

Abstract Concrete: Experimental Poetry in Post-WWII New York City

by

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SS *Standing Still and Walking in New York* (Frank O'Hara)

CP *Collected Poems* (Frank O'Hara)

LP *Lunch Poems* (Frank O'Hara)

Introduction

After World War II, New York City became an international cultural capital, and poets and artists flocked to it. This dissertation looks at the ways in which three poets, and the artists who surround them, respond to New York City – specifically, to its materiality – in the three decades after the war. Mina Loy, Frank O’Hara, and Bernadette Mayer all lived within the same square mile, in or near the Lower East Side. The British-born Mina Loy moved to the city in 1937, in part to escape the war (her father was Jewish), and lived in the Bowery until 1953. That same year, Frank O’Hara finished his master’s degree at the University of Michigan and headed for the city. O’Hara died, tragically early, in 1966, a few weeks before Bernadette Mayer moved to Manhattan from her nearby hometown, Brooklyn. The neighborhood changed radically during and after World War II - it was still a Skid Row for victims of the Great Depression when Loy arrived there; by the time Mayer left, graffiti art had begun to bloom and punk was being born at CBGBs. Nonetheless, the city provides a constant space in which the writers engage with objects that influence their aesthetic responses to the city. Their verse explores the material of New York, not just the concrete from which it is built but also the concrete, tangible objects that fill it. It also recognizes the intangible – the abstract shadows cast by these things.

Loy, O’Hara, and Mayer focus on materiality; ultimately, though, what defines New York for them is their loss of faith in the concrete. For every object they perceive,

they also perceive an absence. In the end, that absence becomes more real than the presence that signals it. Loy's Bowery work focuses on transient people—the homeless—and transient objects—trash. Because her work imagines a city filled with these specific kinds of people and things, it defines the city and the material that fills it as transient. People are bound to their impoverished, liminal state, which seems harsh, but they are also promised that this material condition is only temporary. O'Hara attaches value to mass-produced objects by making them personal. By putting things "between two people," as he proposes we do with poems in his essay "Personism," he makes them more than lifeless objects. His art writing critiques the flatness of Pop art, and his poetry parodies the flatness of celebrities. In the end, mere material is too flat – it needs the touch of the personal to vivify it. Mayer attempts to document memory through hundreds of material artifacts—photographs. They fail to record it with the fullness that she desires, and she responds by swinging in the other direction, relishing in abstractions such as dreaming, the subconscious, and the surreal. In the end, these writers use the concrete world as a portal, vehicle, or stepping-stone towards less tangible notions.

Similarly, I use the materiality of the city as a point of entry to these poets and their work. Mine is not a study of materiality that invokes poetry and art as examples, it is the inverse – one that explores poetry and art by focusing on instances where they confront materiality. I look at narrow aspects of these poets' work – their response to objects and the city – in order to unearth what is wonderful, strange, illusory, and enticing about it. As they use the concrete as a means to the abstract, so do I use their printed words as a means to uncovering the magic behind them. This is not a Marxist reading of poetry, nor is it a Lefebvrian invocation of urban art. It is a close reading of three poets

on their own terms that seeks to reveal their response to New York, postmodernity, and community; and to the interaction of objects and subjects, visual art and the written word, art and everyday life.

In short, I am not reading materiality as much as I am reading these poets' *perception* of materiality. The eye is a prominent theme in Loy's work – hers is a “commodious bee,” those of virgins are “made of glass,” those of mannequins are “mirrored opals” (111, 17, 112). Her eye is particularly alive, her poetry tells us, and I pursue that instruction. Mayer, too, binds her project to her eye; she does so by relying on a camera. Though she initially presents the camera as an objective recording device, her project makes clear just how subjectively attached to Mayer's own position her photography is. O'Hara's experience is peripatetic and personal. He experiences spatially the topography of the city, the space of the gallery, and even his relationship with other people and things. He wants to bump into buildings and sculptures to keep himself cognizant of the city-space. He wants to put poems and things between people so that all are present. It is not things as such that O'Hara is after but how they affect people. I, too, pursue the effect that materiality has on poets and artists more than I do a general theory of materiality.

The scope and particularity of each chapter broadens or narrows according to the poet's perspective. Loy's experience of the city is the narrowest and most specific. She stayed closer to home than O'Hara or Mayer did; since she was growing old while she lived in the Bowery, she was somewhat reclusive, and her hoarding made her room a treasure trove. The same figures and sidewalks reappear in her work. O'Hara's work covers more ground. With O'Hara as our ADHD tour guide, we see more of the city,

albeit sometimes in snatches rather than lingering detail. In Mayer's *Memory*, we often see New York from a car window. We also spend time on the highway between the city and Lenox, Massachusetts, and in Lenox itself, since Mayer travels between the two places often while creating *Memory*. For her, site is less constant; it does not provide the stable ground for her experiments so much as her mind does. Thus, we see more of her mind in her work, and in my chapter on it.

Implicit in this focus on each poet's lived experience is a methodology that recognizes not just texts but also the lives behind them. In discussing both Loy and O'Hara I quote their biographers. While Mayer does not yet have a biographer, my chapter cites her interviews, notebooks, and letters. I ground my readings in texts, but my knowledge of the writers' lives often informs my readings. Loy's renown as a youthful beauty of modernism, and her consequent concern with aging while she lived in New York (echoed in her late "An Aged Woman") certainly map onto her poetry's portrayal of certain bodies as material confines. Mayer claims to see words synesthetically, and I allow that this biographical trait may "color" her work. In some cases, knowledge of biography allows me to work against readings that rely on it too heavily. Some critics attribute O'Hara's aversion to Andy Warhol's work to a personal distaste for what O'Hara called the artist's "sissified" demeanor. I disagree, demonstrating that his aversion to Warhol's work rooted in a nostalgia for the personal, the aura, and the three-dimensional. While my arguments are never based on biographical fact, I am not unwilling to allow biography to inform them.

My project started as one interested in community, but as I realized that Loy, O'Hara, and Mayer saw community growing more evanescent, I became more interested

in their response to materiality and abstraction. All three writers were part of esoteric or fringe communities, so that it is difficult to imagine them outside of New York City (or even in another part of the city). Loy's biographer describes her as an impoverished, slightly batty old woman who "held court" in the living room of her boarding house, having removed herself from high modernist salons. The Bowery's sidewalks provided her ample bounty to hoard. O'Hara left a straight-laced upbringing in Grafton, Massachusetts for a community of queer writers and painters. Mayer moved to the city at the same time that the counterculture arrived for its brief tenure on the Lower East Side. Each of them found a safe place to be in the city, but their work also points to a loss or rejection of community, to varying degrees. For Loy, the Bowery provides a refuge from the modernist compatriots whom she befriended in her youth. O'Hara sees the personal go missing from objects, advertising, and art, and personal connection growing more difficult as things and media become depersonalized. Mayer retreats from the literary community created by little magazines, preferring to explore her own mind and rent a house in the country. In very different ways, things play a role in the dimming of community that each writer notes. For Loy, they replace community. For O'Hara, they threaten to erase it and have the potential to rebuild it. For Mayer, both things and community are less engaging than individual consciousness.

I draw on each poet's involvement with the visual arts because art objects so aptly pair the concrete with the abstract. A piece of art is a tangible thing but one tied tightly to the abstractions that hover around it, such as concept or aura. When Duchamp signs a urinal "R. Mutt" and calls it *Fountain* (1917), he asks the Society of Independent Artists to consider the ineffable surplus that an object gains simply by appearing in the gallery.

Benjamin rightly questions the fate of the aura when art objects can be reproduced *en masse*. Even when there is no art object (as in many works of conceptual art), the *lack* of an art object strikes us. Rauschenberg erases a De Kooning drawing (1953), and we wonder if that action erases the piece's aura, adds to it, or replaces it. Yves Klein empties Iris Clert's gallery, repaints its walls white, and invites 3,000 people to the premiere of his "invisible paintings" in *Le Vide (The Void)* (1958). All of these pieces inspire us to ponder the interplay of the concrete and the abstract, and they do so with objects (urinals, white walls) that are more tangible than language is, one might argue. My chapters invoke art as another means of seeing the significant impact that absences and abstractions, though they are intangible and invisible, have on the material.

Though towards varied ends, each author's response to art nuances the portrayal of materiality that their verse establishes. Loy's poetry, for one, paints a severe, unforgiving portrait of the Bowery's homeless population. The canvases on which they appear, though, suggest that these people's difficult position is at least transitory. Loy chose to create these three-dimensional collages using trash—objects that she found on the sidewalks of the Bowery such as rags, banana peels, and paper egg cartons. Again, we might read the message of this medium as harsh, but the medium is not a derogatory double-entendre. Loy cherished (and hoarded) such items, and her use of them is ultimately more forgiving than it is harsh, since, as my first chapter shows, her artwork allows these people to be in transit to somewhere beyond the harsh conditions of the Bowery. In his verse, O'Hara calls for the "real, right thing," a demand which comes to life in his response to Pop art. O'Hara resisted Pop, my second chapter argues, due in part to an aversion to the impersonal flatness and reproducibility of pieces such as Warhol's

silkscreens. Mayer embraced the flat, reproducible art object of the photograph. That it fails to capture her *Memory* moves Mayer towards words and abstraction, and away from material sites or objects. For each, their encounter with the materiality of the art object speaks to their encounter with materiality – and immateriality – in life and poetry.

It is unsurprising that these poets are interested in the material of the city and the gallery, because they are also interested in words, which are also curious blends of the material and immaterial, present and absent, concrete and abstract. Words are present when we speak or write them but they also stand in for the absent things or abstract concepts that they signify. About the word hover as many ghosts as the ones that haunt art objects. Every poet whom I consider in this dissertation experiments with words, manipulating language in styles identifiably unique to them. To me, their interest in playing with the written word reflects their interest in the materiality of space and objects. Though they do so differently, each asks us to question the materiality of *language* as well as objects. Loy does so by confronting us with esoteric, difficult vocabulary and syntax. Her style is so dense that we are constantly reminded that a text is creating the world that her verse imagines – it does not allow a reader to get easily absorbed or “carried away” and thus forget the vehicle that carries us. O’Hara’s style is often reminiscent of speech. More than Loy’s does, it lets us forget its textual quality and experience it as speech. As he avers in his manifesto “Personism,” the poem is happiest when it is between two people rather than between two pages. His enthusiastic—sometimes frenetic—poetry overwhelms, too, but in a way that is more likely to carry a reader away than make her pause. This is interesting, since the content of his poetry is the most nostalgic for materially substantial things. In this sense, form echoes content –

O'Hara senses a loss of materiality in the world around him, and his verse recreates that lack by rarely reminding us of its textuality. Mayer takes aspects of both Loy and O'Hara – her text is both difficult and conversational. Its density and quantity, channeled through a chatty vernacular, create a contrast that calls our attention to the page, the book, absent photographs, and to objects in general.

Loy creates neologisms, tones, settings, and metaphors that are undoubtedly her own and that constantly remind us that this imaginary world is built from linguistic material. Her poetry melts words down, performs linguistic alchemy, and presents a refigured vision. To describe a soldier blinded in World War I, for example, Loy writes “Pure purposeless eremite / of centripetal sentience // Upon the carnose horologe of the ego / the vibrant tendon index moves not” (83). In my admittedly well-used, much-amended copy of Loy's *Lost Lunar Baedeker* [*sic*], I make notes of definitions or synonyms for five words in these two brief stanzas, and this passage—chosen almost at random—is representative of the text as a whole. Even when one knows what the words mean on their own, their accrual requires translation just to keep meaning straight. For instance, I know that “carnose” means “bodily,” and a “horologe” is a timekeeper, but to understand “carnose horologe of the ego,” I have to think of it as “bodily watch of the self” and translate that translation to “one's bodily watch” as I read. This leaves me thinking that a “carnose horologe of the ego” is something like one's “mind,” but the phrase is contingent on how one understands each of its parts. The meaning of this five-word phrase is so bogged down in the materiality of language, the meanings of these curving letters and words piling up until we find ourselves almost as lost in their sounds and appearance as we are in the (abstract) meaning behind them. The meaning is

obscured by the assonance of “o” sounds, by the mirroring of “ego” back onto the “horologe,” and by the sibilance of “centripetal sentience” trickling across stanzas to filter into “carnose.” By playing with words, this poetry keeps us constantly alert to their material look and sound. They prick our interest to decipher the world they portray because their own materiality is so intricate, even mystical, and because they make us work for it. The experimental difficulty of Loy’s language teaches us that things are difficult to make sense of, and reminds us that words and letters are things themselves, running into each other even before they tangle with the images that they project behind them.

Loy’s work makes O’Hara’s look downright natural, but his verse, too, is messily verbose. He may employ vernacular diction and syntax, but his work often has a hectic pace, an enthusiastic tone, and long and rambling lines that pull it in many directions at once. A favorite O’Hara poem, “Ave Maria,” begins with the plea, “Mothers of America / let your kids go to the movies!” (*CP* 371). The exclamation point is the only punctuation that gives such caesura – not a single period, comma, or dash graces the rest of the poem. The choice hurries the poem, rushing lines into each other and piling clause upon clause. For example:

...they’ll have been truly entertained either way
instead of hanging around the yard
or up in their room
hating you
prematurely since you won’t have done anything horribly mean yet
except keeping them from the darker joys
it’s unforgivable the latter
so don’t blame me if you won’t take this advice
and the family breaks up
and your children grow old and blind in front of a TV set
seeing
movies you wouldn’t let them see when they were young (CP 372)

“Ave Maria” reads faster and faster as it progresses, at a pace that grows breathless by the poem’s end. Clauses form a chain so long that one eventually lets go of its first link. Tone shifts often: the poem begins hyperbolically, then waxes nostalgic, and ends in a tone that sounds like one of the parents it started out scolding (“don’t blame me if you won’t take this advice”). The shifting tones, the pace, and the exuberance make the poem big and loud. Were the poem a person, one might find oneself ready for a quiet moment to oneself after spending a day with them, however delightful it had been. They are not as difficult to read as Loy’s are, but they are similar in their chaotic wordiness. If Loy’s poems are briar patches, full of difficult or made-up words that present snarls in which to get tangled, then O’Hara’s are more like a torrent, pulling you down a swirling river.

O’Hara’s words seem more natural than Loy’s do, though; they don’t constantly remind you of their material density or the strangeness of language as a thing that is both concrete and abstract. They remind you more of speech than they do of writing, and perhaps because they lift us off the page and into the air between two people, the language itself seems less material. Critics such as Charles Bernstein are careful to remind us that this seeming naturalness is every bit as artificial and formal as that of, for example, Language poetry. In “Stray Straws and Straw Men,” Bernstein invokes O’Hara and Mayer as examples of “natural writing” to argue that “there is no natural writing style” (45). O’Hara’s “considerable achievement,” says Bernstein, is that he made the personal a form. Still, it is easier to forget this truth when reading O’Hara than it is while reading Loy. In my chapter on him, I read in his work a nostalgia for unique things that

are materially substantial. Interesting, then, that his poetry foregrounds the concrete “thingness” of language so subtly.

Mayer’s *Memory* shares a seemingly natural style with O’Hara; with Loy, it shares a density. Like O’Hara’s, Mayer’s writing can be chatty, even gossipy. Hers is less a phone call, though, than it is a stream-of-consciousness diary. “paul got in the car impressed with me in my Cadillac,” she recounts in her entry for July 21st, “& we dropped paul off at a dirty movie I took his picture going in” (127). Or, on July 5th, “Bought bourbon & went over to j&k’s yellow or blue small house up a hill near glendale, k in j’s green robe, we talk in the bathroom we like to sneak in the bathroom” (39). The text’s tone may be light, but what makes *Memory* dense is the sheer *quantity* of text, which the book’s lack of lineation accentuates; though *Memory* is 195 pages long, it has no breaks to indicate paragraphs or dialogue. Bernstein calls *Memory* “[h]eavy, dense, embedded” and locates its artifice in its “completely intended, complex, artificial style” (49). One has to work to make sense of *Memory*, and to finish it. With every page you turn, another imposing block of text confronts you. You are reminded of the sheer volume of this project’s matter, linguistic and otherwise.

Together, these poets remind us of the material and immaterial qualities of language. Loy makes you read and reread words like “eleemosynary,” look them up in the dictionary, return to the text with your translation, insert a synonym, and try again.¹ She refuses to let you forget that you are dealing with language. This is often less the case with O’Hara’s texts, but your assumption that the poem speaks to you naturally seems all

¹ Eleemosynary” roots in “alms,” and means “charitable, altruistic, philanthropic.” Even with that definition in mind, however, the image of “faces of Inferno... alternat[ing] with raffish saints’ / eleemosynary innocence” remains complicated (“Hot Cross Bum” 134).

the more naive when O'Hara reminds you that he uses the telephone to transmit poetry, or an Olivetti typewriter, and you realize that there is *always* a material between two people communicating: language. Mayer's work has aspects of both of these approaches. Her *Memory* is literally the most material of these texts due to its length (not to mention the 1,116 photographs on which it is based). However, it is far from the concrete, conceptual, pre-Language writing that she publishes before *Memory*. It speaks to you in a vernacular of quotidian events.

In different ways, and to varying degrees, the sliver of experimental writing that I examine in this project reminds me that all words are simultaneously abstract and concrete, as are the objects that they describe. In some, the latter realization leads to the former; in others, it is the reverse. Loy presents language in a way that made me first consider its materiality, which led me to wonder whether she considered the items that she hoarded to have some power beyond their status as trash. Inversely, I grew suspicious of the seeming naturalness of O'Hara's *Lunch Poems* after I hypothesized that he privileges Pop sculpture because it does precisely what his poems do not: confronts us with its materiality and its status as an art object. It was not until I visited Mayer's archives and spent days viewing the photographs that inspired *Memory* that I recognized just how much material the printed text lacks – how immaterial and subjective it actually is. In one way or another, these three writers make me marvel at aspects of language and things that are so fundamental that I take them for granted. Every word, they remind me, is the concrete placeholder for an absent thing, a thing that we have to abstract from the word that stands in for it. As words have different degrees of abstraction (“church” or “priest” being much more tangible concepts than “religion” or “authority,” for example),

so can things.² Everyday objects, like Loy's trash, become treasure when placed on a canvas, or, per O'Hara, when they are placed "between two people." Dreams can be more real than photographs, Mayer adds. In these ways, poets question and refigure what they perceive to be concrete or abstract in language, art, and life.

In Loy and Mayer's figuration, I also read a critique of consumption in both the content and the form of their work. Loy treasures trash and recycles it to make her art. She makes the immaterial a privileged place. In her verse, consumers possess the ability to deaden organic objects. She blames her neighbors' homelessness on their consumption of alcohol. Mayer presents so much material that we come to understand that profligacy can be a burden, and she reinforces that lesson when she decides that abstractions such as dreams and memory are more useful than the material artifact of the photograph. Formally, too, both writers make a reader think twice about consumption – they do not make it easy for a reader to "consume" their writing. One must look up words and untangle syntax while reading Loy. The sheer volume of *Memory* makes reading it a commitment. Warnings against thoughtless consumption permeate the content of their work, and its form forces us to heed this warning even when it comes to reading.

By contrast, O'Hara's poems are relatively "consumable," and though their content is critical of American consumerism, for the most part O'Hara is more concerned with things being connected to people than he is with commenting on our consumption.

² I thought of the dissertation's title, *Abstract Concrete*, while musing on O'Hara's paradoxical notion of "true abstraction" and reading Borges' *Imaginary Cities*. I wondered what a "truly abstract" city might look like, which brought me around to considering an "abstract concrete jungle" (as some call New York City a "concrete jungle), and then to considering a city built entirely from a material called "abstract concrete." As it turns out, Google returns a search for the phrase "abstract concrete" with links to psychology journals about aphasia, since psychologists use such a scale to measure an aphasic's capacity to understand abstract language. Apparently, it is common for aphasics to lose the capacity to understand abstract nouns, a debilitating condition that demonstrates just how fundamental the ability to abstract – to conceive of immaterial, conceptual absences – is to our language.

Reading his poetry for his response to things, though, provides a new way to read his complex figuration of the personal and of what, in “Personism,” he calls “true abstraction” – that paradox that so closely echoes “abstract concrete.” I could have written an entire chapter on O’Hara’s extremely dense and difficult poem “Second Avenue” and thus aligned O’Hara more closely with Loy and Mayer. Instead, I focus on the poems in which he could almost “use the telephone instead of writing the poem,” since their content is more clearly connected to things and people who were becoming abstractions – brand name items, Pop painting, and celebrities (*CP* 499). For O’Hara, things can be consumable so long as they also remain personal. Coca-Cola or Cracker Jack toys are okay when shared by two lovers. Pop can incorporate mass-produced items as long as it leaves a trace of the artist who made it. Movie stars are fun, but the audience that watches them is real. His own poems may be “consumable,” but they are also personal – chatty, vernacular, and accessible. In this, his form echoes his content: his writing emphasizes the importance of the personal, and his poems enact it.

Different as these poets may be, looking at them together highlights the ways that a writer’s response to objects affects their experience of the city. Their perception of objects – as well as the absence or loss of objects – impacts their lived experience and their portrayal of the city. Loy’s city was downtrodden and relatively confined. However, she regards trash as treasure and uses it to imagine a city that is perpetually in transition. She binds specific objects and people to the Bowery, but her choice of material – trash and transients – also make her city one that is on its way somewhere else. O’Hara responds to the rise of advertising in Manhattan with poetry, art writing, and a manifesto that laments the flattening of objects. His verse seeks everyday objects, art, people, and a

New York that reminds us of its dimensionality and that connects us, somehow, of people. Mayer experiments with material artifacts, photographs, and finds them insufficient. As she comes to prefer more subjective, immaterial modes of thinking and writing, her own mind becomes a more important site than New York City. The city may be less important for Mayer, or a less relevant category of place, but it is actually not much less material than the one that Loy imagines or the one for which O'Hara is nostalgic – since Loy's is a fantasy and O'Hara's, a ghost of New York past. In some sense, all of their poetic depictions of New York are what we might call “abstract concrete.”

Chapter 1

Ephemeral Materiality: The Objects and Subjects of Mina Loy's Downtown New York

In reading modern poetry one should beware of allowing mere technical eccentricities or grammatical disturbances to turn us from the main issue which is to get at the poem's reality. We should remember that this seeming strangeness is inevitable when any writer has come into an independent contact with nature: to each she must show herself in a new manner, for each has a different organic personality for perceiving her.

– Mina Loy, “Modern Poetry” (1925) (Lost 160)

*Bum-bungling of actuality
exchanging
an inobvious real
for over-obvious unreal*

*faces of Inferno
peering from shock-absorbent
torsos*

*alternate with raffish saints'
eleemosynary innocence*

Blowsy angels

-- from “Hot Cross Bum” (1949) (Lost 134)

*Such are the compensations of poverty,
to see-----*

-- from “On Third Avenue” (1942) (Lost 110)

In an essay on “Modern Poetry,” Loy contends that the “main issue” of modern poetry is “to get at the poem’s reality.” It may be difficult to take her at her word that “mere technical eccentricities or grammatical disturbances” should not distract us from this goal, since these same qualities often obfuscate her own poetry. Still, in this chapter I take Loy’s advice and seek out the “reality” of the work that she wrote while living in New York’s Bowery and Lower East Side. I read the “strangeness” of Loy’s verse and visual art as signs of her experience there, or what she calls elsewhere in the essay “the direct response of the poet’s mind to the modern world of varieties in which he finds himself.” The modern poet, for her, translates her visceral experience of her surroundings. “This, then, is the secret of the new poetry,” Loy whispers to us (*Lost* 158).³ So this chapter looks to Loy’s later work as evidence of her “independent contact with nature,” for it is in these responses, she says, that we stand to “discover [her] particular inheritance of that world’s beauty” (158).⁴

Of course, neither the Bowery nor the Lower East Side were particularly beautiful when Loy lived in them, in the years surrounding World War II. After the Great Depression, the area became a haven for victims of the unprecedented financial disaster. New York felt the impact of this national crisis acutely: whereas 158,677 homeless were registered with New York City’s municipal lodging facilities in 1929, by 1934 these

³ Hereafter, all citations for Loy’s work refer to Noonday Press’ 1996 *Lost Lunar Baedeker* [*sic*] (not to be confused with the 1982 Jargon Society’s *Last Lunar Baedeker*).

