing, Boehme’s vision of perfection, or individuation, in secular terms, is turbulent, electric, charged by desire: “In each quality there is an element of anger, of suffering and furore”, says Barthes, citing Boehme, “since each quality suffers from its isolation, its limitation and tries to overflow, to be united with other qualities”⁴⁰²—with what Agamben calls, in a short essay, “the friend”.⁴⁰³

And more and more candelabras. Here he is at a dining table, being served a piano-shaped cake, more chords. He puts his icing-dipped finger to his mouth and turns toward the camera with an expression so coy it isn’t. The camera turns, and with a gentle, undulating motion sails, a dream, through a mirrored room, perhaps the same one from Ault’s video. There are

³⁹⁶ In this essay, titled ‘Toward an Ontology of Style’, Agamben (2016) outlines a Simondonian-, Boehmeian-inflected definition of Wittgensteinian form-of-life: “[...] Form-of-life is a ‘manner of rising forth’, not a being that has this or that property or quality but a being that is its mode of being, which is its welling up and is continually generated by its ‘manner’ of being”.

³⁹⁷ This is a title given to the account (Porter, 1974), which has taken many textual forms since the 700s AD, of Muhammed’s ascent to heaven up the titular ladder, and his encounters along the way with the Angel Gabriel and the Angel of Death.

³⁹⁸ Giorgio Agamben, ‘Toward an Ontology of Style’, *e-flux journal* (2016) <<https://www.e-flux.com/journal/73/52555/toward-an-ontology-of-style/>> Accessed 18-12-2019.

³⁹⁹ Simondon, 2009, p. 10.

⁴⁰⁰ Barthes, 2005, p. 54.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid.

⁴⁰² Ibid.

⁴⁰³ Giorgio Agamben, *What is an Apparatus? and Other Essays*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 34.

flowers in the vases, every brilliantined corner, every form resplendent. Hollywood Regency details and Edwardian furniture, infinite multiplication and dream logic, no one's home.

Liberace beatific in the pool, extracting another handful of chords from piano-key pool tiles. Liberace beatific in bubble bath ecstasy with a tub-side miniature grand piano. Liberace beatific in cloak upon cloak upon cloak of white fur, absolute interstice of conformism and fashion, Barthes' wildly narrow passage of tact: "a kind of social errancy, takes upon itself excessive marginality = that which in mass culture cannot become the object of any fashion;"⁴⁰⁴ "margins within the margins, marginalities that can't be recuperated [...]"⁴⁰⁵ And finally, Liberace beatific in the mirror room, silver sequined jacket ablaze. He turns and walks fast now, away. The camera, still floating, darts behind a wall as if unsure whether to pursue. From a dark corner, we see Liberace turn back to give a gesture of beckoning that momentarily accentuates his rigid posture. He curls his fingers—*follow me*—but the scene cross-fades.

Another dreaming of, or perhaps for, the conductive house⁴⁰⁶ belongs to the philosopher and theorist Vilém Flusser, who saw topology at the surface of public and private, of alone and not alone—whose wish was for the home to become "a warping"—he means it positively—"of the sphere of interpersonal relations".⁴⁰⁷ In an essay about this warping, Flusser rails against doors ("devices that do not provide happiness, nor are they to be trusted"),⁴⁰⁸ roofs ("devices to make us subservient"),⁴⁰⁹ walls ("they are munitions"),⁴¹⁰ and windows ("are experiments carried out through the window...valid?"),⁴¹¹ that are collectively to blame for the contemporary house's haphazard porosity, "a ruin with the winds of communication blowing through the cracks in the walls".⁴¹²

⁴⁰⁴ Barthes, 2005, p. 33.

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁶ Recalling Bachelard's (2014, p. xii) topological epigraph for *The Poetics of Space*: "Thus, an immense cosmic house is a potential of every dream of houses. Winds radiate from its center and gulls fly from its windows". The book's type arches like a wing in flight: "A house [...] allows the poet to inhabit the universe [...] the universe comes to inhabit his house".

⁴⁰⁷ Flusser, 1999, p. 83.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 82.

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 81.

⁴¹⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹¹ Ibid., p. 82.

⁴¹² Ibid, p. 83.

Flusser's alternative is not to seal the cracks or reinforce the boundaries. He wants to perforate further—to perforate infinitely—creating a structure entirely of thresholds⁴¹³ or two-way cables that will “assemble [interpersonal] relationships, process them in the form of information, store them and pass them on”.⁴¹⁴

Lacking roofs and walls, such architecture standing wide open to the world (i.e. made up entirely of reversible windows and doors) would alter the nature of existence. People would have nowhere to cower anymore, nowhere to go to ground or take cover. All they would be able to do would be to offer one another their hands.⁴¹⁵

Although he acknowledges the risk that such an open surface could become co-opted, “‘fascistic’ rather than ‘dialogic’”,⁴¹⁶ Flusser insists that only this “dangerous adventure” will allow those inside—which includes the rooms, heretofore lacking the propensity will allow every room to regain the propensity to allow those inside—to “process noise into information, experience something”.⁴¹⁷ The dreamhouse is mediative. Its conductivity is communication (or the movement of relation, Simondon might say) across thresholds. No longer possessed of an inside and an outside, Flusser's refractive and transmissive architecture begins with and ends with the offer of a hand, the most essential movement, which is always, for Flusser, toward one another.

Now Ault reaches across the page toward the reader: “I want to begin this book by telling you that I knew Felix Gonzalez-Torres well”, she writes, in another excerpt in *In Part*. “The fact of our closeness rendered me witness to his ways of being. I cannot and do not want to discount this domain of shared experience and personal knowledge—the ephemeral realm from which this project takes form—any more than I can or want to give an account of it”.⁴¹⁸

⁴¹³ Although his proposal sounds metaphorical at best, Flusser intends a Simondonian approach to form and matter as operators of a process, “rather than as the final terms of an operation consigned to the shadows”, as the Simondon scholar Muriel Combes (2013, p. 5) puts it, not without a sense of drama. Form, in Flusser's house—indeed, in Flusser's entire theory of space, scaled to metropolis in his essay, ‘The City as Wave-Trough in the Image-Flood’, where the city is “a flection in a field” (2005, p. 322)—is “*information* [...] the very operation of taking on form” (Combes, 2013, p. 5) an operation that becomes visible at the threshold.

⁴¹⁴ Flusser, 1999, p. 83.

⁴¹⁵ Ibid., p. 84.

⁴¹⁶ Ibid., p. 83.

⁴¹⁷ Ibid., p. 84.

⁴¹⁸ Ault, 2017, p. 119.

(In the Group Material archive, I pause on two photographs from the late 1980s or early '90s that belonged to Ault.⁴¹⁹ In the first, Ault and Gonzalez-Torres are standing arm-in-arm, wearing oversized leather jackets, in front of a wall of glass bricks catching New York winter sun. The second shows an arrangement of objects and ephemera on top of a door-sized piece of wood, among them a box of tampons, a balaclava, a paper doll game, an issue of *The Economist* and a weathered photograph of Gonzalez-Torres and Ault, just recognisable with their faces pressed together, broad smiles apparent although blurry, although pale.)

I am thinking about Liberace at home, doubly removed from his live audience by the mirror world of film even in his excessive sharing of confidences, his intimate interior. I am watching Liberace as he finally arrives onstage at the Las Vegas Hilton, accompanied by his chauffeur, Scott Thorson, who was also his lover for a time.⁴²⁰ Ault said it: the glamour of the entrance. Thorson is dressed for the occasion in a grey sequined uniform, a compliment to Liberace's impossibly long, snow-white fur cape. Behind them is a gleaming silver and white Rolls Royce Phantom, "the only [one] in the *world*", emphasis always Liberace's, "with a left-hand drive".⁴²¹ "Well, look me over", he greets his crowd, beaming. "I didn't get dressed like this to go unnoticed. Before I go any further I have to find out: how did you like the entrance? Was that OK?"⁴²²

"Charming creature", this is Barthes now, speaking through the Marquis de Sade, writing from prison to the Marquise, who had offered to do his laundry, "you want my dirty linen, my old linen?" (The question is rhetorical; he knew she didn't, just as Liberace knew we did). "Do you know, that is complete tact? Listen, my angel [...]"⁴²³ Tact becomes Barthes' name for this slight displacement of meaning, the intentional and playful perversion, overflow of the Marquis' fixation on specificities. I am answering Liberace at the threshold—centre stage—with tact, overflowing: "a perversion that plays with the useless (nonfunctional) detail: the analysis generates minutiae [...]" and it's this cutting and rerouting that is the

⁴¹⁹ 'Photograph of Julie Ault and Felix Gonzalez-Torres', Folder 8: Photo Album – Julie Ault GM 1988-1994, Box 10, Series VI, Group Material Archive, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University.

⁴²⁰ David Segal, 'The Boy Toy's Story', *The New York Times* (12 May, 2013)

<<https://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/12/fashion/scott-thorson-the-boy-toys-story.html>> Accessed 01-10-2019.

⁴²¹ 'Liberace Music Video & Entrance 1981', 2008.

⁴²² Ibid.

⁴²³ Sade, in Barthes, 2005, p. 29.

source of pleasure [...] pleasure in the ‘futile’”, where “futile” hews close to its origins in “*fundo*— [that] which flows, that nothing withholds”.⁴²⁴

And more: tact is the “art of the useless supplement”, “verging on the useless or enigmatically useful detail [...] at the edge of eccentricity”.⁴²⁵ Halo, flickering excess, flection,⁴²⁶ shimmer of nuance, “whose aspect, perhaps whose meaning, is subtly modified according to the angle of the subject's gaze”, according to Barthes;⁴²⁷ the tiny refractive bend; fixation on the partial, “analysis [...] when aimless”,⁴²⁸ or “what shines by bursts, in disorder, fugitively, successively”—associatively, indexically—“in the ‘anecdotal’ discourse: the weave of anecdotes of the book and of life”.⁴²⁹ Slight displacement, the surface of in/visibility, the at-once “residue” and “movement of exaltation” through which, by which, in which, Barthes finds he can *enter*—articulate—the infinitesimal “margin of margins”.⁴³⁰

Formally, tact is the “absolute interstice”;⁴³¹ aesthetically, it is the “overdetermination of pleasures”⁴³² that eliminates all repetition and redundancy⁴³³ (“even space must not repeat itself”, Barthes says)⁴³⁴ in favor of an “inventiveness that can border on the eccentric”.⁴³⁵ At the same time, tact asserts specificity (“parrying of generality”),⁴³⁶ has limits to avoid saturation,⁴³⁷ lest it become “more obsessional than perverse, more baroque than delicate”.⁴³⁸ This is how, Barthes says, tact preserves “sweetness”,⁴³⁹ is “supported [...] by something that resembles an amorous state”.⁴⁴⁰ (Flusser had it: to offer one another our hands.)

That the perversion on which tact is based is sexual in Sade’s case is less stimulating for Barthes than Sade’s fascination with—perversion, refraction, reconfiguration, re-articulation

⁴²⁴ Barthes, 2005, pp. 29-30.

⁴²⁵ Ibid., p. 30.

⁴²⁶ Flusser, 2005, p. 322.

⁴²⁷ Barthes, 2005, p. 51.

⁴²⁸ Ibid., p. 30.

⁴²⁹ Ibid.,

⁴³⁰ Ibid.

⁴³¹ Ibid, p. 35.

⁴³² Ibid., p. 32

⁴³³ Ibid.

⁴³⁴ Ibid., p. 32.

⁴³⁵ Ibid., p. 33.

⁴³⁶ Ibid., p. 36.

⁴³⁷ Ibid., p. 33.

⁴³⁸ Ibid.

⁴³⁹ Ibid., p. 36.

⁴⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 35.

(reticulation?) of—the Marquise’s meaning, without altering the specificities of content, a move allowed by the surface or supplement that both separates and connects the correspondents: the letter.⁴⁴¹

Principle of tact = principle (in the sense of movement, force) of value-distinction (to distinguish by valorizing): possible only through the practice of language. Tact is consubstantially tied to the power of metaphorizing, that is, of isolating a feature and letting it proliferate as language, in a movement of exaltation... this principle [is not] possible without [...] the letter, the interlocution, language.⁴⁴²

(See Fig. E: The Letter)

Now I’m talking about love. For Barthes, the separation that structures intimacy and allows for its perversion, nuance, is (made possible by) the (ordering of the) word. I notice him using the adjectival form of consubstantiality,⁴⁴³ the theological term for the way the Holy Trinity are alike in essential value but different in aspect and think of Ault’s associative indexing and whether that too could be an expression of amorous tact. Whether writing and the way writing assembles can do more or be more to its subject. In *In Part*, Ault writes Liberace among her family’s bereaved. In the constellation of *Afterlife*, Liberace becomes a star, a work, a guide, attended by Ault (*A text by Julie Ault*) and William Least Heat-Moon (*An excerpted passage by...*), the travel writer, poet-historian of movement and place.⁴⁴⁴

⁴⁴¹ In ‘The Friend’, Agamben (2009, p. 26) describes a failed attempt at explicating the subject (friendship) through correspondence with the philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy: “we were persuaded that this was the best way of drawing closer to—almost ‘staging’—a problem that otherwise seemed to resist analytical treatment. I wrote the first letter and awaited his response with trepidation [...] the project [ended] upon the arrival of Jean-Luc’s letter”.

⁴⁴² Barthes, 2005, p. 34.

⁴⁴³ Agamben (2009, p. 25) also uses the word “consubstantiality”, albeit modified as “near”, to describe the relationship between the figures of the philosopher and the friend.

⁴⁴⁴ “You may see the country from one of the many transcontinental flights that pass right over it, or you may view it from an Amtrak window [no stops in the country], or you can get fired down the long, smoking bore of the turnpike that shoots across it”, Heat Moon (in Ault 2014, p. 49) writes, at the end of a text reprinted as an image for Ault’s contribution to the Biennial’s catalogue. “You may also see it from its graveled roads, dirt lanes, pasture tracks, or vestiges of historic trails, or from its couple of hundred miles of canoe-navigable waters, and you can travel it by leg or butt—that is, by walking and reading. There’s another means too: call it dreaming, where the less conscious mind can mouse about”.

Ault's tender contiguities in space and in writing surface and give form to both impassable distances and partial communications—presence. Gestures of reach, charged with desire, they overflow like Boehme's particles and Barthes' letter, likewise delimited by the logic of the instant, the glimpse. Ault makes Liberace (into) a mirrored door, open at the boundary of his infinite privacy and her (our) desire to see him; that the communication *is* partial, that the distance outlined is infinitesimal and fathomless, makes the drama of presence as much romance as tragedy. Unlike Plath's mirror, which, planar, cannot but swallow and regurgitate haunted reflection, Ault's refractive folding frees the apparition at the threshold of disappearance: angel of the slight displacement, all tact and twinkling, nothing more or less than a turned back.

In another of Ault's exhibitions, Liberace appeared on a television at the venue's entrance, a diverting and welcoming presence Ault called "additive".⁴⁴⁵ And yet, as the archivist Marvin J. Taylor wrote in that exhibition's catalogue, "what is Liberace doing here? ...His prominence suggested he was our guide—as Virgil was for Dante. Are we to trust a man of so much artifice as an arbiter of value? What kind of path is he leading us on?"⁴⁴⁶

("It's amazing how little people know me as a man", says the angel in *The World of Liberace* (1975)).⁴⁴⁷

Picture, I am picturing, the excessively exquisite face of Jean Marais, iconic French actor and Cocteau's lover for a time,⁴⁴⁸ playing Orphée,⁴⁴⁹ moving his hands across a tailor's mirror like a classically trained Narcissus doomed to collapse the distance between himself and his

⁴⁴⁵ 'Julie Ault', 2014.

⁴⁴⁶ Taylor (2014, p. 55) questions Liberace's status as guide within the refractive space of Ault's index by recounting that, in canto I of *Il Purgatorio*, Dante meets Virgil at the gates of hell and announces: "You are my master and my author, you-/the only one from whom my writing drew/the noble style for which I have been honoured." "Dante draws his authenticity and power from aligning himself with Virgil", Taylor observes. "Liberace, however, was his own self-acknowledged fabrication [...] he played the role of the aesthete homosexual out loud in public in a glass closet".

⁴⁴⁷ "It is the privilege of legends to be timeless", read the opening subtitles of *Orphée* (1950).

⁴⁴⁸ Alan Riding, 'Jean Marais, 84, Dashing French Movie Star', *The New York Times* (November 10, 1998) <<https://www.nytimes.com/1998/11/10/arts/jean-marais-84-dashing-french-movie-star.html>> Accessed 07-01-2020.

⁴⁴⁹ Tracking the preponderance of versions of the Orpheus myth throughout history, from the poet Icybus in the mid-6th century onwards, the psychoanalyst and writer Jules Cashford (2019, p. 255) writes: "the story of Orpheus grows and grows until it reaches the boundaries of life and death," a boundary that Hermes, Cashford (2019, p. 291) notes, "[draws] others gently across". For Cashford (2019, p. 261), Orpheus represents the "harmony" that unites "Bios, the personal and finite reality", with "Zoe, infinite life."

reflection. In Cocteau's redreaming,⁴⁵⁰ Orpheé is a mortal poet, and his guide, played by the genteel François Périer, is Death's chauffeur, the angel Heurtebise. (Death herself, played by the celebrated tragic actress María Casares, is a pearl-bedecked princess, a "form",⁴⁵¹ and the underworld is a bureaucracy, not good, not bad, where Death is sanctioned by functionaries. "Nothing", is how she justifies her love for Orpheé. "It happened through a chain of circumstances".)⁴⁵²

Now Heurtebise arrives in Orpheé's bedroom to accompany him to the underworld, where Orpheé must pursue Eurydice (Marie Déa) as only a poet can.⁴⁵³ (As the philosopher Maurice Blanchot writes, "Art is the power that causes the night to open", but "Eurydice is the limit of what art can attain".)⁴⁵⁴ The angel and the artist stand together before the mirror, threshold of a zone "made of memories and the ruins of human habit".⁴⁵⁵ Orpheé stares into the surface with trepidation.

"I give you the secret of secrets", Heurtebise whispers. "Mirrors are the doors by which death comes."

"How do you know such terrible things?" asks stricken Orpheé.

"Don't be naïve", Heurtebise replies. "As a chauffeur, one does learn terrible things".⁴⁵⁶

Oh, angel of roads and mirrors, angel of doors. Oh, angel of death, angel of dust. Oh, conduit incarnate, "supernatural symmetry",⁴⁵⁷ glamour of the entrance...

⁴⁵⁰ Nathaniel Mackey's serial poem 'Mu' derives its title in part from the etymological Greek *muthos*, later *mythos*, "proffered from time immemorial, poetry's perennial boon, [mu] thrives on quixotic persistence, the increment or enablement language affords, promise and impossibility rolled into one." "Mu," Mackey (2006, p. xiii) writes, with emphasis, "momentary utterance extended into ongoing myth, an impulse toward signature, self-elaboration, finding and losing itself." He specifies (2006, p. xiii) the relationship of myth to time which is dreaming: "'By myth', [Charles] Olson quotes Harrison quoting Aristotle, 'I mean the arrangement of the incidents'—this in advancing a sense of alternative, 'a special view of history.' Against presumptions of an objective ordering of history Olson elsewhere poses 'what we know went on, the dream.'"

⁴⁵¹ Cocteau, 1950.

⁴⁵² Ibid.

⁴⁵³ This is Heurtebise's response to Orpheé when Orpheé worries aloud that only the dead can gain passage to the underworld. In Virgil's telling, Orpheus gains entrance to the House of the Dead by playing his lyre.

⁴⁵⁴ Blanchot, *The Gaze of Orpheus and other Literary Essays*, trans. Lydia Davis (New York: Station Hill Press, 1981), p. 99.

⁴⁵⁵ Cocteau, 1950.

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁷ Jean Cocteau, 'L'Ange Heurtebise,' trans. Kristin Prevallet, *Chicago Review*, 47-48 (2002), 181-186 (p.181).

In 2016, Ault installed Felix Gonzalez-Torres's *Untitled (Orpheus, Twice)* (1991), two identical, rectangular mirrors, wall-mounted about a hand's distance apart, in a survey of his work in London.⁴⁵⁸ One image of the exhibition shows a blurry, striding figure reflected in the work's mirror-distance, split evenly across its panels which, appearing transparent, look like doorframes into a room inside the wall. When the exhibition travelled, *Untitled (Orpheus Twice)* was installed alongside three of Gonzalez-Torres's beaded curtains which, to see fully, one had to pass through then turn back.⁴⁵⁹ Among these airy intervals, the mirrors likewise became annotations of translucence or of an untraversable distance, awaiting a gloved hand⁴⁶⁰ to test their substantiality as if fog, as if mist.⁴⁶¹

The story goes that Heurtebise first came to Cocteau after the death of his lover and protégé, the young poet Raymond Radiguet, who had contracted typhoid from a bad oyster, "as far as anyone could tell".⁴⁶² One night, Cocteau was riding the elevator to Picasso's apartment and fell into a state of hallucinatory grief, "a sleep that seemed interminable, but turned out to have lasted half a second".⁴⁶³

This is how the poet and hypnotist Kristin Prevallet describes that instant:

⁴⁵⁸ Reviewing for the *Guardian*, the critic Adrian Searle (2016) noted that all of the works in Gonzalez-Torres' survey were 'Untitled,' and almost all were made in 1991, the year Gonzalez-Torres' lover, Ross Laycock, died of AIDS-related illness. In a written tribute, Laycock's friend, Joe Clark (1991), lovingly indexed the contents of Laycock's apartment, "in an unswanky Polish section of Toronto", in a similar manner as Ault had done with Martin Wong's: "It was a feast for the senses, what with its kitschy/classy furniture, red boudoir walls, an original print of *Piss Christ*, a bookshelf full of volumes of poetry, cuisine and gay history, a lime-green-and-blue bedroom, and, of course, a Bang & Olufsen stereo".

⁴⁵⁹ Reviewing for *Frieze*, the critic Matthew McLean (2016) describes the curtains thus: "The first of these, *Untitled (Chemo)* (1991), is installed in a doorway to the side of the gallery's biggest display space, which has been left completely empty; the next covers the entrance to the office. The last, *Untitled (Water)* (1995), is installed across the width of the gallery's upper room, some six or so metres, close to the room's entrance, so you have to pass through it and look back to take in its cascading breadth".

⁴⁶⁰ When Orpheé wishes to cross the mirror-threshold of Death, Heurtebise instructs him to don gloves that turn the surface to "water".

⁴⁶¹ "Filling space in a random fashion, mist resembles both the medium and objects, what covers and what is covered", writes Michel Serres (2008, p. 70). "[...] Fog betrays, completely fills the environment with potential things. Whether they are objects or vapours—we cannot tell. Night unsettles phenomenology, mist disturbs ontology. Shadow reinforces the distinction between being and appearance, must blurs it. Thing or veil, being or non-being, that is the question".

⁴⁶² What is the oyster, to the pearl? A recent article in the *Paris Review* (2018) prefaced Radiguet's death thus: "Mortal danger intruded into this calm in the unlikely form of a batch of oysters [...]"

⁴⁶³ Jean Cocteau, in Kristin Prevallet, 'Angels in the Apparatus', *Chicago Review*, 47-48 (2002), 187-191 (p.187).

[...] Cocteau heard a voice calling to him, saying, ‘My name is on the plate!’ Jolted awake, he was faced with the brass door-plate of the elevator company [...] ‘Heurtebise Elevator.’ His angel—not an aura, not a visitation, not a haloed presence—was simply a voice, and a word⁴⁶⁴... For seven days [Cocteau] suffered what he described as a kind of ‘parthenogenesis, a couple made up of a single body that gives birth.’ That ‘birth’ is the poem ‘L’Ange Heurtebise.’ It presumably was dictated by Heurtebise, against Cocteau’s will to die.⁴⁶⁵

Simply a voice, and a word, Heurtebise arrived as the slight displacement cleaving heaven and earth, love⁴⁶⁶ and despair, the partial communication⁴⁶⁷ with which writing, in this case the poem, begins again: a bend at the threshold, an instant of parthenogenetic overflow, fugitive and futile, *fundo*—a microcrystalline structure in which Cocteau, too, becomes refracted, writing:

The angel Heurtebise, on the stairs
 Silken in his wings
 Sings me, refreshes my memory
 The fool, alone, inept
 Here with me, in chalcedony

⁴⁶⁴ Cocteau (1968, p. 36) eulogised Radiguet and his poems, plays and novels, “a burning constellation”, with a radio broadcast in which he quoted Rilke’s ‘The First Elegy’ (1923): “Beauty is the starting point of terror”. (“It amazes us so”, Rilke continues, “because it serenely disdains to destroy us./Every angel is terrible”; “the *Duino Elegies* [...] hold life and death together”, writes the poet Ariana Reines (2020).

⁴⁶⁵ Prevallet, 2002, p. 187.

⁴⁶⁶ In her introduction to Cocteau’s book of written portraits, *My Contemporaries*, Margaret Crosland (1968, p. ix) notes that friendship was a “theme” and “method” for Cocteau, central to his creative practice: “The themes in Cocteau’s work—theme is more appropriate than idea—are like his friends; he keeps them all his life, and most of them are inherent in the people he admired and loved. It is important that the word ‘friendship’ should not be interpreted only as a close personal relationship; for Cocteau had friendship not only for Radiguet or Picasso but for authors or thinkers long dead, or people he admired from a distance when very young, or even people who actively disliked him. He also felt friendship for an object or an abstraction because he established a two-way relationship with any theme about which he wrote. He analyzed as a friend would do, seeing everything in the round.”

⁴⁶⁷ Transfixed by his Rolls Royce’s radio, through which Death’s other angel, the dead poet, Cégeste, is transmitting linguistic fragments, Orpheé clings to disjunctive phrases, single words, the promise of form, in which he hears a future. (“Send your messages”, Death tells Cégeste, “invent what you like”.) These transmissions, a sort of hauntological not-yet and not-anymore, render Heurtebise, who tries and fails to draw Orpheé’s attention, essentially neutral. I am thinking of the philosopher Gustave Thibon’s writing on the neutrality of saints in his introduction ([1947] 2003, p. xxv) to Simone Weil’s *Gravity and Grace*: “Holiness is like degradation in this respect”, with the footnote “This is the postulate of Hermes: the highest resembles the lowest [...] Thus the non-resistance of the saints is outwardly indistinguishable from cowardice; supreme wisdom ends in a sense of ignorance, the motions of grace have the inevitability of animal instincts”.

That is shattered, idiot, by your
Supernatural symmetry.⁴⁶⁸

Cocteau's poem, 'L'Ange Heurtebise', is one visitation⁴⁶⁹ made myriad,⁴⁷⁰ a gesture of reach delimited by tact or the excess of specificity in each iterative, incantatory address:⁴⁷¹

The angel Heurtebise, incredibly
Brutal, sacked me. For grace [...]

The angel Heurtebise knocks me down
And you, King Jesus, mercy [...]

Angel Heurtebise, my guardian angel
I guard you, I hurt you [...]

Angel Heurtebise, in robes of water
My loved angel, grace [...]

Angel Heurtebise, abound, marrow
Of elderberry airplanes and alabaster linen [...]⁴⁷²

"Must it be said of Hermes", Michel Serres writes, "the god of commerce, that he is the father of Comedy, by describing the circulation of all things, the inter-individual communication...?"⁴⁷³ In Rilke's 1904 poem, the "god of speed and distant messages" who

⁴⁶⁸ Cocteau, 2002, p. 181.

⁴⁶⁹ Cocteau (2002, p. 182) found that Heurtebise was also friendly to depiction in his friend Man Ray's 'rayographs', images created by laying an object on photo paper and exposing it, in a sense, "on the edge of light". "I challenge you/If you are a man", Cocteau (2002, p. 182) wrote, in his—let's call it—letter, "Admit/my cerated angel, your beauty./Pose for a photograph by a/Chemical explosion".

⁴⁷⁰ Prevallet, 2002, p. 187.

⁴⁷¹ For Nathaniel Mackey (2006, p. xiv), incantation, in the form of recursion, is itself a phantom: "Recursiveness, incantatory insistence, is liturgy and libation, repeated ritual sip, a form of sonic observance aiming to undo the obstruction it reports. It plies memory, compensatory possession, reminiscent regard and regret...Recursion is conjunctive deprivation and possession, phantom limb, as if certain aroused and retained relations among consonants and vowels and progressions of accent were compensatory arms we reach with, compensatory legs we cross over on."

⁴⁷² Cocteau, 2002, pp. 181-185.

⁴⁷³ Michel Serres, in Josue V. Harari and David F. Bell (eds.), *Hermes: Literature, Science, Philosophy* (Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press, 1982), p. 14.

guides Orpheus to the underworld is more recognisable as a wing-ankled traveller, but the doomed object of Rilke's poem is not Eurydice. Instead, Orpheus follows a fuzzier beacon: the mythic "entire work", doomed to be begun again by his turning back "so near completion".⁴⁷⁴

In *The Gaze of Orpheus*, Maurice Blanchot tails Orpheus like watchful Heurtebise. And Blanchot, too, has dreamt the future: Orpheus' turn away from the possibility of completion is not only inevitable⁴⁷⁵ but necessary. When Orpheus betrays both his intention to "bring [Eurydice] back into the daylight and [...] give [her] form, figure and reality",⁴⁷⁶ and his desire "to look into the night at what the night is concealing [...] which the day condemns as [...] the expiation of excess",⁴⁷⁷ he abandons his recuperative project: symmetrical reflection, a repetition that would strangle tact and spell the end of work: Eurydice's reappearance as—Plath said it—a "horrible fish".⁴⁷⁸

"The dangers of taking pleasure in the past and the benefits of remembering in order to reinvent are not clearly posted", Ault writes, in the artist Alejandro Cesarco's indexical work *A Printed Portrait of Julie Ault* (2012), photographed excerpts of Ault's writings on disparate subjects..

There is the risk of peddling nostalgia, of getting lost and/or paralysed in emotionally inflected territory in which recreation of the past obscures and replaces (or displaces) the present. To aid critical understanding of past specificities, and their effect in the present, it seems more productive to

⁴⁷⁴ These lines from Rilke's poem—"If only he could turn around, just once (but looking back would ruin this entire work, so near completion)"—form the epigraph of Clark Coolidge's *The Crystal Text* (1986), an epic poem that strives at once to "leave things alone" and "grasp the relation of words to matter, mind, process" (1986, p. 8) by becoming, in writing, the "medium" of the titular subject's "transmissions". Coolidge's poem, in turn, provides the epigraph for Lisa Robertson's 'Untitled Essay' (2012, p. 72) on the prosody of citizenship: "a discovery that speech is never simply single".

⁴⁷⁵ "It is certainly true that by turning around to look at Eurydice, Orpheus ruins the work, the work immediately falls apart", Blanchot (1981, p. 100) writes. "[...] But if he did not turn around to look at Eurydice, he still would be betraying, being disloyal to, the boundless and imprudent force of his impulse [...] which wants to see her not when she is visible, but when she is invisible [...]" It is inevitable that Orpheus defy the law forbidding him to 'turn around', because he has already violated it the moment he takes his first step towards the shadows. This observation makes us sense that Orpheus has actually been turned towards Eurydice all along".

⁴⁷⁶ Blanchot, 1981, p. 99.

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 100.

⁴⁷⁸ Plath, 1963, p. 28.

consider loose continuums of production than to provide a form of periodization as punctuation.⁴⁷⁹

How turning back gives form to writing is, Cesarco shows with his index, one of Ault's primary concerns: how can work begin again when presence is sought but reappearance is impossible? How does the impossibility of the subject's complete appearance determine work's—writing's—method?

For Blanchot, Orpheus's impulse to turn back or begin again "so near completion", to begin again, is "inspiration": not good, not bad, at once "the impatience and imprudence of a desire who forgets the law",⁴⁸⁰ the "instant"⁴⁸¹ in which the work "reaches [both] its extreme point of uncertainty"⁴⁸² and its "extreme moment of freedom"⁴⁸³ which "gives the sacred back to itself".⁴⁸⁴ "Scattered",⁴⁸⁵ (the turn, like the surplus quotation of this paragraph, is refractive), all that Orpheus can surface (with) is his song, "the insignificant, the inessential, the mistaken"⁴⁸⁶ that, "to someone who accepted the risk and freely gave himself up to it",⁴⁸⁷ is "the source of all authenticity".⁴⁸⁸

Inspiration means the ruin of Orpheus and the certainty of his ruin, and it does not promise the success of the work as compensation [...] but this forbidden act is precisely the one Orpheus must perform in order to take the work beyond what guarantees it [...] it is also only in this gaze [looking back] that the work can go beyond itself, unite with its origin and establish itself in impossibility [...] ⁴⁸⁹—

— I would say in specificity, able to assert presence, against Blanchot's suggestion of "a nostalgic return to the uncertainty of the origin".⁴⁹⁰

⁴⁷⁹ Alejandro Cesarco, 'A Printed Portrait of *Julie Ault*' [2012], in Provan (ed.), 2016.

⁴⁸⁰ Blanchot, 1981, p. 101.

⁴⁸¹ Ibid., p. 102.

⁴⁸² Ibid.

⁴⁸³ Ibid., p. 104.

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 101.

⁴⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 102.

⁴⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁹ Ibid, pp. 102-3.

⁴⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 103.

And, because: so powerfully, inescapably partial is Orpheus' song, so inessentially additive, in Ault's words—and at the same time so overflowing, more-than-total, excessive, vibration of a perfection, in Agamben's—that Orpheus becomes imbricated within it, only “free, alive and powerful within the space of the Orphic measure”.⁴⁹¹ (“He has life and actuality only after the poem and through the poem”,⁴⁹² Blanchot writes). Orpheus “loses Eurydice because he desires her beyond the measured limits of the song, and”—yet— “he loses himself too [...] but this desire, and Eurydice lost, and Orpheus scattered are necessary to the song, just as the ordeal of eternal worklessness is necessary to the work”.⁴⁹³

“If forced to stress what such a moment seems to reveal about inspiration”, Blanchot continues, I must continue, “we would have to say: it connects inspiration with desire [...] This is why impatience must be at the heart of deep patience [...] like the glittering point which has eluded that waiting: the happy chance of unconcern”.⁴⁹⁴

Glitter.

As if by coincidence. As if by magic.⁴⁹⁵

Cloaked and dazzling, ornamental angel of specific powers, shimmering supplement, overflowing index, apparition.

⁴⁹¹ Ibid., p. 101.

⁴⁹² Ibid.

⁴⁹³ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 104.

