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"A viable breathing substance":
the poetics of atmosphere in the work of Barbara Guest

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Dedication

for my sister

Abstract

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.

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Abbreviations for Frequently Cited Works and Archival Materials

The following abbreviations of works by Barbara Guest are used throughout:

CP Guest, Barbara. *The Collected Poems of Barbara Guest*, edited by Hadley Guest. Wesleyan University Press, 2008.

FI Guest, Barbara. *Forces of Imagination*. Kelsey Street Press, 2003.

FR Guest, Barbara. *Fair Realism*. Sun & Moon, 1989.

IS Guest, Barbara. *If So, Tell Me*. Reality Street, 1999.

LT Guest, Barbara. *The Location of Things*. Tibor de Nagy Editions, 1960.

MM Guest, Barbara. *Moscow Mansions*. Viking Press, 1973.

SA Guest, Barbara. *Seeking Air*. Reality Street, 2021 (originally published in 1978 by Black Sparrow; citations refer to the Reality Street edition).

Archival material is first noted with a full citation. Subsequent citations are abbreviated as follows:

Allen collection	Allen Collection of Frank O'Hara Letters, Archives and Special Collections, University of Connecticut Library, Storrs.
DuPlessis papers	Rachel Blau DuPlessis papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven.
Frankenthaler papers	Helen Frankenthaler papers, Helen Frankenthaler Foundation Archives, New York.
Guest papers	Barbara Guest papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven.

Introduction

> Regard the poem as plastic. It is moveable, touchable.
> It is a viable breathing substance.[1]

I "Cloud-work"

Halfway through a 1995 radio interview, Barbara Guest is invited by Charles Bernstein to describe "the discontinuities and the continuities" between an early poem of hers and a recent draft. Without hesitating, Guest responds:

> Guest: I see that I'm still interested in weather.
> Bernstein: Which is what changes.
> Guest: Yes.
> Bernstein: Always changes.[2]

To write of atmosphere in relation to Guest's poetry is, in the first instance, to go with the obvious: her poems are awash with meteorological phenomena, ranging from the unfathomably large to the imperceptibly minute, forces that envelop scenes and subjects which assert themselves only to sink back into haze. The two poems in question here—"Parachutes, My Love, Could Carry Us Higher," published in 1960; and "Neige Fondante," an unpublished poem[3]—glide through states of transition. In the earlier poem, "falling in love" is reclaimed from cliché as the speaker plumets through air and into water. As they descend, the environment's shimmering distortions stand in for the "exquisite" feel of self-abandon, and the vertical rush of the fall spills outward into the stretch of a "stranger ocean."[4] In the later poem, the wagging "tongue" of an old French barometer is paralleled with the mercurial delicacy of poetic language, which can transport us across continents

[1] Guest, *Forces of Imagination* (Kelsey Street Press, 2003), 32 (hereafter cited as *FI*).
[2] Guest, and Charles Bernstein, "LINEbreak: Barbara Guest in conversation with Charles Bernstein. A transcript of the 1995 radio show," *Jacket 2*, June 20, 2011, n.p.
[3] Guest, *The Location of Things* (Tibor de Nagy Editions, 1960), 27 (hereafter cited as *LT*); Guest, "Neige Fondante," recorded 1995, New York, radio interview with Charles Bernstein. Audio on *PennSound* (University of Pennsylvania).
[4] *LT*, 27.

from the observation of snow melting to John Keats' arrival in a wintry Chichester.[5] To cast the net wider still: the last line of the last poem of Guest's *Collected Poems* reads: "[t]asting of weather and cinnamon"—a final synaesthetic flourish that closes a lifetime's commitment to surrealist methods.[6] Then there is one of Guest's earliest surviving drafts, written at some point in the mid-1940s and published posthumously in 2011, which begins:

> After so many hours spent in the room,
> One wonders what the room will do.
> Whether speech or action will be first,
> And whether the weather will be first
> To begin.[7]

The punning on "whether the weather" condenses the strange game of meteorology: a science that must estimate unpredictability, establish periodicity without fixity, and probabilize the non-necessity of what will follow. This is what illuminates the paradoxical glint of Bernstein's "always changes" (the hard-and-fast of "always" that must cut some slack to "change"), and it is also what makes the weather one of Guest's preferred themes: the poem, like an old barometer out in the yard, will make a moment's passing legible; the atmosphere, like the poem, is a pattern of surprises.

What, then, can a concern for atmosphere alongside poetics bring to our understanding of Guest's poetry? How can a zone of experience as amorphous as atmosphere be meaningfully tied to the poetic page? That several kinds of resemblance, between poetry and atmosphere, between a patterned language and the conditions that surprise it, are played out in the writings of Guest is the point of departure for this dissertation's pursuit of a "poetics of atmosphere." At times, this resemblance subsists in the climatological motifs that hover around the speech or action of the poems. This is, of course, a timeless poetic device. It goes without saying that poetry projects pathos onto an exterior environment, circulates sentiment through surroundings, displaces and exteriorizes emotional states via imagery and metaphor.[8] In Guest's earliest poems, the poetics of

[5] Guest, "Neige Fondante."
[6] Guest, *The Collected Poems of Barbara Guest*, ed. Hadley Guest (Wesleyan University Press, 2008), 516 (hereafter cited as *CP*).
[7] Guest, "Three poems by Barbara Guest," *Jacket 2*, June 16, 2011, n.p.
[8] For an overview of pathos as a romantic trope, see Katrin Pahl, "Pathos," in *Tropes of Transport: Hegel and Emotion* (Northwestern University Press, 2012). Pathos, as a pre-cognitive affective force imagined to be circulating in environs, is characterised by Pahl as inherently intersubjective: "temper and sensitivity no longer

atmosphere is, for the most part, confined to this metaphorical plane. These writings, as one poem puts it, "cross the elemental stations / from windy field to still close,"[9] disaggregating their speaker's moods into the elements of their surreal cityscapes and haunted rooms. They take the ephemerality of light and air as their subject matter, and as the uncertain ground for their lyric interpellations. Late in her life, Guest comments on this method of composition in an email to poet Stephen Ratcliffe: "I too," she writes, "am arranging atmospheres for my new Surrealist poems."[10] Their correspondence is a record of such attempts at "arranging atmospheres," as the pair exchange poems that take in the wide skies of California, through a poetic practice that Guest describes in one message as "cloud-work."[11] It is this "cloud-work"—the agency afforded to climatic motifs as they stream through the poems and the poetic structuring that allows for this streaming to appear so inarrestable—which forms the first level at which a poetics of atmosphere operates.

If the phrase served only to chart an atlas of clouds in Guest's poems, then my readings would be limited to situating Guest in the long continuum of writers alert to environmental dynamics. I argue, however, that Guest's sensitivity to atmospheric conditions generates a tension that goes beyond the reliable trope of an environing pathos. For if transient passages of mere air and shimmering light can be said to ground these poems, then it is also true that such phenomena provoke sensations of dissolution and boundlessness that weaken the spatial and temporal coordinates of the lyric poem.[12] Indeed, how such evanescent and volatile substances can provide the "ground" for a poetic representation is a question that the poem's continually pose themselves. This is why the speakers of Guest's poems, and then the characters of her mid-period narrative works, are self-consciously preoccupied with the precarious confines of the self and its vulnerability to an outside that,

need to be projected to the side of the other, but can be acknowledge—in the self and in the other—as displaying the overlap of agency and suffering that constitutes passion" (62). In comparable terms, Marta Figlerowicz discusses how theories of affect celebrate "Proustian moments when the self and the sensory world, or the conscious and the unconscious self, or the self and another person, fall in step with each other in a way that seems momentarily to make a sliver of experience more vivid and more richly patterned than willful [sic] analysis could ever have made it seem." "Affect Theory Dossier: An Introduction," *Qui Parle* 20, no. 2 (2012), 4.

[9] Guest, *LT*, 18.

[10] "Email to Stephen Ratcliffe," November 18, 2003. Guest and Ratcliffe, *Letters* (Chax Press, 2022), 11.

[11] "Email to Stephen Ratcliffe," October 14, 2004. Guest and Ratcliffe, *Letters*, 125.

[12] Guest's exploration of the limits of lyric address, and the conditions within which it is immersed, anticipates a vein of twenty first century poetics that pursues the dissolution of lyric subjectivity. In contemporary scholarship, the trouble with defining lyric has become bound up with attempts to adequately describe how poetic texts dissolve subjectivity or disorient the self, in ways reminiscent of Guest's experiments with character, voice, and atmosphere. See Jeremy Page, "The Detached Self," *Poetics Today* 43, no. 4 (2022).

by turns, excites, and menaces them: "I wonder," begins the same poem quoted above, "if this new reality is going to destroy me."[13]

This "new reality" that presses into the poems is stratospherically vast, yet it serves to condition and recalibrate the most minimal acts of self-perception. It's here that the poetics of atmosphere assumes a less descriptive function and illuminates the formal workings of the poems. Guest's writing has consistently been praised for its unremitting experimentation with form, the urgency with which it tests the limits of the poetic page, and the risks that are accepted as part of this destructive self-renewal.[14] Like the weather, these changes are both foreseeable and volatile. As each collection absorbs the techniques of modernist precursors, the phenomenological scope and bounds of those techniques, and the kind of subjectivity that they frame and foreground, are transformed. Atmosphere names this expansivity, and the "always changing" conditions that Guest's forms make felt.

How, then, can we best describe this protean "cloud-work" and its effects in the poems? In its account of these transformations, this dissertation puts Guest's writing in dialogue with work on affect that theorizes the subject as unstable, emergent, and induced by processes operating below the threshold of conscious awareness. The precarious and only erratically present subjects of Guest's writing prefigure these affective models of subjectivity and some of the epistemological assumptions that underlie them.

My definition of affect in the chapters that follow remains broad enough to allow engagement with the work of several thinkers—principally: Brian Massumi, Marta Figlerowicz, Rei Terada, and Eve Sedgwick—who take markedly different positions on the roles played (or overplayed) by cognition, the body, and language in the subject's formation and in its attachments to the world. At one end, Massumi's contributions throw their weight behind the "autonomy" of affect, which means that while affective intensities might traverse

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[13] *LT*, 17.

[14] A few years on from their interview, Bernstein comments on Guest's formal experimentation, speaking in 1999 after Guest was awarded the Frost Medal from the Poetry Society of America: "I want to thank Barbara Guest for a lifetime of poetry for which we have been unprepared, for continually testing the limits of form and stretching the bounds of beauty." "Introducing Barbara Guest," *Jacket* 10 (1999), para.5. Linda Kinnahan discusses the generic range and experimentation of Guest's writing, which ranges across poetry, criticism, and prose, in her essay on the early reception of Guest's work in the 1960s: "Lyric Discourse, the Arts and the Avant-Garde: Barbara Guest and Kathleen Fraser in the Sixties," in *Lyric Interventions: Feminism, Experimental Poetry, and Contemporary Discourse* (University of Iowa Press, 2004). In chapter 1, I provide a historical survey of Guest's reception. As well as attending to formal innovation, readings of Guest commonly bring to the fore the self-reflexive, metapoetic and formally intricate nature of her writing. Lisa Russ Spaar is representative here; she begins her retrospective review of Guest's *The Blue Stairs* asking if there is space "in our current poetic moment […] for a poetry whose main concern is with what a given poem means intrinsically, on its own terms." "Second Acts: A Second Look at Second Books of Poetry: Barbara Guest and Gracie Leavitt," *LA Review of Books*, August 15, 2019, para.1.

or impact the body, they circulate independently through environments without ever being given within conscious processes.[15] In this framework, the body is like an instrument that reverberates as pressures are exerted upon it; cognitive processes are an ancillary and partial transcription of the sensations that such exertion provokes.

Contra this notion of affect as ever-eluding consciousness, Figlerowicz and Terada are more interested in how language, particularly as it is constructed through narrative and organized in rhetorical figures, apprehends, and mediates experiences which show up the limits of subjectivity. This sheds light on affect as a relational force, an approach that implicates the subject in an array of interactions that exceed its bounds and expose its instability, while maintaining an interest in representations of the self within discursive norms. Sedgwick's late affect-oriented work, drawing on the ideas of Silvan Tomkins, remains rooted in her concern for social structures, identity formation, and embodiment. Here, affect steps in to describe how subjects are posited within shared emotional conditions, and how it is that the communal life necessitated by such a model can affirm or supress, generate or disable certain habits of thought, behavioural practices, and structures of expression. This results in a skepticism directed towards "any project of narrating the emergence of a core self," and a concentration on potential instances of "disconfirmation and surprise" which will disrupt taxonomies of subjectivity that remain rooted in binary oppositions.[16]

Even this preliminary run-through intimates that the connections I draw between Guest's poetics and theories of affect in subsequent chapters will recursively return to key areas of disagreement among affect's proponents and detractors: the position of the subject; the possibility of apprehending or representing affect in language; the mechanisms and modalities with which affect is transmitted between subjects and across forms of social life. The principal advantage of working along this parallel is that it allows for Guest's works to be read in terms which move beyond their ekphrastic representations, and which can grapple with the shifting subject relations that the poems put in play. Further, affect studies supplies a language with which to describe the atmospheres that envelop and condition these relations—a dynamic which becomes increasingly prominent in Guest's writing as she reconfigures modernist aesthetics.

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[15] The notion of affect's autonomy is covered most comprehensively in chapter 1 of Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Duke University Press, 2002); originally published as an essay in *Cultural Critique*, no. 31 (1995).
[16] Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Duke University Press, 2003), 98.

The risk is that of levelling out the differences which distinguish not only Guest's work from affect, but varieties of affect theory from one another, particularly with regards to how they differently knot subjectivity to language. While it is true that Guest's subjects are always calibrating an onset of "external stimulus […] from simple physical or sensorial stimuli to complex and cognitive stimuli,"[17] it is also true that subjectivity, strained as it is under such pressures, is never altogether dissolved. When a new reality threatens the speakers of her poems with destruction, the poem performs the endurance of voice as it accommodates an exterior felt to be too large and too dissipated for normal perceptual limits. This means that, while I underscore how Guest comes towards the subject obliquely and irregularly, my engagement with the poems in what follows holds back from discarding the subject altogether. This is in part because Guest's poems often vacillate between a subject who is grappling with the onset of what Massumi would call impersonal "intensities," and a less speakerly mode which renders the page as an experimental space for a language that divests itself of subjectivity.

This ambivalent quality of Guest's writing indicates a fundamental tension in theories of affect which it is beyond the bounds of this dissertation to assess systematically, but which can be considered the sometimes awkward theoretical terrain that underlies the following discussion. We can consider this problem in terms of affect's "ephemerality": how is it that affect, qualified as transpersonal and pre-linguistic, can also be a sensation held deeply and durably in the body, and, in a secondary complication, reconstructed, mediated, and parsed in language? As Ruth Leys explains, in what remains the most clear-sighted and methodical critique of the turn to affect in cultural studies, thinkers of affect "posit a constitutive disjunction between our emotions on the one hand and our knowledge of what causes and maintains them on the other."[18] This gap takes on different guises in the works of thinkers of affect; its cause and consequence calculated according to ontological and epistemological assumptions—not least the degree to which language is adequate to the task of redescribing (let alone matching) embodied sensations. My assumption is that this open question of language's adequacy bears just enough resemblance to a poetics uncertain of its own rapport with a changing and unruly world for the cross-contamination of approaches to be worthwhile. It is striking, in any case, that Guest's at times mystical devotion to poetry's

[17] Ian Buchanan, "Affect," in *Dictionary of Critical Terms* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 5

[18] Leys, "The Turn to Affect: A Critique," *Critical Inquiry* 37, no. 3 (2011). Leys proposes "anti-intentionalism" as the common thread connecting a range of responses to affect and argues that this rejection of intention produces "a relative indifference to the role of ideas and beliefs in politics, culture, and art in favour of an 'ontological' concern with different people's corporeal-affective reactions" (451).

power is exemplified by her desire to bring into the poems the ephemeral substances that would, to the mind of most affect theorists, most clearly elude linguistic comprehension.

When it comes to reading for affect in literary texts, we are accustomed to how renditions of subjectivity can perform as "parables," in Massumi's terms, for actors in the world, or how particular forms reproduce "practices," in Sedgwick's, that might parallel the shaping of social habits elsewhere. My readings of Guest's poems will lean closer to the former approach, although my reasoning for this diverges from Massumi's premise of affect's autonomy. I understand the poem as apprehending affect's intersection with language precisely because poetics leverages the power of language's non-semantic qualities.

Atmosphere is the name I give to this area of intersection, where the phenomenologically slippery material of affect theory meets the felt experience of the poem. This means that representations of subjectivity *within* the poems are less indicative of how poetics works affectively than the form of the poem itself. The "parable," if there is to be one, would attune us first to how poetic language *acts*, rather than what it signifies. Much like sunshine breaking through cloud, the "meaning" of such an event cannot be given definitively, and its experiential worth could only be appraised through the sensual, the conditional, and the bodily. In the next chapter, I return to the affordances and limitations of this perspective. Leaving aside this methodological question for a moment, I turn now to the question of how Guest's poetics of atmosphere emerges out of her reinterpretations of modernist aesthetics.

II Affecting modernism

Departing from this consideration of content (poems that are *about* atmospheric phenomena and their bearing on the subject), we can begin to see the repercussions of such atmospherics at the levels of theme and conceit (the poem *as* atmosphere). The thematic case can be stated here, although its repercussions will be felt throughout this dissertation: Guest envisions modernism as an atmosphere within which she situates her own poetics.

This claim takes my argument further than the demonstration of influence or the reconstruction of a tradition. The modernist atmospheres of Guest's texts invite us to think about the ways in which a past moment can be inhabited, reactivated, and extended by a subsequent revision. Here, my interpretative steps are indebted to revaluations of the

workings of lineages, intertextuality, and long networks of mediation.[19] I take the influence of modernist aesthetics on Guest's work as a starting point, and the first part of each chapter can be read as an exposition of one such influence: the cubism of Juan Gris and Max Jacob, the metaphysical writings of H.D. and Stéphane Mallarmé, and the relational aesthetics of Gertrude Stein all make their appearances as conceptual antecedents to Guest's poetics. But rather than limiting myself to an account of how these figures left their mark on Guest's work, I also wish to think along with Wai Chee Dimock about how literary history "pays special attention to low-grade, low-visibility phenomena that, not always developed to their fullest or most forceful extent, have often been overlooked."[20] Guest, a "devout classicist" of modernism,[21] constructs her poetry out of an archaeology of avant-garde futures, incomplete utopias, and stray figures on the margins of early twentieth century aesthetics. Her work belongs within a relational arc longer than the immediate reception of modernism in mid-century New York, one that cuts across major strands of inter-war modernism, reaches back into avant-garde currents of the late nineteenth century, and looks forward towards contemporary poetics. This means thinking about how Guest, far from passively receiving modernist tenets, chooses to accentuate and reformulate aspects of modernism that may otherwise remain concealed or peripheral.

Unlike the over-determining and unidirectional language of influence and tradition, this focus on Guest's adaptive and mobile repurposing of modernism is another way into her poetics of atmosphere. This can be clarified with reference to what Jonathan Flatley calls

[19] In particular, I situate this dissertation in the wake of modernist studies' expansions over the last fifteen years. In 2008, Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz presented "expansion" as the keyword for their New Modernist Studies. "The New Modernist Studies," *PMLA* 123, no. 3 (2008). Since their intervention, scholars have continued, in the words of Jessica Berman, to extend the scope of plural modernism*s* as "a mode that arises in conjunction with impending modernity in many places, guises, attitudes, and temporalities." *Modernist Commitments: Ethics, Politics, and Transnational Modernism* (Columbia University Press, 2011), 32. Susan Stanford Friedman argues that these spatial expansions have spurred a corresponding sensitivity to "nonlinear notions of time […] that do not reproduce the limitations of conventional periodization." "Temporalities and Modernities: New Time Studies," *Modernism/modernity* 26, no. 2 (2019), 381. For a discussion of scholarly re-evaluations of modernist temporalities and periodization, see also the intervention of David James and Urmila Sheshagiri, who propose "metamodernism" as a means of describing how narratives of modernism continue to regenerate and expand the field's parameters. "Metamodernism: Narratives of Continuity and Revolution." *PMLA* 129, no. 1 (2014).

[20] Dimock, *Weak Planet: Literature and Assisted Survival* (University of Chicago Press, 2020), 9.

[21] The phrase is from Ange Mlinko's review of Guest's *Collected Poems*. Mlinko asserts that "[n]o American poet—with the exception of John Ashbery—so reverently extended early modernist aesthetics into the second half of the twentieth century." "Words as Amulets," *London Review of Books* 31, no. 23, December 3, 2009, para.1. While I broadly agree with this characterization, I propose that Guest's extensions of modernist aesthetics were unorthodox and irreverent in their own time, as she carved out a poetics that distinguished her from the institutionalisation of modernism in mid-century New York.

"affective life in its historicity" as it emerges and is transformed in literary texts.[22] Flatley's conceptualisation of mood in his work *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism* attends to the "the affective experience one has within the world created by the work on the one hand and the affective attachments one has within the world of everyday life on the other."[23] Flatley defines affective mapping as a "mobile machine of self-estrangement"; his aim being to detail not only the representation of a structure of feeling *within* a work, but also the relations drawn between this structure, its historical present, and its future receptions. This is Flatley's account of that process in his book's introduction:

> In essence, the reader has an affective experience within the space of the text, one that repeats or recalls earlier, other experiences, and then is estranged from that experience, and by way of that estrangement told or taught something about it.[24]

Guest's poems convert their modernist pasts into comparable affective experiences. This means that they display their own attachments to modernism, and that they enjoin readers to inhabit modernism as though it were an atmosphere that the text traverses and is transformed by—not simply, or not only, a historical occasion that the text "depicts."

One ambition of this dissertation is, therefore, to "map," as Flatley would put it, this conversion of modernisms into the new poetic forms of Guest's work. The contours of Guest's biography show her life-long attachment to modernist aesthetics emerging between an initial contact with the European avant-gardes and the highpoint of their institutionalization in the United States. Guest was born in 1920, when Dada was about to make its way back to Europe after its first short-lived appearance in New York, with Man Ray stating in a letter of 1921: "All New York is dada, and will not tolerate a rival."[25] It would be fifteen years before Dada's carefully staged return: the exhibition *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* opened at the Museum of Modern Art in December 1936, its inauguration delayed due to "the great number and variety of the art" arriving from Paris.[26] In the interim, the institution had begun its annexation of what was already the historic avant-garde.

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[22] Flatley, *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism* (Harvard University Press, 2008), 84.
[23] Flatley, *Affective Mapping*, 84.
[24] Flatley, *Affective Mapping*, 7.
[25] Ray, "Letter to Tristan Tzara, 1921," *Man Ray Writings on Art*, ed. Jennifer Mundy (Getty Publications, 2016), 65.
[26] Museum of Modern Art, "Press Release," November 16, 1936.

Guest moved to New York in the 1940s, in the midst of these migrations, and she would begin her career there as an art critic for *Art News* and then poetry editor at *Partisan Review*. She describes being "'brought up' by the refugee colony" in the city: "men who took it upon themselves to educate me in European customs, who gathered in New York in rooms to discuss the political past of Europe and the current involvement in war."[27] One of these men was Tibor De Nagy, the Hungarian banker turned art dealer who opened his eponymous New York gallery with John Bernard Myers in 1950, and who published Guest's first collection. After his death, Guest wrote of consuming his memories of pre-war Europe:

> I am so happy he would share those memories with me: Hungary, the villa, the paintings, the books, the sister, the pictures on the wall that needed to be brought here, his wife, his very accurate memories of a place and time foreign to me and which I was eager to enter and which he was pleased to share. He brought to my life his memories and I consumed them.[28]

Confirming this sense of an intense immersion within movements, places and times foreign to her, Guest writes elsewhere of how she "grew up under the shadow of Surrealism" and, in an interview with Catherine Wagner, she comments: "I grew up in the febrility of modernisms. I love constructionism and cubism, all those isms [sic]."[29]

Modernism, then, is for Guest a foreign place and time which one enters into, an inexhaustible imaginary that furnishes the poems with their exoticized European backdrops. This desire to go on inhabiting a "febrility of modernisms," which Guest invites her readers to make their own, differs in a decisive sense from Flatley's idea of affective mapping. Flatley's readings of Henry James, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Andrei Platonov hinge on the transformative potentials of "self-estrangement" within their works: the mechanism by which one's own "emotional life must appear unfamiliar" so that it can be thrown into a historical relation.[30] Guest, in contrast, renders modernist pasts as an atmosphere within which the self is dispersed: relieved of its present particulates, consumed by an alien setting, and momentarily synchronized with the historical circumstances that the poem reactivates.

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[27] "Additional Thoughts for Rachel du Plessis [sic]." September 30, 2000 (received). Box 5, folder "Guest, Barbara," Rachel Blau DuPlessis papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven.
[28] "Memorial talk, May 1994." Box 83, folder 1457, Barbara Guest papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven.
[29] *FI*, 51; Guest, interview by Catherine Wagner, *Colorado Review* 24, no. 1 (1994), 176.
[30] Flatley, *Affective Mapping*, 6.

As a preliminary illustration of this, the poem "The View from Kandinsky's Window," from the collection *Fair Realism* of 1989, is particularly useful, since it can demonstrate many of the qualities of Guest's poetics that I have discussed so far. The poem returns us to a marginalized moment of the historic avant-garde that projects itself towards the future. Next, it transposes a present time frame onto this moment, and it proceeds by constellating this triad of past, present, and the future of the past. Guest then attempts to regulate these temporalities by zeroing in on a rearrangement of visual phenomena, and in so doing she extends an avant-garde inclination to blur distinctions between the linguistic and the visual into the poem itself (the specific inclination being, in this case, one connected to Kandinsky's own theorizing). Within these dynamics, the presence of a subject is distinguishable only in proximity to Kandinsky's history, so that the "We" of the poem's final lines leaps out as the unexpected outcome of the poem's transpositions of one time onto another. Building up to that point from afar, the poem opens with a vision of the Russian painter at his window in Moscow:

> An over-large pot of geraniums on the ledge
> the curtains part
> a view from Kandinsky's window.
>
> The park shows little concern with Kandinsky's history
> these buildings are brief about his early life,
> reflections of him seen from the window
> busy with preparations for exile
> the relevance of the geranium color.
>
> Partings, future projects
> exceptional changes are meant to occur,
> he will rearrange spatial decisions
> the geranium disappears, so shall a person.
>
> His apartment looking down on a Square
> the last peek of Russia
> an intimate one knowing equipment vanishes.

At Union Square the curtains are drawn
diagonals greet us, those curves and sharp city
verticals he taught us their residual movements.

The stroke of difficult white finds an exit
the canvas is clean, pure and violent
a rhythm of exile in its vein,

We have similar balconies, scale
degrees of ingress, door knobs, daffodils
like Kandinsky's view from his window
distance at the street end.[31]

The poem unfolds as a double-sighted layering of its temporal sites. It is, in short, an avant-gardist *vision*, with all the relaxation of logical order that the mystical latencies of that word imply: "the overcoming of instrumental knowledge and, therefore, the de-empowerment of the subject, the entrusting of the subject to the rhythm of the real, de-constructing itself."[32] First, we are drawn to Kandinsky's view from his window over Moscow, on the verge of his departure from the city for exile in 1921, as he casts ahead to "future projects." In choosing this moment, Guest envisions the artist around the same period that critic Clement Greenberg identified as the beginning of Kandinsky's artistic decline.[33] In response to this verdict, the poem draws attention to Kandinsky's marginality and impending exile as generative of, rather than damaging to, his future projects. Second, the poem is also a view of this moment, one that looks back with the knowledge of the "exceptional changes" that will come. This doubleness is insinuated by the switch of the title's definite article ("*The* view") to an indefinite one in the third line ("*a* view"—one among others), and set up by the disjuncts of

[31] Guest, *Fair Realism* (Sun & Moon, 1989), 13-14.
[32] Alessandro Dal Lago, "On the Ethics of Weakness: Simone Weil and Nihilism," in *Weak Thought,* ed. Gianni Vattimo and Pier Aldo Rovatti, trans. Peter Carravetta (State University of New York Press, 2012), 125. In my conclusion, I return to the idea that Guest's poetics can be read as part of a mystical modernist tradition.
[33] In his earliest mention of Kandinsky in a review from 1941, Greenberg speculates that post-1914 the artist was misled by "some false analogies with the mathematics of music, with music as an art of self-expression, and with Platonic notions of essential form." Greenberg is referring here to the influence of Arnold Schönberg's atonal experimentation, which Kandinsky had first encountered in May 1913 at a concert in Munich. "Review of Exhibitions of Joan Miró, Fernand Léger, and Wassily Kandinsky," in *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O'Brian (University of Chicago Press, 1986), 64.

the opening stanza, which seem to place the perspective as both looking up (from the second stanza's park) and down through the parted curtains.

The poem's window scene constitutes a restaging of a Kandinskian technique. In his introduction to *Point and Line to Plane*, first translated into English in 1947 by New York's Museum of Non-Objective Painting (the precursor to the Guggenheim), Kandinsky begins by describing how "[e]very phenomenon can be experienced in two ways":

> Externally–or–
> inwardly.
>
> The street can be observed through the windowpane, which diminishes its sound so that its movement become phantom-like. The street itself, as seen through the transparent (yet hard and firm) pane seems set apart, existing and pulsating as if "beyond."[34]

This image of the window opens Kandinsky's treatise on what he defined as the two basic elements of painting: the point and the line, in a theory which he developed during his time in Berlin as a contribution to "the science of art."[35] Kandinsky's text begins from the window as point—a fixed position that does not yet have significance as it is given without relation—and it moves on to the vertical and horizontal lines of the street, lines which enmesh the window's point within the coordinates of urban living, and which ultimately draw the view towards a perception that is beyond reality as it can be immediately observed from the window.

Kandinsky's method, which can only be outlined here, informs the arrangement, texture, and tonalities of Guest's poem.[36] But this informing is returned in kind with a poetic

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[34] Kandinsky, *Point and Line to Plane*, ed. and trans. Howard Dearstyne and Hilla Rebay (Guggenheim Foundation, 1947), 17.

[35] Kandinsky, *Point and Line*, 76.

[36] Guest had come across at least some passages of Kandinsky's treatise. In 1986, she described finding "one book that quoted him on the necessity in art for 'inner sound'" and beginning her poem's composition shortly after:

> One day looking down on Union Square from the apartment, the sudden realization arrived that Union Square looked remarkably like the Moscow park seen from Kandinsky's apartment.
>
> Several years passed and I moved near the south side of Union Square. I walked over to Union Square one day and looked up at my former apartment. The building now seemed to resemble the old photograph of Kandinsky's apartment. That evening I began to write a poem about the last evening Kandinsky had spent in Moscow before going into exile (*FI*, 54).

renewal of Kandinsky's axioms. The exchange between poet and painter is directly expressed at the poem's close: "We have similar balconies, scale / degrees of ingress." As in Kandinsky's theorizing, relatedness and scale are central to Guest's text, from the "over-large pot of geraniums" to the veiled pun of "peek," which ties together the act of looking with its high-up vantage point (perhaps also recalling Greenberg's suggestion that Kandinsky had "peaked" in the 1910s). The choice of "ingress" in the final stanza returns us to the Kandinskian relation of distance and perception: ingress being a position on the threshold, the edge of an entrance not yet crossed, and so resonating in a poem that hovers sympathetically on the edge—and the ledge—of Kandinsky's aesthetic foresight. Guest's poem, then, is not quite a Kandinskian vision, nor a vision of Kandinsky. It is an attempt to place both of these possibilities adjacent to one another. Guest thereby insists on a renewal of the historic avant-garde, a renewal that is worked through as poetic process, and that poses a proliferation of possible relations with prior reflections on the porous binaries of word and image, painting and poetry, distance and scale.

This reactivation of modernist techniques within Guest's poems' spatial and temporal arrangements is the second aspect of her work that I intend to cover with the poetics of atmosphere. As seen in this poetic dialogue with Kandinsky, Guest's returns to modernist pasts do not provoke self-estrangement, but something more like sympathy or harmony, sentiments that resonate because she imagines the past and present as materializing within the shared atmosphere that is built by the poem. The thematization of this process emerges most strongly in the work from 1979 to 1984, the period during which Guest worked on her biography of H.D., an undertaking that she would later call a "dangerous event."[37] Reflecting on the experience in a later essay, Guest describes her approach to the biography in terms that are similar to Flatley's account of how texts invite readers to repeat, recall, and reactivate affective experiences:

> I would follow the wind where it went or where it lay. As my character practiced an indirection, so would my method. Instead of a privileged narrative, I decided to present material in a form which asked each reader to participate actively by synthesizing the narrative according to the personal determinant of the reader. I was

Doubleness is present too in this account: Guest looking down on Union Square and then looking up at the apartment. The poem holds such points in tension, and thereby underscores the movements and dynamics of Kandinsky's theories as they are brought into a poetics.

[37] Guest, interview by Mark Hillringhouse, *The American Poetry Review* 21, no. 4 (1992), 29.

> not going to present a formal narrative line. The line would be moving and inter changeable, hopefully, within time. I wanted a chronology to be a viable aid, the way I believed it to be "in real life." I was at risk. I knew that a moveable chronology goes against a consistently taught and expected formula. But life is not linear. It shoots about, takes unexpected turns, goes the other way with its own firmness.[38]

Guest's biography of H.D., based on several years of archival work at the Beinecke Library, was attuned to the vitality of a life flowing beneath the record, one with its own rhythms and uncertain reasonings.[39] This sympathy for her subject, which, as with Kandinsky, modifies the methods with which that subject is rendered, flows directly from her efforts to reinhabit a high modernist past, an era that Guest said she missed, although she'd never lived it: "I miss that era, I miss the people (characters) I lived with in that era writing the bio."[40]

So far, I have outlined a poetics of atmosphere that operates across the levels of content (atmospheric phenomena) and theme (modernist atmospheres). This goes some way towards defining the "what" that Guest's poetics takes as its object: the mere phenomena of atmospheric conditions that are endowed with form and agency in the poem, and which, in turn, temper and trouble the form and agency of the subjects they envelop. I have also proposed one possible source for this model, as thematized in the poems: the desire to inhabit a modernist past leads Guest to distend the spatial and temporal coordinates of her poems. Atmosphere provides a term ample enough to comprise both steps of this process. Yet neither of these aspects of Guest's poetry, taken together or apart, can amount to a systematic description of the particularity of her poetic project. It is within the late works that this particularity emerges most forcefully. Formally, these poems are stitched together out of parataxical chunks of text, dangling across the white space of the page; sparse phrases arranged with asyndetic coordination that evoke events and perceptions at the limits of semantic availability. Thematically, they become metapoetically preoccupied with the gap that separates their language from reality, and the workings of earlier modernist efforts to close or fill that gap.

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[38] Guest, "The Intimacy of Biography," *The Iowa Review* 16, no. 3 (1986), 69.
[39] Guest's focus on what, in the same essay, she calls the "real life" of her subject—including daily routines and personal relations—means that H.D.'s poetry is largely excluded from her biography. Early reviews comment on this omission and the absence of Guest's reflections on the poetry, as "[distorting] the account" and preventing Guest "from becoming moved deeply by what moved H.D.," and as an "[unfortunate] lack of critical analysis" which excludes much of H.D.'s later work. Adalaide Morris, "Review of 'Herself Defined: The Poet H.D. and Her World," *The Iowa Review* 15, no. 2 (1985), 199; Michiko Kakutani, "Review: Herself Defined," *The New York Times*, January 4, 1984, 17.
[40] Guest, interview by Hillringhouse, 29.

It's here that I take up the phrase "a viable breathing substance," so as to shed some light on the main conceit of Guest's poetics of atmosphere. Guest uses the phrase in a late essay titled "Poetry the True Fiction," first delivered as a lecture in 1992. In that essay, Guest's supposition is that the poem does not represent reality, rather, it constructs itself as an atmospheric zone into which the poet (and then the reader) enters. The poem is "viable" in the slightly antiquated sense of "capable of living; able to maintain a separate existence."[41] It is a "breathing substance" because, in the most intuitive sense, prosody activates breath and, in a more conceptual sense, the poem creates a spatial and temporal arrangement within which non-referential aspects of language interact with an organic responsiveness to one another.[42] The vitalist texture of Guest's language here serves to stress two aspects of her poetics that remain in tension with one another across her writing. Just as a thing in the world cannot be said to possess a referent, poetic language is free to operate independently from referentiality: it exists for itself. On the other hand, just as an atmosphere can be said to contain and affect a thing that is posed *within* it, the poem holds and gives form to formless elements of reality: sensations that are mobile and without an object, and which the poem must nonetheless work hard to house.

This is the final level at which my readings of Guest operate: her conception of the poem *as* an atmosphere, as a viable breathing substance. More than a metaphorical association, this conceit puts the poem in a synecdochic relation with the world. The poem gives us in miniature the phenomenological dynamisms of impersonal, precognitive, and mobile forces within which subjectivized perception is enveloped. Where representation is refused, it is refused because poetic language is capable of sustaining *a* reality, one of self-enclosed relations, made out of the self-referential construction of its own rules and logics, which only has limited and infrequent need of relation to an external referent.

This brings my analysis of Guest in touch with ongoing debates about the modernist/realist antinomy. Indeed, to assert that Guest is a realist (because, not in spite of, her modernism), in the sense that her work seeks to englobe phenomena that resist representation precisely because they are of a substance deemed *more real* than the defective

[41] Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "viable (adj.1), sense b," July 2023, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/4519590521.

[42] Thematically and formally, this emphasis on breath work and the vitality of language means a poetics that focuses on the most elemental aspects of versification. For a discussion of this, see Nathaniel Mackey, "Breath and Precarity," in *Poetics and Precarity*, eds. Myung Mi Kim and Cristanne Miller (SUNY Press, 2018).

instrument of language, is to place her work on the fault line of this discussion.[43] This is realism intended as an epistemological inquiry, comparable in its interrogative mode and experimental resolve to the kind formulated by Fredric Jameson:

> We may even wonder whether the most useful "definition" of *realism* may not lie in the capacity of a text to raise the issue of realism as such within its own structure, no matter what answer it decides to give. In that case, we might call realist any literary work which raises the question of realism, whether to problematize it or attempt to reinvent it; *realism* would then name any narrative that is organized, not around the question of the "real" or of "reality" (philosophical questions), but around the very interrogation of realism and the realistic itself.[44]

Jameson's "definition" here is still, it should be noted, broad enough to contain not only Guest, but the New York poets more generally. It could encompass James Schuyler's admiration for realist painters that seek "to leave things as they are", or O'Hara's "I-do-this I-do-that" poems, as they abridge the distance between the experience of the text and the experience of the city.[45] Guest's difference lies in her willingness to enter into the philosophical territory that Jameson's formulation brackets off from the literary work. Her poems continually problematize the perceptibility of reality because they take reality to be ontologically irreducible to language. Despite this, it is poetic language, according to Guest, that holds the special capacity to make that irreducible expanse felt.

This positions the poem at the juncture of extra-linguistic sensations and the body's apprehension of them—a privileged site located at the far limits of representation and signification. This is "realist" poetics in a sense that discards the standard mimetic gloss of the term and aims instead at an intensification of the poem as event that *intervenes* in reality. As Stephen J. Ross writes on John Ashbery's poetry, this pursuit of the real is "defined by the degree to which inner and outer, subject and object, narrative and material, description and meaning can be mobilized all at once."[46] In the case of Guest, I would add past and future to this list, since modernist pasts are recurrently evoked in the poems for their

[43] Nicolas Bourriaud articulates the trouble with opposing modernism to realism by returning to the latter's origins in the nineteenth century, where Gustave Courbet used it to describe "a *direct pictorial relation to the real as it is lived*." *The Exform*, trans. Erik Butler (Verso, 2016), 78; emphasis in original.
[44] Jameson, "Antinomies of the Realism-Modernism Debate," *Modern Language Quarterly* 73, no. 3 (2012), 478-79.
[45] Schuyler, *Selected Art Writings*, ed. Simon Pettet (Black Sparrow, 1998), 32.
[46] Ross, *Invisible Terrain: John Ashbery and the Aesthetics of Nature* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 19

resonance not only with a sympathetic present but with a still more receptive future moment. The modernist atmospheres of Guest's poems are fashioned out of this arrangement of past times alongside their imagined futures. The formal restlessness of her poetics and the urgency that drives it are products of this reconception of the poem as a container for multiple temporalities.

III Atmosphere and artifice

A poetics of atmosphere offers a way into the interlacing of content and theme, form and conceit that Guest's texts perform. A description of its modernist origins and a detailing of its mechanisms is the primary aim of the following chapters. As anticipated in the above discussion of Flatley's work on mood, in which affect is employed as a way of thinking through collective and generalizable responses to literary works, my thesis is in dialogue with a turn towards atmosphere in cultural studies this century.

Foregrounded by philosopher Gernot Böhme as the "fundamental concept of a new aesthetics," the concept of atmosphere moves across several fields of study influenced by the broader turn to affect.[47] As Böhme describes, it is the mobile, relational, and impersonal quality of atmosphere that permits the word to capture "typical intermediate phenomenon, something between subject and object," and allows its adopters to discuss art works, and their affective force, "from the side of reception aesthetics and from the side of production aesthetics."[48] Böhme's work stresses three aspects of atmosphere, chiefly as advanced in architectural aesthetics: first, atmospheres can be produced; second, atmospheres are "out there," as "quasi-objective" states that are apprehended by subjects but which are anchored in a non-subjective materiality; third, atmospheres can be produced and transformed by "certain agents or facts, in particular by sound and illumination."[49] Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht has elaborated the origins of this emergent interest in his work *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung: On a Hidden Potential of Literature*, in which he details how studies of affect have shifted scholarly emphasis away from structures of discourse, the text, and the subject, and towards ontological propositions as they are modelled and probed in literature: the *what* of a represented object as it begins to colour, displace or disrupt the *how* of its aesthetic representation. Guest's work—its energies concentrated on the blurry confine between

[47] Böhme, "Atmosphere as the Fundamental Concept of a New Aesthetics," *Thesis Eleven* 36, no. 1 (1993).
[48] Böhme, "The Art of the Stage Set as a Paradigm for an Aesthetics of Atmospheres," *Ambiances* (2013), para.5.
[49] Böhme, *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres*, ed. Jean-Paul Thibaud (Routledge, 2017), 3.

language and its referent, the poem and reality—strains at the edge of this "paradigm of representation."[50] As meditations on possible escapes from that paradigm, the poems are interested in phenomena that hover at the limits of perceptibility, shimmers of insight that constitute the limit-experiences which Guest's poetic forms are made for and from.

Atmosphere describes how affective forces coalesce within a given space and time, and how such forces are then registered in the present by the (reading, listening, responding) body. In the work of phenomenologist Hermann Schmitz, atmosphere is conceptualised as a space where "diffuse, undefined, and affective states" converge around a body, in a manner that complicates the binaries that commonly calibrate our sense of location in the world: subject/object, body/world, interior/exterior.[51] Schmitz, in developing what he calls a "New Phenomenology," positions his works against a classical model of subjectivity which configures feelings as introjected from the exterior into a closed interior space, and which reduces the exterior world to an area that is plottable and navigable from the coordinates of a centralizing perspective.[52] According to Schmitz, this division of interior and exterior, and the organisation of the exterior world according to measurable distances, was the foundational move of ancient geometry. In the aftermath of that split, "[w]hat remains are interior worlds for self-control and an external world for mastery of the world, first by God, then by humans and their works."[53]

Atmosphere is then mobilized by Schmitz as an alternative way of describing our experience of spaces that he calls "area-less": spaces which, unlike those that become "locational" through the interference of geometrical measure, are corporeally perceptible, but which do not depend on a split between subject and world. The body's reception of the environing cues that make up such a space can be described as an atmosphere: "an *atmosphere* is a total or partial, but in any case comprehensive, occupation of an area-less space in the sphere of that which is experienced as being present."[54] This definition serves

[50] Gumbrecht, *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung: On a Hidden Potential of Literature*, trans. Erik Butler (Stanford University Press, 2012), 20.
[51] Schmitz, *New Phenomenology: A Brief Introduction* (Mimesis International, 2019), 11.
[52] Schmitz, "Atmospheric Spaces," *Ambiances*, para.1-3.
[53] Schmitz, "Atmospheric Spaces," para.1.
[54] Schmitz, "Atmospheric Spaces," para.6-7. For a discussion of Schmitz's work as it relates to contemporary aesthetics, see Jayne Lewis, "'The Endless Space of Air': Helen Keller's Auratic Worldbuilding," in *Imagining Air: Cultural Axiology and the Politics of Invisibility*, ed. Tatiana Konrad (University of Exeter Press, 2023). For Lewis, Schmitz succeeds in "[rescuing] some element of an archaic super-sensory atmospheric body," allowing us to meaningfully posit the self as an effect of enveloping forces. In Lewis' critique, however, Schmitz maintains the division between the body and world, since the former is still understood as mediating an outer world which it cannot apprehend without the mediation of "verbal, conceptual, and scientific technologies" (204).

as a preliminary outline of the objects of my analysis in subsequent chapters: affective forces that are mobile, non-subjective, and experienced in the body. What Guest pushes towards is the presencing of such forces in a language that draws attention to its own materiality and in forms that play with the possibility of rendering such extra-linguistic phenomena on the page.

The question that remains, then, is how should atmosphere, as the convergence of non-subjective sensations that invest the body but travel from and on elsewhere, be thought in relation to poetics? In providing an introductory response, two bodies of work that stand upstream of contemporary affect studies and Schmitz's "New Phenomenology" are of relevance. The first is Mikel Dufrenne's *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, first published in 1953, and translated into English in 1973. The second is Veronica Forrest-Thomson's *Poetic Artifice*, first published in 1978.

Dufrenne's work is significant because it provides a schema within which the experience of the poem can be distinguished from the text of the poem, in a manner that resonates with Guest's poetics and contemporary approaches to poetry. For Dufrenne, the work of art is distinct from the aesthetic object. The former denotes an object that "converts from nature whatever lends itself to being aestheticized and can appear aesthetic itself."[55] This object is *not yet* an aesthetic object: to become one it must be potentiated by an encounter with a subject who regards it. The work of art is that object which invites and awaits this comprehension by a spectator.[56] The work of art stimulates a contemplative state that will dwell on what Dufrenne calls "the sensuous"; material elements that, given form in the work of art, elicit an affective response from the viewer or reader:

> [The work of art] invites subjectivity to constitute itself as a pure look, as a free opening onto the object, and it invites the special content of this subjectivity to enter the service of understanding instead of obscuring it by causing its own preferences to prevail. The work of art is an education in attention.[57]

It is only this state of contemplation, this participation in an education in attention, that is capable of transforming the work of art into an aesthetic object. Guest, in her essay "Poetry

[55] Dufrenne, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, trans. Edward S. Casey (Northwestern University Press, 1973), 84.
[56] "The work of art is what is left of the aesthetic object when it is not perceived—the aesthetic object in the state of the possible, awaiting its epiphany." Dufrenne, *Phenomenology*, 14.
[57] Dufrenne, *Phenomenology*, 63.

the True Fiction," outlines a comparable process by which the words of a poem invite the engagement of a reading subject, so that the poetic page becomes, in a Dufrennian sense, the "not yet" of poetic experience:

> We have learned that words are only utensils. They are inorganic unless there is a spirit within the poem to elevate it, to give it "wings," so that the poem may soar above the page and enter our consciousness where we may if we wish give it a long life, a longer life than would occur when the poem lies without elevation on a piece of paper.[58]

Guest's term for this state of elevation is "vision"—the mystical condition necessary for the words of a poem to become active as a poetic experience.[59] Her description of this state, in a language that draws on modernist influences and resonates with Dufrenne's phenomenology, hinges on the idea that the experience of the poem is the experience of *an exchange* that occurs between the sensuality of language and the sensuality of the body that receives it. The poem, continues Guest in the same essay, "has not only a voice, but a mouth and the mouth must move just as much as the voice must speak": it is this apprehension of the sensuous materiality of the poem that distinguishes it from other types of language use.[60] It's for this reason that Guest conceives of the poem as an autonomous *being*—a viable breathing substance: poetic language is not the representation of a thing (this would be, for Guest, merely words as utensils, and, for Dufrenne, a mere thing). Poetic language is, instead, a language that has its own "auditory and spatial needs," a language that calls the reader's attention to its sensuous excess.[61]

This brings us back to the question of atmosphere as a means of describing the enveloping presence of inter-subjective phenomena that invest the body. Dufrenne turns to atmosphere towards the end of part one of his *Phenomenology*, where he conceptualizes the aesthetic work as the expression of an atmosphere (what he sometimes calls a "world-atmosphere"), as opposed to the representation of a world.[62] Our experience of the aesthetic

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[58] *FI*, 29.
[59] *FI*, 29.
[60] *FI*, 30. Dufrenne makes a similar point in his *Phenomenology* during his discussion of the representation of a subject in the literary arts: differentiating poetry from prose, he defines the latter as "where the word retains the character of a thing of nature and is expected to manifest its sensuous qualities" (312).
[61] *FI*, 30.
[62] For an analysis of Dufrenne's multivalent use of atmosphere, see the reflections in Ben Anderson, *Encountering Affect: Capacities, Apparatuses, Conditions* (Ashgate, 2014). Anderson's own theorization of

work is here, for Dufrenne, irreducible to our comprehension of what it represents. In fact, before we are able to even parse the signifying content of a work, we are immersed in the presence of its sensuous qualities: "[i]t is often through a certain atmosphere into which we are initially thrown that we apprehend the represented object."[63] This atmosphere "emanates" or "radiates" out from the aesthetic object, but it is also a quality that exists only insofar as it "attested to by a perception and […] situated at the crossroads of a plurality of perceptions."[64] Although his examples are usually drawn from non-literary works, Dufrenne returns to the concept of atmosphere as the sum of a work's sensuous qualities in his subsequent mention of Stéphane Mallarmé's poetry:

> After I have reflected on a poem by Mallarmé, subjected it to a grammatical analysis, interpreted its terms, established its subject—in short, when the work appears to me as clearly as possible—I must still say what Mallarmé has communicated and state, if only half-consciously and to myself, the poem's unique atmosphere, that rarefied world midway between dream and perception where all the edges of reality are blunted in the wave of an exhausted desire and a bitterness which has renounced revolt. Then, if I wish to express the unique affective quality of the Mallarmean world, I can return to all that I learned from my previous reflection, but in such a way that this knowledge will from now on be clarified by feeling, which reveals this quality rather than simply preparing for its advent.[65]

The "unique affective quality" of the poem can be taken as the object of conscious reflection, yet such reflection is itself primed by an interaction with the reality that the poem invites its reader to participate in. For Dufrenne, then, atmosphere denotes the affective intensities which the work's form put in motion, as distinct from its referential or communicative qualities. Not coincidentally, Guest makes her own reference to Mallarmé in "Poetry the True Fiction," taking up his formulation of poetics as a space in which "the concrete object is 'bathed in a new atmosphere,' lifted out of itself to become a fiction." "The poet," Guest

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the concept emphasises atmosphere as an ensemble, a pulling together of elements that is more than the sum of its parts: "a singular affective quality that is irreducible to a series of interacting, component parts" (143).

[63] Dufrenne, *Phenomenology*, 187-88.

[64] Dufrenne, *Phenomenology*, 47.

[65] Dufrenne, *Phenomenology*, 422.

goes on, "is not there only to share a poetic communication, but to stimulate an imaginative speculation on the nature of reality."[66]

Dufrenne's use of atmosphere, although developed non-systematically across his *Phenomenology*, and although often, as above, appearing only as the counterpoint to readings of the aesthetic object that would reduce it to its communicative function or representational capacity, anticipates the theories of affect that my subsequent chapters address in greater detail. For now, the salient characteristics of the concept can be summarized as follows: atmosphere is pre- or non-figurative—it describes not the part mechanics of signification in a work but the holistic effects of the work's sensuous qualities; atmosphere is relational—it describes how this sensuality inheres in the work's form *and* is conveyed through the body of a viewer or reader; atmosphere is mobile—it denotes the continual and inexhaustible exchange occurring between elements of the work and its viewer or reader.

Next to this mobile, relational, and pre-figurative sense of the poem's atmosphere, the formalist concerns of Veronica Forrest-Thomson might seem an odd companion. For whereas Dufrenne explores the phenomenological consequences of an aesthetic experience as necessarily *in excess* of the components of its object, Forrest-Thomson repeatedly insists that "poetry takes over the external world through its forms of language": the poem's effects can, must, be reducible to the workings of its formal components.[67] And whereas Dufrenne turns to atmosphere in order to capture the porosity of a work of art as it is traversed by affects that it activates but does not fully contain, Forrest-Thomson conceives of the poem as a Wittgensteinian language-game: an enclosed relay of non-semantic features, governed by a tight internal logic, that strictly seals off the poem's world from the external world.[68] Despite these evident dissimilarities, I want to suggest that Forrest-Thomson's concept of poetic artifice does bear resemblance to the poetics of atmosphere, as articulated by Guest, if not to the notion of atmosphere as it is traced within Dufrenne.

Artifice, for Forrest-Thomson, covers "the complexity of those non-meaningful features which differentiate poetry from everyday language and make it something other than an external thematic statement about an already-known world."[69] Formal patterning, meter,

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[66] *FI*, 26. In chapter 3, I return to this link between Guest's writing and Mallarmé's poetics.
[67] Forrest-Thomson, *Poetic Artifice: A Theory of Twentieth-century Poetry* (St Martin's Press, 1978), 107.
[68] Tracked on a historical timeline, the poetics of Forrest-Thomson and Guest can be seen to "meet up" in the 1980s, when they are both championed by poets of the Language movement. Charles Bernstein's *Artifice of Absorption* (Singing Horse Press, 1987), in particular, owes much to Forrest-Thomson's assertion that "all norms of other kinds of discourse are changed when absorbed by a poem" (5).
[69] Forrest-Thomson, *Poetic Artifice*, xi.

rhyme, rhythm, lineation, syntax—these components are activated in poetry in order to block or complicate what Forrest-Thomson calls "Naturalisation": the reduction of poetic language to a statement about the "non-verbal external world."[70] Already in these introductory remarks, we can observe some likenesses between Forrest-Thomson's poetic artifice and Guest's visionary poetics of atmosphere. For Guest, like Forrest-Thomson, the poem responds in the first instance not to an external reality but to the tensions and possibilities inherent within language itself: these are the "auditory and spatial needs of a poem" which, if the poet attends to them, can "free [the poem] to find its own voice, its own rhythm or accent or power."[71] Poetic form begets and shelters its own internal logic, independently of language's referential function.

For both Guest and Forrest-Thomson, this does not mean that referentiality is altogether irrelevant. The poem's artifice, as Forrest-Thomson describes, "[builds] bridges between various disparate areas of concern," and one such area may well include the representation of an external world.[72] But language's representational capacities, in this reading, are merely *one level* at which the poem operates, and this semantic level is subordinated to several others, among which: generic convention; the visual experience of the page; the text's phonological elements; and the manipulation of syntax. Guest, in her altogether more mystical register, tells us that "poetry activates an established world of fiction […] that enable it to transform reality."[73] The poem may include semantic workings that point to the exterior world, yet these cannot begin to explain the complexities of its form.

It is when Forrest-Thomson addresses John Ashbery's poetry in her book's final chapter that a stronger affinity emerges between her theorization of poetic artifice and Guest's poetics of atmosphere. Here, Forrest-Thomson wants to demonstrate that Ashbery inherits a modernist antipathy towards "external meanings" which expresses itself in the "destruction of syntax, [the] breaking of the links between words and world."[74] The enemy here is "bad Naturalisation": any attempt to reduce and limit a poem to a statement that communicates an external situation.[75] This attack on referentiality finds its most fervent proponents in Dada, but Forrest-Thomson suggests that it is the common thread of twentieth century modernist poetics, in which the "dominance of non-meaningful aspects of language" allows

[70] Forrest-Thomson, *Poetic Artifice*, xi.
[71] *FI*, 30.
[72] Forrest-Thomson, *Poetic Artifice*, xiv.
[73] *FI*, 27.
[74] Forrest-Thomson, *Poetic Artifice*, 113.
[75] Forrest-Thomson, *Poetic Artifice*, 113.

the poem to parody assumptions about "the intelligibility of the world, as mediated by language."[76] As expressed in Ashbery's hypotaxical extensions and distortions of syntax, the "dissolving parody of artifice" thematizes *within* the poem an epistemological doubt about language's capacity to mediate and affirm our perception of reality:

> The question is not one of causes but of reasons which we give for perceiving and relating one level of organisation in a poem to another. One of the main reasons that distinguishes real poetic innovation in this century from poetry of the past, even while on another level it asserts continuity, is the notion that language in poems not only works differently from the way it works in other discourse but also works against other language by absorbing it into its formal structure.[77]

It is this notion of a poem transformatively absorbing other forms of experience into its own reflections on language that we find again in Guest: "It is poetry that transforms the real world into fiction. Mallarmé understood this. He wrote: 'The true fiction is that of the poet.'"[78] For Guest, this true fiction is guaranteed by what she calls "spirit of the poem, its physicality and its spatial intensity";[79] those particular formal mechanisms which, in Forrest-Thomson's argument, are gathered into her definition of artifice.

How, then, does my approach to Guest's work draw together, if not synthesize, the insights of Dufrenne's phenomenology and Forrest-Thomson's concept of artifice? Firstly, as already mentioned on the question of Guest's "realism," both accounts inform my examination Guest's notion that the poem is a thing in itself. In Forrest-Thomson's thesis, this means that the poem passes language through a series of formal, generic, and conceptual frames which act upon language's referential capacity. Borrowing from Dufrenne's work, we can say that the experience of the poem, our apprehension of language's non-meaningful materiality, runs in excess of any analysis of its subject matter. The particularity of Guest's writings is that they stage their own relation with modernist pasts as one instance of such an apprehension: they self-consciously reflect upon their own rapport not only with the external world, but also with other works of art as they enter into the poem's imaginary.

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[76] Forrest-Thomson, *Poetic Artifice*, 126.
[77] Forrest-Thomson, *Poetic Artifice*, 135.
[78] *FI*, 26.
[79] *FI*, 31.

It is the intensity and repetitiousness with which Guest stages this engagement with prior modernist works, figuring the poem as a re-evocation of those works' atmospheres, that then becomes of interest. She conceives of her poetics as an addendum to modernism, one which alters the material upon which it works, and is therefore positioned at least at a double remove from a stable referent. As we saw in "The View from Kandinsky's Window," this means that the poems not only thematize but integrate into their language and their structure a sensation of doubleness and exchange, techniques that they borrow from the very modernists which they write about. Guest brings this method to our attention in an unpublished poem titled "For Gertrude Stein," drafted in the early 1950s:

> I am sure all things natural
> Must know each other. The dog
> Says "thank you" and the boy
> Says "kill me too". The enchant
> Lasts beyond the simple curtain.
>
> The flowers last beyond fading,
> Their sublime never stops purely,
> Not in the actually, pictorially.
> It is never merely colorful.
>
> Dear Marguerite Ida and Helene Annabel,
> Dear repetition of our graces,
> How absurd, beloved we seem
> With sense addended.[80]

This poem has something to do with pairings, about what it is that keeps separate parts together: whether this is speech, or "discourse" (the dog and the boy talk to one another at cross purposes, and this mutual misrecognition will go on, hiddenly, after they have performed their roles and the curtain has fallen); or whether it is a vitality, a reality that language keeps attaching itself to (the flowers that keep on fading, a fading that exceeds pictorial representation because it is an action in motion, as the adverbs of the second stanza

[80] "For Gertrude Stein." Box 67, folder 1361, Guest papers.

intimate). In both cases, what creates this sense of doubleness is the state of language itself, an enchanted state in which naming is knowledge, which means in turn that knowing must be a provisional act: never quite clinching, it remains open to negotiation and to the invention of new names.

In Stein's 1938 libretto, *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights*, which Guest references here, Faustus' primary antagonist isn't the Devil, who he names repeatedly before summarily telling him to "go away" at the beginning of act one.[81] His main problem is the presence of "Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel," a someone—a "sum of ones"—who logically can't be named "Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel," both, together, at the same time, but who has no other name:

> She will not be never never never, never will her name be Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel never never never never never well as well never Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel never Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel.[82]

A pair of two things can never be one thing, Faustus insists, although in order to make his point, he is forced to name this addended pair as one thing; he has to state the problem in a way which means he can't explain it. "You cannot explain a whole thing," as Stein writes in a late essay, "because it does not need explaining, it merely needs stating."[83] Repeatedly stating that Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel is one person is a poor form of explanation, but it is an excellent display of how language can evade explanations. Faustus' difficulty, which is expressed in his repetition of a disjunction that itself compels further repetition, is close to the role of repetition in psychoanalytic thought, in which repetition repeats not a term or instance or even a memory but rather a difference, a gap, a singular discomfort, what Joan Copjec calls "the minimal difference between the subject and herself."[84] In this model, repetition is never successful: exact repetition is a longed after impossibility. Since it is impossible, it is also an endless source of potential satisfaction; it is pleasurable.

Guest's poem, like Stein's play, is in some ways about showing how this pleasure is motored and nourished by language. Like a prayer, a postscript, or a happily delayed arrival, the poem is composed as a supplement to an event that is itself all about the supplementary

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[81] Stein, "Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights," in *Writings 1932-1946* (Library of America, 1998), 426.
[82] Stein, "Doctor Faustus," 430.
[83] Stein, *Writings*, 216.
[84] Copjec, "The Inheritance of Potentiality," interview by Jennifer Murray, *Verso Blog*, March 23, 2018, para.20.

pleasures of heaping words on words: the original *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* is an exploration of excess, in which Stein asks what it would mean, what it would feel like, to be excessively interpretative of one's own pleasures. Guest builds her own archive of modernism on a similar sensation of excess overcoming itself: to keep writing for modernism, meant, for her, to go on writing with modernism and from modernism, to keep repeating its "graces," and to keep hosting its various languages. Stein's language is a language that stresses composition rather than representation, a writing that pursues, as Marjorie Perloff explains, "the play of signifiers rather than the pointing relation of signifier to signified."[85] What is it then that representation, not just representation of the subject, but also narrative, rhetorical figures, and the poetic representation of world, remain deaf to? What does the work of composition leave out, or half in? What would a composition *without* a representation look like?

One answer to those questions is hazarded by the closing lines of Guest's poem: "How absurd, beloved we seem / With sense addended." How can sense be addended? Addend as a verb is to sum, to accumulate, to count, to add together the parts; or, as a noun, it is the number which is to be added to another, as distinct from the sum total of "addends" when they are taken together. Our sense of something, we might feel, is a whole thing: it arrives as more the sum of our sensations than what their parts can account for. But then any single sensation must also be in communication with others: one person's feeling would then become a part of another's, and theirs a part of another's, and so on. As Guest intimates, this would mean that "beloved we *seam*"—stitch, thread, enlace—any affective response into a shared atmosphere, addending one of our senses to those of another.

