



An Anathema Strikes the Flesh of the Laborer



1.

41.7015° N, 71.1550° W

When we start to tug at the multifarious conceptual threads running through the work of Harry Gould Harvey IV (b. 1991) it is perhaps most productive to begin with a sense of place. It is possible to start elsewhere, considering Harvey's engagement with histories of anarchism and heterodox spirituality; his interest in ecological revitalization and his own social practice of community outreach; his deep understanding and engagement with history and cultural production; or, the sheer breadth of his literary and philosophical influences that range from William Blake to St. Hildegard von Bingen. But regardless of the path one chooses to trace when thinking through Harvey's work, it ultimately returns to and departs from the specificity of a particular site. His work is caught in a web of mills, docks, gilded age mansions, rolling hills, tenement buildings, parks, and the lives of all those who inhabit this place. The works displayed in this gallery provide indices of the artist's hand, which both emanates from and is inextricably bound to Fall River, MA.

Like any city, Fall River, Massachusetts, has been in a perpetual state of transformation and struggle. The area, long inhabited by the Wampanoag, was settled by Europeans in the early 17th century and rapidly increased in population following the decimation of Indigenous communities following King Philip's War in the mid-1670s.<sup>i</sup> Approximately a decade later, a group of industrialists purchased a tract of land known as the "mill right," which ran along the Quequechan River.<sup>ii</sup> This event later set the stage for a particular historical trajectory in the city—one hinged on the endless struggle of workers for self-determination and for their right to enjoy the fruits of their labor. From an industrialist's standpoint, the area now known as Fall River was a geographical gift, as the humid environment helped prevent cotton from breaking during the spinning process, while deep bays capable of hosting port infrastructure ensured an endless flow of materials.<sup>iii</sup> This confluence of conditions allowed those early industrialists to rapidly extend their reach of ownership beyond the mills, to banks, stores, and the land on which the city's population resided.<sup>iv</sup> Through this process, a familiar socioeconomic schism began to form, as a complex web of diplomatic and tactical intermarriages among Fall River's moneyed families ensured a united front when it came to matters of political and socioeconomic control.<sup>v</sup> This divide materialized

- i. Henry Milner Fenner, *History of Fall River, Massachusetts* (Fall River, MA: Fall River Merchants Association, 1911), 9.
- ii. *Ibid.*, 17.
- iii. John T. Cumbler, *Working-Class in Industrial America: Work, Leisure, and Struggle in Two Industrial Cities, 1880-1930* (Wesport, CT: Greenwood, 1979), 101.
- iv. *Ibid.*
- v. *Ibid.*, 103.

along not only class lines but geographic ones as well, with Fall River's Highlands becoming the exclusive residence of the capitalist class, with the working poor only visiting as servants or contractors.<sup>vi</sup>

This schism could not remain stable forever. Over the course of the 19th century, the city's industrial production rapidly increased, while labor disputes remained relatively non-existent, despite harsh working conditions: poor-quality barracks-style housing was the de facto residence for mill workers, and child labor ran rife.<sup>vii</sup> Bound together by their experience in the mills, the workers of Fall River began to form a united front in the mid-1850s. Strikes, pamphleteering, trade unions, and other forms of labor organizing soon followed.<sup>viii</sup> In 1850, the Metacomet Mill spinners went on strike.<sup>ix</sup> In 1867, a general strike took place, seeking a ten-hour workday.<sup>x</sup> And in 1904, another general strike took place, rallying against wage reductions.<sup>xi</sup> These are just a few of many examples of labor-based struggles in Fall River, punctuations along an unbroken, decades-long road of underground organizing that allowed for these confrontations to occur. On occasion, these disputes turned violent and spilled over from the slow violence of wage labor in the mills to more direct forms of conflict between strikers and their opponents. A particularly tense and prolonged strike in 1884 resulted in beatings, shootings, and culminated in the burning of the Sagamore Mill on April 24 of that year.<sup>xii</sup>

vi.  
vii.  
viii.  
ix.  
x.  
xi.  
xii.

Ibid.  
Ibid., 103.  
Ibid., 165.  
Ibid.  
Ibid., 166.  
Ibid., 201.  
Cumbler, *Working-Class in Industrial America*, 181.



2.