⁴⁹⁵ Writing about mimicry or mimesis, relation of “mutual arrangement... reciprocal mapping” (2003, p. 96), Roger Caillois (2003, p. 97) likens the principles of magic to “those governing the association of ideas”, specifically, “the law of magic, *Things that have once touched each other stay united*.” (Michael Taussig (1993) expands on this “Law of Similarity” in his *Mimesis and Alterity*). For Caillois (2003, p. 98), this law corresponds to the principle of “association by contiguity” which he qualifies as “the subjective association of ideas” wherein subjective encompasses “chance or supposedly chance”. For Giordano Bruno ([1584] 2004), writing about magic, the charge of association by contiguity was a consubstantial current he called “bonding”. Bruno asserted that when bonding overflows, it iterates in a specific form that retains the power of contiguity, and that this specific form is a form of production, related to acting and doing, calling forward to Ault's emphasis on how history and friendship can be methods and forms of production. Bruno ([1584] 2004, p. 146-147) writes: “What is absolutely beautiful and good and large and true binds every feeling and every mind absolutely. It destroys nothing; it contains and seeks out all things; it is desired and pursued by many because it invigorates with different types of bonds. Hence, we abundantly acquire many skills, not to be able to act universally and simply, but rather to do this at one time, and that at another time”.

Glitter here and everywhere. Logic of the prism, of the part. Of writing that wants. Heurtebise shattered into nuance, refracted in the perpetual re-beginnings that made up (a) life's work.⁴⁹⁶ Generalised power of association giving charge to amorous tact—index as “and”.⁴⁹⁷ Only in this way is Liberace's apparition an inspiration, consubstantial current, parthenogenetic birth. Only in this way does Ault's refractive practice preserve the possibility of errantry in and as specificity⁴⁹⁸—“loose continuums of production” partial communication, gesture of reach, bewilderment—what the poet Fanny Howe calls “spiral [effect] within the serial [form]”.^{499,500}

I am picturing my left arm now, and the back of my head. A jacket, was I wearing that? Moving distance of Wong's painted gates, Magic Box technicolour dreaming beneath Wojnarowicz's bed and Kinmont's poetic misfile, drawers ajar, one, blank paper, two, crest of white feathers like—he said it—wings, imbricated, implicated in, at, as the surface of Ault's mirror door, index of *Afterlife*, glimpsing; I, too, she, too, we, too scatter, become shimmer.

“What I have been thinking about, lately”, Howe is speaking, I give over to her, “is bewilderment as a way of entering the day as much as the work. Bewilderment as a poetics and an ethics”,⁵⁰¹ as the movement, the surface, the slight displacement of Howe's hands

⁴⁹⁶ Kristin Prevallet (2002, p. 188) observes that the filmmaker Stan Brakhage's passion (“haunted and inspired”) for Cocteau arose from his fascination that a single visit by Heurtebise informed Cocteau's entire lifetime of writing, filmmaking, art. (She quotes Brakhage: “any gathering of dust motes in the light records the passage of angels”.) Prevallet's essay appears in an issue of *The Chicago Review* (2004) dedicated to Brakhage. Skimming the issue's contents, the titles from ‘Heurtebise’ onwards seem to approximate an index of my text: *angels in the apparatus—argument for the immediate sensuous: notes on stately mansions did decree and coupling—dark writing through elementary phases—theory of margins—désirée, from the depths—holderlin hybrids: in a doorway—the shell collector—night music*.

⁴⁹⁷ “The poet does not respect conventional limits in the relation between the signifier and the signified, and reveals the interminability of the process of attributing meaning,” writes Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi (2015, p. 148), in *And: Phenomenology of the End*. “Excessiveness is the condition of this revelation,” he writes, in that “the poetic act is the emanation of semiotic flow [...] That said, I have said nothing, or almost nothing, or very little [...] Poetry is precisely the excessiveness beyond the limits of language, which are the limits of the world”.

⁴⁹⁸ Considering the word ‘friend’, Agamben (2009, p. 29) finds a specificity that preserves errant association, in that “‘friend’ belongs to the class of terms that linguists define as non-predicative: “terms from which it is not possible to establish a class that includes all the things to which the predicate in question is attributed,” which are therefore closer in application to “proper noun[s].”

⁴⁹⁹ I am utilising an earlier version of Howe's text ‘Bewilderment’ from 1999. In a revised version, Howe (2020, p. 109) rewrites: “For me, the serial poem is a spiral poem”.

⁵⁰⁰ For Nathaniel Mackey (2006, p. xi-xii), this spiral is “ringing”, “a step up as well as out”, “emblematic of an outside seriality wishes to reach”, insofar as serial form already implicates “a kind of movement, a kind of mobility, an aspect of ground gone under, loss or lack of assurance”, “the draft unassured extension knows itself to be [...] as though, driven to distraction by shortcircuiting options, it can only be itself beside itself”. Hearing Emily Dickinson [1263]: “Tell all the truth but tell it slant—/Success in Circuit lies [...]”

⁵⁰¹ Fanny Howe, 1999.

writing, gesticulating, in prayer,⁵⁰² the slight north-eastern quaver in her voice when she says “brother” while reading her poem ‘Kneeling Bus’. (“Sometimes my church is a public latrine,” she articulates, the structure of her faith, “[...] sometimes my church is a Franciscan chapel near Penn Station”.⁵⁰³) (“The face of a heart”, she wrote, about love surfacing, “is a face”.⁵⁰⁴)

If I, for instance, want to tell you that a man I loved, who died, said he loved me on a curbstone in the snow, but this occurred in time after he died, and before he died, and will occur again in the future, I can't say it grammatically. You would think I was talking about a ghost, or a hallucination, or a dream, when in fact, I was trying to convey the experience of a certain event as scattered, and non-sequential.⁵⁰⁵

For Howe, bewilderment, the word that scatters, is likewise refractive,⁵⁰⁶ parthenogenetic, the slight displacement with and as which the work begins (again).⁵⁰⁷ “[...] It is with this language problem”, she continues, “that bewilderment begins to form, for me, more than an attitude—but an actual approach, a way—to resolve the unresolvable”.⁵⁰⁸ Bewilderment “circumnambulates, believing that at the centre of errant or circular movement, is the axis of reality”,⁵⁰⁹ and of a body of work which appears to Howe as “an explosion of parts, the quotidian smeared”.⁵¹⁰

⁵⁰² “She’s the poet I admire most”, John Giorno (in Stein, 2015) told me, in an interview about Howe. “I’ve loved her for countless decades, but in recent years I got to know her and she became a friend [...] That inexplicable wisdom that comes out in poetry that’s beyond comprehension, just comes out in these little lines that are perfect and tell you all about the nature of mind [...] she gets to it by being a Roman Catholic meditator, in a sense”.

⁵⁰³ Fanny Howe, in Silverblatt, Michael, ‘Fanny Howe: Love and I’, *Bookworm*, [Podcast] KCRW (2020).

⁵⁰⁴ Fanny Howe, *Indivisible: A Novel* (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2020), p. 106.

⁵⁰⁵ Fanny Howe, 1999.

⁵⁰⁶ “Each little stanza expresses my infatuation with the sentence”; Howe (1999) writes, “and each stanza is a sentence where the parts and phrases are packed and shaped to bring out the best in them”.

⁵⁰⁷ To consider reflection versus refraction, circle versus spiral, writing as “parthenogenetic, a slight displacement”, it is helpful to consider Maurice Blanchot’s (1981, p. 104) assertion that “in order to write one must already be writing”, and Michel Serres’ (1982, p. 30) statement, observing “the artisanal labour of molluscs”, that “a mother emerges from a mother”, alongside Howe’s (1999) description of bewildered writing: “For myself, a poem emerges by itself, like something developing in a dark place. First I receive the impression of a time period as an experience of pure language, glimpses of actions, emotions and weathers. I jot down whatever comes through—in a rush of words. Then I begin to see what is being said and to see it as it unfolds, as if from afar and sometimes I actually stand at a distance from the words that are there [...] to let the words write the words”.

⁵⁰⁸ Fanny Howe, 1999.

⁵⁰⁹ Ibid.

⁵¹⁰ Ibid.

Tender tact, moving mirror, the quotidian smeared: in 1991, Gonzalez-Torres made *Untitled (Portrait of Julie Ault)*, a serial work of dates and phrases, what a choreographer writes for a dancer, the smallest and simplest unit of form, parts of the performance that are in themselves complete. An image of the work installed at Andrea Rosen Gallery shows two intersecting rooms with pale grey text bordering the walls near the ceiling, which breaks at the dividing wall then picks up again in uneven clusters in the next room.

“Aunt Jo’s Kitchen [...] Surtsey 1963 1950 Dance Turned Into A Romance 1980 hair 1979 Hatchet 2013 1970 Soul on Ice 1968 Helms Amen [...] Everything was sleeping as if the [...]”⁵¹¹

This is Ault indexed by Gonzalez-Torres, refracted in Ault: Gonzalez-Torres specified that subjects or owners have perpetual editing rights to the piece of writing, circumscribed by life. When the performer Prince died during one of the work’s installations, Ault added the words “Purple Unicorn” to her portrait. The addition was hand-stamped in each of the already-printed booklets of the work’s text.⁵¹²

In the end, what is unresolvable is “to be continued”...⁵¹³

Reflecting on the philosopher Georges Bataille after Bataille’s death in 1962, Blanchot calls their communion “friendship”, the only thing that can follow, as it does in Blanchot’s book *Friendship*, ‘The Very Last Word’. Blanchot’s communion with Bataille has at its heart a discretion: not the “simple refusal to put forward confidences”, which he deems too “vulgar” to even be thought of, but “the interval, the pure interval, from me to this other, who is a friend”.⁵¹⁴ This distance, or discretion, for Blanchot, is “what puts authentically in relation”.⁵¹⁵

⁵¹¹ Ibid.

⁵¹² McLean, 2016.

⁵¹³ Fanny Howe, 1999.

⁵¹⁴ Maurice Blanchot, 1997, *Friendship*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 291.

⁵¹⁵ Ibid., p. 292.

We must give up trying to know those to whom we are linked by something essential; by this I mean we must greet them in the relation with the unknown in which they greet us as well, in our estrangement... the movement of understanding in which, speaking to us, [friends] reserve, even on the most familiar terms, an infinite distance, the fundamental separation on the basis of which what separates becomes relation.⁵¹⁶

For Blanchot, the death of a friend, which transforms distance in his language from a rhythmic and perpetuating “interval” to a wrenching, irreparable “fissure”, is also where “all that separates, disappears”, where distance itself is displaced, in the “measureless movement”⁵¹⁷ of dying. This communion is both absolute—“the ultimate discretion”—and impossible, enveloped in what Blanchot calls “indifference”; it can be intimated, evoked, made present, but it is neither reciprocated nor innate. An absence, Blanchot writes, in his grief, “that we will imagine, by deceptive consolation, to be our own”.⁵¹⁸

Yet in Ault’s mirrored thresholds, absolute discretion morphs to encompass magical visibility, glowing excess of relation, overflow, a form of “the search for affinity in eras that have ended”, Ault writes at the end of her essay on Liberace, in an endnote that floats with no referent. “Activating the past in the present”, she states. “The gallery’s two doorways were transformed into mirrored thresholds so that every to-and-fro passing was reflected. The conflation of presence and absence. Apparitions. Glimmers. Shimmers.”⁵¹⁹

The work is over and begins again. Liberace’s ‘apparition’ takes form in the glimpse, the interval between privacy and exposure, structured by the movement of visitors into and out of the room. Conductive, refractive, Ault’s doorframes preserve what Blanchot calls “discretion” at the threshold of what Ault calls “disappearance”, and with this gesture they conduct perhaps Liberace’s greatest entrance, all that can follow, Blanchot had it, “the last word”: the slight displacement, which is also the bright shimmer, which is also the tender friendship of Liberace and Ault.

⁵¹⁶ Ibid., p. 291.

⁵¹⁷ Ibid., p. 292.

⁵¹⁸ Ibid.

⁵¹⁹ Ault, 2014, p. 72.

Fig. A: Dreaming

N., the protagonist of the author and poet Nathaniel Mackey's epistolary novel *Late Arcade*, experiences "cowrie shell attacks", aural-material floodings that N. writes when he is possessed by the figure Dredj. The cowrie shell attacks read as metonymic waking dreams, instigated by a sensory "chain of associations or a train of thought"⁵²⁰ of unclear origin. "Was yesterday's letter Dredj's attempt to convey that sense?" N. writes, to "Dear Angel of Dust", the letters' addressee.

Garbled attempt I'm inclined to say, so brimming with matters not particularly germane to 'Sekhet Aaru Struff' [N.'s musical composition and primary subject] the letter seems to me to be. Or are these departures from the point the very 'point,' the diffusion of the point I touched on in the letter that accompanied the tape...?⁵²¹

When N. discovers he and a friend have shared a dream, the subject of which—they cannot agree—may or may not have been "the one [...] we have to have without having",⁵²² the explanation they settle on (later questioned) is Dredj, mediative, figure of relation, being as being-more-than-one: "what order of dream transfer [...] were [we] dealing with, dream theft, dream contagion or what [...] Was Dredj the connection, we wondered, the conduit [...] Yes, that was it we agreed".⁵²³

Dream figures again in the introduction to *Splay Anthem*, an instalment of Mackey's ongoing serial poems, 'Song of the Andoumboulou' and 'Mu', as "the tendency of events to overwhelm rendition [...] dream can be so much and mean so much one wonders what waking up offers."⁵²⁴ Citing the psychoanalyst Géza Róheim's 1945 study *The Eternal Ones of the Dream*, Mackey finds that, for the Aranda people of Australia, "dreamtime, *altjeringa*",⁵²⁵ embodies none of the passivity typically implied by dreaming. Instead, it is productive, even wilful.

⁵²⁰ Nathaniel Mackey, *Late Arcade* (New York: New Directions, 2017), p. 22.

⁵²¹ Ibid.

⁵²² Ibid., p. 90.

⁵²³ Ibid., p. 89.

⁵²⁴ Mackey, 2006, p. xiii.

⁵²⁵ Ibid.

(Calling forward to Fanny Howe, who writes the dream, in ‘Bewilderment’, as “dazzled and horrified”, “free to act without restraint”, “[that which] breaks into parts and contradicts its own will, even as it travels around and around”,⁵²⁶ and back to Gaston Bachelard, for whom “the night dream (*rêve*) does not belong to us [...] a person [who] has lived a lot [...] never knows in which ancient, very ancient night he started off to dream”).⁵²⁷

Dreamtime, Mackey writes, “is a way of enduring reality, the fact that the dream itself borders on dread notwithstanding [...] It is also a way of challenging reality, a sense in which to dream is not to dream but to replace waking with realization, an ongoing process of testing or contesting reality, subjecting it to change or a demand for change”.⁵²⁸

⁵²⁶ Fanny Howe, 2020, p. 101.

⁵²⁷ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Reverie: Childhood, Language, and the Cosmos*, trans. David Russell (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1971), p. 145

⁵²⁸ Mackey, 2006, p. xiii.

Fig. B: The Writing That Is There Already

Quotation is the genesis of Derrida's *The Politics of Friendship*. The address of friendship ("hazardous, without the least assurance")⁵²⁹ arises from a historical address, attributed to Aristotle: "O my friends, there is no friend".

"Quotation of friendship", Derrida writes. "A quotation coming from a chapter entitled 'On Friendship', after a title that repeats, already, an entire tradition, of titles [...] How many friends? How many of us are there? Determining a nomination and a quotation [...] the distinction expresses rarity [...] What account must be taken of rarity? And what about selection or election, affinity or proximity [...]?"⁵³⁰

For Derrida, quotation is (essential to) the structure of friendship in that it qualifies a relationship of rarity, or specificity, and proximity, or affinity: "the small in number [...] counts *those we are speaking of*", he writes, in which "*speaking of*" is—Derrida quotes Cicero—a form of "great and rare [friendship]" that "[takes] on the value of exemplary heritage".⁵³¹

But the great and rare friend's "illuminative" brilliance,⁵³² their promise to endure, is also a promise of legacy, and is therefore both narcissistic in nature and intimately bound up with death. Derrida offers the example of a fantasy of writing one's own eulogy,⁵³³ to be faithfully quoted after one's death by—yes—the great and rare friend.

Why exemplary? [...] Rarity accords with the phenomenon, it vibrates with light, brilliance and glory [...] it gives rise to a project, the anticipation, the perspective, the providence of a hope that illuminates in advance the future [...] thereby transporting the name's renown beyond death [...] it engraves the renown in a ray of light, and prints the citation of the friend in a convertibility of life and death, of presence and absence, and promises it to the testamel *revenance* [ghostly apparition of [...] 'the ghost'...] of more [no

⁵²⁹ Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (London: Verso, 2005), p.vii.

⁵³⁰ Ibid., pp. 2-3.

⁵³¹ Ibid., p. 3.

⁵³² Ibid.

⁵³³ Ibid., p. 5.

more] life, of a surviving [...] Because of death, and because of this unique passage beyond life, friendship thus offers us a hope that has nothing in common [...] with any other.⁵³⁴

Within the dream of the “ideal double”, “survival is then hoped for, illuminated in advance... for this Narcissus who dreams of immortality”.⁵³⁵ The great and rare friend, “the twin, this absolute friend who always returns with the features of the brother”,⁵³⁶ in fact brings about “the putting to death of friendship itself”.⁵³⁷

Derrida makes the case that friendship must not be accessed on the side of the recursive “be-loved” or “lovable”⁵³⁸—quotational, mimetic, one who hopes to invest (install) themselves in others in order to ventriloquise—but “on the side of its subject, ‘who thinks and lives it’”⁵³⁹ (“if we trusted the categories of subject and object here”).⁵⁴⁰ On the side of the one who loves, that is; through the activity of loving, a refractive act, which Derrida calls “the reference”.⁵⁴¹

Why would a friend be like a brother? Let us dream of a friendship which goes beyond this proximity of the congeneric double, beyond parenthood... when it leaves its signature, from the outset, on the name as on a double mirror of such a couple. Let us ask ourselves what would then be the politics of such a ‘beyond the principle of fraternity.’ Would this still deserve the name ‘politics’?⁵⁴²

Simone White takes up reference and citation in adjacent terms in her essay ‘Dear Angel of Death’. She figures citation early with an image of Amiri Baraka’s lengthy epigraph, in *Digging*, of W.E.B. DuBois’ *Black Reconstruction in America*.⁵⁴³ For White, the reference’s

⁵³⁴ Ibid., p. 3.

⁵³⁵ Ibid., p. 4.

⁵³⁶ Ibid., p. 149.

⁵³⁷ Ibid., p. 5.

⁵³⁸ Ibid., p. 8.

⁵³⁹ Ibid., p. 10.

⁵⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 9.

⁵⁴¹ Ibid., p. 11.

⁵⁴² Ibid., p. vii.

⁵⁴³ White, 2019, p. 77.

visual space or “territory”⁵⁴⁴ is a door: “Before I read”, she writes, “I see a block of text, and the name, ‘W.E.B. DuBois,’ which functions as a picture and a mode of transport toward a variety of ideas relating to the intellectual significance of black persons in the history of the idea of America”.⁵⁴⁵

White shifts the “linguistic intimacy”⁵⁴⁶ of Walter Benjamin’s disguised or hidden citations that, per Agamben, “save and punish”⁵⁴⁷ toward “an historical order of aesthetic desire”:⁵⁴⁸ an ethics and form of practice capable of enacting what Derrida dreams for a politics of friendship beyond fraternity, parentage, legacy:

“[...] Where, so unlike what Benjamin and Agamben describe, citation makes a verbal/visual bridge that implies a wish to lay or throw down with ‘the previous’ by virtue of being fully given over to and in its presence, capitulating and recapitulating.”⁵⁴⁹

For White, Baraka’s citation of DuBois, a reference that is also “a manner/matter of composition and citation”,⁵⁵⁰ “shatters the isolation between the thinking and writing that is in front of us—before us—on the page *and* writing that is before us, figuratively, as the sum of what is in our minds now under the sign of reading *and* writing that has come before us in time.”⁵⁵¹ “We are moved, physically [...]”, she writes, by “the ocular and intellectual stress [of] [...] textual interplay”,⁵⁵² “a rejection of certain scholarly, and also philosophical, understanding of originality in general”.⁵⁵³

These marks-become-writing [referring to Baraka’s “incantatory act of textual image-making and declaration of alliance with [black] ‘Soul’”] fasten the original to the past and herald the possibility of, not separation from the antecedent, but mutual release from the antecedent’s conditions of impossibility.⁵⁵⁴

⁵⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 77.

⁵⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 78.

⁵⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁷ Agamben, in White, 2019, p. 78.

⁵⁴⁸ White, 2019, p. 78.

⁵⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 79.

⁵⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 78.

⁵⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵⁵² Ibid.

⁵⁵³ Ibid., p. 80.

⁵⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 80.

At the same time, White considers whether her own references, linguistic intimacies, are doors or walls: “What is required if the expression of DuBois, Baraka, [Nathaniel] Mackey, [Wilson] Harris, [Fred] Moten is to be understood as an order and how does this expression call for order to begin to take place or begin again?”⁵⁵⁵ In an interview, she expands on citation as a space and a form:

I started to look at the thickness of those quotations, of those citations (the way poets look at stuff) formally... That gesture of using, as your own first words, something that long from somebody else seemed big — to announce that your work must be read through this other person’s. That fascinated me. This essay’s underlying questions about citational practice come from that: how does citationality make material one’s more general theory of time? What does it mean to build a specific historicity into your text from the start? How does one place oneself genealogically? And then more broadly: what will our relationship be to what came before? What actions or activities of past black people will shape the range of responses we can have to each other?⁵⁵⁶

Considering an epigraph used by Nathaniel Mackey in his novel *Late Arcade*,⁵⁵⁷ White observes that the transversal movements—visual, poetic and historical—citation makes possible are born of the “physical/spatial” aspects of genealogy, or “repeating/writing-down/re-reading as a method of placing oneself in contact with or over top of the physical space that has been occupied by a previous text”.⁵⁵⁸ Which suggests perhaps that citation, where writing is intimately bound up with “the writing that is there already”,⁵⁵⁹ is a form, structure, ethics of friendship.

This is White:

⁵⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 90.

⁵⁵⁶ Simone White, in Andy Fitch, ‘Questions of Inside and Outside: Talking to Simone White’, *Los Angeles Review of Books* blog (2018) <<https://blog.lareviewofbooks.org/interviews/questions-inside-outside-talking-simone-white/>> Accessed 02-09-2020.

⁵⁵⁷ Mackey’s epigraph (in White, 2019, p. 108) is: “4. Namesake Epigraph #1 came from a book on the Dogon: ‘The Word,’ said the old man, ‘is the sound of the block and the shuttle. The name of the block means ‘creaking of the word.’ Everybody understands what is meant by ‘the word’ in that connection. It is interwoven with the threads; it fills the interstices in the fabric.’”

⁵⁵⁸ White, 2019, p. 109.

⁵⁵⁹ Ibid.

This writing in order to be with is not directed toward the production of the palimpsest, which implies willed dumbness or dimness, scribbling over the substantive previousness—part limitation, part condition of possibility—that must at some level be the subject of the writing, and to which the subject’s criticality comes to pass in the presence of. That is, it is the fact of the writing that is there already that matters, not the fact of its removal, illegibility, or the act of squeezing into a space of legibility that remains in order to make one’s authorship visible.⁵⁶⁰

⁵⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 109.

Fig. C: Friendship

In his short essay 'The Friend', which partly addresses Derrida's analysis of Aristotle, Giorgio Agamben finds "a perfect allegory of friendship"⁵⁶¹ in a painting by Giovanni Serodine that depicts Saints Paul and Peter meeting on their road to martyrdom, positioned with their foreheads so close together that "there is no way that they can see one another".⁵⁶²

This, "a nearness that is, so to speak, excessive",⁵⁶³ a mutual in/visibility, evokes a question and answer for Agamben that recall Barthes' figuring of tact, the excessively marginal: "Indeed, what is friendship other than a proximity that resists both representation and conceptualization?"⁵⁶⁴ Agamben writes. "To recognize someone as a friend means not being able to recognize him as a 'something' [...] since friendship is neither a property nor a quality of a subject."⁵⁶⁵

For Agamben, friendship is "a joint sensation, or a con-sent (*synaisthanesthai*) with the existence of a friend. "*Friendship*"—emphasis his—"is the instant of this 'con-sentiment' of the existence of the friend within the sentiment of existence itself",⁵⁶⁶ and is therefore, as it is for Derrida, political and ontological,⁵⁶⁷ in that "the sensation of being is always both divided and 'co-divided' [*con-divisa*, shared], and friendship is the name of this 'con-division'".⁵⁶⁸

"This sharing has nothing whatsoever to do with the modern chimera of intersubjectivity, the relationship between subjects", Agamben writes. "Rather, being itself is divided here, it is nonidentical to itself, and so the I and the friend are the two faces, or the two poles, of this con-division or sharing."⁵⁶⁹

Neither an innate property of friend-subjects nor an extrinsic agreement of relationship, the extreme proximity and impassable distance of friendship is, for Agamben, a kind of

⁵⁶¹ Agamben, 2009, pp. 30-31.

⁵⁶² Ibid.

⁵⁶³ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 34.

⁵⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁹ Ibid.

consubstantial current. It is in this aspect of its being that he locates friendship's political nature:

“Friends do not share something (birth, law, place, taste): they are shared by the experience of friendship. And it is this sharing without an object, this original consenting, that constitutes the political”.⁵⁷⁰

⁵⁷⁰ Ibid.

Fig. D: Solitude

In ‘The Essential Solitude’, Maurice Blanchot expands on an idea of completion that is neither finitude nor infinitude. He describes completing a work (of writing, in this instance) as a “solitude”, not of the work’s author (who, for Blanchot, self-communes) but of the work coming into individual being, the point at which “the person who has written the work is dismissed... [and] does not know it”.⁵⁷¹

As in Agamben’s and Simondon’s writing, this solitude, or coming-into-individual-being, or individuation, is a completion that starts. To finish means that work begins again, even as the specificities of the singular work remain—this is the case, for Blanchot, even in the instance of the work’s destruction; work cannot be undone.

Where (when) the work exceeds itself, what Blanchot calls the “unique whole” of the work, is also the reason the writer keeps working. Blanchot writes, with reference to Paul Valéry:

The writer never knows if the work is done. What he has finished in one book, he begins again or destroys in another. Valéry, who celebrates this privilege of the infinite in the work, still sees only its easiest aspect: the fact that the work is infinite means (to him) that although the artist is not capable of ending it, he is nevertheless capable of turning it into the enclosed space of an endless task whose incompleteness develops mastery of the spirit, expresses that mastery, expresses it by developing it in the form of power. At a certain point, circumstances—that is, history—in the form of an editor, financial demands, social duties, pronounce the missing end and the artist, freed by a purely compulsory outcome, pursues the incomplete elsewhere.

According to this point of view, the infinity of the work is simply the infinity of the spirit. The spirit tries to accomplish itself in a single work, instead of realizing itself in the infinity of works and the movement of history. But Valéry was in no way a hero. He chose to talk about everything, to write about everything: thus, the scattered whole of the world diverted him from the rigor

⁵⁷¹ Blanchot, 1981, p. 63.

of the unique whole of the work—he amiably allowed himself to be turned away from it. The etc. was hiding behind the divert of thoughts, of subjects.⁵⁷²

For Blanchot, the supplement that is also the work’s solitude—its etc.—its halo—the overflow that affirms the work’s singularity and beginning-again—is communicability, being read: “The work is solitary: that does not mean that it remains incommunicable, that it lacks a reader. But the person who reads it enters into that affirmation of the solitude of the work, just as the one who writes it belongs to the risk of that solitude.”⁵⁷³

⁵⁷² Ibid., p. 64

⁵⁷³ Ibid.

Fig. E: The Letter

In the Group Material archive, I find a letter sent to Julie Ault by an artist, Dennis L. Peabody, dated Monday Aug 6, 1990.⁵⁷⁴

Dear Julie,

Please forgive this hastily typed, stream of consciousness letter. Andrea Miller-Keller of the Wadsworth Atheneum has just urged me to contact you after a brief conversation regarding the 'ARTISTS AGAINST AIDS' benefit which I was involved with one week ago. (We were successful in raising nearly \$14,000 in a very grass-roots effort which will benefit 4 local organizations fighting AIDS. See enclosed program.)

In my conversation with Andrea, I spoke of losing my younger brother to AIDS nearly seven years ago. He was 25 and I was 26 at the time. He was a gay man, a student at NYU and I remember being clearly jealous of his success being in the fast lane in New York while I was emotionally troubled and living at home unable to 'get my act together'. When Dean first began having a rash of health problems in 1982 the word AIDS was not mentioned on the evening news.

When he was diagnosed in late 1982 even I didn't know this was a death sentence and felt I was a reasonably informed gay man also. The following year was a slow descent into an abyss of fear, pain and trial for Dean, myself and our family. We were forced to blaze a trail which unfortunately many are to tread. My parents were heroic at the time, though divorced for many years, fighting for Dean, their baby for health services, Social Security, counselling [sic] many of the things which are now common practice.

During this time I created several works which I offer to allow you to use if you so wished in your display. The first is an oak-framed piece which I had hung in the

⁵⁷⁴ Dennis L. Peabody, 'Letter to Julie Ault', Folder 2: General Correspondence 1990, Box 6, Series II, Group Material Archive, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University.

window of Dean's hospital room. He named it the "Laughing Phoenix" and I have kept that title. The next is a circular panel which was hastily assembled upon returning from the hospital the night Dean died. Sleep eluded me. The piece solidified and was completed within weeks of his death. During the six months which Dean was hospitalized I continuously had been executing a sculptural piece, a lampshade actually, very asymmetrical [sic] twisted, distorted yet beautiful. I feel this piece accurately captured the emotional wrangling of this period. Finally, I have a panel just completed based on a drawing I did of Dean's face in the hospital. The portrait has been painted and fired into a glass pane which is surrounded by old glass I got from broken church windows and sharp shards of dark glass. This piece represents to me the testing and explosion of my faith in dealing with my brother's death and is intended to be icon-like in its [sic] composition and yet disquieting rather than placid in nature.

I look forward to your show in any case. I would love to show you my work even if you are unable to use it and welcome you to look me up when you are in Hartford. I am about 5 minutes south of the Wadsworth Atheneum.

Let me close by saying that in the years since my brothers' [sic] death my dreams of him were always painful where he was sick and dying. About two years ago, however, I had two very strong dreams of him days apart. The first where we met in a childhood neighbor's house. I told him how I missed him and we fell into an embrace of hysterical crying. I awoke crying and several days later had another of those early morning half-sleep dreams where I walked into my room in my childhood house and there was Dean resplendent, radiant [sic] and saintly just glowing gold and a beautiful countenance. One nostril was pierced and a small braided cord was threaded there, a vestige of my memories of the feeding tube he died with in his nose. I commented that his face was beautiful and he smiled and laughed and asked me, "Here do you want it?" while motioning that he was going to pull it off like some sci-fi movie. We both laughed and embraced and cried heartily tears of joy. I awoke at that point again in tears and yet knowing that somehow he had just touched me as sure as if he'd been standing there. That feeling lasted for weeks and I soon realized that in the years after his death the dreams had gradually become less painful and this last strong dream was a culmination of my acceptance of his dying. This process took many years and there

are still questions and fears and doubts about how and why but I am now more able to say that it is not yet time for me to understand. That this (life) is a process that often makes no sense until another level or vantage point has been reached which allow you to make sense of pieces which previously had no relationship.

My best to you in your trials. May you find fortitude and strength in your faith that there's always a happy ending.

Sincerely,

Dennis L. Peabody

‘An ell yielded up’

This chapter is about a figure, a presence both specific and undetermined. What does it mean to write the figure and how does this pursuit also shift the writing I? What is the nature of this pact of sorts—a bond, a fastening, a fix, etymologically—and how can this pact, unspoken by nature, be articulated? What is just between she and I? The chapter takes as its starting point the unique folded structure and conflicting origin stories of the interior designer Janette Laverrière’s work, A Desk for the Ambassador’s Wife (1956).

As the mysterious missing subject of the desk unfolds, the chapter follows suit, folding in on itself and by the end diverging from itself entirely. Sources arrive figuratively: their stories, offered partially and in quotation, are one and the same with that of the chapter, a silhouette or outline overflowing with interpretability. The chapter pursues figure, follows figure’s formal logic of the multiple and partial, and in so doing becomes shaped, in-formed, by the figural or switched-up logic of the desk, which first invites remarks then opens to notation. Figure is everywhere in writing, but where is writing in relation to figure? Who is “she”, the one writing begins and ends with, when figure always gets there first?

The person actually knows the planet and the cosmos better than she knows her own self that disappears.

— Fanny Howe, *The Wedding Dress: Meditations on Word and Life*

The world was to me a secret, which I desired to discover; to her it was a vacancy, which she sought to people with imaginations of her own.

— Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus*

Then:

Janette Laverrière was asked to make a desk for the Ambassador. But on arriving at his home for their first meeting, she was greeted at the door by his wife. The Ambassador is travelling, she said. And this is all she says. But don't worry: I can tell you what he needs.

Laverrière deduces—it is unspoken—that the desk is for the Ambassador's wife. She designs an elegant yet unusual piece comprising a polished Rio rosewood box set into a large, black enamelled wood oval, on polished metal legs of various vectors resembling two leant elbows, chin in palms. The bottom half of the box is akin to a tray with inset drawers and the top when closed is pitched with halves that open laterally from center onto the oval surface below like the cover of a book, if it were possible to begin from both ends at once.

The desk's interior is lined in rich green leather and holds a series of pockets and compartments, at least one of which is hidden for private correspondence with the lovers. Laverrière suggested the Ambassador's wife take up. This clandestine logic informs the desk's folded structure and also, indirectly, her chair, which is, like an accompanying chaise longue, upholstered in cream fabric patterned with rough yet deliberate marks, sometimes heavily drawn and otherwise sparse and singular, as if she had taken up an ink pen and drawn a line then gone over it unevenly, again and again. Notation of a sort, or perhaps redaction. Underlining, if I shift my focus, of the whitespace.

