

“Something like a liveable space”: Poetry, architecture, and the
New York School

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Declaration of Authorship

I, Mae Losasso, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

Signed:.....

Date:.....02/10/2020.....

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Abstract

This thesis explores the relationship between poetry and architecture through close readings of the work of Frank O'Hara, Barbara Guest, John Ashbery, and James Schuyler – the so-called New York School poets. This research contributes to existing scholarship by suggesting that an understanding of architectural history, theory and practice might shed light on the lyric; but it also proposes, in turn, that an embodied, materially reflexive, and spatially aware reading of these textual forms might reveal the significance of poetic language in shaping the built environment.

The starting point for this thesis lies in John Ashbery's designation of "something like a liveable space" in the work of Frank O'Hara. Appropriating this convivial simile, I explore the radical possibility of engaging with poetic spaces that might be *liveable* if not *physical*. To do so, I turn to the social, corporeal, and, at times, precarious character of the New York's School's architectural poetic, locating the points at which the material, the imaginary, and the conceptual intersect. Looking at the work these poets produced from the early 1950s to the late 1980s, this thesis shifts prevailing narratives of context as well as construction, to suggest new ways of conceiving and experiencing both poetic and architectural space. Attending to the semantic, spatial, and material crossovers between these disciplines, I challenge the entrenched binary of modernist depth versus postmodern surface and seek, instead, to highlight the importance of the embodied encounter with both the poetic and the architectural. Through this approach, I argue that the relationship between poetry and architecture is fundamentally a utopian one, attuned both to the social and the political through a future-focussed lens.

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Abbreviations

Frank O'Hara

CP *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*
LP *Lunch Poems*

John Ashbery

ST *Some Trees*
TCO *Tennis Court Oath*
RM *Rivers and Mountains*
DDS *The Double Dream of Spring*
TP *Three Poems*
(in-text citations to collections above refer to *The Mooring of Starting Out*)
SP *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*
HBD *Houseboat Days*
RS *Reported Sightings*

Barbara Guest

LT *Poems: The Location of Things, Archaics, The Open Skies*
BS *The Blue Stairs*
CM *The Countess from Minneapolis*
QU *Quilts*
FR *Fair Realism*
RG *The Red Gaze*
(in-text citations to collections above refer to *The Collected Poems of Barbara Guest*)
FOI *Forces of Imagination*

James Schuyler

FE *Freely Espousing*
HB from *The Home Book*
CL *The Crystal Lithium*
HL *Hymn to Life*
MP *The Morning of the Poem*
(in-text citations to collections above refer to *Collected Poems*)
DJS *The Diary of James Schuyler*

See bibliography for full publication details

Prologue:

“The Modern Museum in Amsterdam has blue stairs”

For almost twenty years, readers of Barbara Guest’s poem ‘The Blue Stairs’ have been deceived. In 2003, Guest reprinted her 1968 composition with a small addendum: “*Note: The Modern Museum in Amsterdam has blue stairs*” (FOI 50) – a fragment that has been taken as read among scholars of her work.¹ In conducting research for the present thesis, however, I turned up an unexpected absence: these ‘blue stairs’ are nowhere to be found.

There is no fear
in taking the first step
or the second
or the third

having a position
between several Popes

In fact the top
can be reached
without disaster

precocious (BS 61)

In June 2019, I visited the Stedelijk – Amsterdam’s museum of modern art – with the intention of “taking the first step” on these blue stairs and writing the first architectural-ethnographic response to the poem. I wanted to study their colour, form, texture; to observe how they were used by visitors to the museum; to think about the nature of ascent and descent; to look for “radiant deepness,” “graduat[ing] dimensions,” and “fantastic area,” as Guest writes. I hoped to confirm that, yes, the colour was “cobalt blue,” and even, perhaps, that the “design” was “extraordinary”; to say, yes, this is a poem of architectural ekphrasis, deferring

¹ Silverberg notes that the “object” of this poem is “‘The Blue Stairs’ of the Modern Museum in Amsterdam” (*Neo Avant-Garde*, 67); Caroline Williamson has written that “the metaphorical stairs apparently refer to the elaborate main staircase of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam” (C. Williamson, ‘Working methods: Painting, poetry and the difficulty of Barbara Guest’ in *Jacket 36 - Late 2008*, <http://jacketmagazine.com/36/guest-williamson.shtml>); while the programme notes to a 2019 podcast on the poem state that ‘The Blue Stairs’ was inspired by a stairway in the Stedelijk Museum of Modern Art in Amsterdam” (The republic of space (PoemTalk #140), Barbara Guest, ‘The Blue Stairs’, <http://jacket2.org/podcasts/republic-space-poemtalk-140>).

to the authority of the ‘real’ stairs. Yet the staircase that I discovered – the only one in the Stedelijk that would have been standing in Guest’s lifetime – was notable for its use of one, single shade: white (fig. 1).



fig. 1 *Looking for blue*: the central staircase at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam

The code
consists in noticing
the particular shade
of the staircase

occasionally giving way
to the emotions

It has been chosen
discriminately

To graduate the dimensions
ease them into sight

republic of space (BS 61)

The stairs were white, unmistakably: the closest inspection of the “composite” (BS 63) flecks in the polished stone could not persuade otherwise. I looked for chips in the paintwork for any trace of blue behind layers of white: the one flake that I found, in the otherwise immaculate architecture, revealed foundational red brickwork under years’ worth of white paint – a palimpsest of white upon white (figs. 2 & 3). So, I follow Maggie Nelson’s advice from her blue book, *Bluets*, and “Keep in mind the effects of all the various surfaces,



figs. 2 & 3 “A palimpsest of white upon white”: Details of Stedelijk stairs

volumes, light-sources, films, expanses, degrees of solidity, solubility, temperature, elasticity, on color. Think of an object’s capacity to emit, reflect, absorb, transmit, or scatter light.”² The Stedelijk’s stairs stand under a large skylight and the effect of daylight, filtered on to an expanse of white – white stone, whitewashed woodwork, whitewashed walls – results in the settling of a soft, blue hue over the space. If Guest’s signpost to the “modern museum in Amsterdam” was a “code,” could this be how one cracked it, by “noticing / the particular shade / of the staircase,” washed in soft, blue daylight?

Radiant deepness
a thumb
passed over it

disarming
as one who executes robbers

Waving the gnats
and the small giants
aside

balancing

How to surprise
a community
by excellence

somehow it occurred

² M. Nelson, *Bluets*, (Seattle & New York: Wave Books, 2009), 20.

living a public life (BS 61-2).

Further research revealed that these stairs had in fact made museum history in 1938, by virtue of their whiteness: the Stedelijk had been one of the forerunners of the gallery as ‘White Cube’. Margriet Schavemaker, in her book *The White Cube as a Lieu de Mémoire: The Future of History in the Contemporary Art Museum*, notes that in the late nineteenth century, the staircase had originally been festooned with colour. “The Stedelijk Museum’s collection,” she notes “contains a historical painting by Sal Meijer that clearly shows the original color scheme: featuring a great deal of yellow, red, and green, with a golden glow coming through the ceiling, which at the time consisted of yellow glass.”³ Colourful, then, but not a hint of blue (fig. 4). And then, in 1938, “during preparations [for an exhibition titled, *Abstracte Kunst*], freshly hired curator Willem Sandberg singlehandedly painted over the brightly colored staircase white within a single weekend.”⁴



fig. 4 Sal Meijer, *Opgang Stedelijk Museum*, 1912, oil on canvas.

By the time that Guest saw this staircase – if indeed she ever did⁵ – not only would it have been white, its

³ M. Schavemaker, *The White Cube as a Lieu de Mémoire: The Future of History in the Contemporary Art Museum*, (Amsterdam: Reinwardt Academy - Amsterdam University of the Arts, 2016), 19.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁵ Though this is far from conclusive, I did find it noteworthy that I could find no evidence of a trip to Amsterdam in the Beinecke Library’s extensive Barbara Guest Papers.

whiteness would have been its most notable feature. Had there been another set of stairs at some time in the building's history? Or had these white stairs once been blue in their own past? I contacted Michiel Nijhoff, Head of Library and Archives at the Stedelijk, who responded with the following:

Dear Mae,

[...] I have found no trace whatsoever of the stairs of the museum being blue at any time. I searched the archive on the terms blue AND stairs, staircase etc. but found no reference. The staircase is white on all the pictures I have of it in the 50s and sixties. There was also a staircase in the New Wing (Sandberg Wing) but that was blackish linoleum. I did find this photo of a room by Fontana in 1967. Poetic license?? Or do the white reflections on the blue wall form a sort of stairs??

Michiel Nijhoff
Hoofd Bibliotheek en Archief / Head of Library and Archives⁶

“No trace whatsoever.” The Sandberg Wing to which Nijhoff refers had been built in 1954 under the auspices of the eponymous Willem Sandberg (of whitewashing fame), in the form of a shiny new, Phillip Johnson-esque addition (vertical sheets of glass set into a mathematical, steel grid). A note on the Stedelijk website from 2011 states, however, that, “In recent years, the old building has been renovated and all later additions removed.”⁷ It is possible that the “blackish linoleum” to which Nijhoff refers was in fact a deep “cobalt blue,” and that, with the demolition of the Sandberg staircase, this blue tinge has disappeared without a trace.

The original design
was completed
no one complained

In a few years
it was forgotten

floating

It was framed
like any other work of art
not too ignobly

kicking the ladder away (*BS 62*)

⁶ From personal correspondence.

⁷ Stedelijk: News & Press: The Building, (2019, August 14). Retrieved at: <https://www.stedelijk.nl/en/news/the-building>



fig. 5 Cobalt blue spandrels

The stairs of the Sandberg may have been kicked away and forgotten, but the central staircase that still stands is “framed / like any other work of art” (*BS* 62) by a symmetrical set of archways, one at the foot, the other at the landing, each consisting of pure white masonry – save for a pattern of cobalt blue stripes, painted on to both sets of spandrels (fig. 5). Could this have been the blue to which Guest’s poem refers? I discovered two photographs from 1969 (a year after the first publication of the poem), one showing a Gilbert and George installation beneath Alexander Calder mobiles (fig. 6), the other hung with a white curtain installation by Ger van Elk (fig. 7). Yet these images reveal that the spandrels bore no blue then and nor, judging from these (albeit black and white) photographs, did any other part of the stairs. Perhaps the 1967 Fontana installation (fig. 8) to which Neijhoff refers had been the impetus for the poem, or perhaps another installation had taken place on the “the elaborate main staircase” in which the stairs were briefly washed with blue. This would account for Guest’s slippage from a description of the stairs to an artwork “framed / like any other work of art” – but Neijhoff’s fruitless search suggested otherwise.

As archives and photographs failed to provide concrete evidence, I began to wonder if the confusion might rest on a mistranslation: maybe Guest was never alluding to the Stedelijk when she made reference to “the Modern Museum in Amsterdam.” I could find only a handful of museums and galleries in Amsterdam that might qualify as a ‘Modern Museum’, and all of these opened in years subsequent to the publication of ‘The Blue Stairs’ (the Van Gogh Museum, 1973; Foam Gallery, 2001; Moco, 2016). Perhaps Guest had



fig. 6 Gilbert and George, *Living sculpture*, 1969



fig. 7 Ger Van Elk, *Apparatus Scalas Dividens*, 1969



fig. 8 Lucio Fontana, *Concetti spaziali*, 1967

simply misremembered the correct location of a set of blue stairs that she encountered *somewhere* in a museum in Amsterdam; yet I could find no trace of any blue stairs in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam's other flagship museum, situated in the same square as the Stedelijk, nor in any of the other museums I was able to see first-hand or in photographs.

Now I shall tell you
why it is beautiful

Design: extraordinary
colour: cobalt blue

secret platforms (*BS 62*)

What *was* the secret of these stairs? What was Guest really trying to “tell you”? And where could these “extraordinary [...] cobalt blue” stairs be? I continued my search, but all I managed to turn up in Amsterdam was a small Bed and Breakfast, located on the bank of the Keizersgracht canal, called The Blue Stairs (fig. 9). I wrote to the hotel to find out if their history bore any relation to Guest’s poem. Here was the response:

Hi Mae,

I’m afraid we are running our B&B for about three years, so we are not the ‘blue stairs’ from the poem.

Good luck with your PhD!
Kind regards

Louise Coppens⁸



fig. 9 The Blue Stairs Bed and Breakfast, Amsterdam

⁸ From personal correspondence.

The harder I looked, the further away the blue stairs travelled. Scouring through iconic staircases, I visited the Vatican museum's spiralling, Simonetti Staircase (fig. 10), a structure bathed in the deep, blue light of its glass cupola (fig. 11).⁹ Situated, literally, "between several Popes," this structure, under close inspection, began to conform to all of Guest's clues:

Heels twist it
into shape

It has a fantastic area
made for a tread
that will ascend

Being humble
i.e productive

Its purpose
is to take you upward

On an elevator
of human fingerprints
of the most delicate
fixity

Being practical
and knowing its denominator

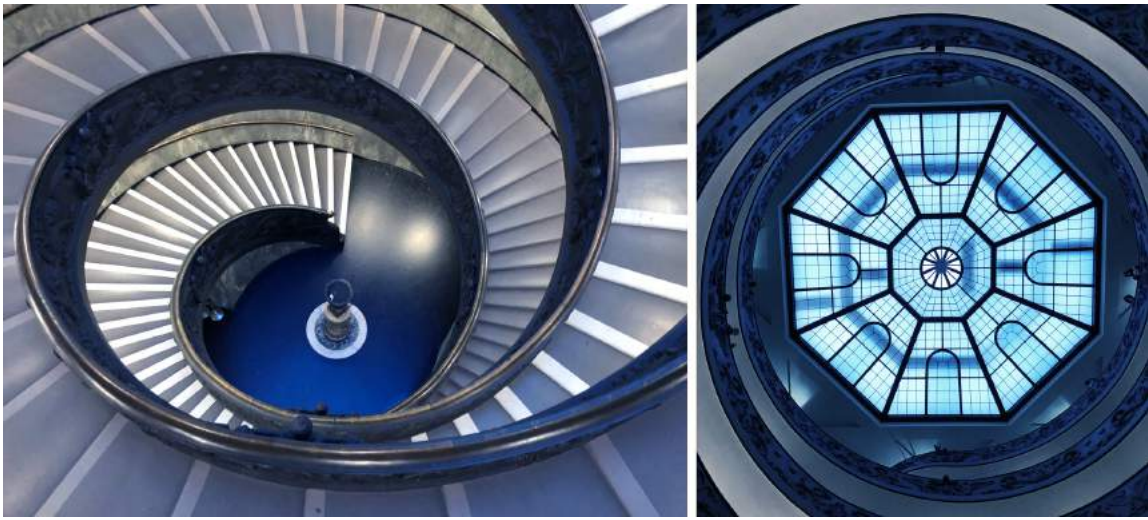
To push
one foot ahead of the other

Being a composite
which sneers at marble

all orthodox movements (*BS* 62-3)

The Simonetti Stairs are based on the Vatican's fourteenth century, Bramante staircase, a granite construction ("a composite / which sneers at marble" (*BS* 63)) in a double helix shape ("an elevator / of human fingerprints / of the most delicate / fixity") that allowed for separate lanes of traffic, so that ascent and descent might be streamlined ("its purpose / is to take you upward") and which remains hidden to this day inside the walls of the Vatican ("secret platforms"), the Catholic Church's most sacred site ("all orthodox movements"). Did Guest have the Simonetti Stairs in mind? Had she simply crossed museum wires on a European tour? As with those Fontana neons, it would take more than poetic licence to draw this conclusion convincingly. But, in the process, I was revealing something crucial: the more I looked for factual answers to these questions, the less they seemed to matter. From Dutch B&Bs to Papal steps in Rome, my seemingly

⁹ As an aside - and as a textual nod to my first chapter on O'Hara - Giuseppe Momo's 1932 design for the Simonetti Staircase was surely the structure foremost in Frank Lloyd Wright's mind when designing the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, with its deep and wide spiral, curling upwards towards a fragmented, glass cupola.



figs. 10 & 11 The spiralling Simonetti stairs and their glass cupola

fruitless search for the ‘real’ blue stairs was creating a new “composite,” a collage of real-life spaces and structures, altering both the poem and the various architectures with which I engaged. And on my elusive search, I found myself beginning to rewrite certain assumptions in my own mind – about what I considered to be ‘real’, about my reliance on optic perception, and about the relationship between a text and its referent.

Shortly after my trip to Amsterdam, a podcast on ‘The Blue Stairs’ was released. Here, poet Kristen Prevallet joined the deceived, sharing her “discovery” that the poem was based on a “real” set of stairs in a museum in Amsterdam. “Oh my gosh, these stairs actually existed,” Prevallet effused, “and I wanted to see them in my mind. But then I realised, I don’t really need to see them in my mind because [...] they’re not really important, finding them and then leaving them behind again.”¹⁰ Prevallet is right in one sense: finding the ‘real’ stairs would not have concretised a reading of the poem. But what she overlooks, in assuming that there *is* a real referent, sitting somewhere in a museum in Amsterdam, is the weight of architectural *absence*. For if these stairs had once been tangible but no longer existed, then all that remains of them now is Guest’s poem: the poem itself has *become* the stairs. Maybe these stairs did fall, somewhere in the Sandberg wing, at the whim of a museum official and a wrecking ball; but as Nelson asks, “Is your blue sofa still blue when [...] no one enters the room to see it?”¹¹ In other words, are these poetic stairs any less blue because their

¹⁰ K. Prevallet in A Filreiss, ‘The Republic of Space: A discussion of “The Blue Stairs” by Barbara Guest’, *Poem Talk*, September 27 2019, available at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/podcasts/151124/the-republic-of-space-a-discussion-of-the-blue-stairs-by-barbara-guest> (accessed 30/09/2020).

¹¹ Nelson, *Bluets*, 20.

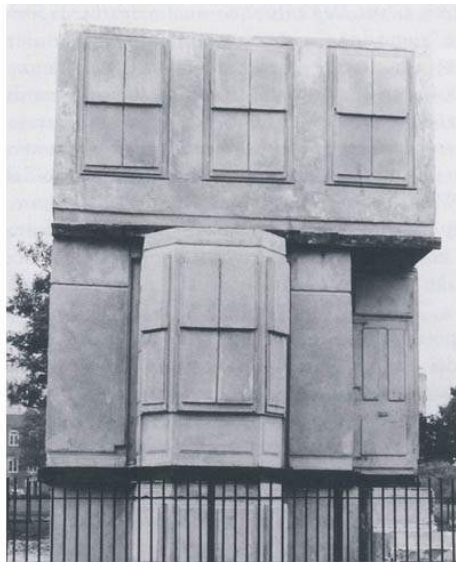


fig. 12 Rachel Whiteread's House

architectural antecedent cannot be seen? Like Rachel Whiteread's house (fig. 12), taking its negative (though still concrete) form only when the original structure had been fully demolished, Guest's stairs have become the only remaining form of whatever staircase she had originally drawn from; the course of architectural history may have forever altered the fabric of the text.

It has discovered
in the creak of a footstep
the humility of sound

Spatially selective
using its counterfeit
of height

To substantiate
a method of progress

Reading stairs
as interpolation
in the problem of gradualness

with a heavy and pure logic (*BS 63*)

It also remains possible, of course, that the terms "code," "secret," "fantastic" (read: fantastical, fantasy), "counterfeit," "false," "withdrawn" (*BS 63*), scattered throughout have, in fact, encoded the poem's best kept secret: that these textual stairs really are no more than a "counterfeit / of height." Given that the story of Sandberg's whitewashing has gone down in museum history, it may be that Guest's project was based on a deliberate misnomer; that the reference to 'blue' was her own version of playful "poetic licence." A full-



fig. 13 Cobalt Blue

bodied colour, cobalt is the natural result of chemical oxidation, a blue with a long history in the production of pigmented porcelain, paint, and jewellery. Chemically stable in the presence of alkali, cobalt blue is also used as a pigment in concrete construction (fig. 13). Cobalt blue as concrete substance: palpable in its materiality, and yet entirely elusive, existing only in the intangible space of the poem. Then again, like Whiteread's negative, perhaps these stairs *are* more stable, more concrete, when residing in the poem than existing in the built environment: after all, in the eternal words of Shakespeare, "Not marble nor the gilded monuments / Of princes shall outlive this powerful rhyme."¹²

The master builder
acknowledges this

As do the artists
in their dormer rooms

eternal banishment

Who are usually grateful
to anyone who prevents them
from taking a false step

And having reached the summit
would like to stay there
even if the stairs are withdrawn (*BS* 63)

¹² W. Shakespeare, 'Sonnet 55' in (ed. John Kerrigan) *The Sonnets and A Lover's Complaint*, (London: Penguin Books, 1986), 104.

By virtue of these lost stairs, “the location of things,” to borrow the title of Guest’s first, printed collection, has been dislodged; and so, too, has the relation between the textual and the architectural. The ‘real’ stairs have been “withdrawn” and now exist in one place only: they *are* the poem on the page in front of us. The “artist” has become the “master builder” and these stairs, with their impossible signpost, are the “invisible architecture,” that Guest describes in an essay of that name, which “support[s] / the surface of the poem.”

In the end, standing in front of the Stedelijk's white stairs, I found that I was no longer looking for architecture to condition or explain the poem; rather, I began to see that both poem and architecture were capable of creating material as well as conceptual spaces. The architectural had become the *architextual*.

Introduction

“Something like a liveable space”

The collected poems of Frank O’Hara were first published in 1971, with an introduction by John Ashbery. In a well-quoted section, Ashbery offers a reading of O’Hara’s development into poetic maturity. He explains that:

What was needed was a vernacular [...] In the poems [O’Hara] was to write during the remainder of his life – from about 1954 to 1966, the year of his death – this vernacular took over, shaping his already considerable gifts toward a remarkable new poetry – both modest and monumental, with something basically useable about it – not only for poets in search of a voice of their own but for the reader who turns to poetry as a last resort in trying to juggle the contradictory components of modern life into something like a liveable space. That space, in Frank O’Hara’s case, was not only the space of New York School painting but of New York itself, that kaleidoscopic lumber-room where laws of time and space are altered (*CP* vii).

Ashbery builds an impression of O’Hara’s poetic, through the delicate interweaving of architectural semantics (“vernacular,” “modest,” “monumental,” “useable”), a sense of the spatial (“creatively messy New York environment,” “kaleidoscopic lumber-room,” “liveable space”), and a feeling for the social (“not only for poets in search of a voice of their own but for the reader who turns to poetry”). In this formulation, O’Hara has become the architect, constructing liveable spaces in which future generations might shape their poetry - and also their lives.

Even the casual reader of O’Hara would be unsurprised to encounter so architectural an account of his work: a self-styled flâneur, O’Hara’s love for the metropolis and its architectural feats characterises his poetry, providing a compositional impetus to create “works as big as cities” (*CP* 497). As he explains in his ‘Notes on *Second Avenue*’, O’Hara’s ambition was to:

keep the surface of the poem high and dry, not wet, reflective and self-conscious. Perhaps the obscurity comes in here, in the relationship between the surface and the meaning, but I like it that way since the one is the other (you have to use words) and I hope the poem to *be* the subject, not just about it (*CP* 497).

The notion of the textual surface has been a defining trope in critical work on these early ‘postmodern’ poets. From the superficiality of pop-culture-quotidian, to the creation of dazzling verbal veneers, the work of these writers has been characterised, as Geoff Ward notes, as “a materialist poetic [...] in which any metaphysical

depth to the physical surface is happily denied.”¹³ Like the canvasses of the 1950s Abstract Expressionist artists with whom they mingled, “the *surface* of the poem, must,” as Marjorie Perloff has explained, “be regarded as a field upon which the physical energies of the artist can operate, without mediation of metaphor or symbol [...] there is nothing *behind* these surfaces.”¹⁴ In spite of O’Hara’s “high and dry” facades, however, it is Ashbery who has been read as the poet *par excellence* of the postmodern surface: critics, it seems, have taken him at his word when he writes, in his triple-award winning collection *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, that “everything is surface” (*SP* 70). But, like any good work of architecture, a facade is only as good its the structure that supports it, and this Ashbery knows. In his poetry, structure is paramount, a network of dizzying constructions “all build[ing] up into something, meaningless or meaningful / As architecture” (*DDS* 285).

A commitment to surface has been one of the prevailing narratives, not only of the New York School, but of postmodernism across the arts. As Frederic Jameson writes, in *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, postmodernism is conceived, first and foremost, as “a new depthlessness.”¹⁵ He remarks “that we are sick and tired of the subjective as such in its older classical forms (which include deep time and memory) and that we want to live on the surface for a while.”¹⁶ If O’Hara opens liveable spaces, and Ashbery builds networks of architectonic structure, then it is Barbara Guest who offers a way of living on the surface, by way of her verbal claddings, woven and stitched like patchwork quilts to adorn her ‘Invisible Architecture’. With its emphasis on reality, her poetry “intrude[s] like hardware / decorating a quiet building, a tic taking / over the façade” (*FR* 229).

New York School edifice erected – with spaces, structures, and surfaces – all that remains is to locate its apertures and openings. These appear in the work of James Schuyler, whose diaristic poems are, as he himself remarked, “mostly about looking out the window.”¹⁷ Reminding his reader to “slam the parentheses” (*FE* 30), or elsewhere finding himself “locked in paren” (*DJS* 175), the architecture of Schuyler’s poetry is to

¹³ G. Ward, *Statutes of Liberty: The New York School of Poets*, (London: Palgrave, 2001), 23; 11.

¹⁴ M. Perloff, *Frank O’Hara, Poet Among Painters*, (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 23.

¹⁵ F. Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, (Durham NC.: Duke University Press, 1991), 5.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 150.

¹⁷ J. Schuyler (ed. N. Kernan), *The Diary of James Schuyler*, (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1997), 14. All subsequent quotations refer to this edition with *DJS*.

be found in an idiosyncratic use of the bracket, creating openings (and closings) with material, spatial, and social significance.

Mapping these architectural attributes on to the work of these four poets, this thesis explores the extent to which the poetry of New York School intersects with the practice of architecture. Incorporating historical context, literary and architectural theory, and close readings of both poetic and physical constructions, I suggest that poetry, like architecture, possesses the ability to engender corporeal encounters and shape utopian models of community: that both, in other words, open up “something like a liveable space.”

Architecture & Language

The story is clearly delineated; poetry and architecture are talking to each other forever.¹⁸

The relationship between poetry and architecture may not be as eternal as architect Carlos Brillembourg suggests, but it can be traced at least as far back as Vitruvius, the first to lay out a fully theorised treatise on architecture as an established practice. In *The Ten Books of Architecture*, written circa 27 BC, Vitruvius muses on the form of the cube as the basis for the room, reminding his reader that “the Greek comic poets, also, divided their plays into parts by introducing a choral song, and by this partition on the principle of the cubes, they relieve the actor’s speeches by such intermissions.”¹⁹ If Vitruvius borrowed from poetry to help define architecture then, some seven centuries later, poetry would, in turn, borrow these semantics back. By the late sixteenth century, the Italian word *stanza* – translating as chamber or room – would come to mean, in English, the partitioning of lines of verse.²⁰

Semantics are at the heart of the relationship between poetry and architecture, as John Hollander (a poet who orbited the New York School in the 1960s) notes in an essay titled ‘The Poetry of Architecture’ (1996). In addition to stanza, Hollander draws out the terms plot, frontispiece, rhythm, punning, gesture, fiction, language, vocabulary, vernacular, allusion, and quotation – all terms that

¹⁸ C. Brillembourg in D. Shapiro, ‘Poetry and Architecture, Architecture and Poetry’ in *Bomb*, (41: Fall, 1992), 20.

¹⁹ Vitruvius (trans. M. H. Morgan), *The Ten Books on Architecture*, (New York: Dover Publications, 1960), 130.

²⁰ Oxford English Dictionary.

architecture has borrowed from literature.²¹ The relationship between *Words and Buildings* has been well documented by architectural historian Adrian Forty, in his book of that name (2000). Forty contends, amid a history of contention, that “language is a necessary part of architecture,” and he traces this linguistic association from the seventeenth century onwards.²² As early as 1683, for example, J. F. Blondel expressed the belief that, “Architecture is like poetry; all ornament which is only ornament is excessive. Architecture, by the beauty of its proportions and the choice of its arrangement is sufficient unto itself.”²³ Over a century later, C. N. Ledoux would claim that “architecture is to masonry what poetry is to literature; it is the dramatic enthusiasm of the craft”; turn-of-the-century British art historian John Ruskin believed that “the architecture of a nation will be great only when it is as universally established as its language”; and modernist architect Adolf Loos claimed that “Good architecture, how something is to be built, can be written.”²⁴ Such analogies have by now become a familiar trope in architectural theory. The reason for this, Forty explains, is that “throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a recurring need in architectural circles was to establish that architecture was a liberal and not a mechanical art. The measure of a liberal art was provided by music, and particularly by poetry.”²⁵ In his essay ‘On the Analogy Between Language and Architecture’ (1820), James Elmes identifies the conscious attempt to elevate the utilitarian practice of architecture “to the honour of being enrolled in among the Fine Arts.”²⁶ Rather than seek aesthetic points of connection between language and architecture, Elmes targets the dichotomy of beauty and utility. He argues that, were utility and beauty really in opposition, “poetic embellishment should be repressed.”²⁷ Yet, since “the most obvious purpose of language is to facilitate the intercourse of mankind,” then poetry, if placed in this utility-beauty dichotomy, would itself prove to be “productive of no real service.”²⁸ Thus, as Elmes notes, “utility is in fact so vague an expression, that it would be difficult to assign to it a precise meaning; no exact

²¹ J. Hollander, ‘The Poetry of Architecture’ in *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, (49: 5: Feb., 1996), 19-21.

²² A. Forty, *Words and Buildings: A Vocabulary of Modern Architecture*, (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000), 13.

²³ *Ibid.*, 69.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 69; 76; 29.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 66.

²⁶ J. Elmes, *Annals of the Fine Arts for MDCCCXX: VOL. V*, (London: Hurst, Robinson & Co., 1820), 244.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 269-70.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

boundary can be fixed which may separate utility from superfluity, superfluity from extravagance.”²⁹ Elmes’s argument is rooted in the dismantling of established binaries in order to bring these materially variant disciplines into harmony. From Elmes onwards, the tussle between beauty and utility would continue to condition architectural discourse, and the desire to elevate the architectural through an association with the poetic continues to inform contemporary schools of architectural thought.

Such an association must have been in Charles Jencks’s mind when he wrote his seminal work *The Language of Post Modern Architecture* (1977). Explaining the difference between ‘architecture’ and ‘building’, Jencks writes that:

architecture, as a poetic art, has levels of communication that are more powerfully suggested than specified. An architecture cannot afford to name everything, spell out all its messages in a clear, denotative language. To insist that it do so would be to reduce it to a revivalist genre: building rather than architecture.³⁰

It is when building becomes *a poetic art*, when it possesses the potential for aesthetic communication, that prosaic forms of construction are transformed into *architecture*. Jencks explains that “there *are* various analogies architecture shares with language, and if we use the terms loosely, we can speak of architectural ‘words’, ‘phrases’, ‘syntax’, and ‘semantics’.”³¹ Borrowing from linguistics as a structuring device for his book, Jencks uses the above terms to draw architectural analogies and demonstrate how they can be “consciously used as communicational means.”³² He offers the following as a definition for each of these terms: by ‘words’ he means architecture’s “known units of meaning” (e.g. “doors, windows, columns, partitions, cantilevers, and so on”); by ‘syntax’, the “certain rules” according to which “a building has to stand up and be put together [...] the laws of gravity and geometry”; and for ‘semantics’, he means something like the conventions of typological style (as he puts it, a “coherent doctrine of semantics which explained which style to use on which building type”).³³ Jencks does not define ‘phrases’ (we can guess at a definition along the lines of, the combination of different architectural ‘words’) but offers, instead, the term ‘metaphor’, by which he means,

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ C. Jencks, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, (London: Academy Editions, 1991), 160.

³¹ Ibid., 39.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., 52-69.

quite straightforwardly, people's tendency "to see one building in terms of another, or in terms of a similar object [...] to compare it metaphorically to what they already know."³⁴ According to Jencks's account, then, we design, construct, and use built space according to a set of *linguistically determined* protocols, conventions, and assumptions. In other words, we need language in order to articulate, perhaps even translate architecture, to help us make sense of built space, to help us *read* sites, and to help us understand how best to use and physically negotiate them. Jencks's account is primarily a study in postmodern architecture; an architecture that "knows the syntactical rules and enjoys having them broken from time to time"³⁵ – a description that could be repurposed to define postmodern (or, late-twentieth-century avant-garde) poetry. By the middle of the twentieth century, in other words, both disciplines had a dawning sense of themselves as disruptive, capable of breaking apart and redefining the norms that had for centuries governed aesthetic practice.

Language & Architecture

In the spirit of Brillembourg's assertion, that "poetry and architecture are talking *to each other*," we should not overlook the migration of spatial terms into poetic discourse: as David Shapiro (another figure at the fringes of the New York School), notes in his essay 'Poetry and Architecture: Mistranslation and Collaboration', "Architecture and poetry do speak to each other, with neither treachery nor promiscuity, neither an academic literalism nor a delirium of mere multiplicity [...] Architecture and poetry," Shapiro suggests, "translate each other and are not lost but found in translation, in the comical mask of correspondence, conspiracy, and collaboration."³⁶

As part of this translation, then, we might note that the basic terms of poetic prosody – 'measure', 'metre', and 'feet' – have been seamlessly appropriated from the spatial lexicon. Our sense of poetic rhythm must then be spatially conditioned by virtue of these semantics. Yet, in spite of these linguistic borrowings, the relationship between the poetic and the architectural did not come fully to fruition on the literary side of the equation until the twentieth century, when language began to adopt a more materially reflexive character. Where architecture had sought to identify itself in relation to poetry, to raise itself from utility to beauty,

³⁴ Ibid., 40.

³⁵ Ibid., 63.

³⁶ D. Shapiro, 'Poetry and Architecture, Architecture and Poetry', 20.

poetry turned to architecture in an attempt to materialise itself and escape charges of (to borrow a phrase from Heidegger), “frivolous mooning and vaporizing into the unknown.”³⁷

In the opening to his 1934 lecture, ‘The Author as Producer’, Walter Benjamin reminds his audience of the way in which:

Plato deals with poets in his ideal state: he banishes them from it in the public interest. He had a high conception of the power of poetry, but he believed it harmful, superfluous—in a *perfect* community, of course. The question of the poet’s right to exist has not often, since then, been posed with the same emphasis; but today it poses itself.³⁸

For Benjamin, this question of the role of the poet surfaces in the twentieth century as widening rifts between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie place pressure on literature to respond to “living social contexts.”³⁹ The writer who toes “the correct political line,” Benjamin urges, must now be the author who understands themselves as producer: if “social conditions are, as we know, determined by conditions of production,” then it becomes necessary that the text also be determined by these same materialist conditions.⁴⁰ Benjamin’s desire to cast the author as producer exposes an urgent need to rescue poetry from Platonic charges of superfluity or ornament. Thus, he explains, “We are in the midst of a mighty recasting of literary forms, a melting down in which many of the opposites in which we have been used to think may lose their force.”⁴¹ According to Benjamin, it is to the architectural paradigm that we must look for the recasting of new forms, since, as he explains in ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’:

Architecture has always represented the prototype of a work of art the reception of which is consummated by a collectivity in a state of distraction. The laws of its reception are most instructive [...] the human need for shelter is lasting. Architecture has never been idle. Its history is more ancient than that of any other art, and its claim to being a living force has significance in every attempt to comprehend the relationship of the masses to art.⁴²

³⁷ M. Heidegger (ed. A. Hofstadter), *Poetry, Language, Thought*, (New York: Harper & Row, 2001), 211.

³⁸ W. Benjamin (trans. R. Livingstone & others), *Selected Writings, Volume 2, Part 2, 1931-1934*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts & London, England: The Belknap Press Of Harvard University Press, 1999), 768.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 769.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 771.

⁴² W. Benjamin (trans. H. Zohn), ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ in (ed. H. Arendt) *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 18.

In Benjamin's account, architecture is unique in its capacity "to comprehend the relationship of the masses to art." Yet in the past, as he explains, it was not only architecture that possessed the ability "to present an object for simultaneous collective experience,"⁴³ but poetry too. Thus, for Benjamin, the "recasting of literary forms" in the twentieth century demanded the revivification of an ancient relationship between poetry and architecture, which would find its voice (or, rather, multitude of voices) in his sprawling, unfinished work, *The Arcades Project*, described by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, in their translator's forward to the text, as "the blueprint for an unimaginably massive and labyrinthine architecture – a dream city, in effect."⁴⁴ Drafted between 1927 and 1940, *The Arcades Project* sought to capture the nature of life in urban centres through readings of "the Paris arcades – *les passages* – which [Benjamin] considered the most important architectural form of the nineteenth century."⁴⁵ A collection of loosely assembled writings – including the incorporation of quotations "from an array of nineteenth-century sources, but also from the works of key contemporaries (Marcel Proust, Paul Valery, Louis Aragon, André Breton, Georg Simmel, Ernst Bloch, Siegfried Kracauer, Theodor Adorno)" – Benjamin's text does more than simply *represent* the city.⁴⁶ Rather, as poet Stephen Collis notes, in his essay "'The Frayed Trope of Rome': Poetic architecture in Robert Duncan, Ronald Johnson, and Lisa Robertson", the "vast assemblage of quotations" that comprise *The Arcades Project*, "demonstrates the slippage between civic and textual passage."⁴⁷ The *passage* – the material structure of the iron and glass covered arcade – bleeds into the *passage(s)* of Benjamin's text, suggesting that the semantic crossovers between the textual and architectural might be *materially productive*, rather than simply metaphorical. In a sense, then, Benjamin *translates*⁴⁸ the arcade into his text, his *Passagenwerk*, as the German title has it, so that language does more than represent or reference: like the pure, exposed structure of the arcade, the text becomes self-

⁴³ Ibid., 14.

⁴⁴ W. Benjamin (trans. H. Eiland & K. McLaughlin), *The Arcades Project*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts & London, England: The Belknap Press Of Harvard University Press, 1999), ix.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., x.

⁴⁷ S. Collis, "'The Frayed Trope of Rome': Poetic Architecture in Robert Duncan, Ronald Johnson, and Lisa Robertson" in *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, Vol. 35, No. 4, a special issue: LITERATURE & ARCHITECTURE (December 2002), 148.

⁴⁸ The notion of translation was important to Benjamin, who wrote the essay 'The Task of the Translator' as an introduction to a translation of Baudelaire in 1923.

signifying, revealing its materiality and structure in order to surpass the “unfruitful antithesis of form and content.”⁴⁹

In 1971, the same year in which O’Hara’s collected poems were published, the first English translation of Martin Heidegger’s lectures on art, architecture and poetry appeared under the title *Poetry, Language, Thought*.⁵⁰ Two essays in particular from this collection would become foundational for both poetic and architectural thinking in the latter part of the twentieth century: ‘Building, Dwelling, Thinking’ and ‘... Poetically Man Dwells...’. The first of these was given as a lecture on 5th August 1951, as part of the *Darmstadt Colloquium II* on ‘Man and Space’. Here, Heidegger encouraged his audience (largely made up of architects) to think about the foundations of building. “Who gives us a standard at all by which we can take the measure of dwelling and building?” Heidegger asks; and in answer: “It is language that tells us about the nature of a thing.”⁵¹ In this lecture, Heidegger conducts his famous thought experiment on the Heidelberg Bridge. Encouraging his audience to “think, from where we are right here, of the old bridge in Heidelberg,” he explains that:

this thinking towards that location is not a mere experience inside the persons present here; rather, it belongs to the nature of our thinking *of* that bridge that *in itself* thinking gets through, persists through, the distance to that location. From this spot right here, we are there at the bridge—we are by no means at some representational content in our consciousness. From right here we may even be much nearer to that bridge and to what it makes room for than someone who uses it daily as an indifferent river crossing.⁵²

These ideas would inform a second lecture, given a few months later in the autumn of 1951, entitled ‘... Poetically Man Dwells...’. In his reading of the German poet Friedrich Hölderlin, from whose hymn, *The Ister*, the title of the lecture is taken, Heidegger claimed that “poetry, as the authentic gauging of the dimension of dwelling, is the primal form of building” – the originary model that sets that standard for all

⁴⁹ Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 770.

⁵⁰ One cannot, in good faith, read Heidegger without calling attention to his outspoken support of Naziism in the early 1930s. This biographical fact (often borne out in his work) continues to be a problem for Heidegger scholars, particularly in discussions of his thinking on dwelling, an idea closely bound up with a troubling celebration of German nationalism. However, it is also the case that one cannot write about the relationship between poetry and architecture in the twentieth century without reference to Heidegger’s theoretical work on poetry and dwelling. In the full knowledge of the contentious politics that surround him then (and of the limited extent to which his thinking actually speaks to the work of the New York School), my use of Heidegger in this thesis remains largely confined to the introduction, and as abstracted from its historical context as is critically acceptable. Rather than “poetically man dwells,” this thesis rests on “something like a liveable space,” a simile that cuts out the nationalist, racist, and even misogynist under(and over)tones that problematise Heidegger’s work.

⁵¹ Heidegger *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 144.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 54-5.

forms of construction (including the architectural).⁵³ “Poetry first causes dwelling to be dwelling. Poetry is what really lets us dwell.”⁵⁴ To dwell, then, is to build; but in order to dwell, we must already have built spaces in which to dwell. “Man is capable of such building [i.e. architectural building] only if he already builds in the sense of the poetic taking of measure. Authentic building occurs so far as there are poets, such poets as take the measure for architecture, the structure of dwelling.”⁵⁵ Heidegger’s formulation of building and dwelling, as mutually dependent on one another (we are only able to dwell through building; we can only build because we are capable of dwelling) amounts to a kind of Möbius strip or chicken-and-egg logic, in which these two activities must be forever looping back on one another. Heidegger is less concerned with the materiality of the text itself (*à la* Benjamin), than with the imaginative possibilities of poetic language as a world-building entity. Poets, Heidegger explains, are accused of “dreaming” instead of “acting,” and “What they make is merely imagined.”⁵⁶ Yet, to imagine is to produce images, and “the nature of an image is to let something be seen.”⁵⁷ The imagined thus becomes the conceptual and, therefore, “To write poetry is measure-taking, understood in the strict sense of the word, by which man first receives the measure for the breadth of his being.”⁵⁸

Both Benjamin’s and Heidegger’s approaches – in tandem with work on linguistics by contemporaneous thinkers such as Saussure, Jakobson, and Wittgenstein – would come to radically redefine our understanding of language in the twentieth century, and bring it into the sphere of the architectural. Forty, for example, echoes Heidegger’s world-building conception of language when he notes that “it is generally supposed that what is spoken or written about works of architecture is merely a tracing of them, an always less adequate reflection of their ‘reality’: yet language itself constitutes a ‘reality’, which, while not the same as that formed through the other senses, is nonetheless equivalent.”⁵⁹ Noting the importance of site and place in the development of modern and contemporary poetics, Kristen Kreider similarly maintains that

⁵³ Ibid., 224-225.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 213.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 215.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 212.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 223.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 219.

⁵⁹ Forty, *Words and Buildings*, 13.

“language is not a reflection of the world but produces reality as an effect of discourse,”⁶⁰ while M. K. Blasing has argued, specifically in relation to postmodern poetry and the work of O’Hara and Ashbery, that “if poetry has a generic and general political function it may be to show us how it constructs itself into a discourse that in turn constructs a meaningful world.”⁶¹ If poetry “constitutes a reality” or “produces reality” or “constructs a meaningful world” then it must follow that it is *poetic language* in particular that, like architecture, possesses a world-building capacity. This reinforces the feedback loop of Heidegger’s thinking, which is at the heart of the present text: that reading poetry through the prism of architecture allows us to conceive of the poetic as world-building; and that, as world-building, poetry possesses the potential to inform our culturally determined protocols for building and dwelling.

In 1958, seven years after Heidegger’s lectures were first given, Gaston Bachelard published *The Poetics of Space* (first translated into English in 1964). Blending an assemblage of quotations with a poetical musing on imagined space, Bachelard’s project is one of mapping and phenomenologically reconstructing the home as “an oneiric house, a house of dream-memory.”⁶² In other words, Bachelard translates the physical place of the *house* into the metaphysical space of the poetic, where it becomes *home*, as I explain in chapter three on Barbara Guest. In doing so, Bachelard explores the extent to which thought is conditioned by spatial experience. “Philosophers, when confronted with outside and inside, think in terms of being and non-being,” he writes. “Thus profound metaphysics is rooted in an implicit geometry which – whether we will or no – confers spatiality on thought.”⁶³ Metaphysical thought is dictated by a sense of the spatial, by the assumption that the traditional dichotomy of ‘outside and inside’ is underpinned by geometrical truism. Yet, as Bachelard elucidates, this opposition is spurious, posing:

problems of metaphysical anthropology that are not symmetrical. To make inside concrete and outside vast is the first task, the first problem, it would seem, of an anthropology of the imagination. But between concrete and vast the opposition is not a true one. At the slightest touch, asymmetry appears.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ K. Kreider, *Poetics and Place: The Architecture of Sign, Subjects and Site*, (London & New York: I. B. Taurus, 2014), 19.

⁶¹ M. K. Blasing, *Politics and Form in Postmodern Poetry*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 19.

⁶² G. Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 15.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 212.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 215.

In other words, as Bachelard illustrates, we think according to the spaces that we experience in the ‘real’ world, but our sense of how the real world exists spatially, derives, in the first place, from our minds: another feedback loop of building and dwelling, language and space, which exposes the transformative potential of placing experimental architectural and poetic practices in dialogue with one another.

The work of Benjamin, Heidegger, and Bachelard (among others), paved the way for the structuralist, poststructuralist, and postmodernist thinking that would come to define the latter part of the twentieth century at around the same time that the New York School were coming to prominence. In 1967, Jaques Derrida would publish his three, seminal works, *Speech and Phenomena*, *Of Grammatology*, and *Writing and Difference*. Borrowing from architectural and spatial terminology, Derrida’s “poststructuralist” project involved “deconstructing” the text, testing its “borders,” “decentering” the authority of the logos, and making the infamous claim that “there is no outside the text” (all terms with architectural application).⁶⁵ In 1986, Derrida turned his attention explicitly to the architectural, in an essay on the work of postmodern architect Bernard Tschumi titled, ‘No (Point of) Madness—Maintaining Architecture’. Here, Derrida would explore points of intersection between writing and architecture, arguing that “*architecture must have a meaning*, it must *present* this meaning, and hence *signify*. The signifying or symbolic value of this meaning must command the structure and syntax, the form and function of architecture” and, following Heidegger, “the experience of meaning must be the *dwelling*.”⁶⁶ Derrida was one among a number of literary and critical thinkers who would turn to the architectural paradigm, including: Jürgen Habermas (*The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 1962); Henri Lefebvre (*The Production of Space*, 1974); Roland Barthes (‘The Eiffel Tower’, 1979); Jean Francois-Lyotard (‘*Domus* and the Megalopolis’, 1991); Hélène Cixous, (*Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, 1993); Frederic Jameson (‘Architecture and the Critique of Ideology’, 1982; ‘The Brick and the Balloon: Architecture, Idealism and Land Speculation’, 1998); Jean Baudrillard (*Mass Identity Architecture: Architectural Writings of Jean Baudrillard*, 2006); Michel Foucault (*Space, Knowledge, Power*, 2007); and Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (*Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 1977).⁶⁷ These thinkers were the architects of postmodern critical theory and their *architextual* work has provided the essential foundations on which I build the present text. Yet the

⁶⁵ J. Derrida (tr. G. C. Spivak), *Of Grammatology*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 159.

⁶⁶ J. Derrida (tr. K. Linker), ‘No (Point of) Madness—Maintaining Architecture’ in (eds. P. Kamuf & E. G. Rottenberg) *Psyche: Inventions of the Other Vol. II*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), 91.

⁶⁷ For more on the relationship between architecture and literary-critical thinkers, see: N. Leach (ed.), *Rethinking Architecture*, (London & New York: Routledge, 1997).

chapters that follow do not dwell heavily on (or in) the work of these (largely male) writers. Rather, I develop a critical approach that incorporates the corporeal (often feminist) modes of thinking that developed alongside, and in response to, these poststructuralist approaches – and that offer a framework better suited to the body-poetic of the New York School.

In 1964, Susan Sontag was already wary of the post-Freudian trend in suspicious, hermeneutic models of critique. In her seminal essay ‘Against Interpretation’, Sontag writes that “Interpretation, based on the highly dubious theory that a work of art is composed of items of content, violates art. It makes art into an article for use, for arrangement into a mental scheme of categories.”⁶⁸ Instead, Sontag calls for models of interpretation that “reveal the sensuous surface of art without mucking about in it,”⁶⁹ and she posits that “in place of hermeneutics we need an erotics of art.”⁷⁰ Sontag’s thinking would be echoed by Roland Barthes almost a decade later, in his 1973 book *The Pleasure of the Text*, where he celebrates the “pulsional incidents, the language lined with flesh, a text where we can hear the grain of the throat, the patina of consonants, the voluptuousness of vowels, a whole carnal stereophony: the articulation of the body, of the tongue, not that of meaning, of language.”⁷¹ These corporeal and sensuous approaches to the text share with strands of feminist literary theory that developed contiguously with poststructuralism (Julia Kristeva; Hélène Cixous; Luce Irigaray); informed later trends in corporeal feminist thinking (Donna Haraway; Sara Ahmed; Rosie Braidotti; Judith Butler; Elizabeth Grosz); and have inspired recent work that explicitly draws on Sontag in rejecting a hermeneutical reading in favour of ‘surface approaches’ to the text. Methods of ‘surface reading’ have been adopted by a number of contemporary literary scholars (Heather Love; Paul K. Saint-Amor; Rita Felski; Toril Moi; Caroline Levine; Jonathan Kramnick; Anahid Neressian; Anne Orford; Franco Moretti) but are perhaps best articulated in Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus’s introduction to their co-edited, 2009 special issue of the multidisciplinary journal *Representations*. According to Best and Marcus, surface approaches might be broad and diverse, but are united in challenging (without altogether dismantling) the paranoid hermeneutics that have prevailed over literary studies for the last half a century or more. Their approach thus celebrates the existence of the surface as that which “is evident, perceptible, apprehensible in texts,” and

⁶⁸ S. Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, (London: Penguin, 2009), 16.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁷¹ R. Barthes (trans. R. Miller), *The Pleasure of the Text*, (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, Inc., 1998), 66-67.

as something that “insists on being looked *at* rather than that which we must train ourselves to see *through*.”⁷² Best and Marcus’s return to the surface of the text will be important to this thesis, since it encourages critics to disrupt the entrenched binary of modernist depth and postmodern surface that has crystallised, as I noted at the start of this introduction, since the publication of Jameson’s *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. After Jameson (a figure whom Best and Marcus explicitly tackle for his suggestion that “the critic [is] the real author; the critic does not literally produce the text, but does produce whatever in it is related to truth”⁷³), the separation of depth and surface along these historical and aesthetic lines have become entrenched; and the poets of the New York School find themselves positioned all too often in the latter camp. This thesis thus follows Best and Marcus in remaining haunted by the spectres⁷⁴ of Heidegger, Bachelard, Derrida, *et al*, while simultaneously working to revise many of the assumptions that their work has engendered, through an attention to the histories, theories, and aesthetics of twentieth century architectural design.

The brief histories that I have sketched – of architecture’s relationship to language, and of literary developments in the twentieth century – attest to a now-established borrowing of semantics and paradigms; yet they tell us little about the relationship between poetry and architecture *as aesthetic practices* in the twentieth century. According to Collis, “the architectural paradigm is crucial to the understanding of twentieth-century avant-garde poetics.”⁷⁵ Collis traces a “trajectory” with “the high archival modernism of Pound at one end and the formal investigations of language poetry at the other.”⁷⁶ At one end of this lineage, he details “Joyce’s Dublin and Woolf’s London, Eliot’s ‘unreal city’, Pound, whose own dream city is pursued throughout ‘The Cantos’, and even H.D., whose city represents the artistic collective under fire from the materialism and violence of modernity.”⁷⁷ Such representations of the city would give way to “an increasing interest in the

⁷² S. Best & S. Marcus, ‘An Introduction to Surface Reading’ in *Representations*, (108: 1: 2009), 9.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁷⁴ In my use of this term, I allude to Derrida’s *Spectres of Marx* (1993).

⁷⁵ Collis, ‘Frayed Trope’, 144.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 146.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 147.

material out of which poetry is made,” in the latter part of the twentieth century, coming to fruition in the work of the language poets in the late 1960 and 70s.⁷⁸

One of the most important figures to appear in the midst of this trajectory was the Black Mountain Poet, Charles Olson. Often credited with coining the term ‘postmodern’ in a poetic context,⁷⁹ Olson was instrumental in paving the way for the approaches that would come to define the American poetics of the postwar period. A decade or more older than the New York School poets, but only a few years ahead in terms of publication (his first book, *Call Me Ishmael* was published in 1947; ‘Projective Verse’ in 1950), his relationship with these poets was, aesthetically speaking, fraught: as I discuss in chapter one of this thesis, the lightness of touch that characterised the New York School sometimes took the form of a self-styled provocation of the bombastic sincerity of Olson’s writing. Nevertheless, Olson remains an important figure in the development of an embodied materialist poetics, and, in this respect, his relationship to the New York School demands critical attention.

Though rarely explicitly architectural, Olson’s work combined a conception of space with a related interest in materiality and corporeality. In the opening of his seminal manifesto ‘Projective Verse’ (1950), Olson explicitly advocates a use-based approach to poetry: “Verse now, 1950, if it is to go ahead, if it is to be of essential use, must, I take it, catch up and put into itself certain laws and possibilities of the breath, of the breathing of the man who writes as well as of his listenings.”⁸⁰ Arguing, through Robert Creeley (and in an echo of Benjamin’s “unfruitful antithesis of form and content”) that “FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT,” Olson explored the poetic possibilities of liberating graphic signs from their grammatical contexts, transforming punctuation marks and measured spacings into quasi-musical notations through the use of the typewriter:

It is the advantage of the typewriter that, due to its rigidity and its space precisions, it can, for a poet, indicate exactly the breath, the pauses, the suspensions even of syllables, the juxtapositions even of parts of phrases, which he intends. For the first time the poet has the stave and the bar a musician has had.⁸¹

⁷⁸ Ibid., 160.

⁷⁹ For more on Olson and the term ‘postmodern’, see: P. Hoover, *Postmodern American Poetry*, (New York; London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2013), xxix.

⁸⁰ C. Olson, ‘Projective Verse’ in Hoover, *Postmodern American Poetry*, 863.

⁸¹ Ibid., 868.

Olson's work fostered a material approach to poetic language that was grounded in a conception of the *spatial*: he called his projective method "COMPOSITION BY FIELD,"⁸² and elsewhere noted that "I take SPACE to be the central fact to man born in America, from Folsom cave to now."⁸³ Combining a deep-rooted American fascination with space, with the material capabilities of the typewriter, Olson's poetic thus mirrors the traits that mark out architectural construction. Thus, as Ian Davidson suggests, in his book *Ideas of Space in Contemporary Poetry*, the page, after Olson, "becomes a 'construction-site' of the poem" and "it is words and their syntactical relationships that are the building blocks of the poem, and they will refer to the 'architecture' of the poem."⁸⁴

The New York School

In the years after 1945, New York City saw an unparalleled surge in architectural construction. The first city to be christened a "Megalopolis," New York had been "given a building boom the likes of which [the city] had not seen since the 1920s and which no other American city was then undergoing," as Robert Stern, Thomas Mellins, and David Fishman note in their book *New York 1960: Architecture and Urbanism between the Second World War and the Bicentennial*.⁸⁵ By the 1950s, "New York, and especially Manhattan was about to enter a new phase of prosperity that was unique in American cities at the time: it would flourish as an office center, its retailing would continue to prosper and it would grow as an upmarket residential center as well."⁸⁶ Emigrés from Europe would bring with them the architecture of the Bauhaus, which would be translated, in the New York City landscape, into the architecture of corporate America. As Robert Bennett notes, in his book *Deconstructing Post-WWII New York City: The Literature, Art, Jazz, and Architecture of an Emerging Global Capital*:

⁸² Ibid., 864.

⁸³ C. Olson, *Call Me Ishamel*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1967), 15.

⁸⁴ I. Davidson, *Ideas of Space in Contemporary Poetry*, (Basingstoke & New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 16, 22.

⁸⁵ R. A. M. Stern, T. Mellins & D. Fishman, *New York 1960: Architecture and Urbanism Between the Second World War and the Bicentennial*, (New York: Monacelli Press, 1995), 27.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

From Manhattan's urban core of International Style corporate skyscrapers and concrete-slab housing projects to the farthest reaches of the city's sprawling suburbs, architects and urban planners extended neo-Corbusian straight lines, right angles, and geometrical grids across the surface of post-WWII New York City.⁸⁷

In 1952, Le Corbusier and Oscar Neimeyer's UN Building was unveiled, setting the stage for a stream of glass-curtain-walled office blocks that would follow like dominoes in its wake, including, most notably, Phillip Johnson's Lever House, also in 1952, and Mies van der Rohe's Seagram Building in 1958 (fig. 14).

Yet by the late 1950s, the trend for international modernism was already beginning to wane. In 1959



fig. 14 Mies van der Rohe, The Seagram Building, 1958

Frank Lloyd Wright completed his only contribution to the New York City topography, and perhaps his most iconic building, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. Although conventionally categorised as a late modernist work of architecture, Wright's Guggenheim signalled the beginning of a shift away from the homogenous, glassy designs of van der Rohe and Johnson, towards something more organic and

⁸⁷ R. Bennett, *Deconstructing Post-WWII New York City: The Literature, Art, Jazz, and Architecture of an Emerging Global Capital*, (New York: Routledge, 2011), 6.

idiosyncratic, which would gradually evolve into the playful postmodernism of the 1970s. Furthermore, in addition to the changing aesthetics of architectural design, a war was raging throughout the 1950s and 60s over questions of urban planning in New York City. Dubbed the “master builder” of mid-twentieth century New York City, construction coordinator Robert Moses toppled plans for the decentralisation of the city in the 1940s, advocating instead the spread of homogeneous office blocks and cross-city expressways.⁸⁸ Moses, however, was met with resistance, most notably in the form of author and activist Jane Jacobs, whose 1961 book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, was positioned as “an attack on the current city planning and rebuilding.” It is also, she adds, “and mostly, an attempt to introduce new principles of city planning and rebuilding,” including:

what kinds of city streets are safe and what kinds are not; why some city parks are marvellous and others are vice traps and death traps; why some slums stay slums and other slums regenerate themselves even against financial and official opposition; what makes downtowns shift their centres; what, if anything, is a city neighbourhood, and what jobs, if any, neighbourhoods in great cities do.⁸⁹

“In short,” Jacobs writes, “I shall be writing about how cities work in real life, because this is the only way to learn what principles of planning and what practices in rebuilding can promote social and economic vitality in cities, and what practices and principles will deaden these attributes.” Jacobs thus emphasises the importance of community and sociality in the design of architecture and urban planning and, in so doing, is explicit in her condemnation of “New York’s Robert Moses,” whom she blames for engendering an attitude among generations of younger architects and planners who feel they “should accept, *on the grounds that they must be ‘modern’ in their thinking*, conceptions about cities and traffic, which are not only unworkable, but also to which nothing new of any significance has been added since their fathers were children.”⁹⁰ In other words, Jacobs reminds us that a shift away from the tenets of modernist architecture and urban design was becoming widespread and well-documented in 1960s New York City.

When Stephen Collis claims that “the architectural paradigm is crucial to the understanding of twentieth-century avant-garde poetics,” he thus captures not only the growing material and spatial self-awareness of poetry in twentieth-century avant-garde practices, but also the shifts (technological, stylistic) in

⁸⁸ For more on Moses and the development of New York City, see: Stern et al., *New York 1960*, 61-133.

⁸⁹ J. Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, (New York: Vintage Books, Random House, 2016). 3-4.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 371.

architectural production, as well as developments in critical and cultural thought, social politics, and economic modes. This is the backdrop against which Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery, Barbara Guest, and James Schuyler emerged as the so-called 'New York School'. Writing and publishing from the early 1950s onwards, these poets inhabit a defining cultural moment in the history of twentieth-century aesthetics: like the architectural gap that was opening up around them, between the last gasp of modernism and the birth of postmodernism (so-called), these poets also sought to carve out a lyric voice that looked to the past while speaking to the future.

The term 'New York School' was coined in 1961 by John Bernard Myers, director of the Tibor de Nagy Gallery, to parallel the established New York School of painting.⁹¹ As John Ashbery noted, "the idea was that, since everybody was talking about the New York School of painting, if [Myers] created a New York School of poets then they would automatically be considered important."⁹² Yet, as countless critics have noted, the moniker is more a misnomer, pitted with gaps, slips, and incongruities. Consensus continues to vary, for example, on: the 'school's membership'; its periodisation; the existence of two, or even three, successive generations; and even on the existence of a school at all. As Ashbery elsewhere admitted: "I am not sure exactly what the name designates."⁹³ For the purpose of this thesis, I take the New York School to consist of Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery, Barbara Guest, and James Schuyler. Others have omitted Guest and included Kenneth Koch, but I opt for the reverse given that Guest's work is more architecturally sensitive, more theoretically challenging, often more lyrically innovative, and more in need of critical redress. Maggie Nelson's 2007 study, *Women, the New York School, and Other True Abstractions*, is one of the first to substitute Koch for Guest and, as the title of the book announces, there is an obvious revisionary agenda for this. In a footnote, Nelson writes that "the exclusion of Koch's work from this discussion may seem wilfully ahistorical" and she is it pains to point out that this is not intended to "diminish Koch's remarkable writing"⁹⁴ but, rather, to reframe the traditionally masculinist readings of the New York School. With Nelson, this thesis also hopes to re-situate the work of Guest, but my decision to remove Koch in her favour is also informed by these poets'

⁹¹ D. Lehman, *The Last Avant-Garde: The Making of the New York School of Poets*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1999), 20.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ J. Ashbery, 'The New York School of Poets' in (ed. E. Richie) *Selected Prose*, (Manchester: Carcanet, 2004), 113.

⁹⁴ M. Nelson, *Women, the New York School, and Other True Abstractions*, (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2007), 232: fn2.

proximity to the art world; a proximity that extends to a poetic interest in the architectural, which remains largely absent from Koch's work.

Almost united by geography, the New York School does not even quite conform to its name: as David Lehman has noted, these poets “were born elsewhere, went to college elsewhere, and contrived – all except Frank O’Hara – to abandon New York City for long stretches in Europe.”⁹⁵ Nevertheless, Lehman concedes, “something of New York’s metropolitan energy and sass made its way into their writing,” and this, in large part, explains my rationale for retaining the term.⁹⁶ That the New York School poets – by their very name – are defined by a specific metropolitan space is a reminder that the intellectual and artistic breeding ground of mid-century New York City⁹⁷ also provided the backdrop to Barbara Guest’s “Invisible Architecture”⁹⁸ to John Ashbery’s suggestion of “something like a liveable space”; to O’Hara’s drive to make “works as big as cities”; and to James Schuyler’s admission that “I love architecture more than anything” (*MP* 277).

Almost all scholarship on the New York School has tended to place these poets in their urban context, incorporating the work of spatial theorists such as Henri Lefebvre, Doreen Massey, and Elizabeth Grosz, as well as urban theorists Jane Jacobs and Robert Moses,⁹⁹ though little has been written on their relationship to architecture as a discipline. Geoff Ward’s, *Statutes of Liberty: The New York School of Poets* (1993), remains the most theoretical in its approach, largely eschewing biography in favour of deconstructivist readings of the poems. Perhaps more than any other scholar, Ward makes use of architectural analogy, identifying resemblances between these poems and contemporaneous architecture (midtown skyscrapers; the Centre Georges Pompidou; vernacular brownstones, etc). The present research picks up where these passing analogies leave off, seeking to build these shared points of connection into a bridge between these two disciplines.

⁹⁵ Lehman, *The Last Avant-Garde*, 19-20.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ Though in fact, the scope of architectural interest in this thesis will be broader than New York City; it also thinks about the architectures of Europe that were so important to these poets.

⁹⁸ Guest, *Forces of Imagination*, 18.

⁹⁹ See: L. Shaw, *Frank O’Hara: The Poetics of Coterie*, (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2006); M. Nelson, *Women, the New York School, and Other True Abstractions*, (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2007); H. Smith, *Hyperscapes in the Poetry of Frank O’Hara: Difference / Homosexuality / Topography*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000).

Much contemporary critical work on the New York School has also been indebted to David Lehman's defining anthology, *The Last Avant-Garde* (1998), which offers a portrait of these poets that is as much biographical as it is critical. In his vivid account, Lehman paints in the architectural backdrop, noting where these poets lived and worked and touching on the ways these urban spaces may have impacted the poetry they produced. This approach has been followed by critics such as Terrence Diggory and Daniel Kane, who take a historical materialist approach in their readings of the New York School by mapping the lives and works of these poets on to the geographical spaces in which they lived and worked.¹⁰⁰

Since the publication of Marjorie Perloff's *Frank O'Hara Poet Among Painters* in 1977, numerous scholars have placed these poets into their artistic milieu. Perhaps most notably, Lytle Shaw's *Frank O'Hara: The Poetics of Coterie* (2006) has redefined the pejorative term in order to "open up a kind of thick description of O'Hara's dialog with the social, literary, and artistic worlds of the 1950s and 1960s."¹⁰¹ Maggie Nelson's *Women, the New York School and Other True Abstractions* (2007) seeks to address the gendered gaps that have accrued in New York School scholarship, and "though [her] study is primarily concerned with literature," she notes at the outset that "it would be a tremendous oversight not to explore, however briefly, the accomplishments of female Abstract Expressionist painters of the period"; while Mark Silverberg's *The New York School Poets and the Neo-Avant-Garde* (2010) tracks the work of these poets against New York's evolving art scenes, from Abstract Expressionism, through Pop Art, Conceptual Art, Happenings, and other avant-garde movements.¹⁰² Yet the emphasis that these critics have placed on the cross-pollination between the poets and painters of the period, forever enshrined in Myers' *nom de plume*, has had the unfortunate effect of obscuring other interdisciplinary connections. As Yasmine Shamma notes, in *Spatial Poetics: Second Generation New York School Poetry* (2018), "While the critical tendency to situate New York School poetry within a painterly tradition has helpfully provided a lineage offering chronology and placement, the result is a body of criticism that moves away from the contours of the poems produced."¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ See: T. Diggory, *Encyclopedia of the New York School Poets (Second Edition)*, (New York: Facts on File, 2010); D. Kane, *All Poets Welcome: The Lower East Side Poetry Scene in the 1960s*, (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 2003).

