

Wreck

Realisms

We acknowledge that the Department of Art History, Visual Art & Theory and the University of British Columbia is situated on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territories of the xwməθkwəyəm(Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh(Squamish), and səḵilwətaɬ(Tsleil-Waututh) nations. This journal, the university, and academia in general perpetuate colonial legacies even as they attempt to address and counter these legacies. It is our mission to support anti-colonial scholarship and promote Indigenous resurgence.

From the Editors

In a world where reality is perceived very differently by different interest-groups, where there is a constant process of struggle against hegemonic definitions of what the world is like, 'realism' is always going to reverberate beyond some bare conception of 'styles of art.'

—Paul Wood, *Realism, Rationalism, Surrealism: Art Between the Wars*

There is a well-known password that opens the gates to an eternal terminological argument, something like a purgatory for art historians. Known to us all, this term is a bane and a responsibility, perhaps critical art history's original sin, and this issue of *Wreck* once again opens the Pandora's box. Enter "realism".

In an era so defined by the proliferation of images that our minds and societies themselves seem little more than recursive engines of recursion, images of the images that address us, a sense of the real is as desirable as it is absent. Far from entrenchment, such circulation seems to be erosive such that the image seems less a social epiphenomenon than a primary mover.

Realist art might either corroborate or subvert the world it addresses. It may serve as a colonial strategy, as a method of subsuming cultural traditions under a domineering ideal. On the contrary, the politics of resemblance at the heart of realism can provide a mode of resistance by pointing out the injustice of one reality attempting to displace another. The present-day critic has ample proof that the term "reality" has become increasingly contested and seems to offer an unconvincing connection between sensing and knowing. The dialectic between reality and representation, between image and fact, guides this issue of *Wreck*. We were interested in papers addressing the particular and peculiar vicissitudes of "realism," whether as an artistic movement, a literary genre, or a political strategy. We therefore ask: does "realism" have political legs to stand on? Can realism still be understood as a means of thinking past appearance, of critique beyond resemblance? Or does it entrench the dominant norms and values of the oppressive systems it depicts? Does realism solidify capitalist dogma or deride it as tentative and contingent? What does it offer and what does it take?

Yerang Park guides us beyond the confines of the Platonic cave of Barbieworld within which the film *Barbie* projects itself in full confidence of there being no such outside. Aligning Barbie's critical self-consciousness—the basis of protagonicity and the conceit of the film—with canonical images of art history, Park's analysis considers the potential of feminist self-assertion in the arena of representation amidst the (near) total reification. For Park, Barbie's transcendence becomes a recursion back into the world of images, yet still manages a salute to a utopia somewhere out there.

From image-status, we pass into an assessment of object-status in Shayan Sheikh's essay, which sketches out global strategies of realism in the premodern world to unfold the ever-elusive and alluring status of the devotional object. Sheikh makes a historiographical intervention to caution against an academic overreliance on and insufficiency of semiotics in the handling of diverse spiritual practices, especially Medieval Islam. By assessing various theological models of religious practice through the practices and objects that circumscribe them, Sheikh sketches out a material cultural approach to the devotional that is vivid, immediate, and somatic.

Nathan Clark (they/them) describes a poetic passage between the lyrical "I" and the collective "us" in Chilean artist Cecilia Vicuña's precarios. These are small sculptural compositions that are arranged so as to evoke a collectivity and a bodily presence within a "ritualized production of place." By bringing Vicuña's work together with Kurt Schwitters' Merzbau—both artists having undergone the experience of exile—Clark develops a dialectical movement between Vicuña's production of a "not-yet," and the afterlife of the commodity. They consider dissolution and possibility, capitalist destruction and art's expressive potential, through the "muse and medium" of the ocean in Vicuña's practice.

Laying claim to a privileged perspective is not the aim or end of these articles as each emerges from distant sources. But in their confluence is to be witnessed that lucidity that springs from art and criticism, one that peels back mystifying veils or momentarily reorders the sensorium in momentary suspension of the given. Art may affirm or subvert. Criticism might salute or rebuke. In such aesthetic deliberation, reality as it is received, conditioned, and reproduced by eye, mind, and action is put on trial, asked by the artist and the critic, if it is to begin again.

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– The *Wreck* Editorial Team

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The Maker of Meaning: The Image and the Subject in Greta Gerwig's *Barbie* (2023)

Yerang Park

Abstract

In the ending of the comedy film *Barbie* (2023), directed by Greta Gerwig, the main character Stereotypical Barbie fulfills her desire to be liberated from her object status and relocates from the Barbie Land to the Real World as a human, following these lines: "I want to be a part of the people that make meaning. Not the thing that's made. I want to do the imagining. I don't want to be the idea." Without realizing it, she performs a critique of Barbie dolls, a representation of an objectified female body in a reified commodity form, only to remodel the promotional image of Mattel's Barbie as a figure of a woman who decides and makes her meaning. This ominous moment of Stereotypical Barbie's transcendence leaves the possibility of this proper meaning-making subject unresolved as a historical aporia for feminist thinkers. I argue that the main character's self-consciousness, her negation of her manufactured object-status, and the essential irony in her transcendence—being rebranded as a neoliberal postfeminist icon by allegedly becoming the maker of meaning—constitute a self-reflexive critique of the problematic subjectivity depicted in Greta Gerwig's *Barbie*, instead of endorsing such representation. Firstly, I compare *Barbie*'s ending scene with two visual artworks, Édouard Manet's painting *Olympia* (1863) and Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* (1977-1980). Both seminal works greatly facilitated the core discussion in feminist art history: identifying the presence or the absence of female self-consciousness in visual art as a critique of the male-centered systems of representation, while the very forms of representation may still render the fetishized images of female bodies as objects of spectacle. Next, I examine how the film questions the possibility of representing "reality" by setting up the Real World, distinguished from the imaginary Barbie Land but no less "unreal" than its counterpart. However, instead of claiming that the postmodern doubt of the "real" is the primary critical method of the film, I argue that the Baudrillardian superficiality and theatricality of the Real World enable us to problematize the main character's fantasy of creating meaning in such world, within and beyond the film's narrative. By doubling down on the hallucination of the meaning-making subject, Stereotypical Barbie's transcendence in the film serves a caveat for such manifestations of utopian feminist imaginations.

The maker of meaning

In the ending of the comedy film *Barbie* (2023), directed by Greta Gerwig, the main character Stereotypical Barbie refuses her own condition as a commodity and the cultural icon of postwar white middle-class American femininity, aspiring to become a human: a maker of meaning. This transcendence from the manufactured object to the human being accompanies the relocation from the imaginative sphere in which Barbie dolls reside, “Barbie Land,” to the realm of the everyday reality depicted in this film, that is, the “Real World.” The symbolic conversation happens between the Stereotypical Barbie and the inventor of Barbie dolls, Ruth Handler, in the meditative space where nothing but a vague sense of a horizon lies in the mute pink background. Ruth warns Barbie about life in the Real World, saying, “Being a human can be pretty uncomfortable. Humans make things up, like patriarchy and Barbie, just to deal with how uncomfortable it is.” Despite Ruth’s caveat, Stereotypical Barbie asserts: “I want to be a part of the people that make meaning. Not the thing that’s made. I want to do the imagining. I don’t want to be the idea.” Shedding tears with a smile, Stereotypical Barbie then finds herself in a living human body, followed by flashing afterimages of women’s lives in the Real World.

At this point, Stereotypical Barbie is an object with critical self-consciousness, knowing that she is a commodity in the shape of a female body. Both Ruth and Stereotypical Barbie’s lines, nevertheless, sound more ominous than liberating. The inventor’s words suspiciously depict patriarchy as a product of subjective meaning-making—merely one among many arbitrary concepts that are fabricated by humans, thereby comparable to the Barbie doll as an object created by herself—and thus bypass the way of seeing patriarchy more as historical and objective systems of power relations that has necessarily mandated the marginalization of women. Stereotypical Barbie, tragically at the very moment when she appears as the most enlightened and inspiring, seeks the possibility to create such “meanings” as other humans purportedly do, rather than questioning such conception. How could feminist critique be validated if it is just another product of subjective meaning-making, situated on the same register as “patriarchy” reduced to a mere human invention?

Mass reception of this film has unsurprisingly been polemical across the globe. Instantly, Stereotypical Barbie’s declarative lines echo the feminist theorist and filmmaker Laura Mulvey’s 1975 essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” In this article, Mulvey criticized the Hollywood mainstream cinema codifying women as a “bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning,” since women have not taken the role of the agential subject in cinematic representation, but been passive tokens

connoting the lack of a penis from the psychoanalytic purview.¹ Mulvey's critical analysis was foundational as it problematized the phallogentric dichotomy determining who makes and consumes the meaning, and who bears such meaning as the symbol of the lack. However, as I will articulate later, this ending scene in *Barbie* does not immediately validate Stereotypical Barbie's subject position as the maker of the meaning. It rather requests the core question of aesthetics to be resolved in advance: the question of the image that embodies the fantasy of liberal humanist freedom, long-standing since the historical emergence of bourgeois subjectivity, and its relation to representations of women.

Scholars have critically noted that postfeminist images in contemporary Western media culture have glorified the subjective meaning-making of the neoliberal female subject. Depicted as empowered and liberated, images of such female subject assert classic feminist ideals such as women's autonomy and self-determination, yet problematically romanticize the individualistic self-fashioning of women and reproduce the values of traditional heterosexual femininity.² Nonetheless, many writers have argued that the *Barbie* movie elevates feminist consciousness despite such idealization of individual freedom and its manifestation of the market's subsumption of feminism and multiculturalism.³ For instance, Robyn Timothy's article praises the film for Stereotypical Barbie's embodiment of

¹ Because the absence of the penis poses a potential castration threat, women had to be rendered as fetish objects that reassures this fear of castration and reaffirms men's privileged position of control over the visual field. According to Mulvey, this inherently masculine position in active looking is identified with the metaphorical eye of the camera as well as the view of the audience in the theater. See Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): 7, <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/16.3.6>.

² Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff, *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism, and Subjectivity* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230294523>. Kim Toffoletti, "Baudrillard, Postfeminism, and the Image Makeover," *Cultural Politics (Biggleswade, England)* (Thousand Oaks) 10, no. 1 (2014): 105–19, <https://doi.org/10.1215/17432197-2397263>.

³ Some of the writers investigated the representation of non-normative masculinity or femininity in the film, promoting the demand for queer feminism while criticizing the unmarkedness of white subjects in the representations of queer experience. See Julie Estlick, "Ken's Best Friend: Masculinities in Barbie," *Feminist Theory* 25, no. 4 (2024): 557–64, <https://doi.org/10.1177/14647001241291448>; Darby M. Babin, "Genderqueer Reflections on Weird Barbie," *Feminist Theory* 25, no. 4 (2024): 587–600, <https://doi.org/10.1177/14647001241291446>. Qianqian Li's article notes the fact that progressive ideals represented in the film are in fact not the critique of the oppressive ideologies but absorption of them; Li carefully examined this self-contradiction that, for example, the images of consumer culture and ideal feminine beauty in *Barbie* are both "rejected and desired," because such images, after all, remain in the allegedly utopian Barbie Land that the protagonist left behind. Qianqian Li, "Performative Resistance and Aestheticized Conflicts: Barbie's Ambivalent Feminist Practice," *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, December 12, 2024, 6, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13675494241305336>. According to Li, the Barbie Land ironically "perpetuates a patriarchal logic of domination through the supremacy of Barbies over Kens," while on the surface level the Barbies seem to fight against the patriarchal ideology penetrating the Barbie Land from the Real World. Li, 7.

cyberfeminist utopia, because the heroine's radical transgression between two worlds embraces the plasticity, fluidity, and hybridity of her body, and thus her possibility of continuous self-reformation.⁴

If the liberating potential lies in this film, it is indeed simultaneously activated and delimited by this ending scene in which Barbie becomes the maker of the meaning. Stereotypical Barbie earns this moment of transcendence only to lose her critical self-consciousness that enabled her leap. Without realizing it, she performs a critique of Barbie dolls—a representation of an objectified female body in a reified commodity form—in order to remodel the promotional image of Mattel's Barbie as a figure of a woman who decides and makes her meaning. This paper suggests that Stereotypical Barbie's transcendence leaves the possibility of this proper meaning-making subject unresolved as a historical aporia for feminist thinkers. However, it is beyond the scope of this paper to examine theoretical discourses on the impossibility of the meaning or the instability of the subject, for instance, in Derridian or Lacanian sense. I argue that the main character's self-consciousness, her negation of her manufactured object-status, and the essential irony in her transcendence—being rebranded as a neoliberal postfeminist icon by allegedly becoming the maker of the meaning—constitute the self-reflexive critique of the problematic subjectivity depicted in Greta Gerwig's *Barbie*, instead of endorsing such representation.

Firstly, I compare *Barbie*'s ending scene with two visual artworks, Édouard Manet's painting *Olympia* (1863) and Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* (1977-1980). Both seminal works greatly facilitated the core discussion in feminist art history: identifying the presence or the absence of female self-consciousness in visual representation as a critique of the male-centered systems of representation, while the very forms of representation may still render the fetishized images of female bodies as objects of spectacle.

An Object with Self-consciousness

In the film, Stereotypical Barbie's self-consciousness of her object-status has always been linked to that of her image-status, and how smoothly her image fits in the operations of the Barbie Land. First of all, the film presumes the fundamental link between the Barbie doll and its owner living in the Real World—the correlation between the self and the image, or the image and its referent. The Barbie doll is the imaginary self of her owner, the projection of the owner's desire, and the doll inspires them to pursue the fulfillment of their dreams. The narrator explains how Mattel's Barbie dolls contributed to women's equality in the public sphere in Westernized modern society, only in an extremely simplified

⁴ Robyn Timothy, "Barbie Land as Cyberfeminist Utopia," *Feminist Theory* 25, no. 4 (2024): 635–48, <https://doi.org/10.1177/14647001241291462>.

second-wave feminist narrative that the narrator herself is able to criticize: “Barbie changed everything. Then, she changed it all again. [...] Girls can grow into women, who can achieve everything and anything they set their mind to,” and then sarcastically adding, “thanks to Barbie, all problems of feminism and equal rights have been solved. At least that’s what the Barbies think.”⁵

As the glitch occurs in the ontological boundary between the Stereotypical Barbie doll and her owner, Gloria, the principle of the Real World is being introduced into the Barbie Land; the once-stable order of the image-world and Barbie’s belonging to that world are being threatened. Stereotypical Barbie’s body has been gradually dislocated from the norms of ideal female beauty that have molded the Barbie doll. For instance, her heels suddenly stick to the ground, unlike the other Barbies’ iconic tiptoe feet suiting high heels. Through her journey to the Real World to solve this problem, Stereotypical Barbie learns from Sasha that the Barbie doll, as an image and a commodity, has been a carrier of oppressive ideologies such as “sexualized capitalism” and “unrealistic physical ideals,” just as much as the doll might have mobilized emancipatory practices. Although all Barbies in the Barbie Land seem to share the consciousness that they are manmade objects that inspire their owners in the Real World, only Stereotypical Barbie acquires this ability of critical reflection.