“A prisoner or a patient becomes a double monster [...]” writes the poet Fanny Howe, on how re-marking might attend erasure, “unless she can redraw the content of the experience, and give it a new name”.⁵⁷⁵

The artist Nairy Baghramian tells the first story. Baghramian met Laverrière in 2007 after she discovered the only existing monograph about Laverrière in a bookshop in London and learned that she was 97 years old and living in Paris. A deep kinship formed: Laverrière called Baghramian her “sister in creation”⁵⁷⁶ and the two collaborated on several exhibitions in the last years of Laverrière’s life. For the 2008 Berlin Biennale, Baghramian designed a freestanding room inside the Schinkel Pavilion⁵⁷⁷ to house works from Laverrière’s *Evocations* series, mirror sculptures “dedicated to some of the most important figures in my life”,⁵⁷⁸ Jean Cocteau, Louise Michel, Victor Hugo, Martin Luther King Jr., Pirandello and others. She called these “useless objects”⁵⁷⁹ and they called the installation *La lampe dans l’horloge*, after the 1948 essay by the surrealist André Breton.

“She brings me the secret of her structure”, Breton writes to the Star of the tarot in *Arcanum 17: With Apertures, Grafted to the End*, “tells me why she counts twice-more branches than all the rest [...] as if it were a matter of a double star, their rays alternating [...] and only now rising to full consciousness, her total dignity”.⁵⁸⁰

In 2019, Baghramian installed a two-person exhibition with Laverrière titled ‘Work Desk for the Ambassador’s Wife’ at Marian Goodman Gallery in New York. The desk from the story was not included in the exhibition—the Mobilier National, the French government’s furniture archive, issued the commission, and only a prototype was ever made—but Baghramian discussed it in the press: “I fell in love with this piece [...] because of the title. It’s *Work Desk for an Ambassador’s Wife*, which is a very long title for a design object. Janette got a

⁵⁷⁵ Fanny Howe, *The Wedding Dress: Meditations on Word and Life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), p. 62.

⁵⁷⁶ Nairy Baghramian, ‘Ménage à trois, quatre, cinq...’, in Karola Kraus (ed.), *Entre Deux Actes, Loge de Comédienne* (Köln: König, 2009), p. 30.

⁵⁷⁷ Burin, 2008.

⁵⁷⁸ Koivu, 2008, p. 87.

⁵⁷⁹ Nairy Baghramian, in Amelia Stein, ‘Nairy Baghramian’, *Artforum* (26 November 2019) <<https://www.artforum.com/interviews/nairy-baghramian-81407>> Accessed 03-07-2020.

⁵⁸⁰ André Breton, ‘Arcane 17 (Excerpts)’, in Franklin Rosemont (ed.), *What is Surrealism?: Selected Writings* (New York: Monad, 1978), pp. 325-333 (pp. 331-2).

commission for a work desk for an ambassador [...] And the name of the desk is now the title of the exhibition”.⁵⁸¹

Baghramian called the show a “pitch point”⁵⁸² in her and Janette’s “coexistence”.⁵⁸³ She again created congruent supports for Laverrière’s “landscape of design objects”⁵⁸⁴—transparent, freestanding steel and glass walls that seemed almost to suspend the works in mid-air—and her powder-coated concrete and glass sculptures in custom vitrines transposed formal elements of several of Laverrière’s exhibited works, including her curvilinear seating platform and peaked *Chapeau Chinois* lamps. Alongside Laverrière’s drawings of unrealised designs Baghramian showed her own, of imagined shapes and projects not intended for production, “objects that only fit in our head”,⁵⁸⁵ she told me at the time. “The labour of coexistence is creating that space for someone else, and it’s a commitment that partly happens unseen”.⁵⁸⁶

In 1956, Laverrière was living in the 8th arrondissement after divorcing her second husband, a mathematician, when she received an invitation to participate in the 40th Salon des artistes décorateurs. The Salon was an annual event, held in Paris from 1904 by the Société des artistes décorateurs, a French organisation of interior designers and decorative artists, of which Laverrière was then a member.⁵⁸⁷ Peers and clients alike considered participation to be prestigious for young designers. In step with the influence of early modernism in Europe, the Salon was especially known for encouraging experimentation with new techniques and materials to explore collaboration between design and industry and to promote the increasingly central role of design in everyday life.

Laverrière was already renowned for her innovative kitchens, which combined formal optimism and material curiosity with a particular acuity for, as she put it, “rationalization of the work steps”,⁵⁸⁸ what should, in space, precede what. Her earlier work with her first

⁵⁸¹ Sarah Cascone, ‘What Nairy Baghramian Is Looking At’, *Artnet News* (8 November 2019) <<https://news.artnet.com/art-world/nairy-baghramian-1698285>> Accessed 12-09-2020.

⁵⁸² Stein, 2019.

⁵⁸³ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁴ Cascone, 2019.

⁵⁸⁵ Stein, 2019.

⁵⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁷ ‘Janette Laverrière’, *Docantic* (2021) <<https://www.docantic.com/fr/page/62/janette-laverriere-1909-2011-biographie>> Accessed 30-09-2020.

⁵⁸⁸ Mauderli, 2005.

husband and fellow designer, Maurice Pré, under the pseudonymous signature M. J. Pré, had been critically well received and awarded in expositions. Following their divorce and the dissolution of their professional partnership in 1946, Laverrière laboured to support two children through private commissions that came barely often enough, usually for single rooms or one-off pieces, from clients in Paris's professional and creative classes.⁵⁸⁹ When the invitation arrived, she had just finished a secrétaire for Mr. Jean Camion, inventor of a universal system of written language that converts phonemes, or sounds that distinguish one word from another, to marks.⁵⁹⁰

“If she has built offices for commercial or public establishments, she prefers the complexity of the problems offered by private homes”, a profile of Laverrière published in 1956 in *Mobilier et Decoration* magazine suggests. “From the living room to the ‘combined kitchen’, from the nursery to the bedrooms, she tends to organize the solutions suggested by the personality and habits of the user”.⁵⁹¹

“As a single mother of two, I had to work hard to remain an independent woman,” Laverrière told *Abitare* magazine some fifty years later. She credited her success to “the help of friends and some lucky breaks”.⁵⁹²

The theme of the Salon des artistes décorateurs changed each year to reflect the social and aesthetic preoccupations of the time, and in 1956 the theme was “the modern framework for women's life”. Laverrière, by then accustomed to considering the particularities of “women's life” in the first half of the twentieth century, accepted. Her installation for the event, *Cabinet de travail d'une femme d'ambassadeur*, centered on a desk “for an imaginary ambassador's wife”.⁵⁹³

The historian Yves Badetz tells the second story. To write Laverrière's monograph, published in 2001, Badetz conducted extensive in-person interviews with her, resulting in Laverrière's only extended biography. He quotes her sparingly in his text, preferring to narrate her life and

⁵⁸⁹ Badetz, 2001, p. 56.

⁵⁹⁰ Jean Camion, 2002, ‘The Phonergy Code of Jean Camion’, *Chrysode* (2002)
<<https://fun.chrysode.org/english/camion.htm>> Accessed 05-12-2020.

⁵⁹¹ ‘Janette Laverrière’, 2021.

⁵⁹² Koivu, 2008, p. 83.

⁵⁹³ Badetz, 2001, p. 92.

practice, her methods and memories, in his own words, which are plentifully detailed yet somehow unrevealing, perhaps because the gravity, curiosity and affection he bestows upon Laverrière's work—the desk is a “fine piece of craftsmanship [that] can be ranked as one of the masterpieces of 20th Century furniture”⁵⁹⁴—often surfaces in other episodes of unrelated, vaguely idiosyncratic description. Of an earlier salon held at the Grand Palais, he writes: “The luxurious atmosphere stemmed largely from a slightly cold neoclassicism combining distinction and know-how”.⁵⁹⁵

Badetz lends a design critic's attention to Laverrière's overlap with major styles and movements—she studied Art Deco, she embraced and then exceeded modernism—but her presence in his story is narrow. Along a scrupulous chronology of personal and professional milestones, her works materialise exclusive of process or method. Little context is offered as to her influences or the nature of her relationships with peers and clients—what was both her and not her alone, in her work. When friends, husbands, collaborators, children do arrive, they are disembodied names. Where her objects are rendered exactly in text and images, she alone and otherwise seems to float.

A photograph of *Cabinet de travail d'une femme d'ambassadeur*, or *Study for an ambassador's wife*, appears in Badetz's book. As well as the chaise, chair and desk, which is closed and shined to a gloss, Laverrière's installation includes a two-faced bookshelf with its back to itself in the manner of a duel, and a small, mosaiced coffee table on quadrupedal-looking iron legs. Badetz attributes the chair's distinctive, sketchy fabric to the French-Hungarian designer Mathieu Matégot, who by then had invented a technique for perforating sheet metal and a machine that worked metal like a textile but had not yet given up his own design work to focus exclusively on tapestries. The angle of seat to desk is expectant as if she is just gone or coming. A covenant of *Ficus elastica*, or rubber figs, encircle a thick pile rug in the same luxurious cream as the chairs.

In Baghranian's story, the Ambassador's wife is real. Laverrière meets her at her home while her husband is away and in unspoken agreement designs the desk to accommodate her specific purposes, her potential needs. In Laverrière's apparent attention to function is a

⁵⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 92.

⁵⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 41.

wilder form, desire anticipated and embedded in her decision to create at least one concealed drawer for secret letters, dramatised where the desk's particular surface meets itself in the middle like wings. And with this speculative gesture that folds the work, the story splits, or rather doubles: Badetz tells that the Ambassador's wife is fashioned, a figure Laverrière confects to animate the work in response to a theme. "Wherever I move this snapshot, you have moved",⁵⁹⁶ writes the poet Robert Lowell, often violently to and of his wife, Elizabeth Hardwick, she and he said, so I too must start from both ends at once.

Call it a problem, that she is one and double, told by two who knew her well. This is how figure arrives as a fold in the story, in the work. "You who are not quite an individual and not quite a group make the very idea of a figure having contour, the singular line that bounds and defines, a problem",⁵⁹⁷ writes the artist Yve Lomax, on how she is imprecisely bounded if at all, but also how imprecision is where and how figure presses into and against the world, not figure, I—"I mean that when most people might feel they've found a good enough figure, you go on to accuracy," Lowell wrote to the poet Marianne Moore, where accurate means "poems that [were] 'more jagged and imagined'", in which "'things I felt or saw, or read' become 'drift in the whirlpool'".⁵⁹⁸

At whirlpool, I am reminded of the story of Lowell's inhabitations, "Christ, Hitler, Napoleon, Dante, Milton, Alexander, John the Baptist",⁵⁹⁹ fits of mania in which he took to ransacking his own house for buried treasure. And there is a bipolarity to figure, at least in the oxymoronic sense, in that it tends to draw together what it isn't, specificities, at least two. But figure is more and less than a subject: instead of spilling over from identity into identity again, the Ambassador's wife arrives as one story that contradicts itself, a specificity identified by inflection or change. (Figure is "without and within", writes Jean-François Lyotard. "This is why it holds the secret of connaturality, but at the same time reveals this connaturality to be an illusion").⁶⁰⁰ What makes figure's "contour", in Lomax's words, a "problem": this drawing together that diverges at the heart.

⁵⁹⁶ Robert Lowell, 'Hospital II', in *The Dolphin* [1973] (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019), p. 61.

⁵⁹⁷ Yve Lomax, *Figure, Calling* (London, Ventnor: The Copy Press Limited, 2017), p. 13.

⁵⁹⁸ Saskia Hamilton, in Lowell, 2019, pp. x-xi.

⁵⁹⁹ Dan Chiasson, 'The Illness and Insight of Robert Lowell', *The New Yorker* (20 March 2017)

<<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/03/20/the-illness-and-insight-of-robert-lowell>> Accessed 08-08-2019.

⁶⁰⁰ Lyotard, 2011, p. 7.

A second image of the desk in Badetz's book shows the work alone with its halves open to their respective sides. The suede lining he calls green appears luxurious even in black and white, its texture, or tone, in the photograph, variegated where fingers must have brushed or smoothed the interior. A continuous blanket of suede covers the central writing tray and dips into the slotted inner sides, called "pencil case and letter box"⁶⁰¹ by Mobilier National, creating one matte surface where before there was one gloss. Two inset drawers sit flush underneath, facing her were she to sit, and although the slots are empty they are somehow poised, as if the point was not to hold material but to release or absorb it, transformed, at the moment of receipt. Gills come to mind, or ears, the way a soft surface metabolises a sharp pitch, confusing duration and also orientation, the here and now but also here and there of it, the order of arrival of the sound in time and space.

On the desk's central tray, a single, small book sits open to centre like a devotional object. A photograph on the book's left-hand page shows a beach at high tide, captured close up at an angle that suggests the photographer was lying frontwards on the sand. The swell is breaking and gentle arcs of limbs in the foreground hint at a figure lying sideways. On the right-hand page, another photograph of the beach, this time at a distance, shows the tide withdrawn to reveal a reef-like shore. A slim, curved shape against the pocked ground rumours an elbow or knee, but the book in the book is small, and the photograph indistinct, and I can't see further. One of the inset drawers has popped open in this image, showing a couple of pages folded like an impromptu envelope. Air or tension lifts the paper's edge as if to tilt the figure out of frame.

Figure absorbs the beginning of *Nilling*, the poet Lisa Robertson's book of essays, in the form of a page-long footnote. For Robertson, figure takes place when "an object or an image [...] receives more of our imaginative projection than its social or mythic function would require",⁶⁰² and takes shape as a "supple transference"⁶⁰³ or an "excess of potential interpretability inherent to a shapeliness".⁶⁰⁴ She reads the philologist Erich Auerbach's foundational essay, which suggests that *figura*, iterated from its earliest use, expresses "the

⁶⁰¹ Bureau de dame (1956), Janette Laverrière, *Mobilier National*

<<https://collection.mobiliernational.culture.gouv.fr/objet/GME-12638-000>> Accessed 10-09-2020.

⁶⁰² Robertson, 2012, p. 11.

⁶⁰³ Ibid.

⁶⁰⁴ Ibid.

notion of *new* manifestation, the *changing* aspect, of the permanent”⁶⁰⁵ (emphasis hers), but that, more than just a thing that changes, figure has an additive quality, is at once innate and extrinsic in the manner of shadow.

In Robertson’s writing, figure is already “part of a willed production of meaning”⁶⁰⁶ and at the same time derives its dynamics, its agency, from the “inherent incompleteness of history”.⁶⁰⁷ This is how figure formally “gives occasion to the desire to interpret”,⁶⁰⁸ not altogether comfortably: as Lyotard suggests, figure is “a spatial manifestation that linguistic space cannot incorporate without being shaken, an exteriority it cannot interiorize as *signification*.”⁶⁰⁹ What makes something figural, then, is both its “capacity to overflow intention”⁶¹⁰ and its appearance in *figuring*, a textual process for Auerbach,⁶¹¹ which takes shape over and over: “interpretive incompleteness”, Robertson writes, “is the figure’s access to potential change”.⁶¹²

This is how she tells it, like a riddle: figure is one instance or cadence with multiple appearances. An imaginative projection that is also shapely, specific but not delimited, flighty but not imprecise, figure is a form, for Roland Barthes, of re-marking, the ranging, enigmatic passages of his lectures on the Neutral that formally expropriate thoughts, references, intimations as “traits”⁶¹³ or “twinklings”,⁶¹⁴ similar to Giorgio Agamben’s glosses, a supplementary section of text not incorporated into the main body of the chapter but integral to its meaning,⁶¹⁵ figuring explanation as creative form. Wayne Koestenbaum writes similarly when he “dwells”⁶¹⁶ in figures such as Harpo Marx that beget his ecstatic speculations: figure is contingency without combination, without metaphor; writing is “figuring (it) out”.⁶¹⁷

⁶⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁰⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁰⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁰⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁰⁹ Lyotard, 2011, p. 7.

⁶¹⁰ Robertson, 2012, p. 11.

⁶¹¹ Auerbach, in Robertson, 2012, p. 11.

⁶¹² Robertson, 2012, p. 11.

⁶¹³ Thomas Clerc, in Barthes, 2005, p. xxi.

⁶¹⁴ Ibid., p. xxi.

⁶¹⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History: Essays on the Destruction of Experience*, trans. Liz Heron (London: Verso Books, 2007), p. 17.

⁶¹⁶ Wayne Koestenbaum, *The Anatomy of Harpo Marx* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012), p. 204.

⁶¹⁷ Ibid, p. 204.

Yet: “notice the pleasure that hits when one thing replaces another”,⁶¹⁸ Koestenbaum writes, on Harpo’s “switch trick”, wherein Harpo offers up his leg for his part in a handshake—and I have to agree. Koestenbaum calls it “substitution as aesthetic category”,⁶¹⁹ perhaps what Agamben means with “bringing language to language”,⁶²⁰ the alternative to that which “unhinges and empties”.⁶²¹ Divergence as a matter of switching meanings over invention as such, interrupting one with one, a change of course as delight. Such figural folds in the story have narrative names—the spin, the split, the twist—and “she” is one: “her pronoun is sedition”, Robertson writes elsewhere, “unrecognized as such”.⁶²² She is greater than one, a power of multiples, and she is inchoate, a partial function. “You expect a fist”, writes Koestenbaum. “You receive, instead, a flower”.⁶²³

I am paraphrasing Robertson: to figure is to affirm partiality and presence at the same time. Which is how, in *The Pleasure of the Text*, Barthes distinguishes figure from representation in textual terms: “figuration is the way in which the erotic body appears (to whatever degree and in whatever form that may be) in the profile of the text”,⁶²⁴ a “diagrammatic and not an imitative”, or mimetic, “model”⁶²⁵ that is, vitally for Barthes, “necessary to the bliss of reading”.⁶²⁶ Representation, on the other hand, is “encumbered with other meanings than that of desire: a space of alibis (reality, morality, likelihood, readability, truth, etc.)”,⁶²⁷ and has the effect of trapping desire, which Barthes believes should be “ubiquitous”,⁶²⁸ within the confines of the text. “This is what representation is”, he writes. “When nothing emerges, when nothing leaps out of the frame: of the picture, the book, the screen”.⁶²⁹

Barthes calls figure a “model” and the “erotic body”, a suggestive, shapely thing that is nonetheless general in that a model both exemplifies and shape-shifts. But “what body?”⁶³⁰

⁶¹⁸ Ibid., p. 29.

⁶¹⁹ Ibid.

⁶²⁰ Agamben, 2007, p. 82.

⁶²¹ Ibid, p. 82

⁶²² Robertson, in Harriet Staff, ‘Lisa Robertson’s Voiceover for Amy Sillman in Paris’, *Poetry Foundation* (2012) <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2012/07/lisa-robertsons-voiceover-for-amy-sillman-in-paris>> Accessed 03-12-2021.

⁶²³ Koestenbaum, 2012, p. 29.

⁶²⁴ Barthes, R. 1975, pp. 55-56.

⁶²⁵ Ibid., p. 56.

⁶²⁶ Ibid.

⁶²⁷ Ibid.

⁶²⁸ Ibid.

⁶²⁹ Ibid., p. 57.

⁶³⁰ Ibid., p. 16.

“We have several of them”,⁶³¹ and besides, “my body does not have the same ideas I do”, which would be straightforward enough if by “I” Barthes meant himself. Instead, Barthes’s “body of bliss”,⁶³² “the given which makes my body separate from other bodies and appropriates its suffering or its pleasure”,⁶³³ is where and how Barthes stages “our plural”:⁶³⁴ the pleasure, or question,⁶³⁵ or suspension,⁶³⁶ in the chemic sense, of the body of the text, Barthes’s “materialist subject”,⁶³⁷ specific but not singular. In the throes of figuring, Nietzschean passion of interpretation,⁶³⁸ “it is not my ‘subjectivity’ I encounter but my ‘individuality’”, figure, he writes—figure he writes: “individual, but not personal”.⁶³⁹

Oh, but let’s say figure is *identified*, rather than *identity*, a distinction Judith Butler borrows from Jacqueline Rose,⁶⁴⁰ describing something like counterpoint in the musical sense, playing as one piece parts independent yet interdependent and differently inflected, Robertson again, through time.⁶⁴¹ I am a voyeur, not a confidant,⁶⁴² in other words, when figure “comes back around”,⁶⁴³ marked by eros’s itinerancy as well as its distance from subjectivity—though I would not go so far as to claim for figure the total, liberated dislocation Barthes eventually finds: “I write myself as a subject at present out of place, arriving too soon or too late [...] anachronic subject, adrift”.⁶⁴⁴ Emphasis mine. When Barthes writes that figure is his “historical subject”,⁶⁴⁵ he means it less artifactually than as a matter of timing.

I am thinking of another table and chairs Laverrière told the design historian Laurence Mauderli about in 2005. A few years before their interview, Mauderli had written a paper arguing for the influential role of the Swiss Werkbund and L'Oeuvre, two design unions founded in 1913 by the architect Alphonse Laverrière, Laverrière’s father, in “[fighting]

⁶³¹ Ibid., p. 56.

⁶³² Ibid., p. 62.

⁶³³ Ibid., p. 56.

⁶³⁴ Ibid.

⁶³⁵ Ibid., p. 64.

⁶³⁶ Ibid., p. 65.

⁶³⁷ Ibid., p. 61.

⁶³⁸ Ibid., p. 62.

⁶³⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁰ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 41.

⁶⁴¹ Robertson, 2012, p. 11.

⁶⁴² Barthes, 1975, p. 17.

⁶⁴³ Rindon Johnson and Aram Moshayedi, ‘A Start: Rindon Johnson in Conversation with Aram Moshayedi’, *Hammer Museum* blog (2020) <<https://hammer.ucla.edu/blog/2020/07/start-rindon-johnson-conversation-aram-moshayedi>> Accessed 07-09-2020.

⁶⁴⁴ Barthes, 1975, pp. 62-3.

⁶⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 62

fierce battles with a naturally conservative industry and public for the soul of Swiss design”.⁶⁴⁶ Alphonse’s later association with Art Deco is consequential in Mauderli’s writing and her interview with Laverrière, since it was also the style in which Janette then trained as an apprentice under the master Jacques-Emile Ruhlmann. For her first question, Mauderli asks Laverrière to account for the arrival of Art Deco in Switzerland in the early twentieth century.

But Laverrière doesn’t answer, says she “can’t really”.⁶⁴⁷ Instead, she tells a story—“but I do remember”⁶⁴⁸—about a seating group or table and chairs in “precious woods” that were retroactively attributed to the Art Deco style, designed by her father with seat covers embroidered by her mother. “When I put it like that,” she says, “I think about how conservative and bourgeois that division of labor was: the man working with wood, the woman with textiles. But that was how it was back then. The seating group was shown at the Exposition nationale d’art appliqué in Lausanne in 1922. Afterwards, we used it at home”.⁶⁴⁹

I find an image of the installation in Mauderli’s earlier article. Although the room holds other noteworthy details—striped wallpaper, a mantelpiece made of various kinds of marble topped with an ornate clock and enormous mirror—the table and chairs dominate, are at once complementary and at odds, just as Laverrière’s story suggests. The small, round occasional table in dark walnut tapers at every edge and end so that surface and shape take turns at convexity, and its narrow legs end in curlicued feet, lightly stepping in all directions. Two chairs with spiral armrests have pretty embroidered borders framing empty centres on their fabric backrests. The installation is credited to Alphonse Laverrière. Comparing Alphonse’s work with that of a German counterpart, Mauderli writes that while the former demonstrates “a design concept geared towards serial production”, the latter exemplifies “that of the individual decorating of the Salon”,⁶⁵⁰ although it is not clear who is individual, or what.

What I notice in Laverrière’s answer is how she meets the idea of categories as historical objects that move through time with forms—table and chairs, husband and wife, but also the

⁶⁴⁶ Laurence Mauderli, ‘Positioning Swiss Design: The Schweizerischer Werkbund and L’Oeuvre at the beginning of the Twentieth Century’, *The Journal of the Decorative Arts Society 1850 – the Present*, 25 (2001), 25-37.

⁶⁴⁷ Mauderli, 2001, p. 25.

⁶⁴⁸ Mauderli, 2005.

⁶⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁵⁰ Mauderli, 2001, p. 34.

story itself—through which time moves, in which time becomes, as Gilles Deleuze writes, “included”.⁶⁵¹ “I have said repeatedly (in relation to virtually every figure): ‘I’m merely opening a dossier’”,⁶⁵² Barthes says, about forms of this kind, which he calls “propositions”, “aerated”, in that “it would be up to you”, not I, “to produce [the painting]”.⁶⁵³ Because she doesn’t answer and tells the story, Laverrière opens these forms to articulation that is propositional, in Barthes’ figural terms, and in the Stoic sense described by Deleuze: a manner or aspect of being rather than a “constant attribute”,⁶⁵⁴ “a predicate passing endlessly”⁶⁵⁵ rather than a “quality”⁶⁵⁶ or “essence”.⁶⁵⁷

From that juncture of “I can’t (answer)” and “I do (remember)”, table and chairs and story alike arrive as anamnesis, an articulation of unsynthesizable things that nonetheless takes form. Agamben writes that for Aristotle this was enigma, not a tension between saying and hiding but a Heraclitan contract of “establishing proximities between contraries and [...] creating oxymorons in which opposites do not exclude each other, but point toward their invisible contact points”.⁶⁵⁸ And I am thinking this has something to do with the way her (particular, contested) story is unspoken at the start, how it folds as it unfolds, forming a seam instead of a gap where the answer really isn’t.

When Laverrière refuses to talk about a movement in general, she introduces a discontinuity that meets itself imperfectly, articulation as flexion. Is this the beginning of figuring, tables and chairs, husbands and wives. As Robertson writes, it’s not history as such that affords figural dynamics but historicity, the inherent incompleteness of an already complete thing. “I miss her, I stop. I miss her and start”,⁶⁵⁹ writes Tracie Morris to the poet Akilah Oliver, whose “she” was intimate and infinite in dialogue, and together they allow that what is unfolding may not be concatenating. If a movement is too static for Laverrière, perhaps her story is a work, not a valence, and her forms are enigmas, assembling specifically and

⁶⁵¹ Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, trans. Tom Conley (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), p. 22.

⁶⁵² Barthes, 2013, p. 134.

⁶⁵³ Ibid., p. 134.

⁶⁵⁴ Deleuze, 2012, p. 53.

⁶⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁵⁸ Agamben, 1993, p. 139.

⁶⁵⁹ Tracie Morris, ‘Foreword’, in Akilah Oliver, *The She Said Dialogues: Flesh Memory* (New York: Nightboat Books, 1999).

differently each time. Formal evidence becomes figural appearance, a way of starting in the middle. And this might be a place to look for figure: at the seam. “Sometimes I feel”, writes Dodie Bellamy, on marriage, “like a role model without a role”.⁶⁶⁰

Drawing on Judith Butler, who tethers recognisability to “existence”, speculative quotation marks hers, the theorist Legacy Russell writes on glitch, that which “manifests with such variance, generating ruptures between *recognized* and *recognizable*, and amplifying within such ruptures, extending them to become fantastic landscapes of possibility”.⁶⁶¹ Russell’s writing offers variations and breaks as manners of identifying, as skins, like avatars, as planes of reflection within “one”, and as frictions, as “nope”. With Russell’s evocation of interruptions that create continuums I imagine related phenomena like bad reception, another riddle: what goes in and out but doesn’t hide or show. Figural appearance is similarly productive and resistant, a matter or question of what enfolds or encloses or closes to what is open or opens to what.

When Deleuze writes that “the multiple is not only what has many parts but also what is folded in many ways”,⁶⁶² he means fold as what is always enveloped,⁶⁶³ wrapped up in itself like Jean Genet’s transference: “every attractive form, if it encloses me, is myself”.⁶⁶⁴ Form for Deleuze is self-absorbed but essentially so, insofar as this makes room for “a gap [...] opened, which makes the envelope the reason for the fold: what is folded is the included, the inherent”.⁶⁶⁵ But also: “Who cares what Gilles Deleuze said about folding?” writes the poet Simone White. “[...] What is necessary in the discourse of folding? What caused me to happen upon it?”⁶⁶⁶ She reads Jarod Sexton, “whose operation moves *the different* together in language (‘in narrative’) in such a way that they lay atop one another, cover one another, cancel one another”,⁶⁶⁷ how fold can imbricate, a formal dependence that doesn’t unify.

⁶⁶⁰ Dodie Bellamy, ‘My Mixed Marriage’, *The Village Voice* (20 June 2000) <<https://www.villagevoice.com/2000/06/20/my-mixed-marriage/>> Accessed 04-02-2021.

⁶⁶¹ Legacy Russell, *Glitch Feminism: a Manifesto* (New York: Verso, 2020), p. 28.

⁶⁶² Deleuze, 2012, p. 3.

⁶⁶³ Ibid., p. 22.

⁶⁶⁴ Jean Genet, *Fragments of the Artwork*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 100.

⁶⁶⁵ Deleuze, 2012, p. 22.

⁶⁶⁶ Simone White, ‘Fold Crease Crinkle’, *The Racial Imaginary Institute* (2017) <<https://theracialimaginary.org/issue/the-whiteness-issue/simone-white/>> Accessed 03-15-2021.

⁶⁶⁷ Ibid.

“I begin, seeking distance”,⁶⁶⁸ Elizabeth Hardwick writes, not from history or subject or self but at the heart of form and work, the divergence and drawing together that makes proposition possible. Can narrative contradictions or gaps be taken as manners of figural appearance or evidence of *she* who keeps on specifying, generally. She is not successive but formally and discursively related: ‘a passage to draw attention or an intermission’, a poem by Bernadette Mayer and Clark Coolidge in *The Cave*, “[...] I swear it”.⁶⁶⁹ “First all belief is paradise”,⁶⁷⁰ Robertson writes, I believe, anyway. That Laverrière’s facticity is counterintuitive the way it leaves room.

OK, Barthes says, “I’ll say over and again the same thing”:⁶⁷¹

“My father was an architect”, Laverrière tells the writer Vivian Sky Rehberg in an interview in 2009, about visiting a salon convened by L’Oeuvre, “and when I was a little girl, six or seven years old, while he was involved with a workers’ housing exhibition, I saw a cabinet for a sewing machine. I thought, ‘Well, right! Maybe what I want to do is to make things for everyone.’ Does that sound complicated?”⁶⁷² “Not at all,”⁶⁷³ Rehberg replies, and it doesn’t: first she wanted to make work with the purposeful ethos of a cabinet, wanted to store and support work: that is, she wanted to work for the worker’s wife.

Where Janette starts is often said to be with Alphonse in that she left art school in Basel at his behest—he was concerned she would marry a painter⁶⁷⁴—and apprenticed at his architecture studio in Lausanne. “It was my father who taught me critical thinking”, she says later, “Alphonse Laverrière was a principled man”.⁶⁷⁵ In 1931, through his contacts in L’Oeuvre’s extended circle,⁶⁷⁶ she moved to Paris to train under Jacques-Emile Ruhlmann, an Art Deco “maestro” who curiously, famously, ran his studio at a financial loss.⁶⁷⁷ And in Ruhlmann’s atelier, she met her first husband and collaborator, the furniture designer Maurice Pré.⁶⁷⁸ But

⁶⁶⁸ Elizabeth Hardwick, ‘Writing a Novel’, *The New York Review of Books* (18 October 1973)

<<https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1973/10/18/writing-a-novel/>> Accessed 01-23-2021.

⁶⁶⁹ Clark Coolidge and Bernadette Mayer, *The Cave* (Princeton, NJ: Adventures in Poetry, 2009), pp. 42-44.

⁶⁷⁰ Lisa Robertson, *The Weather* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 2001), p. 13

⁶⁷¹ Barthes, 2013, p. 134.

⁶⁷² Rehberg, 2009.

⁶⁷³ Ibid.

⁶⁷⁴ Badetz, 2001, p. 11.

⁶⁷⁵ Koivu, 2008, p. 83.

⁶⁷⁶ Mauderli, 2005.

⁶⁷⁷ Wiesenberger, 2017, p. 131.

⁶⁷⁸ Mauderli, 2005.

if I take each story as her confluence of pressures, to paraphrase Lucy Ives paraphrasing Dodie Bellamy,⁶⁷⁹ she shows up differently as father and daughter, husband and wife, table and chairs, Laverrière fully expressed and iterating each time.

“You are not made by yourself, but by the thing that you want”,⁶⁸⁰ writes Fanny Howe, another problem: desire in her stories iterates but does not in every instance become distinct, is less about the congruent than about the shapely and escaping. That in 1956 Laverrière made the Ambassador’s wife her figure, identified yet anonymous, an articulation of unspoken desire, does not suggest a particular relationship to categories or subjects so much as a proposal for what, like enigma, leaves the room. Her story is an aporia that begins with an agreement: Laverrière arrives at the Ambassador’s wife’s house and the Ambassador’s wife says, come in. This is how figure shapes the story to begin with. I arrive looking for a prototype that draws together paratactically but does not touch.

“I love this question”, Rindon Johnson asks: “How can someone respond to a mutation that is unknown?”⁶⁸¹ And elsewhere Rindon Johnson answers: “Our little will. Our little will?”⁶⁸²

Interlude is what to call this seam between “can’t” and “do”.

Interlude:

“It was a large room,

Full of people.

All kinds.

And they had all arrived at the same building at more or less the same time.

And they were all free.

And they were all asking themselves the same question:

What is behind that curtain?

⁶⁷⁹ Lucy Ives, ‘Interview with Dodie Bellamy’, *The White Review* (2016)

<<https://www.thewhitereview.org/feature/interview-dodie-bellamy/>> Accessed 03-08-2020.

⁶⁸⁰ Fanny Howe, in Chris Kraus, ‘Wandering and Wondering: Fanny Howe’s Philosophy of Childhood’, *The Times Literary Supplement* (July 10, 2020) <<https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/fanny-howe-philosophy-of-childhood-essay-chris-kraus/>> Accessed 03-08-2020.

⁶⁸¹ Johnson and Moshayedi, 2020.

⁶⁸² Rindon Johnson, *The Dog is the Brother of the Fox* [Video] (2020)

<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ntEWzb2jdDE>> Accessed 15-09-2020.

You were born.
And so you're free.
So happy birthday".⁶⁸³

Interlude:

In his Letter to the Romans, St. Paul describes an experience of conflict between “want” and “do” brought on by the “inward claim”⁶⁸⁴ of the commandment “Thou shalt not covet”. What Paul did but did not want to do was lust, allegedly after his neighbour’s wife,⁶⁸⁵ and here she appears again, a figure of speech, general yet acute.

“For that which I do I know not: for not what I would, that do I practise; but what I hate, that I do”,⁶⁸⁶ Paul wrote in his letter; “I-will-but-I-cannot” is how Hannah Arendt interpreted Paul’s conflict, in *The Life of the Mind*. For Arendt, Paul’s self-resistance is not only proof of will’s existence but also will’s freedom, that is, ironically, of Paul’s ability to choose.

