Some Ways of Making Nothing

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Historically, apophasis is a kind of writing about God that purposefully undermines itself in order to avoid the heresy of overdetermining God by reducing him to language. It functions in conjunction with kataphatic writing, which is writing about God that straightforwardly declares God’s nature and attributes. Without kataphatic writing, apophatic writing would have nothing to unsay. Without apophatic writing, kataphatic writing would quickly reduce God to a series of assertive truth statements. Apophatic writing is found in a number of religious traditions. It is associated with mysticism, and often finds itself at the boundary of orthodoxy in each of these traditions, since the tenets defining any orthodoxy must necessarily be expressed as assertive creeds, and apophatic writing is always eating away at the edges of credal assertion.

Before I get too far into an explanation of apophatic writing, I should clarify why I am even (re-)opening the notoriously problematic can of worms that is apophasis, and how I mean to appropriate apophasis for my own project. The goal of this book is to analyze some worthwhile ways of making nothing. Initially, it seems like “making nothing” should be as simple as abstaining from making something. Just quit your job making art apparatuses, and you will have succeeded at making
nothing. There is, however, an important difference between abstaining from making something and purposefully making nothing.

According to Alfred North Whitehead and process philosophy, something is always made. Indeed, one cannot refrain from making something. Even my death brings something new into the world, and my subsequent and ongoing absence from the world is negatively prehended by all future actual occasions (becomings) of the world. Thus, to refrain from making art apparatuses (as most non-artists already do) is still to make something. Even when Marcel Duchamp took his famous hiatus from making art in order to focus on playing chess, he was nonetheless making something in the world. Had Duchamp been an auto mechanic instead of an artist, and had he decided to take an obscure hiatus from car repair to focus on playing chess, he would still have been making something in the world. But in neither case would Duchamp have been making an apophatic art apparatus – an art apparatus with the express intention of making nothing.

It turns out that, since everything is always already becoming something new (moment by moment by moment), there is really no way to make a permanent nothing. In Whitehead’s own words, “You cannot approach nothing; for there is nothing to approach.” To make a permanent nothing would amount to a kind of radical, holistic nihilism. I don’t think such permanent, holistic nothings are possible; and even if they were, I wouldn’t advocate purposefully heading toward them. When I talk about making nothing, I am really talking about deferring (however fractionally) the inevitable, headlong rush of the universe toward something new. I am talking about a kind of braking, munging up, and confounding (however-

er fractionally) the inevitable becomings of the universe – the perpetual concrescences that are bound to proceed.

As in cooking, the pace at which and the order in which things come together is often of crucial importance. Gradually turning down the boil is not at all the same as throwing something immediately from a boiling pot into a bath of ice-chilled water. In both cases, room temperature is eventually reached, but the pragmatic effects are qualitatively (and often radically) different. Shock blanching something at high heat for thirty seconds is not at all the same as mildly simmering something on low heat for hours, even if the same quantitative amount of heat is imparted in each instance. Such qualitative differences in speed and sequence are never inconsequential, and rarely even incidental. In the overwhelmingly noun-centric history of philosophy, nouns and the adjectives that describe their qualities have generally been foregrounded; whereas verbs and the adverbs that describe their qualities have generally been marginalized. Likewise, the history of art has skewed toward noun-centricity. “Oh, you’re an artist! Do you paint or sculpt?” Whereas the nothings we are pursuing here are not nouns with adjectival qualities. Instead, they are (jarring or confounding) adverbial arrests in verb-centric becomings that result in the deferred emergence of anything at all (whether subsequent nouns, subsequent verbs, or the noun–verbs that Whitehead calls “actual entities/occasions”).

So why slam on the brakes of concrescence, actualization, and becoming? What is the ethical efficacy of such a seemingly punk rock, nihilistic sabotage of emergence? I address this question more fully in the final chapter, where I approach an ethics of nothing. But a preliminary answer here may make my incorporation of apophasis more followable and sensible. In a world where everything is always already hurtling forward into new becomings, the challenge is not how to make something
new, but how to make something new that might matter. Slowing the emergence of things has been advocated (by conservation-minded folks), and accelerating the emergence of things has also been advocated (by accelerationists and capitalists alike). Both approaches can be relatively useful or relatively impotent (depending on the contexts in which they are deployed). I am simply advocating a third approach of full-on braking (for however brief an instant), in order to qualitatively modulate whatever eventually emerges subsequent to the braking.

I lived in northern Montana for a year, and I had a friend there from northern Saskatchewan who drove deftly (but cavalierly) on ice. He used his emergency brake to steer. Being from south Alabama where there is never any ice, his driving terrified me. But he was actually a safer driver than his more cautious southern counterparts who were only comfortable gradually accelerating or decelerating. His emergency brake was a normal part of his driving apparatus. By rigorously engaging it and disengaging it at strategic moments during his driving process, he was more effectively able to steer on ice. This modicum of seemingly nihilistic and jarring stoppage was actually just one more tool in his driving toolbox, one that better equipped him to co-navigate (and in a sense, surf) the trajectory that emerged from his engagement with both ice and car.

In our current era of broadly entangled and accelerated co-emergence, we are all driving on ice. This is particularly true given that most of our current cosmological models of explanation are noun-centric and event-agnostic (if not altogether event-blind). And probably, the entire history of the universe has always been a kind of driving on ice, co-deciding and co-emerging along a perpetually recalibrating vector, toward a moving future target-on-wheels which our ongoing becomings are continually repositioning. This is not a bad thing. It is (becoming) what it is (becoming). But if this is indeed the way the
universe actually unfolds, then adding a nothing-making brake mechanism to our ethical and aesthetic tool box seems less like nihilistic theoretical wankery, and more like a kind of pragmatically useful safe-driving practice. I am interested in apophasis because it suggests a means of developing such a braking mechanism.

What I term braking, Whitehead himself might term “hesitation” or “indecision.” In a sense, hesitation and indecision during the actual occasion are what lead to the activation of the mental pole and to the ingression and actualization of the virtual into the actual. Hesitation and indecision are ultimately what lead to conscious human thought. Whenever something can’t either be dismissed out of hand (incompatible opposition negatively prehended) or prehended as bare fact without modulation (perfect concordance positively prehended), whenever there is “contrast” rather than mere incompatible opposition or perfect concordance, then there is hesitation and (potential) ingression of the virtual. Whitehead explains that during the actual occasion, things may proceed according to “yes-form” feelings, “no-form” feelings, or “suspense-form” feelings. Only suspense-form feelings (may) lead to the ingression of the virtual. During the actual occasion, Whitehead says that there are judgments of belief, judgments of disbelief, and “suspended judgments.” Suspended judgements allow “concentration of attention involving increase of importance.” In other words, when binary judgments are suspended, qualitative increases or decreases in valuation become possible. These re-valuations or re-reckonings are what reconfigure the prior actual, actualizing virtual potentia. From a similar perspective, according to Brian Massumi, “‘Indecision’ between activity and passivity is a positive re-

2 Ibid., 270.
3 Ibid., 273.
source for the theory of value.”4 Indecision makes a space for non-binary, affective re-valuation to occur. Returning to Whitehead, suspended judgments allow the actual occasion to prehend “information which is neither included nor excluded by our direct perception,” according to an “indifference to truth or falsehood.”5 Indeed, as previously mentioned, according to Whitehead, the main importance of truth is simply that “it adds to interest.”6 Elsewhere, Whitehead explains that, “eternal objects, and propositions, and some complex sorts of contrasts, involve in their own natures indecision.”7 Whitehead says that appetition (being lured by a proposition) includes in itself “a principle of unrest, involving realization of what is not and may be.”8 To be unrestful, to hesitate, is to leave the door cracked to what is not yet but may yet become. Braking is the means by which apophatic art apparatuses invite (however insistently or courteously) such promising hesitations.

Art apparatuses that make nothing never simply create an absence, a vacuum, or a void (all impossible “some-things”). Instead, an apophatic art apparatus might enact a kind of hesitation, an indecision, a deer-in-the-headlights freeze. In so doing, the apophatic art apparatus makes nothing by arresting (however briefly) the ongoing process of becoming. Or, an apophatic art apparatus may make nothing by confounding the presence or absence binary inherent in classical human thinking, triggering a kind of back-and-forth arche-nothing that refuses to arrive at the resolved “something” of mere presence or absence. Whatever the tactics employed, apophatic art

5 Whitehead, Process and Reality, 275.
6 Ibid., 259.
7 Ibid., 29.
8 Ibid., 32.
apparatuses actively make phenomena that lure and ensnare their participants (both human and material) into experiences of nothing that mere abstinence from something (don’t view the artwork; don’t make the artwork) could ever achieve.

Just as there are significant qualitative differences between making nothing and abstaining from making something, so too are there significant qualitative differences between making nothing and simply undoing something. “Undoing” acts on that which is already done; but undoing itself is just another new instance of doing. Since the decisions of actual occasions are irreversible, nothing can really be undone. So, for instance, mere iconoclasm does not inherently equal visual apophasis. Iconoclasm doesn’t return the world to a historical state prior to the existence of icons; it just makes a new world of destroyed icons.

Furthermore, there is an important functional difference between something that is indifferent to enacting signification and something that succeeds at signifying a lack of signification. Critics Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit characterize Samuel Beckett’s unique understanding of failure: “To fail does not mean to represent successfully existential failures or existential meaningless; it means to fail to represent (either meaninglessness or meaning).”9 Apophatic art apparatuses never attempt to signify a lack of signification, but sometimes they do flirt with enacting a failure to signify. Generally, however, the goal of an apophatic art apparatus is not to elude capture by human systems of signification (an impossible and tired goal), but to make nothing(s). Since everything can always be captured and put to use as a signifier by a human (even silence, even “absence,” even “nothing”), apophatic art apparatuses are often indifferent toward their eventual

and inevitable capture by semiotic systems. Sometimes apophatic art apparatuses purposefully attempt to defer their own semiotic capture as long as possible, and then to confound this capture when it does inevitably happen. But apophatic art apparatuses are always doing something more in the world that merely confounding human semiotic systems. The something more that they are always doing is making nothing by braking becoming.

Finally, apophatic art apparatuses are not simply literary apparatuses culled from the historical tradition of apophatic writing. Instead, they are art apparatuses which produce an apophatic occurrence or phenomenon. In the same way that I am not merely taking the concept of apparatus from quantum mechanics via analogy (since art apparatuses are legitimately functioning apparatuses), I am not merely taking apophatic tactics from literary apophasis via analogy (since apophatic art apparatuses produce actual apophatic effects, whether or not they employ human language). It is important to note that uttered human language (whether read or heard) is an actual occurrence in the world; it does not stand removed from the world. So, an apophatic art apparatus that does happen to employ human language (like Arakawa and Gins’s *Mechanism of Meaning*) is not merely talking “about” the world so much as exerting an actual force in the world. It is also important to note that materials in the world already “mean” (if not always human-linguistically). So, an apophatic art apparatus that does not employ human language (like David Crawford’s *Stop Motion Studies*) is still actually uttering and meaning. Both apparatuses (*Mechanism of Meaning* and *Stop Motion Studies*) (do not) mean what they (fail to) become.

I won’t attempt apophatic writing in this book (although the previous sentence comes close), but I will analyze some classic examples of it. I am admittedly offering a kataphatic explanation of apophatic writing. I will use the term “God” and refer to God in the third person
singular masculine as “him.” Apophatic writing would quickly unsay both of these terms. As per the ways in which Jacques Derrida practiced deconstruction, it was almost always counter-productive for him to give a clear definition of deconstruction. Derrida’s deconstructive practices differed from text to text, as determined by the contours of the texts he was deconstructing. I mention Derrida here because, since the emergence of deconstructive practices, deconstruction has often been associated with apophasis. I will argue that this association is not altogether fair to either practice. At any rate, I am not Derrida, and I am not even writing an apophatic text (much less practicing deconstruction). I am not even writing a book about apophatic writing. I am writing a book about apophasic art apparatuses – art apparatuses that behave apophatically. Since using an art apparatus to pragmatically make nothing is already tricky enough, I will not make it any more complicated by treating this book as if it were itself an art apparatus trying to make nothing. I will simply proceed as straightforwardly as possible.

