

**COMPLEX DESCRIPTIVE SYSTEMS:  
AN OBJECT-ORIENTED POETICS FOR RHETORIC AND WRITING**

by

**Kerry Banazek**

Bachelor of Arts, St. Lawrence University, 2006

Master of Fine Arts, University of Montana, 2011

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Kenneth P. Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

University of Pittsburgh

2017

UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH  
KENNETH P. DIETRICH SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

This dissertation was presented

by

Kerry Banazek

It was defended on

June 9, 2017

and approved by

James J. Brown Jr., PhD, Associate Professor of English, Rutgers University-Camden

Stephen Carr, PhD, Associate Professor of English

Cory Holding, PhD, Assistant Professor of English

Dissertation Advisor: Annette Vee, PhD, Assistant Professor of English

Copyright © by Kerry Banazek

2017

**COMPLEX DESCRIPTIVE SYSTEMS:  
AN OBJECT-ORIENTED POETICS FOR RHETORIC AND WRITING**

Kerry Banazek, PhD

University of Pittsburgh, 2017

This dissertation theorizes description as an ethical art inflected by the technologies that share and shape our lives. In recent decades, camera drones, advanced medical imaging, and smartphones have all quietly changed the cultural function of description by changing what we can see and re-see. Similarly, the data abundance characteristic of digital culture foregrounds human reliance on pieces of description that help us sort and access data: lists, maps, keywords, captions, and titles. Because of these shifts, I argue, a theory of contemporary descriptive practice has the potential to bring the fields of writing studies, technology studies, and visual cultural studies together in new and necessary ways around questions of access to information, which I understand as pressing questions of social justice. I argue that examining what “counts” as descriptive in diverse settings provides a way of understanding how shared terms and practices generate and delineate communities; and I suggest that “good” descriptions make specialist domains more inclusive and teach us about writing for accessibility across contexts.

Chapters on Objectivist poetics, ekphrastic writing, the stock image industry, and activist artists’ use of aerial photographs trace out ways in which descriptions’ differently styled failures to match the world perfectly produce different kinds of social bonds. In each chapter, examples set by practitioners (including writers, photographers, and interface designers) ground philosophical meditations on the interplays that characterize relations between text-and-image, human-and-nonhuman, and observation-and-being. This dissertation also argues that description’s status as the rhetorical mode (and poetic figure) most likely to behave *as if* it were a

non-linguistic object makes the study of description an ideal interface between writing studies and new materialist thing theories (e.g. Barad, Braidotti, Brown, Bryant, Garcia, Harman, Hodder), which have gained traction across a wide array of academic disciplines during the last two decades.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES .....	XII
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	XIII
1.0 INTRODUCTION: COMPLEX DESCRIPTIVE SYSTEMS AND THE POETICS OF NEW MATERIALISM .....	1
1.1 UBIQUITY AND OTHER PROBLEMS: THE THING THAT IS DESCRIPTION IN ENGLISH STUDIES.....	6
1.2 A BLAST OF COLD AIR ON A HOT DAY: DESCRIPTION'S PRACTICAL VALUE .....	12
1.3 THINGS THE LANGUAGE OF THINGS CAN DO: GIVING NAME TO SOME LATENT POTENTIALS .....	15
1.4 INTRODUCING DESCRIPTION TO COMPLEX SYSTEMS: INFLUENCES AND METHODOLOGIES.....	26
1.5 SOME QUESTIONS AND INVECTIVES FOR RHETORICAL STUDIES THAT INVOKE COMPLEXITY .....	34
1.6 CHAPTER OVERVIEW: HUMANITY'S MIDDLE GROUND AND SCALING DESCRIPTION UP.....	38
1.7 A NOTE ON <i>KAIROS</i> AND EXIGENCE: COMPLEX DESCRIPTIVE SYSTEMS AND DIGITAL CULTURE.....	46

NOTES CHAPTER ONE .....	49
2.0 LIVED INTERSECTIONS: GENEROSITY, PHILOSOPHY, AND OBJECTIVIST WRITING PRACTICE .....	51
2.1 OBJECT-ORIENTED ETHICS: SOME PROBLEMS AND PROPOSITIONS .....	61
2.2 THE POETRY OF THINGS: HUMANS AND LANGUAGE IN AN OBJECT-ORIENTED WORLD.....	65
2.3 HUMILITY, GENEROSITY, AND ECOLOGICAL ETHICS: COMPOSING <i>MATTERING</i> .....	68
2.4 CRAFT AS A GENERATIVE METAPHOR: HOW THE POEM-AS-OBJECT GETS MADE .....	73
2.5 A TECHNICAL IMAGINATION: REALITY AND THE POSSIBILITY OF MEANING .....	77
2.6 BUILDING A SURROGATE FOR ONTOLOGY: EXTENDING THIS OTHER SENSE OF CRAFT.....	81
2.7 TO EXIST IN ANY CONSIDERABLE WAY: WHERE THE POEMS COME IN .....	84
2.8 WHAT HORIZONS WE TURN CARE TOWARD: OBJECTIVIST SINCERITY AND THE ACT OF REVISION.....	91
2.9 BETWEEN WHAT THERE IS AND TURNING TO OTHERS: POLITICS AS ITS OWN POETICS.....	99
2.10 YES, WE KNOW, WE ARE ALSO HERE: MICRO-ETHICS AS INVITATION .....	102

NOTES CHAPTER TWO .....	107
<b>3.0 EKPHRASIS (OR TRANS-MEDIAL INVESTIGATION): ART METHODOLOGIES AND SMALL-SCALE DESCRIPTIVE ECOLOGIES.....</b>	<b>110</b>
<b>3.1 SEMIOTIC, SENSORY, AND METAPHYSICAL OPPOSITION: EKPHRASIS IN THEORY .....</b>	<b>119</b>
<b>3.2 TENDERNESS TOWARD EXPERIENCE: HOW OBJECTS BRING US FORTH 122</b>	
<b>3.3 PLEASURE IN IMPOSSIBLE TASKS: IMAGINING CAPACITIES NOT- OUR-OWN.....</b>	<b>127</b>
<b>3.4 LIFE AS AMBIENT INSTRUCTION: CONTEXTUALIZING THE CELEBRATION OF VIBRANCE.....</b>	<b>130</b>
<b>3.5 GIVING IN THE WITHDRAWAL: HOW FAULT-RIDDEN INTIMACIES PRESAGE CARE.....</b>	<b>132</b>
<b>3.6 ON EXCEEDING CAPACITY: MAKING THINGS MADE MORE INTENSELY WHATEVER THEY WERE.....</b>	<b>134</b>
<b>3.7 WHAT RESIDES NEAREST TO US: HARNESSING THE IMPULSIVENESS OF INTIMACY.....</b>	<b>137</b>
<b>3.8 RETURNING TO MELISSA KWASNY: LANGUAGE AS FACILITATOR, IMAGE AS CONNECTIVE TISSUE .....</b>	<b>140</b>
<b>3.9 PHOTOGRAPHY, BUTOH, AND THE ECOLOGICAL BODY: LESSONS FROM ANOTHER PARTICULAR CASE .....</b>	<b>144</b>
<b>3.10 WHEN THE DIRECTION IS DISSOLVING: ALCHEMY, INFLUENCE, AND MOVEMENT AS HEALING.....</b>	<b>148</b>



3.11	AS IS OFTEN TRUE OF THE NONFIGURATIVE: BEING NOT CLEAR WHEN THINGS ARE NOT CLEAR.....	152
3.12	RESILIENCE IN RELATION: HOW THE EXAMPLES SET BY DOTY AND KWASNY WORK TOGETHER .....	154
	NOTES CHAPTER THREE.....	159
4.0	INDUSTRIAL EKPHRASIS: STOCK IMAGES AND DESCRIPTIONS THAT DISAPPEAR.....	161
4.1	ORDINARY CAPACIOUSNESS: WHY STUDY STOCK PHOTOGRAPHY? .....	166
4.2	INVENTING THE SPECULATIVE MARKET FOR PHOTOGRAPHS: STOCK INDUSTRY ANTECEDENTS .....	173
4.3	THE SPECTACLE OF RHETORICAL POTENTIAL: WORDS THAT GENERATE VELOCITY FOR IMAGES.....	189
4.4	WHAT DISTINGUISHES MICROSTOCK? A QUICK INTRODUCTION TO SHUTTERSTOCK’S HISTORY .....	194
4.5	STILL SELLING TECHNICAL PROWESS: SUBMITTER INTERFACES AND CURATED COLLECTIONS .....	196
4.6	TURNING IMAGE OVERLOAD INTO “INSTANT” INSPIRATION: SELLING STYLES OF SEARCH.....	204
4.7	PROVIDING A PLURALITY OF SUBSCRIBER INTERFACES AND SEARCH OPTIONS .....	207
4.8	A CLOSER LOOK AT PEOPLE SEARCH: SELLING CONSISTENCY, CUSTOMIZATION, AND DIVERSITY.....	213

4.9	ABSENCE AND AMPLIFICATION: ONE LAST INDUSTRY ANECDOTE .....	221
4.10	TOWARD CAREFUL, METAPHORIC INSTRUMENTALIZATION: WHERE CULTURAL PROCESSES COHERE.....	225
	NOTES CHAPTER FOUR.....	229
5.0	RESPONSIBLE CARTOGRAPHIES: DESCRIPTION AS A TECHNOLOGY OF EMPLACEMENT .....	234
5.1	CONTEXTUALIZING DIGITAL GEOGRAPHIC MEDIA: LANDSCAPE IMAGING IN DAVID T. HANSON’S ANALOG ART .....	242
5.2	LANDSCAPE AS VISUAL MEDIA: INTRODUCING ANOTHER VERSION OF INDUSTRIAL EKPHRASIS .....	244
5.3	APPROACHING <i>WASTE LAND</i> THROUGH THE ROCKY MOUNTAIN ARSENAL TRIPTYCH.....	247
5.4	MULTIMEDIA AND DESCRIPTIVE CO-INCIDENCE: MAP, TEXT, PHOTOGRAPH, BODY.....	252
5.5	IMAGES OF THE IMAGINED WEST: LANDSCAPE “MASTERS” AND THE NEW TOPOGRAPHICS.....	258
5.6	<i>WASTE LAND</i> AND RECEPTION CONTEXTS: THE VIBRANCE OF TRAVELLING LANDSCAPE-OBJECTS .....	267
5.7	EMPLACEMENT AND RESPONSIBILITY: HUMANS IN THE MORE-THAN-HUMAN REALM.....	274
	NOTES CHAPTER FIVE .....	280
	EPILOGUE .....	284

**BIBLIOGRAPHY..... 291**

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. <i>One of the lightboxes promoted on the Shutterstock front page on 9/18/2016.</i> .....	203
Figure 2. <i>Comparative “creativity” based searches; Instant on left, Shutterstock main page on right.</i> .....	205
Figure 3. <i>Spectrum (launched March 2013) allows users to search using keywords and a color slider.</i> .....	208
Figure 4. <i>Palette (debuted 2014) offers a different take on color-based search; Sequence foregrounds Shutterstock’s stock video and stock music libraries and their interest in integrated search and editing tools.</i> .....	208
Figure 5. <i>Image-based search debuted as a core feature in 2016. On rollover, the camera icon in the main search bar offers a description of its capabilities; on click it opens a dialogue box that permits users to upload target images (screenshot 3/28/2017).</i> .....	212
Figure 6. <i>The People search bar (screenshot 3/28/2017).</i> .....	214
Figure 7. <i>The People listing on the Labs homepage and the contents of three main People search dropdowns (screenshots 3/28/2017).</i> .....	217

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

So many people and things made this dissertation possible. I owe Annette Vee a great many kinds of thanks. For sharing her brilliance and her time with me on so many occasions, for her patience with my false starts and my intensive reports on off-topic texts, for showing up at my house with curry after my lung surgery, for the care with which she approached my writing and thinking, for her steadfastly *reasonable* professional advice. My wildest thanks also to Cory Holding, whose eloquence and kindness have helped me keep this text (and myself) tethered to the world. And to Steve Carr, master of details and big pictures both, without whom I feel quite certain I never would have started this project at all, let alone finished it. I also owe a debt of gratitude to Jim Brown for his insights and support. And one to Don Bialostosky for reading Latour with me and making me feel at home in my first years at Pitt.

My thanks also to Kate Ryan, who introduced me to the field of composition and rhetoric in the best possible way, and to Jean Carr, who has helped me picture the field and its history capaciously. I also want to thank Dr. Rafic Farah, my primary oncologist, for leading the team that kept me alive to finish this dissertation and for treating me with a respectful generosity that never threatened my humanity. Erin Anderson deserves special mention here for her kindness in the face of how boring being sick made me—and for how much delight her stories have brought me in all kinds of times. My thinking about description and the world owes great debts to the

time I've spent with Steph Ceraso, Lauren Hall, Katie Bird, and Carrie Hall. All four of them are inspiring, inventive teachers and friends that make it easy to laugh.

My greatest personal thanks—the ones language does the least justice—go to Noel Tague and Kelsey Cameron. To Noel, who shares all my favorite landscapes, for keeping the lyric in my life and looking at my heart's astral cluster on a monitor and taking appropriate delight in the arcs of life that we've both been granted. To Kelsey, whose nimble sense of humor, wide-ranging intelligence, and ability to keep track of queer media keep surprising me, for agreeing to walk everywhere and talking through so many of this dissertation's ideas. And for helping me figure out how to put myself back together.

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION: COMPLEX DESCRIPTIVE SYSTEMS AND THE POETICS OF NEW MATERIALISM

*Some of the inconsistencies of language are symptoms of our coexistence with other objects.*

Timothy Morton, *Realist Magic: Objects, Ontology, Causality* (191)

*Objects are boundary projects. But boundaries shift from within; boundaries are very tricky. What boundaries provisionally contain remains generative, productive of meanings and bodies. Siting (sighting) boundaries is a risky practice.*

Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective” (595)

*So many descriptions have been offered of the world, either in whole or in part, that we are sometimes tempted to be sycophants and without ourselves describing we discuss other descriptions. Only thus could we be fooled into thinking of description as ‘mere’ ...The wealth of history gives us too good a head start.*

James Ward Smith, *Theme for Reason* (175)

Summer 2016 saw the release of a special issue of the journal *Representations* dedicated to exploring description in the disciplines. When this issue—co-edited by literary scholars Sharon Marcus, Heather Love, and Stephen Best—dropped, I had already been writing about description’s status as “a critical practice more complex (and less contradictory) than its detractors have taken it to be” for several years (1). I was excited to read the lively papers they had solicited and to see some evidence that my work might find an audience outside my core field of writing studies, one I hadn’t entirely anticipated. Why hadn’t I anticipated it?

The essay that opens Marcus, Love, and Best's special issue introduces the task of "Building a Better Description" by pointing out:

Academics don't necessarily know what description is, but they know they don't like it. "That talk was wonderfully descriptive; let's give him the job"—said no one ever. When scholars from multiple disciplines gather to evaluate grant proposals, they can usually agree on one thing: the wisdom of rejecting any project they consider "merely descriptive." And at least one university department's grading rubric formalizes its low judgment of work that "is correct but largely descriptive, lacking analysis" by assigning such papers a C. (ibid.)

This opening may be tongue-in-cheek, but it isn't misleading. While the University of Pittsburgh's composition program doesn't publicly denigrate that which is "correct but largely descriptive," I've sat in more than one curriculum meeting while a colleague, voice raised, tone exasperated, insisted that he or she "expected students to do more than just describe things." Once, after the topic of my dissertation had become public knowledge, a colleague even stopped in the middle of a version of this rant, turned to me, and said, "sorry, but it is true," before resuming.

How, then, did I wind up writing an entire dissertation about descriptive practices and descriptions as objects? What good can come from a study like mine? How is it distinct from the projects of other scholars who've taken a chance on description? And why might we want to applaud students, colleagues, and other acquaintances when they make the choice to describe something with care? These, of course, are the kinds of questions any introduction is asked to answer to. Perhaps the best way I know to begin answering them is to offer a story.



For what seemed like a long time, I did ecology field work. First in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado, then in the riparian zones of Western Washington. That chapter of my life went something like this: always bluegrass on the radio, even though my crew chief hated banjos. I lived in close proximity with others, and our lives were very literally object oriented. Our stories were snowberry, willow stakes, and poplars going cool-weather yellow. They were Western cedar, Sitka spruce, and Douglas fir. They were boot laces and brambles. And looking out for rattlesnakes on the dry side of the mountain. They were walking tenderly across mats of invasive canary grass, learning where to step and what subtle feeling meant you were about to fall through into the silt-rich water below. After a while, I became a crew's assistant supervisor, which meant I was sometimes responsible for teaching others to tell these kinds of stories, to do the kinds of work that they portend. This is how it happened, a few years later, that when I walked into a composition classroom as a teacher for the first time I had no idea how to teach writing or talk about it, but I felt pretty good teaching someone how to hold a machete or how to sharpen a chain saw tooth-by-tooth.

I was pretty sure I didn't know what made writing good or even passable. Like many new graduate students (especially those who don't come from families full of advanced degrees), I was more than pretty sure my admission into a relatively storied creative writing program must have been some kind of error—whether clerical or judgement-based, I wasn't sure. *What did I know?* I wondered often. It turned out, I mostly knew things that were no longer useful to me in a particularly direct way, which isn't to say that I didn't know anything useful. I knew how to kill knotweed with a syringe and how to report a hazardous materials situation. Thanks to an 80-hour wilderness first responder course (taught by a woman who also did training for military special ops teams), I knew how to traction splint a femur using only found objects. At least in theory.

More often than not, I could make a “broken” small engine work again, and I could describe the ways in which my sensory apparatuses contributed to this ability.

In part because awkward silences can be a powerful motivator, instead of “just” talking about writing in my first composition classes, I talked about these things. It was either a great gift or a lucky accident that when I began teaching the common syllabus I was handed to work from had the course title “Composition and Sustainability” printed across the top. I was also lucky to be teaching at the University of Montana. My students there—who were often-as-not both afraid of attempting to do college writing and afraid of talking about writing—frequently came from places that made them confident when talking about engines and stretching barbed wire. These students taught me a lot of new, concrete things about pouring concrete and ranching and hunting wolves and working in oil refineries and flying helicopters and fitting prosthetic limbs. They didn’t care about the material turn in the humanities, but they took easily to the idea that “concreteness makes room by inviting the world back into who we are” (Rickert, “Afterward” 231). Moreover, they described things I was already familiar with in different ways than I did, and the nature of those differences struck me as interesting and non-trivial; they made it impossible for me to forget: every act of description is an opinion about the world.

As I became more confident in my ability to talk about writing, I also started to consider the benefits of *choosing to continue* working with things and the language of things in the classroom. I became—and remain—deeply interested in how a conversation about an engine can be understood as useful to writers when the engine in question is seen as something more complicated than, or something entirely other than, a metaphor for the well-composed academic essay or the writing process. Following from that, I became interested in metaphor as a complicated form of travel, as a form of description that sometimes knows to travel via the same

modes by which empathy travels; I also became interested in the relationship between experiential learning—the literal holding of stuff in hands—and the history of materiality as an idea. In how we talk about materiality and what that talk betrays about how we understand and engage the world (and how we wish to engage the world, which isn't the same thing at all). In short, while this is not a pedagogical dissertation in any conventional way, it was materiality's habit of encroaching on my work as a classroom teacher that allowed me to become enthralled by the ways in which descriptions in their details are always both like and unlike the things they describe.

From there, I got interested in how the flavor of disjunctive descriptions (the styles of unlikeness different kinds of descriptions rely on) could occasion social engagement or social disengagement, empathetic creative activity or angry outbursts. These, then, are the true subjects of the dissertation at hand. In a landscape where thing theories are regularly besieged by critics insistent on their lack of social and political engagement, I argue that a full, rich understanding of the prose of things can be a powerfully effective political tool, one particularly useful to community building, community maintenance, and the opening of once closed-door communities to new members. Along the way, I examine description's status as the rhetorical mode (and poetic figure) most likely to behave as if it were a non-linguistic object, and I suggest this status makes the study of description an ideal interface between writing studies and the expansive complement of new materialist and thing theories that have gained traction across academic disciplines during the last two decades (e.g. the work of Karen Barad, Rosi Braidotti, Bill Brown, Levi Bryant, Tristan Garcia, Graham Harman, Ian Hodder, and many others). At times, I suggest that thing theories are well positioned to help writers of all kinds think newly about what description is capable of. At other times, I suggest that some of the lacks thing theories and

materialist philosophies have been accused of are quite real and quite troubling, and that alliance with a dynamic theory of descriptive practice might help future theorists solve some of their more tractable problems without abandoning the investment in working *with* the material vibrancies of our worlds that made these theories resonate in the first place.

## 1.1 UBIQUITY AND OTHER PROBLEMS: THE THING THAT IS DESCRIPTION IN ENGLISH STUDIES

When scholars in English and communication studies bother to talk about description, they tend to define it as a correlate of some other activity. Description is that which interrupts narrative. It is that which provides a negative contrast for the higher order intellectual activities of interpretation, explanation, and analysis. While it may embolden warrants in argument, it is rarely enough to *win* an argument. If it somehow wins an argument, it probably shouldn't have; or there was probably a more eloquent way to achieve the same result. Manuals structured around the four rhetorical modes—description, narration, exposition, and persuasion—regularly imply (via allocation of pages, among other things) description's status as the least of the four. In manuals that rely instead on a more Aristotelean schema, the branch of rhetoric most closely associated with description achieves a similar fate; *epideictic* rhetoric—the demonstrative rhetoric of the here and now—either serves the judicial and the deliberative or it flounders; it is useful, examples seem to suggest, only at funerary celebrations. In other words, Marcus, Love, and Best weren't wrong to assert the thriving of the phrase “mere description.” Their assertion is further buoyed by the fact that a recent Google books search returned 91,800 matches for the phrase. This phrase turns up in methodological conversations across disparate disciplines,

including literature, anthropology, and political economics, but also in texts from disciplines that don't tend to mind trends in philosophy and critical theory closely. Description's "mere-ness" has something to do with debates in geometry, physiological chemistry, and genetic patent law, it seems. Sometimes, we even see description's debased nature leaking into the locations where it is most often deployed; take the way M. G. Jackson declares the "concept of law as mere description is perhaps the major cause of our dysfunctional culture" (72). But where did the diminutive come from, and what sustains it?

We all have *some idea* what the word description means. Yet, when pressed, even those who don't think themselves part of movements that subordinate description to other rhetorical acts tend to find themselves at a loss when asked to offer a positive, satisfying definition of "description" itself. Is it a picture in words? A representation? An elaboration? If one of those dictionary definitions is sufficient, what name should we give the act of, well, describing those things that are sensible but not visible, the parts of experience that consist of scents, tactile sensations, and signals sent by proprioceptors? And what should we name the act of, well, describing that which evidence tells us exists but which is not strictly sensible? Perhaps it is best, then, to lay claim, as the subtitle of Mark Doty's little book *The Art of Description* suggests, to a pragmatic definition, which would allow any rhetorical activity that helps us with the task of getting *World into Word* to count as description. This would put us somewhat in line with the way John Bender and Michael Marrinan suggest "to represent rather than to replicate an object materially" as a "rigorous" definition of description (3). But where do such pragmatic definitions leave imaginative descriptions of virtual objects? After all, Aristotle's poetics does suggest that description's proper domain is that which hasn't yet come to pass; not the world as it is but the world we might choose to travel toward. Perhaps difficulty defining the mode is only right, given

Samuel Johnson's suggestion that descriptions are "definitions of a more lax or fanciful kind" (*Rambler*, no. 143; qtd. Wall 12).

Cynthia Sundberg Wall's introduction to the history of description styles the mode a "foundling." It begins with an epigraph from specialist in 19th century literary history Phillippe Hamon that encourages readers to call "ETC." the emblem of description—"ETC., *tel pourrait être l'emblème de la description.*" (7). It wouldn't be hard to pile on a sentence like that and suggest ETC. is also an emblem of lazy writers, providing further "evidence" of description's status as superfluous ornament and its debased nature. However, Wall's choice of this epigraph relies on her ability to refute its insistence; for her, description's dynamism far outstrips an alliance with the *et cetera* that merely stands in for things whose names were too much bother—and too inconsequential—to articulate or to write out in full. Of course, it turns out, there's another *et cetera*, too. This one represents the world's teeming abundance and language's ability to gesture at that abundance even when it is too much to name. It is a rallying cry rather than a diminutive. There's more out there! More to know, do, see, describe. And I like to think of this *et cetera* as the key to understanding both what invites critics to diminish description and what makes description's failures of representation thrilling or at least useful as points of engagement.

That which is common—everywhere about us—can't possibly be difficult enough to understand that making a study of it is worthwhile. Specious as it is, this is a common, often unspoken academic argument. And what mode of rhetoric, what unit of language, is more ubiquitous than description? Descriptive practices and artifacts crowd and structure our day-to-day lives. Try, for a moment, to imagine moving through a single day without recourse to the information provided by maps, lists, captions, street signs, indices, reviews, packaging materials, and their relatives. Imagine navigating the internet without recourse to search engines—both the

terms we type into search boxes and the metadata that helps those search engines return results we might actually want are easy to classify as descriptive. If you are an academic or a teacher, try to imagine life without case studies, genealogies, and measurements, without examples but also without generalizations. The impossibility of these exercises testifies to description's necessity *and* its ubiquity. And that coupling explains, in part, how the myth of description's "mereness" perpetuates itself.

Ubiquity makes description seem straightforward. In this way, description isn't so unlike other "mere" objects of study. Literacy scholars interested in everyday writing practices—the kinds of practices that generate texts ranging from diary entries to Facebook updates to literary tattoos—are frequently asked to answer for their choice of subjects; as are scholars of pop culture. Marcus, Best, and Love's observations led them to call description an "elusive object that travels by many names, and sometimes by no name at all," and there are at least two operative reasons this is true, both related to what I've taken to calling the ubiquity problem (2). Most simply, those who recognize this problem and have been called to defend their reliance on "mere description" in the past are likely to find giving defenses of description a distraction from their scholarly goals; this motivates some people to shift their methodologies, and it motivates others to look for ways to dress descriptive methodologies in new clothes. For instance, in a book promoting interpretative description as a methodological option for researchers in health fields, Sally Thorne observes,

Perhaps because of the quantitative tradition in which strong findings require experimental approaches, qualitative researchers in the health field have been reluctant to depict their work as "mere" description. Rather, they have often portrayed their work as

phenomenology, grounded theory, narrative, or ethnography in order to ascribe it to some “epistemological credibility.” (48)

One of Thorne’s major concerns is that this reluctance leads to posturing and threatens intellectual integrity. And while we *might* find that possibility less likely or concerning in English studies, where these methodologies have long-rooted histories, there is something about her argument that rings true across disciplinary boundaries. The myth that it is easy to describe something makes it difficult to defend the rigor of methodologies that rely heavily on descriptive acts.

Looking at descriptive approaches as the counterweight to experimental approaches, then, we might find English studies’ vocal disdain a disciplinary correlate to the lady or gentleman who protests too much. And yet, the “more rigorous” hard sciences are extraordinarily descriptive. Sure, they sometimes allow machines to do some of their describing. We can think of even a simple tool like a sundial or a mercury thermometer as a responsive, non-human describer. But descriptive machines were generally devised by humans (often to record things outside the ranges at which humans are capable observers), and oftentimes they require careful calibration by trained technicians.

It is true that certain epistemologies aim to minimize the human-in-loop nature of scientific systems of research that rely on work that is at once descriptive, quantitative, and experimental, but scholars of the history and philosophy of science and feminist science studies have compellingly exposed the lacks of such epistemologies. In fact, it is partly because the socially constructed nature of scientific knowledge has been so thoroughly acknowledged that one of the things scientific paradigms provide for description is a rock to complement lack of rigor’s hard place. When I noted that every description is an opinion about the world, I could



have said instead: objectivity is a construction and an impossibility. Claims to objectivity are functionally linked to the idea of description as a science in a way that allows social scientists and humanists to blame description itself for the “view from nowhere” phenomena. In other words, “the neutrality that many associate with description denies the embodiment, social position, and investments of the observer” (Marcus, Love, and Best 4). While doing “merely descriptive” work isn’t a good way to gain prestige or grant money, seeming disinterested and distancing oneself from methods that can be accused of bias or relegated to “special case” status is a decidedly useful rhetorical trick, and claiming descriptive methods can help with that. Hence, description becomes “a slick con artist, passing itself off as objective in order to score illegitimate gains” (ibid. 5). Never mind the fact that a great many of literature’s great white men achieve the view from nowhere effect or the god effect precisely by flaunting their own excesses of subjectivity.

Less cynically, because description is nimble and versatile, it is and does many things. Which makes the fact that it “travels by many names, and sometimes by no name at all” seem entirely reasonable. It isn’t just that some researchers shy away from the stigmata of “mereness.” The desire to offer specialized sub-modes of description allows researchers to name *how* descriptions can be differently rigorous in different situations. Moreover, given description’s affiliation, however partial, with the arts of categorization, there’s something poetic in the idea that those most dedicated to description would also be most dedicated to naming and tracing its pluralities and the ways in which its negative images operate.

## 1.2 A BLAST OF COLD AIR ON A HOT DAY: DESCRIPTION'S PRACTICAL VALUE

When description achieves an argumentative victory through *pathos* (textbooks do, sometimes, acknowledge the value of vivid description to emotional appeals) or its “negative” tendency to expand, to fill whatever time and space is available, achieves a bold victory via a kind of filibuster, critics are quick to intimate that the same ends might have been achieved more eloquently, more rationally. But that isn’t always the case. Where Samuel Johnson opined that description is interruption and interruption refrigerates the mind, Wall rejoins: some people “favor a refrigerator on a hot day” (24). There are, it turns out, rhetorical situations in which issuing a description signals deft selection of the best among many available rhetorical means.

Moreover, when conventional theoretical wisdom relegates description to secondary status behind other rhetorical modes, it omits the fact that cramming the world into language is not actually easy. “It sounds like a simple thing, to say what you see,” the celebrated writer Doty’s book on description begins (3). But he goes on to admit, even for him, any “attempt to render visual intricacy makes words feel unwieldy, like sacks of meaning that must be lugged into place, dragged here and there,” and after all that, these meaning sacks “still don’t feel quite accurate” (7). Add world’s non-visual components into the mix as I’ve been urging, and the task at hand becomes yet more unwieldy, more precarious. And this isn’t just a problem for the poet as language making specialist. If you have ever told a story or written a field report, you know that something always gets left out. In any given situation, what gets left out depends on a describer’s rhetorical skill, but it also depends on his or her values and expertises (what he or she is primed to notice). Practice teaches that description is integral to writing and living, despite being strictly impossible to get “right.” Practitioners have, consequently, built up a compelling

stock of expertise about the hows of description—both how to get from a blank page to a page that contains a description of something and about ways in which different kinds of descriptions do different jobs.

When I suggested above that as a new teacher I was uncomfortable talking about writing, it wasn't exactly that I wasn't qualified to teach writing. Beyond the specious qualification of having been admitted to poetry graduate school, I had been a professional writer for a couple years, a job that consisted mostly of the object-oriented task of describing things—including shoes, watches, toys, power tools, and consumer electronics—so that people buying them online would know more precisely what to expect when the Amazon box showed up on their doorstep. It wasn't lost on the eMarketing industry that clear, neutral-seeming descriptions could serve persuasive functions. And in the field of writing studies, the subfield(s) of technical and professional writing tend to have far more to say about description's value than the core of composition and rhetoric does. Both the “mechanism description” and the “process description” are standard assignments in technical writing classrooms, and a quick glance at any of the major online job boards suggests that producers of descriptive documentation are in high demand, especially in engineering fields and medical settings. The glossary of Irwin McGraw Hill's popular *Technical Communication* textbook suggests “Information about the principles of operation or the workings of a process” as a definition for the word description (718). This pragmatist's definition is, arguably, somewhat overly focused on the mechanistic doing—or potential doing—of objects, but because of that bias it serves as a neat partner for aestheticized definitions that are overly focused on descriptions' ability to represent abstractly or provoke phenomenological responses in humans. The trick is to avoid feeling like we need to choose

between the technical definition of description and the aesthetic one, and to choose instead to search for new ways to credit their co-dependence.

If our task is to give description space to expand and show its full potential, it is useful to consider books by creative writers for creative writers as a kind of cousin to the manuals of technical communications' curricula. These are sometimes publishing guides stripped of personality, but more often they're idiosyncratic, somewhat personal grapplings with description's relationship to the idea of creative writing as a "craft" (which this dissertation's second chapter takes up in more detail). Doty's book, which consists of six short essays on description, including a tour of description's alphabet, is one entry in this category. Related craft texts instruct obliquely as often as they instruct explicitly; they frequently blend aspects of the personal essay with bits of advice dressed up in well-honed gambits from writing workshops an author has taught, close readings of short passages the writer either adores or reviles, bits of popular science or popular art history or fairytales, descriptions of the writer's process (perhaps including side-by-side comparisons of drafts), anecdotes about the processes of famous authors, including the dead and the writer's close friends, and whatever else a particular writer has at his or her disposal.

Despite their differences, the poet, the fiction writer, and the technical writer all underwrite description's status as vocation. As a vocation, description outsizes any individual writer, style of writer, or generation of writers, but its individual experts clearly have lessons to impart that can—and I would argue should—change our relationship to everyday descriptions as well as descriptions that serve other vocations, including diverse academic pursuits. Consequently, the language of specific descriptive experts, a category in which I include not just poets and technical writers but also photographers, designers, coders, geographers, sociologists,

and many others, drives the individual chapters of this dissertation. But before I get too deep into the lives, theories, and artifacts valued by specific descriptive experts, it seems useful to offer a general list of description's capabilities as a kind of roadmap.

### 1.3 THINGS THE LANGUAGE OF THINGS CAN DO: GIVING NAME TO SOME LATENT POTENTIALS

This list is meant to serve as a counterbalance to the cases for description's mereness; it is necessarily suggestive, incomplete, and somewhat recursive. And it is necessarily colored by my experiences of description (both personal and academic; including the pursuits that led to this dissertation's body chapters and the false starts that didn't make it into those chapters). It begins with what I see as the most significant reason to credit description's independent value and proceeds through an assortment of points that speak to both description's individual powers and its power to act in conjunction with interpretation, explanation, analysis, and narrative as a meaningful, equal partner. As *Technical Communication* reminds, "descriptions written for differing purposes and audiences differ in length, content, detail, tone, vocabulary, and format" (416). These differences are nontrivial; no single description is likely to engage in all the following activities, which are enumerated loosely rather than axiomatically in order to provoke readers into using their own best examples to imagine additional ways in which description's agencies unfold, evolve, and surprise.

**Descriptions can mark community membership.** Among the things that theorists sometimes forget: description isn't a synonym for what's come to be called purple prose. It isn't always a

brute force proof or form of filibuster. Sometimes, descriptions are decidedly brief; in certain situations, a single word can prove an essential and thus decidedly good descriptor. In particular, brief descriptions thrive in places where contextual information is already shared. When someone asks me where I live in Pittsburgh, before answering I usually ask if my interlocutor knows the location of the school that's across the street from my apartment. If he or she answers yes, that saves me the trouble of trying to describe where I live via a long sequence or in very general terms. A version of the same impulse allows long-time community members to give each other directions in relation to things that *used to* exist. The ad hoc short-hand languages developed by people who share close social bonds are related phenomena; romantic couples, families, close friends, roommates, people who work together daily, and members of sports teams are all prone to inaugurating ways of describing specific phenomena that baffle outsiders. Compliments, insults, and comparatives that reference past events are especially susceptible to this treatment. And, perhaps intuitively, descriptions can mark membership in a discourse community just as easily as they mark membership in a community that comes together in physical ways on a regular basis. When you meet someone who does the same job as you or has the same kind of education or shares a hobby, part of what makes them recognizable to you is shared experience, but part of that shared experience is shared descriptive vocabulary.

**Descriptions can reveal sublimated expertise and inaugurate new expertise.** As one of the primary languages of instruction, description sometimes earns its reputation as prescriptive. Commonsense has it that we don't know what we don't know, and reading descriptive texts can help with this. We also don't always know what we know—until we're forced to try and describe it. When *Technical Communication* argues the point that “good” description is context

dependent, it does so by reprinting two descriptions of boiling liquid, one from a cookbook and one from a chemistry textbook. The latter is much longer and more detailed, but it doesn't explain what to look for when distinguishing between a simmer and a rolling boil, something a new cook might want to read.

Cookbooks offer a nice way to think about description's relationship to expertise in part because master chefs are rarely excellent cookbook writers. While celebrity chefs' names are often printed in big letters on book covers, ghostwriters (who go unnamed) and coauthors (who get their names in small print) are common to the genre, and reliance on recipe testers is near ubiquitous. We can think about why this makes sense in a few ways. Classically trained chefs may speak eloquently about exactly how they make specific dishes but use specialized French culinary school terms a home cook is unlikely to know, requiring a ghostwriter to provide "translations." But it is also true, in the same way that being able to describe something doesn't mean one will be able to do it, being physically able to do something doesn't always mean one has developed a lexicon to match. Moreover, when we do things frequently, we sometimes rely on bodily memories that someone doing that thing for the first time doesn't have access to, and this disparity can stymie our attempts to describe fully or usefully the event in question. An experienced chef might know what it sounds like when water reaches a rolling boil in her favorite pot; her hands might "just know" when a dough needs more flour or when it is on the verge of being overworked. She might unconsciously compare olfactory data and tactile data when trying to select a perfectly ripe piece of fruit at the market. An experienced co-author who asks good questions might coax compelling descriptions of these sound, scent, and tactile clues from a chef who wouldn't have thought to provide them otherwise; a description that teaches someone to recognize these things may also require more visual clues, not to mention tips on

how information from descriptive tools like thermometers, timers, and scales can be used in place of the expert's bodily intuition. And a co-writer might practice a chef's techniques and then add these alternate cues in him or herself. It turns out that experts working with novices (especially those who are experts in different things, like writing) sometimes produce much more widely useful descriptive texts than either could have produced alone, and this lends another valence to the claim that we benefit from thinking about description in relation to communities and cooperative action.

**Descriptions can serve as invitations to participation.** Once we have noted that absence of detailed descriptions is often a marker that suggests a speaker or writer assumes her audience is *already* familiar with or amused by the same things that she is, it isn't difficult to reach the realization that inviting new members into a formerly closed community may require descriptive interventions. This point is intrinsically related to the previous two. In addition to acknowledging the roles intuition and muscle memory play in keeping *doing* distinct from *describing*, it is worth noting that experts have often forgotten what being a novice feels like. This causes them to skip "obvious" steps and details without noticing when teaching—a fact that might seem innocuous when it allows me to over knead a loaf of bread, but which can be dangerous elsewhere. For instance, it is well documented that in university settings unclear descriptions of bureaucratic requirements and processes have a disproportionate, negative impact on first-generation college students. We can also think here of in-class examples like the those sketched out in Dave Bartholomae's discussion of ways writing students are asked to "invent the university by assembling and mimicking its language" (5). It turns out that "simply" offering better descriptions of required tasks and the communal or procedural histories that led to their



development can help a wider array of people feel at home in a discipline or institution. And that allowing students time and space to practice getting descriptions “wrong” can help them figure out how to enter all kinds of new-to-them discourse communities.

**Descriptions can impact social environments in ambient ways.** Of course, descriptions can intrude on feelings of belonging and dis-incentivize participation just as easily as they promote it. While using descriptions to remove procedural bars may be a necessary first step to inclusion, it is rarely enough to make a space actually hospitable. Acknowledging this leads us to other places where descriptive interventions can be meaningful. Studies of gender inequities in the computer programming industry are perhaps more illustrative here than general educational contexts are. There’s every reason to believe the women who enter this industry are as qualified as their male counterparts (and several reasons to suspect they are often more qualified). They don’t need to be instructed in the specialist discourses of the job, and assumptions that they do—manifested via provision of the same kinds of “inclusive” descriptions I mentioned positively above—are likely to be received as demeaning rather than welcoming. And rightly so. In addition, casual misogynistic comments with colorful descriptive content contribute to hostile workplaces. In fact, many kinds of microaggressions take the form of descriptive asides. Recognizing and addressing the potential for ambient pieces of “mere description” to do real damage might not help directly with recruitment of new community members from diverse places with diverse backgrounds, but it can help with issues related to retention and community dynamics. This serves as a reminder that the gaps that surround descriptions can be sustained, meaningful silences—the result of intentional refusals rather than “mere” failures to match the world.

**Descriptions can expose cultural and intellectual trends.** Beyond speaking to specific community membership, descriptions can invite study of broader trends that unite disparate-seeming communities. Individual describers may participate in these trends either knowingly or unknowingly. In particular, descriptive praxes are often telling because they create domains where relationships (sometimes filled with dramatic conflict) between parts and wholes, particulars and generalities, and aesthetic materialities and ideals play out. The cultural function of ornamentation, the status of the detail, and the nature of surfaces are all at stake in these dramas. Naomi Schor suggests that during the Enlightenment we see the ornamental and the descriptive feminized, trivialized, and overdetermined, which leaves the sublime to take shape as “a masculinist aesthetic designed to check the rise of detailism” (qtd. Wall 39).

If we wonder, is the particular uninteresting because of its association with the accidental? Some Aristotelian rhetoricians and Augustan theologians would have us answer yes. Debating the merits of close and distant reading can lead to ugly and contentious displays driven by the related questions: how do interiors relate to exteriors? and is studying a surface a good way to learn about an object or a kind of careless neglect that denies that object’s true depths and real value? For all the ways they bring out pedantry, debates about surface and depths mark arenas of inquiry that have real human stakes. After all, we have interiors and exteriors, too.

Whether or not one believes in a soul that outlives the body can matter to one’s position regarding the status of descriptions of human interiors (psychologies) and exteriors and (via a trickle-down effect) the interiors and exteriors of non-humans. So can whether or not one believes in Platonic ideals. So can questions of prejudice—if the society one lives in is openly hostile to one’s thriving, cultivating a rich inner life can be an important survival tactic, and

describing that inner life can become the basis of defiantly descriptive literary works—which also serve as celebrations of intellectualism’s egalitarian potential. Perhaps most famous among calls to think along these lines is Toni Morrison’s “The Site of Memory,” which sets up her ability (and responsibility) to write back into our collective lives the “unwritten interior life” associated with African American subjectivity (71). A descriptive commitment to fidelity allows her to restore a sense of her ancestors’ human complexity that both racism and political expediency deny, in part because her writing responds to a specific descriptive violence—the “deliberate excising” of the interior life “from the records the slaves themselves told” (ibid.).

Despite the power of Morrison’s example, the descriptive personal anecdote can also be a harbinger of anti-intellectualism. In short, cultural relationships to different kinds of descriptions tell us a lot about speakers and their contemporaries. As do the things that specific cultures refuse the right of description (for better or worse).

**Descriptions can extend inquiries and expose fallacies.** It is possible to understand the concept of writing as inquiry—writing to find out what you know and what you want to know—as stemming rather directly from this point. Marcus, Love, and Best remind us that description “makes objects and phenomena available for analysis and synthesis” (2). Anthropologist Anna Tsing writes about contexts in which description “asks urgent questions” and “extends and disciplines curiosity about life,” contexts in which description becomes decidedly critical (28). Novelists, art critics, geologists, botanists, and geographers have all written at length on ways in which manufacturing descriptions trains describers to “see” differently. And while I’ve used quotation marks to suggest this can mean practicing description helps people understand what they are seeing differently, there are certainly those who would go further and suggest that

cognition itself is changed in a physical way by repeatedly viewing and describing certain kinds of objects—that the biological complexes of sensation are malleable enough that being a prolific describer can open new pathways to perception and thus new questions and new solutions to complex problems. It’s also true that being asked to elaborate—to describe our positions in more detail than we have before—can lead us to question those positions or to layer nuance into them. (Of course, it can encourage us to dig our heels in, too).

**Descriptions can act as warning mechanisms.** The “safety description” is another standard technical communications assignment, and another feature of day-to-day life for most of us. Descriptive signs tell us when a recently mopped floor is likely to be slippery, when the paint on a handrail is wet, or that the contents of our coffee cup may be hot. They tell us when trucks and train cars contain materials that are flammable, explosive, or radioactive. And when our activities are being monitored by video surveillance. They remind us—sometimes via pictures that descriptively mime imminent death—to be mindful of ledges and using electronics near water. Of course, there are other ways in which descriptions act as warnings, too. Some of them more subtle. Sometimes, the descriptive statement, *I’m tired*, really means, *don’t talk to me unless you want to wind up in a fight*. Stories that “merely describe” something that happened before you arrived in a place can be a way of saying, *move along*. Descriptive acts can also be leveraged in ways that encourage queer folks, people with invisible disabilities, and people with complex racial heritages whose features allow them to cultivate ways of passing as straight, white, and hegemonically healthy. The prevalence of both veiled and explicit threats that urge certain kinds of people *not to describe themselves* or their lives in detail in public is also linked to the many

ways in which individual, descriptive acts of “coming out” can be both personally important and politically salient.

**Descriptions can transmit *ethos*. And they can generate *ethos*, too.** Nearly every function attested in this list could be reconceived in terms of one definition of *ethos* or another. How an individual wields description can speak to his character (upholding the most common contemporary sense of the word) or to the places where he dwells (speaking to a more classical sense of the word). Insofar as Samuel Johnson and others who would associate description with ornamentation are not wrong, we can even see the descriptive interludes that “interrupt” narrative as those places most hospitable to dwelling in a text—as the places where an author comes closest to “simply” spending time with a reader. And, if the job the concept of *ethos* is tasked with in rhetorical theory is “return[ing] ethics from abstraction to the particular,” as attested on the cover flap of the 2004 essay collection *The Ethos of Rhetoric*, then what mode could be better suited to the task than the mode that manages details and wholes, particulars and generalities?

**Descriptions can help us resist anthropocentrism.** Shifting focus from the individual describer to the human communities that describer is affiliated with and the material infrastructures that support, demand, and influence descriptions in various ways can lead us toward a vibrantly socio-technical approach to language; it can also help us see why decentering the human doesn’t have to mean devaluing humane activity.

**Descriptions can help us discover and negotiate similarity and difference.** The descriptive *et cetera*, it turns out, can be the emblem of similar things—a designator of membership in a

*particular* parliament of things. I have suggested some ways in which this can be true in human contexts, and it is no less true when we expand purviews. Description is the language of cartography and diagnosis, of field guides and taxonomies, of origin stories and trajectories. There can be a great pleasure in walking through a desert and knowing names for all the rocks and soils one encounters; a different pleasure in walking through a forest and knowing which plants are edible; a different pleasure still in being able to identify the clouds in the sky and speak to how they formed and whether or not they portend a dangerous storm or a pleasant evening. Even knowing the name of a tumor can be welcome; accurate pathology can help doctors know which drugs might work on it, and trading in knowns rather than unknowns can make even difficult situations easier for patients to handle.

Taxonomies do not require us to submit to the idea that all similar things are identical; rather, they help ask: what makes a difference significant enough that it becomes a difference in kind, not degree? How do we figure out when it is a good idea to slow down and reassess our styles of engagement because something new-to-us is (or might be) at hand? How do we figure out when changes in appearance are changes in substance, function, or need?

**Descriptions can help us negotiate scale change and state change.** This may be considered a variant on the previous point, but it bears brief separate remark nonetheless. it isn't just that debates about description are bound to debates about what constitutes scales and states; individual descriptions themselves can help us build bridges between seemingly unlike things without requiring us to eliminate the properties that make them unique. The specialized form of description that is metaphor is particularly adept at this.

**Descriptions can care for wonder, mystery, and uncertainty.** While concise descriptions are sometimes best, lavishly detailed descriptions have their places, too. Descriptive acts can serve as emblems of care, concern, or admiration. In a little essay in which someone has dug a ditch and filled it in and is, weeks later, watching a child run across the place where the gash in the land used to be, Lia Purpura describes the act of memory that is “staying with the moment” like this: “You’re turning the moment in your hands, you’re offering it so it breaks in the light and falls in shining disks and you harvest the disks unseen, and again your hands are remade, and you fill your pockets and jingle the pockets” (112). Not only does her description make this moment that might have been utterly inconsequential strange and lovely in its own right, it also serves as a way to think of description itself; to describe can be an offering, an invitation to the shining light, a harvesting, a jingling.

In addition, the descriptive *et cetera* can be a holder that reserves space for things yet to come. It can be an emblem of the existence of things that have no names or that willfully resist being named. It can consist of purposeful and necessary acknowledgement of the truth that being assigned an inaccurate descriptor is often a traumatic experience for a self. In other words, wild partial descriptions can help us remember how wondrous our own existence is, too.

**Descriptions can initiate new conditions.** One complaint frequently lodged against description that I haven’t mentioned yet is that fact that describers sometimes—by their very presence—initiate the phenomena that they describe. This proves a quagmire for scientists trying to control experiments, suss out cause-and-effect relationships, or sell their own objectivity, but this can be precisely what makes the mode an exciting rhetorical tool. As noted above, descriptive practices can initiate positive change by bringing points of structural vulnerability or injustice to wide

attention. And they can act—like Aristotle’s descriptions of what *ought* to be rather than what is—to encourage and coordinate individual and collective actions, a phenomenal action we might associate with visualization practices that athletes use to prepare for competition.

And these are simply the initiations that are easiest to summarize.

#### **1.4 INTRODUCING DESCRIPTION TO COMPLEX SYSTEMS: INFLUENCES AND METHODOLOGIES**

The sheer range of capacities in that admittedly and woefully partial list *and* the ways in which we often find different kinds of descriptions layered to achieve myriad simultaneous effects speak to the “systems thinking” invoked by this dissertation’s title. In choosing a title that suggests the main subject of this dissertation is not description alone but rather whatever it is that constitutes “complex descriptive systems,” I hope to call attention to ways in which descriptions work by *working with* one another, with other communicative objects crafted by humans (including both linguistic objects, visual objects, and other forms of media), with all kinds of material infrastructures, and with less deliberately manufactured elements of the more-than-human environments we inhabit. Put another way, a title that invokes complexity made sense to me because engaging description’s wide range requires endeavoring to understand the many dynamic connections that ally it with the so-called “missing masses” of composition and communications scholarship, and the language of complex systems analysis is well suited to an endeavor like this.<sup>1</sup>

In both humanist and colloquial conversation, the adjectives *complex* and *complicated* tend to look like synonyms. They both announce: this is difficult to understand. But in more



technical contexts, complex systems are defined in part by *not* being complicated systems. Complicated systems can be more-or-less described by aggregating descriptions of the parts their disassembly yields. When we strip down mathematical and scientific definitions, we find that complex systems are systems with many parts that (at least sometimes) exhibit non-linear aggregate behaviors; the sum of actions actors within the system are capable of does not describe the complete set of activities that the whole is capable of. Chaotic systems, which are *highly* sensitive to initial conditions, are a special class of complex systems. Many (but not necessarily all) complex systems are adaptive, which means they are capable of learning from experience. They may have memory functions and tend to achieve results through iterative processes. Feedback loops, both those that dampen and those that amplify, are often hugely important to their workings. The notion that descriptions are always—even at the very moment of their creation—embedded in “complex descriptive systems” encourages us, then, to approach individual descriptions as objects able *and likely* to surprise us; it reminds us that little descriptive objects are sometimes crucial to the coordination of large-scale activity; and it prepares us to think about how situational resonances sometimes have transformative effects on the capacities of individual descriptions and describers. Surprise achievements, surprise shortcomings, and catastrophic cascading failures are all common in complex systems, and these all deserve attention in rhetorical contexts. In addition, complex systems are often open—their boundaries permit energy and matter to be lost or gained, which makes studying the environments that contain them as important as studying the microenvironments they harbor—yet another point useful to thinking about descriptions and descriptive systems.

When I suggest the usefulness of complexity theories to thinking through topics and tools germane to writing and communication, I am not starting down a new path. Rather, I’m working

in relation to an already thriving materialists' conversation. When Byron Hawk pitched his counter-history of composition, he did so under the banner of our need for "methodologies of complexity" and in relation to a "complex vitalism" shot through with elements and drives recovered from both romantic and investigative vitalist traditions. Thomas Rickert's *Ambient Rhetoric* draws on complexity theories in its treatment of digitality and network culture. In addition to building on Rickert's work directly, through him I build on "earlier essays in the field that first broached issues of complexity, such as those by Louise Weatherbee Phelps, Marilyn Cooper, and Richard Lanham, scholars who all saw, surprisingly early, complexity's importance for rhetoric and composition" and figures like Paul Cilliers, who writes compellingly on cross-trends in complexity theory and postmodernism, and Mark Taylor, who pitches the importance of complexity theories for the arts and humanities in general and writes about how the complexity of thought's unfolding leads quite directly to a world in which writing participates in elaborate feedback loops and *writes us* as surely as we write it (*Ambient Rhetoric* 101, 119).

It is not coincidental that the compositionists most amenable to complexity's lessons and lexicons are often also amenable to the lessons and lexicons of the now expansive field associated with the term "new materialism." Arguably, the scientific rise of complexity theories was a necessary precursor to the rise of new materialism as a field in the 1990s. Early on, this new field's supporters claimed exigency from the way discoveries in diverse scientific realms seemed to obsolesce both enlightenment-style pictures of man's control over nature and the playful and malleable but language-centric theories underwritten by deconstruction's legacy that were then ascendant in most humanities disciplines. Diane Coole and Samantha Frost summarize neatly: complexity offered humanists and social scientists a model of the physical world in which "the emphasis is on unpredictable events that can catapult systems into novel configurations" and

where matter is recognized as “exhibiting immanently self-organizing properties subtended by an intricate filigree of relationships” (13). And, while the many new materialisms that have cropped up do not represent a unified front, they have all arguably learned from the multiplicity and dynamism that the hard sciences after complexity model and uphold in *newly public* ways. At their best, new materialisms tend to proceed by remixing complex systems thinking and significant features of disparate “old” humanist materialisms, layering approaches to the more-than-human world in order to provide richer descriptions of cause and effect in general and agency in particular.<sup>2</sup> The widespread uptake of work by feminist scholars affiliated with science studies and some of complexities’ tenets also bears mention here; scholars in writing studies and rhetoric who claim the influence of Karen Barad, Jane Bennett, Donna Haraway, or Katherine Hayles also tend to produce work that centers features associated with complexity—whether or not they point this fact out (and whether or not they appreciate the participation of these figures in new materialisms).

Moreover, as one might expect, not all the strains of humanities and writing studies research relevant to writing’s participation in complex systems announce themselves as directly as new materialisms do. Common examples of complex systems include neural networks, economies, ecological systems, socio-political situations, and the human body—both its physiology and psychology. Theories of rhetoricity and communication that engage these subjects are often deeply attuned to the features of complexity, even if the language of complexity isn’t fundamental to their lexicons; this kind of practical affiliation is near universal across composition and rhetoric’s ecologies and vital materialisms. Work structured around networks, rhizomes, or affects is often affiliated with complexity (although I would argue less reliably and in less comprehensive ways than ecologies of writing). As are some neural rhetorics,

rhetorics of economics, and health care rhetorics. Moreover, historically, the emergence of complex systems as a coherent field of academic study is linked to the science of cybernetics, and studying that history points us toward sensibilities that value self-referentiality, autonomy, and self-organizing capabilities—things also valued (at least arguably) by a great many composition scholars interested in revision and/or metacognition’s relationship to transfer. These loose alliances bear mention even though a survey of them is far beyond the scope of this introduction because they are key to the suggestion: studies of description’s complex systems are capable of participating in composition and rhetoric’s more radical new materialisms alongside writers like Hawk, Rickert, and Cooper *and* capable of meeting the core of writing studies halfway. And I understand this double capacity as much of what makes the sack of meaning that is the word “complexity” worth the trouble it trails.

In the chapters that follow, I sometimes refer to the role descriptions (as objects) play in very conventionally defined complex systems; mathematical models of complexity do sometimes describe situations that elude literary theorists, rhetorical theorists, and working writers. However, I trend towards ways of thinking about relations between description and complex systems that wear their metaphorical nature somewhat baldly. Being up front about ways in which I invite the descriptive lexicons of complexity to gather power by crossing domains (thinking with metaphor’s etymological roots in the act of ferrying) is important to my project because it speaks back to the study of description itself; it turns out that the case of trans-local languages is less a special case and more an example of relatively ordinary descriptive dynamics. I also hope that being careful in my borrowings and up front about the fact that I am deploying the language of complexity in ways that are partial and metaphorical will allow me both to move more inventively and to placate at least a few potential critics.

Where all descriptions leave something out, metaphors often purposefully amplify gaps and change the shape of those gaps in the process. Because metaphors are particularly susceptible to enacting change, they're particularly useful, but they can also be particularly difficult to trust—and the metaphorical move that consists of adopting another field's language and principles garners suspicion particularly easily. That ease is on display when Noah Roderick points out, "The first temptation in a critique of a complexity science of literacy and writing might be to argue that appropriating descriptions and methodologies of complexity in the natural sciences for the social sciences or for the humanities constitutes a misunderstanding or misuse of legitimate scientific knowledge" (n.p.). While it has been well shown that the category "legitimate science" is much more malleable than some (a some that includes both scientists and rhetoricians) would have us recognize, it is I think useful to take the warning that ferrying language across disciplinary divides *can* result in the proliferation of misinformation just as easily as it can result in new insights.

The partialities inherent in using a borrowed lexicon make all humanist and social scientist usage of the term *complexity* metaphorical, even when these scholars are discussing literal complex systems. And while a metaphor *can* slip into appropriation, such a slide isn't an inevitability. In other words, just because a humanist uses the terms of a science in slightly different ways than a hard scientist might doesn't mean she is engaging in serious misunderstanding when she deploys them. Foregrounding the metaphoricity at the heart of rhetoric's complexity, then, is a move meant to keep me and us responsive to the fact that there are better *and* worse ways to translate across expertise.<sup>3</sup>

One job of the complexity theory that is built up from scientific knowledge is to describe the world. I believe scientific theories of complexity often describe aspects of the world well,

and as a scholar of description, I am wary of possible appropriations that threaten to hollow out the language of complex systems and leave us all—scientists and humanists alike—less able describers. And yet, as a scholar of description, I also believe that the best descriptions of the world are inherently flexible and that their accuracy (their relation to extra-human objects and dynamics) makes them resilient.

Turning to the term *emergence* for just a moment is, perhaps, illustrative here. Despite the plethora of properties and lessons complex systems offer, it isn't particularly uncommon to see these systems metonymically reduced to the single feature *emergence*. This happens in mathematical studies of complex dynamics and pop science takes on complex systems as well as in humanist riffs on complexity studies. But we might think about the ease with which humanists seem to succumb to such metonyms as part of the special danger they pose to robust physical concepts in general and complex systems in particular.

Yaneer Bar-Yam's *Dynamics of Complex Systems* (a textbook aimed at advanced undergraduate or beginning graduate students) notes in its first pages that for many people, the concept of emergent behavior means that the behavior is not captured by the behavior of the parts. This is a serious misunderstanding. It arises because the collective behavior is not readily understood from the behavior of the parts. The collective behavior is, however, contained in the behavior of the parts if they are studied in the context in which they are found. (10)

I like this note for the way it emphasizes the degree to which studying context can be one of the best ways to learn about the relationship between parts and wholes, features and implications; I also like it for the implication that emergence isn't *necessarily inexplicable*, which I see as a particularly important reminder for scholars interested in writing's relationship to emergence,

given the long (and I would argue persistent and damaging) history of stories that frame writing only in terms of the unlearnable quality that is genius and the unpredictable event that is inspiration. The set of things that is *readily* understood in any situation isn't identical to the set of things that can be understood about a situation.

But I also like this note for the way its decisiveness can only be understood as clear or accurate in relation to Bar-Yam's intended audiences. The student using this textbook needs to know precisely what Bar-Yam means each time he writes the word emergence; this working definition is also likely to serve students well later on, whenever they are talking to others who have been similarly trained. But the "many people" who think of emergence in relation to *what can't be captured* certainly includes many humanist scholars who utilize emergence as an ontogenetic concept. And declaring them simply "wrong" about emergence would miss the mark. For the professional philosopher or rhetorician, the slim distinction between what is "captured by" a behavior and what is "contained within" a behavior is likely a crucial difference, where it seems to have slipped right by Bar-Yam in writing for a diverse range of science students. Again, we see: *which* distinctions matter to readers and writers is a question whose answers evolve as contexts change. And a theory of description helps us tune to those changes in ways that help us think both metaphorically and carefully.

In order to grasp the importance of this kind of tuning, I think we have to return to the premise that descriptions and shared descriptive languages can help us build relationships and forge or maintain community ties. In addition to observing the potential for writing studies scholars to get complexity "wrong," Roderick observes—I think quite aptly—that "the interesting questions for when natural scientists and scholars in the humanities and social sciences talk are no longer so much about what the mind is or how to understand humanity

through the mind, but on how, for example, information flows, social networks, and animal metabolic rates can occupy the same ontological field” (n.p.). These, of course, are complexity’s questions. So, the metaphorical mismatches invoked above can be precisely what motives scholars from different places to stay at a shared table; and while it’s more fun to picture them collaborating, it’s also useful to note that even pedantic arguments about vocabulary can forge social bonds that lay the groundwork for more clearly fruitful collaborations later. And cross-disciplinary collaboration can help researchers approach problems that they couldn’t approach alone, a fact that’s arguably even more salient in relation to complexity than it is elsewhere. As Syverson notes, “Complex systems breed complex problems, which tend to require complex solutions. More significantly, the solutions are themselves likely to be ongoing and locally situated dynamic processes rather than finite universal determinations” (201). This means: not only do collaborations seem important to the work of coming up with novel solutions to some of the pressing social and environmental issues that complexity science describes well, but ongoing collaborations that span space, time, and expertise are likely to be important to keeping solutions relevant, and complexity’s most specialized scientists aren’t always going to be the people best suited to this maintenance work; various area experts, some of them humanists and non-academics, are rather likely to fit into some of these roles in active, effective ways.