But Arendt also suggests that Paul’s conflict was not between desire and will; rather, it was between will and itself, an affirmative “I will” (to do what is commanded) versus a negative “I nill” (cannot overcome my own internal resistance).⁶⁸⁷ Will’s self-division is its primary identification, “a conflict, and not a dialogue”⁶⁸⁸—Robertson cites this phrase from Arendt in *Nilling*, which takes its name from half of her concept.

That Paul’s neighbour’s wife is what self-divides will at the start is not discussed and may not in fact be true. In his own analysis of Paul, Agamben attributes the division in “the interior of man”⁶⁸⁹ to fundamental aporias in religious law. Maybe she waits for the letter, which Paul wrote, but not to her.

⁶⁸³ Laurie Anderson, ‘Born, Never Asked’ [song], in Laurie Anderson, William Burroughs and John Giorno, *You’re the Guy I Want to Share My Money With* (New York: Giorno Poetry Systems, 1981).

⁶⁸⁴ Charles Gore, *St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans: A Practical Exposition* (London: John Murray, 1902) <<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/32673/32673-h/32673-h.htm>> Accessed 12-09-2020.

⁶⁸⁵ Suzanne Jacobitti, ‘Hannah Arendt and the Will’, *Political Theory*, 16:1 (1988), 53-76 (p. 55).

⁶⁸⁶ Gore, 1902.

⁶⁸⁷ Jacobitti, 1988, p. 56.

⁶⁸⁸ Arendt, in Robertson, 2012, p. 33.

⁶⁸⁹ Giorgio Agamben, *The Time that Remains: a Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 49.

“I cannot-but-I-will” is how figure begins, how Laverrière continues, in this story.

Is this little will where she appears, where she proposes, formally opposed to the “phallic occupying of ideal space”⁶⁹⁰ that Barthes called position⁶⁹¹— is it possible to obviate with a single mark the correlation of fold with interiority in particular and with subjectivity in general—this is integral to the study.

“And what about your objects?” Rehberg asks Laverrière. “What will you work on next?”

“The promise of D.H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* (1928),” Laverrière answers, “for me is not exhausted yet. Lady Chatterley rejected tradition. Perhaps that’s where the man comes in—as a useful object!”⁶⁹²

With that, she leaves the room.

*

Laverrière began producing work with Maurice Pré as M. J. Pré in 1933, the year of Ruhlmann’s death.⁶⁹³ An image in Badetz’s book shows their mark engraved in a section of blonde wood from a dining table. M, stately and symmetrical with foot-like serifs, runs in the direction of an upright J, which tucks under M’s left shoe and centers itself, centers Pré, by mirroring R’s protracted tail. Whereas M, P, R and even E are bodied in their volumes, J simply slips between two punctuation marks, which are elongated and taper like brushstrokes, the same shape and angle as the acute accent stressing the end of the name.

When she was Pré, “they chose to meet their client’s need as a whole and consider flexible solutions”, Badetz writes.⁶⁹⁴ He gives the example of their installation for the 1938 Salon des artistes décorateurs, *Un coin de chambre à coucher*, or *A Bedroom Corner*, which centred on a group of standardised elements that could be “combined by stacking and juxtaposition”.⁶⁹⁵

⁶⁹⁰ Barthes, 2013, p. 134.

⁶⁹¹ Ibid.

⁶⁹² Rehberg, 2009.

⁶⁹³ Badetz, 2001, p. 16.

⁶⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 35.

⁶⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 36.

This innovation supposedly reflected Pré's own financial precarity and intention to solve for others the same. An accompanying photograph shows the modest "corner" with a slanted roof in the style of a Parisian attic apartment. Two perpendicular rows of low, square cabinets line the walls, black with pale fronts and polished metal handles resembling oversized horse bits. A centre cabinet on the left side is taller and opens to a mirrored bar shelf, breaking the uniformity, and a cylindrical standing lamp on a curlicued wrought iron base opposes a lacquered wood chair, which is turned from the camera to display a cut-out pattern of lines and ellipses on its backrest.

Here in the corner, I am thinking about Pré's grammar, about points that echo and lines that only appear to meet, and how, Bhanu Kapil writes, "one thing next to another doesn't mean they touch".⁶⁹⁶ What can vectors say about a place in time, how does Pré tell her story, what are the conditions of the work that comes before. In his heart-shaped book of hours, Badetz describes Pré's 1934 commission by Laverrière's childhood friend for about thirty pieces, which relied heavily on Ruhlmann's aesthetic, distinguished by a "studied solemnity".⁶⁹⁷ Some pieces were multiple, like a bedroom commode "made up of two corner cabinets, which can also be juxtaposed",⁶⁹⁸ which Badetz calls "a favorite ploy [...] typical"⁶⁹⁹ of M. J. Pré, though it is not clear if he is referring to contrast or repetition, and anyway *A Bedroom Corner* affords other ideas about couples.

In the installation image, the floor rug's head is caught seemingly on purpose by the chair's tapered leg. I say head because the rug is cut to pelt shape, a bearskin made from thickly textured black fabric with a ribbon border that curls and puckers, lifting the weight in places—flank and shoulder—off the ground. There's something plaintive and funny about this impression of a bear, a not-quite and more-than, sprawling out in a bedroom without one—a bed, that is. Is this her way of taking the body out twice when vestiges of Ruhlmann's Art Deco that she had long found "precious"⁷⁰⁰ kept on surfacing in Pré's work.

⁶⁹⁶ Kapil, 2015, p. 13.

⁶⁹⁷ Badetz, 2001, p. 18.

⁶⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰⁰ Ibid., pp. 13-14.

“I, for one,” Pythagoras tells Ovid, “would believe that nothing continues the same for too long”,⁷⁰¹ and when I read his syntax through *A Bedroom Corner* I am thinking that precious things are nothing to Laverrière because they respond insufficiently to duration. Following the room’s oblique line, I find her early vectors: precious, what is overdetermined, and *something*, a thing that changes things in unspecified directions, like Pythagoras says, “the changes [elements] pass through” and “the process [...] unraveled” by which “all the elements change back”.⁷⁰² Badetz calls this juxtaposition but I think it’s attraction and repulsion, and the language of taste fits insofar as taste seems to be, for J. within Pré, a method of articulating conditions. Style head-on was at once too static and too fragile.

On the radio, Laurie Anderson calls the bardo a condition. In Buddhist philosophy, bardo describes a state of non-being and a predicate that hinges impossible states of death and rebirth, what moves between and is not arterial, literally where the body was. By calling it a condition, Anderson allows that the bardo is not just indeterminate but something that envelops and inflects the undetermined. I am going towards a suspension of the order of things, in other words, in that condition means “beset by” and its opposite, “agreement”, from the Latin root *condicio*, from *condicere*, “agree upon”. And Pré is similarly Laverrière’s condition, her affliction and predicate, in which Pré comes between nothing and *something*, the work that comes before.

“What I feel like writing”, writes Francis Ponge, in *The Making of the Pré*, “is ‘The Pré’”,⁷⁰³ a work, a word, a meadow and a “differential quality”⁷⁰⁴ that draws pré, the preparation to work, together with pré, work’s object. Pré is Ponge’s “double source”,⁷⁰⁵ at once “prepared” and “longed for”,⁷⁰⁶ a prefigure that hinges and separates writing and subject, “between words (and rocks) and stream (and rocks)”.⁷⁰⁷ In *Signsponge*, Jacques Derrida goes one further, or adds one to one, by identifying Ponge’s signature, F. Ponge, as his double source in writing self and not self as well as self and self, a differential Derrida figures as “sponge”,

⁷⁰¹ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. David Raeburn (London: Penguin Books, 2004), p. 606

⁷⁰² Ibid., p. 605.

⁷⁰³ Francis Ponge, *The Making of the Pré*, trans. Lee Fahnestock (Columbia, MI: University of Missouri Press, 1979), p. 21.

⁷⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 41.

⁷⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 9.

⁷⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 57.

⁷⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 21.

that which “[endures] the ordeal of expression”⁷⁰⁸ in Ponge’s writing, what both scrubs away and allows him to “self-remark”.⁷⁰⁹

For Derrida, Ponge is the thing:⁷¹⁰ in the topology of F. Ponge,⁷¹¹ he “witnesses his name and his writing”,⁷¹² and when I see J. in Pré she is working under but also between the name, an anchor and a differential. “The collaboration was unsatisfying for Laverrière”, the curator Robert Wiesenberger writes, “and the two decided to exhibit separately”.⁷¹³ J. is Pré-figuring *something*, an oblique line that turns flexion when I am looking. “I promise you it should be distinct if it should dawn on you at all”, a writer tells a critic who is searching for enigma in Henry James’s story ‘The Figure in the Carpet’. “[...] It governs every line, it chooses every word, it dots every i, it places every comma”.⁷¹⁴

(“When we mentioned Henry James”, Deleuze writes, “it was with respect to [...] point of view as the secret of things, as focus [...] *what* I am telling you, *what* you are also thinking about, do you agree to tell *him* about *it*, provided that we know what to expect of *it*, about *her*, and that we also agree about who *he* is and who *she* is? [...] only point of view provides us with answers and cases”.⁷¹⁵)

Is the name where her presence is felt as an impression—how J. prefigures the Ambassador’s wife, how she comes out of Pré. “Every name is a step toward the consummate Name, as everything broken points to the unbroken”,⁷¹⁶ Fanny Howe writes, “Martin Buber has written”, on how denomination may prefigure anonymity. I say anonymity because the name Howe writes is not God but “it”, a “small grammatical ploy”⁷¹⁷ in the work of the poet and philosopher Ibn ‘Arabi that denotes person and non-person, object and spirit, enfolding each and all in the generality of one: “Though it has no location,” this is ‘Arabi, in *The Kernel of the Kernel*, “whenever you put your finger on something it is there”.⁷¹⁸

⁷⁰⁸ Ponge, 2011, p. 20.

⁷⁰⁹ Derrida, 1984, p. 6.

⁷¹⁰ Ibid., p. 24.

⁷¹¹ Ibid., p. 22.

⁷¹² Ibid., p. 20.

⁷¹³ Wiesenberger, 2017, p. 131.

⁷¹⁴ Henry James, ‘The Figure in the Carpet’ [1916] in *The Aspern Papers and Other Tales* (London: Penguin Books, 2014), pp. 277-315 (p. 285).

⁷¹⁵ Deleuze, 2012, p. 22.

⁷¹⁶ Fanny Howe, 2003, p. 13.

⁷¹⁷ Ibid., p. 13.

⁷¹⁸ Ibn Arabi, *The Kernel of the Kernel* [n.d.], trans. Bulent Rauf (Cheltenham: Beshara Publications, 2016), p. 7

“It” in Arabi’s writing creates lexical and temporal imprecision where articulation inflects but does not always reveal meaning. It offers a way to present or presence things as enigmatic in the Heraclitan sense, without valence. “One ‘it’ is not distinguished from another ‘it’ by a capital I, or by quotes”, Howe writes, “or by calling ‘it’ ‘itself’—as in ‘the Spirit wanted to reveal itself through its mystery’. Instead the sentence is deliberately constructed so that the Divine It and its ‘it’ are indistinguishable and confusing”.⁷¹⁹ But for Howe, attributive ambiguity is not where sense is lost but where and how sense can become an instrument of its own meaningful disorder, “derived,” Lee Fahnestock writes, of *Pré*, “from the circumstances of its making, an improvisational mode like that of the original baroque cadenzas”—I misread this as “baroque credenzas”—“*It*”—emphasis mine—“is an open form of writing within the closed”.⁷²⁰ This is Ponge, or the figure of Ponge, “surrogate for the person within the text and within whom the text is”.⁷²¹

“Paris, 27 October 1960

A manner of being, that is to say a personality, an individual.

It has an origin, a heredity...

...

It has a behavior (an expression, a gesture, an individual form)

It has a way of dying and of self-perpetuating: an individual mode of perpetuation”.⁷²²

Oh, and—it could be said—another thing:

Adjacent to the image of *A Bedroom Corner* is a smaller photograph of one of its elements, an oblong mirror the size of a page. In the installation, it is shown hanging from a hand-rigged suspension system, fraying cord anchored somewhere behind the cabinets and looped through a ceiling hook, cut off by the top of the photograph, I am guessing, and through the large bronze ring that tops the mirror’s frame. This ring, which is the size of hands touching at forefinger and thumb, has a gun-metal patina. The mirror’s frame is Macassar ebony, delicately painted with dots and an undulating, filigreed border. These details seem important

⁷¹⁹ Fanny Howe, 2003, p. 13.

⁷²⁰ Fahnestock, in Ponge, 1979, p. 14.

⁷²¹ Derrida, 1984, p. 16.

⁷²² Ponge, 1979, p. 45.

because “she came to consider it a talisman,” according to Badetz, “a symbol of the individuality and creativity and her taste for colour used as a decorative element”,⁷²³ although the colour he doesn’t name is grey.

On the reverse of this page like a bookend if it were a thing is another photograph of identical size and placement showing a similar mirror from ten years later, 1948, appearing out of order without reason. This mirror was a wedding present for Laverrière’s friends Estelle and Clément Dora. Its frame is identical but without the brass ring to anchor it, however precariously. The filigreed border has detached into two painted ribbons that snake the length of each side without touching and weaving in and out of this coupling are letters, a letter, painted over and over—E-E-E-E-E-E-E-E-E-E-E-E— a daisy chain of phonic celebration, hers alone.

“Echo with rapturous joy responds, ‘We must come together!’”⁷²⁴ but I know how that ends: E. reaches, “arms outstretched”,⁷²⁵ across irony’s intractable distance and N. reaches for impossible union, “two soulmates in one”,⁷²⁶ to find only himself, “the paltriest barrier”.⁷²⁷ Bound to follow the last word, Echo outlasts Narcissus as a kind of infernal index, a frame, forever beginning with the ends of things. “The echo was almost gentle, like an invitation”,⁷²⁸ writes the psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion in *A Memoir of the Future*, his final work, a roman à clef (All Post-Natal Souls, Doctor, and Germ Plasm appear alongside Bion “himself”) ending in a highly interpretive index compiled against his wishes by his wife, Francesca, or F. in the text. “Well, since you went off on an extended trip I thought I’d better have a go at completing the job we started so long ago”,⁷²⁹ she says of ‘A Key’, bound to follow the last word and a necessary ingress.

Laurie Anderson tells the story of the angel Lailah who arrives at birth to inscribe the whole of the Torah in each child’s memory. When she is finished, Lailah leaves the mark of her index finger above the child’s lips as the indentation of the philtrum, “a sign that means be

⁷²³ Badetz, 2001, p. 36.

⁷²⁴ Ovid, 2004, p. 111.

⁷²⁵ Ibid.

⁷²⁶ Ibid., p. 115

⁷²⁷ Ibid., p. 114

⁷²⁸ Wilfred Bion, *The Complete Works of W. R. Bion Volume XII* (London: Karnac Books, 2014), p. 47.

⁷²⁹ Wilfred Bion, *The Complete Works of W. R. Bion Volume XIV* (London: Karnac Books, 2014), p. 234.

quiet and also forget this”.⁷³⁰ An index is a productive disordering, at once the end and the start of knowledge, figuring the preexistent in the medial. “More words, words, words—how do you stand it? Excuse me, I must get back to my cubby-hole”,⁷³¹ says W., on a page of *A Memoir* titled for the poet Catullus’s elegy to “mute ashes”. And F. simply replies: “Sweet dreams.”⁷³²

Looking for Laverrière in these letters, in this pseudonymous beginning where she is wife, would risk imposing a counterfactual linearity on her practice, on the work leading up to the desk, if it weren’t for the way impressions articulate back to front. What her conditions with and as Pré suggest is a way to work through contingency as two ends at the start, the same way prefiguring runs contrapuntally, is the work. When Barthes writes that he arrives as a subject out of place, he seems to mean it (kind of) how Ram Dass does when he says, “I am talking about I, not me”—a way of describing how prefiguring indexes figure’s drawing together and divergence, specifically.

“Interior designer and decorator, Janette Laverrière, by her training and her tastes, is resolutely of her time”, is how her profile from 1956, the year the desk was made, begins. “She accepts its inventions, progress and constraints while limiting its ties with the past to what is strictly necessary”.⁷³³

Where she refuses to intervene in time and space, she makes up it for in the order of things.

Following his divorce from Laverrière, Pré reinstated some of that “*preciousness*” (sorry) she is said to have abhorred from the start. He augments the unfussiness of early mid-century with some of Art Deco’s taste for ... fuss, manifesting in a renewed preference for sharp tapers and exaggerated proportion or profile to script formal drama. A set of four Pré chairs from 1950 adopt a rigid posture compared to Laverrière’s seating at the time, which was sometimes puffy, obliquely angled or modest, but always inviting. His dining table from 1948 utilises ornamental-looking pieces as stoppers for the height-adjustable top, while her *Table Oeuf* from 1955, similarly flexible, derives its functional logic from what prefigures (or

⁷³⁰ Laurie Anderson, “‘Spending the War Without You’, Norton Lecture 2: The Forest’ [Online lecture], *Mahindra Humanities Center* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, March 24, 2021).

⁷³¹ Bion, *The Complete Works of W. R. Bion Volume XIV*, p. 234.

⁷³² Ibid.

⁷³³ ‘Janette Laverrière’, 2021

envelops) its name: under an ovoid tabletop, legs made up of hollow stacking columns in successive widths adjust by nesting.

“You prefer to speak of the future rather than the past”,⁷³⁴ Rehberg tells Laverrière, who by then was sceptical of ends. “What can I tell you about the past?” Laverrière replies. “I really struggled. I am appalling, because I don’t know how to earn a living”,⁷³⁵ one condition of her work with Pré that continued as she did. But I think this—continuity within a rift—is what Laverrière paradoxically names when she says new, as in, “it was always my desire to create something *new* in life”.⁷³⁶ The tense is strange because she never stopped working, but the question explains it: Mauderli has asked about another movement, of “Parisian taste” to Switzerland in the 1930s, when she was Pré, responsibility for which Laverrière flatly denies. (“No.”)⁷³⁷

“We have only to speak of an object to think that we are being objective”,⁷³⁸ writes Gaston Bachelard, and I hear him, but Laverrière’s attention to the functionally kinetic as it begins to encompass the formally dynamic looks like a way to go on. New in Laverrière’s work allows that nothing that changes is set loose but instead enveloped in time. How she treats predicates, conditions, outlines, as forms at the outset—where she draws together with and diverges from Pré—what moves in the desk, eventually, which is her letter alone.

Asking what figure names, Robertson goes to Auerbach and Auerbach goes all over, beginning with *figura* as plastic form in Terence’s *Eunuchus*, then to *figura* as “closer to the activity of forming than its result”,⁷³⁹ later a copy⁷⁴⁰ and a letter form in Ovid,⁷⁴¹ and so on. Aristotle and then Dante developed *figura*’s use as an impression, both in the sense of receiving a general idea or image and an imprint “as a seal is stamped in wax”.⁷⁴² Auerbach is particularly invested in Lucretius’s “extremely individual, free, and significant”⁷⁴³ usage,

⁷³⁴ Rehberg, 2009.

⁷³⁵ Ibid.

⁷³⁶ Mauderli, 2005.

⁷³⁷ Ibid.

⁷³⁸ Gaston Bachelard, *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, trans. Alan C. M. Ross (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964), p. 1.

⁷³⁹ Auerbach, 1984, p. 11.

⁷⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 22.

⁷⁴¹ Ibid.

⁷⁴² Ibid., p. 15

⁷⁴³ Ibid., p. 16.

which variously expresses *figura* as a concept of form, an outline, a figure of speech, an inherited resemblance, copy or model, and eventually a dream image, a figment, a ghost. For Auerbach, this “dance of figures”⁷⁴⁴ ending with Lucretius exemplifies *figura*’s “element of movement and transformation”,⁷⁴⁵ “dynamic and radiant”.⁷⁴⁶

Meanings “cling”⁷⁴⁷ to *figura* and *figura* develops meaning’s “elements”,⁷⁴⁸ an enfolding of word and form in semantic relationship to “the changing aspect of the permanent” that “runs through the whole history of the word”.⁷⁴⁹ But for Auerbach, this continual and differentiating reiteration is offered at least partially by *figura* itself—is not solely Wittgensteinian in its link between *figura*’s particular flux of meaning and the manner of its use. First, *figura* is its own formal resource, coming to itself over and over as a kind of impression, prefiguring itself insofar as it both reappears in and is inflected by each written appearance and is always forthcoming, historically.

Clarice Lispector, “I, who manufacture the future like a diligent spider”,⁷⁵⁰ has a word for this: “bewitching”,⁷⁵¹ which, mitotic in her writing, gives “oblique”:⁷⁵² “the oblique of life [...] seen through an oblique cut”,⁷⁵³ an infernal index, an aperture. “And the best of me is when I know nothing and manufacture whatever”, she writes. I introduce “whatever”, an elbow,⁷⁵⁴ into Laverrière’s repertoire of *something*. “That living is not only unwinding rough feelings—it’s something more bewitching and gracile, without losing its fine animal vigour for that [...]” Lispector again. “I shall say no more about this intimacy so as not to harm thinking-feeling with dry words.”⁷⁵⁵

I realise I am trying to do what Anderson says Kierkegaard said can’t be done, live backwards so as to know what happens next. To inaugurate myself, for the pleasure of asking

⁷⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 17.

⁷⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 16.

⁷⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 12.

⁷⁵⁰ Lispector, 2012, p. 61.

⁷⁵¹ Ibid.

⁷⁵² Ibid.

⁷⁵³ Ibid.

⁷⁵⁴ Agamben (2007, p. 1) writes: “The Latin [*quodlibet ens*, or ‘whatever’] always already contains [...] a reference to the will (*libet*). Whatever being has an original relation to desire.”

⁷⁵⁵ Lispector, 2012, pp. 61-62.

from within the story. “I understood the inevitability of happenstance”, Lispector writes, “and that is no contradiction”.⁷⁵⁶ Agree to disagree, or whatever. As if the past is something that begins.

*

Laverrière’s archive in the Centre Pompidou’s Bibliothèque Kandinsky holds over 30 boxes of folders, notebooks, objects and books, most of which have not been catalogued. Her thousands of plans, documents and paintings are only loosely and not consistently grouped, sometimes gathered by project, such as the three boxes dedicated to her work for President Hamani Diori’s palace in Niamey, Niger, in 1962, or by typology: chairs, tables and so on. Some folders span decades and others contain sketches for a single piece and it is not always possible to tell which works have been actualised and which remain drawings—her own handwritten list, preserved page by page in plastic filing sheets, purports to organise works by type but contains an additional contents by client, with subsequent pages arranged by years out of order.⁷⁵⁷ No sequence, temporal or otherwise, is imposed throughout the archive, so her works offer up the sporadic order of whoever touched them last.

Folding and unfolding her geometry, I watch her lines shift from pencil for drafting to marker and sometimes crayon for wild thought to pen for presentation and notes. When designing mosaics for tabletops, she paints, and more often than not adds a resting cigarette to a surface, still smoking in time. Although apparently processual—Badetz notes that her shifts in scale, from two centimetres per metre in draft to ten centimetres at full, were a technique adopted from Ruhlmann⁷⁵⁸—her system of marks seems to hint at a method of working from the inside out, of drawing preexisting order into other orders line by line. I find her catalogues, her membership cards, her magazine clippings, her working-from-life, material with which to constellate or compose, but her drawings show her working from within form—flower, grass, shoulder, dog, head, lungs, leaf, beetle—to make shape.

⁷⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 62.

⁷⁵⁷ Janette Laverrière, Janette Laverrière’s Notebook, ‘Classement Oeuvres’, Classeur No. 7, Janette Laverrière Archive, Bibliothèque Kandinsky, Paris.

⁷⁵⁸ Badetz, 2001, p. 15.

The theorist Peggy Phelan writes of a dream museum where all work would be grouped by its most prominent part, “the museum [giving] the human body a visible home, a spatial form, and a communal function”.⁷⁵⁹ Phelan, who was suffering from glaucoma, imagined that an unironic taxonomy of parts might return a fullness of shape to form, with Degas’ dancers populating legs and Mona Lisa welcoming visitors to face. But in Laverrière’s dream museum, interchanges between mark and shape are neither remedial nor entirely instrumental. In her line index, I recognize a steady repertoire of moves and phrases, twists, loops, flicks, bends, curls, slants and folds, not so much emergent as extruded through work and circumstance with necessary force.

“Where does all your energy come from? Does it date from your childhood?”

Yes, I think so. Even at school I thought I should revolt, fight, that teachers were unfair.

But others might turn this desire into something destructive. Your idea to revolt translated into creation.

For me, it meant changing the world.”⁷⁶⁰

One of the few objects designed by Laverrière in the Pompidou’s collection is a wall-mounted credenza made of folded sheet aluminium, exhibited at the Salon des artistes décorateurs in 1952. “This innovative piece of furniture was intended to give rise to a series which was never actually made”,⁷⁶¹ Badetz writes, and the work—he quotes Laverrière but does not name her—“[illustrates] the message which the architect and decorator wanted to pass on to her contemporaries: to address the needs of the client and her own values ‘without ever simply seeking one’s own pleasure as an artist’”.⁷⁶² Looking at a photograph in Folder 10: Ensembles, Devantures, Plans,⁷⁶³ I see a metal orthotope fronted with three doors, each fixed on either side with a reversible panel: red or white. Two standard flat angle brackets affixing the work to the wall are turned upwards and outwards so as to appear, and I,

⁷⁵⁹ Peggy Phelan, ‘To Suffer a Sea Change’, *The Georgia Review* (Fall 1991), 507-525 (p. 510).

⁷⁶⁰ Rehberg, 2009.

⁷⁶¹ Badetz, 2001, p. 79.

⁷⁶² Ibid.

⁷⁶³ Janette Laverrière, Photograph of credenza, ‘543 Secrétaire suspende’ Folder 10: Ensembles, Devantures, Plans, Classeur No. 3, Janette Laverrière Archive, Bibliothèque Kandinsky, Paris.

imagining the weight of it, try to picture Laverrière taking no creative pleasure in this playful switch up of what is meant to show.

I feel I am watching her think. When are two sides a double bind? Across three versions of *Projet villa de vacances, Dr Kirjner*,⁷⁶⁴ an undated room drawn with marker on vellum, the weight of her marks transfers from the room's contents—blue volumes surrounded by pink currents—to the circulation lines themselves, which thicken and turn red, backgrounding the rest of the room. Visual emphasis shifts suddenly to what was just a delineation or contrast. Her varying weights and substances seem to insist on how drawing commits appearance out of order, a potential Degas, now that he's here, seized upon in his etchings, which treat silhouette as both line and form, and are anyway less about legs than waists and elbows:

In his *Actresses in their Dressing Room (Loges d'actrices)* (1879-80), three figures unfurl in preparatory states, fixing her cape of waist-length hair at her dresser, in tentative first position at the sink and arched against the wall in voluminous shadow, separated by an impossibly staggered depth of field.⁷⁶⁵ Emphasis is similarly relative, similarly disordered—figuring is a matter of back and forth. “She discovered an element of my work that she felt was special, without any knowledge that her discovery had been criticized in the past”,⁷⁶⁶ Laverrière tells Rehberg, about a collaboration with Baghranian in which the two reimagined her installation *Entre deux actes: Le loge d'actrice*, or *Between Two Acts: An Actress's Dressing Room*. “In the 1950s, I participated in a salon with a dressing room I designed for an actress. Nairy is going to reinterpret that piece with me”.⁷⁶⁷

But the work took place in 1947—slipping between the dates, I find the original installation photograph from the Salon des artistes décorateurs tucked inside a plastic sheet.⁷⁶⁸ On the back, Laverrière has handwritten the work's title and date in pencil. Details of the contents—red roof, daybed—are written in marker, perhaps later, with a slightly slanted hand. In the small display booth, a chaise lounge upholstered in dark fabric with a latticed enamelled

⁷⁶⁴ Janette Laverrière, Three vellum drawings, ‘Projet villa de vacances Dr Kirjner’ Folder LAV7, Boite No. 19, Janette Laverrière Archive, Bibliothèque Kandinsky, Paris.

⁷⁶⁵ Jodi Hauptman (ed.), *Degas: a Strange New Beauty* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2016), p. 47

⁷⁶⁶ Rehberg, 2009.

⁷⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁶⁸ Janette Laverrière, Photograph of installation, ‘1295 Ensemble ‘Entre Deux Actes’ La Loge d'actrice 1947’, Folder 10: Ensembles, Devantures, Plans, Classeur No. 3, Janette Laverrière Archive, Bibliothèque Kandinsky, Paris.

metal frame faces a broad tiger-skin rug, one of several elements that in black and white look drawn in, along with an enamelled metal pipe that, bent to attach to the wall at both ends, suspends a tall, vertical bookshelf made up of unevenly spaced wooden discs. The actress's circular mirror, angled to where she would see herself, is part of an extended system joined to the line of the pipe including a single floating shelf—her dresser.

Robert Wiesenerberger writes that “against modernist expectations of the simple, mass-produced, and anonymous, Laverrière made objects that are complex, handmade and highly personal”.⁷⁶⁹ And in this room, “personal” seems to name the way some pieces are stripped to their barest structural elements while others are exaggerated to encompass odd volumes of negative space, creating a variation of proportion in which space and presence are given simultaneously. “Against the harmonious ‘total’ interior,” Wiesenerberger continues, “[things] chatter with and over one another,” dialogic but also a little diabolic, “not neutral servants but witty, unreliable, and even needy objects, demanding engagement”,⁷⁷⁰ an apparent continuation of the logic of her drawing, how complete things can go on.

“Accept for now my being tinged with *options*”, Kay Gabriel writes “for and about”⁷⁷¹ the actress Candy Darling, “/e. g. you might careen on/each ridge with me into the skirts/of some or other future”,⁷⁷² and Laverrière dramatises a future for her actress similarly with a large striped curtain that encircles the chaise like a canopy or crinoline. Posters of “the professional singer Hosna Dora”⁷⁷³ decorate the walls along with a jaunty straw hat; a translucent lace smock dress is draped over a white folding screen. “My dress is a visual image of unconscious affirmative processes, the way spontaneity expresses its order, as I create a world [...]”⁷⁷⁴ Laverrière had publicly criticised the spare volumes of Le Corbusier’s student rooms at the Cité Université, calling them “impoverished”,⁷⁷⁵ and I am thinking she may have meant lacking options.

⁷⁶⁹ Wiesenerberger, 2017, p. 128.

⁷⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷⁷¹ Gabriel, 2017, p. 21.

⁷⁷² Ibid., p. 1.

⁷⁷³ Badetz, 2001, p. 60.

⁷⁷⁴ Berssenbrugge, 2013.

⁷⁷⁵ Laverrière, in Badetz, 2001, p. 59.

Baghramian has said that Laverrière designed *Entre deux actes* for “a beloved Egyptian songstress friend”⁷⁷⁶ who had abruptly left Paris and ended her career. Laverrière felt this loss deeply and was devastated that someone who had given their life to performing had simply “stopped singing and disappeared”,⁷⁷⁷ and the room seems to respond in tension with each piece at once formally reduced to and reinforced with its own idea. “Space subsumes the structure of the person by waiting for it,”⁷⁷⁸ writes Fanny Howe, and “only in time itself”, Clarice Lispector, “is there room enough for me”⁷⁷⁹— her particular condition, if only speculatively, also paradoxically, perhaps appropriately, is given as neither here nor there. Between two acts, she has already appeared and is about to, has not yet left but waits, and this waiting is productive not recuperative in Laverrière’s telling, a caesura. She gives space but also presence back to her, is what I mean; what she gives her with space is time.

Actresses were not unusual subjects for designers in the early twentieth century—Badetz cites *La loge d’une actrice* (*An actress’s loggia*), Ruhlmann’s work for the French star Jacqueline Francell, presented at the Salon des artistes décorateurs in 1930.⁷⁸⁰ But Laverrière’s room tells the actress’s story to her, not for her. She tells her story back to her, that is. The work is devoted to a future where she reappears. Where Ruhlmann frames her every which way, most prominently with an enormous discoidal carpet on which, seated at her dressing table, she becomes the sun, Laverrière frames the room, both in the intermittent time of the title and with her attention to edges and outlines, making silhouetted what might otherwise be bodied, an idea of appearing that has more to do with sides than centre stage. “I promise to make you so alive that the fall of dust on furniture will deafen you,”⁷⁸¹ Laurie Anderson reads from Nina Cassian on the radio, and the pact remains the same.

Give time for another thought to enter.⁷⁸²

⁷⁷⁶ Baghramian, in Meade (ed.), 2017, p. 230.

⁷⁷⁷ Cascone, 2019.

⁷⁷⁸ Fanny Howe, 2003, pp. 45-47.

⁷⁷⁹ Lispector, 2012, p. 4.

⁷⁸⁰ Badetz, 2001, p. 9.

⁷⁸¹ Laurie Anderson, ‘Episode 11’, *Party in the Bardo* [Radio broadcast], WESU (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University, broadcast 6 November 2020).

⁷⁸² Ponge, 1979, p. 14.

“Well, firstly I would say that nobody is obliged to do anything they do not want to do,” Laverrière tells Rehberg. “However, as an example of the way women were treated at the salons, I remember how once, at a national furniture salon, a friend told me that it had been decided to give me a very small commission, whereas all the men had substantial commissions. In fact, when I showed my project to the director, he said, ‘Well, aren’t we in for a laugh?’ When the salon opened, I took the friend to see that they had just put me in some corner again. He said he was shocked. That was good.”⁷⁸³

“This is a piece that Janette did in 1947 at a design fair”, Baghramian says. “She was asked to create a proposal for a room. They gave her an awful spot in the end corner of the fair; the main architects occupied the front.”⁷⁸⁴

In 2009, Baghramian and Laverrière exhibited their version of *Entre deux actes* at the Kunsthalle Baden-Baden, a playful doubling or dividing of the original in that some shapes take on photographic perspective and others flatten into lines. It’s her same method of transposing shape with marks, but they do it from memory, creating an image inner or otherwise in space. The wall-mounted pipe frame remains a line but the wall has shrunk to plinth size, and the cylindrical bookshelf is visually flattened by paint, all black except where it’s yellow and pops from the plane. The white folding screen is signified by a hollow orange frame and the shadowed floor has ossified into a sculptural base for the room. Her future drama, the heavy, striped curtain, stays, but the tiger skin rug appears only in imprint, as a chalk drawing, point being the body was there, is missing twice.

