



Tabula Rasa: A Diachronic Approach  
to "Emptiness" in Visual Arts

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From the blank page to the blank canvas

A longstanding feature of modern and contemporary culture is its inclination toward introspection, namely to investigate its materiality, its “cultural” nature, its social role, and its position within power systems blamed responsible for transforming intellectual phenomena into entertainment, products, or fetish.

Since its earlier modern stages, which date back to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, culture has become more and more interested in its own specificities, either medium or content-related, often recurring to extreme measures like the withdrawal of representation itself. The following is a brief history of “emptiness” in visual arts, which focuses on monochromes, voids and other iconoclastic *tabulae rasae*.

The process of emptying in visual arts began with Romantic British painter William Turner, whose abstract representations of running trains, fires and landscapes emphasized the immateriality of nature and physical phenomena (i.e. clouds and storms, fire and smoke, electromagnetic waves and speed). A similar radical approach was that of French Symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé, author of *Un Coup de Dés Jamais N'Abolira Le Hasard* (*A Throw of the Dice will Never Abolish Chance*) (1897), a visual composition spread over 20 pages, made of a free use of typography and large amounts of blank space.

Both these “removals” of content turned out to be extremely fruitful for early 20<sup>th</sup> century avant-gardes

like Futurism, Suprematism and Constructivism. In Italy, Futurist painter Giacomo Balla took Turner's attention for the immaterial aspects of reality to an extreme degree, painting literally electromagnetic waves. Meanwhile in Russia, Kazimir Malevich invoked the “supremacy of pure artistic feeling”, painting primary geometric shapes like squares or circles: black on white, red on white, or white on white. “To the Suprematist”, he wrote, “the visual phenomena of the objective world are, in themselves, meaningless”.<sup>1</sup>

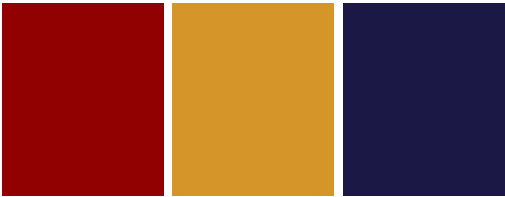
#### The last picture

A few years later, another Russian artist, Alexandr Rodchenko, achieved similar results but starting from a different approach, namely the Constructivist interest for the so-called *faktura* of the materials (their distinct properties). In 1921 he reached a point of no return with *Pure Red Color, Pure Blue Color, Pure Yellow Color*, a triptych in which painting had been distilled into the primary colors from which all other colors can be made. “I reduced

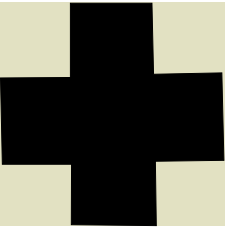
1. Kasimir Malevich, *The Non-Objective World: The Manifesto of Suprematism*, Dover Publications, New York 2003.

2. Varvara Aleksandrova Rodchenko, *Aleksandr Rodchenko: Painting, Drawing, Collage, Design, Photography*, Museum of Modern Art, New York 1998.

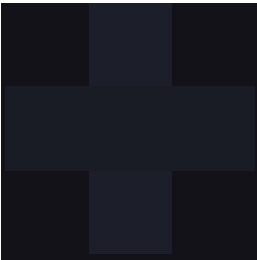




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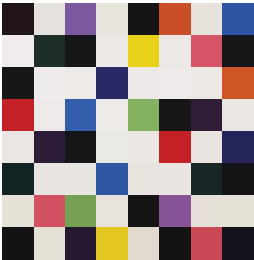
a



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c



e

Graphical interpretation  
of the following works:

- c. Robert Rauschenberg, *White Painting* [three panel], 1951. Painting, latex paint on canvas, 182,88 cm x 274,32 cm.
- d. Ad Reinhardt, *Abstract Painting*, 1960. Oil on canvas, 152,4 x 152,4 cm.
- e. Ellsworth Kelly, *Colors for a Large Wall*, 1951. Oil on canvas, sixty-four panels, 240 x 240 cm.

- a. Kazimir Malevich, *Black Cross*, 1923. Oil on canvas, 106 x 106,5 cm. Russian State Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia.