## **1.5 SOME QUESTIONS AND INVECTIVES FOR RHETORICAL STUDIES THAT INVOKE COMPLEXITY**

I’d also like to offer readers a more concise way to think about how the phrase “complex descriptive systems” drives this dissertation. While the languages of complexity, emergence, and



adaptation aren't always central in the work that follows, a specific style of inquiry lends cohesion to my engagement with the many rhetorical systems addressed in this dissertation's four body chapters. And that style is well invoked by some pieces of languages that also describe well the complex systems of mathematics, ecology, and economics. I offer here three sets of questions and three invectives borrowed from the introduction of Bar-Yam's textbook, reframed as methodological anchors for rhetoricians interested in approaching description's many complexities.

The first set of questions is spatially motivated. "What are the characteristics of the structure of complex systems? Many complex systems have substructure that extends all the way to the size of the system itself. Why is there substructure?" (6). In the context of descriptive systems, asking these questions includes attuning ourselves to both the poetic substructures of individual texts and the contextual clues that suggest how these texts get put to use by readers and writers as they build other things. These questions help us remember that both social materialities and aesthetic materialities can support systems dynamics. Those who study social inequities and description's relationship to their manifestation might particularly benefit from a specialized version of the substructure question that goes something like this, "Where complex systems do take hierarchal form, how is the hierarchy structured and maintained—and at what costs to the system" (Syverson 202)?

The second set of questions is temporally motivated. "How long do dynamical processes take in complex systems? Many complex systems have specific responses to changes in their environment that require changing their internal structure. How can a complex structure respond in a reasonable amount of time?" (Bar-Yam 6). This, in many ways, is the set of questions that speaks most directly to critics of Actor-Network Theory and other descriptively rich

methodologies in the social sciences and humanities. In the context of descriptive systems, this is the set of methodological questions that pushes us to value description but also to ask, how much description is enough? These are the questions that insist upon description's *kairotic* nature; answering to them helps us gauge when it is the right time for a languid, wondrous, or completionist approach to description and when it is the right time for a crisp, sparse, or strategically partial description.

The third set of borrowed questions is motivated by an interest in self-organization and/versus organization by design. "How do complex systems come into existence? What are the dynamical processes that can give rise to complex systems? Many complex systems undergo guided developmental processes as part of their formation. How are developmental processes guided?" (Bar-Yam 6). This is the set of questions that allows us to take time out to consider how our own agencies can remain meaningful in the face of a world where *massively distributed* agency is the norm and systems dynamics seem to overshadow both individual triumphs and individual tragedies. These questions help us identify dynamisms that are susceptible to influence and to think through what kinds of guidance systems—social, infrastructural, environmental, descriptive, et al.—might be developed in order to inaugurate future systems that are more robustly humane than current systems. They also correspond closely to a pair of questions issued directly from within writing studies; "If complex systems are not controlled by a central 'brain' or processor, how do some agents—particularly readers, writers, or texts, for instance—come to have greater influence on such systems and why? How is that influence situated and exerted?" (Syverson 202).

Working with questions from all three of these sets helps us engage difficult to understand phenomena by helping us step toward accurate descriptions that "focus on function

*and structure and diverse manifestation*” (Bar-Yam 4; emphasis mine). Because these are all big questions that can be difficult to frame and approach, it’s also useful to have some cautions that help us steer away from too easy answers and common mistakes made by researchers trying to figure out how particular complex systems operate. These warnings are implied above, but it is, I think, useful to have them enumerated directly.

**“Don’t take it apart”** (Bar-Yam 8). This is the reminder that, because interactions between parts of a complex system are essential to understanding its behavior, looking at parts by themselves is not sufficient. It is also useful to remark here: just because you know enough to take something apart doesn’t mean you know enough to put it back together; complex systems have a tendency to hide critical dynamics and to rely on dynamics that took a long time to evolve, which cannot be re-imposed quickly or easily. This invective allies studies of complex systems with recent trends in humanist scholarship that ask: what else is out there for us, if critique has indeed entered an age of decadence?

A corollary to this general rule is perhaps even more useful to the student of description: “a complex system interacts with its environment, and this environmental influence is important in describing the behavior of the system” (Bar-Yam 8). In other words: be extremely wary of things out of context. And when acts look like magic, look to the ambient world for potential clues about the systems that permit their unfolding.

**“Don’t assume smoothness”** (Bar-Yam 9). This caution is another way of addressing the status of the detail. When we cannot assume that a system is essentially uniform, we cannot assume that local details don’t impact the behavior of a system on larger scales. When studying a complex system, it isn’t uncommon to discover dense areas of local connectivity with sparse connections linking distant regions. This caution is particularly useful because descriptive studies

run the risk of glorifying individual perspectives; we can take individual perspectives, observations, and experiences as (potentially) critically important to large-scale dynamics without assuming that anecdotes or individual experiences are representative of class-wide experiences. And we can study networks workout assuming that all connections within the network are similarly crucial. Among other things, this caution also helps us remember that interconnection and interdependence are not synonyms.

**“Don’t assume that only a few parameters are important”** (Bar-Yam 9). This is the reminder that we rarely know *which* details will be important when we begin an inquiry. In some ways, this is the caution that urges us to adopt a Latourian stance and “follow the actors” whenever and wherever possible. It is a caution that cannot wholly prevent confirmation biases from sneaking in, but it at least asks us to keep their possibility in mind. Objects are always capable of surprising us; and objects (or hyperobjects) that are complex systems often deliver on the promise of surprise more often than their simple or complicated counterparts.

## **1.6 CHAPTER OVERVIEW: HUMANITY’S MIDDLE GROUND AND SCALING DESCRIPTION UP**

I’ve already quoted Margaret Syverson’s *The Wealth of Reality* in several places. This early (1994) landmark study of composition’s complex ecologies deserves formal acknowledgement both for the territory it opened—which the observations and questions I borrowed above all gesture toward—and for the way it speaks openly about the difficulties of both complex and complicated academic projects. Among other things, Syverson notes: in the humanities we are quite good at working at the scale of the single human or individual (the sovereign subject);

we're also quite good at working at the scale of the Human, the all-inclusive abstraction. This is in part a problem of academic cultures and intellectual histories; we've *chosen* to focus on these scales for a variety of reasons, both laudable (the idea that humane treatment of individuals deserves promotion and protection) and dangerously laughable (the idea that humans are ontologically superior to other things and creatures). But this lack of focus on middle grounds is also the less architected result of a very practical phenomena. "Among the problems with attempting to enlarge the unit of analysis beyond the individual, the unit with which we are so familiar, is that such a change confronts us with a seemingly overwhelming amount of information," Syverson rightly observes (27). This problem is decidedly one of description; it calls to mind the Borgesian "map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it," a map fated to find itself ridiculed and dismantled, its tatters left to blow through the desert (325).<sup>4</sup> Yet, as I've already noted, description itself can be a technology of condensation, a method that gestures at a whole by highlighting its situationally salient parts. Systems analysts frequently deploy wireframe-style network diagrams—which *radically* simplify the world—as descriptions of parts in relation to other parts in order to make questions about complex systems more imaginable, which in turn makes answers more approachable. Understanding the importance of thinking ecologically or in relation to complex systems does not require us to endeavor to think *every* thing simultaneously, it turns out.

At the chapter level, this dissertation takes seriously the premise: the humanities, including rhetoric and writing studies, stand to benefit from work that is not preoccupied with the individual but that is nevertheless specific and situated. It deploys an organizational system that emphasizes in-between scales and the objects and movements that link those scales. I offer four major case studies of complex descriptive systems, and I negotiate the issue of "scaling

description up” in their arrangement. Complex systems are often made up of other complex systems. An individual animal and an ecosystem both qualify as complex. Turning to the special case of descriptive systems, we find complexity’s tenets at work in nested ways there, too. An individual poem, a book of poems, the archive of papers left to a library at the end of a poet’s life, the single library that holds those papers, the online system that makes them available to readers in other localities, and the entire text of the internet are all objects that can be considered complex descriptive systems without breaking the concept. Traversing these and related levels of complexity requires practicing different styles of description, and it teaches us things about description itself that staying with any one level couldn’t. The chapters of this dissertation, consequently, argue conventionally, but they also argue through their aesthetics (their styles of describing and omitting). And I hope that as an aggregate they inspire readers to surprising insights in ways that pay homage to complexity’s interest in the emergent and the non-linear. One assumption here is: more can mean different, but we’re not always good at understanding tipping points or the nature of scale-induced differences; consequently, endeavoring to understand how various, structurally dissimilar kinds of compositional ecologies interrelate is itself a complex and desirable task.

**Chapter Two**, “Lived Intersections: Generosity, Philosophy, and Objectivist Writing Practice,” is built around examination of a descriptive system anchored to the life of one exemplary materialist composer, the poet George Oppen (1908-1984). This paradigmatic example draws on descriptions found in Oppen’s poems, daybooks, and letters. It speaks to specific relations that structured the poet’s everyday life and to the way his experiences as a sailor and his work as a

carpenter clearly impacted his understanding of poetics, helping him develop a nuanced materialist approach to the aesthetics of language.

The descriptive gaps that feature most prominently in this chapter are the gaps characteristic of relationships between things as they exist and human knowledge of the existence of things; an association with ontology (rather than epistemology) figures in the rise and fall of description's popularity across times and cultural contexts, and Oppen's example suggests some ways in which even those wary of the humanities recent turn (back) toward ontology might find description's relationship to the unknowable dimensions of *being* useful to the project of living together well. This chapter also introduces reactionary literature that frames new materialisms as ethically suspect. In arguing that Oppen's personal ontology resonates with new materialist and object-oriented philosophy's values, I contend that thing theorists outside writing studies might leverage the way his life—he was a committed labor organizer and often spoke about writing in ethical terms—provides strong evidence: such values do not lead in a teleological way to unethical activity.

**Chapter three**, “Ekphrasis (or Trans-Medial Investigation): Art Methodologies and Small-Scale Descriptive Ecologies,” foregrounds exchanges between makers and explores how material things direct and intervene in artistic communities. It recruits the concept of *ekphrasis* (synonymous with description in classical rhetoric, now generally used to mean writing about paintings or other fine art images) to a study of rich, trans-media practices of invention. This chapter asks readers to think of *ekphrasis* as a traditional humanist area of study that has long invited work with scales just slightly larger than the single human in a unique way. Texts by poets Mark Doty, Cole Swensen, and Melissa Kwasny help this chapter articulate how

descriptive systems anchored to *two* makers and *two* composed objects differ from the kinds of descriptive systems introduced in chapter two. These poetic examples open onto questions with significance outside the art world, including: how can description as a mode and descriptive objects help us work together in innovative ways that honor our differences? And, what else might be entailed in launching and maintaining ethical collaborations?

The descriptive gaps that feature most prominently in this chapter are the gaps characteristic of relationships between different forms of media. I suggest here that stubbornly non-linguistic objects (including image-based art works) can help us learn what language is good at and how it operates. Close examination of ways in which individual *ekphrastic* descriptions succeed by *doing things other than* capturing, replicating, or bringing “before the eyes” the pieces of visual art they reference give texture to some of the stranger capacities that I’ve claimed for description in this introduction.

This chapter also speaks to the usefulness of languages and insights borrowed from scholars interested primarily in images to the study of description. At a philosophical level, scholars who work with images and scholars interested primarily in language both engage issues of representation and reproduction in fundamental (sometimes fundamentally different) ways. Both sets of experts answer variously to questions about the status of *mimesis* as a creative activity, to the impossibility of lossless reproduction, to the roles that sensation and intuition play in rationalist discourses, to the benefits of mechanization and technical extension of the human body and the risks technics pose, to conflicts between content and form, and to issues provoked by cross-culture communication—among other things.



**Chapter four**, “Industrial Ekphrasis: Stock Images and Descriptions that Disappear,” engages synergistic word-image pairings in a very different context. Built up around descriptive systems that thrive in the stock image industry, this chapter connects the poetic and artistic practices detailed in chapters two and three to more common communicative practices. The idea that descriptions act in part via the gaps that surround them functions a little differently here; I introduce two kinds of description that are decidedly influential despite disappearing almost entirely from public view, and I trace some of the ways in which these two descriptive sub-systems influence each other.

In the first half of this chapter, I focus on the structure and history of the stock industry, paying particular attention to descriptions that stock agencies use to lure in the cultural intermediaries that are their direct clients. This side of the industry relies on language to martial the fact that images are “parsimoniously polysemic” (a phrase borrowed from Paul Frosh, who borrowed it from Umberto Eco). An image must seem general to the agency—in order to be worth holding, it must sell many times—and specific to the buyer, who needs to be able to envision it attached to the very specific context he or she plans to use it in. Descriptive concepts that function metaphorically and organize images into a kind of grammar are instrumental in permitting this kind of double-projection. So are the acts of tagging, keywording, and captioning. And yet, when a cultural intermediary purchases an image, he or she likely immediately forgets, deletes, or alters whatever language was attached by the stock agency. The images they purchased, however, go on to form a kind of wallpaper of everyday life; they pop up on buses and buildings, in catalogues and magazines, on posters and packaging materials of all sorts. This was true before the internet was a feature of everyday life. But digital image distribution, digital printing technologies, and digital cameras *have* increased the number of images in existence.

These things have changed the organizational realities that structure the stock image industry, which has more visual influence than ever, but they also suggest the degree to which lessons from this industry—interested as it is in mass but malleable imagery—might help us understand digital and visual cultures more generally.

The second half of this chapter extends that claim. It zooms in on the stock image industry's shift from print catalogues to online image distribution, paying attention to the pieces of description that users enter in search boxes and the way these pieces of description interact with interface- and platform-level features. I argue that search terms, the algorithms that power search functions, and the pieces of descriptive metadata that those algorithms use in their calculations form a descriptive system that exerts powerful cultural influence, and that a vibrant and dynamic understanding of description ought to be part of future work that engages related phenomena.

**Chapter five**, “Responsible Cartographies: Description as a Technology of Emplacement,” speaks to descriptive complexes that engage—or at least seek to engage—massive, geologically significant scales. This chapter is structured around images of the nonhuman assemblages we call landscapes and the languages that locate them. Where readers might benefit from thinking about chapters two and three as a set focused on poetic description, this chapter and chapter four work in tandem as well. Here, I trace out ways in which David T. Hanson's landscape-based multimedia art emerged in relation to a constellation of social, technical, and representational forces not unlike (or entirely separable from) the forces and infrastructures that support and limit the stock photography industry, and I use the parallels and disjunctures that emerge to re-engage

conversations from chapters one and two in which I argued that object-oriented philosophies can steady us and force us reckon with common and communal grounds.

Histories of aerial imagery are inextricable from histories of military surveillance; they are also inextricable from histories of assorted camera technologies, flying machines, urban and industrial development, and cartography. In elaborating these things, this chapter pays special attention to aerial photographs of Superfund sites included in Hanson's multimedia *Waste Land* series, originally composed in 1985 and 1986. These photographs, which capture traces of ways human lives and industries have literally re-written the surface of the earth, can be understood as exemplars of a second kind of "industrial ekphrasis." They partake of scales beyond normal phenomenal grasp and call attention to the way environmental changes accumulate across time (and to the speed with which damage can be inflicted upon landscapes that are otherwise prone to slow change); in doing this, they demand what I've taken to calling "wide-angle engagement" with effects humans have on the more-than-human world.

These pre-digital artifacts also provide a rich context for discussion of more recent artworks that present similar views by manipulating drone footage and satellite image archives, including the popular Daily Overview project curated by Benjamin Grant.

In addition to addressing overhead views *as* descriptive forms in this final case study chapter, I allude to ways in which descriptive metadata—including the numeric descriptors that connect images to longitudes, latitudes, and moments in time—enable two activities that can seem at odds: stitching data sets together (which hides the seams of scale change) and toggling between data sets (which shows the seams of scale change). And I discuss how aerial imageries can be coaxed into acting with linguistic descriptions in symbiotic ways, paying special attention to installation views in which Hanson's *Waste Land* images play off found, government-

sanctioned texts to provide social commentary; some of the practical descriptive “gaps” this chapter addresses, then, are mismatches that exist between technological (official) promises surrounding the cleanup of toxic sites and the unfolding of restoration projects in relation to complex fiscal and ecological realities.

Despite the degree to which the abstracted aerial images at the core of this last chapter keep humans off stage, out of the photographic frame, these artworks are *deeply* concerned with ways in which descriptive media engage meaningfully with humanity, what it is to be humane, and the development of intelligent strategies for living together—with each other and with the more-than-human. Because of that, the idea that descriptive gaps can willfully insist readers and viewers engage with issues of context is also realized in this chapter in an emphatic way. This grounds conversations about how practical powers inhere in abstract and not-quite representational aesthetics (both linguistic and visual that are distributed across the rest of the dissertation and sets the stage for a brief epilogue.

## **1.7 A NOTE ON *KAIROS* AND EXIGENCE: COMPLEX DESCRIPTIVE SYSTEMS AND DIGITAL CULTURE**

In the opening sections of this introduction, I argued in broad strokes for the importance of a nimble and expansive theory of description that respects the mode’s ability to both expose community attitudes and shape communities themselves. I believe it is also important to recognize explicitly the degree to which this is a theoretical project that responds in both abstract and immediate ways to the context of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Looking closely at rhetorical history reveals that description, like all things, is valued differently in

different contexts. In particular, during times of rapid technological change, description is more likely to be treated as both difficult and influential.

Thinking with the example of technologies of vision makes it easy to imagine some reasons this might be true (which is one of the reasons that I dedicate significant space in chapters four and five to describing emergent camera technologies). When technologies of vision are new, people are seeing things that have literally never been seen before—for example, the movements of microorganisms through early microscopes, the particulars of animal locomotion via early stop-motion photography rigs, or the shapes of viruses with the help of scanning tunneling microscopes. Consequently, people using these devices are presented with opportunities to work inventively with language (there are no already standard descriptions for them to fall back on), and their work can't help but call attention to the politics of naming and the many ways in which language is social and nimble. In her study of the ways in which description's status and standards morphed during the eighteenth century and the first years of the nineteenth century, Cynthia Sundberg Wall observes that this morphology was linked “experientially, to technologically new ways of seeing and appreciating objects in the ordinary world through the popular prostheses of microscope, telescope, and empirical analysis” (2). Some of the influence those technologies had on description, of course, was less about direct experience and more about the cultural imaginary; in the era she studies, the ability to imagine *microscopic* worlds became widespread even as the number of people who actually spent significant amounts of time looking through microscopes remained relatively modest; seeing something once through a borrowed scope, seeing sketches of things others had seen through scopes, or reading about things scientists were seeing (or thought they were seeing) was enough to impact a person's way of thinking about the details of the world.

In our century, descriptive practices are implicated in similar transformations, this time inflected by digital communication platforms and fast-changing computational hardware. This can be easy to forget, but in historical terms we're still quite early on in whatever the age of computation will become; what we want from computers and how we talk about them is continually shifting, and computational artifacts keep turning up in new professional and everyday contexts—it turns out that computational culture's ubiquity problems both mimic and outdo description's ubiquity problems. Looking from one angle, we find that ours is an important moment for description because smaller, smarter sensors keep sending digital cameras new places. In recent decades, smartphones, drones, and advanced medical imaging have all changed what we want to describe by changing what we can see and re-see. The ease of image creation and image storage might seem to make description a less necessary task, but it just changes which descriptions are most necessary and how we value different styles of description. Looking from another angle, we see how the data abundance characteristic of digital culture increases human reliance on description. Data navigation requires descriptive signposts; as more data becomes easily accessible, how well those signposts are designed matters more, too. It is in part because of these shifts that a theory of contemporary descriptive practice has the potential to bring the fields of writing studies, technology studies, and visual cultural studies together in new ways.

While communication has always been multimodal, digital technologies are reshaping our world, and communicative practices across personal, academic, and industrial contexts have begun to function in increasingly obvious hybrid ways. Focusing on things like Search functions, code as text, and metadata as descriptive reminds that even where the surfaces of digital culture may look like they eschew writing in favor of images, text glues images and experiences

together. Consequently, understanding relationships between images, texts, and environmental media—and being able to translate across these modes—is increasingly important for rhetoric and writing studies. Because description speaks to both questions of representation and the issue of access to information, it’s uniquely situated to help us deal with some of the most pressing questions of social justice that digital culture has raised. That these questions are increasingly complicated (sometimes also complex) is one of the reasons that, rather than turning solely to digital case studies, I feature the offline descriptive work of poets and the disruptive descriptions of activist artists prominently in this dissertation; their archives may not offer easy answers for our moment, but they do help us understand some things about what *better* and *worse* descriptions look like, and they remind us to keep asking about ways in which the gaps that surround different kinds of digital descriptions exert power, bring us together, push us apart, and tie us to the wider material world.

## NOTES CHAPTER ONE

<sup>1</sup> The phrase “missing masses” echoes Bruno Latour’s sociology; in the context of composition, it suggests both Nathaniel Rivers’ 2014 framing of materialist public rhetoric pedagogy and a review essay by Scot Barnett that framed Harman’s first two books on Object-Oriented Ontology for use by scholars in composition and rhetoric.

<sup>2</sup> For two iconic examples, see the way Manuel DeLanda’s non-linear history laminates distinct approaches to the material or the way Rosi Braidotti’s auto-poetic human subjects remake themselves in relation to the social imaginary, but also in relation to political economies of desire, affect, movement, security, belonging, and creativity—all of which have material dimensions.

<sup>3</sup> This phrasing echoes Latour’s “Compositionist Manifesto,” which positioned his form of new materialism by asking us to turn our attention away from “the irrelevant difference

between what is constructed and what is not constructed, toward the crucial difference between what is *well* or *badly* constructed, *well* or *badly* composed” (474).

<sup>4</sup> Lewis Carroll also references a map with a scale of “a mile to the mile” in *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded*, first published in 1893—well before Borges story unfolded. There, the map in question has never been spread out, dialogue reveals, because “the farmers objected: they said it would cover the whole country, and shut out the sunlight!” The joke concludes, “So we now use the country itself, as its own map, and I assure you it does nearly as well” (727).



## 2.0 LIVED INTERSECTIONS: GENEROSITY, PHILOSOPHY, AND OBJECTIVIST WRITING PRACTICE

*I am trying to be as accurate as I can, as correct as I can, in the matter of where the chance of poetry lies, but it is true that I tend to think first of what will lead to a life, where the constructing or the acceptance of a life lies.*

George Oppen writing to John Crawford in 1966 (*Selected Letters* 138)

*Once communication is understood not only as sending messages – certainly an essential function – but also as providing conditions for existence, media cease to be only studios and stations, messages and channels, and become infrastructures and forms of life.*

John Durham Peters, *The Marvelous Clouds* (14)

During August of 2013, I spent four somewhat delirious days in the hospital, waiting for a chest wound to begin healing and waiting for someone to call with results of the biopsy that had removed two nodules from my left lung. I had just finished six months of chemotherapy for Hodgkin’s lymphoma, which is a good cancer, a pretty curable one, but I was worn down from the treatment, and even a good cancer can kill you—especially if it becomes chemo resistant. The hope was the lesions were some kind of metabolically active fungal infection; the suspicion was—for a variety of reasons related to their shape and placement and my biology—that they were lymphoma, still or again.

An infectious disease specialist came by and asked if I had done any farming or planting lately. He asked where I had traveled in the last year, and in the last six years, and where I had grown up, among other things. Blood was drawn for cultures. Then re-drawn.

Each of the four days that I was there I got an x-ray at 5AM to see if my chest tube was still leaking air, and in the late morning a poet friend came to visit. Each day, she brought me a “real” coffee from the shop across the street (even though I couldn’t keep liquids down until the fourth day). And she read to me from the volume of George Oppen’s letters that Rachel Blau DuPlessis edited, which my friend had requested for the occasion from our University’s offsite library storage facility.

Despite modern science, the lung nodules remained unidentifiable, which was one part the dream—it meant they were not lymphoma—and one part deeply unsatisfying. Especially coming as this not-news-news did at the end of a year that had bred many uncertainties. Perhaps they had been an unusual allergic reaction to one of the drugs I had been taking? I kept waiting for something to grow in the cultures. As long as nothing grew, I didn’t get a phone call, which meant I could continue watchfully on with my life, planning my classes and reading for my comprehensive exams. Except my memory was shot, and I grew tired easily. I had proposed a reading list full of dense philosophy and rhetoric texts, and even thinking about reading most of them was quite sincerely impossible. But reading Oppen wasn’t—or at least not entirely—and I spent all fall that year, on into the winter, reading slowly and self-indulgently the nearly 400 pages of letters that are included in the volume that friend shared with me. Four years later, I still have the book out from the library in her name.

It would be disingenuous to suggest that I discovered the Objectivist poet Oppen then. I had read *The New Collected Poems* three years before. I had, with some regularity, gone back to

dog-eared pages and texted lines to friends I thought might need or enjoy them. I had listened more than a few times to the CD that came with book and laughed with pleasure at the surprising texture and cadence of his voice. It would, likewise, be disingenuous to suggest that those influential but unidentifiable lung nodules and their many malignant precursors (exposed to my view only by PET/CT) had something to do with my (also precedent) interest in the withdrawn objects of Object-Oriented Ontology, their ability to engage in complex causal relations, the weird roles vision and sensation play once objects are “given their due,” or even my new materialist attachment to Latour’s call for a Composition(ism) driven more fully by care, caution, precaution, and compromise. Yet the forced luxury of reading Oppen’s words so slowly while I was first trying to articulate for myself what this dissertation would become *was* wildly influential, as far as accidents go.

Less accidental, I think, was the fact that, during a time when so much of my own writing and thinking was made fragmentary by the machine that is my organism, I found a particular pleasure in the forms of Oppen’s work available to me as a reader—the segmented, conversational, postscript-ridden, conviction-filled letters; the layered, seeking pages of the Daybooks; the spare, almost halting serial poems. I found in these a trust in form and in a specific set of other people. I found an eye for the edges of the material world, an edge of realist anger about how we humans treat each other and about the kinds of atrocities that the world itself can somehow bear, and a brilliant hopefulness—a suspicion that we might now and then get the chance to rescue one another from what he called “the shipwreck of the singular,” at least for a time—and I needed those things (*New Collected Poems* 166). Or I suspected them, and I appreciated his ability to reassure me that aesthetics, “the small words,” which he loved, and

individual relationships all *matter*—in both senses of the word—because I couldn't conceive of the tasks that making a life would consist of if they didn't.

Materiality—as a catchall that foregrounds the physical nature of communicative artifacts, communicative situations, and communicators themselves—is hardly a new *topoi*. And yet, the rate at which theories foregrounding rhetoric's materialities are proliferating signals a *kairotic* moment in our disciplinary history, one that partakes of a larger “material turn” in the humanities and social sciences (one I gestured toward in the introduction to this dissertation). The spread of interest in Object-Oriented Ontology and thing theories that go by other names, like New Materialism and Speculative Realism, urges us to wonder: what exactly is the appeal of these philosophies? What is it they articulate newly? And how might such new articulations help us attend to rhetoric, writing, and the world in more robust or more diverse ways? In short, what do rhetoric, composition, and writing studies *in particular* stand to gain by entertaining various materialisms? In this chapter, I argue that tending the streamlined question, *what does it look like to be an ethical materialist composer?* is a promising way to begin answering that last question. I also argue that the interrelated fields of composition, rhetoric, and writing studies are particularly well suited to grappling with the problems of materialist ethics, and that this positions us to deliver useful insights to object-oriented thinkers who work primarily in other fields.

If anything has dogged the rise of object-oriented thinking, it has been the accusation that object-oriented theories spur unethical human activity—that they shuttle limited resources away from humans in need, and that, despite their emphasis on material forces and the substance of non-human objects, they still manage (somehow) to favor a disembodied conception of intellect. Clear articulations of materialist practices can serve as a concrete remedy to those abstract accusations, and the archives of rhetoric and writing studies are full of such examples; this is part

of why I offer the “complex descriptive system” anchored to Oppen’s life and writing practices—and constituted through the traces they left—as an example-to-think-with. Throughout the chapter, then, when I pay special attention to *how* Oppen’s embedded, materialist ethics coexist with intellectual principles that resonate with contemporary object-oriented principles, I mean to show that (while any theory can lead to unethical activity) the core principles of object-oriented work don’t themselves lead in a teleological way toward anti-humanism, an anti-left, or isolationism.

I recognize that it is easy to ask, why hold *this* individual up as an example? And I began this chapter anecdotally because, in some ways, the most honest answer I have is: given my commitment to exploring descriptive scale change and my desire to practice working reflectively and analytically at scales *slightly* larger than the individual human, I felt it was necessary for this first case study to begin *with someone*. And Oppen has been helpful *to me* as I have practiced describing and explaining (to myself and others) my hunch that there’s something *useful* about trying to talk about ethics by working with object-oriented studies, composition, creative writing, and rhetoric all at the same time. My experience leaves me hopeful that his example will be helpful to others; even if he is not, I hope that the way in which I describe his life, work, and ethics might spur readers toward new ways of thinking with their own best examples.

In writing about Oppen, I also borrow a modicum of exigence from Blau DuPlessis, her poetics admittedly influenced by many of the Objectivist poets, her relationship to Oppen revealed not only in the care with which she undertook the editorial project of the *Selected Letters* but also by a scattering of letters he wrote to her which are included in that collection. In a note written for *Pores: An Avant-gardist Journal of Poetics Research* in 2002—a note that confronts head on some of the political ugliness that’s “out there” for us twenty-first-century

humans, especially those of us who happen to be Americans—she re-articulates and so re-activates the courage that drove many of the poetic encounters I found moving in those letters.

She invites us to

remember with attentiveness the poetry and example of George Oppen, who wanted to look, to see what was out there, evaluate its damage and contradictions, to say scrupulously in a pared and intense language not what was easy or right or neat or consoling, but what he felt when all the platitudes and banalities were stripped away. It is the residue of vision, the residue of hope when all due skepticisms and judgments have occurred. He called it the real, “the real that we confront.” (n.p.)

The definitional move which argues that *the real* might just be what harbors *the residue of hope when all due skepticisms and judgments have occurred* is for me, as for Oppen and Blau DuPlessis, one of the things that suggests: an ethics based on *some kind* of object-oriented philosophy is both possible and potentially desirable.

Oppen wrote on more than one occasion, “I believe in the benevolence of the real” (*Selected Letters* 226). And Blau DuPlessis got it right: in context, this meant he was neither a naïve idealist nor a naïve materialist. He quite simply lived with others and with things and found that something we might call a situated, material metaphysics was part of what made that living possible. His biography suggests a keen ability to balance practical cautions and preparations with the “courage” required to see and “to say what it’s like out there ... out here” (ibid. 122). As Michael Davidson, a meticulous reader of Oppen and one of the curators first responsible for the collection of his papers at The Archive for New Poetry in San Diego, has observed: it may well be true: while under enemy fire in a foxhole during World War II Oppen’s “thoughts were sustained by poetry” as later poems recount, but it is also true that “he was

cautious enough to bury his dogtags, which would identify him to the nearby enemy as Jewish” (*New Collected Poems* xxvi). This anecdote acts as metonym for both the poet’s unshakeable faith in the necessity of language and his awareness of the dangers language summons; it yokes potential and limitation, poetry to an ethics and an idea of *ethos*—an individual body’s customs and accustomed places. And it reminds us that Oppen’s concept of courage is decidedly not one of unchecked bravado.

Much of Oppen’s poetry is not identifiable as political on its surface, yet when he moves to speak of “the air of atrocity” and observes atrocity is “An event as ordinary / As a president,” he is not speaking of an abstract or dislocated evil; he means and clarifies his meaning, “A plume of smoke, visible at a distance / In which people burn” (*New Collected Poems* 173). He doesn’t just mean that he knows these plumes happened; he means he has seen these plumes and in seeing knew precisely what they were. He means: the things he has come into contact with have changed him, and his poetry is in part a record of the way those encounters prepared him for future relations. Consequently, he modeled a complex way of accounting for a self via life and composed works, ethics and aesthetics; and his example provides tools for thinking through how a rhetoric of things that respects writing, wonder, and realism can contribute to flexible ontological models that are capable of guiding—and coordinating—our movements through present and future worlds.

The idea of a feedback loop linking experience of the extrahuman world, the private act of descriptive writing, and human participation in the extrahuman world is (although these are not their terms) part of what is at stake when the Objectivist poets deploy the word “sincerity.” They understand sincerity as a compositional ethic, and that ethic, around which the second half of this chapter is organized, is materialist in the sense that adopting it means *adopting an*

*insistent writerly stance* that a poem *ought to be beholden in some way* to the existing things of the world, even as the poem comes into being as an influential thing amongst other things. Even as and when those other things seem perhaps humanly unbearable rather than plainly beautiful.

It is by enacting the ethic of sincerity that Oppen builds up credibility; it is precisely the reservedness of his hopes that make them seem trustworthy and potentially useful—that we humans are fragile and limited and make bad decisions is *precisely* what suggests that we might *need* to borrow some benevolence from “the real,” that believing in that benevolence might help an individual human shape and sustain a life.

This perspective, like the perspective of Object-Oriented Ontology and the perspectives of many other New Materialisms and Speculative Realisms, is not one that is compatible with a strict definitional division between objects and subjects or a strict theoretical centering of the human.<sup>1</sup> Oppen diagnoses something like the anthropocentrism the new materialists attempt to diagnose when he identifies the “attempt to escape, / to lose oneself in the self” as “a medical faddism” (*New Collected Poems* 159). And in the same poem asserts, “The self is no mystery, the mystery is / That there is something for us to stand on” (*ibid.*). The self *is* but is not the central mystery. “I do believe that consciousness exists and that it is consciousness of something, and that is a fairly complete but not very detailed theology,” the poet says elsewhere (*Speaking With* 11). We can see in just these few claims a deep resonance with the ontology that guides Oppen’s Objectivist poetics and the ontology central to certain emergent strains of object-oriented thinking. In Graham Harman’s own words, what belonged to himself in the radical reading of Heidegger that undergirded Object-Oriented Ontology’s earliest incarnations and philosophical incantations was his insistence on the need for an approach that “relies only on a single, undeniable fact: *the fact that there are discernible individual entities at all*” (*Tool-Being*



44). Everything else that seemed novel or altered in his readings, he argued, relied on that one fact and the oddity of its being true. Every problem of his philosophy could be framed as a problem stemming from the existence of entities, plurality important.

In this kind of world, as Thomas Rickert summarizes, rather than being a given, “Individuation is an achievement,” and an unlikely one at that (*Ambient Rhetoric* 201). The (human) self is not central, but it remains interesting insofar as the world supports and gives rise to it, insofar as a boundary between self-and-world can be perceived as simultaneously there and not-there; in this kind of world, the way in which *individual* objects show up *for us* becomes a crucial point of inquiry for both philosophy and rhetoric. This resonates with the way complexity as an organizing principle calls attention to both the microenvironments that arise within complex systems and the ways in which seemingly “outside” environmental conditions impact open systems and their operations; it suggests that the “self” *might* be better thought of in relation to the emergent self-organization of complex systems (rather than in religious or Freudian terms).

Harman’s use of the word “discernable” foretells his later move to integrate the insights of the carnal phenomenologists into his nascent theory, and yet, what precisely this word means given the context of an object-oriented perspective is still not entirely obvious. Oppen helps us understand something about what it *might* mean when he writes to his sister June,

There is, in some places, at some times, for some people -- the simple intuition of existence. Of one’s own existence, and in the same instant the intuition, the pure intuition of the existence of things, absolutely independent of oneself, and, in some form, permanent... (*Selected Letters* 88, ellipsis his).

There *is* the human and the non-human, the human and the more-than-human. And, in later letters (and later interviews and daybook entries that quote them), Oppen further asserts that it is only by *assembling a collection* of such moments defined by our “pure intuition of the existence of things” that we build lives and communities.

In so doing, he sketches out a world in which our access to the most essential and life sustaining moments is *unpredictable* (they are grounded to places but few and far between) and *not strictly rational* (they are reliant upon intuition or a speculative realist attitude rather than a purely realist attitude). This resonates in a more than superficial way with the complex, aesthetic, and vicarious causalities of more recent object-oriented work.

In what remains of this chapter, then, the primary rhetorical job I undertake is to amplify related resonances, in hopes that doing so makes both Oppen and object-oriented thinking easier for diverse thinkers to mobilize. In service of the goal of amplification, in the above paragraphs I allowed a little slippage between Oppen’s use of the word *theology* and Harman’s use of the word *ontology*. This slippage emphasizes the delicacy required by the very thing that makes their theories of being compatible—the way in which it is a certain *faith* in the real or the actual *and* in our ability to encounter it that drives them both as thinkers, writers, and human beings. This slippage also helps emphasize the fact that there are people out there (actually a great many people) who have elected alternate belief systems. And some of the reasons people have or might elect such alternate systems bear a little scrutiny before we proceed.

## 2.1 OBJECT-ORIENTED ETHICS: SOME PROBLEMS AND PROPOSITIONS

Here is one reason for foraying into these scrutinies that is consonant with the core of object-oriented philosophy itself.

By coming into relation with one another, we produce new objects whose capacities and limitations remain at best partially known to us. Because theories, like letters and poems and people, are objects produced in this manner, they contain implications and properties that are unknowable *and* implications and properties that may be knowable but which are not yet (fully) known to us, even as we shape and adopt the linguistic bodies of these theories. This is, of course, simultaneously true of all theories and true in an exaggerated way when theories have emerged relatively recently and been expanded and reworked by relatively few individuals. It follows that there are many aspects of speculative realist, new materialist, and object-oriented ways of understanding the world that demand more attention than they have received yet. I suggested above that the question of how a thing becomes discernable is one such aspect. But overall, *which aspects deserve or require more attention?* remains a relatively open question. When I engage these theories (and others), I operate under the assumption: without the benefit of attention tuned to identifying and stretching their limitations and the refashioning this attention implies, these theories cannot be judged viable, useful, desirable, and/or capable of helping us act in ethical ways; which isn't to say that these theories cannot become (when deployed in flexible, context-depended ways) all of those things.

One reason I'm interested in how the history of poetics might help us better talk about the relationship between personal ontological beliefs and ethics—and one reason that I've chosen to emphasize Oppen's compositional ethics in particular—is that, as I noted above, the single broad

category of “ethical concerns” encompasses nearly all the most skeptical responses these theories have provoked. This fact is noteworthy because these theories are so diverse in their details.

Skeptical responses vary in their particulars. But they tend to emerge from the way models of human decision making which assume the primacy of individual agency and are governed by assessments of causality (models that enhance our ability to assign responsibility for unethical activity and place blame on individuals who make variously “bad” decisions) seem to fall apart when we put things and humans on equal ontological footing and/or when we assert that non-linear and vicarious causalities are the norm.

Critiques that begin with the failure of blame (whether implicitly or explicitly) often suggest that thing theories are (1) at best, not worth our time because they are ineffectual mediators in real world situations, especially those that require split-second moral, ethical, or political decision-making; (2) at worst, promoters of a deadly *aporia*—they distract human actors from questions that are “more important” in assorted political arenas. Critiques in this broad category may alternately suggest that thing theories are (3) *fundamentally dangerous* in a more active way, consigned by their promotion of flat ontologies to forever be excusing activities and ideas that can only—by any rational human being—be seen as unethical or amoral (e.g. acts of degradation that in practice rob *only* minorities, not all humans, of exceptional ontological status; a version of a very legitimate critique that I contextualize in brief below).

Within each of the three subcategories of skeptical response that the previous paragraph suggests, one can find abstract attacks supported by misconceptions about object-oriented values, disagreements about what those values imply, wholly accidental linguistic slippages, ungenerous readings, and/or conflation of the ideas embedded in thing theories and the public personalities of certain theories’ progenitors. Of the multiple speculative realisms, Object-Oriented Ontology

has suffered some of the worst attacks in this last subcategory, a fact that is understandable given the (at times) masculinist and openly abrasive public personas certain champions of the theory have cultivated for themselves; not to mention the writing styles those figures sometimes adopt, which can be seen as brash or flippant, especially if one is not predisposed to think of them as refreshing and productively playful. We see one version of this kind of attack in the way Nathan Brown accuses Timothy Morton's *Realist Magic* of offering readers little more than an "obscurantism" which evidences how OOO as a theory "is not aging well" in an essay aggressively titled *The Nadir of OOO*. I have to admit, I find this category of critique tedious and uninteresting, and I suspect of participating in the very anti-intellectualism it claims to be combatting by "calling out" OOO as lesser scholarship.<sup>2</sup>

And yet, as I've suggested already, despite all the negative responses to object-oriented work that are couched in wild fear, bravado, or the banal defense of academic turf, there are also criticisms and fears based on realistic recollection of damages caused by one-sided universalism and "equal-opportunity policies" that, when applied flatly, clearly enhance existing power imbalances rather than promoting more equitable systems. For a version of an attack on speculative realism that blurs the lines between personal dismissal and informed anxiety, we might turn to the way Andrew Cole—sparring with Graham Harman in a series of short essays on *Artforum*—calls OOO "the metaphysics of capitalism" arguing that, via its complicity with commodity fetishism it becomes nothing but "a vehicle for an anti-Left." While I am not inclined to agree with Cole or find the style in which he delivers his Kantian nitpicking tasteful, he does press us smartly to pay attention to the messy political and economic systems that inflect *every understanding of ontology available* to humans in the present-tense moment. And in this way, he points toward a kind of criticism that I feel obliged to take an interest in, which is the kind that

can help us extend individual new materialist ideas thoughtfully, ethically, and carefully as we carry them into the future. In short, there *are* specific concerns about the consequences of acting in accord with object-oriented ontological principles that have been articulated in intelligent, historically informed ways (often by insiders committed to the development of these theories).

Deciding which category a critique falls into isn't always entirely straightforward, which means that ignoring critics can't be understood as a strict best practice, even if we believe Latour when he declares that "critique has run out of steam" or Harman when he says "the model of intelligence as *critique* and *opposition* has entered its phase of decadence" (*Guerilla Metaphysics* 236). I believe that trying to draw distinctions between different kinds of critiques is important (especially *before* responding to them directly) for much the same reason that Franz Kline, in a 1958 interview addressing abstract impressionism in painting, made the claim "Criticism must come from those who are around it, who are not shocked that someone should be doing it at all. It should be exciting, and in a way that excitement comes from, in looking at it, that it's *not* that autumn scene you love, it's *not* that portrait of your grandmother" (O'Hara 51). This is to say, in the long term, the critiques of OOO and other thing theories that I am most interested in are those that have less to do with *whether* we should be doing object-oriented work in the first place and more to do with *how* we might do it better, and this includes promptings toward better understandings of *why* we might want to do it better.<sup>3</sup> Put another way, even though I don't buy Cole's case that OOO and its co-travelers are consigned to becoming anti-left, anti-humanists, I *do* believe that these theories *could* carry some people in those directions, and that championing pieces of these theories in my work requires me to emphasize in Latourian fashion that there are better and worse—more and less ethical—ways of integrating ontological work in general and object-oriented ontological work in particular into our writing lives and our worldviews. Further,

I believe observing that possibility means that if I cite these theories, then I have an obligation to try and describe some of the more ethical possibilities, to provide some descriptive modal maps that diverse people might use to move into their own futures. Here, then, is one place where this dissertation *about* description argues through its *deployment* of descriptions (that intentionally leave certain things out).

## **2.2 THE POETRY OF THINGS: HUMANS AND LANGUAGE IN AN OBJECT-ORIENTED WORLD**

In “Composing the Carpenter’s Workshop,” Nathaniel Rivers and James Brown describe in compelling detail an (imagined) composition class driven by object-oriented thinking. Their first-year course encourages students to create “interactive arguments” and to take full advantage of the “available means of persuasion,” a task which entails (for various student groups implicated in their tableau) 3D printing, glassblowing, woodworking, and the design of packaging materials. Brown and Rivers argue that—while it may seem strange—this approach, with its wide “range of compositions enacted ecologically introduces students to a multiplicity of composing skills, moves them to many scholarly activities across campus, weaves in an object-oriented approach, and positions rhetoric not simply as humans changing the minds of other humans, but as the work of relations, relations that remain strange and sometimes strained” (34). Theirs is a convincing argument for materialist composition—and an ethical one, given the way it envisions students using rhetorical concepts to address complex environmental problems—but it doesn’t exhaust the possibilities object-oriented composition presents. In addition, beyond usefully illustrating their pedagogical vision, this sample classroom illustrates a disciplinary meta-fact:

thus far, we've done a good job imagining ways in which interfaces between object-oriented thinking and rhetoric benefit both fields, and we've done a good job imagining how importing object-oriented principles can help us credit and consider the nonhumans involved in ecologies of communication, including those that conspire to make both reading and writing possible (the so-called "missing masses" of composition). There has, however, been less direct engagement with the two-way relationship between object-oriented thinking and writing-as-such. We could imagine this as a necessary corrective measure. Feminist new materialists and anti-correlationist speculative realisms alike (and this is, perhaps, the only thing such diverse theories share) took shape in direct relation to the way high literary theory fashioned discursive structures as prime movers. In short, wariness caused by the memory of post-structuralisms' discursive monopolies is part of what makes object-oriented thinking feel timely and useful. Still, despite this hard earned wariness, there are compelling reasons to persist in the development of an object-oriented approach to writing.

When I contend that histories of writing and poetics can help with the task of providing intelligent and humane responses to ethical critiques that have plagued new materialisms, I do so in part because I see poetic tools as widely useful to living (not just to writing poetry). But I also do this because I see a correspondence between worries those critiques are built on and another set of worries. While composition and rhetorical studies both have vested interests in language-centered (oral and written) traditions of argument, neither of these fields is (or has ever been) as neatly bounded as those investments suggest. Work that uses the tools and expertises of these fields but explicitly de-centers language is experiencing an undeniable heyday. And yet, such work continues to prompt responses that range from curious eyebrow raising to vehement refusals of consideration. Moreover, even those of us who find multimodal and multimedia



composition deeply exciting and believe that bodily, bestial, affective, object-oriented, environmental, and/or networked rhetorics describe segments of the communicative world well (often) remain willing to admit: we aren't sure *yet* what to do with our excitement or our intuitions and beliefs—either in the classroom or in our scholarship and extracurricular lives.

Another way to say that is to say, my personal intellectual history has primed me to look at the way critics talk about object-oriented studies and see two problem sets collapsing on one another. The first, a set built around the big question: how exactly *do* humans fit into (new) materialist philosophies and other object-oriented ways of thinking; the second, built around two linked questions: how *does* language fit into the work of multimodal composition? and what role *does* language play in the most expansive theories of communication, those that extend ecologically and far beyond semantic realms?

Implicit in my wording of those questions is the assumption that humans and language *have* specific roles to play. I take my place in the “us” generated by Levi Bryant’s assertion that,

While humans are certainly exceptional, for us they are not *ontologically* exceptional. To be sure, they differ in their powers and capacities from other beings, but they are not lords or hierarchs over all other beings. They are beings that dwell among other beings, that act on them and that are acted upon by them. (*Onto-Cartography* 215)

I further take as axiomatic the premise that one good way to discover what language can do—what it does best, and how its doing works—is to admit there are things the machine of language does poorly. There are, of course, also things language cannot do at all. This is part of what is at stake in the argument that multimodal composition is a turn toward a “composition made whole” rather than a turn *away* from language.<sup>4</sup> With the passage of time, this argument is increasingly acknowledged within composition and rhetoric as an effective and important re-framing. Object-

oriented thinkers should take that as an encouraging precedent because of the way this composition-specific argument contains structural echoes of the philosophical complaint that object-oriented thinking inspires a denial of human needs. This precedent also encourages object-oriented studies like mine to take the time to respond directly to the accusation that their frameworks imply a turn away from recognizing human vulnerability. The alternative is to claim that well-conceived object-oriented work always has as one objective a more precise understanding of *how* humans are vulnerable. That objective is consistent with the imperative to pay close attention to materials because many human vulnerabilities stem from the way we are sheathed in a shared world, one comprised of non-human objects and systems with their own vulnerabilities.

### **2.3 HUMILITY, GENEROSITY, AND ECOLOGICAL ETHICS: COMPOSING *MATTERING***

One way to suggest that OOO and other speculative realisms *might* be or become more ethically useful than their critics admit (or than they have been thus far) is to assert that these theories are in their structures and their avowed ontological beliefs more explicitly hospitable to humility, generosity, and wonder as guiding values than *many* other sets of philosophies.

In relation to recent trends in humanities and social science research, I have mentioned both a “materialist turn” and an “ontological turn,” and while some thing theories fit into both of those categories, one can certainly be a materialist that is interested only in epistemology, never ontology. It isn’t even hard to see how that happens.

Epistemology isn't just the domain of the question, what is the nature of Knowledge? It also encompasses many questions about lower-case knowledges' particulars. It encourages us to ask, how do we know *X* (where *X* can be anything)? And to ask things like, where is this knowledge instantiated? How is it distributed? Who knows it? Who doesn't? These are all questions that are crucial to living and to discerning *how things mediate* knowledge, flows of information, and power structures. But when we bracket off ontology (and being), we limit ourselves. Choosing to bracket ontology threatens to cut us off from the process of invention. If we've got *things we know* on one side of a balance, and *things that are unknowable* on the other, then where do *things that are knowable but that we don't know yet* go? Where do we put speculations that are grounded and carefully composed but which haven't achieved the status of fact? Where do we put things that our bodies know that we can't explain? How do we develop strategies for living with new-to-us phenomena? The goal in pointing these things out isn't to bracket off epistemology instead, it is to keep both domains in play in meaningful ways.

In one of many smart descriptions of the theoretical landscape we face here in the early-twenty-first-century, feminist new materialist Rosi Braidotti observes, "Doxic consensus is set: without steady identities resting on firm grounds, basic elements of human decency, moral and political agency, and ethical probity are threatened" (299). And yet, as she further observes, that belief "has little more than long-standing habits and tradition on its side" (299). If self is a modality rather than a fact (as Erin Manning has it), or if it is a performance (as the now long tradition anchored to Judith Butler's work would have it), or if we are vibrant objects with diverse powers and withdraw even from ourselves—that is, if we are *always ontologically capable of surprising ourselves*—then such *doxa* is difficult to live with. In denying the ethical viability of those human reserves and those worldly features that are least explicable and most

surprising, it is anti-creative. It short circuits invention by limiting our vision of “the available means” of composition to means that were developed by humans thinking of themselves and others as rational entities with stable identities. And it is anti-*kairotic*, in the sense that it is inhospitable to the kind of value Oppen recognizes when he argues it is possible to build a good life given access only to momentary experiences of groundedness.<sup>5</sup>

In discussing events—like a cancer diagnosis, the death of a loved one, the birth of a child—that are individually extraordinary but statistically unexceptional, writer Adam Phillips makes the case that “what was not possible all too easily becomes the story of our lives” (*xii*). And the question of who we become and how we proceed in relation to events of this kind is part of what I am pursuing in both this chapter and the next chapter.

It is in these moments when “what was not possible” has suddenly become the fabric of our lives that invention and ontological questions cease to be the domain of experimental poets and conceptual artists and become obviously, ordinarily, commonly necessary. And it is this fact that exposes why the *doxic* view Braidotti so eloquently resists is one that is not necessarily available to those in crisis or those made most vulnerable by infrastructures of inequity.<sup>6</sup> Vulnerability is, among other things, an openness to change—sometimes adopted by choice, sometimes latent in a body, sometimes forced upon a body by an environment. When vulnerability forces us to innovate, it is often unavoidable and painful; it also (sometimes) has the capacity to make available new perspectives that simply *were not available* in other, less stressful contexts. Thinking in this way allows us to begin developing a complex story of difficulty’s ability to prompt change even as we resist the (generally offensive, damagingly simplistic) idea that pain is redemptive.

Related to these observations: one of the things I appreciate most about (even the most detached and abstract) object-oriented philosophies is the way taking withdrawal—a measure of how objects are vacuum-packed, which Levi Bryant translates as a principle of (selective) “operational closure”—seriously helps readers, writers, and thinkers guard against the allure that the fantasy of aggregable perspectives exerts.<sup>7</sup> This fantasy, which is tied to the fantasy that access to better information *always* begets better decision-making, forgets that *knowledge about something is not synonymous with knowledge about how to live through and/or with it*. It is a fantasy that fails to account for the unthinkable, the inconceivable that has happened anyway, and the ways in which unthinkable things (both terrible and wonderful, very large and very small) shape individual human beings on a regular basis.

With withdrawal in play, we cannot deny the fact: even if we could aggregate all human perspectives, and with them all kinds of technical and computational perspectives (e.g. including in our aggregate vision the way an electron microscope or an infrared camera sees things the unaided human eye will never see, all the ways in which we’ve learned to extend ourselves and our minds) *and* we could somehow process and understand such a huge data set, there would *still* be something excessive about the objects at hand, some “unspeakable unicity” (Morton, *Realist Magic* 3). Even if we could see all perspectives, we still couldn’t get at certain *influential* properties. And this is terrifying—it means that things we cannot perceive might kill us without giving us any warning. Which is a simple extension of Levi Bryant’s observation, in an “environment that is perpetually changing and more complex than the manner in which an organic or cognitive machine is open, it is always possible that events will take place to which the machine is blind, but which nonetheless destroy the machine” (*Onto-Cartography* 60). Here

anthropocentrism fails doubly. Such structural vulnerability isn't uniquely human in any way. Neither can our humanity protect uniquely against its fact.

Still, there's a way to understand this condition as exciting in addition to terrifying. Sustenance might sneak up on us, too. Or, as Oppen puts it somewhat more starkly, "Possible to be somewhat frightened by being alive without regretting the fact that one is" (*Selected Letters* 258). All this is part of what I mean each time I say that withdrawal is an ontological condition which demands (among other things) our humility. And the kind of humility that extends from the principle that even the smallest and simplest seeming entities are complex and capable of surprising us is different in kind from the humility that acknowledges humans are—in terms of scale—quite small in the face of the complex system that is our universe.

Of course, there are many directions to take the question, *what can be done with this particular kind of humility and the consequences it portends?* And the direction that I've committed to taking in this chapter is the one that prompts us to ask next, how might taking this humility as a serious, rigorous guiding principle change our approach to composition? To acts of reading and writing? These are questions tied to the question, how can we leverage our knowledge of objects and their operations in a way that helps us devise tactics for living with the unthinkable?

In the next few sections of this chapter, I engage related questions via an exploration of how the idea of "craft," conceived both literally and metaphorically, operates. Continuing to think with the specific examples that Oppen's life and work offer, I show how the writerly model of care and humility that craft represents provides a way of bringing together writing-centric models of composition and work concerned primarily with the non-linguistic nonhumans of composition and rhetoric.

## 2.4 CRAFT AS A GENERATIVE METAPHOR: HOW THE POEM-AS-OBJECT GETS MADE

One piece of thinking about composition in relation to humility is aiming to always think expansively about who might be or become an “influential” or “excellent” or “interesting” or “life-sustaining” writer and how—which means at minimum not prematurely limiting this field to those we imagine have been born with the perfect constitution or an innate genius for language. Another piece is endeavoring to think expansively about what “good” or “influential” or “interesting” writing looks like and which qualities lend themselves to those kinds of descriptors.

It is common in creative writing circles, and to a lesser extent in the field of composition, to turn to the metaphor of “craft” whenever questions of rigor, method, quality, and/or the teachability of writing arise. Craft almost always invokes some degree of technical mastery, but how much this mastery defines a writer or a text is widely contested. It can be all that matters, or it can be a necessary but woefully insufficient condition for production of a compelling object. Tim Mayers documents some of the many ways in which working creative writers deploy and engage the term in his book, *(Re)Writing Craft: Composition, Creative Writing, and the Future of English Studies*, arguing along the way that compositionists, literary theorists, and creative writers still have much to learn from one another and that this learning will only be able to flourish if we make structural changes within English departments. Beyond agreeing wholeheartedly that such changes might transform our relationship to language-making in productive ways, I find myself wishing to echo his caution that we too often allow the word “craft” to stand as a simple synonym for mastery of the necessary-but-not-sufficient—the merely—technical aspects of “serious” creative writing.<sup>8</sup> Mayers is working against what he

terms the “institutional-conventional wisdom” of creative writing; “craft, in this context, refers to rules and techniques; it resides in surface or formal features of particular texts” (13). He goes on to locate an alternative richness in what he calls “craft criticism,” the kind of essayistic writing produced by creative writers and sanctioned by their involvement in wider academic structures, the kind of writing where—among many other things—craft might take on Heideggerian tones (or respond to alternate “great” thinkers in rigorous but creative ways) and/or where practical writerly experiences might be called upon to complicate or dispel altogether the myth of the creative genius (or to reaffirm it, depending on the writer-critic).

This yoking of craft and criticism offers to “rescue” the place of the dedicated creative writer in the academic field of writing studies—and, though this isn’t Mayers’ explicit argument, to reinvigorate “critique” by including under its umbrella a wide range of texts that are neither obviously nor easily understood as skeptical or critical. Indeed, much “craft criticism” is affirmative and inventive, easy to ally with what Barad and Braidotti invite us to. This offers a richly historied alternative to producing more essays in a category we might choose to call “institutional-conventional critique,” home of those decadent essays that *have* run out of Latourian steam, that deploy poststructuralism without *cura*.

While this is an exciting proposition, it does not explicitly rescue the richness of the technical itself. Which makes it a rather different case for the value of craft that the ones object-oriented thinking is most clearly primed to support; that the technical is never “mere” is a claim supported by both object-oriented thinking’s commitment to crediting the causal properties of surfaces and aesthetic structures and its alliance with the technical apparatuses writers live with, deploy, and develop (that is, craft).



In addition, for all the ways in which Mayers helps us rethink the institutional place of creative writing, “craft criticism” (a category that doesn’t include such informal writings as appear in places like letters and daybooks) isn’t particularly useful in helping us think about what writing studies can learn from a poet like Oppen—who published almost no secondary writings during his lifetime, a trait he shared with the other Objectivist poets, excepting Zukofsky. Oppen, of course, was also much more concerned with his place in the world than with his place in the academy. And given the prominence of public debates about the social roles that higher education can and/or should play, it is at least worth suggesting that Mayer’s interest in the academic emplacement of the creative writer isn’t truly separable from the way emplacement happens for all kinds of writers.

I suggest the benefit here of returning to the roots of the metaphor of craft itself. This is in part because, as Stephen Cope reminds, “For Oppen—who was employed at various times as a carpenter, construction worker, and factory worker—the issue of ‘craft’ in poetry was more than merely metaphorical” (*SPDP* 4). It wasn’t simply that Oppen liked to *imagine* that building a cabinet and making a poem shared something. His life gave him occasion to test the limits and uses of this kind of comparison. His bodily understanding of how things got made was always inflecting his adoption of fellow Objectivist poet Louis Zukofsky’s term “objectification,” informing what it meant for him to adhere to a compositional ethic that demanded the “making an object of the poem” and relied upon “the necessity of form” (*Selected Letters* 139).<sup>9</sup>

Of course, every poem might be considered an object in the sense that it, somewhere, materially exists—on a page or pages, as a series of sound waves travelling through the medium of air, or as a file stored on a hard drive. Even memories of poems are material. And one of the

things that I mean to emphasize here is how Oppen's wider attunements helped him tune to these "ordinary" materialities of writing, to learn from them while working.

That Oppen was both a literal carpenter and a writer interested in the objecthood of poems is particularly noteworthy for the Object-Oriented Ontologist, given the way Ian Bogost's vision of "philosophical carpentry" has gained traction in composition and rhetoric. A term for "constructing artifacts as philosophical practice," or for "making things to explain how things make their world," carpentry comes into play in forward-thinking defenses of multimodal composition and (either implicitly or explicitly) in conversations about how public writing and public rhetoric classrooms might more fully engage the non-human world (*Alien Phenomenology* 92, 93). This use of the term is based on the way Harman uses the phrase "the carpentry of things" (itself adapted in Harman's idiosyncratic reading from Alphonso Lingis) to refer to the way objects—by coming into relation—manufacture one another, but it also folds into that a romanticized notion of the craftsman. It "extends the ordinary sense of woodcraft to any material whatsoever—to do carpentry is to make anything, but to make it in earnest, with one's own hands, like a cabinetmaker" (93). And, as useful as the idea of philosophical carpentry has already been, there's a liability there—both in general and with regard to writing as a deeply material practice. Part of what looking to Oppen as maker helps make clear is that it isn't necessarily the *earnestness* of making via hand that distinguishes craftsmanship, rather it is a way of thinking that lets both the materials at hand and the body's *knowledge* of the task at hand (and the world) do at least some of the leading. Cope reminded us that craft for Oppen was *more than merely metaphorical* rather than claiming that it *was not metaphorical*.

