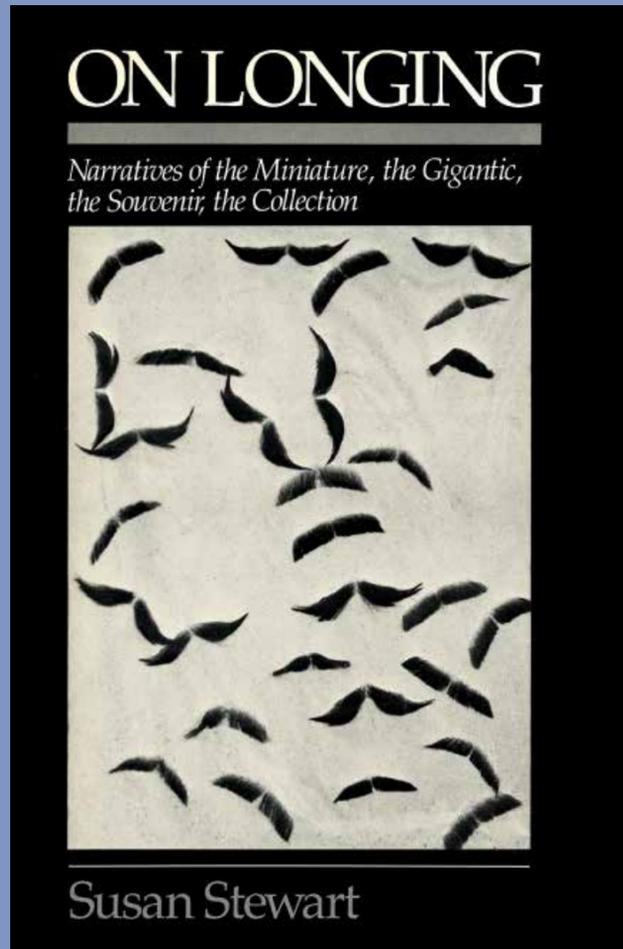


The Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection



The gravitational pull of Susan Stewart's 1984 literary classic



by Judith Stein

Ann Hamilton wanted to see what the UC Santa Barbara library could offer her on longing, a topic that kept returning to her mind.

When the university had hired her, fresh out of the Yale School of Art with an MFA, she'd been thinking specifically about the relationship between words and "things we know viscerally but which are very hard to express with language." At Yale, she'd joined other artists of her generation in regarding the body as a sculptural ingredient, a visceral object to be seen in relation to other objects. For her unforgettable *Toothpick Suit* from 1984, Hamilton wore literal and metaphorical armor fashioned from a thrift-shop suit covered with thousands of spray-painted toothpicks protruding like quills. At once a sculpture, a performance and a photograph, the work signaled her emergence as a major talent.

Thumbing through the card catalogue that day in 1985, Hamilton came across an entry for a book published only a year earlier, called *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, by the poet and literary theorist Susan Stewart. Both the enigmatic title and the opening sentence, expressing Stewart's intent to concentrate "on certain metaphors that arise whenever we talk about the relation of language to experience," captured Hamilton's interest immediately. "Reading Susan," she recalls now, "was like an enormous gift of vocabulary."

In the 35 years since its publication, *On Longing* has quietly established itself as a revered resource and a kind of linguistic catalyst for many artists, stimulating their work or, at the very least, helping them to articulate it more effectively to themselves. A book whose brevity belies its density (some say outright thorniness), *On Longing* has never gone out of print, though it remains something like a passed-along secret even in the world of letters—it has been mentioned prominently, for example, only twice in *The New York Times*, once in the context of Hamilton and once in a review of the work of the celebrated playwright and performer Taylor Mac, who is a fan. Though Stewart didn't aim the book primarily toward the art world, it has seemed to migrate there more fully with each passing year.

"The same surprising connections are made between things in her writing on art

as are made in the conjunctions of images in her poetry," says William Kentridge, who recalled once walking together with Stewart in Italy, "struck by the quiet cautiousness of her words and her confidence in striding along the street."

The painter David Schutter regards the book as a shape-shifter, an "object that, as I turn it and look at it, I can change its facets." The artist Laura Mongiovi said of it recently: "It spoke to me. It still does. There's so much there. Besides, it felt good to read a book by a woman."