The Coordinates of Breakdown

If the mechanisms of capital are always in the midst of producing crisis, it is in these moments of cataclysm that the whole structure comes to the fore. Harvey's work often trades in this category of "spectacular breakdown." After stints living in various cities across the United States, Harvey has returned to Fall River—the city in which he was born and raised. In a 2022 ArtReview interview with artist and musician Ross Simonini, Harvey speaks of being "magnetically drawn" to the city. For Harvey, his deep social and familial roots in the area makes it so that "it becomes linguistically and ideologically schizophrenic" to be elsewhere.<sup>xiii</sup> This formation-by-geography is equally present in the artist's chimeric objects—sculptures that resemble both votive devices and industrial machinery and that erupt into the homogenous space of the white cube. Sculptures formed out of beat-up heaters are topped with partially warped red-wax models of kewpie figures, bioorganic forms, and abstract shapes. These works appear to have been lifted directly from a construction site, but here are redeployed toward some form of liturgical rite. Propped up against a wall, a set of charred church doors index past disastrous events. Elsewhere, framed drawings of impossible spaces, diagrams, and fantastical objects evoke cosmological maps akin to Buddhist mandalas while acting as containers for poetry speaking to anarchist thought, the inherent value of the human subject, and humans' relationship to the divine. Harvey's list of materials in the sculptures also function as poetic objects in and of themselves. Here, where one artist may have simply listed "wood," Harvey specifies it as "salvaged black walnut from the Newport Mansions (the residences of those made wealthy by American industrialism, 20 minutes south of Fall River's industrial center)." Where another may have listed "oil pigment," he lists it as "used motor oil from Sinister Motorsports."

Writing for Artforum in 2012, historian Alexander Nagel penned an essay titled "Art Out of Time: The Relic and Robert Smithson," in which he compares cultural practices of medieval pilgrims to the writings of land artist Robert Smithson, and specifically to his idea of the "nonsite." In 1968, Smithson developed this notion in an exhibition in which he abstracted a quarry in New Jersey by placing stones taken from the original site and installing them into bins in dialogue with photos of the

xiii.

Ross Simonini, "Devotion and Metaphysics with Harry Gould Harvey IV," *Art Review*, May 12, 2022, <https://artreview.com/devotion-and-metaphysics-with-harry-gould-harvey-iv/>.

same quarry. In writings produced by the artist in tandem with this body of work, he attempts to define a “nonsite” as a space articulated through art objects that functions as an evocation, or as the transplanting of a “real” site without relying on full abstraction or full naturalism.<sup>xiv</sup> It is in this gap between abstraction and metonymy that the nonsite becomes productive, allowing for a “new sense of metaphor.”<sup>xv</sup> Nagel, building off Smithson, notes that the nonsite has a precedent within medieval Christian cultural practices whereby stones, soil, and other ephemera taken from the Holy Land were not merely souvenirs but actual spatially dislocated sites. A rock taken from the Mount of Olives is not only a momento but also an extension or translocation of the Mount of Olives.<sup>xvi</sup> In terms of Harvey’s work, consider, for example, *A Monument To The Families That Have Nothing To Offer The State But Their Children* (2021, fig. 1). Composed of charred church doors from Providence that are connected to a grouping of propane heater sculptures, the work acts as an abstracted yet direct evocation of a specific event: Fall River’s Notre Dame de Lourdes Fire. In 1982, a worker’s gas soldering torch accidentally ignited the church’s dry timber, burning down the structure as well as nearby tenement buildings, displacing over 300 people.<sup>xvii</sup> Here, we are presented with the conflagration of the holy. Although the heaters present are not the same tools that resulted in the church’s burning, they nonetheless gesture toward the dangerous conditions faced by the Fall River worker. These propane heaters, which have been reappropriated as sculptures, are now outlawed due to their role as a fire hazard (and yet still remain in use by the city’s poor when heating is not affordable or available). Infamously, they caused one of Fall River’s Great Fires in 1928, when a salamander heater used to warm workers repairing the shuttered Pocasset Mill was blown over by a harsh winter gale, consuming several city blocks and injuring hundreds.<sup>xviii</sup>

xiv. Robert Smithson, “A Provisional Theory of Nonsites,” in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996).

xv. *Ibid.*

xvi. Alexander Nagel, “Art Out of Time: The Relic and Robert Smithson,” *Artforum*, October 2012, <https://www.artforum.com/print/201208/art-out-of-time-the-relic-and-robert-smithson-34522>.

xvii. Dan Medeiros, “Fall River Lost Notre Dame Church to fire 40 Years Ago. The Day Changed The Flint Forever,” *Herald News*, May 11, 2022, <https://www.heraldnews.com/story/news/fire/2022/05/11/fall-river-notre-dame-church-fire-changed-face-flint-may-11-french-canadian-neighborhood/9670365002/>.

xviii. “1928 Fire Destroyed Much of Downtown,” *Herald News*, October 17, 1978, <https://www.sailsinc.org/durfee/1928fire.pdf>.

