

negAtive object; apophAtic gesture

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How much can the absence of an object say?

This is the guiding question at the heart my MFA thesis. Allowing the absence of an object to speak cultivates attentiveness to the plenitude of objects that populate our lives. Even the most mundane object suggests the social, physical, and cultural conditions by which the object functions in the world; if it is human-made, it brings into view those who made, used or discarded it. Such objects can make action possible or impossible. A pen makes it possible to physically record thoughts and ideas. A paintbrush makes it possible to paint a painting. When objects go missing or become obsolete, there is a tangible loss – not only of the object itself, but also of worlds that once existed. Attending to the disappearance of such objects elevates their materiality and agency.

This is what I explore in my exhibition *negAtive object; apophAtic gesture*, and what I explain in this paper. I begin by exploring the absence of objects with a brief summary of relevant conversations regarding the object in art: the readymade, objects of memory, and vital materialism. I will then move to a discussion of apophatic theology and art and how I have adopted an apophatic methodology in this particular body of work in response to contemporary discourse surrounding the object in art and the readymade. Finally, I will expand upon my process of art-making and how I gesture toward mundane absences in an apophatic way.

When considering how much an absent object can say, I have found the example of apophaticism helpful in addressing problems of straightforward representation. Apophaticism is a theological term that attempts to describe the divine through negation, through naming what it is not, or what is not known or cannot be known. I am familiar with this term as a former theological student interested in how it might inform art and artists. While not a common lens for

contemporary art, it is explored by American Poet, Reginald Gibbons in his essay, “On Apophatic Poetics:”

If we add to all the local worlds which, in the midst of constant change, cannot be found, the continuing reality of what is beyond our grasp even in what is really present, what we cannot very easily grasp or evoke for ourselves except by contrasting it with what we can, then we might have a sense of an everyday apophatic.¹

“Apophatic” seems a lofty term to apply to lowly everyday objects. But it is an everyday sense of the apophatic I wish to access.

Through artistic strategies such as erasure, shadow casting, and replication, I am indicating an everyday apophatic, drawing attention to objects that are beyond the grasp of what is immediately present. Drawing from apophaticism in theology, this work, though concerned with material or metaphorical absence, never forecloses on materiality. The missing objects I consider are active even in their absence, and it is my hope that viewers will experience heightened attention to such mundane absences when they encounter my work.

¹ Reginald Gibbons, “On Apophatic Poetics,” *American Poetry Review* 36 [2007]: 19.



Figure 1.

object

The Readymade: Duchamp and Warhol

The question of what sets art objects apart from banal objects has been at the forefront of art discourse since Duchamp presented a mass-produced porcelain urinal as *Fountain* in 1917. The consequences of Duchamp's conflicting and often-problematic legacy continue to haunt contemporary art, particularly regarding the readymade. Duchamp's *Fountain* is what art historian Eleanor Heartney describes as “the original sin of modernism,”² an action that explicitly called into question the structures and institutions of the art world.

² Eleanor Heartney, *Art and Today* [London: Phaidon, 2008] 40.

The political implications of the readymade have been taken to both signify the mechanisms of mass-production as a democratizing force as Walter Benjamin indicates and, more gloomily, the death of craftsmanship, meaning, and original workmanship in art. According to critic Rosalind Krauss, Duchamp's work indicates a "tremendous arbitrariness with regard to meaning, a breakdown of ... the linguistic sign."³ This has led many to regard Duchamp's legacy as that of "anti-art." Anti-art exposes the hypocrisies of modernity and disassembles foundations of meaning by ironically appropriating mass-produced objects (readymades) as objects of high culture, whose sentiments were unable to prevent the most absurd atrocities of the Great War.

