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# Method and madness at the Isabella Stewart Gardner museum

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**METHOD AND MADNESS AT THE ISABELLA STEWART GARDNER MUSEUM**

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor in Philosophy

in

The Department of Communication Studies

By

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## **DEDICATION**

To my father.

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I would like to extend many thanks and heartfelt appreciation to my dissertation committee from whose efforts and insights I have greatly benefitted. To Michael Bowman, thank you for introducing me to the Nudds and for teaching me that it was perfectly okay to tell the same story over and over again. To Joshua Gunn, thank you for being a wonderful friend and teacher and for always encouraging me. To John Protevi, thank you for challenging me to think beyond that which is habitual. To Frederick Ortner, thank you for stepping in and agreeing to go along with this madness. And especially to my advisor, friend, mentor, and inspiration Ruth Bowman, without whom this would not have been possible, thank you for snow.

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## ABSTRACT

The Isabella Stewart Gardner museum in Boston, Massachusetts is unique in history and design. Originating as a privately held collection, the Gardner Museum reflects its namesake's eccentricities and stands in stark contrast to the backdrop of contemporary Boston. Although much has been written about the individual masterpieces held within the Gardner collection and there are numerous biographies of "Mrs. Jack," as Gardner was sometimes called, little work has been done to investigate the museum in light of contemporary research in museology and the practices of collecting and display. Understanding collecting and curating as modes of knowledge production, this study seeks to discover the types of knowledge produced by and within the Gardner Museum. Because the museum highlights forms of knowledge other than that associated with textual criticism, I focus on the affective and historical material transfers at work in museum practice. As such, this study offers an opportunity to explore the nature of a performance-based method or orientation to scholarship. I both make use of and question "performative writing" as a mode of presentation, so that what emerges is an understanding of a method that, like the Gardner Museum, seeks to discover ways of knowing beyond (but not in lieu of) processes of representation and signification. In a sense then, performance methodology becomes both an object of study and my method. In bringing the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum into relationship with the disciplinary problem of performative writing, I have conceived of my research and writing practices as processes of collecting and curating.

## CHAPTER ONE “BUT I DIGRESS...”

The tiny tesserae of an *opus vermiculatum*, meaning “wormlike,” mosaic snake along rounded paths. Jagged triangles are interspersed with trapezoids and rhombuses and other quadrilateral configurations. Eggshell and ecru wash against ribbons of black and blue. The trails of gradation in color and contour collaborate to form the image of the head of Medusa. This second century Roman mosaic lies at the spatial and architectural heart of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. Sixteen foot square, the mosaic pavement is laid into the ground at the intersection of pathways that cut across a sunken garden. This area of the museum is referred to as the “Court” or “Courtyard” in the various museum guidebooks and pamphlets. It is the centerpiece of a building seemingly turned inside out. The brick exterior walls of the museum building are like a plain brown wrapper that offer no clues as to the contents within.

The interior courtyard of the Gardner is an explosion of nature. The roof is made entirely of glass allowing a flood of sunlight into the space. The walls surrounding the courtyard are built to imitate the architecture of the exterior walls of a Renaissance era Venetian palazzo. Each of the three upper floors is wrapped with windows, allowing the sunlight to spill into the museum rooms and enabling visitors to look down into the courtyard from multiple vantage points. The salmon pink paint treatment on the walls produces the effect of stucco, which was accomplished only after Gardner herself showed the painters how to do it. “To achieve the atmospheric coloring of the stucco, Isabella Gardner, in her sixties, intervened with the painters, and demonstrated with a brush and buckets of paint the rough brushwork she wanted” (Goldfarb 43).

The courtyard gardens are planted with flowering plants and small trees. Ivy covers the ground in the areas between the paths surrounding the Medusa mosaic. The head of the Gorgon

is crowned with serpents, which, so the story goes, made her so frightening a creature that anyone who looked upon her turned to stone immediately. As though in testament to the power of such stories, the garden surrounding the Medusa mosaic is populated with ancient Greek and Roman stone statues. The figures of unnamed *peplophoros* women and recognizable characters of legend such as Persephone, Artemis, and Odysseus are arranged to face the center of the courtyard and appear to have been frozen here by the chthonic monster.

Chthonic is one of many Greek words for “earth,” referring not to the surface of the planet, but to its interiors and depths. It evokes at once the abundance and regeneration of life and the deterioration of organic matter and death. Mythographer Robert Graves links the chthonic figure to the process of doing historical scholarship. He sees the Gorgon as a symbol for an attitude or pose that collapses constructs of time, enfolding together the pull of the past and the drive toward the future. The work of the historian follows the evidentiary trail of the past, in material traces and remnants as well as documents, including the work of other historians. However, Graves also makes room for intuition and the imaginary, recognizing within scholarship the tendency of thought towards that which cannot be proven, but is a necessary part of invention and creativity (Wilk 96).

In a special issue of Art Bulletin titled, “The Problematics of Collecting and Display,” art historian Donald Preziosi makes similar claims for the practices of museology. Rooted in a modernist ideology of “representational adequacy,” museum displays often are believed to represent some extra-museological past, to function as documentary and evidentiary artifacts. Preziosi argues, however, that as practices of composition and narrative, exhibitions “establish an ambivalent figuration of the past and the future” (Preziosi 13-14). Museums are sites for



bodying forth imagined histories. They highlight the performance of memory as an active reconstructing and piecing together of experience.

The continual churning of analepsis and prolepsis was a common theme of Renaissance art and literature, an era of great interest to Gardner in collecting objects to be housed in her museum. In Perpetual Motion: Transforming Shapes in the Renaissance from da Vinci to Montaigne, Michel Jeanneret traces themes of movement, transformation, and the unfinalizable throughout various Renaissance works. He argues that people of the time believed that artworks not only contain the traces and conditions for their creation, but they also are unfinished as they extend into the future (Jeanneret 1-3). In Renaissance literature, themes of metamorphosis and continuous creation were represented often by hybrid monsters and chimeras (Jeanneret 115-122). These monsters found their way into Renaissance gardens in the form of statues and mosaics much like the Medusa mosaic in the garden of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. The garden, argues Jeanneret, was a “privileged genre” in the Renaissance because it is the ultimate expression “of the principle of the mobile work of art” (Jeanneret 127). It is the spectacle of the chthonic earth, the gestation of life and organic decay. The garden, as an aesthetic form, does not have to represent change, because, by its very nature, it changes according to the time of day, the seasons, and the weather (Jeanneret 127).

It is 10:05 a.m. on a cold February morning. The slushy piles of snow on the ground outside the museum linger from the previous night’s snowfall. They have turned gray with the dirt of the city and are beginning to disappear in the morning light. The courtyard is brightly lit, as are the various rooms into which the light scatters through windows overlooking the courtyard. The light lacks warmth, however, both in color and in its inability to warm my skin. Like the piles of snow outside, it seems to be tinged a grayish white. I sit on the low concrete

wall surrounding the courtyard to take notes. The paths leading through the sunken garden are roped off, and it is one of a very few spaces in the museum through which visitors are not allowed to walk. On my first visit to the museum, I had assumed that the area was roped off to prevent visitors from picking the flowers or from trudging through the ivy ground coverings. I have learned since however that the Medusa mosaic at the center of the garden dates back to the second century, and its placement makes it impossible to traverse the garden without walking across the ancient gorgon.

A tour group of senior citizens standing nearby turns away from the garden and moves on to another area of the museum. As their hushed chatter disperses and quiet settles, I become keenly aware of the sound of water moving through the stone mouths of two large dolphins and tumbling into a rectangular basin carved with sea monsters and the human-fish figure of Triton. I take notes on the contents of the garden with the pencil and composition book that I have been allowed to carry into the museum. My horticultural knowledge is extremely limited, and aside from recognizing a few peace lilies, I resort to descriptions such as “strange fern-like trees with light brown furry trunks.” The curious unfamiliar plants conspire with the stone statues, weighty with history, and the gentle flow of water to lull me into feeling as though I have been transported into some imaginary place and time.

My reverie is interrupted abruptly however when I notice, nestled in the ivy below my feet, the artifice of two small parcan lights, one with a red gel and one with a blue gel. I stand and follow the cabling around the perimeter of the garden and find several more lights hidden in the greenery. The lights are turned off, and I assume they are used to light the courtyard for evening events. I wonder what that would look like. Are they configured to wash the space, the blues and reds canceling each other out to effect “natural” light? Or are they positioned to create

more theatrical effects, such as a sharp cast of red on the face of the monstrous lion with gaping holes for eyes or a pool of cool blue on the dolphins spewing water from their mouths?

Looking at my watch, I realize that I have spent nearly forty-five minutes in the courtyard, so I move along one side to make my way over to the Spanish Cloister. As I do, I make another surprising discovery: a green leather binder resembling a scrapbook or photo album lying on top of the low concrete wall. A paper label affixed to the front bears the words “The Courtyard” in black lettering. The album is an informational brochure that welcomes visitors to the courtyard and also invites them to view it “from the many angles provided by the windows of the various museum rooms overlooking it.” The brochure contains information about the displays in the courtyard. I learn that the plants are grown by horticulturists in the greenhouse located directly behind the museum and are changed out seasonally, altering the courtyard’s appearance every few months. I also learn that the strange furry trunked trees are Australian tree ferns that just happen to be suited to the climate of the museum’s courtyard. They do not have to be replaced seasonally and have lived in the museum for over ten years.

It is February again, a year later, as I write this, the end of a winter that seemed as though it would never begin. There is melting snow on the ground outside, but here in suburban Virginia it remains impossibly white. In October, I took a trip to New England to visit the Gardner Museum and to see the autumn foliage, but due to an extensive heat wave that had settled over much of the country, this ubiquitous marker of seasonal change had begun to emerge only in the northernmost regions. In the southeastern United States, the prolonged summer weather brought with it water shortages and increased utility charges and added fuel to debates on global warming and the conservation of natural resources. In my small Virginia town, temperatures still soared into the nineties daily and air conditioners whirred throughout my

apartment complex. The weather seemed to be at a standstill, as though the seasons would never change. My husband and I tried to remember what the previous October had been like. We had moved to Virginia that month, anticipating a region with distinct seasons in contrast to the subtropical climate of south Louisiana where I was born and raised. “Hadn’t the leaves changed colors by now?” we asked each other. Since we were new to the area we had no communal lore or collective regional history to draw upon. We had no sense of the way things usually were. We only had our personal memories of our experience of one autumn. “Weren’t we wearing sweaters? Weren’t there leaves on the ground by now?” Then one November day the temperatures cooled. Another day we noticed splashes of yellow and darts of red in the trees. Suddenly the ground was covered with dry leaves and acorns, and then the wind came to strip more leaves from the trees and carry them down to blanket the earth. The season had changed right under our noses.

And now melting snow lies on the ground. Impossibly white.

And we try to remember how and when autumn gave way to winter, to piece together the processes of nature that have brought us to this spot on this day in February as I write this sentence. We can access what seem to be still points of memory only, fragments of affective experience, the crunch of leaves beneath our feet, the whiff of smoke from a neighbor’s fireplace. The transformation, the temporality of movement itself, seems to defy any immediate representation. In order to reactivate it as a process, we must re-perform these memories and experiences in and as a collective. Through sharing the fragments and piecing them together anew, we add to and change each other’s memories and sensations. Such is the case as I visit and re-visit the Gardner Museum physically and in my process of researching, thinking, discussing, and writing about it. It is unclear to me now to what extent I can claim knowledge

that exists prior to or independent of these visits. My movements through the museum, as I wander from room to room, painting to painting, are tinged with proleptic tendency, indelibly marked by future performances. My performances here on the page, meandering through theory and narrative practices, are colored and transformed by analepses of memory, both experienced and imagined.

I remember that my first visit to the Gardner Museum was in the month of November. I was taken there by a close friend and her brother. He was a resident of Boston and had prepared us for the visit by explaining that the museum housed the collection of a wealthy art patron and connoisseur, and that it was both unusual and wonderful, his favorite museum. Otherwise, I knew nothing of the museum, and it provided little information itself. Upon entering, we received a museum map. The floor plan contained the names of the various galleries and highlighted the locations of several important masterworks. It did not however offer a clear schema for the classification and display of what seemed to me to be a jumble of objects. I had no sense of where to start.

Museum maps typically provide some clues to a starting point and a direction of movement for the visitor. As Mieke Bal observes in “Telling, Showing, Showing Off,” the design of a museum prefigures the visitor’s movements through the space. An order for viewing the exhibits is established by means of physical and discursive clues (Bal, “Telling, Showing, Showing Off” 561). For example, the map of the Chrysler Museum of Art in Norfolk, Virginia, highlights the museum’s chronological sequencing of items and leaves little doubt as to where the visitor should start and which direction she should move. The diagram of the building’s second floor shows a circular arrangement of adjoining rooms labeled “Medieval,” “13<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> Centuries,” “16<sup>th</sup> & 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries,” and so on (Chrysler Museum of Art). Similarly, the floor

plan of the Art Institute of Chicago designates each gallery in terms of a region and time period, “European 1500s-1600s,” “European 1700s,” “American to 1890,” “American 1900-1950s.” In the case of the non-Western collections, the galleries are labeled by region only, such as “Indian and Southeast Asian,” phrasing Bal refers to as the “leftover categories” of Western museums (Bal, “Telling, Showing, Showing Off” 559). For certain large collections within the Western chronology, generic labels are assigned, such as “Impressionism and PostImpressionism” (Art Institute of Chicago, [Floor Plan](#)). Although a few gallery names on the Gardner map appear to follow these norms, bearing titles such as “Early Italian Room” and “Dutch Room,” many of the titles, “Yellow Room,” “Blue Room,” and “Long Gallery,” seem a tongue in cheek critique of museum classifications. For me, the map not only highlights the arbitrary and constructed nature of museum norms, but my expectations that a map should tell me how to tour the museum.

The walls of the aforementioned Blue Room are covered with fabrics in multiple shades of blue. Prussian blue. Iron blue. Antwerp blue. The patterns within the fabrics range from moiré stripe to floral brocade. Berlin blue. Chinese blue. Gas blue. Each piece of furniture placed along the perimeter of the room contributes its own blue. The six eighteenth century Italian chairs are constructed of wood frames painted in a blue based shade of white, decorated with medium blue hand-painted trim, and seated and backed with deep gray blue rush caning. Hamburg blue. Mineral blue. New blue. True blue. On a small raised platform recessed between two partition walls there is a settee. The velvet upholstery is brilliant royal blue. International Klein Blue. Oil blue. Tiffany blue. Paris blue. Paste blue. Egyptian blue. Steel blue. In one corner of the room, opposite the door through which I entered, a small mirrored door is framed in blue and made flouncy with blue draping. The mirror reflects blue back to blue. Azure. Indigo. Woad. The room’s walls are overflowing with paintings of various shapes

and sizes. In some areas, they are tiered three high. In other places, they form backdrops to additional paintings mounted in standing frames and placed atop small tables and desks. Even the small wall spaces above the doors and windows hold paintings. Ultramarine. Smalt. Cobalt. For the most part, the paintings in the Blue Room date from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Many of the artists were friends or contemporaries of Isabella Stewart Gardner. There are more pastels and watercolors in this room than there are in other parts of the museum. Mountain blue. Ocean blue. Malachite. Vitrium. All around me are pictured expanses of sky or limitless watery fields of blue. English blue. Pencil blue. Cerulean blue.

IN THE CORNER:

*The Surge of the Sea*, ca. 1900, by Andreas Anderson ([Guide 34](#)).

CONTINUING ALONG THE SOUTH WALL:

*The Brook at Medfield*, 1889, by Denis Miller Bunker ([Guide 35](#)).

EAST WALL:

*Yoho Falls*, 1916, by John Singer Sargent ([Guide 33](#)).

ABOVE THE TABLE:

*A View Across a River*, ca. 1855, by Gustave Courbet ([Guide 29](#)).

Three dried flowers are in a vase with fish-shaped handles. Behind it, two watercolors of boats at dock. Further down the wall, the noonday sun shines down on a herd of cows in a marsh, and then sheep at pasture, and a goat in repose. Blue aire. Blue ochre. Cinder blue. Deep arctic. As though admiring all of these views, a ballerina in a delicate pale blue tutu, her back towards the viewer, stands [At the Window](#) in Louis Kronberg's impressionist oil on canvas. Cornflower blue. Charron blue. Turnsole. Sapphire. Cyan.

Blue.

On the opposite side of the room, an actual window holds a patch of cloudless blue sky. The noonday sun over Boston enters the room in a small square beam ending on the wooden floor in a trapezoidal skew. I make my way towards the window. My favorite painting in the museum hangs on a short projecting wall perpendicular to the window. It is The Omnibus by Anders Zorn. The image is of the interior of a bus or trolley car. The passengers sit in a row that cuts diagonally across the painting. The passenger in the foreground, larger than the other passengers and painted in sharper focus, is a young woman. She is dressed in a high necked black garment and, it appears, a black feathered hat although it is hard to tell because that area of the painting is dark and shadowy. She holds a hat box in her lap. The line of her head and upper torso is slightly extended. Her eyes are opened wide, and her lips are parted slightly. She appears to be looking through the windows on the opposite side of the bus as though checking to see whether this is her stop. There is an anachronistic quality about her. She strikes me as someone who might have been seated on the train next to me on my way to the museum. As I lean in to examine the details of her face more closely, puzzling over this inexplicable affinity I have for her, I realize that there is a rectangular slash of glare obscuring her torso and part of her face. Annoyed, I turn to look over my right shoulder towards the door to the room, which appears to be the source of the light. However, the doorway is dim, and there are no visitors nearby whose watch faces or cell phone screens might have reflected the light onto the painting. I look to my left at the window, and although the sunlight is bright, it is cast downward on the floor and nothing on the other side of the window appears to have refracted it in this way. I look back at the painting and realize with a start that the slash of light is painted into the painting itself. Although I have seen the painting many times before, I have never noticed the slash of light until this day when the sun was at high noon and unobscured by clouds.



In Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture, Eilean Hooper-Greenhill refers to the unidirectional mapping of a museum's holdings as a process of seriating (Hooper-Greenhill 21). She argues that the logical schema that governs the placement of objects in a museum forms groups of statements that work together as a narrative (Hooper-Greenhill 49). These narratives are made evident through the actual placement of the objects, their labels, and the museum map. Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach examine the placement of works, for example, within universal survey museums. They find that the created narratives usually impress upon the visitor a story of civilization advanced through individual genius and/as nationalistic values, "art as cultural triumphs" (Duncan and Wallach 64). The spacing between the works and the limited number of pieces within each room establishes each as significant. Masterpieces are highlighted by their isolation from the rest of the collection, for example by being placed at the endpoint of an axis that runs through a series of doorways. Duncan and Wallach argue that museums sanction the idea that artworks should be viewed one by one within an a-historical and rhetorically neutral environment (Duncan and Wallach 54).

Upon paying admission, a visitor to the Gardner Museum is provided with a map with gallery names that do not predetermine her walking path. Furthermore, very few of the objects within the museum are labeled. The display conventions that would make the museum fit an "art-historical mould" and that visitors would find familiar, are noticeably absent (Duncan and Wallach 64). Throughout the museum, paintings are hung with variable amounts of spacing between them; in some spots, they are grouped so closely together that they seem to overlap. The height at which they are hung also varies. Although some pieces are placed at eye level, others are placed far above the visitor's head or so low on the wall that most visitors have to bend down to get a better look. The floor space of the rooms is strewn with pieces of furniture

and odds and ends, which serve as supports for more artworks and smaller odds and ends. This jumble is contained within rooms that are themselves a mish-mash of architectural elements, ornately decorated with various wall coverings and fabrics that often wash each room in a certain color or convey upon the room a particular mood.

Bizarre stylistic, generic, and anachronistic juxtapositions are found throughout the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. The absence of seriating suggests that the narrative practices at work in the museum tell a different kind of story than that suggested by Duncan and Wallach. Stories emerge through the movement of the visitor in relation to the works in their settings, symphonies of coincidence and contradiction. The museum foregrounds the importance of bodily participation in the co-production of meaning. Further, by stressing the role of a body as the site for sensory processing and the synesthetic nature of perceptual experience, the Gardner Museum highlights the need for addressing reception in aesthetics – for example, the effort required of a viewer to focus on the particular, as when she walks up to a painting placed low on a wall, bends over, and cranes her neck to see it. For the viewer, the affirmation of representation, the “this is what this is,” is contaminated with doubt. Visceral experiences may collide with representations. Presumed static objects in a presumed unchanging museum prove fluid and shifting. The smallest change proliferates in feedback loops. The rise and fall of the sun and direction of the light source change the viewer’s bodily practices and experiences of looking. The viewer’s presence and movements within the museum change the environment, warmth and breath speeding the decay of the artworks while contributing to the life of the plants in the courtyard.

Eventually I discovered the information I desired in the absent labels. In the gift shop of the Gardner Museum, there is a guide, bearing the simple title Guide available for purchase. It

catalogs the museum's holdings and provides titles, artists' names, and dates. This guide is the latest incarnation of numerous guides and catalogs that have been written by art historians and the museum's directors since Gardner's death in 1924. One such catalog, the Catalogue of the Exhibited Paintings and Drawings was researched and written by British art historian Phillip Hendy in 1931. In the introduction, Hendy states that the selection of materials and layout of the book are dictated by the museum's "representative nature of Italian paintings" (Hendy vi). Hendy and others understand that Gardner's main focus was Italian Renaissance painting, and that the museum serves as a historical document of that genre. However, both the museum and the Catalogue contain many works outside of this historical designation, including, for example, Chinese sculptures and paintings and drawings by United States and Dutch artists. In Hendy's Catalogue, works are arranged in alphabetical order by the artist's name or title of the piece. Additional information includes a description of the painting, the history or mythology of the subject(s) of the painting, the process of attribution, the provenance of the work, and the biography of the artist. Each entry heading containing title, artist, and date also names the room in which the work is located although the Catalogue does not provide a visual map or specify where in the room the piece is installed. Hendy's Catalogue does not make any references to Gardner's display practices save one. In speaking of John Singer Sargent's painting El Jaleo, he observes, "[The Spanish Cloister] was designed in the first place as a setting for the picture, with a Moorish arch to frame it and with electric light thrown from below to suit the direction of the painted shadows" (Hendy 317).

In 1935, a new catalog was created by Gilbert Wendel Longstreet under the supervision of the museum's director Morris Carter, a friend and biographer of Isabella Stewart Gardner. The new catalog was intended as a walking guide for museum visitors and is arranged according

to the placement of the works in the museum. A floor plan displays the galleries, numbered one through thirty-one, and the works are listed according to each room and their placement within. Italicized directions further instruct the viewer, telling her to locate works “*going around the room from left to right,*” “*high on the wall to the right,*” and “*in front of the fountain, on the ground*” (Longstreet 15, 18, 45). Longstreet’s catalog was to enable the “lay visitor” to move through the gallery spaces, book in hand, and identify by title, artist, and date, each work contained within the museum (Longstreet 3). In the current Guide, Longstreet’s basic arrangement is retained although many pieces are omitted, presumably to allow for the smaller three-by-five inch pamphlet size that lends itself to more convenient carrying. The deletion of works in the updated Guide are acknowledged in the introduction: “In this third edition of the Guide, the selection of objects for consideration and the revised attributions reflect the stated interests of our visitors, the current scholarship in our updated curatorial records, and the status of ongoing research” (Guide 8).

In 2003, the Guide itself was transformed into a work of art by conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth as part of his residency at the Gardner Museum. In 1992, in an effort to connect the museum to contemporary art without overstepping Gardner’s wish that the museum collection remain intact, an artist-in-residence program was initiated. During their residencies, visual and performing artists are provided a stipend and staff support to live and work at the museum. The resulting pieces are often a response to the story of Isabella Stewart Gardner and her museum. For example, in 1999, installation and performance artist Lee Mingwei created The Living Room. Drawing upon Gardner’s reputation for hospitality and zeal for salon life, Mingwei created a contemporary living room space in which he hosted and greeted visitors, inviting them to sit with him for a cup of coffee and to discuss their impressions of the museum. Mingwei’s

Living Room, like other contemporary exhibits shown at the Gardner, was installed in a Special Exhibition Gallery adjoining the café, gift shop, and public restrooms. The noted spaces were built into an area of the ground floor that was not a part of Gardner's original gallery space.

As a part of his residency project, Joseph Kosuth challenged himself to extend his piece beyond the confines of the Special Exhibition Gallery into Gardner's museum without adding to or disturbing her collection and display practices. Kosuth's exhibit, Artist, Curator, Collector: James McNeill Whistler, Bernard Berenson and Isabella Stewart Gardner – Three Locations in the Creative Process, consisted of four parts. The first, titled "Guests and Foreigners: Three Faces of a Correspondence," took the form of an installation within the Special Exhibition Gallery. Kosuth hung framed paintings, photographs, and letters intermittently throughout the room, which then he wrapped with text painted in white on a gray background. The text interspersed timelines documenting the correspondence between Isabella Stewart Gardner, Bernard Berenson, an art historian and connoisseur instrumental to many of her purchases, and the United States artist James McNeill Whistler. Among these timelines, Kosuth also inserted quotes from various writings by philosophers and artists, such as Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. The second part of Kosuth's exhibit, "Whistler's Warning (c.c.c.c.)," consisted of text formed by white neon lights hung on the exterior brick façade of the museum building. The text was drawn from Whistler's famous "10 O'Clock Lecture," in which Whistler critiques the museological and art historical tendency to classify art according to categories such as artist and date, "reducing Art to statistics" (Whistler). Whistler also questions the tendency of scholars to analyze art only in terms of the symbolic value of the image content, disregarding what Whistler calls the "painter's poetry," form and use of color. "Isabella's Subtext(s)" was the third part of Kosuth's exhibit. In addition to paintings and

sculptures, Gardner also collected rare books, particularly early printings of Dante's Divine Comedy, and ephemera such as the letters, photographs, and signatures of artists and other historical figures. In the museum, these items are displayed in cabinets and cases with glass tops or doors through which the objects can be viewed. To protect the fragile paper from the sunlight that streams through the museum, each glass lid or door is covered with a heavy brown velvet cloth and each cloth bears a small sign stating, "Visitors May Lift Cover." Kosuth replaced these covers with his own gray velvet coverings embroidered with words or phrases lifted from the documents contained within the cases. The final part of Kosuth's project was a redesign of the museum Guide. Titled Guide to Contemporary Art: Special Edition, Kosuth's version contains the full text of the museum's 1997 Guide although it is printed in negative relief; rather than black text on white pages, it has white text on black pages. Dispersed throughout the guide are snippets of text from all parts of Kosuth's project. The additions are highlighted in silver print. Kosuth also retains the photographs of select works included in recent editions of the Guide, which again are presented in negative relief while additional photographs of Kosuth's installation pieces are reproduced in full color.

In Artist, Curator, Collector: James McNeill Whistler, Bernard Berenson and Isabella Stewart Gardner – Three Locations in the Creative Process, Joseph Kosuth's emphasis on text recalls aspects of his earlier work. In "Language between Performance and Photography," Liz Kotz explores the conceptual art of Kosuth and also George Brecht as it concerns the relationship between language and the art object (Kotz 4). Although previous scholarship on Kosuth's work has explicated the ways in which his art problematizes the relationship between referent and signifier, Kotz argues that key performative elements of his pieces have been overlooked. In his 1965 work, One and Three Chairs, Kosuth created an installation that consisted of a textual

definition of the word “chair,” an actual chair, and a photograph of the chair taken in the display context. The work has been described as an investigation into the conditions of representation in art, posing questions such as “What is the real chair?” and “How do we represent a chair?” (Kotz 8-9). Kotz, however, highlights that the performative and temporal elements of the work emerge from the fact of the chair being photographed anew in each new environment. In order for curators to execute each installation, Kosuth drafted a set of instructions (a guide) for the creation of a singular instantiation of One and Three Chairs. Kotz argues that the relationship between the instructions, as a general template or notational system, and the particular realization of the work is not one of representation, but rather specification, allowing for a specific material instantiation of a concept and resulting in varied forms of presentation (Kotz 14). In mapping a series of practices or actions to be executed, the instructions diagram a future possibility. They serve as a schema for invention, enabling the qualitative transformation of a space, an object, and textual and visual representations (respectively, the gallery, the chair, the word “chair,” and the photograph) into something else, “art” for example. Rather than reproduce mimetic objects, the instructions compel participation in a way that makes possible an insistence on the specificity of space and time in spectatorial interaction and experience and highlights the passage of the transformation.

The two upper floors of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum are different in temperament from those on the ground level. On the first floor, the Yellow and Blue Rooms largely contain paintings and correspondence by artists such as Whistler, Sargent, Anders Zorn, and Joseph Lindon Smith, with whom Gardner socialized and who have been referred to as the “Palazzo Barbaro Circle” (Chong, “Introduction: ‘Romance and Art and History’” xi). The Yellow Room, for instance, contains a portrait of violinist Charles Martin Loeffler, a recipient of

Gardner's patronage, painted by John Singer Sargent and given to Gardner as a birthday gift on April 14, 1903. The MacKnight Room, also on the first floor, was Gardner's sitting room and contains her writing desk and attending personal effects such as a silver hand mirror and letter opener. There are cases of travel souvenirs and gifts given to her by associates. The Macknight Room also displays one of the last portraits made of Gardner, a small image showing her old and frail body wrapped in a white shroud as she neared death. These rooms are interspersed with the functional spaces of the museum as a contemporary public institution: the restrooms, the café, the gift shop, main entrance, and the coat and bag check. In contrast, the galleries of the upper two floors contain the collections for which Gardner has become most famous, works of the Early and High Italian Renaissance, Siennese paintings of the Gothic period, and pieces by the Dutch Masters, as well as furniture and architectural elements from various historical periods.