¹⁰¹ Shaw, *Poetics of Coterie*, 11.

¹⁰² M. Silverberg, *The New York School Poets and the Neo-Avant-Garde: Between Radical Art and Radical Chic*, (Farnham, UK & Burlington, USA: Ashgate, 2010).

¹⁰³ Y. Shamma, *Spatial Poetics: Second Generation New York School Poetry*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 23.

Shamma is the most recent in a short line of critics who have interrogated the work of the New York School under a more explicitly architectural lens (after Robert Bennett's 2003 book, *Deconstructing Post-WWII New York City: The Literature, Art, Jazz, and Architecture of an Emerging Global Capital*; Olivier Brossard's 2009 essay "The / profile of a city / exploding": Frank O'Hara's Aesthetics of Shock'; and Keegan Cook Finberg's 2016 essay 'Frank O'Hara rebuilds the Seagram Building: a radical poetry of event', all of which I discuss in chapter one). Shamma's *Spatial Poetics* explores the "readable role the space of writing has on the shape of writing."¹⁰⁴ Eschewing "the influence of Manhattan's external landscape, skyscrapers, and grid," Shamma's study of the Second Generation of New York School poets pays close attention to the "architecture of small spaces," suggesting that these poets' works "bear imprints of the rooms from which they were written."¹⁰⁵ "New York School pages," she writes, "are riddled with the tensions of city life, as syntax, style, and form are manipulated in their formally responsive constructions, poetically rendering urban density."¹⁰⁶ Shamma's work, published two years after I began this thesis, is the closest to my own in its approach: with its explicit interest in the "architectonics" of the poem, Shamma incorporates the work of Bachelard and Heidegger, Jane Jacobs and Henri Lefebvre. Yet, as she notes in her introduction, the book remains focused through "the trifocal lens of formal criticism, ecocriticism, and urban theory." In the present work, I substitute *architectural* theory and practice for ecocriticism and urban theory.

I am indebted to the work of these scholars; the present research understands itself as a construction built upon their amply laid foundations. Indeed, the emergence of Shamma's (and Finberg's) work in the years since I began my own research is evidence of the fact that this disciplinary overlap is timely, perhaps even urgent, for suggesting new engagements with the New York School and with the lyric form more generally. Yet, where all of these scholars have focused on urbanism and on the city, my research thinks about buildings themselves and about the discipline of architecture. Furthermore, where these scholars are concerned with thinking about the extent to which real-world sites and spaces have made their way *into the poetry* or else have been mapped *on to* it, I am interested in thinking about how poetry and architecture *speak to one another*. My research therefore extends these discussions by shifting the focus from the application of urban,

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 17.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 16, 5.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 18.

spatial and social theory on close readings of the poems, to a *discursive* disciplinary investigation, which also explores the extent to which these poems speak back to the experience of building and dwelling in physical space.

Critical Approaches

In 1959, Frank O'Hara published 'Personism', his "sly parody" (according to Marjorie Perloff) of Olson's 'Projective Verse'.¹⁰⁷ O'Hara writes that:

Abstraction (in poetry, not painting) involves personal removal by the poet. For instance, the decision between 'the nostalgia *of* the infinite' and 'the nostalgia *for* the infinite' defines an attitude towards a degree of abstraction. The nostalgia *of* the infinite representing the greater degree of abstraction, removal, and negative capability (as in Keats and Mallarmé) (*CP* 498).

The syntactic formulation that O'Hara rejects – "the *x* of the *y*" – is that which has so often brought poetry and architecture into union: Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* remains the definitive example, but earlier texts include Ruskin's *The Poetry of Architecture*; while contemporary work, such as Anthony C. Antoniades's *Poetics of Architecture: Theory of Design* (1990) attest to how firmly this phraseology has stuck. Yet, while Bachelard's text has been transformative in drawing these disparate disciplines together, it has also, paradoxically, played a role in estranging them: his approach dematerialises architecture by placing it purely into the poetic imagination, while simultaneously reducing the poetic to "something comparable to poetry in its beauty or emotional impact; a poetic quality of beauty and intensity of emotion; the poetic quality *of* something," as one OED definition for the term "poetry" tautologically puts it, neatly cutting *language* out of discussion altogether.¹⁰⁸ This is the charge from which O'Hara rescues poetry. He explains that "Personism, a movement which I recently founded and which nobody knows about, interests me a great deal, being so totally opposed to this kind of abstract removal that it is verging on a true abstraction for the first time, really, in the history of poetry" (*CP* 498). What this "true abstraction" amounts to, in O'Hara's work, is the abstraction of abstraction, a kind of negative formula that works to counter abstraction altogether. In fact,

¹⁰⁷ Perloff, *Poet Among Painters*, 16.

¹⁰⁸ Shaw also notes the abstraction of the term *poetic* in art historical writing: "always uncoupled from any actual examples of poetry (modern or contemporary), the word indicates a straying from the path of critical self-reflexivity." *Poetics of Coterie*, 14.

the triumph of 'Personism', as O'Hara understands it, is that it places "the poem squarely between the poet and the person [...] the poem is at last between two persons instead of two pages." Like Benjamin's socially attuned "mighty process of recasting," which melted down oppositions including "the distinction between author and reader,"¹⁰⁹ O'Hara's abstraction of abstraction saves poetry from the secondary status of designating the dreamy "poetic quality of something" else, by making it concrete through a commitment to the social and, like Olson before him, the corporeal, as I discuss in chapter one.

Contemporary Canadian poet Lisa Robertson has been a key figure for my thinking on the relationship between the architectural and the poetic in this social and corporeal capacity. Yet, it is worth noting that, sharing neither a history (active from 1991-present), nor a geography (born in Toronto, lived in Vancouver, and currently lives in France), nor a discernible political or aesthetic affiliation with the New York School, Robertson might seem an odd critical fit with the poetic focus of this thesis. Robertson belongs, loosely, to the Kootenay School of Writing, a group that mirrors the New York School with its "misleading" name. As Andrew Klobuchar and Michael Barnholden write in the introduction to their edited collection *Writing Class: The Kootenay School of Writing Anthology*, "it is not in the Kootenays, it is not a school, and it does not teach writing (at least, not in the ordinary sense)."¹¹⁰ Emerging out of the Canadian political climate of the 1980s, the poetry of the Kootenay School responded, largely, to the neoliberal policies of Margaret Thatcher's and Ronald Reagan's governments in the UK and USA, and was thus explicitly class conscious and politically engaged in ways that the New York School were not.¹¹¹ Nevertheless, the Kootenay School does share more than a misnomer with the New York School: its countercultural, 1960s roots were informed by Warren Tallman, an early influence who coedited *The Poetics of the New American Poetry* with Donald Allen (a follow-up to Allen's influential *The New American Poetry* (1960), which included the work of O'Hara, Ashbery, Guest and Schuyler).¹¹² Furthermore, Klobuchar and Banrholden's descriptions of the Kootenay School recall many of the spatial and social contexts of the New York School: like the downtown homes and studios

¹⁰⁹ Benjamin, 'The Author as Producer', 772.

¹¹⁰ A. Klobuchar & M. Barnholden, *Writing Class: The Kootenay School of Writing Anthology*, (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1999), 1.

¹¹¹ In fact, as Maggie Nelson notes, the New York School have been typified by a "not caring" apolitical stance." *True Abstractions*, 69.

¹¹² Klobuchar & Barnholden, *Writing Class*, 19-20.

of New York poets, for example, the spaces occupied by the Kootenay School “have always been small, the furniture used and in constant need of repair. Every address it has held has been low-rent and at a considerable distance from the city’s better neighbourhoods”; and, like O’Hara’s “liveable space,” the Kootenay School’s “primary aim was to develop an open space where writers can develop and direct their own work outside all mainstream cultural institutions.”¹¹³ Perhaps most significantly, the Kootenay School from which Robertson emerged was founded on “friendship and a common perspective on poetry”, “a critical sense of language itself as a prime constituent of community in general,” and a strong awareness “of the complex interdependence between art and ideology.”¹¹⁴

It is in this last point that Robertson’s work offers itself as a critical framework for reading the New York School. Like Ashbery and Guest, Robertson occupies a fluid space between poetry, art, and criticism. Her hybrid writing style seeks to collapse genres and disciplines, working at the intersection of architecture and poetry perhaps more convincingly than any other contemporary poet-critic: this is why Collis has positioned her as a key figure in “Twentieth-century poetry’s architectural turn” with its attempt to “incorporate or create a ‘space’/locus for the social/communal in the apparently anti-social realm of the poem.”¹¹⁵ For Robertson, as for the poets of the New York School before her, “The poem as city, or as public architecture, seeks to be the poem as polis.”¹¹⁶ Robertson’s two collections of essays – *Occasional Work and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture* (2011) and *Nilling* (2012) – capture her seamless blend of the poetic and the architectural in a lyrical-critical prose style that reveals the necessity for new forms of criticism. Asking how we figure ourselves within communities in relation to material practices of writing and reading, Robertson explores the ways in which this figuration might be an *embodied* one. Her work on scaffolding, ornament, and surface is particularly pertinent to my chapter on Guest, but her ideas speak to all of the New York School poets.

The term ‘vernacular’ is at the heart of Robertson’s thinking; a term that Ashbery also notes as key to the development of O’Hara’s poetic (“a vernacular corresponding to the creatively messy New York environment”); and one that occupies a space in both architectural and poetic discourse. Robertson writes

¹¹³ Ibid., 1; 5.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 4; 5; 2.

¹¹⁵ Collis, ‘The Frayed Trope of Rome’, 147.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

that the poem “act[s] as shelter to a gestured vernacular”¹¹⁷ and that it “transforms that vernacular to a prosodic gift.” Robertson's conception of the vernacular is rooted in a notion of language as originating from, and being bound to, the *body* (in the tradition of Sontag). It is not language *per se* (not, for example, language when it has “a contained and centrally monitored instrumental value”¹¹⁸) that is of social significance, but language as a “*verbal event*,” language with its “collective and many-*bodied* origins,” language as “shaped *speaking*” which “carries the *breath* of multiple temporalities into the present [all my emph.]”¹¹⁹ Like Heidegger,¹²⁰ Robertson treats this poetic language as key to the transformation from human animal to social agent: “in poems and through vernaculars, citizens begin themselves.”¹²¹ It is when this beginning occurs, Robertson continues, that we can use spoken language to shape the world: “conversations are enlivened by profoundly ancient and constantly reinventing protocols – protocols we enliven, figure and transform with our bodies and their words.”¹²² Robertson is not definitive about the particulars of these protocols but, given her interest in architecture, we might infer the inclusion of our embodied interactions with built space. The political potential of poetic language therefore lies in its capacity to *contain* or to *convey* the corporeal within the vernacular architectural typology of the “shelter.” Robertson's work on the vernacular is thus crucial to this thesis, since it recognises not only the corporeal and social quality of spoken (poetic) language, but also because it identifies it in explicit relation to architectural forms.

Yet, if the architectural paradigm is important to Robertson's work on the lyric, it is not because she understands these forms as possessing some inherent or even unique connection. Rather, her interest lies in the *mediating* potentiality of both: poetry and architecture as capable of *housing* people, voices, bodies, events – as well as *other art forms*, a notion that is important to this thesis. The New York School, as I have noted, have often been read in terms of their relation to painting, though their work (and personal lives) also betray strong kinships with dance, music, film, television, and sculpture. By turning to architecture as a lens through which to focus the New York School, this thesis does not, therefore, overlook, or create a hierarchy among, the other

¹¹⁷ L. Robertson, *Nilling*, (Toronto: Bookthug, 2012), 83.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 78.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 73-87.

¹²⁰ Though Robertson follows the work of Hannah Arendt, rather than Martin Heidegger.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 84.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 73.

art forms with which their poetry is so often in dialogue. Rather, it figures architecture as something that, like poetry, might mediate other art forms; a “relational ontology,” to borrow the term from architectural theorist Albena Yaneva, whose significance inheres “not in the artefact, but in the way it acts and connects to other objects and people in a related way.”

Throughout this introduction, I have discussed “architecture” without advancing a definitive definition. The term “architecture,” as a glance at its dictionary definition attests, is large, it contains multitudes¹²³: it is “both *abstract* and *concrete*”; it refers to the *process* of building, as well as to the *theory* that underlies this process, as well as to the *completed work*—the building. Architecture is both “art” and “science,” it is at once a “style” and an “action,” a “method” or “set of rules” as well as “construction or structure generally.”¹²⁴ When we speak about ‘architecture’, then, we are never straightforwardly speaking about a building, but must necessarily be speaking of the theory, the process, the art, the science, the action, the style, the method, the concrete and the abstract. I want to keep all of these various definitions alive in this thesis, which looks at architecture across historical, geographical, aesthetic, and practical contexts. Yet, ultimately, I take architecture to be something that melds the physical and the conceptual, in its ability to transform corporeal engagements into social encounters. In this, I follow the work, not only of Yaneva, but of Bill Hillier and Julienne Hanson who note, in their book *The Social Logic of Space*, that though architecture is a “physical object” like “other artefacts,” it is its social function that distinguishes it among the arts: “It is this ordering of space that is the *purpose* of the building” and “the ordering of space in buildings is really about the ordering of relations between people.”¹²⁵ In this formulation, architecture transcends its aesthetic status – its abstraction – by virtue of its purpose, its capacity to shape society: “Through the ways in which buildings, individually and collectively, create and order space, we are able to recognise society: that it exists and has a certain form.”¹²⁶ If architecture is fundamentally social and corporeal, I am, in the end, less concerned with the idea of fixed monumentality and more committed to a notion of the fluid, the changeable, and the

¹²³ A paraphrasing of: W. Whitman, ‘Song of Myself’ in ed. Francis Murray, *Walt Whitman The Complete Poems* (London: Penguin Classics, 2004) 123.

¹²⁴ Oxford English Dictionary.

¹²⁵ B. Hillier & J. Hanson, *The Social Logic of Space*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 1.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, Note also that the strenuous work of Elmes, to elevate architecture from utility to beauty, has been reversed: an indication of the ways in which the channel between poetry and architecture keeps constantly reinventing established “protocols.”

transient; architecture as a verb as much as a noun, defined by processes of design, construction, use, and reuse. Breaking apart syntactical rules, challenging social codes, redefining corporeal engagements, I treat both poetry and architecture as radically world-building, and ultimately utopian, pursuits. Architecture might shape and order the physical world, but by rethinking language – by understanding it as something that constitutes, rather than simply represents, its own reality – avant-garde poetic practices of the twentieth century show us how to break down the spatial binaries that have conditioned the standards by which we build. This is the relationship between poetry and architecture that this thesis invites: not one that is analogous, but mutually constitutive; not so much borrowing from, as troubling, challenging and probing one another to reformulate, refresh, and enliven cultural protocols for future generations to build and dwell.

Chapter breakdown

Ultimately, this is a study of the work of four poets, loosely united around particular interests, spaces, and communities. I have retained the term New York School largely because it remains helpful in grouping these connections, but in the chapters that follow, I am less interested in the ‘school’ than in its individual figures and the work that they produced. In chapters one and two, on O’Hara and Ashbery, I set the contextual stage for this thesis, reading the poems these writers produced in relation to the architecture of a particular time and place (1950s and 60s New York City for O’Hara; 1960s and 70s Europe and, later, America for Ashbery). In particular, these chapters consider the work of these poets as falling somewhere between modernism and postmodernism, and I therefore attempt to redefine the prevailing binary narrative of a “coupure” between the two.¹²⁷

An insistence on polarising modernism and postmodernism – though often useful – has created problems in aligning O’Hara’s poetry and the architecture to which he responds: either O’Hara is a late modernist, venerating the international style, or a postmodernist making villains out of corporate buildings. These accounts are not altogether inaccurate, yet they only reveal a part of a bigger picture. In my chapter on O’Hara, I chart his poetry against a growing interest in organic forms, which prevailed across 1960s aesthetics. Considering the connections between O’Hara and Charles Olson, I suggest that O’Hara’s explicitly corporeal work must be read in relation to the organic architecture that began to flourish in New

¹²⁷ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 1.

York City, under the shadow of Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim museum. Treating the Guggenheim as the exemplar of this organic architecture, my first chapter demonstrates the need to develop a new critical discourse for reading both the poetry and the architecture of this period – that it is not enough to designate them simply as late modernist or proto-postmodernist – and that, in so doing, we can shed new light on both disciplines.

In chapter two, I turn to John Ashbery, a poet whose work has often been read as the epitome of postmodern surface. I suggest, however, that this attention to surface has been something of a critical oversight, and that, in fact, Ashbery's poetry is determined by the interplay of *pure structure*. My starting point for this chapter lies in Geoff Ward's suggestion that Ashbery's experimental poem 'Europe' "laid bare all its internal workings, not unlike those 'high-tec' buildings – the Centre Georges Pompidou would be an aptly Parisian example – whose pipes and stairs and rails are exposed on the outside."¹²⁸ Following Ward's analogy, I map Ashbery's poetic on to the architectural styles that developed in both Europe and America between 1962 and 1977, to challenge prevailing readings of poetic surface and propose a poetic architecture of interconnecting structure.

Shifting somewhat away from historical context towards a closer engagement with literary and architectural construction, chapters three and four turn to the work of Barbara Guest and James Schuyler. Where chapters one and two sought to break down *contextual* polarities, these chapters seek to reconfigure the *conceptual* binaries that have governed both spatial and syntactic practices, and that have kept these two disciplines apart. Of the four poets in my study, Barbara Guest's work deals perhaps most explicitly with the intersections between the linguistic and the architectural to develop what she terms an 'Invisible Architecture'. In chapter three, I cast this invisible architecture as akin to the structure of the scaffolding, as theorised by Lisa Robertson. In so doing, I suggest that Guest's writing is scaffolded on the invisible space of the domestic, which her poetry works to recode, rather than reject. Exploring the intertwined spaces of the home and the artist's studio as the combined scaffold on which Guest builds her poetic (both literally and conceptually), I turn away from her invisible architecture to focus instead on the verbal surfaces that amount to a kind of architectural cladding in her work. Through an attention to corporeal feminist conceptions of skin, as well as to twentieth century architectural notions of cladding, this chapter argues that Guest's poetry

¹²⁸ Ward, *Statutes of Liberty*, 35; 111.

radically subverts the surface-depth dichotomy that has historically polarised modernism and postmodernism.

In my final chapter, I turn to the work of James Schuyler, exploring the poet's idiosyncratic use of the parenthesis, a grammatical-rhetorical device capable of opening alternative syntactical spaces and producing haptic engagements with the text. Through his use of the bracket, I suggest that Schuyler translates something of his precarious existence of inhabitation into these poems. Yet, rather than treat this condition of precarity as necessarily negative, I suggest that Schuyler's parenthetical poems offer utopian models of queer futurity. In so doing, this chapter acts as a bookend, mirroring O'Hara's queer corporeal poetry, which I discuss in chapter one, by considering the extent to which Schuyler also "like[d] to play with the gaps that invariably occur when one attempts to get one's body into the body of one's writing,"¹²⁹ as Nelson puts it. In his attempts to locate the body in the spaces created through parenthetical punctuation, I suggest that Schuyler's poems ask the reader to think about how and where we locate bodies in the constructed spaces of the built environment.

In summary, this thesis argues that the poetry of the New York School is not only materially reflexive but sensuously and corporeally crafted, creating textual surfaces and spaces as complex sites of social engagement. These sites, I argue, are hospitable: they invite forms of dwelling, they suggest utopian possibilities for community and, in so doing, they offer new protocols for designing and inhabiting architectural space. To fully comprehend these poetic spaces and structures – to rescue them from the abstraction of theory, to concretise and visualise them – we must read them in terms of the shifting architectural aesthetics of the twentieth century. By fusing these two disciplines in this ontologically revisionary way, this thesis argues that we can re-conceive social interactions, renegotiate both poetic and architectural space and, thus, suggest new directions for the world-building capacities of both. This is the potentiality of art; but it remains the task of original research to draw out these generative possibilities and, through them, to suggest new models for inhabiting the world.

All that remains to note in this introduction, then, is an admission of the ambitious scope of this thesis, with its attempt to draw together historical context, literary and architectural theory, and close critical readings of both poems and buildings. In recognition of this, the present text understands itself as something

¹²⁹ Nelson, *Other True Abstractions*, 82.

of an eclectic construction: to borrow the terms from Scott Brown and Venturi, this is more a 'decorated shed' than a finely sculpted 'duck' with contours smooth and cohesive but ultimately closed. For if the door between these disciplines is presently set ajar, then this thesis seeks throw it open and, in so doing, to carve out a space for future discourse between literature and architecture.

“a marvellous happening of Frank L. Wright / the great accidental architect”: Frank O’Hara and the ethics and aesthetics of 1960s organicism

Introduction

Few poets have written about architecture with as much frequency, specificity, or apostrophic ardour as Frank O’Hara. In popular culture, O’Hara is best known for *Lunch Poems*, a slim collection published by City Lights Books in 1964, containing exemplars of O’Hara’s “I do this I do that” poems: compositions documenting the speaker’s New York City flanerie on his lunch breaks from the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), where he worked from 1951 on and off until his death in 1966. In these poems, written between 1953 and 1964, O’Hara often venerates architectural monuments, including “the House of Seagram” (*LP* 27), “515 Madison Avenue” (*LP* 31), “the Empire State Building” (*LP* 28), “the UN [Building]” (*LP* 47), and “the Seagram Building” (*LP* 47) (again). O’Hara has been enshrined as the bard of mid-century New York City, not only in the cultural imaginary, but quite literally on the city’s urban infrastructure: on a handrail, overlooking the Hudson River from Battery Park, are inscribed the lines from O’Hara’s 1956 poem ‘Meditations in an Emergency’: “One need never leave the confines of New York to get all the greenery one wishes” (*CP* 197).

Critical work on O’Hara has tended to fall into three camps: O’Hara’s relationship to visual art, in particular to the painters of the period (Marjorie Perloff; Hazel Smith; Lytle Shaw; Mark Silverberg); O’Hara as a ‘coterie’ poet (Perloff; Geoff Ward; Smith; Shaw); and O’Hara’s relationship to urbanism (Perloff; Smith; Shaw; Robert Bennett; Olivier Brossard; Keegan Cook Finberg; Yasmine Shamma). All of these aspects are intertwined, both in the poetry itself and in subsequent scholarship. Marjorie Perloff’s account of O’Hara’s relationship to painting, for example, places him “at the center of a circle of artists [...] poets [...] composers [...] dancers” in their explicitly urban “New York scene”¹³⁰; Hazel Smith discusses O’Hara’s work in terms of the “location and dislocation of the cityscape,” creating what she calls “hyperscapes” or “postmodern

¹³⁰ Perloff, *Poet among Painters*, 113; 126

sites” that converge around the body, sexuality, gossip (read: coterie), and visual art¹³¹; and, as Shaw notes, O’Hara’s poems are about plotting the lyric ‘I’ as it drifts “amid the known names of dealers and artists, glamorous first ladies, New York landmarks, and someone named Franz.”¹³² In other words, all of these scholars have positioned O’Hara at the intersection of visual art, community, and metropolitan setting – the same elements that also combine in the practice of architecture. Close readings of O’Hara’s poems – with their frequent inclusion of “New York landmarks” – thus demand that a fourth aspect be added to this nexus of critical frameworks: the history, theory and practice of architecture.

In spite of the profusion of urban readings, however, only three critical texts have emerged in recent years that look explicitly at the role that *architecture* plays in O’Hara’s poetry. Robert Bennett’s *Deconstructing Post-WWII New York City: The Literature, Art, Jazz, and Architecture of an Emerging Global Capital* (2003), considers the explosion of international modernism on to the postwar landscape. Bennett focuses on the McCarthyist politics that came to accompany this style, and its impact on the contemporaneous art scenes emerging out of New York City. His approach to reading the New York School (O’Hara and Guest) positions itself between what he identifies as the prevailing “coterie” inter-arts approach and the urban readings that have placed these poets in relation to their “engagement with the urban space of post-WWII New York City.”¹³³ Bennett’s work is the first to carve out a space between these critical approaches and it offers invaluable contexts for charting the landscape of modernist architecture against the poets of the period. His focus, however, remains largely fixed on the “topography of O’Hara’s quotidian urban experiences,”¹³⁴ rather than on the intersections between these poems and specific architectural constructions; a space that the present text hopes to fill.

Olivier Brossard, in his 2009 essay “‘The / profile of a city / exploding’: Frank O’Hara’s Aesthetics of Shock’, takes a similarly urban approach to O’Hara’s work, exploring “the many ways the poet inhabits the city, through the angle of subjectivity.”¹³⁵ Like Bennett, Brossard thinks about the “socio-spatial

¹³¹ Smith, *Hyperscapes*, 1-8.

¹³² Shaw, *Poetics of Coterie*, 1.

¹³³ Bennett, *Deconstructing Post-WWII New York City*, 85-6.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 101.

¹³⁵ O. Brossard, “‘The / profile of a city / exploding’: Frank O’Hara’s Aesthetics of Shock’ in *Caliban: French Journal of English Studies*, (25: 2009: L’art de la ville), 1.

topography of urban spaces,”¹³⁶ and the extent to which these spaces helped to shape the formal constructions of O’Hara’s lyric subject. Though Brossard’s focus also remains fixed on the experience of urbanism, his readings of O’Hara’s FYI poems of the 1960s touch on the architectural, when he suggests that “O’Hara modeled his poem from ‘the great accidental architect’ Frank L. Wright.”¹³⁷ The present chapter picks up where Brossard’s essay leaves off, exploring the connection between O’Hara’s later poems and the architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright.

Published in 2016, Keegan Cook Finberg’s essay ‘Frank O’Hara rebuilds the Seagram Building: a radical poetry of event’ remains the most explicitly architectural account of O’Hara’s work to date. Thinking about the extant architectural sites that appear in the texts, Finberg suggests that O’Hara’s poems “call on the transformative abilities of spatial practice. They ask us to consider our relationships with spaces and with reading.”¹³⁸ Focusing on Mies van der Rohe’s Seagram Building (named, as we have seen, in a number of O’Hara’s poems), Finberg extends Bennett’s work on the impact of international modernism, arguing that “poems should be thought of [...] as textual creation of spaces to be enacted through reading.”¹³⁹ My chapter responds to Finberg’s notion of the creation and enactment of textual spaces, by suggesting that O’Hara’s poems not only *represent* architectural constructions but actively *recode* them by promoting the possibility of social and corporeal engagements within textual space.

All of these texts have provided firm foundations for the present chapter. In building on the work of these scholars, however, my approach also diverges in three key ways: 1) I am more concerned with *architectural construction* than with urban theory; 2) I am more interested in the ways that the architecture and poetry of this period were responding to the same cultural influences, than I am in mapping one discipline on to the other; and 3) I am more concerned with troubling the prevailing narrative of modern and postmodern polarities that all three of the above texts continue to entrench.

Bennett and Finberg in particular paint a picture of O’Hara as a postmodern poet rejecting the international modernist architecture that dominated New York City in the decade after the Second World

¹³⁶ Bennett, *Deconstructing Post-WWII New York City*, 99.

¹³⁷ Brossard, ‘Frank O’Hara’s Aesthetics of Shock’, 24.

¹³⁸ K. Cook Finberg, ‘Frank O’Hara rebuilds the Seagram Building: a radical poetry of event’ in *Textual Practice*, (30: 1: 2016), 134.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

War. Both conclude, ultimately, that this modernist architecture was simply supplanted by “a new postmodern sense of space”¹⁴⁰ – the implication being that a single architectural mode followed on from modernism, and that this lined up with the ‘postmodern’ ethics and aesthetics of the New York School. Yet this historical designation fails to take into account a number of important developments across the late 1950s and 1960s, in avant-garde poetry generally, in O’Hara’s aesthetic specifically, and in New York’s changing urban landscape. In my approach, I echo the work of Hazel Smith, who positions O’Hara as “a forerunner of postmodernism,” rather than its spokesman; though, where Smith is concerned with casting forward, reading O’Hara (at times anachronistically) as a prophet of the postmodern, I ground him in the transitional moment *between* the last vestiges of modernism and the first inklings of a postmodernism-to-come. Looking, at the poems that O’Hara wrote “from about 1954 to 1966” – the period that both John Ashbery and Marjorie Perloff (roughly)¹⁴¹ highlight as the decisive years – I identify this moment as occupying its own ground, distinct from either the modern or the postmodern. In New York City, the years 1954-1966 saw the erection of a number of buildings without clear precedent or trajectory: buildings that defy the neat categories of the modern and postmodern and thus demand that we treat the separation between the two with caution. Placing O’Hara in this ‘between’ space, the present chapter challenges Frederic Jameson’s notion of a definitive break or “coupure” between these aesthetic modes,¹⁴² and in so doing seeks to find new openings into O’Hara’s work, arguing that an adherence to the terms ‘modernism’ and ‘postmodernism’ has led to certain assumptions about the themes, politics, and shapes of these poems. Charting these poems against the distinctively ovoid architecture of the late 1950s and 1960s, I suggest new ways of conceiving the “liveable spaces” of O’Hara’s commodious poetic.

This chapter begins with close readings of two of O’Hara’s early poems that reference the UN Building, signalling the poet’s commitment to the international style of the 1950s in the shapes, structures, imagery and registers of his early work. Tracing O’Hara’s burgeoning disillusionment with these modernist styles and the political climate they reflect, I move to a consideration of his poetic as something essentially organic, driven by a sense of the corporeal and the vernacular, as expressed in his 1959 mock manifesto

¹⁴⁰ Bennett, *Deconstructing Post-WWII New York City*, 107.

¹⁴¹ In fact Perloff identifies O’Hara’s “great period” as the years 1954 - 1961; Perloff, *Poet among Painters*, 74.

¹⁴² Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 1.

‘Personism’. I consider this work in the context of both the ‘organic’ poetry (Charles Olson) and architecture (Frank Lloyd Wright) that had emerged only a few years earlier, adopting this term as a way of thinking generally about the possibility for corporeal and fertile engagements with the poems. Following the work of Brossard, I make close readings of a number of O’Hara’s later poems in relation to the architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright’s Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, one of the first constructions to embody these organic principles, ushering in a crucial moment in architectural history that can be defined as neither modernist nor postmodernist – much like the work of O’Hara and the New York School poets. In the final part of this chapter I bring together the ovoid shapes of organic architecture and O’Hara’s alimentary¹⁴³ poetics through the image of the egg, an emblem that distills the organic undercurrent in 1960s aesthetics, appearing not only throughout the architecture of the period but across O’Hara’s work – a fact that has, until now, received no critical attention. By attending to this fertile imagery, I will suggest that O’Hara’s poetry transforms the poem into a queer utopian site of social and corporeal engagement: “something like a liveable space.”

“A fragment of paradise”?

Located at 11 West Fifty-third Street between Fifth and Sixth avenues the Museum of Modern Art was housed in a stark, sleek International Style building designed by Phillip Goodwin and Edward Durell Stone, which by its functional facade announced its commitment to modernism.¹⁴⁴

In 1951, Frank O’Hara began working as a sales clerk at MoMA in midtown Manhattan (fig. 15). His biographer, Brad Gooch, paints a vivid picture of O’Hara’s first introduction to the museum, that “stark, sleek” exemplar of New York’s fashionable international modernist style (fig. 16). On his days behind the sales counter, Gooch continues, O’Hara was “quite content to bask in the light flooding through the building’s large waxed front windows and then refracted along its hard edged angled surfaces, the modernist texture of the lobby much like that pictured in Schlemmer’s *Bauhaus Stairway* then hanging in a stairwell of the museum.”¹⁴⁵ In short, O’Hara was an early disciple of international modernism, inspired by the space that he would come to know more intimately, perhaps, than any other over the next fifteen years.

¹⁴³ I borrow the term from: M. K. Blasing, *American Poetry: The Rhetoric of Its Forms*, (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1987), 163.

¹⁴⁴ Gooch, *City Poet: The Life and Times of Frank O’Hara*, (New York: Harper, 1993), 206.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 207.



fig. 15 Frank O'Hara



fig. 16 MoMA, New York

In April 1955, O'Hara was promoted to Administrative Assistant in the International Program, a remit in which he would remain until his death in 1966.¹⁴⁶ Reading through the O'Hara Papers in the MoMA Archives in 2018, I discovered that a number of architectural exhibits fell under O'Hara's professional purview, including: 'Structure and Space in Contemporary Architecture'; 'The Skyscraper'; 'Visionary Architecture'; 'The Twentieth-Century House'; 'What is Modern Architecture'; 'Architecture Without Architects'; 'Twentieth-Century Engineering'; and 'Modern Architecture U.S.A', among others.¹⁴⁷ Countless files in the archives attest to the extent to which O'Hara would have been engaged with these exhibitions: though his involvement remained largely on painterly shows, he was copied into internal memoranda on these architectural exhibits and made his own recommendations and suggestions for sculptural and architectural decisions (figs 17 & 18). Immersed in these contexts of international modernism, O'Hara was seemingly enamoured by it in its initial, just-post-Bauhaus days, as his early poems suggest. Over lunch in Darien, Connecticut, one afternoon in December 2018, O'Hara's sister, Maureen Granville-Smith,

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 257.

¹⁴⁷ I found internal memos for all of these exhibitions in: Department of Circulating Exhibition Records, II.1.a. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York, NY, USA.

cc: CConstantine MHoeler
 LGlaser FOHara ✓
 WGreen ABrecht
 WJanssen YFrost
 Palmer 1-0

The Museum of Modern Art

To Mr. Drexler
 from Waldo Rasmussen

Date April 4, 1966

Re Architecture and Design exhibitions for circulation.

Dear Arthur:

I hate to be sending you a long memo to read in your sickbed, and hope that Connie and Ludy can discuss it with you so that it doesn't take too much of your time and energy.

We are now working on new C/S proposals and I am anxious to develop the Architecture and Design section of the program. C/S is most urgent because we want to get the catalog out as soon as possible.

The following shows are now in the C/S program:

Currently in circulation (U.S. and Canada)

THE TWENTIETH-CENTURY HOUSE (began tour in April, 1962)

WHAT IS MODERN ARCHITECTURE? (began tour in September, 1962)

ARCHITECTURE WITHOUT ARCHITECTS (began tour in March, 1965)

TWENTIETH CENTURY ENGINEERING (began tour in September, 1965)

MODERN ARCHITECTURE: U.S.A. (began tour in January, 1966)

All of these shows will continue through the next fiscal year, even though we expect it will be necessary to refurbish the HOUSE and WUSA since they have been in circulation so long. Since the WUSA ARCHITECTURE: U.S.A. show is so large and expensive, its tour will be very limited, meaning in effect that we have only four Architecture shows to offer the medium-sized and smaller institutions which make up the majority of our subscribers.

In the five-year plan which we submitted to the Trustees last year, and which was approved, we recommended that the Architecture and Design level of our C/S program be maintained at 7 to 9 exhibitions. This means that we could use two new Architecture shows and at least one new design show in the coming year.

Exhibitions scheduled at MoMA

As a starting point, I wonder which of the following exhibitions now listed on

Mr. Drexler - 2 - April 4, 1966

the Museum's schedule might be possible to circulate:

OPENING CARDS - closes MoMA May 8 (Connie has already said she thought this would be a possibility since it is made up primarily of collection material.)

KAMN - April 25 - May 30

THE SUBJECT TRANSFORMED - June 26 - August 22

TOWARD A NATIONAL AUTOMOBILE - September 26 - November 27

NEW YORK - January 23 - March 19

International Circulating Exhibitions

The only two Architecture and Design exhibitions circulating abroad:

ROADS (in Latin America)

VISIONARY ARCHITECTURE (COPY 3) (in Latin America)

Although it has not yet been completed, we also have enlargements for the photo panels for another edition of TWENTIETH CENTURY ENGINEERING for international circulation. We also hope to schedule showings abroad of both ARCHITECTURE WITHOUT ARCHITECTS and MODERN ARCHITECTURE: U.S.A.

At the last Council Program Committee Meeting, it was also suggested that we investigate the possibility of circulating the MUSE DRAWINGS in Europe and the Museum's CHAIRS DESIGN COLLECTION in Latin America. Could you let me know if you think these proposals would be feasible?

I would like to consider your MUSEUMS exhibition for dual national - international circulation.

For later preparations, I would like to do a major 20th century design exhibition for Latin America (like the one sent to India). I hope that we can get a schedule for this show, so that it might begin a tour in 1968.

If at all possible, I hope you may be able to discuss some of these matters with Ludy and Connie so that I could meet with them within the next week to discuss next year's program.

Could you suggest someone you would have confidence in to handle the job of revising the show: WUSA for the New York State Council on the Arts.

WR/af/b

figs. 17 & 18 'Architecture and Design exhibitions for circulation' MoMA memoranda, 1966

confirmed his love of modernist architecture, recalling in particular his rapture after seeing Phillip Johnson's Glass House shortly after it was completed in 1949. One year later, in 1950, the first structure of the UN Building complex would be completed in New York City: the Secretariat Building, a shrine to international modernism, crouching beside the East River in the Turtle Bay, just moments from where O'Hara lived at 326 East Forty-ninth Street.¹⁴⁸

A collaborative design between Oscar Niemeyer and Le Corbusier, the Secretariat Building is the first real example of the international style that would come to dominate the topography of New York City after the Second World War (MoMA was, until then, a Bauhaus aberration amidst midtown deco). The UN's most visible structure, the Secretariat Building (fig. 19) is a tall, imposing skyscraper, a "thirty-nine story glazed slab, 544 feet high, 287 feet wide and 72 feet thick, with 5,400 glass spandrels," as Stern, Mellins and Fishman write in *New York 1960*.¹⁴⁹ Composed of a mathematical and regular grid of reflective windows – or, in the architectural parlance of the day, a glass curtain wall – the Secretariat Building "attracted the attention

¹⁴⁸ Gooch, *City Poet*, 192.

¹⁴⁹ R. A. M. Stern, T. Mellins & D. Fishman, *New York 1960: Architecture and Urbanism Between the Second World War and the Bicentennial*, (New York: Monacelli Press, 1995), 617.



fig. 19 The United Nations Secretariat Building

of some architects who marveled at its slender shape and technological innovations, and the general public, who hadn't seen a comparable large-scale construction project in New York since the completion of the Rockefeller centre [in 1939].¹⁵⁰ Described at the time, by the editors of *Architectural Forum*, as the “first full-blooded realization of Mies van der Rohe’s post-World War I glass skyscraper projects,”¹⁵¹ the Secretariat Building would set the stage for the office block architecture of 1950s New York City, with Lever House following hot on its heels in 1952, and the Seagram Building in 1958.

‘October’, written the same month that the UN complex was completed in 1952, includes O’Hara’s first reference to the dazzling modernist edifice:

Summer is over,
that moment of blindness,

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 619.

in a sunny wheelbarrow
aching on sand dunes
from a big melancholy
about war headlines
and personal hatreds.

Restful boredom waits
for the winter's cold solace
and biting season of galas
to take over my nerves,
and from anger at time's
rough passage I fight
off the future, my friend.

Is there at all anywhere
in this lavender sky
beside the UN Building
where I am so little
and have dallied with love,
a fragment of the paradise
we see when signing treaties
or planning free radio stations?

If I turn down my sheets
children start screaming through
the windows. My glasses
are broken on the coffee table.
And at night a truce
with Iran or Korea seems certain
while I am beaten to death
by a thug in a back bedroom (*CP* 109-110).

The poem is typical of O'Hara's early poetic style, surging between modernist modes but never quite finding its own voice: as Shaw suggests, in aptly architectural terms, O'Hara "was often borrowing styles of subjectivity from a canon of modernist poets, using their personas as scaffoldings for new constructions."¹⁵² The opening lines contain an oblique homage to William Carlos Williams' "The Red Wheelbarrow" ("so much depends / upon // a red wheel / barrow // glazed with rain / water // beside the white / chickens"¹⁵³) while the lines, "is there at all anywhere / in this lavender sky / beside the UN Building / where I am so little / and have dallied with love," mirror a moment from Vladimir Mayakovsky's "To His Own Beloved Self" – "Where to find someone to love / of my size, / the sky too small for her to fit in?"¹⁵⁴ The poem sustains this appropriation of modernist predecessors, vacillating between imagist snapshots ("my glasses / are broken on the coffee table") and fragments of sudden, surreal violence ("If I turn down my

¹⁵² Shaw, *Poetics of Coterie*, 49.

¹⁵³ W. C. Williams (ed. C. Tomlinson, *Selected Poems*, (London: Penguin Classics, 2000), 57.

¹⁵⁴ V. Mayakovsky (trans. J. H. McGavran III), *Vladimir Mayakovsky: Selected Poems*, (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2013), 63. Perloff notes that: "the closest model I can find for O'Hara's lyric voice of that of Mayakovsky, whose poetry O'Hara had been reading avidly since the early fifties." *Poet Among Painters*, 138; while Shaw dedicates a chapter of *Poetics of Coterie* to the influence of Mayakovsky on O'Hara.

sheets / children start screaming through / the windows”). The distinctive voice that will come to define O’Hara’s “I do this I do that” poems is thus fledgling in ‘October’: the lyric ‘I’ remains uncertain, not even announcing itself until the end of the second stanza, where it floats in, weak and nervy, putting up a futile fight against “the future”, which peters out with the words “my friend.” Another modernist allusion, the line recalls Baudelaire’s address to the reader in ‘Au Lecteur’ (“mon semblable, – mon frère!”) especially given that O’Hara’s struggle against “restful boredom” mirrors Baudelaire’s warning against “ennui [...] this dainty monster.”¹⁵⁵ Or perhaps, as the comma indicates, this is an address not to the reader, but to the future itself, and in fighting it off O’Hara finds himself falling back on the familiar friends of older modernist modes. In any case, whatever “anger,” was present moments before has dissipated, only to be replaced with a tired address in worn-out, modernist overtones. When the speaker returns in the following stanza, he thus appears as small and insignificant, dwarfed “beside the UN Building.”

Modernism made manifest, the building itself, at first glance, seems to offer some consolation to the speaker, who searches for a personal version of the kind of optimism that has been enshrined in the political edifice: “a fragment of the paradise / we see when signing treaties / or planning free radio stations.” The term “fragment” ties the promise of paradise to the building itself, which is characterised by the regimental fragments of glass that comprise its reflective facade; yet it also carries overtones of rifts and breakages, a shattered political environment that the poem cannot piece back together. This image is extended into the final stanza, which shifts abruptly from the “lavender sky” and “fragment of paradise” to the broken *glasses* on the coffee table, embedded among moments of terror and brutal aggression. The shift in tone corresponds to a spatial shift that has occurred: O’Hara takes us away from the faintly utopian, public locus of the polis, into the intimate and private space of the bedroom, where both personal and societal angst are exposed. The poem appears to describe its own search – and, perhaps, O’Hara’s search more broadly – for a poetic space within which to realise a political stance, as evinced in the central question, “is there at all anywhere?” If, as Shaw notes, O’Hara was “searching for social structures and genealogies that could support both avant-garde communities generally and gay writers operating outside of heterosexual narratives of community in particular,”¹⁵⁶ then ‘October’ can be seen to capture this doubly liminal position: not only an avant-garde

¹⁵⁵ C. Baudelaire (trans. J. McGowan), *The Flowers of Evil*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 4-7.

¹⁵⁶ Shaw, *Poetics of Coterie*, 85.

poet struggling against a worn-out modernism, O'Hara was also a gay man, seeking to carve out his own space beneath the "lavender sky."¹⁵⁷

In his 2004 book, *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government*, David K. Johnson popularised the term 'Lavender Scare' to parallel with the dominant (straight) discourse surrounding the McCarthy era 'Red Scare'. Johnson's term refers to the ousting of "ninety-one homosexuals" from the State Department in 1950, as "persons considered to be security risks," and the ensuing persecution of homosexual men and women throughout the 1950s under the governmental Cold War rhetoric of "enemies of the state."¹⁵⁸ In his rationale for the term, Johnson explains that "in 1950s culture, lavender was the color commonly associated with homosexuality, as evidenced in references to the 'lavender lads' in the State Department."¹⁵⁹ This context transforms the initially utopian reading of O'Hara's depiction of one of the city's most conspicuously political sites: the 'lavender' sky ceases to function as a picturesque framing device for a monument to political optimism and becomes, instead, a euphemism for New York City's gay subcultures, which are threatened by the aggressively masculinist architecture, espousing the McCarthyist politics of the day. These international modernist monuments, as Bennett articulates, were "deliberately designed to homogenise, organise, and police the city's complex heterogeneity."¹⁶⁰ The implication then, is not that O'Hara identifies with the optimistic politics enshrined in the architectural manifestation of the UN, but, rather, that he recognises his own marginalisation in relation to it: the signing of treaties, the planning of free radio stations, and the truce with Iran or Korea take precedence over the individual liberties of American citizens who have been sidelined, and even criminalised, under McCarthyite politics. In the end, O'Hara retreats into domestic space, only to be greeted with violence and brutality. As Maggie Nelson notes, the bedroom becomes a contested site in 1950s America, where the "constitutionality of a policeman barging into a bedroom without a valid search warrant" was rarely questioned.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁷ The term 'lavender' appears throughout O'Hara's oeuvre, which would suggest that homosexual undertones are to some degree intentional.

¹⁵⁸ D. K. Johnson, *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government*, (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 18; 99.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 216.

¹⁶⁰ Bennett, *Deconstructing Post-WWII New York City*, 10.

¹⁶¹ Nelson *Women, the New York School, and Other True Abstractions*, 68.

O'Hara's poem therefore captures the placelessness of the gay man in 1950s America, reminding the reader that the UN Building offered anything but a liveable space to those in need of privacy and sanctuary. If this critique is an undercurrent in 'October', it becomes explicit by the time O'Hara writes 'Nocturne', three years later in 1955. Here, O'Hara again turns to the UN Building, this time adopting, as Finberg points out, "the language of the critics of Bauhaus"¹⁶²:

There's nothing worse
than feeling bad and not
being able to tell you.
Not because you'd kill me
or it would kill you, or
we don't love each other.
It's space. The sky is grey
and clear, with pink and
blue shadows under each cloud.
A tiny airliner drops its
Specks over the U N Building.
My eyes, like millions of
glassy squares, merely reflect.
Everything sees through me,
in the daytime I'm too hot
and at night I freeze; I'm
built the wrong way for the
river and a mild gale would
break every fibre in me.
Why don't I go east and west
instead of north and south?
It's the architect's fault.
And in a few years I'll be
useless, not even an office
building. Because you have
no telephone, and live so
far away; the Pepsi-Cola sign,
the seagulls and the noise (*CP* 224-225) (fig. 20).

The opening lines establish an aesthetic shift: the flippant juxtaposition between hyperbole ("there's nothing worse") and banality ("than feeling bad and not / being able to tell you"), expressed in colloquial language, illustrates the extent to which O'Hara has turned from the overwrought, poetic register of 'October', towards the directness of sentiment and spontaneous honesty that would define his so-called 'great period'. The lavender sky has broken into "pink and blue," implying that the speaker has found some space of belonging (this poem is, at least, addressed to a "you"), though trouble still lurks in the particoloured "shadows." Employing the term 'eye' ("My eyes") homophonically, O'Hara's poetic identification with the building subverts the dynamic established in 'October': where the lyric 'I' was dwarfed by the imposing structure in

¹⁶² Finberg, 'Frank O'Hara rebuilds the Seagram Building', 132.



fig. 20 The Pepsi Cola sign seen from the UN Building

the earlier poem, it has now *become* the building, and the effect is to enlarge the speaker while simultaneously diminishing the structure. Thus emboldened, the speaker's criticisms of the building become similarly brash: as Finberg explains, "these complaints were popular critiques of downtown office spaces as this style of building became more popular. The glass curtain walls created a very hot environment inside in the afternoon, and despite the aesthetically sterile quality of the light, were thought to be a health concern."¹⁶³

O'Hara's criticisms are predominantly levelled at the use of glass on the structure's façade: a material that rendered the UN Building physically, as well as politically and symbolically, inhospitable. Architectural critic Lewis Mumford noted as early as September 1951 that the building had the "two-dimensionality of a mirror" and betrayed a "lack of attention to human needs."¹⁶⁴ As he elaborated, "all the fundamental qualities of architecture seem to have been sacrificed to the external picture, or, rather, to the more ephemeral passing image reflected on its surface."¹⁶⁵ In spite of an early enthusiasm for the international style, then, by 1955 O'Hara's writing was already laced with disillusionment, aware of the radical political

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ L. Mumford in Stern, Mellins & Fishman, *New York 1960*, 619.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

conservatism of this architectural mode: the exciting avant-garde ethos of the Bauhaus had been replaced with the promulgation of such values as “social conformity, emotional sobriety, cultural homogeneity, and political complacency.”¹⁶⁶ In part, glass had been chosen as the UN Building’s primary material as a gesture of political transparency and openness, as Wallace Kirkman Harrison, director of the UN building project, explained in a 1947 article for the *New York Times*: “As for building with glass, that is one of our good, new materials, and in a sense, uniquely symbolic of our civilisation since it is clear, practical, and beautiful.”¹⁶⁷ Overtones of McCarthyite politics abound in Harrison’s statement, with social purity lingering behind such terms as ‘good’, ‘civilisation’, ‘clear’, and ‘beautiful’. Thus, when O’Hara writes that “[e]verything sees through me,” we see the vestiges of his earlier response to the building, like those pink and blue clouds still laced with darker “shadows”: the all-seeing eye of the McCarthyite “lavender scare.” Yet, if the use of glass signals social purity, it must also sign for both moral and aesthetic *vacuity*, literally manifested in the permanent exposure of the often empty offices within. O’Hara, it seems, agreed with Mumford, who denigrated the building as “a superficial aesthetic triumph and an architectural failure. A few more triumphs of this nature, and this particular school of modernism might be on the rocks.”¹⁶⁸

Mumford was not alone in this view. As early as November 1950, the historian Henry Russell Hitchcock wrote in *Architectural Forum* that “the building seems to me an end, not a beginning, and roughly speaking some twenty years out of date in terms of expression,”¹⁶⁹ while, in the same publication, modernist architect Rudolph Schindler wrote, “Let’s hope that the UN buildings are the final apotheosis of the approach to architecture called the international style.”¹⁷⁰ That Mumford, Hitchcock, and Schindler should all identify the Secretariat Building as an outdated “end” to the international style appears to be at odds with the notion that this was unlike anything New Yorkers had seen since the Rockefeller Center, or that this was the first full-blooded manifestation of Miesian mathematical architecture. How could the building be at once a trailblazer and a dead end? The answer, I suggest, lies in the fact that the story of a definitive break between modernism and postmodernism is not as linear as historical narratives have tended to cast it.

¹⁶⁶ Bennett, *Deconstructing Post-WWII New York City*, 3.

¹⁶⁷ W. K. Harrison, ‘MR. HARRISON’S OPPORTUNITY’ in *The New York Times*, (January 10, 1947, Section C), 20.

¹⁶⁸ Stern, Mellins & Fishman, *New York 1960*, 618.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 619.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 621.

Finberg falls into this easy separation, concluding that ‘Nocturne’ demonstrates the ways in which “postmodernisation makes villains out of modernist buildings,” arguing that “the speaker without his lover is like a modern building under the threat of postmodernised obsolescence. The poem thus depicts these modernist architectural spaces as they sit on the threshold between modernist villain and postmodernist lover.”¹⁷¹ Finberg is right; the poem does indeed embody a “threshold” moment, which makes a “villain” out of modernist aesthetics. Yet this threshold moment does not simply mark the transition into postmodernism, either in terms of O’Hara’s poetics or the prevailing architecture of 1950s New York. Rather, as I argue in the remainder of this chapter, it is imperative that we read the aesthetics of the late 1950s as occupying a liminal moment, between the modern and the postmodern, typified by the organic approaches that would come to fruition in the New York City landscape by the 1960s.

“between two persons instead of two pages”

From 9th November to 7th February 1965, the Department of Circulating Exhibitions, in which O’Hara was working as Associate Curator at MoMA, ran an exhibition entitled ‘Architecture Without Architects’ (fig. 17). The exhibition, and its accompanying book of the same name, attempted “to break down narrow concepts of the art of building by introducing the unfamiliar world of non-pedigreed architecture. It is so little known that we don’t even have a name for it. For want of a generic label we shall call it vernacular, anonymous, spontaneous, indigenous, rural, as the case may be.”¹⁷² In fact, as the case has proved, it was the term ‘vernacular’ that stuck, a term that architectural scholars have, since Bernard Rudofsky’s seminal exhibition, continued to use to refer to “local regional traditional building forms and types using indigenous materials, and without grand architectural pretensions.”¹⁷³ Yet the term does not – and did not – apply exclusively to rural architecture. In 1967, Nathan Silver used it in his book *Lost New York*. Defining the city’s “current equivalent of vernacular building,” Silver describes:

the aluminium and porcelain store fronts, the Coca-Cola ads over delicatessens, the new aluminium double-hung sash in tenement windows. This much is ephemeral but it ranges over to absolutely essential characteristics such as the brick and brownstone, the sheet metal cornices and cast iron railings of row houses,

¹⁷¹ Finberg, ‘Frank O’Hara rebuilds the Seagram Building’, 133.

¹⁷² B. Rudofsky, *Architecture Without Architects: A Short Introduction to Non-Pedigreed Architecture*, (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1964), 2.

¹⁷³ J. S. Curl, *Encyclopaedia of Architectural Terms*, (London: Routledge, 1997), 334.

the old granite curbstones and block street paving, the vanishing shepherds crook lampposts. All the prevalent building materials and familiar methods and practices contribute to the urban fabric and the experience of New York things. Every detail matters. It is important to perceive that hardware stores are often painted orange out front, and that the colour of newspaper kiosks and shoeshine stands is green.¹⁷⁴

New York may not be home to conventional vernacular architecture, yet it does exist in the city's essential street details, which Silver discusses predominantly in terms of their materials, textures and colours, and the sense of character that they create. In Silver's accounts the vernacular sways between residential buildings, shopfronts, exterior street details, kiosks, commercial stands, and ephemeral advertising signs – precisely those mundane details that we find across O'Hara's poetry, from the "Pepsi-Cola sign" in 'Nocturne', to the "shoeshine" and the "tobacconist in the Ziegfeld Theater" (CP 325) in 'The Day Lady Died', and the ephemeral "Manhattan Storage Warehouse // which they'll soon tear down," in 'A Step Away From Them'. What makes these details so important for Silver, as for O'Hara, is their relationship to the social: these are the parts of the city that are "basically useable" (to recall Ashbery's phrase), and which function in such a way as to discreetly allow societies to cohere in the metropolis; unlike the impersonal skyscrapers and office blocks that dominated the iconic skyline, as Jane Jacobs would argue in 1961 in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. Where the reflective office blocks in fact worked to repel marginalised figures and fragment any possibility for social cohesion, these vernacular elements of the city responded to the rhythms of diverse bodies. "Anonymous" and "spontaneous," to recall Rudofsky's words, there was something seemingly *organic* and essentially *rhythmic* about these *vernacular* details – tropes that would begin to inform the architecture of New York, which was becoming increasingly disillusioned with its aesthetically vacuous – not to mention literally empty – office blocks. Is it any wonder then, that from 1954 onwards, O'Hara should replace his interest in the international style with the search for a "vernacular corresponding to the creatively messy New York environment"?

In his 1953 essay, 'The Language of an Organic Architecture', Frank Lloyd Wright coined the term 'organic' in an explicit rejection of the international style. "Present tendencies towards the mediocre international style," he writes, "not only degrade organic American architecture but will eventually destroy the creative architect in America, as elsewhere."¹⁷⁵ In constructing his organic ethos, Wright targets the

¹⁷⁴ N. Silver, *Lost New York*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 6-7.

¹⁷⁵ F. L. Wright, 'The Language of an Organic Architecture' in *The Future of Architecture*, (Ljubljana: Mladinska Knjijiga, 1969), 320.

modernist mantra, “form follows function,” first coined by Louis Sullivan in 1896.¹⁷⁶ “This is a much abused slogan,” Wright remarks, upon which “too many foolish constructions are placed” and it “is now the password for sterility.”¹⁷⁷ Thus, Wright transforms “form follows function” into “*form and function are one*”¹⁷⁸ and roots his organic architecture a sense of the corporeal: “As the *skeleton* is no finality of *human form* any more than grammar is the ‘form’ of *poetry*, just so function is to architectural form [my emph.]” The inclusion of poetry here is key, for Wright concludes that “form is predicated by function but, so far as poetic imagination can go with it without destruction, transcends it.”¹⁷⁹ Here, Wright echoes Heidegger (who’s lecture ‘...Poetically Man Dwells...’ was first given only two years earlier), who suggests that:

Man does not dwell in that he merely establishes his stay on the earth beneath the sky, by raising growing things and simultaneously raising buildings. Man is capable of such building only if he already builds in the sense of the poetic taking of measure. Authentic building occurs so far as there are poets, such as take the measure for architecture, the structure of dwelling.¹⁸⁰

Wright, it seems, had taken Heidegger’s philosophy to heart, seeking to construct an architecture that was predicated on the possibility of dwelling, rather than the functional fact of building. Unlike Le Corbusier and Niemeyer’s UN Building, which had overlooked human need, Wright was for an architecture that placed the body at the centre, like the vernacular architectures that Rudofsky would bring to light in his MoMA exhibition a decade later. Ultimately, for both Heidegger and Wright, it was a *poetic* approach to building that could miraculously disrupt causation to place dwelling before building. Thus, where poetry was learning from organic and vernacular styles of architecture, these architectural forms were already borrowing from the poetic imagination in order to put the body at the heart of architectural design.

In twisting Sullivan’s modernist mantra, Wright recalls Charles Olson’s paraphrasing of Robert Creeley’s “FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT,” which, as Olson writes in ‘Projective Verse’ (1950), “makes absolute sense to me, with this possible corollary, that right form, in any

¹⁷⁶ L. Sullivan, ‘The tall office building artistically considered’ in *The April Number of Lippincott’s Magazine*, March 23rd, 1896. Sourced from the Getty Research Institute; full catalogue record MARCXML.

¹⁷⁷ Wright, *The Future of Architecture*, 322.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 322.

¹⁸⁰ Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 227.

given poem, is the only and exclusively possible extension of content under hand.”¹⁸¹ According to Olson, “a poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it (he will have some several causations), by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader.”¹⁸² This energy, Olson explains, makes its way to the reader by way of a series of corporeal engagements between the poet and their poem. “The line comes [...] from the breath, from the breathing of the man who writes,”¹⁸³ and it is the line – rather than the metrical foot, which has traditionally governed Western poetic practice – to which we must become attentive if modern poetry is to thrive. As Olson “put[s] it baldly”:

The two halves are:
the HEAD, by way of the EAR, to the SYLLABLE
the HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE¹⁸⁴

For Olson, the key to this breathy line rests with technological advancements in poetic composition: it is “the advantage of the typewriter that, due to its rigidity and its space precisions, it can, for a poet, indicate exactly the breath, the pauses, the suspensions even of syllables, the juxtapositions even of parts of phrases, which he intends.”¹⁸⁵ The typewriter affords the poet precisely that which the musical score offers the composer; the breath can at last be measured in all of its nuances and subtleties, in such a way as to break the tyranny of quantitative metrical composition – and get the *body* into the poem.

Olson’s poetics of the breath is associated with a motion towards ‘organic poetry’ that would be defined, over a decade after the publication of ‘Projective Verse’, in correspondence between the poets Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov in 1963. As Levertov writes in ‘Some Notes on Organic Form’ (1965):

A partial definition, then, of organic poetry might be that it is a method of apperception, i.e., of recognizing what we perceive, and is based on an intuition of an order, a form beyond forms, in which forms partake, and of which man’s creative works are analogies, resemblances, natural allegories. Such poetry is exploratory.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸¹ Olson, *Postmodern American Poetry*, 864.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 866.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 868.

¹⁸⁶ D. Levertov, *New & Selected Essays*, (New York: New Directions, 1992), 67.

Levertov's organic poetry evolves out of Olson's ideas, in particular those ideas of spontaneous composition and the importance of the breath to this process: as she writes, when we think of poetic mediation, "we think of 'inspiration' – to breathe in."¹⁸⁷ Yet, the poetry that Levertov outlines, with its "intuition of an order, a form beyond forms," cannot be said to correspond to O'Hara's model of spontaneity. This is why M. K. Blasing has been at pains to distinguish O'Hara from Olson, noting that Olson is a "modernist" whose work seeks to "recuperat[e] [...] Romantic organicism," while the "postmodern" O'Hara is, by contrast, "no 'organicist'."¹⁸⁸ Blasing is right; O'Hara is indeed no organicist, in the explicit Levertovian sense of the word. Yet I am wary of her neat categorisation of the modernist Olson and the postmodern O'Hara. Rather, I suggest, the situation is more nuanced, for O'Hara's poetry does contain elements of the organic, which I take to mean, *qua* Olson, an explicit interest in the relationship between the poem and the body. In this I follow the work of Yasmine Shamma, who suggests that O'Hara's is "a uniquely *urban* organic poetry" by virtue of its embodied character.¹⁸⁹ And as Shamma highlights, through Phillip Sheldrake, the architectural ramifications of this model of organicism must be paramount, for as "people are 'embodied' they are also 'somewhere'."¹⁹⁰

A commitment to the body can be found in O'Hara's mock-manifesto 'Personism', written in 1959 as a "sly parody," according to Marjorie Perloff, of Olson's 'Projective Verse'.¹⁹¹ Playful, spirited, and tongue-in-cheek, O'Hara's 'manifesto' has come to be read as the touchstone for his poetic ethos,¹⁹² promoting a "true abstraction" in poetry, that puts the "poem squarely between the poet and the person" (*CP* 499):

Abstraction (in poetry, not in painting) involves personal removal by the poet. For instance, the decision involved in the choice between "the nostalgia *of* the infinite" and "the nostalgia *for* the infinite" defines an attitude towards degree of abstraction. The nostalgia *of* the infinite representing the greater degree of abstraction, removal, and negative capability (as in Keats and Mallarmé). Personism, a movement which I

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁸ Blasing, *Politics and Form*, 46; 54.

¹⁸⁹ Shamma, *Spatial Poetics*, 20.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁹¹ Perloff, *Poet Among Painters*, 16.

¹⁹² Shaw has noted the potential pitfalls in reading 'Personism' as "the core of O'Hara's theory." He writes that "this decision is itself disputable because the poems, arguably, are more reflexive about his poetry than this one metapoetic statement. But even assuming that 'Personism' is a central, and somehow ur-intention bearing document, reading him exclusively in his own terms has a very traditional and limited effect[.]" Shaw, *Poetics of Coterie*, 10. I agree that we should be wary of reading O'Hara's entire poetic ethos in the light of 'Personism', yet for the purposes of this chapter, it remains a useful text for theorising what I identify as O'Hara's corporeal-organic poetic.

recently founded and which nobody knows about, interests me a great deal, being so totally opposed to this kind of abstract removal that it is verging on a true abstraction for the first time, really, in the history of poetry (CP 498).

O'Hara's "true abstraction" amounts to an abstraction of abstraction, a kind of negative formula that works to counter abstraction altogether. In fact, the triumph of 'Personism', as O'Hara understands it, is that it is "So totally opposed to [...] abstract removal" that it places "the poem [...] at last between two persons instead of two pages" (CP 499). According to Shaw, this model of abstraction might be understood as "a process whereby the concrete specificity of the second person operates not as a final container or destination for the significance of the poem but as an occasion for projecting the poem out into the world."¹⁹³ In other words, it transforms the poem into a social site, generating an encounter not only with a single, named 'you', but with all future readers, who experience the text from the comfort of their own tangible space. In its emphatic opposition to abstraction, and its desire to exist between persons, personism is thus underpinned by a sense of corporeal presence, as the profusion of bodily imagery throughout the essay attests. From the athletic body at the 'manifesto's' outset ("You just go on your nerve. If someone's chasing you down the street with a knife you just run, you don't turn around and shout, 'Give it up! I was a trackstar for Mineola Prep'" (CP 498)), to the analogy between poetic measure and sexual attraction ("As for measure and other technical apparatus, that's just common sense: if you're going to buy a pair of pants you want them to be tight enough so everyone will want to go to bed with you" (CP 498)), O'Hara is explicit: "There's nothing metaphysical about it" (CP 498). The final thrust of Personism – in which O'Hara places the poem "at last between two persons instead of two pages" – not only drives this sense of authorial corporeality home, but implies that the poem creates a transactional space for *two bodies*: poet and reader.

Bodies make their way into O'Hara's poems throughout his oeuvre. As Maggie Nelson has written (of O'Hara, but also of Ashbery and Schuyler), these poets "like to play with the gaps that invariably occur when one attempts to get one's body into the body of one's writing."¹⁹⁴ Throughout the "I do this, I do that" poems (those written after 1954), O'Hara's speaker is seen to be "sweating" (CP 325), "breathing" (CP 325), "walking" (CP 325), "fuck[ing],"¹⁹⁵ "shit[ting]" (CP 351), "eating" (CP 405), "drinking" (CP 57), and so on.

¹⁹³ Shaw, *Poetics of Coterie*, 78.

¹⁹⁴ Nelson, *True Abstractions*, 82.

¹⁹⁵ F. O'Hara & B. Berkson, *Hymns of St. Bridget & Other Writings*, (Woodacre: The Owl Press, 2004), 19.

Echoing Nelson, Josh Robinson also notes, in his essay “‘A Gasp of Laughter at Desire’: Frank O’Hara’s Poetics of Breath’, that in O’Hara’s poems the body “intrudes on the poem, leaving a perceptible trace.”¹⁹⁶ Yet, if the body can be said to intrude on the poem then, according to O’Hara, subject matter might be said to intrude on the body, as it does in ‘To Hell With It’: “How I hate subject matter! melancholy, / intruding on the vigorous heart” (CP 275). In this channel of two-way interruption, the case is clear: “the poem is at last between two persons instead of two pages.”

