

# ***Cloud Writing: Describing Soft Architectures of Change in the Anthropocene***

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The Blur Building, front view, Yverdon-les-Bains, Switzerland; copyright Diller + Scofidio.

Fig. 01

If, as wavists, we believe that change is not determinate, and if we can record the present in enough detail, within a series of closed temporal frames, then kinds of change will perceptibly emerge from the detail of sensing.

—The Perfume Recordist, “Notes on Perfume”

## The Isthmus Between Clouds and Architecture

### Description of Change One

At this instant the sky is bright blue. In the foreground, halfway up the frame, a low-lying cumulus cloud is forming above the surface of the lake. A white volume begins to change and spread outward. At its middle the mass of the cloud is wide and vibrant so that it appears to form a bright solid. Moving and unmoving blocks of sky become visible. A steel structure appears as an orbit of vertical columns and a tensile spun canopy resting on the surface of an elevated saucer. The vapour begins rising again from the left corner of the frame, filling and filling the space until no discernment is possible between the shape of the cloud and the sky.

### Description of Change Two

At this instant the sky is bright blue. In the foreground, halfway up the frame, a low-lying cumulus cloud is forming above the surface of the lake. A white volume begins to change and spread outward. At its middle the mass of the cloud is wide and vibrant so that it appears to form a bright solid. The wool-pack begins unraveling at the edges, the wind rending it into fine wisps that involute in the way that smoke strands bend, thicken for an instant and then move outwards until they are morselled to nothing and consumed. Moving and unmoving blocks of sky become visible. A steel structure appears as an orbit of vertical columns and a tensile spun canopy resting on the surface of an elevated saucer. The vapour begins rising again from the left corner of the frame, filling and filling the space until no discernment is possible between the shape of the cloud and the sky. Darker clouds appear, overhung by straggling clouds that sail over them passing quickly, driven by the lower winds. Then the sky is spread over with one continuous cloud, streaked by silver lines of water running between the ridges of the vapour.

### Description of Change Three

At this instant the sky is bright blue. In the foreground, halfway up the frame, a low-lying cumulus cloud is forming above the surface of the lake. A white volume begins to change and spread outward. At its middle the mass of the cloud is wide and vibrant so that it appears to form a bright solid: solid but not crisp, white like the white of egg, and bloated-looking. The woolpack begins unraveling at the edges, the wind rending it into fine wisps that involute in the way that smoke strands bend, thicken for an instant and then move outwards until they are morselled to nothing and consumed. A shallow valley forms in the middle with widening slopes, which begin to form a shape of the letter V. Moving and unmoving blocks of sky become visible. At once the clouds seem to cleave asunder. A steel structure appears as an orbit of vertical columns and a tensile spun canopy resting on the surface of an elevated saucer. The sky is flat, unmarked by distances, a white thin cloud, chalky and milk-coloured, with a remarkable oyster-shell molding. The

vapour begins rising again from the left corner of the frame, filling and filling the space until no discernment is possible between the shape of the cloud and the sky. Darker clouds appear, overhung by straggling clouds that sail over them, passing quickly driven by the lower winds. Then the sky is spread over with one continuous cloud, streaked by silver lines of water running between the ridges of the vapour.

These numbered sections are experiments in description, composed in an attempt to depict the vaporous dynamics of the architecture of the Blur Building, designed by Elizabeth Diller and Ricardo Scofidio as a temporary installation for the Swiss National Expo held in Yverdon-les-Bains, Switzerland, in 2002. [Fig. 01] The architects used water and air as primary construction materials, drawing up the lake water available at the site and atomizing it into a fine mist by passing it through “a dense array of high-pressure water nozzles.”<sup>1</sup> The result is a cloud building, composed of innumerable tiny droplets of vapour suspended above a steel pavilion elevated over the surface of Neuchâtel Lake. The steel structure of the Blur Building is minimal, acting primarily as a “soft pneumatic skin” that houses the water nozzles, a viewing platform that elevates the visitors above the cloud, and “an angel bar” that serves many different kinds of bottled water. The minimalism of the sparse structural elements is emphasized by a proclivity for the rapid transformation of form, exhibited by the building’s vaporous composition. As such, the Blur Building acts as an architectural construction that emphasizes transience by operating within a non-monumental temporality that is responsive to the vicissitudes of the weather.

