Trans   Objects

Play, Prompts, and Creative Practice

Ira Livingston

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$\mathcal{C}ontents$

Chapter Four
Doors, Keys & Paths to Maximalism

Auguste Rodin, from *Gates of Hell*

The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom.
—William Blake, 1793

Load every rift . . . with ore.
—Keats to Shelley, 1820

This is a manifesto for thinking maximally and making maximalist art and design—thought/art/design that is alive in the maximal way that complex open systems are alive.

It's more of a short course than a manifesto, so it mixes "lectures" with "lessons" (prompts). The prompts vary from questions that could be answered in a sentence to extended collaborative projects; these are all adaptable to expansion or contraction (for example, instead of following through on a prompt, you might write a short paragraph or make a quick sketch on how you *might* do so). It's modular and holographic, meaning that sections don't need to be read sequentially and that you don't need to read every one, since each of them will give you at least a partial picture of the whole thing.

4•1
To Start

We start with everyone's offhand idea of what is meant by *minimalism* and *maximalism*. After all, words mean whatever people think they mean. Acts of definition and redefinition have to gain leverage on an already-full field of meanings. Brain rewiring is a durational process.

PROMPT 1: *Examples of Minimalizing and Maximalizing.* In my "Modernism and Post-modernism" class, even before we have had much of a discussion on how to define minimalism and maximalism (most students come with some idea of minimalism as "less is more," and with a Wikipedia idea of maximalism as "an aesthetic of excess"), I usually ask students **(1)** to bring in examples of each. Each student **(2)** briefly says why they picked the items they did. This is a way of crowd-sourcing the definition, and it works surprisingly well. In each case I ask everyone else to suggest, on the spur of the moment, ways they can imagine each item **(3)** being minimalized or **(4)** being maximalized: what would you change about it to push it in one direction or another?

Of all the smart, sly, subtle and surprising items people have brought in—some images from the internet and others actual objects, stories and poems, natural objects, etc.—it's one of the kitschiest that comes to my mind first: a tie-dye printed Mets t-shirt. More than the garish colors and excessive patterning, it's the jarringly random juxtaposition of hippie tie-dye and corporate sports design that makes it maximalist—an aesthetic nightmare for the same reason that it is visually compelling: as you look at it, your brain struggles with an irresolvable question: *Why? Why? Why?*

Just to quickly balance out the low-brow kitsch with some high art—and gratuitously limiting the examples to the letter *B*—how about Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*; Blake's illuminated book of DIY scripture, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*; Beethoven's fully medieval, baroque, and modernist Piano Sonata #31; or the multi-genre feel and chock-full, edge-to-edge look of Bong Joon-ho's film *Parasite*?

Several specific usages of the term *maximalism* are in circulation, but these are so weirdly over-specific and disparate (an interior design style, a theory of biblical historicity, a form of fascist Zionism) that they need not concern us. As I've said, Wikipedia's umbrella definition—"an aesthetic of excess"—is as good a place as any to start, though not what I'd have put upfront, since it makes maximalism seem like one random style among many (part of the baggage of the word *aesthetics*). How do maximalist aesthetics connect with maximalist politics and epistemology and ontology? These connections are the thrust of what follows, which is why, in what follows, prompts for making things tend to emerge from or devolve into philosophical discussions. To limit the discussion to aesthetics would be at odds with maximalist principles.

4•2
What Is a Manifesto?

A manifesto—this is a low-key example—advocates certain ways of doing or thinking about things—best to say it upfront—at the expense of other ways—though maximalism, by virtue of its inclusivity, works against the expense. Usually a manifesto represents its program as morally or ethically or aesthetically superior (I casually snuck in such a claim in the first sentence of this chapter) but it could be received instead as just a generative set of constraints with which to experiment—a prompt. How it is intended affects but does not dictate how it is received and used. A manifesto could put you on a lifelong path, or you could end up defining yourself against it, or just learn from it and move on, selectively taking what you need and leaving the rest. In any of these cases it will have been formative. And in any case, whatever its pitch, a manifesto recruits you for the team as a self-selecting process: if there weren't something attractive about it to you, if you didn't already have tendencies in that direction, it couldn't get its foot in the door. This is going to be my argument: you were always already a maximalist, and if you were in denial, I'm going to help you get in touch with your inner maximalist.

PROMPT 2: *Declare Yourself a Minimalist or Maximalist.* Before we go down that road, though, please say whether you're a maximalist or minimalist coming into this. Include a specific example or examples of how that is the case: it might be something that runs deep in you or is limited to some specific area of your everyday life, your art or design practice, your writing. Don't worry—nobody will be judged for identifying as a minimalist! In fact, it might be a clever strategy to lower the bar, and then when you deliver some compelling maximalism, everyone will be extra impressed.

Manifestoes can be more or less prescriptive. Everyone who truly follows the principles set forth in Poe's "Philosophy of Composition" will end up writing a version of his poem "The Raven." At the other end of the spectrum would be a set of principles so subtle, so deep, or so open to interpretation that you might not even guess that works made according to them had anything in common at all. But the differences between these two appar-

ent opposites are not straightforward. When I lived briefly in Paris a couple of blocks from the Pompidou Center and its Museum of Modern Art, I used to spend lots of time there until it started to seem to me that all the modernist schools and styles represented there—cubism, dada, abstract expressionism, and so on—each of which differ from each other in dramatic ways that often formed their reason for being in the first place—all seemed the same. That was the point at which I even more thoroughly got over modernism; it seemed to recede into the historical past with Renaissance and Medieval art, and hand-stencils and stylized bison on the walls of caves.

PROMPT 3: *One or Many Modernisms?* Is modernism **(a)** fairly uniform, **(b)** highly internally differentiated, or **(c)** fully heterogeneous and plural? I'll be answering this question below, but until then, you might consider the same question about botulism, bicycles, and broccoli.

Here's some creative license for you: you can misunderstand a manifesto's principles or apply them wrongly—whether it's because you can't be bothered, because your own predilections keep leading you in other directions, or you're just a contrarian—and it still can be generative for you and for others who follow. In fact, this describes pretty well the zigzag history of human thought and art in a nutshell.

4•3
What is Maximalism?

Definition is a process, not a static structure. Start with a simple, dualistic opposition of minimalism—elegant, sparse or stripped down, reductionist, modernist, "less is more"—and maximalism—chock-full, fractally complex, recursive, overflowing with layered and entangled orders of difference and pattern, riding a unicycle while juggling chain saws and pingpong balls—like this sentence!

In the next phase of definition, we'll displace the dualism of the first phase. If we started with a dualistic contrast between the closure of minimalism versus the openness of maximalism (as enacted by the move from closed systems as the object of study in modernist structuralism to the complex open systems of postmodernism and poststructuralism), we can now situate maximalism as *that which rejects the dualism*, a movement from either/or to both/neither. Since modernism situates itself against tradition and the past, postmodernism that simply situates itself against modernism would just be modernism again, which is why exemplary postmodernism often also rejects *and* recycles, samples and even reverentially simulates modernism: its relationship with modernism is maximalist. This step tends dialectically to recuperate the dualism as a meta-dualism of either/or versus both/neither (which can be understood as a synthesis of our original thesis/antithesis). So another step is necessary, one which moves

from this still-dialectical process to a more fully postdialectical maximalism: if openness that defines itself reductively against closure is still a form of closure; true openness must include the closed in its multiple forms, some differentiated crisply, some blurred or overlapping, and others fully and paradoxically coexisting with forms of openness. That which is radically mixed and hybrid must include the pure and unmixed without privileging it; if it excluded the pure it would be less inclusive, less mixed. While this can still be cast as a synthesis that emerges from the interaction of thesis and antithesis in a dialectical development, it at least is the doorway to a more fully untethered openness.

If maximalism reified and domesticated in dualistic contradistinction to minimalism is thereby less maximalist, then maximalist minimalism and minimalist maximalism become more definitive than "pure" maximalism. Less is not more, but neither is more.

PROMPT 4: *Plexiglass Cube Thought Experiment.* Think of five assemblages made of everything from pieces of colored construction paper to bits of rotting meat, but they are all displayed in identical three-by-three-foot plexiglass cubes. **Q** Is it maximalist minimalism or minimalist maximalism? This is not just a rhetorical question: I want to hear your arguments before deciding, even though I have a flip answer: **A** It depends on how much the rotting meat fogs up the inside of the cube, and whether you can smell it from the outside.

PROMPT 5: *Is Structuralism Minimalist?* Think of a structuralist world populated by entities in multiple rigid categories but one in which the monsters that live on the edges and overlaps of the categories are the dominant group. **Q** Is this minimalism or maximalism or some kind of hybrid or tipping point?

The simplest and most minimalist definition of maximalism is that what is maximalized is difference, specifically orders of difference (that is, different kinds of difference). If you are making a collage, the formalist or minimalist way might be to choose pieces that differ only in shape (a single order of difference) but are all more or less the same size, color, material. You can still apply this minimalist constraint minimally—where you might limit yourself to a square, a triangle, and a circle—or maximally—where you might deploy a wilder array of different shapes from squares and circles to unicorn silhouettes and Chinese characters. Even from this little list you can see that I'm trying to think of all the ways I could maximalize the kinds of difference while staying within the minimalist rule of shape-difference only: I'm a maximalist doing a minimalist's prompt and thus producing maximalist minimalism. A maximalist might put all of these categories—shape, color, material—into play as different kinds of differences, but it doesn't end there and might go on to challenge what constitutes a collage—say by the inclusion of three-dimensional objects, by spilling out beyond the frame, by undergoing further metamorphosis in a way that makes it performance art, by writing about it and then incorporating the writing, and—of course—by including conspicuously minimalist elements or motifs.

Instead of thinking of maximalism and minimalism as boxes into which to sort things, think of them as things that one does—you could say tendencies, but better to use them as verbs: to minimalize and to maximalize.

PROMPT 6: *More Maximalizing and Minimalizing.* Here's an expansion of Prompt 1. Find a minimalist artifact in your own field— e.g., a painting, a building, a short story—or even a flower or a mountain—and then **(1)** maximalize it. Now try **(2)** maximalizing it in three steps. Now take your minimalist original and **(3)** minimalize it further. Now start instead with something maximalist and repeat these steps **(4, 5, 6)**. And here's the recursive and open-process steps: **(7, 8)** maximalize or minimalize the rules for this prompt and **(9, 10)** actually do the new prompt(s) you've created.

Maximalism, maximalized: Carla Gannis's *Garden of Emoji Delights*
(see animated form online).

4·4
How to Deconstruct Things

Deconstruction, as a philosophical strategy, is a way of revealing how crucial—and how contradictory and constraining—dualism is (in Western thought in particular), and thereby a way of opening up alternative ways of thinking; it is a doorway to maximalism. Strictly speaking, the dualisms involved are a specific kind: *hierarchized binaries* in which the terms are understood in opposition to each other but one term tends to be understood as derivative or secondary. An exemplary case is *original/copy*. Already you might be able to see a contradiction: if the two are defined against each other, then isn't it only the production of copies that distinguishes an original as such? The first step in deconstructing is generally some form of this reversal of the hierarchy: that which was primary becomes secondary to that which was regarded as secondary. You can try protesting that the original was always original in its essence, even before the copy came along and simply necessitated that the original be named as such, but this isn't quite right: you can't be a parent until you have children, right? The second and even more important step is *displacement*: if the reversal helped unbalance the dominance of the duality, displacement is the means by which its monopoly on thought is broken up further and pushed aside. Rather than thinking of copies as derivative, then, try thinking (as tends to be the more dominant way of thinking in Asian cultures) that copies carry the flame forward. After all, those who make copies of ancient sculptures and calligraphy must often have the same skills the ancients had; they are not forgers but practitioners

in the same tradition; they keep the tradition alive—and furthermore, the so-called originals did not pop up from nowhere but also arose—exactly as the copies do and as life does—from the braided currents of repetition and mutation, sameness and difference. This displacement levels the playing field between originals and copies; it pushes the dualism aside, loosening its grip on how we think and create. But because dualisms—especially those that run deep and are heavily networked in our brain wiring—have so much inertia, deconstruction isn't something that you can do once (as in this paragraph). The dualism will keep coming back and can keep being batted away but can only be uprooted by long contemplative, meditative, creative, and other sustained practices.

Deconstruction operates in particular instances, and though these resonate with other instances, this doesn't mean that all the dominos will fall. The original/copy binary is a big part of the speech/writing opposition (where writing is regarded as a copy of speech), nature/culture (at least in the post-Romantic conception), the homophobic understanding of hetero/homo (where homosexuality is understood as a secondary and sometimes "inverted" version), even inside/outside (at least in the paradigm of expressivity, where that which is authentic and spontaneous is understood as inside and its expression must produce a mediated, secondary copy that can only strive to be faithful to the internal truth)—but each of these dualities are also different and operate differently in different contexts.

The particular inflection of original/copy doesn't seem to apply, for example, to the inside and outside of a purse, because the outside of a purse is not fundamentally an expression of

the inside, though this might be an interesting idea for a designer to play with. In the case of a purse, the more fundamental inside/outside distinction is between one's own property and everything else, and this extends to the implications of *that which is private* versus *that which is public*, and even to the distinction between the inside and outside of a body conceived as the distinction between me and not-me. Now we're getting to a crucial duality—by turning the purse around in our minds, maybe in our hands too, and looking for some of the hierarchized dualities that define the particular axis or armature around which it is designed. How might this particular inside/outside be subject to reversal and displacement? I can't get very far with this one; I can only think of a bandolier or utility belt or vest with external pouches for items, or a purse made of translucent mesh that visually compromised the inside/outside distinction, but neither of these really address the mine/not-mine or me/not-me axis.