A poetics of atmosphere describes this sense of an ensemble: that method by which Guest's poetics, at the level of content, theme, and form, manifests perception as always oriented and enveloped within a transient arrangement of other texts, other times, and other histories. The chapters of this thesis work through the relations that run between theories of affect and Guest's poetics, detailing the ways in which they converge and diverge, while contextualizing the poems within contemporaneous discussions about modernist aesthetics. If the antagonists in Forrest-Thomson's case were "bad Naturalisations," then I work to disentangle Guest's poetics from what might be called "bad Formalisms." Guest's writings have often been read through mid-century formalist paradigms which, resting on strong analogies between poetry and the visual arts, tend to downplay or occlude their affective

[85] Perloff, *21st-Century Modernism: The 'New' Poetics* (Blackwell, 2002), 54.

range and phenomenological complexities. Chapters 2 to 4 each offer a detailed presentation of one such formalist paradigm, its place in the history of mid-century aesthetics in the United States, and its intersection with the poetry of Guest. I then show how theories of affect provide a language with which to describe Guest's poetics of atmosphere, taking a roughly chronological path through the complete range of her writings.

In order to set the stage for my affect-oriented interventions, chapter 1 presents a survey of the history of Guest's reception from 1960 to the early 2000s, taking in her difficult rapport with the New York School of poets, her proximity to experimental women's writing in the United States, and parallels between her poetic techniques and modernist aesthetics. Although Guest was initially anthologized along with her New York peers, she was subsequently excluded from major anthologies and marginalized in later scholarship on the School as an avant-garde by Geoff Ward, David Lehman, and William Watkin. Feminist reassessments of her work from the 1980s onwards, led by Sara Lundquist, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, and Kathleen Fraser, pushed back against these exclusions and closed the distance between her work and engaged modes of feminist writings. These readings tend to focus on Guest's early ekphrastic works in order to argue that they represent a feminist revision of the "painterly poetics" of the New York School, an approach that has its origins in Marjorie Perloff's influential writings on the poetry of Frank O'Hara. While I take Guest's engagement with visual works to be an important element of her early writings, I argue that they go beyond the ekphrastic dramatization of a particular art work and that they create a space for the contemplation of how modernist histories might be reactivated in the present.

This positions Guest's writing as an exemplary case for recent revisions of avant-gardism, aligning her work with feminist critiques of scholars Sophie Seita, Griselda Pollock, Susan Rosenbaum, and Linda Kinnahan. These critics seek to dismantle monolithic narratives of the avant-garde and emphasize instead the diverse contributions of women and other marginalized groups to a more mobile and adaptive series of avant-gardist practices. I frame Guest's engagement with historical avant-garde movements within these reparative techniques that rework past forms to envision new avenues for social and aesthetic experiments. Having widened the historical frame of Guest's work and explored its theoretical implications for the reception of avant-gardism, I then return to the question of affect, the experience of the poem, and the concept of atmosphere as a conceptual bridge between the two. I argue that the introduction of affect to readings of Guest can allow for a more comprehensive account of how her poems go beyond an ekphrastic mode and

representations of the self, and reimagine poetic language as a "viable breathing substance" that is alive to the intersubjective and pre-cognitive elements of reality.

Having addressed the critical bibliography on Guest in chapter 1, chapters 2 to 4 each proceed along similar methodological lines. In the first half of each chapter, I excavate a heuristic antinomy from mid-century formalist accounts of modernism. While Guest's exposure to these paradigms may be more or less direct, I describe their impact on the reception of the New York School poets and mid-century understandings of modernism in general. I then move through close readings of Guest's works, with the aim of demonstrating how these antinomies either fail to grasp or distort our impression of how the poems build their atmospheric rapport with past modernisms and activate affective forces that elude the oppositional arrangements of formalist criticism.

Chapter 2 is about how the mobility of affect upsets the paradigmatic distinction between surface and depth in formalist aesthetics. Guest's first collection of 1960, *The Location of Things*, presents us with acts of perception that pass through a number of frames, windows, and screens; a process that emphasizes the de-centralized relativity of scale and distance as experienced between objects in the world, rather than the centralized fixity of a single speaker's perspective. This results in a depiction of subjects as they succumb to a radical "outscaping" of perception: they feel the world to be pressing in upon them, and under that pressure the illusion of a unifying perspective cracks. Guest elaborates this perspectival flux out of her readings of cubist aesthetics and the work of Robert Goodnough, in contrast to Clement Greenberg's theorization of cubism as the flattening of perspectival depth and the thickening of surface materiality. I trace the influence of the formalist distinction between depth and surface through contemporaneous discussions of poetics, which sought—more or less deliberately—to transfer the surface/depth binary into their interpretation of texts. In contrast to this model, I suggest that Guest's poems prioritize a mobility of perception that disperses subjectivity into atmosphere; a sensation that the speakers of Guest's poems must paradoxically express even as they relinquish the grounds that would anchor such expression. I compare this mobility of perspective to Marta Figlerowicz's analysis of affects and the "dependent solipsism" of Ashbery's speakers,[86] and I argue that the window in Guest stands as a metaphor for the fragility and partiality of

[86] Figlerowicz, *Spaces of Feeling: Affect and Awareness in Modern Literature* (Cornell University Press, 2017), 115.

self-enclosure, as well as an analogy for the framing that poetic language itself performs when it reckons with experiences at the limits of linguistic representation.

Chapter 3 follows this poetic reckoning with experiences at the limits of subjective comprehension into Guest's mid-period works. Here, Guest subtracts subjectivity from the equation, in order to figure the poem as a "thing in itself," a technique that I associate with Barbara Johnson's proposal of a modernist wish "to capture what is at the farthest remove from humanness" within poetic form.[87] This brings my readings towards the ontological edge of theories of affect, as they call into question empirical means of knowing reality. In the collections *Quilts* (1980) and *Fair Realism* (1989), Guest asks what kind of object the poem is, and how its objecthood might be compared to other forms of artifice that operate outside the strictures of representation.

This meta-poetic concern for the materiality of the poem and its special rapport with an enveloping world that it exists within but that it does not signify complicates readings which rely on the binary of figuration/abstraction to approach Guest's work. I show how abstraction emerged as a keyword for mid-century poetics in response to the rise of Abstract Expressionism in New York, and how that coincidence colors subsequent reception of Guest's work as imitative of painterly practices. In contrast to this abstract/figurative antinomy, which stacks the deck in favour of language's referential function, I argue that Guest's poetry of the 1980s explores the poem as ornament, an idea that allows for the non-meaningful and sensuous aspects of Guest's language to come to the fore. The ornamental appeal of the poetic is comparable to the "charms" or "attractions" which post-Kantian aesthetics would consign to a pre-formal category in need of aesthetic configuration. In two sequences of poems from the 1980s, Guest reimagines poetic language as a means of staying with such charms, at the brink of form, in a language that radically evades the coercive metrics of representability. I draw here on Rei Terada's concept of "phenomenophilia"—a sensitivity to minimal perceptions that provide relief from the constraints of representation—and I suggest that the concept can be connected to Guest's vision of poetic language as an excess that adorns (and thereby alters) reality, rather than engaging in the description of reality.

This increasingly self-reflexive mode of Guest's writing has one origin in the narrative works that she produced in the late 1970s, while completing her biography of H.D. Chapter 4 considers how depictions of character in these works are altered by their

[87] Johnson, *Persons and Things* (Harvard University Press, 2008), 27.

envelopment in atmospheres, a dynamic that frustrates their attempts to aestheticize the world around them. Through these character-driven works, Guest explores the division between the domestic sphere and a sense of the ecstatic, a separation that is commonly upheld in accounts of modernism which privilege rupture and epiphany over containment and continuity. Guest's protagonists are alert to the limits of this structuring binary and they "seek air" as an escape from its strictures, a process that is anticipated in the poem "Roses," from 1973's *Moscow Mansions*. In that poem, Guest probes Gertrude Stein's assertion that "painting has no air," and she begins to build a relational understanding of the art work which allows it to hang within an atmosphere that it shares with the viewer. As she transforms this atmospheric aesthetics into a narrative structure, her protagonists are beset by feelings of claustrophobia and airlessness, and they search instead for a communion with the outside world.

Among theories of affect, this "seeking air" resembles Sedgwick's seminal discussion of Proust's mystical plenitude, and I conclude this chapter by extending Sedgwick's use of Kleinian object-relations into the model of container/contained in the work of Wilfred Bion. Guest's characters, as in the psychic structure proposed by Bion, are always seeking to both accommodate exterior phenomena *and* to be held within the atmosphere that they share with them. I therefore pull Bion's concept towards discussions of affect, and I suggest that it provides new ground with which to think through the subject-atmosphere relations that Guest's narrative writings put in motion.

In my conclusion, I return to the phenomenological territory covered in this introduction and I discuss how a poetics of atmosphere expresses Guest's doubt about form's permanence, and a related regard for the ineffable nature of reality, which becomes the dominant theme of Guest's late poems. I situate this diffidence about empirical and objective means of knowing the world within mystical strands of modernism, and alongside Maurice Merleau-Ponty's definition of the "insurpassable plenitude which is for us the definition of the real."[88] It is this mystical sense of the world's plenitude, and the inexpressibility of that sense, which generates the formal restlessness that is the most consistent trait of Guest's writing. Recapitulating and grouping together strands of the preceding chapters, I end by suggesting that the poetics of atmosphere allows us to value and evaluate the eccentricities of Guest's project. At the heart of that project, there is the vitality with which she invests the

[88] Merleau-Ponty, "Cézanne's Doubt," in *Sense and Nonsense*, trans. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus (Northwestern University Press, 1964), 15.

poem, an attitude that poses questions about the boundaries between the object and its world, the world and its representations.

"Modernity," as art historian T.J. Clark reminds us in his recent study of Cézanne, "is loss of world."[89] The cliché is revitalised in modernism each time an attempt is made to face down or evade that loss. This dissertation asks how the poetry of Guest reinterprets this loss of world as an escape into atmosphere.

[89] Clark, *If These Apples Should Fall: Cézanne and the Present* (Thames & Hudson, 2022), 62.

Chapter 1

The locations of Guest

Separations begin with placement[1]

This chapter resituates Guest's work within two strands of scholarship: new approaches to the legacies of the historic avant-garde and theories of affect. To adapt a phrase from Guest: placement begins with separation. My repositioning of Guest's work begins by putting distance between her poetry and the two fields within which it has, so far, been addressed: studies of the New York School of poets and feminist criticism. I first present a survey of these two areas of criticism in order to show that while they have enriched our understanding of particular phases of Guest's career, a more complete and complex account of her poetics requires a consideration of her affective extensions of modernist aesthetics. In the second part of this chapter, I therefore return to the introduction's discussion of affect and its relationship with poetics, so as to set the scene for my readings of the poetry in the following chapters. I open with a consideration of how Guest herself approaches the question of situating a work of art, beginning with a letter to her friend Helen Frankenthaler.

I Resituating Guest: vision and scale

Resituating Guest involves building upon prior readings of her work, while also giving due attention to her own reworkings of her modernist inheritance. The impulse to resituate Guest is, firstly, a response to the paradoxical array of positions that the poems themselves speak from. A Guest poem is always preoccupied with its own spatial and temporal placement and disjunctions: where an object or subject might be located; what relations such placement calls into action; what historical or topographical imaginary the poem crosses. As Garrett Caples comments on Guest's last published poem, "the curious difficulty of locating a perspective from which this poem could be spoken quickly turns us from interpretation of meaning to interpretation of form."[2] Where instances of lyric address seem momentarily coordinated within a setting, Guest's writing will trouble those coordinates and disorient our

[1] *CP*, 145.
[2] Caples, "Barbara Guest in the Shadow of Surrealism," *Chicago Review* 53/54 (2008), 156.

sense of place. It is a poetics, therefore, that is always hyper-aware of its location: ready to be found, as well as doing the work of locating.[3] A preferred theme of the early poems, in particular, is this contingency and ambiguity of the very concept of location, so that locating comes to be understood as a split movement: the ascription of place requires critical distance, and it also has need of a proximity and attentiveness, care and closeness. The poem is itself a location, a site within which meaning occurs, *and* an act of locating, coordinating, perceiving other objects that it holds at a distance. In part, the power of Guest's poetry resides in its capacity to occupy both these positions: to be the moment of displacement that *precedes* the apprehension of its object.[4]

Guest sets out her own vision of how to situate a work of art in a letter that she wrote to her friend the artist Helen Frankenthaler in the summer of 1989. Guest had been to see the Frankenthaler show at the René d'Harnoncourt Galleries at the Museum of Modern Art. The forty canvases on display represented the largest survey of Frankenthaler's work since 1969. Writing after her visit, Guest probes at the limits of a retrospective vision of art. Where the curation of a retrospective would emphasise the past of a painting, Guest imagines a way of relating to the works that would not be bound to a linear chronology. She takes the display of Frankenthaler's work not as a progressive series, but as a grid of interactions that "point infinitely": every canvas can be seen anew, because every canvas is altered in the light of another. The gallery space puts the spectator in the middle of this exchange:

> The exhibition is in every direction not limited to a "retrospective," because each series of paintings or each picture points to another space, and the paintings, themselves, can hardly be seen as the past of a painting, or even its future, because they point infinitely.
>
> And on the personal side—I often think of the "you" I know who executes those paintings, some of them which [sic] I saw in your studio—from the very

[3] Poet Peter Gizzi, in his introduction to Guest's *Collected Poems*, describes this effect as Guest's "delimiting" of space and time: "Strictly speaking, her poems are not abstract; rather, they locate us always exactly where we already are, at the edge of meaning in an already impacted, developing world" (*CP*, xvii). Gizzi's observation that the poems are themselves a "developing world"—an attempt to trace on the page phenomena in motion—informs the poetics of atmosphere that I advance across this thesis.

[4] Guest's deconstruction of the act of locating an object into its component parts recalls Schmitz's discussion of the limits of "locational space": "In the locational space, stillness and movement are defined as staying in one location and changing location. Furthermore, locations are determined, i.e. identified, through their position and distance from static objects." Schmitz's argument, which informs my reading of Guest's poems, is that this locational space is inadequate to the task of describing the space of the felt body and its immersion in an atmosphere, shared with other bodies, that cannot be plotted outwards from a static centre. "Atmospheric Spaces," para.3.

> beginnings. You are a fine model to increase ones [sic] own "vision" and "scale"—to go beyond the moderate reach of a page, so restricted—to the big somewhere else.[5]

With this interweaving of temporalities, Guest reads her friend's pieces as mapping neither a past (of what has been painted) or a future (of what will be made of the painting), but rather a relay between the two. It is this sensation that crosses the present "in every direction." The paintings work *in concert* to produce a sense of circulation: they stimulate the present moment with their moves into the past and future. They point infinitely to "another space," one unconstrained by the frame of any single work.

The presentness, relationality, and unbounded expanse of this interpretative gaze recalls the "pure look" of Dufrenne's phenomenological aesthetics: the work of art as an education in attention, which overruns the formal limits of the art object.[6] As with Dufrenne's insistence on the activation of a work of art within a giving setting, Guest turns her attention away from what the canvas represents, and towards its interactions with other objects in a shared space. She takes the totality of the exhibition as a space in which affective responses are multiplied and intensified. The object is one part of this process, but it does not foreclose what Guest imagines to be the infinite potential of the viewer's responsiveness.

This letter to Frankenthaler is one instance of Guest's atmospheric aesthetics. Across her critical writing and in her poetry, Guest returns to scenes in which a work of art is enveloped in an atmosphere of surprising and unfolding relations: an exchange of position and affect that passes between subject and object, artist and canvas, poet and page, but also between the groundedness of a location and the arrivals of wind, clouds, air that drift in from elsewhere. Guest's novel *Seeking Air* begins with a version of the letter's dynamic gaze: its opening lines describe how "a painting varies in values when seen in the studio, at a gallery, or in a museum."[7] Immediately blurring this aesthetic experience with the everyday, Guest transforms this into a comment on the changing perception of a person's character when they occupy a private or a public space.[8] In "Heroic Stages," an early poem dedicated to another painter friend, Guest imagines Grace Hartigan paused over her work in the studio:

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[5] "Letter from Barbara Guest to Helen Frankenthaler." August 4, 1989. Box 85.4, folder 5. Helen Frankenthaler papers. Helen Frankenthaler Foundation Archives, New York.
[6] Dufrenne, *Phenomenology*, 63.
[7] Guest, *Seeking Air* (Reality Street, 2021), 15 (hereafter cited as *SA*).
[8] *SA*, 15.

> You face a park. There are wings in this atmosphere,
> sovereigns who pour forth breezes to refresh
> your atlas.[9]

Guest's portrait of Hartigan as a heroic figure who battles daily for "[g]rand breaks!" is tempered by the poem's attention to the contingencies of the studio's charmed atmosphere.[10] The work of art remains open to a trick of the light and the artist remains vulnerable to a shift in mood that will alter their designs. The superhuman "atlas" is refreshed by an atmosphere that it can only weakly trace. In her letter, Guest turns her achronological way of looking at her friends' painting into a model for artistic composition. It is the immoderate vision and scale of Frankenthaler's works, or the mobile and aleatory "wings in [the] atmosphere" that flutter around Hartigan's studio, which, for Guest, can keep generating new interpretative leaps, and new art works to admire.

The restlessness of Guest's thinking here recalls Leo Bersani's discussion of critique as the "anticipatory re-categorizing of an idea": "the future of our past thinking breaks down the temporality we usually assign to mental life and points to the oneness, the persisting presentness, of all thought."[11] For both Bersani and Guest, thinking is an act that points towards another horizon. This "big somewhere else" is neither past nor future, but the confluence of the two, mixing together in an uncertain present. The critic's re-categorization (of an idea or an artwork, or a poem) remains provisional: implicitly open to a future recasting. The temporariness of thought becomes its most reliable quality, as mental life gathers up the past and then unfolds itself towards the future.[12]

Returning now to Guest's letter, we might ask what a poetics that aspires to such presentness, scale, and vision would look and sound like? The question carries with it a

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[9] *LT*, 60.
[10] *LT*, 59.
[11] Bersani, "Re-Perusal, Registered," *Henry James Review* 32, no. 3 (2011), 274–75.
[12] The parallel I draw here between Guest's relational thinking and Bersani's definition of critique mirrors arguments for O'Hara's poetic anticipation of later propositions in queer theory. In a reading of O'Hara's work, Gregory W. Bredbeck proposes the "text as trick" as a means of grasping the phenomenological fluidity that is characteristic of the poems. In Bredbeck's argument, O'Hara's poetics regulates the relationship between a material text and a metaphysical one: "the text as trick straddles the binaries of object and agent, of inertia and activity, that mark and mark off the reserves underpinning Barthes's will to limited play." While Guest's poetics is less directly available to queer terminologies, its construction of an atmosphere that is suspended between page and reader, past recollection and future protension, is comparable to Bredbeck's discussion of "absolute play" in O'Hara works. "B/O-Barthes's Text/O'Hara's Trick." *PMLA* 108, no. 2 (1992), 279. See also José Esteban Muñoz's discussion of O'Hara's "Having a Coke with You" as the performance of "a vast lifeworld of queer relationality, an encrypted sociality, and a utopian potentiality," in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York University Press, 2009), 6.

feeling of spatial expansion and temporal entanglements, vertiginous sensations that are common to the poems. The restlessness of their spatial coordinates is often in tension with a present tense, which emerges initially as an effect of direct address. This brings Guest's poetics close to recent theorizations of the poem as event.[13] To speak of the poem as an event is to highlight how it operates by iteration: re-activating language in recitation or performance, and commemorating itself as memorable for the future. The presentness of Guest's poems is fashioned out of a cross-hatching of precursive and recursive glances: the future of the past, and the past of the future. This is not exactly the arrangement of address that we might expect from lyric poetry. As in the scene of Hartigan's studio, refreshed by an inpouring of air, the speakers of Guest's poems locate us in studies, kitchens, corridors, bars, and attics—everyday interiors that are constructed only to then be undone by an onrush of higher atmospheric pressures.[14] But what Guest calls the "moderate reach" of the page is then flooded by a spaciousness that the poem can hold up only for an instant. While this may include the momentary figuration of a voice thrown into the centre of such mobility, the text's temporal and spatial fluctuations ultimately displace this centeredness.

It is with a similar restlessness, in her letter to Frankenthaler, that Guest shifts from the gallery space to the studio then back to her own writing, and then on to the horizon of that "big somewhere else." I begin with this letter because it also speaks to the anti-retrospective, historical reach of my approach to Guest's work. Bersani's persisting presentness underlies my claim, made in this chapter and then furthered in the following chapters, that Guest's poetry has been served poorly by her immediate connections to the New York School of poets. This is because her writing never stops interrogating its own position within much broader contexts, most pronouncedly the legacy of European modernism in the United States, as well as later avant-garde appropriations of that legacy, and, in particular, its impact on experimental writing by women.

The bibliographical record alone alerts us to this fact: although Guest was published alongside the other New York poets at the start of her career, her most significant later works were published by Sun & Moon Press in California, alongside a number of her collaborative

[13] For the event-like immediacy of lyric poetry, see Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* (Harvard University Press, 2015). As Culler elaborates in an interview with Francesco Giusti, he understands the lyric poem as defined "not by the representation of a past event but its evocation in the lyric present": "this involves a fundamental iterability, which […] is already manifested in various aspects of lyric form, such as sound patterning and rhythm." "The Lyric in Theory: A Conversation with Jonathan Culler," *LA Review of Books*, May 27, 2017, para.16.

[14] Timothy Gray describes the amorphous seascapes and "littoral zones" of Guest's early poems as competing with this sensation of enclosed spaces that are suddenly ripped open and exposed to larger environments. *Urban Pastoral: Natural Currents in the New York School* (University of Iowa Press, 2010).

works by the feminist imprint at Kelsey St. Press. To insist too strongly on the New York connection is therefore to circumscribe the reach of her work, missing or stopping short of its influence, from the 1970s onwards, on feminist experimental poetry and the Language movement.

A more significant circumscription of Guest's work occurs when strong analogies are imposed between her style and practices and the New York painters of Abstract Expressionism. Here, scholarship draws on discussions of surface and depth, abstraction and figuration, the everyday and the exceptional, representation and its discontents. Indeed, the analogy between painting and poetry often departs from the idea that painting and poem are best suited to one end of these polarities, and that they might learn something from one another.[15] While these conceptual dyads were of great important for mid-century formalism, I show how Guest worked through earlier modernist experiments in ways that move alleviate the demands of representation. She produces poems that ask us to relate to the art work as a thing in the world and then, unsurprisingly, to conceive of the poem in the same way. This emphasis on relational exchange lightens the burden of the poem's referential or anti-referential intent. I return to how theoretical uses of affect link up with this argument at the end of this chapter. Before that, I turn now to the major strands of criticism which have so far attended to Guest's work: scholarship on the New York School of poets; feminist recastings of her poetics; and reassessments of marginal or peripheral figures in relation to the historic avant-garde.

II Beyond the New York School

Limiting Guest to her relation to the New York School does a double disservice to her work. First, it borrows historical coordinates and critical terminology from the world of her (mostly male) peers and it neglects modernist influences that she discovered further afield. Second, it amplifies a parallelism between her work and the New York painters she socialized with, and in so doing tells us less about how the poems work than it does about a cultural backdrop to which they sometimes allude. The first risk is well addressed in a 1999 review of Guest's collection *If So, Tell Me*, in which Geoff Ward suggests that Guest's work might be better

[15] The related mid-century idea that Abstract Expressionism was a form of art capable of synthesizing a series of divisions in earlier "-isms" is discussed by David L. Sweet, "Parodic Nostalgia for Aesthetic Machismo: Frank O'Hara and Jackson Pollock," *Journal of Modern Literature* 23, no. 3/4 (2000).

situated in conversation with modernist women's poetry and aestheticism.[16] Ward helpfully filters the aesthetic preoccupations of Guest's poems back through the avant-gardist aspirations of the School, which, as I discuss in a moment, was itself a retrospective critical construction from which Guest was largely excluded. An unexplored possibility, gestured to by Ward, is where I position my readings of Guest: I suggest that she transforms a number of conflicts and contradictions inhering in modernist aesthetics in order to expand the phenomenological scale and complexity of her own poetic project.[17]

If we want to detail how Guest's poems go about constructing their meditations on aesthetics, atmosphere, and the space of the poem, the second risk presented by the New York connection is a too-ready adoption of the "painterly poetics" that dominated early readings of O'Hara's poetry. This analogizing approach was the foundation of the School's initial reception and its later status as a neo-avant-garde, with critics following poet James Schuyler's suggestion that "if you try to derive a strictly literary ancestry for the New York poetry, the main connection gets missed."[18] The main connection between poetic experimentalism and visual art in the case of the New York School is, from the beginning, self-evident: the School took its own name, with a wry sense of its own inferiority, from the painters, who had in turn styled themselves on the School of Paris.[19] Early canonical accounts, most notably those of Marjorie Perloff and Charles Altieri, took up the question of the New York writers' painterly poetics, with analysis focusing on their leaps into

[16] Ward, "Review of Barbara Guest's *If So, Tell Me*," *Jacket* 10 (1999), para.10. Ward's intervention is particularly valuable for the questions it raises about the rapport between Guest's writing and "real life": "It has to be asked whether 'real life' is made or marred to Guest by 'emotion' and 'noise,' and whether all that is what is 'Outside of This,' to be alluded to but withdrawn from with relief, into the chiming of rhyme against blest silence. And if so, is that an evasion, as it's held to be when any aestheticism comes under attack, or could it be a defence—even the beginnings of a politics—as can be proposed for a tradition stretching from Swinburne to Veronica Forrest-Thomson?" (para.11).

[17] As Ward intimates, it is this very quality of evasiveness or restlessness in Guest's writing that could be aligned with a perspective that is at least ethical, if not full-throatedly political. Guest gives attention to minimal flutterings of perception. She perceives the page as a space in which these mere phenomena have power and agency. This vision, as I return to at the end of this chapter, can be connected to affect theory's claim that subjectivity is only ever weakly composed out of dynamic forces that are wider and stronger than itself.

[18] Schuyler, "Poet and Painter Overture," in *The New American Poetry, 1945-1960*, ed. Donald Allen (University of California Press, 1960), 419.

[19] In her recent intervention on "components of a definition" for the School, Yasmine Shamma proposes three factors which hold the grouping together: the poets' closeness to the New York School of painters; their living in New York city; their friendship with one another. Yet all three of these qualities are less constant than they might at first appear, and they pointedly withdraw from commentary on the poems themselves. As Shamma puts it, the School, reimagined as a coterie, can appear or surface momentarily in poems where one or more of these components are drawn into play, and can just as quickly vanish once such elements are side-lined. "The New York School?: Towards a Definition," in *New York: A Literary History*, ed. Ross Wilson (Cambridge University Press, 2020), 211.

abstraction, the act of composition, the plasticity of their language.[20] As Fred Moramarco summarizes in an essay on O'Hara and Ashbery: "[they] have demonstrated in their poetry a continuity affinity with developments in contemporary painting."[21] The affinities between painters and poets as delineated by this critical consensus are elastic enough: each poet can be positioned somewhere within a set of relations to their contemporaries in the visual arts.

The fact remains that the New York School coheres due to critical efforts that, in tidying-up confused lines of influence and exchange, risk imposing sameness across varied poetics projects.[22] The first generation of the School usually includes O'Hara, Ashbery, Schuyler, Guest, and Kenneth Koch, following the arrangement in Donald Allen's landmark anthology *The New American Poetry 1945-1960* (with the self-imposed omission of Edward Field, originally published alongside the other five).[23] Schuyler makes his comment on the main connection between the New York poets and painters in his "Poet and Painter Overture," the short statement on poetics that was published in Allen's volume. If we return to Schuyler's original remarks, however, it becomes clear that the main connection he had in mind was not a synchronic snapshot of the mid-century New York art scene and the poets place within it. What Schuyler actually proposes is a number of links between the New York poets and earlier twentieth century avant-garde models: he names "Apollinaire, Reverdy, Jacob, Eluard, Breton," as well as Duchamp and Léger, as his examples.[24] In making the case for a lineage that reaches back to French modernism, Schuyler suggests a more complex rapport with painting than a direct analogy between mid-century Abstract Expressionists and the New York poets. Indeed, such an analogy is precisely what Schuyler cautions

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[20] Perloff, "Frank O'Hara and the Aesthetics of Attention," *boundary 2* 4, no. 3 (1976); Charles Altieri, *Painterly Abstraction in Modernist American Poetry: The Contemporaneity of Modernism* (Cambridge University Press, 1989). In more recent comments on O'Hara and Ashbery, Perloff argues that both writers are now "at the very heart of the poetry canon, even as the New York School, now encompassing three generations, has become a prominent fixture on the global poetry scene." "Reading Frank O'Hara's *Lunch Poems* After Fifty Years," *Poetry* 205, no. 4 (2015), 384.

[21] Moramarco, "John Ashbery and Frank O'Hara: The Painterly Poets," *Journal of Modern Literature* 5, no. 3 (1976), 437.

[22] As Daniel Kane writes, in his history of the New York poetry magazine *C*, edited by Ted Berrigan and Ron Padgett: "it is important to recognize that, at the moment of *C*'s production, the New York School world of cocktails, paintings, and parties as characterized by current academic imagination was, in 1964, as yet unincorporated into an organized and easily recognizable sign encompassing a favoured scene of poetic production." *All Poets Welcome: The Lower East Side Poetry Scene in the 1960s* (University of California Press, 2003), 106-107.

[23] Field's inclusion in Allen's anthology alongside the New York poets was described by Field himself as a misclassification. In an interview, Field comments that he "never belonged" to the group and that it was his relationship with O'Hara in the mid-1950s that had led to the latter securing his inclusion. *The Man Who Would Marry Susan Sontag and Other Intimate Portraits of the Bohemian Era* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 84-85.

[24] Schuyler, "Overture," 418-19.

against: "'Writing like painting' has nothing to do with it";[25] the use of quotation marks intimating that the idea was already something of a cliché in 1960. His argument is that the poets modelled themselves not "on painters," but on how a prior generation of poets had regarded, and reinterpreted, the contemporaneous experiments in aesthetics that surrounded them.

The promise of a less literal-minded exploration of rapports between page and canvas, New York and Paris, past and present is left open in Schuyler's 1960 statement. Such a promise was for the most part side-lined in the subsequent decade, during which the New York School of poets was promoted by gallerists Tibor De Nagy and John Bernard Myers, who published the group throughout the 1960s via the press at their gallery. It was through Myers' promotional efforts that the poets' immediate association with New York painters came to be foregrounded. In his 1969 anthology *The Poets of the New York School*, Myers paired each poet with a painter, and thereby clinched the main connection as a question of proximity and emulation, rather than the more mobile convergence of modernist influences which Schuyler's remarks hint at. The following year, in the introduction to their 1970 *Anthology of New York Poets*, Ron Padgett and David Shapiro voiced suspicion about Myers' promotional efforts with a half-mocking disavowal of the "gruesome possibility of the 'New York School of Poets' label."[26] In order to open up some space around Myers' tightly drawn pairings, Padgett and Shapiro argued that their selection represented a looser "sense of solidarity […] acquaintances and friendships […] sharings of taste and affections."[27] Despite their misgivings about Myers' label, the 1970 anthology proceeded to reprint all nine New York poets from the 1969 anthology, with one notable exception: Barbara Guest.

Padgett and Shapiro's erasure of Guest demonstrates the limits of leaning too heavily on her connection with the School.[28] This is so even, perhaps especially, when the grouping

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[25] Schuyler, "Overture," 418.
[26] Padgett and Shapiro, eds., *An Anthology of New York Poets* (Random House, 1970), xxx.
[27] Padgett and Shapiro, *Anthology*, xxix. Padgett and Shapiro echo here the importance afforded to coterie and sociality in Dore Ashton's classic study of the New York School painters. As well as highlighting shared aesthetic concerns across varied artistic projects, Ashton states that the School coheres because of a shared sense of solidarity: "the most compelling force that emerges is their sense of having found each other." *The New York School: A Cultural Reckoning* (Viking Press, 1973), 44.
[28] For an in-depth critique of Guest's omission from this anthology, see Kathleen Fraser, "The Tradition of Marginality," in *Where We Stand: Women Poets on Literary Tradition*, ed. Sharon Bryan (W.W. Norton & Co., 1993), 52-65. Fraser argues that the erasure must be understood as part of the common practice of gendered biases in poetry publishing. Guest never publicly commented on the 1970 anthology, although she did preserve a copy of a letter of her friend Patricia Dienstfrey to the *San Francisco Examiner & Chronicle*, which objected to her later exclusion from David Lehman's study of the School. Published in the *Chronicle*'s September 17 1995 edition, the letter's by-line read: "Barbara Guest Left Out in the Cold." Dienstfrey wrote:

is reconfigured around Pagett and Shapiro's vaguer, albeit seemingly more generous, sense of "sharings of taste and affections."[29] Loosening the confines of the School in this way has not brought Guest in from the margins. On the contrary, her marginality remains the most prominent feature of her rapport with the School. The poetics of coterie or sociality, as foregrounded in more recent studies of O'Hara and post-war scenes in American poetry, has offered only sparse and cursory commentary on Guest's work.[30] As John Wilkinson describes, Guest's exclusion by Pagett and Shapiro was taken as "a dereliction [that epitomizes] sexual prejudice";[31] and Sara Lundquist has documented the role of gender in the side-lining of Guest in the School's publication history and reception.[32] In the wake of this exclusion, attempts to correct Guest's marginal status by bringing her back into the centre of the School have tended to take up painterly poetics and apply it to her work. In these cases, the accent falls on Guest as a "painterly witness," as building towards abstraction through "painterly osmosis," or as an ekphrastic writer.[33] The ekphrastic impulses in her writing, and the immediate circumstances of Abstract Expressionism, return to the foreground in these assessments of her work.

In an adjacent sphere of criticism, the impact of Guest's exclusion from the 1970 anthology reverberates through scholarship concerning the School as an avant-garde. Book-length considerations by Geoff Ward, David Lehman, and William Watkin each make a case for the School's avant-gardist credentials: on the basis of its self-fashioning as a Parisian

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"Editor—Those readers who were interested in Kenneth Baker's review of 'The Last Avant-Garde: The Making of the New York School of Poets' by David Lehman will be happy to know that a member of that school currently lives in the Bay Area. Unfortunately, she did not appear in Lehman's group of 'four' […] Not only is it a shame that Lehman excluded [Guest] from his history, it is also sad and bewildering that Baker, who is familiar with the New York School of artists and poets and their complex interrelationships, failed to point out Lehman's egregious distortion in his review." "Letter to *San Francisco Examiner & Chronicle*." September 17, 1995. Box 104, folder 1631, Guest papers.

[29] This language of a looser social formation is repeated in a recent summary of the School by Andrew Epstein, who describes it as "[l]ess an actual literary 'school' than a collection of friends with shared tastes, obsessions, and poetic strategies." "The New York School of Poetry," in *Cambridge Introduction to American Poetry Since 1945* (Cambridge University Press, 2023), 60.

[30] For an account of the New York School in terms of sociality and coterie, see Lytle Shaw, *Frank O'Hara: The Poetics of Coterie* (University of Iowa Press, 2006) and Andrew Epstein, *Beautiful Enemies: Friendship and Postwar American Poetry* (Oxford University Press, 2006).

[31] Wilkinson, "'Couplings of Such Sonority': Reading a Poem by Barbara Guest," *Textual Practice* 23, no. 3 (2009), 481.

[32] Lundquist, "The Fifth Point of a Star: Barbara Guest and the New York 'School' of Poets," *Women's Studies* 30, no. 1. When John Ashbery wrote an obituary letter to *The New York Times* following Guest's death in 2006, he noted that "[m]any have felt that [Guest's] relative neglect was due to her status as the only female member of the first generation New York School, though I would not agree with this." He did not provide an alternative hypothesis. "Email to *The New York Times* obituary news department." February 23, 2006. Box 3, folder 40, Guest papers.

[33] Fraser, "The Tradition of Marginality"; Anna Rabinowitz, "Barbara Guest: Notes toward Painterly Osmosis," *Women's Studies* 30, no.1 (2000); Lundquist, "Reverence and Resistance: Barbara Guest, Ekphrasis, and the Female Gaze," *Contemporary Literature* 38, no. 2 (1997).

coterie (Ward); its modernist pursuit of "the new" (Lehman); its breaking of boundaries between the aesthetic and the everyday (Watkin).[34] In *The Last Avant-Garde: The Making of the New York School of Poets*, Lehman stresses that whilst the name the New York School was probably intended as a joke, later disowned as such by Ashbery and Koch, it carried with it a certain sense of in-groupness that allowed the poets to militate for their work collectively.[35] The omission of Guest from these studies only reinforces the sense that the coterie model of the School has a gendered edge.

Watkin's *In the Process of Poetry: The New York School and the Avant-Garde* distinguishes itself from the historical reconstructions of Lehman and Ward by arguing for a poetics that coheres across the work of O'Hara, Ashbery, Koch, and Schuyler. The School as avant-garde, in Watkin's interpretation, is firstly an attempt to dismantle the categories of life and art. The processual aesthetics produced by and in the service of this attempt is described by Watkin as follows:

> [A] three-part process of creation, specifically poetic creation, that brings poetry back into the field of the everyday, problematises the unified subject of bourgeois metaphysics, and retains the specifity of objective existence without being fetishistic, generalizing, or empirical.[36]

This process of poetic creation, dismantling personhood and putting the text in contact with the everyday, hinges on a subject that Watkin describes as "*en procès*": a subject that is "worked out through the text's organization."[37] Experimental techniques deployed on the page—collage, intertextual citation, syntactical disjunction, as well as the present-tense coincidence of the scene the poem represents with its moment of composition—serve to pull the poem towards the quotidian sphere, as well as the quotidian into the poem, and subjectivity is strung up between these two poles.

Guest is a conspicuous absence from Watkin's book. This is a striking fact given his thesis. Her interest in the avant-gardes of the early twentieth century would seem to make her the most transparent example of the "regulation" of the neo- and historic-avant-garde

[34] Ward, *Statutes of Liberty* (Macmillan, 1993); Lehman, *The Last Avant-Garde: The Making of the New York School of Poets* (Doubleday, 1998); Watkin, *In the Process of Poetry: The New York School and the Avant-Garde* (Bucknell University Press, 2001).
[35] Lehman, *Last Avant-Garde*, 24-26.
[36] Watkin, *Process of Poetry*, 26.
[37] Watkin, *Process of Poetry*, 153.

that Watkin ascribes to the School.[38] If the School can be said to have intervened in the historical avant-garde's projects of, in Watkin's terms, processuality, "de-" or "dis-subjectification", and everydayness, and if this intervention renews these past projects with an ethical urgency, then the opening of a poem such as Guest's late "Nostalgia" could be exemplary of his argument:

> Hands are touching.
> You began in cement in small spaces.
> You began the departure. Leaves restrain. You attempted the departure.
> A smile in sunshine, nostalgia.
> Beneath shadow of shadows of Columbus the Navigator. Waving farewell.
> Street, shadows.
>
> I have lost my detachment, sparrow with silver teeth.
>
> I have lost the doves of Milan, floating politely.[39]

This poem engages in what Guest describes elsewhere as the task of "leaving modernity": it stages the experience of leaving a past setting as one that can never be completed.[40] "Nostalgia" opens Guest's final collection, *The Red Gaze*, published in 2005. The major theme of that book is the rapport between a modernist past, imagined as residing in the ruined spaces of "[o]ld Europe,"[41] and Guest's own practice, with the majority of the poems constructing themselves as self-reflexive comments on the "zones of departure" that modernism creates or offering their "praise" of modernism as a means to modify their own poetic form.[42] Guest explicitly positions these last poems as an extension of the unfinished business of the historic avant-garde, which means that her work comes always after the end of modernism, as a surplus that overflows that end. The attempt to reactivate past experience is imagined as a question of extending sympathy to the past: "Do we know how they felt," asks one poem, "born under different signs?"[43]

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[38] Watkin, *Process of Poetry*, 15.
[39] *CP*, 491.
[40] Guest uses this phrase as the title for a poem from the 1996 collection *Quill, Solitary APPARITION*. It is in this poem that she qualifies the phrase: "leaving (without ending)" (*CP*, 352).
[41] *CP*, 492.
[42] *CP*, 504; *CP*, 499.
[43] *CP*, 494.

In “Nostalgia” it is the paradoxical nature of this continual return to the past that is brought to the foreground. Departures begin but are never completed, and they thereby become a motor for new beginnings. If we read this poem within the frames of Perloff’s painterly poetics or Watkin’s de-subjectification, it resists: coming late in Guest’s career, the poem moves us well beyond analogies with mid-century New York painting. The semantic field of the poem covers rituals of departure and separation in order to suggest that its taking leave of modernism is never completed. This tension is sustained through form: the poem’s repetitions (“began”, “departure”, “shadow”, “I have lost”) capture the doubleness of nostalgia as a continuous return to a leave-taking, as the false-start of thinking that you are gone. The first line’s image of touching hands establishes this leave-taking as a moment of ghostly contact. The present touches the past, the past touches the present, and then, there is a “lost detachment” that occurs in the space between the two. Guest’s signature pairings of concrete and abstract noun phrases, their rapid inversions, shows up the stitchwork of syntax, so that the “You”/“I” relation emerges as a product of that stitchwork. In the last two lines quoted, for example, “sparrow with silver teeth” can be read in relation to “*my* detachment,” yet it also points associatively to the doves of the following line, and so the phrase moves away from its own metaphorical bond with detachment. The final phrase—“floating politely”—can refer to the doves of Milan and also, in Guest’s parataxical suspensions, to the subject-“I”, thereby re-establishing a relation with the sense of detachment from which the stanza began.

With this brief foray into Guest’s late writing, we can see how she might be inserted into Watkin’s argument about the avant-gardist mode of the School. Yet the more salient point is that Guest’s poetics can only be read as faintly operating with what Watkin’s identifies as the School’s central techniques of everydayness and de-subjectification. In the case of the everyday, it is difficult to locate Guest’s visionary poetics within the quotidian verve of New York: in “Nostalgia,” for example, the reference to Columbus at the centre of the poem stretches its historical and geographical parameters. In the case of Watkin’s subject *en procès*, we tend to come up empty-handed when searching for even the most fluid or unstable of subjectivities in Guest’s late poems. In the opening lines of “Nostalgia,” the addressed “You” drops out of the text entirely after only the third line. It is a “You” that achieves, realizes, attaches itself to nothing: trapped in “small spaces,” and then rendered only in the beginnings of an incomplete action. Neither is the “I” that surfaces in the poem’s second stanza connected to the poem’s scene of composition (in the manner, as Watkin emphasises, of O’Hara’s or Schuyler’s speakers): Guest’s speaking-“I”, flaring up briefly

and then vanishing, laments only what it has already lost, as it orients us towards the past, and sends us back up to the suggestive nostalgic longing of the poem's title.

Part of Watkin's point is, of course, that this splintering and deferral of subject-formation forces us to engage with the surface materiality of the text.[44] This works well when dealing with the playful self-referentiality of a poet like Koch, or the conversational drifts and digressions of O'Hara and Schuyler. But Watkin's evocation of a subject dispersed across the text ultimately reinforces what, at one point, he refers to as the "myth" of the surface: "a basic avant-garde desire to reject the ideology of depth-poetics in the dominant American poetry of the fifties, which is in accord with the neo-avant-garde painters of this period and their interest in the canvas surface."[45] Here, again, we encounter a painterly poetics, albeit retooled with a distinctly Kristevian interpretation of subject-formation. If we look at Guest's poems without recourse to surface or depth—a possibility that forms the basis of my analysis in chapter 2—it becomes possible to see how a poem such as "Nostalgia" passes its opening image of two hands touching through a series of frames, adding variations that adorn this original image. The poem enacts neither a repudiation of depth nor a valorization of surface. Its effects depend, instead, on the continual renegotiation of the scale and closeness of its multiple perspectives. Where Watkin succeeds in arguing for the neo-avant-garde impulses of the School, he does so by "reintroducing" the subject into his analysis of the poems.[46] In this turn of the argument, there is no space for Guest, since her poetry continually effects an attenuation of subjectivity, effacing the momentary illusion of a speaking-"I", in order to give space to phenomena that occur just below the threshold at which they might be integrated within a coherent perspective.

In the most thorough account of this process available, *Women, the New York School, and Other True Abstractions*, Maggie Nelson makes the case for an interpretative mode that would be less beholden to the formalist antinomies of the mid-century in discussions of the School:

> The critical commonplace that poets such as O'Hara and Ashbery were trying to "do" with words what the Abstract Expressionists were "doing" with surface (i.e., flatness, "all-overness," "push-pull," speed, performativity, improvisation, gesture, etc.) is by

[44] Watkin, *Process of Poetry*, 153.
[45] Watkin, *Process of Poetry*, 64. Watkin's discussion of Koch, in particular, centres on the surface fluctuations of his poems. According to Watkin, Koch's writings incline towards "the privileging of the surface of the poem at the expense of all other semantic possibilities" (43).
[46] Watkin, *Process of Poetry*, 152.

> no means meaningless. But its rush to sublimate the poetry in a formalist paradigm can elide some very interesting questions about sexuality and aesthetics.[47]

As Nelson argues, reducing a diverse set of poetics to a style imitative of Abstract Expressionism means missing the idiosyncrasies of each poet. In making this case, Nelson is sensitive to the predominance of surface and abstraction as the governing formal concerns of the period. She argues for more attention to the ways in which a work of art negotiates its *relation* to abstraction—a catchall term that covers a wide array of practices and attitudes to the status of the work of art as a representation, as a symbol, and as an object.[48] This negotiation poses questions about a work of art in its "dual status as a sign of the thing-world and a part of the thing-world."[49] Nelson's argument is reminiscent of Watkin's dialectic of everydayness and the aesthetic: the former sphere including texts that are intent on signifying the experience of the quotidian; the latter involves the creation of an object as radically separate from the world. In Nelson's hands, however, this distinction becomes more accommodating and flexible than Watkin allows for: the poem operates a continuous to-and-fro between what can be represented *and* the materiality of its own form, as its flights into abstraction cross in and out of the particularities of figuration.[50]

In keeping with Nelson's sense of an art work's open negotiation with practices of abstraction, Guest imagines the poem not as the linguistic representation of an object, but as a space *within which* tensions between abstraction and figuration, surface and depth, the domestic and the ecstatic can be enacted.

This means, as Nelson's work reminds us, that abstraction denotes several contingent practices. It describes a tendency or approach rather than a fixed style. In this spirit, when Guest, in the letter from which this chapter began, admires the vision and scale of Frankenthaler's canvases, she is suggesting that the paradigmatic antinomies of abstraction/figuration, or surface/depth, may be less pertinent than a relational rendering of the perspectival frame that determines how those qualities are received, as well as what connections the art work allows us to draw not only between *what* it represents, but how that

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[47] Nelson, *Women, the New York School, and Other True Abstractions* (University of Iowa Press, 2007), xx.
[48] Nelson, *Women, the New York School*, 4.
[49] Nelson, *Women, the New York School*, 4.
[50] Breaking down the School in a way reminiscent of Nelson's argument, Mark Silverberg draws a further distinction between the "desire to find (not create)" in the descriptive mode of Schuyler's poems, and the "mode of invention," or conversation, in that of Koch and O'Hara. The "descriptive mode" would be comparable to what Nelson singles out as the *representation* of the "thing-world," whilst the "mode of invention" throws its weight behind the creation of the poem as a thing *in* the world. "James Schuyler's Poetics of Indolence," *Literary Imagination* 11, no. 1 (2009), 41.

representation relates to other instances of representation. In other words, what seems figurative may become abstract when its apprehension is momentarily bent and distorted by perspective and position.

I end this survey of Guest's reception within the New York School with Nelson's work because her appeal to the particularities of the individual poets provides a starting point for the close readings of Guest's work in the following chapters. In part, subsequent chapters do reaffirm Guest's interest in painting, in New York, and in her friendships, without intending to overstate any one of those aspects, and taking each as part of the context within which she makes her interventions into modernist aesthetics. As Guest writes in a brief unpublished note titled "Art in America: the Nineteen Fifties and Sixties (Viewed in 1999)":

> Poetry was being written about painting, and lo, painting crept into poetry in metaphors and observations. Feelings of great affection were attached to a momentary canvas partaking of the same emotional process as the poem, of the same witchery of the moment.
>
> This l'Air du Temps, this air of being together in celebrating a moment in time happens rarely, and often its secret is that a great deal of money is being spent on one of the arts, and this leads to a stimulation of the values of art.[51]

The emphasis here falls on a momentary affective charge—"great affection […] emotional process"—that a canvas might elicit in the poet, or which the poem might reflect back to a canvas. This exchange is given as a joint partaking in a shared emotional process. Rather than seeking to read Guest's work through formalist associations with Abstract Expressionism, or the styles of her peers, in my subsequent chapters I take her prioritizing of the "witchery of the moment" to be the affirmation of a poetics: the poem as an "emotional process" elicited by the sensuous materiality of poetic language. This necessitates theorizing connections between aesthetics and poetics not in a comparative mode that equates the semantics of text with that of painting, but through the relational space that Guest imagines as opening up between viewer and object, reader and poem.

[51] Box 83, folder 1458, Guest papers.

III "Poetess riddled": feminist approaches

While Guest's marginalization within assessments of the School hardened from 1970 onward, her work steadily found new resonances within feminist criticism. The culmination of this reorientation came in April 1999. At Barnard college, a two-day conference titled "Where Lyric Tradition Meets Language Poetry: Innovation in Contemporary American Poetry by Women" brought together academics, poets, and poet-scholars in an effort to bridge the gap between the experimental and the lyric traditions in American poetry. During the conference, Guest's work was positioned at the centre of the discussion and as a potential bridge between the two apparently divided wings of contemporary American poetry.

The division addressed by the conference, between a lyric tradition and experimental writing, has deep origins in American poetry of the twentieth century.[52] A reprise of earlier debates between avant-gardes and the literary establishment that can be traced back to the beginning of the century,[53] the lyric/experimental split is particularly prominent in studies of women poets of the post-war era who found themselves doubly marginalized: pushed to the edges of mainstream publishing cultures governed by their male counterparts, and then further side-lined within alternative movements.[54] In her important study *The Feminist Avant-Garde in American Poetry*, Elizabeth Frost proposes a "third margin" for experimental writers loosely associated with second-wave feminism in America: the privileging of "personal voice—and the relatively transparent language that often accompanies it—supports an unspoken assumption that linguistic experimentation has little

[52] For the seminal account of this division as it relates to feminist discourse, see Kinnahan, *Lyric Interventions* (University of Chicago Press, 2004). In her chapter on Guest, Kinnahan argues that Guest's poems of the 1960s "[work] through issues of gender and language" through their engagement with tropes of the romantic lyric (42-43). Since 2000, anthologies and scholarship have emphasised how contemporary poetry complicates the classic distinction between lyric and language-oriented work. As Lisa Sewell writes, "innovative, materialist poetic practices" are observable across the "lyric mainstream and multicultural poetries of identity politics." "Introduction," in *American Poets in the Twenty-First Century: The New Poetics*, eds. Claudia Rankine and Lisa Sewell (Wesleyan University Press, 2007), 3.

[53] Peter Nichols provides a detailed overview of how early modernist writers interacted with the "conventional lyric expectations of interior monologue and a suspended temporality." "Modernism and the Limits of Lyric," in *The Lyric Poem: Formations and Transformations*, ed. Marion Thain (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 181.

[54] The notion of a "double margin" was first proposed by Susan Suleiman in *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde* (Harvard University Press, 1990). It is worth noting that Suleiman attributes a generative potential to this position of marginality: "In a system in which the marginal, the avant-garde, the subversive, all that disturbs and 'undoes the whole' is endowed with positive value, a woman artist who can identify those concepts with her own practice and metaphorically with her own femininity can find in them a source of strength and self-legitimation" (17). Guest makes a remarkably similar point about a tradition of oppositionality that renders writing stronger in her preface to "A Portfolio of Poetry" by women writers, which she edited for *Chelsea* magazine: "[The writing] is fearless and indeed has been tested, not only by male dominance in the Arts, but by the opposite of societal fixtures to the *upstart* experimental." "Preface: A Portfolio of Poetry," *Chelsea* 57 (1994), 20.

relevance to feminist writing."[55] The Barnard conference represented an opportunity to bring together factional views on how such marginalization was inflected by cultural-political factors and registered within the formal features of poetry by women.

Guest was the only writer to feature on both days of the conference. Two panels addressed her work, with respondents including Terrence Diggory, Anna Rabinowitz, Marjorie Welish, Catherine Kasper, Sara Lundquist, and Robert Mueller. The event came a few weeks before Guest was awarded the Frost Medal for Distinguished Lifetime Work from the Poetry Society of America. Speaking at the award ceremony, the Language poet and theorist Charles Bernstein observed that Guest had stood as "an incandescent center, illuminating the entire proceedings" of the Barnard conference:

> At a panel discussion at this milestone conference, Guest told a packed crowd that she had come to us unprepared. I want to thank Barbara Guest for a lifetime of poetry for which we have been unprepared, for continually testing the limits of form and stretching the bounds of beauty, for expanding the imagination and revisioning — both revisiting and recasting — the aesthetic.[56]

Bernstein's comments illustrate the recovery of Guest by the Language movement as one of their forebears. Scholarship that retrospectively affixed Guest to the New York School, and the School to Abstract Expression, had left her work on the margins: feminist strands of experimental writing, associated with, although not limited to, Language, would now recover her work for another tradition. Indeed, Nelson's intervention draws on this other major locus of scholarship. Her revision of Guest's place in relation to the School is indebted to feminist accounts that focus on the complex subjectivities or speakers of Guest's poems.[57]

Guest's special status at the Barnard conference had been anticipated by a new flurry of publications during the preceding decade. Beginning in the 1990s, her work was increasingly included in publications aimed at correcting Frost's third margin.[58] Works of

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[55] Frost, *The Feminist Avant-Garde in American Poetry* (University of Iowa Press, 2003), xix.
[56] Bernstein, "Introducing Barbara Guest," para.5.
[57] As Nelson explains in her work's introduction, her approach intends to trouble attempts "to police" borders between canonical groupings, a choice that is "the natural result of a certain kind of feminist perspective": "many of the women who came to writing in the seventies shared a developing feminist consciousness—a consciousness which challenged and expanded both the New York School's famed antipathy to politics and the male Language writers' occasionally monomaniacal focus on warring economic systems." *Women, the New York School*, xvii.
[58] As well as anthologies, Guest's collaborations with Kelsey Street Press (a feminist experimental publisher established in 1974) began with the publication of *Musicality* in 1988 and would continue until 2003.

Guest were included in two significant anthologies: *Out of Everywhere: Linguistically Innovative Poetry by Women in North America & the UK*, published in 1996, edited by Maggie O'Sullivan; *Moving Borders: Three Decades of Innovative Writing by Women*, published in 1998, edited by Mary Margaret Sloan. These anthologies continued efforts began in the 1970s which foregrounded writing by women in feminist publications. Guest's involvement with this movement emerged out of the important friendships and collaborations she nurtured with fellow female writers and artists in New York. She worked on poetic sequences and book projects with Helen Frankenthaler, Sheila Isham, June Felter, Anne Dunn, Ann Slacik, Jane Moorman, Laurie Reid, as well as dedicating poems to Grace Hartigan, Mary Abbot Clyde, and Frankenthaler. Kathleen Fraser has written of Guest's "generosity toward younger women aspiring to the vocation of poetry" during her first years in New York;[59] Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge, who exchanged drafts with Guest for several years, describes how the "illumination of [Guest's] attention inspired her."[60]

As well as cultivating these relationships, Guest was a contributor to Fraser's *HOW(ever)*—a magazine of experimental writing by women. A 1986 essay in *The Women's Review of Books* by Marianne DeKoven describes the "flourishing underground of experimental writing by women in [the United States] and in Canada."[61] By the late 1980s, what Fraser termed the tradition of marginality had begun to make itself heard and had carved out a space for itself through the circulation of small presses and magazines. Yet, as DeKoven makes clear in her essay, the increased visibility of writing by women within experimental subcultures came at a price:

> As long as an experimental writer whose "signature" is female aligns herself with the language poets, for example, as many of them sometimes do, she has a place on the literary map. The price she pays, a price familiar to all of us, is twofold: the question of gender will be erased, declared a non-issue, and at the same time it is less likely than if her signature were male that she will become one of the stars, even in that tiny firmament.[62]

[59] Fraser, *Translating the Unspeakable* (University of Alabama Press, 2000), 127.
[60] Berssenbrugge, "Recalling a Friendship," *Chicago Review* 53, no. 4 (2008), 115.
[61] DeKoven, "Gertrude's Granddaughters," *The Women's Review of Books* 4, no. 2 (1986), 12.
[62] DeKoven, "Gertrude's Granddaughters," 12.

In order to correct these erasures, feminist criticism sought to highlight the role of gender within Guest's writing and its reception history. To this end, substantial close readings of her poems—a handful of important essays written from the 1990s onwards—often emphasise Guest's deconstruction of subjectivity: Lundquist reads Guest's ekphrastic poems as performing "labour and dialogue, one of both reverence and resistance, in which she [Guest], as viewer and maker of meaning, is equal to the painter as maker of meaning";[63] Fraser describes how Guest's "location of self is disclosed as structural."[64] Such approaches locate Guest's writing within a lineage of what Megan Simpson calls "Language-Oriented Feminist Epistemology":

> These writers offer in their work what I call "language-oriented feminist epistemologies"—ways of knowing that take gender into account without essentializing it, and that interrogate the very category of knowledge and the conditions of knowing.[65]

As Simpson notes of Mina Loy's writing, this interrogative mode is born out of a convergence of modernism and feminism: the first manifests as an aggravated suspicion of received forms and a continual search for new patterns of expression; the second harnesses this suspicion and directs its towards a political objective.[66] Importantly, this convergence involves straining and testing the rapport between subjectivity, language, and gender, rather than reinforcing the presence of subjectivity through the more conventional mode of lyric address.[67]

Guest's work, within this experimental-feminist lineage, should therefore be distanced from a lyric tradition that may elide the complexities of gender-identity as it relates to language. Largely eschewing lyric reading, Fraser and Lundquist seek to recover political valences in Guest's work through alternative routes: the poems are understood to be structured around the drama of perception, expressing the drama of a subject who looks at the world in a self-reflexive mode that allows her to interrogate and critique her gendered

[63] Lundquist, "Reverence and Resistance," 284.
[64] Fraser, *Translating the Unspeakable*, 128.
[65] Simpson, *Poetic Epistemologies: Gender and Knowing in Women's Language-Oriented Writing* (State University of New York Press, 2000), 7.
[66] Simpson, *Poetic Epistemologies*, 53.
[67] Simpson, *Poetic Epistemologies*, 5.

positioning.[68] This provides a language that engages with some of the formal mechanisms of Guest's work. Nonetheless, a marked overemphasis on the role of an organizing subject in Guest's poems (albeit pluralized, decentered, or provisional), means that such readings overlook or occlude the fundamentally impersonal affects contained in much of Guest's writings.

To take the most notable example of a subject-centric reading, Lundquist's 1997 essay on the female gaze as performed in two of Guest's ekphrastic poems offers a fundamental re-evaluation of Guest's engagement with the visual:

> In ekphrastic poetry (by definition a representation of a representation), the central story of self becomes complicated and enriched by the simultaneous centrality of an Other. Two visions consort and conflict with each other, seduce and serve, bewilder and explain each other. In poems such as these, Guest is creating a risky, open-ended portrait of self-as-artist, a portrait that is always strangely and necessarily relational.[69]

This emphasis on self-representation draws Lundquist's reading towards an identification between "The Poetess" of Miró's painting and the subject of Guest's poem of the same name, from *Moscow Mansions*:

"The Poetess"
after Miró

A dollop is dolloping
her a scoop is pursuing
flee vain ingots Ho
coriander darks thimble blues
red okays adorn her
buzz green circles in flight
or submergence? Giddy

[68] As Nelson writes in her analysis of Guest's poem "An Emphasis Falls on Reality," this interrogation of subjectivity involves pushing "beyond the bounds of the subject-object dyad": "No heroic subjectivity dividing the world into the "me" and the "not-me" here—rather, an emphasis simply falls, like light or rain, unprovoked." *Women, the New York School*, 39-40.
[69] Lundquist, "Reverence and Resistance," 267.

mishaps of blackness make
stinging clouds what!
a fraught climate
what natural c/o abnormal
loquaciousness the
Poetess riddled
her asterisk
genial! as space[70]

Lundquist reads this poem as an oblique self-portrait, in which Guest looks at herself looking at Mirò's painting. She traces within it the search for a female subjectivity that must be freed from "the stereotype of the 'wailing' or 'scribbling' poetess that has haunted literary criticism and the popular imagination" and she finds, in place of this, "a visual validation of the inventive, humorous, fluid, elusive, urban, whimsical, postsurrealist work" of writing poetry.[71]

Lundquist recuperates a subjectivity out of the text, at the cost of overstating the coherence of Guest's methods of "visual validation." The poem, according to Lundquist, affirms the Poetess as a subjectivity that escapes from its belittled and narrow stereotype. The trope of the Poetess, as used by Guest, puts the poem in touch with a tradition of writing by women that goes back into the eighteenth century. As Virginia Jackson discusses, the "persona of the speaker that would become the basis of modern lyric reading" is closely connected to the appropriation of this Poetess figure by male poets.[72] In Lundquist's view, Guest's poem enacts an identification that collapses distinctions between the perspective of the viewer of Miró's canvas and the figure of the Poetess trapped within it. The resulting impression is that, in the words of W.J.T. Mitchell, the "mute ekphrastic object awaiting the [poetic voice] already has a voice of its own."[73]

"The Poetess" is certainly interested in recovering for its central figure an agency that would otherwise be trapped or threatened. The opening of the poem speaks unequivocally of a pursuit: this "her" is in flight from "vain ingots." Yet the exaggeratedly poetical "Ho" quickly pivots the text towards a rendering of colours that releases our

[70] *CP*, 121.
[71] Lundquist, "Reverence and Resistance," 268.
[72] Jackson, *Before Modernism: Inventing American Lyric* (Princeton University Press, 2023), 197.
[73] Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Wants?* (University of Chicago Press, 1994), 173.

attention from subject-centred psychologizing. The four intra-lineal breaks on the page are as important as the apparently ekphrastic mode when considering how the poem creates a space within which this figure of the Poetess can be freed from her pursuers. The first break separating "ingots" from "Ho" underscores the rupture between an ekphrastic representation ("ingots" being the jeweled colours of Mirò's blotted canvas) and an exclamative mode of poetic address ("Ho": "expressing, according to intonation, surprise, admiration, exultation [often ironical]"[74]). The following three lines then track back to Guest's preferred subject matter: colours, before the lines "in flight / or submergence?" recenter the theme of escape and pursuit given in the second line. A third intra-line break divides this "submergence?" from "Giddy," and allows for another tonal shift away from the rendering of colour and towards the affective power of the canvas (close scrutiny of which, we are invited to imagine, might make us "giddy").