⁴ Mina Loy’s late work is itself overlooked. In the 1998 critical anthology *Mina Loy: Woman and Poet*, Maeera Shreiber calls attention to this oversight: “Thus far most Loy criticism has concentrated on the early poems (1914-1925), with perhaps Love Songs to Joannes and Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose garnering the most attention. But there remains another set of poems, written between 1930-1950, which have been largely ignored by her most ardent fans” (467). Loy’s body of work has garnered increased attention in the past decade; still, more attend to the poetry that she wrote closer to the First World War rather than to the Second.

facilities cared for over 2 *million* people in need (Crouse 70).⁵ In 1938, just after Loy moved to the city, the Federal Emergency Relief Administration cut funding, an act which sent two million more people back to transiency (Crouse 215-216).⁶ Many flocked to the missions, shelters, and soup kitchens of the Lower East Side and especially the Bowery. Loy made her home in these neighborhoods, first above a cigar factory on 13th Street, later in a rooming house on Second Street, and finally in two such communal houses on Stanton Street (at Bowery). She chose to live not in Greenwich Village, among modernist poets, publishers of little magazines, and Dada painters, but among factory workers, immigrants, and missions.⁷

This side of New York is far different than the one that Loy knew from previous visits. During her first prolonged stay in the city, in 1916 and 1917, she was a darling of high modernism. In 1920, Pound hailed her as one of the only female poets worth reading (along with Moore) (Burke 292). As a twenty-four year old artist and poet, she attended Walter Arensberg's salons, where she traded ideas with the likes of Marcel Duchamp, Charles Sheeler, Wallace Stevens, the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, Bob Brown, and William Carlos Williams (who was a particularly ardent admirer). She was a renowned beauty. Man Ray's discerning eye judged her to be "stunning subject" (Burke

⁵ In 1929, the city lodged 434 people per day; in 1941, they lodged 6,110. These numbers do not include the independent social support provided by organizations such as the Red Cross or local churches, which were prevalent in the Lower East Side and the Bowery.

⁶ Although FERA resumed spending in 1938, they would not do so specifically for "transient relief" for another two years.

⁷ Though Loy moved often during her sixteen years in New York, she lived below 14th Street for much of her time there. Initially, she took up permanent residence in New York in 1937, on Lexington Avenue at 55th Street. Shortly thereafter, she moved to 13th Street, to return uptown in 1944 when Joella married. She remained there until 1948 (when Joella and her husband left to revitalize Aspen) at which point Loy returned downtown until 1953, when she finally left New York to join her daughters.

caption 368). In February 1917, New York's *Evening Sun* profiled Loy as the exemplary "modern woman" about town, introducing her thus: "Mina Loy, Painter, Poet and Playwright, Doesn't Try to Express Her Personality by Wearing Odd Looking Draperies—Her Clothes Suggest the Smartest Shops, but Her Poems Would Have Puzzled Grandma" ("Do You Strive to Capture the Symbols of Your Reactions?"). On May 25 of that year, she attended the last Blind Man's Ball, her account of which caused "a bewildering uproar as to the base immorality of the modernists," as she recalled it (Burke 246).

Twenty years later, she returns to New York in a decidedly less exuberant state, in her own "Great Depression" both economically and emotionally.⁸ In the intervening years, she has divorced Stephen Haweis, remarried and been widowed by Arthur Cravan, and lost her son, Giles, to cancer (she lost her firstborn, Oda, to meningitis in 1905). She has enjoyed moderate success designing lamps, but people repeatedly steal her designs, ruining her business. In the aftermath of this counterfeit, her investor Peggy Guggenheim abandons her. Loy mourns the loss of her youth, and of her appearance. In the late poem "An Aged Woman," she asks:

Does your mirror Bedevil you
or is the impossible
possible to senility
enabling the erstwhile agile
narrow silhouette of self
to hold in huge reserve
this excessive incognito
of a Bulbous stranger

⁸ Loy returned to New York once between her 1917 stay and her 1937 permanent return: in 1920-1921, she waited there for news of her second husband, Arthur Cravan, who mysteriously disappeared while they were living in Mexico.

only to be exorcised by death (145)⁹

Late in life, Loy doesn't even recognize herself: her "agile / narrow silhouette of self" has been overshadowed by "this excessive incognito / of a Bulbous stranger." Upon her final return to New York (she gained citizenship in 1946 and never returned to Europe), she is so self-conscious about her age and her impoverishment that she refuses visits from previous acquaintances such as Duchamp and Djuna Barnes. As a younger woman, Loy exulted in her body to a degree that some decreed scandalous, as evidenced by the response to her erotic "Love Songs to Joannes" (1917). She began to decline social invitations as early as 1929 due to a lack of self-confidence, and by 1957, she asks Jonathan Williams to crop her author photo for *Lunar Baedeker & Time-Tables* so that it shows only her eyes (Burke 368).

Most of Loy's critics see her time in New York as years of reclusion; I see this era as the time when Loy most fully engages with the world around her.¹⁰ When she stops living in salons, her perspective widens, as does the scope of her subject matter. It is evident even in the titles of her poetry. In the 1910s and '20s, Loy writes of "Brancusi's Golden Bird," "Joyce's Ulysses," and "Gertrude Stein." After 1939, she writes poems such as "On Third Avenue," "Mass Production on 14th Street," and "Hot Cross Bum." Unfortunate as Loy may have found the circumstances in which she wrote her last poems,

⁹ Unlike *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, Burke and *The Last Lunar Baedeker* (261) refer to this poem as "An Old Woman."

¹⁰ Loy's biographer, Carolyn Burke, relates that, just before World War II, "Mina withdrew into her private world," and that by the late 1940s and early 1950s "Mina withdrew from society" (402, 409). In fact, this world wasn't so private – housemates recall Loy "holding court" in its common space and Loy's letters to her daughters suggest that she left the house frequently. She may have withdrawn from the society of high modernism, refusing visits from Duchamp and Barnes, but she was socially engaged with life in the Bowery.

she entitles a draft of what she intended to be her last collection of poetry *The Compensations of Poverty* (207 fn 35). The refrain of her 1942 poem “On Third Avenue” repeats “Such are the compensations of poverty / to see-----”, as if poverty, for all its demerits, at least extends her line of sight, as it does her poetic line (110). In “Hot Cross Bum” (1949), Loy chides her homeless neighbors for “exchanging / an inobvious real/ for over-obvious unreal.” Perhaps this is the compensation of her poverty: that she can now see a reality that was to her once “inobvious.” By looking at what she called “the main issue” in “Modern Poetry” – the reality that her late poetry and art translates and creates — we see her reaction to New York as it became the cultural capital of the world, and find the “inobvious real” of Loy’s late work to be an ephemeral city of poverty, trash, and transients.

The New York that Loy imagines offers a complex critique of American consumption. Her verse and art call attention to materiality in their use of fabric as a motif and a medium, and they do so to point to the ephemerality of the material world. Loy establishes this message in three steps; to each of these, I devote a section of this chapter. First, she empties the city of certain people by turning them into objects or by dematerializing them. She thus liberates them from their corporeal form. Next, she fills the city with certain other subjects—the homeless—by keeping them embodied. Finally, her assemblages connect these transient people to transient objects—trash—to suggest that even those subjects and objects that remain in this city are temporary. Taken together, these effects render Loy’s New York a city that is always in the process of disappearing, one that is curiously ephemeral, constantly floating in limbo between material and immaterial, worldly and spiritual, concrete and abstract.

Impersonal Objects and Abstract Subjects: “Mass Production on Fourteenth Street” (1942) and “On Third Avenue” (1942)

Loy’s engagement with materiality comes across especially poignantly in two poems from *The Compensations of Poverty*: “Mass Production on 14th Street” and “On Third Avenue.” In the former, metaphor transforms people into pastoral objects. Because the poem does the same for the goods that these people manufacture, it establishes a subtle syllogism that portrays humanity itself as a system of mass production. Loy inverts this equation by making the poems’ other subjects the simulacra of mannequins. In “On Third Avenue,” people become “dummies,” as well as “mummies,” “luminous busts,” “shadow-bodies” and “Goddesses.” In one way or another, the poems distance people from their corporeal identity. Their response to urban commerce is the first step of the critique of consumption that emerges across Loy’s Bowery poems. It clears the stage for her to repopulate the Bowery with the homeless.

Though its title suggests the opposite, “Mass Production on 14th Street” abounds with rural imagery, a motif that dehumanizes its subjects as much as it naturalizes them.¹¹ The poem opens on a downtown sidewalk during the evening rush hour, a scene in which the urban industrial collides with the organic:

Ocean in flower
of closing hour

Pedestrian ocean
of whose undertow,
the rosy scissors of hosiery
snip space
to a triangular racing lace

¹¹ I hesitate to call this motif urban pastoral since it doesn’t make the city a rural setting so much as it makes its subjects and goods organic.

in an iris circus of Industry. (111)

The crowd is an “ocean in flower,” an image that is more serene and beautiful than one that Poe or Simmel might use to describe the crowd. However, it rather violently liquefies this mass of people: their legs swirl together in an “undertow.” The poem seems to return them their legs when it imagines their strides as “rosy scissors of hosiery” that “snip space / to a triangular racing lace.” But these are not legs so much as they are “hosiery,” the material that encases the leg, and metaphoric scissors, the tools of the trade that turn space into a product of the clothing industry, “lace.” Throughout the poem, Loy recognizes subjects and turns them into objects almost in the same breath. After the opening scene, the speaker calls her own eye “a commodious bee.” She is still defined in organic (if not human) terms, but the metaphor dismembers her. As her eye becomes an insect that pollinates the flowers of the crowd, urban subjects once again become organic objects. The eye “gathers the infinite facets / of the unique unlikeness / of faces” and thus distills what was once an “ocean” back into unique persons. The poem’s next turn, however, undoes this recognition when it sees those faces as “flower over flower, / corollas of complexion / craning from hanging-gardens / of the garment-worker.” Again, the metaphor is an organic one – people do not become mass-produced trinkets or machines, for example. Still, they are dehumanized. The extended metaphor of the crowd as an ocean recurs when mannequins in a shop window reflect “their mobile simulacra’s / tidal passing.” This time the crowd is even less human—they are the opposite of a “unique unlikeness of faces.” They are the simulacra of mannequins, albeit ones blessed with the capacity to be mobile. The people of the crowd are doubly dehumanized – a simulacra of mannequins that are themselves a simulacra of people.

The poem then hones in on consumption as a denaturalizing, objectifying force. We are introduced to “The consumer” as she is fitted by a seamstress, whom the poem calls “her auxiliary creator,” as if the creation of the fabric that covers her is the creation of her self.

The consumer,
the statue of a daisy in her hair
jostles her auxiliary creator
the sempstress---on her hip
a tulip---
horticulture
of her hand labor. (112)

These women do not become flowers, as previous subjects of the poem have, but they remain connected to flowers, “mass production,” and the garment industry. The image contrasts a man-made flower with a natural one, linking the former to “the consumer” and the latter to “the sempstress.” The consumer wears only “the statue of a daisy,” while metaphor gives the seamstress the real thing, “a tulip--- / horticulture / of her hand labor.” This flower is manmade, too, but Loy’s enjambment reinforces it as natural: “a tulip / horticulture,” the line break repeats. Such “horticulture / of...hand labor” becomes a “statue” in the hands of the consumer, who, like a version of Medusa whose touch, rather than sight, turns this living thing to stone.

After this scene, mass production becomes even more unnatural. Organic mass production (people, flowers), the poem teaches us, is not so far from inorganic mass production. The rest of the poem moves from the sidewalk into the store, what Loy calls “the conservatories of commerce,” as if the shop window were a trick mirror. In these conservatories, nothing lives. Instead, mannequins, or “idols of style,” are like people who, dressed in the “horticulture / of ...hand labor”, turn into statues:

From the conservatories of commerce' [*sic*]
long glass aisles,
idols of style
project a chic paralysis
through mirrored opals
imaging
the cyclamen and azure
of their mobile simulacra's
tidal passing; (112)

The mannequins' eyes are "mirrored opals," an image that reinforces their object status. Their eyes show no glimmer of a soul; they only reflect people.¹² These "object people" become more real than the people whom they mirror. Mobility seems to be the human's only advantage, but a few stanzas later, the mannequins acquire that skill, too. They turn on "a windowed carousel / of girls revolving / idly in an unconcern / of walking dolls / letting their little wrists from under / the short furs of summer / jolt to their robot turn." Dressed in the chic garments of the new season, these "girls" are "walking dolls" (or "eye-dolls," in the pun "idols of style"), turning on a mechanized stage where they "jolt to their robot turn." Girls become dolls become robots—these figures grow less human and more industrial. People turn into oceans that become scissors. People are flowers, then flowers become statues. Objects that look like people become more real than people.

Like "Mass Production on 14th Street," "On Third Avenue" (also 1942) portrays a crowded street scene in which fabric dehumanizes the poem's subjects. "On Third

¹² I read these "mirrored opals" as eyes since eyes are such a prominent theme in Loy's verse; often, she uses false eyes to demonstrate the absence of a soul. The refrain of the last section of "Three Moments in Paris," for example, is "All the virgin eyes in the world are made of glass," referring to the dolls lining the shelves of the store in which the speaker stands (*Lost* 17-18). In "Der Blinde Junge," she describes war's "eyeless offspring" (a young man blinded in World War I) as "this slow blind face / pushing / its virginal nonentity / against the light" (*Lost* 83). The subject of "Idiot Child on a Fire Escape" has "domed awning / over the somnolent / reluctance of [his] sight--- // inverted cups / of mortal ivory, / almost emptied" (*Lost* 114).

Avenue” turns its subjects into “dummies” and personifies “Time” as “the contortive tailor” who:

clowned with sweat-sculptured cloth
to press
upon these irreparable dummies
an eerie undress
of mummies
half unwound. (109-110)

As a tailor, Time works with “material” as in “fabric;” he also alters “the material,” in a broader sense, as he transforms these people from subjects into objects – “dummies” (and “irreparable” ones, at that). In an echo of the seamstress in “Mass Production on 14th Street,” the tailor of this poem, Time, also engages with not-quite-human things.¹³ Mannequins populate “Mass Production on 14th Street;” in this poem, Time dresses figures like mummies, so that they resemble not people but the material vestiges of what were once live people.

The poem ends in the ephemeral, with a metaphor that transforms people into statues and then evaporates them. The speaker sees a trolley passing by and, to her, it looks as if it is “loaded with luminous busts” (110). “Mass Production on 14th Street” liquefied people’s legs; this image erases them. The trolley is not full of people, but busts—sculptures that represent people. The image then dematerializes these objects:

Transient in the dust,
The brilliancy
Of a trolley
Loaded with luminous busts;

¹³ Maera Shreiber reads the figure of the Tailor in an earlier work, “Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose” (1923), as a reincarnation of Loy’s paternal grandfather, a Jewish tailor. She links the figure to the corporeal, since he is “engaged in the holy vocation of adorning and giving shape to the human body” and thus reads him as “the ultimate incarnation of God on earth” (472). In both instances, but especially in the later one of “On Third Avenue,” I read the figure of the tailor as the sign of the power of the material over the corporeal, not vice versa.

Lovely in anonymity
They vanish
With the mirage
of their passage. (110)

The first quatrain's "abba" rhyme turns "dust" into "busts," briefly solidifying this material into an object before it vanishes into a mirage, reminding us of that the material is an ephemeral state. Not only does the scene dematerialize people and things—it makes ethereal even things that are already intangible, such as movement and light. Convoluting syntax renders the "passage," not the trolley, a mirage. Furthermore, the trolley itself isn't even the subject of these clauses – its "brilliance" is. The things that we thought were vanishing are actually not even concrete in the first place, it turns out. The poem dematerializes even the immaterial.

The speaker privileges the immaterial. The poem begins with a quotation that admonishes, "'You should have disappeared years ago' –". The speaker takes the bait but twists the criticism to her own ends, answering:

so disappear
on Third Avenue
to share the heedless incognito

of shuffling shadow-bodies
animate with frustration

whose silence' only potency is
respiration
preceding the eroded bronze contours
of their other aromas (109)

The urban crowd offers the speaker a merciful escape. There, she finds a place where one can take the advice to "get lost" if one so desires. The somewhat eerie "shadow-bodies" don't swallow her up, nor do they sweep her away; they "share" with her. The

anonymous crowd may be frustrated, but it offers the chastised speaker a disguise, a place to become a shadow of herself.¹⁴ Its “potence” is in its intangible qualities: its shadows,” blurred faces, “respiration,” and “aromas.”

These shadow-bodies, mummies, and relics may seem haunting or horrific, but in Loy’s verse, they are not. In earlier work, she reserves such mutation for artistic geniuses. In “Three Moments in Paris” (1914), a performer “prophetically blossoms in perfect putrefaction” (17). Putrefaction, “the decomposition by bacteria of dead animal or plant tissue, which becomes foul-smelling as a result,” can be “perfect” in Loy’s poems. This transformation is a beautiful blossoming rather than a foul rotting – in fact, it allows the one putrefying access to divinely inspired language, to “prophecy.” “Poe” (1918) “embalms” the writer’s “hour glass loves” but does so with such tenderness that the transformation becomes beautiful and desirable. The elegy then takes these embalmed loves, “on moon spun nights,” to a polar fantasyland where “icicled canopy / for corpses of poetry / with roses and northern lights” awaits (76). The speakers of “Apology of Genius” (1922) also recognize disembodiment as an elevated state of being. Its subjects are “lepers of the moon / all magically diseased” (77). These “mystic immortelles” are “beyond your laws,” the speaker gloats, for “the chances of your flesh / are not our destiny” (78). In Loy’s early work, to be mystically removed from the common populace and their bodily burden is to be part of a superhuman species of aesthetic gods. Although it may not seem a benefit to be a leper or to be embalmed by a death potion in most contexts, in Loy’s verse it is a release to leave the human body behind, however rotten

¹⁴ It is hard to read these lines without thinking of Loy herself as the speaker of the poem. Given that she’d “disappeared” herself from modernist renown, and her geographic position in New York when she wrote this poem, it is easy to map poet onto speaker, both happy to trade their burdensome, aging bodies for “shadow-bodies” and “incognito.”

the process. In her later work, she offers this release to (some of) the everyday inhabitants of the Bowery.

For example, she transforms the final figure to appear in “On Third Avenue” into a Goddess. In a circle of neon light, “before a ten-cent Cinema,” a woman sits in a ticket booth. Loy describes the woman’s booth as “like a reliquary sedan-chair, / out of legend, dumped there.” The simile surrounds the woman with “reliquary,” the corporeal vestiges of saints or martyrs that become objects of worship. In the next stanza, the woman’s “sugar-coated box-office” becomes “her runt of a tower,” one that “en jail[s] a Goddess / aglitter... / with ritual claustrophobia.” The woman may be enjailed, but Loy uses metaphor to remove her from such material constraints. The woman is “a Goddess,” a superhuman entity and thus in a realm removed from material concerns, as saints or martyrs are.

Loy takes the title of her collection-in-progress, *The Compensations of Poverty*, from a refrain of “On Third Avenue.” “Such are the compensations of poverty,” the speaker acknowledges, “to see-----.” What that speaker sees is a city whose people are shadows, myth, statues, mirages. She sees her neighbors, but her poetic eye also dehumanizes them. “To see” should be a compensation, but it is as though she cannot bear the sight and so transforms them. This is the gift of sight which compensates for poverty: a city emptied of people. This is the first step of Loy’s reconstruction of the city. Having cleared the stage of these people, her next step is to fill it with a specific population of others: the destitute.

Permanent Transients: “Chiffon Velours” (1944) and “Hot Cross Bum” (1949)

In the poems that Loy writes about her homeless neighbors, she does not dematerialize her subjects, nor does she turn them into objects. This shift is not sympathetic; her attention to the impoverished does not signal a moral reverse for a writer who, at times, comes across as an anti-Semitic, misogynistic eugenicist.¹⁵ Letting these people maintain their subjectivity is not a blessing, especially given the way that she defines their subjectivity. These people are trapped in their bodies, forced to continue a miserable experience. The way these poems give the city over to the homeless is a red herring – they don’t give these people a place of their own so much as they define the Bowery as an inhospitable space.

In “Chiffon Velours,” an old woman withers before our eyes, but she doesn’t vanish, become a flower, or melt into the crowd. She stays firmly – dismally – embodied. The very features of her visage seek to escape her face. They are oddly personified as about to scream, criticizing the face that carries them, horrified by its age. “Her features, / verging on a shriek / reviling age, // flee from death in odd directions,” but to no avail, for they are “somehow retained by a web of wrinkles” (119). Though death is precisely that which would free these things from the body, they are terrified of it, too. No matter, since try as they might to evade death, they cannot – they are caught in a web cast over them by wrinkles, sign of the age from which they flee. The way that Loy describes the woman, it is as if the rest of her body is intent on leaving, too. “She is sere,” it begins. Loy’s spacing echoes this content, as the three-syllable line merits its own stanza. Loy’s

¹⁵ A number of scholars who write on Loy’s later work read it as doing restorative work for the city and its dispossessed. See Burke’s Chapter 19 (409-424) and essays in Shreiber, Tuma, eds., especially Shreiber’s “Divine Women, Fallen Angels: The Late Devotional Poetry of Mina Loy” (467-486).

restraint from her trademark lavish verbosity makes her subject seem startlingly dry, malnourished, and scant. Her chest is “[t]he site of vanished breasts,” and the “memorial scraps” that she wears would be “skimpy even for a skeleton.” In the poems of the previous section, Loy might have used metaphor to *make* this woman a skeleton. Here, she does not, which is perhaps more painful.

As its title makes clear, fabric is a central concern of “Chiffon Velours,” one that calls attention to materiality.¹⁶ In this, it echoes “On Third Avenue” and “Mass Production on 14th Street,” but where in those poems material makes people “dummies,” “mummies,” or the simulacra of mannequins, in this one, it offers no such transformation. It connects the subject of the poem to her material surroundings, the city street. The poem closes with a stanza about the titular fabric, chiffon velours:

Trimmed with one sudden burst
of flowery cotton
half her black skirt
glows as a soiled mirror;
reflects the gutter—
a yard of chiffon velours. (119)

Rather than dematerialize the subject, the fabric of “Chiffon Velours” connects her with the material of the city, specifically with its infrastructure for waste. In “Mass Production on Fourteenth Street” a “yard” of flowered fabric might be a metaphor for a lawn, but when worn by the vagrant woman of “Chiffon Velours,” it reflects the path to the city’s sewers. Her skirt becomes a mirror in which the gutter is reflected, and Loy’s irregular

¹⁶ For more on Loy and fashion, see Susan E. Dunn’s “Mina Loy, Fashion and the Avant-Garde” (Shreiber, Tuma, eds). Dunn’s overview is largely historical, an account of Loy’s own designs in context of the disappearance of petticoats, the rise of female designers such as Chanel and Schiaparelli, and the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven’s contribution to Dada.

punctuation emphasizes that this reflection is an equation.¹⁷ A semicolon closes the line “glows as a soiled mirror;”, leaving the last couplet to read as a clause of its own: “reflects the gutter— / a yard of chiffon velours.” The em dash establishes a caesura that, read aloud, sounds like a colon, so that the woman’s skirt “reflects the gutter: a yard of chiffon velours.” The gutter is thus the fabric that she wears, as the fabric that she wears is a mirror of the gutter.¹⁸ In “Chiffon Velours,” the subject is not removed from the city. Instead, she may as well *be* the city, specifically, its muck.

The eponymous fabric symbolizes the woman’s worldly grounding. Chiffon is a diaphanous material, a light, layered mesh, a fabric cut thin. Velour, by contrast, is a type of velvet, a fabric made thick by an accumulation of piles. As wrinkles catch the features of the old woman’s face, so does the chiffon’s net of mesh catch the velour. Vice versa, the sheer heft of the velour anchors the chiffon. The poem takes its title from this marriage of contrasting materials, even though the “subject” of the poem is an impoverished woman. When it comes to the impoverished, the title suggests, material is key. This woman is wrapped up in the material, and in the city it reflects. Almost a skeleton herself, she reflects part of the city’s skeleton, its infrastructure.

Similarly, Loy’s long poem “Hot Cross Bum” binds the homeless men that it portrays to the city and to their bodies. Repeatedly, the poem denies them in their attempt

¹⁷ In Loy’s work, windows and mirrors are often interchangeable. In “Mass Production on 14th Street,” the shop window reflects back the sidewalk crowd as the mannequins’ simulacra, and the poem ends by returning to the street, where a girl stands in the same dress the mannequins wear. A poem that Loy wrote in Paris thirty years, “Magasin du Louvre,” earlier echoes this window/mirror doubling. In it, the speaker stands in a shop and regards a group of prostitutes out on the sidewalk with whom she identifies.