I will first present a more expanded definition of apophasis and analyze some instructive examples of apophatic writing. This will be followed by some relevant similarities and differences between apophasis and deconstruction, in order to salvage (for my own particular purposes) what may be salvaged from deconstruction, and to distinguish the ways in which apophasis differs from deconstruction. Next, I will consider the ways in which language is real (both actually and virtually); and what “real,” “actual,” and “virtual” mean in regards to language. This will involve an explanation of literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the utterance, and a brief return to Whitehead and Deleuze. I will acknowledge the sense in which the perpetual becomings of matter are themselves “discursive” (Karen Barad’s term), but this recognition alone will not be enough to account for the particularly unique behaviors of human language. I will
then consider the ways in which human language is itself a force in the world, but this recognition alone will not be enough to account for all that matter comes to mean. It turns out matter and language both mean and matter, but differently. Ultimately, we will arrive at an understanding of language that strongly opposes both: 1. the reduction of the universe to a giant text that awaits human interpretation; and 2. the concept that there is any such thing as direct phenomenological access to immediate meaning which would overcome the shortcomings of mediated human language.

Having thought through language and its functions in the world, I will return to apophatic language proper and extract some of its tactics for use in our apophatic art apparatuses. In particular, we will consider the sister tactics of perpetual deferral (no ending) and the arche-trace (no beginning), the powerful (hard-braking) tactic of indifference, and the immobilizing (confounding) tactic of aporia. Finally, I will consider why art might be more suitable for apophasis than writing, and think through some salient differences between apophatic art and what might be understood as deconstructive art.

A Kataphatic Explanation of Apophatic Writing

Apophatic writing is a way of talking about God that seeks to properly revere him by not overly delimiting him. “Apophasis” is negation and “kataphasis” is affirmation. Since God is beyond all we can affirm about him, in order to more accurately describe him, we must balance our affirmations with reverent negations. Theologian Bruce Ellis Benson explains, “One affirms something but denies it, because to affirm it too strongly would be heret-
ical and to deny it completely would also be heretical.”

In the Greek, Kataphasis means something like “toward assertive speaking” and apophasis means something like “away from assertive speaking.”

By definition, it might seem that any art which refrains from using human language is apophatic. But apophatic writing doesn't simply move away from “language” (on the contrary, it traffics in the medium of language); instead, it more specifically moves away from assertive, declarative language – away from the copula of equation. Whereas kataphatic language would freely assert something like “God is love,” apophatic language would never couple or equate God with anything. So visual art that traffics in non-linguistic media (as much visual art does) has not yet overcome the copula (the “is”) of equation and representation. A realistic painting of a pear that is meant to represent a pear is still operating in the realm of kataphatic assertion, even if the painting lacks a human language title (“This is a Pear”). Magritte’s paintings and titles playfully and ingeniously trouble this space between pictographic and linguistic assertion, but they are still probably not yet apophatic art apparatuses.

Regarding the coupling function of the “is” and its (non-)relation to apophatic writing, Jewish philosopher Jacob Taubes explains:

In the realm of the “is”-assertion, there is no place for God. With an “is”-assertion, an object is referred to and described. The sum of “is”-assertions constitutes science. What is not an object is not knowable, cannot enter the realm of knowledge, and must be declared by science as null. But “God is not” is also the assertion of theology. For theology has always denied that God

is an object and agrees in this with atheism, and with science grounded on atheism.\[11\]

From this perspective, apophatic writing doesn’t “unsay” language per se, but rather it “unsays” the linguistic copula, the linking verb “is” of equation, in order to avoid overly reducing God to mere ontological presence.

Indeed, “disontology” is the name given by literary historian Michael Sells to the kind of apophatic writing that refuses to reduce God to an ontological thing. Disontology is not simply an alternative way of practicing ontology. Instead, it opposes the ontological project altogether, (ab)using language in order to undermine and confound its ontological presumptions.

In the Greek, “ontology” means something like “the study of being.” Ontology assumes that there even is such a thing as “being,” and that being is made up of noun-ish things. Ontology tries to understand the “nature” (the essences and qualities) of these noun-ish things – what are they like individually and how do they relate to each other? Indo-European languages (including English) presume an ontological understanding of being. To ask, “What is being?” is already to presume that being is some kind of “thing” that has a “nature.” Once “being” (or “the world,” or “immanence,” or “the real”) is instead understood as a series of becomings and events in perpetual flux (à la Whitehead), this alternate understanding of being and becoming is not simply a new kind of ontology, but an entirely different “thing” altogether. This new way of thinking requires a new way of speaking which avoids the presuppositions of ontology – a kind of disontological speaking. Apophasis is one such way of disontologically speaking. In *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche writes, “I’m afraid we’re not rid of God because we still

believe in grammar.”12 Apophasis attempts to approach a non-ontotheological, disontological God who exceeds the strictures of grammar.

The God of apophasis is a uniquely thorny entity when it comes to ontology, particularly if he is to be understood as the giver of being who himself precedes being. This giver and source of being may then subsequently choose to participate in being, but he is hardly reducible to being. It is worth noting that Whitehead’s cosmology contains a God, but Whitehead’s God is more like the creative force immanent to the universe itself. Whitehead’s God is intrinsically bound up with Whitehead’s eternal entities, and since I have chosen not to follow Whitehead into the nuances of his eternal entities, I am not bound to wrestle with the subtle nuances of his God. I’m not so much substituting the God of apophasis for Whitehead’s God, because my cosmological amalgam of Whitehead and Deleuze doesn’t really require (or forbid) a God, per se. But the God of apophasis must (initially) become central to my focus on apophatic writing, since the original and primary function of apophatic writing is to properly revere the apophatic God.

In a nutshell, Whitehead’s God is too small to be the God of mystical apophatic writing. Whitehead’s central concern is not, “Why is there always something new?” but rather “How is there always something new?” So, Whitehead’s God is not the originary creator of the universe; but instead, he is a wholly immanent entity within the functional mechanisms of the universe, as contingent upon the actual real as the actual real is upon him.13 Whereas the God of apophasis exceeds being altogether. Humans may speak kataphatically about God only inso-

13 See particularly Whitehead, Process and Reality, 225, 348–49.
far as God has revealed himself to humans. In the words of (Pseudo-)Dionysius (the Areopagite), arguably the greatest Christian apophatic writer, “It alone could give an authoritative account of what it really is.” But humans can never speak ontologically about God as if he were some sort of categorizable thing (“He is nothing. He is no thing.”)

It is crucial to note that, in apophatic writing, negation never takes primacy (for then it would turn into another kind of affirmation), nor does it “cancel out” the affirmative. Instead, negation and affirmation work hand-in-hand, cycling back and forth, as we try to reverently speak about God. Catholic philosopher Jean-Luc Marion explains, “Negation and affirmation bear upon the same attributes, only envisaged from two points of view. Instead of neutralizing one another, they reinforce one another with a properly unthinkable tension.” This back-and-forth process of affirmation and negation has been called “negative theology” (after a phrase from Dionysius’s classic apophatic text The Divine Names), but Marion rightly points out that, “Dionysius uses nothing that might be translated as ‘negative theology.’ If he speaks of ‘negative theologies,’ in the plural, he does not separate them from the ‘affirmative theologies’ with which they maintain [their] relation.” So, although I will continue to refer to this way of writing as “apophatic,” it is more properly understood as “kataphatic/apophatic.”

Pseudo-Dionysius himself further reminds us that God is necessarily beyond even this kataphatic/apophatic way of thinking: “We should posit and ascribe to it all the affirmations we make in regards to beings, and more appro-

15 Ibid., 103.
17 Ibid., 145.
appropriately, we should negate all those affirmations, since it surpasses all being. Now we should not conclude that the negations are simply the opposites of the affirmations, but rather that the cause of all [God] is considerably prior to this, beyond privations, beyond every denial, beyond every assertion.” In other words, even the new resultant kataphatic knowledge gained by the kataphatic/apophatic way of saying/unsaying must itself be apophatically unsaid ad infinitum. Unlike some sort of Hegelian dialectic which seeks (through thesis, antithesis, and synthesis) to perpetually evolve concepts throughout history, the kataphatic/apophatic dance means to elude any synthesis (however historically temporary) and any evolution (however ongoing). Neither kataphasis nor apophasis ever get the last word. There is no last word, because any God worthy of the role necessarily eludes any sort of reduction. Apophasis means to perpetually confound, undermine, and mung up any linguistic attempt to reduce and capture the living God. It is this emphasis on the perpetual deferral of reduction (the extra-linguistic version of “reduction” might be understood as “becoming”) that we mean to port from apophatic writing into our apophatic art apparatuses. A successful apophatic art apparatus is a work of art that resists (however fleetingly) the inevitable move toward becoming.

Apophatic writing shares certain affinities with many forms of experimental writing: Dadaist absurdity, Zen mysticism, Oulipian pataphysics, Korzybskian general semantics, and Derridean deconstruction, to name a few. (The specific relationship between apophatic writing and deconstruction will be explored later in this chapter.) But apophatic writing is its own unique form of literature. Importantly, apophatic writing is not simply illogical, irrational, random, arbitrary, or generic. On the contrary,

apophatic writing is rigorous, non-arbitrary, and quite specific. Michael Sells explains, “The apophatic paradoxes are constructed upon a foundation of conventional logical distinctions; the more highly tuned the rationality of the kataphatic context, the more successful will be the apophatic paradox.” This practice of rigorous unsaying that is in meticulous dialogue with the specific contours of the kataphatic assertions which it unsays makes apophasis a particularly suitable tactic for any art apparatus that means to “make nothing” (brake the becoming) of the well-decided materials with which it is in dialogue.

Before we proceed to some specific examples of apophatic writing, it is important to understand that any apophatic experience ultimately exceeds the generic confines of “literature” and “writing.” As philosopher and literary theorist William Franke clarifies:

The experience of apophasis, as an experience of not being able to say, is quintessentially linguistic: the experience itself is intrinsically an experience of the failure of language [...]. And yet the experience in question is not fundamentally experience of language or of any other determinable object, for this could be adequately expressed. The experiencing subject is affected by “something” beyond all it can objectively comprehend, something engendering affects that it cannot account for nor even be sure are its own.

Successful apophatic writing must always ultimately exceed any tidy reduction to writing, speaking, human language, and even non-human discursivity; because the
goal of apophasis is to confound reduction. So, although we have chosen to begin with the historical genre that is apophatic writing, apophasis itself is an affective experience, not merely a style of linguistic formulation. As such, apophatic experiences can be (and are) triggered by a variety of non-linguistic materials.

Some Examples of Apophatic Writing

Without much accompanying analysis or commentary, here are some historical examples of apophatic writing. I’ve tried to select passages of extreme apophasis in order to foreground the very limits of the genre. I’ve chosen passages written by Pseudo-Dionysius (c. 500 CE) and Meister Eckhart (1260–1328 CE), both Christians famous for their apophatic writing. Apophatic writing occurs across most religions (there is a particularly strong strain within the Sufi tradition of Islam), and even (arguably) in various genres of philosophy, but it seems to me that apophasis is forced to be at its most extreme when faced with kataphatic assertions that are most straightforward and clearly formulated. Christianity, with its specific claims of a particular, incarnate, historical messiah presents apophatic writers within the Christian tradition with a particularly acute challenge, and Dionysius and Eckhart ingeniously rise to that challenge in the following passages.

