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THE RADICAL EKPHRASIS OF GERTRUDE STEIN'S *TENDER BUTTONS*

A Thesis Presented

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis offers a reading of Gertrude Stein's 1914 prose poetry collection, *Tender Buttons*, as a radical experiment in ekphrasis. A project that began with an examination of the avant-garde imagism movement in the early twentieth century, this thesis notes how Stein's work differs from her Imagist contemporaries through an exploration of material spaces and objects as immersive sensory experiences. This thesis draws on late twentieth century attempts to understand and define ekphrastic poetry before turning to *Tender Buttons*. Although the question of categorizing *Tender Buttons* has been an issue since its original publications, few have noted its essentially ekphrastic nature. Doing so, I argue ekphrasis helps to account for the way Stein's poetry interacts with spatiality and temporality, illustrates sensory experiences, and plays with the multiplicity of language while also provoking readers to re-interpret their own experiences.

My work with *Tender Buttons* seeks to extend the theoretical conversation. Applying a categorical term like ekphrasis to Stein's work forces readers to interact with the descriptions in the text, in conjunction with their own experiences, in a way that elevates the objects rendered to pieces of art. Via an analysis of spatiality/temporality, invocations of the senses, and the plurality of diction in every poem, the reader can experience *Tender Buttons* through a unique and individualized approach that openly invites her to ask questions about Stein's world and her own material surrounds. Essentially, I offer a reading of *Tender Buttons* as a collection that fastens materiality with language, asking anyone who interacts with the text to ask questions about the boundaries between verbal and visual material.

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INTRODUCTION

The intersection of the verbal and visual arts is a long contested topic of intellectual discussion. It seems as though there is a never ending list of vocabulary to describe the connections between language and the material space it signifies and describes. Pictorialism, iconicity, the sister arts, ekphrasis; these terms are concerned with interactions between language and the physical world. Conversations that include concepts from the aforementioned list are often interested in representation. How does language represent materiality? At the root of this question lingers an anxiety about how to interpret signs. Words signify material space, but is it possible for words to equate themselves to material space? Is the value of a verbally depicted chair equal in value to the physical chair? My interest in the debate between the verbal and visual arts rests on these questions and has thus stimulated the case study of Gertrude Stein's 1914 *Tender Buttons* in conjunction with ekphrasis.

Tender Buttons is an avant-garde examination of domestic space. Organized into three sections—OBJECTS, FOOD, and ROOMS—the collection is comprised of poems that describe ubiquitous household items and foodstuff like carafes, stamps, potatoes, and chicken. However, when working through Stein's collection the reader is presented with a unique representational problem. In most literary instances where language works to invoke visual objects and/or material space, the author seeks to accurately describe or imitate the subject. *Tender Buttons* challenges this mimetic standard. There is a semiotic disconnect between the title of each poem and the subsequent verse which is often confounding in its abstractions. For example, the fifteenth entry of part one, OBJECTS, is titled "A RED HAT." Yet what follows is far from a mimetic rendering of a red hat:

A dark grey, a very dark grey, a quite dark grey is monstrous ordinary, it is so monstrous because there is no red in it. If red is in everything it is not necessary. Is that not an argument for any use of it and even so is there any place that is better, is there any place that has so much stretched out.

(Stein 19)

The description is jarring as it contradicts the preconceived notion of what the words “red hat” physically signify. The reader will not find a mimetic rendering of a red hat. The poem instead opens with a description of the color grey: “a dark grey, a very dark grey, a quite dark grey is monstrous ordinary, it is so monstrous because there is no red in it” (Stein 19). Additionally, neither “hat” nor any of its synonyms make an appearance in the verse. This thesis is an attempt to make sense of how Stein’s self-defined still-life portraits are descriptions of domestic objects when those portraits are intrinsically anti-mimetic.

Reading *Tender Buttons* has taught me that the multiplicity of language matters a great deal. We now live in a world that is hyper-visual, perhaps saturated with more kinds of images than when Stein was writing over a hundred years ago, while challenges to received definitions of words or classifications of categories continue. What classifies, for example, the photograph of a trained photographer as a piece of art in comparison to the photograph of an Instagram influencer with millions of followers? If anyone with a camera phone can suddenly become an artist, then using vocabulary like ekphrasis to describe the representation of both art and other classifications of the visual objects is helpful. This is merely a contemporary version of the questions Stein’s *Tender Buttons*

attempts to answer in a radical experiment with ekphrasis. Perhaps the current definition of ekphrasis is shifting from the verbal representation of visual art to the verbal representation of a visual object as an artistic statement. Stein elevates ordinary domestic objects and practices to the level of art by approaching verbal representation of material space in the same way a cubist painter might approach the pictorial representation of material space. She requires the reader to carefully consider the multiplicity her word choice in congruence with a commonplace understanding of the domestic space. By multiplicity, I mean that words in *Tender Buttons* have multiple meanings. Turning back to “A RED HAT” as an example, the color “dark grey” is described as “monstrously ordinary” (Stein 19). In this context, ordinary can be interpreted as plain or dull. Grey is not monstrous because it is grey, but instead because plain: “it is so monstrous because there is no red in it” (Stein 19). Stein is asking the reader to experience a domestic space and consider the many perspectives through which objects can be viewed and experienced as works of art.

Calling Stein’s work strictly visual is insufficient, as Chad Bennett observes in “Scratching the Surface: *Tender Buttons* and the Textures of Modernism.” Stein’s poems present the reader with a variety of senses and in this particular instance touch: “If poetic texture is understood as those textual elements independent of a poem’s argument or logic, resisting paraphrase, then the notoriously intractable *Tender Buttons* is almost nothing but texture and our engagement with it by necessity tactile” (21). Like Bennett, I argue that *Tender Buttons* often transcends traditional uses of imagery due to its rich sensory nature. An imaginative concoction of sensations, *Tender Buttons* transports readers to a moment in which an object is both observed and experienced, hinging on the

many sensory-producing facets of every titular object. Stein accomplishes this task through a radical form of ekphrasis that sutures verbal and visual media together to represent experiences that are perceived by more than just the sense of sight. These extreme attempts to document a domestic space bring a life to common objects and verbally render those objects as multisensory experiences.

Tender Buttons has never been classified as an ekphrastic collection, and for at least one obvious reason: it does not verbally depict pieces of visual art, real or imagined¹. Stein is invoking a domestic space—a material space that is often defined by its objects. Thus, the representation of her domestic space is fundamentally ekphrastic in that it verbally depicts a material space defined by its objects. Furthermore, Stein and her partner Alice Toklas decorated their home with a critical eye for aesthetics and detail. The pair thought of their apartment as a work of art comprised of works of art. Often remembered for her role as an art collector, Stein's home was in many regards a thoughtfully curated museum, brimming with pieces of modernist visual art. *Tender Buttons* is also radically ekphrastic in the way it conveys subjectivity in the objects it depicts, invoking senses beyond visions like touch, taste, and smell. Rather than attempting mimesis and recreating visual images within a verbal medium, I argue that Stein challenges herself and her reader to consider what visual images can become when verbally reimagined within a spatial and temporal context that incorporate senses beyond just sight. Breaking from more traditional uses of ekphrasis, *Tender Buttons* is a collection of images that are not static snapshots, or verbal recreations, of objects fixed in a moment in time; rather they are moving, changing, living.

Tender Buttons is an arrangement structured to direct the reader's attention towards a complex multi-sensory experience. Stein's invocation and depiction of the domestic space comprises visual, aural, and tactile elements, drawing on the signification of the objects and the reader's perception of those objects. Thus, *Tender Buttons* documents a domestic space in a manner that is new. Coupled with the linguistic arrangement, it is helpful to consider the spatial arrangement of *Tender Buttons*. With the attention paid to the arrangement of the domestic space, it is critical to understand how Stein organizes the various items within OBJECTS, FOOD, and ROOMS in regards to their materiality. In terms of cubist literature and the continuous present, Stein uses space as means through which to suspend objects temporally, emphasizing the materiality of the subject outside of a synchronic contextⁱⁱ. In the same manner that cubists suspend their objects temporally so as to examine a subject from past, present, and future views of the observer's imagination, Stein's continuous present attempts a similar task. Through repetition and tautology, she fixes objects so as to scrutinize them from various viewpoints, noting the various senses needed to experience the object.

The abstract nature of *Tender Buttons* places a hefty work load on the reader, requiring a focused attention to detail. *Tender Buttons* is written in a manner that foregrounds the multiplicity of both language and the subject under examination; thus, the text becomes slippery to define in absolutes as the text is practically infinite in its meaning. The objects described in Stein's poems are ordinary items that the reader would have an experiential understanding of. So, the interpretations of Stein's descriptions are influenced by the reader's experience. Due to Stein's extensive reliance on the multiplicity of language, no two readings of the text can be identical. Carl Peter's echoes

this sentiment in the preface to his extensively annotated edition of Stein's poetry: "other readers of *Tender Buttons* will, of course, be led to other words, places, thoughts, recognitions, and things—and that is entirely the purpose of Stein's text as she composed it. I hope that this example of one reader's encounter of this text will inspire other readers to see, recognize, and apprehend other "truth values" in it" (3). I agree with Peters that *Tender Buttons* is a text designed to be open for individual interpretation.

It is within the vein of intertextuality and subjectivity that I wish to make my intervention in the current critical conversation surround *Tender Buttons*. Similar to the early imagist works published around the same time, Stein's *Tender Buttons* is highly visual and concerned with crafting visual objects through verbal means. The imagist project was intended to be mimetic in the extreme, and the imagists hoped their verbal work would become equal in visual merit to that of a piece of visual art. Their poetry was intended to make the reader see. While the success of their aspirations is debatable, the imagists and Stein share a common goal. They both express a desire to render the visual world through poetry to such a degree that the visual and verbal objects are equal in sensory value, or as Janet Hobhouse observes: "an exact description of inner and outer reality" (96).

The first chapter of this thesis, "Plural Imagism: Gertrude Stein, *Tender Buttons*, and the Multisensory Image" is devoted to introducing Stein and her abstract poetry. I situate Stein and *Tender Buttons* alongside their artistic contemporaries. This brief literary history leads to a conversation on the difficulty of defining and decoding Stein's work. Moving through the critical conversation surrounding the collection that looks to make meaning of her abstractions, I call for a reading of Stein's poetry that foregrounds

language over images. Stein's text is not a consideration of what OBJECTS, FOOD, and ROOMS physically are, but rather how language is the means through which material space is understood and experienced. The second chapter, "'A Lecture in Aesthetics and Epistemology: A Shift from Cubism to Radical Ekphrasis,'" navigates the connections between the author and her experimental grammar. The language of *Tender Buttons* is abstract by design, and Stein is encouraging the reader to play with words and how their arrangement in sentences creates limitless perspectives of visual objects. The final chapter, "Ekphrastic Buttons: Fastening Gertrude Stein's Verbal and Visual World," explicates Stein's radical ekphrasis. Ekphrasis allows for Stein to augment grammar and play with the relationship between signifiers and signifieds, and I show how a reader might interact with the text and extract their own interpretation of the domestic space and to reconsider the previous understandings about the relationships and boundaries between language and materiality.