Arthur Danto, art critic and philosopher, proposes an even more radical interpretation of the readymade. He suggests that the ontology of the art object does not reside in the object itself, but in the idea or in the meanings we (and the artist) bring to it. Art is a physical embodiment of meaning. Danto came to this conclusion while considering another readymade – Andy Warhol's *Brillo Box* – a wooden replica of a cardboard soap pad box first exhibited in 1964. Danto observed that though the *Brillo Box* was nearly indistinguishable from the mass produced original, its historical and cultural context as an art object is what made it art.⁴ "Nearly indistinguishable" is an important qualifier, as Danto suggests that the small inconsistencies resulting from the screen-printing process and the fact that the boxes were made of wood instead of cardboard reveal that Warhol's *Brillo Box* is more about an idea than about replication. Surely what makes the *Brillo Box* art is not simply the difference between cardboard and wood, nor the

³ Rosalind Krauss, "Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America," *October* 3 [1977]: 77.

⁴ Arthur C. Danto, *Andy Warhol* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009] 65.

small aberrations indicative of the printing process.⁵ According to Danto, what makes an object a work of art is completely invisible.

Duchamp himself noted small inconsistencies between objects in his concept of the *Infra-mince*. When asked to define the *Infra-mince*, Duchamp would respond that the concept could only be grasped by examples:

(verso) Cutting noun – cutting (adj.) (guillotine, razor blades / sliding - /Drying – gluing / viscosity – (/breakage./Burning/melting (in liquids with sugar for ex.) / Porosity – imbibition (blotting paper) Permeability / to water and air / (leather) / Pushing-in (nails, planting an arrow) / rubbing scratching - / adjusting registering - / repairing camouflage / invisible weaving – or mechanistical / reparation / Adhesion gluing - / starching -.⁶

According to this list of processes, *Infra-mince* had to do with the “inbetweenness” of objects. On one hand, it is dependent upon material processes. On the other hand, *Infra-mince* and is also intensely conceptual and tied to the processes of thought. Unlike Danto’s purely conceptual definition of art, it would seem that the *Infra-mince* “gauges the difference between a readymade and its compromising object.”⁷ Seemingly insubstantial differences between objects might be more important than Danto would suggest.

Whether the difference between an art object and the banal is *Infra-mince* or purely conceptual, the legacy of Duchamp’s readymades became the vehicle of anti-art utilized to question notions of originality and the creative genius. Haim Steinbach, Jeff Koons, and Barbara Kruger appropriated imagery from consumerist culture to highlight such ironies. Sherrie Lavine took this one step further in replicating Duchampian objects such as Duchamp’s fountain in

⁵ Ibid. 63.

⁶ Duchamp’s note 26 quoted by Thomas Deane Tucker, *Derridada: Duchamp as Readymade Deconstruction* [Lanham: Lexington Books, 2009] 66.

⁷ Ibid. 67.

Fountain (After Marcel Duchamp A.P.), applying the negation of anti-art to the father of anti-art himself. Artists working in this ironic trajectory generally separate nominal meaning from the objects they consider.

Embodied Memory: Cornelia Parker, Doris Salcedo, and Rachel Whiteread

Unlike Duchamp, artists have also addressed the readymade in less ironic ways, with more interest in the social, political, and historical associations objects can carry. For example, Cornelia Parker and Doris Salcedo are intensely interested in the human implications of banal objects. Placing mundane objects in museum-style displays, labeling them with intriguing didactics, Cornelia Parker insinuates memories that elevate the mundane to a sacred status as in *Unsettled* – an arrangement of building materials found in Jerusalem. She also treats objects to extreme transformations, using explosives on structures, or steamrollers on musical instruments.⁸ Doris Salcedo uses ordinary objects to refer to the human cost of war and political upheaval in her native country of Colombia. She uses worn shoes, used chairs, tables, and cabinetry to “invoke domesticity, but our comfortable familiarity with such objects is undermined by jarring details.”⁹ In both cases, the objects in question raise associations and memories in the viewer, transforming the banal to a monument, totem, or artifact.

