NOTHING

- Philip Brereton
Abstraction
Void
Darkness
Memory without use
Disappearance
Destruction
Silence
Simplicity
Inside/Outside
Presence/Absence
Traces
Shadows
Timelessness
In January 1957 Ives Klein exhibited eleven monochrome canvases in Milan. Each canvas was mounted twenty centimetres in front of the wall as if to comment on the very emptiness of the space itself. The canvases, seen in this context, seemed weightless as if suspended in the space of the room itself. As such, the boundaries between subjective and objective were subtly blurred. For Klein each of these blue canvases “presented a completely different essence and atmosphere. None resembled any other”.

However, Klein had begun painting similar monochromes as early as 1947, considering them to be a way of rejecting the idea of representation in painting and therefore of attaining creative freedom. Although it is difficult to date many of these works precisely, the early ones have an uneven surface, whereas, those painted later, are finer and more uniform in texture.

For Klein blue was dimensionless. Blue was a unification of heaven and earth, the sky and the ground. Gone is the dividing line of the horizon. These monochrome canvases were to form a fundamental concept for much of Klein’s art. Within this setting the paintings appear to take on a life of their own. The singularity of colour dissolves any notion of the edge as a condition. As such the known merges with the unknown. Outside, Klein had hoped to illuminate the obelisk at the Palace de la Concorde in blue floodlights, while the base was to remain in total darkness. Like the canvases inside, the column would appear to float in mid-air as if suspended above the city.
In 1960 Ives Klein created his famous photomontage showing a man jumping away from a building. The image, entitled “Leap into the Void” was created by the merging of two negatives into a single image. One depicts the artist himself leaping through the air while the other is of the surrounding scene. Most of the image is dark except for the top right hand corner which is white. It is towards this emptiness that the viewer is drawn. Yet as one gazes at the artist suspended in mid-air, one notices that his feet are still gently touching the surface of the building.

Thus the solidity of the building’s facade is softened. The outer edge of the building no longer exists as a hard surface. In fact it is dissolved. The body is bridging the space between the immaterial void and the surface of the building itself.

One reads through the negative space to the edge of the buildings around it. It is in that sense that the wall as an edge is dematerialized, blurring the distinction between form and void, inside and outside. Yet the fall itself has been eternally delayed. We do not know what happens next, nor do we need to.

For Klein, the void is something that is indefinable. It is in this sense that the void becomes something that can only be expressed through the presence of something else. Klein’s interest in the void remained a constant theme throughout much of his work. In an exhibit entitled “The Void”, Klein emptied out an entire room within a gallery. Every piece of furniture was removed, while the walls were painted white. For Klein white represented non colour. Within this void, Klein exhibited nothing.

The only thing left in the room was a single empty cabinet. What was exhibited was a silent empty room. As such, Klein made an empty room into an art-object. The emptying out of the room had liberated the space of anything ordinary or mundane. As such the void is seen as a state of nothingness. The void is now understood as a hinge, a pivot between meaning and non-meaning. In the absence of anything else, one notices the shadows that gently fall on the surfaces of the walls. The corners of the room start to take on a greater significance. In the end the space was occupied only by the thoughts of those who came to see it. It is in that sense that the void is understood, not as an empty space, but rather as a state of openness.
Black and white are not considered as colours but rather as neutrals. Black is understood as the absence of colour and white as the mixture of all colours. While its surface is pristine and pure it bears no likeness to reality. Within this abstraction time seems to vanish into a perpetual sameness. There is almost something yet nothing. Each painting becomes memory and forgetfulness.

Indeed Minkowski writes of black or dark spaces; space which despite all loss of vision exists intellectually. The disintegration of space and time seem very apparent. As such, timelessness is to be found in the lapsed moments of perception, in a common pause.

For the artist James Turrell, the concept of a dark space is not about what one is supposed to see but rather the experience of “seeing yourself see.” In black paintings by Ad Reinhardt, Robert Motherwell and Mark Rothko we see a related preoccupation with the fraught relations between darkness and perception. Indeed, when one looks at such black paintings for some time, one starts to see matter, more than shade. What was initially perceived as a singular dark surface is actually composed of many shades of dark colour. Such black paintings are reminiscent of Kashmir Malevich’s painting “Black on Black”. Completed by the artist in 1915, here a black square is placed on a white background. There exists a certain tension between the empty white space and the darkness of the object itself. Yet this black square of pigment depicts nothing.