So, deconstruction is not just something that can be done with ideas but also with things. When I teach deconstruction, I sometimes do a little performance where I try to deconstruct small items people happen to have in their pockets or purses or backpacks. I got the idea from a comedy group called the Flying Karamazov Brothers, who used to juggle items offered by audience members. It's a kind of virtuoso performance—one of those things, along with parallel parking, that I happen to be pretty good at (though you've already seen me fail once to deconstruct a purse, above)—but now, rather than showing off, I'm going to teach you how to do it.

Let's start with things people are likely to have in their pockets or purses: keys, coins, wallet (with paper money and credit cards inside), smartphone, assorted bits of paper (receipts, scrawled notes), makeup, mementoes (such as those little baubles and minifigs you attach to a phone) and so on. Let's take the key as an example: around what dualistic axis or axes is it constructed? Well, let's see: it's a lump of metal with a hole in it for putting it on a keyring, but the business end is the serrations that fit it to the tumblers of a particular lock. In what sense can this be understood as a duality? I can think of one: materiality and information. The hierarchy between the two terms is ambiguous. A key was, one might think, first a lump of metal (materiality) that is then shaped according to a set of instructions (information), but nowadays we are used to the idea that information precedes materiality—in the way that bodies are built from the set of instructions coded into DNA. In fact, the same kind of logic applies to the smartphone (which, via computer back-up, can be restored onto another physical phone that would be functionally indistinguishable from the first), the credit cards (pieces of flattened plastic that can be replaced when necessary) and paper money or coins, in a related but different way (we can change one bill for any other or deposit it and, in the process, change it into information: this makes me think of the premise for a comedy sketch in which a bank customer withdrawing funds complains that the bills he is given are not the ones he deposited). In all these cases, the information seems to be unique and essential and the materiality secondary and interchangeable. Door keys are usually bits of metal but share a basic identity as keys with a heterogeneous range of other kinds of things that are closer to pure information: a password, a numerical combination, a digitized face or fingerprint.

PROMPT 7: *Transmitting a Key by Phone.* What if you had to convey a door key to someone over the phone—by giving them instructions to make a copy? There will be a definitive empirical demonstration of the adequacy of your instructions: if the copy opens the lock, you've succeeded. You'd have to provide very precise measurements, which is at least possible to do verbally, but easier by scanning, digitizing, and 3D printing. Digital information can now easily be sent as an image by phone, but could also (with rather more trouble) be converted to an audio signal and even spoken. Can you imagine how you'd do it verbally?

In the process of starting to deconstruct this materiality/information axis, I've found a way into thinking about what all the wildly different key designs have in common—and I thought of an interesting prompt to convey a door key by audio telephone—which, you could say, is in fact a redesigned key. This makes me think of how you could transmit a door key by code: if, say, you assigned coded shape-and-measurement values to each of the 26 letters, the first letters of each line of these two paragraphs about keys might convey enough information for you to manufacture the key. Now I've really deconstructed the difference between a text about keys and an actual door key! And we've gone through the doorway into the grey area of materiality/information—sometimes known as *virtuality*—which is as big as the universe or as small as keys and coins and DNA. The maximalism here is a wildly expanded world of key-ness that is also a fertile ground for further permutations that might yield actual keys or other kinds of things altogether.

PROMPT 8: *Deconstructing Stuff from Pockets and Purses.* How would you identify and deconstruct the binary axes around which paper money and coins or smartphones (or any of the other stuff in your pockets and purses) are designed, and then go on to redesign them—in either practical or wildly fanciful and impractical ways? Here the initial problem might be that there are so many crucial binaries you could identify—a bewildering number of doorways and paths. The design and redesign of money is probably a more appropriate focus for a semester or a lifetime, but maybe this challenge makes it even more attractive as a one-off exercise—or maybe it would be even more attractive if I announced that I hereby prohibit anyone from using this prompt to redesign money? Of course, as we've been exploring, the minimalism/maximalism axis is itself one way of approaching any object (e.g., the Apple-dominated corporate minimalism of the smartphone, the 19th-century maximalist anti-forgery engraving style of paper money), though I'd suggest using this occasion to find other dualities to deconstruct unless you get stuck and need a fallback.

Deconstruction is hard and it takes practice and lots of trial and error to find deconstructible dualities and fruitful ways of displacing them. After years of doing this, I'm never sure what I'll find when I begin: what you learn along the way is a way of turning something around in your mind. These few paragraphs won't make you a deconstructive virtuoso, but I'm pretty sure there's enough here that, even if you misunderstand and misapply it, it will still work well enough to make interesting things happen. Just focus entirely on the process—*lose yourself* in it as Eminem once said—and not on the outcome. Like me, you might get a comedy sketch or outrageous conceptual art rather than a redesign of the object in question, but stick with it and trust the process. If you have time, throw the conceptual art back into the hopper and see whether redesign will come out after a few more iterations. As we'll see below, sleeping and dreaming on it might also be very helpful.

4•5
Maximalism and Freeplay

A structuralist or formalist notion of play—like the structuralist/formalist notion of art and language—is crisply distinguished from its real-world environment, as by the "magic circle" of the game or the ritual (that which marks off the game space and time from the "meta-game"—the context in which the game is taking place) or the "fourth wall" of theater. This kind of play is anchored in rules that are not themselves subject to play, which is to say, the rules might be changed, but that would have to happen strictly outside the play or game. On the other hand, *freeplay* (a concept taken from deconstruction in particular) is not simply a free-for-all with no rules—

that would not be play at all—but play in which the rules themselves can become subject to the play.

Let's say the two of us are engaged in a contact-improvisation dance guided by the principle that contact is shared and weight is exchanged in democratic interactions involving dynamic counterbalancings between dancers that we make up as we go along. Let's say that you fall onto me in a way that I'm not ready for, and instead of us rolling off each other smoothly into the next movement, I stagger to avoid falling down and awkwardly clutch onto you for a moment to make sure you don't fall unceremoniously to the floor either. What happened? Did you fail to correctly assess my readiness and thus, rather than sharing the contact, ended up simply subjecting me to your weight? (I'm afraid that this might metaphorically describe how I subjected you to the deconstruction exercise above!) Or did I fail to rise to the occasion; failing to "be there for you" in a way that you had a right to expect? Did we together fail to achieve the smooth transitions via mutual wordless understandings that build confidence and trust? Or was this *success itself*, an instance of us testing the limits and discovering that we can falter without getting hurt? What if we had only perfectly smooth interactions with no limit-testing? Wouldn't that be failure itself? Contact improvisation has rules and has developed a range of typical kinds of moves but the improvisational nature of it means that every dance is about developing a grammar and vocabulary of interactions: this is what is danced; the finding and making of rules—never *ex nihilo*, of course—and the attempt to remain sustainably in the space of their ongoing negotiation. This is freeplay. Thus Contact Improvisation can be a generative form that lends itself to variations; most will be ephemeral, some may be conserved or spread

enough to shape the evolution of the form, others may quickly branch off into other forms. Sound familiar? This is also the way biological life and human cultures evolve.

PROMPT 9: *Danced Dialogue.* **(1)** Have a dialogue in simple dance form; I suggest starting with three people to a group. This will not involve contact so as to keep it within the comfort zone of those who aren't dancers— and it could even be done remotely if necessary —but it will involve back-and-forth in the form of one person making a brief gesture or movement sequence and another person answering with another. The response may be a completely intuitive one, or you might consider several ways of crafting a response: by mirroring (repeating back the same sequence), matching without mirroring (where the movement is repeated but in a different register, such as smaller or in slow motion), variation (taking some aspect of the movement and changing it, magnifying it, repeating it, etc.), opposition (performing a sequence that is in some way the opposite), and so on. These are not guidelines but just a few of the infinity of ways to think about the grammar/vocabulary that you may be developing. Do the dance for five minutes.

(2) Spend a couple minutes talking about what happened, especially about moments you liked: why did you like them? How can you try to get more of this to happen in the next iteration? Was there some kind of arc or development across the five minutes? Did the conversants tend to stay "in character"? Now add some rules or guidelines for the second iteration based on what you liked about the first one. Consider whether each person might begin to develop a character that may have been emerging in the first iteration and to dance in character. Consider whether the conversation might have a specific topic. Consider whether you would like it to follow a particular arc (to build to some kind of climax or turn, and to come to a conspicuous end, such as agreement or alienation or reversal). Consider focusing on a specific kind or set of gestures or movement sequences as an ongoing motif (whether defined by speed, posture and movement, size, etc.). Consider expanding your comfort zone. Consider focusing on what was most awkward rather than what was smoothest. Again, all of these possible considerations are just examples, not meant as prescriptive and definitely not as exhaustive. Then **(3)** do the second iteration for at least a couple of minutes.

(4) Talk again about what happened and how to organize the next iteration. You can think of this as a continuous evolution of what you did in the previous version, or you may want to start again and try something completely different.
(5) Iteration #3. Do this one in front of the class. Probably limit it to a couple minutes, depending on size of class.
(6) Writing. Spend about 10 minutes writing up some specific thing you noticed, either in your own experience of the exercise or something you noticed in other performances—especially something revelatory, but if there was nothing like that, then you might try focusing on some specific detail.
(7) The class should comment on what they saw in each performance—on what they thought was going on, drawing on (but not limited to) what people wrote. Talk about what others thought they saw in your performance, in light of what you thought you were doing. This exercise—like contact improvisation—is not unambiguously maximal, but it is maximalist in several senses, especially in the ongoing openness of the rules or guidelines, which will insure that a roomful of groups of three people doing the exercise will come up with very different performances—and think also of how chaotically maximal the whole

roomful of groups working their way through the steps will be at every moment (compared to, say, a lecture class). But—again, like contact improvisation—this exercise is also supremely modernist and minimalist, especially in the "purity" of kinetic language as its single, stripped-down modality (you could—perversely—have contact improvisation with elaborate costumes from *Swan Lake*, but it would be less contact improvisation for being less pure and stripped-down). So let's make the process more maximally open: **(8)** Using poster paints, cheap little brushes, glue and glitter, fill in the blank spaces on the page where you wrote about the exercise. When everyone is done, have one person take a smartphone photo of each page and send the photos to everyone in the class. Homework for next class: each person comes up with a plan or prompts for what to do, using these pages, in the next step or steps. Then cut up each original page into quarters and glue in checkerboard pattern on large sheets of paper. Bind the sheets into a book, then figure out what to do with it, such as putting it up for sale on the internet.

Page 126 Entity World 2020 (details); collaborative drawing by Madison Burger, Jialun Cao, Hao Chen, Seth Crider, Eyal Lerman, Matthew Loudon, Zheng Yi Ren, Toni Shi, Noah Simon, Mahzad Sohelli, Sixuan Tong, Duncan Hamilton, Ira Livingston.

4•6
Maximalism and Collaboration/Improvisation

Collaboration and improvisation tend to be good ways of generating maximalism.

Both shape the maximalist drawing exercise called Entity World. Full guidelines for the prompt appear in Chapter Two (you can also find examples at http://poeticslab.com/works/3_prompts/), so here, after the briefest description, we will go on to consider the principles that make it work.

To generate Entity World, each person comes with an entity (animal, human, deity, microorganism, etc.) that they can draw in a minute or two. Everyone draws their entity on a large roll of paper, then the entities "encounter" each other and the artists negotiate how the encounter will play out—how the entities will change or hybridize (or not) in the process—and these encounters keep on being drawn out and the evolution of the entities keeps happening until the paper is more-or-less full, ideally over a couple of hours.

One of the most maximalist aspects of this exercise is that students come with radically different drawing skill levels, but this range enhances the maximalist aesthetic. This is not just something I say to make those who are at the elementary-school stage of drawing feel okay about their participation—in fact, having some actual elementary school kids participating, alongside art and design students, would only improve and further maximalize the project!

I could not, by myself, replicate the range of different kinds of drawing that a heterogeneous group of students effortlessly generates: the group is a much better maximalist drawer

than I am. This raises the question of how to incorporate this excitingly maximal heterogeneity, wildness and difference into your own work, and the first answer is simply *to collaborate*! Various forms of collage attempt to incorporate this heterogeneity in at least a limited way; artists and writers have all kinds of practices for drawing on unconscious resources (less bounded by identity than one's conscious personality; actors and fiction writers in particular have to cultivate their own pluralities—though self-difference is of a different order than difference-from-others). Even when a work involves hundreds of collaborators (say, a medieval cathedral or a Hollywood film), balances have to be struck between overall auteurist and directorial control and the winning heterogeneous texture that is the mark of all those brains and hands. Matisse worked against the grain of his self-controlled singularity as a draughtsman by putting a brush on the end of a long stick or by using a big scissors to cut out shapes instead of drawing; William Burroughs and David Bowie each used cut-ups and combinatories to collaborate with chance as part of their creative process. I will go so far as to say there is no creative process at all without *otherness*. Best of all, can you imagine ways of exploring how the othernesses of others interact with your own othernesses? Call it *intersectional maximalism*.