Rachel Whiteread works in a similar trajectory because she is considering not only the banal object (or space) with regard to memory, but the absence of a banal object and the negative spaces such objects occupy. In an essay titled *Remembrance of Things Present*, Jennifer R. Gross relates Whiteread’s work to the tradition of *Memento mori*, still life painting that reminds the viewer of his or her mortality. Seventeenth century Dutch Vanitas painting, as well as reminding

⁸ Heartney, 51-53.

⁹ Heartney, 53

the viewer of the transience of “earthly pleasures,” also sought the “imitation of unseen life, the primary effect for which Whiteread’s work has come to be so well regarded.”¹⁰

Whiteread’s work is about embodying the unseen. The forms of negative space make familiar objects unfamiliar and reference the bodies and the lives of the people who used to occupy such spaces. Unlike Doris Salcedo and Cornelia Parker, Whiteread’s sculptures are not straightforwardly totems and mementos intended to trigger cultural associations. It is better to think about her work as preservation of unseen spaces without nostalgia.¹¹

Vital Materialism: Maggie Groat and Barb Hobot

A more recent development in the discourse on the readymade is the concept of vital materialism. Vital materialism considers seemingly inanimate things (banal objects included) as active entities, impacting systems on even the molecular level. In her opening essay to the book *Vibrant Matter: a Political Ecology of Things*, Jane Bennett describes the agency she experienced when encountering a random assortment of debris in the gutter: “In this assemblage, objects appeared as things, that is vivid entities not entirely exhausted by their semiotics.”¹² The surplus Bennett experienced is described as wholly nontheistic, a *thing-power*.¹³ Viewing inanimate things not as passive objects that exist solely for human use, but as *actants* (active agents in the world outside of human interpretation), one is more likely to treat all matter – in its otherness – with a deeper respect. This is not to say that human beings can somehow avoid the

¹⁰ Jennifer R. Gross, “Remembrance of Things Present” in *The Art of Rachel Whiteread* ed. Chris Townsend et al. [London: Thames & Hudson, 2004] 35.

¹¹ Ibid. 41.

¹² Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, [Durham: Duke University Press, 2010] 5.

¹³ Bennett’s discussion is related to Adorno’s concept of nonidentity – a presence acting upon us giving a “painful, nagging feeling that something’s being forgotten or left out.” Unlike Adorno, Bennett’s material agency is non-messianic, acting on human beings directly.

interpretative lens, but rather adopting a measure of naivety when encountering the out-side (otherness of things) delays the human tendency toward constructivism. By doing so, one might foster attentiveness to the *thing-power* presented by material, non-human objects.

In the fall of 2014, I was able to observe an example of what I understood to be vital materialism in the work of Canadian artists Maggie Groat and Barb Hobot. Maggie Groat uses assemblages of found objects and photography, while Barb Hobot works with whimsical faux/real forms. According to the exhibition statement by curator Tarin Hughes, the thesis behind *Untitled (new visions)* was:

inspired by Elaine Scarry's *Imagining Flowers: Perceptual Mimesis (Particularly Delphinium)* that the presence of a flower triggers dreams, ghosts of recognition and/or memory. Scarry's discussion of the *sentience* [emphasis added] of flowers and the power of absence/ presence gave way to considerations of the life of the object and the charged space between the real and the false.¹⁴

The “sentience” of objects, including the life of objects made to resemble other objects, was central to the curation of this work. The real and imaginary materialities of Groat and Hobot's work were allowed their own agency, their own discrete non-human conversations through the way they were unconventionally installed in the gallery space. The relations between objects and how they are assembled in space draw viewers' attention to the same *thing-power* – the agency – that Bennett describes in her concept of vital materialism. To attend to the lives of non-human objects is an imaginative exercise.