- b. Aleksandr Rodchenko, *Pure Red Color*, *Pure Yellow Color*, *Pure Blue Color*, 1921. Oil on canvas. Each panel, 62,5 x 52,5 cm.

painting to its logical conclusion”, he affirmed, “it’s all over. Basic colors. Every plane is a plane and there is to be no representation”.<sup>2</sup>

In *From Easel to Machine* (1923), Russian art critic Nikolai Tarabukin talked about Rodchenko’s monochromes as “the last, final step of a long journey, the last word, after which the speech of the painter must fall silent, the last ‘picture’ to have been created by an artist”.<sup>3</sup> Saying so, Tarabukin advocated a “productivist” approach, which soon after was embraced by artists like Rodchenko. As state employers, after years of abstract experimentations, Constructivists turned Productivists devoted themselves to document and celebrate the Soviet state as well designing its visual identity.

Although fascinating and highly inventive in its earlier stages, the productivist approach will later bring to sterile forms of Socialist Realism, not dissimilar from art produced under other totalitarian regimes. Abstraction and the monochrome, on the other side, became weapons for those artists who didn’t want to deal neither with society nor with representation. Interestingly enough, in his iconic essay *Avant-Garde and Kitsch* (1939), American art critic Clement Greenberg chose Socialist Realist painter Ilya Repin as an example of kitsch in opposition to the avant-garde poet or artist who, “in turning his attention away from subject matter, turns it in upon the medium of his own craft”.<sup>4</sup>

### Silent zen white

Painting achieved purity through abstraction and what Greenberg called “self-definition”, more or less literally, with Pablo Picasso, Piet Mondrian, and Joseph Albers in Europe, and later with Abstract Expressionist painters like Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning in the United States. And it is not a coincidence that some of these artists have been pivotal references for the rise of a new series of “last pictures”, that took form in the fifties within

the walls of the Black Mountain College, a small experimental art school founded in North Carolina in 1933 which had Albers, a European refugee, and later De Kooning, among its notable professors.

It is at Black Mountain College that two major American artists, John Cage and Robert Rauschenberg, a faculty member the former and a student the latter, developed their contributions to the history of “emptiness” in art. In 1951 pianist David Tudor performed Cage’s piece *4’ 33”*, which consisted in four minutes and thirty-three seconds of silence, while Rauschenberg made his *White Paintings* as the logical evolution of a series of monochromatic prints started few years before, titled progressively starting with *This is the First Half of a Print Designed to exist in Passing Time* (1948-49).

The idea of emptiness suggested by both silence and the white color, was meant to direct the attention toward the contextual space within which the work of art was performed or exhibited, giving importance to factors like time, indeterminacy and chance. For Cage, this approach was influenced by Zen Buddhism, which celebrated passivity and gave attention to ambient sounds and the noises made by the audience. For Rauschenberg, considering his following productions with silkscreens and combines, the monochrome was part of a larger process of reconfiguration of the art object.

Influenced by Cage and, like him, by Zen Buddhism, Nam June Paik realized the cinematic version of the monochrome: *Zen For Film (Fluxfilm n°1)* (1964), a 16 mm unexposed film, 8 minutes long. Its projected image consisted simply in an illuminated surface, occasionally altered by scratches and particles of dust. Similarly, Tony Conrad’s *The Flicker* (1965) consisted in five frames, one of which was pure white and one pure black. A more recent experiment that fits in this lineage is Derek Jarman’s *Blue* (1993), a 79 min. single shot of saturated blue (Klein) color which serves as background to a

soundtrack where Jarman and others describe the director’s vision and his struggles with AIDS.

### Literal purification

Another contribution by Rauschenberg to the history of *tabula rasa* in visual arts has been *Erased De Kooning* (1953), a drawing by De Kooning that Rauschenberg insisted to receive as a gift by the older artist and then erased. The act was an iconoclastic gesture of refusal of Abstract Expressionism as the dominant artistic avant-garde at that time. Similar results were achieved in the same years by Ellsworth Kelly, whose combination of chance and use of the grid brought him to *Colors for a Large Wall* (1951), made of sixty-four square panels, each one a monochrome painted with color samples.