PLURAL IMAGISM: GERTRUDE STEIN, TENDER BUTTONS, AND THE
MULTISENSORY IMAGE

"I was a little obsessed by words of equal value . . . you had to recognize words lost their value in the nineteenth century . . . they had lost much of their variety, and I felt I could not go on, that I had to recapture the value of the individual word, find out what it meant and act within it."

--Gertrude Stein on the language of *Tender Buttons*

I

In the early spring of 1914 Donald Evans, a friend of Mabel Dodge, asked Gertrude Stein if she would be interested in publishing some of her new plays. Having just rejected an offer from John Lane to publish work in Wyndham Lewis's vorticist magazine *Blast!*, Stein offered Evans the manuscript of her "most abstract" work to date—the prose poetry collection *Tender Buttons* (Hobhouse 100). Evans was delighted by the strange and unconventional work, and facilitated its publication by Claire Marie in May of 1914 (Hobhouse 100). *Tender Buttons* has been regarded as an abstract experiment in modernist aesthetics and poetics since its original publication, sparking debate over both its meaning and its fundamental objective. For over a century, scholars have asked: how can the collection be defined and categorially placed amongst its peers? How can we make sense *Tender Buttons* and make sense of its abstractions?

Tender Buttons is an experimental linguistic examination of the domestic space, organized into three sections: OBJECTS, FOOD, and ROOMS. *Tender Buttons* moves from small items of little consequence like seltzer bottles in OBJECTS, to more intricate domestic practices like dining in FOOD, and finally to a comprehensive look at domestic spaces and practices that are enclosed by ROOMS. The text builds on itself in

complexity, drawing the reader further into Stein's understanding of the world. As the reader moves through the prose poems she wanders through Stein's carefully curated domestic space via common objects and social conventions. When the three sections are read completely in succession the reader observes how Stein creatively sutures together both the materiality and the intangibility of domestic spaces. In his 2016 annotated edition of *Tender Buttons, Studies in Description*, Carl Peters comments on the organization of the collection and how each section sets up an experiential sensory reading:

In the first section, OBJECTS, the language holds no discours—the Other in fact is situated in seeing. In the second section, FOOD, the language holds both the object for the reader and the author seeing the object –we share in the experience— here we encounter the dialectics of breaking bread and breaking fast with the author. However, in the third section, ROOMS, the language also provides contexts; in this section we find ourselves grappling with quantity and not quality- with re-visioning and not revising- with new and multiple views of the same thing within its frames. In ROOMS we enter into a quantified universe constantly and consistently adding to itself- assembling and building- both in the moment and from the moment. We have been well prepared.

(Peters 5-6)

Peters highlights the reader's experiential reading of the text and the multifaceted language of *Tender Buttons*. Stein verbally constructs material objects and social practices through continuous re-visions of her literal domestic space—27 rue de Fleurus—and its metonymic rendering: *Tender Buttons*. It is paramount to remember that

Gertrude Stein does not simply record or reconstruct a Parisian apartment, but *her* apartment. 27 rue de Fleurus was both a home and a hub of artistic activity. Stein is often remembered for her position as a collector and curator of art when *Tender Buttons* was written. The coordinator of an elite and charismatic salon, Stein's home exhibited the work of Picasso, Cezanne, Matisse, and others visual artists. A multifaceted and cosmopolitan domestic space that defied established social norms, 27 rue de Fleurus is the *parergon* to Stein's prose poem, the extricable supplementⁱⁱⁱ. Stein's apartment was an epicenter of modern art and culture, and Gertrude and her brother Leo immediately immersed themselves in the turn of the century art world, with Leo buying his first piece of modern art in 1902—a painting by Wilson Steer (Hobhouse 36). Over the next two years the Stein siblings would acquire work by Cezanne and Matisse. This interaction with the Parisian art work would lead to their introduction to Picasso in November of 1905 (Hobhouse 49). This acquaintance with the twenty-four year old Spanish painter would blossom into a deep personal and professional relationship with Gertrude.

While the friendship between the self-proclaimed geniuses would grow into an iconic example of intermedium collaboration, it also signified a dramatic increase in Gertrude's interaction with the art world of Paris. The coterie that develops from Stein's friendship with Picasso would not only shape her social life, but her domestic space. Stein immersed herself wholly in the art world of early twentieth century by decorating her home with art, sculpture, furniture, and other cultural artifacts. Her life was orchestrated through intertextuality and called upon the aesthetic values of modernist visual art, values found throughout her body of work.

Tender Buttons encapsulates this intermediality by drawing on cubist aesthetics. The text moves the reader from glimpses of common household items, to domestic practices, and then finally a combination of those objects and practice, all through abstract linguistic arrangements that fracture traditional conceptualizations of objects and practices. The first section of *Tender Buttons*, OBJECTS, provides the reader with abstract descriptions that create complex sensory experiences. Stein invokes multiple images in every poem over the course of OBJECTS, FOOD, and ROOMS by calling on the plurality of words. For example, in the second poem of the collection, “GLAZED GLITTER.,” Stein writes “Nickel, what is nickel, it is originally rid of cover” (11). Stein opens with a rhetorical question and requires her reader to consider the appearance and definition of a *nickel* with her. Drawing on the multiplicity of *nickel*, both a piece of currency and common metal, Stein challenges the reader to pick apart the definitions of nickel as a substance and as a marker of economic value. Furthermore, the title “GLAZED GLITTER” reminds the reader that nickel is shiny, silvery, but not actual silver.

The second segment of *Tender Buttons*, FOOD, serves as a transitional section that shifts the reader from the confounding OBJECTS to the more focused ROOMS. The reader immediately notes changes in the format of FOOD from OBJECTS. While the organization of the poems is similar (a poetic description that abstractly correlates to the titular object: “EGGS.,” “CHICKEN.,” “CAKE.,” etc.), Stein includes a list of contents before the first poem. This list adds to the slow construction of boundaries within the poem. OBJECTS feels completely open, moving from item to item with few clues hinting towards Stein’s decision to hop from topic to topic. However, in FOOD the reader is

provided a list of ingredients, as it were. Stein is limiting herself in subject in the section, much like a cook would be limited by the ingredients in a pantry or ice box. Stein then writes the recipes for FOOD using:

ROASTBEEF MUTTON BREAKFAST SUGAR
CRANBERRIES MILK EGGS APPLE TAILS
LUNCH CUPS RHUBARB SINGLE FISH CAKE CUSTARD
POTATOES ASPARAGUS BUTTER END OF SUMMER
SAUSAGES CELERY VEAL VEGETABLE COOKING
CHICKEN PASTRY CREAM CUCUMBER DINNER
DINING EATING SALAD SAUCE SALMON ORANGE
COCOA AND CLEAR SOUP AND ORANGES AND OATMEAL
SALAD DRESSING AND AN ARTICHOKE A CENTRE IN A TABLE.

(34)

The final section of *Tender Buttons*, ROOMS, is a stark contrast from the previous two segments. ROOMS differs from OBJECTS and FOOD as it contains only one poem. Fourteen pages of prose poetry, ROOMS reads like a manifesto, drawing on momentum built from the previous two sections. Alongside references to previously described in OBJECTS and FOOD^{iv}, Stein incorporates new observations about her domestic space. These new observations are largely concerned with boundaries, noting the physical limitations of rooms and insinuated limitations of domestic spaces. The final section opens with:

Act so that there is no use in a center. A wide action is
not a width. A preparation is given to the ones preparing.

They do not eat who mention silver and sweet. There was
an occupation.

A whole center and a border make hanging a way of
Dressing. This which is not why there is a voice is the remains
Of an offering. There was no rental.

(Stein 63)

The first sentence, “Act so that there is no use in a center,” pulls the reader into Stein’s approach to material space. She suggests that there is no center, no definitive focal point of space or objects. Furthermore, she argues that “wide actions,” or poetic descriptions, do not provide scales of measurement. Rather, poetic descriptions act on behalf of the poet to craft their subject—preparation is for the one preparing. *ROOMS* is a self-referential segment that notes the framing of space via architecture but simultaneously argues against the framing of perception. There is no center because there is not an ultimate, singular, point of view. “Voice,” or language provides “an offering” of perspective.

Stein forwards her interest in word value and the potential perspectives they offer. In an interview with Robert Haas in 1946 she commented: “I felt that I could not go on, that I had to recapture the value of the individual word, find out what it meant and act within it” (Copeland 88). Her attention to the multiplicity of language adds a layer of complexity to any analysis of her work. The phrase “value of the individual word” reads like the philosophical platform for Stein’s prose poetry as she highlights her interest in both the multiplicity of language and the experimental descriptions that come from her word arrangements. Janet Hobhouse notes in her biography on Gertrude Stein, *Everybody*

Who Was Anybody, that the infamously difficult poet “never altered a single word that she wrote” (96). Rather, Stein believed that “her work had to express her as she really, totally, exactly was. It was, she said, intended as ‘an exact description of inner and outer reality.’ Exact, as in a laboratory; and as in a laboratory, one could not tamper with the results” (96). Much of Stein’s literary work between 1909 and 1912 supports this description; they were her interpretations of the fascinating world that surrounded her. In many regards, it seems as though Stein sought to document that world. Stein carefully notes social practices, interactions and appearances throughout *Tender Buttons* as she sets about recording and scrutinizing the many intricate details of her life^v.

II

It is easy to see why *Tender Buttons* challenges commonplace definitions and perceptions of poetry with its confounding abstractions.. The first step in interpreting Stein’s work is often an attempt to aesthetically define the text and place a categorical label upon it. Cubist, prose style, avant-garde, and modernist: these taxonomic groupings provide some relief for a reader who is desperately hoping to decode this difficult text because categories bring with them discerning characteristics. Stein so often presents challenging and unexpected ideas to her audience that ask them to question commonplace writing practice. Suggesting alterations to standardized conventions like grammar and form^{vi}, Stein encourages readers to push boundaries and conceptualize something fresh and new. This newness further complicates the desire to label *Tender Buttons*. Much like Ezra Pound, Stein sought to stimulate a writing tradition that had for so long been steeped in the nineteenth century culture of romanticism; however, instead of looking to the past for inspiration Stein rooted herself in the present. Disregarding social expectation and

regulation, Stein was a creative entity of her own. It is this rebellious and free thinking that becomes taxonomically challenging.