Regarding God

God is not some kind of being. No. [...] He was not. He will not be. He did not come to be. He is not in the midst of becoming. He will not come to be. No. He is not. [...] He is not contained in being. [...] He has every
shape and structure, and yet is formless and beautyless. [...] He is nothing. He is no thing.\textsuperscript{21}

God is therefore known in all things and as distinct from all things. He is known through knowledge and through unknowing. Of him there is conception, reason, understanding, touch, perception, opinion, imagination, name, and many other things. On the other hand, he cannot be understood, words cannot contain him, and no name can lay hold of him. He is not one of the things that are and he cannot be known in any of them. He is all things in all things and he is no thing among things. He is known to all from all things and he is known to no one from anything. This is the sort of language we must use about God.\textsuperscript{22}

It is not soul or mind, nor does it possess imagination, conviction, speech, or understanding. Nor is it speech per se, understanding per se. It cannot be spoken of and it cannot be grasped by understanding. It is not number or order, greatness or smallness, equality or inequality, similarity or dissimilarity. It is not immovable, moving, or at rest. It has no power, it is not power, nor is it light. It does not live nor is it life. It is not a substance, nor is it eternity or time. It cannot be grasped by the understanding since it is neither knowledge nor truth. It is not kingship. It is not wisdom. It is neither one nor oneness, divinity nor goodness. Nor is it a spirit, in the sense in which we understand that term. It is not sonship or fatherhood and it is nothing known to us or to any other being. It falls neither within the predicate of nonbeing nor of being. Existing beings do not know it as it actually is and it does not know them as they are. There is no speaking of it, nor name nor


\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 108–9.
knowledge of it. Darkness and light, error and truth – it is none of these. It is beyond assertion and denial.²³

Whoever perceives something in God and attaches thereby some name to him, that is not God. God is above names and above nature.²⁴

God is nameless because none can say or understand anything about Him.²⁵

As he is simply one, without any manner and properties, he is not Father or Son or Holy Spirit, and yet he is a something that is neither this nor that.²⁶

You should know Him without image, without means, and without semblance.²⁷

Regarding Mystical Practices

It is not God’s intention in his works that man should have in himself a place for God to work in. Poverty of spirit is for a man to keep so free of God and of all his works that if God wishes to work in the soul, he himself is the place in which he wants to work... Man should be so poor that he should not be or have any place in which God could work. When man clings to place, he clings to distinction.²⁸

What is the final end? It is the hidden darkness of the eternal Godhead, which is unknown and never has been known and never shall be known. God abides there unknown in Himself, and the light of the eternal Father has ever shone in there, and the darkness does not comprehend the light.\textsuperscript{29}

Lead us up beyond unknowing and light, / ...in the brilliant darkness of a hidden silence.\textsuperscript{30}

We pray to enter within the super-bright gloom, and through not seeing and not knowing, to see and to know that the not to see nor to know is itself the above sight and knowledge.\textsuperscript{31}

Leave behind you everything perceived and understood, everything perceptible and understandable, all that is not and all that is... By an undivided and absolute abandonment of yourself and everything, shedding all and freed from all, you will be uplifted to the ray of the divine shadow which is above everything that is.\textsuperscript{32}

As we plunge into that darkness which is beyond intellect, we shall find ourselves not simply running short of words but actually speechless and unknowing.\textsuperscript{33}

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\textsuperscript{29} Meister Eckhart, \textit{The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart}, 283.
\textsuperscript{32} Pseudo-Dionysius, “The Mystical Theology,” 135.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 139.
My goal in citing the above examples is not to lay out any sort of particular theological propositions. Any such propositions would be beyond the scope of this book. Among other things, the God of mystical apophatic writing is a kind of limit-case study of an entity who refuses to ever finally and reductively resolve into any stable or static thing. The God of Pseudo-Dionysius and Meister Eckhart is useful to us not because he is a typical example of the kinds of enduring objects we will encounter in our art apparatuses (apophatic or otherwise). Far from it. Rather, the ways in which these mystical writers are forced to approach such an anomalous entity causes them to invent rigorous braking strategies, linguistic ways of making nothing, which will become useful to our own apophatic art apparatuses as we attempt to brake (however temporarily) the eventually inevitable self-becoming of ordinary actual occasions.

It is important to note that Dionysius and Eckhart aren’t purposefully obfuscating the issues or deceptively muddying the waters with tangentially vague, abstract language. Apophatic writing is not mere sophistry. Instead, it rigorously traces the contours of its subject to the point at which the representational, denominating, explicative, kataphatic function of language itself is exhausted. This exhaustion doesn’t affirm or deny the “being” or “existence” or “immanence” or “transcendence” of God. It merely enacts the inability of language to reduce God to any one of these states. Such extreme apophatic writing initially invites and then requires and enforces a kind of intellectually athletic (and often contortive) performative reading. The texts above do indeed denotatively mean what they say (they are not mere babble), but their main goal is not simply to clearly assert truths (that would move them toward the realm of kataphasis). Instead, these texts mean to lead their readers away from the realm of assertive truth statements. The apophatic experience that the reader has while being led away from
assertion is itself the “meaning” of the texts. The texts “mean” the performative intellectual contortions that they instigate. Of course, the same could be said of all texts. All texts “mean” the performative readings that they instigate; it’s just that kataphatic texts instigate less contortive readings than apophatic texts. According to this understanding, then, all texts (whether kataphatic or apophatic, denotative or poetic, sensible or absurd) function as apparatuses. All texts invite an utterance phenomenon (whether heard or read) to occur. More relevant to our interests, the particular apophatic passages above function as apophatic apparatuses. But they are not yet apophatic art apparatuses. To make apophatic art apparatuses, we either need materials other than text, or additional materials in conjunction with text, or we need to treat text as a different kind of supra-semiotic material.

Relevant Similarities and Differences between Apophatic Writing and Deconstruction

Much has already been written on both apophasis and deconstruction. A fair amount has even been written on the relationship between the two. Derrida himself has written about their relationship. Is deconstruction merely a contemporary form of apophatic writing, or is apophatic writing an ancient form of deconstruction? Or are the two mutually exclusive? Or do the two exist in some other more oblique and complicated relationship? Since apophatic writing and deconstruction are both means of troubling stable ontologies, it has proved (and will continue to prove) inherently difficult to construct stable, reductive ontologies about what these two practices are and are not. I will argue that apophatic writing and deconstruction are mostly different, with certain overlapping similarities and goals. In order to make my case, I must first briefly describe my understanding of
deconstruction – an infamously slippery task since, like apophasis, deconstruction inherently resists reduction to resolved, assertive definitions.

Before I tackle a gloss of deconstruction, here is a quite apophatic passage by Derrida himself which could have resided comfortably above amongst the Eckhart and Pseudo-Dionysius passages:

Of him there is nothing said that might hold [...] – Save his name [...] – Save the name that names nothing that might hold, not even a divinity, nothing whose withdrawal does not carry away every phrase that tries to measure itself against him. “God” “is” the name of this bottomless collapse, of this endless desertification of language.\(^{34}\)

Derrida is quite familiar with the mystical traditions of negative theology and the historical practices of apophatic writing practiced within them. Arguably, deconstruction has its precedence in the historical traditions of apophatic writing; but deconstruction is (usually) not, technically or even functionally, apophatic writing.

Derrida purposefully resists regularly and clearly defining deconstruction. He even resists regularly using the noun “deconstruction” as the moniker of his philosophical project. Derrida makes most sense to me as a kind of post-phenomenological philosopher, and less sense to me as a literary theorist. His goal is to read philosophical texts deconstructively, one by one; not to establish a new form of literary criticism known as “deconstruction.” However (in the context of a “dialogue” with analytic phi-

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losopher John Searle), Derrida does come fairly close to defining deconstruction in the following passage:

The structure of the area in which we are operating here calls for a strategy that is complex and tortuous, involuted and full of artifice: for example, exploiting the target against itself by discovering it at times to be the “basis” of an operation directed against it; or even discovering “in it” the cryptic reserve of something utterly different.35

Deconstruction first reads a text according to the contours of the text’s own fault lines, and in so doing discovers these fault lines (implications of the text not overtly stated in the text, weaknesses of the text which the author has attempted to marginalize, prior assumptions that the text has made which work against the very assertions the text is trying to make). According to Derrida, “The movements of deconstruction do not destroy structures from the outside. They are not possible and effective, nor can they take accurate aim, except by inhabiting those structures.”36 Deconstruction then writes its own text in dialogue with the source text. The deconstructive text proceeds according to the logic of the source text, and like a mathematical proof, eventually comes to the aspects of the source text that are inconsistent, revealing them. Unlike a mathematical proof, nothing is reductively proved or disproved by the deconstructive text. Instead, the deconstructive text is itself immediately open to subsequent deconstructive readings. Indeed, if the deconstructive text is truly deconstructive, it openly invites such future readings.

“Deconstruction” is not a philosophy that asserts its own truth, but more like a way of proceeding. As literary theorist Jonathan Culler explains, “Deconstruction has no better theory of truth. It is a practice of reading and writing attuned to the aporias that arise in attempts to tell us the truth.”\textsuperscript{37} In this sense, deconstruction is similar to apophatic writing. Both “feed off” the kataphatic truth assertions of their source texts.

Each deconstructive reading will be different – tactically, formally, rhetorically, tonally. The way in which the deconstructive text proceeds will depend largely on the way in which the source text proceeds. And, according to Culler, “Paradoxically, the more powerful and authoritative an interpretation [i.e., a source text], the more [deconstructive] writing it generates.”\textsuperscript{38} Again, this is similar to apophatic writing. The more specific the kataphatic assertion, the more necessarily contorted the apophatic writing must be. And, as with deconstruction, there is no single, rote formula or method for the ways in which apophatic writing may be done. Each apophatic approach varies depending on the particular contours of the source kataphatic assertion, and thus both approaches (deconstruction and apophasis) are contingent upon the existence of some prior kataphatic assertion. In this sense, deconstructive readings and apophatic writings are like quantum-behavior-measuring apparatus: each relies on a prepared initial state. Art apparatuses also rely on a prepared initial state: their source materials (in whatever media).

The main differences between apophatic writing and deconstruction lie in their ethical goals, however obliquely these must be inferred. The goal of apophatic writing is to undermine ontological language (language based on

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 47.
presences, essences, identities, and assertions of truth) as it attempts to describe God (note: the uniquely anomalous nature of God as subject matter is essential) in order to perhaps mystically be encountered by the God who is beyond “there/not there,” beyond “is/is not.” The goal of deconstruction (as I understand it) is to undermine ontological language as it attempts to describe any and everything at all in order to give difference its due – to reveal difference (rather than presence, essence, or identity) as the actual means by which all meaning in the world emerges.

The fact that apophasis unsays texts about God whereas deconstruction deconstructs texts about any topic whatsoever may seem minor, but it actually puts apophasis and deconstruction in two different philosophical camps. Apophasis would not deny the positivist elements of the universe itself. Attributes, behaviors, and characteristics of actual entities do not arise merely as the result of pure difference. Positivist characteristics are real and in the immanent world. Apophasis does not deny any of this. It would only add a, “Yes, and... the God about which we write also exceeds all immanence.” Apophasis doesn’t claim that everything (or indeed, any other thing) exceeds immanence. The apophatic God alone flashes in and out of immanence at whim and will. Whitehead is intent upon keeping all outside, transcendental forces from being smuggled into his wholly immanent cosmology. Contrarily, apophasis asserts that there is one (and only one) especially unique entity who is not constrained by immanence, being, entity-ness, thingness, or anything else. There is one (and only one) exception to the constraints of immanence: God.

Deconstruction’s project is altogether different in respect to positivist forces, entities, and God. The goal of deconstruction is not to unsay meaning itself, but to dethrone the idea that meaning is the result of originary essences and identities (nouns with inherent qualities and properties), and to replace this idea with a demon-
stration of how meaning is actually the result of ongoing (non-originary) differences. So, for example, green means green not because there is some fundamental, originary, foundational essence of greenness in the world, but because there are all sorts of differences in the world between colors (always already), and the “meaning” of green arises from these differences. The difference between red and green is not derived from an essential property of redness and an essential property of greenness. Instead, red and green are themselves derived from the difference between themselves (and all other colors). Deconstruction means to foreground and enact difference (as opposed to essence, presence, or identity) as constitutive of meaning, so deconstruction always downplays and undermines essence, presence, or identity as originary. This approach of undermining essence as foundational and originary is not applied to God alone, but to everything in the universe.

