

## Something else about nothing: blankness as medium<sup>1</sup>

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Catalogue essay for: '\_\_\_\_\_',

April 10 – May 16, 2015

Margaret Lawrence Gallery

40 Dodds St, Southbank

Melbourne, Victoria, Australia.

This exhibition points toward an aesthetic realm in which conspicuous absence demands that we look *into*, *beyond* or *outside* formal qualities and expectations of content. That some of the artists featured in this exhibition will disagree with most of what follows is in itself evidence of the varied nature of artistic responses to blankness and nothingness. Although we might infer the underlying operation of several divergent strategies for working at the limits of content and specificity within this exhibition, some artists will, I suspect, reject that this is what they are doing. Nevertheless, it is my task here to try and write something else about nothing.

I will begin with a broad invisible brushstroke. Let us assume that art is an arena for experiencing ideas and that it is meaningfully distinguishable from other realms of cultural activity. Yet like other socially-constructed projections within human culture (such as nations or corporations), art does not exist in the continuum of physical reality. Being a consensually projected myth, it only exists – somewhere, but where exactly? – to the extent that people agree that it does. Perhaps most importantly, art is a fictional space that enables us to experientially reflect upon other fictions permeating our collective cultural existence. Artists routinely claim that there is something profound about this self-referential point of difference not easily put into words. Although at least some attenuated variation of this belief is necessary in order to maintain the slippery delusion that is art, many artists nonetheless acknowledge a deep ambivalence. Perhaps, at best, an idea experienced as art can offer insight beyond what can be contained or communicated in a theoretical proposition alone. Yet such insight often escapes as soon as attempts are made to pin it down.

Putting requisite media aside for a moment, I maintain that the philosophical – indeed ontological – condition of *art* is immaterial. Even when set in pigment or stone, an artwork invariably requires a supporting mythological apparatus to be even recognised as art. Strangely, many of us still focus upon the false idol that is the material object. Although unable to ever completely escape the material, embodied and sensorial in its idolatrous vehicular pretensions, art is finally just another fictional and immaterial cultural projection. Sure, we might have material specificity and embodied experience on the one hand, and the networked boundlessness of context, paratext and re-mediation on the other. Yet it all ultimately congeals to become the fictional immaterial delusion we call art (a fiction now extending from a kaleidoscopic array of medium specificities to the antipodean extremities of intermedial expansion and evacuation).

This exhibition presents works, which in operating at the limits of evacuated form and content, seek to illustrate tensions between the vehicular function of materials, and immaterial projections of thought. Accordingly, this exhibition demonstrates that *aesthetic* experience exists both *within* and *beyond* direct sense perception. Most of us did not directly experience the seminal works of conspicuous absence underpinning this exhibition. Nor did artists of the 1960s and 1970s directly experience seminal works of the early twentieth century avant-gardes. Yet we still manage to somehow build these works in our minds via historically substantiated rivers of documentation, witness accounts and multiple interpretations extending across time and space. Without direct sense experience

of the original objects and events, we still manage to respond to these historical works *aesthetically* – that is, in a manner that seems intangibly yet profoundly distinct from theoretical or philosophical propositions alone. Our shared understandings in turn assist these artifices to spread as memes, leading us to recognize that wherever the location of a “work” of art might be, it must extend beyond its material and sensory vehicles.

Aesthetic interpretation, then, is clearly not restricted to direct sense perception alone. Just as we may vicariously feel solace in simply knowing that a wilderness exists, or horror in knowing that a remote disaster has occurred, we can *feel* that we *know* something without directly seeing or touching it. The aesthetic exercise of orienting, in thought, toward conspicuous *absence* can also vicariously provide a sensory experience, perhaps one less easily attained than those based on *presence*. Historically, many artists have employed projections of thought as a medium. From Terry Atkinson and Michael Baldwin’s nomination of a ‘column’ of air over Oxfordshire; *Air Show/Air Conditioning* (1966–7), to the moment of 1:36pm; on June 15 1969 in which Robert Barry nominated *All The Things I Know But Of Which I Am Not At The Moment Thinking*, artists have long demonstrated that we can potentially experience something aesthetically by simply projecting into imagined spaces. An important part of this experience is of course the paradoxical insight that complete comprehension remains unattainable.