The relationship conjured here—between the suffering of the worker and the gaseous contents of the heater—evokes the words of mystic and political activist Simone Weil, who writes, “Like a gas, the soul tends to fill the entire space which is given it. A gas which contracted leaving a vacuum.” Weil (who has figured into many conversations between Harvey and I) refers here, via the “vacuum,”<sup>xix</sup> to her notion of gravity—a natural force in the world that pulls us downward from each other and from God (whom one can interpret as not necessarily a theological specific God but rather the transcendental epitome of goodness, beauty, truth, etc.).<sup>xx</sup> In this vacuum, or to use Weil’s term, void, we can attempt to fill it with many things: ideology, the pursuit of material goods, or inflicting harm upon others in order for them to share in our pain. However, these things merely draw us further inward. Weil suggests that the only counterforce to the downwardness of the natural law of gravity is the supernatural law of grace, which is akin to a radical empathy in which we recognize ourselves in others specifically through our shared potential to suffer. For Weil, this is where the potentiality of art lies: it is through art that we can form an attention to this universal capacity to bear the mark of affliction.<sup>xxi</sup> In my reading of Harvey’s work, his objects function as a substitute or stand-in for the experience of Fall River’s working class writ



xix. Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace* (London: Routledge Classics, 2003), 10.

xx. *Ibid.* 11.

xxi. Simone Weil, *Simone Weil—Essential Writings*, ed. Eric O. Springsted (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), 199.



large, through its indexing of site and event, which concentrates multiple registers of industrial violence into a single point. Following Weil, however, his works can also act as a counterforce to the inward draw of gravity, the brief moment in which "man escapes from the laws of this world in lightning flashes."<sup>xxii</sup>

Although the materials are not directly sourced from the Pocasset Mill or the Notre Dame de Lourdes church, their recombination nonetheless motions toward a specific site. In this way, Harvey departs from Smithson toward a new sense of the nonsite. Namely, Harvey's work drops the fidelity of materials that were present at a specific location yet nonetheless evokes that location through the tactical redeployment of materials that speak to the aesthetic qualities or elements of a given site—in this case, the church doors and the heaters. Unlike Smithson, Harvey's nonsites also entail events. That is to say, Harvey's work entails not only a spatial dislocation that brings Fall River into the space of the gallery—but a temporal one as well. It is precisely through this spatiotemporal dislocation that seemingly disparate (yet related) elements of spiritual belief and radical politics come into contact. This spatial disjunction is further enabled by Harvey's ruinous aesthetic, formed out of rust, char, and architectural fragments. As cultural theorist Svetlana Boym notes: "Ruins make us think of the past that could have been and the future that never took place, tantalizing us with utopian dreams of escaping the irreversibility of time."<sup>xxiii</sup> It is along the coordinates of time that Harvey collapses the spiritual and the political, as is materialized formally within his works. Within the spatiotemporal confines of Fall River, Harvey's work can be read as an excavation of his family history, many of whom were Quakers, a Protestant group that argued for a relationship with God to be personal and not require intercession through religious institutions. Alternatively, there is the brief moment in Fall River's history in which pastors delivered sermons advocating for leftist politics. (Several news clippings announcing these talks are on display in the exhibition). Furthermore, mill owners and their employees were divided not only along class lines but religious ones as well, meaning that spiritual leaders would often play important political roles in organizing.<sup>xxiv</sup> Even the language of class struggle was inflected with theologically derived arguments. When the Mechanics Union went on strike in 1844 with

xxii.

xxiii.

xxiv.

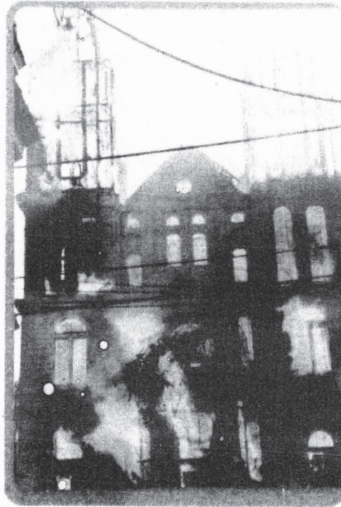
Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 11.

