PARADOXICALLY RECOMPILED: DISTRACTION AND THE SENSES
IN THE SITE-SPECIFIC WORKS OF LISA ROBERTSON

by

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Abstract

My thesis examines Lisa Robertson's engagement with description in two site-specific book projects, *The Weather* and *Occasional Work and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture*. By treating description as a trace of certain ideologies of perception, I look for ways in which Robertson's prose takes up existing descriptive vocabularies, and redeploy them in an attempt to alter our perception (and conception) of certain objects, spaces, and social structures. This redeployment takes the form of what Rem Koolhaas has termed a “prospective archaeology,” which incorporates different and even contradictory discourses, and may thus prompt a variety of different readings. Formulated thus, Robertson's works provide a counterpoint to the genre of *ekphrasis*, poems addressing visual art. By equating ekphrasis with the concentrated attention that Walter Benjamin associates with sculpture and painting, I develop an analogy between Robertson’s work and the distracted engagement that Benjamin finds in film. Ultimately, I suggest that Robertson’s prose is better viewed through the media theory of Benjamin, especially his remarks on distraction and the optical unconscious. Both terms denote altered relationships with the senses, and part of my thesis seeks analogues for optical and tactile experience in Robertson’s work. The remainder takes up this analogy between literature and cinema in terms of montage, using work by Friedrich Kittler and Timothy Morton. Finally, I ask how Robertson’s texts both prompt for and exceed reading in terms of allegory and ekphrasis.
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Introduction

My thesis consists of two linked essays on Lisa Robertson, focusing on two of her most well-known works: *The Weather*, first published in 1999, and *Occasional Work and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture*, first published in 2003. My interest in these books might be framed most generally as an interest in description, and each book presents particular challenges to our understanding of that term: *Occasional Work* asks us to accept and adopt indeterminate and counterintuitive descriptions; *The Weather* plays with our desire for descriptions to possess a referent; and both books ask us to recognize the extent to which descriptions are fashioned with an eye to being repurposed, and so already exist at a certain remove from the things they describe. For this reason, I have found it convenient to focus on a series of notions that we associate more often with *perception*: recognition, distraction, and various forms of sense experience. Both distraction and the senses lead me to take up Walter Benjamin’s writings on media, and in particular his notion of the optical unconscious, where technological mediation alters our relationships to everyday sense experiences. Finally, with each work, I attempt to show how Robertson’s prose functions as a literary analogue to the optical unconscious by restructuring or reconfiguring perception.

The first chapter considers Robertson’s “occasional work” under the Office Soft Architecture pseudonym. At its most general, this chapter proceeds by investigating a series of metaphors that occur in Robertson’s essays, looking for
ways in which those metaphors (i) give shape to indeterminacies in her prose and (ii) suggests ways of working with those indeterminacies. In the process, I tentatively frame these essays using the genre of *ekphrasis*: verbal descriptions of visual phenomena, especially poetry about the plastic arts. Within this chapter, I engage ekphrasis mostly in the broader sense, asking how Robertson’s descriptions can alter our perception of the objects, spaces, and social structures that govern everyday life; but I also play with its connection to painting and sculpture by equating ekphrasis with the concentrated attention that Benjamin associates with those forms, and suggest that Robertson’s work has more in common with the distracted engagement that Benjamin finds in film.

The second chapter draws on more formal aspects of the comparison with cinema, and it ultimately considers the montage practices structuring Robertson’s *The Weather*. However, I first approach this problem through Timothy Morton’s work on nature writing, and eventually critique an analogy Morton makes between literature and film. While I think the notion of montage is essential for addressing the structure of Robertson’s work, I also want to emphasize points of dis-analogy between literary and filmic composition. Through a reading of the book’s “Sunday” section, I point to ambiguities that arise in a literary practice of montage, while a brief reading of several later sections points to Robertson’s use of more traditional montage techniques. In either case, *The Weather* offers the most explicit examples of Robertson’s prose attempting to bring something suppressed or unnoticed into view.
These chapters thus present different yet related approaches, which complement each other in useful ways: while both texts have been “paradoxically recompiled,” a phrase I’ve borrowed from Robertson’s manifesto for Soft Architecture, the effects produced by this recompilation prompt different modes of engagement in each work. *The Weather* provides an excellent opportunity for a kind of distracted reading that the Soft Architectural essays seem to resist because of their difficulty. Conversely, *Occasional Work* provides opportunities for a more direct engagement with visual phenomena, which are presented with considerable abstraction in *The Weather*. But these books also have much in common: the earliest Soft Architectural essay was written before the research at Cambridge that lead to *The Weather*, and the introduction to *The Weather* is attributed to the Office for Soft Architecture. Both works are “site specific.” Both make extensive and varied use of the first-person pronoun “we.” Both consist largely of prose, even as they interrupt that prose with other forms (the lyric portions of *The Weather*, and the photographs of *Occasional Work*). And both, as mentioned above, take up the problem of description.

There are, then, many reasons to consider these works side by side, and while I have gestured to both *The Weather* and *Occasional Work* in each chapter, I have more often left the parallels between them unexplored. It’s my hope that such parallels will suggest themselves to readers, and some become the focus for another project, but I also hope that I have managed to capture something that is particular to each text, and have implicitly contrasted their relationships to ekphrasis,
quotation, and montage. Finally, the coda that completes my thesis gestures to two ironies in the construction of the preceding chapters. While I have taken up the problem of ekphrasis, this has led to a series of allegorical readings. And while my use of ekphrasis has skewed toward its broader sense, the three Soft Architectural texts that I address in the first chapter were originally written as essays for gallery catalogues, where they would at least implicitly address particular artworks. By ending my thesis with a reading of another such essay, considered in the context of the artwork to which it responds, I hope to suggest that this latter approach is not so far removed from the readings I have produced in my chapters.
Chapter 1 // Soft Architecture: A Prospective Archaeology

1. The Work of Soft Architecture

Lisa Robertson’s Office for Soft Architecture is both a pseudonym and a conceptual project. As a pseudonym, it operated as Robertson’s byline for various essays commissioned for gallery catalogues and artist-produced magazines from 1998 to 2003, which were eventually collected in *Occasional Work and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture*. As a conceptual project, it suggests that these writings are united on certain stylistic, thematic, and theoretical grounds. These grounds first appear as such in “Soft Architecture: A Manifesto,” which Robertson points to in an interview with Kai Fierle-Hedrick when asked about her pseudonym: “When I was at Cambridge I was thinking about the manifesto I’d just written, and I started to think there were a lot of ideas in there that I hadn’t finished with. In fact, I’d introduced a group of ideas that I could continue to work with for a long time, probably” (“Lifted” 42). We can get a sense of these ideas by examining the note that prefaces Robertson’s manifesto in *Occasional Work*:

Artspeak Gallery (Vancouver) and Dazibaou Gallery (Montreal)

commissioned a text for a catalogue of the works of artists Sharyn Yuen and Josée Bernard. A theory of cloth, memory and gods emerged during afternoons in Sharyn Yuen’s studio, the Metropolitan Museum and the

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2 Collis’s essay appeared in 2002, before the publication of *Occasional Work*, but while Robertson’s
Frick Collection. This seemed to pertain to urban geography, especially to the speed and mutability of Vancouver’s built environment. The piece was later republished by Nest magazine, which commissioned Andreas Pauly to photograph curtains by Petra Blaisse. (11)

This note first speaks to some of the thematic concerns of Robertson’s occasional work: cloth and memory, speed and mutability, urban geography and the gods that peer down on that geography from on high. Second, it gives her readers a kind of omniscience — reaching back in time, then setting out the panorama of social connections that occasioned the work. But third, even within the context of this note, the work already has multiple occasions: republished and accompanied by other art, the essay proves adaptable to shifts in context and in audience.

In this chapter, I consider Robertson’s “occasional works” with an eye to their adaptability. This will begin with a reading of Robertson’s manifesto for Soft Architecture, in an attempt elucidate the foundations of her project. But in what follows, I also want to consider other iterations of these ideas as they appear in later essays — most notably, “Playing House” and “The History of Scaffolding” (Occasional Work 145–59, 131–43). Although each of the essays in Occasional Work features a note like the one for Robertson’s Manifesto, alerting the reader to the time and circumstances of its composition, my interest in their occasional quality has more to do with how these essays might differ from one other as a result, and so provide varying models for thought. I will often be using these models to think about Robertson’s prose, and ideas and metaphors from one essay will provide an entry to
the language of the others. But each of these essays provides a different set of metaphors to think with, and each will press my theorizing in a new direction: from fabric to architecture and archaeology, from vision to touch and blindness. In short, this is less an attempt to plumb each essay’s depths than to circumnavigate their possibilities.

At its most general, Soft Architecture is precisely a figure for this kind of capaciousness, conducive to various forms and objects of inquiry. The foundations for Robertson’s Soft Architecture are two interrelated metaphors: one in which the practice of poetry is likened to or exchanged with the practice of architecture, and one which sees works of fabric as themselves architectural. At first, the former metaphor seems to depend on the latter: if poetry is an architecture, then it is a “soft” architecture, analogous to a work in textiles. And yet, Occasional Work is itself a work of poetry that addresses again and again architectural spaces as they are marked out by more conventional architectural objects — parks, fountains, pavilions, scaffolding and shacks. Even without the mediation of fabric, poetry and architecture are speaking to one another, and this exchange provides the metaphor that undergirds the book’s construction. But the appeal to fabric also lends a kind of intimacy to this architectural practice, linking it to the body and to decor, which personalizes architectural space.

In Robertson’s manifesto for Soft Architecture, the exchange between poetry and architecture is explored metonymically through the work of rhythm: “The worn cotton sheets of our little beds had the blurred texture of silk crêpe and when we lay
against them in the evening we’d rub, rhythmically, one foot against the soothing folds of fabric, waiting for sleep. That way we slowly wore through the thinning cloth. […] We walked through the soft arcade. We became an architect” (18). Here, the rhythmic rubbing of foot against fabric finds a material counterpart in clusters of alliteration (in \( f, w, sl, \) and \( th \)), and this corporeal foot gives way to metrical feet when the word “rhythmically” announces a length of iambic pentameter. Robertson’s prose takes up the work of rhythm, which is thematized as the work of erosion and decay; moreover, it is erosion that creates the “soft arcade” and hence makes us an architect. In this way, Soft Architecture takes up the metaphor of fabric, but not as a metaphor for poetic composition; instead, all architecture is seen to exhibit the transitory and ephemeral nature of fabric — that is, all architecture becomes soft. (It is not, therefore, that poetry is soft, but that we require metaphor to see the transitory nature of architecture.) Similar clusters of alliteration continue throughout the poem — “grand rooms ranked in small stone,” “Carved cloth connotes,” “petticoated players in painted enamel frolics” — and they too are followed by images of wear and decay, in the form of “the speaking invalid’s couch,” and “the late Maria Callas’s vibrato” (19). In both cases, worn fabrics become a measure of the decay of human life, whereas conventional architectural discourse offers “mass rhetorics of structural permanence,” promising eternity and immortality (19). It is in this sense that Soft Architecture emerges as a “counter-discipline,” whose practice is to “manifest current conditions and dialects,” while gesturing to their transitory nature (20–21).
The work of soft architecture, while exemplified in the manifesto through the work of rhythm, will elsewhere take the form of description: “Practice description. Description is mystical. It is afterlife because it is life’s reflection or reverse” (20). Yet Robertson’s descriptions bear an ambivalent relationship to existing vocabularies:

All doctrine is foreign to us. The problem of the shape of choice is mainly retrospective. […] This nostalgia musters symbols with no relation to necessity — civic sequins, apertures that record and tend the fickleness of social gifts. Containing only supple space, nostalgia feeds our imagination’s strategic ineptitude. Forget the journals, conferences, salons, textbooks and media of dissemination. We say thought’s object is not knowledge but living. We do not like it elsewhere. (20)

While there is a flight from knowledge here, and a flight to living, we should note that this flight is “strategic.” First, to make life the object of thought is not simply to reproduce life, since the practice of description will give us “afterlife,” “life’s reflection or reverse.” Second, Robertson concatenates sites of intellectual activity, both to frame knowledge as the cultural product of a discourse community, and to recognize thought (and writing) as a form of life that exists independently of any particular discourse community. Rather than acknowledge and conform to particular strictures of knowledge production, Robertson seeks a writing that is both the product of nostalgia and, conversely, a record of “the fickleness of social gifts,” which might well be nostalgia’s antidote. That these are social gifts suggests a writing that evolves in relation to a civic community, a writing that entertains both a “nostalgic”
position from within that community, and an objective position — or “record” — from without. It also recognizes a difference between this civic community and the communities that govern knowledge. Nonetheless, her command to forget knowledge and its particular cultural forms (the essay, the lecture, the report) is made only partly in earnest: Soft Architecture will borrow the look and feel of various knowledges to its own ends. As Robertson herself puts it, “The work of the SA paradoxically recompiles the metaphysics of surface” and “makes new descriptions on the warp of former events” (21).