¹⁸ The prevalence of the mirror in the poem’s crucial closing lines calls to mind “An Aged Woman,” in which Loy accuses the mirror of “Bedeviling” her by reflecting back a “Bulbous stranger.” The mirror in these late works is always reflecting an ugly material body, and being tied to that reality is a tragedy. On the one hand, Loy identifies with the woman, but on the other, she treats her cruelly by entrapping her in her tragedy.

to escape both. It is as if they are being punished for trying to escape their bodies *through* their bodies, by imbibing enough alcohol to obliterate their reality. This is not the way to evade material circumstance, the poems teach. These men remain broken and outcast, which suggests that the city does, too, since these are its primary residents in Loy's configuration. Early on, the poem portrays the "bums" as inhuman. It tells us that the Bowery is peopled by "misfortune's monsters," then calls them "the human...race / altered to irrhythmic stagger // along the alcoholic's / exit to Ecstasy" (133, ellipses in original). Loy puns on the phrase "the human race" to signal her subjects' slow, drunken reeling, as if these "monsters" can't keep up with the rest of humanity. She returns to a metaphor from "Mass Production on 14th Street" when she calls the Bowery sidewalks "confluent tides of swarm." In an echo of the "mirrored opal" eyes of the mannequins in that poem, she calls the "bums'" eyes "peep-hole's of delight's observatory / stopp'd by hinterland stupor" and their sight "indirective / abortive ocular / reception of the objective" (134). The men are deprived of the human capacity to see; they are just bodies without souls whose "inideate shutter / halt[s] the bon-fire of the soul / from kindling the eyes" (134). Similar to her view of the "luminous busts" of "On Third Avenue," Loy sees these men as "shock-absorbent / torsos." One might think that these similarities would foreshadow a transmutation similar to those that occurred in earlier poems. However, the poem wavers as to its subjects' humanity. Are they things or people, monsters or angels? These "faces of Inferno," as it turns out, "alternate with raffish saints' / eleemosynary innocence" (134). Repeatedly, the poem refers to those who began as "monsters" as superterrestrial religious figures. They are not just saints but "angels" (134). They include "a prophet," "mystics" and "illuminati" (135, 139, 139).

However, with every metaphor that might raise these men from their earthly status as “hoary rovers,” Loy undoes that possibility. The angels are “Blowsy angels.” The prophet is a “graduate of indiscipline / post-graduate of procrastination // a prophet of Babble-on” who “shouts and mutters / to earless gutters” (135). The men are “impious mystics” and “shrunk illuminati / sunken / rather than arisen // avid for infamous incense / of Bacchus’ raucous breath” (139). Adjectives and surrounding clauses cancel the metaphors that might raise these men above the material world.¹⁹ For such ascension is what they seek, though falsely, the poem ceaselessly points out: it admonishes them for wanting to escape this world through drink. Without hesitation, the poem blames them for their destitution and alcoholism. The speaker calls them “lazy” (133). When she sees one “crying / ‘It isn’t my fault’” she “weighs” that “truth” (136). The poem goes so far as to suggest that the men actively avoid salvation, interpreting their drinking as a way of “avoiding narrow breadth / of theology’s / protect-drapery” (162-5). She chastises them for a lack of “self control”: “none can enter / to the sot’s account,” she writes, “one cent’s

¹⁹ Shreiber attempts to redeem Loy’s portrait of the Bowery’s homeless men by contrasting Loy’s late poetry with that of Eliot’s and Yeats’. While Eliot and Yeats equate imperfection with the secular, Shreiber avers, in Loy’s verse, “holiness is necessarily a broken thing—to be found in the bodies and in the faces of society’s outcasts, otherwise known to her as ‘angel bums’” (Shreiber, Tuma 468). Here Shreiber makes the logical fallacy of affirming the consequent. She reads the conditional equation that holiness is broken in Loy’s verse to *also* hold true in reverse. Thus she reasons, erroneously, that for Loy not only is the holy broken but also that the broken is necessarily holy. Actually, these men’s brokenness is precisely what precludes their chance at holiness.

Shreiber also misreads “Chiffon Velours” as making its subject an angel. She sees the woman as an angel because she “is beyond sexuality” and “walking the runway between life and death,” but on its own, the poem makes no such suggestion of holiness (480). She cedes that this “image is as close as Loy ever comes to a transformation scene...But even here revelation is always partial; just half the skirt is illuminated” (481). It is illuminated but as a “soiled mirror” that throws the image of the gutter, and all that it symbolizes, onto this quite worldly creature. It is illuminated by sewage, then, which is not very angelic (or at least not traditionally so). While such redemptive interpretations may console, they are overly simplified. Burke notes that during Loy’s Bowery years she was “torn between her otherworldly spirituality...and a deep worldliness that expressed itself as cynicism” – her poems about the homeless certainly exemplify the latter (397).

worth / of Salvation / ... that inborn fortune / self control” (137, ellipses in original). She notes her “conditional compassion” and puns that they receive loaves of bread as charity in return for “your loafing” (137). In one way or another, Loy frees many of her poetic subjects from their bodies, but she refuses to do so for these men. It is as if the poem reprimands them for seeking to escape their harsh circumstances because they attempt to do so misguidedly. Especially given this desire, their punishment - to remain trapped in those vehicles - is particularly harsh.

Even the poem’s title, in its play on transmogrification, emphasizes this retribution. Midway through the long poem, Loy sets the scene from which she draws “Hot Cross Bum.” In it, a church “has managed to commandeer / a certain provision / of hot-cross buns” for the destitute, but the recipients do not see the potential in these holy markers of Easter (126-8). Instead, a church bell rings in the Bowery:

tolling a drudgery
of exoteric
redemption

whose cadence
of illenience
transforms the cross bewailed
to flammable timber
for over-heating
Hades

waylaying for branding
indirigible bums
with the hot-cross
of ovenly buns. (227-239)

Rather than become heavenly, this ecclesiastical gift burns (“ovenly”). Because it tolls of “exoteric redemption”—redemption by the obvious and worldly, versus the esoteric, or

mysterious and otherworldly—it makes the cross a branding iron for marking the body of those most worldly creatures, the Bowery’s homeless.

Other bodies become shadows or mannequins, but the “bums” hold on to theirs, often vividly and violently. They are “Bandage-footed” and ridden with parasites, as some are “lifting so daintily / the lusty lice / from their uncovered shins” (136). The man who tells the speaker that his position is not his fault (or, as she calls him, “one lone lout”) is “flecked with opal bruises / of belaboured bone” (136). Loy’s other Bowery poems lack such specific imagery of bodies. The body of the woman in “Chiffon Velours” is marked by absence (where her breasts used to be), the legs of the crowd in “Mass Production on 14th Street” are hidden in hosiery, and the faces of the crowd “On Third Avenue” are “incognito.” Not only do these men have bodies, they are violently afflicted ones. This is the price of having a body in the Bowery. Because these are the only bodies to remain bodies, they make the rule for Loy’s late work: possessing a body means being a slave to it, often torturously. Try to escape it, through “creepy Pete” (which a footnote tells us is what the men call wine) or otherwise, and your attempted “flight into celestial resort” will only leave you “to alight in visceral discord,” a kind of discord that has its root in “viscera,” the internal organs of the body.

The bodies of “Hot Cross Bum” are broken down, the homeless men cast out; so does the poem begin to develop an equation between transients and trash that Loy’s assemblages engage more fully. In a particularly striking scene, the poem sets a hearse and a garbage truck side by side. “Death is about to egress from the church,” we are told, so “an undertaker’s ebon aide” opens the “doors of an obesely curtained hearse / prior to reception / of consecrated corpse.” A garbage truck pulls up, obscuring the hearse:

Concordantly
a ravenous truck
comes to a churning stand-still
before the pious façade;
hiding the invitatory conveyance
and carriages of florists' grievance.

Collecting refuse more profuse than man
the City's circulatory
sanitary apostles
a-leap to ash-cans
apply their profane ritual
to offal

Dust to dust (142)

In this passage, Loy suggests that trash supersedes man, that things are more permanent than bodies. The truck hides the hearse as well as the florist's delivery vehicle. The garbage collectors become holy figures who obscure the church. These collectors don't take anything away, though; they "apply" their ritual to it. In common parlance, the allusion "dust to dust" reassures people that our death is a natural return to an original state. Here, it seems to suggest that dirt remains dirt. So does Loy paint a city of transients surrounded by transient objects. Though Loy makes transients and trash the most present aspects of the city, she also makes clear that this material will not last forever. As the next section will show, Loy acknowledges that these things and people are on their way somewhere else. With the city emptied of these final objects and people, Loy leaves us with a curiously ephemeral city, the abstraction of which is in some ways more real than the concrete city itself.

“Refusées:” Material Transients and Transient Material

While living in the Bowery, Loy created a number of assemblages, collages that make use of three-dimensional objects, often found ones. Loy had plenty of these, since she acquired hoarding habits later in life. Her biographer describes Loy’s apartment at 5 Stanton Street as “so full of her collections that one could barely squeeze in...and the other residents were not allowed inside. Whenever they caught glimpses of her rags, bottles, clothespins, and egg crates, they whispered about Mina’s plans for her ‘trash’” (Burke 413). A housemate who helped her move from 5 Stanton across the street to 16 Stanton remembers, “You had to be very careful with every object, or piece of junk” (424). Burke places “trash” in quotation marks (since it was obviously treasure to Loy), and the housemate fluctuates between “object” and “piece of junk.” Though Loy valued these objects, it is important to recognize their life as trash, since the medium is so key to their message. Trash is transient, like the people the pieces depict, and if the city is filled with transient people and things then it is also constantly in the process of being emptied.²⁰ This limbo is what makes Loy’s depiction so fascinating. The pieces often have religious themes, with titles such as *Bums Praying*, *Bums in Paradise*, and *Christ on a Clothesline*, and the religious turn underscores the depiction of the material as ephemeral. In the assemblages, both bodies and objects are transitory, which nuances Loy’s verse, where transients are highly material. Her assemblages add to that message

²⁰ See Michael Thompson’s *Rubbish Theory*, in which he schematizes objects into tiers of value. In one class are durable objects, those that increase in value and are kept – a vintage, well-kept, valuable car, for example. In another are transient objects, or trash, those items that lose value and are thus cast aside – an old, ill-kept, beat-up car, for example. (Thompson also adds a third category (which he calls a “covert” category): rubbish. These objects are transient objects that remain, valueless, until they are rediscovered and made valuable and durable. This category might apply to Loy’s assemblages today, which are difficult to find and in disrepair but in light of her newly gained critical attention would now endure because of their value.)

that materiality itself is highly transient. Thus, the most prominent and present parts of the city define it as a transitory, ephemeral space.

In Loy's manipulation of trash, we see a conflation of very specific kinds of objects and subjects. Loy referred to these pieces as "Refusees," a pun that plays on refuse, refusés, and refugees. She felt that trash was a particularly apt vehicle for portraying the dispossessed (the "refused") and those who flee as a means of escape, refugees.²¹ Loy identifies with all three of these groups: her hoarding suggests her particular affinity for refuse; impoverished, she counts herself among the refused; of Jewish heritage and living in America as World War II raged, she could count herself as a refugee. But it is not self-portraits that she chooses to create from her "treasures." Instead, she takes as her aesthetic subjects the struggling men who surround her, or as the pieces refer to them, "bums." Her assemblages do not deny transcendence to the homeless as her verse does. Their connection with trash keeps them bound to the material, but it also, at least, makes that state transitory, as trash is.

Christ on a Clothesline is perhaps the most apt depiction of Loy's message of the impermanence of materiality (see Figure 1.1). In it, Loy hangs a Christ figure drifting on a clothesline. A rusted metal fence runs below him and decrepit buildings stand shakily behind him, crowded on close lots, some built in brick and some with falling plywood slats boarding up their windows. Loy's neighbors recognized the Christ figure as

²¹ The change in medium is significant, since the media of her earlier work is so delicate. For a portrait of two dancers published in a 1921 issue of *The Dial*, for example, Loy used watercolor on paper (Burke 302). She used the slightly more opaque gouache in the two pieces she displayed at the 1906 Salon d'Automne (Figure 1.2). With Peggy Guggenheim's backing, she created translucent paper lampshade designs. In Paris, she made Art Deco lamps from glass liquor bottles (Burke 340-341). She called her designs in paper "fairy shadows" and made lanterns of stars in cellophane, opaline, and paper. Many of Loy's assemblage materials are heavier but ironically feel more ephemeral because you sense their decomposition. The distinction between ethereal and ephemeral is key here, for the ethereal is always abstract while the ephemeral is temporarily concrete.

modeled after a certain “tubercular Scandinavian fisherman who hung around the Bowery” (Burke 421). Loy literalizes this “hanging around” by pinning him to a clothesline, thus “hanging him out to dry” as society may do to the homeless.

Full as it is of puns, one might be tempted to read *Christ on a Clothesline* ironically, but the piece offers more empathy than that. Its title connects the Bowery “bums” to Christ, the part of the holy trinity distinguished by his corporeal embodiment. She thus shows the piece’s tested subject to be an embodiment of spirit (in a way that the “unkindled” eyes of the homeless in “Hot Cross Bum,” for example, do not). The link also foretells transformation: as Christ rose above his body after persecution, so might the homeless be offered an escape from difficult material and corporeal circumstances. (The composition of the clothesline across the page points to this ascension, since the Christ figure hangs at its lowest point.) Loy conveys this message in trash, a category of the material that is by definition on its way somewhere else, somewhere away from the everyday.

Communal Cot glues another set of homeless men to the city sidewalk, but it, too, ultimately foreshadows their rise (Figure 1.3 and 1.4). The perspective of the assemblage implicates the viewer by forcing them to look down on its homeless subjects: the scene is composed as if one were looking down on it from a window a few stories up. There, ten subjects clothed in rags lie on the sidewalk. Loy lifts the title from “Hot Cross Bum,” and the contrast between the “communal cot” of the poem and that of its eponymous assemblage is telling. In the former, the homeless are more blamed and bound; in the latter, their ascension seems possible. Near the end of “Hot Cross Bum,” Loy writes:

And always on the trodden street
—the communal cot—

embalmed in rum
under an unseen
baldachin of dream
blinking his inverted sky
of flagstone

prone
lies the body of the flop
where'er he drop. (*Last* 197)

It seems that Loy might be offering the homeless an “embalming” similar to the process that made the subjects of “On Third Avenue” into “mummies.” The “flop,” however, lands firmly back in his body, dropped on the sidewalk. Loy again assigns blame: drink causes these men to pass out drunk on the sidewalk, that “communal cot.” She sets the ethereal as a pointed contrast to the “flagstone” on which her subjects are dropped, but it is only a tease. The “bum” dreams of the “unseen / baldachin of dream.” Interestingly, the imagery makes the sky and dreams material, since baldachin is a rich embroidered brocade, or the canopy over which such fabric is hung. For these men, even a dream of the sky is material, and the sky that is “his,” “his inverted sky” is even harder: flagstone.

While the poem may blame the homeless for their position on “the communal cot,” the assemblage does not. If anything, its perspective incriminates the viewer. Created just a few years before Rauschenberg’s *Bed* (1955), *Communal Cot* is prescient of that landmark piece, which Leo Steinberg said rotated the plane of art to the “flatbed picture plane” (that is, pulled our conception of the canvas from one created on an easel to one created on the ground). Like *Bed*, *Communal Cot* takes an object upon one which lies horizontally and presents it vertically; its scraps of fabric reach out, not up, toward the viewer. Nowhere is the suggestion of these subjects being drunk; by contrast, in its rotation of the viewing plane, it allows the men to rise. For when hung on the wall, the

subjects appear to be floating, weightless, immaterial. Like *Christ on a Clothesline*, *Communal Cot* offers its subjects release from material burden.

The figures in *Bums Praying* float away from the material, too (Figure 1.5). Five men hover around what appears to be a cathedral window, the cowls of their robes blanketing hunched shoulders. One man faces the viewer from the center of the window; the busts of the other men hover around it. Their praying hands point towards the window like rudders steering them towards the glow. Were the title not so descriptive, and if one wasn't aware that the medium was Bowery refuse, one might read these men as priests or angels. They are headed somewhere glowing with light, where their prayer directs them. Perhaps those are wings under their robes rather than shoulders, we might wonder, and the piece's composition emphasizes the men's ascendancy. It's not the edge of the canvas that dictates where their bodies end; rather, Loy cuts all of them off at the waist. While such corporeal cropping made the "busts" of "On Third Avenue" seem like statues, in this piece, it seems to signal their transition from the worldly to the spiritual. It becomes clear that Loy's choice to portray these men in trash is a reprieve more than it is a critique. The medium of these assemblages reminds us that even though these figures are cast off, their position is not permanent. An object becomes trash when it loses its value as an object, so the piece suggests that these men have lost their value as subjects, per society. While this may seem a curse, to Loy, losing one's position as an embodied subject is highly desirable. It would free her from the "Bulbous stranger" of a body that entraps her, and it allows the "bums" to move toward that glowing place where prayer leads.

The title, as much as the composition, of *No Parking* provides a final example of Loy's use of trash to portray the transience of the body (Figure 1.6). In it, one person curls up on the sidewalk at the base of a trashcan. Another rests his head on its lid. A trick of perspective makes this man levitate a foot or so from the sidewalk, as many of Loy's Bowery subjects float or hover. Echoing his position, a moth or butterfly spreads its wings on top of the garbage can. Banana peels and can lids represent themselves as trash strewn on the sidewalk. In the upper-right corner of the canvas sit the capitalized words NO PARKING. The floating man's smile seems to show us that he's found a loophole. His floating position allows him to comply with the mandate, even though he's attached to the garbage can. The piece lacks the religious overtones of many of Loy's other *Refusées*, but it maintains the message that these men are not exactly bound to the material but rather in a sort of limbo or transition from it.

The present state of Loy's later visual art proves its message about the ephemerality of the material. Many of the assemblages survive only in photographic reproduction, in images that Loy's friend Berenice Abbott shot in Loy's Stanton Street apartment. The one that her biographer was fortunate to find, *Househunting*, was in disrepair. How long would those banana peels on *No Parking* last, after all? Even the most careful collectors have to go to great lengths to preserve such work. The fate of these pieces only goes to show the impermanence of their material, not only of the medium that Loy used to create them but also of the material world in general. It is no coincidence that Loy was influenced by the writings of Joel Goldsmith around the time that she created these pieces.²² Goldsmith originally studied Christian Science, an origin

²² Loy studied Goldsmith's writings with fellow semi-recluse and artist Joseph Cornell, whose work of the era also incorporates trash, though more preciously, in small scale and under glass.

obvious in his belief that we should seek the invisible spiritual life running beneath all worldly things, what Loy might call the “inobvious real.”²³

This “inobvious real” or “irreal” is Loy’s version of the “abstract concrete.” Her New York is not ethereal but ephemeral – it exists, but fleetingly. She empties it of all but transient subjects, the homeless, and focuses on its transient material, trash. By pointing to the in-between and shifting state of the city’s people and things, she paints for us a city always in transition, one that is constantly disappearing. It is never quite concrete and thus always something of an abstraction, as immaterial and fleeting as an idea of the city is. Together, her poems and art suggest that the realest city of all, the most permanent one, is one that hangs between the real and the irreal, between the material and the immaterial, between the concrete and the abstract.

In doing so, her work critiques consumption. The portrait of a paradoxical, flickering city questions materiality in a more general sense. With each step she takes to portray the city so specifically, Loy engages this overarching question. First, she focuses on the city’s producers (or “mass producers”) and consumers. In both poems, she sets this examination on streets downtown, 14th Street and Third Avenue, rather than in factories. (When we do see the mannequins in the store, it is from the street in a window display.) Thus, she ties the city’s modes of production and consumption to its everyday life and infrastructure. Then she sucks the humanity out of the workers and products of these systems, whether in an act of benevolent reprieve or as a symbol of the effect of the systems themselves. Her portrait of the homeless or destitute, while not empathetic, recognizes them as a population, one that many overlook. In fact, these subjects, who

²³ For more on Loy and Christian Science, see Richard Cook’s “The ‘Infinitarian’ and her ‘Macro-Cosmic Presence’”: The Question of Loy and Christian Science.”

have been cast out by the capitalist system, become the most prevalent part of the city. Thus, Loy draws attention to those whom the system fails. Loy's final pieces of visual art value trash, as Loy did in life. Placing worth in things that others have deemed worthless threatens to turn the system of mass production and planned obsolescence on its head. One might even read her work as implying that it is only by disrupting that system of production and consumption that one can reach a higher, even holy, state of being.

As much as they do in content, Loy's poems critique consumption formally. Their esoteric diction, neologisms, variable syntax, non-traditional punctuation, and vague referents all work to make the poem difficult for the reader to consume. Though a colleague and admirer of Williams, Loy's own work lies at the other end of the spectrum of presenting "things" as starkly and straight-forwardly as Williams' poetry does.²⁴ Instead of a white chicken, Loy offers an eponymous "Crab-Angel" or, in "Love Songs to Joannes," a "Pig Cupid:"

Spawn of Fantasies
Silted the appraisable
Pig Cupid his rosy snout
Rooting erotic garbage
"Once upon a time"
Pulls a weed white star-topped
Among wild oats sown in mucous membrane (53)

Instead of plums "delicious / so sweet / and so cold" in the icebox, Loy offers "cocaine in cornucopia" served "[f]rom the shores / of oval oceans / in the oxidized Orient" where:

²⁴ Of course, Loy thinks Williams does more than present "bare facts" himself. She concludes "Modern Poetry" by holding his work up as an example of those who are "poets only according to the new reckoning." "Williams will make a poem of a bare fact," she says, but "he throws that bare fact onto paper in such a way that it becomes a part of Williams' own nature as well as the thing itself" (160-1). In keeping with her fluctuation between the material and its opposite, her favorite Williams image is one that uses an invisible presence that draws our attention to a physical object, though a transparent one. "[P]erfect," she says, "is a poem of Carlos Williams about the wind on a window-pane" (161).

Onyx-eyed Odalisques
and ornithologists
observe
the flight
of Eros obsolete (82)

Loy's things are often the stuff of fantasy rather than farm or fridge, and thus necessarily something beyond the "thing itself." Even if they were everyday objects or creatures, her style certainly distracts us from the simple thing. She swerves her diction so constantly that the poems become tongue-twisters ("cocaine" to "cornucopia," "oval oceans" to the "oxidized Orient"). Questionable modifiers and syntax company with vague punctuation to leave meaning multivalent. Is a subject called the "Spawn of Fantasies" the noun that is "silting the appraisable"? A lack of punctuation fails to indicate whether that thought is complete, or whether "appraisable" is an adjective to describe the "appraisable / Pig Cupid" whose snout is "rooting erotic garbage." A comma after "garbage" would clarify that the subject of "pulls a weed" is also said "snout," but without one, we are free to interpret what holds that weed, and how the allusion to "Once upon a time" affects whichever reading we choose to pursue. Indeed, the difficulty of her language obscures the poems' meaning or message to such an extent that this opacity often seems to become the message itself.

Loy's poetry forces us to work for it. In this sense, she asks her readers to do better than those she critiques. In her earlier verse about Stein, Joyce, and Brancusi, her purposeful obfuscation can read like an exclusion, a "KEEP OUT" or "MEMBERS ONLY" sign. She places her high modernist peers on another plane of being, a higher one: infinity, the sun, the moon, outer space. Even "the raw caverns of the Increate" seem higher, since Loy tells us that it is there that "we forge the dusk of Chaos / to that

imperious jewellery of the Universe / ----the Beautiful---" (78). In her later verse, the "producers" are no longer "genius" writers and artists but industrial laborers, but she allows them access to other states of being (even if it is as objects). She accuses the homeless of attempting to take the easy way to an altered state of consciousness and will not grant her readers such effortless passage. In form as in content, Loy draws our attention to consumption and asks that we earn it.

This inaccessibility is perhaps what allowed readers and publishers to forget Loy for as long as they did, but it is also what brought us back to her. Burke hypothesizes that we lost Loy because, of Pound's two top picks for legendary modernist women writers, Eliot chose to endorse Moore instead of Loy. Though this twist of fate may have removed Loy from the kind of literary celebrity that now adheres to Moore, it also allowed experimental and avant-garde writers of the last few decades to adopt Loy as their own and to resurrect her work as part of an alternative tradition. By way of Kenneth Rexroth, Jonathan Williams began advocating for Loy in the late 1950s, ushering her genealogy towards the eclectic artists embraced by the Jargon Society. Barbara Guest, a colleague of O'Hara's in the New York School, appropriates Loy on the grounds that "Loy may be more 'modern' and more 'contemporary' than many of the poets who then appeared in little reviews," "her vocabulary easing into our accepted syntax." Guest does so specifically on the grounds that Loy is an "outsider," in contrast to "Imagism or Eliotism or William Carlos Williams" (Shreiber, Tuma 499). In 1965, Black Mountain poets Robert Creeley and Paul Blackburn pilgrimage to Aspen to interview Loy. Feminist poets such as Anne Waldman and Rachel Blau DuPlessis count Loy as a key influence because of her (decidedly un-Moore-like) frank sexuality. Even as late as 1996, Roger L. Conover

claimed to have “found” Loy for a major press (Farrar, Straus and Giroux) by punning on the title of Williams’ *The Last Lunar Baedeker* to select and edit *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*. Early in her career, Loy noted that “technical eccentricities or grammatical disturbances” make for a “seeming strangeness [that] is inevitable when any writer has come into an independent contact with nature” and advised that we not let these traits “turn us from the main issue which is to get at the poem’s reality.” In the end, these eccentricities and disturbances are what returned us *to* Loy’s poetry, and they are what make getting at the “reality” of her poetry so worthwhile, engaging, and instructive. In the end, these challenging trademarks of her work echo the challenging reality that they portray: the Lower East Side and the Bowery in the 1940s and ‘50s.



