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## Supermarket Sociology

David J. Alworth

ÉMILE DURKHEIM WOULD NOT LIVE LONG ENOUGH to see the arrival of the supermarket in France. Nor would he witness its expansion into the more flamboyant form of food retailing aptly named the *hypermarché*. It wasn't until after World War II and during the Marshall Plan, in which food aid was a central component, that American-style supermarkets began to crop up all over Europe.<sup>1</sup> And it wasn't until 1963 that the Carrefour Company constructed the first of its hypermarkets just outside Paris. After assimilating the dictates of Bernardo Trujillo, an Ohio-based business educator affectionately known as "the pope of modern commerce," the Carrefour developers designed a food-retailing institution unprecedented in both size and style: 2,500 square meters, 450 parking spaces, and a plethora of items (clothes, household appliances, low-cost petrol) and amenities (a cafeteria, a bakery, a dry cleaners) not aggregated in quite the same way anywhere else.<sup>2</sup> Hypermarket grand openings were characteristically hyperreal. They featured circus amusements and games hosted by a television personality, and they included large-scale binge drinking: ten thousand liters of vin de Touraine served from a marquee on the parking lot.<sup>3</sup> It's possible that the founder of modern sociology would've had something to say about such a scene, an early instance of the mass spectacle that eventually would become a hallmark of postmodernism, but his death from exhaustion just after World War I leaves us free to speculate on what that might have been. It leaves us on our own, that is, to imagine a supermarket sociology.

Such a speculative fantasy is more serious than it may seem, for it stages a series of instructive encounters: between fin-de-siècle Europe and the postwar United States; between high theory and vernacular culture; between the systematicity of social science and the heterogeneity of lived experience; between one period imaginary (the industrialization, fragmentation, and anomie of modernity) and another (the globalization, decenteredness, and depthlessness of postmodernity). Moreover, to picture Durkheim strolling the aisles of a supermarket that he never could have visited is, in some perverse sense, to proximate sociological concepts and social facts in order to track the ways

in which an ever-modernizing social world can exert pressure on the theoretical models by which that world is understood.<sup>4</sup> Such is the goal of this essay. I want to portray an image of the relationship between the epistemic structure of sociological theory and the physical infrastructure of society. This will involve two interrelated steps. First, I will examine how a real site, the supermarket, has become a “metaphor” meant to exemplify certain concepts in recent sociological thought: the actor-network-theory of Bruno Latour. Then I will position Latour’s metaphor alongside other responses to the supermarket in the literary and visual arts, ultimately to argue that the aesthetics of site specificity can be a sociological enterprise.<sup>5</sup>

The site, the supermarket, thus serves to organize a comparison of art and sociology that diverts from more familiar approaches in the field of literary studies. My project is not a sociology *of* literature, but an attempt to see what happens when sociology *and* literature are reciprocally illuminated by their dissimilar, yet comparable, approaches to the same site.<sup>6</sup> And my goal is not to understand the social context of literary production in a given period, but to argue that literary and artistic texts can develop a sociology all their own. In this regard, I mean to emphasize the former of the two possibilities suggested by Pierre Bourdieu in his influential reading of *Madame Bovary*: “In sum, on the one hand, Flaubert’s sociology, meaning the sociology he produces; on the other, the sociology of Flaubert, meaning the sociology of which he is the object.”<sup>7</sup> What would it mean to read a work of literature as a sociological monograph? This essay forms an answer to that question, devoting much of its energy to one novel, Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*, and one social-theoretical text, Bruno Latour’s *Reassembling the Social*, to compare their respective figurations of the supermarket, with the ultimate aim of developing a more general understanding of how literary studies and sociology (and, by extension, how the human and social sciences) might become newly aligned in an attempt to think the social and its constituents. In the broadest sense, I hope to demonstrate that these two disciplines still have much to teach one another, provided they discover, literally, a site of contact.

## I. The Supermarket Sociologist

In Durkheim’s era, sociology learned a great deal from literature. As Susan Mizruchi explains, “What literary sources offered were not only characters more richly drawn than those in history books but a common storehouse of culturally specific types—both situational and

human—whose properties could resonate in a variety of unpredictable ways, depending on the context.”<sup>8</sup> It seems fitting, then, that the most thorough critique of Durkheimian sociology to have emerged in recent years should proceed with and through literary theory. Bruno Latour, known for his pioneering work in the interdiscipline of Science Studies, has recently turned his attention to sociology.<sup>9</sup> His *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* is, above all, a challenge to the Durkheimian understanding of the social as autonomous, sui generis, and comprised of uniquely social (as opposed to, say, natural) materials.<sup>10</sup> By contrast, Latour argues that the social is best understood as a constitutively impure and ever-shifting assemblage of humans and nonhumans, both natural and artifactual. Furthermore, he considers the Durkheimian model to be a hypostasis that improperly cordons off one segment of an interconnected world, and he develops an alternative that treats the social as a matrix of innumerable networks comprised of manifold actors in contingent and momentary relationships that must be traced before they can be understood.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, some portion of the real, what Durkheim called “the particular and the concrete,” can be considered social only after it has been delineated as such by the work of actor-network-theory.<sup>12</sup> Rather than being a preconstituted domain opposed to the natural, then, the social is literally *figured out* by actor-network-theory: it is given a kind of figural expression in the sociological monograph not unlike that which is proffered by narrative prose fiction. Hence the reason literary theory is so important for this sociology. “Because they deal with fiction,” Latour explains, “literary theorists have been much freer in their enquiries about figuration than any social scientist, especially when they have used semiotics and the various narrative sciences” (R 54). It is not that “literary theorists would know more than sociologists,” he assures, but that “some continuous familiarity with literature” might enable sociologists to “become less wooden, less rigid, less stiff in their definition of what sorts of agencies populate the world” (R 55).

Agency is a key term in Latour’s thought, and its redescription is perhaps the most important contribution of actor-network-theory. From his point of view, agency is always figured in one way or another whenever it’s conceptualized, regardless of how abstract or concrete that figuration. If agency is, most simply, the capacity for action, then whatever accomplishes an activity is always endowed “with some flesh and features that make [it] have some form or shape, no matter how vague” (R 53). To preserve the distinction between agency and its figuration, Latour relies on the term “actant,” which he gleans from the narratology of A. J. Greimas. In *Semiotics and Language*, Greimas makes clear that “an

actant can be thought of as that which accomplishes or undergoes an act, independently of all other determinations,” meaning it is “a type of syntactic unit, properly formal in character, which precedes any semantic or ideological investment.”<sup>13</sup>

The technology of narrative, according to Greimas, includes six actants paired in binary opposition—subject/object, sender/receiver, and helper/opponent—and these actants, once “invested” or figured, can become anthropomorphic (characters) or idiomorphic (ideas) or zoomorphic (animals) and so forth. Thus, agency in Greimasian narratology is not only distinguished from its multiple figural levels; it is also extended to nonhumans, including both physical objects and abstractions. As long as we’re inside a narratological framework trying to apprehend a narrative text, this seems a reasonable notion, but it becomes less comfortable when our object of analysis is society and our analytical device is an emergent social theory. We have no trouble understanding “a fable,” as Latour puts it, in which “the same actant can be made to act through the agency of a magic wand, a dwarf, a thought in the fairy’s mind, or a knight killing two dozen dragons” (*R* 54); it is more difficult, however, for us to think of the social world as a universe of human and nonhuman actants, giving form and figure to innumerable agencies.