2. Prospective Archaeology

The repeated invocation of nostalgia in the above passage, and elsewhere in Robertson’s oeuvre, requires a careful gloss. Paul Stephens has suggested that, “[f]or Robertson, to engage in practices of nostalgia, or practices of the obsolescent, is to refuse to be useful, particularly to ‘the old bolstering narratives’ of the nation. The angel of history must be assisted by ‘history’s dystopian ghosts’ in order to rewrite the past” (16; “How Pastoral” 25). Later, Stephens compares Occasional Work to the “retroactive manifestoes” of Rem Koolhaas, and specifically his Delirious New York, which “describes a theoretical Manhattan, a Manhattan as conjecture, of which the present city is the compromised and imperfect realization” (Stephens 18; Koolhaas 11, emphasis in original). Stephens’s essay thus portrays Occasional Work as a kind of Delirious Vancouver, and this portrayal necessitates a re-inscription of the real Vancouver against Robertson’s utopian blueprint. Meanwhile, in an essay that brings the theoretical foundations of Occasional Work to bear on
Robertson’s earlier books, Stephen Collis forges a different link between Koolhaas and Robertson, arising from the idea of an “architecture of revision.” Collis reads Robertson’s work alongside that of Ronald Johnson and Robert Duncan, and investigates the interplay between architecture and avant-garde poetics more generally while typifying the production of each poet. While Collis’s reading of Robertson progresses using an analogy borrowed from Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, he quotes Koolhaas as an entrance to Robertson’s work: “An architecture of revision would maintain evidence of past ideologies for the assessment of new building and prevent a single new ideology from becoming paradigmatic and thus above verification. New construction obliterates what exists: it is loss of memory. But an architecture of revision can maintain the viable, modify the untenable” (Collis 155; Office for Metropolitan Architecture 241). While Stephens uses the retroactive manifesto as an approach to Robertson’s nostalgia — an approach thatironically places emphasis on a contemporary Vancouver and its utopian double — it’s Collis, through Koolhaas’s “architecture of revision,” who engages the past as it is brought into the present, through the work of nostalgia and memory.

I want to take up this architecture of revision as it is elaborated by Koolhaas, who envisions it as the vehicle of a “prospective archaeology,” a notion that might reorient us to Robertson’s Occasional Work (OMA 241). The passage cited by Collis

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2 Collis’s essay appeared in 2002, before the publication of Occasional Work, but while Robertson’s essays were appearing in magazines and being presented as talks. Thus, while his essay takes certain cues from Robertson’s Soft Architectural project, it doesn’t directly engage the Soft Architectural essays.
occurs in a proposal for the renovation of a very real panopticon prison in Arnhem, the Netherlands. Koolhaas begins by noting that, ironically, the physical structure of the panopticon was, in 1981, more conducive to then-current ideals of incarceration than prisons built just ten years prior. Koolhaas notes that the large, empty space between the inner tower and the outer cells of the panopticon creates an architectural “margin” — a space of flexibility in use, which has allowed the panopticon to adapt to various reforms in incarceration (239–40). Paradoxically, this margin is necessitated by Bentham’s “ideological purity,” and appears as an unintended excess in an overdetermined architectural program (240). While I will return to the notion of margin at the end of this chapter, what interests me here is the other lesson that Koolhaas draws from the panopticon. Reflecting on the shifting views of incarceration since its construction, Koolhaas notes that “[t]here is no reason to believe that the continuous transformation of current views on the ideal prison will soon come to an end. On the contrary, the ever-changing attitudes toward detention may be one of the most acute indicators of changing values in society”:

The Arnhem Koepel was built at a moment of complete confidence, based on a collective ideal that could be translated directly and unambiguously into architecture. But the consensus among the state, theorists, ideologues, and architects that existed when the Keopel was built has evaporated. Now, the consolidation of divergent opinions, needs and ambitions in the freeze-frame that a new architecture inevitably represents can only be realized at the expense of internal contradiction.
Prisons have been built where the building offers a degree of enlightenment beyond that of the regime, or where the regime attempts to invalidate the modernity of the building. (241)

In response to this impasse, Koolhaas proposes that “[a] ‘modern’ prison architecture would consist of a prospective archaeology, constantly projecting new layers of ‘civilization’ on old systems of supervision. The sum of modifications would reflect the never-ending evolution of systems of discipline” (241). Returning to the passage quoted by Collis, which directly follows this sentence, we can see that such an architecture is less revisionary in itself and more open to prospective revisions. Its goal is not to augment or extend outdated ideologies, nor is it to parody them; instead, an entire history of architectural practice is modelled simultaneously in an effort to present all that is viable, rejecting only the untenable (OMA 241).

In applying Koolhaas to Robertson, Collis notes the latter’s interest in “the ideological construction of gender, genre, the natural (pastoral), identity, and the rhetorics of sincerity and description.” In the context of an archaeology of revision, Robertson’s work “parade[s] fabrication and the outmoded, dallying with some of the past’s most questionable constructions, only to propel toward the newly revised, the tentatively arrived pause amidst the flux of time-bound definitions” (155). In what follows, he pays particular attention to Robertson’s appropriation of neo-classical rhetoric, and her deployment of gendered constructions to feminist ends; but while Robertson’s book wants to be utopian, it also reminds us that nothing is, and Soft Architects “face the reaching middle” (21). Compared with the parade and dalliance
that precedes it, the idea of a pause amidst flux seems like a recapitulation of the ekphrastic principle, which turns Rem Koolhaas into Murray Krieger. For Collis, Robertson becomes a poet who is decidedly of the present, and he repeatedly aligns her work with the ornamentation of surface (150–51, 152, 155–59); meanwhile, Robert Duncan emerges as the poet of the city, of space and the past, whose work is “built up in layers of remembrance and echo as the poetry expands within the time of its reading” (148). Perhaps this is the reason that Collis omits Koolhaas’s notion of a prospective archaeology, which seems more applicable to Duncan in his construal, and which elides the distinction he makes between these poets. The problem is not just that this is a gendered distinction, where Duncan is a poet of space and Robertson a poet of surfaces; or that there is a certain irony here, in that the passage from Koolhaas, which Collis associates with Robertson, is in fact about spatial surplus. Rather, this metaphorical distinction between space and surface itself seems to be false, and it is by undoing this distinction that a prospective archaeology comes into view.

Of course, Collis is interested in earlier texts by Robertson, in which this concern with space is less apparent. Moreover, even in the context of *Occasional Work*, Robertson opens the way for such a reading when she writes that “Soft Architecture will reverse the wrongheaded story of structural deepness” and “paradoxically recompile the metaphysics of surface” while “performing a horizontal research” (21). But to “reverse” this story is not exactly to begin anew, nor is it to turn away from the problem of space. Robertson’s remarks suggest that surface can
indeed become an entrance to space, and that the surface-space binary is therefore untenable. After all, a space is defined or marked out by a collection of surfaces; and conversely, it is by virtue of the space surrounding a surface that we can experience that surface at all, whether by touch or by sight, by sounding or echolocation. The history of surface is thus already a history of space, whether that history is composed as metaphysics or nostalgic phenomenologies — and neither of these alternatives, on their own, would be adequate for a prospective archaeology. The “we” of Soft Architecture slides between that of lovers and readers, community and authority, celebrity and experimenter. In the process, vocabularies that have been developed in one discipline are spliced into another where they have been foreclosed: the Soft Architect wanders among the portraits of the Frick Collection and thinks instead about its decorative objects, only to label those objects “personified”; she sees sculpture as “[c]arved cloth,” its human figures akin to dressmakers’ dummies or mannequins, but without abandoning “the Christly sexual parts” that “swirl” underneath (18). Gestures of adding and subtracting the human sit comfortably alongside one another, distributing attention across surfaces that would otherwise go unperceived. Finally, in paradoxically recompiling these discourses, each combination suggests alternatives, and tensions between competing discourses must be resolved in the reading.

Perhaps the clearest example of a prospective archaeology in Robertson’s prose comes from her essay “Playing House: A Brief Account of the Idea of the Shack” (Occasional Work 145–59). At first, this essay seems more prosaic than the
others in *Occasional Work*, but this makes Robertson’s assemblage of independent and at times contradictory discourses more obvious. The essay features long quotations from Vitruvius, Leon Battista Alberti, Marc-Antoine Laugier, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Henry David Thoreau. Each of these figures provides Robertson with an account of some minimal or originary architectural structure, which they name using various terms in various languages (hut, shelter, and dwelling are some of the terms and translations used in Robertson’s sources), but Robertson reads each of these structures as a shack. Thus, for Thoreau, the shack is the material embodiment of a universalized necessity, in which even a doormat, offered not incidentally by a woman, would be “the beginnings of evil” (qtd. in *Occasional Work* 155). For Rousseau, the shack itself is the original evil, since it is coincident with the advent of property, and thus of competition and conflict in the search for shelter (155–56). For Laugier, the shack arises through man’s failure to accommodate himself to the natural landscape (151). For Alberti, the shack suggests the inaugural division of human activities in space (156). Finally, for Vitruvius, the shack is the architectural correlate of the human capacity for language, where the sharing of techniques learned from animals gives rise to a human architectural form (157–58). Robertson refers to Vitruvius’s remarks in particular as a “shack story,” and this is the last such story presented, the earliest account reproduced, and the story that seems most important for Robertson’s concluding remarks on the shack (which it directly precedes). We might say that the “progress” of the shack stories Robertson assembles is counter to the progress of history; ending as it does with classicism,
the essay risks being read as neoclassicism. But the essay is also an attempt to
elude this model of intellectual history as a progress narrative, where the old may be
productively displaced with the new. By preserving the sometimes distressing,
sometimes engaging arguments of Thoreau and Rousseau, Robertson prevents the
social narrative of Vitruvius from being “above verification,” carrying forward their
interests in minimalism and insecurity even as she refigures them.