Past discussions on *Tender Buttons* have privileged a visual-based reading of the text—a reading which often leads to its cubist label. These image-based interpretations are driven by the visual descriptions and the experimental presentations of conventional subjects throughout the collection. Stein’s constant invocation of the visual characteristics of objects (colors, sizes, shapes, etc.) and visual sensations (“spectacle,” “see,” etc.) contribute to this particular reading. Furthermore, Stein herself labelled *Tender Buttons* as a series of still life poems, a term clearly inspired by both the artists and the art that surrounded her at 27 rue de Fleurus (Hobhouse 100). The well documented connection between Stein and the visual art world of turn-of-the-century Paris offers another facet to the visually-minded reading^{vii}. The collection’s critical association with both the visual and verbal arts has led to difficulty in accurately placing it within a taxonomic category.

While most scholars have turned to specific categorical labels like cubism to define the structural and aesthetic ambitions of *Tender Buttons*, imagism is a more fitting term. The cubist label rightfully asserts both the abstract and visual nature of the collection, but I contend that the term cubist distracts from Stein’s verbal play as cubism insinuates direct connections to visual art rather than literature. Imagism, on the other hand, is an experiment in vivid linguistic description—an experiment in which *Tender Buttons* is clearly participating. Originating from the London “School of Images” in the spring of 1909, imagism was a brief avant-garde experiment in modern poetics that would ultimately become a lasting source of theoretical inspiration and influence for American

modernists. The imagist movement lasted approximately a decade and drew inspiration from a variety of poetic traditions. It pushed the boundaries of what English poetry had been up until that moment through its hyper-focused attempts to verbally render visual images—to make the reader *see*. As William Pratt states in his brief anthology, *The Imagist Poem: Modern Poetry in Miniature*, “somehow, out of the wildly elective borrowings from Oriental, classical, medieval, and modern sources, a new cadence had come into English verse- ‘free verse,’ it was called; and out of a few intuitive principles has come a new sense of metaphor—‘imagism,’ a fresh perception of the relation of language to meaning” (31). According to Pratt, imagism works toward two goals: the linguistic invocation of materiality and an investigation in semiotics, or “the relation of language to meaning” (31). Though favoring linguistic multiplicity over simplicity, Stein’s prose poetry is interested in the same goals.

Thinking of *Tender Buttons* in conjunction with imagism is helpful for two reasons. First, the movement serves as chronological context. Published at the height of the imagist decade in 1914, the prose poems are culturally situated alongside inventive, image-based, work. Second, both *Tender Buttons* and imagist poetry express similar desires to verbally render a spatial world. This spatial rendering differs slightly in execution between Stein and her imagist contemporaries as her work is further informed by senses beyond sight. However, both camps strive to create a verbally constructed sensory experience, sight driven or otherwise. Therefore, it is useful to put *Tender Buttons* in conversation with imagism to track various methods of execution: how does Stein’s representation of objects differ from the imagist work of her American ex-patriot peers, like Pound or H.D.? Though imagism is primarily concerned with extreme mimetic

representations (words that literally make the reader see), imagist works often include sensory descriptors to enhance the visual. Ezra Pound's poem, "In a Station of the Metro," accentuates this point. A brief two line poem inspired by Japanese Haiku, it reads: "the apparition of these faces:/ petals on a wet black bough." A poem devoid of verbs, Pound's imagist poem presents the reader with a verbal image that depicts a specific moment. In this instant, spatial and temporal elements converge to form a visual image, informed by sense beyond sight. Pound draws the reader into the experience of standing on a train platform by illustrating a visual image. If one is waiting on an outdoor platform, then he would be surrounded by both man-made and natural object. Writing "petals on a wet black bough" describes specific material objects and spaces. Depicting the bough as blossoming and wet creates the image of rainy spring day. Thus, Pound has created an image informed by tactility and sight—the wetness of the branch, the inherent warmth of a spring day, the insinuated color of petals. Pound believed that anyone who had taken the Paris metro train would immediately envision this scene. Furthermore, he stated that "in a poem of this sort one is trying to record the precise instant when a thing outward and objective transforms itself, or darts into a thing inward and subjective" (Pratt 37). Referring back to one of the main tenets of imagism, Pound emphasizes that "In a Station of the Metro" is about a singular moment, but it accomplishes another task as well. It takes "a thing outward and object" (the station) and through a poetic process, creates a thing that is "subjective" (the poetic image).

While Pound clearly informs his verbally constructed images with tactile details, the intended goal remains to render *an image*—a singular visual instance. Stein flips this system. Rather than favoring the visual and informing the image through sensory

descriptors she layers sensory experiences to create living snapshots of moments in the domestic space. Imagists take photographs; Stein records videos, refusing to privilege one image or sensory experience over another. *Tender Buttons* is nestled within the imagist decade, but it does not “render particulars exactly^{viii}.” Instead, the collection renders Stein’s interpretation of sensory experiences associated with the objects via a linguistic multiplicity. Imagism aids in conceptualizing the representational goals of *Tender Buttons*, but that categorical label reaches an inevitable limitation as well.

Imagism reveres singularity; Stein’s work hinges on multiplicity. Therefore, I posit that *Tender Buttons* eventually subverts the mimetic imagist project of Pound, H.D., and Aldington, and instead proposes a more comprehensive and experiential presentation of the verbally constructed image.

Although *Tender Buttons* has never been directly linked to imagism, scholars have oft noted Stein’s attention to sensory description throughout the collection. In recent years scholars such as Antje Kley (2004), Lisa Siraganian (2003), and Chad Bennett (2017) have worked to unravel the complex sensory descriptions in the text so as to make meaning of each poem’s subject^{ix}. Each of their critical contributions examines Stein’s unconventional grammar and her use of description; Kley, Siraganian, and Bennett ask *how* Stein plays with language to craft her abstract subject matter. Primarily, their work examines the complex language of *Tender Buttons* so as to lay claims about Stein’s verbal representation of domestic objects and material space.

In her article “‘keeping pace with the visual revolution’: Intermediary Reference in Gertrude Stein's Prose Poems ‘Tender Buttons’ and Wyndham Lewis's Novel ‘Tarr,’” Kley examines the intersection of cubist aesthetics and Stein’s poetry. Speaking to

Stein's "analytical and inventive" mode of cubism rather than the "representational mode of realism," Kley observes that "Stein's verbal still lives are playful pieces which project onto the page different non-referential or associative perspectives seemingly dislodged from the control of the conscious, purposive mind" (519). Kley continues with this anti-mimetic thread and argues that "Stein's work defamiliarizes the familiar and thus temporarily effects and eventually denies the critical distance that seems so central to dominant accounts of modernism—which assume that the modernist text provides an autonomous alternative to mass culture . . ." (520). In this particular critical context, Stein "defamiliarizes the familiar" through her seemingly arbitrary arrangement of signs^x in her poetry. Kley suggests that these arrangements are less arbitrary than they appear during an initial reading of *Tender Buttons*. A collection of seemingly random items ("A BOX.," "A RED STAMP.," "A PLATE.," etc.), the OBJECTS segment of the prose poem is a focused examination of domestic space. For example, in the first poem, "A CARAFE THAT IS A BLIND GLASS.," Stein opens the collection with an abstract rendering of the titular object, setting the pace for the poems to follow:

A CARAFE, THAT IS A BLIND GLASS.

A kind in glass and a cousin, a spectacle and nothing
strange a single hurt color and an arrangement in a system
to pointing. All this and not ordinary, not unordered in not
resembling. The difference is spreading.

(Stein 11)

Kley's interpretation of "A CARAFE THAT IS A BLIND GLASS." is particularly helpful in analyzing the linguistic plurality and inventive subject presentation in Stein's

prose poetry. Postulating that the poem can be viewed as a “musical key” through which the reader can interpret the rest of the collection, Kley points to the “noun based vocabulary” and “the collection’s preference for deceptively simple verbs of being” through iterations of *to be* as hallmarks of *Tender Buttons*’ “arrangement” (520). Pivoting on the phrase “an arrangement in a system to pointing,” Kley argues that “A CARAFE, THAT IS A BLIND GLASS.” is informing the reader about the organization and presentation of material in *Tender Buttons*. It is an *arrangement* of nouns “which directs the reader’s or listener’s focus of attention, rather than pointing beyond themselves to the objects they denote . . . these sensual arrangements of words and phrases are . . . a system which directs us to adjust our perceptual apparatus to see or hear what we usually take to be transparent signifiers to another reality beyond the materiality of the words themselves” (520-521). Kley’s observance of Stein’s abstract linguistic arrangements contributes to a reading of *Tender Buttons* that is concerned with semiotic conventions. If Stein’s intention is to have her readers “adjust [their] perceptual apparatus to see or hear what [they] usually take to be transparent signifiers,” then the intentional use of linguistic multiplicity becomes an experiment in cubist aesthetics that is simultaneously concerned with cognition and verbal/visual relationships. Kley concludes that there is an intrinsic semiotic connection between cubist literature and painting. With reference to Lessing^{xi}, she states that “. . . the specific semiotic quality of the verbal and visual media [are defined] by distinguishing between their objects as bodies in space and action in time. In this respect, Cubist painting and Stein's writing in *Tender Buttons* bring the two media closer together” (523). Kley is interested in *Tender Buttons* as it provides a case study for intermediary spatial studies, but her brief nod to semiotics suggests that the scholarship

seeking to decode *Tender Buttons* is really concerned with sorting out the signifiers and the signifieds throughout the collection.

Stein's *Tender Buttons* extends beyond mimesis and into a semiotic experiment in which the boundaries of linguistic signs are pushed, asking the reader to consider: can a verbally constructed moment make one feel the experience described? Recalling the similarities between Stein's work and that of her imagist contemporaries, imagism is also concerned with semiotics and word value on a visual level. The imagists worked to equate the arrangement of words in verse to the invoked image. An experiment in the praxis of verbal and visual exchange, the imagists strived to make their reader see. Stein, of course, complicates the semiotics of imagism by moving away from the strictly visual in favor of multi-sensory experiences. Rather than giving a Lacanian^{xii} primacy to the signifier over the signified, Stein's linguistic arrangements are purposefully circular and self-referential, suggesting a form of semiotics that plays with the arbitrary relationship between the signifier and the signified. Stein amplifies this arbitrary relationship by pointing to the multiplicity of signs, manipulating conventional signifiers and demonstrating how they are able to produce more than one signified. Taking "A CARAFE THAT IS A BLIND GLASS." as an example, the signifying phrase "blind glass" could produce multiple visuals. An opaque carafe. A carafe that is filled and renders transparent glass unseen, invisible, or blind.