Unless we stroll through the supermarket. Latour himself heads there when he needs a familiar environment in which to situate his defamiliarizing claims. Is it possible, then, that Bruno Latour is who Durkheim *would have been* had he shopped at the *hypermarché*? What Latour calls the “metaphor of the supermarket” appears at two key junctures in *Reassembling the Social* (*R* 65). In both instances, it serves to distance ANT from traditional sociology while clarifying the distinction between agency and its figuration. There is “a shelf full of ‘social ties’”—to be distinguished from the economic, material, psychological, and biological ties that bind the goods on other shelves—in the “imaginary supermarket” of traditional sociology (*R* 65). From the point of view of ANT, however, the entire supermarket should be understood as a social whole, a network whose goods serve as actants variously figured by “their packaging, their pricing, their labeling” (*R* 65). In the ANT supermarket, the human subject is not only one of the many actants constituting the network, but itself constituted by the objects in its environment, the “bewildering array of devices” that buzz and jingle and flash in every aisle and on every shelf (*R* 210). In the ANT supermarket, moreover, “when one has to make the mundane decision about which kind of sliced ham to choose,” one always benefits from the “dozens of measurement instruments” that capacitate the subject as a consumer (*R* 210). Thus, it makes no sense to

polarize subject and object in the ANT supermarket, just as it would be impossible in this site to restrict agency to the human particular.

This conception of agency—call it, distributed agency—poses a real challenge to what C. Wright Mills called the “sociological imagination,” and it has metaphysical consequences that traverse the boundaries established by what Maurice Merleau-Ponty named the “cold war” between philosophy and sociology.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, it was first developed (and is still, perhaps, most powerfully expressed) in literary theory. To understand distributed agency, therefore, is to understand a certain nexus of humanistic and social-scientific thought, which has narratology at its base, but which does not address itself to questions of literary form and structure per se. And yet, it seems reasonable to wonder whether a literary text might contribute to an appreciation (whether sociological, metaphysical, or both) of distributed agency as a feature of the social world.<sup>15</sup> Whereas a fable, from Latour’s perspective, can uncouple agency from the human in an unproblematic way, what happens when a contemporary novel pursues the same uncoupling without venturing into the realm of knights and fairies—that is, while visualizing ordinary life in the supermarket? This is a question begged by Latour’s treatment of the literary in *Reassembling the Social*, yet its answer resides elsewhere, in a literary text, instabilities of textuality aside, that begins to stabilize the experiential pandemonium of the live supermarket.

## II. A Novel View of Supermarkets

Early in Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*, we read the second of four extended scenes that take place in a typical American supermarket circa 1985. The narrator, Jack Gladney, has ostensibly brought his family there to complete the mundane task of purchasing the groceries, but the site is also a kind of holy temple demanding pilgrimage: “This place recharges us spiritually,” one of the characters remarks, “it prepares us, it’s a gateway or pathway. Look how bright. It’s full of psychic data.”<sup>16</sup> After exchanging pleasantries with the eccentric Murray Jay Siskind, a professor of American Environments at the college where Jack teaches Hitler Studies, Jack and his daughter coast down the generic food aisle and over to the produce:

Steffie took my hand and we walked past the fruit bins, an area that extended about forty-five yards along the wall. The bins were arranged diagonally and backed by mirrors that people accidentally punched when reaching for fruit in the upper rows. A voice on the loudspeaker said: “Kleenex Softique, your

truck's blocking the entrance." Apples and lemons tumbled in twos and threes to the floor when someone took a fruit from certain places in the stacked array. There were six kinds of apples, there were exotic melons in several pastels. Everything seemed to be in season, sprayed, burnished, bright. People tore filmy bags from racks and tried to figure out which end opened. I realized the place was awash in noise. The toneless systems, the jangle and skid of carts, the loudspeaker and coffee-making machines, the cries of children. And over it all, or under it, a dull and unlocatable roar, as of some form of swarming life just outside the range of human apprehension. (*WN* 36)

It is difficult not to hear Allen Ginsberg's "Supermarket in California" at the beginning of this passage and more difficult still not to see the poet himself, somewhere in the background of DeLillo's scene, strolling the aisles alongside a wizened Whitman, eyeing the grocery boys: "What peaches and what penumbras!"<sup>17</sup> But DeLillo is not narrativizing Ginsberg's "lost America of love." What is remarkable about this passage, before the final sentence, is the plainspoken clarity of the narrator's observations, which precisely delineate the social relations of humans and nonhumans in the supermarket.<sup>18</sup>

In Ginsberg's poem, social relations are pictured differently: Whitman and the speaker cruise "down the open corridors together in [their] / solitary fancy tasting artichokes, possessing every frozen / delicacy, and never passing the cashier." The supermarket in the poem thus mediates a transhistorical homosocial and homosexual bond, and food objects enable a certain triangulation of desire that is erotic, yet emphatically nonconsumerist.<sup>19</sup> In this sense, the poem makes objects (watermelons, meats, artichokes) into symbols that eroticize the anxiety of influence and mark the difference between Whitman's America and Ginsberg's. It is clear, however, that DeLillo does not want objects (fruit, filmy bags, carts) to function as symbols, or only as symbols, passive containers for human desire and meaning. Jack's description of the supermarket is no homoerotic fantasy of literary kinship, but a microethnography of humans and nonhumans in a given site, a portrait of sociality that includes the inapprehensible, or partially apprehensible, "swarming life" of foodstuffs, things, physical infrastructures, and technical objects.<sup>20</sup> In passages like these, therefore, *White Noise* figures something like a *nonhuman sphere* that is imbricated with the human one, however insufficiently apprehended by the constituents of the latter.