Vital materialism has roots in in the thought of Walter Benjamin, where he equates the work of the artist as a translator of non-human material to the work of a cultural and linguistic

¹⁴ “Untitled (new visions)” published on January 3, 2015 <http://akaartistrun.com/portfolio-item/untitled-new-visions/>

translator. In doing so he acknowledges that non-human forces are agents that have impact upon human social and political systems. Filmmaker and media theorist Hito Steyerl takes this idea one step further into the arena of art practice by suggesting that it is possible to imagine futures where relations between inanimate objects might become models for human/nonhuman communications.¹⁵ Though it might be utterly impossible to remove our human-centric lens, vital materialism imbues mundane, everyday objects and matter with a renewed sense of mystery and wonder in the non-human world.¹⁶

the apophatic

The newer myth, derived from a post-psychological conception of consciousness, installs within the activity of art many of the paradoxes involved in attaining an absolute state of being described by the great religious mystics. As the activity of the mystic must end in a *via negativa*, a theology of God's absence, a craving for the cloud of unknowing beyond knowledge and for the silence beyond speech, so art must tend toward anti-art, the elimination of the "subject" (the "object," the "image"), the substitution of chance for intention, and the pursuit of silence.¹⁷

In this passage Susan Sontag, American writer, filmmaker and cultural critic, associates the trajectory of anti-art with that of *via negativa*, or apophatic theology. And though there is certainly a negative trajectory to conceptual art, particularly anti-art in the West, I would argue that the apophatic is not as straightforward a negation or "silence" as Sontag suggests. Anti-art

¹⁵ Kayla Anderson, "Object Intermediaries: How New Media Artists Translate the Language of Things" *Leonardo* 47 [2014]: 352.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 357.

¹⁷ Susan Sontag, "The Aesthetics of Silence" in *Styles of the Radical Will* [London: Secker & Warburg, 1966] 4-5.

is fundamentally ironic, determined toward negation,¹⁸ whereas apophatic influences in visual art in the East are more paradoxical.

As a theological term, “apophatic” has its origins in neo-Platonist thought and figures prominently in Eastern Orthodox theology.¹⁹ The word in Greek literally means “away from” (apo) and “words” (phasai) and is related to *apophasis*, a rhetorical device where the speaker would allude to something by denying its existence. In its theological use, the apophatic would be employed to describe a God who is beyond all human conception, who can only be grasped by describing what he is not. It is the counterbalance to positive statements regarding God’s being or attributes, conversely known as kataphatic theology. Apophatic theology is meant to restrict the possible triumphalism of kataphatic theology. For example, Dionysius the Areopagite, one of the foremost influences upon apophatic thought, states that God “has no body nor form nor image nor quality nor quantity nor mass.”²⁰ In his use of negative language Dionysius undercuts positive affirmations of God’s being and attributes, qualifying the true boundaries of human understanding.

In literary studies, the apophatic has also been used to describe the work of poets such as Emily Dickinson, Syrian-born poet Adonis, T.S. Eliot, Samuel Beckett, Paul Celan, numerous Russian poets, and work of philosophers such as Wittgenstein, Derrida, and Jean-Luc Marion.

¹⁸ Anti-art’s ironic appropriation of pop culture, commercial imagery, and mass produced objects often assumes an antagonistic posture, seeking to deconstruct the gallery and museum, and confound (or offend) the public. The readymades of artists such as Jeff Koons and Haim Steinbach are distinguishable from mass-produced items only in pricing. (see Heartney, 41). The resultant effect of such work is the un-grounding of established structures, relegating the value of art objects either to the auction block or conceptual content.

¹⁹ There are similarly apophatic texts found in the mystic traditions of both Islam, particularly Sufism, and Judaism, and though the word “apophatic” would only be used in a comparative sense in Buddhist philosophy, the Dharma could almost be described as an almost wholly apophatic discourse, one whose purpose is to eventually negate or unsay itself.

²⁰ Gibbons.19.

Poetry has been a very helpful source for me as apophatic poetics emphasize the apophatic not as negation or silence – but rather an “unsaying.” “The apophatic is a negative that is not straightforward, and can imply something that is in fact present despite the absence or inadequacy of a name for it – such as the nature of God – or present *as* an absence, like meaningful negative space in sculpture.”²¹ Apophatic poetics is therefore not a rejection of language, or a rejection of meaning. It is rather a different way of using language – not for positive affirmations but for qualifying the boundaries of what might be known.