Apophasis, on the other hand, means to give God (alone) his due by enacting the failure of language to reduce him to an ontological meaning. Deconstruction is primarily concerned with difference in and of itself (wherever that concern may lead, as long as it doesn’t permanently and statically lead back to difference as a new originary presence). Apophasis is primarily concerned with God himself (wherever that may lead, as long as it doesn’t permanently and statically lead back to assertive or reductive declarations about God). Deconstruction undermines presence to get at difference. Apophasis undermines meaning altogether to get at God. Deconstruction and apophasis each make a kind of nothing, but deconstruction attempts to make an ongoing nothing of everything, which (according to Whitehead’s cosmology of perpetual process) is simply not sustainable for very long. Deconstruction makes nothing of the primacy of presence and arrives at a vibrant (but ultimately unmoored) world of differences differing. Apophasis makes nothing
of all meaning (whether identity-derived or difference-derived) and arrives at God-only-knows-where. The implicit faith wager involved in apophasis is that God may manifest himself, but there can never be any guarantee of this. Apophasis rigorously descends or ascends into nothing and waits to be found by God (or not).

Just as deconstruction requires ontological language in order to have something to deconstruct, so apophasis requires kataphatic language in order to have something to unsay. But these two relationships are not perfectly analogous. The former relationship is much more antagonistic; the latter much more resigned. Apophatic writing doesn’t need to deconstruct kataphatic writing in order to achieve its goals. Indeed, without kataphatic assertions perpetually remaining to balance the apophatic project, apophatic writing risks heresy (as Meister Eckhart tragically discovered).

The differences between apophasis and deconstruction become particularly acute when one attempts to read apophatic texts deconstructively. It becomes like applying one kind of sulfuric acid to another. Apophatic texts are not your normal presence-presuming texts, defenselessly and naively awaiting deconstruction. Consequently, when Derrida himself attempts a deconstructive reading of Pseudo-Dionysius (in “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials”\(^39\)), it is with such rigor and care that Derrida becomes maddeningly indirect and circuitous, with occasional flashes (due to exhaustion?) of uncharacteristic directness and an (almost) biographical or confessional tone. It is as if Pseudo-Dionysius’s “The Mystical Names” is itself exhausting Derrida’s own deconstructive reading of it. Derrida can’t avoid assertively imposing his

overarching concern with difference onto a text that has itself already moved beyond the identity–difference dichotomy in relation to God.

For our purposes, apophasis is more suitable than deconstruction for the creation of art apparatuses that make nothing, because apophasis is able to work within Whitehead’s cosmology of becoming. Apophasis doesn't need to undermine all presence for all time under all circumstances everywhere forever. It simply needs to make local and temporary naught of presence in the exceptional and singular case of God. What we are porting from apophasis, then, is not a nihilistic approach that would break the entire universe, or even an ethics of (arche-) primary difference that would undermine every and all essences everywhere forever. Indeed, apophasis is flexibly indifferent to the battle between identity and difference regarding all other entities save one (God). Indeed, even in the case of God, apophasis doesn't ever permanently side with difference or absence against identity or essence. It merely performatively and cyclically enacts the role of difference in conjunction with its identity-centric counterpart, kataphasis. Thus, apophasis is a better, less universal, more locally applicable tool than deconstruction for our art apparatuses. We don’t need to break the universe, we only need to brake a part of the universe, and follow wherever such braking may lead.

Language as Actual/Virtual via Mikhail Bakhtin’s “Utterance”

It turns out that tactics from apophatic writing are directly applicable to art apparatuses in actual ways and not by mere analogy. This is not because the world itself is a text (that would require shoehorning all material in the world to fit into human linguistic structures); nor because human language is merely an ordinary and usual
form of material discursivity (that would require diluting, flattening, and dishonoring the unique and complex historical accretions that have resulted in human language being in the world). There is a third way to think about human language and its actual functions in the world which will help us more clearly understand the relevance and applicability of apophatic writing tactics to art apparatuses intent on making nothing. This third understanding comes via Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the utterance, and its relevance to Deleuze’s virtual/actual model of the real as applied to Whitehead’s cosmology of concrescence.

Prior to unpacking Bakhtin’s concept of the utterance, here are some explanations from Bakhtin himself:

Language enters life through concrete utterances (which manifest language) and life enters language through concrete utterances as well. The utterance is an exceptionally important node of problems. [...] Only the contact between the language meaning and the concrete reality that takes place in the utterance can create the spark of expression. It exists neither in the system of language nor in the objective reality surrounding us. Thus, emotion, evaluation, and expression are foreign to the word of language and are born only in the process of its live usage in a concrete utterance.40

An “utterance” event could be spoken words uttered at a particular historical time, but it could also be an instance of reading a book at a particular historical time. What it can’t be is simply a book sitting on a shelf unread. The book on the shelf unread contains the syntactic, system-

atic, grammatical side of human “language,” but that is only one side. I propose that the book on the shelf unread is akin to (but not exactly like) Deleuze’s virtual real. It may be instantiated and read (aloud or quietly) in history at any time, in which case it then becomes actualized, it becomes actually real as it ingresses into all of the actual occasions that take place during that particular utterance occurrence. If humans suddenly stop talking and reading and go extinct on the earth in actual history, the human “language” in the book on the shelf freezes and loses its ongoing, becoming relationship with the rest of the universe. The physical book itself (as a material object) is still prehended as an enduring object by any relevant actual occasions, and even the language within the book is arguably negatively prehended, but the language itself has a negligible effect on the actual real.

However, as long as humans are alive on the planet, talking and reading, even if we ourselves never open that particular book, the words used in that book continue to change over the years through ongoing usage in actual utterance events (changes that feed into and condition the potentia of the virtual real), so that when we finally do open the book and read it (prehending it into a series of actual occasions), our human understanding of certain words in that book will be different now than it was ten years ago. Artist and theorist Joseph Grigely even adds the supplemental idea that when an author pens a text, that historical event of writing (or typing or dictating or whatever) is itself an utterance. It is by no means the defining or final utterance of that particular series of words, but it still qualifies as an actual utterance.41

The speaker of written language speaks once by writing. Her speech is then archived and time-shifted. It is translated into a potential future event that is only com-

pleted (performed) upon its subsequent reading. Furthermore, with each new reading (even by the same “listener”) a new utterance event occurs. Because the writer has already completed her single utterance performance (the initial writing) by the time her book is read (re-uttered), the event-contingent aspect of this two-part process (writing and reading) is often overlooked and superseded by an inordinate emphasis on the static words themselves, what they signify, and how they fit into a syntactic or semiotic system. This calcification of the written word, this inordinate emphasis on its denominational, denotative aspects, is what Bakhtin’s theory of the utterance seeks to counteract. Bakhtin’s theory of the utterance properly accounts for the importance of the lived, bodily, actual affect of the utterance event (what might simply be described as “context”) on the “meaning” of human language.

Bakhtin’s concept of the utterance may be further supplemented with Roland Barthes’s concept of intertextuality, the idea that any single text is actually itself a tissue of citations of prior texts (whether explicitly footnoted or not). And yet, according to Bakhtin, without lived, historical, actually real utterance events (whether they occur via speaking or listening or writing or reading), human “language” remains hermetically sealed. Without real-time historical utterance events (which occur millions of times a day all over the world, and have occurred, day after day, for thousands of years), virtual human language (unread written language in a book on a shelf) is impotent to exert its influence on the actual real. Furthermore, without ongoing historical utterance events, this same virtual language is unable to receive new meanings and connotations that evolve from the particular inflections, affects, timbres, typefaces, lighting, or contexts of each specific, actually real, historical utterance. This two-way transfer of meaning is why Bakhtin calls the utterance event “an exceptionally important node of problems.”
This second aspect (the flow of lived actual language into virtual language) is particularly important. The utterance is the way in which “the world” gets into “language.” For example, imagine you are reading this paragraph in a coffee house. The way your coffee tastes and the music to which you are listening and the sunlight through the window and the condition (and media) of your edition of the book and the typeface in which the book is set are all affectively modulating the language you are reading (in subtle but actually real ways). Subsequent to this utterance event (your reading of this paragraph), the next time you think and use and read and speak any of the words in this paragraph, those words have changed for you (however subtly) based on this particular reading (utterance) of the paragraph. Furthermore, if you read this same paragraph again two days later in a different setting (or even in the same setting), that second reading constitutes a completely new utterance event. All of human language may thus be usefully understood as an ongoing and evolving dialogue amongst all humans throughout all history, but a dialogue totally contingent upon and entangled with the real historical instances (and the non-human materials involved in those instances) in which each word has been uttered. Language itself cannot evolve without the actual utterance event.

To give another example, suppose that I bodily meet a friend with whom I have previously corresponded online but have never met “in real life.” We talk and spend time together. Those utterance events which occurred throughout our bodily meeting have now altered our subsequent online communication. That fact is obvious enough. But each of those utterances has now also altered all of our future communication with other humans (whether online or off), and has also altered (to however subtle a degree) the history of the English language (assuming we are speaking English). Furthermore, there is nothing magical about us having met bodily
(although obviously there are important qualitative differences between online and offline utterances). The online correspondences that my friend and I had prior to our bodily meeting also qualify as actual utterances. Bakhtin’s utterance doesn’t prioritize the spoken voice, or bodily presence, or any particular form of text. The utterance simply has to happen in lived, historical time. It has to be an actual event.

To Bakhtin, the event of any single conversation between two people is an extension of a larger, ongoing historical conversation. Each utterance is a speech act in response to another utterance, going backwards through time. It is not merely that we all inherited the syntax of a common language system. Instead, we are all inheritors of every preceding conversation that has actually happened historically. Our current, nuanced understanding of language is subtly colored by every utterance anyone has ever made. In Bakhtin’s own words:

Any speaker is himself a respondent to a greater or lesser degree. He is not, after all, the first speaker, the one who disturbs the eternal silence of the universe. And he presupposes not only the existence of the language system he is using, but also the existence of preceding utterances – his own and others – with which his given utterance enters into one kind of relationship to another […]. Any utterance is a link in a very complexly organized chain of other utterances.42

All utterances are thus vehicles of transmutation which are simultaneously dependent on their immediate, subjective contexts and on a history of previous contexts. From the perspective of Whitehead’s cosmology, this makes perfect sense. Each utterance is comprised of a series of actual occasions. Each one of these actual occa-

sions prehends all prior actual occasions (whether negatively or positively) and ingresses the positive prehensions into itself.

Granted, Bakhtin’s utterance does prioritize a kind of human subject, but Bakhtin is writing his theory prior to object oriented ontology and its anthropocentric warnings. Might we imagine cross-species utterances (“Lassie, come here girl!”)? Might we imagine animal, plant, or even rock utterances? Of course.

According to Bakhtin’s theory of the utterance, uttered human language is always already doing much more than merely describing the real world (although it is doing that too). Uttered language is actually altering the history of the world. Language is itself a part of (not apart from) the actual world; it is an actual force in the actual world. Language is not merely descriptive or syntactical; it is also an enacted and context-contingent event. Human language operates as a force in the actual world via any entity able to access its virtual reservoir. Most humans are such entities, and humans are not the only ones with such access.

Photographer Hollis Frampton famously observed, “Photography is not a substitute for anything.” Art historian Liz Kotz later proposed the radical corollary, “Language is not a substitute for anything.”43 The implication is that language, like photography, is freed from the burden of re-presentation, to develop as its own artistic medium. Language does not simply declare, define, or describe. As such, language is less usefully understood solely from the Saussurean perspective of signifier and signified and better understood as a holistic relationship between a virtual language system and an actual uttered historical event, one feeding into the other in an ongoing, unfolding progression. Meaning is never solely dis-

embodied and propositional, but always context-dependent and enacted. To revisit Bakhtin’s own explanation:

The natural meaning of the word applied to a particular actual reality under particular real conditions of speech communication creates a spark of expression […]. Only the contact between the language meaning and the concrete reality that takes place in the utterance can create the spark of expression.44

To reiterate, apart from a lived, historical utterance event, any “meaning” that exists in an abstract linguistic system remains quarantined, bereft, and contextless.