The speaker’s heart is often to be found merging with the poem itself, in ways that drive these free-verse compositions in lieu of prosody. In the memorable ending to ‘A Step Away from Them’, after documenting the construction (“laborers [...] with yellow helmets / on” (CP 257)) and demolition (“the Manhattan Storage Warehouse, / which they’ll tear down soon” (CP 258)) of New York’s architectural landscape, O’Hara reassures his reader that “My heart is in my / pocket, it is Poems by Pierre Reverdy” (CP 258). Elsewhere he “observe[s] a heart tangled in the lines of my verse” (CP 35); asks “Whose heart is beating in this shell? the pulse / of poetry” (CP 247); and explains that “You can’t plan on the heart, but / the better part of it, my poetry, is open” (CP 231). Body and poem thus become indistinguishable in O’Hara’s writing: the heart *is* the poem, both rhythmically (“the pulse of poetry”) and emotionally (“the better part of [my heart], my poetry, is open”), and form and function become one.

Yet, as Olson notes, the heart only reaches the poem “by way of the BREATH, to the LINE.” In the poem ‘Hôtel Transylvanie’, O’Hara draws this idea of poetic breath together with images of architectural construction:

Oh *hôtel*, you should be merely a bed
surrounded by walls where two should meet and do nothing but breathe
breathe in breathe out (CP 351).¹⁹⁷

Here, O’Hara envisions architectural space as existing purely in the service of uniting physical bodies: a poetic manifestation of ‘Personism’. The implication is obviously sexual, but perhaps more significant is the typically O’Harian celebration of merely being alive, summoned both in the use of the apostrophe (“Oh

¹⁹⁶ J. Robinson, “‘A Gasp of Laughter at Desire’: Frank O’Hara’s Poetics of Breath’ in (eds. R. Hampson & W. Montgomery) *Frank O’Hara Now: New Essays on the New York Poet*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), 145.

¹⁹⁷ Smith explains that the poem was “written one day when O’Hara had a row with Vincent Warren,” his long-term partner at the time. Biographical detail may not be helpful, as Shaw suggests, for theorizing the poem as a communal site, but it does remind us of the extent to which *real bodies* underpin so many of O’Hara’s poems. Smith, *Hyperscapes*, 51.

hôtel”) and through the speaker’s desire to simply “breathe.” The apostrophe serves the poem here in another sense, too, by personifying the inanimate room. In so doing, we read the repetition of “breathe” as if it were a condition of the room itself, or perhaps the bed on which two people might meet. In any case, these lines generate an overwhelming sense of vitality on several levels: the lovers breathe; the room breathes; the bed breathes; the poem itself seems to breathe; and the reader breathes, as, reaching the end of the long line, they read the word “breathe,” pause, inhale, and then drop down, to the supplication, “breathe in breathe out.” Through a nuanced confluence of syntax, grammar, structure, and poetic pacing, O’Hara creates a rhythm of breathing for his reader; just as he places his own breath into the poem, by way of his breathless apostrophe, that “vocative” figure, as Jonathan Culler notes, which “reflects the conjunction of mouth and happening,” signifying “spontaneous [passion],” and causing the “poem itself to be the happening” rather than merely “the representation of the event.”¹⁹⁸ O’Hara thus engenders a conscious breathing response in his reader, in order that “two persons” might “meet” in the space of the poem “and do nothing but breathe.”

O’Hara’s respirating ‘Hôtel Transylvanie’ captures Wright’s vision of “SPACE” as “the continual becoming: invisible from which all rhythms flow to which they must pass. Beyond time or infinity. The new reality which organic architecture serves to employ in building. The breath of a work of art.”¹⁹⁹ The organic architecture that Wright defines would flourish, alongside the development of organic poetry, in the New York of the 1960s, where it occupied a space somewhere between modernism and postmodernism, both historically and stylistically. In Wright’s earliest built articulations, organic architecture retained many of the abstract, sculptural qualities of modernism, yet it also begins to shake off those heroic, monumental, and machine-like characteristics that postmodernism would challenge a decade later. Indeed, Wright sought to reintroduce ornament, romance, spirit, and tradition to architecture; features that had long since been buried by modernism, in order to subordinate “the mechanization of building [to] the service of creative architecture.”²⁰⁰ In this, he directly anticipates the work of Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi, who, in their 1972 book, *Learning from Las Vegas* would articulate their decorated shed of postmodernism in precisely these terms (more on this in chapter two). The New York School occupy a similarly liminal position in

¹⁹⁸ J. Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 135-154.

¹⁹⁹ Wright, *The Future of Architecture*, 323-4.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 321.

literature, paving the way for a postmodernism that would not come fully to fruition until the 1970s, while producing work that was still charged, in the 1950s and early 1960s, with the trace of late modernism (Williams; Mayakovsky; Olson). If liminal spaces attest to anything, then, it must be to the instability of rigidly delineated categories. As Wright himself wrote, “Isms, ists, and ites defeat the great hope we are still trying to keep alive in our hearts in the face of prevalent expedients now sterilizing the work of young American architects.”²⁰¹

“The great accidental architect”

In 1959, the same year that O’Hara penned ‘Personism’, his sister Maureen moved to New York to begin a job in one of the most innovative buildings the city had ever seen: the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, which had opened in October of that year (fig. 21).²⁰² One of the earliest examples of organic architecture,



fig. 21 The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum

the building was seemingly without precedent. As Francesco Dal Co writes, “buildings of this kind – and their meanings – do not belong to an epoch, a specific culture, or a geographical area; no ‘ism’ applies to

²⁰¹ Ibid., 324.

²⁰² Maureen Granville-Smith told me about her move to New York City and her job at the Guggenheim over an informal lunch in Connecticut in 2018.

them.”²⁰³ In part, Dal Co is right: the Guggenheim has stood the test of time as a work of architectural genius. Yet, as I am arguing, part of the reason that the Guggenheim does not belong to an epoch, culture, or ism, is because it falls in the undefined space between modernism and postmodernism. In fact, there are a number of other sites in New York City alone that also occupy this unclassifiable position: buildings such as Albert C. Ledner’s National Maritime Museum of America in 1964 (fig. 22), Edward Durrell Stone’s Italian

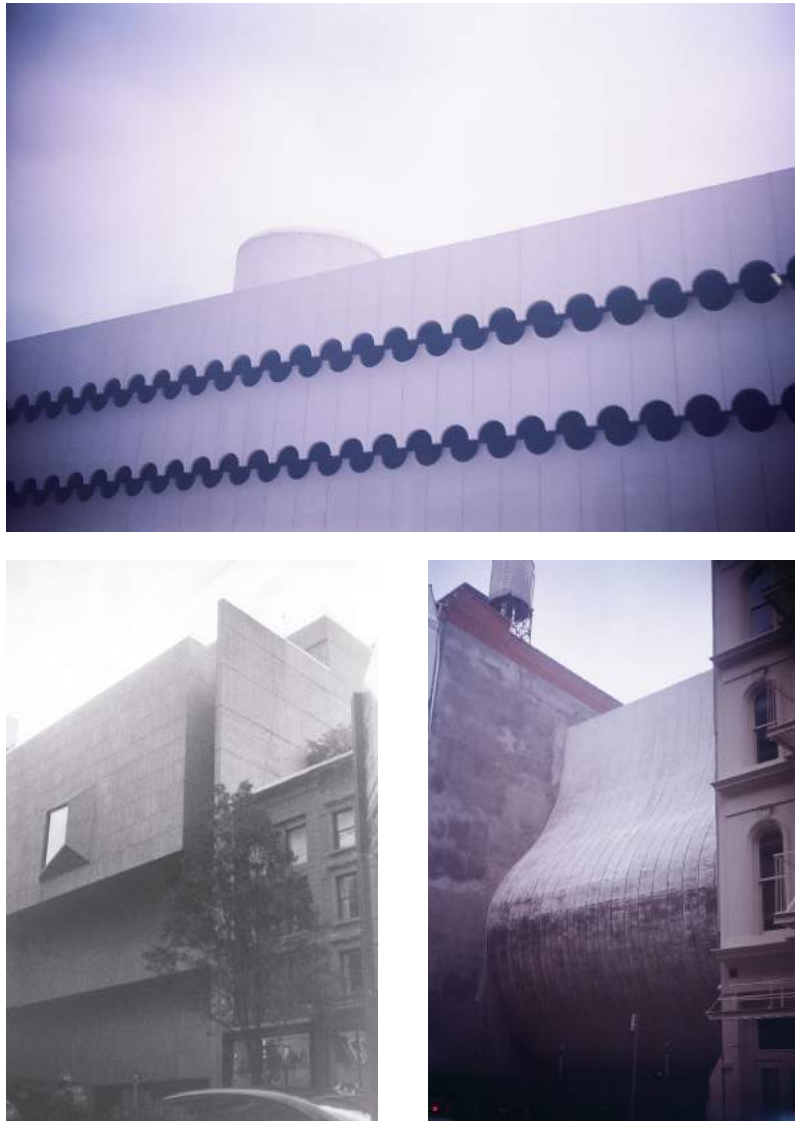


fig. 22, 23 & 24 National Maritime Museum of America, 1964;
Whitney Museum of Modern Art, 1966; Civic Center Synagogue,
1967

palazzo-inspired 2 Columbus Circle, also in 1964, Marcel Breuer’s Whitney Museum of Modern Art (now

²⁰³ F. Dal Co, *The Guggenheim: Frank Lloyd Wright’s Iconoclastic Masterpiece*, (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2017), vi.

the Met Breuer) in 1966 (fig. 23), and William Breger’s Civic Centre Synagogue in 1967 (fig. 24), all favoured the squatter, heavier and more organic style that Wright had established in the city.

Yet, though these styles would gradually evolve into the playful postmodernism of the 1970s, they also remain tethered to many of the qualities that had defined modernism: a sculptural sensibility; an impulse to ‘make it new’; an earnest sense of civic responsibility. Such buildings, I contend, should therefore not simply be overlooked as the last gasp of modernism, nor as the first baby steps of postmodernism. In the spring of 1962, O’Hara penned a review of the Guggenheim exhibition ‘Abstract Expressionists and Imagists’ for *Kulchur* magazine. “Before going into the show itself,” however, O’Hara devoted the first pages of his article to “say something nice about the building itself.”²⁰⁴ He explains that, “From long before construction work started on it, it had been a controversial thing, and it stayed so throughout the work on it, its opening, and its first several shows – every detail of its design discussed everywhere from the newspaper to *The Club*.”²⁰⁵ O’Hara, as this line suggests, had taken an interest in “every detail” of the Guggenheim’s design since long before its completion. Indeed, the building was commissioned in 1943, and Wright created his first blueprint the same year, which shows the building almost exactly as it would appear in New York over a decade and a half later (fig. 25). Work would begin on the foundations some ten years later, in 1954.²⁰⁶ “It’s wonderful looking from the outside,” O’Hara writes, “and when you enter the flat exhibition space on the

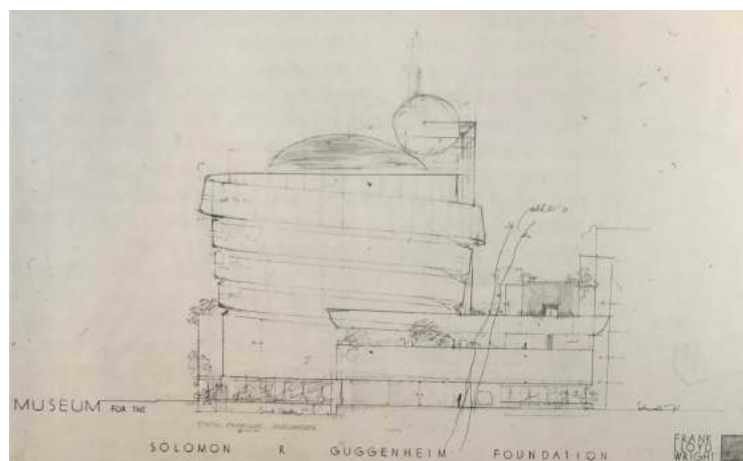


fig. 25 Frank Lloyd Wright, sketch for the Guggenheim, 1943

²⁰⁴ F. O’Hara (ed. D. Allen), *Standing Still and Walking in New York*, (Bolinas: Grey Fox Press, 1975), 126.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁶ For more on the design and construction of the Guggenheim, see: Dal Co, *The Guggenheim*, 38-60.

ground floor the effect of the works near at hand, the ramps and over them glimpses of canvases, and then the dome, is urbane and charming, like the home of a cultivated and mildly eccentric person.”²⁰⁷ In particular, O’Hara was a fan of Wright’s coiled ramp, both for viewing the artworks on display (“the downward stroll, then, is enhanced by pictures on the lower ramps, and you get lots of surprises”; “the light on the paintings, the variety of distance chosen for them, to be against or away from the wall and towards you is usually quite judicious”²⁰⁸) and for physical interactions with the space (“about this ramp, it almost completely eliminates the famous gallery-going fatigue. Your back doesn’t ache, your feet don’t hurt”²⁰⁹). O’Hara’s praise is tongue-in-cheek; but his admiration for the building was, it seems, genuine. In fact, O’Hara’s jocular celebration of the building aligns with the architecture itself – in sharp contradistinction to the work of the abstract expressionists on display. As he explains:

In a capitalist society fun is everything. Fun is the only justification for the acquisitive impulse, if one is to be honest. (The Romans were honest, they thought it was all girls, grapes and snow.) The Guggenheim Museum is fun, and as such it justifies itself. Abstract expressionism is not, and its justifications must be found elsewhere. Not to say it as justification, but simply as fact, abstract expressionism is the art of serious men.²¹⁰

Here, as early as 1962, O’Hara betrays an increasing shift away from the “serious men” of abstract expressionism, towards an aesthetics of “fun,” which he finds in the architecture of the Guggenheim. In an interview with Edward Lucie Smith in 1965, O’Hara will articulate this shift more completely, when he admits that his interests in art are always shifting, but “this coming year [I’m excited by] spatial sculpture.”²¹¹ This is an interest that has been largely overlooked in scholarship on O’Hara, who picks up these threads later in the interview, when he explains that:

It seems to me that the most original work is being done right now [...] in sculpture [...] Say Barnett Newman and sculptor and architect Tony Smith. And Tony Smith, for instance, whose ideas have been influential but no one really looked at his work, you know. And now, because of these younger people, it is possible to find people who are interested enough to investigate Tony Smith’s work and his ideas in a much more tangible way. Before

²⁰⁷ O’Hara, *Standing Still and Walking*, 126.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

²¹⁰ O’Hara, *Standing Still and Walking*, 128-9.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

The shapes, structures and syntaxes of the poem are a far cry from the slender skyscraper compositions that characterise O'Hara's work of the early and mid-1950s. According to Brossard, "the prevailing idea here is juxtaposition as if O'Hara modeled his poem from 'the great accidental architect' Frank L. Wright, as if his poems were to follow no other rule than accidental composition."²¹⁶ Figuring the building as 'accidental', O'Hara ties Wright's organicism to the spontaneous processes that also informed his own compositional practice,²¹⁷ while his use of enjambment, to separate the architect's first name from his last, serves to draw the readers' attention to the shared Christian name. Contextually, the poem thus creates a synergy between the architect and his building, and the poet and his verse. Yet, I argue, the same can be said at the compositional level: where Brossard suggests that "the air that fills the [FYI] poems seems to come directly from the gusts of wind rushing down Manhattan avenues,"²¹⁸ I want to argue that these gaps and horizontal rhythms are more redolent of the Guggenheim's "true logarithmic spiral" (to borrow Wright's phrase), arguably the building's most distinctive feature.²¹⁹

In the form of the skyscraper, which had prevailed over New York City throughout the twentieth century, architectural rhythm is defined by tension. As Soviet Constructivist architect Mosei Ginzburg writes, in his seminal publication, *Rhythm in Architecture* (1922), "When striving into space prevails, when vertical forces prevail, this creates the vertically elongated parallelepipeds of modern skyscrapers with all the tension of their rhythm."²²⁰ According to Ginzburg, rhythm is *the* essential principle behind architectural construction (as it is poetic composition). "From the moment when it came into existence," he writes, "until the present time, in its formal elements, particular articulations, and composition of masses, architecture has been

²¹⁶ Ibid., 24.

²¹⁷ Myths abound around O'Hara's spontaneous compositional process. As David Lehman notes, for example, the poem 'Pome (Lana Turner has collapsed!)' was allegedly written en route to a reading at Wagner College. He writes that: "On the way to the Staten Island Ferry, O'Hara bought the *New York Post* and on the choppy half-hour ride he wrote an instant meditation on the tabloid revelation that Hollywood actress Lana Turner had collapsed... O'Hara read the poem that afternoon, making it clear that he had written it in transit. The audience loved it[.]" Lehman, *The Last Avant-Garde*, 349. Or, as Kenneth Koch recalls: "One of the most startling things about Frank in the period when I first knew him was his ability to write a poem when other people were talking, or even to get up in the middle of a conversation, get his typewriter, and write a poem, sometimes participating in the conversation while doing so." K. Koch, 'A Note on Frank O'Hara in the Early Fifties,' in (eds. B. Berkson & J. LeSueur), *Homage to Frank O'Hara*, (Berkeley, CA: Big Sky, 1978), 26.

²¹⁸ Brossard, 'Frank O'Hara's Aesthetics of Shock', 20.

²¹⁹ Dal Co, *The Guggenheim*, 77.

²²⁰ M. Ginzburg, *Rhythm in Architecture*, (London: Artifice, 2016), 31.

inspired only by the laws of rhythm; these laws determine the true essence of all works of architecture.”²²¹ The reason for this essential quality lies in the *organic* character of rhythm: “It derives from man’s organic essence.” Indeed, “man’s internal world,” writes Ginzburg, “the activities of his lungs and heart, the movement of his hands and feet – is subject to the laws of rhythm, which are an element of psycho-physical nature.”²²² Lungs, heart, feet (as well as hands, as we will see) – all of those corporeal parts that I have outlined in O’Hara’s poetry²²³ – are also those that govern the rhythms of architecture. “Architecture is a living organism like any other,” Ginzburg stresses, “and following this analogy we are accustomed to endow it with all the functions of organic life.”²²⁴ Thus, the monumental tension of the skyscraper is “diametrically the opposite of every notion of movement”²²⁵ – the antithesis of “man’s organic essence.” The task facing the organic architect, then, must be to “overcome the rhythm of the vertical articulations and allow room for free development of the rhythm of the horizontal forces” which “pacify, balance, and reconcile you with the world.”²²⁶

These are the rhythms that dictate the organic architecture of the Guggenheim, its logarithmic spiral masterfully overcoming the tension of the vertical skyscraper while maintaining a sense of monumentality (“both modest and monumental,” to recall Ashbery’s description of O’Hara’s vernacular). This rhythm is generated, in part, by the hollowed sections on the tower’s facade, which both *create* the sense of fluid and continuous motion – “a curving wave that never breaks,” as Wright described it²²⁷ – while simultaneously disrupting it: the smooth, concrete surface is cut into, and thus its continuous nature is, in some sense, broken. This is achieved through Wright’s embedded use of the cantilever; a structural support that allows layers of material to horizontally overhang one another in an inverted stepping shape. Traditionally, the effect of the cantilever is one of visual imbalance, created by asymmetrical anchoring at only one end of the structure, to

²²¹ Ibid., 7.

²²² Ibid., 9.

²²³ As an aside, it is worth noting that these corporeal elements in O’Hara’s work also have crossovers with the practice of dance. According to Gooch, O’Hara and his friend, the dance critic and poet Edwin Denby, were “committed and passionate balletomanes.” Gooch, *City Poet*, 7. For more on O’Hara and balletic corporeality, see: D. Herd ‘Stepping Out with Frank O’Hara’ in *Frank O’Hara Now*, 70-85.

²²⁴ Ginzburg, *Rhythm in Architecture*, 109.

²²⁵ Ibid., 72.

²²⁶ Ibid., 101; 31.

²²⁷ Dal Co, *The Guggenheim*, 2.



fig. 26 Exemplary cantilevers: Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater, 1935

generate a sense of illusory instability, as though the overhanging section might hinge forward and collapse over its own foundations (fig. 26). In the Guggenheim, however, the cantilevers are so embedded into the coil of the structure as to be only subtly visible on the gently inverted stepping of the main tower.

In 'FMI 6/25/61', the lines frequently overhang one another, creating a visual rhythm of uncertainty that parallels an undercurrent of urban uncertainty: the nervous flitting from place to place; a relative absence of the lyric 'I', as Frank *O'Hara* gets displaced by other Franks (František Kupka; Frank Lloyd Wright); and the final teetering block of "whos," with unstable question marks fizzling out in a precarious parenthetical ending. Ultimately, Brossard concludes, the poem seeks to establish itself in opposition to the monumental. He writes that *O'Hara*:

composes an architecture of words which embraces post World War II New York City in the same way Wright's buildings embody the aesthetic concerns of the first half of the 20th century. In the FYI poems and the poems written in the early 1960s, *O'Hara's* architecture turns the accidental into a style against monumentality, integrity and continuity.²²⁸

If, as Shaw suggests, the FYI poems must be understood "in the context of the failures of Pound's late work" – as poems that dramatise the failures of the late modernist poetic that *O'Hara's* early poetry had aped – then they must also be read alongside the failures of late modernist monumentality. Turning away from the slender skyscraper-shaped poems that defined his early work, *O'Hara's* later poems signalled something more

²²⁸ Brossard, 'Frank *O'Hara's* Aesthetics of Shock', 24.

modest, less monumental, more spatially open, and more corporeally attuned: “something like a liveable space.” The question that remains must then be: to what extent are these space *liveable*? What transforms O’Hara’s poems into the “textual creation of spaces to be enacted through reading,” to recall Finberg’s terms, rather than simply the representation of sites and spaces? To answer this question, I turn, in the final part of this chapter, to some of the prevailing tropes and themes that underpin both the organic architecture of the 1960s and the poems of O’Hara’s ‘great period’: fertility, progeny, and communities of kinship.

“oh fertility! beloved of the Western world”

If organic architecture emerged in explicit antagonism to the monumentality of modernism, it also defined itself against what it took to be modernism’s ‘sterility’: as we have seen, Wright dismissed the modernist mantra ‘form follows function’ as “the password for *sterility*,” and argued against “prevalent expedients now *sterilizing* the work of young American architects.” To this end, organic architecture often understood itself as *fertile*. As Lewis Mumford (famously critical of the UN Building and international modernism broadly) wrote: “We must restore to the city the maternal, life-nurturing functions, the autonomous activities, the symbiotic associations that have long been neglected and suppressed. For the city should be an organ of love; and the best economy of cities is the care and culture of men.”²²⁹ Mumford, like Wright, thus advocates a rejection of “sterile escapist projects for exploring inter-planetary space” in favour of a modern city that can encompass “life in all its organic fecundity, diversity, and creativity.”²³⁰ In other words, the overtly masculine, machine-oriented, enterprises of the 1950s are dismissed as “sterile,” while the organic, maternal vision of

²²⁹ L.Mumford, *The City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects*, (New York: Harcourt Brace & World, Inc., 1961), 575. Can it really be without irony that Mumford idealises this feminine utopia as caring specifically, and only, for the interests of *men*?

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, 570-571.



figs. 27 & 28 Egg-and-dart detailing and miniature domes

the city as an “organ of love” is embraced by Mumford as “fertile.”²³¹ Perhaps the pinnacle of this expression in organic architecture appeared in the symbol of the egg, which exploded across the architectural landscape of the 1960s. In architectural theory of the period, Mumford, Le Corbusier, Reyner Banham, Cedric Price, Jane Jacobs, and Buckminster Fuller would all make reference to eggs. In New York State alone three egg-

²³¹ This view has its obvious problems, and both Mumford and Wright remain contested figures in the history of mid-century American architecture. Wright’s criticism of the international style bears traces of American jingoism, a hangover from his commitment to the country’s isolationist foreign policy of the late 1930s and 40s (which he openly supported throughout the Second World War), laced with undertones of racism, anti-semitism, and homophobia (for more on this see: M. Filler, *Makers of Modern Architecture*, (New York: New York Review of Books, 2013), 17-29). Meanwhile, Mumford’s devotion to maternal visions of the city bespeak misogynist strains, given voice to in ‘Mother Jacobs’ Home Remedies’, his 1962 review of Jane Jacobs’s *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. As the title of his article implies, Mumford’s attack was less on Jacobs’s ideas (many of which dovetailed with his own), than on Jacobs herself, with her wives’ tales and crack remedies for problems best left to the boys (L. Mumford, ‘Mother Jacobs’ Home Remedies’ in *The New Yorker*, 1st December, 1962). When Mumford seeks a city that behaves like a mother (“an organ of love”), predisposed to the “care and culture of men,” he relegates femininity to pastoral care, developing a model of organic architecture that reinforces the gender stereotypes that were beginning to break down in the 1960s. Mumford and Wright’s organicism is thus as polluted by toxic masculinity as Le Corbusier’s “city-as-machine.” I cite them, therefore, not to venerate their approaches, but to give a sense of the widespread anti-international modernist sentiment of the late 1950s and 1960s, and the replacement of these aesthetics with a model rooted in organicism and fertility.



figs. 29 & 30 The IBM World's Fair Pavilion, NY 1964 & The Egg Performing Arts Theatre, Albany

shaped buildings appeared between 1959 and 1978: Wright's Guggenheim Museum in 1959 (not only in the structure's tapering, cylindrical tower, but in the miniature geodesic domes that adorn the sculpture gardens and the oversized egg-and-dart detailing on the museum's facade) (figs. 27 & 28); Eero Saarinen's IBM Pavilion at the 1964 World's Fair (mentioned in O'Hara's poem 'Here in New York We Are Having a Lot of Trouble with the World's Fair') (fig. 29); and Wallace Harrison's The Egg Performing Arts Theatre in Albany (which opened in 1978, despite the fact that construction began as early as 1966) (fig. 30). And, between 1958 and 1968, three different designs for chairs explicitly incorporated this ovoid shape: Arne Jacobsen's Egg Chair in 1958; Peter Ghyczy's Garden Egg Chair in 1968 (fig. 31); and Henrik Thor-Larsen's Ovalia Egg Chair, also in 1968.

If the trope of sterility tells the story of international modernist architecture, it has also been the lens through which a number of scholars have focused their readings of modernist literature. Writing about early twentieth century literary modernism, for example, Edward Said diagnoses an "arid" and "wasteful [...] sterility of modern life," brought about by the conjunction of post-war horror and burgeoning Freudian theory:

[With the] authoritative weight of Freud's psychoanalytic theory, a significant and influential aspect of which posits the potentially murderous outcome of bearing children, we will have the unmistakable impression that few things are as problematic and as universally fraught as what we might have supposed to be the mere natural continuity between generations.²³²

²³² E. Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, (Cambridge, MT: Harvard University Press, 1983), 16.



fig. 31 Peter Ghyczy, Garden Egg Chair, 1968

Said suggests that, for the modernists, this loss “of the procreative, generational urge authorising filiative relationships” was also figured as a “loss of subject” in favour of “culture and society”: or, as he puts it elsewhere, as “the passage from nature to culture.”²³³ The solution, according to Said, was to be found in alternatives “whose social existence was not in fact guaranteed by biology, but by affiliation.”²³⁴ If O’Hara was moving away from his modernist forebears, it follows then that he was also moving away from their ‘sterile’ model of affiliation, by reinserting the subject into his poems and championing literary models of fertility.

Questions of filiation and affiliation underpin Shaw’s work on O’Hara as a coterie poet: work that, though it is among the least architecturally focused of the scholarship on O’Hara, remains perhaps the most important theory of O’Hara’s “liveable spaces.” Shaw turns to coterie as a model for addressing the “fact that theorization of community [...] can never operate independent of context.” According to Shaw:

one of the advantages the study of coterie can introduce into the often vague evocation of community, then, is that, because the charge of coterie tends to involve a claim about an aesthetic and social breach, it becomes a moment when historically inflected assumptions about community (and its relation to reading) get articulated. Through its sense of real or imagined social infraction, coterie introduces a self-reflexive component to the study of community.²³⁵

²³³ Ibid. 18-21.

²³⁴ Ibid.

²³⁵ Shaw, *Poetics of Coterie*, 7.

Shaw's designation of an "aesthetic and social breach" aligns with my own critical interest in breaking down the historically determined dichotomies of modernism and postmodernism. Furthermore, it is through such a breach, Shaw suggests, that *coterie* offers a lens through which to theorise community, while filtering out the often limiting scope of biography: as "both a mode of address and an *actual* context for that address," *coterie* bridges the gap between the 'real' and the 'imagined' to transform the poem itself into a social site.²³⁶ Indeed, as Shaw elaborates, *coterie* "is as much an idea about the social possibilities of affinity as it is a concrete sociological fact [...] Understood in this way, *coterie* functions less as a pejorative charge or as an occasion for biographical detail than as a code of reading that emerges as and helps to articulate the seam between biographical, historical particulars and modes of rhetoric, between archival facts and theoretical models."²³⁷ Through Shaw's recoding, the term *coterie* offers a way of reading O'Hara's poems as textual spaces of communal interaction, rather than simply as representations of community or as the poetizing of biographical detail. In searching for the seam between the reality of, and the poetic theorization of, community, Shaw's work mirrors my own thesis: where Shaw has turned to *coterie*, I have turned to architecture. In spite of these different models, the present research argues, with Shaw, that O'Hara's "work might be understood to examine social and literary linkages" and, "though for O'Hara these are primarily a matter of relationships among living persons (be they organic links of familial structures, the contingent links of friendship, or the ideological links of national subjects), they also crucially involve the kinds of linkages that literature can establish with its own past."

Shaw explains that "anthropologists understand kinship in two primary structures: alliance ("horizontal" association through marriage) and filiation ("vertical" association through birth)."²³⁸ Mapping these structures on to O'Hara's work, Shaw suggests that:

O'Hara's version of *coterie*, we might say, recodes both of these movements. He recodes alliances by replacing the organic and fixed social model of the family with a contingent and shifting association of friends. He recodes filiation not merely by refusing to produce offspring but also by refusing to be one. O'Hara's attempt to exit the filiative model of the Great Tradition is coincident both with his cultivation of obscure, often campy, genealogical precedents and with his frequently heretical readings of canonical authors.²³⁹

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, 29.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*

O'Hara's work does indeed re-code filiative models, but I am not convinced that this signals either a wholesale "exit" from them, nor a rejection of an "organic [...] social model." I thus want to build on and extend Shaw's diagnosis: staying with Shamma's notion of O'Hara as an essentially organic poetic, I suggest that if these linkages can be said to establish a relationship with a living present and a literary past, they also engender a relationship with these poems' prospective futures. In the last part of this chapter, I suggest that O'Hara's poetry is productive of a model of queer futurity, figured not only through a vigorous return of the subject but through explicit images of fertility and fecundity, coded in organic structures, intimate spaces, and images of that most potent fertile symbol: the egg.

"Wouldn't you like the eggs a little different today?"

In 1954 – the start of O'Hara's 'great period', as well as the year that construction began on Wright's Guggenheim – O'Hara penned the poem 'For Grace, After A Party'; a poem which, as Keston Sutherland suggests, "exists much as O'Hara claimed to hope that all his poetry might, between persons."²⁴⁰ Written five years before the unveiling of the Guggenheim, the poem also incorporates some of the shapes, structures and motifs that defined organic architecture, attesting to the fact that we can find crossovers between the poems and buildings of the period, not simply by mapping one on to the other, but by attending to shared cultural ideas and influences. Here, in its entirety, is the poem:

You do not always know what I am feeling.
Last night in the warm spring air while I was
blazing my tirade against someone who doesn't
interest
me, it was love for you that set me
afire,
and isn't it odd? for in rooms full of
strangers my most tender feelings
writhe and
bear the fruit of screaming. Put out your hand,
isn't there
an ashtray, suddenly, there? beside
the bed? And someone you love enters the room
and says wouldn't
you like the eggs a little
different today?
And when they arrive they are
just plain scrambled eggs and the warm weather
is holding (*CP* 214).

²⁴⁰ K. Sutherland, 'Close Reading' in *Frank O'Hara Now*, 121.

'For Grace' begins, not with words, but with an indentation; an Olsonian marker of breath that forestalls the opening line and sets the tone for the speaker's uncertain confession. As Sutherland remarks, the indentation betrays "an utterance that has been prepared for, even if only in the space of a conscious brief inhalation."²⁴¹ In the relentlessly enjambed assemblage that follows, presided over by "the warm spring air" that is still "holding" stormily at the poem's close, a sense of tension builds, like the taut pulling of a coil or spring, ready to bounce under the nervous pressure of confession. As with Wright's coil design for the Guggenheim, the familiar axes of composition have been disrupted, so that tension is structurally embedded while rhythm is horizontally dispersed. The single stanza composition is punctuated by line breaks, which threaten the poem's collapse (like the speaker's own see-sawing of anxiety and over-confidence – nervous inhalation; blazing tirade; tender feelings writhing) but in fact remain tentatively held together (as the poem's final word, 'holding', reminds us), maintaining the stanza's upright, material wholeness from start to finish. In this respect the poem resembles the Guggenheim's cantilevered structure, each line projecting over the next to create a 'logarithmic spiral' that carves out spaces for the reader to navigate.

Entering the poem from the outside, we are greeted by the warm spring air. A line drops and, suddenly, we are whisked into "rooms full of strangers." In another instant, the walls of this room fall away and "you" are told to "put out your hand." This unexpected directive transforms the "you" to whom the speaker's feelings have so far been addressed, into the "you" of the reader, who now finds themselves in a bedroom, feeling their way through the poem as they encounter "an ashtray, suddenly, there [...] beside the bed." Through the bump²⁴² enacted by the poem's conflation of cantilevered enjambment and authorial directive, the encounter with the ashtray demands that the reader figure themselves in relation to the

²⁴¹ Ibid., 122.

²⁴² As both Sutherland and Brossard have noted, O'Hara's poems are often about the experience of bumping into things – a bodily experience that is evoked not only through the scenes and images described but by "the verbal bumps and jolts" which are "an essential moment of O'Hara's urban aesthetics." Brossard, 'Frank O'Hara's Aesthetics of Shock', 26. As an aside, O'Hara's only criticism of the Guggenheim design was that "I don't like *bumping* into those pillars when I'm talking to somebody." *Standing Still and Walking*, 126.

bedroom, the scene of the corporeal encounter.²⁴³ The speaker thus invites a groping towards his poem, and implicitly towards himself (the poem existing ‘between two persons’), so that two bodies might meet through the action of *holding* hands, as the poem’s final word implies. Like a complex work of architecture, the poem creates a “liveable space” contingent across its imagery and themes, its shape, structure, and address, and one that is essentially organic in its attention to the bodies that encounter it. Yet, if ‘For Grace’ is organic in terms of its corporeal attention it is also, I suggest, organic by way of its fertile sensibility, captured through the image of eggs at the poem’s close.

Images of eggs appear across O’Hara’s oeuvre – a fact that has, to date, received no critical attention in O’Hara scholarship (fig. 32). From early surreal invocations (“Listen, you really are too beautiful to be true / you egg-beater” (*CP* 10) in the poem ‘Homage to Rose Sélavy’, O’Hara’s address to Marcel Duchamp’s alter ego; or the transformation of Oppenheim’s fur teacup into a “plate of ham and eggs eaten with a fur collar on” (*CP* 143), to representations of consumables - “How sad the lower East side is on Sunday morning in May / eating yellow eggs” (*CP* 405) - the shift that occurs might be read as commensurate with O’Hara’s rejection of modernism towards something franker, more quotidian, and more corporeal: as Blasing notes, “the intimate connection between words and food, between using language and eating in the infantile erotic/nourishing sense, provides O’Hara with a secular version of the ‘Word made flesh’, and accounts for the overwhelmingly alimentary nature of his imagery, including his imagery about poetry.”²⁴⁴ In other words, eggs function as a food stuff that enmeshes with the poem, drawing attention to the speaker’s corporeal presence (a body that eats as well as writes) while also transforming the composition into something to be corporeally consumed (and not just read) by the reader.

In the poems of O’Hara’s ‘great period’ (of which ‘For Grace’ is an early example), the egg assumes a new function, featuring in ways similar to the eggs in the organic architecture of the period: they appear

²⁴³ The moment invites an intertextual crossover with Keats’ “living hand, now warm and capable,” which is held towards the reader at the poem’s close: “see here it is – / I hold it towards you,” J. Keats (ed. J. Barnard) *Selected Poems*, (London: Penguin, 1999), 215. This is not the only moment at which O’Hara writes about hands, and not the only time that he recalls Keats in doing so. In the poem ‘Sleeping on the Wing’, O’Hara writes: “Those features etched in the ice of someone/ loved who died, you are a sculptor dreaming of space/ and speed, your hand alone could have done this./ Curiosity, the passionate hand of desire. Dead/ or sleeping?” (*CP* 236) The dual images of “ice” and “passionate hand” recall the “icy silence of the tomb” that waits to greet Keats’ “living hand,” while the closing question - “dead or sleeping?” - recalls the final line of ‘Ode to a Nightingale’: “Do I wake or sleep?” Keats, *Selected Poems*, 171. Yet where Keats inserts his own hand in order that it might intrude into the space of his future reader, O’Hara’s hand signals an invitation to the reader to *enter* the spaces created in the poetry.

²⁴⁴ Blasing, *American Poetry*, 163.

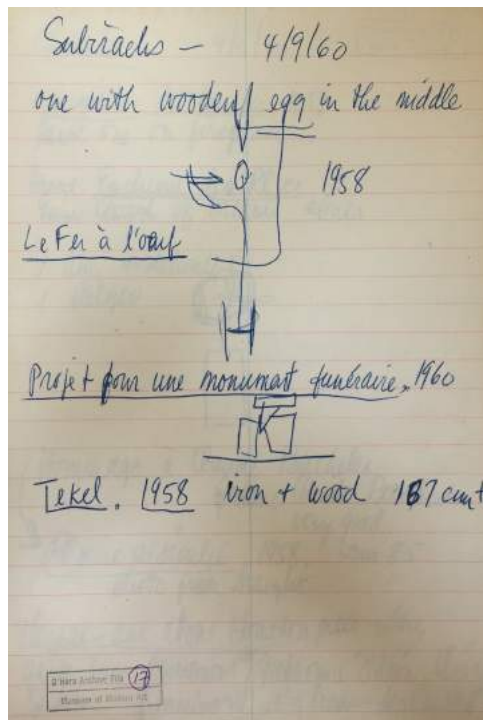


fig. 32 “one with wooden egg in the middle”
 page from O’Hara’s notebook

“between two persons” in the domestic spaces carved out by the poems: “And someone you love enters the room / and says wouldn’t / you like the eggs a little / different today?” (CP 214); or “We will end up praising the mattressless sleigh-bed and the / Mexican egg and the clock that will not make me know / how to leave you” (CP 343); or “love is like the path in the snow we are making / though no one else can follow, leading us only / to the ocean’s sure embrace of summer, serious and free / as you tell me you’ve got to have eggs for breakfast / and we divert our course a little without fear” (CP 355). In these examples the site of the bedroom has been reclaimed: as we recall in ‘October’, “If I turn down my sheets / children start screaming through / the windows. My glasses / are broken on the coffee table. [...] while I am beaten to death / by a thug in a back bedroom.” In rejecting the shapes and modes of modernist architecture, and adopting instead the structures and tropes of organic styles, O’Hara finds a “something like a liveable space,” liminally placed between the monoliths of modernism and postmodernism. Thus, I suggest that O’Hara’s late images of eggs help to construct these intimate and domestic spaces within the poems. In this way, the possibility of literary progeny might be realised in queer models of futurity, generating a relationship between the poet-speaker and the “you” of a future readership.

If the intimate spaces that have been recoded and reclaimed are bedrooms, they appear imbued with attendant sexual undertones (and sometimes overtones). We can trace an implicit sexual narrative in ‘For Grace’, the poem’s opening lines buoyed by sexual innuendo, driving towards the promise of orgasmic release. Phrases such as “blazing my tirade against someone,” “it was love for you that set me afire,” “my most tender feelings writhe,” “bear the fruit of screaming” are suggestive of a somatic, sexual surge, though the moment of climax is never realised. Instead, we skip the act and shift straight to the morning after (as the poem’s title implies) where the “you” is about to eat eggs in bed. The sought-after release is denied by the combination of static imagery – the nebulous “someone you love”; the routine “plain scrambled eggs”; the middling “warm weather,” still “holding” – and the poem’s ‘scrambled’ structure, which keeps threatening to fall apart but ultimately maintains its tension until the end. Recalling, again, Wright’s hidden cantilever, O’Hara embeds anaphora at the end of the poem. Muffled by the enjambed lines, the secreted accretion of ‘and’ quietly helps to build a sense of plateauing: “*and* someone you love enters the room / *and* says wouldn’t / you like the eggs a little / different today? / *And* when they arrive they are / just plain scrambled eggs *and* the warm weather / is holding.” The third ‘and’ (“and when they arrive”) confounds our expectations: shouldn’t this read ‘but’, since we were expecting “the eggs a little different today”? The poem thus substitutes sexual climax for a bathetic image of ‘plain’ breakfast eggs – unfertilized, even scrambled beyond symbolic recognition, to imply a rejection of the sex act as reproductive.

In a poem co-written with Bill Berkson in 1961, entitled ‘Us Looking up to St Bridget’, O’Hara revisits the conflation of sex and eggs, when he writes that “It is impossible / to be American if you’re not French first it is / impossible to fuck without thinking of *oeufs sur/ le plat*.”²⁴⁵ The start of the line is indicative of the influence of French poetry on the New York School: as Perloff notes, in appropriately corporeal terms, “O’Hara’s heart was, from the very beginning, French.”²⁴⁶ Yet the line shifts with uncharacteristic violence, to an image of “fuck[ing],” unexpectedly tied to an image of eggs on a plate. In part, this congruence of imagery is a return to O’Hara’s surrealist roots (also passed down from French forebears). On first reading, the line appears to refute the possibility for anything like fertility: the semantic choice of “fuck” is decidedly antagonistic to the language of heteronormative reproduction, while the image of an unfertilised egg “*sur le*

²⁴⁵ O’Hara & Berkson, *Hymns of St. Bridget*, 19.

²⁴⁶ Perloff, *Poet Among Painters*, 33.

plat” would seem to suggest an essentially unproductive act. Nevertheless, the confluence of imagery must evoke at least the *notion* of reproductive sex, a possibility that the poem thus simultaneously instigates and denies. This doubling is a familiar move in O’Hara’s fertility-oriented poetry. In ‘Cornkind’ (1960), O’Hara recodes fertility by redrawing the (homo)sexual act as fertile in and of itself: “you are of me, that’s what / and that’s the meaning of fertility / hard and moist and moaning” (CP 387). Shaw suggests that in this poem, “O’Hara rethinks structures of literary kinship [...] as something like inhabitation, coexistence or alliance – concretized in gay sex, which would enact linkage in itself outside of representation and reproduction.”²⁴⁷ Shaw’s reading essentially aligns with my own (and I am particularly drawn to the notion of inhabitation, of which more later), yet it relies on keeping the terms of the address within the bounds of the poem. Rather, I suggest, the significance of the poem’s final line extends beyond the margins of representation, for if fertility is coded here it is coded doubly, first in the image of gay sex, and then outside of the poem, in the relationship between the “me” of the poet and the future “you” of the reader: “you are of me, that’s what / and that’s the meaning of fertility.” And if this is O’Hara’s definition of fertility, we can follow it to its logical conclusion: “and so personism was *born* [my emph.]”

Returning to ‘Us Looking up to St Bridget’, the implied, fertile association between sex and eggs is eventually realized a few stanzas later, when O’Hara and Berkson state:

I think everything began on August 30, 1939
 except that I discovered it later I don’t care
 when St. Bridget was born or David or Michelangelo
 or Diaghilev or William Carlos Williams they started
 with me because I thought about them first I built
 the Church of St. Bridget and feel responsible that it’s
 crooked[.]²⁴⁸

The date on which “everything began” is Berkson’s birthday,²⁴⁹ so the implication here is that the poet “births” other writers and artists simply by intoning them in the space of the poem. Not only people but places too, the poets posturing as architects, “building” St. Brigid’s Roman Catholic Church. Replete with homosexual overtones, the “crooked steeple” (removed in 1962 due to safety concerns) fascinated the lapsed

²⁴⁷ Shaw, *Poetics of Coterie*, 36.

²⁴⁸ O’Hara & Berkson, *Hymns of St. Bridget*, 20.

²⁴⁹ Berkson admits in the notes to *Hymns of St. Bridget* that “most of these [poems] are mostly by [O’Hara] and the parts by me are mostly me trying to keep up” (83). Therefore, although this section opens in what is most likely Berkson’s voice, I will nonetheless treat the poem as equally O’Hara’s: the extent to which lines and words belong to which poet can never be fully untangled, and thus the poem has to be taken as fully collaborative.

Catholic O'Hara with all of its "accidental" and vernacular organicism; an antidote to the straight, sterile towers of modernism. As he writes in 'Hymn to St. Bridget's Steeple' (1960) "it is to you, bending limp and ridiculous."²⁵⁰ Or, in the opening lines of 'Steps' (1961), "How funny you are today New York / like Ginger Rogers in *Swingtime* / and St. Bridget's steeple leaning a little to the left" (CP 370). This line is sharply juxtaposed by images of international modernism that counterbalance the poem towards its close: "and all those liars have left the UN / the Seagram Building's no longer rivalled in interest / not that we need liquor (we just like it)" (CP 371).

If the poem's earlier act of "fucking" engendered an image of an egg, then the backward-looking model of literary progeny that follows would seem commensurate with this recoding of heteronormativity: birthing their queer congregation beneath the "crooked" architecture of St. Bridget's steeple, O'Hara and Berkson's model of kinship does indeed become "something like inhabitation, coexistence or alliance" as Shaw suggests – but an inhabitation that speaks to the future by constructing poetic spaces that also invite the reader in. Thus, in these later poems, O'Hara's recalibration of the familiar axes of structure and rhythm parallel his alteration of vertical and horizontal models of association (filiative and affiliate), so that everything becomes "scrambled" like eggs on a warm spring morning.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have attempted to draw attention to the relationship between O'Hara's poetry and the contemporaneous organic architecture of the 1950s and 60s. Placing O'Hara's 'Personism' in relation to Wright's 'Organic Architecture', and 'For Grace, After A Party' in relation to the Guggenheim Museum, I have explored the salient themes, shapes and structures that unite the two: an emphasis on corporeal engagement; a subsequent return to human scale in the shift away from the monumental; and a reclaiming (and recoding) of associative models of fertility to create "something like a liveable space."

At the start of this chapter I emphasised the importance of the mid-point that both O'Hara's (and the New York School's) poetry and organic architecture occupied in the narrative of twentieth century aesthetics, suggesting something of a liminal position between modernism and postmodernism. In

²⁵⁰ Ibid., 13.

concluding, I want to restate the importance of this mid-point and, in so doing, emphasise the extent to which removing these placeholders has helped to generate new readings.

Why is it important to locate the aesthetic moments that fall ‘between’? And why might it be important to move away from the terms modernism and postmodernism? I do not want to suggest that we dismiss these terms altogether – indeed, in the chapter that follows, I seek to place the work of John Ashbery in its postmodern context (albeit with some reframing of the ethics and aesthetics of that term). Rather, I am suspicious of the ways in which an adherence to these terms generates assumptions – especially when working across different disciplines. By marrying O’Hara’s work with either modernism or postmodernism, scholarship has a tendency to replicate gaps, errors, and misreadings. If the aim of this thesis is to encourage poetry and architecture to shed light on one another, then this must occur at a contextual, as well as structural, level. In the present chapter, therefore, I have attempted to demonstrate that a shift away from a reliance on these terms reveals previously unexplored connections: the figure of Frank Lloyd Wright and the Guggenheim has offered new ways of thinking about O’Hara as an organic poet, and new ways of “activating” the spaces that his poems create. To capture this I turn, in closing, once more to the image of the egg as a case study in postmodern tropology. Eggs would continue to appear as tropes throughout postmodern art: on Joaquim de Ros i Ramis and Alexandre Bonaterrain’s Dalí Theatre and Museum (1974), its parapet topped with giant eggs (as well as a geodesic dome) (fig. 33); in Terry Farrell’s Breakfast Television Centre (1981) in Camden, London, crowned with oversized eggs in striped egg cups (fig. 34); in Claes



figs. 33 & 34 Dalí Theatre and Museum & Breakfast Television Centre

Oldenburg's²⁵¹ *False Food Selection* (1966) (fig. 35); in Andy Warhol's screen print *Eggs* (1982) (fig. 36); in Jeff Koons' *Cracked Egg* (1994-2006), which sits among his iconic mirrored sculptures (fig. 37), and so on. What these examples demonstrate is an aesthetics of fun filtered through the image of the consumable: the perfect icon for the "capitalist society," which O'Hara identified in 1962. Almost thirty years later, Frederic Jameson would theorise this tendency as the "cultural logic of late capitalism" under the term "postmodernism." He writes that:

what happened to culture may well be one of the more important clues for tracking the postmodern: an immense dilation of its sphere (the sphere of commodities), an immense and historically original acculturation of the Real, a quantum leap in what Benjamin still called the "aestheticization" of reality (he thought it meant fascism, but we know it's only fun: a prodigious exhilaration with the new order of things, a commodity rush, our "representations" of things tending to arouse an enthusiasm and a mood swing not necessarily inspired by the things themselves).²⁵²

In other words, the postmodern condition is typified by: an explosion of commodification; a drive towards compulsive consumption ("a mood swing not necessarily inspired by the things themselves"); and a rampant aestheticisation of reality. But, as Jameson quips, this depoliticised state of affairs is not the fascism that Benjamin had feared in the thirties; "it's only fun," a kind of thrill-seeking, corporeally (not to mention erotically) designated "arous[al]" into a state of "exhilaration" and "enthusiasm":

So, in postmodern culture, "culture" has become a product in its own right; the market has become a substitute for itself and fully as much a commodity as any of the items it includes within itself: modernism was still minimally and tendentially the critique of the commodity and the effort to make it transcend itself. Postmodernism is the consumption of sheer commodification as a process.²⁵³

Little wonder, then, that foodstuffs should loom so large in the art produced by a culture predicated on consumption and that such images should appear as figures of fun: for as O'Hara diagnosed in 1962, "fun is the only justification for the acquisitive impulse."

Yet, if eggs would come to feature as a playful icon of consumerism in the postmodern art of the 1970s and 80s, in O'Hara's work – as in the organic architecture of the period – they figure in more nuanced ways, as this chapter has suggested. The egg in O'Hara's work epitomises the threshold moment at which the

²⁵¹ In fact, O'Hara praises Oldenburg's ability to "make a lunch counter display case lyrical, not to say magical" later in the *Kulchur* article (p.131).

²⁵² Jameson, *Postmodernism*, ix.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*



figs. 35, 36 & 37 Claes Oldenburg, *False Food Selection*, 1966; Andy Warhol, *Eggs*, 1982; Jeff Koons, *Cracked Egg*, 1994-2006

New York School sit, somewhere between the “serious men” of abstract expressionism (and late modernism more generally) and the playful surfaces of postmodern parody and pastiche. O’Hara’s poems *are*, as Blasing suggests, to some extent positioned in the market as consumable or digestible acquisitions, and his manifesto *does*, as Perloff argues, take the form of a playful or “sly parody.” Yet, in spite of these parodic or consumerist impulses, O’Hara’s poems remain motivated by something more meaningful: a desire not simply to play, but to open up “something like a liveable space,” in which corporeal engagements between the poet and his readership might be possible. Just as the organic forms propounded by the likes of Wright and Mumford filtered the radical past through images of eggs in order to build the city of the future, the egg in O’Hara’s poetry works to overturn conventions of fertility and create queer models of futurity that figure the relationship between the writer and the reader of a poem as one of authorial progeny. If the 1960s represents a liminal gap between modernism and postmodernism, then perhaps we should read this as Maggie Nelson reads the gaps that occur in New York School writing: as a place to insert the body.

“For it all builds up into something, meaningless or meaningful”:

Poetic structures in the work of John Ashbery

Introduction

The poetry of John Ashbery is difficult to read; scholars and critics, disciples as well as detractors, have routinely made a point of noting this fact. “On the one hand, I am an important poet, read by younger writers,” Ashbery himself remarked in an interview in 1979, “and on the other hand, nobody understands me.”²⁵⁴ David Herd’s *John Ashbery and American Poetry* is framed around this paradox. Noting that Ashbery has been lauded as well as dismissed as “incomprehensible,” “difficult,” “paradoxical,” and “irrational,” Herd argues that this trope of critical “misunderstanding” amounts to “a central, perhaps the central, impulse of the work.”²⁵⁵

In his monograph on Ashbery, *On the Outside Looking Out: John Ashbery’s Poetry*, John Shoptaw captures the aesthetics of this difficulty when he describes Ashbery’s poetry as:

an assembly of unruly, irresponsible, factional, long-winded, strange, and outspoken members. Its particulars (details of time and place, objects, selected words) are often vague, unexpected, abstracted, conflicting, misplaced, or missing; its argument or narrative is insufficiently supported, inconsistent, incomplete, and fragmented; its discourses, genres, and forms are strangely mixed or misapplied; its grammar and syntax are twisted, disconnected, or elongated; and its autobiographical subject is withheld or covertly generalized, resulting in an abstract expressionism which unsettles and contorts all other subject matters by removing their frame of reference.²⁵⁶

This layered ‘difficulty’ is what makes Ashbery’s poetry so appealing (“I am an important poet, read by younger writers”), but it is also what makes it so impenetrable for the critical reader (“nobody understands me”). The term *critical reader* is key here, since Ashbery’s poetry consciously hinges on different modes of readerly engagement: the casual reader versus the critical. Asked in an interview if he likes to ‘tease’ his reader, Ashbery responded:

²⁵⁴ P. A. Stitt, ‘John Ashbery, The Art of Poetry No.33’ in *The Paris Review*, (No. 90; Winter 1983).

²⁵⁵ D. Herd, *John Ashbery and American Poetry*, (New York: Palgrave, 2000), 3.

²⁵⁶ J. Shoptaw, *On the Outside Looking Out: John Ashbery’s Poetry*, (Cambridge & London: Harvard University Press, 1994), 2.

I guess it depends on what you mean by “tease.” It’s all right if it’s done affectionately, though how can this be with someone you don’t know? I would like to please the reader, and I think that surprise has to be an element of this, and that may necessitate a certain amount of teasing.²⁵⁷

This teasing, this desire to produce pleasure and surprise in the reader, inheres in all of the difficulties that Shoptaw draws out. But for the critic, the pleasure of this kind of surface reading gets frustrated in the attempt to mine for generative readings; and Ashbery courts this state of affairs. Discussing his 1979 poem ‘Litany’ – a piece written in two, contiguous blocks, intended to be read simultaneously, a feat impossible for a single reader to accomplish – Ashbery commented that:

I intended, in ‘Litany,’ to write something so utterly discursive that it would be beyond criticism – not because I wanted to punish critics, but because this would somehow exemplify the fullness, or, if you wish, the emptiness, of life, or, at any rate, its dimensionless quality.²⁵⁸

Where the *reader* is teased, the *critic* is evaded. Crucially, however this evasion is not intended as “punishment,” but as an attempt to capture the “fullness, or, if you wish, the emptiness, of life.” The conflation of full and empty is a pervasive trope in Ashbery’s work: as he writes in the opening to ‘The New Spirit’, the first expansive prose poem from his 1972 collection, *Three Poems*, “I thought that if I could put it all down, that would be one way. And next the thought came to me that to leave all out would be another, and truer, way” (*TP* 309). What Ashbery elsewhere calls “this leaving out business” (*RM*199) is the poet’s most distinctive textual trick: through the careful construction of grammatical lucidity Ashbery conceals imagistic and narrative illogicality and incohesion: a “leaving out” is made possible by a “putting it all down.” The poems are therefore full – full of words – but empty of narrative cogency. An Ashberyan take on the tradition of the Lucretian swerve, it is in this respect that the poems confound the critical reader; for, as Ashbery shows us, a density of words, logically structured, does not necessarily equate to *meaning*.

Ashbery’s approach to structure amounts to “a kind of improvisatory architecture,” as the poet John Ash put it to Ashbery in an interview in 1985. “Yes,” Ashbery agreed (uncharacteristically for a poet usually reticent to concede a critic’s reading of his work), “I think that’s rather a beautiful formulation, architecture

²⁵⁷ Stitt, ‘John Ashbery, The Art of Poetry No.33’

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

being so non-improvisatory.”²⁵⁹ Always drawn to paradoxical possibilities, the idea of an improvisatory architecture speaks to Ashbery’s sense of the poem not only as a structure, or series of structures, but as a poem in a perpetual state of construction, unfolding in unexpected ways as both writer writes and reader reads. In an earlier interview, Ashbery elucidated this position when he remarked that:

What I like about music is its ability of being convincing, of carrying an argument through successfully to the finish, though the terms of the argument remain unknown quantities. What remains is the structure, the architecture of the argument, scene or story. I would like to do this in poetry.²⁶⁰

Leaving the argument an unknown quantity but creating a *structure* that carries “through successfully to the finish”: this is the “architecture” of an Ashbery poem. Yet it is this relegation of the terms of an argument to its structure that has led to the current state of critical affairs, in which Ashbery’s poetry is continually misunderstood. As Ashbery noted:

My poetry is often criticized for a failure to communicate, but I take issue with this; my intention is to communicate and my feeling is that a poem that communicates something that’s already known by the reader is not really communicating anything to him and in fact shows a lack of respect for him.²⁶¹

In this statement lies the nugget of Ashbery’s poetry: these poems are about *communication*, but not about *meaning* – and this is the basic principle of architecture, the paradigm to which Ashbery is self-professedly drawn, with all of its world-changing, perhaps even utopian, promise: “Although all artists are visionaries in some sense,” Ashbery writes, “architects are perhaps the most radically visionary, since their aim is to alter the world and our lives” (*RS*332). This, as I will show, is why the force of Ashbery’s work lies not in surface or imagery, not even in depth or space, but in form and structure: meaning may not sit easily on the surface, but Ashbery mobilises poetic structure to communicate possibilities for “alter[ing] the world and our lives.”

Countless critics have taken the Ashbery of ‘Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror’ at his word, when he writes that “everything is surface” (*SP* 70). In contradistinction to the ‘depths’ of modernism, Ashbery’s aesthetic is typified as a gilding of postmodern surface: as Daniel Hoffman remarked, in his *Harvard Guide to Contemporary American Writing*, Ashbery’s poetry “is all reverie conceived exclusively on the right side of the

²⁵⁹ J. Ash, ‘In Conversation with John Ashbery’ in *PN Review* 46, (Volume 12; Number 2; November-December 1985).

²⁶⁰ J. Ashbery, ‘John Ashbery’ in (ed. P. Leary & R. Kelly) *A Controversy of Poets: An Anthology of Contemporary American Poetry*, (New York: Doubleday, 1965), 523.

²⁶¹ J. Bloom & R. Losada, ‘Craft interview with John Ashbery’ in *New York Quarterly* (9: Winter 1972), 12.

brain, attractive in texture; but towards structure it is seditious, hence few of these poems hold together as unified experiences and their profusion of imagery, however dazzling, is fatiguing.” The poems are, indeed, concerned with surface – specifically surfaces that seem to repel, as in the great sheets of ice that underwrite ‘The Skaters’ or the reflective mirror of ‘Self-Portrait’. But this much amounts to *readerly* experience: the pleasure of flying across ice or catching your reflection in a hall of mirrors. For the critical reader, on the other hand, these surfaces might best be understood as Homeric sirens: beautiful and intoxicating flashes of imagery or sentiment that lure the critical reader on to the rocks of Ashbery’s difficulty. If, as I am suggesting, the challenge of Ashbery’s poetry is to be located in the conflation of emptiness and fullness, then critical work must recode this conflation, no longer as vacuous surface, but as the interplay – contrary to Hoffman’s reading – of so many complex and densely wrought *structures* – structures of form and mise-en-page; structures of syntax and grammar; structures of reading, of temporality, and of the very process of composition.

If Ashbery’s poetry is thought in motion, or structure under construction, this chapter attempts to approach it in relation to forms of architecture that are not fixed but are in flux, improvised or improvising, moving, changing, fluid. This chapter is split into three parts, each of which charts one of Ashbery’s collections against a contemporaneous architectural movement. Alongside *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962), I consider the visionary architecture of Archigram, arguing that Ashbery’s early experimental collection amounted to a poetic scaffolding, a kind of vision of what poetry *could be*. In the second section, I read *The Double Dream of Spring* (1970) through the work of Italian postmodern architect Aldo Rossi, who captivated Ashbery for his ability to straddle the concrete and the fantastical, both in his drawings and in his realised buildings. In *The Double Dream of Spring*, I suggest that we can begin to chart the development of Ashbery’s embedded grammatical structures, which work, like Rossi’s buildings, to create an illusion of cohesion and classical formalism, while, in fact, masking a complex and finely-wrought illogicality. Skimming over *Three Poems* and *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, the final section of this essay looks to *Houseboat Days* (1977), Ashbery’s most self-consciously postmodern and architectural collection. Following John Shoptaw, I suggest that this collection finds a corollary in Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi’s *Learning from Las Vegas*, with its emphasis on the American commercial vernacular and the decorated shed of postmodern ornament. In this final section, however, I seek to reclaim Ashbery, as well as Scott Brown and Venturi, from the charge of

surface or superficial aesthetics, to show that the question of structure remains pervasive in the thinking of all three.

Moving from the visionary to the prosaic – not only in Ashbery’s poetry but in the architectural movements against which I map these collections – this chapter explores the paradoxical conflation of solidity and void, in the search for new critical openings in the structures of Ashbery’s poetry. At the same time, I extend the work begun in chapter one and continue to reframe the received history of Frederic Jameson’s “radical break or coupure” that separates modernism from postmodernism in the narrative of the triumph of surface over depth. In my attempt to redefine these movements and their aesthetic mores, I adopt and modify Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus’s ‘surface reading’, a critical approach that rejects well-established ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’. In their critique of “symptomatic reading,” Best and Marcus do not “construe surface as symptomatic readers often have – as a layer that conceals, as clothing does skin, or encloses as a building’s facade does its interior,” rather, they:

take surface to mean what is evident, perceptible, apprehensible in texts; what is neither hidden nor hiding; what, in the geometrical sense, has length and breadth but no thickness, and therefore covers no depth. A surface is what is being looked *at* rather than what we must train ourselves to see *through*.²⁶²

Pushing against – or at the very least, reframing – the effect of Freud, New Criticism, and poststructuralism on twentieth century literary thought, Best and Marcus’s approach is defined by its own suspicion of the suspicious critic, rather than as something that advocates the superficiality of the text or that champions postmodernity. The ambition of surface reading, then, is to *reclaim* the idea of surface from the narrative of postmodern vacuity: for, as they show, surfaces can be skated in modernist texts, and depths can be plumbed in the postmodern. What Best and Marcus’s ‘surface reading’ advocates, then, is a return to an idea of surface as something other than postmodern superficiality, something other than the two-dimensional notion of a skin, that covers the text as a facade does a building. Through my attention to structure – that which makes surface possible but which, at moments, can also constitute a surface in and of itself – this chapter hopes to develop its own model of surface reading, looking to the interplay of architectural structures and surfaces in order to break down spurious notions of postmodern superficiality, and to aid future scholars in surmounting some of the obstacles that have historically faced the critical reader of Ashbery’s difficult poetry.

²⁶² Best & Marcus, ‘An Introduction to Surface Reading’, 9.

“Like some crazy balloon”: The Tennis Court Oath

An inquiry into the structures of John Ashbery’s poetry must begin with a discussion of *The Tennis Court Oath*. Published in 1962, Ashbery’s second collection was also his most formally experimental, and has received passionate criticism from devotees and detractors alike.

His first collection, *Some Trees*, was published in 1956 and had relied on the supports of various modernisms; most notably surrealism, as W. H. Auden dourly noted on conceding to Ashbery the Yale Younger Poets prize.²⁶³ Many of these early poems thus assume familiar forms (sonnets, sestinas, pantoums, canzones), traditional poetic genres (pastoral, autobiography, *ars poetica*), and conventional lyrical imagery (“That their merely being there / Means something; that soon / We may touch, love, explain” (*ST* 37)). In the poems that Ashbery included in *The Tennis Court Oath*, however, these supports have been firmly kicked away, to be replaced with a new form of poetic scaffolding – a kind of pure scaffolding that, as I will show, *supports nothing but itself*.

The collection has taken on something of a cult poetic status, since criticism of it has been so polarised. As Ashbery noted, “the Language Poets consider *The Tennis Court Oath* to be my only worthwhile book whereas everybody else hates it.”²⁶⁴ Heralded by a younger generation, who would later become the language poets, dismissed by two of his greatest acolytes, Harold Bloom and Helen Vendler,²⁶⁵ even Ashbery distanced himself from *The Tennis Court Oath*, admitting that “there are a lot of poems in that book that don’t interest me as much as those that came before or since.”²⁶⁶ *The Tennis Court Oath* thus exemplifies the split between reader and critic. Attempts to mine for interpretation are so often thwarted in these fragmented poems, that the critic finds themselves frustrated, as Vendler does, with little choice but to disregard them as a “mixture of wilful flashiness and sentimentality.” This is surely because *The Tennis Court Oath*, as Ashbery’s

²⁶³ In the conciliatory letter that Auden sent to O’Hara, informing him of the outcome of the Yale prize, Auden noted: “I think you (and John for that matter) must watch what is always the great danger with any ‘surrealistic’ style, namely of confusing authentic non-logical relations which arouse wonder with with accidental ones which arouse mere surprise and in the end fatigue.” Quoted in Herd, *John Ashbery and American Poetry*, 42.

²⁶⁴ J. Ash, ‘In Conversation with John Ashbery’.

²⁶⁵ A “melancholy” Harold Bloom asked of *The Tennis Court Oath*: “how could Ashbery collapse into such a bog by just six years after *Some Trees*, and how did he climb out of it again to write *Rivers and Mountains*[?]” H. Bloom in (ed. H. Bloom) *John Ashbery*, (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1985) 52; Helen Vendler has stated that: “I was only one of many readers put off, years ago, by the mixture of wilful flashiness and sentimentality in *The Tennis Court Oath*” H. Vendler in (ed. H. Bloom) *John Ashbery*, 180.

²⁶⁶ Stitt, ‘John Ashbery, The Art of Poetry No.33’

later collections attest, amounted to radical experimentation – and here I use the term ‘experiment’ in the most literal sense of the word, since many of these poems comprise tests or sketches on the way to Ashbery’s fuller poetic. As he himself noted in an interview, “I never expected these poems to see the light of day [...] I was kind of fooling around and trying to do something I hadn’t done before.”²⁶⁷ The resultant poems are therefore best read as a sort of scaffolding, on which Ashbery would build his oeuvre and around which “poets in search of a voice of their own” could develop theirs.