In Russia, where the apophatic tradition is more culturally imbedded, conceptual artists of the 1960’s and 70’s appropriated banal objects and thereby signified a subtle departure from the ironic negation of art in Western traditions. For example, Ilya Kabakov’s assemblages of non-consequential junk objects, arranged and labeled as in a government archive, foregrounded the banal at the “expense of the traditional notion of history as a series of significant events in a linear progression.”²² Kabakov’s use of everyday objects did not necessarily undermine the notions of art objects themselves, as in the case of Duchamp’s *Fountain*. These gestures are better understood as an oblation of the mundane.

In this way Russian conceptualism does not “affirm negation” (the undermining of the art object itself, ironically emptying it of all meaning), but “negates affirmation” by showing preference to the profane, setting it apart as sacred – either in a religious, historical, or political sense. “The function of the banal and trivial is... to draw attention to the existence of another

²¹ Ibid.

²² Slobodanka Vladir-Glover, “Heterogeneity and the Russian Post-Avant-Garde: The Excremental Poetics of Vladimir Sorokin” in *Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture* ed. Mikhail N. Epstein, Alexander A. Genis and Slobodanka M. Vladiv-Glover et al [New York: Berghahn Books, 1999] 280.

reality for which ‘there are no words’ no adequate means of expression.’²³ Thus, the trajectory of conceptualism in the East has been not one of irony, but of *paradox*:²⁴

Nevertheless, although reduced to a negligible part, to an atom of this new conceptualist cosmos, visibility continues to live on. It reappears in the images of fly’s wings or an ant’s footprint. Or even as crumbs of garbage, so lyrically displayed in Kabakov’s installations. A broken pencil, a match, a bite of apple, a tram ticket, a post office receipt, shaving cream, a catalogue of things to be taken on a journey: this materiality is not dead, because in order to be resurrected in a new body, a memory of the past must be retained.²⁵

Paradox essentially negates affirmation in order to deepen an intuitive sense of understanding that goes beyond the binary. In paradox, the question is not “either or,” but “both and.” Holding two things in tension qualifies the true boundaries of certainty. Contrary to paradox, the end goal of the Western approach, irony in anti-art, is finally negation. Anti-art reveals that art objects, under the presuppositions of modernity, have no foundation by which to claim supremacy over other art objects, relegating an object’s value to either monetary speculation or conceptual content. But it is the Eastern approach – the apophatic and the paradoxical – that I have chosen as a response to conceptualism and the readymade, the embodied memories of artists like Rachel Whiteread, and vital materialism.

My preference for the paradoxical in the apophatic approach is evident in my use of mundane, everyday materials, even those of the gallery itself, as primary components of my art

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Duchamp’s *Infra-mince* is less straightforward in its negation than “anti-art.” It can be understood as “trace,” as the relation between mold and object, or as the difference between objects cast from the same mold. *Infra-mince* physically something, it has a quality, but it is almost invisible. The *Infra-mince* relation to the object is essentially paradoxical.

²⁵ Mikhail Epstein, “Emptiness as Technique: Word and Image in Ilya Kabakov” in *Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture* ed. Mikhail N. Epstein, Alexander A. Genis and Slobodanka M. Vladiv-Glover et al [New York: Berghahn Books, 1999] 336.

installation. It is “support” material to the day-to-day life of the gallery space (drywall compound, graphite, nails, gesso, and plaster) that is the focus of my material practice. An example of the elevation of gallery materials is my piece using found glass plates. They are arranged on a plexiglass shelf to highlight reflections and shadows cast by their transparent forms. Glass, used in the gallery to separate artwork and viewer, is elevated by the conventions of its display. In this body of work, it is the closest to the readymade. But whereas Duchamp elevated banal objects in order to mount an ironic critique of gallery structures, I have chosen to elevate gallery banality. I see these overlooked materials as active - even sacred – in that they make creation possible.