On the third floor, I entered the Gothic Room from the Long Gallery, passing through a late fifteenth century French Gothic *tambour*, which is a drum shaped structure that creates an isolated space much like an entrance foyer. From within the small curved *tambour*, I could see neither the room I had left nor the room I was about to enter. Additionally, because the wood exterior of the *tambour* is visible from the Gothic Room only, I did not know what I was moving through until I emerged on the other side and turned to look back at it. The walls of the Gothic Room are lined with dark wood paneling, and the high ceiling is defined by thick rough hewn wood timbers. There is a large fireplace on the wall near the *tambour* with an iron canopy bearing the Spanish coat of arms of the Catholic kings. The fireplace and canopy were taken from a Spanish Gothic church, also of the late fifteenth century. Two long wood dining tables with chairs sit in the center of the room flanking a fourteenth century *couronne de fer* or iron candle stand. One of the tables is covered with multiple lead, wood, and embossed leather boxes



and coffers ranging in date from the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries. Dispersed along the walls throughout the room are large Gothic oak chests carved with *ogive* motifs.

Although many of the items in the Gothic Room are “authentic” to the noted style and period, there is one glaring anachronism. In the corner, directly across from the *tambour*, placed atop one of the large wooden chests, is a portrait of Isabella Stewart Gardner. The painting is considered to be an iconic image of Gardner and has been reproduced in nearly all of the books about the museum, in various biographies, and on the museum’s website. It was painted on commission by John Singer Sargent in 1888. The canvas is over six feet tall and the portrait shows Gardner standing full front, gazing at the viewer. She is wearing a short sleeved black gown with *décolleté* at the deep neckline. The tightly fitted bodice is nipped at the waist prominently displaying her figure. Ruby pendants hang from strands of pearls at her neck and waist and glisten on the tops of her shoes. Her bare arms curve gracefully before her and meet at her loosely clasped fingers. The background of the portrait is an elaborate wallpaper design of gilded gold and red that repeats and enhances the color of the rubies she wears. The curves in the design meet behind Gardner’s body in such a way that they encircle her head in a shimmering golden halo. In the Gothic Room, this painting is installed before a large Franco-Flemish tapestry titled, The Message to the Woodcutters. The pastoral scene of a private garden filled with trees, flowering plants, and small birds is woven with threads of the same gold and red hues as those in the wallpaper in Gardner’s portrait. Near the painting, an easel supports a small tempera on wood painting. Madonna and Child, circa 1325, by Simone Martini is an iconic image of the Virgin Mary. She faces Isabella Stewart Gardner, pictured before an elaborate gilded background, a golden halo circling her head.

In the Early Italian Room, a large painting of Hercules by Piero della Francesca hangs high on one portion of the east wall overlooking the space. It is a fresco in plaster that was cut away from the wall of a villa that once served as the artist's residence. The image of the mythological figure cloaked only in a lion's skin and wielding a club seems strangely out of place in a room dominated by Christian iconography. On another section of the east wall the visual weight of Hercules is balanced by an altarpiece, Simone Martini's polyptych of the Madonna and Child with Saints Paul, Lucy, Catherine and John the Baptist. The gilded triangular pinnacles are repeated throughout the room on triptychs, altarpieces, and predellas. Images of the Madonna and Child, various saints, and the Assumption of the Virgin fill the room. On the north wall, placed before a large panel of St. Anthony, a small image of St. Elizabeth rests on an easel nestled into a *chasuble*, a liturgical vestment. Hercules however is not the only oddity in the room of western Christian art. A small case on a table below Hercules contains a jumble of Chinese rosaries and other beads. A shelf near the fireplace opposite Hercules holds two bronze bears from the Han dynasty, first century B.C. The fireplace is flanked by Japanese *rintō*, bronze hanging lamps, and *ryūzu*, dragon heads carved in wood.

On my first visit to the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, I felt disoriented as I meandered through the rooms, trying to see too much at once and trying to make some sense of what I saw. The visit was at odds with my previous experiences of museums. It was as though in performing the role of museum visitor, I had only a limited number of models to draw upon and none of them worked here. My repertoire of strategies and logical frameworks for viewing art in a museum was inadequate; my habits, strange. I felt myself searching for a secret key or code of instructions suspecting that Gardner was up to some game, and if I could tease out the

rules for play, I might unlock the mystery and play too. I might discover what she wanted to tell me; I might discover her intent.

As I walked through the Early Italian Room, I took mental note of the strange contradictions, such as the display of jade and lapis lazuli Chinese backscratchers in a room titled “Early Italian.” I also couldn’t help but notice that the room contained an inordinate amount of gold triangles, the pointed tips wrapping the room like a picket fence or so many rooftops. There also were a lot of figures in the paintings dressed in red clothing: A Young Man in a Scarlet Turban was followed by A Lady with a Nosegay wearing a gown with voluminous red sleeves. Further down the wall, A Boy in a Scarlet Cap was followed by Portrait of a Seated Turkish Scribe whose crimson sleeves “pop” in contrast to the otherwise muted colors of the painting. Crossing through the open threshold, I moved into the Raphael Room. The walls of the room are covered in red wallpaper. The fireplace is flanked by large swaths of red fabric draped from metal rods. Many chairs of various styles are placed throughout the room, all upholstered in red fabrics. I passed A Woman in Green and Crimson, then a portrait of Count Tommaso Inghirami posed in the act of writing while wearing a red robe and cap, then another red sleeve, and then the Madonna in a red robe, and then...wait. As I moved past an image of the Virgin Mary holding the Christ child in her lap, I did a double take. The child was holding a small bird in his hand. The jolt of *déjà vu* was undeniable. I had just seen this picture. I had already passed it and moved on. I looked around me to gain my bearings. Could I have looped back without realizing it? I turned and retraced my steps through the Raphael Room and the Early Italian Room and, in doing so, realized that there were three separate paintings that showed the Christ child holding a bird. I also discovered that there was one vantage point from which all three paintings could be viewed. I became a point in the line that connected them.

As I stood there, caught between two rooms and three paintings, my head turning back and forth, back and forth, I caught the eye of the docent standing nearby. I asked him if he knew the significance of the paintings showing the Christ child holding a bird; if the iconography held any sort of special meaning for Gardner. “I think it might be a symbol of the resurrection, but I’m not sure,” he said. “Now as for the repetitions...” he continued and his voice lowered conspiratorially. He proceeded to point out to me the repetitions of shapes, colors, and thematic elements in the two rooms that surrounded us, things he had noticed over the course of his time working there. His story offered no explanations, and his hushed but urgent excitement suggested that I was not the only person who responded to the uncanny repetitions with some paranoia. “The whole museum is like this,” he whispered.

As I look at the small paperback Guide to the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, it seems at once to be ludicrously inadequate and yet extraordinary in its practicability. Taken as a representation of the museum, the succinct almost terse Guide comes up short. The museum is not succinct. In form as well as content, it bursts at the seams with affection and memory, ideas and histories, material objects and colors and textures. It is as though there is so much that it wants to say, that to say it all would be impossible. There are infinite details, infinite connections, contradictions, and possibilities. In its compact size and pragmatic instructions, the Guide infers otherwise, telling the reader, “This is it. There is nothing more to say.” However, the Guide enables my interactions within the museum space and makes possible the reactivation of those interactions and experiences. It is clear and concise, but not overbearing in prescription. It constrains my movements by telling me where to look and what direction to move through the room, and it invites bodily participation. The particular realizations of that participation may be as endlessly varied as the participating bodies themselves. The Guide seems to operate in

collaboration with the museum itself. It tells me that what I seek is “to the left on the south wall.” The simplicity of the instruction strikes me as humorous. It directs my attention as though locating this particular object or painting should be a perfectly obvious and facile maneuver. It never is. It requires work on my part, on the part of any visitor who meanders through the museum, guide in hand. Which way is south? To whose left? And of the jumble of objects on the “south” wall, at which one am I being directed to look?

On my second visit to the museum, I brought the Guide with me so that I could properly locate and identify the objects in the museum. I moved along the walls of the Early Italian Room, colliding constantly with elements in repetition, affecting jolts of *déjà vu* – an isosceles triangle, a shade of crimson, another visitor. The person with whom I collided held a Guide too. When she looked up at me, her expression conveyed feelings of bewilderment and pleasure, as if she was enjoying the confusion. It was a combination of feelings that I recognized from my first experience at the Gardner. “Can you help me?” she asked and pointed to the painting in front of her, an image of the Madonna and Christ child. She was trying to locate the work in the Guide to identify the title and artist. In the Early Italian Room, there are multiple paintings that feature the Madonna and Christ child, and as their titles are multiple permutations of “The Madonna and Child,” the Guide is of little help. Nonetheless, I opened my Guide and we stood side by side, guides in hand, puzzling through the wall in front of us until we reached a consensus that the painting must be The Madonna and Child by Pintoricchio, circa 1490s. To recall and write about our encounter here, I pulled out my paperback Guide and, remembering our location in the room, repeated the performance of seeking out and learning (once again) the title and artist of the painting. I first purchased the museum’s Guide with the intent of it functioning as a souvenir. After walking through the museum for the first time that November with my friends, we made

the obligatory last stop at the museum's gift shop before leaving. I picked up both the Guide and a full-color Companion Guide and History so that I might remember, preserve, and augment my experience. Using the Guide as a map, I am able to revisit the Gardner, finding often that my "imagined" visit coincides with my recollection of the experience. At other times, it collides with and changes that experience, enabling a proliferation of new memories, associations, and affections and continually changing my perceptions of my encounter with the museum.

In the Titian Room, Isabella Stewart Gardner preserved for display a remnant of fabric from a gown created for her by the haute couture designer Charles Frederick Worth. It is a swath of white silk, approximately four feet wide and six feet long, pressed flat under a glass frame and hung on the wall.<sup>1</sup> In the silk, small feathery tassels are imprinted in jacquard, a type of weave in which the weft lies above or below the warp thread, the sequence of raised or lowered threads creating a pattern. Gardner hung the fabric directly below Titian's Rape of Europa, a painting depicting a scene in which the mythic Europa is carried off by the god Jupiter who has disguised himself as a bull. The depicted event is believed to be the moment of the birth of civilization. From Europa's union with Jupiter, Minos, the future king of Crete, is born (Chong, Ligner, and Zahn 104). The painting has been referred to as the most important example of Italian painting held by a United States museum (Goldfarb 115). Faced by the uneasy juxtaposition of a remnant of fabric, a scrap of personal memory, against a sixteenth century masterpiece, I find myself wanting to discover Gardner's intent, to hear the story that the piece of fabric tells. Viewing the painting in light of the fabric makes the cloth of Europa's dress and the feathery tasseled tail of the bull come to the forefront of Titian's painting, directing my eye to formal elements that I might have overlooked otherwise. Additionally, the fabric imbues the painting with the

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<sup>1</sup> Longstreet's 1935 General Catalog describes the fabric as "pale green" (Longstreet 220). The 1997 Guide simply refers to it as "silk garment fabric" with no designation of color (Guide 99). I describe the fabric as "white" as that is how it appeared to me on each of my visits.

particular. It articulates a personal relationship with the work. I imagine the possibility that Isabella was carried away by love on the night that she wore the ball gown. In preserving a remnant under glass, has she created a personal scrapbook on the walls of a public museum?

In questioning Isabella's relationship with the painting and the fabric, I am prompted to consider my own. I think of my mother's scrapbook. It is a green leather bound binder in which she has carefully installed and preserved the remnants of memories. A favorite childhood pastime of mine and my siblings was to pull out the scrapbook and exhort our mother to tell us the stories behind the objects on its pages. On one page is a small piece of white silk, a remnant of fabric from the wedding dress my mother designed and sewed for herself. It was from this scrapbook that my siblings and I learned the stories that make up our family history. From the two military medals pinned on one of the pages, we learned of my dad's brother, Uncle Claude, who was killed in the Vietnam War. On another page, a printed beverage napkin taught us the story of the College Inn, a popular dance hall in South Louisiana where my parents went on their first date. Now, as adults, my siblings and I rarely return to the scrapbook or any of the many family photo albums we poured over as children. They are stacked in a closet gathering dust. However, we have not shelved the attending repertoire of stories. Whenever we gather, lately for holidays or funerals, we spend the evenings recreating and re-performing these family stories. (I am reminded of the Nudd family in John Cheever's story "The Day the Pig Fell into the Well.") Sitting together, we take turns asking questions and filling in details. As my mother ages, she sometimes fails to recall certain stories. Events that seemed important to me as a child or that I recall as a momentous part of our family history, she now dismisses as trivial or inconsequential or is surprised that they ever occurred at all. Collaboratively, we build our memories and stories, and it becomes unclear which aspects of the memories are our actual experiences and which

emerge as a result of our retelling, recreation, and re-performance. My younger sister sometimes “remembers” events that occurred before she was born. My brother claims memories that the rest of us find dubious, suspecting that he culled the experience from a dream or from television, and yet I suspect that in the retelling they somehow work their way into the “official” family narrative at a later date.

My own memories of the Gardner Museum have become dubious. In the Dutch Room, several empty frames hang on the walls. The frames once held paintings stolen from the museum in a 1990 robbery. After my first visit, I was certain that within the frame that held Rembrandt’s Storm on the Sea of Galilee I had seen shreds of canvas, traces of where the painting had been cut from the frame. I have written about those shreds of canvas elsewhere and have told numerous stories about them. On my most recent visit however, I was unable to find them. Had I imagined them? Perhaps that “memory” was planted by accounts of the robbery that I have read in the archives of The New York Times or The Boston Globe. But still I feel deeply that the sight of the cut canvas was my experience. I believe that I felt firsthand the shock of seeing the fabric fluttering limply from the gold gilded wood, the violence inflicted by the theft and the loss for a museum whose hands are tied from hiding it. In recounting my encounters with the Gardner Museum, I feel compelled to attempt to trace these changing stories, affections, and memories. The museum inspires me to write in such a way that my own work, my “working through,” becomes a part of the story itself, drawing both from documented sources and dubious memories, and leaving open the possibility for future performances. I want to create a guide from which the reader might imagine their own spectatorial reception and interaction with this museum.



At the end of the corridor referred to as the Spanish Cloister, under a Moorish archway, erupts a clamor of music, tapping, and triumphant cheers. Tpp tpp tpp tpp! Toes tap in rhythm and the heel of a dancer's shoe slaps to the wood floor. Pah pah! Pah pah! Arms swing away from bodies taut with participatory energy and then reunite in the meeting of fingers to palm. Shhii shii shii shii! The folds of a voluminous skirt gathered in the hand of an arm held akimbo is fluttered and manipulated in time like a trembling marionette. John Singer Sargent's El Jaleo maps the resonance of sound with bodies in motion. This celebrated painting hangs in an alcove designed by Gardner for the display of the painting. First exhibited at the 1882 Paris Salon, the painting of a flamenco performance emerged from sketches Sargent made during a trip to southern Spain in 1879 (Curry 553). The title of El Jaleo refers to a process in which performers support and encourage the dancer by yelling, snapping fingers, and clapping (Heller 13).

The scene of the performance takes place on a small stage like those found at a *café cantante*, a large room with a raised stage at one end, a bar at the other, and tables and chairs in between for patrons (Heller 11). A dancer stands onstage to the right of center from the viewer's perspective. She appears to be in the process of moving from stage left to right and faces offstage right, presenting her profile to the viewer. Her body is caught in action, her weight placed on her back foot, her torso extending backward at a diagonal well beyond her center of gravity. Her right hand lifts the folds of her voluminous skirt to her hips, revealing one high heeled dance shoe, and her right elbow pushes forward away from her body. Her left arm stretches to a full extension before her, anticipating a path that she has yet to travel. Her hand rotates clockwise, positioning the back of the hand toward the viewer. Behind her, along the back wall of the stage, there are musicians, a singer, and other dancers seated in a horizontal line. Within the line of figures there is an empty ladder back chair, presumably for the dancer who is

currently performing. Light cast upward on the dancer suggests footlights and creates shadows on the smoky gray wall behind the performer.

In 1915, Isabella Stewart Gardner acquired the painting and installed it in a specially designed space. At the end of a corridor flanking the museum's courtyard, Gardner framed a recessed area with a Moorish arch. The arch operates to define the alcove behind it as a special place, set apart from the tiled walkway leading to it. Scalloped across the top and supported by ornamented columns on either side of the opening, the design of the arch calls to mind the heavy curtains of a proscenium stage. The alcove has been derided by art critics as "stagey" and "dramatic" (Curry 553). It effects an extension of the diegetic space of Sargent's flamenco stage into the "real" space of the museum. Measuring eleven by eight-and-a-half feet, the canvas covers the back alcove wall on which it is hung, creating a life size representation of the flamenco stage and dancer. The gray mottled walls of the alcove resemble those in the painting, and like the implied footlights, the painting is lit from below with electrical lights. Due to its closed-in structure, the alcove is shaded from the sunlight that flows into the corridor from the courtyard. This, in conjunction with the up cast lighting, makes the alcove as shadowy as the painting itself. On the floor of the space, flanking the painting, Gardner has placed a chair and several pieces of Spanish pottery. The clay jugs are like those that early flamenco musicians used as percussive instruments, played by slapping the sides with the palms of the hand (Heller 11).

In "What's There, What's Not: A Performer's View of El Jaleo," Nancy Heller writes that art historical scholarship on Sargent's work often stresses the "artificial or contrived" nature of the painting (Heller 13). Much like Gardner's alcove, the dramatic lighting and shadows have been dismissed as heavy handed or overly theatrical. Heller argues, however, that the painting's

shadowy tones evoke the scene of a performance of the *cante jondo* and *baile jondo* styles of flamenco song and dance. The songs of *cante jondo* have dark themes and are performed by a *cantaor*, a male flamenco singer, whose voice is “hoarse and harsh” (Heller 13). The singer in Sargent’s painting is depicted with his head thrown back and mouth opened wide, revealing neck muscles so taut that they appear to be strained. According to Heller, art historians have called the representation of the singer a “marvelous pictorial invention” or they have traced its apparent antecedents to other works of art, the portrayal of emotion in Francisco de Goya, for example. Heller shows that contrary to these appeals to artistic tradition or imagination, the image is actually typical of singers performing *canto jonde*. “Just as flamenco song frequently sounds harsh, the faces of flamenco singers typically reflect profound emotion. As a result, their grimacing expressions can appear strange, even grotesque, when captured by a photographer (or a painter) and seen out of context” (Heller 15). Critics also have commented on the pose of the dancer, describing it as strange, and her right arm as “grotesquely akimbo” (Heller 14). Again, Heller argues that for flamenco historians and performers, the dancer’s pose is not strange at all. In flamenco dance, it is common for the dancer to lift the folds of her skirt with one hand, resting that hand on her hip. She does this in order to ensure that her feet are visible as the dancer’s footwork is an important part of the dance choreography. Heller proceeds to argue that the “akimbo” positioning of the dancer’s elbow is not only possible to perform, but evident in photographs of traditional flamenco dance (Heller 14).

Heller’s study demonstrates that the reception of El Jaleo is varied – dependent on the viewer and their particular orientation to art as informed by prior experience; for Heller, this orientation is informed by the history and performance of flamenco dance. In “Essentialism, Adaptation and Justice: Towards a New Epistemology of Museums,” Mark O’Neill argues that

when museum visitors engage with museum objects in light of their prior experience they produce different types of knowledge (O'Neill 106). These prior experiences may inform the viewer's encounter with the objects in the form of triggered memories and associations or flashes of insight. They also may emerge as muscular memory. In viewing El Jaleo, for example, a flamenco dancer's experience would be informed by having performed the dance. As Heller shows, for a trained flamenco dancer, the movements portrayed in the painting would be a familiar part of her repertoire. In "Proprioception as an Aesthetic Sense," Barbara Montero explains it is possible to view an artwork depicting motion and "make sense" of the depiction kinesthetically (Montero 238). Kinesthetic sense making suggests the possibility for exploring the reception of artworks in ways that move beyond textual or representational readings. In order to understand the interaction with the artwork as a corporeal practice we can and should begin to account for the physical experience of the spectator in what Erik Myin calls "the full concreteness of the viewing experience" (Myin 51). One possibility for doing so is to attend to the proprioceptive experience of the viewer in an encounter with an aesthetic object in motion (as with a dance) or representing something in motion (as with a painting of a dance).

Proprioception is "the sense by which we acquire information about the positions and movements of our own bodies via receptors in the joints, tendons, ligaments, muscles, and skin" (Montero 231). It is the sense through which bodies register movement and conditions of movement such as muscular resistance, the exertions or ease with which actions are performed (Massumi 59). In dance, for example, one of the ways a dancer perceives her own body and movements is via proprioception. To return to the "grotesquely akimbo" arm of the flamenco dancer in Sargent's painting, a flamenco dancer would know and understand her elbow to be properly pushed outward through her proprioceptive sense. A spectator encountering movement

in others may have a proprioceptive experience too. Montero argues that through mirror neurons, our bodies translate the visual sensory perception of motion (even still images of motion) into actual proprioceptive experience (Montero 236). As a viewer of El Jaleo then it is possible to have a muscular response and sensory knowledge of what an akimbo-ed arm feels like.

Montero's term for this type of encounter is "resonance" suggesting that the depicted motion resonates within our own bodies (Montero 237). She cautions however that resonance should not be understood as a universal or elemental attribute as both a response and its cognition are enabled by having performed the movement before (Montero 237). In Parables for the Virtual, Brian Massumi argues that proprioception is the sense that translates our engagements with the world, our movements and interactions with objects, into muscular memory (Massumi 59). In turn, it is muscular memory that might facilitate proprioceptive experience from the visual sensation of a work of art.

Standing before El Jaleo at the Gardner Museum, I felt myself wanting to mimic the dancer's movements, to perform them myself. I did not. (I was riddled with self-consciousness and just imagining myself "inappropriately" performing the motions in the museum made me blush with embarrassment.) I felt though that I knew how to do the actions with my body and that I had done them before. The phrase "arms akimbo" kept repeating itself in my mind. I tried to place the phrase. Was it a line in a book? A stage direction in a performance? Looking at the dancer's cocked elbow and the diagonal line of her body, I suddenly thought of Molly Bang's Picture This: Perception and Composition. "Diagonal shapes are dynamic because they imply motion or tension" (Bang 62). I became aware that the tension was reflected in my own body. My muscles remembered what "arms akimbo" felt like. Sometime later when working on this

document, I was still plagued by the personal significance of “arms akimbo.” I called several colleagues and asked them what if any meanings the phrase held for them. Without hesitation, they all confirmed what I had suspected; their muscles remembered too. It was indeed a stage direction from a performance that took place in October 1999, in the HopKins Black Box at Louisiana State University. Directed by Ruth Laurion Bowman, the piece explored Molly Bang’s visual principles through multiple renderings of Donald Barthelme’s short story, “On the Deck,” which uses descriptive fragments to evoke an assemblage of people, animals, and objects. In Bang’s book, visual principles perform on the page. By arranging paper cut-outs of basic shapes and colors on a landscape oriented page, Bang creates evocative images and stories. On the opposite page, she explains her creative process drawing on a variety of sources, which include personal discoveries and memories.

Bang’s images reactivate the process of experimentation. On one page, for example, a wolf’s eye is represented by an elongated diamond, giving the appearance of an eye focused narrowly on a target. The next page shows the same image but the eye has been replaced by a broad based triangle. The replacement gives the wolf a less threatening countenance and affects a cheerier sensibility. On the following page, the narrowed eyed wolf returns, Bang preferring the affect it would seem. In the final section of the book, “Arranging Shapes on a Rectangle,” Bang invites the reader to create their own cut paper pictures. Although the book creates a set of instructions, they are not prescriptive. The reader must work through her own discoveries and transformations. “This is your private puzzle. Experiment with it” (Bang 139).

Similarly, in Bowman’s staging of Barthelme’s “On the Deck,” the cast explored how visual principles operate on the stage. In translating Bang’s principles from the two-dimensional page to the three-dimensional stage, the performance staged the process of staging by working

through the many possible choices concerning bodies and their placement and movement on the stage. Broadly, it offered a set of instructions for viewing and also creating performances. Rather than produce an affirmative representational object, the staging explored the ways that relations and processes can be re-activated through performance and a performative viewing. It encouraged the audience to experience a perceptual shift in their reception of visual imagery and to be cognizant of that shift.

In the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, the display of Sargent's El Jaleo also translates a two-dimensional piece into a three-dimensional performance involving live bodies. The elements of the space, such as the wall treatment, the empty chair, and the Spanish pottery, echo and extend elements of the painted image. In one sense, the continuation of El Jaleo's stage space in the framed space of the museum alcove appears to me to be a life size diorama, an evocation of a "small world," albeit on a 1:1 scale. However, unlike the anthropological dioramas common to natural history museums, which create an affirmative representation of "this is what was," the Gardner diorama suggests "what could be." The exhibit requires activation by an embodied spectator, and as such maps potential performances, particular in their instantiation to the spectator. Working in collaboration with embodied sensory experience, the spectacular display of El Jaleo makes the viewer aware of their own activity of "spectating," of how they look at a painting, of their physical spatial relation to the painting, and heightens awareness of the physical movement depicted in the painting including proprioceptive experience of that movement. It reactivates the image within the mediating body of the viewer.

In "The Aesthetics of Affect: Thinking Art Beyond Representation," Simon O'Sullivan writes that "art is...a bloc of sensations waiting to be reactivated by a spectator or participant" (O'Sullivan 126). He calls this the performative function of art and argues that it is an affective

event that is extra-textual and cannot be read; it can only be experienced. This reactivation of sensation through art shifts the spectator out of habitual ways of viewing, hence making way for the possibility of invention. In finding creative ways of seeing, the viewer develops novel practices for engaging the world. Similarly, in her introduction to Jose Munoz's essay, "Stages: Queers, Punks, and the Utopian Performative," Della Pollock coins the phrase "performative seeing," referring to the way Munoz's concept of the "utopian performative" conjures possibilities for a new kind of seeing, for the opening up of "another vista" (Pollock, "Performance Trouble" 7). Munoz writes of performance as a doing that is always on the horizon, that is brimming with the "always about to happen" of futurity. He invokes the practices of spectating to help him articulate how the "utopian performative" opens up new ways of looking at the performance of identity, both individual and communal, that sidesteps the sedimenting forces of absence and disappearance (Munoz 10). In its constant insistence on the body, a singular body, my body, as the site of mediation in my engagements with the world, the Gardner Museum requires me to find new ways of viewing, pulling together memory, history, and sensory experience, and encouraging me to experiment with modes of writing beyond that which is habitual.

The north facing window in the Yellow Room allowed little light. This I remember. It was very small, perhaps two and half feet square. In Boston, a north facing window would receive the least amount of sunlight of all windows and, although the quality of northern light is diffuse and considered ideal for illuminating a subject when photographed, the cold gray light trickling in from the window gave the room the appearance of twilight even though it was midday. The light lent itself to illuminating only that portion of room immediately surrounding the window. The window was covered somehow, partially blocked, which further degraded the



sunlight. As I write this, I look through the materials that surround me, guides and catalogs on a nearby table and books at my feet, to locate a photograph of the room, a photograph that contains the noted window. I find it. The exterior of the window is covered with a piece of ornately cut curlique wrought iron. The photograph shows the room brightly lit. I think it must have been taken with a photographic lighting kit. As I recall, the small space was exceptionally dim. The lack of light made it feel even smaller, claustrophobic, as if I were in a large closet.

The Yellow Room derives its name from the 1888 Thomas Wilmer Dewing painting Lady in a Yellow Dress that hangs on the wall. It is a portrait of a young woman seated in profile wearing a full length lemon colored gown. The color of the tulle layers seems to have inspired Gardner's selection of crocus gold on lemon yellow brocade wallpaper that lines the walls of the room. When I entered the room, I expected a "Yellow" Room that was sunny and cheerful, warm and inviting. The room was dark, and closed in, and uninviting. Visiting that room was an afterthought.

Although the doorway to the room opens into the main entrance corridor and the Companion Guide tells me that "on entering the museum [it is] the first gallery we see" (Goldfarb 26), on each of my visits to the museum, the momentum of the corridor drew me directly into the courtyard, its large open space, sunlight, waterfalls, and greenery welcoming me. I went back to the Yellow Room after I consulted the museum map to make certain that I had not missed any rooms. The docent stationed at the Yellow Room wore a navy blue suit. A curling wire stretched from his breast pocket to his ear, like those I have seen on secret service agents on the rare occasions when I have encountered secret service agents. The wire signaled the presence of a radio communications system, a deliberate show of the security measures that have been implemented in response to the 1990 theft. I recognized the docent from a previous

visit, but at that time he had been located in the Early Italian Room. I remembered this detail because I had spoken with him about the pervasive sense of *déjà vu* the museum elicited.