In 1993 Tony Fretton was asked to make a series of insertions within a disused warehouse on the River Tyne, which was to be used as a temporary film expo. At the time, all the surrounding buildings had been demolished in anticipation for an extensive commercial development. What had once been a dense dockside area was now empty. Only a quarter of the ground floor was lit by windows, while the rest was in darkness. One entered in the light, while the work was exhibited in darkness. The projection of film onto the surrounding walls was used to punctuate this darkness. As such the interior becomes a rational and controlled space with the viewer moving between opposing states of light and dark. The contrast between light and dark is in many ways an opposition between clarity and that which is indefinite. Black and white are not considered as colours but rather as neutrals. Black is understood as the absence of colour and white as the mixture of all colours. While its surface is pristine and pure it bears no likeness to reality. Within this abstraction time seems to vanish into a perpetual sameness. There is almost something yet nothing. Each painting becomes memory and forgetfulness.

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Memory without use

In 1993 Rachael Whiteread began work on a sculpture that would subsequently become known as “House”. Located on the edge of an expanse of unused parkland in London’s East End, “House” was the cast of a house no longer there. For in spraying the internal rooms in concrete and then removing the outer skin of the original structure, Whiteread had succeeded in creating a ghostly negative of the space in which lives were once lived out. What was revealed were a series of concrete boxes; a representation of the space the house had once occupied. The emptiness of each room was thus made present through the absence of walls. Indeed Lao Tzu argues that “the true reality of a room is not its walls but rather the emptiness they contain”. Yet “House” was in fact the inverse of a house turning the space inside out. What had once been air was now solid.

Close to the textures of the cast, the indentations of domestic detail invited contemplation of the interior life the house once had. Soot still clung to the outline of the fireplaces, just as fragments of paint and wallpaper still clung to the fabric of the cast itself. There was no material differentiation between the imprint of wood, glass or plaster, on the cast itself. The flex of wire running down the wall to a light switch seemed so personal now. Yet life itself was absent from these internal spaces. As such, the intimate was made monumental, yet still retained its intimacy. The private was opened to public view. For Aldo Rossi memory participates in the actual transformation of space.

In Whiteread’s early casts of wardrobes and drawers, Whiteread used these simple domestic objects simply as moulds to cast from. The internal space of these objects were filled with plaster, the mould was then broken off and discarded. The surface-marks that linger in the finished pieces are archetypal; they hold out an image of the lost object itself. Whiteread’s casts often seem to emphasise the fact that the objects they represent are not themselves there. Indeed “House” was a representation of the original object, a memory of what had once been there, not the object itself.

As a sculptural and conceptual work, “House” referenced some of the concerns of minimalism. The apparent solidity and sense of wholeness, as well as the emphasis placed upon material presence, echoed the language of the minimalist work of the 1960s. The modernist architect Luigi Moretti himself employed figure ground reversals in his plaster models of interior space in the 1950’s. The casting process itself represents the play between presence and absence, form and void. Yet when seen from across the expanse of unused parkland “House” began to appear rather vulnerable. Looking from north to south the view was dominated by Canary Wharf, a dramatic contrast to the depressed inner city. Three concrete 1960s high-rises towered above the other mundane buildings that surrounded house. While “House” could have been made elsewhere, in a different place and at a different time, it was not possible to separate “House” from its place, or the place from “House”.

In this area memory and nostalgia are active forces. Indeed the East End is an area that oozes meaning. Yet for many, “House” mocked the steady destruction of so much of the East End that had occurred throughout the 1980’s. In the speculative land developments that occurred at that time London’s East End, the docklands themselves became a war zone. What was mourned was the loss of the street as the site for the life of local communities and the social interaction that transforms an area into a neighbourhood. “House” located just on the edge of the docklands development zone, was a reminder to all that had been lost. “House” was the space of a house no longer there.