Figure 2.

Another way I indicate paradox is in my series of black sculptures, facsimiles of office and studio objects. They are at once familiar and convincing, but unsettling in that they are

slightly melted with soft edges. The color gives the sense that they are charred, burned, or baked. They require a careful looking over in order to identify them as replicas, and not just painted (or torched) objects. They become memory objects of trauma, shadows of things that once existed in a pristine state. The only thing that is known to the viewer is that the original objects are absent. They become reliquaries of the creative work they once supported, referencing projects unfinished.



Figure 3.

These works, in their sense of having an absent or overlooked quality, shared with the work of Rachel Whiteread (discussed above), a valuation of what is *not* there. Critic Susan Lawson explores Whiteread’s work as “texts” in a way that has strong parallels to apophatic language. Working with Derrida’s *difference*, a central concept in deconstruction, Lawson uses Whiteread’s *Wall* (1999) as an example of the “slippage” between index and signifier, the

internal paradox of *difference*. *Wall* is made up of two horizontal arches with a human-proportioned space inbetween. One side is an imprint of bricks, the other side reveals the bricks as a thin skin held up by a grid of support framing. *Wall* is a wall and it is not a wall: “the cast shifts from being simply an index for the absent object to being both an index and signifier.”²⁶ Importantly, Whiteread’s sculptures are, for the most part, *hollow* – they exist neither as walls delineating space, nor space contained by absent walls. Similar to Duchamp’s *Infra-mince*, the material relation between Whiteread’s cast, and the absent (often destroyed) original is one of paradox.



Figure 4.

A paradoxical mediation between concept and materiality is most clearly at work in my series of plaster pillar sculptures. These small-scale sculptures look highly worked, and are

²⁶ Susan Lawson, “Sensitive Skin: Infra Mince and Difference in the work of Rachel Whiteread” in *The Art of Rachel Whiteread* ed. Chris Townsend et al. [London: Thames & Hudson, 2004] 77.

unrecognizable as anything in particular. They resemble natural forms to a certain extent, but also retain hard architectural edges. They are intriguing and mysterious, resembling nothing in particular, yet highly material. These objects were made by using cellophane wrapping to cast the form of “trophies,” given to donors to honor their generosity to a church building project completed sometime in the early 1980s. The trophies are triumphantly shaped after the building’s bell tower. They are, for myself at least, high problematic objects on multiple levels. Their triumphalism aligns them in my mind to more heavily kataphatic frameworks common to Protestant and evangelical Christianity. Their strange backstory and the rich hardwood they were fabricated from made them highly attractive to me. I did not wish to completely negate these objects - but under my guiding question, I knew that I had to radically transform them from what they were.

The paradoxical implications of an apophatic approach have helped to negotiate a more material approach to my work. As my central question remains object-based, to drift so far into the apophatic that materiality melts away would be counter-productive. Though I am attempting to represent the absence of an object through negative means, I also want to point to the absent object as *actant*, a term used by Jane Bennett in her book on vital materialism, *Vibrant Matter* (previously discussed on page 10). What vital materialism brings to this conversation is an attentiveness to the givenness of things, a delay in constructing meaning that can open up a space in which the non-human object or material is allowed to speak and is not immediately interpreted by its usefulness or reference to human life.²⁷ The elevation of inanimate objects opens the viewer to the possibility of hidden worlds and realities for which there are no words.

²⁷ The limit of vital materialism is that, even with opening such spaces, human beings cannot help but bring their own humanistic lens to any object they encounter – it is an impossible task.