As a temporary construction, the Blur Building was dismantled following the Expo, and so these descriptions were created not through direct observation, but instead come from viewing the vapour dynamics that constituted the building in a video recording on display as part of the MoMA’s *Applied Design* exhibition (2 March 2013 – 20 January 2014). The procedural imperative for creating these descriptions comes from a text titled “Notes on Perfume,” which accompanied the audio-olfactory performance of *The Perfume Recordist* by Lisa Robertson and Stacy Doris.<sup>2</sup> Writing collaboratively through the persona of “The Perfume Recordist,” the two poets theorize a procedure for documenting the luminous and changing detail of the present: “If, as wavists, we believe that change is not determinate, and if we can record the present in enough detail, within a series of closed temporal frames, then kinds of change will perceptibly emerge from the detail of sensing.”<sup>3</sup> This passage, which appears as the epigraph to this essay, elaborates a methodology according to which description can act as a technology of amplification, flooding the delineated frame of the present with luminous grain of detail, in turn rendering perceptible a more variegated sense of the kinds of change that dynamically constitute the present, thereby opening the unfurling edge of this present toward the future in indeterminate ways. In other words, through this amplification in the “detail of sensing,” differentiated rhythms of change become evident, as “kinds of change” sift themselves into minute and heterogeneous temporalities of changing shapes and qualities.

Upon first attempts at observation, the shape of the Blur Building seemed uniform, white, and “blob-like,” once the initial wisps of vapour had thickened into a cloud-like volume. But what at first seemed like an exercise in mesmerizing pulses of repetition opened itself out to an increasing resolution of detail: the variance in the brightness of the nearly solid vapour mass, the differentiated shapes of the fraying edges of the vapour unfurling into the blue of the sky—were they like curling wisps of smoke or like tearing cloth? Other vocabularies seemed necessary to articulate this detail. To facilitate this, my process of repeated observation and description opened out to a longer history of weather description, drawing on the modalities of description employed by two literary figures of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century: Dorothy Wordsworth, who wrote extensively in the form of journal entries that kept a careful and often ecstatic daily record of the weather, and the Victorian poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, who likewise kept a weather journal filled with luminous detail. With the help of these anachronistic atmospheric vocabularies, the vapour of the Blur Building and the surrounding clouds acquired the sheen of egg-white, the texture of wool, the inner marbling of an oyster shell. In other words, different rhythms and textures of change, evident in the weather journals composed by Hopkins and Wordsworth, infused themselves into my increasingly detailed descriptive accounts of the vapour dynamics of the Blur Building. This process of layering several finite and idiosyncratically dispersed historical frames parallels Robertson’s own methodological impulse to draw on descriptive practices of natural history, and in particular early meteorological description, tracking their passage through eighteenth-century and Romantic poetry; or, as Laurel Peacock suggests, in “Lisa Robertson’s Feminist Poetic Landscapes,” Robertson uses “scraps of antique discourses [to] fashion a new garment,” and through this “construct[s] more livable poetic habitats.”<sup>4</sup> In this way, Robertson’s work offers an “inventive *ecopoiesis*,” which “reads the earth’s climate as a diary,” always seeking “to engage it as a temporal phenomenon [...], a soft, viable architecture lining the movement of days and weeks and years.”<sup>5</sup> As such, Robertson’s poetics of description, with its attunement to the temporalities of meteorological variation and change, offers a way to attend to the changes in climate and other human-induced planetary transformations that have recently been framed as the period of the Anthropocene.

## Temporalities of the Anthropocene: Starfish Time + Egg Time + Larval Time

The Anthropocene is a way of framing time; it offers a means for characterizing a new epoch defined by human impact on the geological, atmospheric, and ecological processes occurring on Earth. Understanding the Anthropocene not merely as an abstract taxonomic category but as a felt temporality requires a careful attunement to the variegated kinds of change that compose this temporal frame in the unfolding moment of the present. Such an attunement to the particulate differences that compose change is difficult because many of them occur at rhythms of transformation that are below the threshold of temporal sensitivity available to human perception.

Imagine, for instance, a sea floor covered with starfish. To a human observer, this may appear to be a scene of near stillness, as the cold purple and red shapes of the starfish seem only slightly more animate than the rocks beneath them. Viewing this scene with the aid of time-lapse photography, however, reveals that the starfish are rapidly moving across the sea floor according to the parameters of their own *Umwelt*.<sup>6</sup> Some of them, like the morning sun star (*Solaster dawsoni*), inch rapidly across the seafloor to attack other starfish, such as leather stars (*Dermasterias imbricata*), which move more slowly and are thus too sluggish to evade the morning sun star. The lens of a camera—capable of capturing increments of change at a different number of frames per second than the human eye—floods the stillness of such an underwater scene with innumerable details, revealing contracting arrays of orange dots and spines moving with hydraulic slowness as individual tube feet attach and detach from the rocky substrate. Such a mediated series of images brings the rhythms of *starfish time* into contact with the temporal pace of the human perceptual world.