He stood in the corridor, almost blocking entry to the Yellow Room, chatting with the visitor services employees who were stationed at the ticketing counter. As I walked past him to enter the Yellow Room, he followed, shifting his position to stand just inside the doorway in order to watch my movements in the room. Finding myself alone under surveillance in the small room made me uncomfortable, and I was acutely aware of my behavior as I moved through the space. The majority of the paintings and sculptures at the Gardner are not protected by glass cases or ropes or, to my knowledge, unseen lasers that trigger angry buzzers if you lean in too close to the artworks. (I learned of lasers first-hand when I accidentally set one off at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.) Aware of the docent watching me, I wondered how close he would allow me to get to the paintings. I imagined tempting him: craning my neck ever so slowly toward a painting, placing my nose but a hair's distance from the image, my breath on its surface...would he stop me?

I thought of the movements of other museum visitors here and in art museums elsewhere, everywhere. There seems to be an unspoken rule that at each painting, a viewer should stop and center themselves directly in front of the piece. If one visitor lingers, another will line up next to them, waiting for their chance to step into the god seat for garnering divine grace and meaning. I also thought about how some works draw the viewer into a back and forth dance, enticing her to slowly increase the distance between herself and the painting and then abruptly close that space. Seurat's *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte* in the Chicago Art Institute certainly seems to have this effect. The painting is very large, approximately seven feet high by ten feet wide. There is a small bench placed before it that appears to be the prized position from which to contemplate the

image. If the bench is taken, visitors linger nearby and then slide into the spots as they empty like school children playing musical chairs. (As an additional inducement, the idyllic park scene provides a lovely place to take a much needed rest in the large museum.) Before the painting, the unseated visitors take care not to stand so as to block the view of the seated people on the bench. The standing viewers are the ones who dance. In response to the size of the painting, they walk carefully backward adjusting their bodies to a position where their eyes can take in the entire image without scanning. Because the image is painted using pointillism, they also dance in for a close up view of the dots and to examine the surprising contrasting border, the self-frame, that reproductions of the painting rarely seem to include.

When I am in museums, I often wonder about visitor behavior become ritual: the proper time we allot to each painting, our pace and rhythm around a gallery, one visitor keeping up with the next, sustaining the flow of traffic, avoiding disruption, we stop and stand and look and contemplate. And then move on. I am reminded of a game I played once standing before a Jackson Pollock painting at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Rather than scan the large painting, I stared at one small area in the center of it. As I stared, my eyes shifted into parallel viewing, the method used to see a Magic Eye stereoscopic image. (In performance vernacular, parallel viewing also is referred to as soft focus). The painting was so vast and busy with colors and paint drips that I lost visibility of the edges of the painting. As the edges disappeared, I became dizzy and teetered toward falling. I felt lost and uneasy. I adjusted my eyes to remedy the vertigo, and my sister who was standing next to me looked at me strangely and asked, “What are you doing?” Although I thought I had been playing a private game, my body gave up my secret.

At the Gardner, I was the only person in the Yellow Room. I could move as quickly or slowly as I wanted. The heightened awareness of being observed had worn off as it does for a person becoming comfortable in front of a video camera. I walked over to the Lady in a Yellow Dress hung on the western wall of the room. I assumed the position, a few feet in front of her, directly centered. I saw only a pool of glare cast by the track lighting hung poorly on the ceiling above me. After my first visit to the museum, I had had the impression that the entire museum was lit only by sunlight from the windows and courtyard. There are so many shadowy areas and so many pieces that are unlit. On the one hand, the “natural” lighting conveyed a certain solemnity. It reminded me of the Rothko Chapel in Houston, a non-denominational space for spiritual worship in which visitors sit before the colorfield paintings in an octagonal room lit by a shaded skylight. On the other hand, since the Gardner is filled to the brim with bits and pieces, masterpieces and antiquities jumbled together like so many Victorian era tchotchkes, it also contradicts that solemnity. At times it seems as though the poorly lit collectibles are simply not important enough to be presented under direct lighting, or that to highlight one piece would run counter to Gardner’s purpose, that these objects must forego their “auras” in order to fulfill their roles within and to the larger collective. Judging from their appearance, the track lights seemed to have been installed within the past twenty years, perhaps a former curator’s attempt to reconcile her training in museum environments with this museum’s inadequate sunlight. But rather than increasing the visibility of the Lady in a Yellow Dress, the track lights have flooded the painting with a pool of glare. In an effort to see the image more clearly, I brought my right hand to my forehead and tried to shield my eyes from the incandescent bulbs overhead. At the same time, I bent at the knees and hips performing a sort of crouchlean and attempted to glimpse at the painting from a sideways angle with my eyes cast upwards.

A painting by James McNeill Whistler, Nocturne, Blue and Silver: Battersea Reach, hangs on the eastern wall of the Yellow Room. The term nocturne refers to a style of musical composition. However, in the late nineteenth century, painters and poets began to apply the word to works evoking or representing images of night scenes (Sharpe 7). Whistler's painted nocturnes were an attempt to translate his perceptual experience onto the two-dimensional canvas (Art Institute of Chicago, "The Thames" 37). The nocturne explored the experience and value of looking at something in diminished light. Whistler reduced form and color to an extreme to capture a specific time of day (Art Institute of Chicago, "The Thames" 34). The painting then emphasizes transformation or metamorphosis, foregrounding the way that the movement of the sun and changes in atmospheric conditions provoke new ways of seeing commonplace or mundane things (Sharpe 5).

In the Yellow Room, I stood before Nocturne, Blue and Silver: Battersea Reach and again felt that I could not see. The painting depicts the Thames River at dusk. Vertical brush strokes of gray and blue pigment wash the entire canvas with darkened abstract shapes while specks of orange mark the existence of boats on the water and a clock tower in the distance. In the darkness of the Yellow Room, I saw only a field of gray, striations of value on the continuum of canvas. I leaned forward. My head and neck and torso extended toward the painting past my center of gravity. I began to make out the faint shape of something on the water, something that might be a boat carrying two men. I came to my toes. I saw an orange speck in the distance covered by the gray haze. Again I pushed my upper body forward. I was being led by my eyes, which strained to see through the darkness. I squinted, believing that my eyes would adjust to the lack of light in the painting as they had when I entered the darkness of the room. My body

performed as though I might somehow see through the “foggy” areas in the painting, as though I might see through to the other side of this haze where undoubtedly things were much clearer.

The gray haze of the painting was not unlike the foggy haze through which I had passed earlier on my way to the museum. Outside, on Louis Prang Street, cold gray sky, weighty and stiff, hung around me, creating resistance against my movements as I approached the Gardner. Each stocking-clad knee pushed forward, peeking from below the hem of my black corduroy skirt as it lifted and bent. Behind me the gray bullet T-train continued on its trajectory, disappearing in the haze. Gray pigeons darted through the heavy air and dotted the ground near my feet. Wrinkles formed and released in the black leather of my heavy boots as my foot flexed and relaxed, reached forward and supported firmly. Coats and scarves of gray wool and flannel and cashmere plodded sluggishly along or cut sharply across sidewalks slowly appearing under gray melting snow. Faceless paper cut outs of gray. Peering through the gray haze between the gray sky and the gray slushy sidewalks I strained my eyes for signs of the pale caramel brick and amber lights of the museum, and as I moved forward it became clear.

In the Yellow Room, however, Whistler’s gray haze revealed only my desire for illumination frustrated by a painting and a museum that refuse it. My habits of viewing had been conditioned firstly by museum experiences that disembodied the practice of vision and privileged clarity. In the museum, I had adapted and changed those habits, growing accustomed in my movements through the space to finding new ways to respond to the environment. Although at first I believed I could contort my body in order to see Whistler’s view of the Thames clearly, I discovered that the perceptual experience communicated through the painting resonates with my own in the museum. In “Affect and Musical Understanding,” Robert DeChaine discusses the effect of musical resonance on the body. He states that it results in a “sensation of being in the

music,” a phenomenon in which the body offers itself up in “collaboration” with the sound (DeChaine 83). The same might be said of my experience with Whistler’s Nocturne. My body performed as though it were inside the painting, collaborating in effect with Whistler’s representation.

As I was exiting the Yellow Room, I noticed that there was a painting hung above the door in what was the darkest corner of the room. I could make out nothing more than a black square. On my way home, I thumbed through my Guide and found:

ABOVE THE DOOR:

*Apartments of the Chief Priest, Kyoto, 1900, by Joseph Lindon Smith (Guide 20).*

My Guide did not offer a picture. Initially, I made several unsuccessful attempts to locate a reproduction of the work. I have stopped since. I still don’t know what it looks like, and I have come to like not knowing.

## CHAPTER TWO “MAY I TAKE YOUR COAT?”

On my first visit to the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, I found myself struggling to make sense of the museum and the artworks in the absence of contextualizing information typically provided by art museums. Since there were no artist attributions, classifications, or explanations, I had to make sense of the museum according to the presentation as I encountered it. In doing so, I noted the repetitions and juxtapositions in form and content. I considered the inclusion of objects that represent personal experience as well as professional discourse in terms of art historical canons. I also became acutely aware of the movements of my body through the museum, as my experience was informed by the space itself and its transformations over time.

As I see it, the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum is a site of productive contradictions manifested through the collection and display as Gardner created it; the restrictions of Gardner’s will and the trustees’ need to maintain a viable museum; and the differences between Gardner’s practices as a collector and my own as a scholar. This chapter stages another contradiction. On the one hand, my aim is to perform as the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum performs. I would like my writing to create a space without a predetermined path, subject to transformation as the reader moves through the pages noting the repetitions and juxtapositions. On the other hand, this document is a dissertation, and I am obliged to my discipline to account for and make sense of the work we do and to take the didactic approach that Gardner herself refused.

In Picture Theory, W. J. T. Mitchell considers the relationship between representation and responsibility: “The terms co-respond at every level: representation is a form, an act of taking responsibility; it is itself a response, in the musical sense, an answering echo to a previous presentation or representation” (Mitchell, Picture Theory 421). Ethical representation holds me responsible for what I represent and to my audience, to my home discipline and those who



practice there. Drawing upon Bakhtin's notion of answerability, Mindy Fenske suggests that an ethics of answerability foreground the need for aesthetic representational practices to show themselves, so to speak, "to demonstrate... the investments of their construction" (Fenske, "The Aesthetic of the Unfinished" 15). Heeding Fenske's advice, I provide a context in this chapter for my approach to the museum, fearing otherwise that my work might be dismissed as the madness of a self-absorbed collector. I hope however that the chapter functions much like the museum Guide does for me, enabling movement without foreclosing meaning.

The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum is a museum of art and antiquities in an area of Boston known as the Back Bay. It was created and designed by Isabella Stewart Gardner. Born Isabella Stewart in New York in 1840, Gardner was the daughter of David Stewart, a self-made importer and mine owner of Scottish descent. In 1860, Gardner married John Lowell Gardner II. Jack Gardner, as he was known, was a member of Boston elite society and Isabella assumed her position among Boston's "ruling class" (Shand-Tucci 10). Biographical accounts of Gardner's life highlight Gardner's uneasy relationship with the conservative Boston Brahmin families and the spectacular rumors concerning Gardner's behavior, some of which still persist. Indeed, Douglas Shand-Tucci's biography of Gardner is titled The Art of Scandal suggesting that Gardner herself courted some of the outrageous claims and tall tales that came to define Gardner's public identity. One such example was born of a visit to the Boston zoo during which Gardner was allowed to interact with a tamed lion. Variations of the story have Gardner walking through the streets of Boston with a wild lion on a leash and riding through Boston's streets on the back of an elephant (Shand-Tucci 27-28).

In 1863, Gardner gave birth to her only child, a son, John Lowell Gardner III. Jackie, as he was called, passed away from pneumonia at the age of two. According to Shand-Tucci, in the

years following Jackie's death, Gardner was plagued by depression. In 1867, Jack Gardner took Isabella on an extended trip through Europe. By all accounts, when Gardner returned she was revitalized and began to devote her energies to amassing a private art collection for her brownstone at 152 Beacon Street. In addition to collecting art, Gardner became a patron to numerous artists and musicians and frequently held concerts and performances in her home.

In 1891, Gardner's father died, leaving her an estate of \$1.75 million (Goldfarb 13). In 1896, Gardner began developing plans to create a public museum, and Jack Gardner enlisted an architect to expand their Beacon Street home. Jack died suddenly of a stroke in 1898, and following his death, Gardner purchased land in the Fenway, an undeveloped area adjoining Boston's Back Bay. Gardner personally oversaw the construction of the four story museum. On the bottom three floors, she created an eclectic display for her collection. The top floor of the building was Gardner's private residence. She named her new home and museum Fenway Court.

The museum officially opened in 1903. During Gardner's lifetime, public days were limited to only twenty days per year. However, Gardner hosted numerous events in the museum, supporting the livelihood of musicians, dancers, and painters. Gardner established a trust so that the museum could continue to operate after her death in 1924 (Goldfarb 20). In her will, she stipulates that the museum must be preserved exactly as she left it. No items may be added to or subtracted from the collection, and the arrangement and display of the objects must never be changed (Cotter, "Despite Devastating Losses, the Gardner Museum is Rebounding" 11).

In 1990, the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum became the site of the largest art heist in a United States museum. Thirteen objects in total were stolen, mostly works of Dutch and French masters, including The Concert by Jan Vermeer. After the heist, a large Rembrandt self-portrait

was found lying on the floor. Evidence showed that the robbers had removed the painting from the wall in preparation to remove the canvas from its frame. Finding however that the portrait was painted on wood and therefore was unwieldy, they chose to leave the work behind (Blumenthal 11). Nearby, The Storm on the Sea of Galilee, one of Rembrandt's only sea scenes was cut brutally from its frame. Because of the specificities of Isabella Stewart Gardner's will, the empty frames still hang on the wall. Prior to the theft, museum attendance had dwindled. Considered "an elitist dinosaur," the museum had lost its cultural relevance (Cotter, "Despite Devastating Losses, the Gardner Museum is Rebounding" 11). In the years since, however, patronage has grown steadily. Museum visitors come to the museum, at least in part, to look at the gaping holes of empty picture frames.

The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum is unique in history and design. Although much has been written about the individual masterpieces in the Gardner collection, and there are numerous biographies of "Mrs. Jack" as Gardner was sometimes called, little work has been done to investigate the museum in light of contemporary research in museology and the practices of collecting and display. Current museum theory focuses largely on the pedagogical function of public museums. Museums are presumed to fulfill a role in public education. According to Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, museum pedagogy has focused largely on the imperfect transmission of knowledge between the museum's curators and the audience. The curators are charged with producing frameworks of intelligibility and interpretations for visitors by displaying objects in groups along with associated images and texts. Visitors, however, "deploy their own interpretive strategies and repertoires to make sense of the objects, the displays and the experience of the museum as a whole" (Hooper-Greenhill 124). As Hooper-Greenhill puts it, "the meanings made by museum visitors from the visual cultures of display are a product of both individual and social

interpretive processes and are complex and unpredictable” (Hooper-Greenhill 124). Although contemporary museum theory has begun to consider the contingent character of meaning and to re-imagine the museum as a process or experience, the realities of museum practice still focus on the production and dissemination of classificatory and objective knowledge.

Objects in museums are subject to curatorial procedures of registration, documentation, and classification which have, in the main, resulted in their allocation to a fixed physical and conceptual position within the collections, which in turn has tended to generate a fixed meaning. This single fixed meaning, almost always relating to an academic discipline (art history, or archaeology for example), has seemed the correct and only way in which the object should be interpreted. (Hooper-Greenhill 124-125)

Contemporary museum procedures and display techniques were developed and systematized during Isabella Stewart Gardner’s lifetime. “Many of the practices introduced into the nineteenth-century art museum are still seen as the foundation of curatorial practice” (Hooper-Greenhill 127). The modernist public museum of the nineteenth century was primarily an educational institution tasked with the production of authoritative knowledge and universal laws. According to Hooper-Greenhill, during the nineteenth century, master narratives were constructed by disciplines such as art, natural history, and archaeology, and museums were designed to illustrate the universal laws of the disciplines through the material arrangement of objects in space (Hooper-Greenhill 126-127). Display techniques ensured a visitor experience of “quantified observation of a rationalized, visual order” (Hooper-Greenhill 129). Visitors were kept at a distance from the displays; in art galleries, paintings were hung at heights considered to be optimum for viewing; objects were sequenced and spaced carefully (Hooper-Greenhill 129-130). The visual culture of nineteenth century museums demonstrated that there were clearly definable boundaries between different classes of objects. “The idealized space of the modernist museum was positivist, objective, rational, evaluative, distanced, and set aside from the real world” (Hooper-Greenhill 130).

The drive toward classification and the creation of class boundaries in nineteenth century museums resulted in the distinction of high art from popular culture. In Boston, the founding of institutions such as the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and the Boston Symphony Orchestra served to uphold the cultural class of the elite Boston Brahmin (DiMaggio 461-462). At the same time, the artists whom Gardner befriended and supported negotiated the dialectic between their “sacred” calling as artists and the desire for commercial success. According to Sarah Burns, this dialectic was observable in artist studios, which commonly contained both a sparse workspace and a show studio designed to display and market the artist’s work. In the show studio, the creation of an opulent and interesting space was a strategy for marketing (Burns 50-51). These spaces often contained a jumble of artworks, souvenirs, and other collectibles that were decontextualized and arranged as a spectacular display of accumulation (Burns 53). Burns compares the decorative interiors of artist studios to the display of items in nineteenth century department stores where similar techniques of artful accumulation were used by retailers to attract consumers. Isabella Stewart Gardner’s museum collapses the dialectic, exhibiting simultaneously the high art of the elite connoisseur and the popular emphasis on theatrical display, decorative interiors, and spectacle.

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett aligns spectacle as a presentational mode with the attitude or disposition of wonder (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 72), as is illustrated in the *wunderkammers* of Renaissance Europe and, it would seem, the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. Displayed in rooms as well as cabinets, wonder cabinets were idiosyncratic collections containing curious and precious objects, both natural and manmade. According to Philipp Blom, wonder cabinets or “chambers of miracles” illustrated the boundless possibilities of the ever-expanding world. As a repository for all manner of bizarre and exotic objects, they represented the unknown and hence

unrepresentable. Wonder cabinets combined “beauty with strangeness, classical form with riotous excess, scholarship with sheer curiosity” (Blom 39).

Michel Jeanneret argues that as collections of miscellany wonder cabinets subordinate systematization as a principle of knowledge to curiosity. He posits curiosity as “an admiring, receptive attitude that collects phenomena and perceives the world as a reservoir of marvels rather than an organized whole” (Jeanneret 46). Demonstrating a belief that “nature defies the frameworks that try to immobilize it,” wonder cabinets accumulate information but avoid “criticism, strict classification, or general conclusions.” (Jeanneret 46). Rather, they functioned to sharpen curiosity (Jeanneret 46).

At present, literature on the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum focuses largely on Gardner’s biography and the art historical significance of the artworks in the museum. Numerous articles in The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs trace changes in attribution of paintings in Gardner’s collection.<sup>1</sup> Art historical essays frequently describe the artworks themselves and may mention Gardner’s acquisition of the piece, but they do not discuss the display context, that is, the museum. For example, in his 1981 essay concerning interpretations of the brushwork in Titian’s Rape of Europa, David Rosand mentions that the painting is located in the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, but the museum context and display of the painting do not influence his analysis. The exhibition catalogs produced by the museum reference the importance of understanding the museum as an artwork unto itself and as an affective and experiential space. Former director Rollin Hadley describes the museum as a “remarkable creation,” both “eclectic” and “unpredictable” in arrangement (Hadley, Museums Discovered 5). In the 2010 catalog, Journeys East: Isabella Stewart Gardner and Asia, Christine Guth comments variously that Gardner’s design strategies were “purposeful,” rendered the “familiar unfamiliar,”

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Hendy, “The Christ Carrying the Cross at Fenway Court.”

encouraged the “visitor’s empathetic response” to the artworks, and established “new narratives” (Guth 61-62). However, no work has been done to interrogate the experience of the contemporary visitor in her engagements with the museum.

Understanding collecting and curating as modes of knowledge production, this study seeks to discover the types of knowledge produced by and within the Gardner Museum. Because the museum highlights forms of knowledge other than that associated with textual criticism or symbolic interpretation, I focus on the affective and material transfers at work in the museum practice. This concentration in turn encourages the exploration of a performance based method or orientation to scholarship. In doing my research, I draw on and question performative writing as a mode of presentation so that what emerges is an understanding of a method that, like the Gardner Museum, seeks to discover ways of knowing beyond (but not in lieu of) processes of representation and signification. As a result, performance methodology becomes both an object of study and my method.

A visit to the Gardner Museum can be a strange experience. If, for instance, a visitor stands in one particular spot in the Raphael Room, she might notice that from that vantage point (and only that point), the following three paintings are visible: Madonna and Child with a Swallow by Pesellino, Madonna and Child Sitting on a Parapet with a Goldfinch by Franscico Raibolini, and The Madonna and Child with a Goldfinch by Bernardo Daddi. The three paintings were created in three different centuries and are stylistically very different. What they share, however, is the thematic element of the Christ child holding a small bird in his hand. The paintings are displayed in a diagonal across two rooms and the relationship among them only emerges in relation to the way the visitor moves through the galleries.

As Brian Rusted points out in his essay “Performing Visual Discourse: Cowboy Art and Institutional Practice,” curating is a discursive act (Rusted 116). The arrangement and display of objects in a conventional museum function to tell us something about those objects. They are grouped often in terms of normative classifications of historical period, artist, and genre and ranked within some linear narrative. “One of the ways museums confer significance on objects is through classifications” (Rusted 121), which then impacts how visitors receive and make meaning of the objects.

The Gardner Museum does not adhere to standard guidelines for curatorial practice or museum display. Although all the museum’s promotional and educational materials highlight the eccentric ways Gardner chose to arrange and display her collection, no one has studied the effects and affects of her choices on the viewer. Gardner arranged the museum with scrupulous attention placed on the “the relation of the works of art to their setting” (Guide 9). Works are grouped in ways that highlight repetitions in form, color, or thematic content, some of these more apparent than others. The viewer also discovers surprising juxtapositions, particularly unexpected in the context of a museum. In the Early Italian Room, for example, Fra Angelico’s Death and Assumption of the Virgin, circa 1432, is displayed next to a pair of Japanese temple lamps (*rintō*) with no documented attribution of date or maker. According to Mark O’Neill, art museums communicate only one thing about their objects, namely, “This is art.” The assertion presumes objectivity and accuracy, which then encourages only one appropriate response, the “pure, detached aesthetic response” (O’Neill 104). If prevailing curatorial strategies invoke the noted response and produce a certain type of knowledge, then how does Mrs. Gardner’s idiosyncratic museum operate? What types of responses does it provoke, and what forms of knowledge are produced?



Beth Lord argues that museums are “fundamentally spaces of representation” that, if nothing else, represent an organizational logic that produces knowledge in a particular way (Lord 83). She observes a trend in museum display that recognizes the imposition of certain representational logics arising from conventions of classification. In response, museums have opted to arrange objects based on principles first established in Enlightenment museums where there were no classifications seemingly to context the objects on display. Museums of this type understand that their purpose is to present objects without a curatorial strategy affecting the visitor’s understanding or appreciation of the objects; in other words, it is a style of arrangement that pretends not to be arranged. The Gardner Museum does not operate according to this logic in that the particularities of Gardner’s arrangement are not masked. Nonetheless, rather than feature meanings that arise from names, classes, or categories, the un-arranged arrangement offers possibilities for knowledge production in affective sensory perception and in the historically and contextually contingent nature of the relationship between the viewing subject and the aesthetic object.

The production of knowledge from affective sensory perception and the fluid nature of the subject-object relation are major concerns of performance research. In her 1998 essay, “Performing Writing,” Della Pollock outlined what she saw as the prevailing characteristics and purposes of a type of creative scholarly writing being produced by performance scholars and others throughout the humanities. Stemming from a desire to be sensitive to issues of representation, performative writing calls for reflexivity on the part of the scholar, an understanding of scholarship as an aesthetic creative act, an awareness of the always partial nature of representational strategies, and the desire to allow writing to account for movement and dimension without freezing or flattening the objects or events being represented. These concerns

have emerged in a variety of productive idioms including but not limited to performative writing, autoethnography, mystoriography, and hauntology.<sup>2</sup>

Although scholars tend to agree that to prescribe a model for doing performative writing is to turn it into something it resists in the first place, many continue to explore the possibilities of this type of scholarship and to justify it as viable within an academy that tends to emphasize empirical research models and expository forms of writing. The most compelling of this research suggests we are not only practicing a style of writing, but a method for scholarship as well. We are asking what does it mean to study an object from within the discipline of performance studies or what does it mean to use a performance method in research? Richard Schechner, Craig Gingrich-Philbrook, and others suggest that the answer lies in the entanglement between performance as object and performance as method. I believe that the entanglement is a firm and necessary one, but will pretend for argument's sake to untangle the two, briefly and unproblematically.

Stemming from Schechner's notion of "is performance," performance as object means that a scholar can study dramatic plays, performance art, ritual performances, cultural performances, investigate them for meaning, and write about them (Schechner 30). The approach might be along the lines of textual criticism or interpretation, ethnography or genealogy, as is the case with Joseph Roach's Cities of the Dead. However, for a scholar to state that she is researching X using a performance methodology implies less a particular subject of study and more a theoretical stance and investment on the part of the researcher (Rusted 117). Hence, to focus on performative writing as a style of writing only – i.e., writing as a performance

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Bowman and Bowman, "Performing the 'Mystory': A Textshop in Autoperformance;" Gordon, Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination; Miller and Pelias, The Green Window: Proceedings of the Giant City Conference on Performative Writing; Spry, "Performing Autoethnography: An Embodied Methodological Praxis."

object – is to lose the critical tension between object and method that is indicative of performance research. Gingrich-Philbrook states that performance “troubles the conceptual boundary” between the experiment and the process of and reporting on the experiment (Gingrich-Philbrook 304). The goal is not to find new strategies for representation, but to explore alternative modes of knowledge production. Rusted’s essay argues that approaching the visual or artifactual object from a performance framework can move visual and art historical studies beyond notions of art objects as textual or representational to explore the kind of knowledge embodied in the production or consumption of these works in their specific historical contexts, in other words, in our material encounters with the material objects (Rusted 118). So what constitutes a performance methodology or framework?

In “Looking for Stonewall’s Arm: Tourist Performance as Research Method,” Michael Bowman highlights the productive potential for critical thought in the purposeful but indeterminate movement of a tourist and his encounter with various objects and modes of engagement (M. Bowman 116, 124-125). Bowman’s work invites the reader to conceive of one’s research as a spatial configuration, “a field” in which both the material instantiation of the critical object (work of art, touristic landmark, performed event) and the tourist-scholar’s interaction with it are highly contingent and historically contexted. His emphasis on chance and distraction offers “the intellectual basis which sees knowledge as a fluid process of discovery” that O’Neill identifies as missing from museum studies (M. Bowman 128; O’Neill 103). A performance framework offers the possibility of attending to forms of knowledge other than those that derive from closed systems of signification, systems in which the aesthetic object is presented with a predetermined symbolic meaning (Plotz 112).

Additionally, O'Neill argues that taxonomies of display traditionally found in art museums are inadequate for attending to history. Objects deemed to be art from various periods and cultures are displayed "without reference to the context in which they were produced and used" (O'Neill 101). The grouping of objects according to art historical norms "make it virtually impossible to say anything intelligent about the past" or to explore the way objects become or are discovered to be art (O'Neill 102, 104). In her work on the LSU Rural Life Museum, Ruth Laurion Bowman suggests that genealogical approaches to scholarship can productively activate the disconnect between contexts of production and that of reception (R. Bowman 166). A genealogical approach shifts our focus from objects as static representations of history to historical objects with multiple relationships to historical subjects. "However materially stable objects may seem, they are...different things in different scenes" (Brown 9).

The relationship of the perceiving subject to the aesthetic object has altered considerably since Isabella Stewart Gardner arranged her collection for public viewing. Paradoxically, it is because the museum itself has not changed that we become acutely aware of the arrangement and the way the objects interact with each other, as well as our encounter with them. It is in the anachronism of the private collection of a connoisseur, particularly one of a wealthy Victorian era socialite, that one begins to see the potential for a genealogy of the material object and its relation to subjects by tracing its circulation and display. Furthermore, a genealogical approach would historicize the changes in the way we navigate "the shifting space between representation and embodied object" (Plotz 113). Katherine Hayles posits an understanding of the materiality of the artifact as the interaction between its physical characteristics and signifying strategies (Hayles 277). A genealogy of the object could take into consideration the social, cultural, and technological processes that brought it into being.

