

The Weight of Air: A Picture Parade of Peter Dickinson's Buildings

by

Leala Hewak

B.A. Hons., University of Toronto, 1985

An MRP presented to Ryerson University

in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in the Program of
Documentary Media

Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2017

© Leala Hewak, 2017

AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this MRP. This is a true copy of the MRP, including any required final revisions.

I authorize Ryerson University to lend this MRP to other institutions or individuals for the purpose of scholarly research.

I further authorize Ryerson University to reproduce this MRP by photocopying or by other means, in total or in part, at the request of other institutions or individuals for the purpose of scholarly research.

I understand that my MRP may be made electronically available to the public.

ABSTRACT

The author discusses her photographic exploration of the works of Peter Dickinson, a British-born Canadian Modernist architect, who designed 75 built works, mostly in Toronto, before his death in 1961 at age 35. The author details her personal relationship with Modernism, her affinity for Dickinson's style and the decisions made in photographing, editing, exhibiting and publishing the images in this body of work.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my advisors Dr. Ed Slopek, Dr. Blake Fitzpatrick, and Craig Rodmore of the University of Toronto, for their unfailing guidance and encouragement.

I am extremely grateful to Drs. Katy McCormick and Gerda Cammaer, Don Synder and, Vid Inglevics for patiently sharing their insights and for their sense of humour.

For invaluable help with editing I would like to thank Dr. Erica Kim of the University of Toronto.

I also would like to thank William Eakin, a great artist and friend, who encouraged me to enroll in the Ryerson University MFA Documentary Media program.

Lastly, I would like to thank my husband Don Hewak. Without his support, I would not have been able to succeed in this program.



The Bodhisattva's mind is like the void, for he relinquishes everything, and he does not even desire to accumulate merits.

Previous page:

Photograph by Panda Associates, 1956, Canadian Architectural Archives, Calgary, Panda Photographers Fonds.

Text from *The Zen Teachings of Huang Po: On The Transmission Of Mind*, trans. John Blofeld (New York: Grove Press, 1958), 49.

All photographs in this paper, unless otherwise noted, are by the author.

Table of Contents

I	A Modern Snapshot	4
II	Humorous	9
III	Modernism, Minimalism	14
IV	Peter Dickinson, Architect of My Dream Home	18
V	Collecting without Owning	25
VI	Rejecting Panda	30
VII	Confession	37
VIII	Depression	39
IX	How I Got the Shot	39
X	Prying, Gumption, Stealth: Case Studies	41
XI	Naming the Parade Floats	49
XII	Book Book Show Show	52
XIII	Topsy	54
XIV	Turvy	56
	Postscript	58
	Bibliography	59

I A Modern Snapshot

I am a modern person. I strive towards simplicity. But I fail. I wish I could be calm, empty my mind. I wish I could care less about others, and what others think of me. But that's not me. I was born, in 1963, a not-quite baby booming red diaper baby, a pre-Gen-Xer, a privileged white North American. My parents, liberal Jews, simultaneously espoused the optimism of peacetime while unconsciously cleaving to the trauma of the Holocaust.¹ I grew up to be artistic and educated, tolerant and evolved, a Zen-curious practising Jew. As a baby, I was taken to the futuristic 1964 World's Fair in New York City, and there is a picture of me in my playpen, watching Walter Cronkite's tearful account of Kennedy's assassination on television. I was an anxious child, and I remain an anxious adult.

My family moved constantly—from Winnipeg to New York City, from Deep River, Ontario, a town of five thousand, to Paris. Most of my childhood was spent in Deep River, however, because of my father's involvement in ground-breaking DNA research at the Chalk River Nuclear Laboratories. Although my parents were caring and relatively financially comfortable, my father's work as a scientific researcher contributed to the anxiety of my early life: I lost connections with people and places, and, significantly, I lost things. The constant requirement to sever attachments, to leave things behind, to pack and unpack belongings, formed my psyche—to this day I remain obsessed with the perpetual packing and unpacking of mental and physical possessions.

As a sensitive and precocious child, I always felt different. It did not help that from time to

¹hemisphericinstitute.org/hemi/images/courses/spring-2009/hirsch_tgpm.pdf, accessed Nov. & Dec. 2016.

time we endured (mostly) subtle anti-Semitism—as a family of Jews in 1970s small-town Ontario, we were almost as out of place as the one Chinese and one Indian family.²

My friends and I grew up in the shadow of a reactor. In 1958, up-and-coming journalist Peter Newman wrote about an almost “utopian” Deep River for *Maclean’s* magazine in the article “Almost the Perfect Place to Live.”³ Newman’s description is of a small town with “some of the most brilliant scientific minds in Canada” —and their wives, — mostly imports from Britain, who found Deep River’s perfection “tiresome.” To combat boredom, there were clubs: theatre, opera, film, badminton, chess, yacht, golf, rugby, soccer, ice boating, fencing, curling, skin diving, rod and gun, wine tasting, and snail racing clubs. My mother worked on the town newspaper and my brother and I won first prize one year in the town parade, for the costumes we wore, made by my mother and father. We went as Indians. There were also occasional “special sprees”, as described by Newman:

*The nuclear physicists roasted a whole ox as their contribution to a giant picnic held to mark Queen Elizabeth’s Coronation in 1953. They approached the operation with the same precision—but not the same efficiency—with which they heat uranium rods to 370 deg. F, controlling the process to 1/100000th of a degree. The scientists elected a watchclock committee, and hoisted the animal, punctured with a battery of thermostats, onto a specially designed automatic spit. After days of calculation, roasting time was set at twenty-five hours. The spit broke down after the fire was lit and when the ox sandwiches were finally served, the middle of the animal was still raw.*⁴

² I was punched in the face just once in my life, right after being called a dirty Jew.

³ Peter Newman, “Almost the Perfect Place to Live”, *Maclean’s*, September 13, 1958.

⁴ Newman, “Almost the Perfect Place to Live,” 25-27.

Left undiscussed, by Newman, and by the Deep River townsfolk, was the rampant alcoholism. In 1958, when Newman wrote the article, newly arrived young families meant a high birth rate and a “shortage of teenagers.” By the time we arrived in town, ten years later, the shortage had been corrected, and added to beer and whiskey was hot-knifing to kill the boredom with the hashish supplied by soldiers in nearby CFB Petawawa.

“The plant,” as we called it, was a hub of peace-time research, improving clean nuclear energy and providing the world with medical isotopes. The goal of my father’s research was, actually, to cure cancer.⁵ But I now realize that for me, the underlying spectre of nuclear radiation from the plant⁶ mingled with an uneasy understanding of my father’s scientific genetic experimentation,⁷ nightmares about the Holocaust, and fears of the atom bomb,⁸ all synthesizing in me a perpetual low-grade dis-ease. Finally, in my fifties, I have begun to find ways to incorporate optimism with anxiety, positive and negative—a fusion generating a deadpan Zen acceptance. Like a comedian, I try to work out my worries through humour, resulting in the sincere irony that inhabits my photographs.

My passion for modernist design and architecture also serves as focal point in the battle to declutter my mind. As part of this campaign, I have long sought empty, generous, right-feeling living space. In 2015, my husband and I finally lucked into our “dream home”: a largely

⁵ My, father, Dr. Chaim Birnboim, is a biochemist. His technique for purifying plasmid DNA became a scientific “Citation Classic.” See <http://garfield.library.upenn.edu/classics1988/A1988Q616600001.pdf>

⁶ The National Research Universal Reactor (NRU) is the world’s largest supplier of molybdenum-99 for diagnostic tests, and cobalt-60 for cancer therapy; it is set to be decommissioned in 2018. There has never been any evidence of harm to the citizens of Deep River from living in proximity to these reactors or their effluents.

⁷ My father once brought us into his lab and demonstrated how he shaved rats and painted their backs with tar to encourage cancerous growths—or at least I think he did. Perhaps a description was so vivid that I came to believe I saw it.

⁸ This fear has never disappeared. I recall when, in university, I awoke terrified by a blinding nuclear explosion, only to find the sun had just risen, beaming through the window directly onto my face. For a while, in my thirties and forties, I almost forgot about the atom bomb, but unfortunately, given recent events, I am conscious of its resurfacing in my subconscious.

undisturbed 1956 penthouse in midtown Toronto. The move was triggered by a barrage of \$800/month heating bills in our overpriced condominium.⁹ As I combed the neighbourhood for vacancies, I happened to look up at the roof of an oddly shaped ten-storey building at the corner of Oriole Parkway and Oxton Road, with what looked like a penthouse and rooftop deck. Although there was no “for rent” sign, I felt compelled to call the superintendent. “How did you know the penthouse was for rent?” he asked, as though I were clairvoyant, or even a witch. “It’s not even on the market yet!” After several weeks of wheedling I convinced him to show it to me, “as-is.”

