

The Longing for Less

Experiments in Absence

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INTRODUCTION

Consider the curious expansiveness of “less”.

The word signals a decreasing, like winding down the dial of a volume knob. It can express a physical fact, like having less room in a house, less money in a wallet, or less food on a plate. Or it can address more abstract lacks: We seem to have less time in our days, we complain, less energy in our bodies. We are less interested, less motivated, less productive.

Less signifies an absence, but it also implies an excess of whatever is causing the shortage. It casts a shadow like the outline of a skyscraper darkening the street: There’s less sunlight hitting the sidewalk because of the vertical sprawl of the building.

When we use the word less, we often mean that the alternative, more, might be better, but sometimes the reduction itself is positive: I’m less stressed, my desk is less cluttered, I have less on my mind. Certain things even glow with an aura of lessness: Think of the innate beauty of a room with nothing in it, the elegance of a simply designed garment, or the relief of silence after the uneven roar of a city street. The word can offer a pleasant narrowing, a slender and essential ease.

The word "less" comes to us from the Greek *loisthos*, meaning "last." Less, then, is not just about reduction, but finding an endpoint, leading the way toward things that are final and absolute. The process of lessening can be an attempt at clarification: Whatever can't be removed might be the solution to the question we pose or the problem we subtract from. And if we don't find an answer, then maybe we didn't get rid of enough.

Less is more, or so the wisdom goes.

This line of thinking — that less presents a path to something greater — can take on various forms. But a thread runs through its different iterations: a sense that accumulating more has lost its appeal and that embracing absence might hold its own solutions.

Those searching for less in our century often call themselves "minimalists." They cultivate a life with an emptier closet, a smaller house, fewer gadgets, and a tighter social circle — less of as much as possible. Some take this reduction to extremes.

Take the two former insurance executives who moved to a cabin in Montana and branded themselves "The Minimalists" in 2012, creating an empire of anti-consumption blog posts, books, podcast episodes, and Netflix documentaries. Or

minimalist blogger Joshua Becker, who mingled cleaning out his garage with lessons from the Bible, citing Jesus as a champion minimalist. The most famous modern minimalist might be Marie Kondo, a Japanese author whose bestselling book called *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up* urged her readers to throw everything out that didn't "spark joy", whether a pair of socks, an uncomfortable couch, or a bad boyfriend. In all these cases, the pursuit of less takes on a moral value: Minimalism attains the feverishness of self-help fads or religious conversion in reassuring its adherents they are doing the right thing.

Internet entrepreneurs are also frequent evangelists of less, using technology as a way to rid themselves of baggage like permanent homes or cars instead, swapping them for Uber and Airbnb. These are people like James Altucher, a 48-year-old investor who gave up his house and stable job to find happiness as a digital nomad, and whose habitual all-black uniform and his perennially packed travel bags identify him as part of a nascent global tribe that prizes mobility above all else. "I have one bag of clothes, one backpack with a computer, iPad, and phone," Altucher wrote in a viral blog post in 2016, suggesting that everyone else embrace the same aggressive simplicity.

The rule of less can be ruthless. The minimalist must gauge the worth of every object in her life, deciding which are worth the burden of keeping around. Getting rid of possessions becomes like expunging guilt. There's no more room for the negative, faulty, or excessive; to keep something requires either a good excuse for

owning it or a sincere emotional attachment. To KonMari your life, as Kondo called it, was to refine it, leaving only what truly mattered — a makeover by means of reduction.

The pursuit of these principles means even getting rid of space. Rather than the pre-millennial ideal of the suburban home with its high-maintenance lawn and crowded basement, minimalists tend to embrace more austere modes of living. In cities already packed with studio apartments, there is a push to develop “micro-apartments,” tiny boxes equipped with the bare necessities of a fold-down bed, desk, and bathroom: only what is essential, and nothing more.

Even where minuscule apartments weren’t already the norm, people still seem to want to pull their walls closer in. A “tiny house” is what it sounds like, a cabin meant to host just one or two people, transported around the country or just planted in the backyard of a friend’s house in Seattle or Portland like a residential mushroom. Designed with generous skylights, sleeping lofts, porches, and miniature kitchens, the tiny houses present aspirational visions of living with less, and thus needing less to live. In the past we might have turned our noses up at it — it’s just a catchy label away from the negative stereotypes of living in a trailer— but today the choice seems somehow ideal, spawning tiny house manufacturing businesses, small living celebrities, and reality television shows.

Even beyond these more dramatic lifestyle choices, an aesthetic of less seems to have infiltrated wide swaths of mainstream culture. Popular interior designs have fewer colors and decorative elements. Clothes are studiously blank, too, communicating more through texture and shape than obvious branding. Creating the perfect “basic” is an ongoing pursuit fought over by brands like Uniqlo, Eileen Fisher, and Everlane, as if everything needed to be reduced down to Little Black Dress essentialism. In architecture, too, the longing for less is apparent: New condos come with walls of glass surrounding open-plan rooms, versions of an industrial artist loft that are wildly out of price range for most actual artists.

All these expressions of less might be labeled "minimalist", but the use stretches the meaning of the term. The original Minimalists, a group of artists in the 1960s, were given the name as a critical dig at how little they seemed to care for traditional artistic practices, instead using industrial materials and factory labor to produce their work. These Minimalist artists saw their approach as a way to shock viewers into confronting art and the surrounding world anew, getting back to fundamental sensory experience. So there's an irony to our current overuse of the word. We're more likely to see the aesthetic of emptiness as a marker of luxury in high-end boutiques or real-estate developments than in radical art. Absence itself has become the fetish.

In the drive to clear out a closet, move into a cabin, or divest of possessions — even in the more common feeling of being overwhelmed by the clutter in a house — there’s a prevailing sense that material things might be holding us back rather than moving us forward. It’s a persistent unease around the things we own, and a nagging sense that our anxieties might be resolved by ridding ourselves of them.

A certain cynicism around excess seems only to be expected. Chasing more has gotten us in big trouble: the way the relentless pursuit of wealth in banking ended up destroying national economies in the 2008 financial crisis, for example. And rampant income inequality almost forces the need to settle for less. As the gap between the richest and the poorest widens, the usual rungs of an adult American life — house, car, job — seem harder to attain than ever. The movement toward less could be read not just as a cultural phenomenon but a survival strategy.

Then again, this same skepticism with materialism can also be found throughout history. We have only to look to Thoreau’s *Walden* to realize that our current attempts to pare down are almost cliché. The idea that the material world is a distraction that must be left behind to pursue the naked truth can be found in the writing of ancient Greek Stoics, Christian hermits, and itinerant Japanese monks, who each practiced their own philosophy of less. Its ideal might be summed up in the Japanese poet Kozan Ichikyo’s couplet written all the way back in 1360, just before his death: “Empty-handed I entered the world / Barefoot I leave it.”

But the longing for less has never before been quite so mainstream. In a time when we produce and have access to more than ever, many seem to be moving just as aggressively to reject it. Lessness presents a vision of liberation: Abandon all the material objects holding you down, and what will follow is a better understanding of yourself and your place in the world — a lightness. Lessness is freedom, in other words, though from what, precisely, its followers might not know.

There's an unexpected moment of vertigo that follows this approach. Think of the Marie Kondo convert in her overstuffed house. The basement is full of kids' clothes and outdated appliances. The living room furniture doesn't get used because everyone's on smartphones in their bedrooms. Food gets delivered more often than cooked in the kitchen, and Amazon Prime packages keep arriving daily on the doorstep.

The idea of radical subtraction seems appealing, even sanity saving, and so the purge begins. The basement empties. The closets go bare. No one sits in the armchairs, so there's no reason to keep them. Eventually nothing is left except the white walls and open windows, because nothing else really seems necessary. The remainder is spacious, empty, and clean — yet filled with a new uneasiness. There's no clearer meaning than there was with the clutter.

The longing for less has at its heart a fundamental ambivalence. We want things — we even define ourselves by our possessions — but we don't want to want them. If

we don't have something, we think about what it would be like to own the coveted object, and then when we have it, we think about what it would be like to be rid of it again. Even in getting rid of things, we end up often bestowing increased importance on what remains rather than severing our attachments altogether. That might explain why it's possible to end up pursuing emptiness with the same energy previously directed at accumulating stuff, with much the same dissatisfaction as the result.