It is the crisis of the protagonist’s image and the image-based world that is so terrifying to her, and then initiates the uncomfortable enlightenment that she has been the bearer of both feminist and counter-feminist meanings. Then, when the Stereotypical Barbie obtains her freedom from her object-status and leaps to the Real World, what happens with her image-status? And how does this image-status contextualize Barbie’s previous and new mode of being, as a bearer of meaning and then putatively a maker of meaning?

This peculiar position of Stereotypical Barbie might oddly remind us of a European realist painting that portrayed a prostitute with the confrontational gaze toward the viewers: Manet’s *Olympia*. Manet depicted a nude of a courtesan—having the double position of an ostentatious

⁵ The affirmative logic of self-fashioning that is being criticized here fairly resonates with the subtext of Betty Friedan’s 1963 book *The Feminine Mystique*. In this book, Friedan articulated how the oppressive ideological function of the mass-distributed image has been powerful in the visual construction of white middle-class women’s lives in postwar America: the prevailing images of what she called “the happy housewife heroine” in advertisements, movies, magazines, and books. Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (Dell, 1964). Although Friedan’s book indeed contributed to provoking feminist consciousness and bringing it to actions in the feminist movement in the 1960s America, Patricia Bradley problematizes that Friedan’s project elided the possible macroscopic political or legal actions yet provided the steps that the enlightened individual reader could take, in the form of “traditional self-help articles of the magazines with the postwar popularization of psychology”—and this book in a mass media writing style made a commercial success with substantive media coverage. Patricia Bradley, *Mass Media and the Shaping of American Feminism, 1963-1975* (University Press of Mississippi, 2003), 12.

consumer and an object of consumption—whose posture lying down on the mattress refers to Titian’s canonical painting *Venus of Urbino* (1534), although her head is positioned frontally unlike Titian’s. *Olympia* provoked immediate reactions of disdain in more than fifty critical writings when exhibited in the Paris Salon in 1865, and most of the entries expressed the disgust toward how Olympia’s body is depicted.⁶ As a response to this scandal, art historians have commonly noted that the prostitute’s bodily gesture and gaze, “utterly straightforward, unflinching, devoid of seduction,” were not in the service of the masculine visual pleasure as much as the traditionally ideal figure of Titian’s Venus was.⁷ Art historian T. J. Clark claimed that Olympia’s ambiguous gaze installs more of a stalemate than the bold realist refutation because the indeterminacy of her gaze led Olympia fail to fit into either category of a woman, a nude, or a prostitute. Instead, Clark suggested the painting displaces the category of woman from the object of the male fantasy to the “fully coded, public and familiar world, to which fantasy has entry only in its real, uncomfortable, dominating and dominated form,” which is, the class society that “*manufactures* the imagery.”⁸ Critically responding to Clark, Charles Bernheimer suggested that disquieting sexuality of Olympia activated and disclosed an escalating reification and spectacularization of women’s bodies along with the dissolution of class distinction in consumer society.⁹ It was when the distribution of pornographic photography, according to Abigail Solomon-Godeau, played a crucial role in constructing “the new forms of the commodification of the feminine” in the nineteenth century.¹⁰

This painting has historically prompted a crucial feminist strategy of troubling the patriarchal cultural codes and dominant structures of representation from within: reimagining an objectified image of woman as having self-consciousness that might act against her presumed passiveness, resulting in the active recognition that she herself is an object being seen. However, it might have produced, and been produced by, another oppressive historical displacement of the image of the female body. It is woman as the spectacle, a coded image of her “elegant artificiality,” a wealthy courtesan becoming the *mise en scène* for her customers.¹¹ Rebecca Schneider noted that Manet’s Olympia is “seemingly self-possessed” within the frame but in fact did not have agency in the discourse of her defiant gaze,

⁶ Timothy J. Clark, “Preliminaries to a Possible Treatment of ‘Olympia’ in 1865,” *Screen* 21, no. 1 (1980): 18–42, <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/21.1.18>.

⁷ Abigail Solomon-Godeau, “The Legs of the Countess,” *October* 39 (1986): 98, <https://doi.org/10.2307/778313>.

⁸ Clark, “Preliminaries to a Possible Treatment of ‘Olympia’ in 1865,” 38–39.

⁹ Charles Bernheimer, “Manet’s Olympia: The Figuration of Scandal,” *Poetics Today* 10, no. 2 (1989): 255–77, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1773024>.

¹⁰ Solomon-Godeau, “The Legs of the Countess,” 68.

¹¹ Linda Nochlin, *Realism, Style and Civilization* (Penguin, 1982), 203.

being bound to the authorizing signature of the male virtuoso and androcentric conventions of established institutions.¹² This might be what foreshadows the fate of Stereotypical Barbie in the film. In the moment of her transcendence, saying, “I want to do the imagining. I don’t want to be the idea,” Stereotypical Barbie alludes to her desire to be freed from the ideologies that have conditioned her “meaning” as the “made” thing—“sexualized capitalism” and “unrealistic physical ideals,” according to Sasha’s accusation. However, the human Barbie wearing Birkenstock sandals instead of high heels is still structured within the visual frame of the spectacle, given that Barbie was literally born as the iconic doll with a plastic body—the all-time hit product of Mattel since 1959—and revitalized as a glamorous character in the commercial blockbuster film. Even worse, human Barbie achieves the historically specific kind of freedom by moving into Los Angeles, United States: the so-called “freedom” to sell her labor time to sustain her living, which is in fact not upon her will but the obligation imposed to workers, allegorized as the “universal prostitution” in Karl Marx’s terms.¹³ Being a human, she is becoming a female consumer who chooses what to buy and how to represent herself following and setting the ceaseless cycle of the fashion trend. Now they are just the Birkenstock sandals replacing high heels.

The Crisis of the Meaning

Hence, Stereotypical Barbie’s transcendence is precarious because she has not been more liberated from her image-status as the consumed spectacle than Manet’s courtesan, and she risks naively believing that there is an outside of the capitalist ideology in which she can freely create the meaning. Nevertheless, another comparison between Barbie’s ending scene and Cindy Sherman’s *Untitled Film Stills* series might let us recall how the appropriation of the mass media images has been the strategy of feminist critique in visual arts and culture, if the total subsumption to the spectacle is one of the problems in Barbie’s transcendence. Sherman’s *Untitled Film Stills* is a series of black-and-white photographs in which the artist dresses up as a female character in films, often acting as if she is not conscious of the presence of the camera, creating the nostalgic mise-en-scène that specifically refers to the films of the fifties from the New Wave to Hitchcock. For instance, *Untitled Film Still #21* (1978) depicts a young woman with short curly blonde hair on the street of a big city, wearing a dress with big white collars, who seems to be captivated by something outside the frame.

¹² Rebecca Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 1997), 25, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203421079>.

¹³ Jaleh Mansoor, *Universal Prostitution and Modernist Abstraction: A Counterhistory* (Duke University Press, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478060734>.

Mulvey's 1991 article noted that Sherman's photographs set the scenes of unguarded female characters as objects of voyeurism, yet the fact that every character is the artist herself in disguise unsettles the illusion and exposes its theatricality. According to Mulvey, Sherman "performs femininity as an appearance" that is inseparable from the sexualization of the female body ingrained into the photographic medium in popular culture, congealed with the fantasy of the fifties in the United States, visualizing "the feminine as masquerade."¹⁴

If Mulvey claimed *Untitled Film Stills* to be a critical feminist work in which the artist-model deliberately subordinates herself to the coded appearance of femininity coupled with its imposed passivity, art historian Rosalind E. Krauss claimed that this series radically questions the hierarchical relationship between the original and the copy in representation. Krauss tells the anecdote of an art critic who assumed Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* to be copies of original film images that summon the memory of the films. However, according to Krauss, this is misrecognition because there are no actual films that precede the acts of copying; Sherman's photographs are the images representing the images, "being a copy without an original," while referring to the characteristic of the mass-cultural photographic image that produces the stereotypes.¹⁵ Krauss finds that the critic's misrecognition on Sherman's stills results from the Barthesian notion of the myth as a de-historicizing and de-politicizing ideology that naturalizes how things are. The myth lures its consumer to assign the supposed naturalness of the status quo (the message) to how it is being represented (the signifier). In this sense, the art critic is the myth-consumer who needs to create the oeuvre of nature, the source, and the original, in order to allocate it to the signifier.

As copies without the original, Sherman's masquerade in *Untitled Film Stills* mobilizes the critique of certain myths. One is about the ontology of the image, that there must be a source that validates the indexical function of the surface, which is valuable only in relation to its depth. The other is the naturalization of femininity as it appears, while Sherman's is a historically specific construct of femininity in the consumerist society of the fifties, mediated by the photographic medium. And how exactly does this question of the surface and the depth becomes the problem of feminist aesthetics? In 1979, shortly after French society witnessed the rapid growth in pornographic film production, Jean Baudrillard wrote in his book *Seduction*: "Now woman is but appearance."¹⁶ To Baudrillard, seduction

¹⁴ Laura Mulvey, "A Phantasmagoria of the Female Body: The Work of Cindy Sherman," *New Left Review* (London) 188, no. 188 (1991): 142.

¹⁵ Rosalind E. Krauss, *Cindy Sherman, 1975-1993*, with Internet Archive (New York : Rizzoli, 1993), 17, http://archive.org/details/cindysherman19750000krau_o6k7.

¹⁶ Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction* (New World Perspectives, 1990), 10, <https://go.exlibris.link/q6NjnlTs>.

indicates the capacity of attraction through the “artificial presentation of the body,” the sensible ways in which the body is offered and presents itself for the other’s pleasure.¹⁷ Insofar as seduction comes from the sensual appearance, it is inherently feminine to the author because the idea of the depth as the truth opposed to the surface has historically been calibrated with masculine values. Instead of merely reclaiming the concept of the feminine depth to counter the masculine one, he claims that the feminine as the surface could attain the power of subversion not because it is diametrical to the masculine depth, but in fact introduces the “indistinctness of surface and depth” or “indifference to the authentic and the artificial,” therefore more profoundly dismantling the established set of values.¹⁸

In light of this discussion, it is crucial to prove whether the film *Barbie* can expose the very construction of the myth of meaning-making as well as the way that myth is materialized in the appearance of the meaning-making subject. I suggest that this myth is subtly, if not obviously, interrogated in *Barbie* through the peculiar relationship between the Barbie Land and the Real World. It is because the protagonist’s leap from the made to the meaning-maker will only be possible when there is the right destination, the world of the real, in which the surface is connected to the depth and the images have their proper referents, in contrast to the imaginary Barbie Land. I examine how the film questions the possibility of representing “reality” by setting up the Real World, distinct yet interconnected with the imaginary Barbie Land, but no less “unreal” than its counterpart. However, instead of claiming that postmodern doubt of the “real” is the primary critical method of the film, I argue that the Baudrillardian superficiality and theatricality of the Real World enable us to problematize the main character’s fantasy of creating meaning in such world, within and beyond the film’s narrative.

The construction of the Real World appears to be fictional from the start of the film, which is self-contradictory to what its name claims to be. The narration in the opening sequence describes the Real World in the past as the land of the little American girls, dressed up in the style of the fifties and playing with baby dolls, showing their dissatisfaction with playing the role of the mother as their only option. In the meantime, audiences can see the absurdly prehistoric landscape of the rocky grounds

¹⁷ Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 8.

¹⁸ Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 10. His view aligns with Luce Irigaray’s thesis that women exist only as the other or the negative in relation to men, yet Baudrillard remains skeptical about affirming female corporeality being as the productive and archaic source of feminine desire that can refuse the appearance-essence dichotomy. Sadie Plant’s article reads Baudrillard’s work as “chimerical,” as he dismisses the contemporary French feminist theory and its focus on corporeality, but at the same time affirms that the power of the liminal position stems from the sensual images of the female body. Plant claims that Baudrillard’s radical theorization of seduction bears the reactionary moment aiming to protect the subject from its dissolution. Sadie Plant, “Baudrillard’s Woman: The Eve of Seduction,” in *Forget Baudrillard?*, 1st ed., ed. Chris Rojek and Bryan S. Turner (Routledge, 1993), 90, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203412886-5>.

combined with the nostalgic fantasy of the fifties. Then, the giant Barbie doll in her iconic swimsuit suddenly appears, which motivates the girls to smash the baby dolls with epic music playing in the background. This way, the film's construction of the Real World is unlikely to be the faithful mimesis of reality, but replaces that reality with the theater of absurdity and humor. Furthermore, the comical chase scene at the Mattel building falls under what Li called the film's "aestheticization of conflicts," as the conflict between the executives and Stereotypical Barbie is devoid of actual threat but more like a staged performance.¹⁹ The Mattel executives appear as no more than a satirical illustration of incompetent decision-makers and institutionalized conventions, since they could not think of passing the waist-level security barrier without tagging the ID card when Barbie was escaping. Ruth Handler, the inventor of Barbie dolls, lives in the Mattel building in a ghostly form; the creator of Barbie and the Barbie Land appears as a phantasm haunting the Real World, as the marketed narrative of the inventor and her image of the successful businesswoman.

Hence, the film *Barbie* deliberately composes the Real World not as the representation of reality but as the world of the images. Baudrillard, in his book *Simulacra and Simulation*, differentiated representation from simulation as the modeling of the real without the origin, which determines the condition of existence and perception in the contemporary society of mass image consumption. According to Baudrillard, representation is predicated upon "the equivalence of the sign and the real," whereas simulation operates "the radical negation of the sign as value."²⁰ The disparity between its name, the "Real World," and the absence of the real in that world discloses that there is no outside of the Platonic Cave in Stereotypical Barbie's journey, and in this sense, Barbie is still living in the Barbie Land but in illusion. It may remind us of the narration at the beginning of the film, "all of these women are Barbie, and Barbie is all of these women."

Feminist Myth-consumers and Utopian Hope

The impossibility to transcend one's image-status is not simply about Stereotypical Barbie's position as a fictional character. It stems from the fundamental principle of these two worlds' operations, the very grounding of the worlds in which she has lived. Under this Baudrillardian condition, two main characters, Beach Ken and Stereotypical Barbie, both manifest their utopian desire toward better modes of life, yet show distinct ways of approaching imageness—the foundational principle of their worlds. When Ken discovers unequal gender dynamics and the ongoing oppression

¹⁹ Li, "Performative Resistance and Aestheticized Conflicts," 12.