When Robertson refers to Vitruvius’s remarks as a “shack story,” this phrase
is apparent as the textual precipitate of an ever increasing correspondence between
these two nouns, and Vitruvius’s narrative linking architecture and language is only
the literalization of a trope that has been in play from the beginning. Laugier’s
account of the shack is “filmic” and “a story” (151); Rousseau and Vitruvius both give
accounts of the shack as and at the origins of mimesis; and “[w]e read the shack[’s]
inventories as legends” (155). When Robertson suggests that the shack “follows
from the sociality of speech,” “choreographs bodily habit,” or “tentatively supplies a
syntax for temporal passage” (157–58), these ideas are facilitated by a comparison
with narrative, where the plastic art of the shack and the verbal art of language
become interchangeable. At times, this prompts a nearly allegorical interpretation,
where Robertson’s essay is itself a shack, which “sees through other eyes,” and it
figures its prospective archaeology as “a series, or an ecology, of looking” (152). But
this observation can play out at two levels: one where Robertson sees through the
eyes of Vitruvius et al., and one where Robertson uses non-western ways of
knowing to engage a European intellectual history. In particular, Robertson’s essay
recalls John Borrows’s descriptions of Anishinabek storytelling in *Drawing Out Law*, where thinking through stories is presented as a form of political and legal decision-making (212–14; see also 71–72; Kovach 94–96). With its appeal to a series of stories, and with its lack of regard for a history given over to chronology, Robertson’s essay might thus be construed as an attempt, not just to see through other eyes, but to see through the eyes of the other while recognizing that we are still ourselves: “The shack is a pliant site that adds to our ideas new tropes, gestures learned from neighbours, creatures, moot economies, landscape, and the vigour of our own language in recombination.” This recombination resists universalizing by framing this process as a kind of learning that, at the essay’s conclusion, gives rise to a questioning of the self: “We love shacks because they pose impossible questions. How can we change what we need? How can we fearlessly acknowledge weakness as an animate and constructive content of collectivity? The city is the shack inside out” (158). To change what we need, to fearlessly acknowledge weakness: these are the contemporary imperatives of the settler, and “seeing through other eyes” can only function as a technique for asking such questions of the self. When the essay concludes by embracing “the delicious series of our transience” (158), it echoes an observation near its beginning, where the shack becomes an antidote to settling: “One sojourns, or starts out, rather than settles, in a shack” (150).

By creating an ecology of looking that functions as a prospective archaeology, “Playing House” takes up a link between perception and ideology that resounds across *Occasional Work*, and which I will later explore in *The Weather*. And yet,
even within the Soft Architectural essays, there are few places where the source materials for Robertson’s recombinations can be isolated and examined in the manner of “Playing House.” As the unit of recombination moves from the architectural narrative to the individual words or locutions that may fashion a description, the recognition of component parts is obscured. To return to the manifesto for Soft Architecture: “Under the pavement, pavement. Hoaxes, failures, porches, archaeological strata spread out on a continuous thin plane, softness and speed, echoes, spores, tropes, fonts; not identity but incident and the accumulation of air miles” (20). While we can continue to think about these essays as interventions in perception, the perception that results is more likely to be attributed to the soft architect than to any identifiable “other.”

3. Distraction, Ekphrasis, and the Optical Unconscious

The viewpoint of the soft architect returns us to the experience of surface as a way to re-articulate vision, and in what remains of this chapter, I want to develop this relationship between sight and surface through various ideas of tactility. As mediated by language, perception returns us to the imperative to “make description” in Robertson’s manifesto. As Susan Stewart writes in *On Longing*,

Descriptions must rely upon an economy of significance which is present in all of culture’s representational forms, an economy which is shaped by generic conventions and not by aspects of the material world itself. […] Not our choice of object, but our choice of aspect and the hierarchical organization of detail, will be emergent in and will reciprocally effect the
prevailing social construction of reality. [...] Literature cannot mime the world; it must mime the social. It cannot escape history, the burden of signification born by language before literature takes it up. (26)

Description is thus the material trace of a mode of perception, which in turn becomes a mechanism for the perpetuation of that perception: perception becomes an ideology, and a burden that literature cannot escape. In Robertson’s case, we can associate this burden with the notion of ekphrasis, which refers to both the genre of poems addressing visual art and, more generally, any verbal description of a visual phenomenon. Insofar as four of the Soft Architectural essays were written for gallery catalogues, and each essay follows a dossier of photographs, the label ekphrasis is in some ways unavoidable. Yet traditional approaches to ekphrasis are not always applicable to Robertson’s practice.

Murray Krieger’s classic essay on “The Ekphrastic Principle” presents poems and art objects engaged in a kind of exchange: the poem “gives voice” to movement and narrative that must appear frozen in the artwork; the artwork provides an anchor for the poem’s language, which in turn “stills” the temporal movement that is inherent in language and narration (107, 125, 127). It is this last exchange that most interests Krieger, and even poetry that is not ekphrastic per se may achieve such a result “through all sorts of repetitions, echoes, complexes of internal relations,” which convert “its temporally unrepeatable flow into eternal recurrence” (105). But the former exchange is equally recognizable in poetry generally, and we have already encountered a version of it in Collis’s “tentatively arrived pause amidst the flux of
time-bound definitions” (155). Of course, as W.J.T. Mitchell has suggested, there is no intrinsic connection between this division between media (writing vs. visual art) and the divisions in terms of representation we map onto it, such as a distinction between time and space, or between narrative and still life (“Ekphrasis and the Other” 159–62). Everything we say in language might equally well be expressed in an image — except that such forms of expression are not yet conventional; we are not used to putting images in syntactic or pragmatic relations with one other, outside certain forms of popular media, such as the comic and the montage.

With cinema in mind, we might return to Robertson’s shack essay and her elaboration of Alberti. When Alberti notes a correspondence between the division of space and the division of activities, he is already making of space a language: a program that allows visual, spatial forms to refer to activity — in particular, to refer to the coordination of action and time, and hence narrative. Robertson, in turn, re-articulates this visual inscription of narrative by aligning it with a twentieth-century example where “the shack choreographs bodily habit”:

Recall the film *An American in Paris*. In the artist’s studio (one of the city’s variations on the self-sufficiency of the pastoral shack), Gene Kelly danced this quotidian gestural economy with the architectural surfaces and the furnishings themselves. In the shack, the implied trajectories from bed to stove, from stove to door, from door to larder shelf, animate space with the vivacity of the body. The subject, absent, is nevertheless
immanent in the shack’s surfaces and in the ordinance of its spaces.

(157)
The subject, in its simultaneous immanence and absence, marks the shack as a form of writing. And while a slippage between “shack” and “story” supports her claims for the shack as a record of bodily habit, this record depends upon an unspoken association between objects and habits — that is, objects become a clearly visual language for bodily activities, independent of an appeal to verbal narratives. (The scene Robertson refers to, while not acted out in silence, is appropriately wordless.) Thus, in the context of Robertson’s shack essay, aspects of Krieger’s hypothesis become unintelligible as a suppressed language of furnishings and surfaces comes to the fore.

Now, when Robertson suggests displacing the discourse of space with one of surfaces (8, 21), her call echoes one by Walter Benjamin. Near the end of “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility,” amid his own remarks about architecture, Benjamin approaches a distinction between concentration and distraction using examples that each play with the relationship between space and surface. First, concentrated engagement is associated with painting and sculpture, which he typifies under a notion of “absorption”: “A person who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it; he enters into the work, just as, according to legend, a Chinese painter entered his completed painting while beholding it” (40). In contrast, Benjamin points to building as an art form “received in a twofold manner: by use and by perception. Or, better: tactilely and optically”:
Such reception cannot be understood in terms of the concentrated traveller before the famous building. On the tactile side, there is no counterpart to what contemplation is on the optical side. Tactile reception comes about not so much by way of attention as by way of habit. The latter largely determines even the optical reception of architecture, which spontaneously takes the form of casual noticing, rather than attentive observation. (40)

To be clear, it is not that the tactile is opposed to the optical. What Benjamin envisions are two modes of optical reception: the first strives for a pure optical encounter, a “devotion” to the artwork (39); the second arises through habit and tactility, where the perceiver is preoccupied with the demands of everyday life. That this distracted engagement is associated with both architecture and film suggests another layer to this opposition. While contemplation turns surface into space, distraction allows spaces (urban, architectural, and otherwise — the spaces of everyday life) to be projected on a screen without the need to enter them. This points to a complex and even compromised tactility informing visual experience: while these images may be understood in relation to habit, the viewer does not inhabit them.

Of course, the general thrust of Benjamin’s essay is to chart the effects of mechanical reproducibility on our visual engagement with artworks, even as this revolution is the result of a desire for tactility. As Benjamin writes, “the aura’s present decay […] rests on two circumstances”: “the desire of the present-day masses to
‘get closer’ to things, and their equally passionate concern for overcoming each thing’s uniqueness by assimilating it as a reproduction” (23). This desire to “get closer” is both a desire for ownership and a desire for tactility; indeed, in a subsequent sentence, “get closer” becomes “get hold of an object at close range” — that is, to reach out and touch it.3 But we also see a restructuring of touch through the proliferation of reproductions: it is not the particularity of the object that warrants touching, but the way in which that object is exemplary of, not an original object, but other reproductions. Both tactility and vision are asked to apprehend an object in a limited or constrained particularity, and it is in this context that actual contact becomes unnecessary. Even a visual image can be representative of a tactile experience.

Fortunately, there is another, potentially positive effect arising from these “profound changes in apperception” (41): technological reproducibility induces a shift from “the extremely backward attitude toward a Picasso painting” to “a highly progressive reaction to a Chaplin film” (36). Moreover, even the relationship between the masses and everyday life can be reorganized or extended by visual media. Such instances of reorganization and extension are what Benjamin refers to as the “optical unconscious,” and here, too, tactility and motility are paramount:

We are familiar with the movement of picking up a cigarette lighter or a spoon, but know almost nothing about what really goes on between hand and metal, and still less how this varies with different moods. This is

3 Here in particular, my reading of Benjamin is indebted to two works by Michael Taussig, “Tactility and Distraction” and Mimesis and Alterity, which helped me connect Benjamin’s remarks about architecture to other sections of the “Work of Art” essay.
where the camera comes into play, with all its resources for swooping and
rising, disrupting and isolating, stretching or compressing a sequence,
enlarging or reducing an object. It is through the camera that we first
discover the optical unconscious, just as we discover the instinctual
unconscious through psychoanalysis. (37)

In all these cases, Benjamin is interested in an exchange between established
habits. Contemplation before the Picasso painting is a habit, which, as Sarah Ahmed
would say, requires a certain “orientation” toward the artwork. And we might even
say that recognition in distraction is precisely habit composed of other habits:
through the optical unconscious, distraction illuminates aspects of everyday life that
are suppressed through routine, using a synaesthesia that is facilitated by
technologically mediated representations. In other words, distraction is formulated as
a kind of exchange between sense experiences; the optical unconscious redoubles
such effects via technological mediation, and what we might call the habits of
distraction that accompany such technologies. But even in its most elementary
forms, distracted experience opens the way for a reorganization of perception along
lines that disrupt the pattern of contemplation, displacing a habit of the mind with one
of the body.

This brings us back to the relationship between Robertson’s essays and
ekphrasis. Ekphrastic writing can exemplify precisely the contemplation before the
artwork that Benjamin attributes to sculpture and painting; distracted experience
opens the way for a reorganization of perception along lines that disrupt the pattern
of such contemplation. The example from *An American in Paris* proves exemplary, correlating as it does cinema, architecture, distraction, and especially habit, which provides the framework for this visual language. Similarly, Robertson’s own artwork might come to function as a textual variation of Benjamin’s optical unconscious, allowing “new tasks of apperception” to be performed on ordinary spaces by a compounding and confusion of both intellectual and bodily habits. Even if our tradition of visual description is already aligned with contemplation, literature can reconfigure our perception of space by running the language of description into the language-like structures of habit. In this way, Robertson can stage tactility or distraction within the ekphrastic project.