In Heuretics: The Logic of Invention, Greg Ulmer figures scholarship as the “finding and linking of information” (Ulmer 29). Ulmer’s project is to locate a mode of rhetorical production that emulates writing in electronic environments, which Ulmer labels “electracy.” The production Ulmer locates features the crossing of disparate discourses as a mode of invention, which then highlights writing as creating a diegesis or “imaginary space and time” (Ulmer xii, 48). Like collecting, writing draws from “extant materials” to create a field “within which might emerge the surplus value of a revelation or an innovation that has not been thought as such” (Ulmer 48). This diegetic field creates a context within which happy accidents can occur. Discoveries may emerge when the “materials of a disciplinary problem are brought into sudden, unexpected relationship with other areas of a thinker’s experience” (Ulmer 142).

My method then has been to bring the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum into relationship with the disciplinary problem of performative writing. Inspired by the museum, I have conceived of my research and writing practices as processes of collecting and curating. Through reading, revisiting, and revising, my work has been somewhat improvisatory. Isabella Stewart Gardner’s curatorial practices emerged over time based on her unique experiences of the world. Similarly, the work presented here is the product of idiosyncratic practices born of experience, memory, research, and intuition. In “Bodily Poeticizing in Theatrical Improvisation: A Typology of Performative Knowledge,” Lesa Lockford and Ronald Pelias state that improvisational work requires that actors learn “to trust the intuitive” (Lockford and Pelias 436). Lockford and Pelias argue that intuition draws from tacit knowledge embedded in the body of the performer via the repetition of everyday practices, habit, and performance training through rehearsal. This tacit knowledge informed the paths I took in my research and writing as I

responded to the challenges presented by the museum, and it is embedded in the body of this document.

Similarly, while some of the discoveries and connections that I have made in the creation of this study are explicitly addressed, others remain tacit and emerge through the reader's interaction with the text. As I stated earlier, it is my hope that this study performs for the reader in ways similar to how Gardner's museum performs for me. Each of the chapters takes as its starting point a different aspect of the museum. As such, each stands alone offering a different view of the museum and performative writing as a method of production. The chapters are connected in that they all emerge from a desire to generate "encounters with the unforeseen" through the play of movement and rhythm, coincidence and contradiction, and clarity and ambiguity (Gingrich-Philbrook 305).

Chapter One: "But I Digress..." takes as its starting point my visits to the museum. The Gardner Museum made me acutely aware of how my movement through the space impacted my experience of the museum and its artworks. As the museum did not dictate the direction of my movement, I meandered. Mindy Fenske draws upon Peter Lunenfeld's concept of the "unfinished" to describe aesthetic work that "implies continuous process in its product" (Fenske, "The Aesthetic of the Unfinished" 16). According to Fenske, one characteristic of the "unfinished" is its tendency to provoke meandering. Meandering as a style of movement is an ongoing negotiation within a changing or unstable space. So understood, meandering connects to other figurations of walking, wandering, and strolling as forms of knowledge production within a spatial field, conceived both physically and discursively. Guy Debord named the *dérive* as a Situationist method where one drifts without motive, letting "themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there" (Debord 22). Michel de Certeau argues that one's

style of walking has equivalences to one's style of engaging the world that he terms a "rhetoric of walking" (de Certeau 100). Refigured as a textual practice, the meander calls to mind those wandering narratives or shaggy dog tales that refuse to get to the point, continually drifting into tangents and digressions.

The meandering tale of Chapter One maps my visits to the museum through my accumulation of knowledge about the museum as I initiated research on it. "Mapping" for Deleuze and Guattari is a process of building rhizomatic connections, one which they hold in tension with "tracing" figured as reproduction. They also align mapping with performance and tracing with competence and mastery (Deleuze and Guattari 13-14). While tracing seeks to isolate, neutralize, and stabilize its object, mapping suggests a possibility for representational practices that create unstable, discontinuous, and multiply articulated spaces. Chapter One builds connections between my changing perceptions of the museum over multiple visits as they are impacted by the time of day and season, my ongoing negotiations with theory and textual representations of the museum, and accretions of lived experiences and memory over time.

In Chapter Three: "This is Not What I Thought It Was," I explore the possibilities of collecting as a trope for performative writing. To do so, I create my own collection of memories, experiences, and collecting practices from my life. In light of Ruth Bowman's work on performance genealogies, I set my own collecting practices against those of Isabella Stewart Gardner to productively explore the disconnect. My understanding of Gardner's practices is informed by written accounts of her process of creating the museum and my experience visiting it. In the introduction to Opening Acts: Performance in/as Communication and Cultural Studies, Judith Hamera writes that "research in critical communication and cultural studies is itself a practice of everyday life, not a function of a sterile lab or gilded ivory tower" (Hamera 19). I

argue that collecting is a practice of everyday life too, demonstrating the collection as an expression of embodied experience and the ongoing attempts of the collector to make sense of that experience through the objects she collects.

Collecting is also a mode of aesthetic production and like any artistic practice contains within it the potential for a shift in perspective. The collection is continually subject to transformation and revision as new items are added to or subtracted from it. The process of collecting can be of value for a collector through the continual production of new and different modes for engaging the world. Additionally, as with the display of any representational practice, the audience will make of it what they will, continuing the process of transformation and revision. An ethics of collecting then might emerge from the valuing of a collection as necessarily unfinished.

I began Chapter Four: “Which Way to Lost and Found?” by conducting research on the theft at the Gardner Museum and the two paintings that are deemed the most costly of the losses: Vermeer’s The Concert and Rembrandt’s Storm on the Sea of Galilee. A disciplinary problem that performative writing attempts to engage is common throughout the arts and humanities, namely, the present representation of an absent thing. This problem questions our ability to represent through language that which sits outside of it, the political implications of forcing visibility through representation, and the desire for preservation enacted through the production of historical representations. The empty picture frames in the Dutch Room of Isabella Stewart Gardner’s carefully preserved museum are a testament to the ultimate impossibility of preservation. The framed empty spaces that once contained The Concert and Storm on the Sea of Galilee are like two yawning holes puncturing the hermetically sealed space. Although



absence often makes itself known through the ghost as a sort of peripheral and immaterial presence, in this museum absence walks up and slaps you in the face.

In light of the noted problems, I initiated my archival research by engaging photographic and discursive representations of the absent paintings, studying news accounts of the theft and ensuing investigation, taking a close look at Sophie Calle's artistic response to the theft, and viewing a documentary film on the theft by Rebecca Dreyfus. I discovered that the practice of description emerged as a common theme across the disparate sources. In the chapter, then, I explore various conceptions of description to discover under what circumstances the constative utterance of description may become performative. Deployed as and through performance, description enacts the ongoing embodied experience of the writer. Emerging from the encounter between the body of the researcher and the body of the object of study, description also can evoke the extra-textual affects that both inform the encounter and leave their mark on the subject. These marks might be conceived as traces in Paul Ricouer's sense of the term, as the "passive persistence" of that which has "struck us, touched us, affected us" (Ricouer 427). These traces then make themselves known through the process of remembering, describing, and writing past experience.

Chapter Five: "Thank You. Please Come Again," highlights the implications of the study. I re-view the display of my research collection and, as I did with Gardner's museum, question what can be made of it. I attempt to identify the movement of the writing by foregrounding its repetitions and juxtapositions. My aim is to explore how writing itself is a practice of investigation and knowledge production. I also discuss how the study supplements research on the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum and performative writing. Lastly, I maintain

my commitment to collecting as an ongoing process subject to transformation and revision by considering future iterations of the work.

The significance of the study is multiple. First, it contributes to the body of work produced on and in response to the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum.<sup>3</sup> It assumes Gardner's curating practices to be a production of knowledge and engages her practices to interrogate what might be learned from an encounter with them. Secondly, the study represents a sustained interaction with performative writing as a method of scholarly production. As such, it seeks to uncover both the possibilities and limitations of the practice. Lastly, the document has implications for the field of visual studies as well, contributing to a body of work that seeks to rescue vision from structural formations that align it with mastery, possession, and domination.<sup>4</sup> "Making visible" is a representational practice with attending ethical obligations. Vision, however, is a sensory mode of experience entangled (to greater or lesser degrees) with all of the other bodily senses. As the practice of a singular body, looking at art can be understood to be sensual, aporetic, and fallible.

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<sup>3</sup> See pages 48-49 above for a summary of literature on the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum.

<sup>4</sup> See Hooper-Greenhill for a general discussion of vision as an instrument of rational knowledge, distance, and evaluation in the modernist museum. The emergence of vision as a master sense in the modern era undergirds contemporary analyses of the political implications of vision such as Foucault's discussion of panoptic structures of surveillance and Laura Mulvey's theory of the cinematic gaze.

### **CHAPTER THREE**

#### **“THIS IS NOT WHAT I THOUGHT IT WAS.”**

Find a broken doll. Its once blinking eyelids are permanently fixed: one eye perpetually open, one eye shut. Sprouts of dark brown hair are interspersed among empty hair follicles on the mostly bald plastic. The doll’s body lies twisted and spotted with dirt. One arm is missing. Place the doll in a container the size of a shoebox and constructed of pitted wood grayed by its previous life as a drifter. Save it for later.

In the performance classroom, we often speak of the “performer’s toolbox.” This economical expression summarizes a process whereby students are trained to recognize that our engagements with the world contain the materials for artistic production. In every encounter with a new technique or theory, a striking image or intriguing mystery, lies something we can pick up, place into a virtual box, and save for later. The performer’s toolbox may contain ephemeral traces of acquired knowledge, personal stories, and muscle memory of performance training and rehearsal, as well as ephemera in the form of post-it notes, index cards, legal pads, and beverage napkins scrawled with citations and ideas. On my computer, I have folders labeled “Ongoing Projects” and “Future Ideas” that I fill with digital images, academic articles, newspaper items, and brainstorm. In *The Archive and the Repertoire*, Diana Taylor states that the archive has been figured traditionally as a repository of “supposedly enduring materials” (Taylor 19). According to Taylor, we confer upon archival objects such as books and photographs the fiction of stability and endurance across time. She posits the repertoire, on the other hand, as a resource for performance comprised of the embodied memory of gesture, movement, dance, and singing (Taylor 20). Taylor associates the repertoire with ephemerality and transformation. The performer’s toolbox is a collection that draws from both the archive and the repertoire. The process of collecting things and saving them for later counters the myths of

genius, innate talent, and divine inspiration often associated with artistic practice. It aligns creative work with process, the gathering of multiple forms of knowledge, experimentation, and sometimes luck and intuition. I may tuck something into my toolbox to save for later without understanding exactly why. I don't know how or even if the new addition will be put to use, but something about it calls out to me. Like Roland Barthes's *punctum*, it "advenes," animating me with the promise of adventure (Barthes, Camera Lucida 19-20).

I carry some aspect of my toolbox with me wherever I go. Though it is not necessarily in the foreground of my attention, it is there as a shadow, and it colors my future encounters and engagements with the world. My toolbox was with me the first time I visited the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. On that visit, I had been actively seeking...*something*. I needed a dissertation topic. I was interested in performative writing. I knew that I wanted to experiment with the possibilities of performance as a method of investigation and performative writing as the textual production of that method. I wanted to put the contents of my toolbox to use. And so, as so many graduate students before me, I was in search of a topic. This, despite the fact that it contradicted another item in my toolbox, namely, Michael Bowman's admonition that topics are irrelevant; one can write well about anything.

As I stated in Chapter One, my first visit to the museum was something of a fluke. It was an unplanned visit, an outing concocted on the spur of the moment. I was not in the museum long before I realized that I had found my dissertation topic. The museum performed in ways that I associated with the possibilities for writing research. Certain aspects of performative writing that interest me most, such as the juxtaposition of institutional and personal discourses, the play of coincidence and contradiction, and the self-conscious mode of presentation, seemed to be at play in Gardner's museum. In the opening line of "Unpacking My Library," Walter

Benjamin writes, “I must ask you to join me in the disorder of crates that have been wrenched open...the floor covered with torn paper...to join me among piles of volumes...to share with me a bit of the mood...” (Benjamin 59). On my first visit to the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, I felt that she had invited me similarly to join her and share a bit of the mood.

Gardner’s collection, coincidentally, began with books. In 1881, novelist and close friend F. Marion Crawford introduced Isabella Stewart Gardner to the writings of Dante. They spent that summer reading The Divine Comedy together, and as a gift and symbol of their friendship, Crawford had the two copies that they used bound together by Tiffany (Carter 57). According to Morris Carter, Isabella Stewart Gardner started collecting rare editions of Dante only a few years later. Gardner’s interest in rare books was spurred apparently by her association with friend, mentor, and noted bibliophile Charles Elliot Norton. In 1878, Gardner enrolled in Norton’s art history lectures at Harvard (Shand-Tucci 39). In 1885, she joined the Dante Society during Norton’s presidency and remained a life-long member. With Norton’s encouragement, Gardner began to collect rare Dante manuscripts (Carter 97). Multiple editions of the Divine Comedy, dated 1481 to 1502, are displayed in what is now called “The Dante Case,” a glass-doored bookcase in the Long Gallery. Gardner was influenced by both the teachings of Norton and the writings of his mentor John Ruskin, whom Gardner never met but whose three-volume The Stones of Venice she acquired in 1882 (McCauley 7). Later, she would find Norton’s criteria for evaluating art based on its “truth of characterization” and uplifting moral content too restrictive (McCauley 6; Shand-Tucci 38).

In 1906, Gardner created an inventory of the books in her collection. The catalogued titles represent a wide range of interests and literary genres spanning from sixteenth century Bibles and the Dante texts to contemporary works by Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Oscar

Wilde to Edward Lear's Book of Nonsense, a children's book of humorous limericks illustrated with line drawings (Gardner 9-10, 12, 21-22, 42, 70). According to Carter, by the time of her death in 1924, Gardner's book collection was more than double the number reflected in the 1906 inventory (Carter 100). In addition to books, the shelves and cases in Gardner's museum contain many "book-like creations from various fringe areas" (Benjamin 66). Autographs, letters, both personal and historical, and newspaper clippings overlap in cluttered collages on the shelves of the cases in every room.

Although we might identify Gardner's books as the beginning of her collection, the museum also contains many personal mementos that were obtained in the 1880s. On numerous trips to Europe and particularly Italy, Gardner purchased a multitude of small decorative items and souvenirs such as lace and silk pieces, jewels, silver utensils, and writing implements (McCauley 11, 13). Gardner also purchased contemporary artworks created by United States expatriots living and working in Italy. She viewed the purchases as both a form of patronage and "attractive memoirs of her stay in Venice" (McCauley 11). According to historian Elizabeth Anne McCauley, throughout the 1880s, Gardner returned to Venice many times and her purchases were always personal in nature.

My own collecting practices began with a green glass bottle unearthed in the swamps of Chackbay, Louisiana. When my brother was younger he found the bottle buried in the soft wet dirt in the woods behind our house. The bottle was approximately three inches tall and the color of Palmolive dish soap. The portion of the green bottle sticking up from the soil was camouflaged by the thick green summer grass and palmetto canopies surrounding it. The sunlight however glinted off the glass, betraying its existence, and caught my brother's eye. He dug it out of the ground, took it home, and washed it out in the kitchen sink. We were

mesmerized by this bottle that had inserted itself into our lives. It was completely smooth, bearing no markings or residual label or glue of any kind. My brother quickly realized that his finger fit into the bottle perfectly, and he immediately repurposed it to function as his very first guitar slide. Many years later, when he moved to Los Angeles to pursue a career as a professional musician, he left the bottle behind. It had long been forgotten, having been replaced with an actual guitar slide. One day when digging through closets at my parents' house, I found the bottle. By this time I had amassed a small collection of green glass vases, Depression glass and reproductions. The sudden reappearance of the bottle led me to believe that it had been the first item in my collection all along.

Although Gardner began to purchase art as a private collector as early as 1891, the first painting that she purchased with the explicit intention of developing a collection for a public museum was a Rembrandt self-portrait obtained in 1896 (Carter 156-157). Rembrandt van Rijn painted the image at the age of twenty-two. It is one of nearly ninety self-portraits created by Rembrandt between 1620 and 1669. Rembrandt's collection of self-portraits is the largest known of any artist. The meaning or intent behind such a prolific series of self-likenesses is an area of investigation and debate for Rembrandt scholars. One common view posits that such an abundance of self-portraits must reflect the artist's ongoing search for self-understanding, an attempt to look inward to discover his "place in the world" both spiritually and artistically (Podro 553). Detractors hold that this view assumes a sense of self and an understanding of the genre of self-portraits that would be anachronistic for Rembrandt van Rijn. They argue that the self-portraits, which at the time would have been called "the artist's image made by himself," were an attempt by Rembrandt to capitalize on his recognition as an artist. Because he was well-known,

the paintings would have been marketable and their circulation and display would have furthered his recognition and their marketability.

In a 1999 review of the traveling exhibit “Rembrandt by Himself,” Michael Podro addresses the two perspectives on Rembrandt’s self-portraits and offers a third view. He argues that Rembrandt frequently portrayed himself as acting a dramatic role, as the apostle Paul or laughing Zeuxis, for example. Such portraits advance Rembrandt as painter, performer, and character simultaneously; a multiple rather than singular identity that recognizes (rather than elides) the performance of self. Podro argues that even when Rembrandt portrayed himself as an artist, the paintings enact a presentational duality that suggests a performance. In “The Myth of Renaissance Individualism,” John Jeffries Martin agrees with Podro’s findings, drawing on Stephen Greenblatt’s notion of “self-fashioning” to argue that in Renaissance Europe, the self was understood as multiple and composed or “made” (Martin 214). In these terms, Rembrandt used the self-portraits to “fashion” himself as artist and artwork, performer and character, producer and product.

Podro’s analysis of Rembrandt’s self-portraits sheds a compelling light on Gardner’s admission to Carter that she purchased the Rembrandt self-portrait with the intention of creating a museum. In nineteenth century experience, the art of self-fashioning was relevant too, particularly during the Aesthetic Movement, which reached the United States by the 1870s. James McNeill Whistler and Oscar Wilde, both of whom were a part of Gardner’s social circle, have been cited as examples *par excellence* of the artist as performer. In “Boundaries and the Victorian Body: Aesthetic Fashion in Gilded Age America,” Mary W. Blanchard states that the performance of self in the Aesthetic Movement constructed the performer as both art and artist. The Aesthetic woman presented herself as a beautiful image, a work of art, and also performed



the role of the creator of that image (Mary Blanchard 23). Sarah Burns, in Inventing the Modern Artist, argues that the nineteenth century artist existed in the realm of spectacle, exhibiting themselves and performing as artists (Burns 221). In Gardner's decision to purchase and display the Rembrandt self-portrait, she performs a similar self-portrait – of herself as creator of the collector role. In this move, Gardner's context for collecting and audience change as she transitions from the stage of collecting for domestic decoration and personal memory to the stage of collecting for museum creation in the public sphere.

As in many homes, my mother collected and accumulated family memories through photo albums, souvenirs, and mementos. My mother created scrap books that she called “baby books” for me and each of my siblings. My baby book contains various artifacts documenting the early years of my life. My first haircut, “July 7, 1973 – age 22 months,” is marked with a thin lock of hair. Each birthday is represented through photographs and handwritten documents that list the party guests, the gifts received, and the winners of party games such as Pin the Tail on the Donkey and Musical Chairs. Throughout the book, my mother includes personal observations and notable occurrences: “Three years old – Gretchen said: I'm big now, but I still can't snap my fingers.” On one yellowed page, there is a four leaf clover pressed flat in a square of Saran wrap: “Gretchen's first four leaf clover – March 26, 1977, 5½ years old.” The plastic is folded over and around the clover in many protective layers. The clover has turned brown and the package looks brittle as though it would crumble to dust if someone attempted to open it. To the right of the clover is a small tooth also nestled in a bundle of clear plastic. Both are taped to the paper with small pieces of Scotch tape that appear to have lost their glue and are in danger of floating away.

While my mother collected and fashioned remnants of my life in the baby book, Mary Kelly created Post-Partum Document, an art installation that spanned the years 1973-1979. In Post-Partum Document, Kelly documents her son's growth and their changing relationship through the inclusion of objects and writings that resemble those my mother collected in our baby books. Post-Partum Document includes items such as notes concerning the child's first table foods, pressed leaves collected by her son, and Kelly's handwritten musings. Post-Partum Document shifts the performance of baby book from the domestic family stage to that of the public art gallery. In addition to bringing together the discourses of family and motherhood with the institutional discourse of art, Kelly draws on Lacan in her writings and employs scientific practices to extend the maternal collecting practices into the realm of fetish and obsession. The child's eating habits, for example, are noted carefully in relation to the stains left on the child's diapers and then charted on a graph. Although Post-Partum Document is read often in terms of psychoanalytic theory and feminist art practices, I cite it here as an example of how collecting practices perform differently in different contexts. In the realm of the home, the baby book invites interpretations centered on preservation and the desire to represent and repeat the past, a performance of nostalgia doomed to failure. In Gilles Deleuze and the Ruin of Representation, Dorothea Olkowski suggests that by connecting discourses of motherhood, art, Lacanian theory, and feminism, Post-Partum Document highlights the collection as a deliberate creation of a past that has never been (Olkowski 207). The shift in context foregrounds the performance of domestic collecting as a kind of artful self-fashioning, not unlike the public presentations performed by Rembrandt and Aesthetic artists such as Whistler and Wilde.

Gardner's decision to become a public collector redirected her interests, and she began to pursue masterworks of the Italian Renaissance. Her efforts were aided by Bernard Berenson, a

promising student of Charles Eliot Norton. Gardner collaborated with Berenson in deciding which pieces to collect for her museum. When Gardner was not traveling abroad, Berenson, who took up permanent residence in Italy, scoured Europe's art and auction houses, sending word to Gardner as paintings became available for purchase. In 1896, Gardner had not yet built Fenway Court, the building that would later house the museum. However, she had transformed her brownstone on Beacon Street into a social meeting place and site for arts patronage, hosting many concerts and literary readings. The works she purchased were on display in her home. Additionally, Gardner's trips to Venice became more frequent, and she rented the Palazzo Barbaro as her temporary residence. There, she hosted United States artists and writers including Henry James, John Singer Sargent, and James McNeill Whistler. This social circle of artists and intellectuals came to be known as the Palazzo Barbaro Circle.

Both Alan Chong and Elizabeth Anne McCauley write that Gardner's romantic views of Venice were influenced by the writings of Ruskin and others who describe old world Venice as dreamlike and otherworldly (Chong, "Introduction: Romance and Art and History" xii; McCauley 8). Gardner collected paintings and drawings of Venetian scenes that aligned with these romantic visions. In truth, Gardner's Venice was a place caught between the vagaries of decay and the growing pains of industrialism. Tourists from the United States and elsewhere who took holidays in Venice were able to cash in on the impoverished state of the nation. While they lived comfortably and ate well, the Italian masses who fed and served them were destitute. As parts of the city were reconstructed to meet the demands of industrialization, the Italian government allowed, and by some accounts encouraged, the selling off of Venetian history in the form of art, antiquities, and architectural remnants. Gardner's purchase records reflect her participation in the scavenging of Renaissance Venice during her own visits and through orders

placed with Berenson. Paradoxically, although Gardner expressed dismay with industrialization and a desire to preserve old Venice, she purchased what she desired to build and house her collection. Gardner joined many nineteenth century collectors in the problematic practice of pillaging cultural and historical antiquities, thereby establishing the “robber baron” as the consummate figure of the wealthy collector.

The collectors who participate in the popular PBS program Antiques Roadshow stand in sharp contrast to the robber baron. In a 2008 episode of Antiques Roadshow, a collector in Louisville, Kentucky, presented a framed black and white photographic print for appraisal. The image was of a young woman in a translucent peignoir. She looks directly at the photographer and viewer with her chin slightly lifted. Her breasts are visible through the gauzy fabric. Her hands meet modestly in front of her lower body. Her legs seem to fade into the white background at about the knees. Below her figure is the word “Kaloma.” The owner of the print stated that she purchased it at a local auction where the image was advertised as a portrait of a vampire. The auction house made the noted assumption based on the repeated double-exposures that resulted when they attempted to reprint the image in their auction catalog. C. Wesley Cowan, the Antiques Roadshow appraiser, begins his narrative with the following statement: “Well, this is a story of not what it is, but what it is not” (“Louisville, Hour 3”).

The story of what Kaloma is (not) begins around 1914, the date on the print. Produced as an anonymous art print and distributed by the Pastime Novelty Company of New York City, the image was popular and enjoyed wide distribution as both a framed print and a postcard. During World War I, the Kaloma image was a popular pinup and later, with some modest darkening of the sheer garment, was used in advertising. In 1967, Alton Kelley, famed poster designer and founder of the Family Dog Collective, used Kaloma’s image on a concert poster

promoting Vanilla Fudge and the Charles Lloyd Quartet at the Avalon Ballroom. As with Kelley's psychedelic Family Dog posters, the prints became popular counterculture décor and have since garnered value as collectibles. In 1976, however, Kaloma's story changed greatly, and her history became a matter of debate. Novelist and Western buff Glenn Boyer used an airbrushed version of Kaloma as the cover illustration for I Married Wyatt Earp, a biography of Josephine Sarah Marcus, Wyatt Earp's third wife. Over the next two decades, the Kaloma print was mistaken often as an actual photograph of Josie Earp. Accordingly, the financial value of the print rose, resulting in a 1996 sale at a North Carolina auction house for \$2750 and a 1998 sale at Sotheby's for \$2875. The book cover illustration and the ensuing auction catalogs that listed the print as a photograph of Josie Earp were the only evidentiary sources of the veracity of the claim. The misattribution persists despite the knowledge that Josephine Earp was born in 1861, and would have been fifty-three years old at the time the photograph was taken.

Despite Cowan's provocative turn of phrase, Kaloma's story is about everything she has been and continues to be: art photo, postcard, pinup, album cover, advertisement, concert poster, book illustration, Josie Earp, auction item, and mystery. Kaloma's image has and continues to hold multiple and diverse meanings for those who wish to possess or appropriate it. At the time of this writing, the Kaloma photograph is available on eBay under various listings. In one, the photo is described as an "original hand colored print" of Josephine Earp with a *Buy It Now* price of \$895.00. In another, it is offered as an art photo in the public domain, to be freely reprinted and distributed, and bearing a purchase price of only \$12.95. There are two versions of the concert poster available: the original print, created prior to the performances at the Avalon Ballroom and listed at \$224.99, and the collectible reprint, created sometime afterward and listed at \$89.99. (The reprint is identifiable by the recoloring of the text, although this seller claims his

or her reprint is an original.) For the guest who presented the Kaloma print for appraisal on Antiques Roadshow, the motivation underlying her purchase was not tied to any of the above classes of collectibles. Instead, she found Kaloma “just looked like a very demure nude. I just thought she was pretty” (“Louisville, Hour 3”).

To write about the meanings and motivations underlying the activity of collecting is to question what exactly constitutes collecting as a practice. In “Telling Objects: A Narrative Perspective on Collecting,” Mieke Bal highlights the difficulties of defining collecting, observing that while the definitions are numerous they are “irremediably fuzzy” in her view. There is however a “collecting attitude” that is “unmistakable and distinct,” which the collector assumes as she confronts objects in the world (Bal, “Telling Objects” 99-100). Bal’s concept of collecting as an attitude or a pose resonates with Gardner’s decision to assume the role of a collector. However, Bal is careful to distinguish herself from the collector, stating that although she is able to discern the collecting attitude in others, she herself lacks it. Bal’s view implies that the collecting attitude is subjectively and perhaps psychologically pre-constituted. Rather than an attitude that a subject chooses to adopt, collecting possesses the subject. Bal’s analysis also seems to isolate collecting from the practices of everyday life and living. Collecting is a specialized performance by an identifiable group, presumably those who are subjectively hailed as collectors. Collecting then is a practice of accumulation that occurs only in certain heightened settings or when motivated by atypical desires.

In “A Rationale of Collecting,” G. Thomas Tanselle argues for a re-conception of collecting whereby everyone is a collector to some degree at some time. If a definition for collecting is to be established at all, Tanselle suggests that it be understood as “the accumulation of tangible things” (Tanselle 23). Such a broad definition makes room for the diverse

motivations underlying collecting behavior and the diverse contexts in which it occurs. Isabella Stewart Gardner collected personal trinkets and souvenirs to function as mementos of pleasurable experiences. She purchased rare editions of Dante as part of her experience of membership in the Dante Society. She doggedly pursued paintings that she wished to include in her collection. In 1892, she visited Whistler's studio in Paris intent on purchasing Harmony in Blue and Silver: Trouville. She had made several requests for the painting previous to her visit, and although Whistler agreed to the purchase, he would not part with the painting. She responded, "This is my picture; you've told me many times that I might have it, Mr. Whistler, and now I'm going to take it" (quoted in Carter 135), and with the help of a companion, she removed the painting from the wall and walked out with it (Goldfarb 27). As a fan, she collected the autographed photos of artists and musicians she admired, frequently by arranging meetings with them. In 1894, for example, Gardner visited Ischl, Austria, learning upon her arrival that Johannes Brahms and Johann Strauss II were visiting Ischl too. By the second day of her visit, Gardner had befriended both men and obtained autographed photographs of them to include in her collection (Carter 146). Gardner's collection also includes gifts given to her by friends and admirers. Upon the death of poet Robert Browning in 1889, Katherine Bronson, a mutual friend of Browning and Gardner, presented Gardner with a lock of the poet's hair (Zorzi 136). The hair is preserved in a moonstone locket in the Long Gallery of the museum.