That our possessions can cause us such anxiety speaks to the fact that many people do truly have too much: throwing things out is ultimately a luxury, and austerity, in the material or economic sense, is usually inequitable. (It's no coincidence that in Old French the original meaning of austere was cruel.) Deciding to get by with less is different than being forced to make due with a lack in the first place, as the poor or disenfranchised must. It's easy to get rid of things when you can always buy them again in the future.

The visual markers of minimalism can become a divider of class and race. "The richer you are, the less you have," as one art historian described the situation to me. To take from the great maximalist Dolly Parton: It takes a lot of money to look this empty.

I have to admit that I've always been drawn toward less. My taste is in part driven by circumstance. As a writer, I've never had much in the way of a stable job, and New York City forces all but the one percent into ever-smaller spaces. Graduating college just after the financial crisis further upended any expectations that meaningful stability might arrive.

My preference for less is also a reaction to my upbringing. Some of my most visceral domestic memories are of my parents arguing over the clutter at home, despite the house's thousands of suburban square feet. I have an inherited paranoia toward piles of stuff accumulating, and so my own apartment tends to be bare.

But what I really feel attracted to is the particular beauty of nothing, or as little as possible. I can't be sure when it started. One of my first visits to Brooklyn, where I live now, was to my cousin's cavernous loft, half converted into a studio for his painting, the other half only roughly livable. Maybe it was that vision of austere bohemianism, with its implication that by forsaking material comforts one might be freer to create oneself. It also could have been sparked by during a teenage visit to the Museum of Modern Art to see the work of Richard Serra, whose sculptures of wall-sized pieces of rusted steel carving out curves of negative space made unvarnished material seem like the most compelling thing in the world. Or it might have even sprouted out of my admiration for the elegantly spare mid-century modern furniture that filled my grandparents' home, its form-follows-function efficiency gradually filtering down to IKEA and my college dorm room.

Whatever its root, I find this stylized emptiness strangely comforting, perhaps because it promises nothing and expects the same in return.

This book is about investigating various forms of absence in all their strange appeal. Each of the nine chapters that follow addresses the pursuit of less in a particular field of experience. They are experiments in seeing how absence can feel.

The first half of the book engages with aesthetics, how thinkers and creators including Stoic philosophers, Modernist architects, Japanese writers, and Minimalist artists have embraced emptiness. The second half looks at how less manifests in our lives today, from the drive to throw things out and seek silence, to strict diets and increasingly uniform global tastes. The book ends with a consideration of the future, confronting the question of whether this longing for less is indeed an ultimate endpoint: the last idea.

Of course, there's a fundamental paradox present in this writing, just as in the word itself. The book that you hold is made up of many pages of something concerned foremost about nothing, a presence made up of absence, a space in which less can flourish.

CHAPTER OUTLINE:

1. Introduction

There's a strangeness to the word "less": It means a reduction, but wherever we find less, more isn't far behind. We seem to be going through a cultural mania for throwing things out as of late. There are those who call themselves "minimalists," abandoning their material possessions and structuring their lives around anti-consumerism. Marie Kondo fanatics clean out their apartments like they're also scrubbing their souls. Others are moving into vans, micro-apartments, or tiny homes, flouting the traditional suburban American dream. This embrace of "lessness" — reduction in every facet of life — has taken on an air of new importance. As much as the desire to reduce reflects our ambivalent relationship to the stuff we own, it's also a response to the anxiety of an unstable world, a belief that if we get rid of enough stuff, we just might survive.

2. Less Life

The book's opening section provides a history of asceticism and ascetics — people who have given up their worldly possessions and renounced society to pursue some deeper truth. These include Greek Stoics like the ancient philosopher Epictetus; zealous hermits like St. Jerome and Simeon Stylites; itinerant Zen monks like the 13th century Japanese poet Kozan Ichikyō; and even Henry David Thoreau. Their

philosophies and practices echo the impulse to reduce that we're feeling now, but they dwell less on material possessions than the deeper moral concerns at the root of materialism, a problem we still haven't solved. The paradoxes of their lives — living in isolation but close to society, relying on family wealth — also expose how difficult truly giving things up can be.

3. Less Darkness

A meditation on the Glass House that architect Philip Johnson built for himself in 1949 and the proliferation of windows through the history of architecture. Why are we so attracted to windows, sunlight, and even electric light pollution? We've traded an intimate darkness for brightly lit, sterile spaces in our homes and offices, believing that the light represents a kind of spiritual or industrial ideal. Johnson pioneered this aesthetic, and the Glass House remains its epitome, as I experience when I visit the site. But looking at it closer reveals the challenges of too much light. An antidote might be found in the philosophy of appreciating darkness outlined in Japanese novelist Junichiro Tanizaki's 1933 book *In Praise of Shadows*.

4. Less Art

"Minimalism" might be an omnipresent term today, but in the 1960s it was an insult directed at a specific group of artists who had reduced their work down to bare industrial materials. For artists like Richard Serra, Dan Flavin, and Sol LeWitt,

minimalism was a revolutionary attempt to bring viewers into a direct relationship with the art object, and through it the sensory world. But over time, their aesthetic has been appropriated by fashion and lifestyle companies. This is particularly true in the case of artist Donald Judd, whose story will form the focus of this chapter. Judd's iconic Soho loft is now a museum and his compound in Marfa, Texas, has become a hipster vacation destination and TV show set for *I Love Dick*. This chapter will provide a vital, currently missing deconstruction of minimalism's history and influence, ultimately considering how a once-jarring aesthetic was co-opted into a signal of taste and luxury consumerism.

5. Less Food

Almonds use too much water. Quinoa is politically questionable. Cows produce methane. Crickets are effective sources of protein but also gross. Environmental change has forced a reconsideration of what we eat and made us realize much of it is ultimately unsustainable. We have to eat less of what's familiar, and less in general. There are various reactions to the problem: Some high-end restaurants, like Copenhagen's Noma, turn to essentialism, highlighting the purest form of foraged ingredients, like a supercharged carrot poached in carrot juice. Popular diets, whether for personal or environmental reasons, promote going vegan, eating only meat, or serial fasting. This chapter will confront the question of if this dietary austerity is ultimately better for us, given input from scientists, or if it's just another

affectation. Fads like Soylent or wellness-marketed Moon Dust juice, which don't appear much like food at all, also underline the absurdity of the pursuit.

6. Less Color

Over the past year, I've taken to only wearing the color grey. It's been a gradual process of reduction; no other color has felt right. In part I think it's a reaction to the anxiety of our current political moment — every day a new presidential catastrophe — but it's also a way of blending in to the world. Having a uniform cuts down on the daily choices I have to make, and the qualities of grey itself are appealing.

Historically, the color has a connotation of anonymity. But it also contains radical possibility, as the 20th-century Japanese philosopher Kuki Shuzo writes. Grey represents the heterogenous mixture that I didn't experience as a kid growing up in the New England suburbs. The life and work of Agnes Martin, a Minimalist painter who lived and worked in the New Mexico desert, particularly fulfills grey's transcendental potential.

7. Less Stuff

On the resurgence of "minimalism" and cleanliness as a lifestyle philosophy in the 2010s, including Marie Kondo and "The Minimalists," two guys from Ohio who became self-help gurus pushing their followers to throw things out. America's consumerist crisis springs from the fact that owning more didn't really make us

happy. In response, we have the trends of small-scale domestic spaces and obsessively organized lives seen today. This chapter will provide a historical context for these cultural cleaning jags, show how shallow the lessons provided by the gurus are, and question the purpose of getting rid of possessions. I'll meet The Minimalists and their fans as well as take stock of my own life as consumer.

8. Less Noise

The 21st century world is overwhelming in the extreme. It's noisy: Not just the barrage of noise in cities but the relentless assault of pop music, smartphone notifications, advertisements, text-message chats, and live video. One response is to mount an aggressive retreat. Hence the recent popularity of "silent retreats" and meditation workshops, places where people go to not speak, or even write, for days on end. I'll go on a silent retreat and write about my experience, set against historical examples of thinking on silence, minimalist music (including my personal favorites like Aarvo Part, Brian Eno, and John Cage), and data about attention, focus, and sensory input in our world today.

9. Less Taste

When so much of our culture is driven by data and algorithm — our Instagram feeds, the numbers behind Netflix productions — what control do we have left over what culture gets made and what we consume? We say that we "curate" our

identities online and off, choosing which images, brands, places, and people we're associated with. Everyone and everything has a "brand." But much of the 2010s cultural output feels homogenous, as is the case with examples like lifestyle magazines, IKEA furniture, Airbnb interiors, and Instagram lifestyle influencers, which all happen to share a spare, empty aesthetic derived from Minimalism. What do we build our identities around, if not the convenience of curated consumption through digital platforms?