From the moment I entered the period lobby, I was filled with an enormous sense of well-being. The elevator opened directly into the penthouse. There, the enormous windows, open design, and expansive private rooftop terrace seemed too good to be true—it was love at first sight. The unobstructed skyline view extending over the treetops of Forest Hill was so heartbreakingly good even at dusk on a winter’s afternoon that I could overlook the conditions inside the apartment: dark, peeling paint and rotting floors—the aftermath of a plumbing disaster. As we viewed the suite, the outgoing tenant, a quiet, late-model Harry Belafonte, surrounded by the elegant remnants of his life: teak furniture, African art, and photographs of his late wife stood by. When I said goodbye to him, he mysteriously whispered, “you understand.” It was then that we decided to take the apartment.

My husband and I were advised that we were the third occupants of the penthouse since the building was erected in 1956. When my friend the artist William Eakin visited from

⁹ Unbeknownst to us at the time, our condominium faced one of Peter Dickenson’s most famous buildings, the Benvenuto Apartments.

Winnipeg he declared ours the nicest apartment he had ever seen in Toronto. We decided to research the “Oxton-Oriole,” as it was named, and discovered Peter Dickinson and his work.

In in the process of acquainting myself with Dickinson’s work I began to discover eerie coincidences that connected my previous life in Toronto with his buildings: I briefly attended high school at York Mills Collegiate Institute, got married at the Park Hyatt Hotel, worked at 311 Jarvis Street, occasionally attended synagogue at the Beth Tzedec, took my children to the paediatrician at the Toronto North Medical buildings, and often celebrate birthdays and anniversaries at the Benvenuto’s Scaramouche restaurant. The thesis exhibition is being presented at Dickinson’s Sony Centre.

I was in fact seeking a thesis topic at the time Bill was visiting, and he suggested I document Dickinson’s buildings. But I was not sure I liked the idea. Buildings sounded boring. Moreover, I thought, *why just pick one architect? why not a grand(iose), far-reaching survey of the modernist buildings I loved, with a built-in excuse to travel?* Fortunately, the more I looked into Dickinson’s graceful, elegant buildings, the more I discerned a subtle playfulness: a reserved, rather acid English sense of humour, which spurred the rational decision to concentrate on his work alone. Figure 1a features some of the hundreds of tiny windows of Dickinson’s Juvenile Courthouse at 311 Jarvis Street. When I pass by the building, I never fail to imagine forlorn little faces peering out of each one of them.

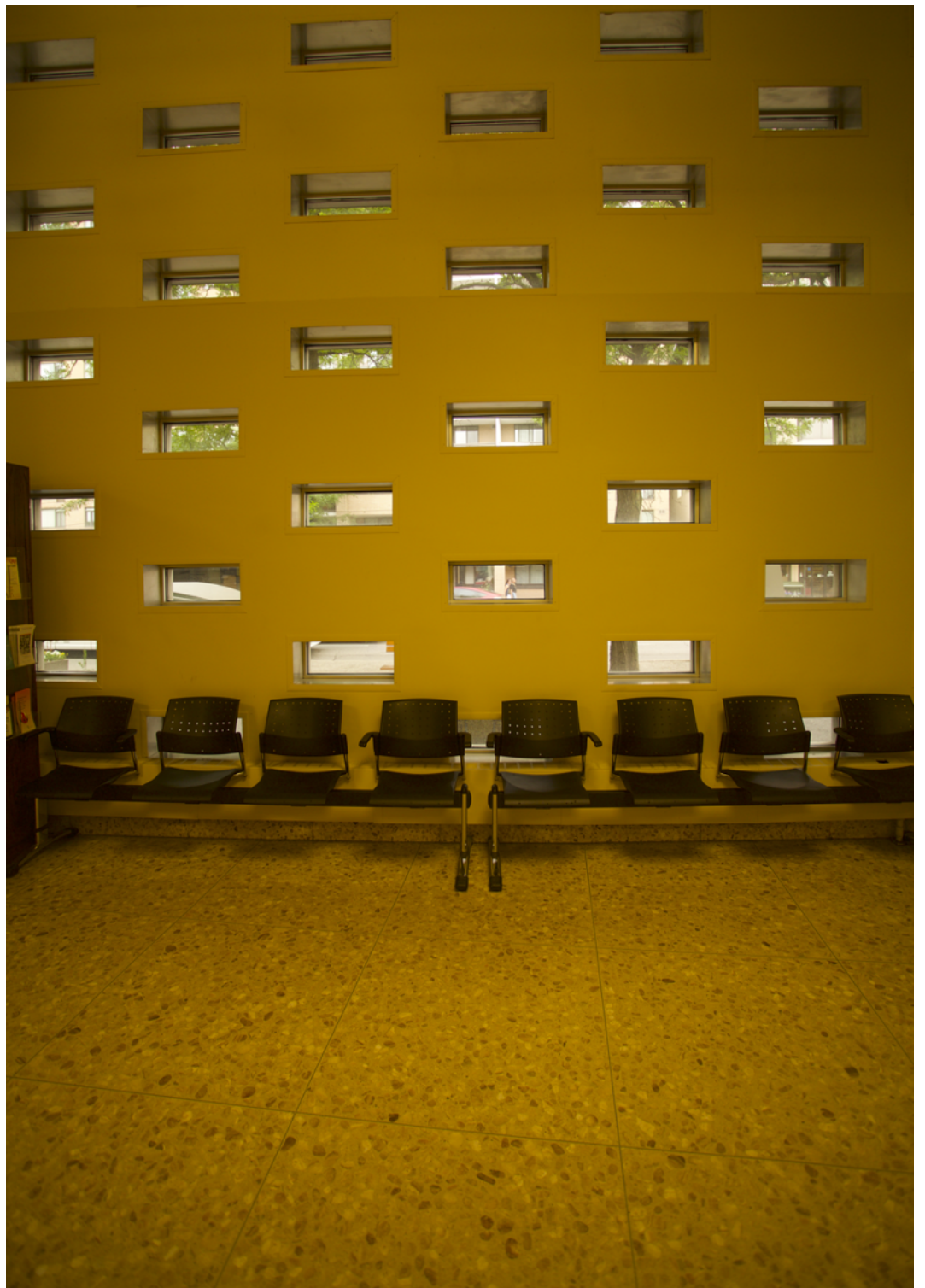
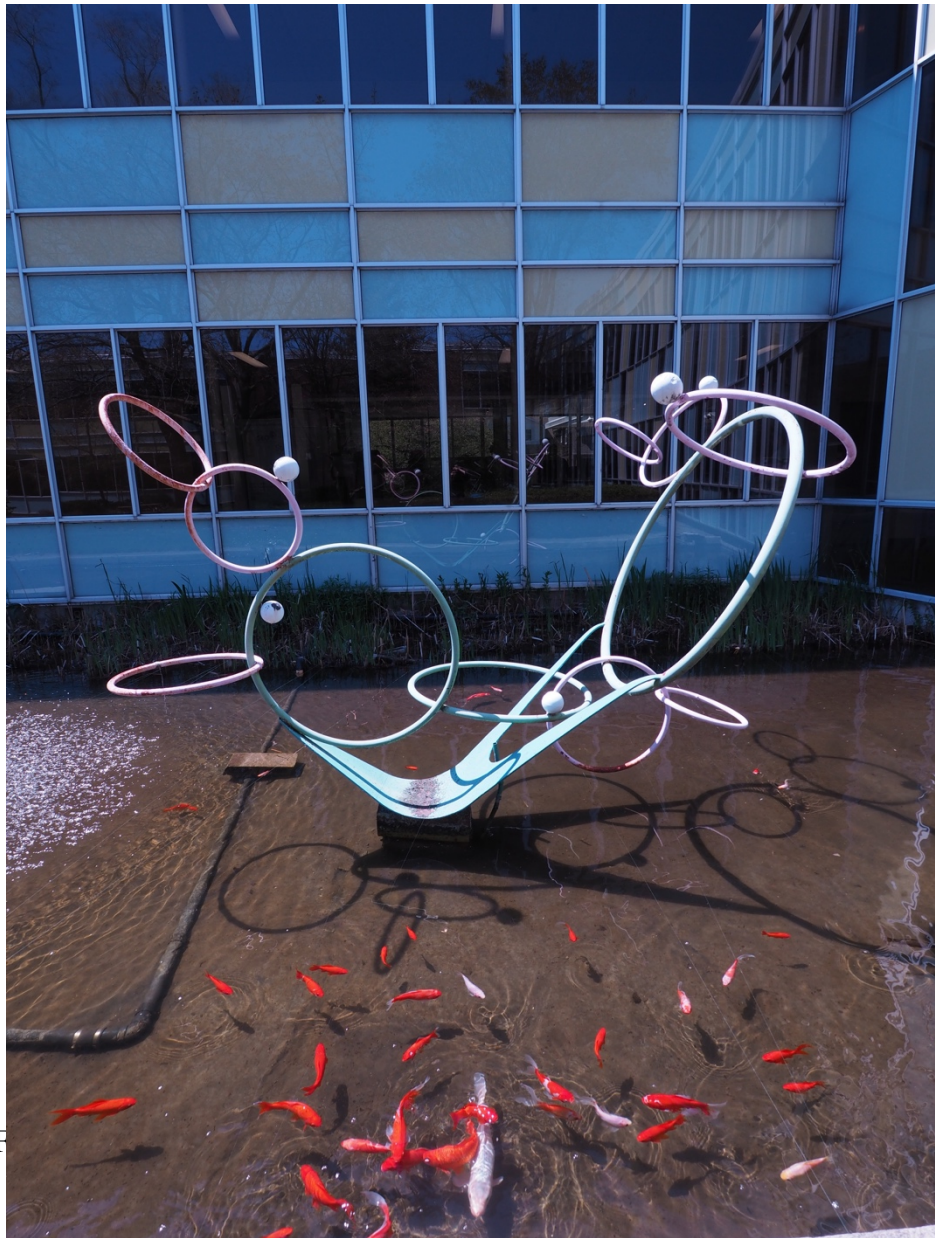


Figure 1a.