I register here the turns of the poem's tone in order to pull away from the idea that it *narrows* towards an identificatory alignment of Guest with Mirò's Poetess. Interestingly, in an earlier handwritten draft of the poem, Guest intimates this identification much more strongly. She puts the voice in the first person, so that the first two lines originally read: "A dollop is dolloping / *me* a scoop is pursuing."[75] The ninth line in the same draft then draws a direct equivalence between the canvas and the writing of poetry: it states that the "stinging clouds" of the painting are "like verse!"[76] Yet in Guest's subsequent drafts, both of these identifications between speaker and object, painting and poetry, are displaced: "me" is edited to "her"; and the phrase "like verse!" is cut altogether.

Rather than hazarding an identification with the Poetess through her writing, we might better read Guest's poem as the search for a genial space that opens out in front of the canvas itself. This does not quite amount to the emergence of a single voice over the course of the poem, one that could recover—through ekphrasis—a lost yet whole agency for the female figure. My cautiousness about the centrality of speaker, subject, and voice in Guest's poetics should not detract from the poem's strong emphasis on a fugitive female subjectivity, one that is caught up in multiple recompositions, and striving to escape from containment. But it is important not to return Guest's poetics to a different form of delimitation in overdetermining the coherence of a single perspective that contains the shimmer of

[74] Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "ho (int.1), sense 1," March 2024, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1051288117.
[75] "The Poetess." Box 68, folder 1368, Guest papers; emphasis added.
[76] "The Poetess." Box 68, folder 1368, Guest papers.

impressions that makes up the poem's surface. What Guest's riddled language in fact enacts is a perspective that is continuously unstable and enquiring, irreducible to the fiction of one perspectival position.

This brief reading of the poem as a space, or, in its own words, "a fraught climate," is intended to enrich, rather than contradict, the subject-centric angle of Lundquist's reading.[77] In an exchange of letters between Guest and Rachel Blau DuPlessis, the latter emphasises how the "manipulation of reputation, positionings, participations […] a system of consumption" are all to be found at work within Guest's poetry.[78] "The Poetess" faces up to these manipulations, including the female figure as she is compressed within Miró's aesthetic distortions. But the poem's exclamations and exuberance are also expressions of the joyous experience of regarding the canvas, rather than the representation of something within the canvas. The art of making space, in Guest's text, takes place around and besides, not through or with, the illusion of subjectivity.

This idea of making space, which I take to be central to Guest's poetics of atmosphere throughout the chapters that follow, can itself be aligned with the feminist projects with which Guest was associated. It is, in other words, no coincidence that it is the figure of the Poetess that Guest takes as the prompt for her meditation on the poem as space. In her final editorial for *HOW(ever)*, Fraser describes the publication as an attempt to "make a place" for the "'peculiar'" writings of women that refused both mainstream and avant-garde norms:

> Unpredictable by definition, "the new" seemed to have become quickly over-prescriptive in journals shaped by various male-dominant poetics or a feminist editorship whose tastes/politics did not acknowledge much of the poetry we felt to be central to our moment— the continuously indefinable, often "peculiar" writings being pieced together by women refusing the acceptable norms.[79]

In 1994, Guest edited an insert of experimental writing by women for the New York magazine *Chelsea*. Her preface for the selection echoes Fraser's emphasis on the creation of

[77] Erica Kaufman also argues that Guest's explorations of space in *The Location of Things* is inherently gendered: "the dichotomy of inside/outside, voyeur/actor resonates throughout the book and continues to remind the reader that women do not have the luxury of occupying space in the same way men (her male contemporaries) do/did." "On Barbara Guest," *Jacket 2* (2011), para.4. See also Lynn Keller, "Becoming 'a Compleat Travel Agency': Barbara Guest's Negotiations with the Fifties Feminist Mystique," in *The Scene of My Selves: New Work on New York School Poets*, eds. Terrence Diggory and Stephen Paul Martin (National Poetry Foundation, 2001).
[78] "Letter from Rachel Blau Du Plessis to Barbara Guest." May 14, 2001. Box 12, folder 227, Guest papers.
[79] Fraser, "continuous, undefinable," *HOW(ever)* 6, no. 4 (1992), 15.

a space for marginal voices, although Guest does so in order to suggest that the chosen writings delimit boundaries. Just as the ending of "The Poetess" gestures towards an escape into an aestheticized pleasure that is unconstrained by a single subjectivity, so Guest here suggests that limitations of spatiality are in conflict with her interpretation of avant-gardism:

> I emphasize the various locals of the poets from which these works emerge. The areas are fairly representative of the U.S. — Boston, New York City, Santa Fe, Arkansas, San Francisco, Berkley, Los Angeles, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Colorado, Pennsylvania. From Europe we have France and Italy. The point I choose to make here is that though all of these poets live within an imposed geographical position, their poetry connects them in a way that is not latitudinal. Designated as "avant-garde" or "experimental," in that sense they are "in touch" with one another, and ignore any boundaries of space. The poetry embraces an intimacy of purpose beyond limitations of spatiality.[80]

This conception of an expansive network, one that is in touch and sharing an intimacy of purpose despite distances and divergences, can tell us something about Guest's own contact with modernism as sustained throughout her writings. Locating Guest within feminist criticism and publication history, as discussed here, has allowed both for more extensive engagement with the poems themselves, as well as the recontextualization of her work beyond the confines of the New York School. The definition Guest offers of avant-garde writing in the above passage, as an overcoming of boundaries, should be read as a sign of her own commitment to the construction of an alternative tradition that does not hold too closely to its immediate circumstances. In order to better understand this, I turn now to recent developments in studies of the historic avant-garde which ask fundamental questions about how oppositional traditions circulate and sustain themselves across literary history.

IV Provisional avant-gardes

In order to broaden the historical context for Guest's writing, I also rely on more recent accounts of avant-gardes that take a long view of their developments across the twentieth century. Indeed, growing interest in Guest's work this century has developed in parallel to

[80] Guest, "Preface," 20.

feminist reassessments of avant-gardism.[81] A consideration of Guest's reception necessarily leads through the major strands of criticism on avant-gardism in the United States: from the mid-century absorption and institutionalization of European avant-gardist techniques and styles in New York, through subsequent critiques of that appropriative phase as depoliticizing and homogenizing, up to more recent revisions of how a complicated interplay of modernist aesthetics morphed into the distinctive aesthetic and political experiments of the 1970s and 1980s.

What is at stake in such assessments goes somewhat beyond determining the influence of pre-war "-isms" as they flowed into North American culture. The more pressing question becomes what *retroactive* effects the reception of avant-gardism in the United States had on the relation of politics, aesthetics, and style to one another in prior avant-garde movements. Do these spheres remain mutually involved as they shift transatlantically? How do the terms of their relation change? For Guest, these questions remain evergreen: the avant-garde remains a constant theme of her critical writing, as well as an inexhaustible source of renewal across her poetry. Indeed, Robert Kaufman's proposition in 2000 that Guest represented "A Future for Modernism" is far-sighted not simply since Guest extends modernism well beyond its standard periodization, but because the reflexivity and openness with which her poetics returns to past "-isms" itself anticipates scholarly reassessments of avant-gardism this century.

Whereas earlier classifications of the avant-garde presented "a limited and predetermined set of possibilities" that homogenized what may have been "very diverse projects,"[82] recent interventions by Griselda Pollock, Susan Rosenbaum, Suzanne W. Churchill and Linda Kinnahan are aimed at opening up a plurality of avant-garde constellations as they are traversed and reshaped by marginalized participants.[83] The result, as Pollock describes, is "a variety of avant-garde communities, trajectories, or traditions where the sense of breaking new ground is always a relative variable subject to the context

[81] For a recent perspective on Guest's place in such studies see Susan Rosenbaum, "Visionary Architects: Barbara Guest, Frederick Kiesler, and the Surrealist Poetics of the Galaxy." *Humanities* 11, no. 5 (2022). Unearthing parallels between Guest's poetics and Frederick Kiesler's modernist architecture, Rosenbaum argues that "the relationship between these works models the kind of affiliation important to experimental women artists and poets such as Guest, affiliations that helped form an *En Dehors Garde* 'in the shadow' of the avant-garde" (para.1).

[82] Kirsten Strom, "'Avant-Garde of What?': Surrealism Reconceived as Political Culture," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 62, no. 1 (2004), 38.

[83] Churchill, Kinnahan, and Rosenbaum, "En Dehors Garde," *Mina Loy: Navigating the Avant-Garde* (University of Georgia Press, 2016). See also Rosenbaum, "The 'Do It Yourself' Avant-Garde: American Women Poets and Experiment," in *A History of Twentieth-Century Women's Poetry*, ed. Linda A. Kinnahan (Cambridge University Press, 2016).

rather than categorical absolutes."[84] Guest's poetics provides us both with an exemplary case of this situated and provisional avant-gardism, as well as representing a mediation of debates about "all those isms," as Guest called them, in her own time, an intervention that can ground and specify this recent scholarly turn towards a looser and more permeable definition of avant-gardism.

In making this claim for the importance of Guest's work, I therefore follow recent efforts to repurpose avant-garde aesthetics as provisional and mobile forms of critique, as theorized by Sophie Seita in her study of small-press publishing. In Seita's work, a prior critical fixation on the "political efficacy" of avant-gardism is replaced with a "new model of avant-garde criticism based on diachronic reading and provisionality."[85] Seita argues for an enlarged and generous sense of avant-gardism as a series of transferable practices that are attuned to future recuperation, but which are, for that, never completed or fully satisfied at any one moment. Studying renewals of the avant-garde in this way requires giving due to attention to what Eve Sedgwick describes as "the many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture […] whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them."[86] The avant-garde's relation with objects of culture is reproposed as antagonistic but also reparative: it seeks to reformulate already available forms in order to present a new conception of society, culture, and their field of interaction.

The plurality and provisionality of this vision extend earlier paradigmatic readings of the avant-garde that resist the idea of completion or continuity. Looking back to the historic avant-garde means returning in order to go forward, a move that counters the linear progress and neat separateness that is inherent to canonical periodizations. The neo-avant-garde, as in Hal Foster's influential schematic, "comprehends" but does not complete the projects of its forerunners.[87] Foster elaborates his own reparative reading of the avant-garde as a critique of Peter Bürger's seminal theorization of the historic avant-garde in the 1970s.[88]

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[84] Pollock, "Moments and Temporalities of the Avant-Garde 'In, Of, and From the Feminine'," *New Literary History* 41, no. 4 (2010), 796.
[85] Seita, *Provisional Avant-Gardes: Little Magazine Communities from Dada to Digital* (Stanford University Press, 2019), 192.
[86] Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 151.
[87] Foster, *The Return of the Real: Art and Theory at the End of the Century* (MIT Press, 1996), 15.
[88] The influence of Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde* in the United States, following its translation into English in 1984, emerges primarily through discussions on aesthetics in the journal *October*. These discussions developed out of an earlier phase of theorization, which had absorbed the insights of Renato Poggioli's *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, translated by Gerald Fitzgerald in 1968. In the work of Poggioli, the avant-garde was to be thought of as a position "beyond" limits, a critique of society from without, with an "annihilation of all the past, precedent and tradition" as its foremost aim (47). In this negatory model, the avant-garde represented either an attempt to reject the notion of limit or, in a weaker form, posited the transcendence of limits so as to make way for the new. In a second theoretical phase, following the work of

Foster's work, as well as that of Seita, represents a reckoning at the end of the last century with the failure of these radical movements to realise their political projects on their own terms, a failure which was understood to prefigure and then allow for their absorption into dominant cultural narratives of post-war America. As Bürger himself describes in a later reflection on his own work: "[t]he paradox of the failure of the avant-gardes lies without a doubt in the musealization of their manifestations as works of art, that is, in their artistic success."[89] By this measure, the avant-gardes fell victim to their own success, with "success" fatefully qualified as the reduction of socio-political "manifestations" to "works of art."

In many respects, recent feminist reformulations of avant-gardism as a set of provisional, local, and marginal practices begin by facing up to this failure, and then they redirect critical energy towards figures marginalized in the narrative of "musealization" as explored by Bürger. Churchill, Kinnahan, and Rosenbaum, through their work on poet Mina Loy, have proposed an "*En Dehors Garde*" that orbits rather than advances, that marks and amends the centre even as it resists its pull:

> Rather than assuming a militant position at the forefront of culture, women, people of color, and queer or disabled artists often came from the outside and circulated on the margins. They rarely enjoyed the power, privilege, or authority derived from membership in the institutions of art, or even in the countercultural, avant-garde circles that challenged those institutions. Instead, they worked and moved strategically to transform gendered, racialized literary traditions and visual cultures that excluded or objectified them.[90]

This approach becomes essential as soon as we recognize that voices on the margins of the historic avant-garde always and already perceived the limitations of utopian projects which

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Bürger, the avant-garde is positioned as working against limits—political, social, cultural—by presenting a revolutionary critique which "cannot be separated from society, but is inescapably implicated in it" and taking the institution as terrain on which to carry out this struggle (109). For Poggioli and Bürger, the limit constructs a field of intelligibility or interpretation: a selection of instances (the poem, the painting) that fall within the limit are taken as paradigmatic. This selection is itself contingent on a paradigm (the poetic, the aesthetic). The significance of the historic avant-garde was its *resistance* to this function of the limit and the strategies it developed to unveil the paradoxes that sustain it. As Ann Gibson summarizes, it did so by "interrupting the sense of continuous development in the arts by its transgressions against anything established as a given." "Avant-Garde," in *Critical Terms for Art History*, eds. Robert Nelson and Richard Shiff (University of Chicago Press, 2003), 205. See also Nicolas Heimendinger, "Avant-Gardes and Postmodernism: The Reception of Peter Bürger's Theory of the Avant-Garde in American Art Criticism," *Symbolic Goods* 11 (2022).

[89] Bürger, "Avant-Garde and Neo-Avant-Garde: An Attempt to Answer Certain Critics of 'Theory of the Avant-Garde,'" *New Literary History* 41, no. 4 (2010), 705.

[90] Churchill, Kinnahan, and Rosenbaum, "En Dehors Garde," para.6.

appropriated and replicated violent, reactionary, and misogynistic rhetoric. It follows that the avant-gardism of such actors is to be interpreted as a discrete set of strategies in tension the predominant motions of avant-gardism, rather than as a naïf echoing of the manifesto's monologic blast.

These feminist interventions are a crucial part of a wider move at the end of the last century that turned scholars away from the individual subject and towards community, away from progress and towards process, away from the monolithic and towards pluralities. Responses to the political failure of the historic avant-garde, of the kind proposed by Seita or Churchill, are often enlist avant-gardism as a networked political culture traversed by multiple agents who were interested in what Kirsten Strom (2004), commenting on surrealism, describes as "a subversive alternative tradition" or "anti-canon."[91] This means that avant-garde methods of organizing in the face of crises, rooted in diverse historical contexts, are by no means limited in scope to their immediate circumstances. Rachel Blau DuPlessis, who more than any other scholar has stressed the centrality of Guest's work to American poetry after modernism, captures well the full consequence of this revisionary approach when she describes the need to recuperate from twentieth century avant-garde movements forms of mass agency and social authorship:

> I am taking the failure of modernity, and the parallel compromise of cultural modernisms to be the large, perhaps unspecific, but palpable, political crisis of the last decades. The ethical trajectory of these cultural products in a revivified critical post-avant tradition is a way of recuperating modernism from its own lost promise.[92]

DuPlessis' point is that the energies of avant-gardism, largely taken to be exhausted by the end of the twentieth century, should be re-evaluated on the basis of what they were once capable of enacting and imagining within their own time. Much like the anticipatory action and presentness of Leo Bersani's thought touched on at the beginning of this chapter, DuPlessis proposes a revival of the past potentialities of avant-gardist visions. Guest's own investment in avant-gardisms, her sensitivity to their weaknesses and failings, combined with a belief in their power to continuously offer new avenues for poetic enquiry, is

[91] Strom, "'Avant-Garde of What?'", 41.
[92] DuPlessis, "Agency, Social Authorship, and the Political Aura of Contemporary Poetry," *Textual Practice* 23, no. 6 (2009), 998.

fashioned in comparable terms. Her poems make recuperative moves that pass back through history so as to arrive not at a fixed origin but at new horizons.[93]

In theoretical terms, Guest's positioning vis-à-vis the avant-garde is well described by the language of these scholars: provisional and reparative, mobile and marginal. But how does such a rapport make itself felt within her writing? By way of example, consider two key early poems of Guest's, in which she reflects directly on the reshaping of avant-gardist histories as they are transferred from Europe to New York. What Frank O'Hara called her "two beautiful Historys [sic]" show Guest mediating on the place of her writing within traditions distant and close at hand.[94] In the summer of 1958, Guest was staying in Paris. In September, she met up with O'Hara and the painter Grace Hartigan.[95] Guest later recounted one of the group's get-togethers that summer:

> I was staying there with my family and had been very busy with the *Guide Bleu* looking at every placard on every building I could find. And I had located the "bateau lavoir" where Picasso and Max Jacob had first lived and where they had held all those studio parties with Apollinaire and Marie Laurencin. And across the street was a very good restaurant. I suggested that we have lunch there… We had a "marvelous" lunch, much wine and talk and we all congratulated ourselves on being in Paris at the same time—a continuation of the Cedar St Bar, where we had formerly and consistently gathered. After lunch I suggested that we cross the street to the "bateau lavoir," a discovery of mine and one I thought would intrigue Frank. Not at all. He did go across the street, but he didn't bother to go into the building. "Barbara," he

[93] In this sense, as mentioned in my introduction, Guest's work speaks to ongoing discussions within modernist studies about the broadening of boundaries that has defined the field this century. Representative of this scholarly engagement with the limits of periodization, Rita Felski states that "[h]istory is not a box" and that, as such, "[w]e need models of textual mobility and transhistorical attachment that refuse to be brow-beaten by the sacrosanct status of period boundaries." *The Limits of Critique* (University of Chicago Press, 2015), 154. Although an interrogation of modernism's spatial and temporal arrangements is not new, the field's expansiveness is now augmented by a self-reflexive presentism that takes the problematisation of spatio-temporal representation as a theme common to the practices of modernism and critique itself. Mena Mitrano carries over "the plane of coevalness" from philosopher Roberto Esposito in order to elucidate this affinity: "The plane of coevalness specifically thematizes the problem of temporalities, suggesting occluded, eccentric lines of thought hosted in the folds of an ongoing critique, which can only fully emerge in the present." *Literary Critique, Modernism and the Transformation of Theory* (Edinburgh University Press, 2022), 20.

[94] "Letter to Barbara Guest." April 20, 1959. Box 1, folder 10. Allen Collection of Frank O'Hara Letters. Archives & Special Collections, University of Connecticut Library.

[95] O'Hara and Hartigan arrived in preparation for Museum of Modern Art's *The New American Painting* exhibition, which would open at the Museé National d'Art Moderne in January 1959. I return to this significance of this exhibition, in relation to Abstract Expression and the New York-Paris axis, in chapter 3.

said “that was their history and it doesn’t interest me. What does interest me is ours, and we’re making it now.”[96]

The anecdote is usually told with O’Hara in focus.[97] When O’Hara’s reaction takes centre stage, the vignette fits neatly into a narrative of avant-garde ruptures: O’Hara’s remonstration—“that was their history and it doesn’t interest me”—is, knowingly, nothing new, but it does become the newest claim on the new. Yet there are other currents converging around O’Hara’s statement, none of which are propelled in a single direction. There is the looping “continuation of the Cedar St Bar,” a favorite New York hangout, back to Paris, the scene which the New York School of artists had styled itself on. There is Guest’s peripatetic pilgrimage through the streets of Paris to locate the history that does so interest her. And there is the *bateau lavoir* itself: Guest’s step inside; O’Hara’s hanging out on the street.

This visit to the *bateau lavoir* was followed by an exchange of letters and poems between the pair. Guest’s poem “History,” drafted in London in November 1958, is a reply to Frank O’Hara’s “With Barbara Guest In Paris,” which was itself a response to another poem of Guest’s, “A London Poem for Frank O’Hara,” written shortly after their time together in Paris. Guest’s “History” was subsequently published in *The Location of Things* of 1960, with a dedication to O’Hara. It celebrates a breakout from the preservative, stifling force of history, figured here as “that pale refrigerator” which, like an ice cream parlor (or a morgue), keeps its stuff fresh for recollection. It starts out with an affectionate *sobriquet*—“Old Thing”—which serves as double address to O’Hara and to history itself:

“History”
for Frank O’Hara

Old Thing

We have escaped
from that pale refrigerator

[96] Guest, “Frank and I Happened to Be in Paris…” in *Homage to Frank O’Hara*, eds. Bill Berkson and Joe LeSueur (Big Sky, 1978), 77.
[97] Brad Gooch includes the scene in his biography of O’Hara, suggesting that since O’Hara had his sights set on the success of the exhibition, which under the direction of Dorothy Miller had become largely his responsibility, he was probably “impatient” with Guest’s Blue Guide tourism. *City Poet: The Life and Times of Frank O’Hara* (Knopf, 1993), 314.

you wrote about
Here
amid the wild woodbine landscapes
wearing a paper hat
I recollect
the idols
in those frozen tubs
secluded by buttresses[98]

O'Hara's divorcing of "their history" from "ours" isn't given space within Guest's poem. The titular-History chimes visually down the page with the 'Here' (and now): the recollection of the past is a question, for Guest, of transferring, exhuming, unboxing "idols" from their original context. The definite article of "*the* idols" suggests that they are in some way unmistakable—a known rather than an unknown quality, while the choice of "idols" is suggestive of a particular relation to knowledge: idols are created for worship, fashioned by devotees. Guest's recollection of idols therefore implies the rediscovery of past devotions.

In the earlier poem also sent to O'Hara from London, Guest arranges this transference of historical icons in the opposite direction, so that the question is how a past atmosphere—"the same air"—or sensibility can be "carried" safely into an older landscape:

"A London Poem for Frank O'Hara"

Do you think above the Georgian ruins here
we might perfect the same air?

Force into columns our dissemblings
and our clean miniatures of love?

After the white rain, on knees

bury what remains of our frescoes

[98] *LT*, 49. The poem was first published in *A New Folder: Americans: Poems and Drawings*, ed. Daisy Aldan (Folder Editions, 1959), 48-49.

in a crypt of St. Paul's?

I've carried you safely across waters
transported the sight of your face above tables
at the Pont Royal and deposited you here

at the hospital, Royal.[99]

Common to both poems are the fuzzy boundaries that Guest explores between the space and the time that a single scene can occupy. In "History," the expansion into "wild woodbine landscapes" is both a liberatory dashing out and a banishment ("we were banished / Sighing / strangers"), so that the task of situating a poem, a moment, or a relationship involves a recovery of lost bearings. "London Poem" is immediately brought into thinking about Paris, and it goes on to imagine how "life / both faints and arouses" memories of that city among the "churchyards and hospices" of London. The solidity of surroundings give way under atmospheric pressures that drift into the field of the poem from this affectively charged elsewhere: "clouds dissolve the chapel," the poem concludes, as "the Thames sinks, then swims / without us."[100] As in Guest's Parisian anecdote, where the foray into the hallowed space of the *bateau lavoir* is as important as the projective continuation of the Cedar Street Tavern in a Parisian restaurant, the present is always given as a mixing up of somewhere else's past with your own.

O'Hara's poetic reply to "A London Poem," "With Barbara Guest in Paris," switches Guest's palimpsestic layering of past onto the present for big strides into the future, followed by one swoon into the past. His poem simultaneously extends and weakens the force of his comment to Guest on rue Ravignan—"we're making our history now"—although it softens the would-be grandiosity of that remark with O'Hara's trademark blend of affection and levity:

"With Barbara Guest in Paris"

Oh Barbara! do you think

[99] "A London Poem for Frank O'Hara." Box 67, folder 1361, Guest papers.
[100] "A London Poem for Frank O'Hara." Box 67, folder 1361, Guest papers.

they'll ever name anything after us like
rue Henri-Barbusse or
canard à l'Ouragan?

will we ever
with a sweet distemper

have infected a pale white
moonish bateau frigidaire
with our melancholy lights
and vaguely proud dissemblings?
neither modest
nor identifiably west

care for the lap of Mallarmé
and the place where heroes fell down
as greatness sleeps outside
we smile and bear
the purple city air[101]

O'Hara does everything here to make this craving for posterity read as a joke: from the opening exclamatory "Oh" to his choice of "*Henri-Barbusse*" (a novelist and committed Stalinist; not a likely model for him or Guest) and then "*canard à l'Ouragan*," which serves as a clowny mishearing and a "mistranslation" of the atmospheric delicateness of Guest's work into the force of a hurricane. The more restrained "dissemblings" of Guest's poem are surpassed here by "vaguely proud dissemblings," which describes well what an O'Hara poem is often doing: it dissembles pride with a throwaway charm, and it prides itself on this very capacity to dissemble. That casualness gives us the *bateau lavoir* first as the rote Symbolist image of poetic inspiration—"a pale white / moonish bateau"—that then comes tumbling down bathetically on "frigidaire." O'Hara signed off the poem to Guest with a

[101] "With Barbara Guest in Paris." Box 27, folder 585, Guest papers. The poem was first published in *Paris Review* 45 (1968).

handwritten note: “PS. I loved our evening in Montmartre and the bateau lavoir being the color of Ricard [the liquor] was perfect!”[102]

Whereas O’Hara amplifies a sensitivity to time as impatience, exuberance, or simply boredom, to read Guest for any length of time, as in these poems, is to feel a weakening of time—its loosening up. This is the stylistic signature of the circling, widening motion of the *En Dehors Garde* as it builds momentum from the margins. The poems themselves tend to run close to the present without ever touching down at a terminal now. The opening of “Sunday Evening,” also published in her first collection, *The Location of Things*, is representative in this regard:

> I am telling you a number of half-conditioned ideas
> Am repeating myself,
> The room has four sides; it is a rectangle,
> From the window the bridge, the water, the leaves,
> Her hat is made of feathers,
> My fortune is produced from glass
> And I drink to my extinction.[103]

This is not the “now” enacted by lyric address. Although the poem begins by tethering itself to a deictic centre (“Sunday Evening / I am telling you...”), it studies that centre from a peripheral position of observation. Neither is the poem is operating in the “just now” past tense, that anecdotal let-me-tell-you pose adopted frequently by O’Hara and Schuyler. It reads linear enough, step by step, as though the directness of its present tense were there only to offset the spatial expansions and rearrangements that the poem’s images unfold. The immediate circumstances are seen aslant: the more expansive the setting becomes, the more peculiarly cramped the timestamp of that initial moment comes to seem, until the poem’s sudden swerve on “my extinction” threatens to tip everything towards a finality that will erase the imaginative expansions of the previous lines. This tension in Guest’s poetry—between the space and the time that a scene occupies—makes the constraint of the present moment, and its gradual unravelling, one of its most characteristic moods.

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[102] “With Barbara Guest in Paris [text on reverse].” Box 27, folder 585, Guest papers.
[103] *LT*, 25.

In the closing lines of "History," it is the constraint of history, "that pale refrigerator," which Guest's speaker wants to get away from. This sensation of escape is rendered with the surrealist techniques preferred in Guest's early work. The impression of O'Hara's poem is felt in Guest's riff off the "melancholy lights," whilst the final line apes the image of poetic languor that O'Hara's poem ended on:

Yet the funicular
was tied by a rope
        It could only cry
        looking down
                that midnight hill
My lights are
        bright
the walk is
        irregular
your initials
are carved on the sill.
Mon Ami !
        the funicular
        has a knife
                in its side
Ah allow these nightingales to nurse us[104]

The poem leaves hanging the question of how any of this might amount to its titular capital-H History. In O'Hara's rendition, as we have seen, history has everything to do with futurity, as well as something to do with a 'greatness' that is ready to be woken up and assumed. Guest's poem doesn't enter into such heroics. Its associative descent, built on the musicality of alternating short /ɪ/ and long /aɪ/ vowels, married in the last line with "nightingales," trades O'Hara's smiling and bearing the heaviness of greatness for a language of precarity, fragility, and woundedness. The history that the pair were writing together, the poem seems to suggest, is neither here nor there. It is all in the movement from here (Paris) to there (New York), and then back again.

[104] *LT*, 49-50.

While the differences are pronounced, Guest's and O'Hara's approaches to writing about the problem of history invite initial comparisons: they both open by centering on a lyric mode of address—"Oh Barbara!", "Old Thing"; they both close with images of recuperation and repose. Yet Guest's "History" remains much more invested in distributing agency across the objects that it draws into its frame. Whereas O'Hara fashions his project as a sharp move beyond the Parisian avant-garde, Guest's imagines tradition as a question of translation or transference: a "carrying over" of whatever can be salvaged, a salvaging of whatever it is that remains to be recollected. We might imagine Guest's poem operating as a mediator in Wae Chee Dimock's sense of the term: a node tied into a "mediating network [that is] imperfect and incessant."[105] It looks back to the legacy of the Parisian avant-garde as something to be recollected and circulated anew, rather than surpassed. As Dimock argues in *Weak Planet: Literature and Assisted Survival*, a literary history that is interested in such weak moments of recollection and near affinity fashions itself as "a nonsovereign field weakly durable because continually crowdsourced, it offers one of the best examples of redress as an incremental process, never finished because never without new input."[106]

If we keep Dimock's weakly durable field of decentered exchanges in mind, it should seem no coincidence that O'Hara's and Guest's meditations on posterity employ the feverish language of contagion and the metaphor of preservation, with Guest's poems in particular assembling images of woundedness, hospitalization, and brokenness. In the case of O'Hara's poem, fame is something that "infects" its surroundings. The poet-heroes are imagined are falling down—swooning into the lap of Mallarmé—and then smiling away their melancholic need to be remembered. For O'Hara, the poet who looks towards posterity is still identifiable as a single, heroic actor, but one who is always threatened with the possibility of collapse (we might think here of the phrase "to *fall* into obscurity"). There is something sickly about this figure, although it will nonetheless remain, within O'Hara's text, a discernible and composed individual. In Guest's poem, it is the Parisian landscape itself that has caught this illness and finds itself in need of repair or care. The funicular up to Montmartre, the hotbed of artistic activity during the boom years of Parisian modernism, "cries" its way down the hill, as though pained to leave those heights behind. It is then the figure of poetry itself, rendered stereotypically in the figure of the nightingale, which is

[105] Dimock, *Weak Planet*, 7.
[106] Dimock, *Weak Planet*, 7.

called upon to "nurse" back to health the literary *flaneurs* who range irregularly through this damaged atmosphere.

These atmospheric pressures—impersonal forces that swell around subjects and ultimately subsume them—are present in all three of the Guest poems discussed so far in this chapter. "The Poetess" works within the space opened up *between* an onlooker and a work of art. It plays with a sympathetic alignment of subject and object, but the "stinging clouds" of Miró's canvas push Guest towards a celebration of a relational space that is distinct from ekphrastic voicing or lyric identification with a depicted figure. "Nostalgia" works through its motifs of departure and return as expansions of the "small spaces" in which the poem's "You" is initially enclosed. This resistance to confinement involves confusing the boundaries between the poem's subjectivities and their surroundings. "History," likewise, juxtaposes its tone of exuberant release with images of confinement. It passes through a number of spaces (the enclosed "refrigerator" of the *bateau lavoir*; the "tubs" of idols; the funicular's descent), each of which suggests a certain relation to the reconstruction of history: as a preservative force; as a devotional practice; as a reckoning with decline.

In these poems, which cover the full span of Guest's career, location is therefore a plastic, fragile, and momentary arrangement, lacking fixed spatial coordinates. This goes for the spaces represented within the texts and for the forms of the texts themselves. In "Nostalgia," syntax is contained by a line that shiftingly alternates in length. In "The Poetess," the sudden moves away from ekphrastic observation and into lyricized exclamations are signaled by those inter-lineal breaks—little ruptures or starts of emotion that pockmark the page. In "History," the funicular's descent is consonant with the jagged, diagonal setting of the lines down the page. Robert Bennett evokes this "unconventional and unsettling sense of space […] a confusing web of intermingled heterogenous space" in Guest's poems, and he distinguishes this spatiality from "the secure and intimate space described by Gaston Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space*."[107] Further than this, Guest's poems don't merely depict space as unsettled: they are formed as unsettled spaces. The question then becomes how best to describe the forces and processes that render the poem as a space that is malleable and vulnerable to forces outside of its control? How does Guest develop

[107] Bennett, "'Literature as Destruction of Space': The Precarious Architecture of Barbara Guest's Spatial Imagination," *Women's Studies* 30, no. 1 (2001), 94.

this sensation of spatial precarity out of the representational tensions she derives from modernist aesthetics?

V "an education in space": affect and poetics

In answering these questions, reading for affect can attune us to Guest's conception of the poem as "an education in space."[108] The dominant modes of reading Guest's work take the fluid plotting of spaces and temporalities in her poems as the consequence either of a painterly technique—language that is "pushed" and "pulled" across the page like dollops of paint—or of ekphrastic voicing, so that the drama of perception is made to coalesce around an emergent subjectivity. These approaches, however, tend to homogenize three distinct aspects of Guest's poetics: representations of spaces *within* the poem; the poetic page *as* an arrangement of space and time; the poem as an event positioned relationally between the reader and the text. Searching for the speaker or a subject will emphasise the first: such a reading supposes that the text is presenting a subject who is navigating or orienting themselves within its spatial metaphors. Viewing the poetic page as a canvas clearly privileges the second of these perspectives: it imagines Guest, like an action painter, as confronting us with the act of composition, her own self poised as a heroic centre-point. The third possibility, the one that brings us closer to Guest's own comments on poetics, is a productive synthesis of the other two: poetic form produces an atmosphere within which "an education in space" occurs, and which the reader is invited to participate in.

The phrase "an education in space" crops up in a late essay of Guest's, "Poetry the True Fiction," first delivered as a lecture in 1992. In that essay, Guest connects her poetics to a modernist tradition that begins with Mallarmé. She wants the poem to be "part of the twentieth century perception based on the discovery that reality is a variable, and is open-ended in form and matter."[109] The language of affect theory is suited to describing this variability, attentive as it is to pre-cognitive sensations that impact on bodies and traverse matter, although its terms, as covered in the introduction, remain vulnerable to accusations of impressionism or imprecision.

The open-endedness of collective sentiments which rush through the body before cognition can catch up with them means that its precise relation to social life, subjectivity, and the representations of each in poetic language is difficult to discern. Indeed, the words

[108] *FI*, 30.
[109] *FI*, 27.

"affect" and "poetics," placed side by side, might first bring to mind W.K. Wimsatt and M.C. Beardsley's classic essay "The Affective Fallacy," first published in 1949. Written at the apex of the New Criticism's authority in literary studies in the United States, the essay intends to establish a distinction between "the poem and its *results* (what it *is* and what it *does*)."[110] Confusion about these two objects of study, Wimsatt and Beardsley warn, is likely to end "in impressionism and relativism": "the poem itself, as an object of specifically critical judgement, tends to disappear."[111]

Wimsatt and Beardsley's critique of the "doctrine of emotive meaning" is intended to guard against what they describe as "affective relativism in poetics."[112] Rereading their essay now, in the aftermath of the affective turn in literary studies, it is curious to note the concessions that they make to the force of affect, even while they work to seal the poem off from extrapolative descriptions of sentiment, emotion, or sensibility that do not remain strongly embedded in the text's form. Here, for example, Wimsatt and Beardsley, criticizing Cleanth Brooks' reading of Tennyson, accept that an alternative pole in criticism, what they call "romantic reader psychology," is theoretically possible:

> [T]he difference between translatable emotive formulas and more physiological and psychologically vague ones—cognitively untranslatable—is theoretically of the greatest import. The distinction even when it is a very faint one is at the dividing point between paths which lead to polar opposites in criticism, to classical objectivity and to romantic reader psychology.[113]

It is only with the founding exclusion of these "cognitively untranslatable" phenomena that "classical objectivity" can then make its inroads. This does not mean, as Wimsatt and Beardsley move on to insist, that emotivity will be altogether discarded: "Poetry is characteristically a discourse about both emotions and objects, or about the emotive quality of objects, and this through its preoccupation with symbol and metaphor."[114] The "objective critic" is capable of presenting these emotions "in their objects and contemplated as a pattern of knowledge."[115] While contemporary theories of affect may appear as distant as could be

[110] Wimsatt and Beardsley, "The Affective Fallacy," *The Sewanee Review* 57, no. 1 (1949), 31.
[111] Wimsatt and Beardsley, "The Affective Fallacy," 31.
[112] Wimsatt and Beardsley, "The Affective Fallacy," 39.
[113] Wimsatt and Beardsley, "The Affective Fallacy," 47.
[114] Wimsatt and Beardsley, "The Affective Fallacy," 52.
[115] Wimsatt and Beardsley, "The Affective Fallacy," 52.

from Wimsatt and Beardsley's classical objectivity, the real sticking point here is not analysis of emotivity *as such*, but the decision as to what sort of thing would *count* as cognitively "translatable," and therefore critically appropriate, and what kind of material should, instead, be considered "untranslatable" into linguistic form, and therefore the product of a distorted reading of the text.

Guest's poems test the notion that such a distinction can be meaningfully sustained. This is because they construct themselves out of emotive impressions that can't be translated into, or focalized around, any single figure or object: the drifts of their attentions keep us apart from a unified perspective and attachment to a stable object. Guest's late writing, in particular, is replete with motifs of skyscapes, clouds, winds, dust, shadows, light, and colours, functioning neither scenically nor symbolically, but as something closer to narrative agents. Consider, for example, the following lines, all taken from the 2005 collection *The Red Gaze*:

> Do not forget the sky has other zones.[116]
>
> In the sky a dilemma.[117]
>
> Distance lingers in her hand.[118]

To read these images as metaphoric vehicles would require their attachment to a ground, or tenor, that the poems do not provide. And neither, as I will go on to elaborate in chapter 3, does abstraction capture the tone with which such phenomena are presented to us: Guest tends to home in on the moments when what *appears* to be abstract language (descriptions of colour, say, or the use here of "Distance" as subject) surprises us with its direct impact on the body and its presence in the world. What Guest's poetics works through, in place of metaphor or abstraction, is a sensitivity to precisely the ways in which reality is composed out of affective intensities that are unattached to appropriate objects—in the terms of Wimsatt and Beardsley—and which poetic language can, nonetheless, evoke.

Affect, and its attendant vocabularies, allows us to name and then parse some of these phenomena. As Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth describe in their 2010

[116] *CP*, 492.
[117] *CP*, 495.
[118] *CP*, 507.

introduction to *The Affect Theory Reader*, writing on affect provides a lexis with which to describe sensations that may traverse bodies and be felt in the observable in the world, all the while originating outside the body and travelling below standard thresholds of observation:

> Within these mixed capacities of the in-between, as undulations in expansions and contractions of affectability arrive almost simultaneously or in close-enough alternation, something emerges, overspills, exceeds: a form of relation as a rhythm, a fold, a timing, a habit, a contour, or a shape comes to mark the passages of intensities (whether dimming or accentuating) in body-to-body/world-body mutual imbrication.[119]

The "inventory of shimmers" that Seigworth and Gregg appeal to here—minimal shifts in atmosphere that regulate, disrupt, and alter patterns of relation between observer and observed, subject and object, body and world—are reminiscent of the micro-phenomena and meteorological events that traverse Guest's poems. These pre-cognitive, transitory, and decentered phenomena circulate within the space of the poem, where they converge and mutate, thereby shifting emphasis away from the poem as the representation of an object, or as the positing of a subject that contends with representability, and towards the poem as a field that holds together affective intensities.

By registering affect in Guest's work in this way, I am firstly making a claim about the need to describe how this "holding together" operates poetically. The motion of "miniscule or molecular events of the unnoticed," crossing and accumulating within the body, that Gregg and Seigworth describe as the terrain of affect, forms a generative analogue with the poetic text conceived of as a site through which minimal variations of language pass. This means that my analysis will focus both on depictions of affective forces within Guest's work *and* the construction of the text as a container of affects.

As an example of this, consider the first nine lines of Guest's most widely anthologized poem, "Parachutes, My Love, Could Carry Us Higher," written in May 1957:

[119] Gregg and Seigworth, "Introduction," in *The Affect Theory Reader* (Duke University Press, 2010), 13.

I just said I didn't know
And now you are holding me
In your arms,
How kind.
Parachutes, my love, could carry us higher.
Yet around the net I am floating
Pink and pale blue fish are caught in it,
They are beautiful,
But they are not good for eating.[120]

The poem's opening state of an uncertain not knowing opens on to an encounter with sensations that must be filtered through the speaker's body. The first line implies a certain weariness with the speaker's interlocutor—"I just said"—offsetting the tenderness of "my love" in the poem's title. This contrast between emotion as stated and affect as conveyed by the poem will continue throughout: "How kind" throws an ironic shade on the bodily embrace that precedes it; and the "beautiful" fish are seen again, in a kind of double take, as "not good for eating." The poem's sound pattering helps sustain this ongoing conversion of bewilderment into the body: the /əʊ/ sound of "know" is picked up in "holding," and then recovered in "floating," at which point the poem will introduce its central conceit of rising/falling inversions, as suggested by the drag force of a parachute.

The poem then repeats its refrain for the third time, and the remaining lines then alternate skyscape with seascape, descent with ascent, so that bodily suspension in space registers the emotional ambivalence that exists between this speaking-I and its addressee:

Parachutes, my love, could carry us higher
Than this mid-air in which we tremble,
Having exercised our arms in swimming,
Now the suspension, you say,
Is exquisite. I do not know.
There is coral below the surface,
There is sand, and berries
Like pomegranates grow.

[120] *LT*, 27.

This wide net, I am treading water
Near it, bubbles are rising and salt
Drying on my lashes, yet I am no nearer
Air than water. I am closer to you
Than land and I am in a stranger ocean
Than I wished.[121]

Suspension is, of course, one way of describing how line breaks operate. Most of the lines keep up with their syntax, but Guest makes a point of situating spatial disjunctions ("higher / than," "water / near it," "nearer / air than," "closer to you / than") across lines, so that repositioning the eye on the page mirrors the up-down flurries that the speaker is plummeting through. To read the poem is therefore to participate in this state of inbetweeness; its "exquisite" suspensions aligning us with the speaker's fluctuating positions.

In Brian Massumi's foundational work on affect, suspension is a key term. Massumi's work focuses on pre-personal and autonomous sensations that traverse the body without necessarily coalescing into a clear emotional state. Drawing on the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Massumi describes in *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* processes of transition that are inherently indeterminate, the intensities and signification of which are always emerging as they impact upon things and bodies. This process occurs within an "atmosphere of modulation," and the "outcome is time":

> [D]ivided into standard and standardizing unites that like snapshots of transition. Stills. Like spatial cross-sections of what has come to pass. Time is now constructed of timeless elements modeled on the spaceless elements of space.[122]

In "Parachutes, My Love," each line operates as a snapshot of transition. The speaker is never definitively positioned, but rather coordinates their sense of location *in relation to* sites which are themselves unstable and relational: hanging mid-air, treading water above

[121] *LT*, 27.
[122] Massumi, *Parables*, 167. As well as Deleuze and Guattari's writings, Massumi is drawing here on Henri Bergson as a precursor. Bergson's notion of duration as the qualitative experience of time flows directly into Massumi's emphasis on affect as a *continuous* quality which does not inhere in any single location. While the connection is less direct, Guest too can be positioned downstream of Bergson's philosophy. In her biography on H.D., Guest devotes several pages to the poet's "Notes on Thought and Vision" of 1919—a text heavily influenced by process philosophy, which Guest describes as "unlike anything else [H.D.] ever wrote." Guest, *Herself Defined: The Poet H.D. and Her World* (William Collins, 1984), 120.

the surface, falling closer to the apostrophized-you and away from land—these are not locations, but attempts to render space as emergent out of actions. It is a positionality that is always understood as it measures itself against other poles of movement.

The resulting mood of suspension is the poem's theme, inscribed within its form. Massumi describes "passional suspension" as the sensation that "[the body] exists outside of itself, more in the abstracted action of the impinging thing and the abstracted context of that action, than within itself."[123] "Parachutes, My Love" forces us into an exchange that makes of the body precisely this space which is impinged on: from the opening's embrace to the ending's distance from what they "wished," the speaker is not actively positioning or, even, acting, but subjected to forces that exceed it: positioned and acted upon by a context. This sensation of suspension is, the poem states, "exquisite"—a word that captures well Massumi's sense of exteriority and receptivity in its etymological sense of "seeking out." Elaborating on his concept of the "body without an image," which tries to reckon with the body as a composite of perspectives exterior to itself, Massumi describes a process that speaks to Guest's evocation of exquisite suspension:

> The body without an image is an accumulation of relative perspectives and the passages between them, an additive space of utter receptivity retaining and combining past movements, in intensity, extracted from their actual terms. It is a less a space in the empirical sense than a gap in space that is also a suspension of the normal unfolding of time. Still, it can be understood as having a spatiotemporal order of its own.[124]

If we turn again to Guest's poem with this concept in mind, we see how it composes the body as nothing more than an accumulation of movements—a series of gestures that comprise holding, floating, swimming, exercising, and treading—that are always provisionally coordinated (in, around, below, above, near and far) within spatial impressions

[123] Schmitz, in his discussion of "area-less spaces" and atmospheres, outlines his model of affective transference and transport in similar terms to Massumi: "The atmospheres of emotion are either merely perceived, or they move one in a *corporeally* perceptible way; in this case, they are felt in affective impingement, as the emotions that one has oneself." "Atmospheric Spaces," para.8. Significantly, for both Massumi and Schmitz, a distinction should be drawn between the *perception* of an emotion as contained within oneself (what is felt as "affective impingement"), and the broader motion of which this momentary registration in the body is merely one part. In Guest's work, we can see a similar concern with the point at which emotion *becomes* internalised, rather than a depiction of emotion as always inhering within an interior private space.
[124] Massumi, *Parables*, 57.

that slide from the graspable particulars of sand and berries up to the expansive terrains of land and ocean.

The temporal coordinates of the poem are likewise plastic and mobile: consider, for example, how the opening line's extra-diegetic reference to what has been "just" said and the closing line's "[t]han I wished" together enclose the present tense of the poem within a wider experience that can only be alluded to within the text. The effect, essentially lyric, here, is to create the impression that the poem is "a suspension of the normal unfolding of time," a space that opens *between* the two past-tense reflections of its first and last lines. My description of this combination of techniques as a poetics of atmosphere hinges on Massumi's suggestion that the "body without an image" has a spatiotemporal order of its own. Guest poem, like Massumi's bodily "gap" in the normal unfolding of time, constructs itself as the suspension of time's progress, and its lines unfold the transformations which can occur within this.

We may still hesitate when pairing poetics with affect theory and the phenomenological lexis of atmosphere in this way: the former is traditionally concerned with the text's semantic and semiotic organisation; the latter two account for extra-linguistic and non-discursive phenomena that resist or trouble signification. The plainest difference is also the most insurmountable: "Parachutes, My Love, Could Carry Us Higher," may well *describe* a state of affectively charged suspension that can be compared to Massumi's suspended body, its language may even *enact* aspects of that suspension as we experience the poem in real time, but as a poem it does, after all, wager that language can meaningfully construct such a description and such an enactment. This becomes even more complicated when we consider how the phenomenology of atmosphere, in particular in the work of Böhme and Schmitz, is vague about how enveloping impersonal stimuli come to gain not only cognitive significance but also bodily presence as they interact with individuals.[125]

My readings are therefore intended to think about how the poems negotiate their own ability to represent and substantiate phenomena that have less form and more life than their own language. To borrow the preferred phrase of Veronica Forrest-Thomson, the risk, as discussed in my introduction, is something like "bad Naturalisation": the hurrying of the

[125] Ben Anderson touches on this vagueness in the following passage: "Numerous bodies can be said to be atmospheric, in the sense that people, sites or things produce singular affective qualities and emanate something like a 'characteristic' or a 'quality.' This expansion of affective atmosphere to multiple bodies is the starting point of Gernot Böhme's ecological aesthetics. It is risky. The risk is that it ignores how an atmosphere 'gains being' from a plurality of encounters, to paraphrase Dufrenne. Yet it is worth exploring because it enables us to think further about the spatialities of atmospheres – how atmospheres condition by enveloping and surrounding." *Encountering Affect*, 146.

poem towards a thematic synthesis, which crowds out "formal pattern, metrical demand, rhythmical pattern of sound and syntax' as valid objects of analysis."[126] But this concern can be allayed once we see that affect theory, although preoccupied with phenomena that are resistant to linguistic apprehension, does allow for an account of how meaning arises within language as one *stage* of a dynamic semantic process. This is particularly true of the work of Marta Figlerowicz and Eve Sedgwick, both of which are engaged in subsequent chapters. In these instances, language is taken as a means mediating affective experiences that resist semantics but are not, as in Massumi's writing, intrinsically independent of it. This means that while apprehension or representations of affect in poetic language may be fuzzy or imprecise, the poem is for that very reason revealing of how, under the pressures of poetic form, the line between what the New Critics separated as linguistically "untranslatable" and "translatable" sensations becomes so malleable.

This puts affect in touch with contemporary theories of the poem as event. In his comparative and transhistorical account of what he terms the "experience of the poem," Derek Attridge marks out a vital distinction between the poetic text and the poem as an "event": something that happens within a given place and time, an occurrence activated upon each reading. Attridge's characterization of this process is worth quoting in full:

> What poetry uniquely does, however, is to achieve this emotional and intellectual intensity by harnessing the particular effectiveness that language possesses by virtue of its physical properties: its sounds, its silences, its rhythms, its syntactic sequencing, its movement through time. Meaning in a poem is something that happens, it's not a conceptual system or entity. Language's manifold powers are made even stronger in this way, and the staging of linguistic acts are given even greater emotional resonance. A poem, therefore, is a real-time event, and if one does not read it in real time—aloud or in a mental representation of speech—one may be reading it as a literary work of some kind but not as a poem. To experience a poem as a poem, therefore, is not to treat it only as an event of meaning, but as an event of and in language, with language understood as a material medium as well as a semantic resource. And because this experience is a response to the materiality of

[126] Forrest-Thomson, *Poetic Artifice*, 3.

> language, the physical body is necessarily involved; even a silent reading in which the words are articulated will make use of slight muscular movements.[127]

Discernible within this paragraph are parallels with what I have emphasized as the embodied and processual conceptions of affect. The experience of the poem, according to Attridge, is an experience of language that is embodied, arranged in and arranging time and space, in a manner that heightens our sensitivity to the production of meaning in language, without being limited to semantics. The poem as event exposes us to the affectively laden aspects of language—sounds, silence, rhythms, movement—and their relation to meaning.

This claim, although it accepts the effects of the poem to be contingent, augments the need to pay attention to features of poetic form. Enjambment, ellipsis, caesura, rhythm and syntax: these properties continually enhance our sense of the poem as a vehicle for affect. As in the process philosophy that has influenced Massumi's theories of affect, the poem-as-event calls attention to the unfolding of meaning *with* and *through* experience, as a dependent product of actions that are always particular to their temporal and spatial setting. The difference between this approach and strong theories of affect like Massumi's remains that the event-like poem, although experiential, sediments that experience through linguistic layers, which in turn activate bodily responses.

Guest's poetics of atmosphere is a means of exploring the overlaps between contemporary approaches to poetics and theories of affect. Their most evident similarity—an emphasis on language as a bodily experience—is also the point of greatest tension between them. Thinking with affect involves relegating language to a secondary appropriation of experience by cognition, whereas, for Attridge, the poem is the trigger for an encounter with language as a sensuous material that acts upon the body. The distinction is one of causation, and although the directions of travel are reversed, the point of arrival remains the poem as an experience that occurs, and then reoccurs, in the present. This allows us to see the poem not as the representation of a prior event nor as the unfolding of a single subjectivized perceptive (the ekphrastic or lyric frames as applied to Guest). Instead, the poem invites participation in what Dufrenne calls an "education in attention":[128] unprepared for what might happen, we step into its atmosphere.

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[127] Attridge, *The Experience of Poetry: From Homer's Listeners to Shakespeare's Readers* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 2.
[128] Dufrenne, *Phenomenology*, 63.

Chapter 2

"window outscaped": frames of perception in the early poems

> Yet inside the window is the person who is you, who are now looking out, shifted from the observer to the inside person and this shows in your work. When you are the inside person you can be both heavy and delicate, depending upon your mood; you have a sense of responsibility totally different from the you outside.[1]

This chapter focuses on the mobility of affect as portrayed in *The Location of Things*, Guest's debut collection of 1960. I examine how four poems from that collection perform a continual exchange of inner and outer emotional states, interior and exterior environments, via acts of perception that destabilize the poetic frames which their speakers are initially couched within. I begin by defining this way of looking as an "outscaping" of perspective, in contrast to Gerard Manley Hopkins' idiosyncratic use of "inscape" in his writings. Whereas for Hopkins an intense regard for the surface of an object allows the poet to glean insight into its essence, Guest's poems suggest that the more intense a gaze becomes, the less stable, unified, and boundaried an object in the world will appear. I show how Guest develops this decentered way of looking out of cubist aesthetics, taking the modernist canvas as a model for the derangement of perspectival scale. Having described the fluidity of perception across several poems, the second part of this chapter proposes a comparative reading of Guest's work alongside Marta Figlerowicz's theorization of interpersonal affects in John Ashbery's early poems.

I Outscaped vision

The indeterminacy of perception is the major theme and formal concern of Guest's early poems. Guest shares this interest in the restlessness and situatedness of the act of looking with the major currents of twentieth century anglophone modernisms. What unifies Gertrude Stein's "Composition as Explanation," Louis Zukofsky's "thinking with the things as they exist," and Charles Olson's "*kinetics* of the thing" is the idea that perception be reimagined

[1] *FI*, 37.

as processual, relative, and enveloped by phenomena that exceed the observing subject.[2] In her 2020 work *Forms of Poetic Attention*, Lucy Alford describes in cognitive terms this modernist sensitivity to the organisation of perspective:

> The ability of human perception to isolate objects (whether material or conceptual) from the general surrounding flux is attention's principal and most primal task: recognizing the shape of a face, the movement of a predator, or a source of food requires the capacity to capture, to set apart, to distinguish an object. This might be an object that captures the attention unexpectedly or the object of an active vigilant pursuit. In cognitive terms, the distinction has been framed as a relationship between figure and ground. The figure is an object or feature that stands out, attracting our attention. Attentional selection is thus the process of discerning figure from ground.[3]

The poems of Guest that I discuss in this chapter depart from a speaker's attempt to discern a figure within a ground. This act of discernment is then challenged by a motion of competing impressions that are too fleeting to be stably attached to one object. In cognitive terms, it is the "categorization" of perceived phenomena that Guest troubles by concentrating on this mobility of perceptual processes.[4] Psychologist John Kihlstrom describes such categorization as those mental processes which construct our awareness of how "two objects in the external environment" are posited in relation to one another, taking into account their relative size, distance, and form.[5]

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[2] Stein, "Composition as Explanation," *Poetry*, February 15, 2010; Zukofsky, "Sincerity and Objectification: With Special Reference to the Work of Charles Reznikoff," *Poetry* 37, no. 5 (1931), 273; Olson, "Projective Verse," *Poetry*, October 13, 2009, para.5. In her essay, Stein emphasizes the act of looking as that which introduces *difference* into observations (and their aesthetic recomposition): "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." "Composition as Explanation," para.2. In a similar manner, Olson's manifesto for Projective Verse stresses duration as a process formed from a chain of interlinked perceptions: "ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION." Discrete acts of looking are therefore woven together in an incessant motion from one to the next. "Projective Verse," para.8. Justin Parks discusses Zukofsky's poetics as an attempt to place this motion within its given historical moment, so as to "restore a sense of language's historical and material situatedness." "Thinking with Things: Language, Commodities, and the Social Ontologies of Objects in Louis Zukofsky's 'A'-8 and -9," in *Poetry and the Limits of Modernity in Depression America* (Cambridge University Press, 2023), 25.

[3] Lucy Alford, *Forms of Poetic Attention* (Columbia University Press, 2020), 13.

[4] Cognitive approaches to literature are interested in the processes by which perception is categorized and organized within representations. As Antonio Damasio describes, this extends the notion of the psychoanalytic unconscious (which he calls "autobiographical memory") to include the "vast amount of processes and contents that remain unconscious" in the work of "attentional selection." *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness* (Vintage, 2000), 228.

[5] Kihlstrom, "The Cognitive Unconscious," *Science* 237, no. 4821 (1987), 1447.

The act of looking in Guest's work brings into focus and then defamiliarizes this unconscious process: the attentional selection of her speakers is rendered inoperable whenever they are confronted with the proliferation of unstable sensations that cannot be meaningfully individuated within a single object. Her poetics thereby dramatizes the difficulty of setting one thing apart from another and of maintaining a boundary between a subject and its surroundings. Guest places us instead within "the general surrounding flux" that Alford identifies as the raw material of attention, prior to the selective interventions of cognitive processes. Simultaneously, Guest imagines the poem as a space capable of containing this flux. The poem is composed out of a multiplicity of perspectival angles, and it gives them form. This, as I argue in this chapter, differentiates her writing from the concept of surface poetics, as it was theorized in Guest's own time. In contrast to the idea that acts of perception constantly glide across the surface of the world, Guest brings our attention to the interference of frames that alter the scale, limit, and transparency of the perceived object. Her poetics therefore emphasizes the viewer's receptivity as it is mediated by their environment, and it resists the notion of perception as an act of mastery that would be capable of systematizing either superficial enchantment or deep insight.

What William Watkin calls the "myth" of the surface has tended to dominate interpretations of the New York School poets, Guest included.[6] In his influential 1973 essay "The Significance of Frank O'Hara," Charles Altieri describes the cruising of urban spaces in O'Hara's work as constructing a "landscape without depth," shorn of "ontological vestments."[7] As I argue in this chapter, this volarization of surface can be connected to the mid-century reception of cubism in the United States and its perceived progression into Action Painting, where the flattening of perceptual depth was conceived as a necessary compliment to a heightened sensitivity to the art object's materiality. Such formalist readings are one instance of the surface/depth dyad as it recurs across twentieth century aesthetics.[8] In one of the most well-known reiterations of this dialectic, Gaston Bachelard describes in *The Poetics of Space* how the "phenomenology of the poetic imagination allows us to explore the being of man considered as the being of a surface […] [b]y means of poetic

[6] Watkin, *Process of Poetry*, 43.
[7] Altieri, "The Significance of Frank O'Hara," *Iowa Review* 4 (1973), 91.
[8] The introductory chapter of Richard Shusterman's *Surface and Depth: Dialectics of Criticism and Culture* (Cornell University Press, 2002) provides the best overview of this paradigm in contemporary aesthetics. As Shusterman emphasises, modern aesthetic critique is energized by a lively tension between the "drive toward depth [which] attains its fulfilment only by breaking back through to the surface […] [i]n short, surface and depth are essentially connected complementaries" (3). My emphasis in this chapter on the mobility of perspective achieved by Guest's frames is an attempt to reckon with this experience of 'breaking back through' as the crux of the kinds of experiential fluidity that the poems reflect on.

language, waves of newness flow over the surface of being."[9] Importantly, Bachelard situates this "surface of being" in relation to a depth within which poetic revery can flourish: "it is from the very fact of concentration in the most restricted intimates space that the dialectics of inside and outside draws its strength."[10] To observe the plenitude of surface is, in Bachelard's phenomenology, predicated on the sounding out of an interior space that extends immeasurably below the surface.

In more recent reception of Guest's work, the surface/depth antinomy is often evoked as a means of describing the moves which the poems make between interiority and exteriority. In a review of the *Collected Poems*, Brian Teare notes how "the poems' verbal surfaces retain both gorgeous figuration and judicious discursion; however, an epistemological search begins to structure the poems, one whose diction is as metaphysical as it is aesthetic."[11] Poet and translator Donald Revell, writing on *The Location of Things*, suggests that the early poems "are vivid exchanges to which the attention of the exceptionalist bears terrific witness," and he proposes "exceptionalism" as the quality of Guest's poems which take every word to be "[going] free": "[t]hey make a dash, as Dickinson's so often did."[12] It is this sense of movement, an exchange that endlessly transpires *between* surface and depth, inside and outside, the material and the metaphysical, that Guest uses the figure of the frame to foreground. In *The Location of Things*, as the book's title suggests, this means a poetic investigation of how it is that attention locates and coordinates perspective, and how the instabilities of that process is one front of the epistemological inquiry opened up by modernist aesthetics.

The opening lines of the poem "Landing," from that first collection, can provide a first example of how this poetic strategy operates on the page. We begin with an act of looking enclosed in a state of hyper-vigilance: the poem follows the eye as it shifts its attention from the body to its surroundings. This speaking-"I" is placed at the caesura of the first three lines: its prominence is signaled by this central positioning after the mid-line stresses of "afternoon," "myself," and "unhatched." As this voice expresses its widening attentions, the poem intimates that the mere act of looking is a dangerous thing:

[9] Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Beacon Press, 1994), 229.
[10] Bachelard, *Poetics*, 229.
[11] Teare, "Revelation," *Boston Review*, January 1, 2009, para.5.
[12] Revell, "A Family of Mountaineers: Barbara Guest's Exceptionalism," *Omniverse* (2014), n.p.

This afternoon I am very careful.
I watch myself. I watch the egg.
Unhatched. I am the sight
Over the egg, like an aviator
Unknowing, but confident
That the instrument will behave.
The window outscaped
Brings the climate indoors.[13]

Recounting this self-conscious act of perception means trusting that the "instrument" of poetic language will *behave* (the choice of verb underscoring language as a mobile and lively thing). The poem's speaker, like the unhatched egg, is cut off from the world in this fragile state of "unknowing." The simile at the centre of these lines, anticipated by the poem's title, is that looking at the world is like landing a plane: perception is a motion that regulates distance and proximity; looking will bring us closer to an object, all the while taking the measure of our remoteness from it. Framing perception in this way will lead the poem toward a series of exchanges between inside and outside, depth and surface, subject and object. This is already made apparent in this act of watching oneself: it is a mobius-strip of attention that bends together inwardness with outwardness, preparing the way for the perspectival fluxes that will follow.

The flux of perceptual activity covered by these first eight lines culminates with the peculiar word "outscaped," which suggests an opening onto an exteriority. The verb "outscaped," in its oldest attestation, is a derivation of escape,[14] and this sense also captures something of the uncomfortable confinement of Guest's "very careful" speaker. Within the context of a poetics, however, the word is recognizably the flipside of Gerard Manley Hopkins' "inscape," a neologism used several times in his letters and journals. The scattered occurrences of the word make it difficult to pin down its precise meaning. Hopkins uses it to describe the inherent uniqueness of an object: the essence of a thing once all of its separate qualities are accounted for and integrated by the observer. In a letter to Robert Bridges, he also states that "inscape" is what he aims to achieve in his poetry:

[13] *LT*, 47.
[14] Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "outscape (v.), sense 2," July 2023, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/2616087151.