As an actual cabinetmaker Oppen made language into objects. Yet, even for him, to be sophisticated about the relationship between world and word was very different from being

sophisticated about wood, about how it shrinks and how it cracks and how it might respond to a given tool. This dual-knowledge is part of what prompted him to caution directly, “The sentimental bourgeoisie believes—and I remember my father on this point particularly—that the craftsman has a certain manual knack and that he, the bourgeois, has a higher intelligence, but there’s something about his *hands* that just won’t work. Whereas of course it’s not the hands; it has nothing to do with the hands. It has to do with intellectual capacity” (*Speaking With* 115). I contend, of course, that the kind of intellect required by both woodcraft and wordcraft is wildly distributed, and that some of it likely does live in the hands.

Still, I consider myself duly warned. If we want to extend the sense of woodcraft but are not convinced that “earnestness” is the thing that’s most extensible (or most desirable as an extension), then we need to ask explicitly: What precisely is the nature of the difference between these kinds of careful making? Where are the most useful schisms in the metaphor of carpentry? How might identifying its “failures” help us extend the concepts of philosophical and rhetorical carpentry further? Where do carpentry and craftsmanship meet? Where do they diverge?

## **2.5 A TECHNICAL IMAGINATION: REALITY AND THE POSSIBILITY OF MEANING**

Philosopher Richard Sennett’s trans-historical study *The Craftsman* also tries to identify some aspects of craft that *do* cross mediums well. For him, there are indeed elements of habitus and worldview that many kinds of craftsmen share across not just mediums but also historical and cultural contexts; and he recruits diverse examples, ancient brick makers and contemporary computer programmers among them, to his case. In building the exigence for that study, he

argues first that “all skills, even the most abstract, begin as bodily practices; second, that technical understanding develops through the powers of imagination,” which is, of course, consonant with many rhetorical understandings of *technē* (10). And it is, I suppose, possible here to think about craft and carpentry in relation to a secondary, minor definition of the word *earnest*, where it appears as noun rather than adjective, as “a thing intended or regarded as a sign or promise of what is to come.” This sense derives from the way in which the Middle English *ernes* meant quite literally an installment paid to confirm a contract.

If to make a craft is not (or not only) to imagine that making by hand is somehow inherently more serious, more consequential and is instead to imagine that there exists a way of making—an *ethos* of craft—in which making acts explicitly as a kind of promise, a kind of engagement with the future—then I retract my issue with Bogost’s use of the term *earnest*.

This way of thinking, for me, opens a space in which the distinguishing feature of the craftsman is neither his hand nor his creative genius but rather his capacity for attunement, his ability to tune to (and so intervene in) the mechanisms by which these orders—the bodily and the intellectual, the technical and the imaginative—*co-inform* life and world. I contend here that it is precisely this kind of attunement which is exposed when we admit a relationship between the speculative aspects of Oppen’s realist ontology and the manual actions of his daily life, which included many kinds of daily writing practice. And I offer the suspicion: much of what Oppen means (and what many others mean) when uttering the word “intuition” in relation to “the existence of things” has to do with the way in which the imagination and abstract concepts, including ontological concepts, feed back into manual, technical ways of knowing.

As scholars intimately and physically familiar with Oppen's papers, Michael Kindellan and Michael Davidson each attest to the degree to which Oppen worked with and in relation to "ordinary" or daily aspects of materialism. The former remarks that

It is difficult to describe to the reader who has not seen Oppen's drafts just how extraordinary they are as records of process. His manuscripts and papers at UCSD are replete with copious amounts of typing and handwritten annotations crammed onto haggard-looking foolscaps suggesting incessant reworking. (n.p.)

And the latter reminds that something about this really isn't typical. As I noted early in this chapter, Davidson was one of the archivists responsible for Oppen's papers when they first arrived at The Archive for New Poetry, and he had special occasion to call the boxes those papers arrived as a "midden," implying the deeply instructive refuse of day-to-day life, but also underscoring that he had never seen someone's papers arrive *quite* like Oppen's did.

Prose and poetry were interspersed with grocery lists, phone numbers, quotations from philosophers, observations on films, tables of contents from books (his own and others). Every conceivable type of paper had been used, from cheap, high-acid newsprint (seriously decaying and flaking) to letterhead bond. Writing had been performed equally by typewriter and pen, the former often heavily annotated by the latter. Occasionally, passages of particular importance had been circled by crayons or felt-tipped pencil. (76)

Those papers have since been divided up into categories, made to fit (as best they might) the shape of an archive, but Oppen's daybooks still offer a visitable testament to the wildly material aspect of his writing life. Legendary in poetry circles even before a subset edited by Stephen Cope was published, these include the "Nailed Daybook," papers bound to a small block of wood with a single nail, the "Stapled Daybook," and the "Pipe-Stem Daybooks," also bound

with the objects their monikers suggest. Pins and pieces of wire take their place as binding agents too, and revision of letters and private musings (not just poems) is often sedimented in the way of geology—through layers pasted upon layers, betraying a sculpic quality.

In short, the physical artifacts of Oppen's life are stunning. Beautiful for their insistence upon trying—again and again—to get things right, into words, not for their uniformity. This suggests, I think, the way in which for Oppen the materiality of writing was not of value in-and-of itself. He was a publisher as well as a writer, and the white spaces of finished manuscript pages clearly held import for him, too. All this materialist practice comprised necessary rather than sufficient condition for the composing of objecthood. For Oppen poems-become-objects are not distinguished by their surfaces alone but rather by their ability to “hold the meanings which make it possible to live,” which meant for him, “one's sense of reality and the possibility of meaning” (*Selected Letters* 123). It is that last phrase that draws him together most clearly with speculative realists, both of the object-oriented ontologist variety and other varieties. Beyond the material supports, both those we understand and those we don't, that make biological life possible, it is not the content of a meaningful discourse or ideology that makes life possible. Rather, it is the possibility that meaning *might* exist. Futurity and potentiality mingle here. And, here again, “one's sense of reality” is not a strict nod to an anthropocentric phenomenology but rather a nod to the humanly unpredictable phenomena which permits “in some places, at some times, for some people -- the simple intuition of existence.”

## 2.6 BUILDING A SURROGATE FOR ONTOLOGY: EXTENDING THIS OTHER SENSE OF CRAFT

The condition: *we might live—it is possible* doesn't mean we will get to. Yet, we need it to go on. It is as nontrivial as human conditions come. That we might need to do things to shore this possibility up is a thing Oppen believed and a thing our present tense demands. The idea of a craft ethos that demands attunement to environments is useful here, too. So is the reminder: where craft conventionally means to make skillfully, the way a member of a craftsman's guild might, it can also refer directly to those things that have been *well* made—by a skilled human or team of humans or in collaboration with non-humans, by robots or biological systems, even—and sent off into the world. In this sense, the poem as object shares something with seacraft and aircraft. Which makes it is worth note that, in addition to being a carpenter, Oppen was a skilled sailor who took deep pleasure in things that taking to the sea revealed to him, while respecting the threat that being ill-prepared there might pose to his life. What exactly this lent his philosophy and his poetry is, of course, part speculative, part substantiated by the writings he left and the writing of those who knew him well.

Oppen's wife Mary shared as a partner in both his artistic endeavors and his itinerant adventures, and it would be remiss to discuss his ethical convictions without mentioning briefly her participation in the sustenance of those convictions.<sup>10</sup> Their mutual friend Bobbie Louise Hawkins acknowledges this relationship succinctly when, asked to contribute to a special George Oppen tribute in *Jacket Magazine*, she wrote of George and Mary both, "I love the friends I have who are couples that work and continue to work, both of them looking full size, and the warmth between them an atmosphere." It is, given this idea of atmosphere, more than fitting to draw an introduction to their mutual way of thinking about the sea from a passage in Mary's

autobiography that detailed a 1929 trip down the California Coast. Before weather-watch existed and without a radio, their survival depended on both manual skills—sewing torn sails to keep them from disintegrating, climbing a mast to sight a narrow passage—and “uncanny luck,” a category in which Mary included the fact that the young Oppens both had excellent eyesight (which allowed them to observe marker buoys in difficult seas when others might have missed them). “Despite the fallibility of a sailboat and the impossibility of steering a straight course, despite currents, fog or nighttime, we still find our way,” Mary wondered more than she declared (102). And she elaborated, “We always test our compass and make sure it will be as accurate as possible, but there are currents that change with the tides and with the winds” (ibid.). In short, sailing demanded testing and re-testing of the degree to which their best tools represented the world. It required constant re-aggregation of information in the *Pacific Current Book*, knowledge of additional currents acquired via either personal experience or from other sailors, and best guesses about current conditions. And in requiring this constant re-aggregation it revealed: that things exist *out there* means that we humans can and do get things wrong. Faced with complexity, what is most surprising really is that we get things right *enough* to survive at all. Being realists required of the Oppens, as it requires of each of us, a measure of humility.

Put another way: seacraft make good teachers—both as physical objects and as metaphorical grounds—because the ocean cares more for ontology than for epistemology. Travel by sea reveals the degree to which even the most scientific knowledge retains within itself a bit of mystery. As John Durham Peters notes in his wild, wide-ranging theory of elemental and infrastructural media, the craft that is a boat or ship is “an enduring metaphor of the ways in which we stake our survival on artificial habitats amid hostile elements—that is, of our radical dependence on technics” (101). He means this quite literally. For him,



The ship is not only a metaphor; it is an arch-medium that reveals the ontological indiscernibility of medium and world. On a ship, existence and technology are one. Your being depends radically on the craft. If the journey goes well you disembark onto terra firma and leave the craft behind, but if it starts to malfunction during the journey, catastrophe looms: the ship's fate is your fate too. The vessel stands in for being. Craft builds a surrogate for ontology. (102)

If medium and world are indiscernible, then of course the poetic (and object-oriented philosophical) insistence that language and form matter—that they influence and act, that the aesthetic is causal—seems a kind of given. Yet there's more that we can glean from this version of the craft metaphor.

Meaning *might exist*. If Oppen is right that this makes it possible to live, then the idea of a “surrogate for ontology” is an important concept. And the poem can do something like what the ship can do with regard to this concept. It can stand in. This, of course, is something language in general might do, not just poetry. Description understood broadly asks for just this, “world into word,” words as surrogate for what exists out there.

The problem for Oppen isn't that prose can't stand in; it is rather that it stands in too well, too easily. “Words,” he writes in his *Stapled Daybook* “are the constant enemy”— all too often, we find that a “thing seems to exist because the word does” (qtd. Cope, *As If*). And only because the word does—not because the writer had an experience of the thing. Which isn't a situation of interest for Oppen. The value of poetry, for him, lies at least partially in the fact that “It is possible to say anything in abstract prose, but a great many things one believes, or would like to believe or thinks he believes will not substantiate themselves in the concrete materials of the

poem” (*SPDP* 32). There isn’t the same pressure on prose to care for language in a way that demands each word become (for lack of better adjective) *good-enough* as a stand in.

This suggests something like the value Donald Revell ascribes to poetry when prodded with the claim that the form itself perhaps isn’t relevant in the face of contemporary political realities. His answer begins with the admission, “Nobody much reads poetry, but that’s not the point,” and it continues,

Nobody much knows about genetic engineering. We’re all affected by it; the history of the species is going to be changed forever by genetic engineering. It doesn’t matter that people aren’t lining up in bookstores to buy the latest book by a genetic engineer just as it doesn’t matter that people aren’t lining up in bookstores to buy the latest book of poetry. Poems are where the language gets made. It gets cleansed or it gets soiled. It gets healed or it becomes sicker—through poetry. When something goes right or wrong in language it goes right or wrong first in poetry. (Interview with Todd Marshall, n.p.)

Oppen, of course, approaches this ever-present question more succinctly. Asked explicitly, “Is the writing of poetry a political act, do you think?” He responds, “It changes the world, doesn’t it?” (*SWG* 116). Poetry re-makes the world, not in its image but in its interactions. What we believe and what we believe gets worked out in the poems.

## **2.7 TO EXIST IN ANY CONSIDERABLE WAY: WHERE THE POEMS COME IN**

In attempting to elucidate a relationship between craft as seacraft and poetics—thinking of both poetry itself and other forms of language filled with poetic *cura*—as something poised to stand in for ontology, it bears note that sailing wasn’t just a youthful pastime for Oppen. Neither am I

imposing from the future-outside the idea that there was a connection between Oppen's love of boats, his respect for ocean ontologies (and their distinctness compared with city ontologies), and his poetics. During what were arguably his most productive years in a more traditional poetic sense, the Oppens spent a significant number of summer months in coastal Maine. In a note to his friend Diane Meyer dated July 1968, George asserted that one of the great values he found each time they returned to that place was the particular kind of daily sailing it offered easy access to, and the way that sailing seemed to restore in both him and Mary an everyday sense of balance, which was related for him to a sense of poetic judgment that sometimes felt distant when he was in New York.

The cruises re-establish a standard ----- one begins again to know how good a poem must be really to exist in any considerable way in the face of the forest and rocks and ocean

or how decent it must be in the face, if it has a face, of the little boat (*Selected Letters* 178)

he writes. This, of course, is in keeping with his broader compositional *ethos*. The world must provide ground and exigence for a poem. And, once made, the poem as object remains bound to the processual inasmuch as it bears significantly on what it means for the poet him or herself to go on living with the "things as they exist." If a poem, having been released into the world by the poet, cannot face the rock islands and the pine trees, then it is not well composed. And, of course, this standard is one that remains in flux, in composition even after many years of sailing, many years of visiting different coasts.

The next line in that letter is, "We're STILL learning how little the little boat is" (178). Part of the miracle of this learning is in the way that finding the little boat to be even smaller than

they first imagined—an ontological truth that might have come as a disappointment—is what allows the Oppens to anchor in creeks and paddle up on beaches, to act as “canoe-ing naturalists” as well as open-water sailors. Imagination, vision, and access to the world as it exists are bound in a very literal way in this minor example. Bound via a mechanism that balances humility (a measure of lack and limitation, as much as it is anything else) with the flexibility afforded by approaching smallness with generosity of vision (where generosity speaks to abundance insofar as it permits: an excess which can be engaged, which can perhaps be given way). This all another way of saying something like: *hope when all due skepticism has occurred*.

Light is the basis of optics, that which makes vision as a concept make sense and allows one to see specific things (a hill, a rock, a girder, a city street, a lover, deer come to graze in the yard). Sunlight is also the source—mediated by the photosynthetic process of green plants—of virtually all the energy used by living things. Both “light” and “image”—a word for (among other things) a thing vision makes—are terms that for Oppen always involve the physical; as literal terms, they are limited by their ties to the world. But they are also always metaphor, which is to say, they are *always also* bearers of more than their commonly understood and accepted dimensions. Robert Creeley, himself an institution of American poetry and the kind of spare prophet of the real that object-oriented studies might learn a lot from, who knew to write a “Prayer” that began—

Bless

something small

but infinite

and quiet.

(in *Poetry* 1966)

—writes also in his introduction to Oppen’s collected poems,

I think much becomes clear, in fact, if one recognizes that George Oppen is trying all his life to think the world, not only to find or to enter it, or to gain a place in it—but to realize it, to figure it, to have it literally in mind. Poetics itself is the art of figuration, of configuring, so to speak, of making a picture, an *imago mundi*, which can serve as the (or a) whole world. (n.p.)

And that last parenthetical is worth note. Imaging *a whole* world is a required condition of humanity, and it is a different project from imagining *the* world. What the two have to do with each other is a question of the “shining out of phenomena,” as Cope reminds; for Oppen there is no exigence for poetry without an image, and for him the image

is no pre-known entity or calculable metaphor but an unformed, wordless state—a chance event, striking object, cluster of sensations, or piece of art—demanding language: the creative occasion of a rightness, the ‘moment of conviction’ when he knows, in unself-deceiving accuracy, what he really feels and believes” (*Speaking With* 2-3).

The image is fundamentally *kairotic*. The object that is the self is formed through a calculus of demanding glimpses.

Worldly encounters offer a heuristic for measuring one’s “finished” poetic, written work. Do the poems stand up as objects? As things that might live well among other things? Oppen asks these questions again and again of his own works, across the many decades of his life and career, and in so doing leaves us a way to think about measuring our own writing. His poetics are clearly suggestive of the idea that the process of making poems re-makes writers as humans in ways that are worth paying attention to, and there are few reasons for us to believe that other makerly activities cannot benefit from similar standards.

In other words, the writing of poetry becomes how the poet tests whether and where he has come into contact with the external object world (*despite* the way objects withdraw from view, from rational reckoning) and whether or which such contacts might sustain a life. Of course, Oppen understood the seeming contradictions and disjunctures that someone might perceive while listening to him speak about these processes—and he did, notably, speak often about these philosophies, despite not writing critically or publically about them.

In defending the urgency of the kind of careful, measured linguistic work he dedicated his late life to, the kind he means these heuristics to portend, Oppen restates himself in part because he knows that his poetic belief system—his ontology—isn't readily translatable into language or self-evident to his interlocutors, even when they are practiced poets he admires (and who clearly admire him). He asks those who listen to him to come along *as if* what he has said is true, in order to see where it can take whoever is present. For instance, in a 1968 interview with L.S. Dembo, the poet says,

I'm trying to describe how the test of images can be a test of whether one's thought is valid, whether one can establish in a series of images, of experiences ... whether or not one will consider the concept of humanity to be valid, something that is, or else have to regard it as simply being a word. (*Speaking With* 11)

In the same interview he also admits,

I realize the possibility of attacking many of the things I'm saying and I say them as a sort of act of faith. The little words that I like so much, like "tree," "hill," and so on, are I suppose just as much a taxonomy as the more elaborate words; they're categories, classes, concepts, things we invent for ourselves. Nevertheless, there are certain ones without which we are really unable to exist, including the concept of humanity. (10)

Here, I think, we finally see in clear, direct terms what's most at stake for Oppen in the "health" of language; what's at stake for him as a humanist in asserting the primacy of the object world and the urgency of the need for words that remain tied to that world. For Oppen, the poet's primary ethical obligation is to act in a way that ensures: language might (continue to) have meaning. A variant on the larger theme: meaning might exist.

This is what gives him permission to believe "a poem may be devoted to giving clear meaning to one word" and to spend much of his life attempting to figure out how to get such clarity into words (*Selected Papers* 78). And what this protects is precisely those very, very few words that do something only words can do, and without which we would not be able to live—which is to say, commune and communicate. Words bind us together, however messily. They offer a response to the repeated theme: "the single person can't live. Impossible to" (*Speaking With* 167). They offer a way to *choose* to be rescued, to rescue one another by holding out

the meaning  
of being numerous  
despite being  
obsessed, bewildered  
by the shipwreck  
of the singular

(*New Collected Poems* 166).

Sometimes we find common ground, both literally and metaphorically. World and word both have their parts to play. So, *I'm trying to describe*, the poet says. Because *trying to describe* is, in a way, what he is always trying to do.

His method seeks to care for language in a way that demands each word become a *good-enough* stand in. He believes that ethics means one ought to have an opinion about the world. And he is trying to protect the opinion that our world—our image of the world—is better with words like humility and humanity in it. Here, too, as exemplary ethical materialist poet, his stakes *always* take the form “Not truth but each other” (*New Collected Poems* 183). This is part of why for Peter Nicholls to write of Oppen is to write “Of Being Ethical,” and it is part of what Cope is hinting at when he observes “as much as any other twentieth-century poet, Oppen held himself and his verse accountable to stringent ethical as well as aesthetic demands” (*Selected Papers* 6).

We might pause here to remember Latour’s assertion that one of the most compelling reasons for us to cast our lot with compositionism is the inescapable fact that “a composition can *fail*” (“Compositionist Manifesto” 474). As I’ve already noted, this fact is particularly important for Latour because it “draws attention away from the irrelevant difference between what is constructed and what is not constructed, toward the crucial difference between what is *well* or *badly* constructed” (ibid.). Still, even after one has cast one’s lot with compositionism, the question, *how to know what is well constructed?* remains a situation-dependent plague, especially when the composition at hand is made of language.

Despite language’s ability to act as a “surrogate for ontology” or “stand-in for what is,” rarely does it fail so obviously, so dramatically as the poorly crafted ship that sinks in rough seas. Rather, it tends to fail slowly and insidiously, in ways that escape notice. This is Revell’s investment in the way poetry tends the health of language. It is what longtime *Poetry* editor Christian Wiman is working with when he summarizes what he learned from oft-quoted critic R.P. Blackmur by saying: what happens when you encounter good poetry, poetry well



composed, is that, “It suddenly makes the amount of reality you have in your life greater” (in an *On Being* interview, n.p.). And in Oppen’s own lexicon, it is what is at stake in the shorthand phrase “a test of sincerity,” which stands in for the complicated ethical calculus that a poet is (or, rather, should be) always operating in relation to. Consequently, Oppen’s work on sincerity is one of the places where his example suggests methodological insights that new materialists who aren’t scholars of writing and rhetoric might learn from.

## **2.8 WHAT HORIZONS WE TURN CARE TOWARD: OBJECTIVIST SINCERITY AND THE ACT OF REVISION**

Even though Oppen was well and widely read, as I suggested in the introduction to this chapter, the term “sincerity” in his usage wasn’t intended to carry any of the long cultural histories of the idea that are likely to be immediately present for us as readers; his usage did not favor the Aristotelian, the Confucian, or the Christian, all of which—despite their differences—might be used to suggest sincerity’s membership in the moral category “human virtues.” For the Objectivist poets as a group, sincerity *decidedly* did not mean freedom from guile or suggest actions predicated on strong, personal emotions. Indeed, whatever Objectivist sincerity is, it “is usually not self-expression,” to use Charles Altieri’s words (33). A fact that befits a group of writers for whom self was not the central question.

One quick primer on the Objectivist poets’ specialized use of term “sincerity,” appears in the long poem “Route,” a centerpiece of 1968’s *Of Being Numerous* (Oppen’s best-known volume). There, the poet describes the confluence of his vocation and its power in these terms:

Not to reduce the thing to nothing-----

I might at the top of my ability stand at a window

and say, look out; out there is the world                    (*New Collected Poems* 193-194).

In context, this passage is hopeful, almost joyful, rather than melancholy (as it might be for another writer). It unfolds as if to presage Latour's much later claim that being "irreductionist" is "the highest ethical standard" an account might pursue ("On Actor-Network Theory"). This passage also suggests the "official" definition of Objectivist sincerity first deployed by Zukofsky in the editorial essay that introduced the idea of being Objectivist to the poetry world. In his recasting, the word became a name for engagement with "the detail, not mirage, of seeing" (*Prepositions* 13).

Following these framings, we find that Objectivist sincerity is the part of composition over which the ethical composer exerts the least explicit control, over which he or she has the least subjective say. Sincerity is a gravity. It both exposes world and binds us to it. This usage rhymes with a similar technical use of the term that appears "without cryptic moral insinuation" in Harman's attempts to fill out the hows of his object-oriented metaphysics, where "the sheer sincerity of existence" exerts an undeniable force (*Guerilla Metaphysics* 135, 138). It follows that one way to think the relation between Objectivism and Object-Oriented Ontology and other speculative realisms is to reaffirm their dual investment in sincerity as a quality that lends *just a little* something empiricist to otherwise phenomenal, invention-oriented traditions of thought.

When adhered to poetic practice as a gauge of something like rigor, sincerity takes on a specific flavor that has consequences for how we understand what poetry (and all sincere composition) makes possible. Poems become objects that in their making reveal relationships between things and change poets by changing their ways of relating. They become records of

attunements, which are necessarily world and situation dependent. Oppen was more vocal than the rest of the Objectivists about how taking sincerity seriously resulted in a world where each poem-in-progress acted as gauge and taught a variety of lessons, which in turn transformed dedicated writers in small but significant ways. Among those things that he reiterated often was this premise—it is possible to experience “a moment, an actual time, when you believe something to be true, and you construct a meaning from these moments of conviction” (*Speaking With* 10). We have little access to Truth writ large, but *momentary* contact with aspects of ontology is possible. Hence, accrual over time and across space is an important part of *how* the lessons a poet learns from writing poems might become building blocks for a life.

Where sincerity as a quality has to do with the integrity of worldliness—the sense that a poem *well made as an object* might have the same substantiality as something like a boat—that poetry provided a “test of sincerity” meant for Oppen that a “poem *is* a test of what you believe and what you believe, if not of truth” (*Speaking With* 84). What you believe meaning what populates your sense of existence. Of course perception is flawed, the poet admits again and again, but it follows from the existence of *something*. And that following is consequential. It matters, then, whether or not one’s perception of an object or an image or a concept or a truth can be relied upon at all—whether it is more “mirage” or more “detail”—and this is something the strict crafting of a poem can help one discover. It also, interestingly for description as the mode most concerned with the status of the detail, suggests a paradigm in which “the whole” is not the antonym that the detail works against.

Consistent with his dedication to the idea that there are certain things poetry *ought* to do was the fact that Oppen was a wild and persistent reviser. He had “an ear that [wa]s apparently inexhaustible,” according to Mary, who often saw him talking his poems into existence; and he

once told a pair of interviewers, “I can read the same line five hundred times and it doesn’t jangle or jingle. I still hear what I want it to be, even though it’s not there” (*Speaking With* 114). Any practiced writer will have a sense of how unusual this skill is. Attendant to this, one way to think of the rich material nature of Oppen’s drafts is to think of them as synaesthetic—visible and tactile—manifestations of this way of working with persistent aural intuitions about the desires of poems (objects) and world.

There’s something of this in the meaningful stutter that proclaims a poem not a test of “what you believe” but of “what you believe and what you believe.” In short, Oppen never rests on his knowledge, his propensity for repetition and his propensity for revision are both the propensity to ask: *do I still believe this, does it still hold up in the face of the variant world?*

Praxis—in his case, the body seeing and thinking and writing and hearing and sailing and writing and talking and making cabinets and writing and revising—bears out temporary (partial) answers to his biggest questions, what he calls the “old questions,” which Robert Baker summarizes in the list, “who we are, where we are in relation to others, where we are in relation to the whole, what horizons we are to turn our care toward, how we are to live” (165). Coming to such answers requires both happenstance (contributions from the world) and directed, conscientious human labor.

Coming at things this way forces us to keep both epistemology and ontology in play in our theorizations (of ethics and relations and whatever else we might choose to theorize). Taking epistemology alone as enough has proven itself inadequate to the task of describing how world initiates collaborations with us—and how we react to those initiations, given the problem that what world and humans share is *nearly* everything. In that expansive category, of course, we can’t quite place language. That language *shapes* the non-human world but is not *shared* by it

matters for rhetoric and all kinds of writing because it permits more generous (or at least more expansive) looks at sources of linguistic inspiration and difficulty, especially difficulty. Sometimes, language's failures point eloquently (as an epigraph to this dissertation's introduction declared) to our co-existence with things unlike ourselves.

Recalling Scot Barnett's generative summary in which object-oriented rhetoric (to which I added an object-oriented poetics) requires not just crediting the existence of objects but also our "attunement to the reality and implications of these objects coming into relation with one another," gives us a way of discussing the sincere poem's implications for the poet (n.p.). It also prompts us to observe just how close the relationships are between attunement as a concept, sincerity as a concept, and the idea that the practice of revision might have an ethical component—that revision itself might be conceptualized as an ethical response to object lessons (issued by a range of objects, including but not limited to early drafts and other textual objects).

Revision is a longstanding interest of composition and creative writing. But it is also an integral part of even the most austere, traditionally humanist rhetorics—imagining that persuasion is a worthwhile task requires imagining that people can change their minds, revise their own ideas. Revision, then, is about promise more than it is about perfection. Where sincerity and *cura* have emerged in this chapter as key terms for handling the present tense—the situating world—with dedicated thoughtfulness, and where attunement helps us think of moving with (composing with) things as they exist, revision is about heading towards possibility. As such, it requires both an ability to engage contingency and a faith that there will be a future. And, of course, *what's not there* sometimes means *not there yet* and sometimes means *what can't be gotten into language*.

The confluence of revision, sincerity, and attunement also points toward the way in which writings mediate communal values over time. Which makes this, perhaps, a decent place to point out that the Objectivist re-casting of sincerity first appeared alongside the previously mentioned re-casting of the term “objectification” (as “the making an object of the poem,” which took place the introduction to a 1931 special issue of *Poetry* magazine). Together, these terms offered a way for Zukofsky to talk about poets he saw as dedicated to “thinking with the things as they exist” (13). That particular issue placed Oppen alongside Carl Rakosi, Charles Reznikoff, and Basil Bunting, who would also stay identifiable as Objectivists, as well as William Carlos Williams, whose modernist imagism was a clear precursor, and several poets who maintained little further relationship to Objectivism or one another.

This “origin story” is noteworthy in part because it shores up the notion that, from the start, Objectivism was less an organized movement or coherent group and more a name for a group of individuals that seemed to share a few significant things in their approaches to poetry, which is to say: a group generally dispersed in space and time but made coherent via praxis and shared ontological commitments, e.g. shared notions of what a poem *is*. This is an important distinction because it articulates Oppen’s example in relation to the Objectivists’ collective example, which in turn acts as a prompt that urges us to develop ways of describing aesthetic and ethical coordination between humans and nonhumans *but also* across distances and identity- , belief- , and experience-based human-to-human differences (a challenge each of the remaining chapters of this dissertation takes up in a distinct way). This loose collective’s “origin story” also situates the reminder: practice and thought aren’t just intermingled, they are inextricably—complexly—intermingled.

What we believe isn't non-trivial because thought is more important or more accessible than the object world; rather it is non-trivial because the two are, it bears saying yet again, complexly and inextricably co-extensive. Figuring out what we believe is non-trivial because we often act based upon what we believe—a statement that does not preclude our sometimes acting in ways that contradict our avowed beliefs. Getting things wrong has real, material, consequences for which we are (at least) somewhat responsible. Rickert elaborates the situation this way:

transformations that are accomplished through rhetoric can and often do lead to actions, however one understands rhetoric to proceed. That is, performing rhetorical acts does not require completely grasping all that is entailed in the performance. Getting a better grasp, however, offers insight, opportunity, and other advances—about rhetoric, about human being, about the world. (*Ambient Rhetoric* xiii)

Which can include insight into opportunities to treat one another better in both small and large ways. Here, again, we see what it looks like to operate *as if* truth—and world—exist; what it looks like to hold beliefs while skirting the most dangerous forms of *doxa*, to avoid both the myth of the wisdom of the crowd and the overvaluing of individual magical thinking, to further avoid either overvaluing or undervaluing what scientific knowledge and instrumentation suggests to us about our world.

Here again, as above, we can only suggest that being earnest is relevant if the world “earnest” suggests a two-way contract with the world more than it suggests anything else. We also find one origin of Oppen’s insistence upon the import of the small, his interest in the way attention to detail accrues—details, like small words, aren’t all there is, but they are more difficult to falsify than grand visions, and so provide ballast (especially where grand visions and

abstract words like “humanity” prove themselves deeply necessary). Moreover, the act of writing a poem isn’t an act that requires the “sincerity” of the poem or poet but an act that inducts poem and poet into a specific relation; which is to say, sincerity is a relational quality, a modal term—not a human attribute. This is why it is plausible to call it a compositional ethic, given the assumption that ethics involve opinions about best practices of relation.

This is also one place where Oppen’s sincerity diverges productively if minorly from Harman’s. For Harman, sincerity is universal in a way that not only permits humans to have this quality but insists upon their being unable to escape it; this means smugglers and double agents are as sincere (as absorbed in being exactly what they are) as saints and infants (this is how he deletes the association between the term and being guileless); however, Harman also allows for “special variations on sincerity that *do not* occur at all moments,” including comedy (agent of humor) and metaphor (agent of allure) (*Guerilla Metaphysics* 136). It seems fair to declare the exercise of Objectivist sincerity a special variation on a related theme. And it is notable that these “exceptions” all have to do with relations in which expectations are somehow upended by the world. Where any human might always be “sincerely” human in Harman’s sense, one is much more rarely *absorbed in being exactly* a human-sheathed-in-a-world. The awareness—of both possibilities and limitations—sparked by shifting between these two kinds of being are what suggest Objectivist poetics as ethical tools and what align them with projects like *Ambient Rhetoric* and the complex ecological composition of scholars like Cooper and Syverson.



## 2.9 BETWEEN WHAT THERE IS AND TURNING TO OTHERS: POLITICS AS ITS OWN POETICS

Perhaps the most striking thing about Oppen really is the way his abiding faith in poetry's powers sustained itself *despite* his deep commitment to the world as it sheathed him. He "began as a poet in the objectivist weather of modernism" (Baker 55). His first book, *Discrete Series*, appeared in 1934 and featured a preface by Ezra Pound. Combined with the force of his poetic friendships, this well received volume seemed to assure him a decidedly literary career, but at the time of its publication he was already moving into a poetic silence. His second book, *The Materials*, wasn't published until 1962. This 28-year "silence" was neither historical accident nor a renouncement of the values that working on his early poems had helped him refine. What it tells us is that even for Oppen poetry was not the answer to everything, every problem.

Oppen joked in later interviews that it had simply taken him 20 years to write the next poem, and many critics and writers expressed public disappointment upon realizing that it seemed he had, in fact, as reported, actually *not written any poetry at all* in the intervening years (as opposed to just not publishing any). But to suspect that something like "writers' block" or lack of inspiration was at work betrays the situation's complexity and the complexity of Oppen's relationship to poetry and the world. And it throws suspicion on individualist narratives that might (anthropocentrically) place a human inspiration rather than a worldly sincerity at the heart of writing itself.

On returning from a trip to Mexico and California in 1934, the Oppens found "families sleeping on their household goods, piled on the sidewalks in front of their apartments;" faced with the emergent conditions of the Depression, George and Mary joined the Communist Party in New York in 1935 and became deeply involved in labor organization efforts (*Meaning a Life*

151). As Mary reported it, at the beginning of that stage in their lives, they “said to each other, ‘Let’s work with the unemployed and leave our other interest in the arts for another time,’ ” and this betrayed a sense that one couldn’t produce *sincere* art while in the party, especially if one was a prominent member, that one had to choose; Oppen’s interest in the integrity of language and poetic language was an important salience of his silence, then (ibid.). This is deeply consonant with the sense that the importance of poetry-as-such has to do with *kairos*. One lesson Oppen’s example teaches is that poetic principles need not be abandoned in moments when the making of poems is not the most urgent task at hand.

There are times when one ought to choose to be a revolutionary and times when one ought to choose to be an artist—this was one part the party line per Mary’s recounting of several conversations she had at a Communist Party training school in the Catskills in 1937, one part their own philosophy as it held poetry’s ability to move and mean *differently* than political action (158). Even later, after his return to writing, Oppen clearly perceived “a basic distinction between the demands of politics, driven by the necessity to reduce suffering, and the demands of poetry, driven by the need to articulate a horizon of what is variously called happiness, the good life, and ‘the thing wanted for itself,’ ” which isn’t to say that he favored one over the other (Baker 63). Here we might think of the Latourian pairing of caution (an activated response to precarity) and precaution (a generous tending of whatever nameless things come before care). There is no clear line between these values, and yet only one is *clearly* available as a happening in times of obvious bodily threat. Of course, what other kind of threat is there?

An *existential* threat framed in the most philosophical terms—a psychological experience that suggests meaning is no longer a concept that makes sense, the kind of experience that renders existence as a category either inconceivable or undesirable—is surely bodily, material,

real, too. This is especially so in the wake of trauma. Being able to articulate the presence of a horizon called happiness isn't inconsequential for a human body's being.

When Baker—himself a visionary whose life seems to hinge upon the edge that connects philosophy and poetry—elaborates the most complex question of Oppen's world as his work presents it to us, he suggests those questions also include these: what is “the relationship between vision and companionship, between the mind's rising into what is there and the heart's turning to others in concern,” the relationship between the historical and the metaphysical (81)?

There are analogs that connect the way we relate to each other and the way we relate to the world at large, these questions teach. But those analogs are complex rather than simple.

While the focus of this chapter requires omission of nearly all the most entrancing biographical details of the Oppens' lives, it bears note that the demands of World War II (where he was wounded), an exile in Mexico (prompted by a McCarthy-era investigation into the party membership that supported his labor work), and new fatherhood all further delayed his return to writing. And that it was around the time of their return to the states that George began writing again; many scholars (including close friends of the Oppens) have written about this decision, but it still remains somewhat mysterious from the outside. Perhaps the re-opening of their own personal horizons—simply having passports again and feeling that travel possible *was* non-trivial for them—had something to do with George's turn back to the tasks of horizon-articulation. But that's too neat; left to stand on its own, it is not the kind of speculation that can be called credible. Rather than overmining too many such details, it is better to remark: one strange thing that happens when readers (including myself, but not limited to myself) try to conceive of Oppen's writing life as embedded in his long non-writing life is that the assertion rises: *just because he spent twenty-five years doing other things didn't mean Oppen ever abandoned the*

*idea that poetry is life-sustaining*. Not only did the richness of Oppen's writing life resume quickly when it resumed, but his aesthetic beliefs seemed remarkably intact, a fact one can hardly imagine being true for a writer driven by a crisis of belief in aesthetic activity.

His first poem back, a response to what he took to affectionately calling "the rust in copper dream," asked, "What do we believe / To live with?" (*CP* 52). In those lines, the same themes—the old questions. And simultaneously: a referendum on the degree to which belief is both malleable and inescapable. What in certain contexts doesn't seem enough (in this case poetry) can quickly become *again* the fabric of a life.

Charles Bernstein wrote rather famously, "poetics is the continuation of poetry by other means," and the continuity of Oppen's primary convictions across so many years doing other kinds of work prompts us to credit the degree to which such continuations are indeed possible and to interrogate the possibilities they present (160). Even the abbreviated biography presented here suggests, I think, Oppen's ability to balance practical cautions and preparations with belief in the agential power of poems and poetic ideals. If anything, Oppen's late work evidences *more* of precisely those things his younger self believed poetry could live up to—it is *more* insistent upon the depth and strangeness of simple, worldly encounters, *more* wary of the dangers excessive indulgence of subjectivity poses, *more* insistent that language is its best self in an open, meditative field.

## **2.10 YES, WE KNOW, WE ARE ALSO HERE: MICRO-ETHICS AS INVITATION**

In the end, the complex way of accounting for a self—via life and composed works, ethics and aesthetics—that Oppen modeled may not help us develop a judicial rhetoric of things that

answers all the critics of object-oriented work, but it does give us a way of thinking through how an epideictic rhetoric of things can help us create flexible models to guide our movement through present and future worlds. Oppen's Objectivism is, in its way, particularly useful as a guiding example precisely because of the dual metric it provides; where *objectification* stands as a measure of completeness or unity (the sheerness of objecthood), *sincerity* stands as a measure of exigence (relation to the world as it exists, the ability to trust one's own commitments). Neither of these ethics is separable from wonder, from awe. And neither one is strictly attainable. They act as heuristics to the extent that they are needed, after which they might be reconfigured. As such, we can carry them forward into worlds Oppen himself never encountered, a fittingly active tribute. I suggested above a pair of questions: what must we bring to a given situation in order to (at least sometimes) find unknown and unknowable objects capable of tuning us to happiness and hopefulness rather than fear and nihilism? And how can we identify situations that require more than that of us, that require alternate interventions? And while I haven't answered these questions exactly (and don't expect to be able to, at least not fully), I do mean to suggest that Oppen cared about them too, and that such caring is an important part of being an ethical composer (regardless of media).

At the very end of his life, in a letter to the British poet and editor Anthony Rudolf, Oppen wrote, "I think there is no light in the world but the world. And I think there is light. My happiness is the knowledge of all we do not know" (352). Aside from his signature and the salutation "Dear Tony," these three sentences comprise the entirety of the letter. A reader encountering that letter in Blau DuPlessis' thick, carefully curated edition is, perhaps, likely to inscribe it with a peculiar summative weight—both for its aphoristic clarity and because it was a product of the end of Oppen's writing life. We know from Blau DuPlessis' notes that it was

composed in response to Rudolf's request for a message to the Cambridge Poetry Festival, but even given a similar context, it's utilitarian brevity would have seemed out of place in the midst of his winding, often long and philosophical mid-life letters. This style is, however, characteristic of the late letters, where intimate recollections sent to close confidants (like his sister June) last a scant paragraph or two and trail off, expecting readers to complete both scenes and ideas. What generosity there is in naming the horizon of happiness *that which one does not know!* But to dwell only there is to miss the more remarkable generosity of the note's sparseness.

To get at that, we need perhaps the way in which Oppen's close friend Diane Meyer identified a "change in tone" in the poems he sent her during the late 1970s. She didn't have a word for what exactly the new tone was, but he easily agreed with her assessment, responding, " - - I no longer have time, time, time to force the meaning, the statement on the reader Time to argue. I must trust him, her, to know where we are. To TRUST himself, herself: to TRUST me: to say yes. To say yes, we know, we are also here" (*Selected Letters* 339). When I propose that what Oppen best exemplifies is an ethics, this is in a way the passage that most resonates for me. For the poet so concerned with how we connect with others, with its near impossibility, for whom language was nearly sacred in its *lack* of plasticity precisely because

There is that one word

Which one must

Define for oneself, the word

*Us*

(*New Collected Poems* 336)

There is a deep generosity, a wild possibility entrusted to the readers of poetry by that letter. And there's something about this generosity, this invitation to community, the way it lives in such little words—"we," "us," "also"—that requires those words be made of vibrant matter, that they

be pluralist worlds unto themselves, or withdrawn objects with influential circuses hidden from our humanly views.

This invitation, its trust, stands in contrast to the scene set in an earlier poem—a poem perhaps notably engaged with the way men tried to talk to one another during war—where Oppen admits,

... One man could not understand me because I was saying  
simple things; it seemed to him that nothing was being  
said. I was saying: there is a mountain, there is a lake. (ibid. 197)

Where, of course, what he was saying was, *this is our circumstance*. World and the simple words, he wanted these to be enough to go on. They didn't always win out, but he kept believing in them, and sometimes they proved just enough. This, then, is what I mean to suggest when I suggest that what Oppen lends us is a micro-ethics—if ethics invite us to sustaining relations, Oppen asks us to consider the way in which just one word well defined, tied to a common experience, might qualify as ethical.

Offering another way to invoke these sentiments and their ways of singing, Elizabeth Grosz invites us to think with her “about ethics, not in terms of morality, a code of conduct or a set of principles to regulate conduct from the outside, but in terms of the exploration of becoming, what kind of a new ontology – an ontogenesis – we must develop in order to understanding the becomings that underlie and make being possible” (n.p.). I think we can take Oppen's poetics as one model that already thinks that way. The revisionist tendencies of his ontology, the tests and invitations, the cast of close confidants that kept his thinking mobile even as he asked the same few questions about existence again and again, these all suggest two intensive becomings that we need experience over and over again in order to go on. One, the

*momentary* becoming of a *we* (which reminds that communities need tending, that memberships of all sorts ask for regular renewals). The other, a becoming that honors the promise that “we awake simultaneously in the same moment to ourselves and things” (a statement that follows philosopher Jacques Maritain; one Oppen quoted regularly and enlisted as an epigraph for *The Materials*).

Throughout this chapter, I’ve done my best to position Oppen as an exemplary ethical *and* materialist composer by describing some of the complex relationships that existed between his poetics (including his formal aesthetics), his expressed ontological beliefs, and the daily practices that made up his life (including his writing life). Describing in detail the beliefs and practices of individuals who we believe composed their lives more well than badly has the potential to change us and our orientations, to make us more aware of how our beliefs inform certain of our actions—including the act of writing—and persist despite activities that contradict their values; (as the unfolding of this example has hopefully suggested already) it also teaches us about interfaces between humans and the extrahuman world. Description as a kind of dwelling leaves us more open to an understanding of ways in which the world is always intervening in our understanding of what might be waiting for us *out there* and why writing—among other actions—might be an appropriate response to ecological, ontological conditions that are felt more than known.

In the next chapter, I re-open my inquiry into the poetics of descriptive circumstance, exploring more fully the degree to which waking to (or through the production of) linguistic things and waking to (or through encounters with) art objects and other kinds of things might be productively thought of in terms of their textural differences as well as their ontological similarities.



## NOTES CHAPTER TWO

<sup>1</sup> Many different theories are invoked under the names in new materialism and speculative realism in this dissertation. DeLanda and Braidotti are generally credited as independent coiners of the term “new materialism” (or “neo-materialism”), which has been in use since the mid 1990s. For an introduction to that term and its history, see the cartographies of Dolphijn and van der Tuin (2012). For an introduction to variants of Speculative Realism, the intellectual tradition that OOO is formally a part of, see Bryant, Srnicek, and Harman (2010). I allow a certain amount of slippage around these terms despite my respect for their histories and differences. In general, I try to use the proper terms New Materialism and Speculative Realism when I mean to invoke directly philosophical thinkers and histories that have come to be associated with these terms and who accept that association. And I use the lower case—e.g. new materialisms—when I mean to suggest broader, more malleable collections of thinkers and thoughts (including co-travelers who share ideas or values with these theories and theorists but would not claim allegiance, either because they preceded them or for political reasons). I ally myself with *both* realism and materialism and am interested in how the unknown or unknowable can be preserved in such a space without sacrificing the concepts of credibility and responsibility; when I move between the terms new materialism and speculative realism in a loose way, it is not because I do not see them as offering distinct views, rather it is a betrayal of the way I see them as distinct and *both* necessary to describing this complex task.

<sup>2</sup> I find harsh critiques of OOO notable in part because, while scholars who work with materialisms of various sorts often see OOO as a very specific theory that is rather different from many new materialisms and speculative realisms, it isn't uncommon to see slippages that refuse consideration of all of these theories (and some that really don't fit in either tradition) on the grounds that Graham Harman's work strikes some people as offensively or dangerously esoteric; while I consider my thinking significantly different from Harman's in many regards, I suspect some of the most vocal critiques in our field of responding more to sloppy summaries of his work than to his texts, and I worry that the tenor of such critiques overshadows a wider range of scholarship than it means to. In addition, even critics who would reduce only this sub-strain of realism to faddism must now choose to ignore the way early adopters associated with OOO have spent 15 years refining their positions, loosening their grip on Harman's texts, developing alternate realisms, and applying related principles to interdisciplinary problems.

<sup>3</sup> This chapter was written long before last year's release of the *Object-Oriented Feminism* collection edited by Katherine Behar, but readers might now find a version of what I call for here in that collection's cyborg-forward blending of (often very strong) resistance to dominant articulations of OOO and deep engagement with aspects of OOO and other theories ascribed to the ontological turn. In the words of reviewer Jesse Bordwin, “Object-oriented criticism and feminist theory are not obviously compatible—their commitments and assumptions seldom overlap—but that tension is precisely what energizes the new collection *Object-Oriented Feminism*” (296)

<sup>4</sup> This phrase suggests an affiliation with Jody Shipka's 2011 Book *Toward a Composition Made Whole*, especially its interest in multi-modal composition practices that are not digital (or at least not solely digital); it more loosely invokes other works that—like Shipka's book—have responded in some way to Kathleen Blake Yancey's 2004 CCCC Chair's address, "Composition in a New Key."

<sup>5</sup> When I use the term "groundedness" here, I think of it in relation to a conversation I participated in during a Human Geography class with Tom Sullivan at the University of Montana, in which "groundedness" emerged as a concept that might allow us to keep some beneficial aspects associated with the loaded term "authenticity" (a term preservation- and restoration-minded students were particularly loath to give up) without requiring the sentimental, epistemological overvaluing of Natural or Historical conditions that is both prevalent and prone to requiring the presentation of complex dynamic systems as static images. That interest in local conditions suggests the need for interest in the histories that brought those conditions into being *and* that affective attachments to particular geographic places and naturecultures (to use a relevant term that Haraway popularized) can be positive, nourishing forces were two claims that emerged in that conversation.

<sup>6</sup> Bryant articulates an even more active way of thinking about how OOO is useful as an anti-*doxa* measure in a blog post on why (despite many differences in their thinking) he has found Harman important. He gestures to a blend of *hope* and *caution* that's compatible with my work; one salient passage reads, "In a world of theory that had increasingly come to be defined by the pessimism of Adorno's culture industry and Foucault's networks of power, [Harman's thesis of withdrawal] is a hopeful thesis. The message is *not* that there aren't these institutional networks of power, discursive construction, economics, etc., but that there's always an excess that allows the possibility of the "more", the *encore*, and the otherwise. People, animals, minerals, technologies, and microbes are always threatening to erupt and challenge all networks of power" ("Harman, Withdrawal, and Vacuum Packed Objects: My Gratitude" n.p.).

<sup>7</sup> When I refer to the "fantasy of aggregable perspectives," I suggest the way present technologies lend users the fantasy of being able to see all perspectives at once. Many kinds of sensory data are newly recordable and aggregable. For instance, you can view a product from any angle (and click on callouts that describe features the eye might not recognize) before buying it online; you can one-click download and install a cell phone app and then create 360-degree panoramic photographs of all the most fantastic landscapes you encounter. As with any lived fantasy, this one invades both personal ontologies and academic theories (including theories of communication), and hazards sometimes result. The panopticon—a seemingly unavoidable stop on the way to fulfilling the dream of visibility of all for all—has become a canonical architectural and conceptual image of fear, control, and abusive, coercive power for a reason.

<sup>8</sup> Where this paragraph picks up the theme of the "merely" technical from this dissertation's introduction, it implies that the mereness ascribed to craft (in general) and the mereness ascribed to description (in particular) are quite related. A full exploration of the claim that "craft" often finds itself a denigrated term for surface features (which are sometimes

understood as merely technical, sometimes merely aesthetic) is out of scope for this chapter, but readers may find it useful to consider Seamus Heaney's distinction between craft, "what you can learn from other verse," and technique, which is "the whole creative effort of the mind's and body's resources to bring the meaning of experience within the jurisdiction of form" (47). It is worth remarking that my use of the term craft makes no such distinction and is in fact generally closer to Heaney's definition of technique than to many definitions of craft.

<sup>9</sup> Louis Zukofsky's role in establishing the principles of Objectivist poetry and delimiting the group of poets that would come to be associated with this term is addressed briefly later in this chapter. Zukofsky was also a personal friend of Oppen's; his own peculiar materialist writing practices have been written about rather more extensively than Oppen's (perhaps because Oppen has been appealing to true metaphysicians in a way that has overshadowed the materialist aspects of his practice); within composition and rhetoric, the ecologies of Zukofsky's writing make an iconic appearance as one of the chapter-length case studies in Syverson's *Wealth of Reality*.

<sup>10</sup> A full account of their relationship is beyond the scope of this article, but it bears note that Mary was present for many interviews George gave, her words intertwining with his in non-trivial ways to clarify their shared convictions. For more, see Swigg's introduction to *Speaking with George Oppen*.

### 3.0 EKPHRASIS (OR TRANS-MEDIAL INVESTIGATION): ART METHODOLOGIES AND SMALL-SCALE DESCRIPTIVE ECOLOGIES

*All objects have a poetics; they make the world and take part in it, and at the same time, synthesize, block, or make possible other worlds. It is one of the powers of art or of invention more generally to cross the planned relations of dimensionality—the modes or dynamics that properly form or make sensible an object or a process. As it does so, other worlds gently slip into, swell across, or mutate those we are apparently content that we live in.*

Matthew Fuller, *Media Ecologies: Materialist Energies in Art and Technoculture* (1-2)

*What seems unique to a great work of art is that it is strangely oblivious to the world in which it falls, not in the sense that, as in the case of a rigid machine like a mathematical equation, it always remains the same and engages in one and the same set of operations, but rather in the sense that it is capable of producing effects of a very different nature as a result of the inputs that pass through it in different historical and cultural contexts. A great work of art resonates. If we take the concept of resonance seriously, then we understand it as a power capable of producing novel local manifestations as a result of the other entities that it encounters.*

Levi Bryant, *Onto-Cartography: An Ontology of Machines and Media* (52)

*We are instructed by the objects that come to speak with us, those material presences. Why should we have been born knowing how to love the world? We require, again and again, these demonstrations.*

Mark Doty, *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon* (10)

Melissa Kwasny writes “*After a series of photographs of Kazuo Ohno taken by Eikoh Hosoe, Hokkaido, Japan, 1994,*” photographs that a friend—the Japanese-American poet Brandon Shimoda—sent her online, as a link:

I watch the butoh dancer fall, layer by layer through the worlds, until the floor becomes a barrier to the last one. He wears a dilapidated hat, made of twig and straw, as if a magpie nest were constructed atop his head. *A great many people are coming to life in me*, he says. Like the minerals of earth inside my blood. Who lives in our bodies? Who passes through? What ghost dances *ghost-dances* in our thoughts? In the series of transformations—the operation, the fire, the night I poisoned myself eating wild mushrooms from the field—there was danger, but something always woke me up. (62)

The four-part prose poem this passage initiates is an object that finds address by interweaving. It is description of the metaphoric *and* metamorphic dimensions of butoh—a genre of dance theatre that emerged in post-World-War-II Japan. It is description of a very specific set of photographs taken of a specific performance—black and white photographs of one of the originators of this dance form, in his 90s, performing in rural Japan, with wetlands spread out around him, the promise of a literal river shaping one of the spaces that metaphor often fills with unseen rivers—that meandering space between life and death. It is direct quotation of the dancer himself, describing his philosophical experience of this kind of dance (in italics, selected from extensive writings the poet familiarized herself with). It is description of the poet’s personal life, in shear terms, set in the Montana she inhabits intimately, and it is a set of questions that invoke relation without demanding equity between experiences that happened in different times, at different scales, to different people.

In writing “*After*,” Kwasny and other poets (this kind of crediting is, after all, a relatively common poetic move) foreground a prepositional world. Linguistically, prepositions provide spatial or temporal information and mark syntactic or semantic roles. They bring directionality

and permit description of power differentials, not to mention the flows that permit the emergence of such differentials and maintain (or corrode) their status.

In the chapter that follows, I understand prepositions as dynamic descriptive objects, but I also understand them as theoretical objects capable of coordinating bodies at a distance. Many theories that rely on flat ontologies or network metaphors emphasize relation's primacy, but a deeply prepositional framing insists on both the importance of relation *and* the importance of designating different kinds of relation, and this insistence permits better descriptions of the world. Rickert has urged us to ask what contemporary theories of communication miss when they foreground the metaphor of the network (or the rhizome) too strongly, and I suggest that prepositions as metaphoric (metamorphic) theoretical objects act as a corrective to this trend in much the same way that the ambient as a theoretical construct does in his study—this consonance is aided by the way prepositions' ubiquity frequently hides their complexity and influence. As objects, and tiny objects at that, prepositions recede easily into ambience.

When Oppen spoke of the importance of the "little words," he tended to mean tiny nouns—hill, tree—and these certainly suggest one materialist way of thinking with language. But there are others, too, of course, some of them teeming rather than sparse. And there are precedents for inviting the prepositional into a vibrant, expansive materialism. Latour's own recent, expansive inquiry into the modes of existence credits pluralist William James with "assert[ing] that there exists in the world no domain of 'with,' 'after,' or 'between' as there exists a domain of chairs, heat, microbes, doormats, or cats," at least not in any strict sense of the word domain; but the good materialist needs to pay attention anyway because "each of these prepositions plays a decisive role in the understanding of what is to follow, by offering the type of relation needed to grasp the experience of the world in question" (*AIME* 57). Prepositions are

*about* acts of worlding. They pressure us to wonder *how* times and places, people and non-human things interweave.

Perhaps inevitably, a bombastic proclamation follows and amplifies the Jamesian in Latour's study. "Prepositions are neither the origin nor the source nor the principle nor the power, and yet they cannot be reduced, either, to the courses to be followed themselves. They are not the foundation of anything and yet everything depends on them," he declares (58). Prepositions are influential because they don't get bogged down debating about novelty and origins. They're situationally dependent in a radical way—at least insofar as their realization is concerned. Yet they are also part of the *how* of invention. A new way of moving prepositionally can be inserted into an existing trajectory, where it will pressure and be pressured by an existing network of actors, perhaps exposing newly salient parties or re-exposing forgotten forces.

Taken seriously as theoretical guides prepositions prompt us to ask different kinds of questions than we might otherwise. Here's a minor instance. Douglas Harper's entry for the word "after" in the online etymological dictionary notes the origins of three exemplary usages:

*After hours* "after regular working hours" is from 1861.

*Afterwit* "wisdom that comes too late" is attested from c. 1500 but seems to have fallen from use, despite being more needed now than ever.

*After you* as an expression in yielding precedence is recorded by 1650.

There's something strange in the injection of social commentary into the middle example—can it really be true that a name for wisdom come too late is needed now more than ever? Isn't there something in the very idea of "wisdom" that implies knowledge structured via lived experience? Put another way, what *is* the difference between coming *after* and coming *too late*? Must it have something to do with the deference of saying, *after you*? Or might we invite it to have that tone,

and what would such an invitation get us? Might this require the creative flexibility of working *after hours*, in the margins of typical, capitalist work structures, but not outside them? We can understand these questions as both ontogenetic and evocative of the larger set of questions that prepositional thinking provokes. These kinds of questions recall the way this dissertation's introduction suggested objects' intrusions can be instructions; they shore up the claim that my description-oriented project is one *about* understanding and engaging *with* the pedagogical impulses of things, *about* what it means for us to be here *with* them and here *with* one another, for us to change and to change as a result of each others' co-presence.

In the chapter at hand, I argue more specifically that thinking about what it means to compose *to* or *toward* or *after* can be a crucial part of understanding what it means (or might mean) to compose—ethically—*with care*. The temporal dimensions of whatever powers things have are clearly at stake here: the persistence of allure, the dynamism of metaphoric relations, and the mechanisms by which seemingly novel powers erupt from objects with long, previously consistent histories, et al. Taking exploration of these complex dynamics as a goal—and following from the previous chapter's examination of relationships between the descriptive mode, George Oppen's Objectivist poetics, object-oriented philosophies, and an emergent ethics of care—I proceed by turning my attention to some ways in which ekphrastic practices have been undertaken, understood, and discussed.

Ekphrasis, of course, is the accepted generic name for the kind of prepositional "writing after" enacted in the Kwasny example (an example addressed in more detail below). Depending on what dictionary we turn to for a contemporary, mainstream definition of this term, we might alternately identify it as a name for the practice of writing "on" or "about" pieces of art. And it is worth acknowledging the fact that for some critics, only paintings truly suffice as proper



ekphrastic prompts, only verses an appropriate output. In the rest of this chapter (and in the later chapters of this dissertation), I embrace more expansive conceptions of the term that have emerged within the field visual culture studies—like James Heffernan’s widely cited definition, the “verbal representation of visual representation”—while maintaining that there is something unique about “narrowly” artistic examples, and that studying them can teach us things about style choices and micro-transformations that are useful in everyday life (3). I do this, in part, by taking as my semantic guide the poet Cole Swensen, whose short essay “To Writewithize” posits that *certain* examples of ekphrasis serve as ideal models for a “with-ness” that is vital, prepositional, and supremely ethical.

For Swensen, this kind of vital, ethical ekphrastic practice exists in contrast to “the traditional ekphrastic stance,” where a writer remains separate from the object of art he or she is engaging; “often physically in opposition to it, often standing across from it in a physical kind of face-off, in a gallery or museum” (70). Her suggestion that ekphrasis has been understood primarily as a competitive mode alludes to both formal conventions and the tradition of art criticism that authorizes Peter Wagner to write, “Ekphrasis has a Janus face: as a form of mimesis, it stages a paradoxical performance, promising to give voice to the allegedly silent image even while attempting to overcome the power of the image by transforming and inscribing it” (*Icons-Texts-Iconotexts* 13). There’s a sense of bravado mixed with reverence in that formula, and ironically both sides of the Janus mask rely upon “traditional” understandings of artistic genius and individual agency. The cult of mastery is not challenged in any fundamental way. It makes sense, then, that a less-traditional view of ekphrasis like Swensen’s might be a necessary bridge to understanding ekphrasis-as-practice from the perspective of object-oriented philosophy

or rhetoric, given the way all three of these perspectives assign world—with all its nonhuman entanglements—a significant agentive role in any humanly creative act.

Swensen's own projects reflect and refract her personal resistance to (and entanglement with) "traditional" narratives of influence and ekphrastic response. She wrote a quietly ecstatic book of poems that "gesture" alongside the sketches in George Bridgeman's *The Book of One Hundred Hands* (a 1971 artist's manual, which instantiates relationships between sketching practice and anatomical knowledge). Another of her many books is structured by its relationship to the work of Andre Le Nôtre, the landscape architect responsible for the gardens at Versailles. When she theorizes about ekphrasis, then, she is doing so as a practitioner. And the ekphrastic projects produced by others that she finds most moving, well, they *move*—they break down boundaries between art and everyday life; they consist of works by contemporary artists and poets who have understand ekphrasis in such a way that a "side-by-side, a walking-along-with, replaces the face-to-face relationship—the two, poem and artwork, are presumed to be going in the same direction and at the same speed; they are fellow travelers sharing a context" (70). She takes art objects seriously as agents, and not just as agents but as agents that are inherently (ontologically) adaptable in ways that humans aren't always or necessarily.

In short, when a Swensen-esque "non-traditional" ekphrasis is at its best, imagining the futurity of flexible and influential objects helps human artists embrace their own flexibility; a rhetoric where loss of control is a tool (not just a warning) begins to take shape. Put another way: these "best" examples invite us to think of taking an ekphrastic walk with an object as one activity that exists on the *praxis* side of a prepositional approach to theory, insofar as both this kind of ekphrasis and prepositional ways of thinking have to do with extension and maintenance

of relationships, with making in relation—with things that others might call re-making, re-imagining, re-contextualizing, or re-vision.