F
A sculpture, (Figure 1) created by Peter Dickinson is hidden away in an inner courtyard of what is now Centennial College, originally the Toronto Teacher's College on Carlaw Avenue in Toronto. To me it epitomizes the pleasure and joy of a fountain: its delicate anthropomorphic slapstick made me laugh out loud the first time I saw it. Dickinson must have had a good sense of humour.

There is no shortage of well-established links between modernism and humour. In her article "Dark Humor and Social Satire in the Modern British Novel," Lisa Colletta discusses the works Evelyn Waugh, Aldous Huxley, and others, concluding that:

*Dark humour is characterized by the very concerns of Modernism. It is generally defined by ambivalence, confused chronology, plots that seem to go nowhere, and a conflicting, or even unreliable narrative stance.... represent[ing] simultaneously, the horrifying and the humorous. Like modernism itself, dark humour defies any system that does not match with personal experience or intuition.*¹⁰

Indeed, to convey my impressions of Peter Dickinson's work, I had to invent my own intuitive system, infusing a deep appreciation for his work and modernism in general with a somewhat fatalistic sense of humour, knowing all things, including buildings, must pass. In his 1963 review of Ed Ruscha's *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, Philip Leider wrote of being "irritated and annoyed by it but not feeling "compelled to resolve the questions it raises."¹¹ Perhaps it is kinship, or an over-simplification, but I find Ruscha's work neither irritating nor puzzling, and consequently do not feel the need to "resolve the questions it raises." On the contrary, I feel pride when apprehending Ruscha's gas stations. The knowledge that these useful, modest yet elegant buildings existed, each a little different from the other, on desert highways, feels like a special privilege conferred to me by the artist.

¹⁰ http://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1057%2F9781403981370_1#page-1, accessed May 10, 2017.

¹¹ Mark Rawlinson, "Like Trading Dust for Oranges" Ed Ruscha and Things of Interest," in, *Various Small Books, Referencing Various Small Books by Ed Ruscha*, ed. Phil Taylor (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), 10.



A wry appreciation of irony pervades Ruscha's work. I see this also in William Eggleston's exquisite elevations of moments which, without his work would have died, forgotten in the gutter of time. Without this deadpan—sometimes slapstick—humour, these photographs of gas stations, swimming pools, supermarkets, apartment buildings and even oil slicks in a puddle, would remain static landscapes.



Figure 3. William Eggleston, *Untitled, Algiers Louisiana*, 1970 ¹²

¹² source :americansuburbx.com/2015/07/william-eggleston-making-a-name-the-southern-way.html, accessed May 1, 2017.

Lee Friedlander, too, provides us a charged and darkly toned laugh by exposing life as it was at the time he created his photographs. In “Little Faces,” the hotel rooms are squalid, but then as now (even more so now), even alone in the room, one can never be alone: the faces on the screen intrude into our private spaces, pretending to offer companionship or even solace, but in fact simply reminding us of our smallness, shortcomings, imperfections and the pathetic-ness of our lives. I have tried in *The Weight of Air* to balance light and dark in images, and this includes humour. However, my greatest effort will be in presenting the entire body of work in a book, comprising hundreds of images. If the work succeeds, it should seem flattened, and so Zen-like, an all-encompassing equivalency of experience.



Figure 4. Lee Friedlander, *Florida*, 1963 ¹³

¹³ fraenkelgallery.com/portfolios/the-little-screens, accessed March 31, 2017.

III. Modernism, Minimalism

Regarding architectural photographs, the urge to gather and preserve has no more famous example than Eugène Atget. In 1897 he began making photographs of Paris to document the remaining architecture and street scenes of pre-modernized Paris. Atget eventually produced a visual compendium that distinguished French culture and its history. Atget photographed streets, shops with their window displays, stairwells, architectural details on façades, and the interiors of apartments. He made efforts to isolate his subjects to minimize visual evidence of modern structures. Most of the buildings and streets he photographed would later be demolished. Atget's record became a magic visual catalogue of the look and feel of nineteenth-century Paris, magical because it was in fact produced in the twentieth century.¹⁴

One of Atget's most noteworthy proponents, Berenice Abbot, spent eight years in Europe assisting Man Ray. Her return to New York where she promoted Atget's work to potential buyers, coincided with the skyscraper boom that was transforming New York into an Art Deco metropolis. Inspired by Atget, in 1929 Abbott set out to photograph New York, with the intention of making a photographic record of the city's contrasts, from sky-high buildings to

¹⁴ Beaumont Newhall, *The History of Photography* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2005), 195-197.

basement diners. As Abbott explained, “the camera cannot reconstruct the past or imagine the future, but the camera CAN see and record the instant NOW.”¹⁵

I link my own desperation to record the “now” to a perpetual struggle with collecting and filling my life with things.¹⁶ Dickinson’s buildings, becoming rarer as we speak, are one more collection to worry about. I began this project like a baseball card collector, determined to own *all* of Dickinson’s buildings. I share this tendency to hoard and collect with Andy Warhol, who grew up anxious too, with better reasons than me.¹⁷ Warhol suggested that “everyone should live in one big empty space. . . What you should do,” he advised, “is get a box for a month, drop everything in it . . . then date it and send it over to New Jersey.”¹⁸ It is the act of possession rather than the possessed thing that is the collector’s objective.

To me, modernist design acts as an anti-depressant (see Chapter VIII). If a space is large and airy, with pleasant lines and plenty of light, perhaps owning the space itself will be enough. If the space is large enough, perhaps it can be kept empty, empty of things which distract from happiness. Le Corbusier, who coined the now-trope “a house is a machine for living in,”¹⁹ was a proponent of architecture where purpose is perfectly served with minimal waste of matter and

¹⁵ Sarah Miller, “Dynamic Equilibrium: Berenice Abbott’s History of the Now”, in *Berenice Abbott*, ed. Gaelle Morel (Boston: Yale University Press, 2012), 64.

¹⁶ Hoarding is often associated with childhood trauma. See Renee Winters, *The Hoarding Impulse: Suffocation of the Soul* (Essex: Routledge, 2015), 83.

¹⁷ Warhol’s family couldn’t afford a car, and all five family members slept in the attic of their home, renting out the floor below. His father died when Andy was a teenager, and the corpse was laid out in the family’s living room for three days prior to burial, Andy hiding in his bedroom all the while. See Victor Bockris, *Warhol: The Biography* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 2003,) 82.

¹⁸ Warhol, Andy, “The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B and Back Again),” in *The Archive*, ed. Charles Merewether (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2006), 31.

¹⁹ Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, trans. Frederick Etchells (New York: Dover), 4.

energy. That said, a cold and unfeeling utilitarian functionalism wasn't Le Corbusier's goal. Instead, he understood function *emotionally*:

"The Architect, by his arrangement of forms, realizes an order which is a pure creation of his spirit; by forms and shapes he affects our senses to an acute degree, and provokes plastic emotions; by the relationships which he creates he wakes in us profound echoes, he gives us the measure of an order which we feel to be in accordance with that of our world, he determines the various movements of our heart and of our understanding; it is then that we experience the sense of beauty."²⁰

Le Corbusier upholds the whitewashing of walls as a moral act. Without it, he warns, we will "make our houses into museums or temples filled with votive offerings" and then try to "camouflage both this ugly accumulation, and our cowardice in not facing a separation."²¹ Whitewashing, he intimates, is a symbolic act of decluttering, a brushstroke of minimalism, leading to the "elimination of the equivocal." He recommends: "Concentration of intention on its proper object . . . Attention concentrated on the object. . . The object of truth radiates power. Between one object of truth and another, astonishing relationships develop."²²

While Le Corbusier did not actually insist on a lack of colour, even striving to acquire Le Corbusier's symbolic moral clarity is an uphill battle. It is true that a light-filled, sparsely furnished, pale-coloured room is soothing to me. Yet, paradoxically, when calmed, I quickly

²⁰ Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, 1.

²¹ Le Corbusier, "A Coat of Whitewash" (1925), in *On Color and Colors*, ed. David Batchelor (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), 82.

²² Le Corbusier, "A Coat of Whitewash," 83.

seek the energy of colour: the objects that radiate it captivate me. I simply can't stick to Le Corbusier's Ripolin diet. I am torn, as can be seen in the photobook chapters discussed below, between the grayscale and the colour wheel. I am tremendously influenced by Eggleston, for several reasons, not least his famous use of colour. I could no more eschew colour in my work than leave a pearl on the sidewalk. I crave emptiness, but to me emptiness does not have to be white.