Notably, something akin to Bakhtin’s concept of the utterance is suggested in the writings of Derrida. Derrida is frequently mischaracterized as one who seeks to reduce the entire material world into a kind of text, but as literary theorist Claire Colebrook argues, “Derrida is not, we are coming to understand, a textualist; he does not endorse a narrowly linguistic idealism.”45 In Limited, Inc., Derrida begins with the speech-act theory of J.L. Austin, which famously observes that certain kinds of “performative” utterances enact what they say. (For example, the utterance, “I promise,” actually makes a promise.) Austin distinguishes these kinds of performative utterances from ordinary “constative” (declarative) utterances. For example, according to Austin, an utterance like, “The sky is blue,” is constative and not performative. Yet even Austin is haunted by the implication that “mere” constative utterances are themselves performative. In his seminal text How To Do Things with Words, Austin confesses:

Clearly any, or almost any, perlocutionary act [the changing of a listener’s mind] is liable to be brought off, in sufficiently special circumstances, by the issuing, with or without calculation, of any utterance whatsoever, and in particular by a straightforward constative utterance (if there is such an animal).46

But Austin fails to develop this insight toward its more radical conclusion. Derrida expands Austin by claiming that all utterances (whether declarative or explicitly performative) are themselves performative. This is true because all utterances cause something to happen in the world. In Derrida’s own words, “The promise is not just one speech act among others; every speech act is fundamentally a promise.”47

Austin is concerned with the intention of the speaker, as if what the speaker means to convey is somehow essential in determining the particular genre of the speech act. But Derrida is unconcerned with the intention of the speaker, since the force and effect of an utterance are never solely determined by the speaker’s intentions. And Bakhtin is more concerned with the context of the utterance, since saying “I promise” as an actor in a theater performance would not be the same as saying it as a groom during a wedding ceremony.

Elsewhere, Derrida introduces the idea of “the unconscious text” which seems very similar to what I am calling the “virtual real” aspect of Bakhtin’s utterance theory. In Writing and Difference, Derrida explains, “The unconscious text is already a weave of pure traces, differences in which meaning and force are united—a text nowhere present, consisting of archives which are always already

46 J.L. Austin, How To Do Things with Words (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 110. [Bracketed clarifications are mine.]
transcriptions. Originary prints. Everything begins with reproduction. Always already: repositories of a meaning which was never present.” The utterance event would thus be the occurrence which takes these “non-present texts” (proto-meanings, differences differing, possibilities of new meanings yet to emerge) and prehends them into actual history.

It will be useful now to pause and connect our current understanding of the utterance back to art apparatuses. It would seem that if the utterance itself is a kind of actual phenomenon, then it must necessarily involve humans; and indeed, it usually does. But the utterance does not solely involve humans as reflective, disembodied, thinking cogitos who use language as a once-removed means of abstractly understanding the world, or even as a kind of Machiavellian means of socially controlling other human behavior within a sociologically sequestered, human-centric “culture” that never quite manages to touch the “physical” world of “nature.” The problem is not with Bakhtin’s utterance model of human language and its relationship with the actual world, but with our understanding of what humans are doing in the actual world when we utter human language.

It is true that humans do not directly and immediately control objects with incantatory spells, causing rocks to levitate by verbally commanding them to do so. The effects of human language on rocks are less direct but no less actual. Land deeds, quarry rights, construction blueprints, town hall dialogues, blog essays about housing shortages, and thousands of other human language utterances have contributed to the eventual and actual levitation of many rocks into many buildings. Because humans are part of the “natural” world and are themselves enduring objects within the world, human language is an actual force in the actual “physical” world. We need not

even take recourse in the argument that certain behavioral patterns of animals constitute a legitimate kind of language (although this is true), or that all materials in the world make “discursive” decisions (à la Barad) that come to mean what these materials have decided to become (although this is also true). It is enough to note that human language causes many actual, physical events to occur in the world. This is because language is always doing more than merely re-presenting the world.

Some of the apophatic art apparatuses we examine will use human language, and some will not. Most of our apophatic art apparatuses will involve humans, but this fact is not shameful or inordinately anthropocentric, as long as materials from the world are also included and given their own say. We will even take time to speculatively consider certain kinds of art apparatuses which do not involve humans, but these will be exceptional.

Because we mean to examine art apparatuses that actually make nothing (instead of merely illustrating “nothing”), it becomes useful to make a case for the actual efficacious force of human language in the world. If ordinary, descriptive human language can be shown to always already have an actual force in the world, how much more of a force will the purposefully disontological, intentionally affective language of apophasis have on the world? It is from this affectively forceful language of apophasis that our art apparatuses import their tactics. Bakhtin’s model of the utterance makes a case for the actual, efficacious force and function of any and all human language in the world. Having preliminarily associated the functioning of language with the functioning of the art apparatus, let us return to examining the utterance in a bit more detail.

Bakhtin is useful for our purposes because he recognizes that all forms of utterance are tinged with contextual affect, not just spoken utterances. He writes:
Each text (both oral and written) includes a significant number of various kinds of natural aspects devoid of signification [...] but which are still taken into account (deterioration of manuscript, poor diction, and so forth). There are not nor can there be any pure texts. In each text, moreover, there are a number of aspects that can be called technical (the technical side of graphics, pronunciation, and so forth). 49

Proust echoes these sentiments when he writes:

Books, [...] through the way their cover opens, through the quality of the paper, can preserve within themselves as vivid a memory of how I then imagined Venice or of the wish I had to go there, as the sentences themselves. 50

Not just human-centric vocal tone and bodily gesture may inflect utterances and infect meaning, but also material-centric typefaces, paper thicknesses, screen resolutions, and font sizes.

Media theorist N. Katherine Hayles has acutely recognized many of the ways in which the material affects of computer-based media inflect and inform their textual “content.” In her seminal essay, “Print Is Flat, Code Is Deep,” she writes, “We can no longer afford to pretend that texts are immaterial or that text on screen is the same as text in print. The immateriality of the text


has ceased to be a useful or even a viable fiction.”\textsuperscript{51} Not only does the materiality of the medium color the text’s meaning, but Hayles radically argues that the materiality of the medium is in turn colored by the meaning of the text. “Materiality is reconceptualized as the interplay between a text’s physical characteristics and its signifying strategies, a move that entwines instantiation and signification at the outset.”\textsuperscript{52}

The idea that the “meaning” of a text cannot be easily separated from its material instantiation suits Bakhtin’s utterance theory well. The semiotic meaning of language (from the virtual realm) combines in the utterance event with the affective “meaning” of the material instantiation of that particular utterance (whether live human voice, recorded human voice, algorithmically generated synthetic [faux-]human voice, printed type on paper, computer-generated font on screen, etc.). The utterance is always a nexus of two-way exchange. Not only does the affective timbre of the voice inform the meaning of the text, but (and this seems the more radical notion) the meaning of the text informs the affective timbre of the voice. Signifying words, far from being cerebral and removed from bodily affect, actually create their own kind of bodily affect. In the utterance event, semiotic meaning ingresses into the physical world (via reading eye, listening ear, speaking voice, writing pen); at the same time, affective force (timbre, typeface, shadow, paper thickness) enters into and colors the virtual (yet real) meaning of words. The actual real informs the virtual real which informs the actual real and so on. Likewise, affect informs meaning which informs affect and so on. This actual/virtual way of understanding the holistic real becomes a useful tool for overcoming the false dichotomy between

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 67.
affect and meaning, experience and idea, physical world and human language.

Regarding the utterance, Whitehead himself observes, “There is not a sentence, or a word, with a meaning which is independent of the circumstances under which it is uttered.” And, “There is always a tacit reference to the environment of the occasion of utterance.” In Whitehead’s text *Symbolism*, language is understood as a human cognitive means of abstracting (and thus filtering) bodily affect (so that humans don’t get overwhelmed by pure affect). But language itself is then returned to the world (as a new entity now itself in the world), and it begins to have its own affective influence. Rather than seeing human language as a problem to be solved or philosophically overcome, Whitehead admires it. In *Modes of Thought* he writes, “Language is the triumph of human ingenuity, surpassing even the intricacies of modern technology.”

Deleuze also understands human language, not as a means of reducing and representing a universe “out there,” but rather as a kind of affective force within the universe. In discussion with Lyotard, Deleuze says, “A text, for me is nothing but a little cog in an extra-textual machine.” In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari theorize “a new ‘pace’ produced by the imbrication of the semiotic and the material.” The world is not a text, and human language is not the master key to accessing it. In-

stead, human language is just one more plateau that has historically accreted in a world full of a thousand other accreted plateaus.

Another advantage of Bakhtin’s utterance model is that it foregrounds language’s contingent relationship with actual history. Human language has never been and can never be ahistorical. Media theorist Alexander Galloway even makes the compelling argument that math is now historically contingent. “After software has entered history, math cannot and should not be understood ahistorically […] after cybernetics, after the mathematization of the genome, after Google’s page rank algorithm, after the industrialization of the social graph, after the growing chasm of the digital divide, any talk of math’s unmediated discourse with reality comes off as disingenuous or in poor taste.”

As Galloway insightfully observes, even math is an affective historical force in the actual world. Again, this is because humans are actual entities in the actual world, and their use of math actually changes the world.

Philosopher Eugene Thacker eloquently describes the relationship between language and affect when he writes, “Literature and life are connected not as form to matter but as mutually deforming and unforming activities.” And Elizabeth Grosz radically contends:

Altogether new conceptions of corporeality […] need to be developed, notions which see […] animate materiality and the materiality of language in interaction, which make possible a materialism beyond physicalism (i.e., the belief that reality can be explained in terms of the laws, principles, and terms of physics), a

materialism that questions physicalism, that reorients physics itself.\textsuperscript{60}

Bakhtin’s model of the utterance event provides a useful way of understanding both the influence of language on physical material, and the influence of historical utterances on the meaning of language; not as separate binary entities, but as Thacker’s “mutually deforming and unforming activities.”

\textbf{Linguistically Generated Affect That Escapes Linguistic Recapture}

It is important to understand the mechanisms of the utterance event and the ways in which human language systems and actual lived affect feed back and forth into each other, but this closed-circuit model of meaning-generation is not the end of the story. There is always a surplus of affect in the world that escapes (re-)capture by language systems, yet which nonetheless continues to “mean” something in the world. To whom does it mean something? To the rest of the non-human entities in the world, and even to those parts of a human that “know” without linguistically knowing. Recall that, according to Whitehead, consciousness (that which is able to traffic in linguistic representation and understanding) is merely the apex of being. “Humans” ongoingly experience and participate in all sorts of actual occasions apart from their conscious awareness of them.

Human language, once uttered, always has affective results. I see a stop sign, read it as signifying my need to stop, and already my physical body is in motion as a result of this linguistic encounter. But the converse is not

\textsuperscript{60} Elizabeth Grosz, \textit{Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism} (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 22.
always true. Not all affect in the world has a de facto linguistic meaning. My increased pulse at becoming aware of the stop sign does not necessarily “signify” anything linguistically. Nor does it refuse to signify anything. It is simply indifferent to its own potential recapture (or lack thereof) by linguistic systems of signification. All affect, all material, every occurrence in the world may be described and understood using human language. But (and this is essential), not all events in the world are so described and understood. Yes, all becomings in the world mean something, just not necessarily linguistically; they mean the very thing that they have become, to themselves and to the rest of the universe in all of its future becomings.

Apophatic language in particular seeks to supersaturate the utterance event with an embarrassment of affective surplus, returning as little assertive meaning as possible. Poetry seeks a kind of back and forth dance between meaning and aesthetic affect, ultimately arriving at a surplus of affect that purposefully exceeds (but never fully drowns out) the denotative “meaning” of the poem. Even a letter to the editor calling for empathetic action involving the construction of new buildings to counter a housing shortage is not merely a declarative utterance. Its goal is to incite a surplus of affective passion that will lead to humans levitating stones into buildings.

Affective surplus always escapes linguistic recapture because all language is inherently polysemic. No single word ever means one single thing. So even when a writer is trying to be as straightforward as possible (as in the case of clear construction instructions for a housing project), there will always be some slippage between what the writer intends and what is understood. A surplus of material affect escapes into the world whenever such slippages occur. The slippage between intention and understanding is not merely an occasional accident caused by carelessly worded language, but an inherent property of all
language. To put this in information-theoretical terms, there is no such thing as a pure signal. No signal is ever possible without a modicum of noise as the background from which it may arise and be recognized as signal.