The grammatical analysis of *Tender Buttons* is also found in Siraganian and Bennett's respective works. Much like Kley, Siraganian is interested in the aesthetic crossovers between the verbal and visual arts. Siraganian's article is an investigation of Stein's perceptions of art, the artist, and the viewer. Opening with an anecdote about

Stein's interpretation of visual art as a separate entity with an independent consciousness, Siraganian proposes a consideration of *Tender Buttons* as a text that presents the poetic art object as a subjective thing, representational of material space but simultaneously separate from the space rendered. Siraganian attempts to demystify Stein's "grammar games" by explicating Stein's linguistic multiplicity:

Stein intends some of her words to signify *as* if they were detached from the sentence by quotation marks—yet she leaves out the quotation marks that would help the reader understand her meaning. . . to define "a box" [Stein] writes a sentence containing variations on the formulaic phrase, 'out of set-x comes y-example.' . . . In each case Stein's words are potentially replaceable, marked by implied—but not printed—quotation marks. Each word is a possible defined value for either x or y ^{xiii}.

(663-663)

This brief passage underscores Siraganian's observation that Stein is purposefully questioning word values. Stein complicates the reader's understanding of the poetic subject by refusing to point to a singular interpretation of the chosen nouns. Siraganian draws on the word "redness" in "A BOX." as example of this word play. The first line of "A BOX." reads: "out of kindness comes redness" (Stein 13). Siraganian interprets *redness* to mean *blushing*, which would suggest the kindness—or perhaps a compliment—warranted a physical response (664). This brief debate further accentuates the semiotic undercurrent in the critical conversation surrounding *Tender Buttons*. In this instance, the signifier *redness* suggests an alternate signifier—*blushing*. Either signifier produces the mental image of the intended signified, a demonstrative change in one's

physical appearance, but the inherent multiplicity of *redness* as a signifier presents the obvious difficulty in definitively decoding Stein.

In contrast to Kley and Siraganian, Bennett's article "Scratching the Surface: *Tender Buttons* and The Textures of Modernism" steps away from an intermediary and/or visual reading of Stein in favor of a sensory driven analysis. Specifically, Bennett investigates Stein's treatment of the titular objects via their textural qualities—an extension of their oft cited visual qualities. Bennett is interested in the sensory experiences that are verbally crafted in *Tender Buttons* and asserts the importance of textures in the poems: "if poetic texture is understood as those textual elements independent of a poem's argument or logic, resisting paraphrase, then the notoriously intractable *Tender Buttons* is almost nothing but texture, and our engagement with it by necessity tactile" (21). As Bennett observes in "Scratching the Surface," Stein's poems present the reader with a variety of senses, in particular touch. *Tender Buttons* is an imaginative concoction of sensations that transport readers to a moment in which an object is both observed and experienced, hinging on the many sensory-producing facets of every titular object. As Bennett eloquently phrases, "the shift in emphasis from the uncertainty of the title's visual imperative to the poem's richly assured textural logic brings to mind the idiomatic phrase 'seeing is believing, but touching's the truth'" (28).

Bennett, Siraganian, and Kley's respective approaches to *Tender Buttons* are helpfully demonstrate how the reader might navigate Stein's "grammar games." However, this scholastic mission to decode the intractable language of *Tender Buttons* inevitably fails in its objective to definitely make meaning of the prose poetry for two reasons: 1) These readings primarily attempt to answer the question *how does Stein*

manipulate language without fully answering *why* Stein makes these choices and *for what* purpose; and 2) these readings insinuate a possibility that a single, definitive, reading of *Tender Buttons* is possible.

In regards to the question how does Stein manipulate language, the answer, of course, is that Stein showcases the multiplicity of language in order to create nearly infinite perspectives of the poetic subject, a domestic space. These critical responses work within an understanding of description, imagery, and the sister arts. For Bennett, Stein examines the material space through sensory imagery—objects are seen and felt. Siraganian and Kley emphasize sensory imagery further by drawing connections between language and vision, stressing the subjectivity of objects through quasi-semiotic studies. Though all three of these analyses of *Tender Buttons* contribute to a better understanding of Stein's aesthetic and poetic approach to spatial representation, they do not fully expand on the question *why*? Why is Stein concerned with writing through linguistic multiplicity? The most popular response, and I argue the largely unchallenged response, is that her abstract still life poems are attempts at literary cubism, fracturing ubiquitous objects and reconstructing them through various spatial perspectives. The multiplicity of her language sets up for the multiplicity of the reader's perceptions of the poetic subject, a fair and well researched assertion. However, I claim that these responses to *Tender Buttons* fail to acknowledge that Stein's objectives extend beyond experiments in abstract poetics or literary cubism; she is also interested in linguistic signification and the possibility that words can invoke material space *and* that those words can breathe a life into those spaces. Even if the relationship between signifiers and signifieds are arbitrary, Stein demonstrates that the careful arrangement of words can produce something unique

and unexpected from the conventional. Suddenly, something as simple and ubiquitous as a box or a stamp is transformed into a sensory experience that expands beyond its spatial materiality and into a larger *living* context.

Analytical readings of *Tender Buttons* require a careful attention to Stein's language and her selective word choice. Just as she curates art at 27 rue de Fleurus, Stein curates the words in her poems—carefully arranging them so as to produce multiplicity. In her comprehensive book, *Gertrude Stein, the Language that Rises: 1923-1934*, the oft cited Stein scholar Ulla Dydo writes: “Yet, precisely because her words are centripetal, pointing inward, to the piece, rather than centrifugal, pointing outward, to the world readers find entry into her work difficult and look for help in a world that offers none” (Dydo and Rice, 23). Though her work examines Stein's writing after the publication of *Tender Buttons*, Dydo's observation is helpful when considering how she constructs a spatial world. The reader will not find allusions to Picasso's *Portrait of Gertrude Stein*, or Matisse's *Woman with a Hat*. There is no conclusive answer for which carafe is a blind glass or what room(s) is explored in *ROOMS*. Instead, the reader is forced to look inward and analyze the arrangement and multiplicity of the words used in every poem. Rather than space informing language, Stein organizes language to inform space. I call for an analytical shift away from reading *Tender Buttons* as an experiment in cubist literature and move toward a reading of Stein's text that focuses on her interaction between language and material space—a mode I categorize as radical ekphrasis.

“A LECTURE IN AESTHETICS AND EPISTEMOLOGY:” A SEMIOTIC SHIFT
FROM CUBISM TO RADICAL EKPHRASIS

“From beginning to end, *Tender Buttons* is this kind of lecture-demonstration in aesthetics and epistemology. At one point, the discourse paradoxically calls attention to its pedagogical methods: ‘Lecture, lecture and repeat instruction.’ But this didactic discourse is informed by radical skepticism: ‘What language can instruct any fellow.’”

—Jayne L. Walker, “*Tender Buttons*: ‘The Music of the Present Tense’”

“the concentration and the long struggle between ~~sound~~ sight sound and wide. and when it all came out so strangely.”

—Gertrude Stein, an inscription to Donald Sutherland

From her inscription to Donald Sutherland in his copy of *Tender Buttons* it is clear that Gertrude Stein was interested in verbally constructing a spatial world and its many sensory productions. Stein calls on her own brand of imagism to produce linguistic images that express *sight* as well as *sound* and *wide* (space). In order to sift through Stein’s sensory descriptions, the scholarship of Chad Bennett, Lisa Siraganian, and Antje Kley is primarily interested in the grammar of Stein’s notoriously difficult prose poetry. This category of Stein criticism calls on an understanding of cubist aesthetics in conjunction with Stein’s imaginative use of diction and syntax; it points to Stein’s linguistic multiplicity and what she would call “the value of words.” Essentially, work that seeks to make meaning of Stein is interested in unravelling her linguistic styling so as to understand the poetic subject. Though the appropriate jargon is rarely systematically used (i.e. sign, signifier, signified, signification, etc.), I interpret the branch of scholarship concerned with decoding *Tender Buttons* to be working under a semiotic-minded lens.

Brief comments on Stein's careful arrangement of words and her manipulation of signs often fall to the side to make room for cubist readings.

This chapter contains a brief explanation of Stein's play with semiotics and sets up the explication of Stein's ekphrasis *Tender Buttons* in Chapter Three. Understanding how Stein manipulates words to create multisensory experiences aids in conceptualizing the ekphrastic nature of *Tender Buttons*. The images and sensory experiences Stein linguistically invokes are formed by her inventive arrangement of words in her prose poems. The reader is able to approach *Tender Buttons* ekphrastically if she is aware of Stein's approach to language as a system of representation that can be rearranged. A semiotic discussion shows *Tender Buttons* is anti-mimetic by exposing the disconnect between the titles of the poems and the descriptive verse that follows. Stein's work is not mimetic, but it is descriptive. Contemporary ekphrasis enables the reader to see how Stein turns objects into art by recognizing the artistic value in ordinary objects.

Despite Stein's clear intentions to explore words and their many values, little scholarship has been written that directly treats *Tender Buttons* in correlation with semiotics^{xiv}. Enrique Mallen's 2007 article "Representational Modularity, Synthetic Cubism, and Language Poetry" is arguably the most comprehensive exploration of the subject, approaching Stein's interest in cubism through an in-depth understanding of Ray Jackendoff's^{xv} rationalization of the lexicon.

Mallen carefully opens his essay with an overview of Jackendoff's lexicon and explains the cognitive apparatuses that create language vocabularies:

In Ray Jackendoff (2002), the language faculty is described as a collection of modular computational processes . . . [a] process [that] hinges on a concept he

terms Representational Modularity—the idea that the mind is divided into modules on the basis of the representational format that a cognitive system uses . . . phonology, syntax, and semantics will comprise three separate representational modules, because the structures they manipulate require different formal primitives and combinatorial principle.

(Mallen 98)

According to Jackendoff, the lexicon (the vocabulary of language) functions through a complex mental process that contextualizes phonology^{xvi}, syntax^{xvii}, and semantics^{xviii} in conjunction with one another. Though separate cognitive functions, understanding the phonology, syntax, and semantics of language creates a system of signs (lexicon).

Condensing his explanation of Jackendoff, Mallen states: “Simply put, the claim is that what we usually refer to as the lexicon^{xix} is not a distinct entity but rather a subset of the interface relations between the three grammatical subsystems (phonology, syntax, and semantics)” (99-100). Vocabulary is formed by the interactions that take place between the cognitive sensibilities of phonology, syntax, and semantics. Through the aural, arrangement, and conceptual meaning of words, language is representative of both materiality and temporality.

