

“Objects Can Be Unintentionally Beautiful”: Feminist Ekphrasis and Object-Orientation in the Poetry of Mary Jo Bang and Bernadette Mayer

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In 1981, Laura Mulvey famously amended her original contentions in “Visual Pleasure” (1973) to introduce the notion of a “female gaze.” Through ekphrastic poems—lyric representations of visual art—contemporary women poets have also questioned the plausibility of a (female) polyvocal viewing subject, especially when poeticizing photographic and sculptural material. This essay analyzes and compares Mary Jo Bang’s and Bernadette Mayer’s examples of ekphrasis, focusing on their feminist revitalization of the inanimate object through linguistic devices. In my close readings, I most notably propose a link between these poetic renderings and Katherine Behar’s ironic reinterpretation of Levi Bryant’s Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) in her book *Object Oriented Feminism* (2016). Following this rhetoric, I reflect on the poets’ blurring of the problematic subject/object dichotomy by means of formal experimentation. The oeuvres of both Bang and Mayer, all in all, highlight the efforts of contemporary feminist experimentalism to dismiss hierarchies and provide a space for the inbetween, anti-logocentric—and anti-patriarchal—poetic reality.

Keywords: poetry; ekphrasis; object-orientation; feminism; photography

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“Los objetos pueden ser inintencionadamente hermosos”: Écfrasis feminista y orientación a objetos en la poesía de Mary Jo Bang y Bernadette Mayer

En 1981, Laura Mulvey corrigió sus afirmaciones originales en “Visual Pleasure” (1973) para introducir la noción de la “mirada femenina.” A su vez, y a través de poemas efrásticos—

representaciones líricas de arte visual—las poetas contemporáneas han cuestionado la plausibilidad de un sujeto observador polivocal (femenino), especialmente mediante la poetización de material fotográfico y escultural. Este ensayo analiza y compara los ejemplos de écfrasis de Mary Jo Bang y Bernadette Mayer, centrándose en su revitalización feminista—basada en artificios lingüísticos—del objeto inanimado fotografiado. Mi lectura propone un vínculo entre estas interpretaciones poéticas y la reinterpretación irónica de la *Object Oriented Ontology* [Ontología orientada a objetos] de Levi Bryant llevada a cabo por Katherine Behar en su libro *Object Oriented Feminism* [Feminismo orientado a objetos] (2016). Siguiendo esta tendencia, reflexiono sobre la forma en la que las poetas desdibujan la dicotomía sujeto/objeto, que ha resultado tan problemática, mediante la experimentación formal. Las obras de Bang y Mayer subrayan el esfuerzo que el experimentalismo feminista contemporáneo ha invertido en desestimar las jerarquías y proporcionar un espacio para realidades poéticas intermedias, anti-logocéntricas y anti-patriarcales.

Palabras clave: poesía; écfrasis; orientación a objetos; feminismo; fotografía

I. INTRODUCTION: THE EKPHRASTIC OBJECT

Commonly defined as “the verbal representation of visual representation” (Heffernan 1993, 3), ekphrasis—from the Greek *ek* [out] and *phrasis* [to speak]—has been in vogue as a literary-artistic device since Homer’s description of Achilles’s shield. Despite such an early first manifestation, it is not until the late 1980s and 90s that critics and writers started to recognize the productivity of ekphrasis for feminist purposes, after the long history of masculinist approaches¹ that identified “time and language as male, and space and picture as female” (Loizeaux 2011, 80). Ekphrasis becomes, then, a locus for a particular experience of agency, abandoning and contesting previous image-text relationships that dwell upon the paradigm of male spectator and female object.

In her cardinal work *Twentieth Century Poetry and the Visual Arts* (2011), following Griselda Pollock, Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux defines feminist ekphrasis as “that strain of modern ekphrasis by women that recognizes the power of a sexually charged, male tradition of looking, takes it on, and challenges its gendered dynamics” (2011, 81). Feminist ekphrastic poems, interestingly, also problematize the existence and pervasiveness of a “female viewing subject” (Goldhill 2007, 3) through the implementation of aesthetic substitutes to traditional hierarchies of artistic contemplation. Indeed, the patriarchally-assigned quality of being “objects [...] from the outset,” as Katherine Behar (2016b, 8) ironically points out, potentially complicates women writers’ perspectives on the nonhuman. Their consequent relationship towards materiality, I argue, is one of continuity and dialogue, rather than linear examination. The powerful voices that Loizeaux analyzes—Anne Sexton, Adrienne Rich and Marianne Moore, to cite but a few—do not initially presume hierarchical relationships between visual and written representation. Rather, their poems constitute dialogic and dynamic “reflections” (Bilman 2013, 4) that emphasize process rather than product, allowing for an opening into the social realm: “Poems about art are inevitably metapoetic in nature. If a poem about art ends up reflecting on its own processes, then it is hardly surprising if the character of the author’s deepest desire resurfaces as well” (Kinloch 2010, 23).