One could use Swensen's observations as a way into asking whether or not the nature of ekphrastic practice (and being-with more generally) is undergoing some fundamental change as a result of present-tense cultural shifts, and it has been suggested that the everyday proliferation of visual media is partly to "blame" for both a resurgence of academic interest in the term ekphrasis and the number of practitioners working primarily or exclusively in ekphrastic ways. Instead, what I propose here is that Swensen's ability to *describe* ekphrasis newly is exciting for the way it primes us—as rhetoricians, writers, and thinkers—to understand both emergent and "traditional" ekphrastic praxis in more expansive, more generous ways. I argue that even in the most conservative literature on this topic we find a record of situated writers grappling with individual objects across time and space—and that because of that this tradition serves as a strong reminder: just because "object-oriented rhetoric" is a new phrase does not mean that its principles have not been long in evidence or that we need start from scratch in our attempts to understand and enact it.

In addition, I propose that part of the value inherent in Swensen's formulation of ekphrasis lies in the way it invites us, as writers but also as readers and human beings co-engaged in the activity of fashioning lives, to think in unique ways about another scale just *slightly* larger than the scale at which a single human exists, one organized slightly different from the one Oppen's example illustrated. Ekphrasis is concerned with the world and ecology writ large, but it most frequently operates on a scale structured by *pairs* of humans and/or *pairs* of objects. As my introduction noted (following Syverson), there's more space yet for work that is not individual but that is nevertheless specific and situated.

In short, ekphrasis offers a test case for methods that examine *some* things as they are influential, agential, and related while resisting the impulse to understand ecological work as work that must strive to consider *everything* at once. As such, it offers a lesson in resisting slips toward the scale of the Human, the all-inclusive abstraction. And the rest of this chapter means to leverage the way (present and past tense) material things direct and intervene in artistic communities in order to position ekphrastic, artistic practice as a (present and future tense) model for working together *while* honoring personal differences and situational contingency.

In what follows, I don't attempt the fools errand of trying to re-frame a comprehensive set of examples using Swensen's words—Robert Denham's *Poets on Painters: A Bibliography* catalogues some 2,500 poems on paintings, as well as offering bibliography entries for 2,000 secondary sources, and his is by no means a comprehensive catalogue of works that adhere to the “narrowest” definition of the term. Neither do I attempt to rehash the substantial body of literature on the history of ekphrasis and its place in larger studies of word-image relations. But I do begin with a brief detour through some of the extant theoretical territory. I understand this as a grounding gesture, a gesture of respect for areas of expertise beyond my own (especially art history). If we are aiming to learn from “works that don't *look at* art so much as *live with* it,” then we need to have an understanding of the ways in which looking gets talked about, not to mention a language for kinds of looking that are inextricable from living (Swensen 70).

Thinking (again) of the way reviews—including literature reviews—move descriptively, I also understand this detour as a performance of description's ability to spur rhetorical and philosophical invention.

### 3.1 SEMIOTIC, SENSORY, AND METAPHYSICAL OPPOSITION: EKPHRASIS IN THEORY

In *Picture Theory*, W.J.T. Mitchell wonders at the fact that ekphrasis manages, somehow, to be “the name of a minor poetic genre and a universal principle of poetics” (156). How is this possible? he asks. He asks not because he is entirely perplexed--such duplicity of meaning isn’t at all unheard of in the universe of words—but because he wants an excuse to get caught up in the interplay between values that adhere (at least for him) in these ways of saying what it is the word ekphrasis names. He makes ekphrasis a centerpiece of his work on the cultural history of word-image relations in order to shuttle our interest toward “the network of ideological associations embedded in the semiotic, sensory, and metaphysical oppositions that ekphrasis is supposed to overcome” (ibid.). There’s an emphasis there on the implication that “supposed to” means “cannot.” Setting out toward an unattainable goal is the nature of the act, and the adventure of how and why one might do this takes on a special import. Put another way: being in *positive* relation to impossibility is an *ontological* characteristic of the form.

It bears brief note here that the long history of the term at hand is decidedly invoked when Mitchell suggests there is a “universal principle of poetics” at work each time the word ekphrasis is deployed. Ruth Webb is excellent on the pertinent rhetorical history, as is James Francis, who reminds that “In antiquity, ekphrasis was a rather uncommon and late-developing term defined, not as a description of art, but as evocative description pure and simple,” a fact Mitchell is clearly familiar with (2). And yet, etymological drift and the way such drift can help cultural values maintain their hold across time, even as new denotative meanings hide their origins, clearly isn’t the only thing Mitchell is referring to. He’s also referring to his own felt, contemporary critical reaction to the term and the kinds of objects it describes. More specifically,

he's referring to a certain entropy that he senses structuring his reactions to ekphrasis, even as it threatens and complicates his conclusions about ekphrasis.

The *speed* with which the “specialness” of ekphrasis seems to unravel as soon as it is pressured is, in fact, much of what he finds alluring about the act of studying this form. Writing about sculpture, performance art, music, or dance is increasingly labeled with the “narrow” term ekphrasis—making Kwasny’s writings about photographs of a dance exciting as an example in part for the way they enact a kind of dynamic, double ekphrasis. From an example like this, it is easy to start to thinking of artistic collaborations that have elaborate procedural constraints or erasure poems (which turn found texts into new versions of themselves by emphasizing their topographies and converting words into the kind of blank space that means by insisting on its own visual weight) as things that enact ekphrastic ways of being. Or we might start thinking of things like literary translation and cover songs or remixes. Or we might stumble into thinking: what’s the difference between Kwasny describing a scene she sees in a photograph and Oppen describing a scene he saw, mediated only by his own body? Are the lenses of his eyes really that different from the lens of a camera? Aren’t all phenomenological descriptions a kind of ekphrasis, a detailed way of suggesting what inheres in and comes after a given encounter? And aren’t all such descriptions “just descriptions,” lossy copies of the original? And if that’s true, why bother with language at all, let alone bother worrying about things like genre distinctions?

Mitchell describes this kind of anxious unraveling as an inevitable reaction to all modes that attempt to get world or vision into words; in doing so, he lays out three phases of ekphrastic thinking. His phases include (1) indifference or ambivalence, based on moments when the everyday knowledge that such a task is *literally impossible* is ascendant; (2) hope, based on moments when linguistic communication succeeds and it becomes clear that *in a sense* the

project of getting world—or work of art—into words is *possible enough* for the practice to be understood as deeply meaningful; and (3) fear, based on moments in which we recognize that we might not actually *want* the world in which modal distinctions collapse, in which the collapse of vision into description robs both modes of their richness or seems to portend somehow a dissolution of the boundaries of the self—or at least a collapse of the system in which a term like “ekphrasis” can be understood to have any meaning at all.

While some theorists claim predominance for one of these modes, we (as laypeople but also as communities with critical tendencies) tend to move in and out of them in response to situational triggers, or so Mitchell argues. And offering all three of them allows him to maintain much of ekphrasis’ flexibility and plurality while conducting a measured study. For his own part, he speculates that the mode’s foregrounding of relationality is precisely (and paradoxically) what helps make all three of these stances possible. Following him still—but a little more loosely now—we might assert: ekphrasis cannot help prompting metacognition with regard to reproductive, artistic, or semiotic modes; what an audience member sees most clearly when he or she looks at an ekphrastic piece of writing is neither the painting (or sculpture or performative scene) thrown before the eyes nor the written words themselves but rather the act of their interaction. Swensen claims a similar effect for her best examples, suggesting that in “these examples, the operative relationship is not so much between a writer and a work of art as it is between visual and verbal modes of experience, both of which the writer lives” (71). And this is nontrivial not only because it tells us something about the so-called sister arts but also because we see—in the interplay between visual and verbal rhetorical objects—some of the same tensions that we see in all kinds of interactions. The forming of relationships between humans and humans is often foremost in Mitchell’s mind (as evidenced by his mobilization of

scholarship on “others” and “othering”) but formative non-human encounters are plentiful in their appearances too, as they are in much writing about ekphrasis, which is one reason this particular scholarly canon makes an enticing addition to a study like mine, which takes up the tripartite relationship between object-oriented thinking, situated ethics, and compositional practices. A rhetorically situated reader might find her or himself thinking here of Rickert’s note that “from a phenomenological perspective, the world is also our involvements, the ensemble of things, situations, and purposes” (170). Where ekphrasis echoes that it also reminds: from the world’s perspective or the work of art’s, *we* are also *its involvements* with us—whether or not we intended or understand them. Which is to say, of course, that ekphrastic prose and poems serve as much more than elaborate captions; they are stranger and because of that strangeness more essential.

### **3.2 TENDERNESS TOWARD EXPERIENCE: HOW OBJECTS BRING US FORTH**

One of the generic markers of ekphrastic writing is the fact that it announces explicitly—by naming the work of art it responds to or by describing it in enough detail that a savvy reader might place it even if the work wasn’t named—the degree to which composition is embodied and emplaced. More remarkably, this occurs without the piece of writing *necessarily* becoming an autobiography of the poet or writer. Even when ekphrasis does become biographical or autobiographical, it often becomes a way of presenting for readers the narrative of a particular way of seeing or experiencing, rather than a narrative of dramatic events, and so credits the subject’s existence as deeply relational, as brought forth in part *by* objects (as opposed to the more traditional correlationist stance that has objects sprung into existence by our access to



them). In other words, the how of seeing and describing becomes not a marker of conventional objectivity (an accounting of an object that can only be achieved if the accounter sets his subjectivity aside) but rather a way of thinking through an extended self or an “extended mind.”

An explicit interest in how the extended-rather-than-objective self influences plays throughout poet Mark Doty’s slim, ekphrastic prose volume *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon*, and in the next few sections I turn my attention to the lessons this book teaches. Short for a book but lengthy for an essay, this 70-page volume takes as its subject the painting that shares its title. The painting in question is “a simply painting, really,” according to Doty, “by one Jan Davidsz de Heem, painted in Antwerp some three hundred and fifty years ago, and displayed today—after who knows what places it has been—in a glass case at the Metropolitan, lying flat, so that one bends and looks down into its bronzy, autumnal atmosphere” (5).

But to get the nature of the book in question right, we need to begin with something other than the painting. In fact, before offering that introduction to the painting itself, Doty introduces us to a specific moment in his own life. This day is a “sharp cracking cold day,” the book’s first paragraph tells readers, and he is outside the museum in question. In the second paragraph, the writer slips into the first person for the first time, and it is to say, “I have a backache, I’m travel weary”—I am living in a machine that experiences fatigue; but it is also to say that, at least momentarily, such stinging mortality “couldn’t matter less, for this whole scene—the crowd and hustle on the museum steps, which seem alive all day with commerce and hurry, with gatherings and departures—is suffused with warmth, because I have fallen in love with a painting” (3). From the very start, then, it is clear that merely saying this is a book “about” a painting doesn’t quite cover it. More accurately, we might say that this is a book that takes Doty’s relationship to that painting as its subject. Or, yet more accurately, that it is a book that takes as its subjects a

great many things Doty experiences (or re-experiences) via his ability to association them with this painting and its affects. The careful reader will be thinking: its affects or its effects? Its affects or his affects? And a commitment to object-oriented thinking inclines me to clarify simply: yes and yes, yes and yes.

A pair of (deeply prepositional) questions do seem to drive Doty's ekphrastic volume: (1) what kind of love is it, really, this love-with-a-painting? And (2) what does it do, what can be done with this odd breed of love? It is perhaps useful here to pause and recall that philosophy has famously (which isn't to say always or accurately) been identified with love of wisdom or love of knowledge, and as Michael Marder recently pointed out, this tends to mean *human* kinds of knowledge; kinds of knowledge that are phenomenologically other get short-shifted—they are not appropriate objects of our admiration (in Marder's example, the knowledges possessed by plants are emphasized) (n.p.). If love of an object helps bring that object's non-human wisdom into focus, contextualizing our own ways of knowing, then loving things isn't *just* a symptom of capitalism as infectious disease. And if nonhuman objects can be credited as knowing uniquely—in ways we simply *can't* know—then there's clear promise and potential in striving to create mutually beneficial alliances with objects.<sup>1</sup> Doty himself admits easily, with regard to the affect he's after, the phrase *fallen in love with a painting* “doesn't seem to suffice, not really.” He goes on to clarify,

it's that I have been drawn into the orbit of a painting, have allowed myself to be pulled into its sphere by casual attraction deepening to something more compelling. I have felt the energy and life of the painting's will; I have been held there, instructed. And the overall effect, the result of looking and looking into its brimming surface as long as I

could look, is love, by which I mean a sense of tenderness toward experience, of being held within an intimacy with the things of the world. (4)

What is most remarkable about this experience, as Doty describes it, is that his sense of tenderness travels. It can be traveled with. It follows him around, through the dark museum lobby, out onto the steps of the museum and far beyond.

With that in mind, it is possible to rephrase again and say: the book at hand is about tracking how an object helped a *particular* tenderness come into being and where Doty's writing (and his writerly body) took it. That phrasing makes it relatively easy to suggest that the book in question partakes of the specialized ekphrasis that is a generic name for "walking-along-with" an object. And from there, Erin Manning's *Relationescapes* offers us a productively prepositional way to begin thinking more closely about that metaphoric definition.

In order to emphasize a connection between daily sorts of movement and her most elaborate, artistic examples of embodiment's potential, Manning describes the act of walking down a crowded city street in detail, and there's no reason for us not to imagine Doty's post-museum self, the one buoyed up by this painting's love, jostling alongside her. At first, all her example really insists on is this, "Walking is the constraint. When you walk, you keep one foot on the ground, always. With one foot on the ground, you can move in three directions: forward, backward, sideways" (29). Simple enough. But it is hard to imagine consequences for violating the rule of this scenario, unless one is a competitive racewalker. The second stage of her scenario upends that by providing just the *slightest* of contexts. Its dual imperative is, "Now take a sidewalk and add walking" (ibid.). Now,

you are moving quickly, trying to get through the crowd to catch the bus. You have two blocks to navigate, and the crowd makes it difficult. You weave through the people,

taking bigger and smaller steps, looking for holes and then filling them, inhabiting them momentarily before they close. Hopefully no child, friend, or lover is lagging behind: sidewalk holes are rarely big enough for two people. And yet walking “alone” does not exist. Walking in/with the world: the only kind of walking. (ibid.)

The world is always with us. This is easy to forget, and dangerous to ignore. But I’m more captivated here by the inescapable qualifier “hopefully”—walking with-the-world as a singular person is different from walking with a co-traveler by your side, someone tethered to you in an elastic way that is “imaginary” but, nevertheless, changes your material relationship to the shape of the sidewalk, the crowd, and the idea of the bus as they draw you forward. And yet, the pleasure of being able to maneuver nimbly comes at a price.

Walking with someone else requires something extra of us, or else we lose them. This is true both materially, literally, and metaphorically. What about walking with a painting, then? Certainly, if one is actually carrying a painting—perhaps ungainly in its dimensions, and susceptible to physical damage (even if well wrapped)—down a busy New York avenue, then the space of the avenue will confront one differently; water dripping from an AC unit might seem a solid deterrent, where it would have disappeared into inconsequence without the painting along for the walk. Offering the painting your seat on the train might prompt disapproving glares (at a busy hour) or a pleasant, unexpected conversation with a stranger about what it is doing there with you. What about walking with a feeling, then? Or with a painting metaphorically along for the ride? What changes when the threefold constraint is: take a sidewalk, add walking and also a sense of “tenderness toward experience, of being held within an intimacy with the things of the world;” and how might we decide which situations are likely to benefit from this kind of shift in frame?

### 3.3 PLEASURE IN IMPOSSIBLE TASKS: IMAGINING CAPACITIES NOT-OUR- OWN

J.D. McClatchy offers acceptance of the invitation to engage a painting in “the moment after it has been seen” as one of the principle excitements inherent in poets’ ekphrastic prose, and whether or not this is indeed a general feature of the category, it is certainly one of the things that distinguishes Doty’s writing in the book at hand (xvi). When the poet takes us out into the street, he does it in order to help us understand the warm residue of whatever feeling the painting has “instructed” him in. He names this feeling, arguing for its materiality as “the medium in which [he] and [his] fellow citizens move,” and he invites us into the odd logic of that feeling through a relational catalogue:

We are all moving, just now, in the light that has come toward me through a canvas the size of a school notebook; we are all walking in the light of a wedge of lemon, four oysters, a half-glass of wine, a cluster of green grapes with a few curling leaves still attached to their stem. Their light is enough to reveal us as we are, bound together, in the warmth and good light of habitation, in the good and fleshy aliveness of us. (4-5)

The trick of the semantically sustained present, the trick of the we that does-and-does-not include readers, these are common poetic invitations. As is the invitation to honor sensory pleasures, to connect them with “the good and fleshy aliveness of us.” Still, as a reader one cannot help but understand that the people crowding about Doty on the street—those fellow citizens shifting their weight in the cold, drinking their coffee, hurrying on to elsewhere—are naïve to the specific light that Doty carries with him; they are also, in all likelihood, not carrying a light much like it—it isn’t just that on the day in question they have fallen in love with different paintings in different phenomenological ways, but rather that they are, most of them, most likely immune to

the premise that it is even *possible* for one to fall in love with a painting. Rather than suggesting this is a shortcoming of the frame or that it somehow makes Doty's experience of the communal a self-indulgent one, we can imagine that this is precisely what makes the ekphrastic move important or at least interesting.

It bears saying that, as a reader and a viewer (and a particularly suggestible one at that), I'm not entirely unlike those other people on the steps of the museum. I might reasonably describe myself as having—via Doty's prose—fallen in love with the *idea* of a painting, but I am not in love with this painting itself. And it is not even the idea of *this* painting that I feel I can say I have fallen in love with. The sweet translucent globes of its grapes, the way in which its slices of lemon rind curl just-so, these are things I find it hard to imagine myself adoring in more than a passing way. And I'm not sure this is a failure of myself or a thing that might be simply changed by longer looking. Neither am I sure that I would be converted by spending a long day in the Met with all its artifacts crowding about in all their material splendor, with all their "authenticity." Neither, it should be re-remarked, do I mean that I am unmoved. A step back reminds: it is not precisely the painting with which I—and this chapter—are sharing a context, it is Doty's prose. And I do feel what might be called, for lack of a better word, an intimacy with the *sentences* that Doty uses to describe the rich dark backgrounds that fill so many Danish still lives.

Surely what's in the painting matters—without the specific light of the oysters and the lemon, the existence of the book remains unthinkable; but it is also true that whatever the "image" at stake *is*, it isn't representational *per se*. What I glean from my intimacy with Doty's sentences is that he takes pleasure in the thought of whoever arranged these objects and converted them into tiny, succulent worlds hundreds of years ago. The lesson of his text is in part comprised of the simple knowledge: such pleasure is possible. Moreover, pleasures *like* the one

Doty derives from this painting can be said, held inside oneself, transferred across time despite the loss of a thing's narrative. There is no telling who ate these oysters or the grapes, who shared the wine or made the table these things were set on, and that is part of their charm, or so we might choose to believe.

Doty shares a slightly sharper vision for how this kind of ekphrasis manages the issue of specificity when he says of the paintings in a whole show composed of Danish still lives that share some kinship with the one he begins from:

They cannot be generalized about without diminishing them, but I can report on their lesson, which is to remind us of the strangeness and singularity of things, and therefore of ourselves. Singularity, they wish us to know, resides in the physical, the particular, the seen; this knowledge can be looked at, can be held. Here you are, the painters say, a body in the city of bodies, in concert, in the astonishing republic of things, the world of light.  
(55)

This lesson is brilliantly object-oriented in its manner of conveyance and in the version of ontology that upholds it. The knowledge of ekphrasis' habits that Doty exposes defines itself not only in terms of the writer composing tenderly the experience of a work of art but also via readers and viewers taking on the embodied knowledge that such tenderness toward the things of the world is *possible*, which opens them to the idea that it might be worth cultivating in other contexts. A Mitchell-esque scholar of ekphrasis might revel here in the way both Doty and I are so clearly tempting vitalism *and* materialism, in the way we oscillate between "mystical and critical attitudes," between phenomenological, affective, and intellectual reactions (*What Do Pictures Want* 7). And it is, indeed, I think, in that oscillation that a version of ekphrastic empathy begins to show itself. This is an empathy that is disassociated from the ideal of

consubstantiality, even as it celebrates the degree to which an ekphrastic practitioner might be shaped (beneficially) by engaging in sustained acts of coordination. The ability to imagine richly how another's capacities drive his/her/its movements through the world is essential. But—like the ability to describe the world—this ability is essential *and* impossible to exercise fully. Again, something always gets left out.

### 3.4 LIFE AS AMBIENT INSTRUCTION: CONTEXTUALIZING THE CELEBRATION OF VIBRANCE

In the introduction to this dissertation and the previous chapter, I highlighted some ways in which accusations of material irrelevance plague both speculative realisms (not to mention much philosophy) and poetry (not to mention much artistic practice). One common refrain leveled against these and related pursuits, which I haven't mentioned yet, is that *just celebrating* abundance and vibrancy and plurality is not sufficient. Well, of course that's true. But arguing that something's influential isn't the same as arguing that it is all that's required in order to describe the world well and interact with it thoughtfully, meaningfully. In the humanities, and this is perhaps related to our lack of well-articulated near-human and in-between scales, we sometime do a poor job articulating the ways in which discrete events have multiple causes—some of which look more like intelligent actions, some of which look more like ambient precedent conditions. Marder and Doty give us two very different ways to think about how nonhuman others can be understood as offering instruction to humans, which in turn lets us think of nonhuman influence in both an anti-anthropocentric way (things influence one another in ways we can't perceive) *and* in a more humanist way (they interact with us and we are changed,



prompted to make decisions we might not otherwise have made, to act in ways we might not otherwise have acted).

The lesson we learn from Doty as a real human writer is not that all our problems might be solved democratically if we only choose to credit the vibrance of objects. It is not that every thing is good, that everything might be made clean and clear by long looking and vivid poetic description. In his world, vividness, ekphrasis, and the intimacy they portend are not exclusively media for the transmission of pleasure. While Doty has received acclaim for works that cross genres and contexts, he is (arguably) best known for the memoir *Heaven's Coast*, which documents the landscape he lived in after he and his longtime partner Wally Roberts discovered that Wally was HIV-positive in 1989. This other book of poet's prose is filled with a wild tenderness, but it is not a sentimental redemption narrative; its griefs are raw, and sometimes mean, as fits the world that fashioned them.

In the context of Mark and Wally's story, what it means for Doty to, later in life, fall in love with a "simple" painting of lemons and oysters is refracted. Knowing both stories, my reactions to the near melodrama of his artistic appreciation are tempered, and my failure to fall in love with the same painting as him is further contextualized. That I am not entirely "just" reading a relationship onto the two books from afar is evidenced in *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon* itself, which takes a brief detour through that earlier time in Doty's life. He (re)introduces Wally to readers (who may or may not have read the earlier volume) as a "man who designed display windows for a living, until he grew too sick to work;" this job is understood as vocation in the same way Doty being a poet is understood as vocational, and it is bound to the way—in Doty's intimate descriptions of him—Wally was also a man who "had a respect for beautiful things, especially simple, clean-lined objects that displayed evidence of use and time" (39). At every

stage, we find their life together transcribed, in part, via descriptions of the still-life-ready objects that collected around them.

This is true during periods when the future seems real (inevitable) and open—as they collect antiques to fill their New England home before illness structures their lives. And it is true as their world narrows, their sense of scale is changed by the everyday demands of AIDS. We discover that the kinds of scenes that populate still life paintings—two or three or five objects made to appear in use (e.g. chipped plates, half-full carafes) arranged on a piece of cloth selected for its texture, positioned in a room with regard to where the light comes in—regularly graced the domestic spaces of Doty’s life during a time that was both deeply mundane (as serious illness often is) and deeply formative (as serious illness often is). I call special attention to this because it is suggestive of the way in which living a particular life prepared Doty to fall in love with a painting, and not just any painting but a particular one—one with particular features, done in a particular style. A Dutch still life that I cannot fathom falling in love with, even after he has instructed me well (and enjoyably) in its specific pleasures and appeals, even though he has well convinced me that I might some day fall in love with some other painting.

### **3.5 GIVING IN THE WITHDRAWAL: HOW FAULT-RIDDEN INTIMACIES**

#### **PRESAGE CARE**

The weird blend of failure and success in transfer between Doty and me suggests, I think, some things about what an ekphrastic project conceived as a prepositional opening can reasonably expect of readers or viewers. And I like that about it, in part because it makes the painting’s ability to instruct explicit but explicit *as an ability*, which, like the ability of any human teacher,

is not always realized, not always able to be encountered by every student in the room. In part, I like it because the “failure” of the text to make me fall in love with the painting itself highlights for me just how instructive I found the text in terms of showing what a lived object-oriented philosophy might look like. It suggests that a book about a painting that I do, in fact, love might have made a much worse traveling companion for me as a specific, embodied thinker.

It is, of course, true that I am able to gather some of the lessons these paintings teach secondhand through Doty’s book because of the way he looks both at and with them. It is, of course, also true that there’s a piece of whatever is going on when I read (and after) that has to do with my habits of being and looking. Neither of these claims requires an interest in ekphrasis or new materialisms, but their simultaneity does point us back toward the big questions of complexity and entanglement. Among other things, the degree to which Doty’s attention to the painting in question’s genre—and that genre’s approach to both objects and space—enhances my ability to engage (and enjoy) both book and painting attests that my background has prepared me somewhat uniquely for the reading of *this* book. And yet, it is impossible to say in any real way how much the relevant part of my background is academic—tied to the amount of poetry, rhetorical theory, cultural geography, and object-oriented philosophy that I’ve read—and how much of it is (for lack of a better word) linked to the “personal” things of my life. Perhaps it would be more salient to ask, was I prepared to move with this book, at its pace, because of my experience with the ways in which human bodies fail or because of the degree to which queer friendships (and queer writers) have shaped my understanding of connection and care taking? Or was it because the meditative aspects of walking and looking and writing had already started helping me live my life, even before this book was written? Or was it much more simply that on the day I first read this book (cover to cover, in one sitting) I had been wanting a respite from the

world as it appears when one is not in love with a thing, surrounded by the medium that is possibility?

It is silly to imagine that an either-or logic could be at work anywhere in this [ me + book(s) + Doty + painting(s) + painters ] equation, just as it is silly to imagine that identifying ekphrasis as a particular form might require us to claim that it embodies either celebratory hope or ambivalence and anxiety. In the above paragraphs, as is almost always true, each either-or represents the assembly of a straw man. Of course, straw men serve their purposes. And wandering through a whole field of them has a different impact on a thinker than neatly cutting one down, especially when the field is full of the “good light of habitation.” Trying to parse narratives of influence—which are narratives of becoming—is difficult. Most of the influences that I have claimed (both for myself and, from a distance, for Doty’s writerly persona) in the above passages benefit from retrospection, even as time obfuscates their complexity. Put more succinctly, the story of an influential object occasions attention to narrative gaps (gaps in action) because of the existence of causalities about which we can never know all that much, which can never be verified. It is easy to ask in the face of such nebulous influencers—why bother pointing any of this out at all?

### **3.6 ON EXCEEDING CAPACITY: MAKING THINGS MADE MORE INTENSELY WHATEVER THEY WERE**

If our world is one of meaning and meaning’s withdrawal, as object-oriented thinking asserts, and as I believe, one of the things that point of view endorses is the (common sense) fact that a meaning not currently available might later be revealed; moreover, this is not a cosmic trick

perpetuated by a higher power but rather an ontic feature of even the simplest things as they exist.

In the prologue that sets the stage for Doty's more traditional memoir, he writes that over time he comes to understand AIDS not as a solvent assaulting people he cared for and the integrity of life and relations (the way he imagined it around the time of Wally's diagnosis) but as "a kind of intensifier" (3). The poet, whose vocation has always been one part watching, reports:

Watching Wally, watching friends who were either sick themselves or giving care to those who were, I saw that they simply became more generous or terrified, more cranky or afraid, more doubtful or more trusting, more contemplative or more in flight. As individual and unpredictable as this illness seems to be, the one thing I found I could say with certainty was this: AIDS makes things more intensely what they already are. (ibid.)

In some ways, the specificity of this situation gives us a way to think about why or how activities—including writing and even "just" looking—that "increase the available stock of reality" perhaps shouldn't be conceived as *simply* ethical.<sup>2</sup> Doty, rightly wary of generalization, wonders to himself but with us along for the ride, "Is this true of all terminal illness, that it intensifies the degree of what already is?" (ibid.) He is not confident that it is. And in calling on his portrayal of experience, it seems prudent to ask a more general question, too.

Keeping in mind the truth that, for humans, ability is always only temporary, can we say that all of us, at some point in our lives, will face situations that we can *only* respond to by becoming more intensely what we already are? If we imagine the answer to this broader question is yes—whether those moments are moments in which reality overwhelms us with its cruelty, moments when reality's benevolence is paramount, moments so ordinary habit near fully takes

over our operations, or moments when we are ordinarily rather than extraordinarily exhausted—then we start to have a more acute frame for the importance of moments in which we are strangely (temporarily) suggestible to object lessons, to learning new ways of being from the things that surround us. There's some resonance here with Oppen's interest in moments when the existence of things reveals itself to our intuitive faculties.

Moreover, if this is true, the question we should be asking is not simply, how to love the world? But rather, what can we do conscientiously on the days that are good, that are easy, to increase the likelihood that we, like Doty, might someday in the future find ourselves sore and cold and travel weary *and somehow still* open to the possibility of being infused with love for the world? To being *surprised* by our own love for the world?

These questions drive Mitchell's notion of a beneficial (even when it is "anxious") oscillation between modes from the present tense into the future tense, where it is capable of undergirding choices and perceptions yet-to-be. They also call to mind the way Susan Miller stresses the importance of *precedent trustworthiness* to rhetoric. Despite her eloquent descriptions of the roles trust and trustworthiness play in communication, Miller is somewhat ambivalent about the degree to which we—as rhetoricians and writers—might teach (or even really work with) these notions, beyond insisting that crediting their existence and importance helps us check ourselves and resist believing too strongly in rationality, linear causality, or arguments' ability to cross contexts. Among other things, she wonders, "can we know how a liminal yet situated space of trust results from shared educational processes, teachings that become conventional perceptions of actions, personalities, and styles?" (151). And while the strict answer to that question may be *no*, the ekphrastic attitude of walking-with in a shared context clearly means to support the idea that close attunement to objects and the environment

contributes in necessary (though not sufficient) ways to the emergence of “liminal yet situated spaces” that are conducive to invention and the kind of communication that prompts change (a category that includes argument). This attitude also suggests ways to cultivate habits that may assert themselves *beneficially if idiosyncratically* at later times, habits that when they emerge might help us communicate and generate new connections—with humans, non-human others, and the world itself.

### **3.7 WHAT RESIDES NEAREST TO US: HARNESSING THE IMPULSIVENESS OF INTIMACY**

This notion that the habit-of-care is capable of asserting itself, generating a feedback loop that mediates its oscillations, and creating liminal but life sustaining spaces is on display late in the still life book when Doty details another museum visit. This trip to the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam is made topically relevant via the fortuitous coincidence of his trip, a celebration of his 45th birthday shared with his then-partner Paul, with an exhibit called “Still Life Paintings from the Netherlands, 1550-1720” (51). Doty describes “skylit, room after room of these somber poems of materiality” and gives a litany of the objects that appear—here oysters, there a rhinoceros beetle or a set of “vegetables that suddenly seem to verge upon mystery” (52). But once again his descriptive acumen is on best display when he tries to describe the day as it comes to him *after* the museum visit. This day is also cold. And Doty is again “tired of walking and standing,” which serves this time as an excuse for a ride in a canal boat.

The intimacy Doty described on the steps of the Met seemed to float out, to encompass all the objects—human and non-human—that his gaze touched. This time the intimacy is more

traditional in a way, understood as *for* the world but held near by the glass roof of the boat, and it is shared most expressly with Paul. Doty relays:

We're sitting close, our jackets a little wet from the rain. Paul's jacket is shiny and blue-black; his shoes are gleaming with droplets; his shoulder pushes against mine. A bit of fog on the windows around and above us from our own heat. I am a little dreamy with the weight of the paintings, with all that's entered my eyes. (55)

Objects—including human bodies and the world itself—instruct even as they withdraw. The work of art, as a special class of object, also instructs even as it withdraws. And, in both the general case and the specific case, there is the potential for many different affects to be generated by our encounters with withdrawal—dreaminess, with its inexact edges among them.

In one of the many passages where he attempts to describe the allure the style of these Dutch still lives have for him, Doty observes that

Sometimes these paintings seem full of secrets, full of unvoiced presences. And surely one of their secrets—somewhere close to their essence—lies in a sense of space that is unique to them. These things exist up close, against a background of burnished darkness. No wide vistas open behind them, no far-flung landscapes, no airy vastnesses of heaven. This is the space of the body, the space of our arms' reach. There is nothing before us here we could not touch, were these things not made of paint. (ibid.)

He follows up with the observation that we rarely see what resides nearest to us—at least not in a way that might appropriately be called vivid. Still life is like OOO in its reaction to that fact. Which is to say, still life is uncanny precisely for the way it insists upon the integrity, presence, and existence of ordinary things; “in still life the familiar is limned with an almost hallucinatory clarity” (56). The things in question do not become other than themselves, merging with the



painter or the viewer, rather these things become more insistently themselves, more reality (so to speak) becomes accessible to those who, like Doty, are primed to encounter these kinds of paintings *well*. And such an encounter with reality further encourages a heightened awareness of the viewer's own materiality (which is not synonymous with his mortality, though some might suggest a slippage between those two things as important). Doty goes on further to say,

That is why, I think, having imbibed such a deep draft of these paintings, I turned toward my lover's body, which suddenly seemed to me such a tangible, intrinsically interesting fact: that's what we are, facts, like the painters' fruits and shells, physical presences. Here was a shoulder against which I could lean my shoulder, jacket to jacket. (56)

He we all are. Facts in the city of facts. Things in the universe of things. And ekphrasis allows us to say some things about those facts, those things that matter to us.

Admittedly, all this could come to seem a little too recursive—imagining the Rijksmuseum exhibit's paintings as preparation for that particular moment of affection in Doty's life, imagining the day at the Met when he first fell in love with the de Heem as preparation for the day in Amsterdam, imagining the tableaux of his affectionate life with Wally designer-of-window-displays as preparation for love of both the de Heem itself and the genre it belongs to, seeing all this as preparation for the writing of the book at hand. But isn't that something *like* the way both life and ekphrastic practice do, in fact, seem to work?

### **3.8 RETURNING TO MELISSA KWASNY: LANGUAGE AS FACILITATOR, IMAGE AS CONNECTIVE TISSUE**

Considering the poet Doty's two books of prose together has provided me with a way of thinking through the celebration of detail and animate abundance in the context of difficulty, but of course this is just one way into that complicated terrain. It has been convincingly argued elsewhere that art's value in difficult times may be to serve as an escape hatch (a purpose that might require surrealism or magical thinking), that its value in such times is (or ought to be) documentary, and that the making of art is (or ought to be) therapeutic (a view often sponsored by confessional aesthetics). While these three assertions make sense of the world—and art's role in helping us orient to it—in different ways, they aren't mutually exclusive perspectives. All three support the suggestion that art's utility is related to making and maintaining the objects that are a self and a community, and a focus on ekphrasis as a form that ties together multiple works and multiple makers further animates the community aspect of these suggestions.

For a very different case in support of these suggestions (and one that transverses aesthetics nimbly), it is worth returning briefly to the segmented Melissa Kwasny poem "Letter to the Soul" that this chapter opened with. Careful always to observe the tensions that exist between imagistic forms, whether those forms are poems, pictographs, photographs, or landscapes unfolding before the open eye, Kwasny offers a "language of nature" that is more elaborately metaphoric than the Romantic languages of Nature in which an idealistic human soul rushes out to animate the world or Nature assumes the mover's place that an all-powerful God had occupied (see: M.H. Abrams celebrated work on Romanticism and mimesis). Kwasny understands groundedness—thoughtful attunement to Earth and surrounds—as a value that prepares us to receive sustenance, but she also points out that the "part of us that is deeply

connected to the earth,” is the same part that is most capable of being tuned to “the catastrophic ‘language of nature’ ” (*Kenyon Review Conversations* n.p.).

Her use of the phrase “language of nature” is partly notable for the qualifying quotation marks that surround it, which serve as a reminder: just as nonhumans do not know in the same way that we know, the things that come to speak with us do not speak to us on our terms, in our languages. For Kwasny, the image is an important unit (and an important concept) because it is a communicative thing that can be passed to humans by non-humans like trees and ferns and fields. This is true for her despite the fact that a language of images is emphatically not a purer, more universal version of language (which bears note in part because adjectives like “pure” and “universal” have provided not altogether unpopular ways of talking about the language of images, especially natural images, at various times and places in history). Indeed, Kwasny implores the reader to imagine: the image’s silence is much of its communicative strength; that contemporary poets often engage images via occlusion, omission, and elision (tactics that avoid the strict interpretation of images) is one of the things that positions poets to teach themselves, each other, and the rest of us useful ways of acknowledging nonhuman ways of being and communicating. She argues convincingly that, while the various tactics by which poets render silences and white spaces descriptive are tactics that *can* also be markers of detached writers making a fetish of esoterism (occlusion in particular is often decried as such in a wholesale way)—these are like other tactics in that they can enact many different things, tending toward many different ends. Including some very important things and ends. In her words

In a world that seems increasingly focused on the needs of humans, when plants and animals are dying out at an alarming rate, the struggle to widen the world to one where we exist *in relation* to other forms of life seems crucial. Examining the way poets ‘read’

and render that relation might help us effect a transcendence of our own. (*Earth Recitals* 21)

More succinctly, one of the lessons that Kwasny's ekphrastic poems and essays have to teach us is that the correspondence between human language and the "language" of images is metaphorical, not exact. Saying there's a metaphoric relationship is here (as it has been throughout this dissertation) a way to assert lack of equivalence; it is also a way to acknowledge transformative potential. In practical terms, "Metaphor innovates by redescription of reality via perceiving similarity among dissimilars," helping us navigate complexity and diversity (Wu 43).<sup>3</sup>

Metaphoric logic is at work when we use past experiences to guess at how we might interact well with objects (or persons or situations) that we've never encountered before. It's also, almost paradoxically, at work in acts of re-mystification—acts that aim to make the everyday strange again, so that common phenomena can be observed without habituation's potentially damaging biases getting in the way. (Both sides of this paradoxical metaphor logic are at work in the Doty examples and in examples that address creative habits—e.g. habits of imaginative re-mystification—more broadly). Of course, metaphors may *initiate* similarity rather than simply recording perceived similarity.

A metaphor can impact an object's capacities by making new forms of engagement readily imaginable—a good reminder that taking resonance and ecology seriously forces us to admit: our capacities are not wholly our own. Moreover, if we take seriously the idea that ekphrastic art is always foregrounding both the specific relationship between an artwork and a piece of writing *and* the relationship between the visual and the verbal as modes, we begin to see how ekphrasis—driven by metaphorical processes—is a process primed to open us up to more

expansive ways of using both modes to engage the “world out there” (in Oppen’s terms) or ontology and ontogenesis (in more traditionally philosophical terms).

Kwasny notes that she often writes about art precisely because ekphrastic projects give her a way to work through—and provisionally answer—the question, “how might poetry *facilitate and transform* our initial perception of a ‘thing’ into another form of being, more closely resembling a dialogue between object and subject” (*Kenyon Review Conversations* n.p., emphasis mine). We can think of this as linked to the qualified question: in order to care for the world in which we live together, how might we leverage poetry’s lessons into learning about how to close the conceptual gap that humans have created between object and subject? In leading us to this question, the case study Kwasny anchors isn’t so different from the cases I’ve laid out surrounding Oppen and Doty. But it bears circling back around to note: *learning to narrow* this gap isn’t the same as erasing the gap; it might mean learning to close it temporarily or intermittently. It almost certainly means learning in an ongoing sense; the surprise and delight and difficulty of always finding oneself *still learning*.

When talking about the way so much of Doty’s “work maps the perimeter of the passageway from selfhood to objecthood, [while] he also presses against it, tries to puncture the screen keeping each from each,” writer and editor Andrew David King observes, “Beyond the human, it turns out, is where so much else is; the distinction, though, is not always tenable” (n.p.). If we are thinking about the relationship between the lessons of things and ethics, which I clearly am, we might want to take this observation as an excuse to ask: *when* is the distinction tenable? When is it not? What are the boundary cases? What happens there? Are all cases boundary cases, in which an oscillation between viewpoints can be helpful? If the latter is true (which I am not convinced it is), it is useful to think of Mitchell’s phases of ekphrasis—and their

oscillating regard for the concept of medium specificity—as a guide in structuring phases of recognition? What would change if we admitted phases that *here* distinguish thoughtfully between object and subject, *there* deny that any extant differences are differences of kind?

### **3.9 PHOTOGRAPHY, BUTOH, AND THE ECOLOGICAL BODY: LESSONS FROM ANOTHER PARTICULAR CASE**

The case of Kwasny’s “Letter to the Soul” is uniquely suited to helping us engage the many quandaries set forth above in part because of its double ekphrasis, which partakes of two very different traditions of material, imagistic transformation.

In writing about photographs, Kwasny writes about a technical form that has engendered many of the most detailed and aggressive treatments of the relationship between art and reality in visual culture studies. Can photographs be used as evidence? (When the medium was young, they were inadmissible in most courts.) Can photographs be considered art? (No, they do not require the skill of the painter. Yes, the chemical manipulation that produces them is akin to magic—and wielding magic is the essence of art. Yes, the eye and mind of the photographer dictate the nature of the image in an essential, artful way. No, they are too common, too numerous.)<sup>4</sup> How close can a photograph come to capturing the vibrance of a human? If it cannot capture that vibrance, is it enough for a photograph to “walk alongside” someone, in the way of ekphrasis? And what happens when the photograph outlasts the individual in question, not just the particular moment it depicts? What becomes newly possible if we ask photographs to tune us to the boundary of life (or “the passageway from selfhood to objecthood”), rather than considering them only as objects that help tune us to life itself?

Questions about the way photography mediates our relationship to the dead are particularly complex and enduring; they are inescapably part of the history of photography, given the way the popularity of the practice of post-mortem portraiture was contemporaneous with the expansion of the medium more generally in the nineteenth century. This is notable here because, however loosely, it helps bind photography as medium, butoh as a dance form, and the set of philosophical questions that drive Kwasny's poetic treatment of these particular photographs. In "Learning to Speak with Them," Kwasny notes that "along with the non-human, we seem to neglect the dead" (*Earth Recitals*). Departed humans and present objects are brought into relation by her language and by our collective activities—both active, enculturated (often fearful) turning away and the turning away that constitutes necessary acts of moving on. That bodies are also literally transformed into other things—and that this has little or nothing to do with us—is true, too. It may seem callous to name our dead "objects," and yet in a world of vibrant matter, this is also, in its own strange way, an act of naming that gives them back their dignity and power to influence. I don't mean to make Kwasny's attention to this correspondence appear overly unique. The common literary term apostrophe can be used when referring to speech addressed to inanimate objects (a stone, a waterfall, a painting) and speech addressed to the dead or humans that are alive but physically distant. In pragmatic terms, then, objects and humans-at-a-distance often serve similar functions in literature. This shores up the premise: speaking to the dead and listening to their silences is, in some ways, an activity that teaches us about our place, our lives, our roles as things, and an activity that teaches us about the "languages" of other worldly things.

The appeal of photographs of a specific butoh performance as an ekphrastic prompt plays into this interest in communion beyond the scope of the conventional, which is to say live, human-to-human communication. Widely cited as a form that couldn't have come into being

without the devastating vaporization of a great many real people by the atomic bombs of World War II, butoh is a form of Japanese dance theatre that made its official debut with a controversial 1959 performance.<sup>5</sup> Its characteristic idioms rely upon the idea of the body itself as a conduit or receptacle through which the dead or non-human others might “speak,” which is to say, gesture meaningfully. That idiom is what’s at stake in the final lines in the first section of Kwasny’s “Letter,” which read:

*What about your hands?* the dancer says. *Use them more freely.* As if they grew those selves inside them and sent them out.

The italics gesture toward Kwasny’s own reading of performer Kazuo Ohno’s writings on butoh, which are the philosophical writings of a founder of the form and dedicated teacher, and also writings about the lived experience of the dead “coming to life” within his singular performing body. These lines also lend us a viewpoint from which to think about shamanistic impulses in relation to the claim that self is a modality.

In a 1987 review essay published in *The New York Times*, Margaret Loke wrote, “if the Butoh message is sometimes bewildering, the visual impact is raw and direct.” Performers often wear white face (or full body) makeup and manipulate props sourced in the natural world. That such a form would make an inviting subject for photography is, perhaps, more intuitive than the premise that it makes an inviting subject for writing; yet this is for some writers *exactly* the kind of human activity that the most dynamic language is primed to engage, the kind of thing that draws poetic techniques into new spheres. Asked by an interviewer to tell the story of the poem, “Letter to the Soul,” Kwasny began by describing her first encounter with the closely related Dance of Utter Darkness—*Ankoku-Butoh*. This encounter also had an ekphrastic distance built into it, consisting as it did of watching a



film of a troop of dancers depicting the suffering and dead after the bombing of Hiroshima. Their ghastly and ghostly figures, moving up a hill, expressed devastation so silently, so slowly, that it was like watching the spirits of the firestorm victims from behind the veil of time. It was as if their suffering had taken over the bodies of the dancers and we, as an audience, were required to look them in the eye. I was equally horrified and drawn in. (*Kenyon Review Conversations* n.p.)

To be horrified but also drawn in is, perhaps, the only way for us to engage the scale of an event like Hiroshima—which is simultaneously out of reach for most contemporary Americans in a cultural way (being touched metaphorically is not synonymous with being materially implicated) and out of reach for all humans conceptually.

Doty gave us a way to think through the resources that might be stockpiled in order to encourage our bodies to stay engaged as open, loving human bodies in the wake of individual tragedy; something like this performance (in both its original form and its re-rendered film and text formats) gives us a way of acknowledging the *different* difficulty that comes from looking back at the compound tragedies of history. If every individual tragedy is infinite, then what of the hundreds of thousands of tragedies wrought by the atomic bombs? Surely this is a different kind of infinity—a scale change that is meaningful?

We cannot claim a thing like the atomic bomb is something we fully understand; even though the physics is within humanly grasp, even the most precise of descriptions fail. And yet, in that failure something happens; claims are staked or unstaked. Issuing a failed description—or crafting an image that reminds through its incompleteness—remains preferable to the violence that is complete non-acknowledgement.

This example that so obviously overwhelms both language and sense also calls attention to a more ordinary ontological mechanism. “The big story” in Rickert’s *Ambient Rhetoric* “is that rhetoric is not solely human doing, that it is worldly, and that world is simultaneously one of meaning and of meaning’s withdrawal. But there is giving in the withdrawal” (163). And the preparatory, prepositional ekphrastic poetics that Kwasny and Doty both embody—which I’ve also been attempting to approach more generally—shares more than a little bit with that story. Yet, the “giving” that withdrawal elicits isn’t just a verb of wonder and love. One of the simplest ways to see how this giving manifests is to observe along with Harman: if things did not withdraw, the world would be less comprehensible, not more comprehensible (*Guerilla Metaphysics* 162-164). If *all* the real, objective rawness of things flooded us, it would be entirely incomprehensible, entirely too much information to order. This inability to process and so respond to the world would likely be deadly. Our hearts would be ruined.<sup>6</sup>

Living with uncertainty (and communicating despite it) is a practical (rhetorical) skill, not simply a poetic ideal.

### **3.10 WHEN THE DIRECTION IS DISSOLVING: ALCHEMY, INFLUENCE, AND MOVEMENT AS HEALING**

A dedicated advocate of nonviolence, Ohno teaches that we “cannot turn away from the messiness of life,” and the bodies of dancers like the ones Kwasny describes above give us occasion to practice looking at and with in messy—complicated—ways (qtd. Fraleigh 3). Where the opening of this chapter emphasized the ability of prepositions to create relation—*withness*—by coordinating movements, butoh emphasizes the ability of *performed withness* to move us into

paradigms that are attentive but not oriented toward progress. “Unlike ornamental European ballet, the democratic designs of American modern dance, or the improvisational games of the postmodern, *butoh* masquerades human weakness. It exposes the watery, subtle body ready to dissolve and go under” (Fraleigh 16). At a prepositional level, *its direction is dissolving*. It enacts a kind of non-linear history at the level of the individual, encouraging us to embrace empathy in a more-than-conceptual way by training this thing that is inarticulate into our very bodies. As such, looking at what it means for writing to move with this form expands the framework that I’ve been attempting to lay out. *Butoh* asks something particularly complicated of a writer who would describe it.

Sondra Fraleigh, who herself studied with Ohno, and who writes both as a scholar and as a *butoh-ka* or *butoh* dancer, remarks,

I understood this form of dance immediately, because it is not filtered through classical or folk forms, but its basic material is the body itself in its changing conditions. It is furthermore a hybrid form of dance, linking physical and spiritual cultures from around the world, also accounting for aging bodies as well as the buoyant qualities of youth. (11)

With this framing, she helps those of us who may be less familiar with the form understand the degree to which it is, at times, a form that compresses metaphor and metaphysics, that permits metaphysics and materialism to cohabit. Tatsumi Hijikata, the principle founder of *butoh* whose long association with Ohno helped shape the form, frequently framed the dance in ontological terms; the dancer’s human body is in no uncertain terms for him “the body that becomes.” And Fraleigh’s observation that this form is available to all kinds of bodies provides a way of thinking through the connection between that ontology and real practices of inclusion—a term that shouldn’t be equated with empathy.<sup>7</sup> Likewise, when she discusses the shamanistic qualities of

butoh, she is careful to qualify that she is “not suggesting the paranormal or supernatural but rather the very real ability of the body to manifest healing through dance and movement” (12). This is shored up by the assertion that metamorphosis and alchemy are linked via the remarkable way “they both point toward transformative change and connectivity, even when the change seems to come magically from nowhere” (11). It is worth recalling that the word “magic” has been deployed in diverse cultural contexts as a stand-in to explain the coming into being of new things (ontogenetic events) and the coming into salience of previously ambient things, especially when these becomings partake of complex, diffuse causalities rather than neat, linear causalities; understanding this helps us consider the potential validity of (at least pieces of) explanations that might otherwise invite contemporary readers and writers to ignore them as phenomena that are “just” superstitious or supernatural. Where healing comes from—especially when that healing must somehow address an unthinkable immense rupture—is, I think, a question that plays into this same space.

Fraleigh’s way of thinking about butoh as metamorphic, alchemical, and healing in a “very real” way also helps us understand the capacity of this form to appeal to a writer like Kwasny, who often writes about shamanism, alchemy, and ways in which blurring the line between the materially present and the imaginary (especially as regards vision and visions) can be understood as useful in a very real way.<sup>8</sup> Of course, letting Kwasny speak for herself on the matter of influence offers an exactitude I cannot provide, and she is eloquent with regard to the joining of capacities that allows specific images to appeal to specific writers:

Since first encountering Butoh, I have seen a few live performances, watched online videos, and read some excellent books on the subject...In writing “Letter to the Soul,” I brought all of that to it, as well as my current thinking about the human species as it

exists in the natural landscape. That cluster or matrix of my attentions was focused finally through the images in Hosoe's photographs. It is the tragic mystery in the photographs, the spiritual and animal nature of the soul that both dancer and photographer were able to capture, that I wanted to express in the poem, that I was drawn to, because of something in me that was already moving toward expression. We are not drawn to images arbitrarily. (*Kenyon Review Conversations* n.p.)

*Something was already moving. We are not drawn to images arbitrarily.* These are the lessons of the ekphrastic form itself, too. Or rather, we can choose to let them be its lessons.

Kwasny also observes rightly that, in choosing to write ekphrastically, "The challenge is to avoid shallowness, i.e. simply describing, reflecting, or reproducing the photograph or dance, as if the source were insufficient in itself" (ibid.). In both of these quotes, Kwasny betrays a theory of care that, for her, permits what we might call an ethical ekphrasis. In order to avoid speaking over the original art object, to avoid implying in an adversarial way that the original object is not enough and doing violence to the perspectives of both the original maker and the object itself, she recruits to her engagement historical, contextual research (e.g. she spends time with materials that are of a kind with the artwork) and she brings outside experiences (the landscape thinking she has developed over decades in Montana, "the series of transformations—the operation, the fire, the night [she] poisoned [herself] eating wild mushrooms from the field") that let her writing do something *akin but distinct*, something elastic and metaphorical that honors her separation from the original creator(s) as well as their similarities ("Letter" 62). This is another way of arguing that one of the ekphrastic mode's lessons is that ethical composition benefits from an emphasis on the tie that binds extension and maintenance as activities.<sup>9</sup>

### 3.11 AS IS OFTEN TRUE OF THE NONFIGURATIVE: BEING NOT CLEAR WHEN THINGS ARE NOT CLEAR

Looking at and thinking with *butoh* further reminds: investigation conducted *with* the body implies a very particular relation to the concept “human.” *Butoh* philosophy argues explicitly for the importance of tending to (or caring for) the human body and the ecological body simultaneously. In the example at hand, this interest in the ecological body, the body that is connected both widely and deeply to both other bodies and the earth itself, is most sharply present in the fourth and final section of Kwasny’s poem, which begins:

In this photograph, the view is from a distance, and it is not clear whether the figure is there or not there, as is often true with the nonfigurative. Not in the uncut grass that has grown so tall it has folded over. Not in the bow or bend of the river, smooth as a road of snow, not snow because the bank reeds are reflected in it. Storm, where we are, ready to take over there. He could be anywhere, under any tree, already buried by the hay. He could be landscape with suffering hiding in it. (65)

Coincidentally, this last section of the poem is the section that allows me as a reader to have a fair amount of confidence that, among all the images of Ohno dancing that I have found online (after knowing that Kwasny received a link to these images herself), I actually know *which* set of four images these poems “after a series of photographs of Kazuo Ohno taken by Eikoh Hosoe, Hokkaido, Japan, 1994” were written after.

The impact of the fourth image in which the figure is there-but-not-there was striking for me, too. It partakes of the promises of serial art in that it could easily be shown alone as “just” a landscape image without implicating *butoh* or Ohno, but once we know about its associations, it

offers unique invitations. Ekphrasis, I have been arguing, is serial in this way, too, even though its seriality enlists multiple formats and multiple human creators.

This last image—both in its textual form and its photographic form--also reminds me of Harman declaring that vividness, the adjective that most often delimits “good” descriptions in classical rhetoric, doesn’t (or shouldn’t) be taken as a synonym for clarity; rather, it is a term that implores us “to be clear when things are clear, not clear when things are not clear” (“A Dialogue” 202). In Kwasny’s block of prose written “after” the image of the river, the catalogue of sentences that begin with “not” chases precision without feigning clarity in the face of uncertainty, and in so doing opens the door for a meditation on where and what the figure could be. Later in the poem, she asks pointedly, “Looking forward, is that what is finally taken away from us?” and because we have been prepared to receive them, it is easy to glean metaphoric resonances from that line. The notion of forwardness is impeded by the distant viewpoint the photographer himself has chosen; it is also impeded by the retrospective nature of photography and the philosophical side of *butoh*—which claims the dance form as a reflective art, an art of taking stock that finds power in dissolving (or evanescence); death itself becomes the thing that might (note the question mark) take the capacity for “looking forward” away from us; more distantly, this is the lesson we might take from global warming and the promise of an eventual mass extinction. Speaking to this field means speaking to the dancer hidden in it; speaking to the dancer from a distance requires speaking *to the field* as well. In Kwasny’s textual picture, there’s both a sadness and a vividness—which, of course, is also a word that indicates life, liveliness.

Ekphrasis is capable (among other things) of focusing attention on how it is that (even in the face of difficult facts) an art object can initiate the lived becoming of a “we.” Dealing in medial refractions foregrounds multiplicity more generally. Each metaphor is transformative but

also anchored to something real. The shamanistic side of butoh throws into relief the ways in which, even for a single dancer alone in a field, human plurality is always already at hand. The *butoh-ka* steps as if into a gap created by human and more-than-human partners—various choreographers invite these dancers to follow the movements of the dead, of marginalized literary characters, and of our entire changing planet.

### **3.12 RESILIENCE IN RELATION: HOW THE EXAMPLES SET BY DOTY AND KWASNY WORK TOGETHER**

The world in which objects like poems and languages themselves get made is one in which “Objects collide with each other—triggering events, forming new objects, releasing qualities into the many breezes of the world” (Harman, *Guerilla Metaphysics* 101). This is, of course, a complicated world to inhabit, make sense of, and respond to. My (ontological) hunch that distributed, feedback driven, nonlinear causality is important to the “how” of description’s influence is one of the many things that makes the metaphor of complexity seem at least moderately applicable to a landscape of ekphrasis like the one this chapter lays out; the element of recursion, the suggestion that feedback loops are an integral part of the continuance of meaning making, the (perhaps oddly hopeful) impression of elements self-organizing (of the existence of meaningful phenomena that are only ever really clear in retrospect)—these at least give the metaphor some traction, even if it is imperfect.

Once in a world based on an object-oriented or machinic ontology, it isn’t hard to imagine ekphrastic practice as a practice that makes visible (on the one hand) and articulate (on the other) some of the more creative capacities that human machines possess. Neither is it hard to



use this framework to consider writing about an artwork as a textual machine that actively relates the writer and the artwork in a world. In taking Swensen's interest in what happens when a "walking-along-with" replaces an oppositional "face-to-face relationship" as part of my exigence early on in this chapter, I aimed to facilitate preservation of the notion: it is not just what ekphrasis does but also what it does *to* us (especially as ekphrastic practitioners but also as readers, viewers, and otherwise embedded human beings) and what we do *with* it that make it whatever it is. This is also what *ought* to make the practice of interest to object-oriented composers who may not be poets and/or who may not be particularly concerned with paintings or photography or modern dance.

In the end, the question at the heart of this chapter is, *what can be done with our objective everyday loves? (including loves lost)*. This is a poet's question, but there's no reason it need be only a poet's question. Barbara Maria Stafford permits the phrase "work of art" to designate "a special class of images that both coalesce and work to make the viewer coalesce large amounts of novel and taxing information—[that] bring a crazy-quilt of physical phenomenon to our notice" (10). Simply adopting this definition offers one succinct way to expand the scope of ekphrastic practice into diverse realms.

Another way to approach the ekphrastic impulse broadly is to observe: the word "modality" can refer to a kind of expression; it is sometimes used interchangeably with the word "medium," calling attention to visual-verbal relationships like those I've been working with. But it can also refer to a kind of existence, a way of being. Slippage between those two understandings is variously at stake in Mitchell's approach to ekphrasis, in Heffernan's definition that insists only upon there being a "verbal representation of visual representation," and in my discussions of habituation and precaution as precedent care.

Having mentioned Latour's modes of existence elsewhere in this dissertation, it bears note that in his thinking attention to "modes" is not attention to communicative modalities that distinguish themselves solely by appealing to specific sense organs or semiotic systems (e.g. the eye or the ear; figurative languages or phonological ones or computational ones). His modes are instead names for various kinds of reason that operate in and structure the human-and-material world. A Latourian mode has a social logic of its own, and the best way to begin to understand the nearly unbearable complexity with which these modes interact, according to Latour, is to undertake many comparative studies, studies that look at these modes neither one-by-one nor all at once but rather two-by-two. Something there resonates with an implied claim that I've been working with—that looking to the interplay between *just* words and images might tell us something about our complex, always multi-sensory phenomenological experiences and our always multiple ways of understanding the world. And about how these complexes respond to representational disparities and perceptual gaps in ways that permit us to intuit the existence of a coherent world. My intent in studying, describing, and otherwise working *with* images and the visual aspects of multi-media forms is to engage ambient rhetorics more than it is to privilege sight over other senses. Sight, it bears note, is also arguably the sense that writing in general and poetry in particular most privileges in our time (given how often poems are read in books rather than heard aloud). So, while many studies of ekphrasis suggest the ekphrastic mode pits sight against sound, in sensorial terms the contemporary "conflict" is perhaps more aptly understood as sight against sight; ekphrasis, then, if it betrays conflicts of "senses" is rather like the Latourian conflict of modes of inquiry or modes of reason. Following from that, the suggestion that what distinguishes poets and painters might well be not their tools but rather their logics can at least be taken more seriously. Put more succinctly, Latour's inquiry helps shore up the

assertion that the practice of using certain tools regularly (whether logics or rhetorical moves or oil paints) prepares composers for all kinds of *seemingly* unrelated future interactions. For the *how* of these interactions. And it gives us a novel way of defining ekphrasis—as a descriptive record of what happens when one kind of thinker/being attempts to travel (for a limited time) via the mode characteristic of another kind of thinker/being; that the disruptions and rough patches, the imperfections, of this attempt are much of what make it illustrative is useful to say outright.

As I noted above, one aim of this chapter has been to allow my personal encounters with ekphrases' plurality to serve as an occasion for description of various prepositional attitudes we might take as we orient ourselves toward things (including ourselves and each other) *with* care. Perhaps the only thing that I have really made any clearer is this: thinking *with* is never a particularly easy task. And it is particularly difficult when we are asked—as composers building texts we hope will be able to walk along with objects that have their own modes—to actively account for both direction (providing coordination in space) *and* pace (providing coordination in time). A complex feat of alien phenomenology attends this kind of composition—the writer must ask, what is this thing? But also, how does it move? How quickly, how smoothly? Where is it looking? Is following its gaze a reliable way of predicting where it means to go next?