The temporal dimension of the human *Umwelt*, as the above example illustrates, is tuned into a limited set of rhythms and durations. Therefore, many of the temporalities that are relevant for developing a politics of time in the Anthropocene—such as minute and incrementally accumulating processes of change, or the long duration of geological time, or even temporal rhythms relevant to particular non-human organisms as they encounter anthropogenic environmental change—may not be directly available to the human sensorium. It is not just the different rhythms of non-human temporality that are difficult to sense, but temporality as a compound entity of other variables, such as increasing temperature, which is literally speeding up the time of certain biological processes, such as egg hatching or pupation. This *egg time* or *larval time* is a factor of temperature measured in units called degree-days, so that certain developmental processes require a kind of accumulation of heat that can occur over the course of a week if the temperatures are warm, or may take longer if the weather is cool. Shifts in this form of physiological time will have drastic effects on biological species as a result of rising temperatures associated with climate change, with “changes in, say, larval hatching times [that] can cause cascade-like changes in entire ecosystems, when these larvae act as food for other animals.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, while many processes of change associated with the Anthropocene occur at temporal scales well below or beyond the human range of perception, they are also subject to sudden or irreversible change, because when complex systems are perturbed, the pressures they are undergoing may be offset or stabilized for a time until, by slowly accumulating, they reach a critical threshold at which rapid and irreversible change occurs.

I would like to stress the significance of developing a different descriptive procedure for thinking the temporalities of the Anthropocene, one that does not simply use the future as a focalizing point from which to retroactively view the past and the present, thus pre-emptively binding these times together into a predetermined, inevitable teleological end. One strategy I explore in this essay for creating an

alternate perspective on Anthropocene temporality involves developing a poetics of description as a mode of affective and aesthetic amplification, which can delineate the fluctuating details of change occurring in the present in order to open out towards a less teleological sense of the future. This future will undoubtedly be marked by anthropogenic change, yet we may still be responsive to it in such a way that will allow various non-human agents to shape possibilities for change, indeterminacy, and differentiation among organic and inorganic processes that constitute the planet. In other words, the central question that I am asking is how poetics and the methodologies of description that it opens up for registering and indexing change in the present can offer a higher perceptual resolution of the variegated temporalities that make up the epoch of the Anthropocene. This mode of descriptive poetic amplification of differentiated temporalities of change carries political significance for our understanding of the forces shaping the current ecological crisis because it carries the potential for displacing other conceptualizations of Anthropocene time which threaten to retroactively collapse the present into the past and the future, thereby foreclosing the political potential of the current moment. A more variegated sense of temporality offers the possibility of registering a wider range of rhythms and durations that do not fit neatly on either side of the dichotomy between fixity and change.

The understanding that nature is undergoing continuous change certainly precedes the formulation of the Anthropocene. Such views of nature as changeable have arisen a number of times within the Western philosophical and scientific tradition, starting with ancient thinkers such as Heraclitus and Lucretius, and becoming particularly prominent in the natural sciences of the nineteenth century through the work of evolutionary thinkers such as Jean-Baptiste Lamarck and Charles Darwin, as well as in the conceptualization of geological change elaborated by Charles Lyell. However, in the essay "The Climate of History: Four Theses," Dipesh Chakrabarty explains that even when historians did assume that geological changes were constantly transforming the surface of the Earth, such change was considered so gradual in comparison to the transformations induced by humans that it was not relevant to the anthropocentric scale that history, as a discipline, took into consideration. Chakrabarty notes that "man's environment did change but changed so slowly as to make the history of man's relation to his environment almost timeless and thus not a subject of historiography at all."<sup>8</sup> In other words, nature, for much of human history, has effectively served as an "apparently timeless backdrop for human actions."<sup>9</sup> Chakrabarty argues that the Anthropocene and attendant "anthropogenic explanations of climate change spell the collapse of [this] age-old humanist distinction between natural history and human history."<sup>10</sup> In this regard, it is the acceleration of rhythms of change, as a result of anthropogenic activity, that has brought into relief the processes occurring at geological time scales and made these the concern of history, as well as politics.