4. Blindfold: Tactility and Indeterminacy

In presenting Robertson’s writing as a verbal form of the optical unconscious, I am taking a cue from Michael Taussig, who makes this claim for the writings of Benjamin (“Tactility and Distraction” 148). Exemplary here is a fragment, originally collected in “One Way Street,” that links the death of criticism with the birth of advertising: “What, in the end, makes advertisements so superior to criticism? Not what the moving red neon sign says — but the fiery pool reflecting it in the asphalt” (173–74). To which Taussig adds: “not language, but image; and not just the image but its tactility and the new magic thereof […], all of which puts reading, close or otherwise, literal and metaphoric, in another light of dubious luminosity” (147). If at this point Taussig is speaking more about reading images than reading texts, it is not that we can simply ignore his challenge. But, in a book where the pictures give
way to text, the hierarchy of the neon sign, where language is translated and displaced until it becomes a tactile magic, may need to be rethought. If Robertson’s texts, through their appeals to habit, carry with them a knowledge that is “not sense so much as sensuousness […]”, a knowledge that is imageric and sensate rather than ideational” (141), then perhaps her language bears a more direct relation to the fiery pool than to the neon sign.

Tactility would seem to have a special place in Soft Architecture, just as it does in Benjamin’s theory of distraction. But it’s worth questioning what exactly we mean by tactility in these contexts, especially given its association with architecture. In actuality, our motion through familiar architectural spaces involves a rather limited tactility: our footsteps touch the floor; our hands interact with doorknobs and handles, elevator buttons and the railings in stairwells. But as we move through architectural space, the point is precisely not to experience the walls that define the space and that constrain the movement of our body. These surfaces are apprehended not tactiley but visually — although this is a vision directed by the possibility of tactile experience, exemplified most dramatically by the prospect of walking into a wall. Ironically, the “tact” of moving though these spaces involves the avoidance of touch. Indeed, the surfaces we experience with our bodies more fully are those that are classified as furniture.

Benjamin’s reference to touch in architecture is a metonymy, then, for a certain kind of vision, and distraction and absorption represent two versions of optics — with and without tactility. Yet the tactility in this coordinated vision is
predominately virtual; indeed, following the work of Jean-Luc Nancy, we might point to a virtual tactility inherent in all space, which Nancy explores using the notion of “areality” in the eponymous section of Corpus: “Areality is an antique word, signifying the nature or specificity of an aire (‘area’). By chance, this word also serves to suggest a lack of reality, or rather a slight, faint, suspended reality: the reality of a swerve [écart] localizing the body, or a displacement within the body” (43). We should note that Nancy’s areality is not just suspended but distributed, since “it makes the whole areal real,” and “reunites the infinity of maximal existence... with the finite absolute of an areal horizon.” Moreover, Nancy cautions that “[t]his ‘reunion’ is not a mediation,” and that, at the site of the body, “[t]he finite and the infinite do not pass into one another, they do not dialecticize each other or sublimate the place to a point, or concentrate reality into a substratum.” While l’écart above carries the sense of both ‘space’ and ‘difference,’ and is thus translated as “swerve,” what Nancy emphasizes in this section is a twofold phenomena that does not admit reduction. We find here a compelling analogy developing between Nancy’s twofold phenomenon and Benjamin’s twofold perception, an analogy that spills over into the subsequent section of Corpus. In the fragment titled “Mystery?” (43–47), areality is cautiously aligned with touch while being contrasted with Plato’s epoptei, which Nancy glosses as follows: “Epopteia, completed sight — meaning the sight that brings us beyond initiation (which only ‘understands’) to ‘contemplation,’ a ‘super-sight’ that is a ‘devouring of the eyes’ (the eye devouring its very self), a grasping and finally a touching: the very absolute of touching, touching-the-other as being-
touched, each being absorbed and devoured in the other” (45). Here again is Benjamin’s absorption, and as Nancy suggests this too involves a kind of tactility, but a tactility that mediates. In contrast, when space and surface are animated by touch, something is kept apart from that experience. Something remains virtual and unresolved.

For Benjamin, the vision that is borne of tactility is really a shorthand for both prior knowledge and recognition within the field of vision. While I believe such moments of recognition occur in Robertson’s prose, her texts are never absorbed or devoured by their visual, experiential other. Again and again, details appear that resist assimilation in the scenes of memory and habit. The list that includes “archaeological strata spread out on a continuous thin plane,” whose beginning I quoted earlier, expands to encompass “a brief history of escalators; […]; a crumpling of automotive glass; the pornographic, the wrapped; [and] Helvetica's black dust” (20). The suburb “yields only negative ontologies” (30). “The white wall is a phantasized exoskeleton, not so much a screen memory as a ghostly amnesia” (122). And from the “Introduction to The Weather” comes the following passage, which is exemplary of such difficulties on a larger scale:

> How should we adorn mortality now? This is a serious political question. Sincerity’s eroticism is different from wit’s. The narcotic and cosmetic each distribute a space. They sculpt what rhythmmed peace could be. Within that chiaroscuro we need to gently augment the fraught happiness
of our temporary commons by insisting on utopian delusion as a passage — like a wet pergola or a triumphal arch against blue. (60)

Here and elsewhere, relations between abstractions are set up; each abstraction comes to seem metonymic of some aspect of everyday life, but which aspect is unclear. We pass from one pair of abstractions to another — adornment and mortality, politics and eroticism, sincerity and wit, the narcotic and the cosmetic, temporary commons and utopian delusion — but these divisions are not mapped onto one another, and while all these categories might be quotidian, there is no part of everyday life that cannot be placed under their banner. When concrete details appear, in the form of the wet pergola and triumphal arch, or “Helvetica’s black dust” and the crumpled automotive glass, they seem only to testify to the capaciousness of the categories that precede them.

Such abstractions suggest a certain “apartness,” a refusal to be completely absorbed by any referent, which is marked adverbially later in the manifesto for Soft Architecture: “We recommenders of present action have learned to say ‘perhaps’ our bodies produce space; ‘perhaps’ our words make a bunting canopy; ‘perhaps’ the hand-struck, palpable wall is an anti-discipline; ‘perhaps’ by the term ‘everyday life’ we also mean the potential” (20–21). This isn’t simply a hesitation, but it does suggest that any recognition that might be prompted by such fragments is less likely to be instantaneous, and more likely a process that takes time. This too suggests the sense of touch, and Susan Stewart has theorized touch expressly as such a process:
[A] key difference between the temporal immediacy of visual perception under the grid of single-point perspective and the spatial immediacy of tactile impressions is the latter’s motility. To experience the toughness or smoothness of an object, to examine its physical position or come to understand its relative temperature or moistness, we must move, turn, take time. Visual perception can immediately organize a field; tactile perception requires temporal comparison. We may say in fact that visual perception becomes a mode of touching when comparisons are made and the eye is “placed upon” or “falls upon” relations between phenomena. (164–65)

Stewart’s remarks on touch affirm part of what we have already seen in Benjamin and Nancy: tactility is still a shorthand for a twofold perception. But her remarks also create a problem in our understanding of tactility and distraction in terms of temporality. In Stewart’s work, temporal associations suggested by Benjamin and Taussig have been inverted: tactility is associated with the process of taking time, and vision is immediate as opposed to contemplative.

Perhaps this aspect of perception is most apparent when we remove sight from our interaction with the environment, as Sarah Ahmed does at the beginning of her *Queer Phenomenology*. Taking up a philosophical example used by both Kant and Heidegger, Ahmed asks what difference it would make “to walk blindfolded in a room that is familiar compared to one that is not”: 


If we are in a strange room, one whose contours are not part of our memory map, then the situation is not so easy. [...] At the same time our intimacy with rooms, even dark ones, can allow us to navigate our way. We might reach out and feel a wall. That we know how a wall feels, or even what it does (that it marks, as it were, the edge of the room) makes the dark room already familiar. We might walk slowly, touching the wall, following it, until we reach a door. (7)

Ahmed’s example condenses and reinforces a number of ideas that we have already seen: the co-determining nature of surface and space; a sense of space as inherently tactile; and a contrast between the speed of vision and the relative slowness of tactility. But Ahmed also finds that “the differentiation between strange and familiar [in this example] is not sustained. Even in a strange or unfamiliar environment we might find our way, given our familiarity with social form, with how the social is arranged.” This brings us back to Benjamin’s concern with habit, which Ahmed spatializes using a notion of inhabitance: “The work of inhabiting space involves a dynamic negotiation between what is familiar and unfamiliar, such that it is still possible for the world to create new impressions, depending on which way we turn, which affects what is within reach” (7–8).

What Ahmed’s example gives us is a clearly tactile formation of the optical unconscious. While the “optical” in “optical unconscious” is already in some sense “tactile,” Ahmed’s example reminds us that cinematic or photographic mediation is just another form of sensory deprivation, not so unlike a blindfolded encounter with a
room. This deprivation facilitates synaesthesia, and the action of this synaesthesia might be stated as the paradox I have been approaching via two different figurations of touch. In the first case, touching provides a metonymy for vision — that is, a vision informed by habit and routine, which carries habitual relationships between objects and our bodies. In the second case, touching is what we rely on when our vision is obstructed or interrupted by an unexpected surface. This surface emerges as something that has not been recognized, that we must take time to encounter, and which distracts or detracts from the task at hand. In both Ahmed’s and Benjamin’s examples, one of these modalities is suppressed while the other is made strange, and as habit tries to fill the gap, new impressions emerge. If a literary work offers us an ambivalence about both modalities, so much the better. The essays of Occasional Work and the poems of The Weather are both recombinations of habitual movements, gestures, and speech acts, and we at times inhabit them as if we recognize their routine. But, insofar as these units are paradoxically recompiled, they give rise to indeterminacies that thwart the trajectory implied by such routines, and demand a different form of recognition. It is in this sense that Robertson’s texts function as an optical unconscious, and train us in new forms of apperception.

Finally, with Ahmed’s example in mind, we might return to the “hand-struck, palpable wall” that is also an “anti-discipline,” remembering that Soft Architecture itself is figured as a “counter-discipline” on the following page of the manifesto (20–21). This, our last metaphor for the work of Soft Architecture, is most persuasively explored in “Doubt and the History of Scaffolding,” where Robertson enlivens the
scaffold with serial definitions. Etymologically, it comes from “scalado, to storm by mounting a wall by ladders” (138). Elsewhere, the scaffold is: “a pause, an inflection of passage,” an “analogy,” “a system, not an organism,” “a furnishing,” “a skin,” and “a grove” (140). The scaffold “lists”; it “explains what a wall is without being a wall”; and it “describes by desiring the wall, which is the normal method of description” (139). While the remainder of the essay is spent elaborating the metaphors of furnishing, skin, and grove — at least two of which might serve to reinforce our discourse of tactility — the twofold relationship between the scaffold and the wall forms the most productive metaphor for indeterminacy. While the prose itself seems to obstruct us, it is as much our readerly habits: the wall becomes a metaphor for the difficulty of abandoning our routine. The scaffold both describes the wall and provides us with a means to surmount it. But more than this, the scaffold is “a furnishing insofar as it supports the desires of our bodies. It’s moveable and it faces us. We orient it to our transient needs. […] A scaffold sketches a body letting go of proprietary expectation, or habit, in order to be questioned by change” (141).

