

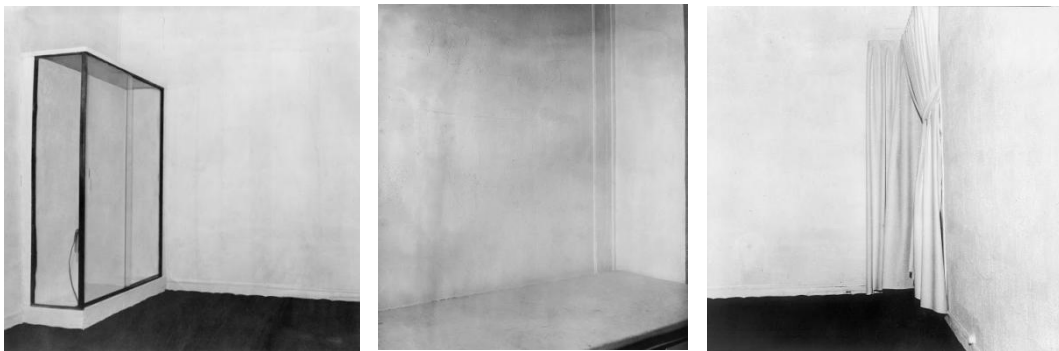
## Research Notes

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On a summer night, when I was 13 years old, around 7 o'clock, I was sitting in the corridor on the ground floor of the middle school with my friend. We were innocently talking about the *Tao Te Ching* that I had read in the self-study class earlier. I could faintly hear the noise upstairs and insect chirping shrill somewhere on the lawn. The white light shines brightly from the roof of the building to the square in the distance. Slight wind blowing through the dark and empty corridor. This is the first thought and experience of nothingness (what I am interested in including the ideas of void, nothingness and emptiness, the 'nothingness' at here is just a general word) when the seed of curiosity hidden in my heart was planted at that time.

Over the years, I have tried to think about "nothingness" from several different perspectives, trying to release my fascination with it by creating something like drawings and installations. Of course, the results of each time did not achieve real success.

For this time, I hope that I can try my best to get rid of the commonly used symbols and intentional expressions as much as possible. Instead of deliberately expounding a particular point of view through works, I want to express my feelings more purely (directly). Here below, I roughly organised some scattered sentences then I noted in the research of artists and their works that are inspiring me at the moment or before.



Yves Klein's The Void, 1958

Yves Klein's work is one of the starting points for my thinking of the artistic expression of "nothingness" in the past two years. His perspective of conceiving the idea of nothing in the art form is diverse. Klein has been profoundly influenced by Eastern culture since his young age. Therefore, his works have the expressive intention of Zen Buddhism. In April 1958, his *"The Void"* exhibition was held at Galerie Iris Clert in Paris. The gallery was painted in white, leaving only a glass showcase with a black frame, white curtains and several white walls in the space. He may want to clear the room and occupy the space with pure white, which would help the audience to arouse the idea of "emptiness" in their minds. What he did for this work reminds me Shen-Xiu (神秀) 's verse in the story of the eminent monk Shen-Xiu and Hui-Neng (慧能). Hong-Ren (弘忍), the 5th patriarch of Chan Buddhism once asked each of his pupils to write a verse to reflect their understanding of Buddhism, and he would choose the best one as the next patriarch. Although Shen-Xiu was one of the most respected pupils among them, Hong-Ren passed his position to Hui-Neng, a man who nearly illiterate and just started to study Chan Buddhism at that time. Here are the verses wrote by Shen-Xiu and Hui-Neng:

Shen-Xiu:

