



## Stockholder in Utrecht

Stuff, and other achievements of irrationality, in Jessica Stockholder's explorations of the third—and fourth, and fifth—dimensions

By [Jeremy Sigler](#)

To marvel at a work by Jessica Stockholder is not only to examine her unorthodox assembly of the world's kit, but to wonder where on earth she shops—where she gets such good deals? Her unconventional art supplies seem to either descend from outer space, or crawl up out of dumpsters. It's as if junk—be it new or used—has no other purpose than to animate her dystopian sculptural choreography.

One imagines Stockholder stocking up, as it were. Like a chef instinctively sniffing out the freshest ingredients (the tackiest kitschiest artifacts), she's confident that in time the right idea for their incorporation will come.

I imagine her throwing back a shot of absinthe and embarking on an epic trip to the 99-cent store, in the same 1970s, American-made station wagon (boat) my mom used to drive—a postmodern suburban *flâneur*, experiencing what Walter Benjamin experienced in Paris (albeit by foot): a fetishistic fix. When the world goes on sale, it's Stockholder who will have all the coupons.

Indeed, at its root, her process is as decadent as a department store. Picture Rooney Mara seduced by Cate Blanchett in the opening scene of Todd Haynes' *Carol*. Or conversely the subtle pathos of a scene in Frederick Wiseman's *The Store* (1983) where an average working man, out to please his wife, gets up-sold by a very cunning mink dealer in a Neiman Marcus in Dallas.

And while I'm a less-is-more kind of guy, when it comes to Stockholder, I make an exception. Notwithstanding, when I received a press release in my inbox for her upcoming exhibition all the way across the Atlantic Ocean—that massive ditch filled with salt water, a few fish, and a wad of plastic bags about the size of Brazil—in the old Dutch province of Utrecht, I was a tinge skeptical.

The world has changed since the last time I checked in with Stockholder. And even though I have always admired her “giant steps,” my mood has sobered, and I'd say I've lost my stride and swagger. When I read her show's title, *Stuff Matters*, and skimmed the Centraal Museum's PR material, I felt growing anxiety about the deeply contaminated world we now live in.

With its arty irony, Stockholder's title seemed laced with '80s propaganda—a bit of retro Reaganomics, trickling down like acid rain, making me want to let the baby boomers go knock themselves out and leave me home hooked up to an IV drip.



From 'Jessica Stockholder: Stuff Matters' (Photo: Gert-Jan van Rooij)

But what about Stockholder's sense of humor? Hasn't her work always winked at us, revealing the paradox of her endgame? Reminding us, somewhere in the back of our minds, about the rising mountain of decomposing waste becoming a gaseous landfill leeching lead and other toxins until colorful microscopic plastic worms show up wiggling in our cells.

I swished the title around, as if at a winery in Napa. Stuff. What does she mean by stuff, I thought, humming the disco hit by Donna Summer, while clicking and scrolling discount flights to Amsterdam on Kayak.

Lookin' for some hot stuff, baby this evenin'  
I need some hot stuff, baby tonight

Knowing Stockholder's love of poets and poetry, I'm fully aware that she wouldn't use a provocative word in one of her titles without expecting us to pull out our dictionaries. Stuff, I quickly found out, comes from the 15th-century French *estofer*: the padding used in upholstery. But it has evolved to connote stuffing one's face, or having a stuffed-up nose. Or, in the culinary sense, stuffing the cavity of a turkey or pig before roasting.

In her early prime, Stockholder was like an evicted pack rat on the run, searching for that next site-specific opportunity. Like a hoarder thrown out onto the sidewalk with all her stuff, she was doomed to do her thing on her own, in public, till her energy

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ran out, though apparently her energy never did run out. After leaving her by herself in the gallery for a week installing a show, one might return to discover a shantytown—poured concrete foundations; aluminum and/or pine studs standing up and tied together like a splint; ultrastrong Hefty trash bags (the same way they look when you find yourself stuck behind a garbage truck); secondhand furniture hauled in from God knows where; kitschy lamps plugged in to heavy-duty, bright orange extension cords. Most significantly, and tying it all together, one would encounter Stockholder's distinct painterliness (*vis-à-vis* the process of being a painter)—her indiscriminating gusto, across virtually any surface, and in colors that don't seem to exist on any color chart, in any store.