The guidelines of Entity World are designed to democratize the collaboration—specifically to anarchize it. This is absolutely not the same as a free-for-all, which would lead to a situation in which certain people (usually those who are entitled in various ways) or certain aesthetics (ditto) will dominate, or destructive encounters, or just an unattractive mess. Parameters have to be tuned so that this doesn't happen, but this is not a compromise with individual freedom: a free-for-all

Pages 128-31 Elementary School Maximalism: collaborative drawing
(details) by Echo Walsh, Nova Walsh, and Ira Livingston. Affixing dried
plants with masking tape was Echo's idea (a classic maximalist ploy);
adding black bras to the angels and elephants-in-raindrops was Nova's
idea. How did these kids get to be such brilliant maximalists?
I'm guessing that grandparenting had something to do with it.
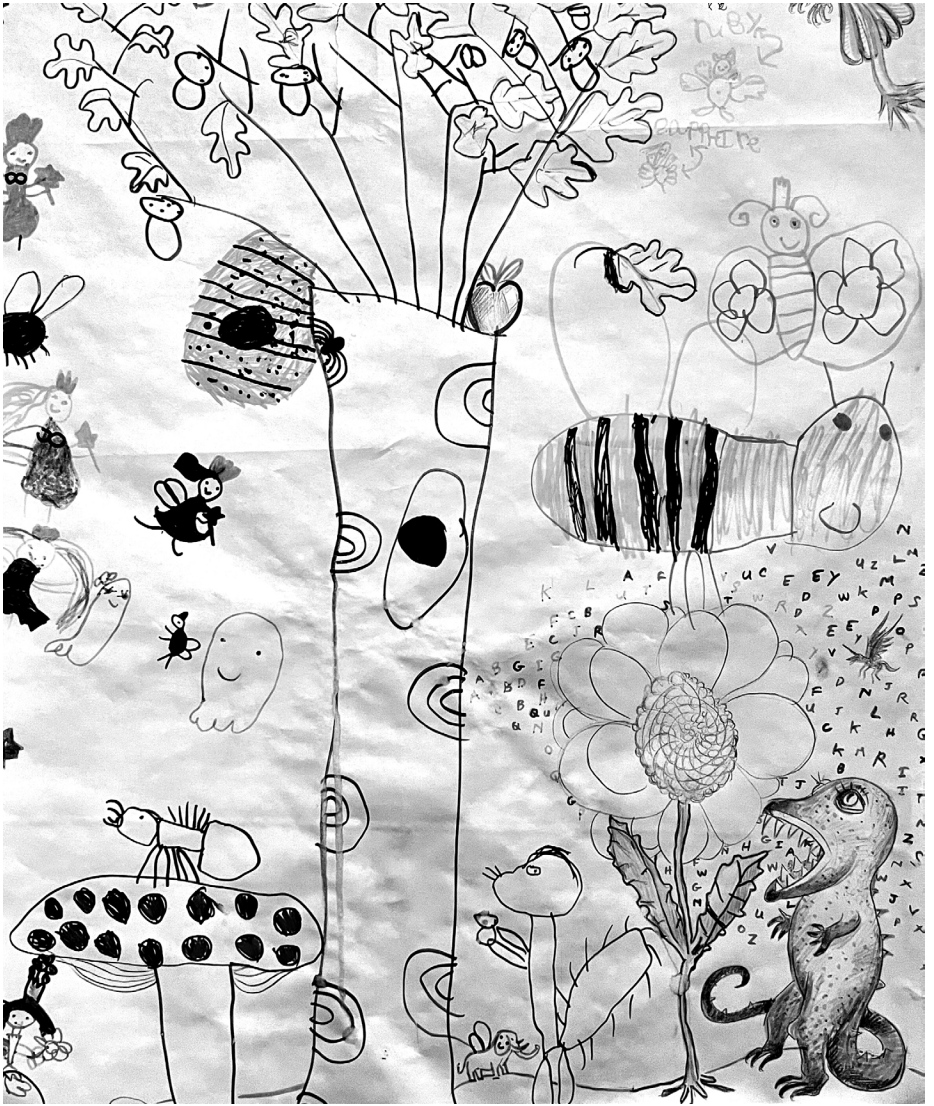
is not conducive to maximal freedom for each participant; for anarchy to work it has to be carefully and caringly designed. In the case of Entity World, each encounter has to be negotiated by the participants (it is a kind of Contact Improvisation Drawing) and the rules specify that, once drawn, entities cannot be altered or drawn over: different entities, and different stages of a single entity, have to occupy different space on the page, so even when two entities meet and decide to hybridize, the new iterations will get drawn next to the ones that came into the encounter. Notice that this also creates a space in which all the generations of entities and their evolutionary stages will be simultaneously present. Nothing is lost!

4•7
Maximalism and Open Process

The eighth step in the Danced Dialogue exercise above (which might be expanded into a series of any number of steps) is an example of Open Process, which simply means that, as the rules themselves can be open for renegotiation and play along the way, the result, subsequent path and/or products of the process can also remain open: the process may branch into several directions, one of which yields a book and another a dance, but unlike branches that simply diverge, these could weave back together and the books be put into the service of creating another dance or vice versa. Play is autotelic, tending to sustain itself, and when you stay in the sweet spot, every product becomes the seed for ongoing process.

PROMPT 10: *Gratuitously Switch Media.* Pick any of the prompts you followed through and make another kind of work. For example, if you wrote an essay the first time, make it into a piece of jewelry. If you did it yourself, make it collaborative. If it was a one-off project, try making it into a repeated daily practice. If it was art or design the first time, make it into a ritual or a full-fledged religion. Or rather than actually following through on this prompt, write out brief descriptions of how you would go about following through, creating a flow chart in which each new iteration leads to others. Spend a long time doing this—

"the road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom" —gratuitously shifting gears and changing routes and destinations, taking weird detours. Think about *going meta*: at some point, will you stop doing the flow chart and incorporate or transform it into some other project? Or will you *go sub* instead, when you get tired of thinking hypothetically and expanding the flow chart and you realize that one or more of the items are things that you actually want to do?

You can also think about Open Process as the ongoing and complete precedence of process over product. One way of achieving this is by systematically looping ends back into means. It took me most of my career teaching critical theory to grad students at a research university to move from teaching "content" to focusing instead on reverse-engineering the thought process of the theorist at hand: the more important question is not what conclusions are reached here but how can I experiment with thinking/writing in this way? The course moves toward being a studio course, and the content comes along automatically. When I moved from a research university to an art and design school, I spent most of my time trying to convert whatever I had been teaching via lectures into hands-on lessons—the move from product to process you see enacted over and over in this book. My sometime co-teacher, the poet Melissa Buzzeo, taught me that "nothing is lost" in process; all the detours and even all the dead ends. I came to realize first that making the classroom a space of receptivity, engagement and thinking together is what makes everything else possible—that is, it makes possible whatever you go on to do with such a space. There is a next stage to this realization: that what I am teaching is how to create that space for yourself and with other people. The end is the means. This is what I mean by the complete precedence of process.

PROMPT 11: *Master Sentence Project.*
I mentioned my "Master Sentence Project" in Chapter Two; here I give a step-by-step account of the prompt. Because this prompt expands writing a single sentence into a meandering several-weeks-long process, the project works to increase the intensiveness of the labor expended on writing, unlike the typical prompt to "write a ten-page paper," which actually lowers the intensiveness of labor spent on each sentence by requiring more pages. My goal is to teach students how to spend more thought and creativity and labor on a smaller total volume of writing; you can't just say, "spend an hour writing a sentence," because very few people know how to do that. You have to approach it circuitously (often like the long sentence itself): **(1)** First, write a five-page paper or take a long paper you've already written. **(2)** Now condense it to a one-sentence paragraph with a sonnet-like progression that winds around to a "turn" at the end. Ideally, this step should come as a surprise: if you know in advance that you're going to have to condense the paper, you lose some of the "making it up as you go" advantage. At this point, read the longest sentences you can find—Allen Ginsberg's poem *Howl* (each section of which is basically an outrageously long sentence) is great at giving students syntactical permission to innovate.

(3) Now add some research to the sentence (the key here may be simply finding aspects—even tangential or gratuitous aspects—that are researchable) and some zoomed-in details and/or zoomed-out contextual framework; either of these might be how you incorporate the research (for example, if I were to add research to this sentence it might be on the cinematic history and theory of zoom shots). **(4)** Now gratuitously re-write the sentence in three different ways. As you do so, of course you should remember that you can always come back to the original if none of the rewrites generate anything interesting. Here I often suggest using the maximalist principle of *multimodality* (familiar to students from previous prompts): that weaving together different modes—usually over the course of many sentences—can give writing the texture of reality, or of a reality unto itself. What constitutes a mode? Tenses, voices, pans and zooms, descriptive and argumentative and narrative, figurative and literal, poetic and prosaic—any way of writing that can be distinguished from other ways. **(5)** Now set it all aside—the originals and the rewrites—and start over, producing at least one new—or largely new—long sentence. **(6)** Now see if you like your original or one of the rewrites better than your started-over version—or try combining them! One of the great things about gratuitous rewriting

is that it can get you from something good—something you'd usually be happy with—to something that surprises you—something really good. **(7)** Now each student is given a sentence each from at least two classmates and asked to rewrite them at will. Note that this is not yet the editing stage—you should take full collaborative license. Of course students will also have complete and unquestioned license to incorporate or reject or adapt any revisions as they see fit. **(8)** Now do a couple rounds of peer editing and proofreading (I generally do this in small groups during class time).

You can see how this qualifies as open process even though the goal—a very long sentence—has remained the same through most of the process. All our effort has been to open up the process, often gratuitously—to add detours and branches, weave in new strands, and so on. Of course the project wouldn't have to end with the long sentences: they could be illustrated, each one spread out into a pamphlet or a poster or all together assembled into a book; in one case I happened to find a journal with a one-sentence-poem contest and several students entered. In any case, though, the point is not to encourage students to always write the longest possible sentences in their subsequent writing (a product-oriented goal) but to open up their writing process.

Even in the most empirical sense of how much syntactical complexity they could manage, students outdid themselves, often extravagantly. What's more, they got an experience of mastery that they hadn't even known was possible, a bit like finding you can juggle ping-pong balls and a chainsaw at the same time. And I even got to slip in something dear to my professorial heart: the rewards of expanding your repertoire of punctuation—especially the uses of semicolons and dashes. It's amazing how something that could be so technical and persnickety gets interesting when it enables you to do something you've been taught that you're not supposed to be doing!

4•8
Thingfield

I used to help friends make an art installation that I called the Wall of Things (I'm now calling it Thingfield to register the fact that it doesn't have to be on a wall): I would ask them to gather up small objects from around the house, all approximately the same size, and then, using little nails, we'd hang the objects, spaced apart evenly, in a grid on a wall. Because the objects are sometimes radically different from each other (a spiral shell, a travel-sized bottle of mouthwash, a bronze dancing-Shiva figurine, a small page of text) but leveled into equivalence by being roughly the same size and occupying interchangeable positions in the grid, what you get is a field of similarity and difference that acts as conceptual velcro for our categorizing minds: it catches the eye as it seems to be asking a question about similarity and difference—or maybe more accurately, it asks us to see if we can ascertain what question it's asking. If you want to push it in a minimalist direction, you could spray paint all the objects white, or in a maximalist direction, paint some but not all of the objects with polka dots and glitter. Because the project thematizes difference and similarity, it lends itself to variants.

PROMPT 12: *Maximalize/Minimalize the Wall of Things.* **Q** What other ways can you think of to maximalize and minimalize the parameters of this project?

Rather than a grid of small objects, imagine a field of small images displayed on a screen: this gives us a larger range of differences to play with more easily, but the screen levels them even more thoroughly. (Note that this can be assembled remotely, if necessary, and collaboratively, if desired.) Again, leave approximately the same amount of blank space between them and make sure each image is about the same size, though they might differ in a range of other ways (you might include a black-and-white nineteenth-century engraving of an aardvark, a high resolution color photograph of an artichoke, the diagram of an atom, an automobile engine, and so on) along an infinite number of axes of difference. Now imagine that the images have been selected so that about half of them are conspicuously natural objects (an artichoke, a pangolin, a grain of sand, a spiral galaxy) and half are artificial (an open book, a car engine, a pair of glasses). Even if the images are chosen to represent each category as conspicuously as possible and if the two are fully and evenly mingled across the field of images, it's probably going to take time for a viewer to notice the two categories: some viewers might notice them almost immediately while some might never notice them. This parameter is what would be called in time-based media *the speed of the reveal* (thanks to my co-teacher Jennifer Miller for this concept). You try to adjust it so the moment of dawning on you is maximalized. If instead of choosing nature/culture images, you used images of things and images of images (a high-res photo of a car engine with no background or framing, and a photo of a photo of a car engine, with frame and margins visible), the difference would probably be immediately apparent and you might not get the dawning.

Even in an arrangement of images chosen randomly (that is, not according to their nature/culture status), the images probably would also have been sortable into nature/culture, but I'm guessing that the categories will be more likely to be noticed if you (1) choose images that most conspicuously fit their categories, (2) make sure there are about the same number of each and (3) that they are evenly dispersed. If it were still too subtle to notice, maybe (4) rigid alternation between categories (as between black and white on a checkerboard) would serve to tap the viewer a bit more heavy-handedly on the shoulder. In a checkerboard nature/culture arrangement, you could say that we've allowed all the differences among the images to be subsumed under one simple either/or, so that it no longer matters as much that one image is an engraving and another a photo—that is, you could say that the nature/culture distinction trumps all the other differences, and that therefore we have minimalized the whole field of differences. On the contrary, though, I think most viewers would experience this as a maximalization: another layer of pattern has been added, and rather than making the field more like a simple checkerboard, this makes it more like a shifty interference pattern, a trippy moire of incommensurable

differences. By the way, this is not to say that complexity and maximalization are subjective (more on this below), especially as subjectivity is usually set in reductive opposition to the objectively real. Relationships are real, meaning and complexity as they are played out in relationships are real, no less so for not being located unambiguously in one or the other party to the relationship.