Feminist thinkers, in particular, have drawn on the traditions of natural history that have struggled to convey the sense of nature as changing, as well as on the

philosophical traditions that have intertwined with them, to develop a non-essentialist understanding of nature and the biological body as a site of indeterminacy.<sup>11</sup> For example, in *The Nick of Time*, Elizabeth Grosz writes that “the natural world prefigures, contains, and opens up social and cultural existence to endless becoming; in turn, cultural transformation provides further impetus for biological becoming.”<sup>12</sup> Grosz, whose work draws on Darwin’s evolutionary theory, as well as Henri Bergson’s philosophy of time and Luce Irigaray’s feminist philosophy, locates the potential for change within nature and biological life, so that all instantiations of culture, sociality, and politics are, in fact, elaborations of the ongoing transformation and complexity of nature. In what follows, I attempt to triangulate these understandings of the relationship between nature and change in the discourses of natural history with both feminist philosophy and poetics of description. It is within this triangulation where poetics becomes a chiasmic site, which trafficks among these disciplinary methodologies and discourses, that I hope to develop a descriptive methodology which can amplify and distinguish the manifold rhythms of Anthropocene temporality.

Robertson’s book *The Weather* operates as such a chiasmic site of description, forging connections between natural history, feminist thought, and experimental poetics to develop a way of diachronically indexing change through the differentiated grammar of its sentences. *The Weather* was composed as part of a site-specific, six-month research residency at Cambridge, during which Robertson “embarked on an intense yet eccentric research in the rhetorical structure of English meteorological description.”<sup>13</sup> Speaking in an interview in *The Capilano Review* about the composition process she used in writing *The Weather*, Robertson situates her interest in mixing these descriptive practices in relation to the moment when scientific and literary modes of description still converged with one another: “It was a discourse that was happening before science and literature were differentiated, strictly speaking, and so it was like the last gasps of a more integrated practice of description, where natural history had very minimal and totally erasable boundaries in relation to literary description.”<sup>14</sup> In seeking a historical connection between the descriptive practices of poetics and natural history, Robertson situates herself in a longer tradition of twentieth- and twenty-first-century avant-garde poetics whose practitioners, including Gertrude Stein, Lyn Hejinian, Clark Coolidge, and Christian Bök, have forged intersections between literary and scientific practices.<sup>15</sup> In composing *The Weather*, Robertson became particularly interested in how different practices of description depicted meteorological phenomena, which are continuously undergoing change: “clouds [in particular] presented a specific formal difficulty to description and nomenclature [...] since [their] appearance as a thing was so ephemeral.”<sup>16</sup> This interest led Robertson to research, among other things, BBC shipping forecasts, William Wordsworth’s *The Prelude*, John Constable’s cloud sketches, as well as the work of the nineteenth-century British amateur meteorologist Luke Howard, who, in his *Essay on the Modifications of Clouds*, devised a system for the taxonomic nomenclature of clouds, by carefully observing how clouds in the sky were diachronically changing from one form to another.





CUMULOSTRATUS; AS PRODUCED BY THE INOSCULATION OF CUMULUS WITH CIRROSTRATUS.  
CIRRI ABOVE, PASSING TO CIRROCUMULUS.

Fig. 02 A plate from Luke Howard's *Essay on the Modifications of Clouds*, depicting the formation of Cumulo-stratus clouds. London: John Churchill & Sons, New Burlington Street, 1865.

## Cloud Writing: Luke Howard's Soft Taxonomy

Howard was concerned that the transience and mutability of clouds made their all too soft edges incongruous with the scientific project of taxonomic classification. The secret of Howard's taxonomy lay in its capacity to avoid the typically ossifying, atemporal effects of classification, and attend, instead, to the mutability of clouds. Thus, in addition to the three primary cloud types, Cirrus, Cumulus, and Stratus, Howard developed the taxonomic categories of Cirro-cumulus, Cirro-stratus, Cumulo-stratus, and Cumulo-cirro-stratus or Nimbus. These transitional categories offer a way of attending to the qualities of clouds as activities that possess patterned modes of behaviour, causing them to transition from one of these morphological forms to another with some regularity. [Fig. 02] Howard's attempt to formulate a taxonomy whose categories would be responsive to differentiated modes of activity is attuned to the difficulties of depicting natural phenomena that are continuously in flux.