10. Less Future

Like Minimalist art and architecture, the future has a way of always looking like an empty white box — see everything from *Star Wars* to *2001: A Space Odyssey*. This final piece will explore the aesthetics of the future. Does lessness represent a kind of end point in culture and lifestyle? If so, we can attempt to build on top of it, forming our own new relationships with absence. As the minimalist Samuel Beckett might put it: We must go on; we can't go on; we will go on.

AUTHOR BIO

I am a freelance journalist, essayist, and critic for publications including the *New York Times Magazine*, *n+1*, *The New Republic*, *The Awl*, *Curbed*, and *The Verge*, as well as many other websites and magazines. My feature writing also landed me as an interview subject on the Longform podcast.

My work covers a wide range of subjects — art, technology, fashion, and business, in part — but my favorite pieces work toward understanding particular human obsessions that span all these areas. I'm interested in cultural phenomena that seem to spring from nowhere but have deep root causes that require digging to find. This is the impulse behind *THE LONGING FOR LESS*.

The book is a natural outgrowth of subjects I have been pursuing. It was inspired by several viral stories of mine, including an essay on “minimalism” for the *Times Magazine*, a profile of *Kinfolk* magazine founder Nathan Williams for *Racked*, and an essay on the homogeneity of technological culture for *The Verge*. The book moves well beyond them, considering examples of absence in cultural history and our lives today in the form of thematic chapters that mingle the critical and the personal.

Other pieces that show my core interests include my memoir on figure drawing for *Adult* magazine, essay on the history of conversation pits for *Curbed*, and report on the failure of digitization at the Library of Congress for *n+1*.

I attended Tufts University and graduated in 2010 with a degree in International Relations and minor in Art History. I then worked in Beijing at LEAP magazine, a bilingual art publication, before moving to Brooklyn for staff positions in art journalism at Hyperallergic and ARTINFO. For the past five years, I've pursued my own interests as a freelance writer for an expanding array of international publications.

My work has been included as chapters in *READING POP CULTURE: A Portable Anthology* (Bedford St. Martin's, 2013) and *A COMPANION TO DIGITAL ART* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2015). I was the subject of a profile in the *Columbia Journalism Review* and a nominee for the Thoma Foundation Writing Award in Digital Art. I also co-founded Study Hall, a collective of freelance journalists. My selected clips can be found online at <http://kchayka.tumblr.com/clips>.

AUDIENCE AND MARKETING

THE LONGING FOR LESS is a tightly linked thematic exploration in the context of Olivia Laing's THE LONELY CITY or Leslie Jamison's THE EMPATHY EXAMS. It can also be compared to recent single-topic books like Eula Biss's ON IMMUNITY and Ben Lerner's THE HATRED OF POETRY: voice-driven volumes that make unusual subjects approachable.

In its wider ambitions, THE LONGING FOR LESS aims to work in the vein of writers like Geoff Dyer (THE ONGOING MOMENT) and John Berger (WAYS OF SEEING), whose books have changed the way the public perceives art and culture while maintaining an entertaining and compelling voice for mainstream audiences.

Accessibility is key to THE LONGING FOR LESS, drawing in readers who may have experienced but aren't well versed in the forms that it covers. The variety of the sections' themes will also appeal to diverse groups, from followers of art, architecture, and fashion, to business executives or sociologists.

The fascination with absence is universal. Despite its ubiquity and fervent audience, there has never been a mainstream literary book covering any aspect of minimalism. The current crop of cleaning-up books desperately needs an intelligent critique that doesn't deny their allure.

As a longtime professional journalist, my presence on social media has given me access to a large audience that follows my particular outlook. I currently have 10,000 Twitter followers and 2,400 Instagram followers. I also maintain a monthly email newsletter with 1,000 subscribers.

As the book is edited and nears completion, I'll work to place excerpts and related writing at publications that I already contribute to, like *New York Times Magazine*, *NewYorker.com*, and *The New Republic* (art publications will also be easy targets), as well as reach out to review editors I have worked with about covering the book. A second appearance on the Longform podcast could highlight the book. Potential blurbs include Gideon Lewis-Kraus, Robin Sloan, Geoff Dyer, Edmund de Waal, and Kathryn Schulz, among others.

I plan to deliver a manuscript of approximately 50,000-60,000 words in 18 months.

SAMPLE CHAPTER (3): Less Darkness

On a 47-acre property in the rolling, wooded hills of New Canaan, Connecticut, the American architect Philip Johnson built himself a house of glass. It's a kind of one-liner, a joke that makes sense as soon as you hear it. A house is four walls and a roof. Just take away the walls by turning them into transparent windows, and voilà: a house without the house, the fulfillment of the mid-century modernist architects' dream of perfect, empty, endlessly repeating space. Its inevitability is part of its success. The Glass House, as Johnson called it, became an icon before it was even finished in 1949.

The facts of its design are easier to describe than the feeling it imparts. The Glass House is a rectangular box 56 feet by 32, the long side overlooking a sharp cliff in the carefully pruned landscape, a pond at its valley. The glass panes of the house's immaterial facade are outlined in charcoal-colored steel, and the edifice rests on a base of brick like a bird balances on a branch. There are no interior walls to block the view and so sunlight comes sluicing over the tree line straight through the structure as if it didn't exist in the first place, which it almost doesn't: The skeletal mid-century furniture, the bare surfaces of tables, and the careful positioning of every domestic accessory inside the house creates a space more for design than people.

Seeing the Glass House today, it's a shock that something built half a century ago should look not just current but still futuristic, part of a world that we have yet to achieve. Johnson built a home based not on possessions, space, or privacy — his conservative country neighbors sometimes spied on the fish-tank house with binoculars — but on bare structure and aesthetic, a completely controlled domestic environment that made austerity seem elegant. Livability, in the usual sense of the word, didn't matter so much as cultivating sensory delight. "Comfort is not one of my interests," Johnson told *Esquire* in 1999. "You can feel comfortable in any environment that's beautiful."

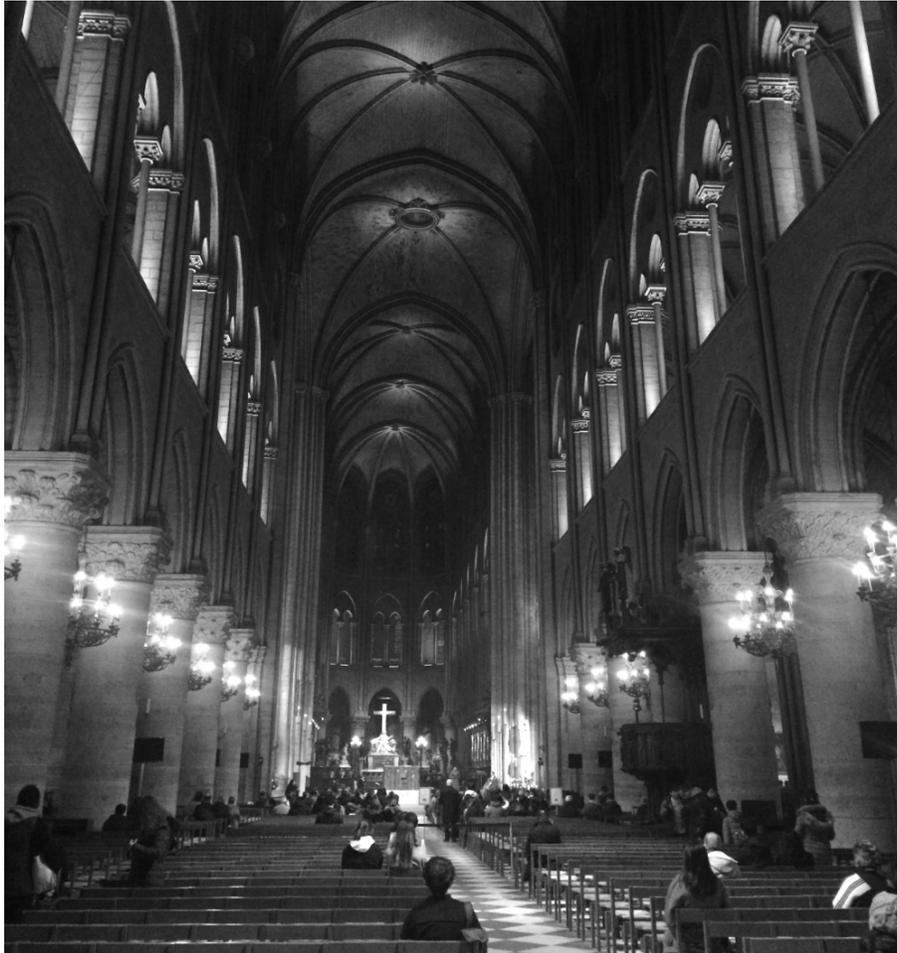
Picture the mouth of a cave as humanity's first window — the aperture where the light marks the boundary between the dangerous outside and safe interior of a domestic space. Our obsession with windows might be so simple: Through that opening, we could keep an eye on whatever was going on outside without risking exposure. But the light that comes through also has a symbolic function that evolved with architecture itself, encoding a kind of social or spiritual morality. The social contract says that I'll behave as long as you do, too; as on the city street, windows guarantee this bargain of both watching and being watched. In the French phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard's 1954 book of dreamy architecture-induced hallucinations *The Poetics of Space*, Bachelard describes windows as the "eyes" of a