To return to Koolhaas, we might say that Robertson’s prose alerts us to the margin that surrounds us: a space for the revision of habit and the perceptions it determines. Of course, the literal scaffold would testify to the margin surrounding any piece of architecture, where the work of its revision takes place. But the “moveable” quality of the scaffold suggests a different, metaphorical margin: it points to both the “occasional” work of the prose and the ability of that prose to transcend any particular occasion. This is not the result of any legible directive: like the fiery
pool in the asphalt, these essays attract and sustain us without necessarily becoming intelligible. What each essay does is to bring elements of a periphery into view, elements that are assembled and reassembled as our orientation changes. In this way, Soft Architecture provides less a flash of illumination than an unending work; the scaffold reminds us that this is a normal state of affairs.
Chapter 2 // “We Design It a Flickering”: Motion, Pictures and *The Weather*

Scaffolding, shacks, furniture, fabric: all of these are part of a material ecology that exceeds individual experience, leading us back to the social. As Benjamin reminds us, this is also the potential of film: “The function of film is to train human beings in the apperceptions and reactions needed to deal with a vast apparatus whose role in their lives is expanding almost daily” (26). Film thus structures a shift in perception, moving from the individual to the “vast” social apparatus that surrounds them, a shift that we observed in Robertson’s Soft Architectural writings. In what follows, I want to examine an analogy between cinema and literature that will ultimately take up these grounds, but I want to begin with the notion of ambience, which is perhaps the other side of distraction. Certainly, we can use ambience to think about spatial experience, and we might say that Benjamin’s “artwork that is received in a state of distraction” (40) is simply another name for ambient art. That said, ambience may also denote a specifically pastoral counterpart to distraction, and this shift in vocabulary marks a transposition of the spatial concerns of *Occasional Work* onto the rural landscapes of *The Weather*.

In *Ecology without Nature*, Timothy Morton outlines a poetics of ambience whose components he attempts to delimit and define, particularly in relation to environmental ekphrasis, or, using Morton’s own terminology, *ecomimesis*. While in general Morton’s lexicon leaves something to be desired, certain elements of that lexicon promise to illuminate otherwise occluded aspects of ekphrastic practice.
Chief among these is the *re-mark*, a term Morton borrows from Derrida, but repurposes to his own ends. Within Derrida’s thought, the iteration of this term that is the most conducive to environmental thinking occurs in the “Outwork” that begins *Dissemination*, and the re-mark is there presented as the thing which, in removing itself from a discourse, constitutes that discourse as the unbounded remainder (54). But Morton’s re-mark is elusive even with this framing, and he finds it operating in avant-garde works of sculpture and sound art, which play with the boundaries of art itself⁴ — for example, the sculptures of Andy Goldsworthy, which are assembled out of nature and eventually dissolve back into it; and Alvin Lucier’s “I Am Sitting In a Room,” where a recording is gradually obscured by reverberations in the room in which it is being played and re-recorded.

These works quite literally efface the difference that separates the work from its environment, and their literary equivalent would perhaps be the engraved sculpture-poems of Ian Hamilton Finlay. In contrast, Morton’s poetic examples come largely from nature writing and Romantic literature (Morton is a Romanticist). In what follows, I will attempt to bridge this divide between experimental art and poetry using Robertson’s *The Weather*, a poem that brings the avant-garde tendency of Morton’s other examples to the literary field that is the focus of his book. In part, this will point to some limitations of even the more useful terms in his vocabulary, but it will also draw attention to aspects of Robertson’s poem that have thus far eluded critical comment. Finally, I will conclude by reflecting on how this reading relates to the

⁴ This too is a Derridean move, owing an obvious debt to *The Truth in Painting* and the “Parergon” essay in particular, which makes an explicit connection between the parergon and the re-mark.
general reception of Robertson’s work, and how this reception might be complicated by a closer examination of her poetics.

Walking and “Sunday”

*The Weather* begins with a prose poem called “Sunday,” which is immediately notable for its repeated use of the deictic adverb “here.” Like the works of sound art cited by Morton, this “shifter” suggests a frame with variable content, and it usually functions as a cue to consider one’s immediate space or environment — although, in writing, *here* is almost always a *there*. It also suggests the kind of minimalism that for Morton is vital to the re-mark. The poem begins as follows:

> About here. All along here. All along here. All the soft coercions. Maybe black and shiny, wrinkled. A sky marbled with failures. A patterned revision. And got here about one o’clock. And got here wet to the skin. And here are houses too, here and there. And luck, too, whenever. And here experienced the benefits. And here again wisps. And here gained real knowledge. And here got into the wild. And here, too. Arrived here about two o’clock. (2)

The repetition of “here” in this passage appeals to the environmental experience of the poem’s speaker, and while this poem soon gives us more concrete details — “a bed of chalk,” “fresh water,” and “Clumps of lofty trees” (2) — what it initially reveals is that, for the utterance as a whole to make sense, the referent of “here” must be at least periodically changing. “About here” suggests that “here” is a point in space, locating some other place or event in the radius around it; “All along here” suggests
a length following some boundary, one visible to the speaker but invisible to the reader, and geometrically distinct from the region gestured to before. When the latter phrase is repeated, its deictic centre has to shift for the phrase to be meaningful, and such a shift is also marked by the movement from “here” to “here, too” later in the poem. Lurking within each repetition of the word *here* is thus, in fact, a disjunction in terms of the surrounding environment or our orientation therein; in Morton’s terminology, Robertson’s text refuses to “render” — “to generate a more or less consistent sense of atmosphere and world” (35). But the reader can supply this rendering via an analogy with movement: deictic disjunction may be resolved by means of an appeal to walking, where deictic shifts accompany the experience of our surrounding environment. Finally, these shifts in space also become shifts in time, and every “here” is also a “then.”

Robertson thus takes us on a tour of some landscape, whose presence is invoked and marked out by the ubiquitous shifter “here,” and the use of this shifter points to visual details that the reader cannot experience. The motion that renders this landscape is confirmed by the incremental shifts in time that accompany the speaker’s narration: “And got here about one o’clock. … Arrived here about two o’clock” (2), “Got here about nine o’clock” (4), and so on. But this also suggests a wealth of tactile and temporal experience that remains out of view. Between “one o’clock” and “two o’clock,” we find only eight phrases documenting the speaker’s passage from “houses” to “the wild,” with no real sense of where — on the spectrum from settlement to wilderness — the intervening statements may be located. More
arrestingly, these temporal markers, and the events they bracket, all occur in the past tense; as the speaker emphasizes on the poem’s third page, “We speak from memory here all the way along” (4). Even if we were walking beside the speaker as the poem were composed, we would not have access to the precise visual experience she is marking out in space. Indeed, while the journey implied by deictic shifts must be a journey taken by (at least) two — a speaker and a listener — the journey described by the speaker is, in fact, one in which she is “Here alone the length” (2). So we have two journeys: the prior, absent journey she describes dictates her movements in space; meanwhile, the present journey provides the context that makes her narration intelligible. Yet, if we are her companions, our blindness is manifold: the reader is unable to see what was seen in the past or what is gestured to deictically in the present. Additionally, the more these views are described, the more necessary such description comes to seem, reinscibing the absence of actual environmental experience. Indeed, the poem eventually suggests that these gestures are a ruse: “Here are farms and manors and mines and woods and forests and houses and streets. Here are hill, dell, water, meadows, woods. … Here are new enclosures. The chalk and the sand. Here are two. Here are tongues. Here be nameless” (3).

This passage hints that the “here” of the poem is nowhere (so “nameless”), fabricated (in “tongues”), and perhaps even duplicitous (always “two”). Moreover, the scope of “here” has to broaden considerably if it is to refer to “farms and manors and mines and woods and forests and houses and streets.” The speaker passes from
area to area with a rapidity that seems impossible on foot, and to reconcile this passage with any embodied experience, we would need an aerial view of the landscape, or the view provided by a map. But this provides only a temporary solution: as the poem goes on, “here” begins to function less like an adverb and more like a name, albeit the name of a “nameless” thing — at which point the poem becomes a kind of lecture about “here,” an ontology of Here: “Here has been the squandering. Here has been the work. … Here is a basin. A canal. A church. Here is a church. Here is a deep loam upon chalk. Here is a hill. Here is a house. Here is a system. Time pours from its mouth. We design it a flickering” (3). On the one hand, many of these fragments can still be read as a spatial exploration (“A church. Here is a church.”), and the poem’s quasi-refrain — “And got here about [X] o’clock” — still marks out time in a manner that suggests motion. Moreover, the metaphor where “Time pours from [Here’s] mouth” might be read literally, suggesting that Here comprises a basin, a canal and a river. Yet the intervening term, “system,” prompts for a figurative reading, and Here is aligned with the passage of time and not any particular space. This lecture thus appears as an anamorphosis in walking. In part, it suggests (at least subconsciously) that there is knowledge to be had from the poem’s many referential fragments, from the spatial journey the reader follows, although that knowledge is not the knowledge of any particular place. But it also gives rise to a generic ambiguity, where the poem can be recognized either as a lyric walk or an ontological lecture. Moreover, this points to an ambiguity of place: are we in a landscape or a classroom? Are we on a personal journey, accompanied by
spatial and tactile experience, or embedded in a social configuration in which the listener becomes anonymous, where tactility is irrelevant and access to space is constrained? The only personal pronoun that is materially present in this poem is “We,” and it accommodates either or these interpretations, moving from the intimacy of both “I” and “you,” to an authoritative or “royal” We, to the voice of an entire community. This “flickering” between genres thus holds the possibility of a movement to an abstracted self, although this movement is always held in suspension. In a sense, as used in this poem, “we” makes the body evaporate.

And yet, insofar as these statements are rooted in a deictic pronoun, they continue to conjure what Susan Stewart has termed the eidos of the lyric: “Divergence in lyric is […] between a subject transforming him- or herself from the somatic both toward and against the social. The history of lyric is thereby the history of a relation between pronouns, the genesis of ego-tu and ego-vos in the reciprocity of an imagination posing and composing itself and its audience via the work of time” (Poetry and the Fate of the Senses 46). While any deictic word would conjure the idea of a speaker and a listener, it is the appeal to movement that anchors them in a surrounding space; and if the poem brings to mind the I-you encounter of the lyric so forcefully, while never using either of these pronouns, it is partially because such a structure is necessary to resolve its fragmentation. The irony of this appeal is that the space itself remains ambiguous, and yet the fact of the bodies involved, as well as their moments in space, seems comparatively real and even knowable.
In one sense, the poem appears as an extension of Lacan’s mirror stage, where a diversity of sense experience is assembled by means of an appeal to an image of the body; and the pronoun that is suppressed from the text of the poem is indeed the “I” of the mirror stage, which the subject invokes to construct such an assembly. And yet, the image of that body remains obscure: the poem uses the structure of language to recall a decidedly visual scene of recognition, but shows us nothing of the body’s particularity. As Kittler notes, literature “stores bodies” only “to the point of individual generality,” and thus retains the possibilities of substitution that Stewart sees in the lyric (Gramophone 151). Perhaps unexpectedly, this condition is an ecomimetic ideal: Morton goes as far as to suggest that one function of the remark is to “put our body into the text” (63), and that “[e]comimetic tone” is “the bodily sensation of thereness” (71). As Morton writes elsewhere in Ecology without Nature:

The narrator is not describing but channelling, an Aeolian harp. On the one hand, the narrator is entirely absorbed in the environment. He or she is an object among others, a set of sensing devices. […] And yet there is another, ghostly quality: that of experiencing the sensitivity of the sensory apparatus, or appreciating it — much like how, in the televised coverage of the second Iraq War, the “embedded” reporters and news anchors appreciated the capabilities of their imaging machines. (129)

On the one hand, Robertson’s poem may trigger in us an increased awareness of this sensory apparatus, precisely because this apparatus is suppressed or subtracted from the text of the poem; on the other hand, the environment that is the
object of this apparatus remains ambiguous, and this separates Robertson’s poem from more traditional modes of nature writing. Indeed, the phrase “the sensitivity of the sensory apparatus” envisions a changing object for that apparatus, thus assuming something outside the apparatus itself. In contrast, Robertson’s poem makes the body appear as the very condition for outside knowledge, insofar as it is inseparable from the scene of recognition.