Rather than attempting to overcome such slippages between “intention” and “understanding,” the cosmic artisan celebrates and exploits them. Indeed, a primary goal of all contemporary artists (and indeed, all artists) is to turn systems of signification into affective surplus. Elizabeth Grosz is adamant in championing such artistic production of affect. In *Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and The Framing of the Earth*, she posits, “Art is the art of affect more than representation, a system of dynamized and impacting forces rather than a system of unique images that function under the regime of signs.”61 Later, she calls for “the generation (and never the reproduction or representation) of sensations.”62 Finally, parenthetically citing Deleuze and Guattari, she proposes that “artworks... do not signify or represent (‘no art and no sensation have ever been representational’ [What Is Philosophy, 193]): they assemble, they make, they do, they produce.”63 An artwork need not even purposefully evade being interpreted as “meaning” something. (Indeed, every entity in the world is defenseless at every moment to being interpreted as “meaning” something.) The goal of the cosmic artisan is not to avoid being reduced to language any more than it is to create linguistic meaning via material affect. Instead, the cosmic artisan means to create a surplus of material affect, via language and any other forces she finds lying around.

Creating a surplus of material affect via human language is not difficult, because human language is always

62 Ibid., 17.
63 Ibid., 75.
slipping, refracting, and diverging during every utterance event. Whitehead was a keen theorist of the affect-generating function of language. Conveniently for our purposes, he even takes the time to analyze the affect-generating function of a particular language-centric art apparatus (in this case, a Hamlet soliloquy): “It is difficult to believe that all logicians as they read Hamlet’s speech, ‘To be, or not to be:...’ commence by judging whether the initial proposition be true or false, and keep up the task of judgment throughout the whole thirty-five lines. Surely, at some point in the reading, judgment is eclipsed by aesthetic delight. The speech, for the theatre audience, is purely theoretical, a mere lure for feeling.”

Not only does Whitehead recognize and analyze the affective surplus created by human language, he rightly recognizes that the inherent ambiguity of language is its cause. He observes, “The vagueness of verbal statements is such that the same form of words is taken to represent a whole set of allied propositions of various grades of abstractness.” He calls attention to “the hopeless ambiguity of language,” but rather than lamenting this ambiguity or trying to overcome it, Whitehead resignedly accepts ambiguity as inherent to language. At times, he even seems amused by language’s ambiguity: “Language, as usual, is always ambiguous as to the exact proposition which it indicates. Spoken language is merely a series of squeaks.” The ambiguity of language allows (indeed, forces) language to do more than merely denotatively “mean” any single representative thing. Instead, human language is able to function affectively and bodily, in addition to and in excess of any cognitive signifying that it may also incidentally be doing.

65 Ibid., 193.
66 Ibid., 196.
67 Ibid., 264.
Karen Barad, from her own unique “agential realist” perspective, reinforces Whitehead’s concept of signifiers as propositional lures to feeling: “Representations are not (more or less faithful) pictures of what is, but productive evocations, provocations, and generative material articulations or reconfigurings of what is and what is possible.”\(^6\)

Indeed, representations act as apparatuses, even if they claim not to, regardless of their ‘accuracy.’ Thus, even the most realistic photographic representation of a forensic crime scene, regardless of any objective accuracy it claims to achieve, is actually functioning as a meaning-generating apparatus.

Note that it is not necessary for signification to cease functioning altogether before a surplus of affect may occur. Oftentimes it is quite the opposite. As with apophatic writing, the more kataphatic the denotative assertions, the stronger the apophatic affect. Likewise, the more a speaker is trying to clearly convey her exact meaning, oftentimes the more affective surplus is generated. Marcel Proust talks about “an increasing profundity of sound.”\(^6\)

Anthropologist Kathleen Stewart describes Roland Barthes’s concept of the “third meaning” of language (a meaning resulting from a surplus of affect) as “Immanent, obtuse, and erratic, in contrast to the ‘obvious meaning’ of semantic messages and symbolic signification… Their significance lies in the intensities they build.”\(^7\)

And Gilles Deleuze evocatively describes what happens when signifying representation becomes aware of its affect-generating capacities: “When representation discovers the infinite within itself, it no longer appears

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as *organic* representation but as *orgiastic* representation: it discovers within itself the limits of the organised; tumult, restlessness and passion underneath apparent calm. It rediscovers monstrosity.”

Deleuze’s own acute and idiosyncratic interest in art makes his writings (and the subsequent theories they have inspired) particularly relevant to our project of making nothing via apophatic art apparatuses. Deleuze’s original analysis of the radical artwork and theory of Antonin Artaud leads us deeper into some specifics of how language may become exceedingly affective. Artaud prescribes, “One may invent one’s language, and make pure language speak with an extra-grammatical or a-grammatical meaning, but this meaning must have value in itself, that is, it must issue from torment.” Artaud critiques Lewis Carroll’s experimental language (in poems like “Jabberwocky”) as failing to issue from bodily torment, and thus resulting in a dearth of affective surplus. It is not enough, then, to merely avoid speaking denotatively. One must do it in a way that somehow incites, hooks into, and lures bodies.

Elsewhere, writing about the novels of Pierre Klossowski, Deleuze recognizes “the shifting function of language which now expresses only intensities.” Klossowski himself describes “fluctuations of intensity […] which


72 I come to the following two examples by way of Brian Massumi own insightful analysis in “Introduction: Like a thought,” in *A Shock To Thought: Expression after Deleuze and Guattari*, ed. Brian Massumi (London: Routledge, 2005), xiii–xxxix.


74 Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 294.
Some Ways of Making Nothing
correspond to the thought of everyone and no one.” 75 Regarding these fluctuations, Deleuze adds, “At the same time that bodies lose their unity and the self its identity, language loses its denoting function (its distinct sort of integrity) in order to discover a value that is purely expressive, or, as Klossowski says, ‘emotional.’” 76 Perhaps, then, art apparatuses may be used to break down human identities (and even human bodies) in order to help language move beyond mere signification and begin trafficking in exceedingly affective intensities. Arakawa and Gins’s apophatic art apparatus Mechanism of Meaning proceeds along such lines.

What other types of slippages and misreadings may be invited and exploited by art apparatuses in order to cause a surplus of affect? To choose just one example, the creation of a purposefully noisy channel between instruction and implementation in something as standard as a dance performance could lead to radically new forms of bodily motion. “Misinterpreted” or “misread” instructions to a dancer never entirely inhibit the dancer from proceeding to move. This is because all language is polysemic. Something can always be performed in the world as a result of instructive utterances, however “misinterpreted.” Billions of things can be performed. And each different performed thing qualitatively differs from the other things that could have been performed.

In this particularly constructed apparatal context (dance instructions relayed along a noisy channel to a dancer), language begins to acts as a kind of affective, analog force on human bodies. Even with very simple instructional language systems, an almost infinite number of interpretations and resultant behaviors are possible.

76 Deleuze, The Logic of Sense, 299.
These variable possibilities increase due to the fact that the apparatal context we have created is itself embedded in an overlappingly complex and telescoping series of contexts (contexts of human etiquette, art historical contexts of performance and dance, contexts of (de-)skilled athletic performance, gendered body movement contexts, modestly contexts, etc.). Not every uttered instruction is completely arbitrary and open to any meaning whatsoever; but the shades of subtle differences in interpreted meaning can be almost infinitely fine-grained and nuanced (depending on telescoping contexts, interpretations of tone, bodily affect, prior human relationships between speaker and dancer, etc.). As Jonathan Culler profoundly observes, “Meaning is context bound, but context is boundless.”

Before we leave our focus on human language and proceed to forms of a-linguistically generated meaning, it is crucial to remember that human language is a strange, unique, wildly refracting force in the world. Human language is prehended by actual occasions (as is every other force in the world), but by means usually involving human-centric utterance events; and humans are peculiarly anomalous enduring objects in the world. To deny the anomalous nature of human consciousness (whatever “human consciousness” is) is to deny the well-decided and well-accreted actual histories of humans and their languages. By no means does the world reduce to human language (that would be anthropocentric, solipsistic, and silly), but neither does human language flatten into just one more ordinary, material-discursive force in the world. Human language is far too complex and historically well-accreted, entangled, and decided to ever be meaningfully accessed via such molecular-theoretical means. Yes, the world is by no means contingent upon

77 Culler, On Deconstruction, 64.
humans, but neither are humans just one more ordinary thing in the world.

The good news for the practicing contemporary artist (Deleuze’s cosmic artisan) is that she is not an ontologist of rhetoric, linguistics, semiotics, grammar, or affect. She need not commit to a Saussurean, Peircean, Whitleadian, Derridean, Bakhtinian, or even Baradian model of language. Setting aside the vast complexities of human language for a moment, to even theorize about the bare ways in which plain old inorganic rocks create rocky material-meaning for other inorganic rocks requires all sorts of complicated speculative gymnastics. When the well-decided and well-accreted plateau of human language systems are unleashed onto the world, wild and complex refractions begin to resound, far too complex and fine-grained for any single theoretical model to pin down. Bakhtin himself proposed a taxonomical project of identifying and labeling every type of speech genre that might ever occur in any utterance context, but was wise enough not to take up the project himself. It would have proved a fool’s errand. Fortunately, our cosmic artisan need only modulate, intensify, complicate, and bother these wildly refracting relationships between material-meaning, human language, oblique incantatory force, consciousness, bodily affect, virtual linguistic potential, and actual pragmatic efficacy. She simply needs enough understanding of language and meaning to trouble the waters and see what arises.

My main reason for getting into the quagmire of human language theory at all is simply to show that tactics from apophatic writing need not be merely metaphorically or analogically adapted in the creation of an apophatic art apparatus. Since language is itself a force in the world, apophatic writing itself is already a kind of actual, non-metaphorical apparatus. It is simply a literary-genre apparatus rather than an art-genre apparatus. But as an apparatus, its functions are more or less the same.
A-linguistically Generated Meaning

Although human language participates in the actual world of actual meaning, it is responsible for only a small fraction of all the meaning-making that goes on in the world. Why do most humans, when they choose to theorize about the world, place such an inordinate priority on human language? Because, as a human, to philosophically theorize about the nature of the world is to inherently traffic in human language. But there are other, less linguistic ways that human consciousnesses may involve themselves in the world. One such way is through the creation of art apparatuses.

The material universe is forever making meaning. Indeed, the ongoing, becoming process of the universe is itself what the universe comes to mean, moment by moment, to all the various parts of the universe that are perpetually attending to (or negatively prehending) all the other parts of the universe. This is the broad and fundamental definition of “meaning.” Meaning has occurred prior to human language, it currently occurs alongside it, and it will continue to occur after it. Indeed, human language, according to our Whiteheadian model of actual occasions/entities, is a form of material meaning – not via any simple analogy, but via very complex forms of ingression that are almost impossible to unpack in any meaningful way at a moment-by-moment analytical pace.

In a sense, our prior treatment of quantum-behavior-measuring apparatuses in Chapter 1 was itself already an analysis of one kind of a-linguistically generated meaning. Art apparatuses themselves may generate a-linguistic meaning, although they are rarely thought of as doing so. The reason is because everything in the actual world may be described using human language. Art apparatuses are (almost always) created by humans for (almost always) other humans in (almost always) human-institutional
contexts, and so art apparatuses are prime candidates for reduction to human language. Indeed, every commercial artist who shows work in a Chelsea gallery is hoping for her art apparatuses to be linguistically reduced, preferably via a favorable review in *Artforum Magazine* or *The New York Times*. But art apparatuses themselves involve materials, and do not always involve human language; and thus they may well (theoretically, at least) create a-linguistically generated meaning that never gets reduced to human language. For example, artwork created by a non-speaking outsider artist who never gets “discovered” may qualify as purely a-linguistic.