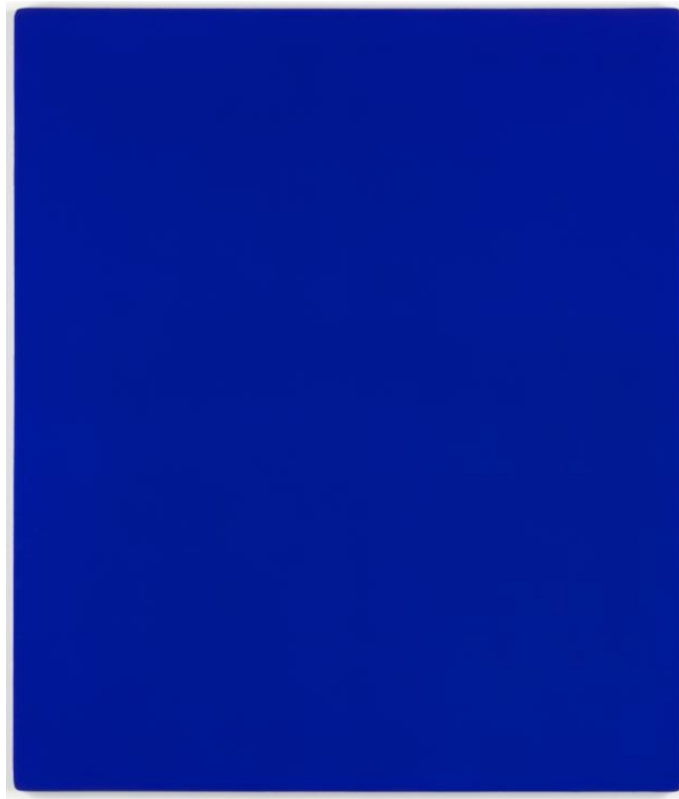
*The body is like a tree of bodhi,  
The heart as a dressing table.  
I will be polishing it constantly,  
Not contaminated by the dust.*

Hui-Neng:

*The bodhi is neither a tree, nor any form,  
The dressing table is not the only platform of the mirror.  
Since it's nothing really there in the beginning,  
Where could the dust alight?*

As what Hong-Ren told Shen-Xiu at the end of this story, *"your verse has not seen the true nature, haven't entered the gate yet,"* it somehow means that Klein's attempt was not successful because these white walls built a barrier separating "nothing". *"But does space only exist when there's stuff in it? Does space only have a meaning when*

*it's enclosed by walls.*" In the documentary *Everything & Nothing*, the host professor Jim Al-Khalili asked. Does space have the shape of itself? In the works of artists after Klein, this question seems to linger on. But before talking about this point, we could not ignore the impact of his monochrome works in International Klein Blue (IKB) as well as the concept in this colour exploration.



Yves Klein, *IKB 79*, 1959

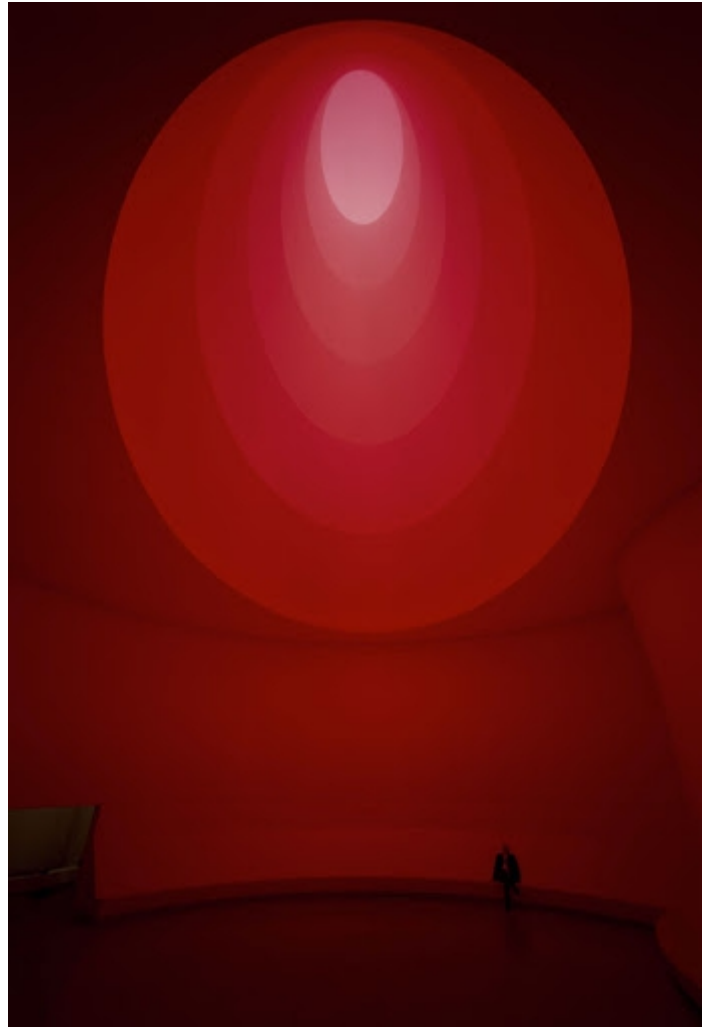
Perhaps in his mind, "nothingness" is a state of extreme purity just like his IKB works. It is not difficult to see from his repeated attempts that he tried his best to purify the content and the concept he proposed as "Non-representitive". He believes that the art of nothingness only can be transmitted from the work to the audience in a direct experience, it is a bit similar to the mechanism of koan in Chan Buddhism.