This brings us, finally, to what is re-markable about Robertson’s prose. This poem conjures the effect of a body in a text where no body is named. To attach meaning to the poem’s fragments, to create pragmatic connections between them, we must appeal to our knowledge of deixis with respect to our own body, and use such a body to anchor the narrative. This is not as simple as substituting one subjectivity for another because we are not party to that speaker’s volition: guided about this landscape, we are exiled from the space where movement is motivated, reasoned, or intentional — nor are we given enough context to dissent. In this way, our body seems to become anybody, and what would be a subjective experience, even a conflict between subjectivities, becomes the record of a sensory organ functioning apart from thought or even reflex. In this way, the poem makes us aware of the body as a re-mark: landscape is what is leftover when the nature writer subtracts herself from experience, making all experience potential while projecting a surplus expanse of potential experience. But by anticipating and enacting such a subtraction in advance, Robertson’s work requires us to add the body, and thus makes the practice of subtracting or ignoring the body seem absurd. As a result, the
“Sunday” section flickers between evoking landscapes, bodies, and knowledge without allowing the reader to construct some independently existing environment. And while it plays with the gestures of ambience, it ultimately directs our attention to these gestures themselves.

From Rendering to Montage

Supply this rendering via an analogy with movement. To move from the specific sensory complex of “Sunday” to the other prose poems of The Weather, I want to return to another of Morton’s terms, the notion of rendering, only touched upon in the previous section. In a recent issue of Open Letter, Erin Gray brings Morton’s work to bear on both Occasional Work and The Weather as part of her “runnel theory of poetry.” Gray envisions a poetics operating within Robertson’s work whose organizing figure is the runnel: a channel of water running through a landscape, a trail or stream of liquid, although Robertson applies this figure to vines and the leaves of plants (Gray 72). Taking up Robertson’s essay on the Himalayan blackberry, rubus armeniacus, Gray points to the runnel as an essential component of her ecopoetic practice. She writes: “The rubus runnel ‘renders’ — a filmic special effects term that Timothy Morton borrows in order to underline the mediated, simulated quality of ecological existence — an ecology out of place” (81). Gray locates the process of rendering in the runnel, although what exactly is being rendered depends on how we interpret the syntactical function of her dashes: does the blackberry runnel render “an ecology out of place,” or is this out-of-place ecology merely a gloss for “the mediated, simulated quality of ecological existence,” leaving
the object of the runnel's rendering unnamed? Indeed, this ambiguity plays on the phrase “ecology out of place”: in the first case, the runnel transforms mere place into an ecology, while in the second case, ecology itself is seen as having become misplaced, unnatural, even abject, with the runnel participating in that unnaturalness. Gray’s phrase is poised exactly between these possibilities, suggesting that Robertson’s prose is rendering nature (via its attention to runnels), but not clarifying if this rendering brings us immediacy or distortion.

Of course, this paradox of the natural is exactly what Morton has in mind when he borrows a film-theory term to talk about nature writing. Nature, according to Morton, is “a transcendental term in a material mask,” capable of housing all sorts of entities simply because they exist alongside one another: in the term Nature, “[a] metonymic series becomes a metaphor” that “refus[es] to maintain any consistency. But consistency is what nature is all about, on another level. Saying that something is unnatural is saying that it does not conform to a norm, so ‘normal’ that it is built into the very fabric of things as they are” (Morton 14). For Morton, rendering involves constructing an illusion of consistency that bridges this norm and the diversity of what actually exists. This rendering also gives rise to a sense of immediacy: it gives the artwork the seamless look of reality — or, rather, of the imaginary that organizes our everyday sense experience. And yet, this rendering “pertains to a copy without an original” (35): the alterations that make the image conform to a norm, that make it appear *natural*, simultaneously serve to distance the image from anything that might exist *in nature*. In many ways, this paradox is simply one instantiation of a general
problem involving the nature of images, which, as W.J.T. Mitchell has shown, goes back at least to the English empiricist philosophers of the seventeenth century, and is further compounded by Romantic and Modernist poetics (“What Is an Image?” 22-25). In particular, the notion that nature must conform to a norm is continuous with scientific practices of collective empiricism, where individual perception is brought in line with existing knowledge structures, and individual experience becomes useful only insofar as it might be universalized. But as Mitchell notes, the spread of empiricism leads to a distrust of rhetoric, and a movement to “objective” description, which Robertson aligns with sincerity. We may not share this faith in descriptive language, yet in the forms of western culture, rendering testifies to a persistent drive to reconcile individual experience with universal knowledge, and to take description for reality.

What makes us accept such descriptions as real? Michel Chion, the film theorist from whom Morton borrows this term, gets to the heart of this matter by positing the “real” as an ideology and sign system predicated by media: “In order to assess the truth of a sound, we refer much more to codes established by cinema itself, by television, and narrative-representational arts in general, than to our hypothetical lived experience. Besides, quite often we have no personal memory we might refer to regarding a scene we see” (107). Here and elsewhere, Chion is principally interested in sound reproduction, and it is in this context that he coins the notion of rendering: “The film spectator recognizes sounds to be truthful, effective,

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and fitting not so much if they reproduce what would be heard in the same situation in reality, but if they render (convey, express) the feelings associated with the situation” (109). This rift between the real and the natural is a consequence of media: in the process of reproducing a variety of embodied sensory experiences in a strictly audiovisual medium, “sounds ‘attract’ affects for which they are not especially responsible,” with sounds occasionally being added to events that make no sound at all (112). Finally, Chion suggests that “rendering involves perceptions that belong to no sensory channel in particular,” and this complex synaesthesia simply extends the fact that “most of our sensory experiences consist of these clumps of agglomerated sensations” (112). Rendering, then, is the term that designates a sensory confusion occasioned by the advent of artistic media, and which perpetuates itself through the cultural work of art: it is a variation and extension on the tactile experience of cinema as proposed by Benjamin, and the addition of sound merely adds another domain through which a technologically mediated synaesthesia can distribute its effects.

The paradox that is artfully preserved in Gray’s phrasing is exactly the context in which the metaphor of rendering makes sense. Morton’s use of the term points to writing as a participant in this ideology of signs, even as his examples skew toward the visual field. And yet, what exactly constitutes the process of rendering in a literary work? It’s hard to think of writing as tricking our senses, and if nature begins where representation ends, then writing is already a barricade against the natural (Stewart, “Reverse Trompe L’Oeil” 275–76). The perceptual ideology of cinematic rendering finds its literary analogy in realism. As Stewart suggests in On Longing,
“Realistic genres do not mirror everyday life; they mirror its hierarchization of information. They are mimetic in the stance they take toward this organization and hence are mimetic of values, not of the material world” (26). Even the detail or ornament that exceeds such hierarchization may be re-inscribed within it as a claim to authority: “There is no point to the detail in bourgeois realism aside from its function within the world of signs, its message that it is the trace of the real” (28). The rendering that Morton envisions involves both the gesture of reproducing this informational hierarchy and the gesture of the legitimating detail, and it uses the authority these gestures grant to assert the immediacy of an underlying experience; yet this is a rather awkward system for constructing a sense of immediacy, which might also be triggered with adverbs and adverbial phrases, shifts in tense, or, more inventively, with a compromised orthography. Finally, as we have seen from Benjamin, representation may involve a process of synaesthesia as it interacts with technological mediation, which can produce “reality effects” that do not simply reinforce such systems.

Writing’s claims are less to a located immediacy than to a general authority; and if rendering is to be a profitable metaphor for literary composition, it must find grounds other than a claim to immediacy or a complicity in perceptual ideology. I want to suggest that literary rendering appeals to something more basic than the illusion of immediacy, and it might be more productive to think about immediacy’s precursor in the rendering process — namely, continuity. If we think of the runnel as a continuous path, we can see continuity as the term common to Morton, Chion, and
Gray’s treatments of rendering. Finally, for both Morton and Chion, rendering is a decidedly compositional process. While I have suggested that the reader renders Robertson’s poem, and Gray gives agency to the runnel, Morton and Chion envision a poet-technician who intervenes in representations before they reach their audience, and who thus perpetuates an ideology of nature that has evolved in tandem with the human sensory apparatus and its technological prostheses.⁶

My point is not to re-stage a rather tired debate about readerly and writerly agency, but it seems we will have very different ideas about rendering depending on whether we locate it in composition or reception. Of course, readers familiar with Robertson’s book will know that, as with Occasional Work, the circumstances occasioning the composition of The Weather are a vital component of its popular and critical reception, recurring across interviews with Robertson and various articles about her books (for example, Rudy 218; “Lifted” 38–42; Davidson 89; Dickinson 11; Peacock 88–89, 91; Quartermain 125; and “This Animal, the Pronoun” 15). Robertson herself prompts this engagement: by referring to The Weather as a “site-specific” work; by intercutting the longer prose poems with seemingly conventional lyrics, all titled “Residency at C________” and linked by the lyric “I”; and with a note at the end of The Weather that includes a discursive list of her sources, bracketed by statements testifying to her research at Cambridge and the subsequent recombination of that research in Vancouver (80). The most recent and most explicit

⁶ Meredith Quartermain makes a compelling case for Robertson as a poet-technician in her account of two courses that Robertson gave at the Kootenay School of Writing.
of these accounts occurs in an interview with Ted Byrne, published in *The Capilano Review*, from which I will quote at length:

LR: But maybe a slightly more Oulipien relationship to rule would be in *The Weather* where I was using source texts, systematically appropriating from source texts, making my lists of kinds of phrases, sorting out some ways to use sequence, the phrase typology.

TB: Where you copying text?

LR: Yes.

TB: Strictly?

LR: I broke it down. But at the beginning, that’s what I was doing. I was strictly copying text. The texts were so great, why wouldn’t I want to copy them? There’s no photocopying in the Cambridge rare book room, so to copy them you transcribe. By hand. Not in a computer, in a notebook. [...] That’s all I did. And then later I figured out ways to select from my transcriptions, and then to re-sequence the selection. But then, and this is where it differed from conceptual appropriation, in almost every instance I figured out a way to interrupt the material that I’d amassed and edited and sequenced according to the set of rules. So the interruption was bringing in some sort of outside material that was not related to meteorology.

(“This Animal, the Pronoun” 15)
Robertson goes through a process of transcription, selection and (re)sequencing, a process that, for Robertson, must establish a temporal continuity insofar as it needs to be interrupted.

Already we should note that, in the case of The Weather, rendering cannot take quite the form that Morton envisions. In Morton’s version of rendering, the poet-technician adjusts details to create coherence and conform to readerly expectation — an image of the creative process that is borne out neither by my reading of Robertson’s “Sunday” nor by Robertson’s account of her method, which is characterized by a certain fidelity to her sources. Moreover, Robertson is a poet working in a tradition of disjunctive poetics, and while her work engages the authenticating gesture of the ornament, it rarely approximates the discourse of everyday life. While formal features (like the word “here”) may unite her prose poems on a stylistic level, they do not suggest coherence at the level of discourse — indeed, once we recognize that these sentences are assembled based on formal qualities, the need for a “content” shaping her discourse evaporates. The function of literary rendering here is to perpetuate the illusion of such a content, to keep these phrases speaking to one another. Finally, from this perspective, the selection process that Robertson describes above cannot be viewed as part of the rendering process, since it displaces the need for content.

