



Turning Point.

## Local Turbulence: Art of the Outmoded in New York, Part 1

Harry Gould Harvey IV at Bureau



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Fall River, Massachusetts is perhaps best-known as a once-bustling textile manufacturing hub, a city of immovable-looking mills built from the ancient granite on which it rests. A relic spanning from the earliest industrial boom to what Marxist economist Ernest Mandel firmly dated as the last of the “long period[s]” of capitalist expansion (roughly 1940-1970) in his tome *Late Capitalism*, this distinctive, stubborn architecture consigns Fall River to a present whose future will almost certainly bear some heavy-handed reference to its past.<sup>1</sup> Harry Gould Harvey IV has taken Fall River and its surrounds—his birthplace and working residence—as the subject of *The Confusion of Tongues!*, his first solo show at Bureau.



Harry Gould Harvey IV, *A Plastic Bag a Vulture a Phantom of Industry* (2021)  
Charred 18th century English Walnut, charred Black Walnut, MDF, beeswax,  
colored pencil and charcoal on archival matboard, 35 ¾ x 25 ½ x 1 ¾ in.

Many of the works feature a unique type of projective, geometric drawing executed in colored pencil and charcoal on matboard and containing radial poetic phrases. The compositions are set into frames made of collaged wood ornamentation, much of which the artist salvaged from a historic Gilded Age mansion in Newport, Rhode Island, where it was originally crafted by now totally anonymous laborers. Harvey took a flame to the wood, charring its surface to a deep brownish-black, before exhibiting it here. Other works treat the now blackened Gothic Revival ornamentals that once adorned the former house as wall reliefs and even stand-alone sculptures, and incorporate cast white bronze elements that Harvey has handcrafted to resemble barbed wire, chain, and weepy hearts—overly-poignant hardware that braces, attaches, or otherwise supports the overall *mise-en-scène*.



Harry Gould Harvey IV, *A Proposal for a New Statue of Liberty toward the Epoch of A New 'G\*d'*, 2021, Charred architectural salvage, cast white bronze, used motor oil, OSB, beeswax, 66 ¼ × 81 × 14 in.

In a short explanatory pamphlet meant to accompany the show, Harvey contemplates the South Coast region's linguistic ethnography and its embedded class structures, before quickly turning a naturalist's eye to the region, detailing the types of wood used in his work and their role in the area's broader ecology. *Quercus alba* (white oak), a staple of his, is a local, ecological mainstay—one under threat from the invasive gypsy moth. Harvey goes on to liken his fiery work process to the controlled burn, a basic—even pre-historic—procedure used to manage forest and brush. A metaphor for processes of ruination, recuperation, and rebirth, the controlled burn, for Harvey, is an “ecological technique” to be used “on the surface of foraged and found materials ... stripping, charring, and burning the previous layers and history.”

Harvey's neo-Gothic *nature morte* calls up an indispensable art-historical precedent, Surrealism, and the movement's great intellectual apostle, Walter Benjamin:

Balzac was the first to speak of the ruins of the bourgeoisie. But only Surrealism exposed them to view. The development of the forces of production reduced the wish symbols of the previous century to rubble even before the monuments representing them had crumbled. ... They are the residues of a dream world. The realization of dream elements in waking is the textbook example of dialectical thinking. [D]ialectical thinking is the organ of historical awakening. Each epoch not only dreams the next, but also, in dreaming, strives toward the moment of waking.<sup>2</sup>

To what extent, then, does Harvey's blowtorch transformation of the nineteenth-century Newport bourgeoisie's "wish symbols" ignite a sense of new perspective, one that is optimistic, redemptive even?

In his 1993 reassessment of Surrealism, Hal Foster teased out an essential psychic gesture from within the heterogeneous array of surrealist practices, appealing to the Freudian uncanny for an interpretive assist as "a concern with events in which repressed material returns in ways that disrupt unitary identity, aesthetic norms and social order."<sup>3</sup> This last disruption is of interest here, a mix-up in the commonplace profound enough to be revelatory. Foster credits André Breton with elevating these occurrences to the status of privileged aesthetic experience by assigning them to "the marvelous", a category Breton invoked as fundamental to the surrealist assault on interwar European culture.<sup>4</sup> Mining Benjamin's account of the surrealists's obsession with the "outmoded"<sup>5</sup>—the life-world of dead commodities, "the ruins of the bourgeoisie"—Foster locates the "social register" of the uncanny, wherein Surrealism "recovers repressed historical as well as psychic materials."<sup>6</sup>



Raoul Ubac, *Fossil of the Eiffel Tower*, (1939) Photograph in *Minotaure* 12-13 (September 1939). Page 156.