The Tennis Court Oath ‘fooled around’ with collage and textual deconstruction to produce poems in which sense was radically subordinated to form and mise-en-page. The collection is filled with challenges to the very concept or possibility of reading, including: broken syntax; words flung across the page in the promotion of blank space; and the graphic misuse of punctuation marks:

“Carol!” he said. Can this be the one time
 ??
 She had known from how (*TCO* 157)

Or:

Cornelia unfolded the piece of crude blue paper that is a French telegra
 #####
 The mouth of weeds (*TCO* 157)

These fragments attest to the difficulty of reading these poems: how do we *read* forty question marks or fourteen octothorpes? What do they *sound* like? What do they do to the *sense* of the poem? Elsewhere, poems in *The Tennis Court Oath* resemble something more familiar, yet sense remains, if not absent, at least elusive:

Piling upward
 the fact the stars
 In America the office hid
 archives in his
 stall...
 Enormous stars on them
 The cold anarchist standing
 in his hat (*TCO* 65).

The opening lines to ‘America’ almost offer something for the critical reader to grip on to: the stars of the American flag; “office” block images of corporate America. Yet these allusions quickly dissolve into ellipses

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

and aposiopesis, severed syntax, wayward capitalisation of first lines, and so on. Images do flash at the reader, but sense is buried, along with the lyric voice, as if entombed in the “long sepulcher that hides death and hides me?” (*TCO* 81) with which Ashbery concludes the poem ‘How Much Longer Will I Be Able to Inhabit the Divine Sepulcher...’. Many of the poems in the collection make references to “construction” (*TCP* 124) or to a “piling up” (*TCO* 69), the speaker offering “the teepee of the great city / I build to you every moment” (*TCO* 86), while elsewhere “Men with orange shovels come to break open the rock / Which encases me” (*TCO* 78) – a veiled reference, perhaps, to the deconstructivist critic, desperate to mine for sepulchral meaning. Various structural features bubble to the surface throughout the collection including: “brick arches” (*TCO* 98) and “dynamic arches” (*TCO* 108), a “loggia” (*TCO* 112), “pillars” (*TCO* 63), a “cornice” (*TCO* 115), “pipes” (*TCO* 155), and even the “Crystal Palace” (*TCO* 141), a construction of pure structure which “address[es] [itself] / to exclusively aesthetic concerns” (*HBD* 48), as Ashbery will later write in *Houseboat Days*.

The poem ‘Europe’ has often been held up as one of Ashbery’s most formally experimental compositions and it is here that sense and imagery are most attenuated, replaced, instead, by what I want to call pure structure. The poem is comprised of 111, seemingly random chunks of numbered text, partly collaged from a 1917 children’s novel: as Shoptaw notes, “‘Europe’ was scaffolded on a forgotten novel, by William Le Queux” entitled, *Beryl of the Biplane*, “a child’s story for girls about a mysterious aviatrix in World War I” that Ashbery found in Paris.²⁶⁸ The poem opens, as David Herd notes, “with an image of constructive deconstruction”²⁶⁹:

To employ her
 construction ball
 Morning fed on the
 light blue wood
 of the mouth
 cannot understand
 feels deeply) (*TCO* 124)

A construction ball is a contradiction in terms: the only ball commonly associated with a construction site is the wrecking ball, reducing structure to rubble and ruin. This is apt, for the structure of ‘Europe’ depends upon the deconstruction of familiar poetic structures; not only structures of shape and form, but of

²⁶⁸ Shoptaw, *On the Outside Looking Out*, 57.

²⁶⁹ Herd, *John Ashbery and American Poetry*, 88.

grammar, syntax, and sense. The poem begins with five lines of neat *visual* structure, employing conventional *mise-en-page* (this opening *looks* more like a poem than many of the other constructions in *The Tennis Court Oath*), but this is offset against wayward *sensical and syntactic* structure (the lines do not follow on from one another, but eschew linearity, narrative, and imagistic accumulation).

The line “cannot understand” steps out of the balanced visual structure in a syncopated moment of clarity and honesty: an admission that the reader will not, *cannot*, understand this cut-up poem. In so doing, the line threatens the collapse of the poem’s visual structure, like a block pulled precariously from a Jenga²⁷⁰ stack, suggesting that sense must come at the expense of structure. M. K. Blasing, in a chapter on Ashbery from *Politics and Form in Postmodern Poetry*, writes that “all structures are erected at an expense, and all substitutive representations exact the cost of repression.”²⁷¹ In other words, for Ashbery’s poetic structures to stay standing, representation must be subordinated and, where possible, stifled: otherwise, the “piling up” of lines risks tumbling down around itself. Yet the question remains: why should this be the case? What is it about Ashbery’s poetry that necessitates this counterbalance between structure and representation? The answer, I suggest, lies in *The Tennis Court Oath*’s drive towards radical experimentation: to develop new poetic forms Ashbery must develop new poetic structures, but in order for these structures to be truly innovative, they cannot continue to support traditional images and narratives. Instead, this new poetic structure must support nothing but itself in what might be considered a late-modernist drive to ‘make it new’. Ashbery’s version of the Poundian slogan (if so it can be called) begins to look backward to look forward (this will become, as we will see, the defining trait of postmodern novelty) through the incorporation of collaged elements (and this is distinct from a return to tradition *per se*). Yet rather than read this poem, as Shoptaw does, as something scaffolded *on* these elements, we must read the poem as *pure scaffolding*, built only partly out of these scraps: anticipating a postmodernism to come, the past is brought into the present, but the focus remains, true to the modernist tradition, fixed to the future.

We can therefore think about Ashbery’s pure structures in *The Tennis Court Oath* as something akin to the structure of scaffolding, in which radical asyndeton creates a “piling up” of words, until they become self-sufficient material entities rather than signifying signs. This is because the words themselves serve to uphold

²⁷⁰ This is not quite as arbitrary a reference as it might at first appear, since the name *jenga* is in fact derived from the Swahili term *kujenga*, which means “to build.”

²⁷¹ Blasing, *Politics and Form*, 119.

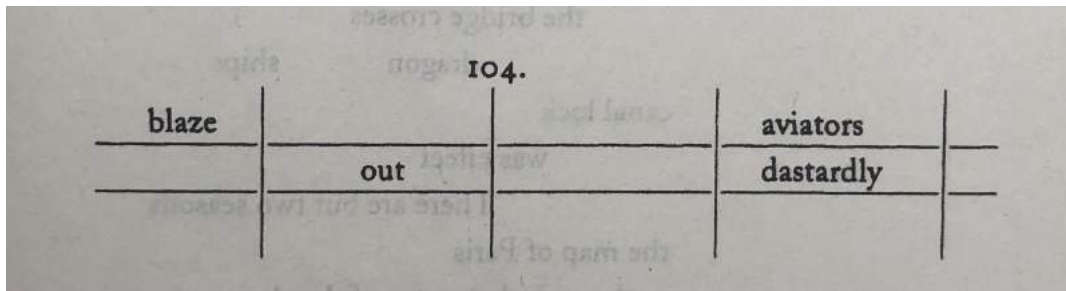


fig. 38 Section 104 from Ashbery's 'Europe'

the structure or “invisible architecture” (to anticipate a term from Guest, of which more in chapter 3), which Ashbery briefly exposes in section 104 (fig. 38). In her short lyric essay ‘Doubt and the History of Scaffolding’, Lisa Robertson explores the history of the scaffold as a uniquely temporary and vulnerable material structure: “neither inside nor outside, neither a space nor a site” scaffolding:

rhythmically expresses the vulnerability of the surface by subtracting solidity from form to make something temporarily animate. It shows us how to inhabit a surface as that surface fluctuates. Whatever change is looks something like this – a leaning, a consciousness towards, a showing to.²⁷²

To “subtract solidity from form” implies an emptying gesture; yet, in Robertson’s equation, form still remains. Indeed, it is the emptied form of the scaffold structure that not only expresses surface, but that makes that vulnerable surface temporarily animate. Surface then, as Robertson’s reading of the scaffold implies, cannot exist without structure. This architectural formulation complicates entrenched ideas of modernism-equals-depth and postmodernism-equals-surface, since structure cannot quite comply with either – particularly in the case of the empty, pure structure of the scaffold. Thus, where the analogy of scaffolding “explains what a wall is without being a wall,” as Robertson writes, we might say that ‘Europe’ explains what a poem is without being a poem. This would account for so much of the frustration that critics have felt with the poem (and the collection from which it springs) and for why “younger writers” have treated it as, to quote Robertson, a “soft bomb of potential.”²⁷³

Scaffolding is a unique architectural appendage, since it represents processes of both construction and deconstruction: a fitting analogue to Europe’s opening “construction ball.” Yet we should be wary about

²⁷² L. Robertson, *Occasional Work and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture*, (Toronto: 48 Coach House Books, 2011), 140.

²⁷³ Robertson, *Nilling*, 12.

liberally applying the term ‘deconstruction’ to Ashbery’s work. “Deconstruction is now a popular word” noted Ashbery in an interview in 1981. “Its not what I would apply to my work, not in the accepted sense, but I was actually deconstructing my poetry in the sense of taking it apart, and the pieces were lying around without any coherent connection.”²⁷⁴ In this explicit rejection of Derridean theory, Ashbery asks his readers to disassociate the process of poetic deconstruction from the poststructuralist practice of literary criticism: another rejection of the critical reader in favour of the poet-reader. As in the opening image of ‘Europe’, deconstruction becomes, for Ashbery, a design principle, a method of construction, building structures that eschew or repel deep critical interpretation. Responding to Ashbery’s rejection of deconstruction, Geoff Ward writes that, instead of being “braced to meet Freudian or deconstructive approaches [...] the poem would have disintricated and laid bare all its internal workings, not unlike those ‘high tech’ buildings – the Centre Georges Pompidou would be an aptly Parisian example – whose pipes and stairs and rails are exposed on the outside.”²⁷⁵ Not the suspicious deconstruction of the literary text – not the “Men with orange shovels come to break open the rock / Which encases me” – but the physical deconstruction of architectural material to create new, structural forms.

Influenced by engineering and modern architectural technologies, high tech, as the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) explains:

was a development in British Modernist architecture from the late 1960s. It was a concept of design, based on engineering, construction and other aspects, such as the manipulation of space. High Tech was marked by a preference for lightweight materials and sheer surfaces, a readiness to adopt new techniques from engineering and other technologies, and the celebratory display of a building’s construction and services [...] High Tech buildings are characterised by exposed structures (usually of steel and or other metals), with services (pipes, air ducts, lifts etc.) often picked out in bright colours, a smooth, impervious skin (often of glass) and a flexibility to create internal service zones, rather than rooms or sequences of rooms.²⁷⁶

If the “exposed structures” that characterise high tech architecture – as in Paris’ Centre Pompidou (figs. 39 & 40) or London’s Lloyd’s building (fig. 41) – resemble anything, it must surely be scaffolding: these look like buildings in a perpetual state of construction (or deconstruction), supported by networks of pure, structural utility, which become “sheer surfaces” or facades, “As pipes decorate laminations of / City unit” (*TCO155*). As in ‘Europe’, there is no separation of form and figuration: the two are fused so that the building literally,

²⁷⁴ Quoted in: Ward, *Statutes of Liberty*, 111.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁶ RIBA, ‘High Tech’, viewed Tuesday 30 Jun 2020 at <https://www.architecture.com/explore-architecture/high-tech>



figs. 39 & 40 The Centre Georges Pompidou, 1971-77

and visibly, *supports nothing but itself*. Yet any comparison between high tech architecture and Ashbery's 'Europe' must be an anachronism: construction on the Centre Pompidou (the premier example of high tech architecture) began in 1971, almost ten years after the publication of *The Tennis Court Oath*, and was not completed until 1977. The analogy, however, need not be entirely nullified, since high tech architecture – and specifically the Pompidou – was the material manifestation of a movement that began in Britain in 1961 (the year before Ashbery published the *The Tennis Court Oath*), which would later become known as Archigram.

Heralded today as “the toast, of the Royal Institute of British Architects,” according to Simon Sadler, in his book, *Archigram: Architecture without Architecture* (a nod to Rudofsky's *Architecture Without Architects* which I discussed in chapter one), the mid-century movement is known for its return to visionary draughtsmanship and is notable for having produced, as a collective endeavour, not one built edifice (Pompidou was the work of high tech architects, and friends of Archigram, Renzo Piano and Norman



fig. 41 Lloyd's Building, London, 1978

Foster).²⁷⁷ Yet, their status as the “toast” of RIBA has shifted, as Sadler drily notes, from the “irritant” of the institution. Archigram’s inauspicious beginnings took the form of low budget, experimental zine publications by a group of student provocateurs:

Little more than a compilation of offbeat student projects at first, the gloriously shoe-string Archigram newsletter became the focal point of radical architecture locally and globally, published from London in nine main issues between 1961 and 1970. Archigram’s coterie began as an informal consortium, with its core membership of six men (Warren Chalk, Peter Cook, Dennis Crompton, David Greene, Ron Herron, and Michael Webb) emerging by the third edition of the magazine in 1963 and assuming the Archigram name as a group label.²⁷⁸

A collection of students, assembling shoestring publications and assuming their group moniker after being informally dubbed by others, the formation of this architectural ‘coterie’ bears a striking resemblance to the New York School poets. Sadler describes Archigram as both a “neo-avant-garde” movement and an iteration of “the last avant-garde”²⁷⁹ – terms which have been used in the titles for two of the most seminal anthologies of the New York School (Silverberg; Lehman). And, although a British enterprise, Archigram drew on cultures of action and event (of which more later) from which the New York School also sprang in the 1950s. These influences were self-professed and palpable in their work, which incorporated Buckminster Fuller’s geodesic dome; turned to Robert Rauschenberg’s collage style as a method of architectural

²⁷⁷ S. Sadler & Archigram (Group), *Archigram: Architecture Without Architecture*, (Cambridge, Mass. & London: The MIT Press, 2005), 3.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 4; 196.

draughtsmanship; and drew on the centrality of movement and flow in the work of figures such as Jackson Pollock, John Cage, and Merce Cunningham.²⁸⁰ In turn, their work travelled back to America in 1964, by way of architectural critic Reyner Banham, and was spreading across Europe, taking hold in France, where Ashbery was living for most of the 1960s.

If Archigram, as a group, parallel the *ethic* of the New York School broadly, then details of their *aesthetic* (to borrow that distinction from Banham) resemble critical parsings of Ashbery's work so strikingly that the descriptions of one might easily be applied to the other. In the journey from "irritant" to "toast" (paralleling Ashbery's trajectory from *The Tennis Court Oath* to the triple award-winning *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*), Archigram's work was "simultaneously realistic and crazy," underpinned by "a logic pursued to a point of absurdity" and committed to "the shock of pure indeterminacy."²⁸¹ As Archigram wrote in issue no. 8 of their eponymous magazine: "Oxford Dictionary definition: indeterminacy: 'Not of fixed extent or character, vague, left doubtful.' Archigram usage: Of varying evaluation. Not one answer. Open-endedness."²⁸²

For inspiration, Ashbery and Archigram both turned to the "urban experience of such flâneurs as Charles Baudelaire and the surrealists," as well as "Dada, the expressionists, and the futurists," but they can also both be read "as comic book caprice,"²⁸³ since Archigram incorporated fragments from sci-fi comics, and Ashbery's work features cameos from popular cartoon figures, Happy Hooligan (*DDS* 231), Popeye (*DDS* 260) and Daffy Duck (*HBD* 31). In the work of both, these influences are incorporated through the avant-garde collage techniques that we have already encountered in Ashbery's 'Europe' (figs. 42 & 43).

Where Ashbery's poetry turned to the architectural paradigm for its structural expression, Archigram's "intrigue with the gaps, joints, and connections of architecture had parallels with the structuralist approach to cultural and literary criticism. Archigram's was also a procedure analogous to the way words were set at liberty from language."²⁸⁴ Yet, this is not to align Archigram with deconstruction, for,

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 93.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 5; 6; 91.

²⁸² *Ibid.*, 91.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, 61; 7; 78.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 98-9.



figs. 42 & 43 Archigram *Rupert IC2*, 1970 and Ashbery *Acrobats*, 1972

as its founders noted, “Archigram is not about Derrida but the staccato of ideas”²⁸⁵ just as, for Ashbery, the term ‘deconstruction’ was “not what I would apply to my work, not in the accepted sense.” In the model of deconstruction particular to both, it was the question of form that was paramount: Archigram found themselves faced with “a tantalizing paradox: the formless as progenitor of form,”²⁸⁶ while Ashbery’s experimental poetry, as we have seen, “subtract[ed] solidity from form to make something temporarily animate.” For both, ultimately, this approach was socially attuned: Ashbery conceived of New York City as a “kaleidoscopic lumber room” that poetry might translate into “something like a liveable space,” while Archigram dreamt up ‘Living City’, a project in which “a giant kaleidoscope symbolized ‘the coming together of all manner and types of man and the way in which they interact upon one another in the shared experience of living city’.”²⁸⁷

In the case of both Ashbery and Archigram, the adherence of the term ‘avant-garde’, so liberally applied to their work, remains slippery. Sitting at the “juncture between ‘modernism’ and ‘postmodernism,’” the politics of Archigram (like those of Ashbery and the New York School broadly) have been the subject of fraught debate. According to Sadler, the movement’s “passion for the future made it overwhelmingly avant-garde, while its abandonment of Marxism made it suspiciously reactionary – and a prime example of what

²⁸⁵ Ibid., 190.

²⁸⁶ Ibid., 78.

²⁸⁷ Ibid., 69.

would soon be described as a “neo-avant-garde,” the “neo-” prefix designating ideological as well as temporal distance from the “historical” avant-gardes.”²⁸⁸ Thus, as Sadler explains:

Archigram indicates a version of the sixties that does not readily emerge in histories of the period – avowedly “apolitical” rather than “engaged,” technocratic rather than anarchic, individualist rather than “hippie,” grounded as much in 1950s assumptions of affluence as 1960s commitments to redistribution.²⁸⁹

This echoes Blasing’s suggestion that avant-garde forms of postmodern poetry do not necessarily align with political vanguardism and this, Blasing explains, is especially so for Ashbery, who “is at once an academic poet who does not locate value in the past and an experimental poet who does not assign inherent value – epistemological, political, or cultural – to discontinuous positions.”²⁹⁰ In a talk given at the Yale Art School in 1968, entitled ‘The Invisible Avant-Garde’, Ashbery articulates the reason for this problem. “Today,” he notes, “the avant-garde has come full circle – the artist who wants to experiment is again faced with what seems like a dead end, except that instead of creating a vacuum he is now at the center of a cheering mob” (RS394). Another articulation of the empty/full dichotomy that pervades Ashbery’s work, the problem that he locates is the appropriation of the vanguard by the mainstream. For Ashbery, as for Archigram, the solution does not lie in hippie culture, since “Protests against the mediocre value of our society such as the hippie movement seem to imply that one’s only way out is to join a parallel society whose stereotyped manners, language, speech and dress are only reverse images of the one it is trying to reject” (RS393). Rather, for both, the solution seemed to rest on the implicit incorporation of the consumerist mainstream into their avant-garde aesthetics. “One of Archigram’s accomplishments,” Sadler notes, “had been to reorient architecture toward changing social and ideological patterns, recognizing that individualism and consumerism were the prevalent postwar European and American social movements.”²⁹¹ Just so for Ashbery who, according to Blasing, created “monument[s] to both a consumer economy and a poetic economy” by blending experimentalism with tradition.²⁹² “Ashbery does not challenge conventional forms in order to

²⁸⁸ Ibid., 6.

²⁸⁹ Ibid., 8.

²⁹⁰ Blasing, *Politics and Form*, 111.

²⁹¹ Sadler, *Archigram*, 194.

²⁹² Blasing, *Politics and Form*, 121.

access natural truths,” Blasing explains. Instead, “for Ashbery, any form may be used as long as it is estranged from itself”²⁹³ while, for Archigram, “Rather than being completely remade from modern forms and materials, the future would probably be cobbled together from bits of the old and bits of the new.”²⁹⁴

The connections between Ashbery and Archigram speak for themselves, but one important question remains: if they never constructed a building, what exactly *did* Archigram produce? All of their projects were on paper, and among their best-known visions was Peter Cook’s ‘Plug-in City’, a scaffold-like megastructure, devoid of buildings (figs. 44).²⁹⁵ As Sadler notes, “Archigram’s attention shifted from the slumbering megastructure to the kit-of-parts festooning it” so that “connections could be made and disconnected at will, like an endless syntax”²⁹⁶ – not unlike Ashbery’s poetic desire to achieve “a general, all-purpose experience –

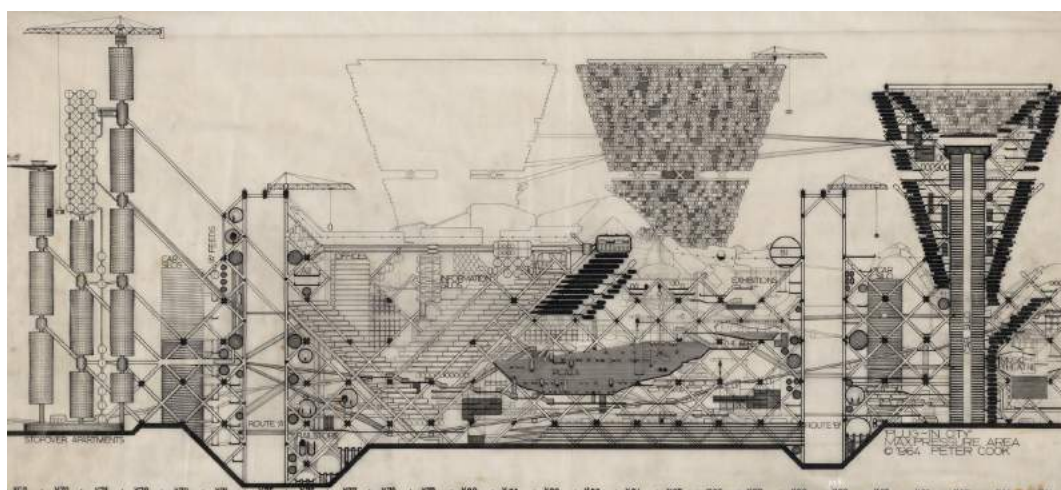


fig. 44 Peter Cook, Plug-in City, 1964

like those stretch socks that fit all sizes”²⁹⁷; and not unlike the “megastructure” of ‘Europe’ that extended scaffold with nothing but itself to support. Archigram’s megastructures, furthermore, found their expression in “the eccentric, proactive qualities of [...] nineteenth-century exhibition structures” such as “Paxton’s 1851

²⁹³ Ibid., 123.

²⁹⁴ Sadler, *Archigram*, 64-5.

²⁹⁵ There are clear crossovers between Archigram and the situationists’s maps of the city (about which Simon Sadler has also written in *The Situationist City*, 1998), a project that was unfolding while Ashbery was living in Paris. Of interest to this thesis, the situationists offer a link between Ashbery, Archigram and Lisa Robertson. As Zoe Skoulding explains, “The legacy of situationism, Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau with which [Lisa Robertson] engages is one that has foregrounded the role of the body in producing space.” Z. Skoulding, *Contemporary Women’s Poetry and Urban Space Experimental Cities*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 154.

²⁹⁶ Ibid., 19.

²⁹⁷ Quoted in: Silverberg, *Neo-Avant-Garde*, 116.

Crystal Palace in London, Eiffel's tower and Dutert and Contamin's Galerie des Machines in Paris in 1889."²⁹⁸ The Crystal Palace, as we have seen, surfaces in 'Europe', as a parallel image to the poem's structure of pure engineering (fig. 45). As Sadler explains, these structures "served as magnificent 'sheds', spatial enclosures amenable to indeterminate activities: an 'invisible' background architecture that put life at center stage."²⁹⁹ The megastructures that both Archigram and Ashbery employed thus served to make available new forms of structural expression to the increasingly invisible avant-garde.

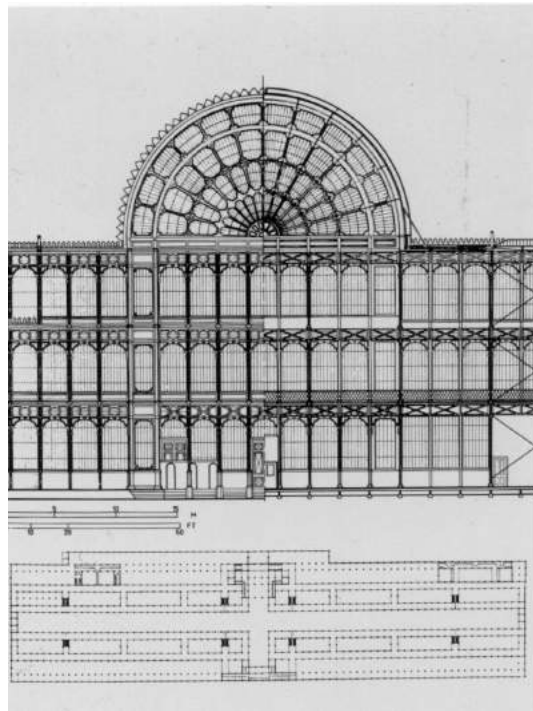


fig. 45 The Crystal Palace

Cook's 'Plug-in-City' would evolve into the 'Instant City', which envisaged the metropolis as a technological event, the "kit-of-parts" and its provisional structures "borne by airships [...] that brought the hermetic environmental conditioning of the Apollo missions back to Earth."³⁰⁰ Utopian in character, many of Archigram's projects looked skyward, often incorporating airships, balloons, ladders, and other ascending structures or emblems (fig. 46). As two of Archigram's members, Warren Chalk and Ron Herron, note, the

²⁹⁸ Sadler, *Archigram*, 103.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 38.

iconography of Archigram incorporated the “geodesic framework of an aircraft, the welded tubular construction of a bridge, the air structure of a barrage balloon, and much more.”³⁰¹

Balloon imagery also pops up across *The Tennis Court Oath*. Flashes of “blue balloons / Poured out over the foul street, creasing / The original paper outside. The ladder failed” (*TCO113*), and “Again, going up in a balloon / Reading from the pages of the telephone directory / The scooter and the Ethiop had gotten away / The building was to be torn down” (*TCO120*). In both, the balloon intersects with architectural structures and spaces: in the first, the city street becomes a paper landscape (an architectural vision), where a ladder suddenly appears without direction or purpose; in the second, the rising of the balloon seems to



fig. 46 Peter Cook, Instant City, 1969

counterbalance the tearing down of the building, like a manifesto for Archigram and their desire to replace the concrete stability of modernist architecture with the transience of “paper cities,” “plug-in-cities,” and “instant cities.” Elsewhere in the collection, the poem ‘Our Youth’ reads like a description of Archigram’s visionary vistas. In the opening stanzas:

Of bricks...	Who built it? Like some crazy balloon
When love leans on us	
Its night...	The velvety pavement sticks to our feet

³⁰¹ Ibid., 110.

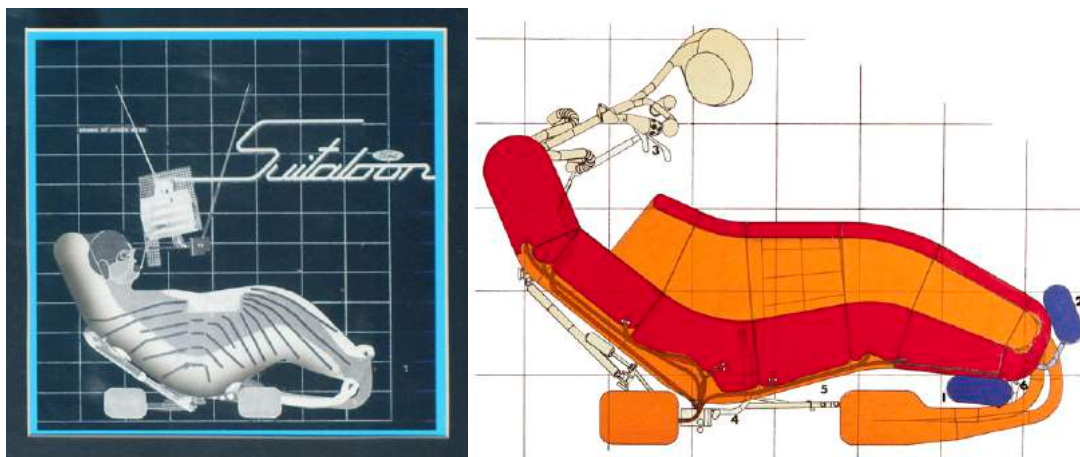
The dead puppies turn us back on love

Where we are. Sometimes

The brick arches lead to a room like a bubble, that broke when you entered it
And sometimes to a fallen leaf.

We got crazy with emotion showing how much we knew (*TCO* 98).

In the first line, the solid materiality of bricks is undermined by the descent into ellipsis, indentations clearing the way for blank space, and the uncertainty of a question that troubles the figure of the “master builder” (to borrow the phrase from Guest’s ‘The Blue Stairs’): “Who built it?” Here, solidity is literally subtracted from form, as bricks are replaced with “some crazy balloon” and a “velvety pavement”: images evocative of Archigram’s “crazy” 1960s aesthetic. Yet the possibility of a concrete architecture has not vacated the poem altogether since, “Sometimes / The brick arches lead to a room like a bubble, that broke when you entered it.” This mirrors Ron Herron’s ‘Walking City’, in which single-body inhabitation pods – known as the Suitaloon and the Cushicle (figs. 47 & 48) – roam the city on robotic legs. Indeed, where the New York School liked to “play with the gaps that invariably occur when one attempts to get one’s body into the body of one’s writing,” the “body/architecture analogy was the one that captured Archigram and its colleagues: enclosure and servicing as lightweight, anti monumental skin and guts.”³⁰²



figs. 47 & 48 Michael Webb, Suitaloon & Cushicle, 1967

By the end of ‘Our Youth’ we find ourselves on another faulty ladder as “We escape /
Down the cloud ladder, but the problem has not been solved” (*TCO* 99). As usual in Ashbery’s case, the
problem has not been articulated either. The image of the ladder, dissolving into clouds and leaving problems

³⁰² Ibid., 113.

unsolved, thus parallels the structure of the poems in *The Tennis Court Oath*, with their meandering forms that lead us only tautologically in and around themselves. As Blasing notes:

His stylistic and syntactic strategies duplicate this kind of movement that gets nowhere, leading us on – in a clear or coherent sentence or passage – toward some 'revelation' but just so far, and at the last moment turning away and collapsing the whole structure, with a non sequitur or a deflation, as 'The balloon pops'.³⁰³

Balloon iconography comes to a head in 'Europe', where images of "Zeppelins" (*TCO129*), cut from *Beryl and the Biplane*, float across the scaffolded landscape like Archigram's 'Instant City'. But, as is well known, the Zeppelin was a lead balloon, and lead balloons are, idiomatically, fated to come crashing down. If the balloon can be seen "going up" across *The Tennis Court Oath*, by the time of *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* in 1975, "the balloon pops" (*SP70*) – not long after the visionary balloons of the Archigram landscape had also drifted back down to earth:

In Italy, architect Aldo Rossi was modifying his rationalist sensibilities, arguing in his *Architettura della città* [...] for the careful matching of modern architecture with the existing typologies of the "architecture of the city." In [Robert] Venturi's and Rossi's wake, "place-making" with piazzas, pitched roofs, classical rhythms, vaults, and mortar started nudging aside the flyaway balloons and rivets of the avant-garde vision.³⁰⁴

The "flyaway balloons...of the avant-garde vision" may have been nudged aside by the postmodernism that followed, yet Archigram's legacy would remain far-reaching. As Sadler notes:

Archigram's historical significance was as an origin of combative neo-avant-garde attitudes and techniques that became stock-in-trade to practitioners keen to rethink architectural space and architectural technology. That rethinking naturally endowed the Archigram phenomenon with a theoretical as well as historical dimension, liquidating the philosophical foundations of architecture as it anticipated wider, "postmodern" anxieties.³⁰⁵

The visionary movement played a part in changing fundamental ideas and assumptions about architectural design and the creation of social space. This is one of the special properties of any purely visionary architecture: it is precisely because it cannot be built that it is able to challenge building conventions. If, as Sadler notes, "beneath the pop art styling, [Archigram] had started to ask all over again just what exactly architecture is" then, beneath the apparent sheen of early post-modern pop surfaces, Ashbery's poetry was

³⁰³ Blasing, *Politics and Form*, 116.

³⁰⁴ Sadler, *Archigram*, 188.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

also asking just what exactly poetry was.³⁰⁶ Furthermore, Sadler's evaluation reminds us that we should be cautious about oversimplifying the shift from Archigram's late modernism to the postmodern aesthetics of the 1970s as a Jamesonian "coupure." For Archigram's 'neo' label had always dimly suggested a pseudo sense of its own vanguardism, an eschewal of "bohemian radical authenticity," while their future-oriented utopianism had been built, like *The Tennis Court Oath*, on collaged fragments of the past.³⁰⁷ Thus, though the postmodernism of Aldo Rossi, Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi, to whom I turn in the remainder of this chapter, may have represented a sharp break with the concrete modernism of the early twentieth century, in its colourful, ephemeral and more than a little tongue-in-cheek approach, it signalled only a bifurcation from Archigram's anticipatory postmodernism.

This is the splintering, or doubling, that is sensed and shaped in *The Double Dream of Spring*, where Ashbery "keeps the door open to a tongue-and-cheek attitude" (*DDS* 245). The poems of *The Tennis Court Oath* replaced the scaffolding of modernism with something entirely new – but something that remained, to all intents and purposes, little more than an experimental vision of what poetry *could be*. Where Archigram's paper visions provided a base on which later postmodernists might build (as well as challenge), *The Tennis Court Oath* provided Ashbery with a foundation that would permit his subsequent return to more lucid and traditional styles, shaking off the modernist mantle that had obscured much of the poetry of *Some Trees* to develop a new postmodern vernacular.

"A period of unanimous tergiversation": The Double Dream of Spring

Ashbery published *Rivers and Mountains* and *The Double Dream of Spring* in 1966 and 1970 respectively, both of which saw a return to lucid and more conventional forms and registers, after the fragmentation of *The Tennis Court Oath*. By the time of *Double Dream*, the prevailing voice of the poems was beginning to crystallise into the quasi-philosophical self-address that characterises his distinctive poetic. As Herd notes, there is "the presence in *The Double Dream of Spring* of a voice new to his poetry: the voice of a critic (or, more precisely, a poet-critic)."³⁰⁸ If *The Tennis Court Oath* had challenged the critic to the point of alienation, the poems in *The Double*

³⁰⁶ Ibid.

³⁰⁷ Ibid., 47.

³⁰⁸ Herd, *John Ashbery and American Poetry*, 114.

Dream of Spring anticipate the presence of the critic to the point of redundancy: the experience for the reader remains one of pleasure, while the critic encounters a new hurdle – their work seemingly already accomplished between every line of verse.

The collection is haunted by the figure of surrealist painter, Giorgio de Chirico, whose 1915 painting lends it name to the book's title. As such, we find references to "dreams" (*DDS* 229), "visions" (*DDS* 259), and "fantasy" (*DDS* 232) throughout the collection, punctuated with images of "cloud-castles" (*DDS* 227), "a paper city" (*DDS* 228), and "houses [...] on narrow stilts" (*DDS* 241). If these images find their corollary in the visionary architecture of Archigram, then these are the visions of a past, a dream from which the speaker awakens and senses, as Herd notes, "that his writing must now be more worldly."³⁰⁹ In so many of these poems, the dream has become a recollection, a state from which the speaker emerges – "What if I dreamed it all" (*DDS* 238); "As one moves forward from a dream / The stranger left that house on hastening feet" (*DDS* 268) – or else as something hopeless – "And trust in the dream that will never come true / 'Cause that is the scheme that is best for you / And the gleam that is most suitable too" (*DDS* 140). In this anapaestic, rhyming triplet, the dream of the experimental avant-garde has been exposed for what it is: Archigram's utopian vistas are the colourful realm of a Dr Seuss picture book, whimsical and fun, but little more than a fantastical relic of the 1960s. Indeed, the poems in *Double Dream* seem resigned to the fact that now "newness or importance has worn away" (*DDS* 288), and "today there is no use in looking to imaginative new methods / Since all are in constant use. The most that can be said for them further / Is that erosion produces a kind of dust or exaggerated pumice / Which fills space and transforms it, becoming a medium / In which it is possible to recognize oneself" (*DDS* 266). All that can remain of the visionary impulse is the dust of an eroded ruin, since all forms are now "in constant use": a poetic iteration of 'The Invisible Avant-Garde', in which, we recall, "instead of creating a vacuum [the avant-garde artist] is now at the center of a cheering mob." Yet, as in this image of a vacuum and its mob, the pumice from eroded ruins does not leave behind an emptiness but "fill[s] space and transforms it." The availability of aesthetic form thus engenders a fullness that amounts to the vacuity of dust – or the cheering mob of the mainstream.

The dream that haunts this collection is, however, a *double* one, and just as Ashbery does not rescind all possibility for an avant-garde in his Yale talk, he does not abandon the visionary altogether; rather, it is

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 113.

reframed in these poems, made more “worldly,” as Herd suggests, but not at the expense of imaginative forms. For now “we have rolled into another dream” (*DDS* 229) in which:

Night after night this message returns, repeated
In the flickering bulbs of the sky, raised past us, taken away from us,
Yet ours over and over until the end that is past truth
The being of our sentences, in the climate that fostered them,
Not ours to own, like a book, but to be with, and sometimes
to be without, alone and desperate.
But the fantasy makes it ours, a kind of fence-sitting
Raised to the level of an aesthetic ideal (*DDS* 232).

Ashbery’s vision is still turned skyward, only now “balloons” and “Cloud castles” have been replaced with the “flickering bulbs” of electrical reality. The “message,” we are told, “returns” and repeats “night after night,” though, in typical Ashbery style, we are never told what this message is. All we know is that it is “ours” but not in the sense of ownership: the importance of the textual artefact, this stanza seems to say, lies not in the finished product of the “book” but in the “being of our sentences.” The stanza performs the message that it describes, consistently evading the critical reader as they attempt to untangle it: we can parse these lines, or try to, but we can never really access the message, only begin to understand the movement of its “architecture,” amounting to the “fantasy” of a message, which is no message at all but only a “fence-sitting / Raised to the level of an aesthetic ideal.”

The term “fence-sitting” typifies the apolitical posturing of postmodern aesthetics. As Blasing writes, “only a desacralized, demystified poetic language that declines morally, politically, or aesthetically superior positions can still resist being totally appropriated.”³¹⁰ In other words, the only way to escape the “cheering mob” is to assume an aesthetic position on the fence and abnegate overt political, moral, or social responsibility in one’s work. This “critical distance” as we have seen, is achieved “by turning to the past.” Yet this backwards turn is not motivated, Blasing emphasises, “toward the future.” Rather, “it opens up a historical perspective from which the construction of the present and the self becomes apparent.”³¹¹ We have glimpsed this motivation already, in the cut-up and collage techniques of *The Tennis Court Oath*, though these poems remain Ashbery’s last breath of late modernism, founded on the Poundian drive to ‘make it new’. The

³¹⁰ Blasing, *Politics and Form*, 62.

³¹¹ *Ibid.*, 24.

postmodern aesthetic that characterises the true “Ashberyian poetic,”³¹² to borrow Herd’s phrase, is thus distinguished not by an experimental cut-and-paste aesthetic, but by producing, more seamlessly and more subtly, a register that might almost be attributed to late-nineteenth-century aesthetics, and characterised by an aloof (or fence-sitting) tone of self-awareness. It is not, therefore, meaning that amounts to “a sociopolitical valence,” to use Blasing’s term, since “rhetoric as a political, persuasive figuration of the material code into meaning bears witness that meanings are not inherent in the material.”³¹³ If meaning loses its value in the postmodern separation between politics (with a capital P) and aesthetics, then the task must be to turn not only to structure, but to the moment of *construction*: for, as Blasing writes, “if poetry has a generic and general political function it may be to show us how it constructs itself into a discourse that in turn constructs a meaningful world.”³¹⁴ In her formulation, the poem that is able to “construct a meaningful world” is the poem that not only “lays bare the devices of its construction” (to return to Ward) but the poem that *knows itself as existing in the process of its own construction*.

The term ‘construction’ is pertinent to the process-oriented aesthetics of the period out of which the New York School arose. The work of visual artists such as Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, and Joan Mitchell (all connected with the New York School coterie) was famously dubbed ‘Action Painting’ by Harold Rosenberg. He explains that:

At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act – rather than a space in which to reproduce, re-design, analyze or ‘express’ an object, actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event.³¹⁵

According to Rosenberg, “the act itself is the object.”³¹⁶ Writing in 1952, Rosenberg’s reading of the canvas as “an arena in which to act” echoes Charles Olson’s “composition by field” approach, set out two years earlier in ‘Projective Verse’. Olson, as I discussed in the previous chapter, advocates an attention to process, which “can be made so to shape the energies that the form is accomplished.” As he urges, “USE USE USE

³¹² Herd, *John Ashbery and American Poetry*, 71.

³¹³ Blasing, *Politics and Form*, 19.

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*

³¹⁵ H. Rosenberg, ‘The American Action Painters’ in *ARTnews*, (January, 1952), 22.

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*

the process at all points, in any given poem always, always one perception must must must MOVE,
INSTANTER, ON ANOTHER!”³¹⁷

Between action painting and projective poetry, Ian Davidson articulates the distinction between the theatre of event and the architecture of construction. In the wake of Olson, he explains, the page “becomes a ‘construction-site’ of the poem,” and “it is words and their syntactical relationships that are the building blocks of the poem.”³¹⁸ In no uncertain terms, then, these semantic building blocks, assembled on to this blank construction site become, Davidson explicates, “the ‘architecture’ of the poem.”³¹⁹ Language poet Barrett Watten confirms this architectural bent in what he terms the ‘constructivist moment’, “a dual concept that refers to a generative moment in poetics in which a work of literature or art takes shape and unfolds, and the critical valorization of materiality, reflexivity, and constructedness across the arts.”³²⁰ Neither a historical epoch, nor a cohesive aesthetic, Watten’s ‘constructivist moment’ is the instant in which a text *constructs* itself in materially reflexive ways. Watten writes that by virtue of its desire to “lay bare the device of its construction [...] the literariness of the material text is not simply an artefact of avant-garde formalism but may be seen as a moment of social construction, from the writing of the text to the processing of it, here and now.”³²¹ By revealing its own processes in this way, then, the material text resists petrification, remaining in a lively and active state of perpetual construction. We have encountered this notion of “laying bare” in Ward’s description of ‘Europe’ which “laid bare all its internal workings, not unlike those ‘high tech’ buildings.” In Watten’s description, however, this laying bare is “not simply an artefact of avant-garde formalism” but “a moment of social construction.” Thus, when Liz Kotz suggests that “‘Europe’ represents a kind of visual artefact, like a snapshot of the ceaseless activity of textuality, an instantaneous recording of language made possible by the typewriter”³²² she touches on the importance of the constructivist moment in Ashbery’s work, but she forgets the message of ‘Soonest Mended’: that the poem is “Not ours to own, like a book,” not an

³¹⁷ Olson, ‘Projective Verse’, 864.

³¹⁸ I. Davidson, *Ideas of Space in Contemporary Poetry*, (Basingstoke & New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 16, 22.

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*

³²⁰ B. Watten, *The Constructivist Moment: From Material Text to Cultural Poetics*, (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2003), xviii.

³²¹ *Ibid.*

³²² L. Kotz, *Words to Be Looked At: Language in 1960s Art*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts & London, England: The MIT Press, 2007).

artefact as such, but something “to be with [...] a kind of fence-sitting / Raised to the level of an aesthetic ideal.” Though the poems of *The Tennis Court Oath* expose their structures, they tell us little about their moment of construction. This is why this early collection demands to be read as *scaffolding*, as an analogy for the poem and as the visionary basis for the later poems.

The term construction fascinated Ashbery as a modifier between the poetic and the architectural. In a review of Aldo Rossi’s drawings at the Max Protech Gallery in 1979, Ashbery picks up on Peter Eisenmann’s reading of the Italian architect, who suggests that “Rossi’s drawings are not merely drawings ‘of’ architecture, nor at they to be taken as metaphors ‘of’ architecture, they are architecture. They do not demand to be built” (RS 334). Ashbery responds that:

If drawings can be equated with architecture, then architecture itself must be something quite different from what we commonly take it to be, and that is precisely what Rossi is proposing. For him architecture is ‘construction’, and construction itself is a broad heading that covers many kinds of activity. For instance, it is somewhat like the act of writing (RS334-335).

What excites Ashbery is Rossi’s opening up of the term ‘architecture’, stretching it to its broadest possible definition as, simply, ‘construction’ – which might even include “the act of writing.” If *The Double Dream of Spring* can be said to harbour a dual vision of architecture – the dream of the “paper city” just breaking, the promise of concrete structure still sleep-gummed – then Rossi is the figure who best encapsulates this duality. Described by architectural critic Ada Louise Huxtable as “a poet who happens to be an architect,”³²³ Rossi is known as much for his realised buildings as for his visionary drawings and writings. Thus, the visionary promise of the Archigram movement has not migrated altogether from the work of Rossi; rather, it coexists with his tangible structures and reinforces the bridge between poetry and architecture by way of Rossi’s active model of construction.

On the surface of things, Ashbery’s and Rossi’s aesthetics appear to have little in common. Rossi is best known for his 1971 design for the cemetery³²⁴ at San Cataldo, which he dubbed his “city of the dead.”³²⁵ The structure is striking for its eery sparseness: a stolid cube of terracotta-covered render forms the

³²³ Quoted in: D. Ghirardo, *Aldo Rossi and the Spirit of Architecture*, (Newhaven & London: Yale University Press, 2019), 4.

³²⁴ A connection might be made, however, between Rossi’s cemetery and Ashbery’s ‘How Much Longer Will I Be Able to Inhabit the Divine Sepulcher?’ and his entombing of the lyric voice in *The Tennis Court Oath* more broadly.

³²⁵ *Ibid.*, 172.

ossuary, punctuated by perfectly symmetrical, glassless apertures on every facia (fig. 49). It has the look of an industrial ruin, freshly built: quasi neo-classical in its simplicity and symmetry, the cemetery at San Cataldo could only have been imagined in the later part of the twentieth century. Rossi created “buildings that look devoid of visible charm or *agrément*” (*RS* 336), as Ashbery notes. Writing not about his “city of the dead” but about his “elementary school in the town of Fagno Olona,” Ashbery remarks that it “would make an Agway complex look cheerful by comparison, and at first glance seems designed solely to stunt the growth of the



fig. 49 Aldo Rossi, Cimitero San Cataldo, 1971

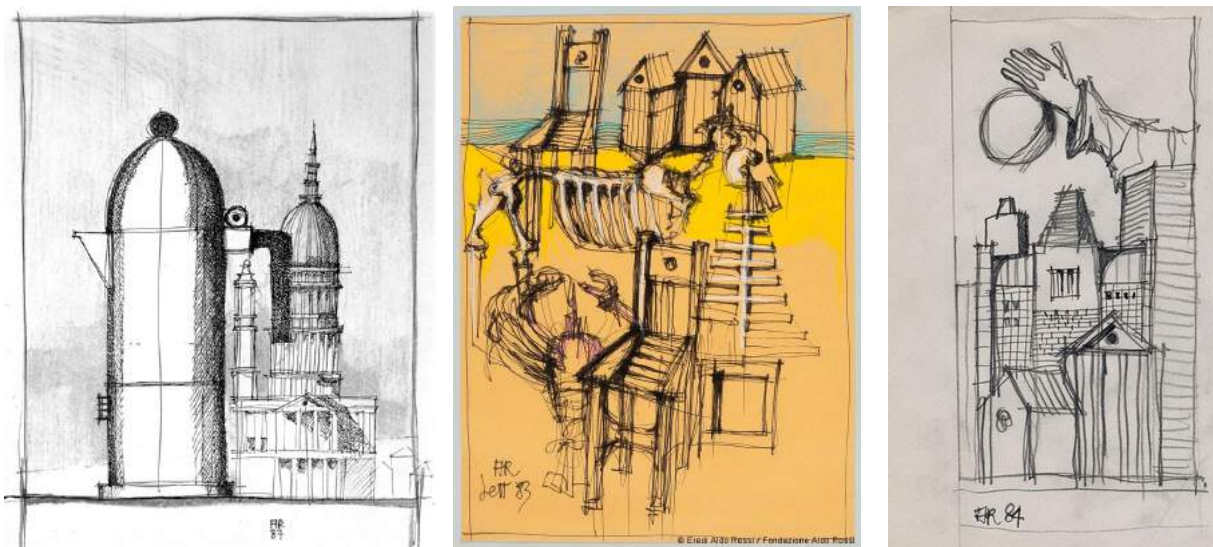
kiddies forced to attend it” (*RS* 336): a far cry, then, from his poetry of tongue-in-cheek pleasure. Yet, as Ashbery affirms, “One has to keep the unseen dimensions of the architecture in mind when considering the built projects” (*RS* 336) – and it is these unseen elements, the structuring principles, that position the poems of Ashbery and the architecture of Rossi in constructive dialogue.

Rossi’s architecture, as Ashbery notes, is an architecture of the future built out of the past, like “the Yugoslavian [now Croatian] seaport of Split, constructed out of the ruins of Diocletian’s vast palace” (*RS* 35). In other words, if Rossi adopted the backward turn of postmodern aesthetics, he did so with one foot in futurism, just as the Ashbery of *The Double Dream of Spring* (published only a year before Rossi’s design for San

Cataldo) blended the visionary with the worldly. This utopianism-which-is-not-one finds its fullest expression in Rossi's sketches, Ashbery argues, which, like Piranesi's impossible designs for Rome, reimagine:

the city itself as a model for the architect's activity. Not the utopian concept of an urban planner but the city as it is continuously coming into being – a concept perpetually modified by the exigencies of everyday reality, where what is built or incomplete has a function no less important than what is actually there, as part of a never completely visible or measurable totality (RS335).

“Continuously coming into being” and “perpetually modified,” what is important to Ashbery is not the completeness of a building but that which is “never completely visible”: the process of construction itself. As Ashbery will later write in ‘Daffy Duck in Hollywood’, “It’s not the incomplete importunes, but the spookiness / Of the finished product” (HBD 33). Little could be spookier than Rossi's completed “city of the dead,” but the sketches themselves remain alive in their colourful compositions. Often washed with bright colour, Rossi's sketches feel unfinished, as though still in a state of construction. Half-finished structures, a surrealistic distortion of scale, and the addition of whimsical elements make for a playful aesthetic: a city assembled out of oversized kitchen utensils (fig. 50); the skeleton of a horse suggesting a design for a chair (fig. 51); or a giant hand reaching into the frame (fig.52). The double dream of visionary architecture is thus realised in Rossi's designs, which “function as the concrete basis of the partly imaginary proposition that all architecture is” (RS 336).



figs. 50, 51 & 52 Aldo Rossi's visionary sketches

In the poetry that Ashbery would write from *The Double Dream of Spring* onwards, this act, this constructive self-awareness, is borne out not through the “fracturing of the poem into grammatical vertebrae,” which Shoptaw identifies in *The Tennis Court Oath*, but in the realignment of those vertebrae into lucid grammatical structure and coherent syntax, enclosed within a poetic skin that masks an absence of sense.³²⁶ This is exemplified in ‘The Bungalows’, which, after lulling the reader into a “presumed landscape and the dream of home” (*DDS* 283), placing them, paradoxically “outside and inside at the same time” (*DDS* 284) and introducing “thoughts on construction” (*DDS* 284), swerves to a detached register of manifesto-cum-philosophical tract:

We shall very soon have the pleasure of recording
 A period of unanimous tergiversation in this respect
 And to make that pleasure the greater, it is worth while
 At the risk of tedious iteration, to put first upon record a final protest:
 Rather decaying art, genius, inspiration to hold to
 An impossible “calque” of reality, than
 “The new school of the trivial, rising up on the field of battle,
 Something of sludge and leaf-mold,” and life
 Goes trickling out through the holes, like water through a sieve,
 All in one direction (*DDS* 284).

The poem favours quasi-traditional form and structure: sections, as above, are ordered into regimented stanzas; line lengths are long, but in the familiarly Whitmanic tradition; expectations of left to right reading are fully complied with; and capitalisation corresponds to lineation rather than grammar.³²⁷ Where a poem like ‘Europe’ does not even attempt to convey lucidity – visual, grammatical, sensical – ‘The Bungalows’ appears cogent, rational, and even systematic. Indeed, were one to skim the poem absent-mindedly, and then try to recall its salient points, they might reasonably assume that what they had read possessed a perfect, if complex, internal logic, and that their minds had simply wandered from the argument: or, as Ashbery writes in ‘The Other Tradition’, “Only then did you glance up from your book, / Unable to comprehend what had been taking place, or / Say what you had been reading” (*HBD* 2). The phrase ‘other tradition’ seems a fitting one for the poetic register of a poem like ‘The Bungalows’, with its uncanny mix of the conservatively traditional with an off-kilter flavour of the avant-garde that it is hard to articulate. In this respect, the poem

³²⁶ Shoptaw, *On the Outside Looking Out*, 55.

³²⁷ This tendency towards capitalisation according to lineation is, incidentally, is one of the most distinctively traditional – and consistently employed – features of Ashbery’s poetry: an antiquated tic that looks unusual for the time that he is writing. One rarely encounters such formalism in the work of Guest, Schuyler or O’Hara.

mirrors the rationalism of Rossi's architecture, which as Ashbery notes, was tasked with "supplanting the narrow functionalism of the glass box with a superior rationalism which must take account of the irrational as well" (RS335). Rossi's structures pass, superficially, as conventional edifices, classical allusion quietly conforming with Vitruvian ideals. In both Rossi's buildings and Ashbery's poems, neat structure masks unexpected elements of form and materiality: the empty apertures at San Cataldo mirror the "holes" in the poem's form through which "life / Goes trickling out [...] like water through a sieve." Rossi's empty apertures also capture, if only subtly, the incomplete quality of the sketches that Ashbery cherishes; an incompleteness that is mirrored in the form of 'The Bungalows', through Ashbery's strategy of tergiversation, which appears both descriptively and performatively in the stanza above.

The term 'tergiversation' means to "make conflicting or evasive statements" or to "abandon a belief or loyalty." In abandoning belief and loyalty, tergiversation corresponds to the postmodern aesthetic of "fence-sitting" while, at the same time, quietly signalling Ashbery's distinctive grammatical structures even as they embed themselves as discrete variations of the Lucretian swerve. Where James Schuyler, as we will see, turns to parenthetical dislocation, or another contemporaneous poet such as Tom Raworth might employ anacoluthon, Ashbery favours this more fluent form of the swerve, which works to lull the reader into a dream-like sense of continuity, cohesion, and integrity of argument – when, in fact, the narrative-disrupting drift remains at play. And if this rhetorical trickery takes its place within the Epicurean tradition (just as Rossi's architecture assumes its place within the Classical tradition), it also speaks to the "constructivist moment," since it demands that each "perception" moves "instanter, on another" (to return to Olson's terms) within a structure of rigorous grammatical lucidity.

Poet and critic Ben Lerner gestures towards this impulse in his discussion of what he calls 'Ashbery's lyric mediacy' in his essay of the same name. "Part of the bizarre power of Ashbery's best poetry," he writes, "is that it seems to narrate what it's like to read Ashbery's best poetry, and when his work manages to describe the time of its own reading in the time of its own reading, we experience mediacy immediately."³²⁸ Lerner describes the moment of the poem's construction, always knowing itself, always revealing itself to the reader, and for Lerner this mediacy rests on a certain cyclical tautology (a poem narrating itself narrating itself, etc...), which unfolds on the level of form rather than content (or content subordinated to form): "form

³²⁸ B. Lerner, 'The Future Continuous: Ashbery's Lyric Mediacy' in *boundary 2* (Vol 37, Issue 1, Spring 2010), 203.

becomes content as one reads because the poem itself fills the vacuum left by indefinite deictics.”³²⁹ The relationship between empty and full drives Lerner’s reading – the poem houses a vacuum, which *is* filled, but only with indeterminate deictics and empty tautology. It is, therefore, through the creation of *structure*, and the devices that engender an impression of the perpetual construction of grammatical logic, that Ashbery’s poetry generates this ‘lyric mediacy’: “Aggressive hypotaxis,” Lerner explains, “creates what feels like analytical subordination and chronological development. All the but’s, yet’s, whether’s, so’s, et cetera, all the commas, semicolons, and colons, produce the affect of logic even in logic’s absence.”³³⁰ In this way, Lerner concludes, “Ashbery pins us to the moment of reading and frustrates retrograde interpretive strategies that would stop the flow of language at its source.”³³¹ To return to the question of the critical reader, then, we find that retrograde critical work on Ashbery is thwarted by the onward movement of the poem, emptiness of meaning again amounting to fullness of structure, made possible by the use of tergiversation, hypotaxis, and other grammatical and syntactical *structures*.

All of this recalls Blasing’s assertion, that Ashbery’s “stylistic and syntactic strategies [...] lea[d] us on – in a clear or coherent sentence or passage – toward some ‘revelation’ but just so far, and at the last moment turning away and collapsing the whole structure, with a non sequitur or a deflation.” Yet I do not agree that this necessarily amounts to a “resistance to revelation.”³³² Revelation is not denied, *per se*; simply, it does not arrive in a moment of climax or epiphany at which we might expect it to (something we have already encountered in O’Hara’s bathetic image of scrambled eggs in place of orgasmic climax). Echoing Rosenberg, “what matters always is the revelation *contained in the act* [my emph.]”³³³ Thus, as Ashbery concludes in the final section of ‘The Bungalows’, the question is not one of ‘meaning’ but of ‘building’:

All this came to pass eons ago.
Your program worked out perfectly. You even avoided
The monotony of perfection by leaving in certain flaws:
A backward way of becoming, a forced handshake,
An absent-minded smile, though in fact nothing was left to chance.
Each detail was startlingly clear, as though seen through a magnifying glass,

³²⁹ *Ibid.*, 206.

³³⁰ *Ibid.*, 204.

³³¹ *Ibid.*, 203.

³³² Blasing, *Politics and Form*, 117.

³³³ Rosenberg, ‘The American Action Painters’, 23.

Or would have been to an ideal observer, namely yourself –
 For only you could watch yourself so patiently from afar
 The way God watches a sinner on the path to redemption,
 Sometimes disappearing into valleys, but always *on the way*,
 For it all builds up into something, meaningless or meaningful
 As architecture, because planned and then abandoned when completed,
 To live afterwards, in sunlight and shadow, a certain amount of years.
 Who cares what was there before? There is no going back,
 For standing still means death, and life is moving on,
 Moving on towards death. But sometimes standing still is also life (*DDS* 285).

Whether meaningless or meaningful is of a secondary importance: what matters is the process of building up, and then abandoning via the swerve of tergiversation “like the friendly beginning of a geometrical progression / Not too reassuring, as though meaning could be cast aside some day / When it had been outgrown” (*DDS* 232). Thus, what is abandoned (along with political responsibility) is meaning, and in its place we find the tautological narrative of the poem’s own construction, borne out through structure. The address to self – not so much to the writer but to the poem as an autonomous entity (as Ashbery writes, “I think of my poems as independent objects or little worlds which are self-referential”³³⁴; as Blasing writes, the poem “constructs *itself* into a discourse that in turn constructs a meaningful world”) pervades this stanza (“You even avoided / The monotony of perfection by leaving in certain flaws”; “nothing was left to chance”; “Each detail was startlingly clear”; “For only you could watch yourself so patiently from afar”) and locks the reader into a contemplation of the verse that cannot extend beyond its perpetual cycling around itself (“Ashbery pins us to the moment of reading”): another full vacuum created from self-supporting structure. Where the poems of *The Tennis Court Oath*, amount to little more than scaffolding, ‘The Bungalows’ “builds up into *something*” by virtue of forward-moving process: “always *on the way*”; “Who cares what was there before? There is no going back.” Yet, in amounting to ‘something’ these poems also complicate their own propulsion. True to Ashbery’s tic of tergiversation, this forward drive is suddenly cut-off in the poem’s closing image as Ashbery again abandons what, for the last six lines, has been building towards a climactic conclusion. With a subtle swerve, Ashbery leaves the poem on a note of undecidability: “But sometimes standing still is also life.” This final contradiction captures the strangeness of an art form that knows its own process of construction. As in the action painting of Jackson Pollock, the projective verse of Charles Olson, or the visionary architecture of Aldo Rossi, process-driven art also results in a finished product: the poem unfolds, is always unfolding, but, when it reaches its denouement, must also crystallise, must halt, must stand still.

³³⁴ Quoted in: Shoptaw, *On the Outside Looking Out*, 211.

As with his paradoxical merging of solid and void, Ashbery repeatedly pairs the possibility of “stand[ing] still” and “moving on” (*HBD* 55). Where the empty-full, self-supporting structure of the scaffold carries “an argument through successfully to the finish, though the terms of the argument remain unknown quantities,” the impossible doubling of standing still and moving parallels the ongoing processes of construction that seem to characterise these static, printed texts. As Ashbery writes in ‘Fragment’, the long poem that crowns *Double Dream*, “Nothing is stationary / Nor yet uncertain; a rhythm of standing still / Keeps us in continual equilibrium, like an arch / That frames swiftly receding clouds, never / Getting deeper” (*DDS* 300). The line is an oblique reference to de Chirico’s painting *The Double Dream of Spring*, from which the collection takes its title. In de Chirico’s vision, three separate scenes are united within a single, strangely flattened landscape (fig. 53). To the left stands a man in frock coat, oversized beyond proportion, his strangely hovering body caught in moment of stilled motion beneath a clouded blue sky. Along the central, vertical axis, the painting is bifurcated by a wooden beam, the frame of an easel, on which sits a Rossi-esque blueprint for an interior. This inside depicts a series of arches, “never / Getting deeper,” which look out on to

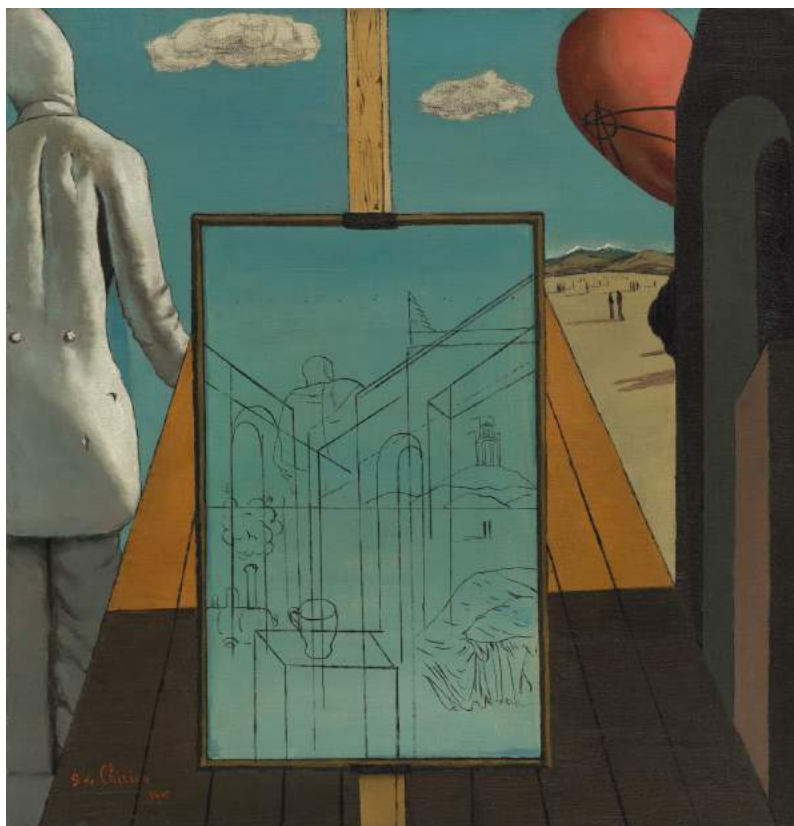


fig. 53 Giorgio de Chirico, *The Double Dream of Spring*, 1915

the same landscape that the painting depicts so that the elements that form the setting are also included in this picture within a picture: even the man in frock coat can be seen in the visionary sketch and, to the left of the easel, “two people [...] collidi[ng] in this dusk” (*DDS* 305) of a desert landscape.

De Chirico’s paintings are the (largely) unacknowledged antecedents of Rossi’s architecture: as Ashbery himself notes, Rossi’s drawings, “as opposed to the projects for architecture built and unbuilt, are bold and whimsical, sometimes suggesting a collaboration between de Chirico and Saul Steinberg” (*RS* 335). Even the ossuary at San Cataldo, that surreal “city of the dead,” is suggestive of a de Chirico landscape, which opens up in paint a “space of dreams,” capable of “changing the rules of space.” In a 1967 article for *Art News*, entitled ‘Space and Dreams’, Ashbery writes that:

the space of dreams can be flat as well as deep, and the Cubists’ fragmented mandolins and apéritif bottles reflect a *hantise* as compelling as de Chirico’s penchant for arcades and perspectives. In fact, de Chirico’s later metaphysical pictures [...] seal the perspectives with two dimensional objects recalling Cubist planes. In his writing de Chirico dwells on constellations and other celestial phenomena, as Miro does in his paintings, and yet he is aware that we are what Gaston Bachelard calls “corner dwellers”; that we sometimes need a shallow space to dream in (*RS* 10).