Judging by her earliest shows at American Fine Arts in the '90s, she had to have been a baffling enigma to the average gallery-goer. When I first walked into AFA and encountered one of her full-room constructions, the only type of person I could have imagined fabricating it was a sloppy, careless, hungover, middle-aged man, working as a freelance independent contractor, taking all the time in the world to completely botch someone's home renovation—your general fuckup. The type of irresponsible, piss-poor craftsman to roll on the first coat of paint before the plaster is even dry, or put in a door frame without using a level, or start a project without even a thumbnail sketch. Back then, and still today, her sprawling installations appear like colossal failures, which means they are achievements of irrationality, and in so being, immensely charming.

What I can't say I'm in agreement with is the sentiment, at least taken at face value, that stuff matters. Peeping iPads; bugged iPhones; boxed and bubble wrapped nothing; empty carbohydrates; placebo-Wellbutrin (even placebo cocaine)—can anything in this day and age be said to matter, or to be worth keeping?



From 'Jessica Stockholder: Stuff Matters' (Photo: Gert-Jan van Rooij)

Let's put it this way: If my house were in flames, and I knew I had to grab one thing and run, I honestly think I'd just run. Possessions marinating in nostalgia? Good riddance. I'm sure that whatever I really need is backed up on some cloud somewhere, or replaceable using my Amazon Prime membership granting me next-day delivery, at pretty minimal cost, due to, I guess, the robots that are causing our present-day global refugee crisis.

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Holland is an impressively tidy country known for its modest, pragmatic people, who have all conformed to one style (remember De Stijl?)—it's safe to say that the Dutch have no stuff. Their country is 100% clutter-free. This makes Stockholder in Utrecht a sort of anomaly, like that one kook who shows up to the costume party actually decked out in a full-on costume.

I was ready to fly. So I emailed my editor that I felt challenged by Stockholder. And he gave me the go-ahead to book my flight. Then I began to flash back to the good ol' days on the cobblestone streets of Soho 1992 where I first witnessed Stockholder's inexplicable plasticity. It was just before Full Total Convenience kicked in, before the days of one-stop shopping at Home Depot, Hold Everything, Costco, Target, Walmart, and Bed Bath & Beyond. And certainly before the days of online shopping! Before the UPS driver (whose name escapes me) became essentially my private



butler, on call 24/7, back when the most vigorous shopaholics knew how to get on their game faces and get out there in the aisles on sale days, and heap their carts with totally useless crap, in bulk.

Stockholder's artistry, however, goes well beyond bulk buying. It's what she *does* with (and *to*) the stuff, that matters. As well as her ability to continually score amazing opportunities to make a splash.

An early AFA show in 1990 was reviewed by Joseph Ruzicka in *Art in America*, proving that the critical response to Stockholder's public display of klutzy imperfection could be visceral. "She contrasts new building materials with a mutilated chair frame, encouraging the viewer to reflect upon the promise embodied in raw materials and the melancholy reality of what society does with them." These words make me think Stockholder was ahead of her time, offering a poignant, somewhat subversive critique of the MTV Generation, or what I call the Empty Void Generation. The critic went on to vividly remark on the emotions of Stockholder's anthropomorphic Walt Whitmanism. "While some works seem to be self-contained mysteries that only grudgingly release information about themselves, others erupt with life, such as a tipped-up car fender that seems to spew forth stuffed animals." Ruzicka continues to reflect on "Stockholder's ability to transform cold, hard metal into something warm and lifelike ... appendages of human softness and roundness," and concludes: "Stockholder seems able to magically transmute the nature and meaning of any material she chooses."

I just saw the formal properties of the work for what they were. It was turbo Tatlin!—an expansion of his *Corner Counter-Relief* of 1913, which was a watershed in geometric painting—planes of wood, metal, and leather, strung in a corner with taut ropes forming a kind of painting-*sans*-paint-*sans*-canvas-*sans*-stretcher. The work's 3D dynamism caused it to, in an abstract sense, open up and admit the room. In other words, the artwork was no longer "in" the room; but the room was "in" the artwork. Conjuring Stockholder's early work, it seems likely that she was familiar with constructivism and futurism, as well as dada and cubism. She was rebelling against the contained, often quaint over-the-sofa-sort-of-painting, while rebelling literally against her professors in the painting department at Yale University (where she was a graduate student) until being adopted by the sculpture department and encouraged to explore the third dimension.