With the increasing prominence and critical potential of technological progress, the analytic possibilities of ekphrasis have broadened significantly. Now, traditional understandings of the term encompass wider visual representations, such as photographic and filmic content. According to W. J. T. Mitchell, it is this “pictorial turn” towards an eminently visual culture that has encouraged contemporary poets to “take up ekphrasis as a way of engaging and understanding [images’] allure and force” (1992, 11). Feminist ekphrasis is not only a critical act *per se*, as Kinloch (2010) contends; it is also a social and ethical act that stems from very specific intentions. Behind its unquestionable aesthetic purposes lies a drive towards the dismantling of

¹ W. J. T. Mitchell observes that “the treatment of the ekphrastic image as female other is a commonplace” in canonical ekphrasis, and categorizes female otherness as “an overdetermined feature in a genre that tends to describe an object of visual pleasure and fascination from a masculine perspective, often to an audience understood to be masculine as well” (1992, 17).

the sexual politics of the look, along with a reflection on the blurring of limits between the poetic subject and the poetic object. In the feminist context, Loizeaux suggests, “the ekphrastic dynamic represents not only the play of difference, but also the play of similarity, disturbing the very terms of antagonistic dualism on which [...] patriarchal culture is founded” (2011, 103).

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, contributions to the ekphrastic theme have revolved around the play of similarity and intersubjectivity, in line with a tendency that presupposes a “revaluation of ludic impulses and pleasure as key terms in understanding ekphrastic exchanges that [...] break down binaries” (Fischer 2014). The female spectator and the contemplated object, the poem and the visual content, often coexist in fluctuation, undermining dichotomized thinking. Continuity with nonhuman objects turns the ekphrastic task into a materialistic, quasi-posthumanist attempt at the erasure of patriarchal objectifications and descriptions.

Departing from the limitations of lyric theory, I consider certain strands of contemporary philosophical thought as especially productive for the analysis of subjectivity and objectivity in experimental poetry. I am referring now to OOO—Object-Oriented Ontology²—but more concretely to its feminist subset, Object-Oriented Feminism (OOF). Aware of its limitations and potential contradictions, OOF functions as an injection of feminism into speculative realism and the works of object-oriented ontologists such as Graham Harman, Ian Bogost and Levi Bryant. Feminist object-orientation, oxymoron aside,³ constitutes a gender-based, ironical subversion of the subject/object tyranny that has long served the purposes of patriarchy. In this light, and contra-Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who states that “for the body to exist as a transcendent presence to the world [...] it cannot exist as an object” (quoted in Young 1990, 150), Katherine Behar’s *Object-Oriented Feminism* contends that “humans are objects no more privileged than any other,” and promises a “positive return to the ‘real world’ after a generation of feminist thought that has been accused of inscribing gender as a construct in language” (2016b, 5).

At the same time as she brings *thingness* and materiality to the fore, Behar prudently advises against the complete erasure of subjectivity, for “all too many humans are well aware of being objects, without finding cause to celebrate in that reality” (2016b, 5). Should we closely analyze contemporary ekphrastic poems’ liminal positioning between the dignification of objects and a renovated attention to the subject, the parallelisms that can be drawn to Behar’s theoretical stance seem conspicuously direct. In line with the efforts of feminist poets to expand and liberate the ekphrastic object from patriarchally-assigned significations, Behar proposes a feminist redefinition of the asymmetrical relationships

² The basic principle of OOO is as follows: “All objects must be given equal attention, whether they be human, nonhuman, natural, cultural, real or fictional” (Harman 2018, 9).

³ “Consider: Object. Oriented. Feminism. Perhaps this sounds funny? Surely, taken together, these terms are either paradoxical or redundant. [...] As one must expect, OOF’s surface silliness carries seeds of something serious” (Behar 2016b, 6).

between the—nonhuman, immanent—object and the—human, transcendent—subject: “Orientating feminism towards objects means attuning it to the object world. While at first such a move may seem to risk abandoning the concerns of real human subjects (i.e., women) the object world is precisely a world of exploitation, of things ready-at-hand [...]. Perceiving continuity with other objects in the world [...] allows us to rework assumptions about feminist political priorities and the what and the who of feminist ethics” (2016b, 7). Feminist ekphrastic poems constructed upon objects—photographical, sculptural, architectural or otherwise—are thus clear exemplifications of a literary turn towards nonanthropocentrism, where the female viewing subject precludes her own objectification through engaging in horizontal conversation with the poeticized object. The formal—material—powers of experimentation are particularly apt for the realization of such an ekphrastic task, often mimicking the object’s external appearance. Following this logic, the present essay puts forth the potential of experimental poetry to engage in feminist, object-oriented ekphrasis. It focuses on the particular contributions of Mary Jo Bang and Bernadette Mayer, whose work with poetry and objects—often through photographic material—advocates for an active female viewing subject and a dignified, equally active poetic object. This essay is also concerned with the subversive intention of their linguistic and formal work. I lastly pay specific attention to the particular close reading of two of their most salient ekphrastic exercises: Bang’s *A Doll for Throwing* (2017) and Mayer’s *Memory* (1975).

2. MARY JO BANG’S FEMINIST MACHINERY

Mary Jo Bang (1946-) is Professor of English at Washington University in St. Louis. Throughout her prolific career as a poet, she has repeatedly concentrated on the collision of the visual and the poetic realms, which stems from her personal interest in photography. Already in one of her first books, *The Eye Like a Strange Balloon* (2004), Bang expands the possibilities of ekphrasis, which becomes a self-reflexive, book-length conversation between the artistic and the literary. Every poem, in addition, illustrates its intrinsic connection with an external, physically absent artistic element—e.g. a painting, a photograph, a collage or even a film: “Beginning with a painting done in 2003, the poems move backward in time to 1 B.C., where an architectural fragment is painted on an architectural fragment, highlighting visual art’s strange relationship between the image and the thing itself” (Bang 2004). In fact, most of Bang’s reflections dwell upon a particular dialogue between “the thing in itself,” the poetic object—the *Zubanden*, in Heideggerian terms—and the “I,” oftentimes metamorphosed into a collective, collaborative “we.”⁴

⁴ According to Rosi Braidotti, “a posthuman ethics for a non-unitary subject proposes an enlarged sense of interconnection between self and others [...] by removing the obstacle of self-centered individualism” (quoted in Shildrick 2018, 172).