Fifteen years later, Ashbery returns to de Chirico, in a review of the artist’s MoMA retrospective. Here he notes that: “The painter’s seeming naturalism [...] is constantly undermined by devices such as the introduction of multiple vanishing points into what looks like straightforward perspective and the placing of highlights where shadows logically ought to be” (*RS* 403). He adds that: “It is a world that is *sui generis*, unrelated to any ‘isms’, and here one can sympathize with de Chirico’s defiant rejection of the rest of modern art” (*RS* 403). Ashbery’s descriptions of de Chirico’s space and style read like soundbites for Rossi’s architecture. A rejection of modern art and its various ‘isms’, Rossi’s built architecture and architectural sketches also alter “the rules of space” through a “seeming naturalism” that is subtly “undermined” by the interplay of light and shadow, depth and flattened surface, “arcades and perspectives,” and multiple vanishing points (figs. 54 & 55). Thus guided by the still dreamy landscapes and structures of de Chirico and Rossi, Ashbery’s “rhythm of standing still” equates, I argue, not only to the empty-full dichotomy that I have articulated, but also to the perpetually modifying city of Rossi’s not-quite-utopian architecture, his model of construction which amounts to the act of writing, where even the static, built edifice can contain the unfolding promise of the visionary. Thus, if Rossi’s buildings are the “concrete basis of the partly imaginary proposition that all architecture is,” then Ashbery’s poetic in *The Double Dream of Spring* might similarly be said

to tread the line from the imaginary to the concrete: the scaffolding of *The Tennis Court Oath* – the suggestion of what poetry *might* be – transformed into a processes of perpetual construction, an architecture that is the act of writing.



figs. 54 & 55 Giorgio de Chirico, *The Enigma of a Day*, 1914 and Aldo Rossi, *Constructing the City*, project, 1978

“A turret there, an art-deco escarpment here”: Houseboat Days

Following *The Double Dream of Spring*, Ashbery published *Three Poems* in 1972, an expansive collection of dense prose poetry where page space is almost obliterated in favour of thick paragraph chunks (and sometimes even paragraphs are abandoned for pages on end). This series represents the peak of the insular introspection and philosophising that had been beginning to crystallise in *Double Dream*. ‘The New Spirit’, the first of the *Three Poems*, opens with an admission of the poem’s empty fullness: “I thought that if I could put it all down, that would be one way. And next the thought came to me that to leave all out would be another, and truer, way” (TP 309). The poems that follow are densely packed with existential contemplation after existential contemplation, each piled on top of one another until the meaning of these musings amounts to little more than Epicurean driftwood. In a brief flash of versification, for example, we are told (characteristically without context for the opening conjunctive):

Because life is short
 We must remember to keep asking to the same question
 Until the repeated question and the same silence become answer
 In words broken open and pressed to the mouth
 And the last silence reveal the lining
 Until at last this thing exist separately
 At all levels of landscape and in the sky
 And in the people who timidly inhabit it
 The locked name for which is open, to dust and to no thoughts
 Even of dying, the fuzzy first thought that gets started in you and then there's no stopping it (*TP* 311).

The section performs its own vacuity, promising the appearance of life's great question but, in this extended non sequitur, letting it fall quietly away into ineffable silence: more "dust" and "no thoughts" in another swerve of tergiversation. In the end, we realise that the density of these poems is less about meaning than it is about rhythm, another poetic structure that works to displace sense since, as Ashbery tells the reader (who is really himself): "There is nothing to be done, you must grow up, the outer rhythm more and more accelerate, past the ideal rhythm of the spheres that seemed to dictate you, that seemed the establishment of your seed and the conditions of its growing upward, someday into leaves and fruition and final sap" (*TP* 310). In fact, Ashbery did "grow up," poetically speaking, to be dictated to the "sphere" of Parmigianino's convex mirror, bringing his poetic to "fruition" by the standards of the literary "establishment": published in 1975, Ashbery's next collection, *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, would earn him the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, and the National Book Critics Circle Award.

In *Self-Portrait*, it was as if Ashbery had emerged, blinking, from the poetic therapy of *Three Poems*, refining his lyric voice in such a way as to amplify the critic over the philosopher – this time in the guise of the art critic, who steps into the poem to proffer descriptions and analyses of Parmigianino's painting: "What is novel is the extreme care in rendering / The velleities of the rounded reflecting surface / (It is the first mirror portrait), / So that you could be fooled for a moment / Before you realize the reflection isn't yours" (*SP* 74). The poem is often read as Ashbery's adherence to the surface of postmodern aesthetics, since "your eyes proclaim / That everything is surface. The surface is what's there / And nothing can exist except what's there" (*SP* 70). The problem with this reading, however, is that it does not take into account the direction of the address: this line is not Ashbery espousing his own view, but Ashbery reading *Parmigianino's* expression. A few lines on, Ashbery in fact complicates this notion of superficiality when he offers his own perspective of the surface, writing that "there are no words for the surface, that is, / No words to say what it

really is, that it is not / Superficial but a visible core” (*SP* 70). Surface, then, is rendered as an integral structure at the heart of the poem. As if to entrench this reading, Ashbery later admonishes his mistaken critics, losing his temper with “those assholes / Who would confuse everything with their mirror games / Which seem to multiply stakes and possibilities, or / At least confuse issues by means of an investing / Aura that would corrode the architecture / Of the whole” (*SP* 79-80). The critics’ insistence on the surfaces, superficialities, and mirror games of Ashbery’s poetry overlook – even “corrode” – the architecture, the structure, and the emphasis on construction, that drives the poem with the forward “momentum of conviction that had been building” since *The Tennis Court Oath*.

Two years after the success of *Self-Portrait*, Ashbery published *Houseboat Days*, a collection that maintained the lyric voice that had earned Ashbery his accolades, while injecting it with a dose of pop-postmodern pastiche and parody. This is also the collection in which the architectural paradigm (which appears in all of Ashbery’s collections, to greater or lesser degrees of abstraction and concretisation) finds its fullest expression as an analogue for the poem. *Houseboat Days* reprises the “rhythm of standing still” that had pervaded *The Double Dream of Spring*. Here, however, this static motion is a less an articulation of the ongoing construction of structure – the senseless “architecture of the argument” as in music or architecture – than it is about the communicative possibility of ephemeral structures of sign, symbol and ornament. “To praise this, blame that,” Ashbery writes in the collection’s title poem, “Leads one subtly away from the beginning where, / We must stay, in motion” (*HBD* 39). In another iteration of aesthetic fence-sitting (or, more accurately, a disavowal of poetry with a moralising agenda), Ashbery signposts us back to the beginning of the poem as a point at which we must stay in motion, always holding off the sense of an ending,³³⁵ “the spookiness / Of the finished product.” Later, in the poem ‘And *Ut Pictura Poesis* Is Her Name’ (the closest Ashbery gets to a defence of his poetic), we discover that the beginning matters not only as an opposition to the ending, but also because it is here that understanding might “be undone.” As Ashbery writes:

Something
Ought to be written about how this affects
You when you write poetry:
The extreme austerity of an almost empty mind
Colliding with the lush, Rousseau-like foliage of its desire to

³³⁵ A similar idea has been discussed, in relation to fiction, in Frank Kermode’s *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (from which I take the phrase) and Peter Brooks’ *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*.

communicate
Something between breaths, if only for the sake
Of others and their desire to understand you and desert you
For other centers of communication, so that understanding
May begin, and in doing so be undone (*HBD* 45-6).

In the collision between “The extreme austerity of an almost empty mind” and “the lush, Rousseau-like foliage of its desire to communicate,” we find another instance of the empty-full conflation that characterises Ashbery’s poetic structures. As he admits here, if the desire to communicate meets an empty mind, then the result, for the critic, can only amount to an illusion of understanding, unravelling the moment that comprehension begins to take shape. Yet, according to Herd, “communication is more than ever the issue in *Houseboat Days*.”³³⁶ If this is the case, then the new task facing the critic is one in which familiar modes of communication (full) must be recalibrated according to the models of structure (empty) that have been evolving across Ashbery’s oeuvre.

In a passing analogy, John Shoptaw detects a parallel between *Houseboat Days*’ drive towards communication and Scott Brown and Venturi’s lessons on the vernacular-commercial signage (fig. 56) of the Las Vegas Strip – “Ashbery,” he writes, “had evidently learned enough from [Denise Scott Brown and] Robert Venturi’s *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972) to construct a poem less like a storm than a ‘strip’ (a street, a comic strip and a strip-tease).”³³⁷ Introducing an architectural typology that privileged communication over structure, form, and space, Scott Brown and Venturi explain at the outset that “Learning from the existing landscape is a way of being revolutionary for an architect. Not the obvious way, which is to tear down Paris and begin again, as Le Corbusier suggested in the 1920s, but another, more tolerant way; that is, to question how we look at things”³³⁸; a sentiment that will be echoed in Ashbery’s ‘Daffy Duck in Hollywood’: “Not what we see but how we see it matters” (*HBD* 34). By virtue of this questioning, Scott Brown and Venturi explain, “there is perversity in the learning process: We look backward at history and tradition to go forward; we can also look downward to go upward.”³³⁹ This is what Blasing articulates when she notes that there is no futurist impulse in postmodern poetry’s backward glance; rather, as we have seen, “it opens up a historical

³³⁶ Herd, *John Ashbery and American Poetry*, 168.

³³⁷ Shoptaw, *On the Outside Looking Out*, 203-204.

³³⁸ R. Venturi, D. Scott Brown & S. Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form (Revised Edition)*, (Cambridge, Mass & London: The MIT Press, 1977), 3.

³³⁹ *Ibid.*



fig. 56 Las Vegas Strip, *Learning from Las Vegas*

perspective from which the construction of the present and the self becomes apparent” – or, as Ashbery writes “The historical past owed it / To itself, our historical present” (*HBD* 86). By the late 1970s, Ashbery, it seems, had hauled his dragging foot out of futurity, fully awake after the double dream of utopian late-modernism, his poetry now firmly rooted in the “historical present” of postmodernism. Early in *Houseboat Days*, in the poem ‘Wooden Buildings’ for example, the reader finds themselves looking both backward and downward, as they are led “upward through more / Powerful forms of poetry, past columns / With peeling posters on them, to the country of indifference” (*HBD* 7). Ashbery’s collection thus grounds us in a postmodern aesthetic, that “country of indifference,” built like “Caesars Palace [on the Las Vegas Strip] with its Classical plastic columns.”³⁴⁰ Peeling posters or plastic, the effect is the same; the past become the pastiche of the present in the search for a new tradition.

The postmodernism of Scott Brown and Venturi established itself in explicit contradistinction to the utopian avant-gardism of late modernist movements such as Brutalism, its cousin, Archigram and its later descendant, high tech. As they wrote in *Learning from Las Vegas*:

No architecture is not the answer to too much architecture [...] The world science futurist metaphysic, the megastructuralist mystique, and the look-Ma-no-buildings environmental suits and pods are a repetition of the mistakes of another generation. Their overdependence on a space-age, futurist, or science-fiction technology

³⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 51.

parallels the machine aestheticism of the 1920s and approaches its ultimate mannerism. They are, however, artistically a dead-end and socially a cop-out.³⁴¹

Looking “down” rather than “up”, Scott Brown and Venturi appeared to be arguing that, in the utopian architecture of the 1960s, “the present ha[d] done its work of building / A rampart against the past, not a rampart, / A barbed-wire fence” (*HBD* 19), as Ashbery writes in ‘Business Personals’. Sadler explains that:

For Scott Brown, and her collaborator from 1960, Robert Venturi, a truly “popular” architecture required not Archigram’s perpetual change of super-technological consumerism, but a “homecoming,” a new interest in meaning and legibility, a new vernacular. The belief that architecture can or should change the world through ruthless modernization – one of the prevalent assumptions of the avant-garde – was rejected by Scott Brown and Venturi as modernism’s worst habit.³⁴²

What marks out Scott Brown and Venturi’s rejection of these late modernist styles is a rejection of the avant-garde belief that “architecture can or should change the world.” This, as we know, is precisely what Ashbery *does* venerate as the special preserve of the architect: “Although all artists are visionaries in some sense, architects are perhaps the most radically visionary, since their aim is to alter the world and our lives.” This much would seem to pose a problem in uniting Ashbery’s ‘visionary’ poetic with the ‘vernacular’ aims of Scott Brown and Venturi. Where Ashbery, in ‘The Invisible Avant-Garde’ had called for a space “between the extremes of Levittown and Haight-Ashbury, between the avant-garde which has become a tradition and a tradition which is no longer one,” Scott Brown and Venturi celebrate the shift “from La Tourette to Levittown,” arguing against those that “contemptuously reject the current vernacular of the United States, that is, the merchant builders’ vernacular of Levittown and the commercial vernacular of Route ‘66.”³⁴³ The problem, as they see it, is that:

The content of the symbols, commercial hucksterism and middle-middle-class social aspiration, is so distasteful to many architects that they are unable to investigate openmindedly the basis for the symbolism or to analyze the forms of suburbia for their functional value.³⁴⁴

Crucial, here, is the emphasis on *analysis*, for these architects are not celebrating “commercial hucksterism and middle-middle-class social aspiration” for the sake of postmodern provocation; rather, they seek to

³⁴¹ Ibid., 149.

³⁴² Sadler, *Archigram*, 45.

³⁴³ Venturi, Scott Brown, Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, 152.

³⁴⁴ Ibid., 153.

demonstrate the fact that the ‘liberal’ architect’s “viewpoint throws out variety with vulgarity,” and that it’s narrow-minded allegiance to “uncluttered architectural form” risks overlooking anything of value in the symbolism and form of vernacular “suburbia.”³⁴⁵ It forgets, in other words, to “question how we look at things.” As they note, with deliberate social overtones, “Many people like suburbia. This is the compelling reason for leaning from Levittown.”³⁴⁶ The point, then, is not that Scott Brown and Venturi *simply* reject the “belief that architecture can or should change the world” but, specifically, that it cannot change the world “through *ruthless modernization* [my emph.]” For, as they emphasise at the outset, they find that “learning from the existing landscape is a way of being *revolutionary* for an architect [my emph.]” Scott Brown and Venturi might then be said to argue, as Ashbery does in ‘The Invisible Avant-Garde’, “that traditional art is even riskier than experimental art; that it can offer no very real assurances to its acolytes, and since traditions are always going out of fashion it is more dangerous and therefore more worthwhile than experimental art” (*RS* 391). Like Ashbery’s ‘Invisible Avant-Garde’, *Learning from Las Vegas* does not, therefore, position itself as a wholesale rejection of the vanguard, nor of all tenets of a movement like Archigram but, rather, as an experiment in looking backwards to look, if not forward to the future, then head-on at the present. In any case, as Herd notes, by the time Ashbery published *Houseboat Days*, his thinking on the avant-garde had been displaced by Peter Bürger’s *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, published a year before, in 1976, whose diagnosis was even more despairing than Ashbery’s: Bürger had taken the vanguard’s dying pulse; the avant-garde had become historical and the poems of *Houseboat Days*, like the lessons from Las Vegas, reflect this shift.³⁴⁷

In seeking a new-old poetic tradition, Ashbery, who, in *The Double Dream of Spring*, penned not only ‘The Bungalows’ but also ‘Sunrise in Suburbia’, mirrors Scott Brown and Venturi in his commitment to the idea of an American vernacular. Indeed, it was a ‘vernacular’ that he identified as central to the development of O’Hara’s mature aesthetic. “What was needed,” Ashbery writes in the introduction to O’Hara’s *Collected Poems*, “was a vernacular corresponding to the creatively messy New York environment [...] that kaleidoscopic lumber-room where laws of time and space are altered.” The vernacular that Ashbery outlines here, as we have seen, is distinctly architectural in character: “both modest and monumental, with something

³⁴⁵ Ibid.

³⁴⁶ Ibid., 154.

³⁴⁷ P. Bürger (trans. M Shaw), *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 15-34.

basically usable about it – not only for poets in search of a voice of their own but for the reader who turns to poetry as a last resort in trying to juggle the contradictory components of modern life into something like a liveable space.” The question of the vernacular – and specifically of an *American* vernacular – had particular resonance in Ashbery’s poetry, which had found itself, following the poet’s emigration to France, cut off from its native language. This, in part, accounts for the “strange syntax and subject matter” of *The Tennis Court Oath*, which, as Adam Fitzgerald notes, “believe just how fascinated he was by being severed from the vernacular he so loved.”³⁴⁸ Ashbery’s delineation of O’Hara’s poetic evolution need only be subtly twisted, then, to fit his own aesthetic development – not the New York City backdrop, but the Parisian one, which would have felt both “kaleidoscopic” and time-bending to this New York poet in Paris. Thus, we might understand Ashbery’s poetic trajectory as one that is, in part, determined by a rediscovery of the American vernacular, at around the time that Scott Brown and Venturi’s ideas were entering the mainstream: the first edition of *Learning From Las Vegas* was printed in 1972; its second edition issued in 1977, the same year that *Houseboat Days* was published.

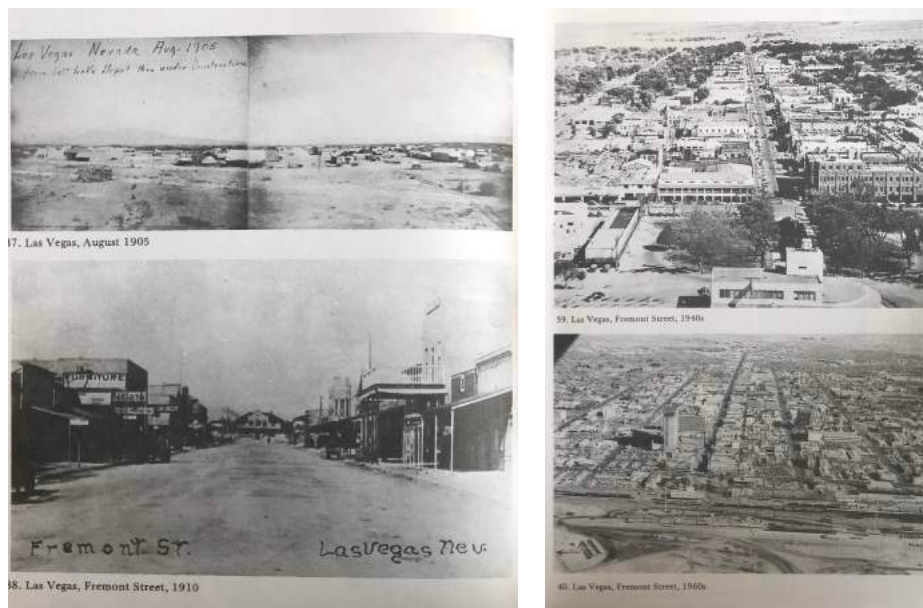
The topography of *Houseboat Days* reads like a catalogue of the architectural mores from which Scott Brown and Venturi sought to learn from American suburbia and the Las Vegas Strip. In ‘Pyrography’, a poem commissioned by the United States Department for the Interior to celebrate the country’s Bicentenary (the height of Ashberyan Americana), we are told that:

The land wasn’t immediately appealing³⁴⁹; we built it
 Partly over with fake ruins, in the image of ourselves:
 An arch that terminates in mid-keystone, a crumbling stone pier
 For laundresses, an open-air theater, never completed
 And only partially designed. How are we to inhabit
 This space from which the fourth wall is invariably missing,
 As in a stage-set or dollhouse, except by staying as we are,
 In lost profile, facing the stars, with dozens of as yet
 Unrealized projects, and a strict sense
 Of time running out, of evening presenting
 The tactfully folded-over bill? (*HBD* 9)

The unappealing land recalls the barren Mojave desert or the swathes of midwestern plains, that built up into the Las Vegas Strip or suburban sprawl within a period of less than half a decade (figs. 57 & 58). Like

³⁴⁸ A. Fitzgerald, ‘John Ashbery’ in *Bomb*, 128: 20014, <http://bombmagazine.org/article/10060/john-ashbery>

³⁴⁹ In the context of an American vernacular, its worth noting an inter-text here with the opening lines of Robert Frost’s ‘The Gift Outright’: “The land was ours before we were the land’s.” R. Frost, *In the Clearing*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1972), 24.



figs. 57 & 58 Development from Mojave desert to Las Vegas Strip, 1905-1960s

Scott Brown and Venturi's description of "Caesars Palace with its Classical plastic columns," the landscape of 'Pyrography' is covered over with "stage-set" scenery and "fake ruins." While the hotels and casinos of the Strip tended to revivify the ruins of Europe (Caesars Palace was no crumbling Roman forum but a restoration of "the grandeur that was Rome..."(fig. 59 & 60)), the incorporation of the classical ruin would become widespread amongst later postmodern architects who had learnt from Scott Brown and Venturi's "perverse" process.³⁵⁰

Informed by the Las Vegas strip, the architecture that Scott Brown and Venturi propose makes a feature of its eclectic and tongue-in-cheek inauthenticity, a well-wrought facade that creates a "space from which the fourth wall is invariably missing." As Scott Brown and Venturi explain: "This architecture of signs is anti spatial; it is an architecture of communication over space; communication dominates space as an element in the architecture and in the landscape."³⁵¹ Yet, though the architecture that Scott Brown and Venturi promote privileges symbol over space, it should not be read as simplistic or straightforward (even if, at times, the authors seem to suggest that it should). Inspired by the "multitudinous styles" of James Joyce and T. S. Eliot, the architecture that Scott Brown and Venturi propound does not seek to communicate forms that would be familiar to their readership: seeking to question not *what* we look at but "*how* we look at things,"

³⁵⁰ For the columnar exemplar of the 'fake ruin' style see Kengo Kuma's 1991 M2 Building in Tokyo, which consists of a giant Ionic column surrounded by 'broken' pediments and arches.

³⁵¹ Venturi, Scott Brown, Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, 8..



figs. 59 & 60 Caesar's Palace

their advocacy of “commercial hucksterism and middle-middle-class social aspiration” as an architectural model would have seemed radically anti-architectural in the early 1970s.³⁵²

To many readers of his work, it would seem a wilful misreading to compare Ashbery’s poetic to Scott Brown and Venturi’s “architecture of communication”: as even Ashbery himself has noted, “My poetry is often criticized for a failure to communicate.” Yet the failure, as Ashbery is at pains to point out, is on the part of the critics: “I take issue with this; my intention is to communicate and my feeling is that a poem that communicates something that’s already known by the reader is not really communicating anything to him and in fact shows a lack of respect for him.” Thus, though Ashbery’s Strip-style poetry – like the anti-architectural “how we look” of *Learning from Las Vegas* – does offer forms of communication in the building of signs and symbols, they remain signs that respectfully make the critical reader work if they want to uncover meaning.

The poem in which Shoptaw finds evidence of Ashbery’s Las Vegas education is ‘Daffy Duck in Hollywood’, his most self-consciously parodic, urban, and architectural poem, stocked with references to “New Brutalism,” “White cardboard castle[s],” “pavilions,” “skyscrapers,” and “model cities.” Narrated in

³⁵² Ibid., 72.

the voice of Daffy, the poem opens with a profusion of pop imagery – high art placed against pulp literature, consumer produce beside plastic goods – set into a landscape of automobile attrition.³⁵³

Something strange is creeping across me.
La Celestina has only to warble the first few bars
Of 'I Thought about You' or something mellow from
Amadigi di Gaula for everything – a mint condition can
Of Rumford's Baking Powder, a celluloid earring, Speedy
Gonzales, the latest from Helen Topping Miller's fertile
Escritoire, a sheaf of suggestive pix on greige, deckle-edge
Stock – to come clattering through the rainbow trellis
Where Pistachio Avenue rams the 2300 block of Highland
Fling Terrace (*HBD* 31).

Billie Holiday modulates into Handel, a can of baking powder mimics the aesthetic trend for tinned goods (Warhol's 1962 *Campbell Soup Cans* had already entered the annals of avant-garde history), jewellery is of the plastic costume kind, a symbol of the celluloid film industry, and cartoon characters have risen to the ranks of pulp fiction and pornography.³⁵⁴ All of this takes place on a fictional Hollywood intersection, a place, Ashbery explains later, where:

[...] You
meet
Enough people on this emerald traffic-island – no,
Not people, comings and goings, more: mutterings,
splatterings,
The bizarrely but effectively equipped infantries of happy-
go-nutty
Vegetal jacqueries, plumed, pointed, at the little
White cardboard castle over the mill run[.] (*HBD* 31-2).

This is the “new scale of landscape” that Scott Brown and Venturi locate on the Las Vegas Strip, where “Styles and signs make connections among many elements far apart and seen fast. The message is basely commercial; the context is basically new.”³⁵⁵ This is because the signage of the Strip is aimed not at the

³⁵³ This term is a play on the title ‘Erosion of cities or attrition of automobiles’, chapter 18 of Jane Jacobs’s *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*.

³⁵⁴ Shoptaw, *On the Outside Looking Out*, 204.

³⁵⁵ Venturi, Scott Brown, Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, 8-9. The question of this commercial aspect is also important to Ashbery’s (and the New York School’s) late-capitalist poetic. As Blasing notes: “In the end, even not making sense is a strategy the poet must market. Ashbery’s aim to communicate without communicating anything of substance reaffirms exchange value over absolute use value and use value alike and is perfectly consonant with a consumer economy” (*Politics and Form*, 154). This idea of communication without communicating anything also corresponds to Scott Brown and Venturi’s Strip architecture: commercial signage has something to say, but in the “multitudinous style” of postmodernism, individual meanings are fragmented and dispersed, and thus remain fundamentally apolitical.

pedestrian – “no, / Not people” – but at the driver who “has no time to ponder paradoxical subtleties within a dangerous, sinuous maze. He or she relies on signs for guidance – enormous signs in vast spaces at high speeds.”³⁵⁶ These signs are the “mutterings, splatterings,” the “White cardboard castle,” or plastic Roman villa, that rises “over the mill run” or above the Strip, signalling in the “bizarrely but effectively” bright lights of quick symbols. Thus, just as the signs of the Strip “contain messages beyond their ornamental contribution to architectural space,”³⁵⁷ the images that crowd the poem must be read, as Shoptaw notes, as more than simply signifying signs:

In a complaint lodged against allegorically-minded critics, Ashbery cited the ‘strange objects’ that ‘avalanche into the poem’ as evidence: “I mean them to be there for themselves, and not for some hidden meaning... They are just the things that I selected to be exhibited in the poem at that point.”³⁵⁸

The poem, as Shoptaw concludes, “is itself something of a cautionary tale against reading signs and wonders into everything.”³⁵⁹ This, however, leaves the critic to wonder: if these images are really only there “for themselves,” if there is “no hidden meaning,” how is one to approach the poem?

Between 1962 and 1977, Ashbery’s poetry may have shifted in emphasis from pure structure, to the process of construction, and finally to the flashing up of ephemeral symbolism, but the lesson of ‘Self-Portrait’ remains the same: that “there are no words for the surface, that is, / No words to say what it really is, that it is not / Superficial but a visible core.” In other words, the poetry of *Houseboat Days*, and ‘Daffy Duck’ in particular, remains wedded to the possibility that communication must be about more than simply showing the reader familiar tropes. Thus, in the aesthetics of this new postmodern tradition, sign and symbol may dominate, but in the drive toward communication, the emphasis remains on process and structure: “to be ambling on’s / The tradition more than the safekeeping of it” (*HBD* 34). Ashbery gestures towards this in ‘Daffy Duck’:

[...] since all
By definition is completeness (so

³⁵⁶ Ibid.

³⁵⁷ Ibid., 5.

³⁵⁸ Shoptaw, *On the Outside Looking Out*, 203.

³⁵⁹ Ibid.

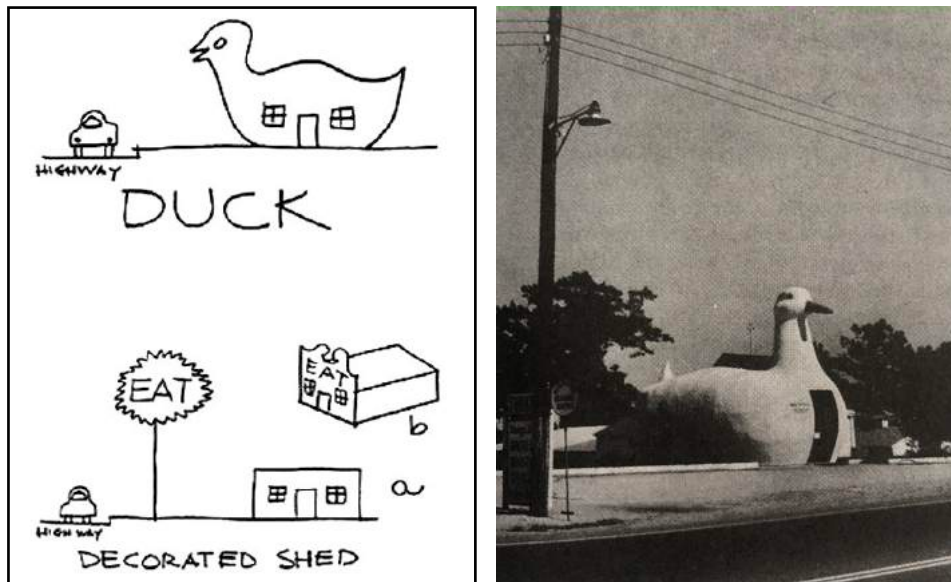
in utter darkness they reasoned), why not
Accept it as it pleases to reveal itself? As when
Low skyscrapers from lower-hanging clouds reveal
A turret there, an art-deco escarpment here, and last perhaps
The pattern that may carry sense, but
stays hidden in the mysteries of pagination.
Not what we see but how we see it matters (*HBD* 34).

“They” (the critics again) who reason in “utter darkness” put store in “completeness.” But Ashbery, as we know, privileges the process of construction above “the spookiness / Of the finished product.” As he writes in ‘Syringa’, “The singer thinks. Constructively, builds up his chant in progressive stages / Like a skyscraper, but at the last minute turns away” (*HBD* 71). The half-finished skyscraper of tergiversated thought poses a stylistic challenge in ‘Daffy Duck’: the glass-box of international modernism has been transformed into the eclecticism of postmodernism, to “reveal / A turret there, an art-deco escarpment here” and, in this anti-spatial architecture of sign and symbol, we might draw nearer to “The pattern that may carry sense, but / stays hidden in the mysteries of pagination. / Not what we see but how we see it matters.”

These same questions, framed around the reclaiming of architectural ornament, underpin Scott Brown and Venturi’s discussion of the ‘duck’ and the ‘decorated shed’ of modern and postmodern architecture, respectively (fig. 61). This distinction is often read as the divide between a modernist commitment to depth and a postmodern dedication to surface. This reading, however, is always two-dimensional at best, and in the case of Scott Brown and Venturi (as in the case of Ashbery) it misses the core of their argument; for, in fact, what they actually critique is modernism’s wholesale adoption of ornament to the level of form. “Ironically,” they write, “the Modern architecture of today, while rejecting explicit symbolism and frivolous appliqué ornament, has distorted the whole building into one big ornament. In substituting ‘articulation’ for decoration, it has become a duck.”³⁶⁰ This is the sculptural “duck” of modernism, whereby “architectural systems of space, structure, and program are submerged and distorted by an overall symbolic form.”³⁶¹ In other words, the modernist subscription to symbolism is *so* pervasive as to rewrite the tenets of form – and not necessarily in profound ways: the duck from which they draw this analogy is the ‘Long Island Duckling’, a structure selling eggs that have apparently popped out of the oversized, bird-shaped building – a far more superficial duck than Ashbery’s ventriloquised, postmodern

³⁶⁰ Venturi, Scott Brown, Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, 103.

³⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 87.



figs. 61 & 62 Robert Venturi sketch and Long Island Duckling

Daffy (fig. 62). On the other side of the equation, the ‘decorated shed’ comprises a simple construction “where systems of space and structure are directly at the service of program, and ornament is applied independently of them.”³⁶² In other words, it is not that ornament and symbolism trump structure but that they are independent of it. Thus, rather than subordinate, “submerge,” or “distort” structure under the didactic impulses of modernism, an independent application of ornament permits structure to retain its integrity. This is what Joseph Hudnut, first dean of Harvard University’s Graduate School of Design, meant when he “introduce[d] the term ‘post-modern’” in 1949, to signal “the separation of figuration from construction.”³⁶³ In other words, as in Olson’s development of ‘Projective Verse’, the earliest articulation of postmodern architecture is one that refers not simply to the surface, but to the separation of surface and structure, and the processes that condition the “act” of building: as postmodern architect and theorist Charles Jencks notes, “architecture really is a verb, an *action* not just a set of correct theories or prescriptions.”³⁶⁴ In comparing the ‘decorated shed’ to the traditional Italian palazzo, Scott Brown and Venturi are explicit about this “separation of figuration from construction” as a driving principle (fig. 63). They write that:

³⁶² Ibid.

³⁶³ D. Leatherbarrow & M. Mostafavi, *Surface Architecture*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England: The MIT Press, 2005), 16.

³⁶⁴ Jencks, *The Language of Postmodern Architecture*, 104.

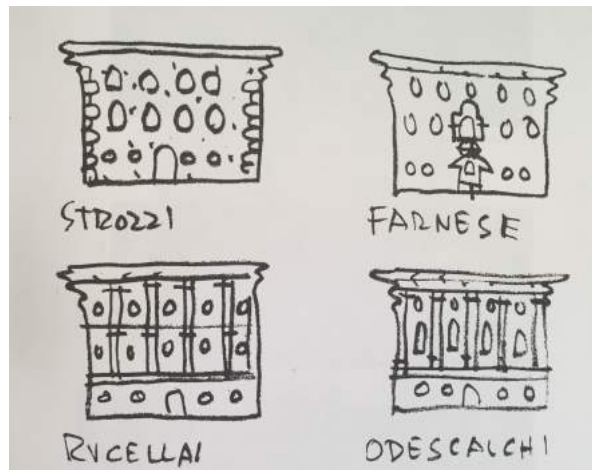


fig. 63 Palazzo facades, Robert Venturi, *Learning from Las Vegas*

The Italian palace is the decorated shed *par excellence*. For two centuries, from Florence to Rome, the plan of rooms *en suite* around a rectangular, arcaded *cortile* with an entrance penetration in the middle of a facade and a three-storey elevation with occasional mezzanines was a constant base for a series of stylistic and compositional variations. The architectural scaffolding was the same for the Strozzi Palace with its three stories of diminishing rustication, for the Rucellai with its quasi-frame of three ordered pillasters, for the Farnese with its quoined corners complementing the focus of the ornamental central bay and its resultant horizontal hierarchy, Odescalchi with its monumental giant order imposing the image of one dominant story on three.³⁶⁵

The “phenomenon of architectural communication” that characterises the Strip is, therefore, not without structure; indeed, it is built on a *scaffolding*, a scaffolding that remains in place and on show, a structure of supports that makes symbolism possible without dominating, distorting or submerging it.³⁶⁶ As Ashbery writes in ‘And Others, Vaguer Presences’, “it is argued that these structures address themselves, / to exclusively aesthetic concerns, like windmills / on a vast plain” (*HBD* 48) – or like those towering structures of signage that seem to sway on the “vast plain” of the Mojave desert. For Scott Brown and Venturi, this interplay of structure and surface amounts to an inversion of “the solid-to-void ratio,” where structure remains essentially vacuous (anti-spatial), in order that its ability to communicate might be heightened;³⁶⁷ another empty-full conflation in which, as Ashbery writes, “there is / Nothing solid, nothing one can build on” (*HBD* 73).

The structure of scaffolding, as we have seen from Robertson, “rhythmically expresses the vulnerability of the surface by subtracting solidity from form to make something temporarily animate.” The

³⁶⁵ Venturi, Scott Brown, Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, 107.

³⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 3-4.

³⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.



figs. 64 Exposed scaffolding in *Learning from Las Vegas*

signage of the strip relies on forms of exposed scaffolding (the images that Scott Brown and Venturi include in the book attest to this (fig. 64)), which not only uphold these signs but generate the “uneven rhythms of the signs behind,”³⁶⁸ stacked up over other signs and streetlights like the “The buildings, piled so casually / Behind each other” (*HBD* 68) in Ashbery’s ‘Spring Light’. Essentially ephemeral (even if many of them have endured), these signs do make something temporarily animate: the experience of travelling through the strip and processing symbols at high speeds is bodily and rhythmic; quick, temporary, and animated. Meanwhile, Ashbery’s animated duck reveals that the structures of his thinking play out in similarly temporary forms: “While I / Abroad through all the coasts of dark destruction seek / Deliverance for us all, think in that language: its / Grammar, though tortured, offers pavilions / At each new parting of the ways” (*HBD* 33).

Writing about this line, Herd notes that:

A pavilion is a temporary structure assembled and disassembled quickly enough to serve the needs of a particular, fleeting occasion. This, Daffy argues, is what is required if the culture is to be delivered from Tophet, and of course the poem is just such a structure: its heavily allusive diction (to Milton, here, for instance) combining with the cartoonic speed of its transitional syntax to generate a language alive both to the requirement of tradition and to the need for that tradition always to be adapting itself anew.³⁶⁹

³⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 20.

³⁶⁹ Herd, *John Ashbery and American Poetry*, 172.

Temporary (“fleeting”; “transitional”) and animate (“cartoonic”; “alive”), the pavilion structure that Herd describes resembles Gottfried Semper’s classical festival scaffold, an essentially ephemeral form that takes its meaning from the interplay of structure and “frivolous appliqué ornament” (more on this in chapter three): the ultimate ‘decorated shed’. In the case of the festival scaffolding, function inheres in the form, while ornament provides an attractive wrapper, and the two are always working together, each to provide meaning for the other. Questions of depth and dwelling may have been subordinated or submerged in the postmodern division of “figuration and construction” – after all, “You can’t live there” (*SP* 79), as Ashbery writes in ‘Self-Portrait’ – but the frame or structure remains integral, creating forms of communication that are both solid and void. This is the language in which Ashbery, *qua* Daffy, thinks; the traces of “an almost empty mind / Colliding with the lush, Rousseau-like foliage of its desire to communicate / Something between breaths.” The grammar – the architecture that shapes and structures this thinking “between breaths” – corresponds to the temporary space of the pavilion, “assembled and disassembled” at “each new parting of the ways,” each drift or tergiversated swerve, branching to create an ever more complex nexus of poetic structure. Thus, Ashbery’s postmodern poetry, built on the scaffolding of the American vernacular, finds its corollary in Robertson’s reading of the poem as a vulnerable shelter for vernacular speech: here, inside these transitory pavilions, we might find a space in which “co-citizens” can “speak together [...] for the duration of speech’s intensity.”

Conclusion

“How was it built?” Ashbery asks in the poem ‘Loving Mad Tom’, “This place / Of communicating back along the way, all the way back?” (*HBD* 17). This notion of building upwards to communicate backwards is the Ashbery paradox in action, performing while describing the construction of its thinking. But it also provides another key to Ashbery’s ‘difficult’ poetic, for it amounts to another instance of solid-to-void, or of standing still and moving. This is the impulse that we find in all of Ashbery’s poems, seeking, as he tells us, to communicate something that is not “already known by the reader” through the musical architecture of the argument while the terms “remain unknown quantities.” The desire to communicate in this oblique, inverted way engenders, as Ashbery writes in ‘The Bungalows’, “A backward way of becoming” (*DDS* 285) for the

reader. These poems lead us back to a beginning, whether the beginning of the poem, the moment of its construction, or the sense of a beginning that, as Robertson writes, is “what anyone belongs to.”³⁷⁰

Robertson’s notion of the poem as a vulnerable shelter for vernacular speech rests on the notion of beginning through that vernacular. Elsewhere she stresses the importance of the architectonics of the book, the textual object of the codex, as another linguistic mode of beginning. In ‘Time in the Codex’, she explains that:

Because of the orderly continuity of structural traits, the architectural metaphor is easily assumed. But what the book subtracts from architecture is the originating connotation of the *arche*. Here origins must be differentiated from beginnings, and from historicity. Each reader begins a movement among a multiple and open series, where memory is impersonal. The tectonics of the book frame chance and its twisting trajectories, not an origin. A read is a beginner.³⁷¹

The text, unlike the architectural monument, permits, even invites, continuous beginnings by promoting “chance and its twisting trajectories.” And it is this – the text’s fluid architectonic structure – that Ashbery exploits in order to build communication backwards. At each swerve, each twist of grammatical chance, the structure of the poem invites the reader to begin again. Communication is thus not blocked or thwarted, rather its “trajectories” are constructed in unfamiliar forms, spun out in unexpected directions, to create, as Robertson writes, an “excess of surface.” She continues, “I might define thinking this way: The partial access, in a sequence, to an infinite and inconspicuous surface complexity which is not my own.”³⁷² Like ‘Daffy’, the thinking that the codex promotes is in a language whose “Grammar, though tortured, offers pavilions / At each new parting of the ways” (*HBD* 33).

The question of “excess surface” as the by-product, so to speak, of these structures of thinking brings us back to the beginning of this chapter, where I proposed a ‘surface reading’ of Ashbery’s poetry. My readings of Ashbery’s structures have attempted to challenge the received notion “that everything is surface,” not only in his poetry, but in postmodern aesthetics more broadly. Yet, in doing so, I have not compromised fidelity to the surface: I have not attempted to negate it, remove it, or seek out depths beyond it via a poststructuralist approach that would be antithetical to Ashbery’s thinking. Rather, I have tried to draw out

³⁷⁰ Robertson, *Nilling*, 73.

³⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 14.

³⁷² *Ibid.*, 13.

the structures that Ashbery's poems create in such a way as to incorporate the surface that "is not / Superficial but a visible core" by reading the poems: as a vulnerable scaffolding that "shows us how to inhabit a surface"; as the high tech architecture that applied structure to surface; alongside the visionary architecture that helped to restructure architectural norms precisely *because* it never moved away from the surface of the drawing board; and by fusing grammatical structures with the skin of surface imagery.

The 'surface reading' that Best and Marcus advocate is predicated, in part, on Susan Sontag's 'Against Interpretation'. In 1964, Sontag, as I noted in the introduction, was already writing against hermeneutic models of critique in terms that equate the surface with the sensuous, as Robertson does in her "embodied" reading of the speaking agent. Sontag writes that "Interpretation, based on the highly dubious theory that a work of art is composed of items of content, violates art. It makes art into an article for use, for arrangement into a mental scheme of categories."³⁷³ Instead, Sontag calls for models of interpretation that "reveal the *sensuous surface* of art without mucking about in it [my emph.]," and she posits that "in place of hermeneutics we need an erotics of art."³⁷⁴ At the start of this chapter I included Ashbery's admission that he likes to "affectionately" "tease" and "please" his reader. The question of "play" or "pleasure" underpins the architectural models that I have explored, from the fantastical imaginings of Archigram, to the play on scale and perspective that characterises Rossi's (if otherwise "spooky") architecture; finally coming to a head in the "pleasure zones" from which Denise Scott Brown and Venturi learn "that people, even architects, have fun with architecture that reminds them of something else."³⁷⁵ In the concluding lines of 'Daffy Duck in Hollywood' Ashbery also gestures towards this tendency towards play. He writes that:

This mulch for
Play keeps them interested and busy while the big,
Vaguer stuff can decide what it wants – what maps, what
Model cities, how much waste space. Life, our
Life anyway, is between. We don't mind
Or notice anymore that the sky *is* green, a parrot
One, but have our earnest where it chances on us,
Disingenuous, intrigued, inviting more,
Always invoking the echo, a summer's day (*HBD* 34).

³⁷³ Sontag, *Against Interpretation* London: Penguin, 2009.

³⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 19-20.

³⁷⁵ Venturi, Scott Brown, Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, 53.

In these closing lines, Ashbery reveals his hand, the “shield” become a “greeting” (*SP* 82), to borrow the terms that Ashbery directs towards Parmigianino in ‘Self-Portrait’. Here, the “mulch for play” is the sensuous surface of the poem, keeping the casual reader “interested” and engaged “while “the big, / Vaguer stuff” is worked out in the structures of the poem, in the “maps” and “Model cities” that bring Ashbery close to the figure of the visionary architect – “the most radically visionary” of all artists, “since their aim is to alter the world and our lives.” Ashbery’s poems do create sensuous surfaces – like the sky that “*is green, a parrot / One*” – but these emerge only out of an “excess of structure,” where life is lived “between,” the “earnest” “echo” of a sentiment “chanc[ing] on us”: “Not what we see but how we see it matters.” And these excessive structures, like the swaying, leaning, and careening scaffold that “shows us how to inhabit a surface,” also show us how to begin in speech, altering “the world and our lives” by transforming poetry into “something like a liveable space.”

“this evening crimson as a scaffold”: Cladding Barbara Guest’s invisible architecture with verbal surfaces

Introduction

If the poetic architecture of Frank O’Hara creates liveable spaces, and John Ashbery’s poetry can be defined as the perpetual construction of pure structure, then this chapter argues that the work of Barbara Guest might best be understood in terms of its *cladding*.³⁷⁶ A shift towards ornamentation typified the postmodern architecture of the 1970s and 80s, perfectly distilled in Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi’s articulation of the “decorated shed.” In the previous chapter, however, I reframed this approach, demonstrating that Scott Brown and Venturi’s architectural ethos amounted to more than the superficiality with which it has historically been read. Rather, their “architecture of signs” is built on a *scaffolding*, which remains in place and on show, making symbolism possible without distortion or submersion to structure. In the present chapter I mould this reframing into a new critical framework to read the poetry of Barbara Guest.

For over thirty years, critics relegated Guest to the margins of the New York School ‘club’ to which she unquestionably belongs. In 1970, the second generation New York School poets Ron Padgett and David Shapiro edited *An Anthology of New York Poets*, which conspicuously omitted her work; a move that, as poet and critic John Wilkinson has noted, has subsequently been taken as “a dereliction [...] to epitomise sexual prejudice.”³⁷⁷ Between 1993 and 2001 Geoff Ward’s *Statutes of Liberty*, David Lehman’s *The Last Avant-Garde*, and William Watkins’s *In the Process of Poetry: The New York School and the Avant-Garde* emerged; a trio of critical works on the New York School that enshrined its membership as what Maggie Nelson has termed the “Big Four”³⁷⁸ – that is, Frank O’Hara, John Ashbery, James Schuyler, and Kenneth Koch. Nelson is one amongst a

³⁷⁶ This thesis was written (largely) in London between 2016 and 2020. Across this period, the term ‘cladding’ has taken on altogether darker connotations in the wake of the tragic Grenfell Tower fire in London 14 June 2017. I have nevertheless chosen to retain the term in this chapter because of its specific alignment with the work of Gottfried Semper, its application to early modernist buildings, and its ability to speak to the architectural facade, textiles, and skin alike.

³⁷⁷ J. Wilkinson, “‘Couplings of such sonority’: reading a poem by Barbara Guest’ in *Textual Practice*, (23(3), 2009), 481.

³⁷⁸ Nelson, *True Abstractions*, 232; fn2.

number of scholars who have worked hard to redress Guest's "shocking erasure from anthologies,"³⁷⁹ as Rachel Blau DuPlessis has put it. The work, in particular, of DuPlessis, Nelson, and Sara Lundquist has been vital for placing Guest back into her New York School context,³⁸⁰ while others have sought to champion her work in relation to alternative schools and movements.

In his 2010 study, *The New York School Poets and the Neo-Avant-Garde*, Mark Silverberg writes that "While Guest is now acknowledged as an important New York School poet, there has been limited success in explaining her involvement with this movement in *aesthetic* terms (beyond the most obvious inter-arts connections)."³⁸¹ In part, this must be because Guest – a self-professed late-modernist – does not easily line up with the so-called postmodern aesthetics of O'Hara, Ashbery, Schuyler, and Koch. Where postmodern poetry has been read in terms of its pop superficiality (an assumption that my first two chapters have already attempted to dislodge), Guest's "unironic investment in theory and philosophy couldn't stand further from O'Hara's 'there's nothing metaphysical about it' attitude," as Maggie Nelson notes, "and while Ashbery certainly gets metaphysical, none of the New York School men really holds a candle to the degree of abstraction of Guest's writing."³⁸²

For Silverberg, however, there has been one "obvious" aesthetic link between Guest and her New York School contemporaries: those "inter-arts connections." Like O'Hara, Ashbery, and Schuyler,³⁸³ Guest worked as an art critic throughout her life, and many of her poems betray this personal and professional interest, not only in the visual arts, but in the architectural too. Sifting through the Beinecke Library's Barbara Guest Papers in 2018, I came across the draft of a letter to *Art and Architecture*, hand scribbled on the

³⁷⁹ R. B. DuPlessis, 'The gendered marvelous: Barbara Guest, surrealism, and feminist reception' in (eds. T. Diggory & S. P. Miller), *The Scene of My Selves: New Work on New York School Poets*, (Orono, Maine: The National Poetry Foundation, 2001), 190.

³⁸⁰ See also: S. Lundquist, 'The fifth point of a star: Barbara Guest and the New York "school" of poets' in *Women's Studies*, 30:1, 11-41.

³⁸¹ Silverberg, *Neo-Avant-Garde*, 64.

³⁸² Nelson, *Abstractions*, 32.

³⁸³ But not Koch. "Writing about this quartet of poets," Lehman notes, "one is struck by how often a useful generalization fits three of the four principles." In the Venn diagram of the group, these four men were (almost) united by their homosexuality, their Harvard educations, and their services in the armed forces. These "useful generalization[s]" may offer a preliminary guide to the "Big Four," yet what strikes one most clearly about Lehman's list is its incompleteness: the failure at actually identifying a single trait shared by all members of the so-called School. Lehman does note one additional quasi-generalisation, when he adds that "three of the four poets of the New York School were professional art critics." Koch is the odd one out in this formulation, but the substitution for Guest transforms this biographical principle into the missing piece of the puzzle; the only trait to successfully unite the group known as the New York School.

back of an envelope. Here, Guest notes that “my apprenticeship in architecture was under aegis of the late Tony Smith” (fig. 65) – an explicit dedication to the architectural, in her own, handwritten words.

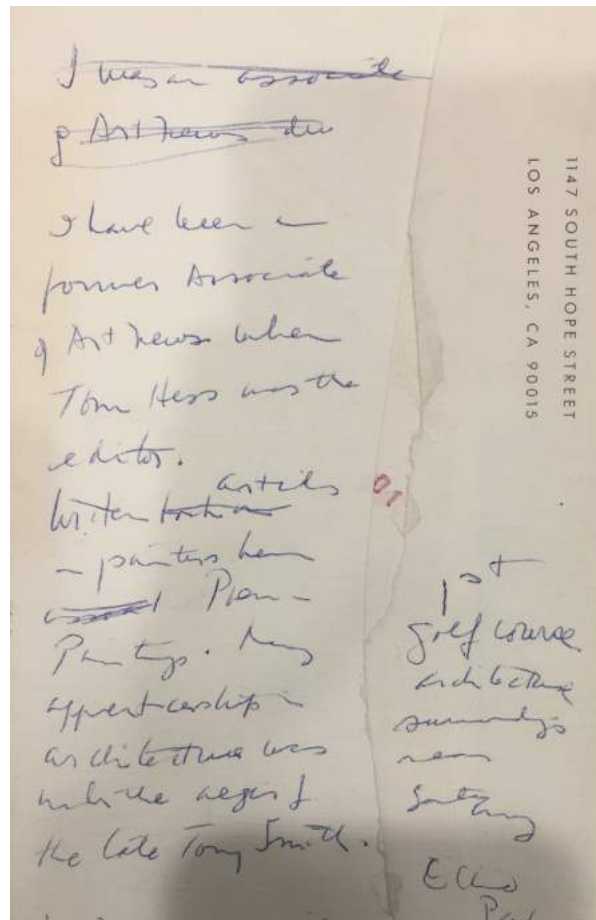


fig. 65 “my apprenticeship in architecture was under aegis of the late Tony Smith,” Barbara Guest

Indeed, traces of the architectural – from semantics to structure – are all over Guest’s poetry, and in the last twenty years, scholarship on Guest has increasingly tended towards an architectural reading. Kathleen Fraser, for example, detects a “lyric gorgeousness and inventive *architecture*” in Guest’s work, while John Wilkinson has picked up on her “*architectonic* tactics.”³⁸⁴ Yet, if this mode of criticism has been rife, it has also been undecided: critics have, it seems, had difficulty in articulating the architecture of her poetry. According to Robert Kaufman, “Guest constructs the edifice by musical phrase; the result is usually an architecture at once monumental and ghostly”; Lisa Donovan writes that, “like the Gothic architects, Guest created a carefully constructed form with very little materials [...] she at once formulates a structure by

³⁸⁴ K. Fraser, *Translating the Unspeakable: Poetry and the Innovative Necessity*, (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1999), 129; Wilkinson, “Couplings of such sonority”, 487.

erecting dissolving walls”; and, as Elizabeth Robinson notes, “[Guest’s] is an architecture whose integrity is built upon the reliability with which it folds, collapses, inverts, moves.”³⁸⁵ As this chapter argues, this undecidability has come about because critics have tended to look too hard for an “architecture” that is, as Guest explicitly points out, *invisible*. As she explains, “There is an invisible architecture often supporting / the surface of the poem, interrupting the progress of the poem” (FOI 18). Meaningless without a poem to support, yet essential to that poem, Guest’s invisible architecture is, as this chapter suggests, a kind of scaffolding – a structure that similarly both supports (supports the construction of a building) and interrupts (interrupts its existence by facilitating its deconstruction) an edifice. Yet, where Ashbery’s poetic scaffold signified nothing beyond itself – the poem *is* the scaffold, an endlessly self-supporting structure or system of structures – Guest’s scaffolding must be read as a contingent entity; for, as she writes, it supports and interrupts *the surface of the poem*. Translating this formulation into architectural terms, this chapter argues that Guest’s poems must be read, like the contemporaneous work of Scott Brown and Venturi, in terms of an architectural cladding, perhaps even ornamentation, that decorates an invisible architecture.

In a 1992 interview with Mark Hillringhouse, Guest states: “I don’t like that term ‘postmodern’. I think it’s a cheap idea. There’s no such thing as postmodernism; you’re either modern or you’re not. ‘Postmodern’! That sounds like some sort of advertising cliché.”³⁸⁶ A self-professed modernist, with a distaste for the ‘postmodern’, Guest’s personal interest in architecture implies this position. Her poems contain references to Modernism, Bauhaus, Art Brut, (Eero) Saarinen, (Alvar) Aalto, (Frederick) Kiesler and (Marcel) Breuer (all modernist styles and architects). Among her Beinecke papers, I found an image of Guest reclining in front of Frank Lloyd Wright’s modernist project at Olive Hill (1914-24) (fig. 66), as well as self-taken photos of Kenwin, the Bauhaus-style home of her friend, the English novelist Bryher (aka Annie Winifred Ellerman) (figs. 67, 68, 69 & 70). Yet, I also discovered the unpublished draft of a short poem that Guest had written in response to a 1974 *New York Times* review of an architecture and design show at MoMA. The original article,

³⁸⁵ R. Kaufman, ‘A Future for Modernism: Barbara Guest’s Recent Poetry’ in *The American Poetry Review*, (Vol. 29; No. 4; July/August 2000), 12; L. Donovan, ‘Barbara Guest: Text as Ruin, Architected Negation, and the Gothic Structure’ in *Jacket 36*, 2008, <http://jacketmagazine.com/36/guest-donovan.shtml>; E. Robinson, ‘Direction’ in *Jacket 36*, 2008, at <http://jacketmagazine.com/36/guest-robinson.shtml>.

³⁸⁶ B. Guest & M. Hillringhouse, ‘An Interview By Mark Hillringhouse’ in *The American Poetry Review*, (JULY/AUGUST 1992, Vol. 21, No. 4), 26.



fig. 66 Guest on Olive Hill by Frank Lloyd Wright

written by Paul Goldberger, was titled 'A Peek into Modern's Architecture Attic' and Guest's response, in its entirety, reads as follows:

Where else are you? City in trees in gutters or rivers.
Zurich? Albion? Trains. Heather.

If there is and this appears more and more likely no where
for me to live then I shall be forced to construct my
whereabouts. Commence to build the model. Something
eccentric and expressionistic perhaps. Or classical along
thelines [sic] of. Or. Then cave of spooky intrigue. A yacht
basin. A letter file. Nails. Grime. Fragments. Lest
one forget spectacular eaves and wainscoting. A little
on the martello side. Or up the estuary. A Sabine farm.
Anywhere the wits stir. Mess. Simmer. Fetch up.

"A Peek into Modern's Architecture Attic". The New York Times.³⁸⁷

In this fragment, Guest "constructs" her own "whereabouts," her own space in which to "live." The resultant model has a distinctly postmodern flavour, mixing the "eccentric" with the "classical," adding pieces of "wainscoting" to the "eaves," and even borrowing from Martello Towers, those niche, Napoleonic-era coastal forts built across the UK and Ireland. The resultant "mess" reads like the bric-a-brac stored in the "kaleidoscopic lumber-room" (*CP x*) of an "Architecture Attic" – an assemblage of junk and excess, a challenge to the heroic, and virulently masculine, Modern architecture that offered "no where for me to live." As I discussed at length in chapter one, the period out of which Guest was writing saw the wane of international modernism, an architectural style responsible for exclusionary spaces, "deliberately designed,"

³⁸⁷ B. Guest, [Where else are you?], undated draft. Barbara Guest Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, MSS 1185, Box: 68, Folder: 1365.



figs 67, 68, 69 & 70 Bryher at Kenwin in Switzerland, by Barbara Guest

as Robert Bennett notes, “to homogenise, organise, and police the city’s complex heterogeneity.”³⁸⁸ Indeed, Bennett also, if implicitly, places Guest into the context of postmodern architecture. Positioning her poetry in antagonism to “rigid geometrical spaces” of “post-WWII America,”³⁸⁹ Bennett suggests that Guest creates “fragmented, chaotic, and abstract” poetic spaces, that parallel “a new postmodern sense of space.”³⁹⁰ He writes that:

Advocating urban paradigms similar to those of the New York avant-garde, a new generation of postmodern architects and urbanists rose to prominence by challenging the fundamental premises of International Style Modernism. For example, Robert Venturi’s *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* criticized modernism’s “bland architecture,” “blatant simplification[s]” and “puritanically moral language.”³⁹¹

Bennett thus aligns the work of Guest (and the New York School) not only with postmodern architecture, but, specifically, with the postmodernism of Robert Venturi (and Denise Scott Brown) and, in so doing, contends that Guest’s “spatial images aggressively confront and challenge conventional notions of space, and this

³⁸⁸ Bennett, *Deconstructing Post WWII New York City*, 10.

³⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 98.

³⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 107.

³⁹¹ *Ibid.*

critical deconstruction of space plays a crucial role in her notion of what it means to write.”³⁹² In spite of Guest’s aversion to the term postmodern, then, the present chapter builds on Bennett’s alignment of Guest with the postmodern architecture of the period. For at its root, Guest’s distaste is levelled at the *term* (“‘Postmodern’! That sounds like some sort of advertising cliché”), and not necessarily at the ethos or the aesthetic that aligns with it. In this respect, Guest’s aversion parallels the ambition of this thesis: to undo a reliance on the *terminologies* of modernism and postmodernism, and the assumptions that attend these terms, in order to create new associations across historical eras, aesthetics, and disciplines.

In one important respect, however, I diverge from Bennett’s reading: for, rather than cast her as “aggressive” in her deployment of “Nietzschean-Derridean hermeneutic models,” and in exclusive relation to the male figures who dominated the art and architecture of the twentieth century, the present chapter reads Guest’s ‘postmodern’ poetic architecture as fitting into female traditions of both poetry and architecture.³⁹³ If her work can be said to “confront and challenge conventional notions of space,” then the space that her poems are often most concerned with challenging is the domestic; a space that is overlooked in Bennett’s account of stellar architects and named commercial buildings. Furthermore, if “this critical deconstruction of space plays a crucial role in her notion of what it means to write,” then it is essential that we ask: what does it mean to write *for a female poet in the 1960s, 70s and 80s*? What are the spaces that would have characterised Guest’s lived experience? And how might she be writing through or about or around these spaces, deconstructing and reconstructing them, as Erica Kaufman has suggested, in “fantastical and relentless” ways?³⁹⁴

The lens of this chapter is thus trifocal: textually, I define the architecture of Guest’s poetry in terms of the scaffold and its cladding; *contextually*, this approach seeks to reclaim the feminine aspects of Guest’s work, which have, in the past, been critically slighted; and, more broadly, this chapter seeks, like the rest of the chapters in this thesis, to trouble the historical and aesthetic distinctions between modernism and postmodernism.

³⁹² *Ibid.*, 93.

³⁹³ *Ibid.*, 95.

³⁹⁴ E. Kaufman, ‘On “The Location of Things”’ in *Jacket* 36, 2008, <http://jacketmagazine.com/36/guest-kaufman.shtml>.

I begin by focusing on Guest's textual commitment to domestic space, not only in her poems, but in her critical prose, suggesting that her work is scaffolded on to historical notions of the home: rather than reject or demolish them, I argue that Guest seeks to reframe and recode them.

From here, I turn to a consideration of the space of the studio; a space that was important to Guest as a place in which to produce her poems, and a space that also makes its way into the poems themselves, thus troubling the boundary between the 'real' and the poetic. Looking at poems from Guest's first three collections, I read the space of the studio as a scaffold, both in its ability to deconstruct gendered assumptions of space and (by extension) in its capacity to act as a support for the imagination.

In establishing the intertwined scaffolds of home and studio, I turn to a consideration of textiles, a theme that runs like a thread throughout Guest's writing. In this section I consider the work of Guest's middle period, reading poems from her 1980 collection *Quilts*. Here, I suggest that Guest creates verbal surfaces with which to clothe her invisible architecture, drawing on histories of domestic labour and feminine work.

In the final part, I consider the importance of linguistic reality in Guest's work, turning to her 1989 collection *Fair Realism* in an attempt to draw together invisible architecture and textual (and textural) cladding. In this section I position Guest's work in the context of modern and postmodern conceptions of architectural surface, and I explore the notion of skin, not only in twentieth century architectural discourse but in contemporary corporeal feminisms. Ultimately this chapter suggests that Guest's poetry disrupts or "delimits" expectations of surface and depth, the physical and the metaphysical, the real and the textual so that, to borrow a phrase from Guest's essay 'Wounded Joy', it "overruns the boundaries of the poem on the page," placing poetry and architecture into close communion.

Sounding silent space: The invisible architecture of home

There is an invisible architecture often supporting
the surface of the poem, interrupting the progress of the poem. It
reaches
into the poem
in search of
an identity with the poem;

its object is to possess the poem for a brief time, even as an apparition appears (*FOI 18*).

In the opening lines of her 2002 essay, ‘Invisible Architecture’, Barbara Guest at once describes and performs the eponymous structure, making, if not visible at least, in some sense, tangible, her invisible architecture through the use of blank space. As we can *see* (and not just *read*), it both *supports* the first two cantilevered lines (for more on the cantilever, see chapter one), while elsewhere *interrupting* the text, through the structural truncation of shorter lines, transforming critical prose into versification. Here, Guest’s invisible architecture explains what a poem is without being a poem.

“Scaffolding is analogy,” writes Lisa Robertson, “It explains what a wall is without being a wall.”³⁹⁵ Robertson’s ‘Doubt and the History of Scaffolding’, which I drew from in the previous chapter, appears among the essays in her 2003 prose collection *Occasional Work and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture*. A selection of catalogue essays and commissions – with subjects ranging from pure surface to colour, the vernacular shack to spatial synthetics, civic fountains to scaffolding – the book rewrites architectural assumptions, drawing a blueprint for an architecture that “is neither palatial nor theatrical but soft.”³⁹⁶ In her essay on scaffolding, Robertson rebuilds the history of the scaffold; a history that, as she explains at the outset, “has been dismantled. We can’t write this history because there are so few documents – only a slim sheaf of photographs. So we use the construction of the present and form theories.”³⁹⁷ Such theories, for Robertson, translate into an articulation of lived experience:

We believe that the object of architecture is to give happiness. For us this would mean the return of entropy and dissolution to the ephemeral. The architecture of happiness would rehearse a desanctification of time, which is itself only a scaffolding. We live on this temporary framework of platforms and poles.³⁹⁸

Giving voice to this unplaceable, ahistorical, and indeterminate construction, Robertson thus offers a model that speaks to experimental tendencies in both architectural and poetic construction. “Neither inside nor outside, neither a space nor a site,” the scaffold, Robertson writes, is “lively,” in its desire “to fall away from

³⁹⁵ Robertson, *Office for Soft Architecture*, 139.

³⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 18.

³⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 138.

³⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

support,” it is “the negative space of the building [...] architecture’s unconscious displayed as a temporary lacework” (fig. 71).³⁹⁹

If scaffolding is “the negative space of the building,” then invisible architecture is the negative capability of the poet: that state, as Keats wrote, “when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason.”⁴⁰⁰ Guest writes that:

[...] An invisible architecture upholds the poem while allowing a moment of relaxation for the unconscious. A period of emotional suggestion, of lapse, of reliance on the conscious substitute words pushed toward the bridge of architecture. An architecture in the period before the poem finds an exact form and vocabulary—,

before the visible appearance of the poem on the page and the invisible approach to its composition (*FOI* 18).

Like Keats, Guest is invested in a notion of the mysterious as a driving force in the composition of a poem. Yet her semantic choices here betray a reliance on sturdier foundations: a “bridge of architecture” develops between the poet’s consciousness and their “emotional [...] lapse,” and though, like a scaffold, it appears



fig. 71 ‘Building Kenwin’, scaffolding by Barbara Guest

³⁹⁹ Ibid., 139-142.

⁴⁰⁰ J. Keats (ed. R. Gittings) *Letters of John Keats*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 43.

“before the visible appearance of the poem,” it nevertheless provides Guest with something structural on which to pin “the surface of the poem.”

Looking through a folder of drafts in the Beinecke Library’s Barbara Guest Papers, I came across an unpublished poem titled ‘Rue Washington’. Dated ‘1/9/1960’ this early poem contains, as far as I have found, Guest’s only reference to scaffolding:

At the hour when I write
 hour of Rue Washington
I am thinking bivalvular thoughts about
 the Rue Washington
they have to do with oysters
 which turn into chestnuts
and the “wayward” trend of the seasons
seized in a great bunch of grapes
which I cut at Fouquets
not far from the Rue Washington

Elaine, whom I am writing to
while I live this pleasant life of streetcars
changed into buses and standing room for pedestrians
overnight becoming the “left lane” for traffic
 here in Washington, D.C.

 on this evening crimson as a scaffold
where the dead tree bark burrows into tomorrow
like the shout of a newly-elected President and
trolleys weep like flags in their barn, I will call out
to you on Rue Washington

 at twenty-four hours in the winter
noiselessly as a huitre leaving its shell
the Potomac will rise
 then I’ll be waived home⁴⁰¹

The image of scaffolding in the poem is small, opaque, serving merely as a simile for a sunset: “the evening crimson as a scaffold.” The likeness is almost surreal (a fitting tradition for the poem’s Paris setting) but the nuanced mingling of the terms “crimson” and “death,” respectively preceding and proceeding the “scaffold,” implies an altogether darker image from French history: the scaffold as a site of public execution. Around this “temporary framework of platforms and poles,” the speaker enjoys only a fleeting life in Europe (“while I live this pleasant life”), writing home to friends and enjoying the novelties of European life (twenty-four hour clocks, left lane traffic, continental histories), before she is “waived home” at the poem’s conclusion.