PROMPT 13: *Patterns of Things and Meta-Things.* **Q** Would it make a Thingfield pattern **(a)** more or **(b)** less obvious—and thus **(c)** more or less interesting—if we juxtaposed a pumpkin and a pumpkin pie, a granite boulder and a statue carved from the same granite, an image of an artichoke and an image of a photo of an artichoke? Does conspicuous ambiguity highlight the difference it ambiguates? Those who answered the questions differently should have an argument. Can you think of a killer example to support your answer?

PROMPT 14: *What's the Conceptual Velcro of Thingfield?* **Q** What is happening in your brain as you look at a field of heterogeneous objects? What is the velcro that makes it interesting? Discuss.

Thingfield is a gimmicky project. As a card-carrying postmodernist, this doesn't bother me. If accused of shallowness, I can flash the card, which is probably just a more polite way of saying *bite me*.

But, because I'm also a post-postmodernist, I have to emphasize that you can have the gimmicky and rigidly grid-like formalism of similarity-and-difference and still fully re-enter the world of people, feelings, activism, life and death and love.

4•9
The **AIDS** *Quilt*

That (see the previous sentence) is the transformative achievement of the NAMES project and its AIDS Quilt, in which each panel commemorates someone who died of AIDS or AIDS-related causes. At this writing, there are 48,000 panels weighing a total of 54 tons and covering 1.2 million square feet; the whole thing can now be viewed online (at https://www.aidsmemorial.org/interactive-aids-quilt) though there is no substitute for walking among the actual panels when parts of it are being displayed laid out on the ground. The panels are 3' x 6' rectangles—about the size of a grave. A standard size is necessary in order to enforce a formal equality that prevents any one participant from dominating and allows each piece to be articulated regularly with the other pieces; this "formal equality" is roughly equivalent to what in social/political terms is known as *equality before the law*. The design principles here are a way the democratic project imagines radical formal equality with radical difference, and this is one way that maximalist aesthetics resonate with maximalist politics. Radical difference is well enacted in the quilt by wildly heterogeneous creative processes (some panels have been made collaboratively and some individually; with elegant sophistication or naivete; by children or seamstresses; by quilting, appliqué, embroidery, collage, and even painting), aesthetics (on a minimalist/maximalist spectrum as well as any number of other spectra), materials (mostly fabrics of all kinds, but with a range of other stuff woven through), kinds of voices (angry, political, grief-stricken, flip, funny, defiant). The quilt medium also enforces several kinds of similarity-producing flattening: it is important that the panels not have full 3D objects—say, statues—affixed to them, which would make it too unwieldy to store and move, would allow some panels literally to overshadow others, and would push the whole thing in the direction of a traditional cemetery of vertical monuments. For maximalists who might have been anxious about too much flattening, it is just as important—it's *a relief*—that quilting and appliqué lend some three-dimensionality (see my account of *someness*, below), splitting the difference between two and three dimensions—or to put it more descriptively, adding a dimension of difference to what otherwise might have been a more two-dimensional surface. This is one of the main reasons that the fully flattened (minimalized) online version doesn't compare to the quilt itself, but after all, each is only part of the overall project in its various incarnations. To more fully appreciate the maximalism of the overall project, consider the quilt and the meta-quilt—that is, all the context out of which it emerges: the groups of people who get together to make panels to commemorate loved ones, the many-moving-parts apparatuses that assemble the panels, store and transport the quilt, arrange for it to be shown, digitize and post it—along with the ways in which it is used in activism, in personal and familial grieving, and in essays on maximalism.

If you needed proof that more is not more, consider t*he aspiration that the quilt be finite*, the dream it embodies that we would all arrive finally to a world in which no heartbroken groups of friends and loved ones would ever gather again to assemble another panel, the quilt's political and artistic aspiration *to be finished*.

4•10
Crocheted Coral Reef

The Crocheted Coral Reef is another collaborative project that combines rather rigid protocols—the uniform use of crocheting to make its components, and even more narrowly the generation of components by mathematical algorithms—in service of maximalist, open-process aesthetics and politics. For example, by crocheting a widening spiral shape starting at the center and adding a few too many extra stitches with each go-round (a kind of primordial maximalism) so that it can't remain flat but starts to warp, you transform what would have been a flat, spiral disk into a wavy-sided funnel. It is not just a coincidence that this yields something that looks uncannily like coral, because such algorithms—growth principles—are enacted by living things and other complex systems: the real difference and real kinship between the principles by which something is made and by which it is represented empower the represented thing to act on behalf of its actual cousin; the combination of radical difference and radical kin-

ship is where eco-aesthetics meets eco-politics. The intersection from which the Crocheted Coral Reef emerges is one where mathematics (hard science, historically coded as masculine) and knitting in collaborative groups (the epitome of craft, coded as feminine), seamlessly (or should that be *seamfully*?) combine with biology and ecology (usually as far from math as from crafts). As with the AIDS Quilt, the maximalist look of the Crocheted Coral Reef derives organically from an aesthetic that is linked to an ethics, an epistemology, an ontology and a politics. Look it up online and take a look at Donna Haraway's account of the Crocheted Coral Reef in her 2016 book *Staying with the Trouble*.

4•11
Exercises in Style

Raymond Queneau's 1947 book *Exercises in Style* spins out many versions of the same little story (about an argument on a bus and then an overheard discussion about buttons) in different styles. What
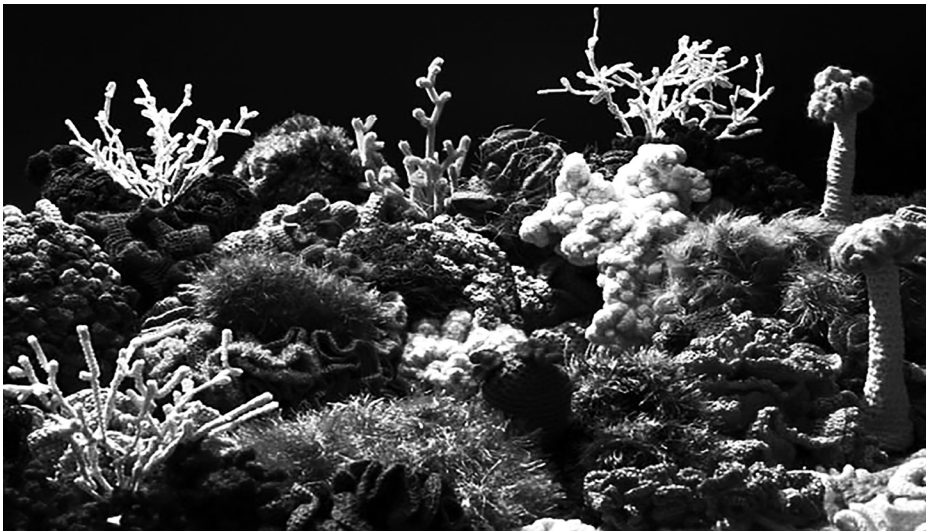
makes this a structuralist, formalist, and rather minimalist exercise is that (1) throughout its variations it remains very clearly the same story, which is why it's an exemplary structuralist *combinatoire* (an algorithm or machine to crank out variants) and not poststructuralist freeplay (since the rules never come up for grabs), and (2) the variations are crisply defined against each other: one tells the story in passive voice; another might be told with dripping sarcasm at every turn, another in Morse code, and so on. But even the wild heterogeny of this list (passive voice, sarcasm, Morse code) indicates that this isn't straight minimalism—minimalist minimalism—but something more like minimalist maximalism: the kind of maximalism a minimalist would produce. The prompt ("variations on a theme") keeps the variants anchored to the same story and prevents them from wandering off. For example, I was going to include, in my impromptu list, a retelling of the story with animals instead of people, but this would be too different for Queneau (though it would still be an acceptable variant if, say, the people and their interactions were all described in animalistic terms). Even so, Queneau's narrow range still generates a potentially infinite series of variants that often differ in outrageous or hilarious ways from each other. Each one is maximally the same in the same way and maximally different in different ways: this may be the crispest definition of minimalist maximalism. But structuralism tips over into poststructuralism in this exercise in one important sense: the exercise may have begun with a basic, economically laid-out version of the story that Queneau went on to manipulate—or it may have begun with some gothically elaborated version that he later stripped down to a basic version, but whichever version the author wrote out first, the flatness of the variations—their formal equivalence—means that *none of them can make a definitive claim to be original* (that is, no internal evidence allows us to identify the initial variant or to trace specific generations of variants): one might simply be called *Terse* and the other *Wordy*. In other words: the exercise both enacts the idea of variants anchored to an original and deconstructs it.

The exercise can easily be maximalized. What if, instead of two men on a bus arguing over a seat, you have two dogs in a yard fighting for a bone; three designers collaborating on designing a chair; or (now in animated video form) a mouse, an angel with elephant ears, a neutron star, and cellist Yo-Yo Ma crisscrossing each other's paths in space without touching (the sound track would be Bach's Cello Suite #3, and it would be playing in the background the whole time and would switch from non-diegetic to diegetic when you finally see Yo-Yo Ma drift by, playing it). Though these still enact easily statable permutations, we move very quickly to a story that could not independently be identified as a variant: we warp out of orbit, even if we are still following a simple prompt: "take the Queneau story and adjust the number and kind of characters and the kinds of interaction." Certain kinds of variations seem to differ more radically than by style: changing the genre of the story feels a bit more radical (genre possibly being more fundamental than style) but can still generate acceptable variants; a meta-fictional version might still stay in the acceptable range—barely— but you would begin to warp out of Queneau's orbit if you used the story as a meta-story that frames another story—or as a sub-story embedded in another story.

PROMPT 15: *Exercises in Style, Maximalized.*
(1) Look at examples of Queneau's story
online, then write a new variant, remaining
within the scope operationally defined by
Queneau (that is, variations of what is still
unequivocally the same story). Now **(2)** write
another variant that pushes Queneau's param-
eters just to the breaking point but no further,
such as retelling the story with animals instead
of people. Now **(3)** write one more variant that
begins to warp out of Queneau's orbit entirely
but retains some resonance with some aspect
of it, even if that resonance is hard to put your
finger on, or might well be missed completely
by a casual reader. And while we're at it, **(4)**
do one more variant in which Queneau's story
is either a meta-story in which a different sub-
story is embedded—or is itself embedded in
a meta-story. **(5)** Now, in small-group editing
sessions—or via online interactions—identify
the best one or more of the four variants each
student has produced, making sure that each
category is well represented. Then edit and
proofread those together. **(6)** Make a book
of these (sorry, but as you can see, I'm just

oriented to making books) with four sections, one for each kind of variant (which might be called Dutiful, Edgy, Warped, and Meta); I suggest calling it *Exercises in Style, Maximalist Minimalist Edition, [year]*. I also suggest that **(7)** each student write either **(a)** a brief, explanatory introduction, and/or **(b)** brief explanatory footnotes to individual variants, and that these be edited and incorporated into the book. When I taught a version of this exercise in 2016, I noticed that there were 20 students in my class and 20 letters in the phrase "Exercises in Style 2016" (yes, my brain is a bit quirky), so I had each of them contribute an elaborate letter for the book cover. Anyway, **(8)** bind and print out the book and send copies to people such as your mother or the president of your university, or bury one in a time capsule (the variants people come up with are also historical documents that testify—in both straightforward and in subtle but profound ways—about the historical moment in which they were produced), or sell it on the internet.