Bogost's alien phenomenological project beseeched readers to ask of the alien not *what is it to us* but rather *what are we to it?* And the kind of prepositional ekphrastic project that I've composited based on the lessons of Swensen, Doty, and Kwasny beseeches us to ask, *what is this alien art object about to do, and how can we co-ordinate with it? How does this artful alien understand emergence?*<sup>10</sup> *What kinds of future can it imagine? What kind of futures might it desire? When a previously imagined future has been violently obliterated, how might we help an object (especially if it is a sentient human who registers pain) heal in the present tense?*

Where Oppen offered a model for not “just” living with uncertainty and surprise but embracing them as generative and potentially life-sustaining, the contemporary poets this chapter travels with speak (via their embrace of the ekphrastic impulse) to the deliberate, intentional tending of relationships across time. They also speak to the way individual objects intervene in our emotional lives, inflecting the worldly attunements we are prone to adopting. In highlighting the tenuousness of creative movements that cross modal and medial boundaries, I have paid particular attention to two special cases. First, the forward-thinking case in which loving attention to details observed in moments of leisure or relative ease help define an individual, preparing him or her to act as well as possible later, when he or she has little choice but to become “more himself” or “more herself” in the face of an unforeseen and exceedingly taxing situation. Second, the more diffuse, more retrospective case in which close attention to a past instance that is complex and not strictly representable connects us ecologically to other humans, non-humans, and the earth itself; this is both the case that makes space for us to *continue* moving our bodies, which opens the possibility of healing (even if healing is incomplete and unassured), and the case that helps us consider how those moments in which we are most aware of our own fragility might also be the moments in which we are most keenly primed to receive messages from the fragile, non-human others that share in our existence. These are, I think, both cases that describe resilience as a hard-won quality—one that rhetoric and writing require us to have access to, but also one that the act of writing can help us acquire.

## NOTES CHAPTER THREE

<sup>1</sup> In crediting diverse non-human wisdoms and desires, we might choose to (again) take a cue from the way in which Mitchell frames his attention to the more specific question, “What Do Pictures Want?” This, of course, is a question that assumes for pictures life, ways of knowing, and preferences, and Mitchell allows that readers might wonder, “why should such an apparently idle, frivolous, or nonsensical question command more than a moment’s attention?” He counters with another question (the “shortest answer” he has), “why is it that people have such strange attitudes toward images, objects, and media? Why do they behave as if pictures were alive, as if works of art had minds of their own, as if images had a power to influence human beings, demanding things from us, persuading seducing, and leading us astray?” (*WDPW* 7).

<sup>2</sup> This phrasing refers back to chapter two, where I introduced Donald Revell’s investment in the way poetry tends the health of language and Christian Wiman’s use of the oft-quoted critic R.P. Blackmur to declare: what happens when you encounter good poetry, poetry well composed, is that, “It suddenly makes the amount of reality you have in your life greater” (*On Being* interview). The suggestion that “increasing the available stock of reality” *might* not always be an unequivocal *good* can be contextualized in many ways; for one example, consider Latour’s now frequently cited worries about the damage done by “good” research showing that scientific facts are socially constructed, which has found its way into climate change denials.

<sup>3</sup> As Wu is well aware, this way of saying might seem to invoke Aristotle’s assertion in the *Poetics* that metaphor—there defined as the calling of one thing by another’s name—is “a sign of genius” that (unlike most rhetorical devices) “cannot be learnt from others...since a good metaphor implies an intuitive perception of the similarity in dissimilars” (Chapter 22; 1459a).

<sup>4</sup> A history of painting’s relation to photography is outside the scope of this dissertation, as is a history of photography itself. In chapters four and five, I engage select episodes in this history in more detail than I do in the present chapter, and I refer directly to Naomi Rosenblum’s *World History of Photography* in several places. Some other engaging (more recent and more selective) volumes that speak to the relationship between the history of photography and theories of inter-media actions include: Dominique de Font-Reaulx’s *Painting and Photography: 1839-1914*, Alison Nordstrom’s *TruthBeauty: Pictorialism and the Photograph as Art, 1845-1945*, and Andrew Hershberger’s *Photographic Theory: An Historical Anthology*.

<sup>5</sup> This 1959 performance, “Kinjiki” (banned colors), was choreographed by Tatsumi Hijikata for himself and Yoshito Ohno (Kazuo’s son, then a young dancer) and based on a novel by Yukio Mishimi. The title of these pieces—a euphemism for homosexuality—invokes taboos outright, and at the end of the performance, Yoshito holds a chicken between his legs in a way that causes the audience to become outraged based on belief that the chicken has been killed (on stage by strangulation). Hijikata is consequently banned from the festival at which the performance was staged. Many versions of this story exist, and while there is no hard consensus about what happened to the chicken or how much bestiality or even homosexuality the

performance implied, Fraleigh recounts engagingly an encounter with Yoshito more than four decades after this performance was staged, in which he claims that the chicken, decidedly still alive, “laid an egg in the greenroom after the performance” (174). For a thoughtful look at this event and at the way creative partnership helped shape this often paradoxical form and its philosophies, see also *Hijikata Tatsumi and Ohno Kazuo* by Fraleigh and Tamah Nakamura.

<sup>6</sup> I know this is a silly, hyperbolic phrase. In the middle of a Montana winter, I once met a preschooler who was prone to yelling “my heart is ruined,” and the phrase stuck in my lexicon.

<sup>7</sup> The term empathy is clearly one I value, yet it is also a term that generates a fair amount of controversy, especially when there users don’t distinguish between cognitive empathy (knowing how another person feels or what they might be thinking) and emotional empathy (feeling along with someone else). That it is easier to *think* we know what someone else feels than it is to actually know within a reasonable margin of error what someone else feels is one source of tension. That claiming to feel along *with* someone else can diminish the real, material, perhaps traumatic events that led in complex ways to the emergence of a feeling is another tension. I am thinking here of the way Paul Bloom, writing “Against Empathy,” qualifies “I am not against morality, compassion, kindness, love, being a good neighbor, doing the right thing, and making the world a better place. My claim is actually the opposite: if you want to be good and do good, empathy is a poor guide” (n.p.). I am also thinking of the first essay in Leslie Jamison’s book *The Empathy Exams*, which speaks to performances of empathy; there she says, “Empathy isn’t just remembering to say *that must really be hard*—it’s figuring out how to bring difficulty into the light so it can be seen at all. Empathy isn’t just listening, it’s asking the questions whose answers need to be listened to. Empathy requires inquiry as much as imagination. Empathy requires knowing you know nothing. Empathy means acknowledging a horizon of context that extends perpetually beyond what you can see...Empathy means realizing no trauma has discrete edges. Trauma bleeds. Out of wounds and across boundaries” (5). I hope that highlighting the (no less problematic) term inclusion alongside the term empathy helps emphasize a rupture that sometimes separates praxis from theoretical discussions of the term; we might work hard to make others welcome in spaces we inhabit, *even* if we lack the cognitive ability to process their experiences.

<sup>8</sup> Perhaps notable here is Kwasny’s extensive work on rock art and native North American healing practices; for more see her essay “The Imaginal Book of Cave Paintings” (*ER*, 81-115) and her 2015 book *Pictograph: Poems*.

<sup>9</sup> For some recent, compelling work on paradigms of care and repair, see: Jentery Sayers’ invitation to move “From Make or Break to Care and Repair” and the way Bethany Nowviskie writes about “the complementary notions of *capacity* and of *care*: two ideas that rarely appear together—particularly as they seem to work on different ends of the scale, and are so differently gendered—in our discourse about the humanities in the digital age” (n.p.). Some readers may find Rita Felski’s work on *The Limits of Critique* consonant with these conversations and useful, but thus far I have found her very literary thinking more difficult to engage.

#### 4.0 INDUSTRIAL EKPHRASIS: STOCK IMAGES AND DESCRIPTIONS THAT DISAPPEAR

*The only thing that is different from one time to another is what is seen and what is seen depends upon how everybody is doing everything.*

Gertrude Stein, "Composition as Explanation" (497)

*What of the lot of the 'photographer,' the person who makes pictures? Are they still a configuration of motivations, conscious and unconscious, desire, different aims, skills and knowledge, institutional values that drive their engagement with the 'camera'? Surely yes, but it is just that now, the act may not be so special; it can be just like writing a little note, or a series of notes.*

David Bate, "The Digital Condition of Photography: Cameras, computers and display" (93)

*The stock photograph is premised on polysemy. Its meaning can be neither stable nor totally explicable through reference to the 'intention' behind the image, the object it depicts, or its style or formal structure; rather its meaning has to be contextual, emerging in the relationship with other images, the texts that appear alongside it, the product or purposes with which it is associated, the socially situated media and environments in which it is displayed, and the cultural proclivities and interpretive strategies of different viewers. This openness, it should be stressed, is material as well as semantic: it can involve radical image manipulation, including the use of one image as the background to another.*

Paul Frosh, *The Image Factory: Consumer Culture, Photography and the Visual Content Industry* (72-73)

The first time I really thought about the stock photography industry was in 2008. I had two interesting but unpaid editorial "jobs," which I was supporting by spending 40 hours a week selling running shoes. To put it generously, the shoe store I worked at wasn't particularly busy. I spent a lot of time standing on the floor, pretending to dust things that were not dusty, listening

to adult contemporary radio, and daydreaming about ways to finance quitting. At some point, the internet recommended becoming a stock photographer as a great way to fund a life of global travel. There are a lot of problems with that as a general recommendation (some of which I'll get to later in this chapter), but I was in my mid-twenties and bored, and while the hyperbole didn't convince me, my interest was piqued. Unlike the vitamin sale ring one of my coworkers kept trying to get me to join, it seemed at least possible that this wasn't *entirely* a pyramid scheme. And I wasn't alone in that evaluation; a 2007 New York Times article glossed the situation like this: "*Earn big money taking photographs in your spare time!* It sounds like a late-night TV come-on for a phony get-rich-quick scheme. But in this case, it might just be true" (Taub n.p.). Despite the promises, a decade later I remain a decently trained but casual photographer. I never earned big money from my photographs, and, in the end, it was a fulltime job in an eMarketing office that financed my ability to quit the shoe store. I became an occasional buyer and frequent editor of stock and stock-esque photos rather than a producer of them, but I was still someone who engaged with images as usable objects on a regular basis.

What the internet was recommending to people like me at that time wasn't traditional stock photography but rather entrance into the relatively young arm of the industry known as microstock (sometimes called micro-payment stock photography). The business of stock photography is the business of selling ready-made images for commercial and (sometimes) editorial use; its obvious counterparts include both the business of art photography and the business of setting up more expensive on-demand commercial photo shoots. Where traditional stock usually relies on curated catalogues, established relationships between recognizable professional photographers and respected distribution companies, and relationships between distribution companies and identifiable buyers working in the advertising industry, microstock



invites *anyone* to submit potential catalogue photos, which, as long as a reviewer approves them, can be sold again-and-again—making both photographer and distributor money across time (across time being an important qualifier, since individual sales don't generate much). Microstock also makes it easier for potential low-volume purchasers to access images. It is a model that leverages online submission and distribution channels and exposes a great many ways in which changing technical constraints can impact aspects of the creative process that seem relatively autonomous, relatively contained within the human mind, or radically dependent upon “just” economic prerogatives.

In the following chapter, I discuss the writing, image-making, and design practices of stock photographers and the companies they work with (paying particular attention to the microstock agency Shutterstock) not because this industry is particularly radical, but rather because it makes widespread content-production practices visible in a unique way. Moreover, I understand the stock photography industry and stock photographs as objects poised to “teach” people who are not part of the visual content industry to think newly about the dynamism of description. While it may always be true that an ‘image is *parsimoniously* polysemic,’ the stock image industry foregrounds this fact in an explicit way via manipulation of word-image pairings that are visible to potential buyers (culture industry intermediaries who will reuse images in some way).<sup>1</sup> An image must seem general to the agency (in order to be worth holding, it must sell many times) and specific to the buyer (who needs to be able to envision it attached to the very specific context he/she plans to use it in), and descriptive concepts that function metaphorically and organize images into a kind of grammar are instrumental in permitting this kind of double-projection. This is true even in the pre-digital era of the industry, so we can

consider moments in the history of this industry as moments in a history of metadata as it relates to many kinds of word-image pairings.

Compellingly for a theory of description's complexity, in this industrial context, once descriptive concepts have done their job (sold an image to a cultural intermediary), they disappear or are radically transmuted. They are, then, influential but invisible to end users (publics that see finished advertisements, etc.) because of the structure of the industry. Because of this fact, products of the stock photography and visual content industries might productively be thought of as inhabiting one end of a spectrum that includes near its other end the "No Caption Needed" phenomena described in Robert Hariman and John Lucaites' study of iconic images. Their work on the most exceptional of photojournalist products is also deeply interested in the relationship between images and publics, distribution practices, and unpredictable instances of multi-use (e.g. the reappearance of these photographs as stamps, billboard advertisements, and tattoos). But Hariman and Lucaites' images act caption-less because audiences already know—or someone thinks they know—precisely what an "accurate" descriptive caption would say. In contrast, when stock photos become caption-less, their success depends on the premise that no synecdoche can imply the whole context of the image's production. A top seller is a top seller because it can be imagined as a perfect fit by many different buyers.

As digital distribution has become the norm, the stock industry's use of keywords (including concepts that function as described above) and other descriptive metadata has shifted in interesting ways that speak to wider cultural trends. And much of this chapter is dedicated to exploring how pieces of descriptions—especially photographer-generated keywords—interact with different kinds of search functions. After providing some historical context, I pay particular

attention to how selling variety (volume of images) now requires not a great, creatively curated concept catalogue, but rather a selling of the sophistication of search capability (the ability to sort quickly and in a satisfying way). I illustrate this by engaging with the ways this shift propelled the company Shutterstock to develop a set of beta search tools and discussing how they help us think about descriptive complexes. In the corresponding sections of this chapter, I address search tools built on color-keyword pairings, real-time response to partially entered search terms, and untitled uploaded images (which need to be “described” numerically behind the screen in order for similar images to be identified) in order to further illustrate how it is that the stock photography industry makes visible the material dynamism of word-image interactions.

In order to integrate this chapter more fully with the considerations of materialist ethics that came in previous chapters, in describing search tools, at the end of the chapter I pay special attention to a search tool called *People* and its potential to simultaneously (1) amplify insidious stereotypes, (2) help cultural intermediaries produce products that break down some of those same stereotypes, and (3) re-frame conversations where savvy researchers worry about what happens at a representational level when we dissolve subject/object divides at a theoretical level. In relation to the last point, I argue that, because of its multi-gate structure and investment in polysemy, the stock image industry shows how in a broader theory of communication the intents and agencies of individual human creators might be credited as deeply influential forces *without* requiring an assumption that producers’ inner lives and intents play a determining role in adhering semantic meanings to communicative objects. Put another way, I suggest that the example of stock imagery gives us a picture that’s just big enough (and controversial enough) to show how distributed agencies contribute to the shape of specific communicative objects.

#### 4.1 ORDINARY CAPACIOUSNESS: WHY STUDY STOCK PHOTOGRAPHY?

As Paul Frosh and Abbott Miller both note, stock photography has not been popular as an object of academic attention. Its historical origins remain somewhat murky, in part, because there are so many different kinds of influences in play—that is, because there are so many different candidate prehistories relevant to reusable imagery that trying to narrating one inevitably starts to seem like a misrepresentation of how complex systems of practices transform across time. Yet, other classes of object (woodcuts and early illustration, iconography, typography, post cards), including the kinds of ekphrastic objects that my previous chapter focused on, have enjoyed academic limelight *because* of how complex—weird, excessive, divergent—their histories seem.

That stock photos haven't qualified as worthy of study is also part of a cross-disciplinary tendency to value—and analyze and theorize based on—the power of extraordinary images (e.g. high art, high-profile advertisements, and the most dramatic and memorable examples of photojournalism) while ignoring the fact that influential capacities inhere in “ordinary” images, too, and these capacities are sometimes *qualitatively* different from the capacities exercised by extraordinary images (i.e. some differences are of kind not scale). As Miller puts it, stock photography is distinguished by the fact that it is neither “the award-winning sort commissioned by top art directors” nor “heartfelt grass-roots expression” (n.p.). He suggests that stock photos as semantic units help constitute a “corporate vernacular,” and in this way their communicative potential relies upon combining two registers that are frequently seen on their own terms as lacking intellectual value. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine how a communicative object might be more effectively associated with base aesthetics that fail to inspire (inspiration, of course, being a name for a particular species of persuasion) than by direct association with *both* the corporate *and* the commonplace. Frosh, similarly, describes “the images produced by the visual-content

and stock photography industries as ‘ordinary’ and ‘unremarkable,’ as the kind of images likely to be overlooked, as part of an enveloping but largely unnoticed visual environment, and as the wallpaper of consumer culture,” primarily so he can point out the fact that “Cultural analysts are not, by and large, interested in the ways in which images are overlooked” (*The Image Factory* 145). This strikes me as correct, but it doesn’t fully engage the question of why (or how) *non-specialists* might have a stake in understanding stock industries and the models (or theories) of labor, creativity, and distribution they support.

Neither Miller writing in the mid 1990s nor Frosh writing in the late 1990s and early 2000s could see how fully prescient their studies of an industry built on both recycling unexceptional images and the mainstreaming of freelance work models would look from 2016—and yet theirs are still the most salient academic works on this format. Stock images as products, the practices of major players in the stock industry, and the history of that industry *remain* relatively unpopular as academic subjects, relatively unexamined as phenomena. This neglect seems more complicated now than it did two decades ago because the idea that ordinary images are not worthy of study has become more widely contested. Diverse academics in diverse fields of visual study seem eager to acknowledge ways in which living in an era of smartphones, social media, and intelligent digital billboards pressurizes both public and private life. “Big visual data” projects, including the Instagram Cities project led by Lev Manovich, Nadav Hochman, and Jay Chow—a project built on a sample of 2.3 million Instagram photos from 13 cities around the world—have begun offering new insights into visual cultural patterns and new methodologies for working with image collections. Martin Hand’s multivalent book *Ubiquitous Photography* contextualizes digital photography as historical and technical phenomena; although it is worth noting given my focus on microstock that when Hand argues we need to be paying more

sociological attention to the “ordinary image,” he most often wields the term as a near-synonym for the “personal image,” which means stock and other low-rent commercial images fail to take a central place in his otherwise wide-ranging study; in fact, what his work contextualizes most adeptly is the ubiquity of cameras, a phenomena related to the proliferation of images but not identical to it.<sup>2</sup>

A more direct nod to the ubiquity of pictures-as-such comes from architectural historian Beatriz Colomina, who writes, “We are surrounded today, everywhere, all the time, by arrays of multiple, simultaneous images,” and it is worth underscoring her insistence on the critical plurality of everyday images—individual images always seem either part of or poised to become part of an amalgam with a commercial tinge (7). Where Frosh’s wallpaper metaphor invoked domestic spaces, her architectural metaphors engage all kinds of environments. She converts descriptions of the resulting “spaces of information” and our entrained ability to process them into the question, “How would one go about writing a history of this form of perception?” (ibid.). Before delving into her chosen design-rich example—the Eamses’ mid-twentieth century “multimedia architecture”—she suggests the relevance of early TV studios “with their walls of monitors from which the director chooses the camera angle that will be presented to the viewer,” WWII situation rooms, and their successors—spaces like the monitor-laden Mission Control room at Cape Canaveral (ibid.). While she isn’t writing about stock images per se, the mixed-use objects, the bleed between industries (often enacted by experts’ bodies when individuals take jobs in industry after completing government contracts), and the controversies about instrumentalism conjured by her list of potential precursors suggest parallels with the stock industry. In addition, the sense of being surrounded by many ambient but *potentially* informative and influential digitally generated images that we get from historians of architectural media like

Colomina and Orit Halpern (whose *Beautiful Data* builds thoughtfully on Colomina's work and related examples) points, I think, to some of the reasons that increased attention to ordinary images doesn't frequently include increased attention to the *most* ordinary of commercial image exchanges.

While the idea that stock forms the "wallpaper of consumer culture" in the late twentieth century is a passing metaphor for Frosh, I've called a little extra attention to it above because it seems worth dwelling for just a moment on the idea that this descriptor's aptness may extend beyond the shared way in which stock images and graphic papers contribute to visual environments. In nineteenth century British novels, wallpaper frequently "becomes a metaphor for dishonesty and dissembling, for the ephemeral as opposed to the secure and lasting, and for the valuing of appearance over substance" ("A Short History of Wallpaper," n.p.). As with much moralizing of aesthetic choices, there's more at stake in those judgements than style; we find it "perhaps no surprise that debates around the morality of ornament—especially on wallpaper—came to prominence at just that time when the invention of machine-printing and the repeal of the excise duty on printed paper had put wallpaper within the reach of quite modest households" (ibid.). In short, what on the surface look like claims that preserve qualities like elegance, integrity, artistic taste, and even human individuality are sometimes (often) in practice claims that simply aim to protect the wealth of individuals (and their ability to visually mark their wealth) and so functionally preserve social inequities. This doesn't make widely distributed visual media or overlooked forms more virtuous than their "exceptional" relatives, but it does help us understand some of the stakes inherent in asking not just what has been overlooked but also when, where, why, and by whom. The way increased attention to ordinary but personal images hasn't yet fully translated into increased attention to ordinary but commercial images

might well be a mark of moralizing that's similarly distant from the political forces it is allied with. While disavowals of "commercial" products (including stock images) and refusals to attend them might seem a good way to combat economic inequities, this can inadvertently lead to a focus on "priceless" objects that conform to elite ideas of aesthetics and draw attention away from the communities (and community practices) that are most impacted by the economic *systems* that are supposedly being critiqued.<sup>3</sup>

When art historian and MoMA librarian Jennifer Tobias' suggests that the phrase "pervasive but uncredited" serves as accurate descriptor for both stock images *and* the stock industry, it is in part these issues of systemic socio-aesthetic influence that she's invoking. Tobias goes on to contend that, "despite" its tendency to remain uncredited, "through its visual power and ubiquity, stock photography has played an important, if unwitting, role in promulgating new assumptions (or anxieties) about media in general and photography in particular" (n.p.). And while I'm suspicious of too easy causal statements, if this were my phrasing, I would have been at least tempted to use the word "because of" where she has used the word "despite." At stake here are assumptions about authorship broadly construed, photography as a specific, aesthetic, and technical activity, and the (seemingly new) roles that highly mobile (digital) images play in the production and mediation of culture.

It is useful to be explicit about the fact: while "pervasive" and "ubiquitous" aren't precise synonyms for "ordinariness," they are also qualifiers that (when they seem well deployed) can discourage academic attention—if something is everywhere, it cannot be that difficult to make or understand. Or so the fallacy goes. In the introduction to this dissertation, I addressed some of the ways in which anxieties of ubiquity have impacted literary and rhetorical scholarship on description and descriptive practice. Here, I want to emphasize that pieces of utilitarian,



descriptive language and ordinary images designed for reuse are pragmatically linked because (1) the style of their unremarked—or, occasionally, derided—ability to influence makes them functionally similar forms of environmental media, (2) individual content professionals often work with both of these formats and via their personal, bodily knowledges connect them and help them influence each other, and (3) both take on new import in light of the shifting technical landscape that we inhabit. In other words, they’re linked by the “ubiquity problem.”

Because this dissertation is concerned with relationships between theory and practice *and* the ways in which complex object relations impinge on human lives, before moving on it bears emphasizing explicitly that, in the arena of theory, anxieties about ways in which digital practices—especially post-production editing practices—challenge long-held myths about the indexical nature of photography are difficult to separate from anxieties about the nature(s) of truth and reality, anxieties that have reached fever pitch as climate change deniers gain political clout and phrases like “post-truth” and “alternative fact” litter newspaper front pages. Moreover, anxieties about the nature of authorship are difficult to separate from anxieties about what it means to be a human subject capable of authorship.

Implicated authorial and economic assumptions build on long-standing discourses—both literary and art historical—that value authorship as a property ascribed to singular, autonomous individuals who produce singular or singular-seeming texts that “succeed” by drawing compulsive interest. (Barthes’ *punctum* is perhaps the most obvious example.) Related discourses can be, and of course have been, described multiply. Within this paradigm, it is possible to suggest that economies of attention are what truly separate study- and display-worthy images from unremarkable images. Or that the product of “masterful” authors is what object-oriented thinkers call *allure*, just as much as the product is material texts themselves. But neither

of these re-framings is wholly accurate to the stock image situation either. And perhaps that's a good thing.

Sometimes overlooked about the myth of the singular authorial genius is that, in addition to making it easier to direct accolades, it makes "fair" financial compensation easier to award in commercial settings. This can make it a useful myth—it can help ensure hardworking creative professionals get compensated (regardless of genius) and combat corporate trends that ask them to give away not just artwork but the labor that went into it—but that isn't a given result. Assigning primary authorship when authorship was distributed can mean one individual gets all the accolades and most of the commission when a large, poorly compensated team did most of the labor. Contemporary, digitally driven design contexts, of course, aren't as unique as they seem in deploying creative labor in highly distributed ways. Where laypeople (including myself, until embarrassingly recently) often imagine that most Renaissance paintings were created from start to finish by individual painters, in fact these paintings were usually produced in workshops full of apprentices who filled in both backgrounds and details—the easily named master artist might have painted only the face of a central figure (or nothing at all). When recalling this example, it's also necessary to recall that contemporary notions of authenticity didn't apply in that context. Guild rules controlled expectations and conditions, and the master's signature was easily understood as a signal that work met his standards, not a signal that he had completed it by himself. In short, what even a brief reference to this phenomena reminds us isn't that the master painters themselves were exploitative but that the currently predominant yoking of authorship, authenticity, responsibility, aesthetic exceptionality, and individuality doesn't represent the only available paradigm. Whether or not we find the workshops of grand master painters good ethical models, the assurance their context offers that *things might be otherwise* bears with it a reminder:

there can be ways to ethically honor labor and expertise within social groups that don't necessarily rely on bylines.

In the two next sections, I stage my later, more specific look at microstock practices. First, by providing a quick look at some prehistories that can be understood as having helped shape the stock image industry; then, by providing an overview of one way to think with the inventive word-image pairing practices of the industry—especially as notable corporate players navigated its “traditional” phase from roughly the 1970s through the 2000s.

## **4.2 INVENTING THE SPECULATIVE MARKET FOR PHOTOGRAPHS: STOCK INDUSTRY ANTECEDENTS**

The contemporary, international stock industry owes clear historical debts to practices, values, and legal precedents set by news archives and wire services like Reuters, the AP, and United Press International, private image collections—frequently but not always tied to wealthy families and tilted toward the inclusion of fine art, and the archives of large scale documentary efforts like the US government's FSA-OWI (Farm Security Administration-Office of War Information) photography projects, which ran 1935-1944.<sup>4</sup>

A comprehensive history is far beyond the scope of this chapter, but I offer here several brief “snapshots” of industry precedents in order to show how many of the practices deployed by contemporary stock and microstock purveyors are not fundamentally new parts of the visual culture industry and to highlight ways in which distributed patterns of influence may temper the goals of individual influencers within the industry. Linkages between media industries, ideals

that frame neutrality as integrity, and financial futures are, of course, longstanding, and yet it is useful to be reminded that these linkages are themselves messy, embedded constructs.

To that end, the following snapshots ask us to acknowledge creative industries' debts to political and militaristic uses of imagery—some of which were or are designed to be open to the public (and to influence widespread opinions), some of which were or remain contained and very tightly controlled. They also ask us to think about viewership as part of a leisure industry; they place the ordinariness of stock images in relation to campaigns that make a spectacle of middle-class daily life in order to sell both specific leisure activities and nationalism-tinged lifestyle aspirations. And they ask us to think about how hard those campaigns are to separate from similar campaigns that make a spectacle of daily working class life—for example through displays of industry and domesticity that were recruited to American nationalist rhetorics (and policies) during both WWII and the Cold War. In short, laced into these “snapshots” are not just organizational trends and lessons but also reminders of the intermingling of high volume imagery's intentional and unintentional social influence.

**Snapshot One: The Advent of News Organizations.** The official, corporate history of the Thomson Reuters “media empire” claims a romantic origin story in immigrant Paul Julius Reuter's arrival in 1850s London. Reuter had run a news and stock price information service in Aachen, Germany that leveraged the relatively young telegraph but also relied on more than 200 carrier pigeons to fill in coverage gaps. In London, he set up a service that utilized the new Calais-Dover telegraph line to convey stock information between London and Paris.<sup>5</sup>

It was both their tested ability to convey specific, limited, and time-sensitive information about stock prices and their experience with specific long-range communication technologies

(including established access to the necessary hardware) that primed Reuters to offer their services to the whole of the British press, then select European press markets, and finally widespread international outlets. Later, Reuters would confirm the organization's investment in infrastructural forethought by being on the vanguard of electric distribution (beginning with electric distribution to select London newspapers in 1883) and radio distribution of international news (in 1923). In the United States, perhaps the best correlate is The Associated Press (AP). Their origin story—equally attuned to the relationship between speed, reliability, and physical supports—dates to 1846, when “five New York City newspapers funded a pony express route through Alabama to bring news of the Mexican-American War north faster than the U.S. Post Office could deliver it.” It is both this very material attunement to how distribution systems function at an infrastructure level and the more conceptual focus on distribution for the purpose of re-distribution that ties such news organizations to the evolution of many different iterations of the stock content industry. That and the fact that the AP now claims (prominently on their website) the distribution of more than one million editorial photos each year as one of their biggest cultural contributions.

**Snapshot Two: Turn of the Century News and Entertainment.** The stereoscope—a device for viewing twin images that gave the illusion of depth—was invented in 1838, and by the mid nineteenth century viewing stereoscope images was a widespread pastime, producing and distributing them serious business. Speaking as a graphic historian, Otto Bettman claimed for Oliver Wendell Holmes' version of the device a place in “every household” during the late 1800s that was similar to the place the television sets occupied in the households of the 1990s (103).<sup>6</sup>

Stereoscope factories that produced travel and entertainment images can and should be considered precursors to the stock industry not just because they produced images, made a spectacle of reproduction, and relied upon linguistic categories to facilitate sales and keep their archives organized but also because it was not uncommon for these companies to *become* companies specializing in the distribution of news photos (and from there, sometimes evolving further into more general stock providers). Miller's narrative offers several specific examples of this evolutionary phenomena. He begins by singling out the particularly successful stereoscope firm Underwood and Underwood, launched by two brothers in 1880:

The Underwoods began as modest distributors of photo cards produced by other companies, but within four years had what appeared to be a monopoly on the US market...In 1891 the company made its headquarters in New York and began to publish its own stereoscopic photos; by 1896 it was supplying photographs to newspapers and magazines, marking its first foray into a 'pictures for rent' type of agency, a development that coincided with the rise of half-tone reproductions in American newspapers. (n.p.)

In the 1920s, the firm officially became Underwood and Underwood News Photos, a supplier of both historical and contemporary images. It is useful to note the semi-convergent trajectories this reveals when combined with interest in histories of the news wire business: news picture agencies variously evolved out of industries previously dedicated to the distribution of print "news" and distribution of "pictures." Practitioners steeped in a version of integrity born in relation to financial markets and practitioners that had been trained to sell image viewing as pleasurable (and leisure-time dependent) were both swept along.

Also noteworthy in Miller's account of stereoscope companies that became news picture agencies is H. Armstrong Roberts. Unlike Underwood and Underwood, which lasted only until

the 1940s, the Roberts agency remained an active player in the stock image market until very recently (their agency morphed in part into Retrofile, one of the first major stock companies, which was sold to Getty in 2005). In Miller's account, what is most interesting about Roberts in relation to the history of stock images isn't necessarily the company's longevity but rather the fact that "Roberts was the first agency to publish a catalog of its holdings, which was circulated to potential customers in 1920 (previous agencies had simply conducted image research in response to general requests)" (n.p.). Miller credits Bob Roberts with the observation that his grandfather "invented" stock photography not by keeping a stock of saleable images but rather by producing a catalogue—a class of artifact that concretized the theory that a "speculative market for photographs" could sustain itself.

This notion—that the catalogue is a (perhaps *the*) defining feature of the stock industry—is consistent with Frosh's detailed look at the role catalogues play in the commercial stock industry as it later evolves across the 1970s, 80s, and 90s, and I'll return to it later in my analysis of microstock's relationship to its precursors. Particularly interesting, I think, for object-oriented thinkers that want to understand what's at stake if we choose to insist language and images simply are objects is the way Miller understands the first Roberts catalogues as tools tied not so much to printing technology (the degree to which it was, relatively suddenly, possible to economically fill a publication with almost nothing except images) or to the power of language (the degree to which meticulously chosen category titles change the potential of images they are adhered to) but rather to the ability to make images behave like another set of "ordinary" objects:

The catalogue, which did not reproduce every photograph in the collection but included broad types of imagery, introduced a new paradigm to the business, putting the pictures

on display *like goods in a department store* in contrast to the more hermetic model of the archive. (n.p., emphasis mine)

Display and research are put at odds here, although they continued to coexist meaningfully for picture sellers. And, given the reference to department stores, it is perhaps worth briefly noting that prior to the 1920s, these stores' social associations were often with urban luxury rather than the suburban bargains we're more likely to associate them with today. It's also perhaps worth a note that in nineteenth century Europe the "revolutionary" idea of using window displays to lure and influence shoppers depended on changing relationships to consumer goods, but it also depended on the (newly reliable) availability of large sheets of plate glass—which helps us remember that photography isn't isolated as a display-oriented art influenced by complicated convergences of aesthetics, technics, calculable economic trends, and abstract socio-economic associations.

**Snapshot Three: Picture Agencies in the Interwar Period.** Rapid expansion of the magazine industry (made possible, again, in part by technical shifts on the printing side) and the popularity of image-rich publications ensured increased demand for editorial images in the interwar period. What were by then just called "picture agencies" consequently became more common and more consistent in their practices. *Life* (debuted in 1936) is in retrospect the most iconic example of the style of magazine implicated here, but in its own time and from a trans-Atlantic perspective, *Life* clearly followed as many image-use trends as it pioneered. In addition to considering *Life*'s American contemporaries like *Look* and *Holiday*, it is worth remarking that Germany during the years of the Weimar Republic (1919-1933) provided a particular fruitful market for picture agencies. We can attribute this to the influence that illustrated weeklies had on the market for



photographs and photographers; we can also count newly mobile German cameras (including the now iconic 35mm roll Leica, which hit markets in 1925) and the Republic's rich, diverse art scene, which allowed increased prestige and inventiveness to be associated with photography as a format, as factors that contributed to the flourishing of both picture agencies and photojournalism in general (Rosenblum 466-468).

With the “picture agencies” of the 20s and 30s, we see the word *news* omitted from the industry's name, even as editorial photographs that a contemporary viewer would be likely to describe as news (or at least journalistic) remained central to the agencies' business. Similarly notable—at least for the purposes of claiming relevance to later incarnations of stock photography—these agencies didn't just sell outtakes from previous commissioned shoots; their archives also contained essay-style images shot *for* the agencies to market *with* multiple use in mind. Today, it is relatively easy to imagine the orgy of rhetorical potential associated with top quality stock images as antithetical to the kind of photojournalistic *ethos* that remained a cornerstone at most mid-century agencies. Yet, again in the case of news photo agencies in Weimar Germany, Miller observes that weeklies like *Ullstein Verlag* frequently bought photographs from agencies like Dephot (Deutsche Photodienst) and Wide World, and this system itself discouraged photographers from producing overt political imagery. Freelancers shooting without the assurance of a commission had to be responsive to the simple fact that “generic pictures could be sold to either liberal or conservative publications” (n.p.).<sup>7</sup> This invocation also calls attention to the close relationship between freelance assignment models, the formation of photographers' collaboratives, and the industry in question—which perhaps ought to bear on our thinking through of perils and benefits linked to current free-agent work models and the communities that (can) make them more tenable.

Worthy of at least brief remark as a backdrop to this 1930s example is the fact that pre-consolidation stock-like companies weren't all news agencies or editorially driven picture agencies; advertising histories are less frequently studied (and even less frequently cited), but ad-world industry precursors certainly existed, too. Helen Wilkinson's 1997 *Study of the 1930s operations of the British agency Photographic Advertising Ltd* offers a standout example. Particularly useful for the way it disrupts linear industrial histories is her observation that the 1930s represented a developmental stage in advertising as a whole, not just a developmental stage in the stock image industry—"it was clearly not yet invariable practice to employ an advertising agency," she remarks (25). "Perhaps as a response to this, Photographic Advertising seems also to have undertaken some of the services now associated with advertising agencies, such as advising advertisers of possible story-lines and strategies" (ibid.). In short, image purveyors don't just later become suppliers of raw materials for prominent ad companies, they also have a hand in shaping the *need* for such suppliers and the client-side roles of the industry.

**Snapshot Four: A More Bookish Interwar Agency Story.** Charismatic figures and simultaneous but distantly related trends and actions have certainly influenced the industry, too. Perhaps the best story to stand in as a marker of this fact is that of Otto Bettman, a graphic historian who lost his job with the Prussian State Art Library (*Die Staatliche Kunst Bibliothek*) in 1933 when Hitler decreed that all Jews employed by the state must be fired. In Bettman's autobiography, he describes the way in which exhibits he worked on for the library—notably, a "Day of the Book" exhibit that featured all kinds of pictures of people reading—helped him develop "subject eyes" and move beyond thinking of art in terms of artists (26). His interest in

the ways in which this shift in thinking might give us a “pictorial history of civilization” led him to start collecting as he worked on other projects; he writes,

the stacks I supervised often resounded with the click of my Leica. In the course of my work, whenever I ran across a good “subject picture”—be it on salesmanship, windmills, baking, or executions—I snapped it, carefully noting its source. During my travels to Italy, France, and the Scandinavian countries, I added voraciously to my picture file, documenting life as it was. (ibid.)

During his forced unemployment, Bettman’s picture file began to evolve; he developed a “visual index,” which featured the categories of artist, subject, and date, as well as subject matter and potential symbolic applications. In describing the system, he notes that “the queen of hearts could be categorized under both ‘gambling’ and ‘love’ ” and announces the innovation in a cross-reference system that “facilitated the speedy tracking down of subjects” (30). This system—which Miller describes as “self-consciously academic”—would come to be what distinguished Bettman’s collection from others like it, and it suggests a model for the stock “catalogue” that takes more from the library card catalogue than it does from the department store display window (n.p.). Whether it remains “hermetic” because of this seems up for debate rather than clearly settled.

In 1935, Bettman and his collection of 25,000 photographs, prints, and negatives (packed into two steamer trunks) left Germany, and in New York this collection became the basis of the Bettman Archive as a business entity—a clearinghouse that “rented” pictures to advertisers and publishers (Frosh, *The Image Factory* 36). A first big contract commissioned pictorial inserts for a ten-volume world history, while “then and now” features that provided historical context for news events delivered what stood in for regular work in the archive’s early days. The relevant

section in Bettman's autobiography is subtitled: "I invent a new profession: the 'backward photographer,' " but these features placed him in direct competition with the longer established historical "picture agencies" invoked above (50). A much bigger inventional leap in his story came in 1937 when an award-winning CBS ad brought the then-and-now format into advertising. This ad featured an illustrated "prototype of a radio station" from a volume on the science of sound by German technologist Athanasius Kircher, published in 1650—via Bettman's archive, of course (Bettman 66). It helped Bettman and others see that "old graphics could be used effectively and tastefully in modern promotion" (ibid).

This story continues, of course, intermingling with the other "precursors" described above. I've told it in relative—if still minor—detail in part because, while many figures' stories impacted the early history of stock imagery, Otto Bettman's is quite arguably the most recognizable name. I've also included his story because the story of the Bettman Archive, like the stories of Roberts and Underwood agencies told above, speaks in a direct way to consolidation trends that have shaped latter versions of the stock industry. The story of the latter agency even overlaps—in the 1970s the Bettman Archive began selling images from the Underwood and Underwood collection on commission, as part of a deal with the vintage photo collector George Rinhart, who had acquired the collection by outbidding Bettman (Bettman 103). And, while the Bettman collection remained relatively autonomous until the 1990s, it eventually became "the flagship historical archive of Bill Gates's Corbis Corp," discussed in more detail below (Frosh, *The Image Factory* 37). Finally, it is worth remark that another thing which ties the Bettman "snapshot" to those above is the fact that he was far from only midcentury European expat to impact the formation of American stock companies; a healthy assortment of influential figures from German picture agencies—including editors and printers experienced in laying out

image-based stories—came to work for and found agencies in the US around the same time, and European photographers (e.g. Robert Capa and Erich Lessing) were important shapers of the shift toward pictorialism in news magazines.

**Snapshot Five: The Industry’s “Modern Era” Begins.** In the 1970s, a new kind of commercial stock agency began to emerge, tied much more closely to the advertising world. News agencies like Reuters and the AP continued to thrive and offer image services, but the line between their work and the work of picture agencies became much starker. For iconic examples of this “new” kind of agency, Frosh and Miller point to both The Image Bank (established in 1974) and Comstock (established by photographer Tom Grill and businessman Henry Scanlon around the same time). Frosh, I think rightly, associates this era with two organizational changes on the part of image purveyors; (1) while picture agencies had been providing images to commercial clients for decades, in this era *industrial priority* shifted to advertising clients; and (2) individual agencies began to position themselves as *global brands*—establishing their own international presences instead of contracting with existing agencies in diverse locations to have images “represented” in international markets; he also associates this era with increased *expectations* surrounding *production values* (40-42). Questions of scale are critical to this wording. While individual stock images often did begin to exhibit higher production values, the role intra-agency expectations surrounding “quality” played is easier to point to as a trend and easier to understand as an infrastructural change. This phrasing further emphasizes complex relationships between products, producers, and corporate structures (including internal communications and workflow structures, like gateways that prevent images deemed “low quality” from entering archives) that are deeply relevant to the rest of this chapter. And it helps us understand: where successful

agencies in this era built reputations on their ability to offer a product that was radically dissociated with the antecedent versions of stock imagery discussed above, this dissociation was as much a feature of intentional rhetoric shifts as it was a feature of changing aesthetic, technical, and corporate structures.

Among other things, this dissociation required *selling the idea* that stock images weren't aesthetically inferior to other kinds of images (including on-demand shots), which was achieved in part by emphasizing the frequency with which stock photographs were produced by the *exact same* recognizable photographers who produced some of those lauded, high-end, on-demand shots. Selling the prowess of your stable of photographers, then, became an important part of the stock game. The Image Bank was particularly invested in making a show of valuing aesthetic excellence through corporate emphasis on both technical precision and the cultivation of "talent," e.g. the careers of specific photographers (Frosh, *The Image Factory* 39-41). In rhetorical terms, we might summarize: in this era that the idea that photography relies on technē (artful, embodied expertise) in addition to abstract technical knowledge, which had previously been considered true primarily in relation only to art photography, became ascendant even in commercial realms. We can also associate this shift with the increasing amount of cultural currency that was being ascribed to anyone skilled at "design thinking" in the 1970s United States, regardless of profession.<sup>8</sup>

The same thing that helps us understand this shift as infrastructural ties it to the definition of complex descriptive systems laid out in the introduction to this dissertation—the feedback loop that *inextricably coupled* changes in actual production values driven by the availability of more reliable cameras and reproduction techniques as well as an influx of skilled, image-making experts into the industry on the photographer side *with* increased buyer-side expectations

surrounding production values that were carefully managed by corporate bodies' linguistic choices. In addition, it is arguable that this phenomena, coupled with the pressure of increased competition for market shares, helped prime the industry to accept aesthetic diversification in the 1980s and 90s—with some agencies staying true to the sharp, evenly lit single-subject images of generic convention, while others found success by specializing in “edgier” or more abstract images. Moreover, the degree to which we can now say with reasonable confidence that this coupling led to significant changes in the industry over time is consequential in terms of visual rhetoric writ large because it gives us a concrete example to refer to when suggesting that aesthetic features—in this case, aesthetic features loosely redolent of “quality” repeated across many items in multiple collections—can undergird visual arguments in meaningful (materially influential) ways without relying on indexical forms of representation or one-to-one recognitions experienced by individual viewers. In other words, this scenario helps us understand aesthetic qualities as a potentially influential part of “content,” despite their ambient, polysemic tendencies. This acts contra the loose, conventional sense of the word “content” that would have it serve as shorthand for “subject matter,” and it should be assumed as having wide relevance within the rapidly expanding present-tense online “content production” industry.

**Snapshot Six: Placing Emphasis on Expansion and Consolidation.** Having hinted at some of the aesthetic features that mark the modern stock image era, it is worth ending this series of “snapshots” with a quick but explicit gesture toward ways in which the stock industry was shaped by legal developments, technical developments, and corporate models of expansion and consolidation across the three decades (from the mid 70s to the mid 2000s) generally considered

the height of the “traditional” form of stock. Here, Miller’s take (written in 1994) is worth quoting at length:

The rapid expansion of the stock market over the last 20 years is the result of a number of factors. Magazines, which traditionally employed staff photographers, whose work was the property of the publisher, gradually eliminated those positions in favour of freelance photographers who could sell their outtakes. This potential was reinforced by the 1978 copyright law, which states that a photograph is the property of the person who shot it: a client who hires a freelance photographer is paying only for the ‘use’ of the photographer’s property. Another major change was technological. By the early 1980s nearly all agency photographs were colour transparencies, which meant that an original would have to be sent out rather than a print generated from a black and white negative. Most transparencies would be damaged after only five trips to a printer or colour house, limiting the lifetime, circulation potential and profitability of a single image. In 1985 Kodak introduced high-quality duping film (Kodak 50/71) that allowed photographers to make limitless dupes of successful pictures. (n.p.)

Of course, there are telling omissions in the short, episodic history that I have offered here. For example, “Michael Hiley’s analysis of the dawn of advertising photography in late nineteenth-century England suggests that something similar to the stock system (even though he doesn’t use the term) produced a thriving market in commercial images before commissioned assignments became the norm” (Frosh 39). And Tobias notes that the professionalization of modeling—especially modeling by women—in the late nineteenth century cannot be separated out from the professionalization of photography and advertising. Still, among other things, providing “stock”



history in episodic form makes even more evident Frosh's assertion that recent (at his writing, this meant late 1990s and early 2000s) "reconfiguration within the visual content industry represents an ironic historical reversal of stock photography's 'decisive break' with its forebears in the 1970s, emphasizing areas of continuity and mutual transformation rather than those of absolute rupture and difference" (*The Image Factory* 38).

The reconfiguration Frosh is most concerned with is the rise of multinational " 'super-agencies', where stock photography, royalty-free image producers, and historical and fine-art archives are being combined synergistically to serve corporate sales" (38). In this vein, Frosh suggests the Freelance Photographers Guild, founded—like *Life*—in 1936, as an example of "a picture agency, and its destiny" (ibid. 37). This photographer owned organization evolved into one of the most successful mid-century stock agencies geared to the needs of advertising clients (an iteration that used the abbreviated name FPG International), and was purchased by the multinational "super agency" VCG (the Visual Communications Group) in the 1990s, with VCG acquired by giant-among-giants Getty Images in 2000 (ibid.). This example even leads us to the need to point out: if you see the acronym VCG in a stock-image conversation now, instead of pointing to the historical contributions of the Visual Communications Group, it likely points to the Visual China Group. *This* VCG caused a big stir by acquiring Corbis in 2016, which brought Corbis' content under the Getty aegis—effectively merging the two largest, most recognizable forces in the visual content world and pushing the idea of the super-agency beyond even what was imaginable to Frosh a decade before.<sup>9</sup>

In following Frosh's lead and emphasizing consolidations and corporate evolutions where possible across all of these snapshots, I've touched on some ways precedent models continued (and continue still) to exert material influence despite the rhetorical disavowals that have

reconfigured perceptions of the industry—once we find that “new” agencies sometimes consist of the exact same staff people, selling the exact same images, sometimes even out of the exact same office spaces as their predecessors, we have to ask where their “newness” resides in more nuanced ways. The arc of the Bettman Archive’s ownership is again pertinent here. Beyond noting that this company has succumbed to the same “destiny” as FPG, Roberts, and most of their top midcentury competitors and become part of the holdings at a super-agency, it is useful to emphasize the way Bettman titled the mid-century sections of his autobiography “You Either Grow or You Go.” There, he details how his initial business model, which relied on building a collection piece-by-piece, was fundamentally quite different from the model of the archive that grew in bounds—by buying photographers’ complete back files and defunct agencies’ “photo morgues,” things he started doing in the 1960s when his company could afford the physical space to house the prints, plates, and negatives in question (101-104).

This distinction helps us remember that not all models of growth are identical and the scale change is, sometimes, an issue of change in type, too—or that it at least has the potential to function that way. This further helps us remember that “greedy” looking growth models necessarily encompass not just “successful” mergers and acquisitions but also false starts and successes that look very different from those that corporate engineers had planned for, and that these “disruptive” industry movements can have rippling effects across diverse content production and consumption industries. In the same “growth” section, Bettman lamented one of the ways in which his first acquisition of a complete collection, the French image archive of Philippe Gendreau, was shortsighted. “I didn’t realize,” he writes, “that if I wanted the Bettman Archive to become a ‘modern’ picture agency, I would have to have a constant influx of current material, and the Gendreau Collection was static” (102). That he points to the ability to both

support and sell “constant influx” as a feature of the “modern” picture industry shows his keen (retrospective) eye, and it gives depth to our understanding of what was being marketed when agencies like The Image Bank promoted their relationships to active, living photographers who shot full time but across contexts.

Thinking here about the ways in which picture agencies influenced via their evolutions and how those evolutions either brought along individual practices or abandoned them also gives us a way to contextualize the speed with which microstock rose in the 2000s. A significant number of successful microstock purveyors were quickly folded into existing super agencies, while those that have remained independent have clearly folded practices deployed by those same super agencies into their own operations and growth models. This fact emphasizes Frosh’s conclusions and his near-prescient understanding of the industry. And yet it also begs for new analyses, given how the fact that *The Image Factory* and other historical studies mentioned here predate microstock’s idiosyncrasies marks them as works that can no longer be considered entirely up to date.

### **4.3 THE SPECTACLE OF RHETORICAL POTENTIAL: WORDS THAT GENERATE VELOCITY FOR IMAGES**

While the practices that structure the stock image industry have been understudied in scholarly contexts, many of these practices *are* well documented in trade journals, photographers’ handbooks, and online forums—where documentation is framed as “instruction” for professionals either already involved in the industry or seeking to get involved. Journals like *Rangefinder* and *Photo District News* aimed at photo professionals and those aimed at diverse

design professions like the UK-based *Creative Review* periodically offer tips and round-ups meant to help readers navigate stock production and sales issues. Similar tips can be found in downloadable PDF guides to stock success, predominantly written by photographers-for-photographers, and print books that follow the same model (perhaps most notable in the print category are Michal Heron's guides to traditional and digital stock photography published by Allworth Press). And the lessons "hidden" in these "specialist" instructional contexts stand to benefit diverse kinds of writers as they tangle with wide ranging communicative situations. Of the available lessons in this category, I'm particularly interested in how the actual practices of the stock photography industry put a wrench in what we think we know about agency's relationship to textual production and the ways in which "intentionality" is modulated by distribution practices and material conditions.

As I have noted elsewhere, championing the ability to adhere an intention to a communicative object need not be an essential or straightforward part of valuing theories of world in which creators of all sorts—including writers and photographers—are understood as agents with rich lives and influence over *certain* aspects of the world(s) they live in. Where in previous chapters I suggested the relevance of new materialisms, art methodologies, ambient rhetorics, and systems thinking to that claim, here I want to emphasize some ways in which the concept of rhetorical velocity grounds it, too. As a term, rhetorical velocity appeared on the theoretical scene in 2009, star of a now widely cited article by Jim Ridolfo and Danielle DeVoss; it names "a strategic approach to composing for rhetorical delivery" (n.p.). Put another way, this term offers "a way of considering delivery as a rhetorical mode, aligned with an understanding of how texts work as a component of a strategy" (ibid.). It is also "a term that describes an understanding of how the speed at which information composed to be recomposed travels"

(ibid.). And the fact that the stock image industry survives primarily by making a spectacle of rhetorical potential makes it a useful limit case for the consideration of rhetorical velocity.

In foregrounding this term, I mean to suggest that making with re-circulations in mind can help creators engage uncertainty in inventive and meaningful ways. And when I use the word *inventive*, I mean to suggest the rangy rhetorical canon of invention. But I also mean to suggest a relationship between the *resourcefulness* demanded by the act of adhering words to images and the idea that images can function as *resources* whose plurality is actionable and amplifiable. Beyond contributing to the production of compelling, expressive objects, practicing the act of composing for recirculation (with partial loss of control in mind) exposes strategies that might be useful to a range of human creators trying to ballast themselves and those around them against risk (especially the bodily risks that miscommunications sometimes inaugurate).

Word-image units are both shaped by and constituent shapers of the industrial context of rhetorical, imagistic velocities. And, as the above historical snapshots suggest, among the many kinds of words the stock industry adheres to images, classifiers that organize categories and catalogues frequently take on special status. Whether or not they are ideal stories about the invention of the (or an) industry, both the Roberts and Bettman stories suggest that a story about what's inventive in the industry ought to be, at least in part, a story that revolves around how sellers and catalogues use language to make archives approachable for buyers. Often conceptual, metaphorical, or both, words this industry adheres to images *for* the potential benefit of buyers “not only enable the anticipation and channeling of interpretation, they directly impinge upon the decisions that photographers take at the very earliest stage of production, and that other agents (stock agencies, cultural intermediaries) make later on” (Frosh, *The Image Factory* 81). This is part of what was formalized in the 1970s when Comstock “invented” the notion of hiring

photographers to generate images to be filed under specific concept words, and it remains emphatically true for contemporary freelance photographers, who look at successful images and give themselves concept-based “assignments” in order to generate saleable images and guard against the precarity their job status portends. In other words, while non-photographers generally see the words of the stock image industry only after an image has been made (e.g. they encounter seemingly straightforward descriptive categories in the contents of a catalogue or on the front page of the Shutterstock website or they see lists of keywords on images’ detail pages), there are also several points in the production process where understanding “words as image generators” is essential to parsing how words and images interact within this industry (Frosh, “Industrial ekphrasis” 248). Put more succinctly: as I noted at the outset of this chapter, regardless of what kind of rights are at stake, the goal of stock image agencies is generally to sell each image in their collection many times, to many kinds of clients, for deployment in many settings. And this goal impinges on the ways in which industry stakeholders choose to adhere pieces of description to stock images.

Consequently, both in the print stock catalogues of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and on the digital sales platforms popular today, we find language (categorical concepts, titles, keywords) intentionally attached “for now” to specific images. The cultural intermediaries that affix these words to those images must see them as lures—and yet they clearly trade in different kinds of allure than the kinds that producers of advertising end-products attempt to trade in. Intermediaries must imagine (at least some of) their carefully selected words being immediately detached after purchase, replaced by other words (often more specific words, e.g. trademarked language) or visual effects that play up specific, seemingly wordless impacts that reside in some feature of the image. And composition and rhetoric scholars also ought to find the model of

“influential but disappearing descriptions” compelling for the way it demands focus on the necessity and ordinariness of many kinds of partial, limited reuse.<sup>10</sup>

Unlike in more scientific contexts, what makes a descriptor “good” in these contexts isn’t its ability to pin an image down or name its components in an unassailable way (which could prevent a potential buyer from seeing the image’s potential malleability, its ability to adapt to that buyer’s particular use-needs). But neither is a “good” descriptor in this context precisely the kind of poetic phrase that makes an image “new” through its associations (which could prevent an agency from seeing the image’s potential reliability, its multiple-sale-ability). Once again, language’s ambiguities function to reinforce the ontological idea that every image is parsimoniously polysemic. We might contrast this with the “a picture’s worth a thousand words” school of thought, where an accent on language’s failures perpetuates an ontology in which images are fundamentally exceptional. Because of this contrast, we might choose to think about even the most instrumental descriptions at work in the stock industry as closely allied with the relational dynamisms embraced by the ekphrastic poets that chapter three presented.

In the last third of this chapter, I turn my attention more acutely to the stock image industry’s digital instantiations. The partial history in the previous section doesn’t tell the whole story of where these “new” versions of the industry came from, but it does point us toward certain kinds of questions that are worth asking about roles that stock images, the words that describe them, and the media industries that generate, circulate, and sustain them all play in wider consumer and visual cultures. Crediting industry-specific approaches to descriptive language and the industry’s long interest in the many ways language shapes both creation of new images and discovery of archived images allows me to argue that search tools developed for and within this industry can’t *quite* be understood as versions of the search tools (Google, Bing,

Yahoo) that most of us use when navigating the open web. In order to stage questions about what interfaces designed specifically to help cultural intermediaries searching stock image databases can teach about the sociality of search technologies more generally, I turn next to an extended snapshot of a company that has taken the development of search tools particularly seriously.

#### **4.4 WHAT DISTINGUISHES MICROSTOCK? A QUICK INTRODUCTION TO SHUTTERSTOCK'S HISTORY**

Stock photography is a field where the repeatability of many processes (image producing, image vetting, image promoting, image selling) is critical economically. Microstock takes that premise to an extreme. On September 13, 2016 the official Shutterstock blog celebrated a milestone. Their collections could finally be cited accurately as collections containing *more than 100 million* images; they declared these collections “an extensive source of fresh and vibrant imagery that can tell the world’s stories” (as if having 99 million images hadn’t been extensive enough), and invited some of their staff—curators, designers, and reviewers—to celebrate by giving notes on trends poised to shape “the future of imagery” (Sachs n.p.). Being *big* and consistently offering *fresh* content—that is, regularly uploaded images from *many* contributors—is the essence of microstock, and not just for this one company. The basic microstock model sells royalty free images for very low rates. Pricing structures vary, but in the Shutterstock example, payouts are tiered based on how successful sellers are, with standard-license single image sales currently garnering contributors between \$0.25 and \$2.85 (as of early 2017).



While they weren't the first microstock image company (a qualifier generally awarded to iStockphoto, established in 2000 by Bruce Livingstone and acquired by Getty Images in 2006), Shutterstock was the first to consolidate their success through an IPO in 2012. For my purposes in this chapter, three things make them a particularly telling example of the industry. (1) Shutterstock continues to operate independent of Getty Images; while the acquisition of other successful microstock agencies by these and related image industry megacorps constitutes a notable trend and contextualizes content industry convergences, focusing on a successful company that remains clearly invested in microstock helps contain my analysis; (2) founded in 2003, they were an early entrant into the market, so have undergone telling and documented transformations as technology has shifted; (3) their forums and Shutterstock Labs tools offer insights into the imaginations that drive the company's more conventional successes.

Not entirely unlike the Underwoods' early 20<sup>th</sup> century company, which thrived on distribution expertise *becoming* production expertise, Jon Oringer's early 21<sup>st</sup> century company turned a series of production experiments into a vast, savvy machine that's compelling because of its relationship to distribution. It is the degree to which tools and interface-level innovations are key to the company's success that makes it seem notable that Oringer came to the stock industry as a computer programmer rather than art-school trained photographer. He was a serial entrepreneur involved in launching more than 10 companies, including a security and privacy tool that helped users deal with popups (a "very successful failure" that became obsolete when Microsoft Windows started shipping with a tool that accomplished the same things), a dating site called "particular personals" that never took off, and a legal services firm with a tool that monitored potential trademark infringements (Harris). It was, in his telling, the act of trying to market all of these products himself that prompted him to think about the then-dominant, rights

managed model of image distribution. It wasn't just that images were more expensive than he wanted them to be that he noticed, it was also the degree to which trying to predetermine things like which territories an image might appear in didn't make sense for online content in the same ways they did for print advertisers. In fairy-tale startup fashion, Oringer bought a Canon Digital Rebel (one of the first DSLRs to drop below \$1000), shot 30,000 images in a year, and launched the site with all his own images in 2003 (ibid.).<sup>11</sup>

It would be a misleading oversimplification to suggest that his ability to conceive of and execute this plan offers a *mise en abyme* style picture of the very ubiquity that makes photography in the twenty-first century seem somewhat unremarkable. And yet, looking to this example can help us see how many things get lost when we imagine the history of media technologies as simple movements from scarcity to abundance, while still acknowledging the pieces of truth that inhere in the maxim that more is different, that there are many kinds of abundance to be accounted for by media theorists.