At this moment, two roads appeared in front of my thoughts, one leading to the sand mandala of Tibetan Buddhism, and the other leading to a more novel light installation.

The sand mandala and Klein's monochrome works have similarities in creative techniques. The mineral pigment powder passed through the hands of Tibetan monks to picture the residence of the Buddha slowly over several weeks. The difference is that Klein's IKB works can remain calm and unchanging for decades. Every time they are displayed all over the world, the audience can still see the blue that Klein saw, and what lay behind the phase of seeing maybe a precisely calculated formula. For the sand mandala, its destination is not only the complicated patterns that were carefully meditated as well. Tens of thousands of fine sands are remixed at the end the rite, the rigorous order returns to chaos, the gorgeous colours become difficult to be distinguished in the sand pile. They will be washed away with the stream, carrying with people's blessings and wishes, and land on the bed in the distance. Compared with the calmness of IKB works, I think the ritual of composing and decomposing the sand mandala is more potent than merely displaying it. Perhaps nothingness is not static. On the contrary, the changes brought about by movement seem to make my heart perceive clearer to what may be the nothingness.



*The Diagonal of May 25, 1963 (To Robert Rosenblum)*, Dan Flavin, 1963



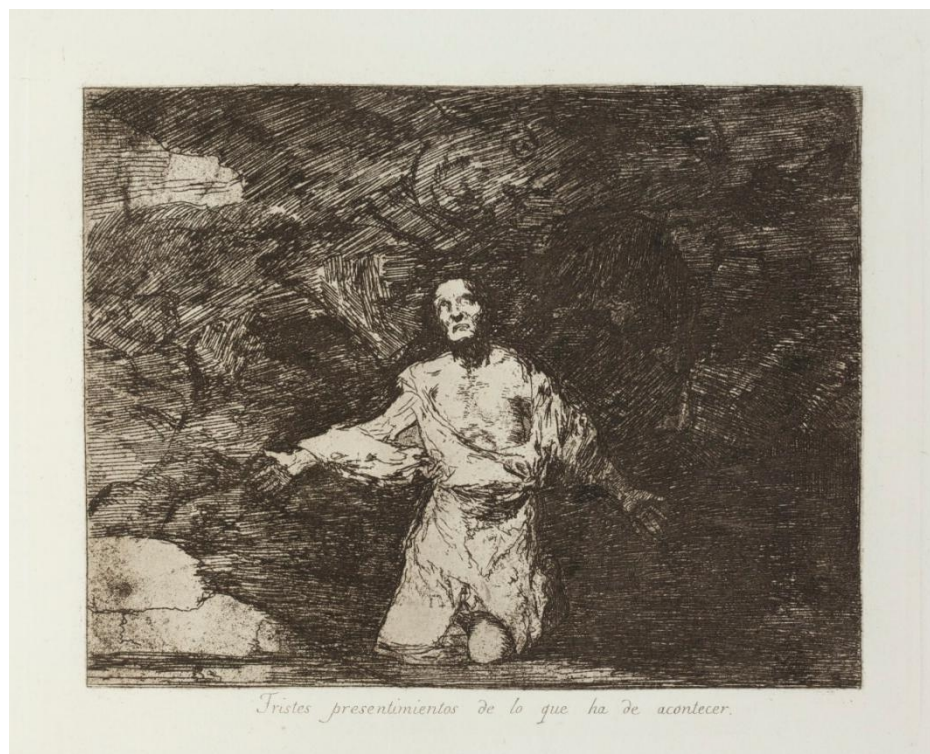
*Aten Reign, James Turrell, 2013*

*"Colours can exist only by themselves,"* Rothko once wrote this sentence in his sketchbook. For the light installations created by Dan Flavin and James Turrell, they are no longer attached to the paint, but directly related to space in the form of light. The works of light are constantly changing, and only viewing at "present" is the way participation. For Dan Flavin's light works, the fluorescent light tubes constitute the shape