What happens to space in an impression or X-ray, where everything reappears differently. “The figure finds itself displaced”, Lyotard writes, “no longer simply the image of presence or of representation, but form of the mise en scene [...]”.⁷⁸⁵ “Think of it starting out this way”, the poet Douglas Crase writes, “in profile”:⁷⁸⁶ *Entre deux actes* moves from a prototype relegated to the corner of a salon to an archived image, to an art object informed by imagistic logic, a corner in the middle of the room. Baghramian and Laverrière induct the work as a system of marks, inheriting irresolution from future pressures, reopening past

⁷⁸³ Rehberg, 2009.

⁷⁸⁴ Cascone, 2019.

⁷⁸⁵ Lyotard, 2011, p. 15.

⁷⁸⁶ Douglas Crase, *The Revisionist and The Astropastorals: Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2019), p. 29.

dissonances in new ways, figuring as conditions passed back and forth imperfectly. This is the frame Baghranian brings to Laverrière's room, the room she gives Laverrière with "co-existence",⁷⁸⁷ in which drawing together doesn't synthesise and figure is a place in time.

Oh, but: "Why call something an old thing to avoid having to wrestle with the parameters of a new thing (way of being)?"⁷⁸⁸ Rindon Johnson writes, and Hardwick's novel, what was that about? How new always starts amidst things and like most things continues. "As an interior architect, Janette would look at her many drawings and imagine them becoming objects",⁷⁸⁹ Baghranian says. So much of Laverrière's work was, in her own words, "extant".⁷⁹⁰ She drew it but she didn't get to make it, or she was waiting for a manufacturer to produce it, to make it available. Where Laverrière's room formalises the appearance of a future, Baghranian and Laverrière return the prototype to the time of waiting. "I still think I've blown it or I've made it,"⁷⁹¹ writes Bernadette Mayer, in 'I Imagine Things', about devotion, where only waiting is new—

Fanny Howe writes that devotion is a "reverse prototype",⁷⁹² alive in the figure of the religious solitary whose celibacy signified a loving embrace of the silent or empty, what isn't consummated or given as bodied but instead takes shape as capacious waiting. For Howe, the solitary, who entered into a pact with God as if into a marriage, undertook a "real effort at revolution": "more than conversion, it was an effort at creating a new person",⁷⁹³ she writes, describing a fold in the order of things. "One could say that the concealment of certain women in history has been a willed action [...] Rather than reading silence as repression, you can read it as a means of liberation [...] One is not so much running from object to object as receiving the future, which is empty. The wedding dress marks the start of a period of waiting. William Blake, a solitary who was not celibate, saw himself coming to meet himself".⁷⁹⁴

⁷⁸⁷ Stein, 2019.

⁷⁸⁸ Johnson and Moshayedi, 2020.

⁷⁸⁹ Stein, 2019.

⁷⁹⁰ Rehberg, 2009.

⁷⁹¹ Bernadette Mayer, 'I Imagine Things', *The Golden Book of Words* (New York: Angel Hair Books, 1974) <<http://www.poetspath.com/transmissions/messages/mayer.html>> Accessed 29-10-2018.

⁷⁹² Fanny Howe, 2003, p. 53.

⁷⁹³ Ibid., p. 59.

⁷⁹⁴ Ibid., pp. 53-55.

What catches about Howe's description of a literally self-conscious Blake is devotion's dual appearance, in which it is not possible to determine which of him is waiting and which has yet to arrive. When Edith Stein, a philosopher who converted to become a Carmelite sister, receives the "mark" of the wedding dress, she too becomes double, a silhouette of full and objectless waiting. Howe writes that Stein "immured and liberated herself simultaneously",⁷⁹⁵ and I read this at first as interred, like a statue, buried for the purpose of symbolic revivification, though Stein's story doesn't deal in hide and show. Instead, the future is contentless, appears for the devoted as an empty envelope. "The desire of Love startle[s] the Tomb(e) once again," writes Hélène Cixous, who encrypted herself at the start of her writing, "splits it and overturns it and the Dream in itself comes out."⁷⁹⁶

Whereas the Ambassador is duty bound to represent, fixing his homeland in himself as identity, the Ambassador's wife is contingent on representation but not of it, and this contingency is paradoxically how she emerges, in the story, from the frame. When she specifies her husband's desk and receives her own in turn, she moves from something unspoken to something articulated, but she also enters a newly capacious state of waiting, not for her husband's return, but to be written. Figure's formal condition is this interpolative, interpretive gesture of writing and re-marking that is also her private correspondence. "I become a member of anonymity",⁷⁹⁷ Robertson writes, on "tracing"⁷⁹⁸ Lucretius at the British Library via a crack in the vellum of his original manuscript. Not to reveal or uncover figure—"properly speaking", writes Robertson, via Hannah Arendt, "they never appear"⁷⁹⁹—but to fall into figuring. I figure, I "fall into",⁸⁰⁰ "more like a pact than a capture".⁸⁰¹

What is the nature of this pact? A bond, a bind, a fix, a fastening, a seal in the etymological sense. "We try not to ruin the idea by pressing too hard on its vulnerable surface",⁸⁰² writes Wayne Koestenbaum, about the force of impression, yet I arrive where figure waits for writing like a gumshoe noting clues. What agreement is afforded by re-marking, which always refolds letters, takes something for granted—I am thinking of Marina Warner's

⁷⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 59.

⁷⁹⁶ Cixous, 2014, p. 245.

⁷⁹⁷ Robertson, 2012, p. 22.

⁷⁹⁸ Ibid. p. 21.

⁷⁹⁹ Arendt, in Robertson, 2012, p. 21.

⁸⁰⁰ Robertson, 2012, p. 22.

⁸⁰¹ Ibid.

⁸⁰² Wayne Koestenbaum, *Figure It Out* (New York: Soft Skull Press, 2020), p. 25.

assertion that “when making something, memories, empirical observation and make-believe continually overlap and intersect”,⁸⁰³ and Fred Moten’s poem, a letter, to William Corbett: “late between a poem and something [...]’To Bill, Philip ’77 unworled/marks of the outside he takes in:/I wanted to say I’m with you [...]”⁸⁰⁴

I am bound in the middle to figure, to figuring. What is just between she and I? “This”—work—“is divided more or less into two triangles”,⁸⁰⁵ Cixous writes, looking at Rembrandt’s Bathsheba, who holds between her flexions “the stroke of the letter”,⁸⁰⁶ where writing intervenes and fails to in figure’s fate. But in *Vivre l’orange*, figure intervenes over and over in the fate of Cixous’ writing: “How to call forth claricely: it’s a long and passionate work for all the senses [...] calling things forth, this is her work, giving things back to things, giving us each thing for the first time, giving us back each time the first time of things,”⁸⁰⁷ and she—Clarice Lispector—goes on. In which she is waiting but also working. In which figure gets there first somehow, precedes.

On the back of a photograph of a concrete fireplace edged with what appears to be black granite, I find her rue Castellane address, where the letter arrives in one or both versions of the story. I begin to open to precedent, to where she’s going. To claim an image of an enamelled metal coat rack, she stamps her name on the verso repeatedly, redundantly, until the ink runs out and I can’t read it. I find a folder titled ‘Bureau de Dame’, lady’s office, or lady’s desk, the desk, her desk—the name is missing Badetz’s attributive expansion where she’s married and Baghranian’s operative addition where she’s working. Each crease in the dormant vellums threatens to crack and tape and other informal fastenings scatter unattached, but the date is there—16 April 1956—along with the commission name, handwritten, Mobilier National.⁸⁰⁸

In elevation, the seam where the desk’s halves meet is capacious, or columnar, defining a space in which unfolding is suggested with little c-shaped lines that curl out from the inner

⁸⁰³ Marina Warner, *Forms of Enchantment: Writing on Art and Artists* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2018), p. 3.

⁸⁰⁴ Fred Moten, *B Jenkins* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 70.

⁸⁰⁵ Hélène Cixous, ‘Bathsheba or The Interior Bible’, *New Literary History*, 24:4 (1993), 820-836 (p. 829).

⁸⁰⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁰⁷ Hélène Cixous, *Vivre l’orange* (Paris: des femmes, 1979), p. 104.

⁸⁰⁸ Janette Laverrière, Vellum drawing, Folder 618: Bureau de Dame (Mobilier National), Boite No. 5, Janette Laverrière Archive, Bibliothèque Kandinsky, Paris.

edges, predicting the arrival of writing with, it must be said, a flourish. A single black and white photograph shows the desk standing unaccompanied on cream carpet, backdropped by pale curtains and a single rubber fig.⁸⁰⁹ But turning the image over, I read ‘1955’ in Janette’s hand, marking the photograph a year before the desk’s installation at the Salon supposedly occurred. Any correspondence about the commission is missing, so this photograph, these plans, must stand in instead for the agreement.

When the desk is closed, its pitched, polished surface is suitable only for storing or anticipating. Her writing becomes possible when the desk is opened and its inner surface offered which is sort of inefficient. But this choreography of waiting increases the desk’s storage and surface area, an economy of minor space that Laverrière often applied in her interiors, having learned to make use of inverse and tricky shapes such as kitchen corners, interior setbacks and staircase spandrels, for which folds are both intelligent and essential. What the desk’s formal trick or reversal suggests is her appearance as another fold in the order of things. Before she writes, she receives writing; before her notation, remarks.

I see a loop in her handwriting that forms a volume or cavity, but instead of the hinge, I’m looking at the ends—what’s there? The shape is a magnet with two positives, self-repellent and enveloping, how she folds once more around the story. As a child, the poet David Rattray inaugurated himself by screaming twice at the moon and multiplying.⁸¹⁰ “This moon is about the future”, writes the poet Ariana Reines. “Dare I say she comes from it”.⁸¹¹ Her identification that is also her un-naming—her letters, s-h-e, like the C of Wallace Stevens’ comedian and the m of Douglas Crase’s dream continent⁸¹²—is where figure draws together when I am writing. Scratch *campo-figura*; write *recto-verso*. I return to the study.

Perhaps because the desk is alone in this image, I see that its halves meet imperfectly: a pale thread of unfinished surface presents an interior that, strictly speaking, doesn’t appear, interrupting the otherwise immaculate rosewood’s grain. Or figure, I should say, in woodworking, the sum of the grain and the cut, the way the tree’s change or growth pattern

⁸⁰⁹ Janette Laverrière, Photograph of desk, ‘618 Mobilier National ca 1955’, Folder 618: Bureau de Dame (Mobilier National), Boîte No. 5, Janette Laverrière Archive, Bibliothèque Kandinsky, Paris.

⁸¹⁰ David Rattray, *How I Became One of the Invisible* (Pasadena, CA: Semiotext(e), 2019), p. 87.

⁸¹¹ Ariana Reines, ‘Mother of God, Ariana Reines’s Blue Moon Report’, *Artforum* (31 October 2020) <<https://www.artforum.com/slant/ariana-reines-s-full-moon-report-84290>> Accessed 31-10-2020.

⁸¹² Mark Ford, in Crase, 2019, p. xv.

appears at the point the cut is made. Figure is form and indexes change in form, or, as Robertson suggests, fold. Is it possible to claim for figure a sort of inverse morphology, the study of a change in form from within the form that changes:

“We could say that history’s formal relationship to the present is morphological”,⁸¹³

Robertson writes, in ‘everything is leaf...’, about Goethe’s invention of a science of change, partly encompassed in his concept of the relationship between idea and form, which he outlined in a letter to his friend Charlotte von Stein: “It”—by which he meant leaf— “is a becoming aware of the form [...] with which nature is always only playing, as it were, and in playing, brings forth its manifold life”.⁸¹⁴ But leaf for Goethe was equally form and idea, such that in his shapely cosmology form came to constitute form’s becoming aware of itself. When Goethe writes to von Stein that “everything is leaf”,⁸¹⁵ he is writing from inside the envelope, to himself from leaf’s perspective. This is what figure does to knowledge: intercedes. Takes on the punishment, the suffering, of objectivity.

Robertson recounts Goethe’s 1815 manuscript poem *Ginkgo Biloba*, named for one of the world’s oldest tree species, often referred to as a living fossil for its sole survival in an ancient order. The tree can still be distinguished by its double-lobed leaves, and Goethe’s inquiry unfolds much as I might turn it—by which I mean leaf—over for consideration between two hands. I and it shift in their attribution at least once in his short stanzas, becoming nearly indeterminate. But in Goethe’s morphological poetics, as it is in structural grammar, shifters like I establish specificity in change. “We could say that history’s formal relationship to the present is morphological”, Robertson writes. “The poem is one place where we can observe this dynamic; politics is another”.⁸¹⁶

“Is it a living being,
Which has separated in itself?
Or are these two, who chose
To be recognized as one?”

⁸¹³ Lisa Robertson, ‘everything is leaf...’, *Poetry Foundation blog* (2013)

<<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet-books/2013/04/everything-is-leaf>> Accessed 12-08-2020.

⁸¹⁴ Ibid.

⁸¹⁵ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, in Robertson, 2013.

⁸¹⁶ Robertson, 2013.

Answering this kind of question,
Haven't I found the proper meaning,
Don't you feel in my songs,
That I'm one and double?"⁸¹⁷

In Paul Valéry's *Eupalinos, or the Architect*, E. cleaves himself, "divides the indivisible",⁸¹⁸ to enshrine "the memory of a bright day of my life"⁸¹⁹ in the shape of a temple. "This riddle is transparent to me", he says. "[...] By dint of constructing, I truly believe that I have constructed myself".⁸²⁰

But: "On second thought: What was she thinking?"⁸²¹ One and double, separated in itself, the desk is not of her but for her—this is its enigmatic logic. Because she articulates out of the story's earshot, the desk is given to her, she appears, as re-marking.

Belief is seamless. But interpretation always finds a faultline.⁸²²

*

What does John the Baptist know?

Emerging from Da Vinci's sfumato, his right arm cuts across his angled body and gestures upwards, almost a balletic *épaulement*, not a position but a spiralling⁸²³ from the shoulder of style and dimension. He who is said in the story to prefigure Christ's arrival is wrapped waist-down in tiger pelt, and his sloping features are framed by a bonnet of tight brown curls. With his right hand, the hand of fellowship and of the ascetic Essenes, who did not believe the body could return, he points toward a narrow cross. And he smiles, improbably,

⁸¹⁷ Goethe, in Robertson, 2013.

⁸¹⁸ Paul Valéry, 'Eupalinos, or the Architect', in *Dialogues*, trans. William M. Stewart (New York: Pantheon Books, 1956), p. 89.

⁸¹⁹ Ibid., p. 82.

⁸²⁰ Ibid., p. 81.

⁸²¹ Bruce Hainley, 'Cady Noland, Museum MMK für Moderne Kunst', *Artforum* (Summer 2019) <<https://www.artforum.com/print/reviews/201906/Frankfurt>> Accessed 26-10-2020.

⁸²² Sharon Willis, 'Mis-translation: Vivre l'orange', *SubStance*, 16:1 (1987), 41-62 (p. 52).

⁸²³ Miles Unger, 'A Mysterious St. John, Found in the Attic', *The New York Times* (18 February 2007) <<https://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/18/arts/design/18unge.html>> Accessed 13-02-2021.

elliptically, his shadowed mouth recalling she “whose features”, wrote the scholar Marie Herzfeld, “had lain all along in mysterious sympathy with Leonardo’s own mind”.⁸²⁴

Why is he here? The figure is formed by subtle differences between light and shade⁸²⁵ which are disappearing. His father did not believe the message foretelling his birth and was struck dumb by the angel until he wrote, with his own hand, John. What follows the address is precedence. His smile should be the tell. Freud called it substitutive, a correction of Da Vinci’s filial hunger.⁸²⁶ Later scholars claimed it was a transposition of “nature’s enigma”.⁸²⁷ Her smile—he was “never free of it”.⁸²⁸ Emphasis mine, at the soft seam of his mouth.

But the irony⁸²⁹ that absorbs and frustrates—how could he know?—splits my attention, shifts my focus to his finger where it hits the inky matrix in a crisp, straight line. Something sharp. Not the cross, which recedes, but that edge of the index carried over in bearing to mean differently. “I came here to complete a thing I began in another place”,⁸³⁰ writes the poet Bhanu Kapil, and the only place in the painting where one thing is not already becoming another is this rearward seam that spills its little story over everything. Impossibly aware of his fate, John points to distinction, to prescience, momentarily apparent as surface against air. He draws his finger inward as if to his lips, silencing, Robert Wyatt sings, “I can only guess me”.⁸³¹ Lit for a moment with lunar apricity “showing all its figures”,⁸³² he is not the source, the story goes, but the herald; he is not the truth, but truth’s prediction.⁸³³

And I am supposed to know what happens next. That his transformation out of being is only change herself.

⁸²⁴ Marie Herzfeld, in Sigmund Freud, *Leonardo Da Vinci, a Memory of his Childhood* [1910] (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 65.

⁸²⁵ Frank Zöllner, *Leonardo Da Vinci, 1452-1519: The Complete Paintings and Drawings* (London: Taschen, 2003), p. 90.

⁸²⁶ Maria Walsh, in Freud, 2013, p. xv.

⁸²⁷ Ibid.

⁸²⁸ Freud, 2013, p. 65.

⁸²⁹ Chen Chunlian, ‘St John the Baptist: Da Vinci’s Irony’, *Theoretical Studies in Literature and Art*, 1:38 (2018), 61-68 (p.610).

⁸³⁰ Bhanu Kapil, ‘Text to Complete a Text’, in *Incubation: A Space for Monsters* (2006), *Poetry Foundation* <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/53511/text-to-complete-a-text>> Accessed 13-02-2020.

⁸³¹ Robert Wyatt, ‘Free Will and Testament’ [song], in *Schleep* (London: Hannibal Records, 1997).

⁸³² Nathaniel Hawthorne, in Raymond J. Wilson, ‘The Possibility of Realism: “The Figure in the Carpet” and Hawthorne’s Intertext’, *The Henry James Review*, 16:2, (1995), 142-152 (p.143).

⁸³³ Chunlian, 2018, p. 61.

“Four second thoughts”, writes the poet Erica Hunt, in *Piece Logic*. “For holy smoke./For the love of later./For Pete’s ache./For whom the elbows?”⁸³⁴

Even the name appears and disappears in iterations.

What he knows is only Salome, only the moon.

Watching footage of herself performing in the collective Grand Union, the choreographer Yvonne Rainer noted the “huge amount of effort expended with a very small result, like moving the paper across the box”.⁸³⁵ She called this category of gesture “behavior”,⁸³⁶ how manner of appearance anticipates improvisation’s intent to conceal nothing, where the object of appearance is an empty box. I am thinking about what shape figure takes, about the future. Just ask Robert Lowell, mimesis and metaphor are inhabitations, though it’s not always clear who dwells in who, and besides, Laverrière had—it’s odd, I know—no taste for *mise-en-abyme*. Does writing put forth impression, the mark of transference, as an alternative. Do I arrive looking for what simply appears.

In the linguist Roman Jakobson’s work, I, a shifter, slide with the house,⁸³⁷ only acquiring meaning when the speaker is identifiable or identifies I in the shift from free indirect to direct style. This particular capacity of I to self-divide in utterance, to contain or envelop I and she, also seems to make I the differential of the divided vantage, an expression of “how, via language, we can distance ourselves from the circumstances of our person, location and time”.⁸³⁸ Shifters unfix reference not by collapsing specificity—for Jakobson, a contiguity of shifters affirms specificity rather than interchangeability as its condition—but by a kind of itinerancy, reference’s becoming variegated and unfolding like *leaf* in the time it takes the speaker to refocus. “In what state I’ve reached the leaf,” Hélène Cixous writes to her figure, “when I’ve not renounced in advance!”⁸³⁹

⁸³⁴ Erica Hunt, *Piece Logic* (Durham, NC: Carolina Wren Press, 2002), p. 3.

⁸³⁵ Yvonne Rainer, in Wendy Perron, ‘Barbara Dilley & Yvonne Rainer with Wendy Perron’ [Online talk], *Conversations Without Walls* (New York: Danspace Projects, 21 November 2020).

⁸³⁶ Ibid.

⁸³⁷ Susan Howe, 2020, p. 10.

⁸³⁸ Kursell, 2010, p. 220.

⁸³⁹ Cixous, 1979, p. 82.

Pronouns exemplify for Jakobson shifters' particular capacity to draw two vantages together with a distance at the seam: I is both symbol and index in that it is associated with the speaker by conventional definition and also indexes the existential relationship between utterer and utterance.⁸⁴⁰ "Let us speak!" Ponge instructs the precipitous air in early spring, "You speak! I am your interpreter".⁸⁴¹ But what about her letters? She, a shifter, is *sh* to begin with, but instead of a phonic that self-obviates she says to I what the angel says to the child: be-quiet-and-also-forget-this. Impression is the mark of pre-existing knowledge as knowledge to come, as in—this is Susan Howe—"shh, the stone hasn't been rolled from the sepulcher yet",⁸⁴² but also, "to facilitate phonetic interpretation I will make up my mouth as if it's a telegram".⁸⁴³

It is true enough that I am the one writing, Elizabeth Hardwick, whose side eventually surfaced,⁸⁴⁴ might have said. She was writing a novel with her name on it in which the wife character asks: "Is it actually OK to write stories about writing?" She has overheard this whispered remark during the question period. Fiction about fiction—Borges, etc. The scepticism thrills her, even as it brings on a little squeezing of her heart".⁸⁴⁵ In an essay, Borges imagined a sort of divine order of conjecture in which "every letter is meaningful",⁸⁴⁶ "a language in which the name of each being would indicate all the details of its destiny, past and future",⁸⁴⁷ opening even "God's secret dictionary"⁸⁴⁸ to re-marking—then Michel Foucault extrapolated his own letters and theory of resemblance as adjacency not mimesis from Borges, to begin *The Order of Things*.⁸⁴⁹

But writing betrays at first and is anyway not without risk: Hardwick's wife suffers her husband's work, in which "her own mother, the creator of brutal emotions in the heart of the

⁸⁴⁰ Émile Benveniste, in Monika Fludernik, 'Shifters and Deixis: Some Reflections on Jakobson, Jespersen, and Reference', *Semiotica*, 86 (1991), 193-230 (p. 197).

⁸⁴¹ Francis Ponge, *Nioque of the Early-Spring*, trans. Jonathan Larson (New York: The Song Cave, 2018), p. 36.

⁸⁴² Susan Howe, 2020, p. 9.

⁸⁴³ Ibid.

⁸⁴⁴ Saskia Hamilton (ed.), 2020, *The Dolphin Letters 1970–1979: Elizabeth Hardwick, Robert Lowell and Their Circle* (London: Faber & Faber, 2020), p. 8.

⁸⁴⁵ Hardwick, 1973.

⁸⁴⁶ Jorge-Luis Borges, 'The Analytical Language of John Wilkins', *Other Inquisitions 1937-1952*, trans. Ruth L.C. Simms (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1964), p. 103.

⁸⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 104.

⁸⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁴⁹ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), p. 28.

author [...] has come out like a beaded purse, pure design”;⁸⁵⁰ he takes from life and creates only monsters, in her estimation, “false in their meaning”.⁸⁵¹ Lowell had recently “cut”⁸⁵² and “doctored”⁸⁵³ Hardwick’s letters without her permission in his *Dolphin* sonnets to make her real “beyond my invention”.⁸⁵⁴ Problem and limitation of re-marking: what is only sharp on one side. Yet Hardwick held on to her letters as “one’s own evidence”,⁸⁵⁵ a form of ideal self in writing, she who was capable of asking, “Was that written for the archives? Who is speaking?”⁸⁵⁶ And: “Now, my novel begins. No, now I begin my novel—and yet I cannot decide whether to call myself I or she”.⁸⁵⁷

“In narrative, we do not know what will happen, until later”, writes Lucy Ives. “Part of what occurs is withheld, and then it is constructed, before our very eyes”,⁸⁵⁸ and I am thinking this is how figure is the shape of the story’s unfolding, but what about that other seam. The one that does touch optically. Where the future appears and nothing is revealed. Is this where I wind up necessarily—her imperfect reflection.

Reflection:

“Dissemblers sometimes
Believe their own sleights
Of hand. I’m so fucking sick
Of you, but that’s the real
Me talking, and not the me
Of poetry. Where literature
Is concerned, ha ha, I’ve still
Got work to do.”⁸⁵⁹

⁸⁵⁰ Hardwick, 1973.

⁸⁵¹ Ibid.

⁸⁵² Lowell, in Hamilton (ed.), 2020, p. 20.

⁸⁵³ Ibid.

⁸⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵⁵ Hardwick, in Hamilton (ed.), 2020, p. 19.

⁸⁵⁶ Hardwick, 1973.

⁸⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁵⁸ Lucy Ives, in Chris Campanioni, ‘Partial Reveals & Inclusive Revelations in the Post-Truth Simulacracy: *The Poetics*’ *The Brooklyn Rail* (2020) <<https://brooklynrail.org/2020/07/books/Partial-Reveals-Inclusive-Revelations-in-the-Post-Truth-Simulacracy>> Accessed 12-02-2021.

⁸⁵⁹ Reines, 2011, p. 42.

Reflection:

In 1989, Laverrière stopped accepting commissions and began her *Evocations* series, her mirror sculptures, which she worked on until her death in 2011 at age 101. She had made mirrors before, but they were unlike *Evocations* in the simplest sense because they were fit-for-purpose. Looking at examples of those from the 1970s, Badetz sees “a good illustration of the principles Laverrière championed as a teacher: to make series of works starting from a rational and functional idea”.⁸⁶⁰ *Cocteau*, the first *Evocation*, immediately inverts this idea or does *something* with it: the work is a square frame of speckled maple wood inset with a broad oval mirror over which another piece of sycamore cut vaguely in the shape of an eye is attached like a door with a hand-wrought metal hinge.⁸⁶¹ When closed, this second surface covers the first unevenly, leaving gaps at the top and bottom that make reflection piecemy. Affixed in the centre of the eye piece that unfolds like “an open book”⁸⁶² is another convex mirror like a portal or lens and the point is it is not I who sees.

“I wanted to make affordable, useful things for all, but nobody wanted them,”⁸⁶³ Laverrière told Rehberg, about her embrace of what she called “useless objects”: a flame framed by a square of mirror on an oxidized metal disc for Martin Luther King Jnr., a wood and metal box riddled with faux bullet holes for Louise Michel, optical devices for imagined futures rooted in the time of living. Baghrmian gathered these works under the sign of the desk at Marian Goodman along with Laverrière’s unrealised drawings, “useful failures” in her terms. “It felt naughty”, Laverrière says, “but I wanted to design objects that would bring pleasure to me, and me alone”.⁸⁶⁴ When I visited, I walked around to the back of *Cocteau* on its plexiglass support and took a picture of myself reflected its exposed backing, a frame. “And I’m the world”, Daniil Kharms writes, “but the world’s not me”.⁸⁶⁵ A disjunctive and illuminated surface, Fanny Howe writes, about the body.⁸⁶⁶ In which emptiness remains in hope, in place.⁸⁶⁷

⁸⁶⁰ Badetz, 2001, p. 136.

⁸⁶¹ Wiesenberger, 2017, p. 126.

⁸⁶² Badetz, 2001, p. 142.

⁸⁶³ Rehberg, 2009.

⁸⁶⁴ Koivu, 2008, p. 87.

⁸⁶⁵ Daniil Kharms, *Today I Wrote Nothing: The Selected Writings of Daniil Kharms*, trans. Matvei Yankelevich (New York: Overlook Duckworth, 2007), p. 149.

⁸⁶⁶ Fanny Howe, 2003, p. 48.

⁸⁶⁷ Ibid.

Dorian Gray, made in 2001, also centres on a convex mirror, suspended by steel wires in a gilt frame that in photographs looks verdigris. The work is “characteristic of Janette Laverrière’s aim to synthesize thought, it seems to say to onlookers: ‘Don’t waste your life!’”⁸⁶⁸ Badetz writes, but who is the message for? Laverrière equated uselessness with pleasure in that the mirrors were not intended for mass production, were meant only to invoke as much as evoke the working lives of her heroes and loves. But pleasure in the last two decades of Laverrière’s life and work was as much about turning towards as turning back on, assembling the meaningful and generative with the resistant. The artist Katarina Burin writes that Laverrière’s “repertoire” is made up of her “material genius, her intellectual fierceness, and her biography, however we take it”,⁸⁶⁹ wherein “the emphasis is not on deceit, but on the textures of the languages of documentation and of design”.⁸⁷⁰ “Indeed”, writes Robert Wiesenberger, “Laverrière’s mirrors—which are too small, distort or divide, or are mostly about their frames—are not useful in the traditional sense. They do not give back reality but reflect the reality of their maker”.⁸⁷¹

The curator Fionn Meade suggests that because the *Evocations* fail to return a stable representation⁸⁷² they “privilege allegorical content over utility”,⁸⁷³ which derives from what Laverrière herself said about them: “Yes, everyone calls them ‘mirrors’, which makes sense to some extent [...] [but] I don’t want to tell a story literally; I want to remind people of one when they see the work”.⁸⁷⁴ I stop on her syntax, which riddles: what does not tell a story but makes *one* appear? “One wants more”,⁸⁷⁵ and I am thinking useless form is how she appears in the work, where only her reality is reflected.⁸⁷⁶ “I’ve got other rhythms and rhyme,” Bernadette Mayer writes, “time to think it’s made by you, made by me, what’s the time I think it’s a better time to sound it all out”,⁸⁷⁷ and she goes on.

⁸⁶⁸ Badetz, 2001, p. 148.

⁸⁶⁹ Katarina Burin, ‘Personal Repertoire: On the Life and Work of Janette Laverrière and Petra Andrejova-Molnár’, in Dominic Eichler and Brigitte Oetker, B. (eds.), *PS: Jahresring 61* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014), pp. 100-112 (p. 111).

⁸⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁸⁷¹ Wiesenberger, 2017, p. 127.

⁸⁷² Meade, 2017, p. 34.

⁸⁷³ Ibid.

⁸⁷⁴ Rehberg, 2009.

⁸⁷⁵ Marcella Durand, in Coolidge and Mayer, 2009, p. ix.

⁸⁷⁶ Introducing *Figure, Discourse*, Lyotard (2011, p. 13) writes: “This book still wants, and wants too much; one is, after all, only the least of men [...] Still, in its defence, this desire for more remains very little”.

⁸⁷⁷ Mayer, 1974.

“Nevertheless”, Wiesenberger writes, “the narrative of the centenarian designer-turned-artist, of a late-life shift from function to free expression, is only half the story. For Laverrière, ‘designer’ was not a starting point but a hard-won achievement, and long before she was an artist, or even a designer, she was a so-called *artiste-décorateur* [...] This late work”—*Evocations*—“is best understood in the context of Laverrière’s formation and the first seventy years of her career, both as a continuation of it and as an ingenious outmanoeuvring of the many obstacles thrown in her way”.⁸⁷⁸

Reading this, I almost miss his reference to the desk, a passing reference that still communicates the secret drawer’s reflective nature, returning to figure an image of herself. Wiesenberger, who thanks Baghranian as a source at the outset of his work, says she is a myth. The drawer exists “so that this fictive woman could manage her *affaires privé*”,⁸⁷⁹ but this one folds too: “during this time”, Laverrière receives “a prestigious commission from the Mobilier National—an esteemed state furniture archive where ministers and embassy officials would choose their office décor [...] The result, *Cabinet de Travail d’une Femme d’Ambassadeur*, featured a winged desk in rosewood with secret compartments for private letters, at once a luxury object and an emancipatory statement for a high-society 1950s woman”.⁸⁸⁰

What does it mean to call form useless, which is to say, pure pleasure, the appearance of a story, at the end? For Giorgio Agamben, this is the paradox at the heart of all signification, indicated in the algorithm S/s by the barrier /, at once resistant in that it is unsignifiable, and productive in that it marks an originary “fracture of presence”, “an agreement, a juxtaposition [...] [which] originally meant ‘join’ or ‘connect’ in the carpenter’s sense [...] a laceration that is also a suture, the idea of a tension that is both the articulation of a difference and unitary”.⁸⁸¹ All signification should be reduced to this mark alone, Agamben writes, where the “putting-together” of presence (or meaning without signification)⁸⁸² simply appears. The seam of the sign is “not merely the trace of difference but the topological game of putting things together and articulating”,⁸⁸³ he writes. With nothing to hide, nothing to show.

⁸⁷⁸ Wiesenberger, 2017, p. 128.

⁸⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 128.

⁸⁸⁰ ‘Vita’, *Janette Laverrière: JL Editions*.

⁸⁸¹ Agamben, 1993, p. 156.

⁸⁸² Lyotard, 2011, p. 14.

⁸⁸³ Agamben, 1993, p. 156.

Laverrière addressed the desk only once, in an interview with *Abitare* magazine in 2008. “Once”, she says, “I was asked to design the study room for an ambassador’s wife. Well, first I wasn’t sure what to do, as I thought that her only purpose was to be pretty. She desperately needed her own little secret. So I designed a desk in rosewood on a delicate metal structure, with hidden compartments for love letters from her secret sweetheart. It was her way of escaping from reality. Today the table lies somewhere in the basement of the Mobilier National, but I haven’t given up trying to bring it back into production”.⁸⁸⁴

On the Mobilier National’s website, I find a listing for “Bureau de Dame” dated 1956,⁸⁸⁵ one of two out of seven of her works accompanied by a grey square—“*objet sans image*”—where a picture would be. The dimensions give the desk’s proportions as shorter than I imagined but as tall as it is deep, almost one metre both ways, such that when the halves are closed a large empty volume forms at the centre. An extensive description of the design makes no mention of a hidden pocket or of the Ambassador’s wife in any specific sense, so what is offered by the official text is only what I am looking at when I see the desk in photographs. One idea about Ingeborg Bachmann’s *Malina* is that she who is I in the text and tells the story disappears into the crack in the wall because Bachmann has finished writing. She is gone at the end with her letters and the work appears.

⁸⁸⁴ Koivu, 2008, p. 87.

⁸⁸⁵ ‘Bureau de dame’ 2021.

Razo

I read about the author Antonio Delfini in Giorgio Agamben's essay 'An Enigma Concerning the Basque Woman', which begins with Delfini's pursuit of the titular figure in the preface to the second edition of his 1937 book *Il Ricordo Della Basca*, or *The Memory of the Basque*. According to Agamben, Delfini recounts, or recalls, his first encounter with she who "I came to call the Basque woman"⁸⁸⁶ entirely in terms of her speech, "a language of such touching delicacy"⁸⁸⁷ within which he understands only a single word, *etonces*, meaning, in Castilian dialect, "at that time".⁸⁸⁸ What came out of this encounter was "a story: 'The Memory of the Basque Girl'",⁸⁸⁹ contained in the book that shares its name.