Here and throughout the novel, DeLillo stages the concerns of an ontological discussion that acquired new terms and reached a new pitch in the mid-1980s. In 1985, the same year that *White Noise* appeared, Donna Haraway first published her influential *Cyborg Manifesto*, which would help to rejuvenate ontological questions for literary and cultural

studies. The figure of the cyborg, according to Haraway, represents “transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities,” granting a certain purchase on what she calls the “informatics of domination.”<sup>21</sup> These issues sustained even more scrutiny during the next decade in the pioneering work of N. Katherine Hayles, whose *How We Became Posthuman* aims to foreground the importance of embodiment for ontological discussions across the disciplines of information science, media studies, and literary criticism. In an earlier article on *White Noise*, Hayles argues, “Embodiment in this text has been fetishized from the body to the commodities that litter nearly every page.”<sup>22</sup> The superfluity of things catalogued by the novel, beginning with its opening paragraph describing a long row of station wagons full of dorm-room durables, suggests to Hayles that “fetishism,” the novel’s and the characters’ libidinal attachment to things, “is necessary because the body is all too apt to disperse into the incident radiation that slices through materiality, exposing the ephemerality that belies its apparent solidity.”<sup>23</sup> For many critics, DeLillo responds to his moment in technological history—just prior to the onset of digital convergence—by simultaneously worrying the putatively immaterial materiality of “waves and radiation” and fetishizing the brute presence of physical things: “Boxes of blankets, boots and shoes, stationery and books, sheets and pillows” (*WN* 3).

In this regard, *White Noise* foregrounds some of the ways that transformations in technology and media affect the human species, even as it suggests a nonhuman world full of mystery and undiscovered meaning, which could explain why it has generated so much commentary about the status of image culture, spectacle, and the commodity form in postmodernity.<sup>24</sup> At the most fundamental level, *White Noise* is about the relationship between humans and various species of nonhumans, whether technical objects (televisions, clock radios), domestic machines (refrigerators, garbage disposals), commodities, consumer waste products, or hulking abstractions (the “Airborne Toxic Event”). At times, this relationship is the source of vague anxiety, but DeLillo has not scripted a science-fictional nightmare of cyborgs and supercomputers usurping the human. Rather, *White Noise* is a microethnographic treatment, however satirical, of social relations in American suburbia during the final decade of the Cold War. Through its descriptions of the supermarket and other social sites, the novel challenges us to redefine the term “social relations” by projecting a view of the social that plausibly includes human and nonhuman actors who are both fully and reciprocally agential.

Of course, DeLillo is not the first twentieth-century writer to consider the possibility of nonhuman agency. As Juan A. Suárez has argued, the surrealists set an important precedent in their poetics and polemics



dealing with the recalcitrance of the material world and “the feasibility of an objective automatism,”<sup>25</sup> although DeLillo is not relying on familiar surrealist compositional strategies, however surreal it is to suggest that nonhumans have “some form of swarming life just outside the range of human apprehension.” DeLillo’s prose is not a flourish of automatic writing but a highly controlled, ironized automatism—combining the idiolects of technobureaucrats and self-infatuated academics with everyday domestic language and the sounds of 1980s low technology—often in the form of short, declarative sentences. The novel’s language consistently registers the interpenetration of human and nonhuman (as in: “Kleenex Sofitique, your truck’s blocking the entrance”), just as Jack’s descriptions of the supermarket recall the *nouveau roman* in their emphasis on the physicality of the object world.<sup>26</sup> But Jack’s attention to the nonhuman never amounts to anything like a theory of sociality that includes human and nonhuman constituents. Jack, in other words, is no Bruno Latour. As he strolls the aisles, marveling at fruits and filmy bags, he focalizes a sociality that includes nonhumans, but he fails to cohere his observations into a fully formed sociology. He can see a new model of the social, that is, though he cannot conceptualize one.

### III. Agency in the Supermarket

Now one could say the exact opposite is true of Latour, since his “imaginary supermarket” hardly contains the imagistic density of a novelistic diegesis, even if it does allow him to exemplify a new sociology and to illustrate the paradox of nonhuman agency. Indeed, DeLillo and Latour offer very different treatments of this paradox, yet both are responding to a certain relay between human and nonhuman agency that manifests itself in the postmodern supermarket. What would it mean, then, to read DeLillo and Latour as collaborators trying to address the same problem with different disciplinary and discursive tools? Not only does synthesizing their respective approaches promise to provide more nuanced and sophisticated understandings of the supermarket and of nonhuman agency than either could provide individually; it could also suggest a new model of humanistic and social-scientific collaboration directed toward emergent problems in and of the social.

Some version of this collaboration, although nothing like what I have in mind, is satirized whenever Jack strolls the aisles, since the supermarket that he inhabits as an idiosyncratic humanist, a Hitler scholar, in the 1980s was formed in the 1950s and ’60s by business gurus armed with social-scientific insights.<sup>27</sup> In fact, when the 1959 meeting of the Super

Market Institute took place in Atlantic City, it could have been mistaken, according to *Time* magazine, for “a meeting of circus showmen or of sociologists.”<sup>28</sup> In an industry characterized by cutthroat competition, “today’s supermarket operators,” *Time* goes on to suggest, “must be both showmen and sociologists to sell their goods.” By the late 1950s, though, a degree of sociological acumen and a flair for salesmanship were not enough to cut the mustard, as it were. To be a success in self-service food retail, one had to promise what the competition had not yet even imagined.

That’s why the Kroger company installed lounges with “foam-rubber sofas” and “partitions to dampen noise,” allowing “the shopper” (read: the housewife) to continue “gathering gossip along with the groceries.” That’s why supermarkets everywhere were being spruced up with “circuslike kiddy corners and amusements” and retrofitted with “easy-touch cash register[s].” And that’s why checkout clerks were sent to an obligatory training course at the University of Houston—“Grocery Checking with Charm”—where they would learn the fundamentals of “personality and poise, how to dress and make up properly, how to discuss problems with customers, how to stand on a hard floor all day without becoming grouchy.” In the booming postwar economy, the success of any supermarket depended on a carefully orchestrated performance, informed from beginning to end by the best insights of marketing science and motivational research, enterprises that drew extensively from the resources of academic sociology and psychology.<sup>29</sup>

It is this triangulation of sociological thought, everyday-life practice, and quotidian spectacle that makes the supermarket, which became nearly ubiquitous in the United States during the 1960s and ’70s, an ideal site for investigating agency as a problematic of the postmodern social world. In fact, the consumer advocacy literature dealing with the supermarket is marked, over and over again, by the fear that the intentionality of the human subject is being overwhelmed by the forces of mass marketing and manipulative design. Vance Packard, in his bestselling *Hidden Persuaders*, was one of the first to sound the alarm: “Large-scale efforts are being made, often with impressive success, to channel our unthinking habits, or purchasing decisions, and our thought processes by the use of insights gleaned from psychiatry and the social sciences.”<sup>30</sup> These efforts included innovative packaging meant to “hypnotize the woman,” as well as floor plans meant to encourage the casual, dazed ambling that is so crucial to “impulse buying.”<sup>31</sup> Following Packard, it became commonplace to lament the plight of the supermarket shopper, especially the housewife. For William D. Zabel, a lawyer and former humanities professor at MIT, she was “the most exploited American

consumer," thoroughly incapable of making rational choices, always drawn to the unreasonably marked-up item, and ill equipped to outmaneuver the corporate marketers. "She may as well close her eyes and pick a package at random," he asserts, "She probably often does just that." (In contrast, Zabel notes, "The most pampered American consumer"—the American male buying booze—"has no such problems in his liquor store.")<sup>32</sup>