⁴⁰¹ B. Guest, ‘Rue Washington’, 1/9/60, Barbara Guest Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, YCAL MSS 1185, Series II, Box: 67, Folder: 1632.

“Words deprived of their stability—that is, if not fed by the imagination,” writes Guest, in the essay ‘Radical Poetics and Conservative Poetry’, “rush around attempting to attach themselves to a surface” (FOI 16). With its succession of quasi-imagistic snapshots, ‘Rue Washington’ remains tentatively held together by an “invisible architecture,” the work of the unconscious seaming the surface – that is, the visual textures of words, themes and images – together. To-ing and fro-ing across the page, the poem’s heavy use of indentation is also supported by the invisible scaffold of blank space, which “rhythmically expresses the vulnerability of the surface by subtracting solidity from form to make something temporarily animate. It shows us how to inhabit a surface as that surface fluctuates,” to recall Robertson’s description of the scaffold.⁴⁰² The fluctuations of oysters into chestnuts, streetcars into buses, Rue Washington into Washington D.C., keep the surface of the poem lively and animated; but in the end, these fantastical transformations make sense, the poem is tethered, the ideas drawn into coherent conclusion, through an image of *home*, that conventional trope of “stability” on which the poem is, if only structurally, anchored.

In 1960, the year that Guest penned her draft of ‘Rue Washington’, she also published her first collection of poems, entitled *The Location of Things*. The collection is filled with architectural references to windows, halls, steps, wooden floors, cantilevers, corridors, stairs, brick walls, apartments, houses, roofs, walls, rooms, alcoves, edifices, columns, buttresses, balconies, friezes, palaces, and villas.⁴⁰³ Yet, in all of this, one word remains conspicuously absent: across these thirty-one, architecturally nuanced poems, the term ‘home’ never once appears. Discussing Guest’s “architectonic tactics” in ‘The Hero Leaves His Ship’, John Wilkinson picks up on this absence, noting that:

Towards the poem’s close ‘I ask if that house is real’; the question is addressed both to the poem and to the questioning voice it houses and which composes it. This sense of the poem as a house (but not a home) is characteristic of Guest’s early poems [...] There, cabin and manse alike are construed as manifestly literary performances[.]⁴⁰⁴

If Guest’s writing can be called architectural, then perhaps it should follow that the term ‘home’ remain absent; for ‘home’ determines not a bricks and mortar construction, but a culturally shaped *idea*. Gaston Bachelard’s *The Poetics of Space* (1957), published in French three years before ‘Rue Washington’ (and

⁴⁰² Robertson, *Office for Soft Architecture*, 140.

⁴⁰³ All terms drawn from *The Collected Poems of Barbara Guest*.

⁴⁰⁴ Wilkinson, ‘Couplings’, 487.

translated into English in 1964), captured this distinction, by translating the physical place of the *house* into the metaphysical space of the poetic, where it becomes *home*; not a material construction as such, but a zone demarcated by a *feeling* of security and intimacy. “All really inhabited space,” he writes, “bears the essence of the notion of home.”⁴⁰⁵ By way of illustration, he offers “two images: the calm nest and the old home, [which] weave the sturdy web of intimacy on the dream loom.”⁴⁰⁶ Home, then, is not the architecture of the house, but the essence that saturates it with an impression of protection, warmth, security, and intimacy: maternal qualities that align with the historical delineation of the home as the female zone.

Bachelard’s book is pioneering in its attempt to phenomenologically intertwine the poetic and the architectural, but the project of transforming the physical house into a notional home dates back at least to the late eighteenth century, when it was properly codified and concretised, and even further back, to the Greek delineation of *polis* and *oikos*.⁴⁰⁷ The seeds of ‘separate spheres’ ideology can be found in Jürgen Habermas’s *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, published in 1962. Habermas was responsible for theorising the restructuring of public space in the eighteenth century, defining the newly reified public sphere as a space that collectively regulated state power.⁴⁰⁸ Responding to Habermas’s work, Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall’s *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780-1850*, published in 1987, also looked to the late eighteenth century in an attempt to recode social space. Yet in their defining account of ‘separate spheres’, Davidoff and Hall pointed out that if *public* space was beginning to crystallise at this time, it must be defined against its opposite, *private* space. This separation, as their formative account demonstrates, was drawn along a (largely) gendered division. Their historical canonical survey maps women’s (and men’s) lives from the late eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century, reading ‘home’ as much as “a social construct and state of mind as it was a construction of bricks and mortar.”⁴⁰⁹ Since the publication of its first edition, the work of Davidoff and Hall’s account has largely been revised: contemporary iterations of separate spheres ideologies have reclaimed private and domestic spaces as hybrid sites of: creative labour, economic

⁴⁰⁵ Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 5.

⁴⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 5; 100.

⁴⁰⁷ For more see: H. Arendt, *The Human Condition (Second Edition)*, (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), 22-78.

⁴⁰⁸ J. Habermas (trans. T. Burger), *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1991).

⁴⁰⁹ L. Davidoff & C. Hall, *Family Fortunes (Revised Edition)*, (London & New York: Routledge, 2002), 358.

gain, social interaction, and curatorial display.⁴¹⁰ Nevertheless, in outlining the separation of social spheres, Davidoff and Hall's work brought to light aspects of public and private life that had, hitherto, been overlooked, and which remain a cornerstone of separate spheres scholarship. Exploring the etymology of the term 'private', for example, they note that:

The Latin roots of the *private* go back to deprive, mutating into withdrawn or concealed. These meanings tally with modern usage of private as the personal or something of one's very own. The intimate and hidden aspect of private also shows up in our euphemism for genitalia as private parts.⁴¹¹

Withdrawn, concealed, and hidden, private space remained, up until the mid-twentieth century, a largely *invisible architecture*. Indeed, like the history of the scaffold, the story of these invisible female spaces is one that also remained silent for many years, and continues to call for reconstruction by contemporary scholarship. Thus, if the word 'home' is missing from Guest's first collection (and the two that followed), perhaps this does not amount to a wholesale rejection of domestic space but, rather, the launch, as Erica Kaufman suggests, "into a deconstruction and reconstruction of the domestic." For, as she notes, "Barbara Guest's remarkable first book, *The Location of Things* (Tibor de Nagy Gallery, 1960), establishes that it is possible to reclaim gendered space, and this possibility is manifest in language itself."⁴¹² If Guest's poetry is built on an invisible architecture, then we need to look not simply at the words that gloss the surface, but the ways in which these surfaces intersect with the *structures* of language, the "negative space" of an invisible architecture: a crimson scaffold beneath a "waiving" (read: wavering) image of home.

Returning to Wilkinson's "sense of the poem as a house (but not a home)," I want to draw attention to some of the problems in overlooking Guest's (and other female writers') relationship to domestic space. To emphasise the inhabitable capacity of the poem, Wilkinson differentiates here between 'house' and 'home'. The distinction is syntactically important, clarifying his use of the term as a verb – "the questioning voice it *houses*" – yet his need to distance the poem from the 'home' also betrays a desire to separate Guest's work

⁴¹⁰ For more revisionary accounts of separate spheres, see: N. Fraser, *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse, and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989); A. Vickery, 'Golden Age to Separate Spheres? A Review of the Categories and Chronology of English Women's History' in *The Historical Journal*, (Vol. 36, No. 2, Jun., 1993), pp. 383-414; M. Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, (New York: Zone Books, 2005); J. Hamlett, *Material Relations: Domestic Interiors and Middle-class Families in England, 1850-1910*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010); J Edwards & I Hart (eds.), *Rethinking the Interior, c. 1867-1896: Aestheticism and Arts and Crafts*, (London: Ashgate, 2010).

⁴¹¹ Davidoff & Hall, *Family Fortunes*, xxv.

⁴¹² Kaufman, 'On "The Location of Things"'.

from the feminine space of the *domestic* – a term that remains conspicuously absent from his essay. By burying the term in the disposable space of the parenthesis, Wilkinson’s delineation shuts off, encloses, and diminishes the very notion of home: a striking textual parallel to the ‘real’ space of the domestic. In the same essay, Wilkinson cautions against “the too-frequent essentialist assertion of an affinity between female sex and open field poetics,” explaining that:

because of her syntactical arrangements, Guest has been hailed as a pioneer of a distinctively feminist strand of ‘open field’ poetic practice, but that is a partial reading, even if historically important given her work’s already-cited exclusion from *An Anthology of New York School Poets* (1970).⁴¹³

I agree with Wilkinson that the conflation of feminism and ‘open field’ poetics can be essentialist and prone to promoting the reductive idea that the “dispersal [of words] about the page resembled flowing, female garments.”⁴¹⁴ Yet I also find that the strenuous work of (usually) male critics to somehow rescue Guest from anything that might be read as quintessentially feminine is equally problematic. For placing her, as Bennett also does, exclusively into a canon of male artists misses much that Guest actively writes into these poems about the experience of being a woman and (in terms of architecture) about the experience of domestic space. In fact, as this chapter hopes to show, these two positions need not be mutually exclusive. As Nelson notes, “none of the New York School men really holds a candle to the degree of abstraction of Guest’s writing” while, on the same page, “Guest’s poems repeatedly return to images of ‘homemaking’, often to pose a parallel between the *construction of a house* and the *architecture of a poem-on-the-page*.”⁴¹⁵ Indeed, if Guest’s work is to adequately engage in the “relentless deconstruction and reconstruction of the domestic,” then it must first *engage* with existing conventions of home; it cannot, as implied by the erasure of ‘home’ in both Bennett and Wilkinson’s accounts, overlook these conventions altogether.

Zoe Skoulding, in her book, *Contemporary Women’s Poetry and Urban Space: Experimental Cities*, explores the difference between what she calls the ‘urban specific’ and the ‘urban generic’⁴¹⁶ along gendered lines. Her starting point is Peter Barry’s pre-emptive defence of the scarcity of female poets discussed in his book

⁴¹³ Wilkinson, ‘Couplings’, 486.

⁴¹⁴ Ibid.

⁴¹⁵ Nelson, *True Abstractions*, 41.

⁴¹⁶ Skoulding, *Contemporary Women’s Poetry and Urban Space*, 21.

Contemporary British Poetry and the City. Barry writes that: “Naming public spaces, like streets, squares and locales is an act which proclaims ownership and identification, and it may be that poets who are women feel less confident of such ownership, and are therefore less likely to name hotels, pubs, workplaces and public buildings than male poets.”⁴¹⁷ Skoulding bites her scholarly tongue (there is, after all, something historically accurate in Barry’s diagnosis) and suggests that, rather than challenge this reading of the ‘urban generic’ in the work of female writers, a more generative approach would be to claim it. Skoulding champions the potential of female writers “to disrupt or critique the referential character of language, refusing to take for granted the ways in which names fix external locations as isolated entities distinct from the processes and relationships that form both subjects and cities.”⁴¹⁸ What Skoulding’s reading of the urban generic shows us is one way in which female writers can reclaim, rather than reject, the spaces traditionally appointed to them, as well as find ways to disruptively occupy conventionally male space. Furthermore, by unhooking language from systems of naming and signification, Skoulding suggests that the work of experimental female poets can transform poetic space into a constructive material entity, rather than simply a series of signs with referents in the mapped, public sphere. If, as Bennett suggests, there is a lack of clarity in Guest’s “ambiguous and confusing poetic spaces” this should not be read as simply the attempt to align itself with a tradition of male modernism. Rather, it may be because the nameless space of the home is not fixed as an “external location” or “isolated entit[y],” it cannot be geometrically plotted on to the coordinates of international style modernism, named buildings, and notable architects but must remain anonymous; and it is in this nameless ambiguity that poetic space disrupts semantic referentiality and, with it, both social and spatial convention.

Furthermore, the space of the home may provide, as Robertson suggests, a significant model for the poem itself: her model of the poem “as shelter to a gestured vernacular” draws on historical linguistic studies of the home in early Latinate cultures.⁴¹⁹ Exploring the semantic significance of the terms “*Civis*” and “*Domus*” (Latin precursors for “civic” and “domestic”), Robertson reveals that, unlike our modern tendency to materially “fix” our spatial boundaries, these terms, in their original context, “did not pertain to concepts

⁴¹⁷ Ibid.

⁴¹⁸ Robertson, *Nilling*, 22.

⁴¹⁹ She does this through a reading of Emile Beneviste’s “historical linguistics” in his book, *Indo-European Language and Society*.

of bordered and material spatial limitation” but to “immaterial concepts of collective reciprocity.”⁴²⁰ “*Domus*” she tells us, “denotes the ‘house in its social and moral aspects, Not as a construction’.”⁴²¹

In turning to originary models of domestic space to shape her ideas around the poem as “prosodic gift,” Robertson reclaims the historically female zone from “the site of the abuse of labour,”⁴²² imbuing it instead with poetical and political force:

If, in the Greek *polis* and in the Roman city, citizenship was limited to the male speaker of the master-language, in a pointed elimination of women, beasts and barbarous speakers from a linguistically bordered polity, her *domus*, her *civis*, the commodious, illustrious and exilic vernacular, will shelter her for the rhythmic duration of a refusal.⁴²³

The “vulnerable,” feminised space of the home becomes the spatial analogue to the poem. Though the poem might possess a public character, it does not equate to the *polis*, which can only “interpret, fix or abstract the fluency of the linguistic given,”⁴²⁴ but to the domestic, where the fluid, vernacular utterance might be “overheard” – and where citizenship is coded as a reciprocal formation:

the poem, with its provisional distributions and tentative relationships, its chaotic caesura, temporarily gathers a received and spoken reciprocity, where the *I* and the *you* create one another for the pleasure of a shapely co-recognition.⁴²⁵

The commodious space of the home thus provides a model by which the poem might shelter the vernacular and, in so doing, allow “citizens” to “constitute [themselves] according to the movement of subjectivity in speech.” The poem opens “something like a liveable space” by containing the “creatively messy” vernaculars, not of New York City life, as Ashbery suggests, but of domestic life. And, if the poem achieves this, then it must also speak back to the domestic space from which it draws by suggesting new ways in which to inhabit the house, while evading historically determined cultural expectation. By borrowing from domestic space,

⁴²⁰ Ibid., 80.

⁴²¹ Ibid.

⁴²² Ibid.

⁴²³ Ibid., 87.

⁴²⁴ Ibid., 74.

⁴²⁵ Ibid., 87.

Robertson's essay implies, the poem might, in turn, be able to transform that space and the assumptions on which it has become enshrined.

Guest's attitude towards the home was marked by ambiguity, not only in her poetic delineation of that space, but also in her lived experience. As she observed to Hillringhouse:

It's very hard on me not having a definite place. It has created a great deal of anxiety [...] I never really had a 'home' [...] so I am grateful for this house [in Eastern Long Island] as long as I am permitted to live here [...] When I say the word 'home' I almost whisper it.⁴²⁶

Guest's reaction to the *house* here is unambiguous: "I am grateful for this house," she states, grateful for the neutrality of its architecture. Yet her reaction to 'home' remains ambivalent: Guest dances around the word home, initially avoiding it altogether by referring to it as a "definite place." Eventually she concedes to voicing the term itself, but only when placed precariously in quotation marks,⁴²⁷ as if its very existence were dubious: "[w]hen I say the word 'home' I almost whisper it." Is this a veneration of the domestic, or a betrayal of discomfort at having settled in a home space? Or could it be both at once?

The key to understanding Guest's ambivalent attitude towards domestic space is to be found in her 1990 essay 'Shifting Persona'. Here, Guest describes poetic construction through the architectural-domestic paradigm: a move that demonstrates the extent to which she seeks to simultaneously build on, and deconstruct, both the conventions and the constructions of domestic space. The essay opens with an exploration of the relationship between the writer and the reader of a text, transforming the poem into an architectural site, where both inside and outside can be occupied. "The person inside the literary creation can be both viewer and insider [...] dwelling in a private space where emotive speculation is stronger than fact or action" (FOI 36). The poem opens a space that is inhabited by *both* the reader and the writer: a hospitable⁴²⁸ attribute that we have encountered in the work of both O'Hara and Ashbery. For Guest, writer and reader are capable of meeting in this quasi-domestic ("private") space by virtue of the slippage of inside and outside.

⁴²⁶ Guest & Hillringhouse, 'An Interview By Mark Hillringhouse', 26.

⁴²⁷ The quotation marks are, presumably, Hillringhouse's addition to the typed interview. Note however, that the term 'house' is not contained by them. The transcription of the interview contains frequent references to Guest's tone of voice, or to her laughter, so it is fair to assume that these scare quotes capture Guest's tentative vocalisation of that term.

⁴²⁸ Sara Lundquist has identified what she calls a "spatial hospitality" in Guest's work. S. Lundquist, 'The Midwestern New York Poet: Barbara Guest's *The Countess From Minneapolis*' in *Jacket 10*, October 1999, <http://jacketmagazine.com/10/gues-by-lund.html>.

“Inside the window is the person who is you who are now looking out, shifted from the observer to the inside person and this shows in your work” (FOI 37). According to Guest, this relationship between the outside and inside of a text has the potential, when activated as a kind of flux between writer and reader, to produce great art. As demonstration of this, Guest cites the work of Jane Austen, Pablo Picasso, Diego Velázquez, and Italo Calvino. Austen sits conspicuously among this group of male artists, like Guest among the “big four” of the New York School. For Guest, Austen’s work is exemplary for its “ability to project both windows,” which, she explains, “is a sign of originality and is rare” (FOI 38), through her depictions of *domestic* space. Guest writes that:

In writing concealed within a limited physical environment, as in the work of Jane Austen, the threat of claustrophobia hangs over the whole body of the novels. In order to relieve this environmental tension, the writer with her strokes of genius elevates the characters above physical dimension, so that although their persons appear to inhabit a closed drawing-room they are actually removed from the interior to the exterior as they move beyond their limited space through the projection of the author. [...] They are relieved of ordained claustrophobia, as is the reader, who might be stuck in that drawing-room, who is lifted by the author’s inked quill[.] (FOI 38)

The language is deliberate: the “limited physical environment,” the “threat of claustrophobia,” the “environmental tension,” and the “closed drawing-room” all gesture towards the history of domestic space as a stifling zone of incarceration (for women). That she should choose Austen as an illustration of the claustrophobia of domestic space is notable, given that Austen was writing only shortly after the period that Habermas (and, later, Hall and Davidoff) pinpoints as the emergence of separate spheres. For Austen, in other words, the space of the home may not have carried the same, concretised weight of convention that it does to a contemporary audience, and yet she clearly writes with a sense of social distinction and an awareness of how men and women occupied public and private spaces in different ways. In scene after scene throughout her novels, a familiar tableau is rehearsed: men are “announced” into drawing rooms occupied by prettily seated women, who rarely move (except perhaps to sew), while their interlocutors often stand and sometimes pace, though with the expected degree of propriety. In a famous scene towards the end of *Sense and Sensibility*, Austen adopts these conventions, though she twists them, if only subtly, in order to “elevat[e] the characters above physical dimension.” As Edward Ferrars declares his spousal freedom to Elinor Dashwood, Austen tells us:

He rose from his seat and walked to the window, apparently from not knowing what to do; took up a pair of scissors [sic] that lay there, and while spoiling both them and their sheath by cutting the latter to pieces as he spoke, said, in an hurried voice, “Perhaps you do not know – you may not have heard that my brother is lately married to – to the youngest – to Miss Lucy Steele.”⁴²⁹

Edward has invaded the female space – emphatically female in this novel, since occupied only by the Dashwood sisters and their mother. In his embarrassment, he moves indecorously about the limited confines of the drawing room, gravitating to the window, where inside and outside might meet, and upsetting the unfamiliar tools of domestic feminine labour. On hearing his declaration, “Elinor could sit it no longer. She almost ran out of the room,” while Edward, “without saying a word, quitted the room and walked out towards the village; – leaving the others in the greatest astonishment and perplexity.”⁴³⁰ Guest turns to Austen because, in her use of free indirect discourse, she seamlessly shifts between writer, character, and reader, and, by passing persona from person to person, she prevents the stifling claustrophobia of the drawing room from overwhelming the narrative. Yet, as Guest knows, Austen also achieves this through her staging and consideration of the gendered occupation and use of these spaces. Thus, when Elinor and Edward both quit the drawing room without acknowledging the proper respect for social propriety, the couple flout convention, liberating themselves physically from the drawing room in which they are seated, as well as from the possibility of “ordained claustrophobia” through their decision to marry for love in defiance of societal expectation. By figuring Austen this way, Guest’s essay gestures towards the cultural significance of attending to even the tiniest disruptions of domestic space: an action as simple as looking through a window or stepping through a doorway, as Austen’s writing shows us, might be heavy with signification.

Interruption and support: The studio as scaffold

In a tribute to Barbara Guest, Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge remembers the architectural spaces that shaped the poet’s life: the “small penthouse” that “she rented [...] to write in”; “an airy rented house” where she would “[talk] about writing with beloved visitors”; “the studio [...] on 16th street, a long series of rooms ending with a kitchen that looked out on a parking lot illuminated at night by mercury vapor lamps”; the concussion that Guest suffered after “a mugging on the stairs of her studio in the late 80s”; and the poignant memory of

⁴²⁹ J. Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*, (London: Penguin Books, 2014), 335.

⁴³⁰ *Ibid.*

“bringing my family to stay with her on Mercer Street and spreading out on the stairs with my baby [...] and washing Martha in her bathroom sink.”⁴³¹ The spaces that Berssenbrugge describes are overwhelmed by an impression of indeterminacy: with their liminal features (stairs and sinks and hallways) and their brief rental periods, these locations seem to be “neither inside nor outside, neither a space nor a site.” This is because the spaces that Berssenbrugge recalls are not Guest’s homes but her studios.

The studio was a significant space for Guest throughout her life (fig. 72). In the 1950s and 60s, these spaces were traditionally associated with visual artists – and with men. Claire Hurley’s doctoral thesis, *The Poetics of Site*, explores the space of the studio in Guest’s poetry, commenting on the “strained history of the artist’s workplace [...] culturally conditioned as a masculine space”⁴³² in the 1950s. Yet Hurley also notes the extent to which ‘studio’ and ‘home’ might be conflated. Paraphrasing Robert Storr, she writes that “‘I am going to the studio’, can mean going into any number of discrete spaces: the living room, the spare bedroom,



fig. 72 Mark Hillringhouse, Barbara Guest’s Studio

⁴³¹ M. Berssenbrugge, ‘Recalling a Friendship’ in *Chicago Review*, (Vol 53/54; No. 4 – Vol. 54; no. 1/2; Summer 2008), 114-116.

⁴³² C. Hurley, *The Poetics of Site: Reading the Space of Experimental US Women Poets*, (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Kent, 2017), 129.

the attic, the basement, or the floor of a warehouse.”⁴³³ As Hurley’s archival work unearths, this was very much the case for Guest in the early years of her poetic career. She writes that:

Until the 1970s Guest’s studio was contained within her household. As such, she expands our understanding of site to include daily overlapping of creativity with domesticity. Particularly in her early poetry, the location of Guest’s studio within the space of the home becomes an important aspect of her aesthetic.⁴³⁴

According to Hurley, “finding the space to live as a female artist was imperative” and, as such, “Guest’s own studio [...] transformed gender relations” by overlapping “supposedly separate spheres – the domestic space with the creative space” in order to “provide a moment of radical emergence for the woman artist.”⁴³⁵ That the studio should be marked out by “discrete space,” that it overlaps “supposedly separate spheres,” is crucial: this is a space distinguished by masculine occupation and creative labour, yet it remains, ultimately, an *interior*, *private*, and even *domestic* space. The studio thus disrupts familiar distinctions and problematises expectations of gendered space: it becomes a site that troubles not only the cultural assumptions of ‘separate spheres’, but the physically demarcated lines of public and private.

The space of the studio appears in a number of Guest’s poems, often as an indeterminate or fantastical site, a space that is not quite inside, not quite outside, neither public nor private, captured through an attention to transitory structures and spaces. In ‘The Location of Things’, the title poem from her first collection, the internal space that Guest describes is overwhelmed by an impression of the transitory:

Why from this *window* am I watching leaves?
Why do *halls* and *steps* seem narrower?
Why at this desk am I listening to the sound of the fall
of color, the pitch of the wooden *floor*
and feet going after? [all my emph.] (*LT* 3)

These opening lines, from the *Collected Poems*’ opening composition, determine the images and themes that would pervade the work that Guest would write throughout her life.⁴³⁶ Here, the studio is implied in the image of the “desk,” while transitory features recall both Berssenbrugge’s recollections and Austen’s drawing

⁴³³ *Ibid.*, 125.

⁴³⁴ *Ibid.*, 133.

⁴³⁵ *Ibid.*, 131; 130; 136.

⁴³⁶ Indeed, ‘Hotel Comfort’, the final poem of the *Collected Poems*, creates a poignant dialogue with ‘The Location of Things’, through its mirror images of “roof[s],” “street[s],” and “windows” (516).

rooms: windows facilitate a connection with the world outside⁴³⁷ and an attention to halls, steps, and floor emphasise motion and ephemerality in opposition to Bachelard’s settled, intimate, and secure “nest” of the home. It is in response to this poem that Kaufman notes Guest’s launch into a “fantastical and relentless deconstruction and reconstruction of the domestic” in which “[t]he house is far from void or abstract; it morphs into a vessel of potential action.”⁴³⁸ For Kaufman, this potential is activated through the silent, synecdochic images of the home, the fragmentation of the architecture into constituent features: “Rather than literally placing the speaker inside a house (traditionally/stereotypically the woman’s place),” Kaufman writes, “she makes reference to ‘this window’ and ‘halls and steps’.”⁴³⁹ The speaker is both there and not there, in one sense occupying the space, in another merely surveying – or travelling across – its connective *architecture*. She must be inside, as she sits at her desk and gazes through her window; and yet the “relentless” fragmentation of these features must also make domestic occupation impossible.

The setting shifts abruptly in the second stanza to “Madison Avenue” (*LT* 3), where the speaker is “having a drink” (note the intrepid blend of the ‘urban specific’ with the ‘urban generic’). Suddenly, street and bar combine through the figure of the architectural cantilever:

[...] The street, the street bears light
and shade on its shoulders, walks without crying,
turns itself into another and continues, even
cantilevers this barroom atmosphere into a forest
and sheds its leaves on my table (*LT* 3)

The private space of the opening stanza has given way to the public space of “Madison Avenue” but the transition is not straightforward. Guest follows the meandering character of the street, as it “bears light and shade on its shoulders,” and allows this wandering path to transform the interior space of the bar into an organic “forest” where “leaves” are “shed” on the “table.” It is the cantilever that makes this organic⁴⁴⁰ conflation possible – a structural support that allows layers of material to horizontally overhang one another. These transitory or transitional architectural features permit Guest to collapse the traditional binaries of

⁴³⁷ As Guest observed to Hillringhouse, of her own domestic studio, “I read here as well and look out these windows, all of which gets into the poetry.” Guest & Hillringhouse, ‘An Interview By Mark Hillringhouse’, 24.

⁴³⁸ Kaufman, ‘On “The Location of Things”’.

⁴³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴⁰ The cantilever, as I discussed in chapter 1, was a popular technique in the organic architecture of the period.

outside and inside, public and private, so that the interior spaces of the poem do not merely amount to a description of the home, but to a poetic recalibration of spatial expectation, which is transformed into the power “to disrupt or critique the referential character of language,” to recall Skoulding. Disorienting and unsettling, these opening stanzas lay the foundations for the poem’s final section, in which the “relentless deconstruction and reconstruction of the domestic” is performed:

through this floodlit window
or from a pontoon on this theatrical lake,
you demand your old clown’s paint and I hand you
from my prompter’s arms this shako,
wandering as I am into clouds and air
rushing into darkness as corridors
who do not fear the melancholy of the stair (*LT* 4).

The final stanza returns to images of architectural transit, but here they are mixed with a sense of the theatrical: a pontoon replaces the floodlit window on a theatrical lake (another seamless move from inside to outside), while the speaker offers make-up and fancy dress to an unidentified ‘you’, who enters the poem suddenly, as if from offstage. This air of make-believe, we are told, has travelled in through the window, which, in Guest’s poem, ceases to be a marker of female entrapment, and becomes instead a locus of inspiration, a frame through which the female poet can look out on to the world outside and gather poetic stimulus as she works at her “desk.” The speaker, in other words, is merely *playing house*.

In ‘The Location of Things’, Guest plays with conventions of the home and with the figure of the woman enclosed in domestic space: we *think* we know where we are in the opening line, yet the writer’s desk, the architectural cantilever, and the web of transitory spaces turns domestic expectation on its head. In his essay ‘Between “Location” and “Things”: Barbara Guest, American Pragmatism, and the Construction of Subjectivity’, Zac Schnier suggests that Guest is “at home within the corridors of imagination, the transitional sites in which the subject is constituted and reconstituted *ad infinitum*.”⁴⁴¹ The transitory studio becomes a home of sorts, and thus she finds not only her poetic voice, but her subjectivity, freed from the cultural constraints of domestic life.⁴⁴² Schnier concludes that “the speaker appears ready to abandon the

⁴⁴¹ Z. Schnier, ‘Between “Location” and “Things”: Barbara Guest, American Pragmatism, and the Construction of Subjectivity’ in *Canadian Review of American Studies*, (Vol. 45, No. 3, Winter 2015), 371.

⁴⁴² Davidoff and Hall note that: “The aristocracy and gentry had begun adding halls and corridors in the seventeenth century to give more privacy and mark the family from the public domain,” *Family Fortunes*, 377. This implies a domestic blueprint for Guest’s adoption of transitory space as home.

comforts of the Cold-War hearth and its gendered significations for the indeterminacy of corridors and staircases, means of exchange between locations, conveyances into the unknown or the other.”⁴⁴³

Nevertheless, Guest’s reconstruction relies first on the *adoption* of domestic space, in the attempt to free it from the weight of cultural and historical determination: her spaces are scaffolded on a history of domestic space and it is this scaffolding, or invisible architecture, that allows Guest to make this recalibration; to both interrupt extant assumptions, and to support the construction of new ones.

Later in Guest’s life, as Berssenbrugge’s recollection attests, her studio became its own distinct entity, a rented home away from home (or a succession of them) in which she could devote herself to work. In a discussion between Guest and Kathleen Fraser, chaired by Elizabeth A. Frost and Cynthia Hogue, Guest articulates this need for a space beyond the home, when she admits that:

I was fortunate in that I was able to rent an apartment away from my home as a writing studio, where I could really go inside. A friend rented it for me, and I think that the separation was crucial, that I was able to get away to write. Because I never wrote at home.⁴⁴⁴

For the female poet, the need to escape the home is driven by the need to create: an assumed privilege for the male artist. Hogue and Frost pick up on this gendered difference, suggesting that there may be a kind of “courage” that is “particularly urgent for women” in separating oneself in this way. “Yes,” responds Guest:

because you cease being a good mother. Automatically. I was fortunate to have had somebody to be there, with the children in the apartment. But it certainly separates you from home. At first, I did try to write at home. I remember there was an extra room, and I tried to write at home. But the work was just awful.⁴⁴⁵

As in Berssenbrugge’s recollections, the studio Guest describes signifies as a *dwelling* of sorts, but not exactly a *home*; a space “where I could really go inside,” but a space that was not conditioned by the societal expectation – mother, wife, homemaker – that the cultural conception of ‘home’ dictates. The sites that Guest rented for her studios were not architecturally distinct from the houses that one might make a home in New York City: they were, as Berssenbrugge notes, “apartments” or “penthouses”; they possessed

⁴⁴³ Ibid., 364.

⁴⁴⁴ B. Guest in ‘An Interview with Barbara Guest and Kathleen Fraser’ in (eds. E. A. Frost & C. Hogue) *Innovative Women Poets: An Anthology of Contemporary Poetry and Interviews*, (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2006), 359.

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid. 360.

“kitchens” (“the black stove”) and “bathrooms” and other domestic attributes – but domestic activities have been suspended or, at the very least, relegated: these are primarily spaces in which to work and write, so when families visit, the baby’s bath has become a sink and the customary parlour⁴⁴⁶ for entertaining has become the transitory space of the stairwell.

When Guest’s speaker enters ‘The Brown Studio’, in her poem of that name, she finds that her voice, her poetic “word,” possesses the imaginative power to collapse inside and outside. Another instance of Guest’s simultaneous description and performance, in depicting the site from which she writes, the poem implicitly enacts the collapse between inside and outside, between text and reality, by virtue of its very existence. The speaker of the poem begins by “[w]alking into the room / after having spent a night in the grove / by the river,” and notes that “its duskiness surprised me” (*LT* 45). Moving from outside to inside, the speaker is struck by the studio’s dull colouration: “the black stove, the black chair, / the black coat” and a “brownness” that “alarmed me” (*LT* 46). In her use of the colour black, Guest generates a sense of the studio’s depth: as she notes in her interview with Hillringhouse, “all painters’ use of black is very interesting and sometimes the word ‘black’ appears in my poetry and it comes from the need to put that dark space into a poem the way a painter will use black.”⁴⁴⁷ Stepping into the studio – the space that Guest has ‘painted’ into the poem with ‘black’ – the speaker thus looks around, noting that:

now there was an emptiness, beginning to darken.

I believed if I spoke,
if a word came from my throat
and entered this room whose walls had been turned,

it would be the colour of the cape
we saw in Aix in the studio of Cézanne,
it hung near the death’s head, the umbrella,
the palette of cool grey,

if I spoke loudly enough,
knowing the arc from real to phantom,
the fall of my voice would be,
a dying brown (*LT* 46).

⁴⁴⁶ As Davidoff and Hall note, the term parlour derives from *parler*, the French for ‘to speak’. The parlour was the middle class iteration of the drawing room, a “late eighteenth-century innovation” set aside “specifically for social intercourse.” In other words, the parlour signifies the public nested within the private, the public-private binary disrupted by spoken language. Davidoff & Hall, *Family Fortunes*, 377.

⁴⁴⁷ Guest & Hillringhouse, ‘An Interview By Mark Hillringhouse’, 24.

The muted room seems to spin, its walls “turned,” as words form in the speaker’s “throat.” Suddenly, the “arc from real to phantom” summons a colourful “cape,” and the enjambed line asks us to imagine not the painter’s smock, but the capes (or Caps) that line the French south coast not far from Aix. We are thus lifted out of the space of the studio, carried from inside back to outside, where we are met with artistic inspiration (Cézanne’s Provençal landscape, as well as his own studio, his site of creative production). It is poetic voice – or at least the capacity for it – that makes possible this imaginative leap, and as it “falls” at the poem’s close, we are thrown back into the “dying brown” of the studio. The space is marked by its blandness: but this is where its force lies. For the studio itself is a form of invisible architecture, a space or structure on which to scaffold the imagination and it is this underlying “stability,” that lends the poem its force. In this respect, however, the scaffold of the studio also clears the way for its own dissolution, for the very fabric of the room’s architecture becomes malleable or transitory, possessing the capacity to open up to the outside without destroying the integrity of the inside: Guest’s poetic imagination, in other words, disrupts not only the cultural conventions of public and private, but the concrete, geometrical divisions of inside and outside. It deconstructs to reconstruct, to produce a sense of interior space that is not stifling, stagnant or claustrophobic, but pregnant with imaginative possibility.

“This quilt’s virago”: Words woven over temporary lacework

As I noted in the introduction to this chapter, one problem that many critics have faced in isolating Guest’s poetic architecture lies in a tendency to look too hard for an architecture that is self-professedly *invisible*. In fact, as Guest makes explicit, the invisible architecture to which she refers does not, solely, constitute the poem but, rather, supports the *surface* of the poem. As Barbara Einzig has noted, it is Guest’s “focus on the surface of language” that is critical and which, as Einzig continues, “has developed organically from her background as a poet of the New York School.”⁴⁴⁸

The poems that I have discussed in the first part of this chapter might be thought of as the early compositions on which Guest scaffolded her later work: just as the depicted studio, the site of production, smudged the distinction between reality and poem, these poems are not only *descriptions* of an invisible

⁴⁴⁸ B. Einzig, ‘The Surface as Object: Barbara Guest’s Selected Poems’, in *The American Poetry Review*, (JANUARY/FEBRUARY 1996, Vol. 25, No. 1), 7.

architecture but *provided* an invisible architecture on which Guest could build her later work. In the section that follows, I turn away from the temporary lacework of the invisible scaffold to focus, instead, on the heavier textiles that quilt the surfaces of Guest's later poems. This, after all, was one of the original functions of the "the festival apparatus, the improvised scaffolding." As nineteenth-century architectural historian Gottfried Semper explains in his seminal book *The Four Elements of Architecture*, these early scaffolds were thrown up, not in the service of another, more permanent, building, but as a structure in its own right, to be adorned "with all the special splendor and frills [...] covered with decoration, draped with carpets, dressed with boughs and flowers, adorned with festoons and garlands, fluttering banners and trophies."⁴⁴⁹

Images of textiles appear throughout Guest's writing as a metaphor for the poem; a trope that is fully realised in *Quilts*, a mini collection-cum-extended poem published in 1980 and patchworked from 14 short parts. Loosely charting the history of textile production, Guest travels from "First Dynasty 3400," where quilts "for warmth" parallel "papyrus for words" (*QU* 192), through "MEDIEVAL" (*QU* 192) times, 1850's "Log Cabin" (*QU* 196) Americana, Romantic poetry, the modernist literary canon, and up to contemporary visual art. Guest's extended poem, itself taking the form of a patchwork quilt of histories, movements, images, and words, hinges around the association between the writing of poetry and the production of textiles: "And just / think of all the unfinished quilts — I mean — poems / he [Shelley] left" (*QU* 198). In this approach, the collection again captures her ambiguous attitude towards cultures of domesticity, by giving voice to the silent female history of textile work. As Davidoff and Hall remind us:

one of the greatest silences about women's lives was undoubtedly filled with needlework. From the long flat-fell seaming of sheets to the embroidered chair cushions, from making up boys' suits to exquisitely worked velvet slippers for papa at Christmas, middle-class women were constantly sewing [...] the samplers, quilts and other surviving artefacts speak forcefully for what is seldom said in words.⁴⁵⁰

Crucially, however, *Quilts* is remarkable for its seamless weaving of this silent female history into the male canon of experimental writers and artists to which Guest also belongs. Stanzas that collage together Pound, Joyce, and Lawrence; Byron, Shelley, and Keats; or Rauschenberg, Johns, and Rivers, sit beside images of

⁴⁴⁹ G. Semper (trans. H. F. Mallgrave & W. Herrmann), *The Four Elements of Architecture and Other Writings*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 255-256.

⁴⁵⁰ Davidoff & Hall, *Family Fortunes*, 387.



figs. 73 & 74 Log Cabin Pattern and Log Cabin

traditional female labour. In section eight, for example, this is captured through the creation of a scattered verbal surface, comprised of women's names:

[...] Seen on

the way to Aunt Dinah's quilting bee:

Phebe's visitor	Aunt Dinah	Rebekah
from Chattanooga Falls		
Phebe	Liza	Nellie
	Sarah	
	Emily Jane	

Quilting the Log Cabin Pattern: 1850 (*QU* 196)

The passage remains at once anonymous and specific: these names betray a female history, but they do not signify in the way that the names Joyce, or Byron, or Rauschenberg do. Without referents, without signifiers to which to attach, these names thus become empty signs, comprising a material, rather than intertextual, history. They retain the *texture* of femininity, without the specificity of a female history, much like Skoulding's distinction between the urban specific and the urban generic. These female words, like pieces of patchwork, are thus stitched together, upheld by an invisible architecture that transform them into a poetic surface that mirrors the quilt. Furthermore, Guest's specific choice of patchwork pattern transforms this surface into a dwelling; for the Log Cabin must signify both the historical quilt pattern (fig. 73) and a space for habitation. In an essay entitled 'Playing House: A Brief Account of the Shack', Robertson turns to the figure of the cabin, or shack, as another articulation of the poetic shelter (fig. 74). She writes that "if architecture is

writing, the shack is speech. Like a folk song is stores the vernacular.”⁴⁵¹ Crucially, for Robertson, it is the carving up of interior space – the development of partition – along vernacular lines, which constitutes the foundation for architecture proper: “The original architectural gesture,” she writes, “is not the erection of defensible barriers, but the disposition of interior spaces according to their use.”⁴⁵² In her poem-as-shack model, Robertson deftly conflates not only the poetic and the architectural, but the house and the home, as implied in the essay’s title, ‘Playing House’. To ‘play house’ is to pretend to the domestic bliss of *homemaking*, yet the activity relies on the structure of the *house* to imbue this make-believe with meaning: an idea we have already encountered in the image of “clown’s paint” at the conclusion to ‘The Location of Things’, as well as in Guest’s frequent lapse into the speech act, which *performs* while describing, transforming poem into the stage and writer and reader into players (of which more later).

To return to *Quilts*, then, the poem gives voice to historically unrecognised female artistry, reclaiming silent quilts as wordless poems. Yet, at the same time, it also transforms the poem itself into a quilt: these scattered words, Guest shows us, are not simply signs pointing to something else, but material entities with a texture of their own, both occupying and opening spaces like other ‘things’⁴⁵³ we might encounter in the ‘real’ world. This emphasis on reality underpins the work of *Quilts*. In the section that turns to “Rauschenberg / Johns / Rivers,” Guest writes that “Reality could be their tassel / and Reality is what’s there, that’s what I think about a quilt / it’s Reality and it satisfied Rauschenberg” (*QU* 197). Criticism on *Quilts* remains scarce, but in a review of Guest’s *Collected Poems* for the *Boston Review*, Brian Teare also picks up on the significance of reality, noting that:

the “Reality tassel” of *Quilts* sums up Guest’s mid-period approach to artifice. This poetry charms because of its certain, deft weave, its serious epistemological fabric annotated by decorative whimsy. Her craft becomes virtuosic when what could have remained effete aestheticism turns densely metaphysical, connecting artist and mythmaker, both of whom treasure the moment when “the other world” touches the real.⁴⁵⁴

⁴⁵¹ Robertson, *Office for Soft Architecture*, 153-4.

⁴⁵² *Ibid.*, 156.

⁴⁵³ For more on the relationship between literature and things, see: Brown, B., *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003.

⁴⁵⁴ B. Teare, ‘Revelation’ in *Boston Review*, (January 01, 2009), accessed on 09/09/2020 at <http://bostonreview.net/teare-revelation>.

Woven, decorative, and annotated, these “poems’ verbal surfaces retain both gorgeous figuration and judicious discursion,” Teare explains, while, “an epistemological search begins to structure the poems, one whose diction is as metaphysical as it is aesthetic.”⁴⁵⁵ In her 1984 essay ‘A Reason for Poetics’, Guest describes poetry as “A pull in both directions between the physical reality of place and the metaphysics of space. This pull,” she explains, “will build up a tension within the poem giving a view of the poem from both the interior and the exterior” (*FOI* 20). This, as we have seen, is the thinking that underpins ‘Shifting Persona’; a spatial conception of the poem that is able to transcend rigid boundaries of outside and inside, thus complicating the distinction between a metaphysical, or poetic, notion of *home*, and the physical place, or architecture, of *house*. In the end, for Guest, this “pull” means that “poet and reader perform together on a high wire strung on a platform between their separated selves” (*FOI* 21). Her formulation recalls O’Hara’s description of the poem “at last between two persons instead of two pages,” yet, where O’Hara only *implies* a spatial dimension, Guest is explicit: she places poet and reader on a platform or scaffold (to recall Robertson, “we live on this temporary framework of platforms and poles”) and connects them by the stringing of a wire. “The usefulness of this tension set up in a poem is to arrange its dimensions. The poem stretches, looking outwardly and inwardly, thus obtaining a plasticity that the flat, the basic words – what we call the language of a poem – demands and, further, depends on” (*FOI* 21-22). In other words, the stringing of the wire across the scaffold of an invisible architecture functions doubly: at a textual (metaphysical) level, it creates verbal *surfaces* and, because these surfaces are material (or ‘real’), it then connects reader and writer in “physical space.”

“In weaving—from basic hand weaving to mechanized looms—the direction is back and forth, left to right and right to left and again,” explains Jill Magi in ‘The shuttle of discourse: Chris Tysh on Marjorie Welsh’s ‘Begetting Textile’ poems’.⁴⁵⁶ She continues:

In reading and writing poetry of course we work with the line—but our movement is from left to right or right to left or up to down, depending on the language we are working in. Our languages seem to consistently direct us to one place only as “the beginning.”

There are some poets who come to mind, though, when I think about the poetics of weaving and the motion of “back and forth.”⁴⁵⁷

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁶ J. Magi, ‘The shuttle of discourse’: Chris Tysh on Marjorie Welsh’s ‘Begetting Textile’ in *Jacket* 2. Accessed 09/09/20 at <https://jacket2.org/commentary/shuttle-discourse-chris-tysh-marjorie-welishs-begetting-textile-poems>

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid.

Magi turns to the work of Marjorie Welish, whose poetic series ‘Begetting Textile’ explores the creative relationship between the crafting of a poem and the weaving of fabric. Yet this thinking might equally be applied to the work of Guest,⁴⁵⁸ in whose *Quilts* we discover not only the patchworking of fragments but, within individual stanzas, the back and forth that Magi identifies as “the poetics of weaving.” In section six, for example, Guest gives us:

Old time seas of quilts
in the gull dawn coverings
on the beach like picking up a sardine
 I see those tickling threads
minnows on muslin (*QU* 195)

Where section eight (Aunt Dinah’s quilting bee) paralleled the pattern of a quilt, here, the movement of the lines insist that we “shuttle” back and forth, to borrow Magi’s terms. And if, in weaving, this back and forth motion produces the textile - the “muslin” out of “tickling threads” - then the implication must be that the reader plays some role in the production of this poem: “poet and reader perform together on a high wire strung on a platform between their separated selves.” Thus, if the platform is the scaffold – the poet’s unconscious, but also the invisible structure of the poem on the page as a kind of loom – then the high wire can be read as the thread that makes the poem possible, the interaction between the writer’s unconscious and the reader’s conscious activity of reading, of moving across a surface created by words.

Casting the surface of the poem as a quilt or product of weaving, draped over the scaffold of an invisible architecture, Guest echoes the work of Semper, who explains that “it remains certain *that the beginning of building coincides with the beginning of textiles*” (fig. 75).⁴⁵⁹ He continues:

we might recognize the *pen* bound together from sticks and branches, and the interwoven *fence* as the earliest vertical spatial enclosure that man *invented*, whose construction required a technique that nature, as it were, put into the hand of man.⁴⁶⁰

⁴⁵⁸ Indeed, Welish is explicit about the influence of Guest on her work and has penned several essays on the older poet. For more, see: M. Welish & M. Cooperman, ‘Diagramming Here: An Interview’ in *Conjunctions* (08.17.04).

⁴⁵⁹ Semper, *The Four Elements of Architecture*, 254.

⁴⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

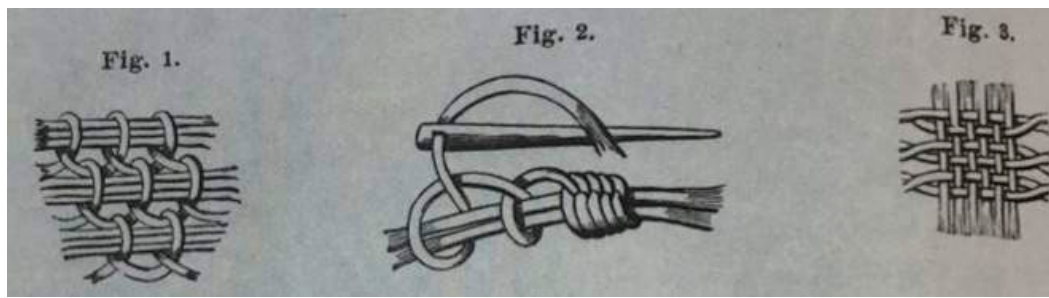


fig. 75 Figures of weaving from Semper's *The Four Elements of Architecture*

Following the construction of pen⁴⁶¹ and fence (the external “erection of defensible barriers”), “the dyeing and knitting of colourful carpets were invented for wall dressings, floor coverings, and canopies.” Semper differentiates between the firmer walls of stone and brick, designed for “protection and defence, to secure permanence in the enclosure, or to serve as foundations and supports” and these woven walls, which carry out an “ancient, original function as conspicuous spatial dividers.” Accordingly, these “more or less artificially woven and seamed-together, textile walls” are the “true and legitimate representatives of the spatial idea,” and it is in them that we find the first articulation of “the ‘home’, the *inner life* separated from the *outer life*, and [...] the formal creation of the idea of space.”⁴⁶² Semper’s revisionary history of textile production transforms domestic labour into architectural labour. And if producers of textiles were responsible for “the formal creation of the idea of space,” then, as Greek literary scholar Anne Bergren explains, this must have significant ramifications for women: “Given Semper’s account of the ‘beginning of building’, by marking weaving as exclusively female,” Bergren writes, “early Greek thought attributes to women the founding form of architectural art.”⁴⁶³ In short, “the female becomes the archetype of an architect.”⁴⁶⁴ Challenging the pejorative view of textile production as feminine frippery, Bergren (through Semper) reminds us that the original practice of weaving was responsible for the *very architectural idea*. To woman, then, is attributed the

⁴⁶¹ That pen should also mean ‘writing’ tool creates a generative – if accidental – homonymic bridge between the poetic and the architectural. Thinking back to Guest’s ‘Shifting Persona’, we recall that it is the Austen’s “inked quill” – her pen – that “lifts” her characters out of the “ordained claustrophobia” of the “drawing room.” Here, the inked pen counters the pen of enclosure, the penning in of these domesticated characters. The pairing of the inked quill with the semiotic distinction between *civis* and *domus*, thus suggests the significance of the literary and linguistic pen in demarcating the spatial pen.

⁴⁶² *Ibid.*, 254-5.

⁴⁶³ *Ibid.*, 226.

⁴⁶⁴ A. Bergren, *Weaving Truth: Essays on Language and the Female in Greek Thought*, (Washington, DC: Center for Hellenic Studies, 2008), 6.

very “creation of the idea of space” and the subsequent separation of “inner life” from “outer life.” Indeed, we might even read these woven walls as the first material articulation of the commodious *domus*, the fluid architectural form that, as Lisa Robertson notes, allows domestic space to maintain its vulnerable, fragile, and exilic character, where it might shelter speech and produce reciprocal subjectivity. Placing Semper and Bergren beside Robertson in this way exposes the necessity for the back and forth between architecture and poetics that I have been stressing throughout this thesis. Robertson’s linguistic study works explicitly to dematerialise architecture, to unfix it in order to extoll the virtues of the immaterial *domus*, the commodious shelter of the poem; but by placing this into dialogue with material, architectural history, Robertson’s poetic notion of the domestic might be given an architectural form that does not come at the expense of vernacular vivacity. Even beyond the metaphysical space of the poem, even in physical places, we might find ourselves in commodious rooms constructed from colourful, turning walls.

In the introduction to this thesis, I noted Bachelard’s suggestion that “philosophers, when confronted with outside and inside, think in terms of being and non-being. Thus profound metaphysics is rooted in an implicit geometry which – whether we will or no – confers spatiality on thought.”⁴⁶⁵ If, as Semper suggests, woven walls are responsible for the “creation of the idea of space,” the separation of “inner life” from “outer life,” and if women are the archetypal producers of these partitions, then it must follow that it is female, domestic labour that has “confer[ed] spatiality on thought” and promoted the distinction between “being and non-being” in “profound metaphysics.” The implications of this line of thinking are profound, yet the retrofitting of permanent, structural walls to the ephemeral partitions originally created by female weavers betrays an oversight. In suggesting that these walls contain the *seeds* of “the spatial idea,” Semper, to some extent, undermines their defining trait: he assumes the necessity of an evolution, which robs these early, textile models of their significance *on their own terms*, rendering them merely a link in a chain towards “entombed structure or *thanatos*,”⁴⁶⁶ to borrow a phrase from Robertson. Rather than see these woven walls as a primitive example of something more ‘civilised’ (read: male, western, white), we should instead note their distinctive *defiance* of spatial and material reification. By virtue of their soft, woven form – like the quilt – they remain both permeable and moveable, emphatically *not* defined by the consecrated binaries of “inside” and

⁴⁶⁵ Bachelard *The Poetics of Space*, 212.

⁴⁶⁶ Robertson, *Office for Soft Architecture*, 110.

“outside” that formalised architecture and philosophical thought have both conferred upon the signifier, ‘wall’. If women are responsible for the “creation of the idea of space,” then it must be an idea of space that does not conform to contemporary assumptions, enshrined in the architectures that have historically been determined by men. And though, with Wilkinson, I do not want to lump feminine models of space in with “flowing, female garments,” I also remain suspicious of the critical tendency to ignore the generative possibilities inherent in looking beyond the norms (poetic, architectural, cultural) concretised (sometimes literally) by millennia of male artists, architects, thinkers, and so on. For, at its root, Wilkinson’s resistance to “flowing, female garments,” relies on a pejorative association with femininity: Guest’s poetry, his stance suggests, *must* be about more than women and their floaty, superficial productions.

This is why Guest’s weaving of silent female histories into established male canons is so crucial to understanding her poetic. In the first section of *Quilts*, Guest makes explicit recourse to these feminine tropes, placing her writing into traditions of both homemaking and female poetry:

You float now tideless, secure in the rhythm
of stuffing and tying, edging and interlining,
bordered and hemmed; no longer unacquainted
you inhabit the house with its smooth tasks
sorted in scrap bags like kitchen nooks
the smelly crockery of cave where apples
ripen and vats flow domestic yet with schemes
of poetry sewed to educate the apron dawn.

Not exactly a hovel, not exactly a hearth;
“I think a taxi’s like a little home,” said
Marianne Moore,

this quilt’s virago (*QU* 191).

With its lack of first person, the ‘you’ of the poem becomes a self-address, and the substitution of ‘you’ for ‘I’ introduces a tone of command or admonishment: a reminder that the female occupation of domestic space remains structurally enforced by systemic patriarchal convention. Here, the diurnal motion of the tide no longer dictates the rhythm of the day, for ‘you’ “inhabit the house,” working, instead, according to the rhythm of domestic labour. “Bordered and hemmed” in this enclosed space, the woman works on the feminine duties of clothes-mending, hemmed in by the expectations of a woman’s role, “stuffing and tying, edging and interlining.” This is “poetry sewed to educate the apron dawn.” The “tasks” are “smooth” but also “smelly” and though an opportunity for “educat[ion]” presents itself, it only extends so far as “the

apron,” with implications of intellectually limited home economics. Domestic female existence is therefore presented not as excruciating, but not as desirable either: “not a exactly a hovel, not exactly a hearth,” a sentiment that encapsulates Guest’s ambivalence towards the domestic. In the poem’s closing image, a new model is advanced, one that does not *reject* the quilt of home, but which yokes it to a sense of the transitory: “‘I think a taxi’s like a little home’, said / Marianne Moore, // this quilt’s virago.” The interior space of the taxi offers freedom from the “secure [...] rhythm” of home, a freedom to travel, to encounter stimulus in the public spaces of the city; the city that we read as New York, through the embedded, synecdochic image of the (iconic yellow) taxicab. In this gesture, Guest transforms the privileged masculine space of city streets in to the feminised ‘urban generic’, removing the proper names that “fix external locations as isolated entities distinct from the processes and relationships that form both subjects and cities,” to recall Skoulding. Nothing is fixed in this final image, for this is an unequivocal rejection of tideless, static space – though not of *interior* space, since the taxi does not quite conform to the ideal of the Baudelairean flâneur, and the distinction is an important one, since it signals another instance of Guest’s desire to recode, rather than reject, the conventions of private space.

Crucially, the space that Guest advocates in the final image is endorsed by another experimental female poet; Marianne Moore, “this quilt’s virago.” Though, as we have seen, the rest of the poem will make reference to male modernist and romantic writers, this opening fragment includes Guest’s most explicit positioning of *this* poem (this quilt), and that she should choose, at the outset, to place it into a tradition of female authorship, must not be overlooked. Furthermore, if the quilt represents traditionally feminine industry, then Guest’s poetic quilt is also an explicit reclaiming of domestic production: swapping the home for the taxi, the quilt for the poem, Guest maps these comparable spaces and productions on to one another, allowing her to recast – or to “deconstruc[t] and reconstruc[t]” – the domestic, rather than dismiss it altogether. Fundamentally, Guest relies on traditional domestic imagery in order to chart new territory: she builds on representations of the home so that she might find textual ways of imagining new spaces for women⁴⁶⁷ to inhabit, both architectural and poetic. If Frank O’Hara’s poems opened “something like a liveable space [...] for the reader who turns to poetry as a last resort in trying to juggle the contradictory

⁴⁶⁷ Not only women, but also others for whom the home represented a dangerous or claustrophobic space – during the cold war, as Deborah Nelson notes, “categories of citizens – women or homosexuals – rather than unlucky individuals were banished to the deprivation, rather than the liberation, of privacy” (in M. Nelson, *Other True Abstractions*, 68).

components of modern life,”⁴⁶⁸ then we might adapt this for Guest’s poetry to say that it opens a liveable space for the reader seeking liberation from the “comfortable concentration camp” of the suburban home, as Betty Friedan so provocatively put it in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963).⁴⁶⁹

A decorative “tic-tacking”: Depth as shallow surface

In equating the veneer of the poem to the quilt, Guest reminds her readers that the surface created by *words* might be as real as the surface created by textiles; and, in drawing out this possibility, Guest offers a version of the poem that is, at root, *hospitable*: a domesticated thread, woven between writer and reader. In the first two sections, I have considered Guest’s invisible architecture, scaffolded on the ruins of the home, and Guest’s weaving, a domestic activity that creates coverings for scaffolds. In the final part of this chapter, I turn to look at the intersection of the two – what happens when Guest’s *real* verbal surfaces meet her invisible architecture?

In her 1986 essay ‘Mysteriously Defining the Mysterious: Byzantine Proposals of Poetry’, Guest describes buying some exotic silks in the Turkish town of Mersan. These “Palatial silks” produce a kind of rapture in “[t]he poet,” who takes them home and domesticates them. “The silk was turned into curtains and began to lead a domestic existence, its history asleep, much as a poem enters into an anthology. (Who knows when those Mersan curtains rustled and their sound entered my poetry.)” (FOI 84). Here, wanderlust gives way to domestication: the enshrining of the exotic silks in the humdrum habitat of the home. The curtains therefore become a sort of surrogate for the poet, who has also entered a “domestic existence,” her pre-marital “history asleep.” The entrance of sound into her poetry from “those Mersan curtains” is distinct from the entrance of the poem into the anthology, which implies stagnation, and this is signalled in the use of parentheses: the line is almost an aside, a puncture, an admittance of kinship between poet and silk, the two rustling together, producing plaintive song, from within their domestic existences. For Guest, the analogy between poetry and textile is thus rooted in the private, female space of the domestic, a space about which Guest remains, characteristically, ambiguous: this is not a wholesale rejection of domestication, but one that subtly plays on pejorative associations while simultaneously advocating the space of the home. She continues:

⁴⁶⁸ J. Ashbery in O’Hara, *Collected Poems*, x.

⁴⁶⁹ B. Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, (London: Penguin Classics, 2010), 228.

The experience in Mersan may be called a first encounter with the Byzantine. Underneath the surface of the poem there is the presence of “the something else.” Mallarmé said, “Not the thing, but its effect.” The “effect” is what I have been leading to with my curtains from Mersan. The “thing” is the poetic process which lends its effect (the silk of the curtains) to the poem (*FOI* 84).

The silk of the curtains (the effect) is draped over the invisible architecture (the thing, the process) to produce the poem. Guest is explicit: the poem amounts to the interaction of textile cladding and invisible scaffolding, deeply rooted in a conception of domestic space: the drape of a curtain over the shifting window of the text, mediating the conceptual spaces between poem and reality (fig. 76).



fig. 76 “the drape of a curtain over the shifting window,” view from the Westbeth Center, NY, 2018

If the question of reality had been driving Guest’s poetry and prose of the early 1980s, it had come to a head by the time she published the collection *Fair Realism* in 1989. In these poems, ‘An Emphasis Falls on Reality’, as one title in the collection has it. Guest offers window views (‘Wild Gardens Overlooked by Night Lights’; ‘The View from Kandinsky’s Window’); textile productions (‘The Thread’); material surfaces (‘The Rose Marble Table’); architectural spaces (‘The Farewell Stairway’); and musings on ‘Words’. In this last example – a poem termed, simply, ‘Words’ – Guest draws the reader’s attention to the materiality of language by illustrating, in the opening line, “The simple contact with a wooden spoon and the word” (*FR* 237). By meeting the word, the material curve of the spoon – an item tangible in its thingliness – transforms language into an object, as it sits on “paper / now gleaming and potent, wise and resilient.” Later, Guest tells us that:

[...] The nearest possession would
house them both, they being then two might glide
into this house and presently create a rather larger
mansion filled with spoons and condiments, gracious
as a newly laid table where related objects might gather
to enjoy the interplay of gravity upon facetious hints
the chocolate dish presuming an endowment, the ladle
of galactic rhythm primed as a relish dish, curved
knives, finger bowls, morsel carriages words might
choose and savor before swallowing so much was the
sumptuousness and substance of a rented house where words
placed dressing gowns as rosemary entered their scent
percipient as elder branches in the night where words
gathered, warped, then straightened, marking new wands (*FR* 237).

Here, words take on the shapes, textures, and smells of household objects. As in the opening lines of ‘Invisible Architecture’, ‘Words’ at once describes a fantastical house of object-words and kitchenware, while also performing this site and spectacle: the poem *is* that house, these words *are* real and material. Spoons, dishes, knives, and bowls find their way into the poem by virtue of their contact with words; just as, in ‘real’ life, a spoon is only a ‘spoon’ (and not just a curved implement) because of its word-sign. Indeed, Guest flags the “importance of *Texture*—the texture of a poem” in her short essay ‘The Voice of the Poem’, asking, “What does it feel like—how layered is the poem, what substance is it composed of, what does it taste like—and we learn this through the poet’s manipulation of language and the control of the structure of the poem” (*FOI* 92). With its dense, compressed, single stanza construction (a shape that Guest experiments with throughout the collection), the structure of the poem assumes the properties of a conventional, domestic room: it is, in its very shape, resting on the scaffold of domestic space. Guest’s poem thus reminds us that the relationship between words and reality must be twofold – for words shape reality by giving voice to inanimate objects, but they also possess a material reality on their own terms, with the potential to transform a poem into a tangible space.

Guest carries this notion into the poem ‘The Screen of Distance’, transposing it to an image of decorative cladding. Here, Guest creates a screen – a moveable partition, traditionally made from fabric – out of words:

On a wall shadowed by lights from the distance
is the screen. Icons come to it dressed in capes
and their eyes reflect the journeys their nomadic
eyes reach from level earth. Narratives are in
the room where the screen waits suspended like

the frame of a girder the worker will place upon
an axis and thus make a frame which he fills with
a plot of a quarter inch of poetry to encourage
nature into his building and the tree leaning
against it, the tree casting language upon the screen (*FR* 226).

In the poem's opening stanza, "the screen" sits on a shadowed "wall," where it yokes together poetic construction with architectural engineering: the screen is built out of "narratives" while also "suspended like / the frame of a girder." Without warning, the screen shifts in line five from the security of the wall to this position of suspension, like the woven partitions of early homes. Guest is careful in her language here, invoking the structural girder in order to remind her reader of the weight-bearing properties of conventional walls ("entombed structure or *thanatos*"), while simultaneously distinguishing her screen as nothing more than an ornamental *frame*. This frame, furthermore, is filled with "a plot of a quarter inch of poetry," entrenching a sense of the screen as a composite of the poetic and the architectural, built upon structural integrity, but imbued with poetic permeability. Later we are told that:

A difficult poem intrudes like hardware
decorating a quiet building, a tic taking
over the façade, a shrug exaggerated by a
column — (*FR* 229)

Here, Guest not only tethers the poetic to the architectural, but places the poem specifically in relation to the *surface* of architecture: the poem decorates the building as "a tic taking / over the façade." In her study of Greek women and architecture, Bergren separates female and male elements of architecture as the distinction between "vertical space-enclosure and columns supporting a horizontal load."⁴⁷⁰ She tells us that "the two primary processes of architectural construction are the woven wall, in Penelope's web, and the column, in the living tree that forms the post of Odysseus' marriage bed."⁴⁷¹ Horizontal walls are the preserve of the woman; vertical columns, the symbol of virile masculinity. We might then read in Guest's nonchalant "shrug," a dismissive gesture directed toward the phallic "column" which she castrates with the hard, horizontal dash at the stanza's end. With its tic-tacked facade, Guest's "decorated shed," to borrow the term from Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi, poses as a challenge to the masculine "duck" of sculptural modernism.

⁴⁷⁰ Bergren, *Weaving*, 6.

⁴⁷¹ *Ibid.*

Scott Brown and Venturi's postmodern approach to architecture was informed, in part, by an interest in the application of what was called "atectonic fabrication," a kind of "shell, skin, cladding, or covering" that might be tic-tacked on to a facade to create the illusion of "dematerialization."⁴⁷² As David Leatherbarrow and Mohsen Mostafavi explain in their book *Surface Architecture*:

While the dematerialization of the wall can result in vacuous and impoverished architecture, it can also allow for the development of new modes of figuration. The first stage of this development was the formulation of a conceptual distinction between the outer and inner elements of the wall, designating the former—the shell, skin, cladding, or covering—as the non-load-bearing or tectonic part.⁴⁷³

In other words, this atectonic approach to architectural design was driven by the desire to separate structure from surface – just as Scott Brown and Venturi would, some sixty years later, and just as Guest does in her architectonic poetry. Furthermore, this "fabric analogy for architectural cladding," which was fashionable amongst early-twentieth-century modernist architects such as "Otto Wagner, Josef Hoffman and Max Fabriani, drew on the teachings of Gottfried Semper."⁴⁷⁴ Thus, the attempt to separate surface from structure derives from Semper's work on weaving and the earliest delineations of (domestic) space. In their reading of Hoffman's Palais Stoclet, Leatherbarrow and Mostafavi describe this atectonic fabrication as the disruption of the conventional surface-depth dichotomy (fig. 77). With its flattened facade, formed from a series of interlocking panels, Leatherbarrow and Mostafavi explain that:

volume or thickness is subordinated to surface, allowing the sliding and gliding of elements past one another in the shallow depth of the surface. Thinning the plane and the elements in this way, and compressing depth into a shallow surface, tends to free the cladding from the building[.]⁴⁷⁵

By turning to the fluid properties of fabric in their architectural designs, these early modernists were able to conflate depth and surface: these buildings did not *lack* depth, they were not two-dimensional, but by way of their atectonic cladding, were able to visually compress "depth into a shallow surface." Through the use of newly available lightweight materials and technologies, these designs altered the established notion of a building and its facade, which had dominated architectural design since the development of *architecture parlante*

⁴⁷² Leatherbarrow & Mostafavi, *Surface Architecture*, 80.