Inescapably ekphrastic, both the collection's title and its homonymous poem constitute an interpretation of Odilon Redon's 1882 lithography *L'Oeil, comme un ballon bizarre se dirige vers l'infini*—"The Eye,⁵ Like a Strange Balloon Mounts Toward Infinity"—today exhibited at the MoMA (The Museum of Modern Art) in Manhattan. The poem echoes the ascendant movement of the eye-balloon at the same time as it introduces the question of subjectivity and objectivity:

We were going toward nothing
all along. Honing the acoustics,
heralding the instant
shifts, horizontal to vertical, particle

to plexus, morning to late
lunch to later yet, instant to over

.....
A building overlooking an estuary,
inspired by a lighthouse.
Always asking, Has this been built?
Or is it all a process? (Bang 2004, 90)

Echoing Michael Greer's contention that "textuality is a productivity or process (rather than static form) that destabilizes the fundamental binarisms and logics of Western ideology and metaphysics" (1989, 344), Bang's poem foregrounds process and movement, reflecting upon the text's malleability. In a contemporary context where the lyric "I" undergoes an unstable positioning, the poem presents the reader with several binaries—"horizontal *to* vertical (4, italics added), "morning *to* late" (5, italics added)—contesting dualistic, traditionally dichotomous relationships by concentrating on their capacity to "shift" (4). Ultimately, shifting processes—suggested, mainly, through preposition choice—question the assumed ontological separation between pairs, which, according to Language poet Lyn Hejinian, constitutes "a dynamic, a momentum, a force." In Bang's poem, too, quantities and binaries are symptomatic of "change, not categories" (2000, 182). Categories, in turn, become fluid and the lyric "I"—or the "we", in this case—is irremediably lost in infinity—"We were going toward nothing" (1)—whenever hierarchical separations would be commonly presupposed.

The same as for Language poet Rae Armantrout, for Bang's pronouns become a way of exploring "forms of personhood beyond hierarchies and false promises of unity" (Sandler 2005, 22). The "I," like a strange balloon, is a polyvocal entity, not necessarily a single persona—and even, arguably, not necessarily human: "There is no reason why S [subject] needs to be human. It could be a camera, a photon, or a line of

⁵ Notice the phonetic play "Eye"/ "I."

code” (Morton 2016, 77). Bang uses artistic objects as pre-texts for her own aesthetic, textual creation. Nevertheless, she recognizes the limitations of her own intentionality and authority, allowing for ethical engagement towards the artwork’s agency and vibrancy.⁶ While talking about her particular ekphrastic pairings, she contended: “I’m imposing a new narrative on it [the artwork], one that is partially suggested by the artwork itself and partially by something that comes from within. Sometimes that thing is an autobiographical moment, sometimes it’s a larger concern, social or political or intellectual” (quoted in Denham 2010, 43). As can be seen, her ultimate objective is not simply to reproduce the artwork by means of poetic language, but to create an independent, self-sufficient text with its own significations and generative potential. Unlike feminist ekphrastic poems which choose linear description to expose gender asymmetries found within the original work—see, for example, “Mourning Picture” by Adrienne Rich or “Victor Over Medieval Misogyny” by Elizabeth Beck—Bang’s collections establish wider and more complex relations with architectural, photographic or pictorial references. Both artistic objects—the written and the visual—become active, feminist-oriented subjects, encouraging discussions on female objectification and transcending the limits of description.

One of Bang’s most salient examples of her extended ekphrastic practice involves the poetization of *Cell (Three White Marble Spheres)*, one of the several sculptural complexes by artist Louise Bourgeois.⁷ At first sight, the sculpture is composed of three marble balls inside a cage-like metal structure. Paradoxically, however, the structure’s door is visibly open, welcoming the viewer’s participation. Hanging from the upper part of the cage and facing the spheres, a circular mirror reflects whoever approaches the sculpture. The politics of the look is suddenly complicated, as the viewing is manifold: the spectator contemplates a sculpture that is already—and permanently—being controlled by the reflecting powers of the mirror. Because the mirror also reflects the viewer, the sculpture is, in itself, an active spectator, bordering on the limits of the quasi-subject.

In her “Cells,” Bourgeois uses architecture and materiality to reflect on her own autobiography, embodiment and psychic space. As Robinson contends, however, “the ‘Cells’ are not easily containable art objects as such [...] to either the viewing subject or Bourgeois herself” (1997, 21). This inbetween, blurred subject/object relationship recalls Behar’s precluding of women’s objectification through the acknowledgement of human continuity with objects. It also reflects on the reversibility of the look: once we assume the art object’s—the sculpture’s—capacity to look upon and invite the

⁶ Here I use “vibrancy,” following Jane Bennett, to refer to the “capacity of things—edibles, commodities, storms, metals—not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own” (2010, viii).