#### **4.5 STILL SELLING TECHNICAL PROWESS: SUBMITTER INTERFACES AND CURATED COLLECTIONS**

A certified commercial helicopter pilot who topped Business Insider's list of "The Coolest People in New York Tech" in 2013, Oringer is often valorized as the rare public figure who really can do it all. Beyond typical hero-story flaws, this obscures the degree to which Shutterstock's early success was fundamentally tied to Oringer's recognition of his own inability to provide enough content to keep up with his fledgling business; he narrates the hurdle of "getting supply in that met demand" as just as crucial as noticing that the demand existed in the first place; and he

credits his ability to see how much potential demand there might be with the fact that the personal images he started out with were selling—sometimes to big name customers (Harris n.p.). “I was not a good photographer,” he says; prompted to explain what kinds of images he was posting, he suggests they were most often things like the coffee mug he was drinking out of, random friends (who he’d badgered into signing model releases), and the streets near his New York home—the kinds of shots unlikely to impress authors of any of the “what sells and why” imagery articles out there. The logic went: if these shots were doing so well, certainly the market for more diverse and more professional looking shots existed and was poised to expand. “More” being a key part of the equation, at least early in the company’s history—especially where the term professional was concerned. Oringer has described the majority of ground floor Shutterstock submitters as “people who loved photography but had something else;” rather than people trying to pay rent and buy food with their microstock earnings alone; these were people who “wanted to buy that next lens,” who were into gear in a way that made their interest in photography expensive but who were also seriously interested in acquiring the kinds of intangible, aesthetic knowledge that might help them becoming better photographers (Harris n.p.). How long this remained true—and whether or not it was ever a particularly good thing—is not entirely clear. When Shutterstock began paying for referrals—giving photographers a tiny “cut” of earnings from other successful photographers they had invited to become submitters—and prioritizing the creation of influencers, they both created “new” kinds of professionals *and* attracted professionals who were once simply skeptical of microstock. (The idea that a flood of amateurs entering a sales place makes life harder for seasoned professionals isn’t unique to this scenario; crediting influencers and paying higher per-image rates to the most successful sellers in a market place responds to this.)

Two of the features that distinguished Shutterstock from competitors early on were forums that let submitters talk to each other about what was selling and photography more generally and a submitter-side interface that let submitters watch what was selling in real time—complete with a map that let them see where in the world buyers were based. Both of these are features Oringer suggests might not have been part of the project if he hadn't had such a clear picture of both who submitters were and what it felt like to be (functionally) a submitter himself. The degree to which Shutterstock's success relies on tools, design choices, and the release of reports that mean to help contributors engage critically and develop a feel for what buyers want (so they can adapt their production practices and generate more sales—benefitting both themselves and the company) suggests that these contributors can't necessarily be understood as stereotypical prosumers—a distinction that's useful for all kinds of people engaged in online content production and other gig economy-style jobs to think through. A portmanteau of producer-consumer, the term prosumer has become cultural shorthand in a way that crosses professions and sometime defies its origins in the marketing of Web 2.0 technologies. As the term prosumer ages, it tends to appear as jargon, joke, or putdown. Yet there's something to this trio that speaks to the goal of developing a nuanced vision of the not-traditionally-professional image producers that the microstock industry has helped generate livelihoods for.

Depending on who is using the term, prosumer can be shorthand for a flexible full-time employee who develops new skills on the job as the company he or she works with changes (often in response to changing technical landscapes) and uses those skills to improve his or her non-work life, too. In this way, it sometimes marks individuals who have become experts or “professionals” by following non-traditional paths, like photographers who neither went to art school nor apprenticed with other full time photographers before launching their own studios; it

can signal a kind of mashup of outsider art discourses, technic autodidacticism, and commercial opportunism, which can make it seem like an accurate description of many successful microstock contributors. But for some pundits, the term prosumer only signals two of those three attributes—it describes the photographer who has the technical know-how, quality equipment, and aesthetic sense required to produce images on-par in every way with those produced by professionals, but who does so *only* for personal reasons and doesn't sell them. Successful microstock contributors perhaps aren't in this category, then. But what about “less successful” contributors? If a contributor makes an extra \$50 or \$100 a month rather than \$5000, how does that impact his or her status as a professional? In trying to grapple with the stakes of related conversations about professionalism and expertise, we get to the ways in which the term prosumer has become an insult in certain industries, a name synonymous less with ingenuity and atypical training and more with excess and lack of prowess. As marketing jargon, *prosumer* can be a behind-the-scenes term companies use when strategizing how to sell expensive professional-grade equipment to consumers who do not need it for work, and may not even use many of its features. Back when I was simultaneously working for the eMarketing company and buying DSLR camera gear, some people might have considered me a prosumer simply because I was looking for more features than many snapshot photographers; some might have considered me a prosumer because I sometimes took my camera rig to work at my “writing” job and used it to produce content for jobs I was working on; others might not have considered me a prosumer at all, either because I wasn't selling my images or because I actually knew how to use most of my camera's features.

While the multiplicity (or descriptive uncertainty) of this single term can seem allied with sloppy deployments, corporatization, and specialist lexicons rather than the potential-driving

aspects of multiplicity that delight poets and philosophers, it is still a form of dynamism. And it points toward issues bound up in two of the big open questions that first drew me to study of the stock image industry: is it accurate to consider freelance art industry models as precursors to or participants in the rise of the wider gig economy? And if it is accurate, how is or might it be useful to imagining ethical constraints we might collectively design to help control this economy? In a 2017 *New Yorker* essay titled “The Gig Economy Celebrates Working Yourself to Death,” Jia Tolentino writes, “No one wants to eat coffee for lunch or go on a bender of sleep deprivation—or answer a call from a client while having sex, as recommended” in a recent promotional video from company Fiverr’s “In Doers We Trust” ad campaign. (Fiverr is a platform that hosts pitches from “lean entrepreneurs” or gig economy workers asking for low payments for a vast assortment of services). While I am not at all willing to commit to the idea that art industry models ought to be expanded or used as a basis for other industries, the “doer” rhetoric of “entrepreneurial flexibility” is at least somewhat different from the rhetoric that says, use your add-on income to afford a vacation or make the gear involved in your expensive hobby pay for itself. And I do believe that Shutterstock’s model of designing infrastructures that help submitters build community among themselves and get better at concrete, technical tasks (from conceptualizing images to keywording them) that may increase their profits is more compelling than some models that funnel freelance work through corporate distribution networks. And I think we can give credit for some of the appeal developing community- and education-based features to the company’s association with histories of photographic professions in general and stock photography practices in particular.

Even though Shutterstock did not evolve out of a pre-existing stock company, their success is clearly built not only on innovation and technical, backend excellence but also on

lateral learning and respect for the industry they have entered into. Where the “modern” industry of the 1970s was defined by request-enabling catalogues, the selling of photographers’ stature and aesthetic prowess, and stock companies’ global reaches, Shutterstock can be understood in relation to all three of these things, too. Like 1970s stock companies, microstock companies benefit from selling the idea that their images are just as good as more expensive images bought through alternate channels. This means claiming equity with on-demand shoots in the same ways their predecessors did; it also means competing with more expensive, more tightly curated rights managed stock images, which are distributed primarily through digital portals that look quite similar to microstock portals. Rhetorics of technical excellence are arguably more important than ever because, beyond winning over buyers who might chose more elite image catalogues, they help a company like Shutterstock sell how and why their images remain worth purchasing as sites boasting free stock images proliferate (these are often collated from various sites hosting images with creative commons licenses).

One place the selling of technical prowess showed up for Shutterstock in 2016 was on a list of ten trends likely to define the future of imagery. On this list, we find drone photography, 360-degree photography, high ISO photoraphy (where changing lens tech helps make low-light candid easier to get right), and hyperreal photography (contingent on improvements in software for post-processing)—all trends that clearly emphasize technologies’ impact on imagery. Good photographers, the kind driving trends rather than jumping on them as they go by, it is implied, have access to cutting edge equipment and the knowhow to use it. This list isn’t a list that makes space for amateur-ish photographers; it provides Shutterstock with a way to argue that *their* contributors are on the vanguard of photography itself, permitting tribute to the positive side of prosumer rhetorics and opening onto other discussions about how technical advancements *can*

invite a wider range of photographers to aesthetic achievement. In setting the tone for technical and aesthetic discussions about stock imagery, lists like this are far from the only tool deployed by the company's web managers. We see a similar but more subtle—or perhaps just less fundamentally language driven—in things like the choice to promote a collection of tilt-shift images on the Shutterstock landing page in September 2016. At any given moment, there are several distinct lightboxes (collections of images) given prime real estate. Often, they are clearly geared to the calendar, promoting themes like “Spring” or “Black History Month.” The “Tilt Shift Collection” is clearly not quite of a type with these other collections. The choice to curate tilt-shift images for front page marketing is a choice to foreground technical skills as they manifest in Shutterstock's larger catalogue.

While a photograph might be taken using a tilt-shift lens (sometimes called a perspective control lens) for various reasons, these specialty lenses are often used to make real-life scenes appear as if they were staged using immaculately detailed miniatures. Similar effects can be achieved in post-processing, but a trained eye and a deft hand would certainly be required to simulate the effect well without a lens, especially if a photographer was concerned about avoiding aesthetics that might be labeled “gimmicky” rather than “stunning” or “surreal.” These lenses and the post-production processes that produce similar effects aren't just for making images that seem to defy realism, they also help maintain a sense of order that's allied with realism when shooting things like skyscrapers or tall trees—controlling perspective is essential to keeping long lines straight (that long line can be the horizon, too).



## Tilt Shift Collection



**Figure 1.** One of the lightboxes promoted on the Shutterstock front page on 9/18/2016.

Beyond being known for the identifiable aesthetics they can generate, tilt-shift lenses are often described as tools that allow photographers using small or medium format cameras to make adjustments otherwise only available when using larger view camera rigs. In highlighting the way big, older style cameras were capable of things their smaller counterparts aren't necessarily adept at, this style of lens offers a "corrective" to narratives of straight-line technical advancement in camera production, as well as a reminder that even completely analog photographic production systems are deeply modular (post-production isn't as novel as it sometimes looks). In short, on Shutterstock's part, naming a collection after the tilt-shift effect suggests a curatorial interest in speaking to informed intermediaries who might be susceptible to an argument for the value of technical skill and training. And it contributes to a corporate narrative of respect for the technics and techniques that contribute to the production of alluring images.

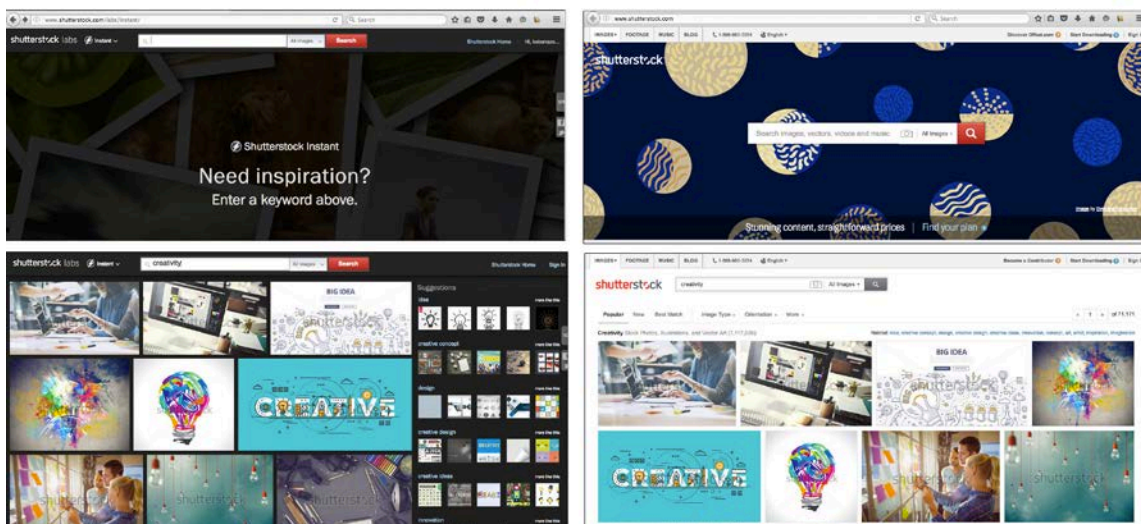
#### 4.6 TURNING IMAGE OVERLOAD INTO “INSTANT” INSPIRATION: SELLING STYLES OF SEARCH

For Shutterstock, selling a stable of image makers who are masterful technicians isn't the only form of selling technical prowess that matters. Consider: the conceptual term “creativity” is attached to more than seven *million* of the stock photos, illustrations, and pieces of vector art in Shutterstock's collections, which amounts to 71,000 pages of search results. If I'm trying to sell an image, this is daunting.<sup>12</sup> How will I ever make it close enough to the top of that list to have my images seen (a prerequisite for selling an image once, let alone the many times necessary to recoup my business expenses, let alone the even more significant number of times necessary to make stock profitable for me as a photographer-entrepreneur)? But if I'm trying to buy an image, this kind of vast library can be daunting, too.

The Shutterstock Labs “discovery tool” Instant aims to intervene in this buyer-side abundance anxiety, and it offers evidence of the degree to which one difference between the 1990s and early 2000s stock markets Frosh analyzed so acutely and today's microstock market is the degree to which selling *size* of library is *only* compelling if you also sell shortcuts that mean buyers won't have to navigate the full set of potentially usable images. As of October 2016, the landing page for Instant (which is associated with an icon that looks like a little lightning bolt caught in a little circle) foregrounds neither editorial lightboxes nor top-selling recent images but rather a simple black background with a little texture and the white text: *Need inspiration? Enter a keyword above.*

As I understand it, we (the we that is Shutterstock subscribers or at least occasional/potential purchasers) are meant to imagine getting different, more *inspiring* results than we might if we just entered our keyword into a more generic search box like the one on the

Shutterstock main page. It seems at first like maybe we're supposed to believe—without having to think about how this works—that different search algorithms are at work on the main page and inside Instant. And yet, if what we're concerned with is the piece of algorithm that determines *which* images make it to the first page of any given list of search results, there really doesn't seem to be much difference. Image search is a highly proprietary technical area, which means that getting answers about exactly what's happening when search results are ranked by any given service is nearly impossible—even for those who are significantly more knowledgeable in this area of computer programming than I am. But a simple search using the conceptual keyword “creativity” yields first page results that contain all the same images. What is in fact different follows from what was different when Google introduced its own “instant” model, too—results start populating the page as searchers type, rather than waiting for searchers to click the red rectangle. Instant search predicts what the end of your string will be; if it is wrong, keep typing, and it updates results. There's a sense of the engine at hand being half a step ahead of the user that changes the *feel* of the page.



**Figure 2.** Comparative “creativity” based searches; Instant on left, Shutterstock main page on right.

The “creativity” example also betrays some slight variations in image order. These are (or at least seem to be) the result of the tiling algorithm that arranges images of different sizes to fill the available page space in a generally pleasing way, not the ranking algorithm that specifies *which* images are the “top” results for a keyword. These subtle differences in how images get tiled also call attention to what is, perhaps, most noticeably different for a buyer (a cultural intermediary) using Instant to search: the way in which “related” search terms are displayed. With Instant, on the right side of the screen, “suggestions” are prominently displayed. Each suggestion is a keyword tied to a few thumbnail examples with an easy way to click through to “more like this.” On the standard search results page, seekers see these same suggestions not as “suggestions” but as a small-type list of terms that are “Related: ” (also on the right hand side, just above the images). The list is again the same for both interfaces, e.g. for “creativity” it begins: “idea, creative concept, design, creative design, creative ideas, innovation...”

That searching is a skill in itself, and that it can take several searches to get results that are truly relevant to what a searcher imagined wanting—let alone elusive “perfect” matches—won’t come as a surprise to anyone who has ever had to conduct or teach college-level research. Neither is the concept likely to be foreign to a design professional that considers him or herself to be tech savvy (a category that certainly describes at least some of the target audience a company like Shutterstock is catering to). Rather than claiming a rupture-inducing difference of type is at work here, it is useful to understand the role selling search tools plays today as one that proceeds in part via amplification of the logics that made print image catalogues central before digitization (with catalogues of intermediate size distributed via CD-ROM offering an unstable bridge between the eras). And yet, in amplification there *is* difference. Whatever kind of cultural intermediaries we are, we’re being invited to imagine what the act of searching consists of in a

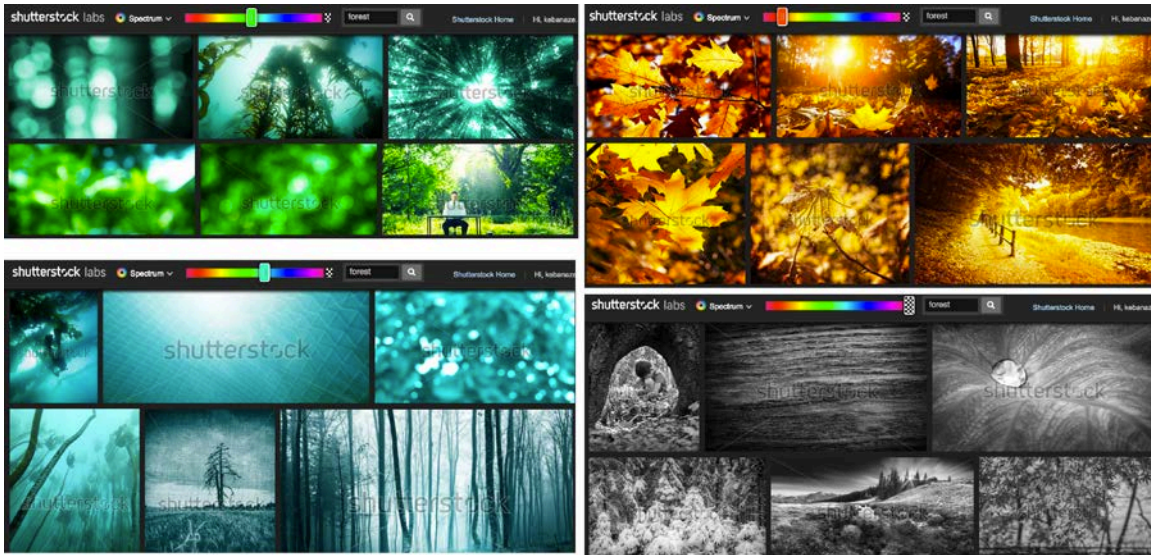
capacious way. Being able to designate our own search terms invites a closer association with the art director that assigns a photographer to produce a custom, high-end image than with the art director flipping through a 1980s Image Bank catalogue. The interfaces we use to choose images for later re-use have an impact on how we imagine ourselves as creators and image deployment as a creative practice.

#### **4.7 PROVIDING A PLURALITY OF SUBSCRIBER INTERFACES AND SEARCH OPTIONS**

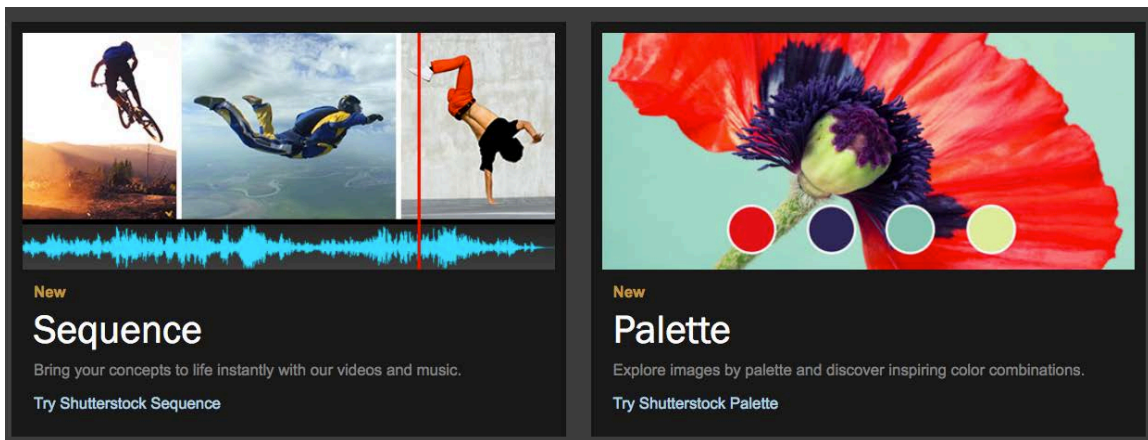
Instant was the first Shutterstock Labs beta search tool, but it isn't the only one. And the relationship between these tools and the maturity of what was once a small, entrepreneurial venture makes it worth including the aside that the Shutterstock IPO and the Shutterstock Labs launch took place during the same year, 2012. Part of what makes the lab spaces and plurality of labs' search tools possible is their beta designation. The stakes attached to these tools are lower than the stakes attached to changes to the main-page design and the site's main search algorithms.

Two of the most straightforward tools that live in this space allow searchers to pair linguistic descriptions with desired color schemes. Spectrum features both a standard search box for text entry and color slider; this allowing searchers to find images in which an individual color is dominant. Using a search term like "forest" and pairing it with a bright green gives a range of shots filled with mid-summer deciduous trees, tall pines, and park shots that scream "summer" (even if that isn't when they were taken). Tipping the slide just a little, into teal-blue yields tinted winter shots, while choosing an orange yields more magic hour autumnal scenes than anything

else. Regardless of color range, the top returns have a highly stylized flair (it is rarer in realist shots to have a single color this dominant).



**Figure 3.** Spectrum (launched March 2013) allows users to search using keywords and a color slider.



**Figure 4.** Palette (debuted 2014) offers a different take on color-based search; Sequence foregrounds Shutterstock's stock video and stock music libraries and their interest in integrated search and editing tools.

The tool Palette works on a similar principle, but it allows searchers to choose multiple colors, a good bet for trying to get contrast (a row of orangy autumn trees *and* a brilliant blue sky, rather orange trees with a color-matched sunset sky) or match other materials (a specific set of oranges and blues that are already prominent on your company’s website). In all of these cases, instead of typing a color name, searchers click on a descriptive “visual” cue, yet there’s a semantic code that isn’t precisely visual operating just below the surface—in this case, numeric rather than linguistic (computers use numbers to represent colors, often as points in 3D space with red, green, and blue axes, which allow algorithms to understand two colors in terms of their distance from one another).

In addition to offering these beta search tools, Shutterstock did recently (in 2016) integrate one “search alternative” into their main page. Reverse image search—accessible via a tiny camera icon sitting at the right end of the search bar—allows a prospective buyer to upload an image and give the directive, *find me something like this*. In trying to provide context for the desire to “discover similar images,” it is possible to see this tool as one that reimagines what a descriptive gap invites. In other words, image-based search can be imagined as a tonic for the frustration text-based search boxes present for users thinking, *I can’t describe what I want, but I can show you*. In this way, it engages wider conversations about how words fail images and how word-image complexes function both synchronously and divergently. While it’s easy to say why this tool is exciting, what’s actually useful about it isn’t as straightforward. Indeed, on its release, stock photo message board users scoffed at how useless this tool seemed. The confusion seemed attached to the way image-based search technology isn’t usually configured to understand the premise that *like* means *similar*, but it also means *not so similar as to appear identical*. If I already have an image, why would I want to buy another image just like it?

In many ways, this tool seems less like a novel addition, and more like a display of keeping pace—Google has a prominent reverse image search feature, and TinEye was built just to provide a similar service. Despite the serious difficulty of getting a tool like this up and running, it feels easy to agree with Thorin Klosowski’s assertion that “Reverse image search is one of those handy innovations that’s often hard to come up with specific uses for.” Writing for the website [lifehacker.com](http://lifehacker.com), Klosowski suggests that the tool can be useful when searching for luxury apartments (or slipping behind paywalls more generally), finding the name of an unlabeled product, or finding recipes that match images. He also suggests identifying insects and checking whether or not others are using your art illegally. And, as a visual culture scholar, I often use the Google version of this tool to try and discover image provenance when I’ve found something on a blog or Pinterest board and know it is recycled but not where from—or when I’ve saved an image and just plain can’t remember where it came from. More particularly, I’ve used it to try to discover end uses that particular stock images have been put to (sometimes fruitful, if partial, when an image has been sold very many times)—a use relevant to tracking imagistic velocity in other contexts, too. But none of these uses seems particularly relevant to the scenario in which it is a potential stock photography buyer uploading the initial “descriptive” image. Of course, if I have a copy of an image that I want to use in a commercial setting but that I don’t own the rights to, I might use this tool to find an alternative. But clearly Shutterstock imagines discovery as a more compelling and wide ranging activity than that scenario alone portends.

It is possible, in light of Shutterstock’s corporate commitment to search as multiple, to think of “standard” reverse image search as a building block that suggests: keeping pace might be an important step on the way to stranger, more industry-specific tools. From a computational

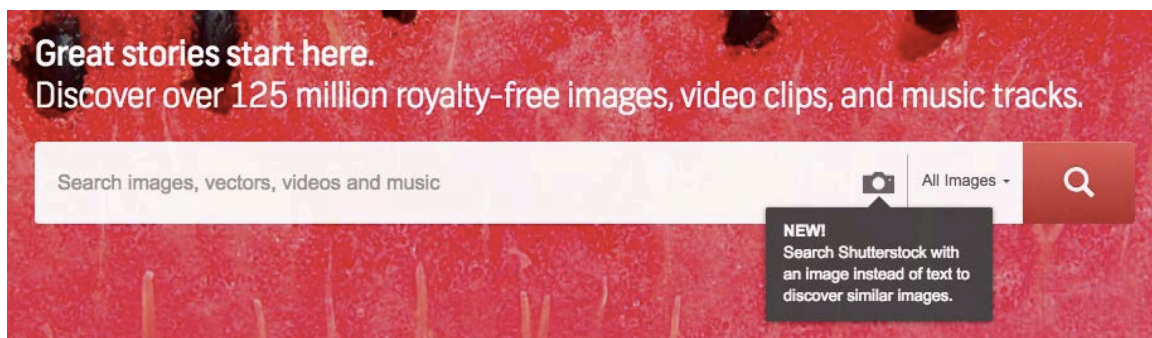


perspective, the ability to “read” and compare images is not a simple task. Indeed, the lack of results that are thrilling, inspirational, or creative half-matches might be chalked up to the recently developed algorithms being *too good* at their jobs in an objective sense. What image-based search doesn’t usually return at the moment are matches where *similarity* can be dynamic and metaphoric rather than a meticulous aesthetic match; it is knowing when giving a “bad” result might result in an extra sale that a human research assistant might distinguish him or herself given a similar image-based prompt. But human-ness isn’t a prerequisite for surprising confluences. The collections of “related” thumbnails drawn up via automated keyword suggestions, which appeared in my brief discussion of the Instant interface, seem to suffer a little less from the “too good” problem, too. And the art world is full of examples of deep learning leading to outputs littered with poetic stutter steps. So it isn’t unimaginable that a future image-and-algorithm tool could be configured to give rangier, more conceptual results. How this would work—and whether it too would be scoffed at—obviously remains to be seen.

A more detailed discussion of how reverse image search, Instant, or the color-based search tools get put to use would require end user interviews beyond the scope of this chapter. I’ve introduced them here because, even without those interviews, it is still possible to take these tools as jumping off points for thinking through the different kinds of descriptive complexes that multimedia contexts promote. Moreover, the peculiarities of these tools allow for a focus on search as multiple, emphasizing the degree to which it isn’t just independent photographers who can and do use words as “image generators,” potential subscribers (buyers) engage in this practice, too.

When we are engaged with the multiplicity of search—including the ways in which distinct search practices *fail differently* when they fail—we are encouraged ask different kinds of

questions than would be available if we were thinking of search in abstract, ideal (singular) terms or if we were only engaged with search as a broad, social technology that influences many subcultures but functionally belongs to Google. In the final sections of this chapter, I focus in on one last Shutterstock search tool, using it to open up some of these questions: What kind of cultural stakes are attached to tools that enlist different kinds of search criteria? What are the stakes of doing things well rather than poorly at an odd, mid-production point? A point like manipulation of the interface for the purchase of stock photos by cultural intermediaries who are themselves planning to manipulate those images—perhaps in ways that make them unrecognizable as “versions” of the “original” purchased images? Does a site like this reflect on larger search ethics in a substantial way? How can we tell, and/or how might professionals in other industries learn from what’s happening here?



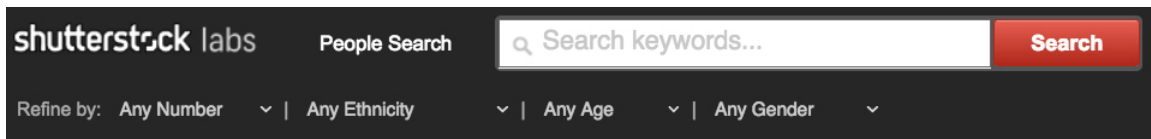
**Figure 5.** *Image-based search debuted as a core feature in 2016. On rollover, the camera icon in the main search bar offers a description of its capabilities; on click it opens a dialogue box that permits users to upload target images (screenshot 3/28/2017).*

#### 4.8 A CLOSER LOOK AT PEOPLE SEARCH: SELLING CONSISTENCY, CUSTOMIZATION, AND DIVERSITY

Faced with the task of choosing one type of image to track through stock catalogues across time, Frosh chose the popular subject of “romantic couples” (a subject that’s also easy to see as iconic of bad stock imagery) in part because the images that appear in this category “clearly raise questions regarding the visual representation of gender and sexuality,” questions about the representation and reproduction of “power relations” (especially between men and women), and questions about “normative representational assumptions regarding ethnicity and class, at the very least through criteria of inclusion and exclusion” (*The Image Factory* 119).

In other words, the potency of the image category lies in the way that the representation of romance *intersects with, structures, and articulates* ‘basic categories by which the self is defined’, such as physical and social reproduction (ultimately in the face of human mortality) intimacy and self-disclosure, the importance of gender and sexuality, and the relationship of the individual to the larger social group (Gilman 1986: 23). We can also understand romantic representation as providing models for the incorporation of individual self-identity, ‘the reflexive project of the self’ (Giddens 1991: 74-80) into a larger social unit and an assured, externally validated narrative trajectory; that is, into certain culturally sanctioned frameworks of social space and personal (non-abstract) time. (ibid. 119)

I suggest here that the factors which made this category and the specific stock images it claims a compelling site of cultural research for Frosh also make People Search, one of the Shutterstock Labs tools, a particularly poignant tool to focus on while trying to think through and with different kinds of search functions and the results they generate.



**Figure 6.** *The People search bar* (screenshot 3/28/2017).

People Search is advertised primarily as a tool to help art directors easily find—and buy—multiple images from a single photo shoot. This can be understood in relation to the promotional moves that claim: (if you look in the right place) buying traditional stock images can be *just as good* as staging an expensive shoot to get images; (if you look in the right place) buying microstock images can be *just as good* as buying more expensive images from a traditional stock distribution company. In this way, People as a beta search tool argues at an interface level in a way that’s similar to the argument made by the foregrounding of tech-forward aesthetic collections like the one presented in the tilt-shift lightbox. It also recalls the days of relatively thin big agency stock catalogues that consisted mostly of outtakes from commissioned shoots, when it wasn’t uncommon for a client to identify a catalogue image that was close-but-not-quite-right and for an agency research assistant to go looking in the company archives for additional photos from the same shoot that the client might like more (Pickerell). The example of the research assistant responding to a client who has described an image as “categorically close but not ideal” is useful because it reminds us that the style of querying we’re reacting to when we react to People Search may not be new at all; it may be that this is basically a human-computer version of a previously human-human interaction that is neither less ethical nor more

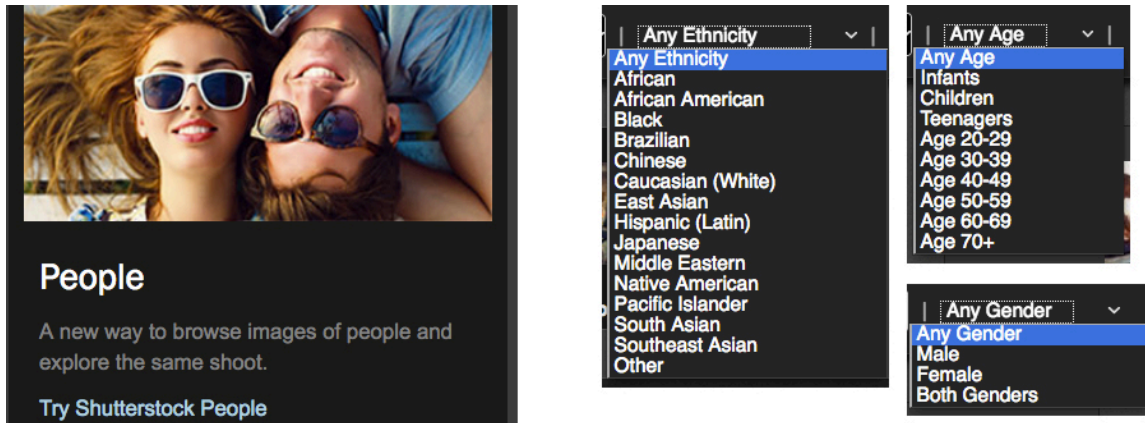
deterministic. The only difference might be that this is easier to interrogate because I can screenshot it. But then again, the “new” version might actually be worthy of increased interrogation. Scale matters, and critical code studies work has started addressing ways algorithms—written by humans with biases—amplify those biases and cause all kinds of damage. I mention this because before I say much more about the People Search tool itself, I need to say, it is easy to be appalled by the ascribing of labels to human bodies and the ways a tool like this foregrounds such labeling. It is not despite but *because of* the validity of negative knee-jerk reactions, that I believe it important to think about the practices that led to the premise that such a tool might be useful or even progressive. To deny that categorization has been wielded as an insidious instrument of colonization and power consolidation would be not just inappropriate but dangerously inaccurate; yet it is also fundamentally impossible to care for words—and for the communicative acts that both self-definition and community building require—without engaging categorically. This is the danger of descriptive language’s necessity.

I pointed to the *generative* power of categorical keywording earlier. I want to admit here that, of course, not all creative constructs are good or put to good uses. This remains true even though happy images generally sell best in a stock image context. Because of histories of violence against human bodies that claim stereotypes as legitimization, the stakes of a stereotypical image of, say “Two African American Men, Age 20-29” are different from the stakes of a stereotypical image of an idyllic mountain lake. And it is difficult to imagine image search tools that “understand” how the stakes of describing “men” and “mountain lakes” are not-identical. Put another way, it is hard to imagine *how* metrics that extend beyond “accuracy” might influence algorithmic decisions about which images are “good” responses to descriptive

queries issued from multiple, relatively unknown or unknowable contexts *for use* in multiple, relatively unknown or unknowable contexts.

Consequently, I think it is useful to consider what a tool like people search is poised for conscription into. And the construction of advertisements for targeted audiences looms large here. If I can easily buy versions of an image that are near-identical except the models in them are visibly marked as belonging to different age groups, races, or genders, then I can version promotional materials faster, and perhaps more compellingly, for presentation to distinct audiences. This kind of targeting isn't, of course, new in and of itself. Market research has long been fundamental to diverse media industries and corporate advertising, and market research practices consequently have complicated histories of their own. And yet, the degree to which declassified surveillance capabilities contribute to targeted advertising is hard to overstate and hard to separate from the fears about stereotyping mentioned above. Shoshana Amielle Magnet's *When Biometrics Fail: Gender, Race, and the Technology of Identity* begins, I think aptly, with the example of "smart billboards" or "billboards that look back." These billboards use biometric cameras to analyze the facial features of passersby for markers of age and gender and to estimate "attention time" and "dwell time." This provides a way for companies to conduct audience research, and it allows the billboard itself to be configured to show different advertisements to different people—an in-the-streets (or "out-of-home," in the parlance of purveyor Quividi) version of the targeted online marketing that garners much more attention.<sup>13</sup>

With the questions of *how* and *where* and *who* advertising targets in mind, then, I want to turn back to the People search interface and the technics it invokes.



**Figure 7.** *The People listing on the Labs homepage and the contents of three main People search dropdowns (screenshots 3/28/2017).*

The ethnicity dropdown provides one starting place. This comes second from the left, after the dropdown that allows searchers to request images containing a specific “number” of people. This dropdown list deploys a seemingly neutral alphabetic order—unlike the U.S. census forms that Simone Brown examines in *Dark Matters*, where “White” is always first among the boxes listed. In the world of People Search, whiteness *is* a thing that needs to be labeled, not a default. And while this is refreshing from a company based in the US, it isn’t necessarily enough to change the historic associations that adhere to such dropdowns. Browne also encourages us to remember the fact that the many boxes from which we can now choose when we describe ourselves on census forms were “first reserved for the management of blackness” (56).<sup>14</sup> Other groupings were later added to reflect changing immigration patterns, and human ecologies and migration patterns remain closely tied to the ways in which racial categories *as these forms present them* are still-evolving (ibid.). Thinking with this urges us to recall the degree to which law, governmentality, and social history are bound up with the social aspects of categorization, even when those forces seem distant.

While I am holding census-style information collection up next to people search as a potential correlate and a real influencer, I should remark: crediting the complex history of the census means crediting ways in which adding identity-based layers to data isn't *only* problematic, too. Neither marketing-industry categorization systems nor government information collection systems like the census are going away anytime soon. And the National LGBTQ task force's 2010 "Queer the Census" campaign provides a glimpse into what it can look like to rhetorically engage a system like this. That campaign argued "data collection tells our stories in ways that help us to access much needed resources that can significantly change the plight of the most vulnerable among us." Which in that context meant queer individuals living in rural places, engaged in inter-racial relationships, and raising children—people who represent a significant portion of the queer community, but who aren't typically represented well or at all (compared with young, white, middle- and upper-class same-sex couples).

Returning to the People Search interface and the nuances of its dropdowns with those caveats in mind, I think it is fair to say that if we were stuck considering only American marketplaces, it would be hard to imagine a commercial tool like People Search offering the ability to select Chinese, East Asian, Japanese, Pacific Islander, South Asian, or Southeast Asian rather than just "Asian." Really, the only thing this tells us is that, in terms of its buyers, Shutterstock is a global company, and they make enough money in distinct global advertising markets to make catering to those markets profitable. Simple stats could have told us this just as easily as interface analysis. In Shutterstock's New York office, they have people answering the phone in 20 different languages, and reportedly 60-percent of their revenue comes from non-US markets. But, in terms of trying to think through the cultural implications of search options, calling attention to places where options seem, for lack of a better descriptor, "less bad" than



they could, encourages us to wonder: Does specificity represent an improvement over eschewing interface-level classification altogether? If any part of the answer to that question is yes—and that is a big if—then we’re also prompted to ask: how accurately are specific qualifiers adhered to images of actual people? Or, just *how* are they adhered? On a technical level, the first thing to note when exploring this question is that there’s no magic vision-based machine learning algorithm that attaches labels to images on its own.

Search technologies are some of the most carefully blackboxed of current cultural products, and this example isn’t exempt. Yet there are things we can say about these systems even without direct access to their algorithms and programmers. Public interviews and press releases suggest company search values. Multiple test searches can tell us additional things about what it being valued and what kinds of “errors” (disparities between images a searcher hopes to find and images returned) are most frequent in a specific context. In the case at hand, the nature of the Shutterstock corpus and their other beta search products make it clear that photographer-generated keywords are *radically* important to how these searches play out. For me, this is the game changer that has the potential to make the People Search example culturally interesting—and maybe even useful—rather than just unnerving. That machine vision doesn’t do the labeling that drives this tool *matters* because it suggests a context for categorical labeling that is at least slightly different from famously offensive examples like the machinic mislabeling of black people as gorillas. Or the Nikon in-camera software meant to improve portraits that frequently glitched because it tended to “see” Asian people “blinking,” despite their open eyes.<sup>15</sup>

Different, of course, *doesn’t mean better*. But I think it is important for us to ask, is it even a little bit better? Or, with some adjustments, could it be better? Before models like People Search disappear altogether. In addition to celebrating the less context-specific technology of

reverse image search, a large portion of Shutterstock's 2016 press focused on development of a proprietary convolutional neural network for use in various image-recognition contexts, so we can't rule out the idea that a People-style search driven by Artificial Intelligence is coming. And Shutterstock is far from the only tech company moving towards using computer vision and deep learning to try and replace the labor-intensive act of entering keywords manually. Changes in how language is adhered to images and how computers parse the resulting word-image complexes *are* coming; and the flavor of those changes is going to impact both our everyday use of words and images *and* the structure of technical writing as a profession.

Where I noted above the global context of Shutterstock's buyers, I want to belabor here the fact that their submitters—their keyword-generating photographers—are distributed globally as well. And this is part of what imbues a search system that relies on keywords entered by those submitters distinct. In testing this tool, and sorting through press releases detailing shifting user demographics, it was readily apparent—as we might guess: when a group of people was better represented among photographers, images that included members of that group tended to be less stilted and stereotypical even while remaining *formulaic enough* to qualify as “good” stock; and these images were often more thoughtfully keyworded, too. On the company's part, letting photographers keyword is a logistical necessity. If over 800,000 new images are added weekly, then having a computer system and an employee quickly confirm that keywords are *accurate* is much better for them labor-wise than doing all their keywording in-house. So, when I say that I think this particular tool's biggest potential is in helping us re-imagine what's possible in terms of search. I mean to suggest: there's a giving up of *just a little control* over the way Searches play out that the company is pressed into accepting—even endorsing—because of the shape of

the industry they're a part of. And I'm arguing that we should think about what would happen if corporations and programmers and word-image producers *chose* to do this in other contexts.

When we're talking about huge scale engagement with images and word-image complexes, providing slightly better, slightly more diverse results might not be enough, but it's nothing to dismiss out of hand either. One of the hazards of Google-i-fication is that those of us who aren't computer programmers or engineers have largely stopped imagining how ubiquitous technologies could have been—and still can be—different. While looking at People Search from a critical humanist perspective still makes me cringe, what makes People Search work really is a collaboration of multi-layered search technologies *and* descriptive meta-data added by invested humans from *many* locations *and* search terms entered by end users. Because of this, People Search *has* helped me better imagine what “something other” than the current standard might entail.

#### **4.9 ABSENCE AND AMPLIFICATION: ONE LAST INDUSTRY ANECDOTE**

One thing emphasized through study of “neutral” technologies like search systems and “simple” descriptors (like keywords and categories) is the axiom *neutrality is only ever perceived neutrality*. Identifying the points of structural uncertainty in complex human-in-loop computational systems *can* allow (which doesn't mean always or even often will allow) us to see both what allows systems to amplify the biases of individuals and where human intervention might prevent or co-opt cascading biases that (despite being computationally mediated) manifest in both visual and verbal ways. In the introduction to this chapter, I noted that People Search has the potential to *simultaneously* amplify insidious stereotypes and help cultural intermediaries

produce products that break down some of those same stereotypes. This Janus effect is linked to the reality: positive images that fail to appear realistic (or that appear realistic despite having no indexical relationship to the world as humans inhabit it) contribute to stereotyping in ways that make well-meaning images differently compelling objects of study than baldly offensive images. This is also linked to ways in which People Search modulates and is modulated by the stock image market's historic exclusions, both manufactured and accidental. The very things that have kept stock photography from being a popular subject of academic study make it a ground on which it becomes obvious that omissions exhibit scaled-up influence as they circulate in everyday contexts. In order to better see how, it is worth addressing once more the cultural intermediaries poised to use a tool like People Search and the goals they might have in mind for the images that it helps them discover and purchase.

Page one of chapter one in Michal Heron's 2007 guide "how to shoot and sell" digital stock photography provides an industry insider's perspective on what good microstock photographers might offer image-wise that earlier, less decentralized agencies failed to produce. It is worth the space to allow his opening anecdote to stand on its own, in his own words:

Note long ago I got an email from a long-time client requesting a stock photo of a Hispanic family having a picnic. The client hadn't found anything on my Web site but knew me well enough to ask if there were some new photos I hadn't posted yet. I didn't have it, but it didn't seem like a tough request. I emailed back, "Sorry, I can't provide that picture but surely you can find it easily. The only alternative I can offer is this photo from my Web site but it shows a white family on a picnic." To my surprise, they chose my photo.

Some weeks later, I saw the client at an industry meeting and asked about her difficulty in finding the right photo of the Hispanic family, and why they'd settled for a white family. She sighed and explained that there hadn't been time to shoot an assignment, so she had counted on finding it in stock. "I looked everywhere, on dozens of agency Web sites, but nothing worked for our concept." They had wanted to target the Hispanic market and appeal to a mainstream middle class audience. It seemed very odd.

Were there other pictures of family picnics in stock agency files?

Yes.

Why didn't they work?

As the client explained it, most everything she saw was one stylistic extreme or another. Some photos were in the style of gritty photojournalism. Others were too far on the other end of the spectrum, showing the current taste for oblique angles, extreme soft focus, or moody color. There were none that presented a Hispanic family in a well-executed photo with an approachable, authentic warmth in the family interaction—and at a picnic. (1)

There's something quaint in both the client's request and Heron's response as they're portrayed here. But there's also something to Heron's confusion around the client's difficulty finding an "appropriate" image. Is the telling part of this "problem" the client's inability to see "warmth" in images that aren't aesthetically white washed? Would the client's desired audiences exhibit a similar lack of imagination if one of these images had been chosen? Is the lack a step backward

from there—did stock companies have the chance to buy images that would have fit this request but turn them down because their gatekeepers failed to imagine the sales potential in these “diverse” images? Or is it a step further back yet—tied to photographers’ lack of imagination (as Heron seems loosely to imply)? Or, alternately, do many versions of the “ideal” image exist for sale, they just weren’t readily discoverable for the client?

Asking these questions might seem to require setting aside the complexities of deciding what it means for a family on a picnic to visually code as Hispanic at first glance—a setting aside as uncomfortable as some of the setting asides that looking at the People Search ethnicity dropdown required. And while identity is complex, multilayered, and inconsistent, there’s danger in allowing either a postmodern view of the self or a radically intersectional view of identity politics prevent us from asking these questions. Because in the world (our world) where cultural intermediaries understand representing—and speaking to—particular communities as desirable, the fact remains that when a descriptive request is met with askance results, inspiration and creativity and a feeling that the set of images being returned is marked by some kind human-touch aren’t the only possible outcomes. Just because stock images in general often get derided for being “stereotypical” doesn’t mean that all stock images engage stereotypes in equivalent or equally innocuous ways.

There is something insidious in the askance result that says, a white family is “not perfect but close enough” when the goal is to find an image that will speak to complex Hispanic markets. Part of the problem with the “white is good enough” result is the way it reinforces the erroneous assumption of whiteness as a neutral, unconstructed, default—a default that has a particular lineage in the photography industry, well traced around the “Shirley cards” Kodak used to calibrate color in and beyond the 1950s.<sup>16</sup> As in the case of the Shirley cards, in the stock

image supply case, the problem has to do with questions of scale. Shrugging off one miss misses what might be at stake when this “problem” is multiplied via similarly “failed” searches, and then multiplied again with each top image result that is integrated into the advertising campaigns that act as wallpaper in both digital and physical spaces. In short, images and interface issues that are innocuous in isolation aren’t necessarily innocuous in aggregate or in every context where they might be deployed—and this issue is particularly relevant to stock (including microstock), given the omnipresent goal of massively multiple image deployment. And finding ways to talk about what makes aggregation powerful is an important problem facing both digital cultural studies and visual cultural studies in the present moment.

#### **4.10 TOWARD CAREFUL, METAPHORIC INSTRUMENTALIZATION: WHERE CULTURAL PROCESSES COHERE**

Throughout this chapter, I’ve attempted to portray the stock image industry in a way that emphasizes recursive relationships between issues we might label cultural, historical, technical, and aesthetic. This is because, like Frosh, I understand that culture “isn’t a conveyer belt,” that speculating about “better” and “worse” practices in the visual culture industry requires a realism that contends with the messy lamination of disparate-seeming questions and professional activities, and that avoiding a “linear, horizontal bias,” is especially difficult in cases like the one presented by the stock image industry,

cases where separate moments of the cultural process are concretely manifested in discrete forms of technical administration. To focus on these stages alone would miss, however, the ways in which they carry traces of one another and are inflected, unevenly,

by ‘external’ (to the linear process) socio-economic and cultural forces, as well as the forms and powers through which they cohere and are articulated together as a complex whole. (*The Image Factory* 56)

The language of complexity shores up the assertion that in order to ask questions about the proliferation of better and worse representations (aesthetic questions), we need to understand the roles that infrastructures, including linguistic infrastructures, play in both directing the creation of images and propelling images in different directions.

Interrogating the complexities of this particular industrial context has given me occasion to refine a set of questions that I now understand as useful to the study of symbiotic word-image relations across varied commercial, academic, and everyday contexts. This set includes questions like: Who adheres words to images? How are they adhered? Why? How do word-image linkages persist across time? How do linkages evolve? Where are words adhered only temporarily, and how are linkages designed as ephemeral different from linkages designed to last or have lasting impact? How are multi-media linkages related to metaphor as a conceptual vehicle (e.g. what might language experts be good people to put in conversation with this decidedly “visual” and “technical” field)? Furthermore, how are visual and textual stereotypes linked? If the use of concepts is often linked to stereotyping in a problematic way, what do or would we need to understand to start talking about “better” practices?

It is perhaps tonally appropriate here to recall chapter two’s engagement with Oppen’s suggestion that, despite the slipperiness of language and the ease with which categories and concepts can be manipulated and misused, there are words without which we can conceive of neither humanity nor humane action. When we consider that there is no such thing as a word that does not perform some typological action, we are perhaps encouraging ourselves and others to



stop decrying categorization itself in order to look at *how* certain materially situated *styles* of movement from specific-to-generic and/or from generic-to-specific can cause damage to both groups and individuals.

With examples like the “good enough” white family on a picnic in mind, it is possible to argue that the way cable companies leverage what Melanie E. S. Kohnen calls “branded diversity” offers a better analogy for a tool like People Search than U.S. Census forms and biometric registries do. Kohnen suggests that even if diversity branding campaigns—like ABC Family’s “a new kind of family” campaign—*do not* in-and-of themselves offer forms of meaningful diversity, they *can* create conditions that permit individual shows to engage meaningfully with questions of diversity, identity formation, and intersectional politics—questions that have a history of being excluded from both basic and extended cable programming.

Applying this principle to the stock image context. While we might, given a magazine ad populated by overly stereotypical Hispanic picnic goers, have a field day picking apart “bad” representational choices, we should also note how often we don’t even get to the point where that kind of important analysis can occur. White washing of models and extras that populate the boring, background images of daily life is a problem, too, not least because our world contains so many seemingly low-stakes images that do not represent the diversity of the countries we live in. Noticing omissions and missed opportunities and the infrastructures that might have allowed a “better” version of the ad in question to exist encourages thinking about how we might produce representational images that are “better” because of their nuance and their engagement with the values of the communities they depict, but also “better” because they achieve significant imagistic velocity and reach the wide audiences often denied to diverse representations, a goal

that likely will require enlistment of keywords (like the keywords that make images findable in People Search) and “stock” aesthetics that—when studied in isolation—may seem antithetical to the goal of complex representation of identity and community. It turns out, knowing what constitutes a “good,” liberal, progressive, or diverse object in the image industry is quite difficult; suggesting “we know one when we see one” isn’t just flawed because others might have different felt reactions to the way an image looks. For instance, given the way Shutterstock’s interfaces and rhetorics suggest a commitment to helping buyers find what they want among existing images *and* a commitment to using information gleaned from searches and purchases to help photographers understand what buyers want, buyers simply *searching* for diverse images and realistic representations using People Search have the potential to create positive influence—even if images that are easy to identify as “good” representations aren’t *yet* a significant portion of the set that is returned.

In trying to engage distinct moments in the production cycle simultaneously, an ideal longer study of the stock industry might diligently pair Kohnen’s urging to think about how certain kinds of “limited” infrastructures still allow imaginative and expansive ideas about diverse communities to flourish with Lorna Roth’s concept of “cognitive equity,” which aims to name “an intelligent strategy for creating and promoting equity by inscribing a wider dynamic range of skin tones into image technologies, products, and emergent practices in the visual industries,” and then layer back in the kind of analysis of instrumental and metaphoric word-image complexes that I’ve been foregrounding (111). Speculating about the coming together of these concepts is difficult and could sound like an overly optimistic or ideal approach, but it also gives us a leg up in situations where it is crucial to credit materials and materialism without allowing any one determinism to control ideas about agency.

In the next chapter, I turn to a very different kind of case study—one structured around images of the nonhuman assemblages we call landscapes. Where chapters two and three formed a subset focused on poetic description, the current chapter and the one that follows work in tandem as well—there, I trace out ways in which these landscape artworks emerged in relation to a constellation of social, technical, and representational forces not unlike (or entirely separable from) the forces and infrastructures that support and limit the stock photography industry, and I use the parallels and disjunctures that emerge to re-engage conversations from chapters one and two in which I argued that object-oriented philosophies can steady us and force us reckon with common and communal grounds in ways that are deeply humane. Despite the degree to which the artworks at the core of chapter five keep humans off stage, out of the photographic frame, the artworks at its core are still concerned with ways in which descriptive media engage meaningfully with “humanity,” what it is to be “humane,” and the development of “intelligent strategy[ies] for creating and promoting equity.”

#### NOTES CHAPTER FOUR

<sup>1</sup> The phrase “parsimoniously polysemic” is borrowed from Paul Frosh, who uses it frequently as a descriptor that nods to Umberto Eco’s way of talking about images in relation to “fields of possibility.”

<sup>2</sup> The Instagram Manovich finds so telling might have something to do with the idea that separating commercial, especially “stock-style,” images and “personal images” is either possible or desirable. The popular photosharing site launched in 2010, but in 2012 when Hand’s study came out it likely wasn’t as clear as it is now that the app’s interface and sharing structures encourage private image sharing between friends, fully commercial lifestyle branding, and gray-area commercially motivated activity by free agent “influencers” to take on remarkably similar aesthetics and to influence each other’s circulation patterns. However, Hand is interested in the

many ways in which “snapshots” taken by private citizens of events that likely would not have been captured at all in eras when cameras were less ubiquitous (especially emergent, unpredictable and politically salient events) can quickly transcend the context of their making, which is deeply relevant to the aforementioned phenomenon and conversations about image-oriented rhetorical velocities.

<sup>3</sup> While not adequate to the complexity of the world, this summary reflects common defenses of pop culture studies and widespread critiques of Marxist theories that fail to engage intersectional work on identity; it is also in line with some of the arguments in Lisa Henderson’s *Love and Money: Queers, Class, and Cultural Production* and the ways in which they are refracted through Melanie Kohlen’s argument for the possibility of meaningful “branded diversity,” discussed later in this chapter.

<sup>4</sup> The Library of Congress houses 175,000 black and white negatives and 1600 color photographs depicting rural life and industrial developments produced for the various agencies that oversaw this project; while most often studied in relation to its role in generating singular, iconic images like Dorothea Lang’s “Migrant Mother,” this project also has a lot to teach about serialization, acts of collection, the ways in which multiple images conspire together to influence the national imaginary, and photography as a form of labor—as sustained rather than syncopated work. I mention these photographs again in chapter five, speaking more specifically about the way their operations contribute to the history of landscape-rich representations set in the American West.

<sup>5</sup> This early underwater line represented a remarkable advance in long-distance communication technology; its relevance to the study at hand is perhaps amplified by the semi-concurrent nature of the rise of the telegraph and the early commercialization of photography, given that both impacted what people understood as easy to communicate and desirable in terms of communicative infrastructures and practices.

<sup>6</sup> Brent Malin’s work with the history of the stereoscope is excellent, and it presages some of the more insidious representational issues that I turn to in the last third of the chapter at hand; he emphasizes relationships between images, image technology, and institutional discourse (especially as it manifests in marketing materials that stressed the educational potential of the three-dimensional stereoscopic effect). He argues, “producers [of stereoscope images] reflected a ‘popularly held logic’ of white, modern consumption and embodied this in presumably high-tech, modern products, promising consumers a means of escaping from their won and others’ immigrant pasts and solidifying their position in the more comfortable middle class. In so doing, these products suggested a means by which consumers’ could replace their ‘marked’ minority identities with more ‘unmarked’ mainstream ones” (409).

Readers might also find it useful to consider postcard companies in relation to the history of stereoscopic images and reproduction models—in composition, this might mean turning to Stephen McElroy’s work on the Teich company’s production practices and the circulation of Teich cards. It is also worth brief note that a wide array of now-odd visual media enjoyed at least modest popularity in the pre-cinema, early photography age; film historian Paul Burns’ website

“The History of the Discovery of Cinematography” ([www.precinemahistory.net/contents.htm](http://www.precinemahistory.net/contents.htm)) links to many of the most talked about examples.

<sup>7</sup> Moves that expose journalistic “neutrality” as a commercial value have been especially poignant in this election year. Additionally, this particular precursor moment’s editorial news lessons are made more salient to the specific case of Shutterstock by the company’s recent A.P. distribution contracts.

<sup>8</sup> The phrase “design thinking” could be seen as anachronistic applied to the 1970s, but its associations make it seem accurate; now seemingly ubiquitous, this phrase owes some debt to Peter Rowe’s book *Design Thinking*, which came out in 1987 and described problem solving strategies of architects and urban planners. Variations on the idea that there is something widely useful about the style of thinking that makes design professionals successful had been circulating, if narrowly, in business circles since at least the early 1980s, and we can imagine those circulations in relation to things like the intensive IPAR (Institute of Personality Assessment and Research at the University of California, Berkeley) studies that attempted to map the minds of famous architects, which were conducted in 1958 and 1959. (Pierluigi Serraino’s *The Creative Architect: Inside the Great Midcentury Personality Study* offers an interesting and relatively comprehensive description of these studies). For a 2016 look at the phrase, the marketing materials of the firm IDEO offer as good an example as any; their current online about page suggests “IDEO is a pioneer of human-centered design—putting people at the center of our work. This approach has come to be known as design thinking.” Now most recognizable as a consulting firm and project incubator, IDEO dates from 1979 and was involved in the development of the first Apple mouse, among other ergonomically driven tech projects; their pitch that “Observing human behavior is serious business” suggests human and rhetorical dimensions of design, which we might choose to consider in relation to the workflows of 1970s advertising or the microstock interfaces that I look at later in this chapter, especially the aspects of these interfaces that in aim to “teach” sellers what buyers want or “teach” buyers what’s available for purchase.

<sup>9</sup> At the time of this acquisition, VCG had been exclusively distributing Getty Images content in China for over a decade. Getty press materials described their expanded deal in the wake of the Corbis acquisition as the establishment of “a global distribution partnership which will see customers globally benefit from an unprecedented content offering,” noting practically that going forward Corbis content—including their most notable named collections, those acquired from Bettman and Sygma—would “be available to customers in China via the VCG platform and to the rest of the world via Getty Images’ global sales teams and industry-leading website, [gettyimages.com](http://gettyimages.com).” Among other things, this reminds us that representation-style distribution agreements did not disappear fully with the advent of the super agencies, and that the Euro-American centric version of the stock image story that I’ve drawn from is incomplete not only because it is short and episodic but also because of its failure to truly engage Asian visual media and visual content industry precedents.

<sup>10</sup> I'm hardly the only person to suggest that, as practices of recombination and remix garner more acute but also more widespread attention, our field might benefit from a decentering of that claim that these practices are inherently (only) anarchistic, that frame reuse as an anti-instrumental art-method. A full cataloguing of extensive works on re-use in rhetoric and composition is beyond the scope of this chapter; readers interested in examples beyond Ridolfo and DeVoss may be interested in the complexity of the history that Jason Palmeri traces in *Remixing Composition: A History of Multimodal Writing Pedagogy*, the methods for iconographic tracking that Laurie Gries lays out in her study of the Obama Hope image, Matthew Pavesich's DC/Adapters project, which documents creative deployments and modifications of the official flag of the District of Columbia, and Shipka's many takes on remediation as a practice that builds critical capacities and occasions reflection.

<sup>11</sup> Spurred by the same economy that spurred Oringer, I bought my first DSLR in 2006—Sony's debut alpha model, which was compatible with the Minolta lenses I had been collecting since high school. Both at the professional level and the hobbyist level, the early-to-mid 2000s are generally recognized as the tipping point when DSLR (digital single-lens reflex) cameras began to “replace” conventional SLRs in earnest. This relative affordability of DSLR camera bodies came approximately a decade after the first consumer DSLR, the Kodak Hawkeye II, hit the market in 1991. Like many innovations in camera technology, the DSLR owes a direct debt to military spending and the perceived national security benefit of comprehensive, innovative surveillance. The Hawkeye was closely based on the first true DSLR: the Electro-Optic Camera designed and constructed by Kodak under a U.S. Government contract in 1987 and 1988 (McGarvey).

<sup>12</sup> I have used creativity as an example here in part because I find Frosh's discussion of how the word means at a conceptual level inside this industry engaging, but mostly out of convenience; dual searches based on other very common terms, including “love” and “landscape,” provided similarly convincing results; common search terms are telling because there are so many images “accurately” tied to them that identical top match pages aren't just all about if a match exists but also what makes it a top match. Frosh uses the term “courage” in many of his examples, noting the prevalence of catalogues organized around single nouns that function in radical isolation and operate at an almost mythical level; this example calls attention to the modulation of context stock images and their sellers need to strive for; when looking at a top-selling image of courage, we're left to our own devices to estimate “courage to do what, in the face of what?” (Frosh, *The Image Factory* 82). A concept like creativity suffers—or benefits from—similar dynamics.

<sup>13</sup> Despite the sci-fi aura that surrounds this technology, billboards using it were live in New York and Philadelphia in 2008, and their example helps Magnet engage and articulate “questions raised by the role of state institutions and the military in driving technological development and expansion, the relationship between surveillance and marketing, the permeable boundary between science and popular culture, and our desire to read identity off the body” (2). At her writing, race was not yet being evaluated by these billboards, but the ability to read it was *enthusiastically* marketed as coming soon (Magnet; Clifford). Somewhat interestingly, as of

April 2016, the industry-early-entrant Quividi that Magnet’s example focuses on has not yet added “estimated race” to the list of metrics their “solution” provides (“What are the metrics offered by the Quividi solution?” n.p.). A patent application submitted on March 31, 2015 by Yahoo describes a system that would use not just cameras but microphones and additional sensors to collect environmental information on wholly different scale for use in targeting billboard-style ads; notably, this environmental monitoring changes the stakes of reactivity—according to the application, “instead of relying on ‘personalization’ like online advertising, the techniques described herein rely on ‘grouplization,’ i.e., selection of advertising content based on an aggregate representation of the target audience that is derived, at least in part, from real-time information.”