Figure 1.1 *Christ on a Clothesline* (1955-1959). Collage and mixed media in deep glass covered box.



Figure 1.2 *La Maison en papier* (1906). Ink and gouache on paper.



Figure 1.3 *Communal Cot* (1950). Papier mache and rags.



Figure 1.4 Detail of *Communal Cot*

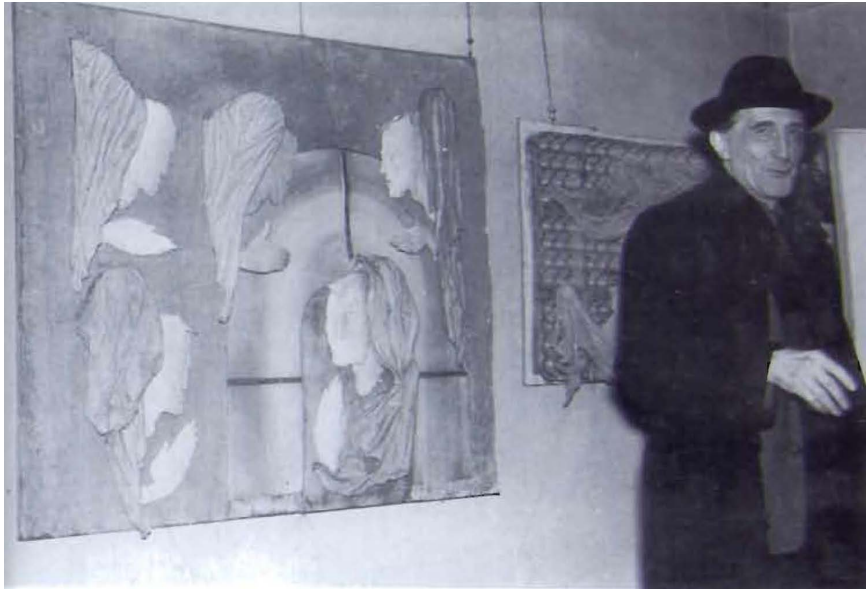


Figure 1.5 Berenice Abbot's photograph of *Bums Praying* hanging in Loy's boarding room. At right, Marcel Duchamp.



Figure 1.6 *No Parking* (early 1950s)

Chapter 2

“True Abstraction:” Frank O’Hara’s Responses to Advertising, Pop, and Celebrity

There was a time when if you wanted a lady to buy a hat you would ask her to do so, or if you wanted a man to buy cognac you would describe the virtues of cognac. Now the persuasion is more indirect...Products have become props for images into which the seller confidently assumes we will try to fit ourselves.

--Daniel Boorstin, *The Image, or What Happened to the American Dream* (1962)

Pop is not a reaction, necessarily, but at best a response to what we see in America around us, both on billboards, on theatre marquees, in newspapers and on TV...It gives you the artist’s interpretation of what we all see in daily life, rather than the non-objective artist’s interpretation of what he feels about daily life.

--Frank O’Hara, “Teens Quiz a Critic” (*Ingenue* magazine, 1964)

New York is one of the most violent cities in the world and its pace is hectic...And it is the characteristic of the avant-garde to absorb and transform disparate qualities not normally associated with art, for the artist to take within him the violence and evil of his times and come out with something. There is more for the artist to do here, and I believe more is being done, than anywhere else in the world at present. (SS 98)

--Frank O’Hara, “American and Non-American Art” (1959)

Personism is so totally opposed to...abstract removal that it is verging on a true abstraction for the first time, really, in the history of poetry.

--Frank O’Hara, “Personism: A Manifesto” (1959)

One of O'Hara's first claims in his essay distinguishing "American and Non-American Art" is that, as opposed to European art, "American art is...still alive, it is part of our lives (not nationally—personally)" (SS 97). This emphasis on the personal suffuses O'Hara's work, as it does through the three passages from him with which I begin this chapter. In the first, he privileges the "artist's interpretation;" in the second, he calls for the artist to "absorb and transform" their lived experience; in the third, he admonishes "abstract removal." All ask the artist to be present and personally involved. I invite advertising historian Daniel Boorstin to the conversation because the premise of this chapter is O'Hara's call for the personal speaks to the rise of advertising in New York City. Analyzing the places where O'Hara's work responds to advertising situates him historically; it also clarifies his complex position on abstraction. This chapter shows that, from a number of directions, O'Hara fights abstraction with the personal. While O'Hara distinguishes between abstraction in art and in everyday life, he only abides the kind of abstraction that leaves a trace of presence. He states as much in his mock manifesto, "Personism" (1959), and the rest of his writing advocates the position seriously. His work looks for the hand of the artist, the voice of the poet, the user behind the mass-produced good, and the person behind the celebrity personality – whatever presence personalizes and particularizes the abstract. As he tells the teenager curious about Pop, he wants to know not what the artist sees (for it is what we all see) but "what he [*sic*] feels about daily life."

O'Hara experienced New York as it underwent a monumental shift, both economically and culturally, and the change informs his work. After World War II, the city's economy moved from manufacturing to abstract industries such as hospitality,

finance, and advertising. The city moved towards a system of production based on experiences, wealth, and concepts. By 1962, Boorstin realizes, “Products have become props for images.” Things were becoming more abstract—images, projections, and brands. As a poet and a curator for the MoMA, O’Hara was especially attuned to the city’s shift towards abstraction. To understand his aesthetics, we must contextualize his verse in its specific historical, cultural, and economic setting. As he notes in his parsing of “American and Non-American Art,” the violence and pace of New York affect its artists, and thus its art. He calls for “the artist to take within him the violence and evil of his times and come out with something.” As it turns out, O’Hara’s writing answers his own call to “absorb and transform” one’s experience of New York City.

The chapter begins with an overview of New York’s transformation to a postindustrial space to show that its new economies made the city a more abstract space. It then reads “Personism” to clarify O’Hara’s stance on abstraction and his notion of the personal. It then applies these readings to poems in which O’Hara takes up brand-name, mass-produced goods, many of which double as love poetry to Vincent Warren. Next, I consider O’Hara’s response to abstraction in his art writing, particularly those pieces in which he responds to Pop, a movement that appropriates the rhetoric of advertising. In conclusion, I turn from abstract object to the abstract subject by unpacking O’Hara’s response to celebrity. In all these areas, O’Hara looks for the vestige of the personal: that which is “characteristic of a person...as opposed to a thing or an abstraction” (*OED* 5a). As his city grows more abstract, he seeks the concrete, or the “true abstraction.” The true or the real, for him, comes from a connection to people, be it in the art object, the everyday object, or the media personality.

A New New York: the Shift to a Post-Industrial City

The garment workers who populate Loy's poetry are conspicuously absent from O'Hara's verse, for manufacturing had largely left the city by the time O'Hara arrives there in 1953. In 1946, New York was the largest manufacturing center in America (Sterns 19), but over 80% of the industrial plants built between 1946 and 1951 "were built beyond the limits of the major industrial districts existing at the close of World War II" (Parke). Urban historian Leonard Wallock notes that "[t]he departure of industries from New York City set the stage for a long-term decline" but that "this trend proved hard to discern and even more difficult to accept" (19). By the time the city recognized the trend, it was already unstoppable. New York was on its way to becoming an international phenomenon and the postindustrial city it is today.

The middle class followed the factories, leaving the city in record numbers. Metropolitan rail, the end of war-time gasoline rationing, and Robert Moses' efforts at urban renewal allowed white-collar Manhattanites to move to Westchester, Levittown, Stamford, Montauk, and the like. Robert Fishman, in *Bourgeois Utopias*, notes that these places "exemplified the central meaning and contradiction of suburbia: a natural world of greenery and family life that appeared to be wholly separate from the great city yet was in fact wholly dependent on it" (134). Postwar bourgeois New York embraced the illusion. Between 1940 and 1960, Long Island's Nassau and Suffolk Counties both roughly tripled in population. *The Exploding Metropolis* (1958), a seminal anti-renewal anthology, issued a stern response to this "sub-urbanization," which it attributed to the rise of consumer culture:

Clearly, the norm of American aspiration is now in suburbia. The happy family of TV commercials, of magazine covers and ads, lives in suburbia; wherever there is

an identifiable background it is the land of blue jeans and shopping centers.... Here is the place to enjoy the new leisure, and as more people make more money and spend less time making it, the middle-class identification with suburbia will be made more compelling yet. The momentum would seem irresistible. It is not merely that hundreds of thousands have been moving to suburbia, here they are breeding a whole generation that will never have known the city at all. (9-10)

By the late 1950s, the trend toward suburbia and consumption was strong enough to elicit this kind of passionate response from those invested in New York's diversity and vitality. Pessimism about the flight of industry and the middle class was widespread. New York City was gaining prominence as the cultural capital of the world, but this was apparently little consolation to those concerned with its economic growth. As the middle class emigrated and industry relocated, "there was practically common agreement that New York would decline in importance in the future" (Gottman, in Sterns 19). It was unclear what income-generator would take the place of manufacturing and middle-income real estate.

The answer came in the arrival of service, finance, and advertising. As urban factories closed and people moved to suburbs (and, increasingly, housing projects), the city filled vacated space with offices. In 1956, Mayor Wagner boasted of "a dramatic growth of wholesale trade, finance and insurance, and service industries of every kind, including the increasingly important business and professional services." The numbers back him up: in the early 1950s, New York added 2 million square feet of office space *per year* (Wallock 33). In 1960, an author in *Fortune* lauded the development, as well: "[A]s we have lost industrial workers from the population, we have gained higher paid, higher educated administrative personnel that make New York an unparalleled consumer's market" (Sterns 29, n85). No longer a center of production, New York found its feet as one of consumption.

Catering to consumption was a timely move, for Americans were finding more money to spend and more ways to spend it. Advertising historian Vance Packard estimates that by the mid-1950s the average American had “five times as many discretionary dollars as he did in 1940” (*Persuaders* 20). Banks began issuing credit cards, allowing patrons to delay payment. Consuming became a patriotic duty. In 1960, Eisenhower encouraged Americans to “perform their economic functions” and buy what they were producing. New York’s State Commerce Commissioner instigated a movement with the forthright slogan “Buy it now!” Manufacturers responded to the swell in spending by courting the customer with advertising, packaging, and redesign. By 1960, advertisers spent \$12 billion per year - six times the amount they had in 1939. A contemporary critic recognizes the new role of packaging when he writes, “Whereas the prewar package was considered to be nothing much more than the carrier for the product to the postwar package was entrusted the vital mission of charming the housewife into buying” (Seldin qtd. in Shannon 61). Thus, the consumer was buying the package as much as the good it contained. Needless redesign allowed companies to offer a “new” product even when it remained essentially the same. “All the emphasis on style,” Packard writes, “tends to cause the product designers and public alike to be preoccupied with the appearances of change rather than the real values involved” (*Waste* 70). In short, the consumer began to buy style rather than content.²⁵ Images became more important than the things they represented. To a poet, especially one who looked up to William Carlos Williams, as O’Hara did, this revaluation of signifier and signified is especially relevant.

²⁵ Products became less materially substantial in a more literal sense, as well, as their designers made them more disposable so that a new edition could replace them.

Williams maintained that there are supposed to be “no ideas but in things,” a maxim that is hard to follow when things themselves become ideas. Things seem endangered, replaced by the mirage of an image of the product or how it will change us. This kind of advertising makes objects as abstract as they are concrete, if not more.

O’Hara’s 1953 mock-manifesto “Personism” offers a point of entry to his response to this abstraction – first, when he distinguishes between abstraction in poetry and painting. O’Hara wrote the manifesto to correct Allen Ginsberg’s use of O’Hara’s “Second Avenue” as an example of what Ginsberg calls “abstract writing.” Ginsberg acknowledges that O’Hara might not be the best example (he uses Corso, Kerouac, and Burroughs first); nonetheless, Ginsberg invokes “Second Avenue” to explain how this experiment in “freedom of composition” is abstract (75). Repeatedly, Ginsberg defines “abstract writing” as literature that doesn’t make sense (74). While Ginsberg doesn’t connect abstract writing to Abstract Expressionism, the connection is implicit because his essay appears in a magazine subtitled *A Magazine for Abstract Art*, which is filled with reproductions of pieces by Motherwell, the de Koonings, Hoffman, Gottlieb, Guston, and Hartigan. O’Hara corrects this implicit connection when he contends, “Abstraction (in poetry, not in painting) involves personal removal by the poet” (CP 498). Here, he draws a crucial distinction between the sister arts and their respective use of abstraction (at least as Ginsberg defines it): nonsensical abstraction removes the poet in a way that abstract painting does not remove the artist. In short, abstraction makes poetry impersonal, and O’Hara is “totally opposed to this kind of abstract removal...in poetry” (498). Thus, poetic abstraction (& the poet’s absence) is undesirable, as opposed to the painterly abstraction (& the painter’s presence) that O’Hara famously championed. In both cases,

O'Hara emphasizes the *presence* of the artist and the personal (whether it results in abstraction or not) as positive.

Almost immediately, O'Hara complicates this stance, but his emphasis on personal presence remains. He adds that Personism is "so totally opposed to...abstract removal that it is verging on a true abstraction for the first time, really, in the history of poetry" (498). O'Hara's concept of "true abstraction" provides a fruitful conundrum. The multivalent adjective in "*true* abstraction" lets us read it a number of ways: that something is *essentially* abstract, that it is "abstract but also material" ("truly" *there*), or that it is *sincere* in its abstraction. Since O'Hara defines "true abstraction" in terms of personal removal, I'm inclined to read the koan to mean that something is "truly abstract" in the Personist sense only if it has personal presence – this is O'Hara's correction of Ginsberg. In his "Notes on Second Avenue," O'Hara makes clear that the poem that Ginsberg references as "meaningless" in its abstraction is, in fact, entirely personal: "everything in it either happened to me or I felt happening...on Second Avenue" (SS 39). He protests too much when he says that Personism "does not have to do with personality or intimacy, far from it!" (CP 499). In the next sentence, he insists that Personism "addresses itself to one person." True abstraction is poetry that is engaged with people: personal.

People and the personal are important to Personism, but so are things. If we consider the poem the poet's art object, then Personism advocates placing art objects between people. Per O'Hara, "[Personism] puts the poem squarely between the poet and the person, Lucky Pierre style, and the poem is correspondingly gratified" (499). The metaphor anthropomorphizes (and sexualizes) the poem. Personism is about connecting

people but it is also about connecting people to things, intimately. Even its genesis does so, for O'Hara claims to have imagined Personism by "realizing that if I wanted to I could use the telephone instead of writing the poem." Were this Donna Haraway's manifesto, the connection between the poet and the telephone would be so obviously intimate as to create a cyborg. While Personism certainly *does* "have to do with...intimacy" (Lucky Pierre making an object a pretty intimate thing), it also mediates personal connection by placing objects between people. This remove allows the poet to concentrate on the poem by "sustaining the poet's feelings towards the poem while preventing love from distracting him into feeling about the person" (499). O'Hara emphasizes the benefits for the poet here, but let us not forget that the situation benefits the poem, too, which is "correspondingly gratified." Personism surrounds its mediating non-human players – the poem, the telephone – with the personal in its most basic definition as an adjective, "that which is of people." It is about people, obviously, but it also makes things intimate and personal in the sense of "private." "Personism" jests, but its tenets ripple across O'Hara's work. In both his poetry and his art writing, he responds to all sorts of abstraction by invoking the personal, especially when the abstraction results from mass-production or mass-media. In the next section, I read O'Hara's poetry for its response to mass-produced goods and find him to be nostalgic for objects that are personal, both "of people" and "private."

Coke, Cracker Jacks, and Tootsie Rolls: Poems

O'Hara signals the importance of making things personal, and his nostalgia for "real" things, in the brief lyric "To the Poem" (1953).²⁶ In it, he asks of the poem:

Let us do something grand
just this once Something

small and unimportant and
unAmerican Some fine thing

will resemble a human hand
and really be merely a thing

Not needing a military band
nor an elegant forthcoming

to tease spotlights or a hand
from the public's thinking

But be In a defiant land
of its own a real right thing (*CP* 175)

O'Hara seeks an object that harbors a vestige of humanity - perhaps the hand that made it. In contrast to the metonymic "hand" of applause referenced in line 9, this "fine thing // will resemble a human hand" as a "thing," "really." In nearly every stanza, the poem emphasizes the importance of the object's essential "thinghood." The first two stanzas highlight the difference between the abstract notion of "something" ("let's do something") and the more material "Some fine thing." The latter is so "fine" because it has attained the status of being "really...merely a thing" rather than an icon of desire, a state that the poem implies is difficult to achieve in America, whose public apparently needs federal parades and "spotlights" to recognize a real thing. The speaker seeks to

²⁶ In its original manuscript form, this poem carries the cancelled title "To the Reader." Initially, the piece appealed to a *person* for help in appreciating the thing; its revised version enlists an aesthetic object, the poem, instead. The amendment suggests that poetry can act as a tool for restoring "real, right" things.

tease the “thing” from the public’s “**thinking**,” or to enfold their thinking in the thing – somehow, to highlight the thing in their thinking. It is not “elegant forthcomings” or applause that are “grand” in this poem’s world; it is the thing in its most basic state, uninfused with American fanfare, connected to the “human hand.” “To the Poem” fairly defines the terms of the object in O’Hara’s work: desire for the concrete, everyday object, a disdain for modern American blindness to “right” objects, and an emphasis on the trace of the subject (“the hand”).

In poems that he writes during his affair with Vincent Warren, O’Hara infuses brand name, American objects with the personal. Nearly all critics who engage the topic of O’Hara and consumption invoke “The Day Lady Died” (1959) among O’Hara’s hundreds of poems, to prove their point that his verse is “the highest product of commodity-market capitalism” (Molesworth 94) or that the New York of this poem “offers unlimited choice, but only in exchange for the reified subjectivity of consumer capitalism” (Lowney 259). Ross and Von Hallberg use “The Day Lady Died” to argue that “mass production and cheapness” make O’Hara an apolitical “consumer-poet” (Ross 383-4). But buying Ghanaian literature hardly groups O’Hara with the “spendthrift clients” of the typical American “conspicuous consumption” (ibid). The average consumer was not spending on copies of *New World Writing*, *Le Balcon*, and particular editions of Verlaine. The poems that comment more aptly on O’Hara’s place in the “new pop continuum of a consumer culture” are those that he began writing a few weeks after his elegy for Holiday, when he fell in love with the twenty-year-old Vincent Warren (Ross 384). These love (and break-up) poems reference American brand names that situate O’Hara in his contemporary milieu of advertising and consumption. By

appropriating these mass-produced objects as objects of affection, he makes them personal. He places them between himself and his lover, “Lucky Pierre style,” as it were.

For one, O’Hara associates Coca-Cola, that supremely American drink, almost solely with his much younger lover.²⁷ Coffee is O’Hara’s (non-alcoholic) drink of choice. Everywhere, he drinks coffee: in “Joe’s Jacket” (1959) (“I am rising...I have coffee / I prepare calmly to face almost everything” (*CP* 330)), in “Steps” (1960) (“oh god it’s wonderful / to get out of bed / and drink too much coffee” (*LP* 58)); in “Cambridge” (1956) (“The hot plate works, / it is the sole heat on earth, and instant coffee” (*LP* 18)). Coca-Cola, by contrast, is a drink that signals Warren. “Having a Coke with You” (1960) is one of O’Hara’s most memorable love poems, written for Warren. In “Song” (1960), another poem for Warren, he asks, “Did you see me walking by the Buick Repairs? / I was thinking of you / having a Coke in the heat it was your face / I saw on the movie magazine” (*CP* 367). In “Early on Sunday,” written in the tumultuous weeks before their final split, O’Hara is miserable and alone, too depressed to go outside; instead he’s “washing the world down with rye and Coca-Cola” (*CP* 405).²⁸ O’Hara wrote this series of Coca-Cola poems during his time with Warren (August 1959-May 1961).

²⁷ Coke is perhaps the perfect product through which to study O’Hara’s stance on the abstracted object, for as Žižek notes, “Coke is not an ordinary commodity, but a commodity whose very peculiar use-value itself is already a direct embodiment of the auratic, ineffable surplus.”

²⁸ O’Hara mixes alcohol with soda in “Biotherm,” too. Written after his final split with Warren, though, he does so in the adopted voice of a drunk and refers to it as lower-case “coke”: “smooch slurp / pass me the filth / and a coke pal” (*CP* 442). Coke as a brand name is almost exclusively Warren’s domain. A notable exception is “A Step Away from Them,” written in 1956, in which O’Hara admires “laborers [who] feed their dirty / glistening torsos sandwiches / and Coca-Cola, with yellow helmets / on” (*LP* 15). Even before Warren, though, this reference is sexualized and humanized (because of the enjambment, the Coke bottles wear helmets “to protect them from falling bricks”). O’Hara himself drinks a generic “chocolate malted” from the local “JULIET’S CORNER” and “a glass of papaya juice” (*LP* 16-17), an international import. Ward argues that the “poem’s things are almost all signs, in a physical as well as a Saussurean sense,” but I’d contend that O’Hara fills these signs with human traces, making them more than just the flat signs they might be otherwise (58).

“Having a Coke with You” (1960) plays on advertising rhetoric by co-opting its vacuousness. One could build an ad campaign around the title alone. 1959 series of ads for Coke, in fact, feature couples taking a moment out of their day to share a Coke with one another: between dances at the school formal, on a date at the drive-in movie, on a boat, in the sprinkler, on the front porch (Figure 2.1). The series ran with the taglines “The Pause That Refreshes” or “Be Really Refreshed” but they may as well have substituted “Having a Coke with You.” Other campaigns of the late 1950s also sell Coke as a means of courtship. In one, suitors offer Coke bottles as bribes for a spot on a young woman’s dance card. In another, a swarm of young men on the beach offers Cokes to “refresh” a comely young lifeguard. In another, a woman holds a Coke at the soda fountain while three young men moon over her from the background. Such “soft sell” advertising was still new in the 1950s. Rather than sell a product by extolling its virtues, the soft sell operates by associating the object with abstract values and role models who embody them, then encouraging a broad viewership to self-identify with those values and models so that they’ll buy the concrete embodiment of them, the product. As Daniel Boorstin puts it in a passage I quote to open this chapter:

There was a time when if you wanted a lady to buy a hat you would ask her to do so, or if you wanted a man to buy cognac you would describe the virtues of cognac. Now the persuasion is more indirect...Products have become props for images into which the seller confidently assumes we will try to fit ourselves.
(193)

Boorstin contends that “the graceful cursive Coca-Cola” is not the most nefarious aspect of modern branding. More evil is “a more abstract kind of image...a studiously crafted personality profile” that embodies the values of the brand (186). Advertising takes advantage of this abstract image to sway the consumer.

O'Hara uses this modern marketing scheme against itself. The title "Having a Coke With You" suggests that O'Hara might spend the poem mooning over his hunky dory, Coke-ad-worthy love with Warren. Instead, O'Hara catches us off guard by beginning it with the faint praise that "having a Coke" with his lover "is even more fun than...being sick to my stomach" (*CP* 360). The startling opening, not exactly the stuff of ad copy, teaches us to read against the easy complacency that the poem's title suggests. The rest of the poem demonstrates the unique reality of the situation it portrays, unlike a soft sell image, which must be abstract enough for a broad viewership to identify with it. For example, a 1956 ad for Coca-Cola uses the soft sell. It features two boys lying side by side in the grass, one fully dressed and one in just his shorts, their legs crossed towards each other, the balls of their feet touching (Figure 2.2). Both hold Coke bottles turned upright into their mouths. Its tagline reads "In all this big wide thirsty world...there's nothing like the great taste of Coke!" This message of the singular bonding experience echoes O'Hara's claim that there's nothing like Warren, in all the museums, paintings, and cities of the world. However, while the soft sell of the ad asks us to project our childhood onto it, O'Hara's poem insists on the uniqueness of having a Coke with Warren. Though we can project ourselves onto the second-person "you" of the poem, the "marvellous experience" [*sic*] it references is not just Coke but specifically Coke shared by these two people (between them, like the Personist poem). After the poem's only stanza break, it expounds on the futility of portraiture, for no painted face, no image, can compare to the singular person Warren:

the portrait show seems to have no faces in it at all, just paint
you suddenly wonder why in the world anyone ever did them
I look
at you and I would rather look at you than all the portraits in the world...

and what good does all the research of the Impressionists do them
when they never got the right person to stand near the tree when the sun sank
or for that matter Marino Marini when he didn't pick the rider as carefully
as the horse

it seems they were all cheated of some marvellous experience
which is not going to go wasted on me which is why I'm telling you about it (*CP*
360)

Images are nothing compared to the real, particular, imperfect subject, the poem argues.