Stewart chose the tantalizing noun "longing" for her title, a word that she wrote connoted "a kind of ache." Nostalgia, our "yearning desire" for the past and for things, is central to her examination—through a semiotic-feminist-Marxist lens—of the problems that arise when we try to describe things in the world and to make sense of our experience through narrative. She emphasizes the primacy of the body as "our mode of perceiving scale," which leads to her unusual focus on the interrelated conventions of the miniature (toys, dollhouses, micrographic writing) and the gigantic (landscape, cities, earth art, fictional giants). "The miniature," she writes, "represents a mental world of proportion, control and balance; the gigantic presents a physical world of disorder and disproportion." This then leads Stewart to two additional ways of thinking about people and their representations of the physical world: the souvenir, whose purpose is to remember its original context, and the collection, which "replaces origin with classification," recontextualizing objects within a world of attention.

The University of Pennsylvania's Folklore and Folklife program was a mecca for the kind of unconventional thinking that Stewart offered up in the '70s, a breakthrough era of rapid change as the field of folklore responded to new streams of thought in linguistics and critical theory. Stewart says she started grad school at Penn already fascinated "by the intellectual, ethical, and aesthetic methods we use to derive meaning from culture." A *summa cum laude* English major who earned her BA in three years at Dickinson College, she was particularly drawn, she says, to "anthropology's assumption that underlying cultural structures and rules, tacit as well as expressed, could be understood."

Her professors at Penn were irreverent scholars with broad interests, remarkable intellects like Dell Hymes, one of the first sociolinguists; John Szwed, an anthropologist, jazz scholar and pioneer of cultural

studies; and the literary critic and theorist Barbara Herrnstein Smith, one of the only women in the field. Stewart took a year off to earn an MA in poetry at Johns Hopkins, another locus for innovative theorists like her teacher Stanley Fish, who taught that the reader creates rather than discovers meaning. Thinking back to her early, intense interest in how we describe things, and how human beings are "the makers or creators" of themselves, Stewart has said she now sees that such questions "also had to do with my own, frequently dismayed, sense of myself as a marginal scholar—at Hopkins I was often one of the very few women, at times the only woman, in my classes."

"Folklore and the avant-garde were two poles of literary production that became quite close in that period," she recalled in a 2014 interview with Lucy Ives for *Triple Canopy*, citing the interest in folk and fairy tales on the part of writers like Alain Robbe-Grillet, Italo Calvino, Angela Carter, and her friend Kathy Acker. Stewart's friend and former classmate at Penn, the poet Edward Hirsch, the president of the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, says of that time, "We were terrifically stimulated by the cross-disciplinary approach. Susan is one of our most original thinkers. She put things together in ways that they have never quite been put together before."

Stewart, now a professor of English at Princeton who is renowned for her poetry as well as her literary criticism, has privileged her creative work ahead of her critical work by alternating the publication of six books of poetry with six of criticism. She was still in her twenties when she wrote *On Longing*, which followed a book of poems and her doctoral dissertation, *Nonsense: Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature* (1979). "I wrote my dissertation on 'nonsense,'" she said to Ives, "out of an intuition about the hyper-rational systems on the border of rationality, and my study *On Longing* grew from consequent concerns with issues of scale, memory and value." *Nonsense* spanned the fields of folklore, literary theory, anthropology and sociology, and covered a far-ranging selection of subjects, from Egyptian papyrus to knock-knock jokes, Gertrude Stein and skipping rhymes.

A few years after Hamilton's serendipitous discovery of *On Longing*, she and Stewart became correspondents and, in time, collaborators. "Intuitively, we have a thing," Hamilton tells me. "I'll be working on something, and it'll be something she's thinking about too. That's what's



From left: Ann Hamilton, *body object series #13 • toothpick chair*, 1984, gelatin silver print. Courtesy Ann Hamilton Studio. David Schutter, *SKL 417*, 2017, chalk and pencil on chamois colored paper, 16 1/2 x 11 5/8". Courtesy the artist and Rhona Hoffman Gallery.

been really interesting to me over the years." In 2016, the year Stewart's poem "Channel" appeared in *The Paris Review*, Hamilton gave it concrete form in *habitus*, an immense installation at a Philadelphia pier and other sites, commissioned by the Fabric Workshop and Museum and featuring towering, spinning wheels of billowing cloth. "These are two ways of reading: the page's turn and the turning wheel," Stewart wrote of the twinned works, "but beneath them both is the possibility of reading a river, which is one of nature's gifts for reading time."