<sup>14</sup> On the 1890 census, Mulatto, Quadroon, and Octoroon appeared as subcategories of “Black,” but by the 1900 census these subcategories” had disappeared, “reflecting the one-drop rule,” in addition to the still-evolving racial categories that can be claimed (56).

<sup>15</sup> This isn’t an assertion that *no* automated, invisible markers contribute to striated search results; e.g. geographic data is a factor in result relevance. In interview mode, Oringer notes that if a custom searches the generic term “food” in Japan, “you want sushi to come up,” while in the US, you might want customers to see a hamburger among first-page results (Harris n.p.). Other factors, some generated in conjunction with machine learning, are likely at work inside their main search function, too; but that’s quite different from an algorithm generating entire descriptions of images.

<sup>16</sup> These cards featured posed models—all white, often Kodak employees—and resulted in film stock and processing techniques physically keyed to the goal of making one kind of skin look good; Richard Dyer’s *White* includes perhaps the best known recounting of this phenomena.

## 5.0 RESPONSIBLE CARTOGRAPHIES: DESCRIPTION AS A TECHNOLOGY OF EMPLACEMENT

*The cultural landscape is the physical and symbolic arena for the social process of production, the accumulation of wealth, and the resistance to unequal accumulation. The cultural landscape ... is both a tool and the context of social change.*

J. Edward Hood, “Social Relations and the Cultural Landscape” (139)

*Works of art—which I am defining as a special class of images that both coalesce and work to make the viewer coalesce large amounts of novel and taxing information—bring a crazy-quilt of physical phenomenon to our notice. This constraining and compressing design makes apparent the normally hidden ways by which domain-specific interface systems (vision, hearing, taste, touch, smell, proprioception) render the ambient intimate for us.*

Barbara Maria Stafford, *Echo Objects: The Cognitive Work of Images* (10)

*Media have a world-leveraging power.*

John Durham Peters, *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media* (21)

On the morning after the 2016 presidential election, *The New York Times* website was dominated by the headline “Trump Triumphs,” while a subtitle clarified this triumph’s status as shocking upset. Opinion articles with titles like “Our Unknown Country” and “Homeless in America” ran alongside real-time analysis of stock markets in turmoil. An attempt at explaining “Why the Race Did a Screeching U-Turn” smacked of defensiveness over of the *Times* own failed predictions (even though the exit poll analysis this brief article included was arguably quite



decent, given the information then available). Nestled among the links to these articles on the top half of the landing page was the differently baffling headline, “Postelection Therapy: View Swing States from Space.” On click through, it became clear that this was a review of Benjamin Grant’s mass market art book *Overview*. Dated Tuesday, November 8 rather than Wednesday, November 9, this review essay by Randy Kennedy would presumably have run no matter who the victor had been. It begins,

At least since July, when the Democratic and Republican National Conventions ended and the presidential campaign began in earnest, but more likely since the spring of 2015, when Hillary Clinton and Donald J. Trump threw down their gauntlets, anyone could be excused for wanting to take a long vacation somewhere.

Maybe somewhere beyond the reach of Twitter and perpetual poll analysis, where words like “loser” and “deplorables” couldn’t be heard, where email servers were too small to see and sites for border walls looked indistinguishable from anywhere else on the planet.

(n.p.)

There are a lot of strange tensions in this setup.<sup>1</sup> It invites us to escape the media saturated election season not by actually unplugging and taking a vacation but rather by immersing ourselves in some of the most *thoroughly* mediated views of our planet imaginable. The spectacular aerial shots that anchor Grant’s book, the Instagram account that gave rise to the book, and this review (which reproduces three shots at the high-for-online-news resolution of 2048x1918) may appear to be comprised of “simple” photographs. In reality, they are composite images painstakingly stitched together and manipulated in Photoshop by Grant.

The super high resolution satellite photos that comprise Grant's "raw" material are provided by DigitalGlobe, a commercial (civilian) operator of remote sensing spacecraft and vendor of space imagery and geospatial data. Even if you've never heard of this company, you've probably relied on data they provide at some point; much of space imagery that supports Google Maps, Google Earth, and Apple Maps comes from DigitalGlobe satellites. A licensing agreement gives Grant direct access to their full-resolution images, captured with cameras that have a 16-meter focal length (32 times the focal length of a "normal" DSLR camera, like the one I own and the ones used by many of the microstock photographers implicated in chapter four); for those trying to wrap their minds around what this means in practical terms, Grant suggests the "cool factoid" that with a camera like this "you can take a picture of a beach ball on the Golden Gate Bridge from Los Angeles in full resolution." (Crager n.p.). DigitalGlobe's more "typical" customers include NASA, offices affiliated with the US Department of Defense, and companies that monitor big agriculture or conservation projects.

The status of image databases that are organized in ways that help humans manage details is decidedly at stake for both DigitalGlobe as a commercial enterprise and Grant as an artist interested in perspectival shifts. Kennedy's quick introduction to *Overview* goes on to make the election-tinged argument that this

project shows swing states like Florida, Nevada and North Carolina as pleasing, placid abstractions, neither red nor blue. A residential development in Delray Beach, Fla., looks like a Mondrian painting. And the view from above, evoking the quietude of space, creates the added illusion of being able to release all your pent-up political frustrations into the ether. (n.p.)

There's something to the promise of "neither red nor blue." The dominant colors in the Delray Beach image, which is the anchor image for the review, are pale pinks, lush greens, and greys, punctuated by a blue that's nearly black; there's no obvious iconography here that speaks back to partisan stump speeches. But there's more than abstraction going on, too. Or at least there's more than one kind of abstraction going on. Abstraction can be a synonym for something that exists only as an idea or something that has slipped free of all context, or it can be the antonym of representation. It is also something that has nuances of many kinds.

The human brain is good at filtering out details it perceives as noise (e.g. abstracting toward meaning), but it is good at filling in missing details, too (e.g. layering context and story into highly abstract forms; see: gestalt principles in both art and psychology). In looking at the Delray Beach image, it's possible the only reason I described "a blue that's nearly black" instead of just saying "black" was because contextual cues tell me these dark "fingers" are bodies of water. The little pink and white squares are clearly homes, relatively uniform in construction and neatly arrayed around cul-de-sacs. I imagine them new construction, their uniformity regulated, meant for people in earnings brackets far above mine. I may be wrong, but there *are* complicated stories in this image for the taking; abstraction, it turns out, doesn't have to be precisely placid.<sup>2</sup>

Grant himself suggests that the *Overview* "images look like abstract art at first, but then you can start to pick up familiar details and kind of ground yourself, despite the fact that you're seeing so much area" (qtd. Crager n.p.). In other words, these images act *as* technologies of vision, training viewers to specific ways of looking, and Grant as an artist is well aware of this capacity. He often acknowledges that his practice is decidedly different from the practices of painters and of photographers who take their own photographs, despite his having great respect for them and often mimicking principles of composition from the more canonical art forms he

studied in art history classes. His principle tasks in creating images for the *Overview* series, in his own words, are “to figure out what is worth showing and then to do all the work after the fact to make it as easily understood as possible” (ibid.). He declares the knowledge he picked up in (non-art) history classes, which helps him choose sites and describe them, just as important to his process as artistic influences. He chooses to focus on places of human impact, on places where we live and move and sites where we farm, extract minerals, and generate power. The argument of this project, encyclopedic as it is, isn’t that wind farms and beet sugar factories are equally beautiful; it is at once something more utopian than that and something more realistic. In his own intro to the project, Grant writes, “If we embrace and learn from this new perspective, I am optimistic that we will create a smarter and safer future” (*Overview* 20).

In other words, the idea here isn’t to invite disengagement. And the captions that accompany Grant’s photos, which he admits having spent an enormous amount of time crafting based on dedicated research, help viewers think through contextualization of patterns in support of what we might call wide-angle engagement. These captions call attention to things like the fact that “rapid expansion of palm oil plantations in the world’s tropical regions is becoming an increasingly significant source of carbon emissions” or to the way “Mobile homes that were supposed to be distributed to victims of Hurricane Katrina remain vacated and unused at Hope Municipal Airport in Hope, Arkansas, USA” more than five years after the hurricane (29; 240). These are decidedly descriptive captions. More clearly objective than poetic, they’re hard to pin down in conventional political terms—they celebrate human ingenuity even as they suggest how often we deny the scale of our negative impacts and how scary this denial is. They lure us in, asking us to think about the global as something made up of many localities and of the products we use in terms of where their components came from and where their carcasses will wind up.

It turns out, because the overhead view can be so easily associated with both the act of providing context *and* the act of abstracting away from the scales at which humans usually choose to provide context for their actions, this style of descriptive view has a lot to teach us about how complexly descriptions act in in more general scenarios. Grant's artistic interest in the overhead view and its potential to generate engagement is neither without precedent nor unique among his peers. The mainstream appeals of the daily overview feed and the *Overview* coffee table book have some exceptional qualities, but there are many artists now working with image databases, satellite and drone imageries, and the phenomenal aspects of the Google-ization of visual and geographic media.<sup>3</sup>

The rest of this chapter outlines an earlier example of aerial-image-rich artistic work in order to provide historical grounding for the way artists use descriptive objects and descriptive principles to develop projects in relation to massive, sometimes global, scales of engagement. I introduce the work of photographer, mixed media installation artist, and activist David T. Hanson, whose artistic career spans pre- and post-Google eras. By telling part of the story of Hanson's work, I mean to give a clearer picture of how narratives that frame *Overview*-style projects only in terms of radical, technological advancement miss much of their social importance; I include social histories of apparatuses in order to remind myself and readers that resisting techno-utopian visions and technological determinisms doesn't mean we can't take technologies' embedded influences seriously.

Throughout the rest of the chapter, I engage aerial photography as a category of imagery that performs descriptive functions, focusing on the form's community generating and community delimiting functions; this work is meant to complement some of the ways in which chapters two and three introduced other photographic forms and their blending of aesthetic and

technical means of address. In addition to addressing overhead views *as* descriptive forms, I speak to specific ways these images can be coaxed into acting with linguistic descriptions in symbiotic ways, and I allude to ways in which descriptive metadata—including the numeric descriptors that connect images to longitudes, latitudes, and moments in time—enable two activities that can seem at odds: stitching data sets together (which hides the seams of scale change) and toggling between data sets (which shows the seams of scale change).

I am particularly interested in how examples like Hanson's and Grant's call attention to humans' ability to toggle between scales of observation and the ways in which this ability is tied to how we conceptualize the more-than-human world as it sustains our existence as individuals and communities. Literal toggling, these examples seem to suggest, can have a profound impact on our awareness of complex environmental dynamics. As Grant puts it, "When we are removed from our usual line of sight on the Earth's surface, we can see things differently. We can better understand the intricacy of the things we have constructed, the sheer complexity of the systems we have developed, and the impact that we have had on the planet" (20). Contra arguments that abstraction allows humans to shirk responsibility, styles of abstraction particular to the overhead view can help us remember that what's just outside a frame almost always matters just as much as what's inside the frame—and that what's inside the frame might only "make sense" given a keen eye and a lot of research.

In other words, there are several different ways in which these examples help us think through how what stays out-of-frame speaks to social contexts, especially those social contexts that intentionally hide dangerous but essential-to-modern-life infrastructures from view. The premise that any project speaks through exclusions doesn't just call attention to the way an artist chooses to show some sites rather than others. It also calls attention to ways in which elements

within a frame that at first seems flat can be invited to foreground and background roles by *either* artists or viewers. In Grant's case, the premise that exclusions matter speaks to how meticulously he crops images, selects which side of each image will face up, and executes commands that result in "slight enhancements on the image to make it crisper and cleaner, to bring out certain colors that help you understand what type of crop or what type of shipping container you're seeing in the frame" (qtd. Crager n.p.). In other words, he encourages viewer's abilities to re-attach context because this, for him, is the thing that makes meaningful the initial phenomenal experience of strangeness that his composite images promote via their geometric forms.

In many ways, the lesson of the Daily Overview is that dull seeming infrastructural sites are just as deserving of our vision and consideration as the Netherlands' famous tulip fields or Robert Smithson's Spiral Jetty (one of the most famous examples of land art in the American West). It is perhaps useful to think here about how, despite the op-ed premise that anxiety producing email servers will magically disappear once one's view is sufficiently distant, space is actually one of the few places that an ordinary citizen *can* see server farms from, if he or she wants to and does enough research. The "soothing" overhead view of North Carolina that made it into the *Times* piece is a phosphate mining operation with brilliantly contrasted white and green rumples, but Google, Apple, and Facebook all have data centers in North Carolina that are visible to satellites.<sup>4</sup> A quick search easily turns up aerial images of these data centers that have been edited by journalists rather than artists for inclusion in news pieces rather than art books. In that context, these buildings tend to look like the unassuming industry-support buildings that they are. But the fact that these images are sometimes flat or awkward doesn't mean these sites aren't *Overview* worthy material. It is easy to imagine Grant—if he hasn't already—using the techniques he has honed while working on the Daily Overview to make the backup generators

lined up alongside a data center pop, drawing viewers' eyes to the sheer quantity of power that keeps "the cloud" alive.

## 5.1 CONTEXTUALIZING DIGITAL GEOGRAPHIC MEDIA: LANDSCAPE IMAGING IN DAVID T. HANSON'S ANALOG ART

Catherine Summerhayes argues in *Google Earth: Outreach and Activism*, among "the major challenges that society faces at this current historical moment is to understand how we embody our perception of the world via digital technologies. Actual people and places populate this world that is represented to us as existing in a new kind of communicative space" (1). This is, in some ways, a request for precisely the kind of toggling and wide-angle engagement I invoke above. The idea that an overhead view can do variously even as it distances and abstracts, that it can expedite unexpected intimacies, provoke research, or change our relationship to environmental contexts might seem like an idea that is thoroughly *of* our digital age. But thinking with histories of photography and cartography suggests there's something not quite right in that assertion. If it really is the digital that's at stake, then what aspects of digital culture, digital infrastructure, and digitally mediated embodiment are most salient? How can we tell? What is *indicated*—Summerhayes goes on to ask—when we're prompted, daily, to react to *mediated* information about *real* places, much of it image-rich? "How much can we rely on previous regimes of interpretation" (2)? These are questions that invoke description as an imperfect indexical mode; I understand them here (in part) as specialized geo-tech based versions of the question, *what's new about new media?* a question that tends to have subtle, murky answers across arenas.



In what follows, I navigate related questions by turning to a non-digital case study, photographer Hanson's *Waste Land* series. This series engages the principles of inclusion, exclusion, and social framing even more directly than Grant and the Daily Overview project do, and it offers multiple contextualizing counterpoints for the everyday visual experience of media like Google Maps and Google Earth. My hope is that this choice of case study will both help me avoid the temptation to over emphasize the “newness” of digitally supported geo-descriptive media and that it will provide a compelling look at some of the histories that permitted the rise of these media. I understand the latter as particularly important because where digital and hybrid analog-digital media *do* encourage and participate in cultural shifts, the changes at stake are often well described as effects of scale changes (not as sheer novelties), which means that having a sense of the techno-social scenarios that gave rise to them remains crucial to understanding at least some of their politics and potentials.<sup>5</sup>

Originally composed in 1985 and 1986, *Waste Land* features 67 triptychs. Each triptych depicts a different Superfund site.<sup>6</sup> The selected sites represent “a cross-section of American geography and industrial waste activities,” and the texts embedded in the project reveal, among other things, “some of the elaborate legal strategies that corporations and individuals have used to avoid responsibility for the contamination and cleanup” of these “highly hazardous” sites (*Waste Land* 53). This choice of subject matter suggests the way Hanson has dedicated his life to documenting “the contemporary American landscape as it reflects our culture and its most constructive and destructive energies” (5). When confronted with his photographs—many of them aerial shots filled with rich colors and dominated by geometric patterns but taken with analog cameras from the air in pre-DigitalGlobe times—it quickly becomes clear that his “and” is inclusive; energies in his work are simultaneously constructive-and-destructive, although the

balance tips more emphatically toward the "destructive" than it does in Grant's later body of work. His preferred subjects include places like Atomic City, Idaho (a largely abandoned Idaho town near the site of the world's first electricity-generating nuclear plant and its first partial meltdown), the abandoned workers' housing surrounding defunct copper mines, and other spaces impacted by military and industrial activities. The photographs of these places that he circulates are staged in ways that encourage viewers to consider how they speak with the landscapes, communities, and ecosystems that they depict. But their staging also speaks to particular and significant bodies of artistic work and activist work. My previous chapter paid special attention to photographs of people and the ways in which we sort them, but photography itself—as both a medium that evolves with the technical devices that support it *and* a disciplined form of artistic practice that foregrounds the social and creative potential in both human and machinic ways of seeing—also has a longstanding relationship to the idea that landscapes always have social dimensions. This relationship is fundamentally complex, conflict-wrought, and both rhetorically and politically constitutive. Consequently, paying attention to the *Waste Land* series allows me to address the many kinds of negotiation that can be prompted by technologies' impact on landscapes, mediated images of landscapes, and ideas about landscape.

## **5.2 LANDSCAPE AS VISUAL MEDIA: INTRODUCING ANOTHER VERSION OF INDUSTRIAL EKPHRASIS**

We sometimes think colloquially of "landscapes" as separate from lived-in places, as backdrops against which human life unfolds, but Hanson's work promotes a more nuanced understanding of landscape that resonates with a broad body of existing geographic and philosophic work. In more

than 20 years worth of writing on “the landscape idea,” Denis Cosgrove has argued that the way we think of landscape is simultaneously *visual, scientific, and social*. In short, for Cosgrove, “Landscapes have an unquestionably material presence, yet they come into being only at the moment of their apprehension by an external observer, and thus have a complex poetics and politics” (“Modernity, Community and the Landscape Idea” 50). Mediated landscapes, like those fixed in photographic form, partake of these social dynamics in unique ways, and they, in turn, have the potential to change the ways in which material landscapes are constituted and understood. The dual material-and-social nature of landscapes also impacts humans directly. As Thomas Greider and Lorraine Garkovitch remind, because landscapes are, among other things, symbolic environments, “when events or technological innovations challenge the meanings of these landscapes, it is our conceptions of ourselves that change through a process of negotiating new symbols and meanings” (2).

We can, it turns out, think of landscapes as visual media—even when we are experiencing them first hand, the only layer of mediation the one provided by our biological systems. Thinking about landscapes themselves as media adds a layer of complexity to all kinds of media that re-present segments of land, and it suggests the literal roots of *geo-graphy* in *earth-writing*. Where the stock image industry qualifies as “industrial ekphrasis” because it amplifies and mechanizes the process of creating images based on chunks of language, we might think of both the arts *and* industries of aerial imagery as a different kind of industrial ekphrasis. They do, after all, capture traces of the ways our lives and industries have re-written the land; they mediate an already mediated world. Thinking in this way reminds us that such images are possible only because they are constructed and imperfect; like any ekphrastic translation across media, aerial

imageries interest in part because of the styles their imperfections and omissions take on. W.J.T. Mitchell proclaims that

of all the media and genres of imagery, landscape is the one that makes the constitutive blindness and invisibility of the visual process most evident. We notice this even in the most common injunction in the presence of a landscape prospect: ‘look at the view.’ What does that mean? How can one ‘look at a view’? One looks at objects, figures, faces, bodies, and signs. Our visual system learns to pick out things that have names: this tree, that house, those fence posts. So what are we looking at when we look at the view? Everything and nothing. The view is the totality of the objects in our visual field, the relations among them, the entire system or syntax that underlies the language of vision.

(35)

Mitchell’s suggestion that one cannot help, at times, experiencing a landscape as a totality—a word that sometimes suggests a distant universality (Hegel’s Spirit, Plato’s Good), but which I take here to mean something like *a rich and complex system*—suggests that what we learn from reacting ekphrastically to landscapes can teach us a lot about the complex roles played by visuality, spatiality, and the enchantment of objects more generally.

In what follows, I try to honor the lessons of this complex ekphrastic framing by tracing out development of some of the military and industrial technologies that negatively impacted one of the Superfund sites that Hanson depicts and some of the specific roles photographic technologies and photographic history play in structuring his vision of these sites. I argue that a particular history surrounding images of landscapes (especially the landscapes of the American West) is part of what allows contemporary photographers like Hanson to engage in a unique, co-constitutive way with broader environmental activist politics. I also suggest that the kind of

engagement he models encourages viewers to confront and contemplate the complex interface between social and ecological interests that we as humans are required to navigate, regardless of where we reside, and that this example has the potential to enrich already vibrant rhetorical conversations about the how of visual persuasion. This chapter's final sections link that suggestion to current trends in cultural geography and new materialist philosophy by engaging Veronica della Dora's work on the history and utility of "traveling landscape-objects." There, I propose thinking of high art photographs and installations like Hanson's as a particular genre of travelling landscape-object, one particularly well suited to the simultaneous transmission of a range (although not an unlimited range) of different landscape ideas. Following Bennett and Whatmore, della Dora sets "an agenda that moves from landscape representations as mere 'visual texts' to landscape representations as 'enchanted' material objects, or 'more-than-human bodies' sensuously interacting with emotional human bodies" (334). I understand this conceptual shift as particularly useful to thinking through the potential impacts photographs and art objects have on viewers and the world, especially when they are photographs—like Hanson's—that encourage viewers to engage both logically and affectively. And I understand this class of travelling landscape objects as particularly valuable for thinking about threatening hyperobjects like environmental racism, contaminated water supplies, or global warming.<sup>7</sup>

### **5.3 APPROACHING WASTE LAND THROUGH THE ROCKY MOUNTAIN ARSENAL TRIPTYCH**

In the midst of World War II, on June 15, 1942, the U.S. government purchased nearly 20,000 acres of prairie and farmland in Adams County Colorado intending to use this site—and

preexisting transportation channels keyed to the needs of the nearby Denver metropolitan area—for development of chemical weapons. This site came to be called the Rocky Mountain Arsenal. It was originally dominated by activities related to the production of mustard gas, Lewisite (deadly and deft at penetrating through cloth and rubber but difficult to deploy effectively, in part because its geranium scent is so easily recognizable), and chlorine gas. Later, white phosphorous, napalm, and rocket fuel would become major products of the arsenal. Sarin gas—a colorless, odorless, and intensely toxic nerve agent that has been classified as a Weapon of Mass Destruction by the UN—was once stockpiled there. In addition, from 1952 until 1982, part of the arsenal site was leased to the Shell Oil Company and used for production of herbicides and insecticides (which share many functional, chemical characteristics with chemical weapons compounds). This double-edged production—herbicides and insecticides are often implicated in activities like ranching, farming, gardening, and forest management rather than being implicated in something as broadly contentious and “clearly unsustainable” as the United States’ war machine—is characteristic of the more wide-spread cultural dilemmas inherent in the way “devastation and reconstruction of the environment brought on by World War II coexisted with a frantic extension of scientific probings of nature at every scale of magnitude and level of abstraction” (Burnett 141). Of course, this sort of frantic, scientific probing has continued under other guises, marked at times by new politics and new rhetorics but almost always with its central contradictions intact.

These contradictions bore out at the Rocky Mountain Arsenal site in a unique way with the fading of the cold war. During the late 1970s and early 1980s the arsenal was re-envisioned in order to accommodate weapons destruction. Associated processes contributed significantly to

the toxicity and contamination of the already degraded site, despite being undertaken in the name of social progress and demilitarization.

Given the tumultuous history of this particular altered landscape, it is not surprising that after decommission the Rocky Mountain Arsenal was in a state that let it be “deemed to be one of the most polluted areas—not only in the United States, but in the entire world” (Baillargeon n.p.). Hanson himself notes that it has often been labeled “the most polluted site on Earth” (“Late Twentieth-Century Landscapes” n.p.). And for this reason the triptych depicting the Rocky Mountain Arsenal is one of the most immediately compelling pieces in Hanson's *Waste Land* series.

Like other entries in the series, this one includes at center an aerial photograph of the site taken by Hanson. At left it features a U.S. Geological Survey map modified to show the official boundaries of the site, and at right it displays the official text associated with the site's EPA Superfund designation.<sup>8</sup> The gridded precision of the map—which makes it impossible to ignore the site's proximity to Denver's population centers—both complements the photo (itself made geometric by the flatness of the high plains and the roads that bisect the site) and betrays the photo's deep abstraction—an abstraction anchored by dark patches so hard to identify that they seem to defy the very possibility of contextualization.

This abstract aerial photograph of the Rocky Mountain Arsenal provides a point of entry for considering Hanson's choice to utilize aerial images in both the *Waste Land* series and other projects. The historical relationship between aerial photographic techniques and wartime reconnaissance activities is well established (beginning with photographs taken from balloons shortly after photography's invention in the nineteenth century).<sup>9</sup> That legacies of aerial surveillance are enabling for Hanson as he levels serious critiques of the military-industrial

complex is a fact that hints at how many technical and imaginative feedback loops make the cultures that support critical environmentalist art possible.

When explaining his choice of not just photography but aerial photography as medium, Hanson cites often practical concerns in addition to aesthetic concerns. Many of the sites he chooses to include (and expose) are decidedly not open to the public. This is especially true of military sites and corporately owned sites (mines, smelters, timber fields) that are still active. These sites, then, can *only* be approached using angles and tools that speak to surveillance aesthetics. It becomes relevant that decommissioned sites like the Rocky Mountain Arsenal be shot from the air even if they could have been approached from other angles because consistency from piece to piece within the series—the “rigorous internal structure of the whole body of work”—is a significant feature of *Waste Land* (Foster-Rice 62). Such consistency is part of what allows the series to train viewers to new and more nuanced ways of viewing, to see slag heaps and evaporation pools as not just beautiful shapes but also reminders of how dangerous creative impulses can be; in other words, inviting attunement to toxic patterns (as a feature of complex industrial and imagistic systems) changes the nature of individual, abstract images.

The arsenal example also contextualizes the “invisible” collateral damage done in preparing for war (or the prospect of war, in the case of the Cold War era) by making visible the war machine’s localized impact on an otherwise recognizable but unremarkable home-front landscape. The premise that concealment of threats *often* masquerades as the containment (or non-existence) of threat, which the Rocky Mountain Arsenal triptych invokes, helps put the 1985-1986 *Waste Land* series in conversation with Hanson’s 1984-1985 photographs of *Minuteman Missile Sites*, which documents 20 sites (generally missile silos disguised as agricultural sites) across the American Midwest. Hanson names the subjects of that series “secret



landscapes,” and he specifically addresses the maintenance of social conditions that allow such “anonymous but deadly constructions [to remain] hidden within the pastoral agricultural landscape of the high plains” (*Waste Land* 5). In other words, he exposes some of the ways in which these landscapes are multiply-constituted as “secret” through human actions, human interactions with non-human agents, and interactions between non-human agents—including the many such sites that make up a “complex, interconnected grid,” which the government actively conceals from US citizens but which nevertheless “constitutes one of the major capital investments of our culture” (5).<sup>10</sup> Hanson also bills this project as a collection of “aerial views of targeted terrain,” suggesting the fact that these sites which were hidden in plain view represented a threat not only to the United States’ cold war enemies (who might be targeted *with* these missiles) but also to the missile silos’ unsuspecting agrarian neighbors, given the reality that weapons stock is itself frequently subject to attack.

In light of observations like these, which make explicit Hanson’s way of thinking about the relationship between socially and materially altered landscapes and acts of artistic production, he can be considered an informant as well as (or rather than) a fine-art photographer. Even if he cannot (or chooses not to) show every detail of these sites, he calls attention to the actions of those who would have us overlook their existence entirely. His dual-identity, artist and informant, maps onto the work he produces and in so doing blurs the line between fine-art photography, vernacular photography (including journalistic documentary photography), and the sorts of strictly utilitarian images (like reconnaissance photographs) that Allan Sekula calls “applied photography” (qtd. Kaplan 158).<sup>11</sup>

Like their commercialized relatives that serve as stock photographs, applied photographs “are believed to be marginal to the interpretive and evaluative practices of both high art and

commercial photography” (ibid.). This marginality, related as it is to production of images that are “distanced and abstract, on the one hand, and time, as well as site, specific, on the other” is one major destabilizing force that confronts viewers attempting to contextualize images like Hanson’s (ibid). Where stock images’ refusal to stay bound to singular contexts limits their interest for image researchers, applied photographs (and the non-photographic geographic imageries they coexist with) suffer from their refusal to transcend the extremely specific contexts of their creation. They are handled as if insistence upon their intended uses is built into their aesthetics in an unassailable way, but of course that isn’t true.

#### **5.4 MULTIMEDIA AND DESCRIPTIVE CO-INCIDENCE: MAP, TEXT, PHOTOGRAPH, BODY**

Reading the aerial photograph at the center of the Rocky Mountain Arsenal triptych as an image that de-stabilizes and re-contextualizes both the landscape itself and related landscape ideas is consistent with Kim Sichel’s observation that aerial photography is able to “offer a radical departure from conventional human-scaled landscape” (an observation in-line with Grant’s later notes on the form’s ability to de-familiarize vision), and her association of aerial photography with concepts including “lack of horizon, abstraction, geometry, flatness, dehumanization, and deception of scale” (94). It also coincides with art historian and critic Suzi Gablik’s suggestion that Hanson’s photographs “are among the most powerful and disturbing images ever to be seen, perhaps because their eerie, abstract beauty almost seems to negate the sinister life that glimmers in them.” This claim appears on the back cover of *Waste Land: Meditations on a Ravaged*

*Landscape*—an art book that collects images from *Waste Land* and three of Hanson's other sustained photographic/mixed media projects.

While the claim that these images are “among the most powerful and disturbing ever to be seen” is, of course, subjective and hyperbolic (it is easy to see why the publisher turned to it as promotional), the tension between ethical responses to these images and aesthetic responses to the same images *is* a central conflict viewers must face up to when confronted with artifacts like the Rocky Mountain Arsenal triptych *and* a key to understanding Hanson’s choice of the triptych form itself. The multiplicity inherent in this format encourages viewers to resist the urge to affix a single meaning to the works. It explicitly invites viewers to contextualize their reactions to the abstract, artistic dimension of the photographs, and Hanson’s pairing of text and image is central to this invitation. Put another way, the ability to appear “distanced and abstract, on the one hand, and time, as well as site, specific, on the other” that prevents applied geographic images from taking prominent places in aesthetic histories is a powerful feature of these triptychs, and that power is amplified (part of what permits it to become exceptional) by the co-incidence of media forms that, solo, might all be considered “mere.”

Above, I suggested that the modified USGS map and the aerial photograph simultaneously complement and contradict one another. This dynamic is intensified by the presence of the official Superfund designation text, which betrays both the extreme abstraction of the aerial photograph *and* the bold black line that surrounds the site on the map. This “found” EPA text appears unedited by the artist. Among other basic facts, it articulates, in the stark yet speculative language of federal documentation,

The Army has identified 165 “possibly polluted” areas at RMA; six received Interim Status under the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA) when the Army filed

part A of permit applications. Contamination from some of these areas has migrated and may continue to migrate off RMA, principally via ground water. (56)

While some aspects of this text are only able to be parsed by already informed readers, who understand the range of ways in which corporate and government entities can be enticed into mitigation activities, the sheer scale of the site's impact resonates even when the text is pulled out of utilitarian, expert-oriented contexts. This piece of text foregrounds another way in which an appropriately ugly, more strictly representational photograph of a site like this one might miss what's (arguably) most salient about the site's nasty legacy: the way in which, whether or not they ever visit the site, local publics *continue* to engage the Rocky Mountain Arsenal bodily through the often invisible and unpredictable migration of toxins into neighboring areas.

The delivery of an "official" promise of toxic migration reinforces the mutable nature of both landscapes and landscape ideas. "Industrial devastation is often located near water," is one of three lessons that Peter Montague and Maria Pellerano suggest we take from Hanson's accumulated works (52). RMA isn't alone among Superfund sites in the fact that seepage and contamination of groundwater suggest some of its most insidious threats, and the below-the-surface nature of those threats means they can, often, only be monitored via complex, scientific descriptive practices. The nature of chemical hazards is that—whether you go to them (as a worker or a recreational visitor) or they come to you, non-specialists often can't tell what's at stake in exposure until well after bodies begin to break down, and even specialists have varied opinions on whether it is even possible to make some of these sites safe again for human inhabitants. That Hanson is acutely aware of the invisible, unknowable bodily dangers these sites pose is made apparent in yet another justification he gives for the selection of aerial photography as a medium—his real, human concern about the unknowable long-term effects that visiting *so*

many toxic sites might have on his own body (*Waste Land* 6). The seriality that drives his aesthetics and lends viewers the possibility of pattern-recognition and political contextualization also suggests a risk quite different from the risk taking a single photograph (or aggregating found images) might entail; Hanson's body, like the bodies of residents who live near toxic sites, is at risk in a way that is slow-motion but high stakes. His focus on collateral, systemically induced bodily damage suggests that the human scale is, in fact, present in these "scientific" aerial shots—it is simply present as context rather than in the images themselves.

Hanson's awareness of systemic, difficult to visualize, bodily threats resonates with Phaedra Pezzullo's work on *Toxic Tourism*. Where Pezzullo presents the body in pain as empathetic, symbolically inarticulate, and consummately *human*, Hanson shows only the marks humans have left on symbolically defined bodies of land (outlines added to maps, roads seen from above). Yet, for both of them *the human body is always perpetrator and perpetrated* (performed upon). Both of them have been subjected to the critical suggestion that their work may be unable to reach those who are not already sympathetic, and both navigate issues of scale, mobility, and commercial-governmental infrastructural in insightful ways. In the case of the Rocky Mountain Arsenal site, resonance with Pezzullo's work is further magnified by changes that have taken place in the wake of the so obviously toxic military and corporate operations detailed above, changes which not only allow but *encourage* others (both human and animal) to visit the site.<sup>12</sup>

The RMA triptych made in 1985 or 1986 doesn't betray the site's destiny, but Hanson clearly continued following many of the sites included in *Waste Land* long after the series was complete, and he lets us in on the way that "in 1992, Congress officially designated the area as the Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge. The Arsenal has used its new status for

strategic public relations effect, including tours for grade-school children bused in from the Denver area to experience firsthand this ‘historic native grasslands and wildlife refuge’ (complete with a Rocky Mountain Arsenal Coloring Book)” (“Late Twentieth-Century Landscapes” n.p.). It is worth note that Hanson’s skepticism regarding this official re-designation is at least partially earned; he also declares “the Rocky Mountain Arsenal in Denver provides a particularly disconcerting example of the ‘creative,’ cost-effective solutions that the new ‘green’ military is finding for the enormous cleanups it faces” (ibid.). And where CERCLA requires remediation of Superfund sites, what the term remediation signifies is unstable, legally and for restoration ecologists; because cost is a CERCLA factor, especially when a cleanup is of a former government site, project goals are keyed to “risk profiles” determined by the planned future uses of sites (not their pre-contamination biological functions). It might seem like becoming a wildlife reserve would suggest the strictest requirements, but compared with potential residential, agricultural, and industrial uses, it turns out that both wildlife preserves (depending on the species being courted and kind of toxicity present) and “recreational uses of green space” tend to signify lower risk and require less intervention “because most people spend far less time at recreational sites than at work or home;” the “faux nature” of a site like the arsenal site, then, can be about expediency in addition to being about outreach and healing community wounds. (Applegate and Dycus qtd. Salcido 1419).

While Pezzullo encourages us to pay acute attention to who goes where and in the process articulates the potential value in tourism and exposure, Hanson encourages us to confront the possibility that maybe people just plain *should not* be going to places like the Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge. The degree to which the past influences the present and the potential for mitigation projects to fall short of the promises they make complicates *both*

prominent, contemporary environmentalist discourses that promote similar projects *and* traditional ideas about the need to “preserve untouched” the wild or natural world as it appears in the national imaginary. Of course, involving school children and the idea of “historic native grasslands” is a strategic rhetorical move on Hanson's part, one that doesn't capture the complex ways in which the environment at the Rocky Mountain Arsenal site *has* improved, the ways in which some restoration and mitigation projects can be said to have succeeded (based on either anecdotes and lived experience or scientific, ecologically defined metrics). Despite this potentially problematic simplification (which some might consider dystopian in its cynicism), Hanson's comments on the “upgrade” of the Rocky Mountain Arsenal site do press us to consider the diverse way in which places—and geographies—organize our experiences in invisible ways—even when we *think* we're being keenly attentive.

In the case of the RMA, the prevailing story as of 2017 is that this site “may be one of the finest conservation success stories in history” (“About the Refuge” n.p.). And a less dystopian re-iteration of Hanson's concerns is *perhaps* now warranted after a quarter century of cleanup. Instead of *no one should visit*, we might now be better off suggesting that *no one should visit without being aware* of the complex history of the site. For all the functional biological gains and ways in which expensive containment systems have made them possible, and for all the publicity measures taken by the Remediation Venture Office (RVO)—the office representing the the U.S. Army, Shell Oil Company and the United States Fish and Wildlife Service in their collaborative responsibility for the transformation of the site into a national wildlife refuge—it remains true,

hazardous materials threatening human and wildlife are literally buried on site. Some members of the public that have stayed involved in the cleanup process have on numerous occasions charged the RVO with breaching the public trust by hiding the truth

or seeking to obscure the history of the arsenal. In the July 2007 Citizen Report, the Site Specific Advisory Board (SSAB) used several items as the basis for its argument that the Army and Shell had contempt for the public (Salcido 1427)

Notable among these incidents for a study of description was the erection (in the late 1990s) of a series of signs that declared the site simply the Rocky Mountain National Wildlife Refuge—where dropping the word Arsenal was (according to the SSAB) “purposefully done to minimize public awareness of the contamination and history of the site” (ibid.). While an appeal to the Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Army at the Pentagon eventually resulted in more descriptive warning signs, this incident suggests the power of minor descriptive shifts and the ways in which communities are impacted by the language of distant government and corporatized bodies. It also implies the tenuous position of stewards associated with this project; where one goal of the project is to generate a positive “community asset,” garnering the local community’s trust, it turns out, may be a goal better served by disclosure of both successes and limitations, rather than the marshalling of a tightly controlled narrative that only includes successes. Hanson’s triptych, in its use of objective views and the juxtaposition of multiple geo-graphic media to provide critiques, provides (arguably) one roadmap to more complex but still informative presentations of places than promotional media campaigns often muster.

## **5.5 IMAGES OF THE IMAGINED WEST: LANDSCAPE “MASTERS” AND THE NEW TOPOGRAPHICS**

Of course, Hanson’s works are—by virtue of their status as art—able to speak in ways that even near identical triptychs might not be able to if they were “sanctioned” by the government or



Shell. Both the galleries and art book publishers that bring viewers into contact with his work encourage viewers to “see” in particular ways; their ability to do this sometimes relies on the textual (the essays interspersed in the Aperture book *Waste Land* or exhibit tags generated by curators) but even their non-textual components (the things they assume viewers will know before viewing or do while in the presence of art) function in caption-like ways, emphasizing the ability of distributed ekphrastic relations to guide aesthetic reactions. Consequently, looking to some of Hanson’s predecessors in the world of landscape photography has the potential to help us understand how pre-existing visual idioms intersect with the moves that make his body of work particularly remarkable. In particular, I think it is worth speaking to at least a few elements of the American photographic traditions that Hanson’s work follows from. He is clearly aware of and working in relation to this history (unlike Grant, who was not trained as an artist, Hanson received an MFA from RISD and later taught there). Working from a perspective that sees this work as embedded in complex descriptive systems also makes it worth addressing this history because it is itself embedded in “expert” reactions to Hanson’s work (generated by art historians and other artists), which in turn leak out into non-expert reactions (like mine).

The “specialist” histories I feature below include images that are *already* widely circulated and credited. Hanson’s predecessors and their most famous images instantiate a particular visual subculture, which in turn influences broader cultural expectations for the imaging and imagining of landscapes; turning to ideas of lineage also helps us see Hanson’s work as prescient—his example useful as an introduction to some of the stakes that adhere to more recent artistic works.<sup>13</sup> Despite the fact that Hanson’s *Waste Land* triptychs are not all representations of sites located in the American West, in the following section I focus briefly on the relationship between landscape photography and the material landscapes of the West for two

reasons. First, Hanson's Montana roots and his larger body of work suggest that Western landscapes exert a particular pull on his own imagination and his relationship to ideas about what constitutes "American" landscapes. Second, Hanson is not alone in allowing some slippage between "American landscape ideas" and "Western landscape ideas." For many people, this conflation is built into the national imaginary. We see this when American photographer Lee Friedlander, known primarily for his urban photographs, writes about taking up some of the Western icons in his newer work, saying "the West to me is where the landscape is" (qtd. Longmire 21). It is easy to suggest that the dramatic nature of many Western landscapes is behind ideas like this one—western mountains are younger, their faces more ragged, their peaks higher; in the west one finds deserts with colorful, unlikely rock formations cut by wind, and even peculiar (and dangerous) geothermal features, not to mention flora and fauna evolved to thrive in these places. Yet there are more humanly historical reasons for this conflation too.

The development of photography as an art, a form of documentation, and a technical practice coincided with the exploration and settlement of the American West by Euro-Americans in the mid to late nineteenth century, and this coincidence has had (and continues to have) a significant impact on the relationship between Western landscapes—real and imagined, geological and social—and the role those landscapes play in the national imaginary. Howard Bossen addresses the ways in which the USGS photographs of William Henry Jackson may or—as he argues—may not have been a key factor in the passage of the Yellowstone Park Act of 1872. Despite Bossen's suspicion of their actual effectiveness *in situ*, the myth that these images were "the first specific group of photographs used for successful persuasion" persists (98). And the persistence of that myth speaks to the powerful narrative that connects photography, the American West, and environmental initiatives, particularly those focused on the preservation of

natural spaces and their “wonders.” A similar myth persists regarding Carleton Watkins’ large plate Yosemite photographs, which brought the sublime nature of the Yosemite Valley to easterners beginning in the 1860s; back east, the myth peddlers suggest, these images single handedly convinced Lincoln to sign the bill that marked the very first setting aside of US public land for preservation and enjoyment rather than profit. In addition to likely overplaying the impact of these images, this story overplays how *direct* their impact was; it’s quite possible that letters and editorials written by influential figures (including Oliver Wendall Holmes and Ralph Waldo Emerson) who saw the images were much more influential than the images themselves; for all their novelty and majesty, these photographs didn’t just argue through presentation of grand, objective views; they were carried by descriptions of their production and contents, and while there are parts of their story we can trace, there are parts of their story that are undiscoverable, too. The resulting realist vibrancy (which some might call objecthood) is partially documented by DeLuca and Demo, who characterize Watkins’ images as complex visual artifacts that simultaneously engage the realms of high art, political rhetoric, and popular culture. They also observe the ways in which this multiplicity is further embodied by the landscape photographers who followed in his footsteps, including commonly acknowledged “masters” like Edward Weston and Ansel Adams.

Impulses similar to DeLuca and Demo’s impulse to describe images in relation to layered realms of reference and engagement can also be seen in the extensive body of critical work that takes up the Farm Service Administration (FSA) photographs of the 1930s, which I mentioned in passing in the previous chapter. While one might compare the government sponsored nature of FSA projects to earlier U.S. Geological Society “documentary” projects like the one that sponsored Jackson’s Yellowstone photos, it is important to acknowledge the scalar difference—

and the ways in which the collective nature of the FSA projects has commanded significant interest. These two factors are part of what suggested the relevance of the FSA photographs to the history of stock imagery in America. In the context of works like Hanson's, it is worth further pointing out: whether the FSA photographs are theorized as landscape-objects owned and sanctioned by the government or whether they are theorized as landscape-objects sanctioned by the dispersed, collective nature of their production and, consequently, "owned" by all Americans is a question that mirrors ongoing debates over the role government should and does play in the management of public lands in the American West. Consequently, we well might declare the U.S. Forest Service motto "land of many uses" relevant to both the case of the FSA photographs and to the case of Hanson's much later work. This motto suggests, perhaps better than any other could, the surprise that finds dedicated wild lands *also* dedicated for acts like extraction, logging, and grazing, dedicated clean-up projects both positive contributions to society and, at times, dangerously imperfect.

George Abbott White's classification of the FSA images as "vernacular photography," which seems at first to set these predecessor images apart from the realm of fine art in which Hanson is most recognizable, is also worth note here. This classification prompts useful comparisons between the documentary style that the FSA photographers deployed, the documentary impulse that is one of many influences apparent in Hanson's work, and the vernacular landscapes (to borrow the influential geographic thinker and landscape architect J.B. Jackson's term) produced by the daily engagement of humans with their physical surrounds. For Jackson, a landscape is "a man-made system of spaces superimposed on the face of the land, functioning and evolving not according to natural laws but to serve a community," where "man, the political animal, thinks of the landscape as his own creation, as belonging to him," while,

simultaneously and paradoxically, “man the inhabitant sees the landscape as a habitat which was there long before he appeared [and] sees himself as belonging to the landscape” (xii, 8, 40). This conflict underwrites both the material alterations of the places that Hanson documents and the ways in which mediated, graphical representations of those places are received or understood, and it is difficult to overstate Jackson’s importance in any conversation about landscape ideals that has its roots in the latter part of the twentieth century.

Jackson and *Landscape* magazine, which launched in 1951 with Jackson at its helm, are often credited with inspiring a renewed interest in the term landscape and the ideas it represents. The second half of the twentieth century saw a wide variety of artists pushing back against narrowly artistic definitions of landscape, with sublime, romantic visions of the American West subjected to particular critiques. It also saw a blurring of the lines between landscape photography and other photographic genres. The 1975 landmark show “New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape” collected the work of several young photographers working in this vein, and critics and artists continue to lend the show’s name to many works focused on what has been critically termed the “altered landscape.” Christopher Burnett favors the term “processed landscape” over “altered landscape” in an attempt to better capture the “dialectics between image manipulation and the physical environment,” a dialectics I attempted to highlight in this essay’s previous sections (149). In addition to calling our attention to the importance of making and manipulation to these works, Burnett further situates this work, explaining that the New Topographics movement was one of a number of cultural efforts—including land art, cultural geography (a field that often claims Jackson), and Louis Marin’s reformed utopics—to foster a more deeply cutting, more reflective apprehension of landscape *while* supporting recognition of the mutually constructive role of the physical land, landscape

imagery, and cultural ideas. This cluster of environmental movements recognized the dialectics of symbols, images, and the real, propelling landscape change (ibid. 148).

Despite the ways in which all these descriptors seem equally apt in relation to Hanson's later work, it is worth noting that *Waste Land* and his other multimedia series do more than simply extend the legacy of the New Topographics. It is important to make this distinction because of the ways a "modified utopian rhetoric" has entered into efforts to understand the New Topographics "even though the New Topographic photographers were probably lukewarm or even hostile to utopia as an ideological projection" (Burnett 140). As viewers with eyes turned toward historical contexts, we are reminded that the meanings of images change as viewing conventions change across time and space. Burnett offers the term "degraded utopia" as a descriptor that can help us tune to the drift that sees the New Topographic images themselves modifying the concept of utopia so that it can be applied to images with related "empty" looks; here, the qualifier degraded is used "not as a value judgment of decline and decay" rather it specifies "a ratcheting down of utopia's conventional idealism to the point where everyday scenes can reveal their utopian impulses and destiny" (141). I have spoken at length about amplification (as a feature of complex systems and their feedback loops) throughout this dissertation, and this example offers a reminder that dampening is just as prominent a feature of complex systems, and that entering specialized realms featuring *descriptive* systems doesn't change that.

We find Hanson's departure from the aesthetic principles of the New Topographics in his resistance to even a degraded "everyday" utopian realm. The everyday, his wide-angle engagements remind, is quite frequently made possible only by toxic infrastructures most of us are able to keep out of sight and mind. There is no implication that simply turning a different

kind of eye (a photo-aestheticized one) toward the details of the landscape will tamp down dystopia's claims on it or mitigate our authorship of dystopia-worthy effects. We can better understand Hanson's departure from the New Topographics' seemingly similar aesthetic by briefly comparing his work with the work of one notable photographer included in the original New Topographics exhibit, Robert Hickman Adams. Adams' stark, black and white photographs portray the "New West" of the Colorado Front Range, foregrounding trailers, freeways, and corrugated metal commercial buildings, in addition to capturing the linkages between these structures, the land, and the sweeping western sky. These photographs portray subject matter categorically similar to much of the subject matter that Hanson takes up, especially in early career series like *Colestrip, Montana*. Yet Adams photos cannot accurately be described in the same highly aesthetic terms that are so easily and so often attached to Hanson's work. In these photos, it is not the spectacular nature of destruction but the banal markers of human existence that disrupt—in the style of Barthes' punctum—the myth of the wild, natural west, and one must ask what the consequences of this distinction are. Put another way, in photographs like his, there is a desolation that insists: human encounters with vastness can be difficult in mundane ways.

While both Hanson and Adams make grand-scale images, the humans residing just out of frame react and are reacted to *by the earth* on different scales, or so it seems. Difference, of course, isn't necessarily rupture. And co-existence of such scales doesn't insist that they contradict one another. Along with other New Topographics photographers, including Lewis Baltz, Joe Deal, and Frank Gohlke, Adams and his pictures are positioned by the promotional material for Foster-Rice and Rohrbach's *Reframing the New Topographics* as images "illustrating the vernacular, human-made world of contemporary America, punctur[ing] the myth of the pristine, wild American landscape—and definitively chang[ing] the course of landscape

photography.” One of the changes marked here is the conflation of “traditional” sublime landscape shots with nostalgia and commercial audiences. Arguably, after a decade of successful illustration and myth-puncturing by these artists, the 1980s world in which Hanson’s photographs and multimedia pieces took shape was one in which a new myth—one of vernacular landscapes populated with vernacular heroes (the cowboys not of a fictional old west but of industrial ranching operations and long-haul trucking)—held sway alongside the remnants of the old myth of pristine nature. That his work does its best to cut through both of these myths without sacrificing its ability to appeal formally is part of what leaves it able to be adopted by viewers with many agendas, for better or worse.

While the moment in which the New Topographics held the most sway, and the moment when associated photographs were most likely to escape accusations of harboring the nostalgic or the utopian, may have passed, it is quite clear that the relationship between Western landscapes, human alterations of those landscapes, and photographic art continues to influence the national imaginary. In the special case of Hanson’s work, persistence of both public and art world interest in these issues is evidenced by his inclusion in major, multi-artist exhibits with titles like “Imaging a Shattering Earth: Contemporary Photography and the Environmental Debate” (2005), “The Body At Risk” (2005), “This Is North America/Is This North America?” (2001), “Down to Earth: The Enduring Landscape” (1998), “Threatened/Threatening Landscapes” (1998), and “Landscape/Land Use” (1997). I offer the titles here because these shows suggest Hanson’s stature in the field of photography, but also because they suggest his engagement with other contemporary artists working on and around land use and landscape ethics. These exhibits are complemented and contextualized by recent printed volumes like Greg Foster-Rice and John Rohrback’s previously mentioned 2011 collection, *Reframing the New*



*Topographics*, and Eva Respini's 2009 volume *Into the Sunset: Photography's Image of the American West*. Published in conjunction with a major exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, Respini's volume features a broad range of photographs from a broad range of photographers. Both the print volume and *Into the Sunset* the exhibit were staged to expose the relationship between shifting photographic conventions and shifting ideas about the American West by taking on works ranging in production date from 1850 to the present. Respini's editorial selections make it immediately clear that the history of this photographic genre is neither linear nor uncontested. The book's sections separate images of the people of the American West from images of the landscapes of American West, pointing toward one of the major critiques facing photographers like Hanson: that, in pointing to the real damage done by and to humans through environmental degradation, humans on a human scale are problematically missing.

## **5.6 WASTE LAND AND RECEPTION CONTEXTS: THE VIBRANCE OF TRAVELLING LANDSCAPE-OBJECTS**

Having laid out just a little relevant imagistic history, it is worth considering more explicitly what it is that makes Hanson's work stand out against, on the one hand, other artistic endeavors and, on the other, the proliferation of strictly documentary projects that address environmental problems and the various environmental stories and images that circulate in news media outlets. That Hanson's photographs are so aestheticized—coupled with the fact that they do not sensationalize for quick emotional effect the stories or visible scars of individual people

impacted by the damage done on and to the landscapes he engages—might well be considered a flag that marks a call for a particular type of attention.

I've already suggested loosely that projects like Hanson's and Grant's, photographs inflected by the New Topographics, and events like the toxic tours Pezzullo studies can be thought of as a kind of collective, and that this collective is brought together (assembled) in part by the style of the criticisms that these art objects garner. Acts of praise, blame, and social or cultural criticism all fit here. And this point is relevant to descriptive ecologies more generally. The review is as much a descriptive mainstay of the art world as gallery texts. When they are shown, these artworks know they are inviting encounters that will end in intentionally biased, subjective descriptive essays. (In this regard, they are not so unlike catalogues of stock images that are designed to "speak" to cultural intermediaries and invite re-making or the images the spur ekphrastic poems and essays). Generating such descriptions is part of what *keeps* art objects vibrant. It also reminds that the intentions of an artist can matter very literally—insofar as they shape formal aspects of whatever object is at hand—without stuffing a *telos* into the object, and this is neither a bad thing nor a thing that suggests only viewers' individual (contained) reactions matter.

It is useful, I think, to consider here Wendell Berry's preface to the volume *Waste Land*, which begins with the declaration, "It is unfortunately supposable that some people will account for these photographic images as 'abstract art,' or will see them as 'beautiful shapes' " (3). Berry's assertion of "wrong" or "unfortunate" ways of "reading" or "accounting for" work like Hanson's seems to absolve the artist from those critiques that dog his chosen styles; it seems to place blame for one-dimensional, aesthetically motivated responses entirely on the images' viewers. And while one can, perhaps, get behind the sense of environmental urgency that

undergirds this absolution (which we can choose to see as an amplification of Hanson's own sense of urgency), this sort of attack on callous, apolitical viewers flattens the complicated nature of viewing and skirts the possibility that smart, observant viewers may have no idea what to do about having seen these images. It neglects not only the responsibility to teach and engage viewers that Hanson has willingly adopted but also the cultural infrastructures that sanction and then hide away the toxic land-altering processes that Hanson is committed to making visible.

By focusing on the figure who needs to teach him or herself to view images in a "better," more thoughtful way, similar critiques of "bad" viewers also neglect the way in which, at least in the case of the *Waste Land* series, historical trends in Western landscape photography, non-photographic elements, and the project's strict serial nature all work to contextualize Hanson's photographs. As I have suggested, these elements serve to make visible and explicit the idea that all kinds of "landscape-objects can tell us intriguing stories which might either complement or contradict the stories they graphically represent" (della Dora 350). In particular, it is worth note that the built-in visual contextualization offered by the USGS maps and the built-in political contextualization offered by the poetically obtuse government descriptions both help the images included in the *Waste Land Series* avoid promoting passive reception, pure enjoyment, or simple disgust. In other words, while art critics almost always focus on the photographs (the part of the series that required the most technical prowess and creative vision to create), the "found" features of the series change the operations those photographs are capable of performing in important ways; they encourage diverse engagements with the images and active contemplation (perhaps even re-evaluation) of the diverse relationships individual viewers have with the landscape ideas that Hanson's multimedia installations circulate. The fact that these are triptychs *for a reason* seems not to enter into Berry's imagination of those unfortunately pleasant

viewings; neither does it seem to enter into the way Gablik declares the ambiguous abstract figures this work presents “powerful and disturbing.”

It is possible, given this format, to imagine that the highly aestheticized nature of Hanson’s photographs does not *signal technically virtuosic but socially careless invitations to revel in destruction* but rather that this aestheticization allows the most spectacular and abstract of the *Waste Land* photographs to act as what Birdsell and Groarke call “visual flags.” Used to attract attention to a message, visual flags “solve a fundamental problem in argumentative discourse, in which someone who wishes to convey a message to an audience must try to stand out against a flood of messages that others are trying to send” (104).<sup>14</sup> Put more succinctly, it is possible to think of the abstraction as a feature that draws viewers in affectively so that they can, if they choose to linger over the work, have something like the complicated, self-complicating, socially engaged experiences of viewership that I have been attempting to describe throughout this chapter. It turns out, Berry’s one-dimensional “good viewer,” who is immediately appalled by the images presented here, might (by not lingering) glean less from this body of work than his “bad” viewer, who is at first seduced by the image’s abstract beauty.

In other words, one plausible, generous response to Hanson’s work suggests that the “finding” of “the beautiful” in such unlikely, toxic places is itself a way of “exposing” their toxicity, and as such it is part of what helps Hanson’s work resonate outside elite, insider art communities. This proposal acknowledges the prospect that art which is intentionally banal can present a high barrier to entry for “untrained” viewers. In other words, the ability to engage these images as “abstract art” or “beautiful shapes” may, however counterintuitive this seems, actually be one of the key features that allows some viewers to perceive Hanson’s photographic work as serious activism in addition to serious art. Despite their origins in the realm of fine art, and

because they contain this agentive, activist potential, Hanson's works clearly exist as "travelling landscape-objects," which function as "media of exchange between one place and another; they are dynamic *vehicles* for the circulation of place through space and time" (della Dora 343). This is true in the way, as physical objects, they circulate among different gallery spaces, taking up places among other works and in relation to different types of viewers. It is also true in relation to the art books that contain these works and the private collections they find themselves in, and it is true in relation to the way Hanson's work circulates online—where it is featured and promoted by galleries, sites dedicated to photography and art more generally, popular news outlets covering art events or environmental causes on which Hanson's work bears, and various blogs and personal websites—including Hanson's own website.

Truly accounting for the diversity of these potential viewing situations is impossible, but acknowledging that diversity helps us to position Hanson's works as objects engaged in a visual ecology of interdependence. For della Dora, "object-hood" is a "dimension that accentuates the 'more-than-human' agency of graphic landscape representations, participating in the activation of intimate geographies of emotion" (350). In chapter two, I suggested that George Oppen's Objectivist poetics represented one "better" way of thinking with objects and valuing ontology (and the way respecting ontology keeps us open to the promise: the world is always capable of surprising us). I invoke della Dora here because she offers a bridge from explicitly object-interested philosophical works to the landscape-oriented works of Hanson, Grant, and others. A prolific scholar who writes fluidly about pre- and post-modern mapping techniques and the practical, vernacular, and spiritual dimensions of landscapes, especially mountains, della Dora layers geography-specific insights into Latour's wide-view work on the complex relationships that link the production of scientific knowledge to complex networks of non-human agents or

actors. In so doing, she suggests another, differently social set of best practices for living with the object world. Her vision of landscape representations as objects that actively participate in more-than-human ecologies is consistent with the positioning of Hanson's aerial photographs as flags inviting both notice and affective interaction. And her articulations of their "object-hood" further accentuate the importance of acknowledging interactions between the academy (including the art establishment) and the enchantments enacted by objects in everyday life, which is a significant first step toward acknowledging the ways in which objects and events composed within the academy can effectively influence the socially constituted landscapes of everyday life.

I've already suggested the non-trivial nature of the fact that *Waste Land* functions serially, and turning to the notion of landscape objects also provides a compelling way to articulate the role seriality plays in Hanson's work (and the many serial geo-presentation projects that have emerged from digital culture's database logics and geographic databases); della Dora proposes "unlike botanical or geological 'immutable mobiles', however, landscape-objects usually are not literal 'fragments of place' (such as a stone picked up from the ground): they claim to convey place in its *mediated* visual totality (through its graphic miniaturization) rather than through synecdoches" (344). In Hanson's work this notion of "mediated visual totality" is related in an important way to the strict serial nature of the *Waste Land* project. Hanson's work takes part in a logic of accumulation, through which each series takes on meanings that exceed the meanings present in individual artworks. This logic is, paradoxically, accentuated by the seeming similarity between individual works in each series. Moreover, it suggests the impossibility of a part that stands *in* for a whole rather than *in relation to* a whole.

Another iconic entry in the history of Western photography is also helpful here. Greg Foster-Rice notes the influence of Eadweard Muybridge's stop action photographs on the

photographers of the New Topographics. This comparison could strike one, at first, as strange. Muybridge's best remembered imageries place animal and human locomotion on similar footing as "worthy" subjects of attention, but his fascination with the mechanical-biological details of movement feels a long way from the landscape tradition. Of course, these details interested publically once they had been "captured" in part because the unaided human eye was too slow to register them. Foster-Rice's comparison thrives on these artists' shared preference for serial work, and where the serial can be understood as pressing the limits of human vision's capacities, this influence can be traced through to Hanson's work, too. Of Muybridge's photographs, Foster-Rice says, "always shown in series, their meaning lay not so much in the autonomous frozen gestures but in the relation between each gesture" (61). And, while the gestures enacted from one *Waste Land* triptych to the next are less literal than Muybridge's gestures, the serial format still conveys important information about relationships-in-motion. We can think of this motion as too slow for the everyday ground-bound human eye to detect. Large scales and simultaneity are things that stymie the eye just as surely as extreme speed and extreme sloth do. And Hanson's serial representations, while they may not "capture" the scale of landscapes' gestures, at least expose phenomenal, bodily limitations to us in ways that remind us that we are bodies *here*.