Howard's focus on the temporal dynamics of cloud taxonomy allows him to remain attentive to the continuously shifting boundaries of clouds: their movement between existing as discrete entities and the sense that cloud edges always remain pliable and soft, casting them towards other clouds and the infinite possibilities of



mixing and dissolution. While Howard is very careful to devise a form of taxonomy that is “soft” enough to respond to the malleable and transient qualities of clouds, he is also insistent that there are regularities in the behaviour of clouds and that the whole project of devising a taxonomy of various atmospheric vapours is not a futile one. “If Clouds were the mere result of the condensation of Vapour in the masses of atmosphere [...and] if their variations were produced by the movements of the atmosphere alone,” Howard conjectures, then the study of them would “be deemed a useless pursuit of shadows,” as their forms, in this case, would be merely “the sport of winds” and would hence be ever varying and indefinable.<sup>17</sup> Instead, Howard argues that the various modifications of clouds are a result of specific causes which govern the movement of the atmosphere, and that through a careful observation of “the countenance of the sky and of its connexion with the present and ensuing phenomena,” one can come to understand how these causes will operate and how the different varieties of clouds will transition from one form to another.<sup>18</sup> Howard bemoans that the experience produced through the labours of “frequent observation” is “usually consigned only to the memory of the possessor, in a confused mass of simple aphorisms” and that, as these single observations lose “connexion with the rest of the Chain” of weather events that accompany them synchronously in space or sequentially in time, they often serve only to mislead the meteorologist who is trying to discern regularities in cloud phenomena.<sup>19</sup>

Cloud-writing typographic marks from Luke Howard’s *Essay on the Modifications of Clouds* (London: John Churchill & Sons, New Burlington Street, 1865).

Fig. 03

As a result, Howard believed that the secrets of effective meteorological observation come to reside “only in the mind before which their relations have passed, though perhaps imperceptibly, in review.”<sup>20</sup> It was his desire in devising a taxonomy of clouds to expose and make available to others the transient flow of relations that constitutes the changes in weather phenomena. For this purpose Howard devised a form of cloud-writing, suggesting the use of concrete, nearly hieroglyphic marks as indicators of specific cloud types, which would help convey the sequence of transitions and relations between weather phenomena. [Fig. 03]

Howard suggests that such marks be inserted into “a column headed *Clouds*” in meteorological registers and that “modifications which appear together be placed side by side, and those which succeed to each other” in the sequential order within the column.<sup>21</sup> Such a mode of cloud writing would create diachronic and synchronic fields of relations, which would allow the reader of the meteorological register to gauge the coincidence of cloud types and envision the temporal flux through which different cloud types would metamorphose from one modification to another.

Howard's careful recording of the changing skies presents a conceptual and observational space in which to examine how phenomena can possess both the regularity of differentiated patterns, while also having the capacity for open-ended future transformation. Due to their highly changeable qualities, clouds occupy the uncertain position between existing as discrete entities and operating as modes of activity.<sup>22</sup> Staring at the blue horizon of the sky, one may be able to point to a discrete, fluffy cumulus cloud sailing by and exclaim "here is a cloud," but the next minute that cloud may have fused its vapourous, fuzzy edges with another cloud it encountered on the way, forming an amalgam or a mixture that can no longer be parsed into discrete entities. In other words, Howard's cloud taxonomy offers a way for thinking about the formation of "soft entities" that are pliable and caught in a processual flow of transformation, and yet, at the same time, are not entirely diffuse, but instead possess a capacity for differentiated rhythms of coalescence and change.<sup>23</sup> As such, Howard's observations of clouds and his formulation of "cloud writing" can act as a conceptual laboratory in which to develop modes of description that would remain attuned to the changing details of the Anthropocene, with its variegated temporal rhythms of speed and slowness of non-human materiality that do not collapse into sharp contrasts between fixity and change.

## Movement of Qualities: Descriptions of Change in the Anthropocene

I propose that Robertson's book *The Weather* can be read as a form of "cloud-writing," similarly setting up fields of synchronic and diachronic relations in order to produce descriptions of change that attempt to convey the activity of the changing sky in another medium—in this case poetic language, with its own distinct capacities for lively dynamism. This difficulty of recording a continuously changing sky is addressed by Robertson in such a way that the patterns of repetition and change within descriptive passages of the poem relay the effects of flux:

The tint twice over. Days heap upon us. Where is Kathleen. The tint twice.  
The clouds darker than the plain part and darker at the top than the bottom.  
The clouds lighter than the plain part and darker at the top than the bottom.  
The lights of the clouds lighter. The others smaller. The same as the last. The  
same as the last. The tint twice in the openings and once in the clouds. Days  
heap upon us. The tint twice over. Days heap upon us. With others smaller.  
With others smaller.<sup>24</sup>

This is the concluding section of the poem "Tuesday," and it repeats many of the syntactical patterns that have already occurred earlier in the poem. For instance, the most explicitly descriptive sentence—"the clouds darker than the plain part and darker at the top than the bottom"—directly precedes a nearly identical syntactic iteration of itself with the substitution of the adjective "lighter" in lieu of the initial "darker" in the first part of the sentence. Both of these sentences have occurred earlier on in the poem, with the sentence beginning with the "darker clouds"

repeating in succession, followed by the three iterations of the sentence beginning with the “lighter clouds.” These minute differences and repetitions recreate the states of temporary suspension that Howard described in his natural historical accounts of the sky, along with the subtle changes in the patterns of light and dark that infuse the clouds with colour and brightness. And yet, even the instances of complete syntactic repetition interject temporality into this description of the landscape of the sky. And this temporality functions in a variegated manner to produce differentiated speeds and rhythms of change.