In *Chromophobia*, David Batchelor argues that Western culture and architecture are paralysed by a fear of corruption through colour. Perhaps this is one source of the prejudice against colour in art photography which, certainly until Eggleston's time, marginalized those who would represent the world as it is. "It is one thing," says Batchelor, "not to know that Greek statues were once brilliantly painted; it is another thing not to see colour when it is still there."²³ He describes the "tyrannically" white modern interior of a wealthy collector's house where nothing seemed at home—rather, everything seemed "*prepared*: approved, trained disciplined, marshalled."²⁴

According to the French psychiatrist and phenomenologist Eugène Minkowski: "our personal lives, as well as the social life of humanity, unfolds in space . . . We have a need of expansion, of perspective, to live. Space is as indispensable as time in the development of life."²⁵

But with space comes the urge to accumulate and fill. I am materialistic. I see things, and I want them. When it comes to things that are rare or endangered, the impulse is irresistible. So, for me, the camera is a practical solution to the problem of storage.

²³ Batchelor, David, *Chromophobia*, (London: Reaktion Books, 2005), 12.

²⁴ David Batchelor, *Chromophobia*, 11.

²⁵ Minkowski, Eugene, *Lived Time: Phenomenological and Psychopathological Studies*, (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1933) 400.

IV. Peter Dickinson, Architect of My Dream Home

Peter Dickinson arrived in Toronto in 1950, a cocky twenty-four-year-old recent graduate of the Architectural Association in London. Stepping off the train from Montreal, he pronounced Toronto to be “mile after mile of small, sordid, even squalid, buildings.”²⁶ Modernist architecture had come late to Canada, only starting to make inroads in the postwar prosperity of the 1950s and 1960s. Prior to this, the thoroughfares were lined with neoclassical and mock-Georgian edifices²⁷ like the Romanesque style Old City Hall. Standing at the corner of Queen and Bay Streets like a gingerbread castle, it now serves as a provincial courthouse.²⁸ Toronto-based architects like John C. Parkin, who had studied at Harvard (where Bauhaus founder Walter Gropius taught), were early adopters of modernism in Canada. Among Parkin’s designs is

²⁶ Freedman, Adele, “Peter Dickinson: Anglo-Canadian Modern” in *Sight Lines: Looking at Architecture and Design in Canada* (Toronto: Oxford University Press 1990), 2.

²⁷ Armstrong, Christopher, *Making Toronto Modern* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 2014), 284-292.

²⁸ I worked at this courthouse as a legal aid barrister for many years. I would arrive exhausted at seven in the morning to try to secure bail for dozens of desperate souls, and yet the small thrill of privilege as the guards recognized and ushered me in at the gates was always a small consolation. As a young lawyer, the faded grandeur of this courthouse made an impression on me. The huge building was like a dowager queen, adorned with coloured mosaic tiles, worn away, thickly marbled bathroom stalls and ornate carved railings in cavernous courtrooms. Growing up in Deep River, where the oldest structures dated from the founding of the town in 1844, Old City Hall transported me to a storybook era. The enormous building echoed my feelings about the legal system at the time: maze-like, strict, heartless in some cases, occasionally sympathetic, and ever fatigued.

Yorkdale Shopping Centre, which, at the time of its completion in 1964, was among the largest shopping centres in the world.

The most well-known examples of modernism in Toronto were constructed in the 1960s. The new City Hall, by Finnish architect Viljo Revell, opened in 1965, following a 1958 international design competition to replace Old City Hall. The building garnered mixed reviews.²⁹ The iconic Toronto-Dominion Centre at King and Bay Streets, designed by Mies Van der Rohe, followed in 1967.

In 1950, the Toronto architectural firm Page and Steele recruited Dickinson, steeped in Modernism. The well-heeled scion of a family of stockbrokers, Dickinson arrived in Toronto with his wife Vera, an Austrian-born model. Apart from fast cars and whiskey, he seems to have had no other interests but designing buildings. It has been said that “no architect has made such an impact on the Canadian scene in so short a time.”³⁰ By 1961, when Dickinson (a chain-smoker) died of cancer at age 35, he had designed seventy-four built works. The few accounts that remain characterize Dickinson as dashing, charismatic, and bullheaded.³¹ He made friends with prominent developers and was amazingly prolific. Peter Dickinson designed schools, churches, skyscrapers, industrial and offices buildings, a grand theatre, some private homes, several apartment buildings and four hotels. On his deathbed at Mount Sinai Hospital, he was designing the second in the Four Seasons Hotel chain³², the Inn on the Park, for Toronto

²⁹ see Christopher Armstrong, *Making Toronto Modern*.

³⁰ Adele Freedman, *Sight Lines*, 14.

³¹ Adele Freedman, *Sight Lines*, 2. Martins-Mantiega, John, *Peter Dickinson* (Dominion Modern: Toronto, 2010, Interview with Morden Yolles, March 21, 2017.

³² The first was Isadore Sharpe’s Four Seasons Motor Hotel at 415 Jarvis Street, Toronto, now demolished.

developer Isadore Sharp. Had he lived, it is likely Dickinson would have designed Four Seasons hotels all over the world.³³

In terms of multi-unit residential buildings, Dickinson's type of modernism, while now considered dated by some, meant spacious rooms. Space is a luxury in Toronto's out-of-control real estate market, but Dickinson's apartments are not luxurious in the contemporary sense of the word. Unless they have been converted to condominiums, as in the case of the Benvenuto,³⁴ there are no golden faucets or crystal chandeliers, nor are there granite-countered kitchens with Sub-Zero appliances, spa bathrooms, and walk-in closets. Instead, luxury is measured in square footage with a view, rooms that breathe, windows that open—wealth derived from spaciousness, simplicity, and pleasing aesthetics. As Adele Freedman, architectural scholar and critic notes, “Dickinson's buildings, though stylish, are always modest. Light, landscape, and creating space were the luxuries.”³⁵ Whenever possible, it seems Dickinson planned each room for maximum enjoyment of living, even to life's more mundane acts, such as laundry. In two of his apartment buildings, one in Ottawa and one in Montreal, I photographed beautiful skyline views from top-floor laundry rooms.

After only ten years in Canada, Dickinson wrote with some authority in *The Canadian Architect*: “Let us all work to encourage sincere unpretentious architecture, well located in harmonious urban surroundings—and ring the death knell of the portly halls of ARCHAICTURE and the skeletal grimness of STARKITECTURE.”³⁶ This last comment would seem to be a “dig”

³³ Martins-Mantiega, John, *Peter Dickinson*, (Toronto: Dominion Modern, 2010) 107-108.

³⁴ It is rumoured Norman Jewison lives there.

³⁵ Freedman, Adele, “Peter Dickinson: Anglo-Canadian Modern” in *Sight Lines: Looking at Architecture and Design in Canada* (Toronto: Oxford University Press 1990), 8.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

at the doctrinaire proponents of the International Style. Adele Freedman has said of Dickinson's contribution:

“he did not design masterpieces. . . [his] strength lay in his continuing search for an appropriate modern architecture, in a country resistant to modernism, for clients who prized economy at least as much as style. He did not design isolated objects, as modernists are always accused of doing. His theme was building-in-landscape-in-city. His style was Anglo-Canadian Modern, pictorial and personable, faithful to the moment, sensitive to locale and circumstance.”³⁷

Freedman adds, significantly: “Because he was not an ideologue, he did not become a victim of modernism.”³⁸ Among Dickinson's best known buildings are the Benvenuto Apartments, the Juvenile Courthouse at 311 Jarvis, the O'Keefe Centre—now the Sony Centre—and the now-demolished Inn on the Park Hotel, all in Toronto, as well as La Tour CIBC in Montreal. The iconic Sony Centre, having (so far) survived threats of demolition and now in the process of being “lovingly” restored,³⁹ exemplifies the tenuous life of Dickinson's work and of Modernist architecture in general: ignored or admired, preserved or “improved,” perpetually endangered.

Easily seduced by Dickinson's *Mad Men* persona, I nonetheless resolved to avoid exploring his life for this thesis. Proceeding on the assumption that a man who had the taste and talent to design these buildings would have been interesting, sexy, and maddening, I have avoided any pretense of conversation with a dead man and did not seek to interview those who knew him. Rather, I have tried to get to know his buildings, many of which remain alive. I have

³⁷ Ibid., 2.

³⁸ Ibid., 30.

³⁹ <https://www.pressreader.com/canada/toronto-star/20100925/285078455347761>, accessed May 10, 2017.

also attended at the graveside of many of the buildings that are now partially or wholly demolished, or have been “altered beyond recognition.”⁴⁰ Figure 5 below depicts the Inn on the Park Hotel. It is now demolished and a Toyota dealership stands in its place (figure 5).⁴¹



Figure 5. *The Inn on the Park, circa 1966.*⁴²

⁴⁰ The phrase “altered beyond recognition”, used in *Peter Dickinson* by John Martins-Mantiega to describe some buildings so enchanted me it was almost used as the title of this work. However, I ultimately rejected the idea as it suggested that the focus of the thesis was Dickinson’s ruined buildings.