As one might expect, the supermarket has fared just as poorly in literary and cultural criticism, where it is often figured not as a site of corporate conspiracy and hapless consumption but as a symbol of American cultural degradation and anti-intellectualism. In *A Sad Heart at the Supermarket*, a collection of essays published in 1965, Randall Jarrell proffers an inflexible opposition between the culture of intellectuals, whom he describes as a "looked-down-on-class," and the culture of rapacious consumers.<sup>33</sup> Jarrell maintains the opposition between high culture and everything else, an expanding middlebrow. Leslie Fiedler has a somewhat more nuanced perspective:

For a long time the index of literacy has crept inexorably upward, the paperbacks in supermarkets have proliferated until there is scarcely room for bread and milk; and the boards of directors of large corporations have invited intellectuals to lecture their junior executives on Dostoevski and Kierkegaard and Freud. Most appalling of all, in the past couple of years, for the first time in our history, more Americans have attended cultural events than have paid to watch sports.<sup>34</sup>

What is obvious here is that Fiedler understands the rise of middlebrow literature, represented by the supermarket paperback, to be an indication of cultural stasis marked by the retreat of a well-developed literary vanguard and the advance of junior executives casually consuming the classics.<sup>35</sup> What is less clear, however, is that Fiedler is implicitly channeling Dwight MacDonald, who published a theory of middlebrow culture several years earlier in *Partisan Review*.<sup>36</sup> MacDonald memorably described the "tepid ooze of Midcult" as a falsification and exploitation of highbrow art by the industries of culture, a process whereby the formal innovations of the avant-garde are repackaged as mere entertainment.<sup>37</sup> Midcult was neither authentic like the folk tradition nor ambitious like highbrow art, but an inauspicious combination of the two that, by virtue of being generally tolerable, eventuated in a tepid ooze across otherwise disparate spheres of American society. Like Fiedler, MacDonald understood the supermarket to play a crucial role in the literary manifestation of middlebrow culture. "This is a magazine-reading country," he explains; "when one comes back from abroad, the two displays of American abundance that dazzle one are the supermarkets and the newsstands.

There are no British equivalents of our Midcult magazines like *Atlantic* and *The Saturday Review*.<sup>38</sup>

While foreign travel seems to have given MacDonald the capacity to be newly, if also ironically, “dazzled” by the American supermarket, foreigners themselves, as Victoria de Grazia has shown in her history of postwar Europe, were not uniformly receptive to its arrival.<sup>39</sup> In France, local butchers, who were being driven out of business by *la méthode américaine*, referred to the influx of supermarkets as “the plague.”<sup>40</sup> In Japan, the first supermarkets took on “the appearance of monsters” descending Godzilla-like on local grocers and “spreading over the country like wildfire.”<sup>41</sup> Yet not all cultures were so alarmed by this monstrosity. In parts of Italy, for instance, the supermarket was welcomed with open arms. When the Minimax chain opened a Rome store in 1965, *Time* reports, “it might have been the premiere of a new Fellini film.”<sup>42</sup> Like hypermarket grand openings in France, Minimax grand openings were spectacular events: “Row after row of limousines pulled up, cameras clicked on all sides, and the chic, smartly dressed guests sipped Scotch and martinis as they ogled a pop art exhibition that included plastic turkeys, fish, steaks and a display of Andy Warhol’s stacked Brillo Boxes.” Following the success of events like these, the mid-60s saw the full realization of the supermarket’s entertainment potential. Thanks to ABC, the 1966 U.S. television season included *Supermarket Sweep*, a game show involving the fast-paced, competitive pilfering of foodstuffs, which was “reminiscent,” as one review describes it, “of the late Roller Derby.”<sup>43</sup> Eventually *Supermarket Sweep* would become, like the institution from which it takes both its name and its mise-en-scène, an international sensation, with a London Tesco staging a mock-up of the show featuring former contestants trying to duplicate their feats of spectacular pseudo-consumption (Fig. 1 and 2).

Would it be extreme to call this the origin of postmodernism: a television show about supermarkets from the mid-60s that spawned a simulacral spectacle-event? This question, taken literally, is tantamount to asking whether an entire theory and practice of cultural production in the late twentieth century has emerged out of a food-retailing institution. And yet, it is far from absurd given the supermarket’s influence on canonical postmodern theory. *Learning from Las Vegas*, arguably the best known and most influential manifesto of architectural postmodernism, began as a field study of A&P parking lots.<sup>44</sup> Before getting to work on what would become *Learning*, Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steve Izenour published “A Significance for A&P Parking Lots, or Learning from Las Vegas” in the March 1968 issue of *Architectural Forum*. This article, the authors explain, “formed the basis for the research program” that



Fig. 1. Mrs. Buzidragis, winner of a U.S. Supermarket Sweep game show, attempts a repeat in a London Tesco. 10 August 1966. Photo: Terry Fincher.



Fig. 2. Joe Buzidragis, who did not participate in the U.S. game show, tries to help his parents win the Tesco contest. 10 August 1966. Photo: Terry Fincher.

would lead, first, to a more comprehensive study of the Vegas strip and, later, to the proclamations about “the ugly and ordinary in architecture” meant to interrupt the modernist orthodoxy of Le Corbusier and the International School.<sup>45</sup>

The claims in *Learning*, which includes the “A&P Parking Lots” article in its first section, mostly concern the outdoor built environment: the “vulgar extravaganza” of the street sign, for instance, exemplifies the new postmodernist tendency toward symbolic structures and “bold communication.”<sup>46</sup> When the architects do briefly venture indoors, though, they discover that the A&P is a reversion to the bazaar form, “except that graphic packaging has replaced the oral persuasion of the merchant.”<sup>47</sup> At this moment, the architects are noticing, but not exactly thinking through, a significant displacement of agency in the postmodern world. With the rise of self-service retailing—a phenomenon that has been dubbed the “revolution in distribution” for the twentieth century—the role of the salesperson has diminished to the degree that its nonhuman counterpart, the commodity package, has acquired the function of enticing, persuading, and ultimately overpowering the desire of the customer.<sup>48</sup>

This explains why consumer advocates, like Packard and Zabel, were so alarmed by packaging-design strategies, and this could explain why Latour situates the paradox of nonhuman agency in the supermarket, a site where the relay between human and nonhuman agency is so powerfully displayed. But display is not a central concern of Latour’s, even though the supermarket display system—from packaging design and shelving to store layout and lighting—could be considered a highly developed network of nonhuman social actants. Thus, to understand supermarket display in this manner, which is to follow a certain spectral logic in Latour’s thought, I would like to return to postwar American literature, this time to read it alongside postwar visual art.