house. On the resonance of the image of a lit lamp shining through glass at night, he offers the guiding koan: “All that glows sees.”

Light found its home in religious architecture, a natural fit for the metaphor of sight. The window as an all-seeing eye could be traced back to the Pantheon of ancient Rome, completed by the emperor Hadrian in 126 A.D. At the center of the temple’s dome, the largest made of unreinforced concrete in the world, is a circular window 29 feet across called the oculus — literally, the building’s eye. Looking up through the aperture to the low Roman clouds beyond, even when surrounded by tourists craning their necks the same way that you are, imparts a certain sense of heavenly sight. All the gods might be looking down on you through that window, their gaze made real by the bright oval of light that the sun casts on the ancient interior.

In 609 A.D. Pope Boniface IV converted the Pantheon, consecrating the building for Saint Mary and the Martyrs and condensing the collective light of all the deities into one. Under the papacy, the window obsession only became more potent. The cult of light is particularly apparent in *The Celestial Hierarchy*, a fifth-century Christian text on the composition of Heaven. Light was holiness and holiness light, “the earthly lights a figure of the immaterial enlightenment,” the text reads. To be illuminated, to have light pass through you, was to attain godliness. In a stirring line, the book describes this universal ideal: “Each intelligence, as far as is right and attainable to it, participates in the most spotless purity, the most abundant light, and the most complete perfection.”

Given that it so embodied god's wisdom, it only made sense to gather the maximum amount of light in holy architecture and build windows as expansive as possible. As church architecture evolved during Christianity's ascendance, the windows grew larger, achieving particular excess during the Gothic period from the 12th to 16th centuries. Spreading from France outward, the Gothic style strained constantly toward the sky, its architecture built from attenuated stone columns and its painted figures stretched to a breaking point.



Notre Dame

One reason for Gothic architecture's ravenous relationship with light might be that the French were obsessed with *The Celestial Hierarchy's* Christian mysticism at the time. The Notre Dame cathedral in Paris, completed in 1345, is a kind of stage set for its vast windows. The stained glass arches and rosettes seem to float below the 115-foot-high ceiling, but they are actually supported by an extravagance of flying buttresses that prop the structure up from the outside like a two-dimensional saloon facade in a spaghetti western movie. From the inside, though, the illusion is seamless. Gazing up, the cathedral's vaults are gently illuminated by its windows, and a viewer has the sense of looking at the sky itself, the details of the stonework lost high above in an atmospheric haze.

I'm not one to suffer much from Stendhal Syndrome, the sudden bemused dizziness that befell the novelist when he was exposed to an excess of great art in Florentine museums. But on a trip to Paris, my girlfriend and I joined the line feeding into Notre Dame one dusk after circling its great hulk. Upon entering the nave and seeing the last light of day filtering through the stained glass windows in a bruised glow, hearing the chanting of the Latin mass in the same words as the century the church was completed, watching the thin threads of smoke from votive candles snake toward the impossibly distant ceiling, and feeling the sheer empty space enclosed by the building floating above us, we both broke into unspoken tears.

Advancing technology eventually made it possible to simply turn an entire ceiling into glass instead of supporting windows with solid stone. Such a structure was London's Crystal Palace, a million-square-foot exhibition hall built in 1851 of cast iron and the largest plates of glass manufactured at the time, 10 inches wide by 49 inches long, repeated in an extending pattern like a mutated greenhouse. The design, by Joseph Paxton, resembled nothing more so than a cathedral, with colonnades supporting levels of windows extending up toward the roof, but its transparency suggested a grandeur that was industrial and economic instead of religious.

The Industrial Revolution had marked a turning point: As glass was more prevalent, a lack of light came to seem more threatening. The British National Council of Public Morals issued a report in 1917 outlining "The Moral Danger of Darkness," which included warnings like "darkness may be used for evil purposes" and "darkness encourages indecency." Its critique was directed at unlit streets and the enclosed chambers of newly popular movie theaters, where who-knew-what unsavory behavior could occur in the gloom, but the sentiment spread to domestic and public spaces as well. Light was a form of social hygiene, exposing anything corrupt or dirty.

Hence the incipient dream of the all-glass house, a space in which everything would be exposed, entirely visible, flooded with the pristine light of progress and sanitation. The image took hold in the 20th century and has never really let go of its

grip on our minds, inspiring the utopian plans of architects like Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, and Philip Johnson. “To live in a glass house is a revolutionary virtue par excellence,” wrote the German critic Walter Benjamin in 1929. “It is also an intoxication, a moral exhibitionism, that we badly need.” The material’s transparency echoed Benjamin’s Marxist ideal of a society without hierarchy: “Glass is, in general, the enemy of secrets. It is also the enemy of possession,” he added in 1933, pointing out a “culture of glass” that extended back decades already from his time.

Benjamin didn’t live to see the completion of the Glass House, but he has an often-quoted remark on glass’s timelessness that applies directly to Johnson’s project. Unlike the unique work of art or the 19th-century bourgeois domestic interior filled with the “traces” of its owners’ habits and the detritus of mundane life, “Objects made of glass have no ‘aura,’” Benjamin wrote, again in 1933. The material’s transparency seemed not only sanitary in the sense of germophobia but also culturally hygienic, disconnected from contaminating reference points or history, forming an artifact and an experience without a lineage. It was modern, in a word: Glass has always been our most modern material.

Glass might possess none of the unique aura of the work of art because it is so endlessly replicated, but the material does have a way of reflecting back on its inhabitant or its viewer. The connotation of modernity itself is desirable; the material imparts an aura of grandeur, whether religious or industrial. The house

made of glass is intoxicating, voyeuristic, a confession and an invitation, a pronouncement that we never need fear the darkness again.

Visiting Philip Johnson's Glass House has always been a pilgrimage, even while Johnson was living there. The architect would invite students, artists, and celebrities to tour the grounds. Andy Warhol brought the Velvet Underground to play a concert in the New Canaan compound's grassy field in the 1960s. Such was Johnson's awareness of his own legacy that he donated the Glass House to the National Historic Trust in 1986 with the proviso that it would be opened to the public after his death. He was 80 at the time, but lived in the house with his younger longtime partner, the curator and collector David Whitney, until Johnson passed away in 2005 (Whitney died at the age of 66 just months after). The Glass House opened as a museum in 2007, which is when I first visited, having begun my college study of art history. I returned recently, a decade later.

Like the Mona Lisa, you approach the building through layers of security. Proceed by train from Manhattan to the downtown of New Canaan, where there's a Philip Johnson Glass House Welcome Center filled with high-design accessories for sale amidst books and souvenirs. Take a designated white van through winding hilly roads, past the town's array of modernist architecture, including homes by Eliot Noyes and Marcel Breuer, then arrive at Johnson's elaborate gate. Two chunky gray

monoliths stand on either side of the driveway, between them a thick metal bar that rises invisibly up and down to allow vehicles through.

The site forms Johnson's autobiography, as one writer has observed. Beyond the Glass House, the architect also built a Brick House meant for guests, made of solid walls with porthole windows; an austere studio for himself that resembles a miniature church; a Ghost House garden shed made of chain-link fence, referencing Frank Gehry; and two gallery spaces for the couple's mammoth collection of paintings by the likes of Frank Stella and Julian Schnabel, one with an all-glass roof and the other installed underground in the side of a hill.