In arguing for an expanded understanding of collecting, Tanselle identifies some commonly held definitions of collecting and collections that are problematic. One popular notion of collecting is that the accumulation of objects must be at the expense of their utilitarian function (Tanselle 24). A suitable example would be someone who collects antique suitcases, not to use for packing and travel but to display in the home. However, there are numerous

collections that fulfill a utilitarian as well as aesthetic or display function. For many years, I have collected Fiestaware, the brightly colored dinnerware and serving dishes first produced in 1936, by the Homer Laughlin China Company. Fiestaware is a popular collectible, and there are many books available on the history of the dishware to assist collectors in identifying years of production for limited series items and colors. I amassed my collection from a variety of sources, such as yard sales, eBay, discount stores, and gifts. In my kitchen, I take care to display the wide variety of plates, bowls, cups, saucers, serving platters, and pitchers in ways that provide me with daily pleasure and showcase (I think impressively) my collection for my guests. I know where I acquired each piece, and they have become mementos representative of certain places and experiences. I also use the dishes daily. Their utilitarian function is not only preserved, it is their primary function. Except in certain cases, such as the original red Fiestaware that contains toxic levels of lead, I believe many collectors of Fiestaware continue to use the dishes.

Tanselle also finds problematic the definition of collecting as determined by systematic and unifying principles (Tanselle 25). He argues that this narrow view ignores chance or random accumulations, a designation applicable to much of Gardner's collecting experience. The definition also simplifies the determination of "systematic or unifying principles," which is a highly subjective practice. As Tanselle's critique suggests, one man's pattern is another man's randomness (Tanselle 25). Further, unifying principles can be construed after a collection has been assembled and displayed. Tanselle cites one definition of collecting that tries to sidestep the problem of determining unifying principles by positing collecting as the "selecting, gathering, and keeping of objects of subjective value" (Tanselle 27). The inclusion of the term "subjective" recognizes the personal aspect of all collecting and the different views of what



constitutes a collection. Even so, Tanselle questions the necessity of conscious intent to the building of a collection. He argues that all collecting “involves a mixture of conscious and unconscious motivations” (Tanselle 27).

Tanselle’s “unconscious motivations” are different from Bal’s collecting attitude in that the motivations are not predetermined. Rather they emerge from the interaction between a subject and the various contexts and objects that inform her collecting practices, i.e. from her lived experience of the world. The brief narrative provided by the Louisville collector on Antiques Roadshow suggests that she purchased the Kaloma photograph not because she is a collector of early twentieth century photography or of Earp memorabilia, but because she was drawn to the “pretty” photograph, which the auction house had marketed (oddly enough) as a picture of a vampire.

The problem of determining collections in terms of unifying principles calls to mind another black and white photograph: a photograph of the interior of a freezer. The freezer is divided into four compartments, and the door stands open to the viewer’s right. The compartments are filled with various tubes, jars, and boxes. It is a collection of containers for preserving biological samples. Several containers are labeled with handwritten letters O through Z. Others bear words that are largely illegible due to the frost blanketing the surfaces of the compartments. On one box in the third compartment, only one word can be read clearly. It is the name “Jackie.”

This photograph is one of twelve black and white prints that contribute to the piece, -86 Degree Freezers (12 Areas of Concern and Crisis), created by Catherine Wagner in 1995. Each of the twelve images shows a similar laboratory freezer containing test tubes, storage boxes, and tissue samples. In exhibit, the photographs are displayed in a configuration of three columns and

four rows. The arrangement gives the visual effect of one large freezer composed of twelve small ones. To the right of the photographs is a column of titles, each of which corresponds to one of the photographs:

DNA Clone Library

Colon Cancer

Human Genome Project

Bipolar Disorder

HIV

Breast Cancer

Thyroid Cancer

Alzheimer's

Mega-Yac Library

Alcoholism

Tissue

-70° Freezer (Wagner)

Wagner's project provides a visual example of how disciplines generally, scientific disciplines in particular, collect, select, sort, and arrange material they deem important. As Wagner sees it, they attempt to detach the material from its prior context(s) and meanings and make it their own; freeze it as a dehistoricized (hence malleable) item. In more liberal terms, in the transfer from context to context, material may retain prior meanings while relinquishing, altering, and adding others. Similarly, museum collections draw objects from a world in which they have been given meanings in varying accumulations and move those objects into new

assemblages. Caitlin DeSilvey states that “acts of counting, sorting, stacking, and inventory convert things from the category of stuff to the status of museum object” (DeSilvey 326).

The process of selecting objects to include in a collection is a critical practice that both ascribes value to objects and enables or constrains the proliferation of meaning. An object that may have been understood as personal or primarily utilitarian performs differently when placed in the context of a public museum. The placement might call into question or advance arguments regarding the meaning of the object or the collection itself. Collecting practices participate in what Beverly Whitaker Long calls the “dynamic economy of valuing” (Long 161). The selection of objects for a collection confers upon the objects an importance that sustains the continued circulation of the objects. “Objects in a collection are transformed from the ordinary or mundane to sacred (special or extraordinary)” (Long and Schiffman 497). This transformation feeds back into the collective cultural perception of the object. My decision to collect and include Kaloma in a chapter about collecting practices both adds to and delimits her meanings.

The rules whereby a collection is formed, the criteria for selection and display, are themselves contingent cultural materials (Delanda 37). Creating a collection is analogous to what Manuel Delanda calls a process of stratification. It is a process of sorting and sedimenting what were heterogeneous materials (i.e. objects from diverse discursive and material locations) to what appears to be a more homogenous and permanent unit (i.e. my collection) (Delanda 62). The unified and stable appearance of the assemblage is illusory and relative, however. For example, while the permanent collection of a museum may seem to create “permanent” stratifications of the objects, we can see in temporary exhibits the ways that these sedimentations are transient. In 2007, curators of the DeYoung Museum in San Francisco assembled a collection of works on “paper.” The contingent nature of the criteria placed a discursive frame

around the objects that made them “mean” in ways that were different from their meanings in the museums that loaned them.

The discipline of art history often acts as a stabilizing force in museums, providing a frame of intelligibility for the collected objects through classifications of period, genre, and media. Isabella Stewart Gardner’s collection undercuts the illusion of unification provided by disciplinary classifications as the criteria for sorting and display are decidedly unclear. Although the visitor to the Gardner Museum may wish to identify some unifying principle, attempts to do so involve creating local connections for a particular body situated in space, time, and a multiplicity of discourses and disciplines. Additionally, Gardner’s mandate of permanence as dictated in her will only serves to highlight the contingency of material (museum) objects as their appearance changes over time, becoming faded and worn. In a New York Times article written in 2010, Holland Cotter considers how his experience of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, “this kooky house full of saints, and rickety chairs, and John Singer Sargents,” has changed during his lifetime. He writes, “I’ve...learned that time can be rough on enchantment. On my visit last week, sections of the museum filled with unidentified, feebly lighted objects seemed more attic than palazzo” (Cotter, “Time-Traveling With the Muses in Boston”).

For four days every August a temporary assemblage of collected and collectible objects is produced at the Highway 127 Yard Sale. Billed as the “World’s Largest Yard Sale,” this annual event spans the six hundred fifty-four miles between Gadsden, Alabama, and West Unity, Ohio, along the Highway 127 corridor. The yard sale attracts collectors both as buyers and sellers. It is a celebration of collecting in all its myriad forms mixing professional vendors, amateur collectors, and curiosity seekers. Some of the roadside sites conform to our typical expectations of a yard sale. Local residents collect and display for sale their discarded

belongings in an attempt to clear their living spaces of clutter and make a few bucks. Others are temporary store fronts for traveling “junk dealers” who presumably have made deals with property owners to sell their wares on their land. Sometimes the noted distinctions are apparent, property lines demarcated by the arrangement of folding tables and the open-air tents of the professional vendors. Other times, they blend into one another in a dizzying overlay of collections within collections, making it difficult for buyers to determine how and from whom to purchase an item.

Several years ago my friend Danielle and I traveled to Gadsden on a whim to visit the yard sale. At the time, it was called the “450 Mile Yard Sale” as it extended northward only to Covington, Kentucky. The magnitude of the event astounded us. We set out on foot for a bit gathering our purchases in our arms and backpacks until we were loaded down. Then we walked back to the car to deposit our treasures and move the car further down the highway so as to repeat the process again. After nine hours of gawking, picking through, bargaining and buying, we had covered only ten of the four hundred fifty miles. My first purchase of the day marked the beginning of my Fiestaware collection, four plates that were factory cast-offs due to a problem in the glaze that left small white dots on the surface of the plates.

At one stop along the route, we encountered a bizarre tribute to Michael Jackson. Someone had carved a plaque from a piece of wood and painstakingly edged it in elaborate scrollwork. A magazine photograph of Michael Jackson was decoupage on the surface of the plaque, although his face was scratched out in what seemed to be a violent fashion. The scratches reminded me of the scratched out faces in some of E. J. Bellocq’s photographs of New Orleans prostitutes. The irony of the homemade tribute to the mass produced image of Michael Jackson was enough to attract us to the object. Further, the contrast between the carefully

constructed plaque and the scratches compelled us to create stories concerning the artist's changing relationship to the icon over time. We purchased the item for two dollars.

At another site, we stumbled across a giant left hand approximately three feet long. The cartoonish hand was made of flesh tone felt and stuffed. At the base of the hand was a hole for one's own hand and, inside, a metal rod to grasp. According to the vendor, the hand had been part of a Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade costume. He seemed relieved that I was willing to purchase a solitary hand. He explained to us that he had had both hands and intended to sell them as a set. However, the night before a couple begged and pleaded and eventually talked him into selling them only the right hand. The next morning he was experiencing some regret because he was afraid that he would be stuck with the left hand. His desire to sell the hands as a set seemed to express an expectation that someone would purchase them so as to create a new costume or to replace the lost or damaged hands of an existing one. The vendor valued the hands in light of their previous history as part of a costume. For me, the solitary hand was kitschy art. It reminded me of the oversized sculptures of Claes Oldenburg. I compared it humorously to the Typewriter Eraser as an obsolete technological artifact. The information that the vendor provided regarding the hand's past did not negate my initial perceptions, but added to them as the hand also became a costume and a costume that had performed in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade.

Although most of the sale sites were outdoors, at one location there was an old wooden building. It might be described more properly as a shack or lean-to. The wood was unpainted or no longer painted. The boards showed the deterioration of weather. They were split and warped and pulled away from the building's frame, exposing rusty nails. The entire structure appeared to pitch forward as we approached it, making entry seem a risky choice. The dim interior was lit

by sunlight coming through the open doorway and dirty windows and by a desk lamp on a cabinet that served as the store counter. The four walls of the shack were lined with additional cabinets and bookcases that were stacked on top of each other, floor to ceiling. In the center of the room, more furniture was stacked to form a partition, creating a narrow path around the perimeter of the room. Crammed onto the shelves were all manner of detritus of everyday life: books, toys, telephones, baskets, pots and pans, typewriters, broken lamps, and pieces of rickety chairs. The objects were balanced so precariously on top of one another that it seemed as though removing any one piece would cause the whole kit and caboodle to come crashing down. The way everything was shoved together and varnished with a layer of dust made the assemblage seem like an organism that had grown either into or out of the shelves and the walls of the building. There was something quite unbelievable about the display as well, both artificial and superficial, as though the store and its contents were merely a façade or an art installation.

In a letter to her family, Mary Berenson, art historian and wife of Bernard, once referred to Isabella Stewart Gardner's museum as a "junk shop" (Shand-Tucci 236). Like the junk shop in Gadsden, Alabama, the objects in Gardner's collection have become part of their environment. Holland Cotter writes that "[the museum] was an exercise in installation art before the term was invented...a minutely customized total work of art" (Cotter "Time Traveling With the Muses in Boston"). In "Collecting as an Art," Kevin Melchionne theorizes that scavenging is a mode of innovation. "The scavenger's originality resides in the appropriation and organization of found objects, either natural or human-made," and "it is no less a giving shape to the world" than any other creative practice (Melchionne 154). Similarly, Hal Foster notes what he terms an "archival impulse" in some artistic practices, which he defines as "an idiosyncratic probing into particular figures, objects, and events in modern art, philosophy, and history" (Foster 3). The eclectic

assemblages that display the “archival impulse” draw on pre-existing archives and produce new ones too. By moving objects in and out of various assemblages (thereby creating new connections, meanings, and functions), the collector invents new modes of relating to and engaging in the world. The performance of collecting; “of wandering, hunting, rummaging, examining, selecting, bargaining, swapping, buying, preserving, restoring, ordering, cataloging, completing, upgrading, researching, and displaying” belies an attitude in which “one lets oneself be enchanted by the world” (Melchionne 151).

Isabella Stewart Gardner’s enchantment with the objects in her collection is evident in her surviving letters to Bernard Berenson. In one brief letter of August 25, 1896, she acknowledges her receipt of Titian’s Europa by writing, “I have no words! I feel ‘all over in one spot,’ as we say. I am too excited to talk” (quoted in Hadley 64). Several weeks later, in a letter dated September 19, she seems to have found her words: “I am breathless about the Europa, even yet! I am back here tonight... after a two days’ orgy. The orgy was drinking my self [sic] drunk with *Europa* and then sitting for hours in my Italian Garden... thinking and dreaming about her. Every inch of paint in the picture seems full of joy” (quoted in Hadley 66). In the Titian Room of Gardner’s museum, the joyful orgiastic Europa bumps up against a surprising counterpoint. Only a few feet away from Titian’s masterpiece, Gardner created a private devotional space around a painting titled Christ Carrying the Cross. (At the time that Gardner purchased this painting it was attributed to Giorgione; it has since been reattributed to the studio of Bellini circa 1505.) The small and intimate painting is installed on top of an occasional table that is placed perpendicular to an exterior window. On sunny days, the image of Jesus’ tear stained face is bathed in light. Gardner obtained the painting in 1898, shortly before the death of her husband Jack. On the table next to the painting, Gardner placed a silver cup



filled with violets, mementos bearing associations of her husband (Goldfarb 125). Shand-Tucci cites the contrast between Europa and Christ Carrying the Cross as “striking evidence of [Gardner’s] lifelong ease with coupling the sacred and the profane” (Shand-Tucci 176).

Surprising discoveries and new meanings can emerge from the juxtaposition of objects within a collection. As objects are added to or rearranged within and between collections, their meanings are subject to transformation and revision. The art of the collector resides “in the continually unfolding process of collecting” and the shifting accumulation of meanings that results (Melchionne 153). Foster suggests that collecting as an artistic compositional practice “underscores the nature of all archival materials as concurrently found and constructed, factual and fictive, public and private” (Foster 5). The result is ambiguity, the ambiguity created by objects that fit into multiple categories at once, retaining what they once were even as they become something else. DeSilvey discusses the ways in which conventional strategies for conservation function to neutralize ambiguity by enforcing designations and value judgments, such as artifact and waste (DeSilvey 320). As an inventive practice, however, collecting has the potential to explore and accentuate ambiguity in productive ways. The all-things-at-once nature of the collection foregrounds rather than erases ambiguity, as seen in the troubling simultaneity of scientific specimen and “Jackie” in Wagner’s photograph that enables her critique of naturalized disciplinary classifications.

In 1883 and 1884, Isabella Stewart Gardner and her husband traveled extensively through Asia visiting Japan, China, Cambodia, Java, and India (Hawley, “Director’s Forward” 10; Chong and Murai 12). During the trip, Gardner created travel albums to document her experiences as was a common custom of the time. The albums contain commercial photographs purchased at the various locations the couple visited, handwritten observations, and ephemeral mementos such

as tickets stubs and pressed flowers and leaves. Gardner's travel albums are unusual in that they do not contain any photos of Gardner herself (Chong, "Introduction: Journeys East" 20).

According to curator Alan Chong, "It was almost expected that a traveler of the period would drop into a studio to have a portrait taken, perhaps in local garb...[However] Isabella's albums are curiously devoid of her image...which leaves her albums strangely impersonal compared to those of other travelers" (Chong, "Introduction: Journeys East" 20). Conversely, Christine Guth notes that the personal comments Gardner used to caption the photographs are full of "imaginative detours and digressions...which give her albums an unusual sense of intimacy" (Guth 60). Like her museum, the collection of purchased images nestled among material traces of her personal experience create "imaginative narratives [through] juxtapositions and layering of contrasting forms, patterns, and textures" (Guth 60).

Greg Thomas explores the juxtapositions and contrasts at play in Gardner's albums as they pertain to the picturesque ideal. "In all regions of the world, Western photographers and travel writers alike generally strove to create 'picturesque' views, a conventional aesthetic system based on harmoniously composed landscapes with unobtrusive, pretty, and sometimes exotic accents of figures and architecture" (Thomas 427). Thomas states that Western travelers of the late nineteenth century found China difficult to reconcile with the picturesque "in part because Western travelers found it unbearably dilapidated and dirty" (Thomas 427). Thomas finds that Gardner's albums display relative disregard for pretty landscapes, appreciating instead disorder and dilapidation as a form of picturesque, as is neatly exemplified in Gardner's description of Beijing: "'Dust and filth and every kind of picturesque and interesting thing'"(quoted in Thomas 427). Thomas argues that the contrasts and juxtapositions that

Gardner creates within the pages of her travel albums highlights the creation of the album as an aesthetic response to her sensory experiences (Thomas 423).

In the final years of her life, Isabella Stewart Gardner befriended art historian Morris Carter. According to biographer Douglas Shand-Tucci, Gardner told Carter stories about her life even as she burned much of her personal correspondence in the fireplace, thereby attempting to create and control her legacy (Shand-Tucci 7). In the biography that Carter wrote, Isabella Stewart Gardner and Fenway Court, he relates the following anecdote. In June 1899, Gardner attended the ground breaking of her future home and museum. “When she arrived on this momentous occasion, she saw at her feet as she got out of her carriage a four-leaf clover, the only one she ever found; it is forever preserved in a crystal locket in the museum” (Carter 177).

When reading Carter’s account of Gardner’s lucky find preserved in crystal in a museum, I cannot help but think of my own clover taped to the tattered pages of a baby book. The consideration of such coincidences determines in part the direction and scope of this study: the collector’s art is indebted often to luck. The next treasure might be hidden in some unusual or unexpected place, a knowledge and enchantment with the world that encourages the collector to follow every path to its (il)logical conclusion or surprising connection. Like Barthes’s lover, the collector transforms trivial incidents into important events. Contingent circumstances seem to conspire, simultaneously exploding possibilities and restricting the collector’s movements by urging paths of action that seem as if divined by fate. Chance intervenes and objects beckon to spur the collector on her quest. They are irritations that must be soothed, itches that must be scratched, calls that must be heeded (Barthes, A Lover’s Discourse 69).

A collector might select an item on impulse without conscious understanding of her actions. On another episode of Antiques Roadshow, a participant presented a collection of cereal

box cutouts from the 1930s that she stumbled upon at a flea market. She was drawn to the items because “she liked paper dolls,” not because she collected cereal boxes (“Louisville, Hour 2”). She purchased them on a whim only to discover later that there was a community of cereal box collectors and the cutouts she had purchased were highly prized Post Toasties collectibles. A collector also might invite luck by relating to the world with an attitude that invites contingency and surprise. The collector rummages through piles of discard looking for... something; the surprise that advenes. The activity of the collector is driven often by a fascination for chance.

In 1893, Isabella Stewart Gardner attended the Chicago World’s Fair. As she walked through the exhibition hall, “her eye was arrested” by a painting (Carter 137). It was The Omnibus by Anders Zorn. I imagine that Gardner was struck by the slash of light partially obscuring the face of one of Zorn’s travelers. She immediately sought out the artist and purchased the painting. Thereafter, Gardner and Zorn formed a friendship, and she supported the artist by helping him establish connections that furthered his career. According to Morris Carter, Zorn made several attempts to paint a portrait of Gardner, which, dissatisfied, he threw away. However, “one evening” in 1894, “he found what he was seeking” (Carter 147). Zorn was among several guests gathered in the drawing room of the Palazzo Barbaro. “Mrs. Gardner had stepped out onto the balcony to see what was happening on the canal, and as she came back into the drawing room, pushing the French window wide open with her extended arms, Zorn exclaimed: ‘Stay just as you are! That is the way I want to paint you.’ He went instantly for his materials and then and there the portrait was begun” (Carter 147). The portrait shows Gardner clad in a flowing yellow gown framed by the open doorway with the night sky of Venice in the background. She wears her trademark strand of pearls with a ruby pendant. The spontaneity of her pose is matched by the brushwork that appears to have been painted quickly (Chong,

“Artistic Life in Venice” 105). Alan Chong argues that “the spur-of-the moment appearance of the portrait reinforces its status as a performance piece,” in that it highlights the circumstances of its making and the interaction between sitter and painter (Chong, “Artistic Life in Venice” 106).

The process of seeking and discovering is a process of continual engagement with contingency (Tanselle 32). Scavenging, motivated by discovery, “is better thought of as a form of exploration or wandering” (Melchionne 152). The collector’s meanderings are part of what shapes the collection. “What one gathers is dependent on what one encounters” (Tanselle 32). Overturning a pile of rubbish or traveling to new locations opens up possibilities for new encounters. The new encounters spur new interests and desires. Researching the histories and meanings of one object connects the collector to other objects. The connections branch out rhizomatically and exponentially, an experience well known to anyone who has ever Googled one item only to find herself enthusiastically absorbed in the world of another radically different item hours later. The collector is spurred by “the desire to find out what will show up next” (Tanselle 33). Meandering sets “the subject astray with only invited coincidence as a guide” (Foster 12-13).

My friend Lisa and I made a surprising discovery once as we meandered the streets of Boston: the head of a hobby horse, riding stick gone, perched on a steel I-beam, a hard skeletal letter supporting the remains of someone’s childhood. We spotted the horse head from above as we crossed an overpass not far from Beacon Street, the location of Gardner’s brownstone. It was too far away to have been dropped from atop the bridge and too high to have been placed on the beam from the street below. And yet there it was. The dampness of the outdoors had settled into the cotton fabric and batting, bloating and misshaping the broken toy.

We were struck by the contrast, the incongruity of a soft swollen toy perched precariously on the cold hard steel. We felt as though we had stumbled upon some great secret: a bizarre mystery of how a child's lost plaything, an emblem of domesticity and private fantasy, had come to be so exposed, dangling dangerously amid the Boston infrastructure. As we stared open-mouthed in wonder, three teenage townies walked nearby. "Ponyhead! Yeah!" they yelled in their distinctive Boston accent. They knew. They had named it Ponyhead and hence had stories about it.

Tanselle identifies wonder as the main affective impulse that motivates collecting. He argues that collecting is a ubiquitous human activity stemming from a sense of amazement and curiosity of objects that exist outside the self. We are entranced not only by the object's existence, but by a history that predates our awareness of them, stirring wonder at how they might have come to exist at this particular place and time (Tanselle 31). On Antiques Roadshow, the objects that people submit for appraisal derive from accumulations they live with, from residue they have retained from previous generations. The guests exhibit amazement that the items now reside where they do. The stories shared between guests and appraisers often center on physical details of the objects, the marks of being viewed and touched and used by different people over time.

Tanselle calls these physical details the "sensuous aspects" of objects and argues that viewing the object as such is one way the object can speak for itself, tell its own story as it were (Tanselle 34). When the collector interacts with the sensuous aspects of the object, they animate it. Running her hand along the surface of an object, for instance, the collector feels the marks of wear and experiences a connection with the history of the object and its various encounters and interactions (Lowenthal 293). Hans Belting suggests that this interaction animates the complex

life of the object (Belting 307). The lively object is not imbued with totemic or mystical properties. The life of the object comes into being through the particulars of its circulation.

After Jack Gardner's death in 1898, Isabella quickened her pace in accumulating objects for her museum. "During her frenzied buying spree, Isabella suddenly began to acquire Asian art" (Chong, "Introduction: Journeys East" 28). Between 1901 and 1903, Gardner purchased more than one hundred fifty artworks and architectural elements including Japanese screens, Buddha statues, and Chinese sculptures. When Fenway Court opened to the public in 1903, the room that is presently the Early Italian Room was named the Chinese Room. The room contained several pieces from the Islamic world, India, and East Asia interspersed with Italian furniture and paintings and the portrait by Zorn of Gardner on the balcony in Venice. However, most of the Asian objects Gardner purchased during this period remained in storage (Chong, "Introduction: Journeys East" 30, 28).

In 1904, Gardner met and befriended Okakura Kakuzo, an art historian and poet who was appointed as the curator of Asian Art at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts. Okakura was dedicated to the development of Western understanding and appreciation of the art of Asia, notably Japan and China, a subject that he addresses in The Book of Tea. In a chapter titled "Art Appreciation," Okakura writes:

The sympathetic communion of minds necessary for art appreciation must be based on mutual concession. The spectator must cultivate the proper attitude for receiving the message, as the artist must know how to impart it. (Okakura 107)

To the sympathetic a masterpiece becomes a living reality towards which we feel drawn in bonds of comradeship. (Okakura 108)

The nineteenth century, pregnant with the theory of evolution, has moreover created in us the habit of losing sight of the individual in the species. A collector is anxious to acquire specimens to illustrate a period or a school... We classify too much and enjoy too little. The sacrifice of the aesthetic to the so-called scientific method of exhibition has been the bane of many museums. (Okakura 117-118)

By all accounts, Gardner and Okakura formed a close friendship, and he spent a great deal of time with her at Fenway Court and at her family estate in Brookline, Massachusetts. In 1905, Okakura performed a traditional Japanese tea ceremony at Fenway Court. The following year, he gave Gardner a copy of The Book of Tea, which now is stored in one of the cases of the Blue Room (Chong, “Introduction: Journeys East” 31).

In 1906, Isabella Stewart Gardner began a program of renovation that would span the next eight years. The changes to the museum included the construction of the Spanish Cloister to house Sargent’s El Jaleo, a new gallery for tapestries, and the reconfiguration and renaming of the Chinese Room to the Early Italian Room (although this room retains some small Asian objects such as the Chinese Han dynasty bears and the Japanese lamps I noted in Chapter One). In 1914, one year after the sudden and unexpected passing of Okakura Kakuzo, Gardner created a private subterranean Chinese Room in an area at the end of the Chinese Loggia that runs alongside the Spanish Cloister on the east side of the museum. In this room, Gardner displayed the sculptures and architectural elements that she obtained between 1901 and 1903. The room was anchored by six large Buddhist sculptures (Chong, “Introduction: Journeys East” 38-39). This second Chinese Room was not open to the public. It was Gardner’s private space for meditation and contemplation. Christine Guth suggests that the room served both to memorialize Okakura and as a performance of memory through which Gardner recreated her experiences of Asia (Guth 66). Guth argues that more than any other space in Fenway Court the Chinese Room exemplified Gardner’s collecting practices as a process of creating an imaginative and affective space rather than one bound to historical authenticity (Guth 66). Gardner’s collection is the deliberate creation of an imagined past (Guth 66).



As a private space, the Chinese Room was not included in the provisions in Gardner's will, and in 1971, it was dismantled and most of its contents sold. While Chong feels this decision was made largely in light of financial and spatial needs, Guth argues that the impetus concerned authenticity claims. She writes:

Once this self-referential, affective mode of experiencing Asian art was no longer controlled by Gardner herself, its authenticity was subject to doubt. By the 1960s, the design practices through which Gardner transformed Buddhist arts into privileged vehicles of subjective expression seemed dated and cast an unsettling light on her engagement with Asia. (Guth 66)

Guth proceeds to elaborate on the "unsettling light," discussing it in terms of early twentieth century Orientalism and the attending "assymetrical patterns of consumption in which the West assumes the power to represent the East" and also in terms of changes in art history that led to a depreciation of the value of the objects collected in the Chinese Room (Guth 66). In this light, the erasure of the Chinese Room was part of an art historical corrective. Gardner's reputation as a discriminating collector and Fenway Court's authority as a public museum were preserved and protected by the enactment of modern museological standards predicated on historical "factuality." Today, postmodernist fascination with fragments and bricolage has made the Chinese Room timely once again (Guth 66). In 2009, the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum borrowed back some of the original contents of the Chinese Room for a temporary exhibit titled, "Journeys East: Isabella Stewart Gardner and Asia," which was designed to evoke the Chinese Room for the contemporary visitor.

"Objects not only stimulate us to discover how they came to exist and what their original function was, they also tease us into probing their subsequent state and adventures" (Tanselle 36). Embracing the object's "subsequent state and adventures" entails understanding objects as processes. DeSilvey suggests that we might hold the idea of the object as artifact, as a relic of

human history, in tandem with an idea of the object as ecofact, as a material relic that engages the material world independent of human manipulation. Object as ecofact directs our attention to decay as a process of the object's materiality in interaction with other physical processes such as climate and biology. Holding the desire for conservation in tension with the material fact of decay reveals that objects as process can generate knowledges outside of staid classifications. Cultural objects reveal their entangled identities; artifact becomes amalgamation (DeSilvey 323). Ponyhead is an act of naming that seems counter to the foreclosure of meaning as commandment or law. Instead, it is a gesture and utterance that acknowledges the sociality of the object in all of its complexity. Ponyhead is a child's toy, and a part of the Boston cityscape, and an invitation to invention. It is a naming that "undoes nomination" (Barthes, The Pleasure of the Text 45). Naming and renaming can be performed in and as wonderment, creating a point of departure from which multiple histories can be produced.