"Having a Coke with You" is against the kind of serialized portraits of couples made
happy by Coke; it refuses to have the empty object filled with impersonal sentimentality.

O'Hara plays on marketing to opposite effect. As Coca-Cola could have used the
title "Having a Coke with You" for an ad campaign, so could O'Hara have used a Coca-
Cola campaign for a title. A few years after O'Hara's death, the company adopted the
slogan "The Real Thing," an eerie echo of "To the Poem" and its call for "the real, right
thing." That piece makes clear the desire for the thing to bear the mark of the human
hand, to be itself, and to be "of its own a real right thing." This is what O'Hara does for
the mass-produced object when he paints it as part of his personal experience. There's no
mark of the creator on Coke, but O'Hara's most personal experience suffuses the poem
that he writes about it. He makes things personal so that they are "real, right" – not
abstract but what he might call a "true abstraction."

"An Airplane Whistle (After Heine)," dated exactly 2 weeks after "Having a
Coke with You," personalizes another mass-produced object. According to Gooch,
O'Hara's title refers to "an airplane whistle given him by Vincent Warren from a Cracker
Jack box" (353). As the title suggests by tipping its hat to Heinrich Heine, the poem pits
Romantic lyric poetry against a cheap plastic object. The first line pays homage to
traditional symbols of high verse – iconic flowers and birds—before reversing direction:

“The rose, the lily and the dove got withered / ...in the soot, maybe, of New York” (*CP* 361). The Romantic symbols don’t fare well in the confrontation with modern New York City, whose dirt “withers” the organic. By contrast, the plastic whistle holds up well. The flowers and bird, after they “wither”:

...ceased to be lovable as odd sounds are lovable
say blowing on a little airplane’s slot
which is the color of the back of your knee
a particular sound, fine, light and slightly hoarse (*CP* 361)

The poem makes a plastic trinket the stuff of love poems. It certainly argues against Barthes on this point, who contends of plastic, “In the hierarchy of the major poetic substances, it figures as a disgraced material...what reveals it for what it is is the sound it gives, at once hollow and flat” (98). When transformed into a whistle, O’Hara would contend, its sound is “particular” and “fine”; when transformed into a symbol of the beloved, it rise from its disgrace “in the hierarchy of the major poetic substances.” Between two subjects who know the color of the backs of the other’s knee, it becomes unique and personal. The brief lyric does not do what the best advertising would do for Cracker Jack: reify love into an easily accessible prize. Such a campaign would promise, “Love in every box! Conveniently contained in a tangible object!” O’Hara’s poem undermines such empty slogans by transforming the modern mass-produced object into something intensely personal, a symbol of the absent lover, itself human, with knees and a voice.²⁹ Even such trivial objects come to life when placed between people. It is as if doing so gives them an aura, that abstract, ineffable something extra that, paradoxically, makes the thing more real.

²⁹ The poem undermines advertising and, to some extent, it also undermines the rhetoric of lyric. By being a love poem about a Cracker Jack toy, it fairly mocks the innumerable songs about love and birds and flowers for being unimaginative and alike.

When disconnected from people, modern goods become dark, negative presences. As its title suggests, “Trying to Figure Out What You Feel” (1960) laments a sense of distance from Warren, and its fifth and final section tries to “unmodernize” highly marketed goods: “a lot of sweat / went into the invention of lipstick / but it was Egyptian not American // as for the tire I never / even liked the wheel” (*CP* 363). In more optimistic love poems to Warren, O’Hara inverts advertising rhetoric to make things personal. In this one, though, he takes care to distance lipstick from America, remind us of its labor cost, and make ancient an essential part of the burgeoning auto industry, the tire, just “the wheel.” He concludes: “it is not / cosy being in love with you / and we are not together” (*ibid*). Without two people to be between, these things are foreign and distasteful.

Written five years later, “Cheyenne” (1965) paints a bleak portrait of brand names and abstraction. After the dissolution of his relationship with Warren, O’Hara’s poems rarely include brand-name products, but these objects return with unprecedented frequency in “Cheyenne,” nearly the last poem in O’Hara’s chronologically arranged *Collected Poems*. “I’ve always loved the good things in life: good art / good food, good coffee,” it begins, but brand names begin to pop up in the wake of these vaguely “good things:”

Listen, Jelly-Belly. Back down a little, will you?

We’re looking at the most advanced apparatus ever recalled.
It’s called a Dixie Cup. I love you. The Tootsie-Roll wrapper
drifts up onto the window ledge
 ready to jump, inflamed
by all the banalities of positive experientialism
diabolical suggestion
that we should all go, go out, so abstract
 so it’s beautiful,

is it? yeah it's about as beautiful as Hiroshima and
Harlem... (CP 489)

The speaker feels confronted by the vacuous modern object, ridiculously asking a Jelly Belly jellybean to give him some space. Still, the brand name product is tied up with love. Wedged directly between the “Dixie Cup” and a “Tootsie-Roll wrapper” is the poet’s declaration of love, as if to contrast the emptiness of these ridiculous modern contrivances with the sentiment of raw human emotion. The Tootsie-Roll wrapper itself is suicidal about his position: even the wrapper is “inflamed” by the “diabolical suggestion / that we should all go, go out so abstract.” The speaker agrees, likening submission to abstraction to Hiroshima.

The poem grows increasingly riddled with violence and filth. “Hiroshima” is followed a few lines later with:

one murder
and one suicide in one week
is a great score for the Yankees

I'll skin you alive for this
I'm sure you would
if you don't see me tomorrow don't be surprised I'm doing
the prairie dog bit
it's called the Dixie Cup
don't shit in it
what's that chef doing going down that manhole (CP 490)

One of the last lines O'Hara ever wrote depicts one of the city's artisans, a chef, “doing the prairie dog bit” himself, escaping the prevalence of death and marketing in the city above by going down a manhole. The scatological reference to the improper use of a Dixie Cup leads us to read the chef's descent as going into the “bowels” of the city

(especially if we read “manhole” in this context as a sexual double-entendre).³⁰ At any rate, the figure heeds the poem’s warning to not “go out so abstract” and instead escapes instead to some sort of personal interiority.

Darkly or lightly, O’Hara plays on the rhetoric of advertising in order to demand the personal. His out-of-love poems escape these ridiculous, flat objects. His love poems, on the other hand, fill products and the soft sell with a singular experience – love – and invite objects into that experience, thus saving them from their empty existence as indistinguishable, mass-produced objects. I see a drive similar to the latter approach in his art writing about Pop, a genre that plays on advertising and modern consumption. The next section shifts from the objects of O’Hara’s own poetry to the portrayal of them in visual art.

O’Hara’s Art Writing on the Pop Object: Warhol vs. Oldenburg³¹

O’Hara is known for his early support of Abstract Expressionism and for his resistance to Pop. In the early 1960s, it seems O’Hara felt he had to pick sides, and he chose Abstract Expressionism.³² In 1962, he wrote to John Ashbery, “Around here, the Abstract-Expressionism New-Realism situation is pretty ‘Thou are either for me or agin

³⁰ Though outside the scope of this chapter now, it is worth noting that O’Hara’s poems often give objects bodies that are queer, as in this instance and the mention of Lucky Pierre in “Personism.” In this sense, they are even more personal because they are connected with the poet’s (then-still-illicit) homosexuality.

³¹ Since its appearance, critics have dismissed O’Hara’s art writing (see Greenberg and Fried). Recently, Lytle Shaw had made a compelling case for its relevancy (151-188).

³² Gooch brings this schism to life in his retelling of the party following the “New Realists” premiere, where De Kooning and Rivers were asked to leave, prompting De Kooning to scream at Warhol, “You’re a killer of art, you’re a killer of beauty, and you’re even a killer of laughter. I can’t bear your work!” (393).

me” (qtd. in Gooch 394).³³ Of the seminal “New Realists” show at the Janis Gallery in October 1962, O’Hara wrote to Joan Mitchell, “most of it is boring and crappy” (Gooch 394). Shaw is right to note that “[m]ost of O’Hara’s critical energies in the 1960s went into the large work of consolidating and critically constructing a version of the accomplishments of abstract expressionism” (217).³⁴ In 1963, O’Hara toured with a retrospective of Franz Kline, in 1965 with one of Robert Motherwell, and was planning ones of de Kooning and Pollock at the MoMA when he died.³⁵

That said, O’Hara did respond more positively to one branch of Pop than he did others: its sculpture. O’Hara’s *Art Chronicle* review of the “New Realists” show reveals his opposite responses to Pop painting and Pop sculpture. In it, he first eulogizes Yves Klein, “a genius in the old-fashioned sense of the word” whose “work has an intellectual lucidity, a personal face-to-faceness and a sensuality which is nowhere else apparent in the new realists” (SS 146-7). Besides Klein, O’Hara has good things to say about

³³ In its early days, the movement now referred to as Pop went by a number of monikers, “New Realism” among them (as well as the more derogatory “New Vulgarians”).

³⁴ In his review of Oldenburg’s 1963 show at the Green Gallery, for example, O’Hara praises “Oldenburg’s...satiric employment of ‘delicious’ abstract paint-techniques to render delicious desserts and snacks” (SS 142). Here, he aligns with Abstract Expressionism an artist who showed early work in the Judson Gallery, a space founded explicitly as “a public venue for the new urban and quotidian art working to counter the hegemony of Abstract Expressionism” (Shannon 136). Still, what O’Hara calls “delicious” about Oldenburg’s painting – the messy brushstroke that preserves the “hand of the artist” in the art object – demonstrates that the things that he admires in Oldenburg are many of the same things for which he championed Abstract Expressionism. Like O’Hara, Oldenburg held artists such as Pollock in high esteem, even as he pursued an alternative path (see *Store Days* 13).

³⁵ O’Hara did support artists on the fringes of Pop such as Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns and he eventually included Pop artists (Lichtenstein, Oldenburg, Brainard) in MoMA shows he curated. He even came around to Warhol by 1965, calling him a “marvelous provocateur” and “a terribly serious artist rather than an agent to make everything lively” (SS 19-20). But his allegiance was with Abstract Expressionism.

Tinguely, Oldenburg, Dine, Segal, Rosenquist, and Raysse.³⁶ All but Rosenquist are sculptors.³⁷ He singles out Warhol by name for critique, although the show also included two-dimensional work by Oyvind Fahlstrom, Roy Lichtenstein, Wayne Thiebaud, Robert Indiana, and Tom Wesselman. “An American ‘new realist’ like Andy Warhol loses the point of his new medium,” he says, “by not inviting the viewer into its space.” By contrast, Raysse’s pieces “are to be inhabited and played with” (148).³⁸ To O’Hara, successful Pop art invites him *in*, which distinguishes it from the reproduced, flat image. It possesses that “personal face-to-faceness.” You can’t expect such a personal invitation from an artist whose motto is, “I think everybody should be a machine” and explains, “The reason I’m painting this way is that I want to be a machine” (Swenson).³⁹ Some critics contend that O’Hara’s anti-Warhol stance was an unprofessional issue of clashing

³⁶ Shaw argues that O’Hara admired Pop artists primarily in their relation to Abstract-Expressionists, as a way of ensuring the legacy of the latter. His review of the “New Realists” show proves Shaw’s point. To O’Hara, “the best works were those in which the connection between the originator of the idea, the off-shooter and the new-realizer were most clear... Oldenburg (Gaudi and Miró through Pollock), Dine (Barnett Newman through Jasper Johns and Bob Rauschenberg), Segal (Giacometti through Larry Rivers’ sculptures of the late 50s), Rosenquist (Magritte through Motherwell)” (SS 147).

³⁷ Rosenquist, a former billboard artist, incorporates the consumer object often and in large scale in his paintings. Perhaps O’Hara approves of his work, despite its two-dimensionality, because Rosenquist at least hand-paints and breaks his images of mass-produced goods into incongruous fragments.

³⁸ Ashbery, on the other hand, who wrote the introduction to the catalogue for the show, is better able to see its sculptors and its painters as more or less after the same goal, and that none are about playing on beaches and making friends. Pop, he says, “makes use of the qualities of manufactured objects” to “come to grips with the emptiness of industrialized modern life.”

³⁹ However, O’Hara’s discrimination is especially baffling because one of Warhol’s paintings in the Janis show was “Do It Yourself” (a paint by numbers canvas), a decidedly “playful” piece that foremost asks for the viewer’s interaction. O’Hara’s negative review, I think, comes from this piece’s reproducibility – it could come off an assembly line (exactly Warhol’s – and his Factory’s – point) and in that sense is “cold” and not “face-to-face.”

personalities, but I'd argue that it had more to do with the flatness of Warhol's medium (in both space and affect).⁴⁰

Pop sculpture, by contrast, produces a three-dimensional art object and thus works against the loss of substance and personality that Warhol's work sometimes glorifies. Sculpture is Personist, one might say, since it puts a thing between people. Warhol's silkscreens, two-dimensional reproductions, are closer to advertising. O'Hara's art writing reflects the extent to which he resisted the impersonal rhetoric of consumption and advertising, and the invasion of that rhetoric in the art world. He wanted artists to critique this rhetoric, not mirror it, as evidenced by his response in *Ingenue*, where he called Pop "not a reaction, necessarily, but at best a response to what we see in America around us, both on billboards, on theatre marquees, in newspapers and on TV" and criticized it for giving "the artist's interpretation of what we all see in daily life rather than the non-objective artist's interpretation of what he feels about daily life" (*What's With Modern Art?* 29). O'Hara was quicker to appreciate work that directly commented on the proliferation of consumption (work that "felt" something about it) than work that operated from within a late-capitalist lexicon (work that merely "saw" it).

This contrast becomes clear when one compares O'Hara's early negative reaction to Warhol and his positive one to Claes Oldenburg. Joshua Shannon, in his interpretation of Oldenburg's 1961 installation, *The Street*, explains the thrust of the kind of work that O'Hara supports when he locates Oldenburg's work as:

⁴⁰ Reva Wolf argues that because "OHara did have positive things to say about other pop artists," "[h]is dislike of Warhol...cannot be attributed solely to Warhol's seemingly anti-expressionist methods, but operated on a personal level" (18). Gooch cites Warhol's acquaintance with Freddy Herko (a roommate of Vincent Warren's), Warhol's blasé reaction to Herko's death, and O'Hara's opinion that Warhol's house was "chi chi" and his sexuality "sissified" (396-8).

part of a broader artistic negation (prominent in the work of other ‘Neo-Dada’ artists such as Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg) of a material environment apparently becoming ever more abstract. It responded to the growth of an ordered, negotiable, and legible system of exchange, which seemed more and more to be trumping the world of material particularities. (157)

O’Hara admired all the artists that Shannon mentions here, and they all work in three-dimensions. Perhaps, these artists are on the fringes of Pop because dimensionality negates the legibility of an environment abstracted into surfaces. Oldenburg’s 1962 *The Store* exemplifies such negation, and O’Hara deemed it “the best thing since L. L. BEAN” (SS 133).⁴¹ Oldenburg installed the piece in a rented storefront-cum-studio at 107 E. 2nd Street, and filled it with sculptures of “goods,” “a wrist-watch, a piece of pie, hats, caps, pants, skirts flags, 7up, shoeshine, etc. etc., all violent and simple in form and color, just as they are” (SD 26) (Figure 2.3). Like Warhol’s paintings of goods, *The Store* deals directly with the capitalist object and its consumption. However, where Warhol’s work is somewhat more sleek and polished (and more closely presents objects “in form and color, just as they are”), Oldenburg’s is rough and sloppy. To craft the pieces, Oldenburg soaked muslin in plaster, hung it over a rough wire frame, then painted the dried muslin with coats of dripping color enamel (Figure 2.4). Warhol’s work could go on a billboard; Oldenburg’s objects are defiantly “art” objects. The objects’ ugliness reminds us that they are art, not retail “goods.”⁴² *The Store* works against the capitalistic “ordered, negotiable,

⁴¹ Shannon’s analysis of *The Street* as anti-abstraction works well for *The Store*, too, but in a way that is more focused on the *city* than *objects*. As Oldenburg himself puts it: “The Store is like the Street and environmental (as well as a thematic) form. In a way they are the same thing because some streets or squares (like TSq) are just large open stores (windows, signs, etc.). In *The Store* the concentration upon objects is more intense” (*Store Days* 27).

⁴² To O’Hara, ugliness was bound up with art. In “American Art and Non-American art, he explains why “[t]here is more for the artist to do [in America]” because “there is more sheer ugliness in America than you can shake a stick at. And it is the characteristic of the avant-garde to absorb and transform disparate qualities not normally associated with art, for the artist to take within him the violence and evil of his times and come out with something” (SS 98).

and legible system of exchange that erases particularities” by disordering it with one-of-a-kind pieces (Shannon). Warhol reproduces images in a way that seem to comply with order and legibility at the cost of particularity: the adjective changes on a soup can, the Coke bottles are filled to different levels, but they’re emphatically similar otherwise.⁴³ Even when Warhol works in three dimensions, as in *Brillo Box*, for example, he fails to rock this too-legible system; the particularity of Oldenburg’s objects, by contrast, O’Hara finds “magical and strange” (SS 131).

In short, Oldenburg provides presence and personality where Warhol does not. O’Hara makes Oldenburg representative of a “big, brave art happening” in America “which makes Paris and Rome seem quite dull and insensitive by comparison”: “the construction-of-esthetic-objects movement” (SS 130). (Note O’Hara’s use of the word “construction” rather than “reproduction.”) The movement, he thinks, imbues the art object with a tenderness and nostalgia for the everyday object. It connects the artwork with its artist in a way that Warhol’s Factory line does not. It “deliberately vies with the fondness one feels for a found object, challenging in intimacy as well as structure all the autobiographical associations that a found object embodies” (ibid). In *The Store*, O’Hara says, Oldenburg “transforms his materials into something magical and strange. If Red Grooms was the poet of this tendency and Jim Dine is the realist, then Oldenburg is the magician” (SS 131). When asked in a 1965 interview why he thinks Warhol “has

⁴³ Oldenburg also made some anti-consumerist claims for his project; Warhol, less so. In *Documents from The Store*, he admits, “This country is all bourgeois down to the last deathtail [*sic*]. The enemy is bourgeois culture” (Harrison and Wood 744). The aims of Warhol’s Factory (which O’Hara found “chi chi”) are more open to interpretation. While many critics read O’Hara as apolitical, I read a political commentary in his verse that is closer to Oldenburg’s than it is to Warhol’s. While O’Hara is certainly not anti-bourgeois (editions of Verlaine and museums being his stock in trade), he supports the kind of gritty particularity for which Oldenburg’s art advocates.

acquired...[a] kind of magic,” O’Hara can only stumblingly answer, “He knows *exactly* *what not* to do...and how diffidently to do it for the right moment in the cultural history of, you know, of a certain city.” He goes on to discuss the impact of “the serious paintings” (“the civil rights pictures,” “The Kennedy things”) but is at a loss when he comes to “The Brillo boxes. It’s something...I don’t know how it happened. I mean, I don’t know why, in a way” (ibid). O’Hara supports art that returns an aura to objects but not the reproduction of objects without that aesthetic particularity.

Filling the space of the gallery with three-dimensional objects makes O’Hara more cognizant of his presence as a subject. Of David Smith’s work, he writes, “It is the nature of sculpture to be there. If you don’t like it you wish it would get out of the way, because it occupies space which your body could occupy” (*What’s with Modern Art?* 27). With his oversized soft food sculptures, “Oldenburg makes one feel almost hysterically present, alert, summoned to the party” (*SS* 142). Sculpture, for O’Hara, makes him realize his position as a subject. When things come between us, they engage us and alert us to our own presence.

O’Hara appreciated his city’s concrete particularity for similar reasons. In “Walking” (1964), he writes:

the country is no good for us
there’s nothing
to bump into
or fall apart glassily
there’s not enough
poured concrete
and brassy
reflections
the wind now takes me to
The Narrows
and I see it rising there
New York

greater than the Rocky Mountains (*CP* 476-7)

Although it may seem that O’Hara is praising the very materials that symbolize the impersonal abstraction of New York’s modernist renewal—glass, concrete, and brass—he is also praising those things as objects “to bump into” or in which to see your own reflection. Concrete, here, is less like the faceless skyscrapers of International Modernism than it is like one of Oldenburg’s impossible monuments, huge blocks of concrete placed in the middle of intersections (*Proposed Monument for the Intersection of Canal Street and Broadway: Block of Concrete Inscribed with the Names of War Heroes*, 1965). Such monuments, ones that make one take note of the city, are “greater than the Rocky Mountains,” because through them, the city pushes back against the subject with its concrete otherness, forcing self-recognition in a way that a natural landscape cannot.⁴⁴ O’Hara’s support for things “to bump into” (in the cityscape as in the gallery) accords with his desire to resist a “material environment apparently becoming ever more abstract” (Shannon 157).⁴⁵ The city, when it strikes you or “fall[s] apart glassily,” provides material to combat the abstractions of economy and industry, if perhaps to a lesser extent than Oldenburg’s sculpted “goods” do.

O’Hara uses the personal to confront abstraction in poetry, advertising, and art. He fills the vacuousness of Coca-Cola or a Cracker Jack toy with the presence of his lover because these things no longer bear any imprint of the hand that produced them. He

⁴⁴ In this reference, O’Hara echoes Harold Rosenberg’s “Pop Culture: Kitsch Criticism,” which O’Hara surely read, in which Rosenberg argues, “kitsch has that arbitrariness and importance which works take on when they are no longer noticeable elements of the environment. In America, kitsch is nature. The Rocky Mountains have resembled fake art for a century” (264-5). To Rosenberg, nature is kitsch & unremarkable, as epitomized by the Rockies. O’Hara reiterates the point in verse.

⁴⁵ After O’Hara’s death, the New York avant-garde would push abstraction to its limits with conceptual art.

defies what Ginsberg calls “abstract poetry” because it is too removed from its maker, but he supports Abstract Expressionism because it connects the paint to the painter’s hand via the brushstroke. He is for sculpture that reminds us of its craftsman rather than its anonymous reproducibility, and for sculpture that connects with the viewer by reminding him of his body’s occupation of space. He is for art with personal presence.

Celebrity: the Abstracted Subject

We have seen O’Hara personalize (or, more rarely, eschew) objects that mass-production and advertising have rendered abstract; he responds similarly to subjects that mass-media have rendered flat. He makes mass-produced consumables like Coke, Cracker Jacks, and Tootsie Rolls the stuff of serious love poetry or, less commonly, tragedy (as in “Cheyenne”), but he responds to celebrity with camp. Celebrity abstracts a person, or as Benjamin phrases it in reference to “the cult of the movie star,” a celebrity is “not the unique aura of the person but the ‘spell of personality,’ the phony spell of commodity” (231). It seems wrong that a famously social coterie poet, who supposedly cares foremost about community and people, would answer this commodification of the subject with frivolity. In fact, his response is not actually as frivolous as it first appears – by calling attention to the ridiculous artifice of celebrity, O’Hara asks us to question it. In her “Notes on Camp,” Sontag distinguishes camp’s distinct ability to highlight artifice:

[T]he Camp sensibility is one that is alive to a double sense in which some things can be taken. But this is not the familiar split-level construction of a literal meaning, on the one hand, and a symbolic meaning, on the other. It is the difference, rather, between the thing as meaning something, anything, and the thing as pure artifice. (16)

In an echo of “true abstraction,” camp forces the question of what “pure artifice” could possibly look like. Its “double vision” can look at the meaning of emptiness, Sontag says, or at the presence of absence. O’Hara plays up (and mimics) the artifice and stylization of pop stars, but his exuberance and distance remind us that these people are fake – that they’re really just abstract concepts, invented personalities – and that modern media is capable of this magic. This double vision treats the victims of this abstraction, celebrities, lovingly and cuttingly, by turns. When it sees “the thing as meaning something,” O’Hara turns tender; when it recognizes it as “pure artifice,” his verse bites. He takes celebrities seriously, but they fluctuate between the real people behind them and the empty images on newspaper covers. The former, he embraces; the latter, he derides.