Whether or not a work of art or an affective material experience is or is not subsequently reduced to human language, such an artwork or experience nevertheless always also creates its own a-linguistic “meaning.” Humans who work with materials have affective relationships with those materials that are always in some ways a-linguistic. Mark Twain as a steamboat pilot on the Mississippi river was always looking for “signs” in the river and sky (rough water, a certain color sunset). These “signs” only become linguistic signs when he writes about them in *Life on the Mississippi*; but as he is actually piloting, these signs are experienced by him more as affective bodily instincts or urges, moving across a large range of qualia, never binarily shifting from signifying “safe” to signifying “dangerous” in a single instant, but known, felt, and apperceived by a racing heart and a rush of adrenalin prior to (and often without ever needing to be put into) words. For a riverboat pilot, the current in a river may cause a qualitative bodily experience that simply means what it eventually becomes. This kind of a-linguistic meaning may also be caused by an art apparatus. Actually, such material “meaning” can’t help but be caused by an art apparatus, regardless of what subsequent linguistic meaning may or may not emerge.
As a matter of fact, such material meaning only rarely results in conscious linguistic meaning. The eruption of material meaning into conscious linguistic meaning is never inevitable. It is an anthropocentric mistake to assume that all phenomena are proto-linguistic; that they all eventually lead to a second-order linguistic difference. Phenomena are indifferent to human language. They may or may not lead to human language. A craftsman may spend his whole life on a lathe in an affective “dialogue” with wood – a “dialogue” which is altogether a-linguistic, and one which he may never choose to put into words (or even think in words). This is unlikely, but theoretically possible. Meaning is always already “made” by all material becomings in the world, indifferent to capture by human language. Indeed, “meaning” is not even “made,” so much as: that which is made comes to mean what it has become.

Some Things That Apophatic Art Apparatuses Are Not

Keeping these understandings of language, affect, material, and meaning in mind, let us return to our apophatic art apparatus which means to make nothing (i.e., brake becoming), and let us disqualify some apparatal approaches that only superficially seem to make nothing, but actually do not. It is not enough for our apophatic art apparatus to simply avoid human language in order to reveal the “bare phenomenological being” which remains. The world doesn’t need human language to make meaning; and more to the point, the mere avoidance of linguistic meaning doesn’t constitute the making of nothing. If mere a-linguistic affect qualified as overcoming meaning, which in turn qualified as making nothing, then all art that avoided the use of human language would be apophatic. This way of thinking is too facile. Linguistic
meaning is hardly the only flavor of “something.” “Nothing” is not merely the absence of linguistic meaning. Thus, constituting a regime of “phenomenological presence” which is indifferent to the regime of human language is not enough. For nothing to be made (for the brakes to be applied), even this regime of phenomenological presence must be somehow apophatically (performatively) confounded. Phenomenological presence itself must be de-territorialized (to use Deleuze and Guattari’s term), and deterritorialization proceeds differently depending upon the strata we mean to de-territorialize. De-territorializing the linguistic representation of presence and de-territorializing phenomenological presence itself are two very different things. How might the de-territorialization of phenomenological presence proceed?

Post-figurative painting is not inherently apophatic, nor is abstract expressionism. Just as avoiding a typographic signifier does not inherently make nothing, neither does avoiding a pictographic signifier. Jackson Pollock’s paintings generate all sorts of affective somethings, whether or not they are semiotically legible as representing any particular, noun-ish, figurative something. Certain flavors of abstract expressionism (Rothko’s chapel, for example, according to Bersani and Dutoit) arguably do create a kind of impasse and poverty of affect that might qualify as apophatic. But this interpretation of Rothko’s work is in almost direct opposition to what Rothko (and Clement Greenberg) thought his work was accomplishing. Was Rothko making luminous darknesses; or was he making lures toward something which then immediately barred our entrance into anything much at all? Only the latter might qualify as apophatic art: Rothko as trompe l’oeil painter of the void.

Another facile move would be to simply do away with material in our art altogether. If we move toward performance art and away from the art object, then certainly our performance art will constitute an apophatic art ap-
paratus, since we have done away with the “something” of material. If this were true, then all performance art (and all “digital” art) would be apophatic art. But, as Whitehead reminds us, all material is actually an accreted series of occasions. From this perspective, all art – from the heaviest Michelangelo marble sculpture to the most ephemeral Allan Kaprow happening – is performance art. So, process philosophy won’t allow us to consider events as “nothing.” On the contrary, according to Whitehead, all material is actually just a series of ongoingly enacted and decided events.

Art that simply mixes language and materials does not yet constitute an apophatic art apparatus. Nor does art that treats language as a kind of material. Neither of these approaches are excluded from apophatic art apparatuses, but they do not in themselves constitute the making of nothing.

“Conceptual” art is not inherently apophatic. To enact a tautology via art (however dematerialized) is not inherently to make nothing. Depending on how the tautology is enacted, such conceptual art may simply be a denotative object lesson, or a kataphatic model of aporia. There is a difference between actually inhibiting processes of becoming and merely representing such inhibitions. The former qualifies as apophatic; the latter does not.

Furthermore, there is no clear and easy (meta)physical separation between “concepts” and “materials.” In the words of the experimental art collective Spurse, “The narrative of conceptual art history is wrong. You cannot dematerialize things to get concepts. Ideas are embodied practices.”78 William James implies something similar when he asserts, “[Consciousness] is fictitious, while thoughts in the concrete are fully real. But thoughts in the con-

78 Spurse, Time Drills: A Series of Exercise Scores (Omaha: Bemis Center for Contemporary Art, 2009), Glossary: “Enaction.”
crete are made of the same stuff as things are.” If concepts themselves are already things, then foregrounding concepts by de-emphasizing physical materials does not yet make nothing. It just shifts the emphasis toward a less solid kind of something.

Minimalism itself is not inherently apophatic. At its worse, minimalism may actually function as a quest for essentialism and pure phenomenological presence, the very things that apophatic art means to problematize.

Nor is apophatic art merely psychedelic art or op art that attempts to affectively and phenomenologically disrupts human perception. Trippy confusion alone is not vacuous enough to qualify as nothing. (It may be a start toward nothing, if rigorously pursued.)

If dematerialization of solidity and avoidance of human language are not enough to make nothing, then how does the apophatic art apparatus make nothing? As expected, it depends on the specific nature of each apophatic art apparatus. In the following chapters, we will examine several particular ways of making nothing, one artwork at a time. Prior to that, let us take some time to extract a few general tactics from apophatic writing apparatuses and port them to apophatic art apparatuses.

**Tactics from Apophatic Writing Apparatuses Ported to Apophatic Art Apparatuses**

In extracting tactics from apophatic writing apparatuses and applying them to apophatic art apparatuses, I should be clear that it is not at all my intention to “critique” or “deconstruct” art apparatuses by using apophatic writing. This book is not an apophatic text, and it would be (and

historically has been) a kind of scatological exercise to write critically about artworks in a deconstructive manner. Similar to Derrida’s failed attempts to deconstruct Pseudo-Dionysius, writing apophatically about any art apparatus (particularly about apophatic art apparatuses) would be like applying one kind of corrosive acid to another kind of corrosive acid. Perhaps something curious would emerge, but that is not my goal. The apophatic art apparatuses discussed in this book are themselves already making much more interesting and alluring nothings than could ever be produced by my making a kind of textual nothing of them. I actually intend to accomplish the opposite: to make a reverent textual something of their ingenious artistic nothings.

Similarly, my goal is not at all to reduce art to a kind of text in order for me to then write critically about it via some form of literary apophasis. Instead, I mean to examine art apparatuses that themselves make nothing of materials and presences and becomings, just as apophatic writing makes nothing of kataphatic linguistic assertion. The “writing” aspects of apophatic writing are less crucial to my project than the “making nothing” aspects of apophatic writing.

Since the universe is always already at every moment making something new, apophatic art apparatuses do not naively seek to escape altogether from this perpetual process of becoming. Such an escape would be impossible. Instead, apophatic art apparatuses seek to rigorously interrupt, stall, defer, or at least doggedly perturb this perpetual process of becoming. If quantum-behavior-measuring apparatuses create phenomenal entanglements that mean what they become, then apophatic art apparatuses create phenomenal entanglements that forestall, stymie, hinder, trouble, problematize, or defer (however temporarily) any resolved, assertive becomings (and thus any emergent meanings). Apophatic art apparatuses fail to mean what they have not (yet) become, in one way
or another, by one means or another. According to their various ways and means, apophatic art apparatuses make nothing (by temporarily braking the inevitable becoming of something).

An Apophatic Tactic:
Perpetual Deferral – No End/No Source

One general way in which apophatic art apparatuses make nothing is via the act of perpetual deferral. Deferral and refusal of resolution are a standard tactics in the perpetual cycling back and forth between kataphatic assertion and apophatic denial. Deferral of resolution works forwards and backwards in lived historical time. Deferral is not only a refusal to resolve future becomings, but a refusal to resolve and establish the prior origins of present becomings as foundational and fundamental. According to our understanding of apparatuses and actual occasions, each becoming must inherently begin with some prior state. But this prior state itself required a prior state before it, and so on. Rather than attempt to track down and resolve which comes first – the assertion or the denial –, kataphasis and apophasis adopt a kind of in medias res approach as they continue to cycle back and forth between each other. Since this cycling is interminable, and its origins are indefinite, there is no end and no source. Apophatic art apparatuses don’t seek to establish “nothing” as the ground of everything, once and for all. On the contrary, the making of nothing (the braking of something) must perpetually defer and unground any and all subsequent attempts to establish nothing as an originary ground. Making nothing thus becomes an ongoing performance rather than a once-and-for-all accomplishment.

H.P. Lovecraft’s apophatic-esque prose provocatively evokes (or rather, fails to evoke) a few such groundless
nothings. He writes of “no trace save destruction itself.”\textsuperscript{80} He describes a God-pronounced decree whereby a human entity “must not only cease to be, but must cease ever to have been.”\textsuperscript{81} Of the destruction of every entity in a prior cosmos, Lovecraft says, “Nothing survived to tell that they had been and gone, been and gone, always and always, back to no first beginning.”\textsuperscript{82} There is always the potential of terror lurking in any rigorously made nothing.

Of course, the apophatic tactic of perpetual deferral not only defers the founding of an originary ground, but it also defers the resolution of a present becoming. Deleuze suggests a kind of topological means of deferral via the baroque process of folding. “The Baroque invents the infinite work or process. The problem is not how to finish a fold, but how to continue it, to have it go through the ceiling, how to bring it to infinity.”\textsuperscript{83} Such topological foldings are not concerned with the deconstructive deferral of linguistic meanings. Instead, Baroque material foldings actually intend to defer the resolution of materials themselves by continuing a process of perpetual deformation. Similarly, apophatic art apparatuses make present nothings by remaining in the flux of process, by perpetually deferring future resolved becomings.


An Apophatic Tactic: Indifference (Utter? Toward What?)

Another general way in which apophatic art apparatuses make nothing is via an attitude of indifference. The apophatic art apparatus must remain indifferent to a number of different agendas (for example, the agenda to manifest presence, but also the agenda to actively deconstruct presence) in order to avoid being sidetracked by any particular agenda. Apophatic art apparatuses don’t even actively oppose being hijacked by these tangential agendas, because to oppose them is also to be reactationally derailed and sidetracked by them. Apophatic art apparatuses simply remain indifferent to these agendas. They give themselves over to these agendas while always simultaneously exceeding them.

Apophatic art apparatuses are indifferent toward resolving differences between subject and object, self and other. They are indifferent toward resisting or not resisting their own subsequent reduction to linguistic signification. They do not actively court or actively resist linguistic interpretation. Some apophatic art apparatuses (like William Pope.L’s *Black Factory*) are purposefully not indifferent toward their own subsequent archiving, canonization, institutionalization, and communication. The *Black Factory* does purposefully work to sabotage its own subsequent insertion into art history. But all apophatic art apparatuses (even Pope.L’s *Black Factory*) are largely indifferent to their own subsequent capture by linguistic systems of assertive meaning. This indifference is precisely what allows apophatic art apparatuses to always affectively far exceed linguistic reduction.

Derrida’s *diﬀérance* (difference and deferral) and “indifference” are neither antonyms nor synonyms of each other. They are just two different responses to the assertive project of kataphatic language. *Diﬀérance* attempts an ethical escape from kataphatic assertion by shifting the
emphasis of such language from likeness and presence to difference and absence. Différance attempts a strong escape from kataphatic language via a kind of weak engagement with it.