The Glass House

The Glass House, in the center of the wide, grassy field, announces itself by its absence. It's an anti-monument: There are no colonnades to mark it, like St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, no flashy facade filigree like Notre Dame. It lacks even Le Corbusier's bright, antiseptic white walls. Instead, what you see is a hovering presence on the edge of a hilltop, a specter of a building in which the reflections of furniture dance but never quite cohere into a solid arrangement. You don't look at it so much as look through it. At first glance, it is architecture reduced to its basic facts. The building is a geometric line drawn in space that divides the world into interior and exterior. But those terms lose meaning here. Does an interior constitute *inside* when all of it is always visible? What is an exterior if it doesn't really *enclose* anything?

The only floor-to-ceiling structure in the space is a cylinder that hides the bathroom, in which visitors are instructed not to use the toilet. Glass doors leading outside are installed in the middle of each of the four sides of the rectangle. If you opened them all, it would be less a house than an elaborate gazebo. Despite the structure's relative symmetry, there is no center or focal point to concentrate on, no clear approach. The house isn't particularly inviting. It simply exists, like a switched-off screen, displaying pure potential. When you do dare to open a door and step inside, the polarity suddenly flips. Rather than trying to place the house within the landscape you experience the landscape through the lens of the house. It's like watching a play and then suddenly being transported onto the theater stage. You are

acutely aware of both seeing and being seen: both the subject framed by the walls and the viewer through them.

The light in the Glass House doesn't induce the spiritual epiphanies of a cathedral. Its design is in part a brag about the 360-degree sylvan view, what Johnson called in 1999 his "very expensive wallpaper." The trees are nice, of course. But the flickering presence of the Glass House itself is really the main event, constantly nagging at the eye, begging to be resolved, impossible to be truly seen in any one glance. Walking around inside is like trying to pin down your own reflection in a mirror: Every time you move, it moves. The glass is only imperfectly transparent. Depending on where you're looking, the walls might show a slice of the blue sky, the grounds, or a mirror reflection.

Johnson arranged his interior meticulously; each ashtray and desk lamp has its precise place to which Whitney carefully returned them when moved. The long, wood-topped counter that conceals the kitchen is more suited to passing martinis over than cooking anything. A single desk is positioned facing a clear wall as if it otherwise wouldn't get enough light. The bed is barely hidden from view behind a wooden cupboard, the only visible storage.

However well equipped it was, the Glass House wasn't ever really a house in the usual sense. For decades, Johnson spent only weekends there, and eventually used the structure more as a living room to the Brick House's enclosed bedroom ("Sex is

best in a cocoon. You have to feel wombish,” Johnson said). The pairing of the two buildings is a dichotomy of public and private. While the glass might suggest absolute exposure, so much was still being hidden outside of the reach of the windows — electric cables, for example, which were concealed in the Brick House along with all the Glass House’s other prosaic infrastructure.

Darkness enables a kind of intimacy, either with others or oneself, that seems impossible in the light. The story goes that Whitney returned some nights to the Brick House, leaving Johnson to lay in bed alone. Wandering the house, I imagined him in his beautiful aquarium, propped up with a book, reading and intermittently gazing out at the darkness beyond the glass and then falling asleep to wake with the sun, enjoying the illusion he had created.

While Johnson may have been the first to experience life inside a glass box, many more do today. Much of 21st century architecture is composed of transparent, empty boxes stacked one on top of another. The downtowns of our cities have been overtaken by a creeping glassiness. Real estate ads for lofts and condos boast “floor-to-ceiling windows,” as if this were a new innovation. The latest Manhattan skyscrapers are Johnson’s ideal extended to its ridiculous extreme, caverns of glass in which the view of the city is the most expensive decor possible. So much glass has been used in new buildings around the world in the past decade that in 2015 there

was an international shortage and developers had to halt construction due to costs for the material rising over 30 percent. In the increasingly crowded urban landscape, access to light is a form of capital and large expanses of glass a rarified luxury good.

The Brooklyn neighborhood I live in is low-rise, made up mostly of vinyl- and brick-sided row houses, but the visual marker of gentrification is this glass tide. Each time a building is demolished, what rises in its stead is a transparent facade, some multiple stories tall. Walking around in the evening, I feel like one of Johnson's voyeurs: If the buildings are occupied, their residents are fully on display. You can see which Netflix shows they're watching. If the condo has yet to be sold, then the lights are simply left on all night as an advertisement that broadcasts: If you lived here, you could see and be seen here. The massive windows present a forced exhibitionism. Barricading them with curtains would ruin the effect; better to maintain a presentable emptiness for any passing spectator.

If during the day sun floods through these expensive, expansive windows, at night electric light leaks out of them. Light pollution, defined as "the inappropriate or excessive use of artificial light" by the International Dark Sky Association, is a global problem. A 2016 study found that more than 99 percent of United States and European populations live under light-polluted skies. The excess illumination confuses nocturnal animals, increases algae growth, and causes anxiety and melatonin suppression in humans, as anyone who has lived with a streetlight

outside their bedroom window can attest. In an infographic map of light pollution, all of New York City save its surrounding rivers is stained bright red, the highest end of the spectrum.

Johnson might have helped to popularize glass as an architectural medium — maybe the primary architectural medium of our time — but he probably didn't anticipate that such transparency would become a mainstream commodity. The religious transcendence of light gradually turned into a symbol of manufacturing capability, and then class identification: the more money you have, the more light you can lay claim to.

This transformation might explain why there's something inhuman about the all-glass spaces of today, from the see-through residential floors of the new skinny skyscrapers rising over Central Park and Apple's retail stores, with their floor-and-ceiling windows showing off the minimalist devices they sell, to Santiago Calatrava's One World Trade Center train station, which has its own linear oculus casting light on the all-white interior below like a contemporary Pantheon. Lifestyle magazines embrace the same aesthetic, presenting bare lofts as the height of luxury, showing off photo spreads of the work of Johnson's successors like Richard Meier and John Pawson, architects whose buildings tend toward the even more minimal than the Glass House.

The omnipresent windows and excess of light in these spaces seems to me to repel not just interior decoration but certain emotions as well. It's impossible to feel safe or enclosed within them. The architecture's bright cavernousness dominates anything the size or scale of our bodies. It's possible to get paradoxically lost in the open-plan layout of a loft or office, despite the absence of walls or enclosures to get in the way. The emptiness is its own form of obstacle. As Johnson admitted, comfort was never really the point of this style, but the Glass House's exposed domesticity metastasized into spaces that are not only uncomfortable but outright alienating.

In today's surplus of light, it's rare that you encounter an argument for darkness instead. That might be why I carry *In Praise of Shadows* around with me as a dog-eared talisman against our glassy world. The book is composed of a single, meandering essay written by the Japanese novelist Junichiro Tanizaki in 1933. It was first translated into English in 1977, published by an obscure press in Maine that still puts out the slim paperback copies that I wear through and give away, its black cover printed with a monochromatic photograph of the rice-paper doorway of a traditional Japanese home. I stashed the book in my bag for my most recent trip to the Glass House and reread it on the ride there.

Writing at the same time Johnson had his first exposure to modernism, Tanizaki occupied a different place and era, living from 1886 to 1965. His novels and essays

track the influence of Western culture and technology on the older generation of Japanese identity as candles and rice-paper screens gave way to electric lights and glass, *bunraku* puppet shows to Hollywood movies. Through *In Praise of Shadows*, Tanizaki tries to square the Western obsession with bright light and untarnished surfaces, the symbols of modern progress, with the Japanese aesthetic of filtered sunlight and the dusky, worn-in softness of wood. He presciently describes the desire for light as a kind of will to domination, long before the consequences of widespread light pollution: “The progressive Westerner is determined always to better his lot,” Tanizaki writes. “His quest for a brighter light never ceases, he spares no pains to eradicate the minutest shadow.”

Through the essay, Tanizaki makes an attempt to rescue the darkness from modernization by constructing an aesthetics out of shadow instead of light. His canon is composed not of the bright, empty room but the dim interiors of old houses; the cloudiness of miso soup in the dark gloss of lacquered dishes; the blackened teeth and green-black lips of a Kyoto geisha (described as “elfin fires”); the way the single candle flame in a high-ceilinged room illuminates a particular flavor of shadow: “lofty, intense monolithic,” the darkness “a pregnancy of tiny particles like fine ashes, each particle luminous as a rainbow.”