This is around the time she broke through. She was apparently back home (circa 1983) in Vancouver, when she got up the gumption to paint a queen-size mattress

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pink, hang it outside on her parent's clapboard garage, and spray paint an adjacent patch of grass a pale shade of blue. A white laundry line, with its pulley, also cuts across the expanded field of vision lending a linear, Tatlinesque quality to the temporary outdoor staging. It could have been the pop-up theater for the play within a play in Chekhov's *The Seagull*.

Stockholder, from the start, showed an awareness of Kurt Schwitters, whose concept of "Merz" rose from the bin of discarded flotsam after all the proper pigment had been used up. And of Picasso's warped cardboard and twine guitars and mandolins. It was Picasso, after all, who is said to have invented assemblage with the oval-shaped *Still-Life with Chair Caning* (1912) that featured a glued-on scrap of caning. (There were also three letters of the word *Journal* cropped to read "Jou".)

Was Stockholder also a throwback to the early days of the American avant-garde—before the generic term "installation art" came along, when there was still a latent urge to be theatrical, and always enough willing and able-bodied participants to form a Happening? Was she, in fact, a descendent of choreographers like Trisha Brown or even Pina Bausch? Or the Ontological-Hysterical Theater of Richard Foreman? A relative of Fluxus, whose founder Dick Higgins once wrote (in 1965):

Thus the happening developed as an intermedium, an uncharted land that lies between collage, music and the theater. It is not governed by rules; each work determines its own medium and form according to its needs.



From 'Jessica Stockholder: Stuff Matters' (Photo: Gert-Jan van Rooij)

Stockholder's paint, on the other hand, seems to have come right out of a Hans Hofmann studio class—her brushwork is like an AbEx Jazz standard from the New York school songbook (gestural and generous). In a way, she is most like King Kaprow, who leapt off painting in the '50s into the tabula rasa of the free-form "environment." Or Queen Kusama who painted juicy red polka dots on the rippled surface of a pond in her psychedelic 1967 film *Self-Obliteration*.

In 2006, the *Times* critic Martha Schwendener described Stockholder (here I paraphrase) as a kind of renegade magician who uses slight of hand to expertly splice and flip ordinary objects. And she includes the itemized list, of course: "orange laundry basket, plastic lamps and tarps, electrical cords, light bulbs, dishwashing scrubbies, a shower curtain or yarn." The shopping list, it would seem, is the fun.

Over the years, Stockholder has exhibited widely, filling exhibition spaces from New York to Paris, Madrid, Rotterdam, and Venice with such giddy energy that you'd think the name Stockholder is not just a singular entity, but an artist collective. To her credit, her way of working defied monetization and exploitation. Her approach was not only economically feasible compared to the high production cost of much art of the time being subcontracted to expert professional fabricators, but it looked free and easy, thus helping to spark a revival of handmade and intuitive sensuousness that had gone out of fashion. It may bear mentioning that this was shortly before the arrival in NYC of maximalist found-object artists from L.A., like Nancy Rubins, and the slightly younger, maniacal Jason Rhoades who died of an overdose in 1986.

In the early '90s, in any case, as markets were tanking, and truck bombs were parking in the basement of the World Trade Center waiting to detonate, a few blocks away, Stockholder's dealer sat nodding off somewhere in the back of his gallery preparing to once again declare bankruptcy and weasel out of his debts. In her obituary for that dealer, who died in 2003, Roberta Smith writes: "Colin de Land, a New York art dealer whose ambivalence about commercialism [...] was known for his relaxed work habits and even more relaxed art installations, which did not all open on time, as well as an insistent sartorial style that presaged the 'white trash' look." By 1988, his gallery "functioned as an art-world laboratory, hangout and refuge ..."

I guess you could say, the least chromophobic colorist of her generation was pretty darn lucky to run with the most colorful dealer since "Deadeye" Dick Bellamy. And while Stockholder and de Land never made a ton of money together, they certainly received dividends of respect. But most of all, the eternally down-and-out art dealer de Land, who reveled in dysfunction, provided Stockholder with an invaluable



platform to preform her ad hoc-ism: her temporary, provisional, improvised solutions destined to only work once.