Both Rauschenberg’s and Kelly’s monochromes occupy a liminal space in art history, between Abstract Expressionism, which they openly took distance from, and Conceptual Art and Minimalism, which they anticipated. But they were not alone. In his *Twelve Rules for a New Academy* (1957), a text published on *Artnews* magazine, Ad Reinhardt called for a new type of art school that would promote an art that is “out of time, art made fine, art emptied and purified of all other-than-art meanings”. He achieved this purification through a series of monochromatic black paintings while coeval artists like Agnes Martin and Robert Ryman based their painterly research on grids.

Grids and monochromes constitute leitmotifs of avant-garde art produced in the 1960s. However, these extreme forms of un-representation illustrate a paradox. On one side they erase representation, on the other they offer a new blank space ready to be filled up, which is also the main conceptual feature of Minimalism. And this is precisely why Michael Fried, a disciple of Greenberg, “attacked” Minimalism in his *Art and Objecthood* (1967), because the Minimalist work of art “literalizes” space, making its coordinates visible and in doing so it becomes “theatrical”. Interestingly enough, Fried talks about ABC Art, while the exhibitions featuring Malevich’s and Rodchenko’s monochromes in Russia were titled with numbers, respectively *0.10* (1915) and *5 x 5 = 25* (1921).

### Air art

With the paintings, sculptures, installations, and interventions of the likes of Reinhardt, Martin, Ryman, and later Donald Judd, Dan Flavin, Robert Mangold, Jo Baer, Michael Heizer, Robert Irwin, Imi Knoebel, Hanne Darboven, and Fred Sandback, to name but a few, we see a shift of attention from content to context and from the final art object to the process of its creation. Many artists associated with either Minimalism or Conceptual Art used “emptying” as a productive force to awake a critical conscience in the spectator as to the context in which art is produced, exhibited and given intellectual as well as economic value. In doing so, they seem to suggest that ideas don’t necessarily need to take a material form, art could be just an act of framing what is already there.

A logical step, at this point, is to recall examples of art works that speculated on air as art, the first being Marcel Duchamp’s *50 cc of Paris Air* (1919), an “empty” ampoule the artist bought from a pharmacist in Paris. But probably the quintessential “empty” work of art is Yves Klein’s *Le Vide* (1958). At that time Klein was already known for his monochromatic blue paintings and that is what the three thousand people who gathered at Galerie Iris Clert on April 28<sup>th</sup> probably expected to see. They found an empty space instead: *le vide* (the void). “Klein, l’homme qui a vendu le vide” the newspapers titled the day after.

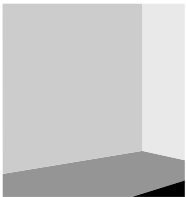
*Le Vide* is the first of a longstanding series of “empty” spaces in art, all blaming the economic power of museums and galleries for turning art into a product. “The real value of the picture is invisible and could only be the hidden social relation that is later to be brutally revealed through its price”<sup>5</sup>, wrote Thierry de Duve regarding Klein. From a molecular point of view, *Le Vide* was far from empty, yet being its content invisible and ephemeral, it challenged the status of art and the intellectual and commercial values associated with it.

A similar discourse can apply to other air-based art works realized in the sixties: Piero Manzoni’s *Artist’s Breath* (1960), balloons inflated by the artist; Hans Haacke’s *Condensation Cube* (1965), a glass cube filled with water aimed at showing the natural process of condensation and evaporation; Art and

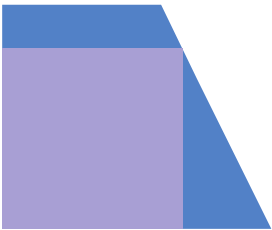
3. Nikolai Tarabukin, *From Easel to Machine*, Rabotnik Prosveshcheniia, Moscow 1923 in Maria Gough, *Tarabukin, Spengler and the Art of Production*, October, Vol. 93, Summer 2000.

4. Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture: Critical Essays*, Beacon Press, Boston 1961.