By night, in the streetlight, it seemed to take on a presence denied to it in daylight, its form became sharper, its colour more subtle and diverse. In the dead of night it made its own space, it no longer had to compete with its surroundings, and as such, it became an object in its own right. As such “House” suggested a mass that resisted rather than accommodated its surroundings. Space in these terms was politically charged. Yet “House” was never intended as a permanent work. Indeed there was always a certain amount of doubt concerning how the concrete itself would weather when exposed to the elements. Despite a national outcry, “House” was demolished in January 1994, in full glare of the media. Today, Grove Road is flanked by an unbroken stretch of open space. House exists now only in photographs, but also in the memories of all those who saw it.
In 1933 Diego Rivera began work on a mural at the Rockefeller Centre in New York that he would never finish. Entitled “Man at the Crossroads”, the fresco was organized by two diagonals, separating scenes of capitalistic and communist life. At the intersection of the two ideologies was a worker operating a machine. Yet it was the presence of a portrait of Lenin on the right hand side of the mural that generated considerable press attention.

After Rivera refused to remove the offending image, he was paid in full and asked to leave. As Rivera and his team left one of his assistants took a series of black and white images of the incomplete mural. They would be the only record of the unfinished work to survive, as six months later the fresco is forever destroyed.

Using these photographs, Rivera repainted the composition in Mexico under the variant title “Man, Controller of the Universe”, yet this version was far smaller than the original version. In the end the Rockefeller Centre commissioned a new mural by Jose Maria Sert to replace Rivera’s work. Entitled “American Progress”, it ironically used Abraham Lincoln as its focal point.

Disappearance
From 1971 until his death in 1978, the American artist Gordon Matta-Clark made a number of temporary interventions within buildings scheduled for demolition. The artist’s use of derelict buildings destined for demolition implied a temporality to the work, even before it came into being. Such notions of art as a temporary act or event take their cue from Dada precedent. While Matta-Clark had made an elliptical cut into a former iron foundry in Italy in 1973, his first large-scale sculptural work has been defined as “Splitting”. Made in the spring of 1974 in a suburban house scheduled for demolition, here a single cut is made through the centre of the house. Tipping the house back on its foundations, one side of the house was then lowered so as to allow the cut splay open towards the roof. The qualities of light, shadow and weather admitted into the body of the house served to blur the distinction between inside and outside. The eaves of the house were also subtracted, becoming the work “Four Corners”.

In a 1975 site project entitled “Conical Intersect” the artist used the same language of the cut to connect two seventh century town houses slated for demolition in Paris. From the street below, the cut allowed a view into the depths of the building itself. From the inside, the cut framed the external life of the city below, bringing the outside into the internal depths of the space. As such, both inside and outside are understood as a dialect of here and there. When seen from the outside, the cut appeared as a literal void. What Matta-Clark had achieved was to open a state of enclosure. From behind, the soon-to-be-completed George Pompidou Centre towered in the background. The void became a place of pause, from which the surrounding elements come into focus. The cut in this sense became a symbol for the vast demolition that was occurring in Paris at that time. Yet the work was neither sculptural nor architectural. Instead it blurred the division between both.

One of the opening sequences of a film made by Matta-Clark of “Conical Intersect” shows a view of the façade untouched. With the camera tightly focused on the north wall of the outer façade, a small hole appears. The hole is of a deeper colour than the wall itself, and as it expands in circumference, it appears as if the entire wall will be consumed by it. Yet what had occurred was the sculptural transformation of an abandoned building. For Venturi “architecture occurs at the meeting of interior and exterior”, with the wall as the point of transition between inside and outside. Indeed the transition between inside and outside represents a moment in its self. For Gaston Bachelard, space itself is nothing but a division between inside and outside. Yet Matta-Clark never saw his building cuts as an act of destruction or vandalism, but rather as a liberating gesture, or the freeing up of space. Here Space is characterized by a sense of incompleteness. One contemplates what was once there and what was still in fact present. As such, the work was decidedly materialistic in its concerns. Yet the void by its very nature does not have a materiality in its own right. The absence of material was, in fact, his art form.