#### IV. The Display of Agency and the Agency of Display

Many of the supermarket scenes in *White Noise* explore the interrelationship of agency and display. Although Jack notices this interrelationship, it is another character, Murray Jay Siskind, who is fixated on it throughout the novel. Murray’s observations are, at first, autobiographical: “Supermarkets this large and clean and modern are a revelation to me. I spent my life in small steamy delicatessens with slanted display cabinets full of trays that hold soft wet lumpy matter in pale colors. High enough cabinets so you had to stand on tiptoes to give your order. Shouts, ac-

cents" (*WN* 38). In contrast to the local, vaguely European grocery store that Murray recalls here, the postmodern American supermarket is a carefully designed system of display in which the customer's attention is always directed toward the packages that give undifferentiated matter an individuating figuration: "Dacron, Orlon, Lycra, Spandex" (*WN* 52). Furthermore, while Murray's grocery store is dense with inelegant human interaction (awkward tiptoeing and brash shouting), the postmodern supermarket is full of human-to-nonhuman contact and all but devoid of any interfacing between humans.

John Updike was the first American fiction writer to explore what this might mean. In his much-anthologized short story, "A&P," the psychosexual conflict is prompted by the intrusion of the human body into a site designed to foreground the nonhuman one: "In walks these three girls in nothing but bathing suits," the story begins.<sup>49</sup> For the narrator, Sammy, a clerk manning the third checkout slot, these girls become an object of attention; he anatomizes their bodies ("She was a chunky kid, with a good tan and a sweet broad soft-looking can with those two crescents of white just under it . . ."), which spurs his fantasies about their individual lives and his speculations about their shared lifeworld.<sup>50</sup> But the interior monologue of the clerk is not exactly what Updike means to explore; "A&P" is less about the private drama in Sammy's mind than the social codes of the supermarket, which have been altogether upended by the presence of these girls. "I bet you could set off dynamite in an A&P," Sammy asserts, "and the people would by and large keep reaching and checking oatmeal off their lists and muttering, 'Let me see, there was a third thing, began with A, asparagus, no, ah, yes, applesauce!' or whatever it is they do mutter." By contrast, "there was no doubt" that the presence of the girls "jiggled them."<sup>51</sup> Not even a bomb could distract the customers away from their attention to the stuff on the shelves; it takes the scandal of scantily clad adolescents, Sammy's hyperbole suggests, to disrupt business-as-usual in the supermarket.

And yet, in a different site these girls would be no scandal whatsoever. "[I]t's one thing to have a girl in a bathing suit down on the beach," Sammy opines, "and another thing in the cool of the A&P, under the fluorescent lights, against all those stacked packages, with her feet paddling along naked over our checkerboard green-and-cream rubber-tile floor." These girls are not merely out of place, but out of place in a site where human attentiveness is intensely directed, ideally toward the nonhuman body. When the girls enter the supermarket with their bodies exposed, however, the technology of display (its fluorescent lights, its cool interior, its muted floor) serves to exhibit them in a way that the beach never could. Their presence is staged by their environment, which is why they are more effective than "dynamite" at distracting customers



away from foodstuffs ready to hand. The scandal of these girls, then, is not their premature sexuality but their unwitting seizure of a display technology intended to ensure that nonhumans are always constituted as the objects of human attention. Furthermore, they reassert both human agency and human embodiment, however unaware they are of their effect on the other shoppers, in a site where nonhumans are the proper agents of seduction.

The seductive power of the nonhuman body is precisely what DeLillo's Murray means to avoid when he decides to start purchasing "nonbrand items in plain white packages with simple labeling" (WN 18). He explains to Jack that "[f]lavorless packaging" is the "new austerity" and that his consumption practices are deeply patriotic: "I feel I'm not only saving money but contributing to some kind of spiritual consensus. It's like World War III. Everything is white. They'll take our bright colors away and use them in the war effort" (WN 18). Likewise, Murray expresses a certain ambivalence about his colleagues' objects of study in the American Environments Department: "I understand the music, I understand the movies, I even see how comic books can tell us things. But there are full professors in this place who read nothing but cereal boxes." Not without some ambivalence of his own, Jack replies, "It's the only avant-garde we've got" (WN 10). This exchange, which continues as the topic shifts, sets the stage for Murray's performance of "austerity" with nonbrand items in the supermarket a few days later. Although Murray seeks to mitigate the power of packaging in the hope of contributing to some greater "spiritual consensus," he nonetheless appreciates the aesthetics of the supermarket shelf: "Most of all I like the packages themselves. You were right, Jack. This is the last avant-garde. Bold new forms. The power to shock" (WN 19).

In this conversation, Murray and Jack begin to develop a history of postwar art that emphasizes the dynamics of cooptation: the styles and strategies of the avant-garde have been so thoroughly appropriated by the advertising and marketing industries that one can now speak of the practices of the latter as authentically aesthetic.<sup>52</sup> For Murray, the supermarket is analogous to the gallery space, and its objects are formal achievements that correspond to, and even supplant, those of minimalism, conceptual art, and the other postwar avant-gardes. What Murray and Jack fail to acknowledge, however, is the history of Pop, a movement whose chief compositional strategies included the appropriation of advertising, foodstuffs, and supermarkets. As a professor of "living icons," Murray should have had more to say about this tradition and about Andy Warhol, in particular (WN 10).

If Warhol's work can be understood as site-specific, then the site of engagement is surely the supermarket, especially in the early 1960s, when



he was working with the iconography of Brillo, Heinz, Coke, Del Monte, and Campbell's. As John Cage glossed it in 1976, Warhol's supermarket art represents an advancement in the surrealist project, adjusting its emphasis from the individual human psyche to the institutional manifestations of a postmodern collective unconscious:

In Paris in the 20's we had Dada first, and it was followed by Surrealism. In Dada is a certain self-abnegation; in Surrealism is a certain self-pronouncement. Now, neo-Dada, which is what we have in New York in the work of Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, is followed by what's called Pop art, which is, in another sense, Surrealism. But it is not Surrealism as related to the individual, but Surrealism as related to society, so that Andy Warhol's work is like Andre Breton's, and we can equate Breton's interest in sex with Warhol's interest in supermarkets.<sup>53</sup>

Although characteristically elliptical, Cage suggests an intersection in Warhol's work of supermarkets, surrealism, and sociology. If the surrealists were interested in "the automatism of objects," as Suárez puts it, then Warhol's supermarket objects, by Cage's logic, must have an automatism of their own, one that is somehow "related to society."<sup>54</sup>

Two years after Irving Blum exhibited *Campbell's Soup Cans* at the Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles in 1962, and three years after Claes Oldenburg opened *The Store* in New York's Lower East Side, Warhol participated in the "American Supermarket" exhibition at the Bianchini Gallery (Fig. 3). In that show—which featured a half-dozen Pop artists, a commercial designer specializing in food replicas, and a gallerist taking orders on a grocer's pad—Warhol exhibited a readymade, a stack of autographed Campbell's soup cans, in addition to a painting from the *Campbell's Soup Cans* series and an installation of various box sculptures, including the famous *Brillo Boxes* (Fig. 4). A few months prior to this, the *Brillo Boxes* had been unveiled at the Stable Gallery in New York, occasioning a powerful, and still influential, interpretation from Arthur Danto in his address to the American Philosophical Association, "The Artworld" (Fig. 5). Danto's lecture grapples with the question—"What makes it art?"—that has been a persistent concern ever since Marcel Duchamp introduced the readymade.<sup>55</sup>