²⁰ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, *The Body in Theory, Histories of Cultural Materialism* (University of Michigan Press, 1995), 6.

of women by men in the Real World, he decides to subvert the tyranny of the female-dominated Barbie Land by introducing the patriarchy from the Real World. However, the capitalist society in the Real World is structured in a way that Ken must fail to understand the intricate social relations that are so radically reified that they appear as abstract relations between commodities. This is why Ken's only option was to revolt in the Barbie Land, as his understanding of patriarchy is mostly grounded on *representations* of patriarchal American masculinity: the image of Bill Clinton with the Stars and Stripes on the background, horses and sheriffs, former American presidents' portraits inscribed on dollar bills, and hyper-masculine male figures at the gym, drinking beer, golfing, or wearing fur coats. Implanted in the Barbie Land, in the world of images, Ken's regime is represented by his Mojo Dojo Casa House and images of American masculinity replacing the Barbie Dreamhouse.

Ken's revolution is not only aesthetic but accompanies the structural transformation of the property rights and the administrative government as Ken's plan to vote to change the constitution, although the actual process of the constitutional change is off-screen, not transparent, and appears mostly through the looks of the election campaign.²¹ He finally earns Virginia Woolf's "a room of her own," as Ken didn't have his dedicated private space before the revolution. However, Ken's plan to establish a government for the Kens is thwarted by the Barbies' collective front and their ruse. It turns out Ken's regime has been fragile from the start, as he confesses that his primary goal was not a political revolution but rather earning Stereotypical Barbie's love. If we can say that Ken in Barbie Land is a mirror image of a woman in the patriarchal world, Ken's feminist revolution breaks down because his consciousness, in fact, remains apolitical. His utopian desire is not toward the structural change itself, and even his effort to bring such social transformation can be manifested only in the realm of the fetishized images and sheer appearance, accepting the controversial presumption that more visibility and representation are equivalent to increased political power.²² On the other hand, Stereotypical Barbie's utopian desire lies in the fantasy that she is the free human subject, and therefore can be more than the appearance if she attains her problematic freedom. Thus, the film *Barbie* is a pessimistic portrayal of two feminist myth-consumers, whose self-reflexive images urgently remind us why we need to interrogate the function of the images in any social and political change.

²¹ Ruth Houghton et al., "Kenstituent Power: An Exploration of Feminist Constitutional Change in Barbie," *Feminist Theory* 25, no. 4 (2024): 611, <https://doi.org/10.1177/14647001241291463>.

²² This ideology of the visible has been criticized by feminist scholars in that it wrongly assumes the real to precede the representation, as if the representation is the reflection of the real, and disregards how the visualization could lead to vulnerabilities to reification and surveillance. Peggy Phelan et al., *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, vol. 1 (Routledge, 1993), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203359433>.

Culminating in the ending scene in *Barbie*, the image of Stereotypical Barbie becoming a human and living in Los Angeles crystallizes both the feminist agency and the myth of the free subject working in favor of capitalist social systems that have historically marginalized women. By doubling down on the hallucination of the meaning-making subject, Stereotypical Barbie's transcendence in the film serves a caveat for such manifestations of utopian feminist imaginations. The film *Barbie*'s coherent theatricality and self-reflexivity of its form of the spectacle also indicate that Stereotypical Barbie's announcement of "making meaning" is a part of this spectacle. For example, when the protagonist Barbie laments that she is no longer "pretty," the narrator intervenes with a joke, reminding the audience that this is a commercial film: "Note to the filmmakers, Margot Robbie is the wrong person to cast if you want to make this point." Less of a popular feminist propaganda, the protagonist's final declaration and transcendence bear rich critical potential as long as the film forecloses the naïve possibility of transferring to the world of the real, the world of the meaning.

Inasmuch as the ending scene in *Barbie* could serve a satirical and self-reflexive critique of the subject model and its image on screen, the film still retains the utopian hope. Feminist thinkers, especially since the Baudrillardian crisis of meaning, have committed themselves to resolving this historical aporia: how could women be more than mere appearance, structured to be passive within an androcentric set of values and systems of representation? The ending scene in *Barbie* indicates the irrefutable persistence of a utopian hope to demonstrate that women can be more than the surface and the objectified image, even if the solution may seem to stumble upon the classic hallucination of meaning-making. Or, it may be this hope that also makes us concerned about the inherent risk of failure in Stereotypical Barbie's transcendence, just at the moment when she seems to reach the peak of her journey of self-liberation in the film.

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Medieval Realism and the Devotional Object

Shayan Sheikh

Abstract

Medieval realism revolves around the radical presence of the corporal sign in the devotional moment and thus mirrors modern realism in significant ways. While pointing to similar exigencies of physical, visceral descriptions in both modern and medieval realism, I shall explore strains of allegory and metaphysics that distinguish the latter. In the Islamic context, the visceral designs of devotional practices relate to sacrality of the Prophet Muhammad's body. We have medieval accounts of devotees paying homage to the relics of the Prophet, as if they were literally the person of the Prophet (Richard McGregor 2020). Most emphatically, the genre of Hilye panels from the Ottoman context epitomise devotional realism. Here, a physical profile of the Prophet's body is evoked for the viewer, in calligraphic poetic glosses and quotations from canonical Hadith sources. Tapping to the corporal underpinnings of spirituality and Prophetic virtue in Islam, such visual regimes echo the machinations of Medieval realism, radically confronting the devotee with the object's body (Tobias Heinzelmann 2022). In Medieval Islam, we see the power of the 'concrete detail', as Barthes claims in the "Reality Effect", to collude the signifier and referent. My contention is that the focus of such realist practices on the Prophetic agent reiterates religious allegory, unlike the disenchanted paradigm of modern realism derided by Lukacs, where all and every body becomes worthy of representation, conflating the 'important and unimportant.'

Introduction

Public discourse on religion in modern secular societies has been shaped by polemics and conflicts, events of spectacular violence and a louder furor over assimilation of minority faiths. These narratives are embodied in the 2005 Jyllands-Posten Danish caricature cartoons of Prophet Muhammad and the subsequent assassination of cartoonists at Charlie Hebdo, Paris, in 2015. The key to the controversy was a semiotic issue: the appropriate role of language and images in signifying God.

It has been argued that the liberal critique of Muslim backlash to the Danish cartoons was defined by a Protestant logic.¹ Broadly speaking, per this logic, the religious sign is considered symbolic and unreal, not to be confused with the signified, God or the Prophet. Martin Luther addresses this issue in his criticism of Protestant millenarian movements and their campaigns of desecration waged on Christian icons as symbols of Papal corruption.² Luther's rationale was not that these images were real and sacred, but that they were so impotent that the iconoclastic campaigns were superfluous. As opposed to this impotence of the sign, we confront the radical immediacy of the image among many Muslims, producing offence and shock to visual caricature.

In this paper, I explore this radical signifying power in devotional sensibilities of Christianity and Islam that conceive potent signs for the devotee as literal mediations of God. I assess these mediations within devotional regimes such as the rhetorical strategies of the Early Church Fathers and the cardinal Islamic pilgrimage, Hajj. My understanding is that in order to better grasp such historic devotional modalities, modern assumptions about the religious subject and the sign have to be questioned to say the least. Equally, navigating these mediations of religious language is crucial to the present, in comprehending anguish over religious pain and resisting secular models of assimilation.

Besides the Reformation, modern Realism features as a dormant theme in this paper. Realism's preoccupations with the body, incarnating real physical forms onto the canvas and the literary text, are not too far removed from the corporal preoccupation in medieval devotion: the flesh of Christ in the Eucharist and his revered physical form in the Christian icon; the Islamic veneration of Prophet Muhammad's body through relics and emulation. These paradigms revolve around vividly invoking and mediating with the signified in the present, akin to the radical presence of "concrete" reality in Realist works.³

¹ Saba Mahmood, "Religious Reason and Secular Affect: An Incommensurable Divide?" *Critical Inquiry* 35, No. 4, (2009), 836-862.

² "Religion and Art: The Crisis of the Image at the Beginning of the Modern Age," in *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image Before the Era of Art*, trans. Edmund Jephcott. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 458-491.

³ For the question of the body in modern Realism, see Margaret Cohen and Christopher Prendergast. *Spectacles Of Realism: Gender, Body, Genre*. (University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 5; Roland Barthes. *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard. (California: University of California Press, 1989), 147.

Protestant Theology and the Disenchanted Image

Anthropologists of religion like Webb Keane and Saba Mahmood show how modern semiotics, represented foremost by Ferdinand de Saussure, has a genealogy in the language ideology of the Reformation and the Enlightenment. For Saussure, the signifier is only arbitrarily linked to the signified, based on a system of differences and a conventional code only shared by its users. Both authors note that this is a virtual system of denotation, underscoring a distinction between language and the world.⁴

This detachment of the sign from the world and the highly cognitive sphere of human meaning has roots in Protestant theology. Keane points to John Milton as an exemplar of the Protestant semiotic framework, when the English poet critiques an attachment among believers to a set litany of prayer. This habit imprisons Inner and Holy Spirit, as well as the vocation of sincere prayer to language, “to outward dictate.”⁵ Likewise, colonial-era Calvinist missionaries on the Sumbalese island of Indonesia questioned forms of ancestral worship in their polemics as an excessive attachment to the “material results” of prayer, whereas signifiers are supposed to be merely “transparent” expressions of the believer’s intent and sincerity, lacking any inherent power.⁶

What persists among these ways of thinking is an integrity of the human subject who is autonomous from the surrounding non-human world. This underscores the Protestant genealogy of modernity and its agentive and autonomous subject, redeemed from the fetishes of the material world. From being embedded in the surrounding world, in this moral narrative inheres an act of self-mastery and purification: demarcating the material from immaterial, the natural from the human and reducing the latter to its most basic and supposedly definitive elements; the soul, thought, belief and meaning of words.⁷

This semiotic ideology has been critiqued by pointing to dimensions of materiality and embodiment in religious and secular language. For Talal Asad, religious signs are not reducible to abstract ideas, but include actual language-in-use and the cultivation of virtuous bodily dispositions by disciplining the body under the supervision of authorities.⁸ Likewise, language-in-use shows how signs

⁴ Webb Keane, *Christian Moderns: Freedom and Fetish in the Mission Encounter* (University of California Press, 2007), 22; Saba Mahmood, “Religious Reason and Secular Affect: An Incommensurable Divide?” *Critical Inquiry* 35, No. 4, (2009), 843-844.

⁵ Keane, *Christian Moderns*, 1.

⁶ Keane, *Christian Moderns*, 15.

⁷ Keane. *Christian Moderns*, 5.

⁸ Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (John Hopkins University Press, 1993), 135;163.

“mediate and embody” relations of power: “the life of people, gestures and things in the world.” Thus, the sign and the world become interdependent.⁹

The thrust of Asad’s argument derives from Marcel Mauss’ concept of embodiment. In “Techniques of the Body”, Mauss situates religious experiences within the broader social field of *habitus* or *exis*. The latter is an Aristotelian term that can be defined as an “acquired ability and faculty”, the cultivated and cultural bodily techniques, such as a particular gait of walking, breath techniques, and traditional ritualised hunting learned by imitating authoritative and prestigious models. These techniques endow dexterity and adeptness in day-to-day quotidian activity and importantly, pertain to a domain of practical reason in which the body and the intellect are interlinked.¹⁰

Mauss reorients religious signs to their embodying and disciplined subjects, for “at the bottom of all our mystical states there are techniques of the body.... the biological means of entering into communion with God.”¹¹ This means that the body is our primary instrument and that *habitus* pertains to its adaptation to technical ends, through acquired actions akin to the assembly of a machine. I believe what is left wanting here is an assessment of the religious object and sign, as an integral accompaniment to the body in the techniques of *habitus*.

In the embodied *habitus* of medieval religion, the acquired communion with God is connected to the acquired invocation of God through mediums of mediation. This is a paradigm where grace and virtue are not merely signified as cognitive meaning but embodied (in human and non-human channels): in the sacrament of the Eucharist; in the ontological links of revealed scripture to God and as stated above, in the practiced and bodily emulation of exemplary models. This materiality of signification, to be elaborated below, firstly shows regimes of mediation with the transcendent. Secondly, materiality and embodiment highlight the limits of human agency in the signifying process, for the latter evades the predictability of the rule-based discursive field into the indeterminate nature of material causal relations, limiting the human “capacity to endow the world with meaning.”¹² Most importantly, this necessitates questioning modern assumptions about the religious practitioner, the object and its operation: An agentive individual enriched with abstract mental meaning hardly aligns with historical religious subjects not merely conceptualising but beholding, disciplining, and subjecting the will to vivid links of grace in order to facilitate devotion.

In this vein, I shall be questioning trends in modern scholarship that focus on mnemonic operations like allegory and *ekphrasis* in discussing medieval devotion. My assessment is that these devices have to be seen as interacting with and contributing to embodied practices of signification, in

⁹ Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford University Press, 2003), 65.

¹⁰ Marcel Mauss, “Techniques of the body,” in *Economy and Society* 2, Issue 1 (1973), 73-75.

¹¹ Marcel Mauss, “Techniques of the body”, 87.

¹² Keane, *Christian Moderns*, 18.

the body and the material sign, which I shall be outlining subsequently. Otherwise, one runs the risk of anachronistically imposing a semiotic ideology that is Protestant in its contours onto a medieval past.

Medieval Memory and the Object

The juxtaposition of the rational Renaissance and its subordinate “medieval” is most effectively critiqued in the work of Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood. Here, anachronism and inaccuracy are denied as some form of medieval malaise, but recognised as an enduring premodern visual epistemology tied to mental designs of memory and archetypes, equally present in the Renaissance. The authors argue that between the schema of inalienable objects like relics and easily repeatable objects like literary texts, there exists a whole range of artefacts that stand in for a lost original. They call this the substitution effect, whereby archetypes and authoritative models are intensely replicated by minutely invoking their structural and conceptual features.¹³ This visual epistemology is shown to be key to both the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, seen in such visual regimes as the Byzantine icon and the substitution of a legendary Triumphant Christ statue in 15th century Venice (Figure 1). In these examples, minute structural references, such as Christ’s mantle and foliage on the pedestal, rekindle the legendary original and its miraculous powers for a later audience.

¹³ Alexander Nagel and Christopher S. Wood, “Interventions: Toward a New Model of Renaissance Anachronism,” *Art bulletin* 137, No. 3, (2005), 405.



Figure 1. *Christ the Redeemer*, bronze, 138 cm; 60 cm; 42.5 cm, 14495-1505. Milan, Museo Poldi Pezzoli.