I address the sacred/mundane paradox in a modular floor sculpture made of the cast interiors of communion cups arranged in a topographical shape. Unlike the Eucharistic chalice in the Catholic tradition, these plastic cups hold no significance in themselves to Protestant participants. Indeed, the Protestant conception of Eucharist is generally purely symbolic – a point that is emphasized in the “throwaway” quality of these odd little plastic cups. The plaster interiors of the communion cups occupy a space the wine or grape juice could have once occupied. The missing cups and the missing grape juice are just inanimate things, but they have a profound impact upon those who partake in the sacrament. They symbolically represent belonging to a community, a commitment to faith. But they are also real things that are taken into real bodies, uniting them in sharing the same set of molecules. The large number of cup forms in the installation shifts focus from symbolic to the realness of the throwaway objects, the objects become *actants* and their inanimate lives become worthy of contemplation.



Figure 5.

Furthermore, though I believe there is great merit (and possibility) in intentionally considering the non-human life of others without anthropomorphisms, vital materiality in its thinning of the distinctions between persons and things holds the danger of instrumentalization of human beings, favoring of the physiological at the expense of the ethical. Perhaps this is why Bennett describes her ambition of vital materialism as necessarily “naive”. See Bennett, 15.

I have also considered ways in which my pieces might be able to speak to each other (as *actants*) in how they relate in space, reinforcing an overall sense of vital materialism within my exhibition. My series of wall drawings is installed in a way that is more akin to lines of poetry than to traditional drawings. For one, these drawings exist “on the page” (on the wall) rather than confined to frames. Furthermore, their spatial relation to other works function as punctuation, changing the relation of one piece to another, giving pause and emphasis to the space, and acting as mediators between the real materiality and the materiality of absence. The drawings themselves are made from photocopies of a fur coat and the drywall compound. The unexpected placement of objects in relation to one another and the re-framing of banal materials bring to mind the unexpected, unintelligible language of absent things. Though the objects themselves are absent, their traces (the work itself) are installed in a way that they are allowed to speak to each other.



Figure 6.



Figure 7.

gesture

Conceptually, the apophatic has been helpful in describing the paradoxical framework by which I explore how much the absence of an object can say. My interest in apophatic theology suggests a turn toward the ephemeral, but like Eastern Orthodox Icon painting and Buddhist Mandalas, mystical theology cannot exist outside of lived and embodied practices.²⁸ The mystical traditions from which apophatic theology stemmed are rich in spiritual disciplines, meant to empty the self to make room for God’s spirit. An apophatic approach has not only influenced my choice of materials and the way in which I approach representation, it has also influenced my process toward a time-based, disciplined practice.

The correlation between disciplined spiritual and art practices was made by Trappist monk and poet, Thomas Merton:

²⁸ For Monastics, even in their renunciation of “the world”, a disciplined life is still an embodied life, full of relationships and mundane tasks, eating and sleeping, chores and play.

Our five senses are dulled by inordinate pleasure. Penance makes them keen, gives them back their natural vitality, and more... It is the lack of self-denial and self-discipline that explains the mediocrity of so much devotional art, so much pious writing, so much sentimental prayer, so many religious lives.²⁹

Discipline can uncover new spiritual and artistic insights by giving shape to our public and private practices.³⁰ This goes against Romantic notions of unrestrained artistic freedom where personal and social limitations such as family life, day jobs, and mundane routines are seen as enemies of creative practice.³¹ In my experience, I have found that when I am most constrained and limited – either by choice or by necessity – my work deepens.



Figure 8.

²⁹ Quoted in Aaron Rosen in *Art + Religion in the 21st Century* [London: Thames & Hudson 2015] 163.

³⁰ American artist, Michale Landy, demonstrates an extreme example of disciplined practice in *Break Down* (2001), where the artist catalogued and destroyed every possession he owned until he was left with just the clothes on his back. Landy remarked on the great sense of emptiness he felt at the end of the process, which left him unable to make art for a year. See Rosen, 163.

³¹ Rosen. 163.