But what happens when the *Brillo Boxes*, hollow wooden sculptures whose surfaces were painted and silkscreened to replicate the appearance of their prototype, are displayed in a gallery that means to be a supermarket? Certainly they raise questions that are not exactly Duchamp's questions, however comfortably they fit into the antiaesthetic tradition. In fact, their juxtaposition with an actual readymade, the autographed soup cans, serves only to emphasize their contrast with Duchamp's *Fountain*, and their inclusion in the supermarket art gallery—a site where



Fig. 3. Installation view of the “American Supermarket” exhibition at the Bianchini Gallery, New York. A stack of actual Campbell’s soup cans signed by Warhol, a traditional readymade, was on display underneath one of the artist’s paintings. *Life* 20 November 1964.



Fig. 4. Warhol at the “American Supermarket” exhibition holding his box sculptures. His painting from the *Campbell’s Soup Cans* series and his readymade appear in the background. *Life* 20 November 1964.



Fig. 5. Andy Warhol, *Brillo Boxes*, 1964. Synthetic polymer paint and silkscreen on wood. Installation. Stable Gallery, New York.

the contextual differences between artworld consumption and mass consumption have been mitigated—denies them the reflexive specificity of Duchamp's objects.<sup>56</sup> This is why Martha Buskirk has called the box sculptures a “remade readymade”; they appropriate a readymade icon, yet they themselves are original creations. In this sense, they echo what Buskirk calls “Duchamp's declared indifference”: their fabrication required a certain measure of artistic skill—the techniques of carpentry, silkscreening, and painting—to become sufficiently artless.<sup>57</sup> And yet, as Buskirk acknowledges, Warhol's Duchampianism stages problems that Duchamp's practice never did. Perhaps the most significant, and certainly the most *substantial*, difference between the *Brillo Boxes* and actual boxes of Brillo is that the former contain no Brillo pads, their surface promising a false interior and their figure misaligned with their agency. On the surface, the *Brillo Boxes* promise to be able to do something—“SHINES ALUMINUM FAST”—that is totally betrayed by their empty insides. Thus, they figure an agency that is not their own.

In the actual supermarket, of course, this is known as false advertising, and Warhol was as interested in this problem as the consumer advocates of the era. In 1963, one year after he first exhibited the *Brillo Boxes* in Los Angeles, he did a series of pictures titled *Tunafish Disaster* (Fig. 6). Like the *Boxes*, these pictures repeat the image of a commodity package, containing what should be ordinary A&P tuna, above newspaper copy and photos of two women, Mrs. McCarthy and Mrs. Brown. Warhol took his material from a case of food poisoning in Detroit that killed these two after they consumed contaminated fish. By concentrating on this tragedy, Warhol was engaging the widespread concern during the era that a modernizing agribusiness was producing foodstuffs unfit for human consumption. As Thomas Crow puts it, “[T]he pictures commemorate a moment when the supermarket promise of safe and abundant packaged food was disastrously broken.”<sup>58</sup> They identify the fear, perhaps most passionately expressed by pioneering environmentalist Rachel Carson, that the efficiency of large-scale food production and distribution was masking an “ever-widening wave of death” caused by the extensive use of pesticides and other contaminants.<sup>59</sup>

Still, the *Tunafish Disaster* pictures are less interesting as indices of food paranoia than as Warhol's most macabre representation of the mismatch between nonhuman agency and its figuration. Like the *Boxes* only more severe, these pictures demonstrate how a single object, which Latour would understand as an actant, could be the site of numerous agential figurations, some true and others false, some real and others faked by the package, which, like the smiling faces positioned below it, always has the ability to lie. How many agencies occupy a can of contaminated





Fig. 6. Andy Warhol, *Tunafish Disaster*, 1963. Synthetic polymer paint and silkscreen ink on canvas. © 2010 The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Used by permission.

tuna, and how much dissembling can be identified in comparing what the package offers, promises, and affords to what the contents of the can actually have the capacity to do? In staging these questions, Warhol suggests that the relationship between customer and commodity is one in which the latter can be just as manipulative, disingenuous, and even dangerous as its human counterpart. The *Tunafish Disaster* series thus proffers an imagistic anthropomorphism, equating nonhuman packaging with the human face, that reveals a sociological one: a striking example of the nonhuman as a multiply agential participant in the social.

### V. Site-Specificity across Disciplines

There is much about Warhol's series, of course, that does not accord so nicely with Latour's argument, just as there is much in DeLillo's novel and Updike's story that is irreducible to any sociology. I understand this imperfect correlation to be a conceptual resource, rather than a liability, made possible by a certain understanding of site-specificity. The supermarket, as I have tried to demonstrate, has provoked a wide variety of responses from the arts and sciences—functioning as a social-scientific example, a fictional *mise-en-scène*, a symbol of cultural degradation, a journalistic scene, an architectural case study, and an artworld spectacle. As a real site transformed into an analytical-organizational device, it proximates otherwise distant and disparate figures, thereby allowing their respective concerns and methods to animate one another as they animate the site differently. My study of the supermarket, therefore, has really been a study of the way that different writers, artists, and intellectuals have responded to the site, and it has been an attempt to curate this mass of material into some kind of analytical coherence. The twinned questions of how to visualize and how to conceptualize the social, posed by the preponderance of the nonhuman, have emerged as recurrent, if unevenly rendered, concerns within this heterogeneous archive.<sup>60</sup> Thus, if the supermarket does reveal, in microcosm, certain constitutive problems of the social, what Durkheim called “social facts,” then is it possible that a multidisciplinary response to the supermarket could constitute something like a new sociology?

For his part, DeLillo concludes *White Noise* with a surprisingly poignant description of what happens to supermarket sociality when the shelves are unexpectedly rearranged:

There is agitation and panic in the aisles, dismay in the faces of older shoppers. They walk in a fragmented trance, stop and go, clusters of well-dressed figures

frozen in the aisles, trying to figure out the pattern, discern the underlying logic, trying to remember where they'd seen the Cream of Wheat. They see no reason for it, find no sense in it. The scouring pads are with the hand soap now, the condiments are scattered [ . . . ] They turn into the wrong aisle, peer along the shelves, sometimes stop abruptly, causing other carts to run into them. (WN 325–26)

This scene demonstrates just how powerfully human subjects are oriented by nonhuman objects, with the shelves representing the physical-infrastructural conditions of possibility for subjectivity and sociality as such. Their rearrangement makes the fact of nonhuman agency known and felt to the discombobulated shoppers who, all but totally ignoring one another, “scrutinize the small print on packages, wary of a second level of betrayal” (WN 326). Paired with Latour’s thinking on the nonhuman actant, this passage, like many others in the novel, comes to seem a real challenge to the way that sociology constitutes its object.