As Johnson drank in his light, so Tanizaki is a connoisseur of its absence. Westerners might “paint their ceilings and walls in pale colors to drive out as many of the shadows as they can,” the novelist writes. But, “were it not for shadows, there would

be no beauty.” It is a sensibility built on the careful appreciation of absence in its own right: “We find beauty not in the thing itself but in the patterns of shadows, the light and the darkness, that one thing against another creates.” For Tanizaki, darkness heightens sensitivity, causing us to look out for details and search for the spare glint of sun reflected as it might be off the gold leaf of a Buddha statue or the blankness of white paper.

But Tanizaki knew this was too simple, too. Throughout the essay, he also admits with an edge of irony that he is writing as a cranky old man lost in the modern age, that his nostalgia for the old darkened restaurants, hushed parlors, emaciated geishas, and all-wood toilets is impossible to preserve forever and perhaps not entirely sincere. He describes how he takes “incredible pains” to install electric lamps and porcelain appliances in his own home, convenient concessions to modernity given a scarcely acceptable veneer of the native Japanese style.

Tanizaki’s third wife, Matsuko Morita, recalled the story of an architect who consulted with the novelist about designing a new home. The architect explained that he had read *In Praise of Shadows*, and so knew exactly what Tanizaki was looking for. “But no,” the novelist replied. “I could never live in a house like that.” Both Tanizaki and Philip Johnson understood that there was a level of artifice to the aesthetics they upheld: One cannot dwell in full darkness or sunlight only, no matter how beautiful it might be.

No one sleeps in the Glass House these days. Given its museum status, the opportunity costs about \$10,000. Nor have I lived in Brooklyn's new glass-box architecture or decommissioned factories turned into condos. Instead, I came across a version on Airbnb: a loft in the Catskills in upstate New York. My girlfriend and I had been looking for a place to stay on vacation, and this space stood out more for its design than its location (the nearby "town" of South Kortright consists of a single intersection). In the glossy photos posted online, it looked like a Soho apartment had been dropped into the middle of the woods. The structure was a large empty wooden box cut through with enormous vertical windows that looked out onto a sloping meadow, not unlike Johnson's New Canaan landscape. Needless to say, it was irresistible.

When we arrived, I realized that I had underestimated how empty it would be. Everything, from the salt and pepper shakers to the refrigerator and the sink, was a shade of white or black. The open floor plan was broken only by one enclosed box with a sliding barn door for a bedroom and another miniature cubby for a bathroom. It had been an unrenovated artist's studio, but a Danish woman who moved to the small town to open a restaurant had converted it into a rental guest apartment. (Her own house was made of two interconnected octagons with all-glass walls.)



South Kortright

The only furniture in the space was a table made of reclaimed wood surrounded by vintage classroom chairs and a “couch” that consisted of thin pillows on top of a literal stack of firewood. Staying there was an experience of exterior rather than interior. The only thing to do, really, was sit at the table and watch the light slowly change outside and the leaves careen in the summer breeze. When the sun began to set over the surrounding hills, we posed in front of the windows and cast sharp dark silhouettes into the sinking yellow on the walls.

As evening came on, the atmosphere changed. With the forest nearly invisible outside, the loft became more cavernous, distant, and lonely. Inhabiting it felt like being an actor on stage, the walls somehow unreal and the lights artificial, potential

spectators gnawingly present through the glass, no matter how unlikely they would be out in the woods.

Even for two people used to close quarters, the space had a way of ratcheting up tension between us. We tossed complaints across the room like characters in a David Mamet play about luggage left around or kitchen equipment not returned to its rightful place. It was impossible to avoid the windows or block them off: You could go into the bedroom and close the door, sealing yourself off from the world completely, or you could exit into the landscape and break the invisible barrier. Once outside, the world somehow becomes whole again, the glass cage safely behind you.

Philip Johnson had the forethought to brand his home “The Glass House,” forever ensuring its place in architectural history. But it wasn’t singular — someone else had actually designed a house of glass before him. The inspiration for Johnson’s structure might have come from seeing plans for Mies van der Rohe’s own version of a glass house, the Farnsworth House in Illinois, completed in 1951 when Mies was teaching at the Illinois Institute of Technology. Mies designed the building as a weekend retreat for Edith Farnsworth, a local nephrologist. It could be described as a Gothic version of Johnson’s neoclassical rectangle: The transparent box of the Farnsworth House is stretched and attenuated, raised above the ground on a series

of hovering white plinths rather than reduced to a single shape. The house was also borne out of an intimacy. Mies and the uncoupled doctor were rumored to have embarked on a dramatic affair, though no written proof of the relationship has been found.

From the start, the Farnsworth House was beset by problems: Architect and client fought over budget overruns, a problem Johnson never had. Edith added hanging curtains and a metal screen around the porch as concessions to livability that also destroyed the design's pure transparency, much to Mies's dismay. The house was again meant to be a kind of lens for nature; the design dances around a single tree left in the open plain of the site. But a nearby river's increasing flooding also meant that the hovering structure sometimes turned into a boat.

Mies's intentional austerity caused a particular anxiety that might be more common today. Dr. Farnsworth described the tyranny of the design in a 1953 interview with *House Beautiful* magazine. "The truth is that in this house with its four walls of glass I feel like a prowling animal, always on the alert," she said. "The house is transparent, like an X-ray." In her unpublished memoirs, Farnsworth recalled her first night in Mies's design, writing that it was "as if the glass house itself were an unshaded bulb of uncalculated watts lighting the winter plains," not so much an elegant coexistence with the natural world or a way to be immersed in the landscape as a human effort to outmuscle it.

As the client, Farnsworth could be forgiven for not anticipating the psychological effects of her radical new home, but Johnson didn't quite understand what he had made, either. The Glass House was a theoretical proposition that made the leap from blueprints into the world. The structure seemed extreme at the time, even to its creator.

Johnson completed the Glass House in time for New Years Eve in 1949. While staying nearby with one of the associates at his firm, the architect decided to spend the night in the house for the first time. He stepped inside and switched all the ceiling lights on. A glow illuminated the box like a lantern's candle, the surrounding hills winter white and grey.

Looking out, Johnson might have expected to see the Connecticut woods that he had so carefully sculpted wrapping him like a blanket, the structure falling away to frame the grandeur of the wider world. The house was made to disappear, after all, to reveal everything but itself. But the illumination of the ceiling lights bounced off the transparent walls, as light does when it's trapped inside a prism.

What Johnson saw instead in the glass under the darkening New England sky was a reflection of the house's interior. It was the same wherever the architect turned in the box, looking past the silent furniture and the unused appliances and seeing only himself staring back, a ghost in the inexhaustible light.

SAMPLE CHAPTER (6): Less Color

There are certain phenomena in life that you don't recognize until they emerge around you in such abundance that missing them would be impossible. Such was the case with a particular fixation I developed.

I had an important meeting to go to and needed to look professional — a rare occasion for me, since being a writer usually means wearing an outfit of whatever's on my bedroom floor under the assumption that no one will be looking anyway — and so I went out in search of a new collared shirt.

I wandered around Soho one weekday afternoon, another luxury of non-office life, when the cobblestone side streets were quiet save for shop-attendant smokers swanning on loading docks taking selfies. After settling on a store that wouldn't require a large percentage of my rent, I wandered the shelves and pulled out button-downs in subdued red, camel, green, and several shades of grey, then took them to the dressing room.

I quickly threw out the non-grey shirts. For the next half-hour, I tried to divine which grey cloth set off by buttons of a slightly different grey would communicate the best version of myself. Some greys were too plummy, saturated with a hidden color. Others were too brittle and metallic, with no depth at all. I narrowed it down

to two shirts and then, feeling ridiculous for my indecision — it was all the same color, more or less — picked one and paid for it.

When I got back home and unwrapped the shirt, I looked in my closet and discovered that I had already bought a shirt just like it, perhaps one shade of grey darker, for my last serious meeting. Laid next to each other, the two shirts looked like a colorblind rainbow; — each grey echoed off the next in a monotone chorus. Despite the sameness, I didn't even think about returning the new one. It was perfect.

Over the past year, I've been increasingly drawn to the color grey as a kind of security blanket. I've taken to wearing grey t-shirts above grey jeans, the aforementioned grey dress shirts when necessary. I have sweaters made of mottled grey fabric. Grey sneakers with grey rubber soles. Striated grey socks. Other colors, black and white included, I've pushed to the side. It's more a compulsion than a conscious choice: Putting on anything else seems like a risk, like wearing a target.