The substitution model brings nuance to medieval visuality as vacillating between physical verisimilitude and phantasmic recollection. Substitution, with its links to lost or antique archetypes, points to the preoccupation with the invisible in medieval visuality. Equally, the capacity of minute references to invoke the archetype delimit the role of figurative verisimilitude in the religious object.

The cognitive aspect of the substitution model relates to how mental apprehension is seen to be the culmination of theology in medieval Christianity. In the theological reflections of the Early Church Fathers, ekphrasis, which can be loosely translated as verbal painting, predominates as a didactic tool. This brings physical verisimilitude to the very foundation of Christianity, albeit as a rhetorical tool and not an end in itself. Dionysius the Areopagite (5th-6th century CE) proposes a theory of devotional ekphrasis. He gives credence to physical signs, both natural and manmade, as manifestations of the

invisible divinity; in explicating the Christian truth, he presents a highly visual version of the Trinity, underscoring its luminosity and natural analogies. But ultimately all signs in their beauty are subordinate channels toward the invisible Godhead, the source of all beauty, in whose presence all language is rendered inadequate. Especially when using affirmative symbols, by drawing likenesses unto God, a qualification is necessary: “to recognise its shortcoming... for God is in no way like the things.”¹⁴

Ekphrasis also features in the Early Christian cult of saints, elaborated in sermons by Early Church Fathers, most notably St. Augustine. The Late Antique Martyrium was a site of a mental theatre or painting, with sermons on martyrs’ days evoking the physical memory of the saint, from their fabled dress to dramatic events of martyrdom itself. Augustine dramatically urged his congregations at one of these martyrdoms to imagine the saint and empathise with him: “just now the passion of the blessed Cyprian was being read. We were listening with our ears, observing it all with our minds; we could see him competing, somehow or other we felt afraid for him in his deadly peril, but we were hoping God would help him.”¹⁵ Here, Augustine pushes the reader to recollect and focus on an ekphrastic account of Cyprian’s martyrdom in his sermon. The recollection is also aided by the vitality and energy of his description, a device called *energeia*, which strengthens the vividness of description. Augustine’s *energeia* drew inspiration from the power of alternate profane modes such as the classical theatre. Equally, such rhetorics tapped into the power of images and vision as a means to a vivid theology. For Augustine, the lust of the flesh and the carnal desire to become the object could be used towards austere means here, with the ideal saint object.

Yet, ultimately, like Dionysius, Augustine’s image of ekphrasis is a tool towards higher theological states. The Augustinian schema of vision involves a hierarchy in ascending order, starting from the simply carnal to the spiritual, i.e. its phantasmic configuration of visible species in the mind, and finally, intellectual vision, which is the apprehension and intuition of theological truths. In the cult of saints, mental painting aimed to engender this comprehension of the Trinity, the true source of everlasting life in the grave of the martyr.¹⁶

¹⁴ Andrew Louth, “‘Truly Visible Things Are Manifest Images of Invisible Things’: Dionysius the Areopagite on Knowing the Invisible,” in *Seeing the Invisible in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, edited by Giselle de Nie, Karl E Morrison and Marco Mostert (Turnhout 2005), 18-20.

¹⁵ Patricia Cox Miller, “Relics, Rhetoric, and Mental Spectacles in Late Ancient Christianity,” in *Seeing the Invisible in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Giselle de Nie, Karl E Morrison and Marco Mostert (Turnhout 2005), 30.

¹⁶ Patricia Cox Miller, “Relics, Rhetoric, and Mental Spectacles”, 35; From the later Middle Ages, Dante’s *Divine Comedy* provides an exemplar of the powers of visual language, *ekphrasis*, to analogically and viscerally comprehend beatitude. He uses fascinating figurative devices such as shapes (circularity), chromatics, and motion to describe the Trinity. And like the Church Fathers, he concludes the Comedy with the artistically defeatist tone, yielding the impotence of language in front of God, where “power fails high fantasy” of the poet. See Dante, *The Divine Comedy: Vol. 3, Paradise* trans. Mark Musa (Penguin Books 1986), 394.

Ekphrasis and the mind's eye in Medieval Christian art

Ekphrasis is extensively employed in allusions to the invisible in Early Medieval Christian art. Late Antique reliquaries shaped as containers in a purse form are a case in point. As containers of concealed, inaccessible relics, the purse reliquary asks the viewer to conceptualise the invisible power within, the heavenly reward and eternal bliss of the blessed in heaven. Christ's invocation in Luke 12:33 is also relevant here: "sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will not be exhausted." The purse metaphor in Luke is evocative in pointing to the ephemerality of earthly treasure, while also using the same as an appropriate symbol for mortals to comprehend the true treasure: heavenly purses full of grace, charity, and good deeds.

The use of precious gems in metallic early medieval Christian reliquaries accentuate this metaphor's effect in using concrete mediums to visualise the invisible. The early-ninth-century Stefansbursa purse is a classic example in paradoxically visualising the bedazzled nature of the invisible (Figure 2).¹⁷ Purse reliquaries of this kind were repositories of literal commodity value in church treasuries while also symbolising in the metaphoric mode: the "selling of possessions" by wealthy patrons. At large, the heavily studded and uneven surface of the Stefansbursa purse, with its multi coloured gems and its metallic medium, is an invitation for mortals to the invisible: using sensory data to conceive invisible grace.

¹⁷ Cynthia Hahn, "Metaphor and Meaning in Early Medieval Reliquaries," in *Seeing the Invisible in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Giselle de Nie, Karl E Morrison and Marco Mostert (Turnhout 2005), 241.



Figure 2. *Madonna of Chancellor Nicolas Rolin*, Jan van Eyck, 66 cm. x 62 cm., c. 1436-41. Paris, Louvre.

Beth Williamson highlights this visualisation of invisibility in paintings expressly representing the devotional telos of spiritual vision. Chiefly focusing on Andrea Di Bartolo's *Madonna of Humility* (1433), the author shows how devotional images engage with the Augustinian tripartite schema of vision, inviting the viewer to activate the invisible dimensions of spiritual and intellectual vision. Motifs such as mandorla clouds around Mary and the depicted devotee's gaze, averted from the Virgin, show the imaginal character of the vision. Equally, open liturgical books point to the temporal progression that attains this beatific vision, compelling the viewer to replicate it. Such machinations are particularly noticeable in works such as the *Hours of James IV of Scotland* (1503) and Jan van Eyck's *Madonna of Chancellor Nicolas Rolin* (1436-1441) the latter depicting the cloud around the object of the gaze as well as the diverted gaze of the devotee (Figure 3).¹⁸ The preceding examples show how dimensions of figuration and invisibility are interlinked in medieval realism. Verisimilitude operates in and is delimited by the ekphrastic mode of using the senses to activate suprasensory theological truths. These works are produced with elaborate concepts and metaphors, aimed at generating the invisible telos of religious experience: the Augustinian intellectual vision. And yet, hierarchy and progression of vision does not equate to an impotence of the sensory sign. The foregoing literature on Christian

¹⁸ Beth Williamson, "Sensory Experience in Medieval Devotion: Sound and Vision, Invisibility and Silence," *Speculum* 88, No.1, (2013), 23.

visuality invariably misses this point, as the signifier is reduced to a mere heuristic tool for devotion. Simultaneously, this approach to the signifier goes hand in hand with presenting cognition as the ideal and authoritative form of theology, a point that is far from self-evident.



Figure 3. Stefansbursa (gemmed front), early ninth century.
Wien, Kunsthistorisches Museum.

As suggested at the beginning of the paper, cognition as a privileged mode of religious observance has a genealogy in the Reformation.¹⁹ The corollary is that material aspects of faith such as rituals and images are reduced to tools of contemplation, arbitrarily linked to the signified through an act of human encoding and interpretation.²⁰ Nagel's substitution model exemplifies this worldview, in the mental recollection of archetypes, just as the ekphrastic model at large presents the senses and the materiality of the object as mere means to an end; the privileged site of theology is the mind of the believer, "the mind's eye" that runs as a continuous theme in Beth Williamson's text.

Embodied Grace

¹⁹ Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*, 43-46.

²⁰ Mahmood, "Religious Reason and Secular Affect," 844.

This cognitive streak of devotion can be questioned by delving into authoritative models of embodied grace in medieval Christianity. The key paradigms of understanding embodiment are scripture and sacrament. Scripture, as the Word of God, is not mere metaphor, but a “Passion to be undergone” according to Thomas Aquinas. In Medieval Christian devotion, Scripture is tapped in the sensorium, by disciplining and training the visual, aural, and auditory faculties to comprehend the Word; it is a “fusion between signifier and signified,” between language and God.²¹

The sacrament is further pertinent to understanding the object’s physical form and its necessity to the believer. Hugh of St. Victor provides a comprehensive definition of the sacrament and how it is “the sign of a sacred thing.”²² A sacrament for Hugh is a corporal thing set before the senses without meaning visibly, and it signifies in three modes. It represents by similitude, by the natural affinity of a substance with grace, such as the cleansing quality of the baptismal water and its association with the grace of the Holy Spirit. Secondly, a sacrament signifies by institution, by the “dispensation” of the Saviour, Christ, and lastly, by a priest’s benediction, “it contains by sanctification some invisible and spiritual grace.”²³

We see that there is nothing incidental about the medium of the sacrament. It is not an arbitrary metaphor delinked from grace. Rather, it is a privileged substance, efficacious through the operations of God and his dispensers, Christ and the church. While Hugh does make distinctions between visible and invisible species (vision), it is by consuming the visible sacrament, with faith, obedience and humility, that the believer is sanctified by spiritual, invisible grace.

Hugh’s inquiry into the sacrament is instructive in linking the body and mind, spiritual vision and embodiment. He shows how grace is not merely attained in the mind or soul, but received simultaneously with the embodied instrument. For him, the sacrament is a practical exercise in humility, in learning and recognising to see the hidden virtue in lower things, to be “stimulated without and restored within.”²⁴

This network of interdependency between the physical sign and grace is largely unaccounted for in scholarly accounts of medieval vision. These accounts delineate a mental telos to meaning, progressively purified and bifurcated from the physical sign. This purifying process has to be seen in light of a Protestant sensibility, in privileging cognition and lending to the formation of an agentive subject, liberated from material fetishes.

Considering this proclivity, it is important to distinguish the Protestant from its past and to assess embodied dimensions of meaning in medieval vision. A further inquiry might explore how

²¹ Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 38.

²² Hugh of Saint Victor, *On the Sacraments of the Christian Faith (De Sacramentis)*, trans. Roy J. Deferrari (The Medieval Academy of America, 1951), 154.

²³ Hugh of Saint Victor, *On the Sacraments of the Christian Faith*, 155.

²⁴ Hugh of Saint Victor, *On the Sacraments of the Christian Faith*, 157.

didactic, symbolic, and embodied modalities coexist simultaneously in the preceding visual paradigms, for instance how the martyr's relic and its ornamental trappings at once embody grace while being a channel to invisible contemplation. Such an enquiry would require refining a purely linear and teleological model of devotion with a cyclical one, which inheres cycles of vivid interaction with embodied grace.

Medieval pilgrimage: illusionism and immersion

Late Medieval pilgrimage sites are an apt paradigm to explore an anthropology of Christian devotion, its vacillation between didactic and embodied practices at the eve of the Reformation. The late-fourteenth-century Well of Moses at the Carthusian monastery Chartreuse De Champmol in the vicinity of Dijon provides an evocative program of immersive pilgrimage. Here, a circular sculptural formation of Old Testament prophets arises from a hexagonal pedestal around the well, with weeping angels in their interstices. In its original state, the well bore a monumental wooden cross, with a sculpture depicting the Crucifixion atop it. The whole sculptural composition presented an immersive plunge into the Crucifixion. The Old Testament figures and the crying angels provide a prefiguration, a prophecy, that the pilgrim is to envision through circumambulation via the Crucifixion of the Messiah above. The Old Testament Prophets bear Prophetic scrolls. Moses' scroll derides the fact that the "congregation of Israel shall kill the lamb in the evening."²⁵ Finally, the medium of water flowing from the well is implicated in the piece, as this was a material as well as spiritual nourishment for the monks and pilgrims at the monastery. It allowed them to envision the spiritual fountain arising from Christ's sacrifice and its correlative, spiritually cleansing sacraments of Baptism and Mass.

An immersive and active pilgrim emerges from the Well of Moses, engaging in the Christian Salvation history through realist, dramatic cues. Donna Sadler likens the expressive Prophets to mediating narrators in contemporary Passion plays, grounding the audience in an emotive empathy with the Passion.²⁶

An equal level of devotional immersion is seen in Medieval Holy Sepulchre chapels, which mimicked the structure of Christ's tomb in Jerusalem and provided local pilgrimages of the Sepulchre for believers across Europe. The chapel of Brugge, for example, imitated the lighting and spatial dimensions of the Jerusalem Sepulchre, using its narrow confines and dim candlelight to replicate the latter. Equally, the original was invoked in mimetic strategies such as the Golgotha sculpture at the Nave retable and the marble slab at the entrance of the lower chamber, i.e. the main burial. The whole site

²⁵ Donna L. Sadler, "The Well of Moses and Roland Barthes' 'Punctum' of Piety," in *Push Me, Pull You Imaginative and Emotional Interaction in Late Medieval and Renaissance Art: Volume One*, eds. Sarah Blick and Laura D. Gelfand (Brill, 2011), 390.

²⁶ Sadler, "The Well of Moses," 400, 406.

provided citizens of Brugge, whether prior pilgrims to Jerusalem or otherwise, with a multi-sensory replication of the Jerusalem Chapel. The crescendo of devotional realism is exemplified by how pilgrims were known to shriek and have emotional outbursts in the narrow confines of the burial chamber upon encountering the tomb of Christ.²⁷ Here visualised with a resting sculpture of Christ, unlike the empty tomb at Jerusalem owing to the Resurrection, the Sepulchre chapel demonstrates a multi-sensory verisimilitude in aid of theological vision.

The Well of Moses and the Holy Sepulchre chapel of Brugge respectively present two alternate modes of devotion: the dramatic procession at Dijon is a case of didactic evocation of the senses, while the chapel at Brugge orients to embodiment, in the intense presence of the referent (Christ and his tomb) through the replication of visual archetypes.