Svetlana Boym, *The Off-Modern* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017), 41.

Teresa Ann Murphy, "Labor, Religion and Moral Reform in Fall River, Massachusetts 1800-1845" (PhD diss., Yale University, 1982), 49.

the goal of acquiring a ten-hour workday, their arguments often hinged on the position that long, exploitative work days barred laborers from self-improvement necessary to become both ideal citizens and Christians.<sup>xxv</sup>

Harvey, in addition to his heterodox Christian spirituality, folds in a wide expanse of sources, from Islamic poetry to Rabbinical thought. Regardless, for Harvey (following Weil), a certain engagement with God or spirituality has the potential for enacting radical sociopolitical shifts. In conversation, Harvey has spoken to me about his notion of "ontological insecurity." This concept—which echoes the Mechanic Union's pleas for material security for the sake of spiritual realization—revolves around the idea that the unaddressed ills of capitalism and imperialism impoverish people not only materially but spiritually as well. Namely, material and cultural impoverishment prevents individuals from thinking through or engaging with transcendence. Economic exploitation blocks spiritual development as well as religious institutions, in the way in which they transpose and crystallize belief, thus denying the ability for one to develop a personal relationship with God or the transcendent.





3.  
The Figure of Fall River

Harvey's frequent citation of anarchist thinkers such as Emma Goldman, Peter Kropotkin, and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon place him specifically with the lineage of the likes of proto-anarchists such William Blake as well as the American Transcendentalists (who were largely based in the New England area), who also saw cultural production as a galvanizing tool for the masses as well as a method of connecting the spiritual to the political. Furthermore, these figures, like Harvey, were producing work informed by, or in response to, the ills and evils of industrial production. This is to say that Harvey's temporal dislocation is not limited to Fall River but rather occasionally extends outward, geographically, to fold in historical movements that dialogue with the concerns of the present. These aforementioned thinkers, like Harvey, posit that the human subject is inherently capable of forming community without institutional intervention. In turn, it is not the state that should become the guarantor of life and community but rather freely associating subjects themselves. This disavowal of institutions is present in Harvey's work through the evocation of infernos that consume sites of labor and spirituality alike. After all, Harvey is not the first from Fall River to seek liberation via anarchism. For instance, in 1889, striking weavers loudly voiced support for the anarchists arrested during the Haymarket Riot.<sup>xxvi</sup>

It is important to note that the artist's deployment of destructive motifs is not, however, simply an act of vengeance—it is potentially generative. If we are to read the conflagration present in Harvey's work as a form of material apocalypse, an (endless) consumption of the institutions that suppress the working poor, the example of William Blake is illuminating when considering the productive or liberatory possibilities held within the notion of apocalypse. By apocalypse, I refer to both its popular connotation, which is synonymous with destruction, as well as the meaning entailed by its etymological root of "revelation," or *apokálupsis* in ancient Greek. For Blake, apocalypse—as described in his work "Jerusalem"—begins when Albion (an allegorical figure for Britain) throws himself into the furnaces, igniting a social uprising that in turn produces a new order of universal kinship, after being inspired by the virtues of Jesus.<sup>xxvii</sup> Blake's Christ, however, is not the divine son of God, but rather an example of self-sacrifice for the sake of the other.<sup>xxviii</sup> It is around this

xxvi.  
xxvii.

Cumblér, *Working-Class in Industrial America*, 188.  
Chris Hobson, "Anarchism and William Blake's Idea of Jesus",  
*Utopian* Vol. 1, 2000, <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/chris-hobson-anarchism-and-william-blake-s-idea-of-jesus>.

xxviii.

Ibid.

redeployed figure of Christ that Blake hoped to ignite a social revolution, without the need of state or party intercession. Here, Christ becomes less an individual subject than an ethics: Christ as a model reveals a model for universal kinship, while prompting the destruction that enables its materialization. It is the potential catalyst for a culture-based, bottom-up social transformation. As Chris Hobson, a scholar of Blake, has argued, art is as capable as political theory at arriving at truth, as well as proposing new solutions to social problems.<sup>xxix</sup> For Hobson, work such as Blake's can be particularly effective in that it draws from vernacular cultural traditions and practices that are more readily available to the working masses.