Yet Robert Smithson argues that when anything is seen through “the consciousness of temporality it is charged into something that is nothing”. In the absence of the original works themselves, the main point of reference for any exploration of Gordon Matta-Clark’s architectural interventions is in fact to be found within the photographs, films and written documents, based on them.
Silence

In the same spirit as his monotone canvases of colour, Klein composed his own monotone symphony. What was in fact composed, was a symphony of sound and soundlessness, a single note followed by an extended silence. Klein’s symphony was one of many precedents that influenced the work of John Cage. Indeed notions of silence have been present in much of Cage’s work.

Within Cage’s 1952 composition 4′33″ the musicians on stage remain silent for the duration of the entire title. Within this silence, the subtle sounds of the audience are brought to the fore, underlining an idea held by Cage that the state of “absolute silence does not exist”. For Cage, silence is a spatial concept. Cage uses this concept of sound and soundlessness, to bring forward the otherness of space, or that which is not readily recognized. In musical composition, silence has always been employed as an element of pause, yet Cage’s interpretation of silence is like no other. His silences have the power to draw the viewer into a world of utter forgetfulness, completely detached from the here and the now. Cage would later comment that 4′33″ was, in his opinion, his most important work.

For Gaston Bachalard, the corner acts as a place of stillness and silence; an intimate space. It belongs to the room, yet does not quite partake in the fullness of the space it is situated in. In such spaces one is alone, surrounding only by one’s own thoughts. The idea of the corner as a space in itself, is beautifully explored by Tony Fretton in his gallery at Reading. The form of the project is simple, a rectangular box placed alongside an existing Victorian building. Yet in plan none of the walls of the gallery are parallel. All four corners are greater than a right angle. What would otherwise have been a rectangular space is thus given a slightly circular quality.

Yet the value of silence is most apparent when language fails to express the most important things in human life. In 1949 John Cage composed his famous speech on nothing. Within this speech, Cage attempts to describe his developing musical philosophy to his colleagues at the artists’ club in New York. Yet the words themselves meant little. In fact the words were little more than a way to create silences. As such, it was the space between words that were of importance. In the end it was a carefully composed speech on nothing.
Between 1986 and 1992 the Swiss architect Peter Märkli designed and built La Congiunta. Here, a sequence of concrete vessels houses a collection of sculptures by the artist Hans Josephson. A series of steel roof light run the length of the building, appearing almost weightless against the solidity of the concrete walls, still marked with the imprints of construction. Here, architecture is reduced to its purest form. The distribution of light upon the surface of the raw concrete walls is constantly changing; every instance is unique. The ceiling height within each of these three rooms differs, thus adding complexity to the simplicity of the architectural form. The subtleties of height between each of the three rooms change the manner in which the light fills the space. In the absence of any windows, the integrity of the concrete surface is maintained.

Yet the overall composition is characterised by an absence of architectural details; no electricity, no insulation; just space. Much of Josephson’s own work focuses on the human figure as a volume in space. Yet the work itself is bereft of any portrait-like individualization. Indeed one is struck by the simplicity of the work exhibited; a collection of reliefs and half-length figures of the human body. Josephson’s reliefs not only explore the fundamental struggles associated with sculpture, but also issues arising in architecture, including themes of volume, form and proportion. “My figures must be enduring in their expression, in their stance”. The absence of any details, allows one to dwell not only on the work, but also on the subtleties of the spaces themselves. In this sense both the art work and space merge into one. As the light falls from above, it picks up the subtleties of detail in Josephson work; finger imprints remain on the surface of the casts, referencing the artist’s hands as it seeks to mould the material itself. Within the stillness of the space, there exists a profound dialogue between the work and its setting; art and architecture. In this sense both the art work and the space itself merge into one.
As often as not, the window acts as the primary structuring element within Edward Hopper’s paintings. In such paintings, the window usually frames some external space or as in “Nighthawks”, painted by the artist in 1942, this night-time view of a deserted street corner and a harshly illuminated diner establishes certain continuity between inside and outside. The painting reveals three customers lost in their own private thoughts. Located at a sharply angled street corner, here a single pane of glass acts as the only division between inside and outside. Although Hopper denied that he purposely infused any of his paintings with symbols of isolation and emptiness, he acknowledged of “Nighthawks” that, “unconsciously, I was painting the loneliness of a large city”.