Although Delfini suggests the Basque woman was a real person, she appears in his writing as "something like a young girl",⁸⁹⁰ obscure beyond his impression of her voice: "slow and brilliant at the same time, clear, serene, with certain emotional inflections that were impossible to describe".⁸⁹¹ Ambiguity animates the Basque woman: she is presence without identity, specificity without definition, "a woman eternally vanished",⁸⁹² still speaking in the time of writing "in sweet and soft Italian, with a slightly strange accent as if it might have come only from above", such that Delfini imagines "she had not even said real words".⁸⁹³

Agamben writes that Delfini considered his story "a pastiche that no one understood", and warns his readers in his preface "against the temptation of asking, 'Why a Basque woman? Who is she? What does she mean?'"⁸⁹⁴ Much analysis followed: for the scholar Kevin Attell, Delfini's story is less about memory's fallibility than writing's oscillation between "a meager and unclear 'reality' and a far more rich and concrete imagination".⁸⁹⁵ Attell writes that the tale in Delfini's preface is a prologue and a rejoinder to the later story, which takes the preface's plot as its own, where Agamben does not make this distinction apparent. At times,

⁸⁸⁶ Giorgio Agamben, *The End of the Poem: Studies in Poetics*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 120.

⁸⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁸⁹ Antonio Delfini, in Kevin Attell, 'The Muse of Translation: "Pure Language" in de Man, Derrida, and Agamben', *CR: The New Centennial Review*, 12:2 (2012), 69-105 (p. 93).

⁸⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 75.

⁸⁹¹ Ibid.

⁸⁹² Agamben, 1999, p. 121.

⁸⁹³ Delfini, in Attell, 2012, p. 76.

⁸⁹⁴ Agamben, 1999, p. 119.

⁸⁹⁵ Attell, 2012, p. 76.

Attell's essay seems oddly circumscribed by Delfini's terms: "And in fact little more is said about [his] relations with Isabella", he writes, referring to the Basque woman by her narrative name. "Indeed, there appears to be little more to say".⁸⁹⁶

(In a 1998 essay, 'Language and History in Benjamin', in which the Basque girl appears briefly as "a middle, a mediator between prose and poetry",⁸⁹⁷ Agamben echoes Attell: "If my reading [of the Basque woman] is correct, the memory of an unknown language is desired beyond all other loves [...] If we wanted to express the memory of this language, Delfini writes, 'we could not say anything that had anything to say'".⁸⁹⁸)

Another scholar, Charles Klopp, finds in Delfini's attention to the elliptical and partial the potential "not only to arrive at *il un'animità comune* (the common soul) involving both the world and its inhabitants but also, at least sometimes, to make contact with what might be called *l'assoluto* (the absolute)".⁸⁹⁹ He offers as example the opening paragraph of the first story in *Il Ricordo della Basca*, in which, "in a series of reflections in the conditional tense",⁹⁰⁰ the main character looks out at the city of Modena, Delfini's birthplace, often figured in his writing as M***, "and [wonders], distractedly, whether the scene before him could just as well be something other than it appears".⁹⁰¹

For Klopp, virtually everything that appears in Delfini's writing appears both certainly and doubtfully, shifting narratively and in the minds of characters until the story "abandons a comprehensive plot to wander off at their conclusion without any sort of conventional resolution of the narrative and emotional tensions they have established".⁹⁰² Klopp quotes Natalia Ginzburg in her preface to the book's French edition: "*Non hanno mai una conclusione visibile, i passi s'arrestano come sul ciglio d'una vallata*",⁹⁰³ which approximately translates as: "they never have a visible conclusion, the steps stop as if on the edge of a valley". Elsewhere, I find a quote from Ginzburg where she says Delfini's stories

⁸⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 76.

⁸⁹⁷ Giorgio Agamben, 'Language and History in Benjamin', *Differentia: Review of Italian Thought*, 2 (1988), 169-183 (p. 180).

⁸⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 182.

⁸⁹⁹ Charles Klopp, 'Elective Affinities: Gianni Celati Reading Antonio Delfini', *Italica*, 91:4 (2014), 735-747 (p. 741)

⁹⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁹⁰¹ Ibid.

⁹⁰² Ibid., p. 738-9.

⁹⁰³ Ibid., p. 739.

have “no conclusion and no point of departure, or at least, these remain secret and invisible”.⁹⁰⁴ Pier Paolo Pasolini, another fan, calls Delfini “the apprentice, the disciple, the stowaway, the diletante”.⁹⁰⁵

I am relying others’ readings of Delfini and on fragments of quoted text because none of his full-length works, a few collections of short stories and a diary, have been published in English. Several stories translated by the writer Janet El-Rayess were printed in three issues of the *Cork Literary Review*, between 2002 and 2007. One of these journals—my copy is buoyantly inscribed: “To one of the best Cork women, Elaine”—contains Delfini’s story, ‘The Book that Could Not be Found’, which opens on a crowd gathered at a “small provincial railway station in M****” awaiting departure of “the little train to Finale”.⁹⁰⁶

A station employee, a woman in a star-embroidered skirt, a “withdrawn”⁹⁰⁷ little boy, “the famous Armellina”.⁹⁰⁸ the story drifts from figure to figure, seemingly carried along by its own material affect: characters cry and smoke and fall unconscious when the narrative turns to them. One by one, they suffer the pressure of authorial possession. A character described only as “thinking good and bad thoughts”⁹⁰⁹ suddenly sees into another’s soul. Someone lapses into “fits of exultation when the future seemed easy and accessible and possible to be described”.⁹¹⁰ Apparent things become occluded—“rails [...] which you might imagine embossed or inlaid [...] but nothing was to be seen”⁹¹¹—and interiorities threaten to turn porous—“[he was] afraid that the repeated cries for help inside his head [...] might be audible to the other passengers”.⁹¹² Everything and nothing appears, and Finale, like the book of the title, is lost from the start. On disembarking at station ‘C.’, whoever is narrating finds the entire world dissolved by an elderly colonel’s “jabbering nonsense as indecipherable and monotonous as the noise of the train”.⁹¹³

⁹⁰⁴ Natalia Ginzburg, in Sheila O’Hagan (ed.), *Cork Literary Review, Volume IX* (Cork: Bradshaw Books, 2002), p. 117.

⁹⁰⁵ Pier Paolo Pasolini, in O’Hagan (ed.), 2002, p. 117.

⁹⁰⁶ Antonio Delfini, ‘The Book that Could Not Be Found’, trans. Janet El-Rayess, in O’Hagan (ed.), 2002, pp. 109-115 (p. 109).

⁹⁰⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁰⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 110.

⁹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 114.

⁹¹¹ Ibid., p. 111.

⁹¹² Ibid., p. 116.

⁹¹³ Ibid.

A preponderance of incompleteness is endemic to Delfini.⁹¹⁴ It envelops the experience of reading, inflects every part of his writing. In his essay, Agamben returns over and over to the final passage of ‘The Memory of the Basque Girl’, several lines of poetry in an unfamiliar language that Agamben cannot be sure aligns with what he suspects is its translation given above. He likens this “final seal”⁹¹⁵ of “incomprehensible verses”⁹¹⁶ to the *trobar clus*, or “closed poetry”,⁹¹⁷ a medieval troubadour style that enfolded all of quotidian life in its verses while stylistically obscuring its content such that recitations only made sense to elite audiences.⁹¹⁸ (This definition is contested: some scholars have interpreted what troubadours wrote about the *trobar clus* to mean it was the style itself that was impossible to define).⁹¹⁹

“The Basque woman appears through the sweetness of an unknown language, and she disappears in the ungraspable murmur of words in a foreign language”,⁹²⁰ Agamben writes, then quickly qualifies that this does not suggest a “naïve faith in poetic immediacy”.⁹²¹ Rather, he imagines that Delfini’s poem must “in some way bear witness”⁹²² to the “radical *diglossia*”⁹²³ of the poetic experience: “an inner divergence”⁹²⁴ in poetic language “between an impossibility of thinking [...] and the compulsion to think”,⁹²⁵ between forgetting in “amorous adhesion” to the present, and the memory that “wells up precisely in [this] impossibility”.⁹²⁶

Two translations arrive for Agamben, the first from his friend, a Basque language specialist, the second from an unknown respondent to an earlier version of his chapter. Both confirm that ‘The Memory of the Basque Girl’ ends with a repetition—Delfini’s translation and the verse in sixteenth- to eighteenth-century Northern Basque—telling a story of a poet who

⁹¹⁴ Towards the end of my research, I make contact with Janet El-Rayess, Delfini’s primary English translator. In the course of our correspondence, she writes: “The critic Cesare Garboli described *Il Ricordo della Basca* as one of the most beautiful and unfortunate books of the twentieth century, and I sometimes feel that my translation shares in the misfortune. I began the work years ago at the request of the author’s daughter, Giovanna Delfini, and my problem has been to get a publisher who will commit to the project and see it through... I can’t give you a date, only an assurance that I am doing what I can.”

⁹¹⁵ Agamben, 1999, p. 119.

⁹¹⁶ Ibid.

⁹¹⁷ Ibid.

⁹¹⁸ Carole Bowser-Nott, ‘*Trobar clus*: A Category of Critical Poetry’, *Parergon*, 15 (1997), 21-40 (p. 21).

⁹¹⁹ Linda M. Paterson, *Troubadours and Eloquence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 93.

⁹²⁰ Agamben, 1999, p. 120.

⁹²¹ Ibid.

⁹²² Ibid., p. 121.

⁹²³ Ibid.

⁹²⁴ Ibid.

⁹²⁵ Ibid.

⁹²⁶ Ibid.

comes to his lover's window to find her sleeping and offers his song "like a dream in the night".⁹²⁷ But even with these assurances in hand, which confirm the poem's, and Delfini's, "play [...] between real language and imaginary language",⁹²⁸ Agamben determines that "[the] enigma [...] still remains to be fully solved".⁹²⁹

Having abandoned his initial hypothesis of "perfect speaking in tongues"⁹³⁰ and still grappling with Delfini's language "without the mediation of meaning",⁹³¹ Agamben returns to the Basque woman as "the figure of this immediate event of language",⁹³² "that which is so inner and present it can never be remembered".⁹³³ She of whom little more can be said, about which everything is still to say. She who is articulated and inexpressible. At the close of 'An Enigma Concerning the Basque Woman', the contradiction remains: "Why then is the story called 'Remembrance of the Basque Woman'? And why is the Basque woman not merely lost but, rather, 'a woman eternally vanished'?"⁹³⁴

The Basque woman does not reappear in Agamben's writing after *The End of the Poem*. In 2010, he publishes *The Unspeakable Girl*, precipitated by "a lost play by Euripides in which figures an 'unspeakable girl'",⁹³⁵ although here "the 'divine girl' [that] presents an indetermination"⁹³⁶ is a figure of what cannot be spoken, whereas the Basque woman, for all her obscurity, self-articulates, a figure of inner divergence in language. But the earlier essay offers a clue to go on: in the title, 'An Enigma Concerning the Basque Woman', Agamben syntactically identifies his own writing, not the Basque woman, as an enigma, a word he uses repeatedly but does not explain. The barely noticeable shift in attribution becomes a sort of lexical crack of the kind Agamben suggests exists in Delfini's stories, an inconclusion at the end that sends me back, looking for her vanished in his bibliography.

⁹²⁷ Ibid., p. 123.

⁹²⁸ Ibid.

⁹²⁹ Ibid., p. 122.

⁹³⁰ Ibid.

⁹³¹ Ibid., p. 120.

⁹³² Ibid.

⁹³³ Ibid.

⁹³⁴ Ibid., p. 120-1.

⁹³⁵ Giorgio Agamben, in Giorgio Agamben and Monica Ferrando, *The Unspeakable Girl: The Myth and Mystery of Kore*, trans. Leland de la Durantaye and Annie J. Wyman (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2014), p. 1.

⁹³⁶ Ibid., p. 3

In *Idea of Prose*, published a decade before *The End of the Poem* in 1985, Agamben returns to, or rather takes up for the first time, Delfini's preface. Considering the Provençal poets' idea of *razo*, a short text that outlined the circumstances or "hidden ground of the poem",⁹³⁷ he suggests that Delfini's *razo* is a "biography invented, of course, in relation to the work... which the reader is tempted to take at face value".⁹³⁸ This story's quixotic ground is the "blissful impossibility of remembering".⁹³⁹ Agamben repeats, or rather states for the first time, that "the Basque woman is what is so intimate and present it can never be remembered".⁹⁴⁰ But here he finds the meaning to be simpler: writing her is "[Delfini's] attempt [...] to grasp an immemorable proximity",⁹⁴¹ which amounts to "autobiography".⁹⁴²

Although repetitions in the chapter suggest it is an earlier version of 'An Enigma Concerning the Basque Woman', the emphasis falls in different places, is more certain and stranger. Agamben skims over the realisation, which preoccupies him later, that the incomprehensible verses are not glossolalia but a Basque dialect. He reads them again as Delfini's "contradicting himself",⁹⁴³ and as the arrival of poetry's "intimate divergence",⁹⁴⁴ but he adds that the lyric is "necessarily empty", without "literally, anything to say or recount",⁹⁴⁵ an exhaustion of poetic language that brings "something like a lived experience [...] to being for the first time".⁹⁴⁶

Agamben saw that the Basque girl's obscure appearance in the emptying out of language is what allows Delfini's story to emerge. But his ground is limited vantage: when he comes back to the Basque girl years later, he loses her again in Delfini's writing. Among *Idea of Prose*'s epigrammatic treatises on matter, music, language and so on, I find 'The Idea of the Enigma', less than three pages long: in enigma, Agamben writes, a primordial fear of representation—"that we have made to ourselves an image of the truth"⁹⁴⁷—finds "both its

⁹³⁷ Giorgio Agamben, *Idea of Prose*, trans. Michael Sullivan and Sam Whitsitt (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995), p. 51.

⁹³⁸ Ibid.

⁹³⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁹⁴¹ Ibid., p. 52.

⁹⁴² Ibid., p. 53.

⁹⁴³ Ibid., p. 52.

⁹⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 53.

⁹⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 107.

expression and its antidote”.⁹⁴⁸ He does not elaborate further. Or perhaps he does. He follows with two fables:

In the first, Plato, nearing the end of his life, gathers students for a discussion of “the Good”,⁹⁴⁹ said to encompass “the innermost and obscure core of his teaching [...] never explicitly dealt with”.⁹⁵⁰ The students, some of whom, including Aristotle, are philosophers themselves, are overcome with nervous excitement. But when Plato speaks, he addresses myriad subjects other than that promised—“mathematics, numbers, lines, planes, and the motion of the stars”⁹⁵¹—until offering that “the Good was the One”.⁹⁵² The students are stunned into mortified silence and gradually leave the room. Thus, Agamben writes by way of a conclusion, Plato, “who had always put his students on guard against the thematic treatment of problems”, yet “who [...] had willingly made room for fictions and stories”, became “a myth and an enigma”.⁹⁵³

In the second, an unnamed philosopher who is said to favour “simple, traditional forms”,⁹⁵⁴ such as fables and legends that dissuade the pursuit of “truth”,⁹⁵⁵ is confronted by another philosopher on his method. The latter contends that his colleague is caught in a contradiction: where the old fables were distanced from their author by iteration over time, taking up traditional forms in the present day as a means to distance himself from his own expression only reinforces the “irremediably serious”⁹⁵⁶ nature of his intention. Only a true and complete absence of intention could escape “all possibilities of deception”,⁹⁵⁷ but such an “image of the Muse”,⁹⁵⁸ while familiar to poets, is unknown to philosophers. Here, Agamben’s writing becomes omniscient, so that it is not clear who the statement belongs to: “Unless it were possible to find an expression which, like the song of that most ancient of muses [...] the Sphinx, would shatter to pieces in the very moment it unveiled its truth”.⁹⁵⁹

⁹⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 108.

⁹⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁹⁵¹ Ibid.

⁹⁵² Ibid.

⁹⁵³ Ibid.

⁹⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 109.

Aristotle becomes an enigma because he gives a lecture both upholding inexplicability as the core of his teaching and issuing this inexplicability to his students whole, as “the absolute Other of thought”.⁹⁶⁰ This is how Agamben defines the One in another section about the scholar Damascius, who overcomes his inability to write “the unknowable [that] has no name”, or the enigma, through the realisation that his work is really an attempt to represent the writing tablet itself. “Now he could break the tablet, stop writing”, Agamben writes. “Or rather, now he could truly begin”.⁹⁶¹ But in the second fable the enigma is already lost to writing, or at least to philosophy. The only antidote is a return to the primordial lesson of language, the indelibly shattered song of the Sphinx.

I turn back to Delfini. While reading *The End of the Poem* and *Idea of Prose* I receive several hand-typed pages of Delfini’s diary inside a catalogue of an exhibition of his photographs and ephemera, ‘Immagini e documenti’, held in Modena in 1983.⁹⁶² The pages have been translated for “Anthony” by “Andrea”, who I take to be Andrea Palazzi, the exhibition’s curator. The catalogue was presumably Anthony’s once. A red Post-It Note with a beer-drinking Smurf sticker attached to the front cover of the catalogue reads: “let’s have a lager Anthony!”, and a yellow card dated 1987 offers: “Dear Anthony, These excerpts are from D’s prewar and wartime diaries, but for the latest one, dating 1948. I’m translating some more things but I’ll be sending these to you meanwhile not to make you wait uselessly [...] Send my regards to Mr Pinter if you submit the translations to him—I’ll write something more when I can get some quite [sic]. All best, Andrea”.

Andrea sent Anthony six and a half double-sided pages of Delfini’s diary⁹⁶³ and a letter which says that the entries span 1930 to 1961 “as far as I know”, although the yellow card says 1948. The letter also indicates that Andrea included drawings and two pages from his own notebook, which are missing. He thanks Anthony for sending him a copy of the *Odyssey* and mentions in elliptical phrasing that he will “speed with Catullus”, noting that he is finally receiving successful therapy from a new doctor for his headaches—“I can’t drink, but cheers anyway! I’ll raise my water!”—and has recently attended a “(short)” course in graphic design.

⁹⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 34.

⁹⁶¹ Ibid.

⁹⁶² Andrea Palazzi and Cinzia Pollicelli, *Antonio Delfini, Modena 1907-1963: immagini e documenti* (Milan: Libri Scheiwiller, 1983).

⁹⁶³ Antonio Delfini, ‘Diary excerpts’ [Unpublished translation] trans. Andrea Palazzi (1987)

“I also enclose some notes from Delfini’s Diary for you—I translated them on the run (how do you say?) to let you taste something,” Andrea writes, before his enthused introduction turns beseeching: “Please think of him like a man who while writing that kind of notes is burning his youth & heart in search of the others. So many people here couldn’t understand that nor of course him”. Writing about Delfini inevitably implicates shifts in mood and propinquity in the writer. I turn the page. “Let’s make a mysterious theater,” the first entry begins, “full with frightening pauses, with breaths suspended in the air and having to speak a wordless language of their own. Matching scenes based on reds, blacks, violets and some light-sky coloured holes in the scene”. This is followed immediately by: “Nowadays at cafes it’s all the same talking. It’s extraordinary the capacity with which every idiot idler discusses about cinema. It’s a never resting flood of more or less odd idioms. Technique of cinema. It’s well done technically. And so on”.

The excerpts bounce from aphoristic opinion—“A silly woman can’t get in love”—to critical reflections that drift into transcendence—“I feel like being the miracle [sic] of an unexplored island in the Mediterranean in full XX century”—to maudlin autobiography—“And here I am, unlucky and cerebrally weakened, repeating the same thing three years six months and five days after that 1st of June 1935, day of my love discouragement”. Delfini records his acute disinterest in work, his diminishing will to write (“How could be lovely an ambitionless life!”) and his vehement distaste for “men of letters”. Imagining a future in which he, “far away on a beautiful island by Australia”, at last sees his unedited writings published and praised, he reluctantly admits that “of course, someone will be needed who sends me a copy of the book”. He recalls with evident repulsion his youthful affinity for fascism, during which “I feel now to have spent my time vomiting”.

The scholar Paolo Gervasi observes that the author Cesare Garboli, in his introduction to Delfini’s diaries, published in Italian, admits “his interest in Delfini is due to the fact that [Delfini] might be the main character of a story”, such that Garboli “does not simply want to know the man, he wants to read him and to help him to write himself down”.⁹⁶⁴ He—Garboli—does do this eventually, in a story about “Delfini’s escape from life, his

⁹⁶⁴ Paolo Gervasi, ‘Into the Author’s Mind: Cesare Garboli and the Essay as Embodied Comprehension’, in Sophie Corser and Lucy Russell (eds.), *Critiquing Criticism: From the Ancient to the Digital* (MHRA Working Papers in the Humanities, 2016), 33-43 (p. 38).

melancholic joy of being a squanderer of his own talent and intelligence”,⁹⁶⁵ which supposedly “reveals [Delfini’s] his style by reproducing it”.⁹⁶⁶ Both Delfini and Garboli, writing in the first person, appear in Garboli’s story as characters. “The writer was only the diabolic piece of glass in which he looked at himself, without recognizing himself”,⁹⁶⁷ Garboli writes. A passage from the story is quoted by Gervasi:

Delfini was there, standing in the patch of light cut out of the depth of the sweltering night, in front of the bar, one hand in his pocket and the other either holding the glass or raising to scratch his almost bald head. When he saw me (when he saw whomever) his grin scooped his face stretching from ear to ear.⁹⁶⁸

Perhaps Delfini smiles knowing that this conflation of life and story was always his to begin with. In her introduction to an English translation of Delfini’s story ‘The Milliner’, Jhumpa Lahiri calls *Il Ricordo della Basca* “a tour de force that straddles artistic statement, memoir and metafiction [...] openly autobiographical”,⁹⁶⁹ although she notes the story has a female protagonist, but that, then again, “he was raised in a household of women”.⁹⁷⁰

‘The Milliner’ also opens with a woman lost, this time in “a place that was easy to get to but painful to return from”.⁹⁷¹ Although her memories seem to unfold sequentially, Delfini’s narrative shifts back and forth in time, sometimes ballooning into oneirics—“the city... invaded by so many feathers in luscious colours”⁹⁷²—then snapping sharply into focus, such as when, having withstood an unwelcome advance, the protagonist finds her blouse torn. Delfini’s telling seems to make decisions that the characters must attempt to keep pace with. At other times the story thickens within a single detail, slowing and bending narration to its sensuous will. When the protagonist’s husband inexplicably disappears, the narration lurches far into the future, where the whole enterprise is undone with a final line: “Signora Elvira couldn’t go back in time”.⁹⁷³

⁹⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁶⁷ Garboli, in Gervasi, 2016, p. 38.

⁹⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁶⁹ Jhumpa Lahiri (ed.), *The Penguin Collection of Italian Short Stories* (London: Penguin Books, 2019), p. 308.

⁹⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁹⁷¹ Antonio Delfini, ‘The Milliner’, in Lahiri (ed.), 2019, p. 309.

⁹⁷² Ibid., p. 310.

⁹⁷³ Ibid., p. 314.

The way the story and the story's telling don't quite add up, are ever so slightly separable and inextricably collapsed, flow through Delfini's writing. Agamben keeps calling Delfini's *razo*, or preface, a "story"—what else is there to call it, I guess—but at no point does he question the veracity of the figure, whether she becomes more real or more fictional in the telling. Agamben's concern is only to get closer to the inexpressible gap between the story and how it is told, so primary in Delfini's work that it invariably shapes the subject and condition of all writing about him.

Agamben notes that the Basque woman is given a name in the story, but he does not mention the protagonist, Giacomo, who takes Delfini of the *razo*'s place. Because of this omission, the "author",⁹⁷⁴ Delfini, the narrator and the protagonist become interchangeable, or at least indistinct. Who is the author in Agamben's grammar? Which is the story? These questions press because of how Giacomo's tale ends: having been called inside by Isabella to shelter from rain, he experiences an epiphanic vision of their cascading happiness: "For the first time there arose in his mind the representation of an embrace: he pressed Isabel to his heart".⁹⁷⁵ But as soon as this union, indistinguishable from its image, occurs, Giacomo becomes tormented by an omniscient voice compelling him to "leap off a cliff with Isabella, lest they grow older or grow apart".⁹⁷⁶

The end of "this relationship that hardly even took place"⁹⁷⁷ is also the end of representation, Agamben writes, because he has failed—it is unclear who fails, Delfini, the narrator, or Giacomo—to stop "an instant before the truth",⁹⁷⁸ the criteria for "true representation",⁹⁷⁹ which must incorporate "the gap that separates [representation] from the truth".⁹⁸⁰ What then is the story that follows? "[Drowned] in tears [...] in the sea their love had formed",⁹⁸¹ the lovers separate, and Isabella returns to her "eternal disappearance".⁹⁸² Kevin Attell writes: "the tale itself [...] ends with Giacomo and the narrator—in an ambiguous oscillation of

⁹⁷⁴ Agamben, 1999, p. 119.

⁹⁷⁵ Attell, 2012, p. 76.

⁹⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁷⁸ Agamben, 1995, p. 107.

⁹⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁹⁸¹ Attell, 2012, p. 76.

⁹⁸² Ibid.

voice—both addressing the lost girl, who has in a lyrical flight of imagination become identified with the moon, the sun, and the stars”.⁹⁸³

Attell quotes Delfini’s translation of the story’s final elliptical verse, which aligns closely with Agamben’s translations of the final Basque from the *razo*. Yet Attell calls the story’s verse “untranslated and uncommented”,⁹⁸⁴ perhaps “a poem with no sense beyond its sound”.⁹⁸⁵ “These verses stand as a final seal on the story,” he writes, “seeming to close it behind an impenetrable cipher like an unreadable inscription”.⁹⁸⁶ The story in Attell’s telling returns the verse to opacity. What is this variance between one and the same, which Agamben considers singly and Attel treats as two unlike?

In 1977, Agamben published *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*; the epigraph from Dante calls stanza a “dwelling” that “enfolds its entire technique”.⁹⁸⁷ In ‘Oedipus and the Sphinx’, a chapter on enigma, a footnote jumps out in apparent warning: for Homer and Calchas, the writer and the soothsayer, “the inability to resolve the enigma had as its consequences death by despair”.⁹⁸⁸ Attempting to get at enigma, Agamben introduces Hegel’s idea that the sign, “the unity of a signifier and its expression”,⁹⁸⁹ retains as its character an inner struggle or “partial discord”⁹⁹⁰ between form and signification,⁹⁹¹ and for this reason makes us “uneasy”.⁹⁹² The sign is “doubled and fragmented”⁹⁹³ and “rejoined and united”,⁹⁹⁴ presenting an “ambiguity”⁹⁹⁵ that exposes its own contradiction. For Agamben, contemporary understandings of signification as either a unity or an “eclipse”,⁹⁹⁶ informed by metaphysical notions of “the relation of truer being to less true, of paradigm to copy, of latent to sensible manifestation”,⁹⁹⁷ elide signification’s basis in what he calls the originary

⁹⁸³ Ibid., p. 77.

⁹⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 78.

⁹⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁸⁷ Agamben, 1993, p.vii.

⁹⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 140.

⁹⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 135.

⁹⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹⁹² Ibid.

⁹⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 136

“fracture of presence”: a co-belonging of presence and absence, not a plenitude but a deferral,⁹⁹⁸ “which is what properly deserves to be questioned”⁹⁹⁹ in relation to enigma.

Agamben writes that the fracture’s most miscast yet most patent endurance is the bar—the seam or barrier—of the sign’s own signification: S/s. This bar is both the “forgetting of the originary fracture of presence”¹⁰⁰⁰ and “what ought to betray it”,¹⁰⁰¹ an essential duality that modern semiology leaves out by “[failing] to ask why the barrier that establishes the possibility of signifying should itself be resistant to signification”.¹⁰⁰²

Whether the relation indicated by the barrier is in fact conceived as a conventional substitution or as the amorous aesthetic embrace of form and signified, in either case what remains obscured is precisely the abyss of the original division of presence over which signification installs itself. The question that remains unasked is the only one that deserves to be formulated: Why is presence deferred and fragmented such that something like ‘signification’ even becomes possible?¹⁰⁰³

Problem and solution appear in the story of Oedipus and the Sphinx with “the enigma proposed by the ferocious jaws of the virgin”,¹⁰⁰⁴ which, when resolved by Oedipus, “plunges the half-human, half-feral monster into the abyss”.¹⁰⁰⁵ The Sphinx’s enigma is often inferred to mean “something whose signified is hidden and veiled under an ‘enigmatic’ signifier”,¹⁰⁰⁶ to be revealed or “decoded”.¹⁰⁰⁷ But for Agamben, the lesson of the sphinx is that enigma consists of “a mode of speech in which the original fracture of presence was alluded to in the paradox of a word that approaches its subject while keeping it indefinitely at a distance”.¹⁰⁰⁸ In this way, “the enigma belongs to the sphere of the apotropaic”.¹⁰⁰⁹ not “the relation of an

⁹⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 137.

¹⁰⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 138

¹⁰⁰⁹ Ibid.

oblique signifier and a hidden signified”,¹⁰¹⁰ but a protective power, defensive and subsumptive all at once.

In one of Delfini’s diary entries addressing what he sees as commonly held ideas about language’s expressive insufficiencies, he offers to himself, or to an imagined reader, this instruction:

[...] To get close to the perfection of expression it won’t be therefore necessary to find at each attempt of expression that equivalent sign which signifies what is meant. Doing that one would get more and more far off one’s purpose because confusion would follow, being each sign (the words) different to what is meant. One will then get closer to expression by ignorance of signs, using those only he knows, which—given their primitivity and little haughtiness—would let place to fantasy that could approach to understanding by intuition.¹⁰¹¹

For Agamben, any interpretation of signifying as an “expressive unity”¹⁰¹² or eclipse between signifier and signified “places itself necessarily under the sign of Oedipus”,¹⁰¹³ or within a discourse of transparency. But “under the sign of the Sphinx”¹⁰¹⁴ lives every theory that foregrounds “the barrier between signifier and signified that constitutes the original problem of signification”.¹⁰¹⁵ The unsignifiable bar, the seam of the sign, should always be thought of as its own foundation, its own source—that is, the original deferral or fracture of presence “over which signification installs itself”,¹⁰¹⁶ a drawing-together that diverges at the heart which Agamben calls “enigma”.

¹⁰¹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹¹ Antonio Delfini (1987)

¹⁰¹² Agamben, 1993, p. 136.

¹⁰¹³ Ibid., p. 138.

¹⁰¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰¹⁵ Ibid., p. 138-9.

¹⁰¹⁶ Ibid., p. 137.

‘Roadrunner your way of surviving’

This chapter is about a supplement. How can writing be additive instead of compensatory in relation to works of art and design? What formal possibilities does supplementation introduce, and what does writing hope to be or do at object’s edge? How can completed work begin and end with a conjunction? From Martin Beck’s ‘UND’ (1992), the chapter unfolds according to the supplemental logic of the first of two catalogues of the 2013 exhibition, Macho Man, Tell it to My Heart: Collected by Julie Ault.

Taking up the notational form of the catalogue’s captions and the domestic context of its images, the chapter moves in short sections or snapshots through the “rooms” of Ault’s publication-house, looking for a form of “and”, or an end to work, that does justice to writing’s supplemental hopes. Works and words alike become supplements, paradoxically accretive, putting pressure on the possibility of writing’s happy ending. Each textual “image” introduces ‘ands’ that might open writing to unspecified future channels or dissolve it entirely. How does or how should work end?

UND is the first word. A smaller word, a smaller work, *one more thing* stuck to the wall of Julie Ault and Martin Beck's living room. "Martin Beck's 1992 text piece titled *UND* is the German word for 'and'; it is a coordinating conjunction that connects words, phrases, or clauses within a sentence", writes Ault—*UND* is her word, a gift from Beck. "[...] The wall became a page and seemed to speak."¹⁰¹⁷

Why and why not *UND*, this page says. Beginning with a conjunction, which is strictly not allowed, invokes qualifying, afterthought. The introduction of conditions that are neither here nor there.

The work, which is three vinyl letters, appears in an image in the middle of the first volume of the catalogue of Ault's 2013 exhibition 'Macho Man, Tell It To My Heart: Collected by Julie Ault'. The three installations of 'Macho Man'—at Museum für Gegenwartskunst in Basel, Cultergest in Lisbon and Artists Space in New York, which then included two spaces—displayed over 200 works Ault has given or received since the mid-1980s.

"This volume is not the kind we're used to celebrating", is how one contemporaneous review began. "There are no works of a show-stopping scale or production value, and no single work takes precedence over the whole".¹⁰¹⁸

But this writing is about the catalogue, a supplement and a work unto itself.

UND is up to one side in this image, in this work. *UND* is secondary and essential. *UND*, a bridge, allows the work to continue.

"'Tell It To My Heart' can be presented as an exploration of *and*", writes the historian Patricia Falguières in one of the catalogues' essays. "[...] 'Tell It To My Heart' occupies the realm of *and*".¹⁰¹⁹

¹⁰¹⁷ Julie Ault, in Julie Ault et al (eds.), *Tell It To My Heart: Collected by Julie Ault, Volume 1* (Berlin: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2013), p. 13.

¹⁰¹⁸ Alex P. Fitzgerald, "'Macho Man, Tell It To My Heart: Collected by Julie Ault'" at Artists Space, New York' *Mousse Magazine* (2014) <<https://www.moussemagazine.it/magazine/macho-man-artistspace-newyork/>> Accessed 16-04-2019.

¹⁰¹⁹ Patricia Falguières, 'Possessions', in Julie Ault, Martin Beck and Richard Birkett (eds.), *Tell It To My Heart: Collected by Julie Ault, Volume 2*, (Berlin: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2016), pp. 67-93 (p. 70).

What writing might want in relation to an existing supplement is just such a passage: *UND*, a bridge, allows the work to continue.

*

Martin Beck is second in the book's list of works, which is alphabetically ordered. A note at the top of the page reads: "All works are Collection of Julie Ault unless otherwise specified".¹⁰²⁰ The absent article introduces indefinite possibilities. This is *a* collection, to which more may be added.

Instead of essays and installation images, *Tell It To My Heart: Volume One* contains hundreds of photographs taken by Ault and Beck's co-editors, Heinz Peter Knes and Danh Vo, of the exhibition's works installed in the rooms of Ault and Beck's homes in New York and Joshua Tree. Alongside these images, the editors have included an annotated works list. These annotations by the editors are sometimes anecdotal or personal, sometimes art historical. They are written by and attributed to a loose network of peers and friends. Not all works are annotated. Some are left alone.