Iconic Presence

The question of sacred visual archetypes necessitates an exploration of the Byzantine icon. In this domain, we see why imposing regimes of metaphoric meaning onto Medieval Christianity is problematic. Hans Belting provides an expansive history of the icon in its philosophical and anthropological contexts. He describes the image as a radical presence, a diachronous contemporaneity between the past (historia) and future salvation of Christian temporality and its God.²⁸ It is a vivid interface with the Godhead. The theory of the icon crystallised during the iconoclastic era, beginning roughly from the late seventh century until its end and the victory of the iconodules (those in favour of the icon) in the mid-ninth century. The radical power of the icon for the iconodules is exemplified by the monumental claims of the Synod of 869, which proclaimed the image as being as potent as Scripture in delivering salvation and as a source of divine revelation. Equally, iconoclastic rejection of the image was tantamount to rejecting Christ himself in iconodule polemics.²⁹

The immediacy of the icon related to Platonic concepts such as the essential, underlying similarity between the prototype/model and its material image. According to Plato, invisible and primal archetypes contain images in their essence, whose emanation produces nature in their likeness. Thus, nature is produced through the principle of similitude. Among iconodules such as King Leo, this paradigm is extended to the image of Christ. By sharing in the essence of the model (Christ), the image was dissimilar in form and nature (likeness) but bore a living relation with Christ, hence justifying its worship.³⁰ Saba Mahmood uses the Aristotelian terms *schesis* and *habitus* to conceptualise the icon,

²⁷ Laura Gelfand, "Sense and simulacra: Manipulation of the senses in medieval 'copies' of Jerusalem," *Postmedieval* 3 (2012), 412-413.

²⁸ Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image Before the Era of Art*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (University of Chicago Press, 1994), 10.

²⁹ Belting, *Likeness and Presence*, 150.

³⁰ Equally, this argument drew from the Trinity, in the formally dissimilar yet inherently same divine essence of Christ and the Father (the archetype), evoking such similar-dissimilarity between Christ and his image, the difference being Christ and

loosely translated as an embodied habitation between model and image. Presenting a more theologically conservative stance based in earlier Byzantine iconodules like Theodore the Studite, Mahmood claims that what the model and image share is not an essence (human or divine) “but a living relationship,” through homonymy (sharing a name) and hypostasis (underlying structure).³¹ To return to our semiotic question, inhabitation at once undercuts and binds the chains of signification (signifier, signified and subject) in an ethical relationship. Cognitive intuition of truths is essential but does not exist independently of this embodied relationship; meaning is tied to the medium of revelation.

Charles Peirce’s theory of signs, particularly the directness of signification in the icon and index, is instructive in understanding the Christian icon. For Peirce, the icon already possesses the character (likeness) which renders it significant. “The quality that it has qua thing renders it fit to be a representamen.” Thus, his model captures the sufficiency and coevalness of the signified in the icon, “as anything is fit to be a substitute of anything it is like.”³² What is left is the causal and existential link in the two, that is in fact contained in the concept of index. For likeness and common material origins are interlinked in the Neoplatonic framework of the Christian icon. The image’s primordial and material containment in the archetype is what generates its likeness to the prior; to be a likeness is to be existentially linked.

Persis Berlekamp elaborates this point in her discussion of Neoplatonism in the medieval Islamic context. The Neoplatonic theory of creation by emanation breaks down the distinction between likeness and contact, as “similarity—not just of form but also of substance and even soul—was a direct result of (past) contact.” This historic contact is the emanation of the terrestrial world through the cosmic sphere, which ultimately derives from God. This emanation renders a sympathy for influences between entities of the world and their cosmic archetypes, such as the likeness between Mars and red things.³³ This Neoplatonic paradigm generates a habitus of religious experience involving embodied instruments: the body and the material world as palpable mediations of the Divine.

The Islamic Image

The immediacy of the Christian icon and its habitus coheres with the Islamic veneration of the Prophet, in the exemplary figure’s constant immanence in the world through signs, facilitating the believer’s self-actualisation of this model. Recently, there has been a surge of scholarly interest in the semblance of devotional figuration in Islam, revolving around representations of Prophet Muhammad, which echo Christian iconophilic tendencies. In Turko-Persian manuscripts, there appeared

his image share the same person while Christ and the Father are not the same person, but the same God. Belting, *Likeness and Presence*, 153.

³¹ Mahmood, “Religious Reason and Secular Affect,” 847.

³² T.L. Short, *Peirce’s Theory of Signs* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 218.

³³ Persis Berlekamp, “Symmetry, Sympathy, and Sensation,” *Representations* 133, no. 1 (2016): 85.

unprecedented anthropomorphic forms of the prophet from the fourteenth century, which have by and large been rare in Islamic devotion and representations of the Prophet. Christiane Gruber provides a rich analysis of such illuminations. She especially focuses on the devotional reception of these images, in the traces of defacement upon the antagonistic figures, rendered through diagonal lines or smudges rendered by rubbing (Figure 4).³⁴ Importantly, these graphic manoeuvres reflect the all-encompassing nature of ethico-affective instincts in Islam, the gradations of action prescribed for Muslims in response to all levels of evil, even on the graphic plane.



Figure 4. *The torturing of Bilal*, Rashid al-Din, *Jami' al-Tawarikh* (*Compendium of Chronicles*), ca. 1350–1400. Topkapi Palace Library, Istanbul.

Another image regime is that of defacement or rather re-facement of the Prophet's face, through a pietistic veil. This practice emerges in the Ottoman court during the sixteenth century, with an explanatory note to one of such illuminations stating “and his blessed, felicitous face is covered out of respect” (ve mübarek vech-i sa'adetleri ta'zimen nikab il- edir): the veil (nikab) reflects the viewer's piety and reverence (ta'zim).³⁵

While the veil also represents the hindrance in equating the Prophet to other human forms, the image at large provides a devotional interface. This is a vivid interaction with the Prophetic model, as the world of the image gets implicated in that of the viewer and vice versa; the sign becomes a charged repository of the signified and an animated arena of piety, thus described as iconophilic by Gruber.

³⁴ Christiane Gruber, “Affective Practices in Early Modern Turco-Persian Manuscript Paintings,” in *Affect, Emotion, and Subjectivity in Early Modern Muslim Empires: New Studies in Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal Art and Culture*, ed. Kishwar Rizvi (Brill, 2018), 98.

³⁵ Gruber, “Affective Practices in Early Modern Turco-Persian Manuscript Paintings,” 117.

This regime of the Prophetic icon in Medieval manuscripts does not pertain to a concerted devotional and theological sensibility, as in the Byzantine context, yet these iconophilic practices are connected to a broader Islamic emulation of the Prophet, which is iconic. As Saba Mahmood shows, the icon is not just a visual regime but an inhabited and living relationality binding the signifier, signified and subject. More so, this living relationality facilitates an ethical and emulative dependence on the model of the Sunnah or Prophetic example. Islamic virtue pertains not only to mere obedience of the injunctions of the Prophet (Hadith) but also to emulating his deeds and actions (Sunnah), canonical accounts of which are rife with physiognomic descriptions of his persona and habits. Mahmood insists that these embodied virtues of the iconic sign do not stand apart from the historical figure of the Prophet as the signified. Rather, they are an integral substrate of a pious disposition. This sensibility is what generates the iconophilic practices of Medieval Islamic manuscripts. For the believer, the binding relationship with and dependence on the iconic form of the Prophet lends itself to responses of reassurance and wounding, as and when the image is venerated and desecrated respectively. Conversely, this relationality shows how the sign coinhabits and participates in the world.³⁶

In devotional sensibilities surrounding Prophet Muhammad's relics, such integration in the signifying process comes to an apogee. Relics in general epitomise the paradox of "visible absence" in the words of McGregor.³⁷ Athar, literally "trace" in Arabic, reflects the ambiguity of the relic in Islam, which is a fragmented part of the deceased, yet an essential and undivided one in its capacity to perpetuate the referent's grace (Barakat).

The Prophet's relics have historically operated as synecdoches in Islamic shrines, intensely standing in for the person and grace (Barakat) of the referent in the mortal realm. This is exemplified in such dramatic cases as a Medieval Ayyubid ruler taking the Prophet's sandal as almost a personal companion, developing an intimate bond with it. Near his death, the ruler is known to have taken the sandal in his hands, "kissing it, placing it upon his eyes, and weeping."³⁸ Here, the relic exemplifies the diachronic eruption of grace in the devotional object. The Prophetic relic presents a synecdoche, an embodied and blessed remnant connecting the part and whole, the sign and referent.

Hajj Processions and the Mediated Sanctuary

I would like to end this paper by briefly assessing Richard McGregor's illuminating discussion of devotional objects from Hajj processions. The processions centred around the public display of the kiswa (dressings) of the Kaaba, the holiest site in Islam considered to be the sanctuary of God. From the fourteenth century, these dressings were paraded in public squares of cities such as Cairo and

³⁶ Mahmood, "Religious Reason and Secular Affect," 848.

³⁷ Richard J. A. McGregor. *Islam and the Devotional Object: Seeing Religion in Egypt and Syria*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 120

³⁸ McGregor, *Islam and the Devotional Object*, 131.

Damascus. The Hajj processions are significant to our consideration of Islamic devotion as they extend the referent beyond the Prophet to the invisible and enigmatic deity of Islam, Allah, and hence elucidate key issues of religious representation. Crucially, this discussion brings us full circle to some of the themes of Christianity I have discussed so far: pilgrimage simulacrum and ornamentation paradoxically referring to the invisible Godhead.

The visual hallmarks of *kiswa* dressings are abstract, geometric patterns interspersed with Quranic inscriptions, while this hieratic aspect is accompanied by exuberance in medium through luxurious types such as embroidery, dyed silks, brocade and satin.³⁹ While no standard visual vocabulary emerged in the history of this cardinal Islamic ceremonial object, such ornamental trends point to an underlying theological regime, with ever-elaborate forms of epigraphy and abstraction in compositions comprising Mihrab (arch) niches, lamp motifs, and medallion frames (*darat*) for scriptural supplications. These forms are tied to apotropaic and supernatural symbolism, representing a passageway into the sacred⁴⁰

An early-twentieth-century black satin dress of the Kaaba exemplifies this visual regime: the satin sheen bears zigzag panels with the Islamic profession of faith, the Shahadat, while the interstices contain mirror texts of Allah and the pious propitiation: “May His Majesty be Increased (figure 5).” Another similar example is a silk dressing from the Prophet’s grave in Medina, where multiple recurring zigzag bands again surmount the Shahadat (figure 6).⁴¹

³⁹ This luxurious element could be traced to the earliest renditions of the *Kiswa*, when *Umayyad* ruler Muawiyah replaced pre-Islamic coarse woolen hangings with a new *kiswa* made of silk and Egyptian linen. Here, the exuberant medium represented a ritual purification as well, in replacing the pagan vestiges of the sanctuary. See McGregor, *Islam and the Devotional Object*.

⁴⁰ McGregor, *Islam and the Devotional Object*, 38-39; Margaret Graves also explores these motifs of apotropaic abstraction, chief among which is the niche (mihrab) and arcade motif. See Margaret Graves, *Arts of Allusion: Object, Ornament and Architecture in Medieval Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018): 38, 59-94.

⁴¹ Incidentally, the visual modalities of the *Kiswa* are not far removed from the metaphors of early Christian reliquaries and the qualifying symbolism of Dionysius. Material luxury is juxtaposed with divine grace, and abstraction emerges as a pale attempt at a likeness to an aniconic transcendent God; the sign is predisposed to signify its shortcoming.



Figure 5. Black Satin Dress of the Kaaba (Damask weave), Length: 69.5cm, Width: 82.5cm, Length: 27 in. Width: 34.5 in. Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

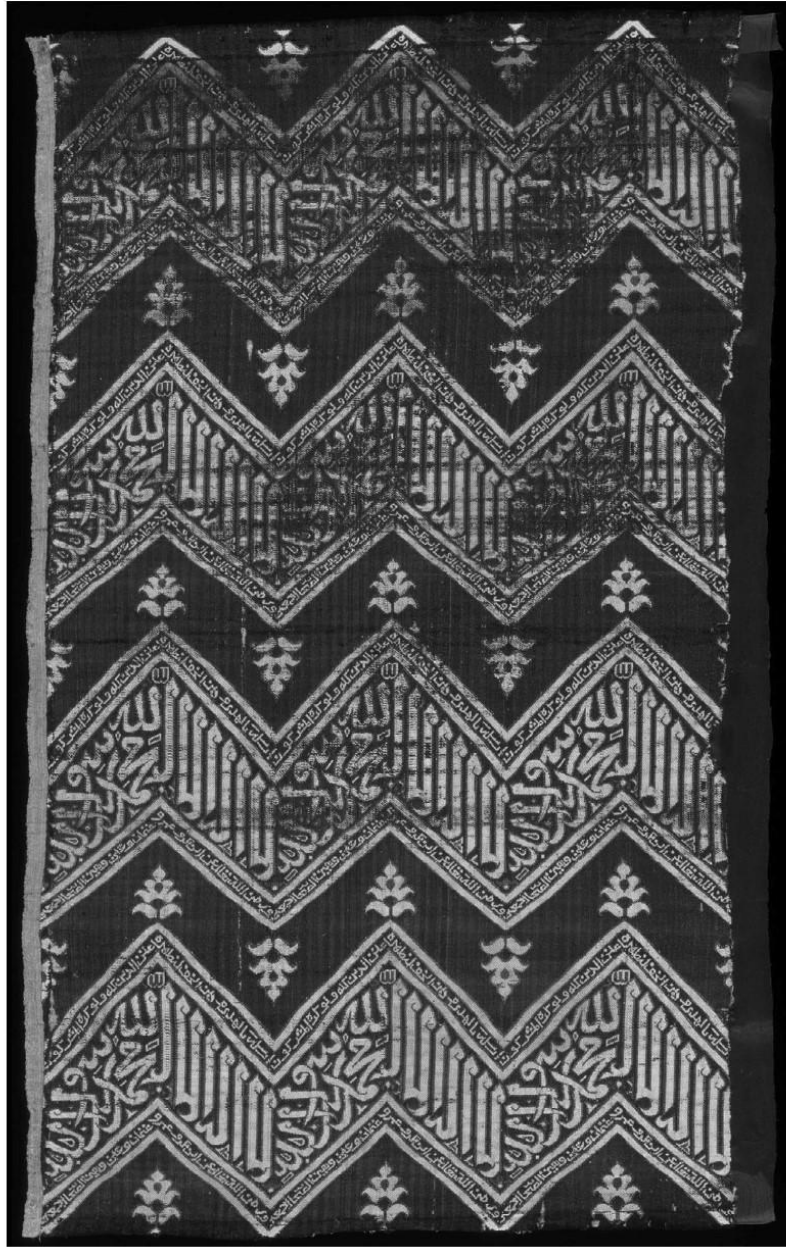


Figure 6. Green Silk Dress for the Prophet's tomb, ca. 1517-1600, lamps woven silk, Bursa, length: 86 cm, width: 49.5 cm, weight: 3.2 kg. Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Milad Karimi links Islamic abstraction to Allah's attributes as revealed in the Quran, in his incomprehensibility through mortal vision. Furthermore, Islamic abstraction elaborates the cryptic quality of His Word, the Quran, which hints at a symbolic thematic connection between chapters without equivocating the central theme, meandering between myriad topics nonchronologically while

maintaining an underlying, persistent tone or voice, a suprarational, mysterious cyclicity.⁴² The semantically unapproachable God corresponds to amorphous and interlacing motifs such as the arabesque in Islamic art, to signify his utter mystery. In this vein, according to Axel Langer, even figurative Islamic miniatures from the Early Modern Persianate world contain degrees of abstraction, in geometric and mathematical principles of composition. Rather than a transparent reflection of truth, such compositions become a means to a higher, superordinate truth, a Platonic essence activated via mathematical abstraction.⁴³