It is through this pane of glass that light spills out of windows onto the street, casting multiple shadows. The bright interior light causes some of the surfaces within the diner to be reflective. This is clearest in the case of the right-hand edge of the rear window, which reflects a vertical yellow band of interior wall, but fainter reflections can also be made out, in the counter-top. None of these reflections would be visible in daylight. Indeed Hopper had a lifelong interest in capturing the effect of light on the objects it touched. It is Hopper’s understanding of the expressive possibilities of light that gives the painting its beauty. Indeed Hooper had explored the theme of artificial light in many of his earlier paintings such as “Drug Store” and “Automat”, both painted in 1927. Yet in “Automat”, the window in the background is dark offering no external prospect. A woman sits alone at a table. Yet, the reflections of the interior light bulbs on the window extend the internal space of the café into the darkness of the night. As the interior light comes from more than a single light bulb, multiple different shadows are cast within the space.
In 2001 Rachael Whiteread was invited to make a temporary sculpture for the fourth plinth in London’s Trafalgar Square. Located in the northwestern corner of the square, the plinth had stood empty since the square was first laid out by Charles Barry in 1841. The other three plinths each hold bronze statues of King George IV, General Charles Napier and General Henry Havelock. Whiteread’s insertion was in fact a clear resin cast replicating the plinth itself. The plinth itself was an incredibly simple and pure form. Yet the finished work was in direct contrast to the solidity of the stone plinth itself. As such, one is forced to consider two objects, the historic plinth and the resin replica, as one. The colour of this resin cast changed with the sky, moving between opposing states of grey and absolute transparency. Such transparency allowed for the cast to almost vanish into the background, as the city passed it by. Yet “Monument” was in direct contrast to Whiteread’s earlier casts of three elongated plinths made in 1998. Here the plinth is seen as a negative of itself. When seen in the context of an empty room, their plastic form seems almost to punctuate the emptiness of the space.
Traces

From 1961 until 1989, the Berlin Wall divided a city and a nation, a metaphor for the distinction between communist and capitalist ideologies. Despite having been demolished in 1989, traces of the wall may still be felt within the urban fabric of the city. A parting in the city’s urban fabric often denotes the space where the wall once stood. While many of these leftover spaces have been intentionally built upon, many more remain.

Along Bernauer Straße, one of the longer preservation sections of the wall itself, poles of cor-ten steel mark where the wall once stood. Here absence takes on a physical presence. It is as if the concrete has been stripped away leaving only the rebar of the concrete wall itself. One contemplates the values that remain.

When observed from a sharp angle, these steel uprights give the impression of a solid wall. As such, the wall is both present and absent simultaneously; a permanent reminder to German division. When the light catches these steel uprights, long shadows are cast across the ground in the space where the wall once was. Indeed, Aldo Rossi maintains that the city remembers its past, that the city has an active consciousness. As such monuments are therefore the structures that give memory presence. Indeed, monumental sculpture becomes the area where art and architecture overlap.
Here the shadow exists in and of itself, a purposefully made image of nothing. As Julian Schnabel asserted in the preface to the catalogue marking the first comprehensive exhibition of these works, in 1989, “there is almost nothing on them, yet they seem to be pictures of something”.

Yet in Pliny’s story of the origin of painting, where a maid traces the outline of her departing lover’s shadow on the wall, the shadow becomes a symbol of memory and loss. What she works on capturing is not her lover’s presence, but rather something in its own right.

Warhol developed two main forms of representation for the shadow. One mode of representation depicts the shadow as a tall and narrow black form on a coloured monochrome background. Here the shadow appears as something placed upon the canvas itself. In the second series the monochrome background remains the same, but the shadow appears as a void, as if subtracted from the surface of the canvas itself. As such Warhol presents the shadow as something absent. Here the shadow is far shorter and more organic than in the first set. Yet the monochrome quality of each canvas ensures that each panel shares in the image of the other. The shadow is often represented as something heavy and dark. Yet when seen detached from the object it emanates from, the shadow takes on a certain beauty, for the profile line of the cast shadow takes on a far greater significance. Yet despite the shadow been closely bound up with the origins of painting and photography Warhol never referred to his shadows as art. For Warhol the shadow is a representation of otherness.