This is why he comes around to Warhol’s portraits of people but not of products. In his 1965 interview with Edward Lucie-Smith, O’Hara explains that Europeans appreciate Warhol more than Americans because “we have not seen...as many of the serious paintings,” for example, the “Kennedy things” (Figure 2.5) (SS 19). He contends that “the picture of Mrs. Kennedy...the one with the silk screens”, shown in its proper, large scale, is “absolutely moving and beautiful...completely compelling work” (SS 20). The interviewer responds by pointing out Warhol’s “strong streak of feeling for tragic subjects,” adding the Marylins as another example. O’Hara’s response initially seems non-committal and vague:

Yeah. And also his whole idea of making icons, for instance, which is presumably one of the... You know, maybe they’re not real icons, but there’s some sort of almost religious element in them – in his motivation to make them the way they are. (SS 20)

That O’Hara gets hung up on the word “icon” is telling. He reads Warhol’s transformation of celebrities as “serious,” even “religious.” These works are “completely

compelling” because they make their subjects signs and ask the viewer to recognize that mass media does so, too. Perhaps O’Hara corrects himself because a religious icon makes concrete the abstract idea of God or a saint whereas mass media does just the opposite: in its portrait of the modern celebrity, it imagines an abstract fantasy of a real person. O’Hara’s odes to movie stars counter this abstraction by campily ridiculing it and contrasting it with real people.

His poem about Lana Turner, probably the most famous example of his campy reaction to mass media icons, does both. The poem opens with the exclamation, “Lana Turner has collapsed!” and continues with the non sequitur, “I was trotting along and suddenly / it started raining.” The speaker and his friend bicker about the consistency of the precipitation for another six lines before he sees a headline that reminds us, in capital letters, “LANA TURNER HAS COLLAPSED!” Rather than empathize, the speaker responds that even with all this sleet, *he’s* never lost his footing (“I have been to lots of parties / and acted perfectly disgraceful / but I never actually collapsed”) before concluding the poem, “oh Lana Turner we love you get up” (*CP* 449). In the first instance, it is as if the speaker addresses the headline, whereas in the latter, he speaks to Lana Turner herself. In the former, the poem contrasts Turner’s flatness with the speaker’s own three- dimensionality. The external environment pushes against him first with snow, then with traffic. His seemingly throwaway bickering with his friend emphasizes dimensionality, too – the speaker contends that the moisture is not hail because “hailing hits you on the head / hard” – its dimensionality is literally striking. Lana Turner, on the other hand, is collapsed into a headline telling us about her collapse.

The poem's concluding line is a joke, certainly, but there's something loving about asking Turner to "get up" off the ground – but also off the newspaper.

O'Hara's "To the Film Industry in Crisis" (1955) also contrasts celebrity with real people. The poem seems to be an homage to stars who are flattened on the silver screen, but in fact it is one to the audience (*CP* 232-3). In it, the speaker declares that it is not experimental theatre or opera that has his heart, "but you, Motion Picture Industry, / it's you I love!" The poem is an ode to a litany of movie stars punctuated with ecstatic exclamation points. Among many others, the poem unabashedly adores:

the Tarzans, each and every one of you (I cannot bring myself to prefer / Johnny Weissmuller to Lex Barker, I cannot!) ... Marilyn Monroe in her little spike heels reeling... William Powell / in his stunning urbanity, Elizabeth Taylor blossoming... (*CP* 232)

It concludes with an affirmation of cinema's "divine precedent" and an allusion to Byron in its coup de grace: "Roll on, reels of celluloid, as the great earth rolls on!" We can read these lines ironically, certainly, but Laurence Goldstein reminds us to also read them in light of the "crisis" to which the poem's title refers: the marked postwar decline in movie-going. (The proviso is especially relevant to this discussion because that cultural shift was due largely to the advent of television, a media fueled by advertising.) For O'Hara, the movies are about the audience as much as the films.⁴⁶ The campiness with which he lists films and their stars forces us to recognize that this community is one of flickering light and shadows, an abstracted replacement for a disappearing audience. His exaggerated tone points to the ridiculousness of embracing movie stars, since these

⁴⁶ Many of O'Hara's poems about the movies are about the people watching the movies. "In the Movies" (1954) turns its attention to the ushers, as "Ave Maria" (1960) does to the young boys in the audience. In his essay on O'Hara and the cinema, Andrew Epstein is right to distinguish that O'Hara's position is both attracted to and wary of the audience as "simultaneous collective experience," per Benjamin (103). These poems' connection with illicit sexual experiences speaks to this conflict.

celebrities are “pure artifice” and thus intangible. Goldstein conceives O’Hara’s love of the movies as an antidote for “imageless and abstract painting” that allows him to “make the kind of direct, if anonymous, emotional contact he experienced as a lovelorn adolescent” (162). But these contacts are no more than shadows, as abstract as Coke ads and inferior to Abstract Expressionism, which at least bears the trace of its creator in its brushstroke.

Poems such as “Poem [Lana Turner]” and “To the Film Industry in Crisis” adore abstract icons of the screen or headline, but their camp highlights the artifice of those icons. It even, we might say, reveals a nostalgia for the “real, right *person*.” As Lawrence Alloway, curator of the 1963 Guggenheim “Six Painters and the Object,” put it, “mass media figures are relished for their physical grandeur, for their pervasiveness (as in Warhol’s diptych), and for the drama of common intimacy they offer their consumers” (14). O’Hara’s camp recognizes that this intimacy is only a drama, only a performance of real intimacy. In his love poems to Warren, O’Hara personalizes abstract products and ads; his poems about celebrity personalize Hollywood icons by pointing to the real people behind them, or to the audience before them.

Conclusion

O’Hara’s desire to personalize the abstract sign, be it in the form of a brand name, art, or a celebrity, reflects the New York of his era. As New York became increasingly overrun with the signs of advertising and mass-media, post-war urban renewal had similar aims. Shannon notes:

All planning is of course a form of representation, an attempt to get the city to hew to an image of itself. Modernist planning, in particular, however, is

distinguished largely by its abstraction, its drive to make the entire city cohere as a single giant sign. (45)⁴⁷

O'Hara is perhaps best known for working against this drive by making the city personal. While he may have relished in the very skyscrapers that Shannon notes served to abstract the city, his *Lunch Poems* also localize the city, bring it to a human scale, and fill the neighborhoods they create with particular names.

Other, less-known poems speak against the abstraction of renewal in much darker tones. In an echo of "Cheyenne," the first lines of "Seven Nine Seven" (1961) set us in a sterile mirage of New York:

A disgusting sun
trying desperately to look lonely
walks over the asphalt shivering sky
a bottle of bleach
when were you in Times Square
last do you miss it

From there, it's bats, cadavers, oil, and "humping and wheezing" until:

boom city testicles flopping
serving the silence, swooning...
there is no ghost there is no wall there is
no people
a formula for an elegy for a duchess drawn
drawn out
cantering Moses-like through the monument
the snarl is buried
in a field of grain
it is the
profile of a city
exploding against the old dull bed (*CP* 432-3)

The "asphalt" of "Cheyenne" acts as an impersonal plane that only serves to project a shimmering reflection into the intangible sky. There is nothing particular to hold on to in

⁴⁷ Here, Shannon echoes Jane Jacobs' *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, in which she argues that "[a] city cannot be a work of art" because "art is arbitrary, symbolic and abstracted" (485). While Jacobs oversimplifies, her point is valid: a city cannot be the abstract sign that modernist planners idealize.

this city, not even a “ghost,” let alone a “wall” or “people.” The “cantering Moses” in the monument is not the Biblical Moses but Robert Moses, the instigator of the city’s efforts at modernist renewal. The booming, “exploding” city (an allusion to *The Exploding Metropolis*) of urban renewal becomes less grounded, less personal, and even—ironically, in the face of such extensive construction—less materially present. To O’Hara, the ruins of this abstracted, modernist city are “a formula for an elegy.” Such an abstract city leaves little room for inhabitants, making it difficult to personalize. The city is only “the profile of a city,” two-dimensional, and contains “no people.” It even flattens the speaker himself. “I am a mural,” he says, before trying again: “I am / a liver an orator / spook drawing window letters piled / drawing figure sticks.” From living and speaking, the subject disintegrates into a “spook,” a “drawing,” a see-through glass pane, a dimensionless stick figure. He is no more than “letters piled,” signifying nothing, an abstract sign himself in an abstract city.

Whereas Loy uses her art to build a transient, phantom city, O’Hara paints that kind of abstract city as a precautionary dystopia of what the city will become if abstraction consumes it. Some critics place O’Hara in the vanguard of a postmodernism that revels in surfaces; in fact, depth, dimensionality, and the personal are crucial to his work.⁴⁸ As someone who lived for signification in all its forms, O’Hara took seriously

⁴⁸ With the turn of the twenty-first century, critics moved toward theorizing O’Hara, many of them with the goal of ensuring his legacy as a progenitor of postmodernism. Watkin (2001), Smith (2000), and even Bennett (2003) all do so through various post-structural frameworks. Watkin emphasizes O’Hara’s as a poet “post-” nearly everything (see p. 139, for instance) and highlights O’Hara’s preference for metonym and the aleatory. Smith calls on Bhabha, Butler, de Certeau, Derrida, Foucault, Guattari, Harvey, Hutcheon, Jameson, Sedgwick, and Sontag to demonstrate O’Hara as “a forerunner of postmodernism.” Though she doesn’t invoke Hayles or Harraway, she applies the model of the hyperscape to argue that O’Hara’s poetry unsettles the city “into a postmodern landscape” (1). Bennett’s argues that O’Hara’s “‘ar(t)chitextural’ interrelationship” with postmodern building and “the fragmented aesthetics of modern and abstract expressionist art” implicate him in New York’s “deconstruction” (100, 105).

the impact that modern marketing and media had on it – they undermine “real, right things” and people. His various responses, diverse as they are, all answer abstraction with a plea for the personal. Brand-name, everyday objects become as personal as a lover. He demands of Pop an object in space that can be “between two people.” His jocular camp asks us to see the emptiness of the icons of celebrity. “Personism” may be a mock manifesto, but perhaps “Personalism” would not be.



Figure 2.1 “Be Really Refreshed...Drive-in for Coke!” (1959)



Figure 2.2 “There’s nothing like that great taste of Coke!” (1959)



Figure 2.3 Claes Oldenburg's *The Store* (1962)



Figure 2.4 Oldenberg's *Mannikin Torso: Two-Piece Bathing Suit* (1960). Plaster soaked muslin over wire frame, painted with tempera. Raymond and Patsy Nasher Collection, Dallas, Texas. An example of one of the "goods" offered in *The Store*.



Figure 2.5 Warhol's *Jackie (16 Jackies)* (1964). Acrylic, enamel on canvas. Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. An example of what O'Hara considered Warhol's "serious paintings...the civil rights pictures, the Kennedy things."

Chapter 3

Experimental Subjectivity and the Immaterial in Bernadette Mayer's *Memory*

In July of 1971, from her loft on 4th Street and Avenue A, Bernadette Mayer embarks on *Memory*, a hybrid language-visual project. She captures quotidian events by shooting a roll of film (36 exposures) every day of the month; later, she accompanies the resulting 1,116 images with blocks of prose poetry that include little punctuation and no paragraphs. Only headers indicating the day (“July 1”) break up the text, which runs 195 pages. The style is dense and paratactic. Peeking through the poem are glimpses of the photographs on which it is loosely based, but the text expands and diverges from the project’s visual component. For example, the first photograph of the project shows a sink full of laundry (Figure 3.1). The accompanying text begins:

July 1

& the main thing is we begin with a white sink a whole new language is a temptation. Men on the wall in postures please take your foot by your hand & think that this is pictures, picture book & letters to everyone dash you tell what the story is once once when they were nearly ready thursday july first was a thursday: back windows across street I’m in sun out image windows & so on riverdale, did you know that, concentrated dash was all there was mind nothing sink...with my white pants in it. I dont [sic] remember this dont remember thinking one on one white & whiter the word pictures, sing on the wall in pictures did you get it right (7)

Text and image cooperate: the accompanying image grounds the difficult text, and the text clarifies the image (we note that the laundry is, in fact, Mayer’s “white pants”).

Opening with the symbol of white pants in a white sink – white on white – nods to this overlap, and foreshadows the complex interaction of language and photography that

Memory confronts. Mayer writes that she doesn't "remember thinking one on one white & whiter."

In the first steps of creating *Memory*, she may not have planned this effacement, but it emerges across the project. In hindsight, she says, this obscuring blurring leads to "the word pictures" and pictures that "sing on the wall." In this line, she depicts the way that language and images connect: language can be images (the word "pictures" is a itself a series of lines and curves), and images have a language (those singing pictures have a voice). Thus from the poem's first lines, Mayer teaches us to read for the literary and the visual to blend and melt into each other, like snowflakes on snow, white on white.

Memory is about this blending and melting, not only of text and image but also of immaterial and material, and subjective and objective. The opening image of white on white functions as a symbol for *Memory* as a whole: what begins as an experiment in accumulating material ends up foregrounding its erasure. No matter how much white one piles on white, that is, a blank results.

This chapter will demonstrate that while *Memory* professes to be an objective accumulation of material, the project actually lies in the shadows of that goal – subjectivity and the immaterial suffuse it. This re-reading of *Memory* is important for a number of reasons, perhaps foremost because it locates Mayer at the complicated crux of a debate crucial to the 1970s avant-garde—dematerialization—a debated that literary and visual avant-gardes handled in paradoxically different ways. By locating the photograph as a crucial part of Mayer's response to objectivity and objects, my argument shows that although Mayer bases her project on the accumulation of art objects, she ultimately loses faith in them. While this loss of faith aligns her with the more conceptual, dematerialized

art of the era, my re-reading also shows that, unlike conceptual art, Mayer's writing has always been subjective and affective. If Mayer loses faith in the material art object then she also loses faith in the word as a material thing – and in literature, unlike art, this paradigm shift allows for more subjectivity and affect, not less. Whereas most fellow experimental writers and critics read only Mayer's later work as subjective and emotional, these qualities also define earlier work such as *Memory*. Recognizing this allows us to see that experimental writing, in general, can indeed have such qualities.⁴⁹ Finally, reading *Memory* as a point when Mayer invests in subjectivity and the immaterial demonstrates how such commitments affect one's experience of space. As *Memory* moves into the mind and away from the material world, it becomes less concretely located. This writing has less at stake in its urban setting than that of authors such as Loy and O'Hara, and that geographic indeterminacy – in addition to the interiority and conceptualism of her work – makes Mayer a bellwether for and a key influence on experimental poetry to this day.

Today, *Memory* survives largely as unadorned blocks of text, but it began as a gallery installation full of objects. In February, 1972, Mayer presented the 1,116

⁴⁹ In a 1999 interview with Ken Jordan, Mayer locates the moment that others saw her as “a failed experimentalist” as happening after the publication of *Memory* and *Studying Hunger*. Jordan asks, “Did you make a deliberate decision [after *Studying Hunger*] to try and write a poem in which one speaks about one's emotions in a more conventional sense?” Mayer answers: “Yeah...I was very interested in the idea that such a thing as clarity could exist in a poem, and that maybe at that point in time I was capable of creating some clarity in my work. {laughs} When I was writing these poems was when I was called a failed experimentalist by...I'm not going to tell you who! But that hit me kind of hard....” (6).

If we recognize Mayer's earlier work as affective and subjective, then we also must look for other reasons that some now dismiss Mayer as “traditional.” For if her work has always been affective, then the change that some critique must lie elsewhere. Though outside the purview of this chapter, I'm inclined to argue that Mayer has been deemed “a failed experimentalist” not because her form became “more conventional,” nor because she began to write about “one's emotions,” but rather because her subject matter – domestic life and motherhood – seems to some an unsuitable one for experimental poetry.

photographs that she had shot during the month-long project in SoHo's Holly Solomon Gallery. She hung the 3"x5" images chronologically in thirteen horizontal rows, vertical edges touching. A 7-hour recording of Mayer's oral narration of the images looped in the background. In 1975, North Atlantic Books published a print version of *Memory*. The text is a slightly extended version of the recorded account that played in the gallery during the installation, but the book includes no photographs (save for the eight that appear on the volume's cover). The printed version does away with the over 1,000 things around which the project originally revolved.⁵⁰ Instead, it offers modern readers what is essentially 195 pages of memoir, however it may experiment with the genre of memoir.

That the published version doesn't include the project's surplus of images is in keeping with experimental art of the era, which sought to eschew the aesthetic object; more striking, however, is that the *text*, too, eschews materiality, which is *not* in keeping with the experimental *writing* of the era. While "dematerializing art" is a familiar concept, it is important to define exactly what it means for "words to be material" in order to trace Mayer's aesthetics.⁵¹ By contrast to art of the late 1960s, which sought "the dematerialization of art," Lytle Shaw notes that experimental "poetry from the same period... announces itself inversely as *the materialization of language*" (156).

"Materialized" poetry interrogates accepted notions of subjectivity and lyric (especially those birthed by the Confessional movement). It defamiliarizes the distance between signifier and signified by calling attention to words as "things" – a series of lines and

⁵⁰ I call photographs "things" here rather than "artifacts" or "objects" to reference Bill Brown's use of the term, which suggests that a thing holds an ineffable something *beyond* the mere object, especially in its relation to us: "the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation" (4). As the section "July 20: XX" will demonstrate, the subjective encounter with the photograph is crucial to *Memory*.

⁵¹ See Lucy Lippard's *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966-1972*.

curves (as Saroyan does in the example of the preceding paragraph), sound waves, or objects with which “to cover a page.”⁵²

Before *Memory*, Mayer co-founded and -edited *0 To 9*, a publication that certainly “wanted words to be material” (Acconci *Complete* 7). That is, many of the poets whom Mayer and her co-editor, Vito Acconci, chose to publish used letters and words more as marks on a page than gateways to meaning.⁵³ For example, Aram Saroyan’s untitled contribution to Issue 3 bisects a spread of pages horizontally with a repeated small letter “i”; he echoes this poem with another in which he bisects two facing pages horizontally with a line. The formal similarity begs the reader to consider the difference between “i” and an artist’s line. On the one hand, the pieces comment on the material property of words. They suggest that we might read the letter “i” graphically, since it is so similar to a line when defamiliarized from language. On the other, they rebuke assumptions of poetic subjectivity. Saroyan compares the “i” to perhaps the simplest component at an artist’s disposal, the line. Since the “line” poem comes after the “i” poem, we could also read these pieces narratively as the line striking out or placing under erasure the subject “i.” Poems across the six issues of *0 To 9* echo Saroyan’s message of “wanting words to be material.” In them, words are shapes, not signifiers.

Though seemingly headed in opposite directions, both “materialized poetry” and “dematerialized art” were after the same end: a critique of consumption. By doing away

⁵² See Craig Dworkin’s anthology of Acconci’s writings (*Language to Cover a Page*).

⁵³ Mayer’s editorial work made a point of providing a site for alternative aesthetics. She rejects work by Ted Berrigan or Ron Padgett (poets of the so-called Second Generation New York School). “Ted and Ron would do these collaborations and send them to *0 To 9* and we would never publish them,” she recalls. “I had this incredible resistance to any New York writing. I really didn’t want to be influenced by it” (Jarnot 6). Mayer cites experimental musician John Cage, for one, as more influential “than any of the writing” (Jarnot 7).

with the material art object, conceptual artists eschew the gallery economy: in short, if there's nothing to show then there's nothing to sell. In poetry, this stance against easy "consumption" is one against "easily consumable" poems – poems that present themselves "as unmediated tokens of interiority" composed of words that we read as pure and perfect signs (157). This is the kind of poetry that magazines such as *0 To 9* were after, as *This* and *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* would be later.

Interesting, then, that just a few years after the final issue of *0 To 9*, Mayer embarks on a project that relies heavily on art objects, photographs, and uses words not materially but rather to share a most subjective experience, memory. Many read *Memory* as a landmark in avant-garde literature. When it comes down to it, though, *Memory* works against its contemporary literary avant-garde: it draws out the subjective and the immaterial and thus moves opposite poets who want words to be impersonal material. Though it sets out against the visual avant-garde of its era, *Memory* ends up complicit with it, since it is failed by its initial dependence upon material objects, photographs. After expanding on Mayer's complicated and fluctuating interaction with materiality in her earliest work, I'll turn to three key moments in *Memory* that pitch the project away from material objectivity, and towards the immaterial and the subject: the double-exposed photographs of July 20, the book's framing texts, and the ghostly presence of the World Trade Center in the July 4th entry.

Mayer's Move Away from "Material" Writing and Conceptual Art

As a young poet (Mayer co-founded *0 To 9* in 1967, when she was only 19), Mayer treated words and letters materially. For her, words were aesthetic objects, since

she claims to have seen language synaesthetically, in colors. Of her early writing, Mayer says:

[A]t that point in time I was just studying language...as if it were that the letters were objects, and I was beginning to realize that I saw each letter as a particular color, with consistent colors for every letter of the alphabet, and that I had always done this...I came to realize that I had been doing this since I was a child, but I never thought everybody didn't do this. (Jordan 6)

Mayer's synaesthesia led her to see "each word [as] a particular vision in terms of its shapes and colors" (ibid).⁵⁴ Mayer constructed works around the shape of letters, using mainly words with skinny letters ("i" "l" "t"), for example, or round ones ("u" "c" "o"). In her widely circulated "Experiments," she suggests that other writers consider words as objects. "Construct a poem as if the words were three-dimensional objects to be handled in space," she offers. "Consider word and letter as forms – the concretistic distortion of a text, a multiplicity of o's or ea's, or a pleasing visual arrangement: 'the mill pond of chill doubt'" (Andrews & Bernstein 18). One of her first published poems, "Counterhatch," teaches us to read its lines visually from the beginning, with its title. Not only does it appropriate a term from the visual arts, it also reminds us to read the work "against the grain," that is, with fresh eyes that might consider words not simply as we're accustomed to (as signifiers) but also as objects themselves. Such reminders run throughout the poem in an alternating chorus of "end red," "end purple," "end light green," "end grey," and "end brown" (*Complete* 2.13-14). As each color "ends," we imagine the block of text before it tinted in that color. Especially for readers who are aware of Mayer's synaesthesia, the chorus thus paints the poem in different color blocks, making it a textual Rothko.

⁵⁴ Her 1996 collection of stories, *Proper Name*, opens with a key to the colors that she associates with every letter ("a red / b pink / c tan" and so on).

By the final issue of *0 To 9*, words become more than objects for Mayer. The magazine's last installment, a special edition called *Street Works*, asked its contributors to create conceptual pieces to be performed in a small portion of the Lower East Side. Some contributors submitted photographs documenting their work, or reprinted instructions, or offered accounts from participants – the usual sorts of remnants that never really add up to a Happening. For her part, Mayer filled an 8"x11" sheet with directions handwritten as small as possible (Figure 3.2). One might still regard the piece as one that treats words as elements of design, since at arm's length they're more lines on a page than discernible words. Still, this time there's a crucial twist: now Mayer uses words not only as elements of design but also to communicate. Whereas "Counterhatch" lacks syntax, punctuation, and a speaking subject,⁵⁵ Mayer's contribution to *Street Works* uses hundreds of imperative commands: "go into every store once," "replace a building with a lifesize photograph," "take over construction sites for 24 hours," and so on. The emphasis on commands suggests that language has the potential to communicate, and even to cause action. The words may still "paint" the page but they also acknowledge multiple subjects in the speaker, addressee, and reader, and allow that words point beyond themselves.

Mayer's affiliations with those involved in the visual arts also changed in the early 1970s, in a way that moves her against the avant-garde current and toward the *materialization* of art. Most notably, she broke professional ties with Vito Acconci.⁵⁶ As

⁵⁵ An exemplary passage from Counterhatch: "end red / enter racial (absorb): where are elements – man (to raise) effervescent // Detroit in nothing the hall of fantasy exclude. // Why not (plumber excretion denude) and so forth to alternate / average, / average in tomb / two spaces, told spaces / deny again sold. // Question in pleat, the unanimous fold now in rite then bell-execute." (*Complete 0 To 9*, Issue 2: 13).

⁵⁶ She broke with Acconci aesthetically, at least. As he was also her brother-in-law, she remained personally connected with him.

early as *Following Piece*, Acconci's contribution to the *Street Works* issue, Mayer began to distance herself from his work. As his work moved further from the page, with pieces such as *Broadjump* and the infamous *Seedbed*, Mayer increased her distance (Shaw 155).⁵⁷ Around this time, Mayer begins an intense romantic relationship and cohabitation with filmmaker Ed Bowes, who unlike Acconci, creates art through thorough documentation. Throughout *Memory*, Mayer describes Bowes recording sounds at various locations in the city and capturing life on an 8 mm camera. *Memory* is a similar quest to document through feverish accrual. Unlike much conceptual art, which is meant to be ephemeral and only survives because of various artifacts of the event (the testimony, the photograph, the recording, the script), *Memory* is based on documentation. Even its 1,116 photographs are not enough; audio and text must back them up.

Mayer works against both avant-gardes when she begins *Memory*; she ends it, however, complicit with just the dematerializing avant-garde of the visual arts. She begins to swim against the avant-garde currents when she decides to rely on art objects and to no longer treat words as objects. In the end, she pursues the immaterial in both art and writing. Ultimately, she comes around to her artist peers, since her material fails to adequately document her experience. The project does not alter her stance on words, however. If anything, *Memory* solidifies her use of words not as objects but as tools to convey subjective, immaterial experience.