Foster turns to Raoul Ubac's augmented photographs of nineteenth-century Parisian monuments as an example. Ubac's *Fossil of the Eiffel Tower* (1939) refashions the Parisian icon through clever illusionism produced by a superimposed photochemical filter—essentially, montage—to appear as a fossil frozen in stone. The metaphor here is as literal as it is illusionistic: Paris, represented by the visage of monuments, has ossified. The prehistory of the contemporary bourgeoisie is arrested in the continual cycle of commercial obsolescence and renewal necessitated by the commodity form itself. "[T]he modern," Foster writes, "is seen as the primal, and cultural history is recast as natural history."<sup>7</sup> In lieu of full-scale revolution, it is in the "accelerated archaism" of bourgeois wish symbols, as surrealist ruins, that the bourgeois present-history is thus "relativized," becoming prehistoric if only in glimpses.<sup>8</sup>

In the remaining detritus of the bourgeoisie past, the surrealists were the first to witness the transience of the bourgeoisie present. In these instances of accelerated dilapidation and impermanence, the surrealists caught sight of a break in the everyday order of things, reveled in marvelous "revolutionary nihilism."<sup>9</sup> Yet with the Freudian psyche, uncanny returns can be missed, lost, or misdirected. Foster's return-of-the-repressed intimates several outcomes other than recovery and redemption: nihilism trained towards less than revolutionary goals. Foster is quick to point out, Albert Speer had a template for history modeled on the marvelous ruin. The Nazi master-builder's "A Theory of the Value of Ruins" (1938) laid down the Third Reich's demand for an architecture that presaged its own demise, projected itself hundreds of years into the future and sought beauty in its own remains—not just wondrous beauty, but a wonderment-cum-obedience meant to overwhelm the fascist subject into political submission.<sup>10</sup> The result was kitsch that pilfered neoclassicism and modernist austerity in equal measure at its own suicidal convenience.

Finally, Foster reminds us of the functional overlap between Benjamin's "outmoded" and "the nonsynchronous," a concept he picks up from Benjamin's contemporary, the Germany Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch in the latter's appropriately alarmist *Heritage of Our Times* (1935).<sup>11</sup> The nonsynchronous attacked Nazism's popular appeals to sham history and ancestral mythologies—not to mention Nazi natural history—by deploying Marx's insight that uneven development in modes of production across space will appear as uneven levels of cultural development with regards to time. 1930s Germany was certainly riven with such unevenness. Decades of rapid modernization, which included the punishing loss of a world war, had manifest a schizoid cultural landscape wherein the Nazis found ample frisson to exploit for their own all-consuming will-to-power.

The deadly power and consumption conjured by the term "wildfire" ultimately implies a natural process: lightning strikes, forests burn. The controlled burn simulates the process by which forests naturally self-regulate via wildfire in a manner that is much less catastrophic for their human neighbors. Harvey's use of this process as a metaphor is predicated on a deathly elision of the natural and the social, as opposed to their positioning as dialectical categories, brushing past an anti-mythical maxim regarding nineteenth-century history recast as primal history Benjamin noted in an



early sketch of his incomplete magnum opus, the *Arcades Project*: “All categories of the philosophy of history must here be driven to the point of indifference. No Historical category without natural substance; no natural substance without its historical filter.”<sup>12</sup> Obscured in Harvey’s *object trouvé* gesture is the imbrication of both categories, the reclaiming of a social object to read it as both social and natural by appeal to place. This is not siting *per se* but siting as an avatar of primal feeling: blood and soil. It is the overlapping of social pessimism—nihilism really—with ecological concern. Buried under this anthropomorphic concern for the Anthropocene and its effects is a hopelessness akin to the one Benjamin surely felt by the end of the 1930s. This hopeless feeling is just that, a feeling—and a diversion.

Consider the Greta Thunberg Spectacle, the teenager’s whinings as they are blasted across all corners of the media life-space. At what level—emotional or rational—is this messaging meant to register? There are grave societal decisions bound up in the looming specter of climate catastrophe—the ultimate outmoding! Are we not being made the double victim of ecological destruction and a neoliberal smokescreen that binds us to a reality in which such cataclysm is neither denied nor resolved—again!—à la Benjamin, through a revolutionary shift of perspective? Perhaps Harvey is right, we do face decidedly un-optimistic insights: impending climate catastrophe may likely be the grand finale collision in which the development of capital meets the Second Law of Thermodynamics. In this case, a dialectics of indifference may paradoxically be a source of hope. As Theodor Adorno said—echoing his then late-compatriot Benjamin—of Surrealism in retrospect:

[I]t must be understood not as a language of immediacy but as witness to abstract freedom’s reversion to the supremacy of objects and thus to mere nature. The montages of Surrealism are the true still lives. In making compositions out of what is out of date, they create *nature morte*.<sup>13</sup>

Harry Gould Harvey IV  
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1 Ernest Mandel, *Late Capitalism*, trans. Joris De Bres (London: Verso, 1999), 120-21.

2 Walter Benjamin, “Paris—the Capital of the Ninetieth Century,” in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Boston: Mariner Books, 2019), 171-72.

3 Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), xvii.

4 *Ibid.*, 19-21.

5 Walter Benjamin, “Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia,” in *Reflections*, 192.

6 Foster, *Compulsive Beauty*, 157.

7 *Ibid.*, 156, 166.

8 *Ibid.*, 162.

9 Benjamin, “Surrealism,” 192.

10 Foster, 167.

11 *Ibid.*, 188-89. See Ernst Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times*, trans. Neville and Stephan Plaice (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1991).

12 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 864. Also cited in Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 59.

13 Theodor W. Adorno, “Looking Back on Surrealism,” in *Notes to Literature*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 104.