⁷ Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010) is a French-American artist associated with expressionism and surrealism. The body and female sexuality occupy a significant place among her artistic interests, as can be seen in most of her work. The sculpture poetized by Bang (1993) is today exhibited in St. Louis Art Museum.

viewer into her own space, the patriarchal gaze loses its anthropocentric exclusivity and becomes obsolete. In her ekphrastic response to Bourgeois, Bang also plays with the agency of *Cell* and the amalgamation of subjectivity and objectivity:

Here it is, the box
 We live in. The circular mirror
 We look in. The crazy face
 Of the day looking back with its blank
 Brazen-high stare. The closed eye
 Of the night looking in

 Some glass is for looking through,
 Some is for seeing
 Back. Every outline is a cage
 One way or another. We stood here once so
 We are what was
 Contained in it. (Bang 2005, 51)⁸

Far from linearly describing or commenting on the art piece, Bang's "Cell" becomes a recollection of diverse forms of looking, viewing, staring. Initially reflecting on metaphorical incarceration—"the box/we live in" (1-2)—the poem fluctuates towards a recognition of the viewing subject's continuity with the sculptural cage: "We stood here once so / We are what was / Contained in it" (11, 12). By choosing the plural we-form, moreover, the poet reinstates her understanding of subjectivity as "immersed in relations with others" (Chelstrom 2013, 2). Disowning the primacy of individual, anthropocentric subjectivity ultimately allows the incarcerated female subject—and the female body—to resurface from the limits of patriarchal objectifications. In line with Behar and other body theorists such as Elizabeth Grosz,⁹ then, Bang shifts feminism from "a 'politics of recognition,' of *standing out*, to a politics of immersion, of *being with*" (Behar 2016b, 9, italics added). The "cell" of patriarchal incarceration becomes in the poem an "outline" of body cells and *incorporation*.

Formal strategies also account for the intersubjective and dialogic character of subject/object relations in the poem. Continuous enjambment and, most importantly, the playful use of punctuation throughout the lines and stanzas translate themselves into an overlap of reflections, views and gazes: "We live in. The circular mirror / We look

⁸ An alternative version was published in *Elegy* (2007), a stormy and quasi-confessional volume comprising those poems written after her son's death: "Here it is / The box / We live in where the crazy face of the day looks back / At the closed eye of the night looking in [...] / Some glass is for looking through, some is for seeing back. / Every outline is a cage one way or another" (2007, 85).

⁹ I am referring here to Elizabeth Grosz's concept of the "politics of imperceptibility," a politics in which "inhuman forces, forces that are both living and non-living, macroscopic and microscopic, above and below the human, are acknowledged and allowed to displace the centrality of will and consciousness" (2002, 470).

in. The crazy face” (2, 3). The roundness of Bourgeois’s marble spheres, arguably, works as a feasible representation of women’s *bodiliness* (Robinson 1997, 22). Through its parallelisms, anaphors and replications of circular, back and forth movement—looking back, looking in, looking through, seeing back, one way or another—Bang’s poem is also reminiscent of the body’s “propensity to leak, to overflow the proper distinctions between self and other, to contaminate and engulf” (Price and Shildrick 1999, 3). Although traditionally relegated to being an object of voyeurism and repulsion, the privileging of the body’s formlessness is a way of contesting the patriarchal hierarchy.¹⁰ As Margrit Shildrick has put it: “Once we understand embodiment to be a highly complex and fluid state, at odds with a psychosocial imaginary that privileges corporeal wholeness and integrity, then what is at stake in constructing a normative model is both the maintenance of an illusion, and the inevitable transformation of it” (2018, 171). The object takes agency and the (female) body positions herself both inside and outside the composition—as art material but also as a viewing subject.

A Doll for Throwing (2017), Bang’s latest compendium of ekphrastic exercises, presents the Bauhaus—and more specifically, its female representatives—as a site for poetic exploration. In this book—her eighth poetry collection—the author focuses on the aesthetic power of photography and architecture, discussing their role in the creative process. While not abandoning the problematics around the “female gaze”—especially taking into account her own position behind the lens as a photographer—Bang continues understanding the ekphrastic task as an interchangeable “cooperation” between the written and the visual, as she stated in an interview with Jennifer K. Dick, published in 2005: “So I started writing poems that would somehow cooperate with an image. Sometimes I would make the image and then write the poem, and sometimes I would write the poem first and afterward try to make an image” (Bang 2005). Her oscillations from art to writing and vice versa highlight process and cooperation, hinting, again, at the feminist blurring of limits and hierarchies.

The world of *A Doll for Throwing* is certainly intriguing.¹¹ Echoing the life and experiences of Bauhaus photographer Lucia Moholy,¹² the book opens with a “portrait” of Moholy’s husband—László Moholy-Nagy—which is, however, intentionally left blank. What the caption specifies should be a “gelatin silver print” photograph is, simply, an empty rectangle. If once the original portrait occupied “the entrance of the

¹⁰ “But a potential for agency arises within the fever of transforming severed qualities confronting other female-related but severed qualities swirling near the abjected subject-object. This formation congeals [...] other and perhaps positive qualities, are [*sic*] cast into metaphoric, constructed, and idealized identity objects.” (Lunning 2016, 91)

¹¹ The collection takes its title from Bauhaus artist Alma Siedhoff-Buscher’s *Wurfpuppe*, a woven doll crafted to gracefully land when thrown.

¹² Born Lucia Schulz, she was a photographer of the Bauhaus—her work was originally attributed to her husband, László Moholy-Nagy, and to Walter Gropius, as *A Doll for Throwing*’s afterword clarifies. Bang’s conscious raising of Moholy’s visibility counteracts the masculinist bias through which her works were originally contemplated.