This manner of tracking minute shifts or micro-dynamics of change and, in turn, developing a complex language of description capable of tracking the shifting qualities of the sky in all of their luminous and delineated detail, resembles the attunement to the details of the changing weather evident in the early weather journals of Wordsworth and Hopkins. It is this attention to the details of the changing sky that allows Hopkins, for instance, to note that the vapourous film of a cloud is peeling off as if with a texture of “tearing cloth,” and then an instant later folding “like the corner of a handkerchief” and beginning to coil “as a ribbon or a carpenter’s shaving may be made to do.”<sup>25</sup> Or, for Wordsworth to note the changing appearance of the sea in her *Alfoxden Journal* as “perfectly calm blue, streaked with deeper color by the clouds, and tongues or points of sand” on 23 January 1798, and then again as “the blue-grey sea, shaded with immense masses of cloud, not streaked” on 26 January.<sup>26</sup> These descriptions possess a level of detail and procedural diligence of repeated observations and recording of the subtle, incremental changes occurring in the same landscape over the course of days or years.<sup>27</sup>

Robertson divides *The Weather* into seven discrete prose pieces—each titled for a day of the week and interleaved with short pieces in verse titled “Residence at C,” ending with a longer verse section titled “Porchverse.” This serves to draw conceptually on the daily patterns of weather description that tune perceptual attention to the minute variations of the changing skies. While Robertson’s text is not based on direct observation of meteorological phenomena, each of the discrete daily sections formally relays the micro-dynamics of change through grammatical variation. In other words, varying rhythms of activity are produced in each section of the book through the diachronic dimension of the syntax and its capacity to convey differentiated rhythms and causal relations. In a sense, then, the act of reading *The Weather* is akin to asking about the particularities of the weather on a given day—“Sunday,” for instance—and relies on a mixture of deixis and a hesitant enumeration of qualities. This sense of hesitancy within the description occurs because the qualities are extracted from the specificity of materials—their sheen, texture, or their capacity to fold and wrinkle—and then used as attributes for abstract concepts: “All the soft coercions. Maybe black and shiny, wrinkled. A sky marbled with failures.”<sup>28</sup> In this way coercion becomes soft and also, perhaps, black, shiny, and wrinkled. In the case of failure, the dynamics of this movement of qualities are more complex, with the sky acquiring the contrasting colouration encased within the veins running through a slab of marble. At the same time, the active and fluid quality of water

vapour that composes clouds ricochets back and inserts a different temporality into the hardness of marble, pointing to the gradual process of metamorphism that brings marble into existence, as well as the manner in which the veins and swirls of coloured marble are a result of this process, acting on various mineral impurities, such as clay, silt, sand, and iron oxides, which were originally present as grains or layers in the limestone.

A similar transposition of hard and soft qualities index different temporal rhythms of coalescence in Robertson's poetic essay "Soft Architecture: A Manifesto," published in her book *Occasional Work and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture*. In this case, the material landscape that is infused with transience is not the changing sky, but the textures of architectural surfaces: "Yet our city is persistently soft. [...] So the camp is a permanent transience, the buildings or shelters like tents—tents of steel, chipboard, stucco, glass, cement, paper, and various claddings—tents rising and falling in the glittering rhythm which is null rhythm, which is the flux of modern careers."<sup>29</sup> In Robertson's description, the expected soft, fabric materiality of tents is replaced by hard materials, producing unexpected "tents of steel," glass, and cement. Hence the evident transience of tent-like structures inserts itself surreptitiously and comes to occupy architectural structures seemingly built of more permanent, harder, less variable materials. In this transaction Robertson renders even cement "soft" by shifting the perceptual temporality of flux as it acts within and transforms materials. What becomes evident, as a result, is that even materials that appear static and hard are continuously shifting, although perhaps at slower rhythms or rates of change than other more malleable forms of matter.