From its very beginning as a discipline, as Peter Wagner has demonstrated, sociology has taken society to be comprised of “connections among human beings.”<sup>61</sup> Yet a postmodernity of endlessly proliferating nonhumans threatens to make that understanding seem incomplete at best. If postmodernism is, in a certain sense, a theoretical attempt to grapple with nonhuman abstractions that can be difficult to think—the world system, the multinational network, the mass media, the global market, and so on—then perhaps a focus on ordinary and proximate nonhumans would help to facilitate our inquiry. They can be tangible figurations of an abstract system that otherwise frustrates our practices of cognitive mapping. They can be understood, furthermore, as actants occupied by objective agencies that exceed and influence subjective intentionality. By tracing how these actants constitute a network, therefore, we could gain some new purchase on what external forces motivate human action, and we could better understand what role nonhumans play in the constitution, self-maintenance, and development of society. This understanding would derive from a certain kind of contact, a site-specific alignment, between humanistic and social-scientific thought, exemplified by the way that the supermarket organizes the proximity of Latour and DeLillo, two otherwise distant figures, thereby allowing them to become reciprocally informative and mutually illustrative of postmodern social facts.

Another way to put this is to say that Latour proffers a conceptual model for the nonhuman in the social, and DeLillo visualizes the social relations of humans and nonhumans. By examining how both have responded to a familiar social site in the postmodern world, actor-network-theory begins to look like a paradigm for which *White Noise* is a

monographic instantiation, a field study that amplifies, challenges, and complicates Latour's claims. In this regard, the site itself, the supermarket, becomes an organizational device for conjoining the humanistic and social-scientific disciplines toward an attempt at reconceptualizing the social and its constituents, both human and nonhuman. The aesthetics of site-specificity can play an important role here. Sites like supermarkets give topographical form to the social, and they visualize abstract social-theoretical dynamics, such as agency. When authors and artists engage a site, they imagine it otherwise, which means they can challenge the models by which the social and its constituents are understood, even as they simultaneously clarify and complicate the most important social-theoretical concepts. In this sense, the forms and figures of site-specific art could be considered conceptual resources, if not quite concepts themselves, in and of the sociological imagination. This seems an especially productive way to understand the aesthetics of site-specificity. At its best, this understanding would prompt a new conversation between humanists and social scientists, enabling a mutually informed "apprehension," to return again to DeLillo's term, of humans, nonhumans, and societies in the contemporary world.

## UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

## NOTES

Many thanks to my dissertation committee members (Bill Brown, Deborah Nelson, and Kenneth W. Warren) for their ongoing support of the project from which this essay comes.

1 Victoria de Grazia, *Iresistible Empire: America's Advance Through Twentieth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard/Belknap, 2005), 376–416.

2 Rachel Bowlby, *Carried Away: The Invention of Modern Shopping* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2001), 157.

3 Bowlby, *Carried Away*, 160–63.

4 For Durkheim's understanding of "anomie," see *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, trans. John A. Spaulding and George Simpson (New York: The Free Press, 1979). For his understanding of the "social fact," see *The Rules of Sociological Method*, trans. W. D. Halls (New York: The Free Press, 1982), 50–60. The comprehensive intellectual biography of Durkheim is Steven Lukes's *Émile Durkheim: His Life and Work* (New York: Penguin, 1973).

5 On site-specific art, see Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002).

6 This is not at all to suggest that the sociology of literature and literary studies is an unproductive enterprise. By contrast, I have learned a great deal from scholars working in this field, especially Mark McGurl and John Guillory, who have been helpful and inspiring in different ways. See McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2009); and *The Novel Art: Elevations of American Fiction After Henry James* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2001). Also see Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1993); and "The Sokal Affair and the History of Criticism," *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 2 (2002):



470–508. I owe additional thanks to John Guillory for years of unflagging support and perspicacious advice.

7 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1993), 161.

8 Susan L. Mizruchi, *The Science of Sacrifice: American Literature and Modern Social Theory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1998), 10.

9 Latour's science studies scholarship is not a central concern of this essay. There is considerable overlap, however, between the claims of *Reassembling the Social* and those of Latour's texts devoted to the study of scientific knowledge production. In addition, shadowing both Latour's sociology and mine is the critique of modern epistemology proffered by Latour's *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1993). For a lucid explication of Latour's earlier work and its influence on social-constructionist discourse, see Ian Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1999), 80–99.

10 Durkheim was committed to distinguishing sociology from other disciplines, especially psychology, by stressing the peculiarity of its object of study. For an overview of his position, see Lukes, 1–36. Also see Dominick LaCapra, *Émile Durkheim: Sociologist and Philosopher* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1972).

11 Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2005), 1–17 (hereafter cited as *R*).

12 Émile Durkheim, *Sociology and Philosophy*, trans. D. F. Pocock (New York: The Free Press, 1974), xxi.

13 A. J. Greimas and J. Courtés, *Semiotics and Language: An Analytical Dictionary* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana Univ. Press, 1982), 5.

14 C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1959). Like Latour and Durkheim, Mills appreciated the propinquity of literature and sociology. In fact, his understanding of the “sociological imagination” is capacious enough to surpass the disciplinary divide between the humanities and the social sciences: “Yet in factual and moral concerns, in literary work and in political analysis, the qualities of this imagination are regularly demanded. In a great variety of expressions, they have become central features of intellectual endeavor and cultural sensibility” (14); Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1964), 99.

15 I am drafting the notion of distributed agency from the concept of “distributed cognition” as it has been defined by Edwin Hutchins in *Cognition in the Wild* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995). In addition, I am also thinking with Janet Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2001); and Bennett, “The Agency of Assemblages and the North American Blackout,” *Public Culture* 17, no. 3 (2005): 445–65.

16 Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (New York: Penguin, 1985), 37.

17 Allen Ginsberg, *Howl and Other Poems* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1956), 29–30.

18 The sociologist Avery Gordon shares my sense that *White Noise* has certain social-scientific features; she reads the novel “like a sociological map of white postmodern America, like an ethnography of sorts” (14). Her attention to the nonhuman, however, is focused on the spectral and the supernatural. See Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2008).

19 On the triangulation of desire, see René Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1966).

20 More than anyone else, Bill Brown has helped me to think the nonhuman, although his privileged site of analysis is the intimate encounter between the perceiving subject and the nonhuman object, whereas DeLillo's privileged site, and thus my privileged site, is the

site itself—a social-spatial unit that includes multiple human and nonhuman constituents. For Brown's take on material things as objects of attention in the postwar United States, see "How to Do Things with Things (A Toy Story)," *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 4 (1998): 935–64. Also see the collection he edited, *Things* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2004), which includes an essay by Latour.