Harvey's repeated ruinous motifs function in much the same way. When the linear temporality suggested by capital's promise of unlimited growth and Karl Marx's prediction of inevitable triumph of socialism have both seem to have failed, Harvey continuously repeats gestures of religious and economic institutional destruction, with the hope of clearing a way forward for a liberated Fall River. The city, which still suffers from high poverty rates in the wake of deindustrialization, indicates that Harvey's work draws from a lineage that still remains relevant today. Harvey's nonlinear use of time within the context of revolutionary politics is prescient. As critical theorist Walter Benjamin argues in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History," capitalism presents a vision of time as linear, empty, homogenous, and equivalent—a series of one-moment-after-the-other, formed through the exploitation of wage labor.<sup>xxx</sup> He suggests instead the notion of "messianic time," which ruptures the stillness of the present, to connect revolutionary activity in a nonlinear sense to both the past and present.<sup>xxxi</sup> It is a struggle over history itself. It is through this notion of time and its relation to politics that the art object's importance comes to the fore. In periods such as ours, where the possibility of mass radical politics seems foreclosed, the art object maintains these strains of thoughts within its material and aesthetic features for future revisitation. In the words of curator Cuauhtémoc Medina, it is the contemporary art object that acts as "the sanctuary of revolutionary thought."<sup>xxxii</sup>

Akin to Blake's Christ, Harvey's Fall River serves as an example. Whereas Blake's Christ is an ethical model, Harvey's

xxix.

Ibid.

xxx. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosopher of History," in *Illuminations* ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 261.

Ibid.

xxxi.

Cuauhtémoc Medina, "Contemp(t)orary:Eleven Theses," *e-flux journal*, no. 12 (January 2010): <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/12/61335/contemp-t-orary-eleven-theses/>.

xxxii.

Fall River acts as a stand-in for the affliction (following Weil) suffered by the city's workers. In an interview with Art 21, Harvey states that his work is a proxy for when his body is not there. However, I argue that his work goes beyond his body—his work is a proxy for the site, or, rather, a proxy for Fall River. In its absolute contingency on the material and cultural realities of this city, in its evocation of site and event, his practice becomes a focal point for all the experiences and lessons gleaned from this sliver of New England's geography. Concentrated into his sculptures, his work can speak to political truths applicable far beyond the city's limits. It is not necessarily that the specific conditions of Fall River may act as a universal model, but rather that Harvey's works, as a stand-in for the suffering worker under capitalism, may attune us toward the potential for affliction that all humans share.

In this way, it feels appropriate to close with these words from Weil's *Gravity and Grace*: "A work of art has an author and yet, when it is perfect, it has something which is essentially anonymous about it."<sup>xxxiii</sup>

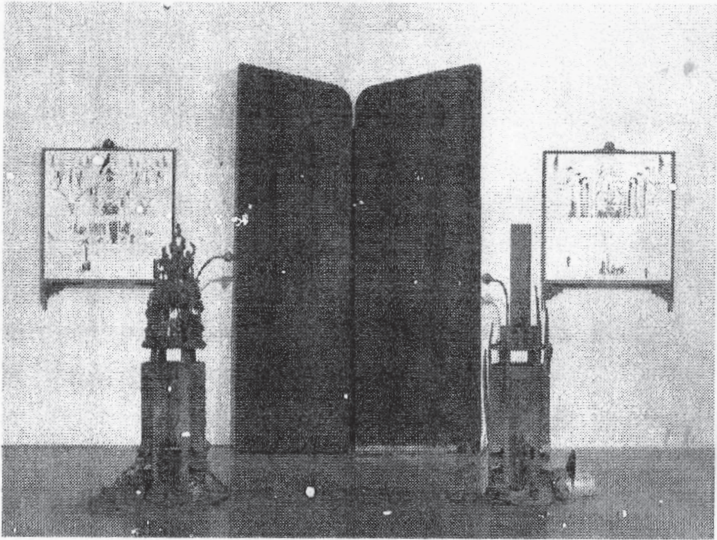


Fig.1 Harry Gould Harvey IV, *A Monument To The Families That Have Nothing To Offer The State But Their Children*, 2021. Partially stripped and charred church doors from Providence, casting wax, candles, lead organ pipes, job-site heaters from Fall River, scrap metal from Whole Foods, steel angel from New Bedford, cast white bronze and colored pencil on Xerox. Courtesy of the artist.  
Photo: Dario Lasagni.

*An Anathema Strikes the Flesh of the Laborer* is curated by Leo Cocar as part of the requirements for the master of arts degree at the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College.

Cover design and images by Harry Gould Harvey IV .  
Design by Arina Sin.

**III CCS BARD**

© 2023