The Protestant semiotic ideology and its operations of purification are prevalent in these accounts of abstraction. In light of an unmediated God, one is presented with the autonomous subject able to stand apart from the object, reading it as text or a code and deciphering meaning mentally rather than materially. Accordingly, both Langer and Karimi overlook the embodied devotional sensibilities surrounding visual paradigms of abstraction. In the case of the *kiswa*, McGregor relates various accounts of devotees at processions ecstatically seeking contact with the fabric. Ibn Jubayr's pilgrim account provides an evocative example of devotional ecstasy. He relates a rich green cloth with red embroidery as "a beauty enchanting all who looked upon it.... the most beautiful sight, a salvation to those who gazed upon it. Like a bride lifting her veil of green brocade, God gives pleasure." Ibn Jubayr further notes that the *kiswa*'s lower fringes had to be kept "beyond the grasp of overzealous worshippers."⁴⁴

This charged amuletic quality of the devotional object depends on a paradigm of portable and embodied grace, the capacity of prominent sanctuaries such as the Kaaba to intensely channel its beatitude through contact with tangible fabrics which could transmit *Barakat* across the Ummah. The aforementioned Hajj processions also heavily relied on tactics of enhancing *Barakat*, through visits to the Prophet's grave and those of his grandsons at the Fatimid shrines in Cairo.⁴⁵ Similar channeling of grace into the devotional dressings can be seen in the ritual of chanting the *Fatiha* by Sufi shaykhs, the first chapter of the Quran (which has prominent funerary and apotropaic associations) upon their display in front of their mosque.⁴⁶ All in all, such strategies show the invocation of grace in the very substance of the object and a mediation of divine grace rather than an unmediated God.

The embodied grace of the *kiswa* urges one to return to the proposition of looking at the vivid mediations and the cognitive aspects of the religious object interconnectedly. At one level, abstraction participates in the very substance of the blessed object. To think in terms of the Neoplatonic framework

⁴² Ahmad Millad Karimi, "God Loves Beauty: On Portraying the Unportrayable in Islam," in *In the Name of the Image: Figurative Representations in Islamic and Christian Cultures*, edited by Axel Langer (Museum Reitberg 2022), 270-272.

⁴³ "Introduction" in *In the Name of the Image: Figurative Representations in Islamic and Christian Cultures*, ed. Axel Langer (Museum Reitberg, 2022), 26.

⁴⁴ McGregor, *Islam and the Devotional Object*, 39.

⁴⁵ McGregor, *Islam and the Devotional Object*, 37, 45.

⁴⁶ McGregor, *Islam and the Devotional Object*, 48.

permeating medieval Christianity and Islam, the quality (abstract forms) and indexicality (the blessed dressings) of the referent are both interlinked in the sign.⁴⁷ The sacred dressings and their mystifying forms are not just invitations to theological contemplation, but means of being blessed by the sanctuary's grace.

Conclusion

Through this discussion, I have tried to question a linear paradigm of religiosity that privileges the invisible and cognitive dimensions of devotion over their physical signs. I have highlighted a habitus of worship marked by practices of embodiment rooted in cultivating virtue within and without, in the body, soul, and instruments of worship. This is not to deny the gradations between corporal and invisible vision that permeate the traditions of Christianity and Islam in varying ways; nevertheless, embodied grace iterates mediations of the Divine, which render intensity and immediacy to the devotional moment. Equally, these mediations bring diachrony and cycles of grace to the devotional vocation, a quality exemplified in the diachrony of Islamic abstraction and the Christian sacrament.

Lastly, modern Realism and its secular underpinnings can help, via juxtaposition, to explicate the devotional sensibilities that I have been addressing. The delimited verisimilitude in domains such as Neoplatonism and ekphrasis is a result of certain epistemological foundations. It relates to what Hugh of St. Victor from his Augustinian framework calls the invisible species, for instance the spiritual grace in the sacrament that the “eyes of infidels are unable to see.”⁴⁸ The invisible is the margin of the signified that eludes the sign. A perfect overlap between the two domains of signification is neither sought nor possible, which would have severe implications in objectifying God to the image and transgressing the prohibition against the graven image. This prohibition is radically transgressed in Realism, when Roland Barthes heralds the realist artist's intent to recreate “concrete reality” in the artwork. He proclaims, “a new verisimilitude is born.... constituted by the direct collusion of the referent and signifier.”⁴⁹ No wonder that this radical posture manifested in theosophical theories of the painter appropriating powers of the Creator.⁵⁰ Realism has unmistakable proclivities with a tradition of secular humanism, verging on designs of self-adoration.

⁴⁷ The theological underpinnings of Islamic Neoplatonism are discussed in Ventia Porter, Liana Saif, and Emilie Savage-Smith, “Medieval Islamic amulets, Talismans and Magic,” in *A Companion to Islamic Art and Architecture volume 1*, eds. Finbarr Barry Flood and Guru Necipoglu (Wiley Blackwell, 2017), 526-531 and Persis Berlekamp, *Wonder, Image and Cosmos in Medieval Islam* (Yale University Press, 2011), 134-146. The overlap of medieval religion and Neoplatonism is important because it centres around an overarching semiotic ideology proposing material mediations of the invisible archetype, a view consolidated by the conception of scripture as the literal, revealed Word of God later challenged by the Reformation. See also Persis Berlekamp, “Symmetry, Sympathy, and Sensation,” *Representations* 133, no. 1 (2016): 85.

⁴⁸ Hugh of Saint Victor, *On the Sacraments of the Christian Faith*, 156-157.

⁴⁹ Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, 147.

⁵⁰ Cohen and Christopher Prendergast, *Spectacles of Realism: Gender, Body, Genre* (University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 5.

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Poetry in Fragments: The Paradox of Place in Cecilia Vicuña's *Pueblos de altares* (1990-2019)

Nathan Clark

Abstract

Cecilia Vicuña's work, *Pueblos des Altares* was in its evolutionary process from 1990-2019, and was first exhibited at Exit Art in New York while the artist lived there after being exiled from Chile. This work is Vicuña's amalgamation of her *precarios*, or what she calls "little trashes," all of which are poetic sculptural compositions created from washed up trash found on the beach of her hometown, Con cón, in Chile. Therefore, I ask the following in my paper: Through Vicuña's ever-evolving and shifting collective material narrative and ritualistic process of *Pueblos des Altares*, how does her use of trash and sand from her hometown aid to rebuild a sense of home, and how do site-specific installations make meaning when they are constantly mobilized? I place Vicuña in historical dialogue with Kurt Schwitters's *Merzbau*, who was inspired by his use of detritus within his sculptural environments. Schwitters, too, was in exile following the Nazi occupation of Germany. With these two artists in dialectical relations with each other, how does the poet/artist use language to convey the oscillation between realism and abstraction through form in sculptural ways, and how does this contextualize (or "make real") the abstract of place and object, both exiled from their origins? How does Vicuña's intimate connection to water and weaving aid her in building connections back to Con cón Beach, and what paradoxical limitations might be present in her reconstruction of this place? I use Adorno's "collective undercurrent" found in poetry as a potential synthesis between the issue of fragmentation and longing for place in a Capitalist-dominated world. Ultimately, both I and Vicuña see the ocean itself as the medium and mediator of these poetic and personal experiences. Vicuña, in her ritualized production of place, mobilized the localized and indigenous meaning of Con cón through her position as an exiled artist illustrating that land and water weave their connections to place through constant, albeit shifting, sense of a place's local, and even global, meaning embedded in both the land and the individual.

The sea is a special kind of medium for modernism, because of its perfect isolation, its detachment from the social, its sense of self-enclosure, and, above all, its opening onto a visual plenitude that is somehow heightened and pure, both a limitless expanse and a sameness, flattening it into nothing, into the no-space of sensory deprivation.

Rosalind Krauss¹

Chilean artist and poet Cecilia Vicuña has always been inspired by the ocean. In an interview with Curatorial Assistant Danielle Brock, she states: “[w]ater is not just water, it’s a teacher at the same time. I began working, playing with water, learning on water [and] what has been given to us by this earth, by the cosmic existence of water.”² In Vicuña’s poetic practice, water is a sonorous, poetic melody that she grew up listening to on the shores of Concón Beach, Chile,³ where “the words speak back to the water, as the water speaks to the word.”⁴ The ocean is at once muse and medium for Vicuña, a limitless horizon to reflect her artistic aspiration onto. Many castaway objects wash up along the shores of Concón beach, which Vicuña describes as her mine of found objects. Just off the coast is a vortex that became a natural gathering place for all drifting rubbish, which later, carried by the tides, washes onto the shoreline.⁵ This cyclical process birthed her *precarios* series, which began in 1966. The *precarios*, each a carefully composed piece crafted and named by the artist, became, in 1990, *Pueblos de altares* (“The Town of Altars”), which concluded in 2019.

The most known iteration of this piece was exhibited in her retrospective show, *About to Happen*, at the Contemporary Arts Center in New Orleans in 2017 (Figure 1). Here the *precarios* sculptures are exhibited across the walls and carefully placed on the floors of the exhibition space: at the centre of the room the *precarios* are on a rectangular segment of sand, its edges naturalized with sprawling trails exiting the composition. It appears at once reserved and free; its installation takes over the space and transforms the white walls into a colorful display of miniature altars, composed of driftwood and trash. Many of the structures in the sand are large, almost architectural; many appear like structures reminiscent to those found in any cityscape. On one wall, upon a white shelf, more of these structures are placed, some tall, while others miniature in scale. The objects hung on the wall all appear similarly structured like those on the shelf and in the sand, like half-built homes or thin, wiry bodies laying down. Although individualized, the *precarios* themselves are displayed as a collective, with

¹ Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1994): 2.

² Danielle Brock, “Cecilia Vicuña taps into instincts to imagine solutions for the impossible,” interview by Art21, *In the Studio*, March 2021, text, <https://art21.org/read/in-the-studio-cecilia-vicu%C3%B1a/>.

³ It is important to note that I am using the most contemporarily used spelling of Concón. Throughout this essay quotes from other scholarly articles and Vicuña’s own publications use alternative spellings such as “Kon Kon,” “Con con,” or “Con cón,” which I have retained within the quotes for accuracy. These alternative spellings all refer to Concón, Chile.

⁴ Lucy R. Lippard, “Spinning the Common Thread,” in Cecilia Vicuña: Seehearing the Enlightened Failure, ed. Miguel A. Lopez (Rotterdam: Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, 2020): 59.

⁵ Lucy R. Lippard, “Spinning the Common Thread,” 59.

none individually labelled. In this community of altars, is the viewer meant to recognize and analyse each altar individually, or entirely as one collective?



Figure 1. *Pueblos de altares*, Cecilia Vicuña, 1990-2019; *About to Happen*, Contemporary Arts Center, New Orleans, Louisiana, 2017. Image provided on behalf of the artist.

Pueblos de altares is further complicated in its 2019 iteration in *Lo precario/The Precarious* at the Wexner Centre for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio (Fig. 2). Here, the objects are displayed only vertically, with the sand entirely omitted, and many of the displayed *precarios* sculptures do not appear to be the same from the 2017 exhibition. What exactly, then, is this work meant to convey? Is it to be a composition of a place, of Vicuña's home in Concón, Chile, or is it an evolving imaginary realm of the artist's own poetic perspective and interpretation of her home? The viewer can see the bright objects situated against the white background of the gallery wall, the *precario* hung with enough space between each other to be almost conveyed individually. Art critic Guisela Latorre responded to the 2019 show, where she expanded upon Vicuña's love for her "little trashes," as she affiliates *Pueblos de altares* with a reflection on the precarity of human existence. Through the artist's attention to the landscape's sacredness, now oppressed, Vicuña opposes and challenges the frailty of meaning-making in community.⁶ Therefore, these objects, intimate and miniature in their nature, become familiar to the

⁶ Guisela Latorre, "Cecilia Vicuña's Precarious Universe," *Wex Centre for the Arts*, July 9, 2019, <https://wexarts.org/read-watch-listen/cecilia-vicunas-precious-universe/>.

viewer as they read them altogether, scattered across the walls and, occasionally, their gestures inscribed into the sand where many of these objects lay.



Figure 2. *Pueblos de altares*, Cecilia Vicuña, 1990-2019; *Lo precario/The Precarious*, Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, Ohio, 2019. Image courtesy of the Wexner Center for the Arts at the Ohio State University and on behalf of the artist.

With its strong ties to both water and the precarity of existence in a globalized world, *Pueblos de altares* appears to transform in its evolving response to Vicuña's meaning of place through its 29-year evolution. Therefore, their collective material narrative conveys Vicuña's poetic aspirations to build an abstracted sense of place—in this case, her home, Concón –and what constitutes the limitations of site-specificity in an exhibited installation. Through the work's consistent recontextualization from the removal and addition of varying *precario*-cum-altars, their creation becomes a ritualized process, as they are stripped of their individual agency in this collective iteration of place. How does the meaning-making of place reflect through these art objects themselves, and what role does the ocean as a medium play in this creation? Are these works truly site-specific, or is there an inherent paradoxical tension between individuality and collectivity?

For Vicuña, her artistic career was born in the sand, with her frequently playing on the beach and remembering the first time she planted a stick in the sand, a precursor to her *precarios*. Vicuña has had a long-term devotion to Concón, the Aconkawa⁷ term for “water, water,” or the meeting place of the Aconcagua River and the Pacific Ocean. In her book *Aborami*, Vicuña describes Concón both as

⁷ Vicuña notes that “Aconkawa” means the people of the Aconcagua, the Western hemisphere's tallest mountain located in Argentina. Vicuña notes that Concón is the ritual site which connected Aconcagua to the sea. For more, see Vicuña's short piece, “Con Con/ Kon Kon (How the site shapes the form),” May 2024, <https://brooklynrail.org/2024/05/criticspage/Con-con-Kon-kon-How-the-site-shapes-the-form/>.

an ancient ritual site of the oracle Con (a Peruvian deity, also spelt “Qon” or “Kon”) and as an ancient cemetery now polluted by a nearby oil refinery. Vicuña’s artistic practice emerged from the ocean waves when she was a child, in which she remembers: “I turned and realized the sea, the sun and the wind were aware. Undone by the living awareness, I melted to the ground.” This, in the sands of Concón, is where Vicuña “became debris[...]on the beach.”⁸ For Vicuña, she was as much a piece of debris as all the other trash which washed up on the polluted shores.