It is the systemic, structural nature of the toxicity that the serial form emphasizes in these 67 triptychs. This, in turn, emphasizes the complex, social relationships that link and, in part, define (or write) the physical landscapes upon which these visual representations are predicated. It links the gallery viewer, who must move from triptych to triptych, to the toxic tourist, whose body-in-motion transgresses physical boundaries. The comparison between these two moving figures exposes, of course, the distinction between them—the ways in which the former necessarily engages "landscape ideas" rather than "pure," physical landscapes (of course, the

toxic tourist, like anyone, is also always engaging socially constituted landscape ideas, and the goal of a toxic tour is to ensure that he or she is cognizant of that fact). This exposure of ways in which landscape is written and rewritten may seem a small or insignificant accomplishment, especially given the gravity of Hanson's subject matter. And, indeed, there are many circles in which it is not revolutionary to acknowledge that landscapes and thus landscape ideas are implicated in a web of interactions between human and agential non-human bodies or that they bear the weight of accumulated meanings. However, as I have been endeavoring to illustrate, the role particular visual and descriptive (textual) elements play in Hanson's engagement with these issues suggests: the relationship between landscape and visibility (especially photographic and cartographic visualities) opens up a unique space from which future interventions can be made.

## **5.7 EMPLACEMENT AND RESPONSIBILITY: HUMANS IN THE MORE-THAN-HUMAN REALM**

The massive, geological scale invoked by landscapes understood as media objects and the fact that Hanson addresses wicked, large-scale environmental problems both speak to why this chapter comes at the end of a dissertation invested in how theories of distributed communication and agency can function humanely at different scales and in diverse contexts. In the introduction to this dissertation, I argued that understanding relationships between images, texts, and environmental media—and being able to translate across these modes—is increasingly important for rhetoric and writing studies given the rise of digital communications technologies. Across this dissertation's body chapters, I've dabbled with two senses of the phrase environmental media; I've used it to invoke media that surrounds—the ads on buildings and buses invoked



briefly in the stock imagery chapter, the museum exhibits a poet loses himself in, landscapes as visual media (a designation that works in urban as well as wild places)—and media that speaks explicitly to and about the biological, ecological, and geological earth systems that sustain human existence on this planet. This final case study offers, of course, the most explicit treatment of the latter. That I've focused more on industrial than digital technologies here, I hope, will serve as a reminder that the rise of digital media doesn't eclipse industrial processes; it builds on existing infrastructures (and forces us, in many cases, to build them out). This is true in relation to the infrastructures of energy production and the infrastructures of communication.

I hope and believe the example of Hanson's aerial photographs and multimedia installations delivers insights relevant to other visual rhetorical means (including digital geo-media artworks). And that understanding this example's complexities can help us develop future media that leverage the multiplicity of descriptive formats in order to promote social and material change in responsible ways. More than that, I see works produced by artists like Hanson, the New Topographic Photographers that came before him, and the environmentally savvy geo-media artists (some of them traditional photographers) that have emerged in the last two decades, including Grant, as examples of a particular, reflective form of ekphrastic engagement with land use ethics. In chapter two, I followed Cole Swensen's suggestion that there are better and worse ways to act ekphrastically and emphasized how two "better" approaches might be related to the concept of resilience. I examined both a forward-thinking case, in which loving attention to detail exercised in moments of leisure helped prepare an individual to act well later, when he had no choice but to become more himself in the face of an unexpected and taxing situation; and a case in which backward-looking attention to a complex, not strictly representable event connected an individual ecologically to other humans, non-

humans, and the earth itself, making way for partial healing in the face of enormous loss. Here, I suggest that the more plainly descriptive ekphrases that are overhead views and the texts that describe them have the capacity to partake of both of these impulses simultaneously.

The *Waste Land* and *Minuteman Missile Sites* images make clear: when abstract overheads fail to represent or explain in precise ways, they retain the ability to gesture toward complex infrastructural and ontological truths about our world. They remind us that what's barely out of view can be important to an image's story not because it has been denied an appearance but because its existence and import remain strongly implied. The absence of human bodies in these images speaks in relation to the land as its own kind of body. We have written these places in the sense that we created the slag heaps, smoke stacks, roads, and now-neon evaporation pools that aerial imageries make into art. We have also written ourselves out of many of these toxic places as surely as Hanson has photographed them from a distance that makes individual bodies nearly impossible to see. Loving attention to detail in these contexts comes with the reminder that the wholes these details portend are vast and devastating, but not only devastating. In another of Hanson's flagship multimedia series, this one called *Treasure State* (the state of Montana's official nickname), sublime photos of the Montana's wilderness areas are mounted under glass; the names of endangered animal species that once lived in these habitats are etched into the glass so that they cast shadows onto the photos. This elaborate approach to captioning is description but also commentary; it tells part of the story of how the mining and logging and missile testing sites that are just-out-of-frame in these conventionally beautiful photos impact "pristine" places. And while their lesson is well taken, this kind of work also reminds us that just outside the most devastating of the *Waste Land* frames humans and non-

humans alike continue living lives that are, just as surely as they are destructive, constructive and shot through with care. It is hard to know what to make of this, but it is there.

In pitching the capacity of overhead views to exert social and aesthetic force by exposing alternative perspectives, Grant invokes the “Overview Effect,” a term coined by Frank White in 1987 to describe “the profound emotional sensation that astronauts experience when given the opportunity to look down at Earth from space” (12). This term is a useful ally because it evokes the ability of visions of Earth to lend humans new understandings about the fragility of this planet we call home. But it elides one of the more remarkable features of the aerial perspectives I’ve been discussing, too. Among the things these images willfully leave out is the horizon line. Whatever emotional phenomena they evoke *ought* to be understood differently from the phenomena evoked by moving back so far the horizon is a circle. What comes next when there’s no horizon to aim for? These serial images seem to answer: what comes next is *another* deep engagement with the damaged world we already have, not a sentimental adventure that leaves an abstract Earth behind. Paired with the legacies encoded in Superfund sites, this perspective reminds us just how true it is: dealing with the damage we’ve already done is never easy.

Environmental activisms, like environmental disasters, are plural and complexly related to one another, human communities, and non-human systems. I suggested above that the limits of the “descriptive” technology of the aerial photograph unsettle prevailing logics, and that in the case of sites like the RMA they teach us to ask new questions not only about our capacity to damage the earth but also about the costs and effectiveness of cleanup strategies. That even acts which represent social goodwill and political progress can have disastrous effects on fragile ecosystems speaks to the ways in which complexity’s tenets laminate different aspects of material existence together. Ecologists, government officials, and laypeople all like to imagine

the simple good in projects like disarmament (neglecting that the danger inherent in destroying weapons can be as great as the danger they pose intact) or ecological restoration, but it has been well documented that

we have a propensity to deceive ourselves about the effectiveness of restoration or technological fixes, and in turn this deception facilitates continued destruction of the environment. The deception runs beyond overestimating our capacity to re-create natural processes, but also in the capacity for restoration to foster environmentalism. (Salcido 1425)

The selling of marquee, big budget, seemingly successful restoration projects writes out the ongoing negative physiological and psychological effects that a site's historical toxicity exerts on neighboring communities (often communities where financial constraints magnify these effects); it writes out the on-going-ness that maintains these projects (in the RMA case, some environmentalists felt this effect so emphatically that they considered the 2007 discovery of a sarin gas bomblet on the site a gift because it brought the incompleteness of cleanup back into public conversation), and it sets unreasonable expectations for other projects. The relationship between ekphrastic approaches to damaged landscapes and the ekphrases of resilience and partial healing invoked in chapter two speaks to these limitations.

Thinking ekphrastically reminds us that every response to an object, system, or event will misrepresent that object, system, or event in some way—it will be incomplete, even if it is a *better* response and not a *worse* one. Consequently, one response is never enough. Neither is one kind of response multiplied by many actors ever enough. In best case environmental scenarios, calls for mitigation (recompense for specific acts that damaged a landscape), remediation (historically and ecologically informed acts of landscape construction), and forward-thinking

social justice and communication initiatives (which respect people and their social relationships to places) occur alongside preservation projects (which recognize that protecting intact ecological systems is easier than attempting to create functional ecosystems). There are lessons here for art, writing, media and communication studies, and rhetoric regarding the importance of our disciplines' expertise to projects that might look at first like they belong to the hard sciences. There's also a set of lessons here about flexibility and dynamism and the values of wide-angle engagement that we can take with us when we turn our focus back toward more metaphoric environments of communication. In the end, the biggest success available to the RMA site may not have to do with its status as a single "clean" wildlife refuge that acts as an island. Its biggest potential from a biological standpoint likely lies in its ability to (despite being an imperfect and ongoing story of moderate success) become part of a wildlife corridor that stretches the length of the Colorado Front Range, helping mitigate not only Shell and the US government's chemical exploits but also the problem of habitat fragmentation, a problem caused by urban and suburban and agricultural sprawls, which can't be pinned on any one entity.

I offer here one very brief final caution: just because an object has a given capacity doesn't mean it will always (or often or ever) exercise that capacity. Or that it doesn't have capacities that pull in alternate directions. Summerhayes reminds us that Google's aerial visions provide humans with "both a tool for militarized vision and a tool for embodied compassionate vision" (14). I've argued that environmental media can invite changes that spread beyond the realms of high art and professional activism; that they can promote more thoughtful, socially responsible engagements with the lands we define, live on, and depend on. Whether and where and when media live up to these declarations has a lot to do with how we, all of us humans, manage to go on living with one another despite our conflicting values and views of reality. It

requires us to take responsibility for the damage we do, the ways in which solving a wicked (systemic) problem usually creates new problems, and the people and things we work alongside.

## NOTES CHAPTER FIVE

<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the most striking tension is one that is primarily out-of-scope for this dissertation; the idea that viewing swing states from overhead might be a good balm for partisan political media chatter has, arguably, become increasingly complicated in retrospect, given how many post-election pundits blamed the Trump phenomena on national media's "misunderstanding" of the needs and politics of so-called "fly over states." A common emergent frame seems to be: the *we* that is non-Trump-ites got duped, in part, because we thought the wide-shot, overhead view was enough when it wasn't. Reporters who fly in and fly out don't get the same stories reporters from a place can get. This is, of course, a too easy story, and one the art and design reporter Kennedy and his editors likely didn't anticipate when planning this review while a Trump victory still seemed at least somewhat unlikely. But it points to some interesting ways in which digital media's influence is striated rather than smooth. Social media bubbles and fake news took a lot of hits this election cycle, but the resource-poor status of local news outlets (in part a financial response to the rise of the internet) and the consolidation of news media infrastructures are part of the story of the ways in which circulation failures triggered predictive failures this year. Another interesting aside in terms of word-image interactions and digital news media is the fact that an article will often run online and in the print edition of a paper featuring the same text in both place but different titles; for instance, this review ran in the C section of the November 9, 2016 print edition of the *Times* with the physically shorter, pithier but less directive title, "Floating Far Above the Election."

<sup>2</sup> Perhaps it is worth recalling here that Mondrian's neoplasticism and the other abstract painting techniques *Overview* is often compared with—cubisms, action painting, color field compositions—took turns shocking establishment figures in the art world even as they encouraged meditations of various sorts. It is also, perhaps, worth noting the way in which attunement to details—like variances in texture achieved by manipulating different kinds of brush strokes—is for some what brings alive "simple" works like those Mondrian came to be famous for. An *Overview* image, then, "describes" the world in a way that is complicatedly both like and unlike the way a Mondrian speaks to the spiritual layers that underpin everyday visual life.

<sup>3</sup> A comprehensive list of artists using drone and satellite imagery—or responding directly to the cultural functions that drones and satellites play—is far out of scope for this dissertation. A few relevant artists include Trevor Paglen, James Bridle, Mishka Henner, Harun

Farocki, Shaun Utter, Jenny Odell, Paolo Cirio, and Clement Valla; the Bard College Center for the Study of the Drone's roundup newsletters often feature related works alongside news, industry analysis, and research.

<sup>4</sup> This image is also the only image of North Carolina included in the 280-page *Overview* book; since there is no index to the Daily Overview images posted online, it is harder to speak to how the state has shown up there in the time before and after the book. While the Times caption for this image reads simple, "A phosphate mine in Aurora, N.C., as seen from space," the caption tied to this image in the book reads, "**Aurora Phosphate Mine** / 35.37564°, -76.785105° / The Aurora Phosphate Mine in Aurora, North Carolina, USA, is the largest integrated phosphate mining and chemical plant in the world. The facility produces 6 million tons of phosphate and 1.2 million tons of phosphoric acid every year. Phosphate is used to create fertilizers and animal feed supplements, while phosphoric acid is an ingredient in food and beverage products, as well as metal treatment compounds" (74).

<sup>5</sup> I think here of David Bate suggesting, "To speak of a 'digital condition' then is not to ask what a technological development means to society, or what changes of society mean for a technology, but rather to consider their heterogeneous and uneven reciprocal affects on one another" (78).

<sup>6</sup> Superfund is the name commonly used to refer to sites covered by The Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act (CERCLA). Originally enacted by Congress in 1980, this act taxes the chemical and petroleum industries and dictates guidelines for holding polluters responsible for the cleanup of abandoned and poorly controlled hazardous waste sites; it was amended, along with the associated hazard ranking system, in 1986. Hanson's project, concurrent with this reflective update, represents a relatively early stage in the life of this program's mandates.

<sup>7</sup> Timothy Morton "coined the term *hyperobjects* to refer to things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans" (1). While I do not work with the many ontological properties Morton claims these objects share in the present essay, the fact that hyperobjects show themselves in part *by* making fragility *conspicuous* makes the term a useful one when gesturing toward these exigencies.

<sup>8</sup> This paragraph describes the work in its installation view. In the Aperture book *Waste Land*, each Superfund text appears at center, splitting a left-hand page with the corresponding USGS map, which allows each photograph to fill an entire right-hand page and avoids the problem of text spreading in an unreadable way across the centerfold of the book.

<sup>9</sup> The history sponsored by the international professional aerial photographers association (PAPA) begins with French photographer and balloonist Gaspar Felix Tournachon. Tournachon patented the use of aerial photographs for mapmaking and surveying in 1855, but the collodion photographic processes of the time essentially required a complete darkroom to be present in the basket of a balloon, making implementation tricky; three years later, Tournachon produced his

first successful aerial photograph, a view from a balloon tethered 80 meters (262 feet) above the French village of Petit-Becetre. The advent of dry plate photography (in 1871) lent practicality and flexibility to the idea of aerial photography, with rockets, kites, and pigeons taking their places alongside balloons as pre-airplane-era camera carriers. In 1903, the Bavarian Pigeon Corps notably began using carrier pigeons for aerial reconnaissance. Their birds wore tiny breast mounted cameras, which could be set to take automatic exposures at 30-second intervals. This history should be understood as an important compliment to texts like Adam Rothstein's *Drone*, which positions contemporary un-manned surveillance aircraft in relation to the production history of cars, aircraft, computers, and robots.

<sup>10</sup> In 1999 a Minuteman Missile silo and underground launch control facility near Philip, SD (four miles from the more well-known Badlands National Park) was granted National Historic Site status. The facility began offering tours in 2004, 20 years after Hanson started calling attention to the lingering presence of these sites across the American plains.

<sup>11</sup> A celebrated writer, photographer, and leftist agitator, Sekula himself certainly deserves more attention than the space of this essay permits. Thomas Lawson productively summarized the interplay of Sekula's identities when he eulogized him by saying: "As a writer, Allan described with great clarity and passion what photography can, and must do: document the facts of social relations while opening a more metaphoric space to allow viewers the idea that things could be different," a goal Hanson's work also clearly engages, and a point at least as compelling as his work categorizing photos in relation to the material at hand (qtd. Seikaly).

<sup>12</sup> An important bridge between my technically-inflected approach to Hanson's landscape-rich work and Pezzullo's work on tourism is Gregory Clarke's *Rhetorical Landscapes in America*, which uses Kenneth Burke to read tourism (of the more conventional, not explicitly toxic variety) as a generator of national identity; early passenger trains and the proliferation of automobiles both play key roles in allowing his story to unfold.

<sup>13</sup> For instance, Hanson is not an artist mentioned in Jussi Parrika's *A Geology of Media*, but his attention to the way engagement with "earth-writing" benefits from knowledge of geography, geology, industrial practice, aesthetic history, and artistic practice resonates deeply with the projects that act as cornerstones in Parrika's reconceptualization of media materialism. Where Parrika says, "I use art projects not merely as ways to illustrate the main thesis but also for the converse: many of the things and arguments in this book have been first mapped by artistic methods," we can benefit from thinking of Hanson's projects in a similar way (28).

<sup>14</sup> This risk of mistaking the impact of this aestheticization can also be associated with the degree to which visually oriented landscape-objects travel across time as well as space. As noted above, many of the original New Topographic photographers sought to engage broader publics and did so effectively in their own time, because their aesthetics presented a break with tradition rather than a continuation of it. Acknowledging that Hanson comes after them foregrounds the way simultaneous continuation and disruption of *their* legacy distinguishes his individual



projects; where he adopts their favored “distancing” point of view, he layers onto that choice the “seductive” abstraction of the view.

## EPILOGUE

*It is time to compose—in all the meanings of the word, including to compose with, that is to compromise, to care, to move slowly, with caution and precaution.*

Bruno Latour, “Attempt at a Compositionist Manifesto” (487)

*Personal experience is often a root structure beneath other kinds of inquiry: driving the questions, the curiosity, the encounters. Confessing to that root structure isn’t just a way of confessing bias—I’m a subjective observer—but a way of connecting to investments, of saying, This was the engine; this got me aching, and then later, This hurt to discover.*

Leslie Jamison, “Six Questions” (n.p.)

The Latourian call to action that serves as this epilogue’s primary epigraph has taken its place as somewhat iconic, especially among composition and rhetoric scholars amenable to new materialisms’ drifts. Publication of the compositionist manifesto in 2010 corresponded in a near perfect way with my decision to move to Pittsburgh and pursue a PhD in the field of composition. Latour was not responsible for that decision, but this confluence did mean his language was part of the weather that helped me find a place in the field, and I remain grateful for that accident.

The poetic tic borrowed from Latour that has had the most persistent influence on my thinking these last six years is the one that insists we need, now more than ever, now in the same measure that we always have, both *caution* and *precaution*. I dealt with these terms briefly in chapter three, and I have come to imagine the difference between them in this way. Caution—

which can be overbearing or tentative, pragmatic or defensive, well or poorly placed—orients toward the present and uses a combination of past experiences and rational thought to minimize risk; precaution orients toward the future. Precaution recognizes that minimizing risk often also minimizes opportunities for invention, which is what often makes caution a stopgap rather than a means to devising more sustainable ways of living. Where caution asks us to be efficacious, precaution asks us to be capacious *and* efficacious. Precaution conceived in this way is what makes it possible to imagine arguing: realism is capable of harboring speculative acts, and an ethical realism might *require* a certain measure of speculation. Thinking with precaution pushed me to ask, what comes before care? What are the conditions of its emergence? What are the conditions is, of course, a question that invites descriptive response, and in many ways it was grappling with related questions that led to my interest in what descriptions are capable of doing, both on their own and in concert with objects beholden to other modes, both rhetorical modes and modes of existence.

Description was a topic I stumbled into because I needed a way to channel my work. While preparing for my exams, I began to believe that a vibrant theory of description (the prose of things) could help solve, or at least productively re-frame, some of the ethical dilemmas associated with object-oriented thinking that I had been dwelling on and with. Description, then, acted as a kind of focusing lens that helped me imagine my way into this dissertation “about” how thing theories and ecologies of writing contribute to infrastructures of care. Each chapter’s case study suggests a different approach to description, yet they all frame descriptive objects and descriptive practices in relation to the concepts of caution and precaution, care and responsibility. Chapter one’s tour of the Objectivist poetics and labor-oriented politics that sustained Oppen’s life speaks directly to the idea that caring for language and language’s tethers

to the material, more-than-human world can teach us to treat each other more well than badly. Chapter two concretizes that assertion differently via its elaboration of models of ekphrastic practice that help individuals process traumatic events and prepare for (future-tense) personal difficulties; it asserts that descriptive practice can support resilience and healing in context-responsive ways. Chapters four and five bring description's relationship to responsibility to the fore in relation to larger scale operations; they link descriptive practices and objects to the ethics of transparency and representation in case studies where complex dynamics make it hard to know how (and how much) human-scale activities matter. Of course, describing this through line offers a relatively precise but incomplete picture of the dissertation. As I worked, description came to captivate me on its own terms, not "just" because it helped me talk about issues of scale and situate the manifestation of care-full, ethical writerly acts.

Writing about description has given me ways to bring together materialist insights drawn from different areas of writing studies—chiefly poetics, technical writing, and digital composition. But, in part because of the topic's ability to remain coherent despite its expansiveness, it has also provided me with a framework for articulating the interdependence of questions and insights that I first encountered spread out across the fields of writing studies, visual cultural studies, cultural geography, and digital studies. I have been emphasizing gaps that surround descriptions, things that get left out despite or because of their mattering, and the social phenomena implicated in those gaps. But I'm also intrigued by the gaps—the empty spaces—that exist *before* descriptions are crafted. There's often something unruly about the texture of invitations to describe that supports the co-mingling of various kinds of aesthetic forms in a unique way. The felt need that initiates a description can be a marker of a rift between observation and being. But the need for a description can also be a marker of a rift between past

and present, here and there, or a rift between one human's experience and another's. And, of course, linguistic descriptive objects aren't the only things capable of responding to invitations like these. Photographs, diagrams, maps and other forms of geographic media, gestures, non-representational sounds, and other non-human things take turns displacing linguistic descriptions and working with them in places where description has been invited. In their descriptive workings, these things come to be interdependent.

Questions related to the politics of image production, the poetics of mediation and circulation, photographic histories, technologies of vision, and emplacement riddle this dissertation. It is as much about word-image interactions, embodied responses to technical language, and environmental media as it is about descriptive language itself. Where these things may make it less uniform than another writing studies scholar's theory of description would have been, they also make it less hermetic than it might have been, or so I hope. This hope is linked to my investment in the relationship between vernacular forms, scholarly forms, and artistic forms. Description is a category that encompasses a wide array of vernacular writing practices; when vernacular photography and the vernacular landscape appear in chapters four and five, I understand them as descriptive forms that are structured similarly to vernacular forms of descriptive writing, but also as forms that act in ways writing could never act and so interact with written texts in complex ways. In the case studies I've presented, these vernacular forms come to mean by co-mingling with each other and with various specialized descriptive forms—philosophical texts, poetic texts that intentionally distort the world they describe, commercialized language, government documentation, and descriptive metadata meant to be “read” only by machines. They also come to mean via their relationships with non-human agents like histories, climates, and commercial infrastructures.

My interest in the complex co-incidence of the everyday and the *seemingly* esoteric emerged out of personal experience of the power that queer, experimental poetics have to make daily life better by making vibrant futures more imaginable. I'm well aware that discovering such intentionally strange poetics that speak in diverse registers—where vulgarity, terms borrowed from high theory, nonsense, autobiographical confessions, and the white spaces of fracture sing next to one another—might have impacted me less if I had grown up in an urban center with more visible queer communities, or if there had been more compelling representations of the diversity of queer lives in mainstream US media when I was younger, or if my experiences of the world were less queer. But these poetics *did* manage to find me during a time in my life when I was particularly susceptible to their lessons (a feat greatly enabled by the appearance of an internet connection in my life); their insistence on the existence of a stranger, more hospitable world than the one I knew carried me for a long time. And, while that experience isn't an explicit part of this dissertation, it is often what draws my attention to feedback loops that cross contexts and levels of erudition or specialization. It is at the root of a habitual attunement that is responsible in a partial but consequential way for the emergence of the "ubiquity problem" and vernacular aesthetics as themes in the work at hand, and for my conviction that assumptions about what qualifies art as relevant to everyday life is rarely obvious or unilateral.

In the end, this dissertation understands descriptions and descriptive practices as contingent, and embedded. It understands their most common capacities and their most exceptional capacities as equally worthy of study. I argue that working with description regularly, rigorously, and explicitly prepares us for the task of engaging the real that exists *out there* and using it to project particular futures and navigate toward them. I also argue that

attunement to description's multivalent absences can help us distinguish between situations where description is missing because it is truly unnecessary—where strong pre-existing experiential ties are doing its work at a non-representational level—and situations where it has been omitted accidentally, carelessly, or dangerously (on one hand, take failures of technical descriptive communication that factor into on-the-job accidents involving heavy machinery; on the other, the example of cross-cultural misunderstandings perpetuated by different social norms surrounding descriptive acts). Good descriptions, I think we can say, make specialist domains more inclusive, and they teach us about writing for accessibility across contexts. And there's room left in the world for both more work on extant “good descriptive practices” and work that takes up the challenge of inventing new heuristics for descriptive engagement.

Descriptive devices are particularly well suited to the task of adjudicating communication in situations where both conventional argumentative tactics and overtly empathetic tactics run the risk of over-writing embodied difference in damaging or disingenuous ways. I see work that addresses this point more explicitly than I have here as both a timely place to take the study of description next, given the way Trump's rise has brought an array of pre-existing identity-based conflicts to wide attention, and an exciting place to take it next. In addition, as I noted in my introduction, the study of description and the technologies that impinge on it are inextricably linked to questions of access to information, and these ought to be understood as pressing questions of social justice. Future work attuned to this fact might take up descriptions' ability to act in relation to issues of environmental justice, following the example set in chapter five. Questions about the effects of striated access to computational hardware and to the disciplinary knowledges that help citizens parse the different kinds of descriptions that circulate in digitally mediated networks are already being asked by a range of scholars, and the lessons of description

as a mode and embodied practice have much to learn from this work and much to offer it. There's more to be articulated about the social roles played by metadata and other descriptive forms that "disappear" or speak to non-humans rather than humans, too.

Machine vision and image-based deep learning are rapidly changing fields, and the feedback loops that tie descriptive capacities to technical and conceptual advances in those areas are certainly deserving of more attention than I've been able to pay them up until now. There are also a number of ways in which drawing out complex relationships between a theory of description and the interdisciplinary field of disability studies could benefit both. This work might begin by paying close attention to audio description of visual media objects (and live performances) or the structural elements that make websites navigable using screen readers. For instance, in web contexts image <alt> tags are "seen" by screen readers that make the internet more navigable for users with vision impairments, but they're also "seen" and weighted by search algorithms as they rank the relevance of results. Consequently, in addition to offering ways to discuss the role description plays in ensuring physical, literal access, looking to their example of practical ekphrasis in a future version of this project would provide a richer context for the analysis of human and algorithmic search practices that appear in chapter four.

This list of places that the study of description might take me or others next is, I hope and believe, suggestively incomplete. It is meant to push readers toward ways of thinking with their own experiences and best examples. And to serve as an open reminder: there's a lot we humans have left to learn from the wildness of the things that come to speak with us.



## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- “About IDEO.” IDEO, 2017, [www.ideo.com/about](http://www.ideo.com/about). Accessed 15 Mar. 2017.
- “About the Refuge – Rocky Mountain Arsenal.” *U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service*, 5 Nov. 2015, [www.fws.gov/refuge/Rocky\\_Mountain\\_Arsenal/about.html](http://www.fws.gov/refuge/Rocky_Mountain_Arsenal/about.html). Accessed 10 May 2017.
- “About Us.” *The Associated Press*, [www.ap.org/about/](http://www.ap.org/about/). Accessed 10 May 2017.
- “About Us.” *DigitalGlobe*, [www.digitalglobe.com/about/our-company](http://www.digitalglobe.com/about/our-company). Accessed 10 May 2017.
- “About Us.” *Reuters News Agency*, [agency.reuters.com/en/about-us.html](http://agency.reuters.com/en/about-us.html). Accessed 10 May 2017.
- Aristotle. *The Eudemian Ethics*. Translated by Anthony Kenny, Oxford UP, 2011.
- . *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by Joe Sachs, Focus Publishing, 2002.
- . *Poetics*. Translated by Joe Sachs, Focus Publishing, 2006.
- . *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*. Translated by George Kennedy, Oxford UP, 2007.
- Altieri, Charles. “The Objectivist Tradition.” *The Objectivist Nexus: Essays in Cultural Poetics*. Edited by Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Peter Quartermain, U Alabama P, 1999, pp. 25-37.
- Baillargeon, Claude, curator. “Imaging a Shattering Earth: Contemporary Photography and the Environmental Debate.” *Meadow Brook Art Gallery/Oakland University*, [www2.oakland.edu/shatteringearth/index.cfm?pageid=4049](http://www2.oakland.edu/shatteringearth/index.cfm?pageid=4049). Accessed 2 Mar. 2012.
- Baker, Robert. *In Dark Again in Wonder: The Poetry of René Char & George Oppen*. U Notre Dame P, 2012.
- Bar-Yam, Yaneer. *Dynamics of Complex Systems*. Addison-Wesley, 1997.
- Barad, Karen. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Duke UP, 2007.

- Barnett, Scot. "Toward an Object-Oriented Rhetoric: A Review of Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects and Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things by Graham Harman." *Enculturation*, vol. 7, 2010, <http://enculturation.net/toward-an-object-oriented-rhetoric>. Accessed 8 Jan. 2016.
- Barthes, Roland. *Camera lucida: reflections on photography*. Translated by R. Howard, Hill and Wang, 1981.
- Bartholomae, David. "Inventing the University." *Journal of Basic Writing*, vol. 5, no. 1, 1986, pp. 4-23.
- Bate, David. "The Digital Condition of Photography: Cameras, computers and display." *The Photographic Image in Digital Culture*. Edited by Martin Lister, 2 ed., Routledge, 2013.
- Behar, Katherine, editor. *Object-Oriented Feminism*. U Minnesota P, 2016.
- Bender, John and Michael Marrinan, editors. *Regimes of Description: In the Archive of the Eighteenth Century*. Stanford UP, 2005.
- Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Duke UP, 2010.
- Berry, Wendell. "Preface." *Waste Land: Meditations on a Ravaged Landscape*. Aperture, 1997, p. 3.
- Bettmann, Otto Ludwig. *Bettmann: The Picture Man*. UP of Florida, 1992.
- Birdsell, David S. and Leo Groarke. "Outlines of a Theory of Visual Argument." *Argumentation and Advocacy*, vol. 43, 2007, pp. 103-113.
- Blau DuPlessis, Rachel. "Statement for Pores." *Pores: An Avant-Gardist Journal of Poetics Research*, vol. 2, 2002, [www.pores.bbk.ac.uk/2/duplessis.htm](http://www.pores.bbk.ac.uk/2/duplessis.htm). Accessed 28 Nov. 2014.
- Bloom, Paul. "Against Empathy." *Boston Review*, 10 Sept. 2014, [bostonreview.net/forum/paul-bloom-against-empathy](http://bostonreview.net/forum/paul-bloom-against-empathy). Accessed 16 May 2017.
- Bogost, Ian. *Alien Phenomenology, or What It's Like to Be a Thing*. U Minnesota P, 2012.
- Bordwin, Jesse. "Review of Object-Oriented Feminism." *Critical Inquiry*, 10 Mar 2017, [criticalinquiry.uchicago.edu/jesse\\_bordwin\\_reviews\\_object\\_oriented\\_feminism](http://criticalinquiry.uchicago.edu/jesse_bordwin_reviews_object_oriented_feminism). Accessed 15 May 2017.
- Borges, Jorge Luis. *Collected Fictions*. Translated by Andrew Hurley, Penguin Random House, 1999.
- Bossen, Howard. "A Tall Tale Retold: The Influence of the Photographs of William Henry Jackson upon the Passage of the Yellowstone Park Act of 1872." *64<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of*

- the Association for Education in Journalism*, East Lansing, MI, 8-11 Aug. 1981, [eric.ed.gov/?id=ED204767](http://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED204767). Accessed 24 Apr. 2012.
- Braidotti, Rosi. *Nomadic Theory: The Portable Rosi Braidotti*. Columbia UP, 2011.
- Brown, James J. and Nathaniel Rivers. "Composing the Carpenter's Workshop." *O-Zone: A Journal of Object-Oriented Studies*, vol. 1, 2014, pp. 27-36.
- Brown, Nathan. "The Nadir of OOO: From Graham Harman's *Tool-Being* to Timothy Morton's *Realist Magic: Objects, Ontology, Causality*." *Parrhesia*, vol. 17, 2013, pp. 62-71.
- Browne, Simone. *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*. Duke UP, 2015.
- Bryant, Levi. *Onto-Cartography: An Ontology of Machines and Media*. Edinburgh UP, 2014.
- . "Harman, Withdrawal, and Vacuum Packed Objects: My Gratitude." *Larval Subjects*, 30 May 2012, [larvalsubjects.wordpress.com/2012/05/30/harman-withdrawal-and-vacuum-packed-objects-my-gratitude](http://larvalsubjects.wordpress.com/2012/05/30/harman-withdrawal-and-vacuum-packed-objects-my-gratitude). Accessed 15 May 2017.
- Bryant, Levi, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman, editors. *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*. re.press, 2011.
- Burnett, Christopher. "New Topographics Now: Simulated Landscape and Degraded Utopia." *Reframing the New Topographics*. Edited by Greg Foster-Rice and John Rohrback, Center for American Places at Columbia College, 2011, pp. 139-158.
- Burns, Paul. "The History of the Discovery of Cinematography." 2010, [www.precinemahistory.net/contents.htm](http://www.precinemahistory.net/contents.htm). Accessed 17 May 2017.
- Carroll, Lewis. *The Complete Illustrated Works*. Gramercy Books, 1982.
- "Center for the Study of the Drone." *Bard College*, 8 May 2017, [dronecenter.bard.edu](http://dronecenter.bard.edu). Accessed 10 May 2017.
- Chen, Jian, et al. "Measuring User Engagement with Smart Billboards." United States Patent Application 20,160,292,713. 31 Mar. 2015.
- Creeley, Robert. "Introduction to the Selected Poems." *Electronic Poetry Center*, SUNY Buffalo, [epc.buffalo.edu/authors/oppen/oppen\\_creeley.html](http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/oppen/oppen_creeley.html). Accessed 8 Jan. 2016.
- . "A Prayer." *Poetry*, vol. 107, no. 5, Feb. 1966, pp. 323.
- Cilliers, Paul. *Complexity and Postmodernism: Understanding Complex Systems*. Routledge, 1998.

- Clark, Gregory. *Rhetorical Landscapes in America: Variations on a Theme from Kenneth Burke*. U South Carolina P, 2004.
- Cole, Andrew. "Those Obscure Objects of Desire." *Artforum*, Summer 2015, [www.artforum.com/inprint/issue=201506&id=52280](http://www.artforum.com/inprint/issue=201506&id=52280). Accessed 8 Jan. 2016.
- Colomina, Beatriz. "Enclosed by Images: The Eameses' Multimedia Architecture." *Grey Room*, vol. 2, Winter 2001, pp. 5-29.
- Coole, Diana and Samantha Frost, editors. *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*. Duke UP, 2010.
- Cope, Stephen. "As if Objectivist: Oppen's Political Epistemophilia." *Jacket*, vol. 36, 2008, [jacketmagazine.com/36/oppen-cope.shtml](http://jacketmagazine.com/36/oppen-cope.shtml). Accessed 28 Nov. 2014.
- "Corbis is Now Available on Getty Images." *Getty Images*, 6 Apr. 2016, [press.gettyimages.com/corbistransition-faq/](http://press.gettyimages.com/corbistransition-faq/). Accessed 2 Apr. 2017.
- Cosgrove, Denis. "Modernity, Community and the Landscape Idea." *Journal of Material Culture* vol. 11, no. 1-2, 2006, pp. 9-66.
- . *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape*. Barnes and Noble, 1985.
- Cosgrove, Denis and Stephen Daniels, editors. *The Iconography of landscape: essays on the symbolic representation, design, and use of past environments*. Cambridge UP, 1988.
- Cosgrove, Denis and Veronica della Dora, editors. *High Places: Cultural Geographies of Mountains, Ice and Science*. I.B.Tauris, 2008.
- Crager, Jack. "Benjamin Grant's Satellite Abstractions." *American Photo*, 19 Oct. 2016, [www.americanphotomag.com/benjamin-grants-satellite-abstractions](http://www.americanphotomag.com/benjamin-grants-satellite-abstractions). Accessed 10 May 2017.
- Davidson, Michael. *Ghostlier Demarcations: Modern Poetry and the Material World*. U California P, 1997.
- de Font-Reaulx, Dominique. *Painting and Photography: 1839-1914*. Flammarion, 2013.
- de Heem, Jan Davidsz. "Still Life with a Glass and Oysters." Oil on wood, ca. 1640, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, [www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/436636](http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/436636). Accessed 28 Nov. 2014.
- DeLanda, Manuel. *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History*. MIT P, 2000.
- della Dora, Veronica. "Travelling Landscape-Objects." *Progress in Human Geography*, vol. 33, no. 3, 2009, pp. 334-354.

DeLuca, Kevin Michael and Anne Teresa Demo. "Imaging Nature: Watkins, Yosemite, and the Birth of Environmentalism." *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, vol. 17, no. 3, 2000, pp. 241-260.

Denham, Robert. *Poets on Painters: A Bibliography*. McFarland & Co, 2010.

Dickey, Megan Rose and Jillian D'Onfro. "SA 100 2013: The Coolest People In New York Tech." *Business Insider*, 25 Oct. 2013, [www.businessinsider.com/silicon-alley-100-2013-2013-10](http://www.businessinsider.com/silicon-alley-100-2013-2013-10). Accessed 2 Apr. 2017.

Doty, Mark. *The Art of Description: World into Word*. Graywolf P, 2010.

---. *Heaven's Coast: A Memoir*. Harper, 1996.

---. "The Lessons of Objects: An Interview with Mark Doty." Interview by Andrew David King, *Kenyon Review Blog*, 12 Dec. 2012, [www.kenyonreview.org/2012/12/mark-doty-interview/](http://www.kenyonreview.org/2012/12/mark-doty-interview/). Accessed 28 Nov. 2014.

---. *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon: On Objects and Intimacy*. Beacon, 2002.

Dyer, Richard. *White: Essays on Race and Culture*. Routledge, 1997.

"Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Black-and-White Negatives." *United States Library of Congress*, [www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/fsa/](http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/fsa/). Accessed 24 May 2017.

Felski, Rita. *The Limits of Critique*. U Chicago P, 2015.

Foster-Rice, Greg. "'Systems Everywhere': *New Topographics*, and Art of the 1970s." *Reframing the New Topographics*. Edited by Greg Foster-Rice and John Rohrback, Center for American Places at Columbia College, 2011, pp. 45-70.

Fraleigh, Sondra. *Butoh: Metamorphic Dance and Global Alchemy*. U Illinois P, 2010.

Fraleigh, Sondra and Tamah Nakamura. *Hijikata Tatsumi and Ohno Kazuo*. Routledge, 2006.

Francis, James A. "Metal Maidens, Achilles' Shield, and Pandora: The Beginnings of 'Ekphrasis.'" *American Journal of Philology*, vol. 130, no. 1, Spring 2009, pp. 1-23.

Frosh, Paul. *The Image Factory: Consumer Culture, Photography and the Visual Content Industry*. Berg Publishers, 2003.

---. "Industrial ekphrasis: The dialectic of word and image in mass cultural production." *Semiotica*, vol. 147, no. 1/4, 2003, pp. 241-264.

- Fuller, Matthew. *Media Ecologies: Materialist Energies in Art and Technoculture*. MIT P, 2005.
- Gablik, Suzi. "The Ecological Imperative." *Art Journal*, vol. 51, no. 2, 1992, pp. 49-51.
- Grant, Benjamin. *Overview*. Amphoto Books, 2016.
- . "Mission." *Daily Overview*, [www.dailyoverview.com](http://www.dailyoverview.com). Accessed 10 May 2017.
- Greider, Thomas and Lorraine Garkovitch. "Landscapes: The Social Construction of Nature and the Environment." *Rural Sociology*, vol. 59, no. 1, 1994, pp. 1 – 24.
- Grosz, Elizabeth. "On Ontogenesis and the Ethics of Becoming." Interview with Kathryn Yusoff. *Society and Space* Open Site. May 22 2014, [societyandspace.org/2014/05/22/on-ontogenesis-and-the-ethics-of-becoming/](http://societyandspace.org/2014/05/22/on-ontogenesis-and-the-ethics-of-becoming/). Accessed 1 June 2017.
- Halpern, Orit. *Beautiful Data: A History of Vision and Reason since 1945*. Duke UP, 2014.
- Hand, Martin. *Ubiquitous Photography*. Polity P, 2012.
- Hanson, David T. "Late Twentieth-Century Landscapes." Personal website, 2 Mar. 2012, [davidthanson.net/writings.html](http://davidthanson.net/writings.html). Accessed 1 June 2017.
- . *Waste Land: Meditations on a Ravaged Landscape*. Aperture, 1997.
- Haraway, Donna. "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective." *Feminist Studies*, vol. 14, no. 3, Autumn 1988, pp. 575-599.
- Hariman, Robert and John Louis Lucaites. *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy*. U Chicago P, 2007.
- Harman, Graham. *Guerilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things*. Open Court, 2005.
- . *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects*. Open Court, 2002.
- Harman, Graham and Tristan Garcia. "A Dialogue Between Graham Harman and Tristan Garcia." Moderated by Rik Peters. *Speculations: A Journal of Speculative Realism*, vol. IV, 2013, pp. 167-203.
- Harper, Douglas. "After." *Online Etymological Dictionary*, [www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=after](http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=after). Accessed 1 Sept. 2016.
- Harris, Jessica. "Jon Oringer, Founder, Shutterstock" *From Scratch* from NPR, 7 Apr. 2017, [www.fromscratchradio.com/show/jon-oringer](http://www.fromscratchradio.com/show/jon-oringer). Accessed 1 June 2017.

- Hawk, Byron. *A Counter-History of Composition: Toward Methodologies of Complexity*. U Pittsburgh P, 2007.
- Hawkins, Bobbie Louise. "George Oppen, Mary Oppen, and a Poem." *Jacket Magazine*, vol. 36, 2008, [jacketmagazine.com/36/oppen-hawkins.shtml](http://jacketmagazine.com/36/oppen-hawkins.shtml). Accessed 1 July 2016.
- Hayles, Katherine. *Chaos Bound: Orderly Disorder in Contemporary Literature and Science*. Cornell UP, 1990.
- Heaney, Seamus. *Preoccupations: Selected Prose, 1968-1978*. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1996.
- Heffernan, James. *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery*. U Chicago P, 1993.
- Henderson, Lisa. *Love and Money: Queers, Class, and Cultural Production*. NYU P, 2013.
- Heron, Michal. *Digital Stock Photography: How to Shoot and Sell*. Allworth P, 2007.
- Hershberger, Andrew. *Photographic Theory: An Historical Anthology*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2014.
- "History of Aerial Photography." PAPA International, [professionalairphotographers.com/content.aspx?page\\_id=22&club\\_id=808138&module\\_id=158950](http://professionalairphotographers.com/content.aspx?page_id=22&club_id=808138&module_id=158950). Accessed 1 Oct. 2016.
- Hood, J. Edward Hood. "Social Relations and the Cultural Landscape." *Landscape Archaeology: Reading and Interpreting the American Historical Landscape*, edited by Rebecca Yamin and Karen Bescherer Metheny, U Tennessee P, 1996, pp. 121-146.
- Hosoe, Eikoh. "Kazuo Ohno in Hokkaido, 1994." Photographs. *Third Rail: International Literature and Arts*, [literatureandarts.com/kazuohosoe1.html](http://literatureandarts.com/kazuohosoe1.html). Accessed 24 May 2017.
- Hyde, Michael, ed. *The Ethos of Rhetoric*. U South Carolina P, 2004.
- "Infographic: Shutterstock's 2015 Contributor Earnings Report." *Shutterstock*, 9 Mar. 2015, [www.shutterstock.com/blog/contributor-earnings-report](http://www.shutterstock.com/blog/contributor-earnings-report). Accessed 2 Apr. 2017.
- Jackson, John Brinckerhoff. *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*. Yale UP, 1984.
- Jackson, M. G. *Transformative Learning for a New Worldview: Learning to Think Differently*. Springer, 2008.
- Jamison, Leslie. *The Empathy Exams: Essays*. Graywolf P, 2014.
- . "Six Questions." Interview with Jeffery Gleaves. *Browsings: The Harper's Blog*, 28 Mar. 2014, [harpers.org/blog/2014/03/the-empathy-exams-essays/](http://harpers.org/blog/2014/03/the-empathy-exams-essays/). Accessed 24 May 2017.

- Kaplan, Caren. "The space of ambiguity: Sophie Ristelhueber's aerial perspective." *GeoHumanities: Art, History, Text at the edge of Place*, edited by Michael Dear, Jim Ketchum, Sarah Luria, and Douglas Richardson, Routledge, 2011, pp. 154-161.
- Kennedy, Randy. "Postelection Therapy: View Swing States from Space." *New York Times*, 8 Nov. 2016, <https://nyti.ms/2k3GVvy>. Accessed 10 May 2017.
- Ketchum, Jim. "Geoimagery." *GeoHumanities: Art, History, Text at the edge of Place*, edited by Michael Dear, Jim Ketchum, Sarah Luria, and Douglas Richardson, Routledge, 2011. 139-142.
- Kindellan, Michael. "The Labor of Revision: George Oppen's Sincerity." *The Wolf*, vol. 23, 2010, [www.wolfmagazine.co.uk/23prose.php](http://www.wolfmagazine.co.uk/23prose.php). Accessed 1 July 2016.
- Klosowki, Thorin. "Clever Uses for Reverse Image Search." *Lifehacker*, 16 Apr. 2013, [lifehacker.com/clever-uses-for-reverse-image-search-473032092](http://lifehacker.com/clever-uses-for-reverse-image-search-473032092). Accessed 17 May 2017.
- Kohnen, Melanie E. "Cultural Diversity as Brand Management in Cable Television." *Media Industries Journal*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2015, pp. 88-103.
- Kolonia, Peter. "David T. Hanson's Ongoing Crusade for the Environment." *American Photo*, 31 Mar. 2016, [www.americanphotomag.com/david-t-hansons-ongoing-crusade-for-environment](http://www.americanphotomag.com/david-t-hansons-ongoing-crusade-for-environment). Accessed 10 May 2017.
- Kwasny, Melissa. *Earth Recitals: Essays on Image & Vision*. Lynx House P, 2013.
- . "Kenyon Review Conversations." *Kenyon Review*. Fall 2013, [www.kenyonreview.org/conversation/melissa-kwasny/](http://www.kenyonreview.org/conversation/melissa-kwasny/). Accessed 1 Sept. 2016.
- . "Letter to the Soul." *Kenyon Review*, Fall 2013, pp. 62-65.
- . *Pictograph: Poems*. Milkweed, 2015.
- Lay, Mary M., Billie J. Wahlstrom, Carolyn D. Rude, Cynthia L. Selfe, and Jack Selzer, editors. *Technical Communication*. 2nd ed., Irwin McGraw-Hill, 2000.
- Latour, Bruno. "An Attempt at a Compositionist Manifesto." *New Literary History*, vol. 41, no. 3, Summer 2012, pp. 471-490.
- . *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford UP, 2007.
- . *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns*. Translated by Catherine Porter, Harvard UP, 2013.



- . "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 20, Winter 2004, pp. 225-248.
- Loke, Margaret. "Butoh: Dance of Darkness." *The New York Times*, 1 Nov. 1987, [www.nytimes.com/1987/11/01/magazine/butoh-dance-of-darkness.html](http://www.nytimes.com/1987/11/01/magazine/butoh-dance-of-darkness.html). Accessed 1 Sept. 2016.
- Longmire, Stephen. "Back West: reviewing American landscape photography." *Afterimage*, vol. 25, no. 2, 1997, pp. 21.
- Magnet, Shoshana Amielle. *When Biometrics Fail: Gender, Race, and the Technology of Identity*. Duke UP, 2011.
- Malin, Brenton. "Looking White and Middle-Class: Stereoscopic Imagery and Technology in the Early Twentieth-Century United States." *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, vol. 93, no. 2, 2007, pp. 403-424.
- Manning, Erin. *Always More Than One: Individuation's Dance*. Duke UP, 2013.
- Manovich, Lev, Nadav Hochman, and Jay Chow. *Instagram Cities*, [phototrails.net/instagram-cities/](http://phototrails.net/instagram-cities/). Accessed 2 Apr. 2017.
- Marcus, Sharon, Heather Love, and Stephen Best. "Building a Better Description." *Description Across Disciplines*, special issue of *Representations*, vol. 135, no. 1, Summer 2016, pp. 1-21.
- Marder, Michael. *Plant-thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life*. Columbia UP, 2013
- Mayers, Tim. *(Re) Writing Craft: Composition, Creative Writing, and the Future of English Studies*. U Pittsburgh P, 2005.
- McClatchy, J.D. *Poets on Painters: Essays on the Art of Painting by Twentieth-Century Poets*. U California P, 1988.
- McElroy, Stephen J. "Assemblage by Design: The Postcards of Curt Teich and Company." *Computers and Composition*, vol. 37, 2015, pp. 147-165.
- McGarvey, James. "The Electro-Optic Camera: The World's First DSLR." Personal Website, 2012, [eocamera.jemcgarvey.com/](http://eocamera.jemcgarvey.com/). Accessed 18 May 2017.
- Miller, Abbott. "Pictures for Rent." *Eye*, vol. 14, no. 4, 1994, [www.eyemagazine.com/feature/article/pictures-for-rent](http://www.eyemagazine.com/feature/article/pictures-for-rent). Accessed 10 May 2017.
- Miller, Susan. *Trust in Texts: A Different History of Rhetoric*. Southern Illinois UP, 2007.

- Minuteman Missile National Historic Site*. U.S. National Park Service. [www.nps.gov/mimi/index.htm](http://www.nps.gov/mimi/index.htm). Accessed 10 May 2017.
- Mitchell, W.J.T. "Landscape and Invisibility: Gilo's Wall and Christo's *Gates*." *Sites Unseen*, edited by Diane Harris and D Fairchild Ruggles, U Pittsburgh P, 2007, pp. 33-44.
- . *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*. U Chicago P, 1994.
- . *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*. U Chicago P, 2005.
- Montague, Peter and Maria B. Pellerano. "Moving into Hubris." *Waste Land: Meditations on a Ravaged Landscape*. Aperture, 1997, p. 52.
- Morrison, Toni. *What Moves at the Margin: Selected Nonfiction*. UP of Mississippi, 1998.
- Morton, Timothy. *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*. U Minnesota P, 2013.
- . *Realist Magic: Objects, Ontology, Causality*. Open Humanities P, 2013.
- Newmark, Kevin. *Irony on Occasion: From Schlegel and Kierkegaard to Derrida and de Man*. Fordham UP, 2012.
- Nordstrom, Alison. *TruthBeauty: Pictorialism and the Photograph as Art, 1845-1945*. Douglas & McIntyre, 2011.
- Nowviskie, Bethany. "On Capacity and Care." *Personal blog*, 4 Oct 2015, [nowviskie.org/2015/on-capacity-and-care/](http://nowviskie.org/2015/on-capacity-and-care/). Accessed 16 May 2017.
- O'Hara, Frank. *Art Chronicles, 1954-1966*. George Braziller, 1990.
- Oppen, George. *New Collected Poems*. Edited by Michael Davidson, New Directions, 2008.
- . *Speaking with George Oppen: Interviews with the Poet and Mary Oppen, 1968-1987*. Edited by Richard Swigg, McFarland, 2012.
- . *The Selected Letters of George Oppen*. Edited by Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Duke UP, 1990.
- . *Selected Prose, Daybooks, and Papers*. Edited by Stephen Cope, U California P, 2007.
- Oppen, Mary. *Meaning A Life: An Autobiography*. Black Sparrow P, 1978.
- Palmeri, Jason. *Remixing Composition: A History of Multimodal Writing Pedagogy*. Southern Illinois UP, 2012.

- Pavesich, Matthew. "Adapting the Flag: Documenting the District." *DC/Adapters*, 2013-present, [www.dcadapters.org/](http://www.dcadapters.org/). Accessed 10 May 2017.
- Peters, John Durham. *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media*. U Chicago P, 2015.
- Pezzulo, Phaedra C. *Toxic Tourism: Rhetorics of Pollution, Travel, and Environmental Justice*. U of Alabama P, 2007.
- Phillips, Adam. *Missing Out: In Praise of the Unlived Life*. Picador, 2013.
- Pickerell, Jim. "A Short History of the Stock Photo Industry." *Selling Stock: Inside the Stock Image Industry*, 7 Aug. 2006, [www.selling-stock.com/Article/history-of-the-stock-photo-industry-0](http://www.selling-stock.com/Article/history-of-the-stock-photo-industry-0). Accessed 2 Apr. 2017.
- Purpura, Lia. *On Looking: Essays*. Sarabande Books, 2006.
- Respini, Eva. *Into the Sunset: Photography's Image of the American West*. The Museum of Modern Art, 2009.
- Revell, Donald. Interview with Tod Marshall. *The American Poetry Review*, vol. 25, no. 4, 1996, pp. 31-36.
- Ridolfo, Jim and Danielle DeVoss. "Composing for Recomposition: Rhetorical Velocity and Delivery." *Kairos: A Journal of Rhetoric, Technology, and Pedagogy*, vol. 13, no. 2, Spring 2009, [kairos.technorhetoric.net/13.2/topoi/ridolfo\\_devoss/intro.html](http://kairos.technorhetoric.net/13.2/topoi/ridolfo_devoss/intro.html). Accessed 10 May 2017.
- Rickert, Thomas. "Afterward: A Crack in the Cosmic Egg, Tuning into Thing." *Rhetoric Through Everyday Things*. Edited by Scot Barnett and Casey Boyle, U Alabama P, 2016, pp. 226-231.
- . *Ambient Rhetoric: The Attunements of Rhetorical Being*. U Pittsburgh P, 2013.
- Rivers, Nathaniel. "Tracing the Missing Masses: Vibrancy, Symmetry, and Public Rhetoric Pedagogy." *Enculturation*, 17 Mar. 2014, [enculturation.net/missingmasses](http://enculturation.net/missingmasses). Accessed 1 June 2017.
- Roderick, Noah. "Analogize This! The Politics of Scale and the Problem of Substance in Complexity-Based Composition." *Composition Forum*, vol. 25, Spring 2012, [compositionforum.com/issue/25/scale-substance-complexity.php](http://compositionforum.com/issue/25/scale-substance-complexity.php) Accessed 20 Mar. 2017.
- Rosenblum, Naomi. *A World History of Photography*. 3rd ed., Abbeville P, 1997.
- Roth, Lorna. "Looking at Shirley, the Ultimate Norm: Colour Balance, Image Technologies, and Cognitive Equity." *Canadian Journal of Communication*, vol. 34, 2009, pp. 111-136.

- Rothstein, Adam. *Drone*. Bloomsbury, 2015.
- Rowe, Peter. *Design Thinking*. MIT P, 1987.
- Sachs, Karen. "Shutterstock Celebrates 100 Million Images and Looks to What's Next With Trends Shaping the Future of Imagery." *Shutterstock blog*, 13 Sept. 2016, [www.shutterstock.com/blog/image-trends-infographic](http://www.shutterstock.com/blog/image-trends-infographic). Accessed 10 Apr. 2017.
- Salcido, Rachael E. "The Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge: On a Rocky Road To Creating a Community Asset." *John Marshall Law Review*, vol. 46, no. 4, 2014, pp. 1399-1430.
- Sayers, Jentery. "From Make or Break to Care and Repair." *University of Victoria Maker Lab in the Humanities*, 19 Jan. 2016, [maker.uvic.ca/inke16/](http://maker.uvic.ca/inke16/). Accessed 16 May 2017.
- Seikaly, Roula. "Allan Sekula Against the Grain." *San Francisco Camerawork*, 1 Oct. 2016, [www.sfcamerawork.org/against-the-grain/](http://www.sfcamerawork.org/against-the-grain/). Accessed 1 June 2017.
- Sennett, Richard. *The Craftsman*. Yale UP, 2009.
- Serraino, Pierluigi. *The Creative Architect: Inside the Great Midcentury Personality Study*. Monacelli P, 2016.
- Shipka, Jody. *Toward a Composition Made Whole*. U Pittsburgh P, 2011.
- "A Short History of Wallpaper." *Victoria and Albert Museum*, [www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/a/short-introductory-history-of-wallpaper/](http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/a/short-introductory-history-of-wallpaper/). Accessed 2 Apr. 2017.
- Shutterstock*. [www.shutterstock.com](http://www.shutterstock.com). Accessed 2 Apr. 2017.
- Sichel, Kim. "Deadpan Geometries: Mapping, Aerial Photography, and the American Landscape." *Reframing the New Topographics*. Edited by Greg Foster-Rice and John Rohrback, Center for American Places at Columbia College, 2011, pp. 87-106.
- "Site History." *Rocky Mountain Arsenal*. 2 Mar. 2012, [www.rma.army.mil/site/sitefrm.html](http://www.rma.army.mil/site/sitefrm.html). Accessed 24 Apr. 2012.
- Smith, James Ward. *Theme for Reason*. Princeton UP, 2015.
- Stafford, Barbara Maria. *Echo Objects: The Cognitive Work of Images*. U Chicago P, 2007.
- Stein, Gertrude. "Composition as Explanation." *A Stein Reader*, edited by Ulla Dydo, Northwestern UP, 1993.
- Summerhayes, Catherine. *Google Earth: Outreach and Activism*. Bloomsbury, 2015.

- “Superfund: CERCLA Overview.” *United States Environmental Protection Agency*, 27 Apr. 2017, [www.epa.gov/superfund/superfund-cercla-overview](http://www.epa.gov/superfund/superfund-cercla-overview). Accessed 10 May 2017.
- Swensen, Cole. *The Book of One Hundred Hands*. U Iowa P, 2005.
- . *Noise That Stays Noise: Essays*. U Michigan P, 2011.
- . *Ours*. U California P, 2008.
- Syverson, Margaret. *The Wealth of Reality: An Ecology of Composition*. Southern Illinois UP, 1994.
- Taub, Eric A. “When Are Photos Like Penny Stocks? When They Sell.” *New York Times*, 5 June 2007, [nyti.ms/2oqv93M](http://nyti.ms/2oqv93M). Accessed 2 Apr. 2017.
- Taylor, Mark C. *The Moment of Complexity: Emerging Network Culture*. U Chicago P, 2002.
- Thorne, Sally. *Interpretive Description: Qualitative Research for Applied Practice*. Routledge, 2016.
- Tobias, Jenny. “Re-Use Value.” *Cabinet*, vol. 22, Summer 2006, [www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/22/tobias.php](http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/22/tobias.php). Accessed 2 Apr. 2017.
- Tolentino, Jia. “The Gig Economy Celebrates Working Yourself to Death.” *The New Yorker*, 22 Mar. 2017, [www.newyorker.com/culture/jia-tolentino/the-gig-economy-celebrates-working-yourself-to-death](http://www.newyorker.com/culture/jia-tolentino/the-gig-economy-celebrates-working-yourself-to-death). Accessed 10 Apr. 2017.
- Tsing, Anna. “More-than-Human Sociality: A Call for Critical Description.” *Anthropology and Nature*. Edited by Kirsten Hastrup, Routledge, 2014.
- Wagner, Peter, editor. *Icons-Text-Iconotexts: Essays on Ekphrasis and Intermediary*. de Gruyter, 1996.
- Wall, Cynthia Sundberg. *The Prose of Things: Transformations of Description in the Eighteenth Century*. Chicago UP, 2006.
- Welsh, Ryan. “Ekphrasis.” *Keywords of Media Theory*. University of Chicago, Winter 2007, [csmt.uchicago.edu/glossary2004/ekphrasis.htm](http://csmt.uchicago.edu/glossary2004/ekphrasis.htm). Accessed 28 Nov. 2014.
- “What are the metrics offered by the Quividi solution?” *Quividi*, 15 Apr. 2016, [help.quividi.com/en/support/solutions](http://help.quividi.com/en/support/solutions). Accessed 18 May 2017.
- White, George Abbott. “Vernacular Photography: FSA Images of Depression Leisure.” *Visual Communication*, vol. 9, no. 1, 1983, pp. 53-75.

Wilkinson, Helen. "The New Heraldry": Stock Photography, Visual Literacy, and Advertising in 1930s Britain" *Journal of Design History*, vol. 10, no. 1, 1998, pp. 23-38.

Wiman, Christian. "A Call to Doubt and Faith, and Remembering God." Interview with Krista Tippett. *On Being*, 23 May 2013, [onbeing.org/programs/christian-wiman-a-call-to-doubt-and-faith-and-remembering-god/](http://onbeing.org/programs/christian-wiman-a-call-to-doubt-and-faith-and-remembering-god/). Accessed 28 Nov. 2014.

Wu, Kuang-ming. *On Metaphoring: A Cultural Hermeneutic*. Brill Publishers, 2001.

Yancey, Kathleen Blake. "Made Not Only in Words: Composition in a New Key." *CCC*, vol. 56, no. 2, 2004, pp. 297-328.

Zipkin, Nina. "How Shutterstock Is Training Its System to Help You Find Better Photos." *Entrepreneur*, 10 Mar. 2016, [www.entrepreneur.com/article/272281](http://www.entrepreneur.com/article/272281). Accessed 2 Apr. 2017.

Zukofsky, Louis. *Prepositions + : The Collected Critical Essays*. Wesleyan UP, 2000.