In part, I'm drawn to grey's ambiguity. As a color, it's paradoxically defined by an absence thereof. There are two types of grey: achromatic and chromatic. Achromatic grey is a point on the spectrum of pure white to black. The addition of a small proportion of another hue gives chromatic greys their tinge, like the greenish grey

of the sky just before a storm or the brownish grey of ceramic clay. I like grey because it's not composed of absolutes. There might be a bluest blue, a reddest red, and even a blackest black, but there is no one greyest grey.

Black and white have indelible symbolism. In his monograph on the color black, the French philosopher Alain Badiou describes them as a "fatal couple": each is inescapable from the other. Badiou explains using Western fashion. White is associated with unblemished skin, innocence: the baptismal gown, the wedding dress. Black, then, marks the body for consumption. It is "the sign of the offering of an object," Badiou writes: the formal suit, or, for the Frenchman, lingerie.

Grey slips between white and black. It doesn't mark an invitation for consumption or a suggestion of purity or power. It feels more like an evasion of all of the above, not a sign of objectification but of becoming like an object, a stone statue, obstinate and immune. Or at least that's how I feel in it.

There's a sense of this worldly remove in the cultural history of grey as well. It's the color of undyed wool, a material of economic necessity rather than luxury. The Franciscan monks wore robes of plain wool, the austerity part of the members' vows of extreme poverty when the order was founded in the 13th century. A painted

portrait of St. Francis from the time shows him dressed in an unadorned dark-grey robe cinched by a rope belt.

It's also the standard color of uniforms, from those once worn by the Confederate army to the outfits of janitors, sanitation workers, and low-risk prisoners in the United States penitentiary system's sartorial color code. Grey has long been associated with anonymous groups and unglamorous jobs. It suggests having little, and thus little to lose.

In the 1950s, the color connoted the conformist nine-to-five office worker, and thus became the target of the color-saturated '60s. In the popular 1955 novel and then film *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit*, a corporate drone dressed in the eponymous monochrome outfit ends up choosing family over promotion, viewing his exhausted boss as a cautionary tale of what that grey life ultimately entails.

The inherent efficiency of grey clothing is part of its appeal. Removing color from your wardrobe means you never really have to choose what to wear or worry about clashing colors. A series of powerful figures have settled on uniforms that became synonymous with them. Steve Jobs went with black turtlenecks and jeans. President Obama only wore blue and grey suits, part of a regimen to cut down on decision fatigue. Mark Zuckerberg picked grey, too. In January 2016, he posted a photo of his closet, which looks kind of like mine only even greyer — a rack filled half with grey T-shirts and half with darker-grey hoodies.

Emphatic fashion color choices have been rather fraught as of late — sameness of hue has become a political strategy. Television news has been awash with the aggressive red of President Trump’s Make America Great Again merchandise, the pink of the knit pussy hats of the Women’s March, and the plain black iconography of anti-fascism spreading through the far left. At times it can feel like a clashing between colors as much as ideologies.

Grey might then seem like a strange choice, especially in the context of its clichéd implications: The color is boring, it has no meaning, it has no fun; it’s only for the poor, the destitute, the spiritually zealous; as a default, it lacks the capacity for individualized self-expression. But this plainness is part of what makes grey compelling: among so much imagery and information, it comes as a much-needed respite.

Grey is in the midst of something like a renaissance at the moment. Its perceived neutrality makes it the most popular choice to paint the walls of suburban homes designed for flipping, since the color doesn’t betray a hint of its owners’ personality and won’t dissuade new buyers. (The grey paint names at Sherwin Williams resemble an extremely dull Rorschach test: “Requisite Grey,” “Well-Bred Brown,” “Accessible Beige,” “Cyberspace.”) In fashion, it’s been adopted to signal the careful blankness that is a hallmark of good taste in our time, as seen in the calculated

indifference of brands like MUJI, Everlane, APC, and Acne. That the clothes make no extreme statements forms the majority of their charm.

In a recent catalog for the Japanese basics brand Uniqlo, one spread features a male and a female model both in head-to-toe grey: sweaters layered over collared shirts and drapery skirts, each item in its own achromatic shade. Together, the pair resemble two felted tubes or twin cat scratching posts. “Combine subtle variations of the same color for a provocative understatement,” the catalog copy suggests.

Its language is almost entirely contradictions. Variations can’t be too subtle, or else they’re unnoticeable, and understatement is rarely provocative. Yet the outfits and the inscrutable philosophy alike sound attractive. Who wouldn’t want to hide in small differences or make big gestures quietly? The brand has fulfilled its ambitions perfectly. It often seems like half of New York City is quietly wearing its clothes at any one time. The Japanese even coined a word that we might adopt, the derogatory *yunibare*, for someone who is wearing Uniqlo but trying to pass it off as something less commonplace.

Lou & Grey, Ann Taylor’s line of “comfortably confident” activewear, features the color in its faux-artisanal name. Walking into one of the brand’s stores is like being delivered by a mysterious wardrobe to a Narnia where everything is made of sweatpants. Common Projects, the \$400 minimalist sneakers that provide current sartorial shorthand for the successful urban creative, embrace monochrome to the

point of absurdity — their particular all-over grey is a subtle marker of status. In 2014, a collective of artists who identified themselves as a branding agency called K-Hole coined the term “normcore.” It both labeled and formalized the fascination with blending in, adopting an intentionally bland look as a subversive tactic.

This subtle disguise brings to mind Stone Island, an expensive Italian label whose minimalist design, technical fabrics, and discreet, removable logo was adopted by British soccer hooligans in the 1990s, the better to pass by police and security guards unnoticed. It’s also apparent in the streetwear designer Virgil Abloh’s brand Off-White (its apropos slogan is “defining the grey area between black and white”), which presents riffs on work uniforms covered in glitched patterns, and Balenciaga in 2017 under Demna Gvasalia, whose riffs on grey business suits, trench coats, and puffer jackets were further subverted by moon boots, models shirtless under their uniforms, and scarves covered in dazzle camouflage.

One outfit featured the logo of Balenciaga’s parent company, Kering, in a straight-faced joke, as if the anonymous corporation were also something to fetishize.

Beyond a critique of the traditional white-collar ensemble, the line can be seen as a satire of the sloppy suit fits favored by the Trump administration, as well as a knowing reflection of the corporate structures and capitalist consumption habits that allow the fashion industry to exist.

The evolution of grey from a low-end default to a marker of luxury presents an irony. Grey's connotation of invisibility is desirable, but it ends up not being very invisible at all. Even choosing to camouflage yourself is a privilege that not everyone can access. Designing your own uniform, as Zuckerberg has, is more empowering than having one forced upon you by institutions you can't escape.

Still, going grey seems to be a popular choice. My own favorite t-shirt in the color is from The Open Company, a now-defunct brand based in San Francisco that sought to engineer the perfect shirt. The grey is as close to my ideal of the color as it's possible to get, reminiscent of the diffuse light shade of an overcast sky or just-dry concrete. On the inside of the shirt's hem is its only concession to color: a logo embroidered in yellow thread.

I like the shirt because it walks the line between functionalism and affectation. The grey is a generic mask for the decidedly un-generic nature of the object, as symbolized by the hidden logo. It's the reverse of the blatant branding of companies like Louis Vuitton or Supreme. In an anonymous-seeming grey T-shirt, no one has to know what you're wearing; only you do. On the other hand, The Open Company's shirt (which costs \$9) is in some regards more of a commodity fetish than its mass-produced competition. Removing the color of a garment has a way of emphasizing the other details that remain: the quality of the cut, the fabric, the stitching, and even the absence of branding.

Grey objects have an aura of inevitability — they don't ask to be interpreted, they just exist. Yet delve into grey long enough, and it's hard to avoid the paradox. The color might seem to mean nothing (despite its substantial sartorial history), but if we define grey by its blankness, doesn't that mean blankness itself is the meaning that we've imposed on it?

When I spoke to Eric Meltzer, one of the creators of The Open Company, he mentioned being inspired by the Japanese quality of *iki*, a stylistic mode that represents a naïve and effortless cool. Originating in 18th-century Tokyo, *iki* is associated with dull, ambiguous colors like browns, blues, and greys, as the Japanese philosopher Kuki Shuzo observed in his 1930 essay, *The Structure of Iki*, which presents the most comprehensive view of the concept.