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I entered Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum and marched, somewhat irreverently, past rows of shellacked, formulaic portraits of landowners in glazed layers of moody oil paint. A heavily intoxicated-looking, rosy-cheeked Franz Hals caught my eye, but I kept charging through consecutive rooms of proper still-lives displaying irrelevant abundance, joining the crowd that had gathered before Vermeer's tight little "Milkmaid" (circa 1657-8).

ow I would have to merge, as if from five lanes down to one on the New Jersey Turnpike, and wait to square off with the impeccably rendered woman in her basic blue and yellow clothes, extending her solid fleshy arms into the soft tranquility of her kitchen, pouring milk over the elliptical edge of a carafe. I could feel time stop, and see all of human existence channeled into a single vertical inch of white liquid (both white milk and white paint).

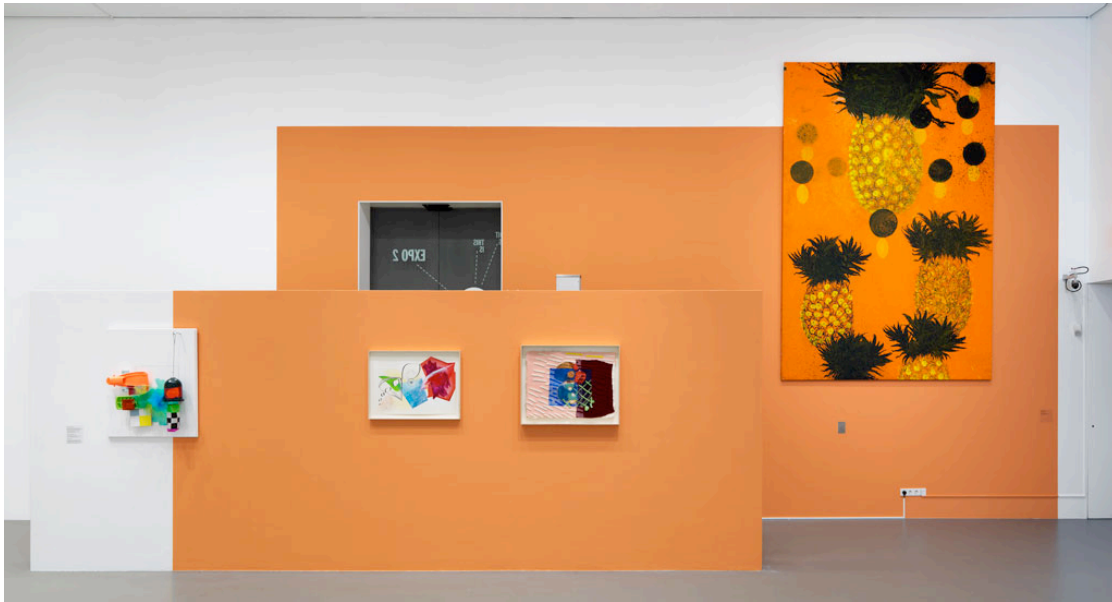
Then I joined the tourists who had formed another line, this time funneling into the special Rembrandt show. I stood before one of the many small, nay miniature, drawings, moved by the compressed emotion packed into the tiniest expenditure of material. The engraving was no larger than a nettle or burr printed on a postage stamp, and while it would have had no impact on the world when it was done, it now, miraculously, expressed every fiber of the artist's being, and blew me over like a freight train. I could feel Rembrandt as if he were living today, say, on hold with Verizon, doodling on the corner of an unpaid bill with a Bic pen, barely aware of what he was doing. His natural genius finding the light with total nonchalance. By comparison, the Rembrandt oil paintings were a display of chintzy bling.

Was the painterly enterprise a fallacy? The biggest, most commandeering Rembrandt, "The Night Watch," was a mesmerizing spectacle. But that only seemed to make me wonder what the person next to me found so interesting. Had I enjoyed people-watching, I'd have been in the right place.

Having weighed in on the present state of Dutch mastery, I was now fully prepped to hit Utrecht and spend the rest of the day with Stockholder. I caught a train, and trekked through the old city to the Centraal Museum. It was time to witness the curatorial circus I'd read so much about. Stockholder had not been invited to merely create one of her mega site-specific installations, but had also been asked to perform the services of guest curator—to incorporate artworks and objects from the museum's vast collection into her work, to essentially pick through the bin of

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stockpiled stuff (down in the basement, I like to imagine) and come up with some way to put whatever caught her eye to good use.