‘master’s house’ the two occupied at the Bauhaus,” placing Moholy-Nagy at the apex of the marital hierarchy, the absence of his image at the “entrance” of Bang’s book is proof of the resurfacing of Lucia’s voice: “Between 1923 and 1928, when Moholy-Nagy was a teacher at the Bauhaus [...] Lucia Moholy was one of the most prolific photographers at the school” (Bang 2017, 1). Starting from this feminist standpoint and mimicking “the Bauhaus model of rational geometry” (Forbes 2017), the compositions are formally filtered through Gropius’s aesthetic parameters.¹³ In the endnotes, Bang systematically indicates every poem’s relationship with a particular photograph or sculptural complex from the time. On the last page, a disclaimer reminds the reader of the fictive nature of the events in the poems. Finally, a quote by Emily Dickinson: “When I state myself, as the representative of the verse, it does not mean me, but a supposed person” (2017, 73). The debate about the lyric “I” is successively reopened—here, yet again, the poetic persona is identified as non-self-centered, non-unitary and subject to diverse interpretations.

“A Model of a Machine,” the first of the poems in *A Doll for Throwing*, presents itself in the form of a rectangle—both margins justified, symmetrical lines—in the middle of the blank page. This disposition draws the reader’s attention to a very concrete geometrical shape, recalling the speaker’s active relationship towards artificial-technological objects. This poem, specifically, surfaces from “the simplicity” of two framed mechanical instruments: Sven Wingquist’s *Self-Aligning Ball Bearings* (1907) and *Outboard Propeller* (1925), exhibited today at the MoMA. Presently, the poem sets out to question female objectification—reminiscent of the book’s title—aiming its attention at a viewer that stresses the revalorization of objects in an almost transcendental way:

I’ll begin by saying that objects can be unintentionally
beautiful. Consider the simplicity of three or four self-
aligning ball bearings, the economy of a compass.
Brilliant, no? We thought so (Bang, 2017, 1).

The renewed interest in “materialism and thingness [...] objectification and instrumentalization” (Behar 2016b, 4) proposed by Behar seems patent in Bang’s poem. From the initial recognition of the objects’ inherent beauty, to the acknowledgement of their brilliancy, Bang creates an indeterminate, collective lyric “we” whose admiration for inanimate objects goes beyond simple contemplation: “We had confidence in architecture and design beyond the base commercial” (4-5). Bang’s objects also establish direct relationships with the creative process, hinting at their poetic transcendence: “At four o’clock in the morning ideas came effortlessly, as if out of the air, the way a *teapot* or a *pan* comes clearly out of the *cupboard*” (Bang

¹³ “The Bauhaus [...] deliberately concentrated primarily on what has now become a work of paramount urgency: to avert mankind’s [*sic*] enslavement by the machine by giving its products a content of reality and significance, and saving the home from mechanistic anarchy” (Gropius 1965, 54).

2017, 1, italics added). The socio-political implications of quotidian objects such as the teapot¹⁴ or the pan, traditionally associated with women's enclosure within interior spaces such as the kitchen or the home, are contested in this case through the use of formal innovation. The quotidian is no longer an inescapable frame for the hierarchical clash between the transcendent subject and the immanent object.¹⁵ Quotidian objects, indeed, share their space with artistic and mechanical devices, progressively acquiring the same ontological dignity as “[morning] ideas” (1): they are not mere cooking instruments at the mercy of humanity, but creative subjects of their own right. Quoting Jennifer Scappetone: “That poetic discourse outside the literary mainstream continues to invoke bodily frames erected and leaned upon by the social world may appear to undercut the will of women authors to contest their historical relegation to the oikos, *unless one beeds critical nuances embedded in the poetry itself*” (2007, 179, italics added). Those critical nuances render Bang's poems feminist without their resorting to direct appellations towards women's oppression.

As has been suggested, Bang's connection with OOO and OOF's proposals does not limit itself to her providing lists of objects and the potential connections between them. Arguably, these objects display a certain potential for the reconsideration of the feminine and feminist experience. Neither the viewer nor the gazed upon object undergo objectification in the phallogocentric sense—cf. Mulvey's ‘male gaze.’ In turn, everything seems reigned by a sense of ethics and morality: “Stage settings, furniture, typography, everything came *with a moral mandate*” (Bang 2017, 1, italics added). As Aristarkhova (2016) points out, it is the position of the subject along with that of the object that demands a change. The “I” in “Model of a Machine,” accordingly, does not participate in objectification processes. Although she is contemplative, she is certainly not authoritarian, nor does she interfere in the objects' development. Bang's conclusion reflects on the possible limitations of objects as something more than inanimate entities with a particular practical function: “In the blank space between the following day and the previous night, you see the beauty of a propeller, for instance, and think, yes, I want that silver metal to mean something more than just flight” (Bang 2017, 1). This premise matches Jane Bennett's understanding of the human-nonhuman relationship. In her view, “man-made objects” can “become vibrant things with a certain effectivity of their own, a perhaps small but irreducible degree of independence” (quoted in Behar 2016b, 15). Although it is unquestionable that the benefits of objectification are few and rare, Bang's feminist analysis of objects as somehow independent subjects reverts the significations of traditional human objectifications of women.

¹⁴ Other feminist ekphrastic works have focused on teapots. See Joanna Baillie's “Lines to a Teapot,” the domestic counterpart of Keats's urn.