⁴¹ see footnote 32

⁴² <http://torontoist.com/2014/07/historicist-the-inn-on-the-park/>, accessed November 10, 2016.



Figure 6. *Tombstone*, 2016.

As Freedman points out, Dickinson's buildings are not all masterpieces and, from my amateur point of view, some seem almost phoned in. In some cases, such as the TransCanada Pipeline Building on Eglinton Avenue West, Dickinson's subtle design choices tend towards a deadpan style, bordering on affectless depression. These instances could not have occurred solely because of disinterest or a sudden dearth of artfulness and skill—no doubt at play were budget and time constraints which plague every architect.



Figure 7.

Still, in studying even Dickinson's most modest buildings, I became acquainted with a tailored beauty; narrow windows, open staircases, hues of sand, aqua, and glaucous green in brick and coloured glass tiles-- a glimpse of a shy but playful English debutante. My own apartment, like other Dickinson dwellings, makes the most of whatever space is available. It measures 1,780 square feet, but most who visit think it larger--a result of the artful layout and generous windows. These apartments are examples of what Alberto Pérez Gómez terms "true architecture:" concerned with "far more than fashionable form, affordable homes, and

sustainable development; it responds to a desire for an eloquent place to dwell—one that lovingly provides a sense of order resonant with our dreams.”⁴³



Figure 8. *Seashells*, 2017.

V. Collecting without Owning

You’ve got to collect. Pieces of the anatomy of somebody’s living... You contrive to ask around. Can you lead me to any material like that? You know how a collector is... “
-Walker Evans.⁴⁴

I have always collected and endlessly organized my collections. Photographers are ultimately collectors, archivists, producers of inventories of themes and things. When I was a child, I used

⁴³ mitpress.mit.edu/books/built-upon-love, accessed April 19, 2017

⁴⁴ Katz/Evans interview, in *Walker Evans at Work*, ed. Jerry L. Thompson (New York: Harper & Row, 1994) 230.

to like to walk in the woods and find things such as seeds and twigs then bring them home to consolidate with my collection of broken jewelry and spools. This lonely occupation gave me comfort and purpose.

I continue to be a magpie and a collector of many things, Modernism being one of them. When, later in life, I was introduced to the figure of the flâneur, I recognized myself. Taking a walk in the city, going where one likes, pursuing without justification private images and trains of thought, here I find some respite from loneliness and anxiety. Driving by Dickinson's buildings or taking the subway there, sneaking into off-limits areas, pretending I had business on the premises, peeping into apartment windows taking pictures of what catches my eye. My pictures become my collection of things too big to pocket, like a nineteenth-century photographer sent to Egypt to plunder and to bring back treasure too big to fit on a ship. I photograph in order, as Baudelaire put it, "To see the world...to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world... The lover of life makes the whole world his family."

45

Walter Benjamin, in adopting the idea of the Flâneur, rejected the traditional "objective" historiography, seeking the discarded and forgotten materials of modern life. He was partly influenced by surrealist techniques, especially chance and free association, in his approach to collecting traces of modernity and gathering them in files ("convolutes"). Various passages in the Paris Arcades become passages in the *Arcades Project*. How can "Fashion," "Boredom, Eternal Return," "The Interior," "The Trace," "Mirrors," "Photography," "Catacombs," "Advertising,"

⁴⁵ Baudelaire, Charles, *The Painter of Modern Life* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1964). Orig. published in *Le Figaro*, in 1863.

and “Baudelaire” be related? These reflections of the same objects on different surfaces capture a fleeting image of the nineteenth century. According to Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, Benjamin sought to present a “magic encyclopedia” or “world of secret affinities,” in which “[t]hese proliferating individual passages, extracted from their original context like collectibles, were eventually set up to communicate among themselves, often in a rather subterranean manner.”⁴⁶ (The idea of de-contextualized and re-contextualized objects communicating among themselves also seems related to Le Corbusier’s belief in the “arrangement of forms [provoking] plastic emotions.”)⁴⁷

In Fall, 2015, the beginning of the MFA program, I made a list and a plan to visit each of the buildings Peter Dickinson designed as well as every site where one of his works had been. Unlike Ruscha, who humorously chose twenty-six gasoline stations to photograph, as if that represented the full inventory, I had no luxury of choice. In the end, I visited only sixty-four of seventy-four places. Even to the last minute, as I prepare my exhibition and book, I am filled with regret and embarrassment at not having achieved what seemed like a simple goal: collecting the whole set.

There were several reasons for the failure. In some cases, where I did attend a site, such as the office tower at 111 Richmond Street West in Toronto, I simply didn’t take a picture worth reproducing. This seems all the more pathetic, considering that I took over seventy thousand pictures for this body of work. At a certain point, I had to choose between editing and taking more photographs. Why were there so many? Ironically, my anxiety—about my camera skills, about missing something important—led to compulsiveness. Compulsive activities brought on

⁴⁶ Eiland, Howard and McLaughlin, Kevin, “Translator’s Foreword,” in *The Arcades Project*, Walter Benjamin, (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999).

⁴⁷ Le Corbusier, *Towards A New Architecture*, 4.

by anxiety usually breed noxious fruits: in this case, a massive, anxiety-filled edit. In the end, however, my ramped-up state gradually subsided. The snake ate and digested its tail. The process of editing actually helped alleviate anxiety about the incompleteness of the set. As I discovered, the pictures and categories I originally thought important (addresses, elevations, architectural details) became irrelevant. Rather than organize photographs according to a conventional checklist that proves successful completion of an architectural design, I decided to make visible the unfinished life of the building. That is, the incompleteness of the set is also echoed by the incompleteness or unfinished nature of the buildings themselves. As Jacques Derrida points out, the archive always opens to an incomplete future.⁴⁸

Making and collecting pictures, as many as I can, is also an attempt to grasp what I like in the world and sort it out. “Collecting,” says Benjamin, “is a form of practical memory, and of all the profane manifestations of ‘nearness’ it is the most binding. Thus, in a certain sense, the smallest act of political reflection makes for an epoch in the antiques business. We construct here an alarm clock that rouses the kitsch of the previous century to ‘assembly.’”⁴⁹ Benjamin’s method in the *Arcades Project* is part of a longer history of wondrous and magical taxonomies also seen in the Renaissance cabinet of curiosities (*wunderkammer*), the Borgesian “Chinese encyclopedia,” and other collections that sought to understand the reality of the world. Many operated under the (mistaken) belief that their systems revealed a true reality. In a feat of irony, Benjamin used modern tools of classification and collecting to expose the fractures and secret

⁴⁸ https://monoskop.org/images/9/99/Derrida_Jacques_1995_Archive_Fever_A_Freudian_Impression.pdf, p. 46. accessed May 12, 2017.

⁴⁹ Benjamin, Walter, *The Arcades Project*. Eiland, Howard and McLaughlin, trans., 2.4-5, H1a.

connections that orthodox Modernism seeks to hide. This revolutionary impulse and critique were further developed by Michel Foucault:

This passage [in Borges] quotes a “certain Chinese encyclopedia”:

(i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) *et cetera*, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies.” In the wonderment of this taxonomy, the thing we apprehend in one great leap, the thing that, by means of the fable, is demonstrated as the exotic charm of another system of thought, is the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking *that*.⁵⁰

When I was first introduced to the “Chinese encyclopedia,” I felt a thrill of identification with its delightful transgressiveness. The mental liberation of this (almost) free-association is the kind of thinking which aided me in titling and editing the pictures for this project (more on this in Chapter XI below.) Miriam Shlesinger says: “Borges’ distortion of classification is humorous in its absurdity but it also evokes an uneasy feeling, as it threatens ‘our age-old distinction between Same and Other.’” I can certainly live with both humour and uneasiness; I have to.⁵¹ Refreshingly, Keith Windschuttle, an Australian historian, cites alleged acceptance of the authenticity of Borges’s list by many academics as a sign of the degeneration of the Western academy and a terminal lack of humour.⁵²

VI. Rejecting Panda

⁵⁰Foucault, Michel, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (Vintage: New York), 212.

⁵¹ Racket, Sela-Sheffy and Shlesinger, Miriam, *Identity and Status in the Translational Professions*, (John Benjamins: Amsterdam), 251.

⁵²<https://web.archive.org/web/20050308191710/http://www.nationalreview.com/15sept97/windschuttle091597.html>, accessed March 15, 2017.

*My photographs are not planned or composed in advance and I do not anticipate that the on-looker will share my viewpoint. However, I feel that if my photograph leaves an image on his mind—something has been accomplished. —Robert Frank*⁵³

The fact that architectural photography exists as a distinct category, like wildlife, portrait, or sports photography, presents specific artistic challenges. It seems to set the stage for a certain kind of conversation before the work is even seen. My rejection of it even seemed to provoke some degree of hostility. During the production of *The Weight of Air*, I participated in more than one class critique where the off-kilter nature of certain images was challenged: “The lines are crooked.” “You say you love modernism, but the way you take the pictures, you are disrespecting the buildings.” It is interesting to consider that some of my peers equate “respecting” the buildings not only with mimicking formal qualities of design and site, but also with presenting a neutral stance towards these subjects—as if the archive or documentary photography is ever truly objective. “Honest—yes. Objective—no.”⁵⁴

One peer even offered: “Hire me, I will take your pictures for you.” Indeed, were strict visual records of the architectural forms of Dickinson’s works needed, more qualified photographers than I could easily be found to do the job. When Dickinson’s buildings were erected in the mid-1950s and early 1960s, Panda Associates, a Canadian commercial photography firm devoted to architecture, was retained to take pictures of them. Those photographs are still widely used in the media and in academic publications.