of the light, affecting the surrounding space. Differently, the works of James Turrell use light to construct space. From Flavin to Turrell, light gradually "freed" from the restricted form and developed from "composition" to "occupation" of a space. However, just like Klein's *The Void*, light, what the audiences can see, is still formed by enclosed spaces. Klein once mentioned in Sorbonne's speech: *"...in front of any painting, figurative or non-figurative I felt more and more that the lines and all their consequences, the contours, the forms, the perspectives, the compositions, became exactly like the bars on the window of a prison."* At this moment, when the colour

has detached from the pigments, we still have not been able to get rid of the boundary of that "wall", the specific space is still the premise of visibility.

We are in the world of "thing (being)", and a bottomless gap always separate us from the "nothing (non-being)" on the other shore. We seem to be convinced of its existence in our hearts. However, reality has already put an invisible shackle on expression from the beginning. Zeno's paradox, *Achilles and the tortoise*, can be easily overturned in reality, but people's pursuit of nothingness seems to be somewhat match up to this one, the distance between the man and void is always a step away in the ideal state.

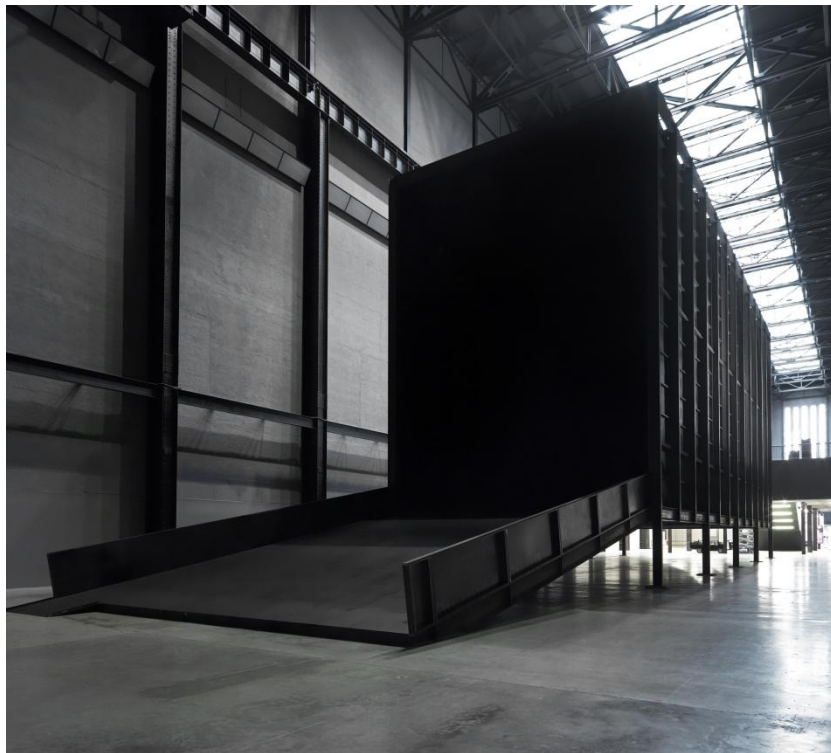
What if looking in the opposite direction? The world that cuts off any beam of light utterly lost sight in the darkness where gives birth to the nothingness from the unknown. Someone said that what we see is the pain of light, the colours are the information negated by objects. Unlike Klein's white space, black absorbs all colours. Is it the abandoned one or the end of the colour? From ancient times to the present, black is mysterious. It always following the objects, as an untouchable inner nature. It seems to coincide with the connection between being and non-being.