This leaves transcription, sequencing, and — ironically — interruption as possible components of rendering, and the process whose operation is most visible throughout her book is the comparatively humble process of transcription. The act of
copying moves the text from a variety of scripts and typefaces to the uniform manuscript of the copyist; it regularizes spelling and orthography; and, importantly, it physically separates the text from its source. In these ways, fidelity to the source is compromised, but comprised in the name of continuity and coherence across the fragments that are transcribed, paving the way for a reader to (mis)recognize them as a discourse. For comparison’s sake, imagine one of Robertson’s texts with each fragment in quotation marks, equipped with a citational apparatus, reproducing the period spelling and the typography or script of each source — remembering that these sources are assembled from across three centuries of English prose. The result is a linguistic corpus, perhaps an over-thorough entry for an historical dictionary. It is the removal of these individuating marks that renders the text as discourse — so that, to borrow a phrase from W. V. Quine, “[rendering] is disquotation” (80). This is not to trivialize either transcription or rendering — if fact, I have elevated rendering to the place that Quine ascribes to truth — but to emphasize that rendering is simply the other side of a system of social expectations concerning absolutely ordinary language use. To return to The Weather, we might say that part of the appeal of Robertson’s poem is as a peculiar instantiation of the fact that, as both Kristeva and Stewart remind us, all writing is quotation (Kristeva 66; On Longing 22), and The Weather consistently plays with social imperatives to recognize and suppress this fact.

In this way, once we locate rendering in the act of composition, the metaphor of rendering moves from a paradox about what is natural to a paradox about what is
a quotation. In effect, we have exchanged one paradox about authenticity and immediacy with another, and the filmic components of this metaphor have been lost. We now seem to have a particularly literary problem, and yet the taboos of plagiarism and forgery mark attempts to excise this problem from writing as a genre. In contrast, the generic qualities of film have been marked from its invention by the possibilities afforded by “trick” photography. As Friedrich Kittler writes, “The trick film has […] no datable origin. The medium’s possibilities for cutting and splicing assail its own historiography,” and “the making of films is in principle nothing but cutting and splicing: the chopping up of continuous motion, or history, before the lens” (Gramophone 117). Kittler can make this claim, in part, because he envisions a film before the advent of celluloid, in the form of the “serial photography” of Eadweard Muybridge. For Kittler, these photographs “testified to the imaginary element in human perception”: “Had they been copied onto celluloid and rolled onto a reel, Muybridge’s glass plates could have anticipated Edison’s kinetoscope” (116–17). Yet this early form of cinema, precisely because it is not yet a physiological illusion, recalls for Kittler the Lacanian imaginary, where disparate perceptions are unified under some master image or “gestalt” (Gramophone 15, 150; Lacan 93–95). He continues:

A medium that is unable to trace the amplitudes of its input data is permitted a priori to perform cuts. Otherwise, there would be no data. Since Muybridge’s experimental arrangement, all film sequences have been scans, excerpts, selections. And every cinematic aesthetic has
developed from the 24-frame-per-second shot […]. Stop trick and montage, slow motion and time lapse only translate technology into the desires of the audience.⁷

Muybridge’s serial photography, whose object was principally human and animal motion, is also thought to be the inspiration for Benjamin’s optical unconscious (Jennings et al. 265; Krauss 178) — indeed, Muybridge’s experiments were funded by Leland Stanford, who wanted to determine if there was a moment when a galloping horse would be in motion with all its legs in the air, something to which human vision could not attest (Kittler, Optical Media 155). Muybridge’s proto-cinema asks the viewer to recognize continuous motion in the form of static images, but this recognition involves acknowledging something that is not already known: the images are proof of a fact that is contested at the moment of recognition. The viewer’s desire for continuity presses them to affirm the contested fact and the act of recognition nonetheless prompts a new form of seeing.

By rewinding the history of film, Kittler allows us to see how the work of rendering is shared by filmmaker and viewer, and the phenomena we associate with film are a function of the audience’s desire. Rendering can only occur in relation to that desire, and the multiplicity of desire (occasioning stop trick, montage, slow motion, etc.) testifies to the possibility of play within recognition. Robertson’s poems, like Muybridge’s glass plates, demand a more explicit labour in rendering; but they

⁷ Gramophone 119. Kittler is referring here to the continuous, analogue transcription (“tracing”) of audio data on a record, as compared with that of visual data on film. It is impossible to continuously transcribe a two-dimensional visual field on a two-dimensional roll of film, hence the roll’s division into cells or frames, and the “24-frame-per-second shot.”
also resist cueing a master image that would make a whole of these fragments. This insight leads to a problem in recognition, which in the “Sunday” section appears as a problem in recognizing genre, and this tentative relationship to genre can be seen in several of the book’s other sections. And yet, there is also a consistent albeit evolving component to this recognition when the book is read as a whole. While “Sunday,” which is framed either as a lecture or a walk, suggests an overarching continuity, subsequent sections feature a consistent appeal to time lapse and montage. The dominant formal feature of “Monday,” for example, is a series of paired adjectives trailing either a particular description or another pair of adjectives: “Deep in the opulent morning, blissful regions, hard and slender. Scarce and scant. Quotidian and temperate. Begin afresh in the realms of the atmosphere, that encompasses the solid earth, the terraqueous globe that soars and sings, elevated and flimsy. Bright and hot. Flesh and hue” (10). In each case, a particular vista is set into view, and the shifting adjectival pairs suggest an articulate and shifting contemplation accompanied by an only potential change in what is observed. This ambiguity, yoking the observer and the observed, is perhaps why this section begins and ends with meditations on belief, “[s]o pliable a medium.” More important for our purposes, this shifting attention suggests a duration of continuous observation, which is interrupted by the “splice” of a new vista coming into view.

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8 Frequent inversions in the “Thursday” section, of the form “Come we now [verb]ing,” suggest either a series of questions or an anachronistic, lyrical discourse. And Indrah Singh’s recent article on the “Tuesday” section of The Weather points to a similar problem of recognition, which arises from Robertson’s use of punctuation. There, the use of short fragments, always punctuated with a period, presents the reader with two linked ambiguities: does a sentence necessarily end where a period occurs? and should a fragment like “Where is Ti-Grace” be read as indicative or interrogative? In context, the former suggest another lecture; the latter, a feminist call to arms.
In “Monday,” local continuities of varying duration, which suggest a series of individual meditations, are thus assembled into a montage with clear breaks between those continuities. In the “Tuesday” section, that arrangement is essentially inverted: breaks appear rapidly and continuities emerge through repetition across the entire piece. Here, the effect of time lapse becomes more prominent as varying but similar descriptions of clouds — “All clouds except a narrow opening at the top of the sky. All cloudy with a narrow opening at the bottom of the sky with others smaller. All cloudy except a narrow opening at the bottom of the sky” (18) — continue throughout the poem, soon interspersed with questions about the fate of second-wave feminism, which themselves become prompts for a discourse on the present:

Days heap upon us. Where is Patricia. In the dream of obedience and authority. The genitalia crumble open. It is only ever a flickering. We never worshipped grief. It has been stuccoed over. […] Days heap upon us. Where is Jane. Looking for food. Hunger crumbles open. All this is built on her loveliness. We have fallen into a category. Love subsidizes our descent. (19)

The effect of montage here is to make these discourses run in parallel. The advancing monotony of the refrain “Days heap upon us,” together with the similarity of the sky across varying descriptions, suggests a passing from day to day. Meanwhile, the use of the present tense, with occasional recourse to the continuing past, makes the fate of second-wave feminism seem both settled and ripe for
intervention. By staging the passing of time on a relatively small scale, Robertson points to an inaction that perpetuates itself from day to day, and she thus calls for action in the immediate present. Indeed, the problems that she points to are precisely problems of everyday life, which is what makes them both urgent and troubling. Finally, the “we” that appears periodically in “Tuesday” is no longer the you-and-I of the “Sunday” section, nor the royal “we” that appears there and elsewhere, but one that refers to a community or collective.

Both of these sections thus play with the sensation of time lapse, although they are eclipsed in this respect by The Weather’s longest section, “Wednesday,” whose extensive catalogue of weather descriptions suggests a larger scale of experience. It begins as follows:

A beautiful morning; we go down to the arena. A cold wintry day; we open some purse. A day is lapsing; some of us light a cigarette. A deep mist on the surface; the land pulls out. A dull mist comes rolling in from the west; this is our imaginary adulthood. A glaze has lifted; it is delusional space. A great dew; we spread ourselves sheet-like. A keen wind; we’re paper blown against the fence. A little checkered at 4 PM; we dribble estrangement’s sex. (28)

On the one hand, these sentences link the weather to particular, individual activities like opening a purse or lighting a cigarette; on the other hand, our attention throughout this passage is divided, since those activities occur at different scales. When we think of the weather, and the passage of weather, it is inevitable that we
think of landscape: although the weather impacts the individual, it does not occur at the scale of the individual, as the maps of weather forecasters remind us.

Robertson’s prose draws our attention to this reality by shifting the subject or agent in the statements that follow each semi-colon: “we open some purse” suggests, at least initially, a singular subject; “some of us light a cigarette” acknowledges a larger but still intimate community. But then “the land pulls out,” and suddenly we are confronted with human being at the level of landscape, and the poem henceforth seems to shuttle rapidly between individual activities — specific enough in character to suggest a particular subject, albeit a subject that is here a metonymy for everyday life — and the shifting patterns of the time-lapse film (Gray 80). As the poem continues we find “April has never lost its leaves” (29), “Crickets accumulate… Dusk invades us” (30), the weather “anticipates the dry scent of autumn,” and “falls in broad flakes upon the surface” (31). Over fourteen pages, as we pass from one meteorological phenomena to the next, a perspective emerges that is neither abstract enough to be a satellite image, nor limited enough to suggest a viewer on the ground. And while the activities and experiences of such a viewer are reserved for the space after the semi-colon, the weather that precedes those experiences points to other viewers that share in the space of that action without necessarily being party to it. In this way, “Wednesday” places us not just in time or in nature, but in everyday life on a social scale.

As the reader may come to realize, the order of Robertson’s montage is not necessarily chronological: in this and other sections of The Weather, the fragments
that conform to the dominant formal rule of each section are in fact alphabetized.\footnote{The “Monday,” “Friday” and “Saturday” sections do not conform to this logic, and “Saturday” includes the kind of chronology that is absent from “Wednesday.” Among the sections that contain an alphabetized list, the “Thursday” section features some irregularities, which we might construe as “interruptions” masquerading as part of the “lifted” list. In the interview with Kai Fierle-Hedrick, Robertson speaks of the composition of her later poem “Face/” in terms of an alphabetized list and a series of interruptions, and mentions The Weather as an example of such interruptions (“Lifted” 52).} Again, this points us to the rhetorical necessity of interruption, which obscures the text’s compositional logic. But it also points to our desire, and the role of our own recognition in transforming these orthographically structured lists into narrative. And yet, as with Muybridge’s photographs, desire and recognition are not simply reproductive. In each of these cases montage points to an excess: the shifting nature of perception and belief; the perpetuation of inaction that occasions activism; and the dissemination of everyday life in the form of a community. These observations are brought into view, not by any one statement in Robertson’s discourse, but by our desire for continuity across these cinematic forms. In the face of various ideologies perpetuated by language — the universality of sense experience, the social narrative of progress, and the separateness of the individual — montage draws the eye to an image we recognize as real, but which is occluded in ordinary narratives of experience. Robertson’s poems, although they partake of a dated technology, thus stage the precise encounter that Benjamin attributes to an optical unconscious.