¹⁵ Like Susan Wheeler, Bang welcomes in her poems “the quotidian, the frightening, the disgusting as well as the rarefied and beautiful” (quoted in Hedley, 2009, 19).

3. BERNADETTE MAYER'S AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL MUSEUM

Even though several of her poetic exercises—e.g. *Works and Days*—can be considered traditionally ekphrastic in their conscious pairing of visual and written elements, Bernadette Mayer (1945-) has never hinted at such a term. Her creative stance rejects every sort of literary encapsulation, and although she is widely considered as one of the most prominent members of the New York School and the 1970s L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E project, she has both manifested her “incredible resistance to New York writing” (Nelson 2007, 6) and joked about her disassociation from Language: “I like it [Language Poetry] now that they—I shouldn’t say ‘they’—that they’ve developed a sense of humor” (Mayer 2011). Free of clear categorizations, Mayer—à la Aristotle—advocates nonetheless for inspiration, imitation and even plagiarism as extremely powerful poetic sources, acknowledging ekphrasis’s primordial “mimetic impulse” (Kinloch 2010, 26). In her “Bernadette Mayer’s Writing Experiments,” developed from 1971 to 1975 within the frame of the Poetry Project in St. Mark’s Church (New York), she blatantly commands: “Rewrite someone else’s writing. Experiment with theft and plagiarism” (1975a, 2). Her humoristic rawness, characteristic of her interviews and poetic statements, is also frequently reflected in her poetry, where it acquires deeper significations. As a nod to the academia that repudiates and punishes imitating practices, Mayer’s *The Formal Field of Kissing* (1992) constitutes a contemporary reinterpretation—in a way, a playful translation—of Catullus:

Once when we kissed you used your spit
to wipe your lips, oh your soft fingers
you looked like you thought you might get Aids
from the dirty kiss of this diseased whore (Mayer 1992, 109).¹⁶

As can be deduced from the extract, experimenting with estrangement is, for Mayer, essential: everything can be written and almost everything can be a literary text. As with any other object, the material body is presented in its absolute bleakness, completely stripped from euphemism or decorum. Quoting William Baker, Maggie Nelson defines Mayer’s literalness as a “startling inclusivity,” an “inclusivity that attempts, in a number of different works, ‘to re-create the innumerable objects, events, memories, and dreams that range into the field of an alert consciousness’” (2007, 100). Everything—even matter—has the potential for originality.

Following poets such as Charles Bernstein and Gertrude Stein, Mayer has disrupted patriarchal forms and highlighted the self-generative qualities of the text in contraposition to author-centered perspectives. However, in line with other women Language poets such as Lyn Hejinian, she has not dismissed the body or the possibility

¹⁶ See Catullus’s original: “For at the same time it was done, you wiped / Your lips, having been washed by many tears, with all your fingers / Nor did anything having been received from my mouth remain, / Just as if it were the filthy spit of a filthy prostitute” (Bradley 1999).

of incorporating autobiography into the Language text. Ultimately, it is Mayer's physical text—her primordial “object”—that leaks bodily characteristics: the text is an individual, agent entity, with a texture of its own.

As other objects are in Bang, texts by themselves are “unintentionally beautiful” for Mayer. The “I,” the poetic subject, is thus rendered into an elusive object with the ability to counteract lyric theories that privilege personality, but also those that demonize its persistence within experimental practice. The limits between the subject and the object are consequently blurred in Mayer's poetry: everything—even poets and voices—can be subjected to the malleability of formal play. Ultimately, Mayer reflects on women's objecthood and objectification through the recognition of their materiality, reminding the reader that “the nonsubjective quality of being an object is grittily, physically realist,” as Behar states (2016b, 8). Elizabeth Povinelli's obscuring of authorship, although originally directed at oppositional, innovative narratives, is perfectly illustrative of Mayer's long, ekphrastic poems of the quotidian: “The authors of these objects (the texts as objects and the object referred to in the texts) are also objects that allure and allude to other objects (subjects)” (2016, 114). As I have suggested, however, Mayer's decentering of traditional—New Critical—hermeneutics does not presuppose the forceful elimination of the “I,” contrary to the radical depersonalization that the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E manifesto originally demanded.¹⁷ This is especially remarkable in *Sonnets* (1989):

You are who I am pregnant, give me my kiss
 You whom I often & silently come where you are
 That I may be with you, we ought not to speak
 At all like this for the women who are your brothers (Mayer 1989, 75).

The blurring of binaries and hierarchies, along with the acknowledgement of the text's and the body's generative capacities, has enabled Mayer to investigate her own life experiences in several ways. The body in her works is fluid, self-conscious and daring. The “I,” like in Bang, is always present but often metamorphosed and in conversation with alterity: “You are who I am”, “you whom I often & silently come where you are” (1, 2). Already in *Studying Hunger Journals*—originally published in 1972—Mayer's several humorous references to Lacanian theory account for this relationship. According to Lacan, “the goal of one's desire is to return to a primordial re-conflation between the self and the other” (quoted in Gardiner 2014, 2). It is thus that the Self eats the Other—the text, and echoing OOF, the nonhuman—in an almost-cannibalistic act that confirms the sameness and continuity between both sides of the coin (Currás-Prada 2019). It is thus that pronouns become “one” multiple, polyvocal entity: “So now I must kill & eat him at this spot, so now I must kill & eat you at this spot. *Settles the*

¹⁷ See Robert Grenier's “I Hate Speech” (1971), considered the manifesto for Language Poetry.

questions of “yous” and “I’s” [...] Yet in the end it still makes you scream. I mean ‘one.’ I have to stop addressing you” (Mayer [1972] 2011, 57, italics added).