⁴⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 82.



fig. 77 Josef Hoffmann, Palais Stoclet

in the eighteenth century.⁴⁷⁶ And, at their core, these buildings drew on a spatial code that had first been established by female weavers in the construction of the home.

In a passage from Guest's 1976 collection, *The Countess from Minneapolis* (1976), Guest captures this possibility of "compressing depth into a shallow surface" through the eponymous Countess's contemplation of a Dutch Renaissance interior:

She waited. Within her limited mathematics she comprehended space. She understood the Dutch room in the paintings. The face behind the mirror. The walker in the dark. The captive tree. Not difficult. It was only within the picture she could breathe. A simple woman sat there wearing a cap, holding a pot. Another peered from a hall. You could sense how close the house was next door. The Countess worshipped that confinement, the enclosure of the scoured space (CM 156).

I have not been able to locate the exact painting to which Guest refers (it is possible, given that she speaks of the plural "paintings," that the description is a composite), but countless works by Johannes Vermeer and Pieter de Hooch depict comparable scenes: women engaged in domestic labour, often seated in a kitchen or other domestic interior, clothed in traditional Dutch dress (the "simple [...] cap"), while other figures can be glimpsed through doorways, in hallways, rooms, or outside through windows (figs. 78 & 79).

In these paintings, there is a sense of the interior intruding on to the scene: the figures depicted are often not the focal point, appearing as secondary to the layout of the room, its architectural features, the way the light falls through a window, and so on. Figures provide both perspective and context, but these remain

⁴⁷⁶ Ibid., 10.



figs 78 & 79 Pieter de Hooch, *The Courtyard of a House in Delft* and *A Woman Drinking with Two Men*

interiors, rather than portraits. The Countess's "limited mathematics" dispose her towards the Dutch interior, since these spaces are at once mathematical and irregular, superficial and deep. Traditional Dutch interiors are known for their architectural symmetry. The sweep of square floor tiles, the regular windows with their uniform panes, the blocky hearth, hung with box-framed paintings: the clean geometry of the Dutch architecture is captured in the relative 'squareness' of these "mathematical" visions. Yet, while these works capture a sense of realism, they also flatten the plane: in the network of hallways and doors, "everything," to quote Ashbery, "is surface" (*SP* 70). The windows that feature prominently in these paintings function like the apertures in Guest's 'Shifting Persona': they offer a glimpse on to an outside that has become inseparable from the inside, "a view [...] from the both the interior and the exterior." The mathematics of the room are therefore limited because pressed against the surface of the painting. These images thus trouble a sense of clear division between surface and depth, so that the domestic interior opens out, an enclosure of release. The poem itself, with its tightly compressed form, mirrors this enclosed interior, the painting on which the Countess reflects becoming a kind of window through which imaginative release might be possible. Like the ability to occupy both an inside and an outside that Guest details in 'Shifting Persona', this passage reminds us that the disruption of the surface-depth dichotomy has important ramifications for the female occupation of space. Where depth symbolises "ordained claustrophobia," surface offers the possibility of release; a

notion that has been articulated in the corporeal feminist reframing of *skin*, to which I turn in the final section of this chapter.

“Nudism is born”: The plangent song of skin

In architecture, an adherence to surface would, as we have seen, inspire later postmodern architects, including Scott Brown and Venturi. Yet, decades before postmodernism would come to fruition, these early modernist aesthetics would be largely submerged. From the 1920s onwards, the development of a more radical modernism, a modernism that would reject all trace of ornament and surface in favour of geometrical, mathematical, and sculptural precision, would take hold in the architectures of Europe and the US: this was the architecture of the Bauhaus, the modernist “duck” that would morph into the homogenous international modernism of 1950s corporate America.⁴⁷⁷ Proponents of this school of design actively rebelled against early modernist ‘ornamentalism’,⁴⁷⁸ and perhaps the loudest voice amongst them was the Czech architect Adolf Loos, known for his 1913 manifesto ‘Ornament and Crime’. In this short pamphlet, Loos urges his reader to “weep not! See, therein lies the greatness of our age [...] we have outgrown ornament; we have fought our way through to freedom from ornament.”⁴⁷⁹ For Loos, the crime of ornament is captured in the image of “the Kaffir who weaves ornaments into his fabric according to a particular rhythm [...] the Slovak peasant woman who embroiders her lace, the old lady who crochets wonderful things with glass beads and silk.”⁴⁸⁰ The “retrograde” native and the woman, with their rhythmic (read: poetic), ornamental activities, are the root cause of “the ornament disease.”⁴⁸¹ For Loos, ornament (and femininity) bespeak a sexual proclivity and an eroticism that self-denying “men of the nineteenth century”⁴⁸² must “outgrow.”

⁴⁷⁷ This back and forth of ornament and minimalism – in the chronology from Hoffman’s early modernist Palais Stoclet, through Le Corbusier’s high modernist Villa Savoye, all the way to Scott Brown and Venturi’s postmodern leanings towards Las Vegas – should remind the reader that the assumption of a binary differentiation between modernism and postmodernism – even within a single discipline – should be treated with caution.

⁴⁷⁸ I borrow the term not from David Cannadine’s book of that name, but from Patricia Conway and Robert Jensen’s book, *Ornamentalism: The New Decorativeness in Architecture & Design*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).

⁴⁷⁹ A. Loos (trans. M. Bullock), ‘Ornament and Crime’ in *Programs and Manifestoes on 20th-Century Architecture*, (Cambridge, Mass & London: The MIT Press, 1976), 20.

⁴⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁴⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁴⁸² *Ibid.*, 20.

Implicit in Loos's conflation of surface, femininity, and eroticism is a notion of *skin*. The ornamental (as opposed to integral, structural, or seamless) cladding of "atectonic fabrication," was derided by Loos not only because of its relation to textile production, but because of its relation to skin, which has long been associated with the feminine. Anne Cheng details Loos's reaction to female skin, in an essay on Loos and Josephine Baker (for whom Loos designed, but never completed, a house). She writes that Loos himself "attributes the origin of architecture not to structure or solid material, as might be expected, but to mobile surfaces: fabric, even skin," but believes, in his call for the "the march of progress," in the necessary "erasure of erotic material excess, deemed to be the exclusive and natural domain" of women.⁴⁸³ In other words, surface-equals-skin-equals-eroticism and, in this formulation, femininity is deemed not only excessive but "useless, pathological, degenerate, and criminal."⁴⁸⁴

Cheng is one of a number of feminist scholars who have sought to reclaim 'skin' in recent scholarship by engaging productively with its feminine, excessive, and erotic tendencies. In her call for "an erotics of art" that can "reveal the sensuous surface of art without mucking about in it,"⁴⁸⁵ Susan Sontag is the architect of this kind of thinking, spawning the work of (among others) Donna Haraway, Sara Ahmed, Rosie Braidotti, Judith Butler, and Elizabeth Grosz, who have been some of the leading voices in this strain of corporeal feminism. The work of these scholars has, in recent years, exposed the profound metaphysical consequences of a feminist reclamation of surface erotics: a consequence that might shake the very foundations on which profound metaphysics have been erroneously built.

Elizabeth Grosz's feminist account of skin is the most explicitly spatial, reading the membranous material as that which might disrupt conventional dichotomous assumptions. In her 1994 book *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism*, Grosz "explores the ways in which the social inscriptions on the surface of the body generate a psychical interiority – the movement from the outside in."⁴⁸⁶ Grosz develops a reading of the female body as "a purely surface phenomenon, a complex, multifaceted surface folded back on itself, exhibiting a certain torsion but nevertheless a flat plane whose incision or inscriptions produce the (illusion or

⁴⁸³ A. Cheng, 'Skins, Tattoos, and Susceptibility' in *Representations*, (Vol. 108, No. 1, Fall 2009), 102.

⁴⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸⁵ Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, 16.

⁴⁸⁶ E. Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 115.

effects of) depth and interiority.”⁴⁸⁷ For Grosz, the female body is *nothing but surface*. Far from reductive, however, this reading allows for a “multifaceted” complexity, with all of the illusion of “depth and interiority,” transforming the female body into a site that simultaneously occupies inside and outside:

relations occurring on the surface of the skin and various body parts [e.g. touch as sexual pleasure] [...] are not merely superficial, for they generate, they produce, all the effects of a psychical interior, an underlying depth, individuality, or consciousness, much as the Möbius strip creates both an inside and an outside.⁴⁸⁸

By casting the female body as a Möbius strip, Grosz deconstructs conventionally pejorative views of the surface as something that *covers* or *conceals* depth. Instead, Grosz offers a model that sees surface and depth, outside and inside, as continuously and inextricably linked: “Tracing the outside of the strip,” she clarifies, “leads one directly to its inside without at any point leaving its surface.”⁴⁸⁹ This possibility is echoed by Robertson, who conceives of the *domus* as “a mediating skin, rather than [...] private interiority conceptually opposed to a social outside.”⁴⁹⁰ And if the *domus* – that immaterial domestic space that equates to the poem – is, for Robertson, a skin, then it follows that it must also be a form of scaffolding; for as Robertson writes, “scaffolding [...] is a skin”:

The deep structure of skin is intricate. It disproves the wrongheaded and habitual opposition of ornament and concept. It does act as an excitation screen but the function of skin includes a necessary psychic dimension not mediated by the conscious bodily senses. This dimension extends beyond the visual plane of the surface, as if the entire skin were spun outwards in its excitable permeability to become an idea threshold.⁴⁹¹

If scaffolding is itself an intricate skin, then both Grosz’s and Robertson’s accounts show us how to marry Guest’s invisible architecture – her underlying *domus* – with the poem’s surface. For, as Catherine Kasper writes “One of the achievements of Guest’s poetry is the interesting architecture of content and form moving together.”⁴⁹² Surface and structure are, thus, never independent of one another in Guest’s poems but move

⁴⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁹ Ibid., 117.

⁴⁹⁰ Robertson, *Nilling*, 75.

⁴⁹¹ Robertson, *Office for Soft Architecture*, 140.

⁴⁹² C. Kasper, ‘Barbara Guest’s Career: Defensive Rapture’ in *Jacket 36*, 2008, at <http://jacketmagazine.com/36/guest-kasper.shtml>.

together as a single, unified entity: words are no more independent of an “invisible architecture” than sensuous skin is of a body.

In her poem ‘The Nude’, Guest also reclaims female skin, granting autonomous agency to the historically passive figure of the female muse in western art practice, by rescuing her from the oppression of the male gaze (fig. 80). “According to usage and conventions which are at last being questioned but have by no means been overcome,” wrote John Berger in 1972, “the social presence of a woman is different in kind from that of a man.”⁴⁹³ The opening lines to Berger’s chapter on the nude, in *Ways of Seeing*, provide a basic, but nevertheless useful, distinction between the ways in which men and women are both seen in society and presented in art. While men embody power, often of a metaphysical kind (metaphysics of space), women are fundamentally *physical* (physical place). “*Men act and women appear. Men look at women, women watch themselves being looked at.*”⁴⁹⁴ Furthermore, as Berger notes, “to be born a woman has been to be born, within an allotted and confined space, into the keeping of men.”⁴⁹⁵ The identity of a woman is thus one prescribed by a sense of enclosed space and this, Berger suggests, is distilled in the image of the nude posing in the artist’s studio.



fig. 80 Titian, *Venus of Urbino*, 1538.

⁴⁹³ J. Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, (London: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books, 1972), 45.

⁴⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁴⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 46.

Guest flags the western painterly tradition in her poem's title. Yet, rather than uphold the convention of the female nude as an object of male contemplation, the title slyly subverts the terms of nudism. Guest wields it in the full consciousness of herself as a female artist, restoring the balance of power and deflecting the penetrating male gaze. Furthermore, her poem is not simply an ekphrastic depiction of a nude in words: rather, it is a narrative, the story of the relationship (of sorts) between a male painter and his female muse. Thus, the decision to name only the nude in her title might *pose* as a continuation of the western tradition, but in fact works to undermine the figure of the artist, giving power, presence, and voice to the long-silent female muse. The poem opens in the artist's studio:

Studios are stations of reminiscence
in the nimble wind they are shadows

The artist attaches himself to the shadow
he attempts to revive it after the wind ceases,

This mixture of dark and light
is mysterious and adds depth

To the position of his model
who rephrases the shadow (*FR* 238).

The studio is depicted as an immaterial space, a space of “reminiscence” and “shadow,” caught in the “nimble wind,” the outside seamlessly penetrating the inside like the fantastical intrusion of the cape in ‘The Brown Studio’. The artist we are told, must “add depth” – not to the space, as the enjambed line initially suggests, but to his “model / who rephrases the shadow,” an artistic decision dimly concealing a baser motive. Instead, we discover, it is the nude herself, that “purely surface phenomenon, a complex, multifaceted surface,” who “rephrases the shadow.” Like a poet, or like the weaver in early Greek society, it is the female model, and not the male artist, who articulates the shadowy room of the studio, making sense of space by virtue of her skin and in this “peace without clothes [...] nudism is born” (*FR* 239).

The artist's need to “add depth” reappears later in the poem: we are told that the “narcissism of the artist escapes into a body / that defines his emotions, // An interior where his own contour is less misty” (*FR* 239). The sexual metaphor of the room, or “interior,” for female sexuality is a familiar trope in Guest's work,

appearing in the earlier poems 'Saving Tallow' and 'Belgravia'.⁴⁹⁶ On the surface, this association might seem to entrench a sense of vulnerable penetrability, yet Guest's decision to cast this in architectural terms might also be read as the granting of agency to her muse, giving back autonomous ownership in the figure of the *oikos* or home (or, indeed, *domus*). As Bergren notes, the:

identification of body and house is embedded in the word for "own" itself, οἰκεῖος, an adjectival form of οἶκος "house." Your "own" thing is the thing of your house, and your house is your "ownership" – your "ownness" itself.⁴⁹⁷

In the conflation of body and architecture, the female interior is not simply a cavity to be colonised but a "room of one's own," a space over which she holds dominion.

Berger tells us that: "To be naked is to be without disguise. To be on display is to have the surface of one's own skin, the hairs of one's own body, turned into a disguise which, in that situation, can never be discarded. The nude is condemned to never being naked. Nudity is a form of dress."⁴⁹⁸ Here, however, Guest upsets these traditional terms:

The figure is a nominal reminder that existence
is not pantomime relieved by the artist

The body of the model, the lift of her torso
the extension of limbs, fold of skin

Express reality beyond tenure of the brush,
shell or escapist sail

A severe distance is established between her realism
and his anxious attempt to define it (*FR* 239-40).

This body is "not pantomime" but "realism," a fleshy, corporeal presence set at a "severe distance" from the posturing artist, "a nominal reminder" of the inadequacy of his brush with its limited "tenure." The artist grows anxious (a trait often associated with neurotic women), while the model reclines openly and sensuously in "the lift of her torso / the extension of limbs, fold of skin." The artist desires his muse, but his touch is

⁴⁹⁶ John Wilkinson notes that, in 'Saving Tallow', "the 'deep water' of the room becomes associated unmistakably with female sexuality," Wilkinson, 'Couplings', 491; in 'Belgravia', the "many interiors" (*LT* 29) in the household of her sterile lover – a figure who bears more than a passing resemblance to the artist of 'The Nude' – also, I suggest, denote female sexuality.

⁴⁹⁷ Bergren, *Weaving*, 311.

⁴⁹⁸ Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 54.

impotent, only an approximation of skin behind a veil of silk: “The painter desires the image he has selected / to be clothed in the absolute silk of his touch / Lonely himself he has admired the glance / of kimonos, mirrors, fans and bestowed them on her / Who for many minutes of this day / borrows from art to cover her nudity” (*FR* 240). As Berger tells us, the appearance of the mirror is a familiar convention in the tradition of nude painting, “often used as a symbol of the vanity of woman.”⁴⁹⁹ Yet in Guest’s poem, these conventions are again subverted, for it is the artist who “admires the glance” of mirrors, deflecting his narcissism (or prudery, impotence, or jealousy) on to the body of his muse by “bestow[ing]” the embarrassed act of pigmented clothing on to her.

At the end of the poem, the model looks at the artist’s canvas to discover that “There is no figure [...] she asks, where am I?” (*FR* 242) The question is existential and spatial as well as literal: the woman locates herself in the physical studio, her body as well as her subjectivity, rather than on the canvas of the artist, which depicts an abstracted landscape, where “only the sheen of her body survives” (*FR* 243). Egotistically, the artist explains that “Each day I define myself” (*FR* 243) and the model responds as though she has not even heard his voice: “‘It is a glimpse into the future / fields light up’, she sighs” (*FR* 243). The nude not only utters her profound analysis (is this Guest herself, the art critic, speaking?), but sighs her weariness at the artist’s failure of representation, finishing the job herself. In the closing image, “She reaches for ombre, noir / ‘It is the narrowness of time’. / Respectful moonlight covers them” (*FR* 243).

Hurley suggests that “By the end of the poem, the studio is no longer a patriarchal environment, as the female has asserted her agency as an artist.”⁵⁰⁰ Guest does subvert the conventions of the studio space, as well as the traditional roles of artist and muse, yet I do not share Hurley’s utopian vision, in which the two “have become equal participants in artistic creation, working collaboratively to finish the painting.”⁵⁰¹ The even tone of voice that Guest maintains throughout the poem arouses suspicion: under this cool narrative, the artist’s flaws are laid bare – his anxiety, his narcissism, his impotence – until it is he who has been stripped, the muse physically confident, rephrasing the space of the room, speaking “the essentials of life” and the “future,” and taking up the brush to add the final stroke and correct the artist’s vanity, his treatment

⁴⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁵⁰⁰ Hurley, *The Poetics of Site*, 130.

⁵⁰¹ *Ibid.*

of the canvas as his “mirror.” Guest’s ability to thread this subplot under her unwavering narrative voice approaches, like the work of Austen, something akin to free indirect discourse. Projecting both windows in this way, Guest gives voice back to another silent female history, shifting persona to lift writer, character, and reader alike out of the “ordained claustrophobia” of gendered convention. Ultimately, in ‘The Nude’, it is female skin that makes this possible. Here, the woman is not simply a muse but the poem itself, her sensuous skin sighing in the shadowy space of the studio like the “plangent” song of the Mersan silk. Rustling out of domestic existence, silk and skin alike clad the invisible architecture of Guest’s poetry.

Conclusion

In the prologue to this thesis, I introduced Guest’s 1962 poem ‘The Blue Stairs’, a poetic structure that might be considered the epitome of her “invisible architecture.” As I noted, Guest’s signpost to the “modern museum in Amsterdam” disrupts the location of things, leaving a vacuum in the ‘real’ world that can only be filled by the verbal structure created on the page. And yet, the poem itself is *not* invisible: it is, in fact, a visual spectacle of words transformed into matter, stepped across the page, and saturated in a conceptual shade of cobalt blue; an invisible architecture made visible through the conflation of *mise-en-page* (or structural scaffolding) and the cladding of colour. Or, as Guest writes in the late poem ‘Hans Hoffman’, “A sudden burst of color. / ‘Structure and sensation’” (*RG* 505).

According to Leatherbarrow and Mostafavi, “Semper described color as the most subtle and bodiless of covering materials, capable of ‘masking’ the materiality of stone so that it appeared as pure form.”⁵⁰² In writing colour into, or *on to*, her poem – in painting her elusive stairs blue, just as she painted her ‘Brown Studio’ in muted tones of linguistic black – Guest simultaneously materialises and dematerialises her poetic construction: she clothes a scaffolding that is invisible, luring her readers into the search for an architecture which, as I noted in the introduction, often leads to critical indeterminacy. Like the emperor’s new clothes, scholars of Guest’s work are always looking for something that can’t be seen – for stairs in Amsterdam, for an invisible scaffold – when in fact, as Guest writes, in ‘A Reason for Poetics’, “I wish the Emperor’s new clothes were less a visual phenomenon and more poetry’s plaintive sigh” (*FOI* 23).

⁵⁰² *Ibid.*

The sigh – the non-verbal, acoustic gesture that we have already encountered, exhaling from the figure of the nude – brings me back to where I started and the possibility of sounding silence. As I noted in the first part of this chapter, Guest’s earliest depictions of the home are to be found not in her use of the word ‘home’, but in her creation of an invisible, yet pervasive, architecture of subtly recoded domestic space, which might account for why so many scholars have missed it. In later work, Guest continues to give voice to silent histories: like the invisible scaffold, whose history Robertson rebuilt through material constructions of words, Guest sounds the silent histories of women, through the textiles that they have produced and through a reclamation of skin as a sensuous substance that silently disrupts the assumed relationship between surface and depth. Ultimately, it is this disruption that is at the heart of Guest’s architecture. Like Best and Marcus’s formulation of ‘surface reading’, which I discussed in the previous chapter, Guest’s poems do not “construe surface [...] as a layer that conceals, as clothing does skin, or encloses as a building’s facade does its interior.” Rather, they *are* that skin, and the facades that they create *are* the poems, not an entity independent of their contingent spaces and structures. Like the atectonic fabrications of early modernist – and later postmodernist – architecture, the woven walls of early homemaking, and the sensuous skin of the nude, Guest’s poems may *rely* on an invisible architecture – be that the breath of a sigh, the silence of an absent word, the mysterious work of the unconscious, or the scaffold of blank page space – yet it is the surface – the cladding, the colour, the texture, of words – where the force of her imagination lies. To borrow again from Best and Marcus, we might say that Guest’s poems:

take surface to mean what is evident, perceptible, apprehensible in texts; what is neither hidden nor hiding; what, in the geometrical sense, has length and breadth but no thickness, and therefore covers no depth. A surface is what is being looked *at* rather than what we must train ourselves to see *through*.⁵⁰³

Guest, like Ashbery, was a forerunner of the language poetry that emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s; a poetry that, as Ian Davidson explains:

drew on the idea of language as material, of the concrete and plastic potential of words in space. It is the construction of the poem itself that is the event, not some occasion or emotion that passes through the poem to the reader, and the poet becomes construction worker, bringing in data from different sources.⁵⁰⁴

⁵⁰³ Best & Marcus, ‘An Introduction to Surface Reading’, 9.

⁵⁰⁴ Davidson, *Ideas of Space*, 15-16.

This is the legacy of Guest: to alter the relationship between language and material; to ask of a poem “What does it feel like [...] what substance is it composed of, what does it taste like”; to “delimit” the work of art until it “overruns the boundaries of the poem on the page,” spilling seamlessly from text into reality. Supporting while interrupting, sounding silence, making visible the invisible, and materialising the immaterial: such are the promises of Guest’s poetic cladding, threading writer and reader together in a “house,” as she writes in ‘An Emphasis Falls on Reality’, that “was drawn for them”: “perhaps they will move in today” (*FR* 222).

“Remember to slam the parentheses behind you”: Precarious openings in the poetry of James Schuyler

Introduction

In 1990, Barbara Guest published an article on her friend, the New York School poet James Schuyler, entitled, ‘James Schuyler: The Vuillard of Us’. Here, Guest writes that, “Schuyler translates the vagaries of inhabitancy, of wherever he is, his locale, particularly into his poetry. So that if you are already acquainted with a particular house he has lived in, you come to know it even better.”⁵⁰⁵ In her reading of his work, Guest identifies Schuyler as *translating* between the architectural and the poetic; the implication being that, as in her own work, Schuyler’s poetry does more than limn the architectural; rather, it reconstructs it within the space of the poem. But perhaps the more crucial term here is ‘vagaries’. According to the OED, ‘vagary’ denotes “A wandering or devious journey or tour; a roaming about or abroad; an excursion, ramble, stroll.” In Guest’s conception, then, Schuyler’s inhabitancies are imbued with a sense of the nomadic – an unsurprising subtext, given Guest’s own investment in transitory models of domestic existence. In describing Schuyler, however, her choice of the term ‘vagary’ alludes not only to her own proclivities, but to her friend’s unsettled domestic existence, brought about, in part, by periods of psychological collapse that saw him in and out of mental health institutions throughout his life. As Guest writes, in an earlier draft of ‘The Vuillard of Us’, “Jimmy never owned his own house, or apartment.”⁵⁰⁶ In 1949 Schuyler returned to New York after two years working in Ischia as W. H. Auden’s assistant.⁵⁰⁷ From then on, his life was marked out by brief apartment rentals in Manhattan; a long, eleven year stay with his friend Fairfield Porter and family⁵⁰⁸; admission into hospitals and ‘sanatoriums’; and his eventual residence at The Hotel Chelsea (fig. 81), where he lived from 1979 until his death in 1991. A handful of these tenancies may have had a long duration, but

⁵⁰⁵ B. Guest, ‘The Vuillard of Us’, undated, Barbara Guest Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, YCAL MSS 1185, Series II, Box: 84, Folder: 1482, p2.

⁵⁰⁶ B. Guest, ‘On James Schuyler’, undated, Barbara Guest Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, YCAL MSS 1185, Series II, Box: 84, Folder: 1481, p1.

⁵⁰⁷ Kernan, *The Diary of James Schuyler*, 282.

⁵⁰⁸ As Anne Porter famously remarked: “Jimmy came for a visit and stayed 11 years.” Quoted in: Gray, ‘New Windows on New York’, 175.



fig. 81 The Hotel Chelsea

they remain *tenancies* nonetheless: a *room* of one's own, but rarely a home in the traditional sense of domestic permanence. The facts of Schuyler's existence might thus be said to invite the term "precarity," described by Lauren Berlant as "a condition of dependency – as a legal term, *precarious* describes the situation wherein your tenancy on your land is in someone else's hands."⁵⁰⁹

The OED offers a second definition for the term vagary as "a wandering in speech or writing; a rambling from the subject under consideration; a digression or divagation." In written language, the figure that denotes digression is the parenthesis: James Schuyler's favourite device.⁵¹⁰ From early experiments with the textural and sonic qualities of the bracket; to jagged interruptions, cutting both visually and sensibly into the verse mid-flow; to long drifting digressions (the most sustained spanning thirty-seven lines), Schuyler is, undoubtedly, one of the twentieth century's most significant poets of the parenthesis. And yet, this fact has been strangely overlooked by almost every critic of his work to date. Nathan Kernan, in the introduction to

⁵⁰⁹ L. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 192.

⁵¹⁰ I adapt this phrase from Howard Moss who notes that the colon is "the poet's favourite device," in 'James Schuyler: Whatever Is Moving' in *The American Poetry Review*, (10: 3: May/June 1981), 15. In *The Last Avant Garde*, David Lehman also comments on Schuyler's use of the colon, when he notes that: "Only A. R. Ammons among contemporary poets has relied so heavily on the colon as a means of emphasizing the connections between clauses in constant postponement of closure" (246). The parenthesis, however, is overlooked in almost every study of Schuyler's work.

The Diary of James Schuyler, notes that “Schuyler was not a stylist in matters of spelling or punctuation – except when he was [...] He kept punctuation to a minimum and aimed first for clarity” (*DJS* 17). Kernan, however, contradicts his own analysis only a few lines later when, defending an editorial decision, he admits that “a failure to close parentheses was typical for Schuyler – he makes a point of it in the poem ‘Seeking’ and elsewhere” (*DJS* 17-8). This is the only instance I have found of scholarly attention to Schuyler’s penchant for the parenthetical, and it is only briefly flagged as a footnote to an editorial justification. It seems remarkable that critics of Schuyler’s work should ignore his idiosyncratic, innovative, and, at times, obsessive use of the parentheses; then again, this bracket-blindness aligns with the long history of parentheses as “additional, irrelevant, extraneous, subordinate, or damaging to the clarity of argument,”⁵¹¹ as John Lennard notes in his book, *But I Digress: The Exploitation of Parentheses in English Printed Verse*. Writing in his diary on the 25th of August 1985, Schuyler comments on:

The utter improbability of me sitting here typing my equally unlikely diary (I am keeping it with malice aforethought: i.e. I would like to make some money out of my writing for a change: oh well, winning an extra few thousand for a long poem in a non long poem contest. *The Paris Review*? Isn’t that where something good always happens? As usual I have locked myself inside a paren. Must bust loose: not always the best idea in life or anywhere else). Where was I? (*DJS* 175)

In his digression into the placement of digressional poetry (“a long poem in a non long poem contest”), Schuyler finds himself “locked inside” the space created by the parenthesis, the “paren.” This situation, Schuyler admits, is not only familiar – “as usual” – but also corresponds to the poet’s real life – “not always the best idea *in life* or anywhere else.” This moment captures Schuyler’s material-spatial awareness of the parenthesis, the brackets forming textual walls or doors, screens or apertures, which open and close to create an “alternative syntactic space”⁵¹² inside the wider limits of the text, as Robert Grant Williams notes in his essay ‘Reading the Parenthesis’. In Schuyler’s diary, the spatially conceived parenthesis has engendered a bodily interaction in the negotiation out of parenthetical space: “Must bust loose.” Emerging from the paren, Schuyler fuses memory with physicality, the cognitive with the corporeal, in his use of the spatial idiom for the lost train of thought: “Where was I?”

⁵¹¹ J. Lennard, *But I Digress: The Exploitation of Parentheses in English Printed Verse*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 242.

⁵¹² R. G. Williams, ‘Reading the Parenthesis’ in *SubStance*, (22: 1: 70: 1993), 65.

If the rhetorical figure of the parenthesis signals digressive speech in poetry, we might then say that the diacritical mark of the bracket houses this wandering thought:⁵¹³ as in the excerpt above, it performs as the textual manifestation of the “vagaries of inhabitancy,” and it is through the parenthesis that Schuyler translates these vagaries into verse. Yet, the stability of the parenthesis – this housing capacity – is offset by an inherent precariousness. While the parenthesis implies a sense of safety in the creation of enclosed, syntactic space, it must simultaneously exist precariously, a tenant dependent on the dominant text, because of its inherently disposable form (“additional, irrelevant, extraneous, subordinate, or damaging to the clarity of argument”).

This chapter explores the use of the parenthesis in the poetry of James Schuyler. Thinking through the architectural ramifications of parentheses – their material, spatial and temporal qualities – I propose that Schuyler’s use of the bracket is imbued with social and utopian potential, placing the poem, to borrow O’Hara’s phrase, “at last between two persons.” In what follows, I suggest that Schuyler’s parenthetical poems disrupt the traditional hierarchy between a text and its subordinate parenthetical clauses. In so doing, Schuyler makes these syntactic spaces do more than simply house a digressional thought. Building on Maggie Nelson’s suggestion that Schuyler “like[s] to play with the gaps that invariably occur when one attempts to get one’s body into the body of one’s writing,”⁵¹⁴ I suggest that we can read the digressional space of the parenthesis as this “gap”: the opening of syntactic space, bounded by textual hardware, in which the body might be located. Precarious and wandering, Schuyler’s lived experience parallels the textual parenthesis through what Yasmine Shamma has called the “practice of absorbing the shapes of New York City”⁵¹⁵ in the poetry of the New York School.

I begin this chapter with a digression on parentheses: on their historical usage, their grammatical and rhetorical singularity, and what happens to them when they enter the space of a poem. From here, I move to a material reading of parentheses in Schuyler’s poetry, mapping them on to the architectural features that appear in the poems and also thinking about them in relation to the poet’s lived experiences. From my

⁵¹³ Lennard notes that “[i]n English the word ‘parentheses’ has two meanings, often conflated: ‘parentheses’, rhetorical figures; and ‘parentheses’, the marks of parenthesis, sometimes called ‘round brackets’: ().” The term ‘parentheses’ thus signifies not only the digressional thought (i.e. the text contained *within* the brackets) but also the brackets themselves, the material, grammatical figure that parcels off the syntactic moment therein. As Robert Grant Williams writes, “unlike other rhetorical figures, the parenthesis is the only one that associates with its own diacritical mark” (63).

⁵¹⁴ Nelson, *True Abstractions*, 82.

⁵¹⁵ Shamma, *Spatial Poetics*, 4.

discussion of the material mark I move to a consideration of the spatial properties of the parenthesis in relation to painterly planarity and Schuyler's creation of a "layered-space" poetic, as Geoff Ward terms it.⁵¹⁶ The third section of this chapter explores the temporal ramifications of the parentheses on the time of reading. Proposing that parentheses produce a kind of radical present tense, the final part of this chapter mirrors my work on Frank O'Hara, by suggesting that Schuyler's parenthetical poetry is imbued with a sense of utopian futurity. Through this architectonic approach, I show how, in creating alternative syntactic spaces, excessive poetic parentheses possess the capacity to break down spatial assumptions, propose new forms of sociality for the future, and open up "something like a liveable space."

"An unnessecary parcel of speach": The parenthesis

In his 1577 literary style guide, *The Garden of Eloquence*, Henry Peacham wrote that the parenthesis is "an unnecessary parcell of speach" and "Although it give some strength, yet when it is taken away, it leaveth the same speach perfect inough."⁵¹⁷ Unnecessary and dispensable at best, at worst, as Robert Grant William notes, the parenthetical aside:

signifies dead text, an appendage to the work which is neither vital nor functional, an appendix which instead of contributing to organic unity only stores toxic waste, a solute which defying homogeneity clouds the solution's transparency – the intrusive adjunct which readers quickly skim over.⁵¹⁸

If parentheses are "dead," "toxic," and there only to be "quickly skim[med] over," then why are they there at all? Why do we continue to use such a useless textual figure in writing? Furthermore, why is the parenthesis ever used in poetry, a form that demands an economy of words, as various constraints of composition dictate that semantic and grammatical choices be carefully made and that no word or mark be incidental or accidental, even if long-form and prose poetry (the kind that won Schuyler a Pulitzer Prize) has a tendency to pretend otherwise? Part of the answer to this must have to do with language's relationship to utility, a relationship that becomes vexed when the parenthesis enters the poem - arguably the least functional of all

⁵¹⁶ Ward, *Statutes of Liberty*, 10-35.

⁵¹⁷ Williams, 'Reading the Parenthesis', 56.

⁵¹⁸ *Ibid.*

textual forms. If all poetic language is essentially non-functional, if poetry, as Schuyler's one-time employer W. H. Auden wrote, "makes nothing happen,"⁵¹⁹ if it is shielded from ideological exploitation so that it can remain creatively liberated, then the superfluous rhetorical trope of parentheses must surely find itself at home in the poetic form. This would imply that the parenthesis is the definitive mode of poetic expression – that the poetic form is itself a kind of literary parenthesis. This is another iteration of Lisa Robertson's sheltered vernacular, which refuses to instrumentally "interpret, fix or abstract the fluency of the linguistic given." Robertson's conception of the poem, as I have noted throughout this thesis, is that of a space in which vernacular language might be housed with profound political and social consequence. This "vulnerable shelter" is a place for "co-citizens" to "speak together [...] for the duration of speech's intensity." Like Robertson's notion of the vernacular, then, the precarious language contained in a parenthesis corresponds to the spoken, by virtue of its inherently digressional nature.

There is something inescapably conversational about digressional language. When we speak, we sometimes lose our train of thought, our attention catches elsewhere, our mind switches tracks, as one thought attaches to another, spinning off on tangents. We do this in writing too but, when committed to the page, the digression ceases to be organically discursive, for now we have the time and space to stop and think before we digress: we can alter our wording, parse our sentences more succinctly, before enshrining them on paper. And if, in a stream of consciousness, we do let our pen run on, we still have the capacity to edit after the event. This raises the question, as Grant Williams articulates: "if the parenthesized comment is just an insertion with no grammatical connection to the text, why did the author not spend the time to integrate the lazy fragment properly? Have those authors who employ parenthesis never heard of second drafts?"⁵²⁰ The answer, I suggest, lies in the fact that the digression in a written text must always know its discursive character. If the writer has chosen to place it, and (more importantly) to keep it, the parenthetical aside must be understood not simply in terms of its conventional utility – that is, its ability to qualify, modify, or amplify – but as a *translation* of the spoken into the written, the vernacular into the poetic, in an attempt to keep alive something of the meandering and intimate quality of thinking aloud. This is akin to what Roland Barthes calls, '*writing aloud*', a phonetic form whose:

⁵¹⁹ W. H. Auden, 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats' in (ed. J. Fuller) *W. H. Auden (Poems Selected by John Fuller)*, (London: Faber & Faber, 2005), 34.

⁵²⁰ Williams, 'Reading the Parenthesis', 58.

aim is not the clarity of messages, the theater of emotions; what it searches for (in a perspective of bliss) are the pulsional incidents, the language lined with flesh, a text where we can hear the grain of the throat, the patina of consonants, the voluptuousness of vowels, a whole carnal stereophony: the articulation of the body, of the tongue, not that of meaning, of language.⁵²¹

Barthes' notion of "*writing* aloud" aligns with my explanation for the continued existence of parentheses in print culture: we *could* find seamless ways of integrating parenthetical digressions into the text, but to do so would be at the expense of these fleshy, blissful moments, fissures into which the writer inserts their own voice, their own *corporeality*. These are, to return to Nelson, those "gaps that invariably occur when one attempts to get one's body into the body of one's writing."

When John Wilkinson introduced Schuyler in his 2010 essay 'Jim the Jerk: Bathos and Loveliness in the Poetry of James Schuyler', he wrote that "only modest attention has accrued around the poetry of James Schuyler despite his routine appellation as a major poet of the New York School."⁵²² Ten years later, and the situation remains little changed: Schuyler's work is still the least attended to of the New York School poets, and most critical attention tends to appear as something of a parenthetical aside to the more prolific work of Frank O'Hara and John Ashbery. In his attempt to unpick this critical oversight, Wilkinson suggests that "part of the reason may be that his poetry is low-key, and its successes so subtle that its differences from the routine or the failed take effort to discern or specify."⁵²³ Schuyler, Wilkinson continues, was a poet who "loved the pastoral mode and gardening; seed catalogues and English diarists from Gilbert White to Virginia Woolf were his inspiration."⁵²⁴ His poetry is driven by routine – by the cycles of daily habit, and the humdrum passages of seasonal change – which might account for why its "differences from the routine" are so hard to discern. His interests are indeed "low key" or modest: as Schuyler himself writes, "The said to be boring things / dreams, weather, a bus trip / are so fascinating" (*THB* 60-61). His lyrical style is characterised by its intimate and personal tone often achieved through the deliberate use of the American vernacular and a fascination with the quotidian. Formally, Schuyler's poetry rarely strays into the experimental (though his

⁵²¹ Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, 66-67.

⁵²² J. Wilkinson 'Jim the Jerk: Bathos and Loveliness in the Poetry of James Schuyler' in (eds. S. Crangle & P. Nicholls) *On Bathos: Literature, Art, Music*, (London, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012), 73.

⁵²³ *Ibid.*

⁵²⁴ *Ibid.*

early work, as I will show, does play with form and materiality), but oscillates between truncated lineation, creating long, slender poems that resemble the “awesome spiky postcard / view” (*MP* 248) of New York City skyscrapers, and extended ecstatic lines of Whitmanic prose poetry. Schuyler’s work is often read as a modern mode of the pastoral, thematically crafted around a love of gardens, flowers, birds, and the cycle of seasons and weather. Yet this penchant for the pastoral is inextricable from an affinity with the city, a simultaneity of focus that Timothy Gray has termed “the urban pastoral.”⁵²⁵ All of this is underscored by Schuyler’s excessive observational attitude,⁵²⁶ a trope so pervasive as to amount to a kind of poetic ethos. As Douglas Crase has written, “the working principle seems to have been to register your attention [...] in words, before it could be altered by your expectation of how things should [be]”.⁵²⁷ In this respect, Schuyler’s style is best understood as diaristic: not only was Schuyler inspired by diarists, he also kept his own, and much of the material from them made its way into the poems. Indeed, many of his published compositions read like diary entries, titled with a date and written in an unfolding present tense that amounts to a parenthetical mode of thinking: observation generates more observation, a drifting, swerving, and digressional excess of thinking and of things.

Informed by early experiments with the material and spatial properties of the bracket, Schuyler’s use of parentheses crystallises in his mature work as a diaristic flourish. This application of the parenthesis indicates a veiled drive towards experimentation that many critics overlook, in part because Schuyler’s poems often pose as diary entries. Yet we must be alert to the generic distinction: these are not diary entries but *poems*, and are thus conditioned by the doubling of attention that is unique to the poetic form. As Lucy Alford writes, in *Forms of Poetic Attention* (2020), all poems are “composed by, and compose in turn, acts and events of attention.”⁵²⁸ Schuyler’s parentheses are, therefore, at their most disruptive, not through avant-garde experimentation but in the recognition of their conventional traits (grammatical disposability, a capacity to clarify or emphasise, conversational tone of voice) and the ways in which these traits direct readerly attention

⁵²⁵ T. Gray, ‘New Windows on New York: The Urban Pastoral Vision of James Schuyler and Jane Freilicher’ in *Genre*, (33: 2: 1 June 2000).

⁵²⁶ For more on Schuyler and attention, see: A. Epstein, *Attention Equals Life: The Pursuit of the Everyday in Contemporary Poetry and Culture*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); D. Crase, ‘A Voice Like the Day’ in *Poetry* (January 1994); J. Wilkinson ‘Jim the Jerk: Bathos and Loveliness in the Poetry of James Schuyler’ in (eds. S. Crangle & P. Nicholls) *On Bathos: Literature, Art, Music*, (London, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012).

⁵²⁷ D. Crase, ‘A Voice Like the Day’ in *Poetry* (January 1994), 228.

⁵²⁸ L. Alford, *Forms of Poetic Attention*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), 9.

when they enter the already parenthetical space of the poem. Through a desire to, at once, uphold grammatical convention and break with it (or, at the very least, to push it to the limit of its proper function), Schuyler plays with the reader's assumptions of how to read parentheses, creating corporeally attuned pockets of alternative syntactic space. Through a tone that I will call *deceptive disengagement*, Schuyler's parentheses pretend to their disposable reputation, while in fact working across textual planes to underpin the poem's forms and structures, its rhythms, its textures, and its visual perspectives.

“() bang and) bang and)) double bang”: The materiality of the bracket

In a number of early poems⁵²⁹, Schuyler draws his reader's attention to the materiality of round brackets by subverting the reader's instinct to look through or past them, demanding instead that we look *at* them. This is Schuyler's attention to “the said to be boring,” where an uncoupling of ‘things’ (plastic bags, language, etc) from productive meaning produces new forms of aesthetic engagement. For Schuyler this possibility extends to the functional joints of language, the visual and sonic textures of grammatical marks: what, after all, could be more boring than a bracket? ‘Seeking’, the poem that Kernan cites as Schuyler's typical “failure to close parentheses,” appears in his first published collection, *Freely Espousing* (1969). Here, Schuyler reminds his reader to:

Remember to slam the parentheses behind you
) bang and) bang and)) double bang
(to be on the safe side) (*FE* 30)

Uncoupled from grammatical context, Schuyler's focus here is on the materiality of the mark, its sonic as well as visual textures. Published almost twenty years after Charles Olson's ‘Projective Verse’ – subtitled, “(projective (percussive (prospective”⁵³⁰ – ‘Seeking’ fits into a by-then established tradition of exploring the poetic possibilities of liberating graphic marks from their grammatical contexts. As I discussed at length in chapter one, Olson suggested that, through the use of the typewriter, poets could transform these marks

⁵²⁹ Some of the best examples from the early poems that I do not discuss in this chapter include: “The Elizabethans Call It Dying” from his first collection *Freely Espousing* (1969) and ‘Our Father’ from *Hymn to Life* (1974). Occasionally, Schuyler returns to this experimental tendency in later poems such as ‘O Sleepless Night’ in *A Few Days* (1985).

⁵³⁰ Olson, *Postmodern American Poetry*, 863.

into musical notations, indicative of breath, of speed, of pause, of silence: “It is the advantage of the typewriter,” he claims, “that, due to its rigidity and its space precisions, it can, for a poet, indicate exactly the breath, the pauses, the suspensions even of syllables, the juxtapositions even of parts of phrases, which he intends.”⁵³¹ Schuyler taps into this projective approach in ‘Seeking’, where the parentheses do not *sign* for a door, or for something else that slams, but are, themselves, *what is being slammed*. The effect is both visual and sonic: the brackets look like something that might open and close (as, indeed, we say that brackets do), but coupled with the onomatopoeic “slam” and “bang” we also *hear* these brackets.⁵³² Schuyler differs from Olson, however, since the poem betrays a desire to simultaneously *reinforce* the functional propriety of the bracket. In ‘Seeking’, Schuyler does not entirely abstract the grammatical mark but heightens our awareness of how it *does* function in a text, by reminding us (with that crucial word ‘Remember’ haunting the section) that when we use parentheses we open and shut (or in this case slam) them. In so doing, Schuyler’s poem is performative of the enclosed, semantic spaces that parentheses create, which in turn parallel the architectural spaces that our *bodies* occupy. As if to emphasise this utilitarian aspect, Schuyler closes the passage with a complete, and properly functioning, parenthesis – “(to be on the safe side).”

The relationship between space and safety was a fraught one in Schuyler’s life. As Guest writes, “The rooms and houses are protective. Gardens and houses of other people were essential props of Jimmy’s travelling domain.”⁵³³ Guest’s invocation of “protective” space gestures towards not only the homes of friends with whom Schuyler stayed for extended periods, but the mental health institutions in which he found himself, on and off, from 1951 until the end of his life: “prisons / transposed to hospitals” (*MP* 241) as he writes in the poem ‘I sit down to type’. In the transposition from prison to hospital – the fine line between sanctuary and incarceration – Schuyler raises a question as to who is being protected by his admission into these institutions: was Schuyler being kept safe from himself, or did the walls of the sanatorium act as a prison to keep others safe from his, at times, frighteningly erratic behaviour?⁵³⁴ Similarly, then, when

⁵³¹ Ibid.

⁵³² Which raises, as a side note, the interesting question of how one might read this poem out loud.

⁵³³ Guest, ‘On James Schuyler’, p1.

⁵³⁴ While staying with Ron and Pat Padgett and their young son Wayne at the Porter’s house in 1971, “Schuyler underwent a serious nervous breakdown and badly frightened both Ron and Pat Padgett with behaviour that was threatening toward Wayne Padgett. Schuyler was taken to Southampton Hospital, then transferred to the State Mental Hospital at Islip, New York, where he stayed for ten days” (*DJS* 290).

Schuyler slams the parenthesis in ‘Seeking’, we are left to wonder: does the safe side signify the syntactic space *within* the bracket, or is there something threatening about this enclosed space from which the speaker must seek escape? Comparing parentheses to walls, Williams draws out a similar distinction. He writes that:

If the round brackets designate an icon of a barrier, then metaphoric or metonymic substitutions enable the reader to specify the kind of barrier operating between the two discourses. When likened to fences, shields, palisades, breastwork, or other similar obstructions, the marks present the further quandary of enclosed space. Fortifications surround prisons as well as strongholds. In both edifices, wherever the citizens reside, walls serve to confine the dangerous alien to either an outside or an inside space. Therefore, are the marks bastions which create a sanctuary for a parenthesized comment under siege, or are they bars which imprison linguistic criminals, textual rogues?⁵³⁵

Schuyler’s desire to “bust loose” from the unwieldy “paren” that he opens on the 25th August 1985 would imply that brackets are the “bars which imprison linguistic criminals, textual rogues.” In ‘The Payne Witney Poems’, a parenthetical series contained within the larger collection *The Morning of the Poem*, Schuyler paints a picture of the enclosed titular space to which he was committed in early 1975.

In the opening poem, ‘Trip’, Schuyler employs parentheses to imply the parcelling off of sanity and neurosis:

Wigging in, wiggling out:
when I stop to think
the wires in my head
cross: kaboom. How
many trips
by ambulance (five,
count them five),
claustrated, pill addiction,
in and out of mental
hospitals,
the suicidalness (once
I almost made it)
but – I go on?
Tell you all of it?
I can’t. When I think
of that, that at
only fifty-one I,
Jim the Jerk, am
still alive and breathing
deeply, that I think
is a miracle (*MP* 252).

Here, the parentheses house Schuyler’s more neurotic moments (“(five, / count them five)”) and his admission of suicidal tendency (“(once / I almost made it)”). Contained within the ‘protective’ space of the brackets,

⁵³⁵ Williams, ‘Reading Parenthesis’, 64.

these troubled moments become stand-ins for Schuyler himself, mirroring his bodily enclosure within the “Pale green walls and / a white ceiling” of the sanatorium. All but of the two of the poems in this series take the form of heavily enjambed single stanzas (rooms), which here engender not the free-flowing thought usually associated with enjambement but a disjunctive and staccato mode of thinking, through the disruption of thought that occurs across truncated lines: a formal mirror to Schuyler’s hours of “Sitting. Staring. Thinking blankly” (*MP* 257).

Yet, to suggest that the parentheses in Schuyler’s work are indicative of incarceration is to assume an analogy between parentheses and *walls*. In fact, as we have seen in ‘Seeking’, Schuyler’s brackets are hung on hinges,⁵³⁶ attuned to their unique ability to open and close. In this respect, the parenthesis can be said to represent not the walls of containment but the window through which Schuyler so often gazes, in the Payne Witney poems and elsewhere: as Schuyler remarked in an interview with Raymond Foye in 1989, “You know what my diaries are like: they’re mostly about looking out the window” (*DJS* 14). In the poems as well as the diaries, the window becomes the frame that permits inside to meet outside, alleviating the sense of imprisonment that might attend these enclosed spaces, and allowing the speaker to register the minute observations that define his diaristic and digressional poetry.

Conventionally, the window, like the parenthesis, is an architectural feature without structural integrity: remove a window from a wall and that wall will remain standing. Remove the wall, however, and the window ceases to be a window at all: reduced to its materials, the window without the wall becomes merely a collection of glass and wood, metal, or plastic. In other words, the window is dependent on a wider structure, it takes its meaning from its position on or in a building. Yet, in spite of its non-structural character, the window cannot be deemed simply ornamental, since it possesses a set of indispensable functions: illumination, ventilation, and a view beyond the confines of enclosed space.

⁵³⁶ In relation to mental health, there is a point to be made about the term hinged – or, rather, *unhinged* – in the work of a poet who often removes brackets from their hinges through his typical “failure to close parentheses.” David Bradshaw makes a similar point in his introduction to Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* – another writer attuned to the subtleties of the parenthesis, and a writer whom Schuyler loved. Bradshaw writes that “the reference to taking doors off their hinges in the second and third lines of the novel most evidently relates to the preparations for Clarissa’s party, but it may also be a cue to readers to ask themselves which character or characters, if any, *are* ‘unhinged’ (as a verb meaning ‘to unsettle, unbalance, disorder in mind, throw into confusion’ (*OED*), *unhinge* had been in use since the early seventeenth century) in *Mrs Dalloway*.” D. Bradshaw (ed.), *Mrs Dalloway*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 3.

Countless critics have remarked on Schuyler's "customary stance – a man seated by a window," which, as David Kaufman notes "is that of the disinterested observer."⁵³⁷ In a similar spirit, Mark Silverberg has written that "His poetry is lazy and meditative, focusing almost exclusively on things seen rather than things done, on the still life, the view from the window, the quiet ordinariness of each 'day like any other'."⁵³⁸ Though perhaps temperamentally true, the suggestion that Schuyler's engagement with the window is "disinterested" or "lazy" overlooks his more complex and nuanced activation of the aperture within the poem. Rather, as I have already hinted, Schuyler's poems are what I want to call *deceptively disengaged*: like the parenthesis, the window works to construct space and to subtly disrupt and redefine conventional engagements with the interior.

The ability to let in light, to provide visibility and clarity, is one of the window's primary functions, and we might say the same of the parenthesis: idiomatically, bracketed text "sheds light on" a point by clarifying or expanding. Schuyler's work is full of examples of this kind of parenthetical clarification, often prompted by observation (sometimes through the frame of the window):⁵³⁹ "a pungent autumn that blends leaf smoke (sycamore, tobacco, other)" (*FE* 17); "Early May (a late spring)" (*FE* 37); "I saw you waiting a cab in light rain / (drizzle)" (*HL* 72). In all of these examples, parentheses function at their most utilitarian: they list, they name, they explain and, in so doing, they expand, they clarify, they *shed light*. Grant Williams's question haunts these apparently functional (as opposed to stylistic) moments: "if the parenthesized comment is just an insertion with no grammatical connection to the text, why did the author not spend the time to integrate the lazy fragment properly?" Yet, in the space of the poem, this question becomes generative rather than derogatory: why *did* Schuyler include these brackets? What is their *poetic* function? How are they operating when practical considerations have been dispensed within the 'useless', and already parenthetical, space of the poem?

These brackets place gestural emphasis on the words contained within. Yet this is a paradoxical emphasis, since it must be attended by the risk of diminishment; the chance that readers will, as Grant

⁵³⁷ D. Kaufmann, 'James Schuyler's Specimen Days' in *Jacket* #2, June 30 2012 at <https://jacket2.org/article/james-schuylers-specimen-days>.

⁵³⁸ M. Silverberg, 'James Schuyler's Poetics of Indolence' in *Literary Imagination*, (11: 1: 2008), 28.

⁵³⁹ For window examples, see: "I wake up / once or twice / a night / and by the light / (starlight, enshrouded in a parchment shade) / of lamplight / check out the time: three a.m." (340) or "When a firefly dances / into my view (a black window)."

Williams warns, “quickly skim over” these remarks. The best way to grasp this paradox is to read one of the examples above with the brackets removed. How is the text altered, for example, when the line becomes: “a pungent autumn that blends leaf smoke sycamore, tobacco, other”? Here, we might place a colon or a comma or a dash after ‘smoke’, which would technically produce the same effect⁵⁴⁰ (i.e. clarification through listing). But, by removing the containment of the brackets, by allowing the words inside to spill outside and merge with the rest of the text, the tone, acoustic rhythm, and visual character have been radically altered.

The conventional hierarchy of the text and its parenthesis is enforced in this autumnal example: the bracket announces itself as humble, its half-moon curvature sliding into the text, promising, as it does, to be unassuming and self-negating. We therefore automatically read a quietness in this list of leaf smokes and this auditory volume seems to mirror the peacefully curling smoke of pungent autumn. This is not a bombastic apostrophe to the “breath of Autumn’s being,” as in Shelley’s ‘Ode to the West Wind’; rather, like Keats’s ‘Ode to Autumn’ with its “mists and mellow fruitfulness,” Schuyler’s seasonal interest lies in quotidian details, the “said to be boring things,” whose smallness is translated intact into the space of the brackets. The enclosed words are emphasised, but because this emphasis is hushed by the self-negating brackets, the leaf smoke is imbued with sensory presence: sycamore and tobacco have disrupted the main flow of the poem, so that, for a moment, they are spectrally suspended in lingering curlicues of vapour and pungent smell. The inclusion of ‘other’ here serves as a kind of puncture: mimicking the list, it returns the reader to the prosaic character of the parenthesis as the bracket closes, throwing them back into the trajectory of the poem.

This parenthetical moment, which appears in the early poem ‘A Man in Blue’, is embedded within the description of an interior:

Enscenced in resonant plump easy chairs
covered with scuffed brown leather
in a pungent autumn that blends leaf smoke
(sycamore, tobacco, other),
their nobility wound in a finale
like this calico cat
asleep, curled up in a breadbasket,
on a sideboard where the sun falls (*FE* 17).

⁵⁴⁰ Given that, as I have noted, the term parenthesis means both the parenthetical thought and the grammatical mark, the placing of a comma or dash would still technically produce a parenthesis.

The parenthesis in its context therefore functions like a window, not only in its ability to shed light, but in its capacity to fold together the inside with the outside, granting this domestic scene an implicit access to the autumn landscape. Libby Rifkin writes that Schuyler's poetry:

was devoted to anatomizing the richly populated inner landscapes of both his mind and his domestic space. Many of Schuyler's most carefully observed engagements with the natural world are made indoors, and they mingle descriptions of his rooms with the weather, flora, and fauna of the world outside, often viewed through a window or through the door opening to let someone in.⁵⁴¹

'Internal', here, is coded as both domestic space and as psychological interiority. To look outside, then, and to register what one sees, is always to offer up both forms of interiority: a body inhabiting internal space *and* the reflexive work of the mind. This is what the parenthesis does: it defines a distinction between the corporeal and the cognitive, and then collapses the two together again. When the bracket functions as the material manifestation of the window in Schuyler's poems, inside and outside, psychological interiority and corporeal exteriority, might thus become conflated.

Architectural theorist Juhani Pallasmaa has identified this distinction as the haptic-optic split.

Pallasmaa's influential book, *The Eyes of the Skin*, opens from a place of scepticism: "I had become increasingly concerned about the bias towards vision, and the suppression of other senses," Pallasmaa writes, "in the way architecture was conceived, taught and critiqued, and about the consequent disappearance of sensory and sensual qualities from the arts and architecture."⁵⁴² Pallasmaa thus distinguishes between a haptic and an optic experience of architecture in order to challenge this "bias towards vision" and to restore the centrality of other senses in the spatial encounter. "The very essence of lived experience," Pallasmaa writes, "is moulded by hapticity and peripheral unfocused vision. Focused vision confronts us with the world whereas peripheral vision envelops us in the flesh of the world."⁵⁴³ To see the world, to take stock, to merely observe: to these ends, an optic perspective may be sufficient, but it keeps us at a physical remove. To really experience the world, to live it, bodily, we need to think about our engagements with all types of space – poetic and architectural alike – in terms of hapticity. For Pallasmaa, this haptic engagement finds its origins

⁵⁴¹ L. Rifkin, "'Say Your Favourite Poet in the World is Lying There': Eileen Myles, James Schuyler, and the Queer Intimacies of Care" in *Journal of Medical Humanities*, (38: 1: November 2016), 84.

⁵⁴² Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin*, 10.

⁵⁴³ *Ibid.*, 10.

in poetry; in the capacity of the poem to capture (as Robertson asserts) spoken language. “In my view,” he writes:

poetry has the capacity of bringing us momentarily back to the oral and enveloping world. The re-oralised word of poetry brings us back to the centre of an interior world [...] Equally the task of art and architecture in general is to reconstruct the experience of an undifferentiated interior world, in which we are not mere spectators, but to which we inseparably belong.⁵⁴⁴

Poetry and architecture “reconstruct the experience of an undifferentiated interior world,” the one through locating orality, the other through the construction of materials, in order to create spaces “to which we inseparably belong.” In Schuyler’s poetry, the parenthesis straddles these two conceptions: the brackets not only house speech, but they generate an interior within which, both writer and reader become more than “mere spectators.” Thus, when Schuyler’s material parentheses merge with his depictions of the window, his poetry must be understood not merely as the lazy optic gaze but, as I have suggested, as *deceptively disengaged*. I will return to this idea in greater detail later in this chapter; for now, however, I want to stay with the haptic engagement as it pertains to the material relationship between parentheses and windows.

Schuyler’s long composition ‘The Morning of the Poem’ (which gives its title to the larger collection in which The Payne Witney Poems parenthetically appear), was written in the summer of 1976, during one of Schuyler’s extended visits to his mother’s home. In an interview with Carl Little in 1986 Schuyler recalls that the composition of the poem “was so involved with being in the place – being in my mother’s house, being in East Aurora”⁵⁴⁵ that it becomes something of a document of that place: blending Guest and Schuyler, we might therefore say that the poem “translates the vagaries of inhabitancy” into an “involvement of place.”⁵⁴⁶ Yet rarely do we encounter full-blown descriptions or details of his mother’s home. Rather, Schuyler evokes the domestic interior by registering his body’s location in relation to certain architectural features – most often the window:

[...] The days go by like leaves
That fall in fall, not yet, soon, so soon, I feel my death in
currents of damp air on the back of my neck,
Filtered through a window screen (a casement window screen I

⁵⁴⁴ Ibid., 25.

⁵⁴⁵ Schuyler, ‘An Interview with James Schuyler’, 156-7.

⁵⁴⁶ Ibid.

open in the watches of the night, too lazy
To make it to the john, and take a moonlit piss into the taxus) (MP 287)

Here, Schuyler figures his corporeality (“take a moonlit piss”⁵⁴⁷) in the space opened by the parenthesis, which parallels the speaker’s interaction with the “casement window screen” (also contained in the parentheses), into which (or out of, or through which) Schuyler must place his body in order to take his “moonlit piss.”

The casement windows of his mother’s house, which are mentioned twice in the poem, are important since, unlike the more conventional sash, with its weighted, sliding mechanism, the distinctive feature of the casement window is that it opens and closes on hinges: like Schuyler’s textual parentheses, these are windows that can *slam* (fig. 82).⁵⁴⁸ At another point in the poem, Schuyler describes a disagreement between himself and his mother over the opening and closing of one of these windows:

As it was

it was enough to
Sit and eat and watch it, wet weavings of a summer morning,
and try to stop
My mother from slamming every window and shutting out
the smell
The sweet, sweet, sweet smell of morning rain, in
your nose, on bare skin.
“Don’t shut that window: it isn’t coming in.” “Well,
it *might* come in and
I’m the one who will have to clean it up.” Slam. I
open it again: “This
Rain will last about thirty seconds (it did), I’m watching
it and if
It starts to blow in I’ll close the window” (MP 282)

Here, the word “Slam” (with its loud, capital ‘S’) acts as an onomatopoeia, furnished with a full stop to generate an impression of physical closure. The word thus functions like the graphic mark of the bracket in ‘Seeking’, to create both a sonic and a physical interaction with the *architextures* of the poem. By attending to these textures, furthermore, Schuyler draws our attention to the interior, domestic setting: though the scene does not *describe* the space in which Schuyler is positioned, the interaction with the window evokes the

⁵⁴⁷ In her discussion of locating the body in the gaps of one’s writing, Nelson looks to a parallel moment in ‘The Morning of the Poem’ in which Schuyler doesn’t quite “make it to the john” not out of laziness this time, but out of desperation. The poem also opens with an image of Schuyler “get[ting] out of bed holding / my cock and go piss.” Nelson reads these moments as the New York School “drive towards excess” (79) – another point of connection with the “additional, irrelevant, extraneous” parenthesis, which I will expand on in my conclusion.

⁵⁴⁸ Another important set of windows, which appeared throughout the diaries and poems, were “my two French windows” (DJS167) in Schuyler’s room at the Chelsea hotel – windows that would also have opened and closed on hinges.

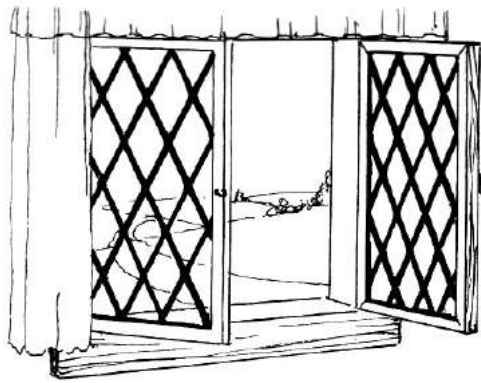


fig. 82 Hinged casement window

“involvement of place” that determines the composition of the poem. We thus find ourselves immersed in (rather than simply spectators *of*) that space, overhearing the squabble between Schuyler and his mother over the intrusion of exterior into interior. This is the haptic-optic split writ large: the optical gaze through the window activates the haptic “attempt to get one’s body into the body of one’s writing.” As Pallasmaa writes, “There is no body separate from its domicile in space, and there is no space unrelated to the unconscious image of the perceiving self.”⁵⁴⁹

Pallasmaa's conception of the haptic-optic split is predicated on an embrace of peripheral vision, something that defines both the window and the bracket: these are features we look *through*, rather than *at*, allowing them to slip into the periphery in order for them to function most effectively: a necessary impulse towards self-negation of material existence. Just as Schuyler disrupts the conventions of the parenthesis by looking at its materiality (as in ‘Seeking’), the speaker of his poems (and in his diaries) often slips into an observation of the material surface of the window (“the said to be boring things”). In ‘Hymn to Life’, for example, Schuyler tells us that “[a] window to the south is rough with raindrops / That, caught in the screen, spell out untranslatable glyphs” (*HL* 215). Looking at the surface of the window, thus provides a different perspective, “A story not told,” as Schuyler continues, “so much not understood, a sight, an insight, and you pass on” (*HL* 215).

In his seminal essay, ‘Myth Today’, Barthes explores the double nature of the window as something that can be looked at and through – but never at the same time. In the creation of myth, Barthes explains, the

⁵⁴⁹ Pallasmaa, *Eyes of the Skin*, 40.

foundational Saussurean distinctions between sign, signifier, and signified are condensed into the myth signifier, which then forks into meaning (on the plane of language) and form (on the plane of myth):

The meaning is always there to *present* the form; the form is always there to *outdistance* the meaning. And there never is any contradiction, conflict, or split between the meaning and the form: they are never at the same place. In the same way, if I am in a car and I look at the scenery through the window, I can at will focus on the scenery or on the window-pane. At one moment I grasp the presence of the glass and the distance of the landscape; at another, on the contrary, the transparency of the glass and the depth of the landscape; but the result of this alternation is constant: the glass is at once present and empty to me, and the landscape unreal and full.⁵⁵⁰

Implicit in Barthes's account is the fact that, in spite of our focus favouring one perspective, it is nonetheless necessary for both planes to exist: we can only really grasp the "distance" and the "outness" of the scenery *because* we can grasp the nearness, the in-ness, the materiality of the window's "wood and glass" (FE 33). However one engages with the window in Barthes's account, they must therefore engage peripheral vision, in order to push either the glass or the landscape *out of focus*. Every engagement with a window must, then, to use Pallasmaa's terms, be a haptic one: whether we look *at* or *out*, we must lapse into peripheral vision, must train ourselves to shift between meaning (the view outside) and form (the material form of the window). The same holds true for the parenthesis: first, a negation of its existence is only possible *because* we can see its contours (which I demonstrated by removing the parentheses from 'A Man in Blue'); and, second, the simultaneity of vision, that every interaction with a parenthetical remark must be haptic, since it requires the activation of peripheral vision. In conventional usage, we have trained ourselves to see *through* parentheses; we skim the parenthetical thought, and we treat the grammatical mark of bracket as though it were invisible. This engagement permits our attention to fall in with the main flow of the text. In Schuyler's disruptively material use of the parenthesis, however, this attention is upended: we are diverted from the main flow; the parenthesis shifts from content to form, and this cutting-into of the text engenders a re-focusing of attention, not only towards the mark of the bracket, but towards ourselves, our own bodies, in both the space and time of reading.