This book is not a record. This book is a supplement, one more thing that completes and extends the work, adding to what is already whole.

A connective action that allows the work—Anne Carson—to overflow its own measures,¹⁰²¹ and amplifies context from outside. She is talking about economy and I am talking about its opposite, maybe. And interferes with end.

*

Camera is the next word: a room with a bed in it.

¹⁰²⁰ Ault et al., 2013, p. 9.

¹⁰²¹ Carson, 1997, p. 14.

In her first annotation for Nancy Spero, Julie Ault describes receiving one of Spero's *Artaud Paintings — Hanging from the Inner Cadaver*—during a studio visit in 1988: “I installed it at close range in front of my desk as a caption for working”.¹⁰²²

Ault's desk is in her bedroom in this image. The work above it is a different painting by Spero of a sort of attenuated black cloud that clots and tangles and concentrates in places, threatening to figure: hell's dogs, angels, traffic lights, Christmas tree. An accumulation or accretion giving rise to variance, mistakes, suggestions.

“For the house furnishes us dispersed images and a body of images at the same time”,¹⁰²³ writes Gaston Bachelard. Image, as in room. Room, as in *camera*.

Und things fit—sit—together¹⁰²⁴ supplementally. Things lay down and lie together in this book, in this work.

*

Roland Barthes called the space between the bed and the desk “proxemics”,¹⁰²⁵ the range of what can be reached without having to see, without having to move.¹⁰²⁶ Work, “the kind [...] you can do sitting at home”,¹⁰²⁷ is one way of delineating this “sphere of the ‘direct gesture’”.¹⁰²⁸

But the access afforded by proxemical conjunction does not depend on a likeness between terms. Familiarity, not intimacy, and not belonging, which is, Lauren Berlant writes, “a name for a kind of attachment”,¹⁰²⁹ Lauren Berlant writes, determines proxemics.

In this room, in this writing, things move freely tethered by reach.

¹⁰²² Ault, in Ault et al., 2013, p. 121.

¹⁰²³ Bachelard, 2014, p. 25.

¹⁰²⁴ Jack Spicer, ‘Second Letter (From Admonitions)’, in *The Collected Books of Jack Spicer* (1975) <<https://writing.upenn.edu/epc/authors/spicer/adletter2.html>> Accessed 30-07-2021.

¹⁰²⁵ Barthes, 2013, p. 111.

¹⁰²⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰²⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰²⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰²⁹ Lauren Berlant, ‘The Commons: Infrastructures for Troubling Times’ *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 34:3 (2016), 393-419 (p. 395).

A centrefold image shows Spero's *Hanging From the Inner Cadaver* installed next to Ault and Beck's wardrobe in New York, which is open to a jumble of clothing, boxes, folders and books.

Spero's figure floats backwards in the head of a dreamer. A tombstone at the far end of the painting, which is open, reads *HANGING FROM THE INNER CADAVER ARTAUD*. And it is not if the ceiling is blue or the sky.

"The anonymity of 'and', its very invisibility, recommends the word to the student of language," writes the critic William Gass, "for when we really look at it, study it, listen to it, 'and' no longer appears to be 'and' at all, because 'and' is, as we said, invisible, one of the threads that holds our clothes together: what business has it being a pants leg or the frilly panel of a blouse?"¹⁰³⁰

And is supplemental and essential. Ault describes the process of collating 'Macho Man' as an excavation in which works were extracted from every room.

"The collection is not certain", Ault writes at her desk, which is covered with stuff—photo albums, charger cables, notepads, a pencil case, headphones, file drawers. "It extends along the lines of exchanges that are in flux and growing".¹⁰³¹

Supplement calls for a mutable form. Proxemics, or working with what is within reach, which is finite, must leave room for things differently placed.

*

To compose a written portrait of David Wojnarowicz for a catalogue essay, Ault employs Wojnarowicz's language of cut, paste and suture by gathering text fragments by and about

¹⁰³⁰ William H. Gass, *Habitations of the Word: Essays* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), p. 161.

¹⁰³¹ Ault, in Julie Ault et al. (eds.), 2013, p. 155.

him and arranging them in individual paragraphs that transmit encounter at varying degrees of distance.

Ault did not know Wojnarowicz personally.¹⁰³² Her text, like this one, is ancillary. Composition is a way to navigate the terrain of the familiar without sacrificing anonymity.

“For a brief moment in time no one in the world knows where I am”,¹⁰³³ Ault quotes Wojnarowicz. And: “Is time a tragedy? [...] Depends on who you are and where you sit”.¹⁰³⁴

Ault introduces the scientific notion of weight as determined by gravity,¹⁰³⁵ by how much of everything else is attracted or drawn to the object, correlates without adding to its mass.

Whereas Gilles Deleuze’s “logic of AND” is “where things pick up speed [...] a transversal movement that sweeps one *and* the other away”,¹⁰³⁶ *UND* has the patience or limitation of what one more can do in the present tense with what is there already.

*

Julie Ault is an artist who works with writing, curating, publishing, and editing. And a kind of custodianship that takes the form of books, texts, exhibitions, collection, archiving, research, display.

“The show is precisely “about” the constellations or conversations between the objects included”,¹⁰³⁷ Cynthia Cruz wrote about Ault’s exhibition ‘afterlife’ at Galerie Buccholz, an expansion of her installation, *Afterlife: a constellation*, for the 2014 Whitney Biennial.

¹⁰³² Julie Ault, ‘Notes Toward a Frame of Reference’, in David Breslin and David Kiehl (eds.), *David Wojnarowicz: History Keeps Me Awake at Night* (New York: Whitney Museum of Art, 2018), pp. 75-112 (p. 75).

¹⁰³³ Ibid., p. 106.

¹⁰³⁴ Ibid., p. 81.

¹⁰³⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰³⁶ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 25.

¹⁰³⁷ Cynthia Cruz, ‘Tracing Narratives in a Constellation of Art, Artifacts, and Texts’, *Hyperallergic* (2016) <<https://hyperallergic.com/267618/tracing-narratives-in-a-constellation-of-art-artifacts-and-texts/>> Accessed 30-09-2018.

One of the artists included in both afterlives is David Wojnarowicz. And one of the artists included is Martin Wong.

I have always liked how gemstones, which can only ever be partially included, retain through imperfections the present tense of pressure and heat.

Introducing an interview with Peter Broda, Martin Wong's friend and collaborator, Amy Zion, a co-editor of *Macho Man, Volume One*, wrote about what is included in Wong's estate: "We tend to think of estates as a fixed set of objects, but in speaking with Broda, I understood Wong's estate—like the love and grief one has for the deceased—rather as a process, one that extends into the present."¹⁰³⁸

Expansion of the present tense, what and formally makes possible, is Ault's ongoing project.

*

In organizing 'Macho Man, Tell It To My Heart: Collected by Julie Ault', Ault used the term "collected by" instead of "collection" "to keep everything active so that it's not something finite".¹⁰³⁹

"Collected by" introduces time, and also choice.¹⁰⁴⁰

Hundreds of works collected by Ault were installed in rows, clusters, stacks and other constellatory or accretive forms across Artists Space's two venues in Tribeca and Soho. The exhibition handout indicated that Beck's *UND* (1992) was installed at the nearby West Side Coffee Shop.

"I think the principle at the beginning was no work would be hung alone—everything's about exchanges and pairings and collaborations," Ault says. "[...] The collection proper, meaning

¹⁰³⁸ Amy Zion and Peter Broda, 'Martin Wong's Jackets: Estate as Process', *Art Journal*, 76:1 (2017), 75-80 (p. 75).

¹⁰³⁹ Ault, in Goodman, 2013.

¹⁰⁴⁰ Ault, in Ault, et al., 2013, p. 154.

things still in my possession, is the source, but it's been extended to include works I don't own. We even borrowed back some pieces that I've given away over the years".¹⁰⁴¹

"Collected by" upholds historicity and casts "collection" when it does appear as a speculative arrangement or a configuration of working in the present tense. To which one more could always be added. To which one could always add one more.

*

A photograph by Felix Gonzalez-Torres titled *Untitled (Alice B. Toklas' and Gertrude Stein's Grave, Paris)* (1992) hangs beside Ault's bed in this image.

In one of her Stanzas, Gertrude Stein writes:

"Why are ours filled with what it is
That they reach mine.
They do and if they do will they be theirs as mine.
And if it is night they could just they share.
Might they be one I won
Or may they be which if they could."¹⁰⁴²

One room in 'Macho Man' held four editions of *Untitled*:

Collection of Jim Hodges

Gift of the artist to Julie Ault, 1993

Acquired by Julie Ault by descent, 1996

Gift of Julie Ault to Danh Vo, 2009; Collection of Roni Horn.¹⁰⁴³

¹⁰⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴² Gertrude Stein, 'Stanza XLVI', in Susannah Hollister, and Emily Setina (eds.), *Stanzas in Meditation: The Corrected Edition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), p. 220.

¹⁰⁴³ 'Macho Man, Tell It To My Heart: Collected by Julie Ault' [Exhibition handout] (New York: Artists Space, 2013) <https://artistsspace.org/media/pages/exhibitions/machoman/2851313499-1623172964/galleryguide_03_final2.pdf> Accessed 30-09-2018.

After Gonzalez-Torres's death in 1996, Ault and his gallerist Andrea Rosen distributed works he owned and made to friends. Many works collected by Ault for 'Macho Man, Tell It To My Heart' are from Gonzalez-Torres and listed as "acquired by descent".

One of these is the artist Nayland Blake's *Untitled (Future Shock)* (1989), a small stack of editions of Alvin Toffler's book *Future Shock*, encased in plexiglass. The book foretold a speed of societal change that would surpass humanity's ability to adapt, triggering "information overload", a term coined by Toffler to describe a condition he considered traumatic.

Ault and Rosen gave Blake's work to Doug Ashford.

As Group Material, Ault, Ashford, Gonzalez-Torres, and Karen Ramspacher included *Untitled (Future Shock)* in the first iteration of their *AIDS Timeline* (1989), a wall installation Ault later described as "composed of art, artifacts, documentary material, and information cut together in a chronologically structured tracking of the AIDS crisis in the U.S.". ¹⁰⁴⁴

Blake's work was made in 1989, the year *AIDS Timeline* was installed, and Toffler's book was published in 1970, but *Untitled (Future Shock)* was placed "right above the date 1979", Ault writes, the year Group Material was founded, and "the year the Center for Disease Control (CDC) started documenting incidences of a new immune suppressive virus". ¹⁰⁴⁵

AIDS Timeline asked how form might concentrate or transmit history and "how personal and public narratives intertwine". ¹⁰⁴⁶ And about display as an ethics and a method.

In Ault's room provenance includes regathering.

One important 'Macho' question was: "how to engage or unfurl 'the collection' in the present tense". ¹⁰⁴⁷

¹⁰⁴⁴ Julie Ault, 'Remembering and Forgetting in the Archive: Instituting Group Material (1979–1996)' [Unpublished PhD thesis] (Malmö Faculty of Fine and Performing Arts, Lund University, 2011), pp. 20-21.

¹⁰⁴⁵ Ault, in Ault et al., 2013, p. 23.

¹⁰⁴⁶ Ault, 2011, p. 29.

¹⁰⁴⁷ Ault, in Ault, et al., 2013, p. 155.

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“Since 2000, [Julie Ault] has concentrated on publications, particularly the book form,” Lucy Lippard writes in her introduction to Ault’s collected writings, “as a means of broader circulation and longer lives for her ideas and those of the artists with whom she works”.¹⁰⁴⁸

“The accumulation of life experience and endings—the AIDS-related deaths of many young friends and colleagues, parting from Serrano, disillusionment over artistic and political agency, [Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s] death, and the dissolution of Group Material, brought the notion of history ‘home’”, Ault writes.

New awareness of ‘having history’ and of being ‘in history’ took hold, which was both enlarging and inhibiting. Although I am somewhat reluctant to probe the specifics for fear of overpsychologizing and *getting into it all*, it seems that Felix’s death was a particularly influential context on my turn toward historicizing, (the need to decipher events and contextualize? as a distancing device?), and on another shift I would make, toward the relatively lasting form of the book as preferred medium.¹⁰⁴⁹

*

Quotation in this writing is about and has something to do with the desire to add, to coextend, to create a context for this work however indirectly in relation to the work that is there already. Quotation adds one to another—can describe as well as demonstrate this accretion that is additive.

One writer who comes to mind (on the contrary) is Giorgio Agamben, who loves rooms and hates quotation marks, within which a word, “suspended within its history”,¹⁰⁵⁰ “only [awaits] its moment of revenge”.¹⁰⁵¹

¹⁰⁴⁸ Lippard, in Ault, 2017, p. x.

¹⁰⁴⁹ Ault, 2011, p. 29.

¹⁰⁵⁰ Agamben, 1995, p. 30.

¹⁰⁵¹ Ibid.

Another is Leslie Scalapino, who in responding to Alice Notley's poem 'White Phosphorus', an epic sequence of quoted words and phrases, wrote that "the idea of history" in the poem "[...] has become a form 'within' the context of the poem (it is its inside). It is our view of it. The 'form' has become an apparatus, a device for transforming actual life and death".¹⁰⁵²

"I've come home." Notley writes in 'White Phosphorous'. "Who's there?"¹⁰⁵³ "They" "who are the subject" "of all history" "& of poems" "as if."¹⁰⁵⁴

And another is Simone White, who says that sequence for the poet Jack Spicer had to do with sustaining connections.¹⁰⁵⁵ That sequence for Spicer was both unit—the poem or poems—and methodological, meaning formal, question: for how long and in how many combinations can you work with any number of related materials in a particular form.

*

So let me not mess up the order, which is considered.

The images in Ault's book are ordered how a curious guest might move, from the front door through the passage and each room, one by one.

Scan for details. Pause before this wall, those works. Check that corner, behind that desk, inside this cupboard. Return to the host. Observe glancing protocols or partialities in looking, like underneath the table but not the bed.

Conversation is taking place in other rooms. The panoply or chorus becomes nuanced with each new or returning voice. Overhearing adds to intimacy. Variations in style convey associative logic. Narratives accumulate in the works list, sometimes counterfactually (the

¹⁰⁵² Leslie Scalapino, 'How Phenomena Appear to Unfold', in *How Phenomena Appear to Unfold* (s.l.: Poets and Poets, 1989)
<http://www.asu.edu/pipercwcenter/how2journal//archive/print_archive/alerts91.html#Quoting> Accessed 25-05-2021.

¹⁰⁵³ Alice Notley, 'White Phosphorous', in *Grave of Light* (2006)
<<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/51321/white-phosphorus>> Accessed 25-05-2021.

¹⁰⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵⁵ Simone White, in Judah Rubin, 'Simone White discusses "or, on being the other woman"', *e-flux* [Podcast] (2019) <https://soundcloud.com/e_flux/simone-white-discusses-or-on> Accessed 10-04-2021.

present as call and response). Cadence is created by the crosscurrent of orders. Linger in a room or image is augmented by other works, other words.

The annotations get louder. And time piling up becomes pronounced.

“How is a Greek chorus like a lawyer”, Anne Carson writes. “they’re both in the business of searching for a precedent [...]”

Precedent can model a way of moving. Image and text in counterpoint create a rhythm of come and go.

*

What images keep you company in the space where you work?

I move from place to place a lot and mostly don’t work at a desk. I prefer to work sitting at a kitchen table or on a couch. The room I’m in and its views outside are my visual environment. When I’m immersed in a project researching, thinking and writing, I need pretty much to screen out what is unrelated, including the view, so the more interiorized I am the better. I used to regularly sit at a desk [...]¹⁰⁵⁶

*

Julie Ault writes about Nancy Spero alongside images of Ault and Martin Beck’s home in Joshua Tree, where Spero’s work does not appear. Spero’s ink storm cloud above Ault’s desk abuts listings for pieces by Sister Corita Kent, whose work hangs above Spero’s Artaud tombstone painting, near to Gonzalez-Torres’s photograph of Gertrude and Alice’s grave.

Every addition in the sequence telegraphs laterally across gaps and circuitries. Each room, each image, is a nimble conjunction.¹⁰⁵⁷

¹⁰⁵⁶ Julie Ault, ‘Questionnaire: Julie Ault’, *Frieze* (5 December 2014)
<<https://www.frieze.com/article/questionnaire-julie-ault>> Accessed 09-12-2018.

¹⁰⁵⁷ Anne Carson, ‘How to like “If I Told Him a Completed Portrait of Picasso” by Gertrude Stein’, *The Threepenny Review*, 97 (2004), 24.

“After all,” Spero told the curator Hans Ulrich Obrist, “I take over my space, too—not in the conventional sense of a canvas, a rectangle in front of me, but peripherally”.¹⁰⁵⁸

*

When she met Ault in 1982, Spero had already turned from working with oil on canvas to working on paper, gathering up whatever was at hand in her studio to make large-scale, frieze-like installations, sometimes pinning pages to the wall in her studio before adjoining them.¹⁰⁵⁹

Spero’s first paper panel work was *Codex Artaud* (1971–72), which Ault describes as “an immense work, spanning thirty-four twenty-inch-by-ten-foot paper panels, [combining] more grim typewritten snippets of Artaud’s writing [...] with collaged and painted images” of snakes with human faces and other fragments of animal and human forms.¹⁰⁶⁰

One of Ault’s stated fascinations with Spero is how the insistent vitality of her work relates to, or even arises directly from, Spero’s exclusion from art discourse. Ault suggests that Spero used collage as a way to divest herself and her work of historical violence, including omission, and to re-circumscribe her context in the present, the critic John Berger writes, in a book about looking, “as it is lived”.¹⁰⁶¹

“I often think of her like a snake shedding its skins”, Ault says. “She sheds painting and standard formats. She sheds Artaud. She sheds male images, and text. She even, at times, drops paper to print directly on walls and ceilings [...]”¹⁰⁶²

¹⁰⁵⁸ Nancy Spero, in Hans Ulrich Obrist, *Nancy Spero* (Köln: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2008), p. 41.

¹⁰⁵⁹ Julie Ault, ‘Nancy Spero’, *Artforum* (February 2010) <<https://www.artforum.com/print/201002/nancy-spero-24756>> Accessed 25-05-2021.

¹⁰⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶¹ John Berger, ‘Magritte and the Impossible’, in *About Looking* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), pp. 162–168 (p. 162).

¹⁰⁶² Ault, in Christopher Lyon, “‘A Constant Striving for Self-Liberation’: Curator Julie Ault on Nancy Spero”, *Hyperallergic* (2019) <<https://hyperallergic.com/501986/a-constant-striving-for-self-liberation-curator-julie-ault-on-nancy-spero/>> Accessed 25-05-2021.

In one image in a catalogue of Spero in her studio she is turning toward something out of frame. SPERO STUDIO is stencilled up high on the wall. Her desk is in the middle of the room with tools and materials arranged around its edges, and it is possible to believe that her entire project is borne of that intensified surface.

“She is defying containment”,¹⁰⁶³ Ault says, of Spero’s topology. (The images of Ault’s desk and Spero’s map almost perfectly).

And Ault quotes an exhibition text for Spero by Lucy Lippard: “There is no such thing as gentle collage. [...] Collage wrenches everything out of its falsely comfortable contexts, forcing the copulation of unlikes to discover new hybrids”.¹⁰⁶⁴

And: “What I appreciate about Nancy’s term *victimage* is that it suggests a layer, a fact of life. It’s transhistorical and can embody any scenario. It extends into the past and the future. It’s a layer of—what do we call it?—‘civilization’?”¹⁰⁶⁵

*

Lucy Lippard used the word “overlay” to describe her own method of placing together historically and the possibility of unlimited rapport.

‘And’, as in “prehistoric images *and* contemporary art”, is how Lippard staged and tested equivalencies between temporal, symbolic, conceptual and aesthetic terms. In her work, collage becomes a supplemental form, less about splicing together than about adding layers that point forward and back. “My internal method is that of collage”,¹⁰⁶⁶ she writes. And: “Nothing was irrelevant”.¹⁰⁶⁷

The structure of Lippard’s *Overlay: Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory* prefigures Ault’s reflexive style, in its emphasis image as a speaking form and its attention to

¹⁰⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶⁴ Ault, in Breslin and Kiehl (eds.), 2018, p. 100.

¹⁰⁶⁵ Ault, in Lyon, 2019.

¹⁰⁶⁶ Lucy Lippard, *Overlay: Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory* (New York: The New Press, 1983), p. 1.

¹⁰⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 3.

annotation, excerpt and anecdote—“The story is [...]”—as ways to imbricate context. Quotes in the margins at a chapter’s outset supplement and orient the writing that follows. Sources: nursery rhymes, the writer Ursula K. LeGuin, the prophet Smohalla, the artist Robert Smithson, The Book of Job, the writer W.H. Auden...

“Speculative” inquiry, in Lippard’s terms, was an attempt to live with Meno’s (reformulated) paradox: “How do you describe something unknown by its relation to what is known already?”¹⁰⁶⁸

Overlay emphasises the reorganization of layers of work and time by one’s own hand.

*

Something impossible happens in this book when the images jump locations and looking picks up seamlessly overpage. What abuts itself is, Ault writes, “this buildup of art anew”.¹⁰⁶⁹

This work is about concatenation. About enjambment. And about how this work is in a constant state of modification by other works and how through such modification work finds its specificity.

Writing about poetic verse, Agamben suggests that the break or “turning-point”¹⁰⁷⁰ is a “sublime hesitation”¹⁰⁷¹ that turns text “in two opposed directions at once: backwards (*versus*) and forwards (*pro-versa*)”.¹⁰⁷²

And does not announce a shift in register in poetic writing. In this writing, and is a chance.

The “phantom diagram”¹⁰⁷³ of concentrations, additions, disavowals and connections in ault’s book forms a circumstantial and not “natural” present. And the glue is “hanging-back”,¹⁰⁷⁴ hanging around.

¹⁰⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 217.

¹⁰⁶⁹ Ault, in Ault, et al. (eds.), 2013, p. 155.

¹⁰⁷⁰ Agamben, 1995, p. 41.

¹⁰⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷² Ibid.

¹⁰⁷³ Ibid., p. 155.

¹⁰⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 41.

“The initial incentive of this project was to see these artworks altogether”, Ault writes, “[...] and to create a situation in which it is possible to grasp how they relate to each other outside of their immediate domestic contexts, when engaged communally”.¹⁰⁷⁵

*

In *Alternative Art New York, 1965–1985*, edited by Julie Ault, Lucy Lippard writes about an exhibition at the Guggenheim museum in New York where the artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres “turned the distribution process inside out” by installing “minimal and ambiguous piles of printed paper that viewers could take home free, sheet by sheet”.¹⁰⁷⁶

Distribution for Lippard encompasses the dissemination of knowledge and how ephemeral things are instituted in collective memory. The sheets are a form or method of passing time in which dispersal does not preclude recollection.

“Since 2000, [Ault] has concentrated on publications, particularly the book form,” Lippard writes, “as a means of broader circulation and longer lives for her ideas and those of the artists with whom she works”.¹⁰⁷⁷

“While resolution was not a goal,” Ault writes of *Alternative Art New York*, “permanence was, in so far as any book or cultural manifestation can be considered enduring”.¹⁰⁷⁸

Gonzalez-Torres’s work *Untitled* (1991) is a photograph of his empty, unmade bed taken after the death of his partner, Ross Laycock, installed on 24 billboards around New York City. Gonzalez-Torres is said to have had a line from the poet Wallace Stevens in mind: “We made a dwelling in the evening air,/In which being there together is enough”.¹⁰⁷⁹

¹⁰⁷⁵ Ault, et al. (eds.), 2013, p. 155.

¹⁰⁷⁶ Lucy Lippard, ‘Biting the Hand’, in Julie Ault, *Alternative Art New York: 1965–1985* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), pp. 79-120 (p. 98).

¹⁰⁷⁷ Lippard, in Ault, 2017, p. x.

¹⁰⁷⁸ Ault, 2011, p. 34.

¹⁰⁷⁹ Lewis Hyde, ‘The Powerful Reticence of Felix Gonzalez-Torres’, *New York Review of Books* (22 November 2020) <<https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2020/11/22/powerful-reticence-felix-gonzalez-torres/>> Accessed 10-08-2021.

Sheets are for lovers. And this image is an addendum to love.

“Each individual looking into that vacant space must come to terms with what is not there”,¹⁰⁸⁰ bell hooks wrote about Gonzalez-Torres’s work, as heavy and as light as life.

*

Nancy Spero returned over and over to “the lovers”, two figures emerging from pictorial chaos into what she called “rapport”.¹⁰⁸¹

In one painting, *But the sleeper that I am...* (1969), the lovers stand opposed and lumpen, exsanguinated or made dust by the distance. Artaud’s text from the title is so alive as to be bleeding: “But the sleeper that I am will not fail to awaken and I believe this may be very soon”.¹⁰⁸²

In *The Poetics of Reverie*, Gaston Bachelard describes reverie as a state or space distinct from dreaming. Reverie is something superadded to waking that is “transmittable”¹⁰⁸³ in that it gives rise to “image”, a poetic form.

Image in Bachelard’s book is always in the present tense of and for the dreamer: “Ah!” he writes. “If only this image which has just been given to me could be mine, really mine”.¹⁰⁸⁴

I am reminded of Iris, the poet Ovid’s alternative messenger,¹⁰⁸⁵ who asks sleep to soothe a grieving goddess with visions of a lost lover.¹⁰⁸⁶ So sleep dispatches image to the dreamer. But Iris, who is “various”,¹⁰⁸⁷ summons the wraith.

¹⁰⁸⁰ bell hooks, ‘Subversive Beauty: New Modes of Contestation’, in *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: New Press, 1995), pp. 45-49 (p. 47).

¹⁰⁸¹ Nancy Spero, in Jon Bird, Jo A. Isaak and Sylvère Lotringer (eds.), *Nancy Spero* (London: Phaidon Press, 1996), p. 122.

¹⁰⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 15.

¹⁰⁸³ Bachelard, 1971, p. 7.

¹⁰⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹⁰⁸⁵ Amy Sillman, ‘Fall 2020 Alex Katz Chair in Painting Lecture’ [Video], *Cooper Union* (2020) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ajCOPWVciwU>> Accessed 17-05-2021.

¹⁰⁸⁶ Ovid, 2004, p. 453.

¹⁰⁸⁷ Homer, *The Iliad of Homer*, trans. Alexander Pope, p. 151 <<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/6130/old/6130-pdf.pdf>> Accessed 01-07-2021.

This assertion of and's limits make me think about a video online of David Hammons talking to fellow artists Ulysses Jenkins and John Outterbridge during a visit to Outterbridge's studio about how artists need to give up the need to be loved.¹⁰⁸⁸ And I'm thinking for a writer the equivalent is to be above reproach. And *UND* is not above reproach.

"Can one word make a world? Of course not",¹⁰⁸⁹ William Gass writes about and, and about finitude.

"In the name of completeness," the writer and artist Moyra Davey quotes from Georges Perec, in a book about reading, "we would like to believe that a unique order exists that would enable us to accede to knowledge all in one go".¹⁰⁹⁰

But strategy accedes to happenstance.

Separated by arrangement from its referent, a more personal or specific annotation in Ault's book creates an enigma, sends me back through the pages in an attempt to happen upon—and it would be happening upon, because the image captions infrequently use titles—the referenced work.

The final caption about Spero is for *Untitled* (1985). Ault, figured as "JA", writes it and it is short:

"If my apartment is ever on fire this is the one thing I will grab on my way out".¹⁰⁹¹

¹⁰⁸⁸ David Hammons, in Ulysses Jenkins, 'In the Midnight Hour' [Video], *UCI Studio Art* (2010) <<https://vimeo.com/13858280>> Accessed 24-06-2021.

¹⁰⁸⁹ Gass, 1997, p. 183.

¹⁰⁹⁰ Georges Perec, in Moyra Davey, *The Problem of Reading* (Montpelier, VT: Vermont College, 2003), p. 8.

¹⁰⁹¹ Ault et al. (eds.), 2013, p. 126.

JA, an interjection, affirms the possibility of proceeding in writing according to additive logic:

“One image routinely draws my attention”,¹⁰⁹² the curator Richard Birkett writes in an essay in *Tell It To My Heart Volume Two*, looking while writing at an image of Ault and Beck’s living room in *Volume One*.

The image shows several artworks on the walls and a black and white bench to one side piled with books. And a CD tower, duffel bag, kitchen table, several chairs. Jacket. On the table are candles, mugs, a coffee pot, three MacBooks—

“The last detail, if incidental, suggests another layer”, Birkett writes, “[...] that of work, specifically *collective* work”.¹⁰⁹³

In Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi’s book, *And: Phenomenology of the End*, and is about “the opening and conjoining of individuals into a collective singularity [...] that does not rely on identification, conventional codes or the marks of belonging”,¹⁰⁹⁴ a “social conjunction” he calls “recomposition”.¹⁰⁹⁵

A question about context, and the appearance of context, surfaces. And about how a picture comes into focus.

The root of Berardi’s conjunction is composition, pointing to image and to rhythm, which is form over time.

“Faulty logic says context is conveyable,” Ault writes, “but context is shaped by untold intangibles, and by a multitude of coordinates. The accumulation of fact, experience, and subjectivity”.¹⁰⁹⁶

¹⁰⁹² Birkett, in Ault, Beck and Birkett (eds.), 2016, p. 9.

¹⁰⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹⁴ Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi, *And: Phenomenology of the End* (Pasadena, CA: Semiotext(e), 2015), p. 20.

¹⁰⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 20

¹⁰⁹⁶ Ault, in Breslin and Kiehl (eds.), 2018, p. 83.

For Berardi, “the community that results from the process of recomposition is a community of desire, not one of necessity”.¹⁰⁹⁷

And for Ault, friendship, like image, is a time-based form.

*

Jennifer Bolande’s photograph *Held Open Day* (1994) is pinned to a section of wall next to Ault and Beck’s bedroom. The image is of a wall calendar: a photograph of three yellow trucks on a dirt road under blue sky and a gridded month which has one date circled.

This work could be about how selection or choice can open a closed form like a door. A day or a relationship: selection tells that this is—was, will be—meaningful even if in undefined or to-be-determined ways.

In Julie Ault’s annotation for Bolande’s work, she recounts the gift of the work to her by her then-partner, Andres Serrano. I will cut excerpts together from there and elsewhere:

“I’d gone back to school to get a degree, with the thought of transitioning from the cultural field into politics proper”.¹⁰⁹⁸ (“The move was fuelled by the fantasy of transitioning into politics proper, where I imagined a more rigorous context of ideas and collaboration existed, and a keener sense of cause and effect would be discernible”).¹⁰⁹⁹ “Eventually I decided against such a move”.¹¹⁰⁰ “Finishing at Hunter, the question, ‘what’s next?’ overshadowed the horizon”.¹¹⁰¹ (“While visiting a show at The Drawing Center one day I ran into Ann Philbin, its director, who asked exactly that, ‘what’s next?’ At a loss, I simply said I had no idea”).¹¹⁰²

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¹⁰⁹⁷ Berardi, 2015, p. 20.

¹⁰⁹⁸ Ault et al. (eds.), 2013, p. 23.

¹⁰⁹⁹ Ault, 2011, p. 24.

¹¹⁰⁰ Ault et al. (eds.), 2013, p. 23.

¹¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰² Ault, 2011, p. 27.

A bracket introduces a certain freedom in this writing. (The freedom to be beside the point).

Writing about the poet Raymond Roussel's experimental text, *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique*, John Ashbery suggests that "by working backward and forward one can at last piece the poem together",¹¹⁰³ a method made necessary by "as many as five pairs of parentheses (((((())) [that] isolate one idea buried in the surrounding verbiage".¹¹⁰⁴

Now I am thinking about anachronism. Whether what arrives later really can create new or different access into what is there already.

*

"I admire Corita the artist, Corita the teacher, Corita the catalyst, and mostly, Corita's ability to fuse celebration, aesthetics, and critical consciousness in her practice of life and art",¹¹⁰⁵ Julie Ault writes.

And Lucy Lippard adds: "(It's possible to attribute these same qualities to Ault herself)".¹¹⁰⁶

This writing is personal work. And nothing personal appears here.

*

Sister Corita's print *Come Alive!* (1967) is one of the works on the wall in Ault and Beck's living room. The text of the title crosscuts a weftly "You can make it", filling the frame with a still-readable cluster of letter shapes that float in the ocular field like afterimage.

Transvaluation happens: message takes on the compressed charge of pictorial space and colour—Yellow! Orange! Blue!—acquires the differentiated attitudes of language.

¹¹⁰³ John Ashbery, 'Postscript: On Raymond Roussel', in Michel Foucault, *Death and the Labyrinth: The World of Raymond Roussel*, trans. Charles Ruas (London: Continuum, 2004), pp. 189-204 (p. 201).

¹¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 201

¹¹⁰⁵ Lippard, in Ault, 2017, p. x.

¹¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

Ault and Beck write: “[Corita’s] freewheeling assemblages of image and text provide a new viewpoint on the 1960s obsession with messages and media”.¹¹⁰⁷

And obsession in their parlance is distinct from love, part of Corita’s political context: an ecstatic embrace that is continuous with history. Against what the theorist Jean Baudrillard, writing about commodity fetishism, called “passion for the code”.¹¹⁰⁸

*

While teaching art in the secessionist Immaculate Heart of Mary Religious Community, Corita looked for heteroglossia with a rectangular “finder”, “an empty slide frame, a cut piece of cardboard or a camera [...] an instrument to look at the world”.¹¹⁰⁹ Her found words “got bigger and bigger”,¹¹¹⁰ became architectural,¹¹¹¹ a house.

Corita imagined or intended for her words a kind of unguentary power unattributable solely to message or form. Or process. But worth mentioning: image in Corita’s work is also imaging, a way to see a visual or textual element as its own material, to ask how context is remade.

The images selected for *Volume One* are cultivated, put together. They are working images: informal in style but not accidental. Each is a point from which context is created and into which context is absorbed.

Corita’s work treats context like a moveable frame: “pictorial space becomes a forum”, Ault and Beck write, “for a carefully orchestrated typographic dialogue”.¹¹¹²

Likewise, it is not wrong to call Ault’s work her vision.

¹¹⁰⁷ Julie Ault and Martin Beck, ‘All You Need is Love: Pictures, Words and Worship by Sister Corita Kent’, *Eye: the International Review of Graphic Design*, 9:35 (2000), 48-57 (p. 49).

¹¹⁰⁸ Jean Baudrillard, *A Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, trans. Charles Levin (St. Louis, MI: Telos, 1981), p. 92.