Photographer and author Rosamond Purcell, who has an eye for natural history collections and macabre medical specimens, experienced *On Longing* as an act of recognition, finding herself saying, "Oh, right. Yes, of course," as she read. Stewart's insight that miniatures trigger feelings of melancholy and desire, of wanting to hold and not being able to hold, resonated with Purcell, whose 1997 book *Special Cases: Natural Anomalies and Historical Monsters* includes passages from Stewart that seemed to speak directly to contemporary art: "Often referred to as a 'freak of nature,' the freak, it must be emphasized, is a 'freak of culture.'"

There are kindred spirits in the art world whose practice predates *On Longing* or who never read it, yet whose work is enriched when examined through its lens. Sculptor Charles Simonds has worked on a minute scale since 1970, well before *On Longing* appeared. Nonetheless, Stewart's ideas about the elegiac implications of the miniature as "a

constant daydream" conducive to narrative unlimited by reality, enhance understanding of the tiny, crumbling, dwelling places he's built for an imaginary civilization of migratory Little People. (One of the best-known examples of this body of work resides partially hidden, permanently, in the stairwell of Manhattan's Breuer building, now the Met Breuer and formerly the home of the Whitney Museum.) Today Simonds esteems Stewart "as an admired fellow traveler as regards thoughts about loss."

Her insights into the nature of collecting have been almost as influential as those about the miniature. The artist Allan McCollum relied on her in a 2001 essay he wrote about his friend and fellow artist Allen Ruppersberg, who has amassed a vast trove of popular culture ephemera, including comics, postcards, magazines and film strips, all the while maintaining that he collects not "for the sake of collecting stuff" but to retain the material for his work. "Ruppersberg repeatedly reminds us that we all remain, as social beings, *collections*," McCollum writes in "Allen Ruppersberg: What One Loves About Life Are the Things That Fade," and then he quotes from *On Longing*: "While the point of the souvenir may be remembering, or at least the invention of memory, the point of the collection is forgetting—starting again in such a way that a finite number of elements create, by virtue of their combination, an infinite reverie."

Artists who completed their education before critical theory became required reading in most art schools say that

parsing *On Longing* on one's own is no small task. Schutter says he feels fortunate to have encountered it in grad school at the University of Chicago in 2001, where conceptual artist and professor Robert Peters used it a starting point to examine the rhetoric of images. *On Longing* gave Schutter his "first legs," encouraging him "to think about the power of objects together," and to puzzle out "the erratic qualities of things that are bound to each other in one way or another. It is a seminal text that rocked me when I read it and has continued to influence me."

For Documenta 14, Schutter engaged with the notorious trove of art seized in 2012 from Cornelius Gurlitt. The elderly son of an art dealer for the Nazis, Gurlitt had squirreled away more than a thousand works of art—many with problematic provenance—mostly in his small Munich apartment, among them works by Matisse, Courbet and Monet, stored in a cabinet, under the bed, in a suitcase. Sifting through high-resolution files of the art, Schutter became intrigued by 36 drawings by Max Liebermann (1847–1935). After a forensic investigation that combined intense scrutiny, intuition and luck, he came to the conclusion that Gurlitt's Liebermanns had most likely once been bound together in a sketchbook. Drawing from memory, Schutter then re-rendered Liebermann's images, working on paper that he recreated, with help from a master papermaker, from the same components as the original. With the support of a Guggenheim Fellowship, Schutter will dive next into the collected material diaspora of Thomas Eakins's world of art and teaching. All of this, he says, "started with Susan."

On Longing has served as an intellectual resource not only for artists but also for curators, art writers, scholars and so many specialists in subgenres of cultural exploration that it has become difficult to track. Ralph Rugoff's 1997–98 traveling exhibition on miniscule and small-scale art, "At the Threshold of the Visible," shares its name with an essay Stewart wrote for its catalogue. And commentators on subjects as varied as Jane Austen, dust and serial killers have buttressed their arguments by citing her on the miniature and the gigantic, the souvenir and the collection.

Recently a blogger, irked by the seemingly "endless references" to *On Longing*, went so far as to exhort writers to "stop quoting Susan Stewart." It's a wish unlikely to be heeded any time soon, especially in the art world.

Il contemporaneo
al Poldi Pezzoli

The Contemporary
at Poldi Pezzoli

Anj Smith

The Mountain of the Muse

3 aprile-April / 12 maggio-May 2019



The Road to the Mountain / Courtesy the artist and Museo Poldi Pezzoli

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