EXERCISES IN STYLE 2016
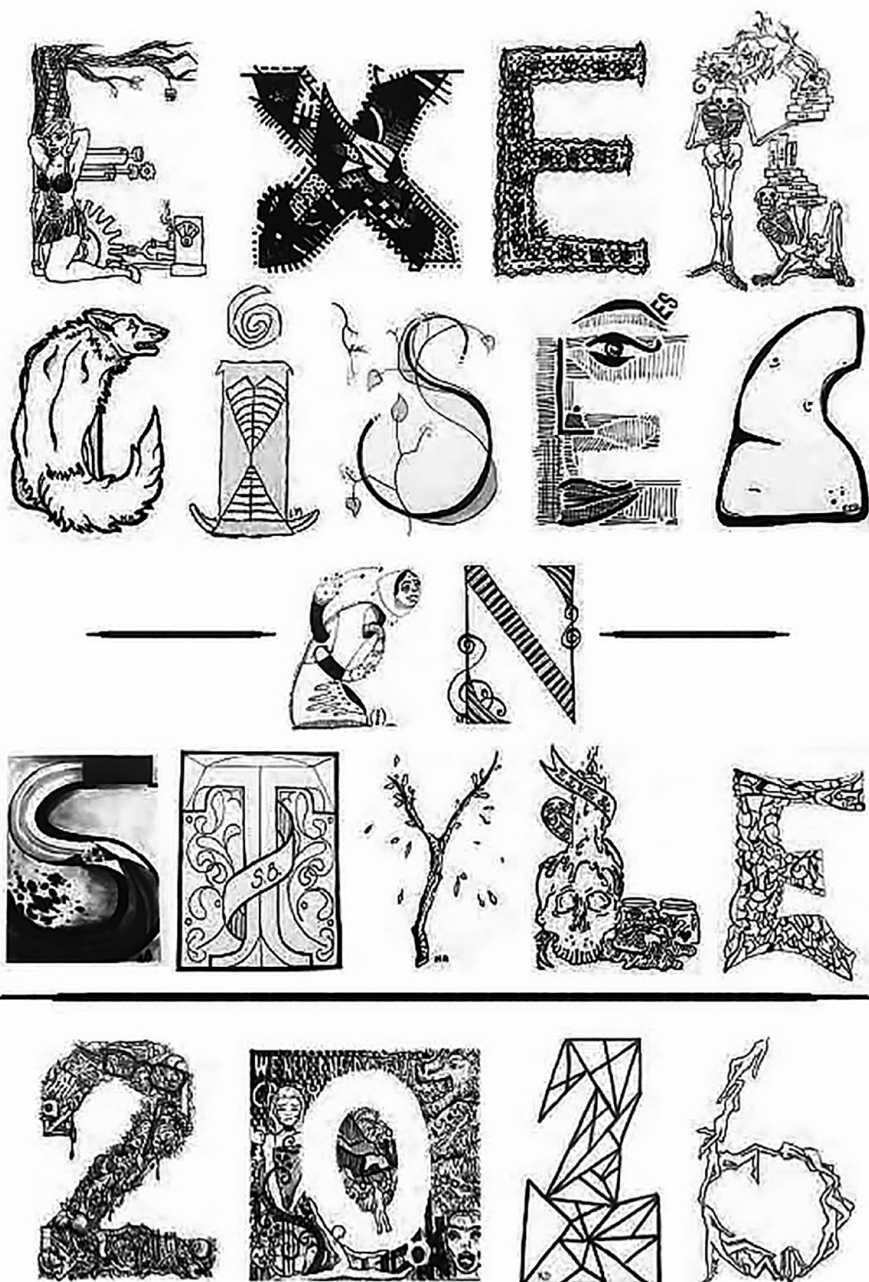
Letters by Francesca Adams, Holly Adams, Rosemary Arpino, Sarah Barkowski, Rebecca Bulko, Kara Dobias, Jocelyn Emus, Olivia Fitzpatrick, Emily Goto, Logan Heffernan, Jacqueline Johnsson, Jamie Lerman, Luke Masella, Harper McVey, Cassidy Nolan, Amanda Ocana, Meg Rhoads, Ava Scott, Emily Stearn, Max Yokoo.

Exercises in Style has been translated into about 30 languages and continues to be widely read and taught. How is it that, in spite of (or because of) its heavy-handed and gimmicky structuralist limitations, it retains its brain-velcro for new generations of readers? There may be a profound evolutionary and neurological answer.

Psychologist Erik Hoel has hypothesized that dreams "inject noise" into the process of storing memories to counter "over-fitting," which refers to a kind of literalist tendency to file memories too narrowly, with too few cross-references. *Counter-fitting* (my word, not his) makes the information more portable, more generalizable, and thus is key to learning; it makes historians into theorists.

Let's say a wildebeest (call him Spiro), visits a particular waterhole (call it Waterhole #1) one morning when the sun is blazing down from the east, and standing shoulder-to-shoulder at the water's edge with his herd-mates, lowers his head to drink and notices a greenish squiggle in the water. As he's drinking, he feels a sudden, sharp pain in his lip that causes him to jerk his head back, but the pain subsides quickly and he begins drinking again. His lip is sore for a while, but there don't seem to be any lasting effects. To accentuate the novelty of the experience, let's say there have been no snakes in the region until recently, and because this is Spiro's first encounter with one, he wouldn't automatically know what links the greenish squiggle to the pain in his lip. And let's say that wildebeest memories tend to be extremely overfitted: this one is defined for Spiro by the conjunction of the pain with four components: (1) the sunny morning, (2) Waterhole #1, (3) being surrounded by herdmates, and (4) the greenish squiggle. The herd moves to Waterhole #2 and Spiro sees another greenish squiggle but it doesn't trigger the memory because it's Waterhole #2, a different place altogether, and later that day they go back to Waterhole #1 but no alarm bells are ringing in Spiro's brain because it's dusk, a different time altogether. If Spiro has learned anything, it's narrow and undergeneralized: it won't help him avoid snakes in other situations, but it has a big upside: he won't be continually tormented by anxiety, either. That night Spiro has a dream in which the incident is featured, but the dream introduces various random noise, for example by moving the incident to the tall grass on a cloudy day: for good or ill, this will likely serve to make Spiro more anxious in other contexts. How good or how ill will depend on how widespread the snakes are, how damaging their bites are, and how damaging the anxiety is. As we know from our own lives, this is not an exact science and our brains can also err on the side of over-generalization—though we also know that snakes are widespread, especially those who have done some online dating. Let's say the dream reproduces most of the components of the memory but the squiggle is whitish rather than greenish: now Spiro jumps at every ripple in the water. The system has to be pretty finely tuned to be, on balance, more of an asset than a liability.

So far, we've imagined the noise introduced by the brain in something like the fussy structuralist way—the more minimalist way—that story vari-

ants are constrained in Queneau's *Exercises in Style* (see above). But dreams almost never differ from actual memories by the simple alteration of discrete details: it just doesn't work that way. Thus Hoel's theory recognizes as crucial "the hallucinogenic, category-breaking, and fabulist quality of dreams" and that, for dreams to serve learning, they are bound to be "extremely different from the 'training set' of the animal, i.e., their daily experiences."

Imagine instead that Spiro has a dream in which he is at the water-hole line-dancing with crocodiles and that one of them farts but he can't tell whether it was him or one of them, which is disturbing enough to wake him up. This might be about as sophisticated as wildebeest dreams get (not that I have been privy to any wildebeest dreams, at least to my knowledge). As in human dreams, you might just barely be able to intuit that it has anything to do with the snake-bite memory, though it's hard to say what. Spiro's mind is trying to manage a difficult situation in which he was mysteriously afflicted at a vulnerable moment (head down, drinking). If you want to try to leave desire, need, and fear out of it in order to use a simple computational metaphor, you could say that Spiro's brain faces some basic dilemmas in how to "tag" the memory: how to file and cross-reference it. The surreal dream plays with the axis of friends-versus-foes: instead of standing shoulder-to-shoulder with his herdmates, he is dancing with crocodiles—in real life, the beasts most likely to attack explosively from the water in front of you as you approach. The fart shifts reality (I was about to say "injects noise") along several axes: the dream takes the snakebite—something that impinges painfully on the body from outside and in front—and twists it into something that provides relief by being expelled outward from the inside and the rear. And importantly, the dream plays with the axis of self-versus-other: perhaps the greenish squiggle was not just another detail like the sunshine but the trace of another creature—a dangerous creature that lives in the water, like crocodiles—and the pain was not a proprioceptive phenomenon like indigestion but something inflicted by this other creature. This makes clear the role of dreams in learning: after this dream, one could imagine Spiro able to file the memory next to crocodiles in the "dangerous water creatures to watch for" box and, in a richer account, to readjust his emotions, needs, desires, fears and other orientations accordingly.

The Dancing-with-Crocodiles Motif and the Motif of the Ambiguous Fart; illustration by David Sandberg.

Here, a self-referential turn to consider my own thought process in producing this "artificial dream" is revealing: after discarding the structuralist algorithm for altering individual details of a memory as inadequate to produce a realistic dream, I knew I had to come up with a more surreal wildebeest dream but I was stymied as to how to do so. I pondered but felt stuck until the next day, when the "dancing with crocodiles" motif occurred to me—and immediately thereafter, the motif of "the ambiguous fart." It was only after the fact that I was able to explain how the surreal dream changed the memory along various axes, or to put this more accurately, I thought through the problem first via the invented dream and only then was able to reverse-engineer the means by which I had done so. Whatever dreams I'd had the night before may have helped me break through my conceptual logjam, but my artificial dream served exactly the same function as an actual dream would have: it enabled me to generalize and, furthermore, to move from what is usually typecast as "creative" to "analytical" thought. Hoel speculates "whether fictions, like novels or films, act as artificial dreams, accomplishing at least some of the same function" but even this parallel between actual and artificial makes the difference too reductive. If remembering a dream distorts it (for example, by cleaning up into more of a narrative what might have been a complex and mostly non-narrative network of thoughts, memories, and feelings), continuing to "inject noise" (Hoel's account of what Freud called "dreamwork"), then remembering a dream is both to keep dreaming and to forge an artificial dream, no less than routinely accessing a memory (especially when reconfiguring it with new experiences) is inevitably a kind of dreaming: memories are altered by being accessed, and can easily be fictionalized (dreamworked) entirely.

PROMPT 16: *How to Invent Dreams.*
(1) Write a short account (a page or two) of an actual dream, and in addition to the scenes from the dream, I invite you to include connections to daily-life events and other elements of your life: this will give more texture to your account—more of the feel of the dream/life relationship. Now **(2)** write up a second dream that is entirely invented (artificial, that is), with the aim of maximum realism. How well each student succeeds can be empirically measured **(3)** by having the class read the accounts and vote on which ones they thought were real and which invented (this can be done online before class). When I assigned this exercise, I thought about grading based on how many votes they got (this works for both the actual and artificial dreams) but that seemed a bit harsh so I decided just to award prizes to the high vote-getters instead. **(4)** We talked about what made the high vote-getting accounts seem real and what disqualified the others. Note that actual dreams that seemed false to most readers also pose interesting questions. **Q** How can we be sure that we are not simply judging "realism" by how much the dream accounts conform to conventions of how to represent dreams,

regardless of how well these conventions actually represent dreams? **A** The short answer is that we can't, but this gets us into a productive discussion of what feels true to our experience of dreams, the extent to which writing invented dreams is also a form of dreaming, and the extent to which the conventions themselves might be a form of dreaming.

After this discussion, **(5)** we read and discussed Freud's account of dreamwork—especially *condensation* and *displacement*—from his *Interpretation of Dreams* to see whether this would help us invent more realistic dreams; we reiterated the exercise **(6)** but the results were ambiguous. It might be interesting **(7)** to have half the class read Freud and half read Hoel and see which ones were able to invent more realistic dreams. In that case it'd probably be necessary to ask another group of students to vote on the dream accounts, since those in the class presumably would have been at least partially made into Freudians and Hoelians. We might then go on to **(8)** try to assess whether the actual dreams of the two groups began to differ! But how could you determine whether it was the dreams that were differing rather than just the accounts of them? That's a real question, by the way!

Hoel is mostly dismissive of Freud, but notice how nicely the two main Freudian components of the dream-work (the algorithms or protocols by which thoughts and feelings are woven into dreams)—condensation and displacement—fit into the counter-fitting scenario. Displacement could be understood as the "noise" that moves the memory along various categorical or associational axes, condensation the reverse process by which, along the same kinds of axes, a range of cross-references are connected back to it.

In spite of Freud having first pulled dreams into the orbit of scientific study more than a hundred years ago, there is still no scientific consensus about how they work: as Hoel acknowledges, it's still early days. The scientific legitimacy of dream study is still tenuous enough that I wouldn't even dare to mention my own interest in resonances between how we dream and how the universe dreams us. But there may be at least enough consensus to claim dreams as a vindication of maximalism—of the necessity of creative and cognitive extravagance—if only because "a dream of flying may actually help you keep your balance running."

4•13
Four Maximalist Terms

I'm not big on inventing new terms; I'm more inclined to try to describe even the newest or most counter-intuitive ideas in everyday language (okay, yes I know, but at least I try). On several occasions over the years, though, I have invented some terms—or appropriated already-existing terms for more specific usage (*maximalism* being one of these), and in looking back over them, I notice that they all describe the result of a deconstructive thought process: for example, when you displace the opposition between singular and plural, you get *someness*. The invention or appropriation of the new term comes from the desire to stake a claim in the more open and positive ground beyond opposition and dialectical negations (where you would be more likely to remain if, instead of *someness*, you always said *both/neither singular/plural*). As mentioned above, this is only partially possible, since duality and reification are almost ubiquitous in language-based thought, a kind of Higgs Field through which we slog, but it's better than nothing: language can be conscripted to help take us to the edge of language. All the terms are generated by—and are generative of—maximalist thought.

4.13.1. Someness

The opposition between singular and plural—or as it often appears in religious thought, the one and the many—is a recalcitrant and limiting one. The problem for maximalism is that it domesticates plurality by keeping it tethered in opposition to singularity, preventing it from coming into its own. So how do you get to wild, maximal plurality? Not by simple multiplication, which only plays out further the caricatured difference

between many and one: this is why "more is more" is only a minimalist's account of maximalism! Someness splits the difference. It names a primordial and innumerable plurality—a pluripotency like that of a stem cell that could develop into a skin cell or an eye cell or a brain cell. The primordiality is crucial: as if before there is singular and plural—before there are countable sets or even countability, there is someness—the ground from which singularity and plurality precipitate. (I say "as if" to avoid reducing this to stages of a linear story.)

Systems are like this, simultaneously singular and plural. The way they exceed plurality/unicity is often recognized in the ways they are "more than the sum of their parts"; it's also vital to recognize that the whole remains *part of the parts* (it is folded back into the system as a component rather than simply trumping or transcending everything). Systems generate and are generated by fields of difference; they are always inhabited by subsystems, embedded in meta-systems, and engaged in interactions with other systems: systems are maximalist.