One of the last things that Isabella Stewart Gardner added to her collection was a watercolor portrait of herself painted by John Singer Sargent in 1922. The painting offers a stark contrast to the large, vibrant, and risqué portrait of Gardner installed in the Gothic Room. It shows Gardner at the age of eighty-two, three years after she suffered a debilitating stroke and two years before her death. Her frail body is shrouded in white. She gazes directly at the viewer as she faces death. The front of the Gardner Museum bears the motto "C'est Mon Plaisir" accompanied by the image of a phoenix, which is a symbol of immortality. Sargent's watercolor is a testament to Gardner's inevitable mortality. But through her collection, Gardner fashioned a name for herself. She created a museum that is part of the Boston cityscape and one that invites multiple stories and imaginative wanderings. In a 1922 letter to Bernard Berenson, Gardner writes, "Did I tell you of Sargent's wonderful sketch in watercolor of me which keeps every

one's tongue busy wagging? Even I think it is exquisite. As it was utterly unpremeditated both by him and by me, I think that is its main reason for being so good” (quoted in Hadley 652).

The objects in a collection have been transformed but still retain their nomadic history in materiality and memory (Belting 310). “Objects as well as collectors can be regarded as narrative agents and the stories that objects tell may be different from the role that the object plays in the collector's narrative” (Tanselle 36-37). These narratives bump up against and revise each other in the ongoing production of cultural memory. DeSilvey argues that cultural memory is not produced by reflection on the static memorial object but by reflection on the processes which move objects as cultural remnants into and out of “ecologies and expressions of value” (DeSilvey 328). To trace the nomadic history of objects, we must embrace the mutable and ephemeral character of cultural artifacts: their material presence, vulnerability to decay, and subsequent revitalization. “Memory, in this sense, is based on chance and imagination as much as evidence and explanation; the forgetting brought by decay allows for a different form of recollection. Such recollection fosters an acknowledgment of agencies usually excluded from the work of interpretation” (DeSilvey 328).

A snapshot. Three inches square. Black and white. The image is a closely cropped photograph of a weathered cypress shotgun house. The front of the house boasts a narrow, unadorned door and one small square window. There is a front porch and two small wooden steps that lead down to a patch of dirt and grass visible at the bottom of the frame. On the ground near the steps, in the bottom left hand corner of the frame, is a child's doll, one arm missing, one eye permanently closed.

This image exists in my memory. It is an image of a sharecropper's cabin at Laurel Valley in Thibodaux, Louisiana. Now a tourist destination, Laurel Valley was originally the site

of a successful sugar cane farm and mill. The mill building has been severely damaged by fire and hurricanes. The charred and jagged remains of the brick exterior walls protrude from tall grasses and palmetto plants at the back of the property. Along the gravel road leading to the mill sit rows of cypress cabins, which once provided housing for the sharecroppers who planted and harvested the sugar cane crops.

When I was a child, Laurel Valley was abandoned and closed to the public. Barbed wire fences stretched along the perimeter of land containing the small shotgun houses. My family toured the grounds on several occasions. Ignoring the “No Trespassing” signs, my father would hold the fence wires apart as the rest of us scooted through. These visits were generally spurred by the presence of out of town guests who were eager to brush up against the simultaneously seductive and sordid history of sugar and the American south.

The first visit in my memory was arranged for the benefit of a photographer living in Washington State. I was too young to have retained many of the details of the visit. However, the photographer gifted my parents with several black and white prints of Laurel Valley that he took on that trip. Those photographs have become the basis of my memory. The doll is not in any of his photographs although I imagine it within the frame of a snapshot. Despite the lack of any evidence of its veracity, the image persists.

Tanselle argues that collecting need not be limited to material objects. He suggests that we collect “intangibles” as well in the form of ideas, experiences, and memories (Tanselle 26). The metaphor of the collection is frequently applied to memory. The active and processual production of memory recalls the ongoing process of collecting. The body of the (re)collector is situated as the active site of the production of images and memory (Belting 306). At the beginning of this chapter, I noted that the performer’s toolbox contains both archival objects,

aligned with longevity and permanence as is the case with books and photographs, and the seemingly ephemeral objects of the repertoire such as memory. Writing as collecting troubles these distinctions. Can theory, for example, be said to exist on the pages of a book or does it exist in its mutations as I remember, displace, and perform it? The collection that I produce here juxtaposes and transforms the Gardner Museum, the theories from which I draw, and my personal experiences and memories, creating a past that has never been.

Finally, if it is to be displayed, the collection must be placed into a container of some kind. The container is the form of presentation and display of the collection. It opens outward to an audience who will engage the collection and carry away pieces of it, continuing the process of transformation and revision. The container acts as a temporary frame, a constructed way of looking that opens out onto further appropriations and transformations. “Curatorial work assumes a certain responsibility for stabilizing things in frames of reference that make them accessible to those who come along afterwards” (DeSilvey 324). This stability is illusory and ephemeral as the entangled and dynamic character of the object exceeds the container and the collection becomes something more than the sum of its parts.

Although she enlisted the services of the architect Willard T. Sears for the building of a museum in the reclaimed swamp of Boston’s Back Bay, it was Gardner herself who designed the structure that would later become Fenway Court. It was unique in several ways. First, the architectural design brought the waterfront facades of the Venetian palazzos to an interior courtyard. The outside of the building was small in scale and very plain and understated. It was something of a box of yellow brick. The building’s exterior stood in stark contrast to the ostentatious homes and mansions being built in New York, Newport, and Ashville by her Gilded Age contemporaries such as the Vanderbilts and Morgans. It also stood in contrast to other

museums in the United States that referenced Western intellectual traditions through architectural details that emulated European cathedrals, temples, and legislative buildings. Instead, the interior architecture of Gardner's museum referenced her personal experience of the Palazzo Barbaro as a site of collective artistic invention.

Gardner took the lead on every aspect of the creation of Fenway Court. She unpacked and sorted the objects in her warehouse dictating how and where each artifact would be integrated into the building. She showed the builders how to create paint techniques that mimicked the Venetian facades and demonstrated the proper way to hew the wooden ballast that stretched across the ceiling of the Gothic Room. When Fenway Court was built Gardner carefully arranged every item in her museum/home to her own eccentric tastes and continued to add to and rearrange the museum throughout her life. The interior décor of the museum was again in contrast to the Gilded Age mansions, where many of the artworks were reproductions displayed in galleries set apart from the living spaces of the homes. Gardner used the rooms of her museum for everyday activities, such as writing, prayer, entertaining, and even as guest bedrooms. The displays in Gardner's museum were also in contrast to the Modernist museums with layouts that adhered to Enlightenment principles of classification and reason. "Fenway Court creates its own time: within its walls, new orders and new narratives are established" (Guth 62).

In Another Way of Telling, John Berger writes, "The photograph cuts across time and discloses a cross-section of the event or events which were developing at that instant" (Berger 120). The discontinuity between the time of the event pictured and the time I view it makes meaning ambiguous. For Berger, some photographs act as a "long quotation" in that the appearances of the event photographed implicate other events producing multiple connections

and cross-references (Berger 121). There is a similar discontinuity between Gardner's collecting practices in the creation of her museum and my own practices in the creation of this document. Armed with my performer's toolbox, however, Gardner's museum performs for me as a long quotation, enabling connections between collecting and performative writing, theory and the personal. Accepting Gardner's invitation to join her in a bit of the mood, I have tried here, following Barthes, to write not *on* the museum, but in its fashion (Barthes, The Pleasure of the Text 22).

## CHAPTER FOUR “WHICH WAY TO LOST AND FOUND?”

### Stolen

On March 17, 1990, the city of Boston celebrated Saint Patrick’s Day with its usual flair and debauchery. Drunken revelers lurched through the streets singing and drinking green tinged beer. At the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston’s historic Back Bay, two night watchmen made their rounds, studied, and played word games, all the while listening to the sounds of parties filtering in from outside. The watchmen were college students. At the time, the night watch was not staffed by security professionals. Rather it was considered a good job for the students of Boston’s numerous colleges and universities, offering late hours and ample free time, perfect for studying.

On the night in question, one of the watchmen was making his rounds when two gentlemen appeared at the door dressed as uniformed police officers. They told the guard that they had received a call to investigate a disturbance at the museum. Although the watchman had been trained not to open the door under any circumstances, he opened it for the officers. They convinced the watchman to summon his partner, quickly overpowered the pair, and took them to the basement where they gagged and bound their victims with duct tape.

The exact details of what happened next are unknown. When museum personnel returned to work the next morning, they found that thirteen works had been stolen from the museum, including Storm on the Sea of Galilee by Rembrandt and The Concert by Vermeer. The canvases had been cut from their frames. Rembrandt’s self-portrait, painted on wood and not canvas, was found on the floor. The combined total of the stolen masterpieces is considered by the museum to be priceless.



In the weeks that followed, details surrounding the theft began to emerge. Because the thieves had disabled the video surveillance system, the only clues to their appearance were the descriptions provided by the two watchmen. In addition to the police uniforms, they recalled that both men wore moustaches, which appeared to be fake. Although the thieves knew to disable the video surveillance, they neglected another security detection device that registered their movements through the museum. This device showed that the thieves were in the museum for upwards of an hour. Detectives attempted to determine whether the men were given a shopping list of sorts, pointing to the existence of a third party in charge. However, for them to have lingered for so long suggests that they were uncertain as to what they were stealing. Several of the stolen pieces were of little value, while priceless masterworks such as Titian's Rape of Europa remained untouched. According to the motion detector, the thieves did not even enter many of the galleries that contained higher valued works. One of the strangest items taken was a finial from the top of a flagpole that held the Napoleonic flag. Experts speculated that the thieves had attempted to remove the entire flag, but finding it unwieldy, resorted to the finial. The theft of a flag could be read as a message; one museum staff member speculated that it was akin to a declaration of conquest, such as when one warring country captures the flag of another.

As of this writing, the Gardner theft remains unsolved. The whereabouts of the artworks are unknown, and the identities of the culprits span a wide range of possibilities. The lack of answers is in no way due to a lack of attention from law enforcement or the media. The theft has been covered by newspapers around the world. There are multiple websites dedicated to the Gardner theft. Interpol and the FBI both have tip hotlines for anyone with knowledge of the theft, and the museum has offered a one million dollar reward for anyone with information leading to the recovery of the stolen paintings. One newspaper account of the theft states that the

stacked boxes containing the FBI's file on the Gardner Museum covers an entire wall (Blumenthal).

In 2004, Rebecca Dreyfus produced a documentary film about the theft titled Stolen. The film follows Harold Smith, a highly regarded art investigator who spent over a decade traveling the globe in search of the stolen Gardner paintings. (Smith has since passed away.) Dreyfus follows Smith on various fact finding missions where he interviews a motley mix of former criminals who may or may not have knowledge of the theft. In addition to providing background information on the events of the theft and the aftermath, Stolen spends some time painting a picture of the museum and the stolen artworks. Of all the stolen paintings, the documentary devotes the most time to the Vermeer. At various points throughout the film, the camera scans the image of The Concert, and zooms in on small sections of the painting, directing viewers to note the details. Dreyfus interviews various authors and historians who offer their responses to the painting. In the final editing of the film, these responses are predominately fragments of description:

The whole picture is alive.  
It makes you slow down...  
You can hear the music and yet somehow you can also hear the silence.  
It's a tremendously calm picture.  
...the delicacy of that hand mid gesture...  
The red seat...it makes me laugh.  
Bright orange...it's the brightest thing in the picture.  
...this incredible red flag.... (Stolen)

#### A Frame Without a Picture

In 1993, the photographer Sophie Calle created a piece titled Last Seen, which was based on the theft at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. Calle made photographs of the empty frames hanging in the Dutch Room and displayed them along with pages of text containing fragments of description of each painting. Calle excerpted the fragments from interviews she

conducted with museum employees and visitors who were not shown reproductions of the paintings but were asked to describe the images from memory.

In the final chapter of Unmarked, Peggy Phelan discusses Calle's Last Seen. Phelan notes that the fragments of description vary considerably from each other and from the paintings, at times contradicting one another. For example, in the descriptions of Rembrandt's Storm on the Sea of Galilee, one viewer remembers the colors of the painting as "yellows, greens and blues" while another describes them as "purples, reds, whites" (Calle). Other descriptions neglect color entirely and describe the painting in terms of action and movement. The descriptions of the paintings do not accurately reproduce the paintings. Rather, through the process of describing and the work of memory, the descriptions highlight the individual and personal experiences of art and "lend credence to the fact that the interaction between the art object and the spectator is, essentially, performative" (Phelan 147). Additionally, Phelan argues that in Calle's work the constative utterance of description and memory becomes a performative expression inasmuch as they "fill in, and thus supplement (add to, defer, and displace) the stolen paintings" (Phelan 147). While Phelan focuses on how the descriptions restage the absent object, I suggest that the descriptions restage and re-perform the interactive exchange *between* the viewer and the painting. What is produced in the recollections and descriptions of the paintings may or may not have ever existed. The attribution of colors and qualities to the artwork that are not exact reproductions of the images reveal and evoke the layers of affect and interest that reside in the performative exchange. In the descriptions of Vermeer's The Concert, each viewer recalls and performs through description only what struck her about the painting:

I'll always remember this painting because I couldn't see it.  
...it's the red back of the chair that would catch my attention  
...this ethereal scrap of paper  
I saw it more as a series of planes. You could almost slice it.

...this yellow in the girl's dress. Just sheer yellow paint.  
I could hear them singing.  
...silence in a concert  
I didn't like it much, not my style. (Calle)

### A Man and Woman in a Garden

Flanking the door to the Dutch Room are two portraits. One is a portrait of a woman. Her age is implied through the wrinkles on her forehead and around her eyes. Her nasal labial folds are deeply grooved. Her chin is full, the jowls of her neck doubling and spilling over under her jaw line. Her expression is stern. Her gaze is averted from the viewer; her eyes slightly lowered and to the left. One eye appears to be smaller than the other, as I have seen mine in photographs. Her clothing is predominantly black, and her black cap peaks at the top like the roof of a house. It is trimmed in white ribbon with textured dots like Swiss dot fabric. The white trim reinforces the angular shape of the cap and frames her face. She wears a white high neck ruffle collar held in place with a band of black lace. A brown fur stole is draped across her shoulders. The pendant suspended at her bust is a vermeil flower with a salmon-orange-papaya center. It could be a chrysanthemum.

The other portrait is of a man. His age and facial features are quite similar to the woman's. His facial expression bears the softness of fondness, a slight crinkle at the eye and crease at the mouth foreshadow an impending smile. His dress also resembles hers, a masculine version of the outfit she wears. His black cap is rounder though and beneath it white curls show themselves at his temple and nape. Brown fur lining peeks out from the collar of his black coat. Draped over his shoulders and framing his broad chest is a weighty gold chain. The interlocking links are perfect circles, each strung perpendicular to the last. He faces the viewer's right and his gaze continues in that direction, across the open doorway to his complement, as though the pair is caught in a private moment. The paintings are labeled with rectangular gold plaques affixed to

the bottoms of the heavy frames. The sitters are Sir William Butts and his wife, Lady Butts. The artist is Hans Holbein the Younger.

#### An Eccentric Observer

The portraits by Hans Holbein call to mind another of his works, one I have encountered frequently in classrooms and academic writing. It is the painting of The Ambassadors. Holbein painted the double portrait of Jean de Dinteville, an ambassador of Francis I of France, and Georges de Selve, Bishop of Lavaur, in the early sixteenth century. The two men are pictured flanking a table containing objects representing discovery and the acquisition of knowledge, such as books, globes, and instruments of navigation. An elongated shape hovers near the bottom of the painting. Holbein's distorted image of a skull or *memento mori*, which floats ominously at the feet of the ambassadors and dominates the painting, is cited frequently as the example *par excellence* of anamorphosis.

Jacques Lacan, Bruno Latour, and art historians such as E. H. Gombrich have taken anamorphosis in general and Holbein's The Ambassadors as points of departure from which to theorize vision and the interaction between subject and art object. Anamorphosis refers to a technique where an oblique or distorted image is cast or projected within the visual field of a larger image that relies upon linear perspective. Linear perspective typically positions the viewer centered before and at a particular distance from the image. The image recedes to a vanishing point, creating a sense of depth. The experience of viewing a perspective image is like looking through a window into the distance. In order to view an anamorphic image within a perspective image, the viewer must relinquish the position assumed by the logic of linear perspective and physically move her body in order to find another angle from which to view the painting. It is only through locating the correct angle of viewing created by the oblique logic of the

anamorphosis that the viewer is able to make sense of the representation. In order to see Holbein's skull as a skull, for example, the viewer must position her eyes to the immediate right of the image and look down towards the skull. As Latour puts it, "Discover the right angle of view... and from the utmost disorder a familiar order will emerge" (Latour 18).

Anamorphosis denies conventions of looking typically associated with the perspectival paradigm, as well as with art museums generally, in which the observer views the image from a central position (Collins 73). The disruption defamiliarizes seeing. The observer becomes aware of her practices of looking, acknowledging vision as a fully embodied sensory experience (Collins 73-74). Additionally, the anamorphic image calls attention to the practice of looking as active production through the viewer's engagement with the image (Raley 14). Because the image is only observable through visual perception and labor, that is, the viewer's physical and conscious efforts to see the image, anamorphosis causes the viewer to become aware of her own position in relation to the painting and to willfully shift her point of view in order to resolve the ambiguity (Raley 14).

Though not entailing actual movement or repositioning of the body, the multistable image as posited by W. J. T. Mitchell requires the same kind of conscious efforts on the part of the viewer through perceptual switching. Mitchell cites the famed Duck-Rabbit as an example of the multistable or dialectic image (Mitchell, Picture Theory 45). When viewed from one point of view, the image looks like a duck, but when viewed from another it looks like a rabbit. The Duck-Rabbit has figured prominently in the writings of Gombrich and Wittgenstein as an image to theorize vision. Mitchell argues that the multistable image of the Duck-Rabbit illustrates the possibility for the co-existence of contrary readings in any single image (Mitchell, Picture Theory 45). The ambiguity contained within the representation of the multistable image displays

itself explicitly. It calls attention to itself and presents itself for inspection rather than effacing itself in the service of a transparent representation of something else (Mitchell, Picture Theory 48). The viewer returns with “fascination” to the ambiguous image that both elicits and points to perceptual play (Mitchell, Picture Theory 48).

Both the anamorphic and the multistable image rely upon the participation of what Daniel Collins has dubbed the “eccentric observer” (Collins 73). The viewer is conscious of her process of seeing and active co-creation of an image. The eccentric observer is willing to relinquish her position of primacy and centrality in relation to the art object and to take risks. As the mechanics of vision become foregrounded in the subject/object relation between viewer and image, the eccentric observer “acknowledges the oblique and contingent nature of her own point of view” (Collins 74). Lastly, although the eccentric observer may seek the revelation of representational coherence and the “correct” viewpoint, as is the case in the revelation of the anamorphic skull in The Ambassadors, this coherence or familiar order can be difficult to attain or fleeting. The eccentric observer willfully entertains perceptual and conceptual uncertainty. She becomes aware of the indeterminacy inherent to ongoing experience and her own ongoing efforts to formulate an oblique logic with which to make sense of things.

#### Glances and Gestures

In my research on Vermeer, one of the most frequently cited sources that I encountered was Svetlana Alpers’ The Art of Describing. Alpers investigates seventeenth century Dutch art in light of the historical and cultural contexts within which it was produced, as well as the scientific and philosophical thought of the time. According to Alpers, visual culture was “central to the life of the society” in Holland (Alpers xxv). Visual experience and the crafting of representations were modes of self-consciousness and produced knowledge of the material world

(Alpers xxv). Alpers explores Dutch art both as it relates to the visual culture of Dutch daily life and with and against the writings of Constantijn Huygens and Johannes Kepler on the science of vision. Alpers proposes that Dutch art should be understood as an art of description and the work of Vermeer as a primary example of this descriptive art.

Alper's goal is to discover ways of responding to or appreciating Dutch art that had been previously overlooked by an art history discipline that "has been determined by the art of Italy and its study" (Alpers xix).

In referring to the notion of art in the Italian Renaissance, I have in mind the Albertian definition of the picture: a framed surface or pane situated at a certain distance from a viewer who looks through it at a second or substitute world. In the Renaissance this world was a stage on which human figures performed significant actions based on the texts of the poets. It is a narrative art. And the ubiquitous doctrine *ut pictura poesis* was invoked in order to explain and legitimize images through their relationship to prior and hallowed texts. (Alpers xix)

Alpers argues that the application of the narrative model of Italian art overlooks the descriptive nature of Dutch works. Dutch art was not used to represent pre-existing narratives such as heroic legends or Biblical tales. Alpers calls upon the distinction between the terms meant to distinguish between different sources of visual perception: "*naer het leven* (after life) and *uyt den geest* (from the mind or spirit)" (Alpers 40). For Dutch artists, invention was not based on mentally stored images of the world but instead was a careful recording of life and nature. Additionally, "the Dutch did not restrict *naer het leven* to the notion of drawing after the live model, but used it to denote drawing after anything in the world presented to the eyes," including renderings of other visual representations (Alpers 40).

Dutch visual culture of the seventeenth century saw artistic representation as a way of describing the world that need not be a faithful replication of it (Alpers 233). Alpers uses the word "picturing" rather than picture or image to insist that the emphasis in Dutch art was on the



crafting of the representation and not the finished product (Alpers 26). Documenting the visible world was seen as an experimental attempt to document and understand experience. Descriptive Dutch art was both selective and passive in nature. Artists often crafted an image by “picturing” it from many angles. “It was a particular assumption of the seventeenth century that finding and making, our discovery of the world and our crafting of it, are presumed to be as one” (Alpers 27). This assumption was common both to picturing and to the crafting of language. Although the narrative traditions of art associated with *ut pictura poesis* privilege word above image, Alpers finds that seventeenth century Dutch culture had a different understanding of the relation between word and image. Rather than subordinating image to language, they were on equal footing.

Although Dutch paintings are described often as realistic, they articulate views of the world which need not be mimetically accurate and may indeed be deceptive or contradictory (Alpers 231, 233). The images produced by seventeenth century Dutch artists were careful renderings of visual experience, but did not make claims that enabled the abstraction of experience to laws or prescriptive ends. Drawing on the writings of Huygens and Kepler, Alpers finds that within seventeenth century Dutch culture there was an understanding of vision as flawed. It was not thought possible to produce faithful representations of the natural world through paintings, the eye, or lenses that aided visual experience, such as a *camera obscura* or microscope. Indeed, paintings were thought to exist at the border between the world and man’s crafting of it. According to Alpers, Dutch paintings present the visual experience of the world as partial without attempting or suggesting the ability to resolve the partial views into a whole. The descriptive Dutch pictorial mode is not an expression grounded in linear perspective, creating a single privileged position from which the represented object is viewed. Instead, Dutch art

pictures the world as an assemblage of partial views and the painting as a surface onto which the aggregate of views may be inscribed. The partial views are fragments that function additively to draw attention to various features of the objects represented (Alpers 85). Sometimes contradictory, the fragments are prized as representing the “infinite attentive glances” that define the perceptual experience of the world (Alpers 85).

The descriptive Dutch mode pictures the world as seen (Alpers 53). Alpers cites an example of a Dutch drawing in which two distinct views of a church interior, views which would be impossible to hold at once, are brought together in one work. The views are oblique angles that meet at a column in the center of the drawing. From this example, Alpers argues that rather than present a view of the thing pictured, i.e. as through a window, Dutch art presents views of the thing viewed. To clarify her point, Alpers draws on narrative theory, observing that the doubling of visual representation in Dutch art is like the ambiguous mode of free indirect discourse in narrative. Just as a narrator recalls and experiences the dialogue spoken by another, so too Dutch art recalls and performs the visual experience of its creator.

Similarly, Vermeer’s paintings do not present a represented object, rather, Alpers suggests, they represent seeing (Alpers 53). Vermeer’s paintings include optical effects such as circles of confusion and highlight halations. These optical effects would have been created by the lens of the *camera obscura* that Vermeer used in his work (Fink 493). In The Concert, the highlight halations are most visible on the pearl earrings of the pianist and singer. The paintings reproduce on their surfaces the act of looking as experienced by the artists. Alpers states that it is the descriptive aspects of Dutch paintings that hold the attention of the viewer (Alpers xvii). Portraying an arrested moment in the domestic scene of a musical performance, The Concert is noted frequently for its stillness, which Alpers cites as a quality of descriptive presence (Alpers

xxi). Time has stopped allowing our eyes to move across the surface of the painting and attend to many small things (Alpers 44). The attention to craft and detail that was a part of Dutch visual culture is reenacted in the painting's affect on the viewer. Her tempo slows as she focuses closely, carefully on the artist's picturing of details.

### Still Life

On the night of January 1, 1903, a cadre of selected guests was invited to Isabella Stewart Gardner's home and museum at Fenway Court for the first public viewing of the museum (Goldfarb 17). The courtyard was filled with flowers and illuminated by Japanese lanterns. In candlelight, the astonished visitors silently toured the galleries. Of the evening, William James wrote, "The aesthetic perfection of all things...seemed to have a peculiar effect on the company, making them quiet and docile and self-forgetful and kind" (quoted in Goldfarb 18). The general public was admitted to the museum for the first time in February 1903, and attendance was limited to two hundred visitors per day for only twenty days of each year. Over the next twenty-one years, Gardner continued to add to her collection and make changes to the museum. On July 17, 1924, Isabella Stewart Gardner died, and the museum was frozen in time.

Gardner's will created a trust for the maintenance and preservation of the museum "for the education and enjoyment of the public forever" (Hendy ii). It also stipulated conditions for the trust forbidding future directors of the museum to make any changes to the collection by adding or removing artworks or rearranging Gardner's careful presentation. According to the terms of the will, if these conditions are ever violated, the entire collection and estate will be donated to Harvard University. With the exception of small restorations, such as the replacement of fabrics with newly created reproductions, Gardner's wishes have been obeyed.

In a certain sense, Gardner's carefully preserved museum may be compared to a still life painting. It is a presentation of composed space and an arrested moment. Both still life paintings and museums in general are often described as acts of preservation, attempts to arrest time and hold objects in permanent stasis, against the vagaries of lived time. Susan Stewart, for example, writes that the still life conceals "history and temporality," engaging "an illusion of timelessness. The message of the still life is that nothing changes" (Stewart 29). Writing on still life paintings, Marc Blanchard notes that the stillness is experienced often as a "minor mood" (Marc Blanchard 277). Viewers find the paintings elegiac or mournful. There is an element of the funereal to the Gardner Museum as well. Visitors move slowly and quietly through the galleries. Some of the spaces are very dimly lit, draped in heavy fabrics and tapestries, and constructed of or furnished with wood darkened with age. The museum could be viewed as a dead space or a space of the dead in which Gardner's absence is perpetually mourned, an effect that is heightened by the presence of portraits of Gardner in nearly every room.

The absence of a human subject, notes Blanchard, may inform a viewer's initial perception of a still life painting. Lacking a human figure, a still life is (mis)understood often as "denying human presence" and lacking in meaning (Marc Blanchard 277, 278). Blanchard proceeds to explain that upon encountering the display of objects in a still life painting, a viewer's first impulse is to locate the person charged with displaying the objects. The drive to link the representations of objects with a human agent belies a desire to derive meaning from our understanding of the agent's relationship to the objects (Marc Blanchard 278).

If I entertain the notion of Isabella Stewart Gardner's museum as a still life, Blanchard's argument is evident in the constant quest, iterated in all written accounts of the museum including my own, for Gardner's intent. Visitors constantly formulate hypotheses regarding the

meaning of Gardner's display choices, the speculations aimed at resolving the ambiguity in the presentation by discovering her purpose. According to Blanchard, the effort to make meaning of a still life by attributing the purpose to a human agent is an attempt to make sense of the still life by reconstructing a story from outside its limits (Marc Blanchard 278).

In Chapter One, I described Gardner's placement of a swatch of fabric from a ball gown next to Titian's Rape of Europa, one of the most puzzling and frequently noted juxtapositions in the museum. One way I might make sense of the puzzle is to draw on my knowledge of the myth represented in the content of the painting and construct a story about Gardner's swatch of fabric in terms of it. In doing so, I convey meaning on the object(s) through reference to a prior and external narrative text; meaning is authorized by a "conceptual reference to [a] time past" (Marc Blanchard 288). For Blanchard, "time past" is when the objects are something other than they are presently, i.e., as produced here and now in the viewer's encounter with them. In time past, the fabric swatch was a Charles Worth ball gown. The objects on display in a still life are presumed to derive their meaning only in terms of their previous contexts or functions as dictated by the agents charged with their display or use. Blanchard calls this the object-in-context (Marc Blanchard 293). In this interpretive maneuver, the representation of the objects in a still life serves to construct the narrative space of the subject (Marc Blanchard 279). The museum is read as Gardner's diary for example.