5. Thierry de Duve, *Yves Klein, or The Dead Dealer*, October, Vol. 49, Summer 1989.

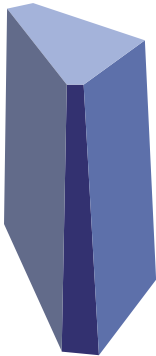


f



i

- i. Olivier Mosset, *Le Vide*, 1958. *Purple Square* 1990, 267 x 320 cm. Acrylic paint on canvas.
- j. James Turrell, *Alta (Green)*, date unknown, Cross corner projection, dimensions variable.
- k. Imi Knoebel, *Canape*. 1987-1991.



g



j

- Graphical interpretation of the following works:
- f. Yves Klein, *Le Vide*, 1958.
  - g. John McCracken, *Tragazur*, 1987. Polyester, 46.4 x 45.9 x 21.5 cm.
  - h. Donald Judd, *Untitled*, 1980, Steel, aluminum and perspex, 2229 x 1016 x 787 mm.



h



k

Language’s *The Air-Conditioning Show* (1966-67), an empty gallery with air conditioning switched on but set at an imperceptible temperature; and Robert Barry, *Inert Gas Series* (1969), consisting in various measured volumes of inert gases released into the Californian desert’s atmosphere.

### The current “value” of emptiness

“There is something about void and emptiness which I am personally very concerned with”, asserted Robert Barry, “Just emptiness. Nothing seems to me the most potent thing in the world”.<sup>6</sup> Barry is not the only artist to be attracted by the metalin-  
guistic power of emptiness and void to reveal, rather than to occlude, space. In a similar vein, Robert Irwin, James Turrell and, more recently, Olafur Eli-  
asson and Carsten Nicolai, have all exploited the im-  
mersive properties of emptiness, although making  
use of more “spectacular” and hypnotic atmospheric  
effects than Barry, through light, surfaces or smoke.

After Tarabukin’s declaration that Rodchenko’s  
monochromes were the “last pictures”, not only  
artists kept producing pictures, but they also kept  
painting monochromes. In addition to the ones  
discussed above, monochromes have been produced  
by Lucio Fontana, Brice Marden, John McCracken,  
Gerhard Richter, Allan McCollum and Olivier Mos-  
set, among others. Jacob Kassay’s silver paintings  
are recent speculations on the monochrome, as  
well as Cory Arcangel’s prints based on Photoshop  
gradients and Claire Fontaine’s grey, black and  
burgundy surfaces painted with “anti-climb” paint  
used on walls and fences to prevent theft. Kassay’s  
mirror-like monochromes reflect the art system that  
instantly celebrates itself; Arcangel’s gradients depict  
a tool for filling up and a space to be filled; Par-  
is-based collective Claire Fontaine’s monochromes,  
instead, speculate on the everlasting need of art to  
detach itself from kitsch, by visualizing a wall that  
cannot be climbed up.

The concepts of “emptiness” has been recent-  
ly explored by artists also through performative  
sculptures. Francis Alÿs’ *Paradox of Praxis* (1997),  
for example, consisted in the artist’s effort to push a  
block of ice through the streets of Mexico City until  
it melted, while Gustav Metzger’s *Null Object* (2012)  
is a stone cube with a hole sculpted as the 3D  
rendering of the electrical activity of the artist’s brain  
while thinking about “nothing”, recorded in a series  
of twenty-minutes sessions.

To make monochromes, voids or speculate  
about “emptiness” and “nothingness” today, is a  
consequence of the perennial artists’ need to claim  
autonomy and direct the attention toward the con-  
text rather than the content of art. In this sense, *tabula  
rasa*, more than a withdrawal from representation,  
“represents” a withdrawal from an apparatus of  
visual production in which art claims its social role  
in conveying inner truths and pure ideas, unmarket-  
able as well as unframeable.

6. Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The demate-  
rialization of the art object from 1966 to  
1972*, Praeger, New York 1973.



l



m



o

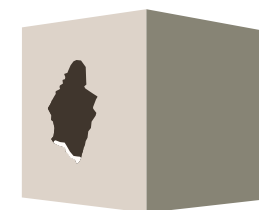
Graphical interpretation  
of the following works:

l. Derek Jarman, *Blue*, 1993.  
Still from video.

m. Allan McCollum, *Collection of Forty  
Plaster Surrogates*, 1982 (cast and paint-  
ed in 1984). Enamel on cast Hydrostone,  
Forty panels ranging from 12.8 x 10.2 cm  
to 51.3 x 41.1 cm.

n. Gustav Metzger, *Null Object*, 2012.

o. Cory Arcangel, *Photoshop Gradient  
Demonstrations*, 2010-ongoing.



n