Panda played a major role in documenting the development of Canadian modernism. Started in 1946 by three ex-RCAF photographers, Paul Rockett, Lockwood Hait, and Hugh Robertson, Panda eagerly embraced architectural modernism, playing a key role in

⁵³ Robert Frank “A Statement,” *U. S. Camera Annual*, 1958

⁵⁴ Smith, Eugene, *Photographic Journalism*, Photo Notes, (June 1948), 4.

introducing it to the public. Its iconic photographs, which utilized creative lighting, shadows, and angles to capture modern buildings in a signature style, were reproduced in magazines and promotional publications. Fig. 9 is Panda's photograph of Dickinson's Juvenile and Family Court at 311 Jarvis Street in Toronto. Panda was the go-to photographic service of leading twentieth-century Canadian and international architects such as I. M. Pei, Mies van der Rohe, Viljo Revell, and Skidmore Owings & Merrill.⁵⁵ In reviewing a 2003 exhibition of the works of Panda photographer Hugh Roberts, journalist Dave LeBlanc of the *Globe and Mail* praised "the brooding light, shadow and angles of his commercial architectural work."⁵⁶ It is almost as if these photographs set a mood and added to the already existing architectural surface patterns and abstract spatial qualities. As valuable as these photographs are, my rejection of Panda-style photography is part of a broader rejection of the more conventional approach of architectural photography categories. While Roberts's work may be engaged in modernist aesthetics, as commercial work it also seeks to be documentary, archival, and objective.

⁵⁵ Parkin John C., *Archives, and Photography: Reflections on the Practice and Presentation of Modern Architecture* (University of Calgary Press: Calgary, 2013.)

⁵⁶ <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/real-estate/an-eye-for-architecture/article18435303/> accessed February 19, 2017.



Figure 9. Juvenile and Family Court, Toronto, circa 1957, Panda Photographers.⁵⁷

Dickinson's buildings are not only classic examples of modernism, but also beautiful and endangered. As such, they make a natural subject for artistic-minded commercial photographers, for example, Toronto-based former computer programmer Vik Pahwa. Figure 10 is Pahwa's dramatic shot of Dickinson's Juvenile and Family Court: This image falls into the category of "respectful" work that my peer quoted above imagined.

As with

⁵⁷ Canadian Architectural Archives, Panda Photographers Fonds.



Figure 10. Vik Pahwa, Juvenile and Family Court, Toronto, 2016 ⁵⁸

⁵⁸ <http://vikpahwa.com/tag/311-jarvis/>, accessed April 13, 2017.

Panda's 1957 photograph of the same building, the contemporary photograph emphasizes the formal qualities of modernism. Pahwa's tips for photographing buildings reinforce his design and composition preferences:

Try black and white. Architectural details can be emphasized by shooting in black and white when background colours are distracting. It can also be effective way to bring out the contrast between light and shadow.

Use symmetry. Balancing an image horizontally or vertically can create a pleasing sense of balance and harmony especially when there is a central point of interest or vanishing point.⁵⁹

I reject these approaches. Figure 11 is my portrait of Juvenile and Family Court. I believe this photograph speaks to the emotional sense of the building, used as it is intended, rather than as model or muse. Pahwa's photograph tells us nothing different or new about Dickinson, the building, its life, its site, or its social context. In a sense, he is simply repeating photographic conventions and codifying them as somewhat banal "best practices." If "objective" information is sought, archival documents are easy to find—many of Dickinson's original architectural drawings are housed in various locations, including the Toronto Archives and the Archives of Ontario and the Canadian Architectural Archives in Calgary. I personally possess some fragments of the original blueprints of Dickinson's York Mills Collegiate Institute: I found them crumbling in the school's basement next to a Christmas tree in storage when the janitor took me on a photo-expedition (figure 12.)

⁵⁹ oaa.on.ca/bloag-detail/Architectural-Photography-Tips:-Vik-Pahwa/380
accessed March 15, 2017.



Figure 11. *Behold*, 2016



Figure 12. *In Storage*, 2016.

No shortage of the more factual type of information about Peter Dickinson's work exists. I was even fortunate enough to access a primary source of information about his ideas. Morden Yolles, the chief engineer of several of Dickinson's buildings, including the one I live in, worked side by side with him. My job is to capture and preserve his vision using my own reality. The project's subtitle, *A Picture Parade of Peter Dickinson's Buildings*, is quite literal. I mean to allude to the motion, life, pride, and joy of a parade, even to the risk that there will be rain.

VII. Confession

I think there are two kinds of photography—Jewish photography and goyish photography. If you look at modern photography, you will find, on the one hand the Weegees, the Diane Arbuses, the Robert Franks—funky photographs. And then you have the people who go out in the woods. Ansel Adams, Weston. It's like black and white jazz.
—William Klein⁶⁰

Before proceeding to the methods I employ to document this parade, I feel compelled to publicly confess: I am not very good at using a camera. Here are my excuses: I have been a photographer for five years. Between 2012 and 2014, I employed an iPhone exclusively. For my first solo body of work, *Girls Girls Girls*, I bought a Sony point-and-shoot camera. However, as a result of the combination of my impatient personality and a learning disability (Adult ADHD),

⁶⁰ Anthony Lane, "The Shutter Bug," *New Yorker*, January 25, 2010, 78.

I found it difficult to learn to use the camera properly. I compensated by rapidly taking a large number of pictures, which was not hard to do. This project involved approaching strangers and asking for permission to photograph them on the spot. Since I did not have much time to interact with them (sometimes as little as a minute), I had to act quickly. Upon reviewing the photographs, I was inevitably disappointed by the large number of blurry and improperly exposed images. I would try from time to time to learn a little more about the camera settings but did not make much progress. For *The Weight of Air*, I purchased a new Olympus and also made use of Ryerson's Canon 5D Mark III. Although these cameras are more sophisticated and more powerful tools, I have continued to use them much like an iPhone, making only small inroads into the technical mysteries of the devices, such as how to compensate for backlighting and avoid overexposure.

The result is often an off-kilter style of photograph. Although I hope and plan to improve my technique as time goes on, in the meantime, my method has chosen me, for better or worse. It remains to be seen whether it is a success, and if it can be sustained and improved in future projects.

VIII. Depression

I am soft-hearted. I even sympathize with Martha Rosler's dirty bottles, lying like kings in filthy tombs. I am oversensitive. I talk too much. The reasons are varied, and rarely interesting. However, there is a connection between the sadness just beneath the skin, ready to surface at a moment's notice, and the identification with broken, dejected, and lost things. Like Ed Ruscha, "I'm interested in glorifying something that we in the world would say doesn't deserve being glorified. Something that's forgotten, focused on as though it were some sort of sacred object."⁶¹

The urge to collect and document the things which, like me, came into being in the mid-twentieth century could be attributed to a primitive effort to stave off mortality. Also, I miss the old days. Even though they were sometimes terrible. Even William Eggleston, a man of few words, felt compelled to explain his desire to capture mundane, disappearing things: "At some time, not just in an instant, but over some period I became aware of the fact that I wanted to document examples like Kroger or Piggly Wiggly in the late '50s, early '60s."⁶² I too feel the urge, compellingly to document examples of this era.

IX. How I Got the Shot

During a talk I attended at a commercial art gallery, the artist stood in front of a large-scale print of a suburban home. The crowd was rapt as he explained how he stood in front of the house for a

⁶¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2008/may/22/bestshot.ed.ruscha>, February 23, 2017.

⁶² <http://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/william-eggleston/print/>, accessed November 11, 2016.

long while, until a little girl scuttled by on her tricycle, and he got the shot. Although everything the artist said was no doubt true, I often think back on what seemed like an absurd explanation of trophy-hunting.

Personally, I aspire to Jasper Johns' more generous attentiveness:

On the street, you will look up at the sky and then look down at a building, or you will look at a woman and then at a construction site. In this work, you shift your eyes from the leg to the ball, or from the colored square to the "scraping," don't you? When I painted flags or targets, I used to see the whole picture at a time, only to make seeing meaningless. Recently, I've been using such objects and traces of action in order to diversify the way to see things. . . I want to confuse the meaning of the act of looking.⁶³

⁶³Alexandra Munroe, "Buddhism and the Neo-Avant-Garde: Cage Zen, Beat Zen, and Zen," in *The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860–1989*, ed. Alexandra Munroe (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2009), 214.

X. Prying, Gumption, Stealth: Case Studies

I am nosy. I must know.