⁵⁵⁰ R. Barthes (trans. A. Lavers), *Mythologies*, (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1991), 122.

Pallasmaa considers the generative possibilities of “a tension or opposition between functionality and uselessness” in architecture.⁵⁵¹ He writes that:

Architecture cannot, however, become an instrument of mere functionality, bodily comfort and sensory pleasure without losing its existentially mediating task. A distinct sense of distance, function and comfort. A piece of architecture should not become transparent in its utilitarian and rational motives; it has to maintain its impenetrable secret and mystery in order to ignite our imagination and emotions.⁵⁵²

Though Pallasmaa is describing architecture as a whole (as a practice, a discipline), this passage lends itself to a consideration of the window, since it urges that architecture should not become *transparent*. The existentially mediating task of architecture might, therefore, be said to be located in the surface of the window since, when we realign our peripheral vision to bring the glass into focus, we are invariably met by our own reflection: the glassy surface is literally capable of arousing an existential confrontation with the self. If, as William Watkin has suggested, Schuyler’s lazy gaze through the window amounts to “a kind of passive-aggressive mode of subject forming,”⁵⁵³ then perhaps it is in this capacity to see oneself in the surface, especially when the windows are dirty or broken, as they often are in Schuyler’s poems and diaries: “O morning light on dirty windows” (*CL* 87); “How well the grime on the windows shows up in this winter light” (*DJS* 43); “The effect not of rainfall, merely of wetness, except that a few copings now draw fresh white lines on the day: a day like a dirty window” (*DJS* 270). We can read these dirty windows as something like Heidegger’s notion of the “conspicuous” tool. According to Heidegger, the tool that ceases to function as it should shifts from a state of “ready-at-hand” (existing solely for its designated use) to “present-at-hand” (possessing Being in the world). When we encounter these conspicuous tools, Heidegger suggests, we also encounter authentic being.⁵⁵⁴ When we look into dirty windows this encounter with the self occurs

⁵⁵¹ Specifically he looks at the work of Tadao Ando, who is perhaps best known for his 1989, Church of the Light, distinctive for its cruciform window that cuts into the East wall, behind the altar, illuminating the minimalist concrete space. In its religious context, the window becomes synonymous with spiritual clarity and illumination: its conventional functions have not been deleted, merely relegated, so that the window’s symbolism has become paramount. And he has said of this space: “In all my works, light is an important controlling factor. I create enclosed spaces mainly by means of thick concrete walls. The primary reason is to create a place for the individual, a zone for oneself within society. When the external factors of a city’s environment require the wall to be without openings, the interior must be especially full and satisfying.” T. Ando in A. Kroll, ‘AD Classics: Church of the Light / Tadao Ando Architect & Associates’ on [archdaily.com](https://www.archdaily.com/101260/ad-classics-church-of-the-light-tadao-ando). Accessed 3 December 2019 at <https://www.archdaily.com/101260/ad-classics-church-of-the-light-tadao-ando>.

⁵⁵² Pallasmaa, *Eyes of the Skin*, 62.

⁵⁵³ W. Watkin, “Let’s Make a List”: James Schuyler’s Taxonomic Autobiography’ in *Journal of American Studies*, (36: 1: April 2002), 49.

⁵⁵⁴ M. Heidegger (trans. J. Stambaugh), *Being and Time*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 72-81.

doubly: we are forced into a confrontation with Being in the breakdown of utility, but we also *literally* see ourselves reflected in the glass surface. This, I suggest, is what Schuyler's parentheses do: they jolt us out of the main flow of the poem by virtue of their material self-awareness, into a confrontation not only with the writer's body but with *ourselves*. Housing the body of the speaker, 'useless' parentheses thus add a corporeal layer to the existential mediation of the poem, which is rooted in both the spatial and the temporal, as the remainder of this chapter demonstrates.

“(here on my desk)”: The space of the parentheses

If Schuyler's early work contained examples of *rematerialising* the parenthesis, his later poetry works to *dematerialise* the bracket, reverting to conventional usage but in ways that are informed by this initial tendency towards experimentation. In his mature work, the poet remains aware of the bracket's materiality, yet the force of the poetry lies in convincing the reader that these moments are merely incidental, offhand asides: this is what I have been calling *deceptive disengagement*. Having explored the texture and materiality of the diacritical mark of the bracket in Schuyler's poetry – not only in his experimental compositions, but in the alignment of parentheses with specific architectural features such as walls and windows – I want now to refocus peripheral vision and look, more conventionally, *through* the parentheses. In this way, I want to explore the effect that parentheses have on the textual plane, how they disrupt conventional lineation and alter the visual perspective of a poem.

The term 'parenthesis' derives from the Greek word *παρένθεσις*, which means “to place in beside.”⁵⁵⁵ Not only does this derivation emphasise the underlying spatial character of the parenthesis, it also signals a geometrical impossibility – how can something be at once in *and* beside? When parentheses enter poetry, this disruptive geometry works to alter our conception of the textual plane: the conventional hierarchy of the subordinated bracket to the main flow is flattened out, visually as well as sensibly, and the relationship between surface and depth – in and beside – becomes realigned in the overhauling of versification and lineation. This is what Olson champions when he advocates working “in OPEN, or what can also be called COMPOSITION BY FIELD as opposed to inherited line, stanza, over-all form, what is the “old” base of

⁵⁵⁵ Williams, 'Reading the Parenthesis', 60.

the non-projective.”⁵⁵⁶ The effect, as Olson explains, is threefold: this open composition alters: “the *kinetics* of the thing,” which amounts to a kind of “energy transferred” from poet to poem to reader; “the *principle* [...] FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT”⁵⁵⁷; and “the *process* of the thing, how the principle can be made so to shape the energies that the form is accomplished.”⁵⁵⁷

The collapse of form and content – like Barthes’s dual peripheral focus *on* and *through* the surface of the window – is crucial for reading the parentheses in Schuyler’s work (as it was for reading O’Hara’s ‘organic’ poetry in the first chapter). As I have been suggesting, these parenthetical moments are never simply offhand remarks – never simply *content* that happens to be enclosed within brackets – but comprise the poem’s *form*: they allow Schuyler to break from “the conventions which logic has forced on syntax” and which “must be broken open as quietly as must the too set feet of the old line.” Despite the bombast of his essay, Olson advocates a modest – or “quiet” – disruption of syntax, which is precisely what the later Schuyler does with his parentheses, replacing the “too set feet of the old line” with the humble, yet idiosyncratic, parenthetical aside. To demonstrate this, I turn, first, to another early poem, ‘Like Lorraine Ellison’, in which Schuyler again employs his experimental “failure to close parentheses”:

I
 send you all the love
 (“Who’s Zéphyrine?”
 in the world
 (“She was somebody
 or would
 (once, now
 if it were mine
 (she is
 to
 (a rose”
 give (*CL* 124)

Here, Schuyler has literally positioned the parentheses both in and beside: the parenthetical remarks are, at once, woven into the body of the poem, like the intertwining threads of Guest’s quilted poems, while simultaneously set to one side, justified to the left while the main flow is indented to the right. The effect is one of fragmentation and scattering, making visually manifest the drifting nature of digressional thinking. The “inherited line” is literally broken, kinetic energy engendered in the words that roam across the page,

⁵⁵⁶ Olson, *Postmodern American Poetry*, 864.

⁵⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

demanding, in turn, kinetic, even corporeal, interaction from the reader, whose eyes must travel back and forth: a vagary of reading. In the breaking of poetic form, the poem encourages a Heideggerian contemplation of Being in the confrontation of the conspicuous (faulty) tool: we are jolted out of the flow of the poem (which until this point has assumed the shape of a fairly conventional stanza) and forced to think about poetic composition as more than an aid to sense making. The nuts and bolts of syntax and grammar are exposed, the lines stretched and flattened so that white space begins to take hold and redefine the visual relationship between the composition and the page on which it sits.

This flattening, and subsequent encroachment of white space, produces not only a visual, but a sonic staccato rhythm: “(she is / to / (a rose” / give.” This moment reveals the particular character of parentheses in poetic construction. Working both with and against the metrical tide, the parenthesis in a poem is shaped by a cross-current between metre, lineation, and punctuation, suggesting new possibilities for free verse rhythm. Performing like a musical notation, the parenthesis is conditioned by this delicate combination, which presses on the texture and opacity of the bracket in ways that are inaccessible to prose. By disintegrating meaning, the parentheses in ‘Like Lorraine Ellison’ thus engender collapse across poetic planes (sonic as well as visual and spatial), to produce a rhythm that is corporeally aware: the interruption of the main flow and subsequent obstruction of sense, the staccato beat, the material mark, all produce a feeling of discomfort on the part of the reader, which locates the body within the act of reading. If we can say that the reader is invited to step into the spatial plane of the poem ‘Like Lorraine Ellison’, we might further observe that this is encouraged by the anaphora of one-sided brackets, which imply the action of an opening door: a kind of spatial hospitality.⁵⁵⁸ Schuyler’s “typical failure to close brackets” here allows for a generous spillage from parentheses into main flow, though the two sections remain at a physical remove, drifting further apart as the words become sparser. This disconnect reminds us that, while the parenthesis may play host to the reader, the opening of a bracket-door must, at the same time, imply a hostile gesture towards the rest of the text: with its curved form, the bracket is a cold shoulder, interrupting and then aggressively shielding its content from the main flow.

This raises an important aspect of the planar and perspectival quality of the bracket: though we read parentheses with a sense of this closed quality, it is never, in fact, the reader who is denied access to any of the

⁵⁵⁸ I borrow the term from Sara Lundquist’s description of Guest’s poetry, cited in fn. 428 of this thesis.

syntactic spaces in a text. From their privileged, aerial point of view, the reader looks down at the text and is privy to both the main flow *and* the digressional remark, while the rest of the text is excluded from the contents of the parenthesis. The reader maintains an overview of these separate syntactic spaces, understanding how they work together, both visually and sensibly, and it is in this way that the parenthesis is able to exist both in *and* beside: physically secreted within the text, rhetorically removed to one side, parentheses always grant readers the simultaneous experience of these two positions. The parenthesis thus depends on its secrecy from the rest of the text, but its availability to the reader as part of the wider context. In this respect, we might think of the parenthesis as analogous to the dramatic aside in a play: the audience observes the totality, they see and hear all that takes place, so that the aside functions within the broader context of the scene. Meanwhile, the other characters on stage (the main body of the text), have no knowledge of this aside – and it is their ignorance on which the force of the line rests. This imperviousness explains the grammarians’ insistence on the superfluity of brackets – the notion that, walled up in its own impenetrable space, the parenthetical remark can be removed and the text’s integrity remain intact. Yet, though the *characters* might continue to move through the play unchanged, were the dramatic aside removed, the experience for the *audience* would be dramatically altered. Just so for the parenthesis: the rest of the text may not collapse or lose any syntactic or sensible qualities, but the reader’s experience would be significantly diminished – and this is especially true in the textual space of “illustriously useless poesis,”⁵⁵⁹ to borrow the phrase from Lisa Robertson.

The aside in a play relies on staging. Because the drama takes place on the flattened plane of the stage (i.e. all of the action occurs, traditionally, in one, single-perspective space), the dramatic aside becomes necessary, not only to provide insight into a character’s interiority, but to create pockets of implied separation (corporeal, temporal, spoken, spatial), which puncture the linearity of dramatic form. Something similar, I suggest, is also at play in Schuyler’s use of the parenthesis. Not only do these asides grant us access to a deeper layer of interiority, they also challenge the flat plane of the poem and introduce spatial complexity to the textual surface. The relationship between Schuyler and theatrics has been noted by Geoff Ward, who suggests that “Schuyler is a subtle as well as an overtly comic writer, and his mimesis of New York life is a latter-day *comedia dell’ arte* [...] leaving the audience pleurably unsure as to what was rehearsed and what

⁵⁵⁹ Robertson, *Nilling*, 87.

plucked from the air.”⁵⁶⁰ This uncertainty – how much of these poems are really offhand? – is distilled in the space of the parenthesis, which purports to have been “plucked from the air” and lazily left in without revision. Furthermore, Ward suggests, “Schuyler both internalizes and dramatizes the self [...] within the poem’s theatre of irony.”⁵⁶¹ For Ward this simultaneity of self plays out as a kind of doubling. He writes that “a doubleness is asserted, but a doubleness which draws our attention to some crucial dislocation between two parts: between what’s said and what’s meant, between expectation and reality.”⁵⁶² Here, Ward gestures towards the deception that I have been flagging throughout this chapter. Riddled with its own sets of dualities (form vs content; material vs immaterial, useless vs integral, etc), the rhetorical figure of the parenthesis makes possible this doubling in Schuyler’s poetry. True to the theatrical wearing of masks and the putting on of personae, Schuyler uses parentheses to generate layers of voice through a single speaker, and to convince his reader that his offhand tone really is “plucked from the air.” The “dislocation” that Ward identifies is, thus, Schuyler’s deceptive disengagement, and the pretence that these parentheses are no more than offhand observation gives way, on closer inspection, to deeper layers of spatial and psychological interiority. As Schuyler writes in ‘June 30, 1974’: “Discontinuity / in all we see and are: / the same, yet change, / change, change” (*MP* 230).

Ward’s reading of Schuyler is constructed around the distinction, in visual art, between deep and layered space. “To an art of deep space,” Ward explains, “would belong all questions and certainties of religion, metaphysics, or the extremes of subjectivism.”⁵⁶³ Deep space art, with its “hierarchical ordering” might be aligned with “the tradition of Romantic landscape painting that describes the inner as much as the outer world.”⁵⁶⁴ By contrast, the “layered space art” dominant in the abstract aesthetics of the twentieth century would, Ward explains:

be typified by the innovations of Mondrian, Léger, or Picasso in his Cubist phase. Here the paint is variously organised into sequences of shapes and flats which, be they referential or non-representational, are freed from

⁵⁶⁰ Ward, *Statutes of Liberty*, 15.

⁵⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁵⁶² *Ibid.*, 17.

⁵⁶³ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁵⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

all metaphysical ambition and urge their claim on our attention by virtue of their *intensity*, rather than their place in some order.”⁵⁶⁵

For Ward, Schuyler’s observational and ostensibly immediate poetry aligns with this layered-space approach, “record[ing] all there is, without any spurious metaphysical depth.”⁵⁶⁶ In Schuyler’s work, this is borne out in the diaristic obsession with recording observation. According to Ward, this impulse is the legacy of the Modernist “cult of the Moment, as it appears in Virginia Woolf or Ernest Dowson,” which “is able to sidestep difficulties of dealing with a temporal, layered-space world by putting art or experience into that timeless, deep space parenthesis.”⁵⁶⁷ This is Ward’s only reference to the parenthetical: after this single invocation of the puncturing of “deep space parenthesis” the image is abandoned and never brought to bear on Schuyler’s work. This remarkable oversight calls for some revision. If Schuyler’s is a poetry of *layered* space (which I agree that it is), and if the parenthesis signals *deep* space, what are the spatial, planar, and perspectival implications of parentheses within Schuyler’s work?

To answer this question, I turn to the work of French, turn-of-the-century painter Édouard Vuillard, the figure with whom Guest aligns Schuyler in her lyrical essay ‘The Vuillard of Us’, and who appears a number of times in Schuyler’s poems and diaries; in one instance, he even makes an appearance in parentheses: “the pianoforte / played by Sviatislav Richter / and Marguerite Long (Vuillard).” Associated with the Intimist movement, Vuillard’s paintings treat intimate, domestic interiors as their primary subject matter. The resultant spaces are characterised by a flattening of the picture plane in deference to the surface of the canvas. “In a Vuillard painting,” Guest writes, “the rooms carefully recount the shapes of the furniture, of tables. A woman stands ironing, her printed dress recedes into the overall patterns of the wallpaper. An Intimist scene of much detail.”⁵⁶⁸ In his approach, Vuillard rejected the conventions of perspectival painting. Rather than sketch out the space of a room, and fill it with isolated people and objects, Vuillard’s interiors are the product of seemingly organic layers: layers of furniture, of wallpaper, of patterned dress, of walls, screens, windows – and of paint (figs. 83 & 84). Crucially, these depictions refuse a focal point: background and foreground become contiguous and Vuillard denies the visual planarity that conventionally

⁵⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁵⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁵⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁵⁶⁸ Guest, ‘On James Schuyler’, 1.



figs. 83 & 84 Édouard Vuillard, *The Window*, 1894 and *Interior, Mother and Sister of the Artist*, c. 1893

generates the illusion of depth. This is layered space art, yet it is not abstraction: rather, by confronting the surface of the visual plane, by disrupting conventions of perspectival painting, Vuillard powerfully captures a sense of an interior, an impression of domestic space, which a more accurately perspectival painting might depict but would not distill or translate with the same intensity (to recall Ward’s use of the term). In Schuyler’s poems, as I have suggested, a haptic engagement with space is also generated by “recounting the shapes of furniture” or architectural details: through the layering of scattered imagery (not fragmented, but often not cohesive either), Schuyler builds space into the poem’s form – and it is the parenthesis that functions as the structural frame around which these images cohere. Like a Vuillard painting, this flattening of form and content, through the dual rhetorical figure / grammatical mark of the parenthesis, thus works to create an “inviting surface,” as David Lehman has noted, through which “Schuyler entered his poetry.”⁵⁶⁹ As in the case of the window, which does more than simply enable a “lazy” glance outside, the non-hierarchical flattening of the poetic plane, through the use of the parenthetical aside, generates a sense of an intimate interior; it translates, as Guest urges, “the vagaries of inhabitancy,” and it opens gaps in which “to get one’s body into the body of one’s writing.”

The poem ‘A photograph’ captures this sense of intimate interiority through its depiction of a space within parentheses:

A photograph

shows you in a London

⁵⁶⁹ Lehman, *The Last Avant-Garde*, 246.

room: books, a painting,
your smile, a silky
tie, a suit. And more.
It looks so like you
and I see it every day
(here, on my desk)
which I don't you (*HL* 186).

A question immediately presents itself: where are we as we read this poem? The reader (who also becomes a viewer) finds themselves looking at a photograph of a room in London; at the same time, however, they are reading a poem, which is composed “(here, on my desk).” The acts of looking and reading become conflated and so, too, do the locations in which these activities occur: we are simultaneously occupying two spaces, through two different media, photograph and poem. The room in London is, therefore, a room within a photograph within a poem (which is itself presumably in whichever room the reader finds themselves while reading). Since the ‘here’ of the poem’s composition resides in the space of the brackets, these parentheses shift, almost imperceptibly, from the superfluous to the integral: posing as an offhand aside, the parenthesis in fact creates a syntactic space, which gives form to the (barely) described space. Placed in humble brackets, the line pretends to be an unimportant moment. Yet we should note that this parenthetical remark is one of the few sentences that is not enjambed across truncated lineation, retaining syntactical integrity over a full line. It thus becomes an obtrusive rift in the poem’s *form*, disrupting the main flow, cutting into the meaning, and drawing the reader’s attention, even if momentarily, towards the speaker’s space, the ‘here’ in which their body resides.

To this effect, the parentheses work to reverse Olson’s credo that form is never more than an extension of content; for here, content is no more than an extension of form. In this flipped formulation, Olson’s emphasis on the *fusion* of form and content remains intact (the poet does not simply pour content into the empty frame of the form), but in Schuyler’s deployment, the content within the brackets – “here, on my desk” – aids in the creation of the syntactic space produced by the parenthesis. Formally, then, Schuyler’s use of the parenthesis allows “here” to exist both in and beside: embedded at the heart of this poem’s composition, while at a remove from the ostensible focal point of the London room. Layered-space is therefore created, building and accumulating in the various images of different locations and the things

contained therein – “books, a painting, / your smile, a silky / tie, a suit. And more”⁵⁷⁰ – while deep space enters in the form of that parenthetical puncture, ‘here’. The term puncture recalls Barthes’ notion of the *punctum*, an “element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me,”⁵⁷¹ as he writes in *Camera Lucida*. Barthes’s notion of the *punctum* is particular to photography: something like an accidental visual detail, the part of the photograph that is not coded by the photographer, but which attaches to the viewer’s attention to the point of distraction from the primary or intended focal point of the image. Given its accidental nature, the *punctum* does not happily migrate into the poetic, where images do not appear by chance. The parenthetical ‘here’ is, of course, intentionally placed and coded in multiple ways, yet it nevertheless behaves in the way that Barthes’s notion of the punctum does, drawing our attention away from the intended focal point (the photograph). This notion of the parenthesis-as-punctum is further reinforced when we find that the Latin term *punctum* offers itself to Barthes not only because it implies a ‘wound’ or ‘prick’ or ‘mark’, but because it “also refers to the notion of punctuation.”⁵⁷² Thus, “deep space parenthesis” cuts into the poem’s layered-space form as the “prick” of the punctuational *punctum*.

If ‘here’ describes a particular space it must also denote a particular time: here, *now*. If parentheses are capable of creating pockets of alternative syntactic space, they are also capable of opening temporal rifts in the surface of the poem: they mark a delay, they expose the fragility of memory, they create double layers of presentness – and they offer utopian possibilities for the future. While Vuillard’s paintings of interiors are capable of flattening the picture plane to produce the visual intensity of domestic space, the painting must always be at a remove from the architectural by virtue of its all-at-onceness: the painting is not experienced across time but in an instant. Yet, because the poem invites a bodily interaction across the spatial, visual *and* temporal planes, it therefore corresponds to architectural space, and the work of the parenthesis is crucial in this formulation. In the final section of this chapter, I turn to the temporal qualities of the parenthesis, to complete the connection I have been sketching between the poetic and the architectural.

⁵⁷⁰ This moment, with its accumulation of things and its merging of spaces through both a photograph and a desk, bears a striking resemblance to a passage from Ashbery’s ‘Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror’, published three years later: “I feel the carousel starting slowly / And going faster and faster: desk, papers, books, / Photographs of friends, the window and the trees / Merging in one neutral band that surrounds / Me on all sides, everywhere I look. / And I cannot explain the action of levelling, / Why it should all boil down to one / Uniform substance, a magma of interiors” (*SP71*).

⁵⁷¹ R. Barthes (trans. R. Howard), *Camera Lucida*, (London: Vintage Books, 2000), 27.

⁵⁷² *Ibid.*

“I’ll / soon forget it”: Parenthetical time

In the poem ‘I sit down to type’, Schuyler employs the parenthesis as a means of cleaving poetic time:

[...] In
fact, I am a Presbyterian:
but before I was
confirmed I’d read
Of Human Bondage
(if that phone rings
one more time I am
going to castrate it
with nail scissors)
and became an atheist:
imagine it: losing your
faith because of a book
by one of the most over-
rated writers of all time (*MP* 240).

As he talks his reader through his volatile relationship with religion, the speaker is momentarily sidetracked by the ringing of the telephone. It is a moment of levity – an instance of Schuyler’s theatrical *comedia dell’ arte* – generating persona more palpably than the plain facts of Presbyterianism or Somerset Maugham, and it is perhaps a familiar moment, too, in the petty admission of low level irritation, which snaps to create a comical burst of empathy. The ringing phone has pulled his thoughts away from the poem that he composes, and, in registering his annoyance in this intimate way, the speaker thus allows the reader to share in the experience of this distraction: our attention, too, is momentarily pulled away from the poem. And yet, it isn’t, for this is still a line *in the poem*, even if it is contained in parentheses. What is happening, then, is something strange, not so much to the formal structure of the poem, but to the *time of reading*.

The poem is composed in the present tense, a feature emphasised by the title, which (as with ‘A photograph’) also doubles as the first line: “**I sit down to type** // and arise whatever for?” This is, therefore, a poem that documents its own process of composition (a bodily process, a choreography of sitting and standing), and that, in so doing, must remain forever stuck in *that* present moment, the moment in which it came into existence. This is what Paul K. Saint-Amour has identified as the literary present, which he describes as “the eternally present immediacy of the textual artefact” where the “presence of the voice had

been given a home outside the ephemerality of the body.”⁵⁷³ The literary present, then, is understood as a proxy shelter for the writer’s voice, a surrogate for the body. True to Barthes’s thesis of *writing aloud*, the parenthetical digression in ‘I sit down to type’ registers the corporeality of the literary present twice over, first because it houses the speaker’s voice “outside the ephemerality of the body,” and then because it registers the speaker’s irritation towards the telephone in explicitly bodily terms: “I am / going to castrate it / with nail scissors.”

The intrusion of nail scissors here acts as another *punctum* moment, especially given that, for Barthes, the *punctum* is so often figured through an attention to *fingernails*: “One of them holds a gun that rests on his thigh (I can see his nails)”; “many of the men photographed by Nadar have long fingernails”; “the grace of the *punctum*, is Tzara’s hand resting on the doorframe: a large hand whose nails are anything but clean”; “Warhol [...] offers his hands to read, quite openly; and the *punctum* is not the gesture but the slightly repellent substance of those spatulate nails.”⁵⁷⁴ When the nail scissors appear in Schuyler’s poem, in the digressional *punctuation* of the parenthesis, they do become a poetic *punctum*, a ‘pointed instrument’ capable of ‘wounding’,⁵⁷⁵ which draws the reader’s attention away from where it *should* be focused (the confession of faithful lapse), towards a corporeally (and embarrassingly) intimate moment: the trimming of unkempt nails. In four truncated lines, the speaker has inserted his corporeal presence, alerting us to his body in situ, his nails, and even his genitals, through that term of Freudian fear: *castrate*.

In dragging the reader’s attention away from the more prosaic flow of the text, the parenthetical digression here also produces what Williams calls “a temporary amnesia.” The parenthesis, he tells us:

obstructs reading by inducing temporary amnesia in its readers; the inconvenience divides meaningful passages in two, distancing text from context, distancing the immediate past from the present as though both writer and reader stood helpless as this diabolical force wiped their short term memories clean.⁵⁷⁶

When Schuyler returns from his castration fantasy, we have lost the thread of the poem’s primary flow: “and became an atheist.” The effect is one of a “cleaving in the mind,” to paraphrase the opening line of Emily

⁵⁷³ P. K. Saint-Amour, ‘The Literary Present’ in *ELH*, (85: 2: Summer 2018), 369; 371.

⁵⁷⁴ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 25; 35; 45.

⁵⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷⁶ Williams, ‘Reading Parenthesis’, 59.

Dickinson's 'The Lost Thought', in which, as she writes, "The thought behind I strove to join / Unto the thought before."⁵⁷⁷ The disorientation produced by Schuyler's parentheses demands that we go back to the line *before* the opening bracket, in order to pick up this 'lost thought' and *remember* how we arrived at atheism in the first place. But then, how far back do we need to go? This will depend, of course, on how much attention we were paying in the first place. If we were really listening then simply '*Of Human Bondage*' should jog our short-term memories, but if our minds had been inadvertently following some other track, we may need to follow the sentence all the way back to its beginning. In this way, the parentheses structurally parallel the speaker's personal journey to atheism: how far back, in his own life, does he need to go to reach the root of his atheism? Was it really *Of Human Bondage* that triggered this loss of faith, or might it have been tripped by some earlier incident? Of course, there remains another readerly strategy, which is that we don't go back at all because, often, we feel that reading a poem has something to do with rhythm and flow (and maybe, with the speaker, we don't really want to dwell on childhood and religious lapse, better to plough on in sinful determination). Thus, we keep going, at the expense of the poem's *narrative*, but in deference to its staccato *rhythm* ("the articulation of the body, of the tongue, not that of meaning, of language," to recall Barthes), which is heightened by the transformation of another form of grammar into rhythmic notation: the colon: "and became an atheist: / imagine it: losing your / faith because of a book."

The parentheses are able to house corporeality by virtue of what I want to call a *radical presentness*. Given that this poem necessarily exists in the literary present, and unfolds in the immediate present tense of the moment of composition, the temporality that is housed in the brackets becomes a sort of deep present amidst various other layers (to use Ward's terms) of the present. In this way, the parenthesis forces the reader into a confrontation with two forms of the present: their own, the moment in which they read, and the present of the writer, captured and held in perpetuity in the brackets. As I have noted, this radical present cleaves a temporal rift in the poem: it creates a delay, severing the main flow of the text in two, pressing one half of the text somewhere into the future, the other half out of our minds and into the past through "temporary amnesia." We might say, then, that parentheses house a "precarious present," a term I borrow from Lauren Berlant's essay 'After the Good Life, An Impasse: *Time Out*, *Human Resources*, and the Precarious Present'. Berlant explores the condition of "precarity," a state I noted at the start of this chapter, which

⁵⁷⁷ E. Dickinson (ed. R. W. Franklin), *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, (Cambridge, Mass.; London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 379.

denotes “a condition of dependency – as a legal term, *precarious* describes the situation wherein your tenancy on your land is in someone else’s hands.” Our present epoch, Berlant explains, is shaped by an overwhelming sense of precariousness, due in part to the emergence of what Giorgio Agamben calls the “planetary petty bourgeoisie,”⁵⁷⁸ by which he means a generation whose lives have become structurally precarious under widespread models of neoliberal economics. Rooted in dependency and tenancy, the notion of precarity pertains both to Schuyler’s lived existence and to his overabundant usage of the superfluous parenthetical remark, whose tenancy within the main flow of the text remains, if only in theory, ever precarious. Berlant describes this precarious present as “a sense of time that is being sensed and shaped – an impasse.”⁵⁷⁹ In an impasse, she tells us:

one keeps moving, but one moves paradoxically, in the *same space*. An impasse is a holding station that doesn’t hold securely but opens out into anxiety, that dog paddling around a space whose contours remain obscure. An impasse is decompositional – in the unbound temporality of the stretch of time, it marks a delay that demands activity. The activity can produce impacts and events, but one does not know where they are leading. That delay enables us to develop gestures of composure, of mannerly transaction, of being-with in the world as well as of rejection, refusal, detachment, psychosis, and all kinds of radical negation.⁵⁸⁰

The space of the impasse might be read as anxiety-inducing, stagnant, constitutive of psychosis and negation; but it might also trigger “impacts and events” without a clearly defined trajectory. This “delay,” Berlant explains, “enables us to develop gestures of composure, of mannerly transaction, of being-with in the world.” Like the broken window, which throws our Beingness back at us both through its conspicuous faltering and its reflective surface, the aesthetic gestures, uniquely engendered by the mentality of the impasse, are both social and corporeal: they are a kind of ‘rhythmanalysis’, a term Berlant borrows from Henri Lefebvre to denote space that comprehends “the rhythm of daily life” as an extension of “the body’s relationship to space.”⁵⁸¹

The parenthesis is just such an impasse: it opens a syntactic space that is non-progressive. We move within that space, but always as a kind of dog-paddling because, in the “unbound temporality” of the poem, the parenthesis “marks a delay.” If the poem is linear, the parenthesis is the cul-de-sac of the present; it doesn’t take us anywhere, but defers the present of the poem’s main flow into an unspecified future. Within

⁵⁷⁸ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 191.

⁵⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 199.

⁵⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸¹ H. Lefebvre (trans. D Nicholson-Smith), *The Production of Space*, (Oxford UK & Cambridge USA: Blackwell, 1991).

the soft contours of the rounded brackets, the parenthesis “doesn’t hold securely” but offers a version of the present that is perpetually “being sensed and shaped.” Yet, the precarious present of the parenthesis, like the impasse, is never simply stagnant; rather, “it marks a delay *that demands activity*.” By interrupting the poem, by disrupting expectations of temporal and spatial progression, the parenthesis alters the reader’s passive relationship to the text.

Schuyler’s long parentheses possess the meandering quality of the impasse, for “one does not know where they are leading.” In these extended asides, Schuyler manipulates a situation in which the reader attempts to skim, glancing ahead, as they would in prose, to the closing bracket. Yet, when these parenthetical remarks span up to thirty-seven lines, as in the poem ‘Dining Out with Doug and Frank’, the reader quickly finds themselves suspended in the time and space of the parenthesis, their linear course derailed, their relationship to the time of reading reconstituted, and their attention diverted, in ways that are both structural and rhythmic. In Schuyler’s poetry this amounts to a kind of rhythm analysis, where the quotidian “rhythm of daily life” is transformed, through the parenthesis, into a formal expression of “the body’s relationship to space” and this, in turn, reorients the reader’s relationship with the past.

A poem about memory and loss, the parentheses in ‘Dining Out with Doug and Frank’ do not simply describe, but structurally *perform* the ease with which we forget, by deliberately playing with the temporary amnesia that they induce:

Not quite yet. First,
around the corner for a visit
to the Bella Landauer Collection
of printed ephemera:
luscious lithos and why did
Fairy Soap vanish and
Crouch and Fitzgerald survive?
Fairy Soap was once a
household word! (*MP* 244)

The trope of deferral is established in the opening words: “Not quite yet.” From the outset, then, we are brought into the company of the precarious gesture, which “marks a delay that demands activity.” To stave off whatever it is that’s “not quite yet,” Schuyler engages in the activity of an O’Harian burlesque of roaming pop-cultural observation: a present-tense perusal of advertising ephemera replete with quippy exclamations. On the surface, Schuyler is deferring the main event – the dinner with Doug and Frank, or so

we assume – as part of a narrative strategy, which takes the reader on the speaker’s physical route: not quite yet, he seems to be saying, because first I have to traverse from “Broadway and West 74th” via the New York Historical Society (where the “Bella Landauer Collection” is housed), around the fringes of “Central Park,” and so on. But the poem suddenly shifts to ‘Part II’ and we find ourselves in the time *after* the dinner, before it has even been served: “Now its tomorrow, / as usual.” The passage from today to tomorrow is a *usual* one – usual in the sense of both normal and routine – but enjambement signals the strangeness of it being tomorrow *now*: a temporal impossibility, made possible by the poetic strategy of deferral, by the poem’s ability to occupy several different temporalities at once, pushing backwards and forwards between the present, the past, and some expectation of the future.

Dinner eventually arrives, and, having shifted from the ‘not yet’ of futurity, back to the ‘so I went’ of recollection, we realise that it was never the activity of dining out that was being deferred:

so I went with Frank (the poet,
he makes his dough as a librarian,
botanical librarian at Rutgers
and as a worker he’s a beaver:
up at 5:30, home after 7, but
over striped bass said he
had begun to see the unwisdom
of his ways and next week will
revert to the seven hour day
for which he’s paid. Good. Time
and energy to write. Poetry
takes it out of you, or you
have to have a surge to bring
to it. Words. So useful and
pleasant) to dine at McFeely’s
at West 23rd and Eleventh Avenue
by the West River, which is
the right name for the Hudson
when it bifurcates from
the East River to create
Manhattan “an isle of joy.”
Take my word for it, don’t
(shall I tell you about my
friend who effectively threw
himself under a train in
the Times Square station?
No. Too tender to touch. In
fact, at the moment I’ve blocked
out his name. No I haven’t:
Peter Kemeny, gifted and tormented
fat man) listen to anyone
else (*MP* 246).

Removing the parentheses, the line contracts to: ‘So I went with Frank to dine at McFeely’s at West 23rd and Eleventh Avenue by the West River, which is the right name for the Hudson when it bifurcates from the East River to create Manhattan “an isle of joy.” Take my word for it, don’t listen to anyone else’. According to the style guides, *this* is the important part, the rest is just “dead text [...] the intrusive adjunct which readers quickly skim over.” Only, we don’t skim over these sections because, in fact, they contain the real substance of the poem: our introduction to the titular Frank, the activity of ‘dining out’, and Schuyler’s lapse into something like an *ars poetica*: ‘Poetry / takes it out of you, or you / have to have a surge to bring / to it. Words. So useful and / pleasant’.⁵⁸² We don’t skim these parenthetical sections, yet Schuyler writes them in the knowledge that, conventionally, readers *do*. And it is in this knowledge that here, as elsewhere in the poem, Schuyler ‘buries’ his dead friends, engendering another corporeal engagement with this semantic space, literally transforming the parenthetical lines into what Williams calls ‘dead text’.⁵⁸³ The poem, as Howard Moss has noted, thus becomes a kind of ‘burial ground’:

In ‘Dining Out with Doug and Frank’, parentheses perform their usual grammatical function, but they also bear the burden of a unique task; they become enclosures, safety pockets of memory, each of which is a burial ground. There lies Bill Aalto, and there Peter Kemeny, and there Ally Nichols.⁵⁸⁴

It is the contemplation of death, then, that the speaker has been staving off since the poem’s opening, but which creeps into those moments of parenthetical dislocation. Moss introduces the notion of safety in relation to the brackets – a motif that we have already encountered in Schuyler’s adjunct in ‘Seeking’, “(to be on the safe side).” In some sense, Moss is right: these brackets do become safe spaces, within which Schuyler can face his fears: his fear of forgetting dead friends, of the death of his memory and, most of all, of his own death. Yet, these death-filled spaces store the “toxic waste” that Williams identifies, and it may be safer (if more banal) to remain with our superficial observations *on the other side*. Once we identify the rhythm of these parentheses, our attention gets diverted to the tender, digressional asides, where Olsonian grammar (excessive

⁵⁸² Note Schuyler’s interest in the usefulness or utility of words here, which also conditions, as I have been arguing, his experimental attitude to the parenthesis.

⁵⁸³ This follows a tradition of placing death in parentheses. In Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*, several of the main characters’ deaths are stowed in bracketed asides – ‘(Mr. Ramsay, stumbling along a passage one dark morning, stretched his arms out, but Mrs. Ramsay having died rather suddenly the night before, his arms, though stretched out, remained empty)’ – and, in Nabokov’s *Lolita*, the death of Humbert’s mother is famously registered as, simply, ‘(picnic, lightning)’. V. Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 105; V. Nabokov, *Lolita*, (London: Penguin Books, 2006), 8.

⁵⁸⁴ H. Moss, ‘James Schuyler: Whatever Is Moving’ in *The American Poetry Review*, (10: 3: May/June 1981), 15.

colons; staccato full stops) behaves like musical notations that encourage us to linger, while the main flow chatters on, minimally punctuated and eminently skimmable.

The poem thus registers our strange relationship with mortality by setting up these simultaneous mental channels of prattle and profundity: layered space punctuated by deep space. It locates our desire to defer contemplation of death, to distract from it, to block it out – “at the moment I’ve blocked out his name” – in spite of the inevitability of our attention being dragged back towards it – “No I haven’t: Peter Kemeny” – in explicitly haptic and corporeal overtones – “Too *tender* to *touch*”; “gifted and tormented / *fat man*.” The speaker’s temporary amnesia here is paralleled in the amnesia of the parenthesis, whose presence, again, forces us to forget the main flow: these interruptions slice into the reader’s attention, troubling their relationship not only to the present – the time of reading – but to memory itself. Like Schuyler’s own fear of forgetting his deceased friends, the poem, with its temporal rifts, reminds the reader of the ease with which one forgets: as Schuyler writes elsewhere, “I’ll / soon forget it: what / is there I have not forgot? / Or one day will forget” (*MP* 232).

In architectural terms we might then think of the parenthesis no longer as a wall or window but as a support – a *bracket*. Indeed, the textual bracket takes its name from the architectural bracket, for its comparable shape.⁵⁸⁵ In architecture a bracket can be *either* structural *or* decorative (grammatical or rhetorical). The *OED* defines it as:

a piece of stone, wood, or metal projecting from a wall, and having a flat upper surface which serves as a ledge to support a statue, the spring of an arch, a beam, shelf, etc.; usually carved or sculptured, and sometimes employed merely as a decoration.

Schuyler’s parenthetical flourishes become structures of memorial support in ‘Dining out with Doug and Frank’. They safeguard against forgetting by enshrining the living record of memory, to paraphrase a line from Shakespeare’s sonnet 55. Yet, as Shakespeare knows, the power of rhyme lies in “the eyes of all posterity.”⁵⁸⁶ In other words, if the precarious present of the parenthesis is a space for sheltering the past, it must also gesture towards the future: to return to Berlant’s description of the impasse, the parenthesis “marks

⁵⁸⁵ According to the *OED*, the architectural term is thought to have derived from “its resemblance to the ‘codpiece’ of a pair of breeches; Spanish *bragueta* meant both ‘codpiece’ and ‘bracket’.”

⁵⁸⁶ W. Shakespeare in (ed. J. Kerrigan), *The Sonnets and A Lover’s Complaint*, (London: Penguin Books, 1986), 104.

a delay that demands activity”: an activity that “can produce impacts and events,” in some undefined space of futurity.

In his exploration of the literary present, Saint-Amour asks: “Might the literary present [...] be decoded, in some instances, as a kind of future?”⁵⁸⁷ To answer this question, he turns to queer phenomenologist, José Esteban Muñoz, whose work sought to critique the notion of the queer death drive, popularised by Lee Edelman in *No Future*, in favour of a model of queer futurity and sociality. In his book *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz finds the possibility of “the future in the present”⁵⁸⁸ in Schuyler’s poem ‘A photograph’, which I discussed earlier in this chapter.

The poem, we recall, opens with the description of a photograph of a room, punctuated by the tiny parenthetical *punctum* of time and space: “(here, on my desk).” Yet, if this is a poem that exists on the temporal plane of the radical present it is also a poem that changes gear between past and future, itself a kind of extended parenthesis. After establishing the present tense, through the deep present of the parenthesis, Schuyler shifts back to the past:

Last
Friday night was grand.
We went out, we came
back, we went wild. You
slept, me too. The pup
woke you and you dressed
and walked him. When
you left, I was sleeping.
When I woke there was
just time to make the
train to a country dinner
and talk about ecstasy.
Which I think comes in
two sorts: that which you
know “Now I’m ecstatic”
like my strange scream
last Friday night. And
another kind, that you
only know in retrospect:
“Why, that joy I felt
and didn’t think about
when his feet were in
my lap, or when I looked
down and saw his slant
eyes shut, that too was
ecstasy. Nor is there
necessarily a downer
from it.” (*HL* 186).

⁵⁸⁷ Saint-Amour, ‘The Literary Present’, 378.

⁵⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 382.

Schuyler again plays with memory, recalling the minutiae of events from a week before. But then, as he wanders through recollections in the here of the present, he turns to ecstasy as a trope through which to conflate these temporal states: on the one hand, he explains, ecstasy is an intense experience in the present (“Now I’m ecstatic / like my strange scream / last Friday night”), and, on the other, is something “that you only know in retrospect,” a memory of ecstasy, pieced back together in the mind. In this temporal doubling, ecstasy becomes the thematic counterpart for the parenthesis, which exists in an immediate or precarious present, an impasse, while holding on to the strands of the past. For Muñoz, this bifurcation of ecstasy generates a sense of timelessness in the poem. He writes that:

To know ecstasy in the way in which the poem’s speaker does is to have a sense of timeliness’s motion, to understand a temporal unity that is important to what I attempt to describe as the time of queerness. Queerness’s time is a stepping out of the linearity of straight time. Straight time is a self-naturalizing temporality. Straight time’s ‘presentness’ needs to be phenomenologically questioned. Queerness’s ecstatic and horizontal temporality is a path and a movement to a greater openness in the world.⁵⁸⁹

To step out of the linearity of straight time and into timelessness’s motion is to enter the dog-paddling space of the impasse. Crucial, here, is the phenomenological questioning of “straight time’s ‘presentness’.” It is the present that Muñoz wants to deconstruct, since doing so will also alter our relation to the future: a future in which Schuyler looks forward to “the perfectibility / of man”: for as he tells the reader, “I really do believe / future generations can / live without the in- / tervals of anxious / fear we know between our / bouts and strolls of / ecstasy” (HL 186-7). Muñoz explains that “When ‘future generations’ are invoked, the poet is signalling a queerness to come, a way of being in the world that is glimpsed through reveries in a quotidian life that challenges the dominance of an affective world, a present, full of anxiousness and fear.”⁵⁹⁰ These “reveries in a quotidian life” are the parentheses of Schuyler’s poems, which delete the anxiety of the impasse and locate, instead, ecstatic – or “blissful” to recall Barthes’s term – corporeal moments in the radical present. Indeed, for Berlant, the anxiety of the impasse is positively translated into a sense of “being-with in the world” via models of queer phenomenology that are concerned with:

⁵⁸⁹ J. E. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The then and There of Queer Futurity*, (New York & London: New York University Press, 2009), 25.

⁵⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

following the tracks of longing and belonging to create new openings for how to live, and to offer the wild living or outside belonging that already takes place as opportunities for others to re-imagine the practice of making and building lives. In this work social attachments are always working in the now and are active and responsive without being expressive, necessarily, of ideologies, or truths, or anything.⁵⁹¹

This is the “literary futurate,” to return to Saint Amour, an “ekphrastic present could trigger but not harbor futurity.”⁵⁹² Through the ekphrastic (and ecstatic) present, the radical present opened up by the deep space parenthesis, the poem does not yearn for a future, does not attempt to contain or map or even imagine a future, but to *trigger the possibility of one*. Schuyler’s poems thus “create new openings for how to live,” they look to define spaces that are “outside belonging,” by “imagin[ing] the practice of making and building lives” *within the space of the poem*. This, we recall from Pallasmaa, is the task of both poetry and architecture: to “reconstruct the experience of an undifferentiated interior world, in which we are not mere spectators, but to which we inseparably belong.” Like Guest’s revisionary work on the domestic, Schuyler’s poetic spaces create “social attachments” that “are always working in the now and are active and responsive without being expressive, necessarily, of ideologies, or truths, or anything.”

Through Saint-Amour, Muñoz and Berlant, I have attempted to define Schuyler’s poetics in terms of a precarious present, an impasse, which might be generatively transformed into the social, spatial, and corporeal gesture of the literary futurate. In its precarity, the parenthesis possesses the unique capacity to defer the future while *at the same time* triggering it. It houses the corporeal gesture, it shelters the vulnerable vernacular, it preserves the past while constantly renewing social attachments and, in all of this, it transforms the poem into a utopian space. Following Muñoz’s reading, I turn, in my conclusion, to the possibility of utopia, tying the parentheses explicitly back to architecture to demonstrate the radical potential of Schuyler’s poetry, in political, social, and spatial ways.

Conclusion

In his essay “‘The Frayed Trope of Rome’: Poetic Architecture in Robert Duncan, Ronald Johnson, and Lisa Robertson’, Stephen Collis argues that “the architectural gives expression to poetry’s social and Utopian

⁵⁹¹ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 198.

⁵⁹² *Ibid.*, 383.

desires, and furthermore, that the architectural paradigm is crucial to the understanding of twentieth-century avant-garde poetics.”⁵⁹³ Collis explains that:

Th[e] process, of making the past present, of seeking the future through the selva oscura of the past, is fundamentally important because the typical “architectural” comment on modern and postmodern poetry concerns its “spatial” emphasis – its topographical interest in the page as a unit of composition and its creation through some kinetic “projective verse” type process. I do not deny that space is one of poetry’s important architectural extensions, but Jencks and Venturi remind us – in the very spatially absorbed paradigm of architecture proper – that time is also of the essence. The postmodern building makes the past present through its “new but old direction.” Poetic architecture, in turn, redistributes the past in order to bring itself into the future.⁵⁹⁴

Collis reminds us that the spatial and material kinship between architecture and poetry tells only half a story; for in fact, what renders the relationship between poetry and architecture singular, is that both share the particular tripartite combination of spatiality, materiality, and *temporality*. We move through a building *in time*, just as we follow the arc of a poem *temporally*. And, as Collis highlights here, if we can *experience* a building in time, we can also *design* it with a sense of its place in time – its relationship to past, present, and future.

Looking to Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi – the archetypal architects of the postmodern – Collis explains that postmodernism’s “old but new direction” is bound up with its drive towards excess and ornament (which I discussed in chapters two and three): “Architecture as decorated shed,” Collis writes, “parades its ornamentation and ornamentality, its shifting surfaces of reference and artifice. It is Utopian to the degree that its aesthetic decoration is surplus, extra, excess, inutile, a sign of abundance.”⁵⁹⁵

The twinned themes of excess and spatialised temporality also inform the work of Italian architect, historian and theoretician, Manfredo Tafuri. In his 1973 book *Architecture and Utopia: Design and Capitalist Development*, Tafuri traces the trajectory of utopia in architectural design, exploring the fate of architecture in capitalist development, particularly in relation to the growth of urban areas from the Enlightenment period onwards. He explains that, as urbanism grew, architecture’s “properly formal roles had been placed in parentheses by the city.”⁵⁹⁶ The implication is that architecture itself – by which he means the design and construction of individual buildings – became relegated as the city expanded. Questions of planning and

⁵⁹³ Collis, ‘The Frayed Trope of Rome’, 144.

⁵⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 145.

⁵⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 156.

⁵⁹⁶ M. Tafuri (trans. B. L. La Penta), *Architecture and Utopia: Design and Capitalist Development*, (Cambridge, Mass & London: The MIT Press, 1976), 11.

urban topography superseded the design of a particular edifice, and thus, architecture found itself *in parentheses*, an excessive footnote to the superstructures of the city. Indeed, something comparable might be said of poetry, whose “properly formal roles had been placed in parentheses” by the development of the novel which, at around the same time, had relegated the poetic form to a kind of literary flourish.⁵⁹⁷ Schuyler’s discussion in the diary entry with which I opened this chapter is a subtle allusion to poetry’s position in the literary field, “locked in paren”: “winning an extra few thousand for a long poem in a non long poem contest. *The Paris Review*? Isn’t that where something good always happens?”

With its newly parenthetical character, architecture “took the task of rendering its work ‘political,’” as Tafuri notes, and “in the acceptance of this task, the architect’s role as idealist became prominent. The real significance of the utopianism which modern historical study has recognised in Enlightenment architecture is thus laid bare.”⁵⁹⁸ Architecture’s utopian character resides, then, in its political idealism but, for Tafuri, this amounted “not so much to unrealizable dreams, as experimental models of a new method of architectural creation.”⁵⁹⁹ In other words, utopian architecture of the eighteenth century was not trying to invent itself in the style of an unimagined future (as modernism would attempt in the twentieth century), but, rather, to recode its political and social responsibilities. This, Tafuri explains, was achieved through “the destruction of the very concept of space,” and the subsequent creation of “a new system” out of a “universe of empty signs [...] which in Piranesi’s work is anguished anticipation.”⁶⁰⁰ Tafuri looks to visionary architect Giovanni Battista Piranesi, whose fictional project for the *Campo Marzio* in Rome shook the foundations of architecture through its experimental and unrealisable reordering of space (fig. 85). “Piranesi’s excess – as otherwise the excesses of the libertine literature of the era of the *philosophes* – becomes, just through its excessiveness, the revelation of a truth.”⁶⁰¹ Piranesi’s seismic contribution to the utopian architectures of the eighteenth century thus lay in the form of spatial destruction through *anticipation* and *excess*: twin themes that would come to characterise the postmodern architecture of the late 1960s and 1970s – and the parenthetical poetry of James Schuyler. For, as Muñoz shows, the future that Schuyler offers is not one that is predicated on

⁵⁹⁷ For more on this, see: I. Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

⁵⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁵⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁶⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 18-19.

⁶⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 16.



fig. 85 Piranesi's visionary plans for the Campo Marzio in Rome

“unrealisable dreams” but, by positioning itself in the timelessness of a future to come, is instead one that suggests new temporal possibilities through the excessive trope of the deep-space, digressional parenthesis: a formulation that, once again, disrupts assumptions of postmodernism-as-surface.

According to Maggie Nelson, the “tendency towards excess” is “a crucial part of the New York School legacy”⁶⁰² – and it is through excess that Schuyler’s poetry “repeatedly awakens to this ‘moment of being’ via an intense attention to the physical body and its surroundings.”⁶⁰³ As she notes, “The drive towards excess in the poetry is real and uncontrollable, as epitomized in Schuyler’s memory of pissing all over himself at the end of ‘The Morning of the Poem’.”⁶⁰⁴ The anticipatory excess of postmodernism is what permits the body to enter the work of art and to promote the kind of sociality that Muñoz, Saint-Amour, and Berlant find in queer phenomenology. This bodily presence is also, according to Nelson, predicated on the temporal: “Throughout ‘The Morning of the Poem’,” she writes, “Schuyler moves in and out of the past and future,

⁶⁰² Nelson, *True Abstractions*, 78-9.

⁶⁰³ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁶⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 79.

but, like O'Hara, he always punctuates his journey by calling our attention back to his body in the present."⁶⁰⁵

At the end of 'June 30, 1974', which appears in *The Morning of the Poem*, Schuyler locates his body in the time and space of the present:

Enough to
sit here drinking coffee,
writing, watching the clear
day ripen (such
a rainy June we had)
while Jane and Joe
sleep in their room
and John in his. I
think I'll make more toast (*MP* 230).

The present is established through the series of gerund verbs, all of which pertain to bodily activity: drinking, writing, watching. The inclusion of writing in this list, reminds us that Schuyler's gaze through the window is never simply passive but, in its translation into the poem, is always *deceptively disengaged*, uniting the corporeal with the cognitive to situate the body in the space of the poem. This moment of intense physical presentness is punctuated by a parenthesis, the past erupting on to the plane of the present: "such / a rainy June we *had*." In this parenthetical recollection, Schuyler deploys his usual tactic of deferring the present, pushing it momentarily into the future. When we catch up with the present, on the other side of the bracket, we discover a correlation between past and present: we *had* a rainy June but we are, of course, still in June (the poem's diary-style title is 'June 30, 1974'), while the 'June' of the parenthetical past finds its analogue in the 'Jane' of the present. Schuyler summons Jane, Joe and John, into the present moment, evoking their sleeping bodies in their own parenthetical spaces: the various rooms of Jane and Joe's house. Ending on a utopian note, the poem casts into the immediate future, through an image of corporeal excess: "I think I'll make more toast." We, the readers, are left to linger in the present, as Schuyler announces his decision to step into an imagined future – and it is, crucially, *imagined*, rather than decisive: "I *think*." By connecting thinking with consumption, this moment again tethers the cognitive to the corporeal in what might pass as little more than a parenthetical aside.

⁶⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 81.

Ultimately, as I suggested in the introduction to this chapter, Schuyler's poems are themselves extended parentheses – and this is why the bracketed asides perform with such temporal and spatial force; a formal figure, rather than simply a rambling rhetorical friend. If the power of the parenthesis is contained in these formal and material characteristics, then it must surely follow that its utopian potential should be located not in what is said, but in the unsayable, for which the bracket signs. Indeed, as Nathaniel Coleman suggests in his book *Utopias and Architecture*, it is “the very unthinkability of utopia” that denotes “an unspoken, often seemingly unspeakable, hope that the world could again be full. Such hopefulness [...] elucidates potential, maybe even confirming that human beings and their relationship to nature and society is not bound by any necessity.”⁶⁰⁶ If the unsayable nature of utopia breaks from *necessity*, then utopia's excess must deconstruct and recode social relations by virtue of *what is not said*. In subverting Olson's credo, this idea underpins the argument that I have been making throughout this chapter: that, in Schuyler's poetry, the disruptive force of the parenthesis lies in the unexpected, and often deceptive, privileging of form over content. Towards the end of ‘The Morning of the Poem’, while making “oatmeal, orange juice and coffee,” Schuyler thinks about:

[...] how this poem is mostly about what I've
lost: the one who mattered most, my best friend, Paul
(Who mattered least), the Island, the California wildflower paper,
the this, the that, Whippoorwill, buried friends,
And the things I only write between the lines. What can one write
between the lines? Not one damn thing (*MP* 296).

This is an admission of parenthetical thinking: the poem itself is an extended parenthesis, a fragile place to bury dead friends, to temporarily house the body, to capture the drifting of writing aloud and the rhythmic ecstasy of physical presence. What is it that Schuyler can only write between the lines? Not one damn thing, he tells us, but this is only another instance of the poet's deceptive disengagement. For as Schuyler knows, the spatial adjunct of the parenthesis writes the utopian future between every line of verse. Between past and present, between writer and reader (at last between two persons!), Schuyler's parenthetical poetry captures the postmodern promise of the utopian futurate: “A story / Not told: so much not understood, a sight, an insight, and you pass on / Another day for each day is subjective and there is a totality of days / As there are as many to live it” (*HL* 215).

⁶⁰⁶ N. Coleman, *Utopias and Architecture*, (Oxford: Taylor & Francis Group, 2005), 256.

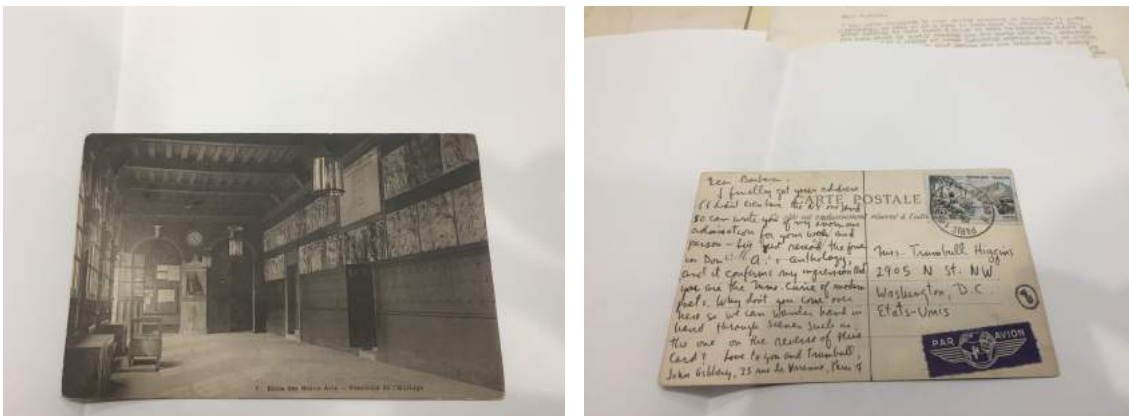
Conclusion

At the start of this thesis I charted my experience of searching for a set of lost, or perhaps only ever imaginary, stairs. As I detailed in the prologue, the journey towards finding this unlocatable structure rewired my thinking about the relationship between poetry and architecture: for, of course, I *did* find Barbara Guest's blue stairs, just not where I was looking for them. From invisible stairs to windows built out of parentheses, this thesis has explored the radical possibility of engaging with spaces that might be *liveable* if not *physical* in the strict (architectural) sense. In other words, by *imagining* a set of stairs, the poem, with its architectonic structures, signs, and surfaces, transcends representation and becomes a *conceptual* space; a space that might *make stairs happen*.

When I began research for this thesis, I wanted to ground my work in the material praxis of both poetry and architecture: this would not be a project that considered *representations* of the architectural in poetic works, nor would it seek to expose the ways in which the poem-on-the-page *borrowes* from the shapes and structures of architecture. Instead, I wanted to place these disciplines into some form of *material dialogue*. Seeking to produce a rigorously interdisciplinary piece of research, I spent the initial months of this project assembling material histories of language, in order to help articulate a version of the poem itself as a liveable space.

Spending time with literary theory revealed the necessity of engaging with architectural theory, so that I might find ways to blend the two and apply this novel composite to my readings of both poems and buildings. I looked to the writings of such figures as Charles Jencks and Adrian Forty for guidance, drawing on the historical relationship between words and buildings, while thinking through the semantic crossovers between architecture and language. In particular, I played with Jencks's lexicon, borrowed from literature and applied to architecture. How, I wondered, could I borrow *back* words like metaphor and syntax, grafting them in this architectural capacity onto my readings of the poems? Central as these questions would become in this thesis, in those early stages they were turning into a game of tail chasing, and this over-dependence on theory was drawing me away from the poems and the buildings themselves. Following the advice of O'Hara's 'Personism', I began to eschew this abstraction, turning my focus instead on to the actuality, the *physicality*, of these poems and buildings, as well as to the people who produced them. I moved from libraries into archives,

mapping the lives of these New York School poets on to the places in which they lived and worked, the architecture that they wrote about or photographed, and the architecturally printed postcards that they sent to one another (figs. 86 & 87). I visited sites around the world, from Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum to the Simonetti Stairs in Rome, the UN Building to the Chelsea Hotel, MoMA to St Bridgid's church, and on and on. In short, I looked from poem to building, from site to space, and back to the page again, all the while seeking ways *in* to these poems.



figs. 86 & 87 Postcard from John Ashbery to Barbara Guest

The resultant piece of research captures these various movements and engagements. Over the four years spent writing this thesis I travelled between the UK, the USA, and Mainland Europe; undertook embodied experiences in archives; encountered the New York School through tactile engagements with material documents; captured locations on 35mm film; and developed ethnographic approaches to these architectural sites – an approach that, as architectural theorist Albena Yaneva explains:

engage[s] in a continuously unfolding process of cumulative interactions; instead of discovering part of it ‘at once’, I gradually witness the building growing in front of me and with me. Experiencing the building is complex [...] I account for the play of light on a building with the constant change of shadows, intensities and colours shifting reflections. A building is never immobile or still in perception. It can be perceived only in a cumulative series of interactions. There is a continuous building up of the architectural object.⁶⁰⁷

⁶⁰⁷ A. Yaneva, *Five Ways to Make Architecture Political: An Introduction to the Politics of Design Practice*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 37.

In the *process* of compiling this project, I began to enact precisely that which I had set out to prove: in short, I was constructing a relationship between architecture and writing in myriad ways, the project itself becoming something of a practice-driven vehicle for articulating the conceptual possibilities I sought to explore.

Albena's approach reminds us of the extent to which architecture is a fundamentally mediating practice: through processes of material construction, architecture produces spaces *in* and *through* which people and things might connect, forge communities, and build societies. Yet these architectural spaces remain as much conceptual as they are physical; for though they take shape by virtue of the material structures that mark them out, the spaces themselves must always be, essentially, *immaterial*, *void*, and, in some sense, *imagined*. It is here that poetry and architecture meet, for this, as we know from the work of Lisa Robertson, is also the special property of the poem, "act[ing] as shelter to a gestured vernacular." If the poem is a unique form of written speech, "transform[ing] that vernacular to a prosodic gift," then it mirrors architecture in its capacity to house speaking bodies (rather than simply *language*); this is what Maggie Nelson gestures towards when she notes that the New York School poets "like to play with the gaps that invariably occur when one attempts to get one's body into the body of one's writing."

An embodied, corporeal, or ethnographic approach has thus been at the heart of this project, from my own processes of research and composition, to my close readings of the poems and the buildings, and the critical methodologies that have helped shape these readings. In my first chapter, on the work of Frank O'Hara, I reformulated the possibility of an "organic" poetry by aligning O'Hara's work with 1960s organic architecture. I read O'Hara's poetry as that which activates the body in processes of both reading and writing, through a shift away from modernist monumentality, and a recoding of fertility through a queer, utopian model of writer-reader association: "at last between two persons." This first chapter set the contextual stage by exposing the problems of adhering to the terms modernism and postmodernism when reading the work of the New York School. By realigning the poetry and architecture of the period, and by looking at works of art that refuse to be comfortably categorised, my aim was not to deconstruct notions of modernism and postmodernism altogether, but to expose the potential pitfalls inherent in a reliance on these terms and the associations that have crystallised around them.

Turning to the work of John Ashbery, chapter two of this thesis continued to trouble this modern-postmodern binary by reading Ashbery's poems not as surfaces, but as structures. In this chapter, I cast

Ashbery as the visionary architect, his work predicated on the possibility of creating structures that entomb conventional sense and lyric voice. Tracing the architectural evolution from the late modernism of the 1960s to the early postmodernism of the 1970s, from Archigram, through Aldo Rossi, up to Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi, this chapter sought, again, to reframe the assumptions that have settled over this architectural lineage. In challenging these assumptions, this chapter shed new light on Ashbery's work, revealing the inadequacy of aligning his poetic with a postmodern notion of surface and uncovering, instead, what I termed an 'excess of structure'.

Ideas of structure fed into my work on Barbara Guest. Having laid the foundation for troubling modernist and postmodernist assumptions, chapter three sought to align Guest's self-professedly modernist poetry with architecture's postmodern devotion to cladding, surface, and ornamentation. Building on the work of chapter two, however, this section continued to pull at the threads of postmodern thinking by exploring the possibility of a surface *without depth*. Conceiving of cladding as skin, through a corporeal feminist lens, I read Guest's verbal cladding as something capable of dismantling the surface-depth dichotomy, "much as the Möbius strip creates both an inside and an outside," to recall Elizabeth Grosz. In order to enact this dismantling, I stressed the significance of Guest's 'Invisible Architecture' as analogous to the scaffold, a structure thrown up in the service of both construction and deconstruction. This dual promise of the scaffold, supporting and interrupting like Guest's invisible architecture, helped, ultimately, to articulate the poet's vexed relationship to femininity and domestic space.

My final chapter on the poetry of James Schuyler reprised the themes of queer utopianism that I sketched in chapter one. Here, I considered the textual bracket as both a material feature (a door, a window, a wall, a supporting bracket) and as something capable of creating syntactic spaces or "gaps" in which to figure the body. In doing so, I drew on the work of Juhani Pallasmaa, to suggest that Schuyler's attention to the bracket produces something like a haptic engagement between writer, reader and poem. Thinking about the relationship between these poetic spaces and the life of the poet, I turned my attention to the precarious character of the parenthesis. Through the work of Lauren Berlant, Paul K. Saint Amour, and José Esteban Muñoz, I suggested that these precarious parenthetical spaces engendered a queer utopian model of the impasse, both temporally and spatially, allowing Schuyler to figure his own corporeality in the "literary futurate" and transform the text into a site of sensuous engagement.

There is much that this thesis overlooks. Most glaring, perhaps, is its silence on the question of racial difference to the formation and use of architectural and poetic space; a question that would undoubtedly enrich the political and contextual scope of this research. Other iterations of this project might: engage with the notion of eco-poetics and its relation to contemporary architectural design; explore the implications of digital and virtual architectures on the production of contemporary poetry; or look more closely at the relationship between poetry, space, and feminist theory. These, and other omissions, are the side-effect of so ambitious a cross-disciplinary scope – yet, as I noted in the introduction, this project understands itself as a door opening, creating spaces with which future research might engage. This thesis, then, does not explicitly attempt to read *contemporary* poetry, architecture, or political and critical issues; rather, it lays a foundation upon which to do so. For, in turning to the New York School, I have explored a body of work unique in its ability to combine architectural – and *architextual* – approaches at a decisive hinge-point in twentieth century history. These poets have been, and continue to be, influential to generations of aspiring writers, to “poets in search of a voice of their own” as well as “for the reader who turns to poetry as a last resort in trying to juggle the contradictory components of modern life.” This is the legacy of the New York School: an ability to transform the imaginary into the conceptual, where woven walls, windows, eggs, and scaffolding are all building up into “something like a liveable space.”

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