> Design, pattern, or what I am in the habit of calling "inscape" is what I above all aim at in poetry. Now it is the virtue of design, pattern, or inscape to be distinctive and it is the vice of distinctiveness to become queer.[15]

Importantly, Hopkins here associates inscape with the materiality of design and pattern. It is not deeper than these elements, or hidden beneath them; it denotes a heightened attentiveness to their sensible presence. At the opening of his classic 1948 study of Hopkins, William Peters glosses the word in terms of this perceptual concentration:

> "Inscape" is the unified complex of those sensible qualities of the object of perception that strikes us as inseparably belonging to and most typical of it, so that through the knowledge of this unified complex of sense-data we may gain an insight into the individual essence of the object.[16]

Guest's outscaped perception cannot imagine how a unified complex could survive under this level of scrutiny. Rather than attaching sensible qualities *to* an object, as though they inhered in it or were typical of it, Guest's poems figure perception as a process of de- and re-composition, by which sensible qualities are detached from their given object, transferred to another, and then circulated through the atmospheric forces that the poem evokes.

This perspectival outscaping should be understood in opposition to a subject-centric way of seeing that would imply the imposition of coherence on external phenomena. In place of such coherence, a series of frames disrupt the observer's capacity to form a unified complex of their objects of perception. Windows, in particular, are usually *doing* things in Guest. They interfere with sight, or else form the ground of vision itself: in the poem "Open Skies," a window is "thrust to you"; in "A Way of Being," "light enters through one window / like a novel"; in *Moscow Mansions* a window is described as "gallant" in its "lifting and reflecting" of an interior scene. In a late poem, titled "Garment," the suffix "(ed)" appears next to the word ("window(ed)"), so that "window" functions as a verb: a view can *be* "*windowed*", and a self might "window" its own subjectivity.[17]

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[15] Hopkins, *The Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges*, ed. Claude Colleer Abbott (Oxford University Press, 1955), 66.
[16] Peters, *Gerard Manley Hopkins* (Oxford University Press, 1948), 1.
[17] *CP*, 49; *CP*, 82; *CP*, 107; *CP*, 333.

These frames, in Guest's writing, refuse to stay put. Their role—as with the window in the poem "Landing"—is to introduce an influx of atmosphere that modifies the speaker's perspective. This is the poetic countermove to Hopkins' compression of vision and valorization of the object's essential "distinctiveness": Guest figures acts of perception that fluctuate wildly in scale, as she slips focus from one object to another on the basis of fractional similarities. "Outscaping" is the name I give to this mobility of perception in Guest. In a knowing reversal of Hopkins' unifying gaze, Guest shows us how the act of looking invites a dispersal of attention amid conflictual impressions.

Hopkins' inscaped vision, with its Ruskinese feel for the weight and import of detail, is therefore an obverse to Guest's poetics. In his *Anatomy of Criticism*, Northrop Frye makes use of the term "outscape" in his definition of lyric. Describing a "cardinal point" of lyric that is "difficult to name," he offers "outscaped" as a "parody [of] Hopkins' term":

> [Outscaped] is the lyric counterpart of what in drama we call mime, the center of the irony which is common to tragedy and comedy. It is a convention of pure projected detachment, in which an image, a situation, or a mood is observed with all the imaginative energy thrown outward to it and away from the poet.[18]

Frye's passive phrasing can already tell us something about the impersonality of affect in Guest's outscaped vision: a mood is observed with imaginative energy that is thrown *away* from the centered subject of the poem. Outscaping is, then, a process by which agency is decentered and distributed. It describes a step back from the position of the self-consciously "very careful" speaker with which the poem "Landing" opens. The complex of sense-data, to borrow William Peters' phrase, that floods into the poem will never be unified by this observer. Indeed, whatever is seen with greater intensity will become ever more heterogeneous and incommensurate with a single position. I return to the role of affect and emotivity in these poems in the second part of this chapter. First, I move to contextualize these perspectival experiments of Guest within modernist aesthetics, focusing on her connections with cubism as it was received and canonized in mid-century New York.

[18] Fry, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton University Press, 1957), 297.

II Cubisms in transition: Goodnough and Guest

The presentation of perspective as contingent, composite, and continuous is part of the legacy of cubist aesthetics that Guest reformulates in her early writings. The poem "Landing" was published in *The Location of Things*, issued as a small edition by Tibor de Nagy Gallery press in 1960. The collection contains thirty poems, the majority written from 1956 onwards. The book's cover featured a collage by painter Robert Goodnough (Fig. 1). The rough geometric shapes of Goodnough's illustration—a bundle of harshly cut black forms flowering upwards from a flat wedge—are echoed in the presentation of the title page, where the text is broken up by pagination and forms a rectangular block (Fig. 2). Goodnough's design establishes an equivalence between the materiality of language and visual forms: lettering is manipulated just as the colored blocks are cut and arranged in his abstract print. The prominent inclusion of Goodnough's name alongside Guest's reinforces this sense of a correspondence. It is the beginning of a sympathy between Guest's writing and Goodnough's work that would continue to develop in the early years of their careers: in 1962, Guest co-edited a pocket edition of Goodnough's paintings, published by Georges Fall in Paris, and in John Bernard Myer's anthology of 1969, *The Poets of the New York School*, Goodnough's work was reproduced alongside Guest's poems.

During the years of Abstract Expressionism's ascendancy, Goodnough's work was closely associated with the reception of cubism in the United States. As well as a painter, Goodnough was a prominent exponent of modernist art in New York, engaged in the small gallery scenes that patronized the artists who would later be branded the New York School. In 1950, he co-edited the first volume of the *Modern Artists in America* series which surveyed the School by way of artist statements from William De Kooning, Robert Motherwell, and Barnett Newman, transcripts of panel discussions, and the first translation of critic Michel Seuphor's "Paris-New York 1951," which acclaimed abstraction as a "universal language in which every individual can forge his own style, with as much originality, felicity, and force as his talent and personality allow."[19] A review of Goodnough's 1966 show at the Tibor De Nagy notes that his work "for some years has been involved with the manipulation of formal elements stemming from the simplistic phase of later Cubism."[20] In 1987, Goodnough subtitled the definitive catalogue of his late show as

[19] Seuphor, "Paris—New York City 1951," in *Modern Artists in America* 1, ed. Robert Goodnough, trans. Francine du Plessix and Florence Weinstein (Wittenborn Schultz, 1951), 121-122.
[20] Dennis Adrian, "Review: Robert Goodnough," *Art Forum* 6, no. 9 (1966), n.p.

"cubism in transition," summing up his career as a long response to Picasso's 1923 suggestion that "[i]f cubism is an art of transition I am sure that the only thing that will come out of it is another form of cubism."[21]

I highlight this connection with Goodnough in order to suggest that Guest's poetics also develops as a cubism in transition, as she takes perspectival techniques developed on the canvas onto the page. The affinity between the two runs deeper than the criss-crossing collaborations of their early publication history. As Guest notes in her 1962 essay on Goodnough, his commitment to cubism made him something of an outlier in the New York circles that they both frequented, where he was pejoratively identified as "'that Cubist.'"[22] The difference between Goodnough and the New York action painters, Guest proposes later in the same essay, is that the former wishes to any trace of his own presence from the canvas.[23] In contrast to the idea of the body's presence in the gestural compositions of action painting, Goodnough's vanishing of his body from the work produces, according to Guest, the impression that "[t]he painter isn't here": "Goodnough wishes to remove all evidence of his own activity. We thus lose interest in the painter and refer to the picture which has presumably painted itself."[24]

In an analogous fashion, Guest's "Landing" advances as the subtraction of subjectivity: the "I" of the opening three lines is dispersed via the outscaping of perspective, which widens the poem's frame of vision to include material that exceeds a single subject position. According to Guest, Goodnough achieved a similar removal of subjectivity by reconceiving of the canvas as a space through which movements pass: "The movement in the room is always rapid and the air tends to turn from density to light."[25] The parallel with a poetics that provides "an education in space" through the immersion of a subjectivity in

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[21] Quoted in John Richardson, *A Life of Picasso: The Triumphant Years, 1917-1932* (Knopf, 2007), 75.

[22] Guest and B.H. Friedman, *Goodnough* (Georges Fall, 1961), 32. Guest begins her essay by commenting on the distance that Goodnough's association with cubism put between him and the other mid-century New York painters:

> Goodnough who has been called histrionically, "that Cubist". What that term implies is surprise, wonder that a painter brough up on the New York scene which is a corridor stretching from the studio of Hans Hofman to the Club, whose walls were constructed and decorated by Action Painters, should so little appear to be one of the group. As if he had discovered within this corridor a separate passage for his private use. Where does it lead? What happens there? Why was it necessary to abandon the historic corridor? Sometimes one believes one has entered a squirrel cage. Or an elevator. Or a room whose dimensions become increasingly abstract as we watch the black lines leading us through its surface. The movement in the room is always rapid and the air tends to turn from density to light. We are also aware of the silence. The painter isn't there. He has also left out his self portrait. He would rather we looked at animals. He would prefer that the paintings announce themselves (32).

[23] Guest and Friedman, *Goodnough*, 33.

[24] Guest and Friedman, *Goodnough*, 33.

[25] Guest and Friedman, *Goodnough*, 33.

volatile atmospheric conditions is striking. In demonstration of this, the final page of Guest's essay on Goodnough is a concrete poem that works to reproduce in words this always rapid movement as it traverses a space (Fig. 3). It is the mirror image of Goodnough's contribution to Guest's collection two years before: language is here displaced across the page, rather than confined to a block, arranged in scrawling lines that recall the thick black outlines of Goodnough's cubist style. The page includes the atmospheric motifs of Guest's poems—"cloud" and "AIRAIRAIR" are both legible—while the central line of text, which reads "the wide forehead reflects its lost eye scales fall," contains within it the perceptual slippages that are observable in "Landing" (visually, the positioning of "lost" at the top of the phrase's arc stresses the disorientation that is a feature of the early poems, while the detachment of "st" alludes to the urban geography—the street—within which that disorientation takes place).

Running through this exchange between Guest and Goodnough is a shared commitment to the perspectival fluidity that cubism opens up, and a corresponding belief that this fluidity can find expression in both visual forms and language.[26] This runs contrary to contemporaneous accounts of cubism that delimited its surface aesthetics to the exploitation of a single medium. By 1960, when *The Location of Things* was published, influential formalist approaches had folded cubist techniques into a narrative of modernist progressions that culminated with the ascent of Abstract Expressionism. Most prominently, in the essays of Clement Greenberg, cubism was lauded as the ur-moment of European modernism.[27] The impact of cubist aesthetics was raised up to a mythic scale: the cubist revolution in perspective conveyed the radical dislocations of modern life.

[26] For a corresponding discussion of O'Hara's references to other artforms in order to "create an effect of emergence, of what 'is', out of the tension between media," see Sarah Riggs, *Word Sightings: Visual Apparatus and Verbal Reality in Stevens, Bishop and O'Hara* (Routledge, 2002), 81.

[27] In Greenberg's essays, the technical advancements of cubism reflect the capacity of avant-garde art to double down on the substance and the formal possibilities of a specific medium: "the avant-garde arts have in the last fifty years achieved a purity and radical delimitation of their fields of activity for which there is no previous example in the history of culture." "Towards A Newer Laocoon," in *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 1: Perceptions and Judgments, 1939-1944*, ed. John O'Brian (University of Chicago Press, 1986), 32. Greenberg's championing of cubism can be traced back through several similar accounts of cubism's "groundedness"—that is, the exploitation of the canvas and the materiality of paint—back to Apollinaire's writing on cubism: "the object is the inner frame of the picture and marks the limits of its profundity, just *as the actual frame marks its external limits*." "Les Peintres Cubistes," in *A Picasso Anthology*, ed. Marilyn McCully (Princeton University Press, 1982), 74; emphasis added. As Roger Rothman discusses, Greenberg's privileging of French modernism over German modernism followed from his insistence on medium-specificity and a related refusal to recognize "the split between the reduction of the figure to the ground on the one hand, and, on the other, the gradual collapse of the ground to the point where what remained were figures-without-a-ground." "Figures Without a Ground: Kandinsky, Schoenberg, and the Dissonance of German Modernism." *Modernity: Critiques of Visual Culture* 2 (2002), n.p.

The post-cubist canvas, as L. T. Fitz writes, came to stand for an epistemological inquiry which aimed "not to enhance an old vision of reality but to delineate a new one."[28] Gertrude Stein takes this rhetoric to heroic heights in her book *Picasso*, first published in 1946:

> When I was in America I for the first time travelled pretty much all the time in an airplane and when I looked at the earth I saw all the lines of cubism made at a time when not any painter had ever gone up in an airplane. I saw there on the earth the mingling lines of Picasso, coming and going, developing and destroying themselves […] and once more I knew that a creator is contemporary, he understands what is contemporary when his contemporaries do not know it yet, but he is contemporary and as the twentieth century is a century which sees the earth as no one has ever seen it, the earth has a splendor that is never had had.[29]

Stein extends the lines of cubism out from the canvas to a planetary and epochal sweep, as Picasso's paintings become the harbingers of an entire new way of seeing. Her account puts Picasso's achievements on a par with the shock of technological advancement, blurring distinctions between innovation in aesthetics and science. She suggests that the cubist image, with its lines "coming and going, developing, and destroying themselves," can be continually rediscovered in the experience of modernity, which is itself analogously composed of comings and goings, developments and destruction.

Stein's extension of cubist perspective owes some of its grandeur to the earliest accounts of the movement. From 1915, Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler's *Der Weg zum Kubismus,* first published in English in 1949 as *The Way of Cubism*, extols in Kantian terms the "unprecedented freedom" which the new grammar of cubist painting had released:

> It is no longer bound to the more or less verisimilar optic image which describes the object from a single viewpoint. It can, in order to give a thorough representation of the object's primary characteristics, depict them as stereometric drawing on the plane

[28] Fitz, "Gertrude Stein and Picasso: The Language of Surfaces," *American Literature* 42, no. 2 (1973), 228.
[29] Stein, *Picasso* (Courier, 2012), 50.

> surface, or, through several representations of the same object, can provide an analytical study of that object which the spectator then reassembles in his mind.[30]

The principles of later formalist interpretations of cubism are already discernible in Kahnweiler's argument. Firstly, the cubist painting releases the object from "the more or less verisimilar optic image" that binds representation to a single viewpoint. Secondly, the plane of representation, unlike traditional exploitations of perspective, is rendered shallow, so that the object of the painting is composed across the canvas, eschewing the illusionary impression of depth.

Greenberg, however, signals his dissent from Kahnweiler's idea of a spectator who "reassembles [the object] in his mind" and Stein's conceptual emphasis on the mobility of the canvas' "mingling lines." In contrast to these less medium-bound, phenomenological, and altogether more exuberant understandings of cubism's innovations, Greenberg's cubism is foremostly defined as an exploitation of painting's materiality. This means, as he writes in his influential "Towards a Newer Laocoön" from 1940, that the "destruction of realistic pictorial space, and with it, that of the object" was achieved with an accelerating "advance to the surface":

> Under the influence of the square shape of the canvas, forms tend to become geometrical […] The picture plane itself grows shallower and shallower, flattening out and pressing together the fictive planes of depth […] In a further stage realistic space cracks and splinters into flat planes which come forward, parallel to the plane surface. Sometimes this advance to the surface is accelerated by painting a segment of wood or texture *trompe l'oeil*, or by drawing exactly printed letters, and placing them so that they destroy the partial illusion of depth by slamming the various planes together […] As we gaze at a cubist painting of the last phase we witness the birth and death of three-dimensional space.[31]

Whereas Stein and Kahnweiler centre their interpretations on the receptivity of the viewer as it occurs in a dynamic, unfolding environment, Greenberg limits the viewer's role to that of "witness" of the "death of three-dimensional space." And whereas Stein and Kahnweiler

[30] Kahnweiler, "The Rise of Cubism," in *Art in Theory: 1900-1990*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Blackwell, 1992), 207.
[31] Greenberg, "Laocoon," 34-35.

were enthusiastic about the repercussions of cubism for the relation of subject to world, extrapolating the implications of perspectival techniques well beyond the canvas, Greenberg begins and ends his assessment with the canvas surface. The cubist's flattening of the planes of depth is not an invitation to the reassemblage of an image in the viewer's mind nor does it trigger an enhanced sensitivity to the play of line and point in the outside world. Cubist innovations are, for Greenberg, the end of representational aesthetics itself. As such, their function and extent are strictly delimited to the canvas surface: "the birth and death of three-dimensional space" happens within the painting, not in an imaginative exchange between the painting and its viewer.

Returning now to Guest's poem "Landing," we can consider how the poem's perspectival mobility hews much closer to Stein's and Kahnweiler's relational cubism than to Greenberg's formalist delimitation of surface materiality. The "unknowing aviator" of the poem, like Stein looking down from her airplane, is recomposing the world as it is channeled through a series of sensual frames (the eye, the ear, the window). Once the outscaped window has brought "the climate indoors," the poem bursts into a celebration of its plurality of perspectives as a measure of freedom:

> The eye is free, adorned
> By that which is becoming.
> What is near, prevalent, adored
> By the inner is echoed
> By the ear. My conscience
> Is receptive. I sight the cause
> Of the exterior and so I hear
> What is sounded in the interior.[32]

The "I" of the opening lines is here subsumed into the "eye": subjectivity folds into the act of looking, just as in the concrete poem published at the end of *Goodnough* the figure of the "wide forehead" is metonymically compressed to "its lost eye" (Fig. 3). Unlike the level plane of Greenberg's formalism, this eye contends with what is "becoming," a word which here means beautiful or flattering as well as something emergent, nascent, and as yet unformed. In an important reversal, Guest gives us an eye that is adorned by what it sees:

[32] *LT*, 47.

perception is conceived as a pressing inward from the outside, caused by a force peripheral to its centre ("I sight the cause / Of the exterior"). Once this outscaping is allowed for, sensations are channeled into an inner form ("so I hear / What is sounded in the interior"). This sense of motion towards the speaker is reflected in Guest's choice of verbs: the prefix "ad-" of "adorned" and "adored" denote a movement towards order ("ad-orn") and towards speech ("ad-ore"). As the rhymed pairing of those two verbs suggest, perception is mobile because it occurs as an interaction of sight and sound: ornamentation is to be "sounded in the interior"; the poem's receptive conscience performs a blending of ear and eye.

The drama of perception as rendered on the page means translating what the eye perceives into sounds, a process that "Landing" imagines as the bringing in of the exterior towards the interior. As Timothy Gray notes in his chapter on Guest's "seascape" imagery: "[t]he location of objects refuses to obey calls to reason, since the inner/outer logic of Guest's urban pastoral poetry suspends ordinary categorizations."[33] In fact, the inner/outer dynamics of "Landing" drive towards the total erosion of that very distinction. The final lines of the poem point abruptly to a 'break' between inner and outer:

> Yet the break is this:
> The germinal is split.
> Not content with eye and sphere,
> I race the continual
> And drift to the absurd,
> The conjugal, from which
> The flight is only heard.[34]

"[G]erminal" here reads as a playful abstraction of the egg with which the speaker's observations began (the "germinal is split" being an extremely roundabout way of saying: "the egg is broken"). But germinal also stands for the original moment of creation, the earliest stage in a process of development. If we read "[t]he germinal is split" as an assertion of fact, then the line suggests that *any* originating act is riven by the dualities of the preceding lines: exterior/interior, sight/sound, subject/object, writing/painting. The poem wants to undo the static preservation of these divisions, and replace them with the continual that runs

[33] Gray, *Urban Pastoral*, 77.
[34] *LT*, 47.

between them—an elusive state of sensations arriving in a simultaneity that is here evoked as a "race," "drift," or "flight"; a pulsation of movements that evades the "conjugal," which would be the more static, binary state of two things fixed to another.[35]

This flight-like motion brings us back to Frye's depersonalized definition of "outscaping": "all the imaginative energy *thrown outward to it and away from the poet*." Indeed, "the absurd" as Guest uses it here signals to us the difficulty of capturing this movement in poetic language, of converting the energetic drift of visuality into what "is only heard." "Landing" therefore closes by exchanging the act of looking, with which it opened, for the act of hearing. It gains its energies from the continual sense that these two polarities, albeit related, are not equivalent: read aloud, "eye and sphere" rhymes with "so I hear," four lines above; "absurd" and "heard" are also a rhyme pair, accenting absurd's etymological sense of something that cannot be heard. Although its title promises a "Landing," the poem's ending in "flight" signals a new departure, invigorated by the collapse of the inner/outer distances that are initially kept in check by its speaker.

To summarize, the poem has moved away from the self-conscious speaker positioned at the opening, through a consideration of "eye and sphere" (the perceiver and the perceived world), and then into a renunciation of this binary as too limited for its poetic perception. This direction of travel means abandoning the transparency and grammatical orderliness of the opening lines, which are composed as syntactically distinct phrases, and arriving at the final lines' increasingly opaque, syntactically intricate, unpunctuated reflections on poetic composition itself. This is, in a sense, just what the opening line of the poem promised: the poet *is* "watching herself" as she composes the poem. The simplest act of perception is then reframed in ways that are as startling as Stein's perception of the cubist landscape from the airplane, or Kahnweiler's idea of the spectator reassembling the object of perception in her mind.

"Landing" wants us to see how the question of remaining receptive to the exterior, an outscaping that Guest believed to be championed by modernism, involves an interrogation of the limits and contingencies of subject and surroundings, producing a vision of both as they are composed out of a relay between sight and sound.

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[35] Guest's conceptualisation of "the continual" as a state of being prior to cognitive categorizations here anticipates Massumi's definition of affect as "a way of focusing on the germinal modes of activity that factor into events as they are just beginning, and not yet fully determined as to where they might lead. It's a directly relational concept, because you have to think of 'to affect' and 'to be affect' as two sides of the same coin of the event." *Politics of Affect* (Wiley, 2015), 151. I return to Massumi's theorisation of affect as it relates to Guest's poetics in the second half of this chapter.

III From surface to scale in *The Location of Things* (1960)

What I have so far described as Guest's poetics of outscaping involves moving attention away from the delimited properties of the single object and towards the perceptual mobility—Alford's "general surrounding flux"—out of which objects are, in a secondary effort, composed. My reading of "Landing" troubles the idea that Guest's poetics was, in step with Greenberg's formalism, drawn to the flattening of perspectival depth and the reinforcement of the canvas' material limits. What Guest's poem bring to the fore is, instead, the impossibility of any such flattening or narrowing occurring within poetic language: the translation of sight into sound puts these two senses in a restless tension.

Guest's derivation of this perspectival play from cubism is made clearer with the direct mention of cubism in another poem from *The Location of Things*. "In the Middle of the Easel" was composed relatively late—March 1960—compared to the other poems of the collection. It was included in first edition as the collection's second poem, although later it was shuffled towards the end of the version as published in the *Collected Poems*.[36] As in the earlier "Landing," Guest confronts the difficulties and pleasures of processing perception at multiple scales. Unlike "Landing," this poem overtly takes the cubist canvas as a means of framing its perspectival play:

"In the Middle of the Easel"

My darling, only
a cubist angle seen after
produces this volume in which our hearts go
(tick tick)

I see you in a veil of velvet
then I'm quiet because you've
managed the apples, you've arranged
to sit. You are twice clothed
in my joy, my nymph.

[36] "Draft – content page of *The Location of Things*." Box 57, folder 1145, Guest papers.

Painters who range up and down
Mont hill or Mont this, disarray
in the twilight those boulevards,
make every stroke count and when one of the Saints
(in the dark apse tonal) quits,
I'm with you.

Together we'll breathe it,
you and I in the sleeve forgiving requiem,
in the priest tinted air.
In the gaslight that ridiculous plume
reminds me of hawks, I admire
their arc, I plunge
my everyday laughter into that kimono wing
what a studio soar! What rapture!
The gifted night, the billowing dark!

The heroine Paint sobs

"No one who has ever loved me
can tell me why
there are two birds at my wrist
and only one flies."[37]

From a cubist perspective, the object rendered on the canvas is an assemblage of discrete moments. The heartbeat's "tick tick" tells us that this is a question of composing a scene out of multiple times as well as spatial angles: on the canvas, as in the poem, "every stroke counts." "In the Middle of the Easel" is a poetic transcription of this perspectival disarray: it decomposes the finished spectacle of a cubist composition into a process that can be approximated textually. It begins by folding the question of historical perspective into the literal act of perception: to see a cubist angle "*after*" its completion evokes the belatedness of mid-century cubist reception in New York and registers the ways in which cubist canvases

[37] *LT*, 5.

stagger and multiply the apprehension of an object. This is why the title refers to an easel, and not a canvas: Guest puts us in the studio, during composition, and not in front of the finished piece at the gallery. For this reason, the poem evades ekphrastic representation of a specific cubist painting, and comes closer to exploring the way of seeing that would produce cubist painting.

In a gesture that mirrors the incorporation of text in cubist collage or the surrealists' development of the poem-painting, Guest wants to put paint "into" the poem. Across comments on her work, Guest consistently describes the transference of principles from visual aesthetics to the poetic page as part of her experimentalism and her modernism. In one essay, she writes of the "creative atmosphere of magical rites," in which "there was no recognized separation between the arts."[38] In a late essay titled "Wounded Joy," Guest reflects on the matter of affinities between painting and her writing:

> In the youth of my poetry I was fortunate to be surrounded by painters in the art movement of Abstract-Expressionism and I learned from them. First I noticed these painters appeared to have a lot more joy than did the poets. They were more playful! Their ideas were exploding on the canvas and they had a sense of freedom the poets were only beginning to learn from them. This was perhaps a heritage of Surrealism, but the fact that they were a MOVEMENT and were accepted even by the commercial world, which meant money, lent them this freedom. The entire city of New York liked their art. More importantly the air around them was hesitating as it turned into *the moment*. The idea of a moment with its special apparatus is a good thing for poetry also.[39]

The two words singled out for emphasis by Guest—"MOVEMENT" and "*the moment*"—are key to her reading of Abstract Expressionism. The emphasis given to "MOVEMENT" as applied to Abstract Expressionism proposes, recalling Goodnough's adoption of cubism in transition, that earlier stylistic innovations travel from one context and medium to another, and that the loose grouping of artists included under the name could be considered a collective working for its own advancement. Then, asserting that Abstract Expression was part of "*the moment*," Guest attaches New York painting to a basic avant-gardist rhetoric of

[38] *FI*, 51.
[39] *FI*, 102.

the moment and the new. Notable in this account is a loosening and extension of this rhetoric outward to the "air" of New York itself. It is as if the modernist moment could be perceived on a sidewalk, scenting the air, just as well as it might be contemplated in the confines of a gallery.

This vision of an aestheticized movement "in the air" shapes what narrative is discernible in "In the Middle of the Easel." We begin within the canvas, then move to an exchange between artist and model taking place in the studio. As in "Landing," the poem's perspective then takes a leap into a wider expanse of exterior spaces, as the artist/model exchange becomes engulfed in a city scene. Anchoring these expansions are the poem's intermittent moments of address, although the terms of that address—its proximity and its involvement—are extremely pliable and mobile: "I see you" morphs into "I'm with you" before "Together we'll breath it" takes the painter-model couple outside, with the verbs poised at line ends ("disarray," "admire," "plunge") lending reinforcement to that sense of momentum.

The entrance of the "heroine Paint" at the poem's conclusion, which is isolated on a single line, sharply separates the final stanza from those preceding it. The addressed "darling" of the opening line has already been associated with a feminine muse in the second stanza, in which the "I" identifies her as "my joy, my nymph." The poem here gestures towards the gendered dynamics of a painter and his "object," a line of inquiry which Guest would return to in later writing, as female figures of the avant-garde take centre stage.[40] "In the Middle of the Easel," however, throws a third figure into the mix. The "heroine Paint" breaks out of the artist/muse relation and into direct speech: in doing so, she concludes the process of composition which began in the poem's first stanza.

The final stanza's description of the painting makes it a likely reference to Miró's cubist-influenced 1918 painting *Standing Nude*, included in an exhibition that Guest reviewed in December 1953,[41] with the poem's earlier mentions of the "kimono wing" and the "veil of velvet" suggestive of the backdrops immediately to the right and behind the nude figure (Fig. 4). Yet rather than giving voice to the model depicted at the centre of Miró's canvas, Guest's poem makes "Paint" itself the protagonist. It is paint, the material basis of

[40] See Lundquist's discussion of the means by which Guest's mid-career poems invite readers "to enter the arena of the 'female gaze' and also compels us to consider in what respects Guest is indeed a feminist." "Reverence and Resistance," 265.

[41] Guest's review of the School of Paris show at New York's Janus gallery in 1953 describes Miró's nude as "the *belle of the ball* […] which startles with its ripe and riotous Oriental décor reminiscent of Matisse, yet, despite birds and flowers and a Cubistically ripened female, points towards this artist's later abstraction." *Art News*, December 1953, 43.

representation, that will give form to all of the excitement, vitality, and jitteriness of the preceding stanza. The joyful "studio soar" depends on what the manipulation of paint in the middle of the easel makes possible, just as the fluttering heartbeat of the speaker can only be produced by the artificial manipulations a cubist angle. In composing a poem that takes as its subject matter this formation of an excitable subject in the act of painting, Guest turns our attention to cubism not as a received style but as a situation and a sensibility: she gives us a cubist atmosphere that can be creatively reinhabited.

A comparison of this kind between cubist aesthetics and Guest's poetics places her writing within the context of a long debate about the applications of "cubist poetics."[42] The poetry of Guillaume Apollinaire, Pierre Reverdy and Max Jacob has been discussed alongside the work of the cubist painters they frequented,[43] with critics examining the ways in which their literary works extend cubism's "new syntax of art," which "[accommodated] all aspects of modern experience."[44]

Jacob's cubist poetics is best represented in his collection *Le Cornet à dés*, written during the early years of Jacob's friendship with Picasso, and first published in 1916. *Le Cornet* remains unassimilable to any single style: its prose poems tend towards what would later become recognizable tenets of surrealism (associative digression; everyday subject matter; puns, innuendo, and erotic subtext), yet they are also in dialogue with Mallarmé and symbolism (visually ornate and allusive, often dreamlike in tone). In *Max Jacob and the Poetics of Cubism*, Gerald Kamber reads *Le Cornet* as a literary counterpart to the angularity of cubist painting. Jacob achieves such an effect, in Kamber's analysis, through the "incessant shifting of the poetic line, a constant turning from the path in which the images seem to have been oriented."[45] Building on this process of disorientation, Kamber gives a definition of Jacob's cubist poetics as centred on "a space-time immobility":

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[42] For a discussion of the historical development of "Literary Cubism" as a category, see Michel Décaudin and Etienne-Alain Hubert, "Petit historique d'une appellation: 'Cubisme littéraire,'" *Europe* 638-39 (1982).

[43] Reverdy and Jacob held opposing views on the pertinence of such analogies. In a brief intervention on the subject, titled "Syntaxe," and published in *Nord-Sud* of April 1918, Reverdy rejects the idea that literature should imitate other forms: "Those for whom literature isn't anything other than the art of imitating others and who only see there the obligation to develop their own skilfulness, criticise us above all for our lack of syntax" (3; my translation). In contrast, Jacob, in a letter to his mother of 1927, presents a direct comparison between his writing and cubist painting: "Cubism in painting is the art of composing that painting in its own terms regardless of what it represents […] Literary Cubism does the same thing in literature, using reality only as a means and not as an end. Example: my *Cornet à dés*, and Reverdy's work." Quoted in Rosanna Warren, *Max Jacob: A Life in Art and Letters* (Norton, 2020), endnote 33.

[44] Wallace Fowlie, "Review of *Cubist Painters and Poets* by LeRoy C. Breunig," *The Sewanee Review* 103, no. 4 (1995), cvii.

[45] Kamber, *Max Jacob and the Poetics of Cubism* (John Hopkins University Press, 1971), 27.

> There is no orientation toward objective reality. Nor is there any attempt to portray any figure external to esthetic [sic] texture. Thus space itself seems turned inside out and comes to represent a kind of negative space, inverted and irrational. And as space and time blend into one another, the poem, instead of being a portrayal of anything, ends on a note of rapt immobility and becomes in effect an esthetic mood.[46]

Guest shares with Jacob this modernist detachment from standard forms of representation. Neither "Landing" nor "In the Middle of the Easel" are much interested in the depiction of an external figure; the poems comment, instead, on the ways in which such depiction might be impeded by the phenomenological complexity of the world as it undergoes a process of aestheticization. As in Kamber's reading of Jacob, this is in part a consequence of a sensitivity to the contingency of time and space, summarily expressed in Guest's assertion elsewhere that "reality is a variable, and is open-ended in form and matter."[47] Yet, unlike Jacob, Guest's early poems foreground the intransigence of representability: they map the *limits* of an orientation toward objective reality, instead of rejecting altogether the possibility of such an orientation. This is why, in both "Landing" and "In the Middle of the Easel," an opening mode of address is used to establish a scene, and a relation within that scene, which will then be reframed in the lines that follow.

This distinction between Jacob's indifference to objective reality and Guest's skeptical interest in representation is minor but decisive. It explains how the "rapt immobility" of Jacob's cubist poetics differs from the rapturous mobility that Guest's speakers arrive at as they "race / the continual" or "plunge" into a "billowing dark." These rapturous instants are the climax of the perspectival mobility that the poems celebrate. They are instances of disorientation energetically conceived of as escapes, flights, from an enclosing frame into a wider atmosphere that exceeds the poem's referential scales.

The result is a poetics that is more capacious and indeterminate than Jacob's rendering of the poem as an enclosed autonomous object, in which the demarcation of depth and surface, with their residual trace of psychologism and dialectical coherence, gives way to a poetics of accretion, erasure, and allusion. Sydney Lévy argues that the result of this is a poetics of *suspension* sustained across Jacob's work: a consistent "inbetweeness" that deactivates our capacity to read for either depth or surface.[48] In Guest, perspectival

[46] Kamber, *Max Jacob*, 27.
[47] *FI*, 27.
[48] Lévy, *The Play of the Text: Max Jacob's Le Cornet a Des* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1981).

arrangements will also scramble the legibility of depth and surface, yet the result is a mode of restless mobility, distinct from Jacob's arrested sensation of suspension.[49] This comparison between Jacob and Guest helps illuminate the elasticity of scale in both their works. The "inbetweeness" that Lévy highlights as the trademark of Jacob's style is achieved through a continual compression or expansion of one image within the terms of another: in a fragment from 1904, Jacob writes, for example, of how "[t]he sky squeezes two atmospheres into one stair."[50] Guest's "In the Middle of the Easel" is also concerned with how perception can range up and down a spectrum of scales: it turns from the middle of the easel, out to the boulevards, the grandeur of the "billowing dark," and then back into the confines of the canvas.

Variability of scale is an important juncture between aesthetics and poetics across the twentieth century. In an early essay on Frank O'Hara's poem "Music," Marjorie Perloff influentially proposes an equivalence between the restive attentions of O'Hara's poetics and the Action Painting of Jackson Pollock. Perloff's reading of O'Hara remains instructive for its expansion of the sense with which we can describe influence as running across media: "[t]o be 'influenced' by another artist," she comments, "is, in other words, to find new means of evading monotony, boredom, sameness—to force oneself to 'see' in new ways, to *defamiliarize* the object."[51]

This rethinking of influence would form the centerpiece of Perloff's 1977 book-length study of O'Hara poetics. In Perloff's argument, O'Hara's works owe much of their immediacy, openness, and spontaneity to the "notion that, as in the case of abstract painting, the 'surface' must be 'kept up'."[52] She cites O'Hara writing on Pollock's painting as the basis for this analogy between the surface of the painting and the surface of the poem:

> In the past, an artist by means of scale could create a vast panorama on a few feet of canvas or wall, relating this scale both to the visual reality of known images […] and to the real setting […] Pollock, choosing to use no images with real visual equivalents […] struck upon a use of scale which was to have a revolutionary effect on

[49] In a similar spirit to this Guest/Jacob comparison, Rob Mengham reads O'Hara back through Pierre Reverdy's poetics. Mengham argues for a common interest in Reverdy and O'Hara in the poem as a site that generates emotion, a concept that does away with individual psychologism in favour of a play between surface and depth. "French Frank," in *Frank O'Hara Now: New Essays on the New York Poet*, eds. Robert Hampson and Will Montgomery (Liverpool Scholarship Online, 2010).
[50] Quoted in Warren, *Max Jacob*, 93.
[51] Perloff, "Frank O'Hara and the Aesthetics of Attention," *boundary 2* 4, no. 3 (1976), 793.
[52] Perloff, "Aesthetics of Attention," 795.

> contemporary painting and sculpture. The scale of the painting became that of the painter's body, not the image of a body, and the setting for the scale, which would include all referents, would be the canvas surface itself. Upon this field the physical energies of the artist operate in actual detail, in full scale […] It is the physical reality of the artist and his activity of expressing it, united with the spiritual reality of the artist in a oneness which has no need for the mediation of metaphor or symbol. It is Action Painting.[53]

Perloff's interest in this passage focuses on O'Hara's claim that the canvas surface itself would become the measure of "all referents." Echoing Greenberg's "birth and death of three-dimensional space" on the cubist canvas, O'Hara aims at abolishing the idea of an outside for the painting: its referentiality, henceforth, will be enclosed by its material ground. An equivalent turn in O'Hara's poetics, according to Perloff, means recounting images and events not for their "symbolic properties" (their referential capacity; their relation to an elsewhere), but rather as a chain of interactions which "functions metonymically to create a microcosm of the poet's New York world."[54]

As both O'Hara's analysis of Pollock and Perloff's commentary on it make clear, surface aesthetics derives its energy from the conversion of scale as a function of representation into scale as an element of composition. The "visual reality of known images," which the skilled manipulation of perspectival scale serves to represent, is substituted for the scale of the painter's body (or the poet's presence). In his late long poem *Biotherm*, O'Hara would make this reduction of referential scale to the body his own: the page becomes a "skin" (the poem's final word), like the skin of the body, that is continually invigorated through its absorption of linguistic detritus.[55] Jasper Johns' 1965 lithograph *Skin with O'Hara Poem* then returns this analogy back into the visual field, placing smeared handprints and scraps of text on his canvas' skin-like surface. Johns' print was part of a projected series combining images and poems, the only piece of which was completed before O'Hara's death in 1966. The trace of the inked hand, pressed onto the canvas, expresses O'Hara's claim that scale draws its measure from bodily contact.

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[53] O'Hara, "Jackson Pollock," in *Frank O'Hara, Art Chronicles 1954-1956* (George Braziller, 1975), 34-35.
[54] Perloff, "Aesthetics of Attention," 796.
[55] Rona Cran, in her work on collage in twentieth century American aesthetics and poetics, describes O'Hara as performing poetic *bricoleur* by which he "[pours] the world into the poem instead of tearing it apart." *Collage in Twentieth-Century Art, Literature, and Culture. Joseph Cornell, William Burroughs, Frank O'Hara, and Bob Dylan* (Ashgate, 2014), 153.

Johns' work sought to reabsorb the question of bodily scale into the object of art. Central to his practice is what Marjorie Welish describes as his "relation of surface to edge," by which "the deliberately fabricated margin has penetrated the spontaneous, gestural center to its core."[56] In Welish's assessment, this means that an Abstract Expressionist language of "presence" and "process" could be disrupted and shown up as a rhetorical mode with the introduction of an element that is alien to the coextensive surface of the artwork. In a Guest poem, a similar tension is achieved with the intrusion of frames that alter the scale at which a given scene is perceived. In "In the Middle of the Easel," the most marked intrusion of this kind is that of the "heroine Paint." It is her direct speech that wrenches the poem out of the diegetic urban flow of the previous stanza. The poem, like Johns' practice of mixed-material insertions, *works to show its edges*. The conservation of the edge of perception is always considered to be a momentary exertion that cannot hold out for long; a provisional act of framing that can then be swapped out for another.

It would be difficult to overstate the centrality of scale in evaluations of Abstract Expressionism. Writing in *Art News* in 1958, two years after the death of Pollock, Allan Kaprow's comments on scale can be taken as representative:

> Then, Scale. Pollock's choice of enormous canvases served many purposes, chief of which for our discussion is that his mural-scale paintings ceased to become paintings and became environments. Before a painting, our size as spectators, in relation to the size of the picture, profoundly influences how much we are willing to give up consciousness of our temporal existence while experiencing it. Pollock's choice of great sizes resulted in our being confronted, assaulted, sucked in.[57]

What Kaprow's and O'Hara's comments elide is any differentiation between the viewer's subjective sense of scale and the painter's body as scale: Kaprow works through this by suggesting that the viewer is "sucked in" to the large-scale Pollock canvas, and thereby subjected to the painter's bodily scale; O'Hara by evoking a spiritual "oneness" that fuses the artist's body to the canvas surface. When Perloff later comes to draw her own analogies between canvas and poem, she can't quite reduce the poetic experience of scale to surface in the same way. This is because O'Hara's poetry, like all poetry, doesn't entirely get past

[56] Welish, "When Is a Door Not a Door?" *Art Journal* 50, no.1 (1991), 51.
[57] Kaprow, "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock," in *Reading Abstract Expressionism*, ed. Ellen G. Landau (Yale University Press, 2005), 185.

the referentiality that is inherent to language. The poetry of O'Hara, Perloff resolves, must work through metonym to "create a microcosm of the poet's New York world." Here, the measurement of scale in terms of an exterior world slips back in: the poem puts the world in miniature; its details thus remain loosely tethered to an exterior referent.

This question of scale marks a difference between what I have described in this chapter as Guest's cubist poetics and O'Hara's surface poetics. Guest's perspectival shifts do measure themselves against the motion of a perceptible world and there remains the sense that the poem is responsive to a surrounding reality that is irreducible to surface, and which may extend behind the perceivable world at a mystical distance.[58] This is comparable to Rachel Blau DuPlessis' interpretation, in her essay "The Gendered Marvelous: Guest, Surrealism, and Feminist Reception," of Guest's poetic vision: "a sense of the visionary behind physical or focused vision."[59] This visionary drive is rendered in Guest's early poems through the continuous alterations of scale. As in "Landing" and "In the Middle of the Easel," the product perspective remains mobile and unfocused, yet these shifts are coordinated by the sense of a pulsing reality that returns its intensities towards the observer.

This means a sense of scale that is radically relativized, differing from O'Hara's assertion that scale can be reduced to the singular relation of painter-canvas or body-world. Whereas O'Hara's heroic rendition of Pollock's action painting casts the artist's sense of scale as the only relevant metric, Guest's poems render scale as the continual triangulation of objects, space, and an observer. For Guest, scale can be pluralized in this way because, as Kaprow intimates, it is the experience of the artwork *as an environment* that means no single measure can hold. No single body, in this equation, could impose a unified sense of measurement. The body is itself startled by the extensions or compressions of scale as they are imposed on it from the exterior, and the canvas becomes just one other type of window onto a world of mobile relations.

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[58] In her study of Walt Whitman's poetics, Jane Bennett finds a similar sensitivity to forces in excess of the single subject running through his work: "I label these other moods 'affections' and 'sympathies,' as those terms become stretched beyond a human-centered, sentimental frame to include apersonal, underdetermined vital forces that course through selves without being reducible to them." Bennett proposes "absorbent" to describe receptivity to such moods, giving the word a comparable significance to my discussion of "outscape" earlier in this chapter: "*Absorbent* in that it is continuously ingressed, ensared, and informed by an outside." *Influx & Enflux: Writing Up with Walt Whitman* (Duke University Press, 2020), xix; 116.

[59] DuPlessis, "The Gendered Marvellous: Barbara Guest, Surrealism, and Feminist Reception," in *Blue Studios: Poetry and Its Cultural Work* (University of Alabama Press, 2006), 171.

IV ‘an elimination of the static’: affective mobility

In *The Location of Things*, Guest explores the relational experience of interacting with a canvas as an alternative to the isolated stance of a unifying observer. Like the cautious speaker at the opening of “Landing,” or the “heroine Paint” at the close of “In the Middle of the Easel,” these positions of self-conscious vigilance are juxtaposed with the elation of an escape into a flux of atmospheric impressions. A unifying speaker is then substituted for a parataxical arrangement of phenomena that cannot be contained within a single frame. The window, like the canvas, is also an invitation to get away from oneself. As we have seen, Guest’s development of cubism swerves away from the flattening of perspective and surface materiality, as well as the heroic centrality of the painter’s body as the regulation of scale. Approaching instead the disorientations and slippages of Jacob’s cubist poetics, Guest decides that the incessant activity of perception out of which reality is composed must be maintained by forces that pass through and *between* objects. In the remainder of this chapter, I consider the affective dimensions of these extreme mobilities of perspective.

In her seminal 2010 essay “Happy Objects,” feminist scholar Sara Ahmed considers happiness as an event that orients attention towards certain objects.[60] Ahmed explains the ways in which happiness simultaneously registers the sense that we are struck by an exterior force *and* channels that force towards a particular object. In doing so, she cautions against understanding affect as something “that stands apart or has autonomy, as if it corresponds to an object in the world.”[61] Rather, affect loosely corresponds to “the messiness of the experiential, the unfolding of bodies into worlds, and the drama of contingency, how we are touched by what we are near.”[62] To feel happiness within this unfolding is therefore to be affected and to be intentional, in the phenomenological sense: to recognise emotion as it directs itself towards an object.[63]

The mobility of perspective in Guest’s early poems is expressive of Ahmed’s premise: that affect eliminates the static; that it works to direct our attention towards objects. Outside of the poems themselves, Guest’s criticism is replete with instances that anticipate

[60] Ahmed, “Happy Objects,” in *The Affect Theory Reader*, eds. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Duke University Press, 2010), 29.
[61] Ahmed, “Happy Objects,” 30.
[62] Ahmed, “Happy Objects,” 30.
[63] Ahmed’s discussion here recalls the double sense of “becoming,” as used by Guest: that attractive force described in “Landing,” discerned in states which are continual, unformed, in process. In fact, Guest’s early poems often associate affectively charged objects with two qualities: proximity and inconclusivity; what “Landing” describes as “near, prevalent” and what is “becoming” are the magnetic qualities of the objects that ground, for a moment, her poetic attention.

this insight. The most direct expression of Guest's affective-laden perception comes in one of the very earliest reviews that she wrote for *Art News*. Written in the summer of 1952, Guest is discussing the work of René Bouché. Although best known for his *Vogue* illustrations, Bouché had joined Pollock, William de Kooning, and Robert Motherwell as a member of The Eight Street Avant-Garde Painters Club in 1948, following his emigration to New York. Guest's review covers Bouché's work at the end of this abstract phase. From 1952 on, he would return to portraiture, describing his interest in abstraction as a hiatus from his "thirst for the human image."[64] In her review of Bouché's work, Guest draws attention to the sense of movement in his paintings, anticipating O'Hara's impression of a field of physical energies at work in Pollock's canvases:

> Space, for him, is something in which one can get lost. Working constantly toward an elimination of the static, he seeks to construct images which will develop and extend themselves *in direct relation to the viewer's receptivity*.[65]

Guest's emphasis here on receptivity is, once again, contrary to contemporaneous formalist paradigms which took the artwork as the closed negotiation of surface and depth. What impresses Guest as a viewer is the activation of an atmosphere that opens up between an observer and the canvas. Just as the receptive conscience of "Landing" reinterprets cubist perspective as an invitation for the observer to participate, Guest here places emphasis on a flow of interpretive work that moves between viewer and artwork. This relationality is allowed for by Bouché's vision of space as "something in which one can get lost": a disorienting condition expressed in the artwork, then reactivated in the viewer.

Speakers in Guest's texts are often striving for this kind of ecstatic self-distancing; a loss of fixity that is the emotionalized complement to her poetic's elimination of the static. The outscaping of perspective—the capacity to lose oneself in one's surroundings, to feel them pressing in upon a position, and then dislodging its fixity—is what disperses agency into the environment, so that things seem to arrive at the speakers with their own vibrant urgency. Rachel Blau DuPlessis has characterized this as the "eroticism" of Guest's work: "wondering affection and ever-mobile empathy [which] all contribute to the work's difficulty."[66] This wondering affection gives a name both to the broader structure of Guest's

[64] Quoted in Daniel Zalkus, "Turn Back the Pages: Rene Bouche," *Illustration Age* (2019), n.p.
[65] Guest, "Review: René Bouché," *Art News*, June 1952, 98; emphasis added.
[66] DuPlessis, "The Other Window is the Lark," *Jacket* 36 (2008), para.13.

poems and to the techniques of assemblage with which they are built phrase by phrase. As John Wilkinson describes: "'syntax' in Guest's poems returns to its Greek root as 'arrangement,' without its subsequent connotation of *regulation*: the verbal elements of a Guest poem are disposed more as the materials of collage than as discourse."[67] Inserting affect into the equation means asking what it is that prevents or destabilizes expected syntactical "regulation" in Guest's poetics. How do her looser syntactical arrangements convey DuPlessis' sense of an eroticized world of continual perpetual exchange?

An answer to these questions can be found in one of Guest's early unpublished drafts, dated 1952. Guest here describes affect-laden objects as operating in a contrapuntal play between aesthetic form and lived space. Within these lines, no single object is given in itself: positionality is always relative and open to reframing. The spectacular, the attractive, and the generative are qualities that the poem treasures as they emerge only from *within* these exchanges between one object and another:

> When first poems are made
> In a room in which only the shadow
> Of sadness shows.
> When first poems are made
> With the grace given by walls
> And chairs which are not spectacular
> In themselves.
> But who have the wish
> Like paintings to make
> Everything around them grow.
> To give life to the particular seed
> Surrounded by ornamental space,
> Which can make all things grow.
> When first poems are made
> There is a mirror
> In which all things
> Show.[68]

[67] Wilkinson, "'Couplings of Such Sonority'", 484-85.
[68] "When first poems are made..." Box 57, folder 1150, Guest papers.

The speaker takes the "ornamental space" that surrounds her as an agent in the creation of the poem. Indeed, the speaker as such is omitted within the passive voicing of the poem's refrain: "when first poems *are made*" occludes the agency of a governing-"I" that would make the poem. The impulse of poetic creation, *poiesis* itself, comes here not expressively from within a speaker's interior emotional state. It arrives from this outscaped perception of the environment, which spreads and hangs pathos across the enclosing space: "sadness" is intuited as a shadow in the room; walls and chairs "wish / [l]ike paintings to make / [e]verything around them grow." These objects gain their vitalizing force upon contact with "[e]verything around them": they vibrate in relation to one another, and they gain sense only within the totality of that relationality. To this end, Guest's poem combines the organic language of life, growth, and seeding with the artifice of painting and ornament: the distinctive, unified object is loaded with vitality via its incessant reorientation toward other things.

The animation with which Guest imbues what might otherwise be taken as inert objects is reminiscent of Ahmed's account of affect's directedness or, in her words, "stickiness."[69] This is Ahmed's description of how the apprehension of happiness directs itself to objects in proximity:

> We are moved by things. And in being moved, we make things. An object can be affective by virtue of its own location (the object might be *here*, which is *where* I experience this or that affect) and the timing of its appearance (the object might be *now*, which is *when* I experience this or that affect). To experience an object as being affective or sensational is to be directed not only toward an object, but to "whatever" is around that object, which includes what is behind the object, the conditions of its arrival.[70]

As in Guest's "When first poems are made," Ahmed wishes to stress the distribution of affect in surroundings, decentering the expressive emotivity of the subject. Ahmed's work should be read in conversation with Brian Massumi's theorizing of affect as autonomous, as discussed in the previous chapter: a force that moves through the body but that is not delimited by. "Affect," writes Massumi, "is autonomous to the degree to which it escapes

[69] Ahmed, "Happy Objects," 33.
[70] Ahmed, "Happy Objects," 33.

confinement in the particular body whose vitality, or potential for interaction, it is."[71] What Guest adds to this model is the poetic text as an imaginative site analogous to a "particular body": a container that accumulates its vitality from a situated interactivity. The poem is a thing, like other things, that is made within its environment, and is then reflected alongside "all things" within the closing frame of a mirror. We have already seen this perspectival breakdown at play in "Landing" and "In the Middle of the Easel." This earlier draft of Guest's presents the distillation of those later techniques. It describes the arrival of the poem, like Ahmed's phenomenological arrival of the object, as exceeding any subjectivity, and as punctuating a single viewpoint: a poetic event that depends on the "grace" or disposition of an environment for its meaning to occur.[72]

The title poem of *The Location of Things* revisits "When first poems are made," and in so doing it intensifies the affective mobility inchoate in that earlier draft. The most significant difference between the two versions can be felt immediately in the later poem's opening lines, where the passive voice becomes active, presenting us with another of Guest's speakers who is momentarily trapped in a state of nervous self-perception. This poem's "I", like Guest evaluating Bouché's artwork as an unfolding relationality, is on the verge of getting lost: the centeredness of its sight is just about to tilt into an outscaping of perception. It is with this vertiginous sensation that the poem begins:

> Why from this window am I watching leaves?
> Why do halls and steps seem narrower?
> Why at this desk am I listening for the sound of the fall
> of color, the pitch of the wooden floor
> and feet going faster?[73]

The cool mode of reflection in "When first poems are made" has transmuted here into the immediacy of a lyric present: an inquiring "I" that is thrown together in the midst of self-inquiry. We can recognise the tone of incipient disorientation with which "Landing" opens,

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[71] Massumi, *Parables*, 35.
[72] This situation is not without paradox, since subjectivity as such is registered in the moment of its undoing. Notably, Massumi, in his 2015 work *The Politics of Affect*, refines his vision of affective autonomy by arguing that the body gains agency from the forces *that escape it*. It is for this reason that he speaks of the body as "implicated" in a relational field: it must always answer to sensations over which it has no control. Guest's outscaping of perception is similarly concerned with moments when an act of composition and regulation (aesthetic or poetic) is shown to gain energy precisely in the moment that it *fails* to delimit itself from the world.
[73] *LT*, 3.

as well as the sensation of catching the self from an exterior angle from which "In the Middle of the Easel" begins. The subject here then circles around self-definition: the "I" placed mid-line is elided in subsequent clauses; a grammatical vanishing that reflects the effort of concentration on the substance of what the subject is observing. This association of subjectivity with sight, the I/eye-pun given in "Landing," stages the subject as seeking definition through the act of perception, at the risk of losing herself in the process. Instead of resolving or stabilizing this process, a constant motion is played out upon visual surfaces, gradually lengthening both syntax and line, with the tensions between the two marking the shifts of poetic attention (exemplified when "fall," in the poem's third line, falls over the line break unexpectedly into "of color"). This effortful, imaginative perception interrupts, rather than affirms, certainties: the speaker does not shore herself up via the strictures of lyric address. It is disintegration of subjectivity that occurs on contact with the environment.

How can this disaggregation of a subject-centered lyric distinguish Guest's poetics from that of her contemporaries? How does the introduction of affect into readings of her work allow us to refine our vision of the particularities of her writing? To begin with the similarities between her own poems and those of her contemporaries, the reframing of urban experience as a space of revery is not unique to Guest. Indeed, window gazing of one kind or another is something of a trope for the New York School.[74] In a mock "eclogue" for the theatre published posthumously as "Amorous Nightmares of Delay," O'Hara imagines his group of New York friends as kids in a New England playground, "*clustered round their dear teacher, picking his brain*."[75] The teacher has something in his pocket, but the kids are much more interested in delivering grandiose tracts on their budding poetic ambitions. The schoolboy "John" (Ashbery) starts expounding to his teacher and playmates on the merits of window gazing:

> JOHN:
> When I speak to you, I speak of the spiritual, which is my fulfilling need. It opens to me, flowers unfurl their gloomy banners to my appetite, readily, like a lunch box. Sometimes I stare out the window as if I were drinking, and it is at these times you become most annoyed, not as you think because I am not attending you, but because something is attending me which you are wary of the exclusion of. […] Then,

[74] For a discussion of the window as "aperture" in James Schuyler's writing, see chapter 5 of Mae Losasso's *Poetry, Architecture, and the New York School* (Palgrave, 2023).
[75] O'Hara, *Selected Plays* (Full Court Press, 1978), 77; emphasis in original.

> beautiful borrowed eyes, you will find the rough tongue of death wrench you like a daisy, you will go green, there will be a fluttering but no dismay, you'll be the feathered wing of a cloud. You don't know, but you will fall like rain.[76]

Not only is the daydreamer transmuted by whatever his eyes find outside the schoolhouse window, but the "you" of the addressed teacher is blurred into the generic "you" of John's revery. It is a way of looking that does not, as the "dear teacher" fears, betoken "exclusion" but rather total *inclusion* in the world. This sensation is so forceful that the "You" which John addresses cannot remain in control, or conscious, of the transformations that it will undergo ("You don't know, but you will fall like rain"). In a reversal that aligns this perspective with Guest's outscaped visions, John sees this lack of control as a response to "something [that] is attending me": the outside world draws the viewer *towards* it, attending to and then attenuating the border that separates the self from the environment. The outcome of this process is an observer that collapses into observable phenomenon ("you'll be the feathered wing of a cloud […] you will fall like rain").

For most of O'Hara's short play, the character Barbara remains the most taciturn of the children: in the first scene she doesn't speak at all. In the second scene—the children "*now in their teens*"[77]—Barbara breaks her silence with a brief monologue that reads almost as a pastiche of the perspectival vertigo in the poem "The Location of Things":

> BARBARA:
> Now before this I had gotten some old lemonade, but I didn't recognize you or what I'd thought you. How wide the lawn, and how narrow the sky! Is it irresistibly sucking us aloft like a high school? I want very much to be, how do you say? pragmatic, which in Bob's case is furious. But you come at me, you do, I can tell it. I don't hate you.[78]

The joke here is that this mini-Barbara's musings are anything but "pragmatic."[79] Indeed, the teenage John shortly chips in to tell us how "[Barbara's] gaze" works: "the deeper the

[76] O'Hara, *Plays*, 78.
[77] O'Hara, *Plays*, 80; emphasis in original.
[78] O'Hara, *Plays*, 81.
[79] O'Hara's choice of "pragmatic" may also be a play on similarities between the pragmatism of William James and Guest's poetics. For a discussion of this connection between Guest's emphasis on states of transition, James' "transitional" philosophy, and John Dewey's "intermediate possibilities", see Zac Schnier, "Between

better."[80] O'Hara's sketch suggests that Guest may lose herself in the irresistible force of her surroundings. Incapable of remaining pragmatic or grounded, she is sucked up to a loftier perspective, and then astonished by the unruly dimensions of the world around her.

A burst of astonishment, of the kind in O'Hara's character sketch, interrupts many of the poems from *The Location of Things*. Several open either with exclamations—"The air! The colonial air!"[81]—or with a speaker disturbed or amazed by some new element of their environment, which now calls for integration or interpretation:

> I wonder if this new reality is going to destroy me.[82]

> Or when I see a sailor in front of my house on the
> sidewalk[83]

> Where goes this wandering blue,
> This horizon that covers us without a murmur?[84]

The opening lines of "The Location of Things" similarly anticipate a transformation that will strike the speaker from the outside. The gaze is turned out upon the world, and remains ever aware that the world is looking back:

> Am I to understand change, whether remarkable
> or hidden, am I to find a lake under the table
> or a mountain beside my chair
> and will I know the minute water produces lilies
> or a family of mountaineers scales the peak?[85]

'Location' and 'Things': Barbara Guest, American Pragmatism, and the Construction of Subjectivity," *Canadian Review of American Studies* 45, no. 3 (2015).

[80] O'Hara, *Plays,* 83.
[81] *LT*, 21.
[82] *LT*, 17.
[83] *LT*, 57.
[84] *LT*, 65.
[85] *LT*, 3.

In order to turn this everyday act of gazing out a window into the substance of poetry, Guest's window-gazer needs to believe (and make us believe) that something might return the gaze. As in the earlier unpublished draft, the poem is thereby situated within an environment that "can make all things grow": these "remarkable / or hidden" changes will occur, whether or not the speaker is able to "find," "understand," or "know" them.

O'Hara's character sketch helps highlight something about Guest's wandering affections: for her, the eroticism of the world, in DuPlessis' words, is a call to lose oneself within it. In this regard, the opening lines of "The Location of Things" merit a comparison with John Ashbery's widely anthologized "The Instruction Manual," first published in *Some Trees* of 1956:

> As I sit looking out of a window of the building
> I wish I did not have to write the instruction manual on the uses of a new metal.
> I look down into the street and see people, each walking with an inner peace,
> And envy them—they are so far away from me![86]

In Ashbery's poem, our attention is drawn immediately to the act of writing itself. The two actions, looking and writing, occur in parallel but separately—"*As* I sit looking out of a window… / I wish I did not have to write"—rather than folding into a single moment of perception. Ashbery's long run-on lines accentuate the poem's orderly syntax: the "I" introduced at the poem's opening remains front-and-centre of the field of vision that it presents us with, as the grammatical subject of each line and as the measure of distance from the street and dissatisfaction with their own position. As Lindsay Turner writes, in a short reflection on what she calls "Window Poetics," Ashbery's poem is "a record *of the separation between the poet and the world*: it ends with the speaker's wistful but inevitable return to the task at hand."[87] Ashbery's speaker looking down into the street underscores distance and detachment: they withhold themself from the blurring of boundaries that Guest's subjects end by vanishing into. And although Ashbery's speaker will later escape into a dream-vision of the city of Guadalajara—"City I wanted most to see, and most did not see, in Mexico!"[88]—that vision is presented by the poet with ironic distance, as a parody of poetic revery; an instruction manual by way of Kubla Khan. Ashbery's window

[86] Ashbery, *Some Trees* (Corinth Books, 1970), 14.
[87] Turner, "Window Poetics," *Post45*, April 2019, n.p.; emphasis added.
[88] Ashbery, *Some Trees*, 15.

demarcates the distinction between this imaginative world and the altogether less fantastical scene of "people, each walking with an inner peace" as observed from the window.