*Stare, pry, listen, eavesdrop. Die knowing something.
You are not here long. —Walker Evans*⁶⁴

*I'm interested in what's interesting. —Ed Ruscha*⁶⁵

PRY: “look inquisitively,” c. 1300, from *prien* “to peer in,” of unknown origin, perhaps related to late Old English *bepriwan* “to wink.” Related: *Pried*; *prying*. As a noun, “act of prying,” from 1750; meaning “inquisitive person” is from 1845.⁶⁶

Beginning with my first body of work, *Girls Girls Girls*, the urge to pry demanded firm engagement with the subject in one way or another. Walker Evan’s sympathetic approach to people: “you can do some wonderful work if you know how to make people understand what you’re doing and feel all right about it”⁶⁷—strikes me more as a wish than a lesson. No matter how carefully you explain it, you cannot assume people will ever understand what you are doing, let alone feel alright about it. Unlike the great fashion photographer Bill Cunningham, who claimed he was shy,⁶⁸ I am aggressive, or at least I have gumption. When focused on taking

⁶⁴ *George Eastman House Interview with Walker Evans*, Image Magazine, Vol. 17, No. 4, December 1974.

(Originally Published in *Yale Alumni Magazine*, February, 1974.)

⁶⁵ <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/02/books/review/various-small-books-inspired-by-ed-ruscha-and-more.html>, accessed March 2, 2017.

⁶⁶ <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=pry>, accessed December 1, 2016

⁶⁷ *George Eastman House Interview with Walker Evans*, Image Magazine, December 1974.

⁶⁸ “The problem is I’m not a good photographer. To be perfectly honest, I’m too shy. Not aggressive enough. Well, I’m not aggressive at all. I just loved to see wonderfully dressed women, and I still do. That’s all there is to it.” “Bill

photographs, I am prepared to pry using charm, wheedling, pretending, sneaking, and lying. I wasn't sure if the girl at this Winnipeg inner-city community picnic in Figure 13 below would talk to me , but when I asked to see her kitten she grudgingly obliged. Some people remark that talking to strangers seems easy and natural for me. Although I can often pluck up the courage to do it, even positive interactions are tiresome performances. And when things go south, it is downright exhausting.

Cunningham on Bill Cunningham,” [nytimes.com/2016/06/26/fashion/bill-cunningham-on-his-life.html?](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/26/fashion/bill-cunningham-on-his-life.html?), accessed November 21, 2017.



Figure 13. *My Own Pussycat*, 2014.

Usually, however, I pick myself up and start over the next day. For someone with my risk-taking personality, taking pictures is crack, or at least Crackerjack: “*The More You Eat The More You Want*,” and I am ever-awaiting the “prize in every box”⁶⁹. Like Ruscha says, “I believe in intuition and approaching things as instant gratification. Just do the things you want to do, make

⁶⁹ en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cracker_Jack, accessed May 21, 2017.

the kind of pictures you want to make.”⁷⁰ As with *Girls Girls Girls*, access to Dickinson’s subjects demanded constant prying and gumption. What follow are some examples of this method.

⁷⁰ Kathan Brown, *Why Draw a Landscape* (San Francisco: Crown Point Press, 1999), 4.

Case #49: St. Regis Apartments, Montreal



Figure 14. *Shame I*, 2016.

I had no idea what I would find in the St. Regis Apartments, a rather ordinary looking Dickinson high rise in Montreal. I snuck into the building to gain access, beginning by wheedling and then lying to an irritable super. I took the elevator to each floor, discovering a laundry room with a ridiculously spectacular view—a replica of an earlier surprise on the top floor of a Dickinson apartment building in Ottawa. Finally, I reached an abandoned pool on the penthouse floor, accessible to any child who might like to fall in.

Case #36: The Beth Tzedec Synagogue, Toronto



Figure 15. *Dust Ruffle*, 2016

Here is the foyer of Dickinson's only synagogue, in the process of renovation. It may seem like a contemplative and peaceful place, but moments after taking this image, I was unceremoniously ejected from the premises by security guards. Although I have pleaded my case as an upstanding member of the Toronto Jewish community, subsequent requests to gain access to the building have been ignored.

Case #17: 89 The Bridle Path, Toronto



Figure 16. *Peering In*, 2016.

Here is Dickinson's last remaining built house, a sprawling bungalow overlooking at a lush golf course, at 69 Green Valley Road, in one of Toronto's most exclusive residential neighbourhood. After knocking on the door and being politely turned away I peered through the window with my camera and took a quick shot, then ran away before the owner could see me and call the police, slipping on the wet grass and almost dropping my camera.

Case #61: The Globe and Mail Building, Front Street, Toronto



Figure 17. *Luxurious Phonebooth*, 2016.

This picture, taken in the richly appointed lobby of the Globe and Mail Building, (formerly the Toronto Telegram Building), is crooked because as I took it I was being ushered out of the premises by a security guard. To defend myself, I cower behind Garry Winogrand: “There’s an arbitrary idea that the horizontal edge in a frame has to be the point of reference. . . Great

photography is always on the edge of failure”.⁷¹ Great photograph or not, as I write this, the magnificent building depicted, with its marble phone booth and everything else in it, is being demolished. It was my hope that the final pictures I took for this project would be in witness of the building’s destruction. As I explain later, I abandoned this idea. At the time, however, to increase my chances of being in the right place at the right time, I became friendly with a foreman on the site. He was frustrated that the City of Toronto had delayed turning off water in the building, which meant waiting weeks to start the wrecking. He gave me his phone number and let me call him every day for an update.

In the future, when there are no more payphones, grey marble is extinct, and the time for lavish finishes in public buildings is long past, this photograph will seem unreal.

⁷¹ Barbaralee, Diamonstein, “An Interview with Garry Winogrand”, in *Visions and Images: American Photographers on Photography, Interviews with Photographers by Barbara Diamonstein*, 1981–1982, (Rizzoli: New York, 1982).

XI. Naming the Parade Floats

What I can name cannot really prick me.... The incapacity to name is a good symptom of disturbance...I must therefore submit to this law: I cannot penetrate, cannot reach in to the Photograph. I can only sweep it with my glance, like a smooth surface...

—Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*⁷²

For this project, I am producing a photobook, *The Weight of Air: A Picture Parade of Peter Dickinson's Buildings*, which reproduces all five hundred final images from this project. In naming and organizing the pictures for the book, I tried to wipe the slate clean by whatever means necessary⁷³ and respond to the images as if I were seeing them for the first time. The first step in naming was to deal the snapshots like cards, throwing them into piles based on the first things that came into my head—feelings, ideas, aesthetic responses.

In the naming process, I sought to expose secret affinities and generate a flash of recognition. When photographing, I stalked, snooped, and took pictures as evidence of the unspeakable relationships between Dickinson's buildings, like a hired private eye. When choosing a title, I tried to work quickly, grabbing the first concept that came into my head. I avoided discarding anything based on preconceptions of what is relatable, or cool, or correct, and I did not edit out humour, even corny puns. For example: a curtain in the Beth Tzedec Synagogue reminded me of a dust ruffle—the image is called *Dust Ruffle*; I was distracted by a purple flare in the garden at the Lawrence Heights Apartments—*Purple Flare*; the plaster cherub

⁷² Roland, Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 106.

⁷³ Means such as turning off the phone, isolating myself, chanting, listening to T-Rex, drinking and even drugs.

and pot of roses overlooking my balcony at 240 Oriole Parkway looked dainty—*Dainty*; a striped wall treatment beside a striped Purolator box in the basement of the Imperial Bank of Canada building called to mind the fabrics of Missoni—*Missoni*; a bag of bananas seemingly abandoned on a desk at the St. Regis Apartments—*Alone*; a circular rack of clothing in a thrift store topped by foil balloons, in Sisters of Notre Dame building in Cornwall, —*Wheel of Fortune*; my daughter and husband bathed in pink sunset on our rooftop, unrecognizable, as in a movie still—*Stepfather*; and so on and so forth, five hundred times. Titling is a powerful and immersive pleasure for me. The sense of creation is complete as I name my creations: Adam, Eve.

In preparing the book of photographs, my final organizational approach was to mimic the process I use when titling images, and the chapters— some containing only two or three pictures, others with a dozen or two—were the result of continuing to see and experience the images anew as I organized them and laid them out. For example, I found myself mesmerized by traces of fences and wires—these became Chapter 1, “A Fine Mesh” (I couldn’t resist a Laurel and Hardy pun)⁷⁴; distracted and delighted by very bright colours—these became Chapter 8, “The Colour Wheel”; soothed and pleased by colour photographs which looked black-and-white—Chapter 10, “Gray Scale”; made uncomfortable by certain images, for no easily explainable reason—Chapter 18, “Uneasy Moments.” Some types of images were most powerfully reminders of places or recurring visual situations: Chapter 2, “A Country Club, A Synagogue”; Chapter 11, “The Home Front”; Chapter 17, “Seating Arrangements.”

⁷⁴ For reading about humour and modernism, see William Solomon, *Slapstick Modernism: Chaplin to Kerouac to Iggy Pop*, University of Illinois, (Kobo eBook, 2016).