Indifference, on the other hand, is simply indifferent to either engagement or disengagement with human language. As such, indifference can be a very powerful tactic. Difference (between what is actually in the world and the language that describes it, between one thing and another, between one word and another) seeks to subsume all (the primacy of primacy, the presence of presence, the becoming of being). But indifference eludes the all-encompassing embrace of difference. Indifference is not anti-difference (simply another form of difference) or alter-difference (yet another form of difference). Indifference is simply indifferent to difference, to identity, and to the difference and play between difference and identity. Indifference enacts a rigorous letting be of such signifying (anti-signifying, alter-signifying, even a-signifying) concerns.

In Writing and Difference, Derrida imagines “an existence that refuses to signify, [...] an art without works, a language without trace.” But apophatic art apparatuses are indifferent to Derrida’s deconstructive agenda. They don’t refuse to signify; they are simply indifferent to signification. They don’t bother camouflaging themselves; they are (usually) recognizable as “works of art.”

In the nastiest and most unfortunate version of “the linguistic turn,” “phenomenological experience” is thought of as an inherently pre-linguistic condition, as if all actual occasions in the world are destined to eventually arrive at some sort of linguistic reduction. But most actual occasions are never reduced to or translated into words or even conscious human thoughts. Not that actual occasions are inherently anti-linguistic, or even a-

84 Derrida, Writing and Difference, 219.
linguistic; they are simply altogether indifferent to human linguistic capture and reduction. Apophatic art apparatuses are also indifferent to human linguistic capture and reduction. They neither court it nor resist it. At most, they sometimes purposefully and playfully bother troubling it (as in the case of Arakawa and Gins’s *Machinism of Meaning*).

Apophatic art apparatuses are indifferent to the “sensible/intelligible” ontological dichotomy. They do not resist capture as intelligible. They do not seek to solely traffic in the sensible or sensory. Nor do they seek to deconstructively undermine this dichotomy by prioritizing the sensible over the intelligible. Nor do they seek to supplant the regime of the intelligible by declaring that all meaning is wholly sensible. Apophatic art apparatuses do not identify as sensible or intelligible, nor do they refuse to identify as sensible or intelligible.

In Chapters 4 and 5 of *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari recognize human language not as some all-totalizing, all-binding force to be escaped and overcome at all cost, but as just one among many well-decided historical accretions of territorialized strata (some other strata being geology, biology, economics, politics, music, ethology, etc.) Deleuze and Guattari don’t seek to deconstruct language, nor do they seek to write their own language in a way impervious to deconstruction. This is because there are always plenty of other relevant and exciting, extra-linguistic strata at play in the world, waiting to be modulated, deterritorialized, and reterritorialized onto other strata and into entirely new strata. And infusing all strata, there awaits the teeming plane of undifferentiated immanence which obeys no single strata, least of all the strata of human language. Like Deleuze and Guattari, apophatic art apparatuses are usually indifferent toward human language and its deconstruction. Apophatic art apparatuses have bigger nothings to fry.
An Apophatic Tactic: Cognitive Aporia

A third general way in which apophatic art apparatuses make nothing is by manufacturing cognitive aporia. Cognitive aporia enacts an impasse. It halts, blocks, stymies, and confounds cognitive resolution. Cognitive aporia is a particular kind of perpetual deferral involving human thinking. Apophatic art apparatuses purposefully make a place for their human “audiences” within the apparatal phenomenon that they engender. Apophatic art apparatuses lure human thinking to crash, but in a very particular way.

(Not that human “consciousness” is reducible to human brains, and not that human brains operate at all like computers, but) by analogy, there are several ways software can crash. One kind of crash returns an error message alerting its user that there has been a crash. A bit less courteous, but still gentle, is the software crash where the software stops functioning and shuts down. The thorniest kind of software crash is created by an endless internal loop within the software that hangs the software up. The software is still running, working, making, becoming, and meaning; often even using an excess of processing energy to do so. But it is trapped within its present process. No result or outcome will ever be returned. Apophatic art apparatuses crash human thinking in a similar way. They do not return the error message “nothing.” They do not shut down and make a weak nothing by failing once and for all to make a conclusive something. Instead, apophatic art apparatuses perpetually hang up any conclusive, summative becomings. In so doing, they continuously and perpetually make nothing.
Why Might Apophatic Art Be Better Than Apophatic Writing?

Why bother porting apophatic tactics from writing to art? What might art be able to accomplish apophatically that writing cannot? One difference between the aesthetics of writing and the aesthetics of art is that, ever since Kant proposed his version of the sublime, the idea of cognitive aporia (achieved by one’s being overwhelmed by the sublime) has been part of the fundamental theoretical understanding of visual aesthetics. One way to achieve aesthetic impact is by ordered beauty; the other is by appeal to an overwhelming sublime. Although apophatic writing predates Kant by many centuries, apophatic writing has always remained at the fringes of most historical forms of writing, as an extreme form of mystical practice. Kataphatic assertive writing has almost always taken center stage. From this perspective, artists have had more historical experience using apophatic tactics (if never explicitly labeled “apophatic”) than writers; and contemporary art audiences are (arguably) more open to engage with apophatic art that contemporary readers of literature are open to engage with apophatic writing (although within certain sub-genres of experimental literature, this claim is debatable). Contemporary artists may find a wider audience (and thus a wider influence) for their apophatic art than contemporary writers may find for their apophatic texts. As literary theorist Stanley Fish snidely observes, “Although the ‘textual’ or the ‘discursive’ is [...] a crucial site of social contestation, the people who study that site are not crucial players in the contest.”

If apophatic tactics are currently more intrinsic to contemporary art than to contemporary writing, why did these tactics first appear historically in writing? My

guess is that human language was so inherently bound by kataphatic assertion that apophasis was most desperately needed there first; and that once it appeared, it was most recognizable as a generic anomaly there.

In shifting from human-instigated apophatic writing to human-instigated apophatic art, I am not shifting straight out into the total, phenomenal universe. I am merely moving sideways from one form of human activity to another. It is not incumbent upon me to make a case for how the “non-human” world-in-itself enacts apophasic tactics and creates apophatic apparatuses, because humans are (almost) always an intrinsic (although by no means sole) component in the creation of apophatic art apparatuses. The difference between apophatic writing and apophatic art is that materials from the world get introduced into apophatic art apparatuses in more direct, less oblique ways than they get introduced into apophatic writing apparatuses. Yes, materials in the world do enter written apophatic language via the utterance event, but this utterance ingress is a particularly unusual, nuanced, human-consciousness-contingent type of occurrence. Whereas materials may ingress into apophatic art apparatuses more directly (or at least differently).

Furthermore, materials always also connect out into the world in discursive but not necessarily human-linguistic ways. This is not to say that humans and their languages don’t also actually connect out into the actual world. They do, but via a more oblique occurrence – the utterance. There are not and never have been any hermetically sealed boundaries between human language, human art, humans, and materials in the world. The art apparatus functions as a uniquely intentional, experimental, and speculative proposition-generator: a fecund, phenomenal nexus where human processes and thoughts encounter material entities. As such, art apparatuses exist in an emergent space between the decisions, whimsies, and proclivities of materials (accreted, enduring objects)
and the purposeful, investigative tactics and approaches of humans (also accreted, enduring objects). Apophatic art apparatuses are thus able to more fine-grainedly become entangled with materials in a way that apophatic writing apparatuses are not.

One difference between apophatic writing and apophatic art is insightfully foregrounded in an observation by Alexander Galloway regarding the difference between literary post-structuralism and architectural post-modernism. When Frank Gehry’s buildings begin to leak, their owners don’t celebrate these leaks as post-structuralist features. As Galloway observes, “Even if an architectural design is allowed to crack and buckle at the semiotic or symbolic level, it is not allowed to fail at the level of material functionality.”

According to my own criteria, if Gehry’s buildings are not allowed, expected, and invited to materially buckle and leak (and they are not), then they are not yet apophatic art apparatuses (and they are not).

How Might Apophatic Art Be Different Than Deconstructive Art?

Both apophatic writing and deconstructive reading must begin with an initial state, something on which to work. In the case of apophatic writing, the initial state is kata- phatic truth assertions about God. With deconstructive reading, the initial state is any text (about anything) which proceeds according to truth assertions. As mentioned previously, the goal of apophatic writing is to undermine ontological language about God (language based on presences, essences, identities, and assertions of truth) in order to (perhaps) be encountered by the God who is beyond ontology. The goal of deconstruction is to

undermine ontological language (about any and everything) in order to give difference its due – to reveal difference (rather than presence, essence, or identity) as the actual means by which all meaning in the world emerges. Apophatic writing must necessarily leave kataphatic assertion standing. To fail to do so would be heretical. Deconstructive reading doesn’t mind leaving whatever text it deconstructs lying in a deconstructed heap. It simply moves on to the next text.

Now let’s shift from writing to art. The initial state of our art apparatus is no longer an ontological truth assertion but a piece of physical material. Here we may understand “material” as an accreted series of historical decisions (if not exactly kataphatic or ontological “assertions”). Returning to Whitehead, a piece of “material” is properly understood as an enduring society of actual occasions, actual decision events. It seems to me that a truly deconstructive art apparatus would always be pursuing a kind of nuclear annihilation of material, a kind of undermining of actual presence in order to achieve a kind of nihilistic absence. This is not to say that deconstructive reading is itself inherently nihilistic (far from it), but simply to say that a deconstructive art practice would shift toward nihilism as it shifted toward physical material. Either that, or deconstructive art would always be undermining the noun-ishness of entities in order to make manifest the flux of difference at the heart of their verbish becomings. From this latter perspective, then, Whitehead’s cosmology (that objects are actually events) simply describes as always already true much of what a deconstructive art might hope to exemplify and foreground.

Whereas apophatic art does not desire to leave its materials in a heap, or even to reveal the differentiating flux at the heart of their apparent presence. Recall that apophatic writing intends to let kataphatic assertion stand. Likewise, apophatic art intends to let materials have their way and their say – not in order to deconstruct them
and reveal their inherent instability, but to use them as kindling to make nothing, as firestarter for braking. Apophatic art apparatuses have nothing against material (whether as object or as event). Instead, apophatic art apparatuses trouble, disturb, and brake the becomings of material in order to make nothings.

Why Make Apophatic Art Apparatuses at All?

“Since every aesthetic encounter is singular, anything like a general aesthetics is impossible.”

– Steven Shaviro

“[All] untranslatable words are in fact synonyms; and all share the desire for untranslatability, the longing for uniqueness.”

– Svetlana Boym

Why make apophatic art apparatuses at all? What might be the ethical goal? Why not just continue making ordinary art apparatuses, or cease making any art apparatuses? Why not just continue writing apophatically, or cease writing apophatically? As mentioned previously, one reason for making apophatic art apparatuses is to brake on ice, and in so doing, somehow more efficaciously steer into the future. There are other ethical reasons which will be more easily unpacked in the final chapter of this book, once we have closely examined several, specific, exemplary apophatic art apparatuses in the next four chapters. Each one of these works of art presents its own unique approach to enacting apophasis.

87 Steven Shaviro, The Universe of Things: On Speculative Realism (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 156.
If every apparatus (scientific, artistic, material, linguistic, “natural”) simply “means” what it has become, then what might the outcome of an art apparatus that makes nothing “mean?” Will it mean anything? Must it explicitly mean “nothing?” Does it defer returning any meaning at all in its deferral of becoming something? Might something relevant and new be learned about ordinary art apparatuses (works of art that make something) by closely examining the function of apophatic art apparatuses (works of art that make nothing)? Hopefully, we shall see.

We now take our current understanding of apparatuses and apophasis and turn to a close examination of a few particular apophatic art apparatuses. At the beginning of my research for this book, I initially “measured” these artworks, and tailored my theory to suit those initial measurements. In the following chapters, I try my theory back onto the artworks to see how well it fits. In order to best reveal the suitability (or lack thereof) of my theory to these artworks, I have chosen to proceed as if the theory fits each artwork just right. That way the reader can more easily judge the instances where the fit seems forced, awkward, or altogether unsuitable. According to Whitehead’s pragmatic criteria for philosophy (his own and others), “The verification of a rationalistic scheme is to be sought in its general success, and not in the peculiar certainty, or initial clarity of its first principles.” Let’s try my apophatic art apparatus theory on for size.

89 Whitehead, Process and Reality, 8.