This keeps "The Instruction Manual" recognizably within what Marta Figlerowicz has described as Ashbery's "falsely earnest" use of romantic tropes of interiority and introspection.[89] In her work *Spaces of Feeling: Affect and Awareness in Modern Literature*, Figlerowicz reads Ashbery's later poem *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* for its representations of "intersubjective cognitive dependencies."[90] According to Figlerowicz, Ashbery's poems present their speakers' self-awareness as "always contingent and distributed, derived from surrounding environments whose help these speakers need to stabilize their sense of themselves."[91] The subjects of Ashbery's poems refuse to regard their emotions as solely an introspective affair. Unconvinced of their own interiority, they search instead for an "accommodating world that would suffice to elucidate them."[92] Figlerowicz's formulation of how Ashbery's speakers are interpolated in their surroundings is important here for the contrast it offers with Guest's poetics:

> [Ashbery's] poems' relationship to the forms and tropes of the Romantic lyric could be described as falsely earnest. Apparently embracing many of these older generic conventions, [Ashbery's] poems make them seem vulnerably hopeful and narrow-minded. In these early works, Ashbery represents the experience of temporarily forgetting, in one's enthusiasm, that the mere fact of being confronted and apparently interpellated by an outward correlative for one's affects does not prove that the world beyond one is particularly interested in one's affective confusion or even that the correlative one has found is readily intelligible to others.[93]

This post-romantic self-reflexivity is, as we have seen, not altogether alien to Guest's work, but two distinctions from the Ashberian subject—interpellated as it is by exterior forces—can be stated. First, the act of looking in Guest's poems does not ultimately return us to a subject that is continuous with the speaker of their openings. Ashbery's speaker is distracted, derailed by what they see, drawn to and absorbed into an elsewhere, before returning, in a circular manner, back into a state of self-absorption. This is not to overstate the coherence

[89] Figlerowicz, *Spaces of Feeling*, 117.
[90] Figlerowicz, *Spaces of Feeling*, 115.
[91] Figlerowicz, *Spaces of Feeling*, 115.
[92] Figlerowicz, *Spaces of Feeling*, 116.
[93] Figlerowicz, *Spaces of Feeling*, 117.

of speakers in Ashbery, which are often multiple, self-estranged, and disjointed. But the governing fiction of *a* voice is largely maintained, whereas in Guest's visions a process of perspectival dispersal is set in motion that is potentially limitless, and that implicates not the affective confusion of an individualizable yet mobile subjectivity but a more forceful dissolution of *any* possibility of self-orientation. Secondly, in Ashbery, visual phenomena are kept at a certain distance. They are posed, observed, and measured with a minimum of poise and control. They remain as vulnerable to the poet's skepticism as language itself, which is to say that they are framed within the lyric mediation of a voice, and discussed with an ironic detachment that nonetheless strives to make sense of the surrounding environment.

In Guest, instead, we approach the poetic text as a space that is traversed by affective forces which evade containment within an individualizable subject. "Making sense," within such a text, has little to do with the limited and ephemeral coherence of a speaking subject: the distortions of syntax or the reformulations of semantic norms cannot be symptomatically linked to what Andrew Epstein calls "the slippery, maddeningly unstable sense of self" which underlies Ashbery's poetics.[94] In Guest, such a state of instability and slipperiness does not reflect an interior state of insecurity; it works instead to replicate the phenomenological mobility of an exterior atmosphere. This means, returning now to the opening lines of "The Location of Things," that the poem's germinal "Why"—provoked by that look from the window—is not existential: it does not signal the subject's response to what Figlerowicz terms its interpellation by the world. Instead, the "Why" provoked by this look is ontological: it relates to the wonderment of change and its causes *as such*; and it displays the difficulties of describing phenomena as they go on happening in the world, rather than motioning us inwards to a subjective explication of this change.

Read in this way, the pressing urgency and imaginative extravagance of the poem's questions disclose the speaker's attempt to make contact with reality as a whole, with "reality" understood as an enveloping atmosphere that cannot be partitioned into discrete observations or made to correspond with a stable interiority. It's for this reason that, as in "Landing," the questions that unfurl across the poem's opening stanza intermesh visual phenomena with aural perceptions ("listening for the sound of the fall / of color"), and emphasize the *relativity* of perception through the use of comparatives. Guest makes of the poetic page an experimental space within which, in the words of phenomenologist Francesco Mata, "the way in which an individual's spatial involvement may put him or her in contact

[94] Epstein, *Cambridge Introduction*, 72.

with reality as a whole."[95] In Mata's theorizing, a body's attempts to orient itself always draw upon an experiential present that is not yet given within the limits and measures by which cognition transforms an emergent, morphic, and sensual "region" into a mathematized "space."[96] It's here that the strongest distinction between Ashbery's voice of lyric self-interrogation and Guest's method of outscaped perception can be drawn. Whereas Ashbery's speaker searches for correlatives to inward states, ultimately concerning themselves with the degree to which the outer world can be said to correspond to an inner tumultuousness, Guest gives us the poetic page as an attempt to contain experiences that are only initially, and then loosely, introjected into an interiority. The movement, instead, is out towards a world in motion.

The desire to contain and describe this world in motion is what Guest brings to the fore in the following stanza, which opens with the word "Recognitions" set apart on a separate line:

> Recognitions
>
> On Madison Avenue I am having a drink, someone
> with dark hair balances a carton on his shoulders
> and a painter enters the bar. It reminds me
> of pictures in restaurants, the exchange of hunger
> for thirst, art for decoration and in a hospital
> love for pain suffered beside the glistening rhododendron
> under the crucifix. The street, the street bears light
> and shade on its shoulders, walks without crying,
> turns itself into another and continues, even
> cantilevers this barroom atmosphere into a forest
> and sheds its leaves on my table
> carelessly as if it wanted to travel somewhere else
> and would like to get rid of its luggage

[95] Mata, "A Phenomenological Investigation of the Presencing of Space," *Phenomenology & Practice* 10, no. 1 (2016), 25.
[96] As in Schmitz's theorization of area-less spaces, discussed in my introduction, the distinction here is between the experiential space that a body occupies and interacts with and the cognitive reconfiguration of that space as an area that can be plotted and made legible to those who do not occupy it. Mata calls this process "presencing," by which a space is "momentarily [rescued] from its prior unavailability" and rendered interpretable. "Presencing of Space," 41.

which has become in this exquisite pointed rain
a bunch of umbrellas. An exchange![97]

The standalone word "Recognitions" breaks the poem off from the more ruminative tone of the opening stanza and resituates us on the street. Recalling Charles Olson's 'new recognitions […] instant by instant" as the base of his field poetics,[98] the prominence that Guest gives to the word here sets in motion a chain of perspectival switches that *re*-cognize objects as they are altered, instant by instant, through their proximity to others. The "exchange" that Guest's poem initiates exhilarates the speaker with its sense of expansion.[99] Rather than measuring such expansion against the enclosed space of a subject, the lines recount a continual blurring of boundaries between *all* subjects within a shared space: each lines collapses one object into another, a sense of movement underscored by the many evocations of travel, luggage, transit, and wilderness. This resituates the poem outside of the narrative position centred on the "I"—Ashbery's reflexive mode—and within a continuous darting from one perspectival position to another.

The final image of this stanza is particularly notable for its structuring of affective mobility. The street "sheds its leaves […] / carelessly as if it wanted to travel somewhere else / and would like to get rid of its luggage." The street's luggage refers to the people on the sidewalk, transformed in the next instance under the "exquisite pointed rain" into "a bunch of umbrellas." The time of this "exchange" is miraculously instantaneous, but its spatial division across lines means that this instant is sifted through a number of angles. As though to emphasise the temporal disjunctions implicated by this arrangement of perception, the opening of the next stanza returns us to the figure at the window with which the poem opened. But now this figure has been depersonalized: it is given as an object, a "head against the window," which is "seen" externally by a non-specified onlooker:

That head against the window
how many times one has seen it. Afternoons

[97] *LT*, 3.
[98] Olson, "Projective Verse," para.5.
[99] The experiential largesse which Guest sets in motion here sets up a further contrast to Ashbery's poetics, in which Christopher Nealon finds a desire "to recognize [the speaker's] smallness, his minority—he wants us to know that he is in danger, like any of us, of being downsized." *The Matter of Capital: Poetry and Crisis in the American Century* (Harvard University Press, 2013), 101. Unlike this Ashberian sense of precarity and enclosedness, it is wonderment and expansivity, in Guest's poetics, that are the most common emotional responses to the affective mobility discussed in this chapter.

of smoke and wet nostrils,
the perilous makeup on her face and on his,
numerous corteges. The water's lace creates funerals
it makes us see someone we love in an acre of grass.[100]

The porosity of these lines, in which the rain-slicked street metamorphizes into a melancholy cortege, has been commented on by Ann Vickery. Reading Guest as working in a pastoral mode, Vickery takes her to be emphasizing "a continuing urban alienation," sustained by the "material separation of watcher and the world beyond" which is then relieved by an imaginative "retreat."[101] But the vanishing of the subject performed by the poem conveys less a state of "separation" or "alienation" than one of a final absorption into the surrounding atmosphere. The falling rain—the "water's lace"—thickens the reflective surface of the window, so that it becomes more present, gaining an opacity that obscures the field of vision. Rather than detachment, this signals the speaker's synchronicity with the melancholic mood of the rainy afternoons, a synchronicity rendered symbolic by the "smoke and wet nostrils" of the afternoon itself, through which vital signs of breath are exchanged not between two people, but between a person and the environment in which they are immersed.

The definitive dispersal of subjectivity is accomplished in the poem's next line: "The regard of dramatic afternoons," where the ambiguous preposition "of" allows "afternoons" to function doubly as subject and object ("The dramatic afternoons *as they are regarded*"). The final stanza of "The Location of Things" then restores an "I," only as it vanishes into "clouds and air":

The regard of dramatic afternoons

through this floodlit window
or from a pontoon on this theatrical lake,
you demand your old clown's paint and I hand you
from my prompter's arms this shako,
wandering as I am into clouds and air
rushing into darkness as corridors

[100] *LT*, 4.
[101] Vickery, "'A Mobile Fiction': Barbara Guest and Modern Pastoral," *TriQuarterly* 116 (2003), 250.

who do not fear the melancholy of the stair.[102]

This is a vanishing act made all the more dexterous by the unclear vehicle of the simile "as corridors." The equivocal syntax of that line can be read as "*darkness as* corridors" (the corridors are dark) or "[I am] *rushing* […] as corridors" (the movement is corridor-like). The poem's final elision of its "I" accomplishes the spreading of a subjectivity into its surroundings, while the final rhyme of "stair" for "air" returns us to the domestic space, from which Guest's poems often depart; a location that has now been evacuated of its occupant, last seen in a state of ecstatic motion: flight, escape, rapture, rush.

V The "all-over" poem

Clouds, as Anahid Nersessian reminds us in her discussion of apostrophe, are often the weak stuff of lyric: they are "[n]ot nothing, but very little: a threshold expression, a tender subsistence."[103] To wander as a cloud, or into clouds, is to exchange the remarkable for the hidden, to enter into "an atmosphere of address" that demurs at the substance of its own pronouncements.[104] As Nersessian explains, apostrophe is intended 'to make the nature of minimal modes of existence maximally present and intense':

> [T]o find the threshold of what is hardly there and color it as vividly as possible. Apostrophe is one way of pulling that off. It calls the slenderest reality by some name, picks out horses and armies from wisps and stripes, asks a question about the weather and makes audible the response called silence.[105]

Guest, as my readings here of her earliest poems have explored, is indeed interested in a poetics that will make "minimal modes of existence" present and intense in the most maximal manner. This is why they are particularly concerned with shifts in scale and frame: nothing, the poems wish to display, can be so minimal that it might not be re-cognized within poetic language. Her speakers want to tell us something about this sensation that the world is unfolding, mobile, enveloping: objects then become, instant to instant, less like what they are, and more like what they are proximate to.

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[102] *LT*, 4.
[103] Nersessian, *The Calamity Form: On Poetry and Social Life* (University of Chicago Press, 2020), 223-224.
[104] Nersessian, *Calamity Form*, 224.
[105] Nersessian, *Calamity Form*, 227.

In this process, the figure of the speaker is itself only ever a flash of intuition. It is for this reason that Guest's poetry rarely organizes itself around apostrophe. In the moment that Guest's "I" appears to be speaking out, the very subject that would speak becomes entangled in the atmosphere that it is supposedly addressing. The weather, the street, rooms, windows, and canvas frames tend to loom larger than the framing-"I" of Guest's poems, not the other way round. In a final move, which affect helps us to characterize, it is, paradoxically, this sensation of being subsumed that seems to hold the subject together: a moment of plunging, flying or rushing into surroundings is the vanishing point at which Guest's early poems routinely close. The speaker is given as they lose themselves, momentarily cognizant of this self-attenuation and of the pathos of that sensation even as it overflows them.

We might expect these sensations of bewilderment and overflow to feel at least uncomfortable, if not painful. It would be the affective equivalent to an "all-over canvas," the kind that John Cage acknowledged as an influence on his music: a composition which, as critic Irving Sandler defines it, "in no sense has a centre of interest," and which "looks as if it could have continued beyond the frame."[106] Translated into, contained within, a psychological disposition, such a state would be bound to come with a certain strain. As Figlerowicz's work reminds us, affective states are always carried through frames of consciousness that they exceed: they may begin from an unstable sense of in-betweenness that loosens the rigid boundaries of the self, but their effects on emotional life, for Ashbery's speakers, feels all too real.

In the case of Guest's early poems, however, we can see how the perspectival vertigo into which the speaking-"I" is tipped is welcomed as a release from the overly tight constraints of self-observation. In place of self-awareness, an atmosphere arrives that will first enlarge and then engulf these hesitant-"I"s. The capacity to hold together such an "all-over" sensation, as the speaker negotiates a constant movement between scales and emphases, *that* capacity is exactly what Guest suggests to be the role of poetic imagination.

This poetic function is made apparent by the few explicit references to poetry that are scattered through Guest's early writings. By way of one final example, consider these lines from the last poem of *The Location of Things*. Titled "The Past of a Poem," this poem contains another poem as a living creature that is lying on the floor of a New York cold-water flat, "not quite dead, / not even suffering," it draws us in to listen to its final words:

[106] Sandler, *A Sweeper-up After Artists: A Memoir* (Thames & Hudson, 2003), 255.

The cold water flat that June
night you put your hands on the radiator

crushed by your fingers
yet still fresh that poem
from its bewildering year

Come close to it now
and listen, don't you hear
"septic sighs of sadness?"[107]

The final words are a citation from a 1960 translation of German Expressionist Georg Trakl's "Rosary Songs," in which Trakl imagines the pathos of a "pool beneath the willow trees," "far in the shadowy country of childhood," filled with "septic sighs of sadness."[108] That poem is imagined as an object, set within a metapoetic frame, internal to this poem. It is positioned within the spatial environment (the apartment) and a temporal one ("its bewildering year"). Trakl's poem is nested within this new poem of Guest's, as she imagines her poem literally "housing" the other.

The quotation, signaled with inverted commas, although not annotated, is a curious note on which to close a collection that contains no other direct citations. With this meta-poetic gesture of embedding a poem within the poem, Guest expands once again the scope and function of her perspectival framing. The collection's opening poem placed its speaker within the frame of the window. It then passed out through a series of architectural spaces that modulate affect as exchanges between a plurality of objects. Setting out from a crisis in the observer's relation to the world, the collection then proceeds to continually flex the scope and scale of what constitutes that world as it is rendered in poetic language. In the face of such expansions, expressions of wonderment and dismay register the difficulties and pleasure of containing imaginative enormities within the confined space of the poem itself.

[107] *LT*, 67.
[108] Trakl, "Rosary Songs," in *An Anthology of German Poetry from Hölderlin to Rilke in English Translation*, ed. Angel Flores (Peter Smith, 1960), 341.

This final poem takes that technique still further: it locates us in an environment within which a poem must be attended to.

In Guest's early writing, the steady accumulation of numerous perspectives flexes scale and swaps frames beyond the confines of an organizing subject. The poem then becomes irreducible to a single ground. Poetic figuration, in this context, becomes less important than the energetic force that the language draws from the moments of transition it stages between scant instances of representation. The representation of a scene or a space, though never entirely abandoned, must therefore contend with this in-between motion of affects that resist framing. With the final poem of the collection, there is a new extension of this technique: a poem that inhabits the poem, a poetic atmosphere that embeds another poem within it. It is no coincidence that Guest is thinking of Trakl here: his poems, like hers, construct themselves through the projection of pathos and animating passions into surrounding environs. In a final leap of imagination, Guest asks us to conceive of the poem itself as it is framed by an atmosphere, vulnerable to intensities that are external to itself.

Fig. 1 - Jacket cover of the first edition of Guest, *The Location of Things* (1960).

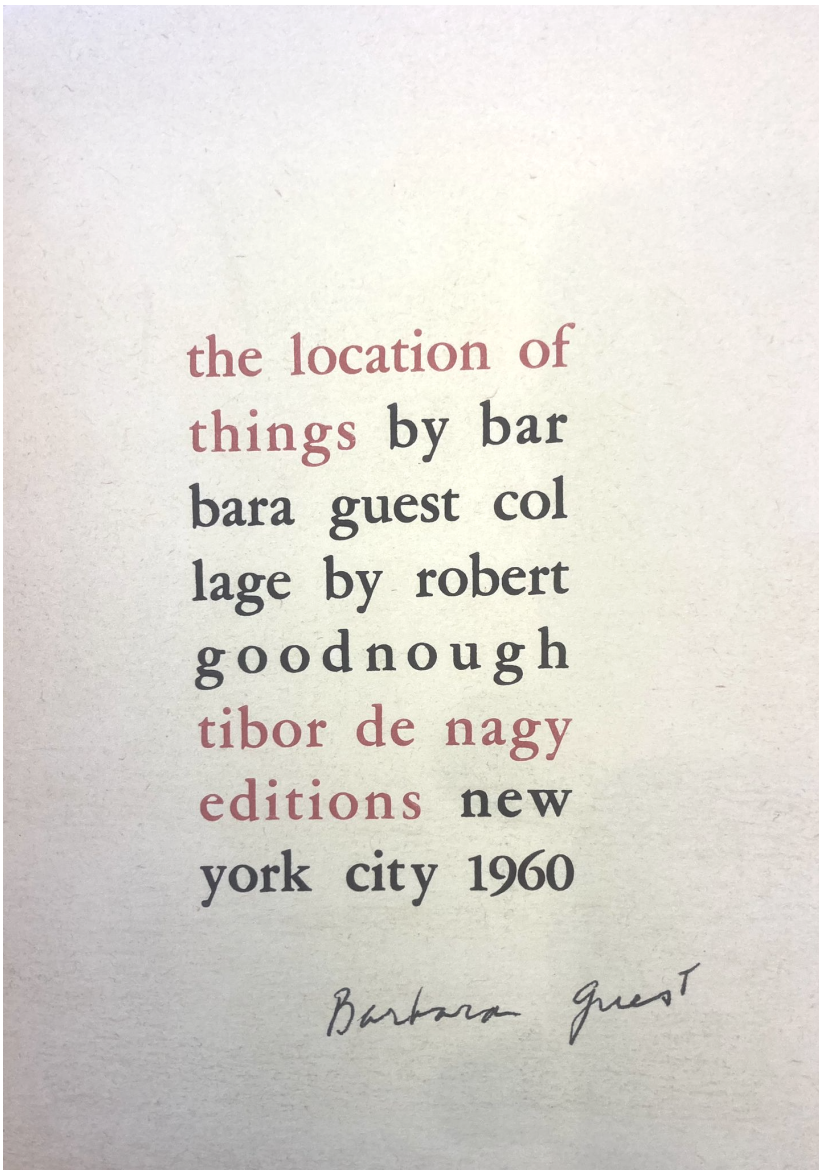

Fig. 2 - Title page of *The Location of Things* (1960).

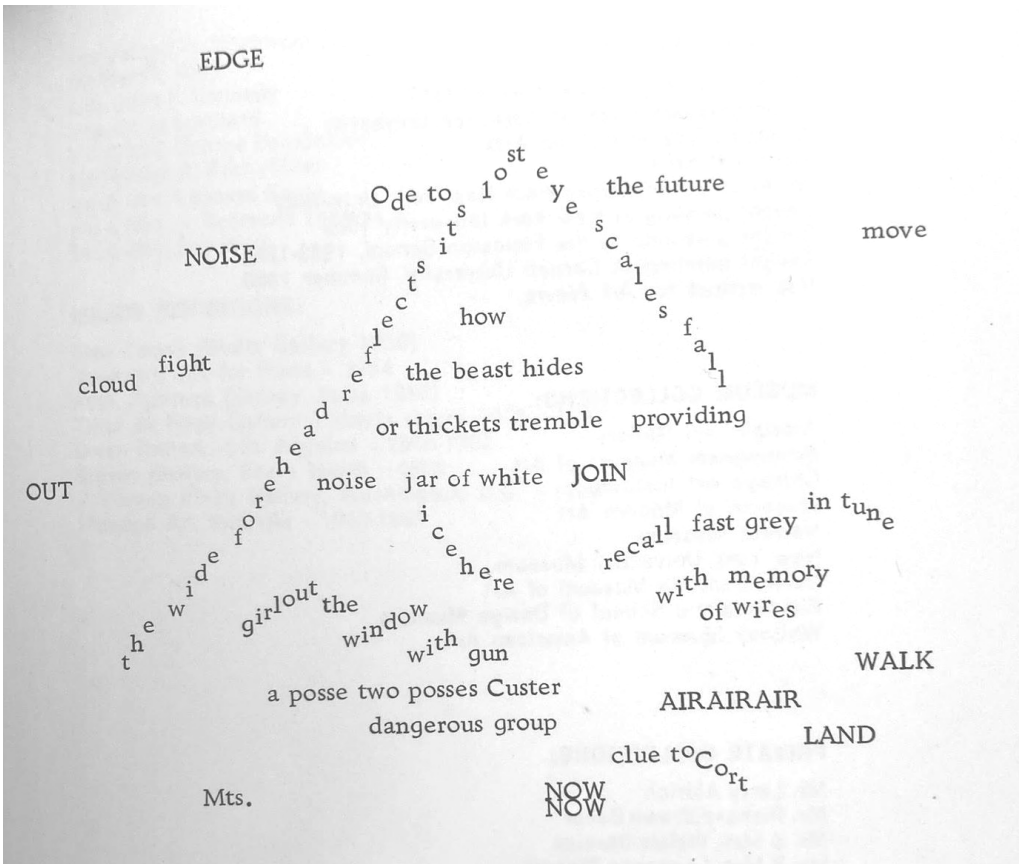

Fig. 3 - Barbara Guest, untitled concrete poem, page 61 of *Goodnough* (1962).

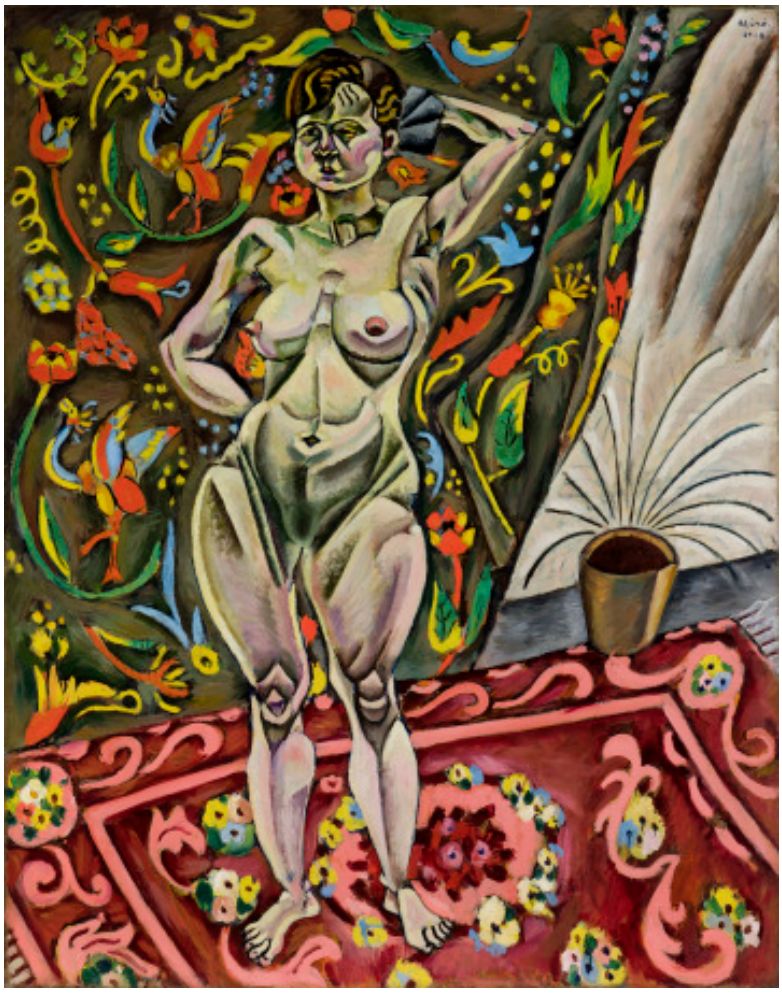

Fig. 4 - Joan Miró, Spanish, 1893–1983; *Standing Nude*, 1918; oil on canvas; 60 x 47 3/8 inches; Saint Louis Art Museum, Friends Endowment Fund 58: 1965; © 2024 Successio Miro / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris.

Chapter 3

"Pattern of drift": phenomenophilia and the poem as ornament

Pattern of drift Is eye of air
stray ephemeral visible hand from sky form?[1]

This chapter considers the materiality of poetic language as posed by two works of Guest's from the 1980s: the little-discussed pamphlet *Quilts*, published in 1980, and *Fair Realism*, her most acclaimed and commented on collection, published in 1989. In her earliest writings, as discussed in chapter 1, Guest cultivates her own cubism in transition: the shifting "I"/eye of these poems distends perspective so as to include discordant temporalities and spatial disarray. In these mid-career writings, Guest moves further away from a subject-centric poetics of voice and perspectival play, and she begins to imagine the poem as a material object. In *Quilts*, this idea is first explored through an analogy between decorative textiles and the poem. In *Fair Realism*, Guest interrogates how formless phenomena might be given shape and significance in poetic language. In the first part of this chapter, I situate this interest in the materiality of poetic language and the poem as a thing in itself within debates about abstraction and figuration in mid-century aesthetics, in order to propose ornamentation as a third term with which to describe her poetics. In the second part of the chapter, I take up Rei Terada's concept of "phenomenophilia" as a means of describing the pre-cognitive and unformed glimmers that Guest's poems invite us to hold on to. This adds a further element to the poetics of atmosphere as formulated within this dissertation: Guest's writing, here distancing itself from referentiality, attempts to enclose within the poem phenomena that are material, object-like, and that contribute to a holistic and impersonal atmosphere.

I A poetics of things

What kind of object is a poem? In a brief chapter on the "poetics of things," from her 2008 book *Persons and Things*, Barbara Johnson describes a basic modernist wish "to capture what is at the farthest remove from humanness—the world as it really is and not the world

[1] *CP*, 49.

inflected by human interests or, still less, shaped by aesthetic forms."[2] This desire for unmediated access to the "thing in itself" is the desire for an impossible knowledge. In Kantian terms, such a knowledge would arrive at an intelligibility greater than appearance, moving us into a noumenal zone that no human reason can reach. Despite this, as Johnson writes, it is poetic language, in the twentieth century, that takes up the challenge: "poetry often attempts to present this impossible knowledge of the thing whose face is turned away."[3] The poem can then be approached as an attempt to bring into language those objects and experiences that are either inappropriate to poetic form, unamenable to linguistic representation, or resistant to form altogether.

In the previous chapter, I argued that the mobility of perspective in Guest's first collection resembles the autonomous, transitory, and object-oriented forces that affect theory describes as enveloping the body. I suggested that Guest constructs her earliest poems as spaces which are traversed by pathos that disturbs and then dissolves their many framing devices. Guest's metapoetic embedding of Trakl's poem takes this spatialization of the poetic page one step further: the poem, in Johnson's terms, is presented not as the re-figuration of a thing, but as a thing in itself, as an object that is situated in a world. It is from this metapoetical gesture that the concerns of the present chapter arise. If Guest's poems enact an education in space, an enactment which, at the level of content, comprises the interplay of multiple frames, then how do they negotiate the difference between the representation of material objects and the presentation of themselves as material objects?

Johnson takes her own illustration of poetry's impossible attempt to render the thing in itself from Francis Ponge's 1942 volume *Le Parti pris des choses*. In that collection, Ponge takes the side of things: abandoning the mediation of lyric address, he wants the poem to describe the thing "objectively and without preconception."[4] In the prose poem "The Oyster," Johnson finds Ponge attempting to get close to the thing, even as he must accept that "human flavorings are unavoidable in human language"[5]:

> The poem's last paragraph is short and concerns an experience the consumer rarely has: a pearl is lodged in the oyster's throat. "Une formule perle à leur gosier de nacre." Ponge uses the verb "to pearl" and not the noun "pearl" to stress the similarity

[2] Johnson, *Persons and Things*, 27.
[3] Johnson, *Persons and Things*, 28.
[4] Johnson, *Persons and Things*, 31.
[5] Johnson, *Persons and Things*, 32.

> between the poet and the oyster: both have something in their throat […] [*Formule*] is being used in its etymological sense: "a little form." The pearl, an ornament, is a little form. But the word "form," again, suggests an aesthetic domain […] Ponge's *formule* suggests that, however distant or inappropriate an object may seem, the poet of things—at least in these two cases—is still working on "form."[6]

In this concluding paragraph, Johnson gestures towards a possibility that lies outside the terms of representation from which her chapter departs. Ponge wants the poem to describe the thing itself, but the closing lines of "The Oyster," quoted by Johnson, go a little further than this. They present the poem *as* a "little form," an ornament, as though its language has been drawn into a sympathetic simulation of the pearl that it began only by describing. In working towards an unmediated description of its object, the poem ends by imagining itself *as* the object it contemplates. This metapoetic swerve short-circuits the terms of the problem as initially posed by Johnson. The idea here is that the poem does not "contain" the non-human thing; renouncing the possibility of representation, the poem thickens its own mediation so as to assume the status of objecthood *for itself*.

In this chapter, I consider how Guest, like Ponge in Johnson's reading, can be said to take the side of things. She does so by presenting the poem as ornament. This reading turns us away from a concern for the "what" of referentiality and towards how the poem works, in Guest's words, as "a viable breathing substance."[7] A conceptual reframing of this kind is necessary in order to understand Guest's work outside the formalist opposition of abstraction to figuration. Whereas this paradigmatic antagonism concentrates interpretative energies on the question of signification, reading Guest's poems in terms of the ornamental offers an alternative criterion, one that deals in questions of waste and surplus, function and pleasure, significance and presence.

This marks a shift away from the confrontation with the difficulties of vision, apprehension, and representational disarray as explored in the earliest poems. Guest's mid-period poems move away from the limits of referentiality, and they begin, in place of representation, to present themselves as ornament. In doing so, they challenge the notion that a poem need describe, to borrow Johnson's phrase, the thing whose face is turned away. They suggest instead that the poem might *be* that very thing and, as such, partake in what

[6] Johnson, *Persons and Things*, 33.
[7] *FI*, 32.

Harold Rosenberg called the "revolution against the given,"[8] a posture that assumes various guises in avant-garde aesthetics. Resisting the pressures of referentiality, the poem as ornament wraps itself around the "unique affective quality" that Dufrenne identifies as emerging from the contemplation of an art work.[9] In order to understand this, I substitute an analysis of figuration and depiction with an appreciation of the ways that Guest's poetic language embodies the very qualities that it perceives as underlying the perceptible surface of appearances. This makes of Guest a "phenomenophile," a term that I borrow from the work of Rei Terada, and which I will return to in my discussion of affect and form in the second half of this chapter. First, I discuss how this mode of clinging to mere phenomena dissents from the leading abstract/figurative polarity of Guest's own time.

II Expressing abstraction: O'Hara and Ginsberg

How many uses of abstraction is it possible to recover from twentieth century aesthetics? "Abstract" describes an art work in relation to its figurative potential. It stands against what Johnson calls the wish to capture the thing in itself, provided that the "thing in itself" is a material part of the given world. And yet, from its earliest use in early modernism up to its later uses in American art, abstraction also puts the art work on an axis that runs from the idealist metaphysics of Wassily Kandinsky and German Expressionism to the materialist formalism of Clement Greenberg and the mid-century artists he championed.

In its earlier use, it names the anti-referential power of a break with representation. After this, abstraction divides itself once again: it indicates, as in Kandinsky's aesthetics, a metaphysical drive towards a truth that *surpasses* the mere appearance of the world; or, as with Abstract Expressionism, a rejection of metaphysics in favour of a heightened sensitivity to the materiality of the art work.[10] Moving between these two poles, I survey here the mutability of the term as used in debates about aesthetics and poetics in mid-century New

[8] Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," in *Reading Abstract Expressionism*, ed. Ellen G. Landau (Yale University Press, 2005), 194.
[9] Dufrenne, *Phenomenology*, 422.
[10] In her essay on Abstract Expressionism, Ann Gibson provides a detailed account of how theorisations of abstraction negotiate these two apparently irreconcilable poles. Gibson's analysis focuses on a cluster of rhetorical "devices" (symbol, metaphor, icon, oxymoron, allegory) as they are put to use, or else challenged, in interpretations of Abstract Expressionism. Her description of the anti-referential short-circuiting by which the abstract art work becomes "ineffable: a thing-in-itself, like a person, rather than something that refers to a person" comes close to the metapoetic strategies of Guest addressed in this chapter. "The Rhetoric of Abstract Expressionism," *Art Journal* 48, no. 2 (1989), 465.

York, in order to provide a context for Guest's subsequent turn to ornamentation as an alternative way of viewing the poem's materiality.

The rigidification of the abstract/figurative dyad in mid-century assessments of modernist art happens in lockstep with the rise of Abstract Expressionism.[11] It was within this climate that Guest began her career: reviewing shows for *Art News*, producing her first poems, and travelling in Western Europe. In the summer of 1958, Guest was in Paris, where Abstract Expressionism was to make its pivotal entry onto the global market. The cultural exchange between the two cities was a transatlantic flow going back generations: Paris offered a gateway to what John Ashbery would later call the "other traditions";[12] in turn, New York received the writers and artists of the city's avant-garde scenes seeking refuge in the 1940s.

The flow between the two cities and their cultures was a lengthy intermingling of arrivals, departures, and returns. During the interwar period, as Paul Hegarty describes, the "time of the modern" was often imagined as in transit from Paris towards America,[13] and by the 1950s, New York artists would project their endeavors back through histories of the Parisian avant-garde. Guest, in her 1962 essay on Robert Goodnough's work, remarks that "[i]n New York a painter may have as a necessary fantasy the art scene in Paris, 1920."[14] The invocations of an enlightened elsewhere in mid-century American poetry, which Peter Stoneley comments on in his reading of Frank O'Hara's early poems, were frequently shot through with a usefully vague "Frenchness."[15] Ashbery had himself been living on and off in Paris since 1955, first as a Fullbright scholar, then as an art critic for *The New York Herald Tribune*. By 1958, the "Beat Hotel" had set itself up in the Latin Quarter, where Allen Ginsberg, Peter Orlovsky, and William Burroughs joined Gregory Corso in rue Gît-le-Cœur. Later that year, Guest, O'Hara, and painters Grace Hartigan and Sam Francis arrived, in anticipation of the Museum of Modern Art's gigantic *The New American Painting* exhibition's arrival at the Museé National d'Art Moderne in January 1959.[16]

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[11] For an account of this ascendancy, see Hiroko Ikegami, *The Great Migrator: Robert Rauschenberg and the Global Rise of American Art* (MIT Press, 2010), 10-11.
[12] Ashbery, *Other Traditions* (Harvard University Press, 2000).
[13] Paul Hegarty and Patrick Crowley, eds. *Formless: Ways in and Out of Form* (Peter Lang, 2005), 83.
[14] Guest, *Goodnough*, 60.
[15] Stoneley, "Frank O'Hara and 'French in the Pejorative Sense'," *Journal of Modern Literature* 34, no.1 (2010), 127.
[16] Guest arrived in Paris in early June 1958. Her day planners from the summer set out visits to Montmartre and Mallarmé's house in Rue du Rome, dinner with Allen Ginsberg and Gregory Corso, and occasional visits to friends Joan Mitchell and John Ashbery. It was during this stay, and a subsequent spell in London, that Guest drafted several poems to be published in her first collection: I discuss two of these, written in an exchange with O'Hara, in chapter 1. "Day Planners." Box 113, folder 1732, Guest papers.

The exhibition had already visited Milan, Madrid (where the metal entrance door had to be sawn off to make way for the canvases), Berlin, and Brussels. It would go on to the Tate in London before returning to New York. The monumental show was co-organized by O'Hara, under the direction of curator Dorothy Miller. It travelled alongside the Jackson Pollock solo exhibition, the two shows together being the latest project of the Museum of Modern Art's ambitious International Program of the 1950s. The spectacle of Abstract Expressionism hitting Europe was the apogee of Alfred Barr's famous "torpedo" model of the museum's collection. It was Barr, the founding director of the museum, who had first imagined its permanent collection as a vessel passing through time, with its tip smashing into the present. The direction of travel was the future; the presentation of earlier movements—periodized and hierarchized—would work to propel and balance out later ones. *The New American Painting* show was to be the explosive edge of Barr's torpedo as it struck the post-war international art scene. As the anonymous contemporary critic "Walter Benjamin" writes in the journal *e-flux*: the exhibition "confirmed to Europeans what was already apparent: the "new painting" coming from American could no longer be ignored."[17] In confirming what was "already apparent," *The New American Painting* relied upon a grandiose sense of spectacle that was much commented on in the European press: the force of its cultural impact was often directly associated with the sheer size of its canvases.

This sense of confirmation speaks to how the show was understood at the time as the evolution of the European avant-gardes towards which American painting now returned in triumph. As Italian critic Marco Valsecchi comments in his review of the Milan showing for *Il Giorno*, the "American art *derives from European art* and is still sensitive to its cultural echoes,"[18] echoes that are then augmented with "the fantasy and motivations of American ideals."[19] These ideals are the undercurrent of the comments of Valsecchi and other reviewers, as reprinted in the catalogue published for the show's triumphant return to New York in 1959. The political force of the show's "Americanness" is expressed in terms of the daunting scale of the canvases, variously praised in reviews as "festive," "free," "vital," "vibrant."[20] Abstract Expressionism's expansiveness of form is conceived as corresponding to the future's expansion in North America: the smaller frame of Europe has been overcome. Deliberated and launched at the height of the Cold War, the touring exhibition of 1958

[17] Walter Benjamin, "The Making of Americans," *e-flux* 48 (2013), para.22.
[18] Quoted in *The New American Painting, as shown in eight European countries, 1958-1959*, ed. Alfred Barr (Museum of Modern Art, 1959), 8.
[19] Barr, *New American Painting*, 7.
[20] Barr, *New American Painting*, 7-10.

presented American painting as the evident inheritor of the freedom won by the European avant-gardes of the first half of the century. Barr would make this connection explicit in his introduction to the exhibition's catalogue, published upon its homecoming to New York, where he writes that the paintings are "*demonstrations of freedom* in a world in which freedom connotes a political attitude."[21] The political ambitions of this rhetoric are well known: the "New American Painting," as Natalie Adamson summarizes, "promised art as a counter-weight to imperialist ambitions and Cold War barricaded frontiers."[22]

In order to consolidate this political position, critics and theorists looked for antecedents that could demonstrate the universality of abstraction and validate abstraction as the natural development of figuration. Several seminal accounts of Parisian modernism present versions of this narrative: Michael Freid's *Art and Objecthood* discusses Matisse's work as progressively forming "radically abstract [effects]" through their "qualities of unbrokenness, uniform intensity, and sheer breadth of color";[23] cubism, similarly, is folded into the argument for a "continuing tradition of abstract art."[24] Reaching further afield, anthropologist A.L. Kroeber's *Style and Civilizations*, first published in 1957, claims that "culture is a set of patterns, abstractable from behaviour," with Indian art taken as proof that such cultural pattering produced an equivalent, and inevitable, "abstract systematization" in visual art.[25] These interventions, alongside the curatorial writings of Barr at the Museum of Modern Art and wider discussions in journals such as *Partisan Review*, prepared the way for a reconception of European avant-gardes as progressively developing towards ever "purer" forms of abstraction.

Despite its unificatory ambitions, this teleological model covered for a number of competing theoretical positions. "Abstract expressionism" was first adopted in English by Barr in 1929, in a description of Kandinsky's work. The phrase originates in a 1919 German review of Kandinsky's work in *Der Sturm*, where it stands for the idiosyncratic synthesis of Hegelian dialectics, mysticism, musical atonality, and geometric theories from which Kandinsky fashioned his spiritual art. From the beginning, the phrase "abstract expressionism" contains within it a tension: "abstraction"—a drawing away, paired with "expression"—a pressing outward. This dual proposition ties an act of distancing (an aesthetics that would be free from the particular and the immediate) to the communicative

[21] Barr, *New American Painting*, 16; emphasis added.
[22] Adamson, "In Focus: Around the Blues 1957, 1962-3, by Sam Francis," *Tate*, July 2019, para.7.
[23] Freid, *Art and Objecthood* (University of Chicago Press, 1967), 251.
[24] Donald Bartlett Doe, "Resource and Response," *Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery* 1, no. 2 (1985), 2.
[25] Kroeber, *Style and Civilizations* (Cornell University Press, 1957), 153.

connotations of expression, as well as connecting it to the earlier use of "Expressionism" to describe the aesthetic manifestation of an "unrepresentable" ideal. After Barr's first usage, the phrase subsequently appears in a 1946 review of Hans Hofmann's work by critic Robert Coates.[26] Wider adoption of the phrase was neither conclusive nor sudden. Rather, Abstract Expressionism emerges gradually as a descriptor, theorized and debated across a series of small magazines and anthologies, published from the mid-1940s onwards, and the *Modern Artists in America* series of 1951.[27] As Ellen G. Landau summarizes, these debates made it clear that the phrase presents "a seemingly contradictory desire: to use distinctly personal means (automatism and improvisation) as a way to attain 'universal' meanings."[28] The denomination Abstract Expressionism does not resolve this contradiction: it designates instead the polarities of the particular and the universal that the New American Painters were taken to be reckoning with in their work.[29]

Within this context, and given the New York poets' close associations with the painters, the question that inevitably arose was how to write about poetry's own relationship not only with Abstract Expressionism but with abstraction in general. The subject is touched on by Don Allen in his introduction to *The New American Poetry*, where he describes the new poets as being "closely allied to modern jazz and abstract expressionist painting, today recognized throughout the world to be America's greatest achievements in contemporary culture."[30] O'Hara's original statement on poetics for Allen's volume also directly addresses abstraction in poetry; describing the abstract as arising out of "the minute particulars where

[26] In his review, before taking up the phrase "abstract Expressionism," Coates first comments that he cannot think of any name for "[this] style of painting gaining ground in this country which is neither Abstract nor Surrealist, though it has suggestions of both, while the way the paint is applied—usually in a pretty free-swinging, splattery [sic] fashion, with only vague hints of subject matter." "Review: Hans Hofmann at the Mortimer Brandt Gallery," *New Yorker*, March 30, 1946, 83.

[27] For a comprehensive study of these publications, their influence on the New York artists' sense of their collective style, and the development of Abstract Expressionism as a descriptor of that style, see Anne Gibson, *Issues in Abstract Expressionism: The Artist-Run Periodicals* (University of California, 1990).

[28] Ellen G. Landau, ed. *Reading Abstract Expressionism: Context and Critique* (Yale University Press, 2005), 6.

[29] Landau argues for the divergence of Clement Greenberg's vision of a European lineage for the movement from Harold Rosenberg's argument that the Abstract Expressionists did not represent a "school." *Reading Abstract Expressionism*, 8-9. The Greenberg/Rosenberg rivalry expresses a tension about the relationship of Abstract Expressionism to the art work's relation to the world of things: Greenberg's "positivist" account stresses the apprehension of the art work as an object, and he attacks Rosenberg for his neglecting aesthetic criteria in his theorisations of the "gesture." For a recent account of this debate, its philosophical hinterland, and aesthetic implications, see Daniel Neofetou, *Rereading Abstract Expressionism: Clement Greenberg and the Cold War* (Bloomsbury, 2022), 101-116.

[30] Allen, *The New American Poetry, 1945-1960* (University of California Press, 1960), xi.

decision is necessary."[31] The remarks come at the centre of the short statement, just after O'Hara's well-known line that "[t]here's nothing metaphysical about [writing poetry]":

> Abstraction (in poetry, not painting) involves personal removal by the poet. For instance, the decision involved in the choice between "the nostalgia *of* the infinite" and "the nostalgia *for* the infinite" defines an attitude towards degree of abstraction. The nostalgia *of* the infinite representing the greater degree of abstraction, removal, and negative capability (as in Keats and Mallarmé).[32]

A little earlier in his statement, O'Hara refers to Allen Ginsberg's essay on abstraction in the 1959 Winter/Spring issue of *It Is. A Magazine for Abstract Art*, one of the small magazines that served as a forum for theorizations of abstract art.[33] In that essay, Ginsberg's evaluation of the abstract in poetry, which includes a citation of O'Hara's "Second Avenue," focusses on surface aesthetics. Ginsberg writes that "long meaningless poems," "bulling along page after page" tend towards a new "freedom of composition" that displaces personality with the sheer exuberance of their language: a surplus superficiality, a spilling over of signification, that mirrors the largesse and liveliness of the abstract canvas.[34]

O'Hara initially seems to agree with this emphasis on the impersonality of surface excess: abstraction means first of all the removal of subjectivity, so that an abstract concept such as "the infinite" can be predicated *as* nostalgic, rather than standing symbolically *for* nostalgia. Given this concept of impersonality, O'Hara's manifesto then takes a surprising turn:

> Personism, a movement which I recently founded and which nobody knows about, interests me a great deal, being so totally opposed to this kind of abstract removal that it is verging on a true abstraction for the first time, really, in the history of poetry.[35]

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[31] O'Hara, "Personism," in *Frank O'Hara: Selected Poems* (Carcanet Press, 1998), xiii-xiv.
[32] O'Hara, "Personism," xiv.
[33] For a discussion of the place of *It Is* in critical conversations about Abstract Expression, see Daniel Belgrad, *The Culture of Spontaneity: Improvisation and the Arts in Postwar America* (Harvard University Press, 1999), 118-19.
[34] Ginsberg, "Abstraction in Poetry," in *Deliberate Prose: Selected Essays 1952-1995*, ed. Bill Morgan (Harper Collins, 2000), 243-245.
[35] O'Hara, "Personism," xiv.

This "true abstraction," as O'Hara goes on to define it, emerges out of direct address to one person: "evoking overtones of love without destroying love's life-giving vulgarity, and sustaining the poet's feelings towards the poem while preventing love from distracting him into feeling about the person."[36] The poem is charged—"between the poet and the person, Lucky Pierre style"—with an excavation of these "overtones of love," without ever detailing the specifities that generate those overtones.[37] Distinct from abstract removal, true abstraction depends, according to O'Hara, upon a carefully arranged distancing that is nonetheless charged with personal investments, so that the poem "is gratified […] at last between two persons instead of two pages."[38]

As O'Hara's and Ginsberg's comments make clear, the definition of abstraction in poetry around 1960 remains capacious enough for a number of contradictory positions. It could denote, as it does in its rudimentary anti-referential sense, a lifting away from quotidian specifities and the observable world. It could also provide a language to describe the surfaces of contemporary verse, where linguistic excess effaces the figure of the poet in a process that Ginsberg identifies as abstraction. Yet abstraction could also, as in O'Hara's contribution, have something to do with a revision of lyric address. Here, abstraction describes the reconception of the poem as an object that exists autonomously between two persons. Despite their divergences, what unifies these positions is a common insistence on surface effects, and an acceptance that an excessive attention to surface detail serves to *lessen* the presence of a governing personality in the poem.

Guest's poetry has routinely been interpreted as abstract in ways that recall this lessening of personality. From the beginning of her career, her poems' attention to the visual field have been contrasted with the lyric tonalities of first-person expressiveness, particularly engaged political poetry and its associated groundedness in the representation of lived experience.[39] Along these lines, Denise Levertov, then poetry editor for Norton, rejected an early manuscript of Guest's in 1964, on the basis that her poems remained detached from experience. Levertov's rejection letter includes the following remarks:

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[36] O'Hara, "Personism," xiv.
[37] O'Hara, "Personism," xiv.
[38] O'Hara, "Personism," xiv.
[39] For a discussion of the division between lyric writing and avant-garde techniques as a structuring antagonism in twentieth century women's writing, see the introductory essay of Juliana Spahr in *American Women Poets in the 21st Century: Where Lyric Meets Language*, eds. Claudia Rankine and Juliana Spahr (Wesleyan University Press, 2002). Attempting to trouble this division, Spahr calls for greater attention to the ways in which women writers "[make] room *within* lyric for language writing's more politicized claims" (2; emphasis added).

> [A]lthough you were often quite wonderfully in touch with your unconscious which presented you with many images of dazzling beauty and strangeness, you either did not have, or did not exercise, an interpretive intelligence to link them to one another, to relate them to experience.[40]

This division between the imaginative expansivity of the poems (a quality usually received as "abstraction") and their relation to life, experience, and lyric is recurrent in the reception of Guest. Echoing Levertov's criticism in an early review of *The Location of Things* in the *Kenyon Review*, Irving Kreutz writes that Guest "is herself, though that self seems curiously without coherence […] she will not connect": "[t]hings happen, she watches them, she writes them down, it is a poem!"[41] James Atlas' 1969 review of Guest's *The Blue Stairs* suggests that Guest "discovers the dangers of abstraction": "the poem itself is disconnected, and if Miss Guest introduces a method by which her poems are to be read, she also introduces a rather inflexible design to the collection."[42] In more sympathetic contemporary reassessments, the question of abstraction remains. Robert Kaufman closes his essay on her late work with the problem of "hearing a specifically difficult lyric whose seeming abstractness or hyper-distillation may appear willfully recondite."[43] Recent readings of the *Collected Poems* also turn back to Abstract Expressionism in order to suggest that Guest's "technique mimics the abstract expressionist gesture," or that her poems work "in abstraction from their own specific material substrate."[44]

These remarks, as with the interventions of Ginsberg and O'Hara, generate more questions than they clarify. They reveal the difficulty of imagining abstraction as a coherent style and they associate, instead, abstraction with a range of practices and particular details of an art work, as well as a general perceived failure to "connect" such details in a coherent manner. Kaufman's reference to seeming abstractness in Guest (as though not quite *actual* abstraction) expresses a hesitancy, as does O'Hara concession that there is a greater degree of abstraction (but not "true abstraction") in the choice of one word over another. Unlike theoretical accounts of how abstraction develops through the massiveness of Abstract

[40] Quoted in Catherine Wagner, ed. "A Portfolio of Unpublished Poems," *Chicago Review* 53/54 (2008), 77.
[41] Kreutz, "Responsibilities," *The Kenyon Review* 24, no. 4 (1962), 758.
[42] Atlas, "A Chronicle of Younger Poets," *Poetry* 113, no. 6 (1969), 429.
[43] Kaufman, "A Future for Modernism: Barbara Guest's Recent Poetry," *American Poetry Review* 29, no. 4 (2000), 12.
[44] Claudia Desblaches, "'Something else is happening' in Barbara Guest's poems: the art of creating events," *Methods* 17 (2017), para.17; Barry Schwabsky, "Ceaselessly Opportuning: On Barbara Guest," *The Nation*, March 23, 2009, para.12.

Expressionist canvases, critical attention here is drawn to a text's minimal parts—word choices or select phrasings, the poetic material that Levertov singles out as isolated "images"—which are detached from referentiality so as to be stitched together to form the poem. There is a presumed antagonism between the linguistic ground of the poems (their "material substrate") and the transcendent ideas that they are thought to become present *through* abstraction, as though the abstract image were somehow detached from the mediation of language, free-floating and unencumbered by materiality. On the other hand, we then find the equally strong affirmation, as in O'Hara's and Ginsberg's reflections, that abstraction in fact inheres only within the materiality of surface poetics: as though the abstract poem thickens its mediacy in a manner that distinguishes it from a more transparent poetics of referentiality.[45]

These contradictions return us to the double origin of the phrase "abstract expressionism": as shorthand for Kandinsky's work and, decades later, the New American painting of the mid-century. In this second usage, abstraction describes the "free" exploitation of canvas and paint, implicitly conceptualized *in opposition* to the "constrained" representational content of socialist realism; a suspicion of content which is the most radical end of a suspicion of politically overdetermined figuration. Correspondingly, the terms "form" and "abstraction" then gain the upper hand, politically encoding a push towards freedom. But this model, as mentioned, performs a near inversion of abstract expressionism as used for Kandinsky's work. There, far from emphasizing the materiality of the canvas, it denotes Kandinsky's attempt to represent a metaphysical plane that could *not* be accounted for by the material elements of the art work as an object.[46]

How, then, might thinking with ornament release us from these contradictions? What can this concept bring to Guest's poetics? First, to approach a poem in terms of ornamentation means thinking about how its language mediates and affects our response to the poem as an object, rather than as a representation. In his seminal study, *The Mediation*

[45] In a later theorization of this thickened mediacy in the poetry of John Ashbery, Ben Lerner argues that Ashbery constructs his texts as "glosses on poems we can't access; it's as if the "real" poem were written on the other side of a mirrored surface: when we read we see only the reflection of our reading. But by reflecting our reading, Ashbery's poems allow us to attend to our attention, to 'experience our experience'; they offer what we might call lyric mediacy." "The Future Continuous: Ashbery's Lyric Mediacy," *boundary 2* 1, no. 37 (2010), 209.

[46] As Moshe Barasch details in her study of Kandinsky, *fin de siècle* interest in visual abstraction was intimately connected to two major cultural trends. Firstly, the perceived "dissolution" of scientific rationalism which sub-atomic particle physics was taken as heralding. Secondly, and not unrelatedly, the widespread emergence of occult doctrines which shared a conviction that "true reality is spiritual, and that in our search for truth we have to go beyond the solid, tangible objects that has thus far seemed to encompass all reality." *Modern Theories of Art, 2: From Impressionism to Kandinsky* (New York University Press, 1998), 301.

of Ornament, Oleg Grabar theorizes the decorative detail as an intermediary agent: ornament is "not logically necessary to the perception of a visual message," but it nonetheless aids our "process of understanding" the art work or structure that is before us.[47] In Grabar's terms, the ornament as mediative agent heightens and sharpens our receptibility to the media of an art work. This inserts ornament into a chain of mediation that runs not between the art work and its referential content but between the art work and the viewer's receptivity to the art work's materiality. Unlike abstraction, ornamentation does not measure its effects according to its anti-referential force. Rather, the definition of ornament depends upon the non-necessity of its presence. Readings that are attentive to ornament will thereby move away from discussions of an art work's significations and towards a consideration of an art work's significance. Ornament forms part, in this respect, of the post-romantic debate about the art work's radical autonomy from the world. It strengthens the case for autonomy not by appealing to the exceptionality of the aesthetic object, but by asserting the presence, the groundedness, of the aesthetic in the everyday.

At the level of textual analysis, attending to ornament involves picking through the granular work of detail, so as to consider how detail influences our reception of the work as an object, while taking a step back from an all or nothing evaluation of the poem as either purely abstract or not. Crucially, this also places the poetic text in touch with crafts, methods, and objects that were, in the eyes of a critic such as Greenberg, to be firmly disassociated from the exceptional status of the art object.[48] Writing against formalist paradigms, philosopher Jacques Rancière argues that the superfluity of the ornament, encountered in the everyday objects of modernity just as in works of art, represents a refusal of the high modernist argument that abstract painting was "to regain the mastery of its own proper surface":

> The type of painting that is poorly named abstract, and which is supposedly brought back to its own proper medium, is implicated in an overall vision of a new human being lodged in new structures, surrounded by different objects. Its flatness is linked to the flatness of pages, posters and tapestries. It is the flatness of an interface.

[47] Grabar, *The Mediation of Ornament* (Princeton University Press, 1992), 230.
[48] In his influential essays, Greenberg presents avant-garde aesthetics as a working through of the possibilities of a given media in order to delimit the exceptional domain of art: "The arts lie safe now, each within its 'legitimate' boundaries, and free trade has been replaced by autarchy. Purity in art consists in the acceptance, willing acceptance, of the limitations of the medium of the specific art." Greenberg's writings were explicitly presented as part of his historical justification of "the present superiority of abstract art" in America. "Laocoon," 32-37.

> Moreover, its anti-representative "purity" is inscribed in a context where pure art and decorative art are intertwined, a context that straight away gives it a political signification.[49]

Adapting Rancière's comments for the present argument, I suggest that Guest imagines the poem as an object that intertwines linguistic material drawn from a variety of sources. This does not mean that poetic language is special because of its separation from the material world, but precisely because of its capacity to insert itself into the world as a thing that is made of language. Much like the "inappropriate" object of Johnson from which this chapter began, this involves drawing an analogy between the poem and decorative crafts, characterized by formalism as inappropriate to, or simply beneath, the higher activity of aesthetics. Guest's poems, as little forms that evade referentiality, embrace a language that is decorative: they are given as an addendum to reality, rather than as its index; an excess of substances and textures that covers the page in artifice that displays itself as such.

I turn now to illustrate this poetic strategy with two collections of Guest's mid-period work. My analysis in what follows focuses on two tropes that Guest uses to associate the poem to decorative objects: textiles and the vine. In both cases, the textural richness of the poem is analogously figured as an adornment, rather than a representation, of reality.[50] My argument requires an approach to the poems that is attentive, as Johnson puts it in her reading of Ponge, to "[forms] of materiality that may be lurking" beneath the poem's surface.[51] It is as though, in these poems of Guest, the work of *re*-presentation is displaced by the thickness of presentation: the complexity of these texts lies precisely in their attempt to render language a material substance that exists independently of its semantic force. In *Quilts*, from 1980, Guest maps a complex correspondence between this poetic materiality and the

[49] Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (Continuum, 2004), 16.
[50] My use of the word ornament, as opposed to abstraction or even decoration, is intended to preserve this older sense of a minor, isolatable detail of form that *embellishes* an impression of the whole. As Michaela Criticos summarises in discussing the "ornamental dimension" of architectural spaces, "[t]he organizing scheme generally associated with ornament is 'pattern,' so that any structure of order manifesting a pronounced regularity, from the scale of the minor decorative motif to that of the entire artistic or architectural work […] gets an ornamental connotation." "The Ornamental Dimension: Contributions to a Theory of Ornament," *New Europe College* (2004), 204.
[51] Johnson, *Persons and Things*, 71. See also Jennifer Ashton, "Introduction: modernism's new literalism," in *From Modernism to Postmodernism, American Poetry and Theory in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge University Press, 2005). Ashton describes the thing-like quality of the poem as a poetics of "literalism": "what is distinctive about literalism in this context is that the materiality of the text is also understood to produce its indeterminacy. Every text is material, but the literalist text understands its materiality as an *invitation* to its reader, and hence as the condition that makes every reading both different from and equal to every other in constituting the text" (3).

materiality of quilted textiles and poetics. In *Fair Realism*, from 1989, Guest asks how the poem as ornament can give form to mere phenomena that are themselves apparently too insubstantial to constitute a thing in the world. Together, these writings are mobilized against the presumption that the poem must remain beholden to the logic of representation or else aspire to the weightlessness of abstraction.

III *Quilts* (1980) and the "threat of the decorative"

In *Quilts*, a short collection published by Vehicle Editions in 1980, Guest inserts the ornamental use of language within a history of the decorative arts. This account is marked with a political signification: the historical refusal to recognise and valorize female labour. This places the "impersonality" of Guest's detail-oriented abstraction, of the kind singled out by O'Hara, within a narrative of the communalized work of anonymous women, a tradition that the collection traces from its pre-historic origins and up to the modern. The fourteen poems that form *Quilts* present their craft, like that of textile-making, as a matter of home-building: neither functional nor autonomous but, more simply, *life-giving* forms, poetics and quilting enfold the human subject in a protective object that is communally woven. If we read the collection with Johnson's formulation of the modernist wish to capture the world as it really is in mind, we find that Guest figures the poem as an object that mediates between an inner contemplative space and an outer public space. The poem neither represents the world as it is, nor does it draw its perspective away from the materiality of the everyday. The poem exists instead as a thing in itself: its textures and tones are as substantial, as real, as the homely objects that it invites comparisons with.

The first line of the collection expresses a desire to ground the poem as ornament within material conditions. *Quilts* opens with a single-line quotation that is set apart from the first section: "'Couch of space'."[52] The phrase, unannotated by Guest, is from book 2 of Keats' *Endymion*. Beginning with a citation alerts us to one of the equivalences between quilting and the craft of poetry that will run on throughout: quilting, like poetry, involves the interlacing of discrete elements. Indeed, "quilt" as the compilation of a literary work formed out of extracts from various sources is a use attested from the sixteen hundreds.[53] The use of this phrase from *Endymion* has a twofold effect. First, the citation couches *Quilts* within the feminized and class-based terms with which Keats' poem was originally attacked.

[52] *CP*, 191.
[53] Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "quilt (v.1), sense 2.b," December 2023, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1633718985.

Predominating *Endymion*'s immediate reception was the idea that the Keats' style was excessive, overburdened by verbosity, and effeminately decorative.[54] John Gibson Lockhart's notorious review for *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1818 dismissed the poem as "calm, settled, imperturbable drivelling [sic] idiocy" and closed with the suggestion that the Keats' efforts would be better spent on manual tasks: "back to the shop Mr John, back to 'plasters, pills, ointment boxes,' &c."[55] Guest's poem—with its references not only to quilting, but also cookery, woodwork, stitching, sewing, washing, cleaning, mushroom-picking and gardening—positively embraces the implications of Lockhart's insults. Poetic language is the product of an activity that is figured not above but within and alongside the manual activities of domestic work.

Secondly, the citation playfully transforms Keats' poeticized use of "couch" into the literal, and more mundane, domestic object. In Keats' poem, the "couch of space" is a contemplative state that envelops Endymion during his descent into the underworld. Having lost his way "[t]hrough winding passages, where sameness breeds / [v]exing conceptions of sudden change,"[56] Endymion enters a temple of Diana. There, exhausted, the hero cries out for assistance in his return homeward:

> There, when new wonders ceas'd to float before,
> And thoughts of self came on, how crude and sore
> The journey homeward to habitual self!
> A homeward fever parches up my tongue[57]

Endymion's cry, at first unheard, is then met by the "[o]bstinate silence" of the temple surrounding him:

> Thus ending loudly, as he would o'erleap
> His destiny, alert he stood: but when
> Obstinate silence came heavily again,

[54] Kelvin Everest, "Contemporary Reviews," in *John Keats in Context*, ed. Michael O'Neill (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 313. Guest returns to Keats and the violence of these attacks in the eleventh poem of *Quilts*, in which a speaker laments that Keats was '"cut / off in his prime, dropped like silk into calico scraps, / one of the losses of all time"' (*CP*, 198).
[55] Lockhart, "Review of Keats's *Poems of 1817* and *Endymion*", reprinted in *Romantic Bards and British Reviews: A Selected Edition of the Contemporary Reviews of the Works of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Keats and Shelley*, ed. John O. Hayden (Routledge, 1971), 318; 323.
[56] Keats, *Endymion: A Poetic Romance* (Taylor and Hessey, 1818), 64.
[57] Keats, *Endymion*, 66.