PROMPT 17: *Visualizing Someness.* How can you portray someness, visually? If you are a writer, how can you write a story in which there are "some" characters? Or if there isn't enough time to draw, paint, sculpt, or write your own: what visual art or writing or design can you find that enacts this kind of someness, or that shows someness in conjunction with (or at odds with) singularity and plurality? You might even get to the point where you start noticing the someness in everything: you could put this to the test by picking a work at random. (I went to my bookshelf and, eyes closed, picked an oversized book and opened

it to a page: Eadweard Muybridge's *Animals in Motion*, "Elephant Ambling." Looking at the freeze-frame photos, I was struck by how intuitively I understood that amble—as if my brain's "mirror neurons" were reproducing it effortlessly (or to put it another way, my body understood it). This made me think about how uncannily human an elephant skull looks, and this led me to Eliot Goldfinger's *Animal*
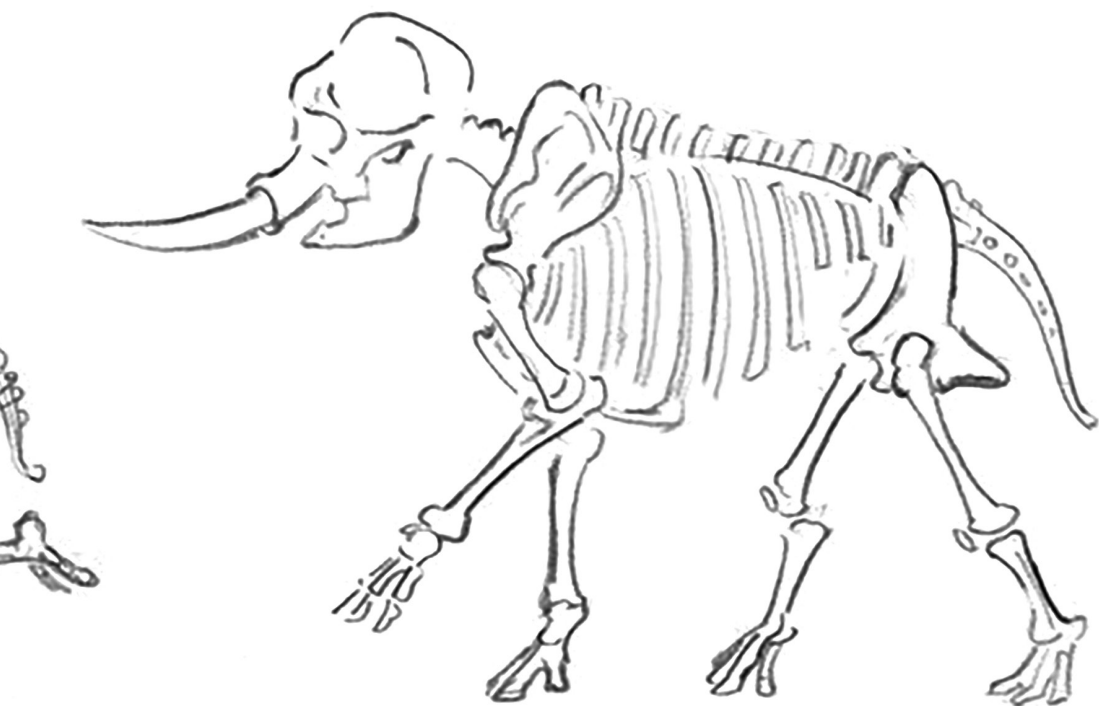
Elephant/Human Ambling; illustration by David Sandberg.

Anatomy for Artists (also among my oversized books), where it was impossible not to be struck how easy it would be to morph an elephant skeleton into a human skeleton, just by standing it up and tweaking a few dials. Elephants and humans are also two, no doubt, but we are also not two, not by a long shot—and it was that someness I recognized in my brain and my body as I looked at the page.)

Withness is a way of characterizing the relationship between language and the world—and between consciousness or knowledge and the world—that differs from the dominant account in which the relationship is more like one of visual *witness*. In the dominant account, although they emerge from the world, language and consciousness "stand back" from it, just as vision has to stand back from its object. If language does not stand apart—except in the sense that all systems stand apart from their environments—but is a part of the world—one system among many—then the notion of objectivity is a false one. With this loss there is also gain: like the spider in its web (which is a sensorium as well as a field of influence and action), our sensitivity is not compromised but enabled by our embeddedness; this is what you get from shifting from a visual to a tactile model.

The dominant idea of the relationship between consciousness/language and the world as one of representation or correspondence is enacted in various conventional relationships between text and image. (1) In a visual image with a caption, the caption "translates" the image into language that stands back from the image, and (2) an embedded illustration in a text is understood simply as the translation of language into image. In practice, the gap between text and image in these cases can be deployed so that one doesn't entirely correspond to the other and the gap functions more as a kind of synapse—as something to think with.

In what I call t*he visionary style*, text and image are interwoven in a way that radically ambiguates the space of the page or canvas as a text and a world: the interwoven text/

image remaps relationships among world and brain. This happens neuro-logically because the way our brains process images and the way they process written language are different, so as we "read" an image in which text is interwoven, we engage in continuous code-switching. Note that this applies only to written text: visual images in conjunction with auditory language are not interwoven and propose no remapping since the brain is used to simultaneously parallel-processing the separate "data streams" of sight and sound.

It isn't quite as simple as "wherever image and text are interwoven, you have visionary art." Q. What about comic books? A. In their conventional forms, anyway, comics tend to domesticate language into two kinds: the *diegetic* (in which utterances are situated as taking place in the actual world being portrayed) and *non-diegetic* (such as captions that stand back from the world being portrayed—more like a voice-over does, even if it represents the thoughts and observations of a character in the world being portrayed). Q. Okay, then what about graffiti, which violates word/image, world/text and world/image protocols in several challenging ways, including literally (that is, by literally violating laws)? A. That's why the maximalist joy of graffiti is radical and that's the basis of its visionary potential. I once imagined Walter Benjamin's essay "Theses on the Philosophy of History" being engraved on the faces at Mount Rushmore and each letter inset with diamonds (see Chapter 3.7) : one of my better ideas, I've always thought, though it would take several revolutions to make it happen.

I am interested in whether the practice of maximalist word/image weaving can produce visionary insights.

William Blake, *The Laocoön* (previous)
and David Chaim Smith, *The Burning Bush
Unfurls the Dream Fire of Pure Gnosis* (above)

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PROMPT 18: *Interweaving Word and Image.*
This prompt asks you simply to interweave the
written word and the image; you can do this
by drawing or some other visual medium, by
collage, or by manipulating an already existing
image. If you don't get an idea of what that
might entail, you might start with the follow-
ing questions: what would it look like if there
were a force field woven together of sentences
and sentence fragments like twigs in a wreath
or a bird's nest that surrounded young lovers
seated together; if words were being emitted
toward each other from the people gathered in
a family photograph; if you could see in words
what trees—or flowers and their pollinating
insects—were saying to each other in their
multiple subtle languages—or if buildings
talked to each other; if you could see the rela-
tionship between you and those who empower
you and those who would destroy you in
words falling onto you like rain from clouds in
which these friends and fiends were arrayed;
if the stories of their origins and your inter-
actions with them clung to every household
object and every piece of your clothing and
jewelry; if your desires trickled and beamed
and swirled in writing out of your fingertips
and your eyes and lips; if the organs of your
body were made of words; if divinity radiated
in words from every creature—what would it
look like? What testimony would they offer?

4.13.3. Middleground

The term *middlegrounding* comes from an essay I wrote about visual complexity, which lays out some of the theoretical groundwork for this chapter—though I hadn't started using the term *maximalism* (the whole essay can be accessed at iralivingston.com). The essay (like the term) applies specifically to visual images and visual culture—but it's also a case study in relationships among systems and between systems and their environments, returning us to questions of how maximalism as a style or an aesthetics resonates more fully with a world characterized by systems in ecological relationships—a living world.

Middlegrounding means throwing the relationship of figure and ground into question, foregrounding their entanglement. This goes against the grain of certain reductive habits of making sense of the visual world, as demonstrated in a sociological experiment. Participants were asked to give an account of a simple computer-animated video of an aquarium. Westerners tended to tell a story with the largest fish cast as the protagonist, while Asians tended to focus less on a single protagonist and gave the rocks and corals and plants more of the status of characters; this result was used to confirm various sweeping characterizations of Western individualism versus Asian collectivism. But both of these approaches—as is the case with narrativizing in general, and specifically with trying to render a visual scene into the dramatically lower-bandwidth medium of language—are reductive or minimalizing in different ways, though the Asian approach is more maximal and middlegrounded. My interest was in making a complex image about which it would be more difficult for *both* the Westerners and Asians in the experiment to write their usual stories.

PROMPT 19: *Middlegrounding.* **(1)** Begin by finding an image with clear figures-and-background and *middleground it*. It won't work to flatten everything into an all-over pattern: the middleground is a wildly heterogeneous place that might well feature fragments or sometimes whole tracts of foreground and background as well as various mixed, chopped, or pureed bits of both. Now **(2)** find an image with more of an overall pattern and again middleground it: play with making various discrete parts or patterns pop out, recede, entangle and disentangle. Empower the forest and trees—the big picture and the details—to renegotiate their relationships.

Wallace Stevens' famous poem "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" is iconic—almost diagrammatic—maximalist minimalism. If there could be a maximalist haiku, this comes close: "among twenty snowy mountains, the only moving thing was the eye of the blackbird." The maximalism lies partly in the seamless movement from the epic panorama of the landscape to the extreme close-up of the bird's eye—two foci that our own eyes and brains normally could not simultaneously maintain (or imagine trying to photograph and keep in focus the distant white mountains and nearby blackbird's eye in which the mountains are reflected), but even more so in the entanglement of our gaze with the bird's. The scene could be described as visually simple—the elegant minimalism of a Japanese print—but complexity is a relationship rather than a property—one that is inevitably ecological, entangling our relationship with the bird and with the landscape with the bird's relationship with the landscape. The work the poem does in this entanglement—whatever magic it performs—is in its middlegrounding conjunction of extreme foreground and extreme background.

PROMPT 20: *Middlegrounding an Image via Writing.* Rather than manipulating an image—such as the animated aquarium—another way of middlegrounding would be to leave the image as it is but to specify how the story could or could not be written in order to push people away from their habitual narratives and descriptions. Pick any image (whether the aquarium or a famous artwork or something else) and think of a writing prompt that would do that.

If complexity is not simply the essential property of an image but derives from the relationship between an image and a viewer in a complex ecology, then visual complexity—the complexity of an image itself—participates in complex visuality—the imbrication of images and reality sometimes known as *visual culture* or even *virtuality*. This definition recognizes that meaning is not something that happens in the interior of a system but in the linkage and interaction of the constellation of a system's components with the exterior relationships of the system with other systems and its environment. There is no such thing as a thing in itself.

It is easy to see the maximalizing influence of fractal complexity, and not simply in how it makes a surface denser with detail: when you have pattern at a range of scales, there is no distance at which you can situate yourself to see the forest and the trees: stand back to see the large patterns and you can't see the details; move close enough to see the small patterns and the big picture disappears (and the museum guard warns you to stand back). This is especially a visual problem, whereas, if you run your hand over a surface with fractal patterns in relief (better wait until the guard leaves the room), you can feel them all though you still may not be able to "read" the largest patterns. Laura U. Marks found this problem addressed in mystical Islamic art by a *haptic* visuality that uses the visual to move beyond the visual, much as mystical writing uses language to go beyond language: our eyes run over a densely patterned fractal surface like a hand running over a texture—or to take a more contemporary example, we might feel, as if by touch, the fuzziness of an out-of-focus photo together with its illusionistic depth (or to put it another way, the close-up becomes so extreme that it slips from sight to touch). Here the anti-iconicity of Islamic art can be understood in a positive sense, less as a prohibition (against visual images of God, which could only be degradations and even negations of that which cannot be represented) and more as an exhortation—to actually deliver the sublime; to bring the viewer and the divine closer, beyond visual representation.