⁵⁷ This may be due in part to the misogyny of these pieces. In *Broadjump*, the participant who can jump the farthest "wins" one of Acconci's lovers. In *Seedbed*, Acconci masturbates hidden under a ramp, where he narrates his activity to the gallery via microphone, connecting his sexual responses to gallery visitors and their movements.

“july 20: XX”: Double Exposures and Absence

...memory & the process of remembering, of seeing what's in sight, what's data, what comes in for a while for a month... (Memory 189, Studying Hunger 20)⁵⁸

The f/stop is the ratio between the length of the lens to the diameter of the opening it has less to do with you than with light (Memory 15)

...it may happen that the order set up for the original experience works for the new experience that we have that we now have & the parts that are added can again be seen as just instances of the order we set up as a result of something of our original experience & if that happens we have no reason to change our order our design. But if that does not happen, if the order if the design...doesn't prove workable when the volume of it is increased, it's the thirteenth, then we have two alternatives: we can reject the new stuff, orange pen, or we can change the order the design, orange pen (Memory 80-81)

Such passages frame *Memory* as a sort of objective, scientific study. The project registers “what comes in” as “data,” and does so over a set period of time because “a month’s a good time for an experiment” (*Memory* 189). Early in the project (in its second entry, “July 2”), Mayer positions herself as an objective photographer when she reasons that “it has less to do with you than with light.” Like a photo-journalist who uses her camera to document moments, Mayer sees her camera as the one recording, leaving her self to act as a witness, an impartial observer.

By the middle of the month, though, Mayer is questioning the grounds of her experiment and whether it “doesn’t prove workable when the volume of it is increased,” which by “the thirteenth,” it certainly has, as it now consists of 468 photographs (80). If “the order the design...doesn’t prove workable” as the amount of “data” grows, then one has two choices: to either “reject the new stuff” or to “change the order.” Three days

⁵⁸ *Studying Hunger*, which appeared in print in 1975, as *Memory* did, shares many of its refrains.

later, in “July 16,” she’s still worrying about what to do “if the order wont work when the volume is increased when we see more” and proposes the same “two alternatives:” rejection and change. This time, she more clearly favors change, declaring that “the first alternative is never taken if the second is available” (97). Does this mean that Mayer is refiguring her objective study? Her repetition of “the order the design” in this passage suggests a schism in the project, as if it is in limbo between being a logical “order” and a more creative “design,” between science and aesthetics, between objectivity and subjectivity, between witnessing and acting. In what ways is she watching *Memory* unfold, and in what ways is she participating in it? Is this experiment assigned or created? She answers these questions when she avers that one “never” takes the first option (rejecting “the new stuff”), meaning that one always takes the second: that in every instance one should jump in and adapt the project.

However, one wonders whether rejecting new data and adapting to accommodate it really matters, since both options end in the same place, with that curious “orange pen” (“we have two alternatives: we can reject the new stuff, *orange pen*, or we can change the order the design, *orange pen*” (81, italics mine)). This detail is more important to Mayer’s photographic aesthetic than it may seem at first, for it answers how she changes “the order the design” – in this entry, she begins to play with colored lens filters. Thus, she becomes an admittedly active participant in the experiment, literally coloring its images with her own aesthetic choices. Early in the entry, Mayer talks about all sorts of yellow objects that she has shot: “a color yellow schools yellow cabs....yellow saab yellow car” and then mentions “red yellow & blue filters over the camera lens aimed at a light” (78-79). She uses the filters to spin the color wheel. When she does, “red with a

yellow ball in the middle of it looks just like the sun,” she notes, and a blue lens over a fluorescent light gives the light “a tint of green” (80). This play with colored filters teaches us how to read the symbol of the “orange pen” in her scientific conundrum. When we take the litany of yellow objects and the red filter into account, we see that the orange pen is an example of the “new stuff” that one could reject (as if she’s saying “we can reject the new stuff, like that orange pen, for instance”). But you don’t reject it, because it is also a sign of what happens when you take the preferred option and “change the order the design,” say, by shooting a yellow pen through a red filter. You’ve already chosen to affect your experiment, and you influence data rather than observe it. You adapt to accommodate and include that orange pen, the sign of your tinkering with “what comes in.” Thus Mayer makes her decision: to act as a poet, a role that roots in the word “maker,” rather than as a scientist. The amount of material makes her question its utility. Here, we see her faith in the material art object begin to falter, pulling her back towards avant-garde conceptual art.

The colored filters symbolize Mayer’s hand in producing and affecting (again, literally “coloring”) its images; they show us that this is a subjective project, after all. The last line of the July 13 entry reinforces this when Mayer concludes, “the light in the loft with yellow red blue filters on, I was holding them” (82). When we first see the filters they are “three filters in a case on the floor” but by the entry’s end, Mayer has taken them into her hand. Something about this sentence – that it ends without punctuation, that it places the first-person after a comma in a book that runs without many caesurae, that it slows pace by doing so – gives it a tone of awe, as if Mayer realizes all of a sudden that the filters are in her hand. The entry leaves us not just with

the filters, but by reminding us that there's an "I" who's been "holding them on, by hand, like this" (80). The work is not purely objective. There's a subjective presence behind the camera influencing what it captures.

That Mayer's photographs are tinted by subjectivity becomes apparent in the double exposures that she shoots on July 20, images that ask us to reread the ways that the rest of *Memory* uses the photograph. In these images, Mayer plays on the roman numeral of the date by shooting exclusively double exposures.⁵⁹ By exposing the same negative to two different scenes, she produces a series of beautifully spectral images (Figures 3.3-3.6). As do the colored filters, the artifice of these images reminds a viewer of the artist behind the camera who subjectively selects and creates these scenes. Their ghostly overlays distinguish them from the rest of the project; they testify to absent objects in a way that its other photographs do not. Some go further than testifying – some, triply exposed, actively negate objects, placing them under the sort of "X"ed out overexposure that the entry's title signals. The entry is exceptional, but that only serves to strengthen its commentary on the project, for it is as if these images catch us red-handed, after reading 684 photographs (nineteen days worth) indexically and point out how gullible we must be to have *believed* that this medium offers a faithful, objective account of the world as it is.

Through this doubling, the exposures testify to photography's artifice. By shooting the sky over a shot of Ed Bowes, Mayer places "ed in the clouds" where "ed takes a nap in the sky his arms up hands clasped behind his neck the strips of the mattress

⁵⁹ In her rough outline for *Memory*, Mayer labels the entry "july 20: XX," the double X alluding to double exposures.

he's on encounter the tree & one of the tress has made it on the door, finally" (118, 119). Because we know that Ed was not magically in "a penthouse way up in the sky," we're stopped from responding to this image indexically. We must consider *how* this image came to be and recognize that photographs can be manipulated. And if these photographs can be so obviously manipulated to combine things in surreal combinations, how can we trust that all the others have been telling the whole truth? We have to consider the possibility that they're not objective indices; behind all of them stands an artist.

The artifice of these photographs emphasizes the absence inherent in any photograph, another trait that the viewer can too easily overlook. More often, we see the photograph as a testament to the presence of things as they "really" were.⁶⁰ The hazy apparitions that the double exposures portray remind us that what it depicts is *not* there. Slide 3 (Figure 3.3) overlays an image of the forest floor with a shot of a curtained window. As the eye shifts from one to the other, neither seems real – to see a single window in the forest seems out of a dream, and to see the dirt ground flat up behind a window's panes brings the ground vertical (or the window horizontal). Laying these scenes on top of each other doesn't double their material presence – if anything, it halves it. Both seem airy and illusory, like the things of dreams. Such images remind us of the fleeting insubstantiality of that which photographs portray. In slide 14 (Figure 3.4), two Eds sit on the back deck. One faces away from the camera and, next to him, a smaller,

⁶⁰ Here I reference both Barthes and Sontag on the photograph as testimony to reality. Barthes identifies photography's referent as unique when he notes that it is "not that *optionally* real thing to which an image or a sign refers but the *necessarily* real thing which has been placed before the lens, without which there would be no photograph... [I]n Photography I can never deny that *the thing has been there*" (76). Barthes returns to this refrain throughout *Camera Lucida* (e.g. in reference to Mayer's subject, when he notes that the subjects of a certain photograph "*were there*; what I see is not a memory, an imagination, a reconstitution, a piece of Maya, such as art lavishes upon us, but reality in a past state: at once the past and the real" (82)). Sontag calls the photograph "the material vestige of its subject" (82), and goes further when she recognizes the photographed object's potential to be *more* real than the object it depicts (147).

fainter Ed sits in profile. The artificial impossibility of Ed sitting next to himself reminds us of the ephemerality of these photographs— that each photograph, even one singly exposed, fades away into the next moment, and that these moments and the things they depict are no longer. In different ways, both these examples dematerialize their subjects, making their absence as pronounced as any presence to which they attest.

The “absent people” of Mayer’s double exposures are a hippie inversion of Victorian spirit photography – they privilege the immaterial as the ideal state.⁶¹ Spirit photography claimed to use the photograph to give disembodied spirits a material medium. Mayer’s double exposures use the same technology to do the opposite: to dematerialize an *embodied* spirit. Rather than show that a deceased loved one is still connected to the material world, these images place the living in ephemeral situations outside their own bodies. Most obviously, a number of them place Ed and Bernadette in the sky by shooting an image of the clouds and then exposing the same negative to record someone on the ground. Thus we see “ed in the clouds,” where he looks like “god a wrathful angry god” (118, 122). In the sky, Ed becomes a celestial being (if not The Celestial Being). The author writes of herself in one such image, “I’m walking in the sky I’ve washed out the trees my notebook’s up there with me” (118). Later, Tom jokingly reads the photograph indexically when he asks, “you were walking upside down? is that you up in the sky?” (122).⁶² In these examples, Mayer places the living human body in the heavens. The images suggest a body so scarcely material that it can mingle with clouds and walk by pushing against air.

⁶¹ Mayer lived on the Lower East Side at the peak of its inhabitation by the counterculture. See Mele’s history of the Lower East Side after WWII, especially Chapter 5: “A Brief Psychedelic Detour” (153-179).

⁶² Tom is Ed Bowes’ little brother.

When it doesn't lighten their bodies to float in the sky, Mayer's "spirit photography" allows people to try on different bodies and thereby portrays spirit as more permanent than body, the immaterial more durable than the material. Of the image of Ed in the sky, Mayer comments, "ed in the clouds & in the clouds too much he's a woman it could happen to anyone" (118). In the haziness of this double exposure, the clouds blur Bowes' fine features, slender body, and long hair to the point that his body becomes disassociated from his gender. A similar corporeal shift occurs in slide 21, in which Mayer overlays her naked body with that of her lover.⁶³ The text describes the image like this: "ed & I are one except one of us is a little off center my body takes over our necks seem the same we are a woman with breasts: the shingles show how off we are" (119). Later in the entry, Bernadette asks Tom, "who do you see first?" and he answers, "Ed. Ed's head & your body" (122). Mayer wears Ed's head and Ed, her body, their common neck joining this chimera of lovers. The living "spirits" are embodied, but the double exposures make those bodies mutable or inhabitable by multiple "spirits." As in spirit photography, these photographs portray the body as a transient thing. Whereas spirit photography relies on the spirit being recorded as a recognizable body, in Mayer's exposures, the body is something to be morphed, traded, or collaged. Spirit photography is about the ineffable finding a corporeal form; the photographs of July 20 make the corporeal unformed and mutable.

The point where these exposures meet spirit photography – somewhere between the material and the immaterial – is an apt metaphor for the photograph, and for *Memory*. The images of July 20 ask us to recognize what a special sort of "thing" the photograph

⁶³ This image must be remarkable; unfortunately, it is missing from the Mandeville Collection's slides.

is, one that's a thing itself (the material on which the image is developed) that depicts other things (whatever the light refracted when the negative was exposed). It is a thing that's purpose is to indicate things that aren't there, "a token of absence" (Sontag 16). It is material, but what it portrays is never more than a material *vestige*, the "mark, trace, or sign of something...which no longer exists or is present" (*OED* 1a). The photograph is a way to hold immateriality in your hand. That Mayer works with this liminal medium so intensely at this point affects the rest of her career. On the heels of her work materializing words in *0 To 9*, she experiments with photography and recognizes that the medium's power lies as much in its ability to harness the immaterial as it does in its status as a material object. It is no coincidence that she simultaneously turns to writing that uses words for their ability to harness the absent and the immaterial, a methodology that remains with her to this day.

The technical aspects of photography affect the language of *Memory*; on July 20th, in fact, Mayer even "double exposes" the text. The text bisects and inverts the original oral narration for the day (the one recorded and played in the Soloman Gallery). That is, the printed version begins the entry with the second half of the spoken script, and then finishes it with the first half of the spoken script. Between these two passages, Mayer adds to the printed version one mysterious sentence, "This is the second part, you lay it over the first like a correction: double exposures tea men to connoisseurs for over 250 years, lift here for the sound for the image: " (119). Perhaps placing the first half last is Mayer's way of "lay[ing] it over the first" in our memory, leaving it fresher in our mind after we've finished reading the entry for "July 20." As the sentence falls at the end of a recto page, reading "lift here for the sound for the image" puts one in mind of turning the

page to reveal the audio and visual components of *Memory*. Perhaps the imperative asks us to recognize that under every text lie previous texts, sounds, and images, and that the text itself is also a token of absence.

The Frame of *Memory*: Psychoanalysis, “Dreaming,” and the Subject

Ken: In the early poems, you just wrote down facts you could know with certainty, dictionary definitions...stuff like that, and you stayed away from writing about more ambiguous emotional experience. How did you walk into writing about your personal experience?

Bernadette: That’s true, but it wasn’t a matter of choice that I didn’t write about those other things, really. Memory is the ultimate factual book, right? It’s all data. I don’t get into emotions in Memory, really. There wasn’t time to keep these journals every day, and to shoot a roll of film as well, and then doing regular things like having a job and eating and sleeping...But after I wrote that book something happened, and I realized I had gotten on the edge, you know, and I went to see a psychiatrist. And it was through him, actually, that I started writing the other books, like Studying Hunger [1975]....And he convinced me that I was not [crazy]. And in the meanwhile we summoned up all these ghosts. (Jordan 7)

Memory turned into a dream returned to a dream that enabled me to walk. (Papers, Box 25 Folder 15)

In response to Ken Jordan’s query about how she came to write “personally,” Mayer responds, sweepingly and unconvincingly, “It’s all data. I don’t get into emotions in *Memory*, really.” She suggests that she couldn’t have done so in *Memory* because the demands of amassing its material were so great that “there wasn’t time.” This seems a strange assertion given the subject and title of the book; not only is memory an inherently subjective experience, it is also often a naturally emotional one. How can one help but write about it “personally”? Had Mayer wanted to be more “factual” when it came to her experiment, she could’ve called the project *Data* or *July 1971* and taken herself out of the equation. But observing oneself muddies the waters of just how objective one can be, in a

way that's almost the inverse of what Stein did when she called Alice B. Toklas' biography her own. That is, whereas Stein's "autobiography" tries to inhabit someone else's subjective experience, Mayer tries to distance herself from her own. Still, in this interview and elsewhere, Mayer insists that *Memory* is objective and scientific. She calls it the "ultimate factual book," describes it categorically as "all data," and asserts that it doesn't "get into emotions...really."

In the book's framing devices, though, we see a capitulation to personal, emotional interiority. After the text of "July 31" (the last entry in her month-long project and the first entry after 189 pages that ends with a period), Mayer adds a 6-page epilogue that she titles "Dreaming." Balancing this epilogue is an introduction signed "David Rubinfine, M.D.," the Freudian psychoanalyst whom Mayer mentions in Jordan's interview. As the double exposures of July 20 create a new lens through which we see the rest of the photographs, these framing devices tint the rest of *Memory*. They teach us to read the text that lies between them for the subjective, the emotional, and the immaterial – what Mayer might categorize as "all these ghosts." The framing devices are so inconsistent with the objectivity that Mayer claims for the rest of *Memory* that they make us wonder whether she protests too much for the project – and if so, why. She corrects herself when she says that "*Memory* turned into a dream returned to a dream that enabled me to walk." She's correct in that correction. By looking at the framing material, we see that *Memory* does not "turn into a dream;" rather, it has been returning to such subjective and immaterial states again and again.

Rubinfine's introduces *Memory* as an enactment of internal consciousness, and although this presentation biases our reading, it is also not far from the truth. His words

make it difficult to enter into *Memory* as “the ultimate factual book” of “data;” rather, we’re predisposed to read it as “a new kind of autobiography” since Rubinfine defines it as such in the first line of his page-long introduction (5). No matter that the refrain “I deny autobiography” runs throughout *Memory*, we’re placed in an autobiography before we even hear Mayer’s voice.⁶⁴ Rubinfine introduces the book as a subjective project. In his description of what we’re about to read, he acknowledges that Mayer “provides us with data” but assures us that she does “not only” that. Again and again, he attributes the work’s wonder to its effect on consciousness, and specifically to Mayer’s ability to meld “external reality” with the internal. It is “by reviving the quality of consciousness in which [moments] occurred,” he says, that Mayer so powerfully translates “inner and outer sensory data.” A paragraph later, he returns to “these altered states of consciousness,” in which, he asserts:

internal stimuli are experienced as external reality, as in a dream. In such states, differentiation between internal and external perception, that is, between sensation, thought and feelings on the one hand, and perception of external reality on the other, is not fixed and rigid, but fluid and dynamic.

According to Rubinfine, the success of *Memory* lies in its power to blend “thought and feelings” with “external reality.” To him, this is not the objective removal of scientific method but the imposition of subjectivity on subject matter. He goes so far as to muse that the book’s overall effect could only be approximated “in hypnotic age regression, or spontaneously in dreams.” Thus does an introduction from a psychoanalyst, one professionally committed to connecting “internal and external perception,” prepare us to

⁶⁴ The denial of autobiography is also a refrain of *Studying Hunger*, Mayer’s next book (1975).

enter *Memory* as a re-creation of states of consciousness, hardly as the “ultimate factual book” that its author perceives it to be.

In a similar move toward subjectivity and immaterial phenomena, Mayer’s 6-page epilogue, “Dreaming,” retreats from the original “order the design” she envisioned for this “ultimate factual book.” It fairly gives itself over to an interiority of the kind that Rubinfine mentions in his introduction. Why? Because “dream,” it explains, “makes memory present,” “dream’s an analogy to reprocessing in process,” and “dream’s a memory kept in process” (189). This new way of *presenting* memory, paradoxically, seems to be precisely what the old way (amassing photographs and diaries) precluded. The entry begins by explaining how the project’s restrictions led to “an explosion of dream” after it was over:

Cause memory & the process of remembering of seeing what’s in sight, what’s data, what comes in for a while for a month & a month’s a good time for an experiment memory stifles dream it shuts dream up. What’s in sight, it was there, it’s over, dream makes memory present, hidden memory the secret dream, it’s not allowed, forbidden, dont come out the door, there’s an assassin at it or a lion, wild Indian, a boar, a little bear upside down in the dream, so, memory creates an explosion of dream in August & I no longer rest I dont rest anymore I dont resist anymore & there’s a haze then & two eyes my eyes just eyes wide open & this is the climax the reversal... (189)

“Seeing,” “data,” the “experiment”: these parts of “memory” (or *Memory*) are what “stifles dream” and “shuts dream up.” When she explains, “What’s in sight, it was there, it’s over,” one imagines her looking at the pile of photographs of *Memory*. What “was there” echo Barthes’ noeme of the photograph: “*that has been.*” With that experiment over, it is now what’s *out* of sight that matters – the “hidden memory the secret dream” is what brings memory to life. Such internal subjectivity was “not allowed” by her experiment, and when she stops resisting it (notably, by putting an “i” in her “rest” and

becoming an active, subjective participant), it creates “an explosion.” When Mayer says that “this is the climax the reversal,” I read the referent as the radical shift to interiority and immateriality, as if her dreaming is the reversal of what she’s been after thus far. Creating *Memory* required an intense focus on objectively compiling material, and the freedom from this project led to its opposite: a prolific outpouring of subjective *immaterial* scenarios, in dreams.

She responds to this freedom with an almost violent assertion of subjectivity. As she did first with filters, then with double exposures, her epilogue again questions experimental procedure, “the order the design.” She puts dream in opposition to the static fixity of photography or printed text when she says, “dream’s an analogy to reprocessing in process” (189). This process maintains a fluidity that she desires. She questions the authority of that process, though, when she wonders, “kept in process kept in present by whose consciousness by whose design” (189). Here, she asserts herself by answering “let me narrate for you & listen, let me violate the rights you got let me tell you that I dream let me design it” (189). This spotlight on the designer of the experiment is anti-scientific, and Mayer begs for it, repeating “let me” four times before settling in to tell us about all the dreams she had in August. This begging may seem solicitous, but she’s also not really asking, she’s telling: “listen, let me violate the rights you got.” Furthermore, although she frames this entry as “for you” (“let me narrate for you”), this sentence is far less concerned with the second-person than it is with “me, me, me, I, me.” Indeed, in the vehemence of its shift towards subjective interiority, “Dreaming” signals “a climax a reversal” “an explosion.”

The sexual innuendos implicit in this “climax” and “explosion” are typical of the epilogue, and coupled with the passage’s emphasis on subjectivity, make it subtly echo Confessional writing. The dreams that Mayer records are filled with sex. In the dream of August 4, “Grace & I are in a movie directed by Jacques-in-charge. & first the men in the movie & I try to make it,” then “Grace & I have no shirts on,” and finally “Grace & I have already made love” (189). In August 5th’s dream, she reports, “I have a long quiet orgasm coming down the banister” and later that “I’m attached to a telephone pole” (190-191). On August 10, three actors “do their act” in which “the large man moves around finally to show his asshole, spread his anus, for the others, And they are begging in a way” and the entry ends with the narrator being turned on thinking of “actors” (193-194). In the dream of August 24th, “Bob shows pictures of fucking upside down to the librarian” (194). I don’t want to perform a psychoanalytic reading of Mayer’s epilogue here, just to point out the fact that “Dreaming” practically begs a critic to do so. Though *Memory* may have begun as an objective, psychological experiment, it ends up nearer the analysand’s *chaise-longue* than it does to the laboratory. Save for the syntax, some might read the epilogue as a text nearer to Sexton than to Stein.

In fact, though, the epilogue protests too much when it portrays “Dreaming” as “a climax a reversal” – in fact, its tone, style, and form remain consistent with the rest of the experimental text. The syntax, after all, *does* remain consistent with the rest of *Memory*, as does the form (both are still Steinian). Mayer’s epilogue attends to interior subjectivity and balances an introduction from a psychotherapist, and though it shares such content with Confessional writing, its other traits remain distinct. Its large blocks of prose keep

her aligned with experimentation and between genres. Its syntax still modifies itself in slight variations on repetition that lack punctuation, as in Mayer's "Labor Day" dream:

Labor day: Kaleidoscope, the fall foliage: In Massachusetts theres a yellow fur running along the side of the road & on a field, sable, ... & someone is picking is harvesting the fur for fur coats & I am running along the side of it I am running along it, no one sees it, to a barn where there's a meeting a formal, forum, social gather & I get there & I'm looking for someone I'm looking for warren or ted & the sky is full of foliage. (194)

The hiccupping self-edits, "is picking is harvesting" and "I am running along the side of it I am running along it," call to mind Stein. A relevant passage from *Everybody's Autobiography*, for example, corrects itself similarly: "That is really the trouble with an autobiography *you do not of course you do not* really believe yourself why should you, you know *so well so very well* that it is not yourself" (70, italics mine). No matter the implications of psychoanalysis and dreaming, their ramifications on form turn out to be slight. Though Mayer may be attending to a realm of heightened subjectivity and immateriality, dreaming, the shift to dreams from memory does not radically alter form. Because form is affected so little, in fact, one must question whether the epilogue really acts as the "reversal" that it heralds.

The epilogue seems different, certainly, because it is founded on dreams rather than photographs, a contrast in materiality that crumbles upon interrogation. In the original installation of *Memory*, a move from photographs to dreams may have been a significant swing indeed. In the printed version that almost all modern readers encounter, on the other hand, the photographs that structure the bulk of *Memory* may as well be dreams, for all we see of them. "Dreaming" makes us realize that the artifacts that we've been taking for granted as the keystone of *Memory* are ultimately apparitions, too. To accept that the text is founded on "facts" and "data" is to put complete faith in the

“scientist” behind this experimental poem, since we have only her report of the data set. The epilogue, like the double exposures, makes us see what we’ve been taking for granted about *Memory*. In this instance, it confronts us with the dearth of artifacts in our reading experience and reminds us that the text that we’ve been reading for scores of pages is actually as unmoored for us as Mayer’s dreams are, and as dependent on an authorial filter.