In this conundrum of identities and experimentations, *Memory* ([1975] 2020) appears as an ekphrastic experiment on autobiography and photography,¹⁸ as Mayer’s official home page notes:

In July 1971, Mayer began experimenting with her memory. She shot a roll of 35 mm film each day, and kept a rigorous daily journal. The project resulted in a staggering total of 1100 photographs and nearly six hours of recorded poetry. In February 1972, *Memory* was shown at 98 Greene Street, an art and performance space in New York City. The unedited photographs were mounted in order, with the recorded narration playing in the gallery (2018).

As Linda Haverty Rugg (2011) asserts, “photographs in an autobiographical context [...] insist on something *material*, the *embodied* subject, the unification (to recall the autobiographical pact) of author, name and body.” And even though she suggests that “the photograph incorporates the body of the autobiographer into the self-narrative,” this is not always the case with feminist ekphrasis (quoted in Edwards 2011, 705, italics added). “The body does not end at the skin,” pointed out Donna Haraway (1990, 220); even less does it end at the author’s skin. The confusion of pronouns makes the identity of the body depicted in *Memory* a difficult one to fathom. Formal experimentation, in this way, works as a protective shield that prevents this body from objectifying practices at the same time that continuous references to inanimate objects paradoxically highlight its materiality. Take, for example, *Memory*’s first lines: “& the main thing is we begin with a white sink a whole new language is a temptation. Men on the wall in postures please take your foot by your hand & think that this is pictures” ([1975] 2020, 9). In this respect, *Memory* works parallel to other ekphrastic-photographic works, namely those of French feminist writers such as Annie Ernaux and Hélène Cixous. In their compositions, the material, human body is frequently absent—or, rather, intentionally absent-ed—from the photographs and the narrative, in order to preclude direct sexualization or objectification. In Ernaux’s *L’usage de la photo*, for example, inanimate objects play substitutes of her own body, acquiring, like in Bang and Mayer, a prominence that elevates them to the status of quasi-subjects, even surpassing transcendental knowledge and emotion.

Mayer goes a step further. Through the exhaustive depiction of nonhuman and human objects, her overwhelming conjunction of photography, autobiography and poetry is able to reflect on the limits of the unconscious and the capacity of the text to reproduce states of consciousness. In the introduction to the 1975 text, David Rubinfine explains this amalgamation between the visible and the internal: “With

¹⁸ Selected images from *Memory* can be accessed here: <https://www.bernadette-mayer.com/memory-gallery-1>

her opening line she puts us on notice that [...] ‘memory’ is regulated by a constantly changing organization of consciousness, shifting from perceived external reality to internal images and from present to past as present” (1976, 1). Like in Bang’s poetry, the relationship between the written and the visual is always oscillating. The oscillation becomes especially noteworthy in *Memory*’s 2020 edition by Siglio Press, where the 1100 photographs are included, alternating with the text and thus enhancing the ekphrastic component of the project.

However, Mayer’s *Memory* not only resembles *A Doll for Throwing* in its interest in the connections between poetry and photography; for both poets, the ekphrastic task seems holistic and simultaneous: images redirect the reader towards poetic content at the same time that poems become active subjects capable of generating and evoking several of the photographs. If Bang’s formal activity concentrated on the reproduction of the Bauhaus’s preoccupation for aesthetic reordering and counteraction of “mechanistic anarchy” (Gropius 1965, 54), Mayer’s almost impressionistic writing recalls the immediacy and incompleteness of memory while reflecting the photograph’s disposition in the showroom wall: “Memory, not forgetting, is the point (memory, said [Rita] Dove, is a museum in itself)” (Loizeaux 2011, 180).

In this book-length ekphrasis, time and space converge with the “solid” (Mayer 1975b, 80) presence of artificial objects and an equally artificial text. Sentences and syntactic units become noticeably long and complex, filled with content words and thus disruptive of the usual conciseness and simplicity of contemporary English:

red cars with black tops
 turns violet where does it come from i was resting on the top of the
 out all the windows let me explain wonder under are are looking
 refrigerator & white white hospital light on ed white rows of light
 the whole story a 3rd red car passes under next to
 rain makes green to purple come fluorescence i guess in the kitchen...
 (Mayer [1975] 2020, 16)

The obsession with time is, in Language poetry, associated with repetition, variation and description, since “nothing is too trivial for the honor of inclusion” (Tate 2016, 50). Repetition in time emphasizes Mayer’s idea of continuity—“nothing has to begin or end” (quoted in Hejinian 2000, 46)—and represents the tedium of everyday routines, while creating a state of “hyperfocus” or hyperattention (Tate 2016, 47) suitable for poetic creation. Rather than repetition, what we encounter in Language poetry is Steinian insistence on several quotidian aspects that reflect larger issues (Currás-Prada 2019). In this excerpt, the particular insistence on colors and light mimics the photographs’ chromatic variety—where white buildings, red cars and green vegetation prevail—ending with a picture of a man stirring the contents of a pot in the kitchen. Of the eight pictures that accompany this part of the long poem, only the last one portrays

a human figure. Notably, though, in the following lines, the poem continues shifting its attention towards the nonhuman—cheeseburgers, dishes, refrigerators, soda beer, hallways, dark chairs, telephone tables. Only sparse, collective pronouns account briefly for the existence of any human subject:

we had worked on moving here & windows back out the back is
 food more food hot & damp tracing my steps through the house
 threatening but rain makes green or brings it under
 looking around the hallway focus on dark chair & telephone table
 & a shady window with torn at the stove violet
 clear yellow light of the white door what looks so square in design (17-18).