Following pages: Wazir Khan Mosque; Lahore
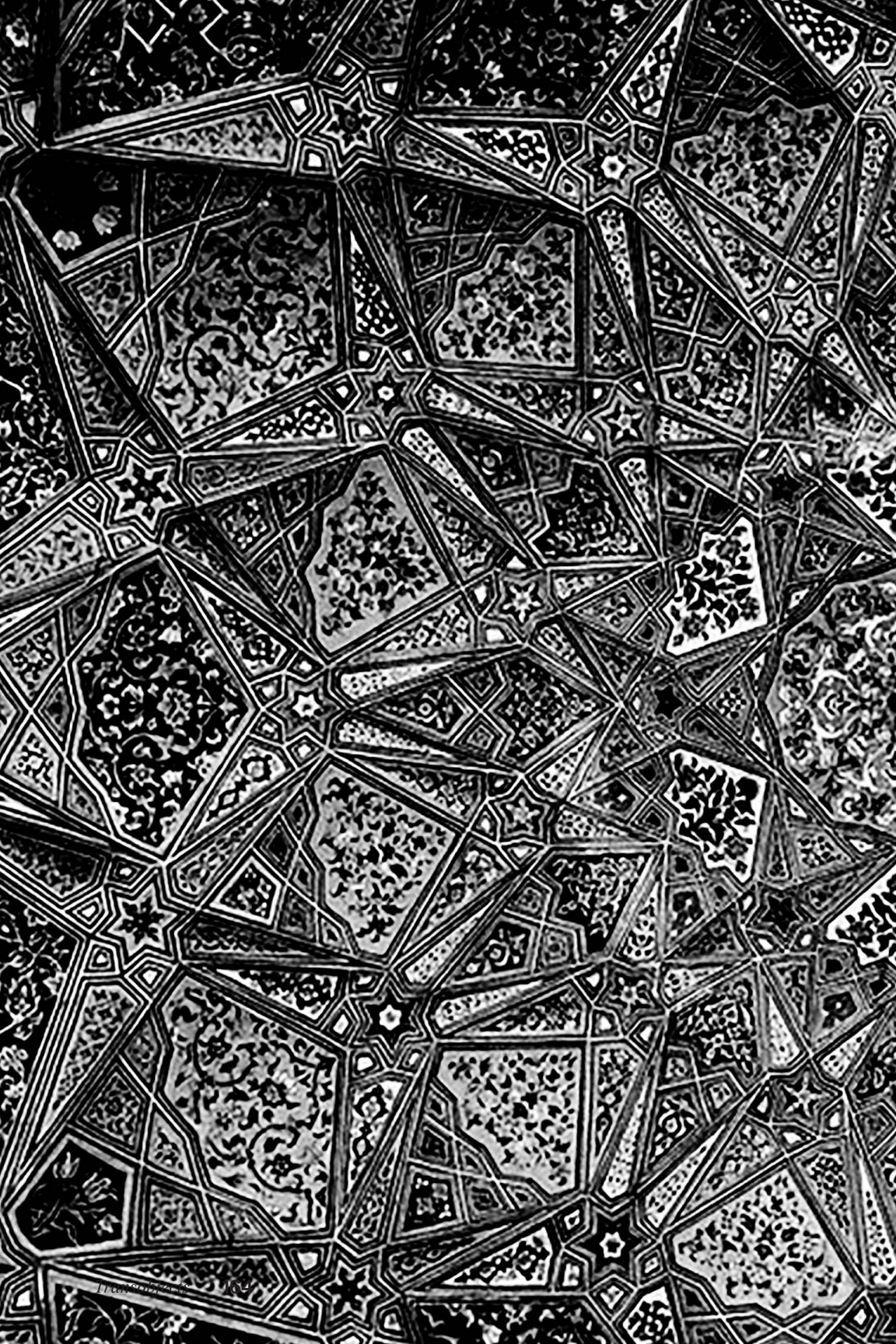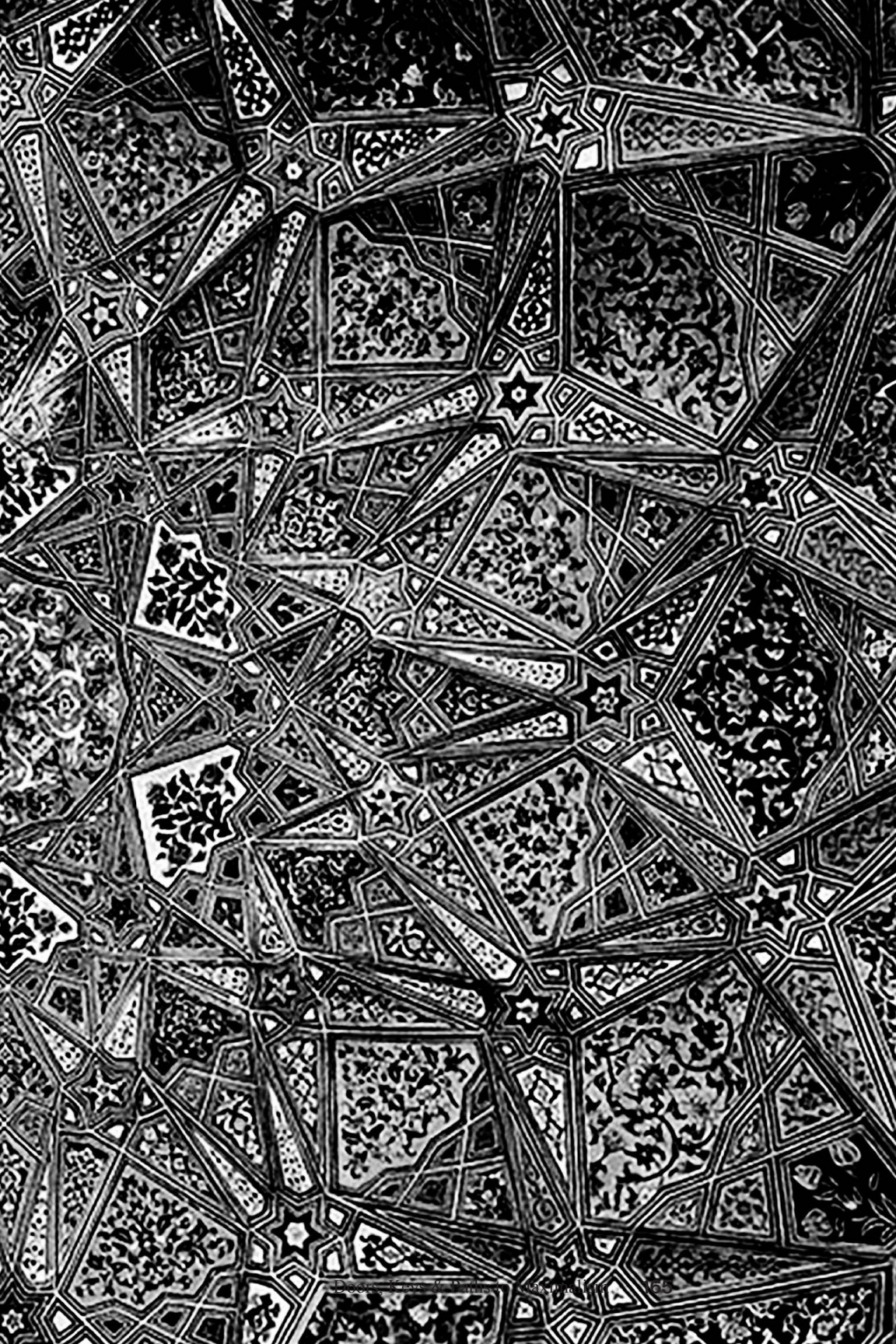
Fractal dimension—density of detail at various scales—is one kind of complexity, but to equate more density with more complexity is too simple. Jackson Pollock's splatter paintings are exemplary in being describable as minimalist or as maximalist. It seems to me that his earlier work—which mixes symbolic images with splatter and complex patterning—are more complex and maximal, and that his "mature" style got purer and more modernist, but the contradictions are part of the maximalism: something we can easily identify as complex is thereby less complex than something that is more ambiguously complex, more difficult to determine whether it's complex or not. Pollock controlled the fractal dimension of his splatter paintings so meticulously that it is remarkably consistent painting-to-painting: it can be empirically measured and used to distinguish his work from forgeries. He choreographed a collaboration of intent with chance, and culture with nature, working with the physical properties of the paint that determine the shapes of blobs and skeins and how they crack and craze at a small scale (*craqueleur*): these determine the density of detail at the smallest scale. Noticing this—getting attuned to the fractal dimensionality rather than just the overall pattern—makes the image more complex, just as the microscopic view of a billiard ball reveals the smooth sphere as a rugged, complex landscape of epic canyons and mountain ranges.

Director Ridley Scott described the making of *Blade Runner* as assembling "a 700-layer cake"—a complex *mise-en-scène* of a world saturated with images vying for our attention, characterized by fractal depth (in which one can zoom in to vital microscopic details), and nature/culture boundary crossings that make the whole world into a bewildering uncanny valley. The interweaving of CGI and live action in order to make the film—that is, the complex visuality of the film as an artifact in the actual world—is mirrored in the interweaving of images and reality in the fictional world in the film—its visual complexity.

Visual complexity can derive from hybridity—the kind of code-switching that happens when words and images are interwoven (see "Withness," above), but also when images from different contexts or cultures—each of which must be "read" differently—appear together, or when reality and images (or images of reality and images of images) are interwoven. Evermore thoroughgoing interpenetrations of reality and images are part of the saturation of the world with information (virtualization) widely recognized in cultural theory (as in Heidegger's "age of the world picture" or Baudrillard's "precession of simulacra"), though we should balance the historical narrative about ever-increasing virtualization with the recognition that this is not in any sense a new issue, as is evident in perennial philosophical and religious debates about a world of appearances.

Computer scientist Stephen Wolfram's account of the complexity of an image seems to offer a schematic account of the visual middleground:

> when we say that something seems complex what we typically mean is that we have not managed to find any simple description of it—or at least of those features in which we happen to be interested....
>
> When we are presented with a complex image, our eyes tend to dwell on it, presumably in an effort to give our brains a chance to extract a simple description.
>
> If we can find no simple features whatsoever—as in the case of simple randomness—then we tend to lose interest. But somehow the images that draw us in the most—and typically that we find most aesthetically pleasing—are those for which some features are simple for us to describe, but others have no short description that can be found by any of our standard processes of visual perception.

This might work as at least a minimalist formula for maximalism—though maximalists may cringe at the reductively universalizing characterization of what "we find aesthetically pleasing" (to which the obvious retort is *we who, kemosabe?*). It's hard to say what this formula specifies when even a single person can find all of the following aesthetically pleasing: (1) a busy but absolutely uniform wallpaper pattern, (2) a busily non-uniform but equally all-over Jackson Pollock painting, (3) a stark and radically un-busy, non-repeating shape (like a zen brush painting of a bamboo branch or Brancusi's *Bird in Space*)—or, on the other hand, when someone can find any of these pleasing and the others boring or annoying.

The most generous way of reading Wolfram's sweeping assertion is that we can find everything aesthetically pleasing, and *when we do, it will be because of its maximalism*—and ours. If complexity is not the property of an image but of the relationship between a viewer and an image, then when you achieve maximalism as a mindset and a way of looking, you recognize the universe and everything in it as maximal and aesthetically pleasing: "to see a world in a grain of sand." We are complex open systems and we like other things that are: they interest us, or we interest each other—birds of a feather. This suggests, furthermore, that minimalism may work by distinguishing itself starkly from a maximalist world and thus by further maximalizing the world, like a boat's geometrically crisp prow cutting through the water generates a wake that is turbulent and gothically complex—or like the rigidly linear forward march of language stirs up these paisley swirls of meaning. If all minimalism is closeted maximalism—if its aesthetic velcro for our eyes and brains is inherently complex—then we should be able to give a maximalist account of how any piece of minimalism works on us.

PROMPT 21: *The Maximalism of Minimalism.* Take Brancusi's *Bird in Space*—or some other iconic minimalist work: how could it be described as maximalist? If looking at it does sustain your interest (not a foregone conclusion, of course), how? Almost certainly your answer will involve not just the work itself but its relationship with other art and other non-art.

4.13.4. Opalescence

Opalescence usually refers to a kind of flashy or milky iridescence like that of some opals. *Iridescence* is the quality of appearing to change color as the viewing or lighting angle changes. Precious opals are distinguished from common opals by varying flashes of color as they are turned, known as *play-of-color*. Some opals are opaque, others translucent or almost transparent. They come in the full spectrum of background colors as well as black and white. The visual maximalism of opals is evident, but I am interested here in the status of opals—along with other things that glitter, shimmer, iridesce, scintillate, sparkle, fluoresce, twinkle—as emissaries of a maximal universe.

Even the precious opal is officially designated a semi-precious stone, though this is often challenged. Since there are different kinds of opals, each with variable sets of features, the word *opalescence* has a shifty array of meanings that mirrors the light-and-color shiftiness to which it refers. The shimmery resonance between word and thing, which normally belong to different realms and operate by different logics, give the opalescent word/thing a power that might be called poetic or magical.

Opalescence is not exactly the property of an object-in-itself but of an interaction, as when you turn an opal around in your hand. Likewise, colors are not properties of opals as such but are produced by the way light is refracted by their microstructures (which, like prisms, do not possess color themselves). The play of things—opals, hands, eyes, brains, and light—and even of words—embodies these maximal and shifty constellations of relationships, structures, events, processes, and properties.

As against the minimalist purity of gems counted as precious, at least by modern definition (diamonds, rubies, emeralds and sapphires), opals are fundamentally impure and maximalist. Purity depends on impurity as its foil, operating by exclusion and by the abstraction or extraction of a single quality, and purity is compromised and negated by the inclusion of the impure. But impurity is only enhanced by the inclusion of purity as one of its heterogeneous components: if it didn't also include the pure it would be less impure, more uniform. When you deconstruct the hierarchized duality between pure, transcendent luminosity and mixed/impure opalescence, you get something that includes sparkles and matrices of pure luminosity—as well as translucencies and

dark opacities—but this returns us to how opalescence had been defined in the first place. By my reckoning, then, the semi-precious is more precious in the irreproducible and unstandardizable uniqueness—the rarity—and locality of each instantiation, in its subtlety and someness, in its recondite and restless play, and in the impossibility of naming it unambiguously or abstracting it entirely from its contexts.

Here we get to the philosophical and theological dimensions of opalescence. If pure, infinite, and infinitely open and luminous divinity prior to the creation of the universe—or divinity considered apart from the created universe—is reckoned superior to the mixed and mottled situation of divinity-and-the-universe, how do you account for a perfect being (or rather, perfection itself beyond any being or beings) that gives birth to a less-than-perfect world? This is a tricky area of theology. In Christianity there is the notion that a fallen world allows humans to achieve redemption (a "fortunate fall"); in Kabbalism there is the crucial concept of *tzimtzum*—a contraction of divinity that allows divinity to flow back in—a bit like a process of breathing out and in at the core of the created world. The tendency is to domesticate this contradiction by spreading it out into a polarized structure (a shining, perfect God that steps down by degrees to a fallen and dark world—*emanationism*) and/or a narrative arc (e.g., first God, then the creation of a fallen world, then its reunion with God; first *tzimtzum* and then *tikkun* or *repair*).