Just as Doris and Robertson take on the persona of "the Perfume Recordist," in "Soft Architecture: A Manifesto," Robertson herself adopts the performative identity of The Office for Soft Architecture (OSA), appropriating the concept of soft architecture from architectural theory as a way of enacting site-specific work of documenting changes in textures of urban environments, in this case the city of Vancouver. In architectural discourse, "soft" signals both a concern with the malleability of a material and its ability to respond to changing circumstances and needs. In the second issue of the journal *Bracket: Architecture, Environment, Digital Culture*, editors Neeraj Bhatia and Lola Sheppard outline the conceptual history of the term "soft" in architectural discourse, locating its origins in the work of 1960s architects such as Cedric Price, Buckminster Fuller, and the architectural collective Archigram. In one sense, the term *soft* signifies the quality of a material that yields "to touch or pressure, [by being] smooth, pliable, malleable or plastic," while from another perspective, it may extend to temporal properties that characterize a particular structure or a system, making it more adaptable to transformations occurring in complex and changing environments.<sup>30</sup> As a structure composed of soft, vaporous materials that are continuously changing in response to the meteorological environment around them, the Blur Building is an exemplary case of soft architecture.<sup>31</sup> The softness of its shape, which arises from the difficulty of discerning the discreteness of its edges as they come into contact with the vaporous bodies of the

atmosphere that surrounds them, literally *blurs* the distinctions between “natural” and “human-produced weather” phenomena, transforming the Blur Building into a micro-model of Anthropocene weather.

In the context of the Anthropocene, the shifting edges of the Blur Building open up the present, even the seeming hardness and fixity of human-built architectural structures, to ongoing change, indicating that what appears as the given reality of the contemporary moment is open to an indeterminate set of futures.<sup>32</sup> As an architectural form composed of different materially instantiated temporalities, the Blur Building offers a material model for the transposition of qualities that also takes place within the grammatical and figurative textures of poetic description. Acting as a kind of material-semiotic isthmus, the Blur Building transposes both the material and figurative dimensions of the vaporous materiality of clouds onto the more typical materials used in contemporary architectural construction in a way that parallels Robertson’s metaphoric infusion of soft, tent-like, fabric materialities into the glass and cement buildings of a contemporary architectural landscape. My analysis of the poetics of description in the Anthropocene continuously skirts this edge between the material and the metaphorical in the hope that poetics can act as a kind of chiasmic site that moves between the material and the semiotic without abandoning either of these dimensions.<sup>33</sup> In an essay “7.5 Minute Talk for Eva Hesse (Sans II),” published in her book *Nilling*, Robertson offers a lithe proposition regarding how such movement between metaphor and material may occur: “But the metaphorical space can’t be inhabitable without welcoming meaning’s propensity to move across materials: Metaphorical meaning does not identify itself with a position; it moves in a fluctuation, serially, to indicate modes of materiality.”<sup>34</sup> The descriptions of the Blur Building with which I opened attempt this movement of meaning “across materials,” carrying the sheen of egg-white, the texture of wool, the inner marbling of an oyster shell into the luminosity or a “tint” that shifts as a thread through the assembling and reassembling clouds. The capacity of poetic description to carry different isolated textures and durations across materials can produce a kind of amplification of detail in a manner that indexes minute temporalities of change, while also creating broad temporal inversions or transpositions across materials. This allows poetic description to defamiliarize the anthropocentric perspective of time in favour of an Anthropocene politics of temporality that is responsive to the variegated rhythms of non-human and human matter.