Analyzed from the perspective of feminist object orientation, *Memory* can be considered a fruitful literary attempt “to move beyond the objects as existing par excellence only for human use” (Aristarkhova 2016, 41) and thus succeeds in its decentring of anthropocentrism and women’s objectification in ekphrasis.

Quotidian objects in the totality of the composition are indeed part of a staged, performed¹⁹ act of Mayer’s own consciousness. Instead of concentrating on a foreign, male objectifying gaze that controls the narrative, *Memory* constructs a polyvocal, multiple viewing subject, sometimes, again, understood as a particularly *vibrant* object. Consider, for instance: “objects painted on the backdrop, trees columns house in a receding street & so on, *carry back the series of similar objects solidly placed upon the stage* & we think *we see* things in a continuous perspective, when *we really see* this way only a few of them & imagine that *we see* the rest” (Mayer 1975b, 81, italics added). The continuity of objects, the absence of punctuation and the visual “stage setting” (Bang 2017, 1) echo Mayer’s daily photographic roll and journal-like composition for *Memory*. At the same time, the prominence of artificial elements, enmeshed in relationships with quotidian situations confers on them the same ontological dignity as Bang’s and Behar’s objects. Everyday matters possess an extraordinary capacity to combine with and ultimately suggest the wider psychosocial reality of women’s objectification: “here’s something about rivers & something about time it’s the number of times in the tunnel & drifts, bill: one bell in a tower, the best bell: *tough and tired she* bends to train rain drain crane” (Mayer 1975b, 81, italics added). It is not coincidental that the bell—“the *best bell*,” in fact—is a “she.”

In Mayer’s photographs, the insistence on multiple bodies and their correlation with the *oikos* is translated to yet another elevation of objects such as pans, pots, plates, fruits and other foods, kitchen sinks, balloons and beer bottles: “The quotidian consists not of things but of *effects playing over* the surfaces of things; it is not beings but a way

¹⁹ “Latour has warned us not to think of objects as substances but as performances [...] experience shows that while objects are not substance, their performance does have material consistency [...] the self as object is both moldable and resistive” (Behar 2016c, 129).

of being” (Hejinian 2000, 358, italics added). This is why, even though these poems create traditional spaces ascribed to women, formal experimentation contests the sociopolitical implications of these spaces. In the words of Tate, “Hejinian and Mayer use the long poem to convey the elusive quotidian while engaging with its gendered associations [...]. Mayer [...] tests the long poem’s capacity for radical inclusiveness and traces metonymic connections between daily routines and larger social issues” (2016, 42). Ultimately, the long poem covertly reflects on the author’s body—and quotidian, nonhuman bodies—while suggesting their position in the social context.

As was already clear in *Studying Hunger Journals*, Mayer’s obsession with pronouns—especially “I,” “you” and “we”—reflects the irresolvable nature of their interrelationships. For Language poets, indeed, there is no particular addressee, no particular identity circumscribed within these—or any—pronouns. Pronouns, rather, are regarded as compounds of shifting, switching identities that suppress any hierarchical relationship within the poem, while hinting at L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E’s blatant rejection of wider hierarchical ‘identities’ and institutions such as the literary academy or patriarchy. In response to Adrian Blevin’s article “In Praise of the Sentence,” poet Cathy Park Hong (2006) remarks:

They asserted that the “I” in the poem is really a fabrication of the self rather than a direct mirror of the author’s psyche. As Hejinian once wrote, “One is not oneself, one is several, incomplete, and subject to dispersal.” From these ideas, the Language poets stylistically formed their own versions of what poet Ron Silliman dubbed the “new sentence”: poetic lines that are syntactically fractured, purposefully atonal, averse to the first person.

Unlike in traditional, Chomskyan sentence construction, the first-person pronoun in Mayer is rather impressionistic, multiple, oscillating between physicality and abstraction (Currás-Prada 2019, 34). Through this unstable, experimental positioning of the subject and the revalorization of objects and the nonhuman, Mayer is capable of reflecting on the possibility of rendering the patriarchal, linear, anthropocentric gaze obsolete. Objects are moral, active entities whose capacity for dismantling patriarchal dominance over the text—and, potentially, a wider patriarchal dominance—can be problematized from a feminist perspective. As Humm contends, “when women *experience* objectification we can evolve feminist methods which in turn can overthrow the distinction between subjectivity and objectivity” (2003, 191, italics in original). This is, I argue, what Bang and Mayer have ultimately achieved in their respective ekphrastic works.

Throughout this essay, I have analyzed and assessed Mary Jo Bang’s and Bernadette Mayer’s examples of feminist ekphrasis, highlighting the importance of formal experimentation when counteracting traditional patriarchal discourses. More specifically, I have paralleled both authors’ poetic reconfiguration of artificial objects as independent and generative bodies, able to revert and transcend subject/object

hierarchies and associations. All in all, and despite their differences, Bang's and Mayer's incursions into ekphrasis have positioned them as non-authoritarian subjects, exciting their powerful poetic reflections on women's agency.

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