Mallen’s examination of Jackendoff’s lexicon moves to a conversation on semiotics and cubism. Understanding how a language’s vocabulary is formed and assigned meaning on a theoretical level enables the reader to delve into a richer reading of Stein’s wordplay. Speaking to this point, Mallen explains that post-impressionism intertwined the artist’s “cognitive commitments” with the “radical idealizing of style” (97). Mallen turns to Stein and Picasso’s mutual interest in cubist aesthetics as a case

study for the praxis of cognitive commitments and the radical idealizing of style: “For Pablo Picasso and Gertrude Stein, painting and poetry, rather than tie themselves to “existing” objects, could define modes of visual and linguistic thinking capable of making concrete the dream of inventing a new modernist sensibility” (98). Cubism was an aesthetic mode through which both the poet and the painter were able to experiment with the cognitive functions that make meaning or understanding from materiality.

Calling on Victor Grauer^{xx}, Mallen continues to draw a connection between semiotics and cubism: “As Gauer points out, cubism was, almost from the start, informed by a kind of ‘semiotic’ awareness far ahead of its time, a development that grew inevitably from the radically realist ‘struggle to see’ initiated by Cézanne” (117-118). If Stein is truly interested in literary cubism then experiments in semiotics become intrinsic to works like *Tender Buttons*. Grauer’s observation of the “semiotic’ awareness” in cubism supplements the radically ekphrastic reading of *Tender Buttons*. Stein is writing during an artistic period driven by a desire to extend previous understandings of vision and perception. Imagists, cubists, fauvist, vorticists, and other groups were challenging systems of both verbal and visual modes of material representation. Through her linguistic experiments, Stein crafts poetry that underscores the relationship between words and material space. This relationship is further emphasized by the multiplicity of the words chosen as Stein’s verbal plurality constructs many perspectives of common household objects and practices. Mallen’s work reiterates this idea. He notes that “by forcing the reader to pay attention to the word, Stein revitalizes the lexicon. The poet doesn’t ignore the meaning of words, as so many critics alleged; but by presenting each word in an unusual context, she directs attention not only towards its phonology but also

towards its semantics, and the interaction between both levels” (132). The semiotic discussion from Mallen underscores Stein’s attention to words and context. She acknowledges that words have assigned values that create meaning. If language creates meaning, then Stein’s poetry asks the reader to carefully evaluate what each word means based on its arrangement in the poem. These arrangements ultimately produce the ekphrastic moments that invite the reader to experience objects—see the blindness of a carafe or feel how vegetables are cut (Stein 11, 52).

In her book *The Making of a Modernist: Gertrude Stein from Three Lives to Tender Buttons*, Jayne L. Walker also touches on the semiotic experiments found in Stein’s prose poetry. She argues that that language is comprised of a fixed arrangement of arbitrary signs, stating “[language] cannot present a literal piece of an object” (133). Walker continues with this idea and adds that “nouns and adjectives are the most ‘concrete’ resources of language, but they are the names of things and attributes and not the things themselves” (133). Though scholars like Walker argue that words cannot literally equal images, Stein’s linguistic experiments in *Tender Buttons* suggest that the poet disagrees. Stein is interested in the relationship between words and objects—how words assign value to objects. Creating complex linguistic arrangements, Stein demonstrates that without words, objects lose a context and a meaning that was supposedly natural. For example, the opening of the third poem “A SUBSTANCE IN A CUSHION.” reads: “The change in color is likely and a difference a very little difference is prepared. Sugar is not a vegetable” (Stein 11). The first couple of sentences are nonsensical when taken at face value, especially when one attempts to draw a direct correlation between the title and the verse. However, this initial nonsequitur between a

cushion and sugar yields a more dynamic interpretation if the reader delves into the multiplicity of Stein's language. Perhaps Stein is creating an analogy. If a cushion has changed color from use or damage then it becomes visually new. The new cushion does not equate the old cushion just as sugar does not equate to vegetables. Though tedious to break apart, the joy of reading *Tender Buttons* comes from these puzzling moments. The sense of discovery in the connection between two ordinary and unrelated objects, like cushions and sugar, is a unique sensation and casts a sense of newness around Stein's work as well as the poetic subjects.

When considering the semiotic play in *Tender Buttons* – the unique arrangement of signs and the multiplicity of the words used—the prose poetry clearly has a connection to the cubist objective in visual art to present the viewer with multiple perspectives of the chosen subject. However, the multiplicity of Stein's language moves beyond perspective alone. Via ekphrasis, the poems found in *Tender Buttons* are able to reconstruct material space and all of its sensory characteristics (sounds, colors, textures, etc). The continuous present sets up for Stein's ekphrastic descriptions by suspending the object spatially and temporally, thus allowing the reader to place the focus entirely on the sensory experience invoked. This grammatical mode does just what its name suggests; Stein perpetually writes in the present tense and thus suspends the subjects in time so as to thoroughly examine it from a variety of perspectives. *Tender Buttons* is an early example of the continuous present in Stein's canon. Given its proclivity for the plurality of images, *Tender Buttons* relies on the continuous present so as to highlight the subject's position in space, slightly removed from a linear time scheme.

The continuous present has been closely linked to Stein's interest in cubism and the way in which the cubist aesthetic treats the subject from various perspectives. Highlighting temporal perspective, the continuous present in Stein's work was meant to isolate an object or concept so as to "[discover its reality]" in a comparable manner to Picasso's early cubist experiments (Hobhouse 72). The intimacy between Stein and Picasso has led to a direct comparison between cubism and the continuous present, if not a direct influence of the art aesthetic on Stein's writing. In the first decade of the twentieth century, Stein and Picasso were both developing their artistic styles and personalities. For Picasso, 1905-1907 marked the end of his Rose Period and the beginning of his serious experiments with fauvism and eventually cubism (Giroud 26). For Stein, these years were early in her writing career—a profession she actively pursued after a trip to Florence in 1903 (Giroud 9.) Though the two artists were gaining popularity in the turn-of-the-century Parisian art world, these first few years during which the pair of friends knew each other were marked with aspirations for notoriety. In *Everybody's Biography*, Stein writes "Picasso and I used to dream of the pleasure of if a burglar came to steal something he would steal his paintings or my writing in place of silver or money" (Hobhouse 69). This drive to produce masterful work made 1905-1912 highly productive years for both writer and painter, leading to experiments and risks in their respective crafts, two of which are Picasso's cubism and Stein's continuous present. Relying on repetition and tautology, the continuous present offers the reader a reflective mode that is highly aural and emphasizes the relationship between the signifier and the signified in Stein's writing.

Janet Hobhouse notes that “. . . the continuous present was an invention as momentous as Cubism. Both deriving from the analysis of form and mass in Cezanne, and from an interest in ‘primitive’ culture . . . they were to challenge the common view of perception of reality and time” (73). Hobhouse observes that “cubism challenged the held theory of perception by demonstrating that an object was everything we knew about it . . . it challenged theory of time by making vision synchronic” (73). Cubism functions through an understanding of multiple visions. Hobhouse uses the example of a man’s head: the viewer sees a face but also remembers what the back of the head looks like; thus, the viewer projects past understandings to create a future image in the present (73). Interested in the spatiality of the written word, as well as temporality, Stein’s continuous present attempts a similar task. Looking to break away from what Stein called the “‘nineteenth century idea’ of a beginning, middle, and end,” her literature is often repetitious, constantly cycling back to the beginning to as to “[suspend] the inevitability of arriving at the end” (Hobhouse 73).

A mode that is both grammatical and theoretical, Stein embraced the continuous present rather than the traditional use of past, present, and future verb tenses throughout her *oeuvre*. Elaborating on her implantation of this mode in her 1926 lecture

“Composition as Explanation” delivered to the Cambridge Literary Society, Stein claims:

“Here again it was all so natural to me and more and more complicatedly a continuous present. A continuous present is a continuous present. I made almost a thousand pages of a continuous present.

Continuous present is one thing and beginning again and again is another thing. These are both things. And then there is using everything”

(Dydo 493)

The meta speech demonstrates the lengths to which Stein used her unconventional grammatical mode. For her, the continuous present was a means through which to express the world.

Carl Peters also speaks to Stein's use of the continuous present in the introduction of *Studies in Description*. Peters is chiefly concerned with the grammatical structure of *Tender Buttons* as a lens through which to view the poetic subjects throughout the prose poem. By understanding the continuous present, or as he puts it the "intact simultaneous present," the reader can extrapolate action by layering the many connotations of the nouns used:

Gertrude Stein reconceptualizes truth value in art as a verb and not, as in past art, a noun. The emphasis is on quantity and not quality—re-
visioning (re-imagining through making) and not revising (i.e. true to Aristotelian "nature" or any other external reference). Picasso's painting, like Stein's writing in *Tender Buttons*, is a multi-dimensional assemblage of parts. The simultaneity, or intact simultaneous present . . . The key connection between the modernist works of Stein and Picasso is a new approach to syntax (both visual and textual) in the process of composition, always involving simultaneously both an allusion to and an elision of the conventional.

(Peters 9)

Stein is ultimately interested in composition as it allows her the freedom to play with language. By altering conventional grammar rules, or experimenting with literary form, Stein is able to draw the reader's attention to the purpose of her text—to verbally render a

material space through augmented perspectives. Considering *Tender Buttons* alongside semiotics and cubism provides a helpful set of vocabulary to explain how Stein is committed to verbally describing the sensory experience of the domestic via experiments in perspective. The suspension of an invoked image or sensory experience is Stein's ekphrasis at work, putting the subject and its subsequent sensory experiences on display. The reader is concerned with the rendering of the subject entirely. Analyzing the ekphrasis of *Tender Buttons* does not negate the cubist understanding of the text. Stein's ekphrasis enables the reader to contextualize Stein's hyper-spatial text within a scope that forwards a literary understanding rather than a visual one. Cubism and ekphrasis are not mutually exclusive; rather, the cubist understanding of perspective feeds into the semiotic play of Stein's continuous present. In the case of *Tender Buttons*, the unconventional description of objects leads the reader to sensory experiences connected to domestic spaces.