“We find beauty not only in the thing itself, but also in the pattern of its shadows, the light and the dark that one thing against the other creates” - Jun’ichirō Tanizaki.

Andy Warhol’s work describes the shadows as an object in its own right. Within a series of paintings made between 1978 and 1979 entitled “Shadows”, Warhol paints the shadow in the absence of the object it emanates from. The shadow is no longer an extension of an object but rather something in its own right.

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Yet in Pliny’s story of the origin of painting, where a maid traces the outline of her departing lover’s shadow on the wall, the shadow becomes a symbol of memory and loss. What she works on capturing is not her lover’s presence, but the presence of his absence – his shadow. Like Warhol’s paintings, this shadow will exist in separation from the object it emanates from. In both instances the shadow is seen as an object, a purposefully made image of nothing.
Timelessness

The Italian piazza is the most frequent subject and repeated theme in de Chirico's work. Numbering well over a hundred variants with their melancholic evening shadows, reductive geometric shapes, and strange angular perspectives, each painting is always a slight variant of the other.

In "The Soothsayer’s Recompense" completed by de Chirico in 1911, the piazza is empty except for a single statue that stands at the centre of the space. The statue represents the sleeping Ariadne, who in Greek mythology was abandoned by her lover Theseus on the island of Naxos. Indeed, the story of Ariadne is the story of the soul, abandoned by reason and logic. The statue itself is darkened by a long shadow that dominates the foreground. The buildings around this space are as empty as the shadows they cast. Indeed, the interiors of the buildings reveal nothing. Indeed silence and shadow are signs that have too much in common, their connotation is absence; a lack of something. Around these cold and pure architectures the air is charged with a certain mystery and silence. One is struck by the overwhelming sense of emptiness of these spaces.

However, de Chirico juxtaposed the classical statue with the puffing steam engine behind it, to create a disturbingly ambiguous sense of time and place, in which the ancient and modern worlds collide. The train is an image that recurs several times within de Chirico Piazza d’Italia series. The piazza itself is bisected by an imposing railway station and a wall that stretches across the piazza, giving the work an almost stage-like quality. A clock looks down from the parapet of this building and across the empty piazza, thus placing time at the centre of the space. Here timelessness is linked with melancholy, loneliness and sense of loss.

While De Chirico’s paintings may seem to reassert the clear depths of Renaissance perspective, they do so in such a way as to make them strange, almost dreamlike. Stage-set like paintings, all is artifice; time has come to a stop. Key to any understanding of de Chirico’s work is his love of the classical past. For de Chirico, the themes and motifs of the Greek and Roman Classics remained valid even in the modern world. However, he recognized that the clash of the past and present produced strange effects. As such, both time and space are inseparable.
Emphasis on the idea that beginnings and endings are intertwined, that existence itself is cyclical. The play itself opens on a bare stage in grey light. Throughout the play there is a tension between a desire for the end, for silence and stillness, and a desire to prolong the end by talking—by repeating the same old jokes and stories, by repeating the same old jokes and stories, questions and answers.

What one is left with is a sense of nothingness, for here, time is zero and everything is zero. In the end there is nothing.
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NOTHING AS FOUND
Vessel and Container;
Interventions in and around the archives at Kings Inns, Dublin.

The area in and around Kings Inn’s, has a loose urban structure, with disparate buildings not supporting a specific urban identity. Here, dereliction and use sit side by side. Yet it is here that a collection of documents relating to the registration of property in Ireland from 1707 are stored.

While the physical presence of these documents fills the rooms they occupy, one may also speak of the intellectual space of archive; the space of containment versus that which is itself contained. As such, the physical material is itself context, just like the surrounding area in which they are sited. The project is seen as a discussion of measure, the most intense contemplation of architecture. Each decision, whether about repair or addition, was grounded by the articulation of its physical quality as well as its meaning. These small moments, dispersed in the depth of the building display an attention to and understanding of the nature of these buildings.

Yet within the silence of these spaces, there is a sense of being both part of and apart from the city.
AN EMPTY ROOM

Lithograph, Robert Ballagh 1986
Interior room, Kings Inns.
THE PLAN AS ORDER
THE PLAN AS DETAIL