Feeling about for its old couch of space
And airy cradle, lowly bow'd his face
Desponding, o'er the marble floor's cold thrill.[58]

The citation in *Quilts* therefore situates Guest's poems within the respite that is offered by "[o]bstinate silence" in response to Endymion's crazed "homeward fever." Yet where Keats' hero is then spurred on to further adventure "[u]pon his fairy journey," and drawn towards "flowers, and wreaths," that carry him on like "a swollen tide,"[59] Guest uses the word couch to pivot immediately towards the interior comforts of a home. The first stanza of her poem presents us with its own fairy journey, a gentle pastiche of Keats' heroic couplets, in which the progress is towards the interior of the domestic, rather than the outward wandering that Keats acclaims as the necessary passage to self-discovery. The imaginative contemplation, and its restorative power, that *Quilts* describes as occurring within the "soul's cell"—the "nest where secrets bubble"[60]—is only possible once the protective layer of the quilt, which shelters the intimate body from the external world, has been pulled around the body:

and you crawl under, pull the quilt on top
making progress to the interior, soul's cell.

Following the channel through shallows
where footsteps tremble on quicksand squiggly
penmanship of old ladies, worms with cottony
spears, the light pillared the way trees crowd
with swallows and then a murmur in the ear
as deeper flows the water.[61]

The quilt therefore offers a layer of protection from the terrifying "aery demons" of Keats' poem. As Peter Henning argues, Keats' imaginary tends to situate poetic contemplation within the spatial metaphor of the sanctuary.[62] The poet has need of a "fair Atmosphere to

[58] Keats, *Endymion*, 69.
[59] Keats, *Endymion*, 69-70.
[60] *CP*, 191.
[61] *CP*, 191.
[62] Henning, "Keats, Ecocriticism, and the Poetics of Place," *Studies in Romanticism* 57, no. 3 (2018).

think in,"[63] as Keats put it in one of his letters: a space that must be protected from the foulness of the world as it is. According to Henning, this sanctuary-space, like the temple in *Endymion*, constructs the "dwelling ground of poetic thought" as an intimate chamber that is cut off from the world, though nonetheless figured as a navigable arena that the poet might access through imagination.[64]

Guest, fashioning her own conceit out of Keats' sanctuary-space, makes the quilt a symbol of poetic language. In doing so, she shares Keats' sense of poetry's protective, nurturing, and vital qualities. Poetic language is imagined as a protective layer thrown over the alarmed and bewildered "You" which the first page addresses. Yet here Guest is also pushing back against a romantic separation of poetic fancy from the domestic sphere. It is, the poem explains, only the careful work of "edging and interlining" that constructs a livable space within which the addressed "You" can be enclosed and cared for:

> You float now tideless, secure in the rhythm
> of stuffing and tying, edging and interlining,
> bordered and hemmed; no longer unacquainted
> you inhabit the house with its smooth tasks
> sorted in scrap bags like kitchen nooks
> the smell cookery of cave where apples
> ripen and vats flow domestic yet with schemes
> of poetry sewed to educate the apron dawn.[65]

This "You" that is secured and held by the "stuffing and tying" of quilting recalls the earliest attested use of quilting in medieval costuming: quilted garments were worn to protect the body from the discomfort of chainmail armor. This quilt is imagined as an intermediary layer. It fortifies the functionality of a protective outer encasement and protects the vulnerable body. Such an image distinguishes the quilt from an art work that is evaluated as either abstract or figurative: the patterns of a quilt may represent or figure a thing, but this does not adequately explain the quilt as an object.

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[63] Keats, *The Letters of John Keats; 1814-1821*, vol.2, ed. Hyder Edward Rollings (Harvard University Press, 1958), 148.
[64] Henning, "Keats, Ecocriticism," 417-418.
[65] *CP*, 191.

Quilts then unfolds an archaeology of this domestic art object, as its poems move on to delineate a chronology of quilting: beginning in antiquity, moving on to the medieval weaving of "obsolete war garments," then up to "A NEW ERA" of "WALL QUILTS," "BED QUILTS!", and into the nineteenth century.[66] Guest begins this historical tour with a glimpse of an ornamental work from ancient Egypt:

Initially glimpsing
an ivory Pharaoh figure
First Dynasty 3400

quilted for warmth
papyrus for words

stitchery sophisticated after A.D.

tribesmanship
later religious jaws went boning
after Renaissance windows, the straw
harshness strikes hanging rebut

then

up went those quilts soft with their clout
I'd like a little cloud here to nestle over the straw
I'd appreciate less straw more feathers
opposite types — straw and feathers —
like the moon nestling on thorns

words you see through windows
threstled words tousled "La Lai del Desire"

Clouet of silks[67]

[66] *CP*, 193-195.
[67] *CP*, 192.

The pharaoh figurine, a symbol of masculine authority, is draped in a quilt, signifying again that the ornamental object delimits and moderates, but also maintains and participates in, a functional role. These lines then trace this "stitchery sophisticated" up to its appearance in *La Lai del Desire*, a twelfth century French poem that contains the earliest mention of a "quilt of two sorts of silk cloth in a checkboard pattern, well made and rich."[68] Like the wider patchwork structure of the collection, the stanzaic form here works on a checkboard pattern: chiastic doubling of contrasted pairs ("warmth / words," "straw / feathers") and the blocked dispersal of stanzas weave the eye as it reads back and forth.

The poem's unfolding of the civilizing development of textiles is shown to depend on the most minimal, repetitive, and sophisticated stitchery. These "threstled words," like the fashioning of beds from feathers and straws in antiquity, are what allow the poetic imaginary, exemplified by the moon, to nestle on the harsh thorns of daily life. In support of this underlying argument, Guest makes the ornamental qualities of her language felt at every turn. Prior to thematic conclusions or gleanings of narrative, it is the density and complexity of the poem's sonority that strike the reader. First, there is the consistent use of powerful assonance throughout, particularly in the alternation of short and long vowel sounds as in the passage above. The heavy assonance that pulls together "clout / cloud / Clouet," for example, or "glimpse / quilt / stitchery sophisticated," works thematically to synthesize the historical progression presented. An initial "glimpse" is then transformed through quilting into a sophisticated art; or the "clout" of authority and the "cloud" of imaginative revery are recombined in the ostentatious royal portraits of François Clouet. The materiality of language is further emphasized by repeated use of verbs that describe the haptic and dexterous processes of making: stuffing, tying, edging, hemming, stitching, picking, weaving. The poem elaborates on these processes as the accumulation of effortful and skilled actions, drawing on a specialist lexis that ostentatiously displays particular, localised meanings.

This sensation of artificial excess and its ostentation in decorative art is observed upon in the two essays that have so far discussed *Quilts*' relation to Guest's poetics. In commenting on Guest's "mid-period approach to artifice," Brian Teare reads the sequence as a 'serious epistemological fabric annotated by decorative whimsy':

[68] Averil Colby, *Quilting* (Scribner, 1971), 9.

> [Guest's] craft becomes virtuosic when what could have remained effete aestheticism turns densely metaphysical, connecting artist and mythmaker, both of whom treasure the moment when "the other world" touches the real.[69]

In a similar key, Mae Losasso explains that the surface *Quilts* is given "as the product of weaving, draped over the scaffold of an invisible architecture."[70] Both Teare and Losasso register Guest's willingness to embrace an excess of linguistic detail in order to render the poem as ornament. To go further still, however, we need to appreciate that what Teare calls the underlying "epistemological fabric" of the poems, or Losasso their hidden "invisible architecture," are presented as *indivisible* from the materialized status of the poem, analogized through quilting, as ornament. This collapses the distinction between a metaphysical elsewhere and the here and now of a domestic sphere in which labour occurs: just as the opening poem reconstructs Keats' sanctuary within the space of the home, so the "effete" aestheticism of a little cloud, in the collection's second poem, is folded into the material substance of a comfort that is produced from the laborious interweaving of straw and feathers.

In constructing a poetics that folds its ornamentation into a history of domestic labour, Guest pulls ornament away from modern connotations of excess and embellishment, and she recalls the word's use, in classical rhetoric, to describe "a vital and useful quality, [that] suggests distinction and excellence, the possession of resources ready for any challenge."[71] The semantic shift of ornament towards a narrower sense that precludes positive connotations of reinforcement and equipping is a process still underway in the nineteenth century. The modern interpretation of ornament as conflicting with "utility and plain language," as Ying Yuan and Yan Jiang argue in their diachronic study of the term, occludes an earlier association of ornament with the virtue of beautiful enhancement and apt amplification.[72] This rhetorical ornament performs, as in Grabar's revisitation of the term, an intermediary function: ornament heightens sensitivity to the prosodic features of language that might otherwise be discarded as secondary to its communicative function. In doing so, the proper use of rhetorical ornament involves the thickening of linguistic detail so as to bolster, rather than attenuate, language's communicative function. This is why what Teare

[69] Teare, "Revelation," para.6.
[70] Losasso, *Poetry, Architecture*, 143.
[71] G. Kennedy, *Quintillian* (Twayne Publishers, 1969), 81.
[72] Ying Yuan and Yan Jiang, "Rhetorical Figures: The Argumentative 'Ornament'," *Linguistics and Literature Studies* 6, no. 5 (2018), 214.

terms Guest's "decorative whimsy" serves to shore up her analogy of poetic language to quilting: poetic excess, a language that is at once haptic, specialist, dense, and ostentatiously sonorous, is the foundation for the reader's ongoing sensitivity to the poem's presence as a material thing.

In the fifth poem of *Quilts*, this resemblance of poetic imagery to the material detail of ornamentation is formalized through a series of annotations that are attached to popular quotations. Here, the poem stitches snippets of religious verse and song to a set of quotidian instructions:

> "Tomorrow is another day"
> let the lawnmower grab those threads
>
> "A porch is a place for sitting"
> do this in cauliflower colors, not too elaborate
>
> "My heart's in the Highlands"
> let yourself go with calico
>
> "The darkest hour precedes the dawn"
> use the father's overalls
>
> "Will O" the Wisp
> use your own gears
>
> (None of that Paisley
> spooking with gaudy thread)[73]

The comments that Guest affixes to each quotation bind them to manual household tasks: the poem's surface rends itself out of these simple conjunctions, and the last couplet differentiates this homey technique from the elaborate patterning of Paisley, a "spooking with gaudy thread."[74] The next poem then imagines quilting as the communal product of a

[73] *CP*, 194.
[74] This insertion of poetic texts within domestic scenery is a technique that Guest revisits in a late poem, where the speaker's decision to "revolutionize [their] life" involves filtering the imaginary of revolution through the

roll-call of female figures: "Aunt Dinah," "Rebekah," "Phebe," "Nellie," "Liza," "Sarah," "Emily Jane," names that are presented just before a turn towards the male artists of Abstract Expressionism. Poem nine begins by explicitly pausing over what the poem's ornamentation has, so far, implicitly argued for—that the handiwork of quilting might be a way of rethinking the art object:

> Only consider, said my author, contemporary painters
> who bear a resemblance to quilts:
>
> Rauschenberg
> Johns
> Rivers
>
> Reality could be their tassel
> and Reality is there, that's what I think about a quilt
> it's Reality, and it satisfied Rauschenberg.[75]

The relation between the quilt and the conceptual aesthetics of Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, and Larry Rivers is expressed here not in terms of abstraction or figuration, but the emphatically capitalized-"Reality." It is the reality of the domestic day-to-day, as presented so far in the poem, which Guest associates these artists to, and so their high art constructions become associates of the painstaking process by which the women construct a couch of space that enables the work of cultural production to unfold.

That *Quilts* should present this labour as the construction of a "Reality" indicates that Guest is more interested in the poem as a thing in itself, rather than the poem as a negotiation with the problematics of representation. The poetic text, like the quilt, is set up as an element of the reality of the everyday ("Reality is there […] / it's Reality") before it is tasked with the fulfilment, or rejection, of representation. By connecting the quilt to the art works of Rauschenberg and Rivers, Guest is resisting what Charles Bernstein refers to the "antidecorative" impulse of high art abstraction. In 2013, Bernstein's contribution to a planning seminar for the Museum of Modern Art's exhibition *Inventing Abstraction, 1910-*

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minutiae of quotidian experiences such as reading a book, opening a window, or going for a walk. "Eating Chocolate Ice Cream: Reading Mayakovsky" (Poetry Foundation, 2001), n.p.

[75] *CP*, 196-97.

1925 was a series of aphoristic notes that describe abstraction as covering a multitude of practices, reinvented and rediscovered across periods, that remain "disruptive, contentious, inchoate, challenging."[76] At the centre of his remarks, Bernstein turns to the relationship between abstraction and the ornamental, posing the latter as a gendered 'threat' to the former's high art status:

> What is the gender of abstraction? Abstraction can never kick its intimate association with the ornamental, the decorative, with textiles, and with fashion; like a Chinese finger trap, the more it tries to disarticulate these elements, the tighter the hold.
>
> Decoration poses a threat to high art abstraction (abstraction-for-its-own-sake) because it owes its canonical success to its double; that is, it can be appreciated as decorative and certified as antidecorative. The relation of decoration to abstraction is, thus, similar to the relation of figuration to abstraction.[77]

The conceptual closeness of abstraction to decoration that Bernstein points out had been evaded by formalist readings of high modernist art that wanted the former to express a new, masculine-coded, heroic Americanness. As Bernstein recounts, the formalist defence of abstraction, in that context, involved a consistent disavowal of decoration, with abstraction being used to ringfence the art object at a safe remove from the feminine, domestic, and altogether ordinary stuff of ornament.

The formalist perspective inherited these anti-ornamental terms from modernist architecture, which, in the exemplary words of Adolf Loos, sustained that "the evolution of culture is synonymous with the removal of ornament from utilitarian objects."[78] Harold Rosenberg, in an influential 1952 essay published in *Art News* on action painting, applies Loos' logic to the removal of figuration in painting, thereby clearing the way for his definition of painting as "an act." In his essay, Rosenberg makes a distinction been works that have achieved their status as a "genuine act," and what he calls "weak" works that fail such a test:

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[76] Bernstein, "Disfiguring Abstraction," *Critical Inquiry* 39 (2013), 489.
[77] Bernstein, "Disfiguring Abstraction," 494-495.
[78] Loos, "Ornament and Crime," in *Programs and Manifestoes on 20th-Century Architecture*, ed. Ulrich Conrads, trans. Michael Bullock (MIT Press, 1970), 20. For a discussion of Loos' critique of ornament, see Andreas Vrahimis, "Wittgenstein, Loos, and the Critique of Ornament," *Estetika: The European Journal of Aesthetics* LVIII/XIV, no. 2 (2012).

> Works of this sort lack the dialectical tension of a genuine act, associated with risk and will. When a tube of paint is squeezed by the Absolute, the result can only be a Success. The painter need keep himself on hand solely to collect the benefits of an endless series of strokes of luck. His gesture completes itself without arousing either an opposing movement within itself or his own desire to make the act more fully his own. Satisfied with wonders that remain safely inside the canvas, the artist accepts the permanence of the commonplace and decorates it with his own daily annihilation. The result is an apocalyptic wallpaper.[79]

The ornamental makes it return here as the botched version of abstraction. The implication is that the "genuine act" will allow abstraction to rise above the commonplace patterning of decoration: it will create an art object that is neither "utilitarian" nor "autonomous," but rather the record of the artist's heroic intervention within the given medium.

Quilts can be read as a riposte to these anti-decorative anxieties of Abstract Expressionism, of the kind alluded to by Rosenberg and then later commented on by Bernstein. Guest advances this riposte through the poem's organizing conceit (*poiesis*-as-quilting), which corresponds to its formal techniques (the text as a citational patchwork); aspects that together demonstrate the communal fabric from which any art object must necessarily emerge.

The collection therefore qualifies the idea that the abstract denotes a greater degree of impersonality in the poem: by drawing attention to its intertextual origins in its patterning, the poems imply that abstract impersonality should be better understood as the result of a collaborative effort. This is not the heroic extinction of the self, rather the declination of the authorial act across an unlimited chain of minor, cross-authorial acts. Further, *Quilts* envisions the poem as an object set within a domestic reality. The plainness with which this position is expressed—"Reality is there"—masks the conceptual intricacies of this vision. By imagining the poem as an object that, simply, "is there," Guest wishes to disarticulate her poetics from the abstract/figurative antagonism of formalist aesthetics *and* insist that the non-necessity of poetic artifice—its functional redundancy and embellishing excess—

[79] Rosenberg, "American Action Painters," 195. This "antidecorative" line of thinking is sustained throughout assessments of Abstract Expressionism. As late as 1961, Clement Greenberg complains that Kandinsky's post-1920 paintings were "a mere receptacle, the painting itself an arbitrary agglomeration of shapes, spots and lines lacking even decorative coherence." "Obituary and Review of an Exhibition of Kandinsky," in *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 2: Arrogant Purpose, 1945-1949*, ed. John O'Brian (University of Chicago Press, 2008), 113. Once again, Kandinsky's technique featured as a foil to the grounded, coherent, and uniform energies which Greenberg associated with true abstraction.

should be the basis for its association with the life-giving processes of acculturation and care as represented by quilt making.

This poem/quilt comparison is, finally, a departure from what Douglas Mao has called the "objectionable objects" as they are commonly figured in modernist aesthetics, with its common opposition between the exceptional work of art and the clutter of "mere objects."[80] As Mao argues, the proximity of the work of art to the status of "mere object" is an anxiety-inducing prospect in the novels of Wyndham Lewis and Jean-Paul Sartre, where the distance between the aesthetic and the quotidian expresses a politically charged distinction between aristocratic ownership and mass consumerism. In showing us the poem's resemblance to textiles, and presenting a taxonomy of quilting through the ages, *Quilts* challenges this distinction between high art object and the "merely" decorative stuff of the household. Quilts and poems are imagined and celebrated as objects which, preserving a vital function, are also able to embellish. They are therefore forms that cross categories through their adornment of reality, troubling firm distinctions between art and craft, the aesthetic and the domestic, form and function: the categorical divisions that mid-century accounts of modernist aesthetics so effortfully sought to maintain.

IV *Fair Realism* (1989), dissatisfaction and phenomenophilia

I turn now to the affective implications of what I have described as *Quilts*' ornamental poetics. *Quilts* represents one mode of expressing Guest's dissatisfaction with an interpretative division between abstraction and figuration. But the extent of that dissatisfaction reaches further than a disavowal of the claim made by proponents of Abstract Expressionism to have superseded the decorative forms that haunt its pursuit of the new. Reimagining the poem as ornament, Guest refutes the paradigm of representation that the abstract and the figurative both participate in. The poem as ornament is relocated, as *Quilts* describes, within a reality that is merely there. The satisfaction that this mere material presence provides differentiates the ornamental work from a realist work that would mount a representation of the world. How does Guest arrive at this move away from representational logic, and how might it be related to a wider dissatisfaction with the world as it is? What does thinking of the poem as an ornamental object contribute to debates about realism and aesthetics as reproposed in theories of affect and emotion?

[80] Mao, "Objectionable Objects," in *Modernist Objects: Literature, Art*, *Culture*, eds. Noëlle Cuny and Xavier Kalck (Liverpool Scholarship Online, 2020), 21.

Affective approaches to literature pay close attention, as Brook Miller discusses, to how "the ordinary, the micro-, and the non-linguistic" contribute to meaning, with meaning conceived of as a secondary response, a cognitive consolidation of the body's exposure to phenomena that are extra-discursive.[81] Miller points to the ways in which theories of affect and cognitive approaches to literature differ in their readings of "perceptual experiences characterized by attention to—and misapprehension of—physical details loaded with the possibilities of failure and the categorical thinking that redeems failure, dynamics associated with the affective."[82]

One such case of categorical thinking, as mentioned at the opening of this chapter, is the perception of poetic language as either signifying an external reality or as expressing an interior emotion. The poem/ornament equivalence sustained in *Quilts* is one attempt to disentangle poetic language from this adherence to the paradigm of representation: Guest reproposes the poem as a material object, and therefore as an instance of exposure to language as a perceptual experience that is holistic, non-subjective, and whose polyvalent potential spreads in excess of its subsequent organisation by cognitive processes. This poem/ornament equivalence means that the text will not organize itself as the retrospective satisfaction, or completion, of an experience that is figured as anteceding the poem's present or as the literary restitution of an object that is imagined as existing outside the text.

This puts distance between Guest's poetics and interpretations of abstraction which emphasize the use of non-figural forms as a communication of the artist's inner emotional state. Ben Highmore, in his essay "Bitter After Taste: Affect, Food, and Social Aesthetics," describes the post-Kantian model of aesthetic completion that Guest's poetics is motivated against:

> This sense that the artwork completes sensual experience (resolves it into more satisfying and morally superior forms) is a central tenet within aesthetic discourse, and it immediately suggests that there is something generally incomplete and unsatisfactory about day-to-day experience (which, surely is often the case)… Aesthetic satisfaction (in its dominant mode) is satisfaction in the end of a process, rather than in the messy *informe* of the ongoing-ness of process. Much of what

[81] Miller, "Affect Studies and Cognitive Approaches to Literature," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Affect Studies and Textual Criticism*, eds. David Wehrs and Thomas Blake (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 116.
[82] Miller, "Affect Studies," 120. The example given by Miller is a football player striking a goal: the player, performing amidst a crowd, is affected by the surrounding dynamics of the match and the exchange of pre-cognitive signals between the player and the goalkeeper.

> constitutes the day-to-day is irresolvable and desperately incomplete, yet, for all that, also most vital.[83]

In *Quilts*, this rejection of completion, an embrace of what Highmore calls "messy *informe*," reappears as a combination of forms that refuses consistent lineation and pagination, includes pronounced typographic variations, and is marked by erratic structural irregularities (the eleven poems, for example, are all numbered, but only the last five are given with a capitalized title). *Fair Realism*, Guest's 1989 collection, once again reproposes this formal restlessness. It ranges from the dense, carefully patterned scene-setting of its opening poems to the elliptical sparseness of its closing sequence, "Tessera," in which one- and two-word line fragments point ahead towards the gaping minimalism that will characterize Guest's later works.

Following Highmore's processual aesthetics of *informe*, I claim that *Fair Realism* presents a skepticism about any possibility of resolving, through representation, the generally incomplete and unsatisfactory phenomena of the everyday. Along such lines, we can see how the collection's title takes an initial swipe at the idea that an aesthetic work can complete or perfect reality through literary mimesis.[84] If realism is to have any need of qualification, if it can be shaded as fair (or unfair), then its founding premise of representational transparency is, at a stroke, undone. This skepticism finds its formal expression in the mobility of Guest's perspectival frames, as well as *Fair Realism*'s intense preoccupation with phenomena that are normally considered simply too minimal, sparse, or weak in substance to stand up to the stringencies of representation.

This can be expressed as the difference between a poem that records what is perceived and a recording of *how* perception operates. Guest activates this distinction in the first poem of *Fair Realism*, "Wild Gardens Overlooked by Night Lights," in which the opening lines intensify the perspectival disarray of Guest's earlier poems:

> Wild gardens overlooked by night lights. Parking
> lot trucks overlooked by night lights. Buildings

[83] Highmore, "Bitter after Taste: Affect, Food, and Social Aesthetics," in *The Affect Theory Reader*, eds. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Duke University Press, 2010), 123.
[84] In a letter to Michael Schmidt, dated May 20, 1997, Guest comments on the title: "Goethe is responsible for my use of 'fair.' In a famous remark about a moment in time, he writes, 'Stay with me, thou art so fair.'" Box 82, folder 1452, Guest papers. The connection here with the temporality of a fleeting experience is interesting, since it suggests that Guest was also thinking about realism as a momentary *impression*, one that remains as provisional as any other apprehension of the world in literary form.

with their escapes overlooked by lights

They urge me to seek here on the heights
amid the electrical lighting that self who exists
who witnesses light and fears its expunging[85]

Every object here is given in the passive, as dependent on the presence of another thing and as overlooked from a position that simultaneously illuminates that presence and tracks attention away from it. It is these interwoven objects that then "urge me" (the only first-person pronoun in the first two stanzas) to "seek" definition, to see "that self who exists / who witnesses light and fears its expunging."[86] The associative consonance of "escape" / "exist" / "expunge" intimates that this "self who exists" is captured by a desire to flee and a fear of extinction. As with the "You" enfolded within the interwoven citations of *Quilts*, subjectivity is not rendered here as anterior or exterior to its textual configuration: it emerges, momentarily, as an effect of—and as affected by—perceptual experiences over which it has no control.

In a later poem from *Fair Realism*, "An Emphasis Falls on Reality," a domestic setting is similarly rendered in the midst of this prolonged seeking, and loss, of self-definition. The scene emerges as it composes itself out of "[c]loud fields," before the second stanza veers to a passage of quoted speech:

Cloud fields change into furniture
furniture metamorphizes into fields
an emphasis falls on reality.

"It snowed toward morning," a barcarole
the words stretched severely

silhouettes they arrived in trenchant cut
the face of lilies ….

[85] *FR*, 7.
[86] *FR*, 7.

I was envious of fair realism.

I desired sunrise to revise itself
as apparition, majestic in evocativeness,
two fountains traced nearby on a lawn …[87]

This poem is among the most representative of Guest's from this mid-period of her career, and she chose lines from it for the jacket quotation of the 2000 edition of her *Selected Poems*. The permutations of direct speech, atmospheric conditions, and a barely discernible domestic setting pushes the poem into registers that are by turns grounded in observable phenomenon and affixed to abstractions drawn from those same phenomena. Later in the poem, Guest characterizes this method as "the necessary idealizing of your reality," which, in presenting us with an "ephemeral" fiction that "looks like a real house," is contrasted with a realism that the poem tells us it is "envious of."[88]

It is here that the affective implications of Guest's ornamental poetics begin to emerge. "Wild Gardens" and "An Emphasis" representatively colour their perspectival fluidity with a tone of unease or discontent. It is as though the will to pay attention to what, in another poem, Guest calls the "stray ephemeral visible"[89]—clouds and skies, lights and shadows, colour and texture—is in competition with flashes of self-conscious awareness about the impossibility that such attention might endure in the form of poetry. In "An Emphasis," this concern is directly invoked as the "envy" of "fair realism": the poem voices a direct frustration with how reality is mimetically imprinted in literature; the act of mimesis risks the "unfair" and reductive flattening out of a phenomena's inchoate potential.

This extreme sensitivity to the limits of representation and form makes of Guest a "phenomenophile." In her 2009 work *Looking Away: Phenomenality and Dissatisfaction, Kant to Adorno*, Rei Terada considers how our apprehension of mere phenomena is converted—or coerced—into the fact of perceiving an object:

> According to this distinction, perceiving an object (it passes across my field of vision) isn't the same as perceiving the fact of the object (I recognize that it's there,

[87] *FR*, 26.
[88] *FR*, 27-28.
[89] *CP*, 49.

what it is); and it is perceiving the fact of the object that's generally taken to produce, seamlessly, knowledge of and belief in the existence of the object.[90]

Reminiscent of Johnson's analysis of poetry's rapport with "the thing whose face is turned away" and Mao's study of troubling "mere objects," Terada's work asks how perception can withhold itself from second-order judgements that impose categories of fact and belief onto sensual perception. This "phenomenophilic" mode of suspending one's attention around "fleeting visual phenomenon" is motivated by a dissatisfaction in the world as it is.[91] Dissatisfaction does not mean denial. Indeed, Terada wants to conceptualize "the manner in which object perception holds itself apart from fact perception *without negating it*."[92] She uncovers versions of this lingering in object perception at work across the writings of Coleridge, Nietzsche, and Adorno, where the association of appearance with "mereness, lightness, radiance" allows for momentary deferrals of categorical evaluation.[93]

I bring Guest's ornamental poetics into dialogue with Terada's concept of phenomenophilia because the latter promises a context considerably wider than immediate mid-century disputes about abstraction. Thinking of Guest's poetics in terms of dissatisfaction with categorical thought allows us to relocate the work within a longer history of post-romantic unease about the adequacy of language to the task of translating visual perceptions. It also furthers my suggestion that Guest's poetics should be understood outside the terms of lyric subjectivity, of the kind which Ashbery's early poems were interested in deconstructing, and an ekphrastic mode, of the kind which studies of Guest have routinely remarked upon.

In place of an expressive or illustrative function for aesthetics, Terada's work contemplates how art objects might sensitize us to emotional states that escape subject-oriented theorizations of how pathos is generated.[94] For Terada, the phenomenophile of post-Kantian aesthetics is compelled to return to fleeting impressions on the glimmering edge of

[90] Terada, *Looking Away: Phenomenality and Dissatisfaction, Kant to Adorno* (Harvard University Press, 2009), 15.
[91] Terada, *Looking Away*, 40.
[92] Terada, *Looking Away*, 16; emphasis added.
[93] Terada, *Looking Away*, 16.
[94] I use the word "emotional" advisedly, since Terada's broader philosophical intervention intends to demonstrate that emotions as non-subjective phenomena are nonetheless articulated through the "theatricality of self-representation," which involves the staging of self-difference, an "extra 'you'", who is rhetorically interpolated in order to convert pathos into personalized feelings. This differs from theories of affect that insist on non-linguistic corporeal sensations as the bearers of emotivity. See Terada, *Feeling in Theory: Emotion After the "Death of the Subject"* (Harvard University Press, 2001).

perceptibility because they might offer some relief from the imperative to convert object perception into given facts. This process, as Terada argues in the concluding chapter of her book, is marked by a dissatisfaction because the "long and potentially infinite time" required for such perception to occur will not ever be assured.[95] Lacking this infinite time, the phenomenophile is also never able to found a new kind of sociality: they must guiltily concede that this search for more time with which to hold on to ephemeral experiences may be "an insult to the given world shared with society."[96] Looking away is always haunted by this accusation of anti-sociality: it is the neglect of whatever else it is we are expected to look at.

As Terada notes, this problem was familiar to psychoanalysis. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud worries about the impossibility of an analysis that could account for group neurosis or, rather, for a group of neurotics who must find a common means of sharing their limit experiences. Such a group, he writes, would provide no "starting-point" which "distinguishes the patient from his environment, which is assumed to be 'normal'":

> For a group all of whose members are affected by one and the same [neurotic] disorder no such background could exist; it would have to be found elsewhere.[97]

The problem, Terada adds, is that there is no such elsewhere: "no one possesses authority to impose such a therapy upon the group."[98] Having made this troubled admission, Terada searches for ways out of this impasse: what would it mean for the phenomenophile to have enough time and enough freedom to tarry with mere appearances without dissatisfaction? Terada suggests that such a state would require a special type of "therapeutic time": a time that she compares to the "free space familiar to the child tarrying between the house and the fence, or in the unofficial spaces of the school."[99]

Terada's argument approaches here the limit of phenomenophilic perception: the meditative act that frees itself from categorical thinking is also essentially solipsistic, resistant as it is to representation and communication. Her interest in how perception might linger over the voided spaces that exist *between* locations that possess stronger, and better

[95] Terada, *Looking Away*, 201.
[96] Terada, *Looking Away*, 203.
[97] Quoted in Terada, *Looking Away*, 200.
[98] Terada, *Looking Away*, 200.
[99] Terada, *Looking Away*, 201.

organized, emotional coordinates, is a continuation of her critique of what she calls the "expressive hypothesis" in 2002's *Feeling in Theory: Emotion After the "Death of the Subject"*. There, Terada critiques the phenomenology of Mikel Dufrenne for its reliance on a rhetoric of unity between subject and object:

> Like much of the ideology of emotion, Dufrenne's approach is transcendental. He contends that when we think we feel the "affective quality" of an object, we're not fantasizing; our feeling corroborates the existence of a "primordial reality" of expressiveness. Expression shapes interiority and exteriority "prior to the distinction between subject and object"—which explains circularly why everything fits together in this world. It is the special mission of feelings to identify correspondences, phenomenalizing the unity between subjects and objects.[100]

Unlike the unifying aspirations of Dufrenne's approach, which solders the subject to its apprehension of the art work in a single atmosphere, Terada maintains that perception activates a self-distancing, precisely because "emotion itself is a figure […] that consolidates an outside, a face, an inside, and a precarious means for getting back and forth between them."[101] Emotion is a rhetorical means of describing this transport.

In *Looking Away*, Terada brings this insight to bear on liminal experiences that cannot be organized rhetorically, and which might not therefore qualify as emotions. The attention of the phenomenophile is constantly displacing itself, doubtful that its experience can find figuration that will preserve the slightness and weakness of the impressions that attract its gaze. In the moment that the phenomenophile's perceptual activity becomes anything more than ephemeral and transitory, then the material upon which it dwells will no longer be capable of providing relief from the constraints of given fact. The phenomenophile's suspended emotional response is subsumed, eventually, by the very pressures that it serves as a short-lived escape from. In a telling passage, Terada explicitly associates this fleeting operation with the time of lyric:

[100] Terada, *Feeling in Theory*, 12.
[101] Terada, *Feeling in Theory*, 15.

> The fear of the open-ended tension of an endless desire cuts its losses by gravitating to lyric instants that are figured as all one can expect. In this way the hope for freedom surfaces and times out.[102]

This lyric instant is some token of consolation: though ultimately inadequate, it is capable of relieving pressure for "no more than a few minutes," whilst also "making sure that the phenomenophile doesn't take much relief (since he feels he lacks a right to any)."[103]

Terada's theory of phenomenophilia helps to clarify how Guest's mid-career poetics develops the affective mobilities as enacted in her earliest collections. In chapter 1, I discussed how Marta Figlerowicz's model of a contingent and distributed self-awareness in John Ashbery's *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* differs from Guest's plurality of perspectival frames. Through her mid-period works, beginning with *Quilt*, we see this technique working in combination with the presentation of the poem as a thing in itself, first, resembling a woven quilt, and then arrogating for itself a materiality that becomes more pronounced as the poems unlatch themselves from referentiality. This shifts Guest's writing into a metapoetic mode that gives the page as the kind of unconditional space, and unlimited time, that Terada suggests could satisfy the phenomenophile. Crucially, this also allows us to regard the poems as enacting something other than the tangled complexities of a subjectivity working to orient themselves in the world. Reading the poetic page as a space that attempts to preserve the pre-subjective charms of a world that has not yet been unified around the fictive presence of a subject, we can see how the materiality of Guest's poetics is a step towards the notion of the poem as an atmosphere traversed by affect-laden agents that move independently of personhood.

In order to see this phenomenophilic attention at work, consider a poem such as "Shuffling Light" from *Fair Realism*. The poem takes as its subject the insubstantial and ephemeral play of light on bedroom walls. It presents a speaker who is awaking with someone in bed as they watch sunrise spilling across the room. Rather than organizing this flickering perception of "light shuffling" into a coherent representation of that scene, Guest wants to take the ephemerality of the light as the centre of the poem's attention, an effort which resists the categorical thinking which would superimpose coherence on formless substance:

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[102] Terada, *Looking Away*, 203.
[103] Terada, *Looking Away*, 201.

Dawn has other obligations
and is preparing them for us.

That I can see, shifting in bed.
There are ignoble thoughts running
over to that corner and that.

Ideas of much simplicity,
like threads in the sheet which
tie it all together, obeying
commands other than beauty.

The clock tick and the cat meow,
a wrist above the coverlet.
A book slides off a table,
pages marking no page,
unfavored literature.

Light shuffling across the ceiling
with a careful tread, making mush
of history. It reminds us a name
changes several times when it crosses
those borders that bring barriers
to speech, voices would enjoy
profiles on which to rest

In figurative space engaged by others,
the spoken wish for a violin.[104]

The experience of observing light as it shuffles across walls, an experience of absolute mereness, lightness, and radiance, here holds the speaker back from "obligations" and

[104] *FR*, 33-34.

"commands." The voice is aware that they might otherwise feel obliged or commanded to organize this perceptual motion-sickness around an object that "[ties] it all together" with the aestheticized satisfaction of "beauty." What the poem actually traces, however, is the continued aversion to representative categories that would coerce this "light shuffling" into aestheticized forms: history is made "mush" by the light; literature is discarded—"unfavored," on the bedside table; "figurative space" is left off as "engaged by others." In place of these formalizing impulses, it is the mere act of observing light that has provoked a mode of restless attention.

Guest's phenomenophilia, as it is felt in the poems *Fair Realism*, forms part of her challenge to the selective distinctions that categorize and organize perception into aesthetic forms. The wandering observations of Guest's poems remain unsubjected to the kind of order that would serve to distinguish between part and whole, interior and exterior, subject and object. Guest's poetic attention is drawn to states that erode these distinctions, just as ornament itself seems to subvert oppositions of form and function, high and low art, detail and totality. In her essay on ornament in *fin de siècle* aesthetics, Alison Georgina Chapman argues that a modern association of ornament with distraction is what renders the former a threat to evaluative thinking:

> Ornament pulls the eye away from what it ought to be attending to; by confusing the mere charm of a work with its formal principles, it compromises the aesthetic purity of the object before us […] What connects ornament with distraction for Kant is an incommensurable relationship between *parerga* [ornaments] and *erga* [aesthetic form], or more crudely, "parts" and "wholes."[105]

The "mere charm" of Guest's poems emerges out of this refusal to relay part to whole. They want, instead, poetic language to evince a new emphasis as it falls on reality. An observation of shuffling light, brought to the centre of a poem, inverts the arrangements that would usually impose aesthetic form on experience: the peripheral becomes central; and the particular outshines the whole. This is felt even more keenly in "Shuffling Light," because the poem's scenario is that of the traditional aubade, in which a speaker, waking in bed with a lover, would typically furnish the poem with its grounds for a lyric address. From its

[105] Chapman, "Ornament And Distraction: Peripheral Aesthetics In The Nineteenth Century," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 45, no. 2 (2017), 235.

inception, Guest's poem evades the lyrical potentialities of this scene. Dawn, the poem tells us, may well be preparing its obligations, but, in the meantime, the poem concerns itself with mere phenomena as they antecede reorganization into lyric tropes, of the kind alluded to in the poem's final line as "the spoken wish for a violin." "Shuffling Light" operates, then, within a phenomenological interim: the suspension of judgement and deferral of coherence, as its eye turns towards and then away from the forms that would usually serve to constitute the aesthetic out of mere phenomena.

V "bending the vine": ornamental layers

So far, I have discussed the analogies that Guest alights on between poetic language and ornament, and I have widened my definition of ornamentation to include the types of formless phenomena that Terada theorizes as resisting coercion into received forms. In this final section, I turn to one other motif of Guest's mid-period work that deserves attention for its development of her poetics of ornament. The pairing of the quilt with the poem, as we saw, draws out the latter's intertextual layers as a communal origin. The motif of the vine, scattered across Guest's collections from *Fair Realism* onwards, reads as another metaphor for a phenomenophilic interest in ornamentation that delivers relief from the pressures of representation. In this new conceit, poetic language, like a vine on a wall, overlays and adorns a more solid structure that it depends upon and consumes.

Guest originally projected an entire book of these metapoetic "vine poems." A handwritten note on the draft of a poem that would be published as "Valorous Vine" reads: "use such a page in prose after each ~~stanza~~ [sic] poem / This will be the contents of the book."[106] That book project never materialized, but a handful of poems that take the vine as their central conceit appear in Guest's collections after 1989. In each case, the vine is imagined as an ornamental mesh that embellishes a deeper structure. Correspondingly, the poem is reconceived as a layer that is cast over a reality which stands at an irreducible distance from the text.[107]

[106] Box 67, folder 1340, Guest papers.

[107] A 1996 review of Guest's *Selected Poems* by Peter Riley describes her poetics as expressing a "sense of detachment." Riley's comments parallel my argument here for a poetics that casts a layer over an unavailable reality: "Always there is a sense of detachment, that the materials of the text do not bear directly on a lived or thought episode (a singularity), but either drawn from a heterogeneity of sources or are formed into a commentary on the media by which we live and think [...] one which comes to effect the reality it might have depicted." "Review of *Selected Poems*, *PQR* Winter 1996." Box 104, folder 1631, Guest papers.

In "Spring Vine," from *Fair Realism*, "bending the vine" makes its first appearance as a symbol for poetic language. The poem "reaches more or less / evasive solutions" as it twines its thinking around visual phenomenon.[108] The first stanza presents a speaker's observation of a bird as it "lighted and fell downward / so bending the vine."[109] The second stanza turns itself back on this simple observation and the conversion of experience into writing:

> A paragraph written to instill
> in you the objective lent
> to a corrected mind,[110]

Implicitly, we are invited to compare such a paragraph to verse, which would be the opposite of prose that is written with this "objective lent." This distinction between prose and verse is made with the form of the verse itself: the common collocation "objective lens" is shifted to "objective lent" so that the line can end-rhyme with "insouciant," at the close of the first stanza. Poetry, like the "insouciant" little bird, is nonchalantly unconcerned about this "objective lens."

When the vine reappears in "The Surface as Object," in the 1993 collection *Defensive Rapture*, Guest styles it as a symbol of a sensual 'proliferation' that layers itself upon the record of "memorial distance":

> the visible
>
> as in the past
>
> subsisting in layered zone
>
> refuses to dangle
>
> oaths on marsh field

[108] *FR*, 21.
[109] *FR*, 21.
[110] *FR*, 21.

whitened or planned

memorial distance

rather than vine

that which proliferates[111]

Poetic language, unlike the immediacy of the visible field which it attempts to grasp at, "dangle[s]" and "proliferate[s]" in a vine-like unfurling, and a Guest poem, in particular, usually dangles its sensual proliferations, arranging, as here, its language in a curved alignment that becomes accentuated in these later collections. The impression is of a visual sensation that seems to have fallen just "behind" ("in layered zone") or "before" ("as in the past") the text. Guest directly articulates this sensation of an object that is absent from the text in a late essay titled "Wounded Joy," first published in 2002:

> Do you ever notice as you write that no matter what there is on the written page something appears to be in the *back of everything that is said, a little ghost?* I judge that this ghost is there to remind us there is always more, an elsewhere, a hiddenness, a secondary form of speech, an eye blink. Not on the print before us. And yet the secret is that this secondary form of writing is what backs up the primary one, it is the *obscure essence that lies within the poem that is not necessary to put into language, but that the poem must hint at, must say "this is not all I can tell you. There is something more I do not say. Leave this little echo to haunt the poem, do not give it form, but let it assume its own ghost-like shape.* It has the shape of your own soul as you write.[112]

[111] *CP*, 274.
[112] *FI*, 100-101; emphasis in original.

If we read this sentiment as the phenomenophile's conviction that an "*obscure essence*" escapes or evades aesthetic form, Guest's description here of a minimally impactful "hiddenness" bears a resemblance to Terada's description of Coleridge's concern with "spectra": "afterimages, optical illusions, errors in perception, and very ephemeral visual experiences. Some of them are what Kant calls 'charms,' the stimuli or 'attractions' too fragile to be aesthetic."[113] The fragility of such attractions does not preclude their presencing within poetic form: Guest suggests that the text may be animated by the very charms that it is unable to put into language.

"Valorous Vine," the opening poem of Guest's 1999 collection *If So, Tell Me*, demonstrates how this haunting component of an ephemeral charm may be smuggled into the poem. This poem is organized around an absent-presence that structures the text which it cannot gain passage into. Guest adopts this conceit from Stéphane Mallarmé, whose "flower which is absent from all bouquets" she cites in a short text titled "Poetic Creation":

> In reaching for this flower "absent from all bouquets,"
> we are in the singular field of poetic creation.
>
> The roots of this absent flower are located in Symbolism.
> The reader must prepare to accept Symbolism as the
> bartered Bride of Modernism.[114]

The celebrated phrase comes from Mallarmé's 1895 essay "Crisis in Poetry," in which the poet reflects on the power of modern poetry to evoke an object "beyond the very text."[115] Mallarmean poetics, one origin of the modernist tradition within which Guest conceived of her work,[116] initiates literature's response to what Shane Weller describes as the "Language Crisis" of modernity:

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[113] Terada, *Looking Away*, 36.
[114] *FI*, 57.
[115] "When I say: 'a flower!' then from that forgetfulness to which my voice consigns all floral form, something different from the usual calyces arises, something all music, essence, and softness: the flower which is absent from all bouquets." Mallarmé, "Crisis in Poetry," 125.
[116] As well as Guest, Mallarmé was considered a forebear by other members of the New York School. Kenneth Koch writes that "Mallarmé, Valery, Apollinaire, Eluard, Reverdy, French poets are all still of our time." "Fresh Air" (Poetry Foundation, 2005), n.p. O'Hara's translations of Mallarmé were published in a 1973 edition of the journal *The World*.

> This skepticism toward language […] marked increasingly by the belief that the only hope of making contact with reality, be that reality objective or subjective, outer or inner, lies in a vigilant distrust of language, a distrust that can lead in two directions: either to a renewal or reinvigoration of language, or to its destruction.[117]

From out of this dissatisfaction, the work of Mallarmé instigates a paradoxical attempt to render *within* language the terms of its own failings. For Mallarmé, poetic language is the arena for this task because its non-referential qualities can show up the limits of linguistic representation.[118] In terms of ornament, these qualities are the "mere charm" of poetic language: they exceed the functionality of linguistic expression, and yet they are too partial and provisional to constitute a form that is other than an addendum to an irretrievable whole.

This generates a further tension that Guest's vine poems lean directly into. For Mallarmé, poetry is the privileged tool with which to expose the limits of language. This is so because poetry's sonority, approaching the purer form of music, exceeds the basic descriptive use of language:

> It is not *description* which can unveil the efficacy and beauty of monument, or the human face in all their maturity and native state, but rather evocation, *allusion, suggestion*. These somewhat arbitrary terms reveal what may well be a very decisive tendency in modern literature, a tendency which limits literature and yet sets it free. For what is the magic charm of art, if not this: that, beyond the confines of a fistful of dust or of all other reality, beyond the book itself, beyond the very text, it delivers up that volatile scattering which we call the Spirit, Who cares for nothing save universal musicality.[119]

It is precisely the poem's sonority, the weight or density of language as it approaches music, that also renders the poetic text a thing in itself. Only through thickening its mediacy can the poem evoke an object "beyond the very text." This makes of the poem a kind of conceptual

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[117] Shane Weller, "The Language Crisis: From Mallarmé to Mauthner," in *Language and Negativity in European Modernism* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 15.
[118] As Elizabeth McCombie writes in her introduction to a collection of Mallarmé's poems, poetic language's unique non-referentiality is won through its prioritization of musical rhythms and sonorities: "Language assumes some of the non-referential quality of music. Removed from the world of objects associated with ordinary reference, words share music's signifying patterns." "Introduction," in *Stéphane Mallarmé: Collected Poems and Other Verse* (Oxford University Press, 2006), xvii.
[119] Mallarmé, "Crisis in Poetry," 125.

blockage or chokepoint through which two competing claims about language's rapport with the world must pass: on the one hand, there is a mystical belief that the poem's language provide contact with what Mallarmé, and Guest, following him, call "Spirit"—a truth that is real but outside reality as perceived; on the other hand, this "Spirit" will only be made felt because of the dense materiality that is special to poetic language, and which makes of the poem an object that inserts itself into reality as perceived.[120]

With "Valorous Vine," Guest evokes in her poetry Mallarmé's flower "absent from all bouquets." The text divides itself across two pages. The first page is sixteen lines of verse that continue the highly allusive tone, curling forms, and densely structured sound play as seen in an earlier poem such as "The Surface as Object." The second page then offers a prose commentary on the first page. This structure reelaborates, and significantly expands upon, the earlier contradistinction in "Spring Vine" of the poetic stanza "bending the vine" and the prose "paragraph written to instill / in you the objective lent." This is the first page of the poem:

"Valorous Vine"

Lifts a spare shadow
encircling vine,
does not tarnish bauble
from overseas and out of silver mine,
drop in clamor and volume.

Along the footpath
returned to mourning a lost stem,

gauzy the stem-like saving, or ruled
over stone to develop muscular difficulty.

[120] This contradiction recalls the competing visions of Abstract Expressionism from which this chapter began—a debate that, like Mallarmé's symbolism, cannot stop oscillating between its metaphysical and materialist poles. Indeed, the very power of abstraction could be read as the result of this capacity to sustain a dialectic between these two positions, keeping them generatively in exchange with one another.

In the wind,
and overhead, held back lightning. Did
not surrender or refuse visibility and pliancy obtained.

Or confuse VIOLETRY with stone
or dissipate the land land unshackled,
budding in another country
while dark here.[121]

This is recognizably Guest's paratactical late style: a phenomephilic zone of half-grasped, haunted almost-seens. In none of the poem's sixteen lines do we find a grammatical subject: the syntax is itself entwined around this absence, just as the poem's images allude to an obscurity that cannot be brought into its perceptual field. The most concrete of the images offered is perhaps this vine laid "over stone": a hanging, gauze screen of leaves that neither surrenders nor refuses the visibility of what it depends on. In the absence of any clear subject or referential object—the "what?" that referential language would normally furnish—the poem emphasises place ("from overseas"), positions ("[a]long the footpath," "overhead"), locations ("in another country / while dark here") as they interfere with perception. This reproduces a perspectival mode that, refused the stability of a subject and the givenness of its object, is nothing other than a restless game of positionality: the *how*, *when*, *where* of an adverbialized perception replace the solid "what" of perceived subject matter. The line breaks, as in Guest's earliest works, are crucial in amping up this sensual disorientation: they either introduce a prepositional phrase that forces us to qualify the previous line, or bluntly negate ("Did / not") what's come before.

Precisely because our attentiveness to semantic logic is continually held up or diverted, we have to turn to the poem's semiotic operations instead. The vine could be taken as the poem's subject, if the title is read on into the first line: "'Valorous Vine' / *Lifts a spare shadow*", although the capital-L of "*Lifts*" seems to conventionally separate the two phrases. From this cryptic opening, a mesh of assonance and slant-rhymes are all drawn from the dissemination of the title phrase into its constituent phonemes. For valorous /rəs/: the echoes of "lifts," and "tarnish," which are then then extended into "of silver." For the long central vowel of vine: the full rhyme of "mine," then rearranged as "stem-like saving," and then

[121] *IS*, 7.

resounding on into the final stanzas. From out of this sonorous texturing, the word that seems to press from behind the poem's sound patterns, or which we intuit as having been dispersed across its words, is *life*. "Life" almost emerges even within the enjambment from the title to the first line: "vine / lifts"; and "life" then re-sounds every time the poem places a long /aɪ/ close enough to an /l/, as in "encircling vine," "silver mine," "pliancy," and "VIOLETRY."

If we keep this ghostly presencing of the word "life" across the page of verse in mind, we can see how the next page of the text presents us with a prose paragraph of commentary on the poem, in which Guest makes explicit reference to Mallarmé's absent flower:

> ii
>
> It can be seen she encouraged the separation of flower from the page, that she wished an absence to be encouraged. She drew from herself a technique that offered life to the flower, but demanded the flower remain absent. The flower, as a subject, is not permitted to shadow the page. Its perfume is strong and that perfume may overwhelm the sensibility that strengthens the page and desires to initiate the absence of the flower. It may be that absence is the plot of the poem. A scent remains of the poem. It is the flower's apparition that desires to remain on the page, even to haunt the room in which the poem was created.[122]

This paragraph, with its orderly "ii" (perhaps a pun on "two eyes," which suggest that we are here seeing things clearly), is "another country" of prose, the kind that the poem on the previous page had ended with looking towards ("budding in another country / while dark here"). The commentary prompts us to turn back immediately to the prior page, where we can begin to collaborate on this seeing of the "separation of flower / from the page."

This gives us another instance of the kind of metapoetic layers that I gestured towards at the end of chapter 2. What Charles Bernstein would call the "resonating of the wordness of language"[123]—its sheer, sonorous materiality—competes here with the *wordiness* of prose, as the once-removedness of the poem's retrospection is transferred into the twice-removed paraphrase of the prose text. This foregrounds Guest's metapoetic concern with the functions of poetic language, approaching the sort of "self-reflexive play" that W.J.T. Mitchell associates with post-modern interrogations of representation: "The represented

[122] *IS*, 8.
[123] Bernstein, *Content's Dream: Essays 1975-1984* (Northwestern University Press, 1986), 243.

object may even disappear when the medium turns itself back on its own codes, engaging in self-reflexive play."[124]

In Guest's case, this self-reflexive play serves to further an argument about poetic language that can be understood in the terms of ornamentation that this chapter has sought to propose. In splitting "Valorous Vine" across one page of verse and then one page of prose, Guest gives a form to Mallarmé's skepticism about the referential efficacy of language, as well as his invocation of poetic language's spiritual force. The split text consigns descriptive language to the role of commentary on poetic language. The opening poem is not referential: it does not refer to or describe the vine. Neither is it abstract: it is constructed out of a series of images, positionalities, observations of phenomena that are too weak to assume subjecthood or objecthood, but which the poem fashions itself out of.

This language forms, instead, an ornamental layer that covers the "absent flower" that will then be directly invoked in the prose paragraph. This sets up a hierarchical arrangement between the two pages: the prose refers us back to the absent-presence of the poem; the poem, in contrast, demonstrates how its absent-presence is generated within the thick sonorities of its prosody. It is the presencing of the word "life," dispersed across the sounds of the poem, that alerts us to this technique: rendering *within* the materiality of poetic language the very thing that always exceeds capture in literary form. In case we missed this poetic sleight of hand, this is precisely what the prose commentary on the next page then alerts us to as central to the activity of writing: "She drew from herself a technique that / *offered life to the flower*, but demanded the flower remain absent."[125]

A clear division has therefore been introduced, one that is only glimpsed in the earlier collections of Guest: by the time of this writing in the 1990s, her work is set up around a sense of "memorial distance"; an unbridgeable divorce between sense perception and its rendering in language. Poetic language, like the symbol of the vine, is an adornment, posited at some distance from direct perception of the world. Yet this impression is made felt through the ornamental work of poetic language: the poem's material textures must be felt and heard, if the "flower absent from all bouquets" is to be perceived. In this, Guest anticipates Stephanie Burke's readings of recent American poetry as "nearly Baroque": "twenty-first-century poets of the nearly Baroque want art that cannot be reduced to its own

[124] W.J.T. Mitchell, "Representation," in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, eds. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (Chicago University Press, 1995), 16.
[125] *IS*, 8; emphasis added.

explanation, that shows off its material textures, its artificiality, its descent from prior art, its location in history."[126]

The dense patternings of sound, elaborate and self-referential structures, complex metapoetic analogies: these contribute to a poetics of ornament, as techniques that resist figuration and insist instead on the material substantiality of poetic language. This owes much to what Johnson describes as the modernist wish to capture the world as it really is. Yet the analogies that Guest builds across her mid-period work, the poem/quilt, and the poem/vine, play with the possibility that the poem may be rendered as a thing in itself, independent of an external world. What kind of object is this poem? Evading referentiality, thickening its mediacy, and evoking an absence, it is an object that elicits the attentions of a phenomenophile: a peripheral, provisional, and inconclusive thing, one with its face turned away from the world as it is.

[126] Burke, "Real Baroque," in *Cambridge Companion to Twenty-First Century Poetry*, ed. Edward Larrissy (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 90-91.

Chapter 4

"venturing into haze": evanescent character in the narrative works

> That there should never be air
> in a picture surprises me.[1]

How does a literary work delineate the boundary between the self and atmosphere? Responding to this question, this chapter looks at two character-centred works of Guest. The concerns of chapters 2 and 3—for the mobility of affect and the materiality of poetic language—return here as elements commented on in narrative sequences from the 1970s. These works ask how it is that seemingly formless sensations of light, air and temperature, humidity, weight, and colour—the substance of mere phenomena that are attract Terada's phenomenophile—can be figured as agents in narrative, and how the form of a character may be rendered capacious enough to contain these diffuse and mobile phenomena that trouble the boundaries between interior and exterior, body and world. Pairing character and atmosphere in this way forces us to ask whether a form's capacity to contain the uncontainable should be read as its yielding to an unassimilable quality or as its enlargement to include a previously unquantifiable level of detail. I first discuss how this interplay of interior and exterior, the domestic and the ecstatic is presented in *Seeking Air* (1978) and *The Countess of Minneapolis* (1976). I then compare these works' modelling of subjectivity as an attempt to contain the uncontainable with Eve Sedgwick's analysis of a mystical plenitude in Proust. In the chapter's final section, I draw on the idea of the "container/contained" in the work of psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion as a means of describing the intersubjective exchanges that Guest brings to the foreground in her study of character and its relation to atmosphere.

I Inviting in the world

In the mid-1970s, Guest produced a series of works that distinguish themselves from her earlier writings for their investigation of character. Characters, in these works, have a

[1] Guest, *Moscow Mansions* (Viking Press, 1973), 58 (hereafter cited as *MM*).

troubled rapport with the atmospheres that envelop them. Oppositions between interiority and exteriority, form and formlessness, person and place, the domestic and the ecstatic begin to dissolve, as Guest presses against the limits of any subject-representation that would depend too heavily upon these partitions. This "venturing into haze," a phrase that I take from Guest's novel of 1978, is the narrative shape which unifies fragmentary impressions that progressively weaken her protagonists' illusions of self-sufficiency and self-enclosure.

This technique of fragmentation, recomposition, and negotiation with an outside that replenishes and tests an interior brings Guest's writing towards what poet and critic Joan Retallack discusses as ecopoetry's concern for writing that "takes part in the recomposing of contemporary consciousness, [and] contemporary sensibilities."[2] The contemporary, in Retallack's sense, is expressed as an act of participation and recomposition: to write the contemporary is to compose a form that exhibits its contingencies, vulnerabilities, and its propensity to change, open as it is to a future that it can only posit as a response to its present imaginary.[3]

As this chapter discusses, Guest's subjects are self-consciously concerned with their own contemporariness: they try to get a grip on a present moment that is forever slipping away from their designs, a sensation that they register as either joyous release from daily constraints or the threat of a self-annihilating dissolution. In connecting this anxious need to affirm the contemporary with the innovations of ecopoetics, Retallack describes poetry's capacity to "invite in" new phenomena, previously debarred from representation, into its vision:

> If we can agree that experiment is a reaching out to experience things that cannot be grasped merely by examining the state of our own minds, here's another little thought experiment: suppose a loose affiliation of "we"s were particularly concerned right now to invite parts of the world, previously excluded, into the operational purview of our poetics—somehow on their own terms. Suppose poets began to operate under the rubric "ecopoetics" with the aim of developing a body of work that reinvestigates our species' relation to other inhabitants of the fragile and finite territory our species named, claimed, exploited, sentimentalized, and aggrandized as "our world."[4]

[2] Retallack, "What Is Experimental Poetry and Why Do We Need It?" *Jacket* 32 (2007), para.25.
[3] Retallack, "What Is Experimental Poetry?" para.25.
[4] Retallack, "What Is Experimental Poetry?" para. 30. For a discussion of how aesthetic and literary works invite a sensitivity to atmospheric conditions that might otherwise remain excluded from representation, see

In the collection *The Countess from Minneapolis* and the novel *Seeking Air*, Guest performs a comparable process of inviting in parts of the world that are conventionally too fleeting to be given aesthetic form. Unlike the earlier collections of the 1960s, these two works foreground the representation of a single character within the development of narrative. Guest investigates the repercussions of relating the self to an enveloping atmosphere through studies of characters who are exceptionally sensitive to the transient and ephemeral phenomena that surround them, and who stylize the self as a container for these impersonal forces. Formally, these works are built up as collages of first-person present-tense journal entries, scraps of dialogue, lyric reminiscence, and epistolary prose, through which the urgency of the present moment is grasped at as it slips away. As character studies, they draw upon the thematization of life and its writing that Guest would go on developing through research for her biography of H.D.,[5] and they signal an extension of her experiments with avant-garde aesthetics as discussed in chapters 2 and 3.

In *Seeking Air*, it is the protagonist Morgan Flew who is nervously susceptible to the influx of atmospheric forces, as his struggles with self-definition progressively give way to a decentred notion of the self as one thing among things. Comically skewering Morgan's "jovian disputes" of self-mastery,[6] and depicting his steady acceptance of how "Things stray,"[7] Guest charts Morgan's perpetual responsiveness to moods that descend from the sky without warning and then depart down the East River without a trace. In *The Countess*, it is the artist's efforts to enclose the mobility and vastness of the Minnesotan prairies that is examined through the voice of the collection's eponym. What begins in the earlier works as a low-key motif—references to weather, clouds, and air found across *The Location of Things*—is elevated in these sequences to a means of interrogating the confines which hold art and life apart, with the former understood as one possible container for the chaotic interactions that course through the latter.

In this way, Guest continues to attend to phenomena that hover on the verge of perception and evade the strictures of aesthetic form. As Melissa Gregg and Gregory J.

Tatiana Konrad, Chantelle Mitchell, and Savannah Schaufler, "Introduction: Toward a Cultural Axiology of Air," in *Imagining Air*, ed. Tatiana Konrad (University of Exeter Press, 2023).

[5] The thematization of an exchange between life and aesthetic form continues through Guest's writings of the 1980s. In 1980, two years after the publication of *Seeking Air*, Guest published a short pamphlet of nine poems titled *Biography*. Produced during the process of research and writing of *Herself Defined*, her biography of H.D., the collection traces the poet's rapport with the subject of the biography, and the art of converting life into verse.

[6] *SA*, 203.

[7] *SA*, 202.

Seigworth summarise, affect theory draws our attention towards "fleeting and flowing ephemera, of the daily and the workaday."[8] Writing in their introduction to *The Affect Theory Reader*, Gregg and Seigworth suggest that this represents a new critical orientation that affect opens onto:

> [Affect theory] attends to the hard and fast materialities, as well as the fleeting and flowing ephemera, of the daily and the workaday, of everyday and every-night life, and of "experience" (understood in ways far more collective and "external", rather than individual and interior), where persistent, repetitious practices of power can simultaneously provide a body (or, better, collectivized bodies) with predicaments and potentials for realizing a world that subsists within and exceeds the horizons and boundaries of the norm.[9]

Guest's narrative sequences act out a confrontation between these "fleeting and flowing ephemera" and forms of containment, measure, or arrest by which interpretative control can be exerted upon a volatile exteriority.

For Guest's characters, the predicament then becomes how to dwell in a world that violently repudiates inertia and resists the definition of given forms. For Guest's readers, character then comes to denote a particular orientation towards this predicament, one that, in the second half of this chapter, I associate with Eve Sedgwick's affect-inflected reading of the mystical orientation of Proustian subjectivity in *À la recherche du temps perdu*.

By way of introduction, we can observe an orientation towards an atmospheric excess in one of *Seeking Air*'s final chapters, during which Morgan senses himself emerging from the melancholic self-obsession that has preoccupied him for much of the novel. Morgan's perception of this upward and outward shift in mood comes in response to an atmospheric flurry that drifts in from afar: "like dust blowing in from the desert," a cloud arrives to envelop him, and then stretch his attention across the crumbling material substance of his surroundings.[10] This paragraph describes that dispersal into haze:

> The inventories of dust… the swift strokes of the straw broom as it swept the earth… the clay in which reaches the tomato plants… pounding of clay into pot or brick…

[8] Gregg and Seigworth, "Introduction," in *The Affect Theory Reader* (Duke University Press, 2010), 7.
[9] Gregg and Seigworth, "Introduction," 7.
[10] *SA*, 179.