From 'Jessica Stockholder: Stuff Matters' (Photo: Gert-Jan van Rooij)

“I treated the collection as one of my materials,” said Stockholder, who wound up pulling 60 items by 45 different makers from the “treasure trove “ and scattering them about the exhibition on various makeshift pedestals, palettes, tabletops, carpets, scaffolds, and stages (often leaving the colored canvas belts used for harnessing and hauling heavy furniture into place). The overall effect was something like a dog-and-pony show (which is not saying much). “The objects in this exhibition—spanning five centuries, created by visual artists, designers and craftsmen—enter into new dialogues with each other,” said Stockholder, expressing her hope of finding a thread between “many of the mundane and formal impulses that unite artists through the centuries” (a fairly broad thesis, I’d say).

I’d already sped past most of the undisputedly important works in the Rijksmuseum, flat out rejecting a few of the most epic allegorical paintings in the history of art (i.e., Rembrandt’s “Isaac and Rebekah,” a.k.a “The Jewish Bride”); how was I now going to get enthused by 60 mediocre, “mundane” artifacts that hadn’t seen the light of day in centuries?

Furthermore—and I hate myself for thinking this, and even more for saying it—but wasn’t Stockholder, in a sense, being used by the museum to help it justify the money it had spent amassing a motley collection of stuff that nobody ever wanted to see in the first place?

Keep in mind, socialist Holland has maintained an institution of purchasing art yearly from its card-carrying artists, which, you might say, has acted to sustain mediocrity.

I entered the exhibit and tried to put all this asshole-ish negativity out of mind and allow Stockholder to work her magic on me. The first wall I encountered was plastered with shiny pieces of aluminum foil, as if the artist had gotten a little off track wrapping up the leftovers from the previous night's dinner or packing deli sandwiches for the entire museum staff. It was like walking into a Reynolds factory. The cheap display (like, say, the *Ali Shuffle*) wrapped around the wall and lead me to the first stifling punch in the nose!—in the form of Courbet's "The Wave" (from the series he painted off the coast of Normandy, in 1869). A certifiable masterpiece of 19th-century realism.

The painting was by no means a mediocre remnant. It was right up there with the Vermeer and Rembrandts I'd drooled over earlier that day. What makes this Courbet so significant is its forgoing of fussy brushwork, and instead, its quickly applied, thick layers of white impasto by palette knife in a slapdash way. Courbet was able to capture the look of the wave's collapsing white water, while shocking the world with a painting that appeared like an obnoxious, ugly middle finger in everybody's face. He flipped the bird to the board of the academy.

Courbet had a point. He got the painting to, in a sense, crash, the same way the actual waves that day would have crashed. And so the convention of the idealized, falsified, romantic landscape came crashing down.

While it was amusing to watch Stockholder get up on the stage and do a kind of duet with Courbet, I guess I was either jet-lagged, or just in a bad mood, because I fled to the museum café to rest. Here I reread the artist's statements on the brochure I had been given and waited for my espresso. "Stockholder will change your perspective on what's worthwhile and worthless," it said.

Had Courbet's wave, by this logic, become worthless? And had Stockholder's tinfoil become reciprocally worthwhile? Had they both met somewhere in the middle?

Feeling let down, I texted my editor: "Stockholder's stuff may not matter as much as I hoped," and waited for a reply, which thankfully never came. I set down my phone and stared blankly across the room, wondering how I was going to go back into that museum and catch that wave, and stand up on my board, and ride it! It was beginning to feel like a total wipeout.



From 'Jessica Stockholder: Stuff Matters' (Photo: Gert-Jan van Rooij)

I sipped my espresso, and suddenly felt my energy (and thus curiosity) surging back to life. I jotted down a few notes, and looked down at the menu on my table to order a glass of beer, and was delighted to see a strange cocktail on the list called a Stockholder Spritz—a concoction (apparently of Stockholder's design) containing Aperol, prosecco, spring water, and a slice of orange. Should I cancel the beer, I thought, and get a Stockholder Spritz? Nah, I think I'll just have to go ahead and get both! And a second espresso!