*Tristes presentimientos de lo que ha de acontecer.*, Francisco Goya, 1863



*Descent Into Limbo, Anish Kapoor, 1992*



*How It Is, Miroslaw Balka, 2009*

In the background of Goya's etching work *Tristes presentimientos de lo que ha de acontecer* (*Gloomy presentiments of what must come to pass*), there seem to be some creatures hidden in the shadow. We can only see one or two, but not the whole scene is hidden in the darkness. For the man in the picture, those hidden-in-the-shadows

would be vaguely regarded as unknown. The invisible and inaudible space behind the kneeling man just like his unpredictable future. He greets his destiny powerlessly, or perhaps that is also implying the situation of us. The dome of fate hangs above everyone's head. Contemporary artists such as Anish Kapoor and Miroslaw Balka directly use black space to visualise the invisible dome, with echoing Goya's work. They try to bring a more personal experience of nothingness to the audiences, and now they are becoming the one used to be in the middle of Goya's etching.



*Leap into the Void*, Yves Klein with Harry Shunk, János Kender, 1960

*Leap into the Void* is another attempt by Klein after creating the two works mentioned in the previous. Through photography, the technique that could "faithfully" records the moment. In this series of photos, the uncertainty arises among the interaction of the body, the force and the moment.

It is like a path leading to "nothing" hidden under dense trees and fallen leaves aside the main road. I can feel the tragic emotion in them, which remind me of the story of Wings of Icarus as well as a Wan-Hu (万户, an honorary title) in the Ming Dynasty



(the name may be Tao Cheng-Dao 陶成道 according to textual research) who wanted to fly to the sky with a rocket chair. Although Klein was only a few meters away from the ground, it was like an abyss under his feet. He seemed to be waving his arms desperately as if wanting to turn himself into a bird. In my favourite photo, his left hand is held up high, and his right hand is slightly bent as if he is trying to accumulate energy to hit the air, then soaring into the sky. Even though the photography only recorded that moment, there was a certain dynamic rhythm within the posture of Klein's arm. His limbs were telling me that at that moment, he was ready to fly, even though his hair had hinted that an invisible force was about to pull him to the ground heavily.



*Kazuo Ohno, Eikoh Hosoe, 1994, from the series *The butterfly Dream* (1960-2005)*

In Eiko Hosoe's photographic works, I could also feel the sense of movement is not bound by photos. The master of Butoh dance Kazuo Ohno seems to have reached an extreme in this picture, where subtlety and burst of body energy coexist at that moment.

The withered flesh. Ohno stepped his right leg on the wooden trestle that extends as far as the eye can see. His left hand put on his waist as if the power of his whole body was converging to the right hand that raised the paper umbrella as high as possible. His mouth was slightly opening while eagerly staring at the umbrella. The black edge of the umbrella naturally blends into the dark sky, while the white in the centre creates an oval space different from the surroundings in the picture.

What did he see? The poetic dreamland created by Hideo Hosoe and Kazuo Ohno in reality. Humans in the ancient time used their body to perform sacrifice and pray for blessing through dance, that is the way of communicating with invisible creatures. The movement of the body gets rid of using objects, and is continuously changing like light but can easily predict the motion by others. Perhaps this way could create a purer expression.



*U. A. Play House, Hiroshi Sugimoto, 1978*

Photography records a certain event happened in a particular space at a specific time. It can be the moment when Klein jumps from the roof, but it also can overlap the

continuous moments through a long exposure. Hiroshi Sugimoto's *Theatre* series made me wonder about the connection of light, time, and nothingness. If Klein's "leap" was recorded with a long exposure, what would we see? His figure will disappear from the picture, the static buildings and roads will remain unchanged, and that "leap into the void" seems to have truly gone to the void. Returning to Sugimoto's work, for us, watching a movie will probably take two hours of our life, but for the characters in it, a film may summarise their whole lives. Whether in or out of the play, emotions like joy, anger and sorrow occupy most of life, while Hiroshi Sugimoto faithfully records the light in a period. The up and down of emotion happened in the theatre are so pale in front of the time. The colour of life will eventually become nothing but as the whiteness appearing on the screen.

At this moment, I have a lot of thoughts about the concept of nothingness. However, I still don't know whether to maintain "non-action", to delete any "doing" and let nothing become as an indescribable wind, or through "doing" to reflect "nothing" is more correct. Today, when I stepped into the fine stones in the garden, the grey-white stones moved and "escaped" from the space of my feet. I always felt that this seemed to imply something to me, but it was still unclear. Just wondering if "nothing" is hiding in the tiny gap of the stones.