## Notes

- 1 Elizabeth Diller and Ricardo Scofidio, *Blur: The Making of Nothing* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2002), 44. See also: *Blur Building*, Yverdon-les-Bains, Switzerland. 1998–2003, film, MoMA Number: 556.2006.a-d.
- 2 The project consists of several iterations, one of which was a performance that took place as part of the Positions Colloquium organized by the Kootenay School of Writing in Vancouver in August 2008. The citations below come from an accompanying manuscript: Lisa Robertson and Stacy Doris, “Notes on Perfume,” from *The Perfume Recordist* (unpublished).
- 3 Robertson and Doris, *The Perfume Recordist*.
- 4 Laurel Peacock, “Lisa Robertson’s Feminist Poetic Landscapes,” *Open Letter* 14, no. 5 (2011): 89.
- 5 Erin Gray, “‘Words Are Fleshy Ducts’: Lisa Robertson and the Runnel Theory of Poetry,” *Open Letter* 14, no. 5 (2011): 73, 76, emphasis in the original. For additional critical context placing Robertson’s work in an ecopoietic tradition, see Adam Dickinson, “The Weather of Weeds: Lisa Robertson’s Rhizome Poetics,” *Rhizomes* 15 (Winter 2007).
- 6 The term *Umwelt* was developed by the ethologist Jakob von Uexküll to characterize the perceptual world of an organism within which only certain, salient aspects of its environment are available to perception.
- 7 Jan Zalasiewicz, Mark Williams, Will Steffen, and Paul Crutzen, “The New World of the Anthropocene,” *Environmental Science & Technology* 44 (2010): 2229.
- 8 Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” *Critical Inquiry* 35 (Winter 2009): 204.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 205.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 201.
- 11 The link between histories of feminist thought and the discourse of the Anthropocene was the topic of a recent academic conference, “Anthropocene Feminism,” held at the Center for 21st Century Studies at University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, April 2014.
- 12 Elizabeth Grosz, *The Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution, and the Untimely* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004), 1–2.
- 13 Lisa Robertson, *The Weather* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 2001).
- 14 Lisa Robertson, “The Animal, The Pronoun: An Interview,” interview by Ted Byrne, *The Capilano Review* 3, no. 15 (Fall 2011): 16.
- 15 In *The Language of Inquiry*, Lyn Hejinian traces the impulse towards description in avant-garde poetics by situating poetry as a field of inquiry in relation to other knowledge practices, reaching all the way back to the empiricist regimentation of observation and description that arose as a result of the invention of the scientific method. See Lyn Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000). For further critical engagement with the relationship between poetics and the discursive practices of natural history, see Lytle Shaw, *Fieldworks: From Place to Site in Postwar Poetics* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2013).
- 16 Lisa Robertson, “The Weather: A Report on Sincerity,” *Chicago Review* 51, no. 4 / 52, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 32.
- 17 Luke Howard, *Essay on the Modifications of Clouds* (London: John Churchill & Sons, New Burlington Street, 1865), 1.
- 18 *Ibid.*
- 19 *Ibid.*, 2.



- 20 Ibid., 3.
- 21 Ibid., 14.
- 22 In this regard, Howard's understanding of the co-instantiation of processes of differentiation and change serves as an antidote to the trajectory of Object Oriented Ontology (OOO), which tends to suggest that the pre-existence of discrete objects is necessary for any differentiation to occur. While Graham Harman's version of OOO posits a necessary relationship between the existence of discrete and persistent objects and the capacity for differentiation and change, Howard's thinking about the co-occurrence of these processes, without the preceding existence of discrete entities, offers a compelling alternative. See Graham Harman, "On Vicarious Causation," *Collapse II* (March 2007): 187–221.
- 23 For a contemporary theoretical complement to Howard's empirical discoveries, see Gilbert Simondon's writing on individuation and change in *L'individuation psychique et collective: A la lumière des notions de forme, information, potentiel et métastabilité* (Paris: Editions Aubier, 1989).
- 24 Robertson, *The Weather*, 22.
- 25 Gerard Manley Hopkins, *A Hopkins Reader*, ed. John Pick (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1953), 46.
- 26 Dorothy Wordsworth, *Journals of Dorothy Wordsworth, Vol. 1*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1941), 3–4.
- 27 For a critical study linking Howard's understanding of clouds and the poetry of the Romantic period, see Marjorie Levinson, "Of Being Numerous," *Studies in Romanticism* 49, no. 4 (Winter 2010): 633–657.
- 28 Robertson, *The Weather*, 2.
- 29 Lisa Robertson, *Occasional Work and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture* (Astoria: Clear Cut Press, 2003), 15.
- 30 Neeraj Bhatia and Lola Sheppard, "Going Soft," in *Bracket 2: Goes Soft*, ed. Neeraj Bhatia and Lola Sheppard (Barcelona and New York: Actar, 2012), 8.
- 31 In part, this adaptable contact between the Blur Building and its surrounding environment is facilitated by an inbuilt weather station, which "reads the changing weather conditions and electronically adjusts water pressure in response to shifting temperature, humidity, wind direction, and wind speed." Diller and Scofidio, *Blur*, 44.
- 32 However, an inverse mapping of temporal qualities is also necessary, so that the durational dynamics of human-made materials and anthropogenic effects, such as radioactive and plastic waste, need to be infused with the due stiffness of their actual inflexibility and long-term effects.
- 33 The movement between materiality and metaphor that I am elaborating here is complex and requires further development, which cannot occur within the scope of this paper. In short, my perspective is invested in generating affinities with Donna Haraway's category of the material-semiotic or Karen Barad's understanding of the simultaneous co-arising of the material-discursive, in which the two are co-emergent and neither precedes the other. In other words, the kind of material-semiotic intertwining that I am developing here suggests that there is no choice to be made between materiality and semiosis.
- 34 Lisa Robertson, *Nilling* (Toronto: Bookthug, 2012), 44.