EKPHRASTIC BUTTONS: FASTENING GERTRUDE STEIN'S VERBAL AND VISUAL WORLD

Thinking of Peters' comments on the descriptive nature of *Tender Buttons* is helpful in conceptualizing Stein's ekphrasis by noting how she works to craft strong sensory experiences. These experiences are framed within a domestic space, and the objects associated with each experience create a constituent relationship. One cannot exist without the other. At its core, contemporary ekphrastic theory seeks to explain the supplemental, what Jacques Derrida explains in *The Truth in Painting* as work that is extraneous to something else calls upon the supplemental (9-12). Derrida explains that there exists a central piece or text, the *ergon*, and then the supplemental element that is incorporated into the *ergon* to provide further context, image, etc: the *parergon*. In its purest form, the *ergon* cannot exist without the *parergon*, and vice-versa. The two are inextricable from each other, and they provide a unique piece when fused together (Derrida 9-12). In *Tender Buttons*, the *ergon* of the collection would be the prose, and the objects described would stand as the *parergon*.

Fundamentally, *Tender Buttons* poems in OBJECTS, FOOD, and ROOMS can be thought of as the *ergon* to the verbally rendered domestic objects, or *parergons*. Without these ordinary things, the domestic space becomes something different entirely. Is a dining room truly a dining room if it lacks a table, chairs, china, and silver? Is a home truly a home without its objects, food, and rooms? I would say no, and I am inclined to believe Stein would agree based on her work. *Tender Buttons* is a radically ekphrastic experiment in that it elevates the descriptions of objects as artful sensory experiences. If poems within this collection are considered without the *ergon*, the domestic space, they

lose the potential for a fuller understanding. Just as the dining room cannot exist without its many accoutrements, neither can the dining table serve its true purpose without the room in which it is housed.

This chapter is devoted to explicating passages from the prose poetry collection with an eye towards Stein's linguistic multiplicity as a mode through which to invoke the sensory-rich experiences of the domestic space. Asking the reader to consider the value of every word, Stein calls on a linguistic multiplicity that in turn stimulates a multiplicity of perception. While drafting *Tender Buttons* Stein claims she "used to take objects on a table, like a tumbler or any kind of object and try to get the picture of it clear and separate in my mind and create a word relationship between the word and the things seen" (Copeland 88). Stein's *Tender Buttons* is an investigation into semiotics that strives to make the reader see, feel, touch, smell, and hear the domestic space through language, drawing out "the word relationship between the word and the things see." If the objects, food, and rooms of the poems create the domestic space and all of its nuances, then why not treat the collection as an experiment in immersive sensory experiences? *Tender Buttons* was drafted to be experiential rather than solely representational. Stein is using the domestic space as a medium through which to express her interpretation of language. Suggesting that word values are inherently plural, her invocation of objects, food, and rooms draws the reader into multiple images and sensory experiences. Calling on her understanding of cubist aesthetics, Stein proposes that pictures in the modern world are leaving their frames. The subjects of still life paintings are a part of the world, and her still life poems look to elevate the ordinary subject to a place of artistic value. She is crafting experiences through radically ekphrastic poetics, manipulating perception

through a semiotic multiplicity of selected signifiers, rendering a domestic space that is cubist in its fractured perspectives of the subject. It is important to remember that Stein *is not* verbally depicting pieces of visual art. Her home is filled with work by Matisse, Cezanne, Picasso, and others. If she wanted to write poems strictly about visual art, she easily could have. Her prose poetry is also not interested in mimesis; rather, it is interested in how language can be manipulated to emphasize the many perspectives and sensory experiences connected to the poetic subject. Through her creative approach to representation, Stein creates scenes of a domestic space that suggests movement and subjectively.

Though *Tender Buttons* is not conventionally ekphrastic, depicting recognized pieces of visual art in verse, it is helpful to remember that the commonplace understanding of the prose poem lies in the analysis of its spatiality and visual components. Over and over, scholars have pointed to the hyper-visual nature of the text as well as the keen eye with which Stein organizes and arranges her subject. Whether an extension of her experiments with medium, in the fashion of the continuous present, or a stylistic preference, it cannot be ignored that Stein's *Tender Buttons* requires the reader to analyze its inherently visual quality. However, *Tender Buttons* is not visual alone; rather, it incorporates aural and tactile elements alongside the visual to craft a unique sensory experience. Drawing on the subjectivity of the objects examined, Stein invites the reader to complete their own interpretive work, noting the sensory details sprinkled throughout the text so as to construct a comprehensive and immerse look into the subject.

Murray Krieger's discussion of ekphrasis in *Ekphrasis: The Illusions of the Natural Sign* helps explain another aspect of the ekphrasis in *Tender Buttons*. Krieger

considers the signification of the visual arts in prose and verse. In the seventh chapter, “The Verbal Emblem II,” Krieger contextualizes spatiality in regards to the verbal medium:

. . . the spatial is now to be achieved by a transformative use of language as a poetic medium that takes arbitrary signs and *literally* changes their nature in spite of their prepoetic tendencies, freezing them in a spatial fix, making them into their own emblem, though hardly a picturable one. So the spatial is no longer defined by way of this visual so much as by way of the material, as taking up its own place: the art object, as spatial, is now to lead, not elsewhere to a something seen, but to its own naturelike organic thinghood, rooted in its own integrity.

(Krieger 213)

Krieger argues that the signified subject, the object rendered verbally, becomes spatial rather than linguistic. Rather than occupying space through its visibility, the object *is* the space. Working with Krieger’s interpretation of space, the ordinary objects, food, and rooms in *Tender Buttons* become spatial because they are both rendered as space and enclose spaces. The objects and food take up space through their identity as objects, and the rooms surround space. Situating Krieger within the Derridean understanding of ekphrasis, ROOMS becomes the ergon to the parergonal OBJECTS and FOOD, framing these objects and spatially contextualizing them.

Acknowledging the titular object of each poem as a linguistic depiction of space enables the reader to envision, to see, Stein’s rendition of a domestic space. Stein compounds the visually ekphrastic experience of *Tender Buttons* by weaving sensory

details throughout the collection, thus crafting moments that are also informed by visual, aural, and tactile markers. I echo Carl Peters' claims that *Tender Buttons* cannot be read the same by any two persons. Because Stein draws on the multiplicity of language and plays with the value of words, it is impossible to ever know what she means. Instead, Stein's ekphrasis allows the reader to form a connection between language and a material space. Stein describes and documents a home, a ubiquitous material space of which nearly every reader would have a commonplace understanding. Coupling the preconceived notions of domestic objects like "A BOX." or "ROASTBEEF." with the interpreted description from the verse in each poem creates a unique reading experience for anyone who encounters *Tender Buttons*. As Mallen also explains, "[the words in] *Tender Buttons* are not conventionally descriptive of the object but have their genesis in the writer and in the sensual and/or linguistic associations evoked by the object (cf. Dubnick 1984:33-34)^{xxi}" (131). Thus, assigning an ekphrastic label to Stein's abstract poetics creates a new way of understanding the connections between a verbal and a visual world. Rather than providing definitive answers to the so called "meaning" of *Tender Buttons*, Stein's ekphrasis opens the text for the reader and provides a richer textual experience.

While the collection is not an exercise in mimetic representation, Stein's poems require the reader to implement their understanding of each object so as to make sense of the abstractions. Stein draws on the ubiquitous nature of ordinary object and layers an avant-garde technique to create multiple sensory experiences of one subject. *Tender Buttons* is an experiment in experiential representation as it meticulously examines objects within the domestic space. Stein drafts verbal images that represent her

interpretation of reality—a reality that demands the reader’s careful consideration. So, why not simply say that Stein relies on creatively woven imagery? Why not explicate the poems for their interesting use of description and creation of unconventional representations? In several regards, this sort of analysis falls a bit short. Firstly, Stein’s use of language in *Tender Buttons* is unconventional to the point that a conventional analysis would inevitably fall short of drawing strong conclusions. For example, take the tenth poem in the collection, “A RED STAMP.:

If lilies are lily white if they exhaust noise and distance
and even dust, if they dusty will dirt a surface that has no
extreme grace, if they do this and it is not necessary it is not
at all necessary if they do this they need a catalogue.

(Stein 15)

A snapshot of the sort of descriptions found throughout *Tender Buttons*, “A RED STAMP.” at first glance seems nonsensical and unrelated to its titular object. If the reader looks for uses of imagery, metaphor, allusions, etc., she would eventually extrapolate helpful information. The descriptors of the lilies are unconventional for a flower, suggesting not only a superficial function through their color, but also their potential to make sound (“exhaust noise”) and move (“distance”). Through a tedious unravelling of Stein’s linguistic choices, the reader is able to “decode” the poem and the analysis has accomplished its rudimentary task: makes sense of the poem. However, the work is clearly not finished. The subject of the verse appears to be lilies, rather than stamps, and the lost connection between the title and the description incites confusion. An imagery minded analysis is meant to extract sensory details that contribute to an understanding or

interpretation of the poem. Piecing together sensory words is not enough when reading *Tender Buttons*. Stein's collection is steeped in sensory imagery but not for the sake of a mimetic representation. Rather, the sensory imagery forces the reader to consider the interactions with or moments involving objects.

Given the rich sensory nature of *Tender Button*, Stein's poetry moves beyond conventional imagery. *Tender Buttons* is an unexpected concoction of sensations that transports readers to a moment in which an object is both observed and experienced, hinging on the many sensory-producing facets of every titular object. Stein's *Tender Buttons* is concerned with verbally rendering what Stein calls the "the rhythm of the visible world." She leads the reader through a well-curated and well-observed domestic space. The text is radically ekphrastic in that it not only invokes sensory experiences but it blurs the lines between spatial reality and verbal reality. The reader cannot help but lose himself in the subjectivity/tenderness of the physical and verbal buttons that fasten language and material space together.

The first section of *Tender Buttons*, OBJECTS, introduces the reader to Stein's unconventional descriptions. OBJECTS leads the reader through a series of abstract still life poems that serve as initial case studies for Stein's radically ekphrastic methodology. OBJECTS is not as focused in subject as the subsequent sections, FOOD and ROOMS. Because of its wide array of subjects, with little connection to each other besides their grouping as domestic items, OBJECTS encourages the reader to play along with Stein as she sifts through each poem. By engaging with the multiplicity of the words used, the reader can envision moments informed by space. Stein's ekphrasis does not yield a

definitive interpretation of text; instead, it enables the reader to openly engage with the text and rummage through its many moving pieces to create a completed image.

Turning to the poetry, “A PIECE OF COFFEE.” is the fifth poem in OBJECTS and offers textual examples of Stein’s attention to spatial and temporal elements, sensory description, and abstract linguistic multiplicity. From the opening lines of “A PIECE OF COFFEE.,” Stein immediately draws the reader’s attention to space and the value of multiplicity in creating sensory experiences:

More of double.

A place in no new table.

A single image is not splendor. Dirty is yellow. A sign of
more in not mentioned. A piece of coffee is not a detainer.