I found that many—maybe too many—of my photographs shared a kind of wistfulness which only recently have I been able to name, thanks to Roland Barthes:

*I then realized that there was some sort of link (or knot) between Photography, madness and something whose name I did not know. I began by calling it “the pangs of love” . . . Yet it was quite not that. It was a broader current than a lover’s sentiment. In the love stirred by Photography (by certain photographs), another music is heard, its name old-fashioned: Pity.”*⁷⁵

⁷⁵ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 116.

XII. Book Book, Show Show

A selection of twenty prints of the final five hundred photographs were installed at the Sony Centre from May 26th to 27th, 2017, in the exhibition *The Weight of Air / Camelot*,⁷⁶ as well as in a longer exhibition at YYZ Artists' Outlet from July 19 to 30, 2017.

I have also produced a souvenir catalogue for the Sony Centre exhibition. It is "Wire-O" bound, a technique developed in the early to mid-twentieth century and commonly used in manuals and guidebooks of that era. I was inspired by Lee Friedlander's slim book *Fourteen American Monuments* and its sense of mysterious practicality. The larger photobook will be launched at the opening YYZ opening on July 21, 2017.

The book strives to avoid certain photobook tropes, such as blank pages for no practical reason, elaborate "sequencing," and an overthought layout. Rather, it is presented as a practical guide for those interested in getting to know Dickinson's work. Pictures will be both portrait and landscape oriented, even though this will mean turning the book clockwise to view some images. In order to ensure the book is practical in this regard, the size will be modest and the paper lightweight. Though the book will include little text, it will have detailed indices cross-referencing titles, locations, and various other categories relating to the images. The presentation of this book as a practical guide is in contrast to its idiosyncratic psychological organization,

⁷⁶ In accessing the Sony Centre Archives for research, I came across a trove of photographs of stage productions at the theatre, including its first production, *Camelot*, with Julie Andrews and Richard Burton. My husband Don Hewak, an actor and artist, was intrigued by these, and I invited him to interpret and display some on video screens in the salon. His work is called "Camelot."

which in turn contrasts with numerous indexes as wayfinding devices. My hope is that providing the reader with practical information about Peter Dickinson's work will encourage a deeper and more unique engagement with the images.



Figure 18. Don's Red Shoes, 2016.

XIII. Topsy

As the end of the thesis approaches, I feel desperate and panicked. Dickinson's Globe and Mail building is being destroyed. Although I have taken seventy thousand photographs of sixty-four sites, I have never actually witnessed a Dickinson building which I knew while "alive" being destroyed. I also feel tired, too lazy to keep taking pictures. I am afraid to take the pictures. It would be too terrible to witness this magnificent marble-veined building whacked to death by the wrecking ball—like seeing Topsy the Elephant electrocuted.⁷⁷ Mostly, I feel the futility of trying to find and experience something important, like Hélène Cixous, arriving in Prague to see Kafka's tomb after thirty-five years of longing:

*But finally I was there, too bad. The long-awaited day was inevitable. I wanted to see Kafka's tomb. Knowing perfectly well (having verified it so many times) that you cannot see what you want to see . . . I pressed myself against the portal, because it was written you will press yourself against the rusted portal of the promised land . . .*⁷⁸

However, hope remains for Dickinson's buildings. The Sony Centre, where this work will be seen, was described in 2010 by *Toronto Star* theatre critic Martin Knelman as "a near-

⁷⁷ see the film "Electrocuting an Elephant," Edison Manufacturing Company, 1903.

⁷⁸ Hélène Cixous in Neil Leach, *Attacks of the Castle, Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, (Routledge: London and New York, 1997) 286.

miracle on the southwest corner of Front and Yonge Streets.”⁷⁹ The rebirth of the Sony Centre after a \$28 million renovation secured its place as the second-largest soft-seat auditorium in North America, second only to the Dolby Theatre in Hollywood, (which hosts the Oscars.) The Sony Centre had to sell “air space” to survive (hence the erection of a large condominium smack on top of it like the hideous boot of a dominatrix. However, at least there is an agreement in place that the developer must hold to its side of the bargain and invest in the landmark building.⁸⁰

⁷⁹pressreader.com/canada/toronto-star/20100925/285078455347761, accessed February 2, 2017

⁸⁰ Ibid.

XIV. Turvy

In two years of pursuing Dickinson's buildings—looking, longing, scheming, chasing,
and taking picture after picture, what, after all, did I discover? Only a series of whispers—

do you remember me?

we sure had some wild times . . .

remember the parties?

the things we did alone?

we got through the hard times together . . .

I am still here for you . . .

I am still here . . .

don't forget me. . .

These messages might seem faint, almost invisible, but this does not make them worthless. There is value in ephemera, a luxury in the air that occupies the ample spaces and vistas of Dickinson's buildings. In this work, I have tried to offer up the weight of this air: for consideration, for my own records, and in the hope that I will generate a desire to pursue and preserve the experiences that his buildings provide.

Towards the end of this project, I found out that an old friend of our family, Duke Segel, had known Dickinson in the 1950s. I asked Duke what Dickinson was like. "Was he handsome?" I asked. Yes, Duke said, "he was." I pressed him, was there anything else? Duke thought for a while. Finally he said "I recall he was rather English in his mannerisms. Quiet, but in an

overbearing sort of way, if you can understand—he took over the conversation because he said little, but when he started to talk everyone else would fall silent.”

Postscript

The family that owns our apartment building—which includes Morden Yolles, the legendary engineer who worked closely with Peter Dickinson—decided to put the building up for sale two months ago. On May 18, 2017, the bidding closed. The tenants are anxiously awaiting the results of this sale. Some worry they will be squeezed out of the building to make way for a new condominium. That, however, is probably not in the cards for the Oxton-Oriole Apartments: zoning and other restrictions make such a move difficult for developers. However, I fear something more insidious—the inevitable water torture of piece-by-piece “improvement.” When I have nothing better to worry about, I visualize the cheap handles that will replace the sixty-year-old brass and mahogany fittings. I try to picture the dull tones of beige or sand or taupe that will adorn the lobby walls when the beautiful green glass mosaic tile has been smashed away. I wish someone could convince me that I am imagining things. Unfortunately, the real estate agent representing the family gleefully assured me that any new owner would surely and immediately “bring the building into the twenty-first century.”

Post-Postscript

In July 2017, with the assistance of Craig Rodmore, I published all 341 photographs in this body of work in a book entitled *The Weight of Air: A Picture Parade of Peter Dickinson's Buildings 2015-17*.

Bibliography

Armstrong, Christopher. *Making Toronto Modern*. Montreal: McGill University Press, 2014.

Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida*. Translated by Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 1981.

Batchelor, David. *Chromophobia*. London: Reaktion Books, 2005.

Baudelaire, Charles. *The Painter of Modern Life*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1964.

Beaumont, Newhall, *The History of Photography*. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2005.

Blofeld, John. *Zen Teachings of Huang Po: On the Transmission of Mind*. New York: Grove Press, 1958.

Bockris, Victor. *Warhol: The Biography*. Boston: Da Capo Press, 2003.

Brown, Kathan. *Why Draw a Landscape*. San Francisco: Crown Point Press, 1999.

Derrida, Jacques. *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. Translated by Eric Prenowitz. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

Diamonstein, Barbaralee. "An Interview with Garry Winogrand," in *Visions and Images: American Photographers on Photography, Interviews with photographers 1981–1982*.

Rizzoli: New York, 1982.

Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project*. Translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999.

Freedman, Adele. "Peter Dickinson: Anglo-Canadian Modern" in *Sight Lines: Looking at Architecture and Design in Canada*. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1990.

Thompson, Jerry. *Walker Evans at Work*. New York: Harper & Row, 1994.

Lane, Anthony. "The Shutter Bug," *The New Yorker*, January 25, 2010.

On Color and Colors. Edited by David Batchelor. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987.

Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*. Translated by Frederick Etchells. New York: Dover.

Hélène Cixous in Neil Leach, *Attacks of the Castle, Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*. Routledge: London and New York, 1997.

Various Small Books, Referencing Various Small Books by Ed Ruscha. Edited by Phil Taylor. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013.

Martins-Mantiega, John. *Peter Dickinson*. Toronto: Dominion Modern, 2010.

Miller, Sarah in *Dynamic Equilibrium: Berenice Abbott's History of the Now*. Edited by Gaëlle Morel. Boston: Yale University Press, 2012.

Minkowski, Eugene. *Lived Time: Phenomenological and Psychopathological Studies*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1933.

The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860–1989. Edited by Andrea Munroe. New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2009.

Parkin John C. *Archives, and Photography: Reflections on the Practice and Presentation of Modern Architecture*. University of Calgary Press: Calgary, 2013.

Racket, Sela-Sheffy and Shlesinger, Miriam. *Identity and Status in the Translational Professions*. John Benjamins: Amsterdam, 2010.

Smith, Eugene. "Photographic Journalism," *Photo Notes*. June, 1948.

Solomon, William. *Slapstick Modernism: Chaplin to Kerouac to Iggy Pop*. University of Illinois, Kobo eBook, 2016.

Warhol, Andy. "The Philosophy of Andy Warhol From A to B and Back Again," in *The Archive*. Edited by Charles Merewether. London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2006.

10808 words