If we trace a now well historicised trajectory from Kazimir Malevich’s seminal *Black Square* (1915) via Robert Rauschenberg’s *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953) to Yves Klein’s *The Void* (1958), it is clear that absence can be used to convey surprisingly varied “content”. As Thierry de Duve has put it, a blank canvas already “belongs to the tradition of painting” well “before it is touched by the painter’s hand”.<sup>2</sup> By exhibiting blankness, an artist can highlight the way in which interpretation often depends upon an invisible informational backstory. She can also demonstrate that elements obscured from view can become an ontological support for extra-perceptual networks of meaning. Blankness possesses no independent essence. It requires *something* (if only to nominate its imagining) to serve as medium. The act of nominating blankness can simultaneously constitute addition and subtraction. Experiencing blankness is to recognise something, for as Susan Sontag put it, looking at something that is ‘empty’ is still an act of looking and therefore “seeing something—if only the ghosts of one’s expectations”.<sup>3</sup>

The walls in this exhibition space have been painted white many times. Somewhere *inside* these walls are the traces of previous artworks and exhibitions. Even this simple thought experiment requires uniting the material properties of paint with invisible functions of thought. Although these traces of previous exhibitions are now invisibly locked inside these walls, the media required for communicating this idea are paint and words. Just as artworks assume a doubled ontological existence – insofar as they are *art* and at the same time *something else* – this text is also made up of semiotic units and the gallery walls of painted wood. Unless “pointed to”, much art is easily unnoticed. Also, without “pointing” it is also difficult to meaningfully delineate that which is inside and outside a work.

The task of nominating something as art requires at least some bare minimum medial ingredients. As noted by exhibiting artist Ilmar Taimre, a useful explanation for this necessity is found in the theoretical framework of philosopher and artist Jeffrey Strayer. In Taimre’s interpretation<sup>4</sup> of Strayer’s formulation of art at the “limits of abstraction,”<sup>5</sup> even art at the outermost limits of conceptual abstraction requires the existence of at least one “public perceptual object” through which a subject’s understanding of the intended identity of the “work” depends.<sup>6</sup> This “public perceptual object” might assume the form of anything from a physical artefact to a performed gesture, text, site, or an imaginary or virtual object (albeit even then still dependent on an initial sensory perception). It is, in the

words of philosopher David Davies, simply the “vehicular medium” through which an “artistic statement is articulated.”<sup>7</sup> As Craig Dworkin has noted, this inescapability of *media* runs counter to the kind of immateriality once claimed of conceptualism.<sup>8</sup> Once again, although the philosophical condition of art is fictional and immaterial, some form of *material* is required to convey this condition.

Although Malevich pointed toward blankness as a space for aesthetic speculation over a century ago, it was clear from the outset that there is no such thing as *nothing* in art. The many and varied evocations of nothingness in this exhibition alone attest to this impossibility. Instead, the idea of blankness underpinning this exhibition aims to evoke the productive sense of possibility suggested by an empty sheet of paper, an empty gallery space, an unpainted canvas, or a digital document devoid of information. By extension, it also performs the potential for empty space to foreshadow the irresolvable tension between doubt and hope underpinning the creative process itself. Blank space remains provisionally protected from the impending spectre of judgement. It is not yet a failure or a success – just a possibility of both. It also reflects the anxiety of having nothing to say or of corrupting the potential of a proverbial clean slate with the vulgarity of artistic expression. Although paralyzing, it invites us to carry on. And as we carry on, we discover that blankness can also be thought of as the end result of erasure and removal, no longer a starting point but an unattainable resting place.

The artists in this exhibition are variously interested in investigating the psychological and formal properties of blankness through gestures that sit as close as possible to the unreachable limits of nothingness. Even identifying blankness is a creative act. Simply contemplating it is a form of production. Blankness focuses both the anticipation of conception and the possibility of indefinitely deferring it. Historically, blankness has been used to conjure up everything from metaphysical sensibilities to haunting historical absences. Today, it still functions as a means of highlighting the way in which aesthetic interpretation requires an informational backstory by drawing upon content or experience that cannot be literally seen, felt or heard. Conspicuous absence can serve to remind us of beauties and dangers enacted by individual and collective imaginations. After all, irresolvable tensions at play between these contradictory poles of human imagination drive cultural production to generate fragile mythologies capable of both driving us to the precipice and provisionally redeeming us.

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to acknowledge that several of the key ideas presented in this text have been developed through an ongoing discussion with exhibiting artist Ilmar Taimre.

<sup>2</sup> Thierry de Duve. *Kant after Duchamp* (Cambridge: October Books/MIT Press, 1998), 250.

<sup>3</sup> Susan Sontag, “Aesthetics of Silence,” *A Susan Sontag Reader* (New York: Farrar, Straux, Giroux, 1982), 181-205 .

<sup>4</sup> As Taimre has neatly encapsulated it, an artwork “is none other than the experiential *meaning* which emerges, in the mind of perceivers (artists and audience), as the product of a translation *process* (or *experience*) involving at least two semiotic systems, and the perception of one or more *publicly perceivable objects*.” Ilmar Taimre. Unpublished Working Draft of PhD Dissertation, School of Creative Arts, The University of Newcastle (forthcoming).

<sup>5</sup> Jeffery Strayer. *Subjects and objects: art, essentialism, and abstraction (philosophy of history and culture)* Brill Academic Pub, 2007), p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> David Davies. *Art as Performance* (Oxford: Blackwells, 2004), p. 59.

<sup>8</sup> Craig Dworkin. *No Medium*, (Cambridge: MIT Press. 2013), pp. 137-138