Like the Danish *hygge*, Spanish *duende*, or Japanese *wabi-sabi*, *iki* is a cultural and aesthetic value that's next to impossible to translate, but to me, it's key to understanding the meaning of grey. In a 2004 book on Kuki's work, editor Hiroshi Nara translates *iki* as "detachment" for the book's title; it also appears as "coquetry" in the text of Kuki's essay. *Iki* emanates from the teasing dance of attraction and repulsion, a dynamic relationship that might be encoded within an interaction between genders, the checked-grey cloth of a kimono, or the beckoning gesture of a hand. To be *iki* is "to come as near as possible, and at the same time making certain

that nearness stops short of actual touch,” Kuki writes, “protecting the possibility as a possibility.”

A 2004 book review in *The Japan Times* gives a succinct definition of iki that provoked a personal shock of recognition:

Iki represented an ideal ... an urbane, chic type of beauty with undertones of sensuality; morally, the tastes of a person who had some money but was not attached to it, who enjoyed sensual pleasures but was never carried away by carnal desires.

It’s the 18th-century Tokyoite’s version of New Yorker blasé: an embrace of pleasure while it lasts, an acceptance of whatever fate might throw your direction, and an endless ability to adapt without sacrificing good taste. It is in part a signal of class belonging, the equivalent of American WASPishness — it would be difficult to be poor and iki. Yet the word represents a certain appealing distance from, as well as an attachment to, the material world. Iki’s connection to grey can also be seen in the capacity to be one thing and then another, to always be receding.

“Protecting the possibility as a possibility” is a phrase of which Kuki was fond. It appears not only in his philosophy but in the poetry and essays he composed while he lived in Paris working on *The Structure of Iki*. By it, I think he means something like: an openness-to-openness, always turning life over in your hands, looking for

new routes and perspectives. The phrase describes Kuki's personal sensibility as well.

The scion of a wealthy political family, Kuki spent eight years traveling through pre-World War II Europe meeting and studying with the philosophers he had read back at home, like Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger (with whom Kuki shared an interest in phenomenology, not fascism). He befriended Henri Bergson and had Jean-Paul Sartre as a French tutor.

When not studying, writing, or lecturing, Kuki frequented dance clubs, patronized expensive brothels, and took long walks through Paris that he memorialized in poems that tend toward the maudlin, though offer some blinding flashes of imagery. In his more personal writing a picture emerges of a fitfully bohemian aesthete, caught between the pleasures of academia and more worldly ones, always navigating the distance between himself and his adopted city: "This is a life / That misses its way," he wrote in a series of *tanka* called "Paris Mindscapes." "And yet / It is the path I came to / Relying on no one."

During his sojourn, Kuki was beset by the vagueness of identity that often strikes expats: It becomes difficult to define yourself within the foreign landscape of your surroundings. Kuki's work on, and obvious sympathy for, *iki* seems to come out of this tension. It was not just about a way of dressing or a charming social code, but a

deep-seated way of living in a state of contingency, an embrace of greyness rather than black-and-white.

Grey remains forever open to reinterpretation, changing its meaning based on its shifting context. As with the t-shirt, what I want from the color is a generic so generic that it becomes unique: meaningless to those who don't recognize it, but a signal of belonging to those who do. It could be the perfect outfit for any circumstance, wearable to a date, a business meeting, a gallery opening, or a protest.

As a kid, I wore clothes that were generic in a negative capacity: cargo shorts from Kohl's, jeans from Kmart. That particular execrable '90s style is now fetishized by avant-garde designers, but at the time it felt like nothing could be worse. I would have rather worn the ornate Americana of my peers, brands like American Eagle or Abercrombie & Fitch that purported to secure their wearer a place among the popular and attractive (at least in my suburban Connecticut hometown). In retrospect, they mostly accomplished the opposite, marking everyone I would eventually be glad I wasn't friends with.

The cost of the brand-name labels was prohibitive, as was my lack of fluency in fashion. No one taught me clothing was something that you judged yourself by or were judged on; my parents don't speak the sartorial language either. But another

factor was my teenage desire not to be seen in the first place. If my clothes couldn't communicate belonging, better that they say nothing at all.

I bought my only American Apparel t-shirt around that time. I still hang on to it. It's a plain, dark heather grey, now so threadbare as to be see-through. Millions of other people probably have the exact same one. This particular shirt means nothing to anyone but me, and that's why I like it. It reminds me of what I have defined myself against, the closed, kitschy preppiedom that I grew up with. Grey is my own blank slate.

Context shapes what we perceive as generic or neutral. Those Americana brands seemed like the fashion norm for me, but my homogenous suburb was also constructed on whiteness as an artificially neutral ground. Anything that deviated was judged as a departure. I had to learn later that whiteness is anything but neutral.

Both as a color and a concept, white's supposed purity is impossible. "Life comes into this world wearing white, but it begins to acquire color the instant it assumes concrete form and touches the earth, like a yellow chick emerging from a white egg," the Japanese designer Kenya Hara writes in his book, *White*. "White can never be made manifest in the real world."

White is “the last vestige of something that has no future,” Alain Badiou agrees, describing a blank flag of surrender. “In reality, no color can be assigned to a given human being, not black, of course, but not white or yellow or any color identity whatsoever either.” Stripped of these delineations, perhaps humanity might meet each other in shades of grey.

There are visual artists who have spent their lives dwelling in the color. The Bauhaus master Josef Albers used grey to begin his series “Homage to the Square”; in each painting, squares of complementary greys nest inside each other. Mark Rothko painted diaphanous clouds of grey as gateways to some transcendental realm. James Howell, a lesser-known New York City painter, passed decades making only spectra and grids of grey determined by mathematical equations. The artist who did the most with grey, though, was the Minimalist painter Agnes Martin.

In 2016, the Guggenheim museum hosted a retrospective of Martin’s career ranging from her early Surrealist experiments in the 1940s to the massive-yet-delicate paintings she became known for, in which networks of thin marks and paint washes coalesce into larger abstract harmony. Mounted on the walls of the museum, Martin’s paintings formed another monochrome rainbow punctuated by a few canvases in dusky golds, blues, and pinks. Square canvas crossed with stripes or grids in white or grey; the formula repeated itself without repeating.

Even before I saw the show in January 2017, I noticed that anyone I spoke to about it expressed feelings of relief after visiting, an art-induced relaxation palpable in their serene Instagrams of Martin's paintings. It's true that life seemed particularly chaotic at the time: The Trump presidency had just started, and no one quite knew what to expect. The year presented a looming precipice, but the hard-won, overwhelming peace in Martin's canvases pitted itself against the mounting turmoil in the headlines. The artist came to her mature work after a personal struggle as well: a lifelong fight with schizophrenia that was partly treated by the relative isolation of the desert in Taos, New Mexico, where she moved from New York City in 1967. She passed away there in 2004.

When I spoke with Melissa Bell, one of the curators of the retrospective, she agreed that the context shaped the public perception of Martin's work. "Coming in the political climate we have, I think that her ideas about serenity and happiness and goodness actually played in a different way than they might have at another time," Bell said. At the museum, the veil of paintings spiraling up the Guggenheim ramp felt like an enormous sigh exhaling every frustration.

But the painter's greyness is no soft capitulation, nor an escapist flight. Martin's repetition and constant experiments in small differences were a way for her to reach the calm reserve of nature, echoing the way waves or trees are always and yet never the same. The paintings project hope for a new horizon and never despair at

emptiness, which Martin animates with a positive presence. “She’s going for this point of nothingness, which may in fact be sublime,” Bell said. The way Martin herself described Rothko might apply equally well to her own work: Both artists “reached zero so that nothing could stand in the way of truth.”

Grey, as I see it, represents a livable, truthful position for a time when the global sweep of events seems to overwhelm the individual, a coping strategy built on cultivated ambivalence — not the lack of a moral code, but the flexibility to persist in challenging circumstances. The color is both functional and distinctive, blending into its context while, in its endless variety, always pointing toward a new alternative. Contemplating it can be a small act of resistance and yet, as Kuki Shuzo suggests, an implicit reminder that we are also drawn ineluctably toward life.

In the final painting of the Martin exhibition, completed in the early 2000s soon before her death, a lone pair of white stripes runs through a luminous body of blue-tinged grey built up in wide brushstrokes of thin paint, making visible the process by which it was made. Within the canvas you can feel the search for a color that will fully reflect the beauty of the world back at itself, the one shade of grey that will finally disappear and leave only infinite possibility in its wake.