The *precarios*, or little trashes, were produced from Vicuña’s self-described practice, *Lo precario*, or the production of the “not yet.” Derived from the Maya K’iche’ (also spelt “Quiche”) creation story of Mahucutah, the “not yet” reflected the destructive potential of humans upon their creation, as humans are the reflection of the “uninformed,” of chaos incarnate. The uninformed, for the K’iche’, was the production of marks that inscribed a “future” into present history, its growth predicated from the death of another body and its dissolution.⁹ For Vicuña, dissolution is at the heart of *Lo precario*, a practice which she can be permitted to dwell within the uninformed, and to ritualistically produce in it. *Lo precario* was born from the beaches of Concón, of the forgotten sonorous rituals of the “first peoples of Chile”¹⁰ which once tied the land to its ancient memories. With her art born on the beach, Vicuña created the *precarios*, or witnesses, whose relational status to the land makes them more than just art objects but living beings whose presence are actualizations of the land’s deeply embedded memories. These objects are produced through prayer to the uncertain, to the *precarios* awareness that their witness to the land will once again be consumed by the waves of high tide.¹¹

But why this drive to mine for found objects to expose precarious existence? *Pueblos de altares* evokes what American art critic and writer Lucy Lippard in *Lure of the Local* discusses how common history is expressed through a community’s evolution that transforms a landscape through experience and history into a place. Place requires context for the community and space to come together as a whole.¹² This awareness of her body being yet another *precario* scattered on the beach worked in

⁸ Cecilia Vicuña, *About to Happen* (New Orleans: Contemporary Art Center, 2017): 6-9.

⁹ Vicuña, “About to Happen,” 102-103.

¹⁰ It’s important to note that Vicuña is not always specific in which Indigenous nation’s practices she is referring to. Vicuña’s work has been frequently criticized for being pan-Indigenous, mixing practices and histories from varying nations throughout South America, particularly those from other regions of Chile and Argentina. It’s important to note that Salvador Allende, whose political practices Vicuña adopted into her work, was also quite often pan-Indigenous in his approaches to pre-Columbian practices integrated into his democratic movement. For consistency of readership, Concón is situated within Wallamapu (Mapuche) territory (“Against a Geopolitics of Death, a Geography for Life,” November 24th, 2018, <https://www.mapuche.nl/english/camilo-catrillanca181124.html>).

¹¹ Vicuña, “About to Happen,” 103; 8-9.

¹² Lucy R. Lippard, *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentred Society* (New York: The New Press, 1997): 24-25.

combination with Vicuña's own political devotion to Salvador Allende's rise in the Popular Unity Coalition in 1970. Most notably, Allende supported an "Art for Everyone" campaign, of which Vicuña was a huge advocate. For Vicuña, she saw Allende's support for the arts as an opportunity to allow people to imagine a variance of methods to participate in the socialist revolution. The "Art for Everyone" occurred not through the institutional (academic or gallery) system, but at the level of the street, with artists producing workshops for children, street exhibitions in tents, and selling works printed on cheaper poster paper. One year earlier, in 1969, Vicuña attended worker's rallies which encouraged labourers to bring their tools: Vicuña brought a self-made hybrid between a quill (to represent her as a poet) and a paintbrush (to represent her as a painter). She was embraced as a worker by other attendees. Big tents which littered the streets offered free performances, lectures, theatrical plays, dances.¹³ In 1970, as Vicuña notes, artists were using revolution as their medium in all forms of artistic practice.

For Vicuña, the artist has always been both a labourer and a revolutionary, a bringer of social joy.¹⁴ Vicuña reflected on the role of artists in achieving "social joy" in her May 1973 talk, "Lecture on the Arts in Chile After 1970," in London, England, where she lived at the time. Before the Allende democratic movement, Vicuña saw the role of arts as very limited, in which artists were living in isolation and only able to sell their works through the private gallery circuit. Vicuña saw the "Art for Everyone" movement as a return to the traditional Chilean folk artist role of the artist as *payador*, or Chilean folk artists who produce improvisational poetry by having long discussions, in lyrical verse, with each other. Together, these improvisational artists, engaged in dialogue, produce "imaginary eras" that emerged from history's status in everyday life.¹⁵ These improvised images were revolutionary insofar as they were forms of language that were limitless and not restricted to any disciplinary form. Artists, through their engagement in everyday life and their improvised and continued dialogue, were active participants in democratic revolution. In Allende's socialist government, art and revolution were one in the same. For Vicuña, these imagined eras of collective life, a "paradise" as she described it, were found through the discovery of socialist forms of language found in laborious artistic expression: the search for a socialist language in the lyrics of poetry and the brushstrokes of painting would thus be a discovery of a new way of socialist life.¹⁶

Pueblos de altares was first exhibited in 1990 at Exit Art in New York while the artist lived there in exile (Fig.3). All works were exhibited in the rectangular bed of sand, with no vertical works on the walls: two benches are situated at one end of the room, which are present again in the 2019 exhibition.

¹³ Vicuña, *Saborami* (Oakland and Philadelphia: Chainlinks, 2011): 318.

¹⁴ Vicuña, *Aborami* (London: Book Works, 2024): 9-11.

¹⁵ Vicuña, *Seebearing the Enlightened Future* (Rotterdam: Witte de With Center, 2019): 315-317.

¹⁶ Vicuña, "Saborami," 71.

The works, carefully embedded in the sand, are consciously arranged across the sand: many of them are tall, thin, and tower-like, while others have their forms curving back into the sand. In an interview with Lippard, Vicuña stated it was to connect her two homes of New York and Concón.¹⁷ For Vicuña, *Pueblos de altares* represents her desires to retrieve her sense of connection with her home, which she was exiled from following the death of Salvador Allende after the military coup against his government in 1973. Vicuña, was exiled for her critical role in the founding of Tribu No and the authorship of the “No Manifesto.” Tribu No was a collective of Communist artists and poets in Santiago from 1967 to 1972, who believed in the death of the “I” as an artistic subject to uncover the “IT,” a collective artistic practice built upon our shared precarious existence which sought to undermine current understanding of reality to under the secret to a harmonious way of existing together. Although this “IT” yearns for freedom, it remains hidden, an ancient mystery waiting to leave all humans naked to connect through common cultural experience.¹⁸ Tribu No sought to transform an “I” into an “us,” a collective unity of people striving for a utopian outcome. Much of this work was later reflected in Vicuña’s activism in producing Allende’s vision for a “participatory democracy:” Vicuña describes this “dream of social justice” occurring during a one million people march occurring in Santiago Chile in which the people collectively chanted, “now we are us.”¹⁹

¹⁷ Lippard, “Spinning the Common Thread,” 59.

¹⁸ Cecilia Vicuña, “The No Manifesto of Tribu No,” *MAKE Literary Magazine*, September 15, 2015, <https://www.makemag.com/the-no-manifesto-of-tribu-no-by-cecilia-vicuna-2/>.

¹⁹ Vicuña, “Saborami,” 161-162.



Figure 3: *Pueblos de altares*, Cecilia Vicuña, 1990-2019; Exit Art, New York City, New York, 1990. © Cecilia Vicuña/ Artist Rights Society (ARS) New York/ CARCC Ottawa 2025.

Vicuña recalls the death of Allende in her 1973 diary entries, which she wrote while she lived in London during the coup. In one of these entries, Vicuña wrote a poetic response of her feelings around Allende's death, where she said: "From the paradise of invention Chile was, there is nothing left but bones, stones, skeletons," of which "[h]is death kills all of my suns, my corners, my union, my velocity. Socialist Chile was all my energy, finally I was not I anymore, I was US for the first time!"²⁰ Vicuña also recalls the inherent censorship by Chilean news media as a "wall of silence," which was kept until a newsreel was smuggled out of Chile by independent sources and appeared first on British news sources.²¹ Vicuña describes the horror of witnessing the torture and death of civilians, including her friend, Victor Jara. Specifically, she describes how countless people were thrown from helicopters into the sea: she called these people *desaparecidos*, or those who were acknowledged which the new Chilean dictatorship attempted to erase. These deaths, for Vicuña, were a "huge blood clot" which fell into the sea. Vicuña states: "[w]ith the coup, we lost the memory of who we were."²² These bodies, like Vicuña's

²⁰ Cecilia Vicuña, *Read Thread: The Story of the Red Thread* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2017): 68.

²¹ Vicuña, "Saborami," 158.

²² Vicuña, "Saborami," 157-160.

precarios, are reclaimed by her artistic effort to make sure they are not forgotten. It is not hard to see that the *precarios* within her works are individuals, objects which litter Vicuña's constructed beaches to reinstall them with the memory of all people and objects which have been forgotten.

Days before the coup, Vicuña produced a small book which she called a "*diario de objetos*" which was full of early forms of her *precarios*. Vicuña filled the pages of the diary with clippings from newspapers, magazines, mementos of Chilean socialist life to archive the inevitable death of Allende's revolution, of a world of "us" and collective aspirational hope for a socialist future. These early iterations of *precarios*, for Vicuña, were archival forms which responded to the violent erasure of Capitalism's disconnection of language from memory, of the violence done to "our bodies, our language, our self-image."²³ The *precarios* maintained the memory of what once was, and what might return. Later, Vicuña would reflect how her *precarios* are reflections of all of us: we are all *basuritas*, or "throwaways" abandoned by the world to become nothing more than "debris/little nothings/bits of crap."²⁴

Thinking through Vicuña's desires to restore a sense of collectivity back into her community, her ritualized actions to create this sacred place within the sands is an earnest attempt to uncover the aforementioned "IT." Accompanying the Exit Art exhibition was an outdoor performance where little wooden rafts would float down the gutter streams just outside the gallery, in tribute to the Kon Tiki voyages in Polynesia. Throughout this performance, Vicuña was amazed at the lack of curiosity of everyday New Yorkers, who wouldn't even pick up the rafts as they made their voyage: they were not, according to Vicuña, "curious about the fate of the precarious."²⁵ These *precarios* are therefore a network of ritualized objects commonly connected through the medium of water in their search for this imaginary place. Vicuña saw the *precarios* as markings etched into the future, divine communications which produce an awareness of that which was forgotten from the land: these objects, circulated by the waves, weave themselves into and are undone by the sea. For Vicuña, these networks of *precarios*, of which *Pueblos de altares* was one of them, was a mirrored site of Concón which linked the exhibition site to Concón in an inevitable pairing. This artistic practice reflects the pre-Columbian means of divine communication which paired land together to make them cosmically aware of each other, to share their memories.²⁶

To understand the poet's role in the fragmented and alienated modern world, German Philosopher Theodor Adorno's notes on lyrical poetry in society proposes an evocative question:

²³ Vicuña, "Saborami, 160-161.

²⁴ Vicuña, "About to Happen," 48.

²⁵ Lippard, "Spinning the Common Thread," 60.

²⁶ Vicuña "About to Happen," 143-144.

“where does the locus of the poem lie?”²⁷ Lyric poetry expresses the immediacy of individual experience through the level of the “I,” the voice which defines and objectifies itself as it manifests through the work of art.²⁸ While the “I” appears opposed to the collective, it still reflects what Adorno defines as the unrestrained intensity of the human experience, which allows the “I” to transcend all grasped and subsumed subjects to societal order. Through the lyrical gesture, the poet becomes an active participant in the pursuit of the self’s transcendence into a universal voice which speaks to the collective, which is abstracted into an aesthetic form.²⁹ Yet, dialectically this “I” retains some individuality, as it is manifested out of the discovery for this seemingly unattainable level of universality in collective society; one which, in the modern world, no longer seems to exist.

The locus of the poem is mobile, abstracted from any concrete sense of place and is thus subjected to the poet’s gestural ordinance as they seek to enter the societal collective voice. Vicuña, in dialogue with Adorno, is echoing her desire to return to her home – to Concón and the beloved beach – of which her *precarios* are born from the waves. This “I” which Vicuña possesses, alongside countless other contemporary poets, is that which seeks to humanize the relationship between society and nature. However, every uttered “I” creates a larger illusion of the necessity of transcendentalism, and therefore the lyrical voice further distances itself from concrete reality, particularly of an established place. As they seek “the infinite within the poem’s finitude,” the poet’s transcendental gestures totalize the self into society, dissolving their heterogeneous identity. Transcendentalism is thus affiliated with totalization which seeks to eradicate all traces of the human during their pursuit toward the collective. The role of the poet is therefore paradoxical, for their individuality becomes homogenized through a universal lyrical language, dissolving their subject position in favour of a universal truth. Therefore, in this “sublime irony,” the poet must be spontaneous to oppose objectifying and constricting social conditions to transcend alienating individuation and return to the collective.³⁰

For Vicuña, the socialist role of the artist was tied to their active participation in sociohistorical events. Vicuña found inspiration in the Mapuche view of communal property following Allende’s *ley indígena*, or national land reform in conjunction with the Mapuche.³¹ Vicuña located the collective undercurrent within ancestral memory and meaning embedded in the land. In *Pueblos de altares* the diverse and evolving set of *precarios* occurred through Vicuña’s constant ritualization of poetic gesture which permitted all the objects to work together, to form an “us.” Though differences occur between exhibited objects, its explicit desire to return to Concón-as-place

²⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, *Notes to Literature: Volume One* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991): 51.

²⁸ Adorno, “Notes to Literature,” 38-41.

²⁹ Adorno, “Notes to Literature,” 38-39.

³⁰ Adorno, “Notes to Literature,” 41-43.

³¹ Vicuña, “Aborami,” 7-8.

becomes a transcendental gesture to illustrate a whole and totalized community. Vicuña's poetic practice was greatly influenced by pre-Columbian sound rituals, *sonido rajado*, in which performers play all their instruments together until the sound becomes one.³² Their identities remain anonymous yet become affiliated back to the collective of the place: of Concón beach and its community. There appears to be an ironic sense of site-specificity, for the sand the objects occasionally lay upon is inscribed with the object's own gestures as they were installed. The *precarios* rest as they would wash up on the shoreline, alienated from their roles as commodities and yet their identities are reinscribed by the artist to this place. Cast away and stripped of their original identity, both object and subject were exiled, and can no longer return to their original realities.