Sincerity’s Eroticism

To keep these phrases speaking to one another. All this talk of duplicity and montage would seem to run counter to the other most cited feature of The Weather
— its sincerity. Of course, Robertson’s relation to sincerity in this project is complex: “What I want to do is to infiltrate sincerity — not to dissolve it in sceptical critique, but to lift it from its maudlin imprisonment, return it to the rhetorical play of idiom, of scale, enjoy its identificatory intensities and climates as conditions or modifications that pass over the face. I am a spy” (“Report on Sincerity” 37). The desire of the reader-viewer is manifest in this passage as “identificatory intensities” and the “conditions or modifications that pass over the face.” In this way, The Weather’s skyscapes, which prompt us to think in continuities and durations, are just an apparatus to stage the weather of belief: belief as it is modulated by discourse, and even belief as a social and material mechanism operating through the forgotten science of physiognomy.

But Robertson, though “a spy,” is still imbricated in this system of sincerity. As she writes in the OSA’s introduction to The Weather, her goal is “to integrate the weather, boredom utopic, with waking life. By ‘integrate’ we mean: to arc into a space without surfaces as if it were an inhabitable, flickering event” (Occasional Work 60). Each alphabetical list of weather descriptions is a “space without surfaces,” and Robertson inhabits the flickering event of the montage even before staging the interruptions that make it inhabitable for other readers. To the sincere reader, an arbitrary assemblage of texts may be readable as discourse, and even its arbitrary character may appear as a mark of reciprocal sincerity. As Robertson notes in the interview with Byrne cited earlier, “it may be that the effect of truth or sincerity in a text actually doesn’t come from any content whatsoever, but maybe comes from
the very paradoxical nature of a sequence [...]. It seems to me that, if you’re talking about sincerity, uncertainty and equivocation is perhaps the most truthful position to be occupying” (“This Animal, the Pronoun” 19). Or as Robertson writes in the OSA’s introduction, “Dear Reader — A lady speaking to you from the motion of her own mind is always multiple. Enough of the least. We want to be believed” (61).

Finally, I want to turn to the respective eroticsms of sincerity and wit that Robertson speaks of in the OSA’s introduction to The Weather: “Sincerity’s eroticism is different from wit’s. The narcotic and cosmetic each distribute a space. They sculpt what rhythmed peace could be” (Occasional Work 60). The wit of The Weather is a pun on the notion of “site-specific” art: the book is composed of descriptions that Robertson had access to by virtue of being at Cambridge, yet those descriptions are not necessarily descriptions “of Cambridge” in the usual sense. The resulting work, while site-specific, does not give us access to the site of its composition. In a sense, this is an amplification of the way any description may be detached from what it describes (say, to be applied to something else), and this detachment is a measure of difference that we find anticipated by calling description “cosmetic.” But if wit undergirds The Weather’s construction, sincerity makes this book readable, and it is in sincerity that these cosmetic descriptions become narcotic. Perhaps, in passing eagerly from description to description, we attain the “rhythmed peace” that she speaks of in the OSA’s introduction. But maybe it is the flickering between two recognitions that sculpts the poem as a whole: one of narcotic
sincerity, and one of cosmetic wit. This, at any rate, is where we find the work of *The Weather* most expansive.
Coda: Distracted in the Gallery

At several points in the preceding chapters, I have produced readings that I have been tempted to call allegorical; indeed, with “Playing House,” I have more or less succumbed to that temptation. In particular, while I have suggested that the Soft Architectural essays can be read literally (such that “Playing House” would indeed be an essay about shacks), I have tended to map the terms of these essays onto other objects and other terms. Often, in the case of Occasional Work, I have mapped an essay’s terms either onto the essay itself or onto Robertson’s writing within the collection — with the idea that this might doubly elucidate her method. This is not, I think, just a feedback loop: our knowledge of shacks, scaffolding, fabric, furniture, community, materiality, and economy is mobilized to other ends, lending their methods of structuring perception to other objects and ideas, including Robertson’s prose. While I have been more tentative in assigning such mappings to the sections of The Weather, my readings are similarly concerned with the way its patterns of perception might be brought to bear on everyday life. And perhaps the ambiguities around which I have structured my readings — such as the ambiguity between a walk and a lecture, or between nature and quotation — might elsewhere form the basis for an allegorical interpretation.

These are not, I think, allegories in the most traditional sense. I have appealed to the notion of recognition, in part, because the mappings that I’ve taken up don’t always extend to the totality of the text or texts under consideration.
Moreover, these mappings are often inaugurated by metaphors within Robertson’s texts, and so it might be more accurate to describe my readings as wilful extensions of her metaphors. But I am attracted to the notion of allegory because it provides a model for restructuring perception. As Susan Stewart notes at the outset of *On Longing*, “In allegory the vision of the reader is larger than the vision of the text; the reader dreams to an excess, to an overabundance. To read an allegorical narrative is to see beyond the relations of narration, character, desire” (3). To this point, Stewart’s remarks would apply just as well to a method of reading, but in what follows the volition of the reader seems almost compromised, and a psychological dimension of allegory is suggested by her subsequent appeal to closure: “To read allegory is to live in the future, the anticipation of closure beyond the closure of narrative. […] The locus of action is not in the text but in the transformation of the reader. Once this transformation is effected, point of view is complete, filled out to the edges. And wherever we look, we see the work of this closure — the image is indelibly stamped upon the world” (3–4).

The next sentence reminds us that this vision of allegory is, after all, historical: “This confidence in […] the complete vision of closure is broken with the advent of the industrial revolution” (4). But there is a more than passing resemblance between this historical vision of allegory and the kind of claims I have been making for Robertson’s work: an altered and enlarged point of view, images “stamped upon the world,” the withholding of closure, and even the transformation of the reader. And while some of these claims could be made for poetic metaphor more generally,
the movement from metaphor to allegory suggests a comparative apprehension, not of any particular element, but of the relationships between elements — indeed, of what would exceed recognition of an object’s form. Of course, this mode of reading “modern” poetry is hardly new, and as Paul de Man notes in “Lyric and Modernity,” “an allegorical element in the lyric […] has never ceased to be present” (Blindness and Insight 185–86). And yet, de Man’s own reading posits allegory itself as a kind of prospective archaeology, which “can only blindly repeat its earlier model, without final understanding, the way Celan repeats quotations from Hölderlin that assert their own incomprehensibility” (186). In short, there are very good reasons to think about Robertson’s work in relation to allegory, just as there were very good reasons to think about her work in relation to ekphrasis.

In de Man’s other writings on allegory, this trope becomes more explicitly a concern with the relationship between texts, and I would like to end by thinking of the most obvious antecedents to Robertson’s writings — the artworks to which several of her prose essays serve as ekphrases. Take, for example, the essay entitled “How to Colour,” which responds to Renée Van Halm’s installation “Taste”: a 10 x 10 grid of coloured discs, in which each row presents popular colour trends in interior decoration for one decade of the twentieth century. At its most elementary, “Taste” spatializes colour trends in 20th-century interior design; meanwhile, in Robertson’s hands, Van Halm’s installation becomes the basis for meditations on Napoleonic uniforms, colour as a Derridean pharmakon, and colour as a marker of the

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10 See, for example, “The Rhetoric of Temporality” in Blindness and Insight, as well as parts of Allegories of Reading. Barbara Johnson’s essay “Women and Allegory” provides a useful summary of de Man’s formulations of allegory in these texts.
permeability of spatial, political, and organic boundaries. There are obvious disjunctions here between the essay and the artwork — perhaps most notably, an historical disjunction: while the installation documents twentieth-century decor, the essay refers almost exclusively to nineteenth-century histories and theories of colour. On the one hand, Robertson’s essay thus prompts the reader/viewer to extend Van Halm’s grid to earlier decades. On the other hand, Robertson’s essay also recounts the economic and political situations that regulate the availability of certain colours, and so the reader/viewer is also invited to imagine the conditions for the distribution and manufacture of each colour in Van Halm’s grid, as well as the scientific and technological conditions that would facilitate their re/production.

Of course, neither of these responses is entirely anticipated by Robertson’s essay. In fact, both suggest themselves by way of analogies between the artwork and Robertson’s writing. The first fits the content of the writing to the form of the work; the second fits the content of the work to the form of the writing. In this way, as Marina Roy notes, “Robertson’s contributions to exhibition catalogues act as more of a supplement to the artwork — a reaction to the work with her own literary interests in mind — than as a critical interpretation of the artwork at hand […]. Laden with historical research, a sensual and often strange language acts as a space of resistance” (85). My question here would be resistance to what? If Robertson’s text is to be a space of resistance, it is resisting a political or cultural formation that lies outside of that space. And yet that we see it as a text of resistance suggests that it, however indirectly, brings the thing it resists into view. But another answer lies in
considering Robertson’s text as a supplement. By refusing to address the artwork directly, yet publishing in a context where the artwork and the writing are assumed to be connected, Robertson asks the reader of her text to seek closure in the artwork, in a way that approaches the condition of allegory. This search for closure is perhaps only the reflection of the search for a tactile experience with the artwork, which Stewart sees in our recourse to the gallery’s textual prostheses, such as wall labels or catalogue essays (Poetry and the Fate of the Senses 174). In any case, no matter where we start, these movements become symmetrical: both the writing and the artwork prompt for a closure that lies outside their respective forms — and, more importantly, even outside their joint form.

Finally, Robertson is also resisting a concentrated engagement with the artwork, and there is a specific sense in which the distracted engagement she produces may be a more ethical alternative. As W.J.T. Mitchell suggests in “Ekphrasis and the Other,” any verbal description of the artwork, any attempt to speak on the artwork’s behalf, serves simultaneously to suggest or reaffirm the artwork’s muteness — its inability to speak for itself. As Mitchell has shown, this dynamic is not an inevitable feature of verbal and visual representations, but an ideological construction, whose more disturbing instantiations include figures who are “seen and not heard”: children, women, colonized subjects, and racial others (162–64). Of course, this ideological construction governing aesthetic engagement is also a cultural reality: the fact is that most people — myself included — require such textual prostheses to begin an engagement with the artwork. Our habits of artistic
engagement prevent us from asserting the narrative or symbolic import of a particular work of art without recourse to language. But essays like Robertson’s may function to remind us that such an engagement is possible — that the artwork can articulate themes and ideas that are only latent or indeterminate in the accompanying prose. By turning away from the artwork, Robertson’s prose gives it the opportunity to speak for itself. And it is here that ekphrasis is displaced by allegory, which is, for both de Man and Barbara Johnson, “the recognition of the difference between signifier and signified, of the relation between any use of language and its linguistic or cultural past, and of the difference between self and other” (Johnson 63).

What this example shows us, and what I hope my readings have exemplified more generally, is how Robertson’s texts, through a strategic disjunction with their contexts, draw our attention to a breadth of material to which they do not refer. This is not necessarily the continual inscription of the text onto the world, but a zooming out from the scene of inscription, a tentative projection or extension of that scene across the surrounding space and history. It is not only colour that marks the permeability of social and political boundaries: weather, scaffolding, and the material components of the shack — all draw our attention beyond the site of their immediate observation, to transpositions and economies that play out across the landscape. While Robertson’s essays may prompt ekphrastic and allegorical readings, they never wholly conform to such readings, and the excesses and deviations they
incorporate open up productive if unpredictable spaces for the extension of her thought.
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