The resemblance to yellow is dirtier and distincter. The clean
mixture is whiter and not coal color, never more coal color
than altogether.

(Stein 13)

Treating space first, Stein references measurement and quantity, signaling that the object occupies space. Specifically, the phrases “more of double” and “a sign of more” indicate that that subject is measurable. “Double” suggests that the titular object has been compounded, expanded from an original single while simultaneously calling for *more*. “A sign of more” follows a similar structure, hinting that the titular object has expanded, occupying more space. Perhaps alluding to the final product, “A PIECE OF COFFEE.” is referring to a cup of prepared coffee. The poem is treating ground coffee beans that have been combined with hot water. A singular object (the coffee bean) has become *double*

through the addition of water. Double in both ingredients and in material space.

Furthermore, “a sign of more” indicates that the grounds have expanded. A teaspoon of coffee is transformed into a liquid, held within a container like a cup. Anyone familiar with a domestic space can imagine this specific moment of transformation—one object shifting into a similar, yet spatially different, object.

This reading of course hinges on an interpretation of the experience of preparing and consuming coffee. A “piece” of coffee could mean both a literal piece of a coffee bean, or a portion of coffee. Portion insinuates a consumption of coffee as foodstuff is measured. “A sign of more in not mentioned” highlights that though the process of making coffee is never shown, the possible signification of “A PIECE OF COFFEE” could be a prepared product. This linguistic multiplicity feeds Stein’s artful depiction of the domestic space as it requires the reader to carefully make choices about which perspective, and inevitable experience, will be taken from the poem. Stein constantly demands that the reader consider the multiplicity of language and how this multiplicity is replicated in the signified objects. This demand for plurality is best exhibited in the line “a single image is not splendor.” Suggesting that the singularity of the image is in some way problematic, Stein makes the reader wonder why a single image falls short. What does the single image lack? Perhaps it is that the single image does not accurately portray word values. Single images only provide one perspective. One arrangement of words has provided one image. For Stein, singularity is linguistically restrictive, and her poetry reflects this anxiety.

In addition to the attention paid to space, “A PIECE OF COFFEE” highlights a sensory experience in congruence with the debate between singularity and multiplicity.

Following the first six lines, Stein writes: “The sight of a reason, the same sight slighter, the sight of a simpler negative answer, the same sore sounder, the intention to wishing, the same splendor, the same furniture (13-14). In contrast to the opening lines, Stein employs specific sensory functions rather than descriptions. Words like “yellow” or “whiter” have been replaced with “sight” and “sounder.” “A PIECE OF COFFEE.” forwards that a single images are do not produce brilliance, visually or verbally. This idea is echoed by the sameness of sight and sound. Stein posits that single images contain one perspective and one sound, and that when a reader or viewer is presented with that same image, it begins to diminish. It contains the same sight, but slighter. The same noise produced by the same “sounder” is now sore and tired. To navigate this problem, Stein uses ekphrasis to create something new out of the ordinary. Towards the end of “A PIECE OF COFFEE.” Stein writes:

The settling of stationing cleaning is one way not to shatter
scatter and scattering. The one way to use custom is to use
soap and silk for cleaning. The one way to see cotton is to
have a design concentrating the illusion and the illustration.

(Stein 14)

This passage is one of many self-referential moments. Perhaps another embedded clue for how to read *Tender Buttons*, Stein writes “the one way to see cotton is to have a design concentrating the illusion and illustration” (14). Cotton, a ubiquitous fabric, might seem as present in life as language. If one substitutes one commonality for another, fabric for word, then the sentence would read “the one way to see language is to have a design concentrating the illusion and illustration.” Playing with words and meanings in a design,

a poem, Stein points to the “illusions” and “illustration” that lie within language. She is expressing how language creates images, but those images are not mimetic. “A PIECE OF COFFEE.” highlights this point. Stepping away from a direct description of the titular object, “A PIECE OF COFFEE.” instead forwards a sensory experience and invites the reader to actively participate in making meaning of the poem while interacting with the invoked subject instead of relying on the same sight.

Stein continues with the radically ekphrastic word play in the second segment of *Tender Buttons*, FOOD. She begins the section with a list of contents, or ingredients as it were, to provide the reader with some context for the section’s subject. Unlike OBJECTS, the subjects of the FOOD poems are more limited in range. Every title is directly related to eating practices—meals, edible substances, dining utensils and accessories, etc.—whereas the titles of the OBJECTS poems are more expansive and encompass everything from clothing (“SHOES.”) to temporal intervals (“A TIME TO WAIT.”). The parameters set up around FOOD enclose the subject and exclude peripheral material distraction. By limiting the scope of FOOD Stein encourages the reader to interpret the description of the titular subject rather than searching for further context.

In the first FOOD poem, “ROASTBEEF.” Stein writes “In feeling anything is resting, in feeling anything is mounting, in feeling there is resignation, in feeling there is recognition, in feeling there is recurrence and entirely mistaken there is pinching” (35). From the first poem forward, the tone of FOOD is much more self-referential and demanding than OBJECTS. Rather than playing with relationship between words and their associative images and concepts alone, Stein demands that her reader acknowledge

her writing practice. *Feeling* words requires time, or rest; the feelings, or values, of words builds images. Though OBJECTS does contain self-referential moments (as seen in “A PIECE OF COFFEE.”), *Tender Buttons* begins to intensify its lectures on word values and the sensory experiences described in FOOD via the narrowing of the subject.

With the linguistic microscope focused on a central topic the reader is able to devote her full attention to each description in each poem, cognitively sketching the invoked sensory experience in each entry. The “CHICKEN.” poems are some of the clearest examples of Stein’s radical ekphrasis in the FOOD segment. A succession of four poems, all simply entitled “CHICKEN.,” these entries play with the multiplicity of the signifier *chicken*. Following the premise that the title serves as the signifier for the signified verse, Stein suggests that there are at least four meanings associated with the sign. Despite sharing a title, the sentences in each poem are strikingly different:

CHICKEN.

Pheasant and chicken, chicken is a peculiar third.

CHICKEN.

Alas a dirty word, alas a dirty third alas a dirty third, alas a dirty bird.

CHICKEN.

Alas a doubt in case of more go to say what it is cress. What is it. Mean.

Potato. Loaves.

CHICKEN.

Stick stick call then, stick stick sticking, sticking with a chicken. Sticking in a extra succession, sticking in.

The juxtaposition of each poem's verse indicates that the signifier, *chicken*, produces multiple signified descriptions. In the first iteration of "CHICKEN." Stein technically lists three birds: pheasant, chicken, and chicken. Similar in resemblance to a chicken, pheasant serves as a point comparison, asking the reader to consider why the two birds are different. Listing chicken for a second time, Stein writes "chicken is a peculiar third." Peculiar in that it is both a repetition and part of a progressing series, Stein underscores that order and sequence are imperative. If *Tender Buttons* is interpreted as an ekphrastic experiment that creates sensory experiences, then foregrounding sequence suggests a linearity to those experiences. While particular moments can be seen and felt from various perspectives or viewpoints, moments are informed by time. Thus, when presented with the word chicken, an observer has to make perceptive choices and interpret the subject from one angle. But, because Stein is invoking sensory experiences related to chicken through printed language on a page she is able to present the same experience from as many perceptive standpoints as she wishes. In this particular instance, Stein presents four using the continuous present to suspend each subject temporally so as to allow for the multiplicity of perspective. When read in succession, the four "CHICKEN." poems present the reader with a surreal sequence. Temporally suspending the abstract subject via the continuous present, Stein creates four distinct sensory images of *chicken*. The list of four poems literally represents Stein's claims on multiplicity by refusing to forward a single image and instead favors "more of double."

Progressing from the first "CHICKEN." poem, Stein continues to foreground repetition and perspective via the continuous present. In the second poem, Stein cycles

through the same six words—alas, a, dirty, word, third, bird: “Alas a dirty word, alas a dirty third alas a dirty third, alas a dirty bird” (Stein 54). This repetitive process is also seen in the fourth “CHICKEN.” poem when Stein writes “Stick stick call then, stick stick sticking, sticking with a chicken. Sticking in a extra succession, sticking in” (55). Much like an imagist, Stein looks to craft a visual image through a verbal process, but she extends these linguistic images through her repetition, crafting four separate sensory experiences from a single subject.

Returning to Peters, he suggests that the use of “alas” in the “CHICKEN.” poems is a reference to Stein’s partner Alice (251). Alas. A lass. Alice. Peters continues with this interpretation by connecting the British slang term for a young woman, *bird*, to Alice’s imagined character (251). This interpretation is reasonable as Stein has already proven that the phonology of words is critical to each poems construct; additionally, Alice often fulfilled the more conventional household roles like preparing meals, so situating her in this section does not feel out of place. However, it is difficult to definitively say Stein is invoking any one person in any of her prose poems due to the abstract signification at work. Alas, a lass, could suggest any female domestic figure. But, Peters’s observation does lead to a more concrete conclusion about the “CHICKEN.” poems and FOOD as a whole. Meals are designed to be shared among people. Designated times are set aside for a shared experiences. Foodstuff is prepared and then divided amongst the diners. Whether Stein wishes to invoke Alice in the “CHICKEN.” Poems or not, FOOD considered in conjunction with a domestic space fundamentally alludes to the presence of people. Without people, OBJECTS, FOOD, and ROOMS, lose their semantic context. Language,

and all of its complexities, is a system built by humans; thus, Stein needs a fundamentally human space, like a home, on which to play out her ekphrastic experiments.

The final section of *Tender Buttons* examines boundaries. ROOMS builds on the momentum from the FOOD segment and narrows the readers focus on the poetic subject even further. This segment of the collection reads in a more pensive tone in comparison to the previous two sections, and is a thoughtful combination of Stein's linguistic multiplicity and self-referential tendencies, containing only one prose poem with no title, save the section heading. The change in structure and organization is striking as Stein seems to contradict herself, moving away from multiplicity in favor of singularity. However, from the opening lines Stein continues to assert her thesis on plurality: "act so that there is no use in a center" (63). This first sentence in ROOMS performs several functions. First, it once again reminds the reader that Stein does not privilege one reading, one image, one experience, one moment, one center over another. Stein puts her assertions into practice and refuses to rely on one method of presentation by breaking previous organizational patterns in poetic and domestic arrangements. There is no linguistic center, nor is there a center in Stein's room. Second, she draws attention to her own poetic practice. She does not act by foregrounding a center or an absolute, and she requires the reader to do the same.