21 Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 154, 170.

22 N. Katherine Hayles, "Postmodern Parataxis: Embodied Texts, Weightless Information," *American Literary History* 2, no. 3 (1990): 409.

23 Hayles, "Postmodern," 409.

24 *White Noise* was received as an important contribution to novelistic postmodernism by two collections edited by Frank Lentricchia in the early 1990s: *Introducing Don DeLillo* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 1991); and *New Essays on White Noise* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1991). Mark Osteen's critical edition of *White Noise* has placed the academic reception of the novel alongside journalistic reviews. Many of the most important essays from the Lentricchia collections are reprinted in Osteen's edition: *White Noise: Text and Criticism* (New York: Penguin, 1998). More recent work on *White Noise* has considered the novel in relation to the rest of DeLillo's oeuvre. Since the turn of the century, there have been several book-length studies of DeLillo and his contributions to literary postmodernism and to late twentieth-century American culture. For instance, see Joseph Dewey, *Beyond Grief and Nothing: A Reading of Don DeLillo* (Columbia, SC: Univ. of South Carolina Press, 2006); Peter Boxall, *Don DeLillo: The Possibility of Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 2006); and David Cowart, *Don DeLillo: The Physics of Language* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 2002).

25 Juan A. Suárez, *Pop Modernism: Noise and the Reinvention of the Everyday* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 2007), 148.

26 On the *nouveau roman*, see Alain Robbe-Grillet, *For a New Novel* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1989). For example: "Around us, defying the noisy pack of our animistic or protective adjectives, things *are there*. Their surfaces are distinct and smooth, *intact*, neither suspiciously brilliant nor transparent" (19).

27 See Bowlby and de Grazia.

28 "Bread & Circuses," *Time*, 8 June 1959, 92.

29 For more on the connections among sociology, psychology, and marketing science during the era, see Elizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Knopf, 2003), ch. 7.

30 Vance Packard, *The Hidden Persuaders* (New York: David McKay, 1957), 3.

31 Packard, *Hidden Persuaders*, 108, 106.

32 William D. Zabel, "The Easy Chair: What's in the Package?" *Harper's*, August 1963, 12. Zabel raises all sorts of questions regarding gender and the supermarket. In Zabel's era, as Rachel Bowlby puts it, "the phrase 'consumer society' usually suggested a deluded, essentially female population: the unresisting victims of manipulative advertising and vulgar, alluring displays" (6). Over the past fifty years, however, there has been what Bowlby calls a "remarkable rhetorical turnabout" in the way that consumers, particularly supermarket shoppers, are figured. "The consumer," she writes, "has ceased to be seen as part of a jelly fishly susceptible mass, having become instead an individual endowed with rights of which, by implication, his or her previous incarnations had been deprived. She (or he) is no longer a fool, but the model of modern individuality, the one who, as patient or passenger or parent, demands and gets the deal to which, implicitly, she was always entitled but that she was never granted before. In the course of this process, the consumer has lost her sex" (7). Thus, Bowlby concludes, the "woman shopper, marked as such, seems to have departed the supermarket aisles forever" (247). For more on the interrelationship

- of gender and consumption in the supermarket, see Daniel Miller, *A Theory of Shopping* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1998); and Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2007), 61–63.
- 33 Randall Jarrell, *A Sad Heart at the Supermarket* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1965), 15, 58–77.
- 34 Leslie Fiedler, *Waiting for the End* (New York: Stein and Day, 1964), 249.
- 35 On middlebrow literary culture in the United States, see Janice Radway, *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1997).
- 36 See Dwight MacDonald, “Masscult and Midcult,” *Partisan Review* 17, nos. 2–3 (1960): 203–33, 589–631.
- 37 MacDonald, “Masscult,” 609.
- 38 MacDonald, “Masscult,” 618.
- 39 de Grazia, *Irresistible Empire*, 376–416.
- 40 “La Méthode Américaine,” *Time*, 16 November 1959, 105.
- 41 “The Supermarket Gains Ground,” *Japan Quarterly* 10, no. 3 (1963): 290.
- 42 “The Yankee Marketeers,” *Time*, 23 April 1965, 97.
- 43 “More Class,” *Time*, 31 December 1965, 36.
- 44 For more on the connection between *Learning from Las Vegas* and postmodernism in general, see Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 1991).
- 45 Robert Venturi, et al., *Learning from Las Vegas* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1972), xi, 90.
- 46 Venturi, et al., *Learning*, 9.
- 47 Venturi, et al., *Learning*, 13.
- 48 M. M. Zimmerman, *The Super Market: A Revolution in Distribution* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1955). Among retail professionals, the commodity package is known as the “silent salesman,” an anthropomorphism that marks the transfer of agency from human to nonhuman (Bowlby, 30–48). My reading of the relationship between customer and commodity is meant to complement, rather than to dispute or to displace, the Marxist understanding of the commodity form, as well as the twinned dialectics of commodity fetishism and reification. But with the help of Latour, DeLillo, and others, I am trying to portray a different image of the exchange, including the exchange of properties, between human and nonhuman in postmodernity.
- 49 John Updike, “A&P,” in *Pigeon Feathers and Other Stories* (New York: Knopf, 1962) 187.
- 50 Updike, “A&P,” 187.
- 51 Updike, “A&P,” 190.
- 52 In part, I take DeLillo to be making a point about commodity aesthetics that one can find more fully expressed in Wolfgang Fritz Haug. *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics: Appearance, Sexuality, and Advertising in Capitalist Society* (Minneapolis, MN: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1986). On the relationship between art and advertising in America, see T. J. Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1994). Also see Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1997).
- 53 Alan Gillmor, “Interview with John Cage,” *Contact* 14 (Autumn 1976): 21.
- 54 Suárez, “Pop Modernism,” 151.
- 55 Arthur Danto, “The Artworld,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 61, no. 19 (1964): 580.
- 56 As I understand it, Duchamp’s *Fountain* reflects on the capacity of artworld institutions (that is, galleries, museums, exhibitions, critical discourses, and publications) to

confer meaning on objects and thus to produce aesthetic value. For more on Duchamp, see Theiry de Duve, *Kant After Duchamp* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996).

57 Martha Buskirk, *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 78.

58 Thomas Crow, *Modern Art in the Common Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 1996), 60.

59 Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (New York: Mariner/Houghton Mifflin, 2002), 127, 174.

60 Here I do mean to echo Adorno, specifically the section of *Negative Dialectics* devoted to the “preponderance of the object.” See Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 2005), 183–86.

61 This quote comes from Wagner’s contribution to Lorraine Daston, ed., *Biographies of Scientific Objects* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2000), 153. An important exception is the growing subfield known as the sociology of objects. See Harvey Molotch, *Where Stuff Comes From: How Toasters, Toilets, Cars, Computers, and Many Other Things Come to Be as They Are* (New York: Routledge, 2003).