In his most famous poem, "Ode to a Nightingale," Keats imagines that the bird's song leads him into a dark but tremulously lit world—into the woods on a moonlit and starry night. "Here there is no light"—that is, in the *here* of the poem—like where you and I are now in this text: the darker *here* of language removed even from the moonlit world. "Here there is no light, / Save what from heaven is with the breezes blown / Through verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways." If divinity and heavenly light only partially penetrate the dark material world, they filter through even less into the narrower confines of consciousness, even less into language and still less into poetry constrained further by rhythms and rhyme, then how is it that the glowingly verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways are in many ways more beautiful than the blazing day or the moonlit night? How is it that poetry—even poetry that systematically laments its depressive distance from the sublime (as Keats's ode does) also magically delivers the sublime?

Keats offers us the radically maximalist proposition that divinity-and-the-universe—perfection alloyed with imperfection—is superior to "just divinity," if there were such a thing. But here a light touch is required: the impulse to make it into a proposition can be at odds with what the proposition was meant to deliver. Gerard Manley Hopkins celebrated "Pied Beauty" ("Glory be to God for dappled things") but his orthodoxy led him, at the last minute, dualistically to counterpose a dappled and changeable world with a divinity "whose beauty is past change." Dualisms reassert themselves.

The way to find the infinite-hidden-in-the finite is not to repeat the dualistic cliché of how the infinitude

and sublimity of God transcends all finite and fragmented things but to value the opalescent finite exorbitantly and extravagantly and find divinity there.

You might take opalescence as a metaphor for a range of other phenomena: writing in which flashes of light and color iridesce with and against a sometimes opaque background, words or worlds in which meaning is made in the play of presence and absence, or the glimmery inhabitation of the sublime or divine in experience or in an otherwise rationalist world at large. But as I am using it, opalescence is a primordial logic or a modality that is played out by opals, language, and worlds not as mere metaphor but as an actual family resemblance. You might say instead, if you're so inclined, that *opalescence is a maximalist's name of God*.

PROMPT 22: *Sacralizing Opalescence.* Create a rite, a meditative or contemplative practice, a sacred space or object or shrine or text (prayer or psalm, creation myth, altar or shrine, vestments, icons, cathedrals)—or anything up to a full-blown maximalist religion—in which opalescence is approached as holy.

4•14
More Maximalist Art-Making Principles in the Form of Prompts and Questions

4.14.1. Frame/Form and Content

Framing is a way of dominating or controlling or closing off content—for example, by crisply and impenetrably marking off the realm of the aesthetic (as in theater's fourth wall). But complex open systems—living things, for example (though there is a good argument to be made that all complex systems are alive)—need boundaries and provisional insides and outsides (their closure) as much as they need traffic between them (their openness): they need to breathe. They need both fully to belong and fully not to belong to their environments. Understanding systems means deconstructing the idea of inside and outside.

In maximalism, content has to win over frame/form, but not without a fight, and not by a knockout. Remember that frames can be outside-- or inside (as a kind of armature; an interior structure) or conceptual or categorical.

PROMPT 23: *Realizing the Narrow Victory of Content over Form.* **(1)** Create a small project in the media of your choice that enacts or embodies the victory of content over frame/form, reveals it as a conflict or contradiction, disproves or argues with it. You might be the kind of person who starts with the principles and then makes the project according to them—this might be identified as the work of an *illustrator*—but you might be the kind of person who makes the project first (with these ideas in mind but only as catalysts) and then, only after the fact, tries to explain how it fulfills the guidelines. Either way is fine! Or if you're lazy—which is fine too—you could simply pick some famous work—or reimagine some famous work with some alterations of your own—that illustrates or enacts the principles. **(2)** In a few sentences (or more if you're so inclined) explain how the project or work embodies the principles.

4.14.2. Unity and Plurality

Here's another way of articulating the someness principle: in maximalism, unity has to win, like it or not, but again, just barely, and not without a fight. Multiplicity should still be able to argue compellingly that it is winning.

PROMPT 24: *Unity Wins (Just Barely) Over Plurality.* **(1)** Create or find a work that enacts this principle, and **(2)** briefly explain how.

4.14.3. Sameness and Difference

(a) Sameness can be embodied in a monolithic identity, a single thing with an overall name, but more often it involves several things that are "the same" in some definitive way. (b) Difference is best enacted by several things that are different but not in the same way: this means that "apples and oranges" doesn't qualify but "fish and bicycle" does. Difference includes self-difference, which refers to how a complex thing is not subsumed under a single identity or umbrella unity. (c) Pattern is an orchestration of samenesses and differences. The maximalist account is that pattern is primordial and generates samenesses and differences, not the other way around. (d) Absence—is none of the above.

Let's say that in a maximalist work, all four of these—sameness, difference, pattern, and absence—have to remain in play.

PROMPT 25: *Orchestrating Sameness, Difference, Pattern, Absence.* Now **(1)** create or find a work that enacts this constellation of principles, and **(2)** briefly explain how it embodies each principle. Or pick an already-existing work or an imagined work (one of yours, or a famous work, or a famous work of yours) and say how it embodies the principles. Disagree with my assertion that a maximalist work keeps these four qualities in play? Show me!

4.14.4. Fractal Similarity, Difference, Pattern

Fractal (as we have begun to explore, above) refers to the relationships between the density of detail at different scales. For example: think of a sculpture in which there is (a) texture at a very small scale (say, a certain degree of roughness or smoothness), (b) printed patterns at the slightly larger scale of millimeters, (c) 3-D shape and articulation at the scale of maybe an inch or two (as there would be if a patterned flat surface were distorted into bumps a couple inches high), and (d) again at a larger scale (if the bumps were on the surface of a considerably larger, voluptuous object). Fractal relationships are always present: you have probably heard that the earth, even with its mountain ranges and ocean trenches, is proportionally smoother than a billiard ball, while the smoothest mirror is jaggedly rough at the atomic scale. Fractal relationships are always present; the point is just to think about them in order to be able to make decisions about them. For example, a small over-all pattern on a big shape will read as decoration. A big pattern will clash with and challenge the overall shape.

PROMPT 26: *The Fractal Signatures of Art and Entities.* **Q** Is there a complexity of fractal relationships that reads as art, and another as an entity? One that reads as art *and* reads as an entity? (This may be where you can get into trouble in the "uncanny valley.") I'm more interested in where these two overlap than in how they differ. (This may be where you can get out of the trouble.) Either way, show me!

4.14.5. Series and Formulae

It often takes poets (for example) a long time to find or make their "signature" forms. Photographers tend to work in series almost immediately; a series can be a way of making something uninteresting in itself into something like art (e.g., photos of the same red couch in different landscapes). So: yes, artists and designers and writers should move quickly—prematurely, immediately—into doing series, sticking with a formula or a repeated gimmick or algorithm. It will evolve quickly—but only if you follow through with it, of course. Working with similarity/difference and unity/plurality across multiple pieces will enhance them as individual pieces, even when they are not displayed together—like magic.

The old-school way is to number each piece (sonnet 33, symphony #9, Dreamsong #310). A series is a way of exploring similarity and difference in a more or less maximalist way, but the almost universal characteristic of a series—that it remains in a single medium and genre, and almost always

a very narrowly defined subset of that— keeps it on the minimalist end. The obvious way of countering this would be to imagine a series that traverses multiple media and genres but is unified by some particular principle.

Something like "movies, poetry, and visual art about Mary Wollstonecraft" sounds like (probably unimaginative) programming for a museum but it isn't a series.

PROMPT 27: *Are There Transmedia Series?* **Q** Does the work produced in response to some of the prompts in this essay—insofar as they have been realized by artists, designers, writers in different media—come closer to a transmedia series? Or is there no such thing?

My real aspiration here is to create prompts and exercises that will help artists and designers explore possibility space in a way that makes it more likely that they will find—or be on a path to find—signature forms and creative processes. I've never found a signature form, myself, though I keep trying—as in this book, insofar as it combines philosophical inquiry with my other long-term commitments to teaching, writing and visual art. This overall mix is also fractally represented in the book's various subunits—that is, in individual prompts, or sometimes in individual sentences.

PROMPT 28: *Your Final Maximalism Project.* Of all the prompts and projects in this chapter, which has been—or might be— most congenial or productive for you? Which can you imagine sustaining your interest as a daily or weekly practice over weeks—or even months or years? This is your final project.

4·15
Coda : A Pile of Things

"This is your final project" would have been a great way to end this, wouldn't it? The first prompt solicited your casual ideas of what maximalism might be and the last sends you out into the world for a sustained engagement with maximalism "over weeks—or even months or years." But such a neat trajectory wouldn't be very maximalist, would it?

When I'm writing, I explore various branching trains of thought as I go, and many of these end up being cut. I keep an open space labeled EXCESS at the end of the document and, as I go, I move passages that I'm cutting into that space—as per William Blake's maximalist maxim, "you never know what is enough unless you know what is more than enough." I like to think this process works in the same way that brains develop by pruning out the neurons that make the fewest numbers of connections to other neurons, ensuring that what's left will be maximally interconnected. The chapter evolves into coherence—comes into its own—and begins to move according to its own logic, like a glacier, pushing the excess ahead of it like a terminal moraine—a pile of fragments of different sizes. So I find it satisfying to end the chapter with a pile of things.

The grid project I called Thingfield (above) is highly—and at least at one level, reductively and minimalistically—ordered. At the other end—the messy, disorderly end—might be a simple pile of things.

A pile of things is not a work of art! I can imagine a sculpture professor angrily saying this to a student whose inclinations are toward conceptual art. If you're like me, a statement like this is basically daring you to prove it wrong. It is sometimes said that art is whatever you can get away with, but in my experience, some things you can't get away with are art, too.

PROMPT 29: *Making a Pile of Things into Art.* **(1)** Find some pictures of piles of things, or pile up some images of things, or (ideally, at least to my taste) make your own actual pile of actual things. If you're a writer, I guess you could pile up, across several pages, various randomly chosen excerpts, or use a cut-up method.

What permutations can you imagine—or, ideally, realize—by manipulating the pile or the image of the pile—that would make it into art? I suggest that you do five iterations, and I invite you to use some of the principles we've been considering. Include a sentence or two about each one.

The most obvious and non-labor-intensive way of making a pile of things into art is to put it in a white-walled gallery with a label on the wall naming it, identifying the artist and listing the materials used. This is good for a cheap laugh, but good luck selling it: not only has it been done many times, but most collectors wouldn't really want it in their houses—so bourgeois, but there it is! So let's not use this exact strategy but still say that **(2)** one of your iterations has to involve recontextualizing the pile without changing the pile itself. For the other four, you can change the context if you like, but also change the pile itself.

Now **(3)**, how would you CURATE the piles that people have made into a group show or installation, a book, video, etc.? This is the meta project—the "pile of piles" project. Chances are you won't be able to fully realize this project—unless someone gets inspired—but we should get far enough with imagining it that we could take it to the next step if we had the time and resources. The key, again, is that the project must walk a tightrope between getting too highly ordered—say, if a picture of each were arranged into a grid pattern in a coffee-table art book (*ho hum*)—and too random—as if an F5 tornado came through a second-hand store (*eek*). How will you incorporate just enough of that delicious "pileness" in your pile of piles?

This prompt is meant to demonstrate the maximalist principle that there is a sweet spot where an argument and a list meet; a list is one incarnation of the pile.

When I was teaching Ph.D. students, I often got some form of the question of how unified a dissertation should be—how subordinated to a single over-arching argument. I developed a stock response: go ahead and see how heterogeneous and unrelated you can make the chapters. Because of the limitations of your own thinking, I doubt if you can make it truly heterogeneous, but go ahead and try! I felt that I was being asked, as an authority figure, to issue a mandate or a prohibition, and that I had to figure out how instead to issue a license. This is what I hoped my students would internalize, since it's the only way actually to explore the unity and/or heterogeneity of an argument.

Likewise, I often find that undergraduate student writers have had it beaten into them in high school that they must forge unity by making transitions between paragraphs, and that this often leads to flattened writing with lots of *thus we sees* and *likewises* and *accordinglys* and *on the contrarys*—and other heavy-handed attempts to enforce the appearance of unified, linear argumentative progression. Accordingly, and on the contrary, I ask them to try the opposite: number your paragraphs and eliminate transitional phrases, making it less like a linear argument or a story and more like a list, however random or interconnected each item might be with the others. I know this is the right way of proceeding because (1) students often find it difficult (and, at the same time, they can feel the pleasure of being critiqued for not being disjointed and fragmented enough); (2) their writing tends to become more economical, surprising, and fun to read, and (3) the thinking they had felt obliged to dress up as a conventional argument can at least move in the direction of genuine or unconventional argument.

When an extremely messy friend of ours was moving, my friend joked that her boxes of books and clothes and dishes were probably labeled "Living Room Floor" and "Piled on Bed."

PROMPT 30: *Is Maximalism One Thing or Many?* Finally, a simple either-or question; of course it might be a trick question. **Q** Do you feel that this chapter is an attic piled full of hobby-horses, and/or a complex, organically integrated system? That maximalism is one thing and/or a sprawling archipelago of many? I hope so!