By the time I downed all three drinks, I was ready for action.

This is when I became enchanted by a long wall hung entirely with an inventory of full-length mirrors, all in different styles from different eras, standing side by side like a big happy family. It was a kind of taxonomy, converting that one room of the exhibition into a store called Vintage Mirror Depot. My mentality was now to shop—to pick out the one I liked best, and stick it in my cart and head for the cashier.

I remembered Walter Benjamin's *Arcades* project, with its "R" chapter, devoted to all the quotes he could find in his library about mirrors. One reads: "The dandy, Baudelaire has said that man should aspire to be sublime, continually. He should live and sleep in front of a mirror" (Louis Thomas). And another, by Baudelaire himself, reading, "The lover of universal life enters into the crowd as though it were an immense reservoir of electric energy. We might also liken him to a mirror as vast as

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the crowd itself; or to a kaleidoscope endowed with consciousness, which, with each one of its movements, represents the multiplicity of life and the flickering grace of all the elements of life.”

I guess you could say that Benjamin believed that we had come to the end of our capacity to draw meaning from pagan rites, and Judeo-Christian religious rituals, and that capitalism’s commodity fetishism would become the force that could reawaken our imaginations. He made room in his mind (unlike his pal Adorno) for the increasing clutter of banality



From 'Jessica Stockholder: Stuff Matters' (Photo: Gert-Jan van Rooij)

I was now fully submerged, and far more engaged as I approached the dazzling, scintillating “Lay of the Land” (2014). Its orange plastic shopping baskets, driveway mirrors, oriental carpet, 15 wooden stools, acrylic paint, pendant lights and bulbs, and other hardware were all humming in unison, like a boys choir holding an ungodly pre-pubescent key. As I took my next heavy step, I felt like a deep-sea diver in one of those great big copper globe helmets in a weighted suit hooked up to an oxygen hose. I felt like I was standing on the sea floor shining a light on some kind of hovering, exotic, never-before-seen, phosphorescent creature. While the work’s many store-bought bits and pieces were perfectly recognizable (i.e., 15 wooden stools, etc.), the vivid colorful phantasmagoria, the overall sensation of it, seemed to radiate my subconscious and vanish forever inside my human darkness.

As much as I felt a deep connection with many of the bona fide works in the show, I was also becoming increasingly entranced by what I call the “incidentals”—ambiguous signs of art that could not be confirmed to be intentional. One often has no way of knowing if such subtle moments of poetry are ever written into the script.



For example, there was a piece of black-and-yellow-striped caution tape stuck to the floor at a dangerous edge of the scaffolding stairs. Was this done by Stockholder or security? There was a single long white line on the floor that I realized was a scratch in the gray concrete left there after a heavy object had been pushed to another location. There was a very dull, gray Rietveldt bookcase with a tiny piece of masking tape stuck to one of the shelves with the name “Engels” written on it with a Sharpie, hinting at the Marxist who presumably once owned (or used) the shelf.

There was a woman who stepped in front of me as I was trying to study “Green Angles” (2014). She was in a shirt with a decorative floral motif the exact shade of green in the work. I became spiritually passive, and let her block the work on purpose, imagining that Stockholder was whispering for me to do so in my ear (clearly I was now under hypnosis). There was a baffling adjustable padded stool that I debated might have been positioned by the entrance to the room by the museum guard (to take the load off), not by the artist. There was an elderly woman shuffling behind a walker. The walker itself caught my eye, and held my interest. It was an undeniable Stockholder (perhaps it had been issued to the woman by the artist herself, I thought, knowing that I had now become insane).

But the show’s most sublime incidental came when I was looking out the window gazing at the lawn the way a dog spies on a squirrel. At that moment, a groundskeeper walked up with a long yellow garden hose, screwed it into an oscillating sprinkler already positioned on the grass, and turned the spigot. Tall arches of water shot out and sprinkled across the grass forming a puddle right in front of me (on the other side of the glass). I watched as the puddle was quickly absorbed into the mud, and as Stockholder’s ideas were likewise absorbed into my brain. In time, I thought, it would all “melt,” as Prospero says in the *Tempest*, “into thin air,” and become something like fertilizer of the soul—“such stuff as dreams are made on.”