> careful rich deposits… yucca perched on shale… a car moving from grass to pavement… its tires heating or cooling the cement… sand on my leg… sand filed against my ankle… sand resting on tile… the weight of tile… heavy here… thin over there… bird's beak pushing the cracks filled with bread… perishable only the mountains… venturing into haze.[11]

This passage comes shortly after Morgan and his partner Miriam have retreated to a villa for respite. Their retreat is an opportunity to get away from the exhaustion that Morgan, an experimental writer, blames on the "claims of reality": the quotidian routine which he chafes against throughout the novel. Morgan hopes that the villa, with its imposing luxury, will reaffirm his commitment to a literary project that can arrest the formless anxieties that shadow him: "I must affect a design here in this villa."[12] The use of "affect" signals the transformation of Morgan's orientation towards the claims of reality that infringe on his writing. Were Morgan to *effect* a design of the villa, he would impose an aesthetic form on to the surrounding space; to affect a design is to fake it or to alter it, but not, in either case, to impose form by design. Morgan is carried into what he feels to be a happier carefreeness from the moment that he begins to understand his role as one participant in the transpersonal claims of reality that incorporate him, rather than a competitor positioned against them.

In her depiction of the anxious Morgan, and the eccentric expatriate Countess in the earlier collection, Guest portrays character as it is affected by and through acts of participation: moments of relief and joy, appearing in domestic spaces, that are driven by the unsettling complexities of atmospheric conditions. The claims of reality which vex Morgan are eventually refigured as the very air that sustains, and exceeds, his self.

In detailing this model, I argue that Guest departs from a well-worn modernist division of domestic containment and the uncontainable ecstatic. She reconfigures this binary as a restless exchange: the quotidian is enriched and enlarged as it accommodates the apparently formless material of the atmosphere within which it is also submersed. I return to some of the affective consequences of this model, departing from Sedgwick's Kleinian perspective and drawing on insights from the work of psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion. Before this theoretical intervention, I describe the modernist antinomy that Guest's evanescent characters seek to escape from: the domestic as separated from the ecstatic.

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[11] *SA*, 179.
[12] *SA*, 174.

II "atmospheric attachments" in *Seeking Air* (1978)

The separation of ecstatic release from the quotidian claims of reality is first defended by Morgan in *Seeking Air*, and then rendered untenable as the novel unfolds. The novel, taking the form of Morgan's journal entries and haphazard reflections, recounts how a domestic space might become an arena for the extraordinary: a container for moments of revelation embedded in the quotidian rhythms of a home. This aligns the novel with what Barry Sheils calls the "structuring paradox" of modernism: "on the one hand, there is rupture, the opening-up of commonsense perceptions of time and space […] on the other hand, an increased focus on everydayness, standardized life, the *homme moyen sensuel* and so on."[13] Guest's novel pulls this structuring dynamic into its psychological foreground: Morgan is not only conscious of this paradox, he is motivated by the need to resolve it.

Reception of *Seeking Air* focusses on its portrayal of this conflict between daily life and the aestheticization of its rapturous interruptions. The novel was first published in 1978 by the independent experimental press Black Sparrow, after several years in which Guest struggled to secure a publisher. One rejection letter, from Farrar, Straus and Giroux, takes issue with the novel's formal fragmentation and its quality of "evanescence": "But [*Seeking Air*] is also evanescent and fragmentary, finally irritating me by its evanescence […] what I am certain of is that we mustn't, can't take it on, because I can't imagine how we'd be able to get it across to the public."[14] The novel received limited attention at the time of its release. A review in the *Washington Post* by Douglas Messerli describes it as out of step with "expectations of realism in modern fiction": "it is difficult to assimilate a work which as such artifice at its heart. But these problems of context, artifice and reality are exactly those with which Guest is concerned, and the book is a virtual anatomy of the creative act."[15]

In a later reappraisal of the novel, Kathleen Fraser reflects on the work as an "antinarrative" that is constructed out of "private notation, the broken surface, and the fleeting thought as they collide."[16] The book's 103 short chapters are, writes Fraser, poetically sutured together as a series of "swift cuts," replacing the "blow-by-blow narrative

[13] Sheils, "The Metereological Device: Literary Modernism, the Daily Weather Forecast and the Productions of Anxiety," *Modernism/modernity* 9, no. 1 (2024), para.4.
[14] "Letter to Barbara Guest from Aaron Asher." April 30, 1976. Box 43, folder 940, Guest papers.
[15] "'Review of Seeking Air' by Douglas Messerli." April 1978. Box 43, folder 940, Guest papers.
[16] Kathleen Fraser, "One Hundred and Three Chapters of Little Times: Collapsed and Transfigured Moments in the Fiction of Barbara Guest," in *Breaking the Sequence: Women's Experimental Fiction*, edited by Ellen G. Friedman and Miriam Fuchs (Princeton University Press, 2000), 241.

of 'real' time" with the obsessive fixations of Morgan.[17] Fraser notes that the novel troubles "compositional scale, in which certain moments will be foregrounded and heightened, others abstracted or reduced, reducing the more conventional novelistic balance and proportion."[18] Taking Fraser's argument to its limit, the novel can be read as a collage of minor events that hardly amount to a plot and which evades linearity. Indeed, Guest herself, in an interview of 1992, leans away from narrative, describing the book as "essentially a prose-poem… about memory, about the collision of ideas, about coincidence, the brevity of ideas, about time, disorder, flux, etc."[19]

Nonetheless, as a book about memory, time, and the development of the self, *Seeking Air* does rest upon genre expectations of the modernist novel on which is its modelled.[20] In particular, Guest invites a comparison between *Seeking Air* and a modernist "stream-of-consciousness" technique with the name of the novel's secondary character Miriam, a reference to Miriam Henderson, heroine of Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage*, the multivolume work that pioneered the technique. Guest revisited Richardson's writing throughout her life. She read Richardson in college, "[preferring] her to Virginia Woolf," and followed reception of her work.[21] In a 1996 review of Susan Gevirtz's critical study of Richardson, Guest comments on Gevirtz's replication of Richardson's style, and compares the methodology of biography to *Pilgrimage*'s own experimental techniques:

> WRITING is a means of participating in a sense of adventure, of producing *a joy that can then be reproduced in the reader, and by the reader. It is this longing for participation* that makes the whole process necessary.[22]

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[17] Fraser, "One Hundred and Three Chapters," 244.
[18] Fraser, "One Hundred and Three Chapters," 242.
[19] Guest, interview by Mark Hillringhouse, 29.
[20] As Rachel Blau DuPlessis notes in her afterword to the 2021 UK edition, the novel can be read as part of Guest's experimentation with non-poetic forms, a process which reached its high-point in the output of the 1970s: "Guest's artistic career can be seen as one of those with not a monumental but a decidedly polymathic, extensive range: she has written plays, serious essays on art, a novel, a biography of HD, poetry and more poetry, theoretical meditations in poetics, aphorisms." "Afterword," *Seeking Air* (Reality Street, 2021), 206.
[21] In her 1992 interview with Hillringhouse, Guest states: '[*Seeking Air*] is influenced by Dorothy Richardson's *The Pilgrimage*. I think she's one of our best writers. She's compared to Joyce in that she uses or relies on stream of consciousness. She wrote about a dental assistant whose name was Miriam, the name I gave to my heroine. When I read her in college I much preferred her to Virginia Woolf. But *Seeking Air* turned out differently, of course" (29). A key difference between Richardson's heroine and the figure of Miriam hinges on the political consequence of the former's quest for liberation. In a typed note from the late 1990s, Guest refers to Richardson's Miriam as "a rebellious figure, influenced in 1905 by literary and political radicalism. My Miriam, alas, is a fainted [sic] edition." Box 82, folder 1456, Guest papers.
[22] Guest, "Review of *Narrative's Journey; The Fiction and Film Writing of Dorothy Richardson* by Susan Gevirtz." 1996. Box 82, Guest papers.

Guest's appreciation for Richardson's technical innovations as the expression of a liberatory adventure is in tune with feminist reception of *Pilgrimage* which foregrounds the themes of self-discovery and subject-formation as explored through the rhythms of the everyday. For Rebecca Rauve Davis, the novel's techniques amount to "an unapologetic description of aesthetic standards and practices grounded in immanence": unity and flow become the watchwords for this representation of consciousness as a "flowing mixture of mind and matter," resisting idealist beliefs popular at the beginning of the twentieth century.[23] Within the topography of Richardson's novels, the adventure of Miriam's self-discovery is anchored to her experience of the domestic space as invigorating and freeing: a space within which she can accrue agency. Tanya Pikula argues that this resignification of the domestic space across *Pilgrimage* is sustained through "[Miriam's] stimulating interactions with other women and the sense of freedom that the non-traditional domestic space affords her."[24]

Seeking Air is shaped as the inversion of this sense of freedom in the domestic: unlike Richardson's heroine, Morgan begins as hyper-sensitive to his own self-fashioning and frightened by a sense of entrapment within the domestic sphere. He expresses this fear in idealist terms: he wishes to escape the confinement of his apartment and realize his potential as an artist who transcends the particularities of time and place. In this regard, his self-perception is filtered through what M. Mattix, writing on Frank O'Hara's poetry, conceptualises as the "ever-changing" fashioning of the heroic artist: a hyper-mobile style of self-perception that continually filters new experiences back through the aesthetic articulations of previous works.[25] Indeed, for the first half of the novel, Morgan cannot even look at Miriam without refashioning her in aestheticized terms. Morgan's resistance to the domestic as a space of revelation, of repose, and of intimacy, represented throughout by Miriam, causes him to fashion a constant aestheticization of her. His first entry describes Miriam at a party "as a painting seen at an exhibition," a muddling up of art and life that will become the major theme as the novel progresses.[26] Morgan's thinking here illustrates

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[23] Rauve Davis, "Stream and Destination: Husserl, Subjectivity, and Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage*," *Twentieth Century Literature* 59, no. 2 (2013), 316, 325.
[24] Pikula, "The Thrills of Modernity: Representations of Suburbia in Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage* Series," *Pilgrimages: The Journal of Dorothy Richardson Studies*, no. 8 (2016), 50. As Rita Felski observes, this celebration of the domestic distinguishes Richardson from contemporaneous high modernist depictions of the domestic as alienating and confining: "[f]requent descriptions of the modern period as a period of deepening despair, paralysis, and anxiety fail to address the visions of many female modernists, for whom the idea of the modern was to embody exhilarating possibilities and the potential for new and previously unimaginable sexual and political freedoms." "Modernism and Modernity: Engendering Literary History." in *Modernism*, ed. Michael Whitworth (Blackwell, 2007), 230.
[25] Mattix, *Frank O'Hara and the Poetics of Saying 'I'* (Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 2011), 39-40.
[26] *SA*, 15.

in miniature what will follow: first, he perceives Miriam as a painting, he digresses on a visit to a museum in Siena, and he then paternalistically presents himself as rescuing Miriam from her "cage."[27] Self-perception is discovered only via a relentless rendering of Miriam-as-object, and Morgan is shocked the next morning to find the apartment disturbed by "an extraordinary disorder," as if only now alert to the real presence of his partner.[28]

Through Morgan, *Seeking Air* explores the limits of an attempt to aestheticize the presence of the other and it highlights a related impulse to escape into an ecstatic temporality that is divorced from the domestic. In a short essay titled "Vision and Mundanity," we can observe Guest thinking about the relation between the quotidian and the ecstatic in a different key. Here, Guest gives her own rendition of that separation, as she divides the "spiritual life" of poetry from the "counter-spirit" of quotidian experience:

> It is the counter-spirit we must be aware of. The presence of the mundane inhibits the imaginative properties of a poem, whittles its growth, cripples wing power; mundanity relegates a poem to the ash heap of words.[29]

Guest here voices her suspicion of "the mundane," the quotidian sphere of activity which she opposes to the transcendent vision of poetic language. As discussed in chapter 3, this connects her poetics to a basic post-romantic scepticism about the world as it is. The poem, exceeding the communicative utility of other forms of language, transforms the unexceptional conditions of its making into an exceptional moment of transcendent insight.

The spiritual tenor of these remarks is representative of Guest's comments on poetics, but the language she deploys to describe this state of poetic transcendence calls for careful consideration: "The poet of vision understands the auditory and emotional needs of the words and frees them so that the word becomes both an elemental and physical being, and continuous in movement."[30] The organic and vitalist lexis that Guest deploys here complicates what might otherwise be a straight-forward dichotomy of the poetic imagination *contra* the immanent materiality of lived experience. In fact, it is in the same essay that Guest observes that the poem is a "physical being," and as such it is therefore *closer* to "[l]ife as it appears."[31] Although she reserves suspicion for the "counter-spirit" of the mundane,

[27] *SA*, 18.
[28] *SA*, 19.
[29] *FI*, 89.
[30] *FI*, 89.
[31] *FI*, 88.

she arrives at this conclusion via the suggestion that there is something more vital, lifelike, and altogether more *real* about poetry's being "continuous in movement," when compared with a language that is "deficient of vision."[32] This "elemental and physical" poetry is then described by Guest in terms that recall the quotidian tasks of care-giving ("the poet understands the auditory and *emotional needs* of the words") and labour ("[words] desire an occupation, [they] cannot exist on beauty or necessity alone").[33]

Guest's notes bring to the fore an interplay between the domestic and the ecstatic, the immanent and the transcendent—an exchange that cannot be levelled to the mere conversion of the former into material for the latter. In imagining that the poem is an object in need of care, maintenance, and work, she puts poetic imagination within the space and time of the everyday. This places her poetics within what Thomas S. Davis identifies as the "everyday turn" in late modernist writing. In *The Extinct Scene: Late Modernism and Everyday Life*, Davis argues that modernism's confrontations with the complexities of everyday experience are inseparable from its formal innovations. The attempt to capture, in Guest's words, "[l]ife as it appears" begets a restless give-and-take that occurs on the threshold between daily life and its reformulations in aesthetics. The mundane settings of everyday life, as Davis' argues, necessarily loom large within such a dynamic. Davis is here resisting the assumption that modernism need be "the art of epiphany, shock, or rupture," a construction that, he argues, "misses the role played by a persistent ordinariness" that modernist forms pay attention to.[34] As Davis summarizes: "[modernism] is the name we give to art that treats everyday life as a problem and not a given."[35]

Davis' thesis is part of a renewed interest in modernist articulations of temporalities.[36] A number of efforts to reimagine the role of literary critique this century have questioned the dominance of shock, rupture, and the new as interpretative frames for modernist writing. In the conventional telling, as summarised by Mauro Ponzi, modernism arises out of "a condition of the individual subjected to the shocks of the experience of the new who feels dislocated from nature and isolated in the labyrinth of the metropolis": a condition that we know as modernity.[37] Alienation and rupture, break and transgression, slippage and fragment are the tropes of an art tasked with probing this condition. The

[32] *FI*, 89.
[33] *FI*, 89.
[34] Davis, *The Extinct Scene: Late Modernism and Everyday Life* (Columbia University Press, 2016), 5.
[35] Davis, *The Extinct Scene*, 5.
[36] See Andrew Epstein, *Attention Equals Life: The Pursuit of the Everyday in Contemporary Poetry and Culture* (Oxford University Press, 2016).
[37] Ponzi, *Nietzsche's Nihilism in Walter Benjamin* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 201.

extraordinary instant is privileged over the ordinary, contrastingly presented as linear, flat, and closed. The historic avant-gardes of the early twentieth century are closely associated with this narrative: the avant-garde gesture aggravates or provokes shock in order to unveil the new, bring it to the surface, make it felt, and organise around the disturbance generated by this shocking unveiling.

In *Seeking Air*, it is precisely the problem of everyday life that preoccupies Morgan, as he struggles to complete a mysterious writing project which he refers to as "Dark." Dark signifies a hidden, closed domain, within which Morgan stitches together the narrative of his own life out of reminiscence, fantasy, literary and artistic references, all the while maintaining an aestheticized detachment from the present. In an illustrative passage, Morgan figures his poetic "exegeses" of life as the product of a "dietetic" routine:

> And what—if not a diet—is this feed I give myself in my exploration of Dark? I am fairly experienced here, tossing myself a crumb, watering it, digesting it with a twinge or two when I haven't followed the prescription, beautifully if the tract is in order. When I have been good to myself, letting the sufficient air surround, no indulgence in obnoxious liquids. Arriving healthily at the exposition of Dark.[38]

The digestive metaphor here is telling: Dark, although a source of melancholic despair for Morgan, can at least supply some kind of intellectual sustenance. Set against Dark, there is the everyday presence of Miriam, who represents a new reality grounded in domesticity and daily life, an opening onto an exteriority and an immanent terrain of shared interactions and dialogue. As Terrence Diggory describes, Guest wants to "explore the necessary accommodations to ordinary reality of a life devoted almost wholly to the imagination."[39] The novel's playful tone responds to the irony of this arrangement: Morgan's diary is a patchwork of high-brow allusions that express his continual frustration with his ongoing aestheticization of daily life. Against this aestheticizing impulse, Morgan must struggle, in his own words, to accept Miriam's "little household ways": a move that would necessitate the renunciation of his chauvinistic desire to convert her into material for the literary object that we are reading.[40]

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[38] *SA*, 38.

[39] Diggory, *Encyclopaedia of the New York School Poets* (Infobase Publishing, 2009), 434.

[40] In chapter 42, Morgan directly confronts the misogyny that underlies his treatment of Miriam:

> My "chauvinism" had taken shape differently from that which I observed among my peers. Their attitudes were ones of convinced superiority succumbing to subordination, frequent rage alternating

Guest situates the couple's little household ways in the intervals of quotidian routine (shopping, cleaning, city walks, bedtime conversations, sex, dinners, and breakfasts).[41] The importance of the everyday is signalled by the novel's epigraph, taken from Jonathan Swift's letters to Vanessa, which frames Morgan's chronicle of his domestic life with Miriam as "little times" that may amount to a record of intimacy:

> It ought to be an exact chronicle of twelve years from the time of spilling the coffee to drinking of coffee. From Dunstable to Dublin with every single passage since… two hundred chapters of madness, the chapter of long walks, the Berkshire surprise, fifty chapters of little times.[42]

With Swift's diary of little times as a model, the novel rarely exits the interior of the home: the action shifts from Morgan's apartment on the East River to a house in the Hamptons, with occasional scenes of visits from friends. In her preface to the 1997 edition, Guest underscores the importance of the apartment as the space where she wrote throughout the 1970s:

> In real life I have only a dusty view of time. *Seeking Air* is a record of time. The time is the 1970s. I composed *Seeking Air* in the same apartment in the E 90s, looking over the East River, as *Moscow Mansions* and *The Türler Losses.*[43]

Blurring the distinction between her own writing with Morgan's fictional journal, she characterises *Seeking Air* as "a record of life," and describes her routine use of the balcony in terms that recalls Morgan's compulsive pacing on his balcony: "I used to sit on the

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> with social and sexual needs. An acceptance of their malehood as a natural state of grace was taken for granted in a world whose laws were created by and for men.
>
> My attitude to Miriam was interwoven with my preoccupation with her as a person whom first I had discovered and then one who I believed I might recreate in the image I desired. It can be said to my distress that I never left her alone. I persistently meddled with her character. I left her only to solitude. When with her, that is in the same room with her, my imagination infused itself with desire (*SA,* 79).

[41] Guest also comments on "the little life" of quotidian moments and mundane materials in her reflection on the H.D. biography:

> Searching among the paraphernalia of what became a biographer's lumber room, it was forced upon me that I was living not exactly with a goddess, or even always a heroine, but with a human being who was rooted also deeply in what is known as "the little life," that of clothes, money, meals, family, love affairs. "The Intimacy of Biography," *The Iowa Review* 16, no. 3 (1986), 59.

[42] *SA*, 12.
[43] *SA*, 7.

balcony. It was really an unimprisoned piece of space I could use to collect my ideas about the novel and spy upon the world outside bringing its debris to *Seeking Air*."[44] The interior of this apartment (a studio on East 94th street that Guest rented from friends to write in) is figured as a container that remains receptive to the atmospheric debris of the outside. Initially, Morgan experiences this containment as the threat of mundanity, the stifling of his creative energies that his imagination must guard against. It is his attempts to escape from this threat that propel the novel's infrequent flashes of action: he plots an escape from Miriam, from his ruminations on Dark, from the compulsive need to compile his life as a series of aesthetically pleasing anecdotes.

The threat of the everyday, as felt by Morgan, is therefore given a spatial grounding within the restrictiveness of the apartment. Yet the novel's juxtaposition of the ecstatic and the everyday is performed above all through its reconfigurations of time. Morgan is intensely aware of Miriam's role in reforming his perception of time. His drive to document the little times which add up to a life recalls what philosopher Peter Osborne terms the "totalising" temporality of a modernist historical conscious, through which the temporalities of a variety of social practices (the everyday, the workplace, leisure time) are mediated and converted into a historical consciousness. Osborne's premise is that not all time is understood historically: time *becomes* historical as the experience of different temporalities is converted into historical narrative by sociopolitical structures. The very existence of categories such as modernity, postmodernity, modernism, progress, the new, and avant-garde indicates, in Osborne's configuration, "a logic of historical totalization."[45] These categories have no meaning without an apprehension of history as a totality, and they articulate aesthetically and politically distinct responses to the pressures of that totalisation.

Modernism, for Osborne as for Davis in his work on the everyday, is therefore a culture of time, one that critiques the discipling of time as a resource, while simultaneously valorising the new as the negation of the past. Within these conditions, the interpretation of history imposes, Osborne writes, "time itself as a problem": any conception of futurity generates a backward pressure on a reading of progress that passes through the present, which in turn rests on a sedimentation of past time as "identifiable periods, movements, forms or styles."[46] In order to account for the ways that history is fabricated out of diverse temporalities, Osborne calls for a phenomenology of "the ongoing temporalization of

[44] *SA*, 7.
[45] Osborne, *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde* (Verso, 1995), viii.
[46] Osborne, *Politics of Time*, viii.

existence."[47] To this end, he recovers the motif of the everyday in Walter Benjamin's later writings and the post-war work of Henri Lefebvre. Osborne's definition of the avant-garde is worth quoting in full, since it clarifies how Morgan's modernist perception of the everyday functions within the novel:

> To put this another way, "now-being" is a form of avant-garde experience. For the avant-garde is not that which is most historically advanced in the sense that (in the image of Benjamin's backward-looking angel) it has the most history behind it – an *historicist* image if ever there was one, even if progress is inverted into the piling up of the wreckage of a linear catastrophism. The avant-garde is that which, in the flash of the dialectical image, disrupts the linear time-consciousness of progress in such a way as to enable us, like the child, to "discover the new anew" and, along with it, the possibility of a better future.[48]

For Osborne, the critical task is to rethink aesthetic forms through their relation to the temporalities of modernity. This calls not for the historicist collocation of an artwork within its own time, but for an understanding of how artworks might activate tensions between temporalities that were never aligned in the first place, and which remain irresolvably heterogenous. The avant-garde is not simply in advance of a present understood as the linear development towards a future. Rather, the avant-garde experience is that experience which violently displaces a dominant temporality, and in so doing alerting us to alternative passages of time. Its function is to make the present felt as an incomplete totality.

Morgan's chronicle of his relationship with Miriam develops an analogous acceptance of the incompletion and openness of the present. Dark, his "life's work," is the name he gives to a competing fantasy of totalisation, by which every moment of his life might be rendered legible ("lisible," in his words) in the terms of a "collective thought" that may finds expression in literature and aesthetics:

> So indeed my climbing over the areas of symbolic codifying of Dark, my adventures in the lisible, jointures with the putrefying heaps of collective thought, attempts to

[47] Osborne, *Politics of Time*, 200.
[48] Osborne, *Politics of Time*, 150.

define ultimate complexity or complexities of Dark, I had earned the right to be modified to the *parole* WRITER.[49]

This writing project is rendered interminable by the ongoing temporalization of existence that Miriam's presence forces Morgan to confront. Guest's innovation is to insert this modernist anxiety about the unexceptional flow of the everyday—time itself as a problem—*into* the dynamics of a romantic relationship that unfolds in the novel's domestic settings. As the subject of Morgan's narrative, Miriam should conform to his desire for a revelatory interruption of the everyday. And yet, in performing what he calls his daily '"exegesis"' of Miriam, Morgan senses the constancy of her presence as an affront to that desire for ecstatic rupture. In chapter fifteen, Morgan begins to perceive the fluidity of time as an emanation of Miriam's constancy:

> It is true she changed from time when I first met her. It took me years to learn how to construct the sentences which would be useful to relate our story to ourselves. When finally it came in parts, the vision and metaphysics themselves began to untangle, thus preparing me. My apprenticeship had been served and I was thus able to inhabit her.
>
> The subtleties of structure could then be put to use. Of course I was only midway, yet I never thought of time. Time was so fluid, because I was approaching a goal which stretched endlessly before me. I was nearer this goal, or object, only as the station were met and crossed, only as the tunnels or mountains appeared and the track continued on the other side of the mountain. As one tree was examined in a forest of many species. And if any change could be said to have taken place in Miriam it was through my series of photographs. She was a constant on the plain I was searching, and as with all constants she varied according to the difficulties or ease with which I might film her on my varying landscape. And the scale might alter; it might be diminished or it might be enlarged according to my sights. Thus she was a true mistress.[50]

[49] *SA*, 194.
[50] *SA*, 34-5.

At this early point in the novel, Morgan still apprehends Miriam as a construction of his own imagination: she is a structure that he wishes to inhabit; her role is reduced to that of a literarily perceptible "true mistress." Miriam's constancy, the mere fact of her presence as it is met each day during the minutiae of a shared life, is the first signal that this view cannot hold, as Morgan begins to perceive her as a radically exterior object who exists and persists within a broader atmosphere over which he must relinquish control. The remainder of the novel will unravel the "subtleties of structure" that Morgan has prematurely imposed upon the relationship: while he is busy carrying out his exegesis, and seeking ecstatic relief, the domestic setting surrounding him will force a close to the restlessness of this search.

As Osborne's study of modernist temporalities illustrates, the back-and-forth of this flow of the ecstatic into and out of the confines of the quotidian is a paradigmatic temporal arrangement in modernist narrative. In his 2012 work *Dying for Time*, Martin Hägglund's offers another account of how the everyday and the ecstatic are inscribed in modernist narratives. Hägglund's analysis of what he calls "chronolibidinal aesthetics" is valuable for its articulation of what a clash of the domestic and the ecstatic might feel like, and how such feelings reorganise affective responses into narrative. In the model proposed by Hägglund, a modernist interpolation of competing temporalities refines psychoanalytic accounts of desire that are centred around lack. Departing from the Lacanian account of the drives, Hägglund argues that "the movement of desire is predicated on a constitutive difference, since one can only desire to be what one is not."[51] This desire to be what one is not is, necessarily, an experience of time. In his readings of Woolf, Proust, and Nabokov, Hägglund shows that the force of libido can only reproduce itself in terms of "temporal life": the "threat of time," he writes, "is not only unavoidable but also part of what animates the experiences of fulfilled desire."[52] The relentless protention and retention of time within modernist prose is the stylistic correspondent of desire itself.

Hägglund plots how the chronotope of modernist narrative binds affective responses to the temporal. He argues that the pathos of modernist writing is bound to two temporalities which are incorporated in the works of Proust and Woolf, in particular: the "temporality of survival" (the awareness of finitude and death, and the pressure that this awareness exerts on life), and an ecstatic, "timeless state of immortality" (a momentary release from the first temporality). In the case of Proust, this means that involuntary memory is structured as a

[51] Hägglund, *Dying for Time: Proust, Woolf, Nabokov* (Harvard University Press, 2012), 3.
[52] Hägglund, *Dying for Time*, 158.

"painful synthesis" of these two temporalities: the "sense of paradisiacal happiness thus depends on the difference that time makes, but for the same reason it is necessarily traversed by the pain of loss."[53] According to Hägglund, daily rhythms are interrupted by ecstasy, but it is only due to a heightened sensitivity to temporal finitude that one can experience such ecstasy as a momentary relief. This thesis complements the Freudian structure of the drives, as elaborated in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, which holds that excitation must be discharged "in favour of repose."[54] Hägglund's proposal is that this mechanism of discharge in fact "*begins* from a bond to temporal life […] a minimal investment, in the sense that one cannot be indifferent to what happens."[55]

With *Seeking Air*, Guest offers a depiction of this modernist attachment of affect to the temporal. Stylistically approaching the fluid interior monologues that Hägglund takes as his paradigms, Morgan's ruminations on Dark and Miriam are presented to us as a stream of *self*-consciousness. His jumpy and inconclusive reminiscences are modelled on the rhythms of high modernist prose, but the entries frequently break off with frustrated dissatisfaction at their incapacity to enter into the "[c]ontinuation of reality" that he associates with Miriam.[56] The novel's fragmentary structure supports this thematization of temporal disjunctures: each short chapter is an arrested attempt to enter into the continuous time-scale of the domestic, an attempt subsequently abandoned, as though the little times of Swift were too stringent to meet the promise of such continuity.

Unable to release himself from what he perceives as the infringement of the everyday, Morgan nevertheless hopes that his aesthetical digressions could be a means of converting his experience into a form that approaches an ecstatic timelessness. His fascination with Miriam, and the desire to disencumber his vision of her of its aesthetic frame, is also an expression of the 'minimal investment' in the temporalities of daily life that Hägglund takes to be the motor of stream-of-consciousness in prose. In contrast to his project on Dark, which detaches him from the present environment, just as it detaches each chapter from the next, Morgan's interactions with Miriam draw him towards an acknowledgment of quotidian time as unbroken, finite, and, for this, valuable.

[53] Hägglund, *Dying for Time*, 155.
[54] Hägglund, *Dying for Time*, 156.
[55] Hägglund, *Dying for Time*, 157.
[56] *SA*, 50.

Morgan's difficulty in accepting this new temporal condition is confronted in the novel's central chapters, where the domestic space is experienced as an oppressive state of airlessness:

> I am confined to my home by restrictions self-inflicted. "House Arrest."
> The house with its heavy consciousness.
> All the rooms are full.
> The furniture unable to breathe. Tables, chairs, sofas, rub against each other.
> Seeking air. Space in which to breathe.
> He felt not claustrophobia, something more tiresome, urban, the tension of a subway. His living room.
> An Ozu movie. Where the camera remains to show us the room after the inhabitants have left it. The room still full, burdened with presences.
> He could not write in his house. Preceding him, antedating him were the action, drama, rehearsals in the chapters called Life. The room ached with selfishness.[57]

Morgan's response to this restrictive airlessness is to "[practise] breathing air": "It was difficult, because the more he wanted to breathe the more he halted the automatic process of breathing."[58] He throws open a window, hoping his dizziness will pass, and he performs the little rituals of daily routine in "mimicry of the act of living."[59] This return to the smallest rhythms of the body, the reduction of temporality to the mere flow of breath, marks the beginning of Morgan's acceptance of the everyday as a time that is more real than their representation in the "chapters called Life."

Breathlessness is a recurring motif in the novel. It corresponds to Morgan's pained acceptance of the domestic space as a vital and sustaining environment, rather than as the stifling of creativity which he fears that it is. It is in terms of breathing and airlessness that Morgan begins to survey the apartment around him, anticipating later episodes in which he accepts the influx of atmospheric sensations into the containment of the domestic space:

> As I check my charts I notice the health of Dark rising with the equinox. Its breathing less anxious and the eyes opening wider; the eyes were beginning to see with an

[57] *SA*, 118.
[58] *SA*, 119.
[59] *SA*, 119.

> acuteness that even I could not help admiring; the objects, people, atmospheric attachments, ephemeral persuasions, making their exits and entrances.[60]

Not yet able to temper Dark with his love of Miriam, and not yet able to relinquish his self-conscious manner of narration, Morgan here is nonetheless shown to be gaining awareness of the "atmospheric attachments" that are the source of the domestic interior's vitality. The steady embrace of his own vulnerability to such attachments will involve the attenuation of Dark and the collapse of the boundaries that divide him from the domestic exterior. As Hägglund's model of a quotidian-ecstatic exchange suggests, Morgan feels this boundlessness as the threat of an atmosphere which he cannot contain, but which he is also drawn towards because of its potential to release him from the selfishness for which he attacks himself. His fixation of breathing expresses this sensitivity to the divisions of exterior and interior, and their regulation—"their exits and entrances"—through the separation of body from world.

The carefreeness that will overcome Morgan by the end of the novel involves, then, the relinquishing of control over such strong mechanisms of self-regulation, perceived first in the simple act of breathing. Guest structures *Seeking Air* as a "venturing into haze," by which Morgan is subsumed within an atmosphere that he no longer seeks to contain. Morgan's aestheticization of the materials that sweep into domestic space breaks into a heightened sensitivity to the mutability of the world around him. With Morgan's "inventories of dust," from which I began, Guest centres the moments of transition that a changeable climate begets: the dust is swept; clay is shaped into brick; the car moves, cools or heats the cement.[61] It is an inventory of impermanent and interactive states: one element transits into the next, perceived only in that state of transformation. This is Guest's rendering of an ever-present "evanescence," a word peppered across her later works, explicitly concerned as they are with representing blurred states of transition between self-containment and atmospheric conditions. It is this state that Morgan, in seeking air, must learn to live within. Against containment, this new state offers Morgan joy and satisfaction in the constant motion that shuttles between a seemingly solid state of domesticity and an ecstatic release his surroundings.

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[60] *SA*, 78.
[61] *SA*, 179.

III Escape from airlessness in "Roses"

Morgan's terror of being unable to breathe within the confinement of the domestic space prepares the way for the atmospheric forces that envelop him at the novel's end. In imagining a way out of what he jealously guards as "his kingdom," the final pages of *Seeking Air* describe the eruption of air into the apartment as the arrival of "White," contrasted to Dark.[62] This new force undoes the protagonist's stringent separation of the domestic from the ecstatic, as the influx of an exterior air, carrying with it "many recuperative qualities," dissolves the boundaries that separate the apartment's closed interior from the exterior world: "Then the holes were found. Then the gaps. Everywhere. Even the ceilings crumbled showing their white behinds."[63] This porosity and mobility is the antidote to the terror of airlessness that Morgan perceives earlier in the novel: a state of exchange between exterior and interior arrives as a revelatory release *within*, rather than in spite of, the domestic domain. The origins of this evanescent state can be traced back to a dispute that Guest stages between her poetics and Gertrude Stein in her 1973 collection *Moscow Mansions*.

Guest gives the first indication of her attempts to extricate her own poetics from a division of the domestic and the ecstatic in her poem "Roses." The three stanzas of the poem present a meditation on a sensation of "airlessness" in painting. They ask if, and how, aesthetic representation can be said to exist "perpetually without air."[64] The first stanza opens asking if a painting can contain air; a question about the rapport between form and life, between representation and vitality. This question is formulated as a reply to the poem's epigraph, from Stein. While Guest will concede that a picture of a certain kind might do without air, in the first stanza she extends the question to include other genres of art where air might enter into the frame:

> "Roses"
>
> *"painting has no air…"*
>
> Gertrude Stein
>
> That there should never be air
> in a picture surprises me.

[62] *SA*, 199-201.
[63] *SA*, 200; *SA*, 199.
[64] *MM*, 59.

It would seem to be only a picture
of a certain kind, a portrait in paper
or glued, somewhere a stickiness
as opposed to a stick-to-it-ness
of another genre. It might be
quite new to do without
that air, or to find oxygen
on the landscape line
like a boat which is an object
or a shoe which never floats
and is stationary.[65]

The particular form of artwork that Guest has in mind is collage—"paper / or glue, somewhere a stickiness"—and the genre is a portrait, where it "might be / quite new to do without / that air" (the human subject, after all, being in need of air). In conceding some ground to Stein's comment, Guest is establishing an alternative set of concerns for the reception of an art work. What would it mean to "find oxygen" in a painting? What would it mean to get air into art?

The poem takes up this inquiry from its citation of Stein: "*painting has no air…*" the only direct reference to Stein in Guest's published work. The citation comes from Stein's 1940 memoir *Paris France*, where she recalls her encounter with Louis Dumoulin's monumental *Panorama of the Battle of Waterloo* in Belgium as a young girl:

> It was then I first realised the difference between a painting and out of doors. I realised that a painting is always a flat surface and out of doors never is, and that out of doors is made up of air and a painting has no air, the air is replaced by a flat surface, and anything in a painting that imitates air is illustration and not art. I seem to have felt all that very intensely standing on the platform and being all surrounded by an oil painting.[66]

[65] *MM*, 58.
[66] Stein, *Paris, France* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1940), 4.

The crucial word in the second sentence is "imitates." Stein implies that aesthetics can be detached from *mimesis*; painting should not illustrate life, it should "replace" it. Since air, she suggests, cannot be rendered as a "flat surface," it must be replaced by the painting's effects. This would draw Stein towards an aesthetics of the surface and enclosure, in which the depth and openness of "out of doors" is flattened on the canvas space.

Stein's association with surface aesthetics can be traced back to her earliest critics. Following the publication of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* in 1933, Georges Braque, Eugen and Maria Jolas, Henri Matisse, André Salmon, and Tristan Tzara published their "Testimony against Gertrude Stein" as a pamphlet in the journal *Transition*. The six signatures attacked perceived inaccuracies in Stein's account of her years in Paris. *Superficiality* is the most consistent refrain of these attacks. In his introductory remarks to the group's responses, Eugene Jolas attacks Stein on the grounds that "she had no understanding of what really was happening around her, that the mutation of ideas beneath the surface of the more obvious contacts and clashes of personalities during that period escaped her entirely."[67] Braque, in his contribution, repeats the charge:

> Miss Stein understood nothing of what went on around her. I have no intention of entering into a discussing with her, since it is obvious that she never knew French really well and that was always a barrier. But she has entirely misunderstood cubism which she sees simply in terms of personalities.[68]

André Salmon, taking issue with Stein's portrayal of the Rousseau banquet at the *bateau lavoir*, added: "It is evident that she understood nothing, except in a superficial way."[69] The repeated stress that all of the respondents place on Stein's superficiality effects a double critique of her prose style and her feminized incapacity to "enter" into the depths of the cubist moment. The matter of Stein's surface style would continue to colour scholarly discussions of *Autobiography* long after the polemics of *Transition*. As Cara L. Lewis comments: "Since 1933 scholars have consistently been unable to avoid underscoring *The Autobiography's* superficiality […] Long after the book's publication, in other words, the surface is still a problem."[70] The problem as defined by Stein's critics was that superficiality

[67] Braque, Georges, Maria Jolas, Eugene Jolas, Henri Matisse, André Salmon, and Tristan Tzara, "Testimony Against Gertrude Stein," *Transition* 23 (1935), 2.
[68] Braque et al., "Testimony," 13.
[69] Braque et al., "Testimony," 14.
[70] Lewis, *Dynamic Form: How Intermediality Made Modernism* (Cornell University Press, 2020), 180.

could be equated with a misapprehension of the reality that surrounded Stein. It was depth perception, in contrast, which would have allowed for a more accurate rendition of the times.

Yet, as Lewis' work on *The Autobiography* and Stein's surface forms clarifies, this problem was one that Stein embraced as part of her investigations of character, repetition, and the rhythms of narrative. In her lecture "Portraits and Repetition," Stein describes the novelty of *Autobiography* in terms that recall her discussion of the out of doors and its relation to oil painting: "the important thing was that for the first time in writing, I felt something outside me while I was writing, hitherto I had always had nothing but what was inside me while I was writing […] I suddenly began to feel the outside inside and the inside outside […] so I wrote *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*."[71] This comment at first leans into divisions between surface and depth, inside and outside, but Stein does so only in order to stress the feeling of this separation *as it dissolves* within the dynamics of artistic creation. Stein articulates the exchange ("outside inside and the inside outside") of two indivisible spheres of experience: it is through the mediation of writing, reading, and aesthetic creation that a vital negotiation between outside and inside can be made felt.

This emphasis on responsiveness to a blending of interiority with exteriority is taken up in Stein's first lecture in America, "Pictures," delivered to members of the Museum of Modern Art in November 1934. Guest's citation of Stein in her epigraph for the poem "Roses" comes from the later version of the anecdote, as cited above, but in this earlier version of the encounter with Dumoulin's *Panorama*, Stein describes how the painting works to conserve "a life of its own":

> It was an oil painting a continuous oil painting, one was surrounded by an oil painting and I who lived continuously out of doors and felt air and sunshine and things to see felt that this was all different and very exciting. There it all was the things to see but there was no air it just was an oil painting. I remember standing on the little platform in the center and almost consciously knowing that there was no air. There was no air, there was no feeling of air, it just was an oil painting and it had a life of its own and it was a scene as an oil painting sees it and it was a real thing which looked like something I had seen but it had nothing to do with that something that I knew because

[71] Stein, *Writings 1932-1946*, 312.

> the feeling was not at all that not at all the feeling which I had when I saw anything that was really what the oil painting showed.[72]

This passage also includes the assertion that "there was no air," yet Stein qualifies that sensation as "no *feeling* of air, it just was an oil painting and *it had a life of its own* [...] *it was a real thing*."[73] In this version, we can see more clearly what Lisa Siraganian describes as Stein's "airless" aesthetics: "[t]he point of insisting that there is no air in the painting is to shift her focus from the relation between an object and its representation to the relation between an art object (a representation) and its beholder."[74] Siraganian's argument is that while the anecdote could well be read as the restatement of a modernist suspicion of referentiality (there is no air in the painting, unlike in life, which it is separate from), the real weight of Stein's comments falls on the feeling—the lived sensation—that travels between self and the art object (the feeling of airlessness provoked by the painting shows us something about feeling in general).

Though Stein has often been associated by critics with an enclosed surface aesthetics, what these versions of the *Panorama* anecdote emphasise is not the autonomy of the artwork but the relation that is set off between the sensation of airlessness and the viewer's vital sense of air as a component of life. The earlier version, in particular, recentres its attentions on this matter of vitality as a quality that traverses the division between surface and depth, enclosure and openness, object and world. As S. Pearl Brilmyer writes on the development of modernist characterology out of nineteenth century realism, Stein's cultivation of a "'fluctuating spontaneity' of character […] ironically entails not a rounding but a *flattening* of character":

> By flattening I do not mean the production of more typological and unchanging figures (i.e., in [E.M. Forster's] sense of the term flat); I refer instead to the flattening of the hierarchies between characters that plot-driven narrative turns upon.[75]

The airlessness of oil painting that Stein observes is not, therefore, to be read as an attenuation of its vitality. On the contrary, Stein emphasizes the fact that the painting persists

[72] Stein, *Lectures in America* (Beacon Press, 1957), 63.
[73] Stein, *Lectures*, 63; emphasis added.
[74] Siraganian, *Modernism's Other Work: The Art Object's Political Life* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 25.
[75] Brilmyer, *The Science of Character: Human Objecthood and the End of Victorian Realism* (University of Chicago Press, 2022), 240.

without air, so as to comment on the miraculous fact that it nonetheless preserves a vital force of its own, operating within a separate aesthetic sphere that Stein suggests is *as alive* as the experience of living out of doors. It is the vitality of both experiences, aesthetic and non-, that is confirmed by the sensations of the young Stein when she compares the one to the other.

It is on this point of relationality that Guest's poem "Roses" enters into dialogue with the airless aesthetics examined in Stein's writings. The poem's surprise that "there should never be air / in a picture" reads as both a retort to the absolutism of Stein's phrasing, and a revision that departs from this sensation of surprise. In proposing that airlessness might be limited to "a picture / of a certain kind," Guest opens a space in which the formal conditions of particular genres could allow for more or less of an outside to enter into an art work. This leads Guest's poem to acknowledge that it "might be / quite new to do without / that air," as in the case of the young Stein's revelatory realisation that oil painting had replaced air with surface, whilst also making the case for the possibility of "find[ing] oxygen / on the landscape line / like a boat which is an object / or a shoe which never floats / and is stationary."[76] Oxygen, the poem implies, unlike the object of a boat as represented in an immobile painting, might somehow filter into the art work from its exterior.

The second stanza of "Roses" shifts away from the aesthetic terrain of a collaged surface. It insists that air is, in fact, a necessary quality that a viewer might be nurtured by in contemplating a work of art. Air is "[s]till there," even when it appears to be replaced by the fixity of the surface. Guest makes this move by conflating the representation of air in pictures with the need for air during "certain illnesses":

> Still there
> are certain illnesses that require
> air, lots of it. And there are nervous
> people who cannot manufacture
> enough air and must seek
> for it when they don't have plants,
> in pictures. There is the mysterious
> travelling that one does outside
> the cube and this takes place

[76] *MM*, 58.

in air.[77]

The language of vitality here competes with the verb "manufacture" in the fourth line, which hints at a mechanistic insufficiency that can be offset by the organic substance of plants and pictures, associating the latter with the organic substance of the former. The verb "seek" points forward to the title of *Seeking Air*; as in the novel, to "seek air" describes this passage from aesthetic demarcations of depth and surface, exterior and interior, and towards a valorisation of vitality. The "mysterious travelling that one does outside / the cube" describes this move as a venturing beyond the aesthetic dimensions of cubism, and towards a wider lexis that will include a vital force provisionally contained within, but never wholly circumscribed by, aesthetic representation.

The poem's third and final stanza turns on this possibility of an airy vitality that runs in excess of aesthetic surface. It gestures towards the ekphrastic mode of several of Guest's earlier poems, while asking what space might be imagined as existing outside the painting's edges:

> It is why one develops
> an attitude toward roses picked
> in the morning air, even roses
> without sun shining on them.
> The roses of Juan Gris from which
> we learn the selflessness of roses
> existing perpetually without air,
> the lid being down, so to speak,
> a 1912 fragrance sifting
> to the left corner where we read
> "La Merveille" and escape.[78]

The collage that Guest refers to here is a still life of Juan Gris, acquired by the Museum of Modern Art from the Stein collection in 1969, and exhibited with the title *Flowers* for the first time in December 1970. Gris' collage (Fig. 5), probably acquired by Stein in the

[77] *MM*, 58-59.
[78] *MM*, 59.

summer of 1914, mixes crayon, gouache, cut-and-pasted wallpaper, and newspaper, mounted on a honeycomb panel. Unusually for works of Gris from this period, the collage is bordered by a single deep blue swathe of gouache paint, and a newspaper with "*La Merveille*" peaks out from beneath the mass of collaged material. The "lid" which Guest's poem refers to can be traced out at the top of the image, where the collaged flowers are pressed down by an oval shape that borders on the blue paint.

As Luke Beesley notes in his article on Guest's revisions to "Roses," two alternative endings, in place of "escape," exist in drafts and in a recorded reading of the poem: in an undated typescript manuscript, the final line of the poem reads, '"Le Merveille" and go to sleep"; while, in a 1969 Library of Congress recording, Guest reads the final line, '"Le Merveille" and breathe."[79] As alternatives to escape, "breathe" and "sleep" cohere more closely with the sounds of end-words of the final stanza: the long /i:/ rhyming with speak and read. These alternative endings also reactivate the language of vital necessities, yet they suggest a moment of reconciliation with the painting's limits: to breathe or to sleep before a painting is a certain mode of staying put, of remaining with the experience of the aesthetic. In contrast, the published choice of "escape" leaves us in no doubt of the desire to go beyond its surfaces, and it sounds a sharper break with the poem's sonority, wrenching the final word out of the poem as it opens up a space that exceeds Gris' collage.

One other text can here enlighten the poem's concluding move outside the painting's edges. In suggesting that the roses exist "perpetually without air, / the lid being down, so to speak," Guest puts her poem in conversation with another response to Gris' work: William Carlos Williams' "The rose is obsolete," from the 1923 collection *Spring and All*. In that poem, Williams uses the poetic line to imitatively mark the harsh edges of the collage's form. His poetic transpositions of the collage's sharp linear arrangement produce lines that are literally cut short, and he makes repeated use of the hyphen in order to replicate the way in which, as Williams writes, the edge of the collage "meets—nothing—renews / itself." In his poem-commentary on the work, Williams' poem takes Gris' canvas as a closed system: auto-sufficient and unheeding of the world outside. The rose's petals at the top of the collage slice into the "columns of air" surrounding them, but this cutting does not, for Williams, force the canvas into "contact" with the world:

[79] Beesley, "Weather and Cinnamon: Late Changes in Major Poems by Barbara Guest," *Cordite Poetry Review*, May 16, 2016, n.p.

The place between the petal's
edge and the

From the petal's edge a line starts
that being of steel
infinitely fine, infinitely
rigid penetrates
the Milky Way
without contact—lifting
from it—neither hanging
nor pushing—

The fragility of the flower
unbruised
penetrates spaces[80]

The interpenetration of spaces performed by Williams' petals remains within what Rob Fure calls, in his analysis of the poem, "the matter of representation and the crucial distinction between the new expressive and the traditional mimetic functions of art."[81] For Williams, the rose is obsolete as a traditional symbol of figurative art, yet it can still serve here as an expression of that sense of obsolescence: it pushes towards a cosmic significance ("penetrates / the Milky Way") which it is nonetheless remains bereft of ("without contact"), as though snapped off from any reference outside of its aesthetic form.

Williams' poem forms part of his intense dialogue with the work of Gris and cubist aesthetics throughout the early 1920s, accelerated during a visit to Paris in 1924. As he notes in his autobiography:

> It was not only among the painters that this step up from the worn-out conceptions of the late nineteenth century, even with its Blakes and Whitmans, took place. Gertrude Stein found the key with her conception of the objective use of words […] It is NOT to hold a mirror up to nature that the artist performs his work. It is to

[80] Williams, *Collected Early Poems* (Macgibbon & Kee, 1951), 250.
[81] Fure, "The Design of Experience: William Carlos Williams and Juan Gris," *William Carlos Williams Newsletter* 4, no. 2 (1978), 16.

> make, out of the imagination, something not at all a copy of nature, a thing advanced and apart from it.[82]

This statement elaborates on Stein's insistence that the oil painting is a "real thing" in the world. It is a sentiment reinforced throughout Williams' theoretical writings from the period, where the poem is imagined, as in "The rose is obsolete," as sustaining itself as an object independent of the natural world. Guest enters into this modernist conversation by asking how a thing "advanced and apart from [nature]" might be *reinserted* into the world, into contact with life, and into a rapport with other objects enveloped in an atmosphere that exceeds its aesthetic frame. "Roses" presents one possibility of recovering from modernist aesthetics a vitality that seeks this kind of participation in the world: in ending with a longed for "escape," it suggests one effect of aesthetic contemplation may be a reorientation towards the world, rather than an enclosure within aesthetic form.

In Gris' own writings on aesthetics in the 1920s, there is a similar concern for the relational potential of aesthetics. "Possibilities," a series of Gris' writings translated and published in *The Transatlantic Review* throughout the 1920s, describes the "essence of painting" as expressing a relationship between artist and world:

> Therefore I will conclude by saying that the essence of painting is the expression of certain relationships between the painter and the outside world, and that a picture is the intimate association of these relationships with the limited surface which contains them.[83]

Gris posits a relation inhering in the canvas that is derived from the still earlier relation between painter and object. The surface does not replace these relations but contains them, a containment that is necessarily conditioned by the limits of the given media. It is this sense of containment that both Williams and Guest grapple with in their poems. In Williams' text, the rose's obsolescence is the result of its enmeshment in the limited surface of the canvas. In Guest, the rose of Gris' canvas is an occasion for marvel: it transmits an ecstatic capacity to escape towards a life that exceeds the form of its representation. In revising the mood of entrapment of Williams' poem, "Roses" suggests that an escape may be found by

[82] Williams, *The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams* (New Directions, 1967), 241.
[83] Quoted in James T. Soby, *Juan Gris* (Museum of Modern Art, 1958), 28.

submerging the aesthetic object within the rhythms, expansivity, and atmospheric flux of the everyday. The poem thereby renders in miniature what will be scaled up in the narrative movement of *Seeking Air*.

Guest, like Stein, is sensitive to the relation that unfolds between the aesthetic and the real. Aesthetic contemplation produces a shuttling between forms of enclosure and a rapturous marvel or surprise—it is the kind of exchange that at first eludes and then ultimately seduces Morgan in his quest to articulate his love for Miriam, and to put distance between himself and the mortifying interiority of Dark.

IV Mystical plenitude in *The Countess from Minneapolis*

From her earliest work as a critic for *Art News* in the 1950s to her late collections, the writings of Guest are saturated with atmospheric conditions that exceed and destabilise the limits of aesthetic representation. In her reviews of small gallery shows from 1952 onwards, atmosphere and relationality recur as key concepts. In her first review from June 1952, commenting on a show of René Bouché, she writes that "[Bouché] seeks to construct images which will develop and extend themselves in direct relation to the viewer's receptivity."[84] Two years later, writing on an retrospective of Lesser Ury's work, Guest comments that Ury's "Northern Impressionism […] maintain an authority of their own climate": "The paintings do exactly what is asked of them—recording the exact moment, the exact atmosphere and quality of the world about them, so we sense his original impressions."[85] That the "paintings do exactly what is asked of them," that they do this by offering an atmosphere, demonstrates that Guest is not only thinking of the representation of a setting, of atmosphere as just another facet of subject matter. Instead, she uses the word to denote a quality that runs in excess of representation and interacts with the viewer, inviting in a participative agency that *asks* something of the paintings.

It is this potential for atmosphere to shift and unsettle the reception of an art work that Guest presses towards in her mid-career writing. Her early explorations of the perspectival fluctuations that run between viewer and object anticipates the later experiments with character in her prose and poetry. This sensitivity to the vagaries of a relational space in which the art work and its viewer are immersed recalls Sedgwick's discussion of an "animated barometer" as figured in Proustian characters. In her late essay,

[84] Guest, "Review of René Bouché at Alexander Iolas." 1952. Box 104, folder 1615, Guest papers.
[85] Guest, "Review of Lesser Ury at Hirschl Adler." 1953. Box 104, folder 1615, Guest papers.

"The Weather in Proust," Sedgwick reads ecstatic moments of inner relief within *À la recherche* alongside Melanie Klein's object-relations theory, in order to discuss a "double function of surprise":

> Surprise is the mark of reality, insofar as what is real—what surrounds the subject, the weather of the world—has to exceed the will of the subject, including its will to arrive at truth. At the same time, surprise, with its promise of an ever-refreshed internal world is the mark not only of reality, but of the mystical orientation that allows Proust to cherish that reality.[86]

According to Sedgwick, Proust invites us to interpret surprise as one segment of a prolonged process of attunement to surrounding conditions. The vitality of the art work is guaranteed by this "ability to surprise—that is, to manifest an agency distinct from either its creator or its consumer."[87] An aesthetic experience is not unique in this regard, although it is well placed to alert us to the "subtle crisscrossings of agency, interiority, and priority" that Sedgwick examines through the lens of Kleinian psychoanalysis.[88] In fronting, rather than concealing, the construction of character as product of these restless dynamics, Sedgwick concludes that Proust exhibits a "mystical orientation" which affirms that "the beings *in* the universe are filled, in turn, like human barometers, with the stuff *of* the universe": "[t]his is as true for art as it is for the irreducibly complex systems and substances that constitute the weather."[89]

Sedgwick's argument for Proust's mystical orientation towards an atmosphere that auto-replenishes its substance is an extension of the theoretical engagements with modernist temporalities as discussed earlier in this chapter. Hägglund, Davis, and Osborne investigate the ways in which modernist narrative orchestrates the flow of the quotidian into and out of ecstatic moments of rupture. For Sedgwick, Proust shows us how the surprising force of such moments is dependent upon a diffused sense of the universe's plenitude. This sensation has its origins in the spiritual and philosophical discourse of Neoplatonism, which holds, in Proust's words, that "there exists but a single intelligence of which everyone is co-tenant."[90] It is the concept of plenitude that allows, in the words of Sedgwick, for "the possibility of

[86] Sedgwick, *The Weather in Proust*, ed. Jonathan Goldberg (Duke University Press, 2011), 34.
[87] Sedgwick, *Weather in Proust*, 33.
[88] Sedgwick, *Weather in Proust*, 33.
[89] Sedgwick, *Weather in Proust*, 32.
[90] Quoted in Sedgwick, *Weather in Proust*, 32.

non-oppositional relations of many important kinds: between pattern and contingency; the eternal and the ephemeral; the universal soul and that of the individual."[91] The ecstatic moment erupts, fountain-like, out of a flow that is inexhaustible, uncontainable, and cosmic, and to which it will return.

A comparable sense of mystical plenitude is felt in the escapes into air that reoccur in Guest's writing. The recuperation of vital signs from the realm of the aesthetic, first presented in "Roses," then extended into the narrative of *Seeking Air*, put pressure upon the strict demarcation of the experience of an art work from an experience of the world's plenitude. In both the poem and the novel, Guest presents affective intensities that unbalance the reduction of the world to aesthetic limits. These intensities, figured as air, atmosphere, weather, dust, clouds, and sky, resist containment within any single object. It is these forms of non-containment that provoke Morgan's crisis of subjectivity, and which menace the "nervous / people" in need of air as evoked in "Roses." The non-containment of atmosphere is a crisis that is felt to be both internal to the subject and, contemporaneously, "out there" in the sweep of an atmospheric totality. Such moments of evanescent self-dispersion dissolve solidity and move Guest's characters into a momentary communion with the complexities of the surrounding atmosphere.

Although present in *Seeking Air*, this mystical concept of plenitude is most perceptible in Guest's 1976 collection *The Countess from Minneapolis*, a book that unfolds the portrait of its titular figure through a sequence of fragmentary epistolary-style dispatches numbered one to forty-two. A concern for the tensions between amorphous flux, the uncontainable, and the constraint of form is already palpable in Guest's previous collection, *Moscow Mansions*, which includes "Roses." That collection concludes with a poem, "Now," which funnels a series of atmospheric conditions into physical space:

> We have a right
> to Autumn. Like stairs
> going up. Also closets
> furniture, a bathroom
> on the first floor, a household
> toughness that defends us
> going into autumn

[91] Sedgwick, *Weather in Proust*, 2.

fewer shadows[92]

The poem collapses together its immediate field of perception with the wider expanse of seasonal climates—"The weather at your eyelid," as a later line succinctly puts it[93]—so that this "household / toughness" must be defensively arrayed against the onset of autumn. With her following collection, *The Countess*, Guest investigates this separation of interior from the exterior, the household from its wider landscape, and shows how it is frayed during the intensities of the Minnesotan winter.

The eponymous Countess is "from" Minneapolis, leaving open the possibility that she is both from the place originally, and writing now, through a series of dramatic dispatches, from Minneapolis. Poet Eileen Myles, in an early review, comments on this sense of disjunction: the Countess is an "exile […] she's begging her beloved Eofirth not to abandon her in Minneapolis, same time [sic] being shocked at his activities […] the Countess' image of an 'artist' has been shattered."[94] Like Morgan in *Seeking Air*, it is the image of herself as a self-enclosed aesthete that the Countess must get over through the course of the collection: she struggles snobbishly to comprehend the mores of her adopted hometown, and the poems document her efforts to comprehend the alien landscape in which she finds herself. The collection's first poem immerses its subject within the vast, flat prairie lands of Minnesota:

water wheels river turns river asides over and under falls
splice rapid brown slow turn fist thrust signal ahead
winter autumn water barge season thrice water bank
bridge system barge deep search over falls rush edge
search nearly there river bottoms watersurge bridgespread[95]

Wrapping this flowing vista around the figure of the Countess for the remaining forty-one texts, the Mississippi river will continue to surge in and out of the text alongside the Countess' voice. The poems disperse that voice across a barrage of environmental

[92] *MM*, 81.
[93] *MM*, 81.
[94] Eileen Myles, "Review of *The Countess from Minneapolis*," *The Poetry Project Newsletter*, April 1, 1977, 7.
[95] *CP*, 143.

impressions, rather than offering Minneapolis as a stable backdrop in front of which the Countess is positioned.

The Countess is initially resistant to this dispersal into atmosphere and disturbed by the expansive bareness of the Minnesotan plains. She surveys the landscape like an art collector, nostalgic for Europe, and hoping to read atmospheric phenomenon through the lens of her past travels. The second poem, a dialogue between two voices that breaks from the dense sound play of the first, establishes the sense of distance she establishes between the setting and herself:

> Believe you Madam yon building of ice was built for thy pleasure?
>
> I do.
>
> Yu're right.[96]

Despite this declaration that the surroundings exist merely "for [her] pleasure," the book-length sequence unfolds the disintegration of the figure of the Countess into her surroundings. This begins with a series of domestic scenes that are haunted by an atmospheric excess that they cannot contain: the Countess makes some tea, and then notes how the "steam settled into atmosphere / steam in atmosphere / it was cold; so the steam did not move."[97] She tries to comfort herself with a blanket, but sees that the cover "loops along leaving / an edge (turned like leaves into something else)."[98] The material pleasures of home cannot remain inured to the "watersurge" of the landscapes that course around them, and domestic comfort is constantly wavering on the edge of transformations into the unfamiliar.

Cutting through the centre of these disintegrative loops, the Mississippi river is the collection's prime symbol of transformative excess: "the unreasonable river that both gladdens and disturbs [the Countess'] heart."[99] Unlike the river Seine, which the Countess remembers as orderly, behaving "perfectly reasonably within the city limits," and providing "uses commercial and aesthetic," the Mississippi is an "unappetizing swell of the muddied water [which] could appeal only to the truly desperate," defined by this tendency to flood

[96] *CP*, 143.
[97] *CP*, 144.
[98] *CP*, 145.
[99] *CP*, 147.

and stretch its boundaries.[100] The coursing vitality of the Mississippi is juxtaposed with the neat containment of Minnesotan "Prairie Houses" in poem twelve, in which the Countess observes how the flatness of the prairie exerts a "wilful pressure" on the sky's expanse:

> Selective engineering architectural submissiveness
> and rendering of necessity in regard to height,
> eschewment of climate exposure, elemental
> understandings,
> constructive adjustments to vale and storm
>
> historical reconstruction of early earthworks
>
> and admiration
>
> for later even oriental modelling[101]

The "constructive adjustments" of homely spaces are one attempt to domesticate the "elemental / understandings" that trouble and condition the Countess' vision of the plains. The houses offer momentary protection from a menacing expansivity, but the landscape itself evaporates into the sky when, out walking on a mountain path, the Countess sees the peaks "going ever upward into fog swirls."[102] It is this dissipation of solid material, the landscape's evanescent transformation by and into atmospheric phenomena, that the Countess seeks to understand in the following poem:

> When shall I
> understand Minneapolis?
>
> If not grain by grain, at least loaf by loaf.
>
> If not the river flow, at least its turn and tributary.

[100] *CP*, 146-48.
[101] *CP*, 149.
[102] *CP*, 148.