Blanchard's point is that in still life paintings access to time past is blocked. Still life paintings deliberately sever the objects from their context, stifling an interpretation of objects based solely on how they relate to human subjects. Instead, still life paintings urge the viewer to reckon with the object produced in the here and now, the object out-of-context, the object on display. In a still life, display is on display, and it presents itself as obsessed with the pertinence

of objects and their details (Marc Blanchard 293). The deliberate, obsessive, and detailed presentational mode makes itself “both the condition and limit of its understanding” (Marc Blanchard 297). Similarly, Gardner’s museum performs itself as a deliberate presentation where authorial intent can be constructed through imaginative conjecture only. Since my knowledge of her time past is effectively blocked, my attention is directed to my encounter with the details of the objects as displayed. I take note, for example, of how the tassels imprinted in the fabric echo and amplify the tasseled tail of Titian’s bull. Blanchard concludes by suggesting that, in this way, still life painting praises the virtues of description (Marc Blanchard 277). Eliding narrative resolution based on the actions of an agent, the still life presents the viewer with the “open vagaries of the unknown” and the indeterminacy of things without “apparent function or finality” (Marc Blanchard 286, 287).

#### Rembrandt’s Black Hat

A portrait of a young man.  
A *young* man?  
You will ask.  
I know.  
How old is this man?  
The age of the oil or the age of the artist?  
An adult.  
But  
Younger than I.  
I am thirty-seven years old.  
A portrait of a man of indeterminate age.  
If pressed  
I guess  
Between seventeen and thirty-seven.  
This man wears  
A black hat  
Perched squarely  
On his indeterminately aged head.  
It resembles a deflated soufflé.  
The hat. Not the head.  
It reminds me of an architectural structure  
From art appreciation class,

A photograph  
Of a building  
On a slide  
On a screen  
In an auditorium  
With surprisingly plush seats.  
The comfortable seats  
Combined with  
Brisk air conditioning  
And  
Dimmed lights  
Periodically  
Caused  
Me  
    To  
        Doze  
            Off.

Perhaps this is why  
I no longer remember  
The location of the building  
Or the name of its builder  
But I remember the image  
And I remember that it resembled a deflated soufflé  
And I remember that deflated soufflés invariably remind me of my favorite childhood book  
*Ginny and the Cooking Contest* where the rising action of the plot revolves around the possible  
deflation of a soufflé.  
Although I didn't remember any of this at all  
Until just now  
When I tried to draw a hat.

The man's hat has sprouted a plume.  
A large brown and white plume  
Growing stubbornly from one side of the hat  
Reaching upwards  
And  
Curving downwards  
Over the top of the man's head.  
A red spherical ruby  
Is nestled into the front of the soufflé  
Its shape inflected by a glint of light.  
Hair bursts from under the cap.  
Frizzy curls  
Exceeding  
Its dimensions.  
The man's nose is rather bulbous.  
He looks.

Eyes round.  
Lips parted.  
He looks as though he has been startled.  
He looks as though  
He is about to  
Speak.  
He looks  
With  
All  
Of  
The  
Energy  
Contained  
In that  
Moment  
In the inhale  
Across  
Silence.  
At an empty frame.  
And I wonder  
What he has witnessed.

The empty frame hangs on the opposite wall  
Floating silently  
Before green brocade wallpaper.  
The wallpaper is not contained within the frame  
But slithers behind and beyond  
The gilded wood  
Slipping its clutches  
Rounding the corners  
And enveloping the room.  
The frame  
Contains  
Nothing.  
Within the stillness of the museum  
Within the silence of the Dutch Room  
Is a frame  
Which contains  
Nothing.  
The portrait of the artist  
Lips slightly parted  
Caught in a startled catch of the breath  
Looks across the frozen moment  
To a place where nothing happens.  
Once  
there was a storm on the Sea of Galilee



Raging water pitching a boat forward violently  
All movement  
The eye as well  
Swelling  
And  
Cascading downward  
To the  
Impish figure  
Clutching the rail  
At the prow of the ship  
The figure who seems to be looking back at the viewer  
Who seems not to belong in this Biblical scene  
Who seems  
To be  
Smiling.  
Where once there was all this  
This  
Painting  
This stormy sea scene  
This Rembrandt  
Where once  
A Rembrandt looked upon a Rembrandt  
Considering his own grinning visage  
Clutching  
At the prow of that holy ship  
Sharing the stage with Jesus of Nazareth  
Indeed upstaging him  
With his incongruous smile  
With his incongruous self  
Where once there was this storm  
Now there are only  
The parted lips  
The frozen moment  
The empty frame  
And a deflated soufflé.

#### An Eccentric Scholar

Performative writing collapses the boundary between practice and product, or experiment and result (Gingrich-Philbrook 304). I understand both the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum and this dissertation project to be experiments in the practice and production of representations. I also have come to understand the practices of collecting and display and research gathering and

writing as similarly intertwined. Furthermore, these practices are situated and embodied practices that reflect only one among many ways of engaging and producing knowledge about the world. Della Pollock suggests that performative writing opens possibilities for interventions into the conventional circulation of representations (Pollock, “Performing Writing” 75). According to Peggy Phelan, as enacted through writing, this circulation of representations relies on the “reproduction of the Same” (Phelan 149). Writing “relies on a substitutional economy in which equivalences are assumed and reestablished” and differences negated (Phelan 149-150). Furthermore, through recourse to transcendent structures of meaning, representation modeled on reproduction often privileges textual strategies of analysis and upholds untenable binaries between text and body.

Writing as performance, however, “writing as doing” in Pollock’s words, can become a productive strategy for resisting the sedimentation of meaning inherently problematic in writing and the recourse to meaning as (only) textual (Pollock, “Performing Writing” 75; Gray vii). Performance as a framework for academic interrogation means an insistence on embodiment, situation, localization, and specification of the critic and the object of inquiry (Rusted 117).

As Lesa Lockford states, as human agents experiencing the world, we have capacity for knowledges beyond the indexical (Lockford xi). Affective and somatic, visceral and instinctive knowledges are a part of aesthetic experience. Although such knowledge may seem fleeting and resist “definitional clarity,” they are in fact palpable and captivating (Lockford xi). It may be productive then for the scholar who wishes to investigate aesthetic objects and the attending experiences to see her own practice of scholarship as an aesthetic practice. Engaging aesthetic practices via aesthetic practice highlights the making of art – the activities of painting, creating display, writing and performing – as a phenomenological practice of knowledge production

(Rusted 118). Performative writing promotes an understanding of writing-language-art as not transcendent but immanent to material practices and the ongoing experience of being in the world.

In visual culture studies, the difficulties and problems posed by writing about images and visual experience are particularly cogent. Purely textual approaches to the image cannot account for the fullness of the sensory experience that is vision. As Brian Massumi states in Parables for the Virtual,

Approaches to the image in its relation to language are incomplete if they operate only on the semantic or semiotic level, however that level is defined (linguistically, logically, narratologically, ideologically, or all of these in combination, as a symbolic). What they lose precisely is the expression event. (Massumi 27)

That event, the multiplicity of desire and affect, becomes overcoded through the tradition of analysis that Deleuze and Guattari call “interpretosis” (Colebrook 134). The contagion of interpretosis has shown itself in visual cultural studies through the emphasis on hermeneutics and meaning. Mindy Fenske argues that this content driven interpretive goal effaces other modes of encountering visual events and places viewer and image within a fixed style of interaction; as Mitchell phrases it, through the repeated posing of the question, “What does this image mean?” (Fenske, “The Movement of Interpretation” 141 & 143; Mitchell, “What Do Pictures Really Want?” 71). Like Massumi, Mitchell argues that this is not an “adequate conception of visuality” and suggests that we need to find other ways within our writing to understand images as complex, irreducible to sign or discourse, and as occupying many subject positions (Mitchell, “What Do Pictures Really Want?” 82). In “Writing on Art (Case Study: The Buddhist Puja),” Simon O’Sullivan states that we need to seek out a kind of writing that affirms the work of art. Writing that does not attempt to capture the image within language but seeks to follow it as a line

of flight that produces the possibilities for other adventures and other events (O'Sullivan, "Writing on Art" 115-116).

One starting point for this type of experiment, suggests Mitchell, is to replace the question "What does this image mean?" with "What does this image want?" In doing so, we imaginatively confer agency on an image, which, Mitchell recognizes, is to succumb to a bit of magic. He acknowledges that to speculate as to the desire of a picture hearkens to premodern traditions of animism and iconoclasm, which held to superstitions regarding the power of images. However, as Mitchell points out, images do have a power over us as evidenced by the way we speak of them. "A picture held us captive" (Mitchell, Picture Theory 12).

Like Mitchell, granting agency to an image is a fiction I am willing to entertain. I have tried in my work to acknowledge my fascination with the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum and to start from there. I have asked the museum to tell me how to proceed. This is an experiment in method that has as its foundation the argument that performative writing, as method and product, be tied to the object of research. "The style of performative engagement with an issue or event is intimately connected to the event itself" (Fenske, "The Movement of Interpretation" 140). Fenske's statement infers that in some way the research object should dictate the method and form of experimentation, that it should be the catalyst for a line of flight. In "Looking for Stonewall's Arm," Michael Bowman cites Roland Barthes's recognition that philosophical knowledge is more pleasurable when it begins with the sensuous material object to see what ideas might emerge (M. Bowman 124). Bowman enacts this form of knowledge production in his essay as his arguments emerge through recounting and performing on the page his search for Stonewall's elusive arm.

Working in this way entails a disposition of openness or passivity on the part of the scholar, a disposition also termed as “haunting” by Avery Gordon, “radical passivity” by Avital Ronell, and one which figures prominently in Gregory Ulmer’s heuretic methods.<sup>1</sup> It is important to note however that this attitude of passivity does not negate responsibility. The position of openness rather is a willingness to approach the work without a predetermined path or resolution, to take de Certeau’s walk in the city, or to meander as described by Fenske. It is the performance of a scholar who is willing to let herself be caught by surprises, follow digressions, and to play along with the Duck-Rabbit.

Svetlana Alpers sees this disposition of passivity in the work of artists such as Vermeer. By attending to detail, Vermeer crafts a perceptual and sensual experience that exposes the viewer to “the crowded indeterminacy of things” and “rouses the mind to invention” (Alpers 47). The ability of description to slow and extend time and space, to create a moment of focused attention “provides access to the multidimensional complexity of encountering a performance or text” (Fenske, “The Movement of Interpretation” 147). Crafting description requires and displays itself as care (Alpers xxi). Care attends to detail, affects, and resonances in one’s interaction with the world and in the production of scholarship and art. Care is evident in Gardner’s careful placement of a vase of violets next to the Giorgione Christ Carrying the Cross and in the construction of the Spanish Cloister to house Sargent’s flamenco dancer. I also see care in Gardner’s placement of Sir William and Lady Butts under the romantic tapestry of A Man and Woman in a Garden, thereby substantiating the fondness of expression Mr. Butts bears towards his wife.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Gordon, Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination; Ronell, The UberReader: Selected Works of Avital Ronell; Ulmer, Heuristics: The Logic of Invention.

## Vermeer's The Concert

A red chair back shaped like a flag. A young woman in profile seated at a piano. Sunlight enters the room from the viewer's left, bathing the woman's back in light. Her face is shadowed. Brown hair pulled tightly into a bun on the back of her head. Two pale pink bows, one on the bun itself, one at the side of her head over her ear. The bow drapes loosely, flops softly. From her ear dangles a droplet shaped pearl. The white of the pearl catches the sunlight. Around her neck a strand of pearls fastened with white ribbon at the nape. The bodice of the dress is pale marigold with black trim. Her voluminous white skirt flares from her waist concealing the lower half of her body. Folds of white fabric extend from crisp pleats to billow and bloom and swell. Her two arms are outstretched, clothed in bountiful yellow sleeves that cinch just below the elbow. Her hands hang suspended just over the keyboard. A red chair back. A trapezoidally skewed rectangle. The orangey red is the most saturated at the center of the rectangle and gradually lightens towards its edges. One corner is flecked with dots of brown and white, which suggest chipping. A woman stands facing the viewer's left but her body is cheated out ever so slightly. Her downstage hand holds a white sheet of paper from which she appears to be reading. Her upstage hand is held palm facing the viewer, thumb pointed upward, fingers slightly curled inward, frozen mid gesture. Her jacket and skirt are pale blue trimmed with what appears to be white fur. At her neck, a strand of pearls. Her eyes are lidded as she looks downward at the paper she holds. Her lips are parted slightly. Her blonde hair is pulled back and small ringlets are visible at the nape of her neck. A red chair back. A man sits in the chair with his back to the viewer. His dark brown hair hangs in ringlets draping onto his upper shoulders. His brown clothing conceals the details of his figure and adds bulk to it. A sash of muted gold drapes from his right shoulder diagonally to his left hip. Over his left shoulder, a hand. The white cuff of a sleeve. The hand is holding the neck of a stringed instrument. The back of the chair is a bright red rectangle, slightly skewed. A woman's hand, mid gesture. The thumb slopes gently downward connecting to the base of an open hand. Four fingers curve inward and cast a shadow on the palm. An ample yellow sleeve balloons over the piano keyboard. Soft folds in the fabric cascade from shoulder to elbow. The yellow shifts in the sunlight. Buttercup daffodil saffron amber mustard sunflower canary golden rod. A pearl drop earring visible on her downstage ear glints in the light. Vertical convex curvature veers into a horizontal ellipse which scoops under and around a bulbous base then continues upward in a concave arc to form a shape filled with bright white flecked with blue and red. A red chair back. A black and white square tiled floor. The tiles are not arranged in an alternating pattern but rather a pattern whereby the black tiles form the shape of crosses. A woman's back bathed in sunlight. A landscape painting in a thick black frame. Silhouetted trees against a blue and white sky. A pop of white. The cuff of a sleeve. A red chair back. A red and dark blue tapestry laid across the corner of a large, blonde wood table. A stringed instrument is placed on top of the fabric. The carved head of the instrument is closest to the viewer. Sunlight reflects off of the glossy surface of the tuning keys. The instrument recedes from the viewer. The shape of the bridge is discernable, as are the climb and descent of the strings stretched across it. An open piano lid. Silhouetted trees against a blue and white sky. A shadowy painting in a thick black frame. The painting contains three figures. Two men and a woman. The woman's chest is framed by the scooped neckline of her dress. One man wears a black hat and is bearded. The second man is in profile. Folds of white fabric. A red chair back. A black cane stretches diagonally to the floor. Another stringed instrument is partially hidden by the tapestry covered table. Strings. A bridge. An f-hole. A black tiled cross.

## Too Blue

The opening paragraph of “Diverging Paths in Performance Genealogies” by Ruth Laurion Bowman paints an image of the author resting in the shade afforded by the buildings of the LSU Rural Life Museum, seeking respite from the south Louisiana heat (R. Bowman 163). The introduction to “Performing Visual Discourse: Cowboy Art and Institutional Practice” by Brian Rusted similarly describes a scene in which the author curls up on a sofa in a cabin, in this case trying to warm himself against the encroaching cold (Rusted 115). Descriptive passages like these are encountered frequently in essays that utilize performative writing techniques. The purpose typically is to forward an understanding of research and composition as embodied and to situate it spatially and temporally. Writing to situate the scholar’s labor disrupts the tendency of the monograph to make the researcher appear as disembodied and as empirically objective.

In an essay evaluating critical autoethnography, a style of writing often aligned with performative writing, Donald Shields attempts to parody descriptive passages like those I mentioned above. Shields’s critique is based on his understanding of critical autoethnography less as a practice than a “special theory” (Shields 398). He seeks to understand how and in what instances autoethnography as theory can be applied to objective reality in order to produce a functionalized sense of knowledge, i.e. knowledge that “eradicates disease and eliminates poverty” (Shields 397). On the one hand, Shields posits autoethnographic stories as symbolic facts that can be shared socially to construct communal rules that govern behavior in a given community. Hence, the sharing of discourse as symbolic fantasy has a functionalized meaning or use. On the other hand, Shields proposes that the stories provide a context for the scholar-as-hero who crusades against institutional hierarchies and structures (Shields 402). In this formulation, the plot of the rebel scholar takes priority over the descriptive passages, which serve

only an ornamental purpose in setting the scene. In his own writing, Shields describes himself thumbing through and marking various essays, cross-referencing texts, eating donuts, drinking beer, having a telephone conversation with colleagues, and petting his cat. Shields's tone is openly mocking and the passages he pens substantiate his dismissal of autoethnography as legitimate scholarship. However, in his rush to parody, he ignores or elides how description actually operates in the writings of those he targets.

Shields's neglect of description echoes similar views of description in literary theory. In his essay "Memory and Description in the Ancient Novel," Steve Nimis argues that description has been functionalized or cast aside as merely ornamental in some approaches to narrative. On the one hand, theorists have engaged an instrumental view of description where it serves as an authorial strategy for creating a functional schema that regulates interpretation. Alternatively, within interpretive elucidations of narrative, descriptions and digressions are discounted as ornamental (Nimis 100). They merely set a scene for human actions within an "already well-plotted narrative" (Nimis 101). These sentiments are echoed further in Marc Blanchard's writings about still life, Susan Stewart's understanding of description in *On Longing*, and Svetlana Alpers' statements regarding the misinterpretation or dismissal of Dutch painting. Again and again, description is disparaged as "merely" ornamental and decorative, or it is functionalized in terms of furthering the plot or providing an interpretive or symbolic schema.

In the essay "Where the Bodies are Buried: Cartesian Dispositions in Narrative Theories of Character," Genie Babb recuperates description from these viewpoints by outlining the way the body figures into descriptive passages. Babb argues that description grows out of and enacts embodiment through language. Her understanding of embodiment is drawn from Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological perspective of embodiment as a "bodily being-in-the-world" (Babb



199). Being-in-the-world is the being of the lived body as it interacts with its environment. Embodiment is the body's experience of orienting itself in and engaging the world through the mutually constitutive faculties of cognition and perception (Babb 199). This conception of embodiment is illustrated clearly in the body of the eccentric observer who experiments with movement in an effort to see and make sense of an anamorphic image.

To support her understanding of the ways description enacts embodiment, Babb draws on Husserl's phenomenological theory of the body as being comprised of two aspects: *Körper* and *Leib* (Babb 198). *Körper* refers to the "physical, objectified body," the body which can be made into an object of representation, the body on display (Babb 198). Babb argues that when description is put to use to classify and differentiate objects of the world, it enacts *Körper*. In discussing The Concert, one of the interviewees in Dreyfus' documentary mentions the singer's hand, which is captured mid gesture. I might describe the same hand further by noting that her palm is turned toward the viewer, her thumb is pointed upward, and her fingers are slightly curled inward, casting a shadow on the open palm. The creation of sensory taxonomies, such as spatial relation concepts, derives from how our bodies interact with the environment (Babb 201). Orientations such as horizontal and vertical placement, straight versus curved, adjacency, and contact are categories and distinctions that we rely on to function within the world (Babb 201).

*Leib*, on the other hand, is the lived sensation of embodiment (Babb 198). Within narrative, description enacts *Leib* in that it presumes a perceiving body. The description that classifies the relation of the palm to the viewer emanates from a lived body that has discerned this through her senses, that is, the description enacts the embodiment of the narrator.

"Descriptive passages bespeak not only the objective sights and sounds but also the perceptual mechanism of apprehending those sights and sounds" (Babb 203). Additionally, description can

make available the narrator's embodied experience through reporting movement, interoception, and visceral and affective experience (Babb 203). The narrative voice in Ruth Bowman's article informs us that her leg itches and that she feels hot (R. Bowman 163). This is not a description that emanates from an objective and totalizing vision of the world but one that reports an embodied experience.

Within writing, the deployment of these types of passages can be put to use to call attention to perception and embodiment. In the essay "Ut Pictura Poesis: Vermeer's Challenge to Renaissance Literary Assumptions," Anne Hurley expands on Alpers' work to explore the way description aggressively asserts sensual experience and the materiality of the world by enforcing perceptual attention before conceptual processing (Hurley 352). As an example, she calls upon instances in Vermeer's paintings where the inclusion of the optical effects such as circles of confusion make the legibility of words or the distinction of objects impossible. The blurring of words on a map for example makes the viewer's conceptual processing of what the map represents futile. Hurley argues that through eliding or disrupting conceptual processing where it is possible, Vermeer calls our attention to our perceptual and sensory experiences, presenting the sensory flux that characterizes lived experience (Hurley 355). Similarly, although the reader of Bowman's article is told that her leg itches, we are never told what if anything this means. The elision of "meaning" urges the reader to attend to the embodied experience and labor of the scholar as well as her own conceptual uncertainty. Hurley proceeds to suggest that rather than arrest flux, description has the power to accentuate it, particularly if not held in check and that this potential toward excess in any description is held back by narrative. If left unchecked, description threatens to drift into the meaningless, non-signifying flux of the merely perceptual (Hurley 355).

In The Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey, Hans Gumbrecht investigates the relationship between what he terms “meaning effects” and “presence effects.” Meaning effects are conceptual processes performed through the work of signification, discourse, and hermeneutics for example. Gumbrecht refers to the complex entanglement of sensation, affect, and kinesthetics as presence effects. He argues that lived experience, the experience of being in the world, is characterized by the oscillation between meaning effects and presence effects (Gumbrecht 107). In other words, they always appear together but are always in tension (Gumbrecht 105). Gumbrecht acknowledges that one of the challenges faced by scholars in the arts and humanities is to find a way to think and write about presence effects, which are an ephemeral yet powerful part of lived experience and, for Gumbrecht, a central feature of aesthetic experience (Gumbrecht 54, 58).

As it pertains to aesthetic experience, Gumbrecht names the tangible yet elusive tangle of presence effects “epiphany” (Gumbrecht 94). He defines epiphany as a moment of intensity that emerges suddenly, demanding our attention, and often receding as quickly. As with Mitchell’s view that an image can hold us captive, epiphany creates a paradoxical experience and event where we find ourselves fascinated without knowing the source of fascination (Gumbrecht 100). For Gumbrecht, then, epiphany is not a revelation, realization, or resolution of meaning. Rather, it is the affectively charged extra of aesthetic experience.

In Parables for the Virtual, Brian Massumi dubs this affectively charged extra of experience “too blue.” He recounts a story of an empirical research experiment in which the subjects were asked to match colors from objects in memory to those of color patches within a laboratory. The objects in memory were “intimate everyday objects...charged with layers of interest and affect,” such as the blue of a friend’s eyes (Massumi 208). What the researcher

discovered was that the test subjects invariably selected color patches that exceeded the actual color of the object in some way, too saturated for example, too blue. Used as a trigger by the researcher, the word blue did not function neutrally but displayed an exaggeration or excess produced through the co-functioning of language, affect, and memory. The inaccuracies always came as a surprise to the test subjects. Massumi uses this story as an example of the pushiness or vivacity of experience, its ability to insert itself surprisingly, arriving seemingly out of nowhere, into a standardized context. Too blue expresses itself as an excess or a remainder. As Massumi puts it, the blue of a friend's eyes was striking; color had struck (Massumi 211).

#### An Ongoing Investigation

“Certain details may ‘prick’ me” (Barthes, Camera Lucida 47).

An obsessed art investigator who wears an eye patch, a bowler hat, and a prosthetic nose to conceal skin ravaged by cancer devotes the last years of his life to searching for the stolen Gardner paintings (Stolen).

The empty picture frames dominate the Dutch Room of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. Like Barthes's *punctum*, they create the wound, the little holes, that display a power of expansion in their ability to fill in the picture of that room (Barthes, Camera Lucida 27). Other than the few descriptions offered in this chapter, I remember little else of the Dutch Room. I am struck by the green wallpaper as seen through the gaping holes of the empty frames. I remember the surprise of encountering empty frames accompanied by small signs that simply state, “Stolen. March 18<sup>th</sup> 1990.” I recall Rembrandt's self-portrait staring open mouthed at the place where his stormy sea scene once hung. Lastly, I note the presence and placement of Sir and Lady Butts, incapable of guarding the door.

I have puzzled over what to say about the theft and empty frames. Their presence is a shock for any visitor who is unfamiliar with the recent history of the museum, as I was on my first visit. They defamiliarized my experience, calling into question my assumptions about museums as informed by past experiences. They made my habits of viewing strange. But in this museum, they are only one of so many oddities and disturbances. There are so many *punctums*, if you will, launching my desire to see more. And so, following Mitchell's advice, I asked the missing paintings of their desire.

A British art thief turned police informant calls himself the Turbocharger or the Turb for short. The name reflects his excessive energy, which he claims is natural not pharmaceutical, all the while fidgeting and sweating profusely. The Turb lives in a one room flat where he proudly displays his art collection, an eclectic mix of paintings and statuettes. Viewed in their surroundings, it is impossible to determine whether the pieces are valuable or flea market finds. They are covered in dust and cobwebs, amid dirty dishes and trash overflowing on the floor. The Turb has a plan for the recovery of the stolen art that entails high level negotiations between Senator Ted Kennedy and the IRA (Stolen).

I have never seen Vermeer's The Concert or Rembrandt's Storm on the Sea of Galilee at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. I have come to know these paintings only as they have been produced through a field of representations including but not limited to digital reproductions, the descriptions in Calle's work and Dreyfus's documentary, accounts of the ongoing investigation, and art historical scholarship. When I look at visual reproductions of the paintings, they don't hold any particular fascination for me. I don't experience the same epiphany, to borrow Gumbrecht's term, as I do in my response to the slash of light in The

Omnibus or the arm akimbo in Sargent's El Jaleo. However, I have developed a fascination for the paintings through the fascination of others.

Although writing on stolen artworks and empty frames would seem to invite meditations on absence, loss, and the desire for recovery, the paintings are not absent for me. They are present and palpable inasmuch as they have been produced through this field of representations. These figural paintings are as material to me as if I were standing before paint on canvas. My response to them is no doubt different than it might have been had I visited the museum before the theft or than it will be if the paintings are recovered. It is, however, no less embodied. In figuring out what to say about the theft and the empty frames, I started with sensuous material objects that weren't there.

A teacher from the United States traveling in Japan spots one painting in the home of a wealthy and eccentric Japanese artist. When FBI agents arrive at his door, he ushers them into a ballroom to show them the reproduction that has hung there for forty years and then invites them to stay for tea (Blumenthal).

Sometimes I like to imagine I exit the museum through those empty frames. Walk right through them and follow the paintings on their subsequent adventures. I join the ongoing investigation not in the hopes of recovering the stolen paintings but to discover what their absence might teach me about my ongoing representational practices.

In "Narrators at Work," an unpublished manuscript, Mary Frances HopKins discusses the relationship of a narrator to the time of the events in the narrated story. She observes,

Traditional theories assumed that the story itself, the history ended in the past, recent or distant, and that the narrator's choices were a matter of decisions such as how much time to allocate to each part of the story, how much to repeat and in how much detail, and what order to use in the telling. In the narrator's mind, the events of the story had reached closure, an ending. (HopKins 39)

HopKins then draws upon John Allison's essay, "Narrative and Time: A Phenomenological Reconsideration," to discuss narratives in which the narrator constructs a story that is ongoing, in which the events being recounted have not yet reached a conclusion. In such cases, the narrator's primary objective for telling the story may be to figure it out for herself. Narratization is the term HopKins and Allison use for the attempt to order into a story experiences one does not yet fully understand (HopKins 39). "The narrator of a narratization is dealing with uncertainty" (HopKins 40). Narrating, then, becomes a kind of working through. In this way, the act of writing as a process of narratization can be seen as an attempt by the narrator to understand her ongoing experiences. The narrator performs as the eccentric observer trying to formulate some oblique logic with which to make sense of things.

A reporter for the Boston Herald, obsessed with the theft, is mysteriously contacted and driven to an abandoned warehouse under the cover of darkness. There, by flashlight, he is shown one of the stolen paintings. The next day his headline proclaims, "We've Seen It" (Mashberg). The museum remains oddly silent on the matter.

In Picture Theory, W. J. T. Mitchell considers the desires revealed by ekphrastic practice, that is, the verbal representation (e.g., in poetry or narrative description) of visual representation. He argues that the fascination with ekphrasis stems, in part, from the reader's desire for the writing to disappear allowing unmediated access to the visual representation (Mitchell, Picture Theory 152). According to Mitchell, this ekphrastic hope goes hand in hand with the knowledge of its impossibility. "Words can 'cite,' but never 'sight' their objects" (Mitchell, Picture Theory 152). Mitchell argues that we often suppose an essential difference between language and images as communicative mediums in the sense that there are particular forms of expressions or communicative actions proper to one or the other. He challenges this notion by citing instances

in which images can be understood to perform “speech acts,” as has been argued of Van Eyck’s Arnolfini marriage portrait (Mitchell, Picture Theory 160-161). Although, states Mitchell, there are obvious practical differences between visual and verbal media, “from the standpoint of referring, expressing intentions and producing effects in a viewer/listener, there is no essential difference between texts and images” (Mitchell, Picture Theory 160).

