

## **"A Viable Breathing Substance": The Poetics of Atmosphere in the Work of Barbara Guest**

This dissertation presents the concept of a poetics of atmosphere, one affected by and affecting modernism, through readings of the work of Barbara Guest (1920–2006), from her earliest writings of the 1950s to the late works of the 2000s. Guest's poetry has often been read via a series of paradigmatic oppositions derived from mid-century formalist interpretations of modernist aesthetics: surface and depth; abstraction and figuration; the domestic and the ecstatic. These paradigmatic oppositions tend to focus critical attention on the mimetic capacity of art, on the lyric expressivity of poetry, and on the separateness of the art work or the poem from reality. I argue that the phenomenological complexities and formal restlessness of Guest's works challenge each of these formalist assumptions and invite us to imagine the poem as an atmosphere: a field of interactivity within which signification is subordinated to sensation and meaning is given as a mobile and relational event.

In order to build this concept, I place close readings of poems in dialogue with theories of affect. Engaging principally with the works of Brian Massumi, Marta Figlerowicz, Rei Terada, and Eve Sedgwick, I show how Guest's poems can be productively read as assemblages of precognitive and transitory sensations within which subjectivized perception is enveloped. Read in this way, Guest's poetics illuminates areas of disagreement among theorists of affect about the limits of subjectivity and the possibility of apprehending or representing affect in language. In kind, theories of affect provide a terminology with which to attend to the atmospheric phenomena and the non-semantic qualities of language that are foregrounded in Guest's poetry.

This theoretical approach is supported by archival findings that draw on the full breadth of Guest's writings, with particular attention given to her essays, her art criticism, and her correspondence with Helen Frankenthaler, as well as her connections with the work of Robert Goodnough and Tony Smith. Furthering the work of previous scholarship which positions Guest in relation to the New York School's avant-gardism and feminist experimental writing, I consider how Guest's notion of the poem as a "viable breathing substance" emerges out of her interpretations of early twentieth century modernism, which emphasize the atmospheric, the relational, and the mystical potentials of aesthetic experience.