As stated by Adorno, language is the collective action in which the poet can tell the times of history, and to situate their "I" into the "us" of collective experience to resist the individuated experience of Capitalist society. This is where the foundation of poetry, what Adorno deems the "collective undercurrent" occurs: this current, like the sea, carries our experiences of language through the expressive poetic actions which strive to produce a sense of collective—rather than individual—existence. Therefore, Vicuña's transmedia poetics utilize trash as a material language of Capitalist consumerism to bring it back into a sense of place. The undercurrent becomes waves to carry voice and reason into an ocean of unlimited possibility and potential for human existence, where language (oral, written, or material) is the medium for historical consciousness.³³ For Vicuña, too, language was mobile, produced by migrant words which were carried by life itself from language to language through participation of people's mouths, a transient and eternal method of producing endless awareness of life's deep ancestral memories. The poet is as much a revolutionary as they are a translator of memory, a means to bear witness to which others do not wish to see, and to unearth what others wish to remain hidden.³⁴ The ocean is therefore Vicuña's locus of all her existential poetry, an expressive medium which provides opportunities for her and her audience to voyage through the imagined realms that transcend striated space toward a meaningful and authentic sense of place. Turning to Diana Taylor, she describes a moving place that accumulates objects as a repertoire, an utterance of embodied memory whose meanings evolve and change over time. Its gestures occur at the level of the individual and material to serve collective identity and memory. Contained within the repertoire—the wastelands of Capitalism, the archive of commodities—is the scenario, an utterance of

³² Vicuña, "Saborami," 162.

³³ Adorno, "Notes to Literature," 45-46.

³⁴ Vicuña, "Seehearing," 337-341.

individual agency amongst the collective in this environment of memory, where the performer is the milieu, inscribing memory into place.³⁵

Vicuña was known to be inspired by a photo of German artist Kurt Schwitters' 1923-1937 *Merzbau*, particularly of the atelier of his Hannover installation (Fig. 4). Schwitters' fascination with detritus began with the fragment's relational nature to words and the poem's structural totality. From paragraphs shattered into individual words, syllables and letters, Schwitters saw that all constructed totalities could be fragmented into their molecular parts. Thus, following Adorno's aforementioned views on the subject, the poem's form-parts become autonomous from the word itself: the poem's context is the expression, not the language.³⁶ In 1923, Schwitters defined *Merz* as such autonomized fragments, of which in society's attempts to find harmonious totality in the poem or work of art, the materialism of the objects themselves remain fragments therein. Real-world fragments therefore expose the falsity of totality, deformed as "our monument from whole to part shifts back to a renewed search for a totality out of these details."³⁷

³⁵ Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2003): 16-21.

³⁶ Megan R. Luke, *Kurt Schwitters: Space, Image, Exile* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2014): 18-19.

³⁷ Luke, "Kurt Schwitters," 20.



Figure 4: *Hannover Merzbau*, Kurt Schwitters, 1923-1937; Reproduction at Sprengel Museum, Hannover, 1933. Public Domain sourced from WikiArts.

Schwitters saw *Merz* as the “corpse of the object,”³⁸ which in their *Merzbau* totality allowed for a site-specificity to reaffiliate pieces of trash back into a sense of place in his Hannover installation. Altar-like compositions were dramatically lit in their grottos amongst each room, their material origins abstracted into this imaginary, poeticized realm in the artist’s search for a totality of place. However, once Schwitters was exiled from Germany following the Nazi’s rise to power, he moved to Norway with his son Ernst, and began his project for a portable *Merzbau*, one abstracted from a concrete place. With *Merzbau* now mobile, this once site-specific artwork could now occupy any space. The portability of site thus illustrates that Schwitters saw place as an abstracted set of fragments that could be returned to a totality through the artist. Ernst saw this as Schwitters’s desire to retrieve the memories

³⁸ Luke, “Kurt Schwitters,” 130.

of place prior to the interruption of normal existence during the war.³⁹ In his exile, Schwitters thus saw *Merzbau* as a tension between totality and the fragment, wherein trash became reinscribed with identity framed by the exiled poet's search for their own sense of place when they could no longer return home.

Like art created from trash, poems piece together words into lyrics regulated by time measures, verses, and rhymes which tell a story. *Merz's* heterogeneity is what initiated Schwitters's desire to produce the *Merzbau* series to find a balance between parts through the artistic transformation of trash into sculpture. Like a poem, *Merzbau's* framework is the integral force that binds its relational materials together into its assemblage, a sculptural form composed of trash collected and put together by the artist.⁴⁰ *Merzbau* was an immersive sculptural assemblage without any imposed boundaries yet totalized into a shared spatial experience by the artist. Its framing was in flux as the viewer moved between parts, and thus explored each individual room and grotto filled with exposed and hidden trash. For Schwitters, abstraction occurred when forms lost their original affiliations to nature; thus, the work of art could integrate viewers into imaginary planes outside of everyday reality.⁴¹ Vicuña echoes Schwitters' poetic romanticized view of site-specificity as a potential to situate the spectator into an imaginary sense of place, as she reflects in her interview with Danielle Brock: that the assemblage of *precarios* are "an architecture that functions in nature, with nature."⁴² The *precarios* are reminiscent of Schwitters' *Merz* in that they reflect the totality of poetry: their forms, while individual and significant, are autonomous from their composition. These miniature trash compositions are the language that speaks the poetic expression of Vicuña's installation. These architectural forms are fluid, their abstract frameworks superimposing the place they are exhibited in, and their objects' referents affiliate site-specificity to this imaginary, yet material, place. Through the lens of *Merz*, the *precarios* is the building block and autonomous subject of Vicuña's imaginary poeticized sense of place. *Pueblo de altares* is therefore one such assemblage, a composition of *precarios* in pursuit of constructing an architectural place within the sands of Concón beach, her childhood place of artistic production.

For many modern artists such as Schwitters, the cityscape itself was an assemblage, and the locus of collage. William C. Seitz notes that across the modern landscape, trash produces its assemblage in gutters, trash sites, and even people's trash cans.⁴³ Through these countless architectural compositions of trash, the city is a hectic collision of contesting realities and abstracted forms of

³⁹ Luke, "Kurt Schwitters," 139-141.

⁴⁰ Luke, "Kurt Schwitters," 20-21.

⁴¹ Luke, "Kurt Schwitters," 121-124.

⁴² Brock, interview.

⁴³ William C. Seitz, *The Art of Assemblage* (New York: Plantin Press, 1968): 73-74.

spectacularized life, precarious existence is exposed and manipulated by the artist. As explained by critic and curator, Lawrence Alloway:

Junk culture is city art. Its source is obsolescence, the throwaway material of cities, as it collects in drawers, cupboards, attics, dustbins, gutters, waste lots, and city dumps. Objects have a history: first they are brand new goods; then they are possessions, accessible to few, subjected, often, to intimate and repeated use; then, as waste, they are scarred but available again....Assemblages of such material come at the spectator as bits of life, bits of the environment. The urban environment is present, then, as the source of objects, whether transfigured or left alone.⁴⁴

This is reminiscent of Vicuña's treatment of Concón Beach, a site of refuse casted from the ocean's waves across the shoreline, waiting to be discovered. *Pueblos de altares* reflects the reality of the consumerist refuse: each altar, like Schwitters' grottos, are composed of pieces of trash, each unrelated until deliberately framed by the artist. This place Vicuña has created echoes with her poetic connection between her identity and the ocean: the once limitless, romanticized realm of untouched nature is now Capitalism's digestive tract which transforms commodity objects into trash after their value to it has reached its end. In her search for her vision of Concón, Vicuña has created an assemblage of ritualistic sculptures that echo the search for one's identity in the Capitalist commodity landscape.

Vicuña's assemblage of *precarios* becomes a response to the ruinous nature of Capitalism, to which "the many qualities and auras of isolated fragments are compounded, fused, or contradicted so that[...]physical matter becomes poetry."⁴¹ The assemblage is an opportunity for the remnants of Capitalism to endlessly express themselves. *Pueblos de altares* is Vicuña's own process to reinscribe the objects lost at sea with a new sense of meaning, of purpose. This parallels with Schwitters' own romantic perspectives on the found object and its use in creating endless potentials for expression in a Capitalist environment. This architecture of rubbish becomes imperative to understand the interconnection between language and materiality in Vicuña's work, and the importance of the body—the poetic "I"—in affiliation with place. In these imagined realms, the body is the extension of place.

Examining more closely the *precarios* of *Pueblos de altares*, they appear to be a city in miniature, with some tower-like structures and anthropomorphic sculpture, and other works hung vertically like clouds or windows of immaterial buildings. Although they are inscribed with the term

⁴⁴ Seitz, "The Art of Assemblage," 74.

“altars,” this town is an imagined architectural representation of a community amongst the sand, its imagined landscape activated through the body’s own movement throughout the installation. Returning to Lippard, she notes that the body is in fact an extension of place, which passes through to slowly become a part of the landscape and community itself as they interact with the layers of meaning inscribed and ritually practiced by its members.⁴⁵ It is a subjective and intimate experience, and place is phenomenologically inscribed into the body, transforming the individuated “I” into a collective “us.” The poet becomes the historian and architect of these imagined places, uncovering material ruins within their site to discover a new meaning to place in a fragmented world. The audience, like the artist, become the weavers which thread together the fragments to gain their own sense of communal existence.

The notion of material connection to body, object, and place is thoroughly explored in Vicuña’s recorded performance piece, *Kon Kon*, in 2010. Here, she returns to Concón Beach to pay tribute to its sacredness through the reconnection of its community back to its ancestral origins by historically examining the *chino* fishermen’s lost Quechan dance. Vicuña notes that this loss of community practice and attribution to place was where the sea died.⁴⁶ “Here I am writing and loving you, my Con cón,” she states as she narrates the entire video from her parent’s home: “One day I felt the sea feeling me. In this instant, I understood my body and the sea conversed in a language I needed to understand.”⁴⁷ Critically, when the video records Vicuña constructing and arranging her *precarios* sculptures, she provides the sea with her offerings of *precarios* and the waters respond in their language by swallowing them whole and returning them to the waters from where they came. In this communication, Vicuña seeks to recover history of place from “the cauldron of modernity,” perhaps alluding to the rubbish vortex just off the shore of her hometown. As stated by Lucy Lippard, as the poetic weaver looks for place, for the meeting of material and community, “the *precarios* are the common formal thread [and] the act of weaving itself is the aesthetic and spiritual thread that runs through all of Vicuña’s cultural production.”⁴⁸

Although the rectangle of sand is reminiscent of this arrangement on the beach, the *precarios* exhibited within *Pueblos de altares* are frozen in time and cannot be undone by the water, and they can remain exhibited for a long period of time. Meaning of place becomes complicated when placed in dialogue with globalization and the commodity’s life cycle, for as place is abstracted from its original community, it is up to the poet to translate its sociocultural meaning in a universal language of visual

⁴⁵ Lippard, “The Lure of the Local,” 34.

⁴⁶ Candice Amich, “From Precarity to Planetarity: Cecilia Vicuña’s *Kon Kon*,” in *The Global South* 7, no.2 (Fall 2014): 143-144.

⁴⁷ Amich, “From Precarity to Planetarity,” 142.

⁴⁸ Amich, “From Precarity to Planetarity,” 142-145.

representation. Like the ocean, the horizons of poetic expression become collective in experience as all is fragmented and muddled together without any clear context or approach to reason. *Pueblos de altares* is a mobilized version of Vicuña's perspective of the sea's relationship to Concón itself: the performance video is thus a thread to weave together material and place through a common language. The corpses of commodity which lie in ruin amongst the land and waters are resurrected as Vicuña assembles these fragments into new material forms.

Both the material installation of *Pueblos de altares* and the video performance of *Kon Kon* illustrate the precarity of inscribing identity onto a commodity culture. In a later part of the film, Vicuña is shown attaching photographs of her earlier, and forgotten, earthworks and *precarios* onto a red thread. Here, she illustrates the loss of relations between place and politics, and the people forgotten after conquest. What Candice Amich concludes in her article about this performance piece is Vicuña's search for a collective language to weave together the fragmented, forgotten remains of collective experience in order to address the commonality between difference and totality.⁴⁹ Through the *precarios* comes a reflection on the heterogenous characteristics of place-as-assemblage, where the materials echo their identity onto passing subjects, whose "I's" become woven into the collective sense of community.

In its recreation of the ocean and community's repertoires, *Pueblos de altares* has a multiplicity of meaning underlying its layers of complex and interwoven assemblage of *precarious*, which once were "little trashes" provided by the ocean. This installation consistently performs and embodies the detritus it carries, composed through the poet's voice and gestures to manipulate materiality, yet simultaneously let traces of their former lives remain. From its first exhibition in New York, *Pueblos de altares* and its collective of *precarios* illustrates that, in our shared precarious existence mandated by striated space and alienation, the fragment will remain the only truth when we encounter a place. Place is thus solely an imagined reality, an abstract concept away from the contemporary condition that can only be accessed through the poetic gesture of weaving together language into an understandable form. Yet, this installation is static, only changing when compositions are omitted or added in each exhibition: it is a ghost town, and place of absolute ruins amongst the sand.

The establishment and mobilization of place is therefore precarious in nature, for at any point its common language threaded through its landscape can dissolve, breaking the illusion of a communal totality and return to its fragmented state. Like site-specificity, totality of a place is a falsity that is perpetuated by the Capitalist expansive metanarrative in its pursuit to totalize the world through a complete striation of all bodies and spaces. The sense of place is transformed when the connection between poet and medium is activated through performance and difference in repetition, which is

⁴⁹ Amich, "From Precarity to Planetarity," 146-147.

reflected in *Pueblos de altares*' multiplicities of form and display. Language is inherently performed, and a repertoire onto its own: through the convergence of mediums of expression, assemblages permit the possibility for a subjective sense of "I" amongst the poetically manifested landscape and sense of community. Therefore, the sand in this installation piece is an abstracted homage to the beaches of Concón, where *Kon Kon* allowed for Vicuña's once exiled performative gestures to be reimagined on the shorelines they began in 1966.

Returning to Krauss' quote in the introduction, the ocean is a paradoxical place where fragments merge into an unintentional totality, yet its medium expresses the potential for a multiplicity of assemblages. *Pueblos de altares* is a dialectical work: at one moment site-specific, in another an assemblage of anonymous detritus from the ruins of Capitalist production, it reflects the imagined place this installation's poetic potentiality to find place once more out of the ruins of the globalized world, however futile it may seem. The ocean is her medium and the language which she uses to express her desire to return to a sense of place prior to the fall of the Allende governmental dream for a socialist Utopia. In the realm of exile, corporeality merges with materiality in the search of finding a new collective language: how then, will the ocean next respond

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