Continuing on, Stein writes "If the center had the place then there is distribution. That is natural. There is a contradiction and naturally returning there comes to be both sides and the center. That can be seen from the description." (63). Stein recognizes the paradox in her work. By placing a focus on particular subjects, she is asking the reader to place that subject at the focal point of the textual analysis. Even if she argues for a

multiplicity in her language, adhering to a singular subject in each poem forwards a center, a point of return for the reader. Despite the dizzying abstractions found in poems like “A PIECE OF COFFEE.” or “CHICKEN.” the reader still returns to the title as the poem’s center.

The tone of ROOMS is almost reflective, considering the implications of the previous two sections. *Tender Buttons* is devoid of punctuation, save for the meticulously used period and comma; however, ROOMS reads like a series of rhetorical questions about language and space that Stein then herself answers. For example, Stein writes: “. . . why is not disturbing a center no virtue, why is it when it is and why is it when it is and is and there is no doubt, there is no doubt that the singularity shows” (72). *Tender Buttons* requires the reader to carefully evaluate the signified meaning of nouns and adjectives, but the use of questions adverbs is often quite obvious. In this passage, Stein asks why over and over, requiring her reader to do the same. Why is not disturbing a center no virtue? Why is it when it is? Why is it? The questions leads to another comment on singularity: there is no doubt that singularity shows. If *Tender Buttons* is read as a text that invokes the domestic space through multiplicity, then Stein’s deferral to the singular in this instant feels like an outlier. But, Stein also evaluates the counter evidence to her claim. Suggesting clarity in singularity, Stein uses this passage in ROOMS to ponder the value of words when they are paired down to one definition. Her conclusion is that singularity produces clarity. There is no doubt in the singular, but of course, Stein perceives a plural world. When carefully arranged, words draw on their potential multiplicity in order to render the multiplicity of space. Objects exist in three dimensions, so why describe them using a system that favors only one plane?

Tender Buttons is more easily recognized as a textual intersection of language and space when examined through a radically ekphrastic lens. By dissecting the words in the various prose poems for their many meanings, the reader is able to craft a one or more images informed by domestic space. The radical ekphrasis of Stein's *Tender Buttons* does not come from her perfectly mimetic representation of materiality; rather, Stein's employment of radical ekphrasis relies on the subjectivity of domestic space. Carefully arranging words so that they refract off of one another, Stein creates a world that is multidimensional and alive. It is a world that the reader is able to construct alongside her as they uncover the tenderness of the ordinary.

CONCLUSION

Gertrude Stein is often remembered for her thought provoking lectures on composition and literary form. Her comments on the various components of writing (i.e. punctuation, grammar, form, description, composition, etc.) have solidified her legacy as an avant-garde literary thinker. In her lecture “Composition as Explanation,” she states:

Everything is the same except composition and as the composition is different and always going to be different everything is not the same. So then I as a contemporary creating the composition in the beginning was groping toward a continuous present, a using everything a beginning again and again and then everything being alike then everything very simply everything being alike was creating everything naturally being naturally simply different, everything being alike.

(Dydo 500).

Stein frequently offers an idea to her audience that asks them to question commonplace writing practice. Suggesting alterations to conventions like grammar and form, Stein encouraged writers to push boundaries and create something fresh and new. Disregarding expectation and social regulation, Stein was a creative entity of her own. It is this rebellious thinking that produces work like *Tender Buttons*. Stein’s work is not simply a century old riddle yet to be cracked, but rather an experiment in the presentation of material space and early twentieth century thought, a collection meant to be enjoyed and experienced rather than solved. Weaving the reader through a domestic space via the poems of “OBJECTS,” “FOOD,” and “ROOMS,” *Tender Buttons* artfully illustrates

moments through a careful and experimental exploration of ordinary things. As Marianne DeKoven suggests in *A Different Language: Gertrude Stein's Experimental Writing*, "it is not necessary therefore, to try to resolve this contradiction at the theoretical level, as long as it is resolved in practice: as long as Stein's writing is incoherent rather than unintelligible, semi-grammatical rather than ungrammatical; as long as she articulates lexical meaning in a way that allows us to read" (26). From her linguistic experiments Stein creates a living world in words. Using the domestic space as the backdrop for her ekphrasis poetry, Stein calls on human experiences like using a stamp or preparing a meal to elevate objects to a place of art and marvel.

CODA

Before settling on *Tender Buttons* as the primary text, this project began as an exploration of imagism in conjunction with ekphrastic theory. I was initially interested in how the Imagist project sought to present the “intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time” through visual images/object. However, after spending time with Stein and *Tender Buttons*, I wondered if the imagists were a bit too focused in the visual element of their poetry. The aural, spatial, temporal, and tactile of those “[instances] of time” are in my opinion equal in value to the visual elements if the poet’s objective is to create some sort of representation of a material world. Objects are not only seen, but felt, smelled, and heard; they are experienced through sensory informed moments. Though there are Imagist poems that experiment with sensory elements outside of the visual (Gould-Fletcher’s “In the Theatre” and H.D.’s “Oread” come to mind), I did not find an entire collection within the “Imagist Decade” that so innovatively played with the subjective and sensory-oriented object like *Tender Buttons*. As such, Stein’s work felt like the ideal text to apply my brand of radical ekphrasis. Perhaps it is the playful nature of *Tender Buttons* that ultimately solidified my choice. Stein’s dynamic and topsy-turvy presentation of material space is an experiment in semiotics and poetics, and I felt compelled to play along, to experiment with her interpretations of language and spatial objects.

Moving forward from this thesis, I would eventually like to return to imagism and re-evaluate other texts through this radically ekphrastic lens with an attention to the treatment of the visual object in conjunction with senses other than sight. Particularly, I am interested in Amy Lowell’s interpretation of imagism and her curation of imagist

work. When Lowell adopts this project, imagism becomes less concerned with the presentation of an object or an image, but rather the “manner” of presentation^{xxii}. Unlike the earlier works anthologized at the beginning of the imagist decade by poets like Pound and H.D., late imagist work is less concerned with the presentation of images as much as the presentation of concepts. The work of John Gould-Fletcher and his treatment of the visual in conjunction with the speaker’s subjectivity is of particular interest. For example, in his poem “In the Theatre,” Gould-Fletcher drafts an image of the inside of a theatre house while simultaneously noting “the irresistible weight” of the audience’s thoughts. The physical space rendered in the poem reflects the anxieties of the modern population that makes up the audience. I am interested in this overlap between space and subjectivity, especially after working with similar themes in *Tender Buttons*.

While imagism lingers in my mind, I know that my work with Stein is far from finished. This thesis attempts to read the difficult semiotic play of *Tender Buttons* so as to better understand the text and Stein’s approach to language that is seen throughout her body of work, but I am left knowing that there is so much more to say and learn. Moving forward, I would like to trace how Stein’s abstract understanding of perspective and cognitive perception evolves in her work over time. How does her prose compare to her poetry in regards to perspective, semiotics, and ekphrasis? Many scholars argue that to understand Stein’s work you have to understand her. Thus, a great deal of the scholarship that analyzes her canon rests on biographical information. While acknowledging her connection to Picasso and cubism aids in my reading of Stein’s ekphrasis in *Tender Buttons*, I feel that relying on biography as an explanation for her authorial choices inevitably distracts from the cognitive work embedded in her literature. Stein is

fascinated by the power of language and its ability to construct reality, and I hope to continue my studies with Stein and her influence on modernist poetics and literary thought.

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NOTES

ⁱ [*Tender Buttons* has never . . .] Brian Glavey examines the intersection of queer theory and ekphrasis in his book *The Wallflower Avant-Garde*. Though he reads Stein as a queerly ekphrastic writer, Glavey does not go as far to say that *Tender Buttons* is an ekphrastic text. Instead, he suggests about Stein's canon that she "imagines a queerly ekphrastic form of aesthetic production that would prevent the approximations of subjectivity from hardening into equal signs" (Glavey 34).

ⁱⁱ [In terms of cubist literature . . .] Janet Hobhouse spends quite a bit of time discussing the influence of cubism on Stein in her biography *Everybody Who Was Anybody*. I will return to this discussion in the first chapter.

ⁱⁱⁱ [the *parergon* to Stein's domestic space . . .] See Jacques Derrida's *The Truth in Painting* (1978)

^{iv} Stamps, cloaks, meals, to name a few.

^v [Stein carefully notes. . .] The majority of *Tender Buttons* was written between 1910 and 1912 (Hobhouse 100).

^{vi} [Suggesting alterations . . .] One of these alterations is Stein's grammatical mode, the "continuous present." See Stein's "Composition as Explanation" (1926).

^{vii} [The well documented connection . . .] This connection further manifests in Stein's use of a grammatical mode she coins as the "continuous present," a point to which I will return to in the second chapter.

^{viii} [render particular's exactly] Amy Lowell, *Some Imagist Poets*, 1916

^{ix} [In recent years. . .] In the past twenty year the majority of scholarship on *Tender Buttons* is interested in either reading the collection as a queer text or as experiment in grammar and description. For this project I am working with the later branch of study, of which Kley, Siraganian, and Bennett are representatives.

^x See Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (1926)

^{xi} [With reference to Lessing . . .] Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laokoon*, 1876.

^{xii} [a Lacanian primacy. . .] Jaques Lacan, *Écrit*, 1977.

^{xiii} ["each word is a possible defined value of x and y"] The poem referenced, "A BOX." uses this formulaic phrase over and over: "out of kindness comes redness and out of rudeness comes rapid same question, out of an eye comes research, out of a selection comes painful cattle" (Stein 13).

^{xiv} [little scholarship has been written . . .] This is not to say connections between Stein's expansive canon and semiotics/structuralism have never been drawn. See Bruce Bassoff, "Gertrude Stein's 'Composition as Explanation'" (1978).

^{xv} [Jackendoff] Ray Jackendoff, *Foundations of Language: Brain, Meaning, Gramma, Evolution* (2002).

^{xvi} [phonology] The branch of linguistics that deals with systems of sounds.

^{xvii} [syntax] The arrangement of words to form phrases and sentences.

^{xviii} [semantics] the linguistic and philosophical study of meaning in language.

^{xix} [we usually refer to as the lexicon . . .] “Every theory of language has to take a word to be a stored complex of phonological, syntactic, and semantic features or structure; commonly the store of words is what we call the ‘lexicon’” (Mallen 101).

^{xx} [Calling on Victor Grauer . . .] Victor Grauer “A Passage from Realism to Cubism: The Subversion of Pictorial Semiosis” (1998).

^{xxi} [Dubnick] Randa Dubnick, *The Structure of Obscurity: Gertrude Stein, Language, and Cubism* (1984).

^{xxii} [the “manner” of presentation . . .] 1916 edition of *Some Imagist Poets*