An example of how constraint informed my art practice can be seen in my series, “Apophatic Drawings”, that I made half-way through the MFA program. Before this series, I was making large theatrical landscapes on black paper, filling them with a plethora of content. At the time, I was taking a summer course that required us to make lightweight work to ship to Australia. I was thinking about missing objects in response to the work of some of our collaborators, and through this decided to start “documenting” the absence of studio objects through drawing their shadows. The constraints of the collaboration led me to small, minimal drawings that needed only the light from my kitchen window and a piece of charcoal. These drawing became a discipline – a manageable way to daily engage in art practice.



Figure 9.

Through these daily rhythms I also opened up my practice to contemplative performance in a way that had been foreclosed in my prior approach. In a performative mediation on a missing fur coat, I drew the coat on its side and then proceeded to erase it. In this gesture I withhold a straightforward representation of the fur coat, obliterating the image of it to foreclose

possibilities of speaking for the object itself. The result of this gesture is an amorphous form that references shadows, clouds, and water in a similarly metaphorical way mystical texts use the same imagery to describe entering into unknowing, into the intimate presence of an unintelligible divine.



Figure 10.



Figure 11.

The same strange, cloudy landscapes emerge in the series of postcards drawings I have imbedded into the walls of the gallery and digitally enlarged. Where once the landscape was domesticated for tourism purposes, familiar places are here transformed into the unrecognizable. Artistic strategies such as erasure, replication, and shadow casting imply the interconnected lives of the missing things but also obscure mundane objects – revealing their unknowable “shadow” side.

In these ways I am beginning to see the process by which I make things as extended physical meditations. This is most evident in my installation piece where I hammer nails into a wall – a destructive act that insinuates the violence of the crucifixion – over and over again. Whether or not the viewer is present for the installation, the destructive quality of the action, or the sound of the action, is still imaginable. After the nails are installed, I draw the shadows left by a spotlight in soft, convincing replications of shadows. Each nail becomes a kind of sundial, recording the time and place that the action took place, and the presence of the now-missing spotlight. In this piece, more than any others, I see that both gesture and object are equally apophatic, and highly physical in negation.

Toward a Sacramental Ontology

Why am I compelled to meditate on the absence of objects? What is there to gain in such an exercise – both for myself and for the viewer? As I have stated earlier, I wish to foster attentiveness to the absence of mundane things that can hopefully lead to a greater attentiveness to the objects that populate our lives. Particular things - studio tools, a fur coat, postcards, religious objects (the throwaway kind) – are in themselves worthy of contemplation and can point to the larger kinds of attentiveness we can all develop. For me, these objects have become

like sacred gifts. The studio tools make creative work possible. I am genuinely grateful for the good eraser, the bulldog clip, and the roll of masking tape. When they go missing, I'm not able to make things. The fur coat and the postcards are objects that are windows to worlds that don't exist anymore. Their obliteration is more melancholy. The throwaway (and problematic) religious objects – the trophies and the communion cups – paradoxically become active, sacred things when their use is concealed, and animates them as “characters” of the *via negativa*.

I wish to clarify that although I am drawing deeply from mystical texts, spiritual disciplines, and from my prior theological education to make sense of this body of work, this work is not ostensibly about the Divine. My primary concern begins and ends with objects. I have found it both helpful and necessary to limit the conversation, bringing me back to my initial question, “how much can the absence of an object say?” Mining each particular absent object limited by this question has focused my work. The question is as much a part of a disciplined practice as my materials and processes.

Through this body of work I am moving toward a sacramental ontology of things, in contrast to using readymades for ironic appropriation. A sacramental ontology views the physical world – cultural objects included – as gifts, participating (or overlapping) with an unseen reality. The apophatic approach opens a window to the possibility of real meaning without triumphant certainty. By qualifying the boundaries of the unknowable through negating affirmation, one can return to the conversation of meaning and presence with more than a material/immaterial binary view of reality. The assumption of this body of work is that there is real meaning to things and not merely a nominal semiotic, which would be the foundational assumption of Duchamp's readymades and indeed Danto's conceptual definition of art. Unlike

Danto and Duchamp, I would suggest that there is more of a mystery to objects – whether in a gallery as art, or as part of everyday life.

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