The descriptive Dutch paintings, the descriptions produced by Calle’s and Dreyfus’s interviewees, and my descriptions here are social practices. They are less objects than processes. They are acts of relay and exchange between and among writers and readers, painters and viewers, images and texts. These representations emerge from the performative play in the interaction between a viewer and artwork, transform and perform that interaction, and pass it along to an audience.

A Vermeer biographer contemplates the reproduction of The Concert printed within the pages of the book he has written and weeps (Stolen).

In Camera Lucida, Roland Barthes discusses a photograph of his mother that he calls the Winter Garden Photograph. In describing his own process of viewing the image he says that he lingers over it: “I decompose, I enlarge, and, so to speak, I *retard*, in order to have time to *know* at last” (Barthes, Camera Lucida 99; emphasis in original). Barthes chooses not to reproduce the photograph in the pages of Camera Lucida but in reflecting upon the image and his relationship to it through writing he reenacts his practices of spectating and seeing, decomposing, enlarging and slowing down time. He lingers, transforms lingering, and passes it on to the reader.

Authorities question a screenwriter who had a hand in a bungled museum robbery eleven years prior to the Gardner theft citing striking similarities. Instead of a police uniform, the screenwriter disguised himself as a Fedex deliveryman (Honan). The screenwriter is eventually



eliminated as a suspect, but reveling in the attention, he gives multiple interviews to media outlets and begins work on a screenplay about an art theft from a private collection (Blumenthal).

There is an expression event in writing too. There are epiphanies and there are details, which I mistakenly remember as too blue.

One painting is spotted in Las Vegas. At the Bellagio Hotel and Casino (Stolen).

I can't show you paintings that I have never seen.

The requisite psychic calls to offer her services (Blumenthal).

But sometimes, the details that prick others prick me too.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **“THANK YOU. PLEASE COME AGAIN.”**

It is February again as I write this. Yesterday as the snow clouds moved in overhead, dozens of small brown birds darted frantically among the lower branches of the bare trees at the far end of my backyard. I stood on my back porch and watched the small nervous birds swoop and settle and soar and call out to one another. I wondered whether they were finches. The word seemed to suit their behavior. I experimented with the infinitive: to finch. Before I could use it in a sentence, my attention was diverted by the sudden appearance of a great blue heron. His long sleek body cut a path across the fat snow heavy sky. He flew past me but just as he was about to disappear from sight he seemed to change his mind. The heron curved back and spiraled down into my backyard and landed on the lowest branch of a tall naked tree. I stared transfixed at the three foot tall bird, and I was torn between my desire to watch him to see what he would do next and a competing desire to take a photograph, largely as proof of his presence. The need for evidence won out, and I dashed inside, grabbed my camera, and ran back out. I removed the lens cap and just as I lifted the camera to my eye, the heron spread his wings and assumed a flight path perpendicular to his previous line of flight, quickly disappearing from sight. As I stared after him, snow started to fall.

Many years ago, when I still lived in south Louisiana, I was given a stage direction during a performance rehearsal that made no sense to me. The director asked several of us in the ensemble to adjust the quality of our movements so as to evoke the sensation and experience of snow. At that point in my life I had never experienced snow. As I watched the bodies and motions of my cast members transform, I puzzled over what “snow” could mean. I pictured holiday greeting cards and Frosty’s corn cob pipe and Rudolph’s glowing nose. I heard Bing Crosby dreaming of a white Christmas while roasting chestnuts on an open fire. I knew what

snow ostensibly looked like but I didn't know what it felt like. For me, at that time, the word "snow" failed to evoke any affective response (other than perhaps envy directed toward those who had these mysterious white Christmases and toward my cast mates who seemed to know what to do). My response to the word snow has altered since. One thing that strikes me is that from an aesthetic perspective, snow is not just a visual experience but also an auditory one. With snow, there seems to be a distinct silence or dampening of sound. The last time it snowed I wrote this haiku to work through the lack of sound:

Felt absence of sound  
Beuys felt art experience  
Underwater felt

In Camera Lucida, Roland Barthes compares the haiku to the photograph. For Barthes, the haiku performs similarly to the *punctum*. It offers a detail that can be grasped but does not lend itself to rhetorical expansion in the way that the *studium* does (Barthes, Camera Lucida 49). The detail given by the haiku or the *punctum* Barthes describes alternately as "an intense mutation of interest" and a "tiny shock... at once brief and active" (Barthes, Camera Lucida 49). An absence of sound that can be felt. A dampening of sound with felt. The expansion of felt when damp. Underwater sound. Submerge. Surround. Drown.

Barthes's descriptions of the *punctum* lead me to understand it as an affective event. Brian Massumi characterizes affect as an intensity manifested in the body "at its interface with things" (Massumi 25). Barthes states that the *punctum* "pricks" him. Similarly, Massumi draws upon Spinoza's definition of affect as an impingement upon the body (Massumi 31). Affective experience is understood generally to be extra-textual and pre-subjective. Like Barthes's *punctum*, it does not hold up under scrutiny. As Massumi puts it, once a subject attempts to

capture affect through recourse to emotion or by transforming it into narrative content, she will find “that something has always and again escaped” (Massumi 35).

The communicability of affect has been of particular interest in performance studies and visual studies as it has been understood to be an important part of sensual aesthetic experience. “The problem is that there is no cultural-theoretical vocabulary specific to affect” (Massumi 27). Through her museum, Isabella Stewart Gardner found, if not a vocabulary, then a creative practice that reflects upon and highlights the affective experience of art without capturing it. Paradoxically it is through the creation of the *studium*, a collection, that the *punctum* becomes possible. Like Gardner, my challenge in this study has been to create a collection that highlights affective experience. To follow the great blue heron in its line of flight and to resist temptations to photograph it.

In Chapter One, I restaged my visits to the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. My first step in the creation of this chapter was to identify specific encounters with and within the museum that struck, perplexed, or surprised me. Then, through research and writing, I worked through these encounters forging connections between my recollection of the experiences, memories of other events, and textual accumulations of museum guides and catalogs and academic research from various disciplines. My discoveries in Chapter One emerged from the interactions between embodied experience, memory, and discourse as they informed and transformed one another.

I discovered, for example, that my encounters with the artworks in the museum were impacted most definitely by their display context. The influence of the display context became evident in the realization that the alcove that Gardner designed to showcase Sargent’s El Jaleo echoes and amplifies Sargent’s work by extending the diegetic space of the painting into the

viewer's space in the museum. Pursuing that line of thought led to the discovery that my encounter with the painting also was dependent on my past embodied experiences. Sargent's painting struck me because of its ability to activate a muscular memory that I had forgotten about until that moment. Furthermore, my conscious awareness of my proprioceptive response to the painting was spurred by and then articulated through language, that is, through the phrase "arms akimbo."

The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum emphasizes the ways in which looking at a painting is a multisensory experience that engages the entire body. Through the poetics of language, writing about images can affect a similar experience. Tpp tpp tpp tpp! Pah pah! Pah pah! Shhii shii shii shii! The sound of the language performs the ruckus of El Jaleo. Throughout the process of writing this study, I read it aloud to listen to the sound of my word choices. The writing, whether through the onomatopoeic sounds of El Jaleo or through the poetic breaks of "Rembrandt's Black Hat" in Chapter Four, emphasizes the multisensory experience and undercuts the primacy of vision.

In Chapter One, I also discussed the tendency of art museums to present themselves or to be perceived as a-historical, static, and neutral environments. The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum counters these perceptions. Through multiple visits and my process of working through the visits, I became aware of how much the museum environment changed as I toured it and how these changes impacted my experiences. Despite the fact that the collection remains largely as Gardner left it and her display practices are unaltered, the museum and the objects in it do change. The transformations became most apparent through the constant shifts in light afforded by the windows and skylight and the living garden in the museum courtyard, which as Jeanneret points out does not represent change, but is change (Jeanneret 127).

Changes also occur in the museum through the material decay of the objects. The museum is not a vacuum and the presence of visitors and the intrusion of sunlight, which Gardner so carefully considered in her placement of objects, contribute to the inevitable decay of the artifacts. Paintings too are material objects that can be understood in light of DeSilvey's concept of ecofact. Although the rate of change may occur at a much slower pace than we typically attend to in a work of art, it is no less a part of the object as process. In working through the space of the Gardner Museum, I found myself to be attentive to various temporalities that I might overlook otherwise.

As viewed from my perspective, oil paint, wood, and fabric change at a glacial speed in terms of decay. And the museum's curators attempt to slow this process even more through conservation efforts. Some of the more vulnerable paper artifacts such as drawings and letters are under glass and covered with the fabric cloths. In most cases, the fabric covers bear a sign that states, "Visitors May Lift Cover." In the Veronese Room, however, several Whistler sketches are covered due to extensive light bleaching. Their placement in the room is such that each afternoon they are illuminated by direct sunlight. Not only was I not permitted to lift the covers to view the drawings, the docent guarding them informed me that he too has never seen them.

The display context of the artifacts – meaning the museum, its composition in space, and the spatial relationship between it and the artifacts – changes at a slightly faster pace. The season and time of day impact the angle and quality of the sunlight, the plant growth in the courtyard, and the temperatures in the museum. Accordingly, the visitor may find that the artworks appear different one day as compared with the next, becoming more or less visible and taking on different hues or tones. As exemplified in my encounter with Anders Zorn's The Omnibus, the

changes in the display context may elicit a different style of engagement in the viewer as she confronts a painting, hence drawing her attention to different aspects of the work.

Lastly, the viewer herself changes. Not only did I find that my encounter with the museum and the artworks altered on each visit, influenced by my ongoing research and accumulation of knowledge, but that my disposition and expectations were changing too. My attempts to make sense of my experiences in the museum prompted constant adjustments to my practices of looking and moving in what I soon realized was a constantly changing space.

Chapter One might be viewed as an unusual beginning for a dissertation. Ordinarily, the first chapter of a dissertation provides an introduction that orients the reader as to the main topic or subject, key theories and methods, and the significance of the study. As a performative writing experiment, this study would seem to benefit most from an introductory chapter that offers the reader an explanation of performative writing before she is thrown into the midst of things. I have elected to reserve the introduction proper for Chapter Two, composing Chapter One so as to place the reader quite literally in the midst of things: at the center of the museum, in the courtyard, viewing the undulating pattern of tiles that form the Medusa mosaic.

To begin in the middle of things upsets the reader's expectations that she will be told how to proceed through the document very like the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum upset my expectations regarding how to proceed through it. I anticipated that the spatial arrangement would imply a particular path to follow. I also expected that the path would operate in conjunction with gallery names, title plates, and a visitor's map to form a certain logic I could use to make sense of the artworks. Finding myself in the middle of things, without direction, I was left with no choice but to meander. In my movements through the museum, I adopted the

role of an eccentric observer. Without an *a priori* frame through which to read the museum, I formed an oblique logic in response to and in interaction with my environment.

Similarly, Chapter One and I think the dissertation as a whole ask the reader to assume the role of an eccentric observer and to craft novel ways of reading – of reading academic research – besides or in addition to what they expect or find familiar. The generative potential of calling the reader into this style of engagement with the text lies in its ability to explicitly highlight reading as an active practice. That is, while all reading is active, I have tried to write so that the reader’s co-creation of meaning and agency are foregrounded, so that she becomes aware of her reading practices and her participation in composing the text, formulating her own oblique logic as she meanders through it.

There are potential pitfalls, of course. A reader encountering Chapter One may experience confusion, and while the confusion may be delightful for some (as was my experience in the museum), for others it might be frustrating. In asking the reader to set aside her frustrations and to continue reading the chapter, I am asking her to trust me and the performative writing process of presenting research as spectacle. Very like responses to Sargent’s El Jaleo and Gardner’s museum, research as spectacle runs the risk of being dismissed as theatrical and showy, in other words, as popular rather than serious scholarship. The phrase “all hat and no cattle” comes to mind. Even more problematic is the risk that in asking for the reader’s trust, I am perceived to be asking the reader to “just trust me,” as if I, the writer, know what I am doing although you, the reader, do not. The noted risks extend beyond the particularities of this study to larger issues concerning performative writing.

In a sense, practitioners of performative writing confront the question of how to be taken seriously but not too seriously. There is no inherent reason, of course, that a creative approach to



scholarship cannot meet standards of academic rigor. At the same time, however, one of the core commitments of many performance scholars is to call into question formulations of knowledge based on mastery. I have attended to this issue by looking to Isabella Stewart Gardner's museum for cues. There, I found a personable and playful disposition toward art and art collecting. As a visitor, I felt encouraged to settle into the moment and enjoy the experience, to meander and play along. While Gardner was a knowledgeable and serious collector of high art, her inventive and humorous display practices counter the very idea of high art, "coupling the sacred and profane" with seeming ease (Shand-Tucci 176). The staging of the Medusa legend with the stone statues in the Courtyard, the placement of The Omnibus next to the window, and the extension of El Jaleo into three dimensional space demonstrate a sophisticated reflexivity toward art and how we view it, and yet they are humorous as well. I have tried to retain this playfulness in my writing, for example, by creating a Blue Room out of as many names for the color blue that I could muster and by performing *déjà vu* through the reappearance of the docent in Chapter One. In these ways, I hope to have drawn on, performed, and generated critical theory while also questioning its authority.

Performative writing sits at the intersection of artistic and academic practice, and as such, it is subject to competing expectations and economies of value. Emerging from the conflict is the practical question of whether, as an artist-scholar, one should reveal or conceal the composition methods through which the aesthetic aspect of the work is produced. In creative work that is to be viewed and valued as Art, the artist is not expected (and often is discouraged not) to account for her choices as calling attention to the means of production interrupts the aesthetic. In contrast, a scholar is expected to demonstrate her argumentative logic in order to arrive at authoritative claims. In this study, one of my aims has been to create an affective space

for the reader and to make room for the surprising arrival of epiphany, i.e. to create an aesthetic experience. I have to question then to what extent the use of conventional analytic language following the description of the Blue Room, for example, interrupts and perhaps counters the reader's affective experience. Although performative writing calls into question the supposed division between aesthetic and academic forms, these competing claims and desires must be negotiated by any practitioner who is writing as an artist-scholar.

In Chapter Two, I provided some background information on the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. Gardner's museum provided the impetus for the study as both an investigation of how the unusual museum affects the contemporary visitor and an experiment with performative writing as a method of investigation. By displaying artworks deemed to be priceless masterpieces amid personal remnants, souvenirs, and trinkets, Gardner's museum highlights the subjective nature of collecting and display practices.

Similarly, scholarship on and as performative writing begins from the assumption that research and writing practices are subjective and contingent. In Chapter Two, I reviewed several examples of such scholarship. Taken together, the pieces encourage scholars to embrace the unpredictable and personal nature of scholarship by juxtaposing disparate discourses, making room for chance discovery, and recognizing all practices as historically situated. Rather than presume a stable and pre-constituted scholar subject capable of producing objective knowledge about an equally stable critical object, a performance method proceeds by attending to the negotiations between subjects and their objects of study where each are in a continual process of becoming, impacting and transforming one another through their ongoing engagement.

As noted earlier, a performance centered approach to material culture reveals the way those "things" we call "things" are in fact processes existing in multiple temporal contexts.

Understanding an object as a process impacts my mode of investigation, turning my attention to how the object comes into being and what it *does* as it encounters other objects, subjects, or processes. In my negotiations with the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, it became clear that subjects do not only act upon the material world, but are acted upon in turn. My encounters with “things” train my body to move differently and add to my repertoire of memories. Things mark me and leave their traces.

Writing and reading are material processes too, and like the Gardner Museum, they are not static. Just as a museum visitor transforms as she moves through the museum environment, so too can a reader as she meanders through a text adjusting her disposition and expectations as she experiences the changing circumstances of the text. Additionally, the material instantiation of a text can come to bear on the reader’s engagements with it. One might consider, for example, the material differences between reading an online version of a dissertation and the printed pages. Furthermore, the written word is not as permanent as we might be inclined to think. Paper is certainly fragile, susceptible to the elements and decay; digital text is easily manipulated and transformed. Finally, the argumentative style of the monograph is not rhetorically neutral. Any style of writing presumes a particular set of assumptions regarding how knowledge is created and shared. In expository writing, the writer often attempts to erase the subjective self in order to claim objective mastery. At the same time, writing complicates this erasure inasmuch as the position of scholar subject becomes the privileged position in relation to the object, which the scholar subject identifies through writing.

In her museum, Isabella Stewart Gardner highlighted her subjective voice through the inclusion of personal items like the remnant of fabric and through the placement of numerous portraits throughout the museum. The images of Gardner serve as a continuous reminder of the

personal nature of the museum and undercut claims to historical objectivity. Similarly, this study draws heavily on personal discourse as it argues for value in careful attention to the particular as a means to question the assumption that knowledge production lies only in the formation of abstract theories or laws. At the same time, however, Gardner lords over her collection, manipulating it as she sees fit and ultimately retaining control. It is her museum; it is her pleasure. The inclusion of personal discourse in writing (or in a museum) does not of its own preclude authoritative claims or domination over the critical object. In fact, the personal can be drawn upon as a technique for obscuring or shutting out other voices, as is the case when one advances truth claims based on personal experience and forecloses the possibility for alternative points of view or critical interrogation.

In Chapter Three, I discussed collecting as an aesthetic practice. I discovered that through her practices, the collector explores, questions, and comes to know the world around her. In addition to recounting Gardner's collecting practices, my aim in the chapter was to investigate collecting as a trope for scholarly research. To do so, I juxtaposed Gardner's collection with my own collection of images and remnants of personal experience. One discovery that emerged was that collecting practices are conditioned by and then read in light of their contexts. Whether for a museum or a dissertation, collecting like any aesthetic practice is historically situated. A shift in context, such as a shift from personal to public, may well impact both the collector's decisions and actions in creating the collection and the reader's or viewer's reception.

The effect of a shift in context on viewer reception was made clear in Christine Guth's discussion of changing perspectives on the Chinese Room. As the room was altered from Gardner's private temple to a public gallery, its perceived value altered too. Since the Chinese Room challenged the historical authority of museum practices, it was dismantled in 1971, and in

2009, the dismantlement was investigated through a special exhibit and catalog, all of which reflects changing perspectives on the production of art, culture, and history.

Recognizing collecting as a historically contexted practice is essential to understanding scholarly production as immanent to the practice of everyday life. Researching and writing are lived experiences emerging from the movements of a particular body as it engages the world. As such, the materials that inform and comprise the production of scholarship are drawn not only from the archive but from the repertoire as well. The collector scholar makes use of that which has marked or impressed upon her body. Her methods and practices emerge from and are transformed by the embodied memory of past experience, intuition, and affection. One of the investments then in working from a performance framework is to explore how tacit knowledges inform the work and to acknowledge and activate them in the writing. Like Gardner's museum, the display of the scholar's collection might produce an affective space rather than one bound to notions of historical authenticity.

As I worked through my experiences in the museum by writing about them, my process was enabled frequently by my discovering associations between the museum's objects and objects from my collection of memories. I drew from my performer's toolbox, often calling on ideas and practices that might be termed "academic." I also found that I was sensing and making sense (forming my oblique logic) according to fragments of visual, sensory, and affective experience. These fragments were sometimes elusive and difficult to hold onto. Like the crunch of autumn leaves or smoke from a neighbor's fireplace, partial memories and affective whiffs would emerge suddenly and unexpectedly. Despite their ephemeral quality, the memories and associations provided insights for how I viewed the present puzzle of the museum. In turn, the process of remembering altered my perspective on the items I recalled. Sensory images and

impressions from coursework and performances emerged as the material remnants of my academic career.

I made use of the remnants in various ways. At times, memories of previous performances and classroom assignments provided an analytic framework, as was the case in Chapter One with the discussion of Molly Bang's book of visual principles and Ruth Bowman's staged adaptation in which I was a cast member. Similarly, the photography of Catherine Wagner, which I called upon in a paper on medical discourse and the body many years ago, proved to offer an interesting perspective on practices of collecting in Chapter Three.

Attending to the memories and flashes of association spurred through visiting, researching, and writing on the museum played a part in my creating an oblique logic through which I made sense of the museum and formulated a method for the study. There are points where I have chosen to acknowledge the memories and associations but leave their significance largely tacit. In this way, they are put on display as yet another object in my collection, altering and transforming the collection as a whole. This is certainly the case in the mention of John Cheever's short story, "The Day the Pig Fell into the Well," in Chapter One and the mention of E. J. Bellocq's photography in Chapter Three. My hope is that these mysteries in the form of allusions create surprise for the reader, inviting similar associative leaps or perhaps spurring a scavenger hunt of sorts on Google. The associations also have informed and are embedded in the analysis provided by the overall study.

In the early twentieth century, E. J. Bellocq made numerous photographs of the prostitutes at Storyville in New Orleans, Louisiana. Many of the negatives have been damaged deliberately, the faces of the prostitutes scratched out, preventing recognition. In Chapter One, I argued that performative representational practices activate processes and relationships rather

than produce affirmative representational objects. The affirmation of representation relies on the ability to identify and hence objectify that which is being represented, i.e. to name so as to define and make stable. The scratched photographs deny the affirmation of identity. The viewer cannot easily name the subject of the photograph. This interruption prompts the viewer to find new ways of engaging and making sense of the photographs. The scratches prevent viewer identification with a subject as created via portraiture. The viewer's attention then is directed to the bodies of the women and the scratches.

Initially, the viewer might question the origin of the scratches and create a story regarding Bellocq's changing relationship to the women he photographed. It is easy to project the emotion of anger onto the scratches. The act of scratching out the face on a portrait is associated often with violence or erasure. Alternately, the scratches could be interpreted as a clumsy attempt to conceal identity. Perhaps as Bellocq formed more intimate relationships with some of the women he photographed, he elected to protect them by making them unrecognizable in his images. In fact, it is a matter of debate as to whether it was Bellocq who scratched the negatives in the first place.

Beyond creating narratives regarding the photographer's relationship to the images, we might consider how the final images perform and how the scratches impact our relationship to the portraits. In a portrait, identification occurs via the face of the photographed subject. With the faces obscured, Bellocq's photographs draw the viewer's attention to the prostitutes' bodies. It could be argued that the images with the scratches direct our attention to "prostitute" as a general category or site where labor might be performed by a dissociated body, i.e. the subject distances herself from the body hence encouraging similar objectification of it by others.

My point here is that the scratches provoke and make possible multiple encounters with the photographs. As a viewer, I can consider what the scratches mean, who created them and why, how they change the formal composition, and how they perform. Although Barthes states that the *punctum* does not lend itself to rhetorical expansion, the scratches seem to be endlessly expanding, meaning this AND this AND this AND... Like the Michael Jackson plaque that I described in Chapter Three, the scratches on Bellocq's portraits perform a subject's changing relationship to an object over time and invite the creation of multiple stories. The scratches also redirect the attention of the viewer and change her relationship to the portraits. Furthermore, the experience of having encountered Bellocq's photographs and considered the complexity of the scratches will color my future encounters with portraits and other objects bearing scratches.

Chapter Four explores the connection of language to affection and memory through description and narratization. The Gardner Museum theft is an ongoing investigation, as is this study. As noted in Chapter One, my orientation to the museum has changed and continues to change as I write this document. In Chapter Four, I discovered that HopKins' and Allison's concept of narratization might be useful in illuminating the potential for writing as a form of working through ongoing experience. Narratization redirects us from conceptions of scholarship as a researcher's final statement in which all is decided and given. A scholar might find instead that through writing she makes new discoveries. Writing becomes a process for making sense of things, for formulating an oblique logic in the face of uncertainty.

Description, as part of the process of narratization, enacts the embodied experience of the scholar subject as she negotiates her ongoing encounters with the critical object. In writing on visual images, I have discovered that the descriptions I produce are highly dependent on the contexts in which I encountered the images. Rather than reproduce the paintings through



description, I believe that my ekphrastic practices have been ongoing attempts to restage and interrogate my encounters with the paintings. In my description of Vermeer's The Concert, I experimented with description that, like Dutch art, could be understood as represented seeing. To create the description, I sat before a large digital reproduction of the painting and noted the movements of my eye as it scanned the image. The description then is ordered not so as to reproduce the image of The Concert for the reader, but to highlight those aspects of the painting that captured and recaptured my attention.

In Chapter Four, I noted Anne Hurley's suggestion that description, if left unchecked, threatens to drift off into the merely perceptual. I think that Hurley's statement invites us to consider the function of recognition as it pertains to ekphrastic practice. The dream of ekphrasis rests on the ability of the reader to recognize and properly identify the thing that is being described. For the reader, a string of words that describe color and line become meaningless if the reader is unable to form in her mind a complete image of the object being described. "Vertical convex curvature" becomes meaningless in a sense if the reader is unable to recognize the identity of the object as a pearl earring. Viewed in light of narratization, this problem becomes more interesting if the writer herself is uncertain of the identity of the thing that is being described.

In Giles Deleuze, Claire Colebrook discusses Deleuze's philosophy as it pertains to language, understanding language to be immanent to experience. She states that "there is no harmonious ordering of a world perceived, a subject affected and a language that signifies this experience" (Colebrook 115). Language rather is a creative event that produces subjects and encounters (Colebrook 109). According to Colebrook, the logic of transcendence presupposes that "there is a subject who observes the world and then predicates certain qualities of that world

in statements,” for example, “the tree is green” (Colebrook 110). This is the realm of the constative statement that produces facts and can be judged as true or false. Drawing on Deleuze, Colebrook argues that language can create “worlds of sense that interact with other material worlds” producing events and movements (Colebrook 111). Writing as an ongoing encounter means writing to sense and to make sense. The potential for ekphrastic practice then does not exist in its ability or failure to reproduce an object, but rather as an encounter that produces both subject and object, as a kind of working through, as an active practice of sensing and sense-making.

In a video on the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum website, Anne Hawley, the current director of the museum, discusses the construction of a new building adjacent to the Gardner Museum designed to house services to accommodate the increase in attendance, such as larger restrooms and dining facilities and spaces for educational programs. The Board of Trustees selected the architect Renzo Piano to design a building to complement Fenway Court. In the video, Hawley describes Piano’s first visit to the museum. She states, “He walked in. He looked at the Court garden. He walked around to the west Cloister. He stood there and he said, ‘She was mad!’” (Hawley, “Building on a Legacy”). I have adopted Gardner’s madness as my method. In doing so, I have not only made new discoveries about the museum but about my own critical practices.

Just as the unstable and changing space of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum provokes meandering, I have allowed myself to meander through this process. I began this research project with no clear idea of what arguments or observations might emerge and with no sense of what the final document would look like. In each chapter, I began again at Gardner’s museum and drifted without motive, following digressions in both my research and writing. As I

moved through Gardner's museum, I found myself at times following straight lines along walls, at other times crisscrossing the rooms, sometimes advancing to the next room and then circling back. I hope that the connections between and among the chapters of this dissertation encourage meandering for the reader as well, drifting through snow drifts and junk shops and deflated soufflés.

I also have tried to find through writing as collecting a practice for reflecting upon affective experience as it pertains to scholarship. Although I cannot and do not desire to compel a particular experience for the reader, I have been guided by my affections in my selection of objects to include within this collection. Additionally, I have tried to create an affective space through careful attention to the placement of objects in their display environment. It is my hope that as the particularities and details of the language and images resonate and play off of each other, the reader might catch herself in a crouchlean or with an arm akimbo, later discovering the Blue Room was too blue.

The display of this collection as you encounter it should be considered a temporary exhibit. My encounter with the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum is ongoing. I believe that future elaborations on this work would benefit from more time spent at the museum. Extended and more frequent visits would enable me to observe more closely changes to the environment over time. Additionally, I think the study might take on an interesting dimension if I were to involve other museum visitors either through interviews or some type of writing project that prompted visitors to perform their own encounters with the museum. Lastly, I believe that this study warrants further exploration of both Gardner's and my own historical contexts through genealogical and archival research. This work is unfinished.

It is February again as I write this.

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## VITA

Gretchen Stein Rhodes was born in Thibodaux, Louisiana, in September, 1971. At the tender age of five, her parents transplanted her from the sprawling metropolis of Thibodaux to the swamps of rural Chackbay. There she found inspiration for her writing, producing such classics as “The Lost Puppy.” In 1989, she graduated from Thibodaux High School and entered the undergraduate program at Louisiana State University. Rhodes received both her bachelor’s and master’s degrees in communication studies at LSU, specializing in performance studies. Before entering the doctoral program, she took some time away from school to fulfill a lifelong dream of working for the Federal Bureau of Investigation. As the Assistant Director of Law Enforcement Online, Rhodes was granted top secret security clearance and as such, has probably already told you too much. During her time as a graduate student at LSU, Rhodes participated in numerous productions in the HopKins Black Box Theatre. She continues to create and produce solo performance work. Her one-woman show, “Looking at *Mona Lisa*, or: What I Thought Was a Smile of Recognition Turned Out Only to Be a Little Gas” has been featured at numerous conferences and festivals. Rhodes currently teaches at Georgia State University in Atlanta, Georgia, where she lives with her husband Lewis and their two dogs, Bebe and Mr. Bean.