¹¹⁰⁹ Ault and Beck, 2000, p. 53.

¹¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

¹¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

¹¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 50.

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“I can’t seem to hold on to this print,”¹¹¹³ Ault writes, about Corita’s *that man loves* (1967), which can be read transversally.¹¹¹⁴ She buys it and gives it away and buys it and gives it away.

What appears in this book is always partly concerned with disappearance and reappearance over time.

“The house is not the ‘residing place’, the intimate truth of the artworks presented to the public in a museum of gallery,” Patricia Falguières writes, about *Volume One*, “it is one of the various points from which the works come and go incessantly: in and out of cupboards, desks, shelves, drawers; in and out of the house, studios, galleries, museums, publications, publishers, etc. [...] [Nothing] posits the museum installation as a mirror of the collector”.¹¹¹⁵

Perspective, a kind of limit, is neither anachronistic nor omniscient in this book. Display is tensile, concerning the circulation of works as well as context. And the knowledge that this work, this arrangement, is one of many.

*

Lucy Lippard’s introduction to Ault’s *In Part* is in sections, alphabetically ordered by heading so that Ault’s love of Sister Corita is filed under HEROS, after DILEMMAS and before HISTORY.

Elsewhere, bell hooks writes: “On paper my house exposed and revealed my obsessions”,¹¹¹⁶ and: “i am always falling in love with structures”.¹¹¹⁷

¹¹¹³ Ault et al. (eds.), 2013, p. 86.

¹¹¹⁴ Ibid., p. 86.

¹¹¹⁵ Falguières, in Ault, Beck and Birkett (eds.), 2016, p. 80.

¹¹¹⁶ bell hooks, Julie Eizenberg and Hank Konig, ‘House, 20 June 1994’, *Assemblage*, 24 (1994), 22-29 (p. 22).

¹¹¹⁷ Ibid., p. 26.

Works temporarily alight in Ault's rooms, images. In Ault's practice works are "housed".¹¹¹⁸ Context is recomposed and sometimes surfaces in these images. Obsession reappears as affinity, intensive but sequenced differently.

*

Ault's method, her "sense of elsewhere",¹¹¹⁹ seems to come from the way works that have been around stay around. And how works that are loaded with context can be movable or light.

"You made use of the whole wall surface in exhibition spaces", Isaac Julien and Mark Nash write to Ault, "echoing the salon hang of 100 years before but with a new modern and post-modern focus on de-hierarchising space".¹¹²⁰

What kind of map is this—charting or diagramming this place that is partly obscured.

Ault calls the past tense "sleight of hand", "entering the past as though it's a mapped, tangible destination—as though it's elsewhere",¹¹²¹ but habitation is a tricky one.

"To draw vision all around the room unevenly, breaking certain equanimous connections and developing others", writes Patricia Falguières, "sends us to those absolutely heterogeneous horizons from which works emanate".¹¹²²

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In Julie Ault's work, horizon is a way of describing how history gets into practice at the point where things appear and disappear.

¹¹¹⁸ Bachelard, 2014, p. 21.

¹¹¹⁹ Anne Carson, 'Lecture on the History of Skywriting' [Video], *Louisiana Channel* (2019) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9F9xUhaimTY>> Accessed 06-12-2021

¹¹²⁰ Isaac Julien and Mark Nash, in Provan (ed.), 2016.

¹¹²¹ Ault, in Breslin and Kiehl (eds.), 2018, p. 78.

¹¹²² Falguières, in Ault, Beck and Birkett (eds.), 2016, p. 81.

“An abstract question for me emerges: what composes the present in any presentation?”¹¹²³
she says, in a lecture on horizons.

And: “Can a horizon be reconstructed?”¹¹²⁴

The poet Mei-mei Berssenbrugge says that horizon in her work is the elongated shape of her sentences and a way of working transversally, “how to join the stars and the earth”.¹¹²⁵

“Break, waves!” Paul Valéry writes, but which line can join as well as break?¹¹²⁶ Maybe or I hope it could be this line here, as Wayne Koestenbaum writes, on the poet James Schuyler’s enjambment: this line that that “[B]reaks / me up”: Line’s schism demolishes ‘me’.¹¹²⁷

*

In one image of Ault and Beck’s living room, a bench covered in a black and white grid pattern stretches the width of the page like a chyon.

The grid, called “supersurface”, was the design collective Superstudio’s proposal for the possibility of urban life with “unalienated human relationships”¹¹²⁸ and “without three-dimensional structure”.¹¹²⁹ Supersurface is pattern in reverse, enharmonic for undoing sense and redoing time.¹¹³⁰

Relief: a surface spreads out everywhere in three dimensions.

¹¹²³ Julie Ault, ‘Rear View Vision: History Enthusiasm and History Anxiety’ [Video], *Former West Research Congress* (2010)

<<https://formerwest.org/ResearchCongresses/2ndFormerWestResearchCongress/Video/RearViewVision>> Accessed 16-07-2021.

¹¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹¹²⁵ Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, in Chloe Zimmerman, ‘A Treatise on Stars by Mei-mei Berssenbrugge’, *The Poetry Project Newsletter*, 263 (2021) <<https://www.poetryproject.org/publications/newsletter/263/a-treatise-on-stars-by-mei-mei-berssenbrugge>> Accessed 30-07-2021.

¹¹²⁶ Carson, 2019.

¹¹²⁷ Wayne Koestenbaum, ‘Epitaph on 23rd Street: The Poetics of James Schuyler’ *Parnassus* 21:1/2 (1996), 33-57 <<https://jasonzuzga.com/wayne-koestenbaum-on-james-schuyler/>> Accessed 30-05-2021.

¹¹²⁸ Superstudio, ‘Supersurface: An Alternative Model for Life on Earth’ [Video] (1972) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n8_mfCb2jn0> Accessed 13-07-2021.

¹¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹¹³⁰ James Imam, ‘Architects Dreaming of a Future with no Buildings’ *The New York Times* (February 12, 2021) <<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/12/arts/design/superstudio-civa.html>> Accessed 13-07-2021.

These unscattered pages, this attempt to index what is excluded, introduces a relationship to space and time that is transferable.

“Dawn, always new, often superb”,¹¹³¹ the theorist Henri Lefebvre writes. Which reminds me of Ault’s idea of horizon: how one line can resurface “those things [that] are not there”.¹¹³²

*

In one image from Superstudio’s *Continuous Monument* collage series (1969), a sailor or castaway in a boat carrying artefacts approaches a desert shore. Other boats are marooned in sandbanks and a transparent, gridded monolith has swallowed the city, which now reappears as a mirage.

Only form, no structure, is it possible.

Supersurface doesn’t idealise the field so much as ironise to make distinct, as the theorist Lauren Berlant writes, “a question about utopia that keeps pushing its way through a field of failed aspirations”.¹¹³³

Berlant refused to put quotes around utopia because they did not wish to do away with the present tense.

*

“Having a somewhat investigational relationship to form means I frequently take on methods from other arenas as part of my art practice,” Ault writes. “[...] Recurrent refreshing is built into this practice that depends on openness to form and new ways of working, as well as on the exchange between and joining of modes”.¹¹³⁴

¹¹³¹ Henri Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*, trans. Stuart Elden and Gerald Moore (London: Continuum Books, 2004), p. 18.

¹¹³² Ault, 2017, p. 197.

¹¹³³ Lauren Berlant, “‘68, or Something’, *Critical Inquiry*, 21:1 (1994), 124-155 (p. 133).

¹¹³⁴ Ault, 2011, p. 30.

Shown in close-up, the bench holds a bowl of envelopes and loose pages in which only one phrase is legible: RESEARCH PROBLEMS. Beside the bowl is *Angie and Emily* (2006), an inkjet print by Roni Horn from a series of New Year cards given to Ault by Horn each year since 2005.

Angie and Emily Dickinson, white text on black background in the manner of a silent movie caption, says something without speaking about placing things together in a frame and calling them related.

“How do artifacts—whether material or informational—communicate?” This is Ault writing. “[...] How to make what is missing evident or register absence as a layer of historicizing?”¹¹³⁵

The varied and discrete arrangements of stuff on the bench suggest intentional groupings by interest, mood or project—perhaps this work in the time of its making.

Something Roni Horn says in an interview might apply or complicate a method of regathering material like the one that appears in this writing: “Are you escaping from something or are you discovering something?”¹¹³⁶

My question is which surface or page can transmit form across format, facilitate lateral moves?

*

“Some believe that photographs conceal memory rather than delivering it,” Ault tells Sadie Benning, in a conversation that ends up being about the obscuring capabilities of frames—language and gender but also calendars, or at least the calendrical year.

¹¹³⁵ Julie Ault (ed.), *Show and Tell: A Chronicle of Group Material* (London: Four Corners Books, 2010), p. 215.

¹¹³⁶ Roni Horn, in Singh, Dayanita, ‘Roni Horn Interviewed by Dayanita Singh’ [Video], *Louisiana Channel* (2012) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bhaMDSDQ-rQ>> Accessed 16-07-2021.

“Photography became a tool for mediating between the multi-dimensional experience of looking at the visual world and the two-dimensional possibilities of a serigraph”,¹¹³⁷ Ault and Beck write, about Corita.

And about how image, a surface, might mediate the three-dimensional world of the exhibition and the two-dimensional laying down of the work in a book.

*

In an essay, Ault and Beck suggest that Corita’s interjectional method—decontextualising via her viewfinder and recontextualising via collage—holds both contexts in the image in interplay.¹¹³⁸

They quote Marshall McLuhan, who calls a collage book by Corita an “x-ray of human thought and social situations”, and x-ray is a helpful analogue for thinking about image as dimensional, as super-.

In *Vanishing Point*, McLuhan describes the way the Virgin Mary’s bench recedes forwards in Duccio’s painting, *Mary Receiving the Announcement of Her Death*: reverse perspective “locates the vanishing point in the viewer”.¹¹³⁹

An angel holding lilies can be seen entering Mary’s chamber through the front of the picture plane. And the future appears as a bouquet of stars.

*

When I think about writing and image, I think about a piece on Marcel Duchamp’s puns by Stephen Jay Gould, a paleontologist and later Duchamp scholar.

¹¹³⁷ Ault and Beck, 2000, p. 53.

¹¹³⁸ Ibid., p. 56.

¹¹³⁹ Marshall McLuhan and Harley Parker, *Through the Vanishing Point: Space in Poetry and Painting* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), p. 59.

In Gould's taxonomical analysis, image is the base substance that allows puns to presence multiple overlapping and diffractive meanings. His favourite Duchamp pun was: "A Guest + A Host = A Ghost",¹¹⁴⁰ printed on a candy wrapper and given to guests at an exhibition in 1953.

Image is language and is reciprocally invested in language as a discrete category, is what Gould suggests. Which is not the same as the artist Seth Price's idea that ready-mades "enact the dispersion of objects into discourse".¹¹⁴¹

Gould thought Duchamp could time travel, by which he meant give form to the future.¹¹⁴²

*

In a tribute, the author Lia Gangitano writes: "[...] Life-work and friendship, collaboration and closeness, history and having a future—all are levelled an 'unconfined horizon' of 'overdrive advocacy' through her work. These are Julie's words for describing activist-curator Frank Wagner, which also describe her particular impact".¹¹⁴³

People who write about Ault often use her writing about the work of others to image her.

The artist Alejandro Cesarco's *A Printed Portrait of Julie Ault* (2012) is made up of excerpts of Ault's writing photographed in their original printing, cropped into simple shapes. "The formerly classified is now in the open",¹¹⁴⁴ Ault writes in one shape. And: "The methodical centrality of the personal carries through his complete oeuvre",¹¹⁴⁵ in another. And: "You don't need to know more than what you see. It's all here".¹¹⁴⁶

¹¹⁴⁰ Stephen Jay Gould, 'The Substantial Ghost: Towards a General Exegesis of Duchamp's Artful Wordplays', *tout-fait: the Marcel Duchamp Studies Online Journal* 2 (2000)

<https://www.toutfait.com/issues/issue_2/Articles/gould.html#N_6_top> Accessed 20-05-2021.

¹¹⁴¹ Seth Price, *Dispersion* (2002) <<http://www.distributedhistory.com/Dispersion2016.pdf>> Accessed 16-05-2021.

¹¹⁴² Karr, Rick, 'Stephen Jay Gould and Marcel Duchamp' [Radio broadcast], *All Things Considered* (National Public Radio, broadcast 30 May 2002)

<<https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1144186&t=1641482960157>> Accessed 20-05-2021.

¹¹⁴³ Lia Gangitano, in Provan (ed.), 2016, p. 38.

¹¹⁴⁴ Ault, in Cesarco, 2012, in Provan (ed.), 2016, p. 9.

¹¹⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 8

¹¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

In *Volume One*, Ault holds Roni Horn up as form-giving: “Horn’s writing is diverse, consisting of anecdotes, explanations, aphoristic musings, memories, declarations, analysis, diaristic observations, working thoughts and maze-like questions [...] The mode Roni fashioned therein is clearly an influence on the formation of this annotated checklist [...]”¹¹⁴⁷

Horn’s work *To Nest, No. 1* (2000), two near-identical photographs of a nestled bird’s egg shot from above, is also on the wall in Ault’s living room. “Due blue”,¹¹⁴⁸ as William Gass writes, the egg, imaged twice, looks back like eyes. But vision makes a getaway.

A larger image on the facing page shows a mass of dirty electrical cords that loop and tangle with cords, cables and a dusty modem across old cardboard file boxes jammed behind something more permanent.

Something about form as amplification, as chosen family. How association can stage familiarity, spread out forever.

*

Formal relationships that do not appear as such but span or jump rooms, pages, create horizons in the book.

History becomes a constant reorganisation of what is lived with and what is, or is not, made visible, as if working, work’s form, is something about light and time.

Referring to Alice Notley, Leslie Scalapino writes: “(What is it or) how is it that the viewer sees the impression of history created, created by oneself though it's occurring outside?”¹¹⁴⁹

And elsewhere Ault writes: “How does bringing documentation together imply shaping and writing history? What kind of horizon is history and history writing?”¹¹⁵⁰

¹¹⁴⁷ Ault et al. (eds.), 2013, p. 66.

¹¹⁴⁸ William H. Gass, *On Being Blue: a Philosophical Inquiry* (New York: New York Review Books, 2014), p. 72

¹¹⁴⁹ Scalapino, 1989.

¹¹⁵⁰ Ault, 2010, ‘Rear View Vision’

*

Having been “intent on preserving [the] ephemerality”¹¹⁵¹ of Group Material, “on not becoming history”,¹¹⁵² Ault, the only founding member who saw out the group’s end, shifted toward wanting to “recuperate”¹¹⁵³ GM’s work in physical “testing spaces”¹¹⁵⁴ like exhibitions and books.

Another decision was to institute Group Material’s archive at Fales Library and Special Collections at New York University. This work is the subject of Ault’s PhD thesis.

“The task of *making history*,” Lippard writes, “or ‘making past present (a new tense?)’ sparked for Ault a series of hard questions”.¹¹⁵⁵

“Over time,” Ault writes, “the responsibility to protect the material traces of ideas, people, practices, and contexts, even as they shift or disappear, has clarified into an active motive”.¹¹⁵⁶

And: “I needed to confront the material traces that had infiltrated every closet, cabinet and spare spot in my apartment, as well as the psychic traces that permeated memory”.¹¹⁵⁷

Custodianship is transitive in that one or more objects are accepted and activity is transferred. The custodian’s faith is in something that hasn’t happened yet. And that form is how it might.

*

Ault is working in the hallway in this image, sorting through files in a hall cupboard under a sputnik chandelier. Light from the chandelier does not reach the kitchen in the foreground except for halation at the doorframe.

¹¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹¹⁵² Ibid.

¹¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵⁵ Lippard, in Ault, 2017, p. xi.

¹¹⁵⁶ Ault, in Ault et al. (eds.), 2013, p. 154.

¹¹⁵⁷ Ault, 2011, p. 68.

Sputnik, which means *fellow traveller*, was named after the starburst shape of the Soviet spacecraft that launched in 1957. Many of the clocks Felix Gonzalez-Torres collected were designed by George Nelson in sputnik-like spheres and prongs. Another image shows several mounted in Ault's living room.

“One interpretation of Felix [Gonzalez-Torres] collecting ‘optimistic clocks’ [...] is that he was buying time”, Ault says. “But I never liked that explanation [...] Perhaps the clocks were about *facing* time. Diagramming a situation of no escape. You can’t ignore time when you have a dozen clocks on the wall”.¹¹⁵⁸

Working over time is one horizon of responsibility.

*

In this image of the kitchen, Tony Feher's *Untitled* (1991) hangs from a nail painted the same greenish off-white as the wall. The work is two dozen marbles in a small blue mesh sack secured at the top with a loop of jute twine and a Jack of Clubs pinned—has been pinned—by the weight of the sack to the wall.

It's a joke about masculinity, is one idea. It's a joke about losing one's senses.

Feher's use of display as a way to make everyday items—glass bottles, dessert dishes, cardboard boxes, plastic rope—reappear in staged precarity says that what's funny is a bunch of things.

A certain weight holds display in tension. Attention falls on how display can structure and is so painfully permeable to space which in this case is time.

Truth in Feher's work concerns immanence, which I might call conditions, but he calls a “trick”.¹¹⁵⁹

¹¹⁵⁸ Ault, 2017, p. 177.

¹¹⁵⁹ Tony Feher, in Andrew M. Goldstein, ‘Tony Feher on Why His “Work Is Very Truthful”’ *Artspace* (2012) <https://www.artspace.com/magazine/interviews_features/in_depth/tony_feher_interview-5234> Accessed 12-07-2021.

“And if Love is not to become Time’s fool”, writes Ariana Reines in an essay titled ‘Sunrise’, “she needs to work out a schedule she can live with”.¹¹⁶⁰

The card of the Fool interpolates faith in the future into the image: a Jack.

*

“I needed to see”, Wayne Koestenbaum writes, “that someone else of my generation was relating to the junk of our earliest life with a measure of irony but a strict limitation on rebuke’s intensity, creating communities of related, nearly identical objects”.¹¹⁶¹

He calls Tony Feher’s commitments “resourcefulness”¹¹⁶² and “purposeless love”,¹¹⁶³ which are overlapping and diffractive meanings allowed by the pun that is work.

A group of alike suspended in ad hoc arrangement remains open to new additions that will inevitably tip the balance: one of Feher’s exhibition titles was ‘A Single Act of Carelessness Will Result in the Eternal Loss of Beauty’, which is not exactly funny ha-ha.

This work will come apart and until then it will hang together. And this produces a curious kind of optimism.

*

In the Group Material archive, I find language:

¹¹⁶⁰ Ariana Reines, ‘Sunrise: January 15, 2018’, *Artforum* (January 15 2018)
<<https://www.artforum.com/slant/sunrise-ariana-reines-s-january-column-73487>> Accessed 16-01-2018.

¹¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹¹⁶² Wayne Koestenbaum, ‘Wayne Koestenbaum on the Sculptures of Tony Feher’ *Frieze* (28 January 2019)
<<https://www.frieze.com/article/wayne-koestenbaum-sculptures-tony-feher>> Accessed 06-07-2021.

¹¹⁶³ Ibid.

An improvised expense report on a square of paper headed “FROM THE DESK OF GOD”.¹¹⁶⁴ I take the tiny electrical storm inside the O to say something about atmosphere, something about “preamble”.¹¹⁶⁵

In one poem of found language, the poet Susan Howe writes: “Principles, that *are* in my mind; that I *found* there; implanted, no doubt, by the first gracious Planter: which therefore *impel* me, as I may say”.¹¹⁶⁶

An inventory of disappearing and reappearing things fulfils this trajectory of *are—found—impel*.

Howe writes about telepathic dialogue in the archive producing givens:¹¹⁶⁷ pre-existing works, concepts, images that are form-giving, that feel as though they could be one’s own. And she ironises the word “discovery”.

“The poems teach me that it is possible to ‘come out of that’ which denies my ongoing struggle with wordlessness,” writes Simone White about form, “by which I do not mean to suggest anything about the unspeakable, which, frankly, I don’t believe in”.¹¹⁶⁸

*

“For me, looking at everything I can get my hands on during research has to do with absorbing sensibility, tone, inference, and various content, ideas, and angles—all stimulating the process, but it does not imply a one-to-one relationship with portrayal. There’s a difference between taking it all in and what you do with it”,¹¹⁶⁹ Ault says.

She interviews her friend James Benning for an essay about Benning’s self-built replicas of the cabins of Ted Kaczynski and Henry David Thoreau, when Benning was also copying

¹¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁶⁵ Susan Howe, ‘Prison Sentences’, *The Rambling* (11 June 2021) <<https://the-rambling.com/2021/06/11/issue11-howe/>> Accessed 06-06-2021.

¹¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁶⁷ Susan Howe, ‘Spontaneous Particulars: The Telepathy of Archives’ [Video] *Woodberry Poetry Room* (2014) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZTGPbiUm-3o>> Accessed 05-12-2018.

¹¹⁶⁸ White, 2013.

¹¹⁶⁹ Julie Ault and Andrea Rosen, in Ault, 2011, p. 194.

paintings by self-taught artists he admired and hanging them in the cabins to create a strange and ideal constellation. One of the paintings Benning copied was by the Reverend Howard Finster.

“It wasn’t very good,” Benning says, “I mean, my painting wasn’t. It was of one of his early ones with a number under 1000. All of those paintings are great. But I never worked hard enough to get it right. I guess I just didn’t connect with him”.¹¹⁷⁰

Attempting to replicate, augment, inhabit total worlds is one way to begin and end your work. I’m wondering what affinity is as a method if not an attempt by the faithful to preserve spontaneous unions of form and context that are delicate.

“People are going back and forth across the doorsill”,¹¹⁷¹ Laurie Anderson says on the radio, and I am asking what is the relationship of context to chance.

But this is bringing in an image from outside which is me choosing.

*

A photograph of Finster on the internet shows him looking sanguine in his Paradise Garden between a large cut-out of an angel flying from the flagpole and a mailbox covered in phrases like “GET IN ON MESSAGES FROM HEAVEN”.¹¹⁷²

“It is an accident of alphabetizing that this work with religious content follows those by Rev. Finster”, Ault writes, annotating Forrest Prince and the Praise God Foundation’s *Untitled* (1989). “This lineup does not indicate a collecting principle that I am aware of”.¹¹⁷³

¹¹⁷⁰ Julie Ault, ‘Freedom Club’, in Julie Ault (ed.), *Two Cabins by J.B* (New York: A.R.T. Press, 2011), pp. 103-143 (p. 139).

¹¹⁷¹ Laurie Anderson, ‘A Solstice Eve Sound Meditation with Laurie Anderson’ [Event recording], (Barre, MA: Barre Center for Buddhist Studies, broadcast 22 December 2020) <https://laurieanderson.com/2018site/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/20201220-Laurie_Anderson-BCBS-a_solstice_eve_sound_meditation_with_laurie_anderson-63417.mp3> Accessed 17-08-2022.

¹¹⁷² Gregory Harris and Katherine Jentleson, 2019, ‘Making Paradise for Themselves’, *Antiques* (2019) <<https://www.themagazineantiques.com/article/making-paradise-for-themselves/>> Accessed 15-07-2021.

¹¹⁷³ Ault et al. (eds.), 2013, p. 38.

One conjunction Ault leaves out is Tony Feher's adjacency to Finster in both the works list and the kitchen.

"When you change this point of space to a point in time", writes Mei-mei Berssenbrugge about horizons, "middle ground appears".¹¹⁷⁴

But text or this writing is a horizon which is far from a middle ground.

*

One image in the book has no artworks in it and that is Ault and Beck's living room in Joshua Tree:

A large, upholstered sofa strewn with blankets and emptied gift boxes, a broad wooden floor littered with gift wrap and ribbons. A Santa hat and small Santa lamp in the background say this was Christmas. Candles still burn but the room is dark and it's dark outside and the time is over. An empty champagne bottle stands sentinel as if to prove a point.

And Laurie Anderson is singing on the speaker: "And if only I could remember these dreams... I know they're trying to tell me... something".¹¹⁷⁵

And Anne Carson is saying in the lecture: "Is the sky something or merely what is left over because everything else has edges"¹¹⁷⁶—

*

In *History and Love, Pleasure and Time*, Martin Beck writes about how David Mancuso, the DJ and founder of legendary house music party The Loft, played each record in his set from beginning to end rather than mixing one's end into another's start.

¹¹⁷⁴ Berssenbrugge, 2019, p. 62.

¹¹⁷⁵ Anderson, 1984.

¹¹⁷⁶ Carson, 2019.

Mancuso wanted to preserve or rather honour the unique “sonic space”¹¹⁷⁷ each record created as well as the narrative of “playing records in a particular sequence”.¹¹⁷⁸

“No mixing, no disturbance”, Beck quotes David Morales, a DJ and Loft regular, as saying. “The record finished, you’d applaud, on to the next tune”.¹¹⁷⁹

For his video work *13 Hours*, Beck recreated Mancuso’s entire final set, “starting late in the evening on June 2, 1984, and continuing until noon the next day”.¹¹⁸⁰ In the video, the records play in succession, including their stops and starts, and you hear them diagetically.

Specificity of form and of formal relationship create affective order that is gappy, “an ecstatic journey through a particular night at a particular moment in time”.¹¹⁸¹

History and Love, Pleasure and Time. I have always loved how the title of Beck’s writing is also its last words.

*

Why end on a celebration? This room is full of potholes and discarded paper.

One of Michel Majerus’s elliptical notes comes to mind: “~~How~~ What kind of approach does an exhibition convey that contains Roadrunner your way of surviving”.¹¹⁸²

In one famous sequence, the bird picks up a hole in the ground like it’s a piece of rubber and lays it down again in time. What comes next depends on a gap in misadventure. What does this say about immanence?

¹¹⁷⁷ Martin Beck, *History and Love, Pleasure and Time* (Paris: castillo/corrales, 2015), p. 3

¹¹⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 3.

¹¹⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 3

¹¹⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 6

¹¹⁸¹ Ibid., p. 6

¹¹⁸² Michel Majerus, in Brigitte Franzen (ed.), *Michel Majerus: Notizen Notes 1995* (Köln: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2018), p. 33.

In her PhD, Julie Ault writes about a crisis of the junctive kind where she began to doubt the ability of exhibitions “to cut together and present intricate compounds of artistic production and information and to stimulate subtle thinking”.¹¹⁸³

Then she turned toward publications, toward this book.

Work is replaced in this image with celebration, synonymous with the end of work, but the image arrives before the book is finished.

What is needed is a form that does justice to intricate compounds and to their afterlife in the work already underway.

An epigraphic or epitaphic¹¹⁸⁴ form that, as Anne Carson writes, “makes a poem a poem, lifting it above the value of its paraphraseable content and persuading us to read or reread it however occasionally for two thousand years [...]”¹¹⁸⁵

...OK.

A form of charis, hoped for. “The discretion outside effort”.¹¹⁸⁶ “And here is where we get entangled”, Anne Carson again, “in the project of saving time”.¹¹⁸⁷

“The party is fading out”, Beck writes, “and slowly entering the clean-up state—of the mind and of the space. Closure is imminent.”¹¹⁸⁸

Conjunction allows form to change, to be tensile.

And what is needed is something else.

¹¹⁸³ Ault, 2011, p. 13.

¹¹⁸⁴ Graham Hamilton, ‘Parentheses, Epitaph, Epigraph’, *Artsy* (2018) <<https://www.artsy.net/artwork/graham-hamilton-parentheses-epitaph-epigraph>> Accessed 10-10-2018.

¹¹⁸⁵ Carson, 1997, p. 15.

¹¹⁸⁶ Lisa Robertson, ‘Hotel Couplets’, *Poets.org* (2013) <<https://poets.org/poem/hotel-couplets>> Accessed 13-02-2021.

¹¹⁸⁷ Carson, 1997, p. 15.

¹¹⁸⁸ Beck, 2015, p. 6.

P. S.

This postscript was delivered as a presentation on the 10th October, 2022.

A postscript. In preparing this presentation/ completing this work, I have been thinking about what it means to be able to say more after the writing is finished.

In this way, the postscript becomes a final metonym for the thesis writing, which also wanted to add to works that were finished.

P. S. I am sending you money.

P. S. I enclose the receipt.

P. S. I love you.

What does it mean to add, is what I am thinking about. What does it mean—what has it meant—to add writing to art.

But if I'm calling this added writing a metonym for my thesis writing, "adding" starts to sound too minor or compensatory.¹¹⁸⁹ So I'm thinking about how adding can be *additive*, which in my thesis is also a question of positionality: where I want writing to *be* in relation to art, how writing can be contiguous to art as a form.

To start / end with the beginning: thinking in these spatial terms brought me back to where I started, with associative thinking. How something brings something else to mind, and how this something-plus-something else is both an additive relationship and a contiguity that arises from my paying attention, specifying the process at a single point, like Lacan's necklace.

But something I also want to mention — a kind of key in terms of what I'm saying makes a contiguity of writing and art possible — is the idea of receptivity. In my experience,

¹¹⁸⁹ Jacques Derrida writes: "The supplement, which seems to be added as a plenitude to a plenitude, is equally that which compensates for a lack". (Derrida, p. 266)

associative thought has an autonomy to it. It unfolds on its own in a way that matches or meets my attention, making me aware of myself as receptive to its process.

Another word for this state of being receptive is admission, which I mean in the sense of being open to and also confessing or being somehow to compelled to admit. Associative thought describes the admission of art's additive or surplus or superadded quality alongside the additive quality of one's own attention.

I am interested in admission as an idea in relation to my thesis because it gets at how a state of being receptive to or in-formed by can be accompanied by communicating or confessing or otherwise somehow making this state of being informed known. Admission gets at how these might be two sides of the same process.

But how does this idea of admission in relation to associative thought say something about writing as additive? To me, it gets at the balance of receptivity and agency that I think makes possible a writing that hopes to effect a position or presence in relation to art by showing its informed nature. And this is really what I am working towards. Very simply stated: in my work, writing that is additive in relation to art is writing that admits that something is already going on.

Something is already going on.

Something is already going on.

This idea or determination is alive in Ault's and Laverrière's works, in their investment in material and ethical conditions. In my work, it is an ethics, an aesthetics, a method, how I'm framing my contribution—the whole cosmology.

It is present in the scope of my references and the way in which they become relevant or resonant, through to how each reference is incorporated, which is also an in-formed process and changes inflected by the subject of the chapter. In the chapter 'Like life', the citations are refractive, appearing and disappearing in footnotes. In 'An ell yielded up', sources are figures who tell their own story and that of the chapter at the same time. My use of references is another way for writing to show its informed nature.

This has an ethical dimension: it shows my writing as mediated by “the writing that is there already” and also as mediative in its use of that writing. References are one way my writing tries to deal with and make explicit the aspect of quotation that is co-optive. Allowing citation to be in-formed is a way of trying to deal with what Simone White calls the “fact” of existing writing, which is not the same as (wanting to cover it over etc. quote white).

I, or the first person, am also part of this. As a shifter, I retains specificity in its meaning but changes identity depending on the speaker. I wanted this I to be additive: to do more than express my subjectivity, and also to show itself as compromised in the manner of a broken cell wall, where its porosity opens my work and the works I’m writing about to further, future work not determined by me, which I will say more about later.

In ‘An ell yielded up’, the I is figural and does what the chapter suggests figure does: it stays partial and also flexible, so that it can be used by other writers who appear as figures through the I. In ‘Mother liquid’, I is closer to me in that it stays fairly singular, but it also acts as a signpost for writing to use to show its process of being in-formed by art. Without meaning to be obtuse, I wanted this first I to gesture toward the idea that starting and continuing a work isn’t only a matter of will — that working is subject to conditions but also possess of its own drive, its own motivations. It therefore became important that the I be “identified, not identity” (Butler) so that it too could establish a formal relationship with the subject of the chapter.

On the relationship of writing’s form and art form, I wanted to explore what it means to be working *with* a form, which is writing to write about a form — art or design, object form and to show how writing and art become mutually elaborated in this relationship. This is what I meant in my introduction when I wrote that the critical proposition of this work is how writing can elaborate specificity through formal relationships.

It’s important to my work to think about writing as showing this contiguity of writing and art because I’m also interested in showing how writing can’t totally convert or synthesize art. Form or formal value as I’m calling it is a way of showing what writing shares with art that is also what makes it specific from and separate from art, and vice versa.

Metonymy explains how my writing's relationship to the something else that is already going on isn't arbitrary. The constellation of the work derives from where writing is specified in relation to that constellation — at what formal point or part of the artwork. It's this *being specified* that admits the metonymic operation or relationship, and the metonymic relationship in turn admits art's specificity.

This is how I'm thinking of this metonymic contiguity of written form and object form in my work as linguistic but also material, existing in the "actual, existential world" (Lodge) as well as in a "word-to-word" correspondence (Lacan). And how I'm building up to be able to say something about the actual or existential consequence or contribution of this work. But I want to stick with contiguity for a minute:

What is the relationship between my writing and Ault's and Laverrière's work (and what relationship does my writing want?

How is this relationship achieved?

How can writing show this relationship?

What does showing this relationship mean or do for art and design writing?

Each of these questions — about the form, method, form again, and contribution of my writing — could be answered with the word "contiguity", meant in the metonymic sense of both contextual and actual. Contiguity inflects every part of my thesis. And to go right back to the beginning of this very long postscript, asking what writing adds to art or how writing can be additive in its relationship to art in my work has meant asking how writing can be contiguous to art as a form.

I wanted my writing to achieve a position of contiguity to its subject, and to show this in its form as a relationship *of* form. This relationship between my work and Ault's and Laverrière's works has to do with their being contiguous on a formal level because of my writing, and with the in-the-world coexistence of writing and art and design as formal practices.

I'm going to say a bit more about contiguity in relation to what I see as the contribution or consequence or opportunity of my work and will then be very pleased to stop speaking.

In my introduction I said that my writing makes a twofold contribution: in terms of method, metonymic writing as a research method might have its own life insofar as I have theorized it; in terms of a critical and creative contribution, my work aims to make a proposition within art and design writing as a field. These very much stand. But I wanted to add one other thing, or be explicit about one more thing: I believe that the opportunity of thinking about my writing — and hopefully this postscript — as additive is that it sets up writing that is receptive to or in-formed by art as the something to an as-yet-to-be-determined something else, further opening itself and its contiguous subjects – in this case, Ault's and Laverrière's work -- to more writing, more adding, done by others.

I think this is what can (or hopefully will) be transmitted in my thesis when it eventually lives in the world: that the method and form of this work are what makes it specifically itself and also what makes it continuous.

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