Still there are permissions to approach through that immigrant air.[103]

This is the point at which Guest first intimates an identification between the voice of the Countess and the Minnesotan climate. As an exile, the Countess identifies here not with the firmness of the "earthworks" or architectural containers that divide themselves from atmosphere. She is instead like the "immigrant air," which offers rushes over the landscape that she too is provisionally traversing. This blurring between poetic voice and its climate gains pace as the sequence progresses: in one passage, the Countess' "grey eyes [fill] with dust" from the sidewalk as she struggles through the wind; in another, her face "[changes] color and once more a tiny parade crossed her temples" as she observes clouds passing across the sun.[104]

The twenty third entry, midway through the collection, takes further the Countess' sensitivity to the unconfined plenitude of the surrounding world. Like Morgan in *Seeking Air*, she comprehends her surroundings in aesthetic terms, admiring a painted scene in a gallery that is an "enclosure of the scoured space."[105] It is within this confined aesthetic vision that she finds she can breathe, but the comfort that this barriered existence offers is antithetical to the accommodation of life, the complex systems that Sedgwick identifies as flowing beneath the tropes of weather and atmosphere in modernist prose:

> **23**
>
> She waited. Within her limited mathematics she comprehended space. She understood the Dutch room in the paintings. The face behind the mirror. The walker in the dark. The captive tree. Not difficult. It was only within the picture she could breathe. A simple woman sat there wearing a cap, holding a pot. Another woman peered from a hall. You could sense how close the house was next door. The Countess worshipped that confinement, the enclosure of the scoured space. The eye never wandered far. The little mirror to tell you who walked in the street.
>
> From where she sat there was the lake and she looked out on it. The further shore was now ripening. After that the flats. After that the river.

[103] *CP*, 150.
[104] *CP*, 155; CP, 163.
[105] *CP*, 156.

> Her skin was growing rough. The wind placed a skull upon her face. Her face where it fell sideways had begun to toughen. It might grow to accommodate this life.[106]

Sedgwick's Proustian narrator takes surprise as the mark of reality. This passage narrates the Countess' *resistance* to surprise. The clipped phrases exhibit the confinement that the Countess worships and depends upon for comfort. Her lack of curiosity, her withdrawal from the world and into the captive space of the painting that she examines, prevents her eye from "[wandering] far," and she relates with tired monotony the flow of the exterior landscape: "After that the flats. After that the river." Whereas, in Sedgwick's reading, Proust alights on the possibility of non-oppositional relations that move between the particular and the whole, Guest shows how the Countess needs this "enclosure of the scoured space": she cannot yet forego the reassurance offered by the limits of an aesthetic work; her "isolation," as another line puts it, "is cushioned" by the aesthetic frame.[107]

As the collection progresses, Guest wants to push at the limitations of this aestheticized cushioning, and she does so most directly in the sequence's concluding moment of revelation. Here, the Countess visits Tony Smith's sculpture *Amaryllis* (Fig. 6), acquired by the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis in 1968.[108] Guest's choice of Smith's work is significant. Smith, a friend of Guest's, had created *Amaryllis* during his period of experimentation with minimalist, modular forms in the 1960s. As Abby Zito recalls, Smith's work reflected his own deeply-held mystical beliefs, which took aesthetic form to be the mediation of a continual exchange between part and whole: "Tony saw the particular as generating the universal in a world of its own design, sometimes anthropomorphic, like *Amaryllis* and *Willy* […] There is no work of Tony's that does not lead the viewer into a relationship with a larger cosmos outside the work that is generated by the work."[109] As already discussed with reference to the poem "Roses," part of Guest's revision of earlier modernist aesthetics involves a comparable opening up of the individual art work into a relation with an unenclosed world. In closing *The Countess* with a pilgrimage to *Amaryllis*,

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[106] *CP*, 156.
[107] *CP*, 160.
[108] Smith also appears in *Seeking Air*, as a friend of Morgan's who offers him this gnomic advice: "Time, said Tony Smith, works for you" (*SA,* 130).
[109] Zito, "The Day I Met Tony," in *Tony Smith: Architect, Painter, Sculptor*, ed. Robert Storr (Museum of Modern Art, 1992), 194.

she therefore underscores the Countess' seeking some aesthetic order that would be capable of remaining opening to the surging expanse of Minnesota. The encounter with Smith's work is a confrontation not with a single art work, but with that work's relation to the environment in which it is embedded.

The history of *Amaryllis*' creation can clarify the significance of its place in the final sequence of Guest's book. In 1963 Smith began work on an installation that was to be a cave of light. It was intended as an experiential space, drawing on Smith's training as an architect, which the viewer would enter into, rather than as a fixed and delimited work to be admired at a distance. As art historian Joan Pachner writes: "Smith wanted form to be made of space and light, not material. Architecture, for Smith, was about creating space out of immaterial qualities, whereas sculpture was about plastic volumes."[110] The plastic volumes of *Amaryllis*' Cor-Ten steel sculpture are constructed from blocks of strong triangular shapes. Smith describes how he was terrified by the resulting work:

> I had the sense that it looked so ungainly and unbalanced. It also seemed rather classical from one view, but then taken from another, it seemed some kind of caricature of form. We're all born with a sense of rightness of form, and this seemed some kind of description of all that, just as the amaryllis plant seems to me a kind of orchid made out of wood or some terrible aberration of form.[111]

In questioning the rightness of form, Smith's comments underline how the art work itself may be left looking ungainly and unbalanced: it may contribute, that is, to the disavowal of form as a fixity, and provoke a reconsideration of form as a disposition or arrangement that is in open dialogue with surroundings.

In the final entry of her collection, titled "Amaryllis," Guest's description of the work tunes into this relay of relational positionings, between the form of the art work, its surrounding, and the natural forms which it refers to:

[110] Joan Pachner, quoted in *Tony Smith*, ed. Robert Storr, 132.
[111] Tony Smith, quoted in Sam Hunter, "The Sculpture of Tony Smith," in *Tony Smith: Ten Elements and Throwback* (Pace Gallery, 1979), 8.

42

Amaryllis

The orange metal plant spread its tendrils aloof over the museum's roof. With all its fragrant captivity asserting the immigrant rites of sculpture.

Restrained by metal from whispering, from complaint, even from homesickness, Amaryllis with its antique name, its distant origins, held a regal stance.

Between its position and the blockades of the city, between it and the nearest reliquary there would remain no communion. Amaryllis would never yield its superior stance. Its moods, glances, were those of an observer less restless as time passed, yet one who possessed the claim to restrict its grace.

There could be detected something of the borrower here, rather than the lender, an attitude the Museum's curator recognized would never change. He questioned the effect of those regal metal blooms upon the visitors. He worried if the city were aware of the undisturbed and selfish enchantment Amaryllis cast. A piece of art that through a collector's whim had come to dwell in Minneapolis.[112]

The first two lines alert us to the interplay between the museum setting and the sculpture's form, in language that mixes the organic with the metallic. The static form of Smith's work becomes mobile: it performs "immigrant rites," recalling the Countess' earlier description of "immigrant air," and its vital, sensual capacity spreads across the museum's containment, as though it were an organic substance resisting captivity.

Guest's anthropomorphised description of the sculpture reimagines it as a symbol for the Countess herself. Like the Countess, the sculpture is given to complaint and homesickness; it is an alien form deracinated from distant origins and finding new roots in strange environs. This sympathetic projection of the Countess' own moods onto the sculpture ends the collection on a strange note. As a self-described worshiper of confinement, the Countess has struggled throughout to contain the atmospheric expansions

[112] *CP*, 165.

of the prairies. In this final passage, she finds a fitting analogy for her struggle in Smith's sculpture. Importantly, the sculpture, like the Countess, remains peripheral to Minneapolis: it is an outside observer positioned between city and outskirts, just as the Countess has observed the city from a lofty distance and perplexed interest. If, as Myles suggests in their review, it is the self-image of the Countess as an "artist" that has been shattered, then what she discovers in the Walker Art Center is a new form *as an art work*. In a self-reflexive turn, Guest's final paragraph suggests that she, like the museum curator, has whimsically planted her fantastical protagonist in Minneapolis. The Countess, like *Amaryllis*, exerts a "selfish enchantment": she seems too alien, regal, and estranged to belong in this new dwelling. Yet, through her identification with Smith's work, she also finds some promise of respite, as "an observer less restless as / time passed," she is able to reimagine herself here as a living analogue to the aberrant form of Smith's sculpture.

V "Things surrounded": uncontainable affects

Seeking air and relief in the contemplation of ungainly and unbalanced forms is the Countess' response to her growing suspicion that her own selfhood might only be a passing, albeit powerful, misapprehension. Synthesizing her self-perception with that of *Amaryllis*, she embraces the artificiality of her subjectivity, while also revendicating her organic interaction with her surroundings. In circulating narrative agency between works of art, the atmosphere that hosts them, and the characters who observe them, Guest's writing of the 1970s construes subjectivity as an ongoing negotiation between form and formlessness, an accommodation hazarded between the two.

Beginning with "Roses," Guest reimagines form as a participatory exchange between an exterior environment and the art work's interior. In *The Countess*, the titular character searches for patterns of containment and enclosure amidst the rolling Minnesotan plains. *Seeking Air* takes off from the verb "seek," buried in the earlier poem, and it folds that poem's exploration of openness and entrapment into its study of Morgan. What both Morgan and the Countess are searching for is a means of containing the atmospheric impressions that threatens to unravel their sense of self. For both characters, the art work seems to promise one possible form of such containment, while their self-conscious inner monologues show the temporary solace that is offered by their conception of themselves and others in aestheticized terms. Guest's renditions of Smith's *Amaryllis* and Gris' collage are intended to trouble this aestheticizing impulse. The power of these works, according to their

depiction by Guest, lies in their capacity to mediate between an exterior formlessness and an interior reorganisation of that exteriority. In this sense, form is always and already a provisional capacity, contingent as it is upon the reception and revision of the art work, once set it is in an environment, by the viewer.

Returning now to the final pages of *Seeking Air*, we find Morgan imposing a form on his atmospheric inventories of dust. Shortly after his arrival for repose at the villa, Morgan observes the "reality that surrounded [him]: House, table, chairs, light, dark, heat, electricity, cushions, windows, driveway, shrubbery floor, the garden, Miriam Miriam Miriam…"[113] This exposition of the surrounding environment is followed by an indented list titled "My escape":

> House fading into landscape
> Night into day
> Heat into cold
> Miriam into Miriam
> Morgan into Miriam
> Water into bottle
> Seed into bread
>
> My voice fading into her eyes
> Her eyes fading into my heart
> My heart fading into its pulse
> The traveller into the inhabitant
> Now into next
> Multiple into choice
> Selection into reach
> Language into silence[114]

The action that each line gives is the conversion of one object into another. From the novel's opening to its end, Morgan is intent on escaping from the claustrophobic interiority that leaves him incapable of working, and incapable of loving Miriam. His proposed escape, as

[113] *SA*, 175.
[114] *SA*, 175.

noted in this list, does not reside in any single one of the objects mentioned, nor even their pairings. It is not, in other words, not a containable or static quality. Escape is the very sensation of the in-between motion which the prepositional arrangement of these lines evinces. The static reality that surrounds him is refigured as a process by which one object moves into another, travelling from exterior to interior and back again, like the storm of dust that will subsequently envelop the villa.

In Guest's concern for how atmosphere is channelled into form, and form back into atmosphere, there is the recuperation of a relationality which cannot be articulated with the spatial separation of surface from depth or the temporal division of the everyday from its ecstatic suspension. The corelation of the observer with a world that is plentiful, dynamic, and complex means that such distinctions begin to loosen; indeed, subjectivity is figured at the energized confine that pulses *in between* interior and exterior. The efforts of Morgan and the Countess to separate themselves from their surroundings through their impositions of form ultimately give way to a realisation of their own co-inhabitation of space, and therefore of time, alongside the ephemerality of things that they are settled among. This tendency to accentuate the mobility of ephemeral phenomena has been remarked upon by Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Marjorie Welish, who highlight, respectively, "emotional propulsion" and "transitory states" as central concepts for Guest's poetics.[115] The propulsive atmospheres that Morgan and the Countess contend with speak to this refusal of fixity and offer a view of the world as a continual exchange.

This perpetual state of in-betweenness is axiomatic to theories of affect, where states of being are characterised as ontologically mobile and evasive. In the influential work of infant psychoanalyst Daniel N. Stern, the "contours" of affect are given as "elusive qualities […] captured by dynamic, kinetic terms, such as 'surging,' 'fading away,' 'fleeting,' 'explosive,' 'crescendo,' 'decrescendo,' 'bursting,' 'drawn out' and so on.''[116] Sedgwick's emphasis on the non-oppositional flux of interior and exterior in her reading of Proust owes something to Stern's kinetic lexis of streams, surges, and fades. Unlike the work of Massumi, however, Sedgwick retains subjectivity as the ground upon which these impersonal forces move and as the epistemological horizon of their effects. Supplementing her use of affect with object-relations, Sedgwick asks "[w]hat kind of intersubjectivity… is apt to characterize a human barometer like Proust's narrator?"[117]

[115] Duplessis, "The Other Window," para.36; Welish, "The Lyric Lately," *Jacket* 10 (1999), para.9.
[116] Daniel N. Stern, *The Interpersonal World of the Infant* (Basic Books, 1985), 55-57.
[117] Sedgwick, *Weather in Proust*, 13.

Guest's characters are as sensitive to exterior climates as Proust's narrator, and they therefore offer one answer to Sedgwick's question: they are motivated by the apprehension that they are unable to contain their environs in literary or aesthetic forms. The Countess confronts Minneapolis as a force that exists, in the end, well beyond the limits of her pleasure, or her capacity to interiorize and relate details of her exterior: her investigative forays into the prairies test the boundaries of a selective aestheticization within which she seeks solace. Surprise, or "*La Merveille*" that Guest picks out from the midst of Gris' collage, here becomes the most reliable indicator that a subject can retain some vital rapport with the uncontainable world. Indeed, *Seeking Air* takes surprise itself as the basis for its narrative rhythms: each entry opens with a jolting encounter between Morgan and Miriam, or Morgan and Dark, that must then conform to Morgan's own self-perception as a harried aesthete.

In answering the question she poses about intersubjectivity in *À la recherche*, Sedgwick turns to the Kleinian model of subjectivity in order to show how "everything in Proust depends on the ratio or relation between an internal object and an ambient surround":

> Inequality between them, or a collapse of either of them, leads to a collapse of the whole ecology of value and vitality. For example, the debacle of the narrator's first attempt to kiss Albertine occurs because his manic excitement has "destroyed the equilibrium between the immense and indestructible life which circulated in my being and the life of the universe, so puny in comparison."[118]

Read through a Kleinian lens, Proust's characters are formed out of a constant regulation of interior and exterior spaces. It is the amplitude and plenitude of the world that generates both moments of revelatory relief and the corresponding fantasies of containment. This "radically fruitful double movement," writes Sedgwick, shapes a text that combines "an acutely enriched space of reverie […] with an enriched interest in the daily-changing climates of reality."[119]

Sedgwick's use of Klein is of interest for the emphasis it lays on the osmotic qualities of subjectivity in modernist narratology. In expanding on Klein, Sedgwick upholds a founding split between interior and exterior—a barrier that the Proustian narrator

[118] Sedgwick, *Weather in Proust*, 32.
[119] Sedgwick, *Weather in Proust*, 34.

crisscrosses as pathos is introjected into subjects and projected onto surroundings. This process is comparable to that undergone by the Countess and Morgan in their attempts to situate their selves within the atmospheric intensities of the external world. But what Guest's characters are led towards is the realization that subjectivity is nothing more than the sensation of contingency which such transitive states provoke. This evanescent state of being is not, in other words, a retrospective organisation of introjective or projective identifications. Rather, the subject in these narratives exists at the point at which the trafficking of external stimuli displaces or erases an attempt to exert some control over the outside world. In other words, Guest's portrayal of character as it tips into atmosphere reveals a model of subjectivity that both requires and renounces the enclosure of form in order to be felt.

This dynamic regulation of exterior and interior is usefully described by psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion's concept of the "container-contained," itself an elaboration of Klein's projective identification. In Klein's account the infant's projection of a part of its psyche onto the mother emphasises "the infant's phantasmic experience of the external object"[120]: it's from here that Sedgwick derives her sense of the Proustian drama of ratio and relation carried out between subjects and their environment. Proust's characters, according to Sedgwick, are ever alert to the need to measure the exterior against an interior and they find, through such exactingness, either a painful sense of enclosure, or a rapturous motion towards an expanse.

Bion extends Klein's model by turning his attention to the mother as a "container" for the projections of the infant. As Naomi Wynter-Vincent describes: "Bion outlines a developmental theory of thinking predicated on the availability of another person's mind (templated on the mother's *reverie*) to receive and transform the anxiety of experience that are initially fragmentary, meaningless, and unassimilable."[121] This elaboration of the Kleinian model accentuates the element of communication that occurs between the infant and the mother (towards whom projection is oriented). Such an exchange involves acknowledging the role of the mother as "an end in and of herself, someone whose emotional processing capacities had to be factored into the matrix of the infant's psychic development."[122] This capacity of the mother to hold and process projected sensations is denoted by the term "container."

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[120] Joseph Aguayo, *Introducing the Clinical Work of Wilfred Bion* (Routledge, 2023), 88.
[121] Naomi Wynter-Vincent, *Wilfred Bion and Literary Criticism* (Routledge, 2022), 54.
[122] Aguayo, *Bion*, 88.

This regard for the second component of the inter-subjective exchange is Bion's innovative proposal. In his 1960 work *Learning from Experience*, Bion describes his departure from Klein's theory in the following terms: "I shall abstract for use as a model the idea of container into which an object is projected and the object that can be projected into the container: the latter I shall designate by the term 'contained'."[123] In Bion's model, the back-and-forth motion of this projection makes the container/contained dynamic an unending process, rather than a position that is assumed (and then surpassed). As analyst Thomas H. Ogden summarises:

> *The "container" is not a thing, but a process. It is the capacity for the unconscious psychological work of dreaming, operating in concert with the capacity for preconscious dreamlike thinking (reverie), and the capacity for more fully conscious secondary-process thinking.*
>
> *The "contained," like the container, is not a static thing, but a living process that in health is continuously expanding and changing. The term refers to thoughts (in the broadest sense of the word) and feelings that are in the process of being derived from one's lived emotional experience.*[124]

The processual conceptualization of container-contained provides, I want to suggest, a closer analogue for the relay between an interior system of emotions and an exterior plenitude that Sedgwick sees as operating in Proust. As a description of a process or flux, one without an end point beyond its own replenishment, it is also a better fit for the circular motion of surprise, reckoning, and growth which the Countess and Morgan cyclically undergo. Guest writes these characters as though they were in search for a space and a time that would be capable of momentarily containing the perpetual motion of phenomena around them. They locate such a capacity, fleetingly, in aesthetic form, as well as in the domestic space that seems to provide shelter from a boundaryless exterior. Within this dynamic, they experience themselves, most acutely, wherever they are at their most restless: as a subject that is most present at the moment when it fades into surroundings, rather than as a gradual sharpening of inner clarity.

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[123] Wilfred Bion, "Learning from Experience," in *The Complete Works of W.R. Bion*, vol.4, ed. Chris Mawson (Karnac, 2014), 356.
[124] Ogden, "On Holding and Containing, Being and Dreaming," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 85 (2004), 1356; emphasis in original.

In the final pages of *Seeking Air*, Morgan achieves a strange state of clarity, as the fantastical enclosure which he constructs for himself is "edged out by White."[125] White—this new imaginative force—is expansive, where Dark was restrictive. It is mobile and restless, where Dark was static and set. The duality which this comparison introduces into Morgan's perspective coincides, in the final pages, with his acceptance of Miriam as an end in and of herself: as an object, like him, among the objects of the world. Indeed, Guest makes this point explicit by suddenly switching the novel's perspective to that of Miriam, as she watches Morgan write, for a paragraph:

> What is Morgan missing? mused Miriam. What with being up half the night hitting the keys in an orthodox manner and only going to the bathroom once and I knew then that he was in there reading. Trying to find a place for White. That's what he is doing in this scheme of things that's like threads posted from chair to door to table, the threads we have been following, almost thriving on in the half light and half life of Morgan and me. The intervals must be catching up, coming closer to one tidy echo.[126]

What Morgan has been missing, of course, is exactly this capacity to accept Miriam's separateness, as it is displayed here by Guest's adoption of her voice. The unexpected switch of perspective frames Morgan within Miriam's gaze, allowing him to be momentarily beheld and contained within her secondary reflections on his anxieties. As Morgan comes to terms with the reality of Miriam's presence, the "scheme of things" that he has chased through the novel begins to dissolve into this strange new "wholeness of White," a mystical state that encompasses the apartment just as sunrise arrives "streaking the river with thin morning colors."[127] The final lines of the novel describe Morgan as relinquishing himself to a sensitive play of light and air as they filter into his apartment. This collapsing of his "impenetrable bachelorhood" into a communion with the atmosphere surrounding him is the first moment that he perceives Miriam.[128] It is also the first time that Guest gives her heroine direct speech. The two characters take in the sunrise together, both at last alive to the way in which their sense of themselves has need of the other, and the air which they share.

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[125] *SA*, 199.
[126] *SA*, 201.
[127] *SA*, 203.
[128] *SA*, 203.

Reading Guest's narrative works as accounts of the acceptance of an inter-subjective dependency is one final way of understanding a poetics of atmosphere. Just as these texts search for forms that can accommodate the meteorological phenomena which course across their fields of vision, so their protagonists seek a way of being in the world that preserves self-definition as a membrane which filters the frightening and exciting presence of enveloping phenomena. To be interpolated, in this way, in an atmosphere is to accept that the surrounding world is uncontainable in any single subject, just as the "selfish enchantment" of *Amaryllis*' aberrant form alters, and is necessarily altered by, the city that houses it.

Fig. 5. – Juan Gris, Spanish, 1887-1927, *Flowers*, 1914; collage of cut printed and painter papers with black crayon, black, blue, white matte opaque paints on canvas; 21 5/8 x 18 1/8 inches; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Paintings; © 2021, Leonard A. Lauder Cubist Collection, Gift of Leonard A. Lauder, New York.

Fig. 6. – Tony Smith, American, 1912-1980, *Amaryllis*, 1965; Cor-Ten steel, painted black; 11’6” x 7’6” x 11’6” feet; Edition 2/3; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; Gift of the T.B. Walker Foundation, 1968.

Conclusion

This form of restlessness is always apparent in art…[1]

I The late works

This dissertation has sought to map the transformations of modernist aesthetics in Guest's poems, as they enfold elements of reality that resist representation and exceed the perceptual parameters of a single subject. In Guest's first collection of 1960, *The Location of Things*, we saw how the cubist canvas provides a model for decentered and mobile perceptual activity. The derangements of measure and scale that the poems perform is motivated by the conviction that no subject can delimit the atmospheric phenomena within which it is immersed. These early texts are unrelenting in their multiplications of "the realities,"[2] as one title puts it, that they encompass: lyric address loosens under the strain of representing phenomena that are indifferent to its deictic coordinates.

In the mid-period work, this displacement of subjectivity opens onto a meta-poetic concern for the poem as ornament: Guest turns poetic language away from the world as it is, and she constructs the poem as a space that is relieved from the pressures of figuration. For Guest, the poem, although itself a mere "[s]pill of ink,"[3] is then enlivened by an equivalence between its ornamental detachment from *mimesis* and the impressively minimal phenomena—the *informe* of colour, a shuffling of light, or the "*spare shadow*" that it throws[4]—hanging on the edge of perception. By the mid-1970s, this preoccupation with atmospheric phenomena becomes the leading theme of Guest's narrative sequences, in which character is redrawn as an effort to contain a phenomenological field that is, by turns, menacingly and thrillingly plentiful, and that becomes an antagonist for aesthetic forms too quick to contain the roiling sensations of an uncontainable world.

Although I have followed a more or less linear chronology, it is worth observing that Guest returns recursively to the modernist antinomies from which this thesis departed. Her emphasis on perspectival frames is a way out of the surface/depth dyad that is kept up in the

[1] "Letter from Barbara Guest." May 20, 1991. Box 88, folder 7, Frankenthaler papers.
[2] The title, in French, is "Les Réalités." *LT*, 19.
[3] *CP*, 386.
[4] *IS*, 7.

writings of Greenberg, Barr, and poet contemporaries in New York. Similarly, her riffs on poetry as stitchwork, embellishment, and a sensuous addendum to reality puts distance between her writing and the anti-figurative focus of Abstract Expressionism, as well as its attendant lionization of the artist's body as the span and centre of the work. The ecstatic transformation of enclosed domestic spaces is played out and reimagined from the first collection to the last. These are not phases of conceptualisation that are overcome in the stretch of a single collection. Indeed, as Guest's writing continues to reckon with the affective dimensions of an art work's relation to its surroundings, she loops back through the narrower terms of formalism in order to renew modernist engagements with life.

This is so because, put simply, Guest remains dissatisfied with mid-century delimitations of art forms from one another, and of the art object from the world. It is in this vein that she writes in a late essay: "What we are setting out to do is to *delimit* the work of art, so that it appears *to have no beginning and no end*."[5] Her inverted use of "delimit" here, with original emphases, proposes not the imposition of limits but their elimination; a call to *de*-limit, which would be the removal of limits as such, aimed towards the limitlessness of "*no beginning and no end*." Her poems enact this de-limiting, inhabit a febrility of modernisms which ranges across artistic forms, and deconstruct the notion of a unified style or a linear progression of innovation.

In Guest's late works, written from the 1990s onwards, this strategy leads towards a paradox, one which I dwell on in closing since it sharpens my application of atmosphere to Guest and her modernism. Guest conceives of her poetics as inheriting modernism's restless search for forms that may accommodate life. We could describe this search as an exercise in "de-limitation"—a Sisyphean pursuit of the new which is a modernist precept. We can observe how Guest subscribes to the heroism of this position throughout her essays and criticism, which celebrate the "unenclosed world of modernism,"[6] the "revolutionaries" of the Parisian avant-gardes, and the writing of poetry as a "beautiful voyage."[7] A poem such as "Leaving MODERNITY," from the 1996 collection *Quill, Solitary APPARATION*, takes this beautiful voyage as its subject, figuring the past as a regenerative fountain that erupts out of its historical parenthesis into the present:

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[5] *FI*, 100.
[6] The phrase is from Guest's 1992 review of the scholar Anna Balakian's work *The Fiction of the Poet*: "She really cares about the unenclosed world of modernism to which [Breton] was dedicated and which she is able to present as an enchanted world with all the difficulties of enchantment." "Review: The Fiction of the Poet by Anna Balakian." Box 103, folder 1617, Guest papers.
[7] *FI*, 51; *FI*, 78.

and the idea of *departure* (simmered between brackets)

and its fountain

equidistant

and near

when soft water gathers
and dispenses[8]

The poem goes on to elaborate on this "idea of *departure*" as a "leaving (without ending)."[9] With sparse and disintegrated phrasing, its pages plot modernism as "*the dissolving string*" that keeps experience, perception, and the world in all its complexity tethered to form and artifice.[10] In such a configuration, it becomes the work of modernism to interrogate this relation between opening and foreclosure: a productive impasse that is simultaneously potentiated and vitiated by its apparent unendingness.[11] To put this programmatically: modernism examines the edges of a reality that is left rough and frayed by modernity. For this reason—since modernism proceeds as an aesthetic rejoinder to a set of dynamic material conditions—the work of examining the unfinished *will never itself be finished*. And so, Guest can write of "leaving modernity (without ending)."[12]

If we conceive of modernism as this production of forms that must continually be broken as they strain to contain life, then Guest's late works epitomize one consequence of such a formula: a language that cannot arrive at the end of a phrase without dissolving itself into an imagined elsewhere. The collection *Rocks on a Platter*, published in 1999, opens by

[8] *CP*, 353.
[9] *CP*, 353.
[10] *CP*, 355.
[11] Running back through aesthetic theories of the nineteenth-century, this perspective aligns Guest with a Hegelian sense of art as a thing of the past. Reflecting in 1994 on Abstract Expressionism, T.J. Clark provides a useful summary of this myth of art's diminishment as enacted in modernism: "Modernism, as I conceive it, is the art of the situation Hegel pointed to, but its job turns out to be to make the endlessness of the ending bearable, by time and again imagining that it has taken place." "In Defense of Abstract Expressionism," *October* 69 (1994), 25.
[12] *CP*, 352.

avowing this connection between the poetic page and an elsewhere that haunts it: "Dreams set by / typography. A companionship with crewlessness— shivering fleece."[13] The poem, imagined as the argonaut's changeful ship, makes towards the hard land of reality, but its course is obstructed by "Rocks, platters, words, words…"[14] Guest writes of a suspicion of any "tangible itinerary," and she wants instead for the poem to linger over the intangible qualities of "tone" and "impression."[15] Pages of the collection are devoted to recounting the difficulties inherent in this exercise:

> *And the words linger, deciding which direction to take.*
>
> *Will they remain with the middle chord? The atonal section is*
>
> *fearful, running along beside the pale brook, clouding and declouding.*[16]

This "discontinuous treatment" of a voyage constantly breaks into clouds, sea spray, sunshine, and skyscapes, expressing its "attraction to distance and disappearance" through the kind of phenomena that are definitionally far off and vague.[17] That the resistance of reality to representation is approached through the hazy stuff of atmosphere returns us to the instigating premise of this thesis: the weather is as close as the poem can get to the world's always changing.

The ontological blurriness of these phenomena, and the force that Guest confers to their distance and disappearance, corresponds with her sense of a modernism that arrives late to pick up the pieces of an irreparable reality. These late poems' aporetic language of "ghost-like presence,"[18] as the title poem of *Quill, Solitary APPARITION* puts it, self-reflexively regard their own process of looking back at modernism as it passes into history. Writing in 1990, Guest describes the prolonged curtain-fall of that moment:

> In the not too far off future the curtain will be drawn on Modernism as it enters history. Already the shades are listing as Modernism begins to cross the border, exulting in the new freedom called the past. The forms of poetry, too, are restlessly

[13] *CP*, 427.
[14] *CP*, 427.
[15] *CP*, 436.
[16] *CP*, 433; emphasis in original.
[17] *CP*, 433; *CP*, 439.
[18] *CP*, 362.

> releasing themselves. Having feasted on Modernism they are readying for a new patrol into less inhibited—and what is glimpsed as a more fractured—territory.[19]

This "new freedom called the past" is where Guest locates her later works. The result of this is a language that draws close to a vanishing object which seems fantastically "larger and further away"; the archivist's equivalent of an optical illusion.[20] Whereas the earlier collections situate their engagement with modernist aesthetics in ekphrastic glimpses of art works, or within the scenic trappings of Picasso's studio, Kandinsky's apartment, and *fin de siècle* boulevards, Guest's later style dissolves such scenic grounding altogether. What remains is the sensation of belatedness, and the poetic attempt to pick a pathway through modernism reconceived as a hinterland without end. As poet Andrew Joron comments, from the 1980s onwards, "[a]n eerie perspectivism now invaded [Guest's] words; everything, even the most ordinary thing, in this new scenery seemed to point away from itself, toward some distant, dissonant state of being."[21]

This, then, is the paradoxical attitude of Guest's modernism: her fascination with modernism's unenclosed world produces poems that seem enclosed in their own. Put another way, her conviction that modernism exists within the gap between form and life, her belief that modernist styles and techniques make this gap palpable, and that modernism's epistemological and phenomenological provocations are therefore perennial, these convictions and beliefs can only find expression in a language that evades all direct representation of life and disintegrates form. A poem such as "Blurred Edge," published in 2002, illustrates this well. Almost without a subject, the "It" of the poem's opening suggests that we read it as account of its own gestation:

> It appears
>
> a drama of exacting dimension.
>
> Anguished figure,
> reign of terror.

[19] *FI*, 11.
[20] *CP*, 354.
[21] Joron, "Review: The Collected Poems of Barbara Guest," *The Poetry Project Newsletter* 219 (2019), 20.

Craft and above all
the object within.
Softness precedes
blurred edge.

A hint disappears inside the earlier one.[22]

As the poem continues this string of parataxical observations, Guest's attention is drawn to ephemeral impressions that can only be described as they resist description:

A hint of what was going to be

Covering and uncovering necessary.

Self pouring out of cloudedness.[23]

The poem then circles around its own apophatic resistances: it recounts "hints" of a ghostly elsewhere, a scene which it has arrived at too late. The urgency with which Guest's late work renders such peripheral sensations is the stylistic correlative to her sense of a belated modernism. A modernism that is "leaving modernity" means a modernism that is always on the threshold of a future that it cannot bring into being, but which it renders as this sensation of a deferred departure: an expectation of an elsewhere that the poem both opens onto and forecloses. The poem's final line sinks that expectation, putting its object outside the reach of language itself: "unworded distance at edge."[24]

That paradox, again: a language that writes its own vanishing. To borrow Emile Bernard's words on Cézanne, Guest aims for reality while denying herself the means to attain it. She champions a restless modernism that operates at the limits of form, and yet it is that restless motion, that openness to mere phenomena arising prior to cognitive coherence, which becomes the unrepresentable substance of her work. We could read this as the terminal phase of Pound's "Make It New," in which the making of the new squeezes out the downbeat "it" that is its ostensible object. This puts Guest's work in touch with

[22] *CP*, 478.
[23] *CP*, 480.
[24] *CP*, 481.

Nathan Brown's claim that "the realism-modernism debate is in fact a debate internal to modernism."[25] As an evocation of an "unworded distance at edge," a poem like "Blurred Edge" is primarily involved in displaying the intransigencies of phenomena that language cannot contain, but which are more, not less, real for it. Guest's modernism, in this sense, is less about an array of aesthetic techniques confined to a period, and more about an animating skepticism that takes issue with a form's alleged self-containment or apparent insensibility to the material upon which it works. Something like this is covered by the Warwick Research Collective's theorization of "irrealism": a collection of techniques, vocabularies and devices that model "a fundamental dissonance in the structure of reality, and therefore also in the way in which reality is experienced."[26] Guest's own comments on modernism show her stretching the term's application to cover a comparably wide range of techniques: in unpublished notes, she writes of "several amazing modernisms in Dr Samuel Johnson's literary evaluations,"[27] and elsewhere she describes the "conversion" of the seventeenth century, "withal its modernism," into the twentieth.[28]

One aim of this dissertation has been to shed some light on the historical components of this protean and expansive modernism. Cubist geometries, Mallarmé's poetics, and Stein's relational aesthetics all share a distrust of the linear, the uniform, and the apparent. All of them converge within Guest's poetics. If her constitutive doubt about form's permanence and adequacy were to be given a name, it would be mysticism, of a kind with that raised by Sedgwick in her discussion of Proust. The most consistent feature of Guest's critical output is the mystic's commitment to the insufficiency of the immediate and its representations as measures of truth—a rhetoric that sharply differentiates her from the playful, occasionally flippant, tone taken by her New York peers. In 1984's "A Reason for Poetics," a text sometimes anthologised alongside Frank O'Hara's manifesto "Personism," Guest writes the following:

> The conflict between a poet and the poem creates an atmosphere of mystery. When this mystery is penetrated, when the dark reaches of the poem succumb and shine with a clarity projected by the mental lamp of the reader, then an experience called *illumination* takes place. This is the most beautiful experience literature can present

[25] Brown, "Postmodernity, Not Yet: Toward a New Periodisation," *Radical Philosophy* 2, no. 1 (2018), 24.
[26] Warwick Research Collective, *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature* (Liverpool University Press, 2015), 65.
[27] "There are several amazing modernisms..." Undated. Box 83, folder 1457, Guest papers.
[28] "Postcard to Rachel Blau DuPlessis." October 21, 1995. Box 5, folder "Guest, Barbara," DuPlessis papers.

> us with, and more precious for being extremely rare, arrived at through concentration, through mediation of the poem, through those facilities we often associate with a religious experience, as indeed it is. The reader is converted to the poem. Invisible magic also passes between poet and reader.[29]

For both O'Hara and Guest, the autonomy of the poem remains paramount. In O'Hara's slangier terms the poem is "gratified" by its position "between the poet and the person"[30]; for Guest, the poem illuminates a space between poet and reader. This is more than a difference of tone: the illumination that Guest imagines taking place through the poem is one which explicitly draws the reader into the equation. The "atmosphere of mystery" that Guest values is the experience of reading, defined as an encounter that can illuminate the mysterious indefinability of reality itself.

II Guest's doubt

Mysticism in modernity is an arrangement of tropes which evoke an experience that transcends language. Early twentieth century interest in the mystic took this incommunicability, "ineffability" or "indescribability" of experience as her defining quality.[31] Mysticism is therefore inherently connected to a concept of *vision*, another of Guest's preferred words, as an extra- or para-linguistic phenomenon. Indeed the etymology of "mystic" itself was traced back in early twentieth century scholarship to the Greek mysteries, where the name of *μύστης* as given to a spiritual initiate, "probably arose from the fact that he was one who was gaining knowledge of divine things about which he must keep his mouth shut (*μύω* = close lips or eyes)."[32] The silence of mystical experience is likewise associated by Robert K. C. Forman with "a forgetting (*vergezzen*) of the ordinary sensory and ratiocinative powers" in the course of which the mystic "ceased thinking."[33] It is a state that marks an experience as extra-linguistic, wordless, and wrenched out of discourse: neither before nor rafter, but resolutely beyond language.

Niklaus Largier's work on the relationship between mysticism and modernity is instructive here. Largier presents a genealogy of thought which "transposes the mystical

[29] *FI*, 22.
[30] O'Hara, "Personism," xiv.
[31] For the seminal account of these qualities in mystical experience, see William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, ed. Matthew Bradley (Oxford University Press, 2012); first published in 1902.
[32] Caroline F. E. Spurgeon, *Mysticism in English Literature* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 2.
[33] Forman, *The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy* (SUNY Press, 1990), 105.

language from its medieval hermeneutical contexts and makes it available to a series of transformations from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries, finally leading to Martin Heidegger's identification of the mystical with something that is 'before thinking'."[34] Taking this "before-thought" as symptomatic of twentieth century appropriations of mysticism, Largier considers how whilst mystical experiences were initially understood in the medieval era as manifesting knowledge of God, "embedded in a specific culture of prayer and contemplation,"[35] it was in early-modern Europe that the deracination of such experiences from their monastic context, and the increasing circulation of mystical texts in the vernacular, posed a pressing problem for newly competing doctrines: how to contain and police the potentially limitless splintering of competing biblical interpretation which mysticism, with its capacity to bypass any canonical authority, now threatened.[36]

In Largier's reconstruction, the resolution of this multiplication of claims to spiritual authority was proposed by Luther with the creation of a new category of experience: the "worldly," or secular; an idea which allowed for "the projection of mystical tropes into a new realm, removing them from authorized hermeneutics and thus setting them free […] for their use in a different epistemological realm."[37] The result was a new paradigm which interpreted mystical experience as an "experimental" or "poetic" episteme engaged with forms of knowledge beyond rationality:

> Devoid of their liturgical and hermeneutical embeddedness and their institutional frame on one side, and from their political-eschatological meaning on the other, these texts and the mystical practices of prayer and contemplation turn into something new, namely, the basis for what we could call an experimental poetic mysticism that is explored in many forms from the sixteenth to the twentieth century.[38]

Mysticism became available as a way of presenting not a communicable truth or a hermeneutical practice but the trace of an experiential contact, often analogous to or expressed as an aesthetic experience.

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[34] Largier, "Mysticism, Modernity, and the Invention of Aesthetic Experience." *Representations* 105 (2009), 39.
[35] Largier, "Mysticism," 40.
[36] Largier, "Mysticism," 44-45.
[37] Largier, "Mysticism," 47.
[38] Largier, "Mysticism," 48.

Crucially, therefore, mystical practices pursue contact with a presence that is other than language, often figured as a totality irreducible to discreet parts. The mystic is the one who *sees* a truth that cannot be said. In her discussion of flares of mystical vision in the writings of Virginia Woolf, Gabrielle McIntire describes how sight restores a sense of wholeness and connection to the world which may momentarily relieve the self from estrangement in language:

> The eternally deferred *différance* that structures our being as always-already alienated is resolved in such a vision since nothing about our ontology is ever deferred if "we are the thing itself." This unified vision of the holistic, even transparent, clear nature of things appears in moments of secular-sacred epiphanies that are scattered through Woolf's fiction.[39]

Whereas the rhetorical position of reticence, a withholding from language, would presuppose a tension between the interiority of felt experience and the language with which it is expressed, mysticism implicates an abolition of the distinction: the unified vision *is* that totality which is incommensurable with language.

Guest's visionary poetics belongs to this mystical strand of modernism. The paradoxical performance of this incommensurability within language can be plotted across her work, where silence and wordlessness are often evoked as generative states, and as more "real" than the words on the page: "The poem begins in silence"; "so silence is pictorial / when silence is real"; "Weight of the useless word."[40] The question then arises: what is this totality that Guest believes to be incommensurable with language? And why should a *poetics* be up to the task of making it felt? Is she seeking a reality that is "external" to language, what Thomas Nagel has called "the view from nowhere"?[41] Or does she take the restlessness of language's mediation as the only view of reality that is possible? I think the second proposition is more likely, although the reason for this exceeds what would otherwise be a quintessentially post-structuralist mistrust of access to an unmediated reality.

In 1946, the year of Guest's arrival in New York, Maurice Merleau-Ponty's essay "Cézanne's Doubt" was translated and published in the *Partisan Review*. The essay is

[39] McIntire, "Virginia Woolf's Agnostic, Visionary Mysticism: Approaching and Retreating from the Sacred," in *The Edinburgh Companion to Modernism, Myth and Religion*, eds. Suzanne Hobson and Andrew Radford (Edinburgh University Press, 2022), 203.
[40] *FI*, 20; *FR*, 26; *CP*, 475.
[41] Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford University Press, 1986).

instructive for its numerous parallels with my discussion of Guest so far: Merleau-Ponty wants to understand a comparable tension, between reality and medium, totality and part, as presented in Cézanne's art. Further, he understands Cézanne, working in the wake of impressionism, as inheriting procedures that made his pursuit of reality at once inevitable and impossible: "[Cézanne] was pursuing reality without giving up the sensuous surface, with no other guide than the immediate impression of nature."[42] For Merleau-Ponty, it is the painting as measure of reality, as tracing a closeness to it, that distinguishes Cézanne from the impressionists. Where they had tried to capture the perceptual play through which reality is apprehended, Cézanne wants to restore to the object its reality, "to find it again behind the atmosphere"[43]:

> If the painter is to express the world, the arrangement of his colors must bear within this indivisible whole, or else his painting will only hint at things and will not give them in the imperious unity, the presence, insurpassable plenitude which is for us the definition of the real.[44]

This is the "insurpassable plenitude," the totality, that Guest's poetic vision wishes to restore to the world. It is the experience of the world as it encompasses, or holds, the art work or the poem, which participates as one part of "this indivisible whole." The things posed for our apprehension within the poem are therefore enveloped by an atmosphere that exceeds them, and perception itself must therefore weather, and then bear out, its own provisionality. Like Merleau-Ponty's Cézanne, Guest does not want "to separate the stable things we see and the shifting way in which they appear."[45] This is why the act of looking often becomes the self-conscious subject of her poems: deconstructed and destabilized until that experience of disorientation and perceptual flux becomes synchronised with the experience of reading the poem itself.

What Merleau-Ponty calls the lived experience of an "inexhaustible reality full of reserves" may ultimately be unrepresentable,[46] but Guest's wager is that the poem can approximate *contact* with this plenitude. This is why she writes of the poem as an

[42] Merleau-Ponty, "Cézanne's Doubt," 12.
[43] Merleau-Ponty, "Cézanne's Doubt," 12.
[44] Merleau-Ponty, "Cézanne's Doubt," 15.
[45] Merleau-Ponty, "Cézanne's Doubt," 13.
[46] Merleau-Ponty, "Cézanne's Doubt," 15.

autonomous force that is in conflict with the poet. Her poems are not engaged in representing reality; they work, rather, to metonymically reproduce the vitality of a world in motion:

> Regard the poem as plastic. It is moveable, touchable. It is a viable breathing substance. Nothing is more useless than a poem with a dull sheen that refuses to move, that is inert. This is the essence of dullness and our eyes run quickly past it.
>
> A poem has not only a voice, but a mouth and the mouth must move just as much as the voice must speak and it must not be careless in its speech. And flesh of a poem. Even as a painting has flesh. The vibrancy of its skin.[47]

This creaturely-poem takes its place in the world, and it is that taking place, that being present, which constitutes Guest's poetics of atmosphere. Read in this way, her extensions of modernist techniques are also retrospective expansions of their phenomenological scope: the poem's perceptual flux corresponds to the apprehension of reality as mobile; the poem as ornament analogizes a reality composed of minimally present formless phenomena; the poem as atmosphere performs a microcosmic rendition of the body in the world.

To return, then, to the contradictory arrangements set out above: why does Guest believe that contact with an indivisible whole can be rendered in poems that seem, at first sight, self-regarding, closed systems, riven with formal fragmentation? If the poem is alive, dynamic, mobile—a viable breathing substance—why do her late works commonly hinge on a language of ghostliness, deficiency, and mystery?

Answering those questions has driven the turn towards atmosphere—and the language of affect—in my argument over the preceding chapters. For if, as I argued in chapters 2 and 3, Guest is drawn to phenomena that subsist beneath the threshold of representability, then her poems are always tracing their own limits and insufficiencies. Just as the characters of the Countess and Morgan, as discussed in chapter 4, are forever seeking to contain the uncontainable, Guest then faces the impossible task of bringing into the poem shifting sensations which are not subjects or which take no form. Out of this impasse, her poetics of atmosphere emerges: the poem, no longer beholden to representation, is imagined as a reproduction in miniature of the flux, excess, and complexities of an affect laden world that is always getting away.

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[47] *FI*, 30.

III Restless forms

In a short essay titled "Atmosphère, Atmosphère," Bruno Latour notes that atmosphere has become shorthand for the "real 'conditions of possibility'" that envelope our lives. Whilst the word may have "sounded pompous in the 1930s, [it] has now become commonplace, perhaps reflecting a universal condition."[48] In our daily lives, we speak of atmospheres—affective and climatological, local and global—when we want to entertain "a reasonable wish to ascertain what sort of breathing space is most conducive to civilised life."[49] The essay was Latour's contribution to the exhibition catalogue of Olaf Eliasson's *The Weather Project*, a monumental work mounted at the Tate Modern in 2003, in which an enormous artificial sun, formed by an eighteen thousand watt semicircle of yellow streetlamps, blazed over the hall, while mirrors hung on the ceiling allowed visitors to watch themselves basking in its light. Eliasson's installation provides the perfect illustration of Latour's argument: it reimagines the gallery's hall as a "cosmogram"; a space in which bystanders become participants as they self-evaluate their role, position, agency within a shared atmosphere.[50]

Eliasson's work premiered a little over a decade after the publication of Latour's *We Have Never Been Modern* in 1991. In that book, Latour makes his case for hybridity and network as key terms for rethinking what he describes as the "double doubt" of modernity, by which nature is divided from the human (the nature-culture dichotomy), in a dualism that is itself buttressed by the further division of subject-object. Significantly, Latour opens his argument with a consideration of atmospheric conditions:

> Can anyone imagine a study that would treat the ozone hole as simultaneously naturalized, sociologized and deconstructed? A study in which the nature of the phenomenon might be firmly established and the strategies of power predictable, but nothing would be at stake but meaning effects that projects the pitiful illusions of a nature and a speaker?[51]

[48] Latour, "Atmosphère, Atmosphère," in *The Weather Project* (New Tate Gallery, 2003), 29.
[49] Latour, "Atmosphère, Atmosphère," 30.
[50] For an ecocritical appraisal of the influence of phenomenology on Eliasson's work, see Lesley Duxbury, "Breath-Taking: Creating Artistic Visualisations of Atmospheric Conditions to Evoke Responses to Climate Change," *Local-Global: Identity, Security, Community* 10 (2012).Duxbury connects *The Weather Project* to a number of similar large-scale atmospheric simulations which aim to provide a space within which audiences "may be able to think differently and more clearly about the world where we live and what is occurring within it" (43).
[51] Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Harvard University Press, 1991), 6.

Latour's argument is that the ozone hole cannot be interpreted within the subject-object paradigm that governs what we have come to conflate with "modern" thinking. An atmospheric phenomena such as the ozone cannot be narrativized and comprehended, not even in the cursory reporting of a daily newspaper, without an interlacing of threads that link "the most esoteric sciences and the most sordid politics, the most distant sky and some factory in the Lyon suburbs."[52] Whereas critique would keep up the illusion of a separation between these strands of thought, siloing them within their ecological, political, cultural disciplines, Latour argues that we are always already immersed in conditions that make a mockery of such divisions. We inhabit a complex, streaming network of interwoven stories that cross the discursive boundaries with which modernity has held apart the sciences and humanities, culture and nature, subject and object. This "[e]nd of modernist parenthesis," as Latour puts it, will come about once we accept of our entanglement in the world.[53]

Guest's poetics might lead us to ask whether there is not a missing link, if not a continuity, between modernism and Latour's atmospheric imaginary of post-critique.[54] At the very least, Guest helps us to perceive how a sensitivity to reality as ontologically complex and contingent, and the expression of that complexity in forms that confront reality with its own elusiveness, was never bracketed away by modernist poetics. Indeed, Guest's poetics of atmosphere arises within the terrain of Latour's double doubt: distrustful of ways of knowing the world that would circumscribe its edges; and, despite this, incapable of imagining that an apprehension of reality unmediated by form is possible.[55] It's for this reason that atmosphere is mobilised, as metaphor, and as matter, by both Latour and Guest. "[An] atmosphere / causing delicate breaks where the nerves confuse,"[56] as Guest writes in *The Location of Things*, describes the scalar extension of what is deemed apprehensible in

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[52] Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 1.

[53] Latour, "Atmosphère," 6.

[54] For a similar argument about the collapse of classical dichotomies of subject/object, and foreground/background, in impressionist painting, see Stephen Kern, "Modernist Spaces in Science, Philosophy, the Arts, and Society" in *The Cambridge History of Modernism*, ed. Vincent Sherry (Cambridge University Press, 2016): "The impressionists took a first step in giving space its due with their depictions of atmosphere. They used coastal fog, steamy summer haze, and winter twilight to fuse subject and background into a single composition" (359).

[55] In *We Have Never Been Modern*, Latour describes this paradoxical arrangement in the following passage:

> During the modern period, the critics will continue to sustain themselves on that double doubt and the impossibility of ever putting an end to it. Modernism consisted in choosing that arrangement, nevertheless, but in remaining constantly suspicious of its two types of representatives without combining them into a single problem. Epistemologists wondered about scientific realism and the faithfulness of science to things; political scientists wondered about the representative system and the relative faithfulness of elected officials and spokespersons. All had in common a hatred of intermediaries and a desire for an immediate world, emptied of its mediators (143).

[56] *LT*, 35.

poetic form. The uncontainability of the material which the poem brings into its field, and "the scope of mobilization," in Latour's words, that hybrid thinking urges, is also the reason why form is refigured as an apprehension of what exceeds it, rather than the outline of a world that it claims to have delimited.[57]

The irony of this position does not escape Guest. That atmospherics, half-glimpsed charms, the "unworded distance at edge" should become the substance of her poetry is a fact confronted with mounting bluntness in her later works: "Where is the sky? / Here," begins one poem; "Do not forget the sky has other zones," admonishes another.[58] The poem must trouble itself with its own partiality, as a sign that it takes the totality of the world as its obscured bedrock. This makes of the poem a self-effacing, precarious thing; its attunement to signs of life larger than itself both substantiates and deteriorates the vitality which it also lays claim to, and the ephemerality of its own form underwrites its fidelity to a world that has no need of its affirmations.

Where does this leave the poem as it is encountered on the page? How should a poem that poses as a viable breathing substance maintain itself as anything other than passing air? What rapport with reality can be sustained by a poetics that refutes representation? Art historian T.J. Clark, in his own reflections on Cézanne, grasps at something of the oddness of this attention to reality that fractures its own objective:

> [T]he whole felt world, the spatial surrounding, ends up as *un*real—as uncanny—as it is real and matter-of-fact. Its solidity is ironized as soon as insisted on […] Space is becoming something palpable, yes, a separate entity; but therefore, it seems, a riddle.[59]

The pursuit of the "whole felt world," in Clark's echo of Merleau-Ponty, is exactly what renders that world strange and distant. Its representation is "real and matter-of-fact," and for that ironically out of place in aesthetic form. In her poem "The Brown Studio," written after a visit to Cézanne's studio in Aix en Provence,[60] Guest grasps at the uncanniness and obscurity of space made palpable, as Clark describes it in this passage. The poem's speaker

[57] Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 107.
[58] *CP*, 486; *CP*, 492.
[59] T.J. Clark, *If These Apples*, 60.
[60] In an email in 2004 to Stephen Ratcliffe, Guest reminisces about the original visit to the studio: "how dark it was, and intense. I brought back a souvenir, and now can't remember what it was. The studio was very brown and dark. It was of course, years ago when Cézanne had used it. But oh, the murmur of his brush was still evident." *Letters*, 140.

returns to a painter's studio "having a spent a night in the grove / by the river."[61] The dusky atmosphere of this space is alarming—its "music" is "distinctly shady"; everything is blackened: "pale," "inky" and dark.[62] The speaker goes searching for someone through this murkiness until she pauses over a photograph of the painter: "now there was an emptiness, beginning to darken."[63] In a move that should by now be familiar, Guest then imagines the act of speaking in this darkening space to be conditioned by the haunting presence of Cézanne:

> I believed if I spoke,
> if a word came from my throat
> and entered this room whose walls had been turned,
>
> it would be the color of the cape
> we saw in Aix in the studio of Cézanne,
> it hung near the death's head, the umbrella,
> the palette cooled to grey,
>
> if I spoke loudly enough,
> knowing the arc from real to phantom,
> the fall of my voice would be,
> a dying brown.[64]

Drawn into a projective sympathy with the modernist painter, the poem synaesthetically takes his palette as its own. The precision with which the speaker recalls this shade of "dying brown," and the intensity with which that shade seems to engulf the space within, conditions here the act of speaking itself. This "arc from real to phantom" is constructed as the poem's associative layers, and the memories that they carry, are worked over one another. As in Clark's reading, the unreality of the scene created emerges not out of detachment from immediate phenomena, but rather a hyper-sensitivity to their sensuous qualities (light, colour, shape). Indeed, so great is the force of this "dying brown," that it threatens to

[61] *CP*, 45.
[62] *CP*, 46.
[63] *CP*, 45-46.
[64] *CP*, 46.

overwrite the capacity of speech. This is how solidity comes to be, in Clark's phrase, "ironized as soon as insisted on": solidity is, in Cézanne's painting as in Guest's poetry, a provisional accumulation, a thickening of mediacy, and to insist that this accumulation *is* the art work ("Where is the sky? / Here"), serves only to underscore the equivalence drawn between the art work's provisionality and the provisionality of reality itself.

We might also, as Clark does, pause to consider how this effects a contradictory weakening and reinforcement of space as "something palpable" in the art work. In Guest's poems, this is felt as what I called their enclosedness: even as they transform themselves into fields of activity liberated from the constrictions of place, interior or exterior, they drop the very coordinates with which their shifts in scale could be gaged. In "The Brown Studio," this is felt as the spatial orientations of the opening lines give way to the conditional "if I spoke," which is carried back to the memory of Cézanne's studio in Aix, and the reduction of exteriority (the poem opens by a wooded river) to the opening of the throat. In an essay on Louise Bourgeois in 1993, Guest affronts a similar process in her own words. Bourgeois' work, according to Guest, sacrifices its "spatial modality" in order to gain a new space that exists *between* the object and its viewer:

> In an era of fading dependence on modernity we now acclaim work that concentrates less on form within a spatial modality, but rather on forms that propose a speaking body, that "listen" to the body, that hear the body's alarms through new sculptural commands. There is a preference for a "dialogue" to develop between the sculptor and the subject, rather than to witness the loneliness of an art form in the process of creation.[65]

Guest's language here, not only for the emphasis it places on aesthetics as a relational model, is close to the terminologies of affect theory which was contemporaneously beginning its emergence in cultural studies. This resonance that passes between body and form is reminiscent of Brian Massumi's foundational work on the need to rediscover the "dynamic form of the body" as it is overlaid with affective intensities.[66] The body as an "affective event" is attuned, add Lone Bertelsen and Andrew Murphie, to a "pool of *relational*

[65] Guest, "Why has Louise Bourgeois finally become the Artist of the Moment?" in *Dürer in the Window: Reflections on Art* (Roof Books, 1993), 10.
[66] Massumi, "The Future Birth of the Affective Fact: The Political Ontology of Threat," in *The Affect Theory Reader,* eds. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Duke University Press, 2010), 65.

potential": it is always, as in Guest's encounter with Bourgeois, emergent from dialogue with other mobile agents.[67]

Yet it is atmosphere, and not the body, that I have proposed as the animus of Guest's poetry. This is partly in response to the relatively moderate presence of the body and the bodily in her work. It is also because the spatial modalities of her poems deactivate modernist antinomies by recentring attention on the plasticity and spontaneity of forces that interact with the body, yet remain *eccentric to it*. Atmosphere offers an opening beyond the oppositions between interiority and exteriority, depth and surface, domestic and ecstatic that this dissertation has retraced in modernist aesthetics. These binaries flowed into the strictures of modernist characterology, as best represented by E.M. Forster's famous distinction between "flat" and "round" characters in his *Aspects of the Novel*. Forster's description of an "inward turn" that permitted the modernist writer to "descend even deeper and peer in the subconscious" set the tone for readings of modernist narrative throughout the twentieth century.[68] As S. Pearl Brilmyer has argued, this paradigm remained remarkably durable throughout the twentieth century, in part because it could present itself as the logical extension of the novel's "subjective and inward direction."[69] Brilmyer explains how this argument resulted from a terminological elision between "depth and vitality," obscuring the latter's significance within an earlier turn of the century "materialist set of ideas, among them: plasticity, impressibility, spontaneity, impulsivity, and relationality," qualities not immediately legible within the later modernist oppositions of depth and surface, flat and round, interior and exterior.[70]

Emerging out of those oppositions, a poetics of atmosphere describes, firstly, the ambient meteorological impressions that Guest funnels into her text, and the phenomenological imbalances that this process induces. Secondly, it describes the relational realignment of reader-text, viewer-object, that Guest recovers from modernism, and which anticipates the terrain of affect theory. A third aspect is an analogy drawn, however lightly, between the form of poetry and atmospheric systems. When Guest writes that the poem is a "viable breathing substance," she alludes to an equivalence that is almost too evident to be stated: poetic language heightens our attention to the regulation of breath as its passages

[67] Bertelsen and Murphie, "An Ethics of Everyday Infinities and Powers: Felix Guattari on Affect and the Refrain," in *The Affect Theory Reader*, eds. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Duke University Press, 2010), 153.
[68] Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (Edward Arnold, 1927), 87.
[69] Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (University of California Press, 2001), 177.
[70] Brilmyer, *The Science of Character*, 223.

contribute to the making of meaning. The poem's formal arrangements extend horizontally and vertically, disrupting linear progression, shifting our attentions forwards and backwards, distending syntax and enlarging semantic sense. Seminal models of the poem as sedimentation, stratigraphy, or folding tend to imagine these dynamics as the cumulative layering of meaning.[71] But what distinguishes the poem from other forms of discourse is that this backwards and forwards flow of attention occurs within prosodic lineation, so that as well as moving across the page, the poetic line demands that our attention also drift up and down; tracking meter, reaching for rhyme, and turning with enjambment.[72]

As a viable breathing substance, the poem, like atmosphere, is a travelling stratification of breathwork. This fact roots the experience of the poem in the body, while placing that experience in a shared field of relations. As Susan Stewart writes, the poem "retains and projects the force of individual sense experience and yet reaches toward intersubjective meaning […] sustains and transforms the threshold between individual and social existence."[73] Guest's poetics departs with this expansion towards the impersonal, and continues to explore its limits. At times, this approaches mysticism, as when the poems seek to catch sight of their own dissolution; at others, it will sound more like materialism, as when the same poems enclose themselves in their own sonorous exchanges and thicken their language towards a thing-like state.

Thematically and formally, atmosphere allows us to better name and observe some of these strategies as they operate in Guest's poetics. It should also bring us closer to a conception of reality—as restless, vital, mysterious—that Guest took her poems to express. In a letter written to Helen Frankenthaler of 1991, Guest reflects on a visit to her friend. In a language suffused with the values that she ascribes elsewhere to poetry, she depicts the

[71] For a discussion of the poem as a sedimentation of meaning, see Giorgio Agamben, *The End of the Poem: Studies in Poetics*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford University Press), in which Agamben describes how "what out to be the most proper site of the poetic work appears instead as a vast field partially submerged in psychological swampland, out of which imposing ruins and theological torsos occasionally rise" (77). William Watkin addresses Agamben's thesis, alongside Derrida's notion of the fold, in his discussion of "stratification" in contemporary poetics. "'The / Turn and the " " Pause: Agamben, Derrida and the Stratification of Poetry,'" in *Textual Layering: Contact, Historicity, Critique* (Lexington Press, 2012).

[72] In proposing a phenomenology of the experience of reading poetry, William Watkin offers "tabularity" as one means of describing this movement in the experience of the poem. In Watkin's model, poetic structure builds a zig-zagging trellis on which to hang its thought. Put simply, our attention is cast back to recollect something already referred to or drawn ahead to expect what will be referred to: "You read, you recall as you read, you predict as you read, you re-read, you read back a few lines, you read up one line to remember the phrase before the line break, you read stanza one again and then the last stanza again." "Tabularity: Poetic Structure in Shelley, Agamben, Badiou, and Husserl." *CounterText* 3, no. 2 (2017), 201.

[73] Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* (University of Chicago Press, 2002), 2.

pair of them watching the river out front of Frankenthaler's house. The present moment here is an eddying confluence of past and future:

> We create a strange interlude: combining the past with the present. And then the day's hours rolling over that stretch of water in front of your house, depositing the small waves of that current and we watch and listen to them, witnesses each [sic] moment of their natural timings, as if they were ourselves, yet we are not so natural; each imprinted in perilous moments. The solvent, I suppose, is understanding, and that other frame that does not give itself so carelessly as time—love.[74]

The vitality of this interlude is felt as a vulnerability to time. The flux of past into present, and onwards, is what Guest's letter goes on to celebrate as Frankenthaler's "spontaneity": her "natural gift." "This form of restlessness," Guest adds, "is always apparent in art."[75] It is this restlessness that best describes Guest's own uninterrupted search for forms that would be adequate to the task of perceiving and producing atmospheres of their own. The paradoxes inherent to this—the insurmountable nature of bringing form to mere phenomenon—goes some way to explaining the explorative breadth and length of her work. In a final addendum, hand-written on the letter's horizontal side, Guest urges her friend to "not limit [herself] to the moderates of literature," and to seek literary "explorations" that would be the equal of her visual art. "There's a blue ceiling of poetry out there," she concludes, in a phrase that folds its atmospheric reach back into artifice, with the promise that new horizons can be found there.

[74] "Letter from Barbara Guest." May 20, 1991. Box 88, folder 7, Frankenthaler papers.
[75] "Letter from Barbara Guest." May 20, 1991. Box 88, folder 7, Frankenthaler papers.

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