Even if Mayer consistently interprets material objectively to make *Memory* “the ultimate factual book,” we must nonetheless acknowledge that the object of her study is always *her own mind*, not just in “Dreaming.” Thus, *Memory* must also be the ultimate *subjective* book. Like Stein’s experimental autobiographies, *Memory* purports to *not* be a subjective portrait of its author. By doing so, it demonstrates the impossibility of writing ever eschewing its writer. In *Everybody’s Autobiography*, Stein recognizes the dual impossibilities of writing identity: that one can neither definitively locate identity through writing, nor can one ever avoid identity in writing.⁶⁵ One passage in which she does so could just as well be a passage from *Memory*:

And identity is funny being yourself is funny as you are never yourself to yourself except as you remember yourself and then of course you do not believe yourself. That is really the trouble with an autobiography you do not of course you do not really believe yourself why should you, you know so well so very well that it is not yourself, it could not be yourself because you cannot remember right and if

⁶⁵ Without mention of Stein, Linda Russo calls to mind *Everybody’s Autobiography* when she argues that we read *Memory* as “group memory and group mind” because it “retrieves history-making *for* the collective *from* the individual” (142). Because the “overabundance of text and image effaces any trace of the singular ‘she’ that initiates the spatio-temporal experience *Memory* offers...the focus is never on the self, but on the material, gestures, and actions which involve others” (141). Thus, “the text functions as a site of collective cognitive action: the reader/viewer is invited to engage in the process of meaning-making that perception initiates” (140). Russo reads the project’s glut of material as effectively erasing Mayer’s creation of it. I’d answer that we can often see Mayer’s eye behind the camera in these shots and the first-person narration (originally read in Mayer’s own voice) pretty constantly reminds us of whose *Memory* we’re inhabiting. I agree that the text’s difficulty invites our active participation in its creation – but also that “the process of meaning-making that perception initiates” on which Russo grounds this claim is *Mayer’s* perception.

you do remember right it does not sound right and of course it does not sound right because it is not right. You are of course never yourself. Well anyway. I did tell all about myself. (70-71)

Autobiography is impossible because it relies on recognizing oneself in a memory. Even if you “remember right” (which is unlikely), you’ll still be wrong about who you are. Mayer comes to the same conclusion in *Memory*, as she time and again looks at photographs that she took or that feature her and finds them alien. In the face of this recognition, Stein’s response is, “Well anyway. I did tell all about myself.” Mayer’s response is similar. When she recognizes that she cannot translate memory objectively through hundreds of photographs and thousands of words, rather than give up, she pushes on to “tell about herself” through the equally personal and ethereal space of dreams. *Memory*, like *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* and *Everybody’s Autobiography*, attempts a paradox: an objective portrait of an inherently subjective realm. Stein’s and Mayer’s failures teach us that in the experiments of poetry, the scientist’s subjectivity – her “myself” – is always leaking through.⁶⁶

These framing devices provide additional points that lead us to recognize how present the subjective and the immaterial are throughout *Memory*. Their emphasis on subjectivity and immateriality at first seems exception; ultimately, though, we realize their consistency with the rest of *Memory*. In this sense at least, Rubinfine’s biasing introduction actually gets it right. Any reader outside the archive that holds the photographs of *Memory* may as well be reading about Mayer’s dreams. We are equally

⁶⁶ Both authors make their explorations of the self seem less subjective by conducting them under the auspices of science. Stein followed her medical training with work with William James. For more on Mayer’s involvement with science, see Shaw’s “Faulting Description: Clark Coolidge, Bernadette Mayer, and the Site of Scientific Authority,” in which he demonstrates that works such as Mayer’s 1989 *Art of Science Writing* show that Mayer doesn’t want to reduce emotions to a scientific system but rather seeks the opposite: to make science emotional, to recognize the inherent subjectivity in any scientific study.

detached from both. Furthermore, the book is a highly conceptual and personal exploration – memory, we realize, is as subjective as psychoanalysis or dreaming.

“july 4: WTC”: Readerly Subjectivity, Immaterial History, and Place

Double exposures and framing devices aren't the only shadows of subjectivity and immateriality cast by *Memory*; contemporary readers throw some of their own on the project, as well. In her day-by-day outline of *Memory*, Mayer summarizes July 4 as “july 4: fourth of july, WTC.” On that day, she visits the World Trade Center, whose twin towers were in the final stages of construction in July 1971.⁶⁷ Of the roll of film that she shoots July 4th, thirteen photographs depict the towers' construction site. The first two point up from one tower's base to show it stretching into the sky. (See Figure 3.7, which is one of eight images to appear on the cover of the printed edition of *Memory* (for the cover, see Figure 3.8).) The next series of shots depicts the scene at the base of the towers: piles of rubble, the guts of one of the towers, a desolate, dusty construction scene. She takes the last two photographs from a block or so away, as if looking back on the site as one walks away from it. To the modern viewer, these are ghostly images indeed. Even the majority of readers, deprived of the photographic component of *Memory*, enter the project with this image in mind; because it wraps around the book's spine, one cannot even take *Memory* off the shelf without encountering it. Our experience of the book's cover – a shell one degree further out than the text's framing material – affects our reading of *Memory*, especially for “July 4.” Once again, this project that set out to

⁶⁷ Ground for the towers was broken on August 5, 1966, just eleven days after O'Hara's death. While the north tower was capped in December 1970 and the south, in July 1971, the other five buildings that comprised the center weren't finished until 1985.

document facts, collect data, and amass material demonstrates the futility of such attempts, for the passage of time increases its poignancy in unpredictable ways, ways that affect us because of our experience with what's become immaterial. We've seen in the past two sections of this chapter that Mayer can't help but be a subjective recorder. As we experience the nostalgia caused by the "data" of "July 4," we understand that *we* can't help but be subjective *observers*, either.

The text of July 4 approximates objective distance. It begins with an emphasis on precision and method, once again foregrounding this undertaking as a scientific one: "twelve seventeen & ten seconds," it starts. Then Mayer delves into the specifics of her developing process:

HC-110 at 7:1 dilute B at 68° straight-hypo, into cans, stop bath in beaker, take temp. of HC-110, 68°, get time, lights off, roll & cover on, shake 30 seconds, lights off, stop bath one minute, cover, do cold running water 2 minutes, permawash solution, 2 minutes, agitate, cold 2 minutes, or cold one hour, photo flow, 2 minutes, hang & squeegee (in photo flo), hang one hour, then contact: shiny faces paper, prints dull. (26-27)

On what could be a sentimental day of patriotism, Mayer begins her entry with precise facts and detailed method. Without using the first person, she walks us through a step-by-step process for developing film. She doesn't mention what is supposed to be the day's framing conceit at all until its fifth page, when she notes drily, "It was sunny. We went out. I had wanted to go down to the world trade center so we did. ...& the most interesting thing about the WTC was the rust on all of the materials" (31). Then they had lunch, "had a few beers," "shot a game of pool two games," and take sound recordings of firecrackers. The colon in her notes between "july 4" and "WTC" asks us to question the World Trade Center as a symbol of American independence long before 9/11 does so, and "July 4" might have done so, too, since these buildings – the biggest in the world at

the time and an accrual of material exponentially beyond Mayer's own project – hiccup into the sky to cast a shadow on the counterculture of the Lower East Side of which Mayer is a part. Her response, though, seems removed. She does not equate the buildings with Independence Day, nor does she offer up the contrast as a political statement. In fact, for Mayer, the Twin Towers barely seem to register. This time, she seems to come close to something like objective observation.

For us, it's an entirely different story. How can they *not* register subjectively? When Mayer writes that her group “[c]ouldn't get close enough to it so we drove down Broadway to Barclay Street & when we left up deserted Washington Street, not exactly deserted but torn down,” anyone familiar with New York and alive on 9/11 pictures the World Trade Center not as a construction site but as a *destruction* site, its surroundings deserted *and* torn down. A New Yorker remembers how eerily empty the streets were that day and the difficulty of navigating one's way around or off the island of Manhattan. When Mayer notes, “We saw a pile of stones somebody had carefully cut out on Washington Street,” that “pile of stones” calls to my mind a grave marker, and I see the spontaneous memorials that sprung up below Fourteenth Street in the days and weeks following 9/11. Even if Mayer can manage a somewhat objective distance, her modern reader certainly cannot, which shows us once again that objective writing about memories is a fool's errand. Even when they're not our own, they interpellate us as nostalgic subjects.

This moment speaks not only to the pervasiveness of the subjective but also to the endurance of the immaterial. When Mayer writes, “the most interesting thing about the WTC was the rust on all of the materials,” one recognizes that the twin towers will never

rust, as such - they're gone – but also that perhaps she's right that their most enduring legacy will be what the decay of rust implies: their structural fragility and disappearance. Paradoxical as it may be, the immaterial is in the end what remains, as memories keep experiences present. What's *not* on Ground Zero is what fills that space to bursting today. This recognition brings us full circle, for it is what the photograph professes in the first place. What the photograph captures is not what is present but rather “what has been” and is no more, a “pseudo-presence.” In hindsight, we should know entering into this project founded on photographs that it will attest to what is present as much as it will to what is now immaterial. That the photographs themselves are, for the most part, now absent from the common reception of *Memory* infuses the project with this lesson still more deeply.

The other seven images that remain available, on the cover, reinforce the supremacy of the ephemeral, if in a less striking manner than the one of the World Trade Center. In one, on the front cover, an unbelievably young Bernadette Mayer stands next to a hot dog stand, straight hair hanging down to her waist and parted in the middle. Models of cars and a bus from the 1970s are parked on the street behind her. On the back cover, three of her friends confront us with their gazes. At the bottom, a man sits in the driver's seat of an old convertible, his shoulder-length wavy hair, V-neck softball shirt, and leather strap bracelet identifying his era as much as his car does. In the top image, a young Ed Bowes glares out at us rather confrontationally, as if the photographer just roused him mid-thought. In the middle, a woman stares at Mayer's camera as if she's fed up with all these snapshots. These subjects make the moment seem mundane, but for me, the images invoke nostalgia for a time before I was born, a longing to experience a heyday of experimental poetry in New York. These images make me miss something I've

never even known, as do the text and audio of *Memory*. If a reader removed by almost forty years can experience *Memory* so affectively, how could Mayer herself have expected to remain objective about her material? Our personal responses to these images and words are visceral reminders of how fleeting the material world is, and how impossible it is to be objective about that loss.

Tinted by recent history, these images have an effect similar to that of the double exposures and the book's framing materials: they make a reader/viewer recognize that immateriality and subjectivity lie at the heart of *Memory*. Again, we see the folly of believing Mayer's suggestion that this project is about material and objectivity. If *Memory* accumulates artifacts, they ultimately show us how temporary photographs are – that they are testaments not to what is but to what has been and is no longer. Where *Memory* seeks to capture a science, psychology, it ends up seating that science in its object of study – the subject – so firmly that it comes closer to psychoanalysis. If *Memory* captures a place, these images demonstrate, then it is a place that is no longer, one that is crumbled and thus fundamentally changed. *Memory* reminds us of the ephemeral, the immaterial, the affective, and the subjective: what O'Hara might have called “true abstractions.”

Recognizing that *Memory* is more grounded in subjectivity than it is in data provides an account for its remove from New York City.⁶⁸ Even when *Memory* describes

⁶⁸ Lytle Shaw opens this discussion in an essay in which he compares Mayer's work to that of site-based and conceptual artists. He notes Mayer's relative distance from New York City (when compared to peers such as Waldman, Notley, and Berrigan) and argues that the “site” of Mayer's work is often the book itself, which functions as a discrete environment, each one creating a unique conceptual territory (154). While I agree that the “site” of Mayer's work is her own mind, aligning her so directly with conceptual artists is dangerous, since as I argue here, her work is subjective in a way that works in direct opposition to most conceptual art, which aims to be purely objective and impersonal.

or depicts sites unique to New York, such as the World Trade Center, we might say that it is writing about a “there with no there there,” the absent “there” of the photograph, a no place, a conceptual New York of the subjective mind. In this, Mayer is like Loy, who summons up a shadow New York that lies just beneath the surface of the material city. But Mayer goes further, for it’s not just New York that *Memory* dematerializes: it’s site as such. As Shaw says, “even if Mayer’s early works like *Moving* and *Memory* maintain a stronger link to the quotidian details of New York City, the conceptual structures of these books go a great length toward displacing and complicating any immediate relation between self and site” (153). One could argue that *Memory* should maintain as strong a link to the “quotidian details” of life in Lenox, Massachusetts as it does to those of New York (as Mayer actually spent as many days of July, 1971 there as she did in the city), but Lenox is similarly immaterial to the project. Whereas Loy pulls to the surface an ignored New York, Mayer erects a subjective memory.⁶⁹ More than “displacing...any immediate relation between self and site,” I’d argue that *Memory* goes so far as to replace the self *as* site. Shaw astutely notes that Mayer’s work could affect “the discourse of place in poetry” because it isn’t tied to any “consistent spatial ‘ground’ (a New York, a Gloucester, or a Paterson...)” (170). Certainly, her portrayal of the immaterial untethers her geographically. However, I’d also contend that by choosing such subjective, personal realms for her projects, Mayer *does* give poetry a constant, if immaterial, place: the self.

⁶⁹ Doing so has left Mayer in an aesthetic and critical “no place” herself, between Second Generation New York School and Language writers. Shaw notes that Mayer has been “claimed” by both schools but can be “read” persuasively by neither of the main interpretive paradigms that came into play in the receptions of the two schools” (152). Though Ann Vickerey includes Mayer in her “feminist genealogy of language writing,” she admits that Mayer is “a site of ideological and aesthetic conflict” (159). The two-pronged re-reading of *Memory* that this chapter offers suggests a few reasons for Mayer’s critical limbo. In early works such as *Memory*, her focus on the immaterial and the conceptual distances her from her New York School peers, while her permeating subjectivity knocks her out of line with Language Poets.

That this self is the mind rather than the body dims the presence of New York in Mayer's writing. Mayer herself was an active participant in the poetic community of the Lower East Side, leading some of the first experimental workshops at the Poetry Project and acting as its director in the 1980s. Her writing, though, retreats from the city: one cannot imagine her New York the way that one can inhabit Loy's Bowery sidewalks or O'Hara's malt shops and museums. The photographs that she compiled for *Memory* portray it, but these are absent to most contemporary readers and even those who view them find that more than half of them are shot in Lenox or on the road. Once Mayer moves away from photography (*Memory* is her only project that uses the medium anywhere near as heavily), New York becomes even more of a phantom in her work. In the end, *Memory* leads her to the dematerialization that other conceptual artists of her era sought, in that after it, the city is a specter. In later works, the mind and the book become Mayer's prominent poetic sites. We inhabit her memory, her imagined utopia (*Utopias*), her knowledge (*Eruditio ex Memoria*), her syllogism, her voice, or the rhythm of her line more than we do any concrete place.

Though the way that she leaves the city behind is unique, such a departure is not. The mid- to late-1970s saw many poets physically move to other parts of the country. Along with the Lower East Side's counterculture, many Second Generation New York School writers scattered in the late 1970s, setting out for communes in Bolinas, or to teach in Midwestern college towns. Others followed Mayer's departure aesthetically by minimizing the city as setting. The Language Poets, for their part, moved towards theory. It was in Mayer's workshop at the Poetry Project that many young Language writers first encountered the theory they'd use to explore writing and ways of making meaning (work

from Wittgenstein, Lacan, and Barthes).⁷⁰ Even if Language writing is more interested in intersubjectivity, commodification, and politics than Mayer's verse is, it explores these areas very theoretically.⁷¹ This roughly defined movement trades in theories and ideas of the mind more than it dwells in everyday life on the ground, in a city. Just how geographically dispersed the network of Language writing is (a rather unique attribute for a literary "school") attests to its disconnect from the city as a locus or unifying point. *Memory*, then, is a bellwether in its move towards the immaterial and away from the city. Recognizing these qualities in it allows us to properly position Mayer as a key influence in the genealogy of recent experimental writing, especially because critics and writers so often take Mayer at her word that *Memory* is "the ultimate factual book" of "data." The project is a precursor of affect in experimental writing, as innovative poets today infuse their writing with feeling (the New Sincerists perhaps foremost among them). Reading *Memory* as a feat of blending the conceptual with the personal perhaps also speaks to Mayer's mentorship of contemporary female writers such as Lee Ann Brown, Lisa Jarnot, Nada Gordon, and Ange Mlinko, who write experimentally about such experiences as childbirth and mothering. Mayer hovers over many branches of the tree of contemporary poetry, and understanding the ways that her influential *Memory* has informed responses to materiality, subjectivity, and site defines not only Mayer's work but these many stretching branches, as well.

⁷⁰ For more on Mayer's influence on Language writing, see Daniel Kane's chapter "Bernadette Mayer: 'Language' in the Poetry Project" in *All Poets Welcome*.

⁷¹ For examples of Language theory, see primarily Bernstein and Andrews' *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, especially Silliman's "Disappearance of the Word/Appearance of the World," Hejinian's "If Written is Writing," and Bernstein's "Objects of Meaning."



Figure 3.1 “& the main thing is we begin with a white sink a whole new language is a temptation” (7)



Figure 3.3 “the window still has panes but the curtains fade into the ground I mean blend & snap something new could happen” (116-117)



Figure 3.4 “ed from the side has made the grass his hair by sitting on the edge of the deck & making me look past him to see him over his own shoulder” (118)



Figure 3.5 “orange crates & I kept that feeling about orange but this time I put them through a transparent blue awning & the awning only gives them more light” (118)



Figure 3.6 “the salt’s in his eyes & for a lung a plate of salad & cheese & bread & for a heart beets in a yellow plate...he holds the fork of his heart to his tongue” (118)



Figure 3.7: The cover of *Memory*, with an image of a twin tower on the spine, a young Mayer on the bottom front cover, and three of her friends (from top: Ed, Tom, and Kathleen) on the back cover

Conclusion: Flarf and the Abstractions of Cyberspace

One might say that Flarf is a radical elevation of the tendencies already there in Personism.

If the occasion called for it I could make this claim in very very very intimidating THEORYSPPCCHHHChhgccchh ARF ARF ARF.

But anyway it's true.

--Michael Magee, in an October 2002 email to the Flarflist

*Way over there
In the far dark park
The fake reality queen gorges
On premium foie gras.*

*And here, by the fake snake lake
"Africanized" bees tease chuffing swans
At the undone zombie picnic,
Worrying the spoors. (74)*

--an example of Flarf, from Nada Gordon's "Extreme Smile Makeover"

By way of conclusion, I'd like to gesture, ever so briefly, towards a certain poetry that has emerged from New York in the twenty-first century: Flarf. Many of its practitioners live in New York (though most live somewhere in Brooklyn, having been priced out of the now-gentrified Lower East Side) and are active in the poetry scene on the Lower East Side – they read at the Poetry Project and in local reading series, and the Bowery Poetry Club holds an annual Flarf festival. To say that Flarf emerged “from” New York is not entirely accurate, though: *cyberspace* would be a more precise (non-

)place to call the birthplace and landscape of Flarf. The style began on an email list (“the Flarflist”), uses text generated by Google searches, and appears largely in electronic journals published only online.⁷² Like *Memory*, Flarf abandons the notion of geographic site, as such, but it does so more radically.⁷³ By adopting that most twenty-first-century site, the *website*, as its domain, Flarf works in a space that is more abstract and intangible than any that this dissertation examines, as well as with things that are abstract and intangible. Though it can be ridiculous and anonymous, we can also read Flarf as an attempt to make the abstractions of the internet more personal and aesthetic.

Because Flarf relies so heavily on the internet, it is less connected to geographical space, tangible material, and even people. I have seen many Flarf performances – nearly all of them on YouTube, by myself, rather than in person, with people. I have read a good quantity of Flarf – almost all of it online, in electronic journals that are everywhere and nowhere, pixels and data rather than paper and ink. For those of us outside New York, Flarf happens in our studies, one-on-one with our computer screens. We can talk to other readers about it – but for many of us, it is easier to do so on the Poetics listserv than in

⁷² Given the brevity of this conclusion and its focus on materiality, I only address one of the two prominent branches of Flarf: Google-sculpted poetry. Another branch of Flarf, Gary Sullivan describes thus: “A kind of corrosive, cute, or cloying, awfulness. Wrong. Un-P.C. Out of control. ‘Not okay.’” (Bernstein). See Sharon Mesmer’s “Annoying Diabetic Bitch,” or K. Silem Mohammad’s “Peace Kittens,” Peek-a-Boo,” or “Crucifixion Xing.”

⁷³ Because Flarf began as a response to 9/11, it provides a haunting bookend to *Memory*. Mayer writes *Memory* just as the twin towers are going up; Flarf emerges just after they fall. Though the list started in the Spring of 2001, it had died down by September of that year. Gary Sullivan recalls:

Not too long after 9/11, people began posting again, though now all of the flarfs – many of which were parodies of AP News items in some way shape or form [*sic*] addressed the aftermath of 9/11... I remember, for instance, “We’ll rebuild the Twin Towers – on your Pizza”...I started a “sadness” series – doing searches on “the horrible sadness,” “the awful sadness,” “the unending sadness,” etc., in response to what was becoming a kind of stifling national(ist) mourning. (“The Flarf Files”)

While some read this response as callous or insensitively ironic, the poets are not making fun of the tragedy but of the media’s coverage of it. Degentesh and Sullivan do not respond to the material circumstances of New York, as such – they respond to its reflection in cyberspace. As Mayer ignores the “WTC” in favor of personal interiority, so does Flarf shift its focus to media coverage of 9/11 rather than the tragedy itself.

person. In the same email that I quote in the epigraph above, Michael Magee asserts that “the web is to flarf what the telephone was to O’Hara”, but the analogy is false: the telephone puts the poem between two people, while the internet puts the poem in cyberspace, amidst a sea of anonymous readers.

Compiled as it is from Google search results, Flarf also makes the poem’s speaker an abstraction of a person. In *Memory*, at least we know *whose* mind we are exploring and *whose* voice is navigating our journey. We get a sense of Loy’s experience, or of O’Hara’s, in their poems. Flarf culls faceless voices from across the internet. As a result, the poems have speakers, but the poet stays safely behind them. Katie Degentesh’s *Anger Scale*, for example, uses questions from the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory, a “psychological test...that has been the benchmark for determining people’s mental pathologies as well as their fitness for court trials and military service since the 1930s” (75). To find the text of the poem, she Googled phrases from the test’s questions (for example: “I loved my father,” “I sometimes tease animals,” or “My hands have not become clumsy or awkward”) and selected passages from the search results (not the web pages, just the snippets offered in the list of results). The resulting poems are oddly beautiful, and a speaker’s voice coheres in each. “I Loved My Father” begins:

I loved my father and I loved Jesus.
What was I to do?
I felt like a canoe
that was being pulled apart by two strong men.

I expressed that eloquently by imitating his life,
by becoming more and more ineffectual daily.

People would generally hide from him
because he looked so American

I didn’t know that my father was controlling and manipulative

I wanted to glorify Him by paying off the debt of sinful man

At least he could've explained why
he didn't want me to play with the toy gun. (58)

A speaker does coalesce – a person wounded by growing up with a controlling father, one who was strict and, perhaps, severely Christian. Flarf poems have a voice, and beauty, but the ridiculousness of the style reminds us that this voice is a conglomeration of anonymous voices. We learn little of Degentesh's lived experience from this collection of poems; rather, we experience our shared experience of Google in a new way.

These aspects of Flarf – its lack of location, intangible medium, and anonymous speakers – may make it distant and impersonal, but we can also see it as a form that works *against* the abstractions of our cyber-era, which have the potential to isolate and alienate. While I don't think that Flarf is the “new Personism” that Magee considers it, it does answer the loss of material with the personal, as O'Hara did – albeit it with a postmodern version of the personal.⁷⁴ Frank O'Hara had only to “wonder if one person out of the 8,000,000 is / thinking of me” (*LP* 33). Flarfists have to wonder about exponentially more people than that, now that their scope is cyberspace rather than New York City. Although it is not putting a poem “between two people,” as O'Hara did, sharing poems among a listserv of thirty people, the Flarflist, narrows cyberspace significantly. Perhaps this is as personal as we can make the internet. If O'Hara's “real right thing” is no longer possible, then Flarf does what it can to make art of the internet's abstract ether. Like Loy, Flarfists make treasure of trash: spam, search results, pop-up ads, inane comments to online articles. Like Mayer, they embrace the immaterial as a

⁷⁴ At least, I read this response in some of it – the Google-sculpted Flarf, not the “un-P.C.” Flarf that I mention in the first footnote.

place to explore consciousness, but the consciousness they explore – the collective conscious of the Internet – is broader. Intangible, abstract, dislocated, and impersonal as it may be, Flarf embraces this eminently twenty-